Destruction of Cultural Sites: A Historical Analysis

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**Abstract**

Culture is defined as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular notion, people, or other social group. The culture of a society is often regarded by its members as their most prized possession and their greatest asset. However, because of their importance, destruction of cultural sites has become a common weapon of war. Through historical analysis and three-dimensional printing, I examine the destruction of cultural and historical sites in Europe and the Middle East to explore the motives behind the actions of the destroyers, as well as the history that is now lost. Additionally, I analyze possible policy actions that can combat this exponentially growing trend of war.

**Contents**

## Introduction

Philosophers and politicians have provided numerous sentiments with regard to the importance of history. Spanish philosopher George Santayana is credited with the first expression of "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it."[1] While Churchill took the phrase to assert "those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it," he matches Santayana's sentiment conveying the necessity of remembering our history and learning from our successes and failures.[2] However, the growing trend of attacking history and culture in times of war has destroyed hundreds of years of history and thousands of artifacts of cultural property. Cultural destruction began as a tool for invading powers to target large populations or demoralize a group being invaded, but it has become a much larger weapon, systematically deployed to destroy a society's entire culture, and cause a loss of history detrimental to everyone. Furthermore, there are practices in place to combat the destruction of cultural property in warfare, but they have not been effective and are often ignored because of the lack of consequences for invaders.

In order to determine why destruction of cultural property has exponentially risen over the past hundred years, I examine three case studies of well-recorded cultural property destruction events. Due to the destruction of history, there is no way to know for sure how much has been lost, but it is important to examine the threat of cultural destruction in war to predict it and stop it before it happens. An increase in case studies surrounding cultural property destruction and a growing international outcry would allow policymakers to stop the events and preserve history more effectively. If this tactic of war is not stopped, then societies will not be able to remember there past and consequently learn from it.

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[1] "History Repeating." College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. Virginia Tech, January 8, 2019. https://liberalarts.vt.edu/magazine/2017/history-repeating.html.
[2] "Folger Library – Churchill's Shakespeare," International Churchill Society (Folger Library, May 11, 2021), https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/in-the-media/churchill-in-the-news/folger-library-churchills-shakespeare/.

**Literature Review**

**Destruction of Cultural Property**

*What is cultural property?*

The term "cultural property" was first officially defined in Article 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of an Armed Conflict. The definition includes:

(a) movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological site; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above;

(b) buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) such as museums, large libraries and depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter, in the event of armed conflict, the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a);

(c) centres containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as 'centres containing monument'.[3]

The definition was created with the intent to keep it broad in case there are new forms of cultural property after 1954 which would eventually be considered historical.[4] In addition, the definition of the term was further extended in 1998 in the Rome Statute, which governs the International Criminal Court. The statute incorporates attacks on "buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes; historical monuments" in the definition of war crimes.[5] Most recently, "cultural property" has been expanded again to include intangible cultural heritage such as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, etc."[6]

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[3] "1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict." UNESCO. UNESCO. October 10, 2021. https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention.

[4] This has been expanded to include film and digital archives.
"Defining Cultural Heritage and Cultural Property," The Blue Shield (Blue Shield International, January 15, 2022), https://theblueshield.org/defining-cultural-heritage-and-cultural-property/.

[5] "Rome Statute International Criminal," International Criminal Court (International Criminal Court, July 17, 1998), https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf.

[6] "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO (UNESCO, October 17, 2003), http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

Despite multiple specific definitions being provided by world organizations for the term "cultural property," there is still an abundance of discussion around the term in the historical and political communities. The debate was summed up most effectively by a researcher at Georgetown University Law Center in 2007 with her discussion of the "paradox of cultural property." The researcher discusses how the term "cultural property" is problematic because "property is fixed, possessed, controllable, and alienable," while culture is "unfixed, dynamic, and unstable."[7] The assertion that cultural property is an oxymoron and placing culture into a physical form dilutes it illustrates how the public has lost an agreed upon understanding of culture. Furthermore, a loss of respect for culture and a lack of understanding about the most effective way to share it has led to a lack of appropriate preservation and safety measures for cultural and historical sites. Another major roadblock in understanding and preserving cultural property is the debate of who owns culture: does humanity own all culture and history, or are specific groups responsible for their own? For example, the existence of antiquities trading and its ethics has been a debate since its practice grew rapidly in the early nineteenth century.[8] The extreme polarization of either side of the argument continues to contribute to an absence of cultural understanding and a destruction of cultural sites and artifacts.

***Why is it important to preserve culture?***

Despite the debate around who culture belongs to and specific terminology, historians and the majority of the general public all agree on the importance of preserving culture and cultural sites. Historical sites and artifacts can "promote access to and enjoyment of cultural diversity," as well as "enrich social capital and create a collective sense of belonging."[9] Additionally, culture "adds character and distinctiveness to the place, region, or community and hence provides a sense of

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[7] Naomi Mezey, "The Paradoxes of Cultural Property," *Georgetown University Law Center*, 2007.
[8] Alexander Bauer, "New Ways of Thinking About Cultural Property: A Critical Appraisal of the Antiquities Trade Debates," *Fordham International Law Journal* 31, no. 3 (2007), https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2096&context=ilj.
[9] "Cultural Heritage," UNESCO (UNESCO, February 11, 2022), https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio#:~:text=Cultural%20heritage%20has%20the%20potential,maintain%20social%20and%20territorial%20cohesion

identity."[10] Preservation of culture is a necessity in modern times not only as a remembrance and celebration of the past, but also to help maintain local economies and promote tourism.

