



Destroying  
the Past,  
Ancient  
and Modern.



armed with power tools, hammers and pickaxes, it took just minutes for ISIS to reduce a 3,000 year old relic to rubble. It took even less time for the video of the famous Assyrian winged bull deities at the Nergal gates of Nineveh being vandalised beyond recognition, to be uploaded onto the internet by the tech-savvy propaganda wing of ISIS.

The video then cuts to the Mosul Museum and an ISIS representative condemning polytheists before smashing museum pieces with hammers and pushing them to the ground, watching them break into tiny fragments.

In addition to priceless relics, statues and documents, lost forever in the attack on the Mosul Museum, were five life-sized statues depicting the kings of Hatra. There are 27 known statues of Hatrene kings, so this represents a loss of 15 per cent of all the sculptures in existence.

'We are currently living through perhaps the greatest period of heritage destruction that the world has ever seen,' says Dr Benjamin Isakhan, a Senior Lecturer in Politics and Policy Studies and Convener of the Middle East Studies Forum at Deakin University.

A few months after the Mosul Museum was destroyed, news broke that the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, an archaeological site near the city of Mosul, had been completely flattened by ISIS troops using heavy military vehicles.

Nimrud was built around 1250BC and grew to become the capital of the powerful neo-Assyrian empire, which extended from Mesopotamia to modern-day Egypt, Turkey and Iran. The region is, says Dr Isakhan, the birthplace of civilisation.

Yet as the world watches on in horror, and archeologists and anthropologists wring their hands in despair, a unique project, headed by Dr Isakhan will soon be used by governments, museums, NGOs and international bodies to halt the further destruction of ancient relics, and may even help create secure and peaceful countries in a part of the world that has almost always known conflict.

According to Dr Isakhan, the destruction of heritage sites in Middle Eastern countries occurs for a number of reasons. 'One of the objectives of ISIS is to destroy symbols of alternative religions,' he says. 'Hatra, for example, is a city that has come under ISIS control and a lot of statues and relics have been destroyed because of the belief that representation of false gods or polytheism should be destroyed.'

Shock factor is another undeniable motive. 'ISIS has released videos of all kinds of humanitarian tragedies as well as heritage destruction because they know it gets a lot of airtime globally and allows them to get their message out.'

If the destruction of the world's heritage sites is to be understood and addressed, says Dr Isakhan, it needs to be acknowledged that ISIS is not the only culprit.

He points to the US military's use of the ancient Mesopotamian cities of Babylon and Ur.

'These sites were turned into US military bases and thousands of troops moved through,' he explains. 'Ur had an old air force base adjacent so it was tailor made for the US to move in.'

'The US went as far as to set up Pizza Huts and Burger Kings at the ancient site.'

But right now, says Dr Isakhan, ISIS is doing large-scale destruction and, he says, there is another less pious reason why the looting of ancient artefacts has exploded to an industrial scale.

'There is evidence that one of the key revenue streams of ISIS is archeological looting,' he explains. 'In one part of Syria alone they made \$32 million from looting in under six months.'

Dr Isakhan draws a picture of a massive international operation that is mindboggling in its scale and sophistication.

'Since 2003 there has been a huge international black market operation to loot these archeological sites, and this is going on at an industrial scale today,' says Dr Isakhan.

'The looters dig and smash their way through the ancient catacombs of archeological sites, grabbing anything with writing on it or an image, or anything made from precious stones and metals, to sell on the black market.'

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'It's then moved on to middle men, the black market operatives that move it over the borders, and to the next wave of people who upsell it.'

Recently, Greek coins from around 500BC turned up on EBay, and were sold for around \$100.

'Another market is private collectors,' says Dr Isakhan. 'Owning your own collection of antiquities is big amongst the nouveau riche in certain countries. Sometimes artefacts are given fake documents and then sold at major international auction houses in New York and London. There was one piece that recently went for \$53m, which was later found to have been illegally removed from Syria.'

But Dr Isakhan's research project documents not just names and dates of heritage destruction, but the social and political context in which it occurs, and this is the real game changer.

