



UNESCO'CALL TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE IRAQI CULTURAL HERITAGE

Today, UNESCO calls on the nations of the world for aid to accomplish the challenging task of protecting, conserving and restoring the Iraqi cultural heritage, after decades of neglecting and looting.



*The White Temple of the god Anu at Uruk (modern Warka) is one of the most ancient temples in Iraq
(Courtesy of M. Van Ess)*

On 23 May the UN Security Council Resolution 1483, article 7 calls upon UNESCO to assist in the implementation of decision «that all Member States shall take appropriate steps to facilitate the safe return to Iraqi institutions of Iraqi cultural property and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance illegally removed from the Iraq National Museum, the National Library, and other locations in Iraq since the adoption of resolution 661 (1990) of 6 August 1990, including by establishing a prohibition on trade in or transfer of such items and items with respect to which reasonable suspicion exists that they have been illegally removed».

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Beside recent acts of vandalism, since 1991 Gulf war, the Iraqi cultural heritage has largely suffered from a long period of looting and neglecting.

In line with its constitutional mandate, UNESCO has been cooperating closely with the Iraqi authorities in safeguarding and preserving the Iraqi cultural heritage. Since 1976, UNESCO has been involved in training programmes, delivery of equipment and technical material to the Iraqi Museum and the National Centre for the Restoration of Manuscripts in Baghdad, and has provided technical assistance in preventive conservation and conservation plans for movable and immovable property, and management plans for archaeological sites and historic buildings. In particular UNESCO's assistance contributed to the restoration of the archaeological site of Babylon, the Abbasid Palace and Bayt al-Hikma (Madrasa Alà 'iya) in Baghdad, to the plan of renovation of the historic city of Basra, as well as to set up, with the assistance of ICCROM, the Baghdad Regional Training Centre for the restoration of cultural heritage. UNESCO's active role led to the reopening on April 2001 of the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad.

On 2 July 2003 the site of Ashur has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and on World Heritage List in danger. It is the second Iraqi site, after Hatra (1985), entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

UNESCO response to the recent damage to the Iraqi cultural heritage

Since the looting of the Iraqi Museum of Baghdad on 11 April 2003, several measures have been undertaken. Upon information of the pillage at the Iraqi Museum, UNESCO immediately alerted the Ministries of Culture of neighbouring countries of Iraq, as well as the American and British authorities to request their assistance in enforcing the control of borders to prevent traffic of Iraqi cultural property.

Two meetings on Iraqi cultural heritage have been organized by UNESCO in April and May 2003 to assess the situation and define the main lines of an emergency action. The first meeting was convened by the Director-General of UNESCO at Paris Headquarters on 17 April 2003, a week after the looting of the Iraqi Museum. Some thirty international experts, as well as representatives of relevant governmental and non-governmental

organisations, such as ICCROM, ICOM, ICOMOS and ALECSO attended this meeting. The second meeting took place at British Museum on 29 April 2003 and was jointly co-chaired by UNESCO and the British Museum, to focus on the urgent needs for the rehabilitation of the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad.

The first two meetings resulted in a number of recommendations establishing urgent measures to protect Iraqi cultural heritage, to fight against the illicit traffic of cultural property, prohibiting the export of all artefacts of historical value from Iraq, as well as banning the international trade in objects of Iraqi cultural heritage. Moreover, the experts convened at the meetings recommended the urgent dispatching of an assessment mission to Baghdad, under the UNESCO coordination.

UNESCO was also invited to co-chair a one-day's meeting held on 5 and 6 May 2003 at INTERPOL Headquarters in Lyon. The meeting, attended by about seventy among experts, dealers, representatives of museums and customs agents, focused on Iraqi stolen properties and ways to recover them. It emphasized on the need for worldwide cooperation in tracking down stolen cultural property and the importance to have synchronized and interlinked databases about stolen objects. It results in the need to urgently set-up a database of Iraqi stolen cultural properties to be developed in cooperation with INTERPOL.

A first expert mission under UNESCO coordination visited Baghdad from 15 to 20 May last, in order to carry out a preliminary assessment of the extent of damage and loss to cultural property in Iraq and in particular of the Iraqi Museum, the Baghdad National Library, Bayt al Hikma and the Abbasid Palace, as well as elaborate a first report on the state of Iraqi cultural heritage in Baghdad. The mission focused on questions related to the theft of cultural objects, the preparation of an inventory for the Iraqi Museum and the fine-tuning of an action plan aimed at restoring the principal cultural institutions of the city. The immediate measures identified aimed in particular at enabling the employees of the museums to resume their activities. The mission had the opportunity to extensively assess the damages in the Iraqi Museum and establish a list of priority actions in coordination with the Director of the Museum, Ms Nawala Mutawalli, the Director of Research, Mr Donny George and the Director-General of the Iraqi Antiquities Department, Mr Jaber Khalil and under the supervision of Ambassador Piero Cordone, Advisor for

Culture designed by the Coalition Provisional Authority.

