

The Politics of Erasure *Intellectual Hegemony, Epistemicide, and the Security of Knowledge Systems*

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Abstract

Mainstream International Relations theory measures state power in material terms: military capability, economic weight, and territorial control. This paper argues that such accounts overlook a distinct and consequential domain of power, namely the capacity of a political community to produce, store, and authorise its own knowledge. Drawing on Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of epistemicide, it examines the destruction of knowledge systems as an object of security analysis. Its central claim is that epistemicide is not a single phenomenon but a family of four analytically distinct mechanisms: attritional decay, kinetic destruction, displacement, and narrative capture. These are tested against three historical cases: the decline of the Library of Alexandria, the sacking of the mahaviharas of Bihar around 1193, and the transmission of Byzantine learning to Italy before and after 1453. The evidence supports a more qualified conclusion than the popular literature suggests. Deliberate destruction of repositories is a poor instrument of long-term subjugation, because knowledge is carried by dispersed custodians rather than by buildings, and because conquerors frequently absorb what they capture. What has proven durable is not the destruction of records but control over their interpretation. The paper argues that this shift, from kinetic to interpretive erasure, is the defining feature of the contemporary period, and that the legal architecture for protecting cultural knowledge, established at The Hague in 1954 and first enforced by the International Criminal Court in 2016, has not yet extended to the digital domain where the contest now takes place.

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I. Introduction

The study of International Relations has long been anchored in a realist paradigm that privileges tangible metrics of state power. In Kenneth Waltz's formulation, the structure of the international system is defined by the distribution of material capabilities across units, and security is understood as the defence of territory against coercion (Waltz 1979, 98). Joseph Nye's later concept of soft power widened the frame to include attraction and cultural appeal, but retained an instrumental logic in which culture is an asset a state deploys rather than a substrate on which the state itself rests (Nye 2004, 5-11).

This paper is concerned with something prior to both. Before a state can project force or exert attraction, it must be able to know itself: to record what it owns, adjudicate what it has promised, train those who administer it, and transmit an account of where it came from. James Scott has described the state's need to render society "legible" through cadastral surveys, standardised measures, and permanent records, and has shown that a polity which cannot see its own population cannot tax, conscript, or govern it (Scott 1998, 2-3). Knowledge, on this account, is not an ornament of state power. It is the condition of its exercise.

If that is so, then the destruction of knowledge systems ought to be a subject of security analysis rather than of cultural lament. The concept available for this purpose is *epistemicide*, developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos to describe the annihilation of a society's ways of knowing, and elaborated in postcolonial scholarship as a companion process to physical conquest (Santos 2014, 92). The term has considerable rhetorical force. It has, however, been applied loosely, and this looseness has obscured an important empirical question: does destroying a rival's knowledge actually work as an instrument of statecraft?

This paper argues that the answer is more equivocal than the existing literature allows, and that the equivocation is itself the finding. It advances three claims. First, epistemicide is not one mechanism but four, distinguished by the locus of destruction and the degree of intent: attritional decay, kinetic destruction, displacement, and narrative capture. Second, the two mechanisms most prominent in popular accounts, the burned library and the sacked university, are the *least* effective instruments of durable subjugation, because knowledge resides in dispersed human custodians rather than in centralised repositories, and because conquerors have historically found it more profitable to absorb captured learning than to destroy it. Third, the mechanism that has proven durable is narrative capture, in which the records survive but the authority to interpret them does not, and this is the mechanism that has migrated most completely into the digital domain.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section II sets out the theoretical framework and the fourfold typology. Section III explains the case selection and the standard of evidence applied, which matters here more than usual because two of the three cases are surrounded by contested and politically instrumentalised historiography. Sections IV, V, and VI examine Alexandria, Bihar, and Constantinople respectively. Section VII confronts the strongest objections to the thesis. Section VIII turns to the contemporary period and to the existing legal architecture for protecting cultural knowledge. Section IX concludes.

II. Theoretical Framework: The Archive as an Instrument of Rule

Three bodies of theory converge on the claim that control of the record is control of political possibility.

The first is Michel Foucault's treatment of the archive. Foucault defined the archive not as a repository of documents but as "the law of what can be said," the system that governs which statements can appear as legitimate at all (Foucault 1972, 129). On this reading, an archive does not passively record a political reality that exists independently of it; it establishes the boundaries within which claims can be made and adjudicated. Whoever controls the archive therefore controls not merely the past but the range of arguments available in the present.

