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Author(s): R. Stephen Humphreys

Source: *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* , Summer 2002, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2002), pp. 1-8

Published by: Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA)

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23063229

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The Destruction of Cultural Memory

(2001 Presidential Address)

R. STEPHEN HUMPHREYS

IN A WORLD SO STRICKEN BY TRAGIC EVENTS AS OURS, and in a field of studies so closely touched by these tragedies, it may seem odd to use a presidential address to reflect on the loss of objects made of bronze or stone or paper. But that is what I have chosen to do in this essay, not as a medievalist who has forgotten just where and when he lives, but as a scholar who believes that memory is essential to our lives as human beings. Without authentic memories of our own, we literally cannot know who we are, where we came from, to whom we are connected. We are nothing, or more accurately, we are only what other people tell us we are. In a very real sense, we exist only as products of the imagination of others, an imagination benevolent or malicious as the case may be, but an imagination which we cannot control or even understand.

Memory floats in the mind, but it is fixed and secured by objects. Collective memories, the memories generated and shared by a society, are anchored in the products of culture. These products may well be works of nature—a sacred mountain, for example—but more often they are human contrivances: works of art or poetry or music. These are the things, broadly shared among a community, that allow a people to know that they are a people. They are also the things that visibly (or audibly) set them apart from others. When they are destroyed or effaced or forgotten, cultural identities and social boundaries disappear along with them. This is not necessarily a bad thing, of course—who among us regrets the dynamiting of Hitler's Reichskanzlei by Soviet troops in May 1945?—but it is always a grave matter. Apart from its impact on a particular community, it represents an irreparable loss in our collective human knowledge of who we are and the tortuous paths we have taken.

What I hope to do in this essay, then, is to examine the destruction of cultural memory, not simply in order to mourn it—though there is much to mourn—but rather in order to ask what this process means for us as human beings.

We have to begin, I think, with the truism that not everything can be saved or ought to be. Change is after all the one constant in human life, and change very often means disposing of what is already here and replacing it with something new and different. We cannot be confined forever within the worlds created by our parents. And it would be a fine irony if we were prevented from creating memories for ourselves out of misplaced piety before the legacy of the past. What intrigues me is less the process of forgetting or eroding the past than our own, very contemporary response to it. For sometimes we look on with ironic and even amused detachment, like so many modern-day Edward Gibbons contemplating the triumph of religion and barbarism. At other moments our sympathies are actively engaged, and almost against our will we find ourselves committed partisans in conflicts that no longer concern us in any tangible way. Nor is it always a question of how near or remote in space, time, or cultural affinity an event may be. For me, the defacing of the elegant Greek-inflected reliefs at the Temple of Philae, at the hands of the very people who had worshipped so ardently at temples of this kind over so many scores of genera-

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tions, is still a bit of a shock, 1600 years too late to do anything about it. In a different realm, the loss of so much of France's heritage of medieval religious art in the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion and then again in the French Revolution, provokes dark reflections on the malicious vandalism of our species.

But both Philae and (citing one example to stand for a hundred) Sainte Chapelle present an intriguing paradox to historical understanding, for both were looted and defaced by the very people (or properly, the descendants of the people) who had originally built and adorned them. In that way, the construction, the pillage, and the abandonment of such monuments are simply the physical embodiment of the social and cultural processes by which those societies reshaped themselves over many centuries. If monuments and artifacts had been preserved perfect and pristine, they would have little to tell us. They would be, not witnesses to the past, but museum pieces shorn of all connection to time and place. The sadness and regret that one must feel about the damage suffered by such exquisite artistic achievements is perhaps tempered by the recognition that much of their remarkable power to evoke a distant past lies precisely in that damage. That is why modern replicas, however exact, or over-restored monuments, however meticulously carried out, seem so flat, trivial, and unrevealing. Time and humanity have been scrubbed out of them.

There can be no such mixed emotions, however, when we are dealing with those who have deliberately set out to destroy the heritage and thereby the memories of others. Such acts are not genocide in a strict sense, though often enough they accompany genocide, but they are consciously aimed at erasing a society's sense of itself and recasting that society in the image and for the purposes of another. It is no mere figure of speech to call such destruction a criminal act. And though as historians we are obliged to understand and explain as well as we can, as human beings we are also compelled to deplore it. Condemnation is not merely moral outrage, but flows from a deep sadness—a sadness occasioned by the knowledge that we ourselves, or perhaps our own revered ancestors, have engaged in similar acts, and also by the foreboding that at some point, we do not know when, a similar destruction will be visited on our own legacy.

