

IRAQ

State of Ecology and Built Heritage after Four Decades of Adversity

In 1925, Baghdad City Council wanted to demolish the famous 14th century mosque of al-Marjan as part of a street widening project, but a public campaign, supported by the press, forced it to reverse the decision and the monument was saved. In a press conference the next day, the Mayor addressed the leaders of the campaign as follows: "Understand this: we were willing to build a bigger and better mosque in its place, of concrete. That you prefer an old ruin over a modern concrete building is truly astounding."

Disregard for the shared heritage and ignorance of its potential to forge and sustain a uniting identity for all sections of the population have prevailed, in varying degrees, among all the rulers of Iraq ever since its creation in 1921. However, empathy between the rulers and the past reached an all-time low during the decades of the dictatorship. This article highlights some of the consequences of that for Iraq's historic building stock and natural environment. A general historical overview is followed by more detailed presentations in five case studies where the damage was so serious that one can talk of cultural genocide.

Overview

Iraq came to occupy a position of prominence in Islamic history when Umayyad rule came to an end and the seat of the Caliphate moved to it from Syria in 750. Nearly all the surviving historic buildings were built after that date. The relatively fragile building materials used in their construction, namely sun dried bricks, fired bricks and wood, and prolonged exposure to the region's great temperature fluctuations and frequent floods make the task of maintaining them extremely difficult. This work is the responsibility of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), which was initially established in 1923 to oversee excavations in Iraq's numerous archaeological sites and this continues to be its principal preoccupation. This is understandable in a country which possesses more than 10,000 unexplored sites. Despite this however, the Board's achievements in the field of rehabilitating historic monuments is impressive. Many heritage sites have been identified, surveyed and restored to their original state. In 1975, the Board with help from UNESCO established the Regional Centre for the Conservation of Cultural Property in the Arab Countries (RCCCP), which provided support in the form of consultancies, laboratory tests and training.

What is missing from the work of the Board in this field however, is a preventive maintenance strategy based on regular inspections of all sites by qualified staff who record their observations on specially prepared inventory forms. The inspections are repeated at intervals determined to suit each site in order to update the information. Based on these findings appropriate preventive repairs are carried out before decay sets in. Absence of such a strategy is responsible for the loss of many fine heritage sites, among them three 14th century minarets, and threatens others with the same fate.

The work of the Board is regulated by the Heritage Site Law No 55, promulgated in 2002, that defines the various categories of heritage sites and sets out procedures for dealing with them. It is an iniquitous law because it gives all the rights to the government and puts the entire responsibility on the shoulders of the citizen. It makes no provision, for example, for any form of help to owners of listed monuments or buildings of merit who cannot afford to

preserve them. As a result many unique examples have been lost or deteriorated.

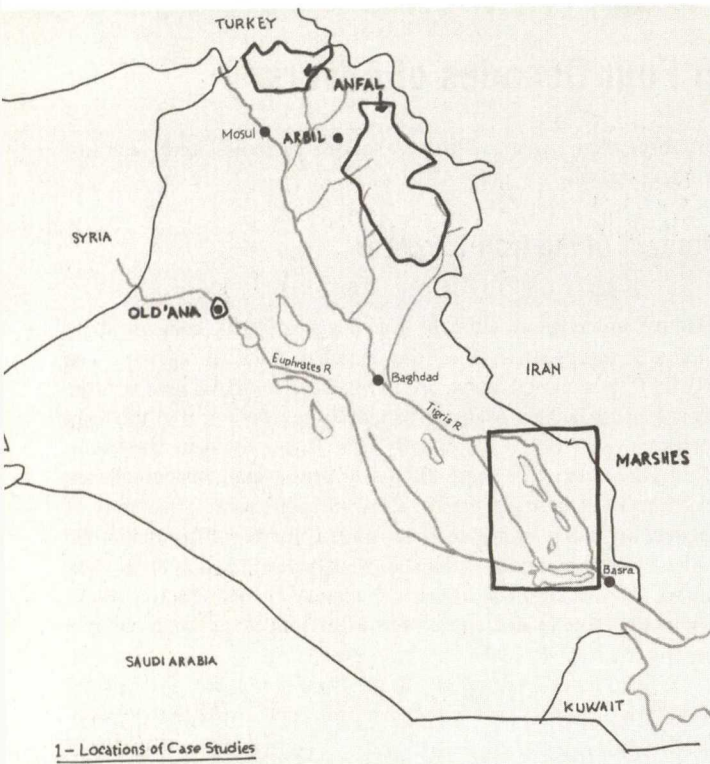
Impact of the Iran-Iraq War

Almost immediately after the war began in 1980, concern about heritage disappeared from the national political agenda. The RCCCP was closed down in 1993 and the SBAH lost a large chunk of its budget. Many of its employees were sent to the front and many others left the country to seek employment elsewhere. Restoration activities were limited to urgent maintenance of care for important heritage places. Even in such cases, constraints of budget and manpower sometimes forced SBAH staff to ignore the rules of sound practice. When cracks developed in the brick vault above the western *iwān* of the 13th century al-Madrassa al-Mustansiriyya in Baghdad the entire vault was removed and replaced by a reinforced concrete slab.

While battles were raging on the front the leaders in Baghdad were gripped by a hysterical spasm of mega construction projects. Public parks, playgrounds, schools, sport fields, even privately owned sites were seized to build palaces for the ruling family and the big-wigs of the Ba'ath Party and turned into no-go zones. Major planning decisions, frequently breaking fundamental taboos, were taken arbitrarily and in direct contravention of approved land use patterns. The riverside cafés along Abu Nouas Street, among the Middle East's most famous leisure centres, specialised in serving *masguf*, the renowned smoked carp, were closed down and a hedge of water hyacinth (*eichhornia crassipes*), a thick fast growing bush, was planted in their place, totally cutting off the street from the view of the river.

A rational, preplanned strategy to destroy monuments and other cultural vestiges was followed to sever Iraqis from the elements that connected them with their pre-Ba'athist past, as the examples below show:

- Guest workers from Egypt and elsewhere, with little knowledge of urban life, brought to replace Iraqis who had been drafted, were settled in the oldest and most traditional quarters of central Baghdad. The social pressures that followed forced the original inhabitants to leave their homes and a unique close-knit society, heir to a way of life over twelve centuries old was torn apart.
- In 1995 the traditional 19th and early 20th century courtyard houses of al-Shawwakah in west Baghdad were demolished and replaced by a line of concrete apartments, 15 storeys high copied from Europe of the 1950s, years after they had been condemned there as social disasters. They are out of keeping with the scale of the city and bear no relation to the life style of their occupants.
- In Rashid Street, the capital's main shopping centre, scores of old shops dating back to the 1940s were demolished to make room for a contemptible statue of a Ba'ath Party member who had been killed in that spot in 1959 while attempting a terrorist attack against the then prime minister.
- Iraq's Unknown Soldier Monument designed by one of the country's foremost architects and built in 1959, was demolished in 1982 and replaced by a presidential statue which became the focus of international media attention when American soldiers pulled it down in April 2003. A telling case of going from the sublime to the ridiculous.



