

BBC and Guardian cover up US role in Iraq looting

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Looting of archaeological sites and regional museums is continuing in Iraq despite the responsibility under international law of the US as the occupying power to protect cultural sites.

The journal *Archaeology* is documenting the extent of looting. Journalist Roger Atwood, who specialises in the antiquities trade and is in Mosul, reports that 30 bronze panels that once hung on a gate leading into the Assyrian city of Balawat have been stolen from the museum there along with numerous cuneiform tablets and 20 valuable books. At Hatra, a first century B.C. world heritage site to the south of Mosul, looters have hacked out a carved face from the apex of a stone archway.

Meanwhile in Baghdad some of the artefacts stored offsite for safety have been recovered and some of the stolen items have been returned to the city museum. Among those returned is the famous Warka vase, a 5,000-year-old ceremonial vessel from the city of Ur. According to the British Museum, which has two members of staff working in the Baghdad Museum, at least 28 items from the exhibition halls remain missing along with numerous less spectacular objects that have an important research value.

The major pieces that have been recovered are some of the artefacts from the Assyrian city of Nimrud and some material from the royal burials at Ur, which were stored in the vaults of the Central Bank at the time of the first Gulf War. The presence of this material in the bank vaults is not a revelation. A visiting Unesco delegation was told about it in May, but it was inaccessible because the vaults were flooded. Moreover, the recovery of these artefacts does not minimise the damage that has been done and is still being done by organised looting.

Despite the devastating losses that have been suffered and the continued looting, however, certain journalists have made it their business to assert that the extent of the problem has been exaggerated and even to claim that Iraqi archaeologists are responsible for stealing whatever is missing. This campaign of denial and disinformation can only compound the damage already done to Iraq's cultural heritage. Not only will it distract from the task of tracking down the artefacts that are flooding onto the antiquities market, but it is also being used to discredit Iraqi archaeologists and to take control of the country's history out of their hands.

The BBC is leading the way in this scurrilous campaign. In a prime-time documentary screened June 9, art and architectural historian Dan Cruickshank made a number of unsubstantiated claims. He suggested that the Baghdad Museum was a legitimate military target, that the looting was "an inside job" and that the staff were unsuitable to be left in charge of Iraq's cultural heritage because they had been members of the Ba'ath Party.

Cruikshank's claims were immediately ~~Challenged~~ by correspondent David Aaronovitch, who declared that the staff of the Baghdad Museum were "apparatchiks of a fascist regime". He poured scorn on the world's journalists and academics for believing the stories about looting.

In an April 15 column Aaronovitch had already asked, "Is this plundering really so bad?" "There is a lot of sentimentality attached to archaeology by outsiders," he went on. He belittled the importance of cultural history in giving the Iraqi people a sense of their identity when compared to the evidence of mass murder in Abu Ghurayb prison. It did not really matter if archaeological artefacts were looted and ended up in western museums which were already full of material from all over the world.

Aaronovitch was, therefore, understandably enthused by Cruickshank's documentary. In a June 10 article, he accused Dr. Dony George of Baghdad Museum and archaeologists internationally of deliberately creating a false picture of "100,000-plus priceless items looted either under the very noses of the Yanks, or by the Yanks themselves. And the only problem with it is that it's nonsense. It isn't true. It's made up. It's bollocks."

It is, he claims, an "indictment of world journalism" that anyone believed this story. Only Dan Cruickshank's "remarkable programme" has exposed it as a lie.

Cruikshank's programme was indeed remarkable. But this was mainly for the contrast between what it showed and what it claimed. Cruickshank could not bring to bear a single fact to substantiate his allegations.

Some aspects of the programme might be dismissed as merely bad journalism and a pathological desire for self-dramatisation. Clad in a combat jacket and keffiyeh, Cruickshank insisted on being filmed camping out on the doorstep of the museum with his primus stove because it was too dangerous to move about the city. This impression of an intrepid reporter braving a threatening city was belied by the crowds of smiling Iraqis who cheerfully waved at the camera as he drove through Baghdad ostentatiously wearing a flak jacket the next day.

To watch Cruickshank you would believe that he was the only Westerner in Baghdad apart from the US Marines. He breathlessly entered the vaults of the Central Bank as though he alone had made this discovery. The presence of a team from the television series *National Geographic Ultimate Explorer*, who had paid to have the vault pumped out, was not mentioned. *National Geographic* magazine report that the vault had been flooded by bank staff in an attempt to protect the stored artefacts from looting.

Far from the world being ignorant about the fate of Iraqi

archaeology until Cruikshank arrived, a number of international teams have been present in Baghdad and elsewhere advising on conservation, reporting on looting and attempting to itemise what has been lost. Few of them have been accorded the assistance that Cruikshank seems to have received from the US authorities. A team of international experts assembled by Unesco met with considerable obstruction in their mission to Baghdad. British Museum director Neil MacGregor told the *Art Newspaper* that negotiations with the US authorities were “tortuous” and that the size of the delegation had to be reduced.

That Cruikshank seems to have met with every assistance from the US authorities is hardly surprising since it was their story that he told.

He interviewed marines who told him that the museum had been fortified and a centre of Iraqi resistance. Had that really been the case it would have been reasonable to expect US forces to have occupied the museum and not left it unguarded as they did. The only evidence of fortification Cruikshank offered was a crude dugout roofed with corrugated iron and earth on the lines of a World War II Anderson shelter. This, Dr. Dony George told him, the museum staff had made for themselves to shelter in during the air raids. There was some evidence that Iraqi soldiers had used rooms in the museum, which in a city that had been the scene of a running battle for several days was hardly surprising.

Cruikshank’s aim was to implicate the staff in the looting of the museum. He criticised them for not clearing up the looted galleries, ignoring the fact that international experts had advised them to leave the debris. The whole scene will have to be treated as an archaeological excavation so that broken material and scattered pieces can be retrieved scientifically and forensic evidence gathered for a future war crimes trial.

The fact that the staff were reluctant to talk to him and refused to open store rooms Cruikshank took as evidence that they were guilty of looting. He ignored the obvious explanation that they were unwilling to reveal the whereabouts of hidden artefacts with Baghdad under armed occupation by a hostile power. They were, he claimed, all members of the Ba’ath party as though this were damning evidence of guilt. In a one-party state, membership of the ruling party is almost inevitable for people who want to hold official posts in museums or universities. It does not implicate them in the crimes of the regime.

Aaronovitch was quick to take up Cruikshank’s allegations and to amplify them, going so far as to accuse Dr. Dony George of being a fascist. By throwing such emotive language about he is attempting to create the atmosphere of a witch-hunt against Iraqi intellectuals.

There is a serious agenda behind this vicious journalism. Wealthy collectors in the West are casting avaricious eyes on the museums of archaeologically rich countries like Iraq. The American Council for Cultural Policy (ACCP), which advised the US government in the run-up to the Iraq war, has led the way in calling for legislation restricting the export of art objects and archaeological artefacts to be ignored in the US courts.

The ACCP has evoked a storm of opposition in the US, where even the robber barons saw the wisdom of putting their money into public museums and libraries and the selfish acquisitiveness of the ACCP runs counter to a strong sense of the importance of such public institutions.

The Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) has vociferously opposed the ACCP and is campaigning for legislation that will prevent plundered artefacts being brought into the country. So strong has opposition been that the *Wall Street Journal*—a paper that could be

expected to warm to the ACCP’s free market attitudes—has carried an article calling on them “to put their money into restitution and reconstruction within that country [Iraq].” It would, the article points out, be tax deductible.

For the obscenely wealthy and criminal clique that surrounds the Bush administration, however, the benefits of tax deductible charity are no longer enough. They may have been warned off in the US, but it is their attitude to the history of semi-colonial countries that finds an echo in Cruikshank’s film and Aaronovitch’s article.

A former student radical from the Euro-wing of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Aaronovitch has cultivated a particular brand of educated philistinism that mixes a passing acquaintance with culture and ugly right-wing rhetoric. It is to the credit of *Guardian* readers that they have found Aaronovitch’s articles thoroughly repugnant. His defence of looting elicited a response from the Assistant Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, who criticised his flippancy in “sniggering over the genitalia of Greek gods”. His latest article accusing the staff of the Baghdad Museum of being fascists produced a defence of these internationally respected scholars from chairman of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, Doctor Harriet Crawford; Doctor Eleanor Robson of All Souls College, Oxford; and Doctor Jane Moon of the Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.

Doctors Crawford and Robson write, “Our high opinion of the character of Dr. George and his colleagues has been formed over two decades of working with them throughout an era of extraordinarily difficult circumstances—from the Iran-Iraq war to the few months leading up to the most recent conflict. George deserves the world’s praise, not its condemnation, for saving so many of Iraq’s treasures, and strong practical support in restoring the museum to functionality.”

Cruikshank and Aaronovitch’s unfounded and ignorant comments lend themselves to a deliberate campaign of vilification against Iraqi intellectuals that aims to dismantle the entire system of laws and institutions that has been built up in Iraq to protect the country’s archaeology and to further research into its history. This is looting on a grand scale. The intention is not merely to acquire this or that artefact, but with regime change to declare open season on the Middle East’s great museums.



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