

REPORTING HERITAGE DESTRUCTION

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Chapter 16.

Cultural Heritage in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988): The Unreported Legacy of a Protracted War

Bijan Rouhani and Bill Finlayson

Introduction

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was one of the twentieth century's longest interstate wars, with hundreds of thousands of casualties, and widespread damage to historic urban spaces, monuments, museums, and the intangible heritage of both countries. However, despite the fact that the protection of cultural properties during armed conflict has become a global concern, especially after WWII and as crystallised in the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, cultural heritage destruction received little international attention during the Iran-Iraq war.

During the conflicts of the last two decades in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), international attention became re-focused on the issue of cultural heritage destruction and how to safeguard it during war. Numerous academic studies have been conducted¹, and several international funds and projects established for documenting, protecting, and reconstructing damaged heritage². This chapter questions why so little attention was paid to the issue of cultural heritage in the Iran-Iraq War, what differed between that and more recent conflicts in MENA, and what factors subsequently returned the issue of heritage protection during armed conflict into a global concern. Did something new happen in the 21st-century conflicts to raise attention and encourage all parties to weaponise cultural heritage?

The Taliban's deliberate destruction of Buddha statues in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Valley in 2001, amplified and

perhaps even encouraged by the power of mainstream media, was one of the landmark moments that drew worldwide attention to the protection of ancient sites in the 21st century (Klein 2018; UNESCO 2021). Although the event sparked heated debates about ideological iconoclasm for propaganda purposes (Janowski 2015; Obuse 2015), it also demonstrated how cultural heritage could be utilised as a propaganda tool for attracting public attention to political and social issues. After the US and its allies overthrew the Taliban and installed a new government in 2001, foreign countries and international organisations funded several cultural heritage projects for recovering Afghanistan's historical sites, museums, archives, and intangible heritage and traditions (Stein *et al.* 2017). However, there has been criticism of spending methods, the short lifespan of many of these programmes, the short-term focus on 'fixing' culture rather than a long-term view of cultural development, and the rivalry and lack of coordination between international organisations and projects (Leslie 2017). Conversely, it could be argued that many of these programmes encourage various forms of development, both cultural and otherwise, instead of merely 'repairing' what has been damaged. This issue is part of a broader discussion about whether development interventions truly benefit local communities and their livelihoods, especially if they undermine traditional cultures.

The widespread destruction and looting that followed the US-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003, particularly the images of looting at the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad, prompted strong criticism and condemnation of the US forces' lack of planning and inability to protect Iraq's heritage (Rothfield 2009). Scholars and journalists reacted swiftly and strongly to the April 2003 looting of the National Museum, describing it as catastrophic. This response was intensified by the fact that archaeologists had warned the US military about the vulnerability of Iraqi museums to looting, based on past experiences like the 1991 Intifada (Bernhardsson 2012: 160).

¹ A Google Scholar search for cultural heritage and conflict in Syria and Iraq between 2003 and 2023 returns over 18,000 results. See also 'A Selection of News Articles on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East' (2001-2016), available at: <http://we-aggregate.org/media/files/91526cc763a119da2191efbd7fcafc33.pdf>

² Summary of the international responses towards a protection of the Syrian cultural heritage until December 2016 are available at: <https://www.heritageforpeace.org/news/reports-towards-protection-syrian-cultural-heritage-summary-international-responses/>

Other high-profile cases of damage include the US military causing significant damage to the historic site of Babylon by utilising it as a military camp (International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq 2009). Other ancient sites, like Ur, and Samarra, were also damaged due to the occupation by Coalition forces, military operations, vandalism, and looting (Hamdani 2008; UNESCO 2007). Looting and the illegal excavation of ancient sites skyrocketed, damaging many sites and creating a global antiquity market issue (Emberling *et al.* 2008; Stone 2008; Stone 2015).

