

Race To Preserve Shared Heritage Under IS Threat

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The nihilism of Islamic State allows room for no other culture - the group has taken the hammer to many precious historical sites and artefacts.

But new digital techniques could help preserve the objects of our shared heritage, even as IS wages its total war.

At Oxford University, a project called Emergency Archaeology is watching sites like Palmyra and Nimrud under IS control from afar.

Professor Robert Bewley, the project's director, told Sky News: "For a number of the sites, what we're doing is trying to get the latest satellite imagery, and that might be a month after the damage has occurred, and then we will look at it to monitor it.

"Because the purpose of the project is to say: what happens after the conflict is over?"

"The damage that Islamic State is doing is absolutely terrible.

"We saw the explosion at Nimrud and everything else. We'll look at that - at how much damage they've done. Hopefully, they are doing less damage than they were, but we don't know yet. So we've got to keep a really close eye, but in a way that's the tip of the iceberg."

Professor Bewley and his team of researchers are building a database of at-risk sites and images, which will go online in September and be available to everyone.

If the Emergency Archaeology project is about the big satellite picture, Factum Arte is obsessed with the fine detail.

The group has documented works of art and buildings up close and personal, using high-resolution photos and different sorts of laser scanners.

Combining these two lets Factum create precise digital replicas of artefacts, including a facsimile of Tutankhamen's tomb.

Now, they are training local volunteers to do the same, to create a network of digital conservators around the world. A pilot of the project has been tried in [Lebanon](#).

Factum's director Adam Lowe told Sky News: "What we're up to right now is we're desperately trying to be proactive rather than reactive.

"We need to record as many of the at-risk sites across North Africa and the Arab world as possible, at the highest resolution that's possible."

He said that "it's time for the politicians to hand over to the technicians to get out there in the field and to record as much as possible."

Factum was supposed to document the statues at Nimrud, but the Iraqi security ministry refused clearance. In the end, IS got there first.

The damage is permanent. But these digital traces are not just records of loss - they are a new sort of artefact, valuable in their own right.

