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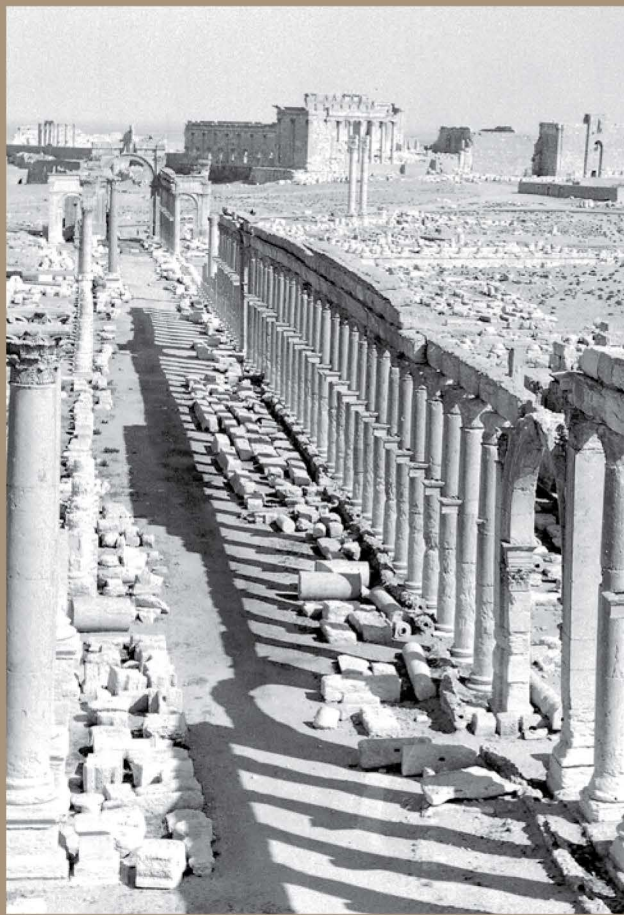
Kazimierzowski Palace, University of Warsaw

EXHIBITION



endangered heritage

SYRIA AND IRAQ IN THE RESEARCH
OF THE POLISH CENTRE
OF MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY



Great Colonnade in Palmyra

Palmyra became the site of Polish research in 1959 when Prof. Kazimierz **Michałowski** first came there, drawn by the fascinating legend of this ancient trading town in the middle of the Syrian Desert, conveniently located on the famous Silk Road, one of the major trade routes of antiquity between the Mediterranean and the lands of Persia and the Far East. The city owed its wealth to this location, giving it control over the lucrative trade. In its heyday in the 2nd and 3rd century AD it was a densely populated urban center with a developed street network and an impressive Great Colonnade running across it. Public buildings lined this thoroughfare: agora, theater, baths and temples, including the most splendid of them all, the Temple of Bel. Polish excavations, continued until 2011, have brought many spectacular discoveries in the city and in the necropolises. One of the most important discoveries was **the sanctuary of Allat** and a cult statue of the Greek Athena identified with the Arab goddess, as well as a monumental relief sculpture of a **Lion**, which reconstructed by Polish conservators, stood for 35 years in front of the entrance to the Museum in Palmyra. In 2015 it suffered damages at the hands of religious fanatics. The museum building was turned into a prison. The fate of the archaeological finds collected in it, including the statue of Athena, was unknown until the liberation of the town in March 2016. The statue was deliberately beheaded and many other objects have been lost.



Statue of Athena from the Allat sanctuary



ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND CONSERVATION PROJECTS OF THE POLISH CENTRE
OF MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW:

in Syria: Hawarte, Palmyra, Tell Abu Hafur, Tell Amarna, Tell Arbid, Tell Djaissa al-Gharbi, Tell Qaramel, Tell Rad Shaqra
in Iraq: Bijan, Hatra, Nemrik, Nimrud, M'lefaat, Masnaa, Tell Raffaana, Tell Rijim, Tell al-Saadiya, and the Upper Zab Basin.

The fate of objects of Assyrian art from **Nimrud** in Iraq is also unknown. Some of them were bulldozed into oblivion by religious fanatics (the reliefs that survive are by paradox those that were removed a long time ago to the museums in Europe and America and sold on the antiquaries market). A brief documentation and excavation project in 1974–1976 allowed Polish specialists to reconstruct the relief decoration of the palace of Assyrian rulers of the 9th century. Detailed plans were made of the palace and the stone slabs still in place were inventoried, identifying the exact locations from which many of the reliefs were removed in the past.

Ancient heritage is endangered also in times of peace, foremost by investment programs of different kinds. From the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, first Iraq and then Syria invested in huge dam construction projects on the Tigris and Euphrates and their tributaries. Many archaeological sites in the river valleys were flooded as a result. Before this took place Polish archaeologists joined the international effort to conduct **salvage excavations** at a number of tell sites concealing the remains of ancient **Mesopotamian** cities and towns. The results of their investigations broadened extensively our knowledge of the civilizations of northern Mesopotamia and the history of the region from prehistory to modern times. Polish archaeologists explored ten archaeological sites within the frame of five different salvage projects.

