

From catastrophe to exaggeration, and from blunder to bluster, the looting of the Iraq Museum turned a scientific and cultural tragedy into a media event and political free-for-all

Mayhem in Mesopotamia

BAGHDAD—Quietly and secretly, five people entered the empty and echoing halls of the shuttered Iraq Museum. Each chose a gallery and unlocked the glass cases with keys obtained from the nearby administrative offices. Then they removed the precious artifacts—everything from a 10,000-year-old carving of a bird head to delicate medieval Islamic pottery. A total of 8366 objects, worth untold millions of dollars on the black market, were hidden away. Once they had finished, they swore on the Koran not to reveal the location of the objects until well after the war was over.

This clandestine caper was not carried out by thieves during the chaos that engulfed Baghdad in early April. Rather, it was a preemptive strike carried out by Ministry of Culture employees weeks before the U.S. invasion. The removal of these premier objects to an air-raid shelter was part of a concerted although flawed effort by the ministry to safeguard the complex from U.S. bombs or local looters. It wasn't until 6 July that the five revealed the whereabouts of the gallery objects to U.S. investigators, who found them intact.

But what should have been a cause for celebration went virtually unnoticed by a world sated with coverage of the looting of

the Iraq Museum. What began in April as an unprecedented international scandal—*The New York Times* reckoned it as “one of the greatest cultural disasters in recent Middle Eastern history”—had by July become the butt of jokes among conservative commentators, who derided the episode as an example of academic exaggeration, media gullibility, and Iraqi mendacity. The original count of 170,000 lost artifacts had plummeted to a figure that could be counted on “two hands and two feet,” sneered John Podhoretz in the *New York Post*. (In fact, more than 10,000 artifacts are still missing; see scorecard, p. 584). The drama's conclusion has left Pentagon officials relieved, scholars defensive, and the public confused.

Behind the looting, the wanton destruction of administrative and storage areas, and the reappearance of hundreds of objects in Jordan, Italy, and the United States lies a fascinating tale of misunderstandings, mistakes, surprises, and bureaucratic infighting. The story stretches from the corridors of the Pentagon to the basement of the Iraq Museum itself. *Science* followed the trail from Washington, D.C., to London to Baghdad.

Unlisted numbers

When Cyrus the Great and, later, Alexander the Great captured ancient Mesopotamia's capital of Babylon—a short drive from today's Baghdad—both leaders were welcomed as foreign liberators. After throwing off oppressive tyrants, the new rulers immediately imposed order on the vast and wealthy city. “Green twigs were spread in front of him,” one scribe writes of the conquering Cyrus. “The state of peace was imposed upon the city.”



Hole in one. U.S. tanks fired on Iraqi militia lodged in this museum arch, and they now guard the complex.

More than 2 millennia later, U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair can only dream of such an outcome. Even as the two leaders assured the international community on 8 April that they were taking “every step possible” to protect Iraq's religious and cultural sites, looters began to take apart dozens of bank, university, library, hospital, and government buildings in the city. “We were still fighting our ass off as we went into Baghdad,” Lt. Gen. William Scott Wallace explained a month later when questioned by reporters. “And our first responsibility was to defeat the enemy forces.”

The tanks and troops that poured into Baghdad in early April had orders to secure presidential palaces and sites of potential weapons of mass destruction, says U.S. Army Col. Rick Thomas, spokesperson for Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, who commanded the coalition land forces under U.S. Central Command. But there were no specific orders, he adds, to safeguard cultural, educational, or health care facilities—including the Iraq Museum.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. Months before, outsiders had tried to light a



Shattered. Statues brought to Baghdad from regional museums for safekeeping lie in heaps.

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) D. COLON/BRITISH MUSEUM; YANNIS KONTOS/POLARIS

fire under senior Pentagon officials in Washington (see timeline). On 24 January, archaeologists, collectors, and curators met with Joseph Collins, defense deputy assistant secretary for stability operations. They told him about the vulnerability of the museum, citing the Iraqi mobs that had stripped more than 4000 objects from regional museums in the bloody aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War.

According to minutes of the meeting, Collins promised to look into issuing an order to ensure that U.S. troops did not loot or damage important archaeological and cultural sites. But he dropped the matter, Collins later told *Science*, after learning that U.S. troops were already operating under such orders, so no new one was issued. Ordering commanders to halt looting by Iraqis, he adds, was outside his bailiwick. “We are a policy shop,” Collins says. “We aren’t in the business of guiding military operations.”

