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Heritage under attack: motives for targeting cultural property during armed conflict

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ABSTRACT

Although attacks on cultural property have caused international outcry, our understanding of this phenomenon is still limited. In particular, little research has been directed towards exploring the motivations for such attacks. Therefore, we ask: *What are the motives for attacking sites, buildings or objects representing cultural heritage?* By combining insights from peace and conflict research with findings from heritage studies we present a typology of motivations for attacking cultural property. We identify four, not mutually exclusive, broad groups of motives: (i) attacks related to *conflict goals*, in which cultural property is targeted because it is connected to the issue the warring parties are fighting over (ii), *military-strategic* attacks, in which the main motivation is to win tactical advantages in the conflict (iii), *signalling* attacks, in which cultural property is targeted as a low-risk target that signals the commitment of the aggressor, and (iv) *economic incentives* where cultural property provides funding for warring parties. Our typology offers a theoretical structure for research about why, when, and by whom, cultural property is targeted. This is not only likely to provide academic benefits, but also to contribute to the development of more effective tools for the protection of cultural property during armed conflict.

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The systematic destruction of cultural symbols [in Palmyra] embodying Syrian cultural diversity reveals the true intent of such attacks, which is to deprive the Syrian people of its knowledge, its identity and history. (...) Such acts are war crimes and their perpetrators must be accountable for their actions. (Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, August 24, 2015, UNESCO 2015a.)

Introduction

Recent attacks on cultural heritage sites have been vigorously condemned by the international community, as exemplified by the above statement following the destruction of Palmyra's Temple of Bel during the Syrian civil war.¹ While the destruction of ancient archaeological treasures is particularly dramatic in present-day Syria, this case is far from unique. Cultural property has been attacked in wars of conquest and colonisation, during interstate and civil conflicts, by governments, rebels or rioters around the world. Cultural property is sometimes destroyed during armed conflict by accident, or as a result of indiscriminate attacks, which is rather plausible given a chaotic war situation.² What is much

more puzzling, however, is that some fighting groups use parts of their finite resources to deliberately carry out attacks against cultural property. These attacks have been carried out for different purposes and in a variety of ways. Some have deliberately targeted people using the site, while others have been directed against the monument or structure itself, in order to take control of, damage or destroy it.

We focus on such intentional attacks on cultural property and ask: *What are the motives for attacking sites, buildings or objects representing cultural heritage?* Despite the importance of this phenomenon, little is known about why armed organisations choose to target cultural property. Most existing research has focused on documenting the circumstances and extent of destruction in specific cases (see for instance, Gamboni 1997; Lambourne 2001; Layton, Stone, and Thomas 2001; Rothfield 2008; Noyes 2013) rather than the motivation behind such behaviour. One reason for the relative shortage of studies examining motives is that they are often difficult to pinpoint. Not least since myths and biased interpretations are common in conflict situations, which makes it difficult to access impartial accounts. Also, political rivals often produce propaganda about why the enemy is fighting (Viejo-Rose 2008). For instance, the German attack on Rheims cathedral during the first months of First World War illustrates how motives for a particular attack can become part of a propaganda war. The Allies argued that the Germans attacked the cathedral to signal their power and brutality, whereas the German state argued that the cathedral was attacked because it was used for military purposes (Emery 2009).

Nonetheless, some scholars have examined motivations for attacks on cultural property and suggested that they are common in campaigns of ethnic cleansing, identity-bound wars and iconoclastic actions (Bevan 2006; Coward 2009; van der Auwera 2012; Viejo-Rose 2013). While this provides the context for specific cases, the absence of a comprehensive framework to situate individual studies makes cross-case comparisons difficult. The lack of a common conceptual framework for possible motives behind attacks on cultural property limits the opportunities for advancements within this research field and negatively affects the ability of scholars to provide policy-relevant research and advice. Unless we know why cultural property is attacked, we cannot design policies to prevent such attacks or predict where the risk is greatest or why. There is also a strong judicial reason to better document and analyse the intention behind deliberate attacks on cultural property, as has become evident in the trials of the International Criminal Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia (Walasek 2015; Cunliffe, Muhesen, and Lostal 2016) and in a recent case in the International Criminal Court about destruction of cultural property in Mali (UNESCO 2015b).