The second is Antonio Gramsci's account of hegemony. Gramsci's central insight was that durable domination is not sustained by coercion alone but by the manufacture of consent, exercised through the institutions of civil society that shape what a population takes to be common sense (Gramsci 1971, 12). This is the machinery that a purely material account of power lacks. A conqueror who holds territory by force alone must garrison it indefinitely; a conqueror whose account of the past has become the subject population's own account of itself need not. Gramsci thus supplies the mechanism by which epistemic control converts into political economy: it lowers the cost of rule.

The third is Michel-Rolph Trouillot's analysis of historical silence. Trouillot argued that silences enter the historical record at four moments, in the making of sources, of archives, of narratives, and of history itself, and that these silences are produced by unequal power rather than by accident or neglect (Trouillot 1995, 26). Trouillot's contribution is methodological as much as theoretical: it directs the analyst to ask not only what a record says but which records were never made, which were made and not kept, and who decided.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that a society's capacity to produce and authorise knowledge, what may be called its *epistemic sovereignty*, is a component of sovereignty proper rather than a cultural adjunct to it. This framing also brings the subject within the ambit of securitisation theory, which holds that an issue becomes a security matter when it is successfully presented as an existential threat to a valued referent object (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 23-26). The argument of this paper is that intellectual heritage satisfies that criterion and has not yet been treated accordingly.

A typology of epistemicide

The analytical difficulty with the existing literature is that "epistemicide" is made to cover processes that differ in mechanism, in agency, and in effect. A library that burns in a siege, a research institution that closes because its patron withdraws funding, a scholarly community that emigrates, and a state that floods its information environment with revisionist material are not the same event described in four ways. They are four different events, and conflating them makes it impossible to ask which of them actually achieves the political result attributed to epistemicide as a whole.

This paper therefore proposes the following fourfold distinction, which structures the case studies that follow.

Table 1. Four mechanisms of epistemicide.

Mode	Mechanism	Agency	Case
Attritional	Withdrawal of patronage;	Diffuse; rarely a single	Alexandria
	dispersal of scholars; decay of institutional continuity	decision	
Kinetic	Physical destruction of	Deliberate, but objectives	Nalanda
	repositories and killing of custodians during conquest	often mixed	
Displacement	Knowledge survives but	Unintended by the	Constantinople
	relocates with its custodians to a rival polity	conqueror; exploited by the host	
Narrative capture	Records survive intact, but	Deliberate and sustained	Contemporary information
	access, indexing and		

The value of the distinction is that it makes the thesis falsifiable. If epistemicide is a general instrument of statecraft, all four mechanisms should produce lasting subjugation. If only some do, the concept requires narrowing, and the cases should tell us which.

III. Method and Case Selection

The three cases are selected to vary the mechanism while holding constant the object of study, namely a major centralised institution of learning whose fate is claimed to have altered a regional balance of power. Alexandria represents attritional decay across several centuries; Bihar represents kinetic destruction in a single campaign; Constantinople represents displacement, and functions as a control case in which the knowledge survived and the political effects can therefore be compared against the destruction cases. The cases are also drawn from three distinct civilisational and documentary contexts, which limits the risk that the findings reflect the peculiarities of a single historiographical tradition.

Two of these cases require an unusual degree of caution about sources, and it is worth stating the standard applied before the evidence is presented.

The destruction of the Library of Alexandria and the sacking of the Bihar mahaviharas are both surrounded by accounts that entered circulation long after the events, that were composed by parties with evident interests, and that are today deployed in live political arguments. In both cases, the dramatic version of the story is the one most often repeated and the one least well supported. This paper therefore distinguishes throughout between contemporary sources, later sources, and archaeological evidence, and gives weight in that order. Where the sources conflict, the conflict is reported rather than resolved by preference.

