

Collaboration, sustainability, and reconciliation: Teaching cultural heritage preservation and management in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

Following armed conflict or natural disaster, cultural heritage preservation is vital in the reconstruction of national identity and local community. The Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage, located in Erbil, Iraq, is a successful partnership between local and international institutions and individuals. This intensive educational program, designed to teach international standards of conservation in addition to English language and critical thinking skills, is supporting the preservation of Iraq's immensely important archaeo-

INTRODUCTION

Iraq's diverse peoples share the heritage of one of the world's oldest civilizations, preserved in sites like ancient Babylon, the historic Erbil Citadel and embodied in antiquities ranging from the exquisite ivories of Nimrud, to colorful textiles produced by nomadic herders. That shared heritage, the tangible symbols of Iraq's history and a source of pride for all of Iraq's people, is a critical unifying element in a nation challenged by decades of war, sectarian violence, sanctions, looting, and professional isolation of cultural heritage professionals. This paper explores international collaborations developed through the founding of the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage in Erbil, Iraq to address these significant preservation and educational challenges as the country recovers and redevelops.

HISTORY**Need**

Iraqi cultural heritage and museum professionals, once part of an internationally respected community, were isolated from their professional peers through decades of war and repression. They have fallen far behind in almost every area – collection management, preventive conservation, stabilization and management of archeological and architectural sites and monuments, museum education and outreach programs, and conservation treatment.

A key part of US commitments to Iraq following the 2003 war was training for cultural heritage professionals. In 2008, the US State Department asked representatives from the Walters Art Museum, the Winterthur Museum, and the University of Delaware to develop an educational program in collaboration with the Iraq National Museum, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), and the US Embassy in Baghdad. Iraqi and American advisors advocated strongly for the establishment of a conservation education program in Iraq, tailored to Iraqi needs but taught at a level that met international standards, avoided the pitfalls of disjointed short courses, and promoted communication and critical thinking skills. Original funding for the program (2008–10) was part of the US Embassy in Baghdad's Ambassador's Fund and was managed by the NGO International Relief and Development.

logical, historic, and cultural heritage. The model may serve as a guide for other global educational programs in the future.



Figure 1
The Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage

Figure 2
Preparing a new mount for an ancient figurine in the Erbil Civilizations Museum

Local support

Because of security factors, Erbil, in the north of Iraq, was chosen as the site for a conservation institute and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) contributed a building renovated to state-of-the-art specifications. The building includes well-equipped laboratories, classrooms, and dormitories to house students from throughout Iraq. Classes began in the fall of 2009 in a temporary facility; the renovated building opened as the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage (Iraqi Institute) in early 2010, under the academic and logistical direction of authors Jessica S. Johnson and Brian Michael Lione (Figure 1).

At the end of 2010, an agreement between the governor of Erbil and the SBAH placed Iraqi Institute management with a five-member board of directors; two members from the KRG and three from SBAH were appointed. In practice, the day-to-day management of the Institute is conducted under Director Dr. Abdullah Khorsheed (also a professor at local Salahaddin University), with paid staff transferred from other departments of the KRG and SBAH (Johnson and Lione 2013).¹

Local developments in the Erbil heritage sector

Erbil is the capital of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region, an area that has long been much more secure and stable than central Iraq, which was one reason for its designation as the Tourism Capital of 2014 by the Arab Council of Tourism. Cultural heritage has been identified as important for the region's tourism and redevelopment by political entities that have committed resources to local cultural heritage initiatives, such as the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalization, the Kurdish Textile Museum, and other local museums (Deisser 2009, Deisser et al. 2011).

This institutional support provides important collaborative training opportunities for the Iraqi Institute. For the past two years, graduating students in the advanced conservation class have conducted exhibition improvement projects for the Erbil Civilizations Museum. Working with archaeological figurines on display, conservation students create secure mounts made from stable materials and remove old, disfiguring mounting materials from ancient clay figures (Figure 2). Similarly, students in the architecture and site preservation course have surveyed historic houses at the Erbil Citadel to learn documentation techniques for historic buildings.

