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Getty Trust and World Monuments Fund team up for Iraq conservation

The organisations will survey the condition of the country's historic sites and then raise money for their restoration

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Two of the world's most powerful conservation bodies have joined forces to help Iraq restore its cultural heritage. The World Monuments Fund (WMF) and the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) are to collaborate with Iraq's Ministry of Culture and State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) to repair the damage sustained as a result of the 2003 war.

The initiative, announced last month, will not deal with the restoration or protection of Iraq's museums, but with endangered buildings and archaeological sites. The goal is to mobilise international resources to help repair Iraq's cultural heritage and to help build the infrastructure and expertise that are required in the country's conservation and heritage

management sectors.

The initiative got off the ground with a grant of \$250,000 from the J.M. Kaplan Fund, a New York based family foundation that supports historic preservation. The amount will be matched by in-kind support from the Getty, which will provide staff and training. Additional funding sources are being sought, but WMF president Bonnie Burnham says that even with the modest budget, the initiative will attract support by developing conservation plans that the United Nations cultural branch, Unesco, the World Bank, and other international government organisations can finance on a larger scale.

One of the first tasks, she says, will be to create a National Cultural Heritage Information System and Database that will create an inventory of Iraq's archaeological and historical sites, compile condition reports for each, and help determine conservation priorities. Ms Burnham says the database will be modelled on one created in Jordan by the American Center for Oriental Research (Acor). A planning meeting held last month in Amman, in cooperation with Acor and the Jordanian Antiquities Department, brought together WMF and GCI staff with Iraqi antiquities officials and computer technicians. "We're going to try to develop a network of Iraqis who can do the surveys," says Ms Burnham, adding that the WMF/GCI initiative will provide training.

Meanwhile, the new organisation has already made emergency grants to the Massachusetts College of Art (\$17,000) for the reinstallation of protective roofing over the looted archaeological site at Nineveh, and to the American Association for Research in Baghdad (\$12,000) for the protection of archaeological sites in central Iraq that are being looted by villagers.

According to Timothy Whalen, director of the Getty Conservation Institute, once the initiative gathers steam, the next projects will include emergency work and conservation projects that he says will be "selected to ensure maximum impact."

These include the remains of the Ottoman-era Qushla administrative complex in central Baghdad, the largest group of historical urban buildings in the capital. These were occupied by government ministries before the war but were then badly looted in the aftermath of the fighting, and now urgently need conservation so that government functions can be restored. Another priority is Erbil, an ancient city in Iraqi Kurdistan, the citadel of which has been continuously occupied for 5,000 years. Now it is at risk from unmanaged urban development.

SBAH is eager to secure the leaning minaret of the 12th-century al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul and

the so-called Arch of Ctesiphon, the remains of a huge vaulted hall built by Parthian Kings in the fourth century AD.

“In recent times, Iraqi professionals responsible for conservation and management of these sites have been isolated and demoralised,” says Dr Whalen “We are under no illusions about the difficulties and dangers involved, but this is something that we can do, where we can and will make a difference. We owe this to the future.”

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