IRAQ

Also from the conservation point of view the situation in Iraq remains disastrous (see also H@R 2004/2005) and the alarming loss of cultural heritage continues.

Attack against the Askariya Shrine (Golden Dome) in Samarra

In 2006/2007 several holy shrines were damaged and devastated in the sectarian reprisals that swept the country after an explosion destroyed the Askariya shrine’s famous Golden Dome on 22 February 2006. The Askariya shrine is one of the most revered sites of Shiite Islam. It contains the tombs of the tenth and eleventh imams, Ali al Hadi (d. AD 868) and his son Hassan al Askari (d. AD 874). The Askariya shrine has been continually added to since the tenth century, often by Iranian rulers – its great dome was rebuilt in 1623 by the Safavid Shah Abbas and was first covered in golden tiles by the Qajar Shah Nasir al Din in 1868. On 13 June 2007 the Askariya shrine was once again attacked; this time both minarets were blown up.

The ongoing looting of Iraq’s cultural heritage

2,000-year-old Sumerian cities torn apart and plundered by robbers. The very walls of the mighty Ur of the Chaldees cracking under the strain of massive troop movements, the privatisation of looting as landlords buy up the remaining sites of ancient Mesopotamia to strip them of their artefacts and wealth. The near total destruction of Iraq’s historic past – the very cradle of human civilisation – has emerged as one of the most shameful symbols of our disastrous occupation.

Evidence amassed by archaeologists shows that even those Iraqis who trained as archaeological workers in Saddam Hussein’s regime are now using their knowledge to join the looters in digging through the ancient cities, destroying thousands of priceless jars, bottles and other artefacts in their search for gold and other treasures. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, armies of looters moved in on the desert cities of southern Iraq and at least 13 Iraqi museums were plundered. Today, almost every archaeological site in southern Iraq is under the control of looters.

In a long and devastating appraisal to be published in December, Lebanese archaeologist Joanne Farchakh says that armies of looters have not spared “one metre of these Sumerian capitals that have been buried under the sand for thousands of years. “They systematically destroyed the remains of this civilisation in their tireless search for sellable artefacts: ancient cities, covering an estimated surface area of 20 square kilometres, which – if properly excavated – could have provided extensive new information concerning the develop-
ment of the human race. "Humankind is losing its past for a
cuneiform tablet or a sculpture or piece of jewellery that the dealer
buys and pays for in cash in a country devastated by war. Humankind is losing its history for the pleasurable of private collec-
tors living safely in their luxurious houses and ordering specific objects for their collection.

Ms Farchakh, who helped with the original investigation into
stolen treasures from the Baghdad Archaeological Museum in the
immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, says Iraq may soon end
up with no history. "There are 10,000 archaeological sites in the
country. In the Nassariyah area alone, there are about 840 Sumerian
sites; they have all been systematically looted. Even when Alexander
the Great destroyed a city, he would always build another. But now
the robbers are destroying everything because they are going down
to bedrock. What's new is that the looters are becoming more and
more organised with, apparently, lots of money." Quite apart from
this, military operations are damaging these sites forever. There's
been a US base in Ur for five years and the walls are cracking
because of the weight of military vehicles. It's like putting an archae-
ological site under a continuous earthquake."

Of all the ancient cities of present-day Iraq, Ur is regarded as the
most important in the history of man-kind. Mentioned in the Old
Testament – and believed by many to be the home of the Prophet
Abraham – it also features in the works of Arab historians and geog-
raphers where its name is Qumran. The City of the Moon. Founded
in about 4,000 BC, its Sumerian people established the principles of
irrigation, developed agriculture and metal-working. Fifteen hun-
dred years later – in what has become known as "the age of the del-
uge" – Ur produced some of the first examples of writing, seal
inscriptions and construction. In neighbouring Larsa, baked clay
bricks were used as money orders – the world's first cheques – the
depth of finger indentations in the clay marking the amount of money
to be transferred. The royal tombs of Ur contained jewellery, daggers,
gold, azure cylindrical seals and sometimes the remains of slaves.

US officers have repeatedly said a large American base built at
Babylon was to protect the site but Iraqi archaeologist Zainab Bah-
rani, a professor of art history and archaeology at Columbia
University, says this "beggars belief". In an analysis of the city, she
says: "The damage done to Babylon is both extensive and irrepara-
ble, and even if US forces had wanted to protect it, placing guards
round the site would have been far more sensible than bulldozing it
and setting up the largest coalition military headquarters in the
region." Air strikes in 2003 left historical monuments undamaged,
but Professor Bahrami, says: "The occupation has resulted in a
tremendous destruction of history well beyond the museums and
libraries looted and destroyed at the fall of Baghdad. At least seven
historical sites have been used in this way by US and coalition forces
since April 2003, one of them being the historical heart of Samarra,
where the Askari shrine built by Nasr al Din Shah was bombed in
2006."

The use of heritage sites as military bases is a breach of the Hague
Convention and Protocol of 1954 (chapter 1, article 5) which covers
periods of occupation; although the US did not ratify the Convention,
Italy, Poland, Australia and Holland, all of whom sent forces to Iraq,
are contracting parties.

Ms Farchakh notes that as religious parties gain influence in all the
Iraqi provinces, archaeological sites are also falling under their con-
trol. She tells of Abdulamir Hamdani, the director of antiquities for Di
Qar province in the south who desperately – but vainly – tried to pre-
vent the destruction of the buried cities during the occupation. Dr
Hamdani himself wrote that he can do little to prevent "the disaster we
are all witnessing and observing". In 2006, he says: "We recruited 200
police officers because we were trying to stop the looting by patrolling
the sites as often as possible. Our equipment was not enough for this
mission because we only had eight cars, some guns and other weapons
and a few radio transmitters for the entire province where 800 archae-
ological sites have been inventoried. Of course, this is not enough but
we were trying to establish some order until money restrictions within
the government meant that we could no longer pay for the fuel to patrol
the sites. So we ended up in our offices trying to fight the looting, but
that was also before the religious parties took over southern Iraq."

Last year, Dr Hamdani’s antiquities department received notice
from the local authorities, approving the creation of mud-brick facto-
ries in areas surrounding Sumerian archaeological sites. But it quickly
became apparent that the factory owners intended to buy the land
from the Iraqi government because it covered several Sumerian capi-
tals and other archaeological sites. The new landlord would "dig" the
archaeological site, dissolve the "old mud brick" to form the new one
for the market and sell the unearthed finds to antiquity traders. Dr
Hamdani bravely refused to sign the dossier. Ms Farchakh says: "His
rejection had rapid consequences. The religious parties controlling
Nassariyah sent the police to see him with orders to jail him on cor-
ruption charges. He was imprisoned for three months, awaiting trial.
The State Board of Antiquities and Heritage defended him during his
trial, as did his powerful tribe. He was released and regained his posi-
tion. The mud-brick factories are 'frozen projects', but reports have sur-
faced of a similar strategy being employed in other cities and in near-
by archaeological sites such as the Aqarshofd Ziggarat near Baghdad.
For how long can Iraqi archaeologists maintain order? This is a ques-
tion only Iraqi politicians affiliated to the different religious parties can
answer, since they approve these projects."

Police efforts to break the power of the looters, now with a well-
organised support structure helped by tribal leaders, have proved
lethal. In 2005, the Iraqi customs arrested – with the help of Western
troops – several antiquities dealers in the town of Al Fajr, near
Nassariyah. They seized hundreds of artefacts and decided to take them
to the museum in Baghdad. It was a fatal mistake. The convoy was
stopped a few miles from Baghdad, eight of the customs agents were
murdered, and their bodies burnt and left to rot in the desert. The arte-
facts disappeared. "It was a clear message from the antiquities dealers
to the world," Ms Farchakh says.

The legions of antiquities looters work within a smooth muss-smug-
gling organisation. Trucks, cars, planes and boats take Iraq's histori-
cal plunder to Europe, the US, to the United Arab Emirates and to
Japan. The archaeologists say an ever-growing number of internet
websites offer Mesopotamian artefacts, objects anywhere up to 7,000
years old.

The farmers of southern Iraq are now professional looters, know-
ing how to outline the walls of buried buildings and able to break
directly into rooms and tombs. The archaeologists’ report says: "They
have been trained in how to rob the world of its past and they have
been making significant profit from it. They know the value of each
object and it is difficult to see why they would stop looting." After the
1991 Gulf War, archaeologists hired the previous looters as workers
and promised them government salaries. This system worked as long
as the archaeologists remained on the sites, but it was one of the
main reasons for the later destruction; people now knew how to
excavate and what they could find. Ms Farchakh adds: "The longer
Iraq finds itself in a state of war, the more the cradle of civilisation is
threatened. It may not even last for our grandchildren to learn from."

Robert Fisk

“It is the Death of History", in: The Independent,
17 September 2007