

Year Zero for the Archaeology of Iraq: A Reply

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I am extremely grateful to my colleagues for producing these stimulating comments and ideas in reply to my paper. It is encouraging to see that there is general agreement on the thrust of my arguments, in particular as regards the need for integrated joint research programmes, for improved education at the local and global scales, for significant improvements in publication strategies and for an appreciation and incorporation of Iraqi views of the past into constructed historical trajectories. I now take each respondent in turn.

Lamia al-Gailani Werr suggests that “Year Zero” could equally apply to the fate of the archaeology of Iraq in the 60s, 70s or 80s, but it seems to me that the current break in activity and interaction is far more severe and deep-rooted than was the case in those decades, which saw a wealth of fieldwork and academic interaction between Iraq and its international colleagues that has not since been equalled. Even the dreadful circumstances of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), for much of which time I was myself resident in Baghdad, did not seriously hinder the practice of the discipline. The real breakdown happened in 1990-1991. Since then, it is important to highlight the amazing dedication and bravery of individuals within Iraq who have risked their lives in order to protect and explore their heritage, for example by conducting programmes of excavation at remote archaeological sites in order to discourage illicit activity. We have heard little of these activities in the West through the 1990s, because no western scholars were involved, but that does not at all diminish their significance.

Al-Gailani Werr is right to stress the value of ongoing Arabic publication of recent Iraqi excavations, even if these may be hard to track down in the West. Her own efforts, through the Edubba series, to bridge the Arabic-English divide in terms of archaeological publication concerning Iraq is a rare venture and deserves the highest praise.

Harriet Crawford makes many practical and valuable suggestions about the possible future of archaeology in Iraq, laying stress upon training, integration and local outreach. Her own experiences in Bahrain are illuminating, and the point about local involvement as a means of engaging interest in site protection and development is especially well made. As to the future of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI), there appear to be many possible courses of action, but until the security situation improves immensely there are unlikely to be many developments on the ground. We do at least have the time to think carefully about what might be feasible and productive ways to proceed. I still feel that the BSAI should devote a greater proportion of its funds and energies to publication of previous projects as a top priority.

Sophia Labadi makes some challenging observations. In my article I suggested that in formulating a possible future scenario for the archaeology of Iraq, “we are free, should we wish, to turn our backs on that past”, that is the past of imperial exploitation, colonial administration and post-colonial angst that I had outlined in the immediately previous sentences. In subtly modifying and generalising my words to “turn our back on *the* past” (my emphasis) she opposes this imputed sentiment against the proposal that the Iraqi people do not have the option to “forget about the past”. This is not a valid opposition. I was proposing that practitioners of the discipline of the archaeology of Iraq can move on from a specific point in the historical trajectory of that discipline, if they so choose, not that we should “forget about the past”.

Labadi describes my outline of a possible future for the discipline of Mesopotamian archaeology as “somewhat utopic”, on the grounds that I fail to engage in the Orientalist debate. Again, this is a matter of choice. I choose not to see the Orientalist debate, in which Occident and Orient are opposed to each other in an essentialist and caricatured manner, as a productive, valuable or meaningful way to proceed. She herself describes the Orient/Occident debate as an “antagonistic discourse” (twice), and I continue to fail to see what of value we have to learn from it. Furthermore, I do not believe that the recently televised interaction between Dan Cruickshank and staff of the Iraq Museum can suitably be situated within the context of an Orient/Occident discourse nor, as she claims, that the exchange can be interpreted as demonstrating a reluctance (nor willingness) of museum staff to cooperate with occupying forces. I saw it as the actions of a boorish, ill-mannered man raising the hackles of understandably apprehensive members of staff, who in extremely difficult circumstances responded with dignified caution, wantonly interpreted by Cruickshank as complicity and guilt. I wonder how a director of the British Museum might respond to an Iraqi TV crew barging without appointment into his/her office and asking in Arabic a series of pointed and loaded questions while aggressively filming the proceedings, soon after a catastrophic series of events had befallen the museum? The episode had nothing to do with East and West, and everything to do with empathy, manners and behaviour.

Labadi makes many interesting points about the UNESCO World Heritage list. I accept that this is a complex issue, and that clearly there has to be motivation and capability on the part of the applicant nation. Nevertheless, unless non-western nations are assisted more fully and generously in formulating and submitting their applications, the list will continue to be the preserve of rich western nations and therefore lacking in global relevance. Ways have to be found by which non-western nations can make applications commensurate to the wealth of the heritage within their borders, or the list remains meaningless in any global context.

I was intrigued to learn more of John Simmons’ thoughts relating to reconstruction and the role of cultural heritage, being already familiar with his work through the Baghdad Museum Project website. He stresses the importance of local integration and education, and makes many practical and ingenious suggestions for ways in which recent developments in information technology and GIS might be deployed to good effect in the context of the heritage of Iraq. I wish him well in these endeavours and look forward to hearing more about them in the future.

Marc Van De Mieroop picks up with vim the theme of archaeological publication. It is fair to say that significant steps have been taken both by funding bodies (blacklists of underachievers in the publication stakes are now maintained at the major British funding sources), and by national archaeological services. In Syria, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Israel and Cyprus it is now extremely difficult, usually impossible, for foreign archaeologists with poor publication histories to obtain permits for new field projects. But Van De Mieroop is absolutely right to raise concern over the question of who will administer the issue of fieldwork permits in Iraq once the security situation allows the return of foreign academics. I am already aware of attempts by western colleagues with less than perfect publication track records to recommence, or start anew, in the field in Iraq. I hope that western funding bodies will have the fortitude to stand by their principles in these cases.

I fully agree with Van De Mieroop's assertion that scholars of ancient Mesopotamia are at least partly to blame for the poor representation of our subject in schools and other educational and public media. One potentially positive outcome of the recent bleak events has at least been an increased level of public awareness, in the UK at any rate, of the history and heritage of Iraq/Mesopotamia and their global significance. Television programmes on the archaeology of Iraq are being produced at a considerably increased rate, and the participation of scholars in such enterprises may help to bridge the hitherto broad chasm between specialist knowledge and public appreciation of the subject.

Finally, there are several recent developments that may profitably be mentioned in the context of this forum. Firstly, attention should be drawn to the brave efforts of a group called Archaeologists for Human Rights (AFHR) who are addressing the sensitive and supremely important issue of meticulous excavation of mass graves in Iraq. Their work can be encountered and supported at <http://www.afhr.org/>. Secondly, a special issue of the *International Foundation for Art Research Journal*, volume 6, is devoted to the topic of the cultural heritage of Iraq and the disasters of recent months. It contains many relevant and highly informative articles and is available through the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR) website at <http://www.ifar.org/>. Lastly, an announcement came last month from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that a sum of \$4 131 274 had been granted to a consortium of universities from Iraq, USA and UK in order to "modernise curricula in archaeology and Assyriology and conduct research using modern analytical methods" amongst other aims (<http://www.usaid.gov/iraq/>). It is greatly to be hoped that security and political circumstances will in due course exist so that such programmes can effectively and equitably be implemented and augmented in the years and decades ahead.