

# Cultural Artifacts

Starting in the Summer 2014, a United States led military coalition completed a series of air strikes in Iraq and Syria targeting the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIL, ISIS, and Daesh. The United Nations reports that over 200 sites have been damaged or destroyed by ISIL alone.<sup>1</sup> This includes the destruction of United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites of Mosul, Nimrud, Hatra, Dura-Europos, and Raqqal—Iraq and Assyrian-era antiquities—dating to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations General Assembly claimed that ISIL attacks on cultural heritage sites is a tactic of war to spread terror and hatred, a form of “cultural cleansing” intended to destroy the past, present, and future of entire cultures.<sup>3</sup> Syrian scholar Khaled al-Asaad lost his life when he refused to tell ISIL militants the location of hidden antiquities.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in looting irreplaceable antiquities, ISIL is not only destroying history but profiting as a result. The world’s stolen antiquities market is estimated to be worth over 2 billion dollars, and the largest purchases of these antiquities are from the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> These sales fund ISIL activities of terror.

In a news conference, Adel Shirshab, Iraq’s tourism and antiquities minister, accused the United States coalition of not doing enough to protect the country’s cultural heritage and has urged the military coalition to use air power to protect the country’s antiquities from ISIL fighters. Aircraft could better monitor preparations for possible ISIL attacks and prevent them, especially at UNESCO World Heritage sites or other historical cities. Speaking about the destruction of the ancient city Hatra, Shirshab said, “It was possible to carry out surveillance. Why didn’t this happen?”<sup>6</sup>

Rather than using more military force, the United States and UNESCO are co-hosting a series of roundtables with stakeholders – including armed forces, Interpol, the World Customs Organization, museums, and leading auction houses – to discuss how to weaken the selling of looted cultural antiquities. Additionally, a social media campaign has been created called #Unite4Heritage to draw support for the protection of artifacts and sites in areas threatened by extremist groups.<sup>7</sup>

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the value of cultural artifacts? Are we morally permitted and/or required to preserve them? Why or why not?
2. Are we morally permitted and/or required to use surveillance and/or air strikes to protect cultural artifacts? Why or why not?
3. Are we morally permitted to purchase cultural artifacts that, for all we know, may have been looted? Why or why not?

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2015/06/01/411138497/cyber-archaeologists-rebuild-destroyed-artifacts>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232028.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-v-vlasic/the-tomb-raiders-of-mesop\\_b\\_6934682.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-v-vlasic/the-tomb-raiders-of-mesop_b_6934682.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/isis-beheads-archaeologist-syria>

<sup>5</sup> <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/america-tonight/articles/2015/11/19/isil-culture-syria-iraq-artifacts.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/08/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-hatra-idUSKBN0M40O320150308>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.unite4heritage.org/>

