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Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Stefano de Martino on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday

Edited by Michele Cammarosano, Elena Devecchi and Maurizio Viano



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Stefano a Venezia

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Indice

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From Turin to Karakorum Archaeology for the Public through Asia

Carlo Lippolis – Roberta Menegazzi¹

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, archaeologists working in Middle Eastern countries have been facing a lot of issues related to the nature of their work, and to its impact on complex and changing political, social and economic structures. This is hardly surprising: as N. Merriman pointed out, "archaeology is ultimately about the development of cultural identities, and therefore it is inextricably bound up with politics."²

The case of Iraq is paradigmatic of the entanglement between archaeology and politics. First excavations were conducted during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century on sites that attracted the interest of European and North-American scholars because of their relation to the Bible. At that stage, archaeology was embodied within the Western imperialistic perspective, and its results were considered relevant insofar they could be integrated in Western historical narratives.³ During the years of the British Mandate, after World War I, the Iraq Museum of Baghdad was founded by the British officer and Director of Iraqi Antiquities Gertrude M.L. Bell, who had played a crucial role in the definition of the geographical borders and the ruling élite of the country. Initially the purpose of the Museum was to serve as a storehouse for the artifacts found by foreign archaeological expeditions. Its establishment was seen as a natural development of British colonial politics in Iraq. In a letter to her stepmother, dated March 3, 1926, talking about the museum Gertrude Bell proudly wrote: "It will be a real museum like the British Museum, only a little smaller."

After the country gained its independence in 1932, several Iraqi politician and scholars, supported by local newspapers, started campaigning against the plundering of antiquities by Western archaeologists: in 1936 the new Director of Iraqi Antiquities, Sati' al-Husri, partly amended the antiquity law written by G.

¹ The paragraph on the activities in Iraq is by C. Lippolis, the paragraph on the activities in Mongolia is by R. Menegazzi; the introduction is by both authors.

² Merriman 2004, 4.

³ Bernhardsson 2005, 10–13.

Bell by stating that any object older than 200 years found in Iraq had to be considered property of the country.⁴ As sharply argued by M.T. Bernhardsson, those days "archaeology entered Iraqi politics in a profound manner, thereby laying the foundations for archaeology and nationalism to intersect and thus becoming inseparable in Iraqi politics in succeeding decades."⁵ The 1940's–1950's saw an impressive growth of archaeological activities led and promoted by Iraqi scholars, from the investigation of important sites such as Hassuna and Dur Kurigalzu, to the planning of salvage excavations related to dam projects, and the starting, in 1957, of the works for the new seat of the Iraq Museum. Works did not stop after the coup d'état that subverted the monarchic rule in 1958: the Museum opened in 1966, two years before a new coup that marked the first step in the rise of power of Saddam Hussein.

Under Saddam's rule, archaeology assumed highly strategic importance. Iraqi's past—especially pre-Islamic past—was deliberately used to justify Iraq's leading role within the Arab world. Thanks to the co-optation of contemporary local artists, in 1980s–1990s Baghdad was filled with monuments and sculptures inspired by scenes and symbols of Iraqi ancient history that the ruling regime considered essential for the education of the nation.⁶ Within this framework, the Iraq Museum became the favored venue for the expression of ideological propaganda. Such an instrumentalization of the past was one of the reasons that led to the well-known sack of the Iraq Museum after the fall of Baghdad in 2003: because of their association with the regime, ancient objects were temporarily identified with it, being perceived as "negative heritage," and became a target of the anger of the population. Of course, this cannot be seen as the sole explanation for the episode: the desperate condition of the population, exhausted after years of embargo, must have played a role in it.

The dramatic economic situation of the country surely played a role in the looting of archaeological sites, a phenomenon that had already started during the embargo, but exponentially increased in the years after the fall of Baghdad, reaching unprecedented levels.⁷ That was not the last threat to the Iraqi heritage. In the most recent years, the Museum of Mosul and sites such as Hatra, Nineveh and Nimrud were targeted by members of the Islamic State: their deliberate acts of heritage destruction were ritualized in order to separate new recruits from existing social norms, and create solidarity and mobilization towards violence.⁸

⁴ Fales 2004, 127. Nevertheless, the 1930s can be considered a golden age for Mesopotamian archaeology, in terms of number and results of excavations conducted by Western archaeologists (Fales 2004, 114–129).

