Breaking and Talking: Some Thoughts on Iconoclasm from Antiquity to the Current Moment

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In the European tradition, there have been two classic outbreaks of iconoclasm – in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries and in the Reformation during the early modern period. Both involved the breaking of works of art, but the prime reason for their subsequent significance is the heavy theorizing (theological and philosophical) that accompanied both the attack on material objects and the defense of images by those who opposed the iconoclasts.[1] The crises in both cases might be seen as a fundamental clash of ideological positions around a series of profound social phenomena (ritual, orthodoxy in relation to religion, the sense of assault from external forces – arguably, the threat of Islam in both cases) that crystalized around objects in material culture and their veneration, even their very validity. But beyond these two intensely textual and polemical moments, the Western tradition has always been characterized by cultural discourses of image-attack in material culture, on the one hand, and the textual record of such attack, on the other.

To separate the actual demolition of images and the record of the act of destruction (whether visual or textual) may arguably seem artificial – but there is certainly the possibility for violence done to a monument that results in total and unrecorded erasure. One example is the impressive over-life-size bronze head of the emperor Augustus found by early twentieth-century excavators interred beneath the steps leading up to a temple of Victory in Meroe in the Sudan. This fine piece – certainly the finest surviving bronze of the emperor – was decapitated from a statue probably in upper Egypt (which may have been left headless to mark its demise, or may have been melted down, or may otherwise have been destroyed) and carried back by Kushite marauders opposed to the Roman empire to be ceremonially interred in a spot where it would be perpetually trampled on by worshippers at the temple, even after its burial and existence had been forgotten [Fig. 1].[2] Another example, also from ancient Rome, is the very careful erasure and recutting of the figure of the emperor Commodus (assassinated at the end of 192 AD) from reliefs that once celebrated the triumph awarded to him and his father, Marcus Aurelius, on an arch in the city of Rome [Fig. 2].[3] In this case, Commodus, whom modern scholarship through shrewd archaeological analysis has reconstructed as standing next to Marcus in the space beside him in the triumphal chariot, was cut away and his body turned into the steps, column and base of the temple in the background. Here the fallen emperor is effectively airbrushed out of the visual record, and the monument presents the world as if he had never been there.

However, arguably more common is the choice to preserve a record of iconoclasm in a still surviving but altered object – marking both the offense implied by the original and a subsequent, violent, act of righting or avenging it through assault. The elements in the reliefs and inscriptions on the early third-century AD Arch of the Argentarii in Rome which commemorated the emperor

Geta, the empress Plautilla (wife of Geta's brother and co-emperor, Caracalla) and her father Plautianus – all killed with their memories condemned by Caracalla by the year 212 – are eliminated in such a way as to mark the act of erasure on the still-standing structure for all time. Instead of airbushing and the fantasy of perfected finish, the viewer is offered unsightly gashes in the carved stone reliefs and the marks of destruction [Fig.3].[4] These examples all belong to the political iconoclasm surrounding *damnatio memoriae* in the ancient world.[5] They can certainly be extended – and we have evidence of inscriptions recording such acts even when the objects themselves were destroyed in order to preserve the memory of destruction.[6] But the same is true of religiously motivated iconoclasm in the Christian era. At Aphrodisias in Caria in Asia Minor, there was systematic defacement – surely by late antique Christians – of deities, images of sacrifice and exposed genitals in the fine Julio-Claudian sculptures of the Sebasteion, within a larger culture of conservation and respect for the memory and monuments of the ancient past [Fig 4].[7] The erasure of genitals is not so far from the provision of fig leaves to nude male statuary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whether the application of coverings counts as iconoclasm is a moot point – but the later depiction of drapes to cover the nudity of the figures in Michelangelo's Last Judgment (painted 1536-41, 'improved' by Daniele da Volterra in 1565 after the decrees on images at the Council of Trent)[8] was certainly a destructive intervention even if al-secco additions in tempera to frescoes are potentially reversible. When Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria (384-415), orchestrated the destruction of the temple and statue of Serapis in 391 AD, visual and textual records were certainly fostered to affirm his saintly piety in removing the demonic forces of idolatry from the world [Fig. 5].[9]

