

# Isis's destruction of Palmyra: 'The heart has been ripped out of the city'

Isis is destroying the 'Venice of the sands' piece by piece - and worse atrocities may be yet to come. Will the brutal organisation erase the memory of Syria's extraordinary history? Plus, Robin Yassin-Kassab assesses the impact on the nation

**Stuart Jeffries**

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**A**t length we stood on the end of the col and looked over Palmyra," wrote the British traveller, archaeologist and poet Gertrude Bell on 20 May 1900. "I wonder if the wide world presents a more singular landscape. It is a mass of columns, ranged into long avenues, grouped into temples, lying broken on the sand or pointing one long solitary finger to Heaven. Beyond them is the immense Temple of Baal; the modern town is built inside it and its rows of columns rise out of a mass of mud roofs. And beyond, all is the desert, sand and white stretches of salt and sand again, with the dust clouds whirling over it and the Euphrates 5 days away. It looks like the white skeleton of a town, standing knee deep in the blown sand."

Bell, the so-called Queen of the Desert - whom Nicole Kidman plays in a new film directed by Werner Herzog - was entranced by what she saw. She wrote that "the stone used here is a beautiful white limestone that looks like marble and weathers a golden yellow like the Acropolis". As she rode on a camel into town, she passed the "famous Palmyrene tombs", "great stone towers, 4 stories [sic] high, some more ruined and some less, standing together in groups or bordering the road ... Except Petra, Palmyra is the loveliest thing I have seen in this country."

Bell was admiring what has become known as the Venice of the Sands, the ruins of an ancient city that, between the first and third centuries AD, rose in splendour as an oasis of date palms and gardens in the Syrian desert, sometimes independent and at other times under the control of Rome, and which, for 1,500 years, remained one of the best preserved sites from antiquity.

Later scholars have gone further than Bell in praising the city. "Among the great cities of antiquity, Palmyra is comparable only to Petra in Jordan, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and the Athenian Acropolis in Greece," argues GW Bowersock, professor emeritus of ancient history at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

But, since Monday, the view Bell savoured no longer exists. The splendour Prof

Bowersock hymned is fast disappearing. Ancient Palmyra is, seemingly, turning Ozymandian and being integrated with the surrounding desert as the buildings that made it worthy of being a Unesco heritage site are reduced to rubble. On Monday evening, after comparing satellite images taken before and after an explosion in Palmyra, Unitar, the UN training and research agency, confirmed the destruction of the main Temple of Bel (also known as Baal or Ba'al) and a row of columns nearby.

Ross Burns, adjunct professor of ancient history at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and author of two works on the archaeology and history of Syria, explains what the world has lost. "This is one of the most important of the great temple sites of the Roman eastern provinces. The central shrine, or cella, stood in an enormous colonnaded courtyard. The shrine itself was also surrounded by a columned portico on all sides and was blown up with great proficiency ... The only part that appears to be standing is the remarkable western doorway into the shrine, which was a spectacular entry with a richly decorated frame that sloped inwards as it rose in an Egyptian-influenced style."

Burns says the temple's shrine and courtyard were relatively large, reflecting the early Roman period's tradition of enormous pilgrimage complexes, including the original Temple of Jupiter in Damascus, its even larger counterpart in Baalbek and the Jerusalem Temple built by Herod the Great. "The Bel temple was the only one of these four to survive in fairly recognisable form. Its loss is a major blow and the building was the most significant in Syria from the Roman period," he says.

Not just significant, but beautiful. Syrian antiquities director Maamoun Abdulkarim said earlier this week: "The Temple of Bel was the most beautiful symbol of all of Syria. It was the most beautiful place to visit." The temple was built 2,000 years ago and was the best known of the monuments of this ancient city visited by 150,000 tourists each year until war broke out in Syria in 2011. But, as a symbol of polytheism, it was also a glaring target to Isis. The temple was dedicated in AD32 to the god Bel or Ba'al, who was worshipped at Palmyra along with the lunar god Aglibol and the sun god Yarhibol.

The razing of the Temple of Bel was just the latest act of destruction by Isis which seized control of Palmyra in May. In addition to damaging sites in Syria, Isis has destroyed statues, shrines and manuscripts in the Iraqi city of Mosul, and demolished the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud.

But in May, in an interview with an anti-Assad radio station, Abu Laith al-Saoudy, the nom de guerre of the Isis military commander in Palmyra, pledged not to damage the city's historic buildings but only destroy statues. "Concerning the historic city, we will preserve it and it will not be harmed, God willing," he said. "What we will do is break the idols that the infidels used to worship.

"The historic buildings will not be touched and we will not bring bulldozers to destroy them like some people think," he added.

Soon after Isis seized Palmyra, its fighters repurposed one of the city's grand historic

buildings, the majestic Roman theatre, using it as the venue for the execution of nearly two dozen pro-Assad foreign fighters who had been resisting Isis.

There were hopes, then, that - despite the killings and the destruction of statues - much of Palmyra's ruins might survive the stewardship of Isis. But that promise of its military commander in Palmyra was detonated last month when photographs released by Isis showed that Palmyra's second most important temple, the Temple of Baal Shamin (a temple to a Phoenician god and so different from the Temple of Bel, which was devoted to the worship of a Mesopotamian god, explains Burns helpfully), had been dynamited. "It was a small temple," says Burns, "thus easy to explode as the walls were intact, so containing the blast within the structure." Despite its size, the Temple of Baal Shamin had another major significance - it was built in the second century AD, but on a site in use earlier for religious purposes. A column of the front porch recorded that one of its benefactors had helped fund the visit to the city by Emperor Hadrian in AD130, two years before the temple was completed.

So far then, Isis has destroyed two temples, a statue of a lion guardian that had been reconstructed at the entrance gate to the Palmyra Archaeological Museum, and the tombs of two Muslim holy men.

It is worth pointing out that earlier Muslims who have occupied Palmyra didn't see fit to destroy it. Under the Umayyad caliphate that existed in the city in the 7th century AD, part of the temple of Bel was used as a mosque. Isis is erasing, then, not just pre-Islamic culture, but Islamic heritage, too.

In this iconoclasm - literally, the destruction of religious icons and other images or monuments for religious or political motives - Isis has its place in a rich history of destruction. Moses reduced the Golden Calf, made from Israelites' golden earrings, to dust. Centuries later, the 93 carved relief sculptures of the life and miracles of the Virgin Mary in Ely Cathedral's lady chapel, were hacked off during the Reformation. In between Moses and the mutilation of Ely was something called the Iconoclastic controversy in the history of the Eastern or Byzantine Christian church. Between AD726 and 843, the then emperors of Byzantium believed icons were not only a reversion to the pagan idolatry of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but that their existence was the chief obstacle to the conversion to Christianity of Jews and Muslims, to both of whom the image was anathema. Iconoclasm, then, is by no means only an Islamic thing.

As Burns argues, though, there are more important considerations in Syria in 2015 than the preservation of ancient monuments. "The physical damage to monuments has to be assessed against the scale of the human tragedy which has swept over Syria," he says. It's an important caveat: more than 240,000 people have died in Syria's conflict since March 2011. Among the murdered is Khaled al-Asaad, the 81-year-old former director of the world-renowned archaeological site at Palmyra, who was beheaded by Isis in August. His body was hung on a column on one of the city's colonnaded streets.

Important, too, is the likelihood that Palmyra is being destroyed not only for iconoclastic

religious reasons, but also to supply loot for the black market. Indeed, one suspected reason for Khaled al-Asaad's murder is that he would not, even under torture, give details of the whereabouts of valuable antiquities. "One hesitates to hand Isis a target list by identifying others," says Burns.

Another motive behind the destruction is publicity. Footage of murders isn't as viewer-friendly as that of blown-up temples. As a result, to write about the fate of Palmyra is a questionable business: it risks encouraging Isis to commit more media-friendly outrages; to ignore it, though, is to collude with Isis in its erasure of history and memory. "Without the Temple of Bel, it is much more difficult to understand the mix of cultures that made up this extraordinary civilisation on the fringes of Rome's empire," says Burns. "The heart has been ripped out of this most illustrious of the great caravan cities of the east." Cheikhmous Ali, of the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archeology, regards Isis's actions as "a way to pressure and torture the local population - to suppress their history and their collective memory".

One reason that Palmyra matters perhaps - apart from the distress its destruction causes in anyone with a sense of beauty or concern for human history - is that its very architecture was a creative meeting of west and east, and so serves as inspiration to us in 2015, a time when some seek to make such cross-cultural dialogues impossible. As Charles Gates notes in *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome*, the Temple of Bel showed a remarkable synthesis of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman architecture.

More important than what ancient Palmyra and its obliteration means to western travellers, archaeologists and historians is what Palmyra signifies locally. Not so long ago, rebels in Palmyra proudly proclaimed that they were the "grandchildren of Zenobia", expressing their fidelity with the city's extraordinary third-century queen. She was an independent, cultured woman who challenged the power of Rome and established a salon in Palmyra of leading intellectuals. She led an army into Egypt and, Bowersock relates, set herself up for a while as Cleopatra's successor, though she was ultimately taken as a captive to Rome. And yet she remained inspiring in the Arab tradition, where she is known as Bat Zabbai.

Bowersock writes: "It is moving to read in the first guidebook to Palmyra ever published by the Syrians, in 1966, that the images evoked by the objects at the newly built museum there 'form a chain of our great Arab national heritage'. That great chain is being broken link by link."

Burns fears worse is to come: "Now that Isis is moving into the western parts of Syria, where the majority of the country's most spectacular sites are located, it is opening a new front in a war whose consequences for the people of Syria have long exceeded the level of tragedy to become a catastrophe."

