

GLOBAL THREAT: THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE BY ISIS

I. Introduction

According to Michelle LeBaron: “Cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments and ideas of self and the other”.¹ Cultural heritage has a hugely important impact to make on, and provides symbolic meaning and means for, the recovering of war-torn societies inspiring them to break the cycle of violence and heal the scars of war. This article explores the problem of destruction of cultural heritage in areas of armed conflict, with the main focus on such activity by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). As by the end of 2017, this radical movement has lost much of its territorial control, the evidence of its barbarism and destruction of cultural heritage multiplies, also actualizing the need to think about how the world could best try to restore at least part of the destroyed heritage and to limit the immense damage caused to it by the pseudo-caliphate.

The international community’s concerns about the fate of the historical and cultural monuments and temples located in Iraq and Syria gravely increased since the rise of ISIS that turned destruction and theft of cultural heritage into systematic practice. In February 2015, thousands of ancient books from the central library of Mosul were burnt by ISIS. In the following month, three ancient cities – Nimrud (13th century BC), Khatra (3^d century BC), Dur-Sharrukin (8th century BC) were remorselessly demolished. Above all, the UNESCO-designated World Heritage site city of Palmyra repeatedly suffered heavy damage and destruction. The ancient temples of Bel and Baal'shamina, the Monumental Arch, the Lion of al-Lāt and three funerary towers were destroyed – and this is hardly a complete list of ISIS’s intentional attacks on unique historical/cultural heritage sites.

While, in committing crimes against cultural heritage, ISIS has not been that different from several other radical militant groups (e. g. the Taliban who in March 2000 destroyed the world’s two largest standing Buddha monuments in the Bamiyan province, Afghanistan), ISIS has also widely practiced looting and trafficking of historical artwork for profit – a criminal activity that the movement’s predecessor(s), such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, heavily engaged in Iraq following the 2003 U.S.-led intervention.

II. Cultural heritage in areas of armed conflict

Approaches to the problem of cultural assets and heritage in war zones have evolved significantly over the time. It is useful to trace these shifts of perception.

Firstly, the significance of masterpieces in ancient Rome could be mentioned. Roman Empire’s military triumphs were impressive victory celebration parades that deliberately displayed “tokens of war” including artworks. Consequently, the Romans set up “the winner takes all” tradition that attached symbolic value to the looting of cultural heritage in conquered or occupied lands. This approach aimed at strengthening the authority and asserting domination through applying the power of cultural capital.

Another relevant historical example is the role of appropriation of cultural property in Napoleon's political concerns. Napoleon revived the practice of Roman triumphs by festively entering Paris in 1798. The major difference from the past – and novelty – was a systematic approach to pillage developed by Napoleon's forces. They conducted looting on an unprecedented scale, planning and organizing a safe transportation of cultural significances to Louvre. Moreover, Napoleon legitimized the transmission of artwork's proprietorship. Apart from, and addition to, the related material benefits, this policy was meant to support his aspirations for hegemony of France and expansion of his own authority. Therefore, the plunder of masterpieces was vital for Paris to take over the position of a "new Rome" as the world's cultural center.

Special attention should also be paid to modifications in the perception of cultural values during and in the context of the Second World War. Plundering by the Nazis was carried out in "professionally" selective, emblematical and tactical manner. Experts were employed to analyze which works of art best embody the German spirit and elevate German superiority by "proving" and inventing its deep historical roots. Forces were dispatched to various historical and cultural locations with a specific mission to obtain the cultural treasures in identified regions. Pieces of art, however, were not only plundered and despoiled, but destroyed as well, on a massive scale. In fact, the German Nazi ideology postulated that looting cultural property and destroying those artworks to which certain groups and nations were bonded were acts to emancipate "subjugated" from their cultural and ideological background and eventually to enforce a new identity.

Against this background, it is also important to consider the origins and development of legal protection of cultural property in a situation of an armed conflict. After the Battle of Waterloo, the Allies brought innumerable antiquities appropriated by Napoleon during his conquests back to their original locations and owners. That was the time when the first norms and rules regulating the status of monuments and artworks in armed conflict settings started to emerge. For example, Article 17 of the Project of an International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War (Brussels, 27 August 1874) was taken as a basis to the Hague Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land (18 October 1907), which proclaimed the principle of inviolability for cultural objects.

