

Inspection of Babylon on behalf of UNESCO 25th – 29th February 2009

Introduction

Following the recommendation made at the first official meeting of the ICC Babylon subcommittee in Berlin on 25th June 2008, an inspection of Babylon on behalf of UNESCO was made on the three successive days 25th – 27th February 2009. The purpose of this mission was firstly to ascertain whether there had been further damage to Babylon since the compilation of the various reports that have been drawn on for the draft UNESCO Report on Damage Assessments in Babylon, and secondly to check some specific details for the UNESCO Report.

The inspection team (Fig. 1) comprised Dr John Curtis (British Museum), Tamar Teneishvili (UNESCO Office for Iraq in Amman), Diane Siebrandt (Cultural Heritage Liaison Officer in the US Embassy, Baghdad), Dr Ismail Hijara (Cultural Advisor to the Babil Provincial Reconstruction team), Ambassador Stanislaw Smolen (Polish Embassy, Baghdad, on 25th and 27th February), Grzegorz Wielogorka (Protection Officer for Ambassador Smolen (on 25th and 27th February), Lt Col Alan Marshall (Deputy Military Advisor, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq), and Mezmel Abu Karaki (UNAMI Security Officer).

Arrangements for the mission were made by Tamar Teneishvili, Diane Siebrandt, and Lt Col Marshall, and the visit was facilitated by the US Embassy in Baghdad and by the US army. Grateful thanks are due to all of these individuals and organizations.

We were accommodated in the US Regional Embassy Office at Hillah, and particular thanks are due to Kenneth Hillas, Leader of the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team, and Ari Nathan, Economic Officer of the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team, for their hospitality and assistance. A protection force was provided by the 1st Squadron, 10th US Cavalry Regiment, commanded by Lt Col William Benson.

We were led around the site by Dr Maryam Umran Musah (Director of Babylon), who as ever was unfailingly helpful and courteous and always ready to share with us her unrivalled knowledge of the site. Iraqi colleagues that accompanied Dr Maryam on all three days and also contributed greatly to the proceedings were Haidar Abdul Wahid, Raed Hamid, Aeed Ghalib al-Taee (Director of Babylon Museum), Muna Mohammed Jawad Ali, Mathem Hamza Sheed, and Jawad Mohammed Jawad.

There was no attempt to replicate previous inspection work at the site, so many areas where there was known to have been damage were not visited. Instead, we focused on areas that I had not visited during my tour of inspection in December 2004 (see <http://www.britishmuseum.org/iraq> Babylon meeting and Report 2004-5), or on areas where a revisitation might prove to be informative.

The Reconstructed Ishtar Gate

Two of the bull figures on the modern half-size reconstruction of the Ishtar gate at the entrance to the site have been broken away. They were sculpted from wood and were mounted on doors on opposite sides at the back of the gate. This damage is probably accidental rather than deliberate.

The Shop

The shop that was looted and burnt out in 2003 has now been repaired and restocked, but it was closed at the time of our visit.

Babylon Museum

It remains closed and boarded up.

The Ištār Gate

By June 2003 one of the dragon (*mušhuššu*) figures in the Gate had been damaged, and by December 2004 a further eight figures had been damaged, making nine in all. We were assured that there had been no further damage since December 2004, but it is possible that there has been some further degradation in the areas of damage as a result of weathering. It would only be possible to verify this by careful comparison of photographs taken in December 2004 with photographs taken now. One difficulty confronting the assessment team was that brick debris and rubbish resulting from earlier damage have not been cleaned up, so that it is impossible to see whether any fragments have fallen recently. It is suggested that this area should be cleaned up as a matter of urgency. Apart from the moulded brick figures, it is clear that some sections of walling, particularly near the base of the foundations, are in urgent need of repair and consolidation.

The Ninmakh Temple

In December 2004 the roof of just one room of this reconstructed temple had collapsed (Room VC), but there are now three more collapsed roofs (Rooms NO, O1 and C). In each case, the poplar beams supporting the reed matting and mud plaster have broken causing part of the roof to fall in (Fig. 2). Other roofs in this temple are also in a dangerous condition, and further collapse is likely. Many of the poplar beams are sagging, cracked and sometimes broken. Note there are some discrepancies between the published plan and the plan of the temple as it is now visible.

For a plan of this temple, see Robert Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon* (ed. by B. Hrouda, Munich 1990), fig. 38a on p. 69.