Now there is a complexity, indeed an inconsistency, in the twin process of actual image-breaking and its public announcement. If the destruction of an object, whose potency (whether representing a hated ruler or an idol) marks it as evil, is an act of simple and straightforward purification, why require a record? The record preserves the memory of the evil, which the act is in principle designed to remove. The absence of the images of Geta, Plautilla and Plautianus preserve their memory, under erasure, and the memory of the evil, which the polemic directed against them caused them to embody, while at the same time affirming their pious removal from the world by Caracalla. The act of iconoclasm here is more about affirming the destroyer – a rightful new ruler in the case of Caracalla's image-breaking or a truly orthodox believer in the case of the Aphrodisias reliefs – than it is really about the destroyed or even the process of destruction. That is – despite the apparent object-centeredness of iconoclasm as orchestrating an ontological removal of something from whose material absence the world is better off – really (or at least usually) the activity of iconoclasts (both in the physical attack on images and in their verbal assaults and accounts of such attacks) is a discursive act of self-affirmation through the negation of a material symbol of what is rejected.[10] The object serves as a cipher for a complex variety of discourses – social, political, religious, ethnic, cultural etc. – that come together and coincide in the rejection of a material object as the embodiment of what is condemned.[11]

In purely material terms, then, iconoclasm is never solely a matter of destruction. Something new and different always remains – whether that is the

object refashioned to be something else (as in the Commodus panels or in so many recut imperial portraits from Rome),[12] or left as a desolate marker of its lost former state (as in the Argentarii panels or the Aphrodisias friezes), or simply an absence where there was once a statue or a dedication or a temple (as in the case of the original statue of Augustus whose head was severed and carried off to Meroe). Indeed, while we rarely think of archaeological excavation as iconoclastic, since we emphasize the antiquities uncovered and dug up, insofar as it involves intervention in the landscape – the removal of modern buildings, the preference for certain (earlier and lower) layers in the stratigraphy over other (higher and later) ones – arguably destruction is as much archaeology's driving force as is discovery. When such things become politicized, for instance in the razing of contemporary houses to dig ancient sites in Palestine or the recent removal of the sixteenth-centry Babri mosque at Ayodhya to reveal the birth site of the Hindu god Rama, clearly the claim that iconoclasm is at work, in what may call itself the excavation of a previous and more valid past, cannot be easily discounted.

The profound interconnection of the iconoclastic gesture and its reportage remains in place in the modern world.[13] Here the specific and current issue of iconoclasm by extremists evoking religious authority – which has been in the news since the Taliban blew up what remained of the Bamiyan Buddhas in central Afghanistan in 2001 and has become potent in the recent atrocities perpetrated by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – is a remarkably interesting if disturbing series of cases. First, the idea that this might be some non-Western phenomenon dismissible (at least intellectually) as a feature of primitive and fundamentalist Islam, is nonsense. Clearly the prime market at which these acts are aimed – to generate the kinds of shock, outrage and condemnation that drive all reports in the Press or online media – is Western. Indeed, many of the objects of attack by IS lie in the ancestral history of the West (whether they are the surviving masterpieces of a Biblically-linked Assyrian/Babylonian past, like the remains of Nimrud and Nineveh, or the grand monuments of the space between the Roman and the Parthian empires, like the cities of Hatra and Palmyra). A second audience, in part inspired by the sight of Western self-righteousness appalled at both the offense of iconoclasm and the incapacity to prevent it, is the Islamicist youth (often living in the West and radicalized there) which this kind of activity is intended to help recruit. But my point is that neither of these audiences experiences the thrill of assault or the horror of destruction at first-hand. Iconoclasm, as invented for the contemporary moment by IS, is a vicarious game, a pornography of snuff movies disseminated with propagandist mastery across an internet invented by the Great Satan.[14]

