CHAPTER 9

GERMAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE’S
PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN IRAQ AND
ELSEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The German Archaeological Institute (DAI) emerged 180 years ago out of the Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica in Rome, which had been founded by friends of academics—scholars, artists, and diplomats—from various countries in Europe. Their purpose was to collect, document, and publish information about ancient objects and sites and thereby foster the flow of correspondence between archaeologists throughout Europe.\footnote{Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Vom internationalen Privatverein zur preussischen Staatsanstalt. Zur Geschichte des Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica, in 9 Das Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. Geschichte und Dokumente [The German Archaeological Institute. History and Documents] (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut ed., 1986).}

For financial reasons, however, the international mission of this circle of friends slowly but surely yielded to an institution with a national character. The primary motive of collegial cooperation among scholars in all countries nevertheless persevered. In 1871, this organization was officially installed as an institution of the Prussian state, that is, the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.\footnote{For the legal structures and changes, see Hans Meyer, Der Rechtsstatus des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, in Rechtsgutachten, 2004/2 AA, at 155–220 (2005).} A manifestation of this official status today is that the DAI is an independent governmental agency located in the sphere of the Federal Foreign Office. Despite its status as a governmental agency, it is nevertheless solely devoted to academic research, while its structure and ethical guidelines are reflective of German cultural policy. Moreover, representative departments and offices of the DAI are located in most of its host countries: Egypt, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Spain, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen.

Members of the DAI usually reside in the host countries for many years, where they are integrated among the population. They conduct archaeological research and cultural and historical studies together with local archaeologists, historians, and other scientists. They also take part in the academic programs of the respective countries’ universities. Hence, they are actively engaged in fulfilling the charge of the DAI of maintaining, preserving, and fostering the cultural heritage of the particular country. Aside from their scholastic duties,
members of the DAI also assist and consult in organizing exhibitions at sites and in museums, preparing informative pamphlets and booklets for the public, advising filmmakers, and organizing or assist in guided tours.

The DAI is committed to recognizing the special circumstances that prevail in the various host countries and to working collaboratively with the cultural institutions of each country. The DAI’s strong interest in this type of cooperation has led to many collaborative projects that are widely acknowledged in the host countries. In consequence, many of the DAI members are honorary professors in the respective country’s universities and academies of science. At present 11 departments of the DAI are engaged in archaeological work in 36 countries, and around 190 projects are maintained worldwide.3

This background succinctly describes the Oriental Department of the DAI, which maintains branch offices in Baghdad, Damascus, and Sana’a. The branch office in Baghdad was founded in 1955 shortly after the resumption of German excavations in Uruk following World War II. One of its aims was to serve as an administrative base for German archaeological projects. For many years, excavations in Uruk-Warka, Babylon, and several other sites were carried out by the department.4 From its very beginnings, this office nevertheless saw itself as a cultural institution, cooperating directly with several Iraqi institutions as well as other foreign institutes in Iraq. For instance, some rooms in the DAI’s Baghdad office were used for teaching courses in ancient Near Eastern philology to Iraqi students, until the subject was introduced at the University of Baghdad.

The archaeological work of the DAI in Iraq continued during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980–89 and during the economic embargo imposed by the United Nations on Iraq in 1990–2003, albeit irregularly.5 This period of time was marked by the increasing difficulty of Iraqi colleagues in maintaining contact with the international scientific community. Because of the war, almost all Iraqi citizens were barred from travel permits; further, because of the embargo, even the import of books and other research materials was greatly constrained. The exchange of literature was also subjected to strict control. Chemicals and other substances for conservation work, photographic supplies for documentation, and technical equipment fell under the restrictions of the embargo. During that time the DAI devoted itself to supporting Iraqi colleagues, and this goal often involved carrying out unspectacular yet not at all easy activities. For example, I was serving as director of the Baghdad office in the spring of 1999 when we learned from staff members of the German Embassy that part of the embassy building would be cleared out. Among other things, many boxes of writing paper with embassy letterhead were to be thrown away. At that time, the income of the Iraqi populace had decreased drastically, to an average three to five U.S.


5 During that period Prof. Dr. Rainer Michael Boehmer (until 1996) and Dr. Margarete van Ess (since 1996) have headed the branch office in Baghdad.