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Istanbul conference: The Future of the Past

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The Absent Past: Heritage Destruction and Historical Erasure Today

In ancient Babylon there once lived a man called Nabu-zer-lishir. He was a scholar who was expert in ancient languages and scripts. He also directed excavations and recorded the architectural remains and artefacts that were found under his supervision. He lived in the 6th century BC, during the reign of the Babylonian king Nabonidus, but we know that he discovered remains of the mid- second millennium BC, from the time of the Kassite ruler Kurigalzu I, who lived 800 years earlier. He understood what these were, and recorded them accurately. And even these artefacts themselves already contained a record of the earlier Kassite archaeological activity and interest in the past. Among those artefacts excavated by our scholar, Nabu-zer-lishir, was a text that recorded how the Kassite king, Kuriglazu had preserved and restored the Emekalamma Temple wall in the city of Agade as a way of preparing for the Akitu New Year festival at the beginning of the springtime.

Nabu-zer-lishir was a scholar and an archaeologist, not unlike all of us who are gathered here for this meeting. He studied the traces of the past in artefacts and architecture. He knew the ancient languages and scripts, which he could read, and translate and which he recorded carefully. Among the texts that he reproduced (he made a copy of it by pressing it on clay) was one that was even older than the Kurigalzu one I just mentioned. It was from the era of the Akkadian king Sharkalisharri who ruled 2217-2193 BC. On the back of the impression Nabu-zer-lishir in fact wrote carefully where he had found this ancient text (which was already almost two thousand years old when he found it) and what the material of the object was, on which it was written. Nabu-zer-lishir's story is not the only one we have from the Mesopotamian past. In fact, there are many records from the past that reveal to us the great antiquity of historical consciousness in Mesopotamia. The ancient Mesopotamians were very aware of the extensive history of their land, they understood that it was extremely old, and they took pride in it. They felt it was their sacred duty to preserve it. They saw it as their ancestral past.

Today we echo these concerns. So I would like to open this meeting by stating what may be the obvious: Preservation of the past *is* important for the people of this part of the world. It is not just the pass time of well-to-do people in western nations. This is one of the main reasons for this meeting we are calling *The Future of the Past*. Unlike many of the meetings about the cultural heritage of the Middle East, most of the speakers and panellists whose views we will hear in the next two days are from the region itself. The meeting has been called with a specific focus on Iraq and Syria, both lands with very urgent concerns. Together with my co-organizers, Dr. Joan Aruz and Dr. Sheila Canby of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Prof. Christopher

Roosevelt of Koç University, we have called this meeting so that the voices of local scholars and archaeologists can be heard clearly. It is important to stress that this region's past is a global cultural heritage of interest to all, but for those of us from this part of the world, it is also our specifically local heritage and a significant part of the characteristics of our lands.

Let me return to the ancient Mesopotamians. They understood archaeological artefacts as traces of the past, but when they put artefacts into the ground, or erected them as architecture and monuments the important thing we should understand is this: they saw these artefacts and monuments not simply as looking back to their ancestors, but as reaching out to the future, as an infinite form of presence through monuments and images, and through written historical accounts. Their horizons of time were vast and distant, pushing forward into the future. Why was this case? It was because of the manifest traces of the past, which also evidenced the historical antiquity of the land. They saw the future through the lens of the traces of the past.

This meeting's main concern is the preserving and safeguarding of our cultural heritage, especially the cultural patrimony of Iraq and Syria. This is primarily the area we call the land of the two rivers: Mesopotamia. Significantly for our conference, and our current concerns, the first historical evidence for preserving and conserving antiquities comes from this part of the world. We always say that writing was invented here, cities, the law and so on, but we should add to this list of the beginnings of civilization, the practices of archaeology and conservation. The first clearly attested acts of preservation, conservation and archaeological research emerged in Mesopotamia. The Uruk Vase, which became emblematic for the looting and destruction of the Iraq Museum in 2003, dates to 3300 BC. When it was buried in the fourth millennium BC, it had already been repaired carefully with a metal pin attaching a piece that had broken off at the top. This is a conscious act of conservation.

