PICKING UP THE PIECES

Confronting heritage trauma in the post-conflict national museums of Syria and Iraq

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Humanities

Leiden University

_____

In Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts and Culture

_____

Name:

Tommi Arbiv

Student Number:

S2253585

Email address:

tommiarbiv@gmail.com

First reader:

Dr Mirjam Hoijtink

Specialisation:

Contemporary Art in a Global Perspective

Academic year:

2018/2019

Abstract

This thesis follows the trajectories of two museums, the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, across the past two decades, to investigate the extent to which notions of nation, national heritage and the public good have come to be evaluated before, during and after conflict. Charged with pride and burdened with pain, the material heritage of this region in many ways stood at the centre of the conflicts of the past twenty years, and would come to define the future of the nations of Syria and Iraq. Tracing the histories of the two national museums, from closure to reopening, through the vantage point of the antiquities in their collections, this thesis strives to illustrate how Syrian and Iraqi heritage has been appropriated and narrated in strategic and contested ways by a diverse network of invested actors, both locally and globally. Drawing on exhibitions and press material surrounding pivotal events in these museums' biographies, this thesis argues that in suppressing the legacy of pain and trauma with which their patrimonies are inscribed, local and international culture professionals impeded post-conflict healing and inadvertently acted against the interest of the public good. Reconstructing the museum and its destroyed collections could serve to incite national introspection and to reconnect the peoples of Syria and Iraq with the heritage from which they have for so long been alienated, but if recent years' heritage trauma remains unaddressed in the post-conflict museum, genuine healing may never be attained. In order to lay the groundwork for reconciliation, and to pave the way for the transformation of conflict, this thesis proposes agonistic dialogue as the means through which museum professionals and museum publics may collectively come to terms with the healing and hurting sides of their national heritage.

Key words

Nation, National museum, Civic mandate, Healing and hurting heritage, Agonistic dialogue

Table of Contents

Introduction

The National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad share a troubled history. In a matter of two decades, they have endured the US invasion, the rise and spread of ISIS, and the ensuing civil war in Syria. During these years, countless ancient artefacts have been damaged, destroyed or simply disappeared from the respective national museums. Some of the damaged objects in these collections have since been restored, while others have miraculously made it through the past twenty years unscathed. The two museums have both, at different times and for different reasons, been forced to close, however as of late 2018, they were both open to the public again. Their life histories stand testament to the enduring power of heritage and the irrepressible agency of antiquities.

Starting out from the fateful year of 2003, this thesis sets out on a mission to follow the parallel biographies of these two museums, and to map out the network of crosscutting political forces which have converged within them before, during and after conflict. Though they share similar histories, the advantage of a two-sited approach is to show the ways in which these two museums interact and learn from each other. Following the evolution of these national museums, from closure to reopening, from destruction to restoration, and from tragedy to opportunity, this thesis works to examine how notions of nation, heritage, the public, and the public good have become contested and re-evaluated. Paying close attention to sites of tension in the interplay between nation-states, national museums and the general public, the objective of this thesis is to explore how the loss of material heritage destabilises the nation, and how this friction and instability in turn enables museums to reconfigure their projections of nationhood.

Historical context

The National Museum of Damascus was founded in 1919 at the Madrasa al-'Adiliya, displaying a small collection of Islamic artefacts. The collection kept there quickly outgrew the museum and was moved to a new building located next to Al-Takiyya al-Sulaymaniya in the West of the City, between the Damascus University and the Tekkiye Mosque Complex, on Shoukry Al-Qouwatly Street.[1] In its nascence, the National Museum of Damascus proudly displayed the "Islamic heritage" of Syria, but under the French mandate

[1] Museums With No Frontiers. "Discover Islamic Art: National Museum of Damascus, Damascus, Syria" islamicart.museumwnf.org/pm_partner.php?id=Mus01;sy&type=museum Accessed on 25 June 2019

(1923-1943) this unity was downplayed by accentuating the diversity of Syria's past.[2] By placing more Hellenistic and Byzantine artefacts on pedestals, the French sought to stifle the emergence of a blossoming Arab identity and to quell growing calls for independence. In defiance against this development, the current building was built in 1936, and was adorned with the front façade of the recently excavated eighth century Umayyad palace of Qasr al-Heer al-Gharbi (Fig. 1.). The work of transposing the ancient façade onto the new building took several years, much due to impact and effects of the Second World War, but the official opening could finally be celebrated in 1950, four years after the after the official end of the French Mandate. After their departure, new halls and wings were added to display more exhibits, devoting more attention to the Islamic period, as well as contemporary Syrian art. Although the museum's focus shifted back to highlighting Syria's Islamic past following the departure of the French, an array of Greco-Roman and Byzantine material still remained present in the museum and was used to present Syrian identity on a global stage, to tourists and foreign leaders.[3] These classical objects include countless Roman era mosaics, a restoration of the Dura Europos Synagogue from the 3rd century AD, the hypogeum of Yarhai from Palmyra, dating to 108 AD, and the world's first alphabet from Ugarit. With major additions made to the collection throughout the decades, the museum has grown to almost four times its original size, yet it has maintained its original vision. Divided into five sections, the museum takes you through the history of Syria from the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, to the Ancient Syrian Oriental period, into the Classical and Byzantine era, followed by the big Islamic gallery displaying objects all the way from the Umayyad to the Ottoman empires, and closing off with the section for Modern Art.[4]

The Baghdad Antiquities Museum was inaugurated by King Faisal in 1923, in a triumphal stance against Ottoman imperialism. Though its inauguration was lauded as a national victory, the founding of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad actually owes much to help of the famous British author, political agent and amateur archaeologist, Gertrude Bell, who later became the museum's first director. During the archaeological boom, Bell worked hard to persuade British archaeologists against removing any more of Iraq's treasures to European collections, such as the British Museum. The artefacts which she managed to salvage

[2] Soufan, Anas. "Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria." In ICOMOS University Forum, vol. 1, pp. 1-18. ICOMOS International, 2018.
[3] Ibid. 2-4
[4] The current director of the National Museum of Damascus is Mahmoud Hammoud (Head of the General Directorate for Antiquities and Museums).

constituted the museum's first official collection and offered a material foundation to the newly independent nation.[5] In 1966, the present-day Iraq Museum opened in a modern building with help from Germany, and in the early 1980's, six galleries were added to the existing 18 with the help of the Italian government. The building of the museum is marked by elegance and simplicity, with the gate, a large replica of a late eighth century Assyrian city gate from Khorsabad, facing on one side a peaceful garden, and on the other the museum library (Fig. 2). The top floor comprises five sections displaying pieces from prehistory, and effects of the Sumerian, Akkadian and Babylonian periods, successively. The ground hall has more space, presenting visitors with the riches of the Assyrian civilisation, and guiding them through the Parthian and Sasanian galleries and into the Islamic section. With less than 3% of their vast collections on display, the Iraq Museum's holdings have generally been regarded as one of the world's greatest repositories of ancient Near Eastern artefacts.[6] In order to protect these collections from the bombings of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980's and the First Gulf War in the early 1990's, the museum has been forced to close and reopen many times. Currently located in the Alawi area in the heart of Baghdad, only two blocks west of Haifa Street, a major throughway on the west bank of the Tigris River, the museum is extremely vulnerable to direct attack.[7] In a nearby bus terminal, many car bombs have detonated and drive-by shootings have occurred on many occasions, wounding several museum guards. A rocket even struck the museum's garden, leaving a massive hole above the entrance gate. To prevent further loss and damage, the museum shut its doors and all moveable objects were transferred to the vaults of the Central Bank, where they were safer, but still subject to damage from humidity. The objects stayed locked away in the Central Bank, and even when the museum was reopened in 2000 to celebrate Saddam Hussein's 63rd birthday, the museum only displayed casts and photographs of antiquities. Exactly three years later, the US invaded Iraq and the national museum was again forced to close its doors, following widespread looting and plundering.[8]

[5] Seized from the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Iraq became a British protectorate, ruled by a Muslim king, until it was granted independence in 1932.
[6] Youkhanna, Donny George. "*Learning from the Iraq Museum*" 2010 ajaonline.org Accessed on 25 June 2019
[7] Nateq, Laith. "The Iraqi Museum: A long history and a sad present" Al-Jazeera www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2019/1/16/ Accessed on 25 June 2019
[8] The current director of the Iraq Museum is Ahmed Kamil Muhammad.

Thesis content and structure

Drawing on scholarship specifically related to the histories of The National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and on works examining the construction of nation and heritage in the museum more generally, the first chapter of this thesis strives to show how "the Nation" has been projected through and onto heritage in the contexts of pre-conflict Syria and Iraq.[9] The point in starting off with this discussion, is that it will introduce the dissonance between national heritage and the heritage of humanity, and the ways in which this tension would come to trigger heritage destruction of years to come. As Benedict Anderson argues, antiquities constitute the material anchorage of the imagined community of the nation, lending shape and meaning, affordances and constraints, to what it means to be a citizen.[10] When this anchorage is destroyed, or kept away from the public eye, it leaves heritage and the national imagination up for grabs. This chapter examines how the destruction of antiquities served to destabilise reified notions of Nation and national identity, and how such objects often stood at the centre of social and political frictions. Bringing works by Tony Bennett, Mary Witcomb and Ian Hodder into dialogue, the second chapter of this thesis suggests museum closure as the breaking of a social contract, and in so doing seeks to describe the relationship between the national museums and their publics as a negotiation of civic rights and duties.[11] It asks to what extent the museums' conventional mandate of civic education and reform came to be re-evaluated in response to museum closure, and how notions of the public good came to change with that. The third chapter devotes itself to critically analysing what prospects the two museums entered the era of post-conflict recovery with, and what role heritage artefacts played, or could have played, in tackling the legacy of trauma and loss.[12] In having this discussion, it is critical to avoid confusing the notion of "post-conflict" with a clean break from the past, and instead it is necessary to recognise that Syrians and Iraqis are facing a long and arduous process of reconciliation. My aim in this last chapter is thus to investigate how material heritage can act as a pivotal agent in "post-conflict" dialogue, and to evaluate whether the national museums of Syria and Iraq are ready and suited for this purpose.

[9] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 2011; Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 2003; Youkhanna, Donny George. "*Learning from the Iraq Museum*" 2010; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *World Heritage and Cultural Economics*, 2006; Edwards, *The nation's temple*, 2005

[10] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983

[11] Bennett, *Exhibition, difference and the logic of culture*, 2006; Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 2003; Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 2010

[12] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 2014, Macdonald, Is 'difficult heritage'still 'difficult'?, 2015

Post-conflict heritage reconstruction is a field which involves a wide spectrum of stakeholders and a large number of political, social, economic, environmental, aesthetic and financial considerations.[13] To help locate all of these actors within one network, and to define their motives and visions, this thesis re-appropriates Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, and describes the situation at hand as a triangle drama within which antiquities act as central social agents. In the contexts of post-conflict Syria and Iraq, this network of invested actors comprises the State (the incumbent party and political strongmen), the international community (supranational bodies such as UNESCO and ISESCO), and popular actors such as the diverse communities of Syrian and Iraqi citizens, and global citizens like you and me, all of whom regard the archaeological heritage of this region in different ways. By positioning objects at the centre of this dynamic, this thesis aims to explore not only how heritage has been politicised, but also how it is political in its own right. ANT allows us to appreciate objects and materials as social actors, and helps explain how bronze figurines, alabaster sculptures and even crude oil act as nodes in a network of invested individual and corporate actors. While the friction between these actors determines the nature of post-conflict recovery, the internal agonism inscribed within heritage objects conditions this process to a great degree, too. To paint a picture of heritage trauma, and how museum closure and reopening was lived and experienced, this thesis relies on sources like newspaper articles, exhibition proposals and museum catalogues, but also strives to depart from the objects themselves in its analysis. As Sharon Macdonald and John Giblin make us aware, heritage has the power both to heal and to hurt, yet in the national museums of Syria and Iraq this ambiguousness is often de-emphasised and muted.[14] Though the traces of conflict are physically and symbolically inscribed onto every object in these museums' collections, neither of the two institutions, once reopened, did anything to reflect on the horrors of their immediate past, but rather sought comfort in a return to normalcy. The ways in which people interpret the meaning of heritage in the present, greatly influences what becomes of the future of the nation and the national community, because heritage plays an integral role in shaping national memory – both remembering and forgetting. This thesis proposes the thought that maybe the only way of moving toward national recovery and reconciliation and of finding ways to come to terms with conflict in the present, is to engage heritage in agonistic dialogue, and to embrace the full spectrum of affect which it elicits, both its healing and hurting aspects. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's work on political agonism, Sarah Maddison proposes agonistic dialogue as a public

[13] Al-Hassan, *Cultural Heritage Destruction*, 2018
[14] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 2014, Macdonald, Is 'difficult heritage'still 'difficult'?, 2015

peace process for divided societies to promote reconciliation through 'a vibrant clash of democratic political positions'.[15] Not aimed at a solution nor at finding consensus, this type of dialogue actively works to foment dissensus as a measure of allowing people to come to terms with and learn from each other's differences in order to make conflict more liveable.[16] Though it has not yet been applied specifically in the context of heritage reconstruction, I believe that agonistic dialogue may be of great use in post-conflict Syria and Iraq. To this end, I will use the conclusion to explore what means local museum professionals and publics have to enable the national museum to become a space for agonistic dialogue, and what obstacles stand in the way of bringing these ideas into action

Relevance

The lessons to be learned from looking at the last twenty years of the histories of the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad teach us about the agency of antiquities and their integral role in constructing and deconstructing the nation and national memory. What is perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt from the recent history of these two museum is how heritage is in a constant state of becoming, how it is continuously used as a political device in the present and how it will always remain contested. Heritage gives us strength and fills us with pride, but it can also hurt and burden us with shame, however, as this research indicates, the pain inscribed within heritage is often neutralised, silenced or worse yet, erased in in most national museums. Nowhere is this tension between memory and oblivion more apparent than in the post-conflict museum. This thesis thus proposes agonistic dialogue as the means through which the forces of historical amnesia may be exposed and combatted in the national museums of Syria and Iraq, and urges these two museums to begin to envision their institutions as arenas for civic dialogue, not as a means to find a quick solution to deal with the trauma of the conflicts which have plagued Syria and Iraq, but rather to argue that conflict is the solution. Although the perspective of this research seeks to shed light on the frictions at work in the negotiation of nationhood in the aftermath of destruction, it is ultimately an optimistic view, showing how devastation can be turned into opportunity, and how the agency of museums can be harnessed to socially constructive ends, on a collective and individual level.

