

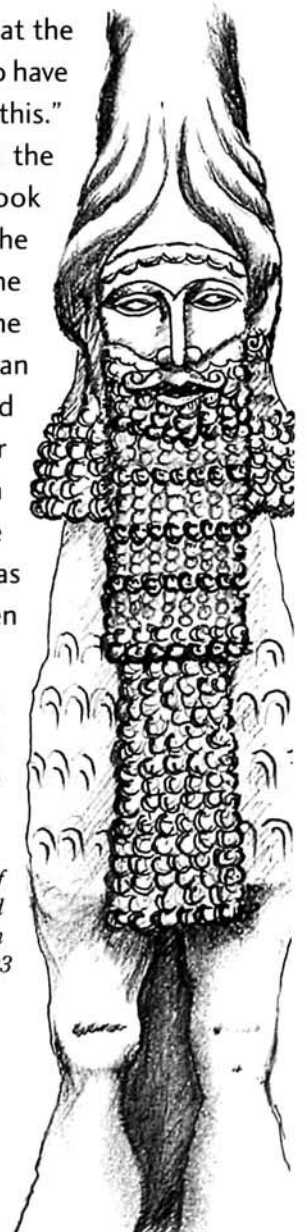
Iraq's treasures looted

Alleging that Iraq had and intended to use or export weapons that could cause widespread damage, the U.S.A. attacked the Middle Eastern country this year, without the support of the United Nations. In April, after invading the city of Baghdad, with numerous deaths resulting from the war, the casualty figure of which has - oddly - not garnered much attention in the international media, American forces secured oil fields but were unable to prevent the looting of cultural treasures from Iraq's museums and historic sites.

At a conference in July on archaeology in the Middle East, an American archaeologist, Elizabeth Stone, called on the US military to kill looters who pillage archaeological sites in Iraq: "I would like to see some helicopters flying over these sites, and some bullets fired at the looters." Professor Stone was reported by *The Guardian* to have said, "I think you have got to kill some people to stop this." The professor had directed major excavations in Iraq in the 1980s, and is now head of archaeology at Stony Brook University in New York. Making her comments during the international conference at the British Museum in July, she said that the looting of major archaeological sites and the destruction of artefacts might prove a greater disaster than the looting and destruction at the museums in Baghdad and Mosul. Priceless archaeological information, for example, has disappeared when looters discarded broken cuneiform clay tablets. "At least to a certain extent we know what was in the museum, but we don't know what has been taken from the sites, and that knowledge has been lost to us forever," she explained to *The Guardian*.

The Guardian report also quoted Donny George, head of research at the museum service, as having said that gangs of up to three hundred were systematically

*Ninth Century B.C. sculpture, Baghdad Museum from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud
Sketch by Pattanapong Varanyanon
Drawing after Archaeology May, June 2003*



ransacking archaeological sites, many untouched by archaeologists. The country has more than 10,000 registered sites, ranging from a few square metres to the huge sites of some of the oldest cities in the world.

After Baghdad fell to US military forces in April, looters pillaged various cultural centres and museums, including the Iraqi National Museum. According to *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, thieves ransacked and made off with precious heirlooms and artefacts from a 7,000 year-old civilisation, and some of the Middle East's leading archaeological collections while American soldiers were protecting the Iraqi oil ministry building.

She wrote satirically that "the Pentagon, a.k.a. the International Trust for Historic Preservation, has once more shown the world its deep cultural sensitivity." While one can not press the Pentagon too much on this, the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld could have done better than to dismiss the matter as a few old pots in the big scheme of things. He said "we've seen riots at soccer games at various countries around the world ... to the extent it happens in a war zone, it's difficult to stop." These things happen, he seemed to be saying.

Sonyote Waeohonsa, a Political Science lecturer at Silpakorn University, Thailand, was reported by the *Nation* to have said that the Iraq Museum had a record in 1976 of containing 100,000 antiquities from the Stone Age to the Mesopotamian period. He is also particularly concerned about the archaeological sites in Nineveh, Mosul, Nimrud, Samara, Babylon, Najaf and Ur.

Three cultural advisers in the US government resigned following the failure of American forces to prevent the ransacking of the National

Museum in Baghdad. One of them, Martin Sullivan - Chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on Cultural Property for eight years - informed *Reuters* that "it didn't have to happen." He described the looting as a "tragedy" and said in the resignation letter, "in a pre-emptive war, that's the kind of thing you should have planned for."

