

## Ashur (Iraq)

No 1130

### 1. BASIC DATA

State Party Iraq

Name of property: Ashur (Qal'at Shergat)

Location: Salah Addin Province

Date received: 18 October 2002

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is an archaeological: *site*.

Brief description:

The ancient city of Ashur is located on the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia. The city has its origins in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. It was the first capital of the Assyrian empire from 14<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Ashur was also the religious capital of the Assyrians, associated with the god Ashur. The city was destroyed by the Babylonians, but revived during the Parthian period in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. At present, this archaeological site is threatened by the construction of a dam some 30-40km downstream.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The site of the ancient city of Ashur (Assur, modern Qal'at Shergat) is located 390 km north of Baghdad. The settlement was founded on the western bank of river Tigris, on uneven bedrock; within its walls it covers the area of about 65 ha. The excavated remains consist of numerous superimposed stratigraphic levels of archaeological deposits. The earliest of them date to the Sumerian Early Dynastic period of the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. After the Akkadian and Ur III periods, which are present at some points, follow the Old, Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, the later one ending at the mid-first millennium BCE. Finally, Hellenistic remains and those of the Arab Hatrian kings are attested. Structurally, the city of Ashur was divided into two parts: the old city (Akkadian *libbi-ali*, the heart of the city), which is the northern and largest part of Ashur, and the new city (Akk. *alu-ishshu*), a smaller southern projection in the city, which was constructed around the middle of the second millennium BCE.

The major features of the city which are presently visible on-site consist of architectural remains (some of them partly restored): the *ziggurat* and the great temple of the god Ashur, the double-temple of Anu and Adad (with the remains of two smaller *ziggurats*), the temple of Ishtar, the Sumerian goddess of love and war, the Old Palace with its royal tombs and several living quarters in many parts of the city. Some parts of the Parthian palace are visible at the border between old and new city. The double-temple of

Sin and Shamash has almost disappeared. The same is valid for the Assyrian New Year's festival building (*bit akitu*), which is located outside the walls of the city. Living quarters with indoor-burials and a palace area in the northern centre of the city are being excavated. The city was surrounded by a double wall with several gates (the new city just by a single wall) and a big moat.

The majority of the buildings of the city were built with sun-dried mud-bricks with foundation of quarry stones or dressed stone, depending on the period. Artistic objects and parts of architectural remains of the city are at present on display in the major museums of the world, in the Louvre, the British Museum, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, as well as in other museums. The surface of the site is partly covered by the excavation debris from several generations of archaeological excavations.

### History

The history of the city of Ashur goes back to the Sumerian Early Dynastic period (first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE). Some remains may even date to preceding periods. For this early part the stratigraphic excavation of the temple of Ishtar provided substantial information about the development of the religious architecture. Two of the five major building stages of it belong to this period. During the Akkadian empire (ca 2334-2154 BCE) Ashur was an important centre, and a governor of the third dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE) ruled over the city which had to pay taxes to the central administration in the south. Still, the temple of Ishtar and its findings remain the main archaeological reference point. As an independent city-state Ashur became capital of Assyria and the Assyrians during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE starting with the Old-Assyrian rulers Erishum, Ilushuma and Shamshi-Adad I and thereafter with the Middle-Assyrian kings Eriba-Adad I and Ashuniballit I. From here, the military campaigns of the Middle-Assyrian kings Tukulti-Ninurta I and Tiglathpileser I started and laid the foundation for the territorial expansion of the Assyrian empire to the west, ie Syro-Mesopotamia and the Levant, and other adjacent regions. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE a systematic building programme is attested for Ashur, culminating in the Middle-Assyrian period, when king Tukulti-Ninurta I not only renovated or reconstructed the majority of the temples (among them the temple of Ishtar), but terraced a large area for the his New Palace (the building was not erected since the king founded a new residential city named Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, further upstream).

Ashur remained political capital until the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), who moved it to Kalhu (modern Nimrud). After that, Ashur continued to be an important religious and provincial Assyrian centre even though it had lost its function as national capital. The Neo-Assyrian kings executed restoration work at the main sanctuaries and palaces of Ashur as it was requested by the inscriptions of their predecessors and erected the royal burial place within the area of the Old royal palace. The majority of the private houses and living quarters date to this Neo-Assyrian period and provide important information about domestic architecture and the conditions of life of those parts of the Assyrian society not belonging to the royal elite. Special

attention was received by the more than 1,000 inhumations in graves and tombs, mainly located inside the buildings, which provide important information on aspects of burial rites and funerary culture. The site survived the fall of the Assyrian empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and it flourished in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. The Parthian palace and a temple close to the *ziggurat* are architectural testimonies of this period. Presently, residential areas of the Parthian period are being excavated.