The security and safety of the area (compared to other parts of Iraq and the surrounding region) have led to a resurgence of archaeological research in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region. Recent survey work across the Erbil plain reveals that only about 20 percent of the archaeological sites had been previously identified (Ur et al. 2013). Numerous archaeological excavations have begun providing collaborative opportunities between archaeologists and the Iraqi Institute. This work by foreign institutions brings new and welcome knowledge to the region, in addition to immediately challenging management issues for site preservation and artifact preservation and storage. The Iraqi Institute has responded to this need by offering a course on archaeological repositories starting in January 2014.

Conflicting visions

Beginning in 2009, academic courses carefully scheduled over a two-year period were designed to provide a holistic foundation in conservation – teaching problem solving, scientific concepts, research skills and critical thinking, computer and English communication skills, as well as documentation and technical proficiency. Iraqi Institute sustainability mandated long-term engagement from experienced instructors in key subject areas with an emphasis on documentation, management and planning, preventive conservation, and a commitment to the development of master Iraqi teachers and program administrators.

However, some initial funders with shorter-term goals considered the project complete once the building was occupied, the first class had graduated, and the core curriculum was in place, bolstered by a stack of CDs with associated PowerPoint lectures. Better and more direct communication of the fundamental goals and purposes of the Iraqi Institute between all partner institutions, as well as renewed support from the US Embassy in Baghdad and funding from public and private sources, brought a degree of stability by 2010 as the Iraqi Institute moved to governance by an Iraqi board.²

Some Iraqis also wavered in their support for this educational concept that required staff to spend many months off-site and asked managers to embrace a new understanding of heritage preservation, emphasizing preventive conservation, limited intervention, and a broad understanding of conservation practice. Two meetings in 2013 addressed this issue, bringing director generals of antiquities from each of the 18 Iraqi provinces, as well as academics from all university archaeology programs and architecture and engineering programs, to the Institute where staff shared curriculum goals and benefits to directorate projects. These meetings significantly improved understanding of the quality and relevance of educational programs at the Institute, resulting in increased commitment to and support for the Institute from the heritage community across Iraq.

CURRICULUM AND TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Through 2013 the Iraqi Institute provided several offerings of three courses composed of eight- to ten-week modules:

- Collection Care and Conservation (6 modules over 2 years)
- Architecture and Site Conservation (4 modules over 2 years)
- Archaeological Site Preservation (1 module)

In fall 2013, a reassessment of all curricula was initiated with feedback gathered through interviews with past lecturers, students, staff, and advisors. Insights from this survey, coupled with evolving financial support, provided impetus for the development of a new model for training: an interdisciplinary 28-week, three-module foundation course that focuses on fundamental theoretical and practical knowledge for *all* aspects of heritage conservation. This course, scheduled for fall 2014, will broaden student understanding of the conservation field globally and strengthen



Figure 3
Students working on restoration of newly
excavated ceramics

significantly their analytical and technical skills. The foundation course, to be offered annually, will serve as a prerequisite for a selection of shorter, tailored advanced courses designed to respond to the evolving educational needs of the heritage community in Iraq. This course will also enable students to better incorporate new ideas and techniques taught in short courses offered outside of the Iraqi Institute.

The Iraqi Institute academic programs combine fundamental theory with practical exercises in the laboratory and local Iraqi institutions or sites. These educational programs emphasize problem solving, critical thinking, and teamwork. In addition to fundamental conservation and preservation topics, students study English and strengthen computer and communication/advocacy skills. Each eight- to ten-week module is followed by a two-week practicum at the students' home institutions that connects theory to practice. Iraqi collections benefit from this training directly, while supervisors at the home institution witness immediate, tangible benefits from the students' course work.

The Iraqi Institute employs leading instructors from 11 countries throughout the world. A growing number of Iraqi and international archaeological and preservation projects partner with the Iraqi Institute to provide exceptional field experiences. For example, in September 2013 students restored a cache of prehistoric pottery vessels from the ancient site of Surezha, under excavation by the University of Chicago (Figure 3).

A daily class schedule provides a tea break and a buffet lunch, allowing ample time for social interactions outside of the classroom and an occasion to share similar interests in cultural heritage. On-site dormitory facilities allow students across Iraq to become professional colleagues *and* true friends. A recent student described the Iraqi Institute as "a little Iraq"; here, she met people from throughout the country, an opportunity she had never before imagined.

