

Professor uses satellites to study damage to Iraq, Syria ruins

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From his lab more than 6,000 miles away, University of Central Florida archaeologist Scott Branting bears witness to the cultural destruction happening in Syria and northern Iraq.

The [satellite images](#) the professor reviews depict pillars toppled over or looters driving up to a palace with their trucks. Branting can see where people have dug up ancient sites in search of something to sell on the [black market](#).

He records the damage at mosques, churches, art museums, historical forts, [archaeological sites](#) and other places of importance.

"If you know what actually is happening, yes, it may be horrific, but at least you know what it is and the extent of the damage," Branting said.

The assistant professor's work has appeared in White House briefings, been shared with Interpol and foreign governments, and could be used as evidence to prosecute war crimes in the future.

Branting is working with the American Schools of Oriental Research, a Boston University-based group that does archaeological work in the Middle East and Mediterranean. It received a \$900,000 contract from the U.S. State Department to survey the damage.

The UCF researcher's work is primarily paid for by other sources, such as the Getty Conservation Institute. Branting declined to say how much.

He is waiting to hear if the federal government will renew the project under the Trump administration.

About 25 percent of the images taken from private satellites over the past two years show damage at the cultural sites, although Branting warns he cannot see all the destruction, such as inside the buildings.

Branting is a new-age archaeologist using modern technology, a change from the days of the archaeologist who typically headed to a scene and painstakingly coaxed artifacts from the ground.

Andrew Vaughn, executive director of the nonprofit ASOR, said Branting is one of the world's top experts in his field.

"He is one of the leaders in terms of studying satellite images and identifying archaeological sites and identifying damage," Vaughn said.

Branting's analysis can refute what the Islamic State and other groups claim they have done to ancient ruins.

For instance, they may boast on propaganda videos about a site's entire destruction, Branting said, but he can see people looting the site beforehand with the likely intent of selling antiquities on the black market to raise money.

Branting also hopes his work could help first responders have a better understanding of the damage and determining the priorities as they undertake the clean-up process when they return to war-torn countries.

Branting arrived at the University of Central Florida in 2015 as part of a wave of new faculty hires.

He said he was intrigued by UCF because of its location near Cape

Canaveral; he hopes to work with other faculty to put up mini-satellites and study more cultural sites.

At UCF, about a dozen students have had the opportunity to assist on the satellite project.

Paige Paulsen, a UCF anthropology graduate student who moved from Seattle to study under Branting, said it can be challenging at first to make sense of the satellite images. The orchard she thought was actually a parking lot, she later realized during her first semester on Branting's team.

It's also put the conflict on the other side of the world closer in her mind, she said as she studies photographs of Aleppo, before the war and after.

"It's alarming how different it looks," said Paulsen, 24.

Before coming to UCF, Branting spent 10 years working as the director at the University of Chicago's Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes.

The 42-year-old's work has taken him to Turkey, where he led students on digs of an ancient city once ruled by Midas.

Branting's background includes a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University at Buffalo as well as several other degrees in Middle Eastern studies and geography.

Growing up as a kid in Vermont, he was fascinated by history.

"That's usually the question people say, 'Why did you become an archaeologist?'" Branting said. "I really enjoyed history quite a lot growing up, but I wanted a job where I wasn't going to have to sit in a

library or sit behind a desk all the time."

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