

Creating Futures for the Past in Southern Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities

Eleanor Robson

Iraqi archaeologists and Assyriologists are desperate for communication and collaboration and intellectual challenge. Almost every colleague I meet in Iraq is keen to set up research partnerships and training programmes. Yet they are working in a vacuum, mostly isolated and unheard in their own country and beyond. There is little public discourse on local history and archaeology, and little Iraqi government understanding of the value of these matters in civic and cultural life. In this paper I explore how this situation came to be; why it is

a matter of concern; and what, if anything, we as western academic historians, should try to do to about it. In the latter sections of the paper in particular, I do not try to be comprehensive but draw upon my own experiences and observations, in relation to the UK context in which I work. My aim is not simply to describe but to stimulate discussion, response and action.

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Let us begin with a thought experiment.¹ Try to imagine that the biggest, best funded research centres on ancient British monuments such as Stonehenge and Avebury are all in East Asia. Some British universities carry out some basic archaeological exploration of smaller prehistoric earthworks, such as the Rollright Stones, but publish little of their work. The British public has a basic understanding of the cultural importance of stone circles—they vaguely remember studying them at primary school—and like to visit them for family picnics and school trips. In order to keep up with the latest discoveries and theoretical developments, however, one needs to read the academic literature in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. All online resources, as well as most popular histories, television programmes, etc., are in these languages too, and their authors show little interest in getting them translated into English—which, by and large they do not speak very well. Indeed, most of the best researchers hardly ever set foot in the United Kingdom (UK) and rely instead on decades-old archaeological surveys, satellite imagery and large collections of artefacts, whether excavated or purchased, now housed in their own countries.

This scenario may seem very far-fetched. But it approximates the current state of an-

cient Babylonian history and archaeology in southern Iraq. In October 2012 I gave two lectures on Old Babylonian mathematics, literature and scribal schooling in the ancient city of Nippur in southern Iraq. This was nothing unusual in itself, for these are subjects I have researched, on and off, over many years. What marked the occasion was not so much the *content* of my lectures but the *context*. For the first time since the 2003 Iraq War I was back in southern Iraq itself, around 20 miles from the site of Nippur, which I had first visited just a day or two earlier. Initially, I was struck only by the oddity of the fact that I had become expert on the place (or at least some aspects of it) over a decade before actually setting foot in it. But as my visit wore on I became increasingly aware of, and uncomfortable about, how little my audiences knew about what was, in effect, local history. Here I was, giving lectures in English to Iraqi academics (mostly mathematicians) and university students (mostly archaeologists) about their own cultural and intellectual heritage. And in order to do so, I had to dramatically simplify the story that I was telling, even compared to when I talk to school children or amateur history groups in the UK. It was not just a matter of language—my words were being translated into Arabic sentence by sentence by a kind colleague—but of concep-

tual content too. Then, when people asked me for further reading, I could give them one recent article of mine that has been translated into Arabic but almost everything else required a good grasp of academic English, French or German, a high-speed internet connection, and/or the means to buy or borrow expensive, low-print-run books. With some notable exceptions—for instance the journal *Sumer*, and the work of University of Baghdad archaeologist Abdulillah Fadhil and his students—there is little local academic publication of ancient Iraqi history and archaeology, whether for researchers, students or the interested general public. The more I thought about the situation, the more ethically problematic it seemed.

It is not that there is no local interest in ancient history. My invitation to Diwanayah had come from Dr Ahmed Zainy, a Berlin-trained mathematician at the Women's College of the University of Baghdad, who had been using my work in his undergraduate teaching. Some of the most acute and appreciative reactions to my most recent book have come from within the Iraqi mathematical community. And my talks generated a lot of animated discussion amongst my Iraqi friends and colleagues. French-educated Basra mathematician Dr Hanna Ali Munther, for instance, introduced me to a colleague as the person

who had taught her most about the history of her own country.