As for Palmyra, are the losses irretrievable or might the city's main buildings be reconstructed at some point, I ask Burns. It would not be impossible, he says. He points

to Syria's impressive record in reconstruction, and its nurturing of the stonemason's craft. What's more, detailed drawings by Swiss, French and Syrian experts have been made since the 1930s. "Reconstruction would be slow and would have to be painstaking, but it is not impossible. The Parthenon comes to mind in this context - and that has taken quite a few centuries." (Time, wars and thefts reduced much of the 2,500-year-old Parthenon on top of Athens' Acropolis to very nearly rubble, but, in 1975, the Greek government started a reconstruction project that still continues to this day.

Mike Pitts, editor of *British Archaeology*, says that Palmyra could be rebuilt to look at least superficially like the original. But he adds: "I think that would be wrong. Isis will one day be history. Palmyra will be its permanent lesson, about the darkness into which oppression, ignorance and corruption can sink. To over-restore the ruins would be to create a fiction, denying the tragedy and devaluing what had genuinely survived." Instead, he calls for new research, leading to partial restoration and a better understanding and public appreciation of the site. "We cannot predict what Isis will yet do. But it is likely that in terms of what we can learn about the people who created Palmyra, there will still be a lot left. Archaeology is a science of forensic detection, of making tiny things tell big stories. I would expect archaeologists to be able to recover a surprising amount of information. We will need to celebrate Palmyra."

Pitts even sounds a cautious note of optimism. "Isis has chastised archaeologists for digging up the past. Yet it cannot stop that happening. And no amount of physical destruction can remove the knowledge of mixed cultures, creative thinking and love of beauty that bequeathed a desert ruin. In the face of heritage, at the end of the day Isis is powerless."

### **'This is a rupture for Syria'**

*Novelist Robin Yassin-Kassab assesses what the destruction means for the country*

In the course of the past two weeks of its Syrian rampage, Isis has bulldozed the 1,600-year-old monastery of Mar Elian in al-Qaryatain and blown up the 2,000-year-old temples of Baal Shamin and Bel in Palmyra.

Syria's heritage illustrates the history of civilisation from the Sumerians of 4000BC to the end of Ottoman control in 1918. Its universal significance provoked the leading French archeologist André Parrot's comment: "Every person has two homelands ... His own and Syria." For Syrians themselves, these sites provided a palpable link to the past and, it seemed, to the future too, for they once assumed that their distant descendants would also marvel at them. Such monuments were references held in common, regardless of sect or politics. Like Stonehenge or Westminster Abbey, they provided a focus for nationalist pride and belonging. Naturally, they would have been central to any future tourism industry. Now they are vanishing.

The potential future looked very different until very recently. The popular revolution of 2011 announced a new age of civic activism and fearless creativity, but the regime's savage repression led inevitably to the revolution's militarisation, and then war.

President Assad's scorched earth policy - artillery barrages, barrel bombs and starvation sieges on residential neighbourhoods - has displaced more than half the population. Four million people have fled Syria, subsisting in the most dire conditions. Traumatization, the world's failure to properly arm the Free Army, and the west's refusal to act when Assad used sarin gas, handed the reins to various Islamists.

Four years in, Syria is prey to division, nihilism and competing totalitarianisms. A third of the country is split between Kurds, the Free Army and either moderate or extreme Islamic-nationalist groups. The rest is divided between what leftist intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh calls "bearded" and "necktie" fascism. With the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, in which the great powers decided how to divide the lands of the crumbling Ottoman empire, Syria's borders were redrawn by imperialists to manifest an inherently unjust order; today's partition scenarios look even worse.

Isis - the bearded fascists - control about half the land, though much of this is desert. Its assault on Syrian culture fits its anti-national ideology. "Syria is not for the Syrians," says Isis "caliph" Abu Bakr -al-Baghdadi, "and Iraq is not for the Iraqis."

As for the "necktie" - Bashaar al-Assad controls 17% of the land, and almost half of the remaining population. Though his rhetoric is nationalist (and sectarian), his forces have destroyed national infrastructure and heritage including the historic mosques in Aleppo and Deraa. Running low on Syrian manpower, Assad's war effort is increasingly managed by Iran, another power pushing for partition. In recent negotiations over the besieged town of Zabadani, Iran demanded a Sunni-Shia population exchange. It seems Assad and the Iranians aim to retrench in an area stretching from the coast through Homs along the Lebanese border to Damascus - their version of what the French occupiers called "la Syrie utile". The cleansing of strategic zones - currently Zabadani and the Damascus suburbs - is part of this plan.

The land under Syrian feet is dissolving. The latest destruction symbolises a total rupture with the country's past and presumed future. A people who dared to demand freedom received annihilation instead.

*Robin Yassin-Kassab is the author of [The Road from Damascus](#), a novel. He is co-author with Leila al-Shami of the forthcoming book on the Syrian revolution and war [Burning Country](#) (Pluto January 2016). He co-edits [www.pulsemedia.org](http://www.pulsemedia.org) and blogs at [www.qunfuz.com](http://www.qunfuz.com)*

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