

Looting at Archaeological Sites and Museums

Famous world heritage places around the world – Ban Chiang, Banteay Chhmar, Bamiyan – share a common plight: they have been pillaged or damaged due to widespread looting, political/religious violence, or instability. **Roberto Gozzoli** shares his thoughts on the looting of such sites and museums as well.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand's Ban Chiang is a well-known archaeological site discovered during the 1960s by an American anthropologist who literally fell over the rim of a pot (Higham 2003 pp. 133-134; White 1982 p. 15). The joint excavations between Thailand's Fine Arts Department and the University of Pennsylvania, led by Pisit Charoenwongsa and Chester Gorman, found a past civilisation, that purportedly introduced bronze-smelting in the region around 1,100 BCE (Higham & Thosarat 2012 p. 121).

Better dating, on a wider range of material gave more precision about the actual chronological span of the Ban Chiang civilisation, and dismissed the assumption of it being the first bronze-smelting civilisation.



Ancient tombs discovered by looters and illegal diggers (Photo: Monica Hanna)

From a heritage point of view, however, the discovery created an interest in the Ban Chiang ceramics. As American military bases were located in Thailand's Udon Thani region during the Vietnam war, many of the American soldiers returned home with some of the pots from Ban Chiang for souvenirs. Local inhabitants were quick to appreciate the importance of the place, and helped in digging for new pots. Today, visitors at the site, which was registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, can only admire some of the tombs which are now part of the Museum (Peleggi 2002 pp. 47-48). Most of the other tombs in the region were completely looted by hunters in search of objects to sell. A recent American investigation noted that American art dealers were complicit in the looting of Ban Chiang pottery, and it occurred over a long period of time.

In Cambodia, systematic looting took place at Banteay Chhmar, a Khmer heritage site. Entire walls of monument were dismantled (Nagashima 2002), and most were transported to Thailand, where they were sold at River City (a modern shopping complex), or through a triangulation with Singapore and re-imported into Thailand (Nagashima 2002 p. 108). The site is now under the supervision of the Global Heritage Network, which is developing its own strategies for site and tourism development.

Cambodia's heritage, including the major site of Angkor Wat, was susceptible to damage and looting, in particular during the civil conflict between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese who supported a national government.

The author is also quite struck by the number of heads that had been cut off Buddha statues in various temples, especially Wat Mahathat in Ayutthaya, the city in Thailand on which the author has recently completed a report.

Similarly in Afghanistan, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha images testify that religious hatred can bring about great loss and damage of precious heritage. As the Taliban destroyed what they considered symbols of a pagan/lesser religion, they culturally impoverished their own country (Gillman 2010 pp. 9-14).

It is, however, in Baghdad and Cairo that examples and reminders are offered starkly of the fragility of heritage in times of conflicts and wars, when political events determine the fate of thousands of heritage objects.

Iraq and its heritage

Iraq was the centre of the Mesopotamian civilisation, which is considered the cradle of civilisation (Maisels 1999 pp. 80-185). Mesopotamia spanned over 3,000 years (Frankfort 1970) with various political and cultural entities (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Chaldean) in the region. The first urban developments and the earliest forms of agriculture appeared, due to the presence of Tigris and Euphrates and the alluvial plains that they formed. The cuneiform writing arose there, and part of this civilisation was connected with Western culture. Biblical references speak of splendid cities, such as Babylon, Niniveh, and Ur, which is the birthplace of Abraham, the founder of Israel (Woolley 1958).

The archaeology of Mesopotamia started during the 1850s, with the decipherment of the cuneiform language. From the excavations led by scholars searching for biblical connections rather than artefacts, some of the major cities in the area were discovered. Those excavations brought a great amount of objects to European museums, such as the Louvre, British Museum and Berlin Museum in particular. Benefiting from the disinterest of the local rulers, Western archaeologists had an easy task in claiming most of the artefacts found during the excavations.

