

Stop the Ilisu Dam

Martin Hall

On 16th January 2001, the President of the World Archaeological Congress, Professor Martin Hall of the University of Cape Town, wrote to Prime Minister Blair to protest about British support for the proposed construction of the Ilisu dam in South East Turkey.

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you in my capacity as president of the World Archaeological Congress in order to express grave concern with respect to your Government's proposed support for the construction of the Ilisu dam in South East Turkey.

As you will be aware, this particular project has been the subject of widespread criticism from many quarters. I am writing today with reference to fundamental issues concerning the human rights of the large and overwhelmingly Kurdish populations scheduled to be moved from their homes and resettled in advance of the flooding of towns and villages – specifically their rights with regard to the potential cultural heritage impact of the proposed dam.

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is an international forum for the discussion of all aspects of the past that holds large international conferences every four years attended by hundreds of archaeologists and other interested parties. Its continuing membership comprises concerned individuals from all five continents, represented between the four yearly meetings by regional representatives drawn from twenty-eight countries around the world. WAC has a particular interest in the areas of the protection, conservation and exploitation of the archaeological heritage, with a specific emphasis being placed upon the effect of archaeological and heritage work on the wider community and the responsibilities of archaeologists with regard to the cultural rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. To that end, an indigenous constituency is represented on the WAC executive.

World Archaeological Congress is aware that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Stephen Byers M.P., has made it a condition for the granting of an export credit guarantee to the British construction firm Balfour Beatty that the Turkish authorities concerned, 'produce a

detailed plan to preserve as much of the archaeological heritage of Hasankeyf as possible'. At present, a few archaeologists are struggling to document just a fraction of the archaeological material now under threat in that town. The World Archaeological Congress also notes with particular alarm press reports of last minute 'salvage archaeology' recently carried out at sites such as the Roman city of Zeugma/Apamea within the catchment area of the Birecik dam on the Euphrates River, another construction project under the management of the Turkish State Hydraulic Works. Such working conditions can never lend themselves to the fulfilment of the condition set with respect to the archaeological heritage at Hasankeyf.

In fact, the World Archaeological Congress believes that it would be very difficult to draw up and implement a satisfactory preservation plan in the circumstances prevailing in the region at present. In this regard, Congress would wish to make it clear to your Government that the cultural heritage impact of the dam reservoir extends far beyond the purely physical confines of Hasankeyf itself in two related ways.

Firstly, hundreds of different cultural sites, dating to every period of human history, fall within the total catchment area of the proposed dam reservoir, and are therefore threatened with destruction through inundation, or associated construction and irrigation works. Individual sites of local, regional and international significance include examples dating to the Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Neo-Assyrian, Late Roman, Byzantine and later medieval periods respectively. Many other sites of crucial importance to any adequate understanding of the more recent histories of the local populations in this region, including ancestral graveyards, are also under threat of destruction and/or prevention of access.

Secondly, from an archaeological perspective it is vital to consider the relationship between the physical archaeological material and the affected communities living in the area today. There are a variety of claims to aspects of cultural heritage made by differing sectors of the population located right across the catchment area of the proposed dam, of which the importance of Hasankeyf itself to Kurdish people is only the best known. These claims and different valuations of the past, whether disputed or not, must be outlined, researched and addressed in full, and those affected must be consulted and equitably involved in any decisions regarding further investigation of this heritage. This applies to Hasankeyf but also to all of the other archaeological material mentioned above. To date, there seems to have been inadequate consultation with affected communities in the area regarding cultural heritage and no serious attempt to involve them on an equal basis. Even less recognition has been given to their capacities and knowledge with regard to this impact or their rights to retain access to and use of cultural property.

In particular, the World Archaeological Congress must express grave concern that the vast majority of sites dating from medieval and modern times and of most direct relevance to the recent history of indigenous populations are in danger of being ignored altogether. The archaeology of these more recent periods

has suffered most from the enforced brevity of archaeological surveys carried out thus far and archaeologists in the area are currently without the knowledge necessary even to begin to attempt adequate documentation. Such an oversight is all too readily made in the case of 'salvage archaeology' of the kind proposed for Ilisu, and can lead to the total submergence of the unrecorded material heritage of marginalised people.

The severing of people from the materials through which they understand their past has demonstrable traumatic effects, particularly when those people are already excluded, exploited or discriminated against. Several national and international bodies now emphasise the need for consultation with all sectors of project-affected communities on their cultural and social rights, the requirement to seek avoidance of detrimental impacts on those rights and in particular, the principle of free, prior and informed consent with regard to indigenous and tribal peoples. Like many other organisations, the World Archaeological Congress is currently considering the report of the World Commission on Dams, which was the most recent statement on such issues in the context of dams and which summarises the international rights framework for foregrounding the social, cultural and environmental impacts in decisions on building a dam or opting for an alternative. Congress also notes the emphasis on social inclusion and cultural diversity in the English Heritage review of policies relating to the historic environment – factors surely as relevant in South East Turkey given the nature of society in the region. Congress itself strongly supports the rights and capacities of indigenous peoples in the use and disposition of their cultural property including access to their religious and cultural sites (whether legally held or not) and recognises the rights of different ethnic groups to give consent over any proposed treatment of their dead. The code of ethics of the World Archaeological Congress includes an obligation 'to establish equitable partnerships and relationships between Members and indigenous peoples whose cultural heritage is being investigated' and 'to seek, wherever possible, representation of indigenous peoples in agencies funding or authorising research to be certain their view is considered as critically important in setting research standards, questions, priorities and goals'.

You will see immediately how cultural rights, as an aspect of human rights, are a key priority in archaeological work since obligations include responsibilities to those communities with whom archaeologists work. In relation to the Ilisu dam, the issues of cultural rights of affected communities, of the much broader range of archaeological material at risk and of the obligations of archaeologists in these two related instances, do not currently form any substantial part of your own Government's express condition with respect to the archaeological heritage of the region.

Adequate opportunities to discharge these professional obligations or to give voice to cultural rights are unlikely to occur at Ilisu, given the realities of the current political situation in South East Turkey. The prevailing circumstances of emergency rule in force in the region make it impossible to document the true

extent of the cultural impacts of the dam in any archaeological preservation plan. It is not difficult to outline a likely scenario under the present circumstances, however. The World Archaeological Congress believes that the inadequate respect for human rights in this area, which includes violation of cultural rights, makes it very likely that those impacts will be severe, irreversible and disastrous for long-term social stability within affected communities and in the region generally. Congress considers that violation of social and cultural rights of affected communities, in the context of the lack of any attempt to avoid present and future impacts by seriously considering alternatives to the project, is legitimate ground for not proceeding with construction of the Ilisu dam itself.

The World Archaeological Congress asks that current and potential violations of this sort be regarded as the fundamental archaeological ground for reconsidering the United Kingdom Government's proposed funding of this project and, on that basis, requests that your Government withdraw its support for it immediately.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,
Martin Hall
President
World Archaeological Congress