

With ISIS execution, Syria loses key guide to Palmyra's ancient treasures

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Long before the self-described Islamic State took over the ancient city of Palmyra, archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad had put the magical desert ruins on the map.

“This is a man who devoted his life to Palmyra and preserving its heritage,” said Jean-Marie Le Tensorer, a University of Basel professor and Swiss archaeologist who first met Asaad in 1982. The two colleagues last spoke in May, right after IS militants seized Palmyra.

On Tuesday, those militants beheaded the 82-year-old expert, who introduced dignitaries and archaeologists from across the world to the monumental treasures that lie in the heart of Syria. They put his body on display behind a banner labeling him an “apostate” and listing his offenses, which included “representing Syria at infidel conferences,” visiting Iran, and being in contact with high-ranking regime officials.

“I had hoped that Khaled Al-Asaad would go to Damascus or leave the country because he played a pivotal role as an archaeologist in Palmyra,” Le Tensorer said. “We are really shocked. I think he didn’t want to abandon his town and that he underestimated the level of barbarity of this people.”

His colleagues recall that Asaad had facilitated every foreign mission that joined in the early excavations of Palmyra starting in the 1960s, and oversaw the restoration of its ancient sites, including the Temple of Bel, the triumphal arches, the ramparts of the 13th-century citadel overlooking the ruins, and the desert Ummayyad Palace, or Qasr al-Kheir. Asaad stood out as one of the few experts to master Palmyrene, a rare Aramaic dialect with a unique alphabet that was spoken in the early centuries of the common era.

When Islamic State arrived in May, Asaad, who was in charge of Palmyra's archaeological museum before passing the torch to his son, helped evacuate key pieces from the collection to an undisclosed location. The only artifacts left behind were a few sarcophagi that were too heavy to carry and the lion at the museum entrance.

They immediately detained the scholar and threatened to kill him, according to his nephew, also named Khaled al-Asaad. Under duress, Asaad expressed “repentance” and went to IS stronghold Raqqa for one month before returning to Al-Tayba, a desert village near Palmyra.

“He loved Palmyra and the ruins; his family, his home was there,” Asaad said of his uncle. “Then IS went after him again. I don’t know why.”

Islamic State, according to Le Tensorer, had hoped to find gold in Palmyra, and turned to the archaeologists of the town for guidance, without success. “It was complete idiocy,” he said. “There has never been any gold in Palmyra; all you can find is ancient busts and things like that. No one could have met such a request.”

That account was confirmed by Asaad's nephew, who said Asaad was detained for 20 days before being executed. On arrival, the militants also briefly detained the scholar’s son, Walid al-Asaad, who had taken over his responsibilities in 2005. The younger Asaad—who tried to debunk the militants' gold fantasies—is now in hiding.

The rest of the family gathered in Homs on Wednesday to mourn together.

“I am really sad,” said Asaad's nephew. “He never hurt anyone, he helped everyone, he was cultured, he wrote books about Palmyra. There was nothing but the regime in Syria, so of course he had to work with them.”

The International Council of Museums issued a statement vehemently condemning the murder of Asaad, who was a member.

Denis Genequand, a senior lecturer in archaeology at Geneva University, whose field work in Palmyra brought him into regular contact with Asaad, said, “Instead of carrying out a spectacular attack on the ruins of the ancient of Palmyra, the Islamic State took aim at the Syrian character who embodied and represented the city for more than 50 years, both in the world of researchers and the general public.”