In 1924, an Antiquities Department was established, thanks to Gertrude Bell, an English archaeologist and antiquarian who was a phenomenal force in Mesopotamian archaeology, and helped found the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. In her role, however, she did not stop the sharing of archaeological objects between the local museum and foreign missions.

Nevertheless, Iraq was the most advanced in having indigenous archaeologists dealing with their own antiquities after the Second World War.

It can be said that Saddam Hussein helped archaeology in Iraq prosper after the military establishment declared Iraq a republic in 1958. Identifying himself with Nebuchadnezzar and Sargon, two of the major kings of the Mesopotamian civilisation, he re-created links with the past, bypassing the Islamic background. The punishment against looters, some sentenced to the death penalty, was harsh; and the employment of soldiers as guardians at sites/collections also served to deter looting.

Up till the First Gulf War (1982-1988), budget and attention were allocated to heritage conservation, with emphasis on the nationalistic and personalistic elements. The Iraq-Iran war during the 1980s led to some cuts in the budget given to archaeology, and the Kuwait invasion in 1990 as well as the subsequent war against US-led armies brought archaeology to a complete stop. No foreign missions came to Iraq for the entire decade of the 1990s. Moreover, the severe sanctions against Iraq threw many Iraqis into poverty. The situation deteriorated, and resulted in a declining level of education amongst the population. In the 1980s, the level of education was one of the highest in the region, but a decade later saw a general decline in school attendance and, inevitably, education.

The archaeological services suffered too, as there were many redundancies in the archaeological personnel. Consequently, Iraqi archaeological sites were looted. In 1992 and 1993, Western archaeologists issued two volumes relating to missing objects.

The situation seemed to improve toward the end of the 1990s and up to 2002, as major controls were tightened by the Iraqi archaeological service, in spite of the economic limitations. As 2003 marked 13 years of troubled economic and social conditions since the first Gulf War, the Iraqi population encountered food shortage and lack of primary goods. American troops entered Baghdad in April 2003, but there were serious flaws in the American planning of post-war Iraq, which are evident now. Patrolling of controlled zones by American forces was not fully considered, and it proved costly in the destruction and loss of heritage. In spite of warnings from archaeologists from the University of Chicago in US, one of the major centres for Mesopotamian archaeology, as well as other scholars from Britain, precautions were not taken (Rothfield 2009).

While the National Museum was one of the targets American troops avoided to attack or bomb, the presence in the museum compounds of paramilitary forces fighting for the regime of Saddam Hussein, and firing against the American troops from the adjacent Children's Museum provoked an exchange of fire, leading to an American tank blasting a hole in the Museum facade.

The National Museum was neglected by the American troops, and many of the museum officials had already fled, fearing for their lives. The majority of the objects were fortunately secured in storerooms in the museum

basement. Most of the gold objects from the excavations of the tombs of Ur were kept in the Bank of Baghdad safes. Some important objects were still on the displays within the museum, however.

As the museum laid virtually abandoned for a couple of days, it was invaded and devastated by looters and vandals. From the damage done to the objects, it is clear that some of the invaders were vandals aiming to destroy some of the sculptures just for the sake of it, and most possibly, as revenge against Saddam Hussein, who celebrated the ancient Mesopotamian civilisation for his own benefit. Museum offices were also destroyed, and stripped of their contents, from computers to chairs.

Spoliations targeting some of the major objects still on display or kept in the storerooms took place. The famous harp of Ur was heavily damaged on its frame, but the original golden bull head at the base of the harp was under custody. The Uruk vase was stolen from the museum, only to be returned later, but a particular loss within the collections was the disappearance of thousands of cylinder seals; these are very valuable in the art markets, and have yet to surface among art dealers.

While the number of objects actually missing has been estimated to be about 170,000, the actual number of groups of artefacts registered in the museum was set at a few thousands. The definite number of looted relics was finally 15,000; however, flawed assessments were made by some of the museum curators, who simply ignored that a number of the objects actually missing were kept in safes.

