Implications for social justice of the military usage of the archaeological site of Ur in Iraq

Diane C. Siebrandt
Abstract

This paper examines the history of the military usage of the archaeological site of Ur, which is located in southern Iraq, and how military operations affected the ruins and the local Iraqi caretakers. Iraqi archaeologists were restricted in their abilities to engage in the tangible heritage of the site due to both foreign and domestic military occupation and control of the ancient ruins over the course of time. This paper outlines the manner in which the social opportunities and privileges of the Iraqi archaeologists and the local community were affected by the actions of Iraqi and US/coalition armed forces. Further, this paper looks at the restrictions that were placed on Iraqis from gaining entry to the site, and how this was in violation of cultural heritage laws that serve to protect cultural property. The complexities of warfare presented their own set of challenges, and yet a few positive examples of cross-cultural cooperation emerged.

Introduction

This paper is based on my doctoral research, in which I examined and analysed the manner in which Western factions have utilised archaeological sites in Iraq over the course of time. The information contained in this paper focuses on the archaeological site of Ur, the ruins of an 8,000 year old urban centre located in southern Iraq. The mud-brick structures of the ancient city were excavated during the nineteenth century by European explorers and antiquarians, and occupied by British military forces during the First and Second World Wars. This paper will only briefly describe the importance of the site and the history of the archaeological excavations, as its focus is on the military occupation of the ruins.

In 1971 the Iraqi government constructed an air force base just 1 km south of the main ruins. An Iraqi army camp was added in the early 1980s, which was targeted by US military forces during the early 1990s First Gulf War, and again in 1998 in the operation known as Desert Fox. The result of military action caused damage to some of the standing ruins and unexcavated areas of the site. In addition, the presence of the Iraqi military units restricted civilian access to portions of the site, specifically the air force base, which was built within the boundary of the ancient city.

In March 2003 the United States and their coalition partners, namely Australia, the United Kingdom and Poland, entered Iraq during what was then called Operation Iraqi Freedom, with the intent to depose Saddam Hussein and his Ba’athist government. By April of that same year, the Iraqi Air Force Base at Ur was commandeered and occupied by US and coalition forces. The existing Iraqi military structures were used, but in order to accommodate a workforce of more than 5,000 personnel, additional buildings and roads were constructed, which encroached further onto the ruins. The use of the site by both Iraqi and Western militaries prevented
archaeologists from gaining full access to the ruins, thus preventing them from carrying out conservation activities and restricting their engagement with the ancient past.

The occupation impacted Iraqis’ abilities to access the site for scientific and recreational purposes, which this paper will argue negatively affected social opportunities for the professional community, as well as the surrounding villagers. I will first provide background information about Ur secondly, I will examine the impact of modern warfare on Ur, and finally I will argue that the military usage of Ur that barred Iraqis from the site was socially unjust in that it prevented them from openly and freely engaging in activities and restricted their control over decisions related to the use of the ruins.

Background on Ur

Ur, or modern-day Tell el-Mukayyar, is located in the Dhi Qar Province of southern Iraq, approximately 300 km southeast of Baghdad. Excavated pottery date its early occupation to the Ubaid Period, when some of the first farming communities settled in the Euphrates River region approximately 8,000 years ago. Ur was ruled by a diverse series of kings and conquerors over the years, until approximately 500 BCE, when occupation ceased (Leick 2002; Roux 1992). A series of mud-brick houses, temples, burial chambers and ceremonial structures were erected by the various cultures that populated the city. This included the Ziggurat of Ur Nammu, a pyramidal-shaped terraced tower, which was constructed between the Early and Third Dynastic Periods (Woolley 1929, 1930). After its abandonment, desert sands consumed the remains of the metropolis, which laid buried for more than 2,000 years, until Western explorers began mapping and unearthing the site in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hall 1930; Leick 2002; Roux 1992).

