Archaeologists in Conflict: Empathizing with Which Victims?

Umberto Albarella

Isn’t it true that there have been fearful episodes in human history when prudence and discretion would have just been euphemisms for pusillanimity? When caution was actually cowardice? Isn’t it true [...] that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we [...] overtly take sides?

Arundhati Roy 2001:12

This piece is not about the horrors of war, though perhaps it should be. Millions of pages have been written about that monstrous failure of the human mind that war is. But people have short memories, and often little awareness of what happens beyond their back-gardens. They need to be constantly reminded of what complete collapse of any form of decency and civilised behavior war inevitably brings. This is an extract from an episode occurring during the Second World War, the “just” war, the war that “was worth waging,” according to even some of the most dedicated pacifists among us.

The French colonial troops are on the rampage again. Whenever they take a town or a village, a wholesale rape of the population takes place. Recently all females in the villages of [...] were violated. [...] Today I went to see a girl said to have been driven insane as a result of an attack by a large party [...]. I found her living alone with her mother (who had also been raped a number of times), and in total poverty [...]. She was unable to walk as a result of her physical injuries. [...] At last one had faced the flesh-and-blood reality of the kind of horror that drove the whole female population of Macedonian villages to throw themselves from cliffs rather than fall in the hands of the advancing Turks. A fate worse than death: it was in fact just that [Lewis 2002:130-1].

There should be a parallel history written not by the war survivors, but rather by those who died or were injured in the body or the mind; those whom we have forgotten or emarginated. If there were, our perception of the progress of human society would be very different. As the US former Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, once said, during war “stuff happens.” Indeed. But unlike Rumsfeld many people of the world are decent enough to object to such “stuff.”

At the last Word Archaeological Congress (WAC) held in Dublin 29 June–4 July 2008 the following resolution, proposed by Yannis Hamilakis and seconded by the writer, was presented at the final plenary session, and eventually approved by a clear majority of the assembly:

The sixth World Archaeological Congress expresses its strong opposition to any unilateral and unprovoked, covert or overt military
action (including air strikes) against Iran by the US government, or by any other government. Such action will have catastrophic consequences for millions of people and will seriously endanger the cultural heritage of Iran and of the Middle East in general. Any differences with Iran (as with any other country) should be resolved through peaceful and diplomatic means.

The Congress also urges its members, all archaeologists and heritage professionals to resist any attempts by the military and governments to be co-opted in any planned military operation, for example by providing advice and expertise to the military on archaeological and cultural heritage matters. Such advice would provide cultural credibility and respectability to the military action. Archaeologists should continue emphasizing instead the detrimental consequences of such actions for the people and the heritage of the area, for the past and the present alike. A universal refusal by archaeologists and others would send the message that such a plan is hugely unpopular amongst cultural professionals as well as the wider public.

The aim of this piece is to explain the ethos behind this resolution and discuss the reasons why the implementation of a close relationship between archaeologists and the military of a country waging war is a matter for concern. Before I delve into these questions a clarification regarding the above resolution is, however, due, as this has already generated much confusion and controversy. The resolution was presented to the WAC plenary session in the form reported above, but the chairman of the meeting, without any previous consultation with the proposers, decided to split it and put the two paragraphs separately to the vote of the plenary session. Both paragraphs were approved with a clear majority, but eventually the WAC executive decided to ditch the second one. Whether the whole resolution represents the view of WAC is therefore a question of perception— is WAC's view best represented by its general assembly or its executive? Whatever is the case, the resolution contributed to place a complex, delicate, and controversial item at the centre of the archaeological agenda; an item of great importance, which feeds on the idea that archaeology is relevant to contemporary political debate.

Forms of collaboration between archaeologists and the military have always existed and, though they have generally been accompanied by various degrees of controversy, none is more delicate than the cooperation of archaeologists with the military of a country involved in a war. This is particularly so when that country is responsible for the beginning of the hostilities. Notorious is the well documented close relationship that some archaeologists had with the Nazi party in Germany, even as the German military was invading large parts of Europe (Arnold and Hassmann1995). Should we regard these archaeologists as scientists working in difficult circumstances or Nazi collaborators? There is probably no general answer to this question and different cases need to be evaluated according to context, circumstances, and individual
attitudes. But the question needs to be raised because, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, no scientist can be regarded to be above politics or without responsibilities towards the wider society.

A much more recent example is represented by the work done by archaeologists in conjunction with the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. To avoid possible misunderstandings it is worth specifying that this case is historically and politically very different from the one mentioned above. Up to the First Gulf War of 1991 many international missions of archaeologists had operated in Iraq, attracted by the rich ancient heritage of that country, and hardly discouraged by the brutal and dictatorial regime under which inevitable control they had to operate. Following the 2003 invasion archaeological work was immediately resumed but mainly in the areas of forensic science and heritage conservation. In fact this latter work began even before the invasion, and consisted, in those early stages, mainly of the provision of maps for the military. These pointed out the location of important archaeological sites that should be spared by the bombing (e.g., see Stone 2005).

Forensic and heritage conservation jobs are of course very different and operate in entirely different contexts, but in this case they had in common the need to work with the protection and logistic supervision of the occupying armies. In other words like many (but not all) journalists working in Iraq these archaeologists had become, in the words of one of them, “embedded,” which led to some dilemmas regarding their level of independency (Teijgeler 2006a). It must not be forgotten that the war in Iraq did not end with the invasion and eventual conquest of Baghdad, and in fact continues to rage as I write. This meant that the archaeologists had to operate in difficult and dangerous conditions and working without protection would have certainly been uncalled for. It is also important to remember that, apart from any ethical considerations, the invasion of Iraq was by many, including the then UN Secretary-General, deemed to be illegal according to international law. This puts the archaeologists in an interesting international legal limbo, as most of their activities were in fact approved if not implemented by the UN itself.

If analyzed without its social and political context there is no reason why the work of archaeologists in Iraq should be regarded as any less than commendable. The terrible damage that was done to the Iraqi heritage by the chaos generated by the invasion and direct military intervention from either side certainly required a rescue plan implemented by professionals. The forensic work was aimed at reconstructing crime scenes as a help in the identification of the culprits, but had also a humanitarian purpose in allowing a sense of closure to all families who had suffered from loss and persecution during the years of Saddam’s regime.

As history teaches us we do not, however, operate without a political context. And it is important to emphasize here that the question which I am raising in this piece is not whether archaeologists should work at all in Iraq, but rather whether they should collaborate with the invading armies. In fact some archaeologists advised the US and UK military without ever setting foot in Iraq.

Rene Teijgeler, a reserve officer of the Dutch Army and a heritage expert, has
written that “it is not the primary task of cultural heritage management to prevent or stop war [...] politicians declare war and soldiers wage war. Nevertheless, what cultural institutions can do is to prepare themselves for the event of war” (Teijger 2006b:133). Factually his statement is certainly correct, but the problem is that such “preparation” means to work with the governments of the countries that have generated the problem in the first instance. To wonder whether this provides an element of legitimacy to a belligerent attitude is certainly a justifiable question to ask. Politicians may well take the decision to declare a war but they need an ethos that is conducive to such action gaining support. Ultimately their aim is the stability of their positions of power and the final prize is re-election. Though archaeologists do not have ultimate responsibility for a war, they do have the opportunity to distance themselves from those who are instrumental in generating it. A just society needs alert intellectuals more than technocrats and the attempt of some scientists of “being accepted merely as professionals and experts, not as critical thinkers who question the ‘regimes of truth’ within which that expert knowledge is deployed” (Hamilakis 2003:107) is concerning.

Peter Stone is a British archaeologist who advised the Ministry of Defence (MoD) regarding the approach the British Army should take to minimise damage to the cultural heritage of Iraq. In the context of discussing his involvement in various plans that were being implemented to stop the looting and damage that followed the earliest phases of the invasion, he wrote:

I attended the meeting at the British Museum on 29 April with some unease: here was the primary museum in the UK positioning itself at the forefront of efforts to assist in the protection and conservation of the cultural heritage in Iraq when it was the — many believe unlawful — actions of the UK Government that had put the cultural heritage at risk in the first place [Stone 2008:939].

Stone’s concern is, however, somewhat puzzling when we consider that he was dealing with a cultural institution that happened to be British but had no responsibility whatsoever in the planning of the war. On the contrary he did not seem to feel the same “unease” about his collaboration with the MoD, an institution that had been instrumental in making the case for war. It is just an example of the inevitable confusion of responsibility that occurs when scientists present themselves merely as professionals or experts, rather than as informed citizen aware of the wider political implications of their actions.

That concern existed regarding the role of archaeologists in the context of war is clear from the robust response that the World Archaeological Congress produced in the occasion of its quadrennial conference that happened to be held just a few months after the Iraq invasion. This is an extract from a press released issued by the WAC President Claire Smith following the fifth World Archaeological Congress in Washington, DC (US):

The invasion and occupation have had tragic consequences for the globally significant archaeological
heritage of Iraq. More importantly, they have resulted in death or injury for thousands, which may well have a detrimental long-term effect for the Iraqi people and environment. The Executive Committee of the World Archaeological Congress, meeting on 27 June [2003] in Washington DC, noted these deep concerns as well as significant concerns relating to requests from the aggressor countries' military forces for archaeologists to provide information and advice concerning the identification and protection of the cultural heritage in Iraq [cited in Hamilakis 2003:109].

Such strong wording is perhaps ironic considering the much more timid approach taken by the WAC executive in the occasion of the last congress (see above). Perhaps sympathy for the pain of the innocents faded away as time passed and the courage of the WAC position took some beating following the increasingly threatening attitude of the established powers.

If the heritage protection work in Iraq obviously required some immediate action, the same level of urgency for the forensic work is more difficult to justify and it is hard not to see it as mainly politically motivated. The earlier forensic evidence is retrieved the better, but considering the circumstances of the Iraq conflict it is hard to see how a few months would have made much difference. Though forensic scientists may have gone to Iraq as entirely independent investigators with no specific political agenda in mind, it would be disingenuous to believe that this was also the case for those who had the power to implement and finance their work. I have the greatest admiration for forensic archaeologists and anthropologists, who typically operate in difficult and emotionally charged circumstances and make their expertise available for the reconstruction of criminal events, which are often of unspeakable brutality ("crimes against humanity" as is often said). There is, however, a tendency to perceive them as pure human right defenders, whose work is above any ethical scrutiny, being as it is ethical by definition. Margaret Cox, a forensic archaeologist and anthropologist who has provided expertise for the excavation of mass graves presumably dated to the years of Saddam’s regime, has written about the socio-political context of her work: “As the world order changes around us, and violations of human rights become common knowledge we respond” (Cox 2003:225). However admirable the work of these scientists is, before procedures for sanctification take place it is probably necessary to scrutinize more closely the circumstances in which it has occurred in Iraq. In a BBC News article Paul Reynolds, the BBC News online world affairs correspondent, mentions that,

the UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw stressed to the Parliament the evils of the Saddam regime and the possibilities for the future. He quoted Professor Margaret Cox, the leader of the British forensic team in Iraq investigating mass graves, so saying that “the Saddam regime was propped up with the bones of the Iraqi people buried beneath its sands” [Reynolds 16th July 2003].

To provide an idea of the media in-
volvement in such propaganda machinery it is worth mentioning that in this same news article—and despite ample evidence that even by then things in Iraq had gone pear-shaped—Reynolds praises Bush and Blair for having “in common a sense of moral rectitude which leads them to seek bold solutions.”

It is easy to see how the, surely well meant, work of forensic archaeologists was being used as part of the war propaganda machine. The importance of this should not be underestimated as in July 2003 the British government was in deep trouble in justifying its support to the invasion of Iraq. The war had generated widespread unease in the population, leading to huge anti-war demonstrations, and there was also substantial opposition in the political world, even within the cabinet. With the various excuses for war having all gradually been proven to be spurious (e.g., the existence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of the Iraqis and the link between the Ba’ath government and Al Qaeda first and foremost) the British government needed to work on the public opinion by concentrating on the only element that was unquestionably true: the brutality of Saddam’s regime. But with people getting gradually sceptical about the words of the government and the prime minister widely perceived to be a liar and a puppet of the Americans, some hard evidence was required, and the forensic scientists were those who could provide it.

Margaret Cox has publicly expressed her opposition to the Iraq war, so her words about “the bones of the Iraqi people” cannot be taken as an attempt to purposefully endorse the action of the British Government. They rather represent an example of a unwise idea of ethics, seen entirely within the boundary of professionalism. In reality there cannot be ethical behavior without political analysis and Margaret Cox’s misguided collaboration with a war party led her to provide some kudos to a war she did not support.

Eventually the work of the forensic scientists in Iraq contributed to accumulate evidence that was used to execute a number of individuals, including Saddam Hussein. Additionally, it helped some of the communities which had been persecuted, the Kurds in particular, to achieve some closure and know more about the fate of their many friends and relatives who had been massacred. We have seen what suspicious circumstances led to such achievement, but it would be unreasonable not to sympathize with the needs of people, such as the Kurds, who had been oppressed for a long time. It would be equally unfair not to have admiration for at least some aspects of the work of the forensic scientists.

Their achievements, however, required dangerous liaisons with governments responsible for an illegal war and protection from an army involved in the invasion of an independent country. Questions therefore need to be asked. Why was the same level of humanitarian concern not applied to the many other countries in the world where equally heinous crimes have been committed and still are committed on a regular basis? It cannot be a chance that most archaeological forensic work has been carried out in countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq, where it was supposed to uncover the dirty work of the enemies of the American and British governments. It is true that some work is also being un-
dertaken in countries where the position of the western powers is more neutral, such as Rwanda or Guatemala, but if the main concern is entirely humanitarian, why are the forensic scientists not risking their lives also in Columbia and Uzbekistan (close allies of the American and British governments) or indeed digging the Afghanistan villages where innocent civilians are regularly killed by American bombs? Why are they not joining forces with the few forensic archaeologists operating in East Timor (Blau and Skinner 2005), a country whose population was decimated with the help of British-made weapons? And why the forensic scientists operating in the Balkans and Iraq get so much institutional support while those trying to uncover the victims of the Spanish Civil War (cf. Gassiot Ballbè et al. 2007) are sidelined and encounter constant obstacles in their work? Finally, shall we see those same forensic scientists currently working in Iraq eventually uncover the bodies of those who were killed by the bombs of the aggressors? The circumstances of many civilian deaths in Iraq are still in need of clarification, and the actual number of victims is still only vaguely known. There seems to be a great amount of necessary work for forensic scientists for years to come, but somehow I suspect that the funding for such work will not be provided quite as promptly.

There are no simple answers to the questions above but they do highlight the need for an open and mature debate within the archaeological world and perhaps wider society. The archaeologists who have “engaged” with the military and whom I criticise in this piece, have given me this opportunity by being prepared to express their positions and ideas openly and therefore by allowing public scrutiny. This is admirable, but, despite much discussion within the World Archaeological Congress, my impression is that in archaeology there has not been the same level of soul searching that has occurred in anthropology. It is interesting for instance to compare the clear condemnation by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) of the so-called US Military’s Human Terrain System Project, which embeds anthropologists in military teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the unwillingness of the World Archaeological Congress executive to condemn cooperation of archaeologists with the military in the case of a hypothetical attack on Iran.

An extremely insightful contribution to the topic has been provided by Hugh Gusterson, a researcher specialised in the analysis of the political culture of nuclear weapons. Gusterson (2007:164) has suggested that anthropology, and I dare to add “archaeology,” was perceived by some to play to the War on Terror the same role as physics had to the Cold War. This has been an opportunity on which many anthropologists and archaeologists have been prepared to jump. Gusterson (p.165), however, points out that:

Militarism […] is a life world with its own escalatory logic that takes different forms while displaying fundamental underlying unities. Despite these underlying unities, local processes of militarization are invariably defended as defensive reactions to someone else’s militarism from which they therefore differ in moral character.

He suggests that a more valuable role for anthropologists is the unmasking of
such militaristic ideological process of legitimization. Ultimately his key point is that “anthropology has much theoretical and empirical work to do to illuminate militarism, the source of so much suffering in the world today. If we sell our skills to the national security state, we will just become part of the problem” (Gusterson 2007:165).

It is my point here that archaeology has the knowledge and ability to fulfil a similar role alongside anthropology, particularly for its ability to provide a time depth to our understanding of human behavior. When we are too closely involved with the activities of organizations and/or institutions which have specific economic and political interests we run the risk of losing our intellectual independence. Mourad (2007) has provided a useful historical account of how archaeologists have often operated as servants of various empires during centuries of Near Eastern conflicts. At the same time Ronayne (2007, 2008) has shown how we can become subservient to established powers, not only by operating within the military machine, but also by working within the remit of the big business. The militarization and commercialization of archaeology are, in many respects, different elements of the same problem.

At the last World Archaeological Congress in Dublin Peter Stone gave an excellent, clear, and honest account of his involvement with the British Ministry of Defence in the wake of the invasion of Iraq (Stone 2008). He justified his involvement explaining that he felt that it was his duty to do all he could to protect the heritage of Iraq under circumstances that were beyond his control and that in fact he disapproved of (like Margaret Cox he was also opposed to the war). As staff of the MoD put to him, the bombing of Iraq was “the only game in town," and therefore a salvage operation was the only card he could play. At the end of his talk I asked Peter if he would have provided the same level of collaboration had Britain decided to attack Denmark rather than Iraq. After some hesitation he answered “yes.” It was of course the only answer he could provide as any others would have implied that his actions were qualified by his political position regarding the attack on Iraq. I was just exploring what level of political and humanitarian madness such professional advice was prepared to embrace. Had time allowed it I would have gone further and asked what his position would have been had the target of the bombing been not Iraq or Denmark but his own town. Would he have tried to persuade the army to spare the local church despite knowing that many of his friends and family would have died as a consequence of the bombing? I am not sure that he would have also answered positively to this further question. This just shows that ultimately our preparedness to “engage” with the military is a measure of our level of empathy with the victims. Though I understand many of the arguments brought forward by the “pro-engagement” lobby in archaeology, and I care as much they do for the past heritage of Iraq, my repulsion of war is such that in no way would I have been prepared to give any level of legitimization to a military that was in the process of initiating such insane action. We should perhaps have perceived the people of Iraq as far away friends, whom one day we could have met again, and our attitude would have then been different. In 2003 I wrote
an article on the reaction of archaeologists to the war in Iraq, which I concluded with the words “Iraq was attacked with the consent of the archaeological community” (Albarella 2003:2). Five years and almost 100,000 civilian deaths later I still see no reason to change my mind.

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Notes
1. I personally heard this in the occasion of a talk that Margaret Cox gave as part of a session entitled: “An eternal conflict? Archaeology and social responsibility in the post-Iraq world” which I organized as part of the Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference held in Sheffield in December 2005.
2. Open discussion within WAC may in fact now be a thing of the past, as proven by the recent decision of the WAC executive to censor messages sent to the WAC email list.
3. According to the latest figure (9th December 2008) provided by the Iraq Body Count http://www.iraqbodycount.org/ since the beginning of the war there have been between 89,600 and 97,828 violent civilian deaths in Iraq.

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Forum Response

Archaeology in Zones of Armed Conflict

Susan Malin-Boyce and Michael K. Trimble

Rather than to dwell on the disingenuousness of his opening comments to not write about the horrors of war, followed immediately by the quote from Lewis (2002) detailing the rape of whole villages by French colonial soldiers, we will turn to the crux of his argument and, in our view, logical fallacy. The author wants to send the message that all professional “archaeologists and others” should refuse to participate with warring parties — in this case governments — thereby letting those governments know that war is unpopular. Further, as evidenced by the author’s labeling of Margaret Cox’s work toward the identification and documentation of mass graves following the invasion of Iraq as a “misguided collaboration,” any archaeologist or scientist who does work to alleviate either destruction of heritage assets or human suffering is “merely” an expert and not a critical thinker. While we appreciate the author’s ideological position that non-participation will somehow impact the diplomatic process, we do not accept turning our collective professional backs on the people or cultural heritage at risk. As archaeologists we are neither misguided nor do we have an “unwise idea of ethics,” we simply disagree with the author about what role we have a responsibility to play in situations involving conflict at national scales.

This past September, the United States Senate ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict — specifically, the Second Protocol. The 1954 Convention was written following the devastation of cultural sites, monuments, and repositories during World War II. At its writing, the Convention was modeled on guidelines from General Eisenhower for the protection of European cultural heritage where it was anticipated that future conflicts would continue to destroy whole cities. Subsequent Protocols (1977, 1999) were crafted to define and clarify types of protection, enforcement, and the scope of application. The gravity of the current situation with respect to looting in Iraq has aided archaeologists and other cultural heritage professionals to press their advantage for ratification. Organizations including UNESCO, ICOM, ICRC, AIA, and ANCBS have formalized systems and symbols (such as the Blue Shield) to indicate sites with basic and enhanced protection status as provided within the Second Protocol. The US military has implemented training on cultural property protection, and service personnel and contractors are advised to observe laws on the protection of historical and cultural properties in Iraq and Afghanistan. Archaeologists, historians and anthropologists provide the guidance that assures the military has training tools that effectively prepare soldiers and civilians to observe those laws.

Let us be clear, we believe that as professional anthropologists to refuse engagement where we have unique skills that can mitigate the destruction...
of armed conflict is to abrogate our responsibility to our profession and more importantly to the world cultures that we cherish. Unfortunately, the author and general public frequently fail to recognize the bedrock principles of public service. Situated, as we are, within the military we acknowledge that the military and diplomatic corps of the government are less than perfect—but we also work within an environment where like-minded professionals are committed to uphold and improve a code of conduct and standard of ethics, and at the same time perform their missions to the best of their ability. More importantly, these agencies recognize and respect the importance of subject matter expertise which is why archaeologists and other anthropologists from both academia and the private sector are consulted and contracted. When the author closes his article by saying that “Iraq was attacked with the consent of the archaeological community,” we must ask ourselves what this sort of incendiary thinking has done for anyone except to allow them to feel comfortably superior to those of us who, for many different reasons, choose to engage.

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Forum Response

A Response to Malin-Boyce and Trimble

Umberto Albarella

I am very grateful to Donald Craib and George Gumerman for giving me the opportunity to reply to this comment and particularly to Susan Malin-Boyce and Michael Trimble for taking the time to read my article and critically discuss it. Although our opinions differ greatly I hope they will converge on the fact that this debate is helpful and necessary. It is fundamentally important that we all remain free to express our—often strong—opinions without fear, and that we avoid expressing views by standing on opposite barricades. Eventually we are unlikely to reach a consensus, but it is our duty to explore every possibility of finding some common ground. This debate will fail if it will only have contributed to generating feuds and animosity among scientists. It will succeed if there is respect for each other’s views and a genuine willingness to contribute to the fight against the widespread injustice that affects most world affairs.

I must confess to being a touch disappointed that, despite stating their desire “to turn to the crux of [my] argument and [its] logical fallacy,” Malin-Boyce and Trimble do not even make an attempt to tackle it. They, rather, spend most of the space at their disposal highlighting the virtues of international conventions for the protection of world heritage threatened by military conflict, and reiterating the conventional slogan that we should not turn “our collective professional backs on the people or cultural heritage at risk.” Although we may differ on the methodological aspects of taking care of “people or cultural heritage,” I find myself in agreement on both points. There is, in fact, nothing in my piece that contradicts such views, though, unlike my commentators, I believe that such work can have credibility only if carried out under the aegis of independent international organisations, not of the offending countries.

The “crux of my argument”—on which Malin-Boyce and Trimble remain completely silent—is that, as I say in my concluding paragraph, our preparedness to engage with the militaries of warring countries is inversely proportional to the disgust that we feel for their actions. This is why I am more prepared to accept the argument of those scientists who work in collaboration with the invading armies because they believe that the invasion of Iraq was just, rather than the view that support or opposition to the war represent irrelevant questions in the pro-engagement choice.

Another fundamental element in my piece is that I allege that the timing of the forensic work in Iraq was suspect and prone to propaganda manipulation. On this too my commentators, despite being prominently involved in the forensic work in Iraq, express no opinion.

Finally, Malin-Boyce and Trimble take issue with the tone of my sentence that “Iraq was attacked with the consent of the archaeological community.” Although it was put provocatively, I wanted to make a direct appeal to the sense of political responsibility of archaeologists.
To accuse me of “incendiary thinking” smacks of irony when the organization that my commentators represent has—literally, rather than metaphorically—set the country of Iraq on fire for the past six years.