

# Weaponizing Near Eastern archaeology: violence, amnesia and the ‘cultural heritage experts’ – then, now and suggestions for a different future

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage management in the conflict zones of the Middle East in the 21st century intersects with long-standing western hegemonic policies in the region, in continuity with its role as a political instrument in colonial interventions since the era of European empires. That this continues to be so has so far remained largely invisible not only in the public sphere but also within political, historical and sociological studies on colonialism. Instead, in the popular domain archaeology is often portrayed in a positive light, as an inherently innocuous but lofty pursuit in times of conflict, dedicated to the protection of (the tangible) cultural heritage. Such portrayals and perceptions of archaeology and ‘Heritage Studies’ overlook the context in which these fields of study operate and the covert aims that they are often made to serve. The present article details how the disciplinary evolution of academic fields related to cultural heritage often contributes to the very weaponization of the latter, through either a disciplinary-inflected, feigned indifference to politics or the committed embeddedness with military structures, which perpetuates imperialistic geopolitics akin to those of foregone centuries.

## KEYWORDS

‘Heritage Studies’, imperialism, neo-liberalism, war, ethics, monuments

## A armamentização da arqueologia no Médio Oriente: violência, amnésia e os ‘especialistas do patrimônio cultural’ – então, agora e sugestões para um futuro diferente

**RESUMO** A gestão do patrimônio cultural nas zonas de conflito do Médio Oriente no século XXI cruza-se com políticas hegemônicas ocidentais na região há séculos, em continuidade com o seu papel como instrumento político nas intervenções coloniais desde a era dos impérios europeus. A continuação deste fato até agora permanece em grande parte invisível, não só na esfera pública, mas também nos estudos políticos, históricos e sociológicos sobre o colonialismo. Em vez disso, no discurso popular, a arqueologia é frequentemente retratada de forma positiva, como uma atividade inerentemente inócua e especificamente no caso de zonas da guerra, como uma busca elevada dedicada à proteção do patrimônio cultural (tangível). Tais representações e percepções da arqueologia e dos ‘Estudos do Patrimônio’ ignoram o contexto no qual estas disciplinas operam e os objetivos velados que elas servem. O presente estudo detalha como a evolução disciplinar dos campos acadêmicos relacionados ao patrimônio cultural contribuiu frequentemente à armamentização dele, quer através de uma fingida indiferença científica a política, quer de uma integração comprometida com as estruturas militares, que continuam geopolíticas imperialistas semelhantes a essas do passado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**  
‘Estudos de Patrimônio’, imperialismo, neoliberalismo, guerra, ética, monumentos

Weaponizing Near Eastern archaeology: violence, amnesia and the 'cultural heritage experts' – then, now and suggestions for a different future

*Ces soldats aveuglés qu' une inflexible loi  
Rend instruments passifs et barbares sicaire  
Ces monstrueux soutiens des monarchiques guerres*

Gustave Gaillard fils, *Poésies de l'exil* (Carouge 1872, 10)

## INTRODUCTION

In *L'Enracinement*, written in the early 1940s, the philosopher, critic, sociologist and World War II resistance fighter Simone Weil defined the 'need for roots', castigating as a crime the uprooting of any community and the destruction of its physical connections with the past.<sup>1</sup> Forward-thinking and critical, her emphasis on preserving a community's roots in its physical environment anticipated global concerns that only decades later were enshrined in international law for the protection of cultural heritage in relation to living populations. Specifically, the 1970 UNESCO Convention for the protection of cultural property deemed essential for every state "to become increasingly alive to the moral obligations to respect its own cultural heritage and that of all nations".<sup>2</sup> More aspirational than pragmatic, the legislation has not always been coterminous with either the collective moral consciousness that it evoked or the safeguarding of cultural heritage that it intended.

Commendable as this legislation's aims were, they have often been proven inconsequential. From this perspective, the emergence of several new self-advertized 'fields of expertise', in reality labels for endowing *ad hoc* employees of organizations, universities and the military with respectably-sounding credentials, rather than addressing the shortcomings of legislation, or even offering palliative measures, can be seen as a mirror to the wider cluster of factors that lead to the destruction of cultural heritage in war zones. In particular, the ill-defined field of 'Heritage Studies', which in theory straddles archaeology, history, anthropology, and the technical aspects of conserving monuments and artefacts, has in the last two decades come to the vogue, churning out battalions of self-declared 'cultural heritage experts', who are often individuals with no training in archaeology or history of the period in which they claim to be experts, but have infiltrated from other academic routes. One of the recent splitters of 'Heritage Studies', the so-called Critical Heritage Studies, not only suffers from a fuzzy definition, ambit and aims, copying its snazzy vocabulary from other disciplines but more to the point, it conveniently avoids to situate the field (and its 'experts') vis-à-vis modern power structures (from the international power relation politics that it implicitly or explicitly supports, to funding organizations). In this it

<sup>1</sup> | In a recent edition, see Weil (2005: 57-58).

<sup>2</sup> | "Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural heritage", signed in Paris, November 14, 1970, UNESCO: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133378>.

copies other fields that are emerging within the ill-defined 'Critical Area Studies'.<sup>3</sup> Situated uneasily between history, archaeology and the social sciences, the moniker 'Heritage Studies' has mushroomed into a pseudo-discipline wedged between literal and metaphorical zones of conflict. Riding on a momentum of new imperialistic and military pursuits, the sudden predominance of this new and ambivalent field, hardly only an 'academic pursuit' and already branching off into various subfields, is largely symptomatic of the increasing role of western universities and institutions in the management (and appropriation) of cultural heritage in conflict zones, and the collaboration with the military of occupying countries at the same time that the humanitarian credentials of the experts are proclaimed through their links with Non-Governments Organizations (NGOs).<sup>4</sup> Has this helped, and if so, whom?

The question of ethical and practical dilemmas raised by western political and military 'interventions' (an apter term would be 'assaults') are profoundly evident in the context of Middle Eastern archaeology and cultural heritage management, often on the tail of invading military forces. These ethical problems replicate the ones posed by 'western interventions' in development aid and education,<sup>5</sup> but are graver in as much as they collude with invading western armies.

The very term 'Middle East' has imperial origins, rooted in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century imaginative geographies of an occidental European ideology of 'othering' world regions.<sup>6</sup> By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century both anthropology and archaeology have found themselves again embroiled in imperialistic, hegemonic agendas, once again actively embodying imperialistic violence. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century military invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, imperialistic wars in the sense of being connected to the participants' agendas of economic and political domination, have spawned lengthy, multi-sided military conflicts across Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and north Africa, propelling mass migration movements of violently displaced populations, numbering millions of people within a year alone (e.g. in 2015), leading to depopulations in the regions of their origins, and the break-down of communities, threatening the very survival of cultures and languages (e.g. Syriac). As a form of continuous military invasions, they have engendered perpetual war, and are part of the "colonial present" as trenchantly described by Gregory (2004) at the commencement of this war.

Calls to protect (or appear to protect) the *tangible cultural heritage* of countries in the Middle East and western Asia that are occupied by the US and its NATO allies, are routinely strategically co-opted to enhance the rhetoric and practice of imperialistic strategies.<sup>7</sup> Archaeologists have been embedded in invading armies, collaborated with military structures of occupying forces, participated in conferences co-organized by military structures and received funding from them. The expertise of the archaeologist as useful to the military (of the occupation country) in conflict zones is presented as an unquestionably positive thing, even though it concerns the

3 | E.g. on problematizing 'Critical Geography Studies', see Koch (2016).

4 | 'West' and 'Western' make for uncomfortable, unhappy terminology, if not by dichotomizing in the way foreign policy planners do; by using them one risks reifying hostile policies that aim at divisions; though I avoid for the most part placing the terms in quotes, it is clear the meaning is not clear-cut unless defined by context.

5 | On the discourse regarding 'ownership' in the context of western development aid and power politics, see Salinger (2013).

6 | For example, on French colonialism in Egyptology, see Langer (2016); for an overview in the Middle East, see Seyfi and Hall (2020).

7 | For this kind of output, see as example Kila and Zeidler (2013).

archaeologist providing, through the imparting of their “techniques”, “useful experience for military planners”, while the archaeological sites become training grounds for army troops (Osgood, 2013: 113). On occasions, archaeology and cultural heritage are directly linked to warfare in academic conferences and edited volumes, as if constituting opposite sides of the same coin, and the views of the ‘embedded [in military structures] archaeologists appear side by side with those expostulating on... ethics,<sup>8</sup> despite the overt and explicit conflict of interest – an impediment to offering one’s opinion as an authority to discussing ethics in any profession or situation. Even when the history of archaeologists in conflict is elaborated on, the present-day circumstances are offered as apolitical, neutral objectives.<sup>9</sup> While some criticism was mounted as a reaction to the collaboration of archaeologists with the militaries of occupying countries in Iraq (e.g. Albarella, 2009; Hamilakis, 2009), such cautions and admonitions went unheeded. The commonplace tendency in academia not to want to stir the waters too much when something consequential is at stake rendered these debates not only ‘academic’ (in the pejorative sense of having no real-life input or effect) but also marginal. It may not be too cynical to envisage that such silence was itself an artefact of complicity, with publishing houses and academic journals of archaeology in Europe and North America for the most part refusing to publish any critical voices.

In these ‘extra-curricular’ pursuits in war zones with western imperialistic armies involved, archaeology followed anthropology, which for decades had provided assistance to the national state security apparatus, including the US military, infiltrating universities for military and intelligence purposes (González, 2007). Such policies perpetuate earlier strategies of weaponizing anthropology, utilizing research input from the discipline in counterinsurgency manuals and the so-called paramilitary social science, with the infiltration of the national security systems in university research and funding schemes (Price, 2011). Such extra-academic allegiances have come to define the ‘embedded archaeology’ and the ‘embedded anthropology’ respectively.

The self-professed post-colonial discourses in the archaeology of the Middle East, and the nascent field of ‘Heritage Studies’ not only show little signs of being post-colonial in actuality, but on the contrary reinforce western hegemonic policies grounded in political and military agendas through the direct collusion of academic ‘experts’ with occupying military forces. The latest development in this trend concerns the creation of a body of scholarship that justifies war on account of ‘protecting’ cultural heritage, co-organized and funded by academic research boards in the UK and the US military. In a milder form, cultural heritage experts from the academy tout the ‘peace-keeping’ potential of cultural heritage, disengaged from any actual political structure, as if its beneficent functions worked through spells or a

8 | See for example an edited volume by Clack and Dunkley (2023), published within a series on ‘Defence Studies’ (!), where among the contributors are ‘experts’ on cultural heritage attached to universities, side by side with other ‘experts’ employed by military forces.

9 | “Less covertly, archaeologists continue to work alongside the military in the Middle East (Rush 2012a, 2012b) and provide strategic advice through international organizations like Blue Shield (Stone 2011), attempting to mitigate military logics and monumental preservation efforts.” (Meskell, 2020, 562), where ‘working alongside’ refers to furthering the aims of a military occupation of a sovereign state, having been ‘embedded’ in an invading and occupying army and having self-declared oneself an ‘archaeologist’ despite admitting any lack of such credentials. On how Peter Stone came to ‘collaborate’ with the UK Ministry of Defence in the invasion of Iraq (and his lack of expertise in Near Eastern archaeology), see his own account (Stone, 2005, 934); for a critical perspective on this ‘contribution’ to Near Eastern archaeology by ‘advising’ the military on its targets, see Pappa (2018, 21-22).

magic wand. Through this constellation of actions, the result is the weaponization of cultural heritage whereby it is used to gloss over war or to justify it – constituting the 'military-heritage' complex at worst, or a way to muffle public disquiet at destructive wars through placating at best, or creating a media circus of western 'heritage heroes'.

These strategies of weaponizing cultural heritage, using it both as a pretext for new wars and as a 'Public Relations' tool for hegemonic policies, employing a politically non-committal language centered on decentralizing the academic subject and the perception of its audiences, result in disengaging the social ills of military conflict and political interventions from their causes. In essence, they turn these extra-academic actions into intra-academic ones by bringing in institutional funding and support, links with the military apparatus, as well as international recognition through famed 'heritage rescue' publicity, presenting the above as valid ways of conducting one's academic profession. This is a sinister phenomenon that aligns the political and economic interests of a state with the personal interests of people employed by academic institutions funded or otherwise supported by the very same state. I argue that this constitutes an anti-deontological professional conduct with pernicious effects for other world regions, which tend to be delimited by what 'western' countries consider the 'other'. The Middle East falls squarely into this notion of the 'other', where the failure to decolonize the field has proved poisonous in the last two decades of constant western military aggression.

In what follows, I present this phenomenon focusing on the political agenda of western interventions in the Middle East and the deployment of archaeological and heritage management project as one of their components, documenting that far from a novelty, this modern coloniality appears on a continuum that began in the Age of the Empires. Tracing the historical role of archaeology as subservient to the European colonial interventions in the Middle East up to its contemporary incarnations within specifically the context of western military invasions and/or occupation in the region in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>10</sup> I confront the historical synergies of archaeology with colonialism in the Middle East. The analysis proceeds from a discussion on western epistemologies, the development of archaeology within the political and social context of European colonization and the growth of industrial capitalism, demonstrating how cultural heritage protection has evolved since the onset of the so-called 'war-on-terror' military interventions by the US, UK and their allies in the Middle East. The problematic spheres of protecting cultural heritage, which evolved within this nexus, are described within its historical and socio-political context and repercussions. I show that practices thought to belong to the past are very much alive in the present, even if they operate on a level of charged political alignment that few want to acknowledge and even fewer to address.

10 | Which does not exhaust the subject of the political uses of archaeology in the region, for example by national governments within the region.

I demonstrate that this predicament, marking a point of profound decline in the academy with large-scale effects, has been sustained by a group of disciplinary fields that are ostensibly apolitical but actually operate in and contribute to highly polemical, – in a literal sense *polemical* – political situations: in essence, they are a way of *doing politics*. This is realized with a silent consensus where the broader, western political society permits hegemonic, militaristic policies to continue to unfold in the present, legitimized in anachronistic narratives of civilizing influence, one of which is the care for the 'international' cultural heritage.

From this critical perspective on current realities of cultural heritage protection in Middle Eastern war zones, the present study proposes a capacity-building framework that departs from this state of affairs and aims for equitable relations. Revealing the unacknowledged competition between the academic duty toward the promotion of knowledge in service to society, the global hegemonic aspirations of nation states and the atomized interest of the academic as a careerist whose livelihood depends on professionally conforming with the *status quo*, the study discusses new, alternative ways for approaching the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones that do not contribute to imperialistic policies, do not fuel wars, and are equitable in essence and not in jargon. To this end, avenues are explored on how to proceed with archaeological exploration and cultural heritage management in ways that are disengaged from the socially unjust practices that serve extra-territorial, national agendas. What is at stake is consequential not only to the survival of monuments, but to the cultures that gave birth to them and the communities to which they immediately relate. In this, the rhetoric of 'international' or 'global' heritage is debased as another form of appropriation and domination. The proposal for alternative ways of cultural heritage management is built from this critical historical and ethically-informed perspective, aiming for the protection of the tangible cultural heritage without inhibiting world peace by aligning with factional political interests that destroy communities and nations, the very bearers of the intangible cultural heritage that the self-proclaimed 'heritage experts' purport to want to preserve.

**COLONIAL VIOLENCE AND INDIFFERENCE IN ARCHAEOLOGY: STILL SEARCHING FOR THE 'POST' IN MODERN EPISTEMOLOGIES**

*Now because Britain, France, and recently, the United States are imperial powers, their political societies impart to their civil societies a sense of urgency, a direct political infusion as it were, when and wherever matters pertaining to their imperial interests abroad are concerned.*

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1979)

Modern professional archaeology was born out of colonial and imperial forays of European powers and was closely linked to both imperialism and capitalism (Díaz-Andreu, 2007). Routinely dismissing the social knowledge and collective memory of nations regarding their own past, it consciously sought to impose a hierarchy of not only civilizations but also epistemologies. In tandem with Egyptology, it promulgated the ideology of the superiority of western European cultural, social and political tenets through method, practice and representation. Emerging as a modern academic discipline since, archaeology has purportedly succeeded in rehabilitating itself as an objective academic field of study, free from the reins of colonialism and subservience to authority, where searching for the historical truth, unrestrained by any obligation to authority, produces knowledge scrutinized by freedom of thought and critique. Decolonizing archaeology in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a gradual development in the context of changing western socio-political mentalities that self-reflexively denounced the colonial past, the brutal violence it engendered against people previously considered inferior, which had taken many forms: violence against humans, their culture, their language, their tangible and intangible heritage, their environment, their social structures and religious beliefs. Archaeology would no longer serve imperial powers or concede intellectual freedom to authoritarian regimes.

