

## The Present Condition of Babylon

When I was asked to speak at this conference, the title I was given was “The Condition of Babylon in December 2004”, reflecting the fact that in December 2004 a meeting was held in Babylon to assess the condition of the site prior to its transfer from military control back to the care of the Iraq State Board for Antiquities and Heritage (hereafter SBAH). However, while it would be perfectly possible to speak about the condition of Babylon at that particular moment, it would be of greater interest and more meaningful to put this subject into a wider context and consider what happened at Babylon both before and after the period of military occupation. Therefore I am proposing to describe the situation at Babylon from the end of the German excavations in 1917 up to the present day, and accordingly I have changed the title of the lecture to “The Present Condition of Babylon”<sup>1</sup>.

In the course of the German excavations directed by Robert Koldewey between 1899 and 1917, much was discovered about the topography of ancient Babylon and many of the buildings in the centre of the ancient city were wholly or partially excavated.<sup>2</sup>

However, the remains of mudbrick buildings are notoriously difficult to preserve and once they are exposed to the elements they rapidly deteriorate. The disintegrating mudbrick buildings, plus the trenches and spoil tips that are a feature of all major excavations, combined to present a site that was difficult to interpret and visually unappealing. This is reflected in early views of the ruins (e.g. Fig. 1).

There were, it is true, some redeeming features. The foundations of the Ishtar Gate, with unglazed molded bricks showing bulls, lions and dragons, were still visible, and the Lion of Babylon was a well-known and popular attraction for visitors to the site. Although the site of the Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, has never been convincingly identified, they figured largely in the public imagination (e.g. Fig. 2).

All these features, combined with the fame and notoriety of ancient Babylon, were enough to ensure that after the state of Iraq came into existence in 1920, Babylon became one of the iconic symbols of the new state. Thus, the Lion of Babylon was shown on various Iraqi stamps from 1941 onwards (Fig. 3).

In an effort to improve the quality of the visitor experience at Babylon in the 1960s, the Ninmakh Temple was reconstructed in its entirety and in the centre of the ancient site a half-size replica of the above-ground part of the Ishtar gate was built, showing the brilliantly co-

1 See also J.E. Curtis, *The Site of Babylon Today*, in: I.L. Finkel/M.J. Seymour (eds.), *Babylon. Myth and Reality*, London 2008, 213–220.

2 R. Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon*, hg. von B. Hrouda, München 1990.



Fig. 1 | Postcard showing the 'Ruins of Babylon', 1932 (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 2 | Colored postcard featuring 'The Hanging Gardens of Babylon', c. 1935 (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 3 | 8-fils stamp showing the Lion of Babylon, first issued 1943 (J. E. Curtis).

lored glazed bricks with representations of bulls, lion and dragons (Fig. 4). The upper part of the gate had in fact been found in thousands of fragments which were taken to Berlin and painstakingly restored to produce the monument that is now visible in the Vorderasiatisches Museum. In spite of these welcome innovations at the site itself, however, Babylon still remained a disappointment for most visitors.

It was not altogether surprising, therefore, that Saddam Hussein should have attempted to turn Babylon into a symbol in keeping with his nationalistic ambitions for the republic of Iraq. Accordingly, the ‘Archaeological Restoration of Babylon Project’, managed by the SBAH, commenced on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1978, and had as its objective an ambitious and extensive reconstruction of the centre of the ancient city. Even the Iraq-Iran war, which began in September 1980, was not allowed to interfere with or hold up the plans for the reconstruction, which continued unabated. As early as 1982, a set of seven coins was issued commemorating the restoration project and bearing images of Babylon. These show the Ishtar Gate, the Lion of Babylon, the Stele of Hammurabi (now in the Louvre in Paris) and a reconstruction of the Babylon ziggurat. These coins were distributed in a presentation case together with a small metal tablet with a cuneiform inscription recording the fact that Saddam Hussein was the restorer of Babylon (Fig. 5). Hand in hand with the ‘restoration’ project was a large amount of excavation work undertaken by the SBAH, much of it reported on in *Sumer* volume 41.<sup>3</sup>

3 M. S. Demirji (ed.), *Researches on Babylon in the Two International Symposiums*, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, held in 1979 and 1981, *Sumer* XLI, Baghdad 1983.

