

Global privatized power

Heritage politics and private military contractors in Iraq

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Abstract: The practice of archaeologists and other heritage specialists to embed with the US military in Iraq has received critical attention from anthropologists. Scholars have highlighted the dire consequences of such a partnership for cultural heritage protection by invoking the imperialist dimension of archaeological knowledge production. While critical of state power and increasingly of militarized para-state actors like the self-proclaimed Islamic State, these accounts typically eclipse other forms of collaboration with non-state organizations, such as private military and security companies (PMSCs). Focusing on the central role of private contractors in the context of heritage missions in Iraq since 2003, I demonstrate that the war economy's exploitative regime in regions marked by violent conflict is intensified by the growth of the military-industrial complex on a global scale. Drawing on data from interviews conducted with archaeologists working in the Middle East, it becomes clear how archaeology and heritage work prop up the coloniality of power by tying cultural to economic forms of control.

Keywords: coloniality of power, globalization, heritage, Iraq, military, political economy

The privatization of war

The world is a slanted playing field. The circuits of capitalism are anything but circular, instead forming a lopsided matrix that thrives on military control and economic exploitation. The US-led war in Iraq was deeply embedded in this matrix, driven as it was by a desire for profit and the private expropriation of resources. The notorious blurring of the boundaries between state agencies and private businesses—a symptom of late capitalism—is also illustrated by the increasing reliance of the US government on private contractors

for its military operations. The outsourcing of military and security tasks to private companies has made the US-led war in Iraq “the most privatized in American military history” (Miller 2010). The various ways in which the private security sector is entangled with state interests underscores more than anything the validity of the notion of a US military-industrial complex. It also highlights how the expansion of capitalism is facilitated by violent military encounters, which not only affect political regimes but seep into the crevices of all spheres of life, including cultural traditions, histories, and heritages.



When the US government first reacted to the destruction of cultural heritage sites in the wake of the Iraq War, sending archaeologists and other specialists into the field, anthropologists variously criticized collaboration with the military (e.g., González 2007, 2009; Hamilakis 2003; Teijgeler 2008). One of the main points of contention was the notion that this partnership contributed to a form of imperialism that sought political control over the country's cultural resources, specifically its heritage and history (Lutz 2006; Pollock 2003; Scham 2001). But scholars have yet to investigate the degree to which the economic interests of the US state and, more important, of the private military industry figure into practices of heritage protection and archaeological work in Iraq. This omission is curious insofar as cultural imperialism thrives on neoliberal practices of commodification and privatization of cultural heritage. What is more, the assistance provided to build up Iraq after the war, including the restoration of the country's major archaeological and cultural heritage sites, took advantage of Paul Bremer's call for "an open economy" (Smith 2005: 178), which sought to liberalize foreign investment and expose the country to the profit-gouging strategies of private companies.

As the US government did not work exclusively with military forces to accompany heritage experts into Iraq after the country's invasion, the two main companies that provided security for archaeologists between 2003 and 2011 were the private contractors Blackwater and Triple Canopy. Blackwater, whose name was later changed to XeServices and Academi, has become infamous due to a high-profile incident in 2007 when employees of the corporation killed 17 civilians, including women and children, in Baghdad's Nisoor Square. As a result of the unprovoked shooting, the company's operating license for Iraq has not been renewed, and earlier this year four former Blackwater security guards received long-term prison sentences for voluntary manslaughter in a federal ruling. But Blackwater was not the only firm implicated in acts of wanton violence

during the US occupation of Iraq (Scahill 2007). At the time, numerous contractors all over the country engaged in "reckless conduct," including "extralegal actions" carried out on behalf of the US state (Scahill 2010: 22). In a Congressional Service Research Report from 2009, a number of companies, including Triple Canopy, were accused of "shooting civilians, using excessive force, being insensitive to local customs or beliefs, or otherwise behaving inappropriately" (Schwartz 2009: n.p.).

