

Spectrum

Fall 2015

Article 10

11-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

McGinnis, Matthew (2015) "Lecture Review: “Why is ISIS Destroying Humanity’s Heritage?” Presented by Dr. Michael Danti and Dr. Andrew Vaughn of the American School of Oriental Research’s (ASOR) Syrian Heritage Initiative," *Spectrum*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol5/iss1/10>

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Chapter 9

Lecture Review: "Why is ISIS Destroying Humanity's Heritage?" Presented by Dr. Michael Danti and Dr. Andrew Vaughn of the American School of Oriental Research's (ASOR) Syrian Heritage Initiative

Matthew McGinnis

In recent current events, the terrorist group known as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) has garnered much press attention not just for their acts of violence against civilians, but also for the heinous atrocities they are committing against cultural heritage in these countries. A May 16, 2015 NBC news brief reported on the state of affairs on the ground in Syria, where everything from ancient Roman to early Islamic sites are being looted for profit (NBC 2015). To raise awareness about this issue, the Center for Humanities held a panel discussion on April 9, 2015, at which I was present. Two distinguished scholars sat on the panel, Dr. Michael Danti and Dr. Andrew Vaughn. Danti and Vaughn spoke about the endangered condition of Syria's cultural heritage, how they are collecting data on these sites from afar, and what is being done to stop the destruction.

Professor Danti was extremely knowledgeable about the subject of Syrian history and heritage, having conducted fieldwork at various sites in Syria for over 15 years. The main focus of his presentation was on the impact of ISIL's heritage-destroying activities. A rebel party based in Syria, Iraq, Liberia, and Nigeria, ISIL's control spills into neighboring countries as well. The stated goal of this group is to purge the Middle East of all that is "unholy," referring to anything that is polytheistic or not in keeping with strict Islamic law and tradition. In this regard, ISIL

differs from the better-known terrorist group Al Qaeda because ISIL is focused primarily on cleansing the Middle East, rather than expanding their dogma outward to other countries and regions of the world.

Danti went on to discuss how looting has been a long-standing problem in Syria and adjacent war torn countries (e.g., Iraq). However, ISIL is taking this destruction of ancient settlements to a new level by promoting “industrialized” looting, which entails systematic demolition and plundering of both standing and buried monuments and structures across the region. For example, I learned that ISIL is paying locals to go to heritage sites and dig up artifacts, which are then sold by ISIL middlemen to foreign brokers and collectors for greatly elevated prices; the profits from these sales are then used to fund their terrorist effort. Professor Danti described in detail how ISIL is destroying ancient sites by the dozen (tunneling, bombing, looting, and flattening). Some sites, like the ancient Roman city of Apamea, have been thoroughly looted, its famous columns severely damaged (see image in Lawler 2014). Other destructive events, like the demolition of the Nebi Yunus Mosque in Mosul, Iraq, are considered by Danti to be “performative demonstrations” meant to showcase ISIL’s power and spread their message of Islamic purity (this mosque was constructed somewhere around 1226 B.C. and was targeted because of its importance to Muslims and Christians alike). To date, there are 75 confirmed cases of these demonstrations, and many more await confirmation. Frankly, I found this information infuriating—what really irritated me was that in most cases, the locals respect these sites and want them to be preserved. ISIL’s destructive intentions have been carried out regardless, driven by fear mongering and the misguided promise of riches. This performative destruction is a unique form of religious fanaticism, with ISIL evoking quotes from the Qur’an to justify their actions.

Another thing that I noted was the apparent canniness of the people orchestrating the looting, individuals who specialize in targeting generic looking artifacts from the early Islamic or Roman periods. Once these artifacts are smuggled across the Syrian border to Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey, their generic character allows dealers to claim they are from any country in the region. While it is not legal to buy and sell antiquities and items of cultural significance anywhere in the world according to the UNESCO 1970 Convention (UN 1970), there is heightened surveillance around artifacts that derive from Syria and Iraq given the recently passed UN Security Council Resolution 2199 (UN 2015). Under this resolution, sanctions will be levied on countries permitting the trade of oil, antiquities, and hostages from war-torn locations, in an effort to "prevent terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria from benefitting (UN 2015, 1)." Regardless, the illegal trade of antiquities persists because, according to Professor Danti, "it's much easier to sneak coins and statues across the border than sell barrels of oil, and that's why [looting] is becoming so common" (Danti 2015).