Of such purposeful destruction we can find countless examples, at all periods and among all cultures. A relatively recent example will do by way of illustration. In 1943, an attack on German forces by Italian partisans induced a German military officer to offer his unhappy Italian hosts a choice: systematic reprisals or the systematic destruction of the Archivio di Stato di Napoli. Obviously there was no choice, and a trove of documents comparable to the Venetian archives was consigned to the flames.[1] This was perhaps the least of all the crimes committed by the Nazis, and yet it remains breathtaking in the sheer malice and contempt it displays to a defeated and occupied people. In the end there was a kind of rough justice in this event, since the materials destroyed included most of the Italian documentation on the Emperor Frederick II, whom the Nazis fondly regarded as a heroic incarnation of the spirit of the German nation. But justice or no, the documents are gone, Sicily and the Mezzogiorno have been

[1] David Abulafia, *Frederick II, a Medieval Emperor* (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 321-22.

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stripped of a substantial part of their past, and we all are impoverished with them.

This kind of attack on one's enemies (or in this case, on despised former allies) hardly surprises us. Defeated foes have always been subject to a systematic *damnatio memoriae*, along with a public and highly ritualized destruction of the works of architecture and art which had symbolized their power, wealth, and prestige. Only rarely is there some impulse to preserve these things, and even then it is done largely to symbolize the triumph of a new dispensation. In this regard, perhaps we should be grateful to the Christian monarchs who led the Spanish Reconquista between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, for they not only preserved many of the grandest and most characteristic Muslim monuments, but continued to define the symbols of Spanish Christian kingship largely through the forms and motifs of Andalusian Muslim art. Their Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabel, unrelenting in so many things, nevertheless recognized the unique value of the Alhambra, for nothing else could so convincingly demonstrate the victory of Christian truth over infidel error. As a Morisco counselor reminded their obstinate great-grandson, Philip II, himself already far removed in time and sensibility from any direct contact with Arab-Muslim culture: "[The Catholic Monarchs] sustained the rich palaces of the Alhambra...as they were in the time of the Muslim kings, in order always to manifest their power through the memory of the triumph of its conquerors."[1] There are other such cases, to be sure, each with a distinct flavor of its own. For example, we might recall the colossal irony of the Bolsheviks enclosing themselves for seven decades in the fortress of the Czars, even as they did everything in their power to eradicate the country's imperial and Orthodox past. But a willingness to preserve the achievements of others, if only to bend them to serve our own purposes, is all too rare a thing.

Is there any constructive response to all this? We may mourn the inexorable work of fire, flood, and earthquake, and deplore what seems the ineradicable violence in human nature, but we cannot rid ourselves of these things. One possible response, and the most common one, is simply to accept what we must, even as we lament its effects. Indeed, one of the oldest themes in literature is mourning the losses of time—a theme readily engaged by the contemplation of the ruins of majestic monuments. A particularly eloquent example (at least for those who have a taste for Renaissance rhetoric at its most florid) is furnished by the fifteenth-century Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini as he stood on the Capitoline hill overlooking the heart of ancient Rome:

> Her primeval state, such as she might appear in a remote age, when Evander entertained the stranger of Troy, has been delineated by the fancy of Virgil. This Tarpeian rock was then a savage and solitary thicket; in the time of the poet, it was crowned with the golden roofs of a temple; the temple is overthrown, the gold has been pillaged, the wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution, and the sacred ground is again disfigured with thorns and brambles....Cast your eyes on the Palatine Hill, and among the shapeless and enormous fragments, try to find the marble theatre, the obelisks, the colossal statues, the porticoes of Nero's palace....The forum of the Roman people...is now thrown open for the

[1] Peggy Liss, *Isabel the Queen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 258

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> reception of swine and buffaloes. The public and private edifices, that were founded for eternity, lie prostrate, naked, and broken, like the limbs of a mighty giant; and the ruin is the more visible, from the stupendous relics that have survived the injuries of time and fortune.[1]

