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Iraq's ancient city of Babylon gets long-overdue international recognition. By Hadani Ditmars *



Babylon has seen it all. From its peak as the Neo-Babylonian capital under King Nebuchadnezzar through its heavy-handed 1987 reconstruction by Saddam Hussein to its post-invasion demise when American and Polish troops ran roughshod over its ruins and ISIS threatened its very existence, the ancient city has witnessed empires come and go.

History spanning the centuries

The 2500-acre site, 50 miles south of Baghdad, comprises both the ruins of the ancient city as well as surrounding villages and agricultural areas. Between 626 and 539 BCE, the city was the capital of the Neo-Babylonian empire and the largest metropolis in the world. It was here that King Hammurabi produced the world's first written law. The city is also believed to be the site of the mythical Hanging Gardens — one of the “seven

wonders of the world” — said to be a legacy of King Nebuchadnezzar, who ordered the complete reconstruction of the imperial grounds, including the 300-foot Etemenanki ziggurat (believed to be the legendary Tower of Babel), and the building of the Ishtar Gate, the most prominent of eight gates around Babylon.

Before its glory years under Nebuchadnezzar, it was the most important city in Mesopotamia during the reign of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE). Sacked by the Hittites in 1595 BCE, and conquered by the Kassites in 1570 BCE, it became a center for worship of the god Marduk for four centuries. After the Assyrian King Esarhaddon rebuilt the holy city, amid fear of divine retribution, Babylonians regained control in 612 BCE. The Esagila, the temple dedicated to Marduk, was rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar and the *akitu* — an 11-day festival — paid homage to the god with sacrifices and the recital of an epic poem about the creation of the world and the triumph of order over chaos. (This was possibly the inspiration for the [Babylon Festival](#), a recently revived cultural happening that began in 1987 at the time of Saddam’s reconstruction.) In 539 BCE, the ancient world’s then capital of scholarship and science fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great.

More recently Babylon has survived years of colonial looting, a brutal sanctions regime that encouraged cash-strapped government employees to sell artifacts to the highest bidders, and ongoing environmental challenges — not to mention the disco hit by Boney M that was once banned by Saddam for its alleged “Zionist” connotations.

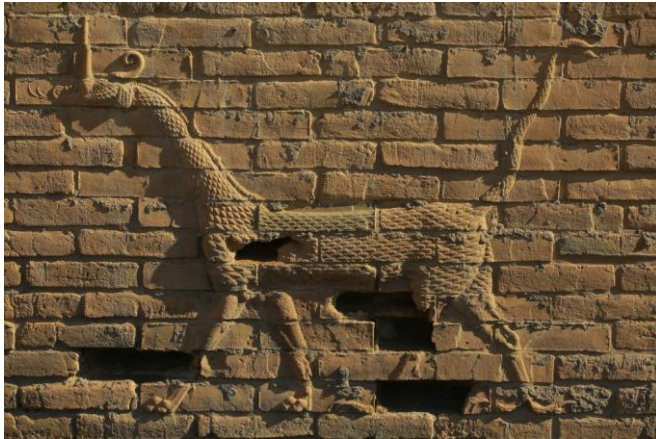
Construction, too, has taken a toll over the years. In 1927, the British ran a railway line through the site, and in the 1980s, Saddam built a highway through part of it, along with a palace for himself, complete with a heli-pad. There are still three existing but non-functioning oil pipelines as well, two of which were built in the 1970s and 1980s and the third of which is more recent — work on it was blocked after the General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage filed a lawsuit in 2012.

UNESCO recognition

One can only imagine that Marduk, the supreme god of Babylon, to whom local ladies still ask for intercession at a de facto re-appropriated fertility site where a recently reconstructed medieval shrine to Imam Ali’s son sits on

top of his ancient temple, is well pleased that Babylon has been officially recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Its new designation can only encourage Iraq's struggling tourism industry and local economies. But what took so long, one might ask?



An image of *mushussu*, the Babylonian Dragon and sacred animal of Marduk, on the rebuilt walls of Babylon. (Photo by Ameer Al Mohammedaw/picture alliance via Getty Images)

According to May Shaer, a consultant for the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the site was submitted for nomination by the Iraqi government in 1983. "But they failed to submit a comprehensive safeguarding plan," she explains from her office in Amman. The eight-year war with Iran, followed by Operation Desert Storm in 1990-91, a 12-year UN embargo, the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation, and the rise of ISIS meant that for years Iraqi heritage was not an urgent priority.

Now, with "a new phase of peace," says Shaer, "is the moment to present it and conserve it in a better way." The new World Heritage status represents, she says, "hope for the future."

On a practical level this means what Shaer terms "sustainable tourism." "We need a balance between tourism, conservation, and archeological excavation," she says, "and local communities have to be a part of the whole process."

Before Babylon could gain UNESCO World Heritage status, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a global non-governmental organization dedicated to conservation, had to visit the site and carry out an evaluation. [Ten key criteria](#) were employed to determine whether it has “outstanding universal value.”

