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Plundering the Past
 The Rape of Iraq's National Museum
[Francis Deblauwe](#)



During the second week of April, something terrible happened in Baghdad: Looters broke into the National Museum, smashing display vitrines full of ancient objects and making off with some of the museum's prized holdings. The damage didn't stop there; frenzied mobs also set fire to the National Library and then continued on to the Awqaf (Religious Endowments) Library and the Saddam House of Manuscripts.

Whether these acts were motivated by revenge, greed or temporary insanity, the loss to knowledge—especially knowledge about the roots of Western civilization and the world's three great monotheistic religions—is incalculable.

The National Museum in Baghdad was founded in 1921 by the British, who administered Iraq after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. It is the most important museum in the Middle East, rivaled only by the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Until mid-April, the National Museum housed about 170,000 artifacts. Although it is considerably smaller than the great museums in Paris, London, Berlin and New York,* its collection consists of objects unearthed in controlled excavations in Iraq—meaning that it provides an almost continuous record of life in ancient Mesopotamia, something no other museum can boast. Moreover, since the museum's objects were mostly found in well-documented archaeological contexts, we know how to interpret them, and we know that they are authentic, which is not always the case with museum objects.

“History begins at Sumer,” wrote University of Pennsylvania Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer. “Sumer” refers to a collection of city-states—including Ur, Nippur and Uruk—that arose around the end of the fourth millennium B.C. in southern Iraq. Although we don't know where the Sumerians came from (their language is not related to any other known language), they are in a sense our earliest recognizable ancestors. They created the world's first written numbering system, and they created the first fully developed writing system, which came to be called cuneiform (from the Latin, meaning “wedge-shaped”).** Learning to write by scratching simple inventories on clay tablets, they eventually created the world's first written fables, prayers and epics, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh.‡ They

created a flood story that is so similar to the biblical story of Noah's Flood that most scholars believe the Genesis version somehow derives from the Sumerian version.

Some of the earliest examples of cuneiform writing (so-called proto-cuneiform, from about 3200 B.C.), excavated in Uruk (the modern Iraqi site of Warka), were preserved in the National Museum. As this article goes to press, we do not know if they are still there.

The Sumerians also created some of the earliest cities, law codes and pharmacopoeias. Sumerians were the world's first mathematicians and astronomers. And they even discovered how to make glass, a technique that has since been passed down to almost all peoples on earth.## In short, the Sumerians created the world's first civilization, in the largest sense of that word, and many of the artifacts forming the record of that civilization are—or were—in the National Museum in Baghdad.

Around 2300 B.C., Semitic-speaking peoples took over the reins of power in Mesopotamia (from the Greek, meaning "Between the [Tigris and Euphrates] Rivers"). Their language, Akkadian, would henceforth be the lingua franca of the ancient Near East—though Sumerian would continue in use as a literary and scientific language through the first millennium B.C. The languages used by Babylonians in south Mesopotamia and Assyrians in north Mesopotamia were both Akkadian dialects.

The National Museum's collection includes about 100,000 cuneiform tablets dating from the late fourth millennium B.C. to the first century A.D.—an indispensable written record covering a period of 3,000 years. Are these tablets still in the museum, and, if so, have they survived the vandalism? News service photos show clay tablets smashed on the museum's floors, but some tablets have also been returned.

One important group of tablets was found as recently as 1986. At Sippar, 20 miles southwest of Baghdad, Iraqi archaeologists discovered a nearly intact archive from the Neo-Babylonian period (625-539 B.C.). About 800 clay tablets, inscribed in cuneiform, were found still organized on their shelves. The Sippar archive included hymns, prayers, lamentations, fragments of the Gilgamesh epic (including some that fill in holes in the text we have) and other epic-like poems, glossaries, astronomical and scientific texts, missing pieces of the Sumerian flood story, and the prologue to the Code of Hammurabi, the first complete law book. (Hammurabi [1792-1750 B.C.] ruled from Babylon, 75 miles south of Baghdad, during the Old Babylonian Period.) Only about 20 of the Sippar tablets have been published so far—and now unpublished tablets may have been destroyed or stolen. All over the world, the scholars who study cuneiform texts, called Assyriologists, are holding their breath.

Everyone who has visited the National Museum must vividly recall passing between two colossal human-headed bulls and entering a corridor paneled with magnificent relief carvings—all from the Neo-Assyrian kingdoms of the early first millennium B.C. in north Mesopotamia. In the 19th century, some of the huge guardian figures were hauled off to European and American museums. The National Museum's colossi appear to have escaped the looting unharmed, probably because of their massiveness.

Other, more portable sculptures have not been so lucky. Perhaps the saddest example is the beautiful, haunting Warka Vase, found at the site of the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk (biblical Erech). This extraordinary example of ancient Mesopotamian art was one of the first objects in the National Museum to go missing; there is a strong likelihood that it was stolen not by frenzied looters but by calculating thieves who knew just what they wanted.

This vase, along with dozens of other high-profile items, has been reported missing by Interpol. The missing objects include a life-size marble mask of a woman from Uruk (c. 3100 B.C.), a stone statue of King Entemena (c. 2400 B.C.) of the Sumerian city of Lagash, a delicate ivory carving (c. 800 B.C.) of a lion attacking

a human that was found at Nimrud (the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu), various Hellenistic marble sculptures from the Seleucid period (311-65 B.C.), and a lovely carved wooden door (12th century A.D.) from a mosque in Mosul.

As early as January, the Pentagon met with scholars to learn about threats a war would pose to archaeological sites and Iraq's cultural heritage. The U.S. military was handed a list of important sites to avoid in combat, including the National Museum in Baghdad. The scholars also specifically warned that museums around the country would probably be looted during and after the fighting, as they had been following the 1991 Gulf War. To their great credit, the American and British air forces deliberately avoided the National Museum.

