

Library and Archival Destruction in the Middle East and North and Sub-Saharan Africa

By Blair Kuntz

University of Toronto

Surveying the relatively short history of human civilization, it is not difficult to discover a shocking litany of destruction of world heritage, including the ruination of library and archival resources. Perhaps the most famous example of such destruction was the immolation of the Royal Library of Alexandria, one of the largest and most significant libraries of the ancient world, in 48 B.C. The destruction of the Library of Alexandria has since become a symbol of cultural destruction. Other famous examples of European colonial destruction include the Spanish Army's destruction of the Mayan codices from the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries and British troops' destruction in 1848 of the historic library housing the Pali-language manuscripts of the Buddhist tripitaka. Meanwhile, perhaps the most famous example of colonial plunder of cultural resources is the theft of the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon in Athens by Lord Elgin from 1801 to 1805. Despite numerous attempts by the Greek government to pressure the British government to return the marbles, they remain housed in the British Museum as they have done since 1817.

Living as we do in a supposedly post-colonial era (in which the former colonial powers have, in fact, continued to practice colonialism through other means), one might assume that such destruction and plunder is a thing of the past. However, as we shall see, in recent times, such cultural destruction in the Middle East and North Africa, a place of rich natural resources, principally petroleum, has proceeded at an alarming pace hand in hand with the societal and environmental destruction Western powers have wrought upon the region. It should also not pass without notice that these libraries, archives, and cultural resources survived hundreds of years, even centuries, without being harmed. It took in fact meddling from Western countries, the self-proclaimed home of self-professed Western values such as freedom of speech and respect for open dialogue, to begin the process of cultural destruction.

In order to understand the roots of the present cycle of destruction, it is in fact necessary to go back to the years of the administration of American president Jimmy Carter and his efforts to undermine the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan. American efforts via the CIA to provide assistance to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan began in fact *before* not *after* the Soviet invasion of the country in 1980. Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brezinski admitted that his support for the Afghan rebels was designed to provoke the Soviet Union into invading Afghanistan so that it would be bogged down in its own Vietnam War. As he said in an interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*, "What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet Empire?" Under the subsequent administration of Ronald Reagan, support for extremist religious groups fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan expanded, empowering the CIA to fund the mujahedeen rebels in what was viewed as a religious war of Christians and Muslims against the atheistic Soviet Union. In 1985, in fact, Reagan would meet with the mujahedeen and declare, "These gentlemen are the equivalent of America's founding fathers." The support for these militant jihadi groups would eventually lead to the rise of the Taliban who were anti-Iran and anti-Shia and who assumed power in 1996. The Taliban would soon enforce its extremist interpretation of Islam on the people of Afghanistan, an interpretation that included destroying musical tapes, not allowing women to attend school, and forbidding employment for women except in the medical sector. The rise of the Taliban would soon see the destruction of Afghani cultural resources, most notably

the destruction of two incomparably beautiful standing statues of the sixth century Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001. In fact, by the time the Taliban had entered Bamiyan in 1998, the Taliban and the local people had forgotten the statues were a representation of Buddhism. The Taliban would later claim that they destroyed the statues because UNESCO had offered money to protect the statues during a harsh winter during which Afghans were starving. The Taliban claimed that outside agencies were concentrating more on the statues than on the suffering of the local people and therefore had to be destroyed. The Taliban's other examples of cultural destruction, however, were clearly related to religious extremism. In a now familiar pattern, the Taliban destroyed books and manuscripts, particular those in the Dari language, and smashed statues in the National Museum with a human form, such as those of Greco-Buddhist Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Photographs, films, and paintings of humans and animals were also targeted for destruction.

The illegal Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 would set a template for the later cultural destruction in the region. Using the fictitious pretext of the Iraqi regime's possession of weapons of mass destruction, U.S. president George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair launched their invasion aimed at ousting Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, whose numerous human rights abuses passed unremarked when his regime backed Western economic and geopolitical aims. For instance, the West supported Hussein against Iran as he battled Iran in the devastating Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. Shortly after the invasion, in 2003 the National Museum of Iraq, widely considered one of the best in the Middle East, was looted. While the invading U.S. Army had made sure to safeguard the Ministry of Oil building, the National Museum merited no such protection. The National Museum was, in fact, subjected to three successive waves of looting, which resulted in the theft of over 15,000 artefacts, many of which were then sold on the open market. The American attitude to the looting and destruction was remarkably nonchalant. The day after the first looting, for example, American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld remarked simply that “stuff happens.” Meanwhile, during a pre-war press conference in which he was asked about American plans to secure cultural sites, American General Tommy Franks declared, “I don't have time for this fucking bullshit.”

In subsequent invasions, Western would prove further that they didn't have time to think about the “fucking bullshit” of worrying themselves over the possible destruction of priceless world patrimony.

The next country that became the target of Western regime change was that of Libya, ruled under the authoritarian regime of Muammar Qaddafi. Despite a history of strained relationships between Libya and the United States, in 2006 the United States had decided to renew diplomatic relations with Libya; however, during the 2011 Libyan uprising, the United States and other Western powers such as France pushed the United Nations Security Council to pass Resolution 1973, calling for a ceasefire and unauthorized military action to protect civilian lives by establishing a “no fly zone.” Typically, using the pretext of a supposed threatened massacre in the city of Benghazi, NATO troops soon took over the operation, and rebels killed Qaddafi on October 20. As in Iraq, the invasion was presented as a humanitarian intervention, but the fact that Libya, like Iraq, contains vast amounts valuable natural resources, in this case gas and oil, surely should not pass without notice. For instance, another oil and gas-rich country but Western ally, Equatorial Guinea, has significant human rights problems, but that country has never been the target of a Western humanitarian intervention. Although elections were held in 2012, Libya's government quickly disintegrated, leading to a civil war fought by a number of feuding factions. The disintegration was soon followed by the return of ethnic Tuareg militia, who had been

integrated into the Libyan Army, to their home country of Mali, which allowed the Tuaregs to keep their arms, hoping they would be integrated into the Malian army. However, in order to increase their power, the secular Tuareg troops soon joined forces with three radical Islamic groups. The Tuaregs declared an independent state, called Azawad, in April 2012, but the secular Tuaregs were soon displaced by the radical Islamist groups who aspired to establish a state governed by a strict interpretation of Islamic law. In the aftermath, as the rebels were retreating from the ancient city of Timbuktu, they set fire to a library containing thousands of historic leather-bound manuscripts that had survived undisturbed for centuries, housed in wooden trunks and buried in boxes under the sand and also in caves. Some of these manuscripts dated back to the thirteenth century. The manuscripts, which covered subjects as diverse as astronomy, poetry, music, medicine, and women's rights, were an irreplaceable part of Mali's and sub-Saharan Africa's medieval history. The manuscripts were held in two separate locations, in an older library and in a state-of-the-art modern building, both of which the rebels burned. Thankfully, local residents, anticipating the carnage, spirited away thousands of the manuscripts, most of which were written in Arabic, but also in African languages. Other cultural heritage resources were not so lucky; for instance, medieval Sufi Muslim shrines, tombs, and a mosque dating back to the fifteenth century, that the insurgents considered "idolatrous," were destroyed. Today, in Libya itself, Greek and Roman antiquities and prehistoric artwork are all in danger of plunder, theft, and destruction.

Meanwhile, the seeds of the West's illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 would lead to further cultural destruction and plunder as a result of bungled American policy. Favoring the majority Shia over the Sunni minority from which Saddam Hussein hailed, the Sunnis, whose army officers who had been loyal to Saddam Hussein, were refused service in the regular Iraqi Army. In turn, these army officers soon felt spurned and alienated and began giving military advice to a group of Islamic extremists who called themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Shams or ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State (IS), or its Arabic acronym, Daesh. Like the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, ISIS held to an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, and the region's cultural heritage in 2014 became a victim of this ideology aimed at establishing a monotheistic Sunni Islamic state that views Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Sunni Muslims who do not agree with their interpretation of Islamic law, and non-Islamic religious minorities such as Christians and Yezidis as apostates. ISIS followers believe that the destruction of historic ruins and leaving no trace of previous civilizations allows it to begin anew.

In the process, the group has destroyed multiple Shiite mosques, shrines, and tombs throughout Iraq and Syria. It has also destroyed Christian churches, monasteries, and ancient medieval sites, including the destruction of the thirteenth century B.C. Assyrian city of Nimrud. In February 2015, ISIS released a video showing the destruction of various ancient artefacts in the Mosul Museum. Then, following ISIS capture of the world heritage city of Palmyra in Syria, the group destroyed, among others, the ancient Lion of Al-Lat statue and blew up the first century Temple of Baalshamin and the Temple of Bel. Furthermore, on August, 19, 2015, ISIS beheaded Syrian government archaeologist and Palmyra expert Khaled al-Asaad. Western backing for so-called "moderate" rebel forces in Syria, the vast majority of whom are religious extremists, was aided financially by Western allies such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, while Turkey in its war against Syrian Kurds allowed foreign ISIS fighters to cross the border with impunity. Moreover, Israel, which like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries has accepted no Syrian refugees, also aided rebels from the al-Nusra Front, and, as in Iraq, pushed for regime change in Syria, as it had done previously in Iraq in 2003. Indeed, Israel has formed alliances with both Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As Israeli ambassador to the United States Michael Oren proclaimed, "If we have to choose

between Assad and ISIS, we'll take ISIS." Yet another report states that Israel has bought most of the oil smuggled from ISIS territory.

ISIS did not spare libraries in its attacks on cultural heritage; indeed, its stated goal was to destroy all non-Islamic books. The most prominent victim of such plunder and ruin was the Central Library of Mosul, which was ransacked, blown up with explosives, and subsequently burned, resulting in the loss of 100,000 books and manuscripts. Other libraries targeted included the library of the University of Mosul, a Sunni Muslim library, the Latin church and monastery of the Dominican fathers, and the Mosul Museum Library. As in the case of the pillage in Timbuktu, some of the books and manuscripts destroyed were priceless, including the Iraqi newspaper collections from the beginning of the twentieth century, and maps, books, and collections from the Ottoman period.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the opprobrium meted out to Western enemies such as Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, and Syrian leader Hafiz Assad, authoritarian, unelected leaders of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, whose citizens fund extremist religious militias in Libya, Iraq, and Syria, are feted, armed, and praised. For instance, when Saudi Arabia (a country which shows scant regard for its own cultural heritage and in 2008 destroyed three hundred of its own ancient sites in Mecca and Medina) goes on to destroy cultural heritage in Bahrain and Yemen, Western governments greet the acts with silence and in fact actively support the country by selling it arms and weapons. For instance, when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries invaded Bahrain to quash the Bahraini uprising of 2011, at least 43 Shia mosques, including the 400-year-old Mohammad Braighi mosque, were destroyed, but Western leaders issued hardly a whimper, especially since Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy 5th Fleet. Today, as Saudi Arabia, a country whose medieval system of government has provided a model for ISIS, illegally attacks its neighbor Yemen, thereby threatening that country's incomparable cultural heritage, including exceptional collections of Korans housed in museums and libraries, the West not only remains mum about the invasion, it in fact sells arms to the country. In turn, the Saudi and Gulf country coalition uses to destroy Yemen's architectural history, which is often referred to as a living museum. In total, in Yemen forty-seven historical sites, including the National Museum in the city of Taiz, have been destroyed. It should also be noted that both ISIS and al-Qaeda, forces the United States is ostensibly fighting, now have a substantial presence in Yemen.

In conclusion, it seems evident that these instances of cultural destruction have at their root Western destabilization, disintegration, and interference in the region. It also seems self-evident that Western countries' economic interest in controlling the region's rich natural resources are of far higher importance than the protection of cultural resources. If cultural destruction occurs in the process of invasion, it is an unattended consequence the West can live with. As Donald Rumsfeld said concerning the cultural destruction in Iraq in 2003: stuff happens. However, as the mayor of Timbuktu declared after the destruction that occurred there, these incidents are devastating blows to world heritage, particularly non-Western world heritage. The manuscripts in Timbuktu, for example, contradict the European Orientalist myth that so-called "black Africa" had developed only an oral history. As academic librarians, our mission is to protect and disseminate knowledge for the good of humanity. It would seem self-evident to highlight the relationship between academic librarianship and democracy, decry such cultural destruction, and expose its root causes before, not after, the damage has been done.