

# Event explores effects of ISIS on historical artifacts



Geoff Emberling, assistant research scientist at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, speaks about the destruction of antiquities and the state of ruin caused by ISIS in the Middle East in the South Thayer Building on Monday.

Zoey Holmstrom/ Daily

[Emily Davies](#)

For the Daily

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As nations worldwide grapple with the rise of the terrorist group ISIS, the Near Eastern Studies Department held an event Monday to discuss the physical and historical impacts of the group's violence on the modern Middle

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Three faculty members and about 40 attendees joined Geoff Emberling, assistant research scientist at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, to discuss the destruction of antiquities and the state of ruin in the Middle East.

Images of destroyed monuments and historical sites cycled behind the speakers as they talked about how the city of Apamea in western Syria was looted block by block, and barrel bombs pressed against artwork in the palace of Ashurnasirpal II.

Panelists provided attendees with their perspectives on ISIS' path of destruction and one common theme emerged: helplessness.

"This situation is extremely dire, and it's not going to get better soon ... I have a tremendous sense of impotence. There is very little we can do about it, and that is the depressing part," said Piotr Michalowski, a professor of ancient Near Eastern languages and civilization.

Emberling began his lecture by providing a brief history of Iraqi and Syrian destruction. The panel followed a previous lecture he gave in early November to a Museum Studies program on a similar topic. Emberling said he invited to continue the conversation with a second event due to the amount of interest surrounding this topic.

Emberling summarized related historical events, like Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and ISIS' recently acquired caliphate label, but his focus moved toward understanding how these historical events and the intentional destruction of historical artifacts are linked to the United States and European nations.

Strategically, through the destruction of Roman artifacts, ISIS gains attention from the West and from potential recruits. Roman monuments in the Middle East are more closely related to European and U.S. culture than any heritage in the Near East. Because of this, U.S. media reacts strongly when such artifacts are targeted.

Panelists said this publicity in Western countries is exactly what ISIS is seeking. This national attention attracts young radicals searching for a voice. Economically, the destruction helps ISIS due to its sale of some antiquities. By bulldozing large arches or monuments, ISIS makes room to dig up the portable, and therefore marketable, items. By publicly advertising the growing scarcity of Middle Eastern artifacts, ISIS increases the value of these smaller objects.

As scholars, Emberling and the other panelists said they often feel defeated by ISIS'



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As Emberling articulated, understanding the strategy behind ISIS' destruction of national history calls attention to the broader story explaining the rise of ISIS.

“What are the larger conditions that make it possible for a larger movement like this to take root?” Emberling asked. “It has a large part to do with American policy ... (The destruction of antiquities) can call attention to this Middle Eastern issue beyond the political debates we’ve been hearing that demonize refugees who are just trying to survive.”

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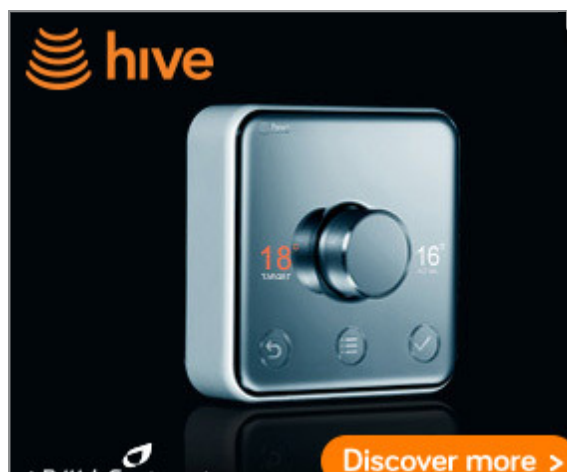
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