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Local voices on heritage: Understanding community perceptions towards archaeological sites in South Iraq

Federico Zaina Licia Proserpio and Giulia Scazzosi

ABSTRACT

Community engagement is now a consolidated and essential part of many archaeological research projects. In particular, it is widely recognized as a powerful tool for laying the foundation for any community archaeology programme. This paper explores the perceptions of a community living North-East of the city of Kufa (Iraq) towards the archaeological sites and cultural heritage in general. In particular, we designed an action-oriented research consisting of interviews and focus groups conducted between 2017 and 2019 at selected sites. The multifaceted picture that emerges from this research allows to better understand the relationships between the different actors revolving around the archaeological sites. The objective is to assess the awareness and understanding of the significance of its cultural heritage by the local community, and consequently propose recommendations including actions aimed at better safeguarding and communicating the archaeological sites.

KEYWORDS

Community engagement; archaeological sites; South Iraq; qualitative ethnographic methods; heritage narratives

Introduction (FZ, LP, GS)

The southern Iraqi floodplain is widely acknowledged as the core of Mesopotamia, one of the regions where the first agricultural and urban development processes took place (Stephens et al. 2019; Yoffee 2005; Wilkinson 2003). This cultural landscape is characterized by an intensive anthropogenic manipulation that created a complex settlement pattern over several millennia, as revealed by almost two centuries of archaeological researches (Adams 1981; Adams and Nissen 1972; Marchetti et al. 2019; Wilkinson 2003; Wilkinson, Rayne, and Jotheri 2015). However, in the last 30 years, substantial advances in the study of the archaeology of the Iraqi floodplain suffered for a dramatic halt due to the political instability and the conflicts which prevented fieldwork activities. Among others, these events led to a drop in the quality of education, widespread poverty, greater gender inequality and plundering of archaeological sites, heritage buildings and museums (Emberling and Hanson 2008). The partial destruction of the cultural heritage in the country has boosted a gradual loss of awareness of a common past among the population and the subsequent crumbling of social cohesion (Cunliffe and Curini 2018; Marchetti et al. 2018).

Since the 2010s, archaeological activities have resumed in southern Iraq and a new season of research has begun (Campbell 2017; Jotheri, Allen, and Wilkinson 2016; Lippolis 2016; Marchetti et al. 2017; 2019; Nadali and Andrea 2020; Romano and D'Agostino 2019; Stone and Zimansky 2016). The new projects are introducing new research methodologies and approaches to contribute to the reconstruction of the long-term historical dynamics of the ancient Mesopotamian floodplain. However, the harsh consequences of Iraq's turbulent years, and in particular the destruction and

looting of heritage sites and museums, are spurring archaeologists to rethink their role and reshape their research goals. In this wake, several international teams have recently developed and implemented initiatives focusing not only on pure academic research, but with a careful attention also to the safeguarding of the sites and on the communication of heritage to, with and for local communities. At the same time, larger projects supported by international institutions, such as the European Union and the United Nations, are increasingly employing archaeology and history as powerful tools for social and economic development. In Iraq, relevant initiatives are currently being conducted in the frame of the UK-based Nahrein network and the British Museum's Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme or the UNESCO UNITWIN projects, among others, while at regional level various activities are been promoted by the Deutsche Archäologische Institut of Berlin (Matthews et al. 2019).

Among the different strategies implemented by the European Commission to address the above-mentioned issues (European Commission 2014), the EuropeAid Civil Society Organization and Local Authorities Program in Iraq was launched in 2015. The specific aim of this call is to develop different types of actions to strengthen Civil Society Organization (CSO) and to support Local Authorities (LA) in the country (for a review of EU policies on CSO and LA see European Commission 2012; 2013). Under this framework programme, the EDUU – Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq project started in 2016, as a European-Iraqi multidisciplinary initiative aimed at supporting CSO and LA in documenting, safeguarding and promoting Iraqi cultural heritage (www.eduu.unibo.it). Specific sets of activities have been designed to achieve this aim, falling within the macro-themes of (1) Documentation, (2) Conservation, (3) Legislation, (4) Education, (5) Communication.

Designed in response to a call for application launched by a big donor (i.e. the EU), the EDUU project could run the risk of being considered a typical top-down project within a geographical area where the local communities have been scarcely involved in actions related to archaeology and heritage. This lack of engagement may be a consequence also of national policies on heritage still based on a colonial perspective, together with the emergence of recent projects funded by big donors that often do not properly consult local archaeologists, heritage professionals and inhabitants. For this reason, despite the difficulties of conducting fieldwork in this specific context, the EDUU project members (European and Iraqi) have decided to kick start an exploratory study aimed at collecting 'bottom up' perceptions of local communities towards archaeological sites and cultural heritage that could shape future projects.

