

DEBATE: RELIGION AND ICONOCLASM**Idol-Breaking as Image-Making in the 'Islamic State'***Finbarr Barry Flood***I**

Arab chroniclers depict the Mongol invasion of Iraq in the thirteenth century as uniquely destructive. Eight centuries later, its specter was sufficiently enduring and potent to be invoked by Saddam Hussein in an apocalyptic speech made in 2003 to rally support against the impending American-led invasion of Iraq. Yet there are numerous indications that early rule by the Mongols was by no means marked by destruction and ruin. These include inscriptions such as those preserved until recently in the monastic church of the Christian saint Mar Behnam, 30 kilometers southeast of Mosul. One, inscribed in the ancient Aramaic language of Syriac, detailed how in 1295 a Mongol raiding party stole the monastery's gold and silver, including its precious liturgical vessels. The inscription went on to record that, following a complaint from one of the monastery's monks, the Il-Khan Baidu, the Mongol ruler of Iran and Iraq, a Muslim with Christian sympathies, not only restored all that had been looted, but made amends by means of a generous gift to the shrine of the saint. Shortly afterward, the ecumenism, generosity, and rectitude of the Il-Khan were recognized in an inscription on the saint's grave invoking blessings on him and his court. This inscription was written in Uighur, a Central Asian Turkic language with its own script, the sole example of a medieval Uighur inscription documented from the Middle East (Harrak and Ruji 2004).

Neither the inscriptions nor the shrine and monastery with which they were associated exist today. In the spring of 2015, agents of Da'esh, the so-called Islamic State (IS), dynamited the monastic complex, among whose unique treasures were two twelfth- or thirteenth-century life-size stucco sculptures of Mar Behnam and his sister, both martyred by their own father in the fourth century. The loss of these unique testimonies to the cultural and religious heterogeneity of the Jazira region of northern Iraq, Syria, and southern Turkey is just one entry in a staggering catalogue of deliberate destruction that includes Iraqi and Syrian monuments associated with Christian, Muslim (both Shi'i and Sunni), and Yazidi communities. The physical destruction of communal connective tissues—the archives, artifacts, and monuments in which complex micro-histories were instantiated—means that there are now things about these pasts that cannot and never will be known.

My own interest in Islamic architecture was galvanized by living in northern Iraq for several months in 1986. It was crystallized by time spent in Syria in the years following, some of it working on a German-Syrian excavation in Raqqa, now the capital of the Islamic State. On the weekends in Iraq, I traveled from Tell Afar, a town with a large Turkman minority, to places



like Sinjar, where I was often treated to lunch by a Yazidi family, and Mosul, whose churches, mosques, and hospitable imams and priests offered rich materials to fuel an embryonic interest in architecture and history. At the time, in my early twenties, I was exceptionally ignorant of the historical complexities manifest in the rich panoply of monuments that I was privileged to visit and that excited both my developing aesthetic tastes and hunger for knowledge. Despite my naiveté and neophyte status, however, I understood instinctively that, in terms of its cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, this was a world like few others.

The Islamic State's recent ethnic cleansing of Christians, of Muslims considered heterodox in their beliefs and/or practices, and of Yazidis, among others, has almost succeeded in eradicating a unique cultural landscape that had survived from late antiquity. Its very diversity was the fruit of successful resistance to the imposition of monotheistic orthodoxies in other parts of the Middle East and the Mediterranean over the course of the preceding millennium and a half. It is against the enduring memory of this heterogeneity and co-existence that the violence of IS is undertaken. The erasure of the materials of memory is common to many historical episodes of iconoclasm (Elsner 2003). In tandem with the enslavement, exile, murder, rape, and torture of the region's citizens, the systematic destruction and erasure of Christian, Islamic, and Yazidi monuments across Iraq and Syria is intended to create a *tabula rasa* over which the reductive certainties of singular truths can finally be inscribed.

II

The standard rationale for this onslaught is the rejection of *shirk*, beliefs or practices considered idolatrous or polytheistic by virtue of their deviation from the worship of one immaterial and unrepresentable God. In addition to the worship of idols, trading in idols or in the materials of idolatry is prohibited in Islam (as in Judaism), which explains IS directives specifying that images designated as idols should not be sold for profit. However, there is evidence that the group is trading in other kinds of antiquities. This trade is controlled by the Diwan al-Rikaz (Ministry of Buried Resources or Treasures), which oversees the disposal of antiquities and mineral resources, including oil. These goods involve the payment of the *khums*, the 20 percent tax payable on certain kinds of spoils. The ultimate market for such antiquities likely includes collectors in countries whose media are often loudest in denouncing the destruction that renders them available as commodities or consumables.

Propaganda materials produced by IS invoke specific passages from the Qur'an referring to the destruction of idols by Ibrahim/Abraham, who is said to have smashed the idols worshiped by his people in a foundational act of aniconic monotheism. In the Qur'an, neither the appearance nor the materials of the idols destroyed by Ibrahim are specified, although in Qur'an 37:95 they are referred to using the verb *naḥata*, to carve or hew, which suggests that they were fashioned in relief or even in the round. This episode has been a constant in the polemics of idolatry by Muslim iconoclasts trying to forge an illustrious transhistorical genealogy for their historical acts. An al-Qaeda propaganda video showing the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001 superimposed the relevant Qur'anic verses on the scene. The destruction of the Buddhas was timed to coincide with the last Islamic month, Dhu'l-Hijja, during which pilgrims make the hajj, the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca, followed by the Eid al-Adha, the most important festival in the Muslim calendar, which commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son (Elias 2007).

