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# Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm: the Islamic State and the war on cultural heritage

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## ABSTRACT

This paper puts forward the new analytical framework of 'Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm' (DMI) to analyse and interpret iconoclastic acts that are experienced through the propaganda (videos, social media, photographs, and other media) that the actor perpetrating the destruction makes available in global information networks for its consumption, duplication, and distribution. DMI captures three stages of the destruction (before, during and after the event) as both evidence of that destruction and as a perdurable digital archive. To demonstrate the relevance of DMI, we focus on an analysis of the videos and photographs depicting heritage destruction at pre-monotheistic sites targeted by the Islamic State (IS), such as Palmyra in Syria, the Mosul Cultural Museum, Nineveh and Nimrud in Iraq. The analysis focuses on the three stages that DMI comprises, showing the different photographic and audio-visual production techniques that the IS uses to enhance the tension that is built up leading to the destruction of cultural heritage while allocating material and human resources to produce digital propaganda. This analysis demonstrates how the analytical framework of DMI can be used to advance important work in heritage and media studies.

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## Introduction

The video starts with the phrase 'In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful' written in Arabic, in white over a black background (Al-Hayat 2015a). The soundtrack features chants reciting the *Qur'an*: 'Behold!' he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images, to which ye are (so assiduously) devoted?' They said, 'We found our fathers worshipping them'. He said, 'Indeed ye have been in manifest error – ye and your fathers' (Al-Anbiyaa, 52–55). As the chants continue, the video shows the interior of the Mosul Cultural Museum, abandoned and dimly lit. Armed Islamic State (IS) militants start unwrapping one of the statues as if participating in the ritualised undressing of a corpse. Several images show the artefacts before their destruction; silent, eternal, still. The video then cuts to a bearded man standing at the Gate of Nergal at the Nineveh archaeological site, five kilometres north of the museum. The man justifies the destruction that viewers are about to witness. While he speaks directly to the audience, the camera shows ancient Assyrian artefacts. The video then cuts back to the

museum, where two men push a statue from its plinth onto the floor. It crashes down in slow motion as we hear machine guns and screams on the soundtrack. Men, dressed head-to-toe in white and sporting thick black beards, raise sledgehammers over the statues before smashing them down with all their might. The footage slows at the moment of impact to emphasise the destruction – the ancient material splits and crumbles. The statues lie prostrate and battered on the ground.<sup>1</sup> On the screen, superimposed words from the *Qur'an* state: 'So he [Ibrahim] broke them to pieces' (Al-Anbiyaa, 58).

It is the 25th of February 2015, and the IS use of digital media to capture and disseminate their iconoclasm stands as a watershed moment in the use of *jihadi* propaganda. In the days to come, this digital footage will 'go viral': seen, discussed, and shared countless times across the world, both via the Internet and broadcast media. However, the video described above constitutes just one of the many released by the IS. Between 2014 and 2016, they released several films of varying lengths and quality. The films document not only heritage destruction but also genocidal pogroms, beheadings of prisoners, enslavement of women, their training camps, religious indoctrination programmes and military successes. They share the use of sophisticated audio-visual production techniques and a reliance on the fast-paced dissemination of content through digital media.

The group responsible for these troubling films, the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' (IS), is a militant network composed of mercenaries, religious fanatics and *jihadists* (holy warriors), all of whom are loosely bound by a radical ideology. The group was originally formed from the remnants of *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq but split with the *Al-Qaeda* leadership in 2013 when *Al-Qaeda's* leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri expelled IS' leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, from the organisation (Kilcullen 2016, 77; Mabon and Royle 2016). Inspired by fundamentalist ideologies such as Wahhabism and Salafism, the IS succeeded where others had failed: they established a Caliphate (*khilāfa*) and implemented strict *shariah* law (Isakhan 2015; Stern and Berger 2015). In June 2014, the group conquered Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, with little resistance from the Iraqi army. Before Mosul, the IS had taken advantage of the civil war that engulfed neighbouring Syria to capture territories across the border. Alongside their rapid and aggressive conquests and the imposition of a strict and austere vision, the IS developed and deployed a highly efficient propaganda machine to disseminate their nefarious ideology and to urge the faithful to migrate to the new Islamic State and take up arms in a broader *jihad* (holy war) on its behalf. Central to the IS propaganda machine is *Dabiq*, its online magazine, and *Al-Hayat*, the media centre responsible for its audio-visual productions.<sup>2</sup>

Among the most successful propaganda released by the IS – in terms of total views and widespread condemnation by the international community – are the several videos that document the destruction of heritage at institutions such as the Mosul Cultural Museum, and at archaeological sites such as Palmyra, Nineveh and Nimrud. For the first time in the history of iconoclasm, a militant faction had issued several propaganda films that focused solely on heritage destruction. These videos were designed to simultaneously send different messages to diverse audiences: to attract and indoctrinate recruits; to mobilise their support base; to strike fear into the hearts of locals; to inflame and infuriate ideological and religious opponents; and to shock Western audiences with their heady mix of zealotry and gore (Harmansah 2015; Smith et al. 2015).

By mediating heritage destruction, IS positions traditional iconoclasm – the deliberate targeting of material culture for political and religious purposes – in the contemporary technological world. Articulating a new conceptual framework to capture such mediated destruction is vital because, as 'images become more widely available, more easily reproducible, and more accessible than ever before, their power increases and iconoclasm becomes ever more frequent and widespread' (Freedberg 2016, 87–88). As images of destruction become more commonplace, we need fresh conceptual frameworks via which to analyse and interpret evolving forms of production and reception of these images, along with their changing meanings, scales and impacts (cf. Elsner 2016).

This paper analyses and interprets such videos through the analytical framework of Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm (DMI). DMI entails the deliberate destruction of heritage sites experienced primarily through the propaganda that the actor perpetrating the destruction (in this case the IS) makes available for consumption via global information networks. This propaganda includes videos, social

media messages, photographs, and other digital media on online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Tumblr. The strategy entails the recording of a site before, during and after the moment of destruction – what Elsner (2016, 135) calls ‘a kind of slow striptease conducted through episodes of filmed destruction, like a porn soap opera’. It also relies on digital technology for the storage, duplication and distribution of the propaganda via social media, for its consumption and experience by both global and local audiences. For the IS, the process of destruction is as important as the outcome; the three stages are essential acts in their own right. For instance, recording the moments before the destruction of a site builds up tension in the narrative. The process of destruction is intentional and literally ‘directed’ by someone with knowledge of propagandistic filmmaking techniques. The site is then dutifully recorded after the destruction has occurred as if to document the scale and veracity of their war on cultural heritage. What sets DMI apart from other iconoclastic events is not only the effort and attention to detail that the IS puts into creating high-quality digital products, but also the tension that is produced by the stages of destruction that they document. Also, such destruction involves the allocation of human resources to create a digital product, demonstrating the commitment of the group towards an iconoclastic agenda. More telling is the fact that the destruction is recorded not by the victim, but by the perpetrator, further evidence of IS commitment to the destruction of heritage.