Map 1: Locations of case studies

Five Case Studies

The locations of the case studies are shown on map No 1. The first case study sets forth the draining of the interconnected marshes and lakes of south Iraq that has caused what the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has called 'one of the world's greatest environmental disasters'. Case study 2 describes the devastation that the Iraqi army visited on Kurdish towns, villages and farms, laying to waste about half of Iraq's productive farmland. Case study 3 is a eulogy to the old town of 'Ana, on the upper Euphrates which was submerged when the construction of al-Qadisiyya dam was completed in 1987. The ancient Qala'a (Citadel) of Arbil, the oldest continuously occupied site in the world, is the subject of case study 4. The last case study focuses on the Saray Administrative Complex, a group of mainly Ottoman buildings just inside the northwestern corner of Baghdad's 11th century wall, which eighteen weeks of post-war ransacking left in shambles.

1 Draining the Marshlands of South Iraq

Situation before the 1990s

The marshlands of south Iraq are located at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates, between latitudes 32°30' and 30°0' and stretch from the Iraq-Iran border in the east to altitude line 40°30' in the west. They were made up of several permanent lakes and stretches of seasonal marshes interconnected with lagoons and watercourses. Covering an area of up to 20,000 km² during the flood season, they were the largest wetlands in the Middle East

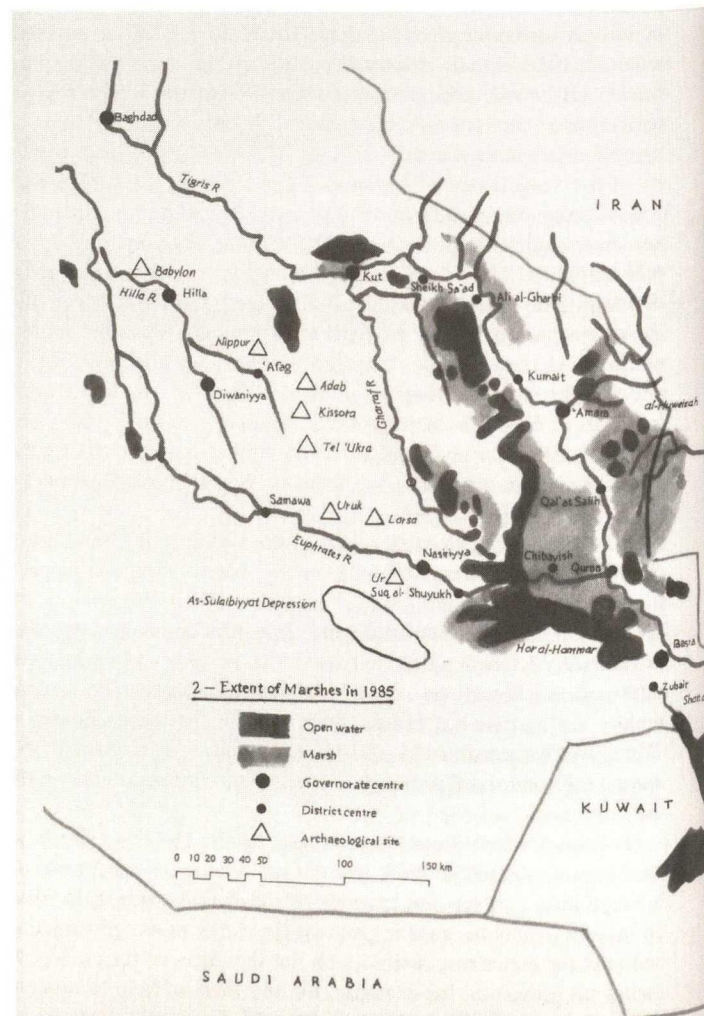
and among the most important in the world. A study of early Islamic documentary records and Sumerian cylinder seals that depict canoes similar to those used by the marsh dwellers, show that the marshes of Iraq were in existence for 5000 years or more before they were made to disappear.

They were home to about 400,000 Madan, who lived in arched reed houses on islets and moved by poling *mashhufs* (canoes), made locally of wood and reed mats waterproofed with bitumen. They lived by fishing and kept water buffalos for milk and yogurt. Produce of the marshes consisted of cereals (wheat, barley and rice), buffalo skins and bones, fish, dates, bamboo and woven mats. Ecologists have compared them to great mega deltas such as the Yangtze and Amazon in view of their interaction within regional and world ecosystems. They were the natural habitat of rare species of mammals, way station to migratory birds between Siberia and South Africa and they acted as a great water treatment system that released clean water into the Gulf.

Marshlands in 2001

The marshes began to decline in the 1970s as dam building in Syria and Turkey attenuated the flow of the two rivers. The situation worsened in 1990 when the gigantic Ataturk Dam in Turkey was completed, the first phase of the Southeast Anatolia project. Sub-

Map 2: Extent of marshes in 1985



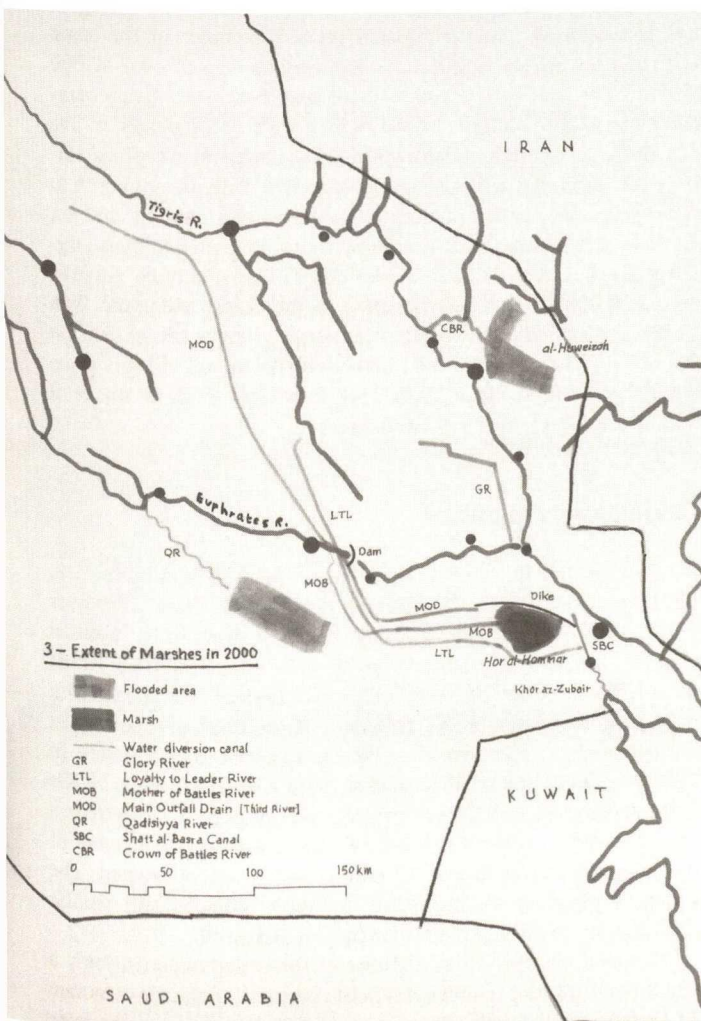
sequent phases of that project include the construction of 22 dams and 19 hydraulic stations.

In 1991, the previous government, as part of its systematic targeting of internal opposition groups, began constructing an intricate system of diversionary canals to drain the life-giving waters in order to force the inhabitants to evacuate the area. Some of the drained water has been harnessed to irrigate the major farms with a total area of over 2000 km², which the government distributed among farmers from tribes loyal to it.