Similarly, the widely circulated video of the destruction carried out by IS in the Mosul Museum in February 2015 included quotations from Qur'an 21:58, narrating how Ibrahim

pulverized the idols worshipped by his people. In an article that appeared in *Dabiq*, the Islamic State's English-language magazine, these events are justified as an emulation of both Ibrahim's iconoclasm and the cleansing of the idols from the Ka'ba by the Prophet Muhammad after the Muslim capture of Mecca in 630 CE (Anon. 2015). The invocation of reiterative genealogies imbues such acts with a paradoxical temporality, mapping each act of iconoclasm onto a concatenation of resonant antecedents, while simultaneously asserting its own historicity as a reform necessitated by diachronic deviations from monotheistic orthopraxy (Flood 2002).

Additionally, recourse to Qur'anic repudiations of idolatry has the great advantage of sidestepping over a millennium of Islamic jurisprudence, which tends to be invoked selectively by IS. There is, for example, a predictable focus on Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the hard-line Syrian jurist who rejected intercession, material mediation, and shrine visitation, denouncing even the veneration of purported relics of the Prophet Muhammad as idolatrous. By contrast, the broader history of juridical rulings on images in general, and on the definition of idols and idolatry in particular, covers terrain that is both contested and highly contoured. The only near consensus among the jurists is the rejection of three-dimensional imagery and statuary, presumably one reason why this features prominently (although not exclusively) in IS propaganda images and videos.

Even here, however, Islamic jurisprudence has traditionally differentiated between the nature of statuary, its social context, and the practices associated with it. From the nineteenth century onward, many jurists distinguished antiquities, even those once worshipped by defunct civilizations, from those venerated in the present. Especially in Egypt, with its rich heritage of antiquities and antiquarian scholarship, jurists often made a distinction between serving images as idols and pressing them into service for educational or scientific purposes. In 1904, for example, the grand mufti of Egypt, the great reformist Muhammad 'Abduh, issued a fatwa, which declared that objections to image-making in hadiths, the traditions of the Prophet recorded after his death in 632 CE, were specifically directed at idols; consequently, the use of images for scientific or pedagogical purposes was permitted. Prompted by a visit to a Sicilian museum, 'Abduh (1904) legitimized the collecting and display of antiquities by comparing the memorialization of the past through poetry in Arabic tradition with the preservation of the past through its material remains (see also Ramadan 2013). Many Egyptian jurists followed in Muhammad 'Abduh's footsteps, judging ancient statues and reliefs and their public display in museums to be licit as long as they were not subject to adoration, since they have positive educational and historical value and reveal the fate of past civilizations. The jurists generally prohibited praying in museums or erecting statues to glorify contemporaries. Some noted (and continue to note) the need for care in the presentation of the pharaonic past. For example, ancient ideas about the ability of carvings and statues to represent gods or the talismanic power of images should be presented as defunct beliefs rather than historically enduring facts (Aldeeb 2007: 21; El Kadi 1996: 19, 23). Other rulings reveal a more ambivalent relationship to antiquities, museums, and the material traces of the past. Elliot Colla (2007: 75) notes that "religious discourses on Pharaonic antiquity remained a powerful source for dissident, especially Islamist thinking in Egypt throughout the twentieth century."

Campaigns of destruction by IS have been both intra- and inter-sectarian in nature and confined neither to antiquities nor statuary. They have also extended to architecture, including pre-Islamic monuments devoid of figurative imagery, temples that had fallen into desuetude more than a millennium ago, and places of visitation and worship used by both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims. Some of these were shrines and tombs of those seen as saints, whose destruction reflects a consistent objection to religious mediation, whether as spiritual aspiration or material practice. Both were and are rejected as modes of *shirk* by hard-line proponents of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. There is in fact a long tradition of opposition to the veneration of relics,

saints, and tombs in certain strains of Sunni Islam, even if the scale of recent destructions by Islamist groups in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria, Tunisia, and elsewhere represents the globalization of what had previously been largely localized and sporadic phenomena (Beranek and Tupek 2009).

For proponents of particular orthodoxies and orthopraxies, the realm of the (potentially) idolatrous is not confined to the figurative: it can include any kind of misplaced investment in the material world. Particularly revealing were reports in April 2105 that IS had ordered the removal of all ornamentation in the mosques of Mosul, including Qur'anic inscriptions carved or painted on their walls. The idea that Islam has substituted words for images, or that inscriptions in the mosque play a role comparable to icons in Christian tradition, is long-established in etic discourses on Islam. These imagine the assumed shift from image to word as a kind of aniconic revolution, comparable to that which took place in sixteenth-century Europe, when Protestant reformists expelled the images from the churches, replacing them with the Divine Word writ large on retable and wall. And yet this misleading (and Christianocentric) analogy ignores the existence of a considerable body of medieval and modern jurisprudence that rejects even the aniconic ornamentation of mosques.

Opposition to ornamenting mosques and Qur'ans, and even the presence of richly carved or gilded Qur'anic inscriptions in the space of the mosque, was far from uniform, but insofar as it persists, it is rooted in a late-antique suspicion of ornament and ostentation (Flood, forthcoming). This permeates the Qur'an but is most clearly articulated in hadiths. In these, questions about the acceptability of images are intimately linked to questions about the materiality and permissibility of ornament, a relationship that has been generally ignored in modern scholarship on Islam's *Bilderverbot*. From at least the ninth and tenth centuries, many jurists discouraged decoration (*naqsh* or *zukhruf*), ornament (*zīna*), and pictures (*al-ṭasāwīr*) in mosques, citing hadiths on the subject, including a tradition in which the Prophet rejects decoration and images as un-Islamic, recommending instead the whitewashing of mosques. It is not clear whether or not such rulings were invoked in the edict(s) ordering the removal of inscriptions and ornaments from the mosques of Mosul, but the gesture stands clearly in their spirit.

