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Heritage Education as a Tool of Social, Ethnic, and Religious Cohesion in Iraq: Empirical Insights

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ABSTRACT
While the politicization of cultural heritage in Iraq is widely covered by research, little attention is dedicated to how exactly heritage education has been implemented, the knowledge gap this article aims to address. Focusing on the methods employed to educate an average citizen in cultural heritage (*how*) rather than on the motivation behind them (*why*), the article unveils novel empirical data drawn from 25 oral history interviews with Iraqi heritage-sector stakeholders demonstrating several important findings. First, a profound gap emerges between cultural awareness levels in pre-1990 and contemporary Iraqi society. Second, the data allows us to identify 12 categories of pre-1990 heritage education strategies, nearly all of which are currently missing or slowly being revived. Third, the respondents disclose a strong reliance on heritage education potential for raising cultural awareness in the sectarianism-torn society. Finally, the article suggests a holistic and inclusive heritage education methodology as a tool of social, ethnic, and religious cohesion in Iraq.

Introduction

"We were proud to be Iraqis. In those years (1970s), if someone would find an archaeological object on a site, they would not even think about taking it home. They would just bring it to the museum. Illegal excavation was almost inexistant" (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori, Assistant Professor of archaeology, University of Babylon; Former General Director of Investigations and Excavations, Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage [SBAH]). This eloquent quote is deliberately chosen for the opening of this article as revealing an extremely high level of awareness about what cultural heritage is, how important it is, and how it should be treated and preserved, characterizing pre-1990 Iraqi society. In this context, it is important to underline that the modern cultural history of Iraq has undergone two major conceptual divides imposed from outside and defined, for the purposes of this research, as vertical and horizontal ones. The vertical divide is associated with the mid-19th century A.D. rise of Western interest in Mesopotamia and the construction of a historic trajectory viewing the Mesopotamian past as a necessary prelude in the progressive cultural development unfolding from East towards West, disconnecting local inhabitants from their rightful past (Childe 1952; Bahrani 1998; Matthews 2003). The second divide, a horizontal one, consisted in the imposition of sectarian policy by the Coalition government in 2003 along ethno-religious lines, leading to the alienation of Iraqi people from a shared cultural heritage (Alkhudary 2020; Kathem, Robson, and Tahan 2022). In between these divides lies a period stretching from the independence of Iraq from the British Mandate in A.D. 1932 to the beginning of the 1990s and the imposition of an international embargo, followed by the 2003 US/UK-led invasion, the subsequent political, security, and humanitarian crisis, and the advent

of the Islamic State in 2014 (Matthews et al. 2019). From A.D. 1932–1990, comprehensive cultural policies were pursued by successive Iraqi governments encompassing archaeological excavation and research, enhancement of education, and development of museum networks (Bernhardsson 2006), resulting in high levels of cultural awareness in society, as illustrated by the opening quote. While archaeology is arguably always political (McGuire 2008), it is even more so in historically contested lands rich in cultural heritage such as Iraq (Bernhardsson 2006). The archaeology of Mesopotamia in the decaying Ottoman empire was treated as purely an international matter and part of colonial control, becoming an area of exclusive political and administrative interest under the British Mandate (A.D. 1921–1932), comparable only to the oil industry (Bahrani 1998; Bernhardsson 2006; Dodge 2006) and similar to the political control of archaeology exercised by the French in Iran in A.D. 1895–1927 (Matthews and Nashli 2022) or the competition over archaeology in Jordan (Corbett 2015). Following independence from the British, archaeological heritage turned into an instrument of self-determination of the newly-born Iraqi state through the establishment of sovereignty over cultural resources and the pursuit of cultural development (Bernhardsson 2006; Koush forthcoming), culminating in the intense use of archaeology by the Ba'athist regime for the purposes of nation-building, identity-creation, and social cohesion (Pettengill 2012; Brusasco 2022). However, while the use of heritage for political purposes in modern Iraq is widely covered by research (Davis 2005; McGuire 2008; Brusasco 2022), noticeably little attention has been dedicated in the existing literature to how exactly the above-mentioned cultural awareness mindset was achieved in an average Iraqi citizen. Aiming to address this knowledge lacuna in this overtly

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political context, this study attempts to assume a non-political stance, with "non-political" understood as not having or expressing an opinion about politics (Cambridge Dictionary 2024), and focuses on heritage education in Iraq, providing empirical insights on the methods employed (*how*) rather than on the political context or motivation behind them (*why*).

To do so, heritage education, defined here as a complex of formal and informal educational processes resulting in increased awareness about the value of cultural heritage (Mendoza, Baldiris, and Fabregat 2015), is first contextualized within the human rights system as a strategy capable of strengthening both the right to education and the right to take part in cultural life and, by means of that, enhancing a series of other human rights. Further, comprehensive cultural policies pursued in modern Iraq in the A.D. 1932–1990 period are scrutinized, along with the impact of the post-2003 sectarian policy on the cultural landscape of the country. Against this background, we build upon novel empirical datasets obtained from 25 oral history interviews with Iraqi cultural heritage-sector stakeholders from nine different cities, including three in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Despite some intrinsic limitations of oral history, such as people recalling the past differently or a tendency to romanticize the past (Mariner 2005; Batty 2009), this method was chosen because it allows us to reconstruct details of past events where little historical documentation exists (Valk and Brown 2010) and that might otherwise be lost (Merchant 2019). Moreover, oral history could be viewed as a social justice project (Janesick 2007, 2020), giving testimony to the first-hand views of the lived experience of the participants, especially those on the outside or periphery of society. Therefore, in the context of Iraq, where the last three decades have witnessed Iraqi intellectuals, academics, and archaeologists persecuted and discriminated against (Fales 2004; Galbraith 2007; Baker, Ismael, and Ismael 2010), oral history was preferred as a way of giving voice to those consistently deprived.

Thus, based on 25 oral history interviews with Iraqi cultural heritage-sector stakeholders, this study provides valuable insights into the trajectory of heritage education in Iraq over the last several decades, with the interviewees' comments covering a span of time from the A.D. 1940s–1950s up to today, with a threshold of pre- and post-1990 clearly emerging from the interviews, marking the end of an era and the beginning of sanctions, wars, and political, security, humanitarian, and cultural crises. The diverse age groups and backgrounds of the interviewees (Table 1, Supplemental Material 1) integrate perspectives from several different disciplines and offer a holistic analysis of the ways in which this trajectory has impacted identity formation, community development, and, most importantly, cultural awareness in Iraqi society. The obtained results reveal several important findings. First, a profound gap emerges between cultural awareness levels in pre-1990 and contemporary Iraqi society. Secondly, the data disclose the multiplicity of formal and informal best practices,

strategies, and methods employed in pre-1990 Iraq, formerly considered a cultural lighthouse of the Middle East. The reported strategies were classified within 12 categories, with the participants' comments highlighting the *then* pre-1990 and *now* post-1990 comparison, as nearly all of the identified categories are currently absent in Iraqi cultural policies or only slowly and gradually being revived. Thus, the categories of formal and informal heritage education initiatives include: 1) the educational system at large and the role it played in raising cultural awareness level in society; 2) heritage education in schools reportedly bringing the 7000 years of Iraqi history to the minds of children; 3) archaeology education in universities contributing to shape the internationally recognized Iraqi School of Archaeology; 4) visits to archaeological sites regularly conducted by schools all over Iraq and allowing pupils not to forget what they saw with their own eyes; 5) the leading role of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad and its cultural excellency in educating children; 6) the no-less-important educational impact of the capillary network of regional museums only slowly being revived now; 7) the widespread reading culture including numerous heritage books for children and adults, largely available through generous government funding; the far-reaching role of 8) cinemas and 9) theaters used to effectively deliver cultural messages to wider society; 10) cultural festivals engaging the entire population in celebrations; 11) other large-scale public awareness activities, including TV and anti-looting awareness-raising campaigns; and, 12) public archaeology projects by foreign archaeological missions, yet not frequently mentioned by the respondents. Moreover, the analyzed data allowed us to identify two more sub-themes, namely 1) a cultural lighthouse of the Middle East and overall cultural awareness in Iraq and 2) from *divide et impera to uni et evolve* and emerging initiatives on the ground, which open and close the empirical analysis of the study, shedding light on the perceived loss of the former "cultural lighthouse" role of Iraq and the need to overcome the divisive and degrading legacy of sectarianism. Third, the data disclose a strong reliance on heritage education among respondents for raising cultural awareness in the sectarianism- and conflict-torn Iraqi society, with a number of important initiatives reported. Building upon the obtained empirical results, the article suggests holistic and inclusive heritage education methodology as a tool of social, ethnic, and religious cohesion in Iraq. Incorporating Iraqis' own experiences and international heritage education practices, such a methodology inclusively views each epoch and each ethno-religious group as indispensable pieces of a unique puzzle, vertically succeeding one another within the historical timeline and horizontally completing each other under the umbrella of Iraqiness. Efficient implementation of such national-level heritage education programs are instrumental in raising once again the level of cultural awareness in Iraqi society, fostering human rights empowerment, bottom-up decolonization of heritage management processes, and offering a wealth of inspiration both for Iraq itself and heritage educators worldwide.

