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**Manipulation and Re-Interpretation: al-Qa'ida,
Islamic State and the Re-Claiming of the Arab
Poetic Tradition
Transcript**

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19 May 2016

Cultural Heritage and War

Symposium

Programme

The symposium will look at the risks to culture at a time of war, focusing especially on the current situation in the Middle East.

Welcome and introduction by Professor Tim Connell

Sir Derek Plumbly

Cultural heritage in times of war and the present crisis in the Middle East

Dr Mark Altaweel

Patterns of Looting in Syria/Iraq and the Western Art Market

To follow

Dr Elisabeth Kendall

Manipulation and Re-Interpretation: al-Qa'ida, Islamic State and the Re-Claiming of the Arab Poetic Tradition

Welcome and Introduction

Professor Tim Connell

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to today's Gresham Symposium on the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East. And a warm welcome to our very distinguished panel of experts who will each be speaking on their particular topic. This will enable us to consider the subject from different angles and we shall then have time for an open discussion. With a lecture, we only have time for a few questions. Today we will have an opportunity to ask our experts their views, though with such a contentious topic we may well not come to any firm conclusions!

The impact of war on the Middle East, in Iraq and Syria in particular, has been catastrophic. Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilisation and (some may fear currently) its deathbed. Years of warfare (going back to the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 - 1988 [\[i\]](#)) have had an enormously damaging impact on every aspect of life in the region. In the context of today's Symposium, important strategic sites were damaged or destroyed and some, like the *tehs* (historic mounds yet to be excavated) were used as military strongpoints or artillery firebases. The ongoing war in Syria has also led to the destruction of both urban and rural cultural treasures. [\[ii\]](#)

But worse was yet to come with the emergence of ISIL/ISIS/Daesh [\[iii\]](#) . Apart from the many atrocities committed against both military enemies and civilians, it has quite deliberately targeted the rich cultural heritage of the area, most notoriously in Palmyra, though even minor archaeological sites such as the *tehs* have been dug through for artefacts to be sold on the black market. To the Western mind (and doubtless many others) both the violence and the wrecking are incomprehensible – but our experts will be looking at these points today in detail, and it is important for me not to steal their thunder!

So let me place all of this in a wider context. Religious intolerance, conflict and iconoclastic behaviour are by no means alien to Western history. The Romans deleted Carthage, even sowing salt into the ground to put an end to agriculture; the Aborigines were hunted to near extinction in Tasmania in the 1830s [\[iv\]](#) ; and smallpox blankets were distributed to the Indians in North America [\[v\]](#) . However, in this context a prime example would be the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. The Aztec Empire stretched from the north of modern-day Mexico to the middle of what is now Central America, and in 1519 is thought to have had a population of around fifty million. By 1600 that figure had gone down to two million as a result of ill treatment, social disruption and the accidental introduction of European diseases. Although these aspects of the Black Legend should be recognised, there were highlights in the form of Churchmen such as Bartolomé de las Casas, who in 1512 pushed through the Laws of Burgos [\[vi\]](#) to protect the new subjects of the Spanish Crown in the West Indies. Then there were the missionaries who became the first ethnographers of Mexico and who have left us whole volumes of valuable data. Men like Motolinía [\[vii\]](#) , who converted Indians in their thousands; Fray Diego Durán [\[viii\]](#) who wrote extensively on all aspects of life in New Spain and all that he could find out about the pre-Conquest era; or Fray Bernardino de Sahagún [\[ix\]](#) who produced nearly two and half thousand pages of useful material. But the key character is Bishop Landa of Yucatán who was sent to impose religious control in the South in the 1560s and who set about thoroughly destroying artefacts, including the celebrated codices, of which only three survive. [\[x\]](#)

Later in life he realised that he was dealing with a far more complex and advanced culture than anyone could possibly have imagined, and he set about recording as much as he could about pre-Columbian times with the same thoroughness. In particular, his record of Mayan hieroglyphs is seen to be of particular value. [\[xi\]](#)

However, we do not need to go as far afield as Latin America to see examples of religious intolerance, conflict and iconoclastic behaviour. Henry V's suppression of the Lollards was pretty complete. [\[xii\]](#) Our own Reformation led to the destruction of the monasteries and the loss of thousands of religious artefacts including large numbers of medieval manuscripts which were either destroyed or sold abroad. People died for their faith on both sides, even though England was less damaged than other parts of Europe in the wars of religion at the time. However, even in the English Civil War, further damage was caused by the Puritans in a period when there were religious splinter groups of different persuasions. Worcester Cathedral was left in a state of dereliction, and was used as both a barracks for the infantry and as a stable for the cavalry. [\[xiii\]](#)

Religion in England continued to be a contentious issue and Christianity in an era of ecumenical faith traditions may hit raw nerves even today. Listen to this description of a well-known figure from the early 17th Century and see what you think:

“He was a man of considerable experience as well as knowledge. Thanks to his prowess he has acquired considerable fame and name among the soldiers [...] He was pleasant of approach and cheerful of manner, opposed to quarrels and strife [...] In a word, he was a man liked by everyone and loyal to his friends.”

Who was that? None other than Guy Fawkes, the man who tried to blow up Parliament plus the whole of the British government and elite in what the IRA would have called a “spectacular”. The description comes from a school friend of Fawkes – who went on to become a Jesuit. [\[xiv\]](#)

Religious intolerance, the suppression of belief, the destruction of cultural identity, cultural violence, cultural death, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide have all been with us for a long time, even if those terms are fairly modern. The aim is to destroy all records and even trace of the past so as to undermine any common history, identity or values. A dire uniformity can then be imposed, though of course if we can no longer learn from the past, then errors are bound to be repeated in the future. Can a society actually go backwards? Cambodia and Year Zero [\[xv\]](#) , the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda [\[xvi\]](#) and the Shining Path in Peru [\[xvii\]](#) are indicative of attempts at social change which had, or might have had, dire consequences and have led to years of violence, uncertainty and upheaval for the populations involved.