To elucidate this conceptual framework, this paper begins with a discussion of the critical concepts utilised in developing DMI, namely ‘heritage’, ‘iconoclasm’, ‘heritage destruction’, and how these interface with digital media. This leads to a discussion of the precise contours and parameters of DMI and its usefulness in analysing contemporary iconoclasm. DMI is then applied to an analysis of photographs and videos produced by the IS that document the destruction of the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, the destruction of artefacts inside the Mosul Cultural Museum and at the archaeological sites of Nineveh and Nimrud in Iraq. These case studies reflect one key category of the vast array of different types of sites that have been attacked by the IS, that of *Pre-Monotheistic Iconoclasm*. Such sites are deliberately attacked because they are the material remnants of polytheistic cultures and religions that inhabited modern Syria and Iraq before the advent of Islam, such as those of ancient Mesopotamia or the Greco-Roman world. Under strict interpretations of Abrahamic monotheism, such sites and artefacts are considered heretical and blasphemous and therefore ought to be destroyed (Isakhan and González Zarandona 2018). This paper concludes by proposing that understanding the various motives that underpin DMI is critical to understanding and mitigating against iconoclasm as a form of terror and its dissemination via digital media technologies.

## Heritage, iconoclasm and digital media

To understand the processes of mediation involved in DMI, we must first contextualise the meaning of ‘heritage’, ‘iconoclasm’ and ‘heritage destruction’. Heritage does not exist outside of a conceptual framework (Smith 2006), particularly regarding the role of the historical past in present socio-political and cultural configurations. Heritage is not only the materialisation of culture but also the intangible processes by which humans socialise and construct themselves through symbols (Miller 1994). As such, heritage plays a fundamental element in the construction of identity. Likewise, scholars have looked at the political aspect of heritage and the tensions that arise as a result of contestations over definitions, interpretations, ownership and competing claims to the past (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; García Canclini 1997). As heritage is defined and interpreted by different groups, a struggle for political power arises. This political dimension of heritage is a crucial focus of Heritage Studies, where contestations over the past are inherent in the formulation of contemporary identities.

Iconoclasm is a term traditionally associated with historical instances of the destruction of religious iconography during the Byzantine period of the eighth and ninth centuries, Protestant sects such as Calvinism during the sixteenth century, and the spread of Wahhabism across the Arabian Peninsula from the nineteenth century (Brubaker 2012; Noyes 2013). In these cases, iconoclasts focused on the destruction of what they saw as the sacrilegious representation of God, or God’s creations, in images and icons. By erasing a particular image or object, iconoclasts sought to target the mnemonic capacity

of images and objects that make specific practices or identities manifest in the world. The concept of iconoclasm has also expanded to encompass and reflect instances where the deliberate destruction of art and heritage occurs for political reasons (Gamboni 1997; Boldrick, Brubaker, and Clay 2013), or because some might find it offensive and transgressional (Julius 2002; Gubern 2004). Iconoclasm therefore also includes the abolition of established beliefs, ideas, and traditions that the images or objects enshrine. In this regard, iconoclasts seek to purify society and remove the ideologies of their political enemies through the eradication of idols. Iconoclasm is the specific targeting of material manifestations of cultural heritage because of their perceived threat to a particular doctrine or ideology.

Iconoclasm can therefore be understood to include attacks beyond religious icons. Recent literature has focused on the concept of heritage destruction to interpret the attempt by an actor or group to deliberately damage or destroy the tangible or intangible manifestations of the culture of a particular community (Layton, Stone, and Thomas 2001; González-Ruibal 2013; Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015). Scholarship suggests that heritage destruction is the result of a desire to erase the memories and the cultural identities associated with a particular community (Mitchell 2016, 69–70; Isakhan, González Zarandona, and Al-Deen 2018). By destroying heritage, the perpetrator is destroying national, social or sacred aspects attached to identity (Riedlmayer 2002; Auwera 2012). For this reason, scholars have argued that the destruction of cultural heritage sites may be a case of cultural genocide that seeks to destroy the history and memory of entire ethnic groups (Bevan 2006), by targeting sites where the practice of traditions, in the form of rituals, gives meaning to cultural identity (Braarvig 2014). In sum, iconoclasts attack these places and the people who cherish them because they are central to the dismantling of their cultural identity and the practices that in turn nourish this identity (Walasek 2015, 52–58; Isakhan *forthcoming*). Targets for iconoclasts can be religious sites, but also libraries (Knuth 2006; Frieze 2011), museums (Stone and Bajjaly 2008), archaeological sites (Meskell 1998) or any other place that promotes and encourages the practice of a group's language and culture, including repositories of their artistic, literary and intellectual achievements (Nersessian 2005).

However, the mediation of heritage destruction has seldom been analysed, a lacuna that the concept of DMI seeks to address. Mediation is at the core of every act of iconoclasm. We understand mediation as 'an intrinsic condition of being-in and becoming-with the technological world' (Kember and Zylinska 2012, xviii). Even though early periods of iconoclasm were not experienced through broadcast or digital media, a type of mediation did take place. This mediation, between the transcendent being and its depiction in an image or sculpture, was the reason why iconoclasts took issue with images and objects. Iconoclasts also took a stand against the creation of ornamental objects, arguing that the resources allocated to this end could be better spent elsewhere (Flood 2016, 119). Iconoclasts believed that the power of images and objects resided in the mediation that was made possible through the physical embodiment of the transcendent being (Freedberg 1989, 2016). The fact that a divinity could be represented in an image was, for the iconoclast, the reason idolatry existed.

More to the point, throughout history moments of iconoclasm have been recorded and disseminated to document the erasure of blasphemous idols or images. Iconoclasm is pointless without an audience, and the witnessing or recording of heritage destruction is key to disseminating the message. The defacement of the Golden Calf by Moses was not only witnessed by the Israelites but recorded in the Bible alongside the recounting of the Ten Commandments which explicitly prohibit the worship of idols (Exodus 20: 3–4; 32: 1–20; 34). During the French Revolution, when countless statues and effigies associated with royalty and Catholicism were wrecked and removed, the destruction was mediated not only by the press, but also by artists who created etchings, drawings and paintings that depicted the defacement of monuments during and after the revolution (Gamboni 1997, 31–36; Clay 2012).

