

Relations between Archaeologists and the Military in the Case of Iraq

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In this short paper, I want to consider the controversial question of whether archaeologists should work with the military, principally in Iraq. During the course of 2008, the British Museum and the British Army collaborated in a project to inspect archaeological sites in the south of Iraq and to develop plans for a new museum in Basra. I shall describe the background to this collaboration, and consider the ethical questions arising from this arrangement.

Firstly, the engagement with the British Army needs to be put into its proper context. Since the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces in Spring 2003, and the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad on 10-11 April 2003, the British Museum has been working alongside other organisations to help our Iraqi colleagues in their attempts to protect and save Iraqi cultural heritage¹. A large part of this work has consisted of providing condition reports and listing damage. I shall describe these attempts in chronological order because they are germane to the question of why we eventually sought the assistance of the British Army.

Following the looting of the Iraq Museum, a press conference that had been arranged at the British Museum on 15 April to promote its 250th anniversary was dominated by this shocking news. Through the good offices of Channel 4 News, a link-up by satellite telephone was established with Dr Donny George, then Director of the Iraq Museum, in the Iraq Museum. He reported that the museum was still unguarded, and urged me to come out to Baghdad as soon as possible to witness the situation at first hand. When it became known that we were planning a visit to Baghdad, a number of journalists and film crews offered to join forces with us. We decided to link up with a BBC team which wanted to produce a programme to be presented by Dan Cruickshank. We needed each other. I would be able to get the BBC team into the Iraq Museum (they would not have got access otherwise), and they would be able to get me into Iraq, with protection from the security firm Pilgrim Elite.

It was not a bad arrangement. The advantages were that I was able to spend 25-26 April 2003 in the Iraq Museum (with the BBC team) photographing and recording the damage, and Donny George came back with me to London to appear at a press conference in the British Museum on 29 April at which he was able to tell the world's media exactly what had happened in the museum. Also at this time, we made a list of the 40 or so most important objects stolen from the galleries. The disadvantages of this collaboration with the BBC were that they produced a film of which I strongly disapproved, in which it was suggested that the Iraqi curators were somehow complicit in the looting of the museum.

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I was, and still remain, firmly convinced that the curators were entirely blameless. As an American colleague has remarked: they may have been Baathists, but they weren't criminals.

The next opportunity to visit Iraq came in June 2003. At the press conference on 29 April Donny George had said that he wanted the British Museum to coordinate efforts to provide assistance to the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (ISBAH), particularly in the field of conservation². Accordingly, a small British Museum group, which included two conservators, spent the period 11-26 June in Iraq. The visit was funded by the Packard Foundation, and security was again provided by Pilgrim Elite. The early summer of 2003 was actually the only time since the war in Iraq began when it has been possible to travel around the country relatively safely, and we were able to make full use of this window of opportunity. In Baghdad we made further observations in the Iraq Museum, and the conservators drew up a detailed conservation plan, which was in fact not possible to put into effect because of the rapidly deteriorating security situation thereafter. We also inspected the material in the Rafidain Bank that had been recently unpacked – chiefly goldwork and ivories – and we made a visit to the north. During this tour we visited Nimrud, Nineveh and Balawat, and we were the first western archaeologists to visit the Mosul Museum, which was looted at exactly the same time as the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. Lastly, we went down to Babylon, which at that time was guarded by a very small detachment of Coalition troops. Throughout this visit, we were accompanied by two filmmakers from Cicada Films, but sadly no film has ever appeared. At the time, it appeared to be difficult to reconcile the agendas of the filmmakers on the one hand and we archaeologists on the other.

As I have said, the military detachment at Babylon in June 2003 was small. However, the camp continued to grow through the second half of 2003 and the first part of 2004 so that, by the summer of 2004, it occupied an area of 150 hectares and housed 2,000 soldiers. Following a storm of protest in the international press and on the Web, the Coalition took a decision to vacate the camp. A handover ceremony was arranged by the Polish ambassador – Polish troops being at that time the last residents of the camp – and, in preparation for the handover, a lengthy report on the overall condition of Babylon was prepared by Polish archaeologists embedded in the Polish army. At the same time, I was invited by Dr Mufid al-Jazairi, then Iraqi Minister of Culture, to visit Babylon and prepare an independent report, focusing on the damage that had been caused during the time that Babylon was a military camp. With the assistance of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the British Embassy in Baghdad, and with the help of American forces in Iraq, I was able to join the inspection team at Babylon for the period 11-13 December 2004. Security cover was provided by Control Risks Group (CRG). In due course I prepared a report³ which attracted considerable publicity⁴. This report highlighted problems such as the digging of long trenches through previously undisturbed archaeological deposits, the removal of large amounts of surface deposit, the flattening of areas which were then covered with compacted gravel, filling sandbags and HESCO containers with earth from outside Babylon (thereby contaminating the record at Babylon itself), driving heavy military vehicles along the ancient Processional Way, and damaging dragon (*mushhushu*) figures in the Ishtar Gate. At the time of writ-

