The identification and protection of cultural heritage during the Iraq conflict: A peculiarly English tale

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The author offers us a first hand account of his extraordinary and unexpected duties during the second Iraq war. This is history, heritage, regulation and perhaps even legislation in the making.

Keywords: Iraq, heritage, war

In the early months of 2003 there was much anxiety concerning what the British Government was doing to avoid damage to archaeological sites in the expectation of conflict in Iraq. Questions were asked in Parliament, appeals made to various government departments, and letters published in the national press. As reported in Antiquity’s Editorial for June 2003 (Carver 2003a), scholars such as Lord Renfrew and Harriet Crawford and institutions such as the Archaeological Institute of America asked urgent questions of politicians, and made strong public statements, drawing attention to the imminent threat to the safety of Iraq’s 25,000 archaeological sites and historic mosques, churches, forts, khans and treasures housed in museums and emphasising their duty of care. On 24 January, the White House and the Pentagon had been given a prioritised list of almost 200 sensitive sites.

In Britain some formal acknowledgement was achieved by Lord Renfrew in response to his question tabled in the House of Lords on 24 February concerning what ‘measures [the Government] plan to implement, in the event of military intervention in Iraq, to prevent the looting of archaeological sites and museums, and to safeguard the rich historic, archaeological and cultural heritage of Iraq’. The Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Bach, assured him that ‘very careful attention’ was being applied to ensure that ‘we minimise the risk of damage from any quarter to civilian populations and infrastructure, including sites of historic, archaeological, and cultural heritage’ (PQ Ref No 1953N). In the House of Commons, veteran Labour backbencher Tam Dalyell (who has had a lifetime interest in archaeology; Dalyell 2002) was assured by the Prime Minister that the Government was not only fully committed to the protection of cultural property but that (quite correctly) it had obligations to protect sites under the Geneva Conventions. He ended his response by stating ‘we will do everything we can to make sure that sites of cultural or religious significance are properly and fully protected’ (Hansard 19 March 2003; Column 940).

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Received: 7 December 2004; Accepted: 14 March 2005; Revised: 23 May 2005

ANTiquity 79 (2005): 933–943

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The public expressions of anxiety by numerous institutions were not necessarily intended to add opposition to the war, but to offer advice and assistance in the business of protecting sites. A key agency was the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), the organisation established by International Charter (the 1954 Hague Convention) to protect cultural heritage by co-ordinating preventative measures to meet and respond to emergency situations, both natural and man-made. Through the Second Protocol to The Hague Convention (adopted in 1999, though still not in force in March 2003 as the requisite 20 states had not ratified it) the ICBS has a particular and specialised role to advise the Convention’s Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In its statement of 7 March, the ICBS, having urged all governments concerned in the potential conflict to ‘work within the spirit of’ the 1954 Hague Convention and to protect ‘archives, libraries, monuments and sites, and museums’, went on to offer technical assistance and co-ordination. It called upon ‘all governments in a position to act to provide the necessary resources, human and financial, to assess the damage caused by the conflict to cultural heritage and to implement plans for the necessary repair and restoration. In the case of looting of cultural property, detailed plans by trained experts should be prepared for the repatriation or restitution of the property concerned, with the involvement of Iraqi scholars and heritage professionals’. The statement ended by calling upon all governments which had not yet become party to the Hague Convention and its two protocols to do so. This latter statement was aimed, one assumes directly at the USA and UK, as neither had signed. The Second Iraq War began on 20 March 2003. Public pressure concerning the identification and protection of the archaeological cultural heritage took second place to widespread concern over the possibility of the invasion provoking biological and/or chemical war. Such fears abated with the speed of the initial advance, and archaeological attention soon returned to the sites and museums.

In the period during and after the build-up to war, in the shadow of these heavyweight public exchanges, I found myself to be a player in a peculiarly English sub-plot, one that has, however, had a direct bearing on the question of the fate of antiquities in war, and as it transpired, constituted the only actual direct dialogue on the subject between an archaeologist and the British Military. The story does something to unravel the tangled and discontinuous thread of heritage in government, and sounds a warning for the future. This paper offers a sketch of the key events and the discussions that took place and are here revealed for the first time.

On Sunday 2 February 2003, I was approached by a friend, a serving officer in the Royal Navy, who was at the time working in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). He asked if I could provide some information on the major archaeological sites that might be threatened if, as anticipated, an American-led coalition invaded Iraq. I was immediately interested (as any archaeologist would have been), but pointed out that I was the wrong person to ask, not being a specialist in Middle Eastern archaeology. My friend persisted that it would be very helpful if I were to front the delivery of information as I was known personally to him (and therefore implicitly trustworthy). He was also aware of my role as honorary Chief Executive Officer of the World Archaeological Congress and surmised that if I did not have the necessary information myself then I would know where to find it.
Accordingly, I contacted Roger Matthews, the most recent Director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, and Neil Brodie, a specialist in the illicit trade of antiquities. I had to ask both to keep our conversations and work confidential (although at no time were any of us asked to sign any confidentiality document, such as the Official Secrets Act). On 4 February, Roger Matthews, who had already been in consultation with Iraqi colleagues over this matter, provided me with a selective list of 36 of the most important sites in Iraq, ranging from Neanderthal to Islamic. He also underlined the importance of the dedicated staff of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities, who had often risked their lives to protect the archaeological cultural heritage. Both Matthews and Brodie stressed the vulnerability of Iraq's museums during and after any fighting, bearing in mind the disasters that had befallen many of Iraq's museums during the regional uprisings against Saddam Hussein in the spring of 1991, when thousands of artefacts had been looted and not yet recovered.

I forwarded the Matthews list to the MoD on 4 February, underlining the vulnerability of museums and sites. I also noted that, despite the fact that the UK had not signed the 1954 (Hague) Convention for the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflict, or the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, or the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, it did nevertheless have responsibilities under Article 53 of the 1977 Additional Protocol of the Geneva Conventions. Specifically, that, as a signatory to the conventions, the UK was ‘prohibited to commit any acts of hostility directed against the historic monuments, works of art or places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples’.

Finally, I reminded the MoD that the UK also had responsibilities under the terms of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Article 6) to which Iraq was also a signatory ‘not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage . . . situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention’. On 5 February, I spoke with staff in UNESCO who confirmed that, although Iraq had only one site, the city of Hatra, inscribed on the World Heritage List, a further seven were on the Tentative List. It was one of my first frustrations that I was unable to ascertain which sites these were, as such information was deemed to be confidential between UNESCO and the State Party. I was also informed that, while the Iraqi Government had transmitted four volumes of documentation to UNESCO in October 1991 of items missing from a number of provincial museums as a result of the 1991 Gulf War, no request had yet been received requesting special protection under Article 8 of the Hague Convention with respect to the impending conflict.

I did learn, however, albeit unofficially, that the UNESCO Director General had recently written to Kofi Annan, Director General of the United Nations, asking him to raise the issue of protection of cultural heritage in Iraq with the UN Security Council, but that the letter was at present regarded as private correspondence. Finally, UNESCO staff agreed with earlier assessments that the most vulnerable time for the cultural heritage in Iraq would be immediately following the cessation of hostilities. I was asked informally to do all in my power to ensure that British and Coalition forces realised this and that they understood and accepted the full extent of their responsibilities under the various relevant International Conventions.
On Friday 7 February, the MoD requested the itemisation of those sites on the Matthews list that were close to, or in, urban centres. We provided this information on Monday 10 February, also including those close to military installations. In summary, we had, by this date, done three things: tried to identify the ‘most important’ sites in Iraq (an almost impossible task in itself); stressed the vulnerability of sites and museums immediately post-conflict; and stressed the Coalition’s responsibilities under International Conventions. As a result, it seems that all the sites on the Matthews list were added to British military maps being prepared for the conflict and that British Military Field Orders identified them as places to avoid. Moreover, the list was apparently drawn to the attention of the Attorney General, who, as the senior legal officer of the country, vets all places that the military wish to target during a conflict, and designates those that should not be targeted (with the inevitable proviso ‘unless the military situation demanded otherwise’). This was probably the first time that archaeological sites were included in a list that is usually dominated by religious buildings, hospitals and schools. All of this information, including our grave concerns for the museums and sites immediately following any conflict, was apparently shared with Coalition partners.