Given that discussions of archaeological work in conflict-ridden Iraq tend to highlight how archaeologists embed with the military—something the professionals I spoke to have described as "necessity" rather than "choice"—the role of private military and security companies (PMSCs), many of which continue to operate in the service of heritage missions, requires scrutiny (Hamilakis 2009; Teijgeler 2009, 2011).¹ This is no less important today than it was more than a decade ago when the United States and its allies invaded Iraq. The activities of private contractors in the region highlight particular and persistent problems of super-modern conflict, such as the privatization of the security sector, and they seriously compromise the sovereignty of the states that are parties to a conflict. Government contractors are, after all, not simply supplements to state power that offer defensive security services, even if companies such as Blackwater portray themselves "as a patriotic extension of the U.S. military" (Scahill 2006: 11). Many firms provide a variety of services that go far beyond personal security and logistical support, ranging "from routine military tasks to contract oversight to rural development" (Miller 2005), and they can include the maintenance and operation of weapons systems or prisoner detention even after a conflict has been officially declared over (Isenberg 2012). The fact that archaeologists and heritage professionals choose to rely on the services of private contractors inscribes the practices of heritage management within a global regime of power that contributes to the perpetuation and proliferation of the military-capitalist matrix.

Archaeology and security in Iraq

In the early years of the Iraq War, scholars identified the US military and other coalition forces as the primary (though not exclusive) providers of security to archaeologists. Since the beginning of the occupation, however, heritage specialists have collaborated extensively with PMSCs. Government officials as well as researchers have repeatedly stated that heritage protection in the country was extremely challenging if not inconceivable without the use of personal security. This situation has only intensified since the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq in late 2011, and once again with the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and its targeted destruction of sites of “idolatry” (a term used to designate not only pre-Islamic sites but also cultural heritage claimed by non-Sunni Muslims as well as non-Muslim religious groups). In an article published by Reuters in early 2014, the British archaeologist Jane Moon talked about her recent fieldwork in Ur in southern Iraq. “We have to have security wherever we go,” she told a journalist, “but hey, you know it’s worth it. This place is fantastic” (Lyon 2014). The nature of the security services provided and the extent to which their use involves partnerships with notorious private contractors such as Blackwater or Triple Canopy is, however, still often shrouded in mystery and silence (Price 2009).

While we know that the US government contracted with a number of private-sector companies to provide logistical support and security to archaeological expeditions visiting Iraq as early as 2003, we rarely learn who these contractors were. Yet researchers today increasingly hire private security companies or private bodyguards instead of military or police protection, and supply for these services is ample. During the Iraq War, private soldiers or gun-for-hire constituted the second-largest armed contingent after the US forces. According to the US Department of Defense (DOD), almost 90 percent of them were armed (Schwartz 2009). At the height of the US military surge in 2008, when the number of US troops in Iraq peaked

at 157,800 (Belasco 2009), private contractors employed 180,000 people in Iraq (including soldiers as well as other workers, such as translators, drivers, cooks, etc.), thus constituting an armed force larger than the US military contingent in the country (Risen 2008). Since 2009, the year when overall troop levels in Iraq began to significantly decrease, statistics on PMSCs show a more or less steady rise in the number of armed contractors. As late as January 2013, there were still around 12,500 private security contractors operating in the country (Lamothe 2013).