Unlike what this textbook narrative would suggest, however, some of the most recent uses of archaeology as an instrument of propaganda for aggressive foreign policies reflect the continuous links of this colonial past of the discipline with its present. They take their cue from the era of European imperial expansion in a historical continuum that brings us to the present day. Likewise, the post-colonial turn of Egyptology remains ambivalent. In South America, given the colonial past and its contemporary legacies, post-colonial approaches inform research strategies (e.g. Menezes Ferreira, 2008; Menezes Ferreira and Funari, 2009; Flores and Acuto,

2015), which then find expression in the anthropological research carried out in other world regions, such as the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, calls to heed post-colonial multi-vocality and 'inclusion' in archaeology and cultural heritage management have not always been philosophically coherent, sketching a new caricaturish image of the field (Grabow and Walker, 2016),

In Europe and much of North America, however, post-colonial perspectives in archaeology have not been as successful. This inability of western archaeology to constructively engage with learning from history reflects latent prejudices concerning the needs and capabilities of the 'indigenous' people and their relationship with the cultural heritage of their own lands, whatever the officially stated good intentions felt by archaeologists.<sup>12</sup> In parallel, anthropology has followed a similar trajectory, albeit with more self-reflection. Initially concerned with studying cultures encountered in the imperial-colonising forays – just as these cultures were becoming extinct by the same socio-political apparatus that gave birth to the discipline – it often ignored the structural violence of imperialism or neo-colonialism in relation to which it had been created. Historically, anthropologists failed to voice critique towards the genocides of cultures and peoples in the so-called New World.<sup>13</sup> Instead, anthropology delivered the 'scientific' position on the need to eradicate non-western populations in colonial lands, as instances from 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil demonstrate.<sup>14</sup>

This tendency to depoliticize its subject of studies is a long-standing feature of anthropology that continued into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and North America. Anthropologists posted in far-away countries would fetishistically occupy themselves with the semeiotics of cockfights on islands that they perceived as exotic while ignoring ongoing social revolutions in the same locales. Delving into recondite analyses of alien to them cultures, they would ignore the Marxist revolution in the Peruvian Andes while they occupied themselves with the ritual cosmology or ecology of the local populations, as if their research subject existed "outside of the flow of historical time".<sup>15</sup> Violence as a subject of study pertained to the culture of the 'Other', rather than to that of the anthropologist. In particular, the failures or pretensions of North American anthropology to take notice of structural violence explains both the hegemonic orientation of anthropology and the power politics of anthropologists as academics that supported such powers (Astrinaki, 2005). Even as it continued to expand its fields of interests and compartmentalize into subfields from the 1980s onwards, anthropology remained unable to provide a global *problématique* for violence in human societies, almost to the point of providing an apology for violence (Astrinaki, 2005). These contradictions permeate the discipline from birth to post-modernism, which in Argyrou's (2002) post-colonial critique of the discipline amount to an innate paradox that in political and theoretical terms turns the field inherently incoherent, since it proposes that all cultures are in fundamental

<sup>11</sup> | On the 'mobility' of Muslim religious identities in Syria, see Chagas (2011).

<sup>12</sup> | E.g. when a Dutch research fieldwork team (van den Dries and van der Linde, 2012) expressed surprise that 'the local community' near the Tell Balata archaeological site (West Bank) was interested in the archaeology of their own town, as they found out during a "structured communication project" (the purpose of which comes across as a conflict avoidance strategy to the reader), as if archaeological discoveries could only be of interest to western archaeologists.

<sup>13</sup> | The example is excerpted from real events, see Astrinaki (2005).

<sup>14</sup> | Where Herman von Ihering, the German director of the Museu Paulista, which collected and exhibited indigenous relics, championed the eradication of the Amerindian populations, so as to pave the way for the industrial exploitation of their forested lands (Funari, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> | E.g. as Clifford Geertz did in Bali, see Astrinaki (2005).

aspects the same while studying cultural differences. In ethnographic terms, defining the anthropologist's work as the ability to contain multiple frames of reference and to shift from one to the other<sup>16</sup> may address the intrinsic subjectivity of anthropology, the epistemological dilemma where the cultural positionality of researcher versus the studied culture refracts the construction of the 'Other', as if the employed analytical competence lay outside the researcher's cultural frame of reference. And yet these paradoxes only reflect conscious alignments with the power structures that gave birth to anthropology especially in conjunction with explicit aims of political interference in foreign lands, using anthropology as a respectable vehicle for 'intelligence' gathering that is then put to the aims of political and military influence or dominance (Gkefou-Madianou, 2024).<sup>17</sup>

Tangential to this is a depoliticizing tendency, evident in Post-Colonial Studies that emerged as a field with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in the late 1970s, a fertile period for its reception<sup>18</sup> – a turn of events seemingly incongruent with the political concerns that propelled the field into existence. In this seminal work, Said (1979: 12) propounded that the political interests and state policies of a country derived from the prevailing social and political culture. This understanding posits, for example, that imperialistic foreign policies emanate not from an isolated political class, but from the broader society that props up this elite in power. Distilled in this work is the author's own predicament of intellectual isolation as a Palestinian emigré in the US and literary critic in academia, unable to find common ground among his contemporary peers. His experience was condensed in his stated position that the US and the 'West' more generally, decreed the study of "imperialism and culture off limits".

How have things changed since, if at all? The Middle Eastern, Palestinian academic in the US, lived long enough to see that his *Orientalism* had become an oft-cited book in the 'Occident' as much as in the 'Orient', established as a standard of reference for a number of disciplines in the social sciences and in the humanities, a staple in reading lists across western university curricula.<sup>19</sup> And yet would Said be at all surprised to see that despite these academic shifts, whence post-colonialism cannot be said to be "off limits" any longer, imperialistic policies by states have not waned? That the civil society permits, or better described, generates discourses of imperial hegemony turned into policies of at best ambivalent moral outlook, by the political society? Probably not. After all, the scholarly community's immunity to the geopolitical structures that on surface get castigated proves feeble when later historical research reveals collusion of academics with government agencies and complicity with top-down political machinations, or else when the once radiant, radical thinking aiming at sweeping socio-political changes dissolves into open-ended, abstract, obscure, and therefore ineffectual, 'theory'. Looking at euphemistically-called

16 | Hegner (2013) describes this as a "methodological transgression in ethnography".

17 | For a detailed analysis on such government strategies enhancing foreign policy activities, including in espionage and the military, with the input of academics, and especially anthropologists, see Price (2011).

18 | It was received in a climate that under the effect of French theory was ripe with humanistic critique, and *deconstruction* (popularized by Said's contemporary Jacques Derrida in his post-structuralism), bridging art, literature, politics and philosophy, yet Rooney (2009) speaks of a "missed encounter" between the politics and philosophies of Said and Derrida, Palestinian and Algerian respectively, both intellectuals forged in the crucible of decolonization.

19 | For a recent biography of Said focusing on the multi-dimensional aspects of his intellectual achievements, see recently Brennan (2021).

'humanitarian interventions', that is wars, in the Middle East of the beginning of this century, which have created perpetual war zones, and the public response to them, proves the endorsement of Said's ideas an academic topic, despite ample performativity in language by institutions and officials within the academy (e.g. on 'multivocality', 'diversity', 'equality') with little effect on actual policies. A cynic would venture that more than a hint or reasoned guess, here is the empirical confirmation that academic debates and scholarship, when resting on public moral rectitude and equitability vis-à-vis the 'Other', remain 'academic' even within academia itself, removed from the society at large, but also from the conduct of the academic within society. The field of postcolonial studies that Said unintentionally created has been criticized for degenerating into textuality-based musings, banal debates, self-referential topics on inconsequential matters, seemingly unconcerned with their impact on the world outside academia. Rao (2006) astutely noted that "just as the U.S. was winding up phase one of its war on terrorism by declaring victory against one of the poorest countries in the world [Iraq], *Postcolonial Studies* [the journal] treated us to a particularly illuminating and urgently relevant special issue on toilets and plumbing, with an editorial titled 'Plumbing the Depths: Toilets, Transparency and Modernity,' and with articles on 'bucket latrines in Ghana' and 'the supermodern Japanese toilet in a changing domestic culture'". Discussing the "debilitating" debates over aesthetics, location and textuality mired by linguistic acrobatics and games, and the over-indulgent concern of his peers with the elite subject of the non-western exile academic in the West, the same author attributed this lack of concern for the political, economic and social grounding of post-colonial studies to the unwillingness to surrender the multiplicity of (post-colonial) perspectives to a totalizing framework (understood as totalitarian) offered by political economy theories, such as Marxism.

An additional flammable ingredient has been added to this mix. The birth of a whole range of ill-defined, newly emerging fields of subjects that have been riding on the wave of self-referential academic problems, exhausting themselves in inconsequential debates through paroxysmic word games, and self-centred academic rhetoric, explained by another set of pettier factors: the social and economic standing of academics, who after all are tied to the institutional funding provided by those who decide on state policy, including institutions complicit in structural violence. It is convenient, after all, for one's immediate life circumstances, to not have to go against the grain of the political and economic structures that support one's privileged (by comparison) lifestyle in the ivory towers. This alone has proven a compelling excuse for acquiescing to authoritarian policies, lulling whatever personal moral unease with notions of academic work as 'apolitical', which postulates amount to pure fantasy. Creating a feedback loop, those who align with this *faux* apolitical stance go on to perpetuate their outlook and conduct through the

inculcation of graduate student populations, indoctrinated in theories of legitimizing imperialism under various 'humanitarian' disguises, thus successively imposing a bottleneck in the opinions allowed and expressed over waves of newly-trained professionals.<sup>20</sup> In effect, the pseudo-apolitical aspect of professional academics is not only a legacy of an intellectually-based epistemic break, but a pragmatic career option for remaining in academia, by acquiescing to broader state policies and economic interests that fund those who employ academics – often reputable universities. A state of conformism is far easier, and if it need exhaust itself to the exoticized by the West cockfights, so be it.

And yet currents in international law and human rights, as well as social movements, demonstrate progress in how we think of social justice, civic responsibility and solidarity across national and cultural borders. Particularly in fields where the anthropologists study their own society and not that of (exoticized) other cultures, the borders and rifts of academic identity and activism have become malleable.<sup>21</sup> Jarring to this underlying paradigm are more recent voices of critiquing complicity, drowned in the din of polarization and asphyxiated through official university policies of containment (including terminating job contracts). Yet some of the progress made with regard to western actions in the Middle East is reflected in *The World Tribunal on Iraq*, set up by a transnational, decentralized network of anti-war activists, lawyers and academics after the invasion of Iraq by the US and the UK in 2003. As an attempt to defend human rights and create a global public platform, it appealed to the "collective conscience of humanity", embodying a global protest against the war and outrage at the impunity and lack of personal accountability for those responsible for it (Çubukçu, 2018: 158-159). As a set of initiatives without legal mandate, its authority was ideological, emanating from the "collective conscience of humanity" but unable to inform cross-national governmental policy. From this perspective, the contribution of the 2003 World Tribunal on Iraq lies in its value as resistance to militarism and as cross-border political and academic activism.

20 | On the ideological-intellectual bedrock of the discourse on 'humanitarian wars' developed over decades, see Çubukçu (2018: 126-157).

21 | For an example from Britain, see Koch (2018).

## INSPIRATIONAL PIONEERS OR IMPERIAL INSTRUMENTS? WESTERNS ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND THE GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST - THEN.

### *Imperial and Mandate archaeologies in the Middle East: origins, practices, representations*

The close links of archaeology-in-service to imperialist enterprises by western imperial powers can be traced to Napoleon's Expedition to Egypt in 1798. Champolion's 'discovery' of ancient Egypt, was followed by Napoleon proclaiming that "They

[the 'natives'] cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Said, 1979, 293). From Napoleon's collection mania and the appropriation of the Egyptian or Greco-Roman ('Classical' past), to the British infiltration of former Ottoman territories, colonialism went hand-in-hand with archaeology, eventually leading to the emergence of the modern disciplines of Classical Archaeology, Egyptology and Near Eastern studies (Langer, 2016; Bernbeck, 2012; Díaz-Andreu, 2007). Connected to the ancient past but far from rooted in an innocent antiquarian tradition – glimpses of which impression are still entertained in university textbooks – these disciplines are closely linked to colonization, imperialism and the growth of industrial capitalism (Hamilakis and Duke, 2007). The capitalism induced by the industrial revolution needed expanding markets and material resources; Africa and Asia were to provide what politically was no longer available for them in the Americas.

Antiquities and the claims to past cultures have long been used to ideologically pin down civilization superiority during the imperial exploits, even if fantastical genealogical claims, or claims to kinship with past civilizations, had to be put forward.<sup>22</sup> This is no novelty. From the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, Frankish scholars and chroniclers (Amon de Fleury, Robert d' Auxerre and Guillaume le Breton) argued that the French language was descended from ancient Greek, a far-fetched idea which continued down to the 14<sup>th</sup> century when sermons in France spoke of the 'Attic idiom' of the country (Shawcross, 2009: 206-211), formulating thus a legitimizing narrative for the Frankish occupation of the Peloponnese and parts of what is now central Greece, conquered by Crusaders from western Europe who installed their own kingdoms on foreign lands and inconveniently had to content with the heirs of the ancient civilization they coveted. During what is called 'the Age of Empires', when not making direct claims to biological ancestry, the old argument of technical or scientific superiority for the custodianship of the past by nations better suited to manage the cultural heritage of 'natives' was put forward (Gidtri, 1974). Yet archaeology as a field of interest and intellectual pursuit had already been born already in Byzantine lands, anticipated by Chinese scholars who had created periodizations of prehistory already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the false idea that the study of the past through its material remains was a unique pursuit of western European intellectual achievements reflects how archaeology was shaped as a tool in the legitimization of colonial empires.

Rather, what western Europe could lay claim on with some justification was the emergence of the *profession* of archaeology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the concern over the anarchy of conducting archaeological excavations gained momentum, gradually demarcating the remit of scientific archaeology. The concerns over the ethical norms on researching and recording the material remains of the past through formal excavations turned archaeology from an elite, past-time pursuit or

22 | Such as the less known appropriation of the Phoenicians in British imperial ideology, see Champion (2011).

23 | On Byzantine interest in the ruins of classical Greece, see Kaldellis (2007); Pappa (2020: 370-371). On China: Yuan K'ang in 52 CE cited a 5th-century-BCE historian who had proposed a four-era periodization of chronology in China (Gidtri, 1974: 437).

opportunistic treasure-hunting into a discipline within a Euro-American domain (Lynott, 2003). Such ethical norms however were nailed to the safeguarding of the archaeological material, and were not disengaged from the broader cultural mentalities and values, political and economic tenets and interests of the archaeologists (González-Ruibal, 2018: 345-360; Zimmerman et al., 2003).

From scratch, power and culture were interlinked into a formidable tool of imperial consolidation and colonial control of foreign territories (González-Ruibal, 2010: 40). From the era of colonization to decolonization, the dominance of imperial archaeology was unambiguous. Archaeological projects funded by the UK and the US were from the outset political and often nationalistic in character. Economic and political asymmetries provided fertile ground for the expansion of modern archaeology even in lands not directly colonized. In 1920s Greece, permits to the American School in Athens to excavate in the prestigious Athenian Agora of the ancient city were intertwined with economic loans from the US to the young and small Greek state, struggling with wars since the 1820s Greek Revolution against the imperial Ottoman overlords, and mired in military conflicts through to World War I. For the creditor, the rewards of this bargain of sorts of a century ago, a project of American nationalism, continue to this day as excavations at the site of the Agora have been monopolized by the American School ever since (Hamilakis, 2013).

