

Iraq, stewardship and ‘the record’

An ethical crisis for archaeology

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological thinking now commands an impressive and increasingly sophisticated array of interpretative frameworks, yet, despite these advances, the investigation of the socio-political dimensions of archaeological thinking and practice is much less developed. Ethical issues, while now firmly on the archaeological agenda (see Zimmerman et al., 2003, for the most recent volume), are often treated as a neutral, de-politicised set of rules and regulations (cf. Pluciennik, 2001, for an exception). Even the challenges of ‘indigenous’ and other, non-archaeological interest groups are often dealt with in a managerial framework, devoid of context-specific power relationships, class and other social inequalities and asymmetries.

Using the archaeologists’ involvement in the recent war in Iraq as a case study, this paper argues that professionalisation, and especially the notion that stewardship towards the ‘archaeological record’ is the archaeologists’ main responsibility, are primarily to blame for this phenomenon; these notions reify an entity (‘the record’) that is produced by archaeological practices themselves, out of the fragments of the past. This principle thus not only is epistemologically problematic, but also ethically and politically self-serving as well as dangerous.

THE CASE STUDY

In the last few months, we all witnessed an unprecedented coverage of archaeological issues in the

print and electronic media. Archaeology has now a continuous presence, with a total of many hundreds or even thousands of articles so far, and more to come, as the story covered unfolds daily and develops in at times unexpected twists. The saga, which has almost acquired the features of a police drama, is of course the looting of antiquities in Iraq, following the invasion of the country by US and UK forces, and the subsequent occupation (see <http://ctr.umkc.edu/user/fdeblauwe/iraq.html>, for a comprehensive listing of articles). The issue is too important and too complex to be discussed adequately in this short paper, but what I want to do briefly is to expose and open to debate one of its aspects which has been totally ignored. My question is this: what does the reaction of individual archaeologists and professional organisations reveal about key issues such as ethics and responsibility? In other words, my concern here is neither the issue of looting per se, nor the continuous destruction of the archaeological past of Iraq and its implications. I do not mean to underestimate their importance, despite my different take on the matter, as will become obvious. But enough has been written and broadcast on that already, and no doubt there will be many academic articles and books to follow. I want instead to turn the light, not on the thieves of Baghdad and Mosul, nor on the countless looted artefacts that are bound to ‘resurface’ sooner or later on a Manhattan, London or Tokyo mantelpiece, but on us, the archaeologists, and to ask: what does our own reaction (both before and during the war) say about our notion of ethical responsibilities in the present?

The dust in Iraq has not settled yet, but the first reactions to the above events are now sufficiently well documented to allow for some comment and contemplation. Archaeologists' reactions to the news of the looting of the Iraq Museum and to subsequent looting and pillage of archaeological sites was instant and in many ways effective. Initially responding to the appeals by Iraqi archaeologists, they managed to raise the issue in the international media, and sustain interest in the matter for months. Many archaeologists found the pages of prominent newspapers and the microphones of radio and TV shows open to them. It was not uncommon to see newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, carry up to three articles on the matter in a single day (e.g., 17 April 2003), some of them by archaeologists. This enormous publicity and exposure are undoubtedly linked to the heated public debate on the war on Iraq, a war that many millions around the world have considered, justifiably, both illegal and immoral. It is also linked to the position of Mesopotamia in Western imagination, as an important biblical reference and as a locus that has long been seen as the 'cradle of civilization', a phrase that the media (and most archaeologists) will repeat endlessly, unaware of or oblivious to the patronising and highly loaded meaning of both terms. Thus, in some ways, this discourse makes an interesting contrast with that on Afghanistan, the 'country we invaded earlier' as a British TV programme chose to put it, a country that – according to many media discourses – was primitive or, in some more charitable expressions, lived in the Bronze Age.

