

## LOST TREASURES FROM IRAQ (IRAQ MUSEUM DATABASE PROJECT/IRAQCRISIS)

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Over two years after the Iraq War, the fall of Baghdad, and the looting of the Iraq Museum, Iraq continued to dominate the news. While much is heard about political developments, military operations, and the ongoing insurgency, little if anything tends to be reported about the fate of Iraq's cultural heritage. This does not mean that its archaeological sites or even its museums are safe — quite the contrary. Unfortunately, to most elements of the press a continuing misery is about as newsworthy as an old hat.

It is for this reason that we will continue to host and develop “Lost Treasures of Iraq,” the Oriental Institute's information page on threats to Iraq's cultural heritage, which was launched shortly after the fall of Baghdad and the looting of the Iraq Museum in April 2003. Since most of our work in 2004/2005 was dedicated towards expanding the existing features, I will refrain from extensive repetition in describing the Web site and instead refer to my detailed description of its features in the *2003/2004 Annual Report*. The site consists of four main parts (see sidebar): (1) a database of archaeological objects from the Iraq Museum; (2) photos of archaeological sites in Iraq; (3) a bibliography documenting the contents of museums and libraries in Iraq, and (4) “IraqCrisis,” a moderated e-mail list that relates substantive information on the cultural property damaged, destroyed, or lost during and after the war in March/April 2003. Most of the work was divided between Charles (“Chuck”) E. Jones and me, with (1) and (2) being my responsibility and (3) and (4) being Jones's achievements.

As of June 2005 some 15,000 items have been reported as stolen from the Iraq Museum during its looting in April 2003, of which about half are said to have been retrieved since then. Yet over two years after the looting we still lack final numbers and tallies of what is missing and what has been retrieved, though some lists of missing items have become available. For these reasons the number of items in our Oriental Institute Iraq Museum Database continued to grow — not as fast I had hoped for in the past but significant progress was made nonetheless. With more information available on the museum's losses our additions have become more focused on objects that are either known to or feared to have been stolen. During summer and fall of 2004 we added to our database 172 items of stone sculpture and relief from the Diyala excavations that had been allocated to the Iraq Museum, including the famous votive figurines from the temples of Tell Asmar, Tell Agrab, and Khafaje. Though eyewitness accounts indicate that a good number of them survived the looting intact we simply do not know the fate of all of them, and it is quite possible that some of them were indeed stolen. In November 2004 we returned to work on an artifact group that required top priority — the cylinder seals from the Iraq Museum of which some 4,800, a sizable part of the museum's collection, had been reported as stolen in June 2003. This news had a tragic personal component for us, since these numbers included many seals excavated by the Oriental Institute, including over 500 cylinder seals from the Diyala excavations — one of the largest collections of excavated and therefore well-dated cylinder seals. Since November 2004 we have added the images and descriptions of 517 seals from the Diyala sites, of sixteen seals from Umm al-Hafriyat (fig. 1), and of thirty-seven from Nippur to the database. Work on the seals is ongoing and currently refined by adding information from a list of stolen Iraq Museum cylinder seals, which Lamia al-Gailani had compiled during her stay

in Baghdad and which she forwarded to McGuire Gibson in 2004. Alexandra Witsell, student assistant at the Oriental Institute, had already translated this list from Arabic and compiled a spreadsheet with scans of archival and published copies, which we could use for our database entries on seals from Umm al-Hafriyat and Nippur. We are currently finishing the data entry for the Nippur seals — by the time this report will appear in print we should be done with it.

One of the key problems in compiling this database was the verification of an object's status: was it stolen (if so, was it retrieved later on), was it damaged, are parts of it missing? With relatively few items being unambiguously listed as missing and even fewer positively identified as either having remained in the museum or having been retrieved, we usually had to define the objects' status as "unknown" (at least unknown to us) — in case of doubt it seemed better to err on the side of safety and to include items that could potentially have been stolen. This uncertainty remains for many objects, but at least for the cylinder seals posted on our site al-Gailiani's list now gives us the opportunity to identify firmly those who have been confirmed to be missing.

At present (July 2005), we have 1,320 objects from the Iraq Museum in the on-line version of our database. This is a small fraction of the total number of objects in the Iraq Museum, but to my knowledge it remains the by far most extensive on-line catalog of items from the Iraq Museum. In the near future we will continue our work, largely guided in our additions by object photographs and descriptions that are available to us. We will continue to add photographs and descriptions of the Nimrud ivories, whose fate has remained largely unknown. Georgina Herrmann (University College London/British School of Archaeology in Iraq) kindly made scans of photographs available for those ivories that had been recovered during the British Excavations at Nimrud (1949–1963). Four hundred eighty-five of them have already been posted in the on-line version of our database, but literally thousands more remain to be added.

In addition to posting objects from the Iraq Museum we have added a new section to "Lost Treasures" called "Site Photos from Iraq," which contains recent photos of archaeological sites in Iraq from before and after the war (<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/sites/sitesintro.htm>). This initiative was actually spurred by a member of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq: SPC William

### Lost Treasures from Iraq

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq.html>

#### • Visualization

Iraq Museum Database: An illustrated database of objects from Iraqi museum collections.

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/Iraqdatabasehome.htm>

Site Photos from Iraq: An illustrated database of objects from Iraqi museum collections.

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/sites/sitesintro.htm>

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/farchakh/farchmain.htm>

#### • Documentation

Preliminary Bibliographies of Books documenting the contents of the Iraq Museum, the National Library and Archives, and the manuscript collection of the Ministry of Religious Endowments — all in Baghdad — as well as of other damaged or destroyed collections in Baghdad or elsewhere in Iraq including Mosul, Basrah, Suleimaniyah, etc.

