
Iraq's Antiquities

A U.S. Faction Wanted Looting of Museums

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

When Mongol invaders razed magnificent buildings and plundered precious objects in Baghdad seven centuries ago, they did so out of ignorance and hatred. But under the barbarian policy of the Rumsfeld Pentagon, the American armed forces deliberately and methodically allowed looting of the most important cultural institutions of Iraq, robbing it of priceless exemplars of thousands of years of history. The immediate benefactors of the operation are expected to be certain art collectors and dealers, who may reap billions from such objects. But a deeper motive for the vicious action may have been to attempt to eradicate the history of an entire people and nation.

In 1253, Hulagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, led a huge army out of Mongolia, towards the Abbasid caliphate, which had its capital in Baghdad. By September of 1257, the Mongols proceeded down the Khurasan highway, and sent an ultimatum to the caliph, demanding his capitulation and the destruction of the outer walls of the city. Hulagu stormed the city, put the caliph and 300 officials to death (despite their surrender), and plundered the entire city, which was then set on fire. Only two major Abbasid architectural wonders survived: the Abbasid palace and the Mistansiriya University.

In 2003, after three weeks of incessant bombing raids against Baghdad, the American military took the city on April 9. By the following day, the National Museum of Baghdad had been plundered. There followed the looting of the National Library and Archives, the Library of the Korans at the Ministry of Religious Endowment, and, in Mosul, the museum and the university library.

The loss for Iraq, the Iraqi people—indeed, all of mankind—is immense. The Baghdad Museum housed the greatest collection in the world of Mesopotamian art. Its collection embraced a uniquely vast span of history, what Director Donny George has called “a complete chain of civilization”: from the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian to the Islamic ages. As archaeologist Roberta Venco of Italy’s University of Turin put it, “You can’t study the history, all the history of the Near East, without seeing this museum.” The museum had been closed in 1990-91, and its greatest treasures hidden. During the 1991 war, 4,000 pieces had been stolen from museums in the south and north of the country, as well as Baghdad. For ten years, it remained closed, for fear



“You can’t study the history of the Near East, without seeing this museum, said one Italian archeologist.” This bronze head of an Akkadian king was in the looted Baghdad National Museum. Found in Nineveh, it has been identified with Sargon, and comes from the Akkadian era 2350-2150 B.C. (The damage visible here was done in ancient times.)

of theft. During that decade, Iraq managed to recover large amounts of stolen goods, and to gather them all in one central location. Many precious items were stored in steel vaults. On April 28, 2000, the museum reopened its doors, with 10,000 pieces on display—about 3% of Iraq’s artifacts. Then, three years later, it was ravaged.

Among the single items in the museum before the most recent plundering, were 2nd century B.C. Parthian sculptures from Hatra; jewelry from the royal tombs of Ur, from 2500 B.C.; gold artifacts from the tombs of the Assyrian queens in Nimrud; one of the oldest surviving copies of the Koran; tablets with Hammurabi’s Code; an estimated 30-40,000 clay tablets with cuneiform inscriptions, including the oldest examples of written tablets, from before 3000 B.C.; cylinder seals; the earliest mathematical tables from Tell Harmal; a solid gold harp from the Sumerian era (3360-2000 B.C.); 4,000-year-old Sumerian sculptures; ancient stone carvings of royalty, and bulls; ivory figurines; friezes of soldiers; and records of every archaeological expedition in Iraq since the 1930s.

The director of the Roman-Germanic Museum in Mainz, Germany, told *Neue Solidarität* newspaper, that in addition to art objects, also computers and archives had been destroyed in the looting. This means that, even if all the objects were returned, it would not be possible to order the objects historically: where they were found, when, from what period they come, etc. And it is precisely in the historical ordering of the artifacts, not in the single objects as such, that the true value is located. He added that if what is known as the “basic book” (a detailed catalogue, historically ordered) is gone, everything is gone. The only possible remedy would be to reconstruct this through the collation of other existing catalogues.

How and Why?