Armed security

Available statistics provide only scant information on the role of PMSCs in heritage missions and archaeological research projects, however. Interviews I conducted with several colleagues, who have worked in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 or still have ongoing research projects in the country, suggest a regular reliance of archaeologists on private security services during field trips to Iraq. My findings indicate that several private security firms were deployed in the framework of USAID programs and cultural heritage initiatives, which the US State Department carried out in collaboration with North American research institutions. The State University of New York at Stony Brook, for example, contracted with at least one private security company, Neareast Resources, in the context of a HEAD project, short for “Higher Education and Development for Archaeology and Environmental Health Research.”² According to its website, Neareast Resources has a subdivision called Neareast Security Services (NESS), which provides “armed security” in a “difficult and dangerous time” in Iraq, for both public institutions (including government organizations) and private businesses.³

Dr. John Curtis, who traveled to Iraq in 2003 and 2004 in his capacity as the Keeper of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, also relied on two private security contractors during his trips—Pilgrim Elite

(which today calls itself Blue Mountain Group) and Control Risks Group (Curtis 2009). Pilgrim Elite, a private firm based in Wales, hit the news in 2012 after it became known that the US government had hired the company to protect its consulate in Benghazi, Libya (Ackerman and Shachtman 2012). Media outlets reported that just months before the attack on the consulate in September 2012, which resulted in the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stephens and three other State Department and CIA personnel, the United States had signed a contract with the company for almost US\$800,000 (Zakaria et al. 2012). The second private security firm that Curtis traveled with in Iraq, the Control Risks Group, also contracts with the US government and was apparently involved in “pitched battles in Iraq” (Mathieu and Dearden 2006: 5).

In addition to providing security to government-sponsored research projects or to individual archaeologists, other PMSCs active in Iraq are hired by private heritage organizations, such as the World Monuments Fund or The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII). TAARII is an organization founded in 1989, which coordinates visits of its members to Iraq through a local bureau in Baghdad. As one interviewee relayed, this bureau provides security for researchers who plan trips to archaeological sites, museums, universities, and state offices all over the country, hiring what has been described to me as “local”—that is, Iraqi—security companies. Other colleagues too have indicated to me that more and more archaeological teams now comfortably trust in what they call “local security,” and they see this increasing reliance on private contractors as a positive indicator that the direct violence exerted by the state and the military in Iraq has overall lessened (see also Schiller and Fouron 2003).

Global issues

Although many of the PMSCs that work in Iraq today do indeed train and hire local people, this does not mean that the companies them-

selves are local firms. Like other global businesses, small private security firms and even individual bodyguards often have unexamined ties to transnational contractors, only a portion of which is American-based. While the employees of private contractors typically include US nationals, firms also hire local nationals and a large number of individuals from non-coalition countries, such as Chile, Fiji, Nepal, and Nigeria, who are referred to as third-country nationals (TCNs). A separate group of private military and security personnel active in Iraq is composed of expatriates, or coalition nationals, from Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and South Africa, many of whom have previous experience working in law enforcement. As a consequence, as the UN Working Group on Mercenaries has noted, it is extremely difficult to assess to what extent private contractors that are registered and categorized as Iraqi “are in fact owned and managed by Iraqis” (DeWinter-Schmitt 2013: 25). And whereas Memorandum 17 of the Coalition Provisional Authority resolved that all private military and security companies “must be registered with the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MoI) by June 1, 2005” (Palou-Loverdos and Armendáriz 2011: 34), the website of the US Embassy in Iraq indicates that most of these registered security providers are global companies, such as Triple Canopy, which operate under permits from the Iraqi government. Even after 2011, when many international contractors active in Iraq were replaced with Iraq-based firms, an independent research report has found that the majority of local companies are still managed by foreign nationals or subcontracted by transnational companies, even if the staff on the ground is composed of local nationals (DeWinter-Schmitt 2013).