The objections to mosque ornaments are various, with many finding parallels in critiques of church ornaments deployed by Protestant Reformists, parallels that reflect a common debt to late-antique debates about materiality and religiosity. They include, first, the idea that ornamentation is a non-Muslim practice that undermines a necessary visual distinction between mosques and non-Muslim places of worship. Concerns are also expressed about the potential of well-wrought ornaments (including even Qur'anic inscriptions) to attract the gaze of the worshipper and distract her or him from prayer. Lastly, objections are raised over the expenditure occasioned by ornamentation, which is viewed as a frivolous waste of economic resources that would be better spent elsewhere. It was this last aspect that was reportedly stressed in IS's edict ordering the stripping of ornaments, including Qur'anic inscriptions, from the mosques of Mosul.

III

Images and iconoclasm have long been deployed in a dialectical polemic between reformists and traditionalists in the Islamic world. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for example, reformist Muslims, including those who identified themselves as Salafis, mobilized against relic and shrine veneration. In response, supporters of both harnessed new technologies such as lithography and photography to the production of images intended to promote the role of material mediation in devotional practice. Contemporary Islamist movements complicate this

binary between creation and destruction, deploying digital and social media to produce and circulate carefully crafted images aimed at recording and promoting the extirpation of such practices. Just as Protestant iconoclasts produced prints and woodcuts commemorating the stripping of images and ornaments from churches, IS has been assiduous in its selective recording of its destructive spectacles. The consumption of antiquities by destruction and sale thus finds its corollary in the production of images of destruction circulated by IS for consumption across a wide range of global media.

Depictions of iconoclasm are relatively rare in medieval Islamic art. By far, the most popular example of the genre is the removal of idols from the Ka'ba by the Prophet Muhammad, an event explicitly invoked in the Islamic State's visual and textual representations of the destruction in the Mosul Museum. However, hard-line Islamic jurists generally forbade the production of *all* images of animate beings; hence, within a literal understanding, such paintings would themselves have been in breach of the relevant injunctions on figuration. Consequently, despite their instrumental use of images featuring living activists, Islamist groups including IS demonstrate certain sensitivities with regard to images of living beings. Thus, for example, purported designs for coins to be minted by the Islamic State make exclusive use of inanimate subjects, such as architecture, plants, and script.

The appearance of new imaging technologies—lithography and photography in the nineteenth century and television and digital imaging in the twentieth—reinvested long-established debates about the limits of permissibility (al-Tibi 1990: 213–270; Larsson 2011). Like the images of Protestant iconoclasm that were permitted because their content fell outside the realm of the potentially idolatrous, the stills and videos of IS are, therefore, necessarily underwritten by an implicit claim that they violate no injunction. In this sense, they are comparable to the didactic images produced by many Islamist groups for educational or polemical purposes. Paradoxically, such usage is premised on the very distinction between educational and idolatrous images that 'progressive' jurists have made use of since the nineteenth century to argue the need to protect pre-Islamic antiquities.

As Dario Gamboni (1997: 22) has pointed out, "often elaborately staged destructions of works of art must be considered as means of communication in their own right, even if the 'material' they make use of is—or was—itself a tool of expression or communication." Seen in this light, antiquities are merely hyle, raw material (or even, to use a phrase beloved of modern militaries, 'collateral damage') in the staging of spectacles integral to the production and circulation of images of destruction within global networks of consumption. The discursive role of iconoclasm in such spectacles transforms the repudiation of images into a potent image of repudiation.

This is not, of course, a phenomenon peculiar to Islamist movements. What distinguishes episodes of destruction staged by IS in Mosul, Palmyra, Raqqa, and elsewhere from media spectacles such as the 2003 destruction of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad—carefully orchestrated by the US military to coincide with East Coast morning television shows—is the ascription of divergent status to their objects within distinct (but not necessarily incommensurate) regimes of value. Both kinds of phenomena deploy iconoclasm as a discursive tactic to signal rupture, the institution of new political orders and temporalities conceived of in terms of restitution or restoration. Like the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001, or the more recent spectacles performed and recorded by IS, the scenario enacted in Firdos Square was an act conditioned by earlier iconic images of liberation from false consciousness. These included, in the one case, accounts and images of Ibrahim's foundational act of iconoclasm and, in the other, a panoply of images showing US troops erecting the Stars and Stripes in Iwo Jima, or a Russian soldier raising the flag of the Soviet Union over the Reichstag in Berlin in 1945.

It might be tempting here to distinguish ‘secular’ from ‘religious’ iconoclasm, the former being considered a hallmark of liberated subjectivity, the latter an ingrained reflex of piety. On closer examination, however, the distinction often holds little water. In the first place, the iconoclasm of secular modernity—in both their literal and metaphorical incarnations—often sound suspiciously like foundational narratives of monotheism, in which the breaking of idols liberates those whom they hold in thrall. The resulting paradoxes are acutely felt in the modern museum, a site of desacralization whose origins lie in revolutionary vandalism, and yet whose architecture and culturally sanctioned protocols of appreciation and consumption often bear more than a passing resemblance to secular cults (Flood 2002). This coincidence between religious idolatry and modern secular fetishism was hinted at in IS representations of the destruction of the Mosul Museum, which expressed the hope that God “cleanse all Muslims’ lands of the idols of both the past and present” (Anon. 2015: 24). The idols of the present may also, however, refer to the many examples of modern public statuary that the group has destroyed in Iraq and Syria.

But even outside of the museum, acts of ‘secular’ iconoclasm are often ritualized in revealing ways. Take, for example, the iconic spectacle of image destruction orchestrated in Firdos Square. Like many iconoclastic spectacles, including that enacted by IS in the Mosul Museum, this was a two-step process. In Mosul, antique statues were first toppled and then pulverized by drilling or smashing. In Baghdad in April 2003, a statue of Saddam Hussein, erected one year earlier to commemorate the president’s 65th birthday, was toppled after first having the US flag draped over its face, an act of desecration that presaged the fall of idols.

The perceived efficacy of the flag in this carefully orchestrated spectacle reflects its quasi-sacral character. As early as 1861, it was argued that the Stars and Stripes was not merely a material sign, but was identical with the nation. In the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it became the focus of a quasi-military cult of veneration. Historical attempts to outlaw flag desecration have often cast it as a form of religious desecration, a characterization underlined by the flag’s association with the cross and the Bible as fundamental icons of the nation. Conversely, this role has been subject to frequent challenges that depict flag veneration as a form of idolatry. As recently as 1990, when the issue was debated before the US Supreme Court (under the gaze of a relief featuring the Prophet Muhammad, among other historical lawmakers), opponents of a constitutional ban on flag burning decried attempts to turn the flag into a ‘golden image’ that must be worshipped, alluding to the idolatrous calf of the Israelites (Boime 1998: 30; Goldstein 1995: 218). A similar reasoning had been accepted by the US Supreme Court in a landmark 1943 decision that accepted the right of Jehovah’s Witnesses not to salute the flag, which the court acknowledged functioned as a *de facto* sacred icon. The plaintiffs had argued that honoring the flag in this way violated the Second Commandment, which forbade the making and worship of idols (Morgan 2005: 233–240).

If examples of ‘secular’ iconoclasm often have more in common with practices of ‘religious’ iconoclasm than first appears, the converse is also true. Yet the rhetoric of religiosity employed by Islamic iconoclasts is generally taken at face value. In this way, the coincidence (if not collusion) between Orientalist clichés and Islamist rhetoric obviates any need for a more sustained analysis. Despite the Taliban’s use of religious rhetoric, for example, a good case can be made that what was at stake in the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was not the literal worship of religious idols, but their veneration as cultural icons (Flood 2002). On the one hand, there was little theological or juridical justification for their destruction; the last worshippers of the Buddhas were long dead and the statues had already been defaced in antiquity, and so conformed to a long-established juridical tradition according to which defacement renders figurative images acceptable (Flood 2013). On the other hand, there is the fact that the Buddhas and their image had been co-opted in processes of modernization and nation building long before the rise of

the Taliban. Their image had, for example, appeared on Afghan postage stamps from the 1950s onward, while the large Bamiyan Buddha had featured prominently on the ticket sleeves issued by the national airline, Ariana, a pre-modern religious icon transformed into an iconic symbol of the modern nation-state.

As this suggests, the role afforded specific artifacts, images, or monuments as symbols of the secular nation-state can heighten their vulnerability, producing them as targets for those who repudiate such regimes or reject the very concept of the nation-state. This is especially true under repressive dictatorships such as the Ba'ath regimes of Iraq and Syria, which systematically exploited the artifacts and imagery of antiquity (Bernhardsson 2006). The selective classification of certain monuments as having universal value or World Heritage status by international bodies such as UNESCO, in addition to their historical associations with autocracy, colonialism, and despotism, can render these monuments uniquely vulnerable (Flood 2002: 651–655; Gamboni 2001). The bestowal of such exceptional status upon these artifacts and monuments underlines their association with, or co-option by, regimes of value that are rejected by many Islamists and amplifies the capacity of threats and violence to generate outrage (and thus publicity) on the global stage. The instrumental value of antiquities was explicitly invoked in IS propaganda surrounding the destruction of antiquities in Mosul in 2015, which explained that the very idea of cultural heritage served a nationalist agenda at odds with the fundamental duties of Muslims. According to IS, the obliteration of cultural heritage sites not only emulates the destruction of idols by the prophets, but also enrages the unbelievers, thereby garnering further divine favor (Anon. 2015: 22). This may have been the aim of the Islamic State's destruction in October 2015 of Palmyra's Triumphal Arch, a monument that never served for purposes of worship and whose destruction seems to augur a worrying expansion of the group's potential targets.

More prosaically, by concentrating antiquities in one place, the institution of the museum increases their vulnerability to destruction in situations of conflict, whether targeted deliberately or simply as 'collateral' damage. While the violence enacted on images in the Kabul Museum by the Taliban in 2001 received international publicity, the earlier destruction of portions of the museum in Ghazni (including those holding its Islamic antiquities), when rockets fell on it in 1993 and 1998, went largely unremarked. This unanticipated consequence of museumization parallels the perils of excavation, which renders previously invisible artifacts vulnerable to decay and destruction. Both aspects of modern archaeology and museology were highlighted in the IS video recording of the destruction of antiquities in the Mosul Museum. Emphasizing that these ancient statues and reliefs were not visible during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the accompanying text explained that they were extracted from the earth by "the worshippers of devils," thereby connecting the archaeological pursuit and museological presentation of antiquity with the worship of the same carvings in antiquity. More unnerving still was the co-option in the video of museum wall labels in Arabic identifying some of the reliefs as images of the Mesopotamian god Nergal. Highlighted selectively in neon green, the authority of these didactic texts identifying the subject of the reliefs verified their status as depictions of pagan deities and, by extension, as idols, thereby justifying their destruction.