During the twentieth century, new technologies were used to document the destruction of symbols for propaganda purposes. In the First World War, photographs of the burnt Library of the University of Louvain in Belgium were used to portray the German perpetrators as the barbarian 'Huns', while also creating a collective consciousness about the loss of cultural heritage. As Tollebeek (2014, 11) writes: 'The burning of the precious, centuries-old library prompted more outrage even than the civilian casualties or ruined houses'. Another emblematic case was the attack on the National and University

Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo in August 1992. The attack aimed to destroy the histories and stories belonging to the different cultural groups that made up the social fabric of the former Yugoslavia (Riedlmayer 2002; Walasek 2015). Mass media broadcasted images of the fire, and later on, photographs of the ruins became widely known when cellist Vedran Smailovic was photographed playing his instrument inside the remains of the building. The tradition of using media to document iconoclasm has continued into the twenty-first century. In 2001, a video documenting the blowing up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban brought worldwide attention to the plight of heritage sites under fundamentalist rule (Flood 2002; Falser 2011; Elias 2013). Two years later, global news channels covered the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad, an event that was carefully staged and documented by the US Army to symbolically mark the end of a regime (Major and Perlmutter 2005; Isakhan 2011). The war on cultural heritage and their mediation are an extension of the battlefield (cf. Mitchell 2005, 94, 2011).

### **Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm: digital media and terrorism in the twenty-first century**

In the digital age, new media technology has created new publics to which propaganda acts and iconoclastic events can be directed. What we have termed DMI is positioned in a historical and technological juncture in which digital media has become key to most political communication. Social media platforms, therefore, provide groups such as the IS with the ability to disseminate their fundamentalist message to reach both local and global audiences in ways and at a speed impossible to earlier generations of *jihadists*. Using such technology to disseminate footage of violence or iconoclasm, the IS has been able to dominate the narrative during the current phase of the war on terror.

Social media platforms are crucial for the IS in the expansion of its ideology in digital spaces. This digital ideological campaign takes advantage of the nature of online publics, which are constantly being reshaped. As boyd (2010, 43) states: 'The properties of bits regulate the structure of networked publics, which, in turn, introduces new possible practices and shapes the interactions that take place.' The IS has been able to identify different networked publics and shape its messages accordingly. Even though the use of different types of media for terrorist propaganda is not a new phenomenon (Nacos 1994), the formation of networked publics alters the mechanisms by which the IS and other organisations circulate their propaganda.

This change is mainly due to the potential to reach diverse and often opposing audiences. In the case of the IS, these audiences include IS enthusiasts, IS cells around the world, anti-IS groups, diasporic communities, news media organisations, researchers, citizen journalists, commentators, and consumers. The ripples that spread out from the IS and their DMI across digital spaces could be understood as what Madianou calls 'polymedia events', where an event 'generates a series of reactions or related events which are played out in different media platforms' (Madianou 2013, 261). Polymedia events, Madianou (2013, 261) argues, are 'transnational and decentralised in the sense that there is no shared official or central narrative; polymedia events are marked by parallel or clashing narratives.' When the IS releases an iconoclastic video, the responses by different actors turn it into a polymedia event – thus constituting a vital part of DMI.

Another key part of their DMI strategy is that the IS also relies on the ability to archive information on the Internet, making its storage decentralised, and allowing its propaganda to be relatively easy to access. Congealed in space and time, the destruction of heritage exists in a digital archive that reminds us about the absurdity of war and the damage it brings to people and the objects they make meaningful. Cultural heritage is not only transformed when it is destroyed through physical harm but also when it is uploaded to the Internet where the outburst of violence is permanently stored for widespread and repeated consumption. It is then widely interpreted by networked publics, extending the process of iconoclasm ad infinitum. With the advent of digital archives, 'a universal cultural memory bank accessible to all cultural producers' (Manovich 2013, 250) has been created. The proliferation of digital content distribution channels also means that violent groups – cultural producers in their own right – have a more extensive range of propagandistic tools at their disposal and they can distribute

this content faster than ever (Mitchell 2011, 20). When spread on social media, DMI spectacles can be shared, remixed and commented upon by audiences endemic to digital.

The IS relies on the interplay between social and broadcast media, as ‘public discourse about terrorism is also primed by mediated images of terrorists and terror violence in broadcast and (to a lesser degree) print news media’ (Tuman 2009, 179), as well as online outlets. And media is the oxygen that keeps feeding the fire of terrorist propaganda, as ‘terrorists have learned to manipulate news media to ensure publication and distribution of their rhetoric to a global audience’ (Tuman 2009, 179). Indeed, the IS has been quick to adapt to contemporary social media dynamics. Researchers have identified fundamental differences between *Al Qaeda* and the IS use of social media, resulting in part from the increasing sophistication of social media platforms. As Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Yayla (2017, 84) argue:

What differentiates ISIS from other extremist groups [...] is its ability to utilize its online campaign to both attract and recruit potential followers and promote its brand as a serious, powerful, and ruthless organization. Unlike other jihadist terrorist organizations, its online campaign does not operate in the shadows; on the contrary, its content is outsourced and distributed to everyone willing to embrace it.

The IS looks for publicity rather than secrecy, evidence of its sophisticated understanding of social media platforms. On Twitter alone, it is estimated that, at its peak, more than 46,000 accounts were created in support of the IS (Speckhard, Shajkovci, and Yayla 2017, 84). Russo (2017, 459) has recognised the use of pop culture motifs as a strategy of the IS, through which they built a powerful brand. When distributed via social networking sites, IS heritage destruction is seen as newsworthy and has been picked up by the mainstream media, something which amplifies the potency of their iconoclastic acts. This recalls what Debord defines as a ‘spectacle’ or ‘a social relation among people, mediated by images’ (Debord 1983 [1967], 2). Best and Kellner (1999, 144) take this a step further, contending that we are in a more advanced stage of the spectacle: the interactive spectacle, which involves the creation of cultural spaces and forms that present exciting possibilities for creativity and empowerment of individuals, as well as novel ways of seduction and domination.

Some scholars have sought to document the IS use of ‘interactive spectacle’ via an examination of the interface between social media, cultural heritage and terrorism. For example, Smith et al. (2015, 10) define ‘Socially Mediated Terrorism’ (SMT) as ‘the use of social and networked media to increase the impact of violent acts undertaken to further a social, political and/or religious cause with the aim of creating physical, emotional or psychological suffering that extends beyond the immediate audience’. The authors rightly frame the difference between previous heritage destruction and the iconoclasm perpetrated by the IS as contingent on their use of digital media and its potential for global impact, given that these acts are directed towards several audiences.

However, we contend that DMI is a more suitable tool than SMT for the analysis and interpretation of the destruction of heritage sites by groups such as the IS. Firstly, the use of the term ‘digital’, as opposed to ‘socially’, shifts the focus from social media to encapsulate the broader interplay between traditional media (TV, radio, print) and new media (including, but not limited to, social media), and the extent to which this interface is contingent on the unprecedented speed and ubiquitous nature of information technologies. Secondly, DMI’s use of the term ‘iconoclasm’ does not reduce the heritage destruction perpetrated by the IS to purely a form of ‘terror’. While Smith et al. (2015) advance the study of IS terror as propagated through social media, their thesis reduces the heritage destruction of the IS to a part of their broader violent agenda. DMI focuses more specifically on its iconoclastic programme, capturing the fact that the IS seeks to destroy venerated images and rupture a community’s sense of identity, to send powerful ideological messages, as well as to terrorise local populations and horrify global audiences through impactful ‘interactive spectacles’. Finally, DMI advances earlier work by focusing on the mediation of the key phases of destruction (before, during and after) through digital technology, building a tension never experienced in earlier cases of iconoclasm. As Flood (2016, 123) has put it: there is a tension ‘between the desire for information on unfolding events and the fact that the full efficacy of iconoclastic spectacles occurs in a symbiotic relation to practices of circulation and viewing that underwrite the ability of images of destruction to ‘go viral’. This process

can be explained via a definition of iconoclasm as: ‘a moment in ongoing processes of discursive sign transformation that precede, accompany and proceed from moments of physical breaking’ (Boldrick, Brubaker, and Clay 2013, 2).

Iconoclasm therefore accelerates the natural lifetime of cultural objects. This notion resonates with Mitchell’s (2016, 32) argument that the destruction of images can never be achieved because images are always evolving and being adapted to newer types of media. Although that adaptation is interrupted by destruction, it may continue in another form of media, a fact that is emphasised by the three stages of DMI. In other words, the mnemonic quality of images allows their endurance in other forms of media after they are materially destroyed. Viewing iconoclasm as a process of transformation therefore allows us to consider DMI as a more fluid polymedia event that permeates not only different media but also different phases of the same event. The mediation of heritage destruction by the IS therefore not only serves as a physical embodiment of IS ideology, terrifying local populations and horrifying global audiences, it also creates a carefully staged documentation of the process of heritage destruction, a digital legacy of the before, during and after of the moment of destruction. To demonstrate, the remainder of this paper analyses and interprets videos and photographs produced and published by the IS, focusing specifically on the destruction or Pre-Monotheistic artefacts and sites such as the ancient city of Palmyra, the Mosul Cultural Museum, Nineveh and Nimrud.

## The Islamic State and Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm

### Palmyra

A clear example of DMI is the digital mediation by the IS of the defacement of several monuments at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Palmyra, located in the Homs province of Syria.<sup>3</sup> Originally an oasis, Palmyra – adjacent to the modern town of Tadmur – became a prominent caravan city on the Silk Road from the first to the third century CE. It reached its splendour in the mid-second century after it achieved independence from the Roman Empire in 129 CE. Its inhabitants spoke Palmyrene – an Aramaic language related to Hebrew and Nabatean until it disappeared in the late-third century as a result of Emperor Aurelian’s reconquest of the site (Terpak and Louis Bonfitto 2017). Although Palmyra is often framed as a Greco-Roman city, for much of its history it was the capital of an independent trade empire. In fact, it only became known as Palmyra (the ‘City of Palms’) after it was annexed to the Roman Empire in the first century. Over the centuries, the Palmyrenes venerated an array of gods and devoted many temples to them, as the various rare religious sites and beautiful monuments across the site attest.

Since the IS established Raqqa as their de facto capital in 2013 up until their defeat in 2017, there was significant concern amongst the international community about the potential destruction of archaeological sites in Syria by the IS, particularly World Heritage sites such as Palmyra (Bokova 2015). Such concerns proved prescient. In May 2015, Palmyra was the scene of heavy fighting between the IS and pro-regime forces in Syria, and by the end of the month, the IS had captured the ancient city (Sami 2015). Among the first acts was the rounding up and execution of approximately 20 Syrian soldiers at the site’s famous amphitheatre. Locals were forced to watch before the bodies were dumped in mass graves.

The first video of Palmyra uploaded to the Internet by the IS was made available on YouTube by the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA) on May 26, 2015, just days after the group conquered the city. The video shows several architectural features of Palmyra, including the Temple of Bel, the colonnaded street, and the amphitheatre (APSA 2015a). Unlike subsequent videos released by the IS, no post-production effects were added to the raw footage. Consistent with the model of DMI, the brief video (1:27 min) appears to deliberately document the ‘before’ stage – showing the site at the time of the IS conquest and demonstrating that no destruction had yet occurred. Two days later, on May 28, 2015, APSA posted on its Facebook site pictures of Palmyra published by the IS the previous day. The photographs reveal that virtually no damage had been done to the site, although



one image from inside the small museum located at Palmyra showed some evidence of looting and internal damage. Particularly noteworthy are two pictures. One is a panoramic shot of the amphitheatre with the iconic IS black flag flying atop the building, symbolically showing the conquest of the site. Another photograph shows a fighter holding an IS flag and standing among the famous colonnades as if preparing for battle (APSA 2015b).

A month and a half later, on July 15, 2015, IS posted high resolution pictures of the Palmyra citadel (twelfth-thirteenth century), known in Arabic as *Fakhr-al-Din al-Ma'ani Qalaat*. APSA subsequently posted the photographs on its website (APSA 2015c). The pictures depict the citadel, which sits at the top of a hill overlooking the modern city of Tadmur and the archaeological site. The images not only show the IS occupation of the site, but also help highlight the monumentality of the fortress. One of the photographs – which was utilised by news outlets across the world (Al-Arabiya 2015; SMH 2015) – shows the fort with the IS insignia flying atop the citadel (Figure 1). The caption in Arabic reads: ‘Tadmur citadel under the control of the Caliphate’. The image is dated 4 Sha’ban 1436 (23 May 2015). Together, the pictures document the presence of IS in Palmyra and are designed to send a clear message: the fate of the site now depended on the IS.

Here, we can identify a fundamental dynamic of DMI propaganda: its capacity to reach mainstream global audiences and generate tension. The images were first distributed by the IS online. The imminent threat to heritage represented in these images was then echoed by concerned organisations and later magnified by established print and broadcast outlets across the world in a ripple effect. By using recognisable symbols, such as the placing of a flag over the site, the IS achieved both a physical and an ideological conquest.