Once the war had begun, I was keen to ‘go public’ as soon as possible and on 31 March I requested that the MoD hold a briefing session with a small group of selected archaeologists and politicians at which we might finally explain what had been done so far. I hoped this would not only go some way to appease the – still growing – frustration of the archaeological community over their perception that no serious or detailed consideration had been given to their concerns, but would also allow those present to offer advice on what should be done post-conflict.

I augmented my request for a briefing by drawing the MoD’s attention to the concern that was growing over the aims and role of the ‘American Council for Cultural Property’ (ACCP) which, on scratching its surface, revealed itself to be a loose, but potentially extremely influential, coalition of wealthy collectors and curators. The ACCP were actively lobbying to have the very strict Iraqi antiquities legislation relaxed to enable them to purchase archaeological material in a post-Saddam Iraq. The ACCP played on the publicly voiced (on both sides of the Atlantic) concerns regarding the risk of looting and claimed that its only concern was to protect the country’s archaeological record from further loss and destruction. This showed the complexity and importance of the issues surrounding the cultural heritage, a matter I was able to impress on the staff of MoD.

On 2 April, apologising for the delay, the MoD informed me that the idea for a briefing session was receiving ‘serious consideration’. The MoD also confirmed that the American Operational Plan contained detailed instructions to Coalition forces on avoiding damage to sensitive places, including archaeological sites. The MoD then approached me on 7 April with the suggestion that I meet with a group from MoD and the fledgling UK ‘Iraq Secretariat’ – a group working on the strategy for the administration of post-conflict Iraq prior to the hand-over of power. This meeting was scheduled for 9 April. I decided that if the MoD – understandably as they were in the midst of running a war – did not have the time to brief archaeologists about pre- (or post-) war planning, I would take the initiative and contact a number of people from whom I wanted advice in anticipation of this meeting. MoD was aware that I was going to be talking to more colleagues and accepted the reality that people
needed to know what had been done. Over the next few days, I contacted Lord Redesdale, Harriett Crawford, George Lambrick (CBA) and Tom Hassall (ICOMOS). Between them, these individuals, and others, raised a number of concerns that I was able to use on 9 April.

The three key points were that (1) coalition forces must act immediately to ensure no looting took place; (2) coalition forces needed to be made aware of who they should be liaising with from the Iraqi Department of Antiquities; and (3) the international archaeological community was ready to offer any support deemed necessary by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities but that any post-conflict assistance must be at the request of the Iraqis and be led by Iraqi archaeologists. All of these points were accepted by those present. I also noted international concern over Saddam’s plans for building a dam that threatened some 60 or more archaeological sites, including the Assyrian city of Ashur, and I again raised grave international concern over the aims and objectives of the ACCP.

During the meeting, I suggested that the type of support it was envisaged the Iraqis might request was (1) immediate liaison with known and trusted international colleagues; (2) conservators; (3) conservation chemicals that had been outlawed by the UN Embargo, and (4) structural engineers to ensure the safety not only of museum buildings but of some archaeological sites and the reconstructions at them. I indicated that, in the longer term, there might well be a need for international lawyers to help counter potential requests from the USA to relax Iraq’s antiquities legislation and that assistance would probably be needed for the drafting of management plans and nomination documentation for inscription of sites onto UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

I repeated my request for a briefing for key archaeologists and politicians, noting that the American military had held a major press conference in Kuwait on 5 April outlining its commitment to the protection of the cultural heritage. I stressed that the international archaeological community was sharply focused on the situation and that an opportunity existed in the forthcoming Fifth World Archaeological Congress (to be held in Washington, DC, in June 2003) for the whole issue to be discussed. I asked how the MoD might ensure that Iraqi colleagues could attend that meeting if they so wished. Finally, and in some respects most important, I stressed the need for a proper system to be put into place that would ensure that transparent, specialised archaeological and other advice be available to the UK military in the future.

