

The sacking of Iraq's museums: US wages war against culture and history

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The looting of Iraq's museums and National Library, with the destruction of much of Iraq's cultural heritage, is a historic crime for which the Bush administration is responsible.

US government officials were warned repeatedly about possible damage to irreplaceable artifacts, either from American bombs and missiles or from post-war instability after the removal of the Iraqi government, but they did nothing to prevent it. Their inaction constitutes a gross violation of the 1954 Hague Convention on the protection of artistic treasures in wartime, adopted in response to the Nazi looting of occupied Europe during World War II.

At least 80 percent of the 170,000 separate items stored at the National Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad were stolen or destroyed during the looting rampage that followed the US military occupation of Baghdad. The museum was the greatest single storehouse of materials from the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, including Sumeria, Akkadia, Babylonia, Assyria and Chaldea. It also held artifacts from Persia, Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and various Arab dynasties.

The museum held the tablets with Hammurabi's Code, perhaps the world's first system of laws, and cuneiform texts that are the oldest known examples of writing—epic poems, mathematical treatises, historical accounts. An entire library of clay tablets had not yet been deciphered or researched, in part because of the US-backed sanctions that restricted travel to Iraq.

The 5,000-year-old alabaster Uruk Vase is the earliest known depiction of a religious ritual. The stone face of a woman, carved 5,500 years ago, is one of the oldest surviving examples of representational sculpture. The world's oldest copper casting, the bust of an Akkadian king, dates from 2300 BC.

Another significant loss came from the burning of the nearby National Library, containing tens of thousands of old manuscripts and books, and newspapers from the

Ottoman Empire to the present. The library's reading rooms and stacks were reduced to smoking ruins.

Ironically, the only hope for the survival of some archaeological treasures is that they might have been removed from the museum before the war, to be displayed in one or another of the private residences of Saddam Hussein and his family. A large selection of artifacts made of gold was stored for safekeeping at the Iraqi Central Bank, but that facility was looted and burned as well.

US claims to have been taken by surprise by the ransacking of cultural facilities in Baghdad, Mosul and other cities are not credible. Such a tragedy was not only predictable, it was specifically warned against. In late January of this year, a delegation of scholars, museum directors and collectors visited the Pentagon and explained the significance of the Iraq National Museum and other cultural sites. One participant told the *Washington Post*, "We told them the looting was the biggest danger, and I felt that they understood that the National Museum was the most important archaeological site in the entire country. It has everything from every other site."

The Archaeological Institute of America called on "all governments" to protect cultural sites, and it appears that the Iraqi government took this appeal far more seriously than the American or British governments. After looting in 1991 during the uprisings that followed the first Persian Gulf War, the Iraqi government passed legislation restricting the export of historical artifacts.

There is a long tradition of concern for history and cultural heritage in Iraq. As soon as even nominal independence was established, in the 1920s, the Iraqi government required that reports be filed with the museum on all archaeological "digs." More recently, all excavated material had to be submitted to the museum for cataloguing, making the facility the central database for

all such work in the country.

As an American assault on Baghdad loomed, officials of the National Museum made preparations to safeguard their priceless collections, removing some items to secret locations and putting the bulk of the artifacts in specially secured vaults under the building, protected from bomb damage by layers of brick and cement. Those items too large to be removed from the galleries were carefully wrapped.

Looters took or destroyed everything in the galleries, then broke into the underground vaults and plundered their contents. They also destroyed the card catalog and wrecked the museum's computer system.

The Pentagon not only knew in advance of the potential threat to Iraq's cultural heritage, the US military received direct appeals as the looting began to safeguard the National Museum. One Iraqi archaeologist, Ra'id Abdul Ridhar Mohammed, told the New York Times he had gone directly to a squad of marines aboard an Abrams tank in Museum Square, less than a quarter mile from the museum, and asked them to stop the looting.

The marines went to the museum, chased away the first wave of looters, then left after 30 minutes. "I asked them to bring their tank inside the museum grounds," Mohammed told the *Times*, "But they refused and left." He continued: "About half an hour later, the looters were back, and they threatened to kill me, or to tell the Americans that I am a spy for Saddam Hussein's intelligence, so that the Americans would kill me. So I was frightened, and I went home."

The archaeologist added, "A country's identity, its value and civilization resides in its history. If a country's civilization is looted, as ours has been here, its history ends. Please tell this to President Bush. Please remind him that he promised to liberate the Iraqi people, but that this is not a liberation, this is a humiliation."

There are direct commercial reasons for the Bush administration to permit the plundering of Iraq's cultural treasures. According to a report April 6 in the Sunday Herald, a Scottish newspaper, among those who met with the Pentagon before the onset of the war were representatives of the American Council for Cultural Policy (ACCP), a lobbying group for wealthy collectors and art dealers that has sought to relax Iraq's strict ban on the export of cultural artifacts.

The group's treasurer, William Pearlstein, has criticized Iraq's policy as "retentionist" and said he would urge the post-war government to make it easier to export artifacts to the United States. The group sought to revise the

Cultural Property Implementation Act, the US law that regulates such international trafficking in artistic treasures and antiques. According to this press account, "News of the group's meeting with the government has alarmed scientists and archaeologists who fear the ACCP is working to a hidden agenda that will see the US authorities ease restrictions on the movement of Iraqi artifacts after a coalition victory in Iraq."

The Los Angeles Times reported Tuesday a Northern California collector of Iraqi art had been "contacted surreptitiously before the war and told that Iraqi antiquities would soon become available. He speculated that the thieves acted in accordance with a plan, but no such design has been revealed."

Appeasing a group of millionaires with a taste for Oriental curiosities would certainly fit the profile of the Bush administration. Much more fundamental, however, is the political value for the American ruling elite of allowing such repositories of Iraq's history and culture to be destroyed.

The goal of the US military occupation is to impose colonial-style domination over Iraq and seize control of its vast oil resources. It serves the interests of American imperialism to humiliate Iraq and condition its population to submit to the United States and the stooge regime to be established in Baghdad. Attacking the cultural resources that connect the Iraqi people to 7,000 years of history is part of the process of systematically destroying their national identity.

The tragic result is that treasures that survived even the Mongol sack of the city in the 13th century could not withstand the impact of 21st century technology and imperialist barbarism. Bush, Rumsfeld and company personify the new barbarians: a "leader" who is himself only semi-literate and wallows in religious backwardness; an administration populated by former corporate CEOs for whom an artifact of ancient Sumer is of more interest as a tax shelter than as a key to the historical and cultural development of mankind.



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