

New perspectives on Iraqi archaeology and cultural heritage

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SHARED SECURITY

In the last decades, Iraqi public and private institutions together with the media have widely manipulated the country's rich and multi-cultural past for political propaganda and entertainment purposes. However, among the assets to safeguard against deliberate or accidental destruction and violence, the heritage paradoxically ranked very low. Furthermore, Iraq's cultural symbols have been systematically exploited by the country's ruling powers - from Saddam Hussein to the Islamic State - to pursue different political, social, cultural and religious agendas, drawing arbitrary lines between relevant and irrelevant. As a result, thousands of archaeological sites and heritage monuments - from Nineveh to the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf - as well as cultural, ethnic and religious minorities - from the Kurds to the Yazidis - have been threatened by what has been widely defined a "process of cultural cleansing".

CULTURAL CLEANSING AND THE FALL OF MESOPOTAMIA

Cultural cleansing ultimately aims to eradicate cultural diversity and replace it with a single homogeneous perspective and set of behaviours. According to the UN, one of the consequences of this practice is the emergence of mistrust between different communities and towards the state as well as a weaker feeling of belonging to a shared culture and history. The country's political instability and cultural cleansing are also the consequence of a drop in the quality of education, widespread poverty and greater gender inequality especially during the Second Gulf War

and in its immediate aftermath and, most recently, under ISIS rule. The severe blows to the education system and the decrease in teaching quality have caused major disruption at all levels of society, but youths and rural communities have been particularly affected. This state of affairs has led to a return to more traditional values among Iraqi families especially in marginal communities, a gradual loss of awareness of the country's past among the population and the subsequent crumbling of social cohesion. The main effects of socio-political developments in Iraq on the country's cultural heritage may be summarised as follows: 1. Continuous conflict and instability and the resulting increase in poverty have contributed to the destruction and plundering of archaeological sites, heritage buildings and museums as physical symbols of the past; 2. The drop of investment in education has led to a collapse in the quality of education and the impossibility to train a new generation of archaeologists and cultural heritage experts; 3. The collapse of the country's institutions has left the symbols of Iraq's past vulnerable and exposed.

NEW COMMITMENTS FOR ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN IRAQ

The harsh consequences of Iraq's turbulent years have given rise to a series of initiatives by international research groups to safeguard the cultural heritage of Mesopotamia. Numerous consortia now bring together universities, private and public institutions that are working side by side to protect archaeological sites and monuments, contributing to the wider battle

