

# REPORTING HERITAGE DESTRUCTION

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# Chapter 14.

## Sowing Salt and Cultivating Fear: Examining Patterns in Reporting Cultural Heritage Destruction from Ancient Times to the Digital Age

Bijan Rouhani

### Introduction

Destruction of cultural, religious, and historical heritage has occurred throughout wars, socio-political changes, and revolutions from ancient times to the present, driven by multiple reasons. These destructions have been reported and narrated in various forms and media. In addition to accounts by societies and groups whose cultural heritage has been targeted, the perpetrators of these acts have also presented their own narratives of cultural heritage destruction of other communities. These narratives reveal intentions, uses, or misuses of cultural heritage. Reporting the destruction of cultural heritage can involve complex layers of meaning that go beyond recording and documenting the events of destruction. While these narratives provide insight into what has been destroyed and how, the analysis of these narratives, the media employed, and their intended audiences also play a crucial role in understanding the interaction and weaponisation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, it enhances our comprehension of the role of cultural heritage in broader narratives of power dynamics, justification of warfare, and propaganda. Were they tailored for specific audiences, or were they always intended for a general audience? Have the patterns, forms, and structures of these narratives evolved with changes in the media? With changes in media and narrative patterns, have the messages and meaning also changed?

In the digital age, where media, social platforms, and new technologies, including artificial intelligence, rapidly reshape contemporary societies and cultural productions and alter how news is produced and disseminated (Jin 2021), reporting heritage destruction is undergoing profound changes. In particular, social media and digital technologies, while playing an effective role in disseminating news and raising public awareness during crises and disasters, and being increasingly used by both the public and professional organisations for documenting heritage destruction during conflicts (Munawar 2022), can equally amplify

propaganda, misinformation, and fake news. In this context, the past can serve as fuel for such actions due to its capacity to draw out potential divisions, including cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and gender sensitivities. While various scholars have examined the socially and digitally mediated destruction of cultural heritage by extremist groups like ISIS and how these images have captured the attention of heritage specialists, academics, politicians and the general public (Azzouz 2022; González Zarandona *et al.* 2018; Isakhan 2018; Smith *et al.* 2016; Stein 2022), a more thorough exploration of narrative patterns in the modern and digital age requires understanding these processes and their evolution. This is crucial for identifying persistent patterns and highlighting their transformations over time.

This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of the narratives of destruction, the media used to express them, their audiences, and their underlying messages, both in their initial use and as they have changed in meaning over time. The purpose is not to investigate what has been destroyed throughout history and in different civilisations, nor the methods employed. The abundance and diversity of these narratives, both temporally and geographically, do not allow for a detailed historical account or examination within the confines of this chapter. Instead, by focusing on some prominent examples from different historical periods, it examines some of the most significant narrative patterns, changes in media, audiences, and meaning.

Mesopotamia, where armed warfare was first formalised, has left numerous narratives of how the cultural heritage of neighbouring civilisations was destroyed, depicted in the form of reliefs and inscriptions. Examining these first examples of such propaganda and comparing them with the media and forms employed in subsequent millennia, especially through the monuments and memorials of ancient Rome, reveals significant differences. Differences can also be observed in the messaging of the eastern rivals

of the Roman Empire, such as the Sasanian Empire. The narratives of heritage destruction pertain not only to times of war but also to the turmoil of revolutions and social and political changes, where the destruction and alteration of historical heritage serve to propagate the revolution's message in a new language. In the more recent past, the French Revolution and the associated extensive destruction of historical and religious heritage stands as a particularly interesting case, as it illustrates the adoption of new languages, media, and the emergence of new concepts amidst societal changes. With the advent of the modern era and the codification of international laws of war, international attention and reporting on the destruction of cultural heritage within these new legal frameworks increased. To explore how heritage destruction narratives influenced philosophical and legal ideologies, we need to examine the perspectives of some protagonists of the 'just war' argument and their reflections on the destruction of cultural heritage. During the world wars, the warring parties even established commissions to report on the destruction and protection of cultural heritage. From this modern perspective, the safeguarding of cultural heritage gradually evolved into a tactical and strategic objective for warring parties to ensure military deliverables (Kila and Herndon 2014: 118). When these objectives were prioritised, there was more reporting on heritage destruction. Conversely, when such strategic objectives were not prioritised, significant instances of cultural heritage destruction were sometimes overlooked. In subsequent wars, modern media, especially television reporting, such as in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, gained prominence. One of the most significant examples of staged propaganda destruction of cultural heritage publicised using modern communication tools was the Taliban's destruction of Buddha statues in Afghanistan (2001), which successfully garnered global attention. Following that, with the advent of social media, ISIS deployed digital tools in new and more sophisticated ways in the context of the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East. These new tools have turned the production of narrative and its dissemination into a public matter, contributing to democratisation as well as speeding and extending the spread of news and the messages. Such digital tools are highly suited to the production of misinformation and fake news and, helped by artificial intelligence algorithms, result in 'echo chambers'.

In the digital age, while the means of producing narratives about cultural heritage destruction are rapidly transforming, their purposes and impacts on societies remain complex. This chapter explores some of these transformations and continuities in narratives of cultural heritage destruction, examining historical examples and their evolution over time.

