

Remarks by Maj Hugo Clarke (Scots Guards)

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES – 15 JUNE

In November 2007 Maj Gen Barney White-Spunner, prior to his taking command of British Forces in Southern Iraq, and Dr Neil MacGregor, head of the British Museum discussed the feasibility of a joint project between the British Museum, the British Army and the Ministry of State for Antiquities and Tourism of Iraq, with a view to assessing the impact which the last five years had had on significant archaeological sites, and the possibility of developing a museum in Southern Iraq. OPERATION HERITAGE, the cultural heritage project born from these discussions enabled us to take forward important work in an area which has been in the spotlight for a significant period and which was in need of specialist attention.

The aim of the project is to identify key heritage sites and museums in Southern Iraq, assess what state the sites are in, and in coordination with Iraqi authorities and the British Museum, implement a plan to safeguard these sites and museums.

OPERATION HERITAGE has been run from the start with full IRAQI backing. In my mind, such a project could not or should not be run in any other way. This Operation is split into two parts: OPERATION SUMERIA, the site assessments and OPERATION BELL, the construction of a Museum in Southern Iraq. OPERATION SUMERIA, the site assessment we conducted in June last year was advised and accompanied by three senior Iraqi cultural representatives from the Ministry of State for Antiquities and Tourism. ¹ Without their authority, advice and guidance we could not have achieved what we did during this trip.

As you are all aware, Mesopotamia was the 'cradle of civilisation' and as such contains many sites of great significance.

¹ The team led by Dr John Curtis included Dr Paul Collins from the British Museum, Dr Margarite Van Ess from the German Institute of Archaeology in Berlin, Professor Elizabeth Stone from the State University of New York, and from the Ministry of State for Archaeology and Heritage, Mr Qais Hussein Raheed, Director of Investigations and Excavations, Mr Mehsein Ali, Director General of Iraqi Museums and Abdulmir Mayeh Madhji Alhamdani, Inspector of Dhi Khar Archaeology Inspectorate.

However, The British Museum assessed some of the most important ones, within the south of the country and prioritised these sites by availability of access, particularly with the limited time frame we had available and the usage of a military helicopter which was freed up from other important taskings for the duration of this project.

Dr John Curtis, visited Iraq in April 2008, during which time site visits were organised to Eridu and Ur and further sites were overflown including Uruk. Excellent photography and film footage was gained from this visit. This photography and film footage was shown at an Iraqi Heritage Working Group organised at the British Museum.

A subsequent trip took place in June 2008 , with assessment being made at Ur, Eridu, Uruk, Kissiga, Larsa, Lagash, Tel El Oeili and Ubaid.

At each site we were looking for evidence of looting, and when it might have occurred, for evidence of military damage, whether before or after the coalition invasion in March 2003, and for evidence of damage deriving from nearly thirty years of underfunding.

The team found that the conditions were different at each site, so it is difficult (and dangerous) to generalise. The main purpose of the mission was to assess damage at the sites, and the damage observed can be categorised under four headings:

Damage resulting from turning the sites into military defensive positions. Damage to sites resulting from coalition activities. Damage from looting and Damage from neglect.

Although this survey seems to indicate that there has been no looting during the last few years, it should be noted that we visited only 8 sites and these are all in the southern part of Iraq. We should remember that the sites visited may not even be typical for the southern region. It is also worthy of note that the reality on the ground differed from assessments made using satellite imagery.

A full report on all of these locations can be found on the British Museum website.

The other main focus for this project, appropriately named Operation BELL, is to identify museums in southern Iraq with a view to restoring them. One such important museum is located in Basra.

The Ministry of State for Antiquities and Tourism has regained control of the old Basra Museum but there is infrastructure damage to the building that would require significant work.

To this end and in liaison with the Ministry of State for Antiquities and Tourism, we have tried to seek an alternative location. We believe this location should have the required security for work to take place unhindered, as well as being a building of significance in the eyes of the Basrawi people.

