

Iraq

Continuing State Of War Threatens Cradle Of Civilizations

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Iraq is a country of firsts: the earliest villages and cities, writing, poetry, epic literature, temples, codified religion, armies, warfare, world economy and empire. Tragically it is also the first entire country to be designated an 'endangered site' by the World Monuments Fund (WMF).

"Decades of political isolation, a protracted war with Iran and, more recently, the conflict begun in 2003 have put Iraq's extraordinary heritage at grave risk", said WMF President, Bonnie Burnham. "Widespread looting, military occupation, artillery fire, vandalism and other acts of violence are devastating Iraq. By focusing attention on imperiled sites, the WMF helps bring local communities, governments and preservation professionals together".

Specific sites have been named by the WMF as a major risk, including the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, the ziggurat in Ur, the temple precinct in Babylon and the 9th century spiral minaret in Samarra. The fund has begun working with the Iraq State Board Of Antiquities and Heritage to assess and document what has survived and plan for its long-term preservation.

But this project, like all other endeavors to stop Iraq's heritage from becoming history - literally - has been delayed because of the threat of kidnappings and attacks by insurgents. Three Iraqi archaeologists who studied site management in Britain earlier this year, refused all publicity due to fear of reprisals for their "collaboration with



Westerners" when they returned home. British archaeologists are training Iraqis to draw up the first modern inventory of the country's ancient sites and monuments in an attempt to curtail widespread looting. Tragically the ambitious survey has been

delayed due to the security situation. "It has become desperate since the end of the war", said Bill Blake the head of English Heritage's metric survey team who recently returned from running courses in neighboring Jordan because of the dangers to Westerners in Iraq. "State control has effectively collapsed and people are helping themselves to whatever they can get. They are taking material for building or digging for antiquities to be sold abroad".

But if the looting does not stop little will be left to survey or record. Antiquities smuggling is a multibillion dollar business that ranks third in international monetary terms, behind drug smuggling and weapons sales.

"The picture is appalling", said Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly, an independent archaeologist and journalist covering the Middle East, who has been studying Iraqi heritage for the last seven years. "More than 150 Sumerian cities dating back to the 4th millennium BC such as Umma Al-Akkareb, lie destroyed, turned into crater-filled landscapes of shredded pottery and

broken bricks. If properly excavated these cities, covering 20 sq km, could help us learn about the development of the human race. But the looters have destroyed ancient monuments, erasing the region's history in a tireless search for a cylinder seal, a ➤



sculpture or cuneiform tablet that they can sell to a dealer.

Bajjaly's view is echoed by Abdul Amir Hamadani an archaeologist, working in Nasiriyah, southern Iraq. "More than 100 Sumerian cities have been destroyed by looters since the beginning of the war. It's a disaster that we all keep watching but

about which we can do little. We are incapable of stopping the looting. We are five archaeologists, some hundred guards and occasionally a couple of policemen – and they are a million armed looters, backed by their tribes and the dealers". It's not only the ancient monuments which are suffering. Baghdad's unique 19th

century houses are also being destroyed as people want steel frames.

The story of the Iraq Museum is another tragedy. In April 2003 looters plundered over 15,000 antiquities – at present more than half, spanning 10,000 years of human history, are still missing. It is too dangerous for museum staff to work on an inventory of the material that has been returned. And in summer, with no air conditioning due to the faltering electricity supply and temperatures of 40 degrees, even the most determined conservationists succumb to the unbearable heat and call it a day. The museum remains closed with little prospects of re-opening.

After failing to protect the museum from looters the coalition forces added insult to injury by damaging archaeological sites. An alarming report by the keeper of the British Museum's Near East Department, Dr John Curtis, describes how areas in the middle of Babylon were leveled to create a landing area for helicopters and parking lots for heavy vehicles.

"They caused substantial damage to the Ishtar Gate, one of the most famous monuments from antiquity. US military vehicles crushed 2,600-year-old brick pavements, archaeological fragments were scattered across the site, more than 12 trenches were driven into ancient deposits and military earth-moving projects contaminated the site for future generations of scientists. Add to all that the damage caused to nine of the moulded brick figures of dragons in the Ishtar Gate by people trying to remove the bricks from the wall".

Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly concluded that there will be no end to the destruction of Iraq's heritage unless the country's leaders take a political decision to consider archaeology a priority. But the recent merger of the Iraq State Board Of Antiquities and Heritage with the newly created Tourism Ministry does not bode well for the future. The longer Iraq finds itself in a state of war, the more the cradle of civilization is threatened. It many not even last long enough for our grandchildren to learn from. ■