Some claim that the concerns for the distant past are modern-western imports into the east; they are not. This is a point that I have demonstrated in some detail in my own research and books. These claims are made by those who try to convince us that, in our lands, we did not understand the past until Europeans taught us to do so. But these mistaken claims are now also being used by some in the region itself for their own goals. Some have come to believe we should reject the past; that caring for it is an imported western concern. In a recent lecture I gave, there were present some scholars of the modern era in the audience who challenged me on this point. I was told you cannot speak about preservation, as that is a modern western concept. But this assertion is of course completely erroneous and not based on any research into ancient texts and practices. Engagement with the past is neither a western construct, nor a modern invention. It has existed since the first recorded history when kings restored and renovated architecture and protected historical and sacred places that we would now call 'heritage sites'.

The rise of scientific archaeology in Europe in the nineteenth century brought about a new and different engagement with the past that defined itself as a science. This was an important moment in the history of scholarship and museology, a turning point that formed the basis for the way that we conduct our work today. However, it was certainly not the first historical moment in which there was an interest in the ruins of this part of the world. In the early Arabic and Persian traditions of Islamic scholarship, writers such as Ibn Hawqal (fl. 943-69) already went to see Babylon and wrote about it in the 10th century AD. Benjamin of Tudela (a rabbi from Spain) referred to the ruins of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, where he visited. Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217 AD) and Abu al Feda (1273-1331 AD), Masudi (who died 957 AD) and Muqqadasi (945-1000 AD) and several other scholars had regularly described the exact locations of Nineveh and Babylon. In the Ottoman Empire, Mehmet Zilli known as Evliya Celebi described ancient buildings during travels in his Seyahatname written in the mid 17th century. In Iran, the Qajar dynasty likened its authority to that of ancient kings, and borrowed iconography directly from ancient sculptures.

These sites and monuments, these remains of history have formed and defined the landscape of the region for many centuries. Without them, we cannot understand what this region is, nor what it has been. When we ignore them, the region becomes something else. It becomes a place with no tangible past, a place whose history is wiped out and re-written. Why is this the case? History is always a narrative, but the phenomenon of the solid material remains have stood there nevertheless, and had to be explained or subsumed into the stories. The standing monuments and traces of the past were explained as part of the ancient and mythical history of the land and its peoples.

For the first time in thousands of years, these remains are now being systematically wiped out. We are now faced with confronting not a solid and tangible presence of the past, but a conspicuous glaring absence. Entirely new definitions and stories are being told that fit better with the current goals of conquest and genocide. This ancient land is being erased and transformed into what can be described as a *terra nulla*, an empty land, devoid of people and history, ready to be colonised and occupied as a vast and empty frontier for whoever wishes to take it. These aims and strategies of violence are enabled by, and erected upon, the absence of the past. I would stress therefore that the evidence of the past and history is not just the collateral damage of war. Its destruction is a strategy of erasure, reconfiguration and conquest of land.

There is now an existential threat to the Middle East by the erasure of history of its multiple cultures and peoples, of its distant past and its recent past. Not only in Iraq and Syria, and in south-eastern Anatolia—the areas that we are discussing in our meeting--- but also in Yemen, in Tunisia and Libya, in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, everywhere our heritage, our pluralistic historical roots and rich cultures, are endangered. The past of the Middle East is not a simple homogeneous thing. The beauty of this past is its diversity. Heritage preservation is not a luxury. It is

essential. These remains of antiquity and historical buildings have existed for thousands of years. People have lived with them in peace, not only that; they have seen them as part of their natural landscape and its identity. Now this landscape is threatened with erasure.

What is worrying is not just the deliberate destruction and iconoclasm of heritage buildings or images, but a total erasure of what does not fit in the new narrative of ethnic or religious purity. Thus ancient sites, historical Islamic architecture and 20th century secular buildings are all attacked for similar reasons. This destruction has several causes. We have seen the devastating destruction of sites by terrorism and warfare whether by state powers and militaries, or by terrorist groups, but that is not all. The creation of exclusionary narratives is beginning to take hold across communities. We are also seeing the re-writing and re-identification of heritage sites of all eras, ancient to modern, along ethnocentric lines in ways that are erroneous and unacceptable because they perform historical erasure in their own way. We also see some ill thought out archaeological projects emerging. We see the mass looting of archaeological sites, museums and libraries for a global free market in our heritage. And we are also witnessing the terrible damage done by unrestrained and unsupervised development projects that do not always follow the rule of law when it comes to the legal imperative of conducting archaeological surveys before bulldozing, drilling or tearing down old architecture and restructuring the traditional urban centres. Here the burden and responsibility is not only on local people and governments but on the international, European and US firms that come in to conduct the work. All of these forms of destruction are areas that we will address in the next days.

