

Australian scholar visits important Iraqi heritage sites to assess war damage

Iraq is the birthplace of human civilization and the country has a rich and proud history that dates back to more than 3500 BCE. In addition to the many great achievements of Ancient Mesopotamia, Iraq was the capital of the Islamic empire during the Abbasid period (750-1258 CE) in which key innovation were made in astronomy, philosophy, politics, law, science, and medicine.

However, since the invasion and military occupation of Iraq from 2003, Iraq's rich cultural heritage has suffered terribly.

Museums, libraries and art galleries have been looted with devastating efficiency; mosques, churches and historic markets have been bombed in deliberate ethno-religious sectarian motivated attacks; coalition military bases have been set up at very sensitive archaeological sites; and professional black market operatives have dug and smashed their way through the ancient catacombs of Iraq's many archaeological sites in search of treasures from the ancient world to sell on the international black market for antiquities.

In light of these dramatic and devastating events, Deakin University's Dr Benjamin Isakhan is currently conducting field work in Iraq in order to develop the world's first database that documents the destruction of heritage in Iraq.

Dr Isakhan, from the University's Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, heads a significant research team of Australians, Americans and Iraqis who will work together to build the database over the next three years (2012-15). Funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council's Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) scheme, Dr Isakhan's research will not only include several trips to Iraq to assess damage done to various heritage sites, but also interviews and archival work in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

The purpose of the database is not only to enable policy formation towards the minimization of heritage destruction during times of conflict, it also aims to list the heritage sites in Iraq that most urgently need protection and restoration from the Iraqi government and the international community.

During his current trip, Dr Isakhan has been able to visit several sites of historical significance that have been severely damaged since 2003.

Perhaps the most well-known example was the looting of the Iraq National Museum (INM) immediately after the fall of Baghdad on 9th April 2003. Over the course of three days, hundreds of looters set fires, smashed cabinets, stole documents and equipment and destroyed much of what they could not remove.

In total around fifteen thousand objects were stolen from the galleries and stores of the museum, ranging from Sumerian cylinder seals to Hatrean statues. Other statues and relics in the INM were damaged during the bombing of Baghdad, including a statue of the Assyrian god of Wisdom, Ea, which fell of its mantle and sustained heavy damage from the fall.

Following the looting, an amnesty program was set up in which objects could be returned without question or reprimand. This has seen some 6000 objects returned to the INM.

Dr Isakhan met with the Director General of the Museum, Dr Amira Edan, who gave him an update on the restoration projects going on at the INM. Among the many significant projects was the

restoration of entire wings of the museum and the repair of significant objects damaged in the looting.

This has included the restoration of the statue of Ea which now stands proudly in the Assyrian wing of the Museum; a metaphor for the triumph of wisdom over war and the enduring spirit of the Iraqi people.



[Photo Caption: Damaged during the bombing of Baghdad in 2003, the statue of the Assyrian god of Wisdom, Ea, has been carefully restored by staff at the Iraq National Museum. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]

Dr Isakhan has also been able to visit the ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon.

Babylon is among the most important cities of Ancient Mesopotamia and one of the world's most significant archaeological sites dating back to 3000 BCE when it was a small city-state.

It later came to prominence around 1800 BCE and served as the capital of the Babylonian Empire. It was once ruled by the famous King Hammurabi who developed a sophisticated set of laws to govern his empire (the Hammurabi Code). Later, King Nebuchadnezzar II is credited with building the Ishtar Gates as well as the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. At the height of his empire, Alexander the Great made Babylon his capital and in fact died there in 323 BCE.

In April 2003, the Coalition made the unfortunate and ill-advised decision to turn the ancient site into a military base known as "Camp Alpha".

They did a great deal of damage to the site: they dug trenches through sensitive parts of the site; they scraped and levelled parts of the site in order to build a car park for military and other heavy

equipment, to build living quarters and to build two helipads; they did damage to the Ishtar Gate and the Procession Street of the ancient city; and there is evidence that coalition soldiers took “souvenirs” (looted) home from the site including bricks from the walls and tablets with cuneiform writing on them.

Dr Isakhan was able to tour the ancient site and make detailed assessments of much of the damage that has occurred. He also met with senior Iraqi archaeologists on the site who informed him about the damage that had been done and the ongoing effort to protect the site from further destruction. One of the biggest problems that the site faces today is neglect with parts of the site showing evidence of disrepair while at other parts important archaeological relics are left exposed to the elements.



[Photo Caption: Parts of the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan standing next to the walls of Babylon from which bricks have clearly been removed since 2003. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan inspects a cuneiform tablet found lying on the ground at the ancient city of Babylon, the fragile tablet is left exposed to the elements. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Part of the ancient site of Babylon – to the left are ancient ruins; to the right is the part of the site that the US levelled in order to create a car park for heavy machinery and for helipads. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]

Whilst at Babylon, Dr Isakhan also toured one of Saddam's palaces that was built adjacent to the site.

