

Sensationalization of Damage to Cultural Sites

It may be unequivocally agreed upon that the loss of cultural property is a tragic affliction upon ancient communities and their modern-day descendants, but in a left-shifting world, do we overprioritize preservation of cultural sites? The debate over the nature of acts responsible for destruction of heritage property is highly contentious. Part of the issue seems to be the stigma around the concept of damage to historic locations; many seem to immediately associate it with violent shows of political dominance and attempts to wreak havoc upon societal stability. Current tensions between the United States and Iran likely come to mind; editorialists for many prominent American media outlets have spoken out to denounce the American president's online threats against Iranian cultural sites as forecasts for aggrievous war crimes¹. Yet, before coming to such alarming conclusions, perhaps we ought to educate ourselves on the true parameters of said deed.

As defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross, a war crime is a serious violation of the international humanitarian law - universally recognized rules which mandate permissible and forbidden acts during political conflict². Fundamentally based upon guidelines detailed in the Geneva Convention, the only rule of war which could possibly relate to destruction of cultural sites, is that military forces must avoid destroying anything essential to civilian survival². It is a ludicrously extreme stance to claim that cultural sites can in any way be essential to survival. Important to quality-of-life and dignity of collective identity, certainly - but not a basic physiological or psychological need. Thus, we have already proved that destroying them cannot constitute a war crime. Yet, in a philosophical context, we might choose to define war crime more broadly as any nefariously-intended act with deleterious effects on people of a rival nation. Even so, because destruction of cultural sites does not result exclusively from deliberate political conflict, it is both inaccurate and unfair to brand and shame it with the label of "war crime." Destruction rarely originates from benevolence, and we who do not outright condemn it would be heinous to forgive or dismiss it leniently. However, the destruction of a cultural site cannot always be exclusively considered as a war crime; it may very well be the consequence of nonpolitical factors such as negligence, ignorance and greed.

Although it does not make for so fantastic a headline, slow deterioration in the absence of proper care and attention is a far more palpable threat to the existence of historical artifacts and locations than intentional desecration could ever be. The many African and Asian artifacts currently being stored in Berlin's state museums³ can attest to this painful truth. As they await display in the brand-new Humboldt Forum, disorganization and outdated storage facilities mean that these precious artifacts waste away at this very moment. All the same, Germany's culture authorities have committed to repatriating the objects to their homelands³ as a way to amend the past wrongs of colonialism. This is just one example of how lack of resources, knowledge and organization - ultimately leading to neglect - is often the guilty party for the destruction of cultural sites. So now, the question which begs to be posed, is whether we can criminalize a

group for *inaction*? Somehow, does Germany's lack of funding and capacity for proper care of cultural property, translate to nefarious hidden intentions to rob the peoples of Africa and Asia of their cultural identity and sovereignty? The trend towards political correctness and cultural sensitivity often backfires in this sense; in blind defense of one group, we create and unfairly attack a perceived enemy, accusing them of extreme offenses such as war crimes.

The witch hunt does not stop there; now we must consider wrongdoing bred by ignorance, and whether we expect people to be accountable for the "wars" they never knew they had waged. Those unaware of a site's cultural or historical significance may unwittingly damage it, and people of ancient civilizations would be scandalized to learn that their direct descendants are the most common culprits. It is human nature to covet advancement, and in our reveries of a perfect future, crumbling relics from the past only present an eyesore. Denied requisite structural maintenance for years, the fall of a vaulted gallery of Rome's Domus Aurea in spring of 2010⁴ serves as a prime example. Salvo Barrano, vice president of Italy's Association of National Archaeologists⁴, assigns accountability to municipal politicians who, unversed in ancient architecture, favour investing in modern infrastructure before attending to the upkeep of historical sites. Materialistic ambition and a lack of appreciation for cultural heritage, although disgraceful, are not threats to humanity.

Then we have those who are aware of the implications of their actions, but whose greed is stronger than their respect for cultural heritage. Tomb-raiders, robbers, smugglers - we could identify them as enemies of human decency, but even the most capable histrionic would struggle to characterize them militants. We might recall the events of October 2018, where hundreds of arrests were made in the Shanxi Province of China, all related to a large-scale tomb raiding and smuggling operation⁵. Over 5 000 artifacts were recovered⁵, but many remain unaccounted for, and still more are lost to overseas smuggling. The issue, unfortunately, is no recent plague upon China's historical artifacts. Those with little morals - or little choice - often choose to disregard the sanctity of cultural legacy most atrociously if monetary gain becomes an option. Yet, the common motif of today's discussion appears once again: none of this damage is politically executed. As repulsive as avarice may be, it still fails to resemble a war crime or a human rights violation.

Demonstrated through multiple given contexts, those truly committed to accuracy and truth will refuse to recognize destruction of cultural sites as war crimes. When it results from some less urgent factor such as negligence, ignorance or greed, then the highly contentious act which we have discussed today cannot be labelled as a political transgression. By sensationalizing such events, a discredit is done to the true war crimes. I have assumed a highly controversial stance which may be mistaken as marginalizing, but in reality, objectivity and pragmatism are the only approaches with which we can effectively respond to incidents which threaten the preservation of global cultures.

Bibliography

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