ing, a final assessment of damages has still not been officially agreed, but a UNESCO report, incorporating my findings together with those of Iraqi colleagues and others, will be released shortly. The work I was able to undertake at Babylon is an example of how such visits can be facilitated if the invitation has been extended at a senior level – in this case by the Iraqi Minister of Culture.

In the course of 2005-2006, as a result of the worsening security situation, I was not able to visit Iraq at all to continue the task of monitoring damage to cultural heritage. This was in spite of the fact that, in March 2006, reports began to circulate that inscribed stones had been taken from the famous site of Ur of the Chaldees to Nasiriya Museum by Italian archaeologists working with Coalition troops, without the permission of the Iraqi antiquities authorities. Dr George sent his staff to investigate, and received reassuring reports from them, but he was still anxious to visit Ur himself and invited me to join him there for a tour of inspection. I was keen to do this as it would provide an opportunity to see if Coalition troops from the adjoining Tallil Airbase had caused any damage at Ur, a site of special interest to the British Museum because of the excavations there by Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934. However, the visit took so long to organise that by the time it came about Dr George had left Iraq for the US and had been replaced as Chairman of the State Board by Dr Abbas al-Husseini.

I was eventually able to go out to Ur in February 2007. The trip was facilitated by the FCO, and security was again provided by CRG. The plan was that I should meet up with Dr al-Husseini at Ur, but it went horribly wrong. The site is incorporated within the perimeter fence surrounding Tallil Airbase, so all access to the site is controlled by US forces. When Dr al-Husseini arrived at the main gate, after having driven down especially from Baghdad, he refused to be searched and was therefore denied access. His entirely reasonable argument was that, as Director of Antiquities, he had responsibility for all archaeological sites in Iraq and should have unrestricted access to them. The stand-off lasted several hours, but Dr al-Husseini's protests were to no avail and he was unable to enter the site. In these circumstances my own inspection had to be aborted, but I was able to ascertain before leaving that shrapnel damage to the façade of the ziggurat had been caused during the First Gulf War (1990-1991), and bomb craters to the north-east of the site also dated to that time⁵. More worrying was the realisation that the new Visitor Control Centre at the main gate complex had been built on top of the ancient suburb of Ur known as Diqqiqa. The construction of the Centre will inevitably have caused some damage to the archaeological deposits in this area, and could have been avoided if archaeologists or experts in cultural heritage had been consulted beforehand.

The fiasco at Ur was not only deeply embarrassing, but also very frustrating. We were keen to do more to record and rebuild Iraqi cultural heritage, but it was proving very difficult to go to Iraq and engage with Iraqi colleagues. Therefore, it was a welcome breath of fresh air when Major General Barney White-Spunner, the British commanding officer, came to the British Museum in September 2007, in advance of the deployment of the Third Division to Basra, and asked what he could do to help protect cultural heritage. By now the advantages of working with the Army were obvious, as we shall

see, but I recognise that our ready agreement to do so requires some explanation. This is particularly so in view of the heated debates on this subject, such as at the recent World Archaeological Congress (WAC) in Dublin.

Before the war started I had been unwilling to provide a list of sites for the military⁶. In fact, the British Ministry of Defence never asked me or the British Museum for any information, but I *was* approached (in a private capacity) by a person collecting information for the US Department of Defense. I declined to give any information for the following reasons:

- (i) Iraq is a vast archaeological site: providing a list of selected sites would give the army *carte blanche* to do whatever they wanted elsewhere.
- (ii) Providing information would somehow be collusion, assisting in the preparations for the war.
- (iii) Providing information was, I thought, a political rather than a military gesture – in fact dancing to a political agenda.

