

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR

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In the summer of 2002, with the Iraq War looming, our attention turned sharply toward Iraq, the fate of its people, and the probable looting of museums and ancient sites. Nippur, as one of the most important and largest sites in Iraq, would be a likely target of looting, although it has been spared throughout the period of the embargo, during which dozens of other sites have been systematically ruined by illicit diggers.

As the market value of Mesopotamian antiquities rose steadily during the past fifteen years, the pace of looting increased to fill the demand. Although initially powerless to stop the wrecking of site after site, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities was able to obtain emergency funding in the late 1990s and carried out salvage operations at more than twenty-five sites. Chief among these were Umma, Umm al-Aqarib, and neighboring mounds to the southeast of Nippur. The excavation teams had to work through the summers because they knew that if they left the sites the looters would return. By hiring as many as thirteen guards for each tell, they were able to keep the looters away. The day the war started on March 20, however, the looters came back and drove off the guards. Between 200 and 300 men would work every day on each site, brought out in the mornings and taken home each evening on trucks hired for the purpose. At Umma, they even set up a little camp. While we did not know this was happening until much later, we assumed that it was.

As far back as January 2003, I became involved with other archaeologists in trying to make America aware of the importance of Iraq as Mesopotamia, the birthplace of civilization. The Ar-



Statues from the site of Hatra showing failed attempt by looters to remove head, Iraq National Museum

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR



Artifact holding and preparators' room after partial clean-up. Iraq National Museum

archaeological Institute of America put out a call for archaeologists to give to the Pentagon as much information as possible on the location of sites and standing monuments. I furnished the locations of more than 5,000 sites so that they might be avoided. This much information was easily assembled because we, at the Oriental Institute, have been working with students for years entering the locations that Thorkild Jacobsen, Robert McC. Adams, and other archeologists have put on settlement maps of Iraq since the 1930s into computer format. Using Remote Sensing, or Geographical Information Systems (GIS) technology, these students can give much more precise coordinates than could be done in traditional mapping procedures. At the request of the White House, we compiled a prioritized list of more than 100 sites that are better known, such as Nineveh, Babylon, and Ur of the Chaldees. We also included other sites that were of great significance not for any tourist value, but for the archaeological record. Throughout, we always emphasized the central importance of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad and the Museum in Mosul. In more than one message to various officials, I also stressed the importance of the National Archive and Library in Baghdad. On two occasions, I was assured that the Pentagon was aware of the importance of these buildings and that they would be secured.

When American troops entered Baghdad and were reported to be at the Ministry of Information on Tuesday, April 8, I assumed that the next reports would be of the saving of the Iraq Museum. I started e-mailing my contacts in the army about this. On April 10, Thursday, when nothing was being reported, I phoned the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* and asked that they send their reporters to see if the Iraq National Museum was secure.

The world was informed by reporters on April 12 that the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad had been entered by looters on Thursday, April 10, unhindered by U.S. troops nearby. The looters were of two kinds. The first group seems to have been professional, armed and equipped with

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR

tools to open safes, doors, and cabinets. This group knew something about the routine of the museum, where storeroom keys would be kept, where important groups of items would be stored. They opened three out of the five storerooms and took thousands of artifacts. They also took forty important objects from the public galleries. They would have gotten much more except that the museum staff had disassembled the display cases and removed all portable objects to a secure storage facility. They had to leave large items and objects mounted on the walls. Thus, all of the Assyrian reliefs, similar to the ones in the Oriental Institute Museum, were left on display, but sandbags were laid out in front of them, and some items were wrapped in foam sheets. The most famous of the forty stolen items were the Warka Vase and the Warka Head. But an important cast copper figure, known as the Bassetki statue, was also lost. This statue weighs more than 300 pounds and seems to have been the object that was bumped down the marble stairs from the second floor gallery to the ground floor, breaking each step as it went down.

Following on the heels of the purposeful looters, crowds of more casual looters went into the Museum and into the wing that houses the State Board of Antiquities. They broke into each of the 120 offices, making huge holes in the wooden doors. They dragged out all of the office machines, computers, tables, chairs, and most of the desks. They seem not to have been very much interested in file cabinets, but they took out the papers and records, strewing them around the offices and all along the halls. The photographic archives of all the work done by Iraqi and foreign scholars since 1923 were trampled and scattered, with negatives badly damaged by dirt and abrasion. In addition, all personnel files, payroll information, and accounting records were thrown around, and the safe containing one month's salary for all employees was drilled, opened, and emptied.

