
Reviewed by Kyle Bradley Ashley

Among their many crimes, The Islamic State (IS/ISIS) shocked the world with videos of deliberate, almost jubilant, destruction of ancient artifacts and heritage sites in the areas they controlled in Iraq and Syria. This destruction is a curious phenomenon, as none of the other rebel groups in the protracted conflicts in these two countries have engaged in similar activities, or if they did, not usually as thorough and publicized. In his book, *the Idols of ISIS*, Aaron Tugendhaft sheds light on the Islamic State’s campaign against Syrian and Iraqi heritage by interrogating the presumptions underlining IS’s acts of destruction. He asks the following questions: “What does this video reveal about the role images play in politics? Why destroy images? Can we find better ways to live together in their midst?” (Introduction) For most of the book, Tugendhaft attempts to offer the readers informative answers for these questions.

The monograph is divided into three tight chapters, each elaborating on a distinct aspect of the Islamic State’s iconoclastic campaign. In the introduction, Tugendhaft recounts the incident which instigated this project: his viewing of a 2015 video published by IS that captures the shattering of Assyrian relics in the Mosul Museum in Iraq. This video, in Tugendhaft’s reading, marks an uncanny resemblance to an Assyrian carving which depicts three men smashing the sculpture of a deposed king. The comparison sparks the questions which inspire the contents of the book. What drives the destruction of images? And what drives the production of images depicting the destruction of images? Tugendhaft argues that the public spaces in which democratic politics operate within are mediated by images which inform our desires and shape our perception of the world. As a result, ISIS’s iconoclasm can be seen as an effort to build a society without politics — the image of the destruction of images operating as a symbol to impose unity.

The first chapter demonstrates how iconoclasm is not merely a destructive act, but a process in which new symbols are generated through the destruction of other ones. This is achieved through comparing the destruction of Assyrian relics in the Mosul Museum to the destruction of Babylonian idols by Abraham as narrated by the Qur’an. Drawing on the writings of Medieval philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi, Tugendhaft notes the paradox that lies within the heart of iconoclasm, that the commitment to an imageless regime can only be cultivated through the usage of images.

The second chapter of the book explains how ancient relics of Assyria and Mesopotamia have been appropriated by various social actors in the context of legitimizing larger political projects. Tugendhaft details the process by which images of Mesopotamia were appropriated in order to construct a universal cultural heritage during the area of European imperialism. European archaeologists working before and during the First World War used images of Assyrian and Babylonian relics to connect contemporary Western culture to ancient Mesopotamia, which was believed to be the first world civilization. Tugendhaft also notes the subsequent appropriation of these images in the construction of an Iraqi national identity throughout the 20th century, detailing how Saddam Hussein utilized Assyrian and Mesopotamian relics to imagine Iraq (and himself by extension) as the destined leader of the Arab world. Drawing on theorizations of avant-garde art, Tugendhaft argues that through the smashing of these ancient relics, ISIS again transforms how these images of ancient Mesopotamian past are perceived in today’s world, not unlike how Western humanists and Iraqi Ba’athists have transformed our relationship to these images before.

The last chapter approaches the Islamic State’s digital productions and its resemblance and connection to American war propaganda. Tugendhaft illustrates this connection through tracing the images and videos produced by the media arm of IS, the Al Hayat Media Center, to visuals produced by the popular video
game franchise, Call of Duty, which Tugenhaft argues are reproductions of news coverage of American military operations. The chapter concludes with a passage critiquing social media conglomerates in their construction and management of digital forums. Though outwardly posed as a democratic medium, Tugendhaft argues that profiteering usually governs online discourses, which is especially apparent when tech giants commodify political images and campaigns that occur within their platforms. He argues that this brings about a new iconoclasm, wherein images are not destroyed through their smashing by a hammer, but through the draining of their meaning by digitization and commodification.

Ultimately the driving argument of The Idols of ISIS can be summarized succinctly by invoking the opening line of chapter 3, “Iconoclasm does not remove images so much as generate new ones.” Tugendhaft’s convincingly illustrates this point through examining the spectacle of the Mosul Museum. In this, The Idols of ISIS marks a solid scholarly contribution to the field of Middle Eastern studies, specifically by demonstrating the function of images, and the function of their destruction, in the construction of political spaces. The brevity and legibility of Tugendhaft’s prose makes the book ideal for usage in higher-level undergraduate courses, or as a companion text in graduate seminars. It should be noted that the accessibility of the text does not detract from the quality of the analysis set forth by Tugendhaft; and for scholars interested in the politics of signification, or the politics of insurrection in the Middle East, Idols of ISIS is a book that is worth visiting.

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