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Layers of religious and political iconoclasm under the Islamic State: symbolic sectarianism and pre-monotheistic iconoclasm

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the heritage destruction undertaken by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. To date, their iconoclasm has been mostly characterised either as acts of wanton barbarism devoid of religious or political justification, or as a cynical performance designed as a mass media spectacle. Drawing on a systematic analysis of two key IS propaganda outlets – their on-line magazine, *Dabiq*, and the various slick films released by *Al-Hayat* – this article argues that the heritage destruction perpetrated by the IS are not only situated within a carefully articulated theological framework and key to the creation of a new and ideologically pure 'Islamic State', but that they are also constituted by several complex layers of religious and political iconoclasm. To demonstrate, this article documents the iconoclasm undertaken by the IS along two key axes: *Symbolic Sectarianism* (Shia and Sufi mosques and shrines); and *Pre-Monotheistic Iconoclasm* (ancient polytheistic sites). Attacks on key sites within these categories, such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus or the Mosul Museum, not only adhere to their religious and political framework but also serve broader geo-political agendas and are attacked as proxy targets for their physical and ideological opponents.

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Introduction

In March 2013 the terrorist organisation, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, seized the city of Raqqa in Syria before expanding into Iraq, capturing significant cities such as Mosul in June 2014. Among the many horrors that have unfolded under the rule of the Islamic State (IS) are the mass genocidal pogroms that have included the slaughter, enslavement and forced exodus of thousands of innocent civilians (Isakhan 2015a; Weiss and Hassan 2015; Kilcullen 2016). The rapid and terrifying advance of the IS has also proved fatal for many of the region's heritage sites. Across the vast swathe of territory they control, the IS have overseen the mass looting of archaeological zones; the razing of ancient buildings and statues; the destruction of untold numbers of religious sites that do not conform to their strict doctrine; as well as the desecration of what might be called 'secular' state institutions such as museums, art galleries and libraries. However, the international community has struggled to interpret the unprecedented scale of this heritage destruction. With some notable exceptions,[1] both the global media and policy-makers have tended to frame these events as random by-products of wanton terror

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or as moments of unrestrained barbarism. To briefly list a few examples, the United Nations Security Council condemned the attack on the Mosul Museum as part of the 'ongoing barbaric terrorist acts in Iraq by ISIL' (Charbonneau 2015); UNESCO described the destruction of archaeological remains in Palmyra 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). More specifically, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova reacted to the destruction of the ancient Assyrian capital of Nimrud by arguing that such attacks were underpinned by 'propaganda and hatred' and that 'there is absolutely no political or religious justification for the destruction of humanity's cultural heritage' (Bokova 2015a, 2015b).

The central argument of this paper is that the acts of heritage destruction undertaken by the IS are much more than mere moments of barbarity, ignorance or propaganda devoid of political or religious justification. They are not only very deliberate and carefully staged, but also justified via a series of very specific religious and political ideologies. However, the religio-political dimensions to the iconoclasm wrought by the IS have not been adequately addressed in existing scholarly works on this topic. Much of the literature has documented the use of satellite imagery to monitor the looting of archaeological sites (Wolfinbarger et al. 2014; Casana 2015) and the extent to which the IS have raised revenue from the illicit trafficking of artefacts which are sold on the international black market (Keller 2015; Losson 2017). Others have focused on the extent to which the responses issued by various governmental and multinational bodies have been largely ineffective (Brodie 2015; Al Quntar and Daniels 2016) and the possibilities for cultural peacekeeping and prosecuting the perpetrators post-conflict (Cunliffe, Muhesen, and Lostal 2016; Foradori and Rosa 2017). Additional work has documented the complex array of motives that underpin the heritage destruction of the IS. These include their use of media – especially social media – to present heritage destruction as dramatic spectacles to local, regional and global audiences (Smith et al. 2016) and the use of heritage destruction as a means to create the idealised *jihadi* (holy warrior) via a symbolic connection to an iconoclastic past (Campion 2017). Others have noted the targeting of specific sites by the IS, including those of ethnic and religious minorities as part of a broader campaign of ethnic cleansing (Isakhan, González Zarandona, and Al-Deen 2017) and sites used by oppressive regimes to impose a sense of collective national identity (De Cesari 2015). Where references are made to the iconoclasm of the IS, it is framed as a 'performative, staged spectacle' (Rossipal 2016) that forms part of a simplistic 'return' to a 'barbarian ideology' (Rutelli 2016). For Ömür Harmanşah, the heritage destruction perpetrated by the IS is a form of cynical re-enactment that 'frequently and explicitly cites' earlier waves of Islamic iconoclasm as part of 'an atavistic performance' (Harmanşah 2015, 174). As such, the actions of the IS do not constitute a legitimate instance of iconoclasm, but instead deploy it 'as a historical reference, a rhetoric, and perhaps more powerfully as an archaising re-enactment of the idea' (Harmanşah 2015, 176). Although the elements of pathos and spectacle evident in the iconoclasm perpetrated by the IS cannot be denied, such works are at times dismissive of the very real theological and political principles which drive their actions.