Indeed, this research was conceived as a first step towards a community-based participatory research (Atalay 2012), with the aim of better understanding the local community, before designing a real community archaeology project. In other words, quoting Humphris and Bradshaw (2017), the present study points at 'understanding the community, before community archaeology'. Similar approaches have already been tested in other countries such as Jordan (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019), Syria (Jamieson 2016; Moualla and McPherson 2019), Turkey (Atalay 2010; 2012), Egypt (Moser et al. 2002; Tully 2007; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016), Sudan (Humphris and Bradshaw 2017; Näser 2019; Kleinitz and Merlo 2014; Näser and Tully 2019) and Israel (Killebrew et al. 2017), while in Iraq it represents one of the very first attempts (Isakhan and Meskell 2019). Overall, these studies have shown that the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes on the preservation and communication of cultural heritage can guarantee a long-term, effective and sustainable impact.

Qualitative ethnographic methodologies (Low 2002) have been used to capture the narratives, the degree of attachment and commitment to archaeological sites by the local community and the potential interest in developing joint activities to enhance and communicate local heritage.

Our study targeted some of the archaeological sites documented by the 'Land of Kufa' archaeological survey project conducted between 2019 and 2020 in the north-eastern part of the Najaf governorate (Maner, Alaa, and Federico *in press*) as an additional activity within the framework of the EDUU project and related to the first macro-theme 'Documentation' (see above).

Research questions (GS)

The present research, developed as an action-oriented study, aimed to understand the perceptions and narratives of the local community towards archaeological sites and to develop recommendations and actions for a more effective preservation and communication of heritage. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the awareness and understanding of their heritage by local residents and cultural heritage operators, and how do they define it?
- Are the archaeological sites considered part of the narratives of past and present history?
- How do the actors influence each other in narratives and perceptions of heritage?
- Are the archaeological sites considered a potential valuable asset for their community and for the entire region? And how do the local communities imagine the future of archaeological sites?
- What are the suggestions and opinions of the local heritage authorities and researchers to engage local communities for better understanding and preservation of cultural heritage?

Research design (FZ)

This research has been designed by a multidisciplinary team composed of four archaeologists and an anthropologist from the University of Bologna (Italy) and the University of Kufa (Iraq), supported in the fieldwork activities by two research assistants and five students of the University of Kufa. It was conducted in collaboration with three members of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) the Iraqi governmental authority for the protection of the cultural heritage. International researchers with different academic backgrounds have collaborated to achieve fruitful cross-fertilization between different disciplines. This approach made it possible to read the local context using appropriate cultural and linguistic methodological tools (Atalay 2010; 2012). Our methodology combined several qualitative approaches, mainly used by the social sciences, to capture the dynamic and iterative narratives and perceptions embedded in archaeological sites (Low 2002). Social research methods, such as rapid ethnographic assessment (Ervin 1997) through qualitative interviews and focus groups, were used to collaboratively discover local knowledge. Therefore, the data collection was the result of a joint collaboration of a team of local and international researchers, together with state authorities who interacted with the local community favouring the integration of different perspectives. As argued by Jones (2017), we have blended social research methods with community-based participatory approaches that aim to include the local community as active 'agents' of the research design and the deliverable. We designed a research plan consisting of three fieldworks, each comprising the following specific activities:

1. First fieldwork (October 2017): to select heritage sites and to map the local actor of our 'community of reference' (Tully 2007; Isherwood 2011), to identify and interview the key informants (for a basic definition, see Natali 2018), and to collaboratively create the interview structure for the second fieldwork. This first fieldwork has been designed based on the concept of 'reflexivity', based on Schmidt and Pikirayi's (2016). To do so, we have adopted a self-critical approach to understand whether we were engaging the stakeholders in a fully participatory way or if we were holding most of the decision-making in setting the research agenda. This 'reflexivity' approach lead us to deeply involve local academics in formulating questions for all the actors, which could be useful not just for our own academic purposes but for other archaeological projects in the area. Open questions we specifically designed to allow actors to challenging common knowledge and perceptions of international scholars.
2. Second fieldwork (March 2019): to collect qualitative data by conducting semi-structured and in-depth interviews (Natali 2018) around the selected archaeological sites. The team interviewed 65 residents, 15 keepers, 5 chief keepers, 8 archaeological policemen and 6 SBAH officers.

3. Third fieldwork (September 2019): to discuss the analysis of the data collected by the team and develop recommendations for the preservation of sites and communication of the archaeological work. A focus group was organized on the premises of the University of Kufa and saw the participation of 4 community leaders, 9 chief keepers, 15 keepers, 4 SBAH officers and 4 archaeological policemen.

In total, we conducted six weeks long fieldwork. This relatively short research period on-the-field was due to the current security conditions and the travel restrictions in Iraq, which, especially between 2018 and 2019, limited both international and local research. When longer fieldworks will be possible, other methodological approaches, such as participant observatory or oral histories methodologies, will be integrated.

