"So Yesterday Was the Burning of Books" — *Wartime in Iraq.*
Lecture Held at Responsible Stewardship Towards Cultural Heritage Materials, Preconference of the IFLA Rare Book and Manuscript Section, Copenhagen,The Royal Library, 11 August 2005 [1]

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Introduction

From July 2004 till March 2005 I was working for IRMO, the Iraq Reconstruction Management Office, as the senior consultant for the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. I was send by the Dutch Army as a CIMIC-officer, a NATO unit that stands for Civil Military Cooperation, and I was deployed at the IRMO-office of the US Embassy in Baghdad.

IRMO played an important role in the formation of the IIG, Iraqi Interim Government[2], under the CPA, Coalition Provisional Authority[3], and continued to do so when the US Embassy took over from the CPA in June 2004. For every ministry a senior consultant was appointed at IRMO, some of them had a staff of 30 or more. My office was supported with a local and very dedicated secretary and for some time an Italian archeological technician. Later a military liaison officer was appointed to my office, a person who smoothed many military paths for me. The senior consultant acted as the main liaison officer for the Iraqi Minister of Culture and advised him and the US Embassy on all issues concerning cultural heritage. After seven months the Dutch contribution to the Multi-National Forces Iraq was over upon which IRMO unfortunately decided to close down their office of culture.

Since my return, I kept in close contact with those responsible for the reconstruction of the cultural heritage in Iraq partly through the Unesco-ICC, International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq[4], the Sub-committee on Libraries and Archives[5] as well as the Sub-committee on Babylon. Most probably I will return to Iraq by the end of this year especially to continue my work in support of the Iraqi libraries and archives. This paper will mainly touch on the present and past problems within the Iraqi library system.

The importance of cultural heritage in countries in transition

In an interview a Dutch reporter[6] asked me why on earth I put my life on the line for a bunch of potsherds, dilapidated buildings and old pieces of paper. It is sad but one recurrently has to explain why culture and especially cultural heritage is important

whether it be in discussion with ambassadors, politicians or military commanders. It is my strong believe that the importance of cultural heritage is heavily underestimated, certainly in times of 'armed' conflict. Let me present you with some arguments why it is significant, although I am fully aware of the fact that I am speaking to the converted.

Culture is imperative for the development of society[7], especially for countries in transition and developing countries. As part of human activity it produces tangible representations of the value systems, beliefs, traditions and lifestyles. Cultural heritage as an essential part of culture as a whole contains these visible and tangible traces form antiquity to the recent past.

It is this heritage that can play a very important role in bridging the group differences that are based on ideology, like religion or politics, or based on ethnicity or regionalism.

It is significant because it will give people the necessary symbols and points of reference for a collective memory and a renewed collective identity in case of conflict: 'unity in diversity'. At the same time it will enhance political cooperation. Cultural heritage can then break through the homogenising of group identities. Of course we need cultural diversity but in times of conflict we first have to search for the common denominator, the common symbols.

Cultural heritage also plays a vital role in the democratization process. In general the arts will offer the people an alternative point of view, and in presenting a different picture people will be more lenient in accepting differences in real life and thus will stimulate mutual respect.

For a literate population access to knowledge is essential for their empowerment and self-realization. Besides a declining literacy has so often been proven to be devastating for the economy.

As for the archives, the contribution of the historic archives to the collective memory of a people is usually acknowledged.However, the significance of the dynamic archives in controlling the democratic institutions and the political administration is often heavily underrated.

Last but not least, cultural heritage can be a main economical resource. It is to be expected that cultural tourism will be the second source of income in Iraq.

Popular fury

In often swollen language the news was brought to us about the destruction of the 'cradle of civilization' during the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Let me just quote Robert Fisk in the Independent, six days after the multinational forces officially secured Baghdad 'So yesterday was the burning of books, first came the looters, then the arsonists. It was the final chapter in the sacking of Baghdad' And he continues 'Genghis Khan's grandson burnt the city in the 13th century and, so it was said, the Tigris river ran black with the ink of books. Yesterday, the black ashes of thousands of ancient documents filled the skies of Iraq. Why?'[8]

