

EDITORIAL

☞ Many *Antiquity* readers will have spent a miserable first quarter of 2003 wondering how it is that war can still be reckoned an acceptable instrument of politics at the beginning of the third millennium of our era. Now it is over, we first mourn the tragic accidents, injury and loss of life suffered by combatants and bystanders. But next we must face a matter which is almost of equal misery and affects the world of archaeological scholarship much more widely: the looting of the Iraqi Museums. Whatever benefit may accrue to the recent military action in Iraq, it will long be overshadowed by this irreversible calamity. How did a coalition of such overwhelming might, and so confident of its own morality, allow such a thing to happen?

The event itself has been described to *Antiquity* in chilling terms by Dr Lamia Al-Gailani Werr, formerly of the Iraq Museum and founder of its Children's Education Department: "The looting of the Iraq Museum lasted more than two days. Some objects, such as the Warka vase and the Bassetki statue base of Naram-Sin, were clearly stolen to order, while a number of copies of famous pieces now in European museums were deliberately avoided. The looters also gained access to the locked vaults, where the extent of the loss and damage has yet to be evaluated. Extensive and wanton damage was caused by those who simply smashed everything in sight, including Hatra statues and the famous life-size terracotta lion from Tell Harmal. Fortunately many of the smaller pieces had previously been removed from the museum. The damage also extended to the administrative offices where the registers and photographs were torn and scattered about. All the equipment in the museum laboratory was completely destroyed."

"The Mosul Museum was also looted, again clearly on the orders of professional dealers; the lost objects are believed already to have left the country. The damage was not limited to museums. Among many others, the Manuscript Library of the University of Mosul was robbed. In Baghdad the Awqaf (religious) Library which contained priceless Islamic, Christian and Jewish manuscripts was burnt, while the National Library, the Iraqi equivalent of the British Library, was also burnt. The art galleries suffered similar destruction: the Saddam Centre of Modern Art was looted and the Gulbenkian Gallery burnt."



The Bassetki statue base of Naram-Sin found recently near Dohuk in northern Iraq. Credit: Directorate-General of Antiquities, Baghdad.

“Words cannot express my personal feelings at this terrible destruction of the culture of modern and mediaeval Iraq as well as ancient Mesopotamia. A catastrophic loss for the ordinary Iraqi was the burning of the National Archives, which included all personal and property registers. Indeed the enormity of what happened to the Iraq Museum is beyond immediate comprehension. I personally feel both cheated and angry, since I was one of the archaeologists who went to Washington to warn of the possibility of looting. We were given to understand officially that the Museum would be protected, and I feel particular anger when I know that just one or two tanks would have prevented all this destruction. Even the Iraqis under Saddam, when they invaded Kuwait, protected, stored and packed away the Museum, and the objects have now been returned intact.”

☞ Were other warnings given that such damage and theft was likely to occur? Yes indeed. In a letter to *The Times* on 24 April 2003 Colin Renfrew pointed out that he, Lord Redesdale and Lord Lea of Crondall had written to the Prime Minister on 11 February indicating the likelihood of looting in the event of military action. The letter was passed to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and officials of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq made similar representations to the same office, but without response. “Who was responsible in the FCO for gathering and assessing this information?” asks Lord Renfrew. “Why were warnings not heeded and the obvious risks assessed? What contacts were there with United States colleagues responsible for planning the capture and subsequent administration of Baghdad?” A ministerial statement delivered in the House of Lords on 26 March referred to the provisions of the Geneva conventions, which presumably meant that the Government and the US State department were aware of the responsibilities, under those conventions, of an occupying power. Colin Renfrew concludes: “I was one of those persuaded by the arguments of the Prime Minister that military action against Saddam Hussein was justifiable; but I doubt whether this incalculable loss to the historic and artistic heritage of Iraq can be justified” [full text on our website at <http://antiquity.ac.uk>].

In a letter to the *Independent* dated 5 March 2003, Dr Harriet Crawford and six eminent co-signatories drew attention to Iraq’s 25 000 archaeological sites and historic mosques, churches, forts, khans and treasures housed in museums (<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~wolf0126>), and expressed their anxieties at the potential side-effects of a military campaign: “Imagine if Egypt or Greece were about to be bombed, for whatever reason. An assessment of the risks to its ancient sites would be high on the international agenda”. [full text on our website <http://antiquity.ac.uk>]