With the rise of ISIS/Daesh in 2014, the destruction of cultural heritage entered a new phase. The propaganda destruction of cultural and ancient sites in Iraq and Syria, including the historic city of Mosul and its museum, the ancient sites of Nineveh, Nimrud, Hatra, Palmyra and numerous places of worship, shrines, and cemeteries of various religions and ethnic groups, made protecting cultural heritage a global concern, while this international concern regarding the destruction of cultural heritage increased its propaganda impact (Rosén 2020). Irina Bokova, the then Director General of UNESCO, called heritage protection a 'Humanitarian Imperative and Security Issue'.³ The issue was raised at the UN Security Council, which ultimately issued two unprecedented resolutions, 2199 (2015) and 2347 (2017), on the protection of cultural heritage and combating looting and illicit trafficking.

After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of ISIS and similar Jihadist groups, many projects were initiated for remote sensing monitoring and documentation of at-risk cultural heritage, as well as digital reconstruction of destroyed sites and objects to preserve the memory of lost or endangered heritage, raise global awareness, and promote reconstruction. These were primarily established by US, UK, and EU institutions and universities, including the Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI) project at ASOR (the American Society of Overseas Research, funded by the U.S. Department of State and non-federal donors), and the EAMENA project (Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa, a partnership between the Universities of Oxford, Durham and Leicester) and funded by the Arcadia Fund⁴ and subsequently the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund, and SHOSI (the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project at the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Pennsylvania). During this time, many non-governmental organisations, such as Heritage for Peace, the Association for the Protection of Syrian

Archaeology (APSA), and The Day After's Heritage Protection Initiative, were also founded in Europe and US in collaboration with local communities and professionals.

In 2014, the European Union funded the €2,750,000 UNESCO Emergency Safeguarding of Syrian Cultural Heritage project, with Flemish Government support, for 36 months.

In Iraq, 'Revive the Spirit of Mosul', a reconstruction campaign led by UNESCO, received US\$105.5 million from 15 partners, including the UAE and the EU⁵. Sponsored by the UK government, the British Museum launched the £2.9 million Iraq Scheme programme in 2015 for the reconstruction of Iraqi heritage⁶. By December 2022, ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas) had 25 projects with a total budget of US\$10.5 million in Iraq. Unlike the Iraq-Iran War, the recent destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq has been discussed in numerous conferences and academic papers, many of which are cited here.

The heated theoretical, ethical, and technical debates over the reconstruction of recently damaged heritage sites in the MENA revealed gaps in the international charters and the World Heritage Convention (Rouhani 2016), leading to the publication of the ICOMOS Guidance on Post Trauma Recovery and Reconstruction for World Heritage Cultural Properties (ICOMOS 2017). During the Iran-Iraq War, although the extent of these discussions was much more limited, they did contribute to legal debates that laid the groundwork for the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, as mentioned below.

Cultural Heritage in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

Conflict formally began on September 22, 1980, with air and land invasions by Iraq following the rise in tension between the two countries after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Much has been said about the origins of this war, which went back to Ottoman-Persian border disputes, disputes which Iraq inherited, especially after the discovery of oil by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (Abdulghani 2011). These tensions continued in the following decades and escalated with the rise of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq in 1968 and the withdrawal of Britain from the Persian Gulf in 1971. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran brought two ambitious leaders with different ideologies face to face: Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator who wanted to strengthen Iraq's role as a regional power, and Ruhollah Khomeini, who wanted

³ <https://www.europanostra.org/unescos-director-general-irina-bokova-protection-heritage-become-humanitarian-imperative-security-issue/> (accessed 18 May 2024).

⁴ Arcadia – a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.

⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/revive-mosul?hub=1067> (accessed 18 May 2024).

⁶ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/international/iraq-scheme> (accessed 18 May 2024).

to expand his Islamic revolutionary ideology from Iran to other countries in the region, especially to Iraq and to overthrow Saddam's regime (Chubin 2019; Razoux 2015: 2). The Islamic revolutionaries in Iran viewed the Iraqi regime as 'atheist' and malevolent. Conversely, Saddam Hussein perceived the new Islamic Republic as a significant threat to Iraq, especially because of its support for Shiite opposition movements within the country (El-Dine 2012: 269).

