

The Right Honourable Tony Blair MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London

cc Foreign Secretary
Secretary of State for Defence
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

15 April 2003

Dear Prime Minister

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN IRAQ

All those involved in cultural heritage have been reading with increasing dismay and disbelief details of the looting and destruction of antiquities in Iraq.

Iraq's cultural heritage it is arguably its greatest economic asset – even more valuable than oil. Unlike Iraq's infrastructure, which can be replaced, its cultural heritage is quite simply irreplaceable. Once the fighting is over it should be one of the key ways of increasing income from tourism; it will also be needed as a means of re-engendering pride and self-confidence.

Damage to the Baghdad museum has already destroyed something of huge value to mankind as a whole. Its contents told the story of significant stages in the evolution of the great early centralised societies of Summeria, Babylon, Assyria and Persia. Looting has also been reported from other museums and university libraries; as yet we don't know how far other cultural sites may have been ravaged. Measures must now be put in place to stop further damage to some of the richest cultural heritage in the world.

In Prime Minister's question time on 19th March, you confirmed that the government was committed to protecting Iraq's cultural heritage. Furthermore the Ministry of Defence in a letter to me of 21 March confirmed that 'notwithstanding the fact that the [Hague] convention is yet to be ratified the UK remains fully committed to the protection of cultural property in times of armed conflict in accordance with international law'. The Hague Convention specifically covers the need to take appropriate measures to prevent looting of, and damage to, significant cultural heritage in post-conflict situations.

We now call urgently on the government to put these principles into practice and take immediate steps to:

- Offer protection to key cultural heritage sites that could be under threat of looting

- Give protection to what remains of museums, university libraries and other significant collections in Iraq
- Encourage the recovery of looted objects and put in place measures to deter their sale in the art market outside Iraq
- Identify professionals who can help with the process of documentation and protection in Iraq and in the UK

Furthermore we would like assurances that aid given for reconstruction in Iraq is directly linked to the needs of cultural heritage and provides for capacity building to ensure that appropriate skills are in place to optimise cultural heritage assets. Cultural heritage does not just need protecting – although that must come first – it needs managing to ensure that it can deliver substantial social, economic and cultural benefits as a key part of sustainable development.

ICOMOS is an international, non-governmental organisation whose mandate is the world's cultural heritage. Through its national committees worldwide, it provides a forum for professional dialogue.

In collaboration with other ICOMOS National Committees, ICOMOS-UK would be very willing to put the resources of the ICOMOS network at the disposal of the government in order to help facilitate this urgent and crucial process.

Yours sincerely

Tom Hassall
President, ICOMOS-UK