

Scourging Paganism Past and Present: The Tragic Irony of Palmyra

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, MAY 28 2015

Over the past several days I have been somewhat perplexed, if not perturbed by the news media coverage of the impending destruction of pagan sites, particularly the iconic Temple of Baal and later Roman ruins, at Palmyra in ISIL-occupied Syrian territory. If the destruction of these sites does take place, it will continue ISIL's carefully calculated strategy of publicly and performatively erasing pagan history from the Islamic Middle East. On Euronews, BBC World, and other international media (including Catholic media outlets), a familiar refrain has emerged among (mostly European) commentators, including representatives of UNESCO, bemoaning ISIL's architecture-razing rampage in Nimrud and elsewhere as 'cultural genocide', and affront to the very foundations of Western civilisation. However, there is a bitter irony at work here, particularly when one focuses a critical gaze upon how we engage with historical memory, the idea of Europe, and the notions of cultural and religious 'cleansing'.

By all accounts, the medieval knitting together of Europe under the Emperor Charlemagne serves as the historical basis of what we today call 'Western civilization' by initiating a return to the transnational integration that had once characterised the Roman Empire. This king of the Franks' empire-building also served as the ideological wellspring of the very concept of a unified 'Europe', manifested most visibly by the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957 (a geopolitical space that almost perfectly mapped Charlemagne's domains, minus a standoffish Switzerland). Today, most Europeans see Charlemagne through rose-coloured glasses, a great hero who unified warring nations and ushered in an era of economic prosperity, cultural renaissance, and intellectual advancement. This *pater Europae*, or 'Father of Europe', is so revered that he commands one of the most precious pieces of geography in all of Europe, the plaza just outside the doors of Notre-Dame Cathedral on the Île de la Cité, Paris. Yet, this reverential view of Carolus Magnus carefully omits his role in the mass-murder of untold thousands of pagans, as well as a merciless eradication of pagan sites of worship across northern Europe.

Some 4,500 pagan Saxon captives lost their lives in the bloodbath known as the Massacre of Verden, a powerful message of the Sword to those who would not accept the Cross. Also as part of the Saxon Wars (772-804), Charlemagne ordered the destruction of the Irminsul, or 'Tree of the Universe', in the foothills of the Teutoberg, in a calculated effort to present himself as a 'true leader of the Christian faith and enemy of paganism'. These are just two of the most (in)famous instances of Charlemagne's decades-long campaign to annihilate polytheism across the Continent. Surely, in the cold light of unbiased historical reflection, the slaughter at Verden compares neatly to ISIL's execution of 600 Yezidis in northern Iraq in May 2015, while the destruction of the Saxon's sacral world-tree should be seen as even more abhorrent than any of ISIL's acts of demolition, given that it was the veritable *axis mundi* for Germanic pagans, not some historical relic of an ancient faith dead for nearly two millennia.

However, history is about forgetting, not remembering. The sanitised myth of Charlemagne is a necessity for modern Europe, a transnational polity built on transnational cooperation, cultural respect, and economic integration. True, Charles the Great laid the groundwork for the 'idea of Europe', but he also rooted a deep and pernicious religious intolerance into the DNA of the Continent. Seven centuries later, the same lands where his troops forced conversions and slaughtered those pagans who remained faithful to their old gods would again be the site of a series of catastrophic religious wars lasting from 1524 to 1648.

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For those of us who teach history, and particularly the role of religion in history, it is important to remember that politics, militancy, and faith often go hand in hand. Sadly there is nothing novel about ISIL's use of public executions of 'infidels' to intimidate their enemies and rally support amongst supporters and attract possible allies, nor is the destruction of symbols of one's political predecessors as a display of power anything new. What matters is how the historical record decides to render these acts in the distant future. As paganism scholar Michael Strmiska points out in his essay on 'The Evils of Christianization: A Pagan Perspective on European History', medieval paganism's contribution to the patrimony of Europe has all but been blotted out and the actions of those state and non-state actors who purged the every last pagan from the Continent are forgiven their crimes by the passage of time. While this is not a likely scenario for ISIL, it does force us to confront how we view the past, and more specifically the creation of 'Europe' which, as the 2004 row over its 'Christian roots' proves, is forged on a misremembered past which confines millennia of paganism to the dustbin of history.

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