

History, Politics and Science

Temerity of Archaeology

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The echoes of the execution of the Syrian archaeologist, Khaled al-Assad by ISIS for trying to protect the antiquities at Palmyra, and the attempts to brutally erase intellectual inquiry, are to be heard in events closer to home.

The recent execution of Khaled al-Assad, well-known Syrian archaeologist has brought attention to an often misunderstood subject. Khaled al-Assad, director of antiquities and the museums at Palmyra was executed by the ISIS on various counts --- including, it is believed, treachery --- for having attended conferences outside the country (in the land of ‘infidels’) and also for the fact that he was an ally of the ruling party at Damascus. As other credible reports have it, he earned the ISIS’s wrath for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of Palmyra’s antiques that could fetch the ISIS high prices in the black market.

Palmyra is an ancient site, one of the earliest global cities as it stood on the ancient caravan trade routes traversing east and west across the Syrian Desert. In course of its history, Palmyra was independent for brief periods, or more often under the sway of powerful states around it – the Romans, and those who came after, the Seleucids, the Sassanids, and the Abbasids and even later. Under the Romans it was allowed, perhaps for reasons of distance, to function almost as independent colony. For a short period in the early 3rd century, Palmyra, under its now legendary queen Zenobia, declared independence from Rome, before she was, as the story goes in its different versions, brought to Rome and forced to accede to the Emperor Aurelian.

From the tenth millennium CE until the last century, Palmyra was a relatively minor centre. From the Ottomans it passed under the French Mandate post World War 1. And it was sometime at the turn of the 19th century, that excavations began, when an entire village was moved to a nearby site to facilitate archaeological efforts. The excavations have been part of an international effort led by French, Syrian and other East European archaeologists. Palmyra secured world heritage status in 1980.

The ISIS’s role in Palmyra’s destruction was not merely directed against the present regime but also against a more universally shared past. It wasn’t merely Khaled al-Assad’s death but also

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the entire act of destruction of Palmyra that is a very visual deliberate act. His death also focuses on archaeology; and how inextricably entangled its role is with the prevailing politics of the time, making the two conjoined and interrelated in strange ways.

In the past, and archaeology has had comparatively new beginnings (since it was antiquary studies that was at the forefront), archaeologists were almost like expedition leaders, leading journeys across frontiers to, literally, discover strange new lands.¹ Little wonder then the archaeologist, for many, conjures up the image of a lonely frontier hero ---there was Shahrukh Khan as one, excavating old Harappan sites in the movie *He Ram*. The discovery of different Harappan sites forms a real adventure story as well. As new sites of the Harappan culture continue to be discovered and excavated, indicating its spread over a greater geographical area than believed, archaeologists especially have been at the forefront of these efforts.

S R Rao's excavations offshore at Dwarka continue to excite the imagination, historically and in general. Excavation here deployed modern methods of marine archaeology, while the debate around discoveries made till now remain ongoing, showing that archaeology is a continually evolving field, as much because it is a science that continuously borrows from other sciences and also because of its efforts to resist the pull of what is still regarded as a mythical past. In other respects, excavations such as those in Dwarka appear to assure linkages with times past, and even in misunderstood, overly simplified ways, hold out the promise of a resurrected heroic past.

Archaeology in several unfortunate ways became a tool in establishing these hoary truths. The archaeologist Sarunas Milisauskas in his book, *European Prehistory: A Survey*, has detailed how in the mid-1930s, archaeologists played along with Fascist ideologies of the day, especially when there were at the time 18 dictatorships across Europe (with the exception of an undivided Czechoslovakia till 1930s). Mussolini, for instance, fondly hoped to recreate the old Roman Empire by expanding Italy into the Balkans and North Africa.

Archaeologists have often found themselves working, willy nilly in support of, or to prove, old mythical concerns. The past could appear an inviolable truth; but archaeology is a science where the past has to be properly created, proved, and validated. Gustaf Kossinna (1859-1931) one of the most renowned archaeologists of his time – credited, as Milisauskas writes, with the very definition of archaeological cultures, archaeological cartography and cultural historical studies - earned himself considerable disrepute when his alleged views on German superiority appeared to have been wholeheartedly embraced by the Nazis by 1933. But as Milisauskas elaborates, it was

¹Consider the case of the Russian Peter Kozlov in the early 20th century who explored Xinjiang and discovered

Kossinna's 'settlement archaeology' method that gave ethnicity almost an archaeological sanction: argued that the distribution of distinctive artefact types indicated some kind of unique cultural province, and this in turn could be associated with the settlement areas of ethnic groups. This was used to prove the establishment of a greater German lebensraum. While Kossinna's method was soon discredited, it was popular among Soviet archaeologists in the 1950s and 1960s.

