

'Impudent Lies': Rhetoric and Reality in Wartime Heritage Protection, 1943-2003

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This paper offers a historical perspective on the current debates about the protection of museums, heritage and archaeological sites during warfare or civil conflict. Mortimer Wheeler's experiences of heritage destruction in North Africa during the Second World War, despite government promises of protection, demonstrate striking parallels with events and debates following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A comparison between these two episodes highlights a common political duplicity and disdain for heritage issues in wartime. This failure of formal mechanisms of heritage protection highlights the vital importance of heritage professionals maintaining international contact networks, even between combatant nations, to monitor and report threats to archaeological sites and museums.

Introduction

One of the most vigorous debates in contemporary archaeology concerns the ethics of archaeologists working with the military to identify and safeguard the cultural heritage of a nation being attacked or invaded. This issue has been raised most recently by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the calamitous impact on historic sites, museums and the archaeological record in that country. Much of the debate has focused on whether or not this massive loss could have been avoided or ameliorated, and whether the archaeologists who worked with the military during the invasion planning are morally responsible, or whether they in fact helped prevent an even greater loss (Curtis, 2009; Hamilakis, 2009; Stone, 2009a). The disparity between the planned protection of heritage sites and their eventual destruction has led some of those involved in this planning process to reconsider the impact of their role (e.g. Stone, 2005).

My aim in this brief note is to provide a historical perspective on the issue of heritage protection during military action: my focus is on the disparities between official reassurances and the realities on the ground. The value of a historical view on archaeological controversies is two-fold: firstly as a source of good practice to emulate, and second as a way to learn from (rather than repeat) the mistakes of our forebears. This paper offers an example of the latter: the lesson for archaeologists in future wars is, I hope, quite clear.

Protecting Cultural Heritage 1943

Alongside his career as an excavator and educator of note, the British archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler was a

military man, serving as an officer in both world wars. As an artillery captain on the Western Front in 1918 he was awarded an MC for 'conspicuous gallantry and initiative' (Hawkes, 1982: 71). Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War Wheeler rejoined the army and formed a reserve light anti-aircraft battery. By 1942 he found himself in North Africa taking part in the second battle of El Alamein and the advance on Tripoli; shortly thereafter he was promoted to Brigadier, and took part in the planning of the invasion of Italy before travelling to India to take up the post of Director-General of the Archaeological Survey (Mallowan, 1976).

During his time in North Africa Wheeler made considerable efforts to protect the sites of Tripoli and Lepcis Magna from the British military who, unlike the Italians they had evicted, seemed intent on despoiling the archaeological sites for sport or perceived necessity: for example, the Royal Air Force sought to place a radar station within the ruins of Lepcis Magna (Hawkes, 1982: 216-7; Wheeler, 1955: 154). In his memoir *Still Digging* (1955) Wheeler reflects on the destruction he witnessed, and quotes a written answer in the House of Commons by the then Under-Secretary of State for War, Arthur Henderson:

When the British Forces advanced into Libya in the autumn of 1942 immediate steps were taken for the preservation of any archaeological monuments which might come into our possession during the course of the occupation. In the case of Cyrenaica, similar steps had been taken during the two previous occupations of the territory and despite Axis allegations to the contrary it is believed no damage of any importance was done to the ruins at Cyrene, Appollonia, Ptolemaide or Tocrá. (Henderson, 1943).

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Wheeler's commentary is uncharacteristically splenetic: 'In those righteous words, and others which accompanied them, the Secretary of State had unhappily been misinformed: not to put too fine a point on it, his office had been guilty of communicating an impudent lie.' (Wheeler, 1955: 152). Following a discussion of the more gentle Italian and German treatments of the historic sites he continues:

Now let me make it clear that, in spite of the subsequent assertion in the House of Commons quoted above, at the time of our advance into Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in 1942-3 no steps of any kind had been taken by our military authorities to safeguard museums, records, works of art, 'monuments', whether during the active process of occupation or during the subsequent military administration. The idea had presumably not been put to them, and in their busy preoccupation with other things there was little likelihood of its spontaneous emergence. (Wheeler, 1955: 153).

From his position on the frontline Wheeler is generous in his forgiveness of the senior military commanders, admitting that for some time '[a]lthough a professing archaeologist, I had not myself envisaged the problem in any clear fashion' (1955: 153). He reserves his ire for the distant politicians providing meaningless reassurances, and for the officers on the ground wreaking wanton careless destruction, such as the Royal Air Force officer who declared 'What would it matter if the whole of these blank [sic] ruins were pushed into the sea?' (Wheeler, 1955: 154; expletive presumably removed).

Protecting Cultural Heritage 2003

Six decades and one *Hague Convention* later empty political promises of the sort that so enraged Wheeler were still being made and were still succeeding in pulling the wool over the eyes of concerned citizens, archaeologists and others (UNESCO, 1954). The role of archaeologists in advising the British Ministry of Defence in anticipation of the invasion of Iraq has been described by Stone (2005) and similar processes of consultation took place in the US. In 2003 shortly after the invasion a consortium of organisations led by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) wrote to President Bush to express their concern at the looting taking place in the country. The opening paragraph of the letter states that:

During the fierce fighting of the past few weeks, we were relieved to see that our military leaders and coalition partners took extreme precautions to avoid targeting cultural sites along with other non-military places. It was also comforting to receive reports that our armed forces have conducted inspections at some of the important archaeological sites (AAA *et al*, 2003, quoted in Hamilakis, 2003: 109-10).

Perhaps there is a cynical tone to the start of the letter, perhaps not. Either way, this statement is representative of an attitude within elements of the heritage community in this early period, when it was unclear how long the period of violence and civil unrest following the invasion would extend. The reports from 'our armed forces' that they highlight with approval probably carry as much weight as Henderson's earnest written answer to a parliamentary question.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and in 2009 Peter Stone reflected on this earlier period in a book review. The book in question, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* (Rothfield, 2009), focused on the looting of the Baghdad Museum, a site that had been specifically identified for protection. Stone's words are an eerie echo of Wheeler's furious condemnation:

American strategists (one almost hesitates to use that word, given the damning absence of evidence for anything resembling a strategy) failed to plan for the proper identification and protection of the cultural heritage in Iraq before the invasion; no ground forces were allocated responsibility to protect museums and sites post-invasion; when pressed, no American troops appeared to even know where the Iraq Museum was in Baghdad as it seems not to have been marked on their maps (Stone, 2009b: 378).

History repeats itself, we are told, first as tragedy, second as farce: third, fourth and fifth, I presume, just get more farcical. Wheeler was not the first antiquary to bemoan the destruction of cultural heritage in wartime, nor was he the first citizen to notice that politicians lie, and politicians in wartime lie with more than usual gusto and impunity. What are the lessons for archaeologists, keen to protect cultural heritage, and invited or encouraged to participate in future military planning? Wheeler had some success at preventing damage to historic sites, but his military rank of Brigadier gave him clout: should undercover antiquarians infiltrate the armed forces? The true value of Wheeler's account is not his rank, however, but his presence: he personally visited and inspected the sites, and was therefore able to contradict the government's lies. To protect sites we need to be able to access them, to monitor their condition and to rapidly report threats, or to be in direct contact with people who can do all these things. Quite simply, no other source of information can be trusted to the same extent. Maintaining friendships and contacts among networks of colleagues around the world can do more to highlight and prevent threats to heritage in times of war than any military commander's assurances or politician's promises.

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