

The looting of Baghdad's museum and library

US government implicated in planned theft of Iraqi artistic treasures

Ann Talbot
19 April 2003

As the full extent of the looting of Iraq's National Museum in Baghdad emerges, it becomes clear that there was nothing accidental about it. Rather it was the result of a long planned project to plunder the artistic and historical treasures that are held in the museums of Iraq.

Had the National Museum of Iraq been looted by poor slum dwellers it would have been crime enough, and the responsibility would have rested with the American administration that refused, despite repeated warnings, to provide for the security of Baghdad's cultural buildings.

Once the museum staff were able to communicate with the outside world, however, it became apparent that the looting was not random. It was the work of people who knew what they were looking for and came specially equipped for the job.

Dr. Dony George, head of the Baghdad Museum, said, "I believe they were people who knew what they wanted. They had passed by the gypsum copy of the Black Obelisk. This means that they must have been specialists. They did not touch those copies."

Speaking on Britain's Channel 4 News, he told Dr. John Curtis of the British Museum that among the artifacts that have been stolen are the sacred vase of Warka, a 5,000-year-old golden vessel found at Ur, an Akkadian statue base, and an Assyrian statue. It was, said Dr. Curtis, "Like stealing the Mona Lisa."

It was only almost a week after the museum was originally looted that Dr. George was able to alert archaeologists worldwide to what had been stolen. The American military authorities had made no effort to prevent the objects leaving Baghdad or to put in process an international search for the stolen artifacts.

The US reluctance to act cannot be explained by any lack of warning. Professional archaeologists and art historians had told the Pentagon of the danger of looting beforehand. Dr. Irving Finkel of the British Museum told Channel 4 that the looting was "entirely predictable and could easily have been stopped."

The museum was the victim of a carefully planned assault. The thieves who took the most valuable material came prepared with equipment to lift the heaviest objects, which the staff could not move from the galleries, and had keys to the vaults where the most valuable items were stored. Not since the Nazis systematically stripped the museums of Europe has such a crime been committed.

The US online publication of *BusinessWeek* magazine reiterated the theme of premeditation and conspiracy in the looting of Iraq's museums in an April 17 article headlined "Were Baghdad's Antiquity Thieves Ready?" The article carries the subtitle: "They may have known just what they were looking for because dealers ordered the most important pieces well in advance."

BusinessWeek writes: "It was almost as if the perpetrators were waiting for Baghdad to fall to make their move. Gil J. Stein, a professor of

archaeology at the University of Chicago, which has been conducting digs in Iraq for 80 years, believes that dealers ordered the most important pieces well in advance. 'They were looking for very specific artifacts,' he says. 'They knew where to look.'"

Since the last Gulf War in 1991 Iraqi antiquities have flooded onto the market from the museums that were looted then and from archaeological sites that have been attacked with bulldozers. At such locations ancient statues have been sawed apart so they could be exported.

This plundering of Iraq's cultural heritage has only whetted the appetite of collectors who are already responsible for looting Far Eastern, Latin American and Italian archaeological sites. With the collapse of global stock markets, works of art and antiquities have come to be regarded even more highly as a secure investment, fuelling an already huge underground market.

The illegal trade in antiquities is thought to be as lucrative as drugs trafficking, to which it is often linked. According to a report by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, "The Trade in illicit Antiquities: the Destruction of the World's Archaeological Heritage," produced in 2001, London and New York are the main markets for this trade. Switzerland, which allows an art work that has been in the country for five years to be granted a legal title, is a key trans-shipment point.

Professor Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn, director of the McDonald Institute at Cambridge, told a press conference at the report's launch that the trade continued because "The government is in the pocket of the art market, which wants to keep the flow of antiquities." He added, "It's a scandal."

As news of the latest looting broke, the Labour government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair organised a hasty press conference in the British Museum, at which Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell promised official support to protect Iraqi antiquities.

Even as she spoke, the National Library of Iraq was being looted. Home to rare, centuries-old illuminated copies of the Koran and other examples of Islamic calligraphy, as well as irreplaceable historical documents from the Ottoman Empire, the building was set on fire, destroying an untold number of texts.

Reporter Robert Fisk, who saw the flames, ran to get US marines in an attempt to save some of the collection, but they refused to help. Fisk wrote in the *Independent*, "I gave the map location, the precise name in Arabic and English. I said the smoke could be seen from three miles away and it would take only five minutes to drive there. Half an hour later, there wasn't an American at the scene and the flames were shooting 200 feet into the air."

After the fate of Baghdad museum, it can only be concluded that the generalised looting and arson at the library served to cover up a more systematic crime, in which select manuscripts were stolen for wealthy

collectors. In the process they connived in the burning of books—another Nazi practice.