So what was the archaeologists' reaction? Obviously, it is easy to fall into generalisations here and, as I will show, there were some atypical responses. But on the basis of the extensive material I have preliminarily surveyed, there seems to be a broad general pattern emerging. To quote an article in the *New York Times*, archaeologists 'mourn[ed] both the loss of treasures we knew, and those we will never know' (Foster and Foster, 2003). They also expressed anger, at times outrage, at the destruction and loss of sites and artefacts. They pointed to the enormous archaeological and scientific value of the antiquities of Iraq, stating time and again that Iraq's heritage belongs to the whole of humanity. In the words of

another specialist, 'It is as if the pages of history books are being torn out ...' (H. Wright, in a widely reported interview, after a survey funded by the *National Geographic*: see e.g., Duffy, 2003; Vedantam, 2003). In the first few weeks after the news of the looting hit the West, many archaeologists and others directed their anger against the occupation forces for not guarding the museums and sites of Iraq. Yet, as one American marine, stationed at a historical site in southern Iraq, told the *Boston Globe* (7 June 2003):

I know how to kill people – that is my job. Now, we are being asked to be these people's best friends. And guard their antiquities, even as Iraqis themselves steal them.

(Incidentally, for this marine, it is not *our* antiquities, it is *theirs*.) The archaeologists' involvement in this affair started much earlier. In the run up to the war, some specialists visited the Pentagon and pointed to the risks that the sites and museums would face. But they did more than that: according to one specialist (M. Gibson interview in *Archaeology*, 56(4), July–August 2003), they provided the co-ordinates of 5000 sites that should be spared in the imminent bombing. Here is an interesting passage from this interview:

–What did you tell them [i.e., the US Department of Defense] about protecting Iraq's heritage and what did they say to you?

–We pointed out the importance of Mesopotamia. It's not just the desert. Iraq is not just the desert. It's the place where civilization began, it's the largest surviving continuous tradition of civilization in the world, its earlier than Egypt, its earlier than any place else. And that it is the foundation of all ideas of civilization, for Western Civilization as well as Eastern. And that we trace our own roots back to Mesopotamia.

As the extent of looting became known, many archaeologists, engaged in several initiatives, expressed a genuine will to contribute to the effort to survey and assess the damage done, and offered help for the conservation and reopening of the museums.¹ One of the most widely publicised initiatives was the expedition funded by the *National Geographic* magazine. It involved prominent Mesopotamian specialists who, in close col-

laboration with the American army, travelled up and down the country. The team documented the extensive looting that was taking place throughout Iraq (and which somehow received less attention in the media than did the Iraq Museum). The leader of the expedition team added: 'Somebody in the US government deserves positive credit for sparing the archaeological sites from bombing' (H. Wright, in Vedantam, 2003).

In addition to individuals, almost all prominent archaeological organisations adopted statements and took initiatives, more or less along the above lines: they all expressed concern about the looting and the destruction, and made genuine offers of help. A letter of 16 April 2003 to the US President by all major American archaeological and heritage organisations is of particular interest. I quote some passages (see Appendix for the complete document):

During the fierce fighting of the past few weeks, we were relieved to see that our military leaders and the coalition partners took extreme precautions to avoid targeting cultural sites along with other non-military places. It was also comforting to receive reports that our armed forces have conducted inspections at some of the important archaeological sites.

...

The return to freedom of the Iraqi people must include the freedom to enjoy the great heritage resources inherited from their ancestors.

...

In contrast to the inhuman Iraqi regime that has just ended, the United States is a benevolent nation committed to the realization of the full human potential through freedom, democracy, fair play and the rule of law.

What makes this document extremely interesting is not only the uncritical adoption of the American nationalist discourse (when archaeologists have been recently very active in deconstructing nationalism), and the endorsement of the invading countries' rhetoric that considers this war as 'liberation'. It is also the lack of any reference to the misery, destruction and death that this war continues to cause to the people of Iraq.

This extreme endorsement of the invader's rhetoric is absent from many other archaeological reactions; some of these reactions even expressed

subtle opposition to the war. Yet the common thread is concern, worry and, at times, outrage over the looting and theft of antiquities. Even the World Archaeological Congress, an organisation with a distinctive history that puts the interest of various publics at the centre of the archaeological enterprise, initially produced a statement almost indistinguishable from the rest, save for one phrase that expressed concern for the humanitarian situation, before devoting the rest of the statement to the looting of museums and sites.

In short, most individual and collective archaeological responses focused on the destruction and loss of antiquities. In contrast to the majority of the people in the world and the vast majority of academics, intellectuals and cultural workers, they fell short of explicitly opposing the invasion, and failed to link up to the wider oppositional movement. In fact, they actively offered specialist advice and help to the invading armies: these archaeologists were happy to provide the co-ordinates of the archaeological sites so that they could be spared from the bombing.

