

The background of the entire page is a photograph of ancient Assyrian stone reliefs. The reliefs are carved into a light-colored, weathered stone wall. They depict various figures, including a central figure in a chariot or on a horse, and other figures in traditional Assyrian attire. The carvings are detailed, showing patterns on clothing and weapons. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights that emphasize the texture of the stone and the depth of the carvings.

R. EDWARD

Assyrian Cultural Heritage at Risk in Northern Iraq

ACSYA INC.

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Theme

Long known as the “cradle of civilisation”, Iraq is home to upwards of 10,000 cultural heritage sites, including the archaeological remains of ancient cultures as well as more recent architectural achievements.

Archaeological sites have been looted and damaged since the start of the 2003 conflict in Iraq, and most recently by the terrorist organisation styling itself as Islamic State “IS” or “ISIS” (also known by its Arabic language acronym ‘Daesh’). Historic buildings in northern Iraq, namely in the Nineveh Governorate, have been looted and destroyed as a result.

Catastrophic losses have already been sustained with regard to Assyrian cultural heritage, and many sites remain at great risk. These sites maintain connections to cultural identity and are highly significant, particularly among First Nation peoples (Indigenous Assyrians) and their collective memory. The following report provides a brief analysis of the risk posed to Assyrian heritage in northern Iraq and offers recommendations to help ensure their protection.

Acknowledgments

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Assyrians



The Assyrians are a transnational ethnic-group indigenous to a contiguous geographical area spanning adjacent parts of northern Iraq, north-western Iran, south-eastern Türkiye, and north-eastern Syria (effectively Assyria and northern Mesopotamia).

With the majority of those who identify as Assyrians coming from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds, and adhering to a number of denominations, the community is linguistically dichotomized as “western” and “eastern” Syriacs. The Assyrians trace their roots to the ancient people of the same name and form a distinctive community, united through ethnicity, a culture that constitutes one of the oldest continuous traditions in the world, and language (Assyrian, also more commonly known as Syriac or Neo-Aramaic).

According to political experts, the Assyrians have been deemed a ‘stateless-nation,’ i.e., a people without a state. They have also been regarded as an ‘ethnonationalist movement’ or ‘proto-nation’, i.e., a nation seeking to establish their own sovereign state in the Middle East.

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Introduction

In June 2014, the terrorist organisation styling itself as Islamic State “IS” or “ISIS” (also known by its Arabic language acronym ‘Daesh’) swept through the city of Mosul, destroyed the shrine of Nabī Yūnis (St. Jonah) which sat atop a church of the same name and earlier an ancient Assyrian temple and palace. By August of the same year, Islamic State had captured large swathes of the last Assyrian stronghold in northern Iraq— the Nineveh Plains. Aiming to drive out Iraq’s First Nation peoples (Indigenous Assyrians) they largely succeeded due to the direct lack of organisation by the federal and regional authorities. The moral shock as a result of their nascent and abject barbarism had competing parallels with the atrocities of Tamerlane many centuries earlier.

The cessation did not end with those ancient, inhabited towns; they proceeded to destroy the remains of ancient cities which had stood the test of time. What they destroyed was portrayed as an act of carrying out their core tenant beliefs and what wasn't destroyed had been surreptitiously dealt with in global marketplaces. The actions by Islamic State, coupled with the ever growing presence of cultural appropriation in the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Iraq, which slowly emerged following the downfall of Saddam Hussein and his regime in 2003, adds to the cultural deterioration and obfuscation of history which is at the forefront of the regional authority as they not only have allowed it to permeate but also irrevocably portray ancient Assyrian reliefs, and the region itself; as Kurdish in origin as a means to delineate the region as a tourist attraction at the expense of the Indigenous Assyrians. The pernicious and voracious acts mentioned above adversely affects, and if not abated, will gradually strip the Assyrians of their tangible and intangible heritage. Such practices can also be substituted as a form of cultural cleansing, and concurrent shift in the ethnos appellation.

► The archaeological site of Nimrud (ancient Kalḫu), south-east of Mosul, served as the capital of the Assyrian empire between the ninth– and eighth–centuries BCE. Between August and October 2016, the marauding forces of Islamic State encroached and devastated this site leaving behind a barbaric pile of rubble.