To demonstrate the religious and political layers that constitute IS iconoclasm, this article documents and analyses their heritage destruction along two key axes. The first is referred to here as *Symbolic Sectarianism* – that is, attacks on sects within Islam that do not conform to the Salafi and Wahhabi inspired doctrine of the IS, especially Shia and Sufi mosques and shrines. The second is *Pre-Monotheistic Iconoclasm* – the destruction of sites and artefacts that pre-date monotheism and emphasise polytheistic cults and practices, such as those of ancient Mesopotamia or the Greco-Roman world. To do so, this article includes a systematic analysis of two key IS propaganda outlets: *Dabiq*, their glossy periodical online magazine which is part manifesto, part call to arms and part grizzly newsletter; and the various slick propaganda films released by the IS media outlet, *Al-Hayat*. The analysis reveals that the iconoclasm perpetrated by the IS are much more than random moments of barbarity, mass media spectacle and/or historical re-enactments motivated by a simplistic return to primitive attitudes. Instead, their iconoclasm is carefully articulated and deliberately designed, drawing on historical precedent and key Islamist principles to construct a coherent theological framework and to establish ideological purity and political homogeneity towards the creation of a new and serene

'Islamic State'. In addition to these layers of religious and political iconoclasm are the sites that are attacked as part of a broader geo-political agenda, where the site itself becomes a proxy target for the ideological and physical opponents of the IS: Shia dominated governments, regional powerhouses, Western imperialism, and key multilateral bodies. The article concludes by noting that understanding these layers of religious and political iconoclasm is key to interpreting, responding and mitigating against such heritage destruction.

Iconoclasm: religious and political dimensions

Traditional approaches to the study of iconoclasm have focused on its theological foundations. Indeed, iconoclasm has deep roots in all three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – in which, strictly speaking, iconography (material representations of the natural or supernatural world), idolatry (the worship of false idols) and polytheism (the worship of more than one God) are considered grave sins. The origins of iconoclasm in Abrahamic monotheism dates at least as far back as the story of Abraham himself. In both the Qur'an and in Genesis Rabba,[2] Abraham's father, Terah, ran a store which manufactured and sold wooden idols for people to venerate. When Terah left the young Abraham in charge of the store, he destroyed many of the idols (Genesis Rabba 38:13; Qur'an 21:51–67). Other examples include the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments in which Moses destroyed the statue of the Golden Calf that was being worshipped by the Israelites (Exodus 32:1–20; Qur'an 7:146–154). Moses then presented the community with the Ten Commandments; the first clearly emphasises monotheism ('You shall have no other gods before me') and the second forbids idolatry ('You shall not make for yourself an image … You shall not bow down to them or worship them') (Exodus 20:3–4; Qur'an 6:151–153). It is little wonder that all three of the Abrahamic faiths have endured and performed iconoclastic episodes throughout their history. For example, Christianity has seen several significant waves of iconoclasm, such as during the Byzantine period of the 8th and 9th centuries (Barber 2002) as well as during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century (Koerner 2003), particularly under strict sects such as Calvinism (Eire 1986).

Iconoclasm has also played a significant role in the doctrine and history of Islam. The *Qur'an* makes several statements about idolatry, such as: 'whoever associates partners to God is indeed guilty of a very grave sin' (Qur'an 4:48). Various Hadith[3] also rally against the worship of idols: 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah'; and the creation of images: 'the makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection' (Bukhari 8:387; 7:110). In terms of iconoclasm, it is highly significant that the Prophet Muhammad's first act after conquering Mecca in 629, was to destroy over 300 idols in the Ka'bah (Bukhari 5:583). Later, the Prophet ordered others to destroy the idols across the growing Islamic world: 'Do not leave any image without defacing it or any built-up grave without levelling it' (Muslim 4:2114).

Although some have rightly highlighted the dangers in drawing links between contemporary iconoclasm and Abrahamic monotheism, including the risk of perceiving such religions as stagnant, archaic and inherently violent (Flood 2002; Rico 2014), modern iconoclasts have drawn heavily (and selectively) on these theological foundations. Indeed, religiously motivated iconoclasm has been a central principle of various staunchly puritanical reformist sects driven by Salafist interpretations of Islam. Such sects advocate the creation of an 'Islamic State' ruled by Shari'ah law in their quest to return Muslims to the purest days of Islam during the life of the Prophet and his companions in the seventh century (Wagemakers 2009; Weismann 2009). One extreme example emerged in the mid-eighteenth century when Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab forged an alliance with certain Arabian tribal rulers (Commins 2009). They not only went on to win several significant military victories before creating the modern state of Saudi Arabia, they also underwent several episodes of violent iconoclasm that included the destruction of untold numbers of historical and religious sites across their territory (Yamani 2009 [2004]).

The Salafi and Wahhabi sects rely on several key religious principles. At the core of their teachings is the broader Islamic belief in *tawhid* (monotheism) which, in its most extreme iterations, can be used

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to justify the active targeting of the *kuffar* (unbeliever), including those who commit *shirk* (idolatry) or are accused of practising *mushrikin* (those who associate others with God, such as polytheists) (Sirriyeh 1989). Drawing on this theological framework, several extremist Salafi/Wahhabi movements have sought to eradicate any rival sect within Islam (Sufi, Shia), alternative religions (Yazidi, Christian), or pre-monotheistic cults (ancient Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman) – especially when such beliefs include the active worship of images or structures that undermine the oneness of God and ultimately lead to the grave sins of idolatry (Besançon 2000). Unfortunately, the early twenty-first century is replete with examples of iconoclastic movements who have drawn on this legacy to justify their actions: in 2001 the Taliban destroyed two 1700 year old statues of Buddha in central Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley, one standing at 165 metres tall (Flood 2002; Elias 2013); in 2006, and again in 2007, the ideological and physical forebears of the IS, al-Qa'eda in Mesopotamia, attacked the al-'Askari Mosque in Iraq – a revered Shia site which triggered a brutal and bloody sectarian civil war (Isakhan 2013); in 2008 al-Shaba'b destroyed many Sufi shrines and graves, as well as an old church, in Somalia (HRW 2010); and in 2012 Islamists from al-Qa'eda and 'Ansar Dine overran the city of Timbuktu in Mali, a UNESCO World Heritage site, destroying at least half of the 600 year old Sufi shrines (O'Dell 2013).