Nabu-ša-hare Temple

There is partial wall collapse in three different rooms of this reconstructed temple that is alleged to have happened since 2004 (Fig. 3). In each case sections of wall up to a depth of two rows of bricks have collapsed. The collapsed sections of wall are partly original and partly restoration, and were covered during the restoration with a thick coat of modern plaster. It is likely that it is the weight of this plaster that has caused the walls to collapse, probably combined with rainwater seeping into the middle of the wall through leaking roofs above. The collapses are as follows:

(i) In the room to the south of the smaller courtyard (Room 22). The area of collapse in the south wall is *c.* 8m long and *c.* 3m high, to a depth of two rows of bricks.

(ii) In the room to the north-west of the main courtyard (Room 9). The area of collapse in the east wall (north of the doorway) is *c.* 7m long and *c.* 2m high to a depth of one row of bricks. The north wall of this room is also ready to collapse.

(iii) In the room to the north-east of the main courtyard (Room 7). The area of collapse in the north wall (west of the doorway) is *c.* 5m long and *c.* 3m high to a depth of one row of bricks. In this case, the heavy plaster has been fixed on to the wall with modern iron pins driven into the ancient brickwork.

The roofs of this temple are in poor condition. A few of the poplar beams have rotted and fallen, and others are broken. Some of the roofs will soon collapse if they are not repaired or replaced as a matter of urgency.

For the plan of this temple, see D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon* (London 1985), fig. 9 on p. 66; *Polish Report on Babylon* (2004), § XIII on p. 421.

The Ištar Temple

There is a bad crack in the outside wall of this reconstructed temple at the south-east corner of the building that needs urgent attention (Fig.4). In addition, replastering is badly needed (i) on the outer façade of the building on the east wall to the north of the doorway, and (ii) on internal walls throughout the building.

For a plan of this temple, see Koldewey, *op. cit.*, fig. 244 on p. 287, and *Sumer XXXV* (1979), p.76.

The Babylonian Houses

Both of the reconstructed Babylonian houses situated between the Nabu-ša-hare Temple and the Ishtar Temple are badly in need of external replastering (Fig. 5).

The Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar

The Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar was the centre piece of the restoration work under Saddam. This vast building, covering an area of more than 4 hectares, and containing five courtyards and about 250 other rooms, was entirely rebuilt. The reconstructed arch at the main entrance to the palace is 30 m high, and many of the walls have been rebuilt to a height of 18 m. In many cases, but not always, the new walls are built on top of surviving original walls and use new bricks sometimes stamped with an Arabic inscription giving the name and achievements of Saddam Hussein. It is clear that throughout the building there is a problem with rising damp in the walls, and in many places the paved floors show signs of buckling up, presumably because of underground water. The problems are particularly acute in the Throneroom and in Courtyard 1 (“Osthof”). These matters will be complex and costly to resolve.

For a plan of the Southern Palace, see Koldewey, *op. cit.*, fig. 44 on p. 80, and *Sumer* XLI (1983), p. 25 (Arabic section).

Inner Walls

The reconstructed south face of the Inner Fortification Wall, to the north of the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar, is in poor condition and in urgent need of repair. Some rebuilding appears to be necessary in addition to extensive replastering, and lack of maintenance has led to some erosion of the surviving original brickwork.

For the reconstruction of the inner wall, see Ahmed Kamil, ‘The inner wall of Babylon’, *Sumer* XXXV (1979), pp. 137-149.

Firing Positions

Working from satellite photographs, Elizabeth Stone and John Russell had identified more than 100 Iraqi firing positions dating from the period immediately prior to or during the invasion of 2003. Dr Maryam Umran Musah is of the view that there are only 14 firing positions of this sort, which we were taken to. All 14 firing positions are in the area to the north of the Southern Palace and west of the Processional Street. We looked carefully in this area, and we are confident that there are no further firing positions in this part of the site. The firing positions are very distinctive, and cannot be easily missed (Fig. 6). They are mostly rectangular trenches, varying in length from 3.0 m to 3.8 m and in width from 0.75 m to 1.9 m, and about 1 m deep. A few of the trenches were crescentic in shape, one was oval and one was L-shaped. The firing positions are located as follows:

FP 1
N 32° 32.617’
E 44° 25.325’

FP 2
N 32° 32.603’

E 44° 25.298'

FP 3

N 32° 32.594'

E 44° 25.274'

FP 4

N 32° 32.594'

E 44° 25.262'

FP 5

N 32° 32.591'

E 44° 25.251'

FP 6

N 32° 32.588'

E 44° 25.240'

FP 7

N 32° 32.595'

E 44° 25.214'

FP 8

N 32° 32.585'

E 44° 25.213'

FP 9

N 32° 32.581'

E 44° 25.188'

FP 10

N 32° 32.581'

E 44° 25.183'

FP 11

N 32° 32.576'

E 44° 25.180'

FP 12

N 32° 32.606'

E 44° 25.182'

