

## Response to “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.” The author obviously implies that whilst this question has been raised in particular by the Iraq war, it is more generally controversial for archaeologists dealing with conflict and post-conflict situations. John Curtis sees some involvement by archaeologists with the military as inevitable and in post-conflict situations, as desirable. Any earlier engagement with the military, he argues, should be avoided on ethical grounds – in particular giving information or advice could appear as collusion and taking the political stance of encouraging the war preparations. The ethical questions raised are whether to have relationships with the military (on the perhaps benign assumption that whatever their motives to destroy an enemy, somehow ‘culture’ will escape their attention if sufficient information or warnings are given) or, not appearing to collude with the destruction of human life and property that must inevitably ensue from conflict. If the latter, then it is the best of a bad job not to provide the advice and information needed to avoid accidental destruction and to focus instead on post-conflict recovery and cleaning up.

I am not sure where the ethics lie in this position. It seems to me that the real question raised here is not whether archaeologists should work with the military, but how to avoid the need to do so at all. Whether pre- or post-conflict, to work with a military organisation that is planning a campaign of destruction is surely like relying on ‘poachers to conserve the game’. We can adapt the old adage that ‘with war comes opportunities’ to a more specific rendition that with war comes opportunities for cultural revenge and looting. In the case of the Iraq war, the idea that the American or British armies would want to participate in the destruction of the origins of ‘western civilisation’ is barely conceivable (but I guess not impossible) to many archaeologists. This may of course be crediting the American and British armies with too much foresight and not enough recognition of their incompetence. McGuire Gibson’s complaint about being involved with advising the Pentagon on the lead up to the Iraq war is precisely that, even with all the data on site itineraries and map coordinates he provided the officials preparing for war, the ‘rush to Baghdad’ meant that none of the relevant people were there in time and there were not enough troops on the ground to do anything much except protect the site of first priority, the Oil Ministry. As he says at one point:

Perhaps it is America’s general disregard of and suspicion of “culture,” relegating it to non-governmental bodies and individuals to support (with the exception of much debated funding for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and a few other programs) that caused it to be left out of the planning. Perhaps culture, as a government concern, is considered too European or too Socialist (Gibson *n.d.*).

By mid-May 2003, the Pentagon had sub-contracted 'culture' to the Italians with the Italian ambassador to Iraq put in charge of the Iraq Ministry of Culture. Gibson's account is one of continuing American neglect and incompetence, mainly to do with the fact that the whole question of cultural preservation was never an important part of the agenda. Even with good will and enthusiasm from some 'lower ranks', the fact that orders never came down from on high meant that nothing usually was done.

Curtis' account of much the same period reflects a more British way of doing things. Alerted to what was going on, a press conference and crisis meetings held at the British Museum in London were followed by an emergency satellite phone call to Donny George, the Head of the National Museum in Baghdad, who appealed for help from the British Museum. Within a day, Curtis got on the first flight out to Baghdad to meet the beleaguered staff of the Iraq National Museum. As he describes it, lots of good things were done, in a shutting-the-stable-door rather British way of doing things, and no doubt the situation would have been much worse otherwise. However, it all flows from the ethical stance that, unlike Gibson, Curtis and the British Museum presumably did not and would not have any dealings (nor were they asked) with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) about cultural preservation before the Iraq War began. Was it all a bit 'stand-offish'/stiff upper lip/we won't ask and they wouldn't volunteer anything and does it matter anyway? Suspicion of the MoD and its machinations is complimented by faith in the integrity of the staff of the Iraq National Museum and condemnation of the dastardly Dan Cruickshank who turns up with a BBC crew casting gross aspersions.

Curtis' article, from June 2004 on, is a narrative of visits and inspections of the damage to archaeological sites, the writing of reports and bringing the weight of culture (and the British Museum) to bear down on the British Army in Basra. Unlike the American archaeologists trying in vain to get the Pentagon to take cultural matters seriously, British Major Generals with impossible sounding names come to visit Curtis at the British Museum, and involvement with the army in Basra is a natural follow on from these meetings. The natural affinity between the hierarchies of the British Museum and the British Army in the field is such that you can scarcely tell the difference between them. An Army Major is put in charge of converting an old palace into a museum for Basra, and joint expeditions are made in Merlin helicopters to explore the damage to archaeological sites. Somewhere in all this are the chosen officials of the Iraq National Museum who are drafted in to be consulted, to agree, and to join in in what is, after all, how the 'Brits' always do things.

That there is a cultural logic to cultural preservation shouldn't be a surprise. However, we have to ask: is this the best way to do things? Are there other ways for archaeologists to have an effect? I am sure there are lessons to be learnt from situations like Iraq, and they have been. One lesson seems to be the need for training and infrastructure to be available on the ground, particularly in sensitive situations where conflict is a high probability. After the experience of the First Gulf War, when there was significant looting and damage to archaeological sites, there was a widespread recognition of the likely consequences of the Iraq invasion and both UNESCO and International Coun-

cil on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) made presentations to the Bush administration, presumably to no avail. Institutions, however, tend to produce their own cultural ideologies in the cases revolving around the need for inventories and trained personnel to produce and implement them. We hear that the Getty Conservation Institute and the World Monuments Fund held a meeting in October 2003. By March 2004, they had signed a collaborative agreement with the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (ISBAH) to form the Iraq Cultural Heritage Conservation Initiative and to assist ISBAH to redevelop its professional and managerial capabilities. In addition, by 2004 there was an initiative to bring in an American private consultancy firm to carry out a GIS survey of all archaeological sites affected by the war in Iraq. Big money was involved, with agreements on interregional collaboration and the institutionalisation of cultural heritage management is rapidly established to take over responsibility from the military in Iraq.

One can imagine the last scenario being already drafted as more or less the recognised response to conflict and post-conflict scenarios of the institutions of cultural heritage management. In a crazy sort of way, heritage management transcends the reality of the conflict and the suffering of people into an abstract logic of GIS mapping and the provision of cultural security in order to preserve sites and objects from the madness of civil strife and conflict. Omar Mullah, it is claimed, said to the Director of UNESCO that he couldn't understand how the 'West' could be more concerned for the preservation of the Bamiyan statues when UN sanctions were leading to deaths of thousands of Afghani children. It would appear that 'crimes against culture' still need to be put in their proper place, which is with the people involved in the conflicts.

### **References**

- Gibson, McGuire *n.d.* Culture as Afterthought: U.S. Planning and Non-Planning in the Invasion of Iraq. Unpublished manuscript.