The desire to re-write history, to destroy the past in order to re-shape the present, to exterminate whole peoples may all be seen among the more extreme elements that have been unleashed in the Middle East, with the added complications of conflicting religious beliefs, ethnic differences, Great Power rivalry and (it has to be said) oil.

Our speakers today will be looking at the topic of Cultural Heritage and War from a variety of angles. Sir Derek Plumbly, as you will see from your programmes, is a former diplomat with decades of experience in the region. He is a fluent Arabic speaker and knows the region well, in particular Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. He will be speaking to us on the subject of Cultural heritage in times of war and the present crisis in the Middle East.

Other Speakers

Dr Mark Altaweel is from University College London and his range of interests are literally worldwide. His main focus in the Middle East at the moment is on Iraqi Kurdistan and he has been in the media in recent months talking precisely about this topic of the looting of artefacts from areas of conflict in the Middle East (which is how I came to invite him).

Dr Elisabeth Kendall is an Arabic specialist based in Oxford who has been working in recent years on Egypt and Yemen. Her most recent book is on Twenty-First Century Jihad and she has also produced some useful language books on media and security Arabic. She has a particular interest in the way that traditional culture is being re-interpreted by the jihadists –

it might even come as a surprise to discover that jihadists actually have a culture, so I am looking forward very much to what she has to say.

Conclusion

The loss of items of cultural value, be they miniature artefacts or the whole sites of ancient cities, is a matter of serious concern and, in the case of the Middle East, appears to have no end. And as John Donne reminds us, “If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is poorer by the loss”, and why? “Because I am involved in mankind”. The well-known ancient sites of Mesopotamia in a way belong to us all, as so much of our own civilisation originates from there, and hence we too have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that they are still there for future generations. Clearly however, strategic issues inhibit rescue, though it is to be hoped that, as in the First Gulf War, steps can still be taken to protect or conserve items of cultural value, and all credit should be paid to those who have not only risked their lives but actually died while trying to prevent wanton destruction. [\[xviii\]](#)

Of course, wartime damage is not the only threat facing the three million or so archaeological sites to be found from Mauretania to Iran. [\[xix\]](#) Natural erosion, urban development and expanding agriculture to meet the needs of a growing population are in their own way as potentially harmful as being in a war zone.

There are some positive stories. The UK government has finally agreed to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention (and its two protocols) which means that over 115 countries (including all the UN Security Council members) now adhere to it. The formalities are still pending [\[xx\]](#) but the spirit is already to be found in matters such as rules of engagement for the military. More interesting perhaps is the fact that the Government has voted £3 million to set up the Iraqi Emergency Heritage Management Project, which will be run by the British Museum over the next five years. [\[xxi\]](#)

There are also academic projects which will hopefully have a beneficial effect, such as EAMENA, the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa project. [\[xxii\]](#)

In the meantime, we can only hope and pray for an end to hostilities in Syria, and that a solution can be found to all the insecurity caused by the activities of ISIS, though it would be unreal to look for anything in the short term. It is to be hoped that international action will help control the illegal sale of looted materials – and if all else fails then we may be able to fall back on 3D printing techniques to re-create some of what has been lost [\[xxiii\]](#) , though this may be a controversial note to end on!

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Cultural Heritage at Times of War and the Present Crisis in the Middle East

Sir Derek Plumbly –

I was asked by Professor Connell to give an overview of the issues, including the political and legal ones, relating to our subject this afternoon.

There is nothing new in the threat posed by war to cultural heritage. I will briefly set out a little of the back history, the instruments through which the international community has in the past sought to address the issue; then look at the impact of recent conflicts in the Middle East on some of the region’s extraordinary wealth of monuments and archaeological sites, of tangible and intangible heritage; and finally address the response, and what if anything may be done to contain the damage to that heritage and set us on a better path in future.

I approach the issue with the diffidence, but also the enthusiasm, of an amateur who over 45 years in the Arab world has derived pleasure from engaging with its history and heritage and those who treasure it. Some of them have helped me greatly in researching the issue for this afternoon’s discussions. My own experience has made me acutely aware too of the particular responsibilities that fall to a country which has been involved, and remains involved in however limited a fashion, in combat in the area.

I am also very conscious, not least as a result of my work with the United Nations from 2012 to 2015 in Beirut on the periphery of the Syrian conflict, of the need for a sense of proportion when highlighting the threat to heritage. The war in Syria alone has taken - depending on the estimate - somewhere between 200000 and 400000 lives. Almost 5 million Syrians have been registered as refugees in neighboring countries. Over 6 million are internally displaced. The international community's response generally in terms of relief, and still more of peacemaking, has been wanting.

The last few weeks have seen a further grim round in the battle for Aleppo, with atrocities that have become all too familiar including the bombing of hospitals and murder of children. It would be grotesque in these circumstances to single out the fact that the old city at Aleppo's heart is a World Heritage Site. But that is an integral part of the picture. Already, in earlier rounds of fighting, the Great Mosque and the Citadel have been damaged and the Souks in their entirety have been burnt down. Future generations of Syrians will be the poorer for what is lost. So will we.

The Hague Convention

Such thinking, and the perception that destroying an enemy's cultural property is not the best way to win the subsequent peace, have underpinned the efforts made over the past century or so to encourage the protection of cultural heritage in times of war. The first international conventions with that objective were concluded before the First World War. They had little impact. Further attempts were made between the wars.

Massive damage during the Second World War - the bombing of historic cities by both sides, Nazi looting of cultural property - concentrated minds. As a result there was a collective international effort after 1945 to codify things, to provide more by way of protection for cultural heritage in event of war. That effort led to the conclusion in 1954 of the Hague Convention at the heart of which is the obligation to ensure such protection save in cases of imperative military necessity, and of an additional protocol which sought to prevent the illegal trafficking of cultural property, the spoils of war.

The Hague Convention falls under the auspices of UNESCO as do other later relevant international conventions - that agreed in 1970 on preventing illicit trade in cultural property more broadly and the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage which established the system whereby countries nominate World Heritage Sites.

