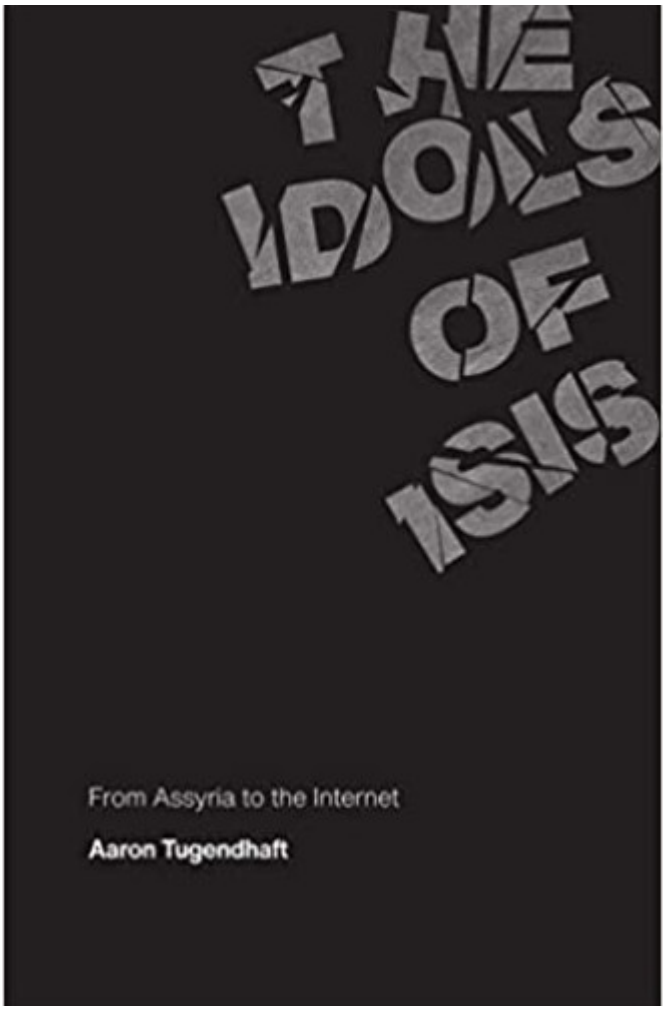
Why did ISIS film its destruction of ancient Assyrian artifacts in the Mosul Museum?

Aaron Tugendhaft says all acts of image-breaking are also acts of image-making.

by Nathan J. Ristuccia in the May 5, 2021 issue

In Review



The Idols of ISIS

From Assyria to the Internet

by Aaron Tugendhaft
University of Chicago Press
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In 2015, men carried sledgehammers into the Mosul Museum and shattered dozens of ancient Assyrian sculptures. They filmed the destruction; edited the clips; added dialogue, a soundtrack, and slow motion; and uploaded the resulting music video to social media. The global intelligentsia condemned the video's producers (who were members of ISIS) as boors, barbarians, and madmen. But the video was powerful because it juxtaposed ancient and modern, artistry and violence. There is nothing uncultured about systematically destroying an enemy's artwork or using cutting-edge technology to edit a video. Only scholars know which books to burn.

Aaron Tugendhaft, a Near Eastern studies scholar of Iraqi Jewish heritage, responded to the video by writing a biting work of political theory and art criticism that sympathizes more with ISIS than with UNESCO. He centers on two theses. First, "images . . . are what make political life possible." And second, therefore, all acts of image breaking are also acts of image making.

Quoting Nietzsche's *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Tugendhaft says his method is "to tap images against one another"—that is, to scrutinize formal parallels between temporally and ideologically distant pieces of art and literature in order to sharpen his reader's judgment. The book abounds with astonishing parallels: between ISIS propaganda and PlayStation games, between writings of French revolutionary Henri Grégoire and the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute.

Tugendhaft compares the ISIS video itself with a relief from an eighth-century palace of King Sargon II that once stood 15 miles away from the Mosul Museum. In the relief, three Assyrian soldiers pulverize a sculpture of a defeated enemy king with sledgehammers. Visually, the relief is identical to the ISIS video's climactic shot. The jihadis followed a millennia-old tradition of making images for a new regime by memorializing the demolition of the last regime's icons.

