

# US occupation damages ancient sites at Babylon

## Imperialism and cultural vandalism in Iraq

By Harvey Thompson  
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US-led occupation forces in Iraq have inflicted widespread damage and severe contamination to the remains of the ancient city of Babylon, according to a British Museum-commissioned report released this month. Ignoring protests by archaeologists, US and Polish forces have used the world-renowned site as a military depot for the past two years.

Dr John Curtis, curator of the British Museum's Ancient Near East Department, found "substantial damage" at the site during an investigative visit to Babylon last month. An authority on Iraq's many archaeological sites, Curtis has worked as an archaeologist in Iraq for decades, personally directing many excavations.

US forces established the military camp at Babylon city—some 50 miles (80km) south of Baghdad—in April 2003, and damage was already visible when Curtis first visited part of the site in June of that year. The Pentagon contracted Kellogg, Brown and Root—a subsidiary of the Halliburton corporation, where US vice-president, Richard Cheney was chief executive officer before joining the Bush administration—to develop and maintain the site, which grew to a 150-hectare camp, housing 2,000 soldiers. The base was officially handed over to Polish forces in September 2003.

Commenting on the decision to site the military base in Babylon, the British Museum report said, "This is tantamount to establishing a military camp around the Great Pyramid in Egypt or around Stonehenge in Britain."

Curtis returned to Iraq following the US-led invasion, when the British Museum led an international effort to assess the damage and losses resulting from the looting of the national museum in Baghdad. He returned last month at the invitation of the Iraqi authorities and inspected Babylon with a team of Iraqi archaeologists. However, he was still not able to inspect the entire site, as part of it is still fenced off and mined.

Curtis therefore warns that his report "should not be seen as exhaustive, but is indicative of the types of damage caused."

The 14-page British Museum report, compiled during a site visit in December, includes maps and lists numerous examples of visible damage. The report details:

- \* Damage to the dragons decorating the Ishtar Gate "caused ... by a person or persons trying to remove a decorated brick." The report details 10 separate areas of damage to the molded brick reliefs.

- \* Broken bricks inscribed with the name of Nebuchadnezzar lying in spoil heaps. At the "Warsaw Gate" two 20-metre long trenches have been dug here. "In the piles of spoil alongside the trenches there are many fragments of brick, some with inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar," the report says. One brick clearly has an inscription that reads: "Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who provides for Esagila and Ezadila, the eldest son of Nabopolassar, King of Babylon, am I."

- \* Original brick surface of the great processional route through the gate

crushed by military vehicles. Two areas of sixth century BC brick pavement, part of the processional street, are exposed in this area. "In both cases the bricks are badly broken. This is thought to be the result of a heavy vehicle or vehicles driving over them. If this is so, it is likely that the bricks still covered by earth are similarly damaged."

- \* Fuel seeping from tanks into archaeological layers.

- \* Acres of the site leveled, covered with imported gravel—which Curtis said would be impossible to remove without causing further damage—and sprayed with chemicals that are also seeping into the unexcavated buried deposits.

- \* Thousands of tonnes of archaeological material used to fill sandbags and mesh crates. At one point, outside the base entrance nicknamed the "Reno Gate," is a 200-metre stretch of road, lined with the mesh baskets "that have clearly been filled with deposits from the Babylon site, containing shards, bones, etc." And equally damaging, when that practice stopped, thousands more tonnes of material imported from outside the site, contaminating it for archaeologists forever.

- \* Trenches dug into the ziggurat, one of the distinctive stepped pyramids or Babylonian monuments that probably gave rise to the legend of the Tower of Babel. "Much pottery and many fragments of brick with cuneiform inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar were observed in the bank of spoil" next to the trench.

Other observations include: an old car park vastly expanded to make a helicopter landing zone and parking lot, all flattened and graveled; old tracks covered in new stones, now deeply rutted from heavy vehicles; large areas scooped out to a depth of two metres to fill the sand bags; and metal baskets and earth mounded up to protect six fuel depots, which also show evidence of leakage.

The report also suggests that the most serious damage may be invisible. The contamination and disturbance of areas that have never been excavated may mean that many of Babylon's secrets, including the site of the hanging gardens, will never be resolved.

In concluding the report, Curtis says, "A full-scale international investigation should be launched into the damage done to the archaeological site of Babylon during its occupation by coalition forces."

Curtis has said it was not possible for him to determine when the damage took place and which forces did it but the chronology of the findings strongly suggest that the most of it occurred under the aegis of the US military.

Although the coalition authorities have now formally handed over the base, a US military spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Steven Boylan, recently told the BBC that the base, which now has around 6,000 troops under Polish command, is needed to "further defeat terrorists and insurgents."

The damage has outraged the world archaeological community. Mike

Pitts, editor of *British Archaeology*, wrote; “What were they thinking immediately that leveling whole areas of an ancient archaeological site such as Babylon is just not done.” surely the significance of Babylon was not missed? Babylon the capital city of Hammurabi, of Nebuchadnezzar, of the hanging gardens described by Herodotus; Babylon the military powerhouse that ravaged its neighbours in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, yet also developed astronomy, science and art to extraordinary levels. Surely no one in the West was so ignorant at least not to ask: should we not be concerned?

“...Turning the pages of Curtis’s report I see case after case where the document that would tell this story has been ripped apart. An area 50m by 200m close to the ancient Ninmah temple was flattened for a helipad, graveled and treated with petroleum to control the dust. All of these—leveling, introduction of foreign materials and contamination—are potentially destructive of archaeological remains, as are the many cuttings and trenches detailed, the heavy vehicle wheel ruts, the earthmoving and the fuel seepages. And this list—the report’s killer phrase—‘should not be seen as exhaustive, but ... indicative.’”

Many prominent British archaeologists have an extensive knowledge of Iraq’s 10,000 archaeological sites. They catalogued the previous looting and destruction of Iraq’s antiquities under the very nose of indifferent US troops (See: “The looting of Baghdad’s museum and library—US government implicated in planned theft of Iraqi artistic treasures”). They also witnessed the destruction of the historic mosques of Fallujah last November. Thus, they summed up their reaction to the conduct of the US-led forces in Babylon as one of “anger, but not surprise.”

Writing in the *Guardian* January 17, Dr Mike Heyworth, director of the Council for British Archaeology, said: “The extensive cultural vandalism of archaeological sites in Iraq by US-led forces is deeply depressing, but it comes as no surprise. Archaeological organisations on both sides of the Atlantic were warning British and American governments about these issues for months in advance of the conflict, and we have repeated our concerns many times since.”

Prof. Geoffrey Wainwright, chairman of Wessex Archaeology, writing in the same issue, said: “We should be angry but not surprised at the destruction of Babylon. Despite the requirements of The Hague convention, aggressors throughout history have targeted the cultural treasures of occupied territories in order to undermine their opponents’ national esteem and sense of cultural identity. Nebuchadnezzar created a world wonder, which, 2,600 years later, is the heritage icon for the Iraqi state—past and future. It is also part of a precious global heritage, which belongs to us all.

“We should feel outrage and contempt for the perpetrators whose actions have diminished our common inheritance. At the very least there should now be a proper inventory of the damage to Iraq’s heritage, conducted by an international coalition of concerned nations.”

Tim Schadla Hall, reader in public archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, commented, “In this case we see an international conflict in which the US has failed to take into account the requirements of the Hague convention ... to protect major archaeological sites—just another convention it seems happy to ignore.”

Lord Redesdale, an archaeologist and head of the all-party parliamentary archaeological group, said: “Outrage is hardly the word, this is just dreadful. These are world sites. Not only is what the American forces are doing damaging the archaeology of Iraq, it’s actually damaging the cultural heritage of the whole world.”

Dr Francis Deblauwe, an independent Mesopotamian archaeologist based in Kansas City, Missouri, who runs the *2003 Iraq War & Archaeology* web site, dismissed Pentagon claims that it “worked with” local archaeologists on the construction of the base.

“How on earth all this was allowed to happen, long after the fiasco with the National Museum in Baghdad, is beyond my comprehension,” said Deblauwe. “Any civil affairs officer worth his/her salt should have known

He went on to suggest the real relations between archaeologists and the US military: “My guess is that their protests were summarily brushed aside once the wheels of the military machine came into motion. It seems the infrastructure necessary for modern hi-tech warfare was installed and provided for without much—if any—regard for the exceptionally sensitive and unique setting. Furthermore, the constant traffic of heavy trucks and machinery wrecks havoc on the archaeological deposits right underneath the surface.

“Due to security concerns, Iraqi experts were shut out, especially the people from the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), whom the coalition military probably saw as Ba’athist holdovers.”

The irreparable damage done to the ancient sites of Babylon is a criminal act whose historical precedent is to be found in the Nazis’ looting of art treasures and destruction of famous monuments throughout Europe during World War II.

The decision to base a military depot in one of the most important archaeological sites in the world can only have been issued from a deeply reactionary and reckless power that is utterly hostile to the cultural achievements of mankind. The damage done to Babylon has seriously impaired the prospect of further understanding an ancient civilisation of world importance, and has curtailed the ability of future generations to study and wonder at the historic sites.

Despite attempts to pass off the vandalism of the sites as the folly of individual troops, this level of cultural and social philistinism has definite political roots. It is the logical by-product of a predatory war and occupation launched by subterfuge, which had as its main goal the seizure of Iraq’s oil resources. In the process, the Iraqi people have been subjugated to military rule and the country’s historical and artistic heritage looted or destroyed—with the complicity or tacit approval of the US military.

In a cruel historical irony that will not be missed by those concerned with the fate of ancient Babylon, the Bush administration, a criminal political elite that purports to be waging war in defence of the values of ‘civilisation,’ is destroying important remnants of the origins of Western civilisation itself.

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