Moreover, the most common form of sharing and preservation of cultural property is in museums. Most museums, especially those associated with specific cultural sites, have four main goals in sharing history.[11] The first is to document daily life in order to allow different cultures to have a more wholistic understanding of parts of their culture they can recover. The second is to educate people outside of the culture. Education is especially important for the preservation of cultures who are considered the minority of the population, but they must be displayed respectfully to be effective. The third goal of a historical site is to display alternative perspectives which a visitor may not be exposed to every day. Museums are where biases which were developed in history courses and political movements can be stopped and different questions can be considered. Lastly, museums provide a place for people and groups to connect, which fosters stronger community support and a larger public outcry to stop the destruction of cultural property.[12]

**Stealing/Displacing History**

*Lord Elgin and Greece*

Cultural destruction, whether accidental or purposeful, has historical precedent. In 1801, Lord Elgin and his wife came to Greece, which at the time was under control of the Ottoman Empire. He came to Athens to study Greek art with his officials and was given permission by the sultan to make casts of the sculptures.[13] However, Lord Elgin decided to fully remove parts of the Parthenon Frieze and other marble sculptures and take them away from Greece in more

[10] "World Heritage -Why Preserve, Conserve and Protect?," Flame University (Economic Times of India, April 20, 2021), https://www.flame.edu.in/in-the-media/world-heritage-why-preserve-conserve-and-protect#:~:text=It%20is%20important%20to%20protect,the%20way%20a%20community%20develops.

[11] "The Importance of Museums: Preserving Local Culture," New Jersey Maritime Museum (New Jersey Maritime Museum, August 17, 2016), https://njmaritimemuseum.org/the-importance-of-museums-preserving-local-culture/#:~:text=Museums%20play%20a%20crucial%20role,those%20from%20different%20cultural%20backgrounds.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Josse Scala, Michele Falzone, and Santi Pérez., "How the Parthenon Lost Its Marbles," National Geographic, March 28, 2017, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/magazine/2017/03-04/parthenon-sculptures-british-museum-controversy/)

than two hundred boxes.[14] One of the ships carrying the marble sculptures crashed on its way to London, and the remnants ended up staying at the bottom of the ocean for two or more years. He would go on to sell individual marble statues from Greece for what today would be roughly half a million dollars.[15] Lord Elgin claimed he took the marble statues and frieze to preserve them in a more stable environment with less conflict, but it was simply for his own gain. Ultimately, he tricked the Ottoman leaders into letting him steal from the ancient Greek culture, and these items have still not been returned to Greece. Moreover, he began the practice of western powers pillaging other cultures for their own financial gain. In 2014, UNESCO offered to act as a mediator between the United Kingdom and Greece to assist in the transfer of the Parthenon Frieze back to its original home, but the British Museum refused to cooperate because the organization works with government bodies and not the trustees of the museum.[16]

In addition, much like the debate over cultural property identification, the discussion of the UK returning the marbles to Greece is highly contested. The case for returning the frieze and other surviving marbles to Greece is extensive. The strongest argument has been that the British Museum is simply not equipped to preserve the artifacts or present the culture. For example, one researcher at King's College in London found that Lord Elgin's marble casting practice has caused a speedy deterioration of the facial features of the sculptures, and she even found evidence of vandalism from the Victorian era.[17] Additionally, the British Museum was subject to water damage in 2018 and 2020, as well as roof damage in 2021 all in the Greek gallery near the exact location of the Parthenon Frieze, which has prompted Greek officials to take a much more

[14] Josse Scala, Michele Falzone, and Santi Pérez., "How the Parthenon Lost Its Marbles," National Geographic, March 28, 2017, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/magazine/2017/03-04/parthenon-sculptures-british-museum-controversy/)

[15] Ibid.

[16] "On This Day in 1801, Lord Elgin Removed and Stole the Parthenon Marbles from Greece," Greek Herald (Greek Herald, July 30, 2020), https://greekherald.com.au/culture/1801-lord-elgin-removed-stole-parthenon-marbles-greece/#:~:text=Greek%20Food%20Bloggers,On%20this%20day%20in%201801%2C%20Lord%20Elgin%20removed%20and,the%20Parthenon%20Marbles%20from%20Greece&text=In%20the%20early%20morning%20light,most%20important%20pieces%20of%20history.

[17] Kerry Rork, "The Case for Returning the Parthenon Marbles," Duke Chronicle (The Chronicle, January 24, 2022), https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2022/01/greek-uk-parthenon-frieze-colonial-artifacts-museums.

dire stance on receiving the artifacts.[18] The unwillingness of world powers to step in for this situation and acknowledge UNESCO's power is one of many examples of cultural destruction not being effectively stopped.

