

The Theft and Destruction of Iraq's Ancient Past

Robert D. Biggs, Ph.D. Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

The looting of the Iraq Museum that occurred April 10th to 12th 2003 was widely reported in the media to universal outrage. But it was no surprise to American and British scholars who had repeatedly warned their governments of the possibility—indeed the likelihood—of such looting if precautions were not taken to prevent it. A detailed report is given by McGuire Gibson in “Cultural Tragedy in Iraq: A Report on the Looting of Museums, Archives, and Sites,” *IFAR Journal* [International Foundation for Art Research] 6 (2003), pp. 30-37 in which he reports on his findings from a visit to the Iraq Museum and to sites in the south of Iraq in May 2003. A more recent publication is Milbry Polk and Angela Schuster, eds., *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York, 2005). This volume has a brief account of the looting itself, but also detailed chapters on the museum's holdings in various periods and various genres. My chapter is entitled “The Birth of Writing, the Dawn of Literature.”

Though initial reports of the number of objects stolen from the Iraq Museum turned out to be based on a misunderstanding, a number of the most famous treasures of the museum were indeed stolen. Among them was the famed Warka vase from ancient Uruk, a masterpiece of Sumerian art. It was eventually recovered, but in a damaged condition. Likewise the famous Warka head, one of the most instantly recognizable pieces of Sumerian sculpture, was stolen (but recovered some months later). The copper statue of a seated figure, nearly life-size, the base of which is inscribed in cuneiform with a dedication of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (about 2350 B.C.), and which weighs hundreds of pounds, was carried off. It, too, was recovered some months later, reportedly from a cesspool where it had been hidden. See figure 1.

A really major loss was the theft of the museum's entire collection of cylinder seals acquired before 1991—many hundreds of seals, some of the very highest quality, from excavations going back to the 1920s and 1930s. The former Director of the Iraq Museum, Nawala al-Mutawalli, gave the number as 4,795, though I do not know whether that figure also includes the considerable number looted from regional museums in 1991. A very few have been recovered in New York and elsewhere, but the vast majority have disappeared, presumably into the illegal antiquities trade. Several are illustrated here in modern impressions (figures 2-5). The seals illustrated are all from the Oriental Institute's excavations in the Diyala region of Iraq in the 1930s. All are presumed to have been looted from the Iraq Museum.

It is believed that someone who once worked at the Iraq Museum may have had a hand in the theft of the seal collection since the looters knew where the keys to the locked storage cabinets were kept and where the cabinets themselves were located. It has been reported that the huge coin collections of the Iraq

Museum escaped the same fate only by accident. The looters apparently dropped the keys in the storeroom and in the darkness were unable to find them.

Apparently the huge collection of cuneiform tablets was spared because the tablets had recently been moved to a new location and someone who had not worked at the museum recently would not have known where they had been moved to. However some cuneiform tablets from recent excavations that were awaiting cataloguing were stolen along with other finds awaiting cataloguing.

The Nimrud gold from the tombs of the queens of Assyria, one of the most extraordinary finds of recent times, was a major concern. It turns out that this collection had been stored in the underground vaults at the Central Bank. In the aftermath of the invasion of Baghdad, these vaults were flooded (whether accidentally or on purpose is not clear). When the flooded water had been pumped out (with technical help provided by the National Geographical Society) and the vaults opened, the cases containing the gold were found sealed and intact. The gold was put on display again briefly in the Iraq Museum, but is again in storage until such time as the museum can be reopened. Some of the pieces, of truly extraordinary workmanship, are illustrated in Muayad Said Damerji, Gräber assyrischer Königinnen aus Nimrud (Mainz, 1999). A number of pieces are published in color in "The Golden Treasures of Nimrud," Time, October 30, 1989, pp. 80-81.

Reporting on an art crime conference, the British newspaper The Independent on May 24, 2005, quotes John Curtis, Keeper of the Department of the Ancient Near East at the British Museum, as saying that about half of the 40 iconic items looted from the Iraq Museum still have not been retrieved. And of at least 15,000 items looted from its storerooms, about 8,000 have yet to be traced. Of the items recovered, about 1,000 have been confiscated in the United States.

This was not the first occurrence of looting of museums in Iraq. In the chaos following the 1991 Gulf War, many of the provincial museums were looted. It had been the practice of museum authorities to display in the regional museums original artifacts, especially those from sites in the region. These losses (hundreds of objects) have been listed (and partly illustrated) in Lost Heritage: Antiquities Stolen from Iraq's Regional Museums (fascicle 1 by McGuire Gibson and Augusta McMahon, Chicago, 1992 and fascicle 2 by H. D. Baker, R. J. Matthews, and J. N. Postgate, London, 1993). Losses included pieces from Nippur, Ur, Abu Salabikh, and many other major sites. Very few of these objects have been recovered. One that was recovered was a copper peg figurine from the Temple Oval at al-Hiba (ancient Lagash) of about 2400 B.C. It was identified when it was published in an auction catalogue in New York.

The smugglers of antiquities and art objects are not only organized groups with connections to the shadowy world of the illicit antiquities trade, but individuals as well. A journalist who had worked in Iraq was convicted of smuggling into the United States several cylinder seals that still bore their Iraq Museum registration numbers. A newspaper story on May 19, 2005 reports that in a court martial at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, an officer has been accused of shipping home from Iraq enough foreign-made automatic weapons to equip an army platoon, along with hundreds of other illegal war souvenirs, for example, a Chinese machine gun, six rocket-propelled grenade launchers, 1,183 Iraqi army

berets, 600 pairs of socks, eight full uniforms, and 253 bayonets), as well as a statue looted from an Iraqi museum (Associated Press story by Bill Kaczor in the Mercury News, cited on the Iraqcrisis web site). It turns out that the statue is not ancient, but a modern wooden sculpture stolen from the main art museum in Baghdad (formerly known as the Saddam Center for Art), illustrating again the extent to which cultural institutions in Iraq were looted. No doubt, other service personnel returning from Iraq do smuggle back a few items, but they cannot hold a candle to the reported truckloads of antiquities being smuggled out of Iraq by the professional smugglers.