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/IraqBibs.html>

#### • Communication

IraqCrisis: A moderated list for communicating substantive information on cultural property damaged, destroyed or lost from Libraries and Museums in Iraq during and after the war in April 2003, and on the worldwide response to the crisis.

<https://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/iraqcrisis>

Oriental Institute Homepage

<http://oi.uchicago.edu>

On-line Resources on the Oriental Institute's Web site addressing the threat to Iraq's cultural heritage.

## RESEARCH



**Figure 1. MISSING SEALS:** Page from on-line version of *Iraq Museum Database*, showing description and photo of modern impression of a seal excavated by the Oriental Institute's Nippur Expedition at Umm al-Hafriyat (1977/78); a hyperlink on the main page connects to other photographs available of this object, in this case a side view of the seal (bottom right)

apocalyptic scale of damage that had been done to sites in the Sumerian heartland such as Umma, Umm al-Aqarib, Isin, Larsa, and Bad-Tibira since the 2003 war and which continues at an undiminished pace (fig. 2). The impact that these photographs could have on public awareness of what is being irretrievably destroyed was not lost on us; we are very grateful, therefore, that Joanne allowed us to post 183 of her photographs on our Web site (<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/farchakh/farchmain.htm>). We have made no attempt at covering all aspects of the damage caused by site looting — time constrains and logistics simply do not permit us to do so, and other sites such as SAFE (<http://www.savingantiquities.org/h-feature.htm>) are already doing a great job in educating the public — but we hope that this large corpus of primary information from Iraq, which largely has not been made public elsewhere, will be found useful for purposes of education, documentation, and reference.

Chuck continues to moderate the “IraqCrisis” e-mail list (<http://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/iraqcrisis>). By 2005 the number of subscribers had grown to 775. Subscribers not only include academics involved in the study of the history and culture of Iraq but also government officials and reporters for major news outlets, making a list a highly useful and widely appreciated resource for exchanging and distributing information concerning Iraq’s Cultural Heritage.

During spring we devoted much time to the preparation of “The Threat to Iraq’s Cultural Heritage — Current Status and Future Prospects,” a workshop held on July 23, 2005 in conjunction with the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale. The Rencontre will be summarized in the Annual Report for 2005/2006, but since this workshop addressed current issues concerning Iraq’s Cultural Heritage it should at least be mentioned here. The presentations read at the work-

Peterson, who in 2003 and 2004 was stationed in Iraq and who had visited and photographed numerous sites in southern Iraq, very kindly sent us his photographs for evaluation; with his permission we posted 196 of his photographs from Girsu, Nippur, and Uruk on our site. In January Joanne Farchakh-Bajjal, a Lebanese journalist who between 1998 and 2004 undertook several trips to Iraq, presented a lecture in Breasted Hall on the fate of Iraq’s archaeological sites from the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War to the 2003 Iraq War. Her photographs show the

shop (the full list of papers is posted at [http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq\\_ws\\_papers.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq_ws_papers.html)) addressed the Iraq Museum looting and its aftermath, the destruction of Iraq's archaeological sites, initiatives to build GIS-based databases of archaeological sites in Iraq, and legislative initiatives aimed at curbing the sale of illegally imported antiquities from Iraq in Europe and the U.S. Much of the discussion focused on a statement introduced by Michael Müller-Karpe (Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Mainz, Germany), which called upon scholars to refrain from providing expertise to antiquities dealers and to private collectors on illegally excavated objects. The statement, which was signed by forty-six attendees of the workshop, has been posted on the "Lost Treasures of Iraq" Web site ([http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/ws\\_statement.html](http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/ws_statement.html)); the statement is posted as an information item relating to the workshop, not as an officially adopted Oriental Institute policy). As of August 23, thirty-six additional scholars have requested for their names to be added to the list of signatures. Numerous thanks are

due, but I particularly want to thank Oriental Institute Director Gil Stein for a generous financial contribution to the workshop and Development Director Monica Witczak for taking care of most of its organization.

Many readers will be aware of another development that impacted our Iraq Working Group: in May 2005 Chuck Jones left the Oriental Institute to become Head Librarian of the Blegen Library at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. The fact that I have failed to mention his departure in this summary could be interpreted as a denial to myself and indeed, I continue to miss Chuck's collegiality and friendship every single day. Thankfully, in this age of the Internet spatial distances have become less relevant. Chuck will continue to moderate IraqCrisis from his new home base in Athens. Subscribers to IraqCrisis will notice little if any difference; naturally we are delighted that, despite Chuck's physical absence from Chicago, his unrelenting commitment to aid the preservation of Iraq's cultural heritage will continue to connect him closely to the Oriental Institute.

I cannot close this report without a sign of appreciation to our project volunteer Karen Terras, whose dedicated and enthusiastic work has been a model and source of inspiration for all of us. I also want to thank the Provost of the University of Chicago for supporting our work with an Academic Technology Innovation grant for 2003/2004 and 2004/2005, which has allowed us to buy the equipment necessary to run this project efficiently. Lastly, I want to thank those donors who have continued to support "Lost Treasures of Iraq" financially. In a project that has been



**Figure 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES DESTROYED:** Baked brick façade of an Ur III temple (ca. 2050 B.C.) at the site of Umma, destroyed by looters in search for inscribed bricks. Photo by Joanne Farchakh-Bajjal; posted on "Lost Treasures of Iraq" with permission

**RESEARCH**

(and in fact can be) successfully operated on a shoestring “a buck goes a long way.” Thanks to those bucks we have come a long way, and we promise to continue to do so throughout the next year.

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