### *Napoleon Bonaparte and Egypt*

As the Ottoman Empire declined and Egypt fell into shambles politically and economically, Napoleon was plotting to invade and loot the area while citing morals.[19] The invasion lasted over a three-year period until Napoleon's army was too weak to fight and the British swooped in to take over the country. One lasting result of the invasion has been Napoleon being credited with starting Egyptology because he brought *savants* along with his army to make the Egyptian Scientific Expedition. Although this sparked major interest in the history of Egypt and its people, Napoleon's true goal in studying the civilization was to learn the best way to assimilate them into French culture.[20] As Napoleon and his army traveled across the desert, they began to find artifacts and historical sites beneath the sand, including the Rosetta Stone and the Sphinx. When the British removed the French from Egypt in 1801, many of the artifacts that had been found were at the disposal of the British army.[21] The artifacts, including the Rosetta Stone, were taken to Britain, and placed in the British Museum where many of them stay today with artifacts stolen from other cultures around the world. In addition, the objects the British did not want, including numerous pieces of art, were left to the French to bring back to France where they started an Egyptian section at the Louvre.[22] Although their actions seemed innocent at face value and were not considered problematic by the general public for decades, it has become clear that Napoleon's actions can only be described as looting. Napoleon justified him more or less

[18] Kerry Rork, "The Case for Returning the Parthenon Marbles," Duke Chronicle (The Chronicle, January 24, 2022), https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2022/01/greek-uk-parthenon-frieze-colonial-artifacts-museums.
[19] Erin A. Peters, "The Napoleonic Egyptian Scientific Expedition and the Nineteenth-Century Survey Museum," Scholarship.shu.edu (Seton Hall University, 2009), https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=theses)
[20] Ibid, 17.
[21] Ibid, 29.
[22] Ibid.

stealing the history of Egypt and completely removing cultural sites and artifacts by claiming he was doing it to protect them from the conflict, but the fact they have never been returned to the people of Egypt shows that he was looting as a weapon of war whether the *savants* saw it as one or not.

In addition, Napoleon may be credited with Egyptology, but he is also credited with legalizing looting. He forced groups he invaded to surrender their art and historical artifacts and sign contracts so they cannot dispute his actions.[23] Napoleon convinced his followers that he had liberated his victims from their unjust past by taking their history, effectively creating a tactic which has been used in multiple conflicts since the nineteenth century.  He even went as far to parade his stolen artifacts around France in a display referred to as the "Festival of Liberty."[24] Thankfully, unlike in the case of Lord Elgin, a significant amount of Napoleon's plunder was returned to its original home upon the fall of the Empire after 1815. The return of cultural property to Egypt and other countries in the Middle East set important precedents for the transfer and return of historical artifacts.[25] However, the concept of the white, European "savior" continued as France was able to successfully argue their actions as protecting the civilization and their knowledge.

**Current Legislation and International Guidelines**

***1954 Hague Convention***

One major event that was created to combat the destruction of cultural sites and cultural property was the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The Convention was held in Hague in 1954 to conduct a plan "to preserve cultural heritage and

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[23] Kirsten Scheid, "Artfare: Aesthetic Profiling from Napoléon to Neoliberalism," in *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage: From Napoléon to ISIS* (The Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative, 2016), http://we-aggregate.org/piece/artfare-aesthetic-profiling-from-napoleon-to-neoliberalism.

[24] Gilks, David. "The Attitudes to the Displacement of Cultural Property in the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon." *The Historical Journal* 56, no. 1 (2013): 113–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23352218.

[25] Ibid, 143.

protect cultural property from destruction or damage in the event of an armed conflict."[26] The goal of the convention leaders was to teach nations how they should be preparing to save cultural sites and property while they are still in peacetime. However, a United States congressional report from the Convention in Hague clearly states that all protections of cultural property are invalidated if they are being utilized for military purposes and it allows for military actions to cause collateral damage to cultural sites.[27] The ability to wave the provisions of the entire Convention has made protecting immovable cultural property a difficult and confusing task for many smaller nations. It is also difficult because smaller nations do not have the power to confront the world powers when they choose to destroy their cultural sites.

In addition, there were numerous commitments made by the States Parties to the Convention, some of which have proved to be effective in the armed conflicts that followed. Some major obligations include:

(a) Registering cultural property of very high importance on the International Register of Cultural Property under Special Protection in order to obtain special protection for such property;
(b) Marking certain important buildings and monuments with a distinctive emblem of the Convention;
(c) Providing a place for eventual refuge to shelter movable cultural property;
(d) Establishing special units within the military forces responsible for the protection of cultural property.[28]

Despite specific guidelines, many participating nations outlined major challenges they still have with the original obligations. At a UNESCO meeting in 2022, States Parties to the Convention of 1954 were given a survey of what they believe to be the most high-priority challenges to address at their next meeting. Specifically, 73.33% of the respondents highlighted "ensuring the adoption of peacetime safeguarding measures" as a major concern, and 51.11% of the respondents voted for "the

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[26] "Ex. Rept. 110-26 – The Hague Cultural Property Convention," Congress.gov, accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/110th-congress/executive-report/26/1)
[27] Ibid.
[28] "1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," UNESCO (UNESCO, October 10, 2021), https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention.

compliance with the provisions of the Convention in the event of non-international armed conflict"
as a concern.[29]

### *1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*

UNESCO's 1972 Convention around cultural heritage and the protection of cultural property
extended the guidelines for protecting the territory of States Parties to the Convention. The
obligations focus more on researching and educating countries specifically it states countries must
work to:

(a) Develop scientific and technical studies and research and to work out such operating
methods as will make the State capable of counteracting the dangers that threaten its
cultural or natural heritage;
(b) To foster the establishment or development of national or regional centres for training in
the protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage and to
encourage scientific research in this field.[30]

Additionally, the 1972 Convention was the first step in merging the movements of cultural
preservation and conservation of nature. A bridge between both allowed for more attention to be
placed on the meetings and guidelines, which led to more countries being willing to adopt the
new requirements. Adoption was only the first step, in 1975 twenty convention participants
ratified the plan to formally establish the World Heritage Fund to provide compulsory and
voluntary assistance to cultural sites with the most need.[31]

### *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization*

The leaders of the world met at the end of the second world war to prosecute the Nazis
for their many crimes against humanity.  Each crime was an atrocity, but the destruction of
cultural sites and history was given a lot of attention since it is irreversible.  The world leaders

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[29] "1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," UNESCO (UNESCO, October 10, 2021), https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention.
[30] "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO), accessed April 20, 2022, https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/.
[31] "The World Heritage Convention," UNESCO World Heritage Centre (UNESCO), accessed April 20, 2022, https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/.

tried to fix this by forming new organizations with different responsibilities concerning the

protection of cultural sites.  One of the organizations that was created was the United Nations

Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, also known as UNESCO.  The organization

was created in 1945 and has one hundred and ninety-three member states.[32] According to their

mission statement, UNESCO's vision is to "reaffirm the humanist missions of education,

science, and culture," because "cultural diversity is under attack and new forms of intolerance,

rejection of scientific facts and threats to freedom of expression challenge peace and human

rights."[33] Since their creation, UNESCO claims to have helped preserve over one thousand and

seventy-three cultural sites around the world and published history of countries and regions that

previously had little information about their history open to the public.[34] However, UNESCO has

not been as effective as it was originally intended to be because limited funds stop them from

being able to take direct action in conflicts, which leaves it up to non-governmental

organizations to fund efforts.

### *International Council on Museums*

One organization concerning the protection of cultural property created after WWII in

order to help combat the destruction of cultural sites and property is the International Council on

Museums.  However, they fell into major debt within two decades, which has stopped them from

being able to participate in large conservation projects over the years.[35] Since then, the ICOM

has created a committee for disaster risk management which has provided training to countries

for many types of emergencies. They also act as a liaison between the officials in each country

and the international communities willing to help them in disastrous situations.  Additionally, the

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[32] Moustafa, Laila Hussein. "Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Lessons from World War II and the Contemporary Conflict in the Middle East." *The American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 320-38. Accessed March 24, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26356664.

[33] "UNESCO in Brief - Mission and Mandate," UNESCO, February 9, 2020, https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco)

[34] Ibid.

[35] "Emergency Preparedness and Response," ICOM, accessed April 10, 2020, https://icom.museum/en/activities/heritage-protection/emergency-preparedness-and-response/)

International Council of Museums is one of the four founding members of the Blue Shield, which has become known as the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.[36] The Blue Shield was not founded until 1996, and it ties all of the previous mentioned organizations and resources together along with many more, as well as non-governmental organizations to ensure funding for programs and efforts.  Ultimately, all of these organizations have attempted to work together in the past few decades to lessen the impact of warfare on cultural sites in a number of conflicts. However, they have not been very successful overall due to continued lack of funds.

**Cultural Destruction in the Middle East**

*Afghanistan*

Afghanistan has been the site of one of the largest occurrences of cultural destruction in the Middle East. The conflict in Afghanistan began with the invasion of the Soviets in 1979 and violence has been present in the country ever since. The Soviets battled for control in the country for almost a decade and the end of the war only resulted in more destruction with the Afghan Civil War. In 2001, an anti-Taliban leader in Afghanistan was assassinated by al-Qaeda operatives, ensuring Osama bin Laden would have enough Taliban protection after he carried out the September eleventh attacks.[37] This would eventually result in the United States attacking al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and destroying the homes and lives of hundreds of Afghan citizens, despite the fact none of the hijackers were Afghan nationals. Throughout the conflict, destruction of culture has occurred multiple times. The first and most prominent event took place in early 2001 when the Taliban destroyed the two Buddha statues of Bamiyan. The Buddhas were carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan province in the sixth century and thousands of monks gathered at the holy site for centuries.[38] However, the Taliban decided to

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[36] "Emergency Preparedness and Response," ICOM, accessed April 10, 2020, https://icom.museum/en/activities/heritage-protection/emergency-preparedness-and-response/)
[37] Ibid.
[38] Little, Becky,"7 Cultural Sites Damaged or Destroyed by War," History.com (A&E Television Networks, January 9, 2020), https://www.history.com/news/cultural-sites-heritage-wars)

destroy the statues after UNESCO visited the nation and offered to pay for the protection of the site.[39] Islamic religious leaders decided it was time to destroy the statues because their children were dying from starvation, but no organizations were offering to help them with that and instead just continued to impose sanctions on Afghanistan.

