

Desecrating history

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In the first few days after the end of the "shock and awe" campaign, from April 10-12 2003, Iraq's main museums, libraries and archives were looted and extensively damaged by fire. A Bradley tank and a number of US troops were in the area. At one point a curator from the Iraq Museum staff walked over and asked for assistance but was told by the tank commander (who to give him credit, actually radioed his superiors to request permission) that no orders had been given to help.

At the time, Donald Rumsfeld appeared on our television screens in the US and declared these events a positive sign of the liberation of an oppressed people, "stuff happens" he said.

Those of us who opposed the war from the start, and who implied that the US bore some responsibility for its negligence were dismissed as anti-American radicals even in the mainstream press. But by 2007, Barbara Bodine, the US ambassador at the time, revealed to Charles Ferguson in his documentary film No End in Sight that direct orders had come from Washington stating no one was to interfere with the looting.

The events of that April are still lamented everywhere as the unfortunate collateral damage of war, another consequence of the occupation that was not foreseen, like so many other aspects of the occupation, due to the lack of foresight of the Bush administration. But the looting spree in the museums and libraries was just the tip of the iceberg of a catastrophic destruction of historical treasures that was to come in the following five years, and it was not simply the result of poor planning or the inadvertent

damage of war.

Even if the original looting of the museums and libraries could not have been avoided, or was not foreseen (an excuse that I personally find rather weak given the fact that numerous archaeologists and other scholars had warned both US and UK governments against exactly such a scenario months before the war), there are areas of cultural destruction that were entirely avoidable and sometimes pre-planned.

First, there was the Pentagon's strategic decision to use the main cultural heritage sites of the country as military bases. These sites include Ur, the legendary birthplace of Abraham; Babylon, the famed capital of Mesopotamian antiquity; and Samarra, the Abbasid Islamic imperial city. The digging, bulldozing, filling of sand bags and blast-barricade containers, the building of barracks and digging of trenches into the ancient sites; all this has destroyed thousands of years of archaeological material, stratigraphy and historical data. Walls and standing structures have collapsed as a result of shootings, bombings and helicopter landings.

At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to remind readers that such activities are against both Iraqi cultural heritage law and against international laws of war and occupation. In other words, like human rights abuses, the destruction of a people's cultural heritage and history has elsewhere been regarded as a war crime. To be precise, similar to the case of torture, international law has regarded such activities as war crimes when people or states other than the US have been responsible for them.

Imagine, if you will, that Stonehenge was taken over as a military barracks that housed thousands of troops and required the digging of the earth in order to provide plumbing and sewage in the middle of the ancient site itself, while trenches were dug around the megaliths and perhaps some of the smaller monoliths were relocated, and used as blast

walls to protect the troops at the checkpoint entries to the base. When leading archaeologists came to point out the damage, they were asked: "Are you suggesting that we risk the lives of our troops?" This is the situation today at some of the most important cultural sites of Iraq.

At other locations we have a second type of massive but preventable destruction. This is the ongoing looting of countless Mesopotamian archaeological sites, looting that continues because the state board of antiquities and heritage has little money or equipment for site guards like those in other countries rich in antiquities such as Egypt, Italy, Turkey or Greece, and because the US and UK governments have had little interest in including such site protection in the multi-trillion dollar budget of the occupation. Despite the noble pledges of commitment to the rescue of cultural heritage and rebuilding of the museum and libraries that were made in 2003, the reality is similar to that of the situation with electricity and water. Almost nothing has been done. The Iraqi government is no better. It has shown a remarkable lack of interest in preserving historical sites, whether they are of the pre-Islamic or Islamic eras. More recently, the Maliki government has actually cut what little money had been allocated for these sites. Worse yet, last summer Iraqi troops marched into the National Library and physically assaulted librarians and other staff.

At the time when the first news of the Iraq Museum looting emerged, there were also allegations made in the western press and media that the curatorial staff had been responsible. These charges were never substantiated, although people's lives and reputations were seriously damaged as a result. In the de-Ba'athification plan of Paul Bremer, qualified curators, archaeologists and professors were removed from their positions. In the following five years, many more scholars left the country, forced into exile because of direct threats to their lives; others were not so fortunate and have just

become part of the collateral damage of war.

So on this fifth anniversary of the looting I will repeat what I wrote in April 2003. The destruction of history, which has become a prominent aspect of this violent occupation, is not simply the unfortunate damage of some art objects.

As in other wars at other times and places, the destruction of monuments and historical archives works to erase the historical landscape and the realms of memory around which people define their collective identities. The fact that people's relations to monuments, history and landscape are always and everywhere constructed does not make cultural destruction any more ethical or legal. It is precisely through such destruction that empires have usually re-mapped space.

The continuing destruction of historical sites in Iraq must be addressed more seriously as one of the distinctive aspects of the current occupation of Iraq. History and archaeology are never untainted by politics. If ethnic groups or nations construct identities through monuments and historical narratives, the opposite is also true. In the words of George Orwell, "who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past".