Setting the scene (FZ)

The 'Land of Kufa' survey project provided the physical context for our research. This area, located in the north-eastern part of the Najaf governorate, was particularly suitable as it is located on the edge of the southern Mesopotamia alluvium and has so far been superficially touched by archaeological investigations. Indeed, while the previous large scale surveys in central and southern Iraq, carried out between the 1960s and 1970s (Adams 1965; 1981; Adams and Nissen 1972; Al-Shukri 1974; Dougherty 1925; Gibson 1972) did not include the Najaf governorate, a single archaeological excavation

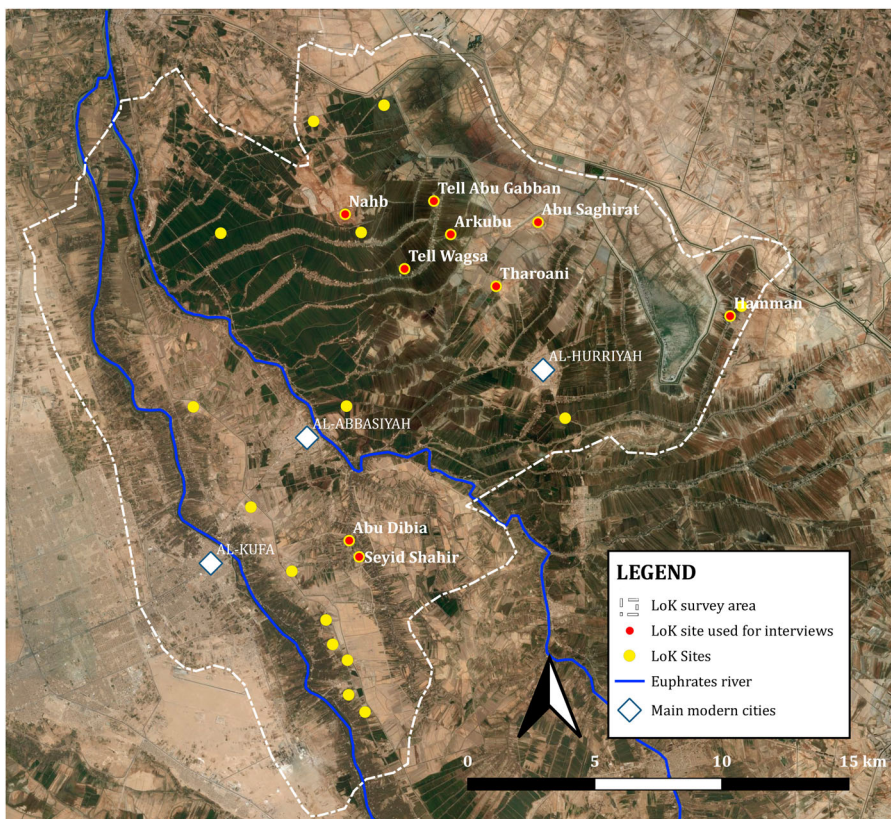


Figure 1. The Land of Kufa survey region. In red are the archaeological sites that have been selected as case studies for our research.

project was recently conducted in the southern part of the region (Müller-Weiner et al. 2015; Müller-Weiner and Siegel *in press*).

The research, conducted between February 2019 and March 2020, allowed to identifying 29 archaeological sites distributed throughout the area (Figure 1), most of which are small settlements with little visible archaeological evidence, while only a handful of them represented ancient major centres (Maner, Alaa, and Federico *in press*). The chronological range of the sites confirms the relatively late occupation of the area from the Neo-Babylonian (1000 BCE) up to the Islamic and Ottoman periods (1900 CE), although the preliminary results of the survey reveal that the majority of the sites date to the Islamic period (Maner, Alaa, and Federico *in press*).

A number of archaeological sites have been selected among those recently documented on the basis of four criteria: (1) We have taken into consideration the archaeological sites adjacent to modern villages and in more rural settings; (2) We have considered the entire chronological range of occupation (from the Neo-Babylonian to the Islamic period) of the area; (3) We have included both small sites with scarce archaeological evidence and the largest and best-known ones to map the possible links between site awareness and community attachment; (4) We have targeted both well-preserved and damaged archaeological sites (for a review on the most common threats and damages to sites, see Lopez 2016; Palumbo 2000; Stovel 1998; UNESCO 2010; Zaina 2019) to explore possible perceptions related to the most common threats to archaeological heritage.

The selected sites are Nahb, Tell Wagsa, Abu Dibia, Seiyd Shahir, Hamman, Arkubu, Tell Abu Gabban, Abu Saghira and Tharoani (Figure 1). The first two are among the main sites in the region, Nahb was a large Sasanian and Islamic centre (220-1500 CE) of more than 100 ha, while Tell Wagsa presents substantial evidence of the Neo-Babylonian period (1100-550 BCE). The rest were smaller settlements, most of which were occupied throughout the entire chronological period of the region.

Defining the community of reference (LP, GS)

The definition of the 'community of reference' represents a major challenge in the field of community archaeology (Agbe-Davies 2014; Atkinson and Cope 1997; Atalay 2012; Tully 2007). This is particularly true for Iraq where the recent conflicts have left scars that can be easily triggered if the general sense of 'belonging' associated with the concept of community (Cohen 1985) is misused or misdirected.