I was reassured that all of my points would be carefully considered and acted upon where possible. The Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs (ORHA) was being set-up to administer Iraq immediately post-conflict, and had cultural heritage as a key priority. A suitable specialist would be appointed to liaise between ORHA and the Iraqi Department of Antiquities (eventually, this was John Russell from the USA). I was then invited to a meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) on 14 April organised by The Iraq Planning Unit (IPU) – which appeared to have a similar strategic role within the FCO to the MoD’s Iraq Secretariat. A wide range of UK organisations involved in education and cultural heritage were due to meet to discuss the UK’s future involvement in Iraq (the meeting was also attended by John Curtis and Christopher Walker of the British Museum).

And then, on 12 and 13 April, as American troops took control of Baghdad, came news of the looting of the museums, first in Baghdad on 11 April and Basra and then reports (initially unconfirmed) of looting at other regional museums. The looting of the museums
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of Iraq immediately became a major agenda item for the 14 April meeting and John Curtis outlined plans for assistance to be led by the ‘five world museums’ (identified as the British Museum, London; The Hermitage, St Petersburg; The Louvre, Paris; The State Museums, Berlin, and The Metropolitan, New York). Following that meeting, I went back to the FCO on 16 April detailing four areas of concern that I had. First, and most urgent, was the pressing need for the Baghdad museum to be sealed (according to the press and TV news it was still being looted). I emphasised again that the Coalition was responsible as an Occupying Force under the Geneva Conventions for the protection of the cultural heritage – a point acknowledged – finally – by US Secretary of State Colin Powell on 14 April. Second, I noted that we did not know what, if any, damage had been done to the archaeological sites either through fighting or looting, but argued strongly that protection of cultural heritage could not be seen as a museum-only issue. Third, I expressed concern over the self-appointment of the five so-called world museums. I stressed that in no way was I questioning the ethical or professional motives of any individual scholars involved but noted that all five museums had collections of dubiously provenanced material from the region. I felt obliged to make UK Government sources aware that such a cabal might attract international criticism, if not outright hostility. Finally, I repeated my request for a group of relevant archaeologists and politicians to be briefed by MoD and/or the IPU.

It soon became clear that many archaeological sites were being looted (and continue to be, as I write, in November 2004). Slightly later in June, the journalist Robert Fisk travelled to southern Iraq together with Joanne Farchakh, a Lebanese archaeologist and journalist and reported to the world the destruction that they witnessed (see, e.g. The Independent Review 3 June 2003; Antiquity Editorial September 2003 [Carver 2003b]). When Joanne asked villagers why they were looting, many responded that since the collapse of the Saddam regime no one purchased their crops and the only way they had of surviving was by providing the goods demanded by antiquity dealers. As the looting of museums and then sites began to be reported in April 2003, I asked the MoD to provide me with contact points for the American military who were involved in the protection of cultural heritage. I tried through the first half of April to make contact by phone and email. I had hoped that combined efforts might just have slightly more influence than working separately. I failed to get any response.