In June 2014, Islamic State captured Iraq’s second largest city— Mosul (mod. Nineveh Governorate, Iraq). This moment in history heralded the beginning of the militant group’s early wave of conquest and destruction. In fact, it was from Mosul in Nineveh that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of his supposed caliphate. Mosul was transformed into the epicentre of Islamic State conflict and the site of some of the most devastating scenes of cultural destructions in modern history, including the ransacking of museums and libraries. As Islamic State seized swathes of territories in and beyond the city of Mosul, over 1,800 of Iraq’s registered archaeological sites lay under their control. These included the two World Heritage sites of Āshūr and Ḥaṭrā; as well as two other sites on the Tentative List— Nineveh and Nimrud —both of which were reduced to heaps.

The militant group developed a methodical strategy that targeted and destroyed tangible cultural heritage in the region. Islamic State spearheaded these campaigns in a propagandistic and sincere bid to erase and re-shape the region’s historic identity. Although Islamic State militants claimed these destructions solely under ideological grounds, experts say these acts were carried out to conceal the organisation’s



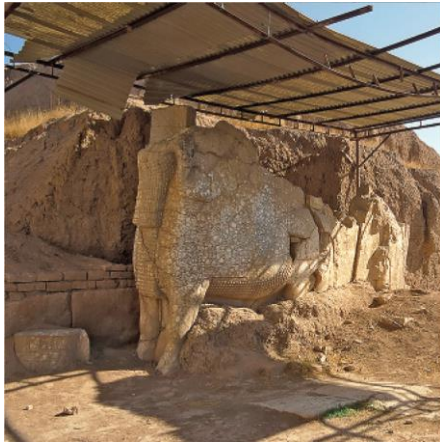
▲ In July 2014, Islamic State obliterated the shrine and mosque dedicated to Nabī Yūnis (St. Jonah). This site once sat on top of an archaeological mound that formed part of the ancient city of Nineveh. Beneath the shrine, a labyrinth of looters tunnels dug by the militant group lead to a fully intact ancient Assyrian temple and palace.



▲ In March 2015, the militant group rigged the fourth-century CE monastery of Mār Bēhnām with explosives and completely levelled the structure. The Church of Mār Bēhnām was also plundered and torched.

illicit excavations to plunder new and undiscovered antiquities. The militant group claimed the destruction of highly historic shrines belonging to Christian, Muslim, and Yezidi populations. For a period of approximately two years, Islamic State militants carried out a series of destructive campaigns targeting various sites throughout the region, i.e., archaeological sites, artefacts, buildings, natural landscapes, and monuments of artistic, cultural, historic, religious, scientific, or technological significance. Islamic State militants looted and transferred artefacts to other criminal networks, en-route to global marketplaces and collectors. These campaigns were facilitated as a moneymaking venture to finance Islamic State's military operations in the region. There exists mounting evidence that Islamic State either deployed expert archaeologists, or received remote instructions and guidance from such experts, who directed the militant group toward excavation sites. Such evidence would support a re-evaluation of these campaigns as organised crime, as opposed to ideological vandalism. The true value of antiquities looted by Islamic State lies in global marketplaces, which is where they have and will continue to surface in the forthcoming decades. International organisations, such as the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL), play a crucial role in helping combat this illicit global trade.

The terrorist organisation produced and distributed boastful propaganda footage of these campaigns depicting sledgehammer-swinging extremists rampaging through cultural heritage sites, damaging priceless statuary, and toppling friezes. The history pages of the region's Indigenous Assyrians lay in charred fragments on the floors of centuries-old Christian monasteries (i.e., Monastery of Mār Bēhnām) whom Islamic State considered as "unbelievers". Islamic State's destruction of Nineveh's tangible cultural heritage was also a direct attack on the indigenous population. Irina Bokova, during her tenure as director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), employed the term "cultural cleansing," in reference to Islamic State's assault on the region's



▲ In February 2015, Islamic State published footage of the militant group in a series of montages systematically pulverizing priceless Assyrian antiquities and reducing the archaeological site of Nineveh to rubble. The militant group also bulldozed the city gates and associated fortification walls.