The role of the ACCP

In the aftermath of these two devastating attacks on culture, attention has focused on the activities of the American Council for Cultural Policy. Even the British press that works under some of the toughest libel laws in the world has been willing to suggest that the ACCP may have influenced US government policy on Iraqi cultural artifacts.

The ACCP was formed in 2001 by a group of wealthy art collectors to lobby against the Cultural Property Implementation Act, which attempts to regulate the art market and stop the flow of stolen goods into the US. It has defended New York art dealer Frederick Schultz, who was convicted under the National Stolen Property Act, and opposes the use of the 1977 *US v. McClain* decision as a legal precedent in cases concerning the handling of stolen art objects.

In the *McClain* case a US judge accepted that all pre-Columbian art or jewellery brought into the US without the express consent of the Mexican government was stolen property. Mexican law regards all archaeological artifacts as state property and bans their export. Mexico is one of a number of countries that has such legislation.

Ashton Hawkins, a leading art lawyer and founder of the ACCP, regards such legislation as “retentionist”. He has condemned the archaeologically rich “source” countries for attempting to protect their archaeological sites and museums by such measures, and has argued that under the Clinton administration such “retentionist” policies came to dominate US government policy.

Hawkins has his sights set on the great Middle Eastern museums. He has called for the Egyptian antiquities that are held in the Cairo Museum to be dispersed. “I would like to propose,” he said, “that the Cairo Museum offer museums around the world the opportunity to acquire up to 50 objects for their collections. In return, the museums would make a very substantial contribution for the construction of the new museum under the Giza plateau—\$1 million each, for example.”

The ACCP’s inaugural meeting took place at the Fifth Avenue apartment of Guido Goldman, a collector of Uzbek textiles. Among those present were Arthur Houghton, the former curator of the Getty Museum at Malibu in California, which is notorious for displaying works of suspicious provenance. Hawkins himself retired in 2000 as vice president of the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, an institution that, according to its own former director, Thomas Hoving, holds many artifacts looted from Etruscan tombs.

Before the war began, the ACCP met with Pentagon officials, declaring their great concern for Iraqi antiquities. What that concern means is evident from the remarks of William Pearlstein, the group’s treasurer, who also describes Iraqi laws on antiquities as “retentionist”. The ACCP deny that they want Iraqi laws changed, but the looting of the museum and library will effectively circumvent that problem if US law on stolen art objects and archaeological material can be changed.

Professor John Merryman of Stanford Law School and a member of the ACCP has called for a “selective international enforcement of export controls” in US courts. In other words, it should be perfectly legitimate to import the objects looted from Baghdad if a US court chooses not to recognise Iraqi legislation.

Merryman set out the organisation’s principles in a 1998 paper in which he argued that the fact that an art object had been stolen did not in itself bar it from lawful importation into the US.

He went on to claim, “The existence of a market preserves cultural

objects that might otherwise be destroyed or neglected by providing them with a market value. In an open, legitimate trade cultural objects can move to the people and institutions that value them most and are therefore most likely to care for them” (*International Law and Politics*, vol. 31: 1).

This is a self-justifying argument that reeks of hypocrisy. Wealthy collectors can now point to the chaos on the streets of Baghdad, the looting of the museum and the burning of the library as evidence that the Iraqis are unable or unwilling—too poor or too ignorant—to look after their treasures, which would be better housed in American museums or private collections.

The ACCP’s ideas represent the interests of particularly rapacious sections of the US ruling class, who operate on the principle that everything—even an object of priceless artistic or scientific value—is defined by its “market value”.

What they mean is price, since the real value of the objects stolen from the Museum of Baghdad and the Iraqi National Library is incalculable. These are quite literally people who understand the price of everything and the value of nothing.

The prescription for the market to determine possession of and access to works of art and archaeological material would place these artifacts in the hands of a rich minority and make public access to them depend on the good will of their wealthy owners. Despite the fact that many of the ACCP members have been associated with major public institutions, their agenda is profoundly opposed to the public dissemination of art and archaeology. They are not only trying to change the law in other countries, but are working against the most progressive traditions of American society, which has always prized its public museums.

A scientific tradition

The development of public museums went hand in hand with the development of a scientific understanding of archaeological artifacts and the societies that produced them. Publicly funded museums represented a break with the tradition of private treasure hunting. Their exhibits aimed to display the material artifacts of the past in a rational and scientific manner.

The accumulation of archaeological artifacts in private hands tends to disrupt scientific work, since material becomes scattered, is difficult to catalogue and much of it remains unknown to scholars working in the field. Public museums are public not only in their funding and because they open their galleries to visitors, but in the sense that they make knowledge available to all—something that has been recognised as a primary requisite of the scientific process since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century.