These early legal provisions could not, however, prevent massive damage to cultural treasures caused by the First World War and, on an even greater scale, by the Second World War. It became clear that international laws and regulations in this field had to be strengthened and reinforced. The Nuremberg Trials postulated that destruction of cultural objects is a war crime and the principle of criminal liability was accepted. The Nuremberg Trials set up a precedent for international courts that stimulated the gradual shift in the perception of acceptable behavior towards antiquities in wartime. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established in the aftermath of the Second World War and tasked, among other things, with the protection of cultural objects, also contributed to gradual change of attitude to cultural heritage on a global scale. According to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the objects of cultural significance are to be respected and protected in their own right, as part of common human heritage and regardless of which ethnic (religious or other) group they belong to. Protection of works of art, thus, should surpasses cultural, national or religious divisions.

As a result, the general notion of a "threat to cultural heritage of mankind" started to form – and the legal framework for categorizing cultural destruction as a war crime/crime against humanity continued to develop.

III. The role of antiquities in ISIS's strategic outlook

As of the mid-2010s, the ISIS got under its control a vast historical and geographical area encompassing large parts of Syria and Iraq and rich in cultural heritage sites. A range of militant-terrorist groups in and beyond the Middle East pledged an oath of allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to act on his behalf.²

The "Islamic State" evolved as a totalitarian system propagating an extremely conservative version of Islamic fundamentalism through aggressive propaganda and violent jihad and proclaiming a literal return to medieval norms and practices, including in the employment of violence and norms of war. ISIS had no intention to use historical and cultural objects, both Islamic and non-Islamic ones, in order to increase its authority as a cultural center. Instead, physical control and destruction of such objects in the territory under its control became an additional tool of intimidation and ideological propaganda.

First, let us consider the role of art objects in the ISIS's effort to spread its ideology through aggressive and increasingly globalized propaganda strategy. Islamic State did not appropriate the cultural objects obtained during its attacks – it tried to willfully destroy the masterpieces. The explicit, excessive publicity of such actions and their results amplified by international media was part of the ISIS's psychological warfare – while shocking much of the rest of the world, it did back the movement's aggressive propaganda "by word" with a decisive and conspicuous "deed" and tried to create a vivid illustration of ideological commitment to the common cause of the caliphate where there is no place for the attributes of "the infidels" or "apostates".

To this purposes, the ISIS also effectively employed the "smoke and mirrors" tactic. For example, in January 2015, ISIS threatened to annihilate the antique walls of Nineveh – news that immediately acquired a global resonance. In the following months, ISIS continued to "fuel the story" by repeated "premature", or "fake" leaks about the destruction, ensuring sustained international reaction, even as the menace was only actually implemented in March.³

The tactic of "shock-and-awe" made the adversaries of ISIS fall into their own traps. An illustration of that was, for instance, deliberate, orchestrated circulation by ISIS of shocking photos of the eradication of cultural sites through social networks, with an intention to instigate the opponent to overreact. The following public denunciation of ISIS by UNESCO and the Western powers who, however, proved unable to stop or prevent continuing destruction of high-profile objects of the world's cultural heritage, in fact, facilitated the "Islamic State" efforts to emphasize the international community's inability to stop it.⁴ By attaching excessive publicity to the demolition of cultural objects, ISIS both spread the news of its domination and transformed the monuments into its operational facilities.

The spectacular eradication of objects of major cultural significance in a splendidly staged performance was awe-inspiring, efficiently transmitting the message and enhancing commitment. Consequently, the main impact of provocative demonstration of annihilation of antiquities was meant: in its core areas of operation and control (in Iraq and Syria), to give ISIS the fame of invincibility and diminish any opposition to its expansion; on the broader "periphery" of ISIS reach in and beyond the Middle East, to convince its adherents in the seriousness of its project; at the global level, to challenge the world order at the ideological and cultural level etc.