In the USA, the warnings were no less vocal, and two congressmen later protested over the US government failure to take action to protect the National Museum, pointing out that they had managed to protect the oil wells. (And it might be said that Iraq’s culture, which cannot be substituted, is of greater value than its oil, which can). On 26 March the Archaeological Institute of America initiated an *Open Declaration on Cultural Heritage at Risk in Iraq* to be sent to heads of governments and leading journals and newspapers, which must rank among the finest statements of archaeological principle ever issued. It was signed by 10 institutions and 130 scholars and heritage managers from all over the world, and could hardly have been clearer on the threat to the cultural resources of Iraq and why they mattered:

“The extraordinary global significance of the monuments, museums and archaeological sites of Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia) imposes an obligation on all peoples and governments to

protect them. In military conflict that heritage is put at risk, and it appears now to be in grave danger. Should war take place, we call on 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". The Declaration offered action as well as words:

"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 artefacts and buildings ... refitting laboratories ... assessing the damage done by illicit digging or warfare ... and in repatriating stolen antiquities. The signatories to this letter urge all governments to recognise that fragile cultural heritage is inevitably damaged by warfare, that irreparable losses both to local communities and to all human beings 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 respect them." [full text on our website <http://antiquity.ac.uk>]

There is evidence that the army itself was sensitive to the global importance of Iraq's heritage – as witness the remarkable words of Lt-Col Tim Collins addressing his men of 1st Bn Royal Irish Regiment on the eve of the first battle: "Iraq is steeped in history. It is the site of the Garden of Eden, of the Great Flood and the birth of Abraham. Tread lightly there". On 8 April the BBC *Today Programme* reported that a group of marines who had been asked to check out the 4000 year old city of Ur ended up being so fascinated that they asked for a guided tour.



The Warka vase. Credit: Directorate-General of Antiquities, Baghdad.

How then did the custody of Iraq's antiquities escape the apparently comprehensive agenda of the British and US governments? Dr Lamia Al-Gailani Werr's comment that the looting was organised in advance raises a particularly infectious suspicion. William Langley writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* said that at least four of the artefacts were so large that they would have required fork-lift trucks to move them, and witnesses spoke of well-dressed men with walkie-talkies apparently co-ordinating events at the scene. "So who were they? And where have they taken the stuff?" demanded Rod Liddle in *The Spectator* [26 April 2003], and he goes on: "Stealing a country's physical history, its archaeological remains, has become the world's third biggest organised racket, after drugs and guns". But "There are those who argue that it shouldn't be illegal at all. There are those who say, look, the free market should operate here ...". He cites the American Council for Cultural Policy, a lobbying organisation formed shortly before the invasion of Iraq who "want a relaxation of Iraq's tight restrictions on the ownership and export of antiquities" and "object to what they call Iraq's 'retentionist' policy towards its archaeological treasures".

Clearly two kinds of redress are urgently required. The first is the immediate security of the sites and museums that remain and the repair of the Iraqi Antiquities Service as urged by the Archaeological Institute of America. Many friends of Iraq stand by to give a helping hand. Speaking on BBC Radio 4 on 14 April, British Museum director Neil MacGregor offered the help of BM expertise, at the same time stressing that the museums must first be sealed rather than cleaned up, so that there was some hope of reconnecting the broken fragments that remained after the raids.

The second response to this disaster must surely be a renewed assault on the illicit trade in antiquities. Apart from those doing it, there can be few educated people on the planet who do not recognise the public value of the archaeological past as the inalienable property of all people alive and those as yet unborn. The market place cannot yet function as a reliable custodian of archaeological assemblages and it is doubtful that it ever will.

As we go to press there is some sign that the international community is gearing up to take action. *Antiquity's* chairman, Joan Oates, who with her husband David represent a partnership of more than fifty years of Anglo-Iraqi scholarship, reports on a preliminary meeting of experts on various aspects of the cultural heritage of Iraq organised by UNESCO in Paris on 17 April:

"The purpose of the Paris meeting" she writes "was to identify and implement urgent action with respect to the salvage of what had survived recent looting, the prevention of further damage to cultural property and the facilitation of the return of stolen items, both within and outside Iraq". Representatives of sixteen countries were present as well as a number of Iraqi archaeologists, including former members of the Directorate-General of Antiquities in Baghdad. The meeting was unanimous in its condemnation of the extensive damage and looting that had taken place, and called on 'coalition forces to observe the principles of the 1954 Hague convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two protocols'. At the time the meeting opened, no protection had yet been provided for the National Museum itself, a week after the looting and damage, despite pre-war agreements to do so.

"An immediate prohibition was demanded on the export of Iraqi cultural property, including works of art, books and archives, and a call made for the immediate and voluntary return of

any such property already exported. Much anger was privately expressed at the lack of concern for the fate of Iraqi cultural institutions shown by the occupying forces.

