

# The Cultural Heritage of Iraq after the 2nd Gulf War <sup>(1)</sup>

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## Abstract:

This paper conducts a review of the situation in which currently Iraq's archaeological heritage finds itself, following the military intervention carried out by United States and its allies in Iraq, which has had a tremendous impact not only on archaeological sites but also on cultural centers and museums Institutions in Baghdad and Mosul.

## Resumen:

En este trabajo se lleva a cabo una revisión de la situación en la que se encuentra actualmente el patrimonio arqueológico iraquí tras la intervención militar llevada a cabo por Estados Unidos y sus aliados en Iraq, que ha afectado de manera importante no sólo a sus yacimientos arqueológicos sino también a los centros culturales y a las instituciones museísticas de Bagdad y Mosul.

## INTRODUCCIÓN

Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, has often, quite rightly, been called the cradle of civilization. Here, from about 8000 BC onwards, in the rich alluvial plain created by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, we find evidence for settled communities that are dependent on farming rather than hunting and gathering. After 3000 BC we see the formation of the first cities, the introduction of complex economies, and the invention of writing. In the south part of Mesopotamia, Sumerian civilization flourished in the 3rd millennium BC at cities such as Warka and Ur. In the 2nd millennium BC, the Sumerians were replaced in central Mesopotamia by the Babylonians, whose capital was at Babylon and whose best-known king was Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC), famous for his law code. In the 1st millennium BC the centre of power passed to the north of the country, to Assyria, which is the subject of the present exhibition in Alicante. From their homeland around modern Mosul the Assyrians spread out to conquer practically the whole of the Ancient Near East. The most characteristic products of Assyrian civilization are the huge stone gateway figures in the form of human-headed bulls or lions, and the carved stone reliefs that decorated the walls of their palaces. These often show the king hunting lions, and sometimes we also see lions represented in glazed bricks. The great wealth of Assyria was shown in a graphic way in 1989-90 with the discovery at Nimrud of four tombs of Assyrian queens, containing an astonishing amount of gold jewellery and vessels. The Assyrians also had a rich literary tradition, and King Ashurbanipal even had a royal library containing about 25,000 clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform. One of these tablets, a copy of an earlier Babylonian text, is known as the flood tablet, and gives an account of a great flood in Mesopotamia. It was this tradition that probably

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provided the inspiration for the flood story in the Bible. After the collapse of Assyria in 612 BC, Babylon again became an important city, particularly under its king Nebuchadnezzar, and the splendour of Babylon at this time is shown by the extraordinary Ishtar gate, now in Berlin. I have mentioned a few of the great archaeological sites in Iraq, but in truth there are many thousands of sites in Iraq. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Iraq is a vast archaeological site. There are also, as we shall see, many standing monuments in Iraq, dating from early times and from the Islamic period. Add to this the wonderful collections in the Iraq Museum, and it is obvious that Iraq has a very rich cultural heritage. Therefore, in advance of the 2nd Gulf War, it might have been expected that the international community would pay particular attention to this rich cultural heritage, particularly as there was known to have been destruction and looting after the 1st Gulf War. Did this happen? Unfortunately not.