### **Management regime**

#### *Legal provision:*

The area of the ancient city of Ashur has been the property of the State of Iraq since 1935. In the past, the site was protected under the Law of Antiquities of 1937, and its further amendments. Currently, the site and its buffer zone are protected under the recently revised Law of Antiquities and Heritage, no. 55, dated October 2002.

#### *Management structure:*

The protection and management of the site is the responsibility of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (former Directorate General of Antiquities). Locally, the archaeological site is under the responsibility of the Inspector of Antiquities in the province of Salah Addin. Excavations are conducted by the Department of Excavations and Archaeological Investigation in the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Ministry of Culture. The site has 10 guards in charge for its protection.

#### *Resources:*

Excavations by the Iraqi expedition are financed annually from the central budget of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Government of Iraq. The *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* has financed the German expedition. At the moment there are no funds for restoration and conservation facilities or for training.

There are ca 1,000 visitors per year. Until 1991, there was a site museum in a military barrack. At the moment there are practically no facilities for visitors.

### **Justification by the State Party (summary)**

The city of Ashur is the first capital of the Assyrian empire and the religious centre of Assyria, the core of which is located between Ashur, Nineveh and Erbil. The singular settlement was founded in a specific geo-ecological zone, ie at the borderline between rain-fed and irrigation agriculture, at the intersection between nomadic and sedentary subsistence strategies. The city gained its reputation because it was the city of the god Ashur, the national deity of the Assyrians. ... Ashur played a key role as the centre of political power for the foundation of the Assyrian empire in the Middle Assyrian period (14<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> BCE) and for Assyrian art and craftsmanship, retaining its importance as the main cult site even later. ... It was also the place where the Assyrian kings were crowned and buried. As one of the few archaeological multi-period sites in Assyria of its kind, remains of the buildings and their furnishing have been extensively excavated. The architectural and artistic record is accompanied by a large

corpus of cuneiform texts which attest a leading role of Ashur in religion and scholarship, especially during the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods.

**Criterion iii:** During its history of three millennia, the most important step at Ashur was certainly the establishment of the Assyrian civilisation. The strong tradition in the material, religious and intellectual culture of Assyria remains connected to the site and its region. As to the space use and urban layout, most significant is the concentration of public buildings at the periphery of the city, the development of the specific Assyrian temple ground-plan and of the palatial architecture, its decoration, monumental art and furnishing. These elements became the standards for the other urban and provincial centres during the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, that is, for a time span of more than seven centuries. At Ashur, the early steps towards a systematic shaping of Assyrian cities could be observed for the first time within the limits of an extremely restricted space and a grown urban system, this in contrast to all the later Assyrian capitals. The tight and complex cultural identity is expressed by the fact that the land, the god and the city bore the same name: Ashur. It is clear that, already during pre-Assyrian periods, the site played an important role in the land of Subartu, since it was a desired place for foreign control over the region during the Akkad and Ur III periods (last quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE).

**Criterion iv:** Ashur has an outstanding density of excavated architectural remains from different parts of the Assyrian periods without comparison. The ensemble of public buildings (temples, palaces, city walls) finds its counterpart in several areas of domestic architecture. As for the religious architecture, the presence of three *ziggurats* erected of mud bricks and two double temples should be mentioned as well the temple of the national god Ashur. Of them, the impressive ziggurat of the god Ashur is still standing today and is a visible landmark. Whereas these buildings embody the Assyrian architectural tradition, the temple of Ishtar alone features a different building tradition (bent axis), which has its origin possibly in the area southeast of Assyria. At two places a sequence of royal palaces was observed, one of them saved later as burial place for Assyrian kings.

## **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

### **Actions by ICOMOS**

The ICOMOS evaluation has been referred to the mission organised by the UNESCO (World Heritage Centre, Division of Cultural Heritage, Amman Office) to Iraq, 18-28 November 2002, involving a hydraulics engineer and an archaeologist to assess the impact of the construction of the Makhool Dam currently underway on the Tigris River. The mission was considered positive and encouraging, and a good collaboration was established with the authorities re the identification of the cultural issues on the site of Ashur and in the region concerned. Nevertheless, the experts were not provided with technical information regarding the Makhool Dam itself and its environmental impact. Therefore it was not possible to make a full assessment of the specific risks faced by the archaeological site, nor of the interventions that would be required.