Tugendhaft's guide throughout the book is Abu Nasr al-Farabi, the tenth-century Muslim philosopher. Political philosopher Leo Strauss argued that al-Farabi was an esotericist—that is, a writer who hid a radical message for philosophically trained readers underneath a surface message aimed at normal readers. On the straightforward reading that Tugendhaft supplies, al-Farabi reinterprets Plato and

Aristotle in defense of monotheism and revelation.

Al-Farabi makes a case for the prophet-lawgiver—an adaptation of Plato's philosopher-king. By nature, humans have conflicting desires and limited understandings. Left to ourselves, we cannot reach agreement or happiness. As a result, before political order can arise, a prophet must harmonize the people through shared opinions and actions—what al-Farabi terms "religion" (*milla*)—as a "prelude" to political life. Politics thus rests not on reason but on images: enthralling visual or literary representations that prepare people to accept the law.

For al-Farabi, and for Tugendhaft, the only alternative to images is brute force. Hence the ignorance (*jahiliyya*) of all regimes—whether jihadi, Puritan, globalist, or Zuckerbergian—that claim to establish political life upon reason, data, or revelation alone. Without images, the most sophisticated philosophy or algorithm becomes impotent or tyrannical. As John Adams said to the Massachusetts militia: "We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by . . . morality and Religion. . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Not all images help. Prophets must match images to the national character of each people. The mark of a prophet is a "well-honed imaginative faculty," or excellent taste. For centuries, museums (like churches) have aimed for "a cultivation of the imagination, and of the faculty of judgment" in a citizenry. As a result, Tugendhaft terms museums "prophetic institutions" devoted to "the representation of a community." A world that can appreciate a urinal or a dead shark in formaldehyde as art can watch the ISIS video as a docent's tour. ISIS understood this, so they staged their iconoclasm in a museum.

Tugendhaft's book breaks images—and therefore it also makes them. He taps images together, using the ISIS video to sound out the hollowness of contemporary Western culture, from the internet to the United Nations to the war on terror. For Tugendhaft, all images are man-made and hollow. He explicitly writes as a Jew who is a good-natured Straussian nonbeliever. There is no space in his book for images that come from revelation.

In contrast, Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual father of Islamism, believed that adopting "man-made law in any shape or form" in the place of God's law is the definition of living in the era of ignorance (*jahiliyya*). Early in the book, Tugendhaft exegetes a

Quranic passage (21:52–67) quoted in the ISIS video, in which Ibrahim hammers to pieces the ancestral idols of his kinsmen to reveal the falseness of paganism. Tugendhaft defends the pagans, contending that they wisely served voiceless statues handed down from their fathers. “If God doesn’t rule through images, then he must resort to force,” he warns. I do not know how Qutb would respond, but Christianity answers through the sacraments: outward and physical images of inward and spirit-made grace.

Tugendhaft’s atheism also explains why his book’s “Coda” draws this progressivist moral:

> We will neither live in a regime without images nor find images that aren’t the work of human hands. The best we can do is embrace the ongoing task of deciding which imperfect images to live with. Unlike Ibrahim’s neighbors, we don’t have to serve unthinkingly the images we’ve inherited; we can take a step back to ask whether those images suit our needs. We can become our own prophets.

No, we cannot. Not if al-Farabi was correct. Images are prior to the polis, a prelude. Humans cannot come together to agree on what shared opinions to hold, because shared opinions are the only grounds for agreement. Tugendhaft must know that his coda contradicts his book—but he’s a Straussian, so he writes esoterically.

Tugendhaft thinks that progressivism worships images (say rights, or diversity, or internationalism) just as hollow and man-made as any image that ISIS serves. Knocking down Assyrian statues suits one nation; knocking down Confederate statues suits another. His hidden conclusion is that the West needs a new prophet. Polarization and “irreconcilable individuality” reveal that our current images no longer fit us.

But Tugendhaft has no guess whence a prophet will come. All he can do is hone that prophet’s judgment.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Images broken and made.”