

Destruction of heritage

Dawn
1-9-04 By Zainab Bahrani *Iraq*

THE destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban was met with an outcry in the United States, Britain and the countries that form the coalition in Iraq. Yet the coalition forces can now claim, among other things, the destruction of the legendary city of Babylon.

Ironically, the bombing campaign of 2003 has not damaged archaeological sites. It was only in the aftermath, during the occupation, that the most extensive cultural destruction took place. At first, there was the looting of the museums under the watch of coalition troops, but that was to be followed by more extensive and active destruction.

Active damage of the historical record is ongoing at several archaeological sites occupied as military camps. At Babylon, I have seen the continuing construction projects, the removal of and digging into the ancient mounds over the past three months, despite a coalition press release early in June stating that work would halt, and the camp would be removed.

A helicopter landing zone, built in the heart of the ancient city, removed layers of archaeological earth from the site. The daily flights of the helicopters rattle the ancient walls and the winds created by their rotors blast sand against the fragile bricks. When my colleague at the site, Maryam Moussa, and I asked military personnel in charge that the helipad be shut down, the response was that it had to remain open for security reasons, for the safety of the troops.

Between May and August, the wall of the Temple of Nabu and the roof of the Temple of Ninmah, both sixth century BC, collapsed as a result of the movement of helicopters. Nearby, heavy machines and vehicles had parked on the remains of a Greek theatre from the era of Alexander of Macedon. The minister of culture has asked for the removal of military bases from all archaeological sites, but none has yet been relocated.

Iraq is ancient Mesopotamia, otherwise called the "cradle of civilization". It has more than 10,000 listed archeological sites, as well as hundreds of mediaeval and Ottoman Muslim, Christian and Jewish monuments. The coalition did not establish a means of guarding the sites, though they would be protected in any other country rich in antiquities. As a result, archaeological sites are being looted to an extent previously unimagined.

The looting supplies the appetites of an international illicit trade in antiquities, and many objects end up in places like Geneva, London, Tokyo and New York. The lack of

flooding last year, the archive began to mould. Upon the advice of conservators, the entire archive was removed to freezers to stop the mould.

Because of the lack of electricity and equipment, the only place that could be found with large freezers, and where power could be maintained, was an abandoned and bombed building that had previously been a Ba'athist officers' club. In Iraq, where it is not unusual for temperatures to soar up to 60C (140F) in summer, and where the Coalition Provisional Authority never managed to restore the electrical power to the country, this was no small feat.

The power in Baghdad (outside the US-occupied presidential palace and embassy buildings) is available, sporadically, about nine hours a day. If the archives should thaw, the documents will be destroyed. The conservation process needs to be done in a time- and climate-controlled manner if the archive is to be saved. But the Coalition Provisional Authority re-assigned ownership of this building to the ministry of justice. There is now still no place to move this archive to, the loss of which would be the loss of the modern historical records

of Iraq, much of which has not been studied or published.

In the midst of the disasters of Iraq under occupation, the condition of its cultural heritage may seem a trivial matter. But, as a historian of antiquity, I am painfully aware that there is no parallel for the amount of historical destruction that has taken place over the past 15 months in Iraq.

The Geneva and Hague conventions make the protection of heritage the responsibility of the foreign powers during occupation. Instead, what we have seen under the occupation is a general policy of neglect and even an active destruction of the historical and archeological record of the land.—
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border controls has only added to the ease with which the illegal trade in Mesopotamian artefacts functions. The looting leaves the sites bulldozed and pitted with robber holes. Ancient walls, artefacts, scientific data are all destroyed in the process.

But it is not only the stolen artefacts that are lost. The loss of this data is the loss of the ancient history of this land. Many important Sumerian and Babylonian cities have been irreversibly damaged in this way already. Passive destruction of this kind has been widespread under the occupation, but antiquity is not the only area of concern.

In Baghdad, the National Library and State Archives building is a burned-out shell in which the employees work in the most horrendous conditions. The Ottoman archive that records the history of the country, spanning the 16th to the early 20th centuries, is in the gravest danger. Having been soaked by