

# Art Loss In Iraq

## **CULTURAL TRAGEDY IN IRAQ: A REPORT ON THE LOOTING OF MUSEUMS, ARCHIVES, AND SITES**

by MCGUIRE GIBSON

*McGuire Gibson, Ph.D., is Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.*

Ancient Mesopotamia, although older and more important than Egypt as the originator of civilization, has a much lower public profile. Lacking the plentiful stone that characterizes Egypt, Mesopotamia essentially built in clay. Mudbrick and baked brick buildings of great sophistication just do not last as long or look as impressive as stone ones. Even the stone-built capitals of the Assyrian kings, such as Nineveh, are preserved much less well than the monuments of Egypt. Yet Mesopotamia had a tremendously strong cultural tradition that lasted from at least 5000 B.C. until the early centuries after Christ. As the home of the Sumerians and Akkadians, later the Babylonians and Assyrians, Mesopotamia laid the foundation for all later civilizations, giving us basic concepts of government, religion, literature, and art. Later, under the Abbasid caliphs, Iraq was for a while the center of an empire that stretched from Central Asia to Spain. The material culture of Mesopotamia, and of its successor, Iraq, is therefore of major importance.

The creation at about 3400 B. C. of the first writing system (pictographs and later cuneiform characters inscribed on clay) gave Mesopotamia a vehicle for the transmission of myths, epics, poems, and other genres of information that is the most permanent one ever invented. Unbaked clay tablets written thousands of years ago if taken from the ground today can be read fairly easily. If left in the ground, they would last for thousands of years more. In Mesopotamia texts and objects are intricately associated since either category can be used to date or to elucidate the other. The artistic masterpieces and the more mundane artifacts of Mesopotamia have been in the headlines for months, even before the start of the recent war against Iraq. A number of scholars and organizations were warning of the potential damage to Iraq's and the world's cultural heritage if war swept over Iraq. We foresaw the probability of looting of museums and other cultural institutions if there were any period of chaos in the transfer of power. Iraq's National Museum is the main repository of archaeological artifacts in Iraq, being derived from the hundreds of

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excavations that have been carried out in the country since 1923. The museum also incorporates a Heritage Section that collects objects of the recent centuries, from architectural ornament to lamps, containers, and costumes. The museum also owned thousands of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish manuscripts. The feared period of chaos did occur, and the media presented most vividly the looting of the Iraq National Museum that took place from April 10 to 12, 2003. (Figs. 1 and 2) The global reaction to the images was an outpouring of concern and even anger that the looting was allowed to occur while U. S. troops were nearby. But the looting was not confined to this one complex. Not given as much media attention was the looting and burning of the Iraq National Library and Archives and a famous Koran Library, as well as the looting of the Mosul Museum. There was also looting and destruction of artworks in the Museum of Fine Art in Baghdad, and the destruction of libraries in universities around the country. Fine art departments and institutes, as well as private art galleries were destroyed. There were initial reports of the loss of the holdings of the Saddam Center for Manuscripts, a division of the State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage, but later it was learned that although the building was ransacked, the collection of almost 40,000 manuscripts had been hidden in an underground air-raid shelter somewhere in Baghdad.



*Figure 1. Statues from Hatra in the Iraq Museum, right one damaged by looters in failed attempt to break off head.*



Photo: McGuire Gibson

*Figure 2. Safe in the conservation lab of the Iraq Museum, broken into by looters.*

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## Early Reports

Early reports of the losses from the Iraq National Museum were inaccurate since they were based on inadequate information. They started with the first footage and photographs of looters still in the museum's public galleries while personnel from the Antiquities organization were seeing the wreckage of the museum for the first time. One of the most telling pictures was of a woman hitting her head and wailing that everything was gone. When pressed by reporters on how many objects were in the museum, one of the staff said "170,000." Thus, that number became a fact. Scholars abroad, including myself, refrained from giving a figure for losses, since behind the wailing woman you could see some large objects still standing and in one photograph of a looted storeroom, pottery and other objects were clearly visible on the shelves. Obviously, not everything was missing. But the looters had had three days to take what they wished from the museum, so a very high number was possible. Potentially, the figure of 170,000 items was realistic. Those who know the museum well realized that there are far more than 170,000 items in its storerooms. That figure does not represent the number of items in the collections but only the number of Iraq Museum (IM) numbers that have been given out since 1923. Many IM numbers are, in fact, for single objects, but some numbers can include several or even dozens of objects of the same type found together, with subnumbers such as a, b, c, etc. There are also many artifacts in the "Study Collection" made up of artifacts from archaeological excavations that the museum staff has decided are not likely ever to be exhibited, although many are significant for a variety of reasons. These items are stored by site and by year of excavation, under the field numbers assigned by the excavators, rather than by IM numbers. And there were several metal trunks filled with objects that had been brought from Iraqi excavations just before the war. The museum did not have time to register these items, but put the trunks in one of the storerooms, where they were ransacked. We do not know, at present, how many of the stolen objects came from the trunks.

