

The last two months have seen ISIS deliberately despoil a series of historical sites in the territory under its control. The Christian monastery of Mar Behnam, once home to a priceless library, was reduced to rubble. The twelfth-century Khidr mosque and the tomb of the prophet Jonah in Mosul met a similar fate.

ISIS have also targeted a series of pre-Islamic sites, such as the Assyrian complexes at Khorsabad, Nineveh and Nimrud, destroying statues and sections of the city walls with bulldozers. The Iraqi antiquities ministry has condemned the attacks as 'an attempt to erase the history of humanity.'

It is very hard to confirm the Baghdad government's reports of destruction, though archaeologists' assessments of devastation in Syria make unpleasant reading (<http://www.heritageforpeace.org/>). But ISIS itself has made clear its wish to publicise its destruction of the pre-Islamic past, in a series of videos that show militants destroying the exhibits taken from the ruined city of Hatra in the Mosul museum.

Hatra, in western Iraq, is a fine showcase of the region's cultural riches. The city prospered in the first and second centuries AD, and was probably the region's best-preserved settlement from this era. Its walled area covered a circumference of four miles, and its religious culture incorporated the gods of Babylon, Greece, Syria and Arabia. Hatra was a pilgrimage centre, dedicated to the sun-god Shamash, and it was dominated by an enormous temple complex. The many inscriptions found here use a dialect of Aramaic, a language that flourished in the trading cities of the borderlands between the great empires of Rome and Persia.

Hatra and the Assyrian cities are, or perhaps were, substantial archaeological sites that might have been part of the foundations of the tourist industry of a resurgent Iraq. More importantly, both were symbols of Iraqi identity, chapters in the complex history of a region that saw some of the earliest urban cultures on Earth. The destruction of Hatra's material culture is especially galling since so little had been published.

Of course, war will always bring the kind of insecurity that encourages treasure-hunting and the sale of antiquities. But the actions of ISIS in Syria and Iraq suggest a deliberate policy of destruction, which aims to destroy the remains of the pre-Islamic past.

ISIS is dominated by a Salafist ideology that uses an idealized version of seventh-century Medina as a model for contemporary government and daily practice. Salafism is less of a set of doctrines than an attitude to the past, which emphasizes the rejection of innovation and the committed defence of the *sunna*, the alleged practices of Muhammad. The best-known example of this tendency is Wahabbism, the puritanical version of Islam that predominates in Saudi Arabia and that Saudi oil revenue has propagated throughout the world in the last thirty years. Indeed, we might usefully think of ISIS as another creature of the Saudis, albeit one that they have lost control of.

In recent times, Salafis have often taken stands against the introduction of ideas ('innovations') from the West, ranging from bans on smoking, women cyclists, and Valentine's day, to rules on the proper use of *siwak*, a stick used as a substitute for a toothbrush (Muhammad is said to have toyed with making their use compulsory before prayer). Rather more seriously, ISIS have also drawn on early Muslim history to impose a poll tax (*jizya*), to be paid in gold, from 'conquered' non-Muslims, which has been in major factor triggering the exodus of Christians from Mosul, and the conversion of those few who remained.

Salafists criticise many contemporary societies, both Muslim and Western, for their failure to introduce strict *sharia*. This is seen as a cause of disasters ranging from the 2008 economic crash to the 2004 tsunami. Salafists also stringently oppose any 'innovation' in religion. For them, Islam is the original religion from which all others are deviations, and their innovations add other objects of worship alongside God. The Qur'an asserts that Muhammad was only the restorer of the pure religion that had once been practiced by Abraham at the Kaaba in Mecca, which neatly gets around any chronological or geographical objections to the appropriation of earlier Hebrew prophets by the new Arabian religion.

For the Islamic state, Hatra and Nineveh are sites of 'idolatry', relics of a pre-Islamic past that may turn people away from the worship of God. Statues are presumed to be the idols of pagan gods. They are destroyed lest they become objects of false worship, in a re-enactment of Muhammad's own destruction of the idols kept in the Kaaba in Mecca. The same mentality of cultural cleansing underpinned the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taleban in 1999 and the destruction of pre-Islamic sites in Saudi Arabia. From such a perspective, protests by those in the West, or by moderate voices in the Middle East, are simply signs of their own contemporary *jahiliya*, the age of ignorance before Islam.

ISIS wish to use their vandalism to create a gulf between a 'pure Islam' and what they see as a corrupt world around them. Hatra, as a pre-Islamic city, has no role in their own self-fashioning and therefore, to their minds, no value to humanity. In so doing, they are attempting to re-forge the whole region according to their version of Islam. They offer no compromise to other ways of being Iraqi or to the histories that sustain them.

There is a great temptation to allow intellectual shorthands to obscure the complexity of reality. It is much easier to tell a straightforward narrative by re-imagining the past to fit present concerns. ISIS provide an extreme example of destroying aspects of the past that do not fit with their notion of the present. But we see the same tendency on a smaller scale every time we speak of 'the Islamic world', because it sees the region as defined solely by a religion. This equation is not made for other parts of the world, such as South-east Asia, Oceania or America, and no other religion is seen to define a region in the same way. We do not speak of 'the Buddhist world' or 'the Christian world'.

This objection is more than mere hair-splitting. The moniker 'Islamic world' implies that Christians, Jews, Yezidis or Bahais are there illegitimately, even though many of these groups were present long before Islam. ISIS drew on such close associations between a religion and a place to justify their expulsion of Christians from Mosul and their genocidal attacks against the Yezidis. Here the actions of the extremists draw support from the longstanding prejudice that defines Iraq by the religion of the majority. In this environment, individual moral reasoning is farmed out to those who interpret a religious orthodoxy that is supposedly unchanging, and where rules of right and wrong vary greatly depending on the religion and gender of the participants.

The term 'Islamic world' also implies that the pre-Islamic past has no relevance to the present of societies like Iraq and Syria. Places like Hatra and Nineveh serve as symbols of a complex past that set Iraq apart. They are important because they make the place and its peoples impossible to fit into simple frameworks, whether these are imposed by foreign empires, inspired by exclusive nationalism or extremist religion. These ruins evoked a world that existed before the inhabitants of Iraq spoke Arabic or practiced Islam. These heritages do not have to be interpreted as threats to those Iraqis who do these things, but as a means of enriching the culture of Iraq as a whole. It will be a challenge for Iraq to find political identities that go beyond the divisions of sect and ethnicity, but the resonance of its ancient past may provide one path to a future that is less confessionalised and more secure.

ISIS's destruction of archaeological sites is a war crime. It is rooted in a desire for a simple past, where the boundaries between pure religion and falsehood are clearly known. But even if the places themselves have been wrecked, their memories can still play a role in the new Iraq. Even in destruction, Hatra tells a story of cultural achievement and political independence that cannot be captured by the extremists. An Aramaic inscription from Hatra, now preserved in Baghdad, deserves the last word: 'Let everyone who has entered inside the walls of the city be remembered before [the gods]'.

Published in the *Salisbury Review*, June 2015.