Poggio's reflections are suffused with poetic melancholy, and they are superbly visual; they paint a picture which any Baroque master might envy. But though they recall a distant past and describe the ruins of the city in minute detail, they have no historical content. Poggio sees no organic connection between the ruins of Rome and his own time. He assumes a vast, unbridgeable gulf between past and present, and takes for granted that what is gone can in no way be recovered or restored. It is Edward Gibbon, at once the most coolly ironic and the most romantic of men, who finds the vital link between a lost past and the present, and thereby transforms nostalgia into history. Most of us are familiar with the famous statement in his autobiography: "It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amid the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind."[2]

Evocative as these lines may be, they were written in 1790, a quarter-century after the event. Even more revealing is a letter to his father dated 9 October 1764, describing his very first impressions of the city:

> I am now Dear Sir at Rome. If it was difficult before to give you...any account of what I saw it is almost impossible here....I am really almost in a dream. Whatever ideas books may have given us of the greatness of that people, their accounts of the most flourishing state of Rome fall infinitely short of the picture of its ruins. I am convinced there never existed such a nation and I hope for the happiness of mankind there never will again.[3]

These brief remarks reveal a major shift in mentality, for the ruined monuments of the past are no longer merely an occasion for meditation, but require explanation of the processes by which they fell into ruin. They can be understood as the products of a complex historical process, and that process is intelligible and important. We often forget that the last chapter of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is devoted to a meticulous analysis of the transformation of the city of Rome, as it slowly degenerated from the splendid imperial capital of the Antonine emperors to the half-ruined eighteenth-century city of the popes. Nor was this transformation due to the impersonal workings of time, but rather to human agency.

It is only a short step from Gibbon's active engagement to an urge to preserve, restore, and where necessary recreate the past. This tendency, sporadically visible among the antiquarians of the eighteenth century, took wing with the Romantic nationalism of the post-Napoleonic era. It began in France in the circle of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-79), but soon spread to Germany, Eng-

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[1] Poggio, "Historiae de varietate fortunae," cited in Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Wormersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), vol. 3, pp. 1062-3 (Ch. 71).

[2] Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography*, ed. Dero A. Saunders (New York: Meridian, 1961), p. 154.

[3] Edward Gibbon, *Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton (4 vols., London: Cassell, 1956), vol. 1, p. 184.

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land, and then Italy. It found a home even further afield, with the Khedive Isma'il, who by no accident was the most francophile of nineteenth-century Middle Eastern rulers. By the 1860s, the Service des Antiquités under Auguste Mariette was taking steps to preserve Egypt's Pharaonic heritage, and for the Islamic monuments (though to a far lesser degree) the famous Comité de Conservation des Monuments Arabes followed soon thereafter, in 1881.[1] We often look back with scorn, even with dismay, on the work of these first generations. Certainly it is true that Viollet-le-Duc, to take the most famous or notorious among them, was often guided more by enthusiasm for an imaginary Gothic ideal than by the sober scrutiny of real monuments. But new movements breed great enthusiasms; sobriety sets in soon enough.

When the movement to recover and restore the past began, it was almost always as part of a nationalist project. And of course this has remained the case down to our time. The new states which emerged in the Middle East after World War I found the monuments of the remote past to be an essential element in their emerging national mythologies. Thus, Republican Turkey discovered an affinity with the Hittites, Iraq with the Assyrians and Babylonians, Pahlavi Iran with the Achaemenids. Of Israel's obsession with archaeology we need hardly speak. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, a new ethos had begun to emerge alongside the nationalist one. There was an increasing concern to respect the works of other peoples and cultures, even when these cultures were remote and little known. After World War II this concern became, perhaps for the first time, truly global, and was institutionalized in UNESCO, important not only because of its mission to preserve and enhance the world's cultural heritage, but also because it demonstrated a solemn international commitment to that end and provided a permanent structure by which to pursue it.

So it might seem that mankind had finally learned how to transcend its ancient instincts of wanton or malicious destruction, how to value and learn from the cultural achievements of others, how indeed to incorporate these things into a more universal sense of social and cultural identity. And as multiculturalism moved from a frame of mind to a movement to at least a proto-ideology, we might have hoped that this victory had been firmly and permanently secured. But the 1990s, if nothing else, have taught us how fragile and momentary are our victories over the common barbarism of mankind. We seem still to be the same reckless and destructive creatures we have always been.