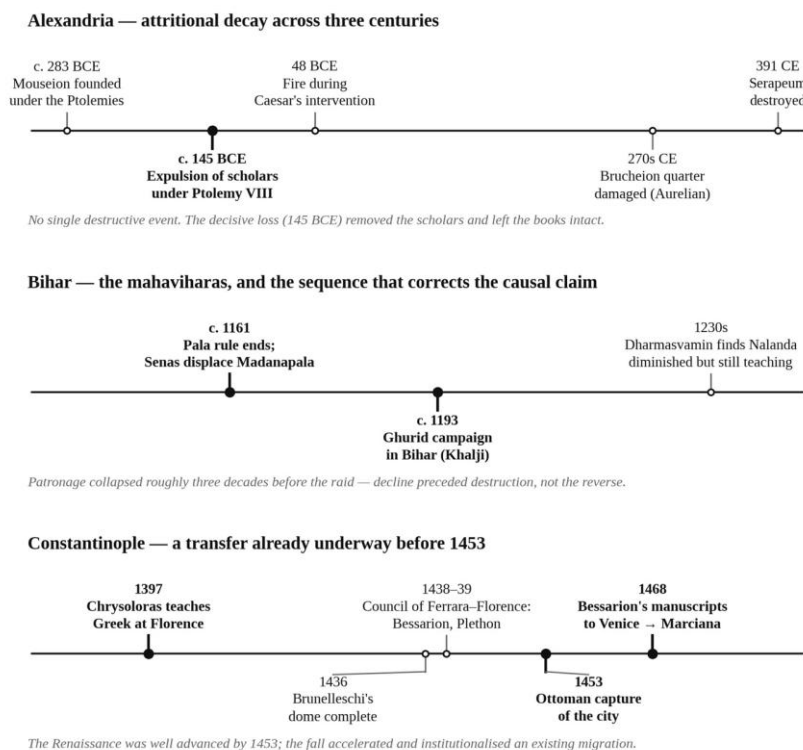


Figure 1. Chronology of the three cases. Each strip is separately scaled. The Bihar and Constantinople strips make visible two sequences on which this paper departs from the conventional account: Pala patronage ended roughly three decades before the Ghurid campaign, and the transmission of Greek learning to Italy was well advanced before 1453.

This is not merely methodological hygiene. It is substantively connected to the paper's argument. If the thesis is that control over the historical record is an instrument of power, then the historiography of epistemicide is itself a site where that instrument is used, and a study of erasure that uncritically adopted a politically serviceable account of erasure would be self-refuting.

IV. Alexandria: Attritional Epistemicide and the Dispersal of Custodians The Library of Alexandria is the standard reference point for the destruction of knowledge, and it is the case that least supports the standard account.

The Mouseion as an instrument of Ptolemaic statecraft

The Library was an organ of the Mouseion, a royal foundation established under the early Ptolemies that supported resident scholars at state expense (El-Abbadi 1990, 84-90). Its function was not disinterested. By concentrating scholars from across the Greek-speaking world in a city that had no claim to ancient prestige, the Ptolemies purchased cultural legitimacy for a Macedonian dynasty ruling an Egyptian population, and acquired practical advantages in astronomy, geography, engineering, and medicine. Eratosthenes, appointed chief librarian in the third century BCE, produced a measurement of the earth's circumference of remarkable accuracy, and his geographical work had direct application to navigation and administration (MacLeod 2000, 6-9). The Library is thus a clear instance of knowledge production organised as a state capability.

What actually happened

The popular narrative of a single catastrophic destruction has no support in the sources. Roger Bagnall has shown that the figures conventionally cited for the Library's holdings are inflated well beyond what ancient book production could plausibly have supplied, and that the modern imagination of Alexandria owes more to Enlightenment mythmaking than to evidence (Bagnall 2002, 348-350). What the record supports instead is a long attrition with several distinct phases.

Around 145 BCE, in the course of a dynastic conflict, Ptolemy VIII expelled a substantial part of Alexandria's intellectual community, and scholars associated with the Mouseion dispersed to Rhodes, Pergamon, Athens, and elsewhere (Canfora 1990, 41-44). No books were burned. The fire during Caesar's intervention in 48 BCE, frequently identified as the destruction of the Library, most probably consumed scrolls warehoused near the harbour rather than the Mouseion's collection (El-Abbadi 1990, 145-150). The Brucheion quarter, in which the Mouseion stood, was damaged during Aurelian's suppression of Palmyrene control in the 270s CE. The Serapeum, a subsidiary collection, was destroyed in 391 CE, by which date it is unclear whether it held a significant library at all (Bagnall 2002, 353).

No single actor destroyed the Library. It ceased to function because the institutional conditions that sustained it, continuous royal patronage, political stability sufficient to retain scholars, and a dynasty that regarded learning as an asset, were withdrawn incrementally over three centuries.

The finding: the custodians were the archive

This case requires a correction to the argument with which this paper began, and the correction is instructive.

It is tempting to read Roman ascendancy in the Mediterranean as having been served by Alexandria's decline, and to infer intent from benefit. The inference does not hold. There is no evidence that any Roman authority pursued a policy of intellectual suppression against Alexandria, and the Roman elite in fact absorbed Hellenistic learning enthusiastically, importing Greek tutors, libraries, and physicians. To describe the outcome as calculated statecraft would be to mistake a consequence for a plan.

What the case does establish is more interesting. The most consequential event in the Library's decline was not a fire but the expulsion of 145 BCE, which removed the scholars while leaving the books untouched. The institution's capability resided in a community of practice, in the people who could read the collection, teach from it, and extend it, rather than in the physical holdings. Attritional epistemicide works, where it works, by dispersing custodians. It follows that a state seeking to protect its epistemic sovereignty should attend less to the security of its buildings than to the continuity of its scholarly institutions, a conclusion with obvious contemporary application to academic funding, migration policy, and the independence of universities.