Some defense officials did express concern. On 26 March, 2 weeks before troops arrived in Baghdad, the Pentagon’s civilian office in charge of overseeing postwar Iraq drew up guidance for U.S. land forces to secure key Baghdad institutions “as soon as possible to prevent further damage, destruction, and/or pilferage.” First revealed by Paul Martin in the 20 April *Washington Times*, the document from the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) is stamped “working draft.” But government officials confirm that it was conveyed to McKiernan’s Kuwait office for implementation by the military.

The Iraq Museum is ranked second on the list, on a par with the Abbasid Palace and behind only the Central Bank. “Baghdad contains one of the largest archaeological museums in the world,” the document states. “It contains literally thousands of priceless historical objects” covering “over 5000 years of recorded history and presents the fruits of 200 years of scientific investigation.” Presciently, it warned that the museum “will be a prime target for looters.” Al-

though the document remarks that “it will be impossible to protect everything” in a country loaded with valuable sites, it argues that the museum, palace, and Ministry of Culture “should be safeguarded by the stationing of U.S. forces.”

That message was reinforced in public comments by Maj. Christopher Varhola, an Army civil affairs officer, who told reporters on 5 April in Kuwait that military officials were worried about looting, “especially in the absence of law and order and the economic uncertainty that is inherent to any military operation of this magnitude.” He expressed special concern for the museum’s “priceless material.” Still, no military order was issued.

A last-minute plea by a U.S. senior officer to protect the museum fared no better. U.S. Central Command acknowledged the 10 April request by the officer, who prefers to remain anonymous, to move expeditiously to protect the museum. They wrote him that U.S. forces were on their way. But again, no order went out.

By 14 April, the fate of the museum had become an issue for the White House and State Department. During a teleconference led by White House Office of Global Communications chief Tucker Eskew, British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s spokesperson Alistair Campbell warned that the looting “looks bad, is playing bad, and we need to protect [the museum],” one White House official recalls. But Eskew was not in the chain of command and was thus in no position to issue an order, and Central Command officials participating in the teleconference took no action. That morning, however, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell assured reporters that Central Command “has issued instructions to all troops in-

side Iraq to protect museums and antiquities throughout Iraq.” In reality, however, it would be 48 hours before any tanks showed up.

Picture window

The man finally charged with securing the museum was Jason Conroy of the 3rd Infantry Division. The 30-year-old Army captain was wary of the task; in recent days his four tanks and 16 soldiers “had taken heavy fire” from the walled compound and its vicinity.

That firing began late in the morning of 8 April. By that time, most of the museum staff had fled, but Jaber Khalil, chair of the State Board of An-



Bad rap? DOD’s Joseph Collins says it wasn’t his job to ensure that artifacts were protected from Iraqi looters.

CREDITS: (LEFT) HELENE C. STIKKEL/ODD; (SIDEBAR, TOP TO BOTTOM), SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP PHOTO; A. LAWLER; THE GUARDIAN

Crisis Countdown

24 January: Concerned group warns of looting threat during Pentagon meeting.

February: Museum closes.

Early March: Gallery artifacts are stored in a “secret place.”

19 March: War begins.

26 March: ORHA memo is transmitted.

27 March: UNESCO director urges U.S. to protect cultural heritage sites.

A Fateful Week

8 April: Bush and Blair pledge site protection; museum staff flee; battle commences.



9 April: Baghdad falls to U.S. forces.

10 April: Looters enter museum complex; Central Command pledges protection.

11 April: Pillage continues; looters enter museum galleries and storerooms.

12 April: Museum friends and staff members secure museum; media arrive and cite loss of 170,000 objects.

13 April: Senior museum staff members return.

14 April: White House holds teleconference; Powell issues statement assuring protection and recovery.



16 April: U.S. tanks secure museum; American Schools of Oriental Research issues statement decrying looting.

22 April: U.S. investigators arrive.

29 April: Donny George cites 34 known objects missing; U.S. promises \$2 million for museum-related recovery.

1 June: Central Bank vault is opened.

10 June: Conservative criticism mounts.

3 July: Museum reopens for 2 hours.

6 July: Iraqis reveal “secret place” location to U.S. officials.



tiquities, and Donny George, the board's research director, had decided to stay behind to protect the museum from looters. The pair were busy stockpiling food and water for a long siege when Khalil spotted Iraqi militia in track suits and tennis shoes jumping into the adjacent garden outside his office window. "We have to go, it is too dangerous to stay," he told George. They escaped out the back door.