The looting of the museums has been the subject of much controversy as to what happened and when, with much claim and counterclaim as to who did or did not do what. This controversy is not a topic of this article. Whatever the process, it was clear very quickly that a number of museums had suffered considerable losses to their collections. In the division of Iraq into ‘Areas of Responsibility’, the only major town, and therefore the only regional museum, for which the British had responsibility, was Basra. Once Basra was secured, the British authorities launched an Arabic-language newspaper, Al Zamera. I wrote a piece on the importance of the cultural heritage which, I believe, was printed alongside an offer of total amnesty for anyone returning anything that had been removed from the museum. In some respects the British authorities were lucky in that Basra Museum did not hold a major archaeological collection and therefore they were not subject to the enormous scrutiny and criticism that their American partners received over the looting of Baghdad Museum.
As soon as the initial fighting had calmed down there were meetings in Paris, organised by UNESCO, and London, organised by the British Museum, to try to assess the damage and losses to the cultural heritage in Iraq. I attended the meeting at the British Museum on 29 April with some feeling of unease: here was the primary museum in the UK positioning itself at the forefront of efforts to assist in the protection and conservation of the cultural heritage in Iraq when it was the – many believe unlawful – actions of the UK Government that had put the cultural heritage at risk in the first place. This feeling of unease had been reinforced by a number of comments I had received from international colleagues questioning the motives and/or the sensitivity of the offered advice. I felt obliged to raise this at the meeting and was somewhat reassured to hear Donny George, Director of Research for the Iraqi Department of Antiquities (and who had been extracted from Iraq by John Curtis at significant personal risk to them both, to attend these meetings), that the British Museum was the obvious choice to spearhead an international response and that he was perfectly happy to work with the British Museum where he, and other Iraqi specialists, had long associations.

The meeting, however, raised two new concerns. The first regarded so-called leaking borders: there were numerous rumours circulating in the press that Jordanian Border Guards had amassed some 12 case loads of antiquities that had been waived across the border by American troops only interested in finding players from their infamous ‘pack of cards’. The second concerned the behaviour of the military where there was a real worry over antiquities being smuggled out of the country as souvenirs. After the meeting, I immediately contacted the MoD to request that UK personnel with border responsibilities be fully briefed to search for antiquities and to request that all UK personnel leaving Iraq be searched specifically for antiquities. Once again, the British came off quite lightly as the UK only had responsibility for a short part of the Iraq–Iran border – which, I was assured, was so heavily mined that no one in their right minds would try to smuggle anything across it. I believe that all UK personnel were – and continue to be – searched for antiquities.

The MoD eventually came back to me regarding my requests for a briefing meeting for key archaeologists and politicians by turning my request on its head and asking for a presentation from me to a cross-Whitehall audience on ‘Archaeology, Heritage and War’. The argument ran that archaeologists and politicians now knew what had happened and that the most important issue was to put the ‘cultural heritage side’ to as wide an audience of those who might be able to influence decision makers as possible. There was a clear acceptance amongst those with whom I was dealing directly that things could have been managed much better and that they wanted to get it right ‘next time’.

Accordingly, on 17 July I made a presentation to staff of the MoD, FCO, Department for International Development (DFID), and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in which I suggested that there were three levels of necessary action: immediate concerning Iraq; medium-term concerning (mainly) Iraq; and, longer-term, more generally. However, before I embarked on what was essentially a shopping list of aspirations, I suggested that I needed to place my concerns regarding the protection of the cultural heritage into a wider context, one that might resonate more clearly with my audience (and their elected masters). This suggestion came from a realisation that many of those to whom I had been talking over the previous months had no background in, or understanding of, the importance
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of cultural heritage. They had been told by numerous scholars that cultural heritage was important for all humankind, but such academic statements had failed to impact upon their own, impossibly busy, day-to-day work in the build-up to war. I attempted therefore to put cultural heritage into their worlds, to try to make it relevant and therefore important, to them. I used the examples of Nazi Germany, colonial Rhodesia, and the former Yugoslavia to show how the cultural heritage can be used and abused by governments in a variety of ways. I also gave an extremely basic overview of the trade in illicit antiquities and how damaging it is to so-called source countries. I think I am correct in saying that very few, if any, of the audience had ever had the importance of the cultural heritage explained in these, rather pragmatic, terms before. From questions and follow-up email correspondence, it was clear that at least some of the audience had grasped the relevance of the cultural heritage to their work and to the role and responsibilities of the military. I then turned to my wish-list.