Another main problem that has arisen, and which was already clear in 2003 at the start of the Iraq War, is the spread of both information and misinformation. In 2003 already, we saw the increase of websites and not for profit organisations that set themselves up in the west as representatives of the Iraq Museum or Iraqi archaeology. Unfortunately, many of these were self-appointed experts whose aim was to acquire donations or to influence public discussion in some way. Today, with the widespread use of the internet, there is even more misinformation being disseminated. Some questionable websites have even been relied upon by the press as sources of authority. At times, sensitive information about locations of monuments, or even of our colleagues who are working in dangerous zones, are posted on line, thus exposing them to danger.

We are gathered here in Turkey, in the region being directly affected, alongside Iraq and Syria. Most of the scholars present here are from this area, and we asked them here specifically so we can hear their views. We have gathered together a group that includes specialists in pre-Islamic antiquity, Islamic art and archaeology, and the modern architecture and art of the region. In many meetings and discussions about the threat to cultural heritage in the Middle East, too often the voices of local scholars are excluded or not listened to seriously as the voices of colleagues who are also stake holders. Here, we want to change that working method. The future of the

past in Iraq and Syria is certainly a question of global cultural heritage as defined by UNESCO and other international organisations, but it is far more urgent and devastating for the people of these lands. On the other hand, local people have a responsibility as well, to protect this heritage and to educate children about it, and to do this without falling into the trap of ethnocentrism and exclusionary, sectarian politics.

To end, I hope you'll allow me to turn briefly to my own work at Columbia University, a project that hopes (in a small way at least) to fight the process of cultural erasure I just described. As a means of countering all this destruction, three years ago I established a fieldwork project that I direct, called *Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments*. With my team (some of them are here today: Helen Malko, Turkan Pilavci and Serdar Yalcin), we have conducted work recording standing monuments and architecture across northern Iraqi Kurdistan in Dohuk, Erbil and Suleymaniye, and in South-Eastern Anatolia. Our aim is to continue this work in the rest of Iraq to the south, and eventually also in Syria. We are not mapping *tells* or conducting the standard archaeological surveys, but focussing specifically on monuments and architecture. We have no historical or religious boundaries for our project; we document inclusively. Our work has already documented many ancient Mesopotamian monuments and rock reliefs, early Islamic and early Christian architecture, mosques and madrasas, churches and monasteries, bridges and aqueducts, Ottoman era buildings and early twentieth century buildings. We use a range of technologies including photogrammetry, perspectival stills, and 360° immersive panoramic records while mapping things geo-spatially. For each work we have assessed the condition and written detailed descriptions. We currently have an archive of thousands of the images we have made in the field, that we have curated into a closed website. At the moment, we are reluctant to open the site to the public. Indeed we have avoided seeking any publicity or wide recognition of our extensive work for fear of creating more targets. These are some of the difficulties of working on the protection of heritage sites on location. Some of our colleagues here today also continue to work on location in areas that are high risk, not because they will ever be thanked or applauded, but for the sake of preserving what remains in the midst of the chaos of war.

We abhor and lament the horrendous events that have overtaken our lands and destroyed our history. However, in this meeting, The Future of the Past, our goals are rather practical. The aims of those of us who organised the conference, with the full support of our home institutions (Columbia University, Koç University and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) is to make real plans for moving forward. In the next months already, we hope to create a network of cooperation for work across east and west. As we are not emperors and kings, but scholars and archaeologists like our great ancestor, Nabu-zer-lishir, it is only by research and documentation, by the taking on of students and Post doctoral researchers from Iraq and Syria into our home institutions, by adopting archaeological and preservation projects together with our colleagues locally, and by having open lines of communication that we can counter this existential threat to our shared history.

