Lessons from Looting: The Place of Museums in Iraq

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Early trepidation at the potential destruction of Iraqi archaeological sites has long given way to anger and profound sadness about the looting and sacking of Iraqi museums and libraries. The unexpected scale and intensity of the looting has produced various reactions, initially dominated by blame and recrimination of the United States' mishandling of the post-war situation but is now focused on ameliorating the damage by tracking down stolen antiquities and controlling their traffic across international borders.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has just finalized a Red List of Iraqi Antiquities at Risk to be distributed to all relevant border crossings. While almost everyone agrees that the US – the authority legally responsible for maintaining law and order in Iraq – was woefully negligent in protecting Iraqi national treasures, very few have attempted to understand why some Iraqis looted their own cultural institutions. This is a difficult and still quite unpopular line of questioning. Over three days of meetings in Lyon, France with INTERPOL and ICOM officers, the question was hardly discussed, only muttered in passing with total incomprehension and a measure of disdain.

As an Arab-American, a frequent visitor to Iraq and an art historian, I am especially troubled by this question: why did some Iraqis take advantage of the breakdown of order to loot and even sack their own museums, libraries, and universities? Rather than fixing blame, in this essay I would like to use my knowledge of Iraqi history, museums, and institutions of culture to address a question that may haunt us for a long time, in Iraq and in other countries that may face similar upheavals in the future. Silence on this matter, I think, is dangerous.

While some might attribute Iraq's current state of lawlessness and disregard for historical patrimony to underdevelopment, my long-term association with the country tells me otherwise. Until quite recently, when wars and sanctions took their inevitable toll, Iraq was ahead of most of the Arab world in cultural matters, including archaeology, museology, art, architecture, and music.

So what may have led to this tragic situation? First, we now know that the recent looting of Iraqi museums was in some respects the sad culmination of a process that had already gained considerable momentum in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. There are confirmed reports, in the most recent issue of Smithsonian, for example, of extensive illegal excavations in such Sumerian and Babylonian sites as Urukm Ur, Isin, and Larsa, digs often conducted by underworld groups under the protection of armed men. The current efforts of ICOM, the British Museum, and the College Art Association to control the trade in Iraqi antiquities are equally directed at the looting of Iraqi museums and the more intractable problems of illicit excavations and the illegal art trade.

Second, whereas cultural heritage has often been co-opted for nationalist purposes, Baathist Iraq turned it into an instrument for the aggrandizement of the party and especially of Saddam himself. By appropriating the antiquity of the land.

Saddam linked himself with Assyrian, Babylonian, and Abbasid rulers, substituting his humble origins with false genealogies. Bricks used in his megalomaniacal restoration of Babylon are stamped with his name, and a large inscription states that the city was begun by Nebuchanezzar and completed by Saddam. Close identification with a single ruler can easily backfire once the ruler is removed.

The third factor that seems to have contributed to the looting of museums has to do with their origins under colonial rule and their persisting state of alienation in Iraq and other Arab countries. Most Arab museums still operate within an outmoded orientalist framework, displaying artefacts with little regard for local general audience or even specialists. My Danish colleague, Ingolf Thuesen,

who conducted a survey of visitors to a regional museum in Hama, Syria, noted that the museum was primarily visited by foreign tourist and government officials and rarely by the adult Syrian population. Interestingly, precisely this museum suffered severe damage from looting in the aftermath of the 1982 bombardment of the city. By and large seen as symbols of the government, signs of privilege, and as 'foreign' institutions, one can understand why some Iraqis were willing to loot their museums and cultural institutions.

The Laws of Antiquities governing the excavation, possession, and transaction of antiquities in Iraq and other Arab countries seem to foster this rupture between society and artistic culture, in two main ways. First, the overly stringent policies in these laws virtually ignore the existence of an art market or the age-old desire of some people, Iraqis included, to collect ancient objects. Whereas such policies prescribe an ideal situation, in reality they have contributed to the proliferation of an illegal art market. Second, by defining a protected cultural artefact as 200 years or older, these laws valorise the ancient over the more recent and cheapen the still palpable memory of the population.

Finally, I agree that a few well-placed tanks in front of Iraqi museums and libraries would have prevented or at least minimized their looting. But in the end such security measures, whether by US or Iraqi forces, only serve to deepen the rupture and further disengage culture from the population. Rather, I would like us to look a little more proactively towards a future when cultural institutions are not only better protected but also better integrated within their own societies. It is time, I think, to turn alienation into outreach, to develop the public and educational components of these museums, following the example of European and especially American museums. Once Iraqis feel included in their own cultural patrimony, I suspect they will have second thoughts before looting it.

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