

Ten years ago, looters ran wild through the Iraq National Museum. Then they moved on to ransack the country's unrivalled array of archaeological digs, flooding global antiquities markets with irreplaceable ancient artifacts. Now—finally—experts from Iraq and around the world are returning to the scene of the crime

PICKING UP THE

PIECES

BY CLEMENS REICHEL

After the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, The Iraq Museum—one of the world's most precious collections—was overrun by looters.

Photo: Shutterstock

Explore ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA in a major new exhibition at the ROM, opening June 2013



The pictures of the Iraqi national museum running on the evening news on April 12, 2003, told a shocking, heartbreaking story. It was a chronicle of empty, ransacked exhibition halls, smashed glass display cases strewn everywhere. In the midst of it, a woman dressed in black, crying, repeatedly saying in Arabic, “It’s all gone... they have taken *everything!*”

To someone like me, working in the field of Mesopotamian archaeology, these images were a worst nightmare come true. One of the world’s most precious collections had been looted, after the fall of Baghdad to U.S. and coalition forces. And, from initial eyewitness reports, we were to believe that everything had been stolen. The world’s most important Mesopotamian archaeological collection—170,000 artifacts—gone! My head was spinning as I tried to take in the full implication of this tragedy. What did this mean? And how could it happen? *Everything?*

For many decades, Iraq had been the focus for archaeologists from all over the world. Home to the ancient cultures of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, it had a well-funded antiquities service. By the mid-1960s a new national museum, with state-of-the-art installations and conservation equipment, was built in Baghdad. The problems began in the 1980s during the brutal Iran-Iraq

war, which made archaeological work difficult and dangerous. The next decade was even worse. Following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the Gulf War of 1991 meant the end of all foreign archaeological expeditions while an economic embargo forced the Department of Antiquities to shed employees.

While some looting occurred in Iraq’s provincial museums after the Gulf War, the consequences for Iraq’s archaeological sites were much more severe. Since the Second World War, Iraq had boasted a well-maintained system of inspectors and site guards to prevent significant looting of archaeological sites. As a result, unlike many neighbouring countries, Iraq had been able to prevent any large-scale illegal trade of its antiquities. With the war and the embargo, this situation changed dramatically. Economic hardship created an incentive for an increasingly desperate rural populace to loot archaeological sites. Without inspectors and guards, there was little that the antiquities services could do.

Aware of the stakes and with only limited resources, Iraq’s archaeologists set out to fight the looters in the only way left to them—they would carry out as many controlled excavations as quickly as they could. These operations, carried out with

A nightmare come true: In a power vacuum left by the crumbled Iraqi state and with no provisions set in place by invading forces, intruders pillaged The Iraq Museum at will for two days.

Photo: Getty Images



Collateral Damage: Looters in 2003 pillaging treasures at Isin, the site of an ancient city-state in southern Iraq dating to around 1900 BCE

minimal logistical support from central authorities, were dangerous. Often, archaeologists found themselves outgunned and were literally chased away by looters. One of them, Dr. Donny George Youkhanna (known to most everyone as “Donny George”), recounted to *Science* magazine’s Andrew Lawler how one day “a large force of some 50 to 70 looters appeared, and there was a full day of fighting between our government forces and the looters.... We had a dozen of our people injured and killed.” Following a physical attack on him (which required 14 stitches to his head), Donny George resorted to carrying a Kalashnikov rifle during his trips to southern Iraq.

Iraq’s political and economic woes eased somewhat after 2000. In early 2001, a multinational group of archaeologists visited Iraq to assess a possible resumption of archaeological work. Their efforts, however, were short-lived; with the World Trade Center attacks in September 2001, everything was once again at risk. Within the year it became increasingly clear that Iraq was in for another war.

Iraqi archaeologists fought the looters in the only way left to them —quickly carrying out as many excavations as they could

Remembering the danger posed to sites and museums during the 1991 Gulf War, archaeologists approached the U.S. Department of Defense. One of them, Dr. McGuire Gibson from the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute (my own teacher), provided a list with maps of 4,000 sites of archaeological and cultural significance. In a summary published in *Science* magazine in March 2003, right at the outset of the war, Gibson warned of the risk to archaeological sites in prospective combat zones and concluded that “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.”

Only three weeks later, following the fall of Baghdad on April 9, looters descended on the museum. In a power vacuum left by the crumbled Iraqi state and with no provisions set in place by invading forces, intruders pillaged at will for two days. News about the massive theft broke on April 11, when French and Australian journalists entered the building. The next day, the first devastating images became visible to a world audience.