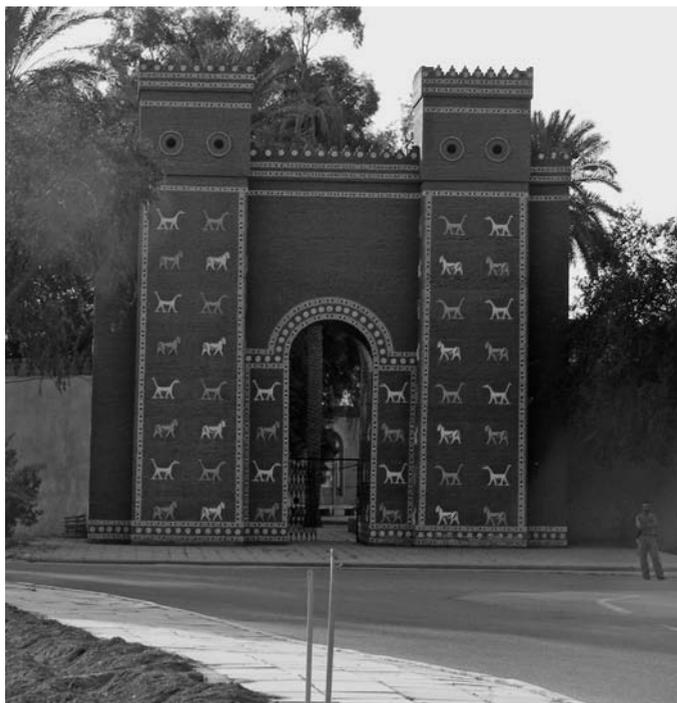


Fig. 4 | Half-sized replica of the Ishtar Gate in the centre of Babylon (J. E. Curtis).

The 'restoration' project was on a vast scale, and involved the creation of three artificial lakes on the site and the formation of three gigantic artificial mounds. On the top of one of these mounds, overlooking the site, a palace was built for Saddam Hussein. Also in the course of the 'restoration' project, the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BC), containing five major courtyards and about 250 rooms, was largely rebuilt. One of the grandest rooms, the throne room of Nebuchadnezzar II (the Al-'Arsh Hall), was adapted for use for concerts and receptions. The main entrance to the palace was rebuilt to a height of 30 m and many of the walls were rebuilt to a height of almost 20 m. For the reconstruction, new bricks were laid on top of bricks surviving from the original structure. Many of the original bricks were stamped with an inscription in Babylonian cuneiform of Nebuchadnezzar II, and Saddam Hussein continued this ancient practice by having many of the new bricks stamped with his own inscription in Arabic, reading in translation 'In the era of Saddam Hussein, protector of Iraq, who rebuilt the Royal Palace'. There was further restoration work on buildings including the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way, and on the Hellenistic period theatre, where seating was restored so that 2500 people could be accommodated for performances. Also, the Lion of Babylon was given pride of place in open ground adjacent to the Southern Palace. Clearly, much of the 'restoration' work undertaken at Babylon during the time of Saddam Hussein went far beyond what is normally acceptable and has been roundly condemned by conservation groups.

