

Monuments stand for everything – they deserve protection

By [Daniel Gronow](#)

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Photo credit: Varun Shiv Kapur

Last month, the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra fell under ISIS control. For those who have been keeping up with the extremists' conquest of the Middle East, the fear now is that the militants will, under some iconoclastic pretext, destroy the site's historic Graeco-Roman ruins. And yet, should you openly bemoan this impending devastation, prepare to face the sanctimonious platitude that 'the loss of a few stones is nothing compared to the death of a single living person'. I have to disagree, even if that means flouting the shackles of 'good taste'.

Before arguing that point, however, I would like to address the contention that, by focusing our attention on Palmyra (as the media has done), we are inadvertently putting the ruins in more danger. On the hand one, this is undoubtedly true. By investing ourselves emotionally in the historic site, we have unintentionally created in the ruins a political tool, and ISIS will appear all the more ruthless when they raze it to the ground. On the other hand, Islamic extremists have been incensed by the Western world since time immemorial, and the above argument seems to propose something along the lines of 'ignore them and they'll go away'. This is shockingly immoral. If ISIS demolishes the site, it will be because they want to. Our self-censorship would serve only to remove ourselves from blame.

Others would argue the same point; that we are putting the ruins in danger, by asserting that ISIS will

destroy the ancient site because of the disproportionate and 'hypocritical' coverage of Palmyra in comparison to Syrian casualties. This is absurd. If ISIS demolishes Palmyra because we care more about ruins than human lives, they are being indignant. They want us to focus our cameras on the people they themselves have killed? The idea is staggering, but if it happens to be true, it reveals nothing but the depravity of the whole narcissistic crusade.

On the initial point regarding human lives: we need to stop sentimentalising. To claim that every life is 'sacred' (I'm an atheist, but is there a more pointed synonym?) is an act of self-delusion, indicative of moral laziness. It is a prosaic byword for the naïve and the conceited, and it should be contemplated only so that it may be thrown away. Monuments, history and heritage; all these things are more important than any single individual, or any group of individuals whose death falls short of populicide.

It is not people, you see, but a people which matters here. The determiner makes all the difference. As long as there are survivors (and what civilisation has ever been truly extinguished?), then monuments stand for everything. Without culture and without heritage, any survivors of the conflict in Syria would hardly be survivors at all. ISIS, under the pretence of religious devotion, are systematically effacing Syrian identity. This isn't, as one person informed me, the 'smashing of churches to save souls' (an inane reference to William Dowsing). This is an attempt at subjugation via cultural genocide. To dismiss this in favour of 'the Syrian people' is to abandon those very people to oblivion.



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