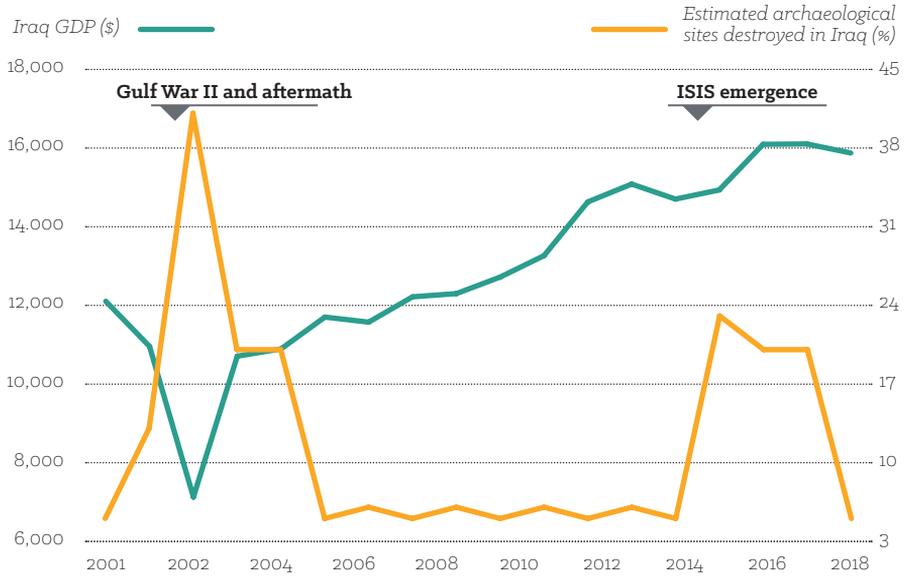


6

sites in Iraq listed in the World Heritage list of UNESCO

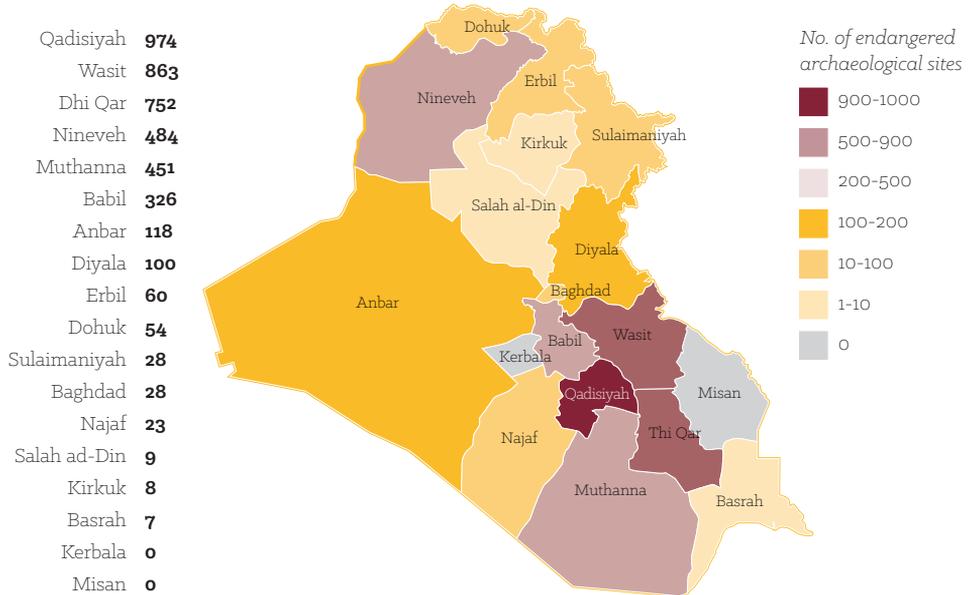
WAR AFFECTS ECONOMY AND CULTURE

Relation between GDP and looting of archaeological site



THE ENDANGERED IRAQ

Number on endangered archaeological site by region



Sources: Stone 2008; 2015; Al-Hamadani 2008; WE





3

sites inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger

against the collapse of the country's social fabric. This may represent a new approach to the study of Iraq's past. These initiatives are also possible thanks to medium- and long-term funding schemes promoted by national and international institutions mostly in Europe and the United States. Today archaeologists are called to embrace a more holistic approach to face the new challenges originated by the long years of political and social instability in Iraq, while also acknowledging the need to engage new target groups, like local communities, local and national institutions. In order to promote the cultural heritage with this multi-faceted audience, in 2016 a multi-disciplinary European-Iraqi partnership developed two projects, WALADU and EDUU, that aimed to address these issues through a wide range of activities:

- Documentation: creating detailed documentation of endangered archaeological sites and heritage monuments;
- Conservation: preserving the ancient remains according to modern restoration techniques in order to make them accessible to the public;
- Legislation: working together with experts to improve existing legislation on the cultural heritage;
- Education 1: training a new generation of archaeology and heritage professionals through capacity building activities to guarantee the sustainability of documentation, conservation and communication of the national heritage;
- Education 2: Promoting the national heritage among local communities by organizing events and creating ad-hoc educational materials;
- Communication: Promoting Iraqi archaeology to a wider audience through public events as well as exhibitions or documentaries.