The invasion took place after the 1979 revolution had destabilised Iran. Not only had many army officers been purged or even executed, but also many experts were dismissed because they were considered counter-revolutionary. This included archaeologists and cultural heritage professionals such as Firouz Bagherzadeh, the prominent archaeologist and founder and General Director of the Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research (ICAR) (Aryamanesh 2019: 20). In July 1980, two months before the war began, the National Museum of Iran hosted a symposium titled 'Archaeology in Line with the Revolution,' which opened with a statement from then-President Abolhassan Bani Sadr. A resolution presented at the end of the conference strongly criticised the ICAR and regarded its efforts before the revolution 'to serve and cement the foundations of the former regime'. It further requested that any archaeological works conducted by foreign missions in Iran be halted (Asar 1980: 246-248). In revolutionary Iran, archaeology, especially pre-Islamic heritage, was viewed with great suspicion as it was considered synonymous with the nationalistic approaches of the Pahlavi era, which integrated the 'golden past' into its political agenda much as the Ba'ath party in Iraq used ancient heritage extensively for government propaganda and the ideology of national unification (Abdi 2008).

The war had different phases in terms of strategies and tactics, as well as international reactions, each of which left different effects on the cultural and natural resources of the two countries. In the early months of the war, the Iraqi army managed to occupy some cities in the south and west of Iran. Khorramshahr, Qasr Shirin, Naft Shahr, Sumar, Mehran, Musian, Susangerd, Huweizeh and a total of about 15,000 square kilometres in the three provinces of Kermanshah, Ilam and Khuzestan. Several other cities, including Abadan, Shush (Susa), Ahvaz, Dezful, and Andimeshk, all in Khuzestan province, which has a considerable Arab population, were besieged by the Iraqi army or targeted by its artillery. Heavy battles, especially in Khorramshahr, Qasr Shirin, Naftshahr and Mehran, turned these cities into ruins. In Qasr Shirin, in addition to extensive damage to the old city and its neighbourhoods, the ancient Chartaqi, believed to be a Sasanian fire temple, was destroyed. Naftshahr has never been rebuilt after

the war. The 19-month occupation of Khorramshahr in Khuzestan became a significant chapter in the war and subsequently an Iranian national symbol. The city was never completely rebuilt after the war and has never regained its status as a strategic port.

After Iranian forces reclaimed large portions of the occupied regions, both sides were constrained to their trenches for a long period. From the Zagros Mountains to the flat southern alluvial plains where the River Shat Al-Arab meets the Persian Gulf, the fighting front included practically all of the border areas from north to south. This frontier encapsulated significant prehistoric sites in the plains of Dehloran and Mehran, large areas of the ancient Mesopotamian civilisations, as well as important Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian, and Islamic sites. To thwart the opposing forces, both sides dug huge trenches, ditches, and water canals, one of them running for 30km. The engineering units of the Iraqi army constructed earthworks, including using ancient ramparts to create defensive fortifications (Robert Killick *et al.* 2018; Shepperson 2021). A concentration of such defensive fortifications was built to protect the strategic city of Basra against Iranian assaults, which caused irreparable damage to ancient sites, such as Charax Spasinou, an ancient Parthian city.

After the Iraqi army had advanced to the western banks of the Karkhe River in the early months of the war, the city of Susa was evacuated, and the Iranian army took up a position there. The siege continued into the static second part of the war when, due to bombardment and exchange of fire over 18 months, Susa suffered extensive damage, including to part of Daniel's Tomb. The city is one of the oldest settlements and has been continuously inhabited since around the fifth millennium BCE. Other nearby ancient sites were also damaged, including the Elamite site of Haft Tepe, severely damaged due to heavy shelling and defensive earthworks, and the Sasanian city of Ivan-e Karkheh, which was the location of fierce conflict. Iraqi forces had advanced to the western fortifications, while Iranians had taken up position near the eastern wall. The entrance gate and the Royal Palace were both destroyed as a result of the firefight. More damage was caused by Iranian forces digging trenches on the site and taking shelter inside the ancient towers and defences. The area was heavily mined, which made any archaeological survey or excavation impossible for long after the war (Karimian and Koochak 2012: 152).

Even decades after the war ended, the extensive use of land mines remained a major concern in both countries, contaminating large areas, including a 5km wide minefield in Iraq that ran along the border for about 1600km (Schreuder 2008). It was also estimated that millions of land mines were left in Iran, especially in

Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and Khuzestan provinces (Jahunlu *et al.* 2002: 108). Even two decades after the war, any archaeological survey or protection in Iran's Mehran plain was impossible due to the explosive remnants (Javanmardzadeh *et al.* 2013: 14–15). For the same reason, for many years it was impossible to identify, research, or safeguard the archaeological areas of Chogha Ahovan and Sarpol Zahab. Mine clearance of these vast areas on both sides was done very slowly. In Iraq, these efforts were repeatedly stopped due to subsequent conflicts. Furthermore, archaeologists were concerned about potential damage to historical places contaminated with landmines because of the methods employed to clear them, which can include intentionally blowing them up. In 2006, ICAR requested that special techniques be applied for demining ancient sites. According to the director of the Iranian army's demining unit, in many cases, you must either ignore ancient sites and confidently demine the areas, or give up on gaining full confidence in demining (Behmanesh 2006). There are no statistics on how many historical sites have been damaged by demining in Iran and Iraq.

Military use of cultural properties caused damage to them as well. Because of their relative elevation, Iran mounted anti-aircraft weapons on a number of ancient sites, notably the top of the ziggurat of Tchogha Zanbil, which was founded around 1250 BCE and was included on the World Heritage List in 1979. Other historic monuments, like the Semnan Caravanserai and the Susa (Shush) Museum, were used as ammunition storage or detention centres for prisoners of war (Hodjat 1995: 220).

With the outbreak of the war, Iraq quickly closed the Baghdad Museum and evacuated most of its galleries, storing the artefacts in a safe place within the museum. Sandbags and foam were used to safeguard large items on-site, but the museum was never attacked (Amin 2019). The museums of Basra and Kirkuk were also evacuated, as well as 'the excavations and antique camps' at Hemreen district (UNESCO 1989: 20).

In Iran, several museums were seriously damaged due to shelling and bombing. Movable artefacts from the Abadan and Khorram Abad museums were sent to safe places. Abadan Museum suffered significant damage (Mūsavī 1991: 19). This museum, which opened in the 1960s, was inspired by the design of the cone-shaped dome of Daniel's Tomb in Susa. The authorities were able to evacuate an important part of the Susa Museum under artillery fire and transfer objects to the National Museum of Tehran by train but not before some objects were damaged (Hamedani 1997). The few archaeologists involved in evacuating museums had to contend not only with limited resources and security risks due to the war but also with the negative attitude toward cultural

heritage at the beginning of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. They faced accusations of prioritising the preservation of artefacts from the Shah's era over saving the lives of people dying in the conflict (Hamedani 1997: 21).

The War of the Cities was another brutal episode of the conflict, employing air raids, missile assaults, and artillery shelling, which wreaked devastation on cultural heritage in addition to civilian losses. The first stage started in 1984 with the targeting of the historic Iranian city of Dezful by Scud B missiles. As a result of several attacks, more than half of the historic centre of Dezful, including about 15,000 cultural, religious, residential and commercial properties as well as historic neighbourhoods, were destroyed or severely damaged (Mūsavī 1991: 23). Other cities, including Abadan, Ahvaz, Susangerd, Ilam, Kermanshah, and Andimeshk were attacked later. In retaliation, the Iranian army bombarded the cities of Basra, Khanaqin, Al-Faw and Al-Qurna and caused considerable damage (Razoux 2015: 302–303). In the following years, 30 Iranian cities, including Tehran, Isfahan, Qom, Tabriz, and Shiraz were targeted. The attacks on Isfahan in central Iran and its historical neighbourhoods, particularly the Jame Mosque (Masjed-e Jamé, also known as the Friday Mosque), which dates back to the 9th century CE, were shocking for Iran, which accused Iraq of 'carefully planning' to target the city's historic areas (Hodjat 1995: Appendix VIII-iii), and subsequently requested UNESCO to send a mission. This was a rare instance of one side accusing the other of deliberate cultural heritage destruction at the highest international level during the war. Iran also attacked Baghdad, Basra, Mandali, Khanaqin, and Sulaymaniah in Iraq. In 1988, the War of the Cities was focused on the capitals, Tehran and Baghdad. Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam with symbolic meaning for the Iraqi regime, was also hit. It is believed that in 1988, Iraq fired 193 missiles at Iranian cities, and Iran launched 77 missiles at Iraqi cities and villages (Razoux 2015: 436). With the exception of the situation in Isfahan, both sides appear to have largely regarded cultural heritage destruction as collateral damage occurring during the general bombardment of the cities.