Table 1. Description of study sample (age groups)

Age group	Total (%)
20–29	4 (16)
30–39	6 (24)
40–49	9 (36)
50–59	2 (8)
60–69	3 (12)
80–89	1 (4)
Total (%)	25 (100)

Contextualizing Heritage Education

Heritage education in the framework of human rights

Education strategically positions itself at the junction of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization's mission, human rights law, and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Transformative for the state by ensuring its economic, social, and cultural interests (UNESCO 2019), education is a primary vehicle for empowering women and economically and socially marginalized adults and children, protecting the environment (ECOSOC 1999), and contributing towards the implementation of other fundamental rights (UNESCO 2021b). Quality education is also at the core of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 of its Agenda 2030, aiming to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including the appreciation of cultural diversity (UN 2016; UNESCO 2021a).

Furthermore, considering cultural dimensions of the right to education, the Special Rapporteur Koumbou Boly Barry issued a call to view it as a cultural right (A/HRC/47/32 2021) intrinsically linked to the right to take part in cultural life, as any transmission or development of knowledge is a cultural act in itself (UCLG 2021) fostering mutual understanding and respect (ECOSOC 2009). Accordingly, heritage education is strategically positioned at the convergence of all the above elements. As a strategic pedagogical process incorporating active educational methods, cross-curricular approaches, and partnerships between education and culture professionals (Council of Europe 2004), heritage education enables people to acquire knowledge about cultural heritage and its importance for society (Mendoza, Baldiris, and Fabregat 2015), generating senses of identity and social belonging (Ferreras-Listán, Pineda-Alfonso, and Hunt-Gómez 2020). Article 27 of the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 1994 World Heritage (WH) Education Program encapsulate the idea of heritage education by encouraging States, with educational and information programs, to strengthen appreciation and respect of cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO 1972, 2020).

However, despite a strategic potential for human rights enhancement, sustainable development, and heritage protection, effective implementation of heritage education still remains a goal rather than best practice internationally (Grünberg and Zehbe 2022). Focusing on conservation practices, rather than current challenges of post-conflict reconstruction, terrorism, illicit trafficking, or climate change (Grünberg and Zehbe 2022), heritage education is identified as a serious management issue on WH sites (UNESCO 2015). Limited attention is given to art and heritage education in formal didactic programs (Council of Europe 2017; A/HRC/47/32 2021), and theoretical and empirical research still remains scarce (van Boxtel, Grever, and Klein 2016). Yet, with recent attacks on cultural heritage reaching unprecedented levels in numerous countries worldwide, including Iraq (A/71/317 2016), an urgent need to enhance heritage education implementation has clearly emerged. In this context, the multi-decade experience of heritage education practice in Iraq represents a prominent case study for attentive, non-political, empirical scrutiny.

Comprehensive cultural policy in modern Iraq: A.D. 1932–1990

The prioritization of cultural heritage and archaeology in modern Iraq is habitually ascribed to its use for political and ideological purposes, with the era of Saddam Hussein considered the apex of such politics (Davis 2005; Al-Musawi 2006; McGuire 2008). However, the below historical overview, as well as the subsequent empirical analysis, strives to take a non-political stance, focusing primarily on heritage education aspects as such. Indeed, the roots of the heritage, archaeology, and politics nexus go far beyond Saddam Hussein's agenda and can be traced to early ideas of nation-building in modern Iraq that exercised a long-lasting impact on cultural policies for decades to come.

Thus, upon the admittance of Iraq into the League of Nations in A.D. 1932, the British Mandate was terminated by a resolution (Pedersen 2010). The A.D. 1934 appointment of the former Director-General of Education Sati' al-Husri as Director of Antiquities signaled the beginning of a merging of archaeology and education (Bernhardsson 2006). Promoting Iraqi archaeological excavations and training, educating the public to love their country and its history, and fostering the return of cultural property were all part of al-Husri's political scheme. In A.D. 1941, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad was re-organized in chronological sequence with successive cultural phases, allowing it to best perform its educational function (Fales 2004; Brusasco 2013). In A.D. 1945, an internationally-recognized archaeological journal *Sumer* was launched, serving both a scientific and awareness-raising function, while the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Baghdad was founded in 1952 (Fales 2004). Viewing the educational system and school curriculum as a mechanism of social change, al-Husri introduced history in schools as the bearer of memory and consciousness of the nation (Al-Husri 1968) and initiated a widescale awareness campaign about the value of Iraqi archaeological heritage through the publication of guide books and pamphlets. His pedagogical view of archaeology influenced future generations of archaeologists, educators, and politicians alike, ensuring that archaeology was no longer an exclusive concern of Westernized elites but instead shaped the minds of young generations and the general public (Bernhardsson 2006).

Economically, the 1950s saw the creation of the Iraq Development Board and a sixfold increase of state oil share income, resulting in huge development in the country. Economic, social, and educational changes led to a gradual increase in the literacy rate to 30% and to the establishment of universities and qualified technical institutes (Issa and Jamil 2010). Following the 1958 Revolution overthrowing the pro-British Hashemite Kingdom, Akkadian and Babylonian symbols were incorporated into the new national emblem and flag, showcasing Iraqi Mesopotamian particularism (Bernhardsson 2006). From the 1960s onwards, health, education, and culture enjoyed the most generous progressively-growing expenditure shares as direct investment in human capital (Issa and Jamil 2010; Al-Shaikhly and Cui 2017), with those years becoming rich in literature, architecture, and visual arts inspired by ancient history but interpreted in a modern way. With the ascension to power of the Baa'th Party in 1968, Iraqi archaeology was further strengthened, with government schemes guaranteeing full-time employment at the State Department of Antiquities to all graduates from the Department of Archaeology of Baghdad University (Bernhardsson 2006).

With the 1970 Iraqi Constitution amendments, the 1972 nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company, and the resulting economic boom, Iraqi education achieved its highest development since independence (Bernhardsson 2006).

The constitution guaranteed the right to free education at all levels—primary, intermediate, secondary, and university—to all citizens of Iraq, other Arab nationals, and foreigners alike, rendering it one of the best educational systems in the Middle East, excelling in terms of access, quality, and regional equity, with new universities founded in all 14 governorates (Shlash 2008; Issa and Jamil 2010). Investing a significant part of oil revenues in social services, government spending on education increased to 6% of GDP in 1984, amounting to 20% of the total government budget, despite the ongoing Iraq-Iran war (Al-Shaikhly and Cui 2017). This progressive development of the education sector resulted in Gross Enrollment Rates exceeding 100% in the 1980s, complete gender parity in enrollment, and the best dropout and repetition rates in the Middle East and North Africa (Al-Shaikhly and Cui 2017), culminating in 100% illiteracy eradication in 1985, as recognized by UNESCO (UNESCO 2000). The above overview highlights that the course of Iraq's gradual decolonization, nation-building, and cultural self-determination went hand in hand with the progressive exercise of sovereignty over cultural resources and the acquisition of dominance over archaeological matters, legislation, cultural policy, and the educational system. In this context, during the Saddam Hussein presidency (1979–2003), the full potential of heritage education and archaeology was also realized (Brusasco 2022), deploying the non-sectarian appeal of Mesopotamian civilization in uniting the country's various ethnic and religious groups on neutral ground (Bernhardsson 2006). The regional network of museums was established, with all spectra of Iraqi history represented in each one (Fales 2004), appealing to citizens nationwide and suggesting how Iraq's heritage is genealogical and linear to all current populaces (Wasfi 2008), with large amounts expended on archaeological projects (Bernhardsson 2006). Yet, we do not have an accurate understanding of which specific heritage education initiatives were employed and how they were perceived by society, the knowledge lacuna this research contributes to bridge empirically.