I pleaded that the following action was needed in Iraq immediately, that is, within the next few weeks:

(a) the UK must accept that as part of an Occupying Force under the Geneva Conventions it had (and continues to have) a responsibility to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq. I noted that it was difficult to see how the Government could claim that it was fulfilling this responsibility;
(b) that ORHA must understand that this was not just a museums issue. A review was needed of what support for cultural heritage was required across Iraq, and I noted that the most pressing concern was the protection of archaeological sites;
(c) that ORHA must support Iraqi colleagues within the Department of Antiquities by arranging for salaries to be paid and for staff to be provided with the infrastructure necessary to carry out their work (I noted that all of the Department’s cars had either been stolen or damaged beyond repair);
(d) that Iraqi guards be deployed on 24-hour rotas – with the support of Coalition forces – in sufficient numbers to safeguard sites;
(e) that Coalition forces should continue to

- provide amnesty for the return of objects
- check all military personnel leaving Iraq
- keep tight control on borders;

(f) that more effective communication needed to be developed between different elements of Coalition forces, the embryonic Iraqi government, and the Iraqi Department of Antiquities;
(g) that ORHA should reject the suggestion, apparently put forward by Cultural Heritage Ambassador Cordoni, that new excavations should take place, because

- it was currently unsafe
- there was no archaeological infrastructure at present
- there was no mechanism for the conservation of finds;

(h) that DFID undertake an immediate review of the purchasing of crops in Iraq;
(i) that Government support the Richard Allen Private Members Bill that made it a criminal offence to deal in illicit antiquities in the UK; and

(j) that the UK support Iraq (UN sanctions) Order 2003 Statutory Instrument 2003 1519.

In the medium term I argued the UK should:

(a) indicate support for the US Congress in its plans to pass HR 2009 and equivalent law in Senate that would help to protect any objects arriving illegally in the USA from Iraq;

(b) start a public relations and education campaign with local Iraqi people as to the long-term economic value of their heritage to them;

and that the MoD should:

(c) develop liaison with archaeologists already working within the Ministry. It had come as a total surprise to my contacts within the MoD that the Ministry actually employed four archaeologists within Defence Estates, the MoD agency which manages the Department’s estate in the UK and overseas. These archaeologists had themselves been trying to raise the issue of identification and protection of sites and museums before the war but had, in the time-honoured civil service way, been unable to get their voices heard in a different part of the Ministry.

I finally asked that over the longer term:

(a) DFID acknowledge value of, and put into place planning for, the development of cultural heritage tourism for local developing economies in Iraq (and that DFID should see this as a legitimate role for them more widely);

(b) where reconstruction takes place in Iraq, interim authority must ensure archaeological excavation precedes it;

(c) the UK should sign and ratify the 1954 Hague Convention (and both its protocols), the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention;

(d) consideration be given to planning for the protection of museums and the wider cultural heritage if the UK came under attack;

(e) serious consideration be given to how the archaeological – and wider cultural heritage – community could and should liaise with the UK military in the future. I noted that such liaison falls into two parts: first, introduction of the importance of the cultural heritage into military, and customs, training at all levels (but especially at the Joint Training College for senior officers at Shrivenham); second, when conflict is imminent, co-ordination between the heritage community and military – and here I stressed the role of, and need for Government funding for, the UK and Ireland Blue Shield (UKIRB).

Conclusion

The 17 July presentation was the last major contribution I made regarding the identification and protection of the archaeological cultural heritage in Iraq. I was to have given evidence to a House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee meeting on ‘Military Operations and Reconstruction: the Environment in Iraq’ in the spring of 2004 but the inquiry was postponed on 29 April, reflecting the deterioration in the security situation in Iraq. (I was later informed that it was unlikely that the Committee would meet until after the
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UK election.) Partly as a result of the postponement of this Inquiry, the UK’s All Party Parliamentary Group for Archaeology held its own meeting on 19 May 2004. I made a verbal presentation outlining the extent of my role with the MoD. This is one of a number of presentations I have made since June 2003 in the USA, UK, Jordan, Australia and New Zealand regarding my experience. In these I have tried not only to show that something was done in the lead-up to war – however ineffective that action now appears to be – but that something far more must be done with respect to future conflicts.