In 2000 UNEP reported that 90% of the marshes had disappeared and studies presented at the Worldwide Forum three years later indicated that a third of the remaining 10% had disappeared. The immediate result has been the displacement of about 300,000 Madan after their habitat was destroyed, and the loss of vital agricultural land and products. The draining has had other far-reaching environmental consequences. Among them:

- Disappearance of endemic flora and fauna. According to UNEP, forty birds types are in danger of extinction and rare species of fish-eating water animals have all but died out.
- Disappearance of way stations for migratory birds.
- Contamination of rivers with toxins from industry, sewerage and agriculture.
- Intrusion of saltwater into Shat-al-Arab causing disruption of fisheries in the Persian Gulf.

Map 3: Extent of marshes in 2000



Marsh village, before 1985

Restoring the marshes

The central marsh between the two rivers has turned into a complete dust bowl. It is covered by a salt crust, 60 cm thick in places, due to the rapid evaporation of brackish water. Hor al-Hammar, west of Shat al-Arab still has some remaining lush areas where date palms are in cultivation and sizable segments of marsh remain in al-Huweizah, east of the Tigris where returnees have reintroduced their water buffalo. The current Iraqi interim government, with help from UNEP, USAID, international NGO's and universities, plans to make al-Huweizah a seed source for pilot projects that will lead to restoring as much as possible of the lost marshes. The implementation involves the following activities:

- Removal of about 800 km of diversionary canals.
- Rebuilding Iraq's damaged research infrastructure, particularly the Marine Science Centre of the University of Basra, which was looted after the war.
- Training Iraqi marine biologists and zoologists in wetlands ecology and management.



Reeds house under construction

The main restraining factor in this effort is the availability of water. The region is in the grip of a water crisis, therefore it is going to prove difficult to persuade Iraq's neighbours to heed the United Nations' call to reconsider their water policies to avoid further damage.

2 The Kurdish Countryside

The terrain

The fertile plains of Kurdistan begin to rise gently from the northern foothills of the arid Hamrin Hills towards the cold and snowy mountainous terrain in the northeast whose highest peak of Hasar Rost is over 3700 m. The climate of the plains is fairly rainy and Mediterranean, the produce is tobacco, cereals, wood, vines, fruit, hides, wool, mutton and goat meat, eggs and dairy produce.

In certain areas the sub-soil is very rich, especially in iron and chrome, but it is not properly exploited. The country's great source of wealth is obviously oil, a resource from which the Kurdish people draw very little benefit.

Iraqi Kurdistan covers an area of about 74,000 km², 15% of that of Iraq, the population is about four million, which is just over 18% of that of Iraq, more than half of it is rural. It occupies a central position in Greater Kurdistan whose population of about 25 million is divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Historical background

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the Turkish Empire and the United Kingdom in August 1920 gave the Kurds the opportunity to form an independent state in Kurdistan, in the parts formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire but subsequent events in Turkey rendered the treaty inoperative. With help from Russia, the Kurds proclaimed in December 1945 the Mahabad Republic, which last-

ed for a year, until the Shah's troops overran it and executed its leaders. Since then Kurds in Iraq have been struggling for self-determination. The events that bear directly on our subject begin in 1970.

In that year the Iraqi Government granted the Kurds a considerable degree of autonomy. Soon after, it reneged on the covenant by evicting Kurdish farmers from the oil-producing areas of Kurdistan and replacing them with tribal Arab families. In March 1974 the Kurds rose up against the government, which turned into a full-scale war the following year. In 1975, the Algiers agreement between Iraq and Iran put an end to the struggle.

Tens of thousands of villagers in northeast Kurdistan were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated in barren sites in the desert in southwest Iraq. In 1976 the Iraqi Government secured the approval of Turkey and Iran to create a *cordon sanitaire*, 5-15 km wide along their borders. Between 1975 and 1978 an estimated 250,000 people were cleared out of this zone and relocated in crude concrete encampments built on the main highways in army-controlled areas. From 1982 onwards more villages, lying outside the *cordon sanitaire* were cleared. By the beginning of 1987 it was becoming evident that a carefully calculated ethnic cleansing strategy was being implemented. In the first phase, carried out between April and June of that year, 711 villages were burned and bulldozed. The subsequent phases took place seven months later under the code name of Anfal.

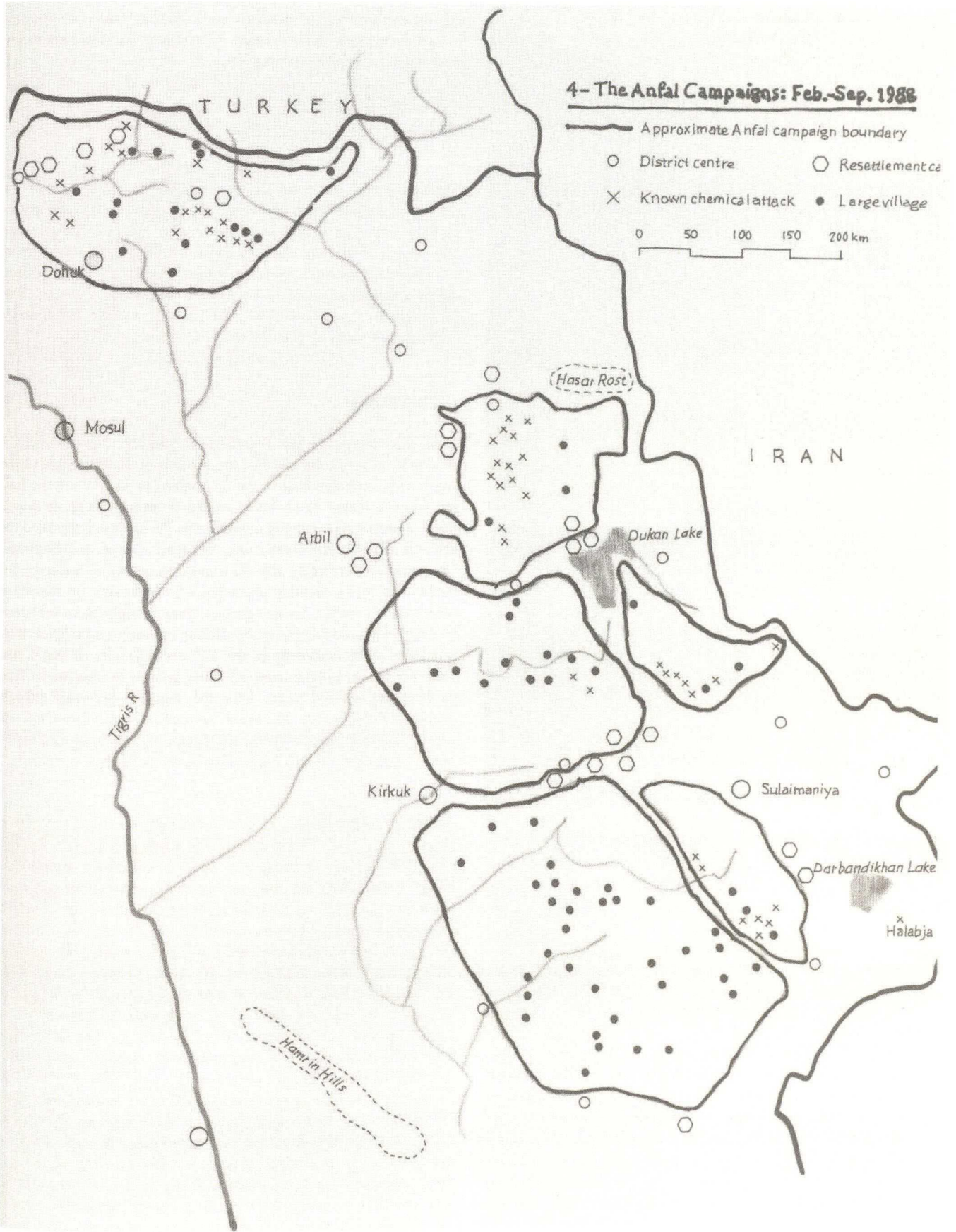
The Anfal campaigns

The first Anfal campaign began in February 1988 and the eighth and last campaign was completed on 6 September of the same year. There were six target zones covering an area of over 40,000 km² or more than half the total area of Iraqi Kurdistan. Every campaign began with multiple blitzes, which were accompanied in five of the six cases by bombardments using chemical weapons, followed by ground troops and pro-government militias moving in to destroy human habitation, loot possessions and animals and set fire to homes before the demolition crews were called to blast larger buildings such as schools, clinics and similar structures. An estimated 50,000 rural Kurds perished in the Anfal and more than 1270 villages were destroyed (only large villages are shown on Map No. 4), bringing the total number of destroyed villages since the 1970s to more than 3500. This represents 80% of the total number of villages in Iraqi Kurdistan.