Post-1990 Iraq and the impact of sectarianism on cultural heritage

Since the 1990s, Iraq has gone through a series of events resulting in a destructive impact on the country's cultural tissue. The Kuwait War (1990–1991), the devastating UN embargo (1990–2003), the spring 1991 insurrections, the 2003 US/UK-led invasion, the dissolution of the Iraqi army leading to a security vacuum and breakdown in law and order, the occupation of parts of northern and western Iraq by Daesh (2014–2017), and its expulsion in 2017 are some of the major events (Matthews et al. 2019), accompanied by numerous violations of the Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and Convention on the Rights of the Child (Kentane 2013). Moreover, the post-2003 de-Baathification of government institutions and the introduction of a power-sharing formula split along ethno-sectarian lines, known as *muhasasa,* distributed power and state resources between three main religious and ethnic groups—Shia, Sunni, and Kurds—elevating the political relevance of sectarian identity to unparalleled levels (Haddad 2017; Alkhudary 2020). While ethnic differences and sectarian divides have existed in Iraq throughout its history

(Yaphe 2014), the post-2003 divide et impera sectarian quota arrangement resulted in unprecedented political crises (Al-Mawlawi 2023). Contrary to the claims of democratization and reconciliation, it incited a failure of the state to provide for the basic needs of citizens, rampant corruption, and post-invasion city-to-city fighting (Alkhudary 2020).

The damage to Iraqi cultural heritage in these decades, through intentional destruction, illicit trade, plundering of museum collections, burning of archives and libraries, cultural cleansing, persecution of intellectuals, and genocide of ethnic minorities, has been extensively documented in academic literature and media (Fales 2004; Baker, Ismael, and Ismael 2010; Brusasco 2013; Isakhan 2018; Westcott 2019, 2020). The educational system, having previously achieved excellent quality levels, was also pushed far backwards, becoming one of the weakest in the area (Shlash 2008). Moreover, the exacerbation of ethno-religious differences produced a disastrous impact on social cohesion and cultural awareness in society, alienating people from their shared cultural heritage perceived through narrow confessional prisms (Alkhudary 2020). Moreover, the muhasasa transfer of power over heritage matters from central authorities to semi-state and non-state religious and political stakeholders resulted in the competitive exploitation of cultural resources for political purposes, defined as heritage predation (Kathem, Robson, and Tahan 2022). While empowering local communities is not a bad thing in and of itself, its over-politicization has led to destructive consequences and disproportionate empowerment. The fracturing of diverse identities and cultures contributed to the erasure of a coherent sense of Iraqi identity and intangible heritage, wiping out the concept of multicultural Iraq and that "warm and loving community that previously identified as Iraqis—not as Sunnis or Shiites" (Alani 2023). The term mixed family, used to describe a Sunni-Shia marriage, was unheard of before 2003, as Iraqis did not identify so strongly with their religious differences (Wasfi 2012). What was meant to be a common resource was reimagined through the lens of Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, Christian, Yazidi, or other identities, rather than perceived as a national treasure belonging to Iraq as a whole (Kathem, Robson, and Tahan 2022).

The 2019 Tishreen protest movements became a symbol of social dissent calling for systemic changes, with numerous young people carrying Mesopotamian symbols and masks and heralding, "We are all Iraqis" (Alkhudary 2020; Alani 2023), triggering further reflection on the role of the youth in safeguarding cultural heritage and the memory of the past (Selim and Farhan 2024). While sectarianism continues to impact the country's political landscape, various recommendations have been suggested for a step-by-step strategic transformation and planning of Iraqi cultural policy. Among these are decolonization of archaeological excavation practice (Jotheri 2021), creation of a national heritage management strategy, establishment of a national conservation training institute, financial scrutiny of international and private funding, strengthening the existing legal framework, empowerment of civil society and universities (Kathem, Robson, and Tahan 2022), development of the museum sector, enhancement of Iraq's presence on the UNESCO World Heritage Lists, and the fight against illicit antiquities trafficking (Matthews et al. 2019). Heritage enhancement as a human rights-based practice, through the fulfilment of a right to education and its heritage education component, is

also seen as a structural way of reconciliation (Matthews et al. 2019).

Thus, the above overview provides a top-down perspective on the sources of cultural awareness in pre-1990 Iraqi society, as well as on the multiple causes of its decline in recent decades. Against this background, this article builds upon previous work and focuses on novel empirical data, revealing which specific heritage education initiatives, strategies, and methods were implemented in pre-1990 Iraq and their impact on overall levels of cultural awareness in society as compared to its decline in subsequent decades. The obtained results constitute the basis for suggesting an inclusive heritage education methodology as a tool of social, religious, and cultural cohesion of Iraqi society.

Methods and Materials

Research design and participants

This study was performed in accordance with the relevant regulations and was approved by the Research Ethics Commission of the School of Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, UK. The research design consisted of conducting online oral history interviews with 25 Iraqi cultural heritage-sector stakeholders (age 44 ± 14, seven female) representing different age groups ranging from young adults (20–29 years old) to seniors (80–89 years old) and nine different cities in Iraq, including three in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (see Table 1, Supplemental Material 1). During the data collection process, 19 interviews with non-Iraqi experts (age 54 ± 11, six female) were also conducted (Supplemental Material 2). However, within the overarching decolonization (Munawar 2024) and "nothing about, us without us" (Apoh and Osuagwu 2022) philosophy that this article adopts, the empirical data obtained from the non-Iraqi participants were used exclusively as background research, not constituting a direct source of citations, thus prioritizing the voice of the Iraqi respondents. All participants were free to choose anonymity; only one Iraqi participant preferred anonymity (n = 1), while the others opted to disclose their names (n = 24). Within the non-Iraqi participants group, two participants preferred anonymity (n = 2), with others rendering their names public (n = 17).

The interviews were conducted in English in the period October–December 2023. All participants received written instructions describing the study (Participant Information Sheet) and gave written informed consent to participate by signing the Consent Form. The interviews varied from 1–2 hours, sometimes up to 3 hours, depending on the interviewee's availability. Interviews were conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform and, in some cases, due to technical or organizational reasons, via phone, WhatsApp, or Zoom. No video or audio recordings were made to allow for more unconstrained memory-sharing about oftentimes delicate issues. However, notes were accurately taken for each interview and have been transcribed and safely stored according to the relevant data management policy (University of Reading 2023).

Research tools and data analysis

The method of oral history, defined as the collection of stories and reminiscences of those persons who have firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences (Janesick 2010), possesses several intrinsic limitations, such as people recalling the past differently, lack of memory reliability in referring to factual data, subjectivity, and a tendency to romanticize the past or, by contrast, present it in a particularly bad light (Mariner 2005; Batty 2009). The evolution of heritage education in Iraq being little studied and lots of archival information lost or compromised due to the events of the last decades, oral history might help empirically bridge those gaps by drawing from first-hand accounts of Iraqis themselves (Valk and Brown 2010) and allowing us to reconstruct details of past events that might otherwise be lost (Merchant 2019). Moreover, giving testimony to the lived experience of participants, especially those generally on the outside or periphery of society, oral history is viewed as a social justice project (Janesick 2007, 2020). In the context of Iraq, where the last three decades have witnessed cultural heritage suffer from massive intentional destruction, looting, and cultural cleansing, with Iraqi intellectuals, academics, and archaeologists persecuted and discriminated against (Fales 2004; Galbraith 2007; Baker, Ismael, and Ismael 2010), oral history was preferred also as a way of doing justice and giving voice to those consistently deprived.

Thus, the interviews were primarily concerned with educational and heritage aspects, deliberately abstaining from questioning the participants' political and ethno-religious affiliations, in order not to raise complex political, identity, and ethnic discussions, which were not the object of this research. Yet, the geographical distribution of the interviewees within Iraq may in itself be indicative of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Interviews were conducted using no uniform guide, with semi-structured conversations opening up through a series of introductory questions about the participants' professional experience. Further, two main aspects were explored: first, participants were asked about how the Iraqi population was educated about cultural heritage before and now, followed by a further detailed discussion of the reported strategies of heritage education and their impact on society, with the 1990 threshold clearly emerging from the first interviews. Secondly, participants were asked to comment on the overall level of cultural awareness of Iraqis before and after 1990. The obtained qualitative data were analyzed, mapping the reported heritage education strategies, best practices, and initiatives and classifying them into 12 categories and two sub-themes, described in detail below.