This training of local security forces is actively supported by the US government, which considers it “an important element in DOD’s counterinsurgency strategy” (Schwartz 2009: 6). The precedent for this practice was set during the Vietnam War as part of a stratagem of “Vietnamization” that involved the training of local security forces (Turse 2013; Young

1991). Similarly, during the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, the United States “used a private security contractor to train Croat troops to conduct operations against Serbian troops” (del Prado 2010). But local nationals are also cheaper to hire, because they are typically paid only a fraction of the salary that personnel from other countries, especially countries in the Global North, receive. The company Blue Mountain Group, for example, which had accompanied the archaeologist Curtis to Iraq in the early years of the war, relied mainly on local nationals for its operations in Libya. As a news report from October 2012 states, the company kept staff costs low by conducting no more than a “casual” recruiting and screening process; some of the individuals who were hired, such as a local teacher, had “never held a gun” in their lives (Zakaria et al. 2012). Indeed, according to the US government, some of the gross violations of human rights that occurred in the context of private contractor operations are due to “poor contract management” (Miller 2010). In the case of Iraq, this led to what a report by the Center for Research on Globalization lists as “summary executions, acts of torture, cases of arbitrary detention; of trafficking of persons; serious health damages caused by their activities; as well as attempts against the right of self-determination” (del Prado 2010).

That the cost effectiveness of hiring local staff can clearly override concerns for proper conduct is also echoed in a memorandum issued by US Army General Raymond Odierno, which states that employment of Iraqis does not only help “eliminate the root causes of the insurgency—poverty and lack of economic opportunity” but also “saves money” (Schwartz 2009: 6). The lower wages that local employees receive for carrying out the exact same tasks as their Western colleagues is indicative of an exploitative global hierarchy, which reserves “inferior” wages for “inferior” people (Starzmann 2012: 411) while allowing companies to increase their profit margin considerably. At this point in time, the annual market revenue of the private security and military industry is estimated to

be over 100 billion US dollars. This money does not exclusively stay with the companies, however, but is used to establish ties with military and financial institutions as well as private businesses worldwide, thus creating “a cartel uniting high tech weaponry (BAE systems, United Defence Industries, Lockheed Martin), with speculative financiers (Lazard Frères, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank), together with raw material cartels (British Petroleum, Shell Oil) with on the ground, private military and security companies” (del Prado 2010).

In comparison with the low salaries of local staff, as well as of certain US military personnel, the relatively high payments for US or coalition nationals employed by PMSCs suggest that their status closely resembles that of mercenaries. While the definition of a mercenary as stipulated in international conventions is strict and relies on cumulative criteria, it appears that employees of private contractors are often motivated by business interests and the desire for personal gain. It is noteworthy that, even if they cannot be considered mercenaries in the legal sense as defined by the Geneva Convention, the staff of private contractors resemble mercenaries insofar as they are typically “promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of the Party” (article 47 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Convention).

Local concerns

Notwithstanding the fact that PMSCs constitute important nodes in a global network of military industrial interests, archaeologists continue to collaborate with private security contractors, and they do so despite the extralegal tactics used by these companies. Indeed, what practitioners of heritage management and archaeology often ignore is that private military and security firms are largely positioned outside the reach of judicial frameworks that are supposed to govern in the context of violent conflict. Although the

personnel of global corporations are technically required to respect international law, state institutions only minimally regulate the private security sector and, as a consequence, the politico-legal status of PMSCs remains highly ambiguous (Elsa 2010). As private contractors operate in a *de facto* legal vacuum, cases in which employees of PMSCs commit gross human rights abuses all too frequently remain without judicial consequences (ICRC Resource Center 2013). Yet, as long as the security personnel accompanying archaeological teams are, or appear, unarmed because they do not openly carry heavy weapons, they are often not officially recognized as members of PMSCs. Those who hire private security may prefer to consider the armed employees of such companies civilians as long as they merely work for an archaeological team and, at the moment of their employment, do not formally assume combat functions.

What is more, individuals working in the heritage sector often recount positive experiences of contracting with private security firms, arguing that they could actually prove “helpful” in interactions with local people. They attribute this to the fact that the companies’ staff members tend to wear plain clothes, not uniforms like US military personnel, which supposedly makes them “less threatening” to Iraqi civilians. But the appearance of private military and security companies was, and still is, not always unthreatening. According to archaeologists who worked in Iraq between 2003 and 2008, it was not until after the Blackwater incident of September 2007 that the culture of private contractors in the country changed dramatically. Since then, many PMSCs try to keep a low profile. After 2007, a colleague told me, employees of private security firms operating in Iraq were suddenly “painted up like civilians,” thus highlighting the ability of many contractors to switch effortlessly between active and passive security roles. Company mottos, such as Triple Canopy’s “Assess, Avert, Achieve,” are also meant to suggest that the services these contractors provide are more about self-defense than actual maneuver operations.

