“LOCAL VOICES” ON HERITAGE: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN SOUTHERN IRAQ

ALAA AL-LAMI University of Kufa
LICIA PROSERPIO Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna
GIULIA SCAZZOSI Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES MANAGEMENT IN THE NAJAF REGION

The region of Najaf is located around 150 km South of Baghdad. In the whole region there are around 800 archaeological sites, often without name and in the most cases not excavated.

In 1995 all the archaeological sites of the region became State property and the public institution of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (SBAH) took control of them. From that moment onwards, a hierarchical division of roles for the sites management was established. The SBAH controlled all the archaeological sites and directly employed the keepers. The SBAH of the region of Najaf is one of the largest in Iraq, after the ones of Mosul, Basra and Qadisiyah regions. There is a total of 10 chief keepers and 300 keepers, which have to report directly to their reference chief keeper. Despite this clear division of tasks, the keepers do not receive a training from the SBAH on the history of the sites and on their management. The keepers are generally chosen due to their vicinity to the site and their knowledge of the community there living. Additionally, it is important to note that there are no female keepers in the whole region. The keepers are public officials, monthly paid by the SBAH.

Besides the keepers, the other figures that cooperate for the protection of the sites are the archaeological policemen. They received a special training in the Police Academy on how to protect the heritage and on the history and archaeology of Iraq in general. When people living close to a site sees someone illegally excavating, it is reported to the keepers who call the archaeological police.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results of this preliminary study can be summarized as follows. The local community’s understanding of the archaeological sites is linked to: 1) the storytelling of local leaders; 2) the presence of the keepers; 3) the presence of international archaeologists and researchers. Local communities know if there are archaeological sites situated near their villages/houses (in the majority of the cases) and they have general ideas on the sites, but they do not have information on the tangible value of archaeological remains (i.e. the historical period, the material culture, the architectural structures, etc).

- Storytelling of local leaders: Stories may vary but there are some similarities that can be found, such as the idea of a glorious ancient past (a civilization more advanced than the present one) or the belief that the ancient populations were their direct ancestors.

- The presence of the keepers: The keepers and the chief keepers play an essential role in connecting local communities and archaeological sites. This is underlined by the fact that the local communities already link the archaeological sites with their keepers: people may not know the exact location and name of the site, but they always know the name of the keeper (and his personal information). The archaeological sites are alive and have a place in the community thanks to the keepers. At the same time keepers do not help the community in shaping a local understanding of the archaeological sites, past identities and heritage. This is due to the fact that also keepers have a limited knowledge of the sites and they rally chosen due to their vicinity to the site and their knowledge of the community there living. Additionally, it is important to note that there are no female keepers in the whole region. The keepers are public officials, monthly paid by the SBAH.

- The presence of international archaeologists and researchers: In the interviews people have often underlined that the archaeological sites can boost the local economy, by attracting international tourists. This idea is given by the fact that, at the present, archaeologists and researchers are a big part of the international community in Iraq and a source of income for the national economy. This fact is spreading the hope that also in rural areas of southern Iraq, the economy can be supported by the presence of archaeological sites. This idea is also linked to the belief that in all the archaeological sites a wide range of treasures can be found.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In conclusion, this preliminary study aims to provide new paths of research to the international scientific community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the “EDUU - Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq” project (EuroAid CSOLA/2016/382-631), of the Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Heritage and of the University of Kufa (and especially Hayder Al-Hamdani therein for his unflailing friendship).