Image not available for online use.

Laughing matter. The museum looting became an easy target for U.S. political cartoonists questioning the invasion.

Those militia, armed with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), were setting up positions on top of the large arch facing Museum Square, as well as on the roof of the museum library. Both spots offered a strategic view of a major intersection. The soldiers also used dugouts in the front lawn of the museum that George insists were built before the conflict to protect staff from air raids.

Early in the battle, the M1A1 Abrams tank commanded by Sgt. 1st Class David Richard took out the position on the arch. "We thought they needed a picture window," he says dryly. A trail of blood on the arch threshold testifies to the effectiveness of the 120-millimeter round. A second, 25-millimeter round was fired into a storeroom window in the rear of the museum, where U.S. investigators later found a sniper's nest. The room was entered from the inside without force.

Conroy and Richard believe that the museum complex was a well-planned and well-fortified position that served as an arms and ammunition stockpile for Saddam's forces. As evidence, they point to the abandoned RPGs, AK-47s, and Iraqi military uniforms that littered the rear area of the museum, which is shared by a police station and a mosque. A small gate there—easily climbed—opens onto a busy market street, and the market arcade is riddled with small-arms fire, testament to intense fighting. "They were running across that street and firing at us," Conroy says.

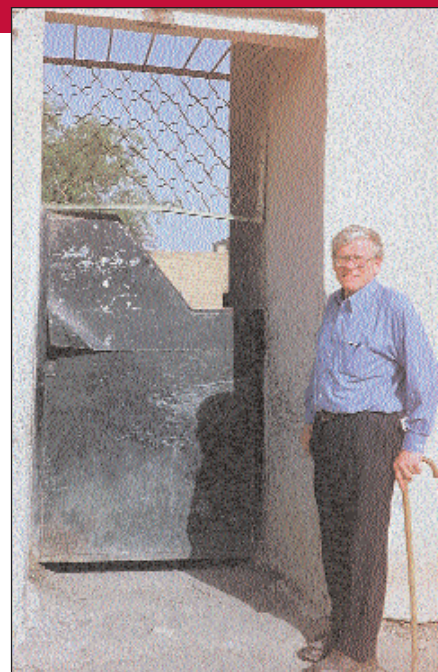
However, an investigation by U.S. Ma-

rine Col. Matthew Bogdanos into the looting found no evidence that Iraqi soldiers were present in the compound before 8 April. The sniper, speculates George, may have arrived later with the looters. Discarded Iraqi military uniforms were found in the administrative area.

The battle raged until the 16th, Conroy says. "There were lulls," he recalls, adding that large numbers of civilians did not begin to emerge until 14 April. But as early as 10 April crowds of looters began attacking the museum. They burst into the administrative areas, stealing air conditioners, chairs, tables, computers, cameras, and anything else of value, according to Mohsen Hassan, a 56-year-old archaeologist who lives on the museum grounds.

Hassan remained inside his home in the rear of the compound during most of the fighting, but he says he tried to convince Richard to move his tank from the nearby intersection to the museum. Richard says he doesn't remember the encounter. "It was total chaos; people were shooting at you," he says.

There are persistent but unconfirmed rumors in the neighborhood that U.S. forces actually preceded looters into the museum and came out with boxes. Other



Back door. The University of Chicago's McGuire Gibson stands beside the poorly secured rear gate of the museum.

rumors are that U.S. soldiers actively encouraged the museum looting and that American tanks chased away a crowd of looters on at least one occasion. But no U.S. officials or senior Iraqi museum staff confirm any of these scenarios.

Museum Scorecard*

Public gallery thefts:	40
Recovered:	10
Conservation room thefts:	199
Recovered:	30
Heritage room thefts:	236
Recovered:	164
Ground-floor storage area thefts:	2703
Recovered:	2169
Basement storage thefts:	10,337
Recovered:	671
Returned through local amnesty:	1453
Recovered through raids/seizures:	1591
Safe in off-site locations:	
39,453 manuscripts	
8366 public gallery objects	
616 objects from Nimrud and Ur	
Total thefts:	13,515
Total recovered:	3044
Still missing:	10,471

*As of 28 July 2003.