FP 13 is *c.* 5m. west of: N 32° 32.602'

E 44° 25.173'

Not inspected: other side of barbed wire

FP 14 is c. 100m north of the Lion of Babylon Not inspected – beyond barbed wire

Trenches near the Ziggurat

We visited again the two long trenches in the area of Etemenanki (c. 170m and c. 45m long respectively, partly dug through previously undisturbed archaeological deposits) and found that there had been some collapse of the sides of the trenches coupled with growth of vegetation in the bottoms of the trenches and on the spoil-tips at the sides. Just to the north of these trenches is a barbed wire barrier delimiting the camp on the south side, and Lt Col Alan Marshall was of the view that the purpose of the trenches was to stop cars, trucks and lorries from driving into and possibly over the barbed wire. He informs me they are therefore vehicle obstacles but definitely not fighting trenches which would have been zigzagged. Inside the barbed wire we saw at least three 2-man fighting positions approximately 100m apart.

Between the two long trenches near the ziggurat there is a large rubbish dump of fragments of concrete slab. Dr Maryam informed us they were deposited here at the time of the building of Saddam's Palace. The removal of this dump will need to be part of the site management plan.

We revisited Trench 9 of the SBAH Report to the south-west of the Nabu-ša-hare Temple (Map Point 25) and are able to confirm that it is an Iraqi firing position presumably dating from the period immediately prior to or during the invasion of 2003. This trench measures c. 14m x 3.50m, with a depth of 2.60m. There are banks of earth on three sides, and it is open at the south end. At the closed north end, there are sandbags to a height of c. 0.7 m above the floor (originally they might have continued to the top of the trench). It is thought that this was either a pit for a mortar or a "scrape" for a command vehicle. When SBAH staff were cleaning up this trench they found part of a skeleton and a glazed pottery vessel.

The Greek Theatre

In the reconstructed Greek Theatre the roofs over the east, west and north porticoes of the entrance courtyard have now gone. It is believed that the roofs collapsed when the poplar beams were looted in 2003. The building at the back of the auditorium (i.e. on the north side of the banks of seats) is in relatively good condition, but all the glass is now missing. In the southern room some marble panels were looted and the doors taken, but the ornamental plasterwork in both the southern and northern rooms is relatively good condition, except where it has been damaged by the forceful removal of the chandeliers. The mural panels of the Saddam period on the north and south sides of this building (one with an Assyrian theme, the other with a modern Iraqi theme) are undamaged.

For an account of the re-excavation and restoration of this theatre, see Mohammed Said Mohammed Ali, 'The Greek Theatre', in *Sumer XXXV* (1979), pp. 94-111, and for a plan of the theatre as excavated, see Koldewey, *op. cit.*, fig. 253 on p. 295.

Houses and Gardens

It is well known that in the time of Saddam a number of buildings (guest-houses, pavilions, offices, etc) were constructed in an area measuring approximately 300m x 200m bordering the river and to the south-west of the Sadddam Palace mound. Now, in defiance of the wishes of the SBAH, the Governor of Babil Province, Mr Salim Salah Mahdi al-Muslimawi, has moved people (thought to be Governorate employees) into these buildings. Although there are no new buildings as far as is known, the new residents have created gardens, lawns and vegetable patches. Furthermore, the Governor has flattened the ground between the area of modern buildings and the artificial mound with a bulldozer, and he has planted palm-trees and created gardens. These developments have been unsuccessfully opposed by officials of the SBAH, who rightly believe that they are inappropriate for an archaeological site of national and international importance.

The Garden across the River

On the west bank of the river, opposite the residential area and the Palace Mound, the Governor is in the process of creating a garden about 700m long and 150m wide (Fig. 7). The whole area has been flattened and covered with picnic tables. This garden may be just outside the walls of the inner city, but this is uncertain. In any case, it is highly likely that there are archaeological remains in this area. Again, this development is strongly opposed by the SBAH.

The Palace of Saddam Hussein

In contrast to some other public buildings, the Palace of Saddam Hussein at Babylon was not extensively looted in 2003. Much of the decorative woodwork, carved plaster decoration and marble paneling is still in position, but on the upper floors the marble balustrades are broken and missing in places. There are many graffiti on the upper floors, some evidently written by coalition soldiers (Fig. 8). The interior of the building is very dirty, and there has been no attempt to clean it since 2003. There are no indications that the building has been used for any purpose since 2003, and we were assured that this was indeed the case.

In December 2008, a document entitled 'General Repair Requirements and Cost Estimate for the Babylon Palace' was prepared for the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team by the US 729th Facility Engineer Detachment.

On the slopes of the artificial mound on which the Saddam's Palace is built, bushes, shrubs and palm trees have been planted and are being carefully tended and watered.

