ASHLEY KOCA (SHE/HER)
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Modern Iconoclash: ISIS and the After-Image

ABSTRACT: Militant groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) destroy ancient works of art and architecture in order to attack the identity of an opposing people through tangible means. They often target historical monuments and museum sites not only to obliterate a region's past, but also redefine its future. This form of hostility towards heritage sites is commonly regarded as traditional iconoclastic behavior, in which such militant groups resent pre-Islamic or non-Islamic art and objects as religious idols. While no longer used for devotion, these objects allow the laypeople to understand their abstract connection to ancestry through the transcendence of past art and architecture. To partially destroy ancient relics is to create an after-image out of their newly rendered state; their identity is then appropriated by ISIS, and historical significance replaced by their role in acts of terror. In this reinvention of the image, ISIS conforms to Bruno Latour's notion of iconoclash as opposed to overt iconoclasm.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is engaged in a pseudo-iconoclastic endeavour, destroying cultural objects across the Near East. The word "iconoclasm" is used to describe a practice of intentional image destruction. The scope of this term is limited to the erasure of the target image, rendering it far too narrow to define the behaviors of ISIS. A more appropriate characterization is "iconoclash," a phenomenon proposed by French philosopher Bruno Latour in which a new image is born from the effacement of the old. The notion of iconoclash diverges from traditional iconoclasm, in which case the motivations behind the destruction of objects and monuments are clear—to nullify the icon's power by obscuring its recognizability. With iconoclash, "one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive."[1] More concisely, an iconoclash occurs when the image is not devastated in its entirety. The partial preservation of the image instead creates it anew. To choose the route of iconoclash over iconoclasm is an attempt to denounce, to disenchant, to generate, or to outline a new truth as opposed to erase entirely.[2] If ISIS wanted to expunge the Near East of pre-Islamic or non-Islamic art, it would have done so without a visual trace—the militant organization would not provide a platform for art it deems sacrilegious. Instead, ISIS participates in an iconoclash to redefine the art ravaged by the organization. No longer are these monuments testaments to the deities from days of yore. They are now tributes to the military triumphs of the Islamic State.

While there are certainly ideological divisions between iconoclash and traditional iconoclasm, both actions participate in varying degrees of cultural heritage destruction. Cultural heritage represents the "collective memories, the memories generated and shared by a society, [that] are anchored in the products of culture."[3] Both iconoclash and iconoclasm actively alter and/or devastate works of art, effectively attacking these "collective memories" by uprooting what binds them to the tangible world. Iconoclasm seeks to erase certain pieces of cultural heritage in their entirety and iconoclash attempts to disturb the appearance of these objects so as to create them anew; in either case, the authentic material culture of civilizations is at risk of disappearance. The destruction of heritage objects is not genocide in the literal sense of the word, but the act effectively kills a society's sense of self and "recast[s] that society in the image and for the purposes of another."[4] The physical traces of these ancient societies remain as the last vestiges of their existence, without objects to ground their histories these civilizations become figments of literary imaginations, dormant memories. The destruction of monuments and works of art alike destroy the sole souvenirs of humanity's past, and "without authentic memories of our own, we literally cannot know who we are, where we came from, to whom we are connected. We are nothing, or more accurately, we are only what other people tell us we are."[5] Yet, this is the goal of both iconoclash and iconoclasm. The two practices aim to either erase or rewrite history in order to support the version of the future favoured by the perpetrators of this destruction.

ISIS seeks not to simply destroy cultural heritage that stands in opposition to its ideologies but, instead, imitates the violent iconoclasm of the region's past as a tactic of humiliation and dominance. More specifically, the Islamic State evokes the decimation of palatial reliefs in which damage is localized to the faces of specific individuals – an allusion to a ruler's literal deposition on the visual plane. In both the ancient and contemporary examples, an after-image is produced from such damage. The destruction serves as an assertion of an iconographic paradigm that aims to establish this modern model of iconoclash not through complete

erasure but through revision. Serving almost as a predictive allusion to the threat of ISIS, fear surrounding this form of monument destruction has existed since the time of the Assyrians themselves. ISIS targets historical sites of both past and living civilizations to alter historical narratives—to render a non-Salafi-jihadi people subordinate. While the Islamic State is not an ethnic group in and of itself, the global Salafi-jihadi ideology that it follows unifies its members under a common cause.[6] Those outside of the movement are labelled as a cultural Other, including the pre-Islamic civilizations in which much of the Near East's cultural heritage is rooted. In accordance with this ideology, ISIS members commit crimes against cultural heritage in order to commandeer the memories associated with such objects by replacing them with its own narrative.[7]

EF(FACE)MENT OF ASSYRIAN ARTIFACTS

In 2015, ISIS released a video that featured its members smashing pre-Islamic antiquities inside the Mosul Museum of northern Iraq.[8] Flooding the internet, this screen capture (Fig. 1) has become prolific in visualizing the atrocities committed by IS militants. Among the monuments destroyed was the Lamassu that once guarded the palace gates to King Sennacherib; its face and ears appear to have been nearly shaved off in their entirety. The Lamassu was originally intended to serve an apotropaic function, assigned to guard the palace entrance and ward off malevolence with only its image.[9] Interestingly, the talisman whose image was made to protect the palace is in the midst of its own erasure. The militants appear to attack the *image* of the object before its total destruction as if it is the face that is the biggest threat to the Islamic State. The screen capture seems to communicate that it is not the monument itself that carries the Lamassu's power—it is not its size or its craftsmanship—but it is the visage, the face, that gives the artefact its mystic function. By leaving the rest of the body intact, targeting just the face, ISIS construes a story far different than what would have been told by a picture of rubble. Without identifiable features, the remaining debris can only be regarded as an alleged piece of ancient history. In targeting this most human element of the Lamassu the militant group expresses an understanding of the power that the object once held. This image of the Lamassu's destruction is a proclamation that ISIS has brought this mystically-charged object to its knees through its own demolition – depicting the active removal of an old regime by the new. A transformation occurs within this liminal space between total recognizability and total erasure. Latour's iconoclash is the result of this state of in-betweeness. The juxtaposition between the defaced and the untouched changes the image entirely. It is neither a picture of the great Lamassu nor merely the detritus of its obliteration. The image has been, instead, co-opted by the

FIGURE 1. 'An ISIS video showed the destruction of ancient Assyrian artifacts in Mosul, Iraq.' Screen capture from video released by ISIS. Retrieved from *The New York Times*, original image from Agence France-Presse — Getty Images.

Islamic State—in which its "significant place-based memories are erased and replaced with a specific Salafist narrative through the re-enactment of Koranic traditions of conquest and dominance."[10] More specifically, these traditions reflect notions of "Al-Wala" and "Wal-Bara," to both love and hate for the sake of Allah – translating to a disavowel of idolatry in this case through purification.[11] To go about "purifying" pagan idols, IS militants imagine themselves as the inheritors of an ancient legacy of "conquest performance," participating in a visual comparison to past acts of monument destruction.[12]

This relief depicting King Sennacherib enthroned, observing the capture of Lachish (Fig. 2), is an example of the same form of intentional damage practiced by ISIS. Such as in the case of the Lamassu above, its vandalism localized to the face of the figure. This act is a form of *damnatio memoriae*, used to "demonstrate the defeat and humiliation of a known and still identifiable character, real or symbolical."[13] Thus, much like the Lamassu, the relief was not destroyed in its entirety so that it could serve an alternative function: to not only depict the *triumph* of Sennacherib, but his metaphorical *downfall* as well. More concisely, the "selective mutilation" of Sennacherib's head amidst an otherwise untouched relief catalyzes the tension between what art once meant and now conveys.[14] The relief was previously erected as a King's assertion of power over a conquered territory and now stands as a counter-assertion of power over that same King. It is

FIGURE 2. Unknown Artist, *Wall Panel Relief depicting Sennacherib as he watches the capture of Lachish*. ca. 700-692 BCE, gypsum relief. The British Museum, London. Accession number: 124911.

in the destruction of the relief that it became an icon, its status was born from its death because its original intention was not to serve as a venerated object—it only became so when the destroyer decided that was what it was. In this stage of destruction, the relief takes on an element of animism, regenerating as an object existent through a metaphorical death, imbued with sanctity and mysticism because of its perceived threat.[15] The screen capture of the Lamassu revives this interpretation of the icon, that the icon only becomes an icon when treated like one—through its destruction by iconoclasts. Except, when considering the enduring effect of this partial iconoclasm, one is not led to an understanding that the destruction's perpetrator was operating on ideological principle because of the remaining potential to recognize the image. Instead, the after-image, the *damnatio memoriae*, is the goal. Iconoclash lies in the production of this after-image, operating on multiple planes. The first of these planes works artistically, as the evocation of the dominance of the new order through the decimation of the old. The second continues the aforementioned Koranic traditions of Al-Wala and Wal-Bara, recalling historic instances of iconoclastic triumph as the militants portray themselves as the heirs of this legacy.

FIGURE 3. Unknown Artist, *Bronze Head of Sargon from Nineveh*. ca. 2300-2200 BCE, bronze cast, 30.7 cm (height). Iraq Museum, Baghdad. Photo credit: SCALA/ART Resource.

To draw a further parallel between the screen capture (Fig. 1) and selective mutilation throughout antiquity, the isolated dismemberment of the Lamassu's ear mirrors the damage exhibited on the mask of Sargon (Fig. 3). The copper head was found with damage localized to four areas: the obvious hole in the place of the left eye, the chiseled upper bridge of the nose, the split beard, and the two missing ears.[16] The Lamassu, in comparison, appears to be missing the entirety of its face along with an ear and the beginning of its beard. In this instance as well, Sargon's head is regarded as a *damnatio memoriae* to explain its partial destruction—to act in a propagandistic manner in which the "particular details of the mutilation may enhance the message to the viewers by alluding to the sinister sphere of punishment and retribution."[17] This idea of allusion is also present in the image provided by ISIS; the mutilation alludes to this evidence of historical iconoclash and uses the Assyrian's own visual language against them in terms of iconoclash. To the ancient inhabitants of northern Iraq, "the bond between animate essence and inanimate image" was created through "rituals that transformed the image from the product of human hands into an animate entity, an irreversible process of

identity fixing that could be terminated (by killing or disabling) but not transferred."[18] In a way, the personhood of the individual depicted became metaphysically intertwined within his image—thus, the destruction of this image would be the equivalent of murder, even beyond the grave. In this culture, there were also rituals that "served to purify the divinely inspired image, erasing the imprint of human agency in its creation and activating its efficacy. This efficacy was understood to endow the image with the senses of smell, taste, and sight."[19] Through these rituals, the artefact gains a secondary agency beyond the biological body that continues on even after death.[20] In this way, the image-destroying behaviors of the ancient Assyrians and ISIS function identically, the Assyrians on a more personal level and the Islamic State on an ideological level. ISIS strives to kill the culture surviving through its objects in using that same culture's behaviors to ensure its destruction in the eyes of its inheritors and descendants.

DOCUMENTING & BROADCASTING ICONOCLASH ACROSS MEDIA

From looting to image destruction, antique Assyria was fraught with cultural heritage loss. It was not only common to commit crimes of cultural heritage destruction, but to depict them in relief—mirroring that of ISIS publishing photos of the organization's own crimes against art history. The damaged relief of the seated Sennacherib comes from a series of panels now housed by the British Museum. Among them, there are multiple relief fragments detailing warriors carrying loot back to Nineveh after the siege of Lachish.[21] The presence of this action on the reliefs speaks to how important the capture of booty was to the Assyrians. Like image destruction, the theft of art and other precious objects from another culture is "deeply intertwined with struggles for sovereignty, whether between nations or within them."[22] The looting and destroying of artefacts are two sides of the same coin, they occur side by side in most instances. In fact, an inscription describing Sennacherib's campaign against Babylon explains that:

> *The wealth of that city — silver, gold, precious stones, goods and valuables — I distributed them among my people and they made it their own. The hands of my people took hold of the gods who dwelled there and smashed them. They took their goods and valuables. . . I destroyed the city and its houses, from foundation to parapet, I devastated and burned them. I tore out the bricks and earth of the inner and outer walls (of the city), of the temples and of the ziggurat, as much as there was, and I dumped these into the Arahtu canal.*[23]

This account of Sennacherib's campaign brutally describes how he razed the city. The inscription boasts of how precious objects were both stolen and destroyed alongside the absolute decimation of religious structures such as the ziggurat. The text was phrased in this way so as to provide a justification for the plundering of Babylon—revenge.[24]