### Ancient Time

Even 2600 years after the destruction of the ancient city of Susa in 647 BCE by the Assyrians, the account of Ashurbanipal, the powerful Assyrian king, of the city's conquest by his soldiers, the destruction of its temples and ziggurat, the looting of its treasures, and the uncovering of its tombs continues to evoke horror. His report vividly demonstrates how the heritage of an ancient city, now in modern Iran, was transformed into a desolate, plundered wasteland, sown with salt (Luckenbill 1927: 309). The account of the devastation of Elam's temples and cities, their looting, and the scattering of their gods and goddesses to the wind by the Assyrians is not solely gleaned from the cuneiform tablets and cylinders unearthed in Nineveh. Monumental reliefs, such as those at the British Museum, also vividly portray the destruction of temples and the ruin of gardens and palaces.

While the message conveyed by these written and visual reports may be readily apparent, it is equally crucial to consider their medium. Ashurbanipal's reports represent an extraordinary endeavour to craft royal documents that not only serve as a symbol of Assyrian kingship's might but also to sow the seeds of fear among enemies, vividly portray their humiliation, and symbolise the obliteration of their cultural icons and identities. Furthermore, they illuminate how the resources and capabilities of the royal court were harnessed to create enduring records for posterity, despite the limited capacity to make copies for dissemination. We are confronted with a power akin to that of a deity, one that has undertaken its actions with the intent of immortalising fear and humiliation in the enemy through a magnificent royal statement. A statement that, even after 2600 years, sends chills down one's spine when hearing of the events that unfolded in Elam. In this context, the enduring nature of the message and its preservation over time carries more importance than its distribution. It was a message safeguarded within the royal palace, visible to all who came to seek audience with the king.

Here, the narrative materials themselves become noteworthy artefacts, serving as symbolic links to power. The documentation of these events transcends mere narrative purposes and imparts value to an object intimately tied to authority. Another example is the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin. The stele, now in the Louvre Museum, dates to approximately 2254-2218 BCE and commemorates the victory of the Akkadians over the mountain people of Lullubi<sup>1</sup>. However, the stele was discovered in the city of Susa, modern-day Iran. In the 12th century BCE, the Elamite king, Shutruk-Nahhunte, brought this stele to Susa along with considerable

<sup>1</sup> <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123450>

booty collected during his victorious campaign in Babylon. He offered it to Inshushinak, his deity. A span of approximately a thousand years had not only failed to diminish the importance of this stele to the Elamite king but had, in fact, invested it with a transcendent quality. This inspired him to relocate it from Sippar, in modern Iraq, to his capital, where he added a few lines about himself and the manner in which he looted and brought the stele, treating it with profound reverence. It appears that the account and narrative of victory were infused with enduring power, capable of traversing from one realm of kingship to another even after a millennium. Here, we may be encountering ancient patterns of narrative and storytelling, where will, action, and power intersect. Hence, the stele is not merely a physical, historical document; it becomes a medium of power or sanctity itself, preserving its transcendent aura even after a thousand years, even if it was kept within the fortified royal palaces and castles, likely intended for a select audience rather than the general public.

Lamentations recounting city and temple devastation in ancient Sumer, especially during the Third Ur Dynasty's decline in 2004 BCE, have a notable position in Sumerian literature. Vividly detailing destruction and pleading for restoration, these works chronicle the toppling of cultural pillars alongside physical ruins as temples and cities fell. The composition of such lamentations after a kingdom's downfall, now under new rulers, can also be viewed as part of a royal endeavour – legitimising successor powers by linking them to once-proud ancients (Samet 2021: 6–7).

This style also appears in biblical literature, especially regarding the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem. The 70 CE destruction of the Second Temple also significantly shaped cultural heritage destruction reporting, famously depicted on Rome's Arch of Titus. This over 15-meter high arch displays Roman soldiers plundering the Temple artefacts like the Menorah. Built by Emperor Domitian honouring his late brother Emperor Titus, the arch stands prominently in the Roman Forum's southeast, enabling passing citizens and visitors alike to appreciate its inscriptions and sculptures. Unlike exalted Assyrian palace reliefs, public accessibility deliberately expanded the arch's spatial context – a critical shift scholars like Alois Riegl link to the evolution of late antiquity art (Holloway 1987: 186).

In Rome, monuments such as triumphal arches and columns conveyed propaganda messages beyond simple commemoration of Roman victories. As Thill (2010) notes, the Column of Trajan in Rome, constructed between 107 and 113 CE, depicts Dacian architecture as primitive, using style and materials to cast Rome's

enemies as barbaric. The destruction of Dacian buildings appears self-inflicted, implying their downfall was inevitable (Thill 2010: 38–41). Towering 38 meters with its pedestal, the Column of Trajan recounts the Dacian Wars through a spiral frieze, using prominent reliefs to laud Trajan's life, victories, and death in a dynamic and provocative spiral narrative to deploy the memorial column as propaganda (Davies 1997: 65). The Arch of Septimius Severus (203 CE) in the Roman Forum illustrates conflicts with Parthians and the siege of the ancient city of Ctesiphon. On Severus' arch, Ctesiphon and other Parthian cities appear prosperous and notably urbanised, perhaps emphasising their worthiness for Roman acquisition (Thill 2010: 41). Although formatting and style vary across these Roman arches and columns, the ideological messaging remains consistent.

