

# UNESCO ACTIVITIES INCULDING THE RESTORATION OF THE IRAQI CULTURAL HERITAGE

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On 15 April 2003, as the evidence of the destruction of many parts of the cultural heritage in Iraq was increasing, the Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, warned of the devastation and looting of libraries and archives in the country, which may have irreversible consequences for maintaining and strengthening the country's cultural identity. "I reiterate my urgent call to take immediate measures of protection and surveillance of Iraqi cultural institutions to which libraries and archives belong", declared Mr. Matsuura.

"Libraries, archives and manuscripts must be preserved as essential parts of the rich heritage of Iraq. Libraries are the essence of knowledge societies. Nearly twenty centuries of written history of mankind are in danger; everything must be done to protect them from looting and destruction. Measures must be taken to protect governmental records that are held by archives, since they are vital for the functioning of public administration after the war, for example, to protect the legal, financial and contractual rights of Iraqi citizens", Mr. Matsuura added.

An international experts meeting held on 17 April, at UNESCO in Paris, and another held on 29 April, at the British Museum in London, discussed measures to fight the illicit trafficking of Iraqi cultural property, notably within the framework of the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, for which UNESCO is responsible.

## **THE FIRST UNESCO MISSION TO BAGHDAD (15 – 20 MAY)**

On the initiative of the Director-General of UNESCO, and following recommendations of these meetings, an expert mission visited Baghdad, from 15 to 20 May 2003, to elaborate a first report on the state of Iraqi cultural heritage.

Led by the Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO, Mr. Mounir Bouchenaki, the mission also consisted of the Director of the British Museum, Mr. Neil MacGregor, the Director of the Iraqi-Italian Centre for the Conservation of Monuments, Mr. Roberto Parapetti, the Chief of the Archaeological Mission of Japan in Iraq, Mr. Ken Matsumoto as well as Mr. John Russell, Dean of the Massachusetts College for Arts. It was organized in close cooperation with the UN Coordinator for Security and Humanitarian Assistance in Iraq, Mr. Ramiro Lopes Da Silva, the American authorities and Iraqis in charge of the Baghdad Museum. Ambassador Piero Cordone, who has been designated by the American authorities as Civil Administrator for Iraqi Cultural Heritage, also took part.

During the mission, the experts concentrated on questions related to the theft of cultural objects, the preparation of an inventory for the Baghdad Museum and the fine tuning of

an action plan aimed at restoring the principal cultural institutions of the city, and in particular, at enabling the employees of the museums to resume their activities.

The UNESCO mission was not able to visit any site out of Baghdad for security reasons.

The aims of the mission were the following:

- Provide a first assessment of the conditions of Iraqi cultural heritage
- Evaluate pressing needs of museums, monuments, sites and cultural institutions in Baghdad
- Provide some recommendations for immediate measures, short-, medium- and long- term actions.

## **MAJOR RESULTS ACHIEVED**

The UNESCO mission was able to assess the situation of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities, the Iraqi Archaeological Museum, the National Archives and the National Library, the Adhamiya Mosque, the Manuscripts Center, Bayt al-Hikma, the Abbasid Palace, and the Center for training in conservation created with the support of ICCROM.

The UNESCO team obtained extensive reports on the situation in the North and South of the country thanks to Prof. Tony Wilkinson, of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, Prof. Helga Trenkwalder, of the Innsbruck University, Austria, and Prof. Macguire Gibson, from the British Museum.

At present, the Iraqi Museum is the only cultural institution in Baghdad that is watched over and controlled by the coalition's army. Security is guaranteed by U.S. tanks in the garden, and U.S. troops billeted in the building.

Regarding the Iraqi cultural personnel, Dr Jabr Ibrahim Khalil (Director of Antiquities), Dr Nawalla Mutawali (Director of Iraq Museum) Dr Donny George (Director of Research) and other colleagues from the Iraqi Department of Antiquities are awaiting news on their future roles. The impression is one of paralysis and the absence of communications by telephone or any other means. Staff salaries have not been paid for some months. The UNESCO mission donated to the personnel of the Iraqi Museum half their *per diem* allowances (\$4,200). On 18<sup>th</sup> May, Ambassador Cordone and General Kern arrived at the Museum to announce that payment of salaries will be resumed soon.