In the museum, the casual looters were probably the ones who broke the glass in empty cases and tried to yank out of the wall smaller pieces of stone and copper decorations from Sumerian temples. They were probably also the people who ransacked the offices of the museum staff, throwing site catalogues, object catalogues, and other records onto the floor, stealing any equipment that would move and wrecking what was too big. They threw around chemicals in the conservation laboratories, scattered equipment, tore up books, and damaged objects that were in process of being conserved. In the storerooms, it was most likely the casual looters who took objects off shelves at random, while leaving others. They seem not to have wanted to steal pots, but they did take the time to smash hundreds of them on the floor.

Luckily, when the professional looters entered the storerooms, the electricity was off. They did not have enough light to work through the collections carefully. There were



Iron door to basement storage and protective block wall penetrated by looters between April 10 and 11. Iraq National Museum

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR

little piles of ash in the storerooms, evidence of fires made with insulating or packing materials to give them light.

Our associates in Iraq related what they witnessed: Dr. Jabber Khalil, the President of the State Board of Antiquities and Dr. Donny George, the Director General for Research, along with one guard and Muhsin, a man who lived at the rear of the museum, and Muhsin's son, were the only people left in the museum on the morning of Tuesday, April 8. At 11:00 A.M., they saw fedayeen fighters jump over the wall into the Museum grounds, and witnessed the beginning of a battle between them and the U.S. Army. Dr. Jabber decided that they should evacuate the building and come back in a few hours when the fighting had stopped. The only people left on the museum grounds were Muhsin and his son, who retreated to their house.

When Dr. Jabber and Dr. Donny tried to return that afternoon, they found the Tigris bridges blocked by U.S. troops and were not allowed to proceed. They were still unable to get back to the museum complex until Sunday, April 13, after they knew from a BBC broadcast that the Museum had been undergoing looting since Thursday. They appealed to the Marine commander at the Palestine Hotel to do something. On the previous day, museum personnel who live near the museum arrived to drive off the remaining looters and block the doors. But mobs still threatened to come in until Thursday, April 24, when U.S. Army tanks finally arrived to guard the museum.

The devastation that greeted returning museum employees was reflected in the news reports showing their reaction to empty cases, broken displays, and damaged sculptures in some of the rooms. Many had not been in the museum exhibition halls when they were disassembled, so the employees thought that most objects had been taken from the public galleries by the looters. They also found out fairly soon that three of the storerooms had been entered. The early publicized number of 170,000 objects stolen was a misinformed but not unrealistic figure. A reporter had asked the museum staff, "How many objects are in the Museum?" A person familiar with the collection answered 170,000. This figure did not reflect, however, the fact that registration numbers often include groups of objects. So, 170,000 registration numbers represent many more objects in the museum collection.

Another group of missing objects is not reflected in the registration numbers. The Antiquities Board had as many as fifty ongoing digs. In the week leading up to the war, the Iraqi excavators brought their finds and field catalogues to Baghdad to be accepted by the museum. These objects were laid out and inspected, but the process of entering them into Iraq Museum records was not completed. The objects were put in steel trunks and deposited in a storeroom, one of the three that were opened by looters. These trunks were forced open, the objects dumped out. Looters took what they wanted and smashed many objects.

As a result of the numbering system and the unprocessed objects brought to the museum just before the war, when museum staff go through their painstaking inventory of the burglarized storerooms, they have to check more than one set of records. By June 30, the official tally of known missing items reported by the museum staff (working with a team of U.S. Customs inspectors) had reached 12,000, and there was still much checking to be done. In mid-June, news reports across the world began to downplay the losses in the museum, stating that only thirty-three pieces had been taken. This was as gross a distortion of fact as the initial figure of 170,000.

It was known by then that many of the formerly displayed objects were safe in a very secure, secret storeroom off-site. It also became public knowledge that some of the most vulnerable items, such as the treasures from the Queens' tombs of Nimrud in Assyria and much of the gold from Ur, as well as a famous copper head of an Akkadian king were also safe. The gold items and the head had been put in the deep vaults of the Central Bank in 1991, before the first Gulf

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR



Major storeroom of the Iraq National Museum, partially cleaned, notice gaps on shelves and broken pottery on floor, May 2003