The importance of revenge is not limited to the motivations behind the sacking of the city. Instead, revenge permeates the very bricks comprising the city itself. Inscriptions of this nature are embedded in the bricks of buildings commissioned to commemorate the military campaigns of the king.[25] The writings were buried in the foundations "to guarantee that future generations would know who had constructed the building."[26] Kings would commission these accounts of their triumphs in an attempt to preserve them, to tangibly place themselves in history. The element of revenge comes into play in that "almost every Mesopotamian inscription ends with a curse formula to warn the possible despoiler."[27] Obviously, monument and relic destruction alike were frequent enough to the extent that kings took preventative measures to account for the fact that their personal histories were likely to be destroyed—or, in the case of icons, rewritten. To combat this, the kings would couple their campaign records with warnings of revenge to serve a near apotropaic function that worked to ward off the despoiler, reminiscent of Sennacherib's Lamassu talisman. Yet, in each instance, from Sennacherib to the likes of the Islamic State, the inscriptions are ignored.

The age of burying clay tablets as a way of record keeping is long gone, ISIS now chooses Twitter as its vessel for recording the organization's triumphs and campaigns. The militant organization is fully aware of the power it wields in the form of digital media, utilizing the efficacy of the image to concisely express its vision within a character limit, instead of a religious treatise.[28] The destruction of historical sites are not a mere consequence of war, but rather "choreographed media events which form part of IS's self-representation."[29] Social media allows ISIS to document the organization's efforts in a manner that it sees as authentic to its mission—as opposed to through the lens of news outlets or other parties that may interpret the organization's actions differently. Twitter and other media platforms allow the jihadists to realize their vision of themselves as the inheritors of an ancient performance of conquest and the rejection of idols.[30] As heirs to this performance, the screen capture of the destruction of the Lamassu can, therefore, be interpreted as performance art. Staged and perfectly intentional, the damage to its face was done to evoke imagery of the past and elicit a response from its viewer only possible through recognition of what the object once was, and now is. While portrayed as modern iconoclasts, the militant organization is far from anachronistic, instead, it is "extremely modern in its adoption of social media for

propaganda, creating a sense of hyper-reality."[31] The ancient Assyrians understood the capabilities of the image and its narrative capabilities, it is almost as if they predicted the likes of ISIS through their widespread inscriptions warning of retribution and revenge.

INTANGIBLE HISTORY: PAST AND PRESENT RECEPTIONS BY ISIS

In participating in iconoclash, the Islamic State is unbounded by the ideological underpinnings of traditional iconoclasm, calling for the destruction of an idol. Iconoclash allows the organization to instead wield that very same 'idol' for its own gain, to appropriate its narrative as opposed to reject it entirely. In truth, the Islamic State "may exploit iconoclasm as powerful rhetoric without sincerely believing the icons pose a threat to its religious practice."[32] ISIS uses the idea, and the connotation surrounding iconoclasm, to convey its message without the length of a manifesto, streamlining its communicative abilities. If ISIS truly believed that the icons were a threat to the organization's ideologies, funding would not be derived from the sale of looted antiquities. Most of the State's revenue comes from taxation, oil exports, and the natural resources available in controlled regions—antiquities being seen as just another resource to abuse.[33] These artefacts are "valued as sources of potential capital, wherever there exists a commercial supply and demand for the stolen goods, or, alternatively their deconstruction can serve to extract its individual resources."[34] Because of the reliance on these antiquities to fund the efforts of ISIS, it cannot be true that the militant group entirely condemns the objects, that it is the group's divinely ordained, god-given purpose to destroy them. As established in the previous section, since ISIS acts as the inheritor of a *performance* of conquest, its efforts to destroy the icon are for the sake of visualizing the idea of iconoclasm. More concisely, the looting and selling of antiquities by the Islamic State further bolster the notion that the militants are participating in iconoclash, they are not simply iconoclasts.

Before ISIS even began its campaign against ancient art, the group participated in looting. In fact, the organization only began to release the now famous videos of militants smashing artefacts in February of 2015—when a video surfaced of members taking both sledgehammers and power tools to artefacts in the Mosul Museum.[35] This change in methodology indicates that the eradication of icons was never a matter of ideology—only opportunity. Further, the destruction of the Lamassu was never intended to be a full demolition. The Nergal Gate Lamassu was exclusively defaced by ISIS, the organization did not make use of explosives to level the monument.[36] This choice to use comparatively little violence could not have been merely coincidental, or an incident of a lack thereof. ISIS is fully capable of levelling nearly full cities; the site of Palmyra was decimated for the sake of "ideological symbolism" in which the event was more about the "conquest narrative," as indicated by the excessive use of explosives and subsequent dramatized photo opportunity.[37] ISIS's choice to only partially destroy the Lamassu monument was highly intentional, just as the near-full levelling of Palmyra was too. The difference in tiers of damage can be attributed to the difference in the subject of the resultant image. For the Lamassu, a pile of rubble would not be a convincing sight. For the Palmyra, a half-ruined ancient city would appear just as any other weathered by time instead of explosives. Thus, ISIS follows the playbook outlined by the very Assyrians whose objects the organization was out to destroy—ISIS aimed not only to demolish but to create, a forced rebirth of the image conceived by the death of the original.

While ISIS's destruction of historical sites no longer in use for religious or cultural practices falls under the umbrella of iconoclash, ISIS functions as a nearly medieval iconoclastic entity in the context of shrines and monuments still in use by ethnoreligious minorities. In the targeting of these ethno-religions, ISIS aims to extinguish the cultural diversity and obliterate the history of Iraq and Syria along with the surviving Assyrian, Christian, Yazidi, and Shia cultures native to the region.[38] The Islamic State razed both temples and shrines in villages such as Sinjar, which is just west of the Nineveh province where the Lamassu was defaced.[39] These cultural monuments exist as a tangible form of heritage and "the role that tangible heritage sites play in sustaining and re-making the practices and rituals that constitute the intangible heritage of a people."[40] ISIS obliterates existing Yazidi monuments because violence against archaeology "plays a key symbolic role within IS's visual and moral economy and its visual communication, and has, as such, very material effects on people themselves."[41] These "very material effects" exist to demoralize an existing population, a rival culture and ethnicity in the eyes of these jihadists. ISIS elects to destroy the Yazidi monuments in their near entirety—instead of achieving a form of partial disfiguration—in order to "destroy what's left of [the Yazidis] identity and Yezidism."[42]

Since modern Assyrians are predominantly Christian, the partial destruction of sites representing their ancient polytheistic past would not carry the same emotional weight as the complete decimation of active shrines. This difference in emotional attachment explains the inconsistency in the treatment of Iraq's cultural heritage across the country and cultures, each attack is site-specific and designed according to what visual production would be most striking. To the untrained eye, a pile of rubble would be indistinguishable from any other. In order to ensure both understanding and horror in a cosmopolitan audience, ISIS produced

images that simultaneously represent what the object once was and now is. For the Yazidis, a pile of rubble in the right location would be obvious and all the more shocking for it. Many of the targeted Yazidi monuments are sites of festival and pilgrimage; "they foster ties between the religious heartland of the Yezidi faith and the periphery, many travelling from as far away as Europe to participate."[43] Sites easily recognizable and well-travelled reduced to wreckage and rubble would be even more devastating than if only remnants remained—at least in the latter case hope for reconstruction would remain. The dichotomy between ISIS's treatment of extant and nearly extinct cultures speaks to the Islamic State's media savvy and understanding of visual culture—which is paramount in establishing intangible, ideological dominance through a more literal, tangible dominance.

CONCLUSION

ISIS's use of iconoclash not only attempts to destroy the physical remnants of the past Assyrian culture, but further warps this destruction through the creation of the after-image. To accomplish this, the Islamic State mimics the culture of the Assyrians themselves through the use of their own war tactics in terms of looting and artefact elimination. While seemingly contradictory, ISIS hopes to destroy the remnants of a culture by nearly bringing it back to life through the use of its own tradition. In doing so, ISIS confirms the culture's destruction by using the parameters set by the said culture, so that it would be dead even in the eyes of its inheritors. In an opposite way, ISIS's treatment of surviving cultures can be described as a more or less scorched earth-like approach—to erase the heritage in its entirety so as to discourage any possibility of rebuilding, taking another step toward total annihilation. This nuanced understanding of the meaning of image and the effects of its destruction provide the Islamic State with a range of tactics to emotionally harm the widest audience possible—engaging the lay viewer from across the world and simultaneously those native to the regions affected. The ability to tailor cultural heritage destruction according to site and monument enhances the argument that ISIS is instead participating in iconoclash as opposed to pure iconoclasm, the group is able to cherry-pick ideological dogma in order to enhance the effectiveness of the after-image.

NOTES

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