



SECURING A FUTURE FOR IRAQ'S BELEAGUERED HERITAGE

It has been three years since WMF and the Getty Conservation Institute launched a joint initiative to enhance the capacity of Iraq's heritage professionals to salvage their sites in the wake of war. With no end to the violence in sight, WMF and GCI remain committed to their cause.

by NEVILLE AGNEW, DAVID MYERS, and GAETANO PALUMBO

Ugly things happen in war. In the midst of the nightmare of violence that is Iraq, other tragedies are continuing—ones that are largely unknown to the general public. Destruction of archaeological and cultural sites, of monuments and antiquities is continuing at a furious pace. Weighed in the balance against the toll of death that is visited daily on the people of Iraq, does this matter much? Should it matter? Between oil and antiquities, Iraq's two vast underground resources, it's the antiquities that presumably provide some benefit to poor, otherwise destitute people. Even some archaeologists have publicly stated—as at the Fifth World Archaeological Congress in June 2003—that digging their own past for sale is a right of the poor, though it's widely acknowledged that those who do the digging may receive a pittance. Let us not blame the looters; their trade is after all ancient. Think of the pharaonic tombs—King Tut's was one of the very few lucky ones to have survived their attentions—and looting is active today in many countries, even wealthy, developed ones like Italy.

So, can anything be done to limit looting in Iraq? The answer, obviously, is not much in present times when, it is reported, many of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) professional staff work half-time or less, with meager resources, unlike the looting gangs who are well-equipped and armed.

Looting apart, threats to the archaeological resources of Iraq also come from the lack of maintenance and conservation of these sites, an impossible task in the present circumstances, given security operations that involve earth-moving equipment, uncontrolled construction, and future development projects that will certainly affect the landscape of the country once security improves.

Today, as the agony of Iraq continues to unfold and deepen, the preservation of cultural heritage may seem a lost cause. Only recently, the chairman of the SBAH, Donny George, fled to Damascus, fearing for the safety of his family. Furthermore, professionals

around the world have expressed concern about the fate of pre-Islamic sites, which have been rumored to be of little interest to the new heritage leadership. In this context, it would seem less and less likely that the Getty Conservation Institute-WMF Iraq initiative could actually be able to work in the country in safety.

So what is to be the fate of this effort? How should GCI and the WMF respond to a situation that seemingly has slid into hopelessness? Should our organizations declare the effort a lost cause and our investment in training the Iraqis and development of a national database/GIS (Geographic Information System) of archaeological sites and monuments a write off?

These were among the questions our organizations discussed in November 2006, at a meeting in New York. As it turned out, the questions were rhetorical—there was unanimity in the decision to continue the commitment to Iraq. For despite the bleak circumstances, we realized that there was still a lot we could do given the resources we had already gathered.

FACING PAGE, INSTRUCTORS AND SBAH STAFF DISCUSS THE DOCUMENTATION OF HISTORIC HOUSES IN THE OLD CITY OF SALT, JORDAN; BELOW, WILLIAM BLAKE, OF THE ENGLISH HERITAGE METRIC SURVEY TEAM, INSTRUCTS SBAH SURVEYORS IN THE USE OF A NEW TOTAL STATION PROVIDED BY THE PROJECT.



First—and of critical importance—we still had the promised support of the Jordan’s Department of Antiquities, which since the beginning of the project has unstintingly provided assistance in training courses for Iraqis undertaken in Amman. This will continue through 2007, but with greater participation planned from the Jordanians, who have offered the services of their department’s staff to teach some of the courses for the SBAH staff, while having their own staff attend some workshops as trainees. In other words, the Jordanian Department of Antiquities will be partnering with GCI/WMF to both support training courses, and benefit from them.

Second, the national database/GIS of archaeological sites and monuments under development for Iraq is planned to be reconfigured as a web-based system, since for the time being, locating the system in Baghdad is out of the question. A customized and enhanced version of the database/GIS will be developed for Jordan as well, which will replace the existing JADIS (Jordan Archaeological Database Information System) database. Over time, archaeological site data for the whole region will be migrated over to the new system.

Third, the new chairman of the SBAH, Abbas al-Hussainy, is now working with GCI and WMF to draft a new memorandum of understanding. He has declared that his priorities are staff training and the protection of sites through the deployment of a special police force and, with better security in place, to survey and document areas and start compiling a comprehensive archaeological map of Iraq. In addition, WMF and the SBAH have embarked on the development of a management plan for the protection of the ancient site of Babylon, which is to be put in place when conditions permit. The site was adversely impacted by excessive development and restorations under the previous regime, and by the Polish and American military base on the site between 2003 and 2005.

These developments provide exciting opportunities to not only maintain momentum in the Iraq initiative, but to expand our collaborative efforts with Jordan. When the dire situation in Iraq finally stabilizes, we will be poised to provide more direct and hands-on assistance. The database/GIS when deployed will be an essential tool for mapping the location and recording the condition of archaeological and other heritage sites. In the case of looted sites, the system will at least enable a new benchmark of conditions to be established.

In the three years since the GCI/WMF launched its Iraq initiative, good progress has been made. Relationships have developed through personal interaction with the dedicated SBAH staff, many of whom are deeply appreciative of our efforts, having been isolated for decades without recognition or resources. The initiative has also been fortunate, not only in its partnership with Jordanian authorities, but in its training consultants as well, several of whom are expatriate Iraqis, living in Amman, Canada, and the Netherlands. UNESCO, too, has consistently supported the work of the initiative, and has indicated a commitment to continue doing so through the Amman office. We have every hope, therefore, of ultimate success in bringing Iraqi heritage professionals back into the international mainstream, and remain committed to providing the training and tools that will eventually be needed. The GCI and the WMF are doing this despite the bleak situation in Iraq because we resolutely believe it is the right thing to do. ■