The ancient city of Ctesiphon, located in present-day Iraq, was the capital of the Iranian Empire during the Parthian and later the Sasanian periods. During the Sasanian era, Ctesiphon served as the coronation site for several Sasanian kings until its conquest by the Arabs. The Arch of Ctesiphon, also known as Taq-e-Kasra, stands as the sole visible remnant of the imperial palace from the 3rd to the 6th century CE. Recognised as a historical architectural landmark, the archway holds significance as one of the largest single-span vaults of unreinforced brickwork. Ctesiphon witnessed numerous attacks, sieges, and destruction by the Romans and other invaders. The conquest of Ctesiphon by Muslim Arabs in March 637 CE marked the nadir of the Sasanian Empire's decline. This significant event is documented in various sources, notably in the works of Al-Tabari, a Persian historian and scholar of the 9th–10th centuries. Tabari and other historians recount the fall of Ctesiphon (known as Mada'en or al-Mada'in in Arabic), the arrival of the Muslims, the capture of the White Palace, its conversion into a mosque, and even the plundering of the renowned Baharestan (Spring Garden) or of the Bahar-e Khosrow (Spring of Kosrow) carpet by the Arabs. This grand and opulent carpet, decorated with gold and jewels, adorned the main floor of the imperial palace. According to Tabari, the Arabs seized this magnificent carpet as spoils of war and sent it to Medina. The chronicle notes that Caliph Omar then cut up the grand carpet and divided it among the Muslim army. Ali ibn Abi Talib, who later became the fourth Caliph, sold just one segment of it for 20,000 dirhams (Morony 1988). The ruins of Ctesiphon not only appeared in historical and geographical texts but also inspired literary and poetic works in subsequent periods, especially during the Abbasid era. They became a symbol of the endurance and greatness of past civilisations for many Arab poets (Johnson 2017). The Iwan of Mada'in (Taq-e-Kasra) also held a significant place in Persian poetry, and its ruins have always been

remembered with sorrow and lament or considered as lessons to be learned. Perhaps the most famous ode on this is the work of Khaqani Shervani, a poet from the 12th century, who, after seeing the ruins of Ctesiphon, composed a lengthy ode describing it and considered it a lesson for the instability of royal dynasties (Beelaert 2010). During the modern era, Ctesiphon (Mada'in) and the accounts of its fall and destruction played a significant and pivotal role in the formation of Iranian nationalism. Mirzadeh Eshqi (1894-1924), a prominent cultural and literary figure during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution period, invokes the kings of the Persian Empire in his renowned opera titled 'The Resurrection of Iranian Kings,' set amidst the Sasanian ruins of Mada'in (Seyed-Gohrab 2015: 394). In this opera, they all bemoan the destruction of Taq-e Kasra. It encompasses several key elements observed in the works of other nationalist writers of this era, such as nostalgia tinged with sorrow and complaint, attributing the decline of Iran's glory to Islam as a foreign religion associated with 'others,' and depicting Iran's contemporary degradation with a sense of dissatisfaction (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 181). In the works of these writers and subsequent authors like Abdulhossein Zarrinkoub (1923-1999), the narrative of the fall of Ctesiphon at the hands of the Arab Muslims becomes a pivotal scene illustrating the loss of Iran's glory and the commencement of a period of subjugation and silence for Iranians, marked by the disdain and destruction of their culture and civilisation by 'others'. In his renowned work, 'Two Centuries of Silence', Zarrinkoub views the fall of Ctesiphon and the subsequent collapse of the Sasanian Empire as the genesis of two hundred years of complete silence for Iranians, accompanied by the erosion of Iranian identity (Zarrinkoub 1957). The accounts of the destruction and decline of Ctesiphon over several centuries, from the early Islamic period to modern times, have held an important place in Iranian history and literature. These narratives have not only been used to reconstruct a nostalgic image of past glory and express regret over its loss, but they have also played a significant role in rethinking Iran's place in the modern world and in shaping Iranian nationalism, sometimes with a plea for a return to a golden past.

### Revolutionary Messages

Revolutions and social changes possess distinct languages to convey their messages, and cultural heritage, along with the narrative of its destruction and alteration, plays a crucial role in shaping and disseminating the ideology of change.

The 18th-century French Revolution unveiled another chapter in the narrative of the destruction of cultural heritage and the complex relationship revolutionaries had with it. For the French revolutionaries, pre-

revolution monuments and artworks were seen as having an instructive role and functioning as a tool for social control. Often, they were perceived in contrast to what was deemed the 'truth.' Denis Diderot, in a letter to his friend in 1765, conveyed the idea that 'if one values truth more than the fine arts, they should pray for some iconoclasts' (Idzerda 1954: 13). Diderot (1713-1784) was a prominent figure of the Enlightenment era and served as the editor of the *Encyclopédie*, which played a crucial role in shaping ideas that ultimately contributed to the French Revolution.

For the revolutionaries, historical and artistic heritage acted to convey educational messages employed by the *Ancien Régime* for social and religious control. The initial revolutionary response involved physically dismantling and destroying this heritage. Yet, it wasn't just an act of destruction; the documentation, narration of the destruction, and dissemination of the narrative had the potential to embody a fresh educational message for the revolutionary masses.

A notable example of message dissemination centred around the destruction of the Bastille fortress and prison. The Bastille, symbolising royal absolutism and oppressive power, was dismantled following the storming on July 14, 1789. Ownership of the Bastille was then granted to a private entrepreneur named Pierre-François Palloy, self-styled 'Citoyen Palloy' or 'Patriot Palloy.' Employing nearly 1000 Parisian labourers, Palloy used stones from the fallen building to craft relics and small replicas of the demolished Bastille, as well as medals and other souvenirs (Taws 2013; Lucas 1991). This entrepreneurial venture was echoed about two centuries later by souvenir shops in Berlin creating relics from the fallen Berlin Wall. Palloy sent fragments of the Bastille to different departments, all 544 French districts, political clubs, and renowned individuals, saying, 'It was not enough for me to have been there and contributed to the destruction of this fortress's walls; I had the desire to immortalise the memory of its terror' (Lüsebrink *et al.* 1997: 118).