Memories fade. During the decades of the Cold War, the impetus behind the Hague Convention slipped. Although the great majority of UN member states ratified the Convention some of the precautionary elements in it went largely unimplemented. The wars in Former Yugoslavia, which saw missile attacks on Dubrovnik, a World Heritage Site, as well as the destruction of the ancient bridge in Mostar, helped to rekindle interest. In their aftermath a further Protocol was added to the Hague Convention. The Second Protocol is clearer as to its applicability to internal as well as interstate conflicts. It also established a standing committee in UNESCO to oversee implementation and designated the Blue Shield as the international NGO advisory body supporting it.

According to the former FCO legal advisor Kevin Chamberlain the substantive provisions of the Hague Convention are now part of customary international humanitarian law. No prosecutions have been brought directly under it. But the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia successfully prosecuted and secured the imprisonment of several individuals on charges relating to the destruction of cultural property including the shelling of Dubrovnik. Earlier this year the International Criminal Court brought to trial a person accused of directing attacks on Sufi tombs which formed part of the Timbuktu World Heritage Site in Mali, the first such case brought by the ICC. UNESCO is now supporting reconstruction at the site.

The Iraq War

I will come in a moment to the conflicts which presently threaten heritage and historic sites in different parts of the Arab world. But in Iraq in particular - where the losses to date have perhaps been most acute - the US and the UK also played a negative role, perhaps one of omission rather than commission but negative nonetheless, at a key stage in the drama and it is important that it be understood and lessons learnt.

At the time of the 2003 invasion both the US and the UK were among the minority of countries which had still failed to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention. In the months leading up to the invasion there was some attempt at input by experts as to sites which should be protected but it was ignored. The military were going into battle in 'the cradle of civilisation' without plans or expertise in this field or -crucially- the personnel to provide protection when needed. As one of those who attempted to advise, Professor Peter Stone, has written: 'Remarkably, and essentially by luck, very little destruction of cultural property happened during the conflict part of the invasion... but as soon as the regime collapsed there was endemic looting of museums, libraries and archaeological sites across the country.' This included the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and the burning of the National Archive. The off the cuff comment of Secretary Rumsfeld on this - you will recall - was that 'Stuff happens'.

Stuff continued to happen in the years that immediately followed the invasion, not least as a result of the subsequent deBaathification and the dismantling of state institutions and the stimulus given to sectarianism and Al Qaida affiliated terrorism - of which the bombings in 2006 and 2007 of the great 10th century Shia shrine in Samarra were high profile examples. In the shadow of this violence the looting of archaeological sites continued -

at times experts say on a systematic scale by large groups of looters.

Both the US and the British military sought to compensate for their initial neglect of the heritage agenda - the US for example with a survey of the needs of the Iraqi antiquities authorities in Nineveh province in 2008, the British with a similar survey in the south led by Dr John Curtis of the British Museum. One of the fruits of the latter was British support, initially official, later from the voluntary sector, for a new museum in Basra. That museum is due to open in September.

2011

2011 saw popular revolutions in Syria, Libya and Yemen inspired by the Arab Spring and the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. The armed conflicts which presently afflict each of these countries and threaten their heritage have their immediate roots in the events of that year.

The pressures on heritage across the region do not stem only from conflict. Political, economic and social factors, including urbanisation and the extraordinary growth in population in Arab countries in recent decades, have played, and continue to play, a key part. When coupled with political instability they make for a toxic mix even without descent into war. The collapse of law and order in Egypt after the revolution in 2011 facilitated the looting of ancient sites and encroachment for housing or development. The looting of the pyramids area in Dashur near Cairo in 2013, which reached the point at which rival gangs were using bulldozers and fighting each other over the loot, or the break-in that year at the Mallawi museum in Minya governorate, were dramatic enough to make headlines, locally at least, and to elicit a response from the authorities. But they are only high profile examples of a phenomenon which archaeologists and academics in Cairo describe as pandemic.

Threats to heritage: Syria and Iraq

Nonetheless the scale and immediacy of the threat to heritage in times of war is of a different order. And the conflicts that have engulfed Syria and Iraq in the years since 2011 have been peculiarly complex and destructive, with multiple players domestic and external.

The threat can take different forms. One, here too, is the looting of cultural property, whether by local people or combatants. Another is collateral damage by misadventure or because combatants are unaware of the significance of a location or - for whatever reason - disregard it. A third is the deliberate destruction of monuments or cultural property for ideological or propaganda purposes. Finally intangible heritage - traditions, customs, skills - may be lost through conflict related deprivation and enforced displacement.

While fighting continues and access is impossible we cannot with accuracy judge the extent or relative impact of these threats. But there can be no doubt that all of them are present in the current fighting in Syria and in Iraq.

Dr Altaweel will speak on the first of these. I would just note the evidence of looting in areas of Syria controlled by all sides - regime, opposition parties and ISIS. You may have seen in the media 'before and after' satellite photographs of pockmarked archaeological sites, before 2011 and now. Among those most commonly shown are ones of the Graeco Roman site of Apamea in the Orontes valley and of Dura Europos, on what was once the border between Rome and Parthia in eastern Syria. The first is today in regime-held territory, the second under ISIS control.

I know from personal experience - having been pursued from Apamea more than a decade ago by traders keen to sell their haul - that the business is not new. But, with other possible sources of income gone over 80% of Syrians now live below the poverty line and the driver to dig for antiquities must be all the greater. The satellite images certainly suggest that. One must assume that people would not be digging if there were not a ready market for their findings among traffickers. There is of course a particular and very grave concern that ISIS is benefiting from such trafficking, whether directly or indirectly via the taxation of looters.

Of Syria's World Heritage Sites both the Old City of Aleppo and Krak des Chevaliers have suffered what might be described as collateral damage if the destruction in the former were not so extensive. It is not always easy to apportion precise blame in individual cases. The regime -with their use of barrel bombs in urban areas- have been reckless in their disregard for humanitarian considerations generally. There can be little doubt that they were responsible for last year's direct strike on the Maarat al Numan Museum, an Ottoman caravanserai in an opposition controlled urban area housing mosaics from another World Heritage Site, the ancient Byzantine villages of northern Syria. Fortunately many of the mosaics were saved as a result of protective measures taken by the museum curators.