For our research, we identified three groups of actors that make up our community of reference revolving around and interacting with archaeological sites (Figure 2).

The first actors are the inhabitants of the villages nearby the selected sites, a group of people that have 'a common interest in a shared locale' (Gilroy 1987). We based on previous experiences of community archaeology (Marshall 2002; Moser et al. 2002; Tully 2007) by adopting a location-based concept of community: the group of individuals living in the vicinity of the area under investigation. Although the members of the community of residents do not form a homogeneous unit, they share some characteristics: (1) they are all native-Arabic speakers; (2) they come from an area at most 20 km from the city of Kufa; (3) they belong to the Muslim Shia religion.

The second group of actors includes the heritage authorities. In fact, during the first fieldwork, we noticed that in order to better understand the narratives and the perceptions towards archaeological sites, the 'heritage professionals with responsibility for a place' (as defined by Isherwood 2011) should have been also taken into account. The heritage authorities we interviewed are officers from the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (hereafter SBAH) of Iraq and archaeological policemen. The SBAH is currently a branch of the Iraqi Ministry of Culture, and it is the only official Iraqi national institution in charge of preserving and managing the heritage sites and the national museums. It was established in 1923 as part of the former Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and became active in 1936 (Al-Hussainy and Matthews 2008; Winstone 2004). In the Najaf governorate, all the archaeological sites became state property in the 1990s and a

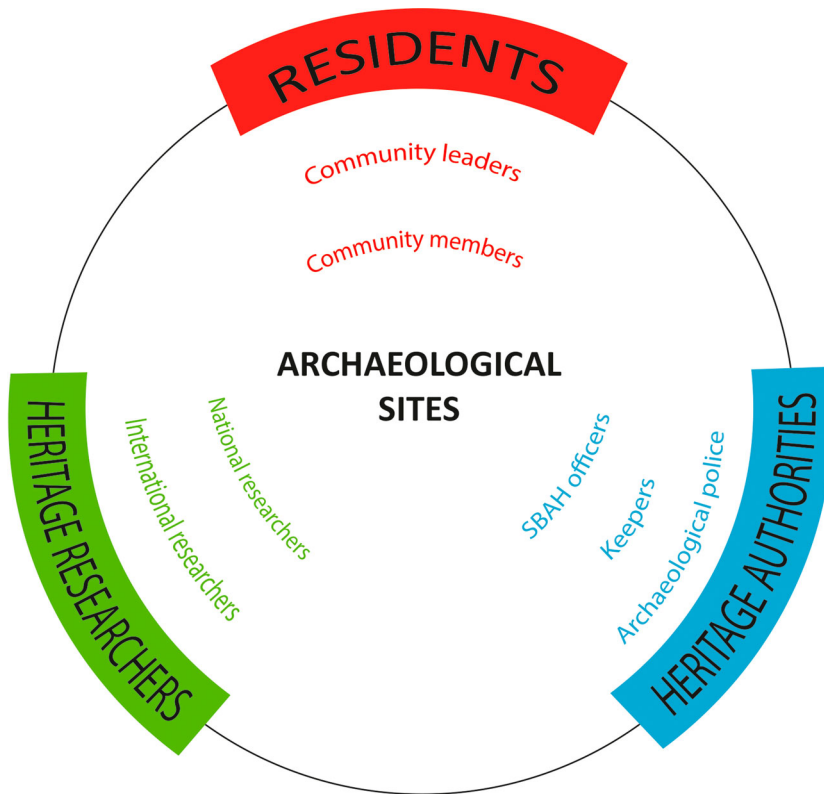


Figure 2. The framework of actors composing the community of reference considered in this research.

hierarchical division of roles was established for their management, according to the SBAH national guidelines which still follow the model created by the British archaeologist Gertrude Bell in the 1920s (Al-Hussainy and Matthews 2008; Foster, Foster, and Gerstenblith 2005). The general structure of the SBAH, its role and duties are defined by the Iraq Constitution (Antiquities Law 2002, 113) and by the Antiquities & Heritage of Iraq Law No. 55 (henceforth AHIL55). The main headquarter of the SBAH is located in Baghdad. In each governorate capital there is a main regional seat and several minor branch offices located in the other towns of the governorate and managed by local SBAH officers. At the top of the heritage sites management system are the SBAH officers, public officials, both men and women typically with a BA degree in Archaeology and further tailored training, in charge of patrolling specific areas of the region and coordinating all the other heritage operators. In order to supervise and safeguard the sites more effectively, the SBAH employs keepers and chief keepers (in the Kufa region they are only men), usually people living in the vicinity of the archaeological area. Both keepers and chief keepers receive a short training mostly focusing on the safeguarding procedures and the overall legislation, while to a lesser extent they also have some basic knowledge of the country history (but not of their region). Each keeper controls one or two sites maximum and must report to a chief keeper, who is usually in charge of coordinating the job of more keepers. The SBAH officers hold periodic meetings with the keepers to be informed of any possible issues regarding the sites. There are a total of 30 keepers in the Land of Kufa survey area, directly reporting to 5 chief keepers. The main duty of the chief keepers and keepers is to guarantee that no illegal activities take place within the sites, which are defined in Articles 2, 9 and 15 of the AHIL55. Each keeper generally lives near the archaeological site that he is in charge of safeguarding. The SBAH and the sites' keepers are supported by the archaeological police: a branch of the state police that receives a specific

archaeological training at the Baghdad police academy, focusing on the protection of archaeological sites and heritage monuments.