The conservative classicist and military advisor Victor Hanson has written recently in relation to Iraq:

The military needs to create a civilian cultural authority board ... such scholars and intellectuals sympathetic to the military might develop policies and procedures to identify problems inevitable in the use of military force ... scholars for example could have advised the military about the complexities that surrounded the potential damage to cultural sites in Baghdad. These duties could be both proactive – creating guidelines about protecting archaeological sites ... but also reactive when tragedies like the destruction of priceless icons unfold. (Hanson, 2003).

What Hanson perhaps did not know is that such a plan is already underway. In addition to the close *ad hoc* advice on sites and their co-ordinates that many American archaeologists had been offering to the US Army, there are indications that a more formal link had been established between some archaeologists and the armies of the invading countries. For example, according to the BBC in a news item reported on 29 April 2003, the archaeologist Peter Stone 'advised the military for more than two months in his role as Chief Executive

Officer of the World Archaeological Congress ... His role included identifying key museums and archaeological sites in Iraq, so they could be included on the same list as hospitals and schools which were to be spared from bombing' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/england/tyne/2985119.stm>; accessed 9 August 2003).

My question is this: why did the concern for the many thousands of innocent dead people, for the criminal illegality of the whole campaign, for the illegal colonisation of a country – concerns that undoubtedly many archaeologists share – not find any prominent place in archaeologists' individual and collective statements? Moreover, why did archaeologists (many, no doubt, opposed to the war) agree to act as advisors to the invading armies, oblivious to the fact that their role provided academic and cultural legitimacy to the invasion?

Here I should say that there were exceptions to this pattern, the most prominent of which was the letter of 78 Mesopotamian specialists, published in the January 2003 issue of the Society of American Archaeologists' bulletin, *The Archaeological Record*. In this letter, the signatories expressed clear opposition to the war on ethical, political and humanitarian grounds. But this was an exception to the broader pattern. Note also that this last statement was published in an archaeological bulletin, although it is undoubtedly the case that some of its authors would have signed similar public statements as individuals or as academics.²

IRAQ, 'STEWARDSHIP' AND RESPONSIBILITY

In my view, this phenomenon constitutes another expression of what I have termed the ethical crisis in archaeology: that is the ethical crisis personified by archaeologists who publicly mourn the loss of artefacts but find no words for the loss of people. It is a crisis of responsibility. A crisis that emanates from the principle, now codified in the codes of ethics of most Western archaeological organisations, that our primary ethical responsibility is the advocacy for and stewardship of the archaeological record (cf. Hamilakis, 1999).

As Linda Patrick (1985), John Barrett (1988) and others have shown, however, the notion of the 'archaeological record' is highly problematic. In

the principle of stewardship, an entity that is *produced* by archaeologists out of the material fragments of the past, ('the record'), acquires metaphysical properties: it is perceived as the finite entity that people of the past have entrusted to us for protection and stewardship (cf. Lucas, 2001). As some recent archaeological work has shown, however, the 'record' is produced by disciplinary practices and identity processes and discourses, using the remnants of the past. We thus declare ourselves stewards and advocates of something that we ourselves have been instrumental in producing, and of which we are often the primary users. As Wylie (2002: 243) has noted, our notion of stewardship sounds suspiciously self-serving, apart from being epistemologically problematic.³

It is this principle that has made even anti-war archaeologists mourn the looting of artefacts in Iraq, the 'pages in the book that were torn out'. Archaeologists were consistent with what they considered their primary ethical responsibility: to defend the 'record' that was being destroyed. I have no doubt that most archaeologists felt passionately that the protection of Iraqi antiquities was their duty. After all, if we do not stand up for antiquities, who will? Moreover, many must have felt that protesting about the looting gave them a platform to express veiled anti-war sentiments and feelings. It was their professional expertise that opened the newspaper pages and the microphones to them. As I mentioned earlier, I found that strategy very effective. But only up to a point. The fetishisation of 'record' and the desire to save it for future generations (evading thus the responsibilities towards the present) can lead into an ethical trap. We can already see the consequences of this trap, as archaeologists praise the invading and colonising armies for sparing antiquities, or even declare themselves willing to be recruited as expert cultural advisers for the present and future invasions. They are thus representing themselves and being accepted merely as professionals and experts (cf. Said, 1994), not as critical thinkers who question the 'regimes of truth' within which that expert knowledge is deployed (cf. Foucault, 1980).