In the case of the Bastille and the later example of the Berlin Wall, we are not only confronted with immortalising the memory of horror but also with the multiplication and dissemination of narratives surrounding their destruction. The small replicas crafted from the stones of the demolished Bastille or the fragments of the Berlin Wall were not merely reminders of those dreadful structures; each of them, individually, constituted a narrative report of the destruction, constructed from the material of the 'dark heritage'. The fragmentation of the grand narrative into smaller pieces, capable of finding a place in the hands of the citizens of the 'new world', effectively disseminated the message that the revolutionaries sought.

Camille Mathieu (2021), in her analysis of paintings and prints depicting architectural iconoclasm during the French Revolution, focuses on Bastille representations. She notes that most depictions, including Hubert Robert's, emphasise the Bastille's monumentality, denying its romantic ruin status. The glorified images of its storming exemplify the conquering citizens' unity while conveying the monumental challenge of destroying the structure. Its architectural iconicity, represented through wholeness, signifies its ties to a decaying monarchy and affirms its inability to be repurposed. Commemorative images after the demolition reinforced ideals of unity and political transformation. The Bastille became a universal emblem of solidarity during the Revolution, depicted as unconquerable yet symbolising civic solidarity. These visual commemorations portrayed it as a monument to the ideal of revolutionary change (Mathieu 2021: 271–73).

During the French Revolution, amid the widespread destruction of artistic, religious, and historical monuments, another figure emerged who, by his word formation and reports, contributed significantly to the preservation of some of France's historical artefacts. Henri Grégoire (1750–1831), known as Abbé Grégoire, a French Catholic priest and revolutionary leader, detailed in his *Mémoires* the widespread destruction unleashed by an enraged mob upon every book, painting, and monument bearing the marks of religion, feudalism, or royalty. He estimated the damage inflicted on objects of religion, science, and literature to be incalculable (Grégoire 1837: 345). Grégoire coined the term 'vandalism' to encapsulate and combat this phenomenon, stating, 'Je présentasse à la Convention un rapport contre le vandalisme. Je créai le mot pour tuer la chose' (I presented a report to the Convention against vandalism. I created the word to kill the phenomenon) (Grégoire 1837: 346). Grégoire was a member of the Comité d'instruction publique. He presented several reports against vandalism, 'Rapport Sur le Vandalisme,' to the National Convention of France. In these reports, in addition to raising awareness about the extensive destruction of French art and architecture, he put forward proposals for safeguarding monuments, libraries, manuscripts, titles, charters, medals, and antiquities. Concluding his initial report, 'Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le Vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer,' published in 1793, he issued a decree outlining protective measures. He urged citizens to report any acts of vandalism or dilapidation to the authorities. The punishment for those who destroyed or degraded monuments was two years of detention (Grégoire 1794: 27–28).

There was also a distinct form of 'narrative' primarily undertaken to safeguard endangered or destroyed

artefacts. It took the shape of a museum founded by Alexandre Lenoir, an archaeologist dedicated to the collection and preservation of sculptures and monuments rescued from revolutionary iconoclasts. In 1795, the Musée des Monuments français (Museum of French Monuments) was established. This institution not only presented a unique narrative of historical monuments but also traced the course of unfolding revolutionary actions by decontextualising the monuments, collecting their fragments, and organising them chronologically. Lenoir did so without placing significant emphasis on their artistic values, all in service of his didactic narrative. This approach, labelled as 'the end of art' by Quatremere De Quincy, an archaeologist and architectural theorist, marked a point where the fragments of history became lifeless objects (Jokilehto 2002: 72–73).

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) are closely linked to the widespread and systematic looting and confiscation of historical and cultural artefacts, followed by their transportation to France. There exist numerous reports and studies on this era. The reports that describe or depict these operations are significant, shedding light on another aspect of the damage inflicted upon historical and cultural artefacts. The depiction of the arrival of Italian masterpieces in Paris and their incorporation into the Louvre is vividly captured on a porcelain vase crafted by Antoine Beranger as Napoleonic propaganda. The artwork illustrates the journey of renowned ancient sculptures from the Vatican to join the Napoleon collection, escorted by soldiers and admired by Parisians<sup>2</sup>. The bust of Homer, followed by the Apollo of the Belvedere, the Laocoon, and the Medici Venus, are seen entering the palace. The French Empire consciously embraced a role as successor to the Romans, who once paraded their spoils through the streets – perhaps most evidently in the symbolism of imperial eagles. In an engraving by Jean Duplessi-Bertaux, the dismantling of the four imposing bronze horses and the quadriga from St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice is depicted as they were removed from the cathedral portico in the presence of both Venetian crowds and the triumphant French army on 13 December 1797. The engraving does not portray a robust reaction against this seizure. Subsequently, in Paris, the horses were initially stored at Les Invalides before being positioned on four pillars surrounding the courtyard of the Tuileries. Ultimately, these horses were repurposed in the construction of the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel in Paris, a project commissioned by Napoleon, inspired by the Arch of Constantine in Rome. Joseph-Louis-Hippolyte Bellange's painting captures the Arc de Triomphe with the horses and

<sup>2</sup> L'entrée à Paris des œuvres destinées au Musée Napoléon. <https://www.sevrescitceramique.fr/galeriesshowroom/les-univers-de-sevres/product/vase-etrusque-a-rouleaux.html>

quadriga atop it at the entrance to the Tuileries Palace courtyard. The horses, which were originally looted from Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, remained there until 1815, when they were returned to Venice.