Basra, Iraq's main port and one of its most strategic cities, was one of Iran's primary targets, and multiple attempts were made by Iranian forces to capture it. Located on the Shatt al-Arab River, Basra was spared from artillery bombardment until 1984, when Iran largely bombarded the city's outskirts and industrial districts, attempting to mitigate casualties among its Shia population. Iranian tactics changed after 1984, and Basra came under constant artillery and bombardment, causing major portions of the city to be damaged and some neighbourhoods to be destroyed, notably the historic regions and neighbourhoods of Al-Ashar

and Old Basra (Barakat 1993: 183–185). Iran occupied the al-Faw Peninsula (also known as Al-Fao) and its important cities for two years in 1986. When the Iraqi army recaptured al-Faw town, it was utterly destroyed because it had witnessed the most intense fighting between both sides.

Both Iran and Iraq had signed and ratified the 1954 Hague Convention at the time of the war. Iran detailed some of the damage to Abadan, Susa, Haft Tapeh, and Khoramabad in its report to UNESCO on the implementation of the Convention (UNESCO 1984: 32). In 1985, both countries warned UNESCO of each other's attacks on cultural property, particularly the Jame Mosque in Isfahan and the Imam Ali Mosque in Basra (a minor tally, given the extensive cultural heritage destruction that had taken place). Following the strikes, the Director General of UNESCO wrote separate messages to both countries, reminding them of their obligations as signatories to the 1954 Hague Convention while also requesting that Iraq and Iran respect the adversary's cultural properties. He also described the mechanism for appointing Commissioners-General under the Convention, with the duty of implementing the Convention as well as specific missions. The Director General also offered both sides technical assistance (UNESCO 1985: 16–17). Iraq did not approve the individual proposed to be appointed as Commissioner General for the implementation of the Convention, and no alternative person was proposed (Hodjat 1995: Appendix VIII-46). Personal representatives of the UNESCO Director-General visited Iran in 1985 and 1987, and Iraq in 1986 (O'Keefe 2006: 178).

Article 8 of the Convention says a limited number of refuges to shelter movable cultural properties and centres containing monuments and immovable cultural properties of 'very great importance' may be registered under the Special Protection regime, given they meet certain criteria (UNESCO 1954), but this provision was not used. According to Article 16 of the Hague Convention, 'cultural property may bear a distinctive emblem so as to facilitate its recognition'. However, Iraq expressed concern in its report on the Convention's implementation that marking cultural sites could expose them to Iranian military aircraft and artillery, which implied Iraq's concern for making cultural heritage an obvious target for the opposing side. The Iraqi authorities could not choose which of the country's more than 10,000 archaeological monuments and historic towns would be added to the list of Special Protection under the Convention since they all were equally significant (UNESCO 1989: 20).

Both a general disregard for the 1954 Hague Convention and challenges to its implementation were brought to light during the Iran-Iraq War. As one of the items on the agenda of UNESCO's general conference in 1987,

Iran pressed for a discussion of UNESCO's role in the Hague Convention's implementation and the protection of the environment and human environment (O'Keefe 2006: 235–237). This debate, as well as the concerns that arose following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and then the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, eventually led to the 1999 Hague Convention's Second Protocol. In this sense, despite limited attention to cultural heritage during the war, this conflict helped sow the seeds for future protection measures.