ISIS' campaign of destruction

The deliberate destruction of cultural property by ISIS has shocked people around the world. It has been a trademark of the group's rule in the vast territory it seized in northern Iraq and Syria in 2014/15. ISIS' unique brand of jihadi salafism has led it to proclaim a Caliphate and a state which is boundless. That state is dedicated to, indeed depends upon, continued offensive action to expand its rule and enslave or eliminate those who reject its peculiarly savage and selective reading of the faith.

For ISIS tangible heritage - monuments, stones, tombs - are a focus or potential focus for 'shirk', denial of the

oneness of God. We will hear more about the ideological thinking behind their campaign of destruction. They are not alone among jihadi salafists in practicing such destruction - the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is another example frequently cited. But they have been peculiarly ruthless in their campaign, and they control lands where there is an awful lot of heritage to erase.

ISIS are also gifted propagandists and their actions should probably also be seen in that light - a desire to wipe the slate clean and cow the people over whom they rule and to demonstrate to the rest of us that they are in charge. The videos of their hacking to bits Assyrian statues and reliefs in the Mosul museum or blowing up the temple of Balshamin in Palmyra were undoubtedly fulfilling part of their purpose when they shocked us. But that doesn't make our sense of outrage any the less justified. Comparisons with earlier acts of deliberate destruction - of monasteries or church decoration in England during the Reformation for example - may be academically beguiling. But they are not particularly useful. This is a different age. And these are war crimes.

These deliberate acts of destruction by ISIS have not been confined to ancient Assyrian or classical heritage. Religious sites have suffered equally if not more. In northern Iraq which is, or was, religiously diverse they have included historic Islamic shrines, Sunni as well as Shia - some 38 were reportedly attacked in and around Mosul between June 2014 and March 2015. Among Christian monuments badly damaged was the monastery of Mar Behnam near Nimrud, the original foundation of which dates back to the fourth century. The fate of its collection of ancient Christian texts is not known. The monks were expelled. Others - notably members of the Yazidi community or Shia Muslims - fared worse.

Cultural cleansing

All in all this was, to borrow the description coined at the time by Irina Bukova the Director-General of UNESCO, 'cultural cleansing'. ISIS aspire to model their 'state' on that of the first four caliphs. I cannot help noting that in this respect their thinking bears little resemblance to that of the second Caliph, Omar ibn al Khattab, who after Jerusalem fell to his armies declined to pray in the Holy Sepulchre lest his followers insist that it be converted to a mosque.

Nor for that matter, though it would trouble them even less, does it bear any resemblance at all to the view of one of his greatest successors nine hundred years later, Suleyman the Magnificent. According to a European traveler of the period Suleyman, when visiting Aleppo and urged by advisors to expel Jews from the city, 'pointed to a flowerpot that held a quantity of fine flowers of divers colours and bid them to consider whether each of the flowers in their colours did not set out the other the better. The more sorts I have in my dominions under me the greater the authority they bring to my kingdoms...and, that nothing may fall off from my greatness, I think it convenient that all that have been together long hitherto may be kept and tolerated so still for the future' (quoted in Philip Mansel, 'Aleppo: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Great Merchant City', I.B Tauris, 2016).

Prospects

ISIS' expansion has been checked over the past year. It has lost 40% of the populated territory it once held in Iraq thanks to Coalition and Iraqi action (major ancient sites where it is known to have wrought deliberate destruction - Hatra, Nineveh, Nimrud - however remain under its control). In Syria it has lost 10 to 20 per cent of the populated territory it controlled, including of course Palmyra to the Syrian army supported by Russian air power.

Such information as comes out of ISIS controlled territory suggests local disaffection. Several of its leaders have been killed. The group is heavily dependent on foreign fighters, who may be finding access more difficult. ISIS' attraction has depended in part on its ability to project an image of success and confidence, of 'statehood' sufficient to make its narrative look at least half feasible. That could be wearing thin.

But it would be a brave man who suggested that the threat ISIS poses, including to heritage, in Syria and Iraq has diminished decisively. Its loss of Palmyra was followed by recapture of a gas field ninety miles to the northwest. It continues to control a vast area straddling two countries and including major cities - Mosul, Raqqa, Deir el Zour - and to enforce its rule on, and tax, the population. That area may shrink further but a real transformation of the situation, the fall of the cities ISIS controls, must be dependent on land campaigns in Syria and Iraq - importantly in Syria I would argue one supported by most if not all of the parties presently locked in the stand-off in Geneva.

This is getting into subjects beyond the scope of this lecture. But it may be worth putting down markers, first that Palmyra was an exposed forward position for ISIS and not part of their 'heartland'; and secondly that, sadly, we still seem to be a very long way indeed from the sort of political settlement that would turn the tables on ISIS, bring peace to Syria and open the door to sustainable reconstruction.

Iraq, with an internationally supported prime minister and army, is different. But even there political accommodation is in short supply, though essential if ISIS is to be confronted successfully. Without a new government in Baghdad and outreach to the Sunni community it is difficult to see a stable situation emerging there even if Mosul were to fall.

Palmyra

A word about Palmyra... It is excellent that Ma'moun Abdul Karim, Syria's Director General of Antiquities and Museums, has been able to report that - for all the loss of the two temples and three of its most spectacular funerary towers - the destruction is less than feared. Still, there must be plenty to do by way of tidying up, assessing the damage in detail and stabilising things where possible - always bearing in mind though that the war continues and fortunes can change.

That alone should be enough to deter people from leaping immediately to rebuild that which is lost, as President Putin and Mrs Bukova at first appeared to suggest. I am not going to get into the debate about whether it makes sense to do that at all. My own, amateur, instinct is that it does, given the manner and immediacy of the destruction. And I would not necessarily rule out a bit of help from 20th Century technology of the sort demonstrated by the Institute for Digital Archaeology in Trafalgar Square in April. But whatever is done by way of reconstruction should surely be done when the situation has been properly studied, things have settled and Syrians have an administration which is inclusive and have had a chance to talk things through and decide what they want to do. Holding a victory concert in the ruins of Palmyra is one thing: expropriating heritage, rebuilding monuments in a hurry to enable one party to make a point in a civil war is another, and dangerous for heritage in the longer term.