Not being able to make contact with Baghdad, the international scholarly community could only judge the damage to cultural heritage by sifting through the media reports, hoping for a bit of real information in interviews with one of the Antiquities officials. Those of us familiar with the museum could see things in media pictures that others would not, so we could make a more informed judgment.

In late April, Dr. Donny George came to a meeting I attended in the British Museum to give the first eyewitness account of the events related to the looting of the museum. He made it clear that until a generator was repaired, the lack of electricity in the complex made it impossible to gauge the losses. Even flashlights were not available, so it was impossible to view the storerooms, and besides, museum experts

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abroad were advising the Iraqis not to enter the looted rooms until conservators were present to deal with the hundreds of broken items.

Details of the looting of the museum have been published with differing degrees of accuracy, but the essential facts are as follows. When the U.S. troops entered Baghdad, most of the contingent of 25 or so guards assigned to the museum left their posts. On April 8, only Dr. George, Dr. Jabber Khalil Ibrahim (President of the State Board of Antiquities), a staff archaeologist named Muhsin and his son, plus one guard remained in the building. I should say that the building is a very large one with public galleries, museum offices and conservations labs, storerooms, workrooms, cataloguing rooms, and so forth. But connected to the museum are wings with more than 100 offices and a reference library that house the State Board of Antiquities, which oversees all archaeological work in Iraq, including museums.

A small group of dedicated staff intended to remain in the building and was expecting to make a peaceful handover to the U.S. troops. But they had been wise enough not to count on that eventuality. They had stored the manuscripts in the underground bunker, as mentioned above. They also took the majority of the books from the reference library and stored them in the same bunker. In addition, they assigned a select committee to dismantle the moveable objects from the public galleries, leaving in place only those that were too large or too firmly mounted into the walls to be removed without damage. They sandbagged some large sculptures, wrapped foam around other items, and hoped for the best. The objects removed from the public halls were hidden in a secret storage facility, whose location was known to only five of the committee. Other groups of important artifacts had been safeguarded years before.

Over the 13-year period of the embargo, press reports would occasionally suggest that Saddam's wives were wearing the gold jewelry from the Queens' tombs at Nimrud, an incredible group of burials found intact in northern Iraq in 1988-89. These objects had been on display in several halls of the Iraq Museum until the Gulf War of 1991. Since they were not to be seen, even after the museum was finally reopened in 1998, the rumors were born. But anyone visiting the museum at that time could also see that many of the items from the famous Royal Tombs of Ur, as well as iconic pieces like the copper head of an Akkadian king, were also not on show. These objects were in sealed boxes in the safe deposit vaults of the Central Bank and had been there since just before the Gulf War in 1991.

It can be said, in summation, that the museum staff had made some very good decisions to preserve the collections. They had also erected new walls in front of a main door and in the entrances of storerooms. They had also transferred to the museum all of the movable objects from the public galleries in the Mosul

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Museum and from the site of Hatra. This transfer was done because in the Gulf War of 1991, most of the regional museums had been raided and more than 5,000 objects were taken from them. They thought that the U.S. would not bomb the museum in Baghdad and that it would be taken intact and protected.

At 11 A.M. on Tuesday the 8th of April, as the sounds of battle grew closer to the museum complex, Dr. Jabber saw Iraqi militiamen jumping over the wall of the museum grounds and saw them take up fighting postures. When the fighting started, he decided to evacuate the museum and return in a couple of hours when the fighting stopped. As it happened, he and Dr. George went across the Tigris and when they wanted to return, U.S. troops holding the bridges would not let anyone cross.

Some fighting took place in the front of the museum, but there are very few bullet holes and only one tank-shell hole in an ornamental gate to attest to it. There have been contradictory reports on the number of fighters on the museum grounds, but even at the rear of the complex, along a street where fierce fighting was evidenced by tremendous damage to buildings across the street, on the museum side, there are no more than 50 or 60 bullet holes.

The museum complex was untouched on Wednesday the 9th, but on the 10th, looters came in through a small back gate and entered the galleries by breaking through a glass block window. It was probably on this day that a group of seemingly professional thieves took selected items of great value from the public galleries and, more important, from one of the most secure storerooms. Skeleton keys were found later in the building, and one or two doors seem to have been opened rather than forced. The knowledgeable thieves broke through a door to a stairway that led down to a steel door. Forcing open the steel door, they were confronted by a stone wall erected inside the doorway. They broke out the top two rows of blocks, enough to squeeze through, and went down another flight of stairs to the deep storeroom. Without electricity, the thieves had to rely on small fires made from packing material for light. But they knew exactly where to go to find one of the most valuable collections in the museum, the cylinder seals. They succeeded in taking 4,800 of these most-sought-after artifacts. They had also known where to find a set of hidden keys that would have opened cabinets with other seals in them, but fortunately they lost the keys before they were able to use them.

This group of thieves did not find the cuneiform tablet collection. These texts are also highly prized by collectors and would have been a prime target. The collection had been in this basement storage area, but had been moved some years before because the humidity was not good for them. The fact that the thieves did not know of the new storeroom for the tablets and did not know of the safe storage facility with the

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prime artifacts that had been taken off display argues against allegations in some media that the museum staff were involved in the looting. No foreign scholar who has done research in the museum believes any of the allegations against the present staff.

There seems to have been another kind of looter in the museum complex. These were mainly people from the neighborhood who saw a chance to get something of value. Luckily, they were more interested in air conditioners, furniture, and computers than in artifacts. They broke every door in the administrative offices of the State Board of Antiquities and in the museum. They took most of the office furniture, opened file cabinets and strewed records not only in the rooms but also up and down the halls. There seemed to be some preparation to make bonfires of piles of paper, an eventuality that did not materialize. The theft of furniture, machinery and chemicals from the offices and conservations laboratories can be remedied fairly fast. The re-sorting and refilling of the thousands of papers, plans, dig records, photographs, negatives, etc. will take years to complete, and some things will be too damaged to save. The loss of institutional memory, or rather the scrambling of that memory, is almost as crippling as the loss of items from the storerooms and public galleries.

The looting was brought to an end on Saturday, April 12, when museum personnel came back into the museum, chased out looters, and put up a sign saying that Americans were in the museum and would shoot anyone entering, although no troops were there. Mobs still circled, wanting to enter, and the situation did not improve until April 16, when tanks finally came to secure the premises.

What exactly was lost? It is important to give real facts here because in mid-June, there was a frenzy of activity in the media to minimize the losses. Some writers accused the Iraqi antiquities staff and foreign archaeologists, such as myself, of exaggerating and even inventing the looting. Most of the commentators seized on the figure of only 30 or 33 items missing, ignoring the looting of the storerooms. Colonel Matthew Bogdanos led a special task force of investigators sent in by the U.S. to investigate the events at the museum. Arriving on April 22, they treated the museum as a crime scene, gathered information from all possible witnesses, worked out a timetable, and began to try to recover stolen objects. Almost immediately, people in the neighborhood began to bring back objects to the museum. Some were significant, including massive statues and metal work, but many were unfortunately reproductions, museum shop replicas, fakes that the museum had stored in a special cabinet, and similar items. Announcements in mosques helped to speed the rate of recovery of objects, and investigative action resulted in the seizure of important items.

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Finishing the initial phase of the investigation, Bogdanos on July 11 at a meeting in London reported in minute detail on what had been taken from the various parts of the museum. From the public galleries, 40 items had been stolen, including the Warka Vase (later returned, probably too hot to sell)(Fig. 3 and photo p. 41), the Bassetki copper statue (see photo, p. 47), the headless statue of Entemena of Lagash, a statue of an Assyrian king (returned). In all, ten of the 40 items from the public galleries have been recovered so far, leaving 30 still missing. The famous Warka Head, still missing, was taken from a storeroom. The gold was stripped from the Ur lyre where it lay on a table in a special storeroom in conservation.



Photo via Oriental Institute

**Figure 3.** (left) *The Warka Vase before recovery* (Strommenger, Eva: *Fünf Jahrtausende Mesopotemien. München: Hirmer Verlag, fig. 19. Photo: Max Hirmer*) and (right) *after recovery*

The painstaking inventory being undertaken by the museum staff in conjunction with U.S. Customs has established that up to this point it can be stated that approximately 12,000 artifacts were stolen from the Iraq museum, predominantly from the storerooms. Of these, almost 3,000 items have been recovered, some of the most significant ones being confiscated at Customs checks in Europe and the U.S. Bogdanos stated that he expects the figures both for lost and recovered items to continue to rise. The inventory of the storerooms is not yet finished, and perhaps there will be more seizures at borders.

It is pointless to guess how large the final number of stolen items will be until we have the final official tally from the Customs officers. But it is clear that the losses from the museum are catastrophic. Luckily, they are not as great as originally feared. But even if only the 40 objects from the public galleries that Bogdanos mentioned had been taken, that would be a major loss by any museum's standards. Think of losing 40 items from any major museum's public display. And think of vandals trashing the administrative offices and labs of the Metropolitan Museum or any other. That will give you a gauge of how serious the situation is in Baghdad. But there are also losses from the public halls and the storerooms at Mosul, and damage to the structures of the museums at Babylon, Basra, and elsewhere.