Tell Babil

The large and impressive mound of Tell Babil, otherwise known as “the Summer Palace of Nebuchadnezzar”, in the northern corner of the outer town, appeared to be in good condition. Extensive quarrying for bricks over the centuries, and excavations both by German archaeologists between 1899 and 1917 (Koldewey, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-24) and by Iraqi archaeologists in the 1970s (*Sumer XXXV* (1979), pp. 150-159) have left the surface of the mound pitted and scarred, but there are no signs of recent interference or of attempts to collect the interesting potsherds and other fragments scattered around the site. There is rolled barbed wire all around the base of the site, and we were informed that nobody is allowed to enter without permission. The site is looked after by two guards, one of whom was present during the inspection. Very little rubbish was observed on the mound, and there does not seem to have been any recent encroachment (i.e. buildings, etc.) around the base of the mound.

Just one firing-point was observed, facing south-east on the crest of the mound (N 32° 33.936', E 44° 25.531'). It is an oval trench, measuring 2.40m x 1.20m, and 0.70m deep. It is thought to be an Iraqi trench, dating from before or during the coalition invasion.

On the east side of the site there is a double carriageway road inside the city wall. This used to be the main Hillah – Baghdad road, but it is now used only for local traffic since the construction of a new double carriageway highway outside the city walls in the 1980s. Between the old and the new roads, beyond the city walls but only c. 400-500 m south-east of the edge of the mound, is the smoking chimney of a brick kiln.

Conclusions

It is gratifying that there are no signs of malicious or accidental damage to the site of Babylon since December 2004. The major problems now arise from neglect and lack of maintenance. The restored buildings at Babylon are all in poor condition, particularly the Ninmakh Temple, the Nabu-ša-hare Temple, the Ištar Temple, the Babylonian Houses and the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar, and they need urgent attention. Apart from the long-term structural problems, a number of these buildings are in a dangerous condition, posing a real threat to visitors. The scale of this problem should not be underestimated. It will be a daunting task to render these reconstructed buildings stable and safe, particularly the Southern Palace where if it not addressed the rising damp will surely cause serious long-term problems.

On a more positive note, since the departure of coalition troops in December 2004, the site of Babylon has been well guarded. We were informed that there are presently 121 policemen from the Iraqi Facilities Protection Service (FPS). They live in portacabins around the site, mostly close to guard towers. They do not live in the Palace, which remains empty and unswept. Access to the site is a problem, and is the subject of a dispute between the Governor of Babil Province and the SBAH staff. The Governor believes that he has a responsibility for the site, which is strongly denied by SBAH staff who point out that they are the custodians of all archaeological sites in Iraq. The site

effectively remains closed to ordinary visitors, but is opened, apparently by the Governor, on special occasions. For example, on 28th November 2008, 400-500 attendees at a Tourism Conference in Baghdad were invited to Babylon, were given a meal in one of the public buildings, and were allowed to wander around the ruins at will (information from Geoff Hann of Hinterland Travel). In addition, the Governor is known to have organized various types of entertainment within the precincts of the archaeological site, and permanent residents in the complex of modern buildings presumably have free access to come and go. In July 2008, it was announced that Iraq's Investment Committee was studying proposals from US and Russian firms to turn Saddam's Palace into a casino. This is clearly a most unsatisfactory situation that needs to be resolved as soon as possible. It needs to be determined whether the site (including Saddam's Palace) should be closed completely, whether there should be a partial re-opening, or whether there should be a full re-opening. If there is to be a partial or a full re-opening, then certain measures will have to be urgently undertaken, namely (i) clean up debris in places such as the Istar Gate; ii) consolidate areas of damage, so that the situation does not get worse; and (iii) render the restored buildings stable and safe.

Recommendations

- 1 The site should be cleaned up (e.g. Istar Gate) but with care being taken not to remove evidence of damage.
- 2 Access to certain parts of the site (e.g. the Etemenanki area and the reconstructed buildings in dangerous condition) should be restricted.
- 3 Building activities, leveling works and replanting schemes should cease immediately.
- 4 There should be clarity on who is the controlling authority at the site.
- 5 There should be agreed procedures for admitting visitors to the site.

J. E. Curtis



1. The inspection team in front of the Lion of Babylon



2. A collapsed roof in the Ninmakh Temple



3. A collapsed wall in the Nabu- sha-hare Temple



4. A crack in the wall of the Ishtar Temple



5. External wall of a Babylonian house in need of replastering



6. A firing position to the north of the Southern Palace



7. The newly created garden on the west bank of the Euphrates



8. Graffiti in the former palace of Saddam Hussein