

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

“49^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale: Nineveh”, The Clore Centre, British Museum and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, 7th-11th July 2003

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Every summer, scholars and students of the Ancient Near East gather together to present the latest discoveries and discuss the newest theories in their field. This year the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (International Congress of Assyriology and Near Eastern Archaeology) was held at the Clore Centre of the British Museum with a workshop at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, between 7-11 July. Sponsored by SOAS and the British Museum, and organised by Professor Andrew George of SOAS, the Rencontre was attended by over 500 participants from all over the world, including Iraq.

The theme of the Rencontre was Nineveh, an ancient Mesopotamian site on the Tigris River, which was inhabited since prehistory, later becoming one of the most important cities of the Assyrian empire and its last capital. Some papers diverged from the main theme, and the topics covered at the conference spanned almost the entire range of the spectrum of Ancient Near Eastern studies. They were divided into thematic sessions which included: “Landscape and Settlement”, “Libraries”, “Art and Artefacts”, “Philology and Science”, “Grammar and Linguistics”, “Trade”, “Prehistory”, “Medicine”, “Digital Assyriology”, “Sennacherib”, “Ishtar”, “Businessmen and Scholars”, “Topography”, “Magic”, “Anthropology and Ideology”, “Archaeology”, “The Levant”, “Craftwork” and miscellaneous papers in general sessions of “Assyriana” and “Assyriologica”. On Thursday a workshop was held at SOAS on “The Administration of the Ur III State”, which comprised “Administrative Practices”, “Royal Ideology and State Administration” and “Current Progress of Web-Resource Projects for Ur III Studies”. Due to such a full programme, the entire Clore Centre of the British Museum was used, which includes two lecture theatres and the Sackler rooms. As it was impossible to attend all sessions, it was necessary to make very difficult choices, which are reflected in this review.

On the evening before the conference, there was a dramatic reading of Gilgamesh, the oldest epic poem and the focus of Prof. George’s studies for the past 10 years (George 2003). Recovered from several fragments of tablets written in the cuneiform script in both the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, in antiquity it would have normally been performed before an audience. Since its rediscovery, this was only the second time that the ancient poem has been presented on stage. The actors included Prunella Scales and Timothy West, supported by a group of five others, amongst whom Dan Peacefield in

the role of Enkidu, a wild man who becomes Gilgamesh's best friend, was particularly convincing.

The first day was largely dedicated to the current situation in Iraq: participants were given up-to-date information and first-hand accounts of what happened in Iraq during the recent war and the looting that ensued. Elizabeth Stone of Stony Brook University, John Curtis, Keeper of the Department of the Ancient Near East of the British Museum and Anna Paolini, Head of the Arab Cultures Unit at UNESCO, had all visited Iraq in June/July, mainly to assess the damages caused by the conflict and the absence of law and order. They also took the opportunity to deliver materials urgently needed by their colleagues, such as stationery, laptops and conservation materials, since absolutely everything was either looted or damaged during the conflict; most of the equipment was paid for by private donors and some institutions, such as the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.

They witnessed the precarious situation of Iraqi archaeologists, which Elizabeth Stone described as "less gloomy than at the beginning"; although a lot of improvement is necessary, the concerted efforts of international institutions coordinated by the British Museum have already given positive results. The need for more cooperation between donations of both academic and humanitarian nature was stressed, as it is important to avoid duplication of aid. This situation is the result of a combination of long years of neglect and sanctions, as well as the recent conflict. No foreign publications have been available since 1990, and the recent looting left museums and universities with very few books.

Numerous archaeological sites suffered to various degrees: Ashur has finally been listed as a World Heritage site, but that alone is not going to protect it. Babylon and Ur are heavily guarded by the coalition forces, not by virtue of being important historical sites, however, but rather for their geographical position; a UNESCO mission was not allowed to enter the site of Ur in order to assess the damage caused by the war. Kish has become a military outpost because of its strategic location overlooking the highway, but the soldiers based there have no idea of its archaeological or historical significance. Some other sites, such as Isin and Larsa, show signs of recent looting and illegal excavations (up to six metres deep). The extensive robbing of archaeological sites is even worse than the looting of museums, since the objects stolen from museums at least have been recorded and/or photographed, while illicit excavations not only remove important artefacts without study or documentation, but also destroy the stratigraphy of the site.

In the looting frenzy that ensued after the battle for Baghdad, even the metal roof that protected the Assyrian bas-reliefs of Nimrud was removed; the carved slabs are suffering considerably as a result and are in urgent need of extensive conservation.

