

features

Focus on Iraq: Spoils of War

by Neil Brodie

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The plundering of Iraq's cultural institutions demonstrates yet again how warfare fuels the global trade in looted antiquities.

In the days following the sack of Baghdad's museums, the first question asked was: Why had coalition war planners and military commanders not done more to stop it from happening? Looking to the events of April 2003, and beyond, another and more fundamental question is: Why has no concerted international action been taken to block the trade and sale of material looted from archaeological sites and cultural institutions during wartime? The simple answer seems to be that the political will just hasn't been there.

No one can blame Iraqis for believing that their museums were modern treasure houses—in a sense, they were. A lucrative international trade in Iraqi antiquities had already emerged in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. In the next three years, ten regional museums were attacked. Something like three thousand objects were stolen, of which few have ever been recovered. By the mid 1990s, the focus of destruction had shifted to archaeological sites, and in Europe dealers were circulating photographs of relief fragments from palaces at Nineveh and Nimrud. Cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, and other small antiquities—more difficult to trace—were sold openly. But not everything was leaving Iraq. In 1997, it was reported that enough antiquities had been seized at Iraq's border with Jordan to form an exhibition at Baghdad's National Museum. One year later a thousand artifacts were returned from Jordan, and in 2000 the Iraqis themselves seized five thousand more of them in southern Iraq. The looting of Iraq has not been without loss of human life. At least one guard and one looter have been shot dead (at different sites) and, in 1997, ten people were executed for stealing the head from a statue of a human-headed bull at Khorsabad.

Despite the fact that, under United Nations 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. In fact, the trade was carried on in blatant disregard of U.N. sanctions. The Iraq Department of Antiquities found itself in the invidious position of being unable to obtain photographic film to document their collections or vehicles to patrol their sites, while at the same time being forced to watch the unhindered flow abroad of looted antiquities.

What has happened in Iraq is not without precedent. In the fighting that followed the Soviet withdrawal from Kabul in 1988, Afghanistan's National Museum was ransacked. By 1996, 70 percent of the museum's collections was missing and archaeological sites throughout Afghanistan were being devastated in the search for saleable material. Early in 2001 part of what was left in the Kabul Museum was destroyed on the orders of the Taliban, and since their fall from power it is reported that there has been an upsurge in the looting of archaeological sites. Other national museums and cultural repositories around the world have also been attacked. The national museums of Somalia in Mogadishu and Hargeysa were emptied during the fighting that broke out there in 1991, and there is no news of the whereabouts of their collections. More can be said about Cambodia, where the Dépôt de la Conservation d'Angkor housed probably the finest collection of Khmer antiquities in the world. At some point during the 1970s a large part of the collection disappeared and about 150 statues were decapitated. Attacks on the Dépôt continued into the early 1990s. To date, only seven objects have been recovered.

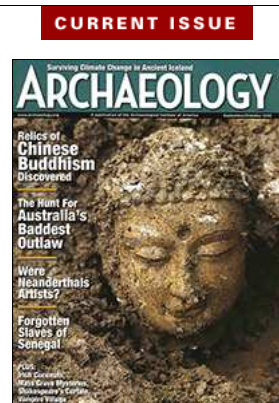
The collections of the National Museum of Beirut largely survived (though hardly intact) the fighting that wracked the city during the 1970s and 1980s, probably because of the successful strategies of deception and physical protection that were adopted by the museum's director, who announced the removal to safe storage of material that was still, in fact, in the museum's basement, and protected larger pieces with concrete barriers. Sites in other parts of Lebanon were not so lucky, and in Somalia and Cambodia they have been the target of illegal digging. Ironically, when the Iraqis occupied Kuwait in 1990 they moved quickly to protect museums from looting before removing collections themselves. Much of the contents of Kuwait's museums was returned in 1991, but its National Museum estimates it has lost about 20 percent of its collection.

Thus the omens were there from the start for those with the wit to read them. Museums, particularly national museums, are ripe for the picking during times of conflict. But little or no practical action has been taken to block the trade and sale of material looted from sites and cultural institutions during wartime.

So, what needs to be done in Iraq? As an obvious first priority, the museums have been secured against further attack; and now sites in the countryside must similarly be protected. The nature and scale of the damage must be assessed, and work should start on the repair and reconstruction of what is left. There seems a broad measure of agreement among the international community that this work should be in the hands of the Iraqi museum and archaeology services, which have the necessary knowledge and expertise for the tasks at hand. This is not to say that there should be no injection of material or expertise from outside agencies, but we should keep firmly in mind that overall supervision is an Iraqi prerogative. The recovery program will be long term and the greatest threat it faces is loss of public interest and thus political support when the media gaze is drawn to other cultural disasters. It is important that the looting of Baghdad's museums does not become last year's news.

