

Amid continued US looting of cultural materials:

Iraqi museum reopens

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The National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, which has been closed since it was looted and vandalized in the first days of the US invasion in 2003, reopened last week to pronounced controversy. Only eight of the museum's 26 galleries were on view, and even those for a few hours only.

The most splendid parts of the collection, the jewelry and ceremonial objects from the royal graves of the Sumerian city of Ur and the 600 pieces from the Assyrian city of Nimrud, were absent and represented only by photographs.

The director of the museum, Amia Edan, who had opposed the opening said, "The collections of the Iraq Museum itself are in boxes in a safe place. We cannot show anything from that collection."

According to the *New York Times*, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki spoke at a dedication ceremony that had been prepared in secrecy. "Heavily armed soldiers patrolled the museum's roof and watched from sandbagged redoubts as Mr. Maliki, other senior officials, and foreign diplomats arrived," the *Times* reported. "Helicopter's thudded in the sky, and the police blocked the streets for miles around."

Qahtan al-Jibouri, the minister for tourism and antiquities, told diplomats that he wanted visitors "to see that Baghdad is still the same as it was in their eyes and has not turned to ruins...."

The museum housed one of the world's great collections of ancient artifacts and works of art provided, for the most part, by the excavation of the remains of nearly 6,000 years of civilization in Iraq, which has historically been known as Mesopotamia.

It likely that writing was invented in southern Iraq during the Bronze Age by the Sumerians, who developed some of the world's first cities based on technological advances in irrigation and on a new division of human labor.

Later societies, such as the Babylonians, codified legal systems and spread their culture to far-flung peoples through trade. Others, such as the Assyrians, embarked on campaigns of world conquest, bringing millions of people into their cultural orbit. Ancient Iraq figures notably in the Bible and as a center of Judaism and Islam.

The Museum was looted between April 8 and 12, 2003, due

to the disregard of cultural heritage law by the American forces. Exactly what happened remains unclear today; the only investigation was conducted by the military itself. It is clear, though, that the American military and political establishment at the highest levels of the Pentagon and the Bush administration disregarded their obligation to guard and protect the museum. Then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld quipped about the thefts: "Stuff happens." The looting of the museum was an American war crime for which no one has been brought to justice.

Over 15,000 objects were taken, some by professional thieves, and others in a rampage of institutions associated with the Baath regime by ordinary Iraqis. Many of the second category have been since returned, but thousands of other objects, some of great artistic and scientific value, remain at large, ultimately for sale to European and American art dealers. Historically, looted and stolen objects such as these have often found their way to the great museums in the United States and Europe.

The Museum had opened briefly in July 2003 at the behest of the American proconsul Paul Bremer. It closed after several hours because of danger from mortar rounds and gunfire.

According to a note on the IraqCrisis List on the Internet by Donny George, the former director of the Museum now in exile in the United States, in January the Iraqi minister for tourism and antiquities, Qahtan al-Jibouri, showed up at the museum with his armed bodyguards, "and started threatening everybody and ordered that the Iraq Museum must be opened by the middle of this February because he had given his word [to] the media."

George has noted that by opening the museum, the Iraqi government was "putting the museum and the collection in a very bad and dangerous situation." The museum's staff opposed Maliki and Jibouri's plans, and an open letter signed by prominent Iraqi archaeologists called on the government to cancel the opening.

It read in part: "The plan to open one of the world's most important museums...displays a remarkable unawareness of cultural heritage management. The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities seems to be unaware that there are internationally acknowledged standards and disciplines of museology and

cultural heritage management, that scholars with doctorates and years of experience in these fields will necessarily be better able to judge what procedure needs to be followed in order to protect the country's museums and historical sites."

The opening of the museum last week was little more than a publicity stunt to show that life in Iraq has returned to normal; far from doing so, the event revealed the weakness, confusion and irresponsibility of the Iraqi regime.