Heroes

To be fair, the record of Syria's Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) during this conflict seems to me to have been pretty creditable in desperate circumstances. It in itself gives no reason for concern of the sort I have just voiced. John Simpson got it right when he said on the BBC after attending that victory concert that Khaled al Assad, the 81 year old former head of DGAM in Palmyra who was publicly murdered there by ISIS last August, was the real hero. His son in law and former colleagues spirited the contents of the museum there to safety as ISIS approached; he stayed on and defied them.

In Syria and Iraq the antiquities organisations have had other martyrs too. Many of their staff are doing vital work in desperate circumstances. In Syria, DGAM have sought to move the contents of other museums to safety. They have worked to stabilise and repair monuments that have suffered lesser damage like Krak des Chevaliers. They have tried in so far as possible to be apolitical, supporting communities and staff in areas beyond the control of the regime - for example in Bosra al Sham, host to some of the most perfect Roman buildings in Syria. For the international community, helping heritage professionals who are in the front line and feel acutely their isolation and exposure must be a priority. Given the sanctions that are in place in the US and the EU this is not always easy but UNESCO and its NGO partners such as ICOMOS have managed to provide emergency training for DGAM whilst the US and others have reached professionals in northern Syria, including those who saved the mosaics in Maarat al Numan.

Libya

I would like to turn now to the situations in two other war-torn Arab countries, Libya and Yemen. Those of you who have seen the amazing Roman ruins of Leptis Magna, or the two other Roman cities on the Mediterranean coast which are World Heritage Sites, Sabratha and Cyrene, will have followed developments over the past five years with trepidation....a NATO air campaign, the apparent disintegration of the country in multiple conflicts with local militias, two rival governments and - most recently - an 'IS' implant in Sirte.

There is certainly reason for concern. Sufi mosques and tombs have been destroyed by Islamists and the Benghazi museum burgled. Officials have warned of a notable increase in the trafficking of antiquities.

There are however two points to which I would like to draw attention. The first relates to the NATO air campaign during which experts in collaboration with national Blue Shield committees reportedly submitted lists of important heritage sites. From physical evidence on the ground they are convinced that on this occasion their input was heeded. One can debate whether this is entirely something to celebrate. We are talking of acts of war, and lists by their nature exclude as well as including. But this was a war sanctioned by the Security Council, for the protection of civilians, and taking steps to avoid damage to important heritage sites in times of war is exactly what the Hague Convention is about.

The second is that Leptis Magna, Sabratha and Cyrene have reportedly come through the past five years largely unscathed, though Sabratha town suffered a brief incursion by the militants from Sirte and Cyrene has been subject to some damage by locals wishing to build. In all three cases local community leaders are said to have been key to the continued protection of the sites.

The political situation in Libya is looking slightly more promising at the moment, with a determined UN mediation and an internationally recognised government back in Tripoli. The international community, with Italy in the lead, has promised additional support if this takes hold. We are definitely not out of the woods yet. But there are at least some reasons for hope.

Yemen

Unlike the mass uprisings in Syria and Libya - each of which quickly escalated into civil war as a result of a violent regime response - that in Yemen initially took a less cataclysmic course. A political process saw the country's

longstanding President, Aly Abdullah Saleh, step aside in November 2011, a transitional government was formed under former Vice President Hadi and a national dialogue initiated. But tensions grew. In 2014 a Zaydi Shia militia, the Houthis, advanced on Sanaa and with the aid of forces loyal to Saleh took the city. They subsequently moved to extend their control south towards Aden. Saudi Arabia saw the hand of Iran behind this. It feared too for its own security. Hadi sought Saudi aid and in March 2015 a coalition led by them launched operations in Yemen.

This then is a more recent conflict than the others I have addressed. But it too is being fought in a country with a rich heritage, home to kingdoms which prospered for almost a millennium until 600AD. It has extraordinary vernacular architecture. Three Yemeni towns contain World Heritage Sites. Buildings in that in Sanaa have been destroyed in coalition air strikes. The Marib dam, another World Heritage Site, was damaged in May last year. Other ancient sites have been hit. Islamic sites have suffered - in Sada, the birthplace of Zaydism; in Taiz which has been subjected to a lengthy and brutal siege by Houthi and Saleh fighters; and in the south where the Al Qaida affiliate AQAP for a period occupied several towns and engaged in the usual deliberate destruction of Sufi and other Islamic shrines (it has since retreated but remains a threat).

This is an under-reported war. Although there are satellite images, hard facts about the precise extent or circumstances of damage are sometimes difficult to come by. Yemenis - AQAP apart - take pride in their ancient heritage; each party has an interest in manipulating such stories as are out there. But there is no doubt that serious damage has occurred and one must fear what might happen in the event of a battle for Sanaa.

With regard to Yemen too there is at least an active effort at present to achieve a political settlement. Bilateral discussions have been taking place between Saudi representatives and the Houthis. Talks are under way under UN auspices in Kuwait. A ceasefire is in theory in place. But it is all very fragile and there are plenty of spoilers. Gulf governments have declared their readiness to contribute significantly to reconstruction. They have already begun to do so in the south. The Yemeni academic Dr Noha Sadek voiced concern in a recent lecture that 'cultural heritage will not be considered a priority in reconstruction'. Given the unique character of Yemen's heritage one must hope that she is wrong.

What can be done?

For the safeguarding of cultural property as for humanitarian concerns more generally, what is most needed in all these conflicts is pressure for real and sustainable progress on the political front and pushing back those responsible for deliberate destruction. I have already underlined just how difficult this is, most particularly in Syria. Sectarian mistrust now runs very deep there, as it does in Iraq. The antagonism between the key regional actors is visceral. Equally however the threat to all, Europe included, from open-ended conflict is self evident and the cost in human suffering is immense. We cannot afford to give in to the sort of fatalism that draws parallels with Lebanon's twenty four year civil war.

