DIGGING IN

New Digs Draw Applause and Concern

Andrew Lawler

Iraqi archaeologists are back in the field and making significant finds. But Western researchers worry about their methods after years of isolation

UMM AL-AQIRIB—Iraqi archaeologists working last year on an ancient Sumerian site in this remote area in southern Iraq heard a rumor that looters were ready to pounce as soon as work stopped for the summer. So they took no chances. The researchers and a team of 30 local diggers worked straight through the ferocious summer, enduring temperatures that regularly soared past 50 degrees Celsius.

Their efforts paid off. The excavators uncovered a rare cemetery, a huge complex of buildings in an unusual configuration, and a 7-meter-high wall in remarkable condition—all of which challenge current assumptions about city development in the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. “It’s astonishing,” says McGuire Gibson, a University of Chicago archaeologist. These findings “will rewrite the history of architecture in ancient Mesopotamia.”

Gibson was part of a team of Western researchers visiting Iraq this spring, the first such group to size up some of the 15 Iraqi excavations begun in the past 18 months after nearly a decade’s hiatus. A new generation of Iraqi archaeologists has fanned out to six sites in the south, five in the north, and four in the area around Baghdad—mostly places threatened by looters, irrigation-canal construction, or the rising waters of new dams.

New finds such as those at Umm Al-Aqirib—“Mother of Scorpions” in Arabic—and nearby Djokha are causing ripples of excitement among Near Eastern specialists. But Western scientists also worry that their colleagues’ economic troubles, long isolation, and emphasis on restoration—trying to reconstruct ancient sites rather than simply preserving what remains—may pose a threat to important and fragile ruins.

At Al-Aqirib, which comprises 5 square kilometers of sand dunes, the team led by Iraq antiquities research director Donny George excavated a palace or administrative building from the 3rd millennium B.C. that is 50 meters square. Jars in the structure still contained the residues of wheat and barley. Nearby, the team has uncovered what appears to be a temple, 38 meters by 28 meters with a 7-meter–high wall, that may date to before 3000 B.C. and that is nearly flush against the base of a platform or ziggurat—an unusual arrangement for that period, says George. On the other side of the platform is a large area of graves dating from roughly the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C.

The extent of the cemetery, which has been partially looted, remains uncertain, but excavators have opened 18 graves so far and generally found either one stone or one copper bowl next to human remains. In the tomb of one woman, apparently someone of means, were 46 pieces of lapis lazuli. Although Mesopotamian burials typically were under homes, one British scholar speculates that Al-Aqirib was a Sumerian religious center and therefore a popular burial place. Other archaeologists agree that the site raises a host of provocative questions. “They have a real puzzle on their hands,” says Gibson.

That is true at other sites as well. At Djokha, for example, about 7 kilometers away, archaeologist Nawala Al-Mutawalli is excavating a site, nearly devastated by looters, that was a major urban center from the end of the 4th millennium to the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. She has uncovered temples and homes, mostly from the 2nd and 3rd millennia B.C., made with an unusually large number
of baked bricks—mud bricks were the more common and cheaper alternative—with valuable bitumen mortar that came from distant northern Mesopotamia. “These are unusually high building standards,” she says. “You usually find such techniques mainly on ziggurats.”

In the north, an Iraqi team is busy uncovering mansions on the southern side of the old Assyrian capital of Ashur that date to around the 8th century B.C. During a recent visit, more than a dozen workers had just uncovered courtyards paved with patterns of small stones on top of sophisticated drainage systems. Digging at the site began in 1999, also to ward off looters. With the area now secure, a German team plans to start its own digging this fall on the western side of the site (see p. 30).

Iraqi archaeologists are also desperately trying to explore sites threatened by irrigation and dam building. Thus archaeologist Fawziwa Al-Maliki, for example, has hastened to begin surveying Habil Ibrahim—a legendary home of Abraham north of Mosul—which is threatened by canal building and farming. And at Tell Al-Namil, also in the north, archaeologist Burhan Shakir is excavating a site that has already suffered at the hands of local villagers but is now threatened by the rising waters of a nearby dam. An unusual circular building with a series of walls includes a main entrance that boasted a 4-meter-wide arch, a spiral staircase, and a brick well; a nearby cemetery has 220 graves. The complex dates to about 2900 B.C.

**Conserve or preserve?**

Although impressed by the initial work of these and other young Iraqi archaeologists, several Western researchers worry that a new generation of excavators lacks education in current methods and technologies. They also fear that the new digs could leave little funding for less glamorous efforts, such as object and site conservation. And they remain wary of the Iraqi tradition of site reconstruction at places like Babylon and Hatra.

The reconstruction at Babylon during the 1980s, for example, placed new walls on old and unstable foundations sitting on a rising water table. UNESCO officials say they rejected an Iraqi attempt to place Babylon on a list of world heritage sites because, in their view, it was compromised by the rebuilding effort. The effects of such reconstruction are most visible at Aqar Quf, a ziggurat outside Baghdad, where the new bricks on the old base are collapsing.

There is also an absence of specialists to care for what is uncovered. “There are no trained conservators in the country,” says one foreign archaeologist. He notes that although a German institute has offered to train Iraqi conservators and cover their expenses, it has gotten few takers. “There’s an attitude that you don’t want to stoop to preservation and conservation,” he adds. And the internal problems with publishing and communicating Iraqi efforts to the outside world only increases Western worries. “If you don’t publish, you are just plundering,” says one Western researcher.

George dismisses these worries as overblown. A recent spate of conferences, books, and journals is easing the isolation, he says, and students in the field are carefully trained and monitored by their elders. “They work 24 hours, drawing, digging, cleaning, gluing, restoring,” he says, noting that four or five people have been sent to Germany to learn the latest conservation techniques, and others are planning to make the same trip.

As for restoration, George has sharp words for Western critics. “A lot of people would like ruins to stay ruins,” he says. “But whenever a central government was strong and wealthy, it restored and rebuilt the ancient cities—it’s a long, long tradition going back to Sumerian times.” That tradition indeed dies hard. One senior Iraqi official recently sought advice from foreign archaeologists on rebuilding the famed tower of Babel, now surrounded by a swamp.

Such proposals clearly appeal to President Saddam Hussein, who ordered that every new brick at Babylon be stamped with his name and
Babylon rising. Saddam's government has poured funding into questionable reconstruction.

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who has built his own sprawling palace there. But after 2 decades of war and economic hardship, such ambitious and inherently costly schemes seem unlikely to go forward.