Looting and exporting antiquities was part and parcel of imperial forays, and this did not change after World War I. The graded forms of colonial government created in the Middle East and North Africa with the Mandate Territories legislation of the 1919 Versailles Treaty sealing this global conflict brought new forms of colonial management. This was legitimized in the notion of international oversight of large territories under the patronizing overtones of custodianship of a land until its "inhabitants", not exactly conceived of as sentient beings with autonomy and critical faculties, were modernized sufficiently to rule over it, sanctioned by the newly-created League of Nations (Melman, 2020: 36-48). Mesopotamia, Palestine (southern Levant, which included Israel) and Arabia were placed under British protection, while France was to maintain control over Syria and parts of south-western Anatolia ('Cilicia'), and Italy over Libya. Under the Mandate Territories legislation or illegally, huge shipments of excavated artefacts arrived in Britain and the US from the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, forming the collections of now acclaimed museums.<sup>24</sup> The Antiquities legislation in the British Mandate governments in the Middle East was set down along with labyrinthine bureaucratic mechanisms for their administration, albeit the legal definition of antiquities was not as detailed and regulated as during the Ottoman empire, and used the chronology of artefacts and sites, rather than their function (as during the Ottoman period), to classify archaeological remains.

<sup>24</sup> | For example, on looted or 'appropriated' Assyrian inscriptions by European powers and their dispersal over various museums, institutions and private collectors during the colonial era, see Russell (1999).

As a result, the management and ownership of the past came under colonial control, and archaeological projects were seen as way to progress towards modernity, all the while discounting the local populations' connection to their own lands' past (Melman, 2020: 38-48). The emerging international institutionalization of protecting antiquities was first elaborated on the so-designated Mandate A territories, *i.e.* the Middle East. Operating from Paris and funded by the French government as of 1926, the International Museums Office (IMO) of the International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) of the League of Nations shared the imperial outlook of its parent organization, but sought to create a "unified system of historical and archaeological discovery and research", accessible to nations (Melman, 2020: 48-51). Under its Secretary General, Euripides Fountoukides, who was Greek, unprecedented efforts were made to create an "international regime of antiquities". Though intended otherwise by the originally members of the League of Nations, in practice this new regime for the protection of antiquities became a foil to these core values of western civilization superiority as it cut across imperial and national lines, giving voice and some leverage to representatives of colonial subjects, thus constricting powerful sovereign states, a situation largely engineered with the energies of a secretary that in his identity embodied a resistance to both aims: he was not the citizen of an imperial power and he came from a country with stakes in controlling its own vast archaeological heritage (Melman, 2020, 51-56).

In Mesopotamia, prior to 1930, large excavation projects were directed by foreign, mainly British archaeologists, with a minimal input from local people confined to the provision of physical labour, with few exceptions. These projects resulted in the mass exportation of antiquities from Iraq, prior to new legislation for the protection of antiquities coming into effect in the 1930s, at the onset of Iraqi independence (Abdi, 2011: 140). The scattering of Sumerian tablets across western Europe and North America is a case in point.<sup>25</sup> On occasion the removal of entire ancient palatial and sacred monumental complexes became a western European past-time. The Museum of Pergamum, in Berlin, boasts half a cultic complex taken from Babylon, in Iraq (Satia, 2008). Egyptian artefacts were shipped to Britain to enrich the collections of individuals and of museums or were sent as token gifts to middle-class subscribers that supported the finances of excavation projects. But that was not all. Colonialism, espionage and archaeology worked as communicating vessels across the Middle East. Imperial espionage and looting of antiquities resulted in hundreds of artefacts from one single site in Syria being physically scattered across more than half a dozen museums and private collectors in the 'West'.<sup>26</sup> That the artefacts and even monuments became dispersed across the globe, decontextualized from their physical environments, distributed across nations and physically and informationally divided by the descendant communities of their creators, not only reduces

25 | Neo-Sumerian Text Maps. Recent digital interactive maps show the distribution of Sumerian tablets in western museums: Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts (BDTNS), Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, <http://bdtns.filol.csic.es/mapa.php?modo=yacis>

26 | There were no few cases where antiquities looted from Asia or Africa and taken to a European country were subsequently seized by a competing nation and transferred to another, as during World War I when Britain confiscated Syrian antiquities looted by a German diplomat: Tabet (2019); Tabet: "Alien Property: In light of what we know now" (Wednesday, October 28, 6–7 pm, Metropolitan Museum of Art), a talk given on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition: <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/rayyane-tabet-alien-property> (accessed October 30, 2020).

their informational content, but continues to generate injustice towards descendant communities and populations inhabiting the very land they were found in. In terms of the work of the professional archaeologist, the looting of artefacts and their dispersal in various museums in Europe and elsewhere means that the study of archaeological and epigraphic material requires first an 'excavation' into the physical and historical archives of looted and exported antiquities, digging into fieldwork archives and looters' purchases and sales of colonial-era excavations, before an archaeologist is able to understand the actual excavations themselves and the finds that they produced.

In territories under colonial rule or colonial influence, archaeological research institutions ('foreign schools') were set up by Britain, France and other colonial powers for the purpose of advancing cultural activities. Several of them, still in operation today (albeit rehabilitated as purely research institutes), were responsible for drawing up the agendas for research into archaeology, history, and philology, with often an abject disdain towards the local interests, needs and stances on the matter. Crucially, they also grew into hotspots of diplomatic intrigue and political-military espionage, as their staff, links and infrastructure were involved in imperialistic and colonial projects.

Physically removing and ideologically appropriating antiquities had a role to play in the ownership of the past across the Mandate-ruled territories (Hamilakis (2012; 2005; 2003). The looting of archaeological sites continues to this day, *inter alia* enhancing collections of museums in the US and Britain, and has been described as an "ethical crisis in archaeology" (Renfrew 2000; 1999). Excavations and projects during this era were not the teleological outcome of institutional modernization. The agency of people who acted, often in discord, to expand archaeological excavations, born out of individual impetus, was often followed by institutional oversight. What animated all these actors' actions, regardless of any selfish profit-seeking, was the ideology emitted by the colonial centres, moulded to be culturally acceptable at home (Melman, 2020).

The ensuing public popularization of ancient cultures should not be seen monolithically. The Egyptomania in Britain, for example, was neither a teleological eventuality of excavations, nor a constant over time. Strategies to possess and exhibit antiquities in Britain, linked to the British control over Egypt, was a way to vaunt the homeland as the empire, emulated by individual citizens who sought to obtain social prestige. Neither necessarily reflected an inherent interest in ancient Egypt (Stevenson, 2019). As such, it joined other novel pursuits of cultivating imperial prestige that reflected anxieties over class and race, with such efforts seen in an array of newly-introduced, elite, recreational past-times and diversions, ranging from embracing Russian ballets to fixations on canine breeding, infused with notions of

pure lineages and intertwined with literature and the visual arts (Worboys, 2023).

Amid a torrent of excavations in western Asia, the visually less dazzling Mesopotamian archaeological remains triggered artistic and intellectual musings over “primitive peoples” in western publics and influenced modern art in the interwar period. Joan Miró’s and Le Corbusier’s Surrealism heavily drew on Sumerian material culture, mediated through magazines such as the *Illustrated London News* in Britain and the *Cahiers d’Art* in France, inspired by the then ongoing excavations in southern Iraq directed by Leonard Woolley (Azara, 2018). In particular, the *Cahiers d’Art*, created by the Greek emigré Christos Zervos in 1918, juxtaposed ancient and contemporary art, uncovering their linkages in artistic photos of antiquities at the Louvre and the British Museum. Another well-known art form inspired by western excavations in Mesopotamia is the spy novel. Agatha Christie, wife and long-term collaborator of the archaeologist Max Mallowan, spent several decades of her life partaking in excavation projects in Mesopotamia and Syria, then Mandate territories (Melman, 2020: 193). These early developments set the tone for who exactly had the upper hand on the ancient Near East, not only politically but also culturally.

### ***Western archaeologists and the Empire in the Middle East***

From the prismatic depth of time, the relationship between colonialism and archaeology appears reciprocal. While archaeology was born out of colonial enterprises, springing from military expeditions, it later supplied fighting armies with the expertise in local topography, customs and knowledge, as well as the resources the latter so much needed. The Palestine Exploration Fund, a research project on the topography of Palestine and its population make-up and infrastructure, provided the ultimate wealth resource for the British military during World War I (Porter, 2010, 51-60). Archaeologists were those that knew the local languages, customs and history and as such, they could facilitate military expeditions by armies and civil servants working for the interests of imperial powers. Very often, their political and military role was more than explicit. Gertrude Bell, Sir Leonard Woolley and Thomas Edward Lawrence immediately spring to mind as some of the figures who wore the double mantle of archaeologists and spies (Satia, 2008). Not uncommonly during this period, British imperial bureaucratic and military personnel enlisted the direct or indirect aid of British archaeologists in the unleashing of violence. The latter’s life stories provide instructive examples of the role of archaeology in service to imperialism.

A young Gertrude Bell, travelling around the world in the vogue of her affluent contemporaries, would exclaim with expletives in her letters over the wonderfulness of the world in general and over “Eastern” culture in particular. In a letter ad-

dressed to her cousin Horace Marshall, written at Gula Hek (the summer resort of the British Legation in Persia) on June 18, 1892, a young Gertrude would muse “How big the world is, how big and how wonderful”, and after describing her reception in Persia even by strangers, she would conclude: “Ah, we have no hospitality in the west and no manners” (Bell, 1927: 25-26). Her stepmother, Florence Bell, who edited Gertrude’s epistolary writing remarked on her correspondence from 1896: “the spirit of poetry coloured all her prose”. Yet poetic inclinations were not all that there was about her step-daughter, as she went on to note: “It was a strangely interesting ingredient in a character capable on occasion of very definite hardness, and of deliberate disregard for sentiment: and also in a mental equipment which included great practical ability and a statesmanlike grasp of public affairs” (Bell, 1927: 31-32).

Fast forward a few decades, and young Bell’s “definite hardness” and “statesmanlike grasp of public affairs” would come into full floruit, while the “spirit of poetry” would permeate even the statecraft manuals that she authored for the British Empire personnel (Bell, 1917). It was during World War I that Bell began officially working for Britain in Egypt and Mesopotamia, then part of the fast-disintegrating Ottoman Empire; by 1916 she had been elevated to the position of the Assistant Political Officer under Sir Percy Cox (1864-1937), later retitled ‘Oriental Secretary’. In her 1917 manual “The Arab of Mesopotamia”, intended for British troops deployed in Mesopotamia, Bell would allude to verses from *Macbeth* so as to demean Arab culture and language (Duplisea, 2016: 65-66; Bell, 1917). Her crucial role in serving imperial interests had appeared earlier. Bell’s imperial agenda was not concealed from the elite Ottoman officials with whom she came into contact. As early as 1900, during an expedition to Jerusalem where she was to meet a certain “Circassian Efendi”, she would reflect that “He probably thinks I have a project of annexation in my mind” (Bell, 1927: 72). Her letters reveal that espionage activities on behalf of the British Empire had (informally, perhaps) commenced much earlier than her official involvement as a British officer in Egypt and Mesopotamia during World War I, likely during this very trip to Jerusalem (Witwit, 2016: 4-19). Bell’s ascent in imperial administration and growing prestige became evident in her new role as the Director of Antiquities in Iraq, an institute set up by Britain with no Iraqis as members.<sup>27</sup> By the 1920s, Bell had become acquainted with Thomas Edward Lawrence (immortalized as “Lawrence of Arabia” in the eponymous film), another (in)famous archaeologist cum imperial officer deployed in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> She was busy working with him when not digging archaeological sites and choosing the next Iraqi king, following imperial orders in helping create Iraq by arbitrarily joining together three Ottoman provinces, being herself responsible for part of Kurdistan becoming annexed by Iraq, drawing the borders of the new country according to British imperial interests,<sup>29</sup> aiding the exploitation of the oil fields for the benefit of Britain, and even supporting,

27 | In Abdi’s (2011: 139) view the Antiquities Department in Iraq which the British had set up lacked any Iraqis mainly because there was no local expertise in archaeology.

28 | For the exploits of T.E. Lawrence as an ‘intelligence officer’ for the British army working among Kurdish groups in 1919 and up to his later position as ‘Inspector of Antiquities’ in Syria, see Satia (2008: 183); Tabachnik (1997: 40-47, 70-71).

29 | Gertrude Bell Archive: <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk> (accessed June 25, 2019).

if not herself envisioning, the bombing of Iraq in the 1920s so as to force its people into complete submission. It was a time when British aerial bombardment was used to quell revolts from Egypt and Somaliland to Afghanistan and Punjab. In Mesopotamia (future Iraq), however, aerial bombardment was intended as “a permanent, every day method of colonial administration” (Satia, 2014: 2). In her epistolary exchange, Bell would describe with literary amazement the bright colours that the British aerial bombing would create in Baghdad’s night sky, during the first ever in the world mass aerial killings. Seemingly impervious to the death toll, she would propose the bombing of “remote villages in Iraq as a good training ground” for the British Royal Air Force (Bell, 1927). Throughout her correspondence, the “civilizing” and “liberating” mission of the British Empire surfaces as an aim close to her heart (Satia, 2014), one that was apathetic to the mass state violence experienced by those being “liberated”.

Through a romantic’s lens, the activities of western archaeologists turned spies, such as Bell in Mesopotamia and Lawrence in Arabia, who roamed the deserts wanting to “become like Arab”, are read as the quest of free spirits who strove to distance themselves from the perceived decadence of their own society (Satia, 2014). The quasi-blind oblivion of the social surroundings in support of imperial statecraft suggests otherwise, however, while what romantic elements may have existed reflect a spirit of adventurousness in these individuals that never trampled their imperial values or career advancement aspirations. Besides that, the regions where Bell was active were Mandate territories, ruled by British administration operating from Cairo: where English was widely spoken in administration, where she herself was an agent of that administration, where lands were being rapidly technologically modernized through the expansion of railways, air travel and the construction of the Suez Canal. It was a period when mass tourism to the Middle East was advertised by Thomas Cook and solo British female travellers would visit the Middle East (Melman, 2020: 257-258). Expeditions into the Sahara by leading British women academics were also taking place. Gertrude Caton-Thompson, prehistorian and archaeologist, and Elinor Gardner, geologist, travelled to the Faiyum on a Morris truck in 1925-6, and 1927-8, visiting different archaeological sites. When their vehicle turned out to be unreliable in the rough desert terrain, they rode camels up to the Kharja oasis in 1930, accompanied by monoplane by Lady Mary Bailey for aerial photographic purposes (Melman, 2020: 251-263). It was also the first time when female-only archaeological excavation projects in the Middle East were pioneered, led by British archaeologists such as Dorothy Garrod (University of Cambridge) and her student Jacquetta Hawkes, who carried out excavations in Palestine and Kurdistan. Garrod is known to have relied exclusively on the labour of Palestinian women (Adams, 2010). Dashing into the wilderness, alone, and singularly exceptional, is a

contemporary, rather artificial image of Gertrude Bell's life. Mechanized travelling, colonial governments, authorities utilizing the English language and mass tourism by solo female travellers prove the romantic adventurer image imparted on Bell, as a lone single pioneer, a modern construct (Melman 2020).

While Bell's abstruse, and seemingly paradoxical, actions have recently been the topic of some feminist and post-colonial academic literature, her historical persona continues to mesmerize within archaeology as a pioneer female archaeologist. Bell's support for the anti-suffrage, for example, in her role as Honourary Secretary of the Anti-Suffrage League, came across as puzzling even among her contemporaries (Witwit, 2016: 9). A realistic and pragmatic take on this is that Bell's imperial career in Mesopotamia was a continuation of her younger self's escapade from familiar constraints, later coupled with Victorian-era restrictions on the professional opportunities permissible to women, and rigid social conventions. While European women in Mesopotamia still faced the limitations of a masculine world, including among their own social circles, they still enjoyed more freedom than in Britain.<sup>30</sup> Economic dependency on her father, class and imperial values were all negotiated along with gender (Witwit, 2016). In her endorsement of anti-suffrage, Bell was typically reflecting the imperial, class and gender values of her time, conforming to the established hierarchies that permitted her an office in imperial administration. Rather than embodying a paradox of an anti-feminist, upper-class female imperial official, her attitudes and actions reflect the dominant values of the era, enmeshed with efforts to accommodate social conventions due to financial dependence and the need to be accepted in masculine-dominated professional circles (Witwit, 2016: 15). From this reading of her life, Bell appears no less an opportunist, one that is also profoundly unhappy and decides to take her life when, with Iraq independent, there is neither the possibility for her to become 'somebody' within imperial administration back in Britain (for as a woman, despite all her imperial achievements, she could not have climbed higher in the hierarchy, much as she toyed with the aspiration), nor the prospect of being construed as anything more than the "spinster aunt" of the family upon her return home (Duplisea, 2016: 69-70).