For the same reasons, I had not been willing to contribute a chapter to Larry Rothfield's book *Antiquities under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection after the Iraq War* (2008), even though I had participated in the original conference organised by the Cultural Policy Center of the University of Chicago in August 2006. My reluctance was based on the fact that I was unhappy to write about what should be done to protect cultural heritage in the event of an invasion when, to my mind, an invasion could hardly ever be justified. Also, to put this decision into context, it was at this moment that an invasion of Iran was being widely spoken of⁷. To return to the question of working with the army, I draw a sharp distinction between providing advice pre-conflict and post-conflict. The pre-conflict situation is, in fact, governed by political considerations over which the army has no more control than archaeologists, but in the post-conflict situation, when the damage has occurred, both the army and archaeologists have an obligation to rebuild the infrastructure including cultural heritage. Working with the army post-conflict is, therefore, a pragmatic solution. It is only they who have the resources to facilitate visits and provide protection. They also have a great deal of expertise that can be harnessed for archaeological work. For these reasons I have come to the conclusion that cooperation between the military and archaeologists post-conflict is very useful and desirable, and indeed if there had been closer collaboration, disasters such as building a military camp at Babylon or building a gate complex on an ancient suburb of Ur could have been avoided.

In the initial discussion with Major General White-Spunner, we indicated that the greatest need was to undertake condition assessments at sites in the south of Iraq which had not been reported on and where looting was believed to be ongoing, and also to refurbish some of the provincial museums in Southern Iraq. Major Hugo Clarke was shortly thereafter appointed the project manager, a post which he still holds, and we have been

working with him throughout. To test the feasibility of the project I stayed with the British Army at Basra Airbase between 12-16 April 2008, and during this time visited Eridu, Warka and Ur by helicopter, landing at two of the sites. It was clear from this brief reconnaissance trip that it would indeed be possible to survey a number of sites, and this was reported at a meeting at the British Museum on 29 April. At the same time, Major Rupert Burridge described how the Lakeside Palace of Saddam Hussein at Basra could be adapted for use as a new museum for Basra, if this suggestion was approved and taken forward by the Iraqis. By this stage, it was clear that there would only be resources to concentrate on one museum, and Basra was the obvious choice.

The next phase of the project was planned for the period 1-10 June 2008. It was conceived of and still remains as a joint project with the ISBAH, and their full involvement in it is seen as crucial. I was joined by three Iraqi colleagues (Qais Hussein Raheed, Mehsin Ali, and Abdulamir al-Hamdani) and by three foreign colleagues (Elizabeth Stone, Margarete Van Ess and Paul Collins). We were based at Basra and Tallil, and managed to inspect eight different archaeological sites, namely Ur, Eridu, Ubaid, Warka (Uruk), Larsa, Tell el-'Oueili, Lagash (Tell al-Hiba) and Tell al-Lahm. We visited the sites by Merlin helicopter, and apart from the archaeological team and Majors Clarke and Burridge, there was a seven-man protection force, a signaller, a medic, a two-person combat camera team, and five crew. The results were both informative and unexpected. We found the following:

- (i) Damage from neglect. For nearly 30 years (since the beginning of the Iraq-Iran War, 1980-1988) little attention has been paid to sites and monuments. At Ur, reconstructed buildings are now in poor condition and there is damage from erosion at a number of sites, particularly Eridu and Tell al-Lahm.
- (ii) Damage resulting from turning sites into military defensive positions, apparently by the Iraqi army in the period leading up to the Coalition invasion of 2003. This situation was evident at Ubaid and Tell al-Lahm.
- (iii) Damage resulting from Coalition activities. This applies mainly to Ur, where as we have noted above a new Visitor Control Centre was built on the site of Diqqiqqah. In addition, some accidental damage may have been caused to the site by the uncontrolled visits of large numbers of coalition troops stationed at Tallil. Discarded food wrappers were noted at Tell al-Lahm, testifying to the erstwhile presence there of US troops, but there was no damage that could be definitely associated with them.
- (iv) Damage from looting. There was clear evidence of looting holes at Larsa, Tell el-'Oueili, Tell al-Lahm and Lagash. At Eridu, inscribed bricks had been looted from the collapsed dig-house. However, as far as we could see this looting had mainly occurred in 2003-2004, and there did not seem to be evidence of very recent looting.

