

# The Iraq National Museum: Networking, Coordination and Collaboration in Wartime Iraq

**Corine Wegener**

Assistant Curator  
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
The United States of America

## Resumen

### **El Museo Nacional de Iraq - Creación de redes, coordinación y colaboración en tiempo de guerra en Iraq**

Inmediatamente después de la guerra de Iraq, los Estados Unidos han tratado de restablecer las relaciones entre las fuerzas militares y las autoridades gubernamentales, así como entre la población y las organizaciones no gubernamentales, por conducto del "US Army Civil Affairs".

El conflicto armado obstaculizó el acceso a Iraq, bloqueando durante muchas semanas la asistencia operacional internacional encaminada a prestar ayuda de emergencia al Museo Nacional de Iraq y a sus colecciones. En la actualidad, una serie de equipos de distintas nacionalidades están trabajando activamente para comprobar el estado de las colecciones y del edificio de este museo, así como para llevar a cabo actividades relacionadas con su restauración, conservación, equipamiento, etc. En un plano más general, se está tratando de crear un equipo de profesionales bajo los auspicios de una organización no gubernamental con vistas a acelerar la realización de intervenciones de ayuda de emergencia destinadas a salvaguardar los bienes culturales.

## Résumé

### **Le Musée national d'Irak : création de réseaux, coordination et collaboration en temps de guerre en Irak**

Juste après la guerre, les États-Unis, à travers le « US Army Civil Affairs » sont entrés en Irak afin de rétablir les relations entre les forces militaires et gouvernementales, la population et les ONG. Le conflit armé a rendu difficiles les entrées dans le pays, ce qui a bloqué pendant de nombreuses semaines l'assistance internationale opérationnelle destinée à protéger le musée et ses collections. A l'heure actuelle, des équipes de différentes nationalités travaillent activement au constat d'état des collections et de l'édifice, à la restauration, à la conservation, à l'équipement, etc. Plus généralement, afin d'accélérer le déploiement des aides d'intervention d'urgence en faveur des biens culturels, une équipe de professionnels de l'urgence devrait pouvoir être mise en place sous l'égide d'une ONG.

In April 2003, I watched in horror with the rest of the world as looters carried off treasures from the Iraq National Museum. My feelings were mixed. I feared for my fellow service members fighting to take Baghdad. At the same time, I felt a great deal of frustration; in addition to being a major in the U.S. Army Reserve, I am an assistant curator in the department of Decorative Arts at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. It is not the purpose of this paper to determine who should bear the blame for the looting of the Iraq National Museum. I believe the international community of scholars, archaeologists and museum professionals did everything within their power to provide information to the Department of Defence to prevent damage to Iraq's cultural heritage. In addition, it is the policy of the U.S. military to protect cultural property in times of armed conflict whenever possible; however, the lives of soldiers come first and those kinds of decisions can only be made by commanders on the ground.

The goal of this paper is to provide some insight into the situation at the museum in the weeks and months after the war and the personnel working there to assist in the long term, and to provide recommendations for action in the event of future conflicts. Museums damaged during armed conflict need to receive direct assistance from trained professionals as soon as it is possible to safely enter the area. Meetings and conferences to plan assistance must include all those concerned, including personnel most likely to be operating in the area; and international, governmental and non-governmental organisations offering assistance must coordinate with personnel on the ground and with each other to prevent duplication of effort, or worse, gaps in assistance for critical infrastructure. Finally, I will propose the formation of a new organisation designed to provide rapid response to museums damaged during armed conflict.

Immediately following the war, U.S. Army Civil Affairs operators began to enter the country. The Civil Affairs mission is to facilitate relations between military forces, government and non-government civilian organisations and authorities, and the civilian populace. In an effort to obtain critical civilian skills not found in the active component, we are nearly all reservists. As a professional art historian, my particular specialty is to advise and assist in locating, identifying, preserving, protecting, and restoring significant cultural property and facilities, including religious buildings, shrines, museums, monuments, art, archives, and libraries. While I knew there were already other Civil Affairs teams on the ground in Iraq, I also knew that I had never met another art historian in Civil Affairs, and a few days after the looting I received the call to mobilise to Iraq.

I was assigned to the Special Functions Team of the 352<sup>nd</sup> Civil Affairs Command, which, among other areas, was assigned the protection of arts, monuments, archives and other cultural property. Our team is the military liaison with the Ministry of Culture at the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). When I arrived at the Iraq National Museum, it was protected by U.S. soldiers with tanks at both the front and back gates. In addition, U.S. Army Central Command sent a team of U.S. military and U.S. Customs investigators from the Joint Inter-Agency Cooperation Group (JIACG), headed by U.S. Marine Reserve Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, to do a full investigation of the looting.