[15] Mouffe, *The democratic paradox,* 2000; Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies,* 2015
[16] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies,* 1019

Chapter One

- **Materialities of Nationhood**

The artefacts unearthed in the region of modern day Syria and Iraq testament to continued human settlement over the course of millennia. In Syrian and Iraqi national museums the frayed and fragmented cultural fabric of this region has been woven together to form a cohesive and continuous thread of Syrian or Iraqi culture. These ancient objects have over the past two centuries also become conscripted into museum narratives across the world, where they often form part of the early stages of the grand narrative of human civilisation. Objects play an integral role in giving shape to nationhood, and in extension, humanity, for they contribute the material evidence around which the spirit of the nation and its people(s) may coalesce. Within the walls of the museum these relics and artefacts are supposed to be safeguarded for posterity, and become endowed with an air of timelessness, however, the process whereby such artefacts become co-opted into the eternal national narrative or the civilizational narrative is not neutral and should not be taken for granted. This chapter offers context to how the material heritage of Syria and Iraq has been narrated throughout history and across the globe, but also seeks to understand how the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad have traditionally been perceived in the minds of their respective visitors. In order to come to terms with the ways in which national museums produce identity through the archaeological past, and how such identities come to be redefined with the destruction of national heritage, it is essential to first form an appreciation of the role that artefacts and heritage play in political legitimation and the writing of national histories.

Imagining Nation and Humanity in the museum

The history of modern archaeology and museology proves that cultural property can never be owned exclusively. Ancient Greek artefacts are a prime example of a body of heritage which has been appropriated into the civilizational narrative, and whose rightful ownership remains a contested and highly divisive issue even to this day. Looking at the contentious history of the Elgin/Parthenon Marbles, Yannis Hamilakis[17] describes how claims of ownership are motivated by the desire to anchor national phantasms to concrete evidence. For the modern Greeks, the Marbles stand as a symbol of the resilience and longevity of the "Greek" culture to which they are the perceived heirs, while in the British Museum the

[17] Hamilakis, *The nation and its ruins*, 2007

Marbles are exhibited to tell the story of human civilisation. [18] In the National Museum of Damascus and in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad one could find treasures from Sumerian, Akkadian and Babylonian civilisations, among which were indeed many civilizational firsts like the first recorded alphabet, the Ugarit tablet – the Syrian museum's "most treasured artefact" – and the first depiction of a human figure, the Lady of Warka, housed in Baghdad, but they still formed part of national history, never human history.[19] Though these artefacts "belong to national history," Syria and Iraq still live in the Islamic age, indicating toward a clear rupture between the Islamic present and the pre-Islamic past in the museum, a distinction which many European museums and scholars have also found useful to employ.[20] While never made explicit, this ambivalence echoes through both museums, and can in many ways be said to have provoked the heritage troubles of years to come. Alhough modern Syria and Iraq comprise a diverse range of political, ethnic, and religious groups, in the museum, the grand narrative is always that of national unity and shared heritage. As Hamilakis describes it, national museums are potent social agents able to unify a divided populace, limit social disintegration and legitimate power.[21] In the national museums of Syria and Iraq this narrative of national unity is fundamentally discriminate in essence, excluding the archaeological heritage of religious and cultural minorities such as Kurds and Christians, as it is viewed as a threat to the Islamic identity of the museum.

The strength of the national imagination thus lies in the ability of museums and culture professionals to construct and repackage a cohesive present, and a holistic vision of the nation, out of a fragmented past and a segregated present[22]. Historically held in high regard by their respective visitors, the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad have been the place where Syrians and Iraqis go to learn about themselves. However, this act of reflection is, and has always been, mediated through the Western gaze.[23] Ever since the inception of the modern museum, European collectors have focussed their attention on the material heritage of the Near East.[24] After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom and France seized in on Syria and Iraq in a wave of expansionist fervour.

---

[18] Hamilakis, *The nation and its ruins*, 79
[19] Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 99; al Moadin et al. *Highlights of the National Museum of Damascus*, 2006
[20] An illustrative example of this is Michael Feener's "Muslim Cultures and Pre-Islamic Pasts: Changing Perceptions of "Heritage"." In The Making of Islamic Heritage, pp. 23-45. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2017.
[21] Hamilakis, *The nation and its ruins*, 286-287, 291
[22] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 173, 181; Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 92
[23] Ibid. 189
[24] Ibid. 174

The halls of the first modern European museums had to be filled with art and artefacts of great ancient civilisations, and in the scramble that followed a huge portion of the region's archaeological wealth was removed from its original setting, scattered across the globe and woven into foreign museological narratives.[25] The idea of a universal history emerged with the first museums of antiquity, who saw it as their responsibility to safeguard and exhibit the material heritage of the Orient in its proper global context.[26] European archaeologists and antiquities traders saw Muslim rulers and elites, who were in possession of many of the most valuable artefacts of the region, as obstacles in their venture of collecting the globe. Mirjam Hoijtink, who just so happens to be the first reader of this paper, writes that:

> The removal of objects and parts of architecture in Egypt and Greece, then all part of the same Ottoman Empire, was easily legitimized in Europe. It was generally agreed that pre-Islamic heritage was at least 'conserved' under Muslim rule. But in the opinion of fairly all European eye-witnesses, quoted endlessly by later historians, antiquity under Ottoman rule had the reputation of being abandoned, neglected or even demolished.[27]

What this makes clear is how "universal history" was, since its emergence, made to seem intrinsically vulnerable, safe only in European hands, far removed from the perils of the Near East.

Local practices of collecting in Syria and Iraq far precede the arrival of the modern museum, and local words for heritage did already exist, but what this initial European heritage intervention put into motion in Syria and Iraq, and many other countries in the region, was an irreversible change in the national self-perception, and local ways of "doing heritage". Now, heritage had to be managed and policed, an approach which effectively excluded the living heritage of local communities, and fixed them to the ancient past, sentencing them to death in the museum.[28] The invasion and eventual retreat of the French and the British irrevocably fragmented the political landscape of the region, leaving the newly independent nations of Syria and Iraq struggling to come to terms with their cultural and national identity. In dealing with the aftermath of the devastation left behind by the

[25] Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 97-99
[26] Winter, Heritage studies, 2013, 560
[27] Hoijtink, M., "Antiquity & conflict: some historical remarks on a matter of selection." 323
[28] Mary Witcomb, whom we will return to at a later stage in this thesis, ventures to describe the museum as a muasoleum. This notion stems, as she has found, from the arrival in Paris of countless artworks from all over Europe as war loot and is firmly linked to the idea that "museums enclose objects, separating them from the life-forces which gave them their original social and political meanings." 103-104

Europeans, the two nations built themselves from the ground up, quite literally, and the objects which remained in situ, or at least within the borders of Syria and Iraq, allowed the young nations to re-formulate an appreciation of what it means to be Syrian and Iraqi out from under the imperial shadow. Despite their newfound freedom, the two national museums were haunted by spectres of European museology –conceptually bound to understanding their archaeological past as the foundation for their future identity. In specific regard to the National Museum of Damascus, Archaeologist Kari Zobler writes:

> The new government of the Syrian Arab Republic developed a strategy for community cohesion that would transcend diversity. One strategy was co-option of the past and manipulation of the presentation of heritage so as to create a sense of shared identity in the "imagined community" of the nation-state. Syrian national museums became the keepers of the material evidence of this cohesion, built on a shared past and landscape.[29]

In order to establish community cohesion, the newly formed governments of Syria and Iraq thus "manipulated" the past so as to create a sense of shared identity in the "imagined community" of the nation-state.[30] Moving forward, it needs to be acknowledged how the foundation for national unity, and the ways in which Syrian and Iraqi citizens relate to their past, has been influenced and conditioned by a foreign *heritage intervention*. International meddling in the national heritage of Syria and Iraq cannot therefore be reduced to a matter of culture, or even humanitarian aid, for heritage is always irreducibly political. Any attempt to protect or reconstruct the heritage of the Near East is thus by default also an attempt to influence the politics of the region.

Imaging destruction

In the last twenty years Syria and Iraq have been beset by armed conflict, and a large part of their material heritage, call it global or call it national, has been devastated. Through it all, museum professionals and cultural ministers have remained fiercely protective of their material heritage, yet the resolve and resilience with which they protect their material heritage is not always shared by the general public. Taking the Iraqi case, it is clear to see that there never was consensus on how Iraqi material heritage should be understood in the present

[29] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 174
[30] Anderson, *Imagined* Communities, 1983; Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 184; Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 100-101

and that Iraqis protect and destroy their heritage for vastly different reasons. Weeks before the Gulf war broke out in 1990, the Iraq Museum closed its doors to the public, and the objects which were seen to be of greatest cultural and monetary value to Iraqi national heritage were stored away, wrapped in rubber foam and locked behind concrete walls or moved to the vaults of the Central Bank and other secret locations across the country.[31] Nine years later, when the coast appeared clear, some objects (many of which damaged) were again shown to the public, however, this stint of respite did not last for long. Only three years later, the museum was again forced to close its doors and look for safer places for its collections, this time however, devastation hit with greater force than ever.[32]

On 10–12 April 2003, soon after US invasion, Iraq's archaeological heritage was not destroyed by invading forces, but rather by the Iraqis themselves. Breaking into the national museum with wheelbarrows and carts, looters stole and shattered priceless statues, bowls, and clay tablets, leaving the galleries empty in their wake (Figs. 3 and 4).[33] The guards positioned by the invading army to defend the museum fled in fear of being caught in the crossfire of the riots which engulfed central Baghdad at the time, resulting in the looting of dozens of many other Iraqi cultural institutions, including the National Library, the National Academy of Arts, institutes of music, dance, and art, and universities. Antiquities looting had been almost non-existent in Iraq prior to the wars of the late 1980's and early 1990's, but growing lack of government control and increasing prices on the global antiquities market made looting a persistent threat to the organisation and integrity of the national museum, and in extension, the Nation. The final tally of the missing items, detailed in the Bogdanos investigation submitted on September 8, 2003, puts the total number of looted objects at about 13,500 items. Many objects, but far from all of them, have since been recovered, returned or reconstructed.[34] While bearing in mind the damage inflicted on Iraqi heritage, it is crucial not to dismiss the actions of looters simply as acts of mindless vandalism, rather, it must be

[31] Wegener and Otter, "Cultural property at war: protecting heritage during armed conflict." 5
[32] Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 99-100
[33] Wegener and Otter, "Cultural property at war: protecting heritage during armed conflict." 7-8
[34]In "The Iraqi national museum and international law: A duty to protect," (2005) Wayne Sandholtz relays the findings of the Bogdanos report on heritage destruction in Iraq, detailing that in the lootings of April 2003, 40 major pieces were taken from the public galleries, 3138 items from storage rooms on the first and second floors, and 10,337 pieces looted from the basement storage room, for a total of about 13,500 items. See Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, USMC, Iraq Museum Investigation: 22 Apr.-8 Sept. 03, U.S. DEP'T DEF. (Sept. 10, 2003), available at www.defenselink.millnews/ Sep2003/d20030922fr.pdf.

recognised that terrorists and looters are rational people and that their actions are done with purpose and reason.[35]

The events of 2003 demonstrate not only how the population of Iraq relates to their heritage in discordant ways, but it also shows that heritage often lies at the centre of political conflict. To assist in getting to the root of what the religious and political motivations for heritage destruction were, the works of Kari Zobler, Amr Al-Azm and Claire Smith *et al.* are of great use. Zobler and Al-Azm bring to our attention how religion structures perceptions of nationhood in Middle Eastern museums, suggesting that the collections of the national museums of Syria and Iraq have historically been used not only to legitimise, but also to sanctify the nation-state. Al-Azm describes this as a process of Arabization, whereby the archaeological past is appropriated and reinvented to bolster and solidify the modern national imagination, and more generally, to defend Arab identity.[36] By using pre-Islamic objects to legitimate their Islamic governments, the national museums of Damascus and Baghdad brought a religious friction to the surface, a friction which, in the Iraqi case, was only intensified by US invasion and which erupted in the events of April 2003. In envisioning the national museum as the nation's temple,[37] its looting appears rather as a radical act of iconoclasm, a sacking of the idols of false prophets, as expressed in videos disseminated worldwide depicting the destruction wreaked upon the material heritage of Syria and Iraq almost a decade after the Iraq Museum lootings.

> Dear Muslims, these idols behind me belong to people from the old times, who worshipped things other than Allah. All of these people, such as the Assyrians and [sic] Arcadians and others, had gods for rain, gods for war. They worshipped these Gods and made sacrifices to appease them . . . Abraham himself was praying to Allah that he and all his bloodline would be saved from worshipping these pagan idols. When Abraham went to Mecca he destroyed idols. [More recently] when Mohammad when to Mecca he also destroyed idols that his people were worshipping.
>
> …
>
> Destroy. Destroy. . . . Destroy the state of the Crusaders. Destroy the idols and statues. Destroy the untruths of the Americans. The idols belong in hell. These

[35] Smith et al., *The Islamic State's symbolic war*, 168
[36] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 175; Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 2018
[37] Edwards, *The nation's temple*, 2005

> statues and idols did not exist at the time of the prophet and his companions but the devil worshippers [i.e. archaeologists] dug them out.'[38]

Idolatry is the explicit target of the looters and Islamic radicals, but the implicit motivation for looting antiquities is the vast revenue it brings. Whether commissioned to loot, or simply getting swept in the frenzy of the moment, the mobs which looted the national museum of Baghdad in April 2003, echoed the general sentiment of the population – Why do these objects deserve greater protection than we do? As a result of the looting, the universe of national unity and cohesion which the museum had created suddenly collapsed, and it collapsed much due to the fact that images of heritage destruction were disseminated globally (Fig. 5).[39] Al-Azm warns us, however, not to reduce these acts of cultural heritage destruction to deliberate iconoclasm, rather, he argues, that the imperative behind such acts is to "shock the world".[40] The goals and targets of Syrians and Iraqis who actively seek to damage destroy heritage artefacts cannot be reduced to a dualism of sacred and profane, or even Sunni and Shia, instead the underlying motivation of acts of heritage destruction is the dismantling of national unity.[41] Looking beyond material destruction, it should not be forgotten that the civic population of Syria and Iraq has had to pay the highest price in recent years' conflict. What one must be wary of, as al-Azm warns, is the danger of the false dilemma which posits that "you either care about ancient stones, monuments and artefacts, or you care about current humanitarian issues and the people affected".[42] In many ways, the health and suffering of the population is connected to the health and suffering of heritage objects. Similarly, the vitality of the nation is intimately tied to the vitality of material heritage. Appreciating the nature of this interdependence is essential in devising strategies for post-conflict recovery.

