

British School of Archaeology in Iraq

A new organisation for a new era

By Karen Dabrowska

Since its foundation in 1932 as a memorial to the life and work of Gertrude Bell, the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI) has been the main institution in the United Kingdom responsible for organising archaeological fieldwork in Iraq, Mesopotamian Syria and the Persian Gulf. It was funded from private sources, principally the Gertrude Bell Memorial Fund but also a considerable sum deriving from individual subscriptions donated to an Appeal Fund. It first received a Treasury grant in 1947, which enabled it to appoint its first Director in Iraq (Professor Sir Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie's husband). It carried out excavations in Iraq and Syria before World War II and again from 1948 worked continuously in Iraq until 1990.



Necklace.



قلادة.



Necklace.

قلادة.



Cylindrical clay stamps.

أختام.

The secretary, Joan Porter MacIver, normally steers clear of politics but she could not help commenting on the shortsightedness of failing to establish a Ministry of Tourism in the interim government announced at the beginning of June. "I can't understand why that happened. I know that tourism is something they are counting on in the future, especially as Iraq is so important in terms of its historical legacy. The Iraqis have always been very proud of that and it is

important to show what the country has to offer – it is the cradle of civilisation. "We really look forward to a time when things are stable and people can travel in Iraq. We know the Iraqi people are very friendly and will welcome tourists once things have settled down. Now is not a time when we would encourage people to travel but once things are clearer and safer I think Iraq would be a wonderful destination for the interested traveller. I don't see it as a

destination for those who are looking for a less intellectual time. If somebody is interested in history, Islam and fostering ties with the Arab world it would be a wonderful place to visit". Important destinations for Islamic religious tourism are the two holiest shrines in Shia Islam: Najaf and Kerbala. The School's return, at the invitation of a sovereign Iraqi government, depends mainly on the security situation and on finding additional finances. In the meantime the ➤



Statues from the Iraqi Museum.

تماثيل في المتحف العراقي.



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School is looking at other ways of helping its Iraqi colleagues and is waiting for things to quieten down before sending a shipment of books collected in conjunction with the British Museum, for Iraqi Museums and universities. Training is a major priority for the Iraqis. Since the first gulf war there have been few opportunities for Iraqi scholars and students to continue their research and they will need to update themselves on new developments by gaining access to literature and journals which have been denied to them since sanctions were imposed in 1991. The School is able to provide a few short scholarships known as the Christie/Mallowan scholarships, funded through a donation from Agatha Christie's daughter, to bring young archaeologists and museum staff over to England for this sort of updating. The BSAI also contributes to the FCO's Chevening Scholarships which have been awarded to Iraqis.

In April this year, Noorah Al-Gailani, the curator of Islamic material at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, conducted a workshop for the staff of the Iraqi Museum with BSAI funding. "Once we got started, I found the Iraq Museum staff as young and excited as the spring. They had been through a lot since March 2003 but things had begun to improve in the museum. They were very keen to explore the world of museums and how it works in other parts of the world. Through the talks and workshops we explored the main issues that concern the museum profession including public access to the collections (physical and intellectual), interpretation and audience development, education and outreach work, and design and display."

Helen McDonald, the school's Senior

Research Fellow and a colleague from the British Museum Sarah Collins (*Islamic Tourism* featured an article on Ms Collins work in the May/June issue) spent two and a half months in Baghdad and Babylon in June 2003 on secondment to the Ministry of Culture. "We hoped to help our Iraqi colleagues in the wake of the looting of the Iraq Museum and the continuing looting of archaeological sites in the south. In the first few days in Baghdad we had the excitement of visiting the Central Bank Vault that contained the Nimrud treasure. It was moved from the vault which flooded as a result of the bombing and we were able to help museum staff unwrap the treasure and repack it all in clean and dry material. It was a great relief to see that it survived the bombing along with the Ur jewellery. The Nimrud treasure was displayed briefly on 3 July at the museum to show the world that it was safe", Ms McDonald said in a report.

"I was then offered a post as Cultural Affairs Officer by the Coalition Provisional Authority in the area encompassing the governorates of Najaf, Kerbala, Wasit, al Anbar, Babil and Qadisiyeh. I hoped that by being further south I would be closer to the areas where the sites were being looted and would be able to get out, assess the extent of the looting and press for some protection for archaeological sites. The looting becomes steadily worse the further south one travels. It was unfortunate that the security situation deteriorated making the planning of trips more difficult".

The school's members have maintained their very strong links with the State Organisation for Antiquities and Heritage and British archaeologists have kept in

contact with their Iraqi counterparts, mainly through private visits. It is the School's intention to return to Iraq as soon as possible and to resume its work, but the final decision lies with the authorities in Baghdad. "A lot will depend on what the Iraqis want. We will see whether they want us to resume work on excavations. It looked as if rescue excavations would be required when a major dam was going to destroy Ashur but this has been put on hold. There have been discussions as to whether there should be a moratorium on excavations to assess the damage that has been done by the looting. So it will be a combination of what the Iraqis decide they require and who is able to go out there as an expert in the field", Mrs MacIver said.

The school is also concerned with the Gulf and the Mesopotamian part of Syria. It is sponsoring renewed work at Chagar Bazar (NE Syria) under the joint direction of Dr Augusta McMahon (University of Cambridge) and Professor O. Tunca (University of Liège). Dr Joan Oate works at Tell Brak. Both these sites had close relations with southern Mesopotamia and at some periods can be considered as culturally identical. Dr Harriet Crawford (University College, London) and Dr Rob Carter have worked in the Es-Subiyah area about 60 kms N.E. of Kuwait city, where a small site with Ubaid pottery on the surface has been identified. Once again the nature of the contacts with early Mesopotamia are of great interest.

The School produces a steady stream of academic journals, newsletters and publications including *Nimrud – an Assyrian Imperial City Revealed* and *Fifty Years of Mesopotamian Discovery*. ■