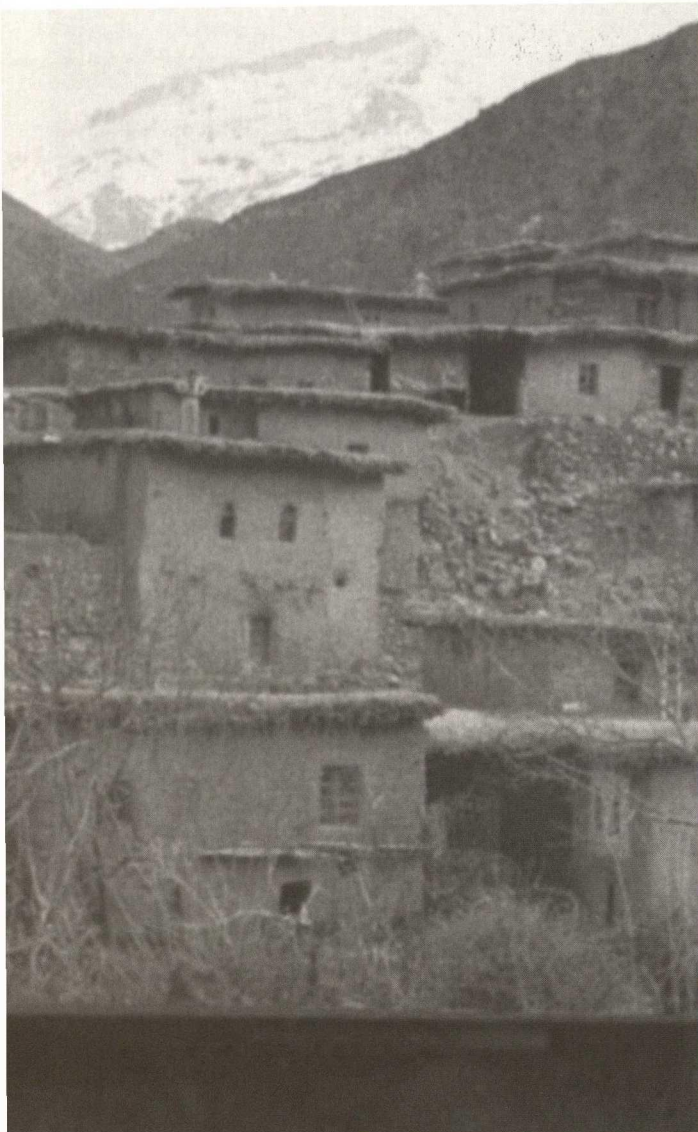
Resettlement Programs

After the establishment of the safe haven in north Iraq by the US, UK, France and the Netherlands in April 1991, there were over 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) waiting to be resettled and the numbers continued to grow with the eviction of Kurds from Kirkuk and towns to the south. UN Habitat was tasked with managing the resettlement program. A number of specialised NGOs also helped by providing shelter and rebuilding villages. In 2003 one such NGO, Mission East, with help from other NGOs and funds from UNHCR, undertook a pilot project to rehabilitate a village in the Governorate of Dohuk. The water supply network of the village was rebuilt and 32 houses and a school erected. The group is planning to rehabilitate 20 more villages and similar activities are in progress in Sulaimaniyah and Arbil.

However, despite the availability of funds and expertise only a small proportion of families has been resettled. In the Governorate of Dohuk, for example, an average of 800 houses per year were



Map 4: The Anfal campaign, Feb.-Sept. 1988



House in Haj Omran, North Iraq, built of stone and mud bricks (photo: Nik Wheeler)

built between 1996 and 2003. According to the Director of the Regional Government's Reconstruction Department, 6000 units per year are needed to resettle the IDPs living in public buildings, tents and collective villages.

Efforts to maintain the momentum of the program have been impeded by the use of conventional forms of contracts, applying urban type building standards and specifying factory manufactured building materials such as concrete blocks; all of which are inappropriate to the scale of the task. The huge volume of buildings demanded can only be implemented in the short time available by involving the beneficiaries themselves in the house production process. The obvious way to achieve this is through aided self-help schemes, whereby each family is given a site, complete with boundary walls, services and wet rooms plus cash grants to complete the construction. This will save time and cost, and create opportunities for employment. The walls can be constructed of stone, if locally available, or sun-dried bricks, to be manufactured in situ using stabilised soil. Kurds are familiar with these two materials and know how to maintain them. With some training,

and expeditious management, teams of masons can be taught how to build small span arches, vaults and domes, which are needed to implement the proposed design.

3 The Old Town of 'Ana

The site of the old town of 'Ana lay on the west side of the Euphrates, about 80 km east of the Syrian border. It is the northernmost among a multitude of towns and villages that grew on both shores of the river attracted by the availability of water, fertile soil and mild climate. It stretches from west to east along a bend in the river extending about 12 km along a narrow strip of land, 200-250 m wide, squeezed between the Euphrates in the north and a high ridge of rocky hills in the south.

Historical note

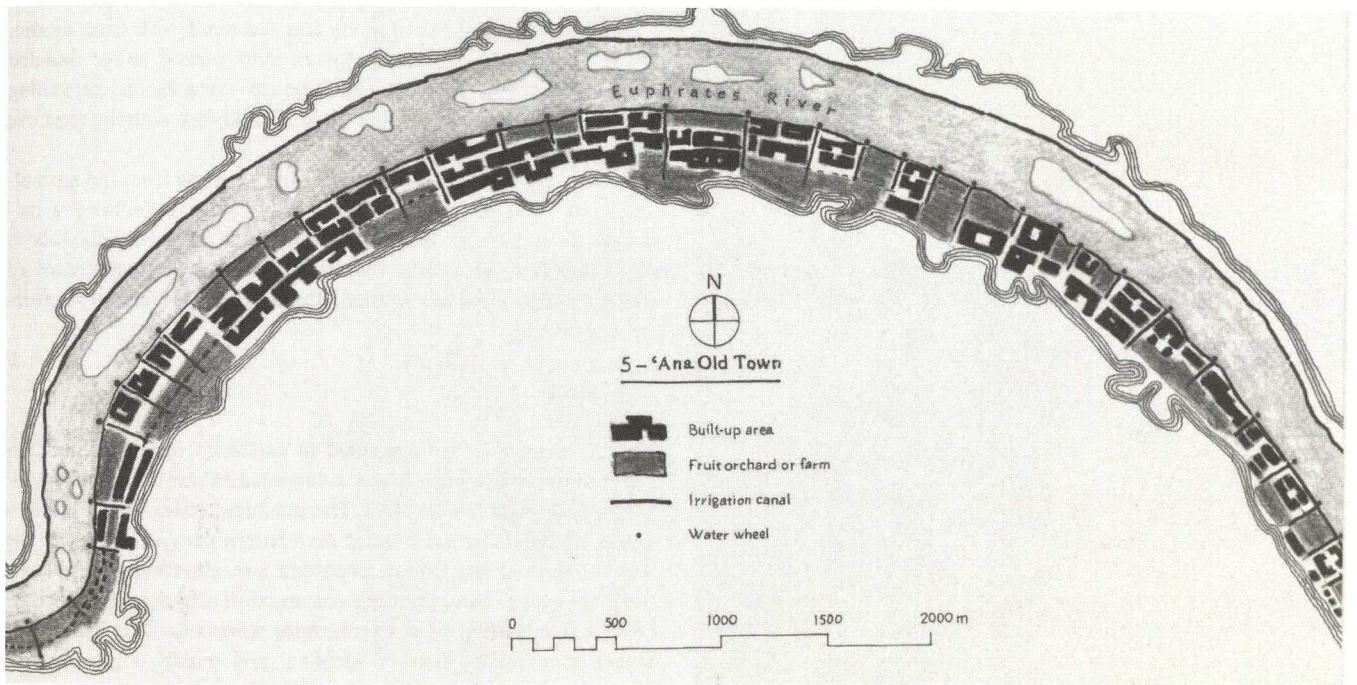
'Ana was known to the Babylonians and the Assyrians. It is described as a fortress town in the records of Emperor Julian the Apostate's campaign against the Sassanians in 363. When the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle visited it around 1620, it was a major entrepôt and virtually autonomous. Its leaders controlled the riparian and overland trade routes between Aleppo and Baghdad. The town was evidently also an important centre of learning, for Della Valle met a Scottish physician who had taken up residence there to study Arabic. Its size grew as trade brought more prosperity. Francis Rawdon Chesney, the British explorer and soldier, who was there at the beginning of the 19th century, tells us that it had 1800 houses, 3 mosques and 16 water wheels to irrigate its fruit gardens. A hundred years later the number of water wheels quadrupled indicating increased agricultural activity. Until its demise in 1987, 'Ana was a district centre belonging to the Governorate of al-Anbar with a population of about 7000.

Structure of the town

Until the 1930s, the Euphrates was a major trade artery. The town's linear shape and long quay provided maximum space for moorings, loading and unloading. With the advent of overland transport, riparian trade came to an end. The frontage was used to build more water wheels to irrigate the farms and orchards through open canals, which run along the alleyways. These are large vertical wooden wheels, attached around shafts, placed in the stream and turned by the river's motion. Flowing water strikes a series of buckets attached to the perimeters of the wheels. The shafts then rotate and the motion lifts the buckets full of water and empties them one by one in an open aqueduct.

Houses are of one or two storeys. The other two building types are public bathhouses and mosques, of which there are over twenty. These act as the public spaces where the men folk meet. There is no traditional covered *sug*, because most families have farms where they grow enough food and keep enough livestock to fulfill their needs. There are two longitudinal streets that run parallel to the riverbank and several transverse streets and canals which carry irrigation water from the aqueducts into the farms.

Houses are arranged in extended family clusters. Access to the units of the cluster is from a common courtyard that also serves as a meeting place for the womenfolk. The units within the cluster are grouped loosely, leaving enough room for expansion when required.



Map 5: Ana Old Town

Ana Old Town, Friday mosque



Street in Ana Old Town (photo: Saieb Khalil)





Water wheel in Ana Old Town (photo: Saieb Khalil)

Arbil Citadel, house interior



Walls are thick, built of stone and plastered with lime mortar. Roofs are of mud carried on woven mats placed above wooded joints. Windows are small and directed towards the prevailing breeze. These features provide thermal comfort without recourse to electricity.

No hard boundaries separate the built-up zone from the agricultural zone. This marriage of town and country produced a balanced life capable of bringing the faculties of the inhabitants to perfection. It is no wonder that this little town produced many of Iraq's creative men and women, among them the country's foremost dramatist.

New town

The old town that had remained in existence for forty-one centuries disappeared when it was submerged in the waters of the al-Qadisiyyah reservoir in 1987. The inhabitants were resettled in a new town hurriedly constructed on a barren plateau, 14 km to the west of the old site. Many important considerations were sacrificed in order to meet the tight construction schedule. Prefabricated concrete panels, used to minimise assembly time, have produced monotonous lines of identical and garish white facades. There is no possibility of expansion. The courtyards have gone and with them the women's social life. Streets are wide and open spaces that cannot be planted for lack of topsoil, contrast sharply with the intimate spaces of old 'Ana where green spaces and water produced a unique life-centred environment. Large openings, no green areas and structures with low thermal capacity make users totally dependent on electric power for cooling, which is expensive and unreliable. Sadly, a valuable opportunity to apply lessons developed over centuries of trial and error in a creative manner has been missed.

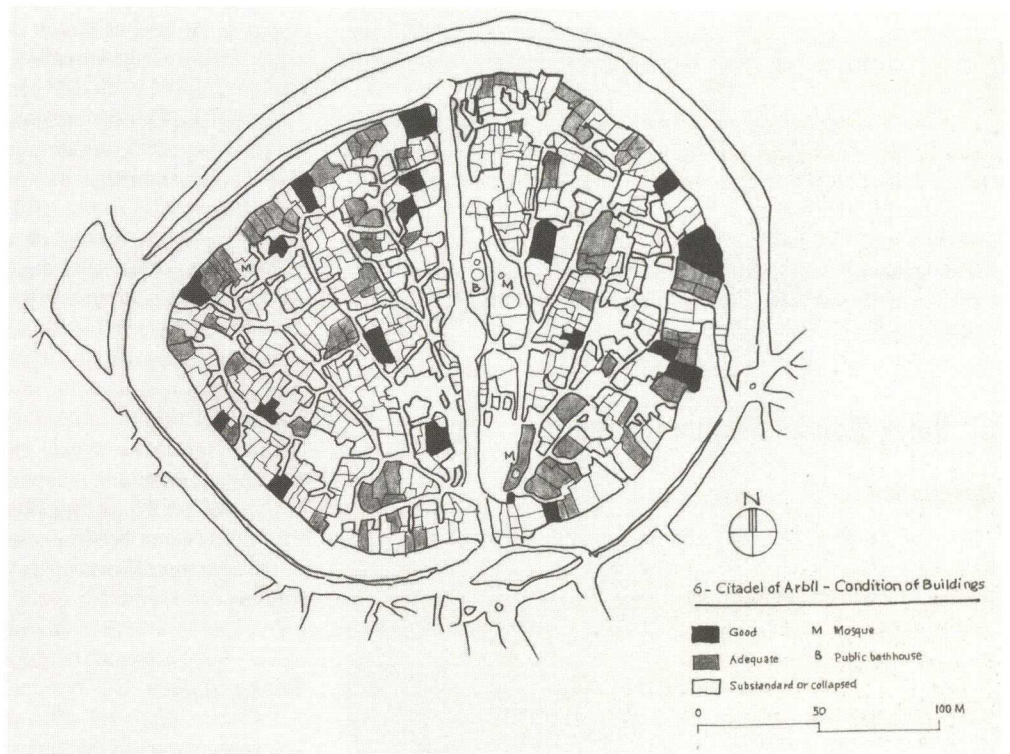
4 Citadel of Arbil

Description

The Erbil Citadel is more than 8000 years old making it the longest continuously inhabited site in the world. This was made possible by the existence of abundant ground water, which has sustained the population throughout its long history. The Citadel rises 28-32 m above the surrounding city, and overlooks the wheat fields, which extend all the way to the Greater Zab River 30 km to the west. The mound has been formed by successive layers of settlements: Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek. In 331 BC, Alexander the Great defeated the Persian King Darius the Great in a battle which was fought thirty kilometres north of Arbil. The area of the Citadel is over ten hectares; the population is about 5400, only a fifth of whom are descendants of original families. There are just over 800 dwellings; most of them are courtyard houses with brick walls and mud roofs on timber joists, one-or-two storeys high, some of them have basements. About half of the houses are privately owned and the rest belong to the local and central governments. There are two mosques and one public baths. The citadel is accessible by a vehicular road and two pedestrian ramps. Water is supplied from elevated steel tanks and electricity through an overhead network. There is no sewage system; pit-latrines are used throughout.

