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Archaeology on the front line

Tiffany Jenkins speaks to heritage professionals in fierce disagreement about their sector's involvement in wars.

Tiffany Jenkins

In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, thousands of priceless antiquities from the Babylon, Ur and Nineveh civilisations were looted from the National Museum in Baghdad. Among the artefacts plundered was the sacred vase of Warka, a 5,000-year-old carved alabaster stone vessel.

The destruction could have been limited, even prevented. In the months preceding the war, antiquities experts asked the Pentagon and the British government to ensure the safety of Iraqi museums, monuments and historical sites from combat and plunder, but they didn't. In fact, the site of the remains of Babylon, the city-state of ancient Mesopotamia, 80-odd kilometres south of Baghdad, was used as a coalition force base between April 2003 and December 2004.

Heritage professionals tried frantically to salvage the situation. They provided information and advice to the military in an effort to stem the devastation and save the region's cultural heritage. This appears to be a laudable aim - so why is the heritage sector divided over the question of whether or not they should be involved in war zones?

Peter Stone, professor of heritage studies at Newcastle University in England, was approached in 2003 by the UK Ministry of Defence to help identify archaeological sites in Iraq that required protection. He was initially reluctant, he tells me, because this wasn't his area of expertise. After some thought, however, he agreed to the request. 'It was made very clear that it was me or no one', he says. Seven years on, Stone has few regrets. His involvement was the best of a bad situation, he says. 'So long as you make the point that it is better not to go to war, then the next realistic step is to help mitigate the damage.'

However, Stone has been strongly criticised by those who argue that this kind of involvement militarises the archaeological discipline. They warn that it equals an endorsement of intervention and war and that it is reminiscent of the role archaeologists played in colonialist campaigns in the past.

Yannis Hamilakis, reader in archaeology at the University of Southampton, is a vocal opponent of heritage professionals' involvement in war zones. He explains: 'It's about the loss of autonomy and independence on the part of the specialist.' He believes that 'in situations like Iraq in 2003, assuming the formalised role of the military adviser once the conflict started and once the Western armies invaded the country, made these heritage specialists part of the structure of the occupation and colonisation of the country, regardless of their personal opinion on the war.'

Similarly, Tim Schadla-Hall, reader in public archaeology at University College London, tells me he finds the situation 'distasteful'. 'You cannot work with the army and separate yourself from warfare. You endorse the aims and activities of the invader by being there.'

Not everyone shares this damning view. John Curtis, keeper of the department of the Middle East at the British Museum, who played an active role in attempting to ameliorate destruction to Iraq's cultural heritage, tells me he found working alongside the British military to be a positive experience.

Curtis says he understands why many archaeologists were concerned about the British Museum, a national institution of one of the primary countries waging an illegal war in Iraq, working with the invaders. 'The decision to go to war is political. I was vehemently opposed and nothing changes that. I didn't want to get involved in the run-up to the war.' But, when conflict starts, he argues, heritage professionals have a responsibility to assist in the protection of the local culture. It is essential 'to protect the physical past - including landscape, books and intangible heritage, for the Iraqi people. They need culture and museums as well as schools and hospitals.'

While Curtis found it easy to work with the army 'they were helpful and hospitable', he is careful to stress that he and his colleagues 'were invited by, and worked with, Iraqis' and would not have gone without an invitation from locals.

Heritage professionals are not alone in being drawn into conflict situations because of their expertise. There are embedded journalists and anthropologists, too. And of course, medical professionals work in war zones. Peter Stone says: 'Doctors go to war-torn places and save lives without being accused of being partial.'

But Schadla-Hall takes issue with this comparison: 'Unlike medicine, archaeology comes with major baggage. Archaeology is political.' This is an important point, especially when the archaeologist's role oversteps that of advising what artefacts and sites to protect. In Afghanistan, the protection and cultivation of archaeology is seen by some, including UNESCO, as critical to fostering a sense of national identity.

According to a UNESCO strategy document, 'Cultural heritage can become a point of mutual interest for former adversaries, enabling them to rebuild ties, to engage in dialogue and to work together in shaping a common future.' UNESCO says it is assisting the re-establishment of links between the people and their cultural history, advising on how to develop a sense of common ownership of monuments that represent the cultural heritage of different segments of society.

This is clearly about more than just advising the army on where not to build a base. It is about outsiders and unelected officials intervening in conceptions of identity, and shaping other people's past and future.

Working with the military raises questions even for advocates of the idea. René Teijgeler served as senior adviser of the US embassy to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture from 2004 to 2005. He later spent six months in Afghanistan, negotiating with NGOs and the military leaders about securing cultural rights and protecting traditions and customs.

While Teijgeler found working in Iraq acceptable, he tells me he will not go back to Afghanistan. 'Because of the particularities of the security situation, you get too close to the army, and neutrality in practice is too difficult.' Yet he is still adamant that there should be some future for heritage professionals' involvement in war zones. 'Should we stand by and watch Babylon be destroyed?' he asks, before answering his own question: 'We have a moral responsibility to help.'

Teijgeler says the heritage sector should learn from humanitarian workers, who have more experience in dealing with ethical problems that arise when cooperating with armed forces. He believes there should be guidelines and strict rules in place. For instance, Teijgeler is adamant that heritage experts should not work with the army in conflicts that are not internationally sanctioned.

To that end, Peter Stone is part of an international group meeting regularly to influence training in the US and Europe. He is lobbying the British government to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of the Cultural Heritage in Times of Armed Conflict, which should have been passed in the Heritage Protection Bill but was dropped last year.

Stone is convinced that permanently working with the military, rather than responding too late in urgent circumstances, is sensible. 'If we want to take protection seriously, we need to engage with the military, not as a kneejerk reaction, but continuously, to make sure they and politicians know the importance of cultural heritage.' He is trying to formalise the relationship. 'It shouldn't be about responding to a particular place. From day one, the military and senior relevant government officials should be effectively trained in the importance of culture.'

The Warka vase was returned to the Iraq Museum during an amnesty in 2003 but many other antiquities have been lost forever. How cultural professionals respond in times of war is a political minefield that needs our full attention.

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