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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Mention of Babylon brings us to the damage to archaeological sites. Iraq has had an exemplary record in protecting its sites, and until 1991, there was virtually no trade in Iraqi antiquities. But the looting of 9 out of 13 regional museums during the uprisings at the end of the 1991 Gulf War spawned widespread illegal digging, smuggling, and trade in Mesopotamian material. All through the 1990s, the pace of illegal digging in Iraq increased. The State Board of Antiquities was able to get money to put salvage teams on some major sites and thus stop the looting at least on those sites. But when the recent war started, the looters returned to the sites, drove off the guards, and began wholesale destruction. Since hostilities ceased, the pace has increased, and sites such as Nippur (Fig. 4), which had never been violated before, now have hundreds of holes in them. I saw up to 300 looters at work on several sites (Adab, Umma, Isin, Umm al-Aqarib) when I was in Iraq in May (Fig. 5). The favorites seem to be famous capitals that were already excavated by foreign expeditions. There is a ready market for objects from those sites, since they are known. But I saw even small unknown sites riddled with holes. It is safe to predict that when we get back to work in Iraq, we will find that hundreds of sites have been illegally dug, some virtually destroyed.



Photo: McGuire Gibson

**Figure 4.** Beginning of damage done to Nippur, southern Iraq, June 2003.



Photo: McGuire Gibson

**Figure 5.** Damage done to the site of Isin, southern Iraq, May 21, 2003. Photo McGuire Gibson.

The general situation in Iraq is still uncertain, and the continuing destruction of archaeological sites is a symptom of the lack of control in the country. We hear of some efforts being made to protect 40 or so sites, but every day that passes means that thousands of objects are ripped from their context and begin their journey onto the international market in illegal antiquities. The loss of context reduces the value of an object greatly. If objects are found in place with other objects, each object takes on a great deal more



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significance. Clay tablets with cuneiform writing can give much information, but when found in a specific place with other objects, they can be made to tell much more, such as function of rooms, the location of a specific office or a specific bureaucrat. Genealogies that might be hinted at in one text can be recreated with greater assurance if texts are found in their find-spots. And objects that might appear mysterious in themselves can have their function revealed when found in context.

Without an eager market in the U.S., Europe, Japan, and elsewhere, there would be little or no looting in Iraq. Ironically, the looters are destroying not only their past but also their futures. Many of these sites would have been excavated for years by archaeologists, and the men who are doing the illegal work would find employment for themselves and their descendants. When the oil runs out, Iraq will still have an economy based on agriculture and tourism, which itself will be based on antiquity. The destruction of major sites makes that future source less certain.

We are losing the "Heartland of Cities," the core sites of ancient Sumer. The key to saving the sites of Iraq is the same as the reconstruction of the museums, namely the reconstruction of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage to its pre-Embargo levels. The administration of the State Board must be stabilized and given the authority to manage their personnel, plan programs, and determine the priorities of funding. Guards must be re-hired or replaced and allowed to carry arms, which are sometimes denied them under the occupation. The local representatives of the State Board, resident in cities and towns throughout the country, need to be backed up by the occupying authority until a government emerges. Crucial to the functioning of the local representatives is the supply of transport to make it possible for them to inspect the sites in their areas and report on looting. There must then be immediate action taken to stop the illegal digging. Iraq has many thousands of sites, and it will be a very difficult task to safeguard them. But a start must be made, at least in the area where the looting has been the worst. If one major site can be occupied by Antiquities guards, and the guards are able to call upon the occupying authority for support, they should be able to monitor a number of other sites in the vicinity.

Another aspect of control is the halting of the market for antiquities in the countryside and in the cities. Individuals report seeing antiquities for sale in small towns in the south, as well as in the market in Baghdad. A few arrests by a reconstituted police force may have an effect here, but again the occupying authority must be willing to back up such actions.

The borders of Iraq are still essentially open, with searches only at designated border crossings. But the borders are long and porous. The calls for the banning of trade in Iraqi antiquities would help to slow the

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trade at the consumer end. Recent decisive action by the British government has put a chill on the trade in that country. Switzerland, long a haven for trade in illegally exported antiquities, appears to be joining Britain. Seizures in France and the work of Interpol and the French authorities seem also to be having a good result there. But it is feared that the center of the illegal trade will now shift to Germany and elsewhere. In the United States, which is perhaps the major consumer of illegal antiquities from Iraq, there is legislation before both houses of Congress. Near Eastern specialists, some museums, organizations such as the Archaeological Institute of America, the Society for American Archaeology, and the American Association for Research in Baghdad, as well as Iraqi-American groups prefer the House version.

It may be too late to save some of Iraq's cultural treasures and archaeological sites, but it is to be hoped that the example of Iraq will induce countries around the world to adopt and enforce the various conventions on cultural property (Geneva, Hague, UNESCO, UNIDROIT). Iraq's cultural heritage is also part of mankind's cultural heritage, and to protect it is to protect our own interests.