Results and Discussion

Mapping heritage education in Iraq then and now: comparative empirical insights

The reported formal and informal heritage education initiatives mainly relate to the pre-1990 epoque and were classified into 12 categories according to the type of activity: 1) educational system; 2) heritage education in schools; 3) archaeology education in universities; 4) visits to archaeological sites; 5) Iraq National Museum in Baghdad; 6) regional museums; 7) books for children and adults; 8) cinemas; 9) theaters; 10) cultural festivals; 11) other large-scale public awareness activities; and, 12) public archaeology projects by foreign archaeological missions. Moreover, the analyzed data allowed us to identify two more sub-themes, namely

1) cultural lighthouse of the Middle East: overall cultural awareness in Iraq and 2) from divide et impera to uni et evolve: emerging initiatives on the ground, which open and close the below empirical analysis, respectively. Each category and sub-theme are substantiated by quotes of interviewees highlighting the then and now comparison and also shedding light on the perceived results of heritage education in terms of cultural awareness among people. Due to natural space constraints, only the most appropriate citations are reported. Of note, the below empirical analysis attempts a non-political approach with specific attention dedicated to heritage education practice focusing on the methods utilized (how) rather than on the motivation behind them (why). Yet, even when the political connotation was commented on, it was seen as indispensable: "while education was achieved through politics, people knew the value of what they had, historical sites and cultural heritage" (R11 Omar Mohammed, Founder of Mosul Eye, Mosul) and "it doesn't matter if it is done for the so-called propaganda or not, important is to educate [sic]" (R19 Emily Porter, formerly at the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad, Baghdad). Significantly, the data also demonstrate a gradual cultural revival with a number of important initiatives reported that share a common goal of raising cultural awareness in the sectarianism- and conflict-torn society.

Cultural lighthouse of the Middle East: overall cultural awareness in Iraq

The obtained data expose a high level of cultural awareness reported in relation to pre-1990 Iraqi society. As referred to by several respondents, "Iraq was by right considered a cultural lighthouse of the Middle East and we were proud to be Iraqis, and now we do not know who we are" (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori; R18 Adib Fateh Ali, architect, journalist with Askanews and Piazzapulita, consultant for Iraq-Italy relations, Baghdad/Kurdistan Region of Iraq/Rome). The interviewees generously shared their memories of the time when "the army was powerful, Iraq had a strong agriculture, strong education, strong heritage protection in the region, while heritage was used as a national identity-building element—and by this we mean both the medieval identity and Mesopotamian identity—even though there were certain times of Arabization of the past, not always reflecting the diversity and history of Iraqi population" (R1 Lanah Haddad, archaeologist, Regional Director of the Academic Research Institute in Iraq [TARII], Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq). The above quotes efficiently allude to the complex issue of identity in modern Iraq. Indeed, the quest for Iraqiness entered the agenda of nation-builders early in a constant search for a balance between the territorial nationalism of Iraq for the Iraqis and the Pan-Arabic identity threatened by anything exclusively Iraqi (Baram 1994; Bernhardsson 2010). The progressive recognition, on the one hand, of the inherent connection between Mesopotamian history and modern Iraq and, on the other, of a common ancient Semitic descent of contemporary Arabs culminated in the fusion of both and the glorification of an Iraqi-centered Pan-Arabism (Baram 1994). While modernizing educational and cultural action had been consistently on the agenda of previous regimes, the investment in development and historical memory of the Ba'ath party assumed epic proportions, with a Mesopotamian identity used both as a common unifying ground for various ethnic groups and the promotion of Iraq's Pan-Arabic leadership (Baram 1994; Fales 2004). The eradication of illiteracy, the development of the public schools sector, and the enhancement of Iraqi archaeology and gender equality were all mentioned by respondents, with "the first female minister Naziha al Duleimi elected in Iraq in 1957 basing on civil rights law, while in Italy only in 1976 (Tina Anselmi), or TV appearing in Iraq in 1954, and in Italy in the same year" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). Indeed, the 1971 Labour law guaranteed gender equality in government employment to women enjoying a majority in certain professions (Bernhardsson 2006). All these elements contributed to make Iraqis feel "proud to be Iraqis" in the "cultural lighthouse of the Middle East," a common sentiment among the interviewees despite the well-known forced demographic displacements, political repressions, draining of the southern marshes, abandonment or destruction of archaeological sites due to vast agricultural or hydrological restructuring, and the resulting salvage excavation projects that were all also part of Arabization policies (Natali 2001; Thompson 2003; Fales 2004; Hama 2019).

Reportedly, "the cycle of cultural development broke in 1990" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha, former independent consultant to Abdulameer al-Hamdani, former Minister of Culture of the Republic of Iraq) and "an invisible line got interrupted" (R8 Amir Doshi, freelance journalist, Baghdad), with the participants agreeing on the current lack of cultural awareness in Iraq. "When I ask my 10-year-old nephew which country is older Egypt or Iraq, he responds Iraq is only 100 years old. This generation is at risk, they don't know who they are, no one teaches them how old they are. I feel very sorry for this generation. You need to feed them with culture, through movies, social media, and other possible means" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon, Director of Remote Sensing Center, University of Mosul, Mosul). Reportedly, "the generation of those who are now in their 30–40s feel closer to cultural heritage, while those who were born after 2003 are much less related and not interested in cultural heritage due to the lack of education and all the events that occurred in Iraq after 2003" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka, Team Leader at IOM—UN Migration, Co-Founder of Vortex-Mosul, Mosul). Ordinary people are disconnected from archaeology (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy, Director of State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Basrah), they have no idea of the importance of cultural heritage (R2 Layla Salih, Mosul Architectural Heritage Specialist, SBAH, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq; R4 Omar Jassam, Professor of archaeology, Mosul University, Mosul) and don't even know how many UNESCO sites are there in Iraq (R12 Abdul Salam Taha). For example, "five years ago a journalist from France made a survey in Ur, and people around Ziggurat did not know what Ziggurat is" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). Thus, the selected quotes above clearly expose a cultural awareness gap between now and then, which is further substantiated for all the 12 heritage education categories described below.

Educational system

The educational system in pre-1990 Iraq was known to be of very high quality in the overall context of economic well-being, which was confirmed by numerous comments. To take just a few examples, "in the 1970s, transport, schooling, healthcare were free and of high quality, food was cheap and available, literacy was highest in the region" (R12 Abdul

Salam Taha). Truly, "it was the golden age for Iraq, and education was number one in the Arab world" (R2 Layla Salih). To eradicate illiteracy, which was achieved by 1985 (UNESCO 2000), "they would go to houses and threaten people with jail if they didn't send kids and especially girls to school" (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori; R18 Adib Fateh Ali). The eradication of illiteracy applied not only to kids—"elderly or working illiterate people were educated in evening or morning classes. My mother was one of those teachers and we often joked about some of her pupils being older than her" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin, Associate Professor of environmental design at the Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies & Scientific Research [KISSR], Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq). Education was reportedly advanced, as in 1960–1999, the "programming language Fortrane was already on school curriculum" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), and "schools used to give us food and chocolates" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon). A sense of stability was also mentioned, as "four or five regimes might change, but school system would remain a column" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali).

On the contrary, the comments were endless lamenting the current situation: "the school system and healthcare have broken down after 1990 and haven't recovered yet. There is no public school worth its name" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). In terms of quality, the "education system is very dry now, very abstract" (R1 Lanah Haddad) and "very bad even in most basic material aspects, we may have up to 90 students in one class, the population has increased, while the number of public schools is the same, sometimes we lack desks for children to sit at" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka, Figure 1). On a structural level, a lack of cooperation was also highlighted: "NGOs working on education often don't talk to the Ministry of Education" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka). Thus, the above data show how the deterioration of the educational system, one of the main vehicles of formal heritage education, has been contributing to a decline in the cultural level of the country.

