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THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Glen W. Bowersock

In the later years of the Peloponnesian War in the early fifth century BC, the Athenians enlisted a contingent of Thracian soldiers to join their ill-fated expedition to Sicily, an expedition that ended disastrously in Syracuse near the Assinarus River. The Thracians had been recruited to supplement the Athenian contingent even though the Greeks looked down on Thracians as barbarians. But they could be useful because they were notoriously fierce fighters. Unfortunately, the Thracian forces arrived after the Greeks had already set sail for Sicily. So they were sent back northward along the eastern coast to return to their homeland.

They ultimately came to the small and peaceful town of Mycalessus, which, lacking supervision or direction, they undertook to destroy. Thucydides tells what they did there in one of the most memorable and horrifying chapters of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. They committed an atrocity of horrendous proportions as their Athenian commander made use of the returning troops to harm enemies on the way. The Thracians arrived at Mycalessus in the morning, with none of the inhabitants expecting them as they awoke in a city with old and weak walls and its gate wide open. Thucydides tells us what happened next:

The Thracians bursting into Mycalessus sacked the houses and temples, and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women, and even beasts of burden, and whatever other living creatures they saw—the Thracian people, like the bloodiest of the barbarians, being ever most murderous when it has nothing to fear. Everywhere confusion reigned, and death in all its shapes; and in particular they attacked a boys' school, the largest that there was in the place, into which the children had just gone,

and massacred them all. In short, the disaster falling upon the whole city was unsurpassed in magnitude, and unapproached by any in suddenness and in horror. [7,29]¹

Thucydides knew the horrors of war from personal experience. His opinion of the Thracian action at Mycalessus reflects more than the considered judgment of one of the world's greatest historians. It combines an innate Greek prejudice against the Thracians with a visceral hostility to an attack on a peaceful local community, its old buildings, and its innocent people. This is perhaps the most egregious example of atrocity and destruction in classical antiquity, and it is emblematic of sensational atrocities in the following centuries.

Two further examples from classical antiquity show a comparable fusion of murder with the annihilation of a deeply rooted culture, although both had a much greater impact than what happened at Mycalessus. In 146 BC, the Romans under Lucius Mummius took over the Greek mainland after a local revolt, and demonstrated their control of the region by deliberately and systematically wiping out Corinth, a city second only to Athens in importance. Corinth is near the Aegean Sea and the gulf that bears its name. It was a rich site of temples and cults when reduced to rubble; what happened mirrored the personal tragedies that its inhabitants suffered through the Roman conquest. The devastation on the ground not only ended many lives but led directly to the pillaging of cultural heritage.

Polybius described the scene in a lost passage that Strabo has preserved for posterity: "Polybius ... mentions the contempt of the soldiers for works of art and votive offerings. He says he was present himself and saw pictures thrown on the ground with the soldiers gambling on top of them. He names the painting of Dionysus by Aristeides which some say gave rise to the phrase 'nothing like Dionysus,' and a picture of Heracles writhing in the tunic of Dianeira (8.6.23)."² By the time of Julius Caesar, Corinth was a dead city. As such, it provided an ideal opportunity for him to enlarge his international influence by founding a colony, and so he dispatched soldiers from his campaigns to settle in this ancient center of classical Greek civilization. The city prospered as it took a prominent place in the revival of classical styles in the region under the Roman emperor Augustus.

In 88 BC, between the destruction of Corinth and the creation of Caesar's colony, another of the great atrocities of antiquity occurred. In Anatolia, the western part of mainland Turkey, the powerful and ruthless King Mithridates Eupator of Pontus, whose kingdom was a rival to the encroaching empire of Rome, launched a massacre of eighty thousand Roman citizens. He accomplished this horror by organizing surprise assaults all within the space of a single day. Mithridates also tried to destabilize Athens by inciting riots against a Roman governor, Sulla, but without success. Yet when Augustus assumed power in Rome in 27 BC, Caesar's colony at Corinth was thriving, and the Roman communities in Anatolia had recovered their strength and become some of the

most conspicuous and successful of its overseas settlements. With the Hellenic culture that they absorbed from the Greeks, who had been there for generations, the post-Mithridatic Romans obliterated the damage that the Pontic king had wrought and prepared the way for numerous magnificent cities in the region, such as Ephesus, Pergamum, and Aphrodisias.

This brief overview of murderous assaults and subsequent recovery illustrates the resilience of peoples in the eastern Roman Empire and the tenacity of their culture—but the cost was high. The Romans were more likely to carry off the treasures of the people they conquered than to destroy them where they were. That is why many of the most exquisite pieces of Greek sculpture ended up in the opulent gardens of villas in Italy. Paradoxically, the heritage of the Hellenistic Greeks partially owed its survival to the *Kunstraub* (art theft) that often followed a conquest: the link between atrocities and the fate of cultural heritage is more complicated than it might appear.

