

## **John Curtis attended the Third UNESCO Experts' Meeting on the Safeguarding of the Iraqi Cultural Heritage in Tokyo**

**31 July – 1 August 2003**

The proceedings commenced straightaway on Thursday evening with a reception and buffet supper in the "Apollon" room of the Hotel Nikko. The speeches of welcome included one by Ms Atsuko Toyama, the Japanese Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

The meeting on Friday 1 August was in the International Conference Room of the Plaza Heisi, a short bus ride away from the Hotel Nikko. The conference was opened by Professor Ikuo Hirayama. He told us that he had first visited Iraq in 1969, and in 1973 he had organised an exhibition of paintings from Silk Road countries including Iraq. He stressed the contributions of Iraq to the civilisation of the world. He reminded us that the cultural heritage of Japan had been greatly damaged in World War II, and since then he had been committed to helping other countries with comparable problems, namely Afghanistan, Cambodia and now Iraq. He envisaged a sort of "cultural red cross" which could come to the aid of those countries in need. Mr Matsuura (speech circulated) described the two previous UNESCO conferences on this subject, in Paris and London, and the two UNESCO missions to Iraq, and outlined the difficulties there had been in arranging these missions, particularly the first. He spoke of his regret that until recently there was only one World Heritage site in Iraq, namely Hatra, but was pleased that it had now been possible to add Assur to the list. He outlined the priorities for UNESCO with regard to the Iraq crisis, namely encouraging all countries to sign up to Resolution 1483, co-ordinating all offers of help, and arranging for protection of archaeological sites. For the latter, UNESCO was advocating the introduction of "cultural police". Ms Toyama, who was supposed also to give an opening address, was delayed by urgent parliamentary business and had to deliver her speech later in the morning. Keynote addresses were given by Muayyad Damerji, MacGuire Gibson, John Curtis and Jabr Ibrahim Khalil. Dr Damerji stressed the great contribution of Iraq to the cultural heritage of the world, and reminded the delegates that there were more than 10,000 registered sites in Iraq and more than 30 museums. He thanked UNESCO for its quick initiative and Ambassador Cordone for his fruitful co-operation with the newly-created Cultural Ministry. Professor Gibson recalled that he had provided the Pentagon with a list of over 5,000 sites and monuments in late January, and in early March he had published an article in *Science* reviewing the threat to the Iraqi cultural heritage and outlining the damage already done to it by sanctions. He made an eloquent and emotive plea for the protection of archaeological sites and for measures to halt the trade in antiquities. He explained that a bill currently before the two Houses of Congress in the US would make it illegal to trade in Iraqi antiquities. Dr Curtis (Department of the Ancient Near East, British Museum) described his two visits to Iraq since the end of the war including the work of the British Museum mission 11 – 26 June, and the conservation proposals which had arisen from that. These were to bring a team of 4 Iraqi conservators to the British Museum for top-up training in the period August-September 2003, and to send an international team of 6-8 conservators out to Iraq in the autumn (October-December 2003). Dr Jabr thanked UNESCO for organising this international meeting and the government of Japan for sponsoring it, and urged that more such meetings should be organised to discuss the restoration of the cultural heritage of Iraq.

The first session of the afternoon was dedicated to "short-term and long-term actions for the Iraq Museum of Baghdad", with Dr Jabr Ibrahim acting as moderator. Dr Nawala said that at least 13,000 objects had been stolen mostly from eight large storerooms. The stolen objects were of pottery, glass and ivory, as well as beads. The looters not only stole objects, but also threw them on the floor and damaged or destroyed them. She described how an inventory of the stolen objects had been underway since the end of the looting, but initially it had been hampered by the adverse security situation and the difficulties encountered by staff in getting to the museum. She was grateful to the first UNESCO mission and to Mr Bouchenaki who had organised a bus shuttle to enable the staff to get to work. Some air conditioning had also been repaired, making it

possible to work in the storerooms. Offices and laboratory areas had also been plundered, but fortunately the museum registers and card indices were safe. The Children's Museum had been badly damaged. The pieces stored in the Central Bank, including the Nimrud treasures, were now known to be safe. Professor Shigeo Aoki (Director of the Department of Restoration Techniques, Tokyo) concentrated on conservation needs. He described the present conservation facilities in the museum, spread over 11 rooms, and stressed the need for a restoration "road map" that would take account of health and fire safety needs. It was important that records should be kept of all conservation work undertaken. Amongst the difficulties facing conservators were the facts that in the storeroom temperatures could go above 50°C without air conditioning, which might cause adhesives and resins to melt, and the "new" storerooms were damp, caused by the high ground water level. In the following debate, Dr Donbaz stated that the Turkish government was ready to crack down on the illicit trade in Iraqi antiquities. There was already a long tradition in Turkey for this sort of action, as before the First World War the Ottoman government had taken its responsibility for looking after the Iraqi cultural heritage very seriously. Dr Daoulatti (ICCROM) suggested that the Regional Training Centre for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage in Baghdad should be restored and made use of. Mr Petzet (ICOMOS) reported that ICOMOS had sent a mission comprising Greek colleagues to Baghdad in mid-June. They had come away with a negative impression of the situation and the possibilities; it was important now to be positive and constructive. Mr Bouchenaki stressed the importance of co-operation, and how UNESCO could play a role here. There had been offers from both Italy and Japan to fit out a new laboratory. UNESCO had brought both parties together yesterday evening, to very good effect: a unique list of equipment based on the two offers would now be drawn up. Professor Matsumoto demanded that UNESCO should be more proactive in helping to retrieve the looted artefacts, to which Mr Bouchenaki responded by listing the initiatives already undertaken by UNESCO, and Dr Grattan questioned whether the British Museum should be drawing up a conservation plan. He stressed that any plan should be drawn up under the auspices of UNESCO, involving ICOMOS, ICCROM and ICOM. There were further contributions from Mr Hayao Kawai (Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, Japan), Mr Hiroshi Nozaki (Director of the National Museum, Tokyo), Dr Jacques Perrot, Mr Akiyoshi Watanabe (Director of the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo), Dr Proietti, Mr Tsukasa Kawada (Cultural Affairs Department, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and Dr Damerji.