Condition

During the 1920s a part of the western side of the citadel was removed to make room for shops which were later pulled down



Map 6: Citadel of Arbil, condition of buildings



Arbil citadel

and their area added to the road which encircles the Citadel. The road was enlarged three more times causing erosion to the side of the mound.

Of the 800 houses no more than twenty are in an acceptable state. Their walls are adorned with brightly coloured niches, carved doors and upper verandas carried on columns made of timber or marble. The larger houses have fountains in the courtyards and their top floor veranda runs along 2 or 3 sides. In 1982, the SBAH rehabilitated seven houses. The only other conservation work carried out was the addition of a monumental arched entrance at the southern part of the wall.

5 Saray Administrative Complex

Description

The complex consists of five adjoining buildings along the eastern bank of the Tigris River. Four of them are Ottoman, built in the middle of the 19th century; the fifth dates from the 1930s and is British Colonial in style. Until March 2003 government departments occupied them.

They are located in the capital's old cultural and administrative centre, surrounded by structures representing almost every period of Iraq's past. Here is the 12th century Abbasid Palace, the 16th century Saray Mosque built for Sultan Süleiman 'the Magnificent',¹ al-Wazir Mosque, named after the Ottoman Governor who restored it in 1599, the Mandate era Ministry of defence and many early Hashemite buildings including the General Library and Parliament House. Here too is Suq al-Saray, arguably the oldest book

market in the Islamic world, occupying a covered pedestrian street which connects the complex with the country's oldest existing Islamic University, the 14th century al-Madrassa al-Mustansiriyya.

Between them, the buildings in this historic zone chronicle all the planning patterns and architectural features which Iraq's historic building heritage has produced: closed courtyards, three-sided courtyards, *iwans*, grids, domes, vaults, stone walls, *chaf qim* (facing bricks) and so on, all of which are of superior quality.

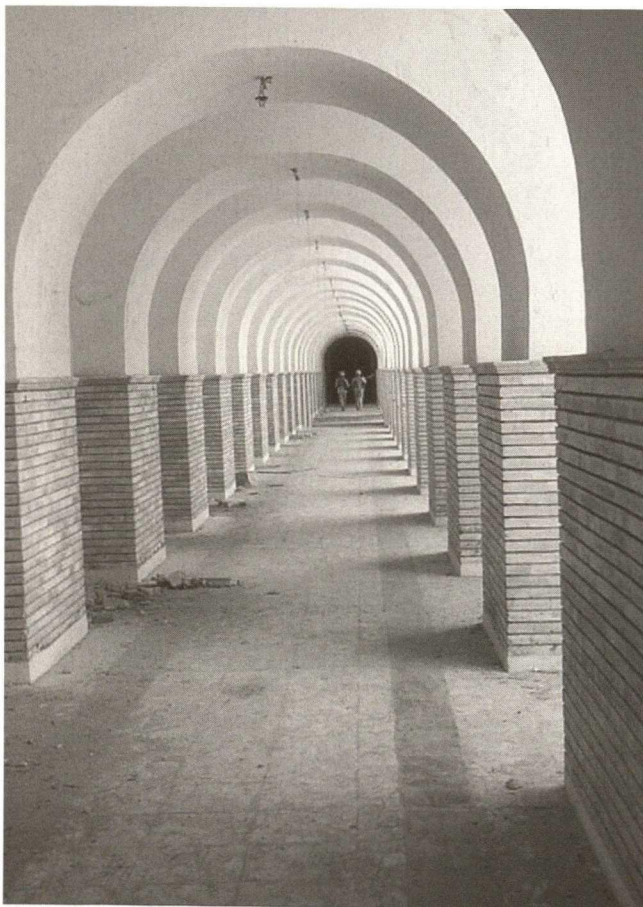
The SBAH renovated the five buildings in 1989. In the early 1990s the extreme austerity measures as a response to the UN sanctions and the fall in oil revenues, meant that no further maintenance work could be carried out. In the chaos which followed the occupation of Baghdad in April 2003, every one of these buildings was plundered, at least one was bombed and several were set on fire. During 12 weeks, gangs of looters emptied all the five buildings of furniture, equipment, fixtures and fittings, doors, windows, wall panelling and floor tiles. In some buildings even the steel floor beams were removed. Appeals to the cultural committee of the Coalition Provisional Authority to provide protection were fruitless.

Rehabilitation

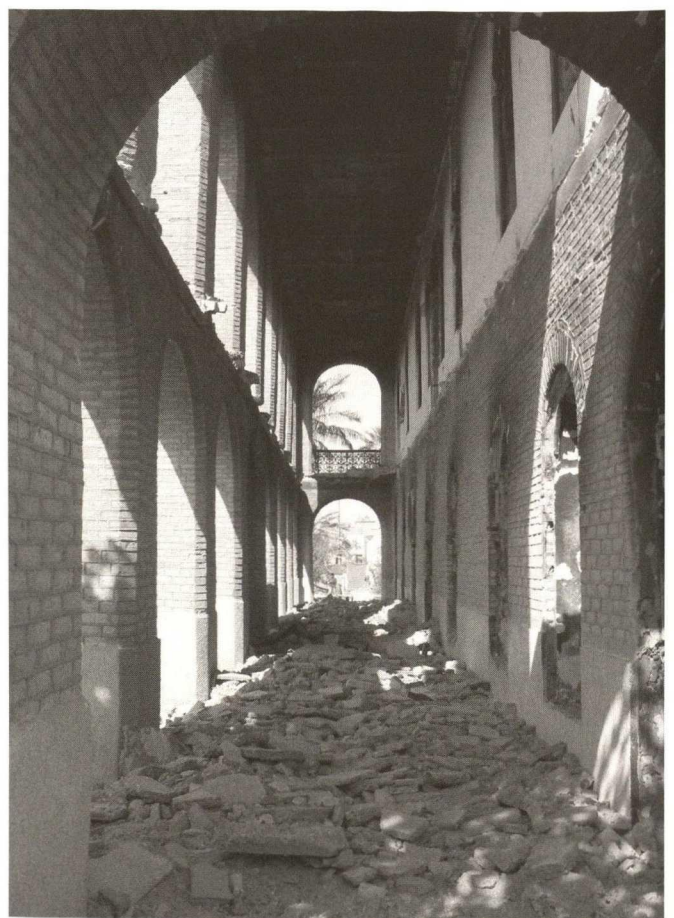
The conservation of the Saray Complex was the subject of a seminar organised by the Ministry of Culture last April. Many arguments were put forward in favour of their rehabilitation. Among them were:

- Upgrading will revive the district generally and restore to it its past function of Baghdad's cultural centre.