The brilliance of the process is currently still being witnessed in the long-drawn-out demolition of Palmyra as a kind of slow striptease conducted through episodes of filmed destruction, like a porn soap-opera. The action began with an actual snuff-movie in the video-disseminated beheading of Khaled al-Asaad, the site's octogenarian archaeologist. This was followed by a series of filmed acts of iconoclasm where one world-famous monument after another at the site was destroyed. A number of conclusions may be drawn from this vibrant but horrific instantiation of the twin logic of iconoclasm (destruction and reportage). Notably, the theoretical difference between the act of destruction and its

descriptive representation (with which I began) has been entirely eroded. There would be no point in such iconoclasm were it not for the possibilities of (instant) internet dissemination – the two are inextricably intertwined for ends that are equally political-ideological and justified through religious claims. More troubling still, especially to Western onlookers, should be the fact that in this kind of theater, the audience is hardly less participant than the perpetrator. The consumers' predictable responses (as loudly voiced in all our media) are themselves the spur to further acts of iconoclasm and help to ratchet up the stakes which have moved from the destruction of the cultural heritage of the Middle East to the filmed perpetration of murder.

In the contemporary moment, iconoclasm still touches on the key fissures of politics and culture – now in a global arena – including such issues as the place of the past in the current era, the claims of what kind of past should be dominant or ancestral and where, all focused on and embodied in material objects of significant artistry that are seen through a lens which claims them to be religiously obscene. Where, in Byzantium or the Calvinist Reformation, the attack on images, its justifications and the defense of images by those who detested iconoclasm, reached high and abstract levels of conceptual argument expressed in texts that themselves formed commentaries on the underlying cultural politics of their times, modernity offers us a universally available visual replication of vicarious destruction as porno-video performance, coupled with largely self-righteous condemnation by a media which reports and voyeuristically enjoys the outrage, and in doing so ensures its continuing perpetration.

The object as idol – the specific instantiation of an ideal-typical class of condemned matter – was and remains the apparent focus of the iconoclastic act. But its reportage – arguably the more important and lasting aspect of iconoclasm, at any rate in the great moments of iconoclastic excess in Byzantium, the Reformation and the activities of IS in contemporaneity – may be thought the thing that is truly central. Indeed, scholars now have significant doubts whether the most famous of all the images purportedly destroyed by the Byzantine iconoclasts, the mosaic of Christ over the Chalke gate of the imperial Palace at Constantinople, ever existed at all outside the mythologies of its demolition.[15] That reportage has moved from textual framing through polemic and apologetic (in the Middle Ages and early modernity) to video and You-tube in the current moment. Even non-figural architectural monuments of no religious function at any time in antiquity or thereafter have become victims of the voracious recording of assault. What modernity offers is an unprecedented excess of voyeurism, performative and visual, in place of the complex of philosophical discussion and exegesis which characterized responses to image-breaking in the past.

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NOTES

[1] The literature is large. See generally on iconoclasm D. Gamboni, The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution, London, 1997; A. Demandt, Vandalismus: Gewalt gegen Kultur, Berlin, 1997; A. Besançon, The Forbidden Image: An

Intellectual History of Iconoclasm, Chicago, 2000; B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds.), Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art, Karlsruhe, 2002; A. McClanan and J. Johnson (eds.), Negating the Image: Case Studies in Iconoclasm, Farnham, 2005; S. Boldrick and R. Clay (eds.), Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms, Farnham, 2007; J. Simpson, Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition, Oxford, 2010; J. Noyes, The Politics of Iconoclasm: Religion, Violence and Culture, London, 2013; K. Kolrud and M. Prusac (eds), Iconoclasm From Antiquity to Modernity, Farnham, 2014. On the early middle ages, see for instance: E.J. Martin, A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy, London, 1930; Brown, 1973; A. Grabar, L'iconoclasme byzantine. Dossier archéologique, Paris, 1957; A. Bryer and J. Herrin (eds.), Iconoclasm, Birmingham, 1975; C. Barber, Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm, Princeton, 2002; T. Noble, Images, Iconoclasm and the Carolingians, Philadelphia, 2009; L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, Byzantium in the Iconoclastic Era, c. 680-850: A History, Cambridge, 2011; L. Brubaker, Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm, London, 2012; J. Elsner, 'Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium', The Art Bulletin 94 (2012) 369-95. On the Reformation, see e.g.: J. Phillips, The Reformation of Images, Berkeley, 1973; N. Schnitzler, Ikonoklasmus--Bildersturm : theologischer Bilderstreit und ikonoklastisches Handeln während des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts, Munich, 1976 ; C. Christensen, Art and the Reformation in Germany, Athens Ohio, 1979, 23-35; C. Eire, War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin, Cambridge, 1986; M. Aston, England's Iconcolasts, Oxford, 1988, 62-219; D. Freedberg, The Power of Images, Chicago, 1989, 378-428; H. Feld, Die Ikonoklasmus des Westens, Leiden, 1990, 118-92; L. Palmer Wandel, Voracious Idols and Violent Hands Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg and Basel, Cambridge, 1994; J. Koerner, The Reformation of the Image, London, 2004.