However, there is much more to such instances of iconoclasm than their purely religious motives, with several scholars demonstrating their broader socio-political context (Freedberg 1989, 390; Gamboni 1997, 91–116). As the history of European colonialism (Bernhardsson 2005; Maffi 2009) and major conflicts such as WWI, WWII and the 2003 Iraq war demonstrate (Simpson 1997; Bloxham 2005; Isakhan 2011, 2015b), the destruction of monuments and relics can serve as a powerful symbol of victory, a 'form of aggressive disobedience' that instils fear in the hearts of enemies and establishes authority over space (Eire 1986, 157). Indeed, 'iconoclasts are seldom protesting solely against the artefact itself, but against the value their 'enemy' attaches to it' (van Assche 2014, 149). For James Noyes, however, political iconoclasm is more than the destruction of religious and cultural icons that enshrine the values of the enemy, it is an act that has long paralleled 'the political construction of the modern State' (Noyes 2013, 1). Such iconoclasm is often undertaken for a very clear political purpose: to cleanse the world of a complex and cosmopolitan past and to eradicate alternative identities towards the creation of a politically homogenous state. During the civil war that ravaged the Balkans in the 1990s, the deliberate destruction of mosques, churches, museums, monuments and archaeological artefacts was motivated by a zealous desire to suppress 'evidence of a culturally diverse and hybrid past, in favour of a mythical 'golden age' of ethnic uniformity' (Layton, Stone, and Thomas 2001, 12; see also Walasek 2015). Such attacks on heritage sites in conjunction with genocidal pogroms or ethno/religious conflict therefore occur precisely because heritage sites play such a critical role as the tangible manifestation of community. Sites of religious or historical significance, of public ritual, of commemoration or celebration, enable groups to build an 'imagined community' in which individuals inculcate a sense of collective identity (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992 [1983]). Heritage sites therefore 'act as markers that signify the identity of the place' (Meskell 2005, 129), a physical structure that can be used (and in many cases abused) by various actors towards specific political goals (Baillie and Pullan 2013).

However, when differences between and within communities occur, specific groups become targets and their heritage sites can transform into sites of contestation and conflict (Barakat 2001). In such a situation, actors who target enemy heritage are aiming to destroy not just the site itself, but the site as symbol of the given community (Herscher 2010). In this context, Robert Bevan has argued that attacks on heritage sites and human communities during conflict ought to be thought of as indistinguishable moments of 'cultural cleansing' 'with architecture as its medium' (2006, 8). More recently, William Mitchell has argued that 'the destruction of images is directly linked to … 'ethnic cleansing'. The removal of images, sacred sites, and persons is all one process … to cleanse the world of these images and of the 'inhabitants' for whom they are important signs of identity and belonging' (2016, 70). However, the targeting of a community and their heritage can have divergent consequences and responses (Holtorf 2015). This can range from the complete erasure of a way of life, through problematic reconstruction efforts, and the re-appropriation of suffering by future generations in which

communities come to commemorate their 'places of pain and shame' (Logan and Reeves 2009; see also Giblin 2014; Murtagh, Boland, and Shirlow 2017). However, the targeting of heritage sites can also serve broader geo-political aims beyond targeting enemies, state formation, or ethnic cleansing (Joel 2013). For example, events such as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan or the Sufi shrines in Mali also serve to not only expose the inability of global authorities to prevent the destruction (Gamboni 2001), but also to challenge the post-Enlightenment discourse in which heritage is seen as implicitly valuable and therefore worthy of preservation for the benefit of humankind (Winter 2014). As the following section demonstrates, the IS have drawn heavily upon both these religious and political dimensions of iconoclasm in conducting their heritage destruction across Iraq and Syria.

Religious and political iconoclasm under the 'Islamic State'

The religious and political dimensions to the iconoclasm conducted by the IS are evident throughout their propaganda outlets. In terms of religious iconoclasm, *Dabiq* is certainly framed within an extremist Salafi/Wahhabi interpretation of Islam with specific religious rhetoric providing the theological framework that underpins their iconoclasm. For example, after praising Allah and the Prophet Mohammed, *Dabiq*'s first issue opens by stating that it is 'a periodical magazine focusing on issues of tawhid [monotheism]' (Dabiq 2014c, 3). Later in the same issue, a lengthy treatise on leadership urges followers of the IS to 'openly disassociate oneself from the kuffar [unbelievers] and mushrikin [association]' (Dabiq 2014a, 21). In Issue 3, they remind their readers that 'The Islamic State actively works to … eradicate all traces of shirk [idolatry] and heresy' (Dabiq 2014b, 17). For the IS, such terms are invoked to provide the religious context to their iconoclasm. By asserting the monotheistic foundations of Islam (*tawhid*), the IS seeks to justify their attacks on their enemies – the *kuffar* (unbelievers), those who commit *shirk* (idolatry), or *mushrikin* (association). Taking this a step further, the IS then argue that in order to create a new Islamic State underpinned by a puritanical monotheism, they must embrace a violent iconoclasm.

