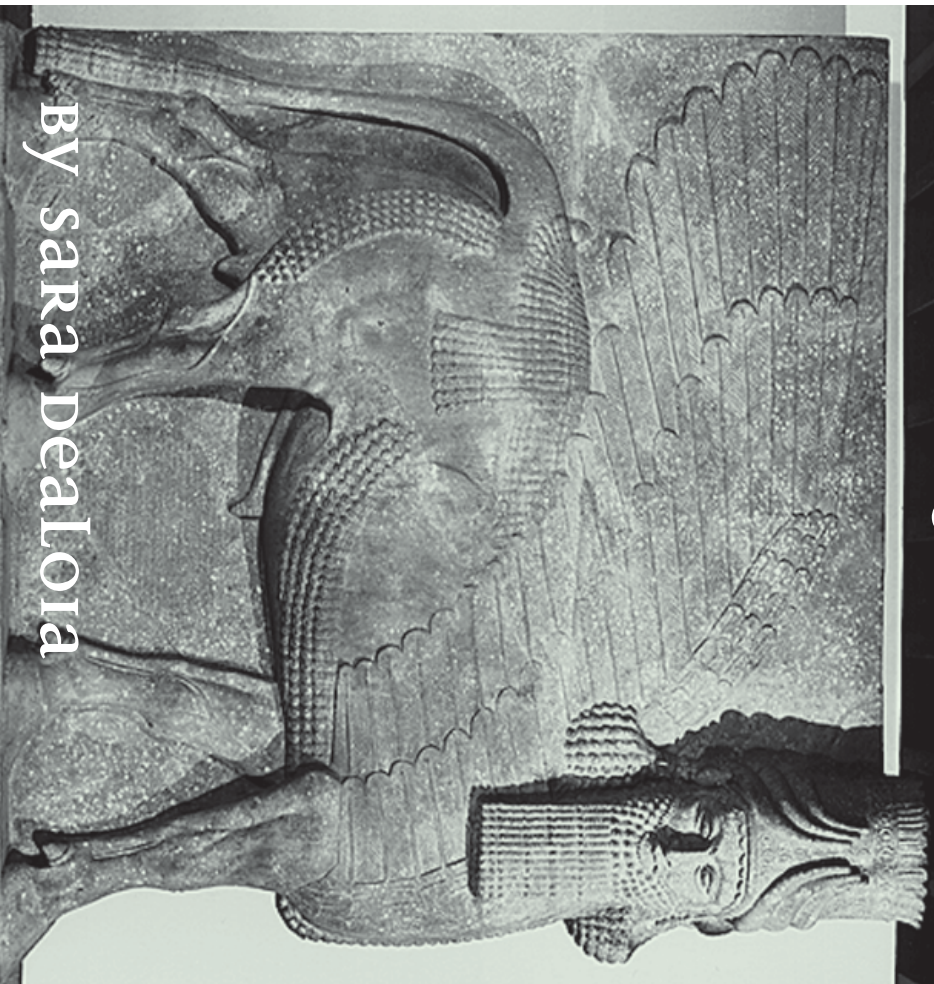


The War in Iraq AND Science in the USA

ONE ARCHAEOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE



BY SARA DEALOIA

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I remember writing last quarter for an assignment in my Human Ecology class that the war in Iraq would not only have horrible humanitarian consequences, but that it would also be devastating for the archaeological heritage of the region known as the "birthplace of civilization." I remember thinking how it hardly seemed surprising that this destruction would come from a country which has done little to protect its own heritage over the years since the "Indians" became "civilized" to the point of near extinction. It is no wonder that this country has some of the most lax heritage preservation laws of any country in the world—to claim the sophistication and complexity of the people who lived here before the United States brings us face to face with a sordid, brutal past most European Statesers would rather forget (1). Examples of the destruction of Native American sites can be seen in my southeastern Ohio town where hundreds, if not thousands, of human burial mounds were bulldozed by land-owners to create land more amenable to building houses or setting up a double-wide. The United States has *no* laws protecting cultural heritage sites on private property, no matter how important they are. If federal money is used for construction, i.e. roads, pipelines, then and only then is it required by law to do an archaeological survey of land to be disturbed. It was only in 1991 that the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed by the federal government. After more than 100 years of archaeological investigation (and pillage), this law set up rules and guidelines for how Native American cultural remains, including bodies, were dealt with by archaeologists.