The use of spoliation, plunder, and the confiscation of artistic works found support among numerous French intellectuals and the press, including *La Décade Philosophique* journal (Chatelain 1973: 169). The transfer of European masterpieces to Paris was viewed as a bold affirmation of the city's status as a haven for freedom and the capital of art. Vivant Denon, the director of the Louvre, actively encouraged Napoleon to continue the transfer of artworks from other European nations to Paris, envisioning the development of the Museum (Ibid). However, dissenting voices, such as that of Quatremere de Quincy, opposed the requisition of artworks. He firmly believed that such cultural treasures, considered common property, should remain in their original locations, advocating against any appropriation. For Quatremere de Quincy, the essence of art lies in its preservation within its authentic context (Jokilehto 2002: 72).

The destruction and plundering of cultural heritage during the French Revolution and, subsequently, the Napoleonic Wars deployed diverse storytelling approaches. These included employing various narrative forms in newspapers and journals, introducing new terminologies, utilising a range of artistic expressions (including painting and decorative arts), and presenting narratives in recently founded museums like the Museum of French Monuments (housing fragments of destroyed monuments) and the Louvre Museum (displaying looted artworks).

### Just War

Considering the right and wrong of wars, how they should be initiated and conducted, whether wars should follow certain laws, and whether they can be just has a long history. Thucydides, the Athenian historian (c. 460 – c. 400 BCE), addressed this topic from a realist perspective through a debate between the Athenian generals and the magistrates of the island of Melos (Walzer 2015: 4). In many discussions about how wars should be fought, the destruction of temples, tombs, and religious and cultural sites has also been seriously considered. Euripides, in 'The Trojan Women,' references the destruction of sanctuaries and burial places (Walzer 2015: 7).

Cicero, a Roman statesman (106 BCE–43 BCE), further developed the question of a just war by arguing that a valid cause, the authority that declares war, and the conduct of the war itself should all be just (Bellamy

2006: 18–20). Although Cicero didn't directly address the destruction of monuments and cultural assets, he recognised forums, temples, colonnades, and streets as common values for fellow citizens of the same city-state. These shared spaces created a more intimate bond among them and allowed them to proceed beyond the universal bond of our common humanity (Cicero 1913: [53] 17).

In late antiquity and the early centuries of Christianity, particularly within the Roman Empire borders, following contemplation and reassessment, the destruction of sacred temples and cultural artefacts acquired distinct philosophical and religious significance.

Marcos (2015) proposes that the integration of the destruction of temples and idols into hagiography occurred in the late fourth century. The destruction, presented as virtues or miracles of saints, served various roles in hagiographic narratives — acting as a form of sanctification, an ascetic exercise, a means of courting martyrdom, and a display of divine will and omnipotence. The demolition of sacred sites and temples became a virtuous act, symbolising the triumph of true religion over polytheistic beliefs. The depicted violence was justified as necessary, addressing the resistance of pagan gods and framing the conflict as a battle between God and the devil. Hagiography was accessible to diverse audiences, including the illiterate who heard it in church on saints' anniversaries, and significantly influenced various cultural traditions, playing a pivotal role in shaping early Christian identity by offering models for emulation (Marcos 2015: 190–191).

Augustine of Hippo (St Augustine) (354–430 CE) is considered the originator of the just war theory (Regan 2013: 14). In his magnum opus, *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*), Augustine explored the matter of temple destruction amid the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 CE. This historical event prompted Romans to lay blame for the calamity on the nascent Christian faith and the end of pagan worship. In his response, Augustine distinguished between temporal and eternal cities, with the City of God as a representation of the heavenly and eternal, separate from the City of Man, which signifies the earthly and temporal realms. In *The City of God*, he revisits the principles of just war and the Roman philosophy of warfare. He advocates for the preservation of temples, citing instances from Roman wars as examples. He admired Fabius, the conqueror of the city of Tarentum, because he abstained from making booty of the images (Augustine 1884: 9). Augustine wrote that one of Fabius' secretaries asked him what he wished to be done with the statues of gods, which had been taken in large numbers and some of them were armed. The Roman commander answered:

'Let us leave Tarentines their angry gods' (Augustine 1884: 9). Augustine wrote that he veiled his moderation under a joke. These and other instances supported his discourse on the ethics of warfare. Augustine's key perspectives on the ethics of war can be condensed into two primary concepts. Firstly, war should be conducted with the correct intentions, and secondly, war must be declared by appropriate authorities. The fundamental distinction between a just and unjust war was that a just war sought not only to reinstate peace but also to address and rectify an inflicted injury (Bellamy 2006: 27).

The concept of a just war, or how war could be legitimised and conducted, continued in the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a priest of the Dominican order and philosopher and theologian in the scholastic tradition who was influenced by St. Augustine's approach to just war. However, it wasn't until the 17th century, with the contributions of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius and his book 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' (1625; On the Law of War and Peace), that thoughtful contemplations on the destruction of historical monuments, religious monuments, and artistic works were placed within theoretical and legal frameworks regarding war. Completing his book amid the turmoil of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), Grotius observed that nearly every page of history is filled with instances of entire cities being razed, walls brought to the ground, and entire countries laid waste by fire and sword (Grotius 2007: 332). In his work, he endeavoured to establish guidelines for the legitimate destruction of enemy property and commodities.