Intangible heritage

Apart from tangible heritage, intangible heritage, including local languages and oral traditions, social practises, rituals, and traditional knowledge, suffered greatly during the war, but little research has been conducted on this. The war caused massive internal and external displacement from both countries' conflict zones. It is estimated that over 2.5 million Iranians were compelled to flee (Salimi 2015: 44). A substantial population from the border areas of Iraq was also forced to relocate. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 200,000 Iraqi refugees fled to Iran in a process that started in the 1970s as a result of prior hostilities (Redden 2003). Also, about 23,000 people migrated from Iran to Iraq, including ethnic Kurds and Arabs (Kessler 2002). Such large-scale migrations have profound and frequently neglected repercussions on cultural and social institutions, as well as the intangible heritage of societies. Salimi used a case study on immigrants from the border town of Sarpol Zahab (Iran), who were mostly speakers of different dialects of the Kurdish language, to demonstrate how forced migrations had substantial linguistic and cultural effects, both on those who became refugees in Iraq and for families who migrated to other cities in Iran (Salimi 2015). After the war, the Islamic Republic invested in promoting war tourism similar to Shiite pilgrimages. Many battlefields were transformed into tourist sites for state-organised tours known as 'Rahian-e Noor' (travellers of the light) to propagate the official perspective and ideology regarding the war (Sajjadi *et al.* 2021; Zandi 2020).

Discussion

In addition to horrific human losses, the eight-year Iran-Iraq War had a devastating impact on the two countries' cultural heritage. The complete destruction of some historical city centres as a result of occupation or direct conflict, damage to ancient sites as a result of shelling and landscape alteration for defensive purposes, damage to museums and their evacuation and long-term closure, and damage to a number of iconic monuments are all part of the toll of this war. Furthermore, enormous forced migration had a significant impact on the tangible and intangible

heritage of the populations living in conflict zones. For many years after the war, the contamination of ancient landscapes with landmines and unexploded ammunition continued to make protection and assessment of these locations impossible. The environment was adversely impacted by everything from widespread marine pollution to changes in water resource management.

However, compared to conflicts before and after, this war differed in that cultural heritage destruction did not arise as a prominent issue, neither between the participants, despite their opposing ideological positions, nor with the international community. Despite the Sunni versus Shia context, shrines in Iran were largely not targeted, nor *vice versa*. Even Baathist Iraq was willing to use Islamist propaganda when it was needed, as in Saddam's fascination with and comparison to Saladin, the famous medieval Muslim sultan and conqueror of Jerusalem (Sayfo 2017; Toth 1992). The conflict was a local war between two regional powers, with much-shared heritage and history. Determining the reason for this apparent lack of concern with cultural heritage is crucial, as it may explain why it has become a significant issue in other conflicts.

One issue that has been raised is that while the Iran-Iraq War was between two sovereign states, most of the other recent conflicts have been at least portrayed as something else –insurgency, interventions by the US/world community as policemen, or regime change. This may have led to big differences in the type of moral justification felt necessary to allow war. Later conflicts, including the US-led invasion, had to stress their legality, following the law, liberating people - so regardless of actual impacts, had to be clear they held the moral high ground by claiming to protect heritage. Although Samuel Huntington's thesis on the *Clash of Civilizations* faced significant criticism, including from Edward Said (Said 2014), this perspective remained a part of political discourse and military training in the US and parts of the West during the 21st-century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the 'War on Terror' (Dunn 2006; Kurth 2010). The situation was different again by the time Daesh emerged. Daesh were specifically fighting a cultural war, and one where the western (esp UNESCO) response effectively encouraged the targeting of heritage, and the consequent escalation in the rhetoric of protecting heritage.

Heritage was not only weaponised by both sides of the later conflicts in the 21st century, with destruction and protection serving as two sides of a propaganda war, but where there was an effective heritage arms race. Cultural protection is weaponised as much as heritage protection, insofar as its destroyers are demonised in the propaganda war (Clack *et al.* 2023; Dunkley and Clack 2023). Arguments that the way to persuade the

combatants to protect archaeology is to convince them that cultural heritage can be a force multiplier is a risky strategy as it instrumentalises heritage in the most direct way possible, although this does not negate the spirit of the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflict. One of the key differences with the subsequent wars in MENA and Afghanistan was the direct military intervention of Coalition forces or the high probability of it in the wars of the third millennium. It can be argued that therefore the issue of cultural property protection (CPP) in the Iran-Iraq War was not of 'strategic value' from the point of view of the superpowers, as CPP is considered part of a military mission success (Berends 2020).