Likewise, Iraqi archaeologists and Assyriologists are desperate for communication and collaboration and intellectual challenge. Almost every colleague I met in Iraq was keen to set up research partnerships and training programmes. Yet, despite multiple international initiatives to engage significantly and intensively with Iraqi cultural heritage professionals (Stone and Bajjaly), many feel they are working in a vacuum, mostly isolated and unheard in their own country and beyond. There is little public discourse on local history and archaeology, and little Iraqi government understanding of the value of these matters in civic and cultural life. In this paper I explore how this situation came to be; why it is a matter of concern; and what, if anything, we as western academic historians, should try to do to about it. In the latter sections of the paper in particular, I do not try to be comprehensive but draw upon my own experiences and observations, in relation to the UK context in which I work. My aim is not simply to describe but to stimulate discussion, response and action.

Building a Country, Constructing a Past

To understand the state of ancient history and archaeology in Iraq today we need to go back at least a hundred years. For con-

venience I shall divide the past century into four distinct phases.

1. *Wartime and Mandate Iraq*

The ancient history and archaeology of Mandate Iraq were initially constructed as a purely British enterprise, while its Islamic heritage was deliberately underplayed. The tone had already been set during the British occupation of Mesopotamia during World War I (Bernhardsson 57-92). Many archaeologists were recruited into the Arab Bureau, due to their expert local knowledge: most famously Leonard Woolley and T.E. Lawrence, who were then excavating together at Carchemish, and of course Gertrude Bell. Antiquity thus gained an unexpected prominence in Britain's conduct of the war. Both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum lobbied to impound the finds from pre-war German excavations as war booty. The British Museum even seconded two Assyriologists to Mesopotamian forces in order to carry out excavations at ancient Sumerian cities in the occupied southern marshes.

When the new Kingdom of Iraq was created under British Mandate in 1920 it was conceptualised as an essentially Arab entity, and a Sunni Arab one at that (Sluglett; Dodge). In this view, pre-Islamic, pre-Arab antiquity was irrelevant to state for-

mation, whose citizens for the most part were not, in any case, supposed to be educated or intelligent enough to appreciate its value. Baghdad had had a college of law since 1908, and engineering and teacher training colleges were set up in 1923, but as late as 1935 the American-led Monroe Commission reported that Iraq was not ready for the introduction of university education, as a surplus of highly educated young men with no suitable jobs to go to would undoubtedly lead to political unrest (Lukitz 115-17). Iraq did not establish a state higher education system until the mid-1950s.

British archaeology benefited greatly from the Mandate (Bernhardsson 130-64; Goode, *Negotiating* 185-202). Gertrude Bell, as Honorary Director of Antiquities, set up a legislative and administrative framework almost single-handedly, in the face of fierce opposition from more independence-minded Iraqi politicians. Two large-scale British-American expeditions ran at Ur and Kish until shortly after 1932, when the occupation officially ended. Other American, German and French teams were allowed to work in the country too. Almost all of the sites they explored were southern cities of the third and early second millennia BC, namely from the first half of ancient Babylonian history. Iraqi involvement was notably absent. The la-

bourers and support staff were of course local men. But no effort was made, anywhere by anyone, to train promising young Iraqis in how to uncover the ancient past of their country. Indeed there was no real means to identify recruits and instruct them in academic work.

Likewise, the nascent Iraq Museum was not initially conceived as an institution made for or by Iraqis. It had no ambitions to bolster the current political messages of pan-Arab unity and no resources to do so, being furnished exclusively with finds from European and North American expeditions, which had no interest in the great Islamic empires of the past. Nor did it aim, as many western museums did, to display imperial trophies or chart a progressivist narrative of mankind's ascent from primitive savagery. It was simply a collection of stuff from excavations, curated haphazardly by Bell and increasingly reflecting her withdrawal from current political life.

2. *Independent Iraq*

When Britain formally withdrew in 1932 the former Education Minister Sati' al-Husri became the first Iraqi Director General of Antiquities (Bernhardsson 164-210; Goode, *Negotiating* 203-28). He revised Bell's antiquities laws in Iraq's favour, which had the effect of discouraging foreign expeditions as it was now harder to bring

finds back home to display to sponsors and publics. Meanwhile, the first Iraqi PhD students were sent to study archaeology in Chicago. Taha Baqir and Fuad Safar would go on to become leading figures in the field. The first Iraqi-led excavations were carried out at the classical Islamic sites of Samarra and Wasit, and Abbasid monuments were restored. Planning began for a much larger and more accessible Iraq Museum.

In schools, meanwhile, history teaching had already been centred on pan-Arabism since the early 1920s (Simon). Post-independence, the curriculum became ever more explicitly nationalist and militaristic, focusing on thirty to forty Arab, mostly Sunni Muslim, 'heroes' of the past as moral role models for Iraqi youth. There was little room in this version of history for the ancient, pre-Arabic past of the region, let alone for global perspectives.

3. *Back to Antiquity in Baathist Iraq*

Given that Baathism was an explicitly pan-Arabist political movement, one might have expected the trends of the post-Mandate years to continue and intensify. However, over the period 1968-2003 Iraq increasingly presented itself as a modernist—and, in the early decades, secular—state built on a deep antiquity (Baram; Davis, *Memories*; "The Museum"). The

Ministry of Information produced glossy English-language publications with titles such as *Mesopotamia Yesterday, Iraq Today*. The state exerted centralised control over the past in various ways: through school history curricula, through the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and through public images of the regime, of Saddam in particular. Collectively they presented Iraq and its leader as the natural, inevitable successor of millennia of militarised dominance over the region, headed by powerful men such as Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar and Salah al-Din (Goode, "Archaeology"; al-Gailani Werr). The Mongol, Ottoman, and Mandate periods of 'foreign occupation' were deliberately downplayed.

The new Iraq Museum was opened in 1966, telling a unified narrative of the country's past, from neolithic hunter-gatherers in the north to the glories of Abbasid Baghdad. Regional museums were sent highly uniform mini-collections of artefacts to display so that the same story could be told from Dohuk in the mountainous north to Basra in the Gulf marshes. In this way local histories, regional identities, and other challenges to the authority and unity of the state were minimised: the diversity of Iraq's long past was homogenised into a single, unifying story which all could identify with but to which

no constituency or community could claim privileged access.

At the same time, Iraqi modernism encouraged other countries to set up research institutions in Baghdad, especially those that focused on the regime's preferred aspects of ancient and pre-modern history. The oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s brought huge budget increases to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and a renewed emphasis on pre-Islamic sites with complex international archaeological rescue projects prior to major damming works. Archaeological excavation continued throughout the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, while nationalist rhetoric increasingly focused on the ancient past in order to downplay commonalities with Iraq's Shia neighbours. Very much in that vein, late in the decade the heavily restored archaeological site of Babylon began to host an annual international festival of Iraqi arts and culture (Tracy).

4. *Sanctions and Beyond*

Foreign missions withdrew from Iraq in the run-up to the invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, as the state started to take 'human shields' as hostages. Just four days later the United Nations enforced an international embargo on financial and trade relations with Iraq. That month, in retro-

spect, marked the beginning of long decades of isolation for the Iraqi academic community. Many provincial museums were looted in the post-war Shia uprisings of spring 1991 and then stayed permanently shut. The Babylon Festival somehow staggered on but the Iraq Museum too closed to public, re-opening only briefly for special occasions such as Saddam's birthday in 2000. Large-scale looting of archaeological sites was impossible to control, as the State Board's budget was now dramatically reduced. Illicitly excavated artefacts, especially cuneiform tablets, flooded international antiquities markets. Museum and university staff suffered like the rest of the population with the drastic impact that international sanctions had on everyday life. University teachers could not live on their salaries alone; students, if they could afford to study, chose more potentially lucrative subjects. Heritage professionals came under increasing surveillance and increasing pressure to support the party line. Contact with the outside world became virtually impossible, except on tightly controlled state visits to conferences or, latterly, monitored and censored emails. New publications, data, methodologies, and technologies—and these were substantial in the 1990s—all passed them by. This loss of contact, in other words, led to many other losses: of knowl-

edge and expertise; of funding and prestige; of professionalism and control. As we shall see, it has been hard to regain these vital but often intangible assets now that circumstances are different.

The Current State Context

These, then, are the complex roots of Iraq's often unhappy relationship with its ancient past. For a century already, some have seen its pre-Arab, pre-Islamic antiquity as irrelevant to its present and future, while for others—particularly Baathists—modernity can only be constructed out of antiquity, thereby deeply tainting that antiquity for the rest. What hope, then, for Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria in the twenty-first century? Does Iraq currently have the capacity to engage with its ancient precursors? What is gained by doing so and what is otherwise lost?

As I finish writing this piece, votes are being counted after the national elections of 30 April 2014. It is currently impossible to predict what the immediate future holds after a year of increasing political corruption and violence, exacerbated by pressures from war-torn Syria and UN-sanctioned Iran. It is not all political doom and gloom, however. Provincial elections are widely acknowledged as successful, with a sophisticated combination of party lists and personal votes allowing people to re-

ward locally successful, honest and popular politicians whatever their political stripe (Haddad). Similarly, on the face of it, Iraq has never been in better economic shape, according to recent reports from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. There is potentially plenty of state money available to support research and education into the country's past, assuming that there is the political willingness and institutional infrastructure to do so.

However, the think-tank Chatham House (*Iraq Ten Years On*) and the charity War Child (“Mission Unaccomplished”) last year drew attention to Iraq's major underlying structural problems. It is the youngest sector of the population who are feeling the worst effects of the post-war period. In a country with a population of 33 million, 18.5 million—56%—are under twenty-five, 12.2 million—37%—under fifteen. Less than half of 12-17 year-olds are in school and drop-out rates in both primary and secondary school are nearly 10% a year. Although 9% of the country's budget goes on education, 90% of that goes on salary costs, leaving very little for infrastructure. As a result over 40% of schools are in need of repair or reconstruction, and a further five thousand schools need to be built—and teachers trained for them—if Iraq is to meet the educational needs of

its fast-growing youth population. The national literacy rate stands at just 78% compared to a world average of 85%, the same as Tunisia and Tanzania and significantly better than India or Egypt at 72%, but worse than Iran, (pre-war) Syria, and South Africa.

The school system and state curriculum have remained largely unaltered since the war, except for a thorough de-Baathification of its contents. According to a 2011 UNESCO report (UNESCO, "World Data"), children study history for just two 40- or 45-minute periods a week, in years 5-6 of primary school (ages 10-11) and years 1-3 of secondary school (ages 12-14). Thereafter secondary schooling splits into two streams, 'literary' and 'scientific', for ages 15-17. The history quotient goes up to three periods a week for 'literary' students but disappears entirely for 'scientific' ones. Ancient history is taught only at primary school. The schools themselves are drastically under-resourced and the teachers under-trained. UNESCO's education programme in Iraq focuses on improving mathematics, science and technology provision, and the promotion of civic values. The word 'history' does not feature at all on the Education Areas of Action section of UNESCO Iraq's website, despite the fact that another high-profile theme of its in-country work is Culture. On that part of its

website UNESCO Iraq states that "safeguarding cultural heritage and rehabilitating cultural institutions are essential elements for national reconciliation and socio-economic development". But that imperative does not seem to extend to equipping civil society with the means to appreciate and take advantage of such initiatives—only making provision for tourists. My worry is that UNESCO is unwittingly replicating the cultural conditions of Mandate Iraq, when ancient history was solely for Europeans.

The public appetite for ancient history is underdeveloped because of its association with Baathist grand narratives amongst the older generation, and ignorance amongst the younger. There are few opportunities to learn about current research on Iraq's ancient past, unless one has particularly good knowledge of English, French or German and a particularly good internet connection. Books in Arabic are still in circulation of course, but those from the 1960s and later are tainted by their political overtones, and those from the 1950s and earlier are woefully out of date. Museums are not yet set up to offer public education, for adults or children, assuming that they are open at all. Print and broadcast news media are highly fragmented and focus primarily on matters of political interest. Government edu-

cation initiatives are narrowly utilitarian and have not yet grasped the potential of humanities subjects in general, let alone ancient history in particular, in developing a strong civil society.