In the end, relates Shaer, Babylon won World Heritage status based on the third and sixth criteria. The third – “to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared” — was satisfied by Babylon’s history as the capital of the Neo-Babylonian empire. The sixth — “to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance” — was satisfied, says Shaer, “because Babylon is directly associated with stories, parables and events in world culture – from the seven wonders of the world – the Hanging Gardens – mentioned in three Abrahamic faiths to its links to Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar.”

But apart from criteria for outstanding universal value, sites have additional requirements, relates Shaer, “to demonstrate that they have maintained authenticity and overall integrity.” UNESCO documents are clear about the challenges that lie ahead for Babylon. A [recent report](#) notes that:

“The property suffers from a variety of threats including illegal constructions, trash dumping and burning, small-scale industrial pollution, urban encroachments and other environmental factors. At the time of inscription, the general physical fabric of the site is in a critical condition and lacks programmed efforts towards conservation. Both the reconstructions and structural alterations of the ‘Revival of Babylon Project’ and other constructions in the 1980s have negatively affected the integrity of the property. Whilst the constructions of the 20th century are excluded from the property and now function as above-ground buffer zones within the property area, the future management of these within the overall property will be critical to the preservation of the fragile condition of integrity.”

While the Iraqi government already have a management plan in place, says Shaer, “they need to augment it with a detailed conservation plan that takes

all risks into consideration.” Key to the success of ongoing conservation efforts, says Shaer, is “engaging the local people” — and to that end, in addition to “mobilizing the international community to comply with a UN resolution prohibiting the trafficking of illegal artifacts,” UNESCO has launched several public education campaigns within Iraq, employing videography and social media.

Local communities

But Jeff Allen, an archaeologist who has worked for the World Monument Fund (WMF) in Babylon for a decade, notes that in the current climate, “most Iraqis don’t care about archaeology unless there is some economic gain for them. There is a sense of pride in their past of course, but they need to benefit personally. They don’t have the luxury to think about heritage preservation per se — that’s a Western concept.”

Since local villagers were displaced by the construction of Saddam’s palace in the 1980s, he notes, there is not a lot of faith in government authority. But during a WMF community engagement initiative from 2010-13 that served as a basis for the World Heritage status application, local people were able to give their input into how the site was managed. Concerns, relates Allen, included zoning and restrictions that might impede use of agricultural lands.



Babylon in the 1970s. (*Courtesy of Jeff Allen*)

There was also a great deal of nostalgia expressed for the old 1980s-era tourist village, itself now an abandoned ruin, where families used to gather for meals at a variety of restaurants, as well as the Babylon casino complex, where a disco offered evening entertainment. Current religious mores preclude a revival of the old disco (which has been repurposed as the office of the local antiquities authority), but there has been talk of restoring some of the crumbling eateries, although Allen notes they would “have to be subsidized by the government as there’s currently not enough tourism to sustain them.”

The WMF worked with the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage from 2009-16, documenting the site, developing conservation and management plans, and assisting with stabilization of the famed Lion of Babylon. Currently the WMF is doing ongoing conservation work on the Ishtar Gate with a team of 12 local masonry workers. Allen sees the new World Heritage designation as a positive development and is “happy to see the world recognize the importance of Babylon,” which he says has the potential to become a vehicle for “national unity.”

A changing symbol

But Babylon has a long history of being used to further political agendas. A symbol of nationalist identity in post-independence Iraq, explains Allen, “Saddam elevated it into political discourse about the war with Iran in the 80s as well as the Israeli-Palestinian issue.” He identified with Nebuchadnezzar, explains Allen, even saying at one point “I am his son,” and praising his capture of the Jews in Palestine. He used the allegory of the Persian conquest of Babylon to rally citizens against Iran and to justify his heavy-handed reconstruction of the site as a kind of “resurrection” after its “destruction.”

In the late 2000s, a power struggle between federal and provincial authorities hampered preservation efforts, although the appointment last December of archaeologist Abdul Amir al-Hamdani as minister of culture, and his technocrat status, bodes well for Babylon’s future.

But now the old portrait of Saddam etched in stone on the north side of the site is draped with a banner praising Imam Hussein. And the lucrative international Shi’a tourism trade has usurped the previous focus, in the

years before the invasion, on Iraq's ancient sites.



Stone portrait of Saddam Hussein at Babylon. (*Courtesy of Jeff Allen*)

Hope amid the challenges

“Like everywhere else in Iraq,” says Allen, “there are internally displaced people in the area. In Babylon they live along the river in villages within and on the edges of the boundaries of the historical site.” Many are from the south, he explains, and build houses out of river reeds and herd buffalo like they do in the marshlands. Encroachment on the site and illegal construction remain ongoing issues.

In spite of all the challenges Babylon still faces, May Shaer is optimistic.

“The UNESCO World Heritage designation is a positive step for future planning,” she says — one that will “encourage much needed international co-operation and support.”

And she notes, there is still much to discover.

Despite the damage and reconstruction Babylon has endured, “The site still has authenticity and integrity,” says Shaer, “as 80% of the artifacts remain underground.”

() Hadani Ditmars is the author of "Dancing in the No-Fly Zone: A Woman's Journey Through Iraq," a past editor at New Internationalist, and has been reporting from the Middle East on culture, society and politics for two decades. The views expressed in this article are her own.*

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