On April 8, U.S. marines penetrated into the neighborhood of the museum. They encountered some resistance from Iraqi forces that had taken position on the grounds of the museum, probably believing that U.S. soldiers would be hesitant to fight there. Nonetheless, it seems that the U.S. military was able to eliminate this resistance, which probably was not very fierce. By April 10, armed mobs had begun to loot the museum. Attempts were made by museum staff and journalists to get U.S. marines to secure the museum; except for one very short-lived intervention, however, the soldiers indicated they had no orders to provide security. Museum officials even braved the dangerous streets of Baghdad to visit U.S. marine headquarters in the Palestine Hotel; although they received assurances that protection would be coming, nothing happened. Finally, Donny George, the director of research at the museum, was able to reach his well-connected colleagues at London's British Museum by satellite phone, and soon the U.S. marines secured the museum grounds. It was now April 16.

Nobody denies that part of the looting was perpetrated by random mobs out for either sheer lucre or revenge against Saddam's Ba'ath regime. However, it also seems clear that there was systematized looting. Secure storage areas of the museum were accessed by looters with keys. Some looters apparently knew their way around the labyrinthine underground passages of the museum. And some of the looting required exact knowledge of the collections—for example, some extremely valuable artifacts were taken while worthless (though extremely well-made) copies were left behind. Either museum personnel were involved in these thefts or well-organized criminals had been stalking in the shadows, waiting for chaos to break out so that they could break in—or both.

The U.S. military has set up the so-called Joint Inter-Agency Co-Ordination Group—consisting of FBI, CIA, DEA, customs and military people—to track down looters and document returned artifacts. The head of this group is reservist Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, an assistant Manhattan district attorney, who also holds a degree in classics.

The U.S. Departments of Justice and State have pledged their support to the concerted action of Interpol, UNESCO and the scholarly and museum communities to deal with the smuggling of stolen pieces. A database will be set up describing all missing artifacts, to be published online by Interpol.

It now seems that initial assessments of the museum's losses, made largely by the museum's staff, were overstated. For example, some of the measures taken to safeguard the most valuable (and breakable) pieces, such as putting them in storage in the Central Bank vaults, were kept secret from most of the staff. No doubt this was a result of many years of working in a police state: Nobody could "betray" the museum and stash something away for a rainy post-Saddam day.

Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to know the full extent of the National Museum's collection. As any curator of a reasonable-size museum will tell you, a detailed, up-to-date inventory of a museum's holdings is usually nothing but an ideal. More common is a system that has information about pieces that have entered a collection since a certain date. The backlog is something to be dealt with when there is time, which, more often than not, is never found. The National Museum was not only understaffed but it was forced to deal with a constant influx of artifacts coming from ongoing archaeological excavations.

It should also be said that some scholars, upset by the rumors and images of museum looting, simply threw caution to the wind and gave panicked assessments of the destruction of Iraq's cultural patrimony. But, then, they were dealing with media people out for sensational stories—and it is not every day that your Assyriologist gets to prime time. The scholars universally felt that it was urgent to impress upon the public the value of the National Museum collection and Mesopotamian archaeology in general. So they inadvertently exaggerated the damage.

We still do not know the extent of the losses. Initial estimates suggested that most of the museum's 170,000 pieces were damaged or missing. That is too high, and later reports that only dozens of objects were missing are probably too low. (Indeed, many of the returned artifacts have turned out to be copies or gift-shop souvenirs; at one counting, of 700 objects returned, only two dozen were real.)

The National Museum's collection consists of several categories of artifacts. First, there are all the display artifacts in the public galleries: statues, carvings, jewelry, seals, manuscripts, ceramic pots, and so on. A second group consists of more than 150,000 artifacts stored in the museum's underground spaces, mostly objects from recent archaeological excavations and objects sent to Baghdad by the provincial archaeological museums. Third, around seven thousand valuable and vulnerable artifacts were stored in the vaults of the Central Bank, such as a gold-covered bull's head from a lyre found at Ur (the one on display in the museum was a replica). Finally, a few thousand objects were stored elsewhere outside the museum.

The objects discussed in media reports are mostly confined to the first group—the display artifacts. These include some of the museum's most prized possessions, like the Warka Vase and the Nimrud ivory. It seems clear that those who took these pieces knew exactly what they were doing: potential buyers may even have placed "orders" for them. If this is the case, the objects are too well known—they have been photographed and documented—ever to appear on the market. The lovely Warka Vase will almost certainly disappear into a private collection, where it will remain hidden from view until the collection is dissolved.

What do we do then, when the Warka Vase resurfaces? And how do we proceed now to recover items from the collection? Should we ransom looted artifacts as fast as possible for the public good—perhaps by soliciting the help of often well-connected (and wealthy) dealers and collectors? Or should we, as is now the conventional wisdom, treat them as illegal contraband, thus ensuring that they remain underground?

No one will know the extent of the damage until a full inventory is undertaken, which may take months. Even then, we will only be able to guess at the damage to the unlogged artifacts. For what it is worth, based on the very incomplete and often contradictory information now available, I suspect that of the museum's 170,000 artifacts, about 14 percent have been stolen and 20 percent have been damaged.

One thing is sure, more effort needs to be made to update databases of stolen antiquities and to make these databases easily accessible to police, customs agents, museums, scholars, art dealers and the public. It is also imperative to develop more and better databases of legally held antiquities in public and private collections. And we need to continually re-evaluate the methods used to counter the looting of archaeological sites.

For updated information on the plight of Iraqi antiquities, please refer to the author's 2003 Iraq War & Archaeology Web site (<http://ctr.umkc.edu/user/fdeblauwe/iraq.html>).

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