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Iraq Update

[Francis Deblauwe](#)

In the July/August 2003 issue of *Archaeology Odyssey*, I reported on the terrible events that took place during the second week of April at the National Museum and other cultural heritage sites in Baghdad.

Fortunately, my suspicion that early assessments of the losses were exaggerated has proved correct. Unfortunately, a number of commentators have now proceeded to go overboard in the other direction, claiming that reports of looting were unfounded rumors.

First, some good news. The National Museum in Baghdad possesses an important collection of the earliest examples of proto-cuneiform writing (c. 3200 B.C.), excavated in Uruk (the modern Iraqi site of Warka). These pieces and about 100,000 other cuneiform tablets (dating up to the first century A.D.) were kept safely in a storage room that was not breached. This group includes the invaluable Sippar archive of about 800 clay tablets from the Neo-Babylonian period (625-539 B.C.). Cuneiform scholars—a.k.a. Assyriologists—can breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Furthermore, almost all artifacts (about 8,000 pieces) in the public galleries of the National Museum were removed by the museum staff to a secure location before the war began. They were recovered unharmed. According to Donny George, director of research for the Iraq Department of Antiquities, and Nawala el-Mutawalli, director of the National Museum, museum workers and archaeologists became highly efficient at the delicate task of hiding objects during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War. The exact location of this hiding place has not been officially revealed, but it is likely on the museum's grounds.

About 100 artifacts were left in the public galleries because they were either too large or too fragile to move. About 40 of these vanished in those dark days of April.

The coalition force's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, now renamed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), wisely instituted a "no questions asked" amnesty policy combined with a campaign in the mosques appealing to the Iraqis' sense of honor. Quite a few artifacts have been returned, including a statue of the Neo-Assyrian king Shalmanezzer III (858-824 B.C.) and the famous Warka Vase (c. 3100 B.C.). However, these artifacts often bear the telltale marks of their ordeal; the Warka Vase, for example, is now in 15 pieces. Still missing, at the time of this writing, are 32 high-profile pieces, including an exquisite mask of a woman from Uruk (c. 3100 B.C.), a statue of King Entemena of Lagash (c. 2400 B.C.), an ivory carving (c. 800 B.C.) of a lion attacking a human from Nimrud (ancient Assyrian Kalhu, known in the Bible as Calah) and the base of the so-called Basetki statue (c. 2250 B.C.).

On July 3, the CPA organized a one-day, invitation-only exhibition at the National Museum. On display were gold pieces from the royal tombs at Ur as well as some recovered artifacts, such as the Warka Vase. But the star of the show was the so-called Treasure of Nimrud, consisting of gold jewelry and other artifacts excavated by Iraqi archaeologists between 1988 and 1990 in Nimrud/Kalhu. At this Neo-Assyrian capital, just southeast of Mosul, four tombs were discovered under a

floor of the Northwest Palace of King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.). Even though two of the tombs had been robbed in antiquity, all but one yielded spectacular grave goods, the likes of which had not been seen since Howard Carter opened Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Excavators found about 125 pounds of gold objects, along with large quantities of silver ware and precious gems.

According to the museum staff, this treasure had been placed in the vaults of Iraq's Central Bank ever since the 1991 Gulf War. When the renowned Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Mainz, Germany, attempted to set up an exhibition of this treasure some years ago, no insurance company was willing to insure the treasure: It was too valuable.

The underground levels of the Central Bank, however, became flooded during the recent war, and it took some doing—with the assistance of the National Geographic Society—to pump them out and locate the treasure. Fortunately, the artifacts suffered no lasting damage.

With the July exhibition, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, who replaced Lieutenant-General Jay Garner as the new "proconsul" of Iraq, wanted to show that normalcy was returning. Sadly, only a few hours after the exhibition closed, a U.S. soldier standing guard at the museum was killed by a sniper, and a couple of days later a British journalist was assassinated just across the street. Nonetheless, CPA Minister of Culture Pietro Cordone hopes to reopen the museum to the public in November. Donny George, on the other hand, says it will take a couple of years.