He analysed various accounts of destruction and concluded that, according to the law of nations, sacred things don't receive special protection when a place is captured by an enemy. However, he argued that considering something sacred doesn't make it completely off-limits for all human purposes. Instead, sacred items are seen as a form of public property dedicated to essential general purposes. He explored historical and legal perspectives, noting that sacred things like temples and statues can be repurposed for secular uses in times of war under specific conditions. His argument, based on ancient Greek and Roman examples, is that under certain circumstances like a wartime need, the practical use of sacred items can be justified. This includes sepulchral structures but respect should be maintained to avoid disrespectful actions towards the deceased (Grotius 2007: 332-333). He initiated a crucial discussion on the preservation of the cultural property and monuments of the enemy, trying to categorise the places and assets that should be safeguarded from destruction. He argued that certain elements did not contribute to war, nor did they bolster or prolong it, so reason itself dictated that

these elements should be spared even in the midst of the heat of war. He turned to Polybius, who denounced the destruction of things that neither diminished the enemy's strength nor enhanced that of the destroyer, labelling it as brutal rage and madness. Examples of such items included porticos, temples, statues, and all other refined works and monuments of art. Additionally, he cited Cicero, who had praised Marcellus for sparing the public and private structures of Syracuse, portraying the act as if Marcellus had arrived with his army to protect them rather than to conquer the city by force (Grotius 2007: 366-367).

Emerich de Vattel, the 18th-century Swiss philosopher and jurist, reflected further on the destruction of cultural and religious buildings in the context of the legal frameworks regarding the conduct of war. In his *Le Droit des gens* (The Law of Nations, 1785), he argued that it is a duty of every nation to labour for the preservation of other nations and for securing them from ruin and destruction (Vattel 2011: 135). In Chapter IX 'The Right Of War, with regard to Things Belonging to the Enemy', he wrote that wanton destruction of public monuments, temples, tombs, statues, paintings, etc., is absolutely condemned as never being conducive to the lawful object of war (Vattel 2011: 370).

Although the theoretical discussions of 17th and 18th-century thinkers on just war and their references to the protection and destruction of cultural and historical heritage had no impact on the fate of cultural heritage during the Napoleonic wars, these reflections laid strong foundations for the development of philosophical, religious, and legal thoughts. This culminated in the late 19th century and continued into the 20th century with international laws concerning the protection of cultural properties during times of war. Arguably, of course, the concept of a just war is another dimension of propaganda.

### From World Wars to the Digital Age

By the close of the 19th and dawn of the 20th centuries, a set of international norms and established ethics had emerged concerning the safeguarding of cultural, religious, and artistic sites and objects during armed conflicts. Key documents contributing to these standards included the Lieber Code (1863), the Declaration of Brussels (1874), the Oxford Manual (1880), the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, and the Roerich Pact (1935). In this context, it is unsurprising that the protection of heritage became a component of war propaganda, with opposing parties in the conflict accusing each other of committing barbaric actions against historic monuments and landmarks. During the devastation of Reims Cathedral in the First World War, the French characterised it as 'Joan of Arc in

the midst of Germans, standing there lonely as their prisoner' (Landrieux 1920: 21). The Germans, in turn, asserted that it was an accidental targeting error, a claim deemed unacceptable by the French, who likened the Cathedral's significance to the emergence of the Pyramids from the desert (Ibid: 18). On the other side, the Germans announced that they had a programme for safeguarding historic monuments and art. Paul Clemen, the German art and architectural historian, was appointed to oversee the protection of art on both the Western and Eastern fronts, and he subsequently published two reports on the protection of art and the Belgian monuments during the war (Clemen 1919; Clemen 1923). The destruction of historical buildings and cathedrals in France and Belgium was also reflected in the new medium of British propaganda posters, which compared the Germans to and identified them as the Huns (Buxton 2019; Schuhmacher 2019). Conflicting narratives about the destruction and protection of cultural heritage had entered into wartime propaganda.

During the Second World War, the United States implemented a protection plan for cultural and artistic heritage in war-torn areas of Europe. On August 20, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, commonly known as the Roberts Commission. This commission was tasked with developing protection strategies both during the war and in the post-conflict period (Roberts Commission 1946).

The consequence of the extensive destruction of cultural heritage during World War II is found in its most refined form within the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict<sup>3</sup>. This convention places a strong emphasis on safeguarding both movable and immovable 'cultural property' as well as the locations that serve as its repositories and refuges. Moreover, it transcends these boundaries, elevating cultural heritage to a matter of global concern and value. In its preamble, the convention explicitly states that damage to the cultural property of any people is equivalent to damage inflicted upon the cultural property of all 'mankind'—an exceptionally liberal and global conceptualisation of the values inherent in cultural heritage. This might be considered the paramount message conveyed in the post-World War II era, predating even the establishment of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and its articulation of 'universal values'. The pivotal observation is that the globalisation of cultural heritage was one of the results of World War II, transforming heritage into a universally esteemed value. Hence, it is unsurprising that safeguarding cultural heritage, along

with reporting on its destruction, has evolved into a strategic priority amid conflicts. President Roosevelt's initiatives during WWII foreshadow this, highlighting that the attention or neglect of cultural heritage has become a strategic consideration for major powers engaged in conflicts. Therefore, Cultural Property Protection (CPP) has been gradually integrated into tactical, operational, and strategic military frameworks to aid in the achievement of military objectives (Berends 2020: 6). In fact, it is this newly gained strategic importance in furthering military objectives that provides a fresh perspective on reporting and even overlooking and ignoring the destruction of cultural heritage. As Rouhani and Finlayson discuss in this book, one of the reasons that extensive damage to cultural heritage and historical cities during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) did not receive international attention and media coverage was that Western military powers, due to their lack of direct involvement, did not find strategic values in protecting or focusing on cultural heritage in that conflict, which should be considered together with the lack of digital communication and monitoring technologies as well as the absence of independent and robust civil societies (Rouhani and Finlayson 2025).