Yet Bell's choices on where to draw the borders of "this new Arab country", as she called Iraq, and her steadfast dedication to the precepts of the British monarchy in its colonial forays in the 'rush for oil' period, mirror the decisions taken by the entire British imperial apparatus that she was serving. Along with the French colonial legacy in Syria and Lebanon, these decisions helped shape the modern Middle East and are in part to blame for the unstable mosaic of people, religions and languages encapsulated by the then newly-minted 'nation states' of the Middle East. Bell urged the removal of archaeological material from their local context and their transport to Britain under the subterfuge that the British climate would aid their preserva-

<sup>30</sup> | See for example the problems Katharine Menke Keeling, later married to Sir Leonard Woolley, experienced as the only woman present at the excavations at the site of Ur during the 1920s (Kaercher, 2016).

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tion and that specialists on antiquities were based in Britain. That cultural heritage management would prove beneficial to the image the British imperial government wished to project remained the main appeal (Duplisea, 2016: 69–70). Archaeological discoveries were disseminated in Britain, trying to deflect public interest from the war itself. Publicizing excavations was transformed into a tool of British colonial bureaucracy in the Levant and Mesopotamia that projected archaeology as a positive pursuit in order to redeem in the eyes of the British public the violence wrought against Iraq during its aerial bombardment by the British in the 1920s (Satia, 2008). Both aerial bombardment and the pursuit of archaeology were defining parameters of British wars in Iraq at the time (Satia, 2014).

Regardless, even nowadays Gertrude Bell is celebrated in books, academic conferences and seminars, and in popular culture as a pioneering, brave, charismatic female scholar discovering ancient antiquities in an inhospitable land,<sup>31</sup> rather than as someone writing laudatory letters for the bombing of the Iraqis. This inscribes contemporary European and North American thought on Gertrude Bell squarely within the imperial-era European agency in the shaping of the Middle East (Bilgin, 2016: 1–8). The modern tendency to celebrate female scholars such as Gertrude Bell within academia occludes their collusion with imperial policies. In this ever so pop style, archaeology has not weaned, it seems, off its affectatious past.

The Janus-like identity of many archaeologists from colonial empires continued, facilitating interwar British imperial stratagems on the manipulation of public opinion. Such government-orchestrated staging of archaeology, where archaeological finds were used as a smokescreen to deflect from the violence and illegitimacy of the wars waged, presaged contemporary practices. Archaeologists played a significant role in World War II too, when yet again they served as spies, often under the guise of mere archaeologists, deployed in countries in which they had lived, the languages of which they spoke, with the topography of which they were familiar, from the Middle East to Greece and Portugal.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Imperialism and the arrogation of the past up to the present: imagined histories and political geographies of power***

Strategies of appropriation of the past by authorities for explicitly nationalistic and identity-creating political pursuits have a long history. From the Russian Czars, the Prussian Keizer and the Persian Shahs, whose makeshift titles attempted to draw legitimacy from the Roman Caesars (Crielaard, 2006: 272), to more recent forms of the appropriation of the past by states for nation-building pursuits, the arrogation of the past remains one of the too well-known problems of history and

<sup>31</sup> | See e.g. biography: Cooper (2016); conferences: 'Gertrude Bell and Iraq - A Life and Legacy Conference, organized on 13 September 2013 by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq at the British Academy in London, <http://www.bisi.ac.uk/content/gertrude-bell-and-iraq-life-and-legacy-conference-4>; seminar: 'Gertrude Bell. L' Occidente in Oriente', part of the *Ciclo di Conferenze di Storia degli Studi*, held on March 14, 2016 at Università degli Studi di Roma, Sapienza; the film "Queen of Desert" was released in 2015, and the documentary "Letters from Baghdad" in 2017.

<sup>32</sup> | Popular books on the topic normally concern the 'celebratory' aspects of the links between espionage and archaeology, as e.g. depicting American help in 'saving Greece' from occupying Germans in World War II: Heuck Allen (2011).

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archaeology (e.g. Ó Ríagáin and Nicolae Popa, 2012).<sup>33</sup> The appropriation of historical eras and events for constructing geographies of power continues at the highest levels, even if disguised. During the recent past, funding policies in the field of archaeology by the European Economic Community (ECC), the predecessor to the European Union, strategically selected projects that purported to document a commonly-shared, European antiquity. Thus, funding academic research was employed as a political tool for 'European' identity-making, by projecting the purported "common European roots" into the remote, ancient past, which historically and archaeologically is a completely and perversely untenable notion from the perspective of any related academic field, from ancient history to archaeology to anthropology.<sup>34</sup>

What makes the Middle Eastern case distinct in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that the use of the past for nation-making was conceived and implemented largely *from the outside*. European empires found a strong ally in archaeology, which they helped found as a profession within the ranks of 'specialists' from advancing armies in the new colonial frontiers. Power and culture continued to be enmeshed in a reciprocal, intertwined relationship. In Egypt and Mesopotamia these frontiers offered avid opportunities for connoisseurs of antiquities. This dimension of archaeology, springing from imperial endeavours and military expeditions, instrumentalizing the ancient past through its material relics, pertained to the broader imperial strategies of manipulating the past in order to serve contemporary agendas. It was entangled with the explicit aim of shaping collective group identities serving strategic, imperial agendas.

The portrayals of the cultures of 'the Orient' by western travelers and historians did not remain mere momentous events of authorship, fixed and frozen windows into remote time-pockets of the particularly dramatic episodes of the past, but were realized through the performance of political actions. They constructed the 'Other' according to the particular western gaze, in the process *irrevocably* shaping the present (Gregory, 2004). In disseminating the representation of the 'Orient' according to their own perceptions, western intellectuals, artists and travellers reified it in an unpredictable series of events and contingencies the repercussions of which reverberate in the present, alive with political and social weight. The imaginative re-workings and re-carvings of the past, the weaving of collective memories and impressions on ancient monuments so as to create desired narratives of Oriental passivity and despotism, underscored, as much as they were fuelled by, the political mentalities of the time.

Population groups with different ethnic, religious and linguistic identities were arbitrarily drawn together into singular state entities according to the colonial interests of France or Britain, on mandate legislations drafted according to the latter's political and military agendas and economic interests. The Mandate Territories

<sup>33</sup> | The case of Turkey's 'particular' appropriation of the Bronze and Iron Age past of Asia Minor so as to create a link with the pre-Ottoman past – yet skipping the intermediate Christian, Byzantine as 'foreign' – or North Macedonia's loud campaign of heroic descent from ancient Macedonians, as a way of connecting late 20th century ethnically and religiously disparate communities into a nascent state ravaged by war and poverty are cases in point. For the former, see Kotsonas (2013) and for the North Macedonian issue (but burdened with many unhistorical claims) see Gori (2014).

<sup>34</sup> | Chiefly in the 1970s and 1980s, see Niklasson (2016: 74-83). The showcasing of "common European roots" for identity-making purposes has toned down post-ECC times.

of the 1919 Versailles Treaty consolidated long-held imperial interests in the region, affixing to them narratives of modernization, custodianship and the globally pioneering concept of international oversight (Melman, 2020: 36). Versions of the historical past were created, appealing to the imperial countries that supplied an origin myth suitable for nation-building. Populations that had no natural affinities to one another were clustered together into the same state entities, haphazardly collating bigger and smaller ethnic groups, religious dominations and linguistic communities, to suit external ideas and plans. Kaufman (2004) has argued that the mandate era out of which Syria and Lebanon were born as two different *states*, but also as two different *nations*, found its sensibilities and representations in previous European involvement in the region – a 'French' gaze upon the historical past, from antiquity onwards, in the case of Lebanon (designed as a 'European'-like state), a different European plan for an 'Oriental' Syria.

Similarly arbitrarily from the point of view of self-perceived (emic) collective identities was the delineation of Afghanistan's borders by the imperial powers. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain fought three wars in Afghanistan, for the strategic control of routes to India. Manifesting the arbitrariness of the colonial cartography of the new state, the 1893 Durand Line, which separates modern-day Afghanistan from Pakistan, established "an arbitrary border between Afghanistan and British India that was drawn with a cavalier flourish by Sir Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the colonial government of India", one that was found during on-the-spot surveys in 1894-1895 to be physically partitioning tribes, and villages, dividing the Pashtun between two countries (Gregory, 2004: 31). Much of the conflict that has followed thereafter for centuries can be traced back to these arbitrary beginnings, including Pakistan's efforts to back non-Pashtun militias within Afghanistan so as to forego an independent Pashtunistan with territorial claims within Pakistani territory. Subsequent competitive interests between the USSR and the US, on the tail of the repercussions of this initial conflict, led Afghanistan to become one more of those extra-territorial arenas where the Cold War was played out (Gregory, 2004: 30-46). Down to the 2001 declaration of the 'war on terror', the "relentless destruction" of Afghanistan by competing imperial powers that backed and supported different factions so as to meet their own geopolitical interests, was facilitated by the western performative "cartographic fixations" of territory and sovereignty (Gregory, 2004: 51). Afghanistan was depicted as a *state* in western political rhetoric and imagination, despite its localized modes of community life and decentralized control of power. The only two, doomed, state-building projects that the ethnically diverse peoples within Afghanistan had experienced by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a form of Soviet-backed, militant communism and US-backed militant Islamism, both of which remained patchy and lacked the centralized apparatus

of a state (Gregory, 2004: 44). This is a past that underwrites the tragic present, with almost a quarter of a century of continuous war since 2001 suppressing any possibility of progressive movements and social change: instead, under the Taliban, human rights have been so truncated that women are not even permitted to speak in public and houses are not allowed to have windows in spaces used by women.

Likewise, created out of three Ottoman provinces (Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul) according to the strategic political and economic interests of Britain in Mesopotamia and surrounding regions, Iraq was established as a nation-state.<sup>35</sup> Motivated by their desire to extend their geopolitical sphere of influence, and to secure routes of communication to India first, and subsequently energy resources (oil), the British arbitrarily and artificially orchestrated the process that led to the formation of Iraq as a nation state during the unravelling of the Ottoman empire, out of populations with no singular ethnic consciousness. The process began with the foundation of a commercial port in Basra by the English East India company in 1763 so as to facilitate maritime contact with India, which gradually led to the infiltration of British agents and interests in the local Mamluk administration. In subsequent centuries, and given the importance of oil for the booming industrialization of Britain, fuelling its colonial expansion, the British consolidated their localized presence until the 1914-1917 British army landing in Mesopotamia (still under Ottoman rule via proxies) during World War I. With the 1919 Mandate government, British control called the shots on finances, foreign and military policy, as well as being in charge of the judiciary. At the start of World War II Britain forced Iraq to enter the international conflict by overthrowing the elected government. Only in 1958 did Iraq manage to free itself from the remnants of the British colonial rule, and then only *on paper*, as the British only withdrew from Iraq after the revolt against the Hashemite ruling monarchs, a puppet royal lineage installed 36 years previously (Gregory, 2004: 30-46; Bernhardsson, 2005). The tensions and frictions of such a state formation would reverberate to the present, however, ignited by continuing western military interventions. Subversive western involvement continued through to the Gulf War and the subsequent, euphemistically-called 'no-fly zones' by the US and the UK, and the 'routine' bombardments of the late 1990s in the populated Iraqi countryside (Gregory, 2004). Thus, Britain returned to the state it had engineered in the remaining part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with several acts of aggression and much of the rhetoric of liberating the locals and protecting the cultural heritage, to match the old, colonial practice of physically removing archaeological heritage.

Decolonization was neither a straightforward affair in practice, nor even in theory. From this perspective, the cases of Afghanistan and Mesopotamia were no unique examples. Imperialism and colonization were not an exclusive pursuit of Europeans against non-Europeans. Areas within Europe were repeatedly invaded and

<sup>35</sup> | On Iraq's fraught state-formation, see Duplisea (2016); Bernhardsson (2005).

Weaponizing Near Eastern archaeology: violence, amnesia and the 'cultural heritage experts' – then, now and suggestions for a different future

colonized, just as areas outside Europe. From Pomerania in the Baltic to Heligoland in the North Sea, imperialism showed no concern with respecting ethnicities and emic identities within the cartography of the continent, transferring entire regions and islands from crown to state or swapping them (e.g. Heligoland, Zanzibar),<sup>36</sup> or offering support to foreign powers in exchange for islands and populations, such as occurred with the acquisition of Cyprus by Britain, as a 'protectorate', in 1878 (in exchange for the latter supporting the Ottoman empire in the Congress of Berlin of the same year against Russia). Intellectuals and activists from colonized regions who opposed the empire, such as Léopold Sédar, later president of Senegal, differentiated between popular sovereignty and territorial sovereignty, and were able to conceive transnational forms of popular rule where the wealth of the metropolis would be shared with the peoples of the former colonies that had largely contributed in creating it in the first place (Younis, 2017; Wilder, 2015). In practice, this imagined equal sharing of resources between former colonies and the former imperial metropolis would require concessions by the latter that given the economic, political and ideological dominance exerted by the European imperial powers appeared utopian (Younis, 2017).

36 | Indicatively on the Heligoland-Zanzibar swap between Britain and Germany, see Ascherson (2017).

#### CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CONFLICT - NOW: MANAGEMENT, PROTECTION OR APPROPRIATION?

*Archaeology studies the pasts of living peoples who also have a present and future. These people have interests in their pasts that may or may not coincide with the interests of archaeologists.*

Randal H. McGuire (2007)

#### ***Taking the cue from the imperial exploits: the maladies of the past tied into the present: Constructing amnesia in real time***

Tied into the physical environment, natural and built, collective-cultural memory, activated and perpetuated through intergenerational customs and rituals marked by spatial significance, is lost when the tangible surroundings are destroyed through war, leading to amnesia. That a sense of place is vital for the perpetuation of cultural memory is seen in the amnesia of late capitalist modernity, where the ever-accelerating pace of life and the sprawling mega-cities, dissolve the marked spa-

tial dimension of life and substitute communal ritual with individual consumerism in an ever-accelerating reality: whereas once specific places were loci of collective memory, mooring traditions and customs repeatedly performed, with memory enacted, their abandonment through displacement leads to disconnect and forgetting (Connerton, 2009).

The ills of colonization and troubles of decolonization were almost forgotten when discussing contemporary Middle Eastern politics, even when western political, economic and military interventions are ongoing, with the exception of the all-present and tragic Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as if the declaration of independent states created a *tabula rasa* of the past. Encouraging public amnesia, the repercussion of these artificial divisions in nation-forming boundaries and the thrust of western interests over local prosperity that suited particular geopolitical interests in the constellation of powers, have been graphically spurned across television sets in the so-called West for decades, presenting an image of timeless backwardness and 'un-civilization' prevailing across areas tormented by conflict in the Middle East – not just merely glossing over, but selectively forgetting, the centuries-long colonial past of recurrent, western state-sanctioned violence. Syria is a raw example of these old issues recurring anew, its creation as a country falling back onto the imaginative geographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, realized through the performative force of political actions that brought into a single state entity groups of people with no collective perception of identity. Both the ongoing crises in Syria and Iraq are cases of the past folding into the present, their creation as states impinging on the imaginative geographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European imperial states, realized through the performative force of political actions, facilitated by strategic narratives that legitimized the merging into a single political entity of groups of people with no collective perception of identity. As if this past were entirely forgotten, interventions of the same type continue anew, with scarce historically-conscious references to what came before by those paradoxically calling for military interventions in order to protect 'peace', 'human rights', or 'cultural heritage'.

