

# Here come the 'monument men'

Islamic State's murderous hammer has smashed many of the Middle East's antiquities. The City of David's upcoming archeology conference will focus on the work being done to ensure these treasures don't fade from memory

• By CARL HOFFMAN

Thus far, 2015 has not been a particularly good year for the Middle East. In addition to burning, beheading, publicly hanging and burying people alive, soldiers of Islamic State have drastically altered the archeological and cultural heritage landscape of the region.

On January 27, Islamic State bombed large parts of the Nineveh Wall in Mosul's al-Tahrir region in Iraq. A few days later in the Syrian city of Raqqa, the terrorist movement publicly bulldozed a colossal ancient Assyrian lion sculpture from the eighth century BCE.

On February 26, Islamic State released a video showing the destruction of various ancient artifacts in the Mosul Museum, including the jackhammering of a granite statue of a lamassu – an Assyrian protective deity with a human head, a lion's body and the wings of a bird. The statue had remained buried until 1941, when heavy rains eroded the soil around it.

March was a particularly bad month for world heritage. Islamic State began the destruction of the 13th century BCE Assyrian city of Nimrud on March 5, when the local palace was bulldozed and lamassu statues at the gates of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II were smashed. It then began bulldozing the ancient city of Hatra on March 7, and sacked Dur-Sharukin on March 8.

In April, the Iraqi Tourism Ministry reported that Islamic State destroyed the remnants of the 12th-century Bash Tapia Castle in Mosul, and the world watched with trepidation in May as the movement took control of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra in Syria. While the ancient colonnades have thus far been left undamaged, Islamic State has destroyed the ancient Lion of Al-lat statue, along with an unknown number of other artifacts.

Most recently, Islamic State beheaded 82-year-old Khaled al-Asaad, a world-renowned antiquities scholar, for refusing to reveal where valuable artifacts had been taken for safekeeping before the movement captured the site.

As of this moment, around 20 percent of Iraq's 10,000 known archeological sites are under Islamic State control, and virtually every site in Syria is under threat.

Speaking of the massive destruction of artifacts by Islamic State, UNESCO chief Irina Bukova said on August 21, "We haven't seen something similar since the



The Warka Vase, from a Sumerian temple in the ruins of the ancient city of Uruk, dated to around 3000 BCE. One of thousands of artifacts looted from Iraq's National Museum during the 2003 invasion of the country, it was later returned. (Matthew Bogdanos)



Col. Matthew Bogdanos, who received the National Humanities Medal from US president George W. Bush for helping to recover more than 6,000 of Iraq's ancient artifacts in eight countries.

"Looking at the horror that is Islamic State, what has really been an eye-opener is their financing component – the fact that people who believe they are engaged in a totally benign activity like collecting antiquities are actually financing Islamic State bombs and bullets," he says. "This shouldn't surprise anybody. The Taliban in Afghanistan learned to use opium to finance their terror."

"Well, Islamic State doesn't have opium, but what they have is an almost unlimited supply – in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and also Israel – of antiquities," he continues. "So it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that, as Mao Zedong told us, organizations either have to adapt or die. And antiquities are a cash crop."

"Just last February, the UN Security Council passed a resolution recognizing that Islamic State and al-Qaida are using the trafficking of antiquities to fund terror. And the G7 Financial Action Task Force, also last February, found evidence that Islamic State is making tens of millions of dollars from antiquities looted

in Syria alone." Reminded that the Taliban in Afghanistan seems to have destroyed the colossal Buddha statues at Bamiyan for purely ideological reasons – denouncing them as "idolatrous" – and asked whether this might also be true of Islamic State, Bogdanos replies, "That's a good question. We see Islamic State on video destroying priceless ancient artifacts and works of art. We hear them denouncing idolatry. What we don't see is what's happening behind the camera. For every statue they destroy, there are hundreds they are selling instead. My response is that for Islamic State this is less about idolatry and more about dollars."