The decision instigated infighting in the government itself, with the *New York Times* noting in a February 15 article: "Jabir al-Jabiri, the senior deputy at the Culture Ministry, said in a telephone interview that the reopening announcement had been premature and surprised the ministry officials who have the final say."

The article continued: "But officials of the Tourism Ministry, which is under the financial and administrative oversight of the Culture Ministry, remained unmoved.

"In a statement issued later on Sunday, Baha al-Mayahi, an adviser at the ministry, said he was surprised by Mr. Jabiri's comments and reiterated that all efforts were being made to reopen next Monday. He said invitations had already been sent out to government and foreign officials.

"Reached in the evening, Mr. Jabiri was not backing down either, calling the reopening announcement an 'illegal action' that was outside the Tourism Ministry's authority."

While such squabbling goes on in the divided and crisis-ridden puppet government, the plunder of antiquities continues at archaeological sites across Iraq. According to McGuire Gibson, an internationally known expert on Mesopotamian archaeology, "It would be great if the looting has stopped, but I doubt that it has."

After examining satellite images on Google Earth, Gibson has noted that they appear to show a devastating picture of recent illicit digging from ancient sites in Iraq. "When I visited Umma on May 21, 2003, by helicopter with Ambassador Cordone, I counted over 250 looters at work, and the disturbed area was much bigger, my impression being that it was perhaps 5 times greater than it had been before the war. The new image from June 2008, however, shows that the entire site of Umma is riddled with holes.... If you look at Google Earth images of Dhi Qar province you can find dozens of small, unidentified sites as well as major ones with differing percentages of looter holes."

In another e-mail posting, Gibson leaves no doubt that the direct cause of the looting is the desperate poverty, particularly since the war, of the Iraqi people: "The looting will stop when the people of southern Iraq have alternative and less arduous ways of making a living. Although there is some improvement in the lives of people in these provinces, there has not been enough job creation to halt the looting."

The Iraqi government has done little to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq. Some high-profile archaeological sites are protected, in a number of cases by foreign troops.

In others cases, occupying forces simply do what they want.

In August foreign troops demolished an excavation house, itself historically significant, at Tell Asmara in Diyala Province, the site of the ancient city of Eshnunna, and held the local guards prisoner.

The Iraqi government has done little to disappoint its American masters concerning cultural crimes.

One glaring case in point is the millions of documents concerning the crimes of the Baath regime, which American forces stole from Iraq after 2003. These now reside in the United States, despite repeated calls by librarians and archivists for their repatriation to Iraq.

A recent paper by Saad Eskander, the director-general of the Iraqi National Library and Archive (which was looted and burned in April 2003) has drawn attention—when the Maliki regime will not—to the illegal use of these documents by the Pentagon with its new Minerva Research Initiative, which "will allow access to its collections of seized Iraqi records."

Eskander notes, "Providing access to sanctioned US universities, US research centers and US scholars is gross discrimination against the undeniable owners of the seized record the Iraqi people, who are the main subject of the records. By taking this ill-conceived action, the Pentagon and the US intelligence agencies have disregarded important considerations, including the right to privacy, the appreciation of cultural distinctions, and respect for the social sensitivities of another nation, and respect for the rights of the victims."

The destruction of the Iraqi people's historical memory and cultural heritage have accompanied the killing, maiming and displacement of millions of people since the American invasion nearly six years ago.

Along with mass unemployment, food insecurity and infrequent access to electricity, these cultural crimes are a part of what the *World Socialist Web Site* has called the sociocide of Iraq, that is, the destruction of Iraq as a functioning society.

There is an objective need by American imperialism not to rebuild Iraq society but to refashion it into an impoverished semi-colonial country whose resources are at the disposal of the ruling elite in the United States.

This need did not end with the inauguration of Barack Obama. On the contrary, with Obama's recent announcement that American troops will remain in Iraq for years, the destruction of Iraq's society and culture will continue under his administration.



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