Heritage education in school

Prior to the 1990s, "archaeological education was taught in schools to give orientation to children on the history of Iraq" (R17 Zaid Aloubaidy, Director of Mosul Museum, Mosul) in such subjects as history and national culture (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori; R7 Jaafar Jotheri, Professor of archaeology, University of Al-Qadisiyah, Al Diwaniyah). Within a school curriculum, "a cross-section of 7000 years of history of Iraq was presented in a balanced way. Now there are only two chapters within the Social Studies subject which unites three disciplines, history, geography, and citizenship, previously studied separately" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha; R20 Khawlah Mousa, Director of Public Relations, Directorate for International Relations and Media, Mayoralty of Baghdad, Baghdad). More specifically, "in high school, in fourth and fifth grades, we had a course on heritage called "Cultural lesson," one class per week, and we were told about the invention of the wheel, Babylon and Sumerians, and also about Islam. In primary school, we had lessons dedicated to the civilization of Iraq, and one or two times per week we were taken to cinema or cultural sites, or just had meetings where they used to talk to us about Iraq. Now all this disappeared, they don't teach kids these things anymore" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon). Moreover, "Iraqi national flag hang in the school hall, teachers controlled cleanliness and checked even if our nails were clean, there was discipline, they taught us that we had not only rights but also duties! A national

Figure 1. A school in Mosul, 2023. Image courtesy of R10 Najat Al-Shoka.

anthem was played every day, they sparked love for the homeland in us, and a sense of belonging to a single community" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). Most importantly, in school, "they used to teach who we are and who we were and how valuable this legacy is. The point was: this is Iraq. You are the last civilization, but there were many civilizations before you living here" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon).

Conversely, it would be hard to quote all the respondents deploring the current status of heritage education in schools. Reportedly, there is no education about heritage in schools (R10 Najat Al-Shoka; R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), no dedicated heritage curriculum (R11 Omar Mohammed), only "pumping the mentality of people to identify as Shia or Sunni but not as Iraqi" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). "Young people in Babylon have no idea about what is Babylon, there is lack of education and lack of information on archaeology" (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori), and "often teachers themselves do not have this knowledge" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). Thus, the selected quotes by the respondents illustrate the cultural awareness and consequences for a sense of identity caused by the progressive loss of the heritage education component in school curricula. Unfortunately, only one respondent reported about plans "to re-introduce archaeological education in schools" (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan, Duhok's Director of Antiques and Heritage, Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq), which highlights the low priority of this issue on the cultural policy agenda.

Archaeology education in universities

While professional university education in archaeology was not the focus of this study, several comments allow us to have an empirical insight into this aspect of heritage education. Thus, overall, "the pre-1990 Iraqi university education was of the highest level and was based on merit, while the University of Baghdad was considered one of the best in the world in the 1970s and even during the Iraq-Iran war with government guaranteeing free education: the generation who went to university in the 1970–1980s joke and strongly criticize today's universities as too simple in comparison to what they were" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). Archaeological training in universities was also much better (R2 Layla Salih) and "the 1940–50–60s were the golden age, when the true Iraqi School of Archaeology was formed and in the second generation of archaeologists, we were digging, studying, publishing, and, most importantly, reading our history on our own with foreign archaeological institutes working in collaboration with the Iraqi ones. It was like this till the end of the 1980s" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha).

By contrast, archaeology education today is far behind both its own prior level and international practice: "archaeology is not taught as a science and method of conservation, preservation, and sustainable development, but just as a history of antiquities. Often the same books as in the 1970–80s are still used. We don't have museology or cultural heritage management disciplines properly taught, no professional capacity-building. Unlike before, now one can graduate in archaeology without even visiting a site, which is like touching knowledge with your own hands. In 2020, we made a survey among the graduates of the Department of Archaeology of Mosul University working at the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, asking them how useful was their education for their work. The answer was 0%" (R4 Omar Jassam). Thus, unfortunately, even limited data on university-level education equally demonstrates a profound gap between the current and pre-1990 levels, requiring urgent updates and improvements. International projects like EDUU (2017–2019), targeting pre-Islamic cultural heritage education and enhancement (University of Bologna 2020b), definitely contribute to improving the quality of education, but such activities need to be implemented on a continuous basis to have a long-term impact. Most importantly, "we need to develop Iraqi archaeology from inside Iraq, helping Iraqi archaeologists to develop locally, like it was before" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha). Only "if we make good education for archaeologists first, we will be able to educate common people. Education is the key. Educated people will make the change. People who love their country and identity" (R4 Omar Jassam).

Visits to archaeological and cultural sites

All respondents recalled plentiful archaeological and cultural visits in the pre-1990 era. "In the 1980s, we had regular visits to archaeological sites, which were very well-preserved. School trips were frequently organized. History books, picnics on archaeological sites, families going to sites—it was all part of normality" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka). Indeed, numerous respondents reported about school picnics in archaeological areas twice a year, visits to museums, educational trips to places like Hatra, Basrah, Samarra, Mosul, Erbil, and Babylon, so-called scientific picnics in factories or industries, other extracurricular activities, and, vitally, families trusting schools in doing all this (R2 Layla Salih; R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori; R13 Alaa N. Hamdon; R14 Mosaab Al-Jubory, Iraq Heritage Foundation, Mosul; R18 Adib Fateh Ali; R19 Emily Porter).

No similar activities have been reported for today, "as in 1990, embargo hit Iraq and things worsened a lot, in 2003 a further decline started, with a total collapse happening in 2014" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka). "Before archaeological sites were always full of people. After Daesh, heritage has become a target, people were unable to go to sites freely" (R1 Lanah Haddad). Indeed, "visits to archaeological sites were made by schools even in other provinces, today cultural awareness is not like it was before and no school would take the risk to go outside the province. However, visits to cultural sites are most important for heritage education, as you will not forget what you saw with your own eyes" (R20 Khawlah Mousa). Thus, the quotes clearly evidence the current lack of this important heritage education element, which could only be restored following a gradual post-conflict rehabilitation in the country and a parallel re-prioritization of heritage education.

Iraq National Museum in Baghdad

While the respondents did not focus on tragic events at the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad in 2003 (Fales 2004), they did underline that "it was at the frontend of the world most renowned museums" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), "a true institution" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali), whose relevance for heritage education was paramount. Indeed, the first children's section was opened in the Iraq National Museum in the late 1960s, properly designed for schools and introducing Iraqi history in a simple and clear way understood by children (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori; R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy; R12 Abdul Salam Taha; R19

Emily Porter). Despite the cutting-edge, ahead-of-its-time character of this innovation, its conceivers still view it critically, along with overall heritage education work: "I started heritage education department for children in Baghdad Museum in 1968/69, the idea came to me during summer holidays, but even that work in those years was never good enough. We need to do more, this is our history, we need to raise awareness of everybody. After 2003, things have never developed in a positive way" (R19 Emily Porter). Confirming this, "a survey was conducted in Baghdad in 2018 aiming to collect answers from taxi drivers to a simple question 'Do you know the exact location of the Iraq Museum?' Out of 47 taxi drivers, only 12% reported to know it, with 9% knowing it exactly and others being unsure, showcasing how strongly people are disconnected from their heritage" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha). While the new EU-funded didactic room was opened in the Iraq National Museum in 2020 (University of Bologna 2020a), it is important to draw from the experience of its early predecessor, and the self-criticism of Iraqi heritage stakeholders indicates a high target level of cultural awareness, suggesting criteria for today's cultural policy.

Regional museums

Along with the beating heart of the Iraq National Museum, "there was a capillary network of regional museums with archaeological objects of all cultural and historic periods represented in each of them aiming to create national Iraqi identity and facilitate knowledge in all Iraq, bringing culture to everyone inclusively" (R1 Lanah Haddad). Indeed, following the equity principle, "there were museums in each city. In Mosul there were three, Mosul Museum of Folklore, Mosul Museum of Natural History, and Mosul Cultural Museum, all of them are closed now" (R11 Omar Mohammed). Indeed, museums in Iraq have been closed since 1991 (R2 Layla Salih) and have reopened only in Baghdad, Basrah, and Nasiriyah (R11 Omar Mohammed), while in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the museums are generally open (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan). Thus, "the Slemani Museum is the second largest in Iraq and the biggest one in Kurdistan, it was closed soon after its move to its current location in the 1980s and re-opened in 2000" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), while "the museum of Duhok covers 20 historic periods of all Iraq, with 800 objects exhibited and other 6000 in the storage" (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan). However, the awareness of museums' importance remains low. In summer 2019, "a survey was carried out in Sulaymaniyah involving over 700 people and aiming to understand people's relationship with the Slemani Museum (with questions like how many times have you been to the museum, what do you remember about your visit, etc.). The results showcased a very limited awareness of people about heritage, very low numbers of visitors, and some even confusing the museum with a gas station" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). To overcome this cultural void, the educational role of museums needs to be revived, and several initiatives are emerging in this direction.