Many governments worldwide are currently struggling to see the value in supporting academic humanities and social sciences, however, not just those like Iraq with more immediately pressing concerns. The British Academy has recently advocated for "prospering wisely" through, in Lord Stern's words, "conceptual clarity and impartial, evidence-based research and analysis, together with open-mindedness and creativity in exploring new ideas" which "can guide—and promote—reasoned political and public discourse, by bringing fresh knowledge and ideas to the fore" (British Academy 2). It is not just about the obvious economic benefits to the creative, cultural and tourism industries. A particularly powerful section argues that "local history (...) makes us who we are. (...) Identity and well-being are inexorably linked" (13). Perhaps even more pertinent to present-day Iraq, "by explaining how narratives of the past created present differences, historians (...) can help us celebrate diversity and not merely tolerate the different" (22). As Diarmaid MacCulloch puts it, "particularly in a democ-

racy, telling the story right is really very important, because so many people are involved in making decisions, even if it is just a vote at an election" (22). Or as Saad Eskander, Director of the Iraq National Library and Archives, said to me in 2013: "If we do not know ourselves, who are we reconstructing this country for? If we cannot look back, we have no memory, we have no identity and we cannot move forward." In this light, it is difficult to sustain the argument that history has no place in any country's future.

Ancient Iraqi History Now

Let us turn to the production of ancient Babylonian history in Iraq at the present time, starting with its most visible symbol, the Iraq Museum.

In retrospect, it is now clear that at least some of the looting at the Iraq Museum in 2003, in particular the ransacking of staff offices, was motivated by its close identification with the previous regime (Polk and Schuster; Stone and Bajjal). There was of course also professional as well as opportunistic theft of artefacts, but this is not the place to dwell on that particular episode. Indeed, I would argue that international concern, even obsession, over the fate of particular archaeological objects stands in stark and shameful contrast with the general indifference to the fate of

Iraqis themselves, both individually and institutionally.

The Iraq Museum and its parent organisation the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage have both suffered major losses of senior staff through de-Baathification, death, and emigration. Current managers and the ministerial staff that oversee them are clearly under-trained and out of their depth. These factors all have repercussions that are detrimental to the Museum itself but—paradoxically—generally beneficial to the provincial structures it nominally regulates. With rare exceptions the Museum is still closed to the public and to researchers, over a decade since the war (Arraf). There is an education officer with good English who can give tours, however. The galleries have been refitted and repopulated with objects, some of them several times, but the end result is much as it was pre-war: large numbers of artefacts grouped by type or material into relatively small cases which often seem too small for the very large galleries, and very little explanatory text or none at all. The staff have by and large relied on outside agencies for gallery refurbishments, especially UNESCO, and there is little domestic curatorial activity. There is still a palpable victim culture—that the museum is still suffering from the war ten years ago, with an explicit expectation that foreign agencies,

governmental and non-governmental, should continue to come to its aid. This attitude is in stark contrast to the energy and entrepreneurialism of other cultural heritage organisations across Iraq.

The Iraq Museum, as home of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, is still nominally in control of cultural heritage in the country's eighteen provinces, including the three that make up Iraqi Kurdistan. In practice, however, its inertia means that for the most part local officials are relatively autonomous and free to innovate where they have the energy to do so; they almost always have the money. As I am focusing here on ancient history, I will mention only in passing the extremely impressive efforts driven by the Shia shrines authorities in the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala to document the material culture of historical Islam; and by the avowedly secular and non-sectarian Iraqi National Library and Archives in Baghdad to digitise and get online all official documentation of the twentieth century Iraqi state, torture records and all. However, both are indicative of a new and exciting move to the creation of local historical narratives. In Basra, for instance, the dilapidated old museum has been replaced with a new one in one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces on the Shatt al-Arab river. The museum is to be funded and managed jointly by the State

Board and—for the first time—by Basra Provincial Council, through its Tourism and Antiquities Committee. UK charity Friends of the Basrah Museum and the British Institute for the Study of Iraq also provide assistance (“Friends of Basrah Museum”). The final phases of work are now underway, and it is hoped that the building will open to the public some time in 2015.

