Statue Breakers and Spirit Exorcists

The Earthquake Destruction and Its Aftereffects

DONALD WHITE

The Sanctuary’s later days are marred by acts of violence that form a disturbing contrast with its apparently tranquil preceding eight centuries of use. To judge from the nearly total drop-off of artifacts, little formal religious observance took place inside its walls after A.D. 262. During the early 3rd century the region was increasingly destabilized by uprisings of tribal people onto the Cyrenaica plateau from the Marmaric coastal region to Cyrene’s east. Perhaps the Sanctuary’s exposed position outside the cities of Asia; but Rome, too, was shaken, and Libya also was shaken (emphasis added). In many places the earth yawned open and salt water appeared in the fissures. (Trebellius 1922:22-23.71)

The excavators found a thick earthquake destruction layer, associated with the A.D. 262 Disaster, wherever their shovels cut below the ground’s surface (Figs. 1.2; also see “The Sanctuary’s History and Architecture” and Preface, Fig. 2). The wide chronological spread of the tangle of artifacts flung into a common stratum as much as their shattered, broken condition leaves no doubt as to the cause of the Sanctuary’s destruction, which in turn signaled the end for the cult on the Wadi Bel Cadir. The site itself was finally abandoned after what was by all accounts an even more destructive earthquake that ravaged the entire province in A.D. 365.

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We are still working out the details about who used the post-A.D. 262 site and why. A series of scrawny walls overlaying the earlier earthquake layer suggests some kind of squat activity took place before the site’s final abandonment. When the ruined Sanctuary lay open and unprotected during the late 3rd and 4th centuries A.D., its grounds seem to have been ransacked by persons embittered against the old pagan cult. The wave of anti-pagan behavior that colors this last installment in the Sanctuary’s long history is best witnessed by the damaged condition of many of the site’s stone statues. Two hundred and sixty-four nearly complete statuettes and major fragments of over a 100 more large-scale stone statues were discovered before work wound down in 1861. Not one piece was found with its head and body intact from this extensive sample, with the solitary exception of a small limestone figure of a seated goddess (see Kane, this issue). In addition, after carefully situating through all of the surviving fragments, Dr. Susan Kane, the project’s sculptor-expert, was able to reattach just a single statuette head to its body. Admittedly the difficulty of joining heads to bodies was increased by the fact that, of the 51 individual stone heads found, most had either badly shattered or entirely missing neck elements. Given that the earthquakes could have caused some of the neck damage, the probability that they caused all of it seems low. In addition, earthquake damage by itself fails to explain why heads rarely seemed to turn up within rolling distance of the many torsos discovered throughout the Sanctuary, even after one takes into account the steepness of the hillside setting.

More tellingly, 18 of the 51 heads, or 35 percent of the total, display signs of deliberate damage. Either the head has been fractured into several large pieces (Figs. 5-9) or specific facial features have been abraded or chipped off (Figs. 10-13). Combinations of both types of damage affected 5 of the 18 heads, 6 experienced breakage only, and 7 abrasion only. While the mere breaking of a head into separate pieces could be attributed to natural causes, this does not account for why we again failed to recover the missing fragments in the overwhelming majority of cases. On the other hand, damage to the nose, mouth, chin, and eyes of heads otherwise left largely untouched, a pathology affecting 7 out of the 51 heads, seems best explained as the action of persons bent on deliberately erasing the portrait features that give a statue its individuality and identity.

Intentional damage to sacred build-
Victims of the Quake

An almost complete absence of human remains trapped in the destruction level of the Sanctuary argues that effectively nothing in the way of worship or even repairs was taking place at the precise moment that the earthquake struck. Perhaps it came in the night. But at least two witnesses were on hand to experience its terrors and then to pay a terrible price for their presence. This is their story.

The skeletal remains of two very young children were found in a shallow crevice formed when the heavy ashlar capping of the post-A.D. 115 retaining wall (T20) that separates the Middle from the Lower Sanctuary split open under earthquake pressure. When found, the body of the better preserved of the two individuals had fallen on its back with its head pointing west. Wedged into the narrow gap the head was pressed forward so that the chin rested against its chest. The right arm lay parallel to its side, the left was extended over the pelvis (Figs. 3, 4).

How did the tiny victims die? Did they live to see the devastation of the earthquake? Did they become trapped and die of suffocation? Bits and pieces from the skeletons cannot answer such questions with certainty, but other clues are nevertheless revealed in the bones.

The First Child

The outline of the body was quite clear at the time of excavation, beginning at the head with the lower jaw extending towards the chest area and fragments of aligned vertebras and ribs; arms placed to the sides; a pelvis with lower limb bones in their correct anatomical position stretching parallel to the wall's massive blocks. This individual either died lying on its back or was positioned there face up as if in a grave.

The projecting and fragile elements of the skeleton were all fragmentary and distorted by the pressure of the overburden of soil. Once the skeleton had been brought back to the Physical Anthropology Lab at The University Museum and the glue used to consolidate its remains in the field removed, the fragments could no longer be positioned precisely, relative to one another, because each piece had been pressure-distorted in unique ways. For example, the precise fit between each of the skull's fragments has been lost so that its appearance after reconstruction is lopsided. Similar distortions are also apparent in the thin fragile bones of the pelvis and the scapula (shoulder blade).

Virtually all of the bones of this individual are represented except for the wrist and ankle joints. Why these are absent is a mystery. It is possible that the grave was disturbed by the action of moving water which washed away these small, light skeletal bits. Alternatively, it is possible that they were removed by the small mammals and birds that inhabited the nearby wadi, picking over the Sanctuary after the earthquake.

The Second Child

Analysis in the Museum's lab posed a second and perhaps more interesting unsolvable mystery. Scattered throughout the skeleton just described were the remains of yet another individual. This second victim is represented by bone fragments that either are too small to be part of the first or else duplicate pieces of the skeletal remains already associated with the first. These bones are indeed tissue-thin by comparison with those of the first individual. Since the bones of living individuals not only become larger with age but increase in mass, these must belong to a much younger child.

The second set of remains consists of skull bones, parts of the rib cage, breast bone, and elements of the upper and lower limbs. Ten complete fragile ribs are present. Most peculiarly, however, everything that survives belongs to the right side of the body.

Did this second individual die along with the first? Was the first, larger child carrying the second when the earthquake hit and entrapped them? The excavation data again fail to answer this question.

Age and Sex of the Two Skeletons

Although the sex of an individual is quite easy to assess from an adult skeleton, the same does not apply to the analysis of immature remains. Most sex-related differences in the skeleton are not developed during childhood. For example, the very clear anatomical differences in the pelvis of males and females strongly develop during puberty and are retained into adulthood. With the pelvis of an adult the sex of the individual can be determined with a high degree of accuracy. With children, however, as in the case of the Sanctuary's two individuals, these differences cannot be determined.

On the other hand, the age at death of immature remains is actually easier to gauge than with mature or adult remains. Specifically, the degree of development of the teeth or dentition reflects the developmental level of the child. The pattern for what is called calcification or formation and eruption of the dental tissues has been broadly assessed in many human populations. Applied to the older Sanctuary victim, our analysis indicates that he or she died between the ages of three to three-and-a-half years old (and had suffered from prematurely worn teeth).

The skeleton of the second individual most certainly is that of a term or near-term infant. Since a three-year-old is probably too young to have carried even a newborn infant, we must imagine that the tiny infant was accompanied by a third, older child or adult. The soil directly south of the two bodies beneath the excavation's Decauville railroad tracks still lies unexplored, which makes it possible that our missing "third man" lies buried under the rails, or perhaps he or she somehow escaped alive.

Janet Monge

Figure 3. Skeletal remains of the child found trapped in earthquake debris in a cleft in the retaining wall (T20) separating the Lower from the Middle Sanctuary.

Figure 4. Drawing of the skeleton by its excavator, the 1978 season's staff conservator, Gayle Wecker.
ings and sculptures has an extensive history in other parts of Cyrene, particularly in connection with the city's colossal temple of Zeus, as well as the lesser temples "B" and "C" located along the central Valley Road. More statistical analysis should be done on a city-wide basis to determine what sort of statues were singled out for this kind of abuse.

Cult officials, or members of prominent local families? Examples of nearly all categories occur in the Demeter Sanctuary, with the only element binding them together being a common association with the resident cult.

Ten of our 18 heads were excavated from stratified earthquake debris, while 7 turned up in the surface layer. Sculptures from both contexts could have been tampered with in late antiquity. Those from the surface stratum in theory could have also been meddled with in more recent times.

The 7th century A.D. Arab invasion and subsequent sporadic occupation of Cyrene have left no discernible mark on the abandoned sanctuary. On the other hand, it is possible that either the invaders or their local Arab descendants were responsible for disturbing at least the surface sculptures. All 7 pieces from the surface layer exhibit only wholesale breakage. This could suggest a less premeditated act of vandalism than one involving the deliberate scrubbing away of facial features.

Let us accept for the sake of the present discussion that all were battered by the post-ca. 640 A.D. Arab population, despite the fact I do not believe that this provides the full explanation.

**A Church Militant**

It still remains to identify who destroyed the remaining 11 heads before they were buried beneath a thick layer of soil in late antiquity. As one might guess from the way the story is unfolding, the finger of guilt is normally pointed at the province's Greek-speaking early Christian population. Only a half century separates the initial destruction of the sanctuary from the adoption of Christianity as the state religion throughout the Roman empire, and certainly Christianity had already penetrated the Libyan Pentapolis long before Constantine's day. The Coptic tradition says that the Apostle Mark was a Cyrenaean Jew, and one wonders about the subsequent fate of the shadowy person of Simon of Cyrene who assisted Jesus on his way to the cross ("And as they led him away, they laid hold of one Simon a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross that he might bear it after Jesus.") (Luke 23:38). A prophet or teacher named Lucas of Cyrene accompanies Paul and Barnabas when they visit the church at Antioch in A.D. 43 (Acts 13:1), and this, incidentally, may have given rise to the late legend that Lucas, the first Christian king of England, was the son of Simon of Cyrene.

The province's first recorded bishop was Ammonios of Berenike (modern Benghazi) who took office in A.D. 260, two years before the 3rd century earthquake. At the time of the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, bishops are recorded for Taucha,
Orthodoxy and Heresy

During the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries A.D. the two principal heresies to agitate the region under discussion were Sabellianism and Arianism. Their principal architects were probably both of Libyan stock. In one case, the nature of the heresy lay at least in theory in their departure from the orthodox doctrine of the Holy Trinity which states that God exists in Three Persons and One Substance. The technical name for Sabellius’s movement, which was largely spent by the end of the 3rd century, is “Modalist Monarchianism.” In their zeal to safeguard the Unity of the Godhead, Sabellius’s Monarchian followers were charged with minimizing the independent substance of the Son. Arius (ca. A.D. 250-ca. 336), whose beliefs were formally condemned at the Council of Nicaea, went further in claiming that the Son of God was not eternal but instead had been created by the Father from nothing as an instrument for the creation of the world. Arius seems to have written little and instead transmitted his dogma in popular songs which spread rapidly among the less educated classes during most of the 4th century. Both doctrines, however, may be seen as offshoots of Alexandrian theology which always tended to stress the transcendence of God and the Divine Nature of the Incarnate Christ at the expense of His humanity.

After the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), the Egyptian Church formally became Monophysite (what is called the Coptic Church today). Its adherents were largely the uneducated native peasant masses, while the Orthodox or Melchite Church of Alexandria continued to attract the rich, aristocratic landowners of non-Egyptian ethnic Greek origin, whose loyalties lay primarily with the central regime at Constantinople. By the 5th century the struggle between the Orthodox and Monophysite communities in Egypt had become as much political and economic as it was doctrinal. The late Richard Goodchild speculated that the frequent presence of two churches in even the smallest villages of the Libyan countryside may also reflect the coexistence of the two rival churches. He further suggested that the more heavily fortified churches belonged to the Orthodox and that they had been erected at government expense to play a military as well as a spiritual role. His view remains to be archaeologically demonstrated.

Ptolemais, Barca, and Bureum. When the provincial capital was transferred from Cyrene to Apollonia some time between ca. A.D. 440 and 500, the old metropolis possessed at least two churches, while the port capital was furnished with four.

In a parallel but more troubling development, the heresiarch Sabellius had already put in an appearance in neighboring Ptolemais before the A.D. 262 disaster, while in the following century Ptolemais, Bureum, and Marmarica were labeled as centers of Arianism and saw their bishops—Seclusus, Sotainas, and Theonas—excommunicated at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). For what it is worth, St. Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315–403) even claimed that the arch-heretic Arius had been born in Libya. In Egypt, where a good deal more is known than in neighboring Libya, the split between the Orthodoxy and its various spiritual and economic opponents often reached extreme proportions. At times this resulted in confiscation of property, exile, and on occasion even harsher penalties. This is not the place to rehearse in detail the sad history of doctrinal schism that beset the early church in this region (see box, “Orthodoxy and Heresy”), but the reader might do worse than to recall the Emperor Julian’s peevish declaration that “no wild beasts are such enemies to Mankind as are most of the Christians in their deadly hatred of one another” (Ammianus Marcellinus 1404. XXII.5.4).

