

Director of Baghdad museum goes into exile

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Donny George, the former director of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad and a leading conservator of Iraqi antiquities, has resigned as president of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and left Baghdad for Syria. In an interview with the British television station Channel 4, he said his reasons for departure were threats to his family and the impossibility of working with the current government.

George has been an important figure in Iraqi archaeology for the last 30 years. He served as one of the officials of the National Museum under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein when he supervised Iraq's archaeological digs as well as the collection and study of archaeological artifacts. During the UN-sponsored sanctions after 1991, he maintained international connections with archaeologists and historians. He was responsible for safeguarding many of Iraq's artistic treasures on the approach of the American invasion.

George was one of the first to alert the world to the dangers facing these sites and the National Museum itself brought on by the invasion. He is well regarded in the international heritage and archaeological communities.

In the Channel 4 interview, George, who lived in the mostly Sunni neighborhood of Dora in southern Baghdad, revealed that his family had received a letter saying that his 17-year-old son Martin had cursed Islam and harassed Muslim girls. The note demanded that the family pay out a thousand dollars and was accompanied by an AK-47 bullet. Donny George and his family are Assyrian Christians.

Another decisive factor in his departure was the corruption of officials on the State Board of Antiquities. George noted that responsible jobs were going to inexperienced people against his will. One deputy minister appointed people to his institute without his knowledge. In one case, a person with no relevant training was put in charge of manuscripts, and

a manuscripts specialist was put in charge of excavations. Someone in this position, George said, "must know every ten inches of the country."

George received word that he would be fired from his position as president of the state board because he was a Christian. A party affiliated to the Sadarist movement controls the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, under which the State Board of Antiquities functions. In an earlier interview with the *Art Newspaper*, he indicated that ministry officials were interested only in saving antiquities from the Islamic period.

George said he also had come under criticism for sending conservation staff abroad for training and in general for his international connections, which are essential in the preservation of Iraqi heritage. He applied to the ministry for retirement and his papers were processed the same day.

George criticized the American-sponsored government as a whole, which he said does not really exist outside of the Green Zone in Baghdad. The 1,400 specially trained guards delegated to patrolling archaeological sites have not been paid, and there is a grave danger that mass looting will resume.

Last month, men wearing Ministry of Interior Uniforms kidnapped 50 people near the National Museum. As a result of this and other threats, the museum was sealed with cinderblocks under George's orders, in defiance of his superiors. The buildings are now surrounded by sandbags and concertina wire. "Every door has been welded shut," said George. The more valuable collections of ancient art have been hidden again. The staff of the museum has been dispersed.

The National Museum was looted in April 2003 during the chaos created by the American conquest. The Bush administration paid no regard to the importance of the museum and took no action to protect it from theft. American troops disregarded international

law protecting cultural heritage during military action at the museum site.

The administration's response to the looting of artistic and archaeological artifacts covering thousands of years was Donald Rumsfeld's notorious quip, "Stuff happens." More than 10,000 items were taken, of which only about half have been recovered.

The state of archeology and heritage preservation in Iraq is a disaster. In June, unknown aggressors blew up the 1,000-year-old Mosque of Ana. The famous Malwia minaret on the Great Mosque of Samara, completed in 850 AD, was damaged in April 2005, and the Askari mosque, a major Shia shrine, was blown up in the same city in February, initiating an initial wave of sectarian killings.

The *Washington Post* quoted McGuire Gibson, a specialist in Mesopotamian archaeology, as saying; "I can tell you the situation regarding antiquities is horrible. There was a lot of attention paid to the looting of the museum the very same days the war started. It hasn't stopped. There has been the looting of sites on an industrial scale. Some of the greatest Sumerian sites have gone."

Donny George's exile is a part of a war of exile and extermination against the human repositories of Iraqi culture, the intelligentsia, initiated by the American invasion of the country and sustained by American policy today. Hundreds of Iraqi professionals been murdered or forced out of the country. In August, two professors at the University of Diyala in Baquba, Mohammed al-Tamimi and Karim al-Saadi, were murdered, causing a student and faculty protest. According to *Azzaman*, postgraduate studies have been suspended at the university because of a lack of staff.



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