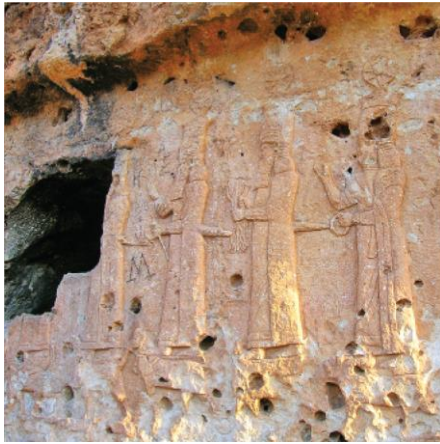


▲ Situated south-east of Mosul, the convent of Mārt Barbara in the Assyrian town of Karamles (ancient Kar-Mullissu) was founded on an archaeological mound. Islamic State militants occupied this site and dug deep tunnels through the chapel floor with the intent of plundering ancient fragments.

cultural heritage. The demise of Islamic State as a territorial entity and the aftermath of their destructive campaigns have fallen off the radar. However, Assyrian cultural heritage continues to remain largely at risk. In the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Iraq, cultural heritage can be seen as a propagandistic mechanism in the nation-building process of Kurdistan. Regional authorities have taken up a controversial project of re-defining cultural heritage through revisionist practices. Elements of the region's past history are appropriated and re-interpreted to bolster Kurdish territorial claims and/or geo-political aspirations. In 2006, an ambitious marketing campaign dubbed *KURDISTAN: THE OTHER IRAQ* was launched under the auspices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although the objective of this initiative was to encourage economic development through tourism— the campaign projected a revisionist image of the region's historic past.

“To trace the history of the Kurds, one must begin at the beginning – for it was here, in the land some believe was once the Garden of Eden, that this resilient ancient people first left their mark upon the world. Nourished by the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, archaeologists believe it was within this Cradle of Civilization that Kurdish ancestors first pioneered agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, metal work and the making of pottery.”

The Kurdification of the region's historic image, as well as the omission of the region's Indigenous Assyrians, may, whether intended or not, contribute to the gradual process of cultural cleansing. The concept of cultural appropriation, re-interpretation or memory construction in this region marginalises and threatens the very existence of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-confessional societies. Indeed, the constitution of the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq embraces multiculturalism. However, in practice, the region's political elites have always implemented policies that are directed toward the development of a purely Kurdish national narrative. Tangible cultural heritage sites have also become susceptible to such revisionist policies. For instance, the seventh-century



▲ Assyrian cultural heritage sites are strongly threatened by erosion, looting, uncontrolled tourism, urban expansion, vandalism, lack of comprehensive heritage management planning, and armed conflict.

BCE Assyrian rock art complexes at Bavian and Maltaï (mod. Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan region of northern Iraq) are depicted in interpretative signages and alleged to be remnants of “Kurdistan Cradle of Civilization”. Use of such mediums to propagate misinformation do not communicate the authenticity and historical integrity of such material remains. These millennia-old remnants of the ancient past, in actuality, pre-date Kurdistan as a territorial entity or geo-political reality. The use of the toponym “Kurdistan” followed by the concept “Cradle of Civilisation” is a relatively new phenomenon. This, remarkably, only became prevalent in the years following the ousting of Saddam Hussein and his regime.

In February 2016, it was reported that unknown vandals had defaced the Assyrian rock relief at Maltaï, with a graffitied depiction of the Kurdish flag. An assessment of the damage was facilitated by expert conservationists that were successful in somewhat mitigating the damage. The ancient relief panel, nonetheless, sustained visible surface discoloration. In July 2016, this site was subjected to further acts of vandalism in which a second Kurdish flag was graffitied onto a neighbouring relief panel. It must be noted that, repeated treatments to remove graffiti may render the surface susceptible to further rapid decay. In May 2017, local media outlets alerted that new structural damage had been detected on the relief panel in which vandals chiselled parts of the facade.