Some of the Iraqi officials were keen to blame the Americans for their failure to control Baghdad (Rothfield 2009). Nine years have elapsed, and yet many objects are still missing from the museums; the list includes one of the finest ivories from Nimrud, the representation of a lioness mauling a Nubian man.

The looting of the museum was, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Much more general and widespread pillaging is still going on at many archaeological sites in various parts of Iraq. Some of the Iraqi pieces have been found in Jordan, and others reached as far as New York and Tokyo.

There are a few factors that determine the fate of Iraqi antiquities: the existence of an art market trading in Mesopotamian relics, seals in particular. The highly prized seals, and the fact that they are very small,

made them the ideal choice of objects to steal. A number of the looters were and are armed professionals capable of fighting security personnel or guardians present at the archaeological sites. The vast majority, however, were local peasants who found that they could enrich themselves through archaeological looting. This group of looters uses antiquities as a means to lift themselves out of poverty.

As Iraq remains in a sort of civil war, its archaeological sites are still under threat, and the prosecution of any activities detrimental to them is virtually impossible. The fight over Iraqi antiquities has also become a motif for religious hatred: Donny George, Baghdad Museum curator at the time of the American invasion, and later elected as head of the museum itself, was threatened with death, both as a Christian in a Muslim country, as well as a “friend” of the Americans (Rothfield 2009). He fled the country, and became a professor at Stony Brook University of New York (George died of heart attack on March 2011 in Toronto as he delivered a presentation on the current state of Iraqi antiquities). Several recent publications highlighted the existence of looting and vandalism (Rothfield 2009), as well as the fact that the issue of preservation/loss of antiquities is used by Iraq in asserting its independence (Chiodi & Pettinato 2009).

In sum, as long as order is not restored in Iraq, no solution for its antiquities can be easily found, and fears that anarchy, poverty and ignorance will doom one of the most ancient civilisations in the world are justified.

Egypt and its antiquities

Ancient Egypt has drawn much attention since the 1920s when Egyptomania developed after the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb. The golden treasures from the tomb, the Curse of the Pharaohs (Lupton 2003), and a general interest in the arts and architecture, temples, tombs and statues of ancient Egyptian civilisation (Schulz & Seidel 1998), turn the country into a cultural tourism destination.

The discovery of ancient Egypt began during the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt in 1798 (at the Battle of the Pyramids, Napoleon told his army: “Forty centuries are looking at you”). Napoleon’s army was accompanied by a group of scholars, whose task was to catalogue antiquities and nature in the Encyclopaedic spirit born in France (Schnapp 1996

pp. 295-298). During the expedition, the French army found the Rosetta Stone, a trilingual document (hieroglyphs, demotic and Greek) from the reign of Ptolemy V and written in 196 BCE (Parkinson 1999). The French expedition was defeated by the British fleet at Aboukir, but the drawings of the various antiquities survived, and stoked interest in ancient Egypt, rousing it from its millenary torpor.

Explorers and treasure hunters created private collections, which formed the core of the major Egyptian collections at the British Museum, the Louvre, and Berlin Museum. In 1822, Jean-François Champollion was able to decipher the hieroglyphs, and initiated “scientific” Egyptology (Fagan 1982).

The antiquities of Egypt were substantially unprotected by any national archaeological service until 1858, when the French Auguste Mariette was able to convince the Khedive (Lord) to institute a museum as well as an antiquities department, with Mariette as head.

With a French as the Head of antiquities, French influence continued until 1952 when Etienne Drioton was obliged to resign after Nasser’s revolution ousted the last king of Egypt. Until 1920, however, the number of Egyptian Egyptologists within the antiquities service was very limited, with the middle ranks filled by Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans and Italians (James 1982; Reid 2002). Before the change in the Antiquities Law dated 1924, the foreign excavations were entitled to half of the discoveries found during the excavation – the laws were changed after Tutankhamun’s tomb discovery. This division of the finds supported the establishment of many North American museums. It was only in the 1950s that the Egyptians started to be the protectors of their own Pharaonic heritage (Haikal 2003).