Due to the widespread availability of mass communication tools and media, particularly television, reports on the destruction of cultural heritage reached people's homes. In contrast to the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, which seemed remote and involved combatants without Western favour, the Balkans conflict, situated at Europe's heart, received extensive attention. The conflict drew focus not only from NATO and the global community, but also public opinion, media outlets, and television broadcasting, which meticulously documented details, including deliberate cultural heritage destruction and cleansing. The destruction of the historic Stari Most bridge (the Old Bridge) in Mostar played a pivotal role in the destruction of cultural heritage during the Balkans War in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was captured by a freelance Scottish cameraman, and its images were repeatedly featured in various reports (Walasek and Carlton 2016: 51). The collapse of the stones of this historic Ottoman bridge into the river was likened to the shattering of hopes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Simultaneously, within the public discourse, questions arose about whether the media's focus on the destruction of historical structures translated to neglecting the suffering people and giving precedence to the preservation of stones over human lives (Williams 1993). Cultural cleansing and widespread destruction of cultural heritage in the Balkan wars were also examined by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, leading to several convictions. However, state-controlled media on the other side, namely in Serbia and Croatia, played a significant role in spreading nationalist and

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention>

ethnic propaganda, disseminating disinformation, and contributing to cultural cleansing (Thompson 1999).

As we stepped into the 21st century, the media began to portray the destruction of cultural heritage in more complex and detailed ways. The demolition of Buddha statues by the Taliban in 2001, captured on television cameras, during a period when social media had not yet become widespread, vividly showcased the immense influence and global reach of images depicting the destruction of symbols, disseminating them to every corner of the world. From the time Mullah Omar issued the fatwa for the destruction of the statues in February 2001 until their practical demolition in March, the Taliban exploited a unique opportunity to attract worldwide attention to both themselves and the situation in Afghanistan. They were approached by various parties, countries, and heritage organisations, urging them to prevent the destruction of the statues, even offering financial incentives in exchange for their preservation. The Taliban seized this moment to criticise the international community, claiming that it had forsaken the Afghan people and overlooked their long-term suffering while showing readiness to save the statues. With the passage of time and following their destruction, the Bamiyan Buddhas have, through journalistic accounts, transformed into an emblem representing contemporary cultural terrorism. As Klein (2018) has analysed, in 70 percent of media reports, the original historical context of the site has been supplanted by the focus on its destruction, ultimately altering the place's historical importance. The Taliban's intentional decision to record and share the demolition of the Buddhas globally played a key role in this transformation (Klein 2018).

The replacement of narratives emphasising cultural significance with narratives focused on destruction, especially in the context of deliberate actions by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), became more prominent. This shift was largely attributed to the widespread use of social media and ISIS's deployment of advanced propaganda techniques in the public domain. In this process, the discourse surrounding the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq took precedence over historical and cultural narratives regarding the affected objects and local communities. Notably, mainstream media also transformed ISIS's cultural destruction into a symbol of 'terrorism'. They faced limitations in showing images of human rights violations and war crimes, such as beheading due to editorial rules and guidelines, but readily disseminated images of the destruction and explosions at cultural sites to illustrate the extent of ISIS's violence. Cartoons equated the destruction of ancient statues by ISIS to killing and beheading people.

The destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, as well as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban, has been characterised by its highly performative nature. These acts make extensive use of new media tools and technologies to disseminate complex messages within the framework of the modern world. In the case of ISIS, it's clear that the group employed high-quality, meticulously staged imagery, which was then repeatedly distributed by social media users and mainstream media. Essentially, ISIS's primary arena for this propaganda was the realm of media and visual productions utilising cultural heritage, rather than the cultural heritage itself or its content.

A paradoxical aspect is that while one of the goals of both the Taliban and ISIS was to portray themselves as religious iconoclasts revolting against idols and shattering them, they achieved this through image production and reliance on the performative aspects of their actions. By leveraging new media technologies and networked social media, ISIS pursued multiple objectives. These included bolstering their power, cultivating an aura of invincibility, propagating a fundamentalist ideology and recruiting new members (Smith *et al.* 2016), diminishing the local populations, advocating scorched-earth policies, and opposing liberal and humanistic global values. However, the focus of most cultural heritage experts and archaeologists has primarily been on analysing the content of media productions and what has been destroyed, rather than delving into the how and why of these productions. They have not fully recognised ISIS as a group that employs modern tools to produce hyperreality for the dissemination and multiplication of violence (Harmanşah 2015). Also, in the case of the Taliban's actions, rather than interpreting them as a 'medieval' and iconoclastic approach, it is crucial to explain them within the context of global modernity and the use of media tools (Flood 2002).

Comparison with the intentional destruction of Sufi heritage by some Salafist branches in Libya and Tunisia during the same period is intriguing. While reports of Sufi heritage destruction did find their way into the media and some international heritage organisations (ICOMOS 2012; ICOMOS 2013; United Nations News 2014), the attention given to these acts remained predominantly within the realm of local media and social media platforms utilised by the local population. It never garnered the same level of widespread attention as the international mainstream media coverage of the highly performative acts of heritage destruction carried out by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. One undeniable reason for this discrepancy was the comparatively less performative and staged nature of the destruction in Libya and Tunisia when compared to the operations carried out by ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The emergence of new social media, characterised by its digital nature, interactivity, global connectivity, and rapid dissemination of viral information, has transformed it into an effective propaganda tool. This transformation extends beyond non-state actors, as even state actors have harnessed new media to utilise cultural heritage as part of their propaganda campaigns. A noteworthy example is President Trump's January 2020 tweet, in which he issued a threat, indicating that the US had identified fifty-two Iranian cultural sites, some of which were described by him as 'at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture.' The message conveyed that the US would swiftly and forcefully strike these targets if Tehran were to attack Americans or US assets in response to the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), by the USA in Iraq (BBC 2020).