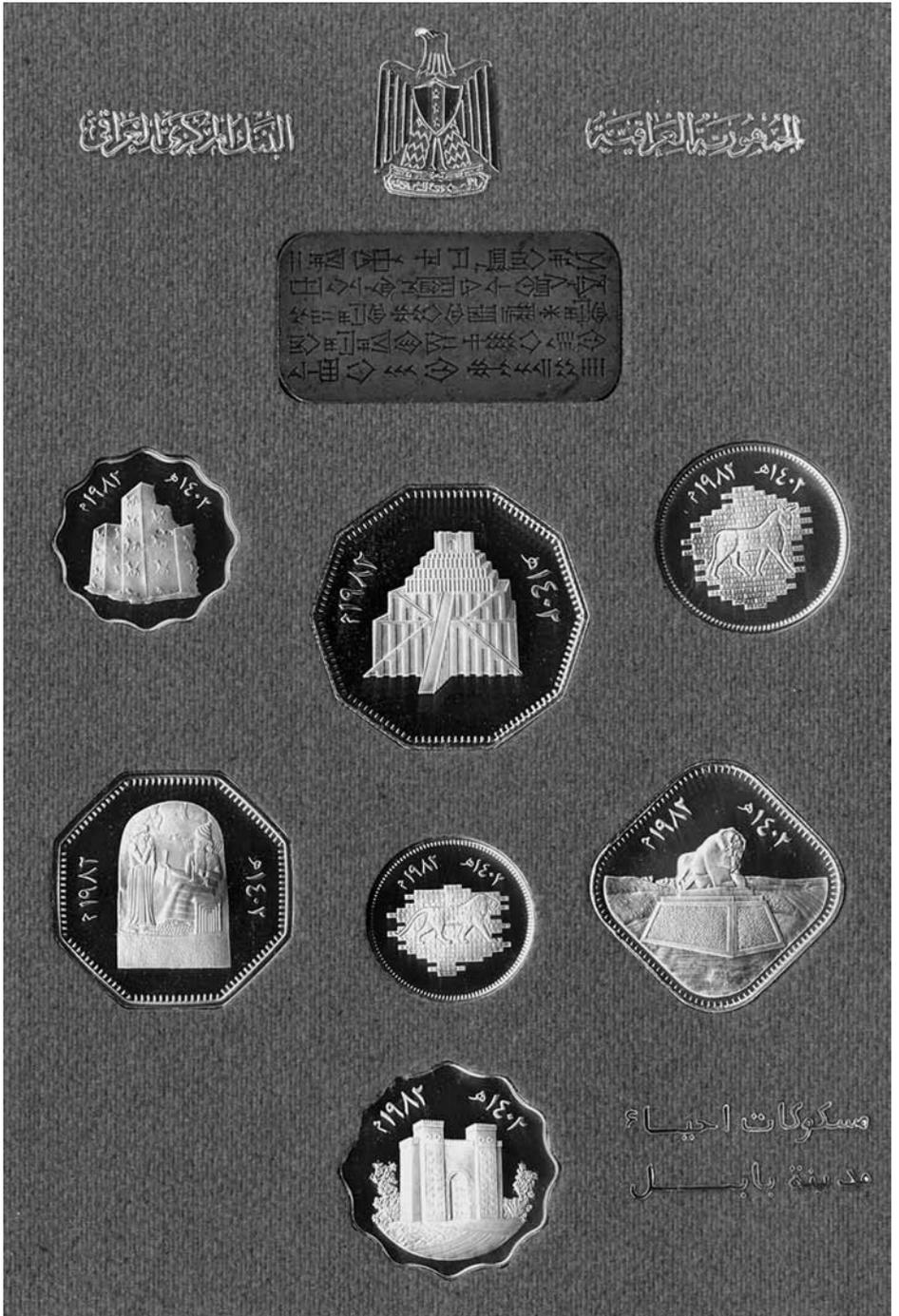


Fig. 5 | Set of 7 coins bearing images of Babylon issued in 1982 to commemorate the 'Archaeological Restoration of Babylon Project' (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 6 | Medal showing Saddam Hussein with Nebuchadnezzar issued to commemorate the First Babylon International Festival in 1987 (Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 7 | 25-dinar banknote issued in 2001 showing the Ishtar Gate and the Lion of Babylon (J. E. Curtis).

The first phase of the reconstruction project was mostly finished in time for the First Babylon International Festival in September 1987. This was a lavish event lasting for a month and featured music and dance by performers from about 30 different countries. In the promotional literature issued by the Festival Committee, Saddam Hussein was compared with great figures from Babylonian history like Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar II, and a special medal was issued showing the profile portrait of Saddam Hussein overlapping that of Nebuchadnezzar II (Fig. 6).

The 1988 festival was even grander, but lasted for only 10 days. There were processions of figures dressed in Babylonian costumes and playing music on Babylonian style musical instruments, and at the end of the Processional Way there were gigantic portraits of Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar II. After that, festivals were held nearly every year up until 2002, sometimes accompanied by an archaeological conference, and as late as 2001 a new 25 dinar banknote was issued showing on the reverse the Ishtar gate and the Lion of Babylon (Fig. 7).