A formal operating plan spells out the museum’s aims, stressing local stories as much as national history. Objects for the museum will be sent from Baghdad, but unusually the choice will be negotiated with the local museum director, Qahtan Alabeed, and supplemented with locally sourced artefacts. The majority of gallery space is given to Sumerian and Babylonian (ancient southern Iraqi) history, along with that of Basra itself, from ancient times to the present day. Assyrian (ancient northern Iraqi) history gets just a single small gallery of its own. It has not yet been decided whether the museum will charge an entrance fee—a prohibitive \$1 for Iraqis has been mentioned, \$10 for foreigners—or will open its doors for free.

Where, in this setup, do new historians, archaeologists, and cultural heritage experts come from? And how do they get trained? There are thirty-three state universities in Iraq, thirteen of them in Kurdistan, and a further twenty-two private ones. All have

suffered badly from sanctions-era and post-war academic emigration, lack of infrastructural investment, and training, etc., and a top-down bureaucracy (Jawad and al-Assaf). The top 15% of school-leavers are channelled into studying engineering, medicine, and pharmacy. Even my mathematician friends complain that they do not get the brightest students. The historians and archaeologists certainly do not. Since 2009 there has been a large-scale graduate scholarship scheme, funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, which has supported over 22,000 students to date. There is also plethora of similar European and US schemes for Iraqi graduate students—in March 2013 ICEF estimated that they amount to about \$200 million—but the majority of those understandably go to students in science, technology, engineering and medicine. Most (but not all) of the state universities have archaeology, ancient history and/or cultural heritage departments, but I know of no systematic survey of them.

I have personally visited the archaeology departments of Qadissiyah University in Diwaniyah and Kufa University in Najaf. At Qadissiyah, the archaeology department is not connected to the internet. The head of department has a laptop and there are at least two classrooms with digital projectors but only one of them is functional.

Technological infrastructure in the much better-funded Kufa University is significantly better. Library provision at both institutions, however, is woeful: budgets are tiny, and the students’ language skills do not extend to reading European textbooks. Even having good skills in conversational Business English does not equip one to read highly technical excavation reports, or the rebarbative musings of an erudite Assyriologist. And Iraqi students are simply not trained in the search and analytical skills needed to locate and make sense of what is on the web. Well-meaning projects to mass-scan archaeological reports to PDF and to negotiate free access to JSTOR for Iraqi universities are therefore largely ineffective. However, all staff and students have phones or tablets—all graduands from the University of Kufa are presented with smartphones by the provincial governor—and everyone is on social media of some sort or another.

The University of Kufa runs training excavations at the early Islamic city there, while their counterparts at Qadissiyah have had digs in recent years at the Old Babylonian cities of Marad and Pi-Kasi (known locally as Abu Antik because of the wealth of ancient artefacts found there). Qadissiyah Assyriologist Saad Salman Sinaa is editing cuneiform tablets found at the latter site. Up at the University of Mosul (which I have

not myself visited) the archaeology department has been working with a team from Boston University, headed by Professor Michael Danti, to reform its curriculum, in a project funded by the US Embassy in Iraq.

Since 2013 young Iraqi archaeologists are also being trained at the British-Iraqi excavations at Tell Khaiber in Dhi Qar province. Dhi Qar University has no archaeology department; the trainees, all university graduates, come from the provincial office of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, along with senior archaeologist Ali Khadem whose primary responsibility is the enormous site of Ur. It is hoped to extend the training programme significantly in future seasons, funding permitting.