In an age when differences between pagan and Christian as well as interfaith beliefs routinely led to confrontation and physical violence, it is perhaps not surprising that the mistreatment of the Demeter Sanctuary’s sculptures should turn out to have numerous archaeological parallels at Athens, Isitha, Ephesus, and elsewhere. In explaining what fuels this particular brand of iconoclasm, perhaps it is enough to observe that it is human nature to yearn to smash the image of someone you hate. Is not that, after all, really what lies at the bottom of Pliny the Younger’s reaction to the destruction of the golden statues of his enemy DMIPI in A.D. 96? It was our delight to dash that proud face to the ground, to smite them [his statue images] with the sword and to savage them with the axe, as if blood and agony would follow from every blow...All sought a kind of vengeance in beholding those bodies mutilated, limbs hacked to pieces, and finally that baleful, fursome visage cast into fire, to be melted down. (Penegetrus 55)
On the other hand, a more subtle motive, and one which transcended simple revenge, arose from the superstitious conviction that the emperor's statue was in some palpable sense alive and therefore capable of not only causing evil but also feeling pain. The roots of this curiously atavistic notion can be traced back to at least Archiac Greek times (6th, early 5th centuries B.C.), when statues were conventionally inscribed in the third person: "so-and-so made me." A related practice that occasionally surfaces throughout antiquity called for dressing statues in sanctuaries in real clothes and actual jewelry.

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According to Nicolson in his classic treatise on Greek Piety, "Statues were worshiped, money offered to them, and garlands and ribbons hung on them...The cult of images in late antiquity is strikingly illustrated by an anecdote concerning the celebrated rhetorician Prosopias: in their enthusiasm many licked his chest as if he were an image filled with divine potency [emphasis added] and kissed his hands" (1969:167).

By later times the spirit inhabiting a statue was referred to as its daemon (or demon), whether the pagan believer could mean an angel for good as well as evil but which to a Christian was invariably a source of menace. Stephen Benko has said that "Early Christians felt constantly surrounded by demons; they sensed them lurking under the statues and images, and behind pagan oracles and divinations" (1984:120).

The standard method for exorcising a statue's demon required destroying the statue. While antecedents to this practice go as far back as the Old Testament and before ("and he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it." Exod. 32:20), the period under discussion is rife with examples. For example, Libanios, who lived in 4th century Antioch, has left a vituperously amusing account of how this exorcism might be accomplished by a company of determined monks: "But this black-soled tribe, who eat more than elephants, attack the temples with stones and iron, and in some cases disbanding these, with hands and feet. Then utter desolation follows, with tearing of roofs, demolition of walls, and the tearing down of statues [emphasis added]" ("Trio Tempula," 8:177:10-08).

According to Marcus Dacier's Vita Porphyri et illo qui porphyri, a mob of cross-brandishing members of his congregation approached the statue of the naked Aphrodite at Gaia (Gaza) in A.D. 402, "the demon who inhabited the statue, being unable to contemplate the terrible sign [i.e., the cross], departed from the marble with great tumult, and, as he did, threw the statue down and broke it in many pieces" (Mango 1983:36). Edward Gibbon has a high old time with Macrobius's lively description of the destruction of the colossal cult statue of Serapis at Alexandria in A.D. 289 by a crowd of Christian zealots: "It was confidently affirmed," Gibbon notes, "that, if any impious hand should violate the majesty of the god, the heavens and the earth would tremble in a universal gamaial chaos. An intrepid soldier, animated by zeal, and armed with a weighty battle-axe, ascended the ladder; and even the Christian multitude expected, with some anxiety, the conclusion of the combat. He aimed a vigorous stroke against the cheek of Serapis; the cheek fell to the ground; and the thunder was still silent, and both the heavens and the earth continued to preserve their accustomed order and tranquility. The victorious sol- dier repeated his blows; the huge idol was overturned, and broken in pieces; and the limbs of the devourer, who in this form had insulted men...While he was being dragged along the stream as far as the Dnieper, the heaten wept for him...Then they threw him in the Dnieper" (Leger 1884:66). Second and closer to our own enlightened era, when the Commissaire of Paris, in a warped finale to the Age of Reason, mandated that the 12th century statues of the Kings of Judah (or France) be torn off the west front of Notre Dame (September 10 to October 4, 1793), they arranged to have the royal eyes scratched out and their noses knocked off (Fig. 14) before burying the images in a great common grave in front of the cathedral. Let no one be surprised; when the same treatment is doled out today to the statues of Lenin and his spiritual heirs, to say nothing of the images of the still puissant leader of Iraq scattered across yet another unhappy landscape.

Bibliography