Furthermore, this situation raised a unique problem in how governments respond to cultural sites that are not relative to their own beliefs and how people lose the importance they hold in their history whenever conflict arises. In this situation, the destruction of the site was not necessarily a weapon of war, but a wartime statement from Afghanistan to the rest of the world. It demonstrates the turning point in the last few decades where Middle Eastern powers have been more likely to destroy the history of their own region to gain more power. Moreover, this raises the problem of international organizations having to work to educate groups on their own cultural sites and their importance.

*Iraq*

Another country in the Middle East that has endured major destruction of cultural sites and cultural property is Iraq. In March of 2003, the United States invaded Iraq with the assistance of some European forces to "free its people and to defend the world from grave danger" while claiming Saddam Hussein had allegedly been creating weapons of mass destruction.[40] Major military operations ended within months and Saddam Hussein was found and tried for his crimes within two years. However, the devastating effects of the conflict on the region's cultural sites and property will never be fully reversed. The first problem that arose from the invasion was the public's use of the conflict as an opportunity to loot the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Many Iraqi people had been looting archaeological sites for years just to make money for their families because of the lack of work options under the sanctions

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[39] Crossette, Barbara, "Taliban Explains Buddha Demolition," The New York Times (The New York Times, March 19, 2001), https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/19/world/taliban-explains-buddha-demolition.html)
[40] War in Iraq Begins," History.com (A&E Television Networks, November 24, 2009), https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/war-in-iraq-begins)

from other countries, but this was the first large-scale looting.[41] Over fourteen thousand objects were taken and only a little more than half have been returned. The United States also contributed to the destruction of cultural sites by damaging many religious buildings during the bombings under claims they were military strongholds.[42] Additionally, both the U.S. and Iraqis stationed their military operations in Babylon, permanently damaging multiple ancient sites.

Warfare has only increased in the country in recent years as the Sunnis and Shiites battle each other. One of the largest destructions of a cultural site as a result of this trend was at the Gates of Nineveh. ISIS is responsible for destroying the gates in an act of cultural warfare and has wreaked havoc on many other parts of the country including turning the University of Mosul into a bomb-making factory, as well as a site to test the bombs.[43] Prior to the past few decades, the public would not loot their own museums because the objects of their ancestors were considered to be sacred, but the desperate situation of extreme poverty in the region has led to the public destroying their culture and history out of pure desperation.  Also, the creation of groups like ISIS has led to an attempt at complete destruction of cultural history that does not align with their Islamic beliefs.

*Yemen*

In the past few decades, Yemen has endured great loss of cultural property. The Yemen Civil War began in 2014 when Shiite rebels took control of the capital and forced the Sunni leaders to resign.[44] Saudi Arabia and Iran have become heavily involved in the conflict with the Saudis carrying out airstrikes, but the United States has also been involved and supplies the Saudis with planes to carry out the strikes. The United States conducts their own strikes to

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[41] Stone, Peter, ed., "The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq," The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq | American Journal of Archaeology, accessed April 11, 2020, https://www.ajaonline.org/book-review/712)

[42] Ibid.

[43] Will Worley, "Isis Has Destroyed Another Historical Site in Iraq," The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 12, 2016), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-destroys-gates-ancient-city-nineveh-mosul-a6980686.html)

[44] "War in Yemen | Global Conflict Tracker," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen)

combat terrorism, aims them at al-Qaeda bases, and has carried out over two-hundred strikes in Yemen since 2002.[45] UNESCO reports that from 2015 to 2017 there were seventy-eight cultural sites damaged or completely destroyed by the conflict in Yemen.[46] The sites were destroyed by a number of different groups, but the majority of them were destroyed by Saudi bombs. The bombs decimated historic cities as well as the temples and dam of Marib.[47] This resulted in the loss of major architectural history including the burnt-brick towers that once stood in Sanaa. Most of the sites were damaged at least seventy percent, which makes it almost impossible to restore them, and fully impossible as long as the conflict continues. Both the Sunni and Shiites involved in the conflict have fought against one another without much concern for the historical sites they were destroying. This comes to show that when groups are in conflict, there is little concern for the preservation of one's own heritage because the concern shifts to being able to control land.

### Syria

In addition, Syria is one of the nations in the Middle East that has been hurt the most by cultural destruction over time. In 2011, the Arab Spring inspired democratic activists to protest in Syria, which would eventually turn into a civil war. The President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, began arresting children and murdering nonviolent protestors, which led to the formation of the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group set on overthrowing the government.[48] The conflict has also included the involvement of ISIS, which both the rebels and Assad's army have fought against. The presence of ISIS in Syria has also led to the United States to participate in bombings of the

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[45] "War in Yemen | Global Conflict Tracker," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen)
[46] Khalidi, Lamya, "The Destruction of Yemen and Its Cultural Heritage," Cambridge.org (Cambridge University, 2017), https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/53D08264CAACB808618BCF9D70053D25/S0020743817000691a.pdf/div-class-title-the-destruction-of-yemen-and-its-cultural-heritage-div.pdf)
[47] Ibid.
[48] Marks, Julie, "Why Is There a Civil War in Syria?," History.com (A&E Television Networks, September 14, 2018), https://www.history.com/news/syria-civil-war-assad-rebels)
[49] Ibid.

region.[49] One major cultural site that has been destroyed in the Syrian Civil War is the Great

Mosque of Aleppo. The mosque was built in the twelfth century and five times a day for 919

years Muslims would be called to prayer from the minaret at the site.[50] Syrians are unsure

whether the site was destroyed by fighters connected to al-Qaeda or by Assad's army, but both

sides blame each other for the travesty.[51] UNESCO has pleaded with the government to place

protections on the site, but the high population of Aleppo at the beginning of the war meant that

it was a hot spot for fighting and protections could not be put in place for the Great Mosque

quickly enough.