Media circus

What is certain is that by the morning of the 12th, returning staff members and their friends had managed to secure the complex and hang a makeshift sign that claimed falsely that the museum was under the protection of U.S. forces. The first wave of media had also arrived to witness empty glass cases, chaotic storerooms, and angry and distraught employees and friends. One woman, identified as the museum's deputy director, was quoted by Reuters, Voice of America, and the BBC as saying that thieves "have looted or destroyed 170,000 objects of antiquity."

But the woman, Nabhal Amin, was actually a former assistant curator who no longer worked at the museum, according to Nawalla al-Mutawalli, the museum director. Amin had not been involved in the pre-war preparations and had no current knowledge of the museum collection. She was able to reach the museum quickly because she lived nearby, and she spoke with authority to Western reporters.

The 170,000 figure actually refers to the number of items in a museum inventory. The total collection likely consists of nearly half a million individual objects—several beads, for example, can be counted as one inventory item. John Burns of *The New York*

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State Board Hopes for Fresh Start

BAGHDAD—The Iraq Museum and the State Board of Antiquities, which runs it, are getting a much-needed makeover. But the biggest challenge is to transform Iraqi archaeology into a modern research enterprise.

Saddam Hussein's oil-rich government showered Iraq's archaeology program with money and attention during the 1970s and 1980s. But in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, government funding dried up, researchers fled, and most foreign scientists stayed away. Politics also grew more intrusive, as senior archaeologists and museum staff members increasingly were expected to join the Baath Party, attend weekly meetings, and beat the drum for the repressive regime. The result was a quiet crisis in Iraqi archaeology even before looters descended on the museum.

"Thirteen years of sanctions affected us," says museum director Nawalla al-Mutawalli. "We've fallen from the top ranks of museums." The State Board of Antiquities, adds senior board official Rabia al-Qaisi, is eager to "become more technically up-to-date and scientifically current." The first step in the process is an inventory of the storerooms, now more than half complete, notes Al-Mutawalli. In addition, donated computers and furniture now line the hallways, waiting to be installed.

But reversing the decline will require more than new office equipment. A decade's advances in excavation, preservation, and curatorial techniques by the outside world are unknown inside Iraq, and policies long scorned in the West—such as paying archaeologists bonuses for finding artifacts—are deeply ingrained. There are also cultural issues to overcome. "There is no motivation for work,

no sense of initiative," says Lebanese archaeologist and journalist Joanne Farchahk, who recently spent time at the museum. "They wait for big government to tell them what to do."

On top of those problems, a cloud hangs over the museum's current management. A series of petitions has criticized Jaber Khalil, the board chair, and other senior managers for alleged corruption. Coalition officials say they see no basis for these complaints, and only one senior manager, a senior Baath Party member who served as Saddam's eyes and ears in the museum, has

been forced from her position as head of excavations. Khalil—who is not a Baath Party member but who is related to Saddam's family—is in ill health and would like to retire or return to teaching at the University of Baghdad, museum officials add.

Coalition partners and foreign researchers want to leave management of the board to Iraqis to avoid being labeled colonial interlopers. But Iraqi officials

say the door is open to mutually beneficial cooperation. Muayyad Damerji, former State Board chief and now a Ministry of Culture adviser, urged archaeologists gathered last month in London to reopen their Baghdad institutes and hinted that they might be able to resume excavations as early as next spring. Donny George, research director, added that he hopes a streamlined bureaucracy will make it easier for outside scientists to gain the necessary approvals.

—A.L.



New era. Iraq's Muayyad Damerji and Nawalla al-Mutawalli meet the press in London.

Times, who clambered with colleagues over the back gate of the museum on 12 April, says that archaeologist Hassan told him that some 50,000 objects were gone. The more cautious figure appeared in the first editions of the 13 April paper. But the final Sunday edition cited "at least 170,000 artifacts carried away by looters."