⁵ Bernhardsson 2005, 12–13.

⁶ Baram 1991, 81.

⁷ On the topic, see Fales 2004, 412–418; Lippolis 2018, 548–549.

⁸ Shahab – Isakhan 2018.

For over fifty years, Iraq has been the main focus of research of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia (CRAST), an institution established in 1963 by the late professor Giorgio Gullini to support archaeological investigations of the University of Turin in the area of Seleucia on the Tigris. Since the very beginning, activities of CRAST in Iraq were not limited to excavation and scholarly research: in 1969, the Iraqi-Italian Institute of Archaeological Sciences and the Iraqi-Italian Centre for the Restoration of Monuments were opened in Baghdad, with the aim of encouraging peer Iraqi-Italian co-operation in the field of safeguarding Iraqi cultural heritage. The commitment of CRAST to the enhancement and protection of the Iraqi heritage has grown in the last decades, dramatically bound up with tensions and conflicts that have had a tremendous impact on the archaeological remains of Iraqi's past. At the same time, our awareness has grown about the importance of engaging more closely with the public. Archaeology cannot any longer be seen as an exclusively academic discipline: archaeologists have, among others, the duty to promote the dissemination of research findings while encouraging and stimulating reflection and creativity. The experience in Iraq, which is summarized in the following paragraph, has contributed to broaden the horizons of CRAST archaeologists, making them more conscious of the ethic and political aspects of their work, and driving them to a closer exchange with a wider range of institutions and social actors, in Italy and abroad. Such an approach has been strongly encouraged by Stefano de Martino, director of CRAST since 2008: his curiosity and open-mindedness has led to new, exciting and sometimes unexpected co-operations, such as the dialogue between archaeology and contemporary art within the framework of the exhibition "Statues also die."9 The project in Mongolia-entirely focused on public archaeology-counts among the new paths taken by CRAST in recent years.

2. Activities in Iraq (2003–2018)

For the reasons mentioned above, the interventions carried out in Iraq in recent years have highlighted the social and public dimension of the work of Italian archaeologists.

The planned activities envisaged not only the opening of a new excavation and proper academic research, but also museological and cultural heritage projects. Moreover, activities of training, awareness-raising and dissemination about archaeology and heritage were carried out involving an audience as broad as possible, from local communities to primary and secondary schools in the capital.

⁹ The exhibition, held in 2018, was organized in collaboration with Museo Egizio, Musei Reali and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo of Turin.

In these latter activities, the Iraqi-Italian Center for Archeology in Baghdad plays an essential role, after its reopening in 2016 with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and of the Italian Embassy in Baghdad. In its premises, every spring and autumn, scientific and technical training courses, workshops, and conferences, but also cultural events such as presentation of volumes, concerts and discussions, are organized. Within this broad cultural framework, Italian language courses have been also activated in the past two years. Finally, practical training courses for archaeologists are carried out on the field at Tūlūl al Baqarat, where an Italian archaeological expedition of the CRAST-University of Turin is active since 2013 (Fig. 1).

The public dimension of these projects has further developed in the frame of the European project "Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq, 2017–2019" (EDUU), coordinated by the University of Bologna with the participation of the Universities of Baghdad, Qadissiyah, Kufa, and Turin and the collaboration of CRAST and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq. The project is grounded on essential aspects of public archaeology such as education, awareness, communication and social cohesion. The activities carried out not only included training sessions for university students and/or heritage professionals, but also involved children and youth between 10 and 14 years thanks to interventions in the schools and visits to historical/archaeological museums and archaeological sites. In order to bring younger generations closer to the themes of the safeguard and of the importance of the past, three comics about archaeology and museums have been printed: the first deals with the archaeological practice and the work on the site, the second is about the universal value of the past, and the third one is about the reopening of the Baghdad Museum and its history. These comics have been distributed in museums and schools in Kufa, Qadissiya and Baghdad.

As far as the Iraq Museum of Baghdad is concerned, the CRAST was engaged in its rehabilitation project since the days of the last war.¹⁰ The 60-years activity of CRAST in Iraq and the high professionalism of Italian specialists in the field of protection and conservation of cultural heritage were essential elements, on the one hand to gain the trust of Iraqis, on the other hand to be able to intervene suddenly after the sack of 2003.

Moreover, since the years of the Second Gulf War the CRAST had started a collaboration project (BRILA) with the international police forces and the Carabinieri of the Cultural Heritage Protection Unit, aiming at the creation of a database useful for the recovery of archaeological materials stolen from Iraq. Indeed, already in the 1990s nine Iraq regional museums were raided and looted and first systematic illicit excavations began to appear at some sites in the southern

¹⁰ On the interventions of CRAST in the requalification works at the Iraq Museum, see Lippolis – de Martino – Parapetti – Capri 2016.

region of the country. A phenomenon that would have had dramatically increase during the Second Gulf War.

Thanks to the collaboration between local and international police forces, the General Directorate of Iraqi Antiquities and CRAST, the Center was called to file and catalog over 1200 objects recovered in 2004 by the Jordanian police at the border with Iraq, and then to follow their return to the Baghdad Museum.¹¹ The Center was also able to identify and return to the Iraq Museum about 800 small objects coming from clandestine excavations or even from the sack of the museum in 2003, already on the black-market and about to be transported out of the country.

From 2004 to the present, the Iraq Museum requalification interventions have been leaded—as CRAST presidents—first by the tireless activity of Giorgio Gullini, then by Antonio Invernizzi (for the Islamic and the Great Assyrian Gallery) and finally by the writer, with the precious collaboration of Stefano de Martino (second Assyrian Gallery and ongoing projects).

The Iraq Museum was founded in 1923 by Gertrude Bell, but it soon proved to be inadequate to preserve the increasing number of finds from archaeological excavations in the country and new locations were scheduled. In 1957 the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was asked to elaborate a new project for a large museum, but the stability of the country was still far from coming and only at the end of the 1960s the new headquarters, on the German project of Werner March, were finally completed and inaugurated. This building remains today the seat of the most important archaeological museum in the entire country and of the offices of the Directorate of Antiquities.

Shortly after the sack of the Museum in 2003, the archaeologists from Turin decided, in accordance to Iraqi authorities, to intervene on some of the main rooms on the ground floor where immovable findings were exhibited, in order to guarantee a new and more functional layout and allow the reopening of a very important museum as soon as the conditions in the country would have improved. In the Islamic gallery a more effective display of the finds was obtained throughout new partition walls, new enhancement of the objects and didactic panels. The Great Assyrian gallery was equipped with a new effective artificial lighting, a reconstruction of the arch of a monumental Assyrian gate with winged human-headed bulls from Dūr-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), and explanatory panels. Finally, two pairs of winged bulls from Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) were transferred in the second Assyrian gallery , while numerous objects from the excavations of the first Neo-Assyrian capital were displayed in new showcases with continuous walls. This last room was then equipped with a large explanatory and didactic apparatus, both in English and Arabic.

¹¹ Menegazzi 2005.

Also thanks to these interventions, in 2015 the Iraq Museum in Baghdad reopened its doors and thousands of visitors, especially schoolchildren, have returned to visit it daily (Fig. 2). The works in the museum continue today, with workshops and training courses for the personnel. Moreover, two new projects have been presented for the requalification of another important gallery and the opening of a didactic room dedicated to educational activities for children.

3. The Karakorum project (Mongolia)

In November 2016, the city of Turin signed a Cooperation Agreement with the city of Kharkhorin (Mongolia): the agreement foresaw cultural activities, indicating the CRAST as one of the most qualified spokesmen for a scientific cooperation between the two cities. This was the starting point for the Karakorum project, a project that broadens the geographical and chronological boundaries of the CRAST activities whilst remaining consistent with its main lines of research, both from the scholarly and ethical perspective. On the one hand, Karakorum was indeed a multi-cultural capital of a composite empire, and crosscultural exchanges in antiquity have always been a core topic of our research. On the other hand, the project—aiming at increasing public awareness on the historical and archaeological heritage of the Kharkhorin area—is grounded in the same vision of the social role of archaeology that has inspired many of the most recent works of CRAST in Iraq.