By now, you will have noticed that throughout this essay, the Middle East has entered in only in passing; it has simply provided a few examples among many. This does not represent a memory lapse, a failure to remember for whom I am writing or for what purpose. Rather, I have wanted us to view in the broadest possible sense the things that have been done to Muslims—and, one must admit, by them—in recent decades. It might be useful for us to close with some thoughts not only on spectacular acts of cultural destruction, but also on certain subtler but in some ways even more damaging transformations. Under the first category, one thinks of the razing of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, or—a far greater loss to our cultural patrimony—the systematic destruction of the Ottoman (and post-Ottoman) heritage in Bosnia, largely though not entirely at the hands of

[1] I owe this reference to Professor Irene Bierman, University of California, Los Angeles.

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Serbian forces during the civil war of 1992-93. Even to mention a few items in this list is profoundly depressing: the burning of the Bosnian National Library in Sarajevo, the dynamiting of countless mosques, including both masterpieces of imperial architecture and more modest regional designs, and the bombardment of bridges and whole neighborhoods simply because of their historical associations. So far as I can tell, we have lost almost all the vast architectural legacy created in his homeland by the most prominent Bosnian politician of the sixteenth (or any) century, the grand vizier Sokollu Mehmet Pasha.[1] On the Muslim side, we have most recently and notoriously the dynamiting of the Buddhist colossi at Bamyan in March 2001. Less widely noted, but no less tragic, was the wholesale smashing and looting of the priceless and utterly irreplaceable collections of the National Museum in Kabul.

In the category of destruction masquerading as restoration, we witness what might be called the Disneyfication of the ruins of Babylon, with the irony that anyone who wants to get some idea what the Ishtar Gate might have looked like now must go to the Pergamon-Museum in Berlin to find out. In Damascus, the Ottoman-era streets south of the Umayyad Mosque and the Midan outside the Citadel have been cleared—not great architecture, to be sure, but still two very characteristic popular quarters now replaced by empty space. Or finally, on quite a different plane, there is the alarming spread of white marble among the Fatimid monuments of Cairo, and indeed a rather wholesale reshaping of these monuments.[2]

The first set of acts appears to belong to the too-familiar category of eradicating the achievements of your enemies, but in each case there is a peculiar twist. The destruction of Muslim monuments, and of buildings which housed (among a multitude of other things) the historical memory of Bosnian Muslims, was part of the whole 'ethnic cleansing' project. These acts were not directed at the Ottomans, who were the builders of the monuments or the compilers of the priceless Turkish documents, for they after all had departed more than a century earlier, in 1878. Rather, it was aimed at the existing (and largely Slavic) Muslim presence in Bosnia and indeed in all of southeastern Europe. A Croatian militiaman explained the destruction of the city of Mostar with perfect clarity: "It is not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims; the relics must also be destroyed."[3] The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, more or less ignored both by Hindus and Muslims for centuries, was caught up in the wave of Hindu nationalism in India which has reduced if not eliminated the secularist orientation of Nehru and his immediate

[1] See a lengthy discussion of these events by Andras Riedlmayer (bibliographer for the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at Harvard University), delivered as a public lecture in 1994. "Bosnia's Multi-Cultural heritage and its destruction" [www.kakarigi.net/manu/ceip2.htm].

[2] Paula Sanders, "Bohra architecture and the restoration of Fatimid culture," in *L'Egypte fatimide, son art et son histoire*, ed. Marianne Barrucand (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Nov. 1999), pp. 159-65. At greater length: Sanders, "The contest over context: Fatimid Cairo in the twentieth century," in *Text and Context: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Levi Della Vida Conference*, ed. Irene Bierman (forthcoming).

[3] Riedlmayer lecture, p. 10.