War, and had been left there for secure storage. During the current war, this bank was hit by a bomb and debris partially filled the stairs to the vault, so there was still a lot of worry about the fate of those objects. Almost immediately after I had heard about the looting of the museum, I began to send e-mails to the Pentagon and to the White House asking that the Central Bank be secured, as I had known about the gold in the vaults as early as 1992. We then saw on TV vivid pictures of people looting the Central Bank and burning Iraqi money (which they later regretted since it was still usable). It took more than a week before the bank was secure. Some men did get down to the level of the vaults and tried to open one of them with a grenade launcher. The blast killed one of them and it may also have triggered an accidental or planned flooding of the basements of the bank. Only after pumping out 50 feet of water could the vaults be opened, in the presence of museum officials, and the still sealed crates identified. Later, the crates were transferred to the museum, where they were unpacked and the objects cleaned and examined for damage.

The losses from the museum in Baghdad were not as catastrophic as they might have been, but they were still major. In the long run, the ransacking of the offices and the loss of valuable records may prove to be even more devastating. Assessing this kind of damage will take a long time. (For more information on the museum looting and attempts to recover stolen objects, see report on the Iraq Museum Project.)

While the world's eyes were focused on the museum in Baghdad, looters were destroying sites, especially in the south, ancient Sumer. The day the war started, hundreds of men went to Umma and drove off the thirteen guards that the Antiquities department had left to protect that site. Nearby sites that had also been the subject of rescue operations in the past few years were

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR



Figure 6. U.S. armed forces survey condition of damage at Nippur, May 2003

hit once again, with looters driving off the posted guards. We now know of at least thirty sites in the south, large and small, that have been or are being dug illegally. Each day, the loss of artifacts from these sites probably outnumbers the losses from the looting of the museum in Baghdad. The looters are quite brazen, greeting the U.S. military with smiles. They pretend that they have been working only a few days, but it is clear from the extent of destruction that the work has been going on for weeks.

I saw the damage firsthand by U.S. helicopter on May 21, when I accompanied Ambassador Piero Cordone, the Occupation Authority's man now in charge of the Iraqi Ministry of Culture. I had given the military a list of eleven sites that I thought had been or were likely to be looted because they are very important, well-known sites. Most had been excavated in the past by foreign or Iraqi expeditions. Included in my list were Nippur, Umm al-Hafriyat, and Adab, all three of which have been excavated by University of Chicago teams. I led expeditions at the first two, and Edgar James Banks dug at Adab in 1903. I had driven to Nippur on May 16 and had seen holes that had been dug as recently as a week before. We met with the guards and the local shaykh. The guards said that sixteen men came and were better armed than they, so they were powerless to stop the looting. I thought that by paying the guards more, and by engaging the shaykh and his entire group, the site would be safe. The day we visited by helicopter, there were no new holes. But in June, a few weeks after my return to Chicago, I received an e-mail message from someone who had been at Nippur and said that there more than a hundred new holes.

We took off from Nippur and flew over Umm al-Hafriyat, a site to the east where I had excavated in 1977. Circling over the site, we could see that the tell looked like a waffle, full of recently dug holes, but no one was working at the time. On the way south to Adab, I could see two more small sites riddled, but not being worked that day. Adab itself was a revelation. Here, as we circled, we could count between 250 and 300 men digging all over the mound. The damage

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR

was unbelievable. Clearly this digging has been going on for years, and Adab's tablets, seals, and other objects must have been flooding into the international antiquities market for some time. We then flew south over Tell Shmid, where fifty men were digging. Then, on to Umma where probably 300 men were busily destroying the parts of the site that had been excavated carefully only a few weeks ago by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. Here, we landed and the military escort shot into the air, scattering the looters. We walked over the site, taking pictures of the ragged pits and tunnels sunk into the rooms already exposed by the archaeologists. As we took off, I could see the tell that is the ancient city of Zabalam in the distance. Though too far off to make a count, it was clear that men were destroying that site as well. The same was true at Umm al-Aqarib, another site that had been excavated until recently by the Department of Antiquities.

Over the site of Girsu, I could see that recent digging had occurred, but no one was working at the time. At Tell al-Hiba, the site of ancient Lagash, there appeared to be no damage at all.

From here, we turned west, passing over four sites that showed recent digging. Bad Tibira was one of those. The helicopter touched down at Ur, near the area of houses that has been in part reconstructed. We walked past the tombs of the Ur III kings (ca. 2150 B.C.) and over to the ziggurat, where the son of the guard had set up a little stall to sell bottled water and souvenirs to tourists. Since the site of Ur is occupied by the U.S. military, his only tourists were soldiers and journalists. Interestingly, we were told by a soldier that the commander of the nearby Tallil air base was sending Military Police to check our identity. Apparently, we had no prior clearance to land at Ur. As we went back to the helicopter, six Humvees arrived at the ziggurat ready to take



Site of Nippur, beginning of destruction by looters, July 1, 2003

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR



Members of U.S. armed forces viewing destroyed site of Isin, May 21, 2003

care of the intruders. However, we were already in the air before we could be arrested. Apparently, one group of the U.S. military doesn't communicate with the other.

From Ur, we made our way to Larsa and confirmed that it also had huge robber holes dug into it. Again, no one was working that day. Then, we circled Uruk for several minutes, checking that there was no digging there. The guards at Uruk are part of a tribe that has worked with the Germans since the 1920s, and they keep the site intact. We were supposed to stop at Uruk, but we were getting very tired and some of the group were feeling a bit ill because of the fumes from the engine and the heat. Besides, I wanted to make sure that we stopped at Isin, where we already had dramatic testimony from a German archaeologist who had visited the site a few days before. When we landed, the 250 or so diggers came running, very pleased to see us. They began showing us objects that they had found that day. After they were rounded up into a group, they were told that it is forbidden to dig. They left, helped along by a few shots over their heads. One young man, who had come out with a tractor and trailer as a taxi for local villagers, wanted us to pay for his fares since his clients had taken off by foot. I know from a reporter's account that the very next day they were back working, talking about the helicopter visit.

From Isin, we flew back to Baghdad, exhausted and convinced that something urgently had to be done to protect the sites. The stealing of objects is a big loss, but the destruction of archaeological context is devastating. Objects left in their original findspots gain much greater value than they have on their own. It is only from context that we can learn about the real function of objects, the role they played in an institution, and the inter-relations of items that might not appear to be connected at all. A clay tablet with cuneiform inscription is a valuable source of information, but when it is found in a room with dozens of other tablets and other objects, we can begin to reconstruct what went on in that room, the connection between the tablets and the

NIPPUR AND IRAQ AT TIME OF WAR

people appearing in the texts, and we can begin to see how specific officials did their jobs. Without such connections only guesses can be made.

There is a U.S. plan to guard sites, but the process is painfully slow. The real key is to strengthen the Antiquities organization, get its representatives functioning all over the country, bring the guards back on sites and back them up with force until it is clear to the Iraqi public that the U.S. occupying power is serious about this issue. It might seem silly to some to worry about antiquities sites when fighting is still going on. But it is no sillier to guard antiquities sites than it is to guard oil wells. In the future, when oil is not so important because it has been replaced by some other fuel, or when it is finally depleted, the country of Iraq will still have an economic base in agriculture, minerals, and tourism based on its cultural heritage. The Iraqi diggers are not thinking of the future, but only about feeding their families. Even the agents who come from Baghdad each week to collect objects and pay the diggers are just doing a job. The dealers in Baghdad, and especially those in Europe, America, and the Far East, are looking for this year's profits, though they have a gloss of education, of artistic appreciation, and a rationale for the evil they do. The collectors are often from the finest old families and do not like to be compared to drug users, but that is exactly, in my opinion, whom they do resemble. They are abetted by some of the finest museums in the world, which, though they do not buy antiquities with shady proveniences, will show objects on loan from Mr. X or Mr. Y. And, unfortunately, some of our colleagues in art history and cuneiform studies authenticate, read, analyze, and write catalogue entries for stolen items. Everyone involved at this level knows that the entire traffic of such objects is illegal and that the voracious appetite of collectors for antiquities is destroying archaeology, but very few ever say a word in public. U.S. Customs tries to halt some of the flow of objects, but the process is very slow. The passage of the Iraqi Heritage Protection Act may finally put some teeth into the law enforcement in the U.S. trade. That would help because our country is now the leading consumer of illegal antiquities. However, until some brave prosecutor indicts one of the collectors, there is little hope for antiquities located around the world, not just in Iraq.

If the situation in Iraq begins to stabilize a bit, we have some hope of returning to work there. For years, we and other archaeologists will be engaged in assessing the damage to sites and running salvage operations. I do not envy the people who try to resume work at Isin or Umma. They will spend most of their time trying to distinguish between robber holes and ancient dirt. I hope that Nippur is not destroyed, but even a hundred holes in what was an un-looted site until the U.S. occupation should not have been allowed to happen. We can only hope there will be better times.
