

Art Loss In Iraq

REPORT ON THE FIRST UNESCO CULTURAL HERITAGE ASSESSMENT MISSION TO BAGHDAD, MAY 16–20, 2003

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In mid-May 2003 I was invited to participate in the first UNESCO mission to Iraq to assess the impact of the recent war on cultural heritage. The text that follows is condensed from the report I wrote for UNESCO after the mission. Although by now (July) there have been some small improvements in the situation as described here, the report is of interest as the first outside assessment of the condition of the Iraq Museum immediately after the war, and in most respects it reflects the situation still facing cultural heritage in Baghdad.

For security reasons, ORHA (the U.S. Pentagon Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance), which was in charge of administration in postwar Iraq, insisted that the group be kept small and that the mission be confined to Baghdad. While waiting in Amman for our flight to Baghdad, we ran into Tony Wilkinson (Professor of Archaeology, University of Chicago), who had just returned from a tour of Mosul and northern Iraqi sites with National Geographic.

As we were unable to visit these areas ourselves, his information was most welcome. Concerning the Mosul Museum, he reported that the sculptures in the Hatra gallery were smashed but apparently not stolen. In the Assyrian gallery, a few Assyrian inscribed bricks and some sections of bronze gate bands from Balawat were stolen. At Nineveh, the Sennacherib Palace site museum is near total destruction and needs immediate intervention. The sheet metal roof needs to be replaced and the remaining sculptures and walls need comprehensive conservation treatment. At Nimrud, the Assurnasirpal II Palace site museum lost parts of two wall reliefs to looting, but was otherwise intact.

Immediately upon our arrival in Baghdad, we met with Ambassador Pietro Cordone, the newly-appointed administrator of culture for ORHA. We described the UNESCO mission goals and shared initial concerns. Ambassador Cordone was receptive, and in turn informed us that his first charge from ORHA was to

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investigate the extent of Baath party involvement of the Antiquities Department officials, in order to determine who could remain in their government positions. He cautioned us not to enter into any agreements with any Iraqi officials until this process was complete and the authority of these officials was confirmed by ORHA. We met again with Ambassador Cordone and his staff the day prior to our departure to report on our findings. Again, the meeting was very productive. Cordone shared with us two very important news items: first, an order had been issued that day authorizing payment of salaries to Antiquities Department personnel retroactive to April 1, and second, Cordone's office had decided to confirm Dr. Jabr Khalil (Director General of Antiquities) and Dr. Donny George (Director General for Research, Antiquities Dept.) in their positions and authority.

Ascertaining the situation in the Iraq Museum was the primary focus of our mission, and we visited it three times. On the first visit, we toured the galleries and administrative offices. The second visit focused on the conservation wing, the incoming objects room, the storage rooms, and the library. The third visit was to inquire about ways we might be of assistance. The building seemed secure at the time of our mission, with two Abrams tanks parked out front (Fig. 1), a military guard and razor wire at the gate, and soldiers living in the library. A summary of my observations follows.

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Photo: John M. Russell

Figure 1. American tank guarding the Iraq Museum, Baghdad in May after the looting.



Photo: John M. Russell

Figure 2. Display stand of the Warka Vase, with the base of the vase still attached, Iraq Museum, Baghdad. Photo: J.M. Russell.

Most objects had been removed from the public galleries to safe locations prior to the war. The only objects that remained behind were those that were too large or fragile to move, and those that were permanently attached to their displays (Fig 2). According to the report of Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, the officer in charge of the military's investigation of the looting, 42 such objects were stolen, of which 9 were subsequently recovered, and 15 more were damaged. [In a presentation at the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in London in July, Bogdanos reported that 30 objects were still missing from the public galleries as of July 8.]

As of May 16, the administrative offices are a mess. All offices were completely emptied of furniture and equipment, such as computers and cameras. Most doors have been broken down and need to be replaced. The object register is said to be safe. According to Donny George, establishing reliable satellite Internet and phone service, and restoring the administrative offices to a functional level are the most urgent priorities for the museum.

The entire conservation lab needs to be reequipped, and staff training brought up to date. Most chemicals were lost and portable equipment, such as microscopes, was stolen. The only equipment remaining is a scanning electron microscope that doesn't work, and four kilns for firing tablets. At present the temperature sensors of the kilns are inaccurate, which has apparently resulted in the destruction of at least one important archive of tablets. Muthena Muslim, the Director of Conservation, reported that a large number of Nimrud ivories were damaged by flooding while they were in storage in the basement storeroom. They were too damaged by water and mold for her to conserve them, so she put them, untreated, in open wooden trays to dry out. These were subsequently

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overturned and scattered during the looting of the storeroom, further aggravating an already major conservation emergency.

