

In the air

For Iraq

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Plenty of people have taken up their pens or marched through the streets against Mr Bush and his war. Fewer have spoken out for Iraq – not for Mr Hussein, but for his country – and for peace.

I wanted to make a plea for Iraq, but what words would serve? Clearly, it would be futile to try and win over hearts and minds by writing about the martyrdom of the people of Iraq – the doctors and nurses desperate for the drugs they need to prevent the sick from dying, the children still suffering the effects of radiation during Mr Bush senior's war, the over one million children under five who suffer from chronic malnutrition, the women afraid to bear children... After all, the Iraqi people have been the greatest victims of efforts by the West during the last twelve years to topple Mr Hussein from power but sanctions continue nonetheless.

Then I remembered Afghanistan and the tidal wave of outrage that rolled over the media when the Taliban demolished the giant Buddhas, while the suffering of the people had barely caused a ripple. So I decided to write about the precious cultural history and the archaeological treasures of the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular that would be devastated if Mr Bush is not prevented from showing off his new weaponry on that country. Perhaps, I thought, that might work up a little healthy anger...

According to the experts in the field, Iraq contains hundreds of thousands of archaeological sites – just ten thousand have been identified so far. This is not surprising when you remember that modern Iraq lies on the territory of one of the most ancient civilisations in the Middle East, the mythical land of Mesopotamia – the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, those twin sources of destruction and fertility.

The Iraqi soil thus contains fabulous riches – and I'm talking not about oil, but about the remains of some of our earliest urban civilisations, cities where some of our most ancient stories are set and whose names resonate down through the millennia: the biblical city of Ur, the traditional birthplace of the Jewish patriarch Abraham; Babylon the Fair, site of the Tower of Babel, where the God of Genesis hurled down punishment upon men by confounding their language, whose Hanging Gardens were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, where King Nebuchadnezzar deported the Jews and was later immortalized by



Head of Lion from Ur, 3rd millennium B.C.

Verdi in his opera Nabucco, where Belshazzar staggered back at seeing the Writing on the Wall; Uruk, home of the legendary Sumerian king Gilgamesh, whose tortured search for immortality became one of the great epics of humanity; the cult centre of Eridu, where excavations have brought to light a miraculous series of temples dating from the sixth millennium BC and culminating, in the third, with the Great Ziggurat; Ashur, named for the Sun God of the Assyrians; Nineveh, site of the Temple of Ishtar, goddess of love and war, and the royal libraries, with their thousands of clay tablets bearing precious witness to ancient Mesopotamian history.

Throughout the ages, civilisation succeeded civilisation, each bringing to the region its particular genius. The Sumerian legacy included the wheel, bronze, the minutes of the hour (the number sixty, sacred to the god An, was their basic unit of calculation) and cuneiform, a mode of writing using combinations of the same basic shape, stamped on clay, to represent words and syllables. Subsequent civilisations left friezes depicting their way of life and complex cities made of brick and stone, canals, roads, astronomy, agriculture, irrigation, mathematics, legal codes and other achievements too numerous to mention.

Of all this rich history, countless traces remain buried, layer upon archaeological layer, in Iraq.

Obviously, many of the most precious artefacts and architectural remains have long been carried off to museums and treasure houses around the world – you

can gasp at the vast over-reaching arches and soaring azure walls of Babylon in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. But one can only guess at the antiquities and archaeological treasures that remain in situ, as yet undiscovered.

Many archaeologists have already left the region, indefinitely abandoning important excavation work on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Some may never return.

Experts say that war in Iraq could result in some of the earliest cities of Mesopotamia being bombed into oblivion.

And what Mr Bush's bombs fail to destroy risks falling prey to the looters and plunderers who profit from post-war chaos and confusion to make their fortune – as was the case after the 1991 War, when untold quantities of Iraq's ancient treasures were stolen, smuggled out of the country and sold to unscrupulous art dealers and collectors for vast sums of money.

As humans, we need to find out as much as possible about where we come from and the archaeological heritage of Iraq is unique as a source of knowledge about our cultural origins. The excavations, with their potential for new knowledge about our history, must be preserved. War on Iraq would be a cultural disaster, the destruction of an irreplaceable part of our civilisation.

The legendary land between the Tigris and the Euphrates is often called the cradle of civilisation.

We must not let it become civilisation's grave.