

*Reception at the Society of Antiquaries,  
Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J*

*Monday 15 June 2009, 6.00pm to 7.30pm.*

## **Catastrophe! The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past**

*Professor Alec Boksenberg*

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, we are here this evening for a private viewing of the exhibition 'Catastrophe!' and for the launch of the paper-back of the book 'The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq' edited by Peter Stone, of Newcastle University's International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies (also concerned with the exhibition) and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly, an archaeologist and journalist from The Lebanon. If the topic were otherwise this gathering would have all appearance of a celebration but both exhibition and book chronicle an appalling loss of the world's cultural heritage made possible through poor – almost absent – planning at a political and military level prior to, during, and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. So I feel we come together not to celebrate, but rather in order that we do not forget, and that we do not let our political masters forget, and that we commit to avoid such catastrophic loss in the future.

The UK National Commission for UNESCO – the "National Commission" – is an independent civil society organisation set up by Government in partnership with civil society as the focal point in the UK for policy advice and programme work relating to UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO is a UN Specialised Agency dedicated to

intellectual cooperation and practical action in education, the sciences, culture, communication and information, promoting the inseparable goals of peace, mutual understanding and equitable and sustainable human development. A key component of the National Commission's work in culture is the monitoring of the UK's role and relationship with international charters and conventions. As such I am intensely conscious that the UK, over the last half century, has not ratified the *1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. Nor have we ratified either of the two Protocols to the Convention. The USA's ratification of the Convention late last year, leaves the UK as the only major international power not to have ratified the Convention, although others, including the USA, have, to-date, not ratified one or both of the Protocols. Our lack, and that of the USA as it stood in 2003, led in no small way to the catastrophe described in the exhibition and the destruction chronicled in the book to be launched here tonight.

Catastrophic action in Iraq is not over – destruction continues as I speak to you this evening in the continuing looting of remote archaeological sites and the seemingly ever present trade in illicit antiquities – but we must begin to look to the future.

In a few minutes we will hear from Major Hugo Clarke about 'Operation Heritage', a partnership between the Iraq State Board of Antiquities, the British Army, and the British Museum in southern Iraq. This is an excellent example of a proactive partnership working on the ground. Meanwhile, the National Commission has

been trying through a number of means to put the UK in a position to ratify the *Hague Convention*.

Our first concern has been to ensure that we play a full part in discussions between the military, at present confined to the UK and NATO allies, and the cultural heritage sector as these two communities grapple with how they can best work with each other. Progress here is slow, but noticeable. As one example of this work, we hope that our advice and support will contribute to the decision by the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft to fund a research institute in Vienna for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

We have also worked hard to keep the issue of protection of cultural property firmly on the radar of politicians, the military, and the general public. It was to this end that we offered to sponsor the exhibition you will see here this evening. 'Catastrophe!' was originally created as a temporary exhibition by the Oriental Institute in Chicago. What you will see is a travelling version of the Oriental Institute's exhibition. The National Commission, with our partners Newcastle University and the North East Museums Hub, sponsored its transformation into this travelling format in order that the full extent, the full horror, of the catastrophe is not quickly forgotten.

In the same way we have, together with the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, sponsored the paper-back edition of *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq* – another way of keeping the events of 2003 and thereafter firmly in our minds.

We are also continuing actively to lobby for ratification of the *Hague Convention*. Members of the National Commission's Culture Committee met last week with both a representative of the Ministry of Defence and with Barbara Follett, the Minister for Culture and Tourism at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Minister reassured us that the Government is committed to passing the legislation required to enable the UK to ratify the Convention and its two Protocols at the earliest possible opportunity, noting that it had substantial cross-party support. She was also keen to see the heritage community work together now in order to develop the environment and resources that will be needed to implement the Convention once the UK has ratified. I can assure you that the National Commission will, over the next few months, be proactive in these areas. Our meeting with the Ministry of Defence was also positive but less fruitful: it will welcome ratification of the Convention but will not be in a position to modify general or specific pre-deployment training until the Convention *has* been ratified. Put bluntly, the MoD does not have the resources to do things that it does not have to do. What this means in practice is that UK forces will continue to be deployed without any – or extremely limited – specific training regarding the protection of cultural property in times of conflict: surely an extremely unsatisfactory situation.

The 1999 Second Protocol to the *Hague Convention* recognises the central role that should be played by national committees of the Blue Shield. The Blue Shield is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. It is the symbol specified in the *1954 Hague Convention* for

marking cultural sites to give them protection from attack in the event of armed conflict. The International Committee of the Blue Shield was set up in 1996 to work to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters. The affiliated UK and Ireland Committee for the Blue Shield has worked valiantly since its creation in 1999. However, the Committee has had absolutely no secretarial or funding support other than that offered on an *ad hoc* basis by its membership. I can announce this evening that the Committee is to become a standing committee of the National Commission's Culture Committee. In the first instance this will provide the much need secretarial support for the Committee. In the medium to longer term this move will enable the Committee to apply for a range of funding in order to carry out its duties more constructively.

To close, the National Commission is committed to working to ensure that future deployment of UK forces will not result in similar catastrophes to that which befell the cultural heritage in Iraq.