A violent, brutal, neo-imperial project began anew in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, utilizing the ideological credentials better suited to the misconceptions and fixations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's colonial discourses. Establishing a US global hegemony entailed the expansion of the military power and the manipulation of the public that only mass media could offer, just as in the past. Engineering media silence in response to the invasion of Afghanistan was instructive as it relied on logical acrobatics that equated a terrorist group with a state.<sup>37</sup> On this theatrical stage of politics, the authoritarian albeit secular state of Iraq was subsequently invaded in order to bring down religious-related terrorism, a military assault endorsed by the US administration on the same day as that against Afghanistan (Gregory, 2004: 50-51). The planned invasion

37 | "It was an extraordinary accomplishment to convince a sufficient public constituency that these transnational terrorist networks [responsible for the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks] could be rolled into the carpet-bombing of Afghanistan" (Gregory, 2004: 50).

of Iraq was delayed for a short while only. The US-UK call for attacking Iraq on the reasoning that the country was implicated in the 2001 terrorist attack was initially rejected by the United Nations, which was later co-opted into giving it a mandate.<sup>38</sup> Afghanistan was bombed in October 2001, while following US pressure, all its neighbouring countries closed their borders to Afghani refugees fleeing the anticipated invasion. Refugees were cut off from supply lines and humanitarian aid, while Kandahar and Kabul were heavily bombarded from air (Gregory, 2004: 52).

These invasions and military aggression were initially justified on a flimsy pretext of Iraq possessing “weapons of mass destruction”, with the press and media back ‘home’ propagandizing this tenuous allegation that somehow necessitated, in the ruling class’ rhetoric, bombing campaigns against civilians, invasion and occupation of a sovereign state that had not declared war. The war began with the March 2003 ‘Shock and Awe’ bombing campaign against civilians in Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriyah and Kerbala, where uncountable numbers of civilians going about their daily life were incinerated on the spot or were torn into pieces.<sup>39</sup> Almost twenty more years of attacks by the militaries of multiple countries of the ‘Allied Forces’ have followed in a cascade effect, overspilling across state borders, fomenting new militia groups and transforming into larger regional conflicts, with the effect of creating and consolidating a perpetual war phenomenon, with outbursts in Syria, Turkish Kurdistan and elsewhere. One of the direct results is the formation of new transnational terrorist militias, often trained and funded by western governments in a game of quick and opportunistic shifts of allegiances according to shifting interests – legitimized by western rhetoric sophistries that are unperturbed in changing their tenor: ‘terrorists’ become ‘moderate rebels’ become ‘freedom fighters’ depending on the contingent expediency of the geopolitical interests of the moment.

The acceptance of the war by western publics was predicated on an engineered, collective amnesia, aided by the constructed invisibility of the victims and the deployment of fundamentalist metaphysics in political speech in order to sell imperialism to western audiences as something different. With clarity, Gregory (2004) described, as it was unfolding, the carefully-constructed invisibility of the war in western media, orchestrated by the US government, with even satellite images suppressed by the government so as to prevent the war atrocities from reaching western publics.<sup>40</sup> The invisibility of the war victims was near total, and extended even to the perpetrators of violence. For the armed forces personnel themselves, trained in computer simulation environments, the “technoculture’ of the war involved “abstract” spaces and targets, a “decorporealization” of Afghanistan’s land and people that became targets on screens, as if in a video game (Gregory, 2004: 52).

It is astonishing too that in the narratives and representations of Iraq in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, historical knowledge and memory was truncated to that of a single,

38 | The decision to instigate the invasion of Iraq was rejected by a UN Security Council, but the US and the UK invaded Iraq in March 2003 without any UN mandate. The then UN Secretary General declared the war “illegal” in September 2004. Two months after the onset of the war, however, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1483, which in essence “equips the aggressor with a mandate” according to activists that opposed the war, discerning in this act not the victimization of the UN, but its complicity, following up on the UN-imposed sanctions on Iraq as of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, see Çubukçu (2018: 53).

39 | See witness reports, e.g. by war correspondent Robert Fisk (2003).

40 | On the restriction of war imagery, obtained by civilian satellite systems of the US war on Afghanistan, by the US National Imagery and Mapping Agency, through commercial rights that could obviate legal challenging, see Gregory (2004: 52).

living generation. With the strangulation of public opinion by mass media, “our boys in Iraq” (a familiar slogan in 2002-3 Britain during counter demonstrations to anti-war marches) were merely fighting so as to support their country in a *tabula rasa* universe – without the past having ever taken place. Reticent as the British and US media have been during the past two decades regarding the activities of Britain in Iraq in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when covering current events, there is a lot to answer for regarding the state in which Iraq was left in following the 1958 coup, when the monarchy eventually fell – a puppet royal house instigated by the British empire, initially as a way of preserving a sphere of influence in a region en route to British India, and later, due to the importance of oil reserves. Similarly, there has been near-complete reticence over the activities of the British in Afghanistan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in media coverage of the latest war. How can it be so easily glossed over, not merely forgotten, that Britain only really withdrew from Iraq after the Hashemite revolt? And that with the US later as an ally, military interventions continued through to and after the Gulf War, including the bombings in the 1990s? The new war zones of the US and Britain, and later of their Allies, were the old war zones of Britain that had been circumscribed by British colonial management, subjected to military and structural violence for centuries. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century mediatic coverage of these new wars, media moguls played a critical role in the collective amnesia regarding the formative forces of these conflicts and the role of western powers, a crucial mechanism in justifying the new invasions.

The rhetoric prior to and immediately after the invasions was peculiar, drenched in outdated notions of western moral superiority, intensified with weird, metaphysical high pitches: the civilized West was not merely fighting barbarians to preserve “its way of life” and what “we hold dear” (in the words of its political masterminds), but it was up against an otherworldly-sounding, metaphysically-infused “Axis of Evil”. Other campaign slogans associated with Iraq, such as the call to ostensibly “win the hearts and minds” of Iraqis (the ones bombed, invaded, occupied no less) were mottos coming straight from the years of the counter-offence of Britain during the anti-colonial struggles in Malaya in the 1950s. Another counter-offence on another British colonial realm, Cyprus, during anti-colonial struggles, offered the model for the invasion of Iraq according to General Petraeus (Linstrum, 2023; Fryar, 2024: 26). And so, a violent, brutal imperialistic, colonial project began using the ideological credentials and cultural fixations of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century discourse of civilization wars. Yet bizarrely, it employed the theological wording of an Evangelical terminology of good versus evil in order to attack religious fundamentalism, which would have been out of place even in some corners of 16<sup>th</sup>-century European empires, when the Catholic missions opposed the dehumanization of the indigenous populations of South America in the colonizing rhetoric coming from the royal courts of western

Europe.<sup>41</sup>

Once again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the compelling objection to the initiation of new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could not be missed by any observer with a modicum of knowledge in geography and history. The American and British troops could not have been fighting for the security of their countries, as argued, for both lie in different continents. Out of its European neighbours (save for Iceland), Britain is the most distant from Iraq. The aims behind the offensive of the invading armies were dictated by colonial-style interests in geopolitical and economic hegemony. What these invading armies were fighting for was a new form of old-style imperialism, linked to economic and political hegemony. Industrial interests were of paramount importance, from energy, to the arms-manufacturing industry, to private army companies and construction corporations ready to rebuild the bombed infrastructure and cities of war-torn countries. After all, global capitalism continues to be structurally linked to imperialism; the accumulation of capital causes repetitive crises but needs permanent cycles of competitions between states (Osório, 2018; Harvey, 2018). Capitalism drives wars and wars feed capitalism.

41 | E.g. Bartolomé de las Casas (1552) challenged the application of the term 'barbarians' to the indigenous populations of the Americas, despite his otherwise complicity (not always blind, especially in his later years) with the imperial policies of colonization.

### ***Cultural heritage, global hegemony and military aggression***

Even at times of peace, archaeology rarely enjoys neutrality, politically speaking, as its practice depends often on the goodwill of the state. Structural asymmetries engender forms of hegemonic power. Political and socio-economic asymmetries and disparities between, on the one hand, western nations with large investments in archaeology internationally, and on the other, (mostly non-western) countries 'mined' for archaeological remains through excavations, with the attendant social implications for practitioners and publics, constitute 'structural violence' by the institutional organization of archaeology (Bernbeck, 2008). In other cases, the political role of archaeology is seen in political concessions made by archaeologists willing to work in foreign countries ruled by what in their ('western') countries are termed 'authoritarian regimes'. In such cases, archaeological research is seen as driven by self-interest relating to the individual's career progression, whatever the political concessions demanded. Following, for example, new funding initiatives in Saudi Arabia for foreign archaeological projects, the Gulf between the Arabic peninsula and Iran began to be referred to as 'Arabic Gulf' and not as 'Persian Gulf' by western archaeologists active in Saudi Arabia, interpreted as career-related opportunism in certain academic circles (Abdi, 2011).

Archaeologists' reactions to wars started by their own states in countries where they carry out fieldwork have not shown unity. According to Joffe (2004),

western archaeologists active in Iraq during the 1990s were split over the Gulf War: some supported it, petitioning through various structures, others were opposed to it from a pacifist-humanitarian perspective. Joffe himself understood, it seems, the participation of foreign archaeologists in fieldwork in the Middle East as a collusion with authoritarian regimes, deriving from self-interest (in the sense that conducting fieldwork in non-democratic states, even during peace, is reprehensible). The self-interest of archaeologists has been criticized from both perspectives: practising archaeology in undemocratic states and 'staying silent' over politics (e.g. while working in Iraq under Saddam Hussein), and practising archaeology in US-occupied Iraq, invaded by the US and its allies on the flimsy pretext of liberation and democracy (Joffe, 2004). One could be forgiven for thinking that archaeologists whose expertise lies in Near Eastern civilizations are met with responses of the "damn if you do, damn if you don't kind" as the author put it. Is this all there is to it, however?

Over two decades ago, Renfrew (1999: 9) addressed the collusion of academic and financial interests in archaeology stating that "since the early years of this century it has become widely accepted that each nation has the duty and right to conserve and maintain its own national heritage". Four years later, the world was in for a stark retrogression on the latent ethical quagmire involving cultural heritage. Media across Europe, the US and other parts of the western world would reel, almost on a weekly fashion, when destruction of important archaeological sites took place in the Middle East, spilling from one country to another without paying attention to rule-drawn borders. From the antiquities at the Baghdad Museum to the destruction of the site of Palmyra by various militia groups, swathes of land and periods of time were bridged enabling cultural heritage destruction, while newspaper headlines would express shock, horror and dismay. Cultural heritage was to become the repository of positive feelings about the war when 'western' armies were said to have 'saved the antiquities', just as the official marketing of the initial war in Iraq barred images of war atrocities from reaching western publics. Individuals working for the US military 'deployed' in war zones authored books, passing official strategic narratives of the invading country as immediate, witness accounts detailing historical truth (Jarmakan, 2007).

There was barely any critical coverage, however, on the transformation of the site of Babylon, one of the most acclaimed in Mesopotamian history, into an army barracks by the US Army, with the British Museum authorities' collaboration with the military producing no tangible protection to the site, while the western institutions involved were those of the foregone colonial period (Pappa, 2018: 24-25). Turning worldwide-known Mesopotamian archaeological sites into US army bases, such as Babylon, Ur and Hatra, could hardly have been accidental. Reviewing the case of the military occupation of Ur by the invading army in terms of social justice, Siebrandt

(2017) examined the practice of barring Iraqis themselves from the archaeological site, in their own country. Reaching the conclusion that the military occupation of Ur by the US army was socially unjust by preventing the local communities from freely gaining entry into the site and Iraqi archaeologists from studying it, that is, preventing the local community (in war-bombarded Iraq, mind you), from “fully engaging in their cultural heritage” (Siebrandt, 2017: 79) was not free of paradoxes. The occupation itself was not questioned. Socially unjust this barring from visiting the archaeological site it certainly was, but should we then take for granted that ‘western’ wars and occupations can wage on, while archaeologists micro-manage how a local community (if not bombed and thus still alive) is allowed to “fully engage” with its heritage? If that is the only perspective from which critique is mounted, then it is not sufficient for it takes ‘western’ occupation for granted, and isolates heritage, in the form of archaeological sites, from its wider social environment. It operates, as will be seen below, in the post-factum acceptance of an imperial order of power.

And so, we come to full circle. The current practice of using archaeology as a tool in contemporary neo-colonial, western politics in the Middle East takes the cue straight from 19<sup>th</sup>-century British interventions in the Levant and Mesopotamia. The emerging ‘anthropology-military’ complex goes hand-in-hand with the ‘archaeology-military’ complex that is fast leading to the financialized heritage-military complex. Profitable contracts for US companies undertaking GIS mapping of heritage sites in the Middle East (to be spared... from next time’s bombing) were paired with the reconstruction of the Baghdad Museum, also in the hands of the occupying powers (Rowlands 2005). The US corporate entanglement in the heritage management of war came to supplement that of foreign, private armies, construction companies etc. Structures created for the management of archaeological sites formed but just one arm of imperial control of an occupied country.

US-funded archaeologists, some working for the military in various functions, publish paper after paper and volume after volume on how cultural heritage is a way to do “soft foreign policy”, as they call it,<sup>42</sup> a term first coined by Joseph Nye, professor at Harvard University, in the 1990s (Duffy 2022). In such works, the ethics of global dominance by a single country is never questioned, but taken as axiomatically positive despite the intended worldwide reach of their authorial endeavours and the glaring lack of democratic consensus that such an outcome would entail. A few years ago, a British Research Council announced that it was to fund an international conference to be held at a US Army base, wherein the subjects to be discussed included “the ethics of war and heritage” and “defence of heritage as a just cause of war” (“Cultural Heritage and the Ethics of War”).<sup>43</sup> The sheer majority of participants were all from north-western European countries, with no Middle Easterners involved (apart from one Lebanese), and were to be discussing, in the intellectual

42 | E.g. Kersel and Luke (2013). See Sargent (2020) for proposals on how such partial use of cultural heritage in conflict situations should be taken into account in law, focusing on intangible cultural heritage.

43 | <https://www.iiiconservation.org/content/conference-cultural-heritage-and-ethics-war> (accessed July 7, 2019). It is unclear if this conference, with the announcement active at least in 2019, went ahead.

environment of a military base (!), if damaging cultural heritage can justify war. The conference agenda unequivocally demonstrates the conscious strategy to build a body of “scholarship” under the patronage of military structures by occupying powers. Once “the defence of heritage” can be scholarly defended to be “a just cause of war” in this announcement of a military-sponsored conference itself, heritage has been weaponized, the same as human rights when used to invade countries. The army of occupying states is then depicted as a stakeholder in the production of scientific knowledge regarding the national heritage of the countries. What is more colonial than that? So much so then for the free thinking and open critique of academia, where tactics of intimidation and silencing of critical thought (as in the army hierarchies and in military bases), have no place.

Cultural heritage protection has been once again rallied as a cover for western aggression, as a new-old pawn in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Great Game in the region, while several western archaeologists have opted for repeating the rhetoric of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, legitimizing archaeological interventions in countries that are military occupied by the states whose citizens these very archaeologists are and which fund their projects. This aptly illustrates the very definition of imperialism, where military, political, economic and academic structures all coalesce against other nations in orchestrated strategies where the political, the economic, the educational and the ideological dimensions are tightly woven together, rendering violence ‘structural’ by making it infiltrate through as many social levels and professions as possible, down to the bureaucrat processing the funding for such ‘conferences’ by research boards. In essence, it normalizes and institutionalizes large-scale state violence in the public sphere and in the society. What ‘legitimacy’ is attached to western ‘cultural heritage management’ in countries that were occupied? Such a practice of managing the heritage of others in their own countries is naked in its ‘new emperor’s clothes’ of the instructive fairy tale. In such a strategy of providing an ethical gloss to the aggressive waging of wars by illiberal in their foreign policies neoliberal states, there is no authentic interest for cultural heritage, and no space for ethics or morality despite the panel of participant philosophers philosophizing on ethics in the aforementioned planned conference. If a monument is a testament to culture, then no war that ostensibly aims to protect only the physical remains of past cultures can be thought to respect said cultures.