It is now clear that looters entered only three of the museum's five storage spaces. A lot of damage was done to artifacts that were swept off shelves helter-skelter, perhaps by frustrated plunderers searching for something salable in the half-dark (there was no electricity). At least some thieves knew exactly what they were doing: They managed to get the keys to a storage area and made off with a magnificent collection of 4,800 cylinder seals. Stumbling around, however, they dropped the keys to a cabinet with valuable coins, and they had to leave without them.

It has been widely circulated in the media that the museum's holdings totaled 170,000 pieces, as I stated in the *Archaeology Odyssey* article. In fact, this is not the number of artifacts held by the museum but rather the number of inventory entries. These entries frequently subsume large groups of artifacts—for example, all items from a tomb. The total number of artifacts in the museum has been estimated at over 500,000 by Selma el-Radi of New York University, who participated in a systematic inventory of the National Museum a few years ago.

Can we now form a better estimate of the losses? The circumstances are still changing, and the available information is far from perfect, but I would hazard an estimate that about three percent (about 13,000) of the museum's artifacts have been stolen and five percent (over 24,000) are damaged. It bears repeating that the full extent of the damage will not be known until a full inventory is completed, which may take several more months. Even then, the damage to the unlogged artifacts will have to be estimated.

We are still in the dark about much of what happened in the lawless days of April. The root problem is that coalition forces should have protected the museum immediately after the battle in Baghdad, but they did not. The U.S. Joint Inter-Agency Co-Ordination Group, headed by reservist Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, has not made any firm determinations about the looters, beyond stating that they were a mix of mobs, professional thieves and insiders. Bogdanos's team—together with Interpol, Kurdish police and the customs agencies of many countries—has succeeded in confiscating numerous artifacts in Iraq and a few abroad. Interpol will significantly expand its database of stolen art to include thousands of antiquities looted during the Iraq War.

Looters also rampaged through provincial museums and archaeological site museums at Mosul, Hatra, Babylon and elsewhere. Happily, a lot of the most valuable artifacts had been sent to Baghdad before the war broke out. The National Library in Baghdad was looted and burned, as were other important manuscript,

document and book collections. The latest information indicates that 30-60 percent of the National Library collection (20 million documents, going back to the Middle Ages) has survived in secret storage, but the situation is far from clear. The Saddam House of Manuscripts (40,000 volumes, now renamed the Iraqi House of Manuscripts) was kept safe in a bomb shelter and appears unharmed. The Awqaf (Religious Endowment) collection did not fare so well: 1,750 of its 7,000 manuscripts were lost.

A National Geographic Society mission has investigated the condition of archaeological sites throughout Iraq. They found that the situation in the north of the country is somewhat better than in the south, where gangs of hundreds of armed looters have been active with heavy equipment. Other reports tell of a thriving and well-organized trade in antiquities, hardly kept in check by authorities, be they Iraqi or CPA.

According to our limited knowledge of the situation on the ground, some of the hardest-hit sites have been reduced to cratered moonscapes—for example, Ishan Bakhriyat (ancient Isin), Tell Jokha (ancient Umma), Tell Senkereh (ancient Larsa) and Umm el-Aqarib. Sadly, however, this looting is nothing new; it has been going on, albeit at a lower intensity, since the 1991 Gulf War. The CPA is now patrolling at least some of the major archaeological sites with helicopters and has a presence on the ground at sites such as Babylon, Hatra, Nimrud and Ur. But Iraq is estimated to have a good 10,000 important sites—and it's impossible to protect them all. Restoring social order, giving Iraqis back a sense of self-respect, providing work and educational opportunities—those are the only solutions to wipe out the scourge of archaeological plunder and destruction.

After years of brutalization, Iraqis need an alternative. It is a tall order.

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