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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

Round-table discussion open to the public

Safeguarding Iraqi Archaeological Heritage: Current Challenges and Achievements

17 October, 15:00-17:30 pm UNESCO, Paris,
Room XIII (Bonvin Building, 1 rue Miollis, Paris 15)



The exceptional archaeological heritage of Iraq - which includes such world-famous sites as Babylon, Nimrud and Ur - has suffered decades of neglect accentuated by war and insecurity as of 2003. Museums and sites have been looted, and many have been bombed or damaged by warring parties. Security concerns have also impeded access to areas rich in antiquities, and the supplying of equipment for conservation and restoration.

At a more structural level, the field of archaeology and heritage conservation in Iraq suffers weaknesses in terms of human capacities, expertise, and training as many leading archeologists, heritage specialists and academics have left the country. Other major challenges include the adoption and enforcement of international bylaws for the protection and restitution of cultural properties, the need to reform curricula in archaeology and conservation to meet international standards, and the yet underdeveloped capacities of specialized government institutions.

Since 2003, the terrible consequences of neglect and conflict on the archaeological heritage of the country have been the subject of several expert and news reports, exhibitions and international cooperation programmes. Much less attention has been given to what Iraqi specialists and institutions have achieved so far with or without international support. Credit needs to be given to a dedicated group of Iraqi antiquity and conservation specialists who pursue considerable efforts to rebuild a domestic capacity for the protection of the country's archeological sites, artifacts and museums within the particularly challenging context of conflict and political transition. Thanks to a slowly improving security situation since 2007, archaeological excavations have resumed involving the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and international teams. Initiatives have been developed for the conservation and rehabilitation of some major archeological sites, to protect remote areas from looting and the illegal trade of antiquities, to ensure the restitution of cultural property sold on international markets, and to train heritage specialists in Iraq and outside. The institutional framework was recently reinforced with the enactment of a law to upgrade the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to the status of a full-fledged ministry.

There remains however enormous needs in terms of strategic planning, infrastructure development for sites and museums, efficient protection of sites, excavation campaigns, restoration and conservation, international cooperation particularly in the area of restitution of stolen or illicitly exported cultural property, and training for existing government staff at the national and regional levels and for the new generation of heritage specialists.

This round-table, bringing together some of the most prominent Iraqi and international experts in the field, will look at where Iraq stands today in the area of archeological heritage safeguarding.

Presentations and debate between panelists will be followed by Q&A with the public.

Panelists

1.

Looting, illicit trafficking and the international restitution of stolen or illegally exported cultural property

- Mr. Abbas Al Mahdi, Director of Restitution Department/ Deputy Director, Iraqi National Museum, Iraqi States Board of Antiquities and Heritage
- Dr Ridha Fraoua, Legal Expert in the illicit trafficking and restitution of cultural property, Switzerland

2.

Achievements and needs in institutional development and capacity-building for archaeological research and heritage conservation

- Mr. Qais Rasheed, Director General of Manuscripts, Iraqi States Board of Antiquities and Heritage
 - Dr. Margarete Van Ess, Scientific Director, German Archaeological Institute, Berlin
- Dr John Curtis, Keeper of Special Middle East Projects, The British Museum