In the heart of the city of Erbil (ancient Arbelā), capital of the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, stands the Erbil Citadel. A walk along the south-east quarter of the city walls leads to the famed Kurdish Textile Museum. Founded in December 2004, the museum acquires, conserves, documents, and exhibits items of Kurdish clothing, textiles, and related items both domestic and commercial. Life-size ethnographic mannequins adorned in traditional Kurdish clothing are displayed throughout the galleries. One mannequin, displayed in Assyrian traditional clothing, is mislabelled as Kurdish. Such misrepresentation can



▲ Satellite imagery confirms that, the archaeological site of Khorsabad (Dur-Sharrukin) remained largely untouched prior to site's occupation by Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

also be observed in the Exhibition of Miniature Kurdish Costumes. Encased in a glass display cabinet, a miniature doll presented in Assyrian traditional clothing is similarly mislabelled as “A Kurdish Christian woman from Southern Kurdistan”.

Traditional Assyrian clothing is not simply functional or ornamental but is infused with unique elements or characteristics that form part of indigenous identity and cultural expression. The appropriation of such clothing without consideration for their underlying cultural significance among indigenous peoples can erode this heritage, widen existing ethnic divisions, and perpetuates a pattern of dispossession and oppression. Such policies demonstrate a systematic pattern of erasure and of forced homogeneity; it serves to reinforce the dominant identity and exclusion of the “others”. Cultural appropriation can also be viewed as a manifestation of power imbalance between the appropriator and the appropriated, the latter being a minority group (i.e., Assyrians).

Between mid-October and early November 2016, the Assyrian archaeological site of Khorsabad (Dur-Sharrukin) was occupied by military units of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in a bid to liberate the district from Islamic State. The Peshmerga presence in this site required the establishment of a military zone, entailing defensive berms and trenches. During their presence in this site, the Peshmerga forces and their contractors bulldozed extensive earthen embankments and developed a large-scale military post on top of visible archaeological remains, which may have destroyed antiquities beneath the surface. According to reports, the Peshmerga forces and their contractors cut deep into archaeological deposits and revealed large architectural fragments. The trenching impacted the entirety of the ancient city's perimeter. While operating on site, Peshmerga forces also facilitated the improper handling and removal of fragments. Although this archaeological site sits within the Nineveh Governorate and outside of the KRG's jurisdiction, Kurdish authorities attended this site and confiscated the fragments. Whether or not Peshmerga forces or their contractors employed any chemical

treatment during their operations in this site is not yet known. The KRG Directorate of Antiquities shortly after issued a statement reporting that the Peshmerga forces were situated at an unspecified location outside the archaeological site, however this is disingenuous. In early November 2016, the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) confirmed that, comparative satellite imagery of the region *“can confirm that the extent of the damage is more severe than originally reported by local media”*. In fact, the available evidence demonstrates significant damage to the fortification walls, palace complex, and city gates occasioning significant damage to the visual integrity of this ancient site.

The ongoing conflict between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in parts of northern Iraq also poses a significant threat to heritage sites in this region. According to local reports, PKK insurgents have frequently occupied Assyrian sites of historic and religious significance (i.e., Monastery of Mār Qayōmā in Barwār). Fierce clashes between the Turkish military and the PKK have in various instances escalated within proximity to other sites, i.e., the Church of Mār Sawā. These operations render these sites and surrounding district under direct threat of attack. Like the Peshmerga at Khorsabad, the military conflict between Türkiye and the PKK may potentially represent a violation of the provisions of the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, commonly known as the 1954 Hague Convention. Under the terms of the 1954 Hague Convention, it is unlawful for State Parties, individuals, or groups to engage in armed conflict or military operations that expose heritage sites to potential destruction and/or damage.

Although Assyrian cultural heritage is abundant in northern Iraq, these sites have been largely neglected by federal and regional authorities. Such is the case with the mass grave site in Simele (mod. Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan region of Iraq) where thousands of Assyrians were systematically massacred in 1933. This site is considered highly sacred to many Assyrians. However, there exists no monument to

honour the lives of those victims. Regional authorities have declared this an “archaeological hill”, the terrain is littered with discarded trash and a telecommunications tower was built above that exposed skeletal remains. It is worth noting that, it was the Simele Massacre that inspired lawyer Raphael Lemkin to coin the term “genocide,” which we use today. Numerous calls for regional authorities to fund an adequate memorial site have fallen on deaf ears. Despite mounting evidence provided by historians, the Simele Massacre has yet to be acknowledged by federal and regional authorities.

