

Iraq's top cultural official resigns

Donny George says lack of money and growing interference from anti-Western Shi'ite party are his reasons for leaving his post

By **Lucian Harris** | Posted 26 August 2006

LONDON. Donny George has resigned as President of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) in Iraq, citing his frustration at lack of funding and at growing interference from the radical Shi'ite party now in control of the government ministry to which SBAH is attached.

Speaking to The Art Newspaper from Damascus where he has moved with his family, Dr George said that the present financial crisis is so severe that from this month there is no money to pay the salaries of the special police force that has been protecting archaeological sites across Iraq, without which looters will be given free reign.

Dr George says Baghdad is now so dangerous that the National Museum has been closed and completely sealed with thick concrete walls. The move follows the kidnapping two months ago of 50 people near the museum building. Dr George then requested permission to seal the museum from the Ministry of Culture. This was initially withheld but Dr George defied his instructions and had the concrete walls put into place. "It was the only way to guarantee the museum's safety," says Dr George.

Iraqi archaeologist Dr George gained international prominence as director of the National Museum in Baghdad, playing a vital role in the recovery of artefacts looted after the US invasion and the subsequent reorganisation and reopening of the museum.

Dr George says that, having worked for the SBAH for over 30 years, he retired on 7 August because his position had become "intolerable" over the past year. "The board has come under the increasing influence of al-Sadr [the militant Shi'ite party founded by radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which has 30 seats in the Iraqi parliament and controls a number of ministries]," says Dr George. "I can no longer work with these people who have come in with the new ministry. They have no knowledge of archaeology, no knowledge of antiquities, nothing."

Dr George, who is a Christian, says that in the past year an increasingly Islamist and anti-western agenda over which he had little control had permeated the activities of the SBAH. "A lot of people have been sent to our institutions," he says. "They are only interested in Islamic sites and not Iraq's earlier heritage." According to Dr George, the new President of the SBAH is Haider Farhan, an al-Sadr party member with no relevant experience for the post. "There is nothing to recommend him," says Dr George.

Dr George is well known in museums around the world, but says that he had come under increasing pressure to discontinue these international links which he believed were essential

to the activities of the SBAH. "They did not like me having any contact with anyone from outside," he says. He says that it had even become difficult to maintain a liaison with the Coalition representatives in Baghdad, making it harder to respond quickly to reports of troops damaging archaeological sites. "With good communications there is a chance that damage can be stopped," he says. "We had the same problems with Saddam's army, but often we could do something."

Dr George says that over the past two years excavations and conservation work in Iraq had ground to a halt and all the foreign archaeologists had left the country. "Recently my main work has been the patrol system," he says. "We organised a force of over 1,400 specially trained policemen who protect archaeological sites throughout the country." However, funding for this scheme has run out, raising the worrying possibility of sites throughout the country unprotected from looters. "From September there is no more money for their salaries," says Dr George. "The Coalition has to do something about this."