

Relations between Archaeologists and the Military in the Case of Iraq – Reply to Price, Rowlands, Rush and Teiggeler

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All aspects of the war in Iraq excite strong emotions and argument, and this is particularly true of the role that archaeologists should play in the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage. There has been much debate about whether archaeologists should engage with the military, and if so under what terms, and there is no doubt that such debates will continue in the future. Jon Price reminds us that a session on this subject at the World Archaeology Conference in Dublin in summer 2008 was so controversial that police protection was necessary. Opinion on this and related matters is sharply divided, and it is no surprise that this is reflected in the comments of the four respondents.

The four respondents all have some connection with cultural heritage:- Jon Price is a Senior Lecturer in the Cultural Management Unit at Northumbria University, and has, by his own account, worked closely with serving military personnel for a number of years; Laurie Rush is Cultural Resources Program Manager at Fort Drum, New York; Mike Rowlands is Professor of Material Culture in the Department of Anthropology at UCL with a particular interest in cultural heritage; and René Teiggeler served as senior advisor of the US Embassy to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture from July 2004 to March 2005. Of the four respondents, one (Teiggeler) has had extensive experience of working with the military in Iraq, one (Rush) has worked with the military and has limited experience of Iraq, one (Price) has had experience of working with the military but not in Iraq, and one (Rowlands) has had no experience of either, and these varying degrees of exposure are closely reflected in the value of the responses.

The issues which have attracted most attention are clearly whether archaeologists should provide information and advice pre-conflict and whether they should work with the military post-conflict. Both Rush and Price believe that archaeologists should work with the military pre- and post-conflict, Teiggeler believes archaeologists should work with the military in certain circumstances, and Rowlands seems to say that archaeologists should never work with the military (although the thrust of his argument is not entirely clear).

Let me clarify my own position. I certainly was not attempting to claim the moral high ground (*pace* Price), or suggest that there are never circumstances in which archaeologists should provide advice and information pre-conflict. The point I was making was that in the case of Iraq I was strongly opposed to the war and I was reluctant to supply any information that might have been used to support, justify or excuse the invasion. I should stress that this is very much a personal view and not necessarily the view of the British Museum which, as has been pointed out, is a government sponsored (although independent) institution.

Papers from the Institute of Archaeology 19 (2009): 24-27

I would have found it very uncomfortable trying to maintain good relations with Iraqi colleagues who were all fervently hoping there would not be a war while at the same time supplying information about which targets to avoid. The same applies to Iran, and I wonder if those archaeologists who argue that archaeologists should always collaborate pre-conflict are now ready to hold up their hands and offer to supply information that would effectively underwrite a battle plan for a possible attack on Iran. In this respect, I would like to reiterate what I said before, namely that “the pre-conflict situation is in fact governed by political considerations over which the army has no more control than archaeologists”. It is surely true that any decision whether or not to engage is political rather than military, and I actually agree with Rush when she says that “civilian politicians made the decision to engage the military in the current overseas conflicts” and “our ethical arguments are with these leaders”. This is one of the main reasons for not supplying information to politicians (or civil servants working for them) who are seeking assurance that war can be waged with minimum collateral damage. I actually wrote a number of letters, not to senior army figures but to senior British politicians (including Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon) pointing out the likelihood of damage to the Iraqi cultural heritage. Any quarrel, then, should be with politicians, and like three of your correspondents, I have a great deal of respect for the army. *Pace Teiggeler*, I certainly have no problem with archaeologists “training and educating military personnel in cultural property protection during peacetime” – I would consider this as a very worthwhile and important activity.

Coming back to the choice of reviewers, I was very surprised – in fact astonished – that my piece was not sent to an Iraqi reviewer for comment. This is an insensitive omission, and it would have been particularly valuable to have had an Iraq viewpoint on what the British Museum has done in Iraq. This omission is particularly unfortunate, as there are some ill-informed comments regarding our relations with Iraq. Thus, Rowlands implies that the involvement of Iraqi colleagues in our survey of sites was a token gesture. In fact, out of seven visits that I have made to Iraq since the invasion, three have been at the direct invitation of the Iraqi side, one has been at the request of UNESCO, and two (the site visits in the south) have closely involved the Iraqi side. It would actually have been unthinkable to do any of the work described without the cooperation and collaboration of the Iraqi side. Then, there is the question of Ur. In the context of possible damage having been caused at Ur, I said that Ur was “a site of special interest to the British Museum because of the excavations there of Sir Leonard Woolley 1922-1934”. What I meant by this was that because of the excavations there by Woolley, the British Museum now holds the site archive and is in a good position to assess damage to monuments excavated by Woolley. This is hardly justification for Price to write that my statement “has huge implications for colonial attitudes, responses and relationships” and he might like to know that we are now in the process (in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania) of digitising the excavation record and photographs and creating a list of objects from Ur (of which Baghdad has the lion’s share) so that colleagues in Iraq can have a full set of the records and start to create a list of missing objects. It is regrettable that three of the responses tell us more about the political views of the respondents than they do about the question in hand. Thus, Price informs us that although he was “opposed to the invasion of Iraq in itself”, he still acted as a Labour

party officer in the constituency of a cabinet minister. It would be interesting to know whether the minister in question supported the war or not, and if the former how Price was able to justify putting the interests of his party before his principles. Then, Laurie Rush seems to suggest that the Iraq war was justified in order to defend western values and lifestyles – this hardly needs any comment. Lastly, Rowlands sarcastically asserts that “the natural affinities of the hierarchies of the British Museum and the British army in the field is such that you can scarcely tell the difference between them”, but he does not explain what he means by this. In spite of this, some interesting points emerge. For example, Price flags up the fact that it is illogical to refuse to work with the official military while at the same time working with mercenary organisations which are not subject to the same checks and balances. Teijgeler also warns against the use of private security companies, and this is clearly an area that requires careful thought, especially in view of the fact that the UK government makes extensive use of Control Risks Group. Actually I found Teijgeler’s paper to be very useful and constructive and to make an interesting contribution to the debate. I thought he made two important suggestions. The first is that archaeologists should only cooperate with the military if a mission has been approved by the UN Security Council or another generally recognised body, and in the case of Iraq this did not occur until 22nd May 2003 (UN Security Council Resolution 1483). And secondly, he suggests that archaeologists should look to emergency workers in humanitarian organisations who face the same ethical and moral problems in working with the military as do archaeologists and have strict guidelines. At this point, it may be appropriate to pay tribute to the valuable work that Teijgeler did in Iraq. Amongst other things, he was instrumental in salvaging many important records and archives.

Lastly, there seems to be some resentment on the part of some correspondents that the British Museum should have played any role in attempts to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq. This echoes sentiments apparently felt by some participants in the meeting at the British Museum on 29th April 2003 when Donny George called on the British Museum to lead efforts to salvage the Iraqi cultural heritage (Stone and Bajjalý 2008: 79). In the event, because of the deteriorating security situation, the British Museum was not able to fulfill this role, but had the situation been different it is doubtful whether any other British organisation would have had the contacts in Iraq, the knowledge on the ground, the conservation capacity and the museological expertise to provide rapid assistance. It would be nice to think that organisations like UNESCO or Blue Shield could have taken a lead, but at that time they were not prepared.

There is no doubt that the Iraq situation will be central to debates on cultural heritage for many years to come. There are no easy answers, and no facile solutions. Above all it is very much to be hoped that some constructive recommendations will emerge from the Iraq debacle, but this will only happen if old prejudices are cast aside and the arguments are depersonalised and deinstitutionalised. Only then will we all be able to join together to provide maximum help to our Iraqi colleagues.

References

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