V. Bihar, c. 1193: Kinetic Destruction and the Politics of the Record

The sacking of the Buddhist monastic universities of Bihar at the end of the twelfth century is the case most often cited as deliberate epistemicide, and the case whose evidentiary basis is most contested. It is treated here at greater length because the contestation is itself analytically relevant.

Nalanda as an institution

Nalanda was a *mahavihara*, a large Buddhist monastic complex that functioned as a residential centre of higher learning from roughly the fifth century CE. Its curriculum encompassed Buddhist doctrinal literature and logic, Sanskrit grammar, medicine, and astronomy, and it drew students from across Asia; the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing in the seventh century remain the fullest descriptions of its operation (Sen 2003, 8-12). It received patronage from the Pala rulers of Bengal and Bihar, alongside Odantapuri, Vikramashila, and Jagaddala, and it was a significant node in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet.

It is necessary to be precise about what Nalanda was not. It was a monastic institution of religious and philosophical education, not an organ of state administration. Land grants, tax entitlements, and legal privileges in early medieval India were recorded principally on copper plates, issued by the ruling authority and retained by the donee, and were therefore distributed across the polity rather than concentrated in any single archive (Salomon 1998, 113-118). The claim, common in popular accounts, that the destruction of the mahaviharas erased a state's administrative memory does not survive contact with the epigraphic record. This distinction matters for the argument, and the reasons are taken up below.

The sources and their problems

The contemporary source is the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj-i-Siraj, composed around 1260. It describes an assault by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, with some two hundred armoured horsemen, on "the fortress of Bihar," where the attackers killed the shaven-headed inhabitants, discovered a great number of books, and learned only afterwards that the fortified place was a college (Minhaj-i-Siraj 1881, 551-552).

Two difficulties follow immediately. The first is one of identification. Minhaj names the target as the fortress of Bihar, and a substantial body of scholarship identifies this as Odantapuri, at present-day Bihar Sharif, rather than Nalanda; the town took its name from the *vihara* itself (Jha 2018, 82-85). Minhaj does not mention Nalanda. The second difficulty is one of characterisation: the account describes a raid on what the attackers took to be a fortified military position, with the scholarly character of the site discovered after the fact, which is difficult to reconcile with a campaign designed from the outset to extinguish a knowledge system.

The vivid details most often repeated, that the library burned for months and that hundreds of thousands of manuscripts were consumed, do not come from Minhaj. They derive from Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*, a Tibetan work of the early seventeenth century, composed more than four hundred years after the events and drawing on a tradition of Buddhist historical writing with its own devotional purposes (Taranatha 1970, 318-320). This is not a contemporary record, and it should not be cited as one.

Against the totalising account stands a piece of evidence that is rarely given its due. The Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin visited Nalanda in the 1230s, some four decades after the raid, and found the site diminished and largely deserted but not extinguished: the aged scholar Rahula Sribhadra was still resident and still teaching a small number of students (Roerich 1959, 90-93). Whatever occurred in the 1190s, it did not produce the instantaneous annihilation the popular account describes. Archaeological excavation at Nalanda has established layers of burning consistent with destruction by fire in this general period, but archaeology can date and characterise a burning without attributing it to a particular agent (Kumar 2007, 60-64).

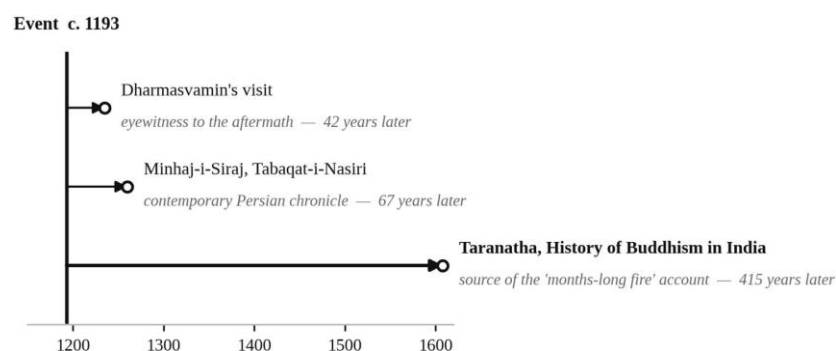


Figure 2. Distance between the event and the surviving accounts of it. The details most frequently repeated in popular narratives — the months-long fire, the hundreds of thousands of manuscripts — originate in the latest and most remote of the three sources, not in the contemporary chronicle.