The recent press coverage only focused on the Iraq Museum, but other institutions across the country have suffered equally: in the Mosul Museum, parts of the Balawat gates were looted; in the library at Basra, books were burnt and stolen. Due to the lack

of order and to the chaotic effects of the fall of the regime and the consequent disbandment of the police force, the traffic of stolen objects is increasing.

Some of the most precious items removed from the Baghdad Museum before the war had been put in storage in the Central Bank, but when recovered they were found sitting in filthy water mixed with sewage. The Department of Conservation of the British Museum (BM) is involved with trying to provide training for Iraqi conservators, who lack knowledge of the latest techniques. The plan is to invite four Iraqis to spend some time working in the BM thus receiving training in treating ivory and stone artefacts, and to send a team of six international conservators to Iraq in October.

Between the initial presentation of recent events and the closing session on Friday, which resumed the subject of looting, it was 'business as usual'. Some of the papers presented were very specialised (particularly those dealing with philology) and only those participants with an in-depth knowledge of the subject could follow them. Others revisited well-established facts through modern techniques, namely the identification of settlement patterns, irrigation channels and road networks using satellite images. Computer technology is being successfully employed by Assyriologists, and many research projects would not have been possible without it. Amongst the ones presented were: "3D Scanning and 3D Visualisation of Cuneiform Tablets" by Dean Snyder, "The Optimal Method of Producing 3D Models of Tablets" by Gerfrid Müller and "A Digital Map of the Ancient Near East" by Michael Porter.

Christopher Walker and Ali Yaseen Ahmad presented the "Ashurbanipal Library Project", which consists of plans to build a centre for the study of cuneiform texts in Mosul, Iraq. This is a joint project involving the British Museum and the University of Mosul; the former will provide the Iraqi University with replicas of several cuneiform tablets that were excavated in Iraq and are now in their keep.

Very interesting and well-attended was the session on Qatna, where the latest finds were presented by Mirko Novák and Peter Pfälzner. Although it had been excavated 90 years ago, recent campaigns of excavation have unearthed important finds: seal impressions which define the main uses of the palace, tablets which belonged to an office rather than an archive, and a subterranean corridor leading to a royal tomb. The latter was seven metres below floor level, and was not robbed in antiquity. Two identical statues flanked the entrance. The tomb, which comprised a main chamber 2.5m high surrounded by three side-chambers with different functions, contained 1900 objects – mainly pottery, jewels and offerings of various kinds. The sarcophagus did not have a lid and was re-used in antiquity between the 18th and 14th centuries BC – as a new person was laid to rest, the remains of his predecessor were moved to a different area of the tomb. This discovery will improve our knowledge of the second millennium BC, and in particular it will allow a new insight into the history of one of the Syrian kingdoms within the larger area of the Ancient Near East.

As mentioned, the conference concluded on Friday with further discussion on the recent situation in Iraq. Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, a US army official in charge

of investigating the looting of the Iraq Museum and recovering the missing artefacts, spoke for one hour about his work. On the one hand there was relief on the part of the participants, because he showed great determination in wanting to give back to the Iraq Museum what was taken from it. On the other hand, there was a sense of resentment because the looting and vandalism was allowed to happen, in spite of early and repeated warnings from many institutions and individuals about the great archaeological and historical heritage of Iraq. It was clear that Colonel Bogdanos was less of a scholar and more of a soldier when he went off on a tangent after being asked a very pertinent and legitimate question regarding rumours that US soldiers had removed 'archaeological souvenirs' from Iraq and taken them back home. Rather than giving an honest reply, he ranted that he was not prepared to discuss such lies about young American soldiers who are giving their lives for freedom and democracy. Not the informed and rational answer one would have expected, and many felt rather disappointed by this attitude.

This year's Rencontre represented an excellent opportunity to bring together people who are passionate about Iraq and its past, and Iraqi scholars who went through the recent war and change of regime. It was the perfect occasion to find out what was really happening and how we could all, as a group, help. Our Iraqi colleagues, against all odds, did their best to preserve the heritage of their country for the sake of us all. Although the media planted the seed of doubt about their integrity and their roles in the looting of the Museum, the scholars in the West who have known them personally and for a long time, had nothing but praise for their work, carried out in difficult and often dangerous circumstances.

At the Rencontre, the numerous participants were able to hear the real facts about the conditions of archaeological sites and cultural institutions in Iraq. They were also informed of the results of recent excavations and of the study of artefacts throughout the entire region of the Ancient Near East. New projects and new ideas were presented to them during the day, while the opportunity for discussions was available at the receptions and parties organised in the evenings. The large number of participants, the extensive range of topics covered, and the presence of Iraqi scholars made this year's Rencontre very absorbing and very instructive.

Reference

George, A. R. (ed.) 2003. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.