In the time of Saddam Hussein, then, the treatment of Babylon was cavalier, to say the least, but it was treated with scarcely any more respect by coalition troops after 2003. To start with, there were few problems. Thus, during the invasion and conquest of Iraq by the USA and its allies in March-April 2003 there was relatively little damage at Babylon. The small museum near the entrance to the site had been cleared out and the entrance bricked up before the war began, which was a sensible precaution, but the nearby gift shop was looted and burnt. The only other damage noted by a British Museum group that visited the site on 18<sup>th</sup> June was to one of the *mušḫuššu* (dragon) figures in the foundations of the Ishtar Gate. Although Babylon had been established on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2003 as a 'Forward Combat Operations Centre' for American forces, who were soon joined by Polish troops, the military presence in June 2003 appeared to be still on a modest scale, even though there were American troops based in Saddam Hussein's palace and Polish military vehicles were parked quite close to the Ishtar Gate. However, this all changed after 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2003 when Babylon became Camp Alpha for the Multinational Division Central South. From this point onwards the camp escalated rapidly in size, so that at its greatest extent it covered 150 hectares in size and was home to 2000 troops. The camp was established right in the heart of ancient Babylon (Fig. 8), straddling the north wall of the Inner City and including many of the famous landmarks of Ancient Babylon such as the Ishtar Gate and the Lion of Babylon, the rebuilt Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II and the Greek Theatre, the restored Temples of Ninmakh, Ishtar and Nabu-ša-hare, and the Babylonian Houses. Most of the infrastructure works for the camp were contracted out to the firm KBR (Kellogg, Brown and Root), and entrances to the camp were given names such as Warsaw Gate, Reno Gate and Ronson Gate. These designations caused particular offence to the Iraqi staff at Babylon when existing Babylonian names could have been used.

During the summer of 2004, as news spread about the scale of military activity at Babylon, there was growing unease amongst the international community and an increasing number of complaints on the worldwide web. Foremost amongst those protesting about the desecration of Babylon was Professor Zeinab al-Bahrani of the University of Columbia. Such was the depth of feeling around the world, that at the end of December 2004 the coalition authorities took the decision to close down the camp and hand control of Babylon back to the Iraqi side (Fig. 9). In preparation for this handover, Polish archaeologists attached to the Polish forces prepared a lengthy document entitled *Report Concerning the Condition of the Preservation of the Babylon Archaeological Site*, which is a thorough survey describing, as its title implies, the condition of the site and the surviving and restored monuments.<sup>4</sup> It is an extremely useful piece of work, and an important source of reference, but what the report does not do is detail the damage caused between March 2003 and December 2004. Consequently, I was asked by Dr Mufid al-Jazairi, then Minister of Culture, to

4 M. Olbrys (ed.), *Report Concerning the Condition of the Preservation of the Babylon Archaeological Site*, privately distributed typescript and DVD, 2004.

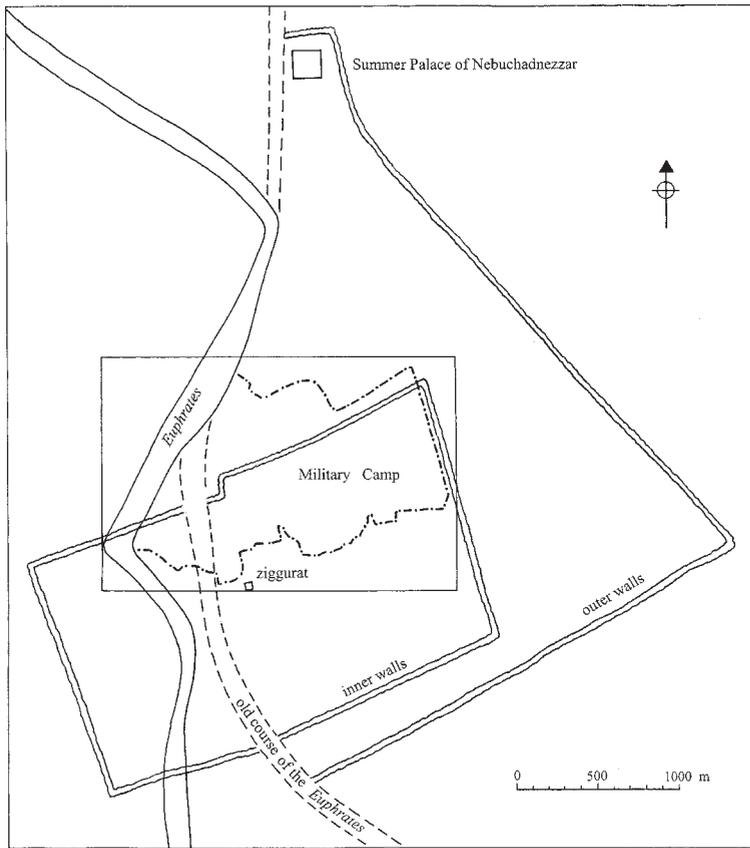


Fig. 8 | Greater Babylon showing the position of the military camp (J. E. Curtis).

attend the handover ceremony on 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> December 2004 and prepare an independent report on damage caused during the military occupation. This report was subsequently published on the British Museum website.<sup>5</sup> At the handover ceremony, participants in the meeting, including Mr Borhan Shaker of the SBAH, Dr Rene Teijgeler, then senior advisor of the US Embassy to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, the Polish Ambassador, Stanislaw Smolen, the Polish archaeologists, and several senior US army officers, were guided around the site by Dr Maryam Umran Musa and her two assistants, Mr Haidar Abdul Wahid and Mr Raed Hamed.