Dozens of eye-witness reports, by journalists and others, have established the fact that the looting of the National Museum was carried out under the noses of the American military present, and that, despite repeated demands that they intervene to halt the theft, they stood idly by. As reported in the *New York Times* on April 12, an Iraqi archaeologist, Raid Abdul Ridhar Muhammed, said that at about 1:00 p.m. on April 10, he had gone personally to fetch American troops to stop the looting. Five marines followed him back to the building, and fired warning shots in the air, dispersing the looters. However, 30 minutes later, the military left, and the looters returned. "I asked them to bring their tank inside the museum grounds," he said, "But they refused and left."

On April 15, Donny George, the Director of Antiquities, was quoted by CNN saying that three days earlier, he had gone with the Chairman of the State Board of Antiquities, to the Marines headquarters at the Palestine Hotel. "We waited there for about four hours until we met a colonel. And that day he promised that he will send armored cars to protect what's left of the museum. That was three days ago. But until now, nobody came." He added that he had just heard Secretary of State Powell announce that the museum would be protected. "I was expecting this morning to come and see some of the armored cars here. But nobody is here."

As if to drive home that this was deliberate negligence, U.S. forces displayed enormous efficiency and speed in securing over 1,000 oilfields in Iraq, and setting up military protection for the Ministry of Oil, not only in Baghdad, but also in Kirkuk. Thirty-five other ministries in Baghdad were looted and then set ablaze.

There is no doubt that the plundering of the National Museum (and other sites) was organized and carried out by highly skilled professionals. Direct television coverage on Arabic networks showed trucks approaching the building, with bands of marauders who entered. Donny George told reporters that glass cutters, not found in Iraq, had been discovered after the rampage. Furthermore, "One of the things that was taken was a bronze bust dating back about 7,000 years. It weighed hundreds of kilograms and was taken off the second floor. The curators say no normal looters did that." Another report cited two men "hauling an ancient portal out of the building."

Not only were the looters well prepared logistically to remove their booty, but they knew exactly what they wanted to steal. As Director George stated, there were a large number of copies of artifacts in the museum, whose originals are in the British Museum, the Louvre, or elsewhere. *None* of the plaster copies were stolen, but only the precious originals. Some reports speak of a catalogue having been completed very recently, by "an art organization in New York."

At an emergency meeting of art experts and cultural historians, convened by UNESCO in Paris on April 17 to assess the damage, the verdict was clear: Although some looters may have been desperate individuals, clearly some were prepared



This is the sound box of an early musical instrument, a lyre from the Kings' Graves from Ur, after 2000 B.C. The sound box is of wood, with inlays of mother-of-pearl, lapis lazuli, and semi-precious stones. The golden Bull's Head is worked metal, consisting of naturalistic elements and ornamental additions, like the fine, chiselled beard.

professionals, who knew what they were after and where to find it. Prof. McGuire Gibson of the University of Chicago, President of the American Association for Research in Baghdad, said, "I have a suspicion it was organized outside the country. In fact, I'm pretty sure it was." UNESCO has called for extraordinary actions to stop the art thieves from marketing their goods. If international cooperation for such a "police" operation is secured, there are hopes that Iraq's national heritage can be saved.

Lobbying the Pentagon

When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was asked about the looting at a press conference, he shrugged it off as "just one of those things" that happen when a regime collapses. The *Washington Post* on April 14 reported that Pentagon war planners had anticipated that the fall of Saddam Hussein would bring a period of chaos and lawlessness, but they (i.e., Rumsfeld) chose to send in only a light, mobile invasion force, that could not possibly quell such unrest. Pentagon officials such as Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith confirmed that that such unrest was anticipated.

The Department of Defense was fully informed, long before the first shot was fired, of the location, nature, and value of Iraq's antiquities. Numerous archaeologists and cultural historians personally intervened at the Pentagon, to plead for protection of Iraq's unique cultural heritage. Prof. McGuire Gibson visited the Pentagon no fewer than three times, with other experts, before the war. He had published an article, "Fate of Iraqi Archaeology," in the March 21, 2003 edition of *Science*, in which he detailed the danger posed by war to Iraq's culture. He reported in that article on the initiative of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) and his American Association for Research in Baghdad, which led to gathering information "on the location of archaeological sites and stand-

ing monuments. He also stressed that, since one day's looting would suffice to empty the National Museum in Baghdad, "You must secure the National Museum from looting." As AIA director Waldbaum put it, "Three guards and one tank would have sufficed as protection."