Burns explains that he decided to use the larger number after talking with other reporters. "We had seen completely ransacked buildings, and when we got to the museum we were disposed to believe the worst," he says. "We were tremendously distraught, and passion got the better of us." Both versions of Burns's stories included the caveat that "a full accounting of what has been lost may take weeks or months."

That caveat, however, barely registered in the outcry that followed. Stunned Mesopotamian scholars, intimately familiar with the museum's collections of artifacts, research materials, and old excavation data, believed the initial media reports—and amplified their message. Archaeolo-

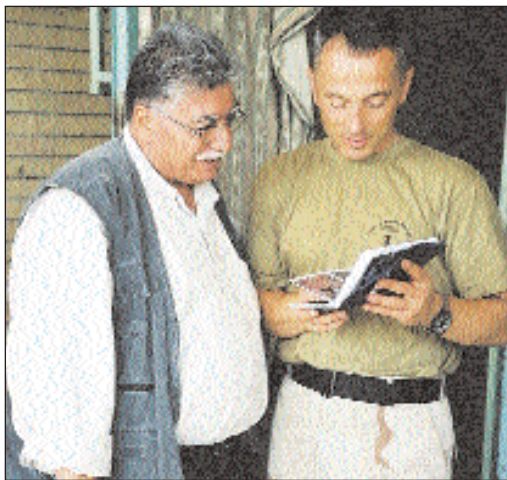
gist John Russell of Massachusetts College of Art in Boston says he received an average of 40 phone calls and 100 e-mails a day from the press for a week. On 16 April, the Boston-based American Schools of Oriental Research compared the museum looting to "the sack of Constantinople, the

burning of the library at Alexandria, the Vandal and Mogul invasions, and the ravages of the conquistadors." A headline in Britain's *Independent* summed up the accepted wisdom: "A Civilization Torn to Pieces."

Scholars say the comparisons were justified, based on the data they had. "It was a shock," says Russell. "The reporting was so extreme that scholars' reactions were very strong." But some have since had second thoughts. "Perhaps we should have realized we were dealing with preliminary reports," says Piotr Michalowski, an Assyriologist at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Senior members of the Iraq Museum staff did exercise caution. On 13 April, Khalil and George returned to the museum after persuading U.S. Marines at the Palestine Hotel—who oversaw operations only on the other side of the Tigris—to send tanks. None appeared, however. A disconsolate George was quoted as saying, "It's gone, it's lost." But he consistently told reporters that quantifying the loss would require a difficult and time-consuming inventory.

At a 29 April closed meeting at the British Museum, George told experts that



Allies. Iraqi archaeologist Donny George (left) and Col. Matthew Bogdanos, an assistant district attorney in New York, are unlikely partners in retrieving lost artifacts.

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) JOHN D. MCHUGH/AP PHOTO; A. LAWLER

“we don’t know what’s lost” beyond a list of 34 specific gallery items. Important collections of manuscripts and cuneiform tablets were safe in bunkers, vaults, or the untouched parts of the museum’s storerooms, he added. John Curtis, the British Museum archaeologist who had been one of the first foreign scholars on the scene, concurred with George’s analysis. “Donny made it clear that things were not as bad as the first reports indicated,” says Elizabeth Stone, an archaeologist at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.

It wasn’t long before the media focused on what seemed like a dramatic—and to some, suspicious—reduction in estimates of the number of stolen items. A team of U.S. investigators led by Bogdanos began arriving on 22 April to follow the artifact trail. Their efforts soon resulted in a drumbeat of news detailing major “finds” that appeared to mock the first media reports. “U.S. Says It Has Recovered Many Artifacts and Manuscripts in Iraq,” trumpeted *The New York Times* on 7 May. “Just 32 Prize Items Still Missing as Iraq’s Treasures Flood Back,” wrote *The Times* of London on 15 June.

Not surprisingly, most of the objects were simply being pulled from storage places outside the museum. The vast Dar Saddam manuscript collection, for example, was locked away in a bunker in western Baghdad before the war for safekeeping, and George himself took U.S. officers there shortly after the museum was secured. Museum staff also reminded American officers about the collection of gold and precious items from Nimrud that had been stored in the Central Bank

Image not available for online use.

Image not available for online use.