Over the coming months, the IS would go on to do a great deal of damage at Palmyra and several significant sites adjacent to it. There is evidence to suggest that from early on in their occupation of Palmyra, the IS had begun to systematically look for small moveable antiquities they thought would be easy to smuggle out of the country and onto the international black market (BBC 2015; Bokova 2015). In August 2015, the IS executed the 82-year-old archaeologist and site director, Khaled Al-As'ad, because he would not reveal where the most precious relics had been hidden (Melvin, Elwazer, and Berlinger 2015). He was brutally beheaded and strung up on a column at the site (Associated Press 2015). At the same time, the IS turned Palmyra’s small museum into a makeshift courtroom and prison,



Figure 1. DMI stage: before destruction. Palmyra Citadel (Al-Arabiya 2015).

where they also destroyed the ancient statue of the 'Lion of Athena', dating back to the first century BCE (The Guardian 2015).

Between June and September 2015, the IS destroyed seven funerary monuments dating to the first and second centuries CE. These sandstone structures are among the most distinctive of Palmyra's funerary objects, standing up to four stories high. They are a testament to the powerful families that once inhabited the city (Danti et al. 2015d, 43–57; Shaheen 2015a). In October 2015, the IS also destroyed the Arch of Triumph, a 1800-year-old structure that framed the entrance to the city (Danti et al. 2015e, 48–51; Shaheen 2015b). Compared to other sites destroyed by the IS, the destruction at Palmyra was widely covered by international media and frequently condemned. UNESCO described the destruction of the site as evidence of 'how terrified by history and culture the extremist are ... and exposes [their heritage destruction] as expressions of pure hatred and ignorance' (UNESCO 2015).

In August 2015, the IS published photos documenting the destruction of two 2000-year-old temples dedicated to pagan gods, the Baalshamin Temple and the Temple of Bel (Danti et al. 2015c, 69–73; 89–91; Danti et al. 2015d, 26–42). These were among the best-preserved buildings devoted to these ancient deities anywhere in the world (Melvin, Elwazer, and Berlinger 2015). The attacks were confirmed when the United Nations released satellite images revealing that the IS had in fact destroyed the two temples. The photos the IS released were also published in Issue 11 of *Dabiq* (2015, 32–33). They appear as part of a double-page spread with 14 colour photographs documenting the defacement of the temples (Figures 2 and 3). In the English edition, the only text accompanying these images is: 'Destroying the shirk temple of Bel' and 'Destroying the shirk temple of Baal' (Dabiq 2015, 32–33). However, in the French edition of *Dabiq*, titled *Dar Al-Islam*, the same images are accompanied by the text: 'Baal is a false divinity for which people sacrificed their children as indicated in the book of Jeremiah (Old Testament). But by the Grace of Allah, soldiers of the Caliphate destroyed it'. Underneath the photographs showing the destruction, a verse from the *Qur'an* (20: 97) is cited: 'And look at your 'god' to which you remained devoted. We will surely burn it and blow it into the sea with a blast' (Dar-Al-Islam 2015, 49).

The 14 images in *Dabiq* conform to the model of DMI. At both sites, four photographs document the 'before' stage. These images depict the logistics involved in setting up the explosives, a job carried out by faceless IS members, anonymous iconoclasts attaching bombs to the ancient temples. Some photographs are close-ups of the explosives placed in different sections of the ancient buildings, revealing that destroying them was a complex logistical exercise, requiring the strength of at least nine men in the case of the Temple of Bel. The most prominent pictures of the two sites show the temples in all their splendour with the bombs attached. As a series, all of the photographs work together to build a palpable tension as a result of the preparations carried out by the group, which devotes a lot of time and resources to ensure maximum destruction.

Two photographs of each temple document the 'during' stage of DMI, the moment when the monuments are blown to pieces. The destruction is recorded from different angles and distances, further indicating the dedication and planning that has gone into capturing iconoclasm in a coherent audio-visual piece. One of the photographs depicting the destruction of the temple of Baalshamin 'went viral' after it was published in various digital outlets; it captures the exact moment when the temple is destroyed and engulfed in a giant brown mushroom cloud that dwarfs the temple's columns.

A pair of photographs document the DMI stage of 'after' the destruction, revealing the desolated and empty landscape after the obliteration of each temple. These photographs stand as definitive proof that the task was completed. Interestingly, both images also reveal remaining architectural features at the sites. They point to the ongoing nature of iconoclasm as the viewer becomes aware that although the destruction of this temple is complete, other structures can be destroyed in the future. via such photographs, the IS was able to not only highlight their iconoclastic agenda but also demonstrate their awareness of how powerful the digital mediation of destruction can be. The number of photographs dedicated to each DMI stage (see Table 1) is an indication that emphasis is placed on the moments before the destruction. Focusing on these moments is particularly effective for creating tension – a key characteristic of DMI. Furthermore, looking at the carefully designed way in which the pictures