Yes, why do people rob themselves of their own history? There are several reasons, the foremost being the uncontrolled fury of a tortured population. Repressed for such a long time by Sadam's brutal regime they just exploded and the released fury did not have any direction except to attack those institutions that represented the former state. However this should not have been a surprise. Massive destruction and looting followed immediately after the fighting in the First Gulf War (1991), especially in Basra museums and libraries were plundered. Besides, I am almost sure that military scenarios anticipate large-scale breakdowns in public order in the aftermath of international interventions. The military should have known that to restore public order it would have to rely on the type of international police force that had been part of peace operations[9]. From the first reports of journalists and civilians it becomes clear that the military did not consider it their task to protect cultural heritage institutions. Yet, they are bound to do so by several international treaties like the Hague Convention (1954) and its Second Protocol (1999), the Unesco Convention (1970) and even according to the Geneva Convention (1949).

Was it really that bad as they say it was? The answer can be short: Yes, it was. Perhaps not as bad as the ongoing looting of the 10,000 archaeological sites and the dreadful condition of the many monuments but still.

As the fate of the libraries is closely linked to the educational system I will give you an idea of the state in which the Iraqi educational system was in after the invasion: 6 million Iraqi students of all levels occupy 16,000 schools of which 80% is damaged in some way, 40% need major rehabilitation and 4% need to be rebuilt[10]. Unfortunately there are no data available on the status of public libraries, we only know that some of them have been looted and torched as well

Let me also give you some figures on the destruction of Iraqi book collections[11]
- Most of the libraries at the 20 university were affected, some seriously as the principal library of the University of Basra and others slightly like the University of Mosul

- The National Library lost 25% of its book collections
- The National Archives lost 60% of its holdings
- The Central al-Awqaf Library could only save 5,000 manuscripts, 45,000 printed books and 1,500 manuscripts were lost
- The House of Wisdom was badly looted and partially torched
- The Centre for Manuscripts all 50,000 manuscripts were saved

Most devastating was the demolition of the floors, the stripping of the wires and pipes, the wrecking of furniture and equipment, the breaking of doors and windows. In many instances there was just nothing left and the little that was left was coverd with a thick layer of soot.

Due to the continuing insecurity in Iraq there are no recent reports on the status of the libraries in Iraq. Almost all reports were written after visits in 2003. For more details I recommend the report by Jeff Spurr from the Fine Arts Library at Harvard University who very recently published an accurate assessment of the status of expecially Iraqi academic libraries Not only did he summarize all other reports but he also updated the information as much as possible and surveyed the major efforts to assist the libraries in Iraq[12]

International Aid

Who is helping the Iraqis to clean up this mess today? What else but words put in well-intentioned statements and resolutions from the ICBS (International Committee of the Blue Shield), ALA (American Library Association), IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations), ICA (International Council on Archives) and Unesco have reached our Iraqi friends. In other words who suits the action to the word.

The Unesco Culture office on the Middle East in Paris is the coordinator of the reconstruction efforts of the Iraqi libraries and archives. This office will bring supply and demand together to put it simply. They will help the Iraqi partners as well as the western counterparts to fund their proposals. The Unesco Middle East desk is also responsible for the organization of the plenary sessions of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq, the so-called ICC-meetings. One of the sub-committees is the Sub-Committee for Libraries and Archives that held its first meeting in Amman on 18-19 May 2005 which was indeed a very fruitful meeting. All their recommendations were accepted at the second plenary ICC-meeting.

Last year Unesco realized the provision of equipment for the National Library and for this year the following projects are planned

- establishment of a database at the National Library and a network with ten libraries in Iraq (UNDG Programme for Culture)
- training course in national library management for 12 trainees from the National Library to be held in Amman (British Library)
- training course in record keeping and management in March 2006. (ICA, UK National Archives)
- pilot project for developing two public libraries one in Mosul and one in Basra (IFLA, Denmark)
- construction of special bibliographies (IFLA)

But much aid does not go through their office. There are many initiatives, too many to sum up here, but most ot them can be found after a thorough search on the internet. Again I can advise Jeff Spurr's report as it gives an enumerative description of the most relevant initiatives.

Let me summarize a few rehabilitation projects.

The U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded US$ 200,000 for Recovering Iraq's Past, read libraries in 2004
- Cornell University for the creation of a preservation tutorial in Arabic which to my knowledge has not been published yet
- Simmons College for an education and training program for up to 25 Iraqi librarians

For this year $100,000 was set aside for a library school update program.

Bilateral help
- the Chech Republic has been very generous in organizing a two-months course in conservation last year for 10 restorers-to-be. They also trained one person in microfilming and provided advanced microfilm equipment to the National Library. This year they want to provide security equipment for the National Library and additional utensils and apparatus for a binding studio

- the Italian Government will support the creation of a new website for the National Library and train one web-technician. They will also train 3 restorers in advanced conservation. The province of Lombardy will continue to pay for wages for three librarians at the National Library for an additional 2 years and purchase some additional equipment and furniture

- book donations have been given through the British Council and the Goethe Institute. The Germans also support the library of the Academy of Sciences and Technology.

The only non-governmental organization (NGO) I encountered in Iraq was Un ponte per… Even after their director was kidnapped they maintained their support and kept on financing the electronic cataloguing at the National Library. They were the first ones on the spot and fullfilled the immediate needs of equipment and furniture.

Under the USAID-Iraq HEAD, the program for Higher Education and Development, five American universities have established partnerships with 10 Iraqi universities. All together the US partners spend over US$ 20 million on higher education. Sadly though the HEAD program might come to an end at the end of this summer..

This is only a random selection of the programs that have been set up so far and I am certain that the number of small and medium projects will run into the hundreds.

Let me finish with one small project I managed to organize during my stay in Baghdad. I discovered that part of the Ottoman Archives were saved but needed badly to be deep-frozen to prevent further damage. With US $ 100,000 from the US Army I had the documents transferred to a freezer truck that was transported to a sun shed we had built at the premises of the National Library. It was agreed with the Library of Congress that they would train a few conservators to restore the deep-frozen documents.

Bottlenecks

True the library and archives situation in Iraq leaves much to be desired and so far not many fundamental problems have been tackled in spite of all the efforts. Than again there are various bottlenecks the donor community has to face. Some of those trafiic jams on the donor road are outlined below.

The status of the education system before the Second Gulf War

The education system went into a steady decline after 1980 driven by a combination of lack of resources, as public funds were siphoned off for other priorities of the ruling regime and the politization of the educational system, which influenced everything from curriculum, to teaching staff, to admissions policies.

The development of the education system came to a standstill and attendance figures declined. This resulted in a general neglect througout the library and archives community. According to the director of the National Library his institution was referred to as the cemetery of books.

To make matters worse the UN-sanctions cut off access to up-to-date knowledge and technology. Especially the higher education system including their libraries suffered

heavily[13].This was the status of the library and archives community before the Second Gulf War. Damaged from the latest conflict or not, the entire library system needs to be restored and this effort must be at the heart of the reconstruction.

The unremitting insecurity of Iraqi society

Many a restoration effort will be immobilized in this war-torn country. Except for the lasting lack of infrastructure donors should realize that the management is often under personal death threat and under continous danger of kidnapping. Just a few weeks ago a roadside bom exploded in front of the National Library. Travelling in Iraq often means putting your life on the line. The most dangerous road in all Iraq is the road to Baghdad's airport, a road we ask the Iraqis to take when we invite them. In addition association with foreigners holds great risks for Iraqis as the insurgents certainly will consider that as betrayal. In general Iraqi life is to blend in with the masses, to be as inconspicous as possible.

The non-ceasing infrastructural problems in Iraq

Book-donation programs, if well-organized, could help a library. Yet there is still no effective postal service except for the international post-office at Baghdad's airport. I remember that my office once held 40 boxes of book donations that had to be shipped to the north, an incredible exercise.

Trucking is made a hazardous undertaking as the roads are in a very bad condition due to the war and general neglect. Besides all the highways are dangerous routes because of the constant bombing, highjacking and kidnapping.

The local telephone lines are in a very bad state. The only way to communicate is by mobile phone and the local Iraqna network does not cover all of Iraq yet. The american MCI network is very expensive and only the highest officials can afford it

Internet cafes are shooting up in the major cities and the Iraqis are very keen to use this medium. Nevertheless many institutions are not connected to the internet and in case of a powershortage gives them only access a couple of hours a day. It was only until July 2005 that the US Embassy opened its doors for local visa applications. Before the Iraqis had to travel to Amman to be interviewed. Visa aplications will continue to be troublesome as many Iraqis do not have the proper papers even to enter the Green Zone where 90% of the embassies are located.