Among the most spectacular discoveries was the prehistoric village of **Nemrik** where **early Neolithic sculpture**, some of the oldest in the world, was found; a heavily **fortified village** from the Early Bronze Age in **Tell Rad Shaqra**, and an **Assyrian fortress** on **Bijan** island on the Euphrates. A natural consequence of this work was the initiation of new projects, which were to continue for many years, such as the joint Polish-Syrian excavations at **Tell Arbid** and **Tell Qaramel**.



Stone idol from Tell Rad Shaqra

At times it is pure accident that determines the need for archaeological and conservation interventions. This was the case in 1998 in Hawarte in Syria, where Polish archaeologists were called upon to excavate an **underground sanctuary** of the Indo-Iranian god Mithras. The next ten years were spent on clearing the rubble from a subterranean cave and preserving the unparalleled paintings preserved on its walls, depicting scenes from Mithraic mythology. Deprived of professional conservation care, these paintings today have become endangered heritage.



Palmyra in Syria, Hatra and Nimrud in Iraq — these place names have been on the news continuously in the past few months. The archaeological sites have fallen victim to the recent crisis in the Near East. Like many other places in Syria and Iraq, they were explored by teams from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. The story of these investigations is told in

ENDANGERED HERITAGE. SYRIA AND IRAQ IN THE RESEARCH OF THE POLISH CENTRE OF MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The presentation centers on a maquette, only slightly reduced, of a relief showing a Lion protecting a gazelle between its paws, reproduced for the purposes of the exhibition and symbolizing asylum in a sacred space. The original carving, discovered and restored by Polish specialists, was for 35 years a world-renown landmark of Palmyra. It was feared destroyed recently, but the news from Palmyra liberated in March is that it can be restored.

A panorama develops around the lion, moving smoothly from view to view of archaeological sites where Polish archaeologists and conservators have been working for the past 50 years. Palmyra, Hatra, Nimrud, Hawarte, Tell Qaramel... Work in Iraq had to be suspended in 1990, in Syria in 2011. Many sites have been scarred by the destructive actions of terrorists and fanatics, as well as ordinary thieves. Unparalleled archaeological and historical heritage has ceased to exist in front of our very eyes. But it is captured in its full glory in our archaeological and conservation documentation and publications, as demonstrated by our choice of exhibits on display in eight different arrangements. Some, like the towers of Palmyra, the lion relief and the sculpture of the goddess Athena have been destroyed or damaged in the name of religious fanaticism, doomed to being plundered and devastated.

The display presented at the University's gallery comes in response to UNESCO's call to support actions aimed at saving the threatened heritage of Syria and Iraq by presenting their history and culture. It is at the same time an opportunity to show Polish research and conservation achievements in these regions.

The Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw is present with its archaeological and conservation projects in several countries of the Near East: Lebanon, Jordan, the autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Armenia and Georgia. However, the work in Syria and Iraq has been going on for the longest time. Two of the sites, that the Centre's teams have investigated — Palmyra and Hatra — are on the UNESCO List of World Cultural Heritage. A few are now at the bottom of dam reservoirs constructed in the previous century on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their tributaries. Sites like Tell Arbid, Tell Qaramel and Palmyra are waiting for safer times for the archaeological investigations to resume.

For the purposes of the exhibition and in response to the UNESCO appeal, we have designed a webpage, www.heritage.pcma.uw.edu.pl, presenting a basic compendium of information on the monuments and sites researched by the Centre in Syria and Iraq. The page is palpable proof of the exceptional role that archaeological excavations have to play in safeguarding knowledge about the past.



QR codes, which the visitor will see in various places around the exhibition, are intended to direct those seeking more information on specific sites and monuments, and a wider selection of images.

The exhibition was organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw in association with the Kazimierz Michałowski Foundation.

We would like to thank all our collaborators – archaeologists, conservators, architects, documentalists and all those safeguarding the collective story of our past embodied in the monuments of ancient Syria and Iraq – for their support of this undertaking and for sharing with us their knowledge and sources.

The conference **POLES IN THE NEAR EAST** on 1–3 April 2016, coorganized by the Polish Centre and the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, sets the ground for discussions and an exchange of information concerning activities aimed at protection and monitoring of the historical heritage of Syria and Iraq, and a presentation of the full range of Polish research in this area in the past and present.

This exhibition is dedicated to **KHALED AL-ASAAD (1934–2015)** Palmyrenian.

Longstanding Museum director. Our Friend murdered in Palmyra.

We also dedicate it to all the known and nameless guardians of monuments and archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq.

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