As a graduate student in environmental archaeology, I have spent a lot of time searching my soul for the reasons why I am pursuing this field of study—especially in the midst of an illegal war being waged in my name, the increasing concentration of wealth and power wielded by corporations and the many other atrocities carried out by this dictatorship known as the Bush administration. I have only recently been awakened to a life of activism and I have this deep sense that my life will never be the same again. Now that I have

NOTES

(1) I have deliberately not called people from the United States "Americans" in my own small attempt at using names accurately and not perpetuating the idea that Americans exist only north of the Rio Grande and south of Canada. A whole lot of people in Latin America think we are arrogant self-righteous assholes for calling ourselves "Americans" with no recognition of the rest of the people in this hemisphere who might consider themselves so.

(2) See especially www.sehn.org which is the website for the Science and Environmental Health Network. This will lead you to all kinds of great resources within the growing field of civic, participatory science.

(3) The increasingly critical student population is based solely on my observations in one class so should not be seen as anything more than a grossly over-generalized statement of how I wish and hope that the larger student population will react to their professors.

(4) This website is one of the best examples of what journalism can be if it severs its ties to corporations and actually focuses on reporting the news that is lived by the majority of the people in the world. The focus is on the drug war and democracy in Latin America but the implications are much wider. I highly recommend this site to anyone interested in what Giordano calls "Authentic Journalism."

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I am breathless at the newly conceptualized hugeness of this enemy. I swore off television eight years ago and while I remember why every time I happen to see one, I forgot that the reality is that 9 out of 10 people *just kept watching* eight years ago. I wonder if the viewing public is being treated to pictures and video of the devastation at the National Museum of Archaeology in the city we have recently reduced to rubble and chaos. I wonder if the viewing public even has the ability to care anymore. I wonder if people from the United States, who have never been instilled with any kind of respect for archaeological heritage, even know the magnitude of the loss to humanity that this represents. I wonder mostly where the rage of the citizens of this country is—as we are spoon fed lies and contradictions, and separated from *each other*, our greatest sources of strength, by the alienation that is rampant in this moment in this world where we live.

In closing, I want to remind people who might be reading this that resource depletion does not only refer to things like oil, forests and water. The earth would probably—if humans were to disappear—regenerate these resources in a million or more years (admittedly this is no small comfort). These resources are non-renewable in the sense that our demands will out-pace the ability of the earth to reproduce what we have depleted. Cultural resources are absolutely, in every sense of the word, non-renewable. Once a burial mound is destroyed it can not be reconstructed without compromising its integrity. Once an archaeological site has been excavated it can not be put back in the ground. Once a National Museum of Archaeology is looted and smashed, it can not be rebuilt as it was before. We can not expect the Inca to return and rebuild their monuments and lifestyles. We already murdered them. We can not expect the Plains Indians to re-inhabit this continent, leaving behind a rich archaeological record. We already murdered them too. Nor can we expect to uncover another rendition of ancient Babylon and Assyria, or to unearth again the history of early Mesopotamia *where agriculture was thought to originate from*. We have already allowed it to be destroyed.

According to Fisk, the National Museum of Archaeology in Baghdad was on a U.S. military data-base. Archaeologists and United States military personnel had met before the war started to discuss the importance of preserving this site if at all possible. Despite this intelligence, I must say once again that it should be no great surprise that this kind of destruction came at the hands of a society which is so disconnected from a sense of the past. However, it is still an outrage and we can change our perceptions and actions even if we can't undo damage already done.

Sara DeAltoia is currently a 27 year old graduate student who hasn't owned a tv or a car in many years. She also hasn't had a "real" job in at least two years. She has no plans to change this approach to life as it seems to have resulted in her ability to live a life almost completely free of fear. The three things she is afraid are tv, cars and real jobs. Contact her at dealtoias@care2.com.

felt the power of my individual desire for a better world, I will never again sit in cynical, intellectual, detached judgment of the fucked up world I see around me. And yet, here I am, once again in the hallowed halls of academia trying to reconcile my activism with the traditionally elitist, colonialist career which chose me long ago. I have struggled with myself over this privileged position I now find myself in, so much so that I almost quit school three months ago after only three months as a fully funded graduate student.



Khoirsabad - Excavation of Gate A in the citadel of King Sargon II (721-705 B.C.).
Photo from the 1933-34 expedition.

I have since realized the lesson I learned three years ago as a senior at this same university—my education is nothing more and nothing less than what I make of it. I do not trust the current university system to know what is best for me any more than I trust an organized government or religion to know what is best (or bad) for me. So I make my own path amidst this colossal institutionalized factory that is the modern university, finding opportunities and supporters in the least likely of places. I have found that if one pays attention, it is actually possible to graduate from a university knowing something more than how to build a great resume and perpetuate corporate hegemony. These lessons have reminded me that, ever since I was first introduced to archaeology I have believed that it is important and relevant to the current problems in the world, despite its (mostly) disengaged and irrelevant past. Against all odds, I am convinced that archaeologists can and will play a vital role in building a more just, safe and equitable world.