Returned. The famous Warka vase, a triumph of Sumerian art, was returned to the museum in pieces.

since 1991—a fact long known by foreign archaeologists (*Science*, 6 July 2001, p. 42). The waterlogged collection of gold jewelry was eventually retrieved from flooded vaults. Finally, a stream of people arrived at the museum and handed over hundreds of objects.

Secrets and lies

Pentagon officials consistently downplayed the museum disaster, privately dismissing the hubbub as a convenient liberal tool to criti-

cize the war. A “bum rap” was how Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld responded on 10 May to accusations that the military was responsible. But White House and State Department officials say they were angered and embarrassed by the event and its coverage.



Salute to royalty. U.S. civilian administrator Paul Bremer examines crown from ancient Assyrian queen at 3 July exhibition.

As the estimated number of lost items began to drop, however, Western commentators—mostly conservative supporters of the invasion—joined the fray. Influential columnists such as David Aaronovitch in Britain’s *Guardian* (“Lost from the Baghdad Museum: Truth”) and Charles Krauthammer in *The Washington Post* (“Hoaxes, Hype, and Humiliation”) accused the media of parroting false numbers from Iraqi officials whose motive was to magnify U.S. crimes. George came in for special drubbing. He was “the source of the lie,” wrote Krauthammer, adding that the media “bought their deceptions without an ounce of skepticism.”

Ironically, George actually was excluded from the biggest museum secret of all: the preemptive move to transfer invaluable objects from the museum’s galleries to a secure location. The closely held operation began at the end of February. Iraq’s Minister of Culture appointed Muayyad Damerji—a former State Board chair and now a ministry adviser—to lead the effort. He was assisted by Al-Mutawalli, Khalil, and two others. “It took a week to 10 days,” recalls Al-Mutawalli. Damerji says similar precautions had been taken before the first Gulf War.

The museum was closed, and the fragile items placed in a secret air-raid shelter built during the Iran-Iraq war. Damerji says he and his team feared that looters might get wind of the stash, so all five pledged to keep the operation secret until a new Iraqi government was in place. On 6 July, just days before the announcement of a council to

govern Iraq, the museum staff revealed the location of the safeguarded items to the Americans. Bogdanos says all the material has been accounted for, but he also declines to name the location.

Although they preserved thousands of objects, the rescue team members made some costly mistakes. They failed to move a host of important objects—notably a 5000-year-old vase—to the greater safety of the shelter or a storeroom. “We were afraid to move the Warka vase” because of its fragility, Damerji says. Objects such as an Akkadian copper statue base were deemed too heavy to transport.

Looters had no such reservations. They took both objects, although the vase has since been returned in pieces. Other important artifacts were stored haphazardly, if at all. The famous 4000-year-old Ur harp—minus its gold bovine head, which was stored in the Central Bank—was found, damaged, on the floor of a trashed workshop.

Some U.S. authorities, in tracing how the looting unfolded, suspect something more sinister than honest errors made in the haste of packing. They are still puzzling over how thieves and the sniper—without using force—opened a massive steel door leading to a ground-floor storeroom that contained

Image not available for online use.

Missing. This classic Assyrian ivory of a lion attacking a Nubian is thought to be lost.

thousands of recently excavated artifacts. The key to that steel door was kept in Al-Mutawalli’s safe in her administrative office, according to U.S. and Iraqi officials; that safe, in turn, was opened by looters with a key. Some 2700 artifacts, most from recent excavations, along with many reproductions, were stolen from the ground-level storerooms, although about 2100 have since been recovered. The upstairs storeroom was large-

CREDIT: (TOP) SAMIR MEZBAN/AP PHOTO; (BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT) COPYRIGHT 2003, USA TODAY; REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION: GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/CORBIS; DAVID LEES/CORBIS

ly undisturbed, save for the sniper's nest.

Downstairs, looters performed another formidable feat. The back entrance to that basement storeroom, which consists of three large storage spaces, was sealed before the war with a concrete wall, which in turn was protected by a thick iron door located in an obscure passageway. The looters found the door and pried it open, smashed the wall, and descended into the cavernous space. They then made their way to one wall of the central chamber containing more than 100 plastic boxes full of cylinder seals, beads, and other small items, along with a row of cabinets with more cylinder seals and a huge collection of Roman, Greek, and Islamic coins.

