

Archaeologists warn of Iraq war's devastating consequences

Sandy English
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The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), the leading professional association for archaeologists in North America, has issued a statement expressing its “profound concern about the potential for damage to monuments, sites, antiquities, and cultural institutions as a result of war.” The statement calls on “all countries” to respect the terms of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which the United States signed, but did not ratify. Similar pleas have been issued by the American Association of Museum Art Directors and the American Schools of Oriental Research.

The AIA is not only concerned with the destruction that may be caused during military conflict itself, but also the aftermath of war, when “Iraqi cultural objects may be removed from museums and archaeological sites and placed on the international art market.”

According to a recent report in the *New York Times*, archaeological research in Iraq has come to a standstill. European teams have already left the area with no plans to resume excavation and survey in the near future. Researchers in much of the rest of the Middle East have also stopped work, even in Israel.

The 1991 Gulf War saw the destruction of ancient sites and building by bombs, and the threat of the Pentagon's new strategy of “Shock and Awe” bombing promises an even more careless and random destruction of fragile artifacts in the nearly 100,000 sites and potential sites in Iraq, many of which are in and near Baghdad.

Just as destructive, however, was the widespread looting of museums and sites after the Gulf War. *Archaeology Magazine* has estimated that some 3,000 objects had been stolen from Iraqi museums and sites by 1996. Most of these ended up on the art market in

Europe and America. Specialists in stolen artifacts have blamed the onerous sanctions imposed by the UN in the aftermath of the war for creating poverty that forced large numbers of Iraqis to look for new sources of income. Many private collectors in rich countries welcomed these antiquities with open arms. There have also been reports of looting by American soldiers.

Removing artifacts from archaeological sites is especially damaging since this erases the context in which the artifacts were discovered. Vital information about the date and use of these objects is destroyed forever in such cases. Moreover, when these artifacts become commodities on the international market, they are often broken up or altered in ways that might facilitate sale. And, of course, when important artifacts, especially illegal ones, fall into the hands of wealthy private collectors, archaeologists are unable to study them at all, and the public is robbed of an opportunity to appreciate them as well.

Iraq is home to the oldest city-cultures in the world. Farming began there about 9,000 years ago and several early societies—the first experiments by human beings in sophisticated, class-organized economies—rose and fell in Iraq. The Sumerians (c. 3500-1900 BC), whose leading centers such as Ur and Uruk lie in southern Iraq, have provided us with the first examples of writing. The literature that originated in Sumeria had a decisive influence on the ancient Greek myths that come down to us through the poets Homer and Hesiod. By 1700 BC the region was dominated by Babylon, whose King Hammurabi introduced his famous code of laws, best known for the interdiction of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

The Babylonians were followed by the Assyrian Empire (c. 1110-700 BC), the most fearsome conquerors of the region. Assyrian art reached a

pinnacle of aesthetic accomplishment. The neo-Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II in about 600 BC conquered Jerusalem and took much of the Jewish ruling class into captivity.

For centuries Iraq was a center of Jewish learning and culture. The Biblical figures of Daniel and Esther lived there. The Persians, Greeks, Romans and the Arabs have all left valuable imprints of their history in Iraq.

It is a longstanding function of imperialism to loot and destroy precious art and historical objects. During the Chinese Boxer Uprising of 1900, to cite only one example, imperialist intervention by Britain, Germany, France, Russia and the United States resulted not only in the massacre of thousands of innocent people in Beijing, but caused a fire in an important library that destroyed many early Chinese documents and paintings. Much of the Squires Collection of Chinese art, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, was stolen from Beijing in the aftermath of the revolt.



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