My belief is backed up by the fact that I am an archaeologist who will fight tooth and nail to build a more just, safe and equitable world. There are other archaeologists (and other scientists) who make explicit their role in

creating a more civic, participatory, accountable, relevant science but our visions are not often nurtured by the university factory (2). Instead, we build our own molds and then abandon them as something new and better comes along. This is not fickle. This is practical and it is the lesson which has been taught to us by the natural world as long as we have been paying attention. Rigidity has never been rewarded in evolutionary terms; adaptability has always been. I find myself secretly thinking more and more often that science/technology as religion (which is undeniably how we experience S/T in the modern world) has outrun its course, expended its last ounce of usefulness. I especially think that as I see old-school scientists (i.e., tenured professors) defending their positions more fiercely against an increasingly critical student population which yearns for relevance (3).

I am not a neo-luddite either. Science and technology are here to stay until we either annihilate ourselves or are invaded by aliens who've been deeply influenced by John Zerzan. Since they are here to stay, it is my simple belief that science and technology must be accountable to the people. Socialized science? Maybe. Democratic science? Sure. Responsible, relevant, civic science? Definitely. Imagine if science were only done or technology were only produced if it were not harmful to the environment, well-made (so that it wouldn't have to be replaced every few years), accessible to the majority of people, and proven to greatly improve the quality of life for the majority of people. Imagine if we could build this criteria into the research and development department of every technology-driven company or if every scientist were to adopt these criteria in any research proposal. Goodbye pharmaceutical companies. Goodbye Microsoft. Goodbye to so many of the desires and products which enslave us.

And of course somehow in the ecosystemic interconnectedness of all



Jewan - The local mukhtar, Ali, in front of his house, which is built of blocks taken from the ancient aqueduct of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.). Note the cuneiform inscriptions on one of the blocks. Photo taken in 1933.

things, this also means goodbye to the passivity of United States citizens, it means goodbye to unjust wars—*two* (!!!) of which have been waged by the current president, it means goodbye to corporate media and of course it means goodbye to the kind of moronic, imperialistic administration which is currently poisoning the collective psyche of the United States public. Of course, any good scientist (or philosopher) would rip apart the giant leap I took from the last paragraph to this one, but then again, that's my point.

I did, however, start this essay with a reference to the archaeological devastation that would result from a war in Iraq and I would like to end up there as well. The impetus for writing this was actually a sound-bite on *Nationalist Public Radio* (interpretation courtesy of David Rovics) a few days ago that the National Archaeological Museum in Baghdad (the birthplace of civilization remember) had been looted in the "chaos" which is reigning in that "liberated" city. This sound bite was supplemented today by an article in my *Hotmail* inbox by Robert Fisk who is reporting from Baghdad. The destruction of the museum is complete. Display cases and 7,000 year old ceramics smashed to bits, untold numbers of artifacts missing, carefully recorded written records of all the archaeological remains strewn about, trampled on, lost, burned, years and years of archaeological inquiry (elitist or not) in one of the most archaeologically significant places on earth destroyed, and finally a report from some illustrious member of the Bush administration that U.S. soldiers were not going to stop the looting because the looters deserved a little holiday. But, not to worry, we can rest assured that whichever arrogant, self-righteous mother fucker said that and whatever corporate media which reported that in true "objective" journalistic fashion are there **BECAUSE WE ALLOW THEM TO BE THERE!!**

Our biggest enemy is the corporate media. I have come to realize this the way I might come to realize that I have always in the back of my mind hated black licorice as I vomit up one too many shots of Jagermeister (this analogy is not based in any kind of experienced reality at least for this author). I have come to realize this the way I might realize that that annoying buzz is a wasp just at the moment when it stings me in the eye. Al Giordano of www.narconews.com, has said (and I paraphrase) that when real revolution comes it will not come to the gates of the White House, but to the doors of CNN (4). It will not come to the WTO or the World Bank but to the hallways of Fox. It will not come to the State House or the Court House but to the television screens of viewing Americans everywhere. As I struggled to make my voice heard in the midst of this surrealistic nightmare that is anywhere in the United States of America in the late winter and early spring of 2003, I realized that we were, all of us—in all our hopes for a better world, in our idealistic visions of something (anything) different, in our communities where we gather strength, in our small acts of resistance—we were all looking in the wrong direction. The monster is all around us. It has been gathering strength as we denounce its corporate ties and tune into NPR or BBC. Except they are complicit in some way or another as well.