To justify this stance, throughout their propaganda, the IS frequently assert a temporal and spiritual link between their iconoclasm and key figures of Islamic history. They repeatedly emphasise the importance of following the path of the Prophet Ibrahim, the Prophet Muhammad, and his companions (Dabiq 2015b, 26–29). For example, in an article in Issue 10 documenting the heritage destruction done by the IS, they state:

> the actions of the mujāhidīn [holy warriors] had not only emulated Ibrāhīm's … destruction of the idols of his people and Prophet Muhammad's … destruction of the idols present around the Ka'bah when he conquered Makkah, but had also served to enrage the kuffār, a deed that in itself is beloved to Allah. (Dabiq 2015a, 22)

In citing such historical precedent, the IS seek to draw theological parallels between their actions and those of the founding figures of Islamic monotheism and of the first 'Islamic State'. More recent examples are also given throughout the pages of *Dabiq* such as in Issue 10 when the IS quote Ibn Sa'ud, the Wahhabi founder of the modern Saudi state, in order to justify their actions:

> We only fight and declare the kufr of one who commits shirk … as well as he who fights in defense of the idols and the domes built upon the graves, which have been taken as idols that are worshipped besides Allah. If you are truthful in your claim that you are upon the religion of Islam and are the followers of the Messenger … then demolish all those idols and flatten them to the ground, and repent to Allah from all shirk. (Dabiq 2015e, 59)

Similar homage is also paid to other, more contemporary, moments of Islamist iconoclasm, such as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001 or the destruction of the al-'Askari mosque in Iraq by al-Qa'eda in Mesopotamia in 2006 and 2007 (Dabiq 2014/2015, 41, 42; 2016, 41).

What is clear here is that the IS are motivated by extremist Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines that advocate the creation of an 'Islamic State' ruled by Shari'ah law and thereby justify the use of both physical violence and aggressive iconoclasm to achieve their goals. This points to the very clear political dimensions of the heritage destruction undertaken by the IS. For example, Issue 1 of *Dabiq* includes a transcription of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech at the Grand Mosque of Mosul in which

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he announced the formation of the new IS in June 2014. In it, the self-proclaimed Caliph warns the world that:

> The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement to make that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism, and boots that will trample the idol of nationalism, destroy the idol of democracy, and uncover its deviant nature. (Dabiq 2014d, 8)

Here, the principle of iconoclasm is extended beyond the relics and monuments of ancient civilisations, other religions or supposedly deviant Islamic sects, to the political ideologies of 'nationalism' and 'democracy'. This is demonstrated later in the same issue of *Dabiq* with photographs showing members of the IS tearing down Iraqi flags and destroying images of revered Shia historical and religious figures as well as contemporary Shia politicians. The article, titled 'Tal Afar liberated', is also accompanied by shocking photographs of deceased Sunni combatants allegedly 'murdered by the Safawis', an inference to the Shia Arab dominated Iraqi state and their Iranian supporters (Dabiq 2014f, 16). These images help to build the visual argument that the loss of Sunni lives under the failed projects of 'nationalism' and 'democracy' are avenged by the destruction of the symbols of the state (Dabiq 2014f, 16–19).

This type of political iconoclasm is part of a broader narrative that features prominently throughout *Dabiq*. Images of destruction are frequently and carefully juxtaposed against the construction of the new IS, governed by extreme interpretations of Salafist doctrine and Shari'ah law (Dabiq 2015d, 66–73). This serves to make explicit that for the creation of the IS to succeed, the first step is to purify the lands via a purge of all people and places that contradict their strict and austere vision. For example, Issue 11 features an interview with Abul-Mughirah al-Qahtani, the leader of the Libyan branch of the IS. As al-Qahtani explains:

> In the cities and regions that it controls, the Islamic State has laid down the proper foundation. It knows that the establishment of the religion and implementation of Sharī'ah cannot be properly achieved with the presence of deviant and divided groups, organisations, and parties within its territory … And so it works to rid the lands of this menace while implementing the Sharī'ah. (Dabiq 2015c, 62)

What is most interesting for our purposes is the iconoclastic dimensions implied by such a statement, further emphasised by two photographs that accompany the interview. In the first, members of the IS can be seen destroying a statue of a horse with pickaxes alongside a caption that reads: 'Destroying a statue in the city of Darnah'; in the second, a bulldozer destroys an unknown Islamic shrine, this time with the words: 'Destroying a shirki tomb in the city of Darnah' (Dabiq 2015c, 62, 63). Such examples demonstrate the interconnected nature of both the religious and political dimensions to the iconoclasm perpetrated by the IS, providing a lens through which we can interpret their heritage destruction. The following sections detail the extent to which the IS draw on this religious and political framework when conducting attacks on two distinct types of heritage sites: Shia and Sufi mosques and shrines, referred to here as *Symbolic Sectarianism*; and *Pre-Monotheistic Iconoclasm*, heritage sites that pre-date the Abrahamic tradition and celebrate polytheistic cults.