Baghdad, Qushla building in Saray complex



Baghdad, looted building in Saray complex



- Rehabilitating the gardens, which overlook the Tigris will provide public open space in one of Baghdad's most congested districts.
- Paving the access road and limiting it to pedestrians will provide quality space for the book vendors whose kiosks now crowd the pavements of the neighbouring main road.

The five buildings offer office space in a prime location in access of 30,000 m². Their rehabilitation is therefore not only desirable because they are visual reminders of the peoples' past, but also because it makes sense economically.

Conclusions

The culture of Iraq is in distress. Museums have been looted, libraries set on fire, historic buildings plundered and attrition continues to act on archaeological sites. But it is too early to write the obituary. Today the world has a far more effective system of protection for important monuments and sites than it used to have. UNESCO, together with many specialised international organizations now lists monuments, monitors threats and helps sustain sites more comprehensively than in the past. The opposition to the willed destruction of heritage is growing and it is organised.

The world has reacted positively and quickly to the cultural tragedy in Iraq and that has given Iraqis hope to rebuild their culture, which means rebuild their lives. Their country is a unique union of races, languages and religions. Much energy is currently being directed at the cleavage lines seeking to take the components apart. Let us hope that the riveting power of Iraq's culture, with the help of the international community will succeed in dissolving those energies into oblivion.

Usam Ghaidan and Nayab Al-Dabbagh

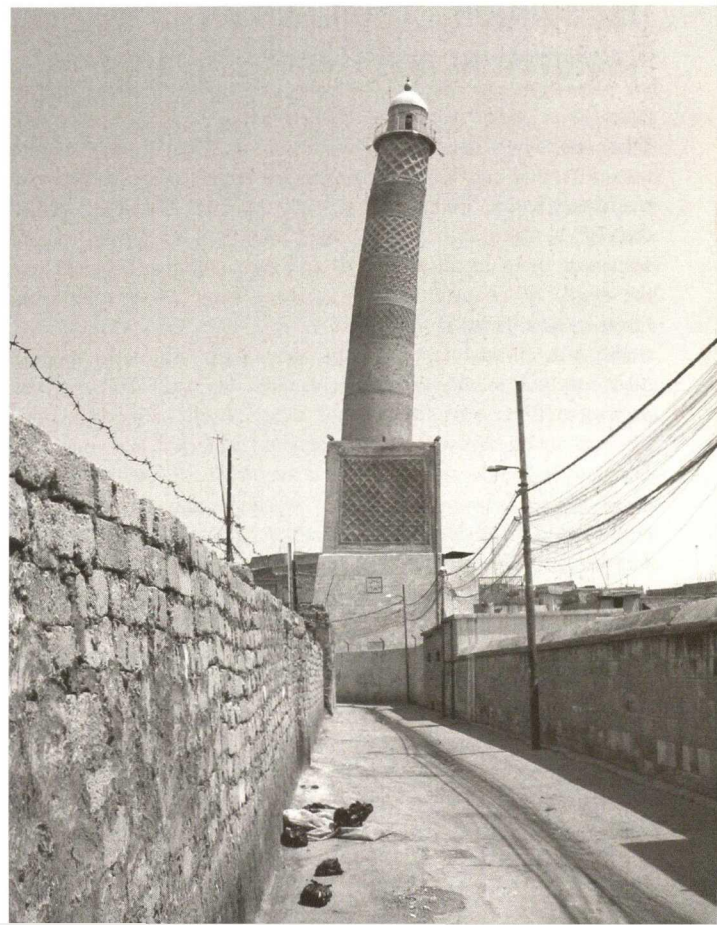
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Stub of collapsed 14th century minaret in Arbil city

Leaning minaret of 12th-century Al-Nuri mosque in Mosul





Houses in Basra (photo: Ingolf Thuesen)

Iraq's Cultural Heritage: Loss and Destruction - The Case for Restoration and Reconstruction

These days we hear a lot about oil and Iraq's other natural resources, and how Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world and so on. Well, while this may be true, let me tell you, at the outset, that Iraq is, more importantly, number one in cultural resources. It is, as all historians and archaeologists would agree, the cradle of civilisation and possesses some of the oldest and rarest cultural heritage of humanity.

Most developed nations today regard their cultural heritage, in all its various manifestations, especially their archaeological and architectural property, as a major irreplaceable national resource that has to be thoroughly documented, protected and enhanced. Some nations have gone as far as reconstructing whole historic areas that have been destroyed by wars or other disasters basing their work on measured drawings and old photographs. In contrast, Iraq has witnessed some of the worst cultural crimes in recent history.

Situated at a nexus of contending powers, rival religions, competing trade routes, and much sought after natural resources, it is not surprising that its history is riven with conflicts and destruction. Geography played a decisive role in the evolution of its culture in general and architecture in particular. Being largely an alluvial plain with two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, offered very suitable locations for human habitat and settlement but not for natural defences against foreign invaders. Some of the

earliest and greatest civilisations developed here along the shores of these two rivers, Sumeria, Babylonia and Assyria. The interaction between the ingenuity of Mesopotamians and land gave rise to some of the most profound inventions in history – agriculture, the wheel, and writing to name but a few examples.

In the art and technology of building there were some tremendous innovations. These included the invention of the mud brick, baked brick, mosaics, ceramic tiles and bricks. In architecture, they included the logic of functional space planning, axuality, symmetry, formal composition, façade design, and the internal open courtyard. Structural elements such as load bearing walls, columns, pillars, multi-storey buildings, round arches, vaults and domes were all first introduced in Mesopotamia. For thermal comfort, several passive cooling techniques were developed. These included the use of thick mud walls and earth covered roofs for insulation, correct solar orientation, small outside openings, ventilated subterranean rooms, and the internal courtyard for better ventilation and cooling.

From the very first villages on earth, founded in northern Mesopotamia some 10,000 years ago to the more recent history of the last century, Iraq has been endowed with an extremely rich and varied cultural heritage. One may classify this heritage into four major groups:

Archaeological Monuments and Sites

More than 10,000 archaeological sites have been identified and officially registered. Most remain, however, unprotected and unexcavated. The real number of sites is much bigger, perhaps even closer to 50,000. Only a few sites attract public attention and therefore deserved official care and protection. These include Babylon, Nineveh, Nimrod, Khorsabad, Hatra, Assur, Samarra, Ctesiphon, Ukhaidir and Ur. Most other sites are subject to looting and erosion.

Historic Urban Centres

These include all the old and historic centres of most cities in Iraq. There are some 50 or so such centres. These include: Baghdad (Rusafa, Karkh, Kadhimiya, and Aadhamiya), Mosul, Basra, Kufa, Najaf, Karbala, Hilla, Kifil, Amara, Kut, Samarra, Hit, Tikrit, Telaafar, Sinjar, Sulaimaniya, Arbil, Kirkuk, Amadiya, Bashiqa, Qosh, Qara-qosh, Aqra, Kwaisanjaq, Dhok, and Zakho. Nearly all of these cores remain largely unprotected or documented. Most have lost as much as 60% of their historic fabric due to direct demolition, decay, and modern redevelopment.

Buildings and Monuments

The exact number of buildings and monuments of historic and architectural interest is unknown but run into thousands. These include mosques, churches, suqs, khans, caravanserais, hammams, madrasas, takyas, palaces and houses. The number could possibly approach 30,000 or even more. There is yet no national register of these important buildings. The database employed by the relevant official agencies is primitive and documentation is weak, unsystematic, and not computerised. Consequently, a very large number of these important buildings has fallen victim to the bulldozer including some very significant monuments such as Abbasid Bab Al-Muadham, Bab Al-Sharqi, and Maaruf Al-Karkhi in Baghdad. As for traditional houses and other smaller buildings they are being lost at an alarming rate.

Villages and Landscapes

The exact number of villages of cultural interest remains unknown but must run into the hundreds. There has been very little interest in them by officials, architects or historians. Similarly, there has been no attempt to protect landscapes and areas of outstanding natural beauty and declare them as national parks etc. These could include areas such as the southern marshes, the palm groves of the Basra region, some mountainous areas of the north, and some outstanding villages such as the domed village of Kimbetler near Kirkuk, Alus and Jubba on the Euphrates to name but a few.

The Ineffectiveness of the Present Protective System

The establishment of the first Iraqi National Museum and the Directorate of Antiquities back in 1923 by Gertrude Bell and Sati Al-Husari with the aim of protecting Iraq's rich cultural heritage marked a hopeful milestone. However, since then there have been some terrible losses to this heritage. The 'protective' official system also includes all municipalities, Amanat Al-Assima of Bagh-

dad, the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments), and the Directorate of Tourism. The legal framework for the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage goes back to the first Antiquities Law of 1924, which was then refined in 1936. It defined 'antiquities' then as 'anything made by the hands of man before 1700 AD, such as buildings, coins, sculptures, manuscripts, and such objects that are illustrative of sciences, arts, crafts, literature, religion, customs, morals and politics in past age...' This arbitrary figure of 1700 meant that most historic centres and traditional buildings were excluded from protection legally! An amendment to this law was passed in 1974, which allowed the government to protect buildings and artefacts of a more recent date.

However, due to the weakness of the existing protective machinery, in terms of its technical, financial, and administrative skills and resources, the various official agencies have largely failed to live up to expectations. In addition, there has been little coordination between them to avoid conflict of interests and wasteful duplication of work. There has never been, for example, a national council for cultural heritage, which would have been responsible for the coordination of all protective efforts on a regional and national level. There has never been a ministry for heritage, Iraq deserves one. Political corruption and totalitarian measures played a major role in the destruction of heritage. Large areas of very important historic and cultural value were bulldozed, ostensibly for 'security' reasons. These included: The Citadel of Kirkuk, the area west of Imam Ali's Shrine in Najaf, the area between the two Shrines in Karbala, the surrounding area around Kadhimain Shrine, and also around the Gailani Shrine in Baghdad, to name only a few examples.

Similarly, much blame should be put upon the hundreds of NGOs in Iraq. Professional unions, associations and societies have been largely uninterested in Iraq's heritage, let alone to lobby for its protection. This also applies to Iraqi academics including historians and archaeologists who are supposed to be in the forefront of this important aspect of public lobbying and participation.

The Muslim clergy too has shown little, if any interest in preserving Iraq's outstanding Islamic monuments such as mosques, *madrasas*, *hussainiyas*, and *takyas*. Indeed, one can say that the Ministry of Awqaf itself has been instrumental in neglecting and even demolishing a great number of historic mosques and other *waqf* buildings. Great historic mosques such as the Mirjaniya Mosque (built 1356) and Maaruf Al-Karkhi (built 1215) were demolished and rebuilt completely new, in 1947 and 2000 respectively. In addition, the overwhelming majority of historic mosques have undergone major 'repair' work, which in reality meant ill-advised restoration or the inappropriate introduction of foreign and modern elements and materials. In fact, the Ministry does not even have a full documentary record of its properties. In conclusion, while it may be said that this 'protective' machinery has done some good work in safeguarding some of Iraq's architectural heritage, it has been largely ineffective and even destructive.

The Directorate of Antiquities has a similar negative and even destructive history. It has been too weak as the main official agency for the protection of heritage. It has succumbed so often to unlawful political pressures from corrupt leaders and political opportunists. A glaring example of its weakness and even apathy has been its inability to stop or divert destructive mega projects such as dams, highways, and other large-scale works which it knew would cause damage to historic sites and monuments. Examples are too numerous to mention here. But glaring ones would have to include: the construction of a pharmaceutical factory some 400 m away from the spiral minaret of Samara, the construction of a huge museum building close to the Arch of Ctesiphon, the rebuilding of Babylon, the reconstruction of several

monuments in Abassid Samarra, the demolition of the historic citadel of Rawa to make way for a new Presidential Palace, and the drowning of the old towns of Ana and Rawa by the Qadisiya Dam in 1987. Incidentally, the rebuilding of Babylon included the insertion of thousands of bricks inscribed with the name of the last President!

Alarming Loss of Heritage

Due to the lack of an effective protective machinery, general ignorance and public apathy mentioned earlier, Iraq, it may be concluded, is also 'number one' in the world in the way it has allowed its heritage to be eroded. It is committing cultural suicide, gradually but surely. It is estimated that most historic towns have lost as much as 60% of their historic fabric, and even more in some cases. What remains now are only a few monuments and traditional buildings scattered here and there. The historic context has been lost or severely disrupted. This self-inflicted damage goes on today unabated. The remaining heritage is now under serious threat of being lost or distorted forever. Most people are alarmed when told that what remains from the once Capital of the Abbasid Empire and the world are only 7 monuments most of which have been altered or heavily restored. They are the Abbasid Palace, Mustansiriyah Madrasa, the minaret of Khafafin Mosque, the minaret of Qumriya Mosque, Zumarrad Khatun's Shrine, Omar Al-Sahrawardi's Shrine and Mosque, and the Wastani Gateway.

Most of this loss took place during the past fifty years. The causes of this incredible destruction include:

- Ineffective and corrupt official protective agencies,
- Negligence and decay,
- Bad restorations and reconstructions,
- Looting and illicit excavations of sites,
- Mega projects,
- Wars (Iraq is a veteran!).

The Future of Iraq's Past

As was stressed earlier, Iraq is 'number one' in world heritage but also *number one* in the destruction of its own cultural heritage. The scale of its loss and destruction has been incomprehensible and unbelievable. And most of this irreplaceable loss had been easily avoidable, including the frequent wars! If one were to draw a list of all countries of the world according to their heritage losses during the last 50 years or so, Iraq would surely be somewhere at the top of that list.

What happens now that Iraq is under foreign occupation and there is so much talk about massive reconstruction? Is the future of Iraq's past ensured? Or the prevailing instability and power vacuum offers great opportunity for looters and other cultural offenders? The answer to these questions lies in Iraq's immediate political future developments. If things go well, and this is a big if, the new situation in Iraq could offer good possibilities for the country's cultural patrimony. Some areas of concern and top urgency would have to include the following measures:

- The formulation of new national and regional development policies and strategies with a new integrated protective system;
- New physical planning policies and development plans for all urban centres, towns, and villages, using GIS techniques, to ensure the conservation of the remaining historic fabric;
- The promulgation of new and more stringent laws to stop further losses or encroachments;
- The preparation of a national register or record of cultural heritage, including the designation of historic areas, areas of outstanding natural beauty, and the classification of all buildings and monuments according to their architectural or historic interest;
- The initiation of national programs for the protection, restoration, and even the reconstruction of lost monuments.

Ihsan Fethi

1 Possibly designed by the great ottoman architect Sinan. Its use of multi domes is reminiscent of Sinan's design for the Süleymaniye complex in Istanbul.