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FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
IN CONSERVATION



Nothing is new

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The last Opinion piece concerned Simon Schama's article, an article he wrote in response to the still images of the wanton destruction of sculpture in Nimrud and his reflection on our own long history of such episodes.

But today we have been shocked where we thought we couldn't be - not only the human, or inhuman, stories coming out of Yarmouk refugee camp - but the footage that has just swirled around the web. The video shows initially, yes, Assyrian sculpture being destroyed with sledgehammers - but we had already been shocked by the images, still and past, done, as they were - and it was these that were the catalyst for Schama's piece.

But then, sadly, in this video we progress beyond the terrible smashing of stone to moving images of wonderful man/animal sculptures and relief carving and script story panels, gracefully, benignly filmed from outside their protective wires, placed to preserve the 3,000 year old surfaces from human intervention.

We have sadly now all seen on YouTube what comes next - the close up shots of excavators hauling carved slabs, men with powerful machine tools gleefully and with shouts of amusement slicing and toppling vast and beautiful works. But even that is not enough. We have a close up of oil drums being filled with powder and as the camera draws back we see the drums are neatly in line, standing in front of the carved friezes, connected by wires - so similar to the protective ones we had seen earlier. But these wires are not protective. They are connecting the detonators that, as we now watch, blow up with vast explosions - not just limited explosions but eruptions from underground - the sites containing the sculptures and panels we have just seen. The force throws massive rocks hundreds of feet into the sky amid the brown dust of destruction that grows like a monster over the hollow pit that once contained, wonderfully and vividly told, evidence of man's extraordinary emerging civilisation.

It's hard to write this - it's harder to think that these objects will never be seen again. What I was discussing in the last Opinion was that the destruction we had seen was nothing very new, that was Schama's thesis and it was a powerfully made argumentwhat we have seen now is new.

It is new in its dreadful efficiency, in its cold but technically assisted execution. This assistance of technology makes this destruction so much more terrible - the use of technology to destroy, efficiently, where that technology can be used - and should be used - to preserve. To preserve our heritage so that we can understand where we come from and so that our children can have what we inherited so that they can too - that's what technology can do if we let it.