A second priority is to prevent looted material from moving around the world, but it is not easy to see how this can be achieved. In the decade of neglect that followed the Gulf War, illicit trade networks were established, transport routes identified, and smuggling techniques tried and tested. Nothing definite is known about how or where looted material moves out of Iraq, but routes can be guessed at. Iraq's long land frontiers are difficult to police and allow easy passage into Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. From Turkey material can move directly to Europe, and from Saudi Arabia it can pass through the Gulf States to Europe. Jordanian customs officers have in the past intercepted Iraqi material, and have made more seizures since April 2003, but they are unable to stop the flow completely. From Jordan material can be sent directly to Europe, or pass into Israel, where there is a legal antiquities market. Presumably material moving through Iran will follow a more circuitous route but with the same European destination in mind. Thus material from Iraq will flow into Europe from all quarters, and by a variety of means, and presumably then on to the markets in Europe, Japan, and the United States. In general, European customs officers are not trained to recognize archaeological material, and so are poorly prepared to intercept suspect shipments. The situation in the United States is better as customs officers there are accustomed to blocking the import of specific classes of archaeological material as called for by various agreements with other countries. They also have the U.S. State Department's International Cultural Property Protection website to consult, which provides links to other websites showing images of looted Iraqi antiquities.

Given the patchy nature of customs preparedness, U.S. and United Kingdom government officials are placing great reliance on the cooperation and self-policing of dealer organizations (other European countries haven't said much; presumably, they don't feel responsible). Yet can we have any confidence that they will act to obstruct the trade in material looted from Iraq? Past experience suggests not. Large numbers of antiquities from Iraq, likely looted, have been on open sale in Europe and America



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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. Presumably, these are only the tip of an iceberg.

No doubt dealers selling these cuneiform tablets would claim that they have been in circulation for years, and moved out of Iraq at a time long predating the Gulf War. Maybe. But it is an interesting fact that a large number of tablets have been authenticated and translated by cuneiform expert Wilfred Lambert, a fellow of the prestigious British Academy. Now it is certainly possible that one or two tablets may have been in circulation for decades or more without being previously noted or translated, but it is scarcely credible that large numbers have been hidden away for years in dusty attics and rusty footlockers only to emerge and be authenticated toward the end of the twentieth century. Yet that is exactly what we are expected to believe.

It is probably too soon to say how much looted material will be recovered, but the prognosis is gloomy. Only a handful of objects stolen from Iraqi museums after the Gulf War have been identified over the years, and the experiences of Kabul Museum and Angkor are hardly encouraging. Inside Iraq there can be little objection to otherwise innocent people being offered immunity to prosecution in exchange for the return of stolen material—presumably major figures will not come forward and would in any case be guilty of other crimes. However, the question of reward might require more careful consideration. Perhaps a small reward is acceptable, provided it is not so large as to spur further looting. Payment could be restricted to objects that are readily identifiable as museum property, and this seems a good solution. Outside Iraq, however, the situation is less clear-cut, and it is harder to justify the payment of reward money if it goes only to sustain the market. An amnesty, however, might still be in order.

The international museum community might also take a hand. The International Council of Museums is at the forefront, and with financial support from the U.S. State Department is preparing a "Red List" of Iraqi antiquities at risk. But more could be done by individual institutions. The American Association of Museums, for example, has advised that museums should research the provenance of objects in their collections that may have changed hands during the period 1933 through 1945 when the Nazis expropriated large quantities of mainly Jewish-owned art. Many leading museums have now established programs with a view to returning stolen paintings or other objects to their rightful owners. Surely now is the time for a similar lifeline to be offered to cultural objects of other nations that have been wrongfully removed during wartime.

Cambodia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and now Iraq are among the worst cases of cultural destruction during time of war. All these cases point either to flaws in international law or to its ineffective enforcement. For example, I was puzzled that the United States had not entered into agreements protecting cultural heritage with Somalia and Afghanistan, as it has with Cambodia and other countries, under the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Then I realized that neither Somalia nor Afghanistan have actually signed the convention.

Furthermore, U.S. policy is responsive—there needs to be a clear request from a recognized central authority before any action can proceed, and the authority requesting action must have an effective jurisdiction and be able to implement measures designed to protect cultural heritage. In wartime, these requirements may be compromised. The First and Second Protocols to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict are designed to circumvent such problems. For example, 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. The Hague Convention is a strong piece of legislation drafted with the express purpose of preventing the types of destruction and theft of cultural material that have become a common feature of modern warfare. So far, however, the U.K. and the U.S. have refused to ratify it, although the reasons for their reticence have never been made clear. 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.

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