One of the effects of the looting of the Baghdad museum has been to destroy the card catalogue and computer records of the museum’s holdings. This has not only made tracking down its treasures more difficult, but has also undermined generations of patient archaeological work. To destroy such a catalogue is, both in a symbolic and practical sense, to make a collection private, because its contents become unknown to the outside world.

While the major objects are well known internationally, a museum’s records goes far beyond these spectacular works of art. It includes all the minor finds of archaeological excavations that, in themselves, are not eye-catching, but when studied together produce a picture of a society that cannot be gained from its art alone.

Archaeologists spend their time sifting the detritus of past civilisations, often literally. They may sieve tons of earth looking for beetle wing cases or seeds. Cess pits and rubbish heaps produce a wealth of knowledge.

What is thrown away and discarded provides a context for the relics of great temples and palaces, or royal tombs.

Petr Charvat's recent book *Mesopotamia before History* [1] contains lovingly photographed images of pieces of mud impressed with rush matting. This is not the stuff to grace a collector's cabinet, but reveals vital information about the craft skills and way of life of ancient Mesopotamians.

A blow to world scholarship

The Baghdad museum was more than a place to display artifacts. All excavations carried out in Iraq by international teams of archaeologists were reported to it. The museum therefore possessed a database of knowledge that was accessible to researchers internationally, and was the hub of a vast cooperative endeavour. Its looting and the destruction of its records are a blow to world scholarship. It threatens to turn the clock back more than 150 years to the period before scientific archaeology in Mesopotamia.

Early excavations were by modern standards unscientific, as excavators were still learning their discipline by a process of trial and error. One of the most elementary lessons of that learning process was that context is everything in archaeology. An artifact can only tell its full story if its context is known.

By context, an archaeologist means the physical position of an artifact in the ground, its relationship to other artifacts and to the layers of earth around it. From this information it is possible to determine an artifact's relative date and considerable information about its practical use and social significance. Ripped out of this context, it loses much of its meaning. Even the finest work of art can be better appreciated when its context and the social conditions of its creators are understood.

In its widest sense, understanding an artifact's context means understanding its relationship to the entire archaeological site at which it was found, to other sites round about it, and to the historic landscape in which it belongs. While national feelings are often evoked to justify keeping archaeological artifacts in their country of origin, the more important scientific reason for doing so is that the context of the artifact is preserved by keeping it close to where it was found.

It is still possible to see in modern Iraq houses built by similar methods to those employed by ancient builders and to see boats built to similar designs. The full significance of Mesopotamian artifacts can only be appreciated by seeing them in the context of the extraordinary landscape of modern Iraq—a country where every hill that rises above the plain has been built up from layers of mud brick representing generations of occupation.

The American colonial administrator, retired general Jay Garner, tried to co-opt the emotional impact of that landscape for his own political purposes by holding his big tent meeting within view of the 4,000-year-old ziggurat of Ur, which was the temple platform for the moon god Nanna. But by allowing the museum of Baghdad to be looted, the US authorities have shown they have no regard for the real importance of Iraq to human history.

When the medieval European cartographers who drew the thirteenth century Hereford map of the world set out to represent the planet on which they lived, they put Asia at the top because to them it was the most important continent. There lay the lands of the Bible. Jerusalem was at the very centre of their world view, and beyond it lay Babylon, the scene of the Jewish captivity, the Tower of Babel and Abraham's home in the city of Ur.

So deeply impressed on the European mind was the Biblical image of

the world that the first excavators of ancient sites in this region were looking for confirmation of the Bible. Even in the twentieth century, Leonard Woolley referred to his excavations at Warka by the Biblical name of Ur of the Chaldees.

Yet the material that came out the excavations carried out by Woolley, and others such as Layard, Botta and Hormuzd Rassam, shook the Biblical view of the world. Not the least important discovery was that familiar Bible stories such as Noah and the Flood had their origin in Mesopotamia long before the Bible was written. As the cuneiform writing of thousands of clay tablets was deciphered, it was realised that numerous complex and highly developed civilisations had existed in Mesopotamia of an antiquity never before guessed.

The full extent of this history only became apparent as the technique of Carbon 14 dating and other scientific methods were refined. Only in the second half of the twentieth century was it realised that settled farming could be traced back to the mid-eleventh millennium BC in the Middle East.

The cradle of civilization

The earliest farming communities do not occur in the area that is present-day Iraq, but in the better watered highlands of the Zagros Mountains, Anatolia, the Levant and the Deh Luran Plain. Nevertheless, Iraq was the centre of the second phase of the protracted Neolithic Revolution that began with the domestication of animals and cereal crops.