Symbolic Sectarianism

Since conquering vast swathes of land across Syria and Iraq, the IS have gone to great lengths to destroy scores of sites of religious significance to various sects within Islam that contradict their extremist Wahhabi and Salafi doctrine – especially Sufi and Shia mosques and shrines. They have also threatened to destroy Shia Islam's two holiest cities after Mecca and Medina, which they referred to as 'Karbala *al-munajjasah* [the defiled] and Najaf *al-ashrak* [the most polytheistic]' (Al-Adnani 2014). In terms of religious iconoclasm, the IS attack these sites because, according to their strict interpretations of Islam, other sects are constituted by unacceptable innovations and are therefore considered heretical. For example: Sufism is enshrined within a tradition of mysticism that claims divine revelation through 'intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties' (Trimingham 1998, 1); Shi'ism is rooted in the occultation of the Imam, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who will return one day to guide the community (Halm 2004). In both the Sufi and Shia traditions, the graves and tombs of key historical or religious figures (saints) are venerated. As a result, Sufi and Shia shrines and mosques are considered

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objects of *shirk* by extreme interpretations of Islam, such as that held by the IS because they confuse the oneness of God and encourage the worship of idols (saints and sites) and mystical beliefs (divine revelation or occultation).

In terms of political iconoclasm, these sites are deliberately targeted for several key reasons. Firstly, the IS seek to promulgate the message that fringe sects and their heritage sites have no place in the so-called 'Islamic State', which is for adherents to extreme Salafi/Wahhabi doctrine alone. Secondly, attacks on certain sites – especially Shia mosques and shrines – can also be seen as proxies for the fight against the Shia-Alawite government in Syria, the Shia dominated government in Baghdad and the broader geo-political struggle against Iran and other Shia entities (such as Hezbollah and various Shia militias). Thirdly, these attacks also serve as demonstrations of power that target the Shia and Sufi communities. Seeing themselves as actors in a much larger battle between the 'true' Sunni Islam that they follow and the apostasy of the Shia, the IS are continuing and greatly exacerbating a sectarian confrontation that has flared since the Iraq war of 2003 and the 'Arab Spring' from 2011 (Haddad 2013; Wehrey 2014).

For example, from very early on in Syria's civil war, various Sunni militant organisations (including earlier iterations and allies of the IS) staged spectacular attacks against significant Shia and Sufi heritage sites. To list a few brief examples: around March 2013 *Jabhat al-Nusra* (The Support Front, JAN) bombed the Seyyida Sukaina bint 'Ali shrine in Dariyya (south west Damascus), doing significant damage to the site and its golden dome; in May 2013 JAN raided a Shia shrine in Adra, exhuming the remains of Hirj ibn Adi al-Kindi, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad; and from March 2014 the IS completely destroyed a prominent Shia mosque in Raqqa housing the shrines of Ammar bin Yassir and Oweis al-Qarni, two contemporaries and companions of the Prophet Muhammad who became religious martyrs killed in the first conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims (Erdbrink and Mourtada 2013; The Committee of Ahlu Al-Abaa 2013; Danti, Cuneo, et al. 2015, 21–29). Of such attacks, perhaps the most widely lamented were the repeated attacks on the gold-domed Sayyida Zaynab Shia mosque and shrine in southern Damascus. This began at least as far back as October 2012 when a bomb exploded adjacent to the site, apparently detonated by the *'Abu al-Baraa bin Malek* rebels, named after a cell of suicide bombers who fought for al-Qa'eda in Mesopotamia after 2003 (Sherlock 2012). More recently, the Sayyida Zaynab shrine was attacked in sophisticated operations conducted by the IS in both January and February 2016, with the latter including a death toll of 120 (Danti, al-Azm, et al. 2016a, 2016b). For Shia Muslims, the shrine is thought to house the remains of an extremely significant female figure, Zaynab. She is the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the daughter of Imam Ali and the sister of Imam Hussein. As such, the shrine is one of the most important Shia sites in Syria and a significant site for Shia pilgrims from across the region.

However, such attacks on Shia heritage sites also have important, but frequently overlooked, political dimensions. For example, while the contemporary shrine of Sayyida Zaynab was built atop a mediaeval Islamic tomb, the bulk of the structure is relatively new. Like many Shia holy sites in Syria, it was built from the late 1980s by Hafez al-Assad with support given by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. From this time onwards, the shrine and the surrounding suburbs became a significant hub of Shiism in Syria, with pilgrims visiting annually from across the region and many Iraqi Shia having migrated there from Iraq during the oppressive reign of the Baath and especially since the wars of 1991 and 2003 (Szanto 2012). The attacks on the Sayyida Zaynab shrine were therefore constituted by several different levels. In terms of religious iconoclasm, it was a deeply symbolic attack on Shia Islam's commemoration of the first battles between the two sects; an attack on the Shia pilgrims who travel from across the region to pay respect to one of their most significant historical martyrs; and an attack on the blasphemy of the Shia veneration of shrines. In terms of political iconoclasm, the attacks were not only a significant attack on the Shia community of Syria in one of their key centres; but also motivated by broader geo-politics, as a highly symbolic attack on the Shia-Alawite government of Bashar al-Assad and its links to the regional powerhouse that is Iran's Shia theocracy.