The JIACG team asked the museum staff to perform a complete inventory of the storage areas to determine exactly which items were missing. While the investigators meant well, they did not realize the difficulty of the task. With a collection of over 200,000 objects, no air conditioning, electricity, or furniture, and still reeling from the sudden changes in all their lives, the staff was overwhelmed. With the JIACG team focused on recovering looted objects, I began to focus on more positive tasks, such as asking the staff how to move beyond the looting and begin proactive planning for the museum's recovery.



Assyrian Gallery of the Iraq National Museum. Staff have placed sand bags on the floor to prevent damage to falling sculpture and reliefs

I toured the museum with director Nawala al Mutawali and immediately saw that the most critical need was conservation for objects damaged during the looting. The staff was beginning to clean up the galleries and I feared important fragments might be lost. I met with the senior conservator and learned that she did not feel she and her staff had adequate training to conserve the objects. They were hoping for assistance from UNESCO which had sent an assessment team a few days before I arrived. I had been following news stories and ICOM lists and discussions about the museum and knew that the museum community had agreed that the British Museum was to act as the clearing house for pledges of aid to the Iraq National Museum. When I contacted the British Museum via email, I was informed that they were having difficulty receiving country clearance to enter Iraq. I found out that anyone entering the country to work under the auspices of CPA had to be invited and receive a "country clearance" from the CPA, which was not easy to come by.



Sculpture fragments from the Hatra Gallery, smashed during the looting of the Iraq National Museum

After about a month, I was finally able to convince CPA to allow an assistant curator from the British Museum and an archaeologist to be granted country clearance to work with our team for ninety days. A team of conservators and curators from the British Museum were also finally able to enter Iraq by travelling overland from Jordan with a team of BBC reporters. Unfortunately, they only stayed long enough to do an assessment of the museum's conservation problems and plan a training programme for Iraqi conservators to come to the BM for a two-month training course. The training has yet to take place because of problems with obtaining passports and visas. To date, no conservation professional outside the Iraq Museum staff have performed any conservation on the damaged collections.

In the days and weeks after the looting I watched as members of the scholarly and museum community had meetings and conferences about assistance to the Iraq National Museum. Meanwhile, I was working to wrap up loose ends at my museum and prepare for what I was told might be a year long deployment to Iraq. I tried to make as many contacts as possible before I left, but was unable to contact anyone already working in Iraq and was unsure who to contact in the unfamiliar discipline of archaeology. Once in Iraq, it seemed more difficult than ever to make contacts and coordination. The few contacts I had gave recommendations for several free-lance conservators and even provided expert conservation advice, but I did not have the authority to bring conservators into the country, nor a budget to pay them.

Over the past five months I have watched a veritable army of people tour the museum making assessments, taking photos, and making promises. But these things take time. I know the staff has been frustrated, mentioning more than once that help would come one day, "in sh'Allah". The help is beginning to arrive. In the past couple of months the museum received conservation assistance from the Italian government,

who are working on a project to refurbish the conservation labs. The military Commander's Emergency Reconstruction Program bought the museum a new 500K generator and paid for repairs to many of the museum offices. The U.S. Department of State sent a large donation of new office furniture, computers, air conditioners, and other equipment, with more assistance on the way. In fact, so much assistance is on the way that there appears to be a danger of duplication of effort. Coordination between donors and personnel on the ground is required to prevent duplication of effort and possible gaps in critical infrastructure, such as plumbing and lighting.

Finally, in the absence of the mutual assistance agreements that most museums now employ as part of their emergency plans, the Iraq National Museum would have benefited greatly from a team of volunteers, with well-equipped conservators and museum professionals who would have stayed on for a few weeks to actually help repair damage and give advice in the aftermath of the looting. In the future, such a team might be developed under the aegis of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) such as the International Committee of the Blue Shield, ensuring the same immediate access to disaster areas granted to other NGOs such as Médecins sans frontières, Care International, or Global Vision.

The Blue Shield could coordinate with potential donors and build a fund to be drawn upon in times of emergency to pay for transportation, equipment, and salaries. Ideally, the employers of the volunteers would agree to pay their salaries. The team would also be able to coordinate with other organisations that might be working in the area, especially the U.S., British, and Dutch military Civil Affairs operatives working to protect cultural heritage. The result could be a quick, responsive result for museums damaged or looted during armed conflict.

The tragedy at the Iraq National Museum is ongoing. Conservation work still needs to be performed on much of the collections, not only for objects damaged in the looting, but also for objects in storage. The museum staff needs updated training and the building is still desperately in need of repairs. While help is beginning to arrive, I believe that if an assistance team had arrived in the immediate aftermath of the disaster to assist the staff, they might be much closer to resuming their operations than they are today.