What in the meantime can be done on the heritage front? I was struck, in a recent article by an American professor on cultural heritage in post revolution Libya, by her conclusion that 'all we can do is watch and wait ... and hope for the best'. Is that in fact the sum of it? To give the professor her due she also conceded that we should provide assistance where and when we can. There are in fact things which can be done now:

First, and most obviously, digitising and recording tangible heritage, and monitoring damage done, using both satellite imagery and sources on the ground, and pooling it to facilitate assessment and remedial action when that becomes possible.

Secondly, providing support, advice and training to local antiquities professionals and others in the front line ... I mentioned the work being done by UNESCO and ICOMOS on training and support for DGAM in Syria. The programme announced last year by the British Museum to train 50 'heritage sector professionals' from Iraq in topics such as emergency retrieval strategies is another case in point; it is designed to create a team of local archaeologists who 'can see beyond the barrier of despair', able when the time comes 'to retrieve the maximum data needed for restoration in sites like Nineveh'.

Funding for the British Museum project will come from the 30 million pound DCMS-led Cultural Protection Fund which the government announced last year after ISIS' acts of destruction in Iraq and Syria. Information as to other projects is promised shortly. Establishment of the fund is obviously a very welcome development, and good news for efforts to enhance the resilience of professionals and communities striving to safeguard heritage most at risk in the region.

The Italian government has proposed a still more forward approach in the shape of task forces of 50 experts including police which would be deployed by governments, at the invitation of their counterparts in the region and in cooperation with UNESCO, to provide support and protection on the ground once access becomes possible - a concept quickly dubbed 'Blue Helmets' for heritage. How many governments would be prepared to field or to host such teams is an open question and the idea has not so far got traction.

Thirdly, acting to prevent illicit trafficking... There is a lively debate about just how much looted material is reaching the market now. There are also questions to be asked about how proactively the police here look for it. The United States recently approved new legislation to crack down on the import or sale of looted antiquities from Syria in line with UN Security Council resolution 2199 which was intended to prevent the proceeds of

trafficking reaching ISIS.

Fourthly, encouraging those working on plans for post conflict reconstruction (and a fair amount of this has been going on, in the UN for example) to factor the protection and rehabilitation of cultural heritage into their planning... Decisions on how to rebuild must ultimately be for the governments and peoples of the countries concerned. Some may not see it as a priority or balk at the expense. But rehabilitating or reconstructing may well make economic sense in the historic parts of Aleppo, for example, given the likely benefits from tourism (which in the past has accounted for a significant part of Syria's GDP - 8.1% in 2010). And failure to give heritage due weight will be at the expense of future generations, and of the effort to rebuild a sense of shared national identity.

All this requires a measure of coordination at the international level. Preparing this lecture, I have been struck by the number of academic and voluntary bodies active on the issue outside the region, and the frequency of conferences and seminars of experts on aspects of it. But for their message to be heard, and support in due course to be maximised and channeled effectively, there has to be coordination and an international agency has to provide leadership. In this, cultural heritage is no different from other humanitarian fields.

Since 1945 UNESCO has been cast in this role. In past situations - most famously the rescue of the Nubian monuments in the 1960s - it played it with panache. UNESCO today is challenged. It lost US funding as a result of Palestine's admission to membership. It is overstretched and needs reform. But in the area of heritage and cultural protection its competence is clear.

Last year UNESCO agreed a strategy inspired by the crisis in the Middle East and aimed at strengthening states' ability to 'prevent, mitigate and recover the loss of cultural heritage as a result of conflict' and ensure that the protection of culture is 'incorporated into humanitarian action and peacebuilding'. The strategy is written in UN-speak but it addresses all the points I have mentioned and more. The staff tasked with implementing it is miniscule, as are the funds presently available.

This is not a plea for more UK funding for UNESCO. But we need to recognize that it is uniquely positioned to coordinate in this sector. I do not know whether newspaper reports last month that 'UK funding for UNESCO is likely to be slashed' are correct. But in this area, in this moment of crisis, we should keep in mind the critical role UNESCO and its voluntary advisory bodies like the Blue Shield and ICOMOS can play and be careful not to undermine it.

I would not wish to end on a carping note. I started by describing the legal framework for cultural property protection in times of war and noted that at the time of the Iraq war the US and the UK were among a minority of countries not to have ratified the Hague Convention. The US did so in fact in the aftermath of the invasion. The UK announced that it would follow suit 'when parliamentary time permitted'. At this point it is probably the most significant military power still not to have ratified. Both NATO and MOD have however engaged quite closely with heritage specialists to ensure that the requirements of cultural property protection are understood and MOD say that they 'work within the spirit of the Convention'.

Yesterday in the Queen's Speech the government announced that it would now submit draft legislation, the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill, with a view to ensuring that the UK ratified the Convention. The announcement should have a particular resonance given the UK's present engagement in combat operations in Iraq and Syria. Hopefully it will attract all party support.

Ratification - together with accession to the two protocols as foreshadowed I believe by the Culture Secretary - will send an important signal. For a long time UK officialdom has appeared to be a back marker in this field, bizarrely given the wealth of expertise here and the strength of public feeling on heritage issues. Taken together with activation of the Cultural Protection Fund it will help to put us where we ought to be, in the forefront, working at a time of appalling assault on heritage of global importance for its protection and conservation for the benefit of future generations.

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Patterns of Looting in Syria/Iraq and the Western Art Market

Dr Mark Altaweel

Thank you for having me today. What I would like to do is discuss what has been happening in Iraq and Syria with regards to looting and objects coming in to the Western art market, and in particular London.

Since the Fall of Mosul in 2014, ISIS, or Daesh, has been getting the headlines with regard to looting, the fact is looting was happening already fairly substantially before the current situation. In other words, various parties are involved, but Daesh gets the headlines because it is politically easy.

From history, we know looting generally follows patterns of declining state authority. This pattern of cultural looting and damage has occurred in places such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Iraq in 2003. For Syria and Iraq today, the same can be said with regards to why there is looting or damage to archaeological sites.

