

OBITUARY ABDULAMIR AL-HAMDANI (1967–2022)

Dr Abdulmir Al-Hamdani, who passed away on 29th April 2022 in Nasiriyah, Iraq, aged 55, was one of the most important Iraqi archaeologists of his generation. The archaeology of Iraq dominated every part of his life – he even named one of his sons ‘Uruk’ – and his dedication to it eventually led to his attaining the position of Minister of Culture. His passion for Iraqi art and culture and his achievements inspired many Iraqi archaeologists and local communities to work hard in protecting the endangered cultural heritage of Iraq. Dr Hamdani was born in the marshes of Southern Iraq, in a village named Al-Midug, within what became a World Heritage Site. He was very proud to be from this unique and understudied region and maintained a lifelong commitment to understanding its landscapes and ways of life. His focus was on archaeology, but he was also interested in modern-day conditions, especially as he had seen so much change over his lifetime.

He obtained an undergraduate degree in archaeology from the University of Baghdad before joining the ThiQar province office of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), where he worked from 2001–2009. In 2010 he moved to the United States to undertake postgraduate studies at Stony Brook University with Professor Elizabeth Stone. His PhD dissertation, awarded in 2015, drew on his own background to investigate the enigmatic ‘shadow states’, the Sealand Dynasties which developed in the marshes of Mesopotamia during the second millennium BC. After graduating, Dr Hamdani returned to his job with the SBAH in ThiQar Province before joining Durham University as the training manager for the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) project in 2017. Just a year later, he was appointed as Minister of Culture, serving from 2018 to 2020. When his ministership ended, he continued to advise and guide local and international projects, serving on the management committees of EAMENA and the Nahrein Network, based in the History Department at University College London.

Dr Hamdani was very well known across Iraq for his brave and decisive actions in safeguarding archaeological sites from looting during the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. The collapse of the Iraqi state in 2003 left many sites with no protection, and they became the target of looters and smuggling networks intent on recovering objects to sell. Dr Hamdani quickly recognised the scale of this brutal destruction of Iraqi heritage and, at great personal risk, began discussions with the occupying coalition forces seeking intervention, even joining troops in the field as they sought to capture looters. He also successfully lobbied the supreme leader of Shia Islam in Najaf to issue a fatwa (religious order) forbidding looting, smuggling, and trading in artefacts. This fatwa was widely distributed by Dr Hamdani and other archaeologists and heritage activists and assisted them in convincing the public to confront the looters and smugglers and shame them for their illicit actions. As a result, thousands of artefacts stolen from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad during the early stages of the occupation were recovered and returned. Dr Hamdani’s activities during this period helped to reduce looting and smuggling, as well as raise awareness in local and international communities about the crisis facing Iraqi heritage in the aftermath of the US occupation. His activism on this front continued whilst he was in the US, including organising a protest outside the Whitehouse in 2014 to raise awareness of the threats to Iraqi heritage posed by ISIS.

At the same time as conducting this vital organising work, Dr Hamdani was also gathering evidence on regional and national archaeological sites. Making heavy use of new techniques such as remote sensing, he began a long-term project to catalogue all known archaeological sites in Iraq, resulting in a dataset of over 15,000 entries. After returning to Iraq, Dr Hamdani also conducted fieldwork in the marshes, ground checking and dating sites he had identified on satellite imagery. Many of these areas had not previously been surveyed, and his work resulted in an additional 1,200 sites being added to the official records of the SBAH for the region. The new



Dr Abdulmir Al-Hamdani at Tell Sakhariya, 2012. Credit: Marie-Helene Carleton/Four Corners Media

dataset has proved invaluable to both the SBAH and international teams working on heritage protection. In the final stage of his career, Dr Hamdani demonstrated his abilities as an administrator and facilitator of projects. As Minister of Culture and director of the SBAH, he was instrumental in the reopening of Basra Museum and commencing renovations at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and oversaw new excavation and restoration works at a host of sites, including major cities such as Ur and Assur. He was well respected internationally, successfully leading negotiations for the return of looted artefacts from Europe and America and lobbying for the city of Babylon to gain World Heritage Site status.

Dr Hamdani's contributions to Iraqi archaeology and culture were profound and long-lasting. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are sites today preserved for excavation, and artefacts in Iraqi museums, which would have been lost without his interventions. His research on the marshes, both archaeological and ethnographic, has provided a record of regions and peoples disappearing fast through modernisation, industrialisation and climate change. Abdulmir was also a profoundly kind and caring person, easy-going and humble with everyone from students to presidents and maintaining time for each, even as his seniority grew. A memorial event was held (online via zoom and in person at Stony Brook University) on 21st May 2022, organised by Stephanie Rost, Elizabeth Stone, Paul Zimansky, Kathryn Twiss, Elizabeth Hildebrand and Jaafar Jotheri. Abdulmir's family (his wife, Mrs Batool Almousawi and his two sons, Haider and Uruk) and close friends participated in the online event, and they were so proud of his legacy and achievements at national and international levels. They also describe him as a great, kind and beloved father and husband. Abdulmir saw the unique heritage of ancient Iraq as a source of national identity, with the power to unify across religious and ethnic divides. Preserving and

promoting this heritage was his life's work, one for which all scholars of the region should be forever grateful.

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