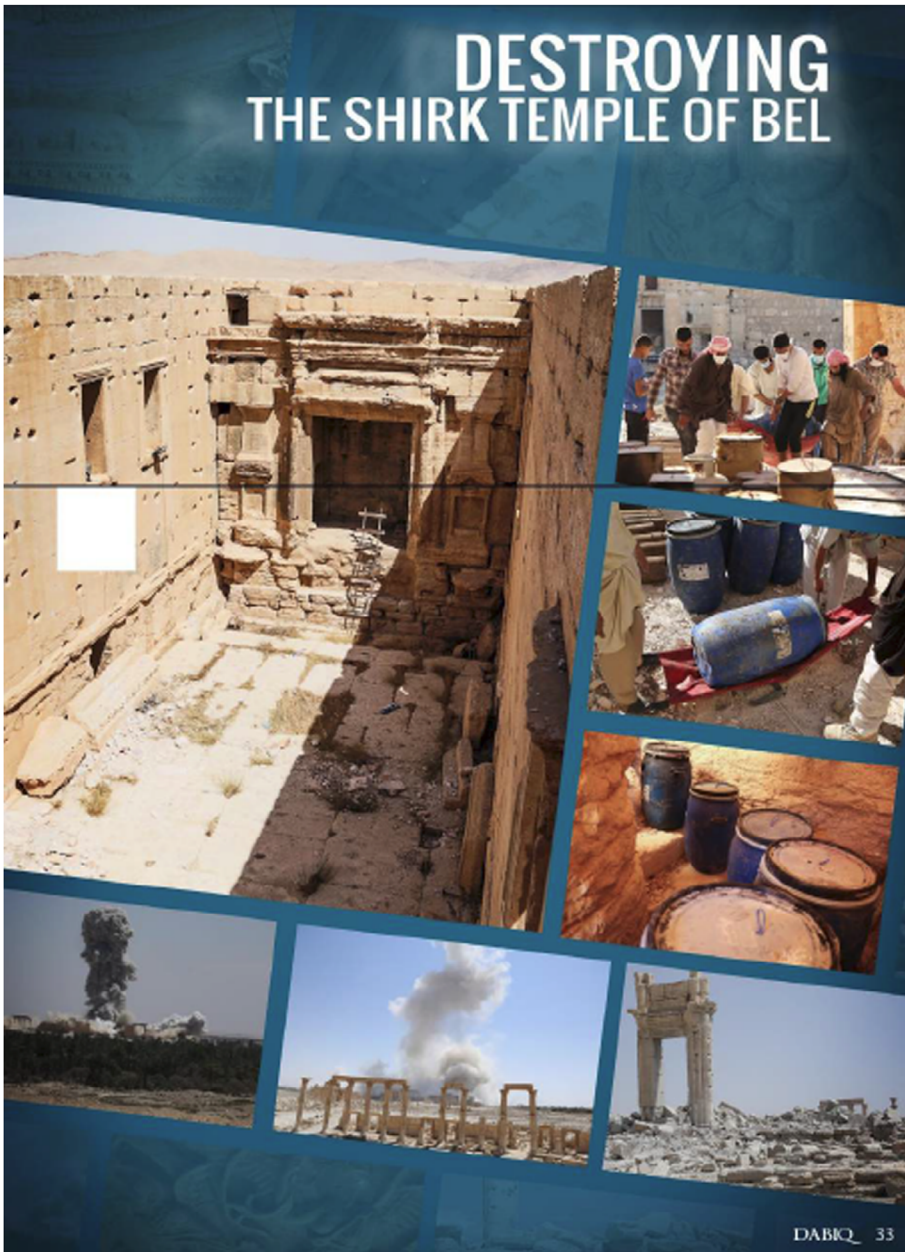


**Figure 2.** DMI stages: before, during and after the destruction. The Temple of Baalshamin (Dabiq 2015, 32).

are arranged demonstrates that someone with the necessary graphic-design skills to construct a visual narrative prepared them to have maximum impact.

### ***The Mosul Cultural Museum and Nineveh***

The Mosul Cultural Museum, the second largest Iraqi museum after the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad, first opened in the 1940s and then re-opened in the 1970s in its current location, adjacent to the Martyrs Park. The collection included Pre-historic, Assyrian, Hatra, and Islamic artefacts organised in four ground-floor galleries or halls. The collection was testament of the rich cultural heritage of



**Figure 3.** DMI stages: before, during and after the destruction. The Temple of Bel (Dabiq 2015, 33).

the area. Following the US invasion in 2003, 1500 objects belonging to the collection were relocated to the Iraqi National Museum to prevent looting. Nevertheless, in April 2003 valuable books and atlases from the library, as well as 30 Assyrian bronze panels, were stolen. The authorities had to close the museum (Gibson 2009, 3–4). In 2009, a report commissioned by UNESCO highlighted the poor conservation conditions in the museum, providing recommendations to improve security standards (Gibson 2009). However, the insecurity that engulfed the nation in the aftermath of Iraq war from 2003 prevented these measures from being put in place.

**Table 1.** Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm: the IS destruction of pre-monotheistic heritage sites.

Country	Syria		Iraq	
Site	Palmyra: Temple of Baalshamin	Palmyra: Temple of Bel	The Mosul Cultural Museum	Nineveh
IS Media	Photographs published in <i>Dabiq</i>	Photographs published in <i>Dabiq</i>	Video released by <i>Al-Hayat</i>	Video released by <i>Al-Hayat</i>
DMI stages				
<i>Before destruction</i>	4 photographs showing site with explosives and preparation of explosives	4 photographs showing site with explosives and preparation of explosives	Footage inside Hatra gallery (00:25–00:56)	Footage outside the Nergal Gate (00:57–02:37); (04:08–04:23)
<i>During destruction</i>	2 photographs showing explosion at site	2 photographs showing explosion at site	Footage showing destruction of statues in Hatra gallery (02:39–03:57); (04:03–04:08)	Destruction of <i>Lamassu</i> at Nergal Gate (04:23–04:29) and <i>Lamassu</i> and colossal head inside the site (04:29–05:00)
<i>After destruction</i>	1 photograph showing ruins after destruction	1 photograph showing ruins after destruction	Footage showing aftermath of destruction in Hatra gallery (03:58–04:03)	Not applicable Footage after the explosion (06:56–07:02)

In June 2014, the IS took control of the Mosul Cultural Museum when it captured the city. In February 2015 the IS released a video where militants are shown destroying Hatrene sculptures at the museum (Brusasco 2016, 248), and Assyrian statues at the ancient archaeological site of Nineveh (Al-Hayat 2015a). This video is perhaps the most relevant case of DMI because it is the first piece that demonstrates the IS intention to record the three stages of digital iconoclasm. As described in the introduction of this paper, the first part of the video shows the museum and its artefacts at the 'before' stage of DMI, when the destruction has not yet begun. The impending destruction is justified, according to a man standing at the Nergal Gate in Nineveh, in order to erase signs of polytheism:

Oh Muslims, the remains that you see behind me are the idols of peoples of previous centuries, which were worshipped instead of Allah. The so-called Assyrians, Akkadians, and others took for themselves gods of rain, of agriculture, and of war, and worshipped them along with Allah, and tried to appease them with all kinds of sacrifices (Al-Hayat 2015a).

Back inside the Hatra gallery, once the Qur'anic words ('So he broke them to pieces') on the screen fade out, the film moves to the 'during' stage of DMI, showing militants pushing a life-size statue representing a priest from Hatra to the floor. One by one, 15 of the museum's most important Hatrene statues and sculptures are destroyed by men with sledgehammers and drills. The statues represent several Hatrene gods, priests, noblemen, animals and kings (Danti et al. 2015a, 58–59), most likely from Hatra's golden age. Like Palmyra, Hatra – 80 kilometres southwest of Mosul – was a trading city, located in the fringes of the Parthian Empire, which reached its peak during the second and first half of the third centuries CE. It was abandoned in 240 after a successful siege enforced by the Sassanians (Dirven 2008, 210–211).

After the statues have been toppled, the destruction continues as many are smashed to pieces by men wielding sledgehammers. Shots from different angles and the use of slow motion allows the viewer to bear witness to the relentless bashing of the ancient artefacts. The cuts are swift and precise with each shot only lasting a couple of seconds, barely enough for the viewer to register the exact moment when the statues are broken to pieces. A chant by a group of men can be heard on the soundtrack. The destruction is not only conveyed through verbal, visual and textual cues, but also reinforced through aural devices:

Allah is the greatest ... Destroy, destroy the state of idols.