In a recent study, Stone (2016) advances our understanding of why cultural property is destroyed during conflict by presenting seven reasons for this phenomenon.³ This comprehensive framework covers causes prior, during and after the conflict. In addition, it includes both intentional and unintentional attacks. This article, in contrast, focuses on deliberate attacks during on-going conflict and thus primarily falls under the category that Stone (2016) calls 'specific targeting'.⁴

In this article, we advance the understanding of motivations for attacks on cultural property by developing a typology that outlines general incentives for armed actors to attack such sites. Our starting point is that political organisations have finite resources at their disposal, and it would therefore not be rational of them to dedicate time and resources to attacking cultural property unless they expect to benefit from this action. By combining insights from literature on peace and conflict research with heritage studies we contend that the motivations behind attacks on cultural property can be classified into four broad categories. First, attacks on cultural property may be motivated by the *conflict goals* of the warring actors. For example, religious buildings may be targeted if religious belief or cultural identity are among the contested issues in the conflict. Second, conflict actors may seek *military-strategic* benefits from attacking cultural property because of their perceived military importance. Third, actors may attack cultural property in order to *signal* their strength and commitment vis-à-vis their opponent, or other audiences including the international community and potential supporters. Fourth, and finally, we also suggest that *economic incentives* may motivate attacks as a means to finance warfare. These categories are not mutually exclusive as any given attack may serve multiple purposes. Our typology of motives provides a structure that furthers an exchange of knowledge between researchers focusing on various individual events and those exploring long-running trends of attacks on cultural

property. Likewise, the typology can be a starting point for contrasting cases of attacks against cultural heritage sites with conflicts in which cultural property has not been targeted.

In the remainder of the article we discuss the concept of cultural heritage, which in itself can be contentious, and then we describe the different types of violent conflict that this article focuses on. This is followed by the presentation of our typology of motives, which has been informed by work carried out by both conflict and cultural heritage scholars. Finally, we present our conclusions and suggest some avenues for future research.

Cultural heritage and conflict

The concept of culture and the identification of what is 'heritage' are by themselves contentious issues. Therefore it should not be surprising that this becomes prominent in some – but not all – violent conflicts (Legnér, 2016). One contested issue is the creation and management of heritage sites, which has been identified by heritage scholars as constructed through cultural practices rather than objectively defined. In this article, buildings, sites and objects are not seen as having intrinsic qualities or values but these values are imposed on the fabric of sites by actors situated in time and space (Smith 2006; Gibson and Pendlebury 2010). Likewise, the heritage discourse in one community may differ from the one in another community, which could spur conflicts. For instance, before the Kosovo War of 1998–1989, Kosovar cultural property such as mosques from the Ottoman age was, with a few exceptions, not protected by Serbian legislation. After the war Serbian religious heritage sites in Kosovo were vandalised and in need of protection by UN armed forces (Herscher 2010). In addition, as cultural heritage becomes increasingly significant across the world, it becomes a venue for contestation and power struggle, ranging in scale from silent resistance to being violently claimed or even destroyed (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Silverman 2011). This can be exemplified by Islamic rebels in Mali who vowed to destroy anything in Timbuktu that was referred to as world heritage, arguing 'there is no world heritage, it doesn't exist. The infidels must not get involved in our business' (Elias 2013, 157).