Implications

The intentional destruction of tangible cultural heritage can have a consequential impact on the intangible cultural heritage. Such practices not only threaten this cultural inheritance intensely but can also amount to ethnic-cleansing and cultural genocide. For Indigenous Assyrians, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are essential elements that form cultural identity, validate collective memory, and provide its contemporary bearers with a sense of belonging.

The relationship between tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage may be roughly divided into two cases. First, tangible cultural heritage manifests itself in the form of archaeological sites, artefacts, buildings, natural landscapes, and monuments of artistic, cultural, historic, religious, scientific, or technological significance that are transmitted intergenerationally within a society. Second, intangible cultural heritage includes traditions or living expressions that are inherited, i.e., festive events, food, knowledge, language, oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and social practices. Despite their distinctive interpretations or approaches— both tangible and intangible cultural heritage share a close affinity with one another.

The systematic destruction of iconic components of Iraq's rich and diverse heritage that we witnessed during the Islamic State invasion and its aftermath is not the first of this scale of devastation. The rewriting of Iraq's diverse history to homogeneity, a *terra nullius*, devoid of preserved tangible cultural heritage began in 2003, with the power vacuum and anarchy created subsequent to the US-led occupation of Iraq. Since then, waves of Indigenous Assyrians have fled their native lands in search of asylum in neighbouring countries and abroad, in an attempt to avoid becoming collateral damage in the never-ending internal struggles between Shia and Sunni peoples, and the intervention of the West. Currently, more native Assyrians live in Diaspora than in their native homeland.

Implications (Continued)

Many indigenous communities around the world empathise with this plight, and centuries of persecution, cultural and ethnic cleansing, seemingly finding it extremely difficult to preserve their cultural identity through the intangible forms of their heritage, including, but not exclusive to their native tongue and cultural practices. They are seen as second-class citizens and are denied access to the same civil and human rights afforded to the majority social class.

This is indeed the case with the remaining Assyrians in Iraq, and those in Diaspora are desperately attempting to maintain cultural continuity in western countries to sustain their identity. However, this becomes increasingly difficult as the generations progress due to the process of assimilation. Gradually, Assyrians are experiencing a disconnect with their native lands, detaching them from their cultural, historical, and ethnic identity. A fear of returning and reconnecting as well as having never seen the lands of their forefathers, in addition to the erasure of historical identity, creates a knowledge gap leading to a lack of belonging, leaving historical sites abandoned to be claimed by the regional authorities as their own.

Recommendations

- ▶ It is our recommendation that, the Permanent Delegation of Iraq to UNESCO considers the inclusion of the archaeological sites of Bandawai, Bavian, Dur-Sharrukin, Faida, Jerwan and Maltai onto the Tentative List. Nomination and inscription onto the World Heritage List yields significant benefits: including and not limited to (1) generating greater awareness among the international community, and (2) access to the World Heritage Fund which assists State Parties in such areas as: training activities, technical cooperation, emergency assistance, and conservation efforts.

- ▶ It is our recommendation that, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) considers a review of the existing interpretive signs situated at heritage sites throughout the Nineveh Governorate and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The use of interpretive signs encourages community cohesion, honours cultural diversity, enhances visitor knowledge, engages the local population's understanding and appreciation for both the heritage site and First Nation peoples. It is imperative that, interpretive signs communicate the authenticity and historical integrity of the material remains it represents. Federal and regional authorities must acknowledge the traditional custodians when engaging in such initiatives and to honour their connection to the land (past, present, and future).

