

The following declaration was initiated by the Austrian President Dr. Thomas Klestil and was passed by the Vienna Conference '*Enter the Past – the E-Way into the Four Dimensions of Cultural Heritage*' of worldwide archaeological experts:

Iraq Culture at Risk

The Vienna Declaration

Vienna 11.04.03 – The conference '*Enter the Past – the E-Way into the Four Dimensions of Cultural Heritage*' (Vienna, April 8th – 12th 2003) focuses on archaeology in the digital age, an increasingly significant area of cultural heritage. This includes the virtual reconstruction of lost cities and damaged sites, such as Nimrud in ancient Mesopotamia, modern Iraq.

In his inaugural speech (Tuesday, 9th April, 2003) the Austrian President, Dr. Thomas Klestil, called for international action to prevent artefacts from Iraq becoming part of the international trade in antiquities, in the wake of developments in the Gulf.

Pledging his support, Dr. Klestil appealed to our international community 'to seek effective protection of the most important excavation sites'. He added: 'Wherever this makes sense, I will support all endeavours to keep the treasures of antiquity in Iraq and to prevent any plundering of these sites. Every effort has to be undertaken that the treasures of Mesopotamia do not become the object of international trade in antiques. Furthermore, assistance must be provided at all levels to museums in Iraq to facilitate their reconstruction, wherever necessary...'

In an Communiqué ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites states (see attached document of ICOMOS):

... ICOMOS as an international non-governmental organisation of professionals from more than 120 countries of diverse cultures, also stresses the importance of respect for the diverse cultural heritage of the World as an essential foundation of peace and progress and expresses particular concern over the fate of cultural heritage in Iraq and the area..

These documents constitute the response of the international community of scholars represented at the congress, 'Enter the Past', to the President's appeal.

The extraordinary global significance of the monuments, museums, and archaeological sites of Iraq imposes an obligation on all peoples and governments to protect them.

During and after the last Gulf War, large numbers of antiquities left Iraq when museums were looted and sites plundered. Archaeologists responded by setting up databases and, more recently, specialist websites, identifying known sites and objects known to be at risk, or already on the antiquities market.

A number of cultural organisations have raised alarm about the heritage implications of the latest Gulf conflict and have made public declarations on websites.

We urge all governments, institutions, and individuals in a position to act to recognize and uphold the validity of Iraq's existing, strong Antiquities Law; to secure the long-term safety of the archaeological and cultural heritage of Iraq of all historical periods, and to stop illicit digging and smuggling of antiquities that have occurred. Following a period of conflict, the staff of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities – in whatever form it might take – must be brought up to optimum strength in academic and technical fields. Most important, the number of guards for individual sites, monuments, and museums must be likewise strengthened.

As represented by the signatories of this letter, the international scholarly community is prepared, at the conclusion of the present crisis, to support the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in strengthening, training and retraining its staff, in assessing the conservation needs of artefacts and buildings, and in refitting laboratories. If asked, international archaeologists are also willing to play a role in any needed assessment of damage done by illicit digging or warfare, in salvage operations directed by the Department of Antiquities, and in repatriating stolen antiquities.

The signatories of this letter urge all governments to recognize that fragile cultural heritage is inevitably damaged by warfare, that irreparable losses both to local communities and to all humanity are caused by the destruction of cultural sites, monuments, and works of art. That is our common duty to take all possible steps to protect them.

Even in the midst of suffering history must be preserved for the future. We ask that those who would be prepared to help in this rebuilding make themselves known.