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heirs.[1] The fate of the Buddhist colossi at Bamyan is far odder, since no Buddhists have lived in that region (or anywhere in Central Asia and Pakistan) for centuries. If we are to believe the words of Mullah Muhammad 'Umar, it was not even provoked by feelings of personal enmity or revulsion. It was a matter of pure religious principle—the need to purge the land of even the vestiges of idolatry. To most outsiders, of course, an act of principle seemed ignorant fanaticism. And to historians of Inner Asia, steeped in the vast sweep of cultures and religions and peoples that have mingled there over so many millennia, it was a brutish campaign to eradicate the still impressive though slowly eroding traces of a religion and culture that once had reached from Japan to the eastern frontiers of Iran, and north across the Gobi and Takla Makan to Mongolia and Manchuria. Buddhism thus fades bit by bit from a dynamic living tradition, to a memory preserved by the statues of Bamyan and the cave shrines of Binglingsi and Dunhuang, to the arid words of historians, the last and perhaps the poorest of the vessels of our memory.

In the case of the transformation of monuments, these are not meant to eradicate the past; they represent an effort simply to turn it to contemporary purposes and tastes. The work of the Bohras in Cairo is surely the most innocent. To the eyes of many, the courtyard of the redone al-Azhar may seem garish, and the al-Aqmar Mosque simply strange. But there is no doubt that the Bohras are, religiously speaking, legitimate heirs of the Fatimids. In a certain sense, the Fatimid monuments represent their heritage, and morally they are free to do with it as they will. Babylon and Damascus are rather a different matter, since they represent a massive intervention by the modern state for a variety of ideological and pragmatic purposes. Here we run into a long-running debate between two sets of values, which can be reconciled with patience and good will, but seldom are. The first set of values states that a government carries the primary responsible for its cultural patrimony—in this case, the ruins of Babylon and the old city of Damascus—and that a government has not only the right but the duty to determine the ways in which this patrimony should be preserved and the uses to which it should be put. The second set of values argues that old monuments and works of art should not be preserved in order to glorify the present, but in order to connect the present to an authentic past, to exhibit in concrete form the continuity and change of human life. It is a debate which power and money normally wins.

My comments in this essay have been guided by two general themes: our sense of loss in the face of the inexorable destruction of the records and monuments which embody our memories, and the ways in which historical consciousness can turn that sense of loss to constructive purpose. I would like to close by alluding to a third theme, which time does not permit us to explore, but which opens up important new avenues for thought and action. In statements issued on two successive days in March 2001, the Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, identified the destruction of cultural property as "a crime against culture." On 12 March, he stated that by demolishing the Bamyan Buddhas,

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[1] A lengthy discussion of the event and its political context is in Katherine J. Komenda, "Sojourn through Saffron: The Life of Sadhvi Uma Shri Bharati and the Feminine Heart of Hindutva Religion and Politics in India" (Ph.D diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001), pp. 11-13, 278-81, 369-87.

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> the Taliban have committed a crime against culture. It is abominable to witness the cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, the whole of humanity...The Taliban heeded neither the unprecedented scope of international mobilization, nor the advice against their decision, spontaneously issued by the highest religious authorities of Islam. [1]

The following day, he had occasion to address parallel acts in the former Yugoslavia. In welcoming the International Criminal Tribunal's decision to include the destruction of the historic monuments of Dubrovnik (1991) in its indictment for war crimes, Matsuura stated:

> This sets a historic precedent as it is the first time since the judgements of the Nürnberg and Tokyo tribunals that a crime against cultural property has been sanctioned by an international tribunal. This indictment concerns a breach of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict...which is administered by UNESCO.[2]

These comments by the Director-General raise a host of questions and difficult problems, if only because the imperative needs of the present and future inevitably mean that some monuments of the past—of our cultural memory—will be lost. There simply is not room enough for everything that was, and is, and is to come, to exist simultaneously. But if we regard "crimes against culture" not as crimes against objects, but rather as "crimes against human memory and personal identity," we will have some idea of how to begin to think about this problem. The destruction of monuments and records of the past is never a neutral act; on the contrary, it is morally deeply charged. Such acts have irreversible consequences, and we need to ask in the most serious manner just what those consequences will be, for ourselves and for others. If these objects are lost, will at least the core of our cultural memory remain intact, or will we be deprived of even the little light that our past can shed as we try to make our way through a troubled world?

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[1] "Director-General Condemns Taliban's Crime against Culture," *UNESCO Press* [www.unesco.org/opi/eng/unescopress/2001/01-38e.shtml].
[2] "Director-General Welcomes Tribunal's Indictment on Destruction of Heritage in Dubrovnik," *UNESCO Press* [www.unesco.org/opi/eng/unescopress/2001/01-40e.shtml].

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