IV

If nationalist regimes often instrumentalize antiquities for polemical purposes, their targeting by Islamists is a corollary that aims to highlight the historical collusions and contestations between discourses of colonialism, humanism, and nationalism in the production of artifacts or monuments that oscillate between being national icons and transnational patrimony, the

heritage of all humanity. The incoherence of this duality is among the factors that underwrite the instrumental value of antiquities as raw materials in the production of both monumental snuff movies and global outrage. That such outrage is entirely understandable in no way mitigates the fact that it is often an anticipated effect of mediatised enactments of iconoclastic acts. There is, in effect, a significant tension between the desire for information on unfolding events and the fact that the full efficacy of iconoclastic spectacles occurs in symbiotic relation to practices of circulation and viewing that underwrite the ability of images of destruction to 'go viral'.

The blurring of lines between the dissemination of information, the threat to antiquities, and the instrumental mediation and mediatisation of choreographed spectacles of destruction raises significant ethical questions. Over the past two years, IS's (imminent) capture of a town or region with significant monuments has initiated media speculation regarding the possibility of Islamist iconoclasm and its potential impact on antiquities. The case of Palmyra is paradigmatic in this respect. However inadvertently, such speculation invariably appears as incitement, enhancing the instrumental value of iconoclasm and its objects in a manner comparable to the affording of World Heritage status. The rush to condemn such actions (and the threats that precede them) in the global media, the insistence on the universal value of antiquities, and the proliferation of outrage when they are destroyed—all this undoubtedly enhances their value as potential targets. In contrast to the dissemination of images of attacks on ancient sites, churches, museums, and shrines, the global media often choose to refrain from reporting details of hostage situations or refuse to screen IS propaganda videos showing violent acts designed to inspire terror, including the murder and torture of prisoners. In a recent article that discusses the centrality of visual media to the global impact of Islamist spectacle, Jason Burke (2015) writes: "The next stage will be a live stream of point-of-view images of a terrorist attack. TV networks will have to decide if they use any of such footage, while all of us will be forced to answer a simple question: will we watch?" (see also Burke 2016).

When it comes to antiquities and monuments, acts of destruction, threats of violence, and images of obliteration function as a kind of 'clickbait', placing us in a double bind. We can either stay silent, refusing to relay IS propaganda but risking complicity through apparent indifference, or be complicit in the dissemination of IS propaganda, whose success will undoubtedly inspire further acts of destruction. The resulting ethical conundrums are well-captured by Ömür Harmanşah (2015) in an excellent analysis of IS visual propaganda. He writes: "We must responsibly consider the possibility that what we treat on our Facebook profiles, tweets, and blogs as documentation of violence is in fact the *raison d'être* of ISIS's biopolitics" (ibid.: 175).

If earlier groups like al-Qaeda pioneered the use of media such as cassette and video tapes, IS has not only exploited the possibilities of digital media and the Internet, but also made use of a wide variety of aesthetic forms, from visual imagery to poetry (Creswell and Haykel 2015). However paradoxical it may seem, the images of destruction that originate in the Islamic State and that are circulated around the globe are no less susceptible to both aestheticization and conventionalization. On the one hand, accepting images of destruction as transparent historical documents obscures their function as meta-commentaries, carefully constructed to perform polemical distinctions between images and idols, licit and illicit. On the other, while purporting to index acts of purification, the highly scripted or staged recordings of violence visited on bodies, images, and monuments produced by IS often adhere to codes and conventions drawn from a wide range of media genres, including movies, music videos, social networking sites, and video games. The Islamic State's ability to co-opt popular iconographies, contemporary imaging technologies, and global media for propaganda ends is firmly at odds with the rhetoric of medieval recidivism that often permeates accounts of IS in the Western media. As Harmanşah (2015: 174) writes of the recent destruction of antique and medieval monuments by IS: "This is

an atavistic performance that deliberately abducts the legacy of a medieval heritage and appropriates it as religious genealogy to serve the very enrichment of ISIS's ultra-modern imagery-machine" (see also Flood 2002: 651–652).

There are, in addition, significant inter-medial and inter-visual aspects of IS propaganda imagery that, although still awaiting sustained analysis, are clearly intended to facilitate its dissemination and reception, while perhaps also heightening its appeal to certain target audiences. In its visual propaganda, IS appropriates the iconography of canonical genres in ways that can suggest an ironical subversion: its propaganda videos not only borrow Hollywood filmic conventions, but sometimes even sample clips of medieval warriors culled from Hollywood movies. In addition, although the similarities have gone unremarked, the format and imagery of the Islamic State's monthly magazine *Dabiq* (named after a site on which it is believed an apocalyptic battle will occur) bear more than a passing resemblance to *Aramco World* magazine, the glossy bimonthly organ of Saudi Aramco, the state oil company of Saudi Arabia, which has been published in Houston by an American subsidiary since 1949. The latter is filled with enticing and lavishly illustrated accounts of the Islamic world and its history. The former offers well-illustrated rationales for destroying antiquities seen as idolatrous, along with insights into aspects of Islamic belief and theology (according to IS) and the ongoing war that IS is waging on various fronts, much as the propaganda newsreels from World War II moved easily between the Pacific and European fronts of the Allied campaigns.