As the importance of Pharaonic Egypt grew from a tourist point of view, so did that of the head of the antiquities service from a political point of view. Zahi Hawass’ involvement in the discoveries, along with his ability to communicate through the mass media, and the profound respect President Mubarak’s family had for him, enhanced his position within Egypt.

Hawass had been vocal about the problem of restituting Egyptian relics held in various world museums, and urged that five objects kept abroad

be returned to Egypt, stressing the security of Egyptian museums in keeping those objects. The restitution claims were reiterated as late as mid January 2011, and referred to the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum; the Ankhaf statue at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Nefertiti bust at the Berlin Museum; the Hemiunu seated statue at the Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim; and the Dendera Zodiac in the Louvre.

What happened by the end of January put Hawass' claims in a different light. As demonstrations against Mubarak went on in January, following the earlier stance of Tunisia, Tahrir Square was the centre of the demonstration. Egyptians demanded freedom from the Mubarak's regime, and fought against many symbols of what they considered an oppressive regime; demonstrators burned the building of Mubarak's party, immediately adjacent to the Egyptian Museum.

On 29th January, a group of people penetrated the museum precincts at night, and pillaged the ground floor of the building. The incursion and damages were widely reported in the media. Many of the details about how the looters penetrated the museum are still not clear – and maybe they will never be – but who the looters were actually is just as controversial. Several objects were smashed, and 42 items disappeared from the museum. Amongst them, a standing statue of Tutankhamun was stolen, and returned in pieces recently. A trumpet – part of a travelling exhibition to US and UK in 1960 and the 1970s (Edwards 1976 p.103 and colour plate 8) – was also lost, but it has now been recovered. A statue of queen Nefertiti holding an offering altar has gone missing, as have some other statues of Amarna princesses. Bronze statuettes of the Late Period, and ushabtis (funerary figures) were the other looted artefacts. The looters simply grabbed what they found available.

The number of objects stolen at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is less than that in Iraq years earlier but the looting itself should have been prevented. UNESCO conventions and Egyptian law forbid the sale of antiquities, and the Egyptian museum objects are impossible to sell since they are registered in the museum database, thus dissuading potential public buyers. If the relics have entered private collections, it is possible they will never be seen again.



Nefertiti Head (now in Berlin). Amarna period objects were highly sought after during the looting of the Egyptian Museum in January 2001. The head of an Amarna princess is still missing (May 2013: <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/>) (Photo: Egyptological Collection, Berlin Museum)



The Antinoupolis temple (Photo: Monica Hanna)

The media-smart chairman of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Zahi Hawass, complained about being abandoned in dealing with the spat of robberies throughout the country, and resigned from his position as Minister of Antiquities. While power plays might have possibly cost Hawass his position, the actual situation concerning antiquities in the country remains even more uncertain. Foreign missions have halted their excavations for the season; storages in Saqqara and other parts of the countries were attacked and looted. It will take some time before a full assessment of the actual losses can be made.

As far as the Egyptian situation can be ascertained, the looting is associated with vandalism and a more general attack on antiquities, perhaps as remnants of the past regime. Cemeteries have been now built over old sites, and removals of reliefs continue.

The looting happening in Egypt is a tragedy, as it deprives humankind of those important and invaluable artefacts. Yet, what is really disconcerting is the fact that the Egyptian people are not protecting their own past. While ancient Arab writers, such as Abu Jaafar al-Idrisi (died 1251 CE), highly

respected their Pharaonic predecessors (El-Daly 2005 p.19), many Muslim countries prefer to disregard any link with cultures that precede Islam.

For Egypt, the attack on antiquities at the local level can be explained, though not justified, by the way the Supreme Council of Antiquities imposed its decisions on the local populations. In 2004, for example, a new village was built at Qurna against local opinion and scholarly advice, to prevent the local inhabitants at old Qurna from encroaching the tombs at the site. The local communities forced out of the area had lived there for generations, and were naturally the keepers of the necropolis. There has,



The new cemetery at Dahshur (Photo: Monica Hanna)



Dahshur pyramids on the background (Photo: Monica Hanna)

rarely, been communication between archaeologists and local inhabitants (Moser et al. 2010). At Luxor, similar developments will damage their relations even further.

