

# My Voice Counts: Iraq, the Cradle of Civilisation

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Iraq conjures up many enduring cultural images: the great lions of Babylon, the Ishtar Gate (pictured), and the superb spiral mosque of Samarra are some of the most renowned. These vast archaeological riches, spanning centuries of civilization, are part of the national heritage that is shared by all Iraqis – and part of the patrimony of all humanity.

Access to this shared patrimony is a right, protected by a number of international human rights instruments. Recent visits to the National Museum of Iraq by the UNESCO Office for Iraq, and UNAMI's Human Rights Office (HRO) and Integrated Coordination Office for Development and Humanitarian Affairs (ICODHA) were part of the UN's strong emphasis in 2013 on promoting economic, social and cultural rights in Iraq. Both visits were a chance to explore the Museum's collections, and to learn about how Iraqis can access and enjoy their cultural heritage.

"The National Museum is a great cultural symbol for the people of Iraq," says Mr. Francesco Motta, Chief of the HRO and Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Iraq. "This visit is a chance for us to identify areas where the UN might be able to assist with the protection, preservation and promotion of this cultural heritage for all Iraqis," he said.

Established in 1926, the Museum houses a collection that covers 7,000 years of Mesopotamian history. Artefacts date from prehistory, the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Islamic cultures, and range from tiny figurines to imposing stone statues of ancient gods.

The devastating impact of war and violence, visible throughout Iraqi society, has also left its mark on the Museum. Widespread looting of its collections occurred in 2003, and thousands of its treasures were smuggled out of the country. To date, only half of the missing pieces have been recovered, and up to 10,000 objects are still unaccounted for. For this reason, and because of damage to and deterioration of the building, it has been years since the Museum consistently opened its doors to the Iraqi people. Currently, a few exhibition halls are accessible to the public, by appointment only.

"It is clear that the Museum has faced some major challenges in the past years," says Mr. Motta. "I hope that Iraqis will soon be able to freely enjoy these incredible collections. The right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the National Museum is arguably the greatest cultural institution in the country."

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reiterates the importance of cultural participation, and cites conservation as a critical step to ensure the diffusion of culture in the community. Conservation is now the key activity to enable the Museum to reopen, and it is well and truly underway. In every gallery, there are conservation specialists working with tiny paintbrushes, or checking the optimal atmospheric conditions on specialized instruments that dot the walls.

Museum staff are immensely proud of what they are achieving. A special guided tour for the UN delegation was led by Museum Curator, Mr. Madhi, and Director of the Museum Education Department, Ms. Yass.

“We are working very hard to restore the galleries and reinstate the collections,” says Mr. Madhi. Standing in the centre of what will become the ‘Sumerian Room’ he points out the works still underway, and the precious objects that are being arranged in new showcases for the very first time.

“The Iraqi authorities have achieved a great deal in protecting our heritage, and to retrieve stolen and trafficked artefacts,” says Ms. Louise Haxthausen, Director of UNESCO Office for Iraq, following her first visit to the museum in her new role. “However there are still vast challenges ahead where the support of the UN and the international community at large will continue to be critical.”

International support has already made a positive impact, and continues to flow in from several countries, including the United States and Italy. The UN continues to be an important partner, with the UNESCO Office for Iraq working side by side with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Ministry of Culture, and the Kurdistan Regional Government to support good practices in museum management, conservation and restoration of antiquities and historical sites. UNESCO also works to strengthen Iraqi capacities to regain cultural properties, both ancient and modern, that have been illicitly exported from the country. In 2013, UNESCO will organize an international conference in Baghdad to discuss the way forward for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage, ten years after the looting of the National Museum.

While the National Museum’s collections are now in safe hands, the Director of the Education Department, Ms. Yass points out that there is much work to be done throughout Iraq to protect the thousands of historical sites dotted across the country from looters, erosion and neglect. This is the next great challenge for Iraq’s cultural authorities, and for the UN. UNESCO has also been working side by side with the antiquity authorities and police forces to reinforce local capacity to protect these sites.

“If these historical and cultural riches are not protected, they will not be accessible for future generations,” Mr. Motta explains. “Conservation is crucial to ensure that this heritage is not lost, and that it remains intact for young Iraqis to discover and enjoy.”

As the Director of the Education Department, Ms. Yass reveals her plans for outreach and awareness programmes on the Museum’s collections. In particular, she is developing a programme of school visits to teach children about Iraq’s cultural heritage.

However, until the Museum’s collections are ready to be unveiled to the public, full implementation of these education programmes is on hold.

With the continued support of the international community, and the dedication of the Museum’s staff, that day may not be far off. Ms. Yass says that the Museum aims to reopen at the end of 2013, a fitting occasion to do so.