Enver Hoxha, the Albanian leader, wanting to establish Albania's unique past and found archaeology a useful ally in securing his own position. Establishing connections with Illyria, an ancient Eastern Europe region, showing apparent similarities between the Albanian language ancient Illyrian and so juxtaposing it to a mythical and glorious past, would, he hoped offset the trauma of Albania's past when the region had suffered conquest by stronger neighbours.

Janus-faced ASI

The ASI in India is one of the world's oldest archaeological bodies. Headed by some pioneering archeologists, it has to its credit several important discoveries. On the other hand, it also has had a chequered history.

It was only the last century that the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon foisted his attention and the government's finances on the ASI. This, besides the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904 enacted during his office, were, as the historian Nayanjot Lahiri points out, dictated by an imperial spirit. Curzon's monuments policy was, however, in some ways discriminatory: conservation efforts and funds were directed more for monuments in British India while those in the 'Native States', most notably the temples at Khajuraho, were given short shrift. Moreover, in the area of religion, Curzon's monument policy encountered and met resistance in equal measure – not merely from the policy's intended beneficiaries but those who had devised it as well. Also, Curzon believed that the 'natives' could not quite manage their own past. So once the mosque at Bijapur was refurbished, it wasn't allowed to be handed over to local Muslims.

The other aspect of this policy was that only a person of the same faith could appeal or participate in the preservation and upkeep of a religious monument or shrine. This led to controversies, as for instance, over the Sanchi Stupa and the Mahabodhi complex at Gaya. At Gaya, the ASI and Curzon encountered stiff resistance when they attempted to wrest control of the complex' management from the mahant, Krishna Dayal Gir, who said it was a multi-religious shrine where people of different faiths –Hindus and Buddhists – had offered worship in different ways over centuries.

John Marshall, as then head of the ASI, made efforts to have a Buddhist custodian or 'chowkidar' appointed to the Sanchi stupa complex. Yet the stupa had been administered and maintained by the ruler of Bhopal for generations; its current ruler then was Kaikhusrau Jahan, who ruled with the title Nawab Begum of Dar-ul-Iqbal-i-Bhopal, and noted for her progressive

work in education and for Bhopal's development. Marshall had even advertised for the position but the Nawab Begum stood up to this pressure, insisting a shrine's upkeep was beyond the matter of anyone's religion. Despite these initial differences, over the next decade, Marshall and his team carried out excavations and crucial archaeological research at Sanchi.

In more recent times, in the early 1990s, the ASI didn't cover itself with glory with its report ordered by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad high court ostensibly about the prior existence of a temple below a disputed site. The ASI's brought out its report within two months of the court's order (a precedent that astonished experts for reports by all accounts took far longer). But for all this, the report was never published.

As is well-known now, at the 1994 World Archaeology Congress, in an equally divisive move, delegates were told not to raise the issue of the Babri Masjid demolition, of two years ago. The president of the Congress and then head of the ASI, BB Lal also courted controversy in some measure. An earlier paper of his had clearly mentioned that while the disputed site had seen habitation in the early years of the first millennium CE, little evidence of this had been found for the millennium after that (*Indian Archaeology*, 1976-77). However, in a paper that appeared in *Manthan*, 1990, he wrote of the remains of a temple pillar dated before the mosque's construction. In 1993, the Indian History Congress had accused the ASI of maintaining a silence over the demolition of a historically maintained site (as the Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi site indeed was), and of allowing illegal diggings around it.

Arguably, one of the chief mandates of archaeology is the preservation of the past, of monuments and sites with a historic meaning, and beyond all political intent. It is also in Syria, almost in a first of its kind move, that the details of the damage sustained by historic sites in the long conflict, as well as the lone battle waged by archaeologists to safeguard priceless artefacts, beyond the immediate political present, is being documented by archaeologists and scholars online, in a very public way. This is a viable counter effort to the violence waged by militants to erase a community totally, by simultaneously wiping away its heritage as has happened in Palmyra and earlier in Mosul, Iraq.

Recently the International Criminal Court in Geneva ordered the trial of one of the arrested militants of the group Ansar Dine that over several weeks in 2012, had destroyed around "ten buildings of cultural, religious and historical importance" in Timbuktu, a heritage site in Mali in Africa. It's the first time a case of 'destruction of cultural heritage' forms part of the ICC's mandate and the Rome Statute that governs it. Syria and Iraq however are not part of ICC; but there is a possibility, as experts believe, that in a post conflict scenario, a case for the ICC's intervention, about the clearly documented cultural destruction currently being waged in Syria and Iraq can be made at the behest of the UN Security council. And hopefully, in the interests of the past, and what it has made us, this shall go some way in preserving and recording our pasts without prejudice.