There is much to learn from the Egyptian experience. Many archaeologists in the West remain adamant that archaeology should maintain its specialized and isolated field, separate from the social issues of the day. Archaeology, however, needs financial resources, and it can interact with heritage tourism in creating sources of incomes for its work as well as for the local inhabitants. In award-winning journalist Sharon Waxman's book on stolen antiquities, *Loot*, she makes the link between archaeology and tourism. In describing the looting of Minoan tombs at Aidonia in Greece, she wrote that the plundering involved the local inhabitants with the complicity of the local police, and included a quotation by a Greek journalist, Nikolas Zirganos, who said that their accomplices sold their past for nothing, while the nearby town of Nemea can live off the tour-

ism generated by the tourists visiting the site, as well as the local farming products (Waxman 2010 p. 348).

Today, the conditions of Egyptian monuments have not improved. The government has been slightly slow to implement new laws protecting the heritage, and police control over the monuments themselves has been lacking.

Encroachment and site damage continue. Archaeological sites have become increasingly vulnerable to illegal digging and land encroachment. The sites of Dahshur and its pyramid field and the Roman site of Antinopolis in Middle Egypt have been under threat from the building of new cemeteries and illegal digging.

Lessons for Southeast Asia

Frustratingly, justifications for the antiquities trade have taken the line that Egyptians and Iraqis (and for that matter, Cambodians, Thais, Italians, etc.) are unable to take care of their own heritage, and thus artefacts should be kept where they can be appreciated – outside their countries of origin. Another justification offered the notion that art belongs to humankind in general, so opportunities to appreciate them should be provided to anyone interested in antiquities, if they are able to afford them (Cuno 2008).

Cultural creations are fruits of specific peoples and places, and they can be best understood within their original environments. A mummy at the British Museum can be a curiosity and source of interest for someone keen on ancient civilisations, but such a mummy is part of a set of elements (tomb, funerary beliefs) that are wholly part of a country's history. Taking something from someone else's land only for the purpose of possessing something exotic to exhibit is certainly far from being ethically right.

It may not be plausible to demand the return of every object to its country of origin. The Rosetta stone, the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon in Athens, the Mona Lisa at Paris reached the British Museum and the Louvre following treaties or circumstances that allowed them to do so. Taking marbles away from the Parthenon, for instance, may provoke intense debate on appropriateness but modern technologies can be employed to make replicas of them to allow the Elgin marbles to become powerful ambassadors of Greek cultural heritage in United Kingdom.

Egypt and Iraq are developing countries experiencing difficult political conditions. As long as there is economic inequality between different countries, money will place buyers and traders in a stronger position. Essentially, two elements are involved: the existence of an antiquities market, and buyers at regional or international level. Prohibitive national and international laws and controls should eventually stop such trafficking, through which Western museums have for long periods impoverished the heritage of many nations.

Laws can be a powerful deterrent against greedy traders but laws cannot be enough. A possible solution entails the cultivation of a different perspective on archaeology and heritage. Firstly, archaeology should be both an academic and a social field. It should be an academic field, as a place where the latest scholarly achievements and theories are studied to understand particular civilisations. Yet, this academic knowledge should be re-employed toward making the local people understand the relevance of archaeological discovery to them, and help them realize how to gain from it economically. In essence, the marvel of discovery should be shared within local communities.

Involvement is another issue: as long as outsiders from distant political lands dictate how a heritage site should be maintained, without consultation with local stakeholders, such endeavours will be detrimental to the heritage itself.

Education is the magic word: if local people are educated and appreciate their own past, looting or vandalism would cease or be reduced at least. Appreciation is obviously not sufficient because there must also be economic benefits for the local entities at the archaeological site. Such economic benefits can assume various forms and levels, from simple guardianship to tourism activities. The approach implies that local inhabitants should contemplate on the issues with a long-term perspective, and reject the immediate advantages by opting for sustainable benefits.