Thus, in autumn 2019, the University of Glasgow curated the opening of a new children's space in the Slemani Museum (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), along with the one in the Garmian Civilizations Museum in Kalar, launching new educational resources to engage Iraqi children and the wider public in archaeology and the history of the region (University of Glasgow 2019). Following these openings, the 2022 statistics of the Slemani Museum indicate a significant increase in visitors up to 24,000, with the majority being students (The Slemani Museum 2022) and "thousands of kids visiting the children's space and other museum spaces and a new survey would be necessary to measure the impact of these activities on local communities" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). Furthermore, "the Basrah Museum re-opened its doors to children in November 2023, when the first group of 200 school children was received, followed by 160 university students" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). In the Mosul Museum, "before, schools were regularly received, and there was a special hall for symposia. Museum was and is the cultural icon of Mosul. New generations have no knowledge, so we try to pass them the knowledge of ancient civilizations. In 2026, a new re-opening is planned following the rehabilitation according to international criteria, and the museum will again be able to perform its educational function aiding people to re-appreciate the civilization they are descendants of. We are also preparing videos about the destruction and looting of the museum to raise awareness about those criminal acts and enforce the feeling of belonging to this country. With this we will be able to give a sound picture to the world that we are not terrorists but the center of civilization and doing our best to preserve it for the whole world" (R17 Zaid Aloubaidy). Thus, a gradual revival of the Iraqi museums and their educational role distinctly emerges as a powerful tool of creating "bridges between culture and population" (R17 Zaid Aloubaidy) and needs to be further enhanced.

Books for children and adults

"Read, read, read! This is what I did when I was a kid. I read Moravia, Russian authors, I went to the book market and bought books at a low price. There were numerous private libraries in Baghdad. There is a famous saying well known in the Middle East: the books are written in Egypt, printed in Lebanon and read in Iraq" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). This quote eloquently illustrates the reading culture in pre-1990 Iraq, which also contributed to building overall cultural awareness. Moreover, "in the 1970s and 80s, there was a wealth of publications and smaller pamphlets about cultural heritage for ordinary people and children, you could find them in any bookshop, very cheap and affordable, and this enterprise was very well funded. There was a lot of encouragement for people about ancient Iraq" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha, Figure 2). In terms of archaeological research, not only was the *Sumer* journal the Bible of Iraqi archaeology, with international scholars publishing in it (R12 Salam Taha), but "it was also a reference point for a wider public and very much read" (R19 Emily Porter). However, though much praised for its glorious past, *Sumer* was not mentioned for its current activities (Sumer Journal 2023), which might be explained by its comparatively lower popularity. Furthermore, "in the 1970s, the 'Atlas of Iraqi Archeological Sites' was published by the Antiquities Directorate, and it was a real masterpiece! In those years, there was a strong push to translate lots of books in Arabic, of highest scientific value, and this was rewarded by the government" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha). Besides, "there existed a state-funded journal for wide public with folklore stories, ethnological and anthropological elements of society, as Iraq was very

A

B

Figure 2. A) The cover and B) the first page of "The Great Journey of Gilgamesh, an illustrated story for children," *Majalati Magazine*, Issue 26, 1972. Image courtesy of R12 Abdul Salam Taha, www.iraqinhistory.com.

professional in documenting identity" (R1 Lanah Haddad). By contrast, no similar publishing activities in the heritage field were reported in today's Iraq, undoubtedly contributing to a decline in cultural awareness. Even "school books in the 1980s used to be much nicer than during the economic sanctions and early 2000s" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), with "no proper books on heritage for children now" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy), who "have books only on religion" (R2 Layla Salih). Significantly, while the EDUU project (University of Bologna 2020b) did create comics on archaeology and heritage in Arabic, none of the respondents was aware of their existence, which might imply a need for better communication about similar projects to Iraqi heritage-sector stakeholders' communities, while major work remains to be done to resume, on a qualitatively new, contemporary basis, the production of heritage books for children and adults.

Cinemas

While a comprehensive overview of the current state of cinema and theater in Iraq is outside the scope of this study, the participants' quotes provide several important insights on the permeating reach of informal heritage education in pre-1990 Iraq, implemented through an extensive network of cinemas and theaters that have largely disappeared today. Thus, the role of cinemas for transmitting culture in pre-1990 Iraq was reportedly far-reaching. "Culture was in the cinema. Movies and documentaries were made on cultural topics and transmitted in TV, and people used to watch them. For example, I love the movie 'The Princess at the River' about Babylon and Sumerians, I first saw it when I was 10 and often go back and watch it even now" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon). The above-mentioned "The Princess at the River" (1982) or the historical epic "Nebuchadnezar" (1962) are only two examples (Ginsberg and Lippard

2010). Indeed, prior to 1990, there were 275 cinemas in Iraq (Battaglia 2018), and reportedly, they were educating in and of themselves, with "one of the most famous cinema chains in Baghdad (now closed) named after Semiramis" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin), a legendary Assyrian female ruler. The respondents' comments allude to filmmaking in Iraq within the context of prolific post-independence film production, nationalized under the Ba'ath Party, which gave rise to the establishment of a film school in Baghdad in 1980 (Ginsberg and Lippard 2010; Ginsberg 2016). The Iran-Iraq war drained the country's resources, the international embargo banned both film-making equipment and celluloid from entering the country, and the US invasion completely destroyed the National Film Archives and film studios—all this brought the country's long tradition of cinema to a halt, and films stopped being produced in 2003 (Isakhan 2009; Ginsberg 2016; Battaglia 2018). Conversely, the so-called New Iraqi Cinema, emerging in the post-invasion decades, is arguably seen as a contemporary cultural (re)colonization of Iraq (Ginsberg 2016). A small number of films issued in these years and publicized as Iraqi are primarily meant for international distribution, directed largely by Iraqi ex-patriots with the financial support of foreign sources, and, though appearing to be issued from an Iraqi perspective, predominantly serve Western ideological narratives (Ginsberg 2016). In this context, and not surprisingly, none of the respondents spoke of post-1990 movies serving the purpose of cultural awareness in the country.

Theaters

As for theater in Iraq, affirmed as an elevated art form since the 1930s–1940s and recognized by the Iraqi state as a dynamic organization structured on cultural and educational values, it progressively developed, efficiently tackling the Iraqi character, culture, and social and political issues

through performances and becoming one of the most productive and fruitful theaters in the Arab world (Midhin and Hussien 2022). However, while before the post-1990 crisis "there were five theaters and 40 cinemas in Basrah, today there are none. No theater in Babylon, no theater in Nasiriyah. Before there was much more culture" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). It is interesting to note that the respondents did not report any contemporary initiatives, which could be telling. For instance, it is worth mentioning the experimental Forum Theatre work conducted in 2010 at the University of Basrah by a group of Iraqi, British, and Canadian academics (Al-Azraki et al. 2012). The project was based on the practice pioneered by the Brazilian director and teacher Augusto Boal and aimed at positively transforming learning-teaching environments through theater. By encouraging "spect-actors" (university students and professors) to actively engage in performance, the Forum Theatre provided a platform to publicly and critically address a wide range of academic life issues such as gender relations, cheating during exams, unproductive student-teacher relationships, and others (Al-Azraki et al. 2012; Al-Azraki 2017). Yet, being undoubtedly a flexible and inspirational tool of social awareness and change, the Forum Theatre has only been reproduced in two experimental settings since 2010, namely in Nasiriya in 2016 and Baghdad in 2017 (Al-Azraki 2017), and was not mentioned by respondents (including those based in Basrah and Baghdad), allowing for several interpretations. First, despite the active engagement of university students and staff, the project's impact was limited within wider local communities and did not leave any long-lasting impression. Secondly, the project dealing with wider social issues within academic environments might not have been perceived as directly pertinent to heritage education. Finally, and probably most importantly, this project might have gone unnoticed, as Iraqi cities, previously used to a concentration of cultural life through abundant networks of cinemas and theaters, need a wider network of cultural institutions in the context of gradual, country-wide cultural revival.

Cultural festivals

As is well known, cultural festivals were widely celebrated in Iraq (Brusasco 2012), and their importance for raising cultural awareness in society was confirmed by the respondents. Numerous colorful festivals in Mosul, Babylon, and other cities were part of the cultural enterprise aiming at reinforcing both the vertical bond between the Iraqis and their land and the horizontal one between Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites, Muslims and Christians, creating a common past for all Iraqis (Baram 1994). Thus, "in Babylon, there was the Babylonian Festival, while in Mosul there was the Spring Assyrian Festival on 1 April each year when the Assyrian civilization was celebrated. Children actively took part in them, dressing up as Babylonians, Sumerians, and Assyrians" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon). The connection with schools was crucial, "suggesting us cultural events to take part in" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). The cultural impact of such festivals on people was very high, with "Babylon being very popular among people even for wedding photos" (R19 Emily Porter).

