

Year Zero for the Archaeology of Iraq: A Response to Matthews

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The thought-provoking paper by Roger Matthews addresses issues that by far surpass the boundaries of Iraq, but the ongoing destruction of the cultural heritage of that country is indeed a good occasion to reappraise the attitudes of archaeologists working in the developing world toward their host countries. Matthews addresses important aspects of the ethics of archaeology, a topic that is often ignored and where scholarly practice shows remarkable callousness. It is hard to disagree with any of the comments made in this paper, and I will try here to nuance them somewhat and place them in the perspective of someone who is not an archaeologist but an historian of ancient Iraq.

The greatest scandal discussed here is the lack of the publication of excavation results. This problem is not limited to Iraq, but characterises archaeological work throughout the Middle East. It may have been exacerbated in Iraq in the last decade, but it has always been a disgrace. Everybody suffers from the negative consequences, except perhaps the archaeologist who continues to excavate. Archaeology is a relatively expensive research method, and granting agencies are denied the results of their investments when excavators do not publish their work. It has always surprised me that this does not seem to prevent the renewal of grants, which reflects the influence project directors have in their home countries. For the host countries this situation is even more disturbing; their heritage is simply destroyed. Since funding institutions do not sufficiently enforce their publication duties, it should be up to the archaeological services to do so. Here the situation in Iraq seems especially inauspicious, with the country's national resources being controlled by the occupying forces and sold off to foreigners. Who will issue excavation permits in the future? If in the past a strong and independently minded Iraqi State Board of Antiquities was unable to make foreign scholars publish, how can one expect a department in the control of the same foreigners to do so? Several national archaeological services in the Middle East wield the threat of discontinuing excavation permits but there is an amazing lack of success. Scholars not connected to the archaeological projects suffer as well. They are usually made aware that data of relevance to their work are out there, but cannot use them. This problem urgently needs to be addressed and fixed; it is a stain on the discipline of archaeology.

Another problem that Matthews discusses eloquently is the lack of communication between foreign archaeologists and the local populations and scholarly communities. To the inhabitants living on or near archaeological sites the appearance of an expedition must lead to conflicting sentiments. On the one hand there is an employment opportunity, which can provide income unavailable otherwise. On the other hand, the villages may be threatened by compulsory relocation, as modern villages in Iraq and

surrounding countries are often situated on archaeological mounds. The State Board of Antiquities enforces such relocations, and it is unlikely that the villagers receive much explanation about the reasons. It is rarely made clear to them what is being excavated, and why it is supposed to be important. As Matthews points out, few foreign archaeologists working in the Arab world speak Arabic, and whatever they communicate to the local populations about the nature of the finds is extremely limited. It is then no surprise that people see archaeological objects as a potential source of income, and the current looting of sites in Iraq by locals should not be a surprise. How can we remedy this? Matthews makes interesting suggestions about pamphlets and education in local schools. I urge archaeologists to explore these further, but would warn them that they have to keep the circumstances of their audience in mind. To develop a web-site in Arabic may seem like communicating to the Middle Eastern population, but very few people there have access to the Internet, and the effect is thus minimal. Matthews' remarks about the lack of translation of books into Arabic are disturbing, but I doubt that it would be useful to translate entire excavation reports. Our colleagues in the Middle East do read foreign languages, and they can access the technical information provided in reports. The practice of providing Arabic summaries, established in some European countries, seems to me a good example to follow.

In presenting the excavation results to local Middle Eastern populations, it is important to remember that they see history in a different context than Europeans and Americans. When we excavate ancient remains in Iraq, we first of all uncover the history of that country, secondarily something we can associate with a teleological vision of world history culminating in the present-day West. Matthews' complaints about the contradictory attitude toward ancient Mesopotamia are interesting, but I do not fully agree with them. Indeed ancient Mesopotamia is declared to be the cradle of 'our' civilisation in the West, yet greatly ignored in school curricula. This situation cannot just be blamed on an unwillingness of education authorities to take the subject seriously, but scholars of ancient Mesopotamia need to accept part of the blame. The idea that we have studied the cradle of civilisation for too long has led to complacency and an assumption that people will continue to be interested in what we do. But the work has often become so specialised that it is incomprehensible – and thus uninteresting – to a wider public. It is not sufficient to lobby the cause of the archaeology of Iraq, but the research results need to be presented in a way that appeals. The fact that so many 'firsts' in history are found in ancient Iraq may elicit curiosity, but if there is no exploration of why that is important it becomes little more. Mesopotamian scholars need to seriously reappraise the context of their work and make it interesting outside the teleological rise of western civilisation. It seems to me that the discipline of world history, studying how humans dealt with historical circumstances all over the world, and in very diverse contexts, presents an important opportunity. It also gives a useful flexibility where one can look at ancient Iraq in a local historical sequence, at the same time that one can wonder about its influences on the classical Mediterranean world, for example.

If this is 'Year Zero for the archaeology of Iraq', let us use it to commence a full reappraisal of it and related disciplines, such as Assyriology (the study of ancient Mesopotamian languages and literatures) and ancient Near Eastern history. I am pessimistic

that this opportunity will be used, however. As Matthews points out, even the enforced cessation of archaeological work in Iraq in the 1990s did not lead to finalising past work through publication. I fear that today many archaeologists are more preoccupied with a possible return to Iraq than with a re-evaluation of disciplinary practices. So I hope that this paper will set into motion a long-term discussion and that, in cooperation with our Iraqi colleagues, we will attempt to introduce ethics into the study of that country's antiquity.