In 2013, Baghdad will be feted as the ‘Arab Capital of Culture’, a milestone for the capital city of a country that has suffered years of conflict. The reopening of the Museum would be a triumphant close to the year for Baghdad, and for all Iraqis – by once again making the rich cultural heritage of the country available to all Iraqis.

*(Source: UNAMI)*

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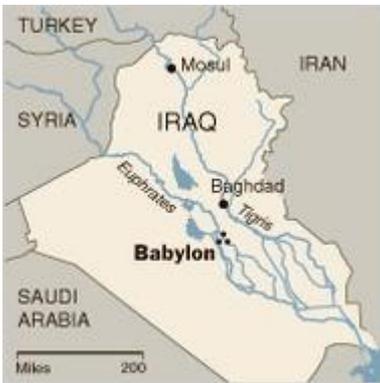
# After Years of War and Abuse, New Hope for Ancient Babylon

By [JOHN NOBLE WILFORD](#)

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The most immediate threat to preserving the ruins of Babylon, the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, is water soaking the ground and undermining what is left in present-day Iraq of a great city from the time of [King Nebuchadnezzar II](#).

**SOAKED** A drainage system at Ishtar Gate, where water is just below ground.



The New York Times

It is also one of the oldest threats. The king himself faced water problems 2,600 years ago. Neglect, reckless reconstruction and wartime looting have also taken their toll in recent times, but archaeologists and experts in the preservation of cultural relics say nothing substantial should be done to correct that until the water problem is brought under control.

A current study, known as the Future of Babylon project, documents the damage from water mainly associated with the Euphrates River and irrigation systems nearby. The ground is saturated just below the surface at sites of the Ishtar Gate and the long-gone Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders. Bricks are crumbling, temples collapsing. The Tower of Babel, long since reduced to rubble, is surrounded by standing water.

Leaders of the international project, describing their findings in interviews and at a meeting this month in New York, said that any plan for reclaiming Babylon as a tourist attraction and a place for archaeological research must include water control as “the highest priority.”

The study, aimed at developing a master plan for the ancient city, was begun last year by the [World Monuments Fund](#) in collaboration with Iraq’s State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. A \$700,000 grant from the United States Department of State is financing the initial two-year study and preliminary management plan. An official of the monuments fund said the entire effort could last five or six years.

“This is without doubt the most complex program we’ve ever had to organize,” said Bonnie Burnham, the fund’s president.

A few archaeologists have expressed concern about what they said was the project’s slow start. Project members said that they have had serious problems persuading foreign experts to go to Iraq and then clearing them and their instruments for work there.

Besides the wear of time that all ruins of antiquity are prey to, consider the depredations Babylon has suffered in recent history. German archaeologists who made the first careful study of the site, before World War I, recognized the despoiling inroads of irrigation waters drawn from a tributary of the Euphrates River, 50 miles south of modern Baghdad.

McGuire Gibson, a specialist in Mesopotamian archaeology at the [University of Chicago](#), who is not involved in the project, agreed that water is Babylon’s “major problem,” which he said was made worse in recent years when a lake and canal were dug as part of a campaign to lure tourists. Nebuchadnezzar himself, Dr. Gibson noted, dealt with water encroachment by erecting new buildings at ever-higher elevations, on top of mounds of old ruins.

The first German investigators, led by Robert Koldewey, reported finding extensive water damage to mud-brick structures and the intrusion of agricultural fields and villages within boundaries of the original city. People had already carted off bricks and stones, leaving almost nothing of the Ziggurat, known from the historian Herodotus and the Bible as the Tower of Babel. The Germans themselves hauled off the elaborate Ishtar Gate to a museum in Berlin.

Then, in the 1970s and ’80s, President [Saddam Hussein](#) of Iraq, casting himself as heir to Nebuchadnezzar’s greatness, had his own imposing palace built at Babylon along the lines of his royal predecessor’s. He even adopted the king’s practice of stamping his own name on the bricks for the reconstruction. Archaeologists were aghast. The new palace and a few other restorations, they say, are hardly authentic, and yet they dominate the site.

What to do with Hussein’s palace is another issue, said the co-director of the project, Jeff Allen. “How to balance integrity of the site with its use as a tourist attraction is the problem,” he explained, noting that Iraq counts on Babylon as a future source of foreign tourist income.

Mr. Allen, an American consultant in cultural preservation who is based in Cairo, said it would cost millions of dollars to demolish the palace or convert it into a visitor center for tourists. "This still has to be studied by other experts," he said, joking that one suggestion is that the palace would make a perfect casino.

"I'd leave the palace alone," Dr. Gibson said, pointing out that it was based on sketches left by the German archaeologists.

"So that way, you will walk around in something of what the ancient architecture looked like," he continued. "Otherwise, you walk around with nothing to see but a bunch of rubble."