Inadvertently, perhaps, this apparent nod to the imagery of what Timothy Mitchell (2002) has dubbed 'McJihad', that is, the enduring alliance between American capital and Saudi autocracy, reminds us that the rejection of material mediation and ostentation in matters religious is by no means at odds with the promotion of commerce and consumerism. On the contrary, the past decades have seen a consistent association between religious and social conservatism and economic neo-liberalism. If the Islamic State endures for any time, it is quite easy to imagine modern malls being constructed on the ruins of the late-antique and early Islamic souk at Palmyra, which was excavated in the 1980s by a German-Syrian team that included the brutally murdered Palmyrene archaeologist Khaled al-Asa'ad, charged by IS with being an agent of idolatry (Rabbat 2015). The combination of austere religiosity, consumerism, and iconoclasm that would underlie such an eventuality may seem far-fetched, but it is precisely the constellation that has seen the radical transformation of the two most sacred sites of Islam—Mecca and Medina—under Saudi rule over the past two decades. In both cities, Islamic shrines and cemeteries have been bulldozed to make way for ATMs, hotels, and malls in a gesture that combines opposition to shrine visitation as idolatry with real estate realpolitik. Today, the Ka'ba, the ancient cuboid structure that is the focus of all Muslim prayer, is dwarfed by the Abraj al-Bayt Towers, a looming presence over 660 meters tall that was completed in 2011. Constructed on the site of a destroyed Ottoman citadel, the complex includes a five-story shopping mall, five-star hotel, and parking facilities for over a thousand vehicles.

Highlighting the contradictions and paradoxes often associated with the very idea of antiquities, cultural heritage, and museums, this onslaught on the medieval and early-modern architecture of the Arabian sanctuaries has been contemporaneous with the promotion of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through traveling exhibitions of spectacular pre-Islamic antiquities, including monumental figurative sculptures, drawn from its museums (Franke 2012; Ghabban 2010). At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that Saudi bombers are deliberately targeting the monuments and museums of neighboring Yemen in a brutal war of attrition that has attracted little attention in the West (Khalidi 2015). The lack of any sustained outcry about such destruction contrasts with the focus in the global media on the Islamic State's predations in Iraq and Syria. Thanks to IS's canny manipulation of the image, many of these take place in the full glare

of a global media co-opted for the purpose, unlike the amputations, beheadings, floggings, and demolitions that happen off-camera on the territory of the West's Arabian ally. It is precisely the hypocrisies inherent in such inconsistencies that open a space for accusations of moral bankruptcy directed by Islamist groups like IS against Europe, the US, and various Middle Eastern regimes. It is in this space that the Islamic State's recruitment drive appears to be most effective, exploiting the dissonance between political priorities, quotidian realities, and the grand rhetoric of universalism, whether applied to cultural heritage or human rights.

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Breaking and Talking

Some Thoughts on Iconoclasm from Antiquity to the Current Moment

Jaś Elsner

In the European tradition, there have been two classic outbreaks of iconoclasm: in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries and in the Reformation during the early modern period. Both involved the breaking of works of art, but the prime reason for their subsequent significance is the heavy theorizing (theological and philosophical) that accompanied not only the attacks on material objects, but also the defense of images by those who opposed the iconoclasts.¹ The crises in both cases might be seen as a fundamental clash of ideological positions brought about by a series of profound social phenomena—ritual, orthodoxy in relation to religion, the sense of assault from external forces (arguably, the threat of Islam in both cases)—that crystalized around objects in material culture, their veneration, and even their very validity. But beyond these two intensely textual and polemical moments, the Western tradition has always been characterized by cultural discourses on attacks that single out material culture, on the one hand, and the textual record of such attacks, on the other.

To separate the actual demolition of images and the record of the act of destruction (whether visual or textual) may arguably seem artificial. Yet there is certainly the possibility that violence done to a monument can result in total and unrecorded erasure. One example found by early-twentieth-century excavators is the impressive over-life-size bronze head of the emperor Augustus, interred beneath the steps leading up to a temple of victory in Meroe in the Sudan (fig. 1). This fine piece—certainly the finest surviving bronze of the emperor—was decapitated from a statue (probably located in Upper Egypt) that may have been left headless to mark its demise or may have been melted down or otherwise destroyed. The bronze head was carried back by Kushite marauders opposed to the Roman Empire to be ceremonially interred in a spot where it would be perpetually trampled on by worshippers at the temple, even after its burial and existence had been long forgotten.

Another example, also from ancient Rome, is the very careful erasure and recutting of the figure of the co-emperor Commodus (assassinated at the end of AD 192) from reliefs on an arch in the city of Rome that once celebrated the triumph awarded to him and his father, Marcus Aurelius (fig. 2) (Elsner 2003: 212–214). In this case, Commodus, whom modern scholarship through shrewd archaeological analysis has reconstructed as standing next to Marcus in the space beside him in the triumphal chariot, was cut away and his body turned into the steps, column, and base of the temple in the background. Here the fallen emperor is effectively airbrushed out of the visual record, and the monument presents the world as if he had never been there.

However, arguably more common is the choice to preserve a record of iconoclasm in a still surviving but altered object, marking both the offense implied by the original and a subsequent

Figure 1: Head from an Over-Life-Size Bronze Statue of Augustus, ca. 30–25 BC



Photograph © Trustees of the British Museum, London

Figure 2: Marble Relief Panel of an Arch Depicting Marcus Aurelius, ca. AD 176-80, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome



violent act of righting or avenging that offense through assault. The elements in the reliefs and inscriptions on the early-third-century Arch of the Argentarii in Rome that commemorated the emperor Geta, the empress Plautilla (wife of Geta's brother and co-emperor, Caracalla), and her father Plautianus are illustrative (fig. 3). All three were killed and their memories condemned by Caracalla. They were subsequently eliminated from the arch in such a way as to mark the act of erasure on the still standing structure for all time. While Caracalla remains, the figures of Caracalla's wife Plautilla and her father Plautianus were gouged out and not replaced after their respective condemnations in 211 and 205. Instead of resorting to airbrushing and the fantasy of a perfected finish, the viewer is offered unsightly gashes in the carved stone reliefs and the marks of destruction (Elsner 2003: 214).