PM Maliki directed for a Palace in Basra to be used as a Museum. The Lakeside Palace, built by Saddam Hussein, was originally selected, and Royal Engineers from the British Army carried out a full structural survey of the building. However, permission for this building is still under discussion; therefore alternative sites are being assessed, including sites in the old Museum District on the Shatt Al Arab river front and possible green field sites. Initial assessments are being carried out by Mr Quatan, the Director of the Basra Museum. Dr Curtis and Dr Collins from the British Museum, and I, will visit Basra later in June to discuss these plans further. Once agreement has been gained for a building to be used, a full assessment will be made, costs will be calculated and a funding plan will be coordinated. Another important part of this project has been the curatorial training of three Iraqis at the British Museum, with funding provided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

OPERATION BELL, the plan to build a museum in BASRA, has been an IRAQI owned project from the outset. We, the British Army and the British Museum have offered advice and support throughout the process and we will continue to do so.

The relationship between the British Museum and the British Army has been critical to this important work taking place. This academic and military relationship is not a new idea, as the

ongoing work with some of our own National Heritage proves. A prime example of this is the conservation of 37,000 hectares, equal in size to the Isle of Wight, on Salisbury Plain. This area has been described as an island within a sea of arable². The Ministry of Defence, with responsibility of over 2,500 monuments, manages to maintain a balance between the needs of the military and the conservation of a historic landscape.

Military commanders have always relied on external advice. The essence of understanding the cultural diversities in the area of operations is fundamental to developing the plan. Before the deployment of HQ 3 (UK) Division to Iraq in 2008, we had put considerable time and effort into ensuring we had a detailed understanding of the country as a whole; its ethnic divides, politics, aspirations, resources, history and culture. We drew on the knowledge and experience from a broad range of academics, journalists, politicians and historians. We were fortunate to be able to draw on the extensive knowledge from the British Museum which enabled members of the Division to understand not only the significance of cultural heritage in Iraq, the birthplace of civilisation, but additionally the issues surrounding the condition of cultural heritage sites in Iraq and what was being done about them. This reliance with external advisers, to us a necessity, goes both ways. It is a reliance forged through trust, strong relationships, a willingness to listen and an understanding of each others' agendas. There will always be different agendas and ethics from separate parties and we should never expect to agree on everything; but we can, if we want to, find common ground where we can all gain the results we set out to achieve. It is this unity of purpose which is all important within these relationships.

Underpinning all of this is an understanding of what our role is. Are we leading or, as is more often the case, supporting the host nation? We can all be at fault for translating western attitudes to different cultures. These attitudes, ignorance from some and arrogance from others, can have far reaching and damaging effect. Gertrude Bell stated that 'any administration...must...command the confidence of the people so as to secure the cooperation of public opinion, without which so

² English Heritage – The Field Archaeology of the Salisbury Plain Training Area.

complex a tangle could not be unravelled.³ It is far better for the host nation to preserve its own culture and heritage. As Nick Brooks recognised in the Western Sahara, 'archaeology can be used to strengthen psychological links between people and land, and strengthen a sense of ownership.'

⁴ But, it is also recognised that the host country in question may have lost a great deal of its specialist knowledge within certain fields due to a conflict. Rebuilding this capacity is not a short term project and requires significant investment from supporting Nations.

Iraq's heritage, from its pre-dynastic cultures to the modern day, is not only of importance to its people but also to the international community as a whole. We all seek to create a safe and secure environment within which this heritage can be preserved. We have proved that the military and academia can work closely together. Openness, honesty, respect and an understanding of our different roles, enabled us to work closely and effectively together in Iraq. It is critical these relationships are maintained and expanded on over time, otherwise we will all venture our different paths achieving nothing tangible, or perhaps building another Tower of Babel.

³ Georgina Howell – Daughter of the Desert.. MacMillan 2006. p. 310.

⁴ Nick Brooks - Cultural Heritage and Conflict: The Threatened Archaeology of Western Sahara