Conclusions: Possible Futures, Enabling Change

The nation state of Iraq is extraordinarily resilient, despite its obvious major flaws—or even because of them, as Fanar Hadad has recently argued. Whatever Iraq's fate as a political entity, there are thirty-three million-odd people living there. They, like everyone, deserve the right to learn about their region's past, both recent and ancient, should they choose to do so, to understand who they and their communities are, and how they came to be. There is great potential to enable that to happen,

not least because current stasis in central government is allowing local identities to flourish as never before since the 1950s. The worry is that, at worst, the old centralised Baathist historical narrative will be replaced by competing sectarian accounts, which are just as limiting, biased and off-putting as the one they replace.

Where do outside experts fit in? Do we have any role in changing the current picture, given that our collective efforts over the past decade have largely failed to be transformative? Westerners certainly should not be dictating terms to our Iraqi colleagues but equally we should not continue to ignore them. Equally, business as usual will not be good enough. Digitising materials is pointless without finding aids and further support. Out-of-country training for limited numbers of people is likewise often suboptimal: once they are back in their home institution, experience shows that they struggle to implement what they have learned without the resources, infrastructure and managerial support that we take for granted. I see three basic prerequisites for the collaborative development of a viable professional infrastructure.

1. Arabic Language

We need to learn to speak it, and write it, in such a way as will make sense to Iraqi

audiences—professional or public—and enable them to engage and respond. We do not expect our undergraduates, let alone our public audiences, to know any foreign languages, so why should that be a prerequisite in Iraq? Of course it is necessary at graduate level but certainly not before. That might mean in the first instance pushing our publishers to commission Arabic translations of our books. But it also means being able to speak face-to-face with colleagues, students, and school groups in their own language. Over the past few months the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus collective (Oracc) has been developing mobile-friendly design for its educational sites such as *Knowledge and Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, *Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses*, and *Cuneiform Revealed*. The next step, funding permitting, will be Arabic translation, cultural adaptation, and focused training for Arabophone users and content creators.

2. Scoping the Landscape in Iraq

There is no shortage of energetic, intelligent, frustrated academics in Iraqi universities and cultural heritage organisations who are desperate for international collaboration, and the innovation and inspiration that collaboration brings. Identifying them and discussing their needs seems a

Eleanor Robson

is Professor of Ancient Near Eastern History at University College London and the British Institute for the Study of Iraq's voluntary Chair of Council.

email: e.robson@ucl.ac.uk

key first step, while ensuring that our own academic needs and principles are met. The partners we work with need not just be academics and university students. In-country NGOs can help develop public education programmes. UNESCO Iraq needs to be encouraged to connect its education and culture strategies more coherently. Government ministries—whether Education, Higher Education, Culture, Tourism and Antiquities—print and broad-

cast media, commercial and industrial sports: all are potential allies.

3. Advocating Internationally

Many of us need to commit to this future. A handful of individuals, or even a handful of organisations, cannot work with every prospective Iraqi partner. Equally, a huge public relations exercise will be necessary, to persuade colleagues, managers and funders of the safety and value of working

in-country, with the right partners and under the right conditions. In particular, it is important to get the message across that sustained engagement with Iraq's ancient history is not merely a western indulgence. Iraq's past matters deeply to many Iraqis, for whom it is a powerful and effective means of asserting collective identity, and celebrating cultural diversity, in these most destructive and divisive of times.

Notes

¹ This paper is a revised version of a talk given to the Institute for Classical Studies' Ancient History Seminar in London in May 2013, at the kind invitation of Amélie Kuhrt, under the title "Publics, Practitioners, and Politics: Talking Babylonian History in Southern Iraq." I wrote it in the context of formulating the next five-year plan and case for support for the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, whose governing council of trustees I currently chair, and submitted it for review in the spring of 2014. In revisions (autumn 2014) I have not attempted to take account of the ever-changing political and military situation in Iraq,

especially since ISIS' invasion of the Mosul region in June 2014, as updates become outdated almost as soon as they are written at the moment.

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