Figure 3: Marble Relief Panel from the Gate of the Argentarii in Rome, AD 204



These examples all belong to the political iconoclasm surrounding *damnatio memoriae* (lit., ‘condemnation of memory’) in the ancient world.² They can certainly be extended, and we have evidence of inscriptions recording such acts, even when the objects themselves were destroyed, in order to preserve the memory of destruction.³ But the same is true of religiously motivated iconoclasm in the Christian era. At Aphrodisias in Caria in Asia Minor, there was systematic defacement—most probably by late-antique Christians—of deities, images of sacrifice, and exposed genitals in the fine Julio-Claudian sculptures of the Sebasteion temple complex, within a larger culture of conservation and respect for the memory and monuments of the ancient past. A marble relief panel shows Aphrodite crowning her own cult statue, rendered frontally in archaic style (fig. 4). Both images were likely defaced by Christians before the seventh century.⁴

Figure 4: Marble Relief Panel from the Sebasteion Temple in Aphrodisias



The erasure of genitals is not so far from the provision of fig leaves to nude male statuary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whether the application of coverings counts as iconoclasm is a moot point. However, the later depiction of drapes to cover the nudity of the figures in Michelangelo's fresco of *The Last Judgment*—painted from 1536 to 1541 and later 'improved' by Daniele da Volterra in 1565 after the decrees on images at the Council of Trent (fig. 5)—was certainly a destructive intervention, even if *al secco* additions in tempera to frescoes are potentially reversible (see, e.g., O'Malley 2012a: 353–355; 2012b). When Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria (384–415), orchestrated the destruction of the temple and statue of Serapis in 391, visual and textual records were certainly fostered to affirm his saintly piety in removing the demonic forces of idolatry from the world (fig. 6).⁵

Figure 6: The Patriarch Theophilus Trampling on the Idol of Serapis in a Papyrus Fragment from an Illustrated Codex Chronicle of World History, ca. Fifth Century



Source: Bauer and Strzygowski (1905). From Goleniscev papyrus, folio 6v, Moscow Museum of Fine Arts

Figure 5: Section of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, Retouched in 1565, Sistine Chapel, Vatican



Photograph © Scala/Art Resource NY, ART467562

There is a complexity, indeed an inconsistency, in the twin process of actual image-breaking and its public announcement. If the destruction of an object, whose potency (whether representing a hated ruler or an idol) marks it as evil, is an act of simple and straightforward purification, why should this require a record? The record preserves the memory of the evil, which the act is in principle designed to remove. The absence of the images of Geta, Plautilla, and Plautianus preserves their memory, under erasure, and the memory of the evil that the polemic directed against them caused them to embody, while at the same time affirming their pious removal from the world by Caracalla. The act of iconoclasm here is more about affirming the destroyer—a rightful new ruler in the case of Caracalla's image-breaking or a truly orthodox believer in the case of the Aphrodisias reliefs—than it is about the destroyed or even the process of destruction. In other words, despite the apparent object-centeredness of iconoclasm as orchestrating an ontological removal of something from whose material absence the world is better off, the activity of iconoclasts (both in the physical attack on images and in their verbal assaults and accounts of such attacks) is actually, or at least usually, a discursive act of self-affirmation through the negation of a material symbol of what is rejected.⁶ The object serves as a cipher for a complex variety of discourses—social, political, religious, ethnic, cultural, and so forth—that come together and coincide in the rejection of a material object as the embodiment of what is condemned.⁷

In purely material terms, then, iconoclasm is never solely a matter of destruction. Something new and different always remains, whether the object is refashioned to be something else (as in the Commodus panels and in many other recut imperial portraits from Rome)⁸ or is left as a desolate marker of its lost former state (as in the Argentarii panels or the Aphrodisias friezes). Or there can simply be an absence where once there was a statue or a dedication or a temple (as in the case of the original statue of Augustus, whose head was severed and carried off to Meroe). We rarely think of archaeological excavation as iconoclastic, but because it involves intervention in the landscape and the preference for certain (earlier and lower) layers in the stratigraphy over other (higher and later) ones, destruction is arguably as much archaeology's driving force as is discovery. When such things become politicized, for instance, in the razing of contemporary houses to dig ancient sites in Palestine or the recent removal of the sixteenth-century Babri mosque at Ayodhya to reveal the birth site of the Hindu god Rama, clearly the claim that iconoclasm is at work, in what may call itself the excavation of a previous and more valid past, cannot be easily discounted.

The profound interconnection of the iconoclastic gesture and its reportage remains in place in the modern world.⁹ Here, the specific and current issue of iconoclasm by extremists evoking religious authority, which has been in the news since the Taliban blew up what remained of the Bamiyan Buddhas in central Afghanistan in 2001 and has become potent in the recent atrocities perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, involves a remarkably interesting if disturbing series of cases. First, the idea that these attacks might be some non-Western phenomenon, dismissible (at least intellectually) as a feature of primitive and fundamentalist Islam, is nonsense. Clearly, the prime audience at which these acts are aimed—to generate the kind of shock, outrage, and condemnation that drives all reports in the press or online media—is Western. Indeed, IS attacks many objects that lie in the ancestral history of the West, including the surviving masterpieces of a biblically linked Assyrian/Babylonian past (such as the remains of Nimrud and Nineveh) or the grand monuments of the space between the Roman and the Parthian empires (such as the cities of Hatra and Palmyra). A second audience, inspired in part by the sight of Western self-righteousness appalled at both the offense of iconoclasm and the incapacity to prevent it, is the Islamicist youth (often living in the West and radicalized there), which this kind of activity is intended to help recruit. But my point is that neither of these audiences experiences first-hand the thrill of assault or the horror of destruction. Iconoclasm, as

invented for the contemporary moment by IS, is a vicarious game, a pornography of snuff movies disseminated with propagandist mastery across an Internet invented by the Great Satan.¹⁰