CHALLENGES

Post-trauma recovery

Because of Iraq's history of conflict over several decades, this project faced the added complication of post-trauma recovery. Local museums had been looted or fallen into disrepair, and security issues inhibited travel and participation for students and instructors, as well as movement of objects to the Iraqi Institute for teaching purposes. But in spite of these challenges, the Iraqi Institute attracted students, both male and female, from all ethnic and religious groups, who soon found that their common passion for cultural heritage was a powerful unifying factor. This significant and early success validates one goal of the project: an improved understanding and reconciliation among diverse cultural groups based on a shared national identity rooted in cultural heritage.

A legacy of Iraq's education system is a dependence on rote learning, and hesitancy by students to take responsibility for making decisions. This is compounded by a lack of science and computer training. At the Iraqi Institute, every instructor addresses these deficits by emphasizing collaborative

work and creating problem-based learning activities incorporating science, documentation, and computer skills into interactive exercises.

An additional challenge for the Iraqi Institute continues to be effective communication between Arabs and Kurds. To address this, courses are taught in English with both Kurdish and Arabic translation. Many Kurdish students, now in their early careers, were refugees in Iran or Turkey as young children. Many who remained in Iraq were not taught Arabic after the “no-fly zone” was established in 1991. By encouraging English language proficiency, students are better prepared to engage globally, to attend and participate in conservation conferences, and to use established preservation publications. As one student said, “I think for me, at the Iraqi Institute, I have learned many things that will help me in my life: scientific things and social things. Social things like how to live with the other types of people. English and Arabic language, which is my dream.”

Sustainability and graduate placement

Sustainability remains the primary challenge as the Iraqi Institute transitions to Iraqi governance and funding. Advanced students need opportunities to study and intern abroad, and negotiations with Iraqi and American universities to provide meaningful diplomas and degrees are under way. Creating a cross-cultural partnership, an International Advisory Council, established in 2011, includes the founding institutions, plus representatives from UNESCO, the Italian Ministry for Culture, SBAH, KRG, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Universities of Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Columbia.³

The Advisory Council objectives are to support the mission⁴ and vision of the Institute, establish curriculum goals that ensure that programs meet Iraqi needs and international professional standards, increase public awareness of and involvement in the Institute inside and outside Iraq, and raise funds through Iraqi and international sources. An annual meeting brings these senior American, Iraqi, and international members to Erbil to meet with students, faculty board members, representatives of the Iraqi and Kurdish government, and the educational and cultural heritage community. The Advisory Council is critical to identifying and promoting funding and academic opportunities.

The founders of the Iraqi Institute intended that programs have an immediate and a long-term positive impact on Iraqi cultural heritage by introducing international preservation standards and methodologies. In addition to increasing students’ professional capacities, sustainability depends on the value users of preservation services place on Iraqi Institute education. The programs’ structure helps address this need; practicums strategically incorporated into the curriculum ensure that students employ new preservation methodologies to benefit their home institution, fostering support for continued staff training. Collaborations with local institutions provide training opportunities for students who work alongside instructors to document and preserve Iraqi heritage in public and private collections, demonstrating to collection managers the benefits of training and introducing collection care techniques using affordable, local materials.

All of the students who attend the Iraqi Institute are employed by cultural heritage institutions. As they return to their home institutions, graduates are prepared to implement and teach others new approaches to preservation. Students working at the Syriac Cultural Heritage Museum in Ainkawa revised storage and exhibits and re-housed artifacts in a safe, systematized manner using inexpensive, locally obtainable materials. Institutions at Babylon and in Suleymania established new conservation laboratories where graduates now work. Another Iraqi Institute graduate taught staff at the Iraqi Museum how to create a collection emergency plan. As the community of graduates grows they remain closely connected, supporting each other as they work to improve their institutions.