The city of Kharkhorin, in the Övörkhangai Province of Mongolia, is located in an area of great historical and archaeological interest. The Orkhon valley, included in the Unesco World Heritage List, is a very ancient settlement area. Its favorable environment and strategic position, combined with its strong symbolic value among the tribes of the steppes, made it an ideal seat for the late nomadic empires of the Uyghur and Mongols, who founded there their capital cities Karabalgasun (745–840), and Karakorum (1220/1235–1260, 1370–1388). In 1585–866, the Erdene Zuu monastery was founded on the southern edge of ancient Karakorum, most likely on the same spot previously occupied by the imperial palace of the Khans.¹²

The site of Karakorum, which lies on the north-western limits of the modern city of Kharkhorin, was investigated in 1949 by a Soviet-Mongol expedition leaded by S.V. Kiselev.¹³ Since 2000, extensive research projects have been carried on by the Mongolian-German Karakorum Expedition, including not only excavations at Karakorum but also investigations of productive areas outside the city walls, field surveys of the Upper and Middle Orkhon Valley, and excavations at the Uyghur capital Karabalgasun.

¹² For an overview on the founding of Karakorum, and the results of the Mongolian-German Karakorum expedition, see Hüttel – Erdenebat 2011.

¹³ For the history of the excavations at Karakorum, see Becker 2009.

The Karakorum Museum, situated in Kharkhorin, not far from the archaeological site of the ancient capital of the Mongols, offers an effective outline of the historical development of the region, and displays dozens of artifacts coming from the excavations of Karakorum and the neighboring sites. The nearby Erdene Zuu complex is an active Buddhist monastery as well as a museum, hosting both Buddhist artifacts and stone fragments belonging to the architectonical decoration of ancient Karakorum.

Approaching such a complex reality—extremely rich in terms of both historical evidence and institutions involved (local museums, foreign and Mongol universities, scientific and cultural institutes)—we decided, in accordance with Mongolian authorities, to offer a contribution aiming at:

- promoting interest in the cultural heritage of the area among younger generations;
- improving museum educational and communication programs, and engaging civil society in cultural heritage initiatives promoted by the museums;
- disseminating the results of historical and archaeological research, and promoting its use as a tool to a deeper understanding of the present.

In August 2018, after signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the National University of Ulaanbaatar and the Karakorum Museum of Kharkhorin, we started our co-operation with the Museum of Karakorum. We arranged a training plan for the museum staff, in order to develop their skills in planning and managing educational programs for children. Our first activity was a theoreticalpractical seminar aimed at designing an educational activity for school and preschool children. We benefited of the help of an expert from the Museo della Ceramica of Mondovì, as the activity foresees the production of clay replicas of ancient terracotta objects, found in dozens during the excavation of a large manufacturing area around 4 kilometers south-west from Karakorum.¹⁴ Thanks to the modern moulds fabricated by the sculptor and ceramist from the museum of Mondovì,¹⁵ children visiting the Museum can learn-by-doing an ancient and widespread technique of manufacturing (Fig. 3).

In 2019–2020 educational activities for children and youth will be enhanced, thanks to the co-operation with the MAO-Museo d'Arte Orientale of Turin, and the same group of young Italian cartoonists that had been working at the abovementioned comics for Iraqi children. The partnership with Italian institutions and experts is another significant aspect of our project, which promotes a deeper exchange between subjects working in neighboring fields. Such a co-operation can have a beneficial impact on the dissemination of the results of archaeological research among not only the Mongolian public, but also among the Italian

¹⁴ Over an area of 760 square meters, fourteen kilns for firing terracotta figures, roof tiles and building decoration were found. On the topic, see Hüttel – Erdenebat 2011, 19–29.

¹⁵ His name is Raffaele Mondazzi, and I thank him for his enthusiasm in taking part in the project.

one. In 2018, CRAST collaborated with the MAO-Museo d'Arte Orientale of Turin in the photographic exhibition "The capital of the steppe lands," organized together with the Karakorum Museum of Kharkhorin, on the results of the Mongolian-German excavations at Karakorum. In 2019, the Museo della Ceramica of Mondovì hosted an exhibition on the CRAST Karakorum project, flanked by educational activities for families and school groups.

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Fig. 1. Training on the field with workers and SBAH officers. Tūlūl al Baqarat 2016.



Fig. 2. School groups visiting the Iraq Museum. Baghdad 2017.



Fig. 3. Educational activities at the Museum of Karakorum. Kharkhorin 2018.