So, how can one approach this quagmire of views and practices in archaeology and the emerging heritage-military complex? Almost twenty years ago, Randall H. McGuire articulated the tripartite ethical obligations of archaeologists to “the archaeological record itself”, to “a variety of publics, most notably descendent communities” and to “each other as professionals” (McGuire, 2007: ix). Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative on treating others with dignity has been defended as a way

to bridge western philosophical ethics with divergent, conflicting worldviews on cultural heritage, e.g. between indigenous populations in North America and state archaeologists, by emphasizing deontological ethics (based on principle), rather than utilitarian ones (based on result) (Wylies, 2003: 11-12).<sup>44</sup> As an approach, it would be useful beyond the context of 'western'-indigenous heritage politics in settler countries such as Canada, Australia and the US. What is actually happening in practice?

Cultural heritage protection and restoration in conflict zones has become a heated issue, with international stakeholders and partners involved, such as UNESCO and ICOMOS. Initiatives such as the 'unite4heritage' and the Beirut-based 'Emergency safeguarding of the Syrian cultural heritage', led by UNESCO, came to be added to the pre-existing institutional framework for international cultural heritage protection (e.g. the Blue Shield). They have, however, proven to be inadequate and came too late, as archaeologists involved in Syria acknowledged (Danti, 2014). Further, they show limited vision regarding the prevention of cultural heritage destruction, instead offering pragmatic restoration proposals. The reality 'on the ground' is that despite all these efforts, cultural heritage continues to be destroyed in conflict zones in a manner that has been unprecedented since World War II, creating a continuous list of sites and monuments that need to be restored but little on the way of prevention.

While the destruction of tangible cultural heritage during conflict calls for concern and diligent response, any ethically informed and socially just effort to protect cultural heritage cannot be disengaged from the broader socio-political contexts in these conflict zones and the hegemonic relations of power. In theory, archaeologists have been engaging critically with the colonial heritage of their disciplinary field. In practice, many are repeating the mistakes of the past, allowing their profession to become entangled with colonial policies. Divergence in the stance that archaeologists adopt often parallels that of the decisions, choices and rhetoric of their national governments. The inescapable fragmentation within the body of predominantly North American and European (academic) archaeologists demonstrates individuals' adherence to a prescribed, nation-based *status quo*, often incompatible with the ideals that their discipline formally espouses (respect to local communities, indigenous people, host nations etc), as well as to the appeals for protecting cultural heritage. In parallel, the visible and public nature of archaeological museum exhibitions and lectures on 'cultural heritage under threat' presents a misleading picture to western publics, veiling the ways through which the cultural heritage of Middle Eastern countries has been put in the service of cultural imperialism and foreign policy (Pappa, 2018: 26-27).

The problems arising from the participation of archaeologists and anthropologists in the western occupying forces, as part of military structures in the Middle

44 | For a recent philosophical perspective on human dignity, see Etinson (2020).

East (“embedded archaeologists/anthropologists”) and the collaboration of museums with such armies, call for the need to introduce guidelines. Few studies have deconstructed the ‘pragmatic stance’ of the proponents of the ‘archaeology/heritage-military complex’, developing analytically counter-argumentation that rejects the collaboration of academics with military structures in cases of armed conflict. This concerns the depoliticization of conflict, the arrogation of the past, evident in a definition of cultural heritage to ‘be spared’ bombing – as if the sacrosanct heritage can exist in vast landscapes of destroyed, depopulated modern lands experiencing decades of perpetual conflict –that fits the occupier’s agenda, the ethics of protecting monuments while abetting the loss of human lives, the Public Relations function of ‘saving’ cultural heritage, museum market economics, the identity of the archaeologist as a professional versus as a citizen and finally, the ineffectiveness of current structures to prevent cultural heritage destruction in situations of armed conflict, despite the documented collaboration of archaeologists with the military.

The limited counter-response from academia can be explained to a large extent by the decentralized nature of ‘theoretical discourses’, the conscious relativism of views linked to the author’s material lifestyle conditions (predicated on employment and funding by such sources), and the consequent explicit disinterest of western academics in politically grounding their work. The voices of resistance from within the archaeological community have been kept at bay, since risking allegiances with employers’ strategies jeopardizes career and professional path choices within North American and several European institutions and organizations.

### ***The ethics of collaborating with invading armies***

During the direct military, economic and political involvement of the so-called ‘West’ in the Middle East and western Asia, the first stage of western intervention in cultural heritage protection has consisted in archaeologists and anthropologists becoming ‘embedded’ in western military structures occupying Middle Eastern countries (e.g. Iraq). The underlying ideological legitimacy of this is expressed in an Indiana-Jones style ‘rescue syndrome’ that has been explicit in efforts to ‘save cultural heritage’ in the Middle East (as in the Balkans during previous ‘interventions’).<sup>45</sup> Several attempts to offer a so-called neutral approach to protecting cultural heritage ignore the issue of ethics altogether, taking (unconsciously?) the value systems underlying the writers’ approach as universally shared or incontestable, reproducing the propaganda of occupying states. The controversies have resulted in high-pitched polemic, with volumes dedicated exclusively to the topic authored by archaeologists, historians and others embedded in occupying armies (US, UK) across much of

45 | For an example of this style of rhetoric, see Naumkin (2015).

the Anglo-American sphere, mostly.<sup>46</sup> These approaches are distinctly at odds with current archaeological theory as taught and researched currently at universities on respecting descendant and marginalized communities, and the triad of ethical obligations as articulated by McGuire, and many others, to past, present and future communities. This creates an emphatic disparity between theory and practice in heritage management. Such strategies of disenfranchising the local populations from the cultural heritage of their land is thus predicated on interests exogenous to cultural heritage: better controlling the collective identities in the protectorate-style countries and inserting cultural heritage fully into the neo-liberal economy, while projecting the benevolent image of the protector. There have been few exceptions that engage with these issues, revealing the fault lines between theory and practice, and the motivations within (Pappa, 2018). From the standpoint of ethics in the practice of archaeology, Williams (2013) made the glaringly obvious, though revolutionary for the cynical times in which it is voiced, call for a professional ethics based on trust that benefits both the living and the dead. Alert to the paradoxical loopholes of the western rhetoric appeal to the 'universality' of cultural heritage, the disjunction between theory and reality in calls to protect cultural heritage in war zones has also been questioned from a philosophical perspective, underlining the opposition between notions of the universal character of cultural heritage and the western fixation on the material record of archaeological sites and monuments that completely omits any consideration for communities, be that dead or alive, whose cultural expression and heritage that record is (Matthes, 2018). That such sites to be protected are viewed as "un-peopled" that can be 'saved' by western archaeologists, regardless of the people in whose territory and culture they lie, is the other side of the US military program of engaging archaeologists and anthropologists in the "human terrain analysis teams".<sup>47</sup> Illustrating how euphemisms are operationally inserted so as to semantically transform people into inanimate terrain, and from there to terrain targets, the shift is not that great. Conceiving of cultural heritage as the sum record of material remains is the natural conclusion of such conceptions. But it is deeply flawed.

46 | For a sample of more such embedded writings, see descriptions by Hamilakis (2009).

47 | On "un-peopled", see Matthes (2018: 77); on the 'Human Terrain' programs, see Williams (2003: 45).

### ***Whose 'universal' heritage and 'global heritage' for whom?***

Current efforts to protect cultural heritage monuments are lacking in the understanding of the causes of the damage purposefully inflicted to it, thereby having limited means to prevent it. International efforts to safeguard heritage have been instituted in an ideologically and politically complex international landscape, in an *ad hoc* manner, under the ideological banner of 'global'/'universal' heritage. Galvaniz-

ing international support for heritage protection in this supposed neutral way has failed to address the thrust of the problem, thus limiting the potential of prevention measures. Western military intervention in conflict zones has created the cascade effect of a power vacuum taken up by militia groups (terrorist organizations) that were ideologically driven to cultural heritage destruction, thus creating a complex phenomenon whose panacea cannot consist in simple restoration projects and voices from the West on the 'universal' charter of cultural heritage. Such a response fails to nuance the contingency of current western political and military involvement in the Middle East.

Tangible cultural heritage is often seen as consisting in material remains. Yet cultural heritage encompasses first and foremost aspects of cultural expression that are immaterially shared. For the same reason, intangible cultural heritage cannot exist in a depopulated, war-torn vacuum. Apart from the underlying neocolonial notion of the western occupier's decision-making on what is worth saving, this has engendered a second problem: the reduction of cultural heritage protection to the *post festum* conservation of monuments. Reducing cultural heritage protection to technical aspects of restoration or conservation of standing monuments is not only disingenuous, it is the first step towards permitting violence. The ensuing task of Heritage Studies is relegated to fields such as geology and related fields.<sup>48</sup> Well-intentioned, effective and fruitful as any such geoscience research turns out to be on the conservation aspects of damaged monuments in conflict zones, any such research ineluctably operates in an ideologically-laden landscape, even if unacknowledged, by relying on western monopolies on demarcating what constitutes heritage, and one that is worth saving at that. The same would also be true of more traditional research in reconstructing monuments damaged during armed conflict that might utilize photographic documentation of the sites before destruction, as new publications of photographic archives from earlier centuries make possible. For example, A. Creswell's photographic archive (Anastasio, 2023), provides valuable insights as to the use of historical photographs of sites and monuments showing the limits of previous and current reconstruction practices (Álvarez García, 2024: 328). In addition, Heritage Studies projects are conducted within a *fait accompli* pseudo-apolitical environment, where the political and social dimensions of academia that enable them are not even acknowledged (western armies occupy countries abroad, westerners are tasked with 'saving' local heritage monuments in countries occupied or having only recently been occupied by the armies of the countries that then fund research projects on 'protecting' the heritage).

Western institutional and corporate exploitation of the cultural heritage of occupied countries also involves trade in illicit antiquities and the role of western museums as purchasers, as well as the 'legal', ever-expanding market for 'treasures'

48 | E.g., a research project on the ballistic impact on stone monuments caught in crossfire (University of the West of England/ Leverhulme Trust). The research addressed the "short- and long-term consequences of small-scale fracture structures and material cohesion loss sustained through bullet impacts on stone surfaces", using "an experimental study that pulled together geomorphologists, geologists, x-ray tomography experts and conservation scientists" in order to examine sandstone alterations after ballistic impact (Mol 2016).

that are removed from the Middle East to the West on various pretexts. Large profits come into play for such western institutions through art market economics where heritage is removed, while the 'softer' involvement of the archaeological pursuits, gives the appeal of the benefactor to the occupying country while simultaneously depriving the occupied nation of its heritage. It also disseminates ideology, which as argued above, is a conscious aim of embedded archaeology in promulgating imperial forays. As Nagel (2020) observed in a review of a US-based exhibition on the ancient Near East: "How can a visitor trust an exhibition these days? What do objects excavated by American amateur explorer Wendell Phillips in south Arabia really have in common with objects excavated by another coalition spearheaded by American explorers in Dura Europos, Syria? Do exhibitions such as *The World between Empires: Art and Identity in the Ancient Middle East* provide an artistic and cultural alibi, a justification for further imperial wars? Anyone will make their own conclusion, depending on which part of the spectrum of "in between" they stand."<sup>49</sup> Nagel noted that while Babylon and Hatra had been used as military bases by the US army and that the exhibition featured these two sites, the destruction caused by the US military was nowhere to be seen in the exhibition. Yet the exhibition organizers opted for the modern designation 'Middle East', not the archaeological-historical term, 'Near East', proof that at least on the surface the intention existed to bridge the ancient relics with the region's present-day populations. Yet in the end, the exhibition "felt a bit like reading vintage postcards written by visitors who admired the past without understanding the context of people living in those very spaces." (Nagel, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> | The exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 18–June 23, 2019.

Calls to introduce social justice in the field of Heritage Studies are concerned with the representation of heritage by marginalized groups, considering "human rights regimes" inadequate (Baird, 2014). This may seem counter-intuitive. Understanding quite how 'human rights' can prevent social justice would be challenging had it not been for the word "regime". The concept of human rights has been used to justify international military invasions ("humanitarian interventions"), promoting a vast body of theory in support of wars fought allegedly for humanitarian reasons. As Çubukçu (2018: 80-81) notes, this constitutes a "certain politics of human rights that consistently – and violently – asserts the universal rights and responsibilities of humanity over the particularly constituted rights and autonomy of citizenry". Jürgen Habermans' enquiry over whether "an illegal act under international law can be considered legitimate" returned positive responses in his mind, turned into justification for international wars from the Balkans to the Middle East and beyond, having previously expressed his view that the western war against Kosovo in the 1990s was justified by invoking the 'Kantian tradition' (Çubukçu, 2018: 204, n. 28). This so-called *cosmopolitan order* (quite a euphemism for its content and objectives)

spearheaded by governments and facilitated by NGOs, under the umbrella of 'global civil society' aims at the "domestication of state power through international law" and the legitimacy of war through the involvement of international organizations, such as the United Nations Security Council (Çubukçu, 2018: 44-83). Effectively, this body of politically-engaged scholarship offers justification for invasion and occupation, in little difference to 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial forays, albeit in the name of human rights.<sup>50</sup> While adherents of this cosmopolitan order in defence of war ostensibly for the protection of human rights are "opposed to the imperialist direction of the new world order", they cannot explain "how a court of law and judges with armies at their disposal could avoid becoming either an Imperial court themselves or a tool in the Plans of Great Power".<sup>51</sup>

50 | Most of such approaches pivot on modern western philosophical ideas on what is ethically acceptable, more than often colluding with foreign policy and its 'humanitarian wars' (Çubukçu, 2018, 133-157). For a critique, Douzinas (2007).

The repercussions of the above for 'heritage studies' is all too clear. Emerging as a new labour niche market, 'Heritage Studies' offers policy making targeting academics and bureaucrats, and the creation of armies of 'Heritage experts' with diverse educational and professional backgrounds (including in the US military). Pitfalls abound. For one, it operates in an unquestioned status quo that was the result of gross aggression against sovereign nations, including military invasion and occupation (as in Iraq). While academics in law and philosophy have toyed with the concept of 'law's empires', versus the 'empire of the law', intentionally or not legitimizing illegal acts under international law, the so-called heritage experts in the Middle East operate under the *ex post facto* re-institution of (neocolonial) power organs under an unethical exertion of power over foreign states, antithetical to the envisioned international rule of law created after World War II with the foundation of the United Nations.

51 | Douzinas (2007, 168, n. 52) cited in Çubukçu (2018, 205, n. 34).

A telling example is a article dedicated to the protection of heritage in Iraq (Matthews et al. 2020). While it purportedly discusses the destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage by ISIS/Daesh in Iraq, and suggests proposals for future measures of protection, it actually calls for international support to override the power of the state (which in Iraq was what started the problems with heritage protection to begin with, as it was the international coalition that invaded the country and led to the creation of militia groups, from which Isis emerged). We read that "the annihilation of Mosul's Old City was completed during the liberation from the 19<sup>th</sup> February to 21 July 2017. The cityscape was bombarded from aircraft and helicopters, targeted by countless missiles and devastated by suicide attacks". Describing the damage to the Old City among the terrorist groups, the reader could be forgiven for misidentifying the agent involved in large part of the destruction: "A change of tactics took place in the final two weeks of the battle in July 2017, from a systematic house-to-house clearance operation to an indiscriminate carpet bombing and razing, resulting in the complete demolition of three town quarters (al-Makkawai, Ras al-Koar and al-May-

dan) along the Tigris river bank.” (Matthews et al. 2020). Only that the “indiscriminate carpet-bombing and razing” of Mosul that is mentioned here as the main cause of the destruction of the Old City was the result of the US and its allies’ military (re) actions, not of the terrorist militias. The destruction of heritage by western armies is conveyed even in metaphysical language, to make amends for the fact that “at least five large river-side houses were sacrificed”. The houses destroyed by the western army bombs were not simply razed to the ground but “sacrificed”, in a strange pagan-religious metaphor that recalls the earlier theologically-charged language of attacking the “Axis of Evil”. The authors made alarming statements that attempt to neutralize the violence inflicted: “we see a correlation between unharmed monuments, including dome structures, and sites on no-strike heritage lists provided by the expert NGOs to the relevant authorities, possibly indicating deliberate avoidance by aerial bombardment planners”. So, the western, private armies (?) that get paid to bomb Mosul and the national militaries are “relevant authorities”, western NGOs decide what stays and what goes from Iraq’s cultural heritage (since the former constitute the designated ‘experts’), and so Iraqis are bombed, their heritage is bombed too by various western state structures, but significantly, they have western ‘experts’ saving some of their dome structures. While the authors declare ‘no potential conflict of interests’, the reality is starkly different: the main author is a professor at a British university, whose country of citizenship and livelihood has been implicated in the invasion and occupation of Iraq for over a decade, and who therefore, as an employed academic, receives funding from British institutional sources for his work. The final call of the article for embedding tangible (although this designation is implicit) cultural heritage under human rights and emphasizing the participation of Iraqis in the management of their cultural heritage, while calling the recent programmes of excavation in Iraq without Iraqis ‘unethical’, tacitly taking for granted the military involvement of western states, is still thin as a gloss of legitimacy.