The valences of heritage and the agency of antiquities

The difficulty of giving one clear reason for why certain people destroy and others protect material heritage stems from the fact that heritage is polyvalent. In order to help us make sense of the multiple and shifting power material heritage holds in shaping the nation, let us briefly turn to the seminal scholarship on nationalism laid out by Benedict Anderson.[43] In basic terms, the ideas which Anderson introduces is that the nation, its culture

---

[38] Smith et al., The Islamic State's symbolic war, 177-178
[39] Duncan, *Civilizing rituals*, 8
[40] Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 100
[41] Cunliffe and Curini, *ISIS and heritage destruction*, 1106
[42] Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 102
[43] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983

and history, are neither material nor natural, but rather that they are fictions, created in the present and in response to real social needs.[44] Applying this idea to nation and heritage in the Middle East, Yuval Noah Harari writes that "nations cannot be created out of thin air," and that the fiction of a common heritage is rendered concrete through things.[45] Things, such as archaeological finds (but also everyday objects such as dress and cuisine) allow the leaders of diverse and fragmented populations to retroject the imagined unity of the nation into the past and project the illusion of cultural continuity into the future.[46] As disparate populations are united by a supposed collective material past, the imagined community becomes more like an objective reality, and the nation begins to take on a life of its own. A central site in which this process of nation-building occurs is the national museum. The political valence of a nation's material heritage consists in its power to authenticate cultural continuity, legitimise power and render resistance against its claim to authority unquestionable. In this passage in *Sapiens*, Harari describes the strategy put to work by Syrian and Iraqi leaders as one which made use of real historical, geographical and cultural materials to render tangible the imagined community of the newly formed nations, but, as he emphasises, co-opting the legacy of ancient civilisations does not turn the Syrian or Iraqi nation into an ancient entity.[47] The looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad in 2003 thus served not only to undermine the museum's assumed role as "the ideological vehicle for identity creation and community cohesion of the modern nation-state," but also worked to bring under scrutiny and dismantle the historical foundations of national unity, Iraq's very claim to antiquity. [48] The looting of the Iraq Museum thus makes clear how the national museum functions both as a site for nation-building and as a site for '*nation un-building*'. When the concept of the nation is already under fire, the protection of the nation's material anchorage becomes all the more necessary, or at least it seems like it for those in power, but for people seeking to stage a revolt, or to express dissent, the material foundations of a nation appear as highly effective targets to bring the government to its knees.

The destruction of heritage exceeds the mere physical destruction of an object. Whether due to intentional destruction, institutional neglect or accidental causes, the loss of material heritage always entails the loss of stories, and the creation of new ones. The looting

[44] Harrison, *Contested narratives in the domain of World Heritage*, 289
[45]Harari, *Sapiens*, 407
[46] Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 94; Soufan, Anas. "Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria." 9
[47] Harari, *Sapiens*, 47
[48] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 174

and vandalising of the Iraq Museum, was not simply an attack on the museum's collections, but it was an attack on the whole universe constructed by the museum.[49] The damaged artefacts, which were once displayed as strong and immortal, were suddenly exposed in all their fragility, and in that moment, the nation which was once unquestionable, was revealed as fiction and as myth. The events which transpired in the Iraq Museum in 2003 show how different actors, with differing interests and motivations, converge in the national museum, and protect and destroy heritage for vastly different, yet equally valid reasons. While some parts of the population experienced the destruction of artefacts as a loss, for the nation or perhaps for humanity, others perceived this destruction as a victory, against the sitting regime, against idolatry or against Euro-American imperialism. Loss is experienced differentially precisely because heritage is polyvalently charged, an aspect often ignored in international responses to Middle Eastern heritage destruction.

UNESCO and the World Heritage List

While the materials which form part of a nation's perceived heritage exist in objective reality, heritage itself is, much like the nation, a fiction created for strategic ends. Though it draws on and lives through the past, heritage is a mode of metacultural production that produces something new.[50] Over the course of millennia, culture has been passed along from one generation to the next, without ever really being understood as culture in the relative sense. With the emergence of museology and the modern construction of heritage this lineage has been broken. Fundamentally, the museum is, as Tony Bennett argues, a "civilizational enterprise," which displaces "popular customs and traditions standing in the way of modernisation by transforming them into historical representations of themselves."[51] Conjuring the past in this manner changes how people understand their culture and themselves, redefines the relationship of cultural practitioners to their craft and turns what was once habitus into heritage.[52] Though the European heritage intervention in the region irrevocably changed peoples' relationship to their material environment, heritage itself was not a novel concept, since consideration for the preservation of local heritage dates back to the Arab Renaissance of the late 19th century.[53] In the process of turning national or cultural assets into world heritage, they become public property, to which open and global access is

[49] Duncan, *Civilizing rituals,* 8
[50] Harrison, *Contested narratives in the domain of World Heritage*, 288
[51] Bennett, *Exhibition, difference and the logic of culture*, 51
[52] Frykman and Frykman, *Sensitive Objects,* 16; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, World Heritage and Cultural Economics, 180
[53] Soufan, "Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria." 1-2

not desired, but expected.[54] By disarticulating culture from nation and people, and "aggregating selected cultural manifestations into a category that imagines a polity wider than the nation-state," as Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett puts it, supranational bodies such as UNESCO produce a body of heritage which belongs at once to the people who created it (or those who consider themselves direct descendants of the people who created it), and to the imagined world community, or as it more commonly known, humanity.[55] The writing of history and the building of a nation, and in extension the construction of humanity, is thus always a selective and discriminate process. When international organs such as UNESCO, ICOM or the Blue Shield get involved in the protection and conservation of the heritage of nation-states they do so in non-neutral and politically motivated ways – to tell a certain story.

In 1972, UNESCO agreed on a World Heritage Convention stating that, "cultural and natural heritage is among the priceless and irreplaceable assets, not only of each nation, but of humanity as a whole. The loss, through deterioration or disappearance, of any of these most prized assets constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all the peoples of the world."[56] With this convention, UNESCO legally ratified a deep-rooted European vision of "world heritage" or "the heritage of humanity"– naturalising their vision of a global polity. The world heritage discourse works from the all-encompassing notion of humanity, to promote the equality of people from all nations, but what it actually effects, is the affirmation of borders and national differences. UNESCO cannot but see the world through a national imagination, and it has specifically identified the nations of Syria and Iraq as hosts of an important part of human material history.[57] While being placed on UNESCO's world heritage list may secure protection and promote cultural tourism, it also serves to distance people from their ways of life, and works to implicate their land and cultural assets into a hierarchy of value in which the cultures of others are given meaning only within the dominant European conception of the history of human civilization.[58] Although UNESCO and other global heritage bodies strive to promote the equal value of all human beings and their unalienable right to their own culture, in reality, the world heritage enterprise does not accord all

[54] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, World Heritage and Cultural Economics, 161-163
[55] Ibid. 189
[56] UNESCO, "Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention" 2013a, para. 4
[57] The UNESCO World Heritage List has identified five world heritage sites in Iraq: Hatra (1985); Ashur Qal'at Sherqat (2003); Samarra Archaeological City (2007); Erbil Citadel (2014); The Ahwar of Southern Iraq (2016), and six in the Syrian Arab Republic: The Ancient City of Damascus (1979); Site of Palmyra (1980); The Ancient City of Bosra (1980); The Ancient City of Aleppo (1986); Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din (2006); The Ancient Villages of Northern Syria (2011).
[58]Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 863; Newson and Young, *Post-conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage, 6, 108*

expressions of culture equal value.[59] The evaluation of what is considered to be of outstanding value ultimately rests on value-laden concepts, and the authority to make judgments on what is of value to humanity lies in European hands. As Yannis Hamilakis makes clear:

> [In dealing with UNESCO,] we are dealing with a politically charged, symbolic geography of representation that not only refuses to acknowledge its colonial origins, but also seeks to maintain and advance neo-colonialism, cast in the rhetoric of multi-culturalism and universality.[60]

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett sees the world heritage list in a similar way, claiming that "the heritage of humanity is first and foremost a list" whose very *raison d'être* is to order the world in a neat queue behind Europe.[61] What Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Hamilakis point to is how UNESCO, by virtue of their assumed moral authority, claims ownership of cultural assets across the world under the guise of altruistic and humanitarian action. UNESCO's approach to the material heritage of "the world" obscures the fact that culture cannot belong exclusively to anyone, because culture does not descend in a neat and unbroken lineage – moving from the ancient Near East to the modern West – but is rather in a constant state of reproduction, reinterpretation and disintegration.[62] Advocates of the world heritage enterprise envision it as a means to protect vulnerable cultures and to counteract the effects of globalisation,[63] what this vision conceals, however, is that world heritage is in fact the result of globalisation, and is constitutive of a global polity of which UNESCO is the supreme leader. In rendering neutral the concept of human heritage, heritage organs such as UNESCO, justify their continued intervention in the Middle East under the auspices that countries such as Syria and Iraq depend, as archaeologist Neil Brodie argues, "upon the international community to ensure that their own domestic laws are not broken."[64] Moreover, it perpetuates the belief that local populations are in no position to take care of their own material history, and that they, for the greater benefit of humanity, need to be educated on the proper way to take care of it. Thus, the destruction of Iraq's archaeological wealth only served to solidify UNESCO's authoritative claim to being the only organisation that can protect and conserve global heritage. Discussing heritage in peril thus gives more expression to a European sense

---

[59] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, World Heritage and Cultural Economics, 186; Soufan, Anas. "Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria." 3
[60] Hamilakis, *The nation and its ruins,* 270
[61] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, World Heritage and Cultural Economics, 191
[62] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights,* 870
[63] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, World Heritage and Cultural Economics, 163
[64] Brodie and Renfrew, *Looting and the world's archaeological heritage*, 18

of cultural superiority than it does any perceived humanitarian concerns. Critically examining what was lost in Iraq in 2003 from the perspective that world heritage is a non-neutral European concept, the destruction of ancient art and artefacts begins to appear not only as an act of national dissent, or radical iconoclasm, but as an act of subaltern defiance against an international community which mourned the loss of Syrian and Iraqi heritage more than Syrian and Iraqi lives.

Continued heritage interventions have today left Syrians and Iraqis in a situation where they can no longer dig the ground beneath their feet without permission from UNESCO, lest they inflict damage on objects of global value. In response to this growing sense of lack control over heritage, ISESCO, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, decided in 2007 to set up the Islamic Heritage Committee to "coordinate and make more effective ISESCO's action in areas relating to Islamic cultural heritiage."[65] In creating its own world heritage list, ISESCO sought to counteract the imperialist force of UNESCO and to tell a different story, one which celebrates the great history of Islamic culture. [66] While their stated mission was to protect and preserve "the Muslim world civilizational heritage," and to "save it from destruction, looting and judaization," ISESCO's world heritage list only ended up replicating UNESCO's methodology and further reifying their notion of world heritage.[67] It thus becomes clear that the heavy influence of UNESCO on local heritage practices in Syria and Iraq, and the dependency of local museums on their aid, has been difficult to break. When the same object is claimed by more than one actor, it undermines each actor's respective claims to ownership and in turn destabilises the legitimacy of the stories which they tell about their nation and its people. Herein lies the tension which in many ways is to blame for the heritage destruction of 2003, and which triggered the heritage troubles of years to come.

National subjects and national objects are both constituted as such through the national imagination. Seen in this way, antiquities are not only the symbolic property of the nation, but fully fledged members of the national body. When these objects disappear it may

[65] ISESCO itself was founded by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in May 1979. Here, I am referring to the address of H.E. Dr Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri, the Director General of ISESCO, before its fifth session held in Tripoli, Libya, on 21-23 November 2007

[66] ISESCO's World Heritage List identifies five sites Islamic heritage across the nations of the Ummah: The City of Al-Quds Al-Sharif (State of Palestine); Red Monastery (Arab Republic of Egypt); Bandiagara Mosque (Republic of Mali); The Mustansiriya Madrasah (Republic of Iraq); The Abbasid Palace (Republic of Iraq).

[67] ISESCO World Heritage Committee, www.isesco.org.ma/islamic-world-heritage-committee/# Accessed on 25 June 2019

dismember the nation once unified, but on a more intimate level it may profoundly destabilise people's notions of self. Not only do the supposed heirs of this lost heritage lament the loss of the self, but they lament the loss of these objects as living beings in their own right. It is a fundamentally human practice to animate the objects which we believe our ancestors passed down to us, to invest them with meaningful, legendary and mythological associations, and to treat them as if the objects themselves were our ancestors and our fellow national subjects. Ultimately, the embodiment of objects as living beings consists in their materiality. Archaeological finds of clay and stone possess a measure of authority and permanence which is rooted in their very physicality, and which holds sway over us even in their absence. They emerge from the same earth that contains the bones of the ancestors, from the same soil fed and watered with their blood. They are us, and we are them. It is, however, also a fundamentally human practice to destroy heritage. [68] All societies destroy, deface and convert artefacts and monuments in times of conflict, and also during times of peace, but when old buildings are torn down to make way for more modern structures, this is rarely seen as an act of heritage destruction. In Europe, the Middle East, and all across the world, we keep and protect only a selection of our history, and only that which is of value to us in the present.[69]

[68] Newson and Young, *Post-conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, 4
[69] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 863

Chapter Two

- **Negotiating the national museum's civic mandate**

The preceding chapter elaborated on the materialities of nationhood, pertaining specifically to heritage destruction in Syria and Iraq. Establishing that neither nation nor heritage are neutral concepts allowed us to form an appreciation of the social agency invested in objects and the role they play in conjuring the strength and vulnerability, singular authority and sprawling polyphony, of the nation, and in extension the global polity. This chapter further examines the process of mourning and healing from heritage loss and destruction, by taking a closer look at the Iraq Museum's latest period of closure (2003-2015), and it does so in order to investigate what became of the social contract between nation, national museum and the general public during closure and in working toward re-opening. The long and arduous work leading towards the reopening of the national museum of Baghdad intertwines with the life history of the National Museum of Damascus in curious and unpredictable ways. Reading the life histories of these two national museums against each other will help us understand the varying ways in which political threat and conflict force museums to re-evaluate their responsibilities and duties to their audiences, and incites the civic population to begin claiming rights and entitlements in relation to cultural heritage. Through this discussion, what I hope to make clear is how heritage duties, rights and responsibilities are honoured and negotiated during and immediately post-conflict, and how re-opening the museum entailed re-thinking the museum on the basic level of function and mission.

To allow us to form an appreciation of whether the national museums of Iraq and Syria harnessed their collections' social agency for the public good during this tumultuous time, it first needs to be explained what the national museums have conventionally assumed to be their duties vis-à-vis the general public – their constituents. Secondly, to come to terms with how these duties came to be re-assessed during conflict, it needs to be understood what the museum's closure constituted on a metacultural level, on the level of the social contract between state and citizen. By coming to grips with how museum closure was felt and experienced, and what it meant on a national and identitary level, one may begin to form an understanding of the thoughts and hopes which brought these museums back to life, but also how those hopes changed in the process. Prior to and during the imminent civil war, the Syrian government, Syrian museums and international heritage bodies learned a lot about heritage protection from the troubles experienced by their neighbour Iraq, and managed to safeguard a lot of their culture heritage. Working under the threat of

encroaching iconoclasts, museum professionals in both Baghdad and Damascus painstakingly and courageously strove to protect their heritage and ensure its perpetuity, indeed, 'the nation' was on the line. With the weight of the world on their shoulders, these two museums grew pressed to follow the imperative of their civic duty and to uphold the nation lest it crumble before our eyes. All the while the Iraq Museum was finding ways to cope with tragedy, collaborating with UNDP and the Italian Ministry of Affairs in order to honour their civic mandate, safeguard heritage and ensure public access to it, Syria's cultural heritage was under increasing threat of destruction and the nation of Syria itself began to be deconstructed.

Shaping the nation and the general public

Before tragedy swept over Iraq and Syria, their respective national museums were globally regarded as important custodians of humanity's heritage.[70] Vested in their authority as the foremost civic and cultural institution of the nation, lay inscribed the mandate to educate the public, safeguard cultural memory, and ensure its longevity *ad perpetuum*.[71] A civic duty of custodianship which seemed to stretch deep into the past and far ahead in the future; it was an obligation to the dead and to the as yet unborn.[72] Following US invasion in 2003 and under the consequent spread of radical Islamic militancy, this fundamental civic obligation was not always, or rather, could not always be strictly and faithfully honoured. Stripped of the means to educate and offer access, and with the national imagination up for grabs, the two archaeological museums have had to devise cunning strategies in order to fulfil their perceived civic mandate during times of conflict, and to keep the nation and its heritage intact. The negotiation of the national museum's duties and obligations hinges on this notion of 'perceived civic mandate', especially during times of conflict.[73] Long before disaster struck, both museums were profoundly aware of the cultural and political value of the objects which they were safeguarding,[74] and the ensuing conflicts of the coming twenty years only heightened this awareness. ISIS troops, pillaging their way across northern Syria and Iraq, were equally aware of the political influence of this heritage, and in their efforts to dismantle the nation and its government, archaeological sites and the national museum appeared as obvious and effective targets. This is why it came as no surprise when the very objects which had for so long served a community-making but also a citizen-making function became the

[70] Ghaidan and Paolini, *A Short History of the Iraq National Museum*, 97
[71] Bennett, *Exhibition, difference and the logic of culture*, 50
[72] Janes, *Museums without borders, 117*
[73] Janes, *Museums without borders*, 50-51
[74] al Moadin et al. *Highlights of the National Museum of Damascus*, 2006

target for looting and destruction. As Tony Bennett argues, these functions are rooted in museums' perceived duty to act as devices for civic reform.[75] The manner in which such civic reform took expression in the national museums of 21st century Syria and Iraq witnesses to and confirms Bennett's notion of the museum as a civic laboratory, a social technology by means of which "distinctive cultural entities are separated out from other relations and practices and made durable, but only so as to be then connected to the social in varied programmes of social management and reform".[76] The modus operandi of these two museums had always, and would always, be expressed in terms of and in regards to the Nation.

Zobler describes how the mission of The National Museum of Damascus was "to represent Syrian culture from a singular national perspective, irrespective of regional differences, both ancient and modern.*"*[77] The national museums in both Damascus and Baghdad were thus primarily spaces where individuals were transformed into national citizens, where they could go to learn about themselves and stand united in the ownership of their shared heritage. The museums' floorplans and their museum catalogues reflect how these were spaces where subjectivities were made and cemented and where nationality and citizenship was augmented and emphasised. These spaces were supposed to make visitors feel more Syrian or Iraqi when leaving the museum than when they entered.[78] This process of subjectification rests on a particular museological notion of the "general public" – an imagined collectivity understood as open to subjugation and discipline.[79] In evaluating how the national museums of Syria and Iraq have negotiated their duties toward the "general public," it is important to recognise that this very notion has been shaped by a particular ideology and is inscribed with particular political motives. Andrea Witcomb helps shed light on the roots of this notion:

> The notion of the 'general public' came into being at the same time as the development of the museum as a public institution … For the first time, the general public was addressed as a subject with interests in the museum.[80]

In giving shape to the "general public," museums make people subjects of history and subject to discipline, a process which, at its core, is socially and culturally exclusive. The instantiation

[75] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 16-17
[76] Bennett, *Civic laboratories*, 542
[77] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 181
[78] Though I have not been able to find any floorplans of the two museums, I make this statement based on a knowledge of the museums' layout in terms of thematic galleries.
[79] Bennett, *Civic laboratories*, 520-522
[80] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 16

of the public, and the construction of its supposed unity, consists in the museum's authoritative claim to knowledge, a claim which, as Witcomb goes on to explain, "situates the curator as a rational subject in a position of control over a homogeneous, mass museum public."[81] Through floorplans and catalogues, as well as exhibition design, the museum thus becomes, in Bennett's words, "a vehicle for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power ... throughout society."[82] Drawing on Bennett and Witcomb, the national museum thus appears as a potent disciplinary device for managing a public "in need of moral regulation."[83] In other words, the museum, as a disciplinary institution, has a duty to move people, an obligation to tell them who they are and how they should act. In this manner, the pre-conflict national museums of Syria and Iraq schooled the "general public" into a governmentally sanctioned historical narrative, a national truth which was to remain impregnable and unquestioned. [84] This dynamic is by no means a local particularity, indeed, the foundations of modern museology rest on the principle that the knowledge produced and transmitted by the museum, for the general public, is neutral and as such indisputable. The authority of the museological voice is grounded in that it has privileged access to knowledge, a privilege which renders such knowledge sacred, open only to those who know how to read its rituals and texts. In this relationship, the "general public," is placed as a passive receiver of knowledge, rather than as a body of actors with a vested interest and active relationship to the objects being displayed.[85] As demonstrated in the Iraqi case, museum closure, had the effect of fundamentally destabilising this dynamic.

Museum closure and the breach of the social contract between citizen and state

Beyond a homogenised and essentialised "general public," the museum identifies, and arguably requires, an idealised individual receiver of knowledge. Based on the bourgeois male of the Louvre, the persona written into the script of the national museums of Syria and Iraq, was thus expected to be self-improving, docile, and have an intellectual distance to the culture from whence he emerged.[86] By ceding control over his own representation, the citizen of a country expects, as Mary Witcomb describes, to have this representation returned by the state in a way which is perceived as beneficial for the entire

[81] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 108,126
[82] Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 1995, 333
[83] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 16
[84] Duncan, *Civilizing rituals*, 3-5
[85] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 128
[86] Tsang and Woods, *The cultural politics of nationalism*, 18

national community.[87] In this regard, the contract between the museum and the general public is analogous to the social contract between the citizen and the state. When the national museum of Baghdad was forced to close its doors to the public in the wakes of the Gulf War and again following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, this social contract was broken, fundamentally destabilising and undermining the museum's representative function.

What becomes clear in retrospect is how the national museum's closure adds urgency to the question of the fulfilment of their civic mandate. When neither the duty to educate, to provide access and to safeguard heritage were fulfilled, the civic populations of Syria and Iraq became unable to find unity in their shared heritage consequently rendering the notion of the "general public" vacuous and open to re-definition, and the national imagination began to fade. As a consequence of the museum's failure in honouring its civic mandate its narrative authority was severely compromised.[88] It was the inability of the museum to fulfil its most basic civic mandate of access brought under scrutiny the institution's perceived tutelary and disciplinary mission, and bore as a consequence the de-privileging of their authoritative voice. During closure, the Iraq Museum's collections were scattered across the country in secret locations, hidden from, or perhaps even protected from, the public.[89] Still, in their absence from public view they exerted agency over people, and their notions of nationhood and human civilisation. As a direct result of closure, it may thus be observed how the national museum began to appear less as noble guardian of cultural memory, and more as extension of the Iraqi government, which was looked on with an increasingly unfavourable gaze.[90] With growing local political instability, the flow of tourists upon which the museum depended so heavily began to dwindle, inciting museum professionals to start to reflect on what values and political valence this body of heritage holds for the very citizenship to whom this heritage is supposed to belong.[91] In the wakes of museum closure – and as friction grew between the State and citizen – a discursive shift was thus enabled, moving the conversation about the duties and responsibilities of museums vis-à-vis their public(s), to a discussion on people's right to "their" heritage. According to Tony Bennett, this is a natural progression, for as dissonance grows between the dominant conception of the national museum as a vehicle for

[87] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 16
[88] Janes, *Museums without borders*, 59
[89] This development demonstrates that as the museum began to lose its credibility and gravitas in the eyes of its visitors, the museum itself lost faith in their audiences.
[90] Khashan, The view from Syria and Lebanon, 5
[91] Rubin, Alissa. "In Iraq Museum, There Are Things 'That Are Nowhere Else in the World'"

education, and its actual functioning as an extension of the State,[92] it triggers public rights demands, calling for greater public access to heritage, and for the museum script to include a wider cast, with a wider range of emotion.[93]

After over fifteen years of keeping the most important national artefacts away from public view, museum professionals, cultural ministers, and even the heads of state, would come to realise sooner or later that they were losing their grip on their constituencies, and losing a grip on the nation – its past, present and future. All the while tragedy unfolded outside the museum's boarded doors and windows, museum closure offered an opportunity for both museum professionals and museum publics to re-evaluate the civic mandate of the national museum. As a part of this change, material heritage ceased to be the sole dominion of the national museum or the nation-state, and became re-appropriated by a network of diverse actors who all claimed their civic right to parts of or all the museum's collection. Museum closure thus forced the national museum of Baghdad to re-evaluate its obligations toward the state and the national general public, and incited them to devise new ways to engage the public with their heritage and the Nation. This development indicates a move toward a more demotic approach to heritage engagement, where the national museum is increasingly seen as an equitable interlocutor in the dialogue on heritage politics, and less as the arbiter of such a conversation. While some scholars warn that "the museum cannot be an objective space," and that "the politically powerful will always maintain a strong role in defining heritage" it does not mean that we should not try to incite the museum to redefine its civic mandate and to become an active agent in post-conflict recovery.[94] In negotiating the social agency invested in it by the State, the Iraq Museum has the power to inspire new ways of making sense of and using heritage, the question remains whether they are willing to harness this potential.

International partnerships and collaboration – The Virtual Museum

An elemental part in the movement to re-think the purpose and function of the national museum of Iraq were international partnerships, such as the museum reorganization agreement signed between Italy and Iraq. Forming these new partnerships held the promise of opening up and democratising conventional museum praxis and redefining the museum's vision. An illustrative example of this was the Virtual Museum of Iraq, an online platform which sought to offer global access to the Iraq Museum's most prized artefacts during the

[92] Witcomb, *Re-imagining the museum*, 16-20
[93] Duncan, Carol. "Ritual in the early Louvre Museum." 98
[94] Edwards, *The nation's temple*, 8; Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 189

museum's closure. At a time when growing international concern was directed toward the material heritage of Iraq, the Italian government became deeply involved, not only militarily, but also in the cultural reconstruction of the nation.[95] Initiated by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2005, the Virtual Museum project was conceived as a means to evaluate Iraqi cultural heritage as a whole, and, in particular, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad.[96] Departing from the assumption that few people in the world have been "fortunate enough" to visit the Iraq Museum and acknowledging that the Museum would probably be closed for a long time, the Italian team behind the project felt that, while waiting for the return to normalcy, it was necessary to reconstruct the museum and its collections virtually so that the global IT visitor could enter, wander through and observe the most important exhibits kept there. The project was not envisioned as a reconstruction of the Iraq Museum, but was rather imagined as "a virtual tour through the cultural roots of the world", from the birth of the world's first metropolises to the foundation of Baghdad in 762. Fundamentally, the Italian partners understood this project as a humanitarian mission of stabilization and reconstruction in Iraq intended to contribute to the funding of activities and initiatives aimed at the reconstruction and safeguarding as well as the enhancement of the Iraqi cultural heritage, and the nation writ large.[97]

With the creation of the Virtual Museum, Iraqi museum personnel in collaboration with the Italians, were presented, through innovative technologies such as 3D reconstructions, with the opportunity to reformulate the entirety of Iraqi cultural history. The Virtual Museum could have been organised using the same chronological criteria that the Museum had before the war or it could be adapted to suit contemporary needs and desires. The reconstruction of the rooms initially presented a number of problems, so in order to expedite the project it was decided, for the prototype exclusively, to place the objects in imaginary rooms. The finished website displayed eight rooms, each corresponding to a historical era: prehistory, Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Achaemenid and Seleucid (Fig. 6). In each of these rooms, the online visitor could observe artefacts on three levels. At first sight the visitor could learn about the provenance, chronology, dimensions and

[95] Italy was originally against the invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam, but had to join the invading forces due to international pressures. Perhaps driven by the guilt of having incited the lootings of 2003, the Italian Foreign Ministry has since been deeply involved in the conservation of Iraq's archaeological heritage. Accessed on 30 May 2019, http://www.italyforiraq.it/en/programmi/programma.php?p=21

[96] Stefania Manni, "The Virtual Museum of Iraq" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.storiadigitale.it/iraq-virtual-museum/; Chiodi, *Iraq Project: The Virtual Museum of Baghdad*, 105

[97] Chiodi, *Iraq Project: The Virtual Museum of Baghdad*, 102-105, 122

materials of the objects. Clicking themselves further, visitors could explore the objects close up, thanks to the 3D reconstruction. On the last and deepest level of information the visitor was presented with a short film recounting the history of this specific object and its place in the museum, and in the grand scope of human civilisation (Fig. 7).[98] Passing from one room to the other, accompanied by music, the online visitor would feel as if they had the whole Iraq Museum to themselves, to explore leisurely and meticulously, with all the information they could possibly need a click or two away. Altering floorplans goes to the very foundation of how national history and identity is constructed in the walls of the museum, and in the minds of its visitors.

What the Italians put into motion in Baghdad, and across the World Wide Web, was the notion that the national museum should facilitate the utilization and understanding of its cultural, historic and scientific artefacts "without limits of space and time."[99] This initiative thus incited the material heritage of Iraq to become reconceptualised from a local cultural commodity to a global civic entitlement, an entitlement which the museum was obliged to grant its constituency – the global community. As the Iraq Museum's ideological grip on this body of heritage began to loosen, it opened up sanctioned ways of interacting with it, but the question of its ownership still remained unresolved, because, as Ian Hodder explains, the very notion of heritage ownership is limiting and exclusive in nature:

> There are numerous ways in which people interact with heritage. They may want access, they may want to use it for education or have a voice in what is written and projected about it, they may want to use it in healing, reconciliation and restitution, make money out of it, put it in a museum, repatriate it, loan it, hide it, destroy it. It is difficult to use "ownership" as a term to encompass all these nuances of meaning.[100]

By placing focus on public access it allows for a reconceptualization of the role of the museum as a guardian of cultural memory, and enables us instead to envisage it as a repository of heritage from which peoples may fashion their own narrative of national history, and their own conceptions of collective and individual identity. Moving into the realm of the immaterial enabled the employees of the Iraq Museum to honour what they came to perceive as their civic mandate, but, in extension, granting online access to their collections also helped

---

[98] Stefania Manni, "The Virtual Museum of Iraq" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.storiadigitale.it/iraq-virtual-museum/
[99] Ibid., 122
[100] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 870

incite them to re-think the very function and purpose of the museum, and its potential role in society. In helping to give shape to the Virtual Museum, Iraqi museum professionals discovered the transformative and regenerative potential of material destruction, however, on this online platform, little effort was made to harness this potential for the purpose of healing cultural trauma.

Lingering ideological issues

While the work to re-open their doors to the public(s) might to a certain extent have been driven by a desire to re-instate civic life and move past conflict, the problematic of the term 'post-conflict societies' first has to be acknowledged because it suggests that conflict has ceased when the nation declares an end to war, when it in fact does not.[101] Building on that, it also needs to be understood that coping with war and trauma is a process which far exceeds the time it may take to rebuild and reopen a museum. Despite the fact that the investment of the Italian Foreign Ministry enabled the museum to partially recover from war and inspired positive changes in museum praxis, the political incentive behind it is not exempt from scrutiny, rather, it is necessary to critically examine how foreign actors, like the Italians in this case, evaluate and valorise Iraqi heritage. Other foreign heritage interventions such as the UNESCO world heritage list, also change the relationship of people to what they do, how they understand their culture and themselves**.** The premise upon which these kinds of interventions rest is that non-Western cultures cannot withstand the pressures of modernisation and globalisation[102]. The intervention of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the cultural life of the region testaments to a greater development where Syrian and Iraqi culture has been rendered to seem vulnerable and under threat of annihilation as a measure of justifying foreign heritage policing and interference, and of solidifying the Iraq Museum's dependence on foreign aid.

The museum's self-perception, and future horizon, has historically been conditioned and determined through the Western gaze, and any attempt of the two museums redefine itself and reformulate its civic mandate in order to move past conflict, would thus always be conditioned through value-lade concepts such as heritage and civilisation. As explained in a statement from ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, in preparation for their Arab Cultural

[101] Newson and Young, *Post-conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, 11
[102] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 875

Heritage Forum in Sharjah, UAE, in 2018: the very concept of "heritage presentation … was confined to museums that were designed by Europeans, mostly for Europeans within a Western conception of archaeology and history."[103] The imperative behind foreign cultural interventions in Iraq, in the shape of financial, technical and professional support, stems from a desire to defend the unity of all people of Iraq and to protect their cultural heritage, and this is done for the greater benefit of humanity. When heritage bodies like UNESCO intervene in local heritage practices around the world and persuade the global community about the right way to "do heritage," effectively, they impose forms of governance and power, perpetuating the narrative of the Near East as the cradle of human civilisation, and the West as its pinnacle.[104] Perhaps the usefulness of this region's archaeological wealth in maintaining the European civilizational narrative is in fact the very thing which merits and warrants its protection. While promoting intercultural dialogue and exchange, the authorised heritage discourse through which UNESCO and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs operate does little to directly address issues of alienation, inequality and injustice which come as a result of foreign heritage interventions.[105] In order to confront this dissonance, Hodder suggests that we

> move beyond the evaluation of heritage in terms of outstanding value … towards a system of evaluation in terms of well-being and social justice … where we discuss heritage more in terms of the degree to which the artefacts matter to participating groups.[106]

In order to get to that point, Hodder, in unison with other scholars such as John Giblin and Claire Smith et al., urges us to deconstruct and transcend the dualism between objects and subjects, to conceive of heritage less as a thing, and more as a cultural process.[107] An all too "thingist" understanding of heritage loses sight of the shifting meaning and agency embodied within heritage artefacts, and renders the notion of heritage static and socially decontextualized. Heritage cannot simply be evaluated along universal standards of outstanding value, but, crucially, has to take into account the specific historical, cultural and socio-political affordances and conditions for heritage engagement. In shaping the notion of the right to one's cultural heritage as a human right, the authorised heritage discourse ignores

---

[103] ICCROM, "Arab Cultural Heritage Forum: A Think- Tank Meeting informing a Vision for the Conservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in the Arab World" www.iccrom.org/arab-cultural-heritage-forum. Accessed on 25 June 2019
[104] Byrne 1991 in Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 865
[105] Smith et al., The Islamic State's symbolic war, 171
[106] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights*, 878
[107] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 502

the locally particular context within which heritage rights, and the affordances for heritage engagement, have been formulated.[108] Cultural rights are inextricably linked to cultural duties, but all too often the authorised discourse on heritage is understood only on the basis of the advantages but not on the duties conferred by right. The rights of the rights bearer are inextricably linked to the duties of a rights giver, and in the case of cultural heritage rights, this rights giver is always the State.[109] If the Iraq Museum wishes to live up to its civic duty, and to act in the interest of the public good, it is critical that cultural policy begins to recognise the conceptual limitations to the Western heritage model, and instead strives to reflect the emergent and relational nature of heritage in order to promote and defend continued conversation and contestation around it.

In denying access to its collections, the national museum of Iraq inadvertently undermined its own narrative authority, forcing the institution to reflect on its current social function and purpose, and what it could potentially become. Exposing "the fallacy of authoritative neutrality," museum closure was thus seen to provoke a discursive shift away from museological duties toward civic entitlements and rights. [110] As a part of this development, new international partnerships were formed, enabling novel forms of heritage engagement, of which the Iraq Virtual Museum is a prime example. Moving into the realm of the immaterial thus enabled the Iraq Museum to open up the authorised heritage discourse by subverting the dualism between objects and subjects. It is, however, deceptively easy to slip into old habits when discussing heritage. During and following violent conflict, Iraqi nationhood seemed increasingly unstable and issues of national identity and memory were intensified and made more visible. The duty toward the nation is not necessarily, if ever, the same as the duty toward the public, and in this time, the duty towards the nation appeared more pressing, and warranted greater priority than the duty towards the general public. To avoid repeating past mistakes, it is essential that the conversation on heritage and cultural rights moves beyond a definition of heritage as inert and passive, to instead revolve around its social dynamism and utility for ensuring the well-being and social justice of the people to whom such objects are understood to belong. Rather than concerning themselves with asserting their national identity on the global stage, by playing into the European civilizational narrative, the collections of the national museums of Syria and Iraq have the potential to

[108] Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights,* 873
[109] Macleod, Alistair. "The structure of arguments for human rights." *Universal human rights* (2005): 17-36. Quoted in Hodder, *Cultural heritage rights,* 874
[110] Janes, *Museums without borders,* 59

instead be used as the means for "heritage introspection."[111] The next chapter takes a closer look at the ways in which this opportunity for collective national reflection was seized in the reopened museums.

[111] Zobler, *Syrian national museums*, 189

Chapter Three

- **Objects in dialogue**

In 2011, with the most intense period of armed conflict behind them, the nation and peoples of Iraq longed for a return to normal life, and plans for reopening the museum were put into motion. Meanwhile, civil war had broken out in Syria, and the survival of its material heritage came under increasing threat from ISIS, who funded their operation largely through the illicit trade of looted antiquities. As one museum was inching its way toward reopening, the other was forced to shutter. History was repeating itself, and the heritage conflicts which had plagued Iraq for so many years now resurfaced with even greater vitality to haunt the nation of Syria. In the "post-conflict" situation it becomes less clear how to deal with the horrors of what once was an everyday reality, but which may trigger traumatic memories, nor is it clear whether actively dealing with such "difficult" heritage should be preferred to a swift return to normalcy, whatever that may be defined as. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, heritage, this fickle thing, harbours the power both to heal and to hurt.[112] Moving into the post-conflict era does not mean that conflict has ended, but rather presents the reopened national museum, be it that of Damascus or that of Baghdad, with a whole new set of challenges. The inhabitants of Syria and Iraq have weathered years of political turmoil. War has fragmented their respective national communities, diminished their strength and denied their history. The restoration of material heritage is thus in many ways the restoration of the nation and the national community, and for this reason, the national museum can play a pivotal part in the narrative of post-conflict renewal.[113] Tracing the post-conflict history of the Iraq Museum, 2015-2018, it will be interesting to observe the extent to which heritage was allowed both to heal and to hurt in the reopened museum, and to evaluate what opportunities for rethinking the museum were seized and what opportunities were lost. Following on from this, this chapter will focus on the exhibition *Our Lady of Warka,* co-produced by the Iraq Museum and the Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2016 featuring what is claimed to be the oldest depiction of a human figure, the Warka mask. I will use this case to investigate how the crosscutting forces of the international community, the nation state, and museum visitors converge in the post-conflict museum, and to analyse in what

[112] What Sharon Macdonald calls difficult heritage other authors have called 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), 'heritage that hurts' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Sather-Wagstaff 2011), 'uncomfortable heritage' (Logan and Reeves 2009), and 'dark heritage' (Harrison 2012, 167).
[113] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 500

regard exhibitions and other international collaborations such as these have the potential to re-articulate or re-configure reified structures of power and narration in the museum.

Employing Sarah Maddison's concept of agonistic dialogue, the conclusive discussion seeks to evoke the frictions inscribed within heritage artefacts to find out how this tension and volatility may be rechannelled as an agent for social justice and reconciliation. What this chapter sets out to examine is whether the optimal place for this agonistic dialogue is the national museum, what such dialogue could sound like, and what means museum professionals and their constituencies have to keep its agonism in motion. As will be argued, the national museums of Syria and Iraq have the potential to become central actors in the process of post-conflict healing and renewal, the question remains, however, whether these two institutions are able and willing to shoulder this responsibility. Critically, the nature of agonistic dialogue is not geared toward a solution, rather it is envisioned as a sustained and relational process of coming to terms with differences and learning and growing through them.[114] These museums harbour the agency to transform the future of conflict, but it is a transformations which depends on how heritage is dealt with in the present.

Re-openings

After years of closure, and having tried different alternatives to enable access to its collections, the Iraq Museum finally reopened all 28 of its galleries in March 2015 (Fig. 8). Leading up to this fortuitous event, objects damaged over the years were meticulously restored in gypsum, among which were many looted objects returned to the museum since 2003. Yet more antiquities, hidden away during recent years' conflict, were again showed to visitors and scholars. The spectacle of reopening was staged as an official national response to the "cultural genocide" perpetrated by ISIS in the north of the country, proclaiming to the world that the nation of Iraq will not submit, but will survive and thrive despite the menace of pervasive antidemocratic forces.[115] The ways in which international voices mediatised this reopening reflects this view – the reopening of the Iraq Museum was understood as a testament to the resilience of the people and as a political or even moral vindication of the nation.[116] The press material surrounding the reopening of the Iraq Museum does, however,

[114] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1021-1022
[115] Rym Ghazal, "In defence of history: The Iraq Museum reopened",Accessed 30 May 2019, www.thenational.ae/world/in-defence-of-history-iraq-museum-reopened-1.611655; Jason Lemon, "Tour Inside Baghdad's Impressive Iraq Museum" Accessed on 30 May 2019, stepfeed.com/tour-inside-baghdad-s-impressive-iraq-museum-1983
[116] Ghazal, "In defence of history: The Iraq Museum reopened",Accessed 30 May 2019, www.thenational.ae/world/in-defence-of-history-iraq-museum-reopened-1.611655

reveal a stark dissonance of vision between the national and international perspective. While the then prime minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi, described the event in a tweet as the "reclaim[ing] of our land from those who seek to destroy our history and culture," international voices instead celebrated the reopening of the Iraq Museum as a defiant stance in defence of world history.[117] It would take another three years before the National Museum of Damascus could again open its doors to the public, and when it did in late 2018, seven years after its own closure, the theme of victory and vindication resurfaced (Fig. 9). At the opening ceremony, Syria's minister of culture, Mohamed al-Ahmad, decreed that "today, Damascus has recovered," and that "when all museums reopen nationwide, then we can say that the crisis in Syria ended."[118] Much like in the Iraqi case, the reopening of the national museum was envisioned as the victory of and "recovery of life" to the nation, sending the message that "Syria is still here and her heritage would not be affected by terrorism," this despite the fact that conflict still raged on in parts of the country beyond Assad's control.[119] Cutting the red band was thus a profoundly political act, an act which on the one hand stood to symbolise the triumph of the nation and the victory of civilisation over savagery on the other.

From training museum personnel, to providing supplies and tracking down looted items, the reopening of the Iraq Museum was a major international effort, including assistance from the UNDP (the United Nations Development Project whose involvement in the region, in the shape peacekeeping and heritage interventions, goes back a long way), the British Academy, and funding from Italy, Japan and the UAE among others. UNESCO director general Irina Bokova described this support as the fulfilment of a humanitarian duty: "Iraq's history, which is part of the story of all humanity – it is our responsibility to defend it."[120] Echoing her words, David Akopyan, UNDP Country Director in Syria, described the reopening of the Damascus museum as the redemption of the whole of "human cultural heritage as the Museum contains antiquities dating back to thousands of years belonging to several civilizations."[121] Although the two museums depended heavily on international

---

[117] Jason Lemon, "Tour Inside Baghdad's Impressive Iraq Museum" Accessed on 30 May 2019, stepfeed.com/tour-inside-baghdad-s-impressive-iraq-museum-1983

[118] "Shut for over 6 years, Syria's national museum reopens" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.arabnews.com/node/1395226/lifestyle

[119] Brigit Katz, "Forced to Close by Civil War, the National Museum of Damascus Re-Opens Its Doors", Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/forced-close-civil-war-national-museum-damascus-re-opens-its-doors-180970652/
Rasha Milhem, "Famed Damascus National Museum's reopening after seven years of closure, prominent cultural event" Accessed on 30 May 2019, sana.sy/en/?p=149817

[120] "Protecting Humanity's Shared Heritage in Iraq" Accessed on 30 May 2019, en.unesco.org/news/protecting-humanity%E2%80%99s-shared-heritage-iraq

[121] Ibid.

support to get back on their feet, Syrian and Iraqi museum professionals had reason to be circumspect towards foreign heritage interventions, for they knew all too well the hidden catches of collaborating with Europeans. In accepting foreign help, the governments of Syria and Iraq dreamed of a return to the glorious past of their national museums, however, they were conscious that this aid also bore a debt, one which could never be settled. As demonstrated above, the old yoke of European cultural authority still weighs heavy on contemporary Syrian and Iraqi cultural and political life, and greatly conditions the future of these two nations. The two national museums of Syria and Iraq thus find themselves stuck in a bind; the more aid they accept from foreign actors such as UNESCO, the greater their duty toward humanity seems to become, and the further they prioritise this global constituency, the further the interests of the national populace come to be de-prioritised.

Lost opportunities for reflection

In Syria and Iraq, conflict served to expose and heighten the polyvalence of meaning and agency inscribed onto heritage, however, utilising this newfound agonism as an opportunity to rethink and rework conventional museum praxis was not the most obvious route for museum professionals to go down. For museum professionals and international heritage bodies, the top priority in the post-conflict situation was a return to normalcy.[122] Reinstating the status quo was envisioned as the key to establishing social unity and peaceful recovery, something which both museums understood to depend on the unifying social force of heritage artefacts.[123] The hopes and beliefs with which the Iraq Museum went about fixing and restoring damaged objects, and their approach to mending its relationship vis-à-vis the general public, was thus built around the silencing of agonism. Indeed, the cultural renaissance which museum reopening was supposed to bring into motion relied on muting and obscuring the complexity and abundance of the significations associated with heritage. Reopening the national museum was envisioned neither by the Iraqi nor the Syrian government as a historical rupture, but was rather projected as a continuation of a triumphalist narrative of cultural survival and vindication within which lay the promise of fixing conflict

[122] "Shut for over 6 years, Syria's national museum reopens" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.arabnews.com/node/1395226/lifestyle
Naomi Rea, "The National Museum of Damascus Reopens in the Heart of War-Torn Syria After More Than Six Years" Accessed on 30 May 2019, news.artnet.com/art-world/national-museum-damascus-reopens-doors-heart-war-torn-syria-1382056
[123] Brigit Katz, "Forced to Close by Civil War, the National Museum of Damascus Re-Opens Its Doors", Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/forced-close-civil-war-national-museum-damascus-re-opens-its-doors-180970652/

to history, and of entering modernity. In refraining from dwelling on the pain and trauma inscribed onto heritage artefacts and in relegating conflict to the black pages of history, Iraqi museum professionals decided on behalf of the general public how to deal with their heritage and the "legacy of anger and loss" that remains in the aftermath of material destruction, but in so doing, also risked repeating past mistakes, promoting historical amnesia, and closing the door on fruitful and sustainable reconciliation.[124]

Perhaps it is simply too soon for the people of Syria and Iraq to reflect with composure and measured distanced on their painful last few years, or perhaps that is not the issue at all. Perhaps it would be useful to instead strive to deconstruct and rewrite the museum script which conditions and constrains their interaction with their own heritage. In order to come to terms with the violence inflicted on humans and heritage artefacts, and how this pain is experienced in the present, it is necessary that the affordances for heritage engagement are opened up. To ensure the sustainability of peace, and to achieve some form of reconciliation, it is therefore crucial that the museum give voice to this dissensus, and activate both the healing and hurting aspects of heritage in "long-term, ongoing efforts toward the transformation of underlying historical and relational conflict."[125] If the goal of the Iraq Museum is simply to move on from its troubled history rather than address it head-on, it would, as Alexander Hirsch suggests, risk "leaving reconciliation and conflict transformation to pursue 'an assimilative resolution' – a mode of 'quietist surrender by the victim to the perpetrator' rather than a mode of true justice."[126] The movement toward a return to normalcy may indeed have been fuelled by popular desire, but in acting for the perceived "public good," heritage custodians should rather have prioritised what people needed for their health and well-being, which was to collectively come to terms with both the positive and negative notions of national memory. In the museum, the triumphalist national narrative leaves no room for reflection on the shameful and painful passages of history, and impedes any opportunity for collective growth and healing. The partiality of the Iraq Museum's approach to heritage engagement limits what futures may be imagined for the post-conflict museum, but also for the nation of Iraq overall. In structuring and conditioning heritage engagement to silence the polyvalence of objects in the reopened museum, Iraqi museum professionals thus

[124] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1015
[125] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1014
[126] Hirsch, Alexander, ed. *Theorizing Post-Conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution & Repair.* Routledge, 2013. Quoted in Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1015

mitigated the generative potential of destruction, and inhibited the general public from true healing and recovery.

Despite Baghdad's relative safety today, the reopened Iraq Museum is still struggling to reconnect visitors, young and old, with their heritage. Abdulameer al-Hamdani, the recently appointed Iraqi culture minister, identifies the issue as one relating to accessibility and sees the main challenge of the post-conflict museum as figuring out how to create a culture of learning around the museum and how to make the museum's artefacts come alive to its visitors. "I've ordered the museum to be open every day and I've asked to let graduate students and university students come for free," he said in an interview with the New York Time's Alissa Rubin.[127] While many more school classes visit the reopened museum than in the past, there are no docents, audio-guides or audiovisual aides to lead the children through the museum. As Ruben noted on her visit to the Iraq Museum earlier this year, "the children rush through, stopping to touch a lamassu or another statue and then dash on."[128] Though audiovisual aides may assist in offering context and of highlighting the relevance of artefacts in the lives of visitors, improvements such as these are insufficient in addressing the fact that visitors are fundamentally understimulated by and disinterested with the heritage presentation in the museum. What this issue hinges on is not a matter of changing how people regard heritage, rather it depends on transforming and opening up the affordances of the museum script. The museum cannot force its visitors to recognise the relevance of its collection in their lives, rather it needs to enable visitors to figure out for themselves why ancient heritage does or does not matter today, on a collective and individual level.

Our Lady of Warka – A critical reading

An elucidating case for us to critically examine exactly how notions of heritage, nation and public good evolved in the post-conflict museum, is the exhibition *Our Lady of Warka*, the first international collaboration of its kind after the reopening of the Iraq Museum in 2015. After the Virtual Museum was set up in 2009, political and financial support from Italy to Iraq only came to intensify. Fuelled by the imperative of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to "raise the interest of the international community for Iraq and the awareness of Iraqis for

[127] Rubin, Alissa. "In Iraq Museum, There Are Things 'That Are Nowhere Else in the World'"
[128] Ibid.

their own cultural heritage," *Our Lady of Warka* was presented to the international public as "a meditation on the human gaze through time."[129]

Discovered by a German archaeological expedition in southern Iraq in the 1930s, the *Lady of Warka*, an alabaster mask depicting the Sumerian goddess of love, war, beauty and fertility, has in many ways come to represent the life history of the Iraq Museum (Fig. 10).[130] Embodying at once the common mortal, the high priestess and the goddess Inanna, the *Lady* stood to symbolise the enigmatic woman who seems to doubt herself and her power.[131] Familiarly known in Europe as the Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia, this mask is generally considered to be the first life-size representation of a human face, and was therefore at the top of the list compiled by Baghdad museum workers of 13,000 artefacts still missing after the looting of the museum in 2003 during the final days of Sadam Hussein's regime.[132] Whoever looted the famed *Lady* quickly realized they couldn't sell her because she was too recognizable, so the mask changed hands half a dozen times in the maze of Baghdad's back alleys and clandestine antique shops, passed between dealer to dealer until it was wrapped in a cotton cloth, stuffed into a plastic bag and buried half a foot underground in a farmer's backyard. Five months passed before a joint force of American soldiers and Iraqi police discovered the priceless 5,200-year-old sculpture in the fall of 2003 and returned it undamaged to the Iraq Museum where she was to spend the next decade hidden away from the public. Even in her absence, the value and importance of the mask to the Iraq Museum's collection never diminished and it even adorned the front page of the Virtual Museum (Figure 11.). The turbulent history of the mask mirrors the history of the Iraq Museum and forms an elemental part in perpetuating the triumphalist narrative of the museum, as summed up by the Iraqi Minister of Culture Mofeed Al-Jazairi shortly after her return: "She was our most priceless piece still at large, and we have her back."[133] Placing *The Lady of Warka* at the centre of its first international exhibition after reopening sent a clear message to the

[129] "La Dama di Warka: così Ca' Foscari aiuterà l'archeologia dell'Iraq" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.genteveneta.it/public/articolo_gvnews.php?id=3567
[130]Iraq Museum, Ca' Foscari presenta i tanti volti della "Dama di Warka" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1[news]=4108&tx_news_pi1[controller]=News&tx_news_pi1[action]=detail&no_cache=1
[131] Chalabi, "The Lady of Warka and the Archaeology of Meanings at the Iraq Museum", Accessed on 30 May 2019, ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/
[132] Badkhen, "Iraq's treasured Lady of Warka returns home", Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.sfgate.com/news/article/Iraq-s-treasured-Lady-of-Warka-returns-home-2555941.php
[133] Ibid.

international community that the Iraq Museum, and the whole nation of Iraq, was ready to put recent years' conflict behind them.

The exhibition opened to the public in December 2017 and was the result of "a protocol of understanding" signed between the Italian Government and Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in 2016 putting at UNESCO's disposal a task force for emergency interventions in disaster or conflict-stricken countries.[134] Under the supervision of the Ca' Foscari University in Venice, the exhibition stayed open until March 2018. In taking the helm of this exhibition, Ca' Foscari's stated mission was to raise the interest of the international community toward Iraq, beyond questions of conflict, and to raise in Iraq the valorisation of its own cultural patrimony.[135] In so doing, the Venetian university sought to offer perspectives for "technological resilience in the contemporary perception of the archaeological heritage to safeguard the contact with origins of human memory and meanings."[136] At the opening conference to the exhibition, two short films were also presented; one on the discovery of Nimrud's treasure and the other on the destruction of Nineveh by ISIS. The dissonance between the dignified and almost majestic presentation of this renowned object, and the recent humiliating loss of the museum, and ongoing devastation in the north, was however not explored further than through this short film. Rather than being used to stand as a testament to loss and recovery, the *Lady of Warka* was perceived solely in terms of her enigmatic beauty and primitive magical aura. Something about the mask – perhaps its antiquity, its unwavering glance, or its immutable silence – was shrouded in mystery, an allure which was seen to lay at the core of the object, and which contributed to the global appeal of the whole exhibition. As such, the exhibition was regarded as crucially important for our understanding of the civilization from which it originates, but it was also envisioned as a means to investigate and challenge how we look at human sculpture and how it looks back at us.[137]

When the artist-photographer Giorgia Fiorio, under whose creative guidance the exhibition took shape, first saw the *Lady* she was struck by how modern it looks. For three years, the ancient modernity of this mask haunted Fiorio, until she finally got the opportunity to see it *in situ* in Baghdad. There, she took thousands of images of the mask, each of which

---

[134] Al-Hassan, *Cultural Heritage Destruction*, 29
[135] Iraq Museum, Ca' Foscari presenta i tanti volti della "Dama di Warka" Accessed on 30 May 2019, www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1[news]=4108&tx_news_pi1[controller]=News&tx_news_pi1[action]=detail&no_cache=1
[136] Fiorio, *The Ontology of Vision*, 2015
[137] Chalabi, "The Lady of Warka and the Archaeology of Meanings at the Iraq Museum", Accessed on 30 May 2019, ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/

was taken a few degrees apart, showing a different head, a different gaze, and a different object (Figs. 12 and 13). During the exhibition, the mask itself was positioned on a transparent pedestal to give a comprehensive view of the piece. The focus on vision and presence in human figuration lies at the core Fiorio's practice and her project entitled Humanum. Using countless photographs in an attempt to envelop and unveil the mask, she proposed this exhibition as an experiential tool of introspection – a journey into the unseen where the presence of the Lady's invisible figure is transposed to the viewer's perception.[138] Beyond raising the awareness of Iraqis toward their own material heritage, Fiorio sought to advocate the potential of heritage in a society that has undergone a disconnection with its cultural identity, claiming that "if artists can work on such [heritage] objects, it will provide an endless well of inspiration; it is a formidable resource of creation, both scientific and artistic."[139] The question remains, however, to what extent this exhibition was successful in reconnecting the museum's Iraqi visitors to their material heritage. Though this exhibition set out to study *The Lady of Warka* from as many angles and perspectives as possible, and to offer a meditation on the human gaze, it did little to inquire into what the hollow eyes of this mask had actually witnessed in the years immediately preceding its exhibition. *Our Lady of Warka* thus exemplifies the dissonance of vision with which foreign and local actors approached the material heritage of Iraq in the post-conflict era. Rather than using this exhibition as an opportunity for national reflection and introspection, the curators involved fell back on the civilizational narrative which for so long had mired the Iraq Museum to ancient history and denied it a place in the contemporary global museum landscape.

International collaborations such as this give hope that the Iraq Museum may move on from destruction, but it does not do enough to actively reflect on what they are moving forward from, nor does it make clear in what direction it is moving. In making the Lady of Warka "*Our Lady,"* Iraqi heritage was again co-opted into the heritage of humanity, and in fact, it appears that playing into these global imaginaries was the only way for the museum to receive the support it needed to be able to reopen. In the museum catalogue of the National Museum of Damascus, printed in 2008, it is written about "the debt mankind owes to the civilisations of the Near East," but as was shown during the years following reopening, the Near East owed more to the very notion of mankind, for it was only by ceding possession of national heritage to humanity that Syrians were able to engage with these artefacts at all. In

[138] Chalabi, "The Lady of Warka and the Archaeology of Meanings at the Iraq Museum", Accessed on 30 May 2019, ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/
[139] Ibid.

retrospect, one may thus begin to question whether it was Iraqi heritage or world heritage that had been reconstructed in the reopened museum.

Bringing the museum back to life was supposed to bring the nation back to life, however, any move toward establishing social justice and well-being for the people to whom this body of heritage matters the most were notably absent in the formulation of this exhibition. Museum reopening was meant to project the strength of the Iraqi nation, and the undying resilience of antiquities, but in order to convey this vision, the difficult and hurting aspects of heritage were conveniently neglected. Though muted, the polyvalence of this object never died, and still holds the potential to galvanise healing and reconciliation.

Conclusion

- **Post-conflict recovery and reconciliation**

In order to reopen, the Iraq Museum and the National Museum of Damascus depended heavily on foreign investment. What the cases above show is how challenging it has been, and still is, for the "post-conflict" museum to reinvent itself when the international community has such a high stake in the survival of the museum. Forced to pander to the international community, and its particular vision of world history, for financial support, it may be noted how the Iraq Museum was facing "the international community" with open arms while keeping its back turned against the nation. While the president attributed reopening to the undying resilience of the Iraqi nation, there was clearly a dissonance that was not being addressed. Made to seem vulnerable and powerless by global stakeholders, and resilient and invincible by local stakeholders, the museum was again caught in the nexus of crosscutting political interests. With its stance set toward the globe, the museum thus went amiss of an opportunity for national introspection. As objects were restored, traces of conflict were removed from the museum, and everything was supposed to go back to normal. In the reopened museum visitors were encouraged to revel in the prideful aspects of their heritage, and to forget or repress the hurting and shameful parts of it. The heritage troubles of the last twenty years are bound to resurface if this dissensus is not accounted for. While the sanctioned museological narrative proclaims the strength and irrepressibility of the nation, it does little to question or criticise what actually constitutes that nation in the divided post-conflict dynamic. Rather than using reopening as an opportunity to rethink and rework the museum – and its notions of heritage, the general public, and the public good – reopening only seemed to serve to recuperate and solidify the museum's singular narrative authority. Dissensus was, however, always boiling under the surface and would only come to grow in the period immediately following museum reopening.

The cultural biography of heritage objects does not end with their destruction nor with their reconstruction, rather, such instances constitute, as Johan Plets argues, "nothing more than a prelude to yet another clamorous chapter in an endlessly enduring narrative of heritage politicization by governments, opposition forces and archaeologists."[140] Though a strong political incentive undergirds the ideological and discursive move away from conflict, there lies a danger in striving to rid a society of the traces of war. By fixing conflict to the

[140] Plets, *Violins and trowels for Palmyra*, 22

past, the national museums of Syria and Iraq risk brushing under the carpet "a legacy of hatred and distrust" which, if left unaddressed, could incite violent conflict to resurface.[141] To avoid repeating past mistakes, and to ensure the restoration of justice in the collective memory, it is therefore crucial that these museums do not strive to resolve, obstruct or mitigate conflict but rather work to transform the nature of the conflict at hand into a non-violent form of social struggle and change.[142]

Sustaining agonism in dialogue

War is a process, not an event, and for this reason, any attempt at dealing with its resulting trauma needs to be formulated as processual.[143] Dealing with trauma and preventing the repression of cultural memory requires ongoing investment and effort on the part of both museum visitors and personnel. Sarah Maddison warns of the pitfalls of striving towards consensus in this process of post-conflict dialogue, claiming that consensus does more to co-opt and settle agonistic views than it does to offer a platform for conflicting voices to be heard.[144] Thus, before putting into place organizational structures for the nurturing and facilitation of conflict in the museum, it is important that the goal of any such process will not be to achieve agreement, but rather, as Sarah Maddison argues, to surface assumptions and to incite people to question their previous judgments through agonistic engagement.[145] While Maddison does not discuss heritage in her paper, her notion of agonistic dialogue is particularly apt for to dealing with the polyvalent charge of heritage objects in post-conflict Syria and Iraq. In this region, heritage has long been the source of conflict, so naturally, any attempt at transforming conflict should be formulated with heritage in mind. Evoking both the prideful and painful sides of heritage through agonistic dialogue holds the promise of disrupting the present and of opening up social divisions, enabling dialogue participants to form a deeper understanding of their conflict.[146] Critically, this type of 'public peace process' must be sustained over time, and depends on the work of good facilitators to ensure that dialogue does not simply replicate the conflict within another format. Agonistic dialogue is not a magic solution for post-conflict societies, but rather depends for its success on political investment and an acute social and cultural sensibility. In returning to and activating

---

[141] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1027
[142]Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1015, 1027-1028; Al-Hassan, *Cultural Heritage Destruction*, 38
[143] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 509-512
[144] Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1019
[145] Ibid., 1020
[146] Macdonald, *Is 'difficult heritage'still 'difficult'?*, 6; Maddison, *Agonistic Dialogue in Divided Societies*, 1026

memories of trauma, for the purpose of cultural healing, dialogue facilitators must acknowledge that "an idealised 'healed' is unlikely to ever be achievable" and may, in fact, be wholly undesirable in working toward reconciliation and the establishment of social justice.[147] If nations and their museums seek to obtain peace by drawing a line under the past and moving forward, attempts to evaluate the causes of conflict may instead destabilize communities and undermine moves toward reconciliation. By valorising diversity and dissensus, the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, may re-establish themselves as social arenas in which ordinary citizens and culture professionals feel safe and enabled to translate their needs and aims into meaningful heritage projects, and to transform the nature of their respective conflicts. Protecting and preserving the nation's history and heritage, is a matter of safeguarding its future, it is thus only by coming to terms with its hurting past that the nations of Syria and Iraq may aspire to future healing.

Tackling trauma

Had *Our Lady of Warka* been curated with the intention of explicitly dealing with the turbulent history of the mask, and the wider social and political agonism which it reflects and embodies, it could have enabled a process of heritage introspection, for the people of Iraq but also for the international community. In discussing heritage objects more in terms of their ability to establish well-being and to grant social justice, they appear less as objects, but rather as active participants in post-conflict recovery and reconciliation. With a heightened awareness of the agency harboured within their collections, the national museums of Syria and Iraq should begin to question and re-articulate their preconceived notions of the public good. Agonistic dialogue is the optimal forum for this development to unfold unhindered. The two museums must be wary, however, not to let this sort of public peace process become, as Sharon MacDonald warns, a "performance of trustworthiness" whereby the shame of reckoning with difficult heritage in the present is washed away through the very act of its public recognition.[148] True reconciliation demands honesty, and it requires dialogue between people who are willing to incorporate and accommodate the truths of others within their own.

Writing on the matter of post-conflict reconciliation in Syria, Amr Al-Azm argues that any endeavour to assist Syrians in "working towards ending the bloodshed and

[147] Giblin, *Post-conflict heritage*, 513
[148] Macdonald, Is 'difficult heritage'still 'difficult'?, 19

rebuilding their shattered country, needs to identify where common denominators exist between the opposing sides and provide mechanisms that will help them work towards consensus."[149] This consensus, he claims, should centre on an "all-inclusive Syrian national identity" built on a shared history and heritage, which, in the national museum, would not be a novel concept. Al-Azm further recognises the greatest challenge to the creation of such an identity as "the alienation of the vast majority of the Syrian people for many decades from the political, symbolic, intellectual and cultural institutions of their country" and argues that UNESCO is the actor best positioned to counteract this alienation.[150] What Al-Azm fails to recognise, however, is the hostility with which UNESCO, and other foreign cultural and political interventions, are regarded by the civic population. Memorialization is a very difficult, and politically fraught process, often contested and rarely subject to consensus. Striving to establish national unity by imposing consensus may thus only serve to fan the flames of dissent and incite the resurgence of violent conflict.

The work of the Ruya Foundation, an Iraqi non-profit NGO founded in 2012 with the aim of aiding and enriching culture in Iraq and abroad, offers inspiring perspectives on how art and heritage may be utilised for therapeutic and reconciliatory purposes. [151] With funding from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, the Ruya Foundation launched a drama therapy project in 2015, the first of its kind, for children and young people dealing with post-war trauma, culminating in a performance at the Muntada Theatre in Baghdad on 3 October by a group of 15 participants, between the ages of 12 and 17, selected by Ruya from an orphanage in Baghdad.[152] Through the use of role playing and dramatic interactions this project aims to promote post-conflict healing and growth in children who have suffered emotional trauma or been exposed to situations of extreme violence. While the concept of art therapy is new to Iraq, the practice itself is engrained within tradition. The inhabitants of this region have always turned to material heritage for comfort and stability, thus it only makes sense that any contemporary effort toward approaching and transforming trauma should depart from such objects. While this project did not focus on heritage objects, its approach to dealing with the painful history of Iraq should offer inspiration to the Iraq museum on how to transform conflict through agonistic heritage engagement. Critically, this

[149] Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 91
[150] Al-Azm, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, 92
[151] The Foundation has also been the commissioner of the Pavilion for the 55th, 56th and 57th Venice Biennales in 2013, 2015 and 2017.
[152] ruyafoundation.org/en/project/prince-claus-fund/ Accessed on 25 June 19

project focussed on the traumatic testimonies of children, the same children who are the future heirs of the national heritage of Iraq, and the demographic which the Iraq Museum has struggled the most with in engaging with their heritage. The children of Syria and Iraq will have to deal with the repercussions of war for the rest of their lives, but if the present-day national museums of Syria and Iraq enable these children to come to terms with trauma through heritage, and the trauma embedded within heritage, it may lay the foundation for reconciliation and healing, and a future of peace.

Relational change

When discussing recent years' heritage troubles in Syria and Iraq in terms of a clash between the opposing forces of nation and humanity, it is easy to lose sight of that the conflicts of the past twenty years were fundamentally conflicts between identities. Although the Iraq Museum has historically played an integral part in national subjectification, it did not do enough to confront what constitutes being Iraqi in the post-conflict era. The lack of dialogue between agonistic identities in the reopened museum, rendered this a non-question, and only served to reify dominant notions of citizen and nation. The risk in sweeping such issues under the carpet, is that they will only come to resurface with greater, and perhaps more destructive, force in the future. The museum thus carries a heavy social responsibility on its shoulders, a responsibility toward the health of its constituency, but also toward the future of the nation. Negotiating these responsibilities will be the main challenge for two national museums of Baghdad and Damascus. Segregation and sectarianism have become institutionalised and normalised within Syrian and Iraqi politics, leaving little capacity for interaction between groups. Undoing this structured way of relating depends on the disruptive force of heritage to "enact a radical break with the social order that underpinned the violence of the past."[153] Crucially, in order to enact this break, the national museums need to position themselves as addressees in any process of agonistic dialogue, for they were never neutral agents in heritage engagement and they are deeply implicated in, and accountable for, the heritage troubles of past years.

Political or cultural agonism is not intrinsically opposed national unity, but rather seeks to define unity in terms of difference. For the future of the Iraq Museum and the National Museum of Damascus, this comes down to a question of narrative and stance. In moving forward from conflict and toward healing and reconciliation, the two institutions have

[153] Schaap, *Agonism in divided societies*, 272

an opportunity to scrutinise their own projections of national history and identity, and to open up the affordances of the traditional museum script, but this development hinges on how they negotiate their stance toward the nation and the international community. By falling back onto an exclusively triumphalist vision of the nation's history, the national museums of Syria and Iraq are losing a unique opportunity to open up and redefine the national community, and risk perpetuating the epistemic violence of institutional neglect to which their audiences have for so long been subject. In order to rebuild trust and to make amends for not listening enough to the public, it is therefore critical that any process of agonistic heritage engagement be formulated as relational. By embracing heritage artefacts in agonistic dialogue, the national museum may become less a place for receiving knowledge, but rather a space for sharing knowledge – a social arena where visitors may unite around both the prideful and painful sides of heritage. In the post-conflict period, it has been clear to see how both the National Museum of Damascus and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad hoped for a speedy recovery and yearned for a return to normalcy, the bitter truth which they both have yet to face, however, is that healing can only come through pain. Conflict has not ended, and the road to reconciliation is long. To avoid repeating past mistakes, and to escape the vicious cycle of heritage destruction, it is therefore critical that the two museums begin to engage their audiences with the dark sides of their heritage and history, for a brighter future.

Afterword

National memory is shaped and reshaped in the present, but always draws on the past. In this regard, ancient artefacts act as powerful actors in conditioning the contemporary world. When such objects are lost or destroyed, it renders national memory, and the national imagination, open to contestation and manipulation. Reconstructing the museum and its collections thus entails the reconstruction of national memory, but if loss and destruction are omitted from this memory, the risk is that the societal and political tensions which triggered acts of heritage destruction remain unresolved, only to reappear in the future with greater destructive force. The last three years have been a time of renewed hope for Syria and Iraq, but many challenges still remain for their national museums as they embark on the long journey of post-conflict heritage reconstruction, and the ways in which they tackle these challenges may set a precedent for national museums worldwide. In September of last year, the National Museum of Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro, burned down, along with ninety percent of its collections. During this period of political turmoil, national memory was already under fire, but with the devastation of the national museum, it seemed threatened by complete erasure. The personnel of the National Museum of Brazil could stand to learn a lot from the recent history of the national museums of Syria and Iraq. It is a history which has the potential to teach them about the volatile charges of heritage, and it could warn them of the dangers of trying to mute this polyvalence, but most importantly it should serve to inspire them to realise the power which heritage artefacts hold to act as agents for social justice and reconciliation.

No museum can predict when disaster may strike, but they can prepare themselves, and a big part of this work is coming to terms with what national memory means for different people in the present. As I have tried to explain in this thesis, museums bear a heavy social responsibility during and after conflict, but in order to shoulder this responsibility, it is critical that museums enable objects to tell their own stories, and allow their visitors to engage with these testimonies in ways that exceed and subvert the conventional museum script. By opening up the affordances for heritage engagement, national museums may then position themselves as powerful agents for national healing and reconciliation.

Appendix

Figure 1. The façade of the National Museum of Damascus with the ruins of the Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi palace in front. (syriafa.ir/?p=554 Accessed 26 June 2019)

Figure 2. U.S. tank takes up position in front of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, April 16, 2003. Note the shell hole above the entrance. (Getty)

Figure 3. A museum employee assesses the damaged collections of the Iraq Museum after the lootings of April 2003. (menafn.com/ Accessed on 26 June 2019)

Figure 4. Golden Lyre of Ur (the world's oldest known stringed musical instrument, ca. 2,600 B.C.E.), destroyed in a storeroom of the Iraq Museum in 2003. (Youkhanna, George)

Figure 5. Still from a video depicting ISIS troops ransacking the Mosul Museum in northern Iraq. The global dissemination of images such as these were a central part of the Caliphate's strategy to shock the international community. (Al-Jazeera)

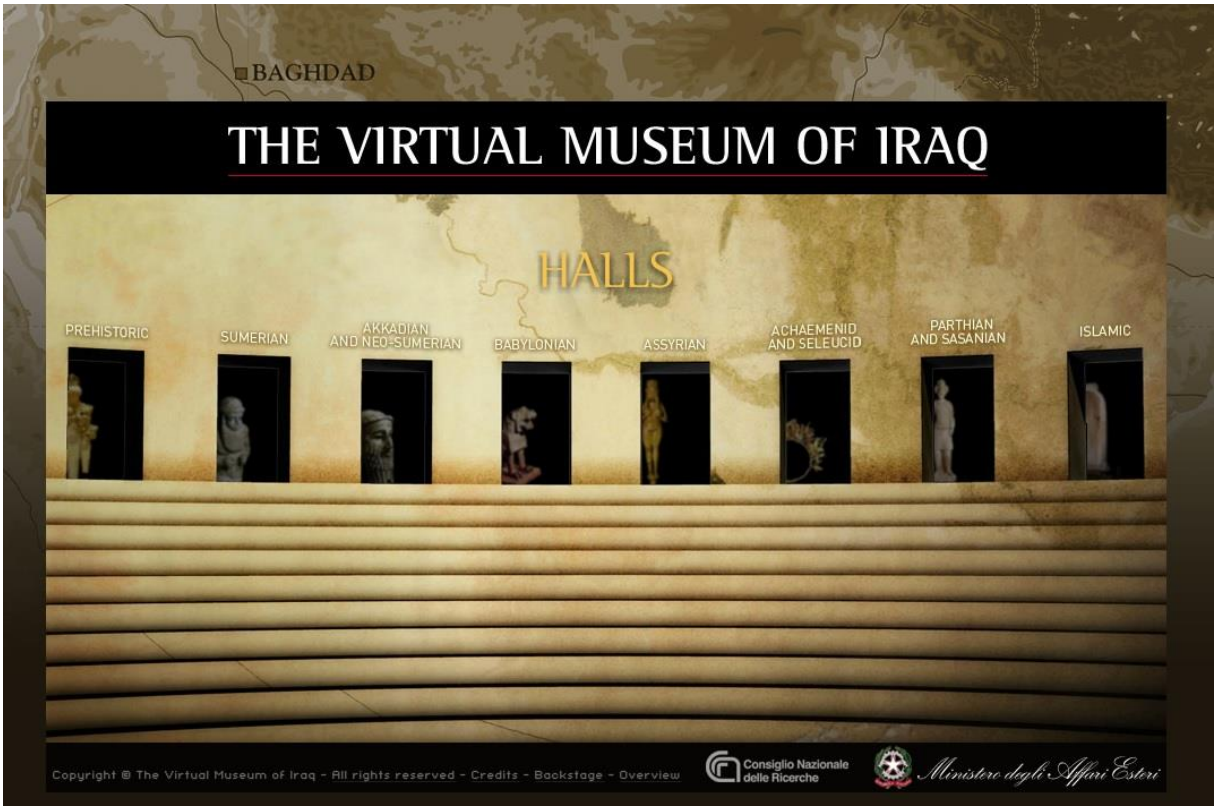

Figure 6. The entrance hall of the Virtual Museum of Iraq. (www.virtualmuseumiraq.cnr.it/ Accessed on 26 June 26, 2019)

Figure 7. Three levels of information in the Akkadian and Sumerian hall of the Virtual Museum. (www.virtualmuseumiraq.cnr.it/ Accessed on 26 June 26, 2019)

Figure 8. Then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi cuts the red ribbon at the grand reopening of the Iraq Museum on 28 February 2015. (Getty)

Figure 9. The who's who of Damascus rubbing elbows at the reopening ceremony on 29 October 2018. (www.syriatourism.org/ Accessed on 26 June 2019)

Figure 10. The Lady of Warka positioned on top of her pedestal during the exhibition *Our Lady of Warka* on 6 March 2018. (ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/ Accessed on 30 May 2019)

Figure 11. The front page of the Virtual Museum depicting the Lady of Warka. (www.virtualmuseumiraq.cnr.it/ Accessed on 26 June 26, 2019)

Figure 12. Giorgia Fiorio's all-encompassing view of the many faces of the mask. (ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/ Accessed on 30 May 2019)

Figure 13. Fiorio herself presenting the exhibition on 6 March 2018. (ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/ Accessed on 30 May 2019)

Bibliography

Al Hassan, Nada. "Cultural Heritage Destruction in the Middle East: UNESCO's Work to Mitigate Damage and Plan for Recovery." In *Post-Conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, pp. 23-40. Routledge, 2017.

al Moadin, Mona, H. Al Sahkei, Muyassar Fattal, and Noha Kabbani. "Highlights of the National Museum of Damascus." *Lebanon: Media Minds LLC* (2006).

al-Azm, Amr. "The Importance of Cultural Heritage in Enhancing a Syrian National Identity and the Role of Local Non-State Actors in Preserving It." In *Post-Conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, pp. 99-113. Routledge, 2017.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books, 2006.

Badkhen, Anna. "Iraq's treasured Lady of Warka returns home", 24 September 2003. www.sfgate.com/news/article/Iraq-s-treasured-Lady-of-Warka-returns-home-2555941.php Accessed on 30 May 2019

Bennett, Tony, "Exhibition, difference and the logic of culture." in eds. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Ciraj Rassool. *Museum frictions: Public cultures/global transformations* (2006).

Bennett, Tony. "Civic laboratories: Museums, cultural objecthood and the governance of the social." *Cultural studies*19, no. 5 (2005): 521-547.

Bennett, Tony. "The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics." *London/New York* (1995).

Brodie, Neil, and Colin Renfrew. "Looting and the world's archaeological heritage: the inadequate response." *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 34 (2005): 343-361.

Byrne, Denis. "Western hegemony in archaeological heritage management." *History and anthropology* 5, no. 2 (1991): 269-276.

Chalabi, Tamara "The Lady of Warka and the Archaeology of Meanings at the Iraq Museum", 22 December 2017. ruyafoundation.org/en/2017/12/warka-fiorio/ Accessed on 30 May 2019.

Chiodi, S. "Iraq Project: The Virtual Museum of Baghdad." *established by: Mauro Cristofani and Riccardo Franco* supplemento 1 (2007): 101-122.

Cunliffe, Emma, and Luigi Curini. "ISIS and heritage destruction: a sentiment analysis." *antiquity* 92, no. 364 (2018): 1094-1111.

Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing rituals: Inside public art museums*. Routledge, 2005.

Duncan, Carol. "Ritual in the early Louvre Museum." In *The Cultural Politics of Nationalism and Nation-Building*, pp. 99-115. Routledge, 2013.

Edwards, Juliet. "'The nation's temple': national museums and national identity, a comparative case study." PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2005.

Feener, R. Michael. "Muslim Cultures and Pre-Islamic Pasts: Changing Perceptions of "Heritage"." In *The Making of Islamic Heritage*, pp. 23-45. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2017.

Fiorio, Giorgia. "The Ontology of Vision. The Invisible, Consciousness of Living Matter." *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (2016): 89.

Frykman, Jonas, and Maja Povrzanović Frykman, eds. *Sensitive Objects: Affect and Material Culture*. Vol. 2. Nordic Academic Press, 2016.

Ghaidan, Usam, and Anna Paolini. "A Short History of the Iraq National Museum." *Museum International* 55, no. 3-4 (2003): 97-102.

Giblin, John Daniel. "Post-conflict heritage: symbolic healing and cultural renewal." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 5 (2014): 500-518.

Hamilakis, Yannis. *The nation and its ruins: antiquity, archaeology, and national imagination in Greece*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Random House, 2014.

Harrison, David. "Introduction: Contested narratives in the domain of World Heritage." *Current Issues in Tourism* 7, no. 4-5 (2004): 281-290.

Hodder, Ian. "Cultural heritage rights: From ownership and descent to justice and well-being." *Anthropological Quarterly*83, no. 4 (2010): 861-882.

Hoijtink, Mirjam. ”Antiquity & conflict: some historical remarks on a matter of selection.” In *Cultural Heritage in the Crosshairs* (2013): 315-327.

ICCROM, “Arab Cultural Heritage Forum: A Think- Tank Meeting informing a Vision for the Conservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in the Arab World” Sharjah, UAE, From 6th to 8th February 2018. www.iccrom.org/arab-cultural-heritage-forum. Accessed on 25 June 2019

ISESCO World Heritage Committee, www.isesco.org.ma/islamic-world-heritage-committee/# Accessed on 25 June 2019

Janes, Robert R. *Museums without borders: Selected writings of Robert R. Janes*. Routledge, 2015.

Khashan, Hilal. "The view from Syria and Lebanon." *Middle East Quarterly* (2011).

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, B. "World Heritage and Cultural Economics” in Karp, I Kratz, C. A, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarra_Frausto (eds) Museum Frictions: Public Culture/Global Transformations." (2006).

Macdonald, Sharon. "Is ‘difficult heritage’still ‘difficult’? Why public acknowledgment of past perpetration may no longer be so unsettling to collective identities." *Museum International* 67, no. 1-4 (2015): 6-22.

Maddison, Sarah. "Relational transformation and agonistic dialogue in divided societies." *Political Studies* 63, no. 5 (2015): 1014-1030.

Mouffe, Chantal. *The democratic paradox*. verso, 2000.

Museums With No Frontiers. “Discover Islamic Art: National Museum of Damascus, Damascus, Syria” islamicart.museumwnf.org/ Accessed on 25 June 2019

Nateq, Laith. “The Iraqi Museum: A long history and a sad present” Al-Jazeera www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2019/1/16/ Accessed on 25 June 2019

Newson, Paul, and Ruth Young, eds. *Post-conflict Archaeology and Cultural Heritage: Rebuilding Knowledge, Memory and Community from War-damaged Material Culture*. Routledge, 2017.

Plets, Gertjan. "Violins and trowels for Palmyra: Post- conflict heritage politics." *Anthropology Today* 33, no. 4 (2017): 18-22.

Rubin, Alissa. “In Iraq Museum, There Are Things ‘That Are Nowhere Else in the World’” in *The New York Times*, 9 June 2019. nytimes.com/2019/06/09/world/middleeast/iraq-museum-baghdad. Accessed on 25 June 2019

Schaap, Andrew. "Agonism in divided societies." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 255-277.

Smith, Claire, Heather Burke, Cherrie de Leiuen, and Gary Jackson. "The Islamic State’s symbolic war: Da'esh's socially mediated terrorism as a threat to cultural heritage." *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (2016): 164-188.

Soufan, Anas. "Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria." In *ICOMOS University Forum*, vol. 1, pp. 1-18. ICOMOS International, 2018.

Tsang, Rachel, and Eric Taylor Woods, eds. *The cultural politics of nationalism and nation-building: Ritual and performance in the forging of nations*. Routledge, 2013.

UNESCO, “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” *Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.* 2013a.

Wegener, Corine, and Marjan Otter. "Cultural property at war: protecting heritage during armed conflict." *Conservation: the Getty Conservation Institute newsletter* 23, no. 1 (2008): 4-9.

Winter, Tim. "Heritage studies and the privileging of theory." *International journal of heritage studies* 20, no. 5 (2014): 556-572.

Witcomb, Andrea. *Re-imagining the museum: Beyond the mausoleum*. Routledge, 2003.

Youkhanna, Donny George. "*Learning from the Iraq Museum*" 2010 ajaonline.org Accessed on 25 June 2019

Zobler, Kari A. "Syrian national museums: regional politics and the imagined community." In *Contested Cultural Heritage*, pp. 171-191. Springer, New York, NY, 2011.