The third group is that of the researchers, meaning the international and Iraqi archaeologists working in the area. These have been included for three main reasons: (1) First, as argued by A. Mickel (2020), local residents experience proximity and develop knowledge not only of the physical place but also of the archaeologists themselves; (2) Second, we wanted to investigate whether archaeologists play an important role in shaping narratives and perceptions around cultural heritage; (3) Third, from the beginning, our project was conceived as a mutual exchange of ideas and information, breaking the invisible glass that sometimes protects the archaeologists as the only 'holders of knowledge' who provide information. The group of international scholars is limited to the members of the project (for details on the current archaeological investigations in the region see above), made up of two archaeologists and an anthropologist, two women and one man, from the University of Bologna all with an international academic background and three to five years of fieldwork experience in Iraq. Their understanding of the overall social situation within the country was based on their researches previously conducted as part of the QADIS survey project in the neighbouring Qadisiyah region (Marchetti et al. 2018; 2019; Marchetti and Zaina 2020), and on the cooperation within other EU-funded projects with academic colleagues, SBAH officers and local community members from the Qadisiyah, Baghdad, Wasit and Najaf governorates. The local scholars consisted of several male and female archaeologists from the University of Kufa. In addition to the two members of the research team (a man and a woman) other local professors and researchers were involved in the project. In order to understand their academic background as well as their attitude and relationship with local communities, it is necessary to take into consideration the recent historical milieu of the country. From the creation of the first universities until the outbreak of the conflict in the 1990s and its consequences, thanks to the creation of long-term international collaborations, the scientific level of Iraqi scholars in the field of archaeology and elsewhere has become comparable to many Western countries (Al-Hussainy and Matthews 2008; Foster, Foster, and Gerstenblith 2005). This important achievement was halted by the political instability and the consequent internal and external conflicts. With the international collaborations reduced to a minimum, the academic standards and language skills of the academic staff have steadily declined. Despite the low recovery registered since the 2010s, the scientific level of the new generation of Iraqi scholars has remained rather low. This situation has determined, on the part of local scholars, an initial reticence towards the application of new archaeological research methodologies that involved the local communities. The same relationship of these with the rural communities of the Kufa area was very limited also due to the lack of excavation or survey projects for over 10 years. The intense discussion, in various meetings organized during the first fieldwork (October 2017), however, allowed the international and local scholars to find common ground and to design the research project as indicated below.

Collecting the local voices (LP, GS)

Once our community of reference was defined, the entire team jointly developed the structure of the semi-structured interviews. The interviews have been designed with different sets of questions, tailored to the different actors we decided to interview. Despite these specificities, the core of the interviews includes:

- (a) demographic data;
- (b) information on awareness and understanding of archaeological sites;
- (c) link between archaeological sites and traditional ideas of the past;
- (d) experience assessment and outlook towards archaeology and archaeological sites;
- (e) issues directly related to the preservation of the heritage, such as the frequency of looting at the site and the perception that the local community has of this action;

- (f) perceptions on the role of the actors of our community of reference;
- (g) awareness of the problematic issues of management and investment by the Iraqi government in archaeology.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, recorded for the most part (Figure 3), transcribed and thematically analysed by the team. The outcomes were discussed during a focus group organized at the University of Kufa, in order to ensure that all the information would be presented and used in the way the community wanted.

Assessment of results (LP)

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected allowed the identification of six main results. These have been used to propose recommendations on how to engage the local communities for a better understanding and preservation of cultural heritage.

When we analysed the results of the interviews, we paid attention to consider the different opinions of each group of actors. In this way, the diversity of perspectives, the different narratives and the needs of the different actors emerged more clearly, leading to more reliable recommendations.

Result 1: archaeological sites as physical places

The community of reference is aware that archaeological sites are part of the national and regional Iraqi landscape. Most of the residents (Actor 1) interviewed were aware of the existence of archaeological sites near their houses. This evidence applies both to well-known sites with clear archaeological evidence (visible surface materials and structures), and to sites that are difficult to recognize on the ground. Furthermore, most of the interviewees (among Actor 1) are aware of the existence of other archaeological sites in the vicinity and more generally that the region is 'rich in archaeology'



Figure 3. An interview in the village of Nahb close to the archaeological site of Nahb.

(Interviewee 19). Chief keepers, keepers, SBAH officers and archaeological policemen are able to identify archaeological evidence thanks to an official list of registered sites.