There are some other equally troubling questions in this affair. The discourse on looting led at times to the colonial strategy of allochrony, the denial of 'coevalness' (Fabian, 1983): the con-

struction of Iraq as a country of the past, living in another time, a country that is 'not immanent to modernity' (cf. Buck-Morrs, 2003: 97) – hence the frequent evocations of Mesopotamia. More importantly, most archaeologists promoted the notion that the Iraqi past is 'our' past, engaging thus in a rhetorical strategy of appropriation. But they meant a selective and constructed past, the past that in the Western imagination has occupied a central position because of its biblical connotations, or its links to urbanism and early writing. How about the more recent past, the Muslim and Arabic heritage? Is that 'ours' too, or just 'theirs'? Were we thus protecting only 'our' past? If, to recall Levinas, the basis of ethics is the engagement with the other, how ethical was the call for the protection of this material past based on sameness and the Western self?

CONCLUSION

I argue that an ethical archaeology of the 21st century should re-politicise ethics. Archaeologists as active agents/workers within the highly contested field of cultural production should address their responsibility deriving from their key role in the production of the past. Ethical-political decisions are inevitably contextually driven and contingent, but the challenge is to construct politically empowering critiques that articulate, in a non-essentialist manner, the local with the global, the universal truth of the 'subjugated' with the specific regimes of truth within which power relationships are played out.

The Iraq case challenges seriously our very ethical foundations and exposes the ethical crisis at the heart of the discipline. The objections and arguments that I outline above may appear to create an unhelpful dichotomy between objects and people, yet they aim at going much further. They ask us to rethink what it is that we do in archaeology, to whom we are responsible and how we can articulate the politics of archaeological practice with the macro-politics of global post-modernity.

It is about time we dispensed with the notion of the stewardship of the record as our primary ethical responsibility. We should strive to protect all material traces of people in the past, not on the

basis of our stewardship towards a selectively constructed 'record', but on the basis of our responsibility towards the social memory of past people and societies. At the same time, we should be aware that the ethic of conservation is a context-specific principle, and that some social groups may choose to place value not on the conservation of the material past but on its re-working, recycling or even destruction. Awareness of social asymmetries and power relationships (such as in the case of the Western antiquities market) should underpin these contextual judgments. More importantly, we should reject the role of the professional specialist who provides expertise in their narrow field but who fails to question the meta-narratives and practices of nationalism, neo-colonialism and imperialism, within which this knowledge is deployed. Archaeological ethics must be politically aware, sensitive to the pain of the other, or they are nothing. To quote Francis Deblauw, the independent scholar who set up the most informative website on the Iraqi looting, 'no epic Sumerian cuneiform tablet, majestic Neo-Assyrian lamassu sculpture, or any other Mesopotamian artifact is worth a human life, be it Iraqi, American, British or other' (<http://cctr.umkc.edu/user/fdeblauwe/iraq.html>).

POSTSCRIPT

This paper was delivered (in an earlier version) at the 5th World Archaeological Congress (WAC), in Washington DC in June 2003. The Iraq war was, inevitably, a central theme in many of the academic sessions, in the plenaries and in informal discussions, especially since a number of WAC members and others had decided not to participate at the Washington WAC as a way of expressing anti-war feelings. Most of the discussions focused on looting and the destruction of Iraqi heritage, while a disproportionately large number of sessions was devoted to conservation themes, causing some members to protest that WAC was turning into a conservation lobby. Some speakers even advocated a closer link with the military, on the basis of the novel concept of 'military stewardship'. At the same time, however, the emphasis on the looting at the expense of the broader ethical issues of the legitimacy and legality of war and its

consequences came under criticism, especially in some of the plenary sessions. A new phenomenon, that of the ‘embedded (within the military) archaeologist’ seemed to emerge (or rather, re-emerge, as there are many 19th and early 20th century examples). The Chief Executive of WAC, to his credit, talked openly about his advising role to the British Ministry of Defence (and the associated dilemmas), making it thus a matter of debate. A motion statement, submitted by 100 participants to the final plenary session, was approved by the overwhelming majority of the participants. The text stated:

The delegates of WAC5 oppose the continuing occupation of Iraq by the USA, the UK and their allies which followed the pre-emptive, illegal invasion that by-passed the UN and was opposed by the majority of people in the world.