Elizabeth C. Stone, an archaeologist at [Stony Brook University](#) in New York who is familiar with Babylon, said she supported efforts to reopen the site to tourists, especially Iraqis themselves. "It's near Baghdad and is the one site where you used to see Iraqis going to get a sense of their past," she said.

Further damage was incurred during the Iraq war, started in 2003. Looting was prevalent there and at other archaeological sites. The United States military occupied Babylon for several years, protecting it from plundering but leaving other scars. About one square kilometer of surface soil, some of it with artifacts, "got removed one way or another," Dr. Stone said.

"The military certainly did not do the place any good," said Lisa Ackerman, executive vice president of the monuments fund. "They moved a lot of dirt around, but that damage is largely fixable."

The site was returned to Iraqi control more than a year ago. Ms. Ackerman and Mr. Allen said the project had already surveyed the remains, building by building, and started the restoration of two museums. Although Iraq has a large corps of trained archaeologists, they said, an immediate need is to instruct others in the conservation of ruins and bring in structural engineers and hydrologists to handle the water problem.

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## Babylon's undiscovered treasures threatened by new oil pipeline

Unesco expresses "concern" after Iraqi oil ministry digs 1,500-metre tunnel under archaeological site

- [Stéphane Foucart](#)
- [Guardian Weekly](#), Tuesday 29 May 2012 14.06 BST



Rich history ... the archaeological site of Babylon, south of Baghdad. Photograph: Ali Al-Saadi/Getty

[Babylon](#) was probably founded in the 23rd century BC. It was sacked countless times and rebuilt almost as many. It was taken by Cyrus II of Persia in 539BC and by Alexander the Great two centuries later. It slipped into oblivion in the early Christian era before being rediscovered in the 19th century by [Claudius Rich](#). At the end of the 20th century it

was spoiled by Saddam Hussein and in the early 21st century [damaged by the US army](#). Now it's bracing for an oil pipeline.

At the end of March, the last sections of this pipeline triggered a letter expressing "concern" from [Unesco's](#) deputy director general for culture to the Iraqi minister for tourism and antiquities. In [Iraq](#) the pipeline is the subject of dispute between the oil and tourism ministries, and the Iraq state board of antiquities and heritage (Isbah) is challenging the legality of the project. "The oil ministry has caused incalculable damage by digging a 1,500-metre-long tunnel under the Babylon archaeological site," declared Qaïs Hussein Rachid, Chairman of Isbah, to the news agency Agence France-Presse in mid-May.

The new pipeline is not far from two others built in the 1980s and 1990s, one of which is no longer in use. "The pipeline crosses the perimeter of the archaeological site but outside the walls, beneath the so-called outer city," said Véronique Dauge, chief of the Arab States Unit at the Unesco World Heritage Centre. "But even if it doesn't cross the centre of the ancient city, it is in an area that has never been excavated." The site covers approximately 850 hectares, most of which is virgin territory for archaeologists. A spokesman from the Iraqi oil ministry quoted by AFP reported that the land dug up revealed no archaeological remains.

"No one can say right now if the oil pipeline has caused damage," said Lisa Ackerman, executive vice-president of the [World Monuments Fund](#) (WMF), a New York-based foundation for preserving architectural heritage, who works on the site with the Iraqi authorities. "But I think it's very likely that it crosses sensitive archaeological zones."

The pipeline is causing a furore in Iraq, said Dauge, because Babylon is still not listed as a World Heritage site, despite being one of the most prestigious archaeological locations in the world. The application was made several times under Saddam Hussein but was always turned down because of the "absence of any management and preservation plans for the site", she explained. That entails preparing the site to receive visitors, demarcating the boundaries, protecting the site, and so on.

"It is very important for Iraqis that Babylon be listed," explained Alessandra Peruzzetto, a WMF archaeologist who specialises in the Middle East. "But the new pipeline will damage the site's integrity, which is an important factor in assessing a site for listing." Dauge confirmed that the pipeline "will be an issue" if a new application is made – which is not yet the case.

Babylon's new scar will be just one more of many – all of which are recent. There were those resulting from Camp Alpha, a military base for the US and Polish armed forces established on the site's perimeter from April 2003 to December 2004. The levelling work carried out for the helicopter landing pads, and the trenches that were dug and later filled with landfill from elsewhere, caused much damage, as did the plundering of engraved ceramics and bricks.

A damage assessment report commissioned by Unesco in 2009 stated: "During their presence in Babylon, the US army and contractors employed by them, mainly KBR [a construction company], directly caused major damage to the city by digging, cutting, scraping, and levelling. Key structures that were damaged include the [Ishtar Gate](#) and the Processional Way."

"However," said Ackerman, "even though the armed forces' installation did cause damage, most of the destruction of the past few years has been due to the lack of conservation measures." Runoff, in particular, has devastated the monuments. Since 2007 WMF has been working with the Iraqi authorities to establish a site management plan, and has now begun conservation work on several key structures.

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