Another Syrian site that was destroyed through the conflict is the Temple of Bel at

Palmyra. The Temple had been standing since the first century C.E. as a religious sanctuary to

the Palmyrene gods.[52] ISIS captured the site in May of 2015 and within four months had almost

completely leveled the ancient city, which destroyed intricate architecture in Greco-Roman style

with Persian influences.[53] They also removed hundreds of statues and historical objects and

either destroyed or sold them. The situation in Syria once again demonstrates a failure by the

government and international organizations to combat cultural destruction. It also displays the

blatant disregard that some groups in the Middle East have for cultures that are not their own,

which has resulted in priceless pieces of history being lost.

**Reims Cathedral**

*Historical Background*

The construction of the Reims Cathedral in 1211 was quite different from the planning for

other cathedrals of the time. The build was ordered by Archbishop Aubry de Humphert, but unlike

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[50] Ray, Chris, "Syrians Won't Give Up on the Great Mosque of Aleppo," Atlas Obscura (Atlas Obscura, December 11, 2019), https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/reconstruction-great-mosque-aleppo-syria)
[51] Ibid.
[52] "Palmyra's Temple of Bel Destroyed, Says UN," BBC News (BBC, September 1, 2015), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34111092)
[53] Ibid.

other churches, the archbishop did not significantly contribute to the finances necessary to complete

the cathedral; he chose to only give a small gift of land.[54] The financial responsibility fell on to the

chapter of the church, which was able to find funds in unique places, including the fulling mills of

Reims and donations from the public.[55] Moreover, this ended up benefiting the church because they

received many more donations and were able to complete the build much sooner than planned.[56] The

funds allowed for the Rayonnant chapels and the ambulatory to be completed within ten years, and

by 1228 the five bays in the nave had been built, allowing church services to resume. However, the

public was not willing to finance the cathedral forever, and they began to revolt against the rising

costs in 1233, which shut down construction for more than two years.[57] The workers did not resume

until King Louis IX took aggressive action at the start of 1236.[58] Furthermore, the 1211

reconstruction demonstrates the necessity of gaining community support for cathedrals and historical

sites.

Cathedrals were a fundamental part of a community in the Middle Ages because of the

popularity of religion. Beginning in the twelfth century, the church granted indulgences to anyone

who assisted in the building of a cathedral.[59] Therefore, building cathedrals became a popular option

for men who were uncomfortable going on crusades. Unfortunately, the length of cathedral

construction meant many workers who assisted with the building process rarely lived to see its

completion.[60] Moreover, when a cathedral was being built within a community, it became a multi-

generational commitment. Recent research has found that most workers were paid, so building

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[54] Branner, Robert. "Historical Aspects of the Reconstruction of Reims Cathedral, 1210-1241." *Speculum* 36, no. 1 (1961): 23–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/2849842.
[55] Ibid.
[56] "Reims Cathedral," French Moments, July 30, 2020, https://frenchmoments.eu/reims-cathedral/#History_of_Reims_Cathedral.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Branner, Robert. "Historical Aspects of the Reconstruction of Reims Cathedral, 1210-1241." *Speculum* 36, no. 1 (1961): 23–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/2849842.
[59] "Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages," Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages   Durham World Heritage Site, accessed December 4, 2021, https://www.durhamworldheritagesite.com/learn/architecture/cathedral/construction.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

cathedrals were the livelihood of families for centuries.[61] However, communities were still forced to commit funds to the construction through their tithes to the church, so what they were paid would be going right back to the source, which is one of the main reasons the construction of the Reims Cathedral was stalled.

Additionally, the most important part of cathedrals in the Middle Ages was typically the symbolism within the sculptures and layout of the churches. The people honored in the churches would often be important pillars of the community surrounding the cathedral, as well as regional religious figures. The Reims Cathedral is home to over two thousand statues including a cephalophoric sculpture of Saint Nicasius and a smiling angel.[62] However, the cathedral did not only honor religious figures, but political figures as well. Reims Cathedral was the baptism site for the first king of the Franks, Clovis, in 469 C.E., and he was later crowned there and granted permission to anoint future kings.[63] King Louis IX was also crowned at Reims and declared that all future French kings would be anointed at the site, which totaled thirty-three monarchs by 1825.[64] Although, the religious and political importance of Reims was unparalleled and rejoiced by the community, it meant the cathedral was one of the first to be attacked in invasions for centuries.

### Destruction of the Cathedral

The Reims Cathedral has been attacked multiple times in history from the invasion of the Vandals to the first World War. However, the community has always chosen to rally around the movement for rebuilding the church. In the ninth century, the monastery was destroyed by a fire and the community fought to save relics locked inside. They were successful in saving a statue of Mary which is said to contain a piece of her hair, and the item is now considered miraculous by the catholic

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[62] France.fr, "Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Reims," France.fr (France FR, September 24, 2021), https://us.france.fr/en/champagne/article/cathedral-notre-dame-reims.