Hell is for idols and statues,

Destroy the lies of America and its gang,

There is no place for the liar and sinful soldiers (Al-Hayat 2015a).

Once all of the statues have been smashed, the camera lingers for a few seconds to document the result, consistent with DMI's 'after' stage. One minute before the video is over, a tracking shot of the Hatra gallery allows the viewer to assess the damage. In stark contrast to the opening scene, the museum floor is now covered with the rubble of statues dating back nearly two thousand years.

In the final section of the video another example of the 'interactive spectacle' inherent in DMI unfolds. The viewer is transported back to the ancient archaeological site of Nineveh, which dates back to the ninth century BCE. Located on the outskirts of the contemporary city of Mosul, Nineveh was one of the oldest and most populated capital cities of the ancient Assyrian empire. Its period of splendour coincided with the reigns of Sennacherib (705–681 BCE), who established Nineveh as his capital, and Ashurbanipal (668–c. 627 BCE), who is famous for collecting a vast trove of cuneiform tablets kept at the site. Both monarchs were instrumental in transforming Nineveh into a magnificent city. However, Nineveh was pillaged by different enemies in 612 BCE and the Assyrian empire collapsed (Russell 1998; Reade 2011, 120). In the nineteenth century, a British archaeologist by the name of Austen Henry Layard undertook extensive excavations at the ancient city (Reade 1986, 12).

When the IS captured Mosul in the summer of 2014, it also took control of the adjacent archaeological site of Nineveh. In the February 2015 video released by the IS, they dutifully record the extent of their iconoclastic campaign at the ancient city (Al-Hayat 2015a). The 'before' stage of DMI sees the

video focuses on the giant *Lamassu* statue at a key entrance to the city, the Nergal Gate. The *Lamassu* statues represented an Assyrian mythological creature which is half-man and half-winged bull. The well-conserved statue is then compared to a photo of a *Lamassu* excavated in the nineteenth century to show its idolatrous provenance (Figure 4). The caption on-screen states that the statue was found by ‘Satan’s worshippers’ (presumably Western archaeologists).

A swift cut and a zoom-out reveal a man on top of a scaffold using a drill to remove the human face of the statue (Figure 5). The sound is magnified to make the destruction more striking. Inside the archaeological site, a series of shots from various angles document the ‘during’ stage constituted by heavy damage being done to a statue by men using power tools. Another winged bull, less well preserved than the one defaced at the Nergal Gate, suffers the same fate: its legs and head are smashed with sledgehammers (Figure 6). Next, the man who defaced the statue at the Nergal Gate is filmed destroying a colossal human head placed next to the heavily damaged winged bull (Figure 7). The spectacle is rendered in slow-motion to emphasise the moment when the sculpture finally crumbles. The video finishes with a black screen on which white letters reveal the organisation responsible for making the video: The Media Organisation of the Islamic State. The ‘after’ stage of DMI is not well-developed in the Nineveh section of the video. Perhaps because this was one of their earliest videos and the IS had not yet realised the potential of showing the aftermath of iconoclasm. However, as documented below, this strategy was later perfected with the recording of destruction at Nimrud.

### Nimrud

Nimrud is one of the most important archaeological sites in Iraq. It is located in the Nineveh province, 30 kilometres south of Mosul. Together with Nineveh, Nimrud was once a capital city of the Assyrian empire. Nimrud gained prominence when King Ashurnasirpal II (883 – 859 BCE) transferred the capital of the Assyrian empire from Ashur. Under Ashurnasirpal II and his son, Shalmaneser III (859 – 824 BCE), Nimrud was ‘conceived and created as the capital city for the new imperial power’ (Radner 2015, 28). It was during Ashurnasirpal II’s reign that the Northwest Palace of Nimrud was built to serve as both the royal residence and the administrative capital of the empire (Danti et al. 2015b). Nimrud remained the capital of the Assyrian empire until 706 BCE, when Sargon II (722 – 705 BCE) moved the capital to Khorsabad (Radner 2015, 37). Nimrud was re-discovered in the nineteenth



Figure 4. DMI stage: before destruction. *Lamassu* statue at the Nergal Gate, Nineveh (Al-Hayat 2015a).



**Figure 5.** DMI stage: during destruction. *Lamassu* statue at the Nergal Gate, Nineveh (Al-Hayat 2015a).



**Figure 6.** DMI stage: during destruction. *Lamassu* statue at Nineveh (Al-Hayat 2015a).

century by Layard, who began excavations in 1845. Novelist Agatha Christie's husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan, also conducted excavations *in situ* between 1949 and 1957.

When the IS took control of the city of Mosul in 2014, they actively targeted Nimrud as part of their broader campaign of heritage destruction. From 25 January to 1 April 2015, the IS conducted a series of iconoclastic acts at Nimrud that culminated in the bombing of the Northwest Palace (Danti 2016). Ten days later, on the 11 April 2015, they released a video documenting their destruction at the site (Al-Hayat 2015b). The video starts similarly to the one at the Mosul Cultural Museum and Nineveh, with the words 'In the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful'. Then, superimposed in white and green typography, we read the film's title 'The Promotion of Virtue and the Preventers of Vice'. Images document the earlier iconoclastic acts of the IS, including the destruction of other





**Figure 7.** DMI stage: during destruction. Colossal head at Nineveh (Al-Hayat 2015a).

archaeological sites, as well as the targeting of mosques and the removal of crosses from churches. Later, a voice recites the *Qur'an*:

When Abraham said, 'My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death', he [the disbeliever] said, 'I give life and cause death'. Abraham said, 'Indeed, Allah brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west'. So the disbeliever was overwhelmed [by astonishment], and Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people (Baqara: 258).

Several images detail features of Nimrud at the 'before' stage of DMI, including a *Lamassu* statue, as well as steles with cuneiform writing and various depictions of humans and gods (see Figure 8).

