

MASSIMO CULTRARO

MR. CULTRARO: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. The subject of my presentation is the Iraq virtual Museum project. It is a multidisciplinary research project promoted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and under the scientific supervision by the Italian National Research Council, CNR.

The project launched in 2006 is designed to create a content-rich website, free to the general public, based on the archaeological collection of the – one of the most important museum in the world.

As you know, Baghdad Museum has been looted, stripping it of priceless collection of cultural artifact which are important historical treasures, not only for Iraqi people, but also for all humanity. The creation of an innovative virtual museum should need to explore new digital communication system to access an impressive archaeological collection at present not available.

The project explored different new integrated digital technologies for virtual heritage focusing on the use of photo modeling, interactive streaming video, laser scanning, and 3D digital advanced technologies.

For the first time, the remarkable ancient civilization of Mesopotamia from the rise of the first state, cities, the Protourban period until the Islamic period are perceived in a long-time historical sequence in order to simulate a word across cultural appreciation and dialogue between archaeologists and publics.

One of the indisputable results of this project is continually to pose new question about research methodologies and the use of applied technologies, both by archaeologists and the scientists too. The aim of the project are three, create a virtual museum, a content-rich website based on the Baghdad Museum collection in order to stimulate cross-cultural apparition cooperation and dialogue. We anticipate that the site would feature the best search and navigational tools including interactive streaming video, GIS 3D navigation, and online classrooms.

The second point is to build 3D collaborative workspace within the virtual Baghdad Museum to allow international teams to work together on a renovation design, exhibit layout, and a new building proposal for the museum in Baghdad.

The third last point is to establish resource center for community, cultural development within the virtual Baghdad Museum offering experience, ideas, and success stories that show how people can contribute collectively to our own culture and thereby strengthen their historical memory.

The first phase of the project is the present website that was developed in the spring of this year, and my direct scientific supervision given me by Professor Demarted (phonetic) who I wanted to thank. The goal for this phase is to help lay the general parameters of

the whole project and to focus specifically on the earliest period of the archaeological aspect of Mesopotamia.

The website is intent to function on two levels. At one level, the visitor will be having the experience of being in the museum moving especially among the major points of culture in place and time. Another level, there is analytical investigation of the major historical periods according to the traditional sequence of the rooms compound in the Iraqi museum.

The visitors can read and see to navigate general background about the history of a selected period, and then to visit the maps on the main assortment and catalog of the main artifacts stored in each hall. Indeed a short movie about a specific topic will be available.

In this paper I don't examine specifically the methodologies and the new digital technologies for virtual heritage. I am as an archaeologist, and I would like to focus on important results in the archaeological field coming from this very innovative project. The study of the most important aspects in the human history of ancient Mesopotamia offers the opportunity to do an evaluation and to reflect on theories, methods, and approaches that are the currency of Mesopotamian archeology at the start of the 21st century. I shall start with the presentation of the main case studies, and then before concluding my paper I will show two short movies on the activity of the virtual museum. Before starting, I would like to spend a moment in consideration of the trajectories of theoretical framework in Mesopotamian archeology.

Ancient Mesopotamia was the original place of many of the major development in human history such as the earliest farming, the rise of urban literature society and the first empires, the very big first empires of antiquity such as Akkad, Babylonia or Assyria.

The history of Mesopotamian archaeology has a modern discipline rooted in the colonial past of the Western powers. That does mean that at the beginning of the Mesopotamia archaeology there exists, and continues until now, an Eurocentric tradition. In fact, the theory and the practices of modern discipline are heavily rooted in the history of the Western political interest in Middle East.

By the turn of the millennium Mesopotamian archaeology had evolved over a period, some 150 years from museum-backed antiquity finding exercise with its roots in biblical interest towards a modern discipline utilizing and generating the latest approach methodologies and techniques.

We can also see the progress of the discipline has occurred in fits and starts with frequent halts to activity brought about political factor. As for example in recent years the use and abuse by Saddam regime of archaeological documentation is very important. Good point of the use of a political imaging was the identification of the Saddam Hussein with Sargon the king.