This mix of religious and political iconoclasm would be exported to Iraq after the IS swept across the north of the country in June 2014. As they had done with Iraq's Yazidi and Christian populations,

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when the IS conquered Shia villages or neighbourhoods, they slaughtered scores of civilians as many more were forced to flee. This was followed by three days (24–26 June) of aggressive iconoclasm in which the IS destroyed an untold numbers of heritage sites, including many Shia and Sufi mosques and shrines. For example, in just two Shia Turkmen villages adjacent to Mosul known as Guba and Shireekhan, the IS placed explosives in at least four Shia shrines and mosques before destroying them (HRW 2014). Meanwhile, over the same three-day period, the IS destroyed at least six Shia mosques and shrines at the larger Shia Turkmen town of Tal Afar, including a mosque commemorating the sixth Shia Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq (Danti, Zettler, et al. 2015, 77). At the nearby town of al-Mahlabiyyah, IS militants also destroyed several mosques and tombs, including the shrine of Ahmed Ar-Rifa'i, a significant site dedicated to a prominent twelfth century Sufi mystic who founded the Rifa'iyyah order (Danti, Zettler, et al. 2015, 85, 86).

This pattern of aggressive iconoclasm against Shia and Sufi sites was to continue in the coming months. In July 2014, the IS damaged or destroyed at least six major historically significant Shia mosques and shrines in Mosul. Of these, at least two were destroyed via large controlled explosions: the Husayniyyatul-Qubbah (or al-Qubba Husseiniya) mosque and the Tomb of the Imam Yahya ibn al-Qasim (Danti, Ali, et al. 2015, 55–63). At around the same time, the IS also destroyed significant Sufi sites such as: the tombs of various Sufi sheikhs in the al-Rawtha al-Muhamadiya Mosque in eastern Mosul and, in southern Kirkuk, the IS detonated explosives at the Sufi shrine of Salih (UNAMI 2014). They also destroyed several sites without specific sectarian elements, such as the Qabr al-Bint (Tomb of the Girl) in Mosul which is dedicated to a local girl who is said to have died of a broken heart (Danti, Ali, et al. 2015, 46). In early August, following their attack on Sinjar, the IS set about blowing up the Sayyida Zaynab shrine[4] and the shrine of Sayyid Zakariya – both prominent Shiite shrines (UNAMI 2014).

Many of these attacks on Shia and Sufi sites are dutifully recorded in various issues of *Dabiq*. For example, a four-page photo report in Issue 2 begins with two dramatic photos of the complete obliteration of the Husayniyyatul-Qubbah Shia mosque in Mosul. This is followed by 4 photos showing the bulldozing of the Tomb of the Girl in Mosul, including one which shows a bearded man standing in front of the shrine and talking to an audience with the caption: 'A soldier of the Islamic State clarifies to the people the obligation to demolish the tombs' (Dabiq 2014e, 15). On the next page there are 2 photos of the bulldozing of the Sufi shrine and tomb of Ahmed Ar-Rifa'i in al-Mahlabiyyah before the report ends with 4 photos documenting the destruction of the Shia mosque and shrine of Ja'far al-Sadiq in the city of Tel Afar (Dabiq, 2014e, 14–17). Another example occurs in Issue 3 of *Dabiq* in which readers are confronted with 2 dramatic photos of the complete destruction (via detonation) of the tomb of Imam Yahya ibn al-Qasim in Mosul. Alongside the photos is the caption 'These pictures are a window into the various hisbah (commanding the good and forbidding the evil) and da'wah [preaching of Islam] related events and activities taking place within the Islamic State' (Dabiq 2014b, 17).

The theological foundations for the IS attacks on Shia and Sufi heritage sites is explained throughout the many issues of *Dabiq* (2014/2015, 40–55). For example, Issue 13 is specifically dedicated to the Shia and includes a 14-page feature article outlining their status as heretics and idolaters. The article cites various significant historical works, including key passages from the *Qur'an*, and even includes extracts from a 2004 letter from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the former leader of al-Qa'eda in Mesopotamia) to Osama bin Laden, urging direct confrontation with the Shia:

> The Rāfidah [a derogatory word for the Shia meaning 'rejecter of the truth'] are the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the scorpion of deception and malice, the prowling enemy, the deadly poison … Shiism contains everything from blatant shirk, to grave worship, to circumambulating tombs, to takfīr of the Sahābah, to cursing the Mothers of the Believers and the best of this Ummah, to claiming distortion of the Qur'ān … as well as other forms of kufr and manifestations … they should be targeted and struck in their religious, political and military core. (Dabiq 2016, 41)

The article is accompanied by many provocative images, including Shia faithful gathered at a shrine with the caption 'The shirk of the Rāfidah includes grave-worship', and bleeding Shia men apparently during the holy *Ashura* (remembrance) procession in which self-flagellation occurs with the caption:

'A Rafidi procession of shirk' (Dabiq 2016, 36, 37). As if to reinforce the iconoclastic dimension of the article, it also features a photo of the ruins of the al-'Askari mosque after the 2006 bombing with a caption that reads: 'A Rāfidī temple after being blown up by the mujāhidin' (Dabiq 2016, 41). Such articles and images seek to provide the religious and political rationale for the aggressive iconoclasm undertaken by the IS against Shia and Sufi holy sites. As the following section demonstrates, this nexus between religious and political iconoclasm is also evident in the heritage destruction conducted by the IS at various pre-monotheistic sites.