[2] See (with bibliography) http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=466397&partId=1.

[3] See J. Elsner, 'Iconoclasm and the Preservation of Memory' in R. Nelson and M. Olin (eds.) Monuments and Memory: Made and Unmade, Chicago, 2003, 209-31, esp. 212-4.

[4] See Elsner, 2003, 214.

[5] On *damnatio memoriae* in Greece, see R. Ross Holloway, 'The Mutilation of Statuary in Classical Greece' in R. Ross Holloway (ed.), Miscellanea Mediterranea, Providence, R.I, 2000, 77-82; in Rome see F. Vittinghoff, Der Staatfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Untersuchungen zur 'damnatio memoriae', Berlin, 1936; P. Stewart, 'The Destruction of Statues in Late Antiquity' in R. Miles (ed.), Constructing Identitites in Late Antiquity, London, 1999, 159-89; V. Huet, 'Images et *damnatio memoriae*' Cahiers Glotz 15 (2004) 237-53; S. Benoist and A. Daguet-Gagey (eds.) Mémoire et histoire: Les procedures de condamnation dans l'Antiquité romaine, Metz, 2007; S. Benoist and A. Daguet-Gagey (eds.) Un discours en images de la condamnation de mémoire, Metz, 2008; L. Hackworth Petersen, 'The Presence of *Damnatio Memoriae* in Roman Art' Source: Notes in the History of Art 30 (2011) 1-8.

[6] For instance the Hellenistic inscription from Delphi discussed by Elsner, 2012, at 371. For late antiquity, see esp. C. Hedrick, History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity, Austin, Texas, 2000.

[7] See R.R.R. Smith, 'Defacing the Gods at Aphrodisias' in B. Dignas and R.R.R. Smith (eds.), Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World, Oxford, 2012, 283-326.

[8] See e.g. J. O'Malley, 'Art, Trent and Michelangelo's "Last Judgment"', Religions 3 (2012) 344-56, esp. 353-5 and J. O'Malley, 'The Council of Trent (1545–63) and Michelangelo's Last Judgment (1541)', Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 156 (2012) 388-397.

[9] For the events, see e.g. C. Haas, Alexandria in Late Antiquity, Baltimore, 1997, 161-4 and J. MacKenzie, The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC-AD 700, New Haven, 2007, 245-8; for images and ancient description on a papyrus variously dated between the fifth and the eighth century, but if late then likely dependent on earlier versions, see A. Bauer and J. Strzygowski, Eine Alexandrinische Weltchronik, Vienna, 1905.

[10] On the discursive nature of iconoclasm, see Elsner, 2012.

[11] For some good discussions of underlying issues in relation to Byzantine iconoclasm, see e.g. P. Brown, 'A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy' English Historical Review 88 (1973) 1-34 and P. Henry, 'What Was the Iconoclastic Controversy About?' Church History 45 (1976) 16-31.

[12] On portraits, see E. Varner, Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture, Leiden, 2004.
[13] On might cite Germany at the fall of the DDR (with e.g. C. Nielsen, Gestures of Iconoclasm; East Berlin's Political Monuments from the late GDR to Postunification Berlin, University of Chicago PhD thesis, 2010) or post-Saddam Iraq or the Taliban at Baniyan (with F.B. Flood, 'Between Cult and Culture: *Bamiyan*, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum', The Art Bulletin 84 (2002) 641-59).
[14] On snuff movies, see e.g. D. Kerekes and D. Slater. Killing for Culture: Death Film from Mondo to Snuff, London, 1996.
[15] See M.-F. Auzépy, 'La destruction de l'icône du Christ de la Chalcé par Léon III: Propagande ou réalité?' Byzantion 60 (1990) 445-92 which reviews the documentary evidence; also Brubaker and Haldon, 2011, 128-35.

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