The invasion and occupation has had tragic consequences for the archaeological heritage of Iraq, but more importantly, it has resulted in death and injury for thousands, and it is bound to have detrimental long-term effects for the Iraqi people and environment.

We urge the WAC council and all archaeological organisations to resist attempts to embed archaeology within the militarised structures of the present and future conflicts and to oppose neo-colonization.

The Executive of WAC considered this motion, and its president, Claire Smith, produced the following press release:

At the Plenary Session of the Fifth World Archaeological Congress, held at the Catholic University of America between 21 and 26 June, the participants from some 65 countries expressed deep concern regarding the continuing occupation of Iraq by the US, UK and their allies which followed the pre-emptive invasion that by-passed the UN and that was opposed by a significant proportion of people in the world.

The invasion and occupation have had tragic consequences for the globally significant archaeological heritage of Iraq. More importantly, they have resulted in death or injury for thousands, which may well have a detrimental long-term effect for the Iraqi people and environment.

The Executive Committee of the World Archaeological Congress, meeting on 27 June in Washington DC, noted these deep concerns as well as significant concerns

relating to requests from the aggressor countries’ military forces for archaeologists to provide information and advice concerning the identification and protection of the cultural heritage in Iraq.

As President I have authorised the immediate establishment of a Task Group to investigate these issues and to draft a WAC Protocol on the relationship between WAC Members and the military. This Protocol will be discussed at an Inter-Congress to be arranged as quickly as possible.

This encouraging development may initiate further debate on the archaeologists’ role in the Iraq war, and their ethical responsibilities in general. At about the same time as the release of this statement, and while the occupation of Iraq was producing more deaths daily, a Mesopotamian specialist made the headlines by suggesting that the occupying armies should kill antiquities looters (Kennedy, 2003), providing thus an extreme example and a further confirmation of the phenomenon that I debate here.

APPENDIX

AAA Urges Bush to Protect Iraq Cultural Sites

April 16th, 2003

Mr George W Bush

President of the United States

The White House

Washington, DC

Dear Mr President

During the military preparations and subsequent implementation of military actions for the war in Iraq, the cultural community in the United States and elsewhere repeatedly pointed out our war responsibilities to the cultural heritage of Iraq. As the cradle of human civilization, the Iraqi territory holds unique artistic, historic, archaeological and scientific evidence of the birth of the very civilization of which our Nation forms part. During the fierce fighting of the past few weeks, we were relieved to see that our military leaders and the coalition partners took extreme precautions to avoid targeting cultural sites along with other non-military places. It was also comforting to

receive reports that our armed forces have conducted inspections at some of the important archaeological sites.

This past weekend, however, the situation changed drastically. Alarming news and dismaying television images confirmed the wholesale pillaging and wanton destruction of the cultural treasures of Iraq by local thugs and thieves. The extensive looting and vandalism of the completely unguarded National Museum in Baghdad have caused irreversible losses in a cultural patrimony that belongs not only to the Iraqis, but to all mankind. Other reports have indicated similar pillaging in Mosul. If this process is allowed to go unchecked, the catastrophic destruction may easily spread to hundreds of more remote, but equally valuable sites.

As leaders of national organizations representing millions of Americans who believe that the material culture inherited from our ancestors constitutes one of humanity's greatest treasures, we call on you to use all means at your disposal to stop the pillaging and protect cultural sites and institutions of Iraq. These include historic sites, historic urban districts, cultural landscapes, buildings of unusual aesthetic values, archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives and other repositories of cultural property and human memory.

We also call for the protection of our colleagues, the Iraqi professionals and scholars who work in these places, thus enabling them to carry out their stewardship duties. During this period of extreme hardship, they need professional support and reinforcement to assist them with their tasks. The United States and our Coalition Partners should provide this assistance at once.