## **DAMAGES ASSESSED**

Inside the Iraqi Museum, damage from artillery or gunfire is real, but limited. The security and climate-control systems were damaged by looters and partly smashed. It is not clear if they can be repaired or need to be replaced. Most offices were comprehensively trashed. There are no phones or computers, very few records, filing cabinets, very little furniture. One of the most pressing needs is the provision of the material infrastructure, which would allow the museum, and the service of antiquities to run. With the current lack of any telephone, email or postal service, it is virtually impossible for anything to develop at the moment.

In the galleries, most of them are physically intact, as are most of the showcases. Many glass cases were broken or overturned, but most survive. There are now no cameras or scanners in the Museum.

In the laboratories and conservation workshops, most equipment was stolen or smashed. Jars of chemicals are being tidied up. Small microscopes were all stolen. Apart from a

few tables, chairs and cupboards, there seems to be only an old scanning electron microscope, a fumigation chamber and two kilns.

The immediate assessment on looted objects: thefts of main-gallery items and damage to the objects on display have been well publicized. Fragments of shattered stone and ceramic objects lie on the floor, loosely tidied to let people walk by, otherwise undisturbed. Some broken objects have been summarily gathered and put on tables, but even major items like the shattered harp from Ur lie jumbled with odds and ends. Everything has yet to be begun in this area of conservation. From the preliminary list of looted and damaged objects compiled by Dr. Donny George and Dr. John Curtis and presented at British Museum meeting on 29 April 2003, about 28 objects are missing from the galleries.

The Museum staff declared that the seals, jewels and numismatic collections were not stolen, and also that the museum treasures (Nimrud and Ur royal tombs furniture) had been stored in the vaults of the Central Bank of Iraq, but this hasn't been checked, yet.

Dr MacGregor notes that there is no way of assessing how much might have been stolen; he thinks that the broken items in each of the three stores seen by the mission would be less than 10% of the total (most of the upper shelves appear crowded but undisturbed). The personnel are slowly and carefully tidying fragments to allow passage.

Concerning the theft from stores, the count of missing objects had reached 2,000.

The museum staff declared that the exhibited objects had been previously placed into museum's storerooms and some to the vaults of the Central Bank, with the exception of those that were considered unmovable because of their size and weight. It was impossible to gain any information about the location of these sites, nor any reassurance that all are still safe.

It appears that the key Museum inventories have all survived, which will make checking holdings possible, if labor intensive.

Fragments of damaged ivories from Nimrud were seen on the floor. They appeared to have been on trays, awaiting treatment, and then dropped or disturbed by raiders. A Japanese team already planned their conservation.

As immediate action was decided by UNESCO with the cooperation of UNDP in Baghdad, to finance the hiring of buses for the women staff of the Museum, using UN buses and drivers for the purpose. This should extend the busing to about 6 months.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Paintings located at the Pioneers' Museum and the Saddam Center for Modern Art were looted and most of the works stolen. According to the declaration of the museum staff, 400 paintings of the Saddam Art Center, out of more than 2000 pieces of the Iraqi painters collection dating from the beginning of the last century to present, have been recovered. Almost all are paintings, large canvases, and stacked pell-mell. The most common visible damage was tearing. They will need assessment. An important map of Baghdad in 1865 by Felix Jones, originally located in the entrance hall, was apparently stolen.

The National Library and State Archives building consists of three floors and a basement. All but the basement had been completely burned during the looting, and the building itself may well have suffered structural damage. It has been reported that around 30% of the entire book collections and archive holdings, initiated in 1920, was located in a safe place before the fire. An intriguing object, a flame-thrower/fire-extinguisher was recognized on the floor.

Dr Muayad Damerji, Advisor to the Ministry of Culture said that part of the book collection and about half of the archive collection (comprising the state archives of Iraq from the late

Ottoman period to the present) had been moved to safety prior to the war. Everything that remained in the building was destroyed, including the microfilm copies of the archives, which were housed on the third floor. Only the basement was untouched by the fire, and since no firefighters came, it is still dry. It was suggested that the library and archives be relocated.

In the Regional center for training the effects of looting were particularly visible on Qushla, the Ottoman Barracks and the administrative center. Looting was still going on as the UNESCO team visited this complex. Two American soldiers came in and tried to drive off the looters. Not one door or window was left in the entire Ottoman complex.

