

Iraq's Cultural Heritage: Collateral Damage

Iraq has rightly been called the cradle of urban civilization. It was here that the world's first cities, with perhaps as many as 50,000 inhabitants, emerged in the fourth millennium B.C. along with monumental architecture and the beginnings of writing. Epic literature, codes of laws, and contributions to astronomy and mathematics all followed in succeeding millennia. The processes by which mercantile economic practices gradually infiltrated into redistributive state institutions are still of contemporary relevance. Ninth-century Baghdad under the caliphs may well have been the greatest city of that age. Literally thousands of archaeological sites of every size and era crowd one another, not only across the alluvial plain between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the south but also in the hilly uplands of the north. It may be as rich and concentrated a cultural heritage of humankind as can be found anywhere.

And even after more than a century of international archaeological efforts it still remains overwhelmingly unexploited. But the Gulf War that forced the Iraqi army out of Kuwait had some other, unintended consequences. Although the Iraq Museum sustained no damage, as an advance precaution many of its treasures had been dispersed to smaller regional museums. There they were pillaged during bloody civil disturbances after the conflict. But with eight preceding years of war with Iran and no easing of the undiminished oppressiveness of the regime, there has also been a continuing erosion of human resources. The exodus has included some of the best, Western-trained personnel in the once strong Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities (see News Focus, p. 32.).

Sanctions have brought further erosion: isolation from worldwide progress in archaeology, restrictions on internal movement, and attenuation of site protection efforts. That has led to extensive looting, stimulated by the international market in illicit antiquities that supplies U.S., European, and Japanese collectors. The root economic cause is widespread unemployment and impoverishment, although visiting archaeologists also report contrasting pockets of intense agricultural development and rebuilding. Its despotic reputation notwithstanding, the regime's control of many rural regions is uneven at best. The marshes in the south, relics of an ecosystem in which the first cities once flourished, have all but disappeared. Turkish and Syrian dam-building is primarily responsible, but this has coincided with Iraqi efforts to close off a refuge for dissidents.

Archaeology in Iraq is caught in a web of larger forces of indefinite, but probably shrinking, durability. International support for sanctions is declining. The "no-fly" zones remain in place, enforced by U.S. and British overflights. With foreign technical assistance reportedly a factor, however, they are encountering increasingly effective anti-aircraft fire. The return of United Nations (UN) arms inspection teams, absent since the U.S. bombing campaign in late 1998, will depend on the success of current efforts to redefine this program in ways acceptable to the UN Security Council (not to speak of the Iraqis!). And calls are increasing to deal directly with Iraq in order to make its enormous oil reserves less of a wild card in the ongoing world energy crisis.

Some foreign expeditions, from nations whose governments are less identified with sanctions and overflights, are returning. An internationally well-attended congress was convened in Baghdad in March 2001 on the origins of writing there. Some U.S. and British archaeologists have visited Iraq as individuals, but under present conditions no institutionally sponsored programs are likely to receive the needed approval and funding. There is a special irony in our growing use of satellite imagery, once a defense-related development in which the United States had a leading role. Now declassified, it is proving marvelously useful in identifying long sequences of ancient settlement and irrigation systems. But without an opportunity to establish "ground truth," its many tantalizing leads remain impossible to follow up. Similarly, many recent advances in the theory and technology of interdisciplinary excavations, currently in use in Turkey, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, remain untested in Iraq.

World heritage or not, archaeologists eyeing the potential rewards for science awaiting them in Iraq probably can do little themselves to hasten the end of the present standoff. But they will keep trying, stressing the importance and international character of their efforts.

Robert McC. Adams

Robert McC. Adams is secretary emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution and adjunct professor of anthropology at the University of California, San Diego.