An alien power confronting a great civilization inevitably experienced both wonder at what it found and jealousy in the face of what appeared to be the glory of a competing culture. This confrontation inevitably provoked destruction, theft, and appropriation. In the early days of the Roman Empire, the conquerors in the eastern Mediterranean simply carried off what they found, as with the great statue of Laocoön and his sons entangled with a huge snake. If an object or monument was too large to be removed, it would be left in place, like the massive altar at Pergamum, to be incorporated into the new Roman environment. This was an environment that acknowledged an alien presence by co-opting and absorbing its traditions and culture. Such an appropriation of Indigenous culture was utterly different from what the Romans did at Corinth or Mithridates in Asia Minor. But it arose from the same disposition that impelled Julius Caesar to rebuild Corinth.

It is both ironic and instructive that the very Roman who undertook to resurrect Corinth was also the perpetrator of a devastating assault on the Indigenous cultural heritage of Egyptian Alexandria. It was not long before Augustus became the first emperor of Rome that the fabulous Ptolemaic library of Alexandria was demolished by Julius Caesar. He destroyed the library, renowned in the Hellenistic world for its books and the great scholars who worked there, not long before he was murdered in 44 BC, just as he was recreating his new Roman city on the ruins of Corinth. In wiping out the Alexandrian library he abruptly ended several centuries of scholarship on Greek literature and all the books contained therein. Caesar's action deliberately wrought a terrible vengeance on the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt. This calamity was echoed centuries later when another library at Alexandria, which belonged to the Serapeum or temple and was an offshoot of the great Hellenistic library, was wiped out along with the Serapeum itself in a vicious assault in AD 381.

It is paradoxical that in the three centuries following the establishment of the Roman Empire in 27 BC there were no mass atrocities at all and, with two spectacular exceptions, there was no deliberate destruction of monuments of cultural heritage. The

greatest devastation of an ancient local culture in this period was entirely due to natural causes: the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that obliterated Pompeii and Herculaneum in perhaps the most remarkable case of widespread destruction of this kind.

But the two exceptions to the absence of human agency in acts of cultural destruction in the imperial age were the Romans' devastating assault on the Second Jewish Temple at Jerusalem in AD 70, which brought to an end the great war that elevated Vespasian to the throne, and then, centuries later, the demolition of the Alexandrian Serapeum and its library at the end of the fourth century AD. As we have seen, this event was a tragic reprise of Julius Caesar's devastation long before.

Both of these deliberate and fierce assaults on great monuments of cultural heritage were linked to religious conflict. In Jerusalem the annihilation of the Second Temple proclaimed the military triumph of the Romans over a militant Jewish population that had risen up against Rome several years before. In Alexandria it was again religion, Christianity this time, that impelled the marauders to destroy a cultural heritage that was anchored in Egypt's pagan past. The common denominator was an Indigenous religion that threatened the dominant international power. But neither in Jerusalem nor in Alexandria was physical destruction connected with any mass atrocity. Horrors such as occurred in Asia Minor under Mithridates were not repeated, even though the Jewish War of Vespasian caused major losses among the local population.

Nonetheless, it remains a remarkable fact that throughout much of the Roman imperial age widespread damage to culture came principally through the theft of its precious remains. This theft led to the widespread imitation and appropriation of styles in both culture and architecture. It constituted the Romans' homage to what they found in their eastern empire. For the most part this homage was not characterized by an effort or even a desire to eliminate it. It was only local religions that threatened to stand in the way of state cultic observances, such as the worship of Jupiter in Jerusalem or of the Christian god in Alexandria, that provoked assaults on monuments of cultural heritage.

This widespread acceptance and appropriation of cultural heritage in late antiquity calls for an explanation, which cannot simply lie in the deep roots that the late Roman and Byzantine Empires undoubtedly had in the world they inherited. In searching for an explanation it may be useful to remember that late antiquity was often shaken by unusually turbulent and difficult conditions. These appear to have preempted any impulse to destroy remains from the past. I am thinking of the exceptionally harrowing circumstances of simply living and ruling at that time. As we endure our present global pandemic it is worth remembering that three major plagues overwhelmed the world of late antiquity: under Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD, under the rule of Decius and Gallienus in the next, and for a long period under that of Justinian in the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century.