The historic building Beyt al Hikma was looted and burned. The roof has collapsed and the interior is completely gutted. Some of the Islamic works of art in the Abbasid Palace were found damaged. Modern reproduction doors and windows were all removed by looters.

## **SITUATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES OUTSIDE BAGHDAD**

The following lines from Prof. Gibson report are self-speaking providing a clear description of the condition of one among several sites in the South.

“We came to the site of Tell Bismaya, ancient Adab. We did not land, but circled several times. More than 200 men were at work, digging illicitly all over the site. There were at least four vehicles on this site. From there we passed over to the site of Tell Shmid and Umma, where we landed. There were more than 200 men at work illicitly digging. The soldiers from the helicopter moved toward the men, firing over their heads. We looked at a devastated landscape. An Early Dynastic cemetery (c.2600 B.C.) was being plundered near the dig house, which had lost its roof. Beyond this, an Early Dynastic building was being covered with new holes, and the area around it was poked with holes. In every direction, there was fresh digging. The diggers were armed, therefore we went back to the helicopter and took off.”

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The mission stressed the necessity to take emergency measures, such as the setting-up by the authorities on the ground of a nation-wide ‘heritage police’, entrusted with the task of watching over cultural sites and institutions, including libraries and buildings where archives are stored.

The Director-General of UNESCO, in his address to the international experts meeting on 17 April 2003 convened at his initiative in UNESCO Headquarters, stated: “Despite all your expertise and good will, the fate of Iraqi heritage does not lie in your hands. It lies in the hands of the international community as a whole, and the only way that we will be able to safeguard these treasures and give them back to humanity is if we can count on the cohesion, coordination and determination of all concerned, at every level”. He renewed his appeal to “all States to adopt the emergency legal and administrative measures required to prevent the importation into their territory of any cultural, archaeological or bibliographical object having recently left Iraq” and again called upon “all museums, art dealers and private collectors to exclude these objects from any commercial transactions”. He also announced his intention “to request the Secretary-General of the United Nations to submit the question of illicit traffic to the Security Council so that a resolution can be adopted which imposes an embargo, for a limited period, on the acquisition of all Iraqi cultural objects and calls for the return of such goods to Iraq if acquisitions or exports of this kind have already taken place. This resolution could thus be made applicable to the 191 Member States of the United Nations and not only to the 97 States Parties to the 1970 Convention”, he explained.

Paragraph 7 of Resolution 1483 adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> May constitutes a significant advance, in so far as it makes it incumbent on all Member States to take all possible measures to facilitate the safe return of stolen cultural property and prohibits trade in or transfer of such property. This paragraph, by extending to all Member States of the United Nations the obligations contained in the 1970 Convention, to which they are not all parties, and by entrusting the implementation of this decision to UNESCO, facilitates the Organization's action in this field.

The results of this first mission will enrich the future international database on stolen Iraqi objects, which was an outcome of the meeting held on 5 and 6 May 2003 at Interpol Headquarters in Lyon, France. The scientific coordination of this database was assigned to UNESCO. This database will be compiled as soon as possible, combining all of the archives, lists and inventories relating to the Iraqi heritage, which would enable customs and police authorities, as well as art dealers and all concerned parties, to identify and check the status of a particular object.

UNESCO has granted emergency financial assistance to the Iraqi Antiquities Department to enable them to recommence their work.

A second UNESCO mission to Iraq is under preparation. This mission will cover the northern and southern provinces of Iraq as well, contrary to the first mission which was limited to Baghdad and shall make an evaluation concerning the libraries and archives in particular.

In conclusion, let me quote a few recommendations from Prof. John Russel

“At present the department can do nothing to halt the looting, as all of the vehicles necessary to patrol sites were stolen by looters, and so are completely reliant on the Coalition to monitor and protect sites. There are a variety of possibilities for monitoring illegal activity at sites: satellite surveillance, aerial surveillance with an unmanned drone or from a helicopter, or land patrols, but stopping this activity once detected requires a military presence of some size, or an armed mobile Iraqi patrol force of sufficient size to discourage the looters, some of whom are reportedly armed”.