We call for the immediate adoption of strict and detailed plans to attempt to recover the stolen artifacts and reconstruct the Iraqi national collections. This should be done through police action, international cooperation, import and export interdictions and other means that may prove effective in this endeavor. Such plans should include international cooperation and exchange of information, as well as strict monitoring of illicit trade within Iraq and its border nations by our armed forces.

Finally, we call upon our Government to ensure that the funds destined for post-war recovery and reconstruction provide sufficient funds for the field of cultural resources. This would include funds for

the immediate physical and institutional reconstruction of Iraqi cultural agencies and organizations, as well as long-term funds for strengthening institutional and professional capacity in order to ensure a permanent protection and effective management of heritage resources and historic sites of Iraq.

We place at your disposal the joint and individual expertise of our organizations to assist our country in providing this protection and recovering the stolen artifacts for the people of Iraq.

The return to freedom of the Iraqi people must include the freedom to enjoy the great heritage resources inherited from their ancestors. As the only source of real authority in Iraq at the present time, the United States and its Coalition Partners bear an obligation to all Americans, to all Iraqis, to the world community and to generations yet unborn to protect the cultural resources of Iraq.

In contrast to the inhuman Iraqi regime that has just ended, the United States is a benevolent nation committed to the realization of the full human potential through freedom, democracy, fair play and the rule of law. In our own country, we revere and protect the thousands of places whence our rich historic legacy sprang and grew. They lie at the root of our national identity and are a constant source of inspiration. We hope that the right will be provided to the people of Iraq, and by extension, to all the citizens of our country and the world who can claim the ancestral treasures of Iraq as partly our own.

Respectfully,
American Anthropological Association
 William E Davis, III, Executive Director
 Arlington, VA

(and 20 other organizations)

NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was submitted for publication more or less in the form that it was originally delivered, in order to serve as a timely intervention in the debate. The issues it discusses demand a more extensive treatment, which will be addressed in an article in preparation. For a fuller discussion on some of the theoretical issues on stewardship, the 'record' and the responsibility of archaeologists, see Hamilakis (1999).

I am grateful to Neal Ascherson for encouraging me to publish this piece and for his editorial suggestions. Neal, together with Cornelius Holtorf, Tamima Omma Mourad,

Jane Ruffino, Bill Sillars, the author and others, were the team who drafted the original motion discussed in the postscript above. The success of this motion owes much to this team and to Jane Ruffino in particular for her conviction and energy. I am grateful to Francis Deblauw for his amazing on-line resource from which this paper has benefited so much. Sven Ouzman and Karoline von Oppen offered suggestions and encouragement.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See for example the foundation of the American Co-ordinating Committee for Iraq Cultural Heritage, set up by a number of major organisations such as the Society for American Archaeology, the Archaeological Institute of America, and the American Anthropological Association.
- 2 Another interesting exception was that of the Columbia archaeologist Z. Bahrani. Like most archaeologists' her starting point was the issue of looting, but unlike them, she linked the looting issue directly with the conquest and occupation of Iraq (e.g., Bahrani, 2003a). More importantly, she provided a different definition of what the archaeological 'record' of Iraq is. Unlike the archaeologists who provided the US Army with lists of sites to be spared, she noted: 'The entirety of Iraq is a world cultural heritage site and there is no way that a strategic bombing can avoid something archaeological' (Bahrani, 2003b). A further exception is the clear public opposition to the war expressed by a group of archaeologists in Britain ('Archaeologists Against the War'), who participated in anti-war rallies held in London under their own banner (see also relevant articles in the group's newsletter).
- 3 The concept of stewardship has recently come under scrutiny, especially within American archaeology and with reference to indigenous issues (see, e.g., Wylie, 2002; papers in Zimmerman, et al., 2003). Some critics propose a shared stewardship between archaeologists and other groups, but its very foundation as a concept is implicitly or explicitly accepted; moreover, the notion of the 'record' has escaped systematic scrutiny and interrogation (but see Lucas, 2001).

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His recent publications include *The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories* (co-edited with K.S. Brown). He is currently completing a book on archaeology and national imagination in Greece and working on another on the archaeology of the bodily senses (to be published by Cambridge University Press). Contact address: Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK; email: y.hamilakis@soton.ac.uk.

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