- ▶ It is our recommendation that, the SBAH develops a stringent 'conservation policy', one which may be included to the existing antiquities legislation. The objective of the policy is to: (1) develop a set of standards and guidelines for use by local councils undertaking heritage activities within their governorates, (2) outline appropriate conservation processes and/or measures to protect the historical integrity of heritage sites, (3) issue conservation plans, strategies, and protection through statutory instruments, and (4) periodically report on the condition of heritage sites.

Recommendations (Continued)

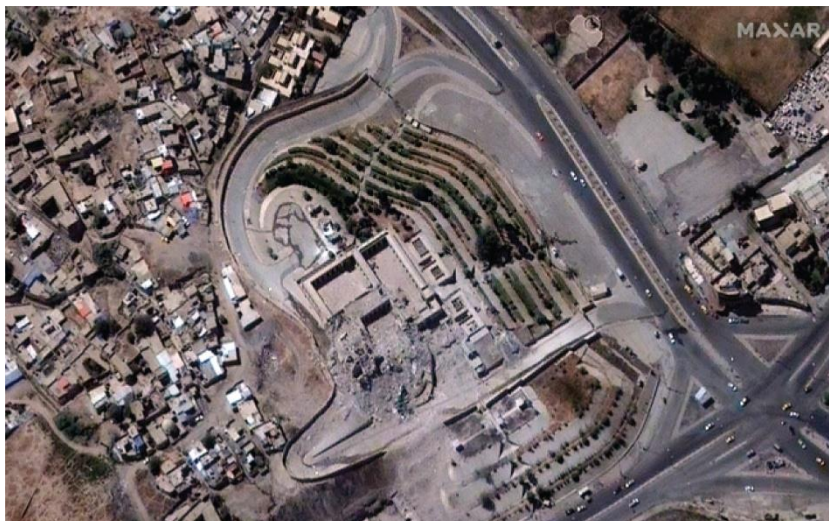
- ▶ It is our recommendation that, the SBAH considers the establishment of an authoritative body responsible for enforcing and mandating the said policy. The objective of the proposed authoritative body is to: (1) foster cooperative arrangements with qualified personnel to identify the conservation needs of each heritage site on a case by case basis, (2) offer sound advice, and consultative assessment to governorates and their respective councils, (3) in the case of First Nation peoples, the authoritative body must acknowledge and respect that Indigenous Assyrians have the right in accordance to international law to be actively involved in decisions affecting their heritage and ongoing management, and (4) it is imperative that, the said authoritative body identifies, reports, and escalates priority issues and breaches to the policy with the relevant government bodies.

- ▶ It is our recommendation that, the SBAH should, as a matter of priority, prepare a comprehensive listing or inventory with photographic evidence detailing artefacts known or believed to have been looted by Islamic State. These records would contribute significantly to the recovery and/or stop the trafficking of such items in global marketplaces. Federal and regional authorities should ramp up preventative measures by tightening up regulations pertaining to the sale of antiquities of dubious provenance.

- ▶ It is our recommendation that, UNESCO, donor nations such as Australia and non-governmental organisations provide assistance— financial and otherwise— for the conservation of Assyrian cultural heritage in northern Iraq. Such initiatives will not only drive tourism, but also serve as an instrument for economic, social, and cultural development. Federal and regional authorities must invest in training and awareness-raising initiatives. Education will play an imperative role in enhancing awareness concerning the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly among future generations.



▲ A satellite image captured on Saturday, 19 July 2014 shows the shrine and mosque dedicated to Nabī Yūnis (St. Jonah) intact.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Wednesday, 30 July 2014 shows the area where the shrine and mosque once stood has been obliterated.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Thursday, 31 March 2011 shows the monastery of Mār Eliyā intact.

Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.

