

# Recent Destructions in Palmyra, Syria: Looting and Illegal Antiquities Trade



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**Abstract** Since 2011, the best preserved monuments of the unique antique city of Palmyra, Syria, were damaged or destroyed, either by “collateral” damage of war activities or by wanton destructive vandalism, especially executed by the so-called Islamic State (Daesh). Some of these destructions become visible especially on satellite pictures. Furthermore, several underground tombs were broken and robbed; many funerary sculptures were destroyed, damaged or stolen. Such illegally exported sculptures are offered more and more in international art galleries, also in the Internet, with the provenance of “Syria” and ownership as “property of a gentleman”. During the last years, the illegal trade in plundered artefacts especially also from Palmyra did increase enormously. Several national and international projects have the aim to curb illegal trade in cultural heritage and to increase the consciousness that buying or dealing with illicitly exported antiquities is a crime and a theft of the historical heritage and memory of us all.

**Keywords** Palmyra · Syria · Destruction · Antiquities · Illegal trade · Cultural heritage · Satellite pictures

## Introduction

The best preserved monuments of the unique antique city of Palmyra, Syria (Fig. 1), were damaged or destroyed during the war in Syria, either by “collateral” damage of war activities or by wanton destructive vandalism, especially executed by the so-called Islamic State (IS or Daesh). Many of these destructions can be recognized best on satellite pictures.

Already before the arrival of the IS to Palmyra, in 2014, part of the Sanctuary of Bel was damaged by tank grenades (Fig. 2).

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**Fig. 1** Palmyra, satellite picture. (DigitalGlobe, European Space Imaging, 2011)

**Fig. 2** Palmyra, Temple of Bel, West wall, 2014. (DGAM)



## Case Studies

Then, in 2015, members of the IS exploded first some Islamic monuments and the Temple of Baalshamin, then the Temple of Bel (Fig. 3), several tower tombs in the Valley of the Tombs (Figs. 4 and 5) and the Arch at the beginning of the great Colonnade Road.

Later, in 2017, the IS destroyed part of the theatre and of the tetrapylon in the centre of the antique town (Fig. 6). Several tombs were damaged in the South-East Necropolis, such as the so-called Aviation Tomb (Fig. 7).

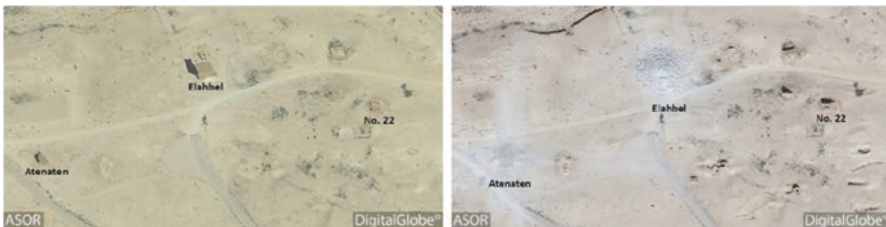
The underground tomb called Tomb of the Three Brothers was used as military headquarter. Several military constructions were installed in the North Necropolis in 2015; in 2016 even a Russian military camp was constructed within this antiquities' zone (Fig. 8)

The Archaeological Museum of Palmyra also was severely damaged outside and inside. Many sculptures as well as small finds were damaged or destroyed (Fig. 9).

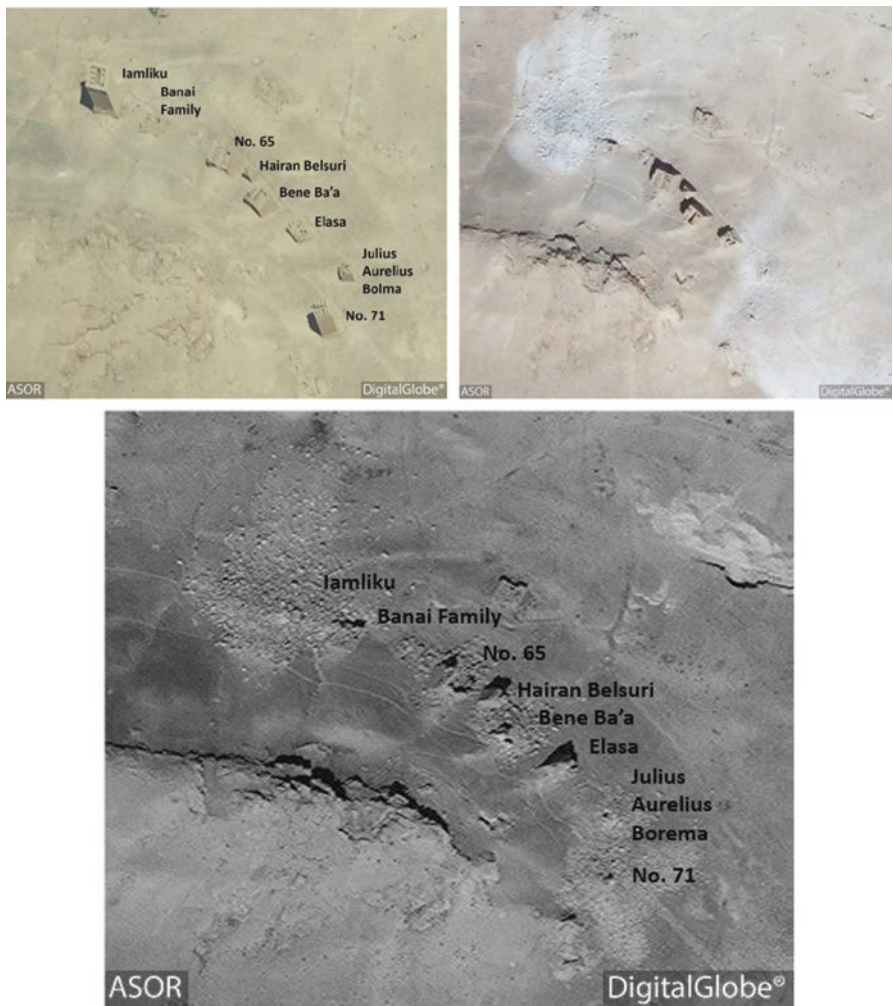
Furthermore, several underground tombs especially in the South-East Necropolis were broken and plundered. Already before the arrival of IS, these underground tombs were easily accessed by grave robbers. Funerary sculptures were broken out



