

Beheaded Syrian Scholar Refused to Lead ISIS Terrorists to Hidden Palmyra Antiquities

Khaled al-Asaad, 82, was interrogated by militants for a month before he was murdered in the ancient city

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[Islamic State](#) militants beheaded a renowned antiquities scholar in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra and hung his mutilated body on a column in a main square of the historic site because he apparently refused to reveal where valuable artefacts had been moved for safekeeping.

The brutal murder of Khaled al-Asaad, 82, is the latest atrocity perpetrated by the jihadi group, which has captured a third of [Syria](#) and neighbouring Iraq and declared a “caliphate” on the territory it controls. It has also highlighted Isis’s habit of looting and selling antiquities to fund its activities – as well as destroying them.

Syrian state antiquities chief Maamoun Abdulkarim said Asaad’s family had informed him that the scholar, who worked for more than 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra, was killed by Isis on Tuesday.

Asaad had been held for over a month before being murdered. Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, said he had learned from a Syrian source that the archaeologist had been interrogated by Isis about the location of treasures from Palmyra and had been executed when he refused to cooperate.

Isis [captured the city from government forces in May](#) but it is not known to have damaged its monumental Roman-era ruins despite a reputation for destroying artefacts it views as idolatrous.

“Just imagine that such a scholar who gave such memorable services to the place and to history would be beheaded ... and his corpse still hanging from one of the ancient columns in the centre of a square in Palmyra,”

Abdulkarim said. “The continued presence of these criminals in this city is a curse and bad omen on [Palmyra] and every column and every archaeological piece in it.”

Palmyra-based activists circulated an unverified, gruesome image on social media of Asaad’s beheaded body, tied to a pole on a street in the city.

A board in front of the body set out the charges against him, which accused him of loyalty to the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, maintaining contact with senior regime intelligence and security officials and managing Palmyra’s collection of “idols”.

Isis, which follows a puritanical interpretation of Islam, considers maintaining such ancient statues to be apostasy.

According to Syrian state news agency Sana and the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Asaad was beheaded in front of dozens of people on Tuesday in a square outside the town's museum. His body was then taken to Palmyra's archaeological site and hung from one of the Roman columns.

Amr al-Azm, a former Syrian antiquities official who ran the country's science and conservation labs and knew Asaad personally, said the "irreplaceable" scholar was involved in early excavations of Palmyra and the restoration of parts of the city.

"He was a fixture, you can't write about Palmyra's history or anything to do with Palmyrian work without mentioning Khaled Asaad," he said. "It's like you can't talk about Egyptology without talking about Howard Carter."

He added:

"He had a huge repository of knowledge on the site, and that's going to be missed. He knew every nook and cranny. That kind of knowledge is irreplaceable, you can't just buy a book and read it and then have that.

"There's a certain personal dimension to that knowledge that comes from only having lived that and been so closely involved in it and that's lost to us forever. We don't have that anymore."

Before the city's capture by Isis, Syrian officials said they moved hundreds of ancient statues to safe locations out of concern they would be destroyed by the militants. Isis was likely to be looking for portable, easily saleable items that are not registered.

Azm said Asaad had played a role in evacuating the contents of the museum before Isis took control, which meant he faced certain arrest. "He'd been there for so long and been part of that city for so long, maybe he figured he lived there all his life and he would die there too, and that's unfortunately what happened," he said. "It's terrible."



Fakhreddin's Castle (top), is pictured in the historical city of Palmyra, Syria (Reuters / Nour Fourat)

Historian Tom Holland said the news was distressing.

"For anyone interested in the study of the ancient world, it comes as – to put it mildly – a shock to realise that ideologues exist who regard the curating of antiquities and the attendance of international conferences on archaeology as capital offences."

Palmyra flourished in antiquity as an important trading hub along the Silk Road. Asaad had worked over the past few decades with US, French, German and Swiss archaeological missions on excavations and research in Palmyra's famed 2,000-year-old ruins, a Unesco world heritage site that includes Roman tombs and the Temple of Bel.

The Sana news agency said he had discovered several ancient cemeteries, caves and a Byzantine graveyard in the garden of the Palmyra museum. He was also a scholar of Aramaic, the lingua franca of the area before the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

"Al-Asaad was a treasure for Syria and the world," his son-in-law, Khalil Hariri, told the Associated Press. "Why did they kill him?"

"Their systematic campaign seeks to take us back into pre-history. But they will not succeed."

In June, Isis did blow up [two ancient shrines in Palmyra](#) that were not part of its Roman-era structures but which the militants regarded as pagan and sacrilegious. In early July it released a video [showing the killing of 25 captured government soldiers](#) in the Roman amphitheatre.

Unesco warned last month that looting had been taking place on an "industrial scale". Isis advertises its destruction of sites such as Nimrud in Iraq but says little about the way [plundered antiquities help finance its activities](#). Stolen artefacts make up a significant stream of the group's estimated multi-million dollar revenues, along with oil sales and straightforward taxation and extortion.

Archaeological experts say Isis took over the already existing practice of illegal excavation and looting, which until 2014 was carried out by various armed groups, or individuals, or the Syrian regime.

Isis initially levied 20% taxes on those it "licensed" to excavate but later began to hire its own archaeologists, digging teams and machinery. The group invested more when the US-led coalition began to bomb oil fields and other targets and enforced punishments for looting without a licence.

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