To some, such calls come across as an ethical farce of sparing sites to be bombed just as a foreign state is about to start bombing, while relegating this power of ‘saving heritage’ to the westerners who will bomb anyway (Pappa, 2018: 23). Perhaps one could retort that within the parameters of war or an unstable security situation, an interested academic and heritage practitioner can only do their best, and use what available resources there are, to mitigate damage, even in the absence of ideological identification with policies of state violence overseas. But can these views be decoupled in practice from those that fall squarely within the ideological frame of the sinisterly-termed ‘humanitarian wars’ built over decades in the West? The question remains applicable in this case, although the particular enemy described is a terrorist organization with pretensions to statehood at the time, and not a state. Ultimately, the warning, at the beginning of the US ‘war on terror’, that

archaeologists would just end up compiling lists of 'sites to be spared' under the orders of invading militaries (Hamilakis, 2009), is now the commonly accepted reality of the anthropology-military complex.

The putative neutrality of 'western' efforts to protect cultural heritage masks the underlying ideological premises that have inadvertently led to the destruction of cultural heritage, by creating a space in which tangible cultural heritage is defined by western criteria, listed as 'universal' and abstracted from its social and geographical contexts, in a way that is alienating to the local communities and populations. As a result, the intangible heritage is construed as a manifestation of foreign ('western') interests that during war can be attacked as a proxy for the exogenous (perceived as 'western') values that it supposedly embodies. From this perspective, the waves of intentional cultural heritage destruction in the conflict zones of the Middle East express a conscious strategy of militia groups, ideologically motivated not only as a memory-erasing mechanism *locally*, but also as a strategy of culture shock for publics *abroad*, namely in the West. Deliberate in their anticipation of the impact of the destruction of monuments abroad that was predicated on the ample dissemination of western notions of 'universal heritage' that connect western publics with monuments in other continents that they have never visited, terrorist groups launched high-tech coverage of the ostentatious smashing up of monuments (e.g. the site of Palmyra in Syria). Dubious claims of anti-pagan religious motivations aside, the terrorist campaigns of vandalizing sites and monuments targeted western publics, in rebellion against and mockery of western identifications with heritage. Although introduced to safeguard cultural heritage monuments, in the actual instance the notion of 'universal heritage' had the opposite from the (one would like to think) originally well-intended effect.

As shown, sweeping statements on 'universal heritage' can be upended as a short-hand for western appropriation and colonial-style control that alienate local populations from their heritage, with the effect of turning local archaeological monuments and sites into targets of local terrorist groups, for such archaeological sites are no longer thought of as local, but as 'universal' (understood as 'western'). The effect of the interplay between western rhetoric on 'universal heritage' and the strategic destruction of this heritage by militias vocally antithetical to the West cannot be ignored, but rather should inform prevention practice measures. In essence, once the rubric 'universal' gets attached to cultural heritage, it potentially leaves open a number of nefarious possibilities: from the legitimization of western appropriation of the cultural heritage of other countries (often those on the receiving end of political or economic violence) to the targeting of cultural heritage by militias as a proxy for targeting what is perceived by them as 'western'. Thus, the western valorization of *specific* sites and monuments by western actors also contributes to the ideological

nexus that avails the destruction of cultural heritage: the notion that heritage monuments are a monopoly for the control and consumption of western publics, which impression leads to the destruction of archaeological sites by militia groups in a theatricality of violence, captured in videos and disseminated for its shock value via the internet for western public consumption

### ***Cultural Heritage as a 'soft power' tool***

The visible and public nature of archaeological museum exhibitions and lectures on 'cultural heritage under threat' presents a misleading picture to western publics, veiling the ways by which the cultural heritage of Middle Eastern countries in conflict has been put in service to cultural imperialism and foreign policy. The use of foreign archaeological institutes in the Middle East has been implicated in foreign policy agendas, not always to the benefit of the country in which such institutions are located, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Even nowadays research centres set up with archaeology and culture as their primary aims are branded as "integral elements in the foreign relations toolkit of the U.S.", a form of "soft power" as its proponents call it, no matter how much it is couched in the language of "mutual understanding", "local empowerment" and "collaboration".<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> | See for example: Kersel and Luke (2018).

These uses of archaeology and heritage management are conceived as part of the political role of these fields as cultural diplomacy, in support of US foreign policy (e.g. Luke and Kersel, 2012). Archaeologists, embedded in military or national security structures, explicitly call for the 'soft power' function of these two fields, thus effectively supporting 'interventions' in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> Yet support for US foreign policy (especially in regions where the latter is militarily active), which is presented as axiomatically desired in these writings and calls, is neither a universal tenet or desire, nor objectively beneficial to all parties affected. The collaboration of embedded archaeologists with the army offers thus a disingenuous gloss of legitimacy to acts of state-sanctioned aggression via policies of cultural heritage promotion. How ethically problematic!

<sup>53</sup> | For more such embedded writings, see their critique in Pappa (2018).

### ***Law and its limits: legislation not fit for purpose***

Even though cultural heritage legislation provides the blueprint as to how nation states should act so as to protect cultural heritage in cases of armed conflict, such international legislation is not always binding for states (e.g. substantive differences between signing and ratifying treaties). This creates tensions between large

organizations such as UNESCO, the host countries, occupying powers and museums and universities in the West. In tandem, the debate over the 'universal' nature of cultural heritage tends to be used as a legitimizing device for permitting the cultural and financial appropriation of Near Eastern antiquities by western governments and institutions (Pappa, 2018: 15-17). The repercussions in this arena of competing powers and interests are felt widely.

What is needed is a clear *ethical framework* set down in which measures for cultural heritage protection take place but also promote prevention. Such a framework cannot be built in an *ad hoc* way, after the damage is done, neither should it be devised in a unilateral way, using the label of 'universal' attached to heritage as a pretext for illegitimate and/or illegal interventions that recall 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial interventions in the Middle East by European states and their allies. A cogent, substantive critique of the use of cultural heritage in contemporary neocolonial political and military involvement in the Middle East, from a variety of academic fields, is the necessary first step towards projects of protecting cultural heritage in a way that is preventative and efficient and not a *post festum* panacea.

#### **A FRAMEWORK FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING WITH COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT ZONES: THE GRAY ZONES OF THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE UNDERCUTTING CURRENT CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION IN ARMED CONFLICT**

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has seen the direct involvement of western heritage organizations, universities and museums in cultural heritage protection efforts in the Middle East, often occupied by the states that sponsor these institutions. The inbuilt biases of current efforts to protect cultural heritage in times of conflict ought to be addressed, as a departure point for establishing an ethical framework, *in practice*, for sustainable cultural heritage protection, with an emphasis on *prevention*. Archaeological fieldwork in conflict zones ought to treat theory and practice as coeval and necessary for safeguarding cultural heritage in context.

The strategies and machinations of the appropriation and arrogation of cultural heritage are the outcome of both hegemonic plans and the demands of the neoliberal economics, as well as historical, structural asymmetries. Acknowledging the problematic ideological framework of contemporary practice in cultural heritage protection, any new guiding theoretical framework of good conduct should be established taking into account evidence-based proposals on how to proceed in ways that are bilateral, not imposed with enforced hierarchies from the outside, and with pragmatic understandings and expectation of the realities 'on the ground' in areas with military conflict or recently demilitarized. Protection of sites and monuments

cannot be addressed effectively unless one understands the causative factors that contribute to their destruction.

In addressing these interconnected phenomena in a critical and viable manner that breaks this cycle, the responses should detail international legal codes, challenge existing complacent frameworks of practice in liaison with armies and aim for practice that is coeval with theory. The ideological and political landscape in which cultural heritage management takes place should be made explicit – not take occupation and bombings of countries for granted, as in the relevant literature discussed – and to propose alternative ways in synergies with national and local authorities and grassroots participation on cultural heritage protection, by joining with institutional and community partners that are directly involved with the local communities, disseminating information and educational reserves that aim to raise awareness and build capacity not just within the local communities, but with the national authorities.

Taking into account the grey areas, the conceptual framework in which archaeological intervention should operate, involving organizations currently active in cultural heritage protection efforts ought to (i) explicate the current assumptions and presumptions of cultural heritage protection, (ii) build a new framework for professional interventions that is multilateral: liaising with authorities and communities on the ground in post-conflict communities, (iii) emphasize the need for local authority invitations that engage local universities and (iv) ban 'collaborations' of western universities and institutions with military structures in cases of occupation of sovereign nations. The creation of a framework of professional ethics, designed in co-operation with partners on the ground (e.g. local universities) should guide conduct and be based on the power of national institutions to reject collaboration, aid and intervention (which is currently often not the case).

### ***Museum Economics and the 'saved' and 'universal' heritage: limiting physical and ideological appropriation***

Aspects related to neo-colonial policies, the art market sector and diplomacy ought to be analytically discussed with organizations entasked with cultural heritage protection. Antiquities should not be leaving the lands where they have been found while under military occupation, be that for 'permanent loans' or 'to save heritage'.

The production and consumption of a cultural product, as sites in conflict zones get excavated or as exported antiquities tour western museums, solely for the consumption of western publics, fulfill a crucial aspect in how foreign policy in

the region is presented to western publics but also shape the understanding of the past in the host countries according to top-down *desiderata*. The site of Babylon in Iraq, for example, forms part of 'our universal heritage' and is of concern to 'us' if it be damaged, but unnamed, endless numbers of dead people killed by 'our bombs' in Iraq for years on end are not 'our universal dead' and not 'our' concern. Casting light on the 'we' and 'our' vis-à-vis heritage when as 'western' (European, American ect) academics we refer to tangible heritage monuments in the Middle East calls for a different approach that is conscious of the degree of ideological bias in cultural heritage protection in conflict zones. The notion of 'universal' heritage used to excavate sites, organize exhibitions and employ private companies for heritage management, all involving occupied countries, should not be permitted while a state is occupied. Antiquities in these instances inadvertently become the tool for furthering appropriation strategies that are perilously close to the mentality that led to colonial involvement in the Middle East, replicated in contemporary imperialistic wars. Neither should the purportedly universal, as well as the real historical significance, of antiquities in the Middle East be presented in such a way that it excludes local publics by aligning monuments and sites with western cultural interests, and thus provoking anti-western sentiments against what constitutes Middle Eastern heritage after all.

### ***Excavations in military zones: are they really needed?***

An existing reality is that excavations continue in military zones and in areas that have just been demilitarized or remain under tenuous security. The successful completion of several archaeological projects in zones recently demilitarized conducted upon invitation by local authorities provides a frame for collaboration that can and ought to be utilized for capacity-building with local actors (universities, cultural heritage authorities).<sup>54</sup>

The critical question remains, however, as to the gray area of excavating in regions with high military conflict potential. Should this practice of excavations in regions under military occupation or recently demilitarized be encouraged? Whose interests does it serve to carry out excavations in conditions that jeopardize the safeguarding of heritage monuments? Is it ethical to carry out excavations in places where the local populations have their communities fragmented, are forced into exile in droves for decades, live in refugee settlements or remain under the threat of armies and militias? Where is the morality in planning fieldwork in countries where war transcends generations? Should excavations take place when the resources for the preservation of exposed archaeological remains are missing or should they bet-

<sup>54</sup> | For recent projects with a level of co-operation: Kopanias and MacGinnis (2016); Marti, et al. (2015).

ter be invested in humanitarian projects of war-ravaged communities? In whose interests is the exposure of archaeological evidence situated in areas of fragile stability? Does the limited, ambivalent, contentious post-conflict healing potential of heritage override the threats to which it is exposed in a zone of meagre stability, especially as the sites exposed through new excavations will not be the ones linked to the local long-term memory, thereby reducing the healing potential of cultural heritage?<sup>55</sup> Archaeological remains have often survived centuries or millennia. The need for new excavations in conflict or near-conflict zones has to be justified on the basis of threat of looting and destruction (is the site immediately threatened?), not for ideological Public Relations or profit-seeking reasons.

55 | On the post-conflict healing potential of heritage, see Gíblin (2009).

### ***Supporting heritage through professional networks: policy-making and the grass-root approach***

Alternative ways of protecting cultural heritage in cases of armed conflict should include new initiatives that have developed in responses to the multiple crises in the Middle East in recent years (e.g. small-scale heritage NGOs led by local archaeologists). Western museums and international organizations active in the Middle East that have sprung up in the past year with the aim of 'rescuing heritage' should disengage from their embedded archaeology connections, thus avoiding repetitions of colonial forms of intervention. The exploration of possible initiatives between western universities and institutions in the host countries that involve the input of specialists and resources on an equal footing should be supported. To maintain academic integrity, western educational and research institutions should thoroughly distance themselves from the rhetoric that connects archaeology to foreign policy and turns 'cultural heritage' into a professionalized fetish for academics and 'cultural heritage experts', a niche market of employment by now, bearing in mind that this amounts to an unprofessional collusion of military powers, government administration and academic authorities – the triad of imperialism.

Several new projects purport to take into account local communities and 'on the ground realities'. The success of such efforts is debatable because latent ideas on local indifference remain. Occasionally such efforts are presented as pragmatic strategies for the furthering of the archaeological work, as a means to an end, rather than as a way to address existing asymmetries in the ownership of the past. Outreach projects, although well-intended, do not always avoid coming across as culturally patronizing. It is here that cultural heritage 'practitioners' (e.g. archaeologists attached to international organizations, universities or NGOs) need to sever links with old-fashioned views of who owns archaeological material. Rather, the

heritage protection makes the collaboration of local populations imperative, not as technical assistants but as partners in choices made with freedom to negate excavation and fieldwork permits.

A central objective should be how to address existing power asymmetries (be it financial or of scientific training), not as a palliative measure for relaxing conflict potential, but as source of real difficulty that needs to be addressed – whether of a scientific excavation or a development aid project. A blanket response is not appropriate as multivariate contexts require different responses. Disseminating awareness and building multi-country collaboration projects where local universities are involved as main strategic partners with ultimately powers of veto, and where the excavations are used as training programmes for excavators and conservators, can be a first step.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> | A precedent for such collaboration (albeit not in a conflict zone) is offered by the 'Central Zagros Archaeological Project'.

### ***Ethics as a response to neo-imperialism: theory and practice as coeval***

The professional response of archaeologists in the Middle East and other regions under colonial control in former times is symptomatic of centuries' long historical circumstances and cannot be addressed with a simple change of law or mentality. It is essential to recognize and critique new forms of exerting hegemonic power over countries in conflict, to protect western educational institutions from becoming embroiled in aggressive foreign policy agendas, protect the freedom and integrity of the academic profession by mounting criticism when archaeologists collaborate with any military-organized activities and 'think-tanks' that aim to justify invasion and occupation, and to reinforce their identity of the civilian that should override all other factional ethics and actions within their professional role.

Any discourse or practice of cultural heritage protection embodies public interest and social valorization of cultural heritage, as well as the communication of archaeological work. The practice of archaeology cannot be subsumed under interests irrelevant to the pursuit of archaeology *per se* or be limited to the micro-management of artefacts/sites, much less be used for the creation of a favourable image of invading forces as part of the diplomatic kit of western countries that militarily intervene in the region. To the contrary, its value, its *raison d'être*, lies in producing knowledge over the *longue-durée* of the human societies so that the past is not re-performed into the present.