Despite the severe damage to cultural heritage, there are various reasons why, unlike in a number of other MENA conflicts, heritage protection during the Iran-Iraq War did not become a major worldwide concern. Except for UNESCO's restricted and official reactions to remind the parties of their Hague Convention's obligations, no other substantial international reaction was made, nor has much research or publication been undertaken since. The context of this conflict, in the closing years of the Cold War, was completely different from the subsequent wars in MENA. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran quickly shifted from a close ally to one of America's main adversaries. Iraq, under Saddam Hussein's rule, never became a trusted friend of the United States not least because of his tight relationship with the Soviet Union, despite Iraq's conflict with Iran, although US policy shifted after the war began to support the Iraqi regime with intelligence, satellite images, and tactical planning (Galen Carpenter and Innocent 2007: 68; Sterner 1984: 129). It is impossible to say whether the destruction of heritage in two countries not allied with the West went unreported for this reason or not. However, having no direct engagement with either participant may have contributed to this undue disregard.

Destruction caused by the military occupation of Iraq in 2003 was explicitly attributed to the invading forces' failure, although the coalition forces promised to bring 'the light of liberation' to the lives of Iraqis.⁷ As a result, it was expected that the Western academic community and cultural heritage professionals would uniformly call for the preservation of Iraq's heritage. During the Syrian conflict, the potential of military intervention through UN troops to protect heritage sites was also widely discussed (Gerstenblith 2022). Hamilakis argues that the collaboration of heritage professionals with US and UK military forces, particularly following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, resulted in a type of military-

⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins' Eve-of-Battle Speech, 19 March 2003. Available at: <https://www.royal-irish.com/stories/lieutenant-colonel-tim-collins-eve-of-battle-speech> (accessed 20 May 2024).

archaeology, which increasingly makes war appear consequence-free by legitimising it as heritage protection in the form of a neo-colonial project, which in turn risks naturalising the whole process of warfare (Hamilakis 2009).

The massive propagandistic destruction of heritage in recent MENA conflicts, widely covered by the Western mainstream and social media, also helped significantly to elevate the issue on a worldwide scale. Images of ISIS destruction in Palmyra, Nineveh, and other locations were broadcast at the same rate, if not more frequently, than images of civilian victims. These ancient sites were usually areas that Western audiences had some knowledge of and sympathy for, more than the locally valued heritage. Such media attention, prompted by intentional destruction, causes the allocation of resources for their protection and reconstruction (Matthes 2018). The rise of social media has been a massive change since the 1980s but was not significant in the region during the invasion of Iraq, and only really came into its own in the Arab Spring and subsequently the ISIS/Daesh issue (where it was deployed by all sides). The change in mainstream media occurs before that – both with the arrival of CNN and a much more constant frontline visual reporting, and the emergence of al-Jazeera (launched in 2006) as a Middle Eastern news source. Limited access to traditional media, along with the absence of social media, the Internet, and open-access satellite imagery during the Iran-Iraq War, which served an important function in monitoring and informing the state of cultural heritage during the recent MENA conflicts, limited coverage of heritage destruction.

Most of Iran's cultural ties with the West were lost following the Islamic Revolution, including the majority of joint archaeological activities. This was also one of the reasons why the widespread destruction of cultural heritage was not reported. Eugenio Galdieri (1925-2010), an Italian architect who worked for many years in Isfahan as the head of ISMEO (Italian Institute for the Middle and the Far East), once told Bijan Rouhani that he only learned about the bombing of Isfahan's Jame Mosque when one of his former Iranian colleagues phoned him from Isfahan, telling him his child (the mosque – by referring to his long-term research and restoration there) was killed. In Iraq, the activities of some Western institutions and missions such as the *German Archaeological Institute* (Van Ess 2010: 200) and the *British School of Archaeology in Iraq* (Shepperson 2018) continued with many restrictions and sometimes with interruptions.

Although professionals from Iran's Cultural Heritage Organisation and Iraq's State Board of Antiquities worked hard to safeguard cultural heritage within

their means, the conflict seriously harmed both organisations' financial and administrative capacities. Iran, for example, inscribed around 706 monuments and sites on the national heritage list between 1972 and 1981. But, between 1981 and 1984, the number was cut to 71, then to 18 and 9 in the following years, and finally to zero at the end of the war (Pazooki and Shadmehr 2005).

