

# Babylon meeting and report 2004-5

## Visit to the archaeological site of Babylon

Babylon is unquestionably one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. It was the capital city of two of the most famous kings of antiquity, Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC) who introduced the world's first lawcode, and Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BC) who built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the World.



Excavations at Babylon during the last 150 years have uncovered some parts of the city but much remains buried beneath the earth and there is still a great deal to discover about the ancient city.

In view of the historical and archaeological significance of Babylon, reported allegations of damage to the site during its occupation as a military camp were particularly serious.

At the invitation of Iraqi Minister of Culture Mufid al-Jazairi, John Curtis joined a meeting at Babylon 11–13 December 2004 convened prior to its handover by the coalition forces to the Iraqi SBAH. The meeting was called to consider a condition report prepared by archaeologists attached to the Polish military. John Curtis was asked by Dr al-Jazairi to prepare an independent assessment.

## Report on meeting at Babylon and damage to the site

Following John Curtis' 2004 visit to Babylon, a report was published on 15 January 2005 detailing damage to that site, attracting a great deal of press interest all around the world.

*Report on meeting at Babylon 11 - 13 December 2004*

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The conclusions and principal recommendations are summarised below.

## **Conclusions**

- About one dozen trenches, the largest 170m long, and about one dozen cuttings, have been made both into previously undisturbed archaeological deposits and into tips or mounds from earlier excavations. In these trenches were found pottery (including a complete vase), bones and fragments of brick with cuneiform inscriptions.
- About 300,000 sq. metres of the site have been covered with gravel, sometimes compacted and chemically treated, to be used as a helipad and to create spaces for vehicle parks, accommodation, storage, etc. All the gravel has been brought in from elsewhere, and will in due course work its way into the archaeological deposits, irrevocably contaminating them.
- Around the site are thousands of sandbags and HESCO barriers that were originally filled with earth scooped up from the Babylon archaeological site (the presence of sherds and bones in the bags is a testimony to the archaeological nature of the deposits used) and from 3rd November 2003 onwards filled with sand and earth brought in from outside Babylon, sometimes no doubt from archaeological sites, thus exacerbating the problem even further.
- In many parts of the site are wheel marks deriving from the movement of heavy vehicles, and damage is also likely to have been caused by the extensive helicopter traffic at the site.
- There is evidence of environmental pollution (fuel seepage) in the area of the Fuel Farm. This is likely to have a deleterious effect on the archaeological deposits beneath.
- There is damage to 9 of the moulded brick figures of dragons in the Ishtar Gate, in one case serious damage to the body of the figure.
- The brick pavement in the south part of the 6th century BC Processional Way has been broken by driving a heavy vehicle along it.
- Parts of the roof of the (reconstructed) Ninmah Temple have collapsed.

## **Principal recommendations**

- A full-scale international investigation should be launched into the damage done to the archaeological site of Babylon during its occupation by coalition forces.
- All disturbed areas should be investigated, recorded and published by archaeologists appointed by the Iraqi Board of Antiquities and Heritage.
- The Iraq Government should be urged to propose Babylon for inclusion on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites as soon as possible.
- Once there has been a proper assessment of the damage, the international community should provide every assistance to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage to enable them to draw up a site management plan for Babylon.

The report produced by Polish specialists may be found online at

**[www.mk.gov.pl/docs/irak/](http://www.mk.gov.pl/docs/irak/)**