## **Conservation**

### *Conservation history:*

The site has been abandoned for nearly two millennia, major incursions having come only from archaeological excavations. In 1903-1914, the German expedition carried out excavations particularly in the northern section of the site and on the defence walls. In the late 1970s the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq resumed the archaeological excavations and carried out some restoration to maintain and strengthen what had been exposed so far, ie the city wall, the Tabira-Gate, some private houses, the temple of Anu and Adad, the Old Palace and the royal burial. A large part of the town still remains unexcavated.

Currently, Iraq is implementing extensive agricultural and economic plans, which involve the construction of a large dam on the Tigris River some 30-40 km downstream from the archaeological site of Ashur. The construction of the dam is expected to be completed in 2006, and the level of water would then cover the lower parts of the archaeological site of Ashur and its surroundings.

### *State of conservation:*

The photographs indicate that subsurface stratification and structures were in good state of preservation when first encountered in excavation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the excavated structures were left open, remaining exposed to erosion by rain and winds and normal natural destruction. The excavated area contains mainly public buildings. A large part of the town, probably mainly residential, still remains unexcavated.

### *Management:*

The responsibility for the site management lies with the government authorities. However there is no management plan, neither regarding the excavation and restoration of the site, nor regarding the visitor management and environmental control. There are no facilities for the presentation of the site nor for the reception of visitors.

### *Risk analysis:*

The main risk at the moment is presented by the dam construction some 30-40 km downstream, expected to be completed by 2006, after which the basin would be filled with water. The archaeological site of Ashur remains within the perimeter of this reservoir, though a major part of the walled city area is on higher ground. Nevertheless, once the basin has been created, especially the southern part of the city would be flooded for certain periods of the year. In any case, the archaeological remains would suffer from infiltration and seepage of underground waters. The water-bearing (phreatic) levels in the foundations of the whole area are expected to rise considerably.

Another problem is presented by the fact that the excavations so far have mainly focused on the main sites in the area. Only quite recently, there has been some attention to the archaeological resource of territory as a whole. In fact, it is estimated that some 63 archaeological sites would remain within the area of the water reservoir. Most of these are small, and many are in poor condition due to damage from agricultural and construction activities. Nevertheless, the UNESCO report emphasises that the sites represent an important information source in order to obtain a balanced

and more comprehensive understanding of the history over the past several millennia. It is only some 30 years that regional settlement analysis has changed the archaeological view of Ancient Mesopotamia, recognising the “significant role of the systemic interaction between urban centres and rural settlements, and contributing to a better understanding of the emergence of states, the economic, social and environmental relations, subsistence patterns and modes of production and trade through time”. The report also notes that the impact of the rise of the Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian empires on the immediate surroundings of Ashur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta has not been studied. In fact, it is understood that only small areas (perhaps only 1%) of the Mesopotamia has been studied so far.

Regarding the Ashur site, the UNESCO report presents three possible scenarios:

1. No retaining wall is constructed to protect Ashur. This is the worst scenario, and the site would be flooded and infiltrated from 2006 on. This scenario will require an urgent programme of salvage archaeology and documentation in and around the site.

2. A retaining wall is constructed separate from the site. This is the least bad scenario. In this case, the salvage programme could focus only on areas directly affected by the water reservoir.

3. A system of protection is constructed directly on the borders of the site. This is the most cost-effective protection as discussed by the Iraqi authorities. It would involve a retaining system that makes use of the actual topographic situation of the areas bordering the reservoir, ie the eastern and northern fronts of the site. The structure could be built of earth, and use so-called ‘gabions’ (small stones held together by a wire-network) to protect the surface.

While no decision has yet been taken, it is possible that the solution to be adopted would follow the third scenario, ie the most cost-effective, even though this would not necessarily be the least bad solution.

At the time of writing this evaluation, the region of Ashur is in war zone, and therefore extremely vulnerable to destruction. In fact, archaeological heritage, even though partly indicated in maps, is often not even visible, apart from remains that still survive above ground.

## **Authenticity and integrity**

The site of Ashur had been abandoned at the end of the Parthian period (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), and, contrary to many other sites in the region, there was no further occupation. Therefore, the authenticity of the remains is high. The nomination dossier mentions two structures built in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, ie Ottoman military barracks at the north-eastern edge of the site. A site museum was located here until 1991. There is also the building of the German expedition, as well as two small guard's houses.