[63] Ibid.

[64] "Reims Cathedral and UNESCO World Heritage Site," The View From Chelsea, July 17, 2020, https://theviewfromchelsea.com/2020/07/15/notre-dame-de-reims-cathedral-of-kings/.

church.[65] The rebuild in 1211 was also a community effort, even though they eventually became

frustrated with the cost of the venture. Additionally, when the statue of the smiling angel was

beheaded in the first World War, the entire country came together to fund the restoration.[66]

On September 18, 1914, the five German artillery shells hit the cathedral, but the attack on

the following day was responsible for setting the roof ablaze and destroyed many of the statues

around the building.[67] Over the course of the first world war, around three-hundred German shells hit

the Reims Cathedral and eighty-five percent of the city was left in ruins.[68] Following the war, France

passed a law to support the reconstruction of cultural sites like the Reims Cathedral, but there was a

lot of discussion over what should be rebuilt because the public did not want to soon forget what the

war had caused. Additionally, the Germans took steps after the war to combat the destruction of

cultural sites. The German government created the Kunstschutz, a bureau for the protection of

monuments which was ultimately ineffective because of World War II, but it set an example for

future organizations protecting cultural sites and property.[69] Furthermore, the destruction of the

cathedral in Reims demonstrates the deliberate use of cultural property as a weapon of war, but it also

shows that community involvement is a successful way to combat and reverse the lasting effects of

this devastating trend.

**Ukraine**

As of April 13, 2022, at least ninety-eight cultural and religious sites in Ukraine have

been destroyed in the invasion by the Russians.[70] The shelling has destroyed sites in eight

[65] "Our Lady of Rheims," Roman Catholic Saints, accessed December 4, 2021, https://www.roman-catholic-saints.com/our-lady-of-rheims.html.

[66] France.fr, "Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Reims," France.fr (France FR, September 24, 2021), https://us.france.fr/en/champagne/article/cathedral-notre-dame-reims.

[67] "The Debate over Rebuilding That Ensued When a Beloved French Cathedral Was Shelled during WWI," Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, April 19, 2019), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/debate-over-rebuilding-ensued-when-beloved-french-cathedral-was-shelled-during-wwi-180971999/#:~:text=Around%20300%20German%20shells%20smashed,incomprehensible%20brutality%20of%20the%20conflict.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Thomas W. Gaehtgens, "Bombing the Cathedral of Reims," Getty (Conservation Research Foundation Museum, November 2, 2020), https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/bombing-the-cathedral-of-rheims/.

regions of Ukraine, including well-known architecture from the early medieval period and early

Soviet history.[71] Thus far, the Russian Army has avoided attacking historical sites on the

UNESCO World Heritage list, but areas around the sites have been decimated. The international

community was outraged to hear of the destruction of the Drobitsky Yar Holocaust Memorial

which marks where more than sixteen thousand Jews were massacred by the Nazis in World War

II. Dozens of Ukrainians have been working tirelessly to secure statues and churches with

sandbags and remove pieces of art from targeted museums, but many have been forced to choose

between protecting their history and heritage or protecting their life as the conflict worsens.[72]

The destruction of cultural sites in the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates the

calamitous power that war continues to have on cultural property across all areas of the world.

Targeting historical and religious sites is not a new tactic, and the trend will not be stopped with

the current policies in place. The actions of the International Criminal Court and the United

Nations in the coming months and years will be telling as to what organizations will be most

successful in preventing destruction and preserving cultural sites in the future.

**Policy Alternatives**

*Education Initiatives*

An ongoing lack of knowledge and understanding has contributed to the difficulties faced

by preservation organizations when combatting cultural destruction. Specifically in the United

States, there is already a major lack of understanding of other cultures and histories outside of

the western world. However, it is imperative that everyone is educated on the cultural destruction

the United States and other countries have caused and continue to cause in many countries in the

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[70] "UNESCO: 98 Ukraine Cultural Sites Damaged, Destroyed during Russia Invasion," VOA (VOA News, April 13, 2022), https://www.voanews.com/a/unesco-98-ukraine-cultural-sites-damaged-destroyed-during-russia-invasion/6527816.html#:~:text=At%20least%2098%20Ukrainian%20cultural,cultural%20agency%20UNESCO%20said%20Wednesday.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Carlie Porterfield, "In Photos: Here Are the Ukrainian Cultural Sites Damaged amid Russian Invasion," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, April 6, 2022), https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2022/04/06/in-photos-here-are-the-ukrainian-cultural-sites-damaged-amid-russian-invasion/?sh=2cf20860cae3.

Middle East. There are different ways to utilize education as a tool in fighting cultural destruction. However, whether the education initiative comes from an independent organization, the government, or a local school board, the lag in the effectiveness of the policy would be difficult to overcome. Therefore, education should never be used as the only policy to combat this, but, instead, it should be used to raise public awareness to create a larger outcry towards the trend over time.

For example, one change in education policy to implement in order to raise awareness of cultural destruction is an addition of its history to curriculum taught in history courses. Many people do not know of Lord Elgin's theft of the Parthenon Frieze or why the Rosetta Stone is in the British Museum until they reach post-secondary school. Incorporating these events and information of looting and antiquities trading into K-12 courses could give students a different perspective of history earlier, which could eventually create a nationwide increase in concern over cultural destruction.