In addition, there is a widespread acknowledgement, among the cultural heritage operators (Actor 2) and the older residents (Actor 1), that the physical borders of the sites have changed profoundly in recent decades. 'At the time of my father, the archaeological site was double in its extension' (Interviewee 1). When this aspect was discussed during the interviews, generally two decades were indicated as critical for the changes in the borders and physical aspects of the sites: the 1970s and 1990s. In particular, a catastrophic natural event (a flood occurred in the 1970s) and looting are considered the most relevant causes of the destruction of archaeological sites. While it could be supposed that actor groups 2 and 3 would have been aware and able to physically recognize the archaeological sites and generally know their history, the results that emerged from the interviews with local communities were less predictable, especially with regard to the less visible sites. In general, the majority of these showed a good knowledge of the sites and an ability to recognize the archaeological evidence.

Result 2: archaeological sites as governmental property

A second result that emerged from the interviews is that the majority of the residents and heritage researchers consider the archaeological sites as 'land of the SBAH' and 'property of the government'. Both residents and heritage researchers know that the sites are government-owned and managed by SBAH and, in most cases, this is the only information they have about the sites. In fact, when asked to provide additional ownership information about the sites, 80% of respondents said they had 'none'. The difference between the different actors lies in the fact that while the heritage researchers and SBAH (Actor 2 and 3) are aware of the historical and cultural value of the archaeological sites, for the local communities (Actor 1) the legal protection of the sites and their management as a 'government' area are the main assumptions that make these places relevant, rather than any cultural and historical element. This particular legal status is often described in this way: 'forbidden places where it is not possible to carry out any activity, in particular, where it is not possible to farm and pick objects from the ground' (Interviewee 29). No activity should be conducted on the archaeological sites and, when we asked the keepers and chief keepers to give a definition of their job, the answer reflected this point of view: 'I'm a keeper, this means that I need to check that no activity is done on the sites. If I see something, I have to report to the archaeological police or the SBAH' (Interviewee 2). This idea of the archaeological sites as protected and at the same time forbidden places has given rise to shared stories of illegal activities conducted there in secret such as: 'long ago, women were going in those places to have abortions' (Interviewee 8) or 'smugglers use those land to hide things' (Interviewee 32).

Result 3: archaeological sites as future economic asset

'If there will be excavations and something "famous" will be found, foreign people will come and the region will benefit economically' (Interviewee 36). This statement, shared by many keepers and chief keepers, highlighted a narrative regarding the archaeological sites as a potential economic resource. The archaeological sites are perceived as a kind of 'piggy bank' to be broken to discover treasures. Possible future excavations are seen as a necessary step to bring to light 'beautiful cities', 'entire buildings', 'gold' as well as 'other precious objects'. In this narrative, the archaeological excavations represent an economic driver for the region thanks to the creation of new jobs. In addition to the digging activities, the interviewees suggested further job opportunities connected to the discovery of ancient artefacts through the establishment of museums and visitor centres and consequently the spill over effect of gaining the attention also of international tourists. This narrative is partially shared by the SBAH officers and several local scholars although some of them have underlined that in the Najaf governorate there are 'less treasures than other areas of the country' (Interviewee 52). As

confirmed by Actors 2 and 3, these statements are supported by the fact that both Najaf and Kufa are well-established tourist places, with an international airport and a wealth of dedicated facilities (hotel and restaurant). Even during the ISIS conflict (World Bank 2016) or the recent protests (WTTC 2020), these facilities remained open and number of tourists arriving in Iraq was only partially reduced. Instead, among the community of residents (Actor 1), only those living near the largest and best-known sites (like Nahib and Tell Wagsa) have confirmed the archaeological sites as a potential economic asset.

Result 4: archaeological sites and their fuzzy historical value

During the interviews, one of the main interests of the heritage researchers (both local and international) was to understand the historical value of the archaeological sites for both the community of residents and the heritage authorities. In other words, heritage researchers were particularly interested in stimulating a discussion about the relation between archaeological sites and the ancient history or the more recent history of the community (Actor 1). Although most residents did not provide relevant information, the elderly of the community and those in political power (local sheiks and mukhtars), offered few general insights into the history of the sites. In particular, they associated archaeological sites with 'ancient times' or a 'glorious Iraqi past' also showing pride in the achievements of their ancestors. Pointing to his 'mud-brick house', an elder told us that 'the times of the archaeological sites were better, we had bigger cities ... In all the archaeological sites a wide range of treasures can be found' (Interviewee 34). These rather broad interpretations may be read in light of the lack of archaeological sites of particular historical importance or with monumental evidence (as for example in the case of Babylon or Ur) within the Land of Kufa area. A little less fuzzy is the description of the historical value of the archaeological sites offered by the heritage authorities (Actor 2). For example, in addition to the general information provided by the residents, both SBAH officers and keepers have a broad knowledge of the history of the region. Considering the four main historical periods of occupation in the Land of Kufa area (Neo-Babylonian, Parthian, Sasanian, Islamic, thus from 1000 BCE to 1500 CE), we observed that while the SBAH officers have a broad understanding of whole chronological range, both keepers and chief keepers have some knowledge of the Islamic period, while they tend to use the term 'Babylonian' when referring to all other periods.