Western archaeologists conducted sporadic excavations in 1853, 1918, and 1919, at which time large portions of the ziggurat and surrounding temples and palaces were uncovered (Hall 1930; Loftus 1857; Taylor 1855; Woolley 1950). During the First World War, British forces occupied the region, and the ruins were used as a garrison outpost (Thompson 1920; Hall 1930). Over the course of their deployment, officers ‘regularly took inscribed bricks from the site’ (Hall 1930, p. 106). Scholars did not specifically mention when the troops departed Ur, but they were absent when British archaeologist Charles Leonard Woolley arrived at the site in 1922 (Woolley 1928). However, the British Government still maintained three air force bases in Iraq during that time, one in Basra, another in Mosul, and one located outside the city limits of Baghdad in the Anbar Province (Anderson & Stansfield 2004; Silverfarb & Khadduri 1986).

Woolley noted that Royal Air Force pilots from the Basra base rendered assistance by photographing Ur from the air on at least one occasion in 1926 (Woolley 1930). However, mention of their existence is absent from further reports. Excavations, which unearthed larger sections of the city, as well as a series of tomb complexes (Woolley 1934, 1950) continued until 1934. After Woolley’s departure, the site remained untouched, until the Second World War when British forces once again briefly reoccupied the site in 1941 (Longrigg 1953, p. 298). However, details of their use of the site are minimal in published records and their impact is unknown.

Since the ruins were uncovered, Ur has provided a wealth of information to scholars and theologians. While Woolley’s endeavors were largely scientific, he also connected the site to the Genesis narrative of Abraham, most notably when he labeled one of his grid maps The City of Ur in the Time of Abraham 2100-1990 BC (Woolley 1930, p. XXXIII). In addition, he also referenced the discovery of foundation-cylinders that identified the site as the Biblical Ur of the Chaldees, and attributed a series of Old Babylonian housing foundations to the authentic home of Abraham (Woolley 1950; Woolley & Mallowan 1976).

Further, analysis of the archaeological evidence has produced invaluable data related to the ancient cultures that occupied the site. A few examples include: determining when the pottery wheel came into use via diagnosing handmade versus wheel-made pottery; understanding previously unknown funeral practices of ancient civilizations, such as mass sacrifices; the
discovery of objects indicating trade with people in the Indus Valley; revealing the use of modern architecture in the fourth millennium BCE; and perhaps most importantly, discovering the Ubaid Period, a previously unknown civilization which predated the Ancient Egyptians by at least 1,000 years (Leick 2002; Woolley 1925, 1934). Because the site has yet to be fully excavated, the remaining hidden ruins also have great potential to add additional information into the archaeological record of ancient Mesopotamian cultures, their ideologies and social practices, and how they may have further contributed to world history.

**Modern warfare and Ur**

While foreign military occupation ceased after the Second World War, in 1971 the Iraqi Air Force constructed an airstrip and accompanying military installation less than a kilometre from the ziggurat. Ten years later, an Iraqi army unit was encamped approximately 1500 meters northeast of the ziggurat. Both of these installations were placed within the archaeological boundaries of Ur, which were initially established during Woolley’s surveys, and later verified and expanded through the use of satellite imagery by members of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) (Woolley 1930; Al Hamdani et al. 2014). The construction of a concrete airstrip and the landing and departing of heavy military jets and ground vehicles on the unexcavated areas of the ancient city would have certainly caused indirect impact damages.

While the Iraqi military was present on the site, archaeologists were not allowed access on or near the installation. They were therefore unable to conduct surveys or excavations on areas that were occupied by military personnel and unable to document damages that occurred to the hidden ruins. However, conservators from the Iraqi Antiquities and Heritage Authority (later known as the SBAH) were allowed to work on areas of the site not controlled by the military, and major restoration works on the ziggurat and surrounding temples were implemented (Al Hamdani 2008a, 2009; Muhsen 2009).

Due to the presence of the Iraqi Armed Forces, Ur was targeted in the First Gulf War, when the US led a coalition of 35 countries into Iraq in response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in late 1990. US fighter jets strafed the military positions, as well as two Iraqi fighter jets that were parked next to the ziggurat. The action resulted in bullet damage to the southern side of the structure. In addition, several bombs were dropped near the Iraqi army camp during the campaign, which created large craters within the archaeological footprint of the site (Forsyth 2004; Nashef 1992; Schipper 2005).

United Nations (UN) Sanctions against Iraq that followed the conflict negatively affected the economy and the healthcare and educational systems. The imposed embargoes on trade created an inability to effectively manage infrastructure requirements for a large population (Alnasrawi 2001; von Sponeck 2006). As noted by Abbas Alnasrawi ‘The centrepiece of the sanctions system was UNSC Resolution 661. This resolution, and the subsequent sanctions resolutions, created a set of conditions which virtually cut Iraq off from the world economy’ (Alnasrawi 2001, p. 208). The manner in which the cultural heritage community operated was changed as well. They were unable to attend international conferences, access current research forums for conservation methods, or engage in cross-cultural exchanges (Forsyth 2004; Wilke 2008).

Before the US Sanctions were imposed on the country, a US Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Team was tasked with disabling Iraqi air bases in southern Iraq, in order to enforce the ‘No Fly Zone’ implemented as part of the UN resolution. In March 1991, they landed at the airstrip and ‘used approximately 40 tons of explosives to make cuts in the runway and taxiway every 2,000 feet’ which rendered it useless to land aircraft’ (Cohen & Olson 1993, p. 30). Such actions would have caused additional damages to the unexcavated ruins, adding to the impact rendered by the original Iraqi landing strip. While the resulting action diminished the air force’s capacities to operate flights, the Iraq army still maintained their presence on the site.

In 1998, Ur was once again bombed by a foreign military during the four-day campaign known as Operation Desert Fox. This was when US and UK forces targeted research installations, supply depots, and military bases across Iraq when Saddam Hussein failed to comply with the
UN Security Council Resolutions on disarmament (Condron 1999; von Sponeck 2006). The explosives did not directly damage the ziggurat or standing ruins, however it is unknown how the unexcavated areas were impacted, specifically the area that was in-use by the Iraqi army unit, as SBAH personnel were unable to conduct assessments due to military sensitivities (Al Hamdani 2009; Muhsen 2009).

The history of Ur being subjected to military action was once again seen when coalition forces seized the existing Iraqi base in April 2003, established operations, and named it Camp Adder/ Ali Air Base, which eventually became known as Tallil Air Base. A fence and military checkpoints were erected around the perimeter, which incorporated the ruins, as well as a single paved road that extended from the ziggurat, along the border of Woolley’s excavations, and into the military installation (Figure 1). This allowed anyone on the base access to Ur. In order to accommodate a 5 000 plus person workforce, the existing Iraqi infrastructure was expanded, which entailed the construction of temporary and permanent buildings, water and sanitation facilities, as well as additional roads, all of which encroached further onto the ruins (Al Hamdani 2008a; Curtis 2009; Siebrandt 2015).

**Cultural heritage laws**

Such actions of occupation by both domestic and foreign militaries were in violation of the 1954 *Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, specifically Article 4.1 which calls for the respect of cultural property. It states:

> The High Contracting Parties undertake to respect cultural property situated within their own territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties by refraining from any use of the property and its immediate surroundings or of the appliances in use for its protection for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the event of armed conflict; and by refraining from any act of hostility, directed against such property. (UNESCO 1954)

While Iraq has been a party to the Convention since 1954, neither the US nor the UK had ratified it when the 2003 war started. As stated by Marion Forsyth:

![Figure 1: The ruins of Ur, dominated by the Ziggurat of Ur Nammu, less than a kilometer north of Tallil Air Base, which is visible on the horizon.](image)
Both the United States and Great Britain have signed the Convention, but neither country has ratified it. The Hague Convention’s provisions apply in any armed conflict where two or more of the hostile countries are members of the Convention. Thus, as a technical matter, the Hague Convention did not govern the March 2003 US and British invasion of Iraq. (Forsyth 2004, p. 88)

Yet it was ‘the policy of the United States to view as binding those provisions of the Hague Convention that the United States regarded as part of customary international law’ (Gerstenblith 2010, p. 11). According to Peter Stone, he and his colleagues ‘stressed the vulnerability of sites and museums immediately post-conflict, and stressed the coalition’s responsibilities under international conventions’ (Stone 2008, p. 76). He later said of his exchange with the military ‘there was clear acceptance amongst those with whom I was dealing directly that things could have been managed better and that they wanted to get it right next time’ (Stone 2008, p. 80).

In addition, Article 15 in the Iraq Antiquities and Heritage Law prohibits trespassing, building, altering, polluting, damaging, or otherwise harming an archaeological site (MOC 2002). However, according to Elizabeth Varner, because all military bases were considered American territory at the time of the occupation ‘the US military will not apply Iraqi laws to US personnel under US jurisdiction’ (Varner 2011, p. 14). Additionally, the fact that a military base was built on an archaeological site drew reference to the ambiguity of the Convention, which calls for refraining from causing damage to cultural property except in cases of ‘military necessity’ a term yet to be universally defined (Gerstenblith 2010, p. 9). However, the violations committed against the sites were still real, and the obscurities within the doctrines did not make them disappear, the nature of the violations was merely altered in technical terms. Along with Stone, other experts in the field also advised the American and British governments about the importance of protecting sites, yet their warnings were ignored (Gibson 2009; Jordan 2012; Stone 2013).

Regardless of the status of the international and national cultural heritage legislation, military personnel did not consult nor contact any Iraqi heritage specialists upon their arrival at Ur. Local archaeologists condemned the occupation that degraded the educational and scientific value of the site, but just as significant, they were indignant that the troops were in fact trespassing (Al Hamdani 2008a, p. 154). This was compounded by the fact that while Iraqis were restricted from entering the site, members of coalition had free access. Thousands of coalition personnel toured the ruins, yet the local population was not afforded the same rights. Instead, they had to watch the soldiers walk freely across an archaeological site in their own county while they were denied access unless given permission by the occupiers (Al Hamdani 2008b; Bahrani 2003; Rush 2013).

Restrictions were implemented by coalition forces as a result of an incident that occurred in December 2004 when an Iraqi male gained access into a military dining facility in Mosul and detonated a suicide bomb that resulted in numerous deaths (IntelCenter 2008, p. 234). Shortly thereafter, strict procedures for base admission were enacted, which included the need to possess US government credentials, specifically a Common Access Card which allowed entry to any given base (The White House 2004). This meant that all the sites that were converted into bases were off-limits to Iraqi archaeologists and the general population. Technically this complied with Article 15 of the 1954 Convention, which mandates that local cultural heritage experts be allowed to carry out their duties on property that has fallen into the opposing Party’s hands, as far as it is consistent with the interests of security (UNESCO 1954). Yet ‘the interests of security’ is not defined and is therefore open to individual interpretation.

Social justice and Iraqi caretakers

Were these actions by both foreign and domestic militaries and their occupation of Ur socially just? As Helaine Silverman and Fairchild Ruggles explain:

Cultural heritage requires memory. It is not enough for things and monuments to exist on a landscape, in order to be cultural heritage they must be remembered and claimed
as patrimony, even if their original meaning is lost or poorly understood. (Silverman & Ruggles 2007, p. 12).

Therefore, how can memories be sustained when a population is prohibited from engaging with a site? In the case of Ur, when Iraqi forces occupied it, archaeologists were allowed to conduct work on the ruins, but were restricted from entering the areas where military operations were taking place. The areas selected by the armed forces for visitation prevented the scholars from fully accessing and maintaining the fuller extent of the ruins. On the other hand, once it was under coalition control, Iraqis were unable to engage directly with the site as a whole. They were denied the opportunity to make decisions about the use of the site by an occupying force. This took away any power or control they had over their own heritage, which it can be argued was socially unjust.

However, while entry restrictions were maintained for all Iraqis who lived outside of the site, the Ur curator, Dnife Muhsen, and his family, were exempt from the regulation. Muhsen’s grandfather was a member of Woolley’s excavation crew, and since the 1920s, the family had been living in a series of houses and outbuildings located next to the ziggurat. The structures were incorporated within the 2003 military fence line, and despite the occupation of the site, Muhsen had regular access to the ruins and was able to inform other Iraqi heritage personnel about the condition of the site (Al Hamdani 2009, Muhsen 2009).

Although Muhsen was able to engage with the site, the wartime occupation affected the social opportunities and privileges of the wider community who were unable to gain free access. Issues related to a local population’s ability to positively interact with their own cultural heritage is covered under Article 9.2 in the Second Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which states that any work executed on cultural property must be conducted in close cooperation with the national authorities of the occupied territory (UNESCO 1999). Yet Iraqi cultural heritage specialists were unable to assess and record site conditions, or attempt to engage in any type of preservation or conservative measures. Since they were unable to connect with and enjoy their sites, their involvement and cooperation was denied. In his discussion on the practical execution of polices, Christopher Hoh stated:

Failing to protect cultural heritage can create a cognitive dissonance, undermining the strategic communication goals of the military. A case in point is the recent building in Iraq of coalition military bases on the sites of ancient Babylon and Ur. This action needlessly fuelled resentment and suspicion among the local population and beyond. (Hoh 2008, p. 198)

Farida Shaheed investigated the degree to which the right to access and enjoy one’s own heritage is a part of international human rights. She concluded that a violation relating to cultural property was a violation that affected the cultural rights of humans. Specifically ‘The right to participate in cultural life implies that individuals and communities have access to and enjoy cultural heritages that are meaningful to them’ (Shaheed 2011, p. 11).

The presence of coalition soldiers revisited the Age of Imperialism that was evident at Ur during the previous British occupation. The colonial military use of the site during the British occupation was enacted with minimal protest from the Iraqis. At that time, there was a lack of local archaeological experts in the region who could lend a voice of protest, as archaeology was a decidedly Western endeavour and had yet to fully reach global status (Renfrew 2006). However, by 2003, this was not the case, and strong words of chastisement came from members of the SBAH. For example, the regional archaeological inspector, Abdulamir Al Hamdani said that the presence of coalition troops within the archaeological footprint not only caused physical damages, but also sent a message of indifference about the cultural and educational importance of the site (Al Hamdani 2008a, p. 155).

However, valid arguments have been made that incorporating the ruins into the 2003 fence line protected it from local looters who were ravishing other unsecured archaeological sites throughout southern Iraq (Rothfield 2009; Thurlow 2005; Wright et al. 2003). While this was
true, was it justification to occupy the site? Was it fair and balanced to use the site as a military post without local consultation? Did the coalition have alternate choices for the base placement or did military necessity outweigh the need to attempt contact with the Iraqi archaeologists and allow them to have input about what happened to Ur? Can such relationships be considered ‘socially just’ if they are strongly one-sided or when the Iraqis were merely on the peripheral during decision-making dialogue?

Many of the mistakes made during the war were a result of poor planning (Allawi 2007; Ballard 2010; Keegan 2005). One of those was the failure to find appropriate living and working quarters for military troops, which resulted in the construction of bases on and near archaeological sites such as Ur. Additionally, because the Iraqi Armed Forces had already established a base near the ruins, Ur offered an attractive and convenient framework from which the coalition could expand. The volatile and fluid war environment itself also hindered the efforts at relationship building. This included daily bombings, combat operations against the insurgents and mistrust between members of the coalition and the local community. Thus, interactions with the surrounding community were minimal, and Ur was occupied without local consultation or approval (Isakhan 2015; Siebrandt 2015).

Despite the occupation and lack of initial cross-cultural communication, positive and productive interactions existed between the troops and the Ur curator who lived on the site. As early as 2003, Muhsen provided daily and sometimes multiple tours a day to coalition personnel (Figure 2). He bridged a wide gap of cross-cultural misunderstanding by serving as a positive contact for the troops. The visits were arranged through the military’s support service unit, or the Moral, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) program, which regularly advertised the availability for 30 personnel to tour the site with the base chaplains, who served as ad hoc liaisons between Muhsen and the visitors (Shiloh 2009).

By May 2008, the soldiers had formed a good rapport with Muhsen, who requested funding for a project at the site, which entailed placing a welcoming archway over the roadway leading into the ruins. Members of the coalition partnered with a local contracting company to erect the arch over the entrance road (Figure 3). The project was implemented as part of the US Department of Defence’s Commander Emergency Response Program, also known as CERP. This was a US military initiative administered in Iraq and Afghanistan in order for military personnel to positively engage with local communities by financing projects that would benefit the region (Martins 2005). The arch was erected as a signal of cooperation and good will that the site would shortly be released to Iraqi control.

On 23 April 2009, six years after Ur was occupied, command staff at the base announced that the fence would be moved, and the road leading to the site would be relinquished to Iraqi control. A week prior to the transfer, a joint American-Iraqi inspection team conducted a site survey in order
to document conditions and propose potential projects. Soon after, additional CERP funding allowed for the construction of guard-towers and living trailers for Iraqi forces, who were hired by the SBAH to provide 24-hour protection. Further, as a result of recommendations noted in the survey, CERP funding was used to construct wooden sidewalks and shade shelters along the most travelled tourist paths (Figure 4), which continued the collegial environment that was previously shared with Muhsen. All coalition personnel withdrew from Talil Air Base in mid-December 2011, at which time the Iraqi Air Force took over, renamed it Imam Ali Air Base, and assumed full control of the area. By 2013, after almost 8 decades of scientific inactivity, Iraqi archaeologists once again commenced excavations at Ur (Siebrandt 2015).

In July 2016, Ur was inscribed on the UNESCO world heritage list as part of, *The Ahwar of Southern Iraq: Refuge of Biodiversity and the Relict Landscape of the Mesopotamian Cities*, under the new category of mixed natural and cultural sites. Ur’s universal value was cited as ‘The remains offer a complete testimony to the growth and achievements of southern Mesopotamia urban centres and societies, and to their outstanding contributions to the history of the Near East and mankind as a whole’ (The Republic of Iraq 2014, p. 8). The inclusion into the list demonstrated the significance of the site to both the Iraqi cultural heritage community, as well as the world stage. However, it must be remembered that the Iraqi Armed Forces continue to maintain a presence within archaeologically sensitive areas of the site, which is a continuation of imposed restrictions on the archaeological community.

**Discussion**

The archaeological site of Ur endured a long history of being occupied by modern military forces. Was it socially just for the British, Iraqi and coalition armed forces to take command of the site and prevent archaeologists from executing their required duties, such as excavation, artefact analysis, and conservation maintenance? Whether it was a foreign or domestic military on the site, their monopoly in the decision-making processes resulted in uneven partnerships and levels of cooperation. While the positive interactions between Muhsen and members of the coalition who visited Ur were a welcome sign of cross-cultural understanding, relations with the larger cultural community were absent.

Although some cooperation did take place, there was potential for much more, which would have lessened or changed the coalition’s impact on the ruins. For example: find an alternative

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**Figure 4:** Wooden sidewalk and shade shelter constructed with CERP funding.
location for a large military encampment yet still guard Ur as a statement of their desire to protect cultural heritage sites; utilize the site with Iraqi consultation and ensure that base expansions were directed away from the sensitive archaeological areas, rather than towards it; allow Iraqi visitation to demonstrate good will and establish positive rapport with the local population; provide a safe and protected location for joint international excavations and conservation projects to take place.

Because the Iraqi archaeologists were not allowed free access to all areas of Ur during military occupation, they were unable to conduct research and conservation on their own cultural heritage. Their opportunities were limited by occupying powers, both the Iraqi military and the coalition. If the site could not be properly studied or maintained due to access restrictions, how was it possible to preserve its scientific and cultural integrity for future generations? Additionally, the decision to place a military base so near the site, and the resulting bombardments in the 1990s, also demonstrated a lack of ethical consideration for the site. The physical damages that resulted from both the unsanctioned construction, as well as airstrikes, also negatively impacted the ruins, and compromised the recovery of archaeological data. The SBAH staff’s ability to carry out their required duties was compromised and the resultant neglect was another layer of social injustice imposed on the community.

The inability of the wider community to visit the site due to the 2003 military fence line presented an additional example of uneven treatment and discrimination against Iraqis, especially when the site was occupied without Iraqi consultation. Conversely, the occupations also serve as a ‘lessons learned’ scenario, specifically illustrating actions that should and should not be repeated in the future. Moreover, the positive interactions with the Ur site curator and the construction of the archway resulted in a standard of practice that should be followed not only at Ur but other archaeological landscapes in Iraq. While a war situation presents a series of diverse complexities, such as described here, militaries can still be expected to adhere to cultural heritage laws and ethical standards that ensure that social justice prevails in that heritage community.

**Conclusion**

The archaeological remains at Ur have provided scholars with invaluable information about some of the world’s earliest civilizations. The excavations at the site should be regarded as a positive undertaking in order to further understand the region’s history. Yet, its occupation by modern military forces interrupted the abilities of Iraqi heritage experts to fully and freely carry out their duties as custodians of the land. From the British occupation during WWI and WWII, to the Iraqi Air Force Base and army camp, the site was exposed to damage and targeted military operations. Additionally, the Iraqi forces, as well as the later coalition takeover of the sites, prevented local caretakers from properly carrying out their duties.

While members of the coalition formed positive and productive relations with the site curator, the overall restrictions placed on the larger community reflected poorly on the troops. Such prejudicial behaviour was observed at Ur over the course of its modern history, from the Second World War to the 2003 conflict. The military occupation and the exclusion of archaeologists and the general public from the site presented an attitude of control that prevented locals from fully engaging in their cultural heritage.

Physical damages to the site covered under heritage laws were important to note, but the social impact is also significant. The ability of the community to maintain memories connected to the site were affected by military operations, ranging from the Iraqi military only allowing selected areas to be sustained, to the full prevention of site visits when coalition forces commandeered the Iraqi base and adjacent ruins. However, positive examples did fortunately exist. The relations between members of the coalition and the site curator can serve as a model of lessons learned. Yet, such interactions should have been conducted on a much larger scale to include the entire archaeological community, as well as communities within the vicinity of the ruins to serve as positive examples for future armies to follow.
While the site is now back under the control of SBAH officials, the Iraqi military continues to operate out of the base near the ruins. While their presence certainly protects Ur from looting, much as the coalition did during their occupation, it remains to be seen what the future brings. In addition, a concerning issue for the future is the county’s continuing fight against the Sunni-jihadist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They have undertaken an aggressive campaign against the rich historical and archaeological sites in the region. Wholesale destruction of religious and archaeological heritage has been well documented, including severe damages at Nineveh, Nimrud and Hatra, which are all located in the north of Iraq (Al Quntar et al. 2015; Bauer 2015; Harmanşah 2015). While they have yet to enter the area surrounding Ur, it must be noted that the social injustices that are likely to be committed by ISIS would bring about an entirely new and devastating chapter to the history of military actions against the site and the local population.

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