Similar to what was discussed above in relation to theater and cinema life in Iraq, respondents did not report any present cultural festivals. Along with the already mentioned interpretations, this tendency could also be attributed to the fact that earlier cultural festivals, despite serving overarching ideological purposes, were largely cultural and historical performances (Brusasco 2012). By contrast, contemporary artistic festivals appear to serve larger social narratives by expressing social and political demands for radical change, learning to engage in deep listening and care for others, and co-writing and co-creating histories and narratives with a shared intent of "putting life back" into Iraq through art and performance—as is the case for the Tarkib's Contemporary Arts Festival organized in Baghdad since 2015 in the framework of multicultural activities of the NGO Tarkib Organization for Arts and Culture (Bellingreri 2022; Tarkib 2024). In other words, rather than a cultural festival in a traditional way, Tarkib aims at introducing contemporary art in the form of artistic activism, raising awareness, stimulating discussion, and promoting an open dialogue on social, humanistic, and existentialist issues (Tarkib 2024). This contemporary orientation towards societal rather than purely cultural issues might be the reason it is not perceived by Iraqi heritage professionals as contributing to raising cultural awareness. Both forms of artistic expression being crucially important, the support of the contemporary initiatives, along with a gradual revival of the traditional cultural festivals, should go hand in hand to aid cultural and humanistic reconciliation and revival in Iraq.

Other large-scale public awareness activities

Along with all the above, large-scale public outreach and awareness activities were conducted to bring culture to the doorsteps of common people: "archaeology was in TV, mass media, attracting foreign attention, and even banknotes carried the symbols of Ishtar and Hammurabi" (R6 Haider Oraibi Almamori). Essentially, "from 1932 onwards, they were educating us to protect our legacy from any enemy. We were told if you see anyone destroying monuments or picking up cultural assets—call the police. We were taught from the very early age that looting is bad and very dangerous, and there was no looting in those years" (R13 Alaa N. Hamdon), contrary to the outburst of the progressively unprecedented looting of archaeological heritage post-1990.

Several recent initiatives have been reported aiming to bring culture back to the masses. Thus, "the first awareness-raising program among school children on how to preserve antiquities and prevent looting and illegal dealings was launched in March 2023 in collaboration between the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq, Ministry of Culture, Mayoralty of Baghdad, Ministry of Interior, and United Nations Advisory Commission. Its main message was very simple: help save your country and heritage; your country has a lot of valuable things which are invaluably important so if you see anything illegal going on—cooperate with the police" (R20 Khawlah Mousa). Moreover, "young bloggers are increasingly focusing on historical places" (R20 Khawlah Mousa). To cite just one example, archaeologist and tour guide Karrar Amer Atiyah is making wide use of social media "to render people aware how rich and important Iraq's history and archaeology are, so that they start understanding their value and start taking care of it again" (R25 Karrar Amer Atiyah, archaeologist and tour guide, Al Samawah). Moreover, in Erbil, a series of 50 TV episodes is being prepared in collaboration with a local film director and local and foreign guest experts. "Each episode will focus on specific themes starting from the very basics, explaining what archaeology is, its importance, intrinsic connection to

local people, difference between treasure-hunting and archaeology, relevant laws, legal consequences of looting and much more, targeting the widest possible public" (R24 Mohammed Lashkiri, Director of Affairs of Antiquities and Heritage, General Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq). Undoubtedly, more initiatives like these will help Iraqis re-connect with their heritage.

Public archaeology projects by foreign archaeological missions

Interestingly enough, within an overall considerable number of internationally-funded archaeological missions and heritage-related projects in Iraq (Selim and Farhan 2024), very few respondents mentioned public or community archaeology projects, despite the fact that these are considered a must for an archaeological mission today (Zaina, Proserpio, and Scazzosi 2021), allowing for several interpretations. First, it is very hard to measure the impact of public or community archaeology interventions. Second, even if carried out, public archaeology initiatives might be perceived by locals as detached one-shot activities that do not have constant educational functions. Third, "archaeological work in Iraq is still deeply colonial and Western-centered. Any change in this direction requires honest thinking, equal collaboration between Iraqi and Western archaeologists allowing and helping Iraqi archaeologists to develop locally Iraqi archaeology like it was in the 1960–70s" (R11 Omar Mohammed).

Indeed, "pursuing decolonization is a demanding task as foreign missions need to work very closely with the locals empowering their skills and voices" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). Interesting bottom-up work in this direction was reported in Duhok, where agreements with foreign archaeological missions require guaranteeing and covering all expenses for one or two Iraqi archaeologists from the area to conduct Masters or Ph.D. study in the respective country (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan). Similarly, today, each foreign mission agreement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq "obliges the team to go and teach why the site they are excavating is important not only to schools, but also to hospital workers, villagers, and other locals. They explain to people why they excavate, saying these were their grand-grandfathers, it is their story, and they are interested in understanding better this civilization" (R24 Mohammed Lashkiri). Thus, in Dohuk, "amazing public archaeology work is done by the University of Udine, with up to 200 school children at a time visiting the Khinis archaeological site, and students from art institutes also visiting the site to create artworks" (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan). Furthermore, "the University of Reading has started running workshops educating local communities about the value of archaeology, with high participation from local people" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). Moreover, "as students and local people in Kurdistan often cannot read in English, we decided to put a clause on agreements obliging each team to write an article about new results in two languages, English and Kurdish, not in academic style but understandable to non-professionals" (R24 Mohammed Lashkiri), providing local readership access to knowledge deriving from their cultural heritage. Such inclusive collaboration, raising awareness of the value of archaeological heritage and seeing Iraqis as protagonists and rule-makers, indeed bears a truly decolonizing spirit that must be spread more widely.

From divide et impera to uni et evolve: emerging initiatives on the ground

With all the respondents demonstrating an in-depth understanding of the profound cultural awareness gap between pre-1990 and contemporary society, an equally thorough realization emerged that it is essential "to spend energy not on complaining but on finding solutions: if you cannot change immediately the system, use the circumstances at your disposal" (R1 Lanah Haddad). Indeed, the empirical data also reveal a number of important initiatives that cannot be classified within the above 12 categories being recommendations specifically aimed at overcoming the harmful impacts of sectarianism. Specifically, "young people in Iraq are getting increasingly tired of societal consequences of sectarian divisions and want to move forwards" (R5 Ali Makhzomy, Founder and CEO, Bil Weekend Tour Company, Baghdad). "When I was a child, we didn't know the difference between Sunni, Shia, Yazidi, Kurds, or Christians. When I went to my grandparents to Sinjar in summer, we played together with Yazidi children, and our neighbors were Kurds, while back in Mosul I had Christian friends. Government employees were from Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, Christian groups. Today it is all about finger-pointing towards different ethnic groups that tend to stay between themselves" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka). Indeed, while prior to the 1990s, "the Iraqi memory was a collective memory of 7000 years" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha), today "the concept of motherland is declining in a preponderant way, as there is no national party, no national development plans, no national culture shared by all" (R18 Adib Fateh Ali). Similar to the colonial mindset when the Iraqis were treated as just those who happen to live on the land of Mesopotamia, worth nothing and with what was underneath not related to them (R1 Lanah Haddad; R12 Abdul Salam Taha), this time "through sectarianism policy, the country was divided by knife at a lower root level of collective memory, and we need to invite it to be again present in the mindset of contemporary Iraqis" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha).

Thus, to change the status quo, first and foremost, "the state should restore the value of cultural heritage as it was before 1990" (R11 Omar Mohammed). Further, in terms of cultural policy, the respondents agree that today "there is no consensus on heritage landscape in Iraq. Not having a singular heritage narrative is not necessarily a bad thing for a mosaic country like Iraq, but then things can get quite chaotic and inconsistent for cultural heritage, as too many inconsistent pieces do not create a coherent and inclusive picture" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin). Therefore, "we need a strategy for cultural heritage education and management, planning for 5–10 year periods to see results, enhancing archaeological work, sustainable development for heritage sites, new education in archaeology both for specialists and wider public. Educating, studying, teaching —this is the way to resolve the problem" (R4 Omar Jassam). Moreover, "we need a strategy on how to invest resources, establishing proper tourism sector, making cultural heritage accessible and secure. The main responsibility lies on intellectuals: they have to lead discussion, produce literature, and work on strategies on how to properly communicate cultural heritage to the people of Iraq. This is a collective responsibility with space for innovation" (R11 Omar Mohammed).