Alternative ways of approaching the protection of cultural heritage are needed. A frank, self-conscious debate is essential, moving beyond the tropes of protecting cultural heritage. This should include those micro-managing aspects of tangible cultural heritage (conservation technicians, geologists etc), and also target social

scientists and other theorists that study global forms of power and post-colonialism, including sociologists, anthropologists and modern historians. Multi-disciplinarity in assessing ethical forms of practice is required, but not one sponsored by military structures and not confined to the institutions of western occupying powers. Open debates should involve the participation of academics and management at universities and cultural heritage institutions directly involved in the Middle East through a range of archaeological and other projects run or otherwise supported by western countries. The establishment of a guiding ethical framework binding for all parties would immeasurably help by informing museum policy in setting up exhibitions with antiquities exported by occupying powers, as well as in efforts to disrupt illicit trade in antiquities. To conclude, ethical guidelines should not limit themselves to abstraction but be pragmatically enforced, especially as regards collusion with military structures.

#### **NEW, OLD FORMS OF WAR AND THE NEED FOR A POLITICALLY-INFORMED, AND SOCIAL- LY-ENGAGED ACADEMIC COMMUNITY**

*We are just citizens and therefore have no right to judge in a strict judicial way and have at the same time the duty as citizens to oppose criminal and war policies, which should be our starting point and our strength.*

Ayça Çubukçu, *For the Love of Humanity* (2018)

At the closing end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people in the so-called West could have been forgiven for thinking that while billions of people across the globe were still suffering from conflict, famine, oppression and diseases extinct elsewhere, the *overt*, explicit and perverse sense of self-entitlement of western nations to dominate or appropriate for themselves territory, resources, people and their heritage had at least been circumscribed by ethical and legal frameworks held in theory at least internationally. Yet much of the social and intellectual progress that was achieved by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in intellectual and legal arenas, without always informing politics. In the aftermath of western invasions and large-scale, perpetual conflict, ongoing for longer than two decades, it appears that several of the values, principles, and ideals that modern western societies appeared to espouse barely escaped the ivory tower walls of critique, reflection and self-criticism that academia considered the norm. Neo-colonial policies abound, instigated mainly by former

colonial nations, as well as neo-colonial powers. Relentless, preemptive and undeclared wars have turned broad swathes of northern Africa and western Asia into consolidated conflict zones. None of these is unprecedented *per se*. During the struggles for decolonization in Africa, Cold War efforts to carve spheres of influence pitted American, Soviet, Chinese and even Yugoslav interests against one another via proxy organizations, arms shipments, sharing of diplomatic capital or even direct military support.<sup>57</sup> Far from being a spectre of the past, imperialism is structuring the present through a series of representational and performative actions amounting to multiple, orchestrated legerdemains whose origins can be traced as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, with multiple temporalities co-existing in the present in a colonial modernity (Gregory 2004). Perpetual war has become the norm, with outdated constructions of the 'Other' aiming to provide a gloss of legitimacy.

In its contemporary reproduction, the colonial modernity has been striking on many fronts, for at least the *intelligentsia* of the West should have been able to put up a strong resistance, mobilizing public opinion against what ought to have been treated not merely as untenable, but as truly unthinkable. Better still, the public opinion after a very dark 20<sup>th</sup> century, after a bloody, difficult (and occasionally, guilt-ridden) decolonization process, should have galvanized resistance against easy, cheap western rhetoric pitting one ethnic or religious group against another, one state against another, in preparation for military conflicts.

Official rhetoric on culture clashes presaged the 21<sup>st</sup>-century invasions in the Middle East, masking the lack of ethical basis for them and the bewildering destruction, death and the annihilation of communities and memory that they continue to extol on what were already tormented populations. By the inception of the US-UK offensive in Iraq in 2003, the population had already suffered twelve years of sanctions following the Gulf War, after the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War. In terms of loss of human life, no register of counted bodies would ever be able to document the loss of lives on a catastrophic scale, or the destruction of the survivors' lives, as of then marked by daily horrors of endless violence, hunger, humiliation, dislocation, occupation of land and country, denial of a peaceful and healthy future in lands poisoned indefinitely by depleted uranium and other radio-chemicals released through bombings, and a topography of death stamped by the hollows of towns and cities. No count of deaths will ever convey the atrocities of bombs released from drones that will continue to kill and maim, physically and psychologically, for decades after the conflicts have (truly) ended.<sup>58</sup> Or of the torture and confinement of individuals designated by some fanciful, state administration neologisms ('unlawful combatants' etc) which aimed to render the dead and the imprisoned, victims and captives of war, outside and above any legal jurisdiction, or the use of automated weapons that kill civilians *en masse* with the push of a button operated by an employee sitting

57 | For the interference of the US in decolonization struggles in Africa, see Williams (2021).

58 | Consistent, sharp rises in cancer and genetic malformations (birth defects) have been attested since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The chemical and radiological toxicity of depleted uranium is well-documented, known also from the NATO bombardment of the Kosovo population. The long-term damage to public health of exposure to heavy metals and toxins released through mass bombardments is also documented in epidemiological studies, see e.g. Savabieasfahani et al. (2016). The release of carcinogens, teratogens and genotoxins through the daily use of toxic munitions by "US-led military forces" in Iraq and Afghanistan has been described as an "ongoing, self-replicative form of harm", termed 'toxic violence' understanding through the uses of state-sanctioned toxic exposure as "weaponry, tactic, or by-product" (Logan, 2019).

at their desk in a different continent or a pilot inured to the reality of their actions by long training hours in the virtual reality programs of military assault simulation environments – never once witnessing with their eyes the death and horror which that single, desk-operated action of pushing buttons inflicts on people in a location across half the globe away (Gregory, 2004: 52). This is the mode of intimidation and destruction with which any state authority considering itself above any sort of law, therefore as if characterized by exceptionalism, imposes its hegemonic aims, having first denied the humanity of those intending to subjugate.<sup>59</sup> Through commercial release of 'simulation environments', the habituating of the brain to war trickles down to society, shaping values and expectations, and dulling reaction to state-sanctioned violence.<sup>60</sup>

The post-colonial western academy took note of *Orientalism*, introduced its trenchant ideas into scholarship, expanded and updated it, but took little note of its content in their actual lived experience of political participation. Colonialism and looting by western European countries, using violence in its many forms and constructing illegitimate means so as to enable it, has not ceased. As it continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the first things an aggressor does is to deprive the conquered of their identity. Appropriating cultural heritage is then a strategy. Social scientists from various fields connected to cultural heritage management continue to abet that by jumping onto the bandwagon of aggressive and oppressive status-quo-supporting narratives and acts of aggression by declaring the (positive) 'universalism' of cultural heritage, while decrying the (negative) 'territorialism' (other used pejoratives are: nationalism, or tribalism etc) of those being deprived of it. The physical appropriation of artefacts is then passed as 'universalism' and a sophisticated relativization of ethics is enlisted to muddle waters, throwing in some post-colonial jargon for good measure.

Despite unabating discussion on ethics in anthropology and archaeology, on post-colonial studies, and on decolonizing western social sciences, the implications of the growing participation of western archaeological projects in regions militarily occupied by the same countries that are funding the universities/institutions undertaking these projects, and in close co-operation with military structures, is being established as the norm: the direct involvement of western academic institutions, cultural heritage museums (including private institutions), the trained personnel being involved in the cultural heritage management of countries occupied by the states that support these institutions (e.g. US, UK), the collaboration of western archaeologists and anthropologists with invading and occupying military forces. This constitutes a glaring disparity between the theory of modern social sciences and their actual practices. The latest failure of academics from a range of fields to critically grapple with the modern uses of their profession and to implement this knowl-

59 | On the "spaces of exception" of regarding people, territory and law in the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, see Gregory (2004: 62-72). People could be killed with impunity in Afghanistan by the so-called Coalition forces, just as the territory itself was assaulted with impunity, while those captives surviving immediate execution were, and some continue to be, subjected to long-term incarceration in extra-judicial centres of detention across world regions with US global reach.

60 | Deploying popular culture for hegemonic pursuits, thus shaping consciousness and values so as to enable public support for US state-sanctioned violence, with tight links between the army and the film and the video game industries, constitutes the so-called 'military-entertainment complex'. Across a variety of film productions, the former disseminates narratives of US exceptionalism and benevolence in an uncritical manner, while the latter's appeal to the young boosts recruitment numbers to the army. Both naturalize war and uphold the country's assumed exceptionality, dulling reactions to real foreign policy support for military conflicts (Faber, 2020; Laderman and Gruenewald, 2018).

edge by defending peace is a paradigmatic case of how the knowledge and achievements of the social and human sciences are demonstrably trampled by government policy and even by members of the academic world itself. Thus, while archaeology – veering into the 'hot' new field of 'Heritage Studies' and producing the raw material for the heritage-military-industrial complex – is becoming increasingly abused in the context of international power plays, even explicitly branded as a foreign policy tool, its practitioners continue to treat it as a pursuit unrelated to politics, displaying the 'post-colonial' sheen in academia, while brandishing its 'post-conflict healing effect'.

An aspect of the vocation of an academic that is slowly being forgotten among some quarters is that fundamentally the purpose of academia is to serve society, and at large, humanity. Linguistic games and the pseudo-apolitical approach as components of several new fields of scholarship (often ending in 'Studies') betray little of the sincerity of thought and practice with which scholars are expected to approach their fields, at the juncture of the philosophical, the social and the political. The realization that societal apathy enables abusive power has been remarked upon by a range of thinkers from different periods and places.

Within many quarters in the academic institutions of Europe and north America, the compartmentalization of contemporary disciplinary fields, the descent into banal concerns and the light-hearted avoidance of the astutely political, coupled with the mundane reality of constant grant-chasing so as to stay 'relevant' or 'in vogue', has been detrimental when it comes to some of the essence of the academic's vocation. As regards the preservation of heritage in Europe, the *1982 Resolution of the European Parliament of 14 September 1982 on the conservation of the European architectural and archaeological heritage*, in recognizing the significance of "importance of the architectural and archaeological heritage" for "European culture" and "history and awareness" of "European identity" decreed the "moral obligation to ensure that future generations inherit a humane world" (Niklasson, 2016: 83, n. 78). Despite being concerned specifically with European heritage, history and identity, at least the Resolution concluded with an ecumenical vision of a *humane world*. Where has this vision gone?

Reclaiming the role of humanistic fields with probity, with an ecumenical vision of human-first ethics, striving for peace, resonates not only with the international legal order that is being unethically and unabashedly abandoned in favour of military might, but also with global needs for stability and prosperity that cannot be achieved via more razed-to-the-ground cities. For professional archaeological projects overseas, this stance ought to translate into an alignment of theory with practice, making a difference to society by adhering to the already set standards of respect for other societies, cultures, and civilizations, in knowledge of the damage

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wrought in the past and its active workings in the present. In the instance of cultural heritage protection in conflict zones, this entails voicing opposition to collaboration with occupying forces, deconstructing the perpetual use of 'culture clashes' as templates for foreign policy, and unequivocally rejecting the collusion with military structures, western military occupation and the neocolonial exploitation by *occupying nations* of others' cultural heritage.

A lucid understanding of the nature of power to expand and self-perpetuate is a long-standing tenet of much of the European political philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Walter Benjamin and Simone Weil to contemporary political thinking. In Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, happiness in the present is conditioned on "reparation for the despair and desolation of the past" (Löwy, 2016: 32). Calls for social justice appear with the onset of capitalism and imperialism, understood as emancipation from class oppression and economic hegemony, as far back as the Paris Commune of 1871 and earlier.<sup>61</sup> Such calls cannot go unheeded so as to protect careers or reputations. In the auto-biographical *Abyss Street Number Zero* (1962), Menelaos Lountemis (a pen name) reckoned with the effects of individual pliability: "If you came to this world to count your years and live a quiet life, you have nothing to fear. No one messes with the quiet ones. But if the world is to go to ruin one day, it will go to ruin by the quiet ones. Because they make the powerful more powerful."<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS<sup>63</sup>

Tracing the links of archaeology with imperialism in the conflict zones of the Middle East from the onset of European imperial projects to the present-day, the article critically examined the exploitation of cultural heritage in situations of armed conflict, from its employment as a 'soft power' tool in representations of the past for 'public relations' purposes to its use as a pretext for war, under the guise of the protection of archaeological sites and monuments, in academic discourses. The use of cultural heritage for legitimizing western aggression in the Middle East is a thread that ties the past to the present. Cultural heritage management in the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East is a pressing concern for those entasked with the protection of the archaeological record but also, an arena where imperialistic agendas of economic and geopolitical dominance play out. Archaeology is often presented as a positive, apolitical pursuit, but its practice in conflict zones is ineluctably explicitly political, and should be approached by its own practitioners in academia and outside as such. New discourses, contrary to the post-colonial perspective, are actively weaponizing cultural heritage management, using it as an instrument of militarized imperialism. An emerging niche of academics collaborating with present-day western armies of

<sup>61</sup> | Indicatively, the life-work of Robert Owen (1771-1858) and Charles Fourier (1772-1837) as well as Claude-Henri Comte de Saint (1760-1825). For the Paris Commune, see Ross (2015); Cerf and Zwirn (1989).

<sup>62</sup> | The book detailed the author's real-life incarceration on the isle of Makronisos over a decade earlier during the Greek Civil War of the late 1940s, itself a symptom of foreign interventions in the region during World War II (Lountemis, 1962). In the year that the novel was published and due to it, Lountemis was stripped of his nationality and a legal case for treason was advanced against him, forcing him into exile.

<sup>63</sup> | Post-Scriptum: This article was first submitted for evaluation in March 2024 and accepted for publication in February 2025. Based in part on a manuscript written in 2013 as a response to the euphemistically called western 'interventions' of the 'Allied Forces' – another euphemism – sadly updated with more tragic ongoing, it cannot per force take into account all episodes of the ever-shifting, fast-changing military and political situation in the Middle East, replete with the rapid succession of various regimes with shifting foreign alliances.

occupation in the Middle East has led to the funding of universities and research institutions tasked with creating the 'scholarship' that offers legitimacy to such pursuits, often under the rubric of 'Heritage Studies'.

Such strategies take their cue at least from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial endeavours. Practices, ideologies and formal policies of foreign relations become intertwined with discourses on cultural heritage management, to the detriment of cultural heritage protection. Within this climate the (western) notion of universal heritage is counter-productive if the real intention is to protect heritage. Instead of safe-keeping, governmental strategies of weaponizing cultural heritage in the Middle East are recruiting academics in order to build a body of scholarship for legitimizing invasions or softening the image of state aggression, which turns monuments into targets by local terrorist militias, in addition to deflecting attention from the violence against humans in the context of war. Precisely due to the politically acquiescing attitudes, often for self-aggrandizing purposes, within certain professional archaeology and anthropology circles in Europe and North America, the expressly political use of cultural heritage with the complicity of academics has taken centre-stage, in a form of new coloniality where the government, the academy and the military are communicating vessels of the acting superstructure of the state in world regions outside their formal jurisdiction and ambit of legitimate exercise of power. The role of the academic community should be unequivocally clear on this: rejecting the collaboration of academics with the military structures of occupying forces, revealing the disastrous effects of war and deconstructing the narratives that are used to justify large-scale violence – calling instead for accountability.

As a counterpoint to these forms of 'scholarship' that derive from the geopolitics of the industrial-military complex, alternative forms of practicing archaeology and cultural heritage management are delineated that are disengaged from hegemonic agendas and the frivolous cant of 'saving heritage' which ignores the realities and causes of wars. By offering an incipient framework for a different future that breaks with this long past of cultural heritage serving imperialism, the article opens a space for seeking alternative pathways to understanding and managing cultural heritage, resisting the hegemonic representations of the past for statecraft purposes. The call is for a socially and politically engaged academic community that does not merely attend to the damaged remains of cultural heritage monuments, but looks at its own role within the wider context of conflict, occupation, military 'intervention', political interference in foreign states and custodianship of the cultural heritage of other countries. This dictates distance from hegemonic power structures. It is only then that cultural heritage can prove beneficial for peace.

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