ISIS destroys ancient sites near Mosul

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has reportedly used heavy equipment to demolish the site of the ancient Assyrian capital of Nimrud, 18 miles south of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. Reports describe ISIS militiamen trucking away statues and tablets from the site and the demolition of the area since last Thursday. The fundamentalist group considers pre-Islamic artifacts to be idolatrous and worthy of destruction.

Nimrud, built over 3,000 years ago, was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire after 883 BC. The Neo-Assyrian Empire, whose rulers spoke a language distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew, ruled Mesopotamia, the ancient name for Iraq and parts of Syria, from about 900 BC to 600 BC.

The site along the Tigris River contained monumental statues, frescos, temples, private dwellings and a ziggurat, the stepped pyramid characteristic of Mesopotamian civilizations. Nimrud boasted some of the most extensive carvings in ivory of any site in the world, most of which had been removed and placed in museums in Iraq and Britain.

A week earlier, the Islamic State released video showing men smashing statues with sledgehammers in the Nineveh Museum, about 20 miles from the site of Nimrud. Nineveh was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire after 705 BC.

In recent weeks, ISIS has also set off incendiary devices around Mosul Central Library. Estimates of the books and manuscripts destroyed range from 8,000 to 10,000. Bookshops on the central Al-Nujaifi Street have been burned, and ancient Christian monasteries have been vandalized.

Over the weekend, the Associated Press reported that residents near Hatra, 68 miles southwest of Mosul, saw ISIS fighters removing artifacts from the 2,000-year-old city. Hatra was built during the Seleucid Empire in the second or third century BC and changed hands over the next several hundred years, belonging in turn to the Parthians, the Romans and Araba, one of the first pre-Islamic Arab kingdoms.

Next to the tremendous loss of life, the destruction of the past is one of the most grievous products of the conflict that was initiated by the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. A whole people is being cut off from its historical roots and the study of the Mesopotamian past by historians has suffered a serious blow.

The plunder of Iraq began on April 10, 2003, when American occupation forces in Baghdad, in spite of warnings by archaeologists, allowed the National Museum to be looted of tens of thousands of historical artifacts of great artistic and scientific value. Only about half the artifacts have been recovered. The American military, in violation of cultural heritage regulations, fired on the museum.

In that first month of the occupation, dozens of other museums and libraries were burned or looted, including the Mosul Museum, where the 2,000-year-old statue of Parthian King Saqnatroq II was stolen.

In 2003-2004, American troops occupied the site of ancient Babylon, where they dug ditches across excavated areas, filling sandbags with ancient bricks labeled with cuneiform writing of the Mesopotamian civilization. The occupation forces built a heliport, and vibrations from American aircraft caused the bases of temples to collapse.

"The damage to Babylon is both extensive and irreparable," Columbia University archeologist Zainab Bahrani said in 2007. "The occupation has resulted in a tremendous destruction of history, well beyond the museums and libraries that were looted and destroyed at the fall of Baghdad. At least seven historical sites have [like Babylon] been used by US and coalition forces since 2003, one of them being in the historical heart of Samarra, where the Askari shrine built by Nasr al Din Shah was bombed in 2006."

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The destruction and looting of Iraqi archaeological sites has been going on nonstop ever since. Iraq's archeological sites and tells—unexcavated mounds of earth that cover formerly inhabited areas—have been dug up with earth-moving equipment and the spoils have been sold on the antiquities market for private gain.

In 2010, the *New York Times* noted the collusion of the police with antiquities thieves in southern Iraq, areas controlled by Shia sectarian militias. One of the great cultural crimes brought on by the American occupation of Iraq was the bombing of al-Mutinabbi Street, Baghdad's historic street of booksellers, on March 5, 2007.

Both Nimrud and Nineveh were plundered several times during the American occupation. Before ISIS's destruction last week, the advanced state of decay of the Nimrud site was causing archaeologists great concern.

The American and European media have expressed "shock" and "outrage" over ISIS's cultural destruction. Irina Bokova, director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESO) said, "We cannot remain silent. The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage constitutes a war crime."

The Iraqi government, somewhat more forthrightly, has used the ISIS vandalism to call for stepped-up intervention by the American and coalition air forces in Iraq.

But the corporate-controlled media, UNESCO, and the miserable servants of the US in the Iraq government conceal the essential causes and nature of this barbarism, and omit even naming the force that is chiefly responsible for the destruction of the past: American imperialism.

This exercise in unbridled hypocrisy assumes that the people of the world have forgotten the destruction of Iraqi, and now Syrian, heritage sites, museums and libraries as the result of 12 years of almost continuous imperialist military intervention in the region.

Over a million Iraqis have died as a result of the American invasion and occupation, and the sectarian fighting stoked up by US imperialism. Tens of millions remain internally displaced and mired in poverty. The utilities infrastructure and the Iraqi health care system have been destroyed and have yet to recover. The *World Socialist Web Site* has accurately defined this process as "sociocide," "the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society."

The same is true for the devastation wrought by right-wing political movements such as ISIS, and the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage. Just as there was no presence of Al Qaeda in Iraq before the American invasion, there was no plunder of the country's archaeology or cultural institutions.

Those above all responsible for the destruction of Nimrud, Nineveh and Hatra bear the names of Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Rice and Powell. One must add to this list Barack Obama, who continued the occupation for nearly three years and has now launched a new war in Iraq and Syria that can only lead to the further destruction of the region's historical and cultural legacy, in addition to more civilian deaths and an increase in the number of refugees.

In a more direct sense, the vandalism of ISIS is an American production. In its eagerness to implement regime-change in Syria, the CIA, working with American allies among the Gulf monarchies, as well as Turkey and Jordan, armed the Islamists fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The American-stoked civil war in Syria led to the widespread destruction of antiquities.

Last year, the UN found that 24 archaeological sites have been completely destroyed, 189 severely or moderately damaged, and a further 77 possibly damaged. All six of Syria's World Heritage sites have been damaged.

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