

Iraq: Ancient Babylon Reborn

19 November 2013



Aerial view of the Southern Palace of ancient Babylon.

"In partnership with the government of Iraq and with the World Monuments Fund, the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation provided site maintenance, environmental monitoring, and training in conservation techniques at the ancient site of Babylon, preserving Iraq's rich cultural heritage for generations to come."

— U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Robert Stephen Beecroft

Ancient Babylonia — situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day southern Iraq — is considered a birthplace of human civilization. Its capital, Babylon, was a city of such scale and sophistication that Greek philosopher Aristotle considered it more comparable to a nation than to a city. The former imperial capital of kings Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar in southern Mesopotamia from the 18th to the sixth century B.C., Babylon was once one of the largest and most influential cities in the world.



Iraqi workers shore up a fragile section of the inner-city wall as part of the World Monuments Fund preservation project.

At nearly 900 hectares, Babylon flourished as a center for culture and engineering and was renowned for its temples, libraries and royal collections. Its citizens are credited with making tremendous advances in astronomy, mathematics, art and architecture. The celebrated "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" — one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World — are said to have been built within its boundaries. Babylon held the distinction of being the largest city until the advent of the Roman Empire.

Today, however, only shadows of this once great ancient city remain. Its fragile architectural ruins rest just 90 kilometers south of Baghdad. Since its founding many millennia ago, the city of Babylon has been ravaged by war, time and vandalism. Celebrated archaeological treasures such as the Ishtar Gate, Nabu-sha-Khare Temple and the inner-city walls are in urgent need of comprehensive conservation to reverse decades of deterioration. Yet the site has been repeatedly denied designation as a World Heritage site, in part because it lacks clearly defined boundaries, a comprehensive preservation plan and safeguards to ensure sustainable tourism.

In 2010, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad granted \$2 million through the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation to the World Monuments Fund for archaeological site preservation, environmental monitoring, and training Iraqis in the conservation of earthen architecture. The World Monuments Fund is carrying out the four-year project in coordination with the U.S. Embassy and in partnership with the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and

Heritage. The funding supports further documentation and stabilization of some of Babylon's major structures; addresses water drainage problems at the Ishtar Gate and several temples; supports development of environmental monitoring systems; and helps train State Board employees, thereby strengthening Iraq's capacity to preserve its cultural sites and monuments for future generations and to reap the economic benefits of tourism.

Read more: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2013/09/20130927283713.html#ixzz2osiZUnIr>