A second UNESCO expert mission visited Iraq from 28 June to 6 July 2003. The aim of the mission was to provide an extensive assessment of the situation of the major monuments, archaeological sites and cultural institutions around the country in order to ensure an international co-ordination of efforts in the overall process for the rehabilitation of the cultural heritage of Iraq. The conditions of museums, historic buildings, archives and libraries and archaeological sites to the North and South of the country have been assessed.

Beside the envoy of experts' missions and due to its role of international coordinator of activities for the rehabilitation of the Iraqi heritage, UNESCO organized on 16 July in Paris a coordination meeting of all its member states aiming at channeling the offers of assistance towards the priority needs and scheduling them within a feasible timeframe.

In view of the opening of a UNESCO Office in Iraq, a *liaison* expert has been recently appointed in Baghdad by the UNESCO Director-General, to ensure coordination between UNESCO, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the authorities responsible for Iraqi cultural heritage.

On going

The construction of the Iraqi stolen property database is presently on going under the scientific leadership of UNESCO. It aims also at setting international standards in cataloging collections. Networking among scientific institutions which already published their data on Iraqi cultural heritage, has been established and it is available through the UNESCO website (www.unesco.org/culture/iraq).

A third UNESCO Experts' meeting on the Safeguarding of Iraqi cultural heritage will take place in Tokyo on 31 July-2 August 2003, jointly organized by UNESCO and the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan. The meeting shall discuss the results of the two UNESCO assessment missions to Iraq and will be particularly devoted to issues related to the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad.

UNESCO Action Plan for the safeguarding of the Iraqi cultural heritage

The first two UNESCO expert missions enabled UNESCO to identify short and long-term needs and define, according to priorities indicated by the Iraqi authorities for cultural heritage, a consolidated strategy for the rehabilitation and preservation of the Iraqi cultural heritage.

Priority domains where financial assistance is sought are the following:

Museums, libraries, archives and collections

Short terms needs

- Providing materials (office supplies, etc.), equipment (air conditioning, computers, photocopy machines, cameras, etc.), fixtures (doors and windows), and furniture (tables, chairs, etc.) to reinstall the offices quarter.
- Securing the buildings and their collections.
- Providing equipment and materials for the conservation, photo and research laboratories, including first aid laboratories.
- Conservation, consolidation, restoration of most threaten objects *in situ* or outside the country if urgently needed.
- Computerised collections' inventories
- Rehabilitation of display and public areas.

Medium and long term needs (goals of following more specialized missions)

- Rehabilitation of the buildings, and, if needed, suitable relocation of collections in other buildings (e.g. National Library)
- Assuring appropriate environmental storage conditions
- Institutional reform and capacity building for local staff
- Museological programme
- Galleries layout and display preparation
- Building of museums, libraries and archives' website, including links with scientific and education institutions

Archaeological sites and historic buildings

Short terms needs

- Securing sites and monuments in order to fight looting
- Capacity building
- Targeted emergency conservation measures on sites and monuments at risk to prevent collapse and significant deterioration
- Documentation of sites and monuments at risk

Medium and long term (goals of following more specialized missions)

- Documentation of major endangered sites
- Sites database and GIS
- Setting of standards in documentation procedures and of documenting techniques
- Conservation and interpretation plans
- Rescue excavations for endangered sites
- Management plans

Financial support

Since the looting of the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, the Governments of Italy, Japan, Switzerland, Flanders and Turkey, generously offered their financial support for the implementation of field projects. Moreover, Italy contributed to the preparation of the UNESCO first experts' meeting in Paris in April 2003 and Japan financed the second UNESCO expert mission to Iraq and the third UNESCO experts' meeting in Tokyo on 31 July – 2 August 2003. So far, other UNESCO member states, such as Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Norway, Poland, Spain, the Czech Republic and UK also express their willingness to contribute to the protection of the Iraqi cultural heritage offering their financial support and technical assistance.

A special account for the Iraqi cultural heritage has been opened at UNESCO aiming at funding projects for the rehabilitation of Iraqi cultural institutions, historic buildings and sites. For any contribution, please use the following accounts:

For USD transfer:

THE CHASE MANHATTAN BANK
International Money Transfer Division
4 Metrotech Center, Brooklyn
NEW YORK, NY 11245, USA
A/C N° 949-1-191558
SWIFT: CHASUS33; ABA N° 021000021

For Euros transfer:

SOCIETE GENERALE
Agence Paris St. Dominique,
106 rue St. Dominique,
75007 PARIS, FRANCE
A/C N° 30003-03301-00037291909-97
SWIFT: SOGEFRPPAFS

Please mention “Special account for the Iraqi cultural heritage”, code 449IRQ4000.

Contacts

For further information and in order to explore together a way of active cooperation, please contact UNESCO, Unit of Arab Countries, Division of Cultural Heritage:

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Further information is available at www.unesco.org/culture/iraq



Illicit excavations are extensively affecting the archaeological sites in the South of Iraq (Courtesy of M. Bouchenaki)



The site of Hatra, Northern Iraq, is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1985 (Courtesy of M. Bouchenaki)



The collections at the Iraqi Museum of Baghdad, such as this terracotta lion from Tell Harmal, have largely suffered by vandalism and looting (Courtesy of M. Bouchenaki)



Traditional houses in Ashur, Northern Iraq (Courtesy of M. Bouchenaki)