Donny George, by then director of The Iraq Museum, became the televised face of Iraq’s archaeological community as it tried to deal with aftermath of the looting. Around the world, projects were launched at various universities and museums, aimed at recovering stolen artifacts. At the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute,



Eventually the missing Warka Vase, an iconic piece from ancient Iraq, was returned anonymously. Although in pieces (along ancient breaks) it has been possible to fully restore it.

where I worked at the time as a research associate, we launched an extensive web-based database of artifacts from the museum and we created IraqCrisis, a list server that provided any information we were able to gather on the status of Iraq's cultural heritage.

Some looted objects were returned, though exact tallies are as impossible to come by as the motivations for their return

By early May 2003, the story of the museum's looting was thrown into doubt. Some news reports now suggested that only 33, then 39 objects were actually missing. Others, including a BBC production, suggested greater losses but were now implicating museum officials in the thefts. (The accusations proved groundless.) Archaeologists who previously had expressed their outrage about the museum's looting now attracted ridicule and scorn for propagating what now looked like a fabricated story.

As the old saying goes, the first casualty of war is truth. In the case of The Iraq Museum, a parade of semi-truths reported prematurely created a misleading picture. The Iraq Museum was known to contain about 170,000 registered objects. When the photos of the looted, emptied museum galleries went around the world, the conclusion drawn by some was that all 170,000 artifacts must have been stolen. Logistically, it was clear from the beginning that this was impossible. Moving that many artifacts—some of them weighing several tons—within 48 hours would not have been possible even with an army of packers and conservators, let alone with a marauding group of disorganized looters. The figure of 39 missing artifacts however was equally misleading in that it was a list of key losses from the gallery exhibit alone. As everyone who has ever experienced the workings of a museum knows, however, the materials on exhibit represent only the tiniest fraction of its holdings. The question as to what had happened to The Iraq Museum's storage areas had yet to be answered.

International experts started to show up in Baghdad soon after the looting. By late April Dr. John Curtis, then head of the British Museum's West Asia section, had undertaken a first site visit, soon to be followed by a group of curators and conservators to further assess the extent of the damage. By mid-May a group of leading American archaeologists (including the University of Chicago's Gibson) went to Iraq under the auspices of UNESCO and the National Geographic Society to inspect the museum and to visit archaeological sites that were presumed to either have been damaged by warfare or by subsequent looting. It was around this time that Matthew Bogdanos, a district attorney from Manhattan and a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, was assigned to create a task force in Baghdad to tally up the losses caused by the museum looting.

The best sources of information, of course, were those Iraqi colleagues who had been at the museum before and during the museum looting. As Donny George recalled during a lecture at the ROM in September of that year (his first visit to North America after the Iraq War), they had tried to prepare for the impending war; any artifacts that were deemed movable were taken off display; the most valuable ones—such as the treasures from the Royal Cemetery of Ur and the gold treasures from Nimrud—were moved to a vault below the National Bank in Baghdad and so were spared.

The storage rooms at The Iraq Museum itself fared less well. Without electricity, amid the darkness and chaos of the ransacked basement, it took weeks to determine what was missing. By mid-June, it was clear that the looters had taken even more than had been feared. Among the losses was a large part of the museum's world-renowned cylinder seal collection—some 5,000 pieces. In August 2003, the Marine investigators presented the first detailed tallies of the losses, though over the subsequent three years the figures rose and fell. Today, the consensus is that some 15,000 artifacts were stolen from the museum.

Almost immediately after the looting some objects were returned. Exact figures and tallies are as impossible to come by as the motivations behind those returns. The fact that The Iraq Museum and its collection were a symbol of national pride that was above and beyond politics probably played no small part in this. In June 2003 the Warka Vase, one of the most iconic pieces from ancient Iraq (pictured in almost every book about ancient Mesopotamia) was returned anonymously. Although in pieces (along previous ancient breaks) it proved possible to fully restore it. The most iconic piece from ancient Sumer, the Warka Head, was retrieved in

October 2003. There were, however, irretrievable losses. The Iraq Museum's famous Gold Lyre from Ur (a companion piece to the Great Lyre of Ur in the Mesopotamia exhibit) had been stripped of its gold cover during the looting. While it may be possible to restore its appearance, it obviously will never be the same.

Unlike two decades ago, antiquities markets today are well “stocked” with stolen Mesopotamian artifacts—mostly from clandestine excavations

The looting of The Iraq Museum was devastating... and only a hint of much worse. Flyovers of archaeological sites in late 2003 by coalition helicopters showed that major archaeological sites literally had been “honeycombed” