

Lecture by Dr Abbas al-Hussainy on 7th June 2007

After an introduction by Neil MacGregor, and a short presentation by John Curtis mainly on his recent visit to Ur (see report on British Museum website) Dr Abbas Ali Abbas al-Hussainy, Chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq, was invited to deliver his lecture.

The Archaeological Heritage of Iraq: Opportunities and Challenges

(i) Monuments damaged by bombs:

One of the major threats to the cultural heritage of Iraq continues to be the bombing of Islamic sites by 'Islamists' (Al-Qaeda) which has nothing to do with sectarian violence. World famous monuments such as the Samarra Mosque, Ana Mosque (completely destroyed), Khidir Mosque (Arban) and the Abdul-Qadir al-Gailani mosque (Baghdad), and the Tomb of Yahya Bin Qasim (Mosul) have been targeted and severely damaged. In the last two weeks alone some ten shrines mainly in the Diyala region have been bombed.



Damage to the Khidir Mosque (Anbar province) from a truck bomb.



Destruction at the Abdul-Qadir al-Gailani mosque (Baghdad).

(ii) Sites damaged by neglect as a result of the security situation:

Next, Dr Abbas referred to the many sites and monuments that have suffered from neglect as a result of the security situation. These included the minaret of the Imam Ali mosque in Basra; heritage houses in Basra; the tomb of Ezekiel at Kifal, an important Jewish and Islamic monument which is in danger of collapse; Nimrud, where there is evidence of general neglect; Ashur, which is being eroded away by the River Tigris; and Qasr al-Atshan (Kerbala). The Late Abbasid caravanserai at Khan al-Rub'a (near Kerbala) had been badly damaged through an accidental explosion of munitions that had been stored there in a well by coalition forces.



Tomb of Ezekiel at Kifal



(iii) The Museum:

The Iraq Museum remains closed but there are plans to install a security door (provided by the Italian government) to replace one of the sealed gateways. This will allow the Chairman and his staff access to check the offices and the storerooms. Dr Abbas suggested that a commission be established to witness this operation. The museum will remain closed to the public because of the security situation. The library and conservation rooms remain accessible but objects and books are suffering from the lack of air conditioning. Many objects from looted sites had been handed in to the Museum. The State Board offices require adequate security, air conditioning and water supply.



Installing the new security door and recovery of objects from looted sites at Baghdad Museum.

(iv) Looted Sites:

Archaeological sites described by Dr Abbas which have been subjected to widespread looting included Isin, Tell Bezikh (ancient Zabalam), Tell Jokha (ancient Umma), Fara (ancient Shurruapak), Abu Antik, Tell Medinah (ancient Bad-Tibera), Bismaya (ancient Adab), Tell Msehib (Nasiriyah Province) and Tell al-Wilaya. This gives some idea of the destruction in the south, but the full extent of the damage will not be clear until the Department's survey of sites is more advanced. The policing of the sites has been renewed following payment of salaries.



Looting at Tell Jokha.

(v) Excavation and survey:

Dr Abbas believed that looting at archaeological sites in the south was now on the decrease, partly because of the rescue excavations he had initiated (currently 11) and the restoration projects (currently 9). Amongst the archaeological projects were excavations at Marad and Qasr Tharab, and survey at Koskhan.



Excavation at Marad.

(vi) *Problems remain:*

Coalition forces have attempted to gain access to the museum on three occasions. On the first visit the barrier of the main gate was forced. On the third visit the museum guards were presented with a typewritten authorization with no signature – the threat of checking the validity of the document forced their retreat. International archaeologists have begun work in northern Iraq without the permission of the State Board. Dr Abbas and his staff have been refused access to archaeological sites by coalition forces – the most recent occurrence on the visit to Ur by Dr Curtis.



'Authorization' presented to museum staff

(vii) *Pressing needs:*

Training for staff

Books, periodicals and air conditioning for the Iraq Museum library.

Following the lecture, there was a question and answer session chaired by Neil MacGregor.