The incoming objects room is normally used as the place where objects coming into the museum from excavations are processed and as a holding area for objects on their way to the conservation lab. At the time of our visit, it was being used as the temporary location for damaged objects that were still on display in the public galleries during the looting, including the harp from Ur (broken and stripped of its gold covering) (Figs. 3 & 4), the formerly bejeweled skull of a woman from Ur, and a number of Nimrud ivories.



Photo: J.M. Russell

Figure 3. *Harp from Ur after being stripped of its gold covering by looters, Iraq Museum, Baghdad.*

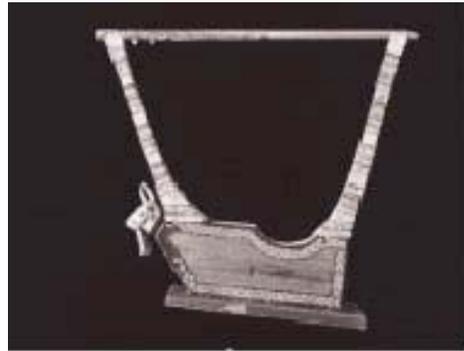


Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 4. *Harp from Ur, before damage. Early dynastic, 2450 BC.*

Five of eight storage areas in the museum had been broken into, and items were missing from at least three of these. Two of these rooms comprise the "old magazine," a two-story area connected by a spiral staircase. The lower room, entered from the first floor, had been cleaned up since the looting occurred. Tin footlockers on the floor containing finds from 2002 excavations were dumped on the floor by looters and plundered - sites reportedly included Harba, Wilaya, Seleucia, and Aqar Quf. No tablets or cylinder seals were in these boxes. Nawala Mutawalli, director of the museum, said these objects had been inventoried and returned to their boxes. Many other objects were stolen from shelves in this room. In July, Bogdanos reported that as of July 8, the number of items known to have been stolen from this room and the one above it stood at 2703, of which 2060 had subsequently been recovered. The upper storeroom is located directly above the first floor room and accessible only from it. It houses dozens, if not hundreds, of Torah scrolls and their boxes. This room was the site of a sniper's post, located at one of the narrow windows (Fig. 5). It is not clear when this was used, but presumably after the storage area had been opened by the looters. This room has natural light from windows, facilitating the work of the looters.

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Photo: J. M. Russell

Figure 5. Upper storeroom with sniper post, Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

In addition, there are five connected storerooms in the basement. Three of these had been entered by looters, who gained access not through an active door, but rather through an abandoned doorway that had been walled up. The looters broke a small hole at the top of the blocking wall, through which they climbed into the store room. This area is windowless, so the looters used foam packing material to build fires on the floor in various locations to provide light for their work. This must have been a fleeting and dim

light. This area had been cleaned up after the looting, so it was not possible to tell how disrupted it had originally been. These rooms house many thousands of objects, so completing an inventory to determine what is missing will take months, if not well over a year. The first basement room was not badly disturbed, except near the door, where a considerable number of wooden trays of water-damaged Nimrud ivories had been overturned on the floor. Other litter in this area may conceal further damaged objects.

The second basement room seems to have been the most disturbed, with the theft of a still-unknown number of small objects, including jewelry and cylinder seals. The most serious loss from this room was the entire collection of cylinder seals accessioned into the museum prior to 1991, a total of 4795 seals. Just prior to the 1991 war these were placed in another location for security. In 2000 they were moved into the basement store room for eventual storage in locked cabinets. They had not yet been put into the cabinets, however, and so were easy prey for the looters who must have had enough information about the collection to know where these seals were. The coin collection was also here, but was reportedly undisturbed. [In July, Bogdanos reported that as of July 8, a total of 10,337 objects were known to have been stolen from this room, of which 671 had subsequently been recovered. He stressed that the number known to be stolen was still rising as the contents of the room were inventoried, a process that will take months.] At the time of our visit, female students from Baghdad University were seated on the floor of this room, carrying out the inventory of objects. The third basement room was opened, but little or nothing appears to have been taken. It contains mainly pottery.

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The museum library was being used by American soldiers as living quarters, and as the place where recovered objects were spread out on a large table. Most of the ones on view were said to be the contents of tin footlocker #175 and 2 cardboard boxes, all of which were seized by Chalabi's men from smugglers heading for Iran. The curious thing is that most of the objects in these boxes were forgeries and reproductions, as also seem to be most of the objects on display that the Americans claim to have recovered from looters. Apparently these objects were stored in the first floor storeroom and were stolen indiscriminately by looters along with genuine pieces.