The video then cuts to the man who defaced the *Lamassu* at the Nergal Gate in Nineveh, clad in black, explaining why the artefacts will be destroyed. The man claims that 'Allah has given [the IS] the honour of destroying all idols worshipped instead of Allah in the old days ... We are destroying each idol and statue which was found as an opponent to Allah'. Then, the man offers the following



**Figure 8.** DMI stage: before destruction. Nimrud (Al-Hayat 2015b).

ripost to those who condemned the destruction that occurred at the Mosul Cultural Museum and Nineveh by stating that:

We all saw ... [the] media's outrage over what the worshippers of Allah had done in destroying these idols and condemning their actions. Scum and worthless people who were shown on TV screens crying and condemning the destruction ... These idols were worshipped instead of Allah ... They [the TV programs] show the believers [the IS] as uncivilized and savages who do not care about heritage and civilization and whatever they did to the idols and statues is a big loss ... To those who are angry and upset about the destruction of idols ... To those who kept these idols protected in museums and made these idols as their history, heritage, civilization and identity. They forgot that there is no civilization, nor a life or dignity without Allah. (Al-Hayat 2015b)

While the man is on camera, several images of Nimrud continue to show the archaeological site before it is destroyed. Equally important is the poetic chant that can be heard on the soundtrack, encouraging the attackers to perform their duty:

Today is your day o' young man,

do what your ancestors did with determination.

Today is your day o' young man,

do what Hamza and Usama and Ibn al-Waleed [followers of Mohammed] did with determination.

Patience and determination are your way to absolute victory,

declare your love loudly, the universe listens to your chant. (Al-Hayat 2015b)

The conjoint soundtrack and images depicting the site enhance the dramatic nature of this 'interactive spectacle'.

The video reaches its peak when the man stops talking and we are suddenly thrust into the 'during' stage of DMI. It begins when IS militants can be seen using sledgehammers and drills to tear down and smash giant reliefs covered in cuneiform writing describing Ashurnasirpal II and his conquests, as well as depictions of gods and humans engaged in hunting, battle, processions and various ceremonies (Danti et al. 2015b). The bulk of these reliefs were in Ashurnasirpal II's Throne Room and the partially reconstructed Northwest Palace. Every time the fighters are successful in separating a piece of the ancient carvings, they shout 'Allahu Akbar' [God is great]. Later in the film, the men use a mechanical excavator to remove a whole section of Assyrian reliefs and reduce them to a pile of rubble.

Once the internal destruction has been completed, the IS militants set about destroying the various standing structures at the site with explosives. Characteristic of IS iconoclasm, the blowing up of Nimrud is preceded by a sermon from an IS member on the unjust and heretical rule of the kings of Nimrud. While he's talking, shots of militants setting-up explosives (see Figure 9) are superimposed, as well as images depicting the site covered in explosives, just as with the temples in Palmyra. The final words of the man are directed to a myriad of audiences:

Whenever we control a swathe of a land we remove all signs of polytheism and fill the land with monotheism. We swear by Allah we will remove all signs of polytheism until we destroy the tombs and the shrines of *al-Rafidha* [a derogatory word for the Shia] and we will break the [Christian] crosses and the [White] house in the country of polytheism, America. (Al-Hayat 2015b)

Once he finishes, the site is shown for a couple of seconds from afar before it is blown up (Figure 10). A giant brown mushroom cloud forms over the site as the explosives are detonated (Figure 11). Different angles are shown and the footage slows down to maximise the dramatic impact of the iconoclasm. The camera shakes with the force of the blow. Finally, following the model of DMI, two images are shown of the 'after' stage, documenting the destruction at the site (Figure 12). These images are important because they serve as proof that the destruction has been completed. Centuries of material culture have been obliterated in a matter of seconds. The landscape is barren. Only scattered rubble, twisted debris and brown dust remains.



**Figure 9.** DMI stage: before destruction. Nimrud (Al-Hayat 2015b).



**Figure 10.** DMI stage: before destruction. Nimrud (Al-Hayat 2015b).

## Conclusion

This paper put forward the new analytical framework of Digitally Mediated Iconoclasm. We have defined DMI as a tool to analyse and interpret iconoclastic acts that are experienced through the propaganda that the perpetrator makes available in global information networks for consumption, duplication, and distribution. DMI therefore enables an analysis of heritage destruction within a historical and technological juncture in which digital media has become key to propaganda and terrorism in the twenty-first century. To demonstrate the utility of DMI, we analysed various propaganda produced by the militant *jihadi* network, the Islamic State, which documented their pre-monotheistic iconoclasm at sites such as the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, the Mosul Cultural Museum and at the archaeological sites of Nineveh and Nimrud in Iraq. The analysis revealed a pattern in how iconoclasm is performed and reproduced in the digital age (Table 1). This pattern is evident in the three key stages of DMI in which the IS went to great lengths to record: the status of the site 'before' destruction; 'during'



**Figure 11.** DMI stage: during destruction. Nimrud (Al-Hayat 2015b).



**Figure 12.** DMI stage: after destruction. Nimrud (Al-Hayat 2015b).

the moment of destruction itself; and ‘after’ the damage had been done. The three stages are essential elements of DMI, enabling the perpetrator to build up tension in the narrative and to demonstrate the veracity of their war on cultural heritage. What sets DMI apart from other iconoclastic events is not only the effort and attention to detail that such groups put into the destruction itself and its recording and dissemination, but also that the use of digital technology and production techniques allows the iconoclasm to be globally disseminated and permanently stored in digital archives for posterity.

The analysis also reveals how the analytical framework of DMI can be used to advance important work in heritage and media studies. Empirical analysis of the type conducted here have not yet been applied to other types of heritage destruction undertaken by the IS (at Shia mosques or Christian churches for example), or to other iconoclastic movements of the twenty-first century. Such analyses are urgently needed in order to continue to develop an understanding of the recurring nature of heritage destruction, the iconoclastic ideologies that drive it, and the interface these have with contemporary

digital technologies. This is critical to any attempt to develop appropriate policy responses in order to minimise or mitigate against such heritage destruction, as well as to countering the violent propaganda of groups such as the IS.

## Notes

1. Although many of the statues inside the Mosul Cultural Museum were fakes, the intentions of the IS remain the same: to destroy them in order to eradicate idolatry in the territories they conquered.
2. According to Winter (2015, 12), IS propaganda is produced by four centres: the Ajnad Foundation; Al Furqan Foundation; Al-Itisam Foundation and Al-Hayat Media Centre. *Al-Hayat* is in charge of translating other propaganda and producing sophisticated videos as well as the IS magazine, *Dabiq*, which changed its name to *Rumiyah* in mid-2016. Both *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are available at: <https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-50/>
3. It should be noted that Palmyra was damaged before the IS arrived at the city and destroyed the adjacent archaeological site. The site had been previously looted and was targeted by Syrian airstrikes as a result of the clash between the Syrian government forces and the IS in August 2013. Likewise, Palmyra had been captured in moving images before, as part of a military campaign. In 1941, a short film, titled 'Near the End in Syria', filmed by the British section of the French owned film company Pathé, shows British troops in full colonial regalia – khaki shorts and pith helmets – arriving at Palmyra and marching under the monuments, while tanks manoeuvre among the ruins.

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