Second, beyond "instrumentalization" of systematic destruction of historical monuments on the territories under ISIS control for its propaganda and global expansion purposes, one should not dismiss a more "genuine" imperative for such actions dictated by the very form of religious extremism that formed the ideological basis for the ISIS

phenomenon. Damage and destruction of the world's cultural heritage was literally seen by ISIS leaders and ideologues as means to help build control and a "true state" through physical "cleansing" of any of its opponents. Radical Salafism in its heavily transnationalized "global jihad" form calls for annihilation of shrines and temples and "eradicating idolatry" wherever that may be.⁵

Thus, the "Islamic State" militants directed their actions against a wide range of cultural objects – perhaps, the widest in modern and contemporary history. The range of cultural targets included all significant symbols and attributes of their enemies. On the one hand, they would readily attack ancient historical sites of the Western civilization and religious/cultural objects belonging to non-Islamic religious tradition (Christian, Yezidi etc.). While being direct attempts to cleanse the areas under their control from religiously/ideologically "impure" object, these actions also pursued instrumental purposes of attracting greater international publicity and facilitating the task of "cleaning" the region from undesirable flows of tourists.⁶ Another "rationale" was to remove the territories of the "re-established" historical "caliphate" – a category of central importance to ISIS, intended to serve as a magnet to attract "oppressed Muslims" and "foreign fighters" from all other parts of the world – of any cultural symbols that could "remind" thousands of foreign fighters, especially from the non-Muslim majority regions or countries of their heritage and countries of origin.

On the other hand, ISIS and some other radical Salafist-jihadist groups active in the Syria/Iraq context eliminated not only the parts of the cultural heritage of "Western civilization" (both ancient, such as Palmyra, and contemporary secular or religious monuments and places of worship for Syria and Iraq's Christian communities of various denominations, including Orthodox Christians, Armenians etc.), but also local pre-Islamic monuments and even objects of Muslim culture, mosques etc. (including not only Shia objects, but also some of the Sunni ones), because they represent "undignified" and "apostate" cultures, and secular and corrupt regimes.

Finally, ISIS also managed to get its share from pillage and looting of cultural heritage sites in areas under its control and fighting zones, through laying Islamic tax on trade upon trafficking of antiquities by criminal plunderers and dealers.⁷

IV. Protection measures and policies

According to UNESCO, the "Islamic State" violated human rights on a massive scale and its empowerment led to a large-scale humanitarian crisis.⁸ More specifically, demolition of cultural treasures, accompanied with the infringement of human rights amounts to "cultural cleansing" whose goals, among others, is to suppress cultural rights, by destroying and denying access to cultural property, both tangible (historical objects, religious sites) and intangible (customs, traditions, beliefs). The purpose of such deprivation of cultural rights is removing cultural diversity and variety and substituting it with an area that is religiously and culturally homogeneous. This cultural cleansing policy also contributes to push the native communities out of their homes and areas and thus aggravates the humanitarian crisis. Mass flows of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to neighboring and other countries, to areas dominated by population of another ethnicity, denomination or culture, in turn, tends to increase tensions between the displaced and their host communities. In the longer term, it can induce an irreversible loss of cultural diversity, making the return of populations and reintegration in their homeland harder.

UNESCO deduces that new measures are required at an international and national level, to more closely integrate and coordinate international actions aimed at protection

of cultural diversity, humanitarian support, peace-building and security. One such suggestion was to systematically integrate issues of protection of cultural heritage and diversity in the discussions and decisions by the UN Security Council (UNSC) on crisis management, humanitarian action, security measures and peace-building. This led to an adoption of the UNSC Resolution no. 2199 (2015) that binds the member-states to take measures to stop cross-border trafficking of antiquities from Syria and Iraq, thus permitting their safe repatriation. In addition, UNSC invokes international organizations to take active participation in implementing the provisions of the resolution.