The armies of Marcus's co-regent Lucius Verus in the mid-second century brought back a deadly virus from their eastern campaigns, and this quickly spread as the

soldiers returned to their homeland. It gravely disrupted the philosophic reflections of Marcus Aurelius, who is best known for his *Meditations*, and it left still visible traces in the amulets and apotropaic inscriptions of threatened citizens even as far away as Britain. The Antonine Plague, as it is now called, left no room for vengeance against earlier or alien cultures. The simple desire for survival is a strong disincentive to the urge to destroy.

A comparable emergency can be detected in the third century, with the devastating spread of what seems to have been smallpox. We hear about this crisis in the letters of the Christian saint Cyprian, but we can also find traces of it in fragments of Dexippus's lost history of the time. This Cypriatic plague, as it is known, wiped out pagans and Christians alike, and we may presume that the prevalent fear, stoked by the mounds of corpses that could be seen in the streets, would scarcely have allowed for attacks on cultural heritage. Certainly there is no sign of such assaults, even as Roman armies advanced into Persia and contemplated the imposing monuments of both Achaemenids and Sassanians. Valerian and Gallienus were well acquainted with this heritage, and they craved to associate themselves with it. But they had manifestly no desire to destroy it.

Similarly, Emperor Justinian in the sixth century was confronted with a devastating plague, now known to be caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, and which we tend to call the bubonic plague. Although Justinian made systematic efforts to convert pagans to Christianity, as we know from the Syriac chronicle of John of Ephesus, there is small evidence that he expected his missionaries, John above all, to damage or remove the cultural monuments of any preexisting cults or worship. Again, we may suspect that the encompassing plague superseded any malice or resentment in the face of earlier cultures.

It was no accident that the most arresting cases of destruction of cultural heritage during the many centuries of Roman intervention in the east are what happened at those two widely separated moments in Egyptian Alexandria. Shortly before Augustus became *princeps* or ruler of the Roman Empire, the great Ptolemaic library in that city, attracted, as we have already observed, the attention and fury of Julius Caesar in his struggle with the next-to-last of the Ptolemies. By the end of the fourth century Christianity was solidly entrenched in Alexandria and such local Egyptian erudition as still survived by that date had to compete with that of the pagan Greeks. Hence the library that was attached to the shrine of the Egyptian divinity Serapis harbored Egyptian traditions that posed a threat to the religious authorities of the Constantinian empire.

It was all too clear that the Christians in Alexandria could be both unruly and violent in asserting their faith. This was demonstrated tragically in the century that followed the destruction of the Serapeum and its library, when mobs of Christian fanatics assaulted the brilliant mathematician Hypatia and literally tore her apart, limb from limb. This terrible episode was a kind of aftershock of the destruction of the Serapeum

and its library. They had both stood as celebrated vestiges of Egyptian culture over many centuries, and the cult of Serapis was known far outside Egypt. But the patriarch and his followers found this intolerable and took irreversible action.

We can see in the religious fervor of the Mediterranean world after Constantine a fierce wave of hostility to cultural heritage that was no less deleterious than the plagues in the ages of Gallienus and Justinian, and no less merciless and indiscriminating in finding victims than Mummius at Corinth or Mithridates in Anatolia. These examples demonstrate that cultural heritage in late antiquity could suffer equally from human savagery and from external and impersonal forces such as a volcano, climate, or disease. There is no single answer as to what causes damage or loss where cultural heritage is at risk, and so there is no single answer to the question of how to preserve such heritage.

Late antiquity therefore provides a context within which to consider this question. Among the variables involved are what constitutes cultural heritage—whether objects, monuments, embedded traditions, or styles that are contemporary but reflect the past. The concept of cultural heritage is both capacious and imprecise. Efforts to protect such heritage must be clear about what is involved. For example, the great Buddhas at Bamiyan that were deliberately destroyed by fanatics in Afghanistan in 2001 are undoubtedly part of the cultural heritage of the region. But is this because of the representation of sacred figures, or because of the veneration they received? These figures were important to the culture of Central Asia precisely because they were numinous. They were more than magnificent objects or monuments, and they were a still-living part of local culture. As such they were vulnerable. Attacking them was a kind of assassination, designed to terminate the life of an animate being.

We know that it is in the nature of cultural heritage to be an integral part of the contemporary world to which it belongs and not a movable object that would be equally numinous in a museum. Museums have been precious repositories of the heritage of many peoples and nations, and their work has often, and legitimately, been justified in terms of preserving what might have been destroyed or lost. Nevertheless, as modern nations have become increasingly assiduous in repatriating objects from museums to their countries of origin, it has become obvious that captured heritage, whether by theft or benevolent custody, remains captured nonetheless. No one could dispute that a captured piece from the heritage of another culture is better than a destroyed or gravely damaged one, nor could anyone dispute that the presence of heritage in an alien environment can be fruitful for that alien environment. But this is not the same as heritage in the culture to which it belongs.