The robbers were clumsy and ill-prepared, however. Lacking flashlights, they lit small fires for illumination. And they dropped a large set of small keys to the cabinets before they had a chance to use them. "They were more like the Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight," says Steven Mocsary, a U.S. Customs official assigned to the museum. Their fumbling prevented the loss of one of the

world's most important coin and seal collections, but they did make off with nearly 5000 seals stored in the boxes. (One fine-quality seal sold on the New York art market 2 years ago for \$424,000.)

How did the burglars know where to look, and how did they obtain the keys? "It was just by chance," suggests Al-Mutawalli, a respected cuneiform scholar who has been with the museum since 1977 and has been director for 3 years. "They got lucky." But George and Bogdanos believe there was no way that uninformed looters, on their own, could have made their way through dark corridors, iron doors, and a concrete wall to the right location. "Someone had inside information," says Mocsary. But there is no conclusive evidence of wrongdoing.

Eager to put the controversy behind them, coalition officials temporarily reopened the Iraq Museum for a 2-hour media event on 3 July. Attended by U.S. civilian administrator Paul Bremer, the event featured a spectacular display of recovered Nimrud gold—hailed out of its bank vault

across town just for the occasion. Iraqis don't begrudge what many academics see as a cynical propaganda ploy. "At least we can assure people that the objects weren't stolen or confiscated by Saddam and his family," says Damerji.

As the events of early April recede in time, few people seem eager to rehash them or extract any lessons learned. The Pentagon says it has no plans to revamp its policies on cultural heritage sites. Academics are still struggling to organize a concerted response to the crisis (see next story). And the media has moved on.

The rare reflection comes from a politician who took heat from the media and scientists in the aftermath of the looting. "The easy answer is that nothing could have been done," Tessa Jowell, the British Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport, told a parliamentary committee on 8 July. But then she introduced a haunting note of self-doubt. "We'll all live for a long time with the question of whether more could have been done to protect these treasures." —ANDREW LAWLER

Researchers Weigh In on Trading

In the wake of the Iraq war, a battle pitting archaeologists and collectors is brewing on Capitol Hill over how far to go in restricting the antiquities market

Many archaeologists are accustomed to lobbying foreign governments for permission to practice their profession. But the highly publicized crisis in Iraqi antiquities is giving them a chance to practice their political skills at home, too.

U.S. archaeologists are pressing to rein in an antiquities market that they see as a growing threat to their databases. However, collectors, dealers, and curators say the sudden attention has gone to the archaeologists' heads and that the proposed changes are too drastic. The controversy promises to turn into a stiff fight this fall, when Congress considers two conflicting pieces of legislation.

The United Nations excluded Iraqi antiquities when it lifted sanctions in May against the country. It is now up to each country to set its own rules. In the United States, H.R. 2009, the Iraq Cultural Heritage Protection Act, which was introduced

by Representatives Phil English (R-PA) and James Leach (R-IA), would establish a permanent ban, whereas a measure proposed by Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA)



Digging in. Ellen Herscher, left, and Jim Fitzpatrick are at odds over a House bill to restrict the antiquities trade.

would limit it to 1 year, starting this fall.

But the House version, which has the backing of archaeologists, goes one step further. It gives the president the power to bypass the Cultural Property Advisory Committee—a presidential panel that in-

cludes a mix of scientists, museum curators, and art dealers and collectors—in case of an emergency such as the one in Iraq. Currently, another country submits a formal request, which is reviewed by the committee before the U.S. Department of State can act. Without an Iraqi government, and with a congressional delay in confirming nominees, the committee has taken no action.

The House bill also would double the length of time of an emergency import ban—from 5 to 10 years—and increase the time such a decree could be extended, from 8 years to a decade. The bill would apply to any object more than a century old, compared with the current minimum of 250 years. "The Iraqi situation has brought to everyone's attention the danger to cultural resources in a war situation," says Ellen Herscher, an independent archaeologist who is chair of the Archaeological Institute of America's legislation and policy committee. "The U.S. is the primary market for antiquities, and this bill gives us the legal tools to deter illicit trade."

But collectors, dealers, and curators think those changes go too far in altering the 1983 Cultural Property Implementation Act, which set up the current system and was the result of painstaking compromise by all sides. They prefer Grassley's version. "I don't want to get rid of the established process for protecting cultural antiquities," Grassley said in June as he introduced S. 1291.

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