It is undeniable that this work could only have been carried out under the auspices and with the assistance of the army. Important results were obtained, but they have not been entirely uncontroversial. We made it very clear in our full report on the Internet⁸ that our conclusions about the probable cessation of looting since 2004 applied only to the eight sites visited, and not necessarily to sites in other parts of the country or indeed to sites in the north part of Dhi Qar Province where looting was known to have been very bad in 2003-2004. However, the findings have been contested by a small number of people⁹. Some hostile critics, apparently motivated by political considerations, have even suggested that we were taken by the army to sites that they knew were in good condition. Needless to say, such claims are entirely baseless, and indeed the selection of sites was made entirely by the archaeological team in consultation with the Iraqis. Nevertheless, we recognise the importance of undertaking further site visits and we hope to do this, as part of the ongoing collaboration with the army, in the early part of 2009.

In conclusion, working with the army has enabled archaeologists to engage with these sites in a way that, because of the security situation, would otherwise have been completely impossible. The benefits of this cooperation are, I think, self-evident. Above all, I very much hope that one of the fruits of this relationship will be a new museum for Basra, which would be a small compensation for some of the damage that has been caused to Iraqi cultural heritage because of the war.

Notes

1. See Curtis, J. 2008. The role of the British Museum in the protection of the Iraqi cultural heritage, in Stone, P. G and Bajjalay, J. F. (eds.). *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, pp. 201-212; Curtis, J. 13 April 2008. 'Days of plunder: who emptied the cradle of civilization?', *The Sunday Times Magazine*, pp. 32-39; [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/museum_in_the_world/middle_east_programme/iraq_project.aspx].

2. This request caused some resentment amongst a small minority of the audience who felt that a museum with large collections of Iraqi material was not an appropriate body to lead efforts to help the Iraq Museum, and they questioned whether an institution with close ties to the British government should be involved, given that the British government had sanctioned the invasion. However, none of the doubters had themselves previous experience of working in Iraq.

3. Curtis, J. E. 2005. Report on meeting at Babylon 11-13 December 2004. British Museum. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/museum_in_the_world/middle_east_programme/iraq_project/babylon_report_2004-5.aspx].

4. See for example *The Guardian*, 15 January 2005. Cultural Vandalism. [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jan/15/iraq.guardianleaders>].

5. Curtis, J. 2007. Ur of the Chaldees in February 2007. British Museum. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/museum_in_the_world/middle_east_programme/iraq_project/ur_report_2007.aspx].

6. In fact, supplying lists of sites does not seem to have been a very useful exercise – witness the lack of care taken at Babylon, Hatra, Kish, Samarra and Ur, and of course the gross neglect of the Iraq Museum and provincial museums.

7. It was suggested at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities conference in Cambridge on 12th December 2008 that I had provided a list of sites in Iran to the press to be avoided in case of conflict, but I did nothing of the sort. The article in *The Guardian* on 5th March 2007 (Kennedy, M. "Iran's rich architecture and rare treasures threatened by possible US strikes.") sought to point out that

an aerial bombardment of nuclear facilities in Iran would have disastrous consequences for nearby sites of cultural heritage interest.

8. "Overview of site visits 2008" is an assessment of archaeological sites in June 2008: an Iraqi-British project. This report will also be published in full in the next volume of *Iraq* (vol.LXX for 2008). [http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/museum_in_the_world/middle_east_programme/iraq_project/overview_of_site_surveys.aspx].

9. In its issue for July-August 2008 (no. 193), *The Art Newspaper* reported that "Archaeological sites in south Iraq have not been looted, say experts". It is true that this was a misleading headline, but the body of the text reported our findings fairly, namely emphasising that the absence of recent looting applied only to the eight sites that were visited. Nevertheless, the validity of our findings was questioned on various websites, which led *Art Newspaper* reporter Martin Bailey to interview Dr Abbas al-Hussaini, recently retired as Director of Antiquities. The next number of *The Art Newspaper* (no.194 for September 2008) carried the headline "Iraq's top archaeologist says looting is over", which resulted in Dr Abbas being unfairly criticised by archaeologists who insist that the looting is ongoing (Bailey, M. July-August 2008. "Archaeological sites in south Iraq have not been looted, say experts". *The Art Newspaper*, no. 193 [<http://www.theartnewspaper.com>]; Bailey, M. September-October 2008. "Iraq's top archaeologist says looting is over" *The Art Newspaper*, no. 194. [<http://www.theartnewspaper.com>]).

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