In late antiquity the profound impact of stolen cultural objects on cultures other than those from which the objects came was immense. The Roman infatuation with Hellenistic art led to imitations that have in many cases served as the only surviving examples of lost originals. This is particularly true of classical Greek sculpture, where copies became a genre of their own. They served to do almost as much to preserve

cultural heritage as the originals themselves might have done. Paul Zanker has admirably addressed this phenomenon in several of his books. The achievement of the imitators in no way compensates for the loss of original works of cultural heritage, nor does it justify theft or destruction. Yet it is a kind of consolation.

The fate of the great monuments of cultural heritage in late antiquity is obviously different from that of movable objects. But comparable considerations arise even in those cases. The huge Pergamon Altar in modern Turkey is instructive. It was impossible in antiquity to take it away to another place. Only German enthusiasts managed to do this in the nineteenth century. So it stood proudly in place where it had been built, and fortunately no hostile forces, of which many rampaged through the region, sought to destroy it.

By contrast, the Parthenon in Athens, which was comparable in scale and majesty, was savagely desecrated and defiled. Its transformation into a mosque was not unlike the late antique destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria. Both of these assaults on major monuments of cultural heritage were due to religious fanaticism. The Christians in Alexandria had no less a burden of responsibility than the Muslims in Athens who transformed the Parthenon into a mosque. The latter's enemies, the Venetians, set off an explosion inside which gravely damaged the Parthenon, but fortunately did not destroy it.

For late antiquity the most prominent recent case of cultural heritage at risk is undoubtedly Palmyra. This great caravan city in the desert of Syria was, alongside Petra, the most important and most beautiful of the eastern Roman cities. Its monumental temples, shrines, tombs, and rich portrait sculptures made it known throughout the western world. Among the modern Arabs Palmyra was always a source of pride, and the citizens of the adjacent modern town considered themselves descendants and heirs of Palmyra's most celebrated ruler, Zenobia. Until a few years ago I was convinced that this heritage was so strong among Arabs that Palmyra might well be spared the depredations of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Da'esh). To my profound sorrow I was wrong. When Da'esh invaded the city in 2015, it greatly damaged the temple of Baal and, to the horror of civilized persons everywhere, beheaded the noble director of the Palmyra museum for protecting the treasures for which he was responsible. Da'esh staged his execution in the Palmyra theater.

This savage assault on a glorious city of late antiquity cannot be undone. Nor can the damage be repaired by visual restorations through multiple digital photographs, as has been proposed by a misguided team in Britain. Such photos are valuable for memory and for study, but the only purpose that a large digital restoration can serve is to lament what we have lost. The public display, through digital photography, of a great Palmyrene portal in Trafalgar Square served no purpose except to raise funds for the organization that created it. But much of the excellent work of archaeologists at the site of Palmyra—Polish, Swiss, and Danish among others—has survived the Da'esh assault, and a precious

collection of Palmyrene portrait sculpture is maintained in Copenhagen, where it can be systematically studied.

The damage to cultural heritage in this terrible case was not associated with mass atrocity, although, as in the case of the museum director, individual atrocities certainly occurred. The most frightening part of this whole episode was that I was not alone in believing that the prestige of Palmyra among those who lived in Syria would protect its heritage. Da'esh has proven decisively that local consciousness of cultural heritage cannot be counted on. The raids of Da'esh were devastating and cruel everywhere: before invading Palmyra they had shown their savagery in many places, but they had until that point never shown that they would feel absolutely no share in a heritage of which most Arabs in the region were proud. This has taught us a bitter lesson.

Unfortunately nothing can protect cultural heritage in the face of marauding and brutal assailants who are driven by a fierce conviction. Their beliefs, manifestly religious in character although by no means representative of devout adherents throughout the world, are similar to the convictions of the Christians who demolished the Serapeum of Alexandria and tore apart the helpless body of the great mathematician and philosopher Hypatia. It is hard not to recall the famous line (101) from the first book of Lucretius's poem on the nature of things, *De rerum natura*, after a description of the sacrifice of the innocent girl Iphigeneia to win the gods' support for launching the Trojan War: "Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum" (Religion was able to cause so many evils).

Late antiquity serves to teach us this painful lesson. It is scarcely comforting or consoling to see that human agency can be no less ruinous to what humans have created than plague or climate. Those of us who struggle, as many try to do, to protect and conserve the cultural heritage of peoples must try to defeat and crush a group such as Da'esh with the same tenacity that we bring to annihilating an invisible natural enemy.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Fergus Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II, 408–450* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

NOTES

1. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, Everyman's Library (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), 506.

2. Strabo, *Geography*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, vol. 4, Books 8–9, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 201.