



The megalithic tomb at Dombate in Galicia, Spain, within its enclosing pavillion completed in 2011 (see Editorial). The elaborate structure is designed to protect the fragile prehistoric painted decoration within the burial chamber. Photograph: Felipe Criado-Boado.



A Sensys multi-sensor gradiometer from the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in use at the classical Greek city of Elis. This survey has mapped an extensive road network to the east, south and west of the central agora of this important city, well known for serving as the administrator for the ancient Olympic Games. The survey was undertaken as part of the AncientCity project which is investigating the use of geophysical and remote sensing methods on sites in the Peloponnese and Central Greece. (c) Ian Moffat.

EDITORIAL

🗿 Nimrud has been described as “not the largest of the ancient capitals of Assyria, but [. . .] undoubtedly one of the most beautiful archaeological sites in northern Iraq”¹. When Layard first visited it in 1840 “[t]he spring rains had clothed the mound with the richest verdure, and the fertile meadows, which stretched around it, were covered with flowers of every hue [. . .] My curiosity had been greatly excited, and from that time I formed the design of thoroughly examining, whenever it might be in my power, these singular ruins”² (Layard 1849). Five years later he began excavations, discovering two royal palaces and some of the famous Nimrud ivories. In his second season, the first of the famous colossal winged bulls and lions came to light, standing at the entrance to the temple of Ninurta. Thus was Nimrud brought back to public gaze, after more than two and a half thousand years of neglect.

Nimrud’s end as an Assyrian capital came at the hands of the Medes, who sacked the city in 612 BC. It suffered again in the nineteenth century, when Layard and his successors removed several of its sculptures to adorn the galleries of the British Museum. Today a third devastation threatens of an altogether different nature. The first act of destruction was through foreign conquest, the second driven by curiosity, imperialism and profit, but this third one is powered by ideology, propaganda and media impact. On 6 March 2015, the Iraqi ministry of tourism and antiquities announced that ISIS had attacked the site with bulldozers and heavy machinery. Their aim was to erase what they regard as ‘idolatrous’ pre-Islamic remains. A local source quoted by Reuters told how “Islamic State members came to the Nimrud archaeological city and looted the valuables in it, and then they proceeded to level the site to the ground.”

If true, this would be archaeological vandalism on an unprecedented scale. Still more worryingly, Nimrud does not seem to be the only site targeted for destruction. Similar treatment was reportedly meted out two days later to Hatra, a Graeco-Roman site in the desert west of the Euphrates. Hatra differs from Nimrud in being part of Arab heritage, capital of one of the first Arab states, and one in a chain of desert cities that included Palmyra and Petra. Irina Bokova, head of UNESCO, deplored this “direct attack against the history of Islamic Arab cities” that marks “a turning point in the appalling strategy of cultural cleansing under way in Iraq.”

Shortly afterwards ISIS turned their attention to another Assyrian capital, the city of Khorsabad. Here, the Iraqi antiquities authorities reported that the city walls and parts of the temples had been razed.

We seem to be facing a new tragedy akin to that of the ‘Bamiyan Buddhas’, an extension of religious extremism into cultural heritage in an effort both to enforce ideology and to focus the attention of the world’s media. The potential for damage of archaeological heritage


¹ Oates, J. & D. Oates. 2001. *Nimrud. An Assyrian capital revealed*. London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq.

² Layard, A.H. 1849. *Nineveh and its remains*. London: John Murray. [It was not until after publication it became clear that the site he had been excavating was Nimrud rather than Nineveh.]

in ISIS-controlled Syria and Iraq is enormous. This is, after all, part of the heartland of the very first cities and empires. The nature of the threat is entirely different from the widespread looting of archaeological sites that has gone on since the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003. So far, there is no firm evidence to confirm the extent of the destruction at Nimrud, Hatra or Khorsabad. No photos or satellite imagery have been released, but video footage recently showed electric drills being used to deface one of the colossal figures at the Nergal Gate at Nineveh. Still more graphic and distressing was the video footage of men armed with sledgehammers and drills destroying ancient statues in the Mosul Museum in an act of wanton vandalism. Among them were recognisable pieces from Hatra and Nineveh. Some of the latter might be modern replicas, but the Hatra statues appeared real enough.


Regrettably, these kinds of actions are becoming increasingly common. Armies have come and gone in Mesopotamia since ancient times and cities have been besieged and attacked. Nimrud was sacked by the Medes, and Hatra boasts (or boasted) an impressive set of Roman siege works. Yet none of these ancient conflicts led to the massive cultural desecration made possible by modern earth-moving machinery and explosives. Interestingly, none of the Roman cities conquered by the Arab armies in the seventh century AD were systematically destroyed by their new rulers, but that is what ISIS are now threatening. They are doing what none of their Islamic forebears sanctioned or encouraged, and this malaise is spreading. The spectacular Graeco-Roman cities of Lepcis Magna and Cyrene are now within the sights of ISIS-affiliated groups in Libya.

How can archaeologists respond? Statements by UNESCO, SAA, EAA and others all highlight the importance of archaeology and cultural heritage for humanity as a whole. Many of the sites that have been attacked have World Heritage status, although in these circumstances that may make them more, rather than less, of a target. The theatrical destruction of 'idoltrous' remains joins the carefully staged atrocities against innocent civilians (including tourists in the recent attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis) as a powerful propaganda tool, one that is aimed clearly against both the Iraqi government and Western powers. The true scale of the damage is hard to assess: the sites affected lie by definition outside government control. And it could be argued that by highlighting the damage, we are giving ISIS what they most desire—publicity. Yet it is impossible to pass over these terrible events in silence. Are ISIS simply grabbing headlines, or are they really impelled by a determination to erase all trace of these ancient societies? In other instances, they seem to be driven more by the money to be made from looting to fund their war effort, taxing the profits made by illicit dealers and traffickers. Some small comfort comes from the successful seizures of looted Syrian and Iraqi antiquities in recent weeks. Let us hope that when the dust settles, the damage is less severe than we currently fear; but latest satellite imagery indicates that ISIS have indeed carried out their threat at Nimrud.

 Destruction of a different kind has hit archaeological sites in Nepal, where a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck on April 25th, just as we were going to press. The human cost is still rising, but historic buildings in the centre of Kathmandu have clearly suffered badly. Nepal is in fact home to no fewer than eight UNESCO World Heritage sites, though most have escaped relatively unscathed. Nonetheless, while some of the older structures, such as the fifth-century AD Swayambunath stupa west of Kathmandu, have survived, many smaller

pagodas and palaces have collapsed. The loss of the exquisite sixteenth-century Vatsala Durga temple in Bhaktapur is a particular tragedy. Some of these structures may be rebuilt and restored, just as many were after the severe 1934 earthquake, and tourism will no doubt return, but the loss of cultural value is irremediable.

Preserving the paintwork

 It is of course not only human actions nor severe earthquakes that destroy archaeological sites but also the passage of time. This was brought home to me in a recent visit to painted megalithic tombs in western Iberia. A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to study at close quarters the Palaeolithic images in several painted caves of Asturias and Cantabria, in the hill country of northern Spain. One of the abiding impressions was of the fragility of the art: charcoal images of reindeer, for example, that looked as fresh as if they were drawn only yesterday. You felt that you could smudge them by merely running a finger over them. The outstanding preservation is of course due to the stable and protective environment of the cave. Once taken out into the open, such images are unlikely to survive long.

Megalithic tombs are not like caves. They do not provide the same stable and protective environment, and painted decoration in megalithic tombs is not common. It is mainly confined to western Iberia, although traces have recently been discovered in Brittany (see Bueno Ramírez *et al.* 'Natural and artificial colours' *Antiquity* 89: 55–72) and there is painted Neolithic stonework in the Orkney Islands. The geography, however, was always difficult to explain. Was it only Iberian megalith-builders who chose to paint their tombs? Or had the vagaries of climate destroyed the paintings in the colder northern regions? It is certainly a very fragile medium, and raises particularly difficult questions about the kind of conservation that is appropriate.

At Dombate in Galicia they have gone for the radical option. This impressive megalithic tomb was excavated in the late 1980s. The chamber is formed of seven tall granite slabs sloping inwards and leaning against each other to support a capstone that forms the roof. To one side is a passage that originally provided access into the chamber. It is a typical megalithic tomb of this region, and radiocarbon dates indicate that it was built in the first half of the fourth millennium BC. Where Dombate differs from most of its neighbours is in the survival of painted decoration: geometric designs painted in red and black on a white background, running around the bases of the stones. The painted band is only around half a metre high, the depth to which they were covered before excavations began. On the upper parts of the stones, exposed for hundreds if not thousands of years, nothing survives. It is only on the lower parts of the stones, where the motifs had been buried and protected from weathering, that paint has been preserved.

