



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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STAGING HISTORY: CINEMATIC NARRATIVES OF IRAQ AND ITS ARTIFACTS

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Earlier this year, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) released a video documenting a group of men destroying 3,000 year-old stone artifacts inside the Assyrian and Hatrene halls of the Mosul Museum in Northern Iraq. In a frantic montage set to a cacophony of sounds, several men demolish one large artifact after another with sledgehammers, drills, and their bare hands. The angle, subject, and setting change constantly, permitting the viewer no time to linger, no time to process the profound act of erasure unfolding on the screen. Two-thirds into the montage, this motion is interrupted by a still image of an entrance to the museum, prominently featuring a massive stone bas relief of a winged bull with a human head. The image is joined by a sepia-toned photograph of the same figure, unearthed from an archaeological dig in Iraq more than a century ago.

This coupling of documentary photography of past and present immediately communicates an argument and its evidence to the viewer: what you are looking at is the real thing. We are presented with the picture of a Lamassu, one of many pre-Islamic Assyrian era stone statues that were excavated by archaeologists throughout Iraq during the last century and a half. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum and the Louvre all display Lamassu and representations circulate prominently in promotional materials and websites. International recognition of the Lamassu image is a fact that the video's makers are well aware of and use to amplify the effect of the ensuing climax.

As the frame shifts away from the Lamassu, a pair of black sneakers on a ladder next to the statue comes into view. The camera pans upward and reveals that the figure in these black sneakers is also clutching a drill in his arms. His face is pressed close to the figure's head, as the

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drill bit works away at the pocked stone surface where Lamassu's face should be. The pace of the video picks up again, cutting between shots of men all over the statues, hammering the Lamassu and its twin until they break into rubble, rolling into the foreground of the camera frame.

As soon as IS released the Mosul Museum video in late February of this year, it went viral: posted on YouTube and reposted by news outlets and social media users around the globe. Questions quickly surfaced over whether the destroyed items pictured inside the museum were authentic artifacts or fake replicas. Iraqi experts familiar with the collection verified that most of the artifacts demolished were replicas, however the Lamassu demolished in the video were in fact authentic.¹

The IS Mosul Museum video is a media event that performs a complex narrative: a staged erasure of what has already been constructed as national Iraqi heritage and world heritage during different eras of Iraq's history. IS has crafted and circulated a deliberate spectacle of destruction, which does work and registers cultural violence to a global audience through references to the cultural image of Iraq as an excavation site for world heritage. This video fits within a longer narrative of representations of Iraq's archaeology that includes those produced through a neo-colonial western lens.

As Magnus Bernhardsson shows in *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (2013), the material practices of excavation and exhibition are inherently political and situated at the nexus of imperialism and nationalism. In his words, "by the 1930s historical artifacts [had] emerged as a useful and crucial foundation for the nation to build for itself a modern present based on a 'modern' past...and solidify the claims and legitimacy of the nation state."² Building on Bernhardsson's conclusions, I argue that representations of archaeological evidence through film and photography have also been vital to the construction of key historical narratives used to define Iraq as a modern nation-state.

Documentary films have captured and projected dynamic images of archaeological artifacts as visible evidence that attested to modern Iraq's lineage of historical importance as the cradle of civilization as well as the seat of the Abbasid caliphate during the golden age of Islam

¹ IS militants have looted, damaged and exploded more than 42 sites, including mosques, churches, shrines, and libraries since IS took over Mosul in June 2014. This destruction extends to a number of the world's oldest known settlements, now treasured archaeological sites, including Ninevah, Hatra and most recently Palmyra in Syria.

² Magnus T. Bernhardsson, "Introduction," *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (University of Texas Press, 2013) Ebook.

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in the Middle East. As Bernhardsson explains: “In Iraq, after World War I, forging a national identity [was] a conscious...top-down process that was integrally tied to the government’s foreign policy, so that the past was reconstructed and based on the reigning ideological stance.”³ The documentary film *Rivers of Time* is the most prominent example of such efforts by the filmmaking unit of the British-controlled Petroleum Company in Iraq (which worked in close collaboration with the British-backed regime in Iraq during the 1950s) to script motion picture narratives about modern Iraq for audiences in Europe and the Middle East.

The film producer and writer Sinclair Road has described the particular challenges of crafting a narrative about Iraq using its archaeological evidence in 1957. In Road’s words: “We wanted to try an experiment of intermingling museum objects with actuality in order to try and heighten the impression of what this land is like – which has produced so rich a heritage.”⁴ In fact, many if not most of the artifacts that were featured in *Rivers of Time* as essential evidence of the historical narrative of modern Iraq were not in Iraq at all, but in the museums of Britain and Europe. Thus the director of photography, Billy Williams, was challenged with seamlessly weaving together images of decontextualized artifacts in the British Museum and the Louvre with staged re-enactments on location in Iraq and scenic panoramas of sites like Nineveh, Babylon and Hatra in order to craft a convincing sequence of historical narrative.

In one example from the film’s closing sequence, a woman’s likeness cast in a four *millennia* old sculpture emerges (through a cross-fade) from the panorama of the Tigris River, which flows through Iraq. As the title suggests, the sequence crafts the image of a river of time bridging ancient civilization, embodied by face/artifact, with modern Iraq where the waters of the Tigris continue to sustain the people and the land. However, in the artfully scripted voiceover, the narrator does not reveal that the actual location of the artifact is no longer in Iraq but instead in the British Museum.

Indeed, archaeological exploration in Iraq since the late 19th century resulted in the imperial plunder of national treasures into the halls of Europe and America’s museums and the private hands of wealthy collectors. In defense of this standard late 19th and early 20th century archaeological practice, is the hegemonic claim that these artifacts belong not only to Iraq but to the world – relying on the narrative of world heritage, as opposed to national heritage. The

³ Magnus T. Bernhardsson, “Introduction,” *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (University of Texas Press, 2013) Ebook.

⁴ Sinclair Road, “Rivers of Time” *Iraq Petroleum Magazine* Vol. 7, No. 5 (December 1957), p 13.

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political contours of this debate complicate the tidy narrative crafted in *Rivers of Time*, which renders invisible the ways in which such archeological artifacts figured (and continue to figure) at the nexus of nationalist and imperialist discourses during the volatile period of mid-century political change in the region.⁵

Fifteen years after the making of *Rivers of Time*, its British director of photography Billy Williams, and his Iraqi counterpart Mohammed Shukri Jameel, were reunited in Mosul for a different reason- *The Exorcist*, a film by director William Friedkin. This undertaking would entail the resurrection of archaeological evidence for the purpose of a fictional narrative that has garnered status as a Hollywood classic. The now iconic opening scenes of *The Exorcist* were filmed on location in Northern Iraq in the ancient settlement of Hatra (just south of Mosul). The scene unfolds as a young Iraqi sprints through the excavation site, characterized by blazing sun, dust, and the bustle of laborers digging into ancient ruins. The boy arrives at his destination, where the protagonist, Father Merrin, an archaeologist, is engrossed in his dig, and delivers the news of a discovery that will change Merrin's life forever

This scene presents the backstory of Merrin's first encounter with the demon Pazuzu, which subsequently possesses the young girl in Washington DC, the basis for the plot of *The Exorcist*. The demon is first represented by the remnants of a small artifact, a palm-sized statuette; but at the scene's climax Merrin is brought face to face with a far more ominous incarnation of Pazuzu, embodied by a stone figure of human stature that glares down venomously at Merrin, and the camera with its over-the-shoulder view.

While this iconic opening scene from *The Exorcist* is presumed to be a work of fiction, its premise as well as its mise-en-scene is in fact based directly on archaeological narratives and the attendant sites and artifacts of Iraq. The figures of the demon Pazuzu are replicas of an actual artifact of Assyrian origin that was unearthed in Iraq more than a century prior. Fiberglass replicas were fabricated in Hollywood, modeled on artifacts that reside in the Paris Louvre, and shipped finally to Iraq to be filmed at the actual site of excavation in Hatra for one of Hollywood's most epic films, blurring any distinction between reality and fiction.

In a recent interview, Friedkin accounts that Lieutenant Colonel David Petraeus contacted him in 2003 in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq to share that his soldiers had been

⁵ *Rivers of Time* was widely distributed throughout Europe and the Middle East over many years through petroleum company screenings, cinematic releases, international festivals (winning a prize at Venice), as well as on BBC television and non-theatrical distribution venues such as British classrooms.

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watching *The Exorcist* on video only to realize that they were stationed in the very same places where the early scenes in the movie had been filmed. This inspired the 101st Airborne to hire students at Mosul University to create a location tour, which they called “The Exorcist Experience.” Petraeus invited Friedkin to come to Mosul to see it for himself and reunite with the residents with whom he had worked in Iraq thirty years before. And so, in 2003 the director intended to return to Mosul; yet by his account: “[The trip] kept getting postponed and postponed, and finally we lost Mosul, which is now one of the most dangerous places in Iraq. It was a most wonderful place. I’d go back today in a minute.”⁶

Friedkin’s retrospective tale of his lost opportunity to reconnect with the people of Mosul due to the ensuing decade of violence and instability in Iraq, is undergirded by a troubling political narrative, one that champions the promise of the US military occupation of Iraq and specifically the opportunity it presented to capitalize culturally and monetarily on Mosul’s status as a Hollywood destination. Friedkin’s account is thus a modern political narrative fashioned on the archaeological evidence of American cinematic spectacle. However, the view of the invasion and its consequences for Iraq’s archaeological legacy from within the country and through the voices of Iraqis was markedly different from Petraeus and Friedkin’s rose-colored tale of salvation and theme parks.

In mid-April 2003, as US troops entered Baghdad, the Iraq National Museum was left unprotected, despite the pleas of Iraq’s cultural experts. It was even reported that soldiers stood by idly watching as the looting took place. As a result, the Museum and numerous other cultural institutions in Baghdad and around the country were ransacked, looted, trashed, and even burned and flooded. The Iraqi Ministry of Culture reported that 14,000 objects were stolen from the National Museum, some more than 3,000 years old. The Iraq National Museum housed artifacts excavated from Ninevah, Babylon, Hatra and other ancient sites regarded by archaeologists the world over as central to Iraqi *and* world heritage. As a counterpart to producing the ongoing media spectacle of archaeological destruction, IS (and other groups) reap profit from the sale of artifacts and replicas on the global black market, while the underbelly of Iraq’s archaeological story, archaeologists, scholars, and politicians, continue to work to salvage, if not reclaim, a shred of the narrative that made Iraq a treasured site of world heritage.

⁶ Bilge Ebiri, “Director William Friedkin on Rising and Falling and Rising in the Film Industry,” *Vulture* (May 3, 2013) <<http://www.vulture.com/2013/05/william-friedkin-interview.html>>

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Mona is committed to developing engaged and creative educational platforms for high learning and public outreach on issues related to the Middle East and Muslim World. She regularly curates and organizes events and exhibitions featuring the work of artists and activists in the Middle East and Muslim World. Recently, this has included [Open Shutters Iraq](#) at UC Berkeley and [Arab Comics](#) at Brown University.