Despite being perceived by the archaeologists I interviewed as “respectful and interested,” private military and security companies do not usually receive the kind of cultural awareness training that most US military personnel stationed in Iraq had to undergo (Emberling 2008). Once successfully established in a country shaken by extreme levels of violence, private contractors often engage in aggressive conduct toward local communities. Even if state-directed forms of violence may have decreased in Iraq with the withdrawal of US troops, this suggests that levels of privatized violence would have risen in those regions where PMSCs are deployed. As recent as 2010, heavily armed contractors were involved in the killing of unarmed civilians in Iraq, which “stirred anger among locals” (Miller 2010; see also del Prado 2011; Schwartz and Swain 2011). The two major companies that have in the past been implicated in such violent conduct—Blackwater and Triple Canopy (which merged into a joint enterprise with Academi, Constellis Holdings, in June 2014)—have allegedly provided security for archaeological teams working with the US State Department in Iraq up until 2011.

Even though the US military ceased its active combat role on the ground in Iraq in 2011, the US government is all but removed from political interventions in the Middle East. As President Barack Obama has authorized the deployment of 450 more American troops in June of this year to aid the Iraqi military in battling the self-proclaimed Islamic State, it is likely that contracts between the US state and PMSCs are to be renewed or extended rather than terminated. Hence it is paramount that we carefully interrogate the political motivations attached to work in the name of heritage and cultural property protection.

The heritage salvage missions in Syria that the US government has co-sponsored in recent years are a case in point: In August 2014, the US Department of State and the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR) signed a US\$600,000 cooperative agreement to launch the Syrian Heritage Initiative (SHI). The SHI,

whose goal it is “to document, protect, and preserve the cultural heritage of war-torn Syria,” seems to be not so much a reaction to the civil war in the country as it constitutes a direct answer to the acts of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.⁴ Run by eminent international scholars, the SHI was founded in the late summer of 2014, that is, more than three years after the first political uprisings and armed encounters between Syrian government forces and various rebel groups had occurred. Indeed, by the time the US government and ASOR signed their agreement, tensions between the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Army of the Mujahideen, the Free Syrian Army, and the Islamic Front had risen considerably. Although reports on the activities of PMSCs on the ground in Syria are still missing, such collaboration between supposedly independent academic organizations like ASOR (a nonprofit organization that claims “apolitical” status) and the US State Department take on a different quality when considering the fact that the US government continues to contract with PMSCs.⁵ After all, these private firms do not merely provide relatively inexpensive security for US installations in conflict zones and war-torn regions. Because they also “outsource political risk” (Brannen 2014), they have the power to dissolve any sense of political responsibility in the US state just as much as among heritage professionals.

The globalization of conflict

Even though not all archaeologists may come into direct contact with such notorious transnational contractors like Blackwater, heritage work in Iraq undeniably takes place within the context of a violent conflict that is increasingly privatized for the gain and profit of a military-industrial complex (Hamilakis 2009). Archaeology and cultural heritage management in Iraq are deeply inscribed into a network of power that relies on the violation of human rights, including the exploitation of local labor by private contractors.

These profit-making strategies are directly indicative of what Anibal Quijano has termed the “coloniality of power” (2000), which highlights that the war against Iraq, while resting on a colonialist foundation, fits perfectly into a model of capitalist exploitation. The specific ways in which private contractors operate in Iraq both violate international humanitarian law and exploit local labor. This observation also suggests that the imperialist dimension of discourses of heritage management and the protection of archaeological sites, which has been stressed by other scholars, is not merely an issue of cultural control. Of course, it is true that due to its articulation of hegemonic narratives about the history of Iraq, archaeology has been a major conduit in the establishment and legitimization of the cultural dominance of the “West” over the “Oriental Other.” Scholars have, for example, long recognized notions such as the “cradle of civilization” as products of colonial discourses that lie at the root of practices of political oppression and dispossession (Bahrani 1998; Meskell 2005). However, the power of these discourses, while pervasive and insistent, lies not in their cultural imaginary alone but in their conjunction with economic forms of control. Quijano indicates as much by insisting that the cultural forms of domination that we can witness today are not only grounded in but have indeed outlived the existence of the colony. Their persistence is the result of a geopolitical model of power that has developed along two structurally linked axes of domination—racism and capitalism—and culminated in what we recognize today as the uneven process of globalization, which collapses race and poverty (Mignolo 2009).

In light of these phenomena, some scholars have expressed their concern about the extralegal conduct of PMSCs in a “Declaration on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict” proposed to the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) during its 2013 meeting in Jordan. The declaration urges both governments and private contractors to make an effort “to ensure that the prin-

ciples of international law in general, and such international law concerning cultural property protection in particular, are observed by such companies.”⁶ However, as long as archaeologists continue to rely on militarized power under the guise of heritage protection, they simply cannot claim distance from the targeted acts of violence that PMSCs perform on the ground, often with the help of the very employees who also work for archaeological teams.

With the formation of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and its recent advances throughout Iraq and Syria, archaeologists have begun to voice concern over the protection of cultural heritage in the Middle East once more. This time, however, the discussion focuses less on the damage and destruction of heritage sites. The greater threat is located in the illicit trade in antiquities, which, some scholars worry, could turn into “a source of funding for terrorists” (Bahrani 2014). Archaeologists who continue their work in Iraq are yet again faced with a tough question—whether to rely on the US military or on private firms to provide security during their fieldwork. It may not be long before they choose to renew or strengthen their collaboration with PMSCs in the urgent defense of heritage. What this logic of urgency for heritage protection in the context of armed conflict eclipses, however, is how the collaboration with private companies fits perfectly within the parameters of a military-capitalist matrix. The unquestioned reliance on private military contractors has contributed considerably to the creation of the kind of disrupted post-conflict landscape we see in Iraq today and which constitutes the context for contemporary archaeological work in the region.

The outcomes of this work are politically far-reaching. As transnational corporations extend their reach into Iraq, global processes take local life hostage (see also Flusty 2004). This means that even if archaeologists find themselves collaborating with organizations that are seemingly fully localized—as the presence of “Iraqi” security companies might suggest—they are never situated outside the grasp of a global-

ized and privatized war. Under late capitalism, power is no longer circumscribed geographically but distributed globally, absorbing any locale in which the corporate interests of powerful states and private businesses manifest (see also Dussel 2000). In its various manifestations, it is precisely such global privatized power that has produced the kind of local power vacuum that is now being filled by militant organizations like the self-proclaimed Islamic State and which invites Western interventionist political strategies back onto the global playing field.

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Notes

1. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations are taken from a series of semistructured telephone and email interviews I conducted with ten archaeologists based in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, including one

former employee of the US State Department and the US Department of Justice. All interviewees have worked or are currently working on research projects in Iraq.

2. See the USAID-Iraq HEAD's monthly report from June 2004, http://www.stonybrook.edu/usaidhead/04_06.htm.
3. See http://www.neareastresources.com/security_about.htm.
4. See <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/about/mission/>.
5. On ASOR's status, see <http://www.asor.org/about/index.html>.
6. The full text of the declaration is available online: http://kulturgueterschutz.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/kz_kulturgueterschutz/WAC7/Declaration_on_the_Protection.pdf.

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