Another indication of success and sustainability is the master trainers program and ongoing educational activities of graduates. A few carefully chosen graduates with outstanding communication and other skills return to the Institute as master trainers, where they serve as teaching assistants for visiting instructors. Award of the competitive Leon Levy Visiting Fellowship allowed one master trainer to spend a year at the conservation center at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. She returned to teach at the Institute and was recently promoted to assistant instructor. Another early graduate is now head of training for the Department of Archaeology at the National Museum in Baghdad and several graduates have applied for or are working on masters degrees at Iraqi or foreign universities.

Building Iraqi and international support

The future success of the Iraqi Institute depends upon support from entities responsible for preservation throughout Iraq and from the international cultural heritage community. To establish reliable funding and continued support for students to attend the program, Iraqis must perceive education at the Institute as relevant and critical to the desired outcome – preservation of cultural heritage utilizing the resources available. Building and maintaining this perception requires ongoing consultation with Iraqi colleagues and cultural heritage managers. Internationally, the Iraqi Institute requires continued academic collaboration and support in the form of visiting instructors, internships, and advanced degree opportunities for students, as well as continued funding. As transition of the Iraqi Institute to a singular Iraqi entity becomes a reality, it must continue to embrace international preservation standards and education. This will be accomplished through expanding affiliations with international organizations leading excavations and heritage site preservation within Iraq, as well as student placements in extended international internships at leading universities and laboratories.

International and foreign agencies and missions who use Institute facilities for training and research provide another source of international support and student enrichment opportunities (Table 1). The modern, well-equipped facilities are able to support a wide variety of educational and research needs. To the extent space and scheduling allow, the Institute will continue to encourage programs that support its mission and goals.



Figure 4
Students make lasting friendships that are developing a new community of heritage professionals in Iraq. Photo: Sebastian Meyer

Table 1
Other programs (non-US) at the Iraqi Institute

Organization	Project Description	Year
International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP)	Training programs	2011
Superior Institute for Conservation and Restoration, Italy	Training programs	2011–2013
University of Athens, Greece	Archaeological research	2011
Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań and Warsaw University, Poland	Archaeological field school	2012
Technical University of Berlin, Germany	Preservation of Erbil Ottoman markets	2012
World Monuments Fund	Archaeological Site Management & Historic Preservation Program	2013
Boston University	Mosel University Archaeology Workshops	2013, 2014
Leipzig and Leiden Universities	Archaeological research	2013
Udine University	Archaeological excavation and research	2014

CONCLUSION

More than 220 graduates of Institute programs work in the cultural heritage sector, where they are improving conservation practices at museums, and archaeological and historic sites throughout Iraq. The growing visibility and credibility of the Iraqi Institute allows it to work effectively with director generals of antiquities in each province and to engage with universities that educate future heritage professionals. Through a dedicated, visionary, collaborative approach between international and Iraqi partners, the Iraqi Institute has become a model for building capacity in the cultural heritage community in regions of the world facing extraordinary challenges.

Cultural heritage and its preservation serve as an important resource for reconciliation and regional recovery (Figure 4). International programs providing cultural heritage development within underserved countries must consider factors beyond the delivery of basic preservation education and training. They must incorporate long-term management and sustainability as part of the project design to successfully build significant, game-changing capacity. Projects must develop real partnerships with national stakeholders and design programs that reflect national priorities and resource availability, while maintaining international standards. The Iraqi Institute's collaborative foci serve as a model for institutional preservation initiatives and strategies in countries that have suffered deep dislocation through armed conflict and natural disasters.

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NOTES

- ¹ A list of press articles documenting the development of the Iraqi Institute since 2008 can be found at: www.artcons.udel.edu/public-outreach/iraq-institute/recent-news.
- ² Funding for Iraqi Institute educational programs (2008–13) has been provided with thanks to the US Embassy in Baghdad, the Office of the Governor of Erbil, the US State

Department's Cultural Heritage Center, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Getty Foundation, Leon Levy Foundation, the Bank of America, Tru-Vue Inc., and many private donors.

- 3 A list of current advisory council members can be found at: www.artcons.udel.edu/public-outreach/iraq-institute/supporters.
- 4 The mission statement of the Iraqi Institute is: "To preserve the legacy of humanity contained in the unique cultural heritage of Iraq. It accomplishes this through educating people in conservation and preservation and by inviting professionals from around the world to share expertise."

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