**Fig. 3** Palmyra, Sanctuary of Bel, before and after destruction. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 4** Palmyra, Valley of the Tombs, Tombs of Atenatan and Elahbel, before and after destruction. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 5** Palmyra, Valley of the Tombs and Tombs of Yamblik and others, before and after destruction. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 6** Palmyra, theatre and tetrapylon, before and after destruction. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 7** Palmyra, South Necropolis, so-called Aviation Tomb, before and after destruction. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 8** Palmyra, North Necropolis, increasing military constructions, cf. Fig. 1. (DigitalGlobe ASOR)



**Fig. 9** Palmyra, Museum, destructions. (DGAM)

of the walls, destroyed, damaged or stolen. We may refer to pictures taken by the customs officials of the Syrian and Lebanese antiquity authorities in 2014 already (Fig. 10).

The Tombs of Artaban and that of Tybel were violated (Figs. 11 and 12), complete panels were ripped from the walls, sculptures were effaced, and heads were broken off and stolen.

When, shortly after that, fragments of very similar reliefs appeared on the international art market (Figs. 13 and 14), doubts may be permitted about the provenance of these pieces and for questioning the legality of these sales.



**Fig. 10** Stolen Palmyrene sculptures. (DGAM)



**Fig. 11** Palmyra, Tomb of Tybel, before and after destructions. (DGAM)



**Fig. 12** Palmyra, Tomb of Tybel, before and after destructions. (DGAM)



**Fig. 13** Palmyrene sculpture in art galleries in London and the USA, 2014



**Fig. 14** Left: Palmyra, stucco head of excavation in 2009. Right: Palmyrene stucco head. (Art gallery Munich 2014)

Between 2005 and 2010, the residence of a noble Palmyrene family was excavated with wall painting reliefs with Dionysian themes (theatre masks) and miniature stucco heads. Until that time, such decorations were unknown in Palmyra. The stucco heads were exhibited in the museum at Palmyra in 2010, and the final publication did appear in 2014. In 2014, astonishing similar such stucco heads were offered for sale by an art gallery with the provenance of “Palmyra” and the property “from an old Bavarian private collection”.

## Conclusions

Political chaos and the absence of the rule of law have led to a steep rise in pirate excavations – the plundering and destruction of monuments and the illegal trade in stolen artefacts. No wonder that illegally exported sculptures are offered more and more for sale in international art galleries, also in online catalogues, with the provenance of “Syria” and ownership as “property of a gentleman”. During the last years, the illegal trade in plundered artefacts especially also from Palmyra did increase enormously. The international crime statistics now show that the illicit trade in cultural artefacts ranks with that of the illegal trade in arms, drugs and human beings. It has been established that different sides involved in the conflict in Syria are financing their weapons’ purchases partly with the illegal trade in artefacts.

There is now a broad international cooperation to document the plundering, systematic theft and irreparable destruction of the cultural heritage of Syria (Figs. 15 and 16) and to discuss carefully the possibilities for the future that means to be prepared for the time after the crisis.



Fig. 15 “Red list” of ICOM. (2017)





Fig. 16 Resolution 47 (2019) of UN Security Council

All these efforts and considerations are well-intentioned, even if there may be some repetitive and duplicated actions. At the same time, all these activities are “culturally minded acts of defiance” (Thomas Weber). But they may help once to restore and to save the cultural heritage of Syria and to increase the consciousness that buying or dealing with illicitly exported antiquities is a crime and a theft of the historical heritage and memory not only of the Syrian people but of us all.

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