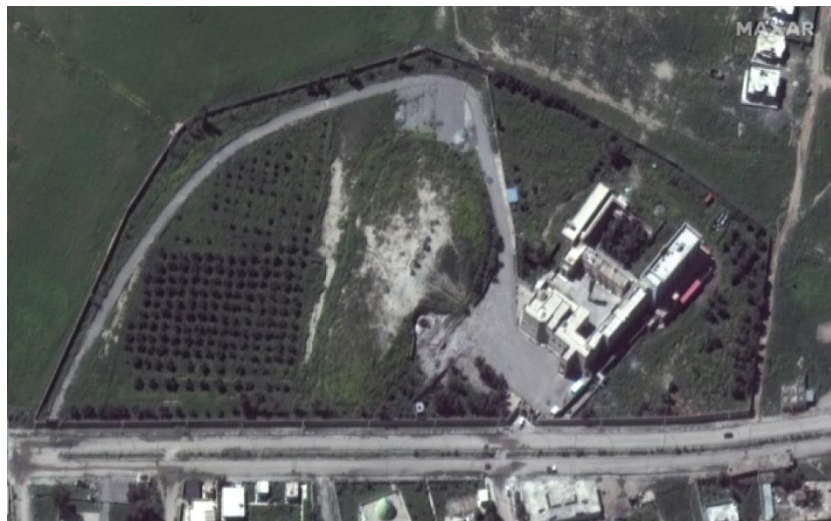


▲ A satellite image captured on Sunday, 28 September 2014 shows the area where the monastery once stood has been obliterated.

Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Sunday, 1 March 2015 shows the mausoleum and burial niche of Mār Bēhnām intact.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Friday, 20 March 2015 shows the area where the mausoleum and burial niche once stood has been obliterated.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



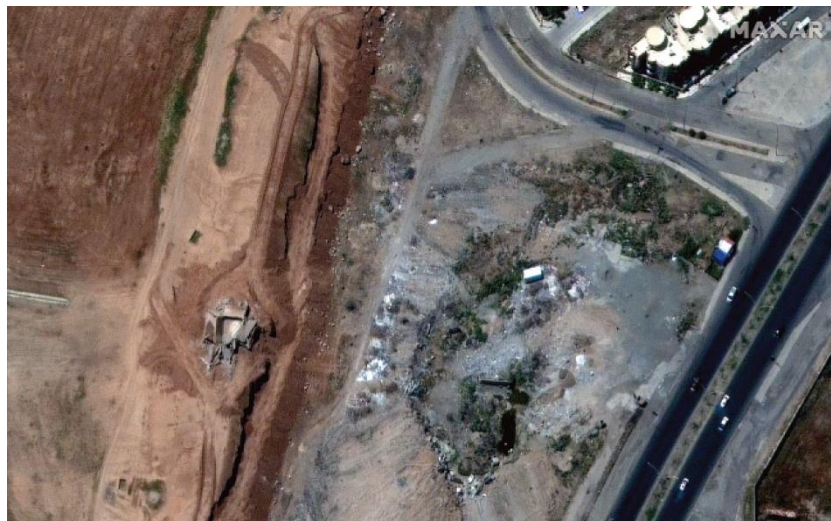
▲ A satellite image captured on Wednesday, 1 April 2015 shows the north-west palace in Nimrud (ancient Kalḫu) intact.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Friday, 17 April 2015 shows the area where the north-west palace once stood following its destruction.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Friday, 1 April 2016 shows Nineveh's city gate and associated fortification wall intact.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