Loss of management skills

Under Saddam the management style was very authoritarian. Centralization and lack of autonomy was the rule and in many institutions it still is. Today Iraqi organizations

are in great need of general management techniques like project management, budget writing, planning, coordination and even computer literacy is very low. Furthermore de-Baathification resulted in the massive loss of the competent professionals who somehow or other survived the 'ancient regime' Sad to say that not many donors realize this fundamental loss of skills. Any program is bound to fail if it does not start with the very basics. Every building needs a firm foundation in order to prevent it from collapsing.

Recommendations

<u>IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations, should take the lead in the coordination of international library aid to Iraq.</u>

It would seem that, to date the approach to library reconstruction in Iraq has been characterised by ad hoc engagement. Unesco tries very hard but in practice there is only one person at the Middle East office who is working on cultural heritage aid to Iraq, the tangible as well as the intangible. Within their limitations they are doing a great job however it is not enough.

On the Iraqi side coordination is hampered by
- Iraqi bureaucracy, all international aid has to go through the Ministry of Planning
- Continous change in the political constellation, in December Iraq will have a new minister of culture
- Persistent competition instead of cooperation among the libraries and ministeries
- Lack of management skills

The result is fragmentation of aid thus ineffective and ineficient. In the end this lack of coordination will only frustrate both the benefactor and the hopeful recipient.

<u>I recommend that libraries worldwide make a serious effort to find a twinning partner in Iraq to the benefit of both parties</u>

To fight fragmentation of aid foreign libraries could link up with one partner in Iraq. This idea has already been put into practice by the American Museum Association and has also been suggested by the Middle East Librarians Association. This collaboration could actually be advantageous to both parties.

The Iraqi library has only to deal with one foreign partner and their counterpart will get to know the institution better and will be able to readjust their plans as they go along and thus see their money better spend. But it can be more then a practical

solution as examples from development organizations teach us that western participants in twinning projects were surprised to learn so much in their field of expertise from their co-partners.

<u>I recommend that sustainable action is the byword that should govern all assistance to Iraqi libraries.</u>

Sustainability has for a long time been the guiding principle for numerous organizations. In development aid this has lead to the introduction of participatory methods. In fact the method is very simple: go meet them and ask what they want.

This means that from the very start of the project the partner should be involved in the decisionmaking process. Often the problem is not clear at all and several sessions are needed to define the problem. For the problemsolving process the participants should plan according to the device: local problems, local solutions.

Apparently it is not so easy as it seems. Too often I laid my eyes on aid proposals that were more selling the donor than anything else. Don't get me wrong, all projects should be based on a win-win relationship but it will only last with the full participation of all parties at the earliest stage possible.

It was once a common saying in the Middle East that *Arab books are written in Cairo, printed in Beirut and read in Baghdad.* When can Baghdad start reading again?

Notes

[1] I thank the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science for supporting me to attend the pre-conference of the IFLA Rare Book and Manuscript Section in Copenhagen on 11 August 2005

[2] See URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_interim_government

[3] See URL: http://www.cpa-iraq.org/ This site will remain available until June 30, 2006

[4] See URL: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17417&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[5] See URL: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=24026&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[6] VPRO Radio De Ochtenden broadcasted on 4 April 2005 from 10.00 till 11.00

[7] See for example Javier Pérez de Cuéllar: Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. Paris, Unesco/Oxford & IBH Publishing, 1998

[8] Robert Fisk: Library books, letters and proceless documents are set ablaze infinal chapter of the sacking of Baghdad. In The Independent 15 April 2003, on-line edition

[9] See Robert M. Perito (2005). The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Public Security in Iraq. Lessons Identified. Washington: United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 137.

[10] See Chapter Three in the report United Nations/Worldbank Joint Iraq Needs Assessment, October 2003

[11] For more details see the following reports: Jean-Marie Arnoult Assessment of Iraqi cultural heritage. Libraries and Archives, June 27-July 6 2003. Paris: Unesco 2003; Nabil al-Tikriti, Iraq Manuscript Collections, Archives & Libraries Situation Report, 8 June 2003 published at http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/docs/nat.html ; Library of Congress and the U.S. Department of State Mission to Baghdad. Report on the National Library and the House of Manuscripts, October 27-November 3, 2003 published at http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/iraqreport/iraqreport.html

[12] See URL: http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/indispensable.html

[13] See note 10