While listening to Professor Danti, I made some connections to other courses that I've taken. The first was an Architectural History course, in which we spent a day discussing the ancient Mesoamerican city-state of Tenochtitlan. This Aztec city was at its peak when the first Spanish explorers arrived. To establish their dominance, the Spaniards destroyed the city center and constructed a Spanish "plaza" that still stands to this day, in the center of Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. According to my professor Trevor Verrot (Dept. of Art and Art History), the surest way to undermine a population/culture is to destroy their architecture, and that is exactly what ISIL is doing in demolishing ancient Roman and Islamic sites. These terrorists are creating a landscape where only ISIL-approved buildings that conform to their extreme Islamic beliefs

are allowed, making it harder and harder for people in Syria to practice any religion other than Islam.

The second connection I made is perhaps a bit more controversial than my first, having to do with different societal valuations of natural and cultural heritage. Last semester I took a course on “Issues of Wilderness and Nature in American Society,” taught by Sean McLaughlin (Dept. of Recreation Management & Policy). A main theme of the course that we repeatedly discussed was: *countries that desire wilderness don’t have it, and countries that have wilderness don’t need it*. For example, one of America’s earliest and greatest exports was its wilderness, depicted vividly in landscape paintings and poems, created by American artists in the 18th and 19th centuries and exported to England and continental Europe, where the art was ravenously consumed. Many European countries at this time (and Germany, in particular) greatly valued Wilderness, but due to a long history of habitation and cultivation of their land, most ‘virgin’ or ‘untouched’ Wilderness had been destroyed or tamed. Today, first-world scholars, policy-makers, and activists see a new Wilderness ‘frontier’ in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Western interlopers have repeatedly provided local communities and government officials alike with advice about best practices for managing land in order to protect resources and make developmental headway. However, what these Westerners do not realize is that many sub-Saharan communities are oftentimes primarily concerned with survival; killing and selling endangered species for a profit may be the only viable way of making a living in places that provide little other economic opportunity, or are plagued by drought, disease, or unrest. I believe a parallel phenomenon is taking place in Syria, in this case substituting antiquities as the black market contraband. It is easy for people removed from the conflict and day-to-day life of the war-torn Middle East to condemn the destruction and looting of ancient cultural and historical

sites but in reality, only the people living in such places know the reality of life there and must make the choice between conserving their antiquities and cultural heritage, to be preserved for posterity's sake, or destroying and looting those sites to ensure their survival and safety.

I am in no way condoning ISIL's actions, but perhaps we should reserve judgment regarding the locals doing the on-the-ground looting for ISIL—could these people have a more complicated story? Could they feel compelled to loot to save a family member, or perhaps their own life? Does looting and ransacking ancient buildings and towns represent the only way of feeding one's family during a period of intense strife and privation? The Middle East has been war-torn for many years now, unrest that can be traced to the first civilizations that inhabited in this area. Life cannot be easy for most inhabitants, especially in these conflict-ridden states. I think people in Western nations need to see both sides of this unfortunate story: certainly, academics and policy-makers can and should try to conserve these locations and artifacts because of their historical importance, but at the same time, we shouldn't be too quick to judge the struggles faced by the residents of those countries. We must consider that some of this looting and destruction is not done out of pure spite, malice, religious fanaticism, or pure financial gain, but rather for the simple reason of self, familial, and community preservation. As always with the Middle East, this is a very complicated issue and we must approach it with open minds and with the realization that ISIL and the people living under their control are not a monolithic entity with only the creation of a pure Islamic state in mind. Instead, there are lots of actors and stakeholders involved, and perhaps by targeting those individuals more favorable toward preservation, scholars can begin to build a program of respect and conservation from afar.

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