

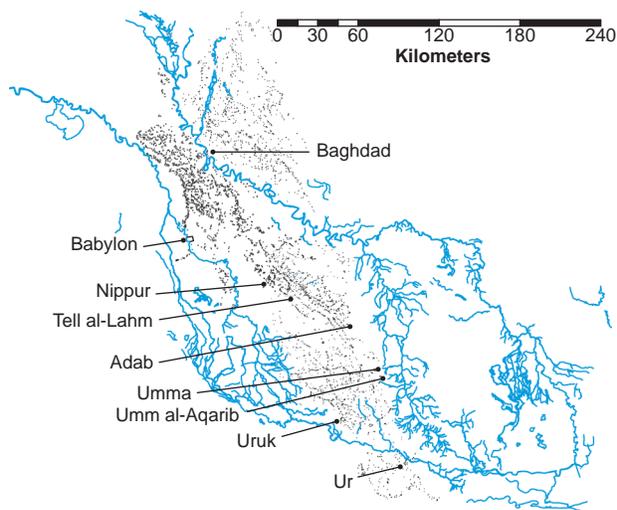
Fate of Iraqi Archaeology

McGuire Gibson

The impending war in Iraq puts the civilian population at increased risk because of the power of the newest weapons. The war also endangers societal cohesion because Iraq has a modern, complex, and technologically based society and is therefore highly vulnerable. Measured against human suffering, material items seem less significant, but also under threat is an important part of the world's cultural heritage. Iraq is ancient Mesopotamia, where the earliest civilization was developed in the fourth millennium B.C. Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, as well as Seleucid Greeks, Parthians, and Sasanians from Iran, and then Arabs ruled increasingly complex empires from capitals in this country.

The number of archaeological sites in Iraq is almost impossible to estimate. The Department of Antiquities has a file of about 10,000 sites, but these are only the ones that have been excavated or have yielded significant artifacts from their surfaces. There are, as a conservative estimate, probably 25,000 major mounded sites, and each of them is surrounded by dozens of small villages and towns. In only a small portion, something like 15%, of the country has any archaeological survey been conducted, mostly in the central region (Fig. 1). Whenever more intensive survey is done, anywhere from 10 to 50 additional sites are found within a 10-kilometer radius of any major site. The western desert has had almost no survey, but enough has been done to estimate that there are thousands of Paleolithic and Neolithic sites there. Overall, it is reasonable to estimate that there are hundreds of thousands of archaeological sites in Iraq. Included in this estimate would be hundreds of standing monuments, mostly from the Islamic periods, that are part of modern urban settings.

From the founding of the modern state of Iraq until 1990, Iraq had an enviable record of protecting its antiquities and cultural heritage. The Department of Antiquities, backed by an exemplary Antiquities Law, had control of all archaeological sites and artifacts. The



Southern Mesopotamia with sites located by on-the-ground surveys (black dots). Compiled by Carrie Hritz, University of Chicago.

department, from its inception in the early 1920s, began to develop a well-trained academic, museological, and security staff. As early as the 1930s, students were sent abroad for advanced degrees, and some became the mentors of new generations of archaeologists and epigraphers. During the 1980s, there were more than 25 foreign-trained Iraqi Ph.D.'s working in the antiquities service or the universities in the country. Archaeology programs at the universities allowed the Department of Antiquities to assemble a staff of thousands for its 20 museums, for supervision of excavations, and other purposes. An important component of the staff was for security: hundreds of guards who were responsible for individual sites. Dozens of Department of Antiquities representatives, residing in towns throughout the country, were responsible for the protection of all sites in large regions, including the deserts.

The result of this evolution of trained staff was that, before 1990, there was virtually no illegal excavation on archaeological sites and no illicit trade in antiquities. The uprising at the end of the Gulf War brought an end to that record. Nine of the 13 regional museums in the south and north of the country were raided by mobs, who smashed exhibits, stole antiquities, and sometimes set fire to the buildings. More than 3000 objects were lost, almost none of which have been recovered.

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 in 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 (1). 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.

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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

1. A. Lawler, *Science* **293**, 32 (2001).
2. J. N. Wilford, *New York Times*, 25 February 2003, p. B1.
3. A. Lawler, *Science* **295**, 2189 (2003).

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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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.

An initiative of the Archaeological Institute of America and the American Association for Research in Baghdad has resulted in the gathering of information on the location of archaeological sites and standing monuments. In the past few months, these and other organizations approached the Pentagon to raise awareness of the importance of Iraq as a key area of world culture. Subsequently, information on locations of more than 4000 sites found in the survey was turned over to the Defense Department—not to aid in targeting,