### *Increases in Funding*

Currently, UNESCO's World Heritage Fund is only able to provide around four million US dollars annually to support members of the World Heritage Convention in preserving their cultural heritage. This money does not go very far, but the process of getting more money is tedious and usually ineffective. No singular country has been able to convince the rest of the members states to increase their funding for cultural heritage organizations, and distribution of funds is subject to major disparities based on location. UNESCO has explored multiple options to increase funding, but none have been successful thus far, which may be a result of UNESCO's overall structure.

UNESCO's World Heritage Convention has one-hundred and ninety-three member states who can nominate sites within their nation to be on the World Heritage list. As the movement around World Heritage has grown, member states have found it increasingly difficult to have their nominations chosen for the list, and they must go through a grueling process to argue the worldly value of the site, as well as a plan for protection and management.[73] Currently, there is argument over the biases of the deciding committee who have ruled against the suggestions of experts in ninety percent of the cases presented in the past few years.[74] Additionally, in 1996, UNESCO designated sites had on average almost seven thousand US dollars to support them, but 2018 sites barely had two thousand.[75] Therefore, UNESCO's funding is clearly not as effective as it used to be and there are hundreds of sites around the world without the necessary protections. However, the most concerning part of the organization's operations are the gaps in the number of sites protected among the different continents. As of 2018, Africa had only one-hundred and two designated World Heritage sites while Europe had over five hundred, while Italy alone had fifty-three sites.[76] The disparities have contributed to the faster destruction of cultural sites in the Middle East and Africa when compared to Europe.

The distribution of funds from the World Heritage Convention currently has the majority of the money funneled toward high and middle-income countries. In order for poorer countries to be able to protect their cultural sites, some experts have suggested requiring well off countries to pay even more into the World Heritage Fund and also fund the nomination process of sites for other countries because it can become quite expensive. Also, in the case of richer countries, they could consider following France's lead and relying on local communities to support repairs and renovations of their own cultural sites. For example, the Reims Cathedral was built back by the

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[73] "Reforming UNESCO's World Heritage," The Globalist (The Globalist, July 2, 2018), https://www.theglobalist.com/unesco-world-heritage-committee-reform/.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

Reims community on more than one occasion, and the awareness the community fosters around

the importance of their site increases the donations it receives each year. If richer countries

focused more on educating their public on the specific need for the cultural sites and the histories

around them, then they may not have to take as much funding from the World Heritage

Convention.

### *Prosecution*

The destruction of cultural sites and property is acknowledged by both the United

Nations and the International Criminal Court as a war crime. There is precedent for prosecution

of individuals and groups by the ICC, but it is incredibly rare. A man responsible for helping

destroy shrines in Timbuktu was only given a nine-year sentence by the ICC.[77] The International

Criminal Court's policy on cultural heritage outlines the need to strengthen accountability for

crimes against cultural property, but it is difficult to find a someone to prosecute in many cases

as most cultural destruction occurs during wartime.[78] Also, there are no specific outlines for

sentencing for crimes against cultural heritage. The official policy statement from the ICC only

states they will consider the gravity of the damage and harm caused to victims and their families.

However, leaving the policy up to interpretation could be beneficial in the long run if the court

can use it to create harsher consequences. Therefore, in order to deter future events of cultural

destruction, the International Criminal Court could focus on standardizing the sentences for

crimes and making them longer.

### Policy Choice

The complexity of this problem and its connection to humanity as a whole makes it

impossible to solve with one policy or in one country. Therefore, all three policies should be

[77] Irina Bokova, "At Last, the Destruction of Heritage Has Been Recognised as a Weapon of War ," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 28, 2016), https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/sep/28/destruction-of-heritage-weapon-of-war-timbuktu-shrines-irina-bokova.

[78] "Policy of Cultural Heritage," International Criminal Court (International Criminal Court, June 2021), https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/itemsDocuments/2021-03-22-otp-draft-policy-cultural-heritage-eng.pdf.

utilized together in order for any one of them to be effective in an efficient way. However, due to the unlikelihood of any of the policies being effective quickly, small steps should be taken immediately to raise awareness of cultural destruction. If enough small steps are taken, then the public outcry at events of cultural destruction will increase and larger policies will be easier to pass. For example, if curricula are changed in the United States, then that would bring the topic of cultural destruction into national discussion, which could lead to additional funding for the World Heritage Convention. Therefore, the current policy focus should be on creating awareness within the United States before any international steps are taken.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the destruction of cultural sites occurs for many reasons. In the Middle East, cultural sites are destroyed and looted as not only the outcome of war, but also because of a desperate community who sells their history as the only means of supporting their family. In Europe, countries specifically target the cultural sites of other countries to systematically wipe their culture off of the face of history. No matter the cause of cultural destruction, perpetrators are usually not held accountable and victims, the countries and members of the culture, lose a part of their past that can never be regained. However, cultural destruction may be on the rise but so is humanity's outrage at it. Now, in the shadow of the Invasion of Ukraine, is the time for the international community to act to prevent the destruction of cultural property.

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    %20has%20the%20potential,maintain%20social%20and%20territorial%20cohesion.

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