ADDRESSING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH THE CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE EXPERIENCE OF WALADU AND EDUU

Different research institutions, mostly from EU and US, committed to developing projects focused on one of the points listed above. Among these, education and capacity building represent good middle and long-term solutions



4,285

the number of Iraqi endangered archaeological sites

An increasing commitment
Number of international projects conducted by research centers in the field of cultural



— Data: UNESCO; WALADU; EDUU

to deal with the challenges of protecting and enhancing the cultural heritage of the country as confirmed by the UK initiatives carried out in the framework of the UCL Nahrein network and the British Museum Heritage Management Training Scheme, the German-based Deutsches Archäologisches Institut's Iraq Programme, or the UNESCO/UNITWIN Chairs Programme. Other international projects focused on the improvement of documentation and conservation strategies to protect the Iraqi heritage, such as the American Schools of Oriental Research Cultural Heritage Initiatives, the UK Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa project, or the Emergency Red List of Iraqi Cultural Objects at Risk issued by ICOMOS amongst many others. In Italy, an integrated approach to the documentation, pro-

tection and communication of the Iraqi cultural heritage was adopted in 2016 through two international projects, WALADU and EDUU (2016-2020), led by the University of Bologna. The two projects are part of a comprehensive strategy to create an EU-Iraqi partnership in the field of education and cultural heritage. WALADU aims to train a new generation of archaeology professionals through collaboration with Iraqi universities. EDUU targets local communities and aims to contribute to a more widespread understanding and awareness of the cultural heritage in the country. The international consortium includes universities, national and private institutions from Italy, Turkey, Germany, as well as Iraqi and international organizations like UNESCO Youth and the Association of Arab Universities.

In order to achieve their goals, the two projects implemented the following activities in various stages. The first phase aimed to take stock of the current state of the heritage in the three regions involved by documenting and preserving archaeological sites and heritage buildings. Between 2017 and 2019, eleven archaeological research and conservation campaigns were carried out in the regions of Kufa, Qadisiyah and Wasit under the umbrella of the EDUU project. The results of these activities converged into an open-access “ArchIraq” WebGIS that provided access to information on the archaeological sites of the regions to a vast audience. The second phase consisted in educational activities aimed to provide local scholars and institutional officials with the necessary skills and tools to guarantee the sustainability of documentation and conservation activities at archaeological sites in the future. Intensive training of Iraqi scholars and other institutional officials was carried out in the framework of both projects in Italy, Germany and Turkey to improve their teaching and research skills and to provide them with higher quality teaching materials.

A major target for educational activities within the EDUU project are local communities. Interviews aiming to understand their perception of the heritage indicated a scarce familiarity with the history of the region and a rather irrelevant role of archaeological sites in community

life, but also revealed an interest in knowing and understanding them. To this end, specific activities have been designed mostly for schools thus targeting future generations. These included the creation of comics on the history of Mesopotamia, as well as the organization of visits to museums and archaeological sites.

This range of activities requires specific communication programs targeting the national and international public. For this purpose, dedicated websites and ad-hoc social network profiles and accounts have been launched for both projects, particularly on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, promotional and educational videos concerning the projects are now available on the YouTube educational channel OrientLab.

NEW PATHWAYS TO COMMUNICATE THE HERITAGE OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

The protection and communication of the national heritage in countries like Iraq remains an intricate and long-term challenge. Nevertheless, the design of a working methodology, the identification of specific target groups, the collaboration and commitment of different public and private institutions as well as the support of specific funding schemes have shown that this objective can be achieved. The activities carried out by various national and international institutions are starting to bear fruit, as demonstrated by the reduction in the destruction of archaeological sites by the local population, by increasing awareness among the new generations of their common past as well as by the renewed teaching capacity of many Iraqi scholars which will allow the training of a new generation of archaeologists. In a country like Iraq, torn by ethnic, confessional and socio-political divisions, better knowledge of the common historical heritage could help overcome some of those rifts. While the cultural heritage will probably neither resolve disputes and conflicts nor drive the spectre of terrorism away, it can certainly help to foster awareness of the nation's common history and develop a stronger sense of belonging. Archaeology can therefore contribute to the rebirth of a country like Iraq, long plagued by wars, and consequently to the reconstruction of its long-neglected social cohesion.



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