Pre-monotheistic iconoclasm

Perhaps the most notorious cases of iconoclasm by the IS are the destruction of archaeological sites from diverse historical periods across Syria and Iraq that pre-date Abrahamic monotheism. These sites are attacked not so much as part of a broader sectarian campaign, but because they are seen to embody a pre-monotheistic religion and are therefore considered heretical and blasphemous. Among the earliest examples of this type of iconoclasm occurred when the IS publicly bulldozed two colossal ancient Assyrian lion sculptures in Raqqa that date back to the eight century BC and were originally unearthed at the Arslan Tash archaeological site near Aleppo (UNESCO 2014; US Department of State 2014). More recent examples are found in the slick propaganda films released by the IS in which they document the destruction done at sites such as: the Mosul Museum where IS militants toppled and destroyed priceless statues and artefacts; the ancient Assyrian cities of Nineveh and Nimrud where the IS used sledgehammers and power tools to deface giant winged-bull statues and, at Nimrud, went on to detonate explosives rigged across the site; and the UNESCO World Heritage cities of Hatra and Palmyra where, at the former, IS militants used assault rifles and pickaxes to destroy invaluable carvings and, at the latter, they blew up several significant monuments, temples and historical buildings, including the 2000 year old temples dedicated to the pagan gods Baal Shamin and Bel.

The religious dimension to the iconoclasm conducted by the IS at these sites is evident throughout their *Al-Hayat* videos as well as on the pages of *Dabiq*. For example, the film documenting the destruction at the Mosul Museum and Nineveh starts with a man justifying the theological foundations of the IS decision to destroy relics and statues:

> Oh Muslims, the remains that you see behind me are the idols of peoples of previous centuries, which were worshipped instead of Allah. The 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 … Since Allah commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey, and we do not care [what people think], even if they are worth billions of dollars. (Al-Hayat 2015a)

A similar message is evident in the *Al-Hayat* video that documents the destruction done at Nimrud. As one militant puts it: 'Whenever we control a swath of a land we remove all signs of polytheism and fill the land with monotheism' (Al-Hayat 2015c). Earlier in the same video another militant states: 'Allah has honoured us in the state of Islam by removing and destroying everything that was held to be equal to him and worshipped without him' (Al-Hayat 2015c). To emphasise the religious motives underpinning much of the destruction, several videos include key passages from the *Qur'an*. For example, in the Mosul Museum video a subtitle across the screen reads: 'He [Ibrahim] reduced them to fragments' (Qur'an 21:58) (Al-Hayat 2015a).

Throughout the videos, the militants make frequent reference to historical figures who have also engaged in religious iconoclasm against pre-monotheistic sites or objects, citing the Prophet Ibrahim's destruction of the idols and the Prophet Muhammad's iconoclasm at the Ka'ba after conquering Mecca. For example, one militant states: 'The Prophet Muhammad shattered the idols with his own honourable hands, when he conquered Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad commanded us to shatter and destroy statues. This is what his companions did later on, when they conquered lands' (Al-Hayat 2015a). The reference to the iconoclasm conducted by the Prophet Muhammad's companions and followers is also evident in the 7-min *Al-Hayat* video which documents the destruction that the IS perpetrated at Hatra. In it, the IS draw on several historical examples of Islamic iconoclasm beyond that of the

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Prophet Ibrahim and the Prophet Muhammad, including several of the Prophet Muhammad's closest companions who were sent by him to destroy the monuments and idols dedicated to other pre-monotheistic gods across the expanding Islamic world (Al-Hayat 2015b). Indicating the synergy between their different outlets, a fuller version of the actions of these individuals and the important lessons that can be drawn from them is given in Issue 10 of *Dabiq* (2015b, 27, 28). More recent historical examples of the active targeting of pre-monotheistic sites by Islamist movements is given in Issue 6 in which Mullah Omar of the Taliban is praised and admired for his destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha's in Afghanistan in 2001 (Dabiq 2014/2015, 40–42).

The destruction of pre-monotheistic sites is also evident elsewhere in *Dabiq*. For example, in Issue 8 a report entitled 'Erasing the legacy of a ruined nation' includes 8 colour photographs and provides further evidence to support the religious dimension of the group's iconoclasm at the Mosul Museum and the various archaeological sites (Dabiq 2015a, 22–24). The article cites several verses from the *Qur'an* as well as significant historical precedents for such aggressive iconoclasm. It begins by making clear the religious motive underpinning their actions:

> Last month, the soldiers of the Khilāfah [Caliphate], with sledgehammers in hand, revived the Sunnah[5] of their father Ibrāhīm … when they laid waste to the shirkī legacy of a nation that had long passed from the face of the Earth. They entered the ruins of the ancient Assyrians in Wilāyat Nīnawā [Nineveh Governorate] and demolished their statues, sculptures, and engravings of idols and kings. This caused an outcry from the enemies of the Islamic State, who were furious at losing a 'treasured heritage'. The mujāhidīn, however, were not the least bit concerned about the feelings and sentiments of the kuffār, just as Ibrāhīm was not concerned about the feelings and sentiments of his people when he destroyed their idols. (Dabiq 2015a, 22)

Along similar lines, the destruction done at Palmyra also features in *Dabiq* (2015e, 54). For example, Issue 11 includes a double-page spread with 14 colour photographs documenting the destruction of the temples of Baal Shamin and Bel at Palmyra. In the English edition, the only text accompanying these images is simply: 'Destroying the shirk temple of Bel' and 'Destroying the shirk temple of Baal' (2015f, 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 of the temple, 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).