In Iraq that revolution went a significant step further with the development of irrigation, a technique that vastly increased agricultural productivity. The surplus produced by irrigation allowed the first urban civilisation on the planet to emerge in the very region that the combined military forces of the US and the UK are reducing to a wasteland.

By 5800 BC, small farming communities were appearing along the Euphrates. Within a few centuries they had coalesced into dense urban settlements, each of several thousand people centred on a temple which was largely responsible for managing the irrigation system, distributing food, and importing stone, minerals and timber from the neighbouring highlands.

Over two millennia these Mesopotamian cities developed the art of copper smelting, alloying bronze and, most importantly, writing. Writing was essential to the administration of cities that depended on a largely artificial ecosystem created by irrigation, and which needed to import even the most vital raw materials.[2]

Writing enabled a dramatic intellectual development to take place. What began as a method of recording stores and deliveries became a medium for writing poetry, stories and history. Science and mathematics flourished.

Modern research has revealed evidence of multiplication tables, tables of reciprocals, squares, square roots, cubes and logarithms to bases 2 and 16. Other texts show volumes and areas, linear and quadratic equations. Babylonian mathematicians calculated the value of pi to 3.125, close to its true value. Astronomy was highly developed and if it was understood in terms of omens and prophecy, its predictions of eclipses and the movement of the planets were nonetheless accurate.[3]

The social and political structure of Mesopotamian society cannot be traced directly from its material remains, and archaeologists differ about its character and the course of its development, but Petr Charvat finds in Mesopotamian society to 3000 BC that "in all spheres of society the principle of universality and equality comes to the fore ... the material standard of living is equalised by redistribution ... people meet in assemblies to discuss and decide matters of common interest.... All

receive the same treatment in life and death” (*Mesopotamia Before History*, pp. 158-59).

From 3000 BC there is some evidence of social stratification and the emergence of a political elite or ruling class in the “royal burials” of Ur, but some archaeologists dispute this characterisation of those burials.

In this period two great civilisations emerge: in the south of present-day Iraq is the Sumerian civilization, and in the north the Akkadian, which are both based on a collection of city states that preserve many of the cultural traditions of the earlier period. Not until 2334 BC does the first empire appear under the rule of Sargon of Agade, who unites these two confederations.

Sargon’s short-lived empire was replaced by that of Ur Nammu in 2112 BC. The thousands of clay tablets that survive from this period testify to the careful management of resources that kept this empire alive until 1990 BC, when it was replaced by the Babylonian empire, which reached its high point under Hammurabi in 1792 BC.

The mid-fourteenth century BC saw the rise of the first Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were to dominate Mesopotamia again, and the whole region from the Gulf to the Mediterranean in the ninth century BC. In 612 BC the Babylonian empire was established. Its most outstanding ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the double walls of the city, the great ziggurat and the processional way. He was responsible for sacking Jerusalem and taking many of the Jews into captivity.

This succession of empires and the Persian empire that followed were sustained by the immense productivity of the irrigation system and the complex system of administration that maintained it. The sophisticated concepts that had been developed in the process fed into the intellectual systems of later societies. Even the Greeks, from whom we derive the name for the land between the rivers, stood in awe of Mesopotamia’s achievements.

One of the ministries that has been systematically destroyed in the recent days of looting is the Ministry of Irrigation. We might say that by this act the US administration seeks to drive Iraq back to the dark ages, except that Iraq has never known a dark age in the sense that Europe has. Empires might rise and fall, but as long as the irrigation system continued to function the land between the rivers could produce more food than it needed. By attacking the irrigation system, the US administration is causing more damage in a few weeks than any other previous invader.

Iraq’s cultural significance did not end with the close of the Persian empire. Throughout the European dark ages it remained a haven of learning, preserving under the Caliphs of Baghdad classical texts lost in the West. Islamic scholarship was to prove vital to the re-emergence of Aristotelian philosophy in thirteenth century Europe and to the Renaissance.

The full extent of the losses in this respect will only become apparent when the looting at the National Library is itemised. That account is yet to come.

What is already clear is that a great crime has been committed against not only the Iraqi people, but against the whole of humanity, since it is the history of humanity that has been attacked. For this reason the sack of Baghdad marks a significant point on the trajectory of the Bush administration as it attempts to plunge the world into a new barbarism that would outstrip anything that history can show from the past.

Notes:

1. Petr Charvát, *Mesopotamia before History*, Routledge, 2002.
2. Brian M. Fagan, *People of the Earth*, Prentice Hall, 2001.
3. Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia*, Equinox books, 1990





To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact