

Review

U.S. Cultural Diplomacy and Archeology: Soft Power, Hard Heritage

Christina Luke and Morgan M. Kersel. New York: Routledge, 2013.
169pp.

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The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 generated a maelstrom of images. There were cities lit by the “shock and awe” bombardment, the falling statues, the traumatized civilians and scene after scene of coalition forces vainly searching for weapons of mass destruction. But among the most peculiarly troubling were the images of the looting of Iraq’s national museum. The human suffering was sadly familiar to the TV audience around the world but the looting broke new ground. The images of looting spoke of the depth of the anarchy into which Iraq was tumbling. They represented the destruction of something greater than the immediate bricks and mortar, blood and bone of a twenty-first century nation; something ancient, irreplaceable and shared: a part of the heritage of all humanity. But the real political impact of those images came from the U.S. military’s failure to either anticipate the action (despite similar smaller incidents during the previous Gulf War) or to react to stop it. It seemed that American indifference had led to what the press dubbed “The greatest cultural disaster of the last 500 years.” The dismissive remark of

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the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that “stuff happens” added the final twist to a poisonous cocktail guaranteed to corrode the image of U.S. as benevolent, wise or respectful of other nations or even its own shared origins. The State Department noticed the disaster and set about a campaign to do what it could to correct the image of American ambivalence over the collective heritage of humanity. That work is a major focus of this book.

Contrary to the claim made in the blurb at the front of this book, the link between archeology and international relations is not especially “well known.” There is a long list of human endeavors which spring to mind first when one thinks of modern diplomatic concerns and tools: economics, military affairs, crime, health, environment, and so forth. Even within the list of established areas for international cultural engagement archeology hardly looms large. It takes its place behind the blockbuster issues of international student exchange, language teaching, sport diplomacy, and the international dissemination of the performing arts. As testament to this, while there is a lively literature around the U.S. use jazz music in international relations, archeology—prior to this book—has lacked much of a mention in the literature of cultural diplomacy. Notable exceptions include a chapter or two in Richard Arndt’s magisterial *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* and passing references in the general literature around the development of UNESCO on issues like the protection of monuments and the campaign to save Abu Simbel in the 1960s. For most readers, therefore, this book faces a double task. It has to show that archeology is relevant to the practice and understanding of American cultural diplomacy and it has to document exactly what that relevance is. Fortunately, the authors accomplish both tasks admirably.

Christina Luke and Morgan M. Kersel know their subject. Both have impressive academic backgrounds in anthropology and archeology respectively; both are expert in the politics of heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and—most significantly of all—both are veterans of the State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). ECA is the element at State responsible for overseeing U.S. exchanges and cultural diplomacy including those relating to international heritage policy and archeology. Their period of service together—eighteen months from 2001 to 2003—was long enough to provide a unique confluence of academic and practitioner insight.

Luke and Kersel frame their approach using Joseph Nye's terminology of soft power. Nye contends that an international actor's success in world affairs hinges not only on that actor's its ability to compel compliance through the economic or physical leverage of hard power but also from that actor's ability to attract though admirable values and culture, which he terms soft power. Nye termed the combination of the two approaches smart power. Luke and Kersel's core argument is to point out that the U.S. government's support for archeological and heritage projects around the world are an important component of American soft power, but that conventional diplomatic tools like the issuing of permits, visas and enforcement of customs restrictions are also essential to the overall policy also. Some governments have been prepared to get really tough and use research permits as major bargaining chips in the diplomatic table. The authors note that in 2011 Turkey was successfully able to strong-arm Germany to return the Hattusa Sphinx, on "loan" since 1915.

As Luke and Kersel explain, archeology has been part of U.S. foreign policy for a long time beginning with the academic expeditions of the nineteenth century. In 1881 a group based at Princeton established the American School of Classical Studies at Athens as a permanent bridgehead for U.S. scholars in the region. More than two dozen such institutions have followed variously sponsored by universities and philanthropic institutes in sites across the Near East, Central and Southern Asia culminating in a new center in Afghanistan in 2008. These centers are supported collectively by a Center for American Overseas Research Centers (COARC) which channels funding from the Department of State and Department of Education (under what is known as title VI). The authors show how their diplomatic role shifted from a vague function of building an international presence for the United States abroad, to an explicit Cold War function as a manifestation of America's commitment to its allies and stewardship of a collective heritage. These centers became a badge of American global prestige today. Today American scholars still travel on what some jokingly term the "tea circuit" made up by the COARC network, partner with their foreign peers and facilitate shared advances and the country is known. This is plainly a valuable soft power tool though—given the nature of that particular beast—it functions best when the U.S. role is high profile and known beyond academic circles, which seems not always to have been the case.

Other major U.S. initiatives documented by Luke and Kersel include high profile efforts to combat the illegal trade in antiquities. The U.S. helped with the

implementation of UNESCO's Convention on Cultural Property even when it was no longer actually a member of UNESCO, passing the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CPIA) of 1983. This work was particularly important in Latin America where the antiquity trade was wreaking havoc with the material heritage. The other major program to be documented at length is the so-called Ambassador's Fund Cultural Preservation. The fund was set up in the wake of 9/11 and has supported an amazing range of heritage projects around the world including the restoration of Islamic texts and buildings. Sadly, as Luke and Kersel note, this dimension of archeology diplomacy—so important in disrupting the image of U.S. as an enemy of Islam—provoked a backlash from domestic Christian fundamentalists who claimed falsely that the U.S. would not support equivalent Christian projects. As one would expect the looting of the Iraqi national museum in 2003 emerges as a major watershed and the United States is shown to have worked extremely hard to live down the bad press generated thereby. Luke and Kersel show that the Department of State was not alone in learning the lessons. The U.S. army seems to have learned the importance of culture and heritage the hard way. The Pentagon now speaks of navigating a "human terrain" as well as physical landscape and holds personnel to a new set of procedures.

The book is not without flaws, however. The author's may be old hands in the field of archeology and culture, but they are plainly newer to international relations and the public diplomacy field. Their reading of the wider history of public diplomacy is somewhat bald resulting in a couple of minor errors and some unusual applications of terminology. Their focus on their own area of expertise can sometimes seem to value archeology diplomacy above other elements of cultural and exchange work, which can seem uncritical and unrealistic. But such things are of minor significance against the value of having these cases documented. The ultimate relevance of this book is clear at its close. U.S. support for archeology can plainly serve as a counter balance to the perception of the country as a heartless superpower willing to crush the distinctiveness of the other nations of the world beneath its juggernaut wheels. Having effectively demonstrated this Luke and Kersel are obliged to inform the reader of budget cuts that leave major programs struggling for funds and remind them that the U.S. is soon to be obliged to withdraw from UNESCO—the essential forum for global cultural policy—because of that body's decision to recognize Palestine. The final impression one gets is

that at this point in history some negatives associated with the U.S. image in the realm of culture may not be wholly undeserved.