

“Plündern, Vernichten, Vergessen: Kulturgüterschutz im Kriege und das kulturelle Welterbe im Irak”, Symposium in Graz and Vienna

11-13 June

This meeting was organised by the University of Vienna in conjunction with other academic bodies in Austria. While the majority of the participants were from Austria there were a number of speakers from Germany, the US etc. The Iraqi participants were Dr Mu'ayyad Damerji (Iraq Culture Cabinet), Dr Nawalla Mutawali (Director of the Iraq Museum) and Dr Abdullilah Fadhil (Head of the Department of Archaeology at Baghdad University). Summaries of the papers are being prepared by the delegates and will be posted on the University of Vienna's website shortly. In addition to the papers, there were films showing the state of the Baghdad museum and destroyed buildings in Baghdad such as the University, looted sites, and a disturbing film by a German team seeking to find out how easy it was to buy the looted antiquities which are freely available and with a market price known to the dealers.

The following report by Venetia Porter (Department of Asia, British Museum) will only discuss questions to her paper which she felt were relevant and the result of informal discussions with colleagues. She and Nigel Pittman (Department of Culture, Media and Sport) were the only participants from the UK.

The looting of antiquities and the role of museums.

Much of the discussion on my presentation came in the form of a question from David Nelson Gimpel (Archaeos) questioning the role of museums and in his view their implication in the smuggling of antiquities. He cited in particular the recent example of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in which unprovenanced material owned by collectors was displayed alongside objects from museums. He said that by agreeing to display our material alongside “museum” objects, museums were effectively colluding in the trade and legitimising it. He also mentioned the role of high profile American collectors who legitimised their collections of smuggled unprovenanced material by making donations to museums etc. He strongly urged museums to take a stand and not participate in exhibitions in which such material was exhibited. In reply, I said how strict the BM is about acquiring unprovenanced material and that we only acquire objects that we can prove came out before 1970. I also cited the recent example of an exhibition in Lisbon on Afghanistan, organised by curators from the Musée Guimet, Paris, in which the British Museum had declined to participate because looted objects were to be included.

Cooperation with UNESCO

Dr Anna Paolini (head of the Unit for Arab countries) was anxious to emphasise that it is UNESCO that will be evaluating the offers of help that are now coming in at a great rate. They particularly want to avoid duplication of effort. UNESCO were planning a meeting in July in which all the offers would be evaluated. It was thought that another mission to Baghdad should also be sent to evaluate the needs on the ground project by project. She also mentioned that it was now envisaged that UNESCO official Usam Ghaidan, who was present in Vienna, would go out to Baghdad soon to set up an office to provide the link on the ground. Whether he would be based in the UNDP office or elsewhere remained to be established.

Dr Abdullilah Fadhil and Dr Mu'ayyad Damerji's assessments of the situation and their needs

Dr Fadhil spoke of the desperate need for basic equipment in the University: overhead projectors and publications in particular. The question of books was discussed more widely. At the museum, the need is for post 1990 publications. At the University they need everything. Anna said that UNESCO could coordinate this. Margareta van Ess said that lists were already being prepared in

Germany and the Frankfurt book fair had been approached for help. Arab donors would also be contacted for Arabic books. Nigel Pittman said that in the UK the Al-Makhtoum Institute and Edinburgh University had launched appeals. Dr Fadhil and Dr Damerji stressed that even if there were several copies of books this did not matter as they could go outside Baghdad.

Dr Damerji stressed first of all that he wished to see more action resulting from the conferences. He emphasised the need for specialists curators/conservators and wished to see long lasting effects to be achieved as a result of full cooperation. UNESCO must urge the countries that have not ratified the 2nd Hague protocol (which included UK, US and Germany) to do so. He urged that the coalition re-open the Iraq Museum as soon as possible, that the foreign Schools and Institutes return and that for the excavations they use Iraqi expertise including retired Iraqi archaeologists. He said that Iraq had huge potential for cultural and religious tourism which had yet to be exploited, and that the preservation of the sites was crucial in this context.

The question of the guarding of sites was discussed in some detail. At present for the 10,000 sites there are 1,600 guards. One difficulty is that the guards are not allowed to carry arms and there are not nearly enough of them. He felt that in order to secure the long term safety and stability of the sites, they had to use the Wasit example. Here, they had brought in a family and given them land, thus securing their loyalty, and had secured the site. He also emphasised that it was up to individual foreign teams to ensure loyalty, as had been done by Dr Trenkwalder who had helped villagers in various ways.