

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

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The term 'Year Zero' could equally apply to Iraqi archaeology in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Prior to then, Iraqi archaeologists, most of whom were graduates of Baghdad University, excavated numerous sites and were in contact with western archaeologists; many continued their studies in Europe and the United States. However, during the Iraq/Iran war (1980-1988), western expeditions were few, the political regime did not encourage contact with foreigners and the purchase of books was discouraged. Contact with international academics came nearly to an abrupt end in 1991, and almost no new publications reached the Iraq Museum Library after the first Gulf War and the imposition of sanctions.

It is perhaps because of the political situation that contact by foreign colleagues was restricted to a few officials, particularly the heads of organisations and departments concerned with archaeology and antiquities. There should be more contact with younger archaeologists, exchange of students and more training courses. Academics, when visiting Iraq, should also be prepared to give talks illustrating the latest developments in the archaeology of the Near East.

I agree with Matthews that the heritage of Mesopotamia is neglected; Samarra should be at the forefront of World Heritage sites. The political atmosphere in Iraq right through the 20th century did not promote its ancient heritage. At the beginning of the century, Iraq was just out of Ottoman control, and the rise of Arab nationalism, emphasising the later history of the country and Islam, did not help matters, as events before Muhammad were ignored. Saddam's attempt to recreate Babylon was met with derision.

In the school curriculum, the history of ancient Iraq is mostly taught in the first year of secondary school. To raise awareness of their ancient history and civilisation, the study of the first 3000 years of Iraq's history should also be taught in the last two years of high school (the equivalent of A-Level).

As Matthews mentions, there is a necessity for interaction with the local community, and it is now under consideration that when the provincial museums reopen, local history and archaeology will be the main themes.

Publications with Arabic translations are welcome, but this goes the other way as well. In the last few decades, Iraqi archaeologists have conducted many excavations, some with important finds. The results of many of these excavations have been published in Arabic only, and thus ignored by international archaeologists. Cuneiform studies and PhD theses have also been published in Arabic. A modest effort by the Edubba series does not redress this problem.