The AIA drafted a "Statement on Cultural Heritage in Iraq," with the message, that all parties must be bound to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The statement gathered the signatures of all leading archaeological institutions and leading experts. Professor Gibson said after the conflict had begun, "I thought I was given assurances that sites and museums would be protected. They said they would be very aware and would try to protect the artifacts."

Apparently, the Pentagon was lending its ear to another powerful lobby, representing diametrically opposed interests. While Gibson and others were pleading for protection of art, an organization of "influential collectors" was lobbying for liberalizing the customs regulations of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, regarding artifacts. An article on April 6 in the *Sunday Herald*, entitled, "U.S. accused of plans to loot Iraqi antiquities," exposed the murky plans of the American Council for Cultural Policy (ACCP).

The group met with DOD and State officials prior to the Iraq war, "to offer its assistance in preserving the country's invaluable archaeological collections," author Liam McDougall explained. The ACCP is known for promoting "relaxation of Iraq's tight restrictions on the ownership and export of antiquities," laws which ACCP treasurer William Pearlstein has called "retentionist." He said he would support a post-war government that "would make it easier to have antiquities dispersed to the U.S."

At this news, the professional archaeologists immediately smelled a rat. Prof. Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn, a Cambridge archaeologist and director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (AIA), stated: "Iraqi antiquities legislation protects Iraq. The last thing one needs is a group of dealer-connected Americans interfering. Any change to those laws would be absolutely monstrous." The AIA said any revision of the laws would be "disastrous." Its director, Prof. Jane Waldbaum, pointed out that Iraq's laws were introduced before Saddam Hussein took power, and are good laws. AIA President Patty Gerstenblith said she thought the collectors in the ACCP were trying to get their hands on the treasures of Mesopotamia by legal means, and added that she thought their chances were not bad. She said they're about 50 people, but "their word is heard in Washington."

Friends and Fellow Looters of Mike Steinhardt

Who are these influential people? Art collectors and lawyers, with unsavory connections, and more than one criminal record. The ACCP membership is characterized by the *Sunday Herald* as "collectors and lawyers with chequered histories in collecting valuable artifacts, including alleged exhibi-



This bronze figure comes from Nippur, and is dated about 2110-2094 B.C. It represents Urnammu from Nippur, carrying a basket with construction material. Such consecrated figures were buried in the corners of buildings and under thresholds, in order to make the gods merciful.

tions of Nazi loot." One case in point is Frederick Schulz, a well-known New York antique dealer, who was sentenced to almost three years in prison for having sold an Egyptian pharaoh head for \$1.2 million, which, years earlier, had been smuggled out of the country as a cheap tourist souvenir. As the *Boston Globe* reported on Feb. 13, 1998, ACCP leader and co-founder Ashton Hawkins pulled together a meeting with Schultz (since imprisoned) and others for the purpose of backing speculator and Democratic Leadership Council sponsor Michael Steinhardt's battle with the law. Steinhardt had illegally acquired an ancient artifact that had been smuggled out of Italy, and his dealer had falsified customs documents to cover up the export of the item from Italy, contrary to Italian law. Hawkins arranged for the Association of Art Museum Directors, for which Hawkins was the attorney, to file a court brief on Steinhardt's behalf. Steinhardt has donated large amounts to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Hawkins had been legal counsel.

The feverish activities of the ACCP, to "liberalize" Iraq's post-war government laws, to allow wholesale robbery of its cultural treasures, are, in light of the recent, professionally organized looting, highly suspect. The question to be raised, most appropriately in a press briefing of Secretary Rumsfeld, is: What precisely was discussed at the Pentagon, back in January, and since, with Hawkins and his ACCP? Is it possible, that a multi-level operation came into being, aimed at facilitating the looting, smuggling, export, and sale of Iraq's national treasures—eliminating the identity of a thousands-year-old nation and people, to help subject them again to colonial rule?