And we have representation of the modeling of ancient imaging in a political dimension. We can also see the progress of the discipline has occurred in – as I said in fits and starts. But according to the theories and approaches to the Mesopotamian archaeology, the Iraq Virtual Museum is based on two major theoretical context. The first is the cultural history, the second, the anthropological archaeology.

Cultural history has been the dominant paradigm of European archaeology in Mesopotamia. Since the inception of the discipline in 19th-century in the general framework of the project the approach to the tradition of history culture is real important. There are still many sense in which we work to establish, even at quite basic levels, the chronological and spatial boundaries of cultural entities with and around Mesopotamia.

The fruits of this application in our project is to extend the study of the main human communities of ancient Mesopotamia to a wider geographical perspective in order to compare the transformation process with those of neighboring areas. About the second point, the anthropological archaeology, it is a very broad and diverse set of ideas and approaches but consistent elements include conviction that human communities can be studied in a range of scientific ways.

In the reconstruction of the historical background that we proposed for each room of the Baghdad Museum we use interdisciplinary approach in which information of different kind are recorded. Arguably, this approach provided to examine the big questions about Mesopotamia archaeology as the region of agriculture, the transformation of a primitive culture into a civilized condition, the origin of the state – the origin of the state et cetera, et cetera. On the words of the archaeologist, important famous archaeologist Henry Wright, research strategy depends upon what one wishes to explain, that's true, but I personally explain this issue saying that one might as well daydream because daydreaming is a part, essential part of archaeology.

But ideas will be more effective and more attractive if tied to a programmatic research strategy in sum but culture, history, and anthropological archaeology (inaudible) with the context of Mesopotamian archaeology. But it's my opinion it's – and it's one of the aim of the project their application in concert both for cultural history and anthropological archeology that is the most beneficial.

Let's now – to show a case study in which humanistic approach is integrated with recent scientific methods. More specifically the ancient sources and archaeological data are integrated with archaeological remote sensing and image based 3D modeling. Moreover, the use of satellite images with hydrometric resolution for no military purposes provide the new opportunities in the identification, interpretation of ancient sites. The case study that I show is Dur-Sharrukin or Fortress of Sargon, one of the most impressive example of an imperial court center from Assyrian, Mesopotamia. The city has been chosen for case study because the ancient capital of Sargon II was deserted immediately after the king's death. And so only the most important public buildings had been finished and the superimposed debris has protected the site for two millennium.

The use of high resolution satellite images provide excellent (inaudible) vision of the topography of Dur-Sharrukin, the arrows – the red arrows indicates the traits and remains of the city walls. The boundaries of the city can be clearly distinguished, and it is possible to locate the seven gates located along the circuit of the walls and the great of the streets. This is the virtual reconstruction according to satellite images.

This is our general plan, and this plan is the result of analytical study on the satellite images, and it's possible to update the original map of excavation by Oriental Institute of Chicago carry out excavation in this area in 1928 until 1935. This image is one taken by QuickBird in 2002 shows the northern area of the ancient Assyrian capital. In the square it's visible, the Temple of Sebitti which was explored by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in 1957. After the exploration, trace of location of this temple is a very important religious building of ancient Khorsabad disappeared and then thanks now of the application of modern satellite image we can relocate the building between the Gate 8 and Gate 7.

The examining of the satellite images is a fundamental premise to the three dimensional modeling activity. Now we see a sequence of reconstruction, virtual reconstruction off ancient Khorsabad. This is the image of the north entrance to the palace of Sargon II, and over there you can see the famous Ziggurat, and view of the palace according to the plan produced by the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

The new plan of the palace with the building of the high functionary of the palace this is the virtual reconstruction of the palace, and to conclude I can say that Khorsabad represent an excellent case study where the reconstructive archaeology must convince the traditional data with the use of modern computer technologies.

This is just only a part of the wider Iraq Virtual Museum which shows the methodological complexity of information process speaking on ancient history and archaeology. The path from understanding to communication towards a large public implies valid sequence of acquisition and representation of the select knowledge which concern the relationships between archaeological data and their perception.

Now we can see the short movie about the room of Assyrian period. I need help to start.

(Video clip being played)

MR. CULTRARO: Okay.

MR. BOBLEY: Thank you.

MR. CULTRARO: Okay, thank you.

(Applause)