Contested memory as a contemporary political instrument

The attribution of Nalanda's destruction is today an active political controversy in India, in which the event is invoked to characterise the nature of medieval Muslim rule and, by extension, to make claims about the present. Richard Eaton's work on temple desecration in the Indo-Muslim period offers the most useful corrective to the framework within which the dispute is usually conducted. Eaton found that desecration of religious sites in this period followed a discernible political logic, concentrated on royally patronised temples of defeated opponents at the moment of conquest, rather than reflecting an undifferentiated iconoclastic programme, and that the number of documented cases is far smaller than polemical accounts assert (Eaton 2000, 297-300).

The scholarly position that the evidence supports is narrower than either polemical camp would prefer. Ghurid campaigns in Bihar around 1193 involved the violent destruction of monastic institutions, and this contributed materially to the decline of institutional Buddhism in eastern India. Whether Nalanda specifically

was destroyed by Khalji's forces, whether the destruction was a deliberate assault on learning or a raid on a fortified site whose character was misapprehended, and how far monastic Buddhism was already weakened by the withdrawal of Pala patronage, all remain genuinely open.

That last point requires a chronological correction that is fatal to a common version of the argument. The Pala dynasty, the principal patron of the Bihar mahaviharas, had already been displaced. Madanapala, the last Pala emperor, was expelled from Bengal by Vijayasena of the Sena dynasty, and Pala rule ended around 1161, roughly three decades before Khalji's campaign (Majumdar 1971, 168-172). The Senas were Hindu and did not extend comparable patronage to the Buddhist monasteries. The mahaviharas were therefore already in decline, deprived of the royal support that had sustained them, before any invader arrived. Any account which holds that their destruction caused a Pala political collapse has the causation reversed, because the Pala state was gone first.

The finding: kinetic destruction and its limits

Read carefully, this case does not support the strong thesis that kinetic epistemicide is an efficient instrument of subjugation. It supports something narrower and, for the purposes of this paper, more useful.

Physical destruction is highly effective against institutions that are already structurally vulnerable. The Bihar mahaviharas depended on concentrated royal patronage, celibate monastic communities that could not reconstitute themselves demographically, and large fixed sites. When patronage was withdrawn and the communities were killed or dispersed, the institutional form did not recover in India. But the knowledge itself very largely survived, carried by monks who fled to Nepal and Tibet, where the Tibetan canon preserved in translation a substantial portion of the Sanskrit Buddhist literature subsequently lost in India (Sen 2003, 240-242). This is displacement operating alongside destruction, and it is precisely the pattern examined in the following section.

Meanwhile the administrative apparatus of the region did not collapse for want of records, because the records were never held at the monasteries. Governance in Bihar and Bengal passed to the Delhi Sultanate through the ordinary mechanisms of conquest and revenue reorganisation (Kumar 2007, 74-80). The "administrative decapitation" thesis is not sustained by the evidence.

What the case does demonstrate, with unusual clarity, is the fourth mechanism operating in the present. The historical record of what happened at Nalanda is thin, contested, and dependent on a late source of doubtful reliability, and that thinness has itself become a political resource. Competing groups supply the missing detail in the shape their arguments require. Epistemicide, in other words, is legible here less in the twelfth-century fire than in the twenty-first-century contest over what the fire is held to mean.

VI. Constantinople: Displacement and the Migration of Custodians

The third case functions as a control. Here the knowledge was not destroyed; it moved. Comparing the political consequences against the destruction cases isolates what is actually doing the causal work.

Correcting the conventional account

The familiar narrative holds that the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453 drove Greek scholars into exile, that they carried classical manuscripts to Italy, and that this transfer triggered the Renaissance. Each element requires qualification.

The migration of Greek learning to Italy began well before 1453 and was substantially complete as an intellectual transfer by the time the city fell. Manuel Chrysoloras took up a chair in Greek at Florence in 1397, and his teaching gave the Italian humanists their first systematic access to the language (Wilson 1992, 8-12). The Council of Ferrara-Florence of 1438 to 1439, convened to negotiate ecclesiastical union, brought a substantial Byzantine delegation to Italy, including Bessarion and George Gemistos Plethon, whose lectures on Plato had a marked effect on Florentine intellectual life (Setton 1956, 55-58). Greek manuscripts were being purchased and copied in Italy throughout the first half of the fifteenth century.

The Italian Renaissance was, correspondingly, already well advanced by 1453. Brunelleschi's dome was structurally complete by 1436; Leonardo Bruni's civic humanist histories had been circulating for decades. To attribute the Renaissance to the events of 1453 is to reverse the chronology.