While other universities are documenting the destruction of artefacts, what makes Dr Isakhan's project different is its multiple dimensions.

'What we are doing is creating a detailed picture of the nature, scope and variety of the heritage destruction going on. It gives us an unprecedented window into why this type of heritage destruction occurs; what facilitates it; what is the context; why certain sites are attacked at certain times; if it's revenue raising; if it's sectarianism.

'Saving the past for the future can only be achieved if researchers look deeply at the social and religious reasons why destruction occurs,' explains Dr Isakhan.

The information collected by his team will be used to create a set of policies and protocols to prevent this type of destruction happening again.

'If a state that is particularly heritage dense is going through a crisis,' says Dr Isakhan, 'we will know what to look for well in advance and will have the systems in place to move quickly.

'In the case of Palmyra, which is currently occupied by ISIS, we knew they were coming for months and months and nobody did anything because there was no system.

'Potentially, we could remove the contents of a museum out of a country in crisis. There could be temporary exhibitions that tour the world, and those exhibitions could potentially fund the rebuilding of the museums. It's a win-win proposition.'

The unique data collection, says Dr Isakhan, will also play a crucial role in promoting peace across the Middle East.

'When Syria and Iraq emerge from this horrible period they will need to build a sense of unified national identity,' he says. 'All national identities are to some extent built on a cohesive and collective past. A collective narrative underpins our sense of nationhood, it's why we want to live together, and work together for a common good – history is a very important thing. All nation states rely on the past to build a future.

'Then there are other more pragmatic things such as tourism. When the last drop of oil is gone from Iraq and Syria the only thing they will have to sell to the world is their history.'

Whilst archaeological destruction is but one of many humanitarian atrocities being committed by ISIS, Dr Isakhan says it should not be ignored.

'When you destroy a country's cultural heritage, you are effectively killing the people of the past,' he says. 'You are killing the people of the present because you are killing their access to these things and the opportunities to learn from them. And you are killing the people of the future, because the people of the future will never be able to stand before that object and admire its beauty.

'And that's why it's so upsetting for people – they see statues that have stood for three and a half thousand years, and how many people have lived and died in that time, how many empires have risen and fell, and now it is gone forever.'

Never stop discovering,  
never stop learning.

🌐 [deakin.edu.au/alfred-deakin-institute/research/projects/partnerships/destruction-heritage-iraq-syria](http://deakin.edu.au/alfred-deakin-institute/research/projects/partnerships/destruction-heritage-iraq-syria)

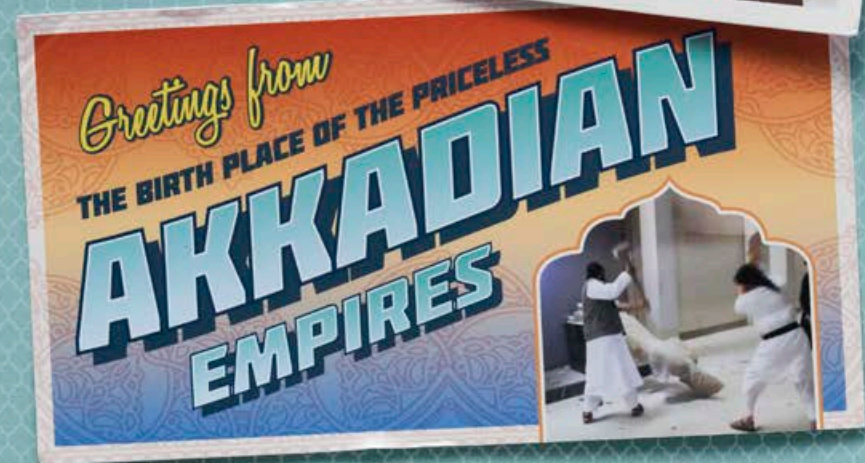
#### Further reading

The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the 'Islamic State'.  
Benjamin Isakhan 2015



Photos: Dr Benjamin Isakhan. ©2012.

( 'When the last drop of oil is gone from Iraq and Syria the only thing they will have to sell to the world is their history.' )



— *the birthplace of civilisation* —