### **IRAQ MUSEUM**

Our story begins with the Iraq Museum. It is by now well known that after American troops penetrated to the centre of Baghdad the Museum was left unguarded, and between 10th and 12th April 2003 the museum was extensively looted. During the war itself there was little damage to the main museum building apart from a shell hole in the facade of the wing holding the children's museum, but in the immediate aftermath of the war the museum was invaded by a large group of looters and vandals, intent on stealing as much as they could and causing as much damage as they could. At the invitation of Dr Donny George I went with a BBC team to Baghdad to report on what had happened, and I was actually the first foreign archaeologist to visit the museum after the looting. It was a horrendous sight. In anticipation of the war, the curators in the Iraq Museum had removed everything they could from the exhibition galleries and sent the objects to a special 'secret store'. Left behind in the galleries were those things which for one reason or another were too difficult to remove. Of these important and sometimes iconic objects around 40 had been stolen, and others had been brutally smashed. For example, a classical statue group from the Parthian site of Hatra was left in a pile of fragments, and Assyrian statues were thrown to the ground. In addition, the glass panels in the showcases were wilfully smashed. Of the 40 iconic objects stolen from the galleries, around one half have now been recovered but some really important pieces are still missing. Amongst them are the head of a Roman emperor and most significant of all an 8th century BC ivory panel from Nimrud, in the Phoenician style, showing a lioness mauling an African. This is one of two similar panels found at Nimrud. The other is now in the British Museum and has been included in the exhibition here in Alicante. The storerooms fared even worse than the exhibition galleries. Although, thankfully, the looters did not get access to the 'secret store', they rampaged through the other storerooms causing a great deal of damage. Many precious objects including delicate ivories were thrown to the ground and trampled underfoot, and it is estimated that about 16,000 objects were stolen from the storerooms. I am afraid this is not a precise figure because the records of the museum were not very complete in the first place. Around one half of the missing objects have now been recovered, but not, unfortunately, the enormously important collection of 5000 cylinder seals. The intruders also broke into all the offices, more than 100 of them, smashing down the doors and throwing onto the floor all the papers, file cards, computer discs and files that were on the shelves. In a number of cases it looked as if they planned to start bonfires, but fortunately this did not happen. Before the war, some of the most precious objects from the Iraq museum had been taken to the vaults of the central bank and there they should have been safe, but unfortunately this was not the case. A bomb in the vicinity of the bank caused flooding in the basements, with the result that the ivories and gold treasures that were stored there were immersed for a long period in filthy water contaminated with sewage. While this has not affected the gold objects too badly, the ivories are showing signs of massive deterioration. In a number of cases we see salts leeching out to the surface, as well as the chemicals that were used to conserve the ivories after they were excavated, and we know of a few instances where ivory plaques have just disintegrated after this immersion in water.

## MOSUL MUSEUM

After this first visit to Baghdad in April 2003, I was back again in June 2003 with a team from the British Museum to conduct a conservation assessment in the Iraq Museum and also to inspect some other museums and sites in Iraq. In Mosul, where the second most important museum in the country is located, exactly the same thing had happened as in Baghdad, in that the museum was ransacked in the period 10th-12th April. As in Baghdad, cases were smashed, statues thrown to the ground, and objects stolen. These included embossed bronze sheets from the gates of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II that had been found at Balawat.

## BABYLON

The situation with the Iraq Museum and the Mosul Museum, then, is very disturbing. But what about some of the famous archaeological sites? We will start with perhaps the best known of all, the iconic site of Babylon that was so important for Saddam Hussein that he rebuilt parts of the ancient city with bricks stamped with his own name. In the first months after the war all was relatively quiet here. When we visited Babylon in June 2003 there was a small contingent of soldiers, but no indication that substantial damage was going to be done. Unfortunately, what started as a relatively small military camp quickly grew in size so that by the summer of 2004 worries were being expressed about the large size of the camp and the extent of military activity that was evident from aerial and satellite photographs. So great were the concerns that the Polish army, which had taken over the camp from the Americans, decided to hand the camp back to the Iraqi authorities. Before doing so, however, they convened a meeting at Babylon in the period 11th – 13th December 2004 for the purpose of ratifying a condition report prepared by Polish archaeologists attached to the Polish army. I was asked to attend this meeting by the Iraqi Minister of Culture and to prepare an independent report.

The first point to make is about the large size of the camp. It covered 150 hectares, and at one time contained 2000 soldiers. It was situated right in the middle of the ancient city, in fact spreading into the area inside the inner wall. It is difficult to imagine that anywhere else in the world a military camp could have been established on top of a country's most famous heritage site, and while it may be true that the presence of the camp saved the site from looters you don't need 2000 soldiers to guard an archaeological site. Well, what of the damage?

There are about one dozen trenches, the largest 170m long, dug into previously undisturbed archaeological deposits. In these trenches were found pottery, including a complete vase, bones, and fragments of brick with cuneiform inscriptions, mostly of the king Nebuchadnezzar.

There are also cuttings where large amounts of earth have been removed from the surface, rather like open cast mining. Again, these cuttings are often into hitherto undisturbed archaeological deposits.

Then, around 300,000 square metres of the site have been covered with gravel, sometimes compacted and chemically treated, to be used as a helipad and to create spaces for vehicle parks, accommodation, storage blocks and so on. All the gravel had been brought in from elsewhere, and will in due course work its way into the archaeological deposits, contaminating them irretrievably.

There is evidence of environmental pollution in the form of fuel seepage in the area called the fuel farm, where the military vehicles refuel. The spilled fuel will seep down into the archaeological deposits beneath, again causing long-term damage.

All around the site are sandbags and so-called HESCO containers filled with earth scooped up from the site. When it was pointed out that this was bad practice the contractors started to bring in earth from other places outside the site but this is just as bad, if not even worse, as often this earth comes from other archaeological sites and will therefore contaminate the record at Babylon.