Result 5: archaeological sites, archaeological messages and messengers

We quote in the title the work by Francis McManamon (2000) to underline a specific aspect of the perceptions of the archaeological work collected with our interviews. There is certainly a general 'curiosity' and 'interest' towards the sites and the archaeological work in our community of reference. However, considering the community of heritage authorities, few SBAH officers expressed these positive feelings also in terms of possible benefits in terms of 'social cohesion' and 'social harmony', and shared any consideration such as 'people need to know their history and heritage after the conflict' (Interviewee 22). Moreover, by answering the question 'do you consider your work important for the community?', the SBAH officers often emphasized not only their established duties of safeguarding archaeological sites, but also that their job 'is important to preserve the history of the civilization that people need to know' (Interviewee 23).

Against this backdrop, it is important to note that although there is a shared willingness to receive and share archaeological information, we have observed a lack of understanding on how this can be done practically and a consequent frustration among the different actors of the community. Archaeological messages can have different messengers but ultimately the actors of our community of reference do not communicate as effectively as they wish. On one side, the keepers and chief keepers have strong relational ties with the inhabitants of the village adjacent to the site, usually becoming a point of reference in all matters relating to the sites and a potential link between the residents and the SBAH officers. Neither keepers nor chief keepers receive specific training from

the SBAH on the history of the sites and their management, therefore they are unable to answer the various questions raised by the residents. It is important to consider that most of the keepers and chief keepers were employed after the closure of a nationally owned cement factory. On the other side, the SBAH officers have a close link with the community of local and international researchers, mainly developed during the surveys activities, which can be enhanced by creating additional opportunities for information exchange.

Result 6: archaeological sites and the perception of threats

During the interview, the community of researchers was particularly interested in understanding how archaeological threats were perceived by the other actors of the community of reference. When a natural catastrophic event or looting was mentioned by residents or the SBAH or the archaeological police, the researchers were always ready with follow-up questions including words like 'danger', 'urgent action'.

Based on the research carried out in the frame of the Land of Kufa survey project, most of the archaeological sites in the region were largely damaged by agricultural activities or the construction of buildings and other infrastructures, while only a couple of looted sites and no relevant conflict-related damages have been documented (Maner, Alaa, and Federico *in press*). According to the SBAH officers and the residents most of these activities took place in the 1980s, although in some cases they are still being perpetrated and sometimes accepted. In addition, specific guidelines for the protection of archaeological sites are indicated by Law 55 of 2002.

Both the residents and the officers showed no particular concern during the interviews about the threats and damages to the archaeological sites. Therefore, we assumed that there is an under-comprehension of the importance of preserving the archaeological sites.

Concluding remarks and recommendations (FZ, GS)

The diverse results emerged on the perception of heritage by different communities in the Land of Kufa region allow to draw some recommendations and future outlooks for developing community archaeology projects. These recommendations were jointly developed in a meeting organized during the third fieldwork (September 2019) by the research team, together with several SBAH officers, chief keepers, keepers and representatives of the local communities.

Recommendations

The results of the interviews and the considerations that emerged from the focus group highlighted different perceptions towards the archaeological sites between the local community (Actor 1) and the keepers and chief keepers (Actor 2). The majority of the respondents recognized the archaeological sites as such based on their status as public places protected by the law.

The safeguarding and preservation of the sites and their management as public goods contribute to making them worthy of consideration as cultural heritage property of the entire community. The archaeological sites become the object of attention for their 'special status' (Result 2) rather than for their intrinsic characterization as tangible heritage of a common past of the country. In other words, we have confirmed, also in this specific context, Carman's (1996) assumption that 'by treating objects/sites in a certain way, they gained an increasing and more complex set of values'. This consideration leads us to think that whenever the SBAH officers, the chief keepers and keepers no longer have the resources to manage them, the local communities could develop the perception of those places as abandoned by the national authorities. Consequently, the archaeological sites may lose their 'special status' and may be downgraded to areas inhabited in the past but of no specific value. The effect of such a process would be that of a reuse of the archaeological sites (as it was

already in the past) and their slow disappearance (Result 6). In order to mitigate this potential issue we propose two sets of recommendations:

1. To train the keepers and make them ambassadors of the local cultural heritage.

The need to increase the perception of the importance of the archaeological sites among the local communities is widely recognized. Result 5 showed that the keepers and the chief keepers are considered community leaders with a notable reputation.

However, our research has shown that the level of awareness and understanding of the keepers towards the archaeological sites is still too vague (Results 3 and 4). At the same time, the focus groups highlighted that most of the keepers involved desire to learn more, not only on the single archaeological site that they are in charge of safeguarding, but also on the history of the entire region and on the archaeological discoveries made over the centuries. Furthermore, they expressed their willingness to communicate new information to the local people. The more the keepers know about the history of the archaeological sites, the more they understand the need to preserve them and the importance of sharing this knowledge with the people of their community.