All archaeologists have the responsibility to consider the long-term survival of the sites that they have excavated, whether by back-filling trenches, laying down geotextiles or consolidating (and if necessary covering) mud-brick or stonework. Nobody would dispute that, but it can be difficult to achieve, especially when the remains are very fragile.

In 2009 the regional government of Galicia decided to preserve the Dombate paintings by enclosing the whole tomb within an enormous building. There are in fact two separate buildings. Tourists today begin their visit at the 'Centro de Recepción' close to the car park

(with a fibreglass replica of the megalithic structure), before taking the path to the ‘Pabellón del Dolmen’ [Pavilion of the Dolmen] that houses the tomb itself. At over 30m², with plate glass windows on all sides, it has not surprisingly been controversial. The tomb has essentially been mothballed, cut out of its landscape—for its own protection. Rather than bringing artefacts to the local museum, the museum has been brought to the site. The local press were keen to know our opinion about the building. Was it a success? Perhaps not altogether, but how else could the painting be preserved, once it had been disturbed? We saw other painted tombs where less radical solutions had been tried (laying down geotextiles, reconstructing the mound), but it was clear that they were not working as well as desired and that something more substantial was required.




The megalithic painted art at Dombate in Galicia: red lines and black dots on a cream kaolin underlay.

One option, of course, would be to rebury the tomb after it had been fully recorded. A fibreglass replica might suffice for future visitors, but we do not know how long the earth would take to settle back into position. Teams at Çatalhöyük are trying to find that out for the wall paintings there. It would be ironic if reburying the painted decoration simply hastened its demise. So the Dombate solution might be the best available. It is preservation but at a cost, in both financial and aesthetic terms.

Visiting Dombate is a memorable experience. It reminds us very forcefully that all excavation is in essence destructive, with the added dimension here of destabilising the

ground conditions that have led to the survival of fragile prehistoric painting for several thousand years, yet it does not provide any easy answers.

Updates

 In last September's editorial I referred to new legislation proposed in the USA (the FIRST Act) that threatened to reduce National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for the



Fireworks at Leicester Cathedral marking the end of 'Reburial Week' (see p. 530). Photograph: Carl Vivian, University of Leicester.

humanities and social sciences, and in particular for archaeological projects overseas. The immediate danger appears to have receded, at least for the present. Initially suspicious of the way in which grants were decided, the Republican-led Science Committee of the House of Representatives seems to have been surprised by the rigorous nature of peer review. At the same time, the NSF, akin to funding bodies in many countries (not least the UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council), is showing greater responsiveness to the concern of the public and politicians alike that research funding paid for by taxpayers should be directed above all to issues of wider public benefit. We would argue, of course, that archaeology brings those kinds of benefits; social science funding, however, remains under attack not only in the USA but in many other countries too. On the other hand, recent events in Iraq—the targeting of famous archaeological sites—surely provides undeniable testimony of the power of archaeology. Will the ideological destruction of Near Eastern heritage bring home to Western governments

and politicians the role and importance of archaeology in a contested world? Or is that too much to hope?

Today (1 April 2015) marks the completion of the UK government's plan to divide English Heritage by transferring responsibility for monuments in state care (under the National Heritage Collection) to a new organisation ('Editorial' *Antiquity* 88: 7–12). That organisation, confusingly called the English Heritage Trust (and retaining the English Heritage branding), is a charity independent of the government. It has been given an £80

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million launch fund but is now expected to cover its costs through entry fees, donations, partnerships and commercial enterprise. Will that raise enough money to maintain the 400+ sites, monuments and historic buildings for which they are now responsible? It is not going to be easy.

Finally, no one following recent UK news can fail to be aware of the reburial of Richard III in Leicester Cathedral on Thursday 26 March. Over 20 000 people viewed the coffin while it lay in state, and travel companies are already offering specialist cradle-to-grave tours, from Fotheringhay castle where Richard was born, to Bosworth Field where he met his death (and not omitting, of course, the now famous Greyfriars car park). The level of public interest is extraordinary but shadowed by debate about the ethics of a ceremonial burial for a ruler with such a dubious reputation. Or was that simply Tudor propaganda? The full account of the excavation of Richard's original burial place was published in *Antiquity* almost two years ago (Buckley *et al.* 'The King in the car park' *Antiquity* 87: 519–38). As journalists would say, you read it here first!

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Durham, 1 June 2015