The premise that the Ottomans destroyed Byzantine learning is also mistaken. Mehmed II collected Greek manuscripts, retained Greek scholars, patronised the production of Greek texts at his court, and installed Gennadios Scholarios as patriarch, thereby preserving the institutional structure of the Greek church under Ottoman authority (Runciman 1965, 154-160). The conqueror absorbed rather than erased.

What 1453 did change

The fall of the city nonetheless mattered, and mattered in a way that fits this paper's framework more precisely than the conventional account does. What 1453 accomplished was to convert a gradual migration into a

permanent transfer of custodianship, and to render the transfer institutional rather than personal.

The decisive event was not the siege but Bessarion's bequest. In 1468 Bessarion donated his collection of some 750 manuscripts, the largest gathering of Greek texts assembled in the West, to the Republic of Venice, explicitly so that the learning of a Greek world he judged to be politically extinguished should have a durable home (Harris 1995, 137-141). That donation became the foundation of the Biblioteca Marciana. A private library, dependent on one man's survival, became a public institution of a state, with the endowment and continuity that implies.

Here the comparison with Alexandria is exact and inverted. Alexandria declined because an institution reverted to dispersed individuals when patronage failed. Venice ascended because dispersed individuals were converted into an institution when patronage was supplied. In both cases the causal variable is institutional continuity rather than the physical survival of texts.

The finding: power follows custodians, not archives

The Italian city-states did not acquire Greek learning by conquest, and the Ottomans, who did conquer, acquired no comparable advantage from it. The transfer went to the polity that offered scholars employment, patronage, printing presses, and legal protection. Venice and Florence gained a durable advantage in the classical tradition that underwrote the political theory of the emerging European state system, and the Aldine Press at Venice subsequently made Greek texts available across Europe at scale (Monfasani 1995, 3-8).

If knowledge were a static asset attached to a place, seizure would transfer it. It is not, and seizure does not. Knowledge is carried by people who can be attracted or repelled, and it settles where the institutional conditions favour it. The strategic implication runs against the intuition that motivates epistemicide: a state gains far more by hosting a rival's displaced scholars than by destroying a rival's libraries. The three cases can now be set against one another directly.

Table 2. Comparative findings across the three cases.

	Alexandria	Bihar, c. 1193	Constantinople, 1453
Mechanism	Attritional	Kinetic	Displacement
Repositories destroyed	Partially, over centuries	Yes	No
Custodians dispersed	Yes (145 BCE)	Yes, to Nepal and Tibet	Yes, to Italy
Knowledge survived	Substantially, elsewhere	Substantially, in Tibetan translation	Yes, in full
Institutional form survived	No	No	Yes, reconstituted at Venice
Political subjugation followed	No direct link	Yes, but already underway	Not of the custodians
Beneficiary	Successor centres (Rhodes, Pergamon)	Delhi Sultanate, by ordinary conquest	The host, not the conqueror

Read across the rows, the pattern is consistent and it is not the pattern the original hypothesis predicted. In every case the holdings mattered less than the custodians, and in no case did the destruction of a repository by itself produce durable political subjugation. Where subjugation followed, as in Bihar, the political collapse preceded the destruction rather than resulting from it.

VII. The Limits of Epistemicide

The thesis advanced here must confront three serious objections, each of which constrains it.

Knowledge systems are unusually resilient

The historical record contains many attempts at deliberate erasure that failed. Rabbinic Judaism survived the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent dispersal precisely by transferring authority from a place

to a portable textual practice. Irish and Carolingian monastic scriptoria preserved classical Latin literature through centuries in which the political structures that produced it had disappeared. Soviet *samizdat* sustained a parallel literature under a state with comprehensive control of publication, printing, and distribution (Knuth 2003, 12-18). Where a knowledge system is embedded in a dispersed community of practice rather than concentrated in an institution, destruction of the institution does not extinguish it. This is the principal reason the Bihar case produced a durable result and these did not: monastic Buddhism in India was institutionally concentrated and demographically non-reproducing, which is an unusual and unusually fragile configuration.

Conquerors usually absorb rather than destroy

The assumption that a hegemon benefits from destroying a rival's knowledge is not borne out by the behaviour of most successful hegemonies. The Abbasid translation movement of the eighth to tenth centuries systematically acquired and translated Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit scientific literature, at state expense, as an instrument of imperial prestige and practical capability (Gutas 1998, 1-8). Mehmed II, as noted, collected what he had conquered. The Romans imported Hellenistic learning wholesale. Captured knowledge is generally more useful to a conqueror than destroyed knowledge, which suggests that where destruction does occur it is often better explained by the ordinary dynamics of siege warfare, by religious iconoclasm, or by the misidentification of a fortified site, than by a strategy of epistemic subjugation.

Redundancy has made kinetic erasure progressively harder

The technological trajectory runs against the destruction mechanism. Manuscript cultures concentrate knowledge in few copies at few sites, and are correspondingly vulnerable. Printing distributed copies at a scale that made comprehensive destruction impracticable. Digital reproduction has reduced the marginal cost of an additional copy to nearly nothing. A twelfth-century library could be eliminated by a raiding party; a modern corpus cannot be, at least not by fire.

These objections do not defeat the argument, but they redefine it. The strong claim that destroying knowledge is a reliable instrument of long-term political subjugation is not supported. What the cases support is a weaker and more precise claim: that epistemic control is a real and consequential dimension of power, that its kinetic form has become progressively less viable, and that the mechanism has accordingly migrated to the one domain where scarcity still obtains. Copies are abundant; attention, trust, and interpretive authority are not. That is where the contest has moved.

VIII. The Contemporary Domain: From Destruction to Capture

Kinetic epistemicide has not disappeared

The physical destruction of knowledge remains a feature of contemporary conflict. On the night of 25 August 1992, Serb forces shelled the Vijećnica, the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, destroying an estimated one and a half million volumes together with irreplaceable Ottoman-era manuscripts and the records of a multi-confessional society. András Riedlmayer's documentation established that the targeting of libraries, archives, and religious buildings in Bosnia was systematic and was directed at the documentary evidence of a shared past, rather than incidental to military operations (Riedlmayer 2007, 108-112). Comparable destruction accompanied the Islamic State's occupation of Mosul in 2014 and 2015, which included the university library and the central museum.

Timbuktu supplies both a case of destruction and a case of successful defence. When Ansar Dine and allied groups occupied northern Mali in 2012, custodians of the city's manuscript collections, coordinated by the librarian Abdel Kader Haidara, evacuated several hundred thousand manuscripts to Bamako in a clandestine operation conducted over many months (Bevan 2016, 20-24). The parallel with the Byzantine case is close: what preserved the corpus was not the security of the buildings but the agency of the custodians and the availability of a refuge.

The existing legal architecture, and where it stops

A significant part of the doctrinal apparatus this subject requires already exists, and the argument for treating intellectual heritage as a security concern is therefore less novel than it may appear. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted in direct response to the destruction of the Second World War, established obligations to safeguard and respect cultural property and created the Blue Shield emblem for its identification. The Rome Statute of 1998 made intentional attacks on buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes a war crime under articles 8(2)(b)(ix) and 8(2)(e)(iv).

That provision received its first dedicated enforcement in 2016. On 27 September of that year, Trial Chamber VIII of the International Criminal Court convicted Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi of the war crime of intentionally

directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion, comprising nine mausoleums and a mosque in Timbuktu destroyed in June and July 2012, and sentenced him to nine years' imprisonment (ICC 2016, paras. 9-63). It was the first case in the Court's history prosecuted solely for the destruction of cultural property. The Prosecutor's submission articulated the rationale in terms that correspond closely to the argument of this paper: what was at stake was not the physical fabric of the buildings but their significance for the historical and communal identity of a population.

The limitation of this architecture is its scope. It attaches to tangible property, in the context of armed conflict, attributable to identifiable perpetrators. It does not reach the destruction of intangible knowledge systems, nor conduct below the threshold of armed conflict, nor the systematic corruption of a digital record.

Digital fragility and interpretive capture

Two distinct problems arise in the digital domain, and they are frequently conflated.

The first is custodial. Digital records are far less durable than the material they replaced, a problem identified early as the prospect of a "digital dark age" in which formats become unreadable, media degrade, and institutional responsibility for preservation is never clearly assigned (Kuny 1997; Rothenberg 1995, 42-47). The empirical scale of the loss is now measurable. A study of citations in United States Supreme Court opinions and in three leading law journals found that roughly half of the linked material was no longer reachable at the cited address, and that a substantial further proportion had changed content since citation (Zittrain, Albert, and Lessig 2014, 177-180). This is decay rather than destruction, and no adversary is required to produce it, but the consequence for the integrity of the record is comparable.

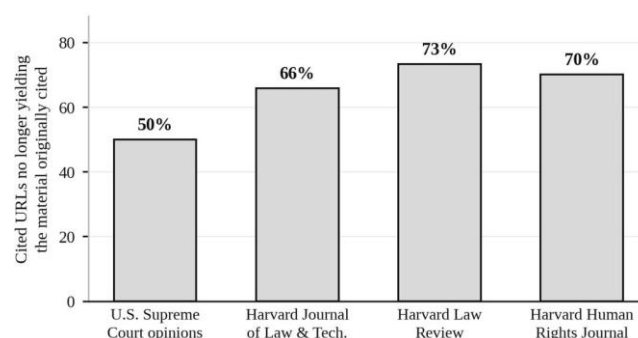


Figure 3. Reference rot in legal citation. Data from Zittrain, Albert, and Lessig (2014). No adversary is required to produce this outcome; it is the ordinary behaviour of a distributed and unowned record.