According to the *BBC*, among the uncountable items presumed missing as of 22 April 2003 were: 80,000 cuneiform tablets with the world's earliest writing; a bronze figure of an Akkadian king (4,500 years old); a silver Warka from the ancient city of Ur (more than 4,000 years old); the three-foot carved Sumerian Warka Vase (5,200 years old); a headless statue of Sumerian king Entemena (4,600 years old), and a carved sacred cup (4,600 years old). It said that the United States has "pledged to recover and repair priceless antiquities looted and has offered rewards for their return."

Archaeologist Professor Mcquire Gibson, who teaches Mesopotamian archaeology at the University of Chicago, had made public his warnings to the US military last July of the importance in protecting the "birthplace of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation, where human beings created the first cities, their first writings, first pondered man's place in the universe, the wonderment of death and souls, and first recorded literature." Regrettably, the American forces did not appear to be too concerned with historical details. Maureen Dowd put the blame squarely on Donald Rumsfeld who "seemed almost perversely determined to act as though vandalising of relics of the birth of civilisation was insignificant, something only sissies could cry over."

A Belgian lawsuit has been filed under Belgium's controversial "universal competence" law, which allows charges to be brought against those alleged to have committed crimes anywhere. In the suit, the US Commander in Iraq (General Tommy Franks) was accused of war crimes, including the damage to Iraq's cultural heritage "under the eyes of American soldiers". Washington has threatened to retaliate if the case is pursued.

Writing for the *NY Times* News Service, R.W. Apple Jr. succinctly pointed to "the failure of US troops to protect the treasures of the national library and schools, even though they managed to safeguard the oil industry". He added that while the widespread looting of shops and houses sent an unfortunate message, "the destruction of precious relics of world heritage and the exposure of the young and the helpless to the remorseless cruelty of war sent a worse one".

Questions relating to what really happened to Iraq's museums have been raised. Dan Cruickshank's BBC film 'Raiders of the Lost Art' makes implications that the museum staff had not been entirely truthful to the military and the press over the extent of the losses, engaged in the looting themselves, let the museum be used as a military position, and had perhaps even protected Saddam Hussein. Eleanor Robson's Comment in *The Guardian* (June 18, 2003) suggested that many of the treasures had been

moved to safety before the US-UK troops arrived in Baghdad. Nevertheless, she reported that experts in Vienna had in early June estimated the losses from the museum storerooms at between 6,000 and 10,000 pieces. The Baghdad museum director, Nawala al Mutawwali, has emphatically denied that any museum staff was implicated in the thefts from the collections.

The global business of antiquities also came under scrutiny, particularly the trade in stolen artefacts. Neil Brodie wrote in *Archaeology* that the conflict in Iraq, as in other cases throughout history – most recently Afghanistan, Somalia, Cambodia and Lebanon, for example - generated the trading of the "spoils of war". It is not surprising that museum treasures and cultural materials become hot commodities for dealers during wars. Neil asked, "why has no concerted international action been taken to block the trade and sale of material looted from archaeological sites and cultural institu-



*Tablet, portraying Ishtar the goddess, that had been looted from a site
Sketch by Pattanapong Varanyanon
Drawing after Archaeology May, June 2003*

tions during wartime?" and went on to provide some answers that business rules, and that "the political will just hasn't been there." He pointed out that the trade was carried on in blatant disregard of United Nations sanctions, and that even though under U.N. Security Council resolutions, "trade in cultural material from Iraq was illegal, the plunder of sites and museums attracted little media attention and no political

action.” Large numbers of antiquities from Iraq, most probably stolen, have been on open sale in Europe and America for the past ten years, and nothing has been done about it. “On the Monday following the attacks on the National Museum, it took me only half an hour to locate forty cuneiform tablets for sale on nine Internet sites from around the world,” he reported, “presumably, these are only the tip of an iceberg”. Neil, who is the co-ordinator of the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge, said that the UK and the US have yet to ratify the Hague Convention of 1954 (for the Protection of

Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict) which is “designed to circumvent such problems”. The Hague Convention is drafted for the prevention of the types of “destruction and theft of cultural material that have become a common feature of modern warfare”. An occupying power has a duty to protect cultural property and prevent its illicit trade, which applies whether or not the occupied country has signed the convention. Neil concluded that “if the coalition partners had acceded to the Hague Convention before the invasion of Iraq, then those responsible for the failure to protect the National Museum would have taken more care to secure it.” ■ Ean Lee

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