Nonetheless, the use of social media and digital technologies extends beyond governmental and non-governmental actors; the wider audience extensively employs them for storytelling, dissemination, and expressing views and emotions during crises, including the destruction of cultural heritage. The widespread accessibility of social media and the extensive capability to generate user content while contributing to the democratisation of narratives pose challenges. These platforms, influenced by algorithms developed by major corporations, have the potential to widely spread misinformation and fake news, polarising the world and accentuating disparities between the global North and South. They can also deepen cultural, social, political, economic, religious, racial, and gender divides. A recent example was the fire at the iconic medieval Notre-Dame Catholic Cathedral in Paris in 2019, which was proven not to be intentional. During the incident, users shared images and videos of the Cathedral on various social networks. Subsequently, millions of user reactions were recorded across different platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (later X), YouTube, and others. However, in the initial hours and days, these platforms also became sources of fake news about the cause of the fire, attributing it to Muslims, diminishing Christian and ethical beliefs in Europe, and mentioning certain political motivations, among other reasons (Kosowski and Luzar 2020; Арбатская and Борисова 2022). However, it also exposed a profound imbalance in coverage between the Notre-Dame fire, which received extensive attention and echoed widely on social media, and other incidents of heritage fires, destruction, bombings, and violence occurring concurrently worldwide. These events often involved issues of extremism, terrorism, or the impact on the lives of underprivileged and ordinary individuals and citizens (Pruden 2019).

## Conclusion

Examining different examples from ancient times to the digital age, this chapter discusses how the narrative of cultural heritage destruction, using various storytelling tools in each era, has evolved into a significant element in propaganda and the presentation of power relations and violence.

In ancient Mesopotamia, the documentation of heritage destruction found expression in monuments housed within royal palaces and archives, a direct symbol of power. These monuments held substantial significance for other civilisations. They were often seized during later wars, even centuries apart, and redeployed to project authority.

Ancient Rome expanded the propaganda audience, situating memorials portraying the pillaging of foreign cultures in public spaces for imperial citizens' consumption. The impact of such narratives was not limited to ancient times and persisted into the modern era to be used in nationalist narratives. A notable example of this is the destruction of Ctesiphon during the Arab Muslim conquest and its reflection in the formation of the modern Iranian nationalist movement.

During the French Revolution, the destruction of cultural and historical heritage was reported not only in works of art and paintings, but also in newspapers, journals, and emerging forms of media, such as the creation of small-scale replicas using the same materials of the destroyed buildings, in the case of Bastille, for instance. It was as if the destroyed structure was transformed into a medium for the replication and dissemination of its own destruction narrative. A similar occurrence transpired centuries later in the sale of souvenirs made from pieces of the Berlin Wall. Writers and intellectuals had diverse reactions, spanning from praise to condemnation with new terms like 'vandalism' emerging. In the Napoleonic Wars, not only did some French intellectuals, writers, and artists attempt to present a narrative that portrayed France as the cultural and artistic centre of Europe and even the world, but new institutions like the Louvre Museum also served this narrative – a role that would grow in the national museums of the 19th century.

The destruction of cultural heritage, besides being employed for the expansion of ideology, power propaganda, and the emergence of nationalist movements, laid the foundations for philosophical and legal reflections on the laws of war and its limitations. From Late Roman writers to modern thinkers, profound reflections on the destruction of historical, cultural, and artistic works took place, eventually echoed in international legal documents. From

the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the protection of cultural heritage gradually became a relatively accepted global value, reflected in international policies. Since then, the protection of cultural heritage has also evolved into a strategic objective, with some warring parties in conflicts considering protective measures for cultural property as part of their military strategies, and so also reflected in propaganda materials.

The advancement of communication technologies, initially television, introduced a new dimension to the narrative of the destruction of cultural heritage, bringing it from the public sphere even closer into the homes of citizens. This shift enabled such narratives to have a deeper impact and play a more strategic role in weaponising cultural heritage. Extremist groups like the Taliban, and especially ISIS were well aware of the power and characteristics of new media, particularly social media. They effectively utilised these platforms to expand and disseminate their performative and staged propaganda. New media, characterised by its interactivity, global connectivity, and the rapid and viral spread of information, elevated cultural heritage from a historical artefact to an object for consumption in propaganda, amplifying the narrative of violence and power.

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The contributions in this volume, an output of the University of Oxford's Endangered Cultural Heritage of the Global South (ECHGS) Hub, speak to some fundamental questions about the reporting of heritage destruction: who is reporting, what is being reported and how, and what are the implications of such reporting? Given that cultural heritage can serve as both a trigger and a casualty of conflict, the relentless flow of reporting from news outlets and social media and user-generated content has consequences. The complex and evolving relationships between communities, media, human rights issues and heritage can also serve to endanger and safeguard identities in the present as well as the tangible and intangible legacies of the past. This volume explores these topics through a diversity of perspectives, including from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The collection culminates with the 'Oxford Recommendations', an ethical reporting framework recommended for use by journalists and others confronted by such issues.



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