The brilliance of the process is currently still being witnessed (as I write in 2015) in the long-drawn-out demolition of Palmyra as a kind of slow striptease conducted through episodes of filmed destruction, like a porn soap opera. The action began with an actual snuff movie in the video-disseminated beheading of Khaled al-Asaad, the site's octogenarian archaeologist. This was followed by a series of filmed acts of iconoclasm in which one world-famous monument after another was destroyed. A number of conclusions may be drawn from this vibrant but horrific instantiation of the twin logic of iconoclasm, that is, destruction and reportage. Notably, the theoretical difference between the act of destruction and its descriptive representation (with which I began) has been entirely eroded. There would be no point in such iconoclasm were it not for the possibility of (instant) Internet dissemination. The two are inextricably intertwined for ends that are equally political-ideological and justified through religious claims. More troubling still, especially to Western onlookers, should be the fact that in this kind of theater, the audience is hardly less a participant than the perpetrator. The consumers' predictable responses (as loudly voiced in all our media) are themselves the spur to further acts of iconoclasm and help to ratchet up the stakes that have moved from the destruction of the cultural heritage of the Middle East to the filmed perpetration of murder. One might argue that a more appropriate response, ironically, would be apathy.

In the contemporary moment, and now in a global arena, iconoclasm still touches on the key fissures of politics and culture, such as the place and ownership of the past in the current era and claims about what kind of past should be dominant or ancestral. All this is focused on and embodied in material objects of significant artistry that are seen through a lens that perceives them as religiously obscene. In Byzantium or during the Calvinist Reformation, the attack on images and its justification as well as the defense of images by those who detested iconoclasm reached high and abstract levels of conceptual argument expressed in texts that themselves formed commentaries on the underlying cultural politics of their times. In contrast, modernity offers us a universally available visual replication of vicarious destruction as porno-video performance, coupled with largely self-righteous condemnation by a media that reports and voyeuristically enjoys the outrage and, in doing so, ensures its continuing perpetration.

The object as idol—the specific instantiation of an ideal-typical class of condemned matter—was and remains the apparent focus of the iconoclastic act. But its reportage—arguably the more important and lasting aspect of iconoclasm, at any rate, in the great moments of iconoclastic excess in Byzantium, the Reformation, and the activities of IS in contemporaneity—may be thought the thing that is truly central. Indeed, scholars now have significant doubts as to whether the most famous of all the images purportedly destroyed by the Byzantine iconoclasts, the mosaic of Christ over the Chalke gate of the imperial Palace at Constantinople, ever existed at all outside the mythologies of its demolition.¹¹ That reportage has moved from textual framing through polemic and apologetic (in the Middle Ages and early modernity) to video and YouTube in the current moment. Even non-figural architectural monuments of no religious function at any time in antiquity or thereafter have become victims of the voracious recording of assault. What modernity offers is an unprecedented excess of voyeurism—both performative and visual—in place of the complex of philosophical discussion and exegesis that characterized responses to image-breaking in the past.

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■ NOTES

1. The literature is large. On iconoclasm in general, see Besançon (2000), Boldrick and Clay (2007), Demandt (1997), Gamboni (1997), Johnson (2005), Kolrud and Prusac (2014), Latour and Weibel (2002), McClanan and Simpson (2010), and Noyes (2013). On the early Middle Ages, see Barber (2002), Brown (1973), Brubaker (2012), Brubaker and Haldon (2011), Bryer and Herrin (1977), Elsner (2012), Grabar (1957), Martin (1930), and Noble (2009). On the Reformation, see Aston (1988: 62–219), Christensen (1979: 23–25), Eire (1986), Feld (1990: 118–192), Freedberg (1989: 378–428), Koerner (2004), Phillips (1973), Schnitzler (1976), and Wandel (1995).
2. On *damnatio memoriae* in Greece, see Holloway (2000); in Rome, see Benoist and Daguët-Gagey (2007, 2008), Huet (2004), Petersen (2011), Stewart (1999), and Vittinghoff (1936).
3. An example is the Hellenistic inscription at Delphi discussed by Elsner (2012: 371). For late antiquity, see especially Hedrick (2000).
4. For an analysis of the defacement of gods at Aphrodisias, see Smith (2012).
5. For the events, see Haas (1997: 161–164) and McKenzie (2007: 245–248). For images and an ancient description on a papyrus variously dated between the fifth and eighth centuries, see Bauer and Strzygowski (1905). If dated later, the description is likely dependent on earlier versions.
6. For more on the discursive nature of iconoclasm, see Elsner (2012).
7. For some good discussions on underlying issues in relation to Byzantine iconoclasm, see Brown (1973) and Henry (1976).
8. For more details on imperial portraits, see Varner (2004).
9. One might cite Germany at the fall of the German Democratic Republic (Nielsen 2010) or post-Hussein Iraq or the Taliban at Baniyan (Flood 2002).
10. For an analysis of snuff movies, see Kerekes and Slater (1995).
11. See Auzépy's (1990) review of the documentary evidence concerning the destruction of the mosaic of Christ. See also Brubaker and Haldon (2011: 128–135).

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