There is also evidence, primarily satellite data, which show that looting and destruction to cultural property has accelerated in places since 2014.

The main problem, though, is where do the items looted end up and who is exactly buying them.

Before we get to that, let's look at the Iraq/Syria case more to see if there are patterns that are different from previous historical examples such as those that I mentioned. For one, we are now witnessing a much more organized force that is not only looting archaeological sites but is also destroying them. Sites targeted by Daesh (ISIS) have generally been those they consider heretical in their theology. However, there is a propaganda message being displayed by these televised destructions. So I like to call these videos of destruction as Daesh's "Ministry of Propaganda," providing a type of demonstration of an ideology to outsiders and their followers.

Palmyra, of course, got the headlines when Daesh did its destruction of the famous temples and monumental gate. However, we should note these structures were located in the heart of the city, where mostly structures exist that are not easily transportable. In other words, it is easy to blow them up since they are not worth much to them.

In contrast, the ancient graveyards of Palmyra are mostly around the city. These graves contain many types of statues or busts, often representing the people who may have been buried in specific graves. It is precisely these areas around the city that had been targeted not just by Daesh but even long before the war. It is not clear how extensively looted these areas are, but these would be the areas targeted even before Daesh took over this region.

As stated, looting has been a problem before Daesh became well organized and powerful. Even before the war we saw some looting as well. Apamea, a famous Roman city in Western city and in the region of Islamist and FSA groups, for instance, was looted since 2012.

If we look at a map of Syria and look at the dots on the image, this shows areas where looting has occurred. You can see it has happened in government, FSA, Daesh, and Kurdish regions. It does not mean all the forces are organizing this looting. For the regime and FSA areas, while these forces are probably not doing the looting they are likely aware of it. They are either unable to stop it or may even allow it in places. It is not clear. Regarding the FSA and Kurdish areas, not much attention has been given to looting taking place in their areas since potentially this might be an inconvenient message. Similar to destruction of heritage in Yemen by Saudi-led forces, politics may prevent a clear disclosure of what is really happening. ISIS, though, clearly is more organized when it comes to looting and has a Ministry of Antiquities providing license to loot. They basically facilitate it rather than actually do the looting.

Here you see what one of these looting licenses looks like, which was obtained last year when US forces raided a compound occupied by Abu Sayyaf, a finance minister of Daesh.

In terms of how much money Daesh gets or has gotten from antiquities, once can only estimate. The US State Department, using documents seized in the May 2015 raid and other raids, estimates Daesh/ISIS makes on the order of "millions of dollars" in antiquities sales, but it is hard to say really how much. I think they don't make an enormous sum, could be tens of millions in dollars, which is plausible. But we have to keep in mind that while Daesh is essentially a poor state, it had been or may still be a relatively rich organization. In other words, tens of millions along with other cash sources are more than enough to do a lot of damage. Finally, perhaps to get an idea of looting, the US State Department also has published estimates of looted art sales, giving perhaps some idea of looting-related sales. The data you see here derives from countries either surrounding the main conflict or are in conflict.

Now in terms of antiquities sales, let us look at some examples. First, on sites such as eBay, one can actually track sales patterns. In this example, Neil Brody looked at a type of figurine that is common from the Neolithic period and typically found in Syria and Iraq. None of these items had provenance information, so we do not know where they come from exactly and when they came, but in terms of sales in a few months for simple items such as these Neolithic figurines, we see sales of over 6000 GBP for 60 figurines. Again, it does not sound like much but what it shows is that a lot of low value items, perhaps less focused on by the authorities, can generate a steady stream of cash that can add up over some time and if sold across the globe. It also shows how easy it is to sell these things.

In August last year, Mike Giglio, from BuzzFeed, was essentially embedded in southern Turkey and reported on tracking antiquities dealers and sales in the border areas between Syria and Turkey. This was a wise move to get a sense of the market, since for us to really see the market we have to best capture it at the border, where these objects transition to the outside world for sale and where once can see them for the last time before they disappear. There he was able to see a lot of objects being sold and even interviewed people doing the looting and selling. It is clear that poverty is driving much of this. It should also be stated that a lot of the objects he saw were also likely to be fake, so there is also a good amount making its way through that is being manufactured.

Finally, he also got some very interesting recordings that show looting taking place in Dura Europos, an important city on the Euphrates and in Daesh territory. There you can see that the looting is actually very organized and meticulous on some well-known sites, where excavations are done properly and slowly perhaps by individuals who worked with some of the foreign teams. This is because there are mosaics or wall frescos that are potentially of high value that the looters want to take.

While we don't really know the precise routes stolen antiquities take for them to make it to Western markets, we do know Turkey and Lebanon, and probably Jordan to a smaller extent, have played important roles.

Next, places in Eastern Europe, perhaps following the refugee trails, appear to be the next stop. Bulgaria, for instance, was recently showcased as a place where some Iraq/Syria objects were found in a police raid, suggesting they were being smuggled through the country.

Finally, from there they reach the main Western markets, such as Sweden, Germany, and the UK. Some articles in the press mention Germany or Munich as key markets, but Germany has begun toughening up its antiquities laws of late and as a response to what is happening in Syria.

But, few places really beat London when it comes to the antiquities market. It is not just the major auction houses but many small galleries and shops in high-end places such as Mayfair are found.

What is different now is the use of social media, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, and online sites such as eBay play an important role in sales. So the market can be diffuse and you don't need to have items in London or other major cities to sell them.

Another pattern noticed from sites looted is they tend to be later in date, or late by Near East standards, which mean the Classical period from after 300 BC through the early Islamic period. However, the problem with these types of sites is they often have objects similar to each other not just in Syria and Iraq but across the Mediterranean and even into Central Asia. Thus, to spot looted items, it is better to look for sites that are earlier in time, such as the Bronze and Iron Ages, which dates from 3000 BC to around 600 BC. These items are more localized and once you see them you know more quickly if they are from Syria or Iraq. Nevertheless, even if we can spot these items, the burden of proof that the item has not been looted is not with the seller but with us, the people who may confront a dealer about the provenance of an object. I should say many dealers do try to document provenance for at least a good portion of their objects. So there are many who try their best to not sell looted objects. However, not all do this.

Now, walking around London you do and can, find items in shops from Syria or Iraq. When asking a dealer when these objects came, then you often get unclear answers such as the items were bought at auction or obtained from someone after someone had passed away. However, documentation is often missing or information about the time when these objects arrived in the UK is not available.

In another recent case, a container in one of the ports in the UK was stopped and was said to originate from Syria. The objects mostly seemed ok or really antiques and not antiquities; however, at least two objects were ancient. So one would think this would result in the items being seized.

However, the opposite happened and they were let go. Once again, even when objects are coming from Syria and the objects do look ancient, somehow that was not enough evidence to stop the shipment. Once again, the burden of proof is not with the person bringing the objects but with the authorities. Now, such items have to go through customs, but I would say one flaw I noticed and have realized in some recent parliamentary meetings on the topic of antiquities looting is that customs in the UK is still generally concerned with revenue generation rather than acting to also police in cases where the items could be from looted contexts. Equivalent of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), the US customs policing force, simply does not exist in the UK. This is a problem in my opinion.

Now, every now and then you find a little luck. In this case, an antiquities dealer in London was selling a lintel from Syria, from the city of Nawa. I should add this piece was featured recently in the Dispatches program on Channel 4. What happened here is this piece was spotted by my former student, Alessio Palmisano, and colleague from Cambridge Augusta McMahon. They disguised themselves as being interested in this piece and inquired about it. They found out where it was from as well as how much it was being sold for. I should also add the store owner may simply have been ignorant about this item having been looted. Long story short, the object was actually published in an old book, with a picture of it from the 1930s. Another photograph of the object showed it to be in Syria in the 1980s. This helps to prove it must have been looted, as Syrian antiquities laws in the 1980s would not have allowed any known monument or archaeological piece like this to be exported.

The truth about looting is we do not quite understand its scale and effect coming into the Western market. There is just little data and the nature of the market, where personal relationships are critical, make it hard to know how objects really move. I think though, it is mostly just too easy to sell antiquities and you often have to do something stupid to get caught, be greedy, or perhaps make an honest mistake and sell something that was looted. Ultimately, there needs to be a better way to regulate what is being sold so we know objects being sold have been obtained legally.

Now I don't want to make it sound like nothing is being done. Yes we do have some relatively weak laws or enforcement structures, making it hard to stop looted items from making their way into this country, but there are some initiatives being done. In part, I think the memories of the 2003 Iraq War, still really fresh in our minds, is driving some of this along with the current events. Some of this effort is limited, as various reasons make focused efforts on Libya and Yemen, for instance, limited.

On the more positive side, there was a fairly substantial cultural fund created (30 million GBP) recently, with about 3 million GBP roughly released to the British Museum to help train heritage specialists from Iraq. This program has already started, in fact, and the first batch of Iraqis are at the moment in London to receive some of that training. I'll even be doing some of the teaching in a few weeks time. Other funds are also to be released for various initiatives that will be considered for funding.

A recent All Party Parliamentary Group was created and launched by the former mayor, MP David Burrowes, and Lord Colin Renfrew. This group held a series of meetings with the intent of creating some recommendations that might be considered in the next parliamentary session. Some of these recommendations included changing or tightening measures of enforcement and also creating more requirements of proof of provenance for objects sold in the UK. We will see if any of these are considered in the future.

The government did announce last year it would try to adopt the Hague Convention protocols calling for the protection of looted cultural property in times of war or conflict. This would make the dealing of Syrian and Iraqi antiquities illegal if they were obtained during the time of conflict.

My opinion is even if ultimately laws are changed, it will be hard to enforce fully and there often are ways to work around laws that people find. So perhaps the best thing is to create social stigmas around antiquities. I find the "blood diamond" model a useful example, where the diamond trade was pressured to clean up its act in trading or obtaining diamonds from conflict regions. Perhaps putting some social pressure for antiquities dealers to certify their objects do not come from conflict areas or have not been obtained due to conflict would be one place to start. It is not a perfect solution but it helps to use the power of social pressure to get more immediate effects.

Other initiatives include those by the Institute of Digital Archaeology. We saw how recently they put up the Palmyra arch, recreated from a scanner, in Trafalgar Square to bring attention to the plight of Syria's heritage.

Perhaps though measures that empower local people could be effective. An initiative by Walk of Truth, a Dutch NGO, is setting up a global network of individuals who are monitoring the trade of illegal antiquities. This simply uses information gathered from people, cases are created and investigated, and then authorities are informed. This helps us to then begin to understand where the trade of illegal antiquities is happening and gives us some power to stop it.

Thank you everyone for your time and attention. I will be happy to take questions and discuss any issues brought up.

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References

Welcome and Introduction

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[v] There is some uncertainty as to whether blankets were distributed deliberately:
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[xiii] http://www.worcestercathedral.co.uk/The_Civil_War.php

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[xvi] See <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/lra.htm>

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[xviii] The eminent Syrian archaeologist Khaled Al-Asaad, who was beheaded by ISIS for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of Palmyra's mobile artefacts is a case in point.

[xix] <http://www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/features/racing-rescue-middle-east-embattled-ancient-heritage>

[xx] See the debate in Hansard for 14.1.16:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2016-01-14/debates/16011452000962/CulturalPropertyHagueConvention>

See also the statement made by the Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Fallon, in a debate on 18.4.16 confirming that the Government would ratify the Convention "at the earliest opportunity".

See <https://hansard.parliament.uk/.../2016-04-18/debates/16.../Daesh>

And thanks to Baroness Andrews (who led the January debate) for her updates before the Queen's Speech - which is taking place today! (18.5.16)

[xxi] See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-scheme-to-protect-cultural-sites-from-destruction>

[xxii] See <http://eamena.arch.ox.ac.uk/>

[xxiii] The re-creation of the Palmyra Arch in Trafalgar Square in April is an indication of what can be done.

See <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/apr/19/palmyras-triumphal-arch-recreated-in-traffic-square>

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