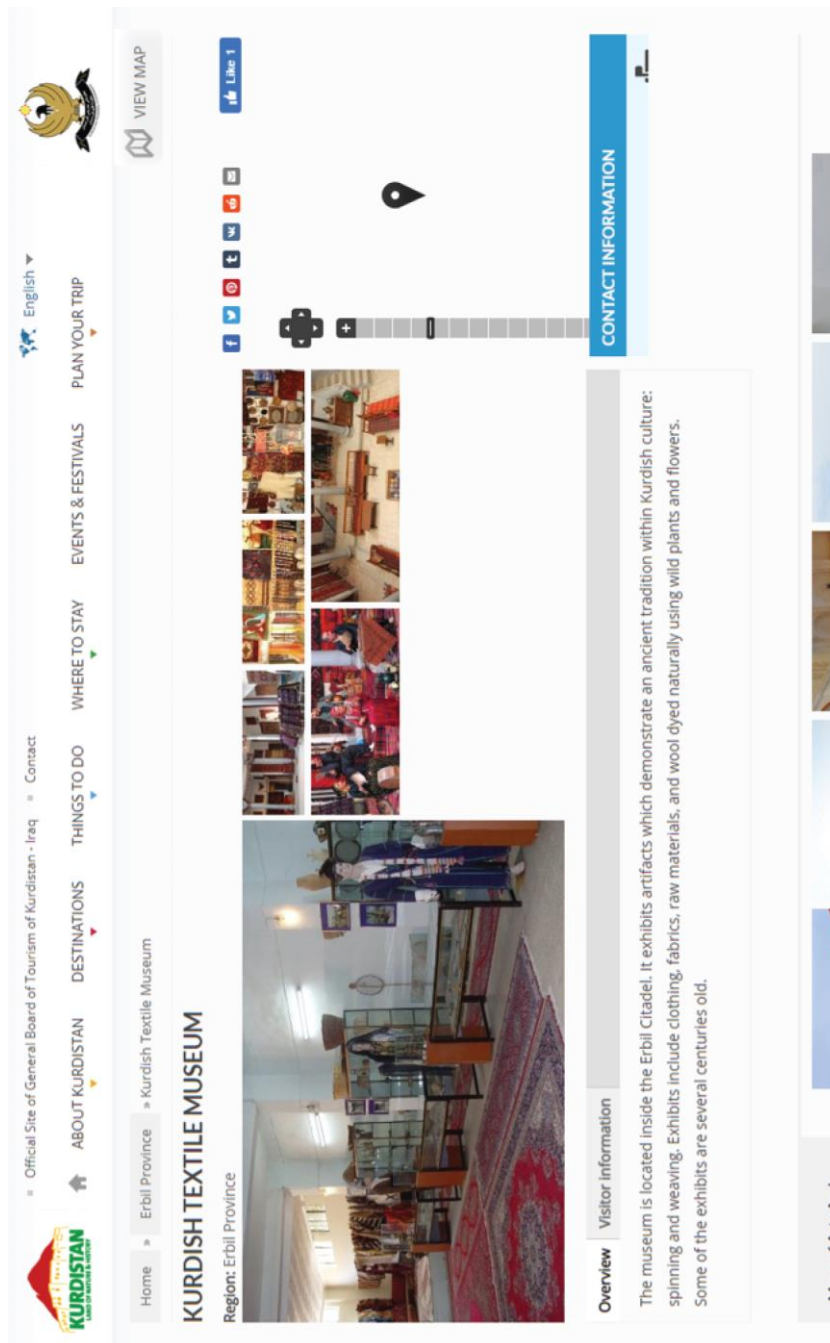
▲ A satellite image captured on Monday, 2 May 2016 shows the area flattened with earth-moving equipment.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Sunday, 16 October 2016 shows the ancient citadel in Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin) intact.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ A satellite image captured on Friday, 4 November 2016 shows the area where the citadel once stood has been flattened with earth-moving equipment.
Source: © 2020 Maxar Technologies.



▲ Ethnographic mannequins adorned in traditional clothing are displayed throughout the galleries of the Kurdish Textile Museum. One mannequin, displayed in Assyrian traditional clothing, is mislabelled as Kurdish.

1. Incident reports concerning Assyrian cultural heritage sites can be extracted from ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI) weekly and monthly reports. These reports are made available online: see <https://www.asor.org/chi/reports/weekly-monthly>
2. For more information about World Heritage sites in Iraq: see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/iq>
3. Tentative sites are those that each State Party intends to consider for nomination for World Heritage status: see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/>
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About ACSYA Inc.

The Assyrian Cultural & Social Youth Association Inc., also commonly known by its acronym ACSYA Inc., is an independent not-for-profit organisation headquartered in Sydney, Australia.

The organisation's primary objective is to support the Assyrian community at reviving and maintaining culture, whether it be tangible or intangible. ACSYA Inc. develops campaigns and conducts independent research that is highly valuable for driving further understanding and appreciation of this rich heritage.

ACSYA Inc. facilitates a host of events, i.e., exhibitions, seminars, training sessions, webinars, and workshops. The organisation's broader objective is to drive volunteerism, develop partnerships, initiate dialogue, exchange of knowledge, encourage youth engagement and participation at all levels of communal life to achieve long-term benefits.

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