It quickly became clear that during the period of its occupation as a military camp substantial damage had been caused to ancient Babylon. We were shown 11 trenches dug by the military, often through previously undisturbed archaeological deposits. The longest of these was about 170 m long, 2 m deep and 1.0–1.5 m wide (Fig. 10).

5 J.E. Curtis, Report on meeting at Babylon 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> December 2004, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/iraqproject>.



Fig. 9 | The military camp at Babylon being dismantled in December 2004 (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 10 | A military trench just outside the southern boundary of the Babylon camp (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 11 | A military “cutting” at Babylon involving the removal of topsoil (J. E. Curtis).

It was just beyond the line of barbed wire marking the southern boundary of the camp, quite close to the site of the ancient ziggurat Etemenanki. The purpose of this ditch was apparently defensive, to prevent vehicles from driving right up to the wire. Thrown up on the sides of the trench were piles of earth containing pottery (potsherds and at least one complete pottery vessel), bones and fragments of brick with inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar II. Then, there were about 14 ‘cuttings’, areas where topsoil had been removed, probably by a mechanical shovel, sometimes to a depth of 6 m (Fig. 11).

The largest of these was an area measuring 30 m × 20 m. Again, the digging of these ‘cuttings’ was indiscriminate, in that while in some instances the earth that was removed may have been from old spoil-tips sometimes dating back to the German excavations, in other instances the earth probably came from previously undisturbed archaeological deposits. The next problem was the so-called ‘fuel farm’, an area where there had been gigantic tanks of fuel, separated by earthen berms (banks). It was here that the military vehicles had come to refuel (Fig. 12), and inevitably there had been considerable spillage and leakage, with the result that fuel will have worked its way down into the ground contaminating the archaeological deposits beneath.

Before the war, some areas of the site had been flattened and covered with gravel, including an area for helicopters to land, but during the construction of the camp this helipad was greatly enlarged and there was a vast increase in the amount of flattened area elsewhere, to provide a base for all the temporary structures needed for a military camp as well as parking lots for the military vehicles. Sometimes, the gravel laid on these flattened areas was chemically treated to keep down dust. In many places around the camp, but particularly in



Fig. 12 | The 'fuel farm' at Babylon (J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 13 | Sandbags, HESCO containers and concrete T-walls at Babylon (J. E. Curtis).

the vicinity of the gates, there were still in December 2004 large numbers of HESCO containers (Fig. 13).

These are large wire-mesh cages lined with fabric which are filled with earth. They serve the same purpose as sand-bags, but are very much bigger. The earth in many of these HESCO containers is mixed with potsherds, bones, and even fragments of inscribed brick (Fig. 14), showing that the earth comes from either undisturbed or redeposited archaeological contexts.

At some point in the life of the camp, it was pointed out that it was bad practice to fill these HESCO containers with earth from Babylon, so earth was then brought in from an undisclosed location outside the ancient city. The problem with this is that Iraq is effectively a vast archaeological site, and wherever one digs there is a high chance of finding archae-



Fig. 14 | HESCO containers at Babylon filled with archaeological deposits (J. E. Curtis).

ological remains. So, some of the HESCO containers will have been filled with archaeological deposits from outside Babylon, and when the containers disintegrate as they are designed to do (they are biodegradable) the contents will spill out contaminating the archaeological record at Babylon. Another problem is related to the driving of heavy military vehicles around the site. In many places wheel-marks and signs of surface disturbance were visible, but it is not usually clear how much damage this might have caused to the fragile archaeological deposits beneath. In one instance, however, it is painfully obvious. This is in the north part of the famous Processional Way, where original paving slabs have been broken by military vehicles which should never have been driven along this street (Fig. 15).

Arguably the most serious damage of all occurred in the Ishtar Gate. We mentioned above that in June 2003 damage was noted to one of the dragon (*mušhuššu*) figures in the foundations of the gate, but by December 2004 a further eight figures had been damaged, making a total of nine in all (Fig. 16). In every case the damage seems to have been caused by a souvenir hunter or hunters trying to remove molded bricks as mementoes. As this monument was in a secure military camp throughout this period, the implication must be that the damage was caused by a person or persons attached to the coalition forces. Lastly, it was pointed out to the inspection party that one of the roofs of the reconstructed Ninmakh Temple had collapsed, allegedly as a result of vibration caused by helicopter movements.

This violation of the site of Babylon caused anger and outrage around the world, and many people turned to UNESCO as the most appropriate body to assess and redress the situation. Consequently, UNESCO convened a meeting of experts for a special session on Babylon at its Paris headquarters on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2005, and this was followed by a second special session in Berlin on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2005, to coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Ro-



Fig. 15 | Broken paving-slabs along the Processional Way at Babylon (J. E. Curtis).

bert Koldewey. A third special session took place in Paris on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2007. This lengthy delay between the second and third sessions was occasioned by the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq. At all three meetings, the participants called for the establishment of an ICC<sup>6</sup> sub-committee ‘for the protection, conservation and management of the archaeological site of Babylon’, and they requested that a full assessment of the damage caused to Babylon in the period March 2003 to December 2004 should be drawn up, based on reports by the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), the report by the Polish archaeologists referred to above, my own report, and information supplied by individuals including Professor Elizabeth Stone, Professor R. Parapetti, and Professor John Russell. The preparation of this assessment should be coordinated by Dr Margarete van Ess. The first meeting of the ICC Babylon sub-committee finally took place in Berlin on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2008. A draft assessment was produced based principally on the SBAH report, but drawing on the other sources referred to above. At the time of writing (March 2009), it is hoped that the UNESCO report will be published shortly. After the Berlin meeting, Tamar Teneishvili<sup>7</sup> and I visited Babylon 25<sup>th</sup>–27<sup>th</sup> February 2008 at the request of UNESCO to check some final details for the report and also to ascertain whether there had been further damage at the site since December 2004<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the inspection team found no evidence of signifi-

6 International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq.

7 Tamar Teneishvili is attached to the UNESCO office for Iraq in Amman.

8 This visit was facilitated by Diane Siebrandt (Cultural Heritage Liaison Officer in the US Embassy, Baghdad) and Dr Ismail Hijara (Cultural Advisor to the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team). Thanks are also due to Dr Maryam Umran Musa who again guided the inspection party around the site.



Fig. 16 | Dr Maryam Umran Musah pointing out damage to a *mušhuššu* (dragon) figure in the Ishtar Gate at Babylon (J. E. Curtis).

cant damage, either malicious or accidental, since December 2004. However, there is much evidence of deterioration resulting from neglect and lack of maintenance, particularly with the reconstructed buildings.

The ICC sub-committee also recommended that UNESCO should be involved with the SBAH in drawing up a management plan for the site of Babylon. At the same time, the US government has awarded a grant to the World Monuments Fund to enable that body to draw up a conservation plan together with the SBAH and the Getty Conservation Institute. It is to be hoped that all these bodies can work effectively together under the auspices of the SBAH to produce a conservation management plan that is worthy of the site of Babylon. It is also to be hoped that Babylon will soon become a World Heritage Site. It was included by the Iraq government on their tentative list on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2003, but it is yet to be accorded World Heritage Site status.

## ADDENDUM

The UNESCO 'Final Report on Damage Assessment in Babylon', edited by Margarete van Ess and John Curtis, accompanied by a CD containing reports by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (Iraq), the Bureau of Defence Matters (Poland), Dr John Curtis, Prof Elizabeth Stone, and Prof Roberto Parapetti, was published in Paris on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009.

For a comprehensive survey of recent events at the site of Babylon see now Roberto Parapetti 'Babylon 1978-2008'<sup>9</sup>. There is also some discussion of the stratigraphy of Babylon in the areas of the Ninmakh Temple and the Ishtar Gate in W. Allinger-Csollich, S. Heinsch and W. Kuntner<sup>10</sup>.

9 R. Parapetti, *Babylon 1978-2008*, *Mesopotamia* XLIII (2008), 129–166.

10 W. Allinger-Csollich/S. Heinsch/W. Kuntner, *Babylon. Past, present, future. The project "comparative studies Babylon-Borsippa": a synopsis*, in: *Proceedings of the 6th International Congress of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, Wiesbaden 2010, 29–38.