They did not receive any significant international support for their emergency response. By comparison, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, several international organisations and funds had given more than US\$5 million to the emergency response to Ukrainian cultural heritage by the end of 2022, in less than a year. The amounts raised by UNESCO for Iraq following Daesh's destruction have been more. The US sidelining of the UN further helped UNESCO take the moral high ground. Many of these specialised international organisations, such as ALIPH and Cultural Emergency Response, did not exist during the Iran-Iraq War and, despite the widespread destruction of cultural heritage, the conflict did not compel the establishment of such structures at that time.

In addition to external factors, save for the work of government specialist agencies, there was no significant activity by civil society and NGOs in either Iran or Iraq for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage. The severely restricted political environment in both countries rendered any activity outside of official and government boundaries nearly impossible, and no criticism of the war, or emphasis of its negative aspects, was accepted. The Iran-Iraq War was far more existential than the later conflicts, so criticism could not be tolerated. In Iran, the revolutionary leadership still viewed cultural heritage, particularly pre-Islamic periods, with mistrust, and hence heritage preservation was not a priority during the war. Only after the end of the war with and the start of the 'Reconstruction Era' (*Doran e Sazandegi*) from the mid-90s, was a new movement for the protection and recognition of cultural heritage born, which caused the formation of a wave of cultural heritage NGOs in Iran (Mozaffari 2015). In Iraq, due to subsequent wars and military interventions, the formation of NGOs and civil societies was postponed, but finally, popular movements for heritage recognition and protection emerged, although it was affected by political and sectarian purposes (Kathem *et al.* 2022).

Due to the conflicts and instability that continued in Iraq, Iraqi experts did not find the opportunity to fully research the negative effects of the Iran-Iraq War on cultural heritage. In Iran too, although there was a period of relative opening of the social and political space after the war, this issue was not taken into

account, and investigating its reasons still requires research.

Conclusion

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century and greatly affected cultural heritage. However, neither during this war nor after, was much attention paid to the cultural heritage destruction of these two countries. During the war, heritage protection was not a primary priority for the parties engaged. Equally, there was very limited international response to the need for protection of cultural heritage, or the destruction of historic cities and urban spaces, museums, and ancient sites. In contrast to subsequent wars in MENA, it did not make to the headlines of the international media and Western audiences.

Military occupation by Coalition forces or the possibility of direct intervention is one of the factors that distinguishes later MENA conflicts from the Iran-Iraq war. The absence of a 'strategic value' in cultural property protection for any superpower, due to their lack of direct military involvement, was a key contributory factor. There was no targeting of the global mainstream media and their audiences and so the deliberate propaganda destruction of cultural heritage was not present in this war. On the Iranian side, especially in the early period after the Islamic Revolution, cultural heritage was viewed with suspicion by the revolutionaries and some segments of the population. Its association with the monarchical past made it difficult for Iranian heritage specialists to emphasise the importance of its protection and promotion. The lack of digital communication and monitoring technologies was another factor contributing to poor reporting of cultural heritage destruction during the Iran-Iraq War. The absence of independent and robust civil societies for the protection, promotion, and monitoring of cultural heritage in either of these two countries, left this to governmental agencies severely constrained by resources and increasingly isolated from the international community.

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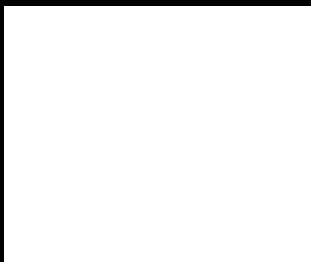
The contributions in this volume, an output of the University of Oxford's Endangered Cultural Heritage of the Global South (ECHGS) Hub, speak to some fundamental questions about the reporting of heritage destruction: who is reporting, what is being reported and how, and what are the implications of such reporting? Given that cultural heritage can serve as both a trigger and a casualty of conflict, the relentless flow of reporting from news outlets and social media and user-generated content has consequences. The complex and evolving relationships between communities, media, human rights issues and heritage can also serve to endanger and safeguard identities in the present as well as the tangible and intangible legacies of the past. This volume explores these topics through a diversity of perspectives, including from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The collection culminates with the 'Oxford Recommendations', an ethical reporting framework recommended for use by journalists and others confronted by such issues.



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