In many parts of the site there are wheel marks caused by heavy military vehicles, and these movements are sure to have damaged the fragile archaeological deposits beneath. Even the ancient brick pavement in the south part of the 6th century BC Processional Way has been broken by driving a heavy vehicle along it. Damage is also likely to have been caused by the extensive helicopter activity at the site, but this is difficult to quantify.

Last, but certainly not least, is damage to 9 different dragon figures in the celebrated Ishtar Gate at the heart of Babylon. These figures are created from moulded bricks, and it is thought that the bricks were removed by one or more souvenir hunters from one of the foreign armies stationed at Babylon.

This should cause no surprise, as soldiers the world over will collect souvenirs if they can and Babylon was no exception. In one random search of departing Polish soldiers, shortly before my arrival, a number of antiquities were retrieved which were then handed over to the Iraqi authorities.

### **ISIN AND SITES IN THE SOUTH**

I mentioned that having a military presence at Babylon, even though it caused damage to the site, probably saved it from being looted. Other places did not have this sort of protection, and it is a sad fact that many archaeological sites, particularly in the area to the south of Baghdad, have been extensively looted. We may refer, for example, to the important Babylonian site of Isin, excavated by the University of Munich. The illegal digging here has been on a massive scale, and the whole site is now riddled with pits and holes. It is thought that this type of looting is being organised along tribal lines, with whole sites being divided up between tribes and families. However that may be, it is a pattern that is being repeated at many sites in the south of Iraq, and at some places digging is carried out 24 hours a day. It cannot be stopped at present because many of these places are simply too dangerous to visit, even for the Iraqi security forces. As to what happens to all the artefacts that are recovered in these illicit excavations, we simply don't know where they are going to, but what is certain is that there is a thriving antiquities trade in many parts of the world.

### **SAMARRA**

We have already mentioned Babylon, but what of other sites that are of national importance for Iraqis? Did the coalition make a special effort to protect them? Unfortunately they did not. First we have the case of Samarra, where the famous Al-Askari mosque containing the remains of the 10th and 11th imams was badly damaged in a bomb explosion in February 2006. The gilded copper dome was formerly a landmark of great prominence. Of course it is true that this explosion was caused by insurgents, or by people attempting to incite sectarian violence, but the point is that the coalition has created the circumstances in which this sort of thing can happen. The other great monument in Samarra, the 9th century AD helicoidal minaret built in the Abbasid period, has also been damaged. Insurgent snipers were occupying the top part of the tower and eventually blew up part of it. Again, the helicoidal minaret is a victim of the ongoing violence.

### **HATRA**

At the great Parthian site of Hatra, dating from the 1st-2nd century AD, the damage is of a different kind. At a distance of a few miles from the site is a munitions dump apparently dating from the time of Saddam Hussein, that is held to be so dangerous that the munitions cannot be moved and have to be blown up on the spot by coalition forces. Formerly these explosions were being conducted daily (now they are slightly less frequent, but will go on for longer). Although these controlled explosions are happening some distance from Hatra, they have caused cracks to appear in some of the arches at the ancient site. In spite of

protests, the explosions continue, with a cavalier disregard for the Iraqi cultural heritage.

## **NINEVEH**

The name of Nineveh is well known, and it is celebrated as one of the great Assyrian capitals, but here too there has been damage. The corrugated iron roof protecting the excavated remains of the palace of the Assyrian king Sennacherib was stripped off by looters in 2003, causing further deterioration of the Assyrian reliefs below. I am pleased to be able to say that the roof has now been replaced, but a great deal of skilled conservation work is needed to repair the reliefs. Of course, this can only be done when the security situation improves.

## **NIMRUD**

At the nearby site of Nimrud, another of the great Assyrian capitals, there has been relatively little damage. Looters did break into the site at exactly the same time as the Baghdad and Mosul museums were being looted, but soon thereafter a detachment of American troops was stationed at the site preventing any further interference. This is a clear indication of what can be done if the will is there, and it shows that these sites can be effectively guarded with relatively few resources. As far as I know, then, the only damage sustained at Nimrud was an unsuccessful attempt to steal one of the Assyrian wall slabs.