The second problem is interpretive, and it is the direct descendant of the mechanism identified in this paper as narrative capture. Margaret Roberts's study of Chinese information control demonstrates that contemporary censorship operates less by prohibition than by the imposition of friction and the strategic flooding of the information environment, so that inconvenient material remains formally accessible but is expensive to find and easy to doubt (Roberts 2018, 6-12). Thomas Rid's history of disinformation operations documents an equivalent logic in interstate practice, in which the objective is less to install a specific falsehood than to degrade the general capacity to distinguish reliable from unreliable claims (Rid 2020, 9-14). Neither approach destroys a record. Both defeat its function.

This is why Foucault's formulation is more apt now than when it was written. An archive that survives but cannot be found, cannot be trusted, and cannot be authoritatively interpreted does not constrain what can be said. The destruction of records has become largely unnecessary.

What follows for policy

The temptation at this point is to propose a technological remedy, and one proposal in circulation deserves specific scrutiny. It is sometimes suggested that distributed ledger technologies could produce "immutable archives" immune to political alteration. The proposal misunderstands the problem. A distributed ledger can establish that a document has not changed since it was recorded; it cannot establish that the document was accurate when written, and it does nothing whatever to resolve the governing question of who decides what is entered into the archive and what is omitted. Trouillot's first silence, the silence in the making of sources, is untouched by cryptographic guarantees. Tamper-evidence is not truth.

The measures the evidence in this paper actually supports are less dramatic and better grounded. First, distributed custodianship: the LOCKSS principle, that preservation is achieved through many independently administered copies in different jurisdictions rather than through any single secure repository, is the digital form of the lesson learned at Alexandria and confirmed at Timbuktu. Second, institutional independence: because the historical evidence indicates that scholarly communities are more fragile than their holdings, the durable protections are those that secure the autonomy, funding, and continuity of archives, universities, and statistical agencies against political interference. Third, doctrinal extension: the Hague and Rome Statute frameworks should be examined for whether their protections can be extended to national digital archives and to peacetime conduct, which is a question of treaty development rather than of new technology. The consistent finding across three cases separated by seventeen centuries is that knowledge is protected by the conditions that sustain its custodians, and not by the walls around its holdings.

IX. Conclusion

This paper set out to test whether the destruction of knowledge systems functions as an instrument of statecraft, and found that the question was poorly posed because "epistemicide" conflates four distinct mechanisms. Separating them yields a more defensible account.

Attritional decay, examined at Alexandria, does lasting damage, but it operates by dispersing scholarly communities rather than by destroying holdings, and it is typically a consequence of withdrawn patronage rather than of hostile design. Kinetic destruction, examined in twelfth-century Bihar, is effective only against institutions already rendered fragile by the loss of patronage and by demographic non-reproduction, and even there the knowledge substantially survived through displacement; the evidentiary basis for the strong version of that case is considerably weaker than its currency suggests. Displacement, examined at Constantinople, transfers advantage to whichever polity offers custodians institutional refuge, which means that the strategic returns lie in hosting displaced scholars rather than in destroying rival archives. Narrative capture, the fourth mechanism, is the one the evidence identifies as durable, and it is the one that has migrated most completely into the present.

The corrected thesis is therefore this. Epistemic sovereignty is a genuine component of state power, and its loss carries the political consequences the literature attributes to it. But the instrument that threatens it is not the burning of libraries, which the historical record shows to be inefficient, frequently incidental, and increasingly impracticable against redundant modern corpora. The threat is the capture of interpretive authority over records that remain physically intact. A state whose citizens cannot locate, trust, or authoritatively interpret their own documentary past has lost precisely what the sacking of a library was once supposed to take from it, and has lost it without any archive having been touched.

This has a determinate implication for security doctrine. Cyber-defence policy is presently organised around the integrity of infrastructure, systems, networks, and data, and is largely silent on the integrity of the record those systems carry. The legal architecture established at The Hague in 1954 and enforced for the first time at The Hague in 2016 demonstrates that the international community can recognise attacks on cultural knowledge as attacks on a population. Extending that recognition to the digital and interpretive domain is the outstanding task. Intellectual sovereignty is not an ornament of national power. On the evidence considered here, it is among its preconditions.

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