During the 1990s, Iraq suffered under the sanctions placed on the country by the international community following the 1991 Gulf War.

As his people starved in the streets, Hussein built grandiose palaces across the country with one report estimating that he spent around USD\$2 billion building or extending 48 palaces between 1991 and 1999.

One such palace was that built to overlook the ancient city of Babylon and the Euphrates river. While it is clearly a monument to Saddam's undeniable megalomania and tyranny, it was also a very impressive piece of architecture with a cathedral-like entryway, arched gates, grand murals and

majestic stairwells. It was a symbol of the excesses of Saddam's regime and the delusions of grandeur which plagued every aspect of his reign.

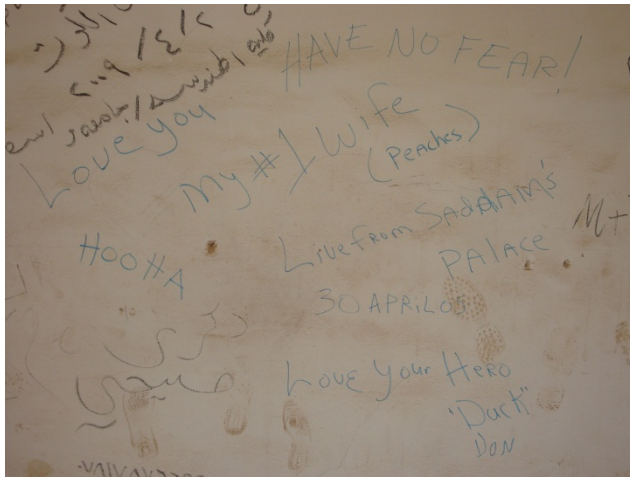
During the coalition occupation of the site, troops set up sleeping quarters in the many rooms of the palace. In Saddam's sweeping throne room, they erected a basketball hoop to pass the time. Throughout the palace there is evidence of graffiti left behind by coalition troops.

The palace has since been heavily looted. All of the furniture has long since been removed; majestic chandeliers have been stripped bare; detailed wood carvings have been smashed; tiles have been ripped from the walls; light globes and faucets removed. Virtually everything that could be taken is gone and the rest has been smashed or destroyed.

One does not have to sympathise with any aspect of the Baathist regime to recognise the mistake made by coalition forces in using this as a military base and the tragedy that the looting has brought to the palace.



[Photo Caption: Saddam's throne room at his palace at Babylon. A basketball hoop has been set up by coalition forces while the chandeliers and tiles have been heavily looted. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Graffiti left behind by coalition forces in one of the rooms at Saddam's palace at Babylon. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan inspects the damage done to one of the rooms at Saddam's palace at Babylon. Graffiti adorns the wall and marble tiles have been removed. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan walks past some of the damage done to one of the rooms at Saddam's palace at Babylon. Graffiti adorns the wall, marble tiles have been removed and electrical sockets have been stolen. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]

Dr Isakhan has also been able to visit the Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) which was built during the Abbasid period. It is the last remaining part of the medieval wall that once encircled the old city of Baghdad and dates to around 1221 CE.

At the height of the Abbasid empire, Baghdad controlled a swathe of land that extended from Algeria to Iran and from Turkey to the Yemen.

The Bab Al-Wastani is a striking fortress that would have both impressed and intimidated any visitor to Baghdad – and still does.

Since 2003, considerable damage has been done to the site. It includes two manhole sized cracks in the walls, clearly used to penetrate the interior of the fortress wall (it is wide and hollow).

While it is impossible to verify when or by whom the damage was done, a source informed Dr Isakhan that the site had been damaged by Coalition troops looking for hidden caches of weapons.



[Photo Caption: The Abbasid era Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) in Baghdad. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan on top of the Abbasid era Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) in Baghdad. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: Dr Benjamin Isakhan at the front of the Abbasid era Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) in Baghdad. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: A manhole sized crack on the top of a wall at the Abbasid era Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) in Baghdad. The hole was clearly used to penetrate the ancient wall. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]



[Photo Caption: A large crack on the side of a wall at the Abbasid era Bab Al-Wastani (The Middle Gate) in Baghdad. The hole was clearly used to penetrate the ancient wall. Credit: Dr Benjamin Isakhan, 2012.]

Such damage has plagued hundreds of sites across Iraq and in many cases the damage has not been adequately recorded.

These sites are not just part of Iraq's rich cultural heritage; they represent major landmarks in the broader story of human civilization.

While there are some success stories, like the restoration work being done at the INM, it is clear that much of this heritage is in urgent need of preservation, protection, excavation and careful restoration.

The legacy of despotic rule and brutal wars hangs heavy over the country and many urgent problems require immediate attention. But as the security situation in Iraq slowly improves and international investment in Iraq's oil sector ramps up, the international community and the Iraqi government could do much to improve and restore Iraq's important heritage.

Further information:

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