Yet, despite being a contested concept, there exist definitions of cultural heritage that are broadly accepted. In this article, we use UNESCO's definition of cultural heritage which emphasises the idea of tangible resources inherited from the past and shared by all humanity: 'The cultural heritage may be defined as the entire corpus of material signs—either artistic or symbolic—handed on by the past to each culture and, therefore, to the whole of humankind' (Jokilehto 2005, 1). Using this definition we can see cultural heritage as being constructed through discourses where values are projected on to tangible objects. Despite the various definitions in use over the world, there is an increasing consensus that cultural property needs protection in times of war. In fact, cultural property protection has become an obligation in international humanitarian law (Stone 2013). Such protection is crucial as cultural property constitutes the memory of a community and the group may become dysfunctional if it is lost (Stone 2016). The devastating effects of attacks on cultural property can be exemplified by Iraq, where systematic attacks on symbols and monuments connected to the Baath regime since 2003 have led to 'a near complete erosion of the Iraqi brand of nationalism' (Isakhan 2011, 260).⁵

This article seeks a comprehensive understanding of motives for attacking cultural property and therefore considers a broad range of types of armed conflicts. Firstly, cultural property may be attacked as part of interstate conflict where different state armies face each other. In fact, cultural property has been captured as war booty by invading armies for centuries. A notorious example is cultural property stolen by the German and Russian armies during the Second World War (Nicholas 1994). Destruction of cultural property as part of 'spoils of war' dynamics between two state armies has, however, decreased in the last decades and one reason is that this type of behaviour has been addressed by international law as a breach of accepted military conduct of war (Meyer 1993; Stone 2016). Secondly, cultural property may be attacked as part of civil wars where the fighting is between a regime and a rebellious organisation which is seeking to take power or secede by the use of force. A well-known example is the Bosnian War in which cultural property was extensively destroyed as part of attempts to destroy religious and cultural identity (Walasek 2015). In these settings, competing identities may provide the

division between the belligerents and political actors may emphasise historical and cultural differences in order to mobilise support for their cause (Toft 2003; Eck 2009). Attacking prominent heritage sites may become part of this dynamic. Thirdly, cultural property may also be attacked as part of communal conflicts, where self-perceived identity differences define the actors in the conflict. In contrast to the more organised actors in interstate and civil wars, intercommunal violence may take place between 'mobs' claiming to represent competing ethnic, religious, or pastoralist/agriculturalist communities (Horowitz 2001; Sundberg, Eck, and Kreutz 2012; Brosché and Rothbart 2013). Cultural property with a high representational value for the other group may be targeted as part of such conflicts.⁶ In India, for instance, numerous heritage sites have been destroyed as part of intercommunal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims (Hansen 1999).

Why attack cultural property?

This section introduces a typology of motives drawn from conflict research about why actors involved in an armed conflict may attack cultural property. We identify four, not mutually exclusive, broad incentives for attacking cultural property: conflict goals, military-strategic, signalling and economic. While the conflict goals are related to the warring sides preferred political and societal system after conflict, the other three are actions intended to facilitate success in winning the conflict. Thus, attacks on culture property are for the first category connected to the question *why* they fight, the latter three focuses on *how* they fight. When interpreting the empirical examples provided to illustrate our categories it is important to remember that we do not claim a particular reason to be the sole motivation. Instead, we include the examples, as we believe that they describe important aspects of the dynamics that we have identified.

Conflict goals

All armed conflicts involve contested issues: the specific demands, grievances, or desires that warring parties have chosen to fight over. Johan Galtung, one of the founders of peace research, conceptualised conflict as being constructed out of three different components: (1) *attitudes*, (2) *behaviours* and (3) *contradictions* (or *issues*): the so-called 'conflict triangle' (Galtung 1969). Wallensteen, when reworking and operationalising Galtung's triangle, reconstructed it into (1) *parties*, (2) *behaviours* and the (3) *issues at stake* (Wallensteen 2012). In this article we use the concept of *conflict goals* to capture this core aspect of armed conflict. Attacking cultural property may constitute a way to achieve a warring party's goal for the conflict. For example, when ethnic and religious divisions constitute a key part of the conflict cultural property may be attacked because it represents symbols of identity and collective memory. Attacks against important sites can take place as part of all our examined types of armed conflict (interstate, civil war and communal conflict) as national, ethnic or religious identity is salient in most of these conflicts.

Theories of the goals in intra-state conflict initially focused on the role of economic discrimination, and in particular group-level relative deprivation as motivation for rebellion (Gurr 1970). For an economically and politically marginalised community, the use of state and international resources for excavation of archaeological sites and preservation of cultural property may seem provocative, and even more so if a multinational tourist industry develops which locals do not benefit from. Local criticism of this kind has been voiced at, for example, the Giza pyramids in Egypt and the Bagan temple area in Myanmar (Aziz 1995; Philp and Mercer 1999).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, and as conflicts erupted in the Balkans and in parts of Africa in the early 1990s, economic and ideological factors were increasingly accompanied by studies about how competing identities and ethnicities led to conflict. In particular, it was suggested that a source of conflict was the intrinsic value of certain territories to groups that could not be solved non-violently because of the indivisibility of the issue (Geertz 1973; Reynal-Querol 2002; Toft 2002, 2003). A commonly used illustration of this problem is the difficulty of finding a settlement for the area in Jerusalem

known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Haram el-Sharif (Hassner 2003). It is not, however, necessary that both sides of a conflict strive to control a particular site for it to be vulnerable during conflict. An attack can be motivated solely through the goals of a specific actor. For example, the destruction of burial tombs in the world heritage site of Timbuktu in Mali 2012 was motivated by the religious-political ideology of Islamic insurgents according to whom idolatry was forbidden and the influx of foreign tourists was considered harmful. These attacks were part of the Islamic rebels' conflict goal to introduce Sharia law in Mali, as well as part of a global struggle against the 'infidels' (Elias 2013; Walther and Christopoulos 2015).

In the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, religion and ethnicity became principal identifiers of difference and attacking religious buildings became a way of establishing superior power over the enemy (Walasek 2015). During the Bosnia War, 1992–1995, the destruction of cultural property was widespread and mosques, churches and monasteries were destroyed in a systematic manner. The primary reason for these attacks relates to the major conflict goal at hand: Who had the rightful claim to a particular territory? Buildings of symbolic value, especially minarets, were not just shot at or burnt but even razed to the ground in order to diminish the incentives for Bosnians to return to their village or town after the termination of the conflict (Chapman 1994; Walasek 2015). The Croatian military's attack on the Ottoman Bridge *Stari Most* in Mostar in November 1993 constitutes one of the most high-profile attacks on cultural property during the war. The prime reason for the attack was that Mostar – and the bridge especially – symbolised a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society living in peace (Coward 2009). This symbolism constituted an obstacle for the creation of a nationalist Croatian state in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Mostar as the intended capital. The destruction of the bridge was thus an attack on the idea of a future multi-ethnic nation. Although one should also keep in mind that the attack on the bridge also sought to stop the Bosnian army from transporting supplies to the frontline (Walasek 2015).

Even if a dispute does not begin over a contested cultural property, a consequence of polarisation during a conflict may lead to an increased willingness to destroy the opponents' culture as a means of asserting, defending, or denying future claims to power, land and legitimacy (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015). In a similar manner, destroying cultural property can become a way for rebels to reject the symbols of the regime even if the warring sides are mobilised along similar identities. Cultural property is typically part of national identity construction and can therefore both be accepted and rejected as the legitimate projection of ethnic history, cognitive collective memory and nostalgia (Bevan 2006; Coward 2009; Galaty 2011). Attacking such symbolic property can serve to destroy the enemies' 'thread of continuity' by harming their sense of belonging to a certain area, with the expectation that if the opponents' affiliation decreases it may be easier to attain control over it (Stanley-Price 2005; Viejo-Rose 2011). This kind of warfare was used to justify the looting of cultural property in Palestinian territories as it was claimed to constitute an act of resistance against the Israeli state. By pillaging archaeological sites associated with a Jewish claim to the land, Palestinian looters felt they were erasing the connection between Jewishness and the contested land (Abu El-Haj 2001; Lowenthal 2005).

Also communal conflicts can be triggered by competing claims to a place representing cultural values for one or both groups. One such example is the conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities in India over access to a sacred site in the town of Ayodhya in northern India. Ayodhya is important for Hindus as it is the assumed birthplace of the god-king Rama and because it is alleged that a historical Rama temple had been located there (Layton, Stone, and Thomas 2001). In 1528, Mughals invaded Ayodhya and according to the Hindu narrative destroyed the Rama temple and replaced it with a mosque called Babri Masjid, which since then has constituted an important site of worship for the Muslim community in the area. Religious violence at this site dates back to the 1850s but the situation escalated severely in 1992 when Hindu-nationalist organisations and political leaders pursued a policy to build a temple in remembrance of Rama. On 6 December 1992, more than 200,000 followers assembled in Ayodhya for a Hindu-nationalist rally during which a mob attacked and demolished the mosque. The destruction of the mosque prompted nationwide rioting between Hindu and Muslims causing more than 2000 deaths (Hansen 1999). Likewise, cultural property has also been targeted in

intercommunal conflicts in Darfur, the western-most region of Sudan. A core grievance in the conflict in Darfur is land and the attempt by communities without established land-rights to gain them. As part of this struggle militias from landless communities have destroyed historical documents establishing traditional land rights to deprive the traditional landowners of their established rights (O'Fahey 2008).

Military-strategic issues

Our second category – *military-strategic* – includes attacks where the main motivation to target a cultural property is an explicit attempt to win tactical advantages in the fighting. In all forms of conflict, strategic decisions shape the ability of actors to continue fighting as well as their probability of success (Gartner 1999). For armies involved in interstate conflict or civil war, capturing or destroying heritage sites may be motivated because of their location on mountain sides or along main thoroughfares or their design which may offer cover for snipers and spies. Furthermore, in wars fought to capture new territory (which is rarely the case in recent decades), one reason for erasing the symbols of the previous regime was to break any resistance. This was one of the motivations behind the deliberate attacks during the Second World War aimed at undermining the enemies' social cohesion and symbols of national unity. This included the German destruction of Jewish and Catholic cultural property in Poland during the 1939 invasion, and the Baedeker raids on historic city centres in England during 1942 (Lambourne 2001; Bevan 2006).⁷

A similar reasoning can be found in many civil wars characterised by irregular (or guerrilla) tactics rather than the conventional warfare of interstate conflict. A key strategy for rebel movements facing a state, which has superior military resources, is to use hit-and-run attacks after which they can blend in and hide among the civilian population (Kalyvas 2006). For that purpose, groups may deliberately choose to establish bases, weapons caches, and recruitment centres at important sites on the assumption that the government would be less willing and able to attack there. This was the background to the presence of many Sikh militants at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which led to a siege and eventually an attack by the Indian military on the shrine in 1984. The fighting killed about 1000 security personnel and Sikh militants (Singh 1993).

In civil wars, military strategy rarely focuses solely on how to act in the battlefield, but is also aimed at improving the military strength of the rebellion by adding recruits (Weinstein 2007). Since organising rebellion depends on secrecy, insurgent groups often rely on pre-existing networks through which they identify new members who can be trusted, and in which family, friendship, and co-ethnic ties become particularly useful. This means that heritage sites where communities regularly assemble – such as churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues – often also become spaces for political discussion and the organising of opposition. As part of the civil war in Kachin state in northern Myanmar, military offensives often include the burning of village churches. A local NGO representative in Yangon explained that this was not surprising since these often were used by the rebel group Kachin Independence Organisation for recruitment purposes and for communicating information about its goals and actions.⁸ Attempts to end these opportunities may therefore be viewed as a military-strategic option, while also attempting to break the morale and momentum building of an opponent. Another example of the connection between attacking cultural property and recruitment can be found in Syria. Considering the willingness of *IS* to broadcast its attacks on cultural property, some have argued that it is used as a means of spreading the reputation of the organisation around the world and to attract recruits from abroad (Noyes 2013).

Signalling

One of the key theories in conflict research holds that an armed conflict is essentially a bargaining game to determine which side 'deserves' most of the contested resource (Schelling 1958; Fearon 1995). According to this view, the key objective of all interaction between parties – both negotiations and fighting – is to signal their respective capabilities and commitment in the dispute. While the full theory

of signalling includes military-strategic motives and is part of the greater aim of reaching the actors' goals in the conflict, we are here particularly emphasising attacks that primarily serve as a signal to the opponent. In this sense, we incorporate signalling into our typology less as it was originally developed to explain interstate relations and more in its later version to explain terrorism and other forms of targeting of civilians during conflict (Crenshaw 1981; Kalyvas 2006).

The logic is as follows. In order to force concessions from the opponent, an actor needs to show their strength and, in particular, commitment to remain in the fight. While the former can be measured in terms of fighting capabilities, the latter relates to the willingness of an actor to suffer in order to win the conflict and is harder to quantify. One way of signalling commitment to the cause comes from attacking symbolically charged targets, which may include cultural property. In this setting, the cultural property is not in itself part of the dispute, nor is it of any military-strategic advantage, but the ability to launch the attack is by itself evidence that the group is capable and deserves to be granted concessions. Urban guerrillas in Latin America explicitly promoted the focus on symbolic attacks as a way of embarrassing the regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This inspired, for example, the Colombian M-19 rebel group to steal the sword and spurs of national hero Simon Bolívar from a museum in Bogota in 1974 (Scheina 2003). Conversely, cultural property may be destroyed, as the regime will seek to remove symbols of rebellion. This was the case when the Mexican army destroyed mural paintings glorifying the Zapatista rebellious leaders in Taniperla 1998 (*New York Times*, July 17, 1998; ICCROM 2005).

There are reasons to suspect that cultural property may be particularly at risk of being used for signalling in irregular conflicts. As noted above, the symbolic nature of what is considered cultural heritage makes it a target that is likely to warrant a lot of attention. At the same time, because most cultural property is not of military-strategic importance, these sites are rarely as well defended as government buildings or military bases. Thus, they are relatively low-risk targets (often referred to as 'soft targets'), but which send a very strong signal. In a similar manner, terrorists often choose to target civilians, even if their goals are political, as civilians constitute targets that are comparatively easy to attack while simultaneously sending a strong signal (Abrahms 2006). If it were the case that attacks on cultural property are a suitable 'weapon of the weak', we would see them becoming more or less common as a consequence of conflict dynamics (Hultman 2007).

In addition to signalling to their adversaries, groups also signal their capabilities and commitment to the international community and the local civilian population. It is likely, for example, that the Taliban decision to destroy Buddha statues in Bamiyan valley – despite the outcry of the international community – was partly taken to send a signal of strength and independence, even though they claimed that their motivation was their opposition to idol worship (Knuth 2006).

Furthermore, attacks may aim to send a signal to the audience of potential supporters. Such attacks may make recruitment (which is strategic) easier, but it is often primarily aimed at increasing collaboration and reducing the risk of denunciation (Kalyvas 2006). Rebel groups seeking cover amongst the civilian population are particularly sensitive to the risk of being infiltrated or betrayed, which means that it is important to clearly signal their ability to punish any civilians harbouring such intentions. Again, cultural heritage sites are often important communal arenas for displaying powerful signals, meaning that they may be at particular risk for this type of action. This is exemplified with the 'afterwar' (Herscher 2010) in Kosovo post-1999, when the dominant Kosovar media sided with the Albanian resistance movements, arguing in public that journalists who dared to compare Albanian violence with Serbian deserved to be attacked. In this way the resistance movement controlled the media and sought to scare everyone who made attempts at balancing the responsibility for violence in the conflict rather than just victimising Kosovar Albanians. This kind of nationalist media campaign has both fed and been coordinated with waves of attacks against Serbian heritage sites (Pettifer and Vickers 2009; Herscher 2010).

Economic incentives

Historically, much cultural property has been destroyed as victorious armies took cultural property as ‘spoils of war’. The theft of cultural property was often used to pay armies. Since the end of the Second World War, however, looting of cultural property conducted by armies winning the war has been limited (Stone 2016). Nevertheless, an important resource for a group to maintain a fighting force is the ability to provide private incentives to participants willing to risk their lives and livelihoods by joining an armed actor. Regardless of whether participants are specifically paid by the organisation, are offered opportunities to enrich themselves by loot, or are driven by ideological aims, rebellion is costly (Lichbach 1998; Weinstein 2007). Weapons need to be acquired; logistics and lodging need to be organised, and supporters and informers often need to be paid off in order for an organisation to function effectively (Petersen 2001; Wood 2008; Parkinson 2013). While conflict researchers have primarily focused on the role of natural resources as a means to boost a group’s war chest, the selling off looted antiquities provides an alternative source of funding. Thus, cultural property may be attacked because of economic reasons. In the contemporary conflict in Syria, for instance, numerous actors have looted cultural property to finance their fighting. The most documented instance is the looting by *IS*, which have attacked cultural property in order to steal artefacts that later have been sold on the black market to fund operations (Weinert 2016). In fact, it has been suggested that an additional purpose for broadcasting spectacular attacks on sites such as Palmyra is to advertise that their antiquities store is open for business (Baker and Anjar 2012). How much of a revenue *IS* actually receives from selling artefacts is highly disputed, but it has been suggested that it constitutes the second largest source of income (after oil) to the organisation (*The Guardian*, July 3, 2015). In addition, Syrian state forces (*The Guardian*, August 15, 2016) and opposition groups like the Free Syrian Army (*Washington Post* February 12, 2013) have also looted cultural property to finance their activities.

While opportunistic looting of cultural property has, to some extent, been a consistent feature of wars (Rothfield 2008), recent research suggests that the incentives for such behaviour have increased in recent years (Brodie 2015; Cunliffe, Muhesen, and Lostal 2016). Following increased export regulations the reduction in the legal international antiquities market means that collectors may be more active in exploiting opportunities when conflict erupts and policing is eroded. As a consequence, armed groups may deliberately modify their strategy in order to specifically capture and exploit cultural property as a means of expansion (Baker and Anjar 2012).

Hence, looted antiques constitute a source of funding for some armed groups and the list of countries torn by armed conflict that have been subjected to widespread looting is long. For example, illegal trade of antiquities constitutes part of the income of armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn countries with a great number of archaeological sites. Also, many features of the illicit trade with antiquities are enabled by the fact that it occurs in contested regions (Cunliffe, Muhesen, and Lostal 2016). Thus, dealers and clients involved in illicit trade do not only commit a crime but also contribute to financing several of the current conflicts.

For example, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraqi forces looted around 30,000 pieces of the Islamic art collection from Kuwait’s National Museum (Levin 1992). Similarly, the Iraq National Museum was looted during and after the US-led invasion in 2003.⁹ The looting of museums is always very complicated and involves factors at the regional, national and international level. Also, both professional and opportunistic looting often takes place at the same time (George 2008). It is not only armed groups that gain income from this type of trade. For example, in Afghanistan – which is a major source of illicit trade with antiquities – many local citizens have turned to looting due to economic hardship (Nemeth 2011). A similar pattern can be seen in Iraq where many locals turned to looting when they lost their normal livelihood. For instance, numerous farmers that were prevented from selling – or even growing – their normal crop turned to looting (Stone 2016).¹⁰ Such ‘civilian’ looting is, however, to some extent overseen by the warring sides as they constitute the de facto local authorities and may receive a cut of the profits from this trade.

Conclusions

This article set out to examine the under-researched question of: *What are the motives for attacking sites, buildings or objects representing cultural heritage?* We have aimed to improve our understanding of the motives of actors who attack cultural property by presenting the first typology of motivations for violence against heritage sites. We identify four clusters of motivations: (i) *conflict goals* where cultural property is targeted because it constitutes a key issue in the conflict) (ii), *military-strategic* where cultural property is targeted in order to gain tactical benefits (iii), *signalling* in which cultural property is targeted in order to illustrate commitment and (iv), *economic* where cultural property is attacked in order to finance armed groups. This typology helps us to structure motivations for attacking cultural property as part of armed conflict. It is important to note, however, that the four outlined categories are not mutually exclusive and that different motivations may interact.

The classification of motives for attacks on cultural property opens up several avenues for future research. Firstly, one issue for forthcoming research should be to collect systematic data on attacks on cultural property: why did they take place, were they directed against people or against objects, what was the extent of damage inflicted, etcetera. Not only would such a data-set allow us to understand which types of motivations are most common. It could also help us comprehend variations over time and geography in terms of attacks on cultural property.¹¹ Secondly, another path for future research would be to examine armed conflicts in which attacks on cultural property did not take place. To scrutinise incidents where attacks on cultural sites were imminent, but avoided, would increase our knowledge about the conditions under which armed groups become less likely to attack heritage sites.

So what are the implications of our typology for the protection of sites? We believe that a deeper understanding of the motives behind attacks on cultural property can facilitate more precise policies for the management of cultural property in conflict areas. With a more profound grasp of the reasons why some actors decide to attack cultural sites we can learn who are most likely to carry out such attacks as well as which types of cultural property has the highest risk of being targeted. Such information is crucial for actors concerned with preventing attacks against cultural property.

Notes

1. In line with Stone (2016) we use the concept cultural property to refer to sites, buildings and moveable artefacts. In addition, as the question of why symbols of cultural heritage are attacked as part of conflict is severely under researched we use a broad definition of cultural heritage (further discussed below) in this article. For instance, we include sites that are important both from a religious and heritage perspective. It is likely that the motivations for attacking cultural heritage will depend on which specific site is attacked and we intend to examine this question in later studies.
2. For a more general discussion on erasure of heritage see Holtorf and Kristensen (2015). Although their focus is not on destruction as part of armed conflict, it provides important insights on erasure more broadly that also have implications for destruction during war.
3. The seven reasons he lists are: (1) its protection is not regarded as important enough to include in pre-conflict planning; (2) it is regarded as legitimate 'spoils of war'; (3) it becomes collateral damage; (4) lack of military awareness; (5) looting; (6) enforced neglect; and (7) specific targeting.
4. Yet, we also cover economic motivations, which he primarily discusses under looting.
5. For a broad analysis on protection of cultural heritage during conflict see for instance Kila and Zeidler (2013).
6. In line with Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2016), we do not define terrorism as a separate category of violence. This is done for two reasons. First, acts of terrorism may occur in all our different types of conflict. Second, defining some perpetrators as terrorists is a political act in itself, making such a distinction less useful in an objective typology (see also Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler 2004).
7. Likewise, the destruction of Jewish, Catholic, and Polish material and intangible cultural heritage was a stated Nazi objective. Hence, the attacks were motivated by both military-strategic and conflict goals reasons.
8. Interview by one of the Authors, 10 March 2016, Yangon.
9. For a thorough examination of the destruction of the Iraq National Museum focusing on the national level (economic, political and educational reasons in particular) see George (2008).

10. Although looting of heritage increases during armed conflict, it should be remembered that looting has been a persistent activity long before armed conflicts broke out in, for example, Iraq and Syria (Gibson 2009; Cunliffe 2012).
11. There are several promising endeavours ongoing for collecting data on destruction of cultural heritage (see for instance EAMENA 2016; Isakhan 2016; PennCHC 2016). Yet, these projects cover a geographically limited area; a more comprehensive data-set would open up several important avenues for future research.

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