In this context, several amazing initiatives were reported seeing Iraqi heritage stakeholders engaged in finding solutions for the transition from the imposed *divide et impera* to a *uni et evolve* environment and for a gradual revival of the cultural lighthouse of the Middle East. "It is as if we have been sleeping for 30 years and start waking up only now, slowly returning to our culture, after 30 years of 'cancel culture'" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). Thus, in Duhok "we are creating the Park of Religions, where each religion will be represented with its symbols, such as a synagogue, a mosque, a church, a Zoroastrian temple, a Yezidi temple, a Temple of Mithras—this park will teach people to respect each one of them, to respect and protect cultural heritage of all the periods, groups, and civilizations present on our territory" (R21 Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan). In the same spirit, in Baghdad "with the late Minister of Culture Abdulhameer al-Hamdani, we revived an Akito House, a House of Prayer. 'Akito' symbolizes the mother of all the festivals, all ancient cities had its own, this is a temple on the river for every religion and fraction where people of any faith could come, pray, and celebrate their rituals. This opening was a matter of principle, sending a message of unity and inclusiveness" (R12 Abdul Salam Taha). On the operational level, there is also a tendency for constructive cooperation. Thus, in the Iraq Heritage Foundation in Mosul, "we are all architects of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and we work together for the reconstruction of churches, mosques, and Yazidi temples, treating them as equally important" (R14 Mosaab Al-Jubory). Last but not least, the creation of an Iraqi Archaeological School was suggested, "not aimed at archaeological research as such, but working on how to better communicate Iraqi culture and teach archaeology to people, holding conferences every three months. This was an idea of an old Iraqi archaeologist, first expressed some 25 years ago" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). In effect, numerous respondents manifest a high potential for heritage education to overcome the status quo: "to change anything, you first need to start with education and awareness-raising activities at a very young age" (R10 Najat Al-Shoka), as "heritage education will let people know that they have one country and one body" (R14 Mosaab Al-Jubory). The voice of the Iraqi heritage stakeholders makes it clear: "we need to educate our people about heritage" (R2 Layla Salih; R19 Emily Porter), as "education is key, if we don't know ourselves, our identity, how can we love our land?" (R7 Jaafar Jotheri).

Next Steps: Suggesting an Inclusive Heritage Education Curriculum

The unveiled empirical data shed light on how pervasively heritage education was realized in Iraq prior to the recent decades of conflict, bringing cultural heritage to the doorsteps of the wider population and resulting in a high level of cultural awareness among Iraqis. Before 1990, heritage education was imparted through a series of formal and informal educational strategies reported by the respondents and classified within 12 categories mostly nonexistent today, with a few exceptions of currently nascent activities within an overall slow and gradual revival. Indeed, the data clearly evidence a cultural awareness gap between pre-1990 Iraqi society and the contemporary populace, as showcased by numerous comments. The exposed decline in cultural awareness is indubitably attributable to the decades of sanctions, wars, terrorism, and poverty and the divisive impact of sectarianism. Yet, the respondents also ascribe its downfall to the lack of heritage education, demonstrating a strong reliance on its potential for regaining cultural awareness among the Iraqi population and underscoring an urgent need for a national-level strategy encompassing heritage education, management, protection, and enhancement.

Thus, building upon the obtained empirical data, this article offers a few specific suggestions to be considered by Iraqi heritage stakeholders and policy-makers. 1) All reported initiatives could lay the initial basis for the creation of an Iraqi reference guidebook of best practices for educating children and the wider public in cultural heritage, to be replicated by other professionals, institutions, and stakeholders nationwide. Recent regional experiences in heritage education in Turkey (Baysal and Miller 2019), Jordan (Badran 2014; Goussous 2022), Lebanon (Damick and Genz 2022), or other countries in the Middle East (Badran, Abu-Khafajah, and Elliott 2022) could also prove useful to draw from. 2) A holistic heritage education methodology needs to be developed as a tool of social, ethnic, and religious cohesion in Iraq to be implemented in schools at all levels through a centralized policy. Such methodology needs to be both vertically and horizontally inclusive. Vertically, such a heritage education curriculum needs to embrace all the phases of the long Iraqi cultural history within a unique and continuous trajectory, without exclusions or disconnections. This verticality would help remedy the residual colonial and post-colonial divisions previously imposed on Iraqi history by dividing the Mesopotamian past from the Islamic chapter and contemporary populations. Horizontally, equal attention should be dedicated to the characteristics, symbols, architectural elements, traditions, values, and cultural diversity of all ethnic and religious groups of contemporary Iraq under the umbrella of Iraqiness. 3) In practical terms, new educational resources need to be developed starting from elementary school that would, in a very accessible, non-discriminatory, and colorful way, showcase all historic periods of Iraq and current ethno-religious groups, dedicating equal attention to each of them and treating them as equally important. Further research, outside the scope of this study, is necessary for the development of content for such didactic resources, and dedicated pools of experts need to be created for these purposes.

Thus, while the best practices empirically extrapolated within this study might constitute the basis of a nationwide heritage education reference framework, the development of an inclusive heritage education methodology would help overcome sectarian divisions, increasing the respect for Iraqi multiculturality from a very early age and enhancing social, ethnic, and religious cohesion. Most importantly, targeted heritage education programs "made in Iraq," based on the Iraqis' own multi-decade experience, and enriched by contemporary regional and international practice would contribute towards rendering culturally aware new generations of Iraqis—its future politicians, legislators, archaeologists, educators, and, most importantly, leaders.

Concluding Remarks

While the prioritization of cultural heritage in modern Iraq is habitually ascribed to its use for political purposes and

has been widely covered by research, noticeably little attention has been dedicated in the existing literature to how exactly heritage education was implemented in Iraq, the knowledge gap that this article aims to address. Focusing specifically on understanding which methods were used to educate an average citizen in cultural heritage (how), rather than on the motivation behind them (why), it targets heritage education as a complex of educational strategies resulting in the awareness of the value of cultural heritage in society (what). The empirical data, drawn from a sample of 25 oral history interviews with Iraqi cultural heritage-sector stakeholders from nine different cities, demonstrate several important findings. First, a profound gap emerges between the pre-1990 level of cultural awareness in Iraq and the current lack of it among the contemporary populace. Second, empirical data mapping allows us to identify 12 categories of formal and informal heritage education best practices, strategies, and methods employed in pre-1990 Iraq, nearly all of which are currently missing. Formal heritage education in schools, regular visits to cultural sites, the didactic role of museums, and a capillary network of cinemas and theatres are only some examples. Third, the data show a strong reliance on the heritage education potential among respondents for raising cultural awareness in the sectarianism- and conflict-torn Iraqi society, and a number of important initiatives in this direction were reported. Finally, building upon the responses, the article offers several specific suggestions to contribute to raising cultural awareness in society. Namely, the study suggests the creation of an Iraqi reference guidebook of heritage education best practices and the development of holistic and inclusive heritage education methodology as a tool of social, ethnic, and religious cohesion in Iraq. Incorporating Iraqis' own experiences and international heritage education practices, such methodology would inclusively view each epoch and each ethno-religious group as indispensable pieces of a unique puzzle: vertically succeeding one another within the unique historical timeline and horizontally completing each other under the umbrella of Iraqiness.

An efficient implementation of such methodology would allow heritage education to perform its function as a tool of human rights empowerment, sustainable development, and heritage protection, triggering bottom-up decolonization of heritage management processes and cultural healing of the "descendants of people who built the Hanging Gardens of Babylonia" (Wasfi 2008). Last but not least, turning diversity from an enemy to a powerful resource through education would undoubtedly become a rich source of inspiration, both (and especially) for Iraq itself and for heritage educators worldwide: "let us not divide ourselves in Sunni or Shia, let us refer all together as Iraqis to our past civilization and look at a Sumerian tablet realizing that this is not a Shia or Sunni tablet, but an Iraqi tablet!" (R9 Mustafa al-Hussainy). Truly, "if Iraq wants, it can make this mosaic a strength instead of a weakness. Heritage must be used as a bridge for connecting instead of a wall for dividing" (R23 Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin).

Disclaimer

The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

Dedicated to Roger Matthews

It was truly touching for me to see the reactions of all the participants, Iraqi and non-Iraqi alike, when I was sharing with them that I work under Professor Roger Matthews' supervision. It would not be possible to refer here to all the comments, but one thing is clear: I am in good hands (R1–R25).

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