Much has been written on the developing situation within the UK, within Iraq, and internationally (see, e.g. Bogdanos 2003; Cole 2004; Catling & Crawford 2004; Cruickshank 2003; Cruickshank & Vincent 2003; Gaimster 2004a, b; Phuong 2003; The Independent Review 3 June 2003). The UK has begun the process of signing and ratifying the 1954 Hague and 1970 UNESCO Conventions (but not, it seems, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention), and now has The Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act. There is also a significantly greater awareness within certain levels of the MoD of the importance of the cultural heritage and the responsibilities of UK forces to protect it. This awareness must be built upon and the archaeological community needs to continue to lobby for dedicated training for all military personnel. While it is clutching at straws to find much good out of the events of 2003/2004 – especially as it becomes increasingly and depressingly clear just how much has been lost from the museums and the extent of the continuing looting of archaeological sites – none of this legal enhancement would have happened without the recent conflict.

However, there is far more on the negative side: despite assurances from within the MoD that they take protection of the archaeological cultural heritage seriously, widespread looting continues: Joanne Farchakh, recently returned from another visit to Iraq, estimates that over 100 archaeological sites have been damaged to such an extent that they are archaeologically almost worthless. There are also reports of significant damage being done to archaeological sites by Coalition forces at Babylon (see, e.g. Zainab Bahani, Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art History and Archaeology, from Columbia University, writing in The Guardian 1 September 2004). In most instances, with the exception of Ur and one or two other sites where military installations sit alongside the site, archaeological sites are not being protected, as Coalition forces do not have the capacity. As fighting escalates, it is clearly impossible for them to protect isolated and remote sites. DFID have, to my knowledge, still declined to purchase crops from local producers in Iraq. No archaeologist or heritage manager has been asked to contribute to any military training at any senior or strategic level – although a senior civil servant (who attended my Whitehall presentation and who had been aware of my earlier work) does now mention this issue in his own lectures at Shrivenham – a small step in the right direction. The MoD’s own archaeologists, who have introduced successful management and protection measures on the Department’s own estate, do not appear to have been introduced into MoD planning teams. In short, not only does the sacking of one of the most important cultures in the world continue unabated but there seems no real move to improve the preparation of UK forces for any future conflict.

Part of the responsibility for this situation must lie with the cultural heritage community itself. In the presentations I have made in five different countries (one of which was to a multi-national audience), it has stunned me to find less than 5 per cent of audiences, made up...
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of academic archaeologists and cultural heritage managers, had ever heard of the ICBS. Such a level of awareness of the ICBS offers no endorsement that we, as engaged professionals, take the protection of the cultural heritage particularly seriously.

I ended my 17 July presentation with the following words:

‘I’ve tried to show that cultural heritage is important. I hope that together we can begin to develop the recognition of this importance. That we can begin to develop strategies that will attempt to protect it, to use it, to interpret it, in the most suitable fashion. Not for any specific nationalistic agenda but for the explicit agenda of making the world a better, safer, more harmonious, and more civilised place to live.’

I can think of no better way of ending this essay other than perhaps sharing this sign photographed last year from above the door of Kabul museum: ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’. I believe anything that anyone can do to contribute to ensuring such life is time well spent.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the following who responded to my request for advice before making my presentation to MoD on 17 July 2003: Neil Brodie; John Curtis; Patrick Boylan; Nicholas Postgate (a member of the Council of the BSAI who had, with Eleanor Robson, set up a website with an excellent catalogue of Iraqi sites, specifically as a means of putting information into the public domain, where it might be accessed by the military, or anyone else with an interest; see http://users.ox.ac.uk/~wolf0126/); and Niall Hammond, an archaeologist working for Defence Estates, an agency of the MoD. This article was written while on sabbatical in the Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

References