As for restoration works, the nomination dossier reports that traditional techniques and materials (mud-bricks and plaster) have been applied in the 1980s for partial reconstruction of the Old Palace, the temple of Anu and Adad, and parts of the city wall. The reconstruction has

been based on the excavated evidence. The walls stand up to a height of ca 2 m. Baked bricks have been used for the Tabira gate, the temple of Ishtar and parts of the Parthian palace. Gypsum and some concrete have been used in mortars.

#### ***Comparative evaluation***

The Mesopotamian region is a cradle of civilisation, where several cultures have followed one another and built on each other's achievements, including the Sumerian, Akkadian, the third dynasty of Ur, Babylonian, Elamite, Assyrian, and Persian. Together with Kalah (Nimrud), Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) and Nineveh, Ashur was one of the four capitals of the Assyrians and the first of these. It is considered the only example of an urban site where continuity and change of the Assyrian civilisation pertaining to religious, public and domestic architecture, artistic production, urban planning, religious and political systems, economic subsistence and social patterns is revealed by the archaeological and textual evidence throughout the recorded archaeological periods.

In terms of historical importance and cultural impact, Ashur can be compared with ancient capitals such as Babylon, Ur, Thebes, as well as Susa, and Persepolis. No sites representing the Assyrian civilisation have been inscribed on the World Heritage List so far. The closest reference is Tchoga Zanbil (WH 1979), in western Iran, the sacred city of Elam, founded c. 1250 BCE.

#### ***Outstanding universal value***

##### ***General statement:***

The significance of the city of Ashur is related to its being the first capital of the Assyrian empire. It was also the religious centre of Assyria, being associated with the god Ashur, the national deity of the Assyrians. Historically, Ashur played a key role during the foundation of the Assyrian empire in the Middle Assyrian period, and for the development of Assyrian art and crafts. It retained its importance as the main cult site even later, and was the crowning and burial place for Assyrian kings. Apart from architectural and artistic records, a large corpus of important cuneiform texts has been discovered on the site. The major pieces found on the site are now displayed in various major museums abroad.

##### ***Evaluation of criteria:***

The nomination dossier presents the site under ***criteria iii*** and ***iv***:

***Criterion iii:*** is certainly relevant in the case of Ashur as an exceptional testimony to succeeding civilisations from the Sumerian period in the third millennium BCE to the Assyrian empire from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and, later, the Parthian revival in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The city has also been strongly associated with the identity of the Assyrians, and the name Ashur has been associated with the god, the city, and the land.

***Criterion iv:*** the site, both on the basis of its visible structures and the structural remains excavated, presents plentiful evidence of being an outstanding example of a

type of architectural ensemble illustrating significant states in human history over some millennia.

#### **4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### ***Recommendation for the future***

ICOMOS strongly recommends that protection in the area of Ashur should be extended from the excavated site to the surrounding territory, which will certainly contain extremely valuable and relevant information to the understanding of the whole region.

Secondly, ICOMOS recommends that a management regime be properly organised and implemented for the site of Ashur and its context as soon as possible.

With reference to the findings of the UNESCO mission to Ashur in November 2002, ICOMOS further recommends that:

- Iraqi authorities launch an invitation to archaeological expeditions on an international level to participate in the salvage excavations and studies of the Makhool Dam reservoir area;
- a coordination centre for the archaeological research in the area of Ashur be established with the support of UNESCO and the World Heritage Fund;
- an integrated approach be applied, combining on-site and off-site research, based on archaeological survey strategies, archaeological excavations, and the use of scientific methods of analysis;
- the necessary technical information on the Makhool Dam construction and its environmental impact be provided by the Iraqi authorities to UNESCO and its specialists as soon as possible, as a necessary condition for appropriate measures to be developed for the safeguard of Ashur and the territory affected by the dam construction.

##### ***Recommendation with respect to inscription***

ICOMOS recognizes the outstanding universal value of Ashur, and despite the current lack of management systems, considering the exceptional circumstances, recommends that the site be inscribed on the basis of ***criteria iii*** and ***iv***:

***Criterion iii:*** Founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, the most important role of Ashur was from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE when it was the first capital of the Assyrian empire. Ashur was also the religious capital of Assyrians, and the place for crowning and burial of its kings.

***Criterion iv:*** The excavated remains of the public and residential buildings of Ashur provide an outstanding record of the evolution of building practice from the Sumerian and Akkadian period through the Assyrian empire, as well as including the short revival during the Parthian period.

Consideration should also be given to inscribing the site on the World Heritage in Danger List.