By the time this is published, news from Iraq may have disappeared from the front pages of our newspapers. The war itself has long been over, but the damage to the cultural heritage of Iraq, the birthplace of much that defines our own 'civilisation', was not only a national but an international disaster of unparalleled proportions. Not since the time of the Mongol invasions, when the Tigris 'flowed red with blood and then black with the ink of destroyed manuscripts' has there been such wanton destruction."

☞ While we grieve for the antiquities and sites which are our irreplaceable resources, we should also emphasise that archaeology has something less tangible but still essential to offer the task of reconstructing Iraq. The students of Mesopotamia have not been idle. The surveys and excavations, the decipherment and artefact studies of the last 200 years have produced a picture of a civilisation which was a hot-house of political experiment, both early and extreme. Over two millennia, as the centre of gravity of the dominant authority moved steadily upstream from Sumer to Assyria, from Al 'Ubaid and Uruk to Akkad and Babylon and to Nineveh and Nimrud, the style and motivation of government made itself archaeologically evident to an unusual degree. The instrument of social control alternated between theocratic oligarchy and the rule of flamboyant tyrants, among whom we may cite such figures as the euphonious Lugal-Kinise-Dudu (2380–2361 BC) king of Sumer, Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) builder of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. Iraq has more than treasures; it is an exceptional template for the study of how people, events and the environment relate to each other. Its prehistory contains explanations for both monumental excess and the subterranean motors of conflict which continue to inform the politics of the area. The rebuilding of countries is a challenge in which previously won knowledge has some relevance. It is to be hoped that among those called upon to help will be Mesopotamian archaeologists, whose acquaintance with the land and its people is long and deep.

☞ This is the age of magic realism. Harry Potter sells millions, shamanistic animals perch on the shoulders of Phillip Pullman's characters, and large audiences of grown-ups watch dragons, elves, orcs and hobbits threatening each other in the cinematic cycle of *The Lord of the Rings*, which has become a sort of Wagner for Middle England. People who were lucky enough to encounter Beowulf, the Gododdin, the Welsh Triads, the Orkneyinga saga and other marvels of early writing



'I don't even think he's a part-time Shaman!'

are apt to regard J R R Tolkien as simply a master of pastiche. But we need not regret his posthumous success. Universities of the Anglo-Saxon world are now thronged with students of Old English and early Medieval archaeology who first came to the Dark Ages not through Taliesen or Sutton Hoo, but courtesy of Frodo Baggins. In this issue and the last we have made several fresh contacts with shamanism – adopted as a term to encompass the study of a broad area of magic practised in the past. The present studies are as inspiring as they are difficult. Whether they concern early Neolithic China (*Antiquity* 77: 31–44), southern Africa (*Antiquity* 77: 165–169) or Viking Sweden (see reviews in this volume), multi-disciplinary skills are necessary and an awareness of how treacherous words can be when deployed to describe a behaviour so elusive, as David Whitely and James Keyser show in our Debate section. Nevertheless, there will be many, including Tolkien fans, who will be grateful that archaeologists and their colleagues are tackling this most rewarding of topics – not magic realism, but the reality behind the magic.

More worries about the loss of academic expertise in museums – this time from Australia, where the process has acquired the sobriquet of ‘de-skilling’. The new National Museum which completed its first year of operation in 2002 was constructed without a library and had minimal historical, archaeological and environmental expertise on its Council, while its successful indigenous director Dawn Casey was given only one year’s extension; these being matters raised by John Mulvaney (Emeritus Professor of prehistory at the Australian National University) in the *Canberra Times* (11 December 2002). Published correspondence in the same newspaper went on to debate the definition of ‘historical expertise’. For some it necessarily requires the accreditation of the academic profession, but others find this ‘narrow’: historians who happen to operate in the political theatre should also be eligible and may have the advantage of knowing what the public want. Correspondent Jack Horner of Dickson felt that the National Museum’s director had been a great success: “... Dawn Casey has been responsible, at least to the million visitors in the museum’s first year, for its brilliant modern styles of display, the courteous staff, the relaxed, happy atmosphere and the careful way the national themes – the environment, white Australia and indigenous Australia have been integrated. Our social history is easy to understand at first visit. Ms Casey evidently has better and deeper knowledge of indigenous Australian history than the Government”.

It is clear that the job of any National Museum – exemplified by that in Edinburgh – ‘to present the world to Scotland and Scotland to the world’ – is highly vulnerable to the good intentions of those who want to give the tax-payers a fair deal. It is the job of academic archaeologists everywhere to convince governments that populist statements soon go out of date and that a carefully balanced, scientifically substantiated and adequately researched display – contradictions and all – means most to more people and so gives the best deal of all.

Martin Carver
York, 1 June 2003