#### **The following recommendations were drawn up:-**

##### **Recommendations on the Iraq Museum:-**

1. UNESCO should ensure that the Iraq Museum laboratories are refurbished and re-equipped immediately.
2. UNESCO should immediately provide the Iraq Museum with a security system to protect the building and its collections.
3. UNESCO should draw up a conservation plan for the Iraq Museum, taking account of the work already carried out by the British Museum.
4. Immediate measures should be taken to stabilise the ivories at risk.
5. UNESCO should set up a long-term conservation training programme in co-operation with ICOM, ICOMOS and ICCROM.

After a break for tea, the third session concentrated on "Measures for the Protection of the Iraqi Cultural Heritage", with Mr Bouchenaki acting as moderator. Films of the UNESCO missions to Iraq were shown by Mr Bouchenaki himself and Professor Matsumoto. The latter film of the second UNESCO mission highlighted the damage in Basra, to the Central Library which was completely burnt out, to the Islamic Library (established in 1950) which was looted and occupied by squatters, and to the Natural History Museum and the library of Basra University, both of which were looted. Dr Jabr Ibrahim described the damage to various historical buildings including the Abbasid Palace, Bab el Wastani, and Qushla. Although the damage to the Iraq Museum was severe, it was very lucky that it had not been burnt down. If this had happened, the whole cultural heritage of Iraq would have been at risk. In this context, Dr Jabr told us of an Arabic proverb: "When the mother dies, the house dies". Dr Damerji focused on cultural centres in Baghdad apart from the Iraq Museum. He told us that in the two modern art galleries, of more than 4000

paintings only 200 had been saved, while sculptures were standing in sewer water. The National Centre for Archives and Documentation covering the Ottoman period and the 20th century up to 1963 had been mostly destroyed, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Al-Qawf Library?) had been extensively damaged. Other cultural institutions that had been looted included the School of Music and Ballet, the Institute of Traditional Music and Melodies, the Children's Library, the Children's Museum, the Rashid Theatre, the National Theatre, and the House for Folklore Arts. He stressed that thought should be given to the intangible heritage of Iraq, i.e. music, poetry and folklore. Dr Parapetti pointed out that when restoring historic sites it should be remembered that some, such as Babylon and Samarra, had been exploited for political reasons, contrary to the spirit of the Nara declaration. Dr van Ess made 3 interesting suggestions: (i) foreign missions should take responsibility for sites and stop looting by paying guards; (ii) it would be better not to restart excavations at the present time but concentrate on surveys; (iii) priority should be given to the stabilisation and conservation of excavated architecture. Dr Daoulatli (now speaking on behalf of ALECSO) said that Arab countries were very concerned about the large number of meetings which had been held and the various missions to Iraq which had been organised in connection with the crisis. They believed it was essential that an international co-ordinating body should be established as was done for example in Cambodia and Afghanistan. There were further contributions from Dr al-Radi, Bonnie Magness-Gardiner, Jean-Marie Arnault, Michael Petzet and Professor Masaaki Sawada.

**The meeting agreed on the following:-**

**Recommendations on Historic Buildings and Archaeological Sites:-**

1. Proper security arrangements to be introduced at historic buildings, cultural institutions and archaeological sites.
2. UNESCO should establish internationally agreed standards in documenting historic buildings and archaeological sites, in consultation with ICOMOS and the scientific community.

There then followed some general discussion which led to some

General Recommendations (not included in the recommendations about the Museum and Historic Buildings and Archaeological sites):-

1. The Director-General of UNESCO should establish as soon as possible an International Co-ordination Committee for the safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq under the auspices of the future Government of Iraq and UNESCO.
2. States which have not yet ratified the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property should be encouraged to do so in the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 1483 (article 7).
3. UNESCO should promote capacity-building and ensure the sustainability of cultural institutions (including archives and libraries) in Iraq by carrying out a thorough needs assessment on the basis of a comprehensive questionnaire.
4. National and local capacities for safeguarding the Iraqi intangible cultural heritage, in particular arts and folklore, should be revived.
5. UNESCO should establish a training programme for personnel in charge of security arrangements at historic buildings, archaeological sites, museums, libraries and archives.

The conference concluded with closing remarks from Professor Hirayama.