However, the attacks on these various pre-monotheistic sites are also done for clearly articulated political purposes. For example, in one *Dabiq* article documenting their destruction, they state:

> The kuffār had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of. Yet this opposes the guidance of Allah and His Messenger and only serves a nationalist agenda. (Dabiq 2015a, 22)

In this quote, the IS detail two dimensions to their political iconoclasm. Firstly, it is an attack on the *kuffar* – presumably Westerners who, as part of the colonial period not only drew the modern borders and created the contemporary states of the Middle East, but also excavated Mesopotamian archaeological sites and placed them in public museums to be admired. Following the end of colonial oversight in the mid twentieth century came the arrival of secular nationalist governments who sought to utilise the rich history of Iraq and Syria to inculcate a sense of collective identity (Baram 1991; Wedeen 1999). Attacks on pre-monotheistic sites are therefore not just an attack on the sins of polytheism and idolatry, but also an attack on the Western colonial powers who unearthed the ancient relics and designed the modern state, as well as an attack on an entire epoch of state produced symbols that manipulated the region's rich history to serve their own 'nationalist agenda' (De Cesari 2015). The attacks on pre-monotheistic sites are also a broader rejection not just of polytheism, colonialism and the modern state – but the secular liberal norms that are enshrined within institutions such as the museum or multilateral bodies such as UNESCO (Gamboni 2001; Winter 2014). For example, in March 2015 UNESCO's Bokova issued a statement reacting to the destruction of heritage sites at the hands of the IS, referring to them as a 'war crime' (Bokova 2015a). Knowing that UNESCO was

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powerless to stop them, the following month the IS showed their clear disdain for such rhetoric in their *Al-Hayat* video filmed at the World Heritage Listed city of Hatra. The film not only shows militants using sledgehammers and assault rifles to destroy priceless reliefs engraved into the walls of the ancient fortress city, it also features a bold repost to Bokova: 'Some of the infidel organisations say the destruction of these alleged artefacts is a war crime. We will destroy your artefacts and idols anywhere and Islamic State will rule your lands' (Al-Hayat 2015b).

Conclusion

The brash assertions made by the IS in reaction to the condemnation from UNESCO clearly demonstrate that their heritage destruction cannot be merely described as a product of their barbarity or ignorance. Equally misguided are arguments which frame IS iconoclasm as devoid of religious or political nuance, or those which reduce it to a cynical performance designed purely as a moment of mass propaganda and spectacle. Instead, a systematic analysis of the two key propaganda outlets of the IS – *Dabiq* magazine and the films released by *Al-Hayat* – reveal that the heritage destruction undertaken by the IS are not only very carefully planned and executed, but also couched within a broader religious and political framework that seeks to justify their violent iconoclasm. Throughout such outlets, the IS have gone to great lengths to explain the religious doctrine and the historical precedent to their destruction, situating their attacks within key Islamist principles and alongside some of the key figures of Abrahamic monotheism, Islamic history, and prominent Salafi-Wahhabi iconoclasts. Beyond this very specific theological framework, the IS also frequently situate their iconoclasm within a clearly articulated political context that includes not only the elimination of opposing ideologies as part of the process of state formation, but also a broader geo-political agenda in which specific sites are attacked as proxy targets for the physical and ideological opponents of the IS.

The complex layers of motives that drive the iconoclasm of the IS comes into sharp relief when one examines closely their attacks along two key axes: *Symbolic Sectarianism* and *Pre-Monotheistic Iconoclasm*. Two brief examples – the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus and the Mosul Museum – demonstrate that beyond the destruction of the sites as purely motivated by their supposed blasphemy, such attacks are also simultaneously steeped in layers of complex religious, historical and political symbolism. In this way, the attack on the Sayyida Zaynab shrine is also an attack on: a key Shia historical figure who is commemorated for her role in the first civil war between the two sects; a contemporary hub of Shia religiosity and activism; a prominent pilgrimage site; and an attack on the Assad regime and its relationship with Iran. Similarly, the attack on the Mosul Museum can be seen as: a rejection of the colonial powers that drew the borders of the modern Middle East and conducted archaeological excavation across the region; the post-colonial state that sought to utilise the region's rich heritage to inculcate a sense of collective national identity built atop secular ideologies; and an attack on key multi-lateral bodies such as UNESCO which promote liberal values including the protection of heritage sites. Understanding the complex layers of religious and political iconoclasm that drive the heritage destruction perpetrated by movements such as the IS constitutes an important step towards providing a more nuanced understanding of this recurring human phenomenon. It is also critical in the ongoing process of developing appropriate analytical tools and policy responses to interpret, and ultimately mitigate against, the destruction of the rich, heterogeneous and shared heritage of human civilisation.

Notes

1. It should be noted here that a handful of extended media articles documenting the heritage destruction wrought by the IS did provide nuanced insights and substantive depth. This includes detailed discussions of topics such as the propaganda potential of iconoclasm in the age of social media (Felch and Varoutsikos 2016), challenges to preserving heritage in times of conflict (Foyle 2015) and the extent to which such heritage destruction can be considered ethnic cleansing or genocide (Ghorashi 2015).
2. Genesis Rabba is an extended commentary on Genesis and the early life of Abraham.

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3. The Hadith are a body of texts which describe the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded by his companions and contemporaries.
4. Not to be confused with the shrine of the same name in Damascus.
5. The Sunnah are a body of texts which are broader than the Hadith and include the Prophet Muhammad's sayings, deeds, teachings and disapprovals – as well as those of his companions and other seminal religious figures.

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