In fact, the Resolution integrates the regulatory norm of UNESCO for the protection of cultural heritage into the broader UN efforts to fight terrorism. The UNSC Resolution no. 2199 imposes a compulsory norm requiring action against plundering of, and illegal trade in, works of art, as a source of terrorism financing. In addition, it stimulates protection of cultural capital in humanitarian operations, through cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC)⁹ and with the UN peace support operations, and also links it to the evolving norm of “ Responsibility to Protect” (R2P).¹⁰ Moreover, it reminds that massive actions against cultural heritage fall under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC)¹¹ and calls for improvement of local communities’ and authorities’ ability to record and track the condition of cultural objects in their area, including as part of broader peace-building efforts and operations.

UNESCO’s strategic goal in this field is three-fold: to assess the damage to cultural heritage required for setting up post-war restoration projects, to collect and submit compelling evidence to the ICC, and to engage local communities in protection of cultural heritage.

VI. Conclusion

Historically, cultural treasures played a vital role as spoils of war. However, in the modern world, their significance in conflict increased: cultural capital became more than just a trophy for the victor, but also increasingly, and in some cases, even primarily a symbol of dominance that serves political purposes. Culture can thus be seen as a dimension of power, as a privileged field in the struggle for hegemony. The role of cultural goods has evolved towards becoming tools of war.

The plundering conducted by the so-called Islamic State had its own economic rationale, as ISIS profited from taxing illicit trade in precious goods. However, the pillage was also heavily ideologically loaded and symbolic: demonstrative, ostentatious destruction of high-profile historical/cultural objects was meant to convey a message of ISIS’s escalating influence and control. Destruction and looting were also selective and discriminate, as they were directed against certain (and entire) ethnic and religious groups. Plundering was also strategic, as it was a form to ensure and demonstrate military domination and state control by self-proclaimed “caliphate”. Finally, intentional and systematic destruction of cultural objects by ISIS was not only part of a strategy to subjugate and exterminate indigenous people, it also had asymmetrical communication effect at an international level, through its visibility in global media and social networks, and horrified the civilized world. This has already led the international community to take first important measures to stop and prevent damage to cultural sites and trafficking of cultural/historical objects, with part of profits redirected to financing militant-terrorist groups. The UN’s specialized body – UNESCO – has identified raising the awareness of local communities regarding the importance of their heritage and cultural heritage protection concerns in peace-building as its strategic objective.

In conclusion, the words of the Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova are worth mentioning. According to her, “culture and heritage are not about stones and buildings – they are about identities and belongings. They carry values from the past that are important for the societies today and tomorrow. ... We must safeguard the heritage because it is what brings us together as a community; it is what binds us within a shared destiny.” If the mankind is able to defend its cultural heritage, it can then resist extremism, violence and barbarity, most recently symbolized, on a global scale and for global audiences, by ISIS.

ENDNOTES

¹ LeBaron M. Culture and conflict // Beyond Intractability. Ed. by G.Burgess and H.Burgess; Conflict Information Consortium. – Boulder: University of Colorado, 2003. URL: <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict>>.

² Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat. UNSC Report S/2016/92 (2016). § 7–8.

³ Smith C., Burke H., de Leiu C., Jackson G. The Islamic State's symbolic war: Da'esh's socially mediated terrorism as a threat to cultural heritage // Journal of Social Archaeology. 2016. V. 16. № 2. P. 10.

⁴ Ibid. P. 11.

⁵ Bunzel C. From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State. The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Paper № 19. 2015. P. 8, 10.

⁶ Gestoso Singer G. ISIS's war on cultural heritage and memory // Museodata-Heritage. 2015. P. 3.

⁷ Healthcare in the Khilafah // Dabiq. № 9 (n.d.). P. 24, 26.

⁸ Strategy for Reinforcing UNESCO's Action for the Protection of Culture and the Promotion of Cultural Pluralism in the Event of Armed Conflict. – Paris: UNESCO, 2015. § 2–4. URL: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002351/235186e.pdf>>

⁹ Memorandum of Understanding between UNESCO and ICRC. Geneva, 29 February 2016. URL: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002442/244256e.pdf>>.

¹⁰ Expert Meeting on the “Responsibility to Protect” as Applied to the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict. UNESCO Final Report. 27 November 2015. – Paris: UNESCO, 2015. P. 7.

¹¹ Strategy for Reinforcing UNESCO's Action. Op. cit. § 12, 16, 25.