Most of what archaeologists discover in excavations has no commercial value. Fundamental in excavating in areas where mud brick was the primary building material is the recovery of architectural remains, usually foundations of buildings. Identifying the distinct occupational levels provides the stratigraphy of the area under excavation. Careful excavation and preservation of finds—including broken pottery—help to date the levels. Other kinds of finds (all with no commercial value whatever) include carbonized seeds and the bones of animals, providing information on local ecology and diet. The looters seek marketable objects, but in doing so, they destroy their cultural context. Francis Deblauwe in reviewing Roger Atwood's Stealing History: Tomb Raiders, Smugglers, and the Looting of the Ancient World (New York, 2005) in National Catholic Reporter of May 20, 2005, cites the phrase "looted objects are pretty but dumb," going on to say that artifacts can only tell their full story when found in context, in association with other artifacts and remains of human activity.

The first wave of looting of ancient sites occurred in the 1990s. There had been very little illegal excavation at ancient sites before the 1990s when sanctions caused such hardships that villagers began to carry out excavations for finds to sell to middlemen who smuggled them out of the country for sale abroad. It has been widely reported that corrupt Ba'athist officials had a hand in the widespread smuggling of antiquities. There was a rumor at the time that Saddam Hussein's son Udai was the leader of the smuggling operation, though the leader has subsequently been identified as Saddam's brother-in-law, Arshad Yasin. Whatever the truth may be, it is indisputable that several ancient sites, most prominent among them being ancient Umma, were severely damaged by looters. Umma was one of the most important city-states of the mid-third millennium B.C. It is well-known for a dispute with the neighboring city-state of Lagash over borders and irrigation water. This dispute lasted for generations. (See J. S. Cooper, Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash-Umma Border Conflict, Sources from the Ancient Near East, vol. 2, fasc. 1 [Malibu, 1983].) In the late third millennium (the Ur III period) it was an important city. Many thousands of administrative documents were illegally excavated there in the late 19th century and early 20th century and are now scattered in museums and private collections throughout the world. In the case of Umma, the Directorate General of Antiquities was able, with great difficulty, to stop the looting and to carry out its own salvage operations at the site. It is my understanding that some of the antiquities they recovered were in metal cases in a storage area awaiting registration when the 2003 looting occurred. It is reported that some of these objects were among those stolen from that storeroom.

Considerable numbers of objects (including substantial numbers of cuneiform tablets) have reportedly entered private and public collections in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Israel, sometimes with suspicious provenances listing old European collections.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the collapse of security, huge crews of men, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, systematically dug many ancient sites, especially in southern Iraq. A listing of ancient sites known to have had substantial looting makes depressing reading indeed. A good example is the site of Isin, which has been excavated by archaeologists from Germany for many years, and which was already in May 2003 pitted with hundreds of holes dug by the looters (see the Gibson article cited above, p. 36, fig. 5), and has surely been continually dug until the present unless the diggers have decided that they have exhausted the site of everything salable. Many sites are now considered totally destroyed. Some look like vast craters on the moon. See figures 6 and 7.

Of the major sites in southern Iraq, apparently only Warka (ancient Uruk) has been spared, thanks to the site being guarded by local tribesmen.

Babylon was not subjected to systematic looting, though it was indeed damaged by American-led coalition forces. For whatever reason, the American and Polish military forces established a military base on the ancient site itself, removing layers of the ancient site to construct a helipad in the heart of the city. According to John Curtis of the British Museum, who was invited by Iraqi authorities to assess the damage at Babylon, about 300,000 square meters of the surface of the site has been flattened and covered with compacted gravel and sometimes chemically treated. He also reported that about 12 trenches, one of them 170 meters long, had been dug through archaeological deposits. He also said that large quantities of sand mixed with archaeological fragments were used to fill military sandbags. Ancient brick pavements that had survived since the time of Nebuchadnezzar have been broken and crushed by the heavy equipment. In 2004 the wall of the temple of the god Nabû and the roof of the Ninmah temple collapsed due to the vibrations from helicopters. Although the military equipment has since been removed, severe and unnecessary damage has been inflicted on Babylon.

While my focus here has been on ancient Iraq, the theft and destruction was by no means limited to Iraq's ancient past. The building housing Iraq's national archives was looted and burned. It has been reported that virtually its entire collection of Ottoman era records was destroyed as well as records from the Republican Period (that is, post-monarchy Iraq). The national library suffered a similar fate. University libraries, laboratories, and classrooms were also pillaged and burned. Art museums were likewise the victims of looters (an example of a piece of art that was recovered from an American military officer is given above). The toll on Iraq's past—ancient, medieval, and modern—has been enormous.

I mourn the tragic losses suffered by the Iraq Museum and deeply deplore the looting of ancient sites that has resulted in the theft and destruction of Iraq's ancient past. I pray that the day will come soon when the looting of ancient sites can be halted and when the Iraq Museum can again open its doors to the

country's own citizens who take pride in their past and to foreign visitors who hold it in high esteem.

For updates, readers may find the following to be useful:
<<https://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/iraqcrisis>>.