Elsewhere in Baghdad, we toured the building that had housed the National Library and Archives (Fig. 6). The building consists of three floors and a basement. All but the basement had been completely burned during the looting, and the building itself suffered structural damage. We toured the building with Dr. Muayad Damerji, advisor to the Ministry of Culture, who was the source of my information on the collections. He said that part of the book collection and about half of the archive collection (comprising the state archives of Iraq from the late Ottoman period to the 1950's) had been moved to safety prior to the war. Most of what remained in the building was destroyed, including the microfilm copies of the archives, which were housed on the third floor. Only the basement was untouched by the fire, and since no firefighters came, it is still dry. Apparently some books are stored in the basement. I inquired about the existence of a paper and book conservation laboratory, and was told that nothing of that sort existed in Baghdad.

Of other historic buildings we visited in Baghdad, the Adhamiya Mosque suffered a large number of small caliber bullet strikes to the interior decoration, but no serious damage. The clock tower out front was almost destroyed. The Bet al-Hikma was looted and burned. The roof has collapsed and the interior is completely gutted. In the Kasr Abassid, all of the modern reproduction doors and windows were removed by looters. The extent of damage, if any, to the Kushla is not clear (Fig. 7). We didn't go far into this structure as it was being looted at the time of our visit. The Architecture Center was looted of its contents and some architectural fittings.

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Photo: J.M. Russell

Figure 6. (Above) Burned book stacks, National Library and Archives, Baghdad.



Photo: J.M. Russell

Figure 7. (above) American soldiers pursue looters in the historic Kushla, Baghdad.

Although our group was confined to Baghdad, we did meet with members of the National Geographic group who had just completed a tour of the south, notably Andrew Lawler, archaeology correspondent for Science Magazine, and Dr. Elizabeth Stone, of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA, who sent me a report of her trip after my return. They reported evidence of looting at several sites they visited, most notably Larsa, where they observed large new holes. In addition, during our final visit to the museum, our group met a German archaeologist, Susanne Osthoff, who had just returned from Isin, where she reported observing large-scale looting by a large group of diggers. Donny George also reported that looters were said to be working on a very large scale again at Jokha, a site that suffered massive damage from looting during the 1990's before the antiquities department reclaimed it by force of arms. Subsequent visits to southern sites by McGuire Gibson and a second UNESCO mission confirmed that looting of sites there was widespread and uncontrolled.

The evening of our return to Amman, we met with a large group of members of the diplomatic community to report on our findings. One of those attending was Dr. Fawwaz Khraysheh, Director General of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, who reported that Jordanian customs was conducting very thorough searches of those crossing the border from Iraq. Customs had seized 163 heritage objects, he reported, of which "fewer than 100" are archaeological. This was consistent with our own experience with Jordanian customs, which searched our luggage very thoroughly at the Amman airport when we returned from Iraq, and with accounts of several other recent visitors to Iraq, all of whom reported being carefully searched at the land border between Iraq and Jordan. Efforts are being made to enlist the cooperation of customs services in other countries bordering Iraq, which is essential if antiquities are to be interdicted leaving Iraq.

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To conclude, as I write this in late July, the shortages that I observed in Baghdad in May still continue to hinder cultural reconstruction efforts. Any plan to assist with heritage restoration in Baghdad must make allowances for the desperate humanitarian crisis in the city, as this affects every aspect of daily life. All of the Iraqis I spoke with agreed that their biggest problem is lack of law and order. One result of the chaos is that office workers leave for home around 3 pm in order not to get caught on the streets when the looting and robbery start. Most women won't come to work at all, since they feel vulnerable to kidnapping at any time. This is one of the problems at the museum, where female students are compiling the inventory under the direction of the museum director, but those who will come in, will only stay for a few hours.

In addition to order, the Iraqis need a lot of other things: On the last two days we were in Baghdad, the neighborhood of one of our local UNESCO workers received a total of a half hour of electricity, and there has been little improvement in subsequent months this summer. The water supply is variable and difficult to pump without electricity. Prices for fresh food have doubled since the war. Gasoline is in short supply and motorists typically must wait in line for gas. Without their salaries being paid, workers are reluctant to risk their personal safety to come to work, and many workers no longer have offices to work in. All of these factors affect the ability of the Iraqi workers to return to productivity, and must be taken into consideration in developing a recovery strategy.