Fate of Iraqi Archaeology
McGuire Gibson

As far as can be determined, the damage to archaeological sites and standing monuments caused by the Gulf War itself was apparently relatively minor. Attempts to send in UNESCO teams to assess damage in the war zone were vetoed by the Security Council. We do know of damage to a few mounded sites in the south (Ur of the Chaldees, Tell al-Lahm). Armies dig in on high ground, and in southern Iraq, almost all hills are archaeological sites. More damage would have been done had the war not ended before the fighting reached the core area of ancient Sumer.

If the war itself did relatively little damage, the economic embargo against Iraq imposed by the United Nations has been devastating. The last 13 years have witnessed drastic losses of staff and funding at the Department of Antiquities. There has also been an increasing pace of looting of archaeological sites followed by large-scale smuggling out of objects to feed the voracious international antiquities market. Only three Ph.D.’s remain in the department. The department has been forced to lay off its guards at many sites; and even where some have been retained, such as at the major sites of Babylon, Nineveh, Khorsabad, and Nimrud, thieves have succeeded in removing surprisingly large objects (weighing several tons).

In the countryside, especially in the alluvial desert between the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Iraq, central government control is greatly weakened. In this area, which was the heartland of ancient Sumer, the illicit digging started as attempts by individuals to find something to sell to feed their families. This work soon grew to an industry, financed from abroad and engaging hundreds of diggers at some sites (J). The most sought-after objects were cylinder seals, statues, and especially clay tablets with cuneiform writing. A few pickup trucks have been intercepted by Iraqi border patrols, but most shipments have gotten through and end up in London or other centers of the trade. Collectors who seem to consider this a “golden age for collecting” do not worry that they are breaking international laws on cultural property and are violating the economic embargo on Iraqi goods.
When made aware of the extensive looting of the sites of Umma, Adab, and Umm al-Aqarib, the department of Antiquities was able to gain emergency funding and send out teams to excavate them. An army unit drove off the looters, and the Department of Antiquities established as many as 18 guards on a site. The department's excavations have yielded important information on the development of architecture, as well as major groups of artifacts, including inscribed items. These finds are the only ones, among the many thousands of objects from these sites, that have come from recorded archaeological contexts. All others, which now reside in museums and private collections around the world, lack context and are of far less value as information sources.

The embargo has caused other damage to sites, and even the loss of entire mounds. To feed its population, Iraq has embarked on emergency agricultural projects, encouraging farmers to open new irrigated fields in southern Iraq on land that has been desert since the Mongol conquest in the 13th century. Judging by satellite images, some new fields seem largely unregulated, and archaeological sites that would have been respected in normal times appear to have been erased, apparently with graders and other heavy equipment. Now, a new war will mean the damaging of many more sites in the western desert, which is classic "tank country," and if the campaign bogs down for any length of time, sites between the two rivers once more will be the high ground. But the greatest concern of archaeologists, art historians, and historians around the world is for the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad and the Museum in Mosul, as well as our colleagues on their staffs, who will try to protect the collections. Both buildings are close to government buildings that were hit by "smart bombs" in the Gulf War. Even if they survive the bombing, any period of chaos or uncertain control during or after the fighting will render both institutions vulnerable to looting.

Statement on Cultural Heritage at Risk in Iraq

The extraordinary significance of the monuments, museums, and archaeological sites of Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia) imposes an obligation on all peoples and governments to protect them. In any military conflict, that heritage is put at risk, and it appears now to be in grave danger.

Should war take place, we call upon all governments to respect the terms of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its First Protocol. We urge all governments, institutions, and individuals in a position to act to recognize and uphold the validity of the existing, strong Antiquities Law in Iraq. To secure the long-term safety of the cultural heritage of Iraq and to stop the illicit digging and smuggling of antiquities that have occurred during the period of the embargo and that may follow a period of conflict, the staff of the Department of Antiquities must be returned to pre-embargo numbers in academic and technical fields. Most important, the number of guards for individual sites, monuments, and museums must be returned to pre-embargo strength.

As represented by the signatories of this letter, the international scholarly community is prepared, at the conclusion of the present crisis, to support the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in strengthening and retraining its staff, in assessing the conservation needs of artifacts and buildings, and in refitting laboratories. Foreign archaeologists are also willing to play a role in any needed assessment of damage done by illicit digging or warfare, in salvage operations directed by the Department of Antiquities, and in repatriating stolen antiquities. In the long term, international scholars could aid the department in carrying out a systematic, countrywide survey in order to locate all identifiable archaeological sites.

The signatories of this letter urge all governments to recognize that fragile cultural heritage is inevitably damaged by warfare; that irreparable losses both to local communities and to all humanity are caused by the destruction of cultural sites, monuments, and works of art; and that it is our common duty to take all possible steps to protect them.

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but rather to aid in not targeting. As in the first Gulf War, the military will try to avoid damaging sites and monuments, but some damage will occur.

If this war must happen, it is imperative that a thorough and systematic assessment of damage be made, in order to allow the Iraqi Department of Antiquities to organize salvage operations. It is more immediately important that the department continue to function and that its academic and technical staff be reassembled at full strength. As soon as possible, the guards must be rehired or replaced. Most important is recognition of the Antiquities Law and a guarding against attempts to dilute its scope and authority. There are persons and organizations who desire to change the Iraqi Antiquities Law as well as U.S. practice in regard to international cultural property (2, 3). Such changes are not in the interests of Iraq’s cultural heritage, the cultural heritage of the world, the pursuit of scholarship, and the reputation of the United States.

Scholars and institutions in the United States and other countries stand ready to assist the Department of Antiquities. (See box, which is a letter that has been sent to President George W. Bush, U.N. Secretary Kofi Annan, and Prime Minister Tony Blair. For further information and updates, see www.archaeological.org) However, funding for this training and needed equipment will require resources on a far greater scale.

In the expected post-war rush to develop new oil fields, industries, and irrigation projects, archaeological and ecological assessments should become part of any planning, and steps must be taken to carry out salvage operations before development. Iraqis have a history of coordinating such salvage, with foreign teams joining in the work. It would be a tragedy for the world if thousands of sites are lost as a result of political upheaval or decisions made for short-term economic gain.

References and Notes