"Look, looting has been going on since the dawn of recorded history, but Islamic State is taking it to a whole new level by institutionalizing it. They do this two ways. First, they 'own' the properties they're looting. Right now they have pos-

session of around 4,500 archeological sites. They allow people to loot from those sites and they take the money. The second way is working with independent looters on sites that aren't Islamic State-controlled. They're taking 20 percent as war booty allowed to them by the Koran, so they're making money hand over fist."

That's where we are right now, the end of the beginning." So, what are we to do in the meantime? That is the question addressed by the conference's second keynote speaker – architect, architectural historian and archeologist Dr. Donald Sanders, whose professional interest is the application of such nontraditional methods as advanced computer graphics and virtual reality to the study and visualization of the past.

"I will be speaking about some of the work on some of the Assyrian sites we've been working on," he says. "Some of these sites, like Nimrud, have been in the news lately because of adverse effects from attacks and destruction by Islamic State. It seems as though despite the fact that Islamic State would like to see these sites and their history disappear, we need to have them survive to teach future generations. Right now, the only way to do that seems to be digitally."

"And as far as I know, we may have the only accurate, detailed, 3D computer model of the northwest palace at Nimrud that was blown up by Islamic State this past March. It is the only remaining record of that building." Books on archeology, history and pre-history have always featured pictures of ancient buildings and cities as they are thought to have looked thousands of years ago. Some, like those that often appear in high school and college textbooks, are often quite detailed.

Asked what computer imagery brings to the discussion that was lacking before, Sanders replies, "Reconstructions of archeological sites have been done for a long time, with pencil on paper. A lot of the standard visualizations that we have of the ancient world are based on these very nice renderings that people did, back when people knew how to draw better than they do now. It turns out, however, that when you draw things on paper, they're not necessarily as accurate as they seem."

"When we build digital models on the computer, the building has to stand up," he explains. "The beams have to be long



The palace in the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud was bulldozed by Islamic State in March. Here, Dr. Donald Sanders has digitally recreated its courtyard (top) and throne room (bottom). (Donald Sanders)

enough and thick enough to support the weight. The doors have to actually open and swing one way or another. It turns out that if we try to reconstruct digitally, a lot of the standard visualizations that were done in the past turn out to be wrong interpretations, or interpretations that structurally could not have worked."

Sanders notes that his reconstructions are not based on imagination but, rather, on previously published materials – usually the excavation reports – where he and his team at the Institute for the Visualization of History find photographs, measured drawings and descriptions.

"We also rely heavily on experts who have been to the various sites we've worked on," he says, adding that those experts also often have their own photographs, interpretations and analyses of what happened at the site.

"It's a fairly lengthy research project to turn out one of these things. We're not just a graphics house that cranks out visualizations like they do on the Discovery Channel, the History Channel and things like that."

Sanders also notes that he and his team have also recently begun using drones to fly over and photograph archeological sites.

Asked whether advanced computer imaging might one day aid in the visual-

Sanders's 3D computer model of Nimrud's northwest palace. (Donald Sanders)

ization of the First Temple and Second Temple in Jerusalem, Sanders maintains, "That would be wonderful, but I don't think it's possible to do much more accurate conjecture about either the First or Second Temple, simply because the physical evidence is so slim. There's simply not enough that survives to mesh with what biblical accounts say in order to make any kind of definitive recommendation about what the temples looked like. I'm afraid that we don't have anything to add to that discussion."

The City of David Archeological Conference will also present a session detailing recent discoveries in the City of David area itself, as well as a presentation by Yehuda Kaplan on the al-Yahudu documents, currently on display at the Bible Lands Museum. Found in Iraq, these clay tablets provide irrefutable corroboration of the biblical account of the Babylonian exile, documenting the presence of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, right down to family names and occupations.

*Prior to the conference, the City of David will offer tours of recent and current archeological excavations in the area; all events are open to the general public. Attendance at the open-air venue of Area E, is free of charge. Pre-conference tours are NIS 10 each and require preregistration on the City of David website.*

*For further information: \*6033 or www.cityofjuda.org.il*