In light of these assumptions, we follow previous observations (Atalay 2012; Humphris and Bradshaw 2017) on the necessity to lay a solid educational foundation before conducting communication activities. In particular, we suggest focusing on the education and the training of the keepers and the chief keepers, as the first recommendation that aims to contribute to a more effective preservation of the local cultural heritage. The keepers can play a key role in connecting the local communities and the archaeological sites. They may become ambassadors of the local heritage and help raise awareness among the people living in their community of reference (their village).

Practical activities should begin with focus groups involving all the actors with the aim of defining tailor-made training courses on shared historical narratives and communication techniques and strategies. Thanks to these new skills acquired keepers and chief keepers, if necessary in collaboration with the SBAH officers as well as the university staff, can organize different types of activities involving the local residents at any level. These may include: (1) the creation of panels and indications that tell the history and the main characteristics of each site documented by the 'Land of Kufa' project; (2) the organization of small temporary exhibitions on the history of the region and its archaeological sites; (3) the creation of online platforms including videos explaining the importance of the sites and open access databases of ancient artefacts especially designed for the younger generations; (4) the development of books on the history of the region for children.

Most of these activities have already been successfully tested in several archaeological projects involving Muslim communities in Egypt (Tully 2007), Sudan (Näser 2019) or Israel (Killebrew et al. 2017) among others. For example, in Sudan, following the request of the local residents, a dedicated website www.mogratarchaeology.com and the publication of the bilingual book 'Discovering Mograt Island Together' were jointly designed and developed (Tully and Näser 2016; Näser and Tully 2019).

2. To focus on the archaeological sites dating to the Islamic period as a starting point.

The preliminary results of the Land of Kufa survey project (Maner, Alaa, and Federico *in press*) have shown that most of the archaeological sites in the area date back to the Islamic period, representing the most important historical phase in the region. Moreover, the results of the interviews have shown that the keepers and chief keepers generally have a wider and more detailed understanding and knowledge of this period (Result 5). The Muslim component also represents the main link with the local communities, where all people are of the Islamic religion. While agreeing with the researches (Näser 2019; Humphris and Bradshaw 2017) which underline that Muslim community is interested in the pre-Islamic past, we believe in a gradual communication of the different and complex periods within the long history of the country, starting from what they can approach

more easily both in terms of cultural and temporal proximity. Therefore, in order to involve the local communities more effectively, the academic staff of the University of Kufa suggested that the keepers and the chief keepers communicate the history and heritage of their region starting with the archaeological sites inhabited during the Islamic period. In this way, the local residents could get closer to their past through a better known and more comprehensible historical period. This could be a first step for a broader understanding of the entire chronological range of occupation of their region and, subsequently, for a deeper awareness and understanding of the value and importance of cultural heritage in general.

The role of the university of Kufa in the implementation of this recommendation could be significant given the presence of a specific Department of Islamic Archeology which includes numerous scholars of the period and a BA course in Islamic Archeology.

Lessons learned

During the different phases of this research, we have learned some lessons. As already pointed out by other studies (Atalay 2010; 2012; Humphris and Bradshaw 2017), the different language represents a major obstacle. Most of the non-Iraqi team members are not fluent in Arabic and so the collaboration with Iraqi colleagues from both the SBAH and the University of Kufa was key to carrying out the research. As a result, they conducted the interviews, translated and transcribed the questionnaires, the answers and the results of the focus groups from Arabic to English.

Another relevant lesson regards the gender issue, represented by the exclusion of women from focus groups, due to the lack of women holding important roles within the heritage authorities and the wider community. Furthermore, in many cases men, when interviewed together with their wives and daughters, often tend to respond for them. This last example has already been tested in other Muslim communities and it has been accepted considering the presence of 'lead interviewee' (Näser 2019).

Future outlooks

Our research represents a first step towards the broader and long-term outcome of the engagement and involvement of the local communities in decision-making processes related to cultural heritage in the Kufa region. We can confirm that all participants in our project have expressed appreciation for the collaboration between the different actors and that the local communities are quite interested in being involved in decision-making processes. In order to validate the results of our interviews and to develop a sustainable strategy, a future project should include other governorates in the country and should take into account a larger and more differentiated range of actors. For example, it would be useful to devise new ways to engage local women more effectively. A dedicated focus group with tailor-made questions, possibly led by both Iraqi and international female researchers, could represent an effective way to reach this part of the society.

Overall, the results suggest that a fully-fledged sustainable 'community archaeology program' in the region is feasible. The ultimate result would be that future archaeological projects in the region will review their approach and take community-based research questions and local needs as preconditions. This is the essential prerequisite for involving the local communities as co-producers of projects, from planning the excavation to displaying and communicating its results (Belford 2017).

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