*Exposed pottery shards after illegal excavations
(Photo: Monica Hanna)*

Bibliography

- Chiodi, S. & Pettinato, G. (2009). *La pietra nera e il guardiano di Ur. Intrighi nella città di Abramo*. Milan: Editrice San Raffaele.
- Cuno, J. (2008). *Who owns antiquity?: Museums and the battle over our ancient heritage*. Princeton, N.J. and Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press.
- Davis, T. (2011). Supply and demand: exposing the illicit trade in Cambodian antiquities through a study of Sotheby's auction house. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 56(2), 155-174.
- Edwards, I.E.S. (1976). *Treasures of Tutankhamun*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- El-Daly, O. (2005). *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium*. London: UCL Press.
- Fagan, B. (1982). *Alla scoperta dell'antico Egitto*. Rome: Newton Compton Editore.
- Frankfort, H. (1970). *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. London: Penguin Books.
- Gillman, D. (2010). *The Idea of Cultural Heritage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haikal, F. (2003). Egypt's Past Regenerated by its Own People. In M. Rice, Macdonald, Sally (ed.) *Consuming Ancient Egypt* (pp. 123-138). London: UCL Press.
- Higham, C. (2003). *Early Cultures of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: River Books Ltd.
- Higham, C. & R. Thosarat (2012). *Early Thailand: From Prehistory to Sukhothai*. Bangkok: River Books.
- James, T.G.H. (1982). *Excavating in Egypt: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1882 -1982*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lupton, C. (2003). 'Mummymania' for the Masses - is Egyptology Cursed by the Mummy's Curse? In M. Rice, Macdonald, Sally (ed.) *Consuming Ancient Egypt*: (pp. 23-46). London: UCL Press.
- Maisels, C.K. (1999). *Early Civilizations of the Old World*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Moser, S., Glazier, J., Phillips, J.E., Nemr, L.N.E. Mousa, M.S., Aiesh, R.N., Richardson, S., Conner, A. & Seymour, M. (2010). Transforming Archaeology through Practice: Strategies for Collaborative Archaeology and the Community Archaeology Project at Quseir, Egypt. In M.M. Bruchac, Hart S.M. & Wobst H.M. (ed.) *Indigenous Archaeologies: A Reader in Decolonization* (pp. 272-282). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Nagashima, M. (2002). *The Lost Heritage*. Bangkok: Bangkok Post Publisher.

- Parkinson, R.B. (1999). *Cracking Codes. The Rosetta Stone and Decipherment*. London: British Museum Press.
- Peleggi, M. (2002). *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press.
- Reid, D.M. (2002). *Whose Pharaohs?* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Rothfield, L. (2009). *The Rape of Mesopotamia*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Schnapp, A. (1996). *The Discovery of the Past*. London: British Museum Press.
- Schulz, R. & Seidel, M. (1998). *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs*. Cologne: Könemann.
- Watson, P. & Todeschini, C. (2007). *The Medici Conspiracy: The illicit journey of looted antiquities from Italy's tomb raiders to the world's greatest museums*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Waxman, S. (2010). *Loot*. London: Old Street Publishing Ltd.
- White, J.C. (1982). *Ban Chiang: Discovery of a lost Bronze Age: an exhibition organized by the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Pr.
- Woolley, L. (1958). *Ur dei Caldei*. Turin: Giulio Einaudi.

Roberto B. Gozzoli, PhD University of Birmingham, UK, Ancient History and Archaeology, has worked as research associate at the University of Birmingham and Turin. With specialisation in Near Eastern Archaeology and Egyptology, other than Classical Archaeology, he has published articles relative to Egyptian Archaeology in various international scholarly journals. He is the author of the book, *The Writing of History in Ancient Egypt during the First Millennium BC (Ca. 1070-180 BC): Trends and Perspectives* (London 2006). He is now a lecturer at Mahidol University International College, Thailand.