## **UR**

The last site I want to talk about is Ur of the Chaldees near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, the legendary birthplace of Abraham. This is one of the most iconic sites in Iraq, and it was here in excavations between 1922 and 1934 that Sir Leonard Woolley found a royal cemetery dating from about 2500 BC with graves containing a wealth of treasures such as the famous Standard of Ur and the so-called 'Royal Game'. The ancient site is immediately next to the gigantic Tallil Airbase, covering about 2.4 square kilometres or 240 hectares, now used by the coalition forces, and since 2003 has been included within the perimeter fence of the airbase. This means that the only access to the site is through the main gate to the airbase, and the increased military activity around the ancient site has also been a matter for concern. In addition, reports had been circulating last year of inscribed objects having been improperly removed from the site and sent to the museum in Nasiriyah. In view of all this, an arrangement was made for me to visit the site with Dr Donny George, then Director of Antiquities, but it was only in February that I was eventually able to go, by which time Donny George had emigrated to America. Instead, I was supposed to meet at the site his successor, Dr Abbas al-Hussainy, but unfortunately this did not happen because Dr Abbas came with a large party of 20 people and for security reasons was not allowed onto the airbase. So, I was not able to conduct a joint condition assessment with him as planned, but during my short time on the airbase, 21st – 23rd February, I was able to check out some of the worrying features. One of these was two bomb craters that could be seen on satellite photographs on Google, not on the main mound but quite close to it. Since the photograph was taken we discovered that the holes had been filled in, but close by were Iraqi gun emplacements dating from the 1st Gulf War. These gun emplacements were evidently for the defence of the airbase and had been attacked at that time, hence the bomb craters. So far as I could see there was no associated archaeological damage, but ancient settlement surely extended over this area. The most distinctive landmark at Ur is the ziggurat, which can be seen from many miles away. The Iraq department of antiquities has often claimed that it was damaged in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and I established that this was indeed the case. The north-east face of the ziggurat and the south-east side of the ziggurat staircase are pock marked with bullet and shell holes caused during the invasion. Apart from this, the main site of Ur appears to be in reasonably good condition. The site is looked after by an Iraqi guard, whose

brother runs a gift shop for coalition troops, and the guard himself takes soldiers of different nationality on tours of the site. Included in the tour is the block of reconstructed housing where Abraham is supposed to have been born. The only major problems on the site are with the tombs of the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Here the ceilings of the tombs are not in good condition, but this is a long-standing problem and has nothing to do with the war. Apart from this, the guard showed me where a rocket had landed on 3rd February 2007 but it did not destroy any ancient remains. So far, so good, but I have to report that the new main gate to the complex, the Visitor Control Centre, has been built on the top of the ancient suburb of Ur known as Diddiqqa. Although there have never been proper excavations at Diddiqqa, Woolley obtained many finds from here and it is presumably an important place. The Visitor Control Centre is extensive, and there is no doubt that during its construction there must have been damage to the archaeological deposits beneath. Of course, this damage is not intentional, but it comes about through ignorance and a reluctance to consult. Any archaeologist could have told the coalition contractors not to build any structures in this place, but in this case, as in so many others, no archaeologists were consulted.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, the situation of the Iraqi cultural heritage remains very bleak. Archaeological sites, particularly in the south, continue to be looted, and the museum is now closed. Before he left for America, Donny George had the entrances to the storerooms bricked up, to prevent further looting. They remain like this. Further outrages, as noted at Ur, occur at regular intervals. The biggest problem is still the security situation. Sectarian violence in Iraq means that large numbers of qualified people are leaving the country, like Donny George himself, and there are not many people left behind to replace them. Those that stay are not able to carry out their regular duties, and it is not safe for foreigners to visit Iraq and offer assistance. The position of the cultural heritage will only show real improvement when the security situation improves. In the meantime, though, there are some glimmers of hope. Some of the 40 iconic objects stolen from the galleries of the museum in April 2003 have now been returned to the museum. Amongst them are the Bassetki statue, a bronze statue base of the Akkadian period, c. 2200 BC, and one of the largest bronze castings from antiquity, a Sumerian statue that was recently seized in America, the Warka vase, a 4th millennium BC stone vase from Uruk carved with various religious and processional scenes, and the Warka head, one of the greatest triumphs of Sumerian civilization. It would be idle to speculate about what might happen in the future – one of the worries is that the collections of the Iraq museum will be split up in line with a possible division of the country itself – but we have to accept that it will be some time before the country returns to normality and people can again begin to pay serious attention to the cultural heritage. Before that can happen, it is our joint responsibility to promote Mesopotamian cultural heritage as actively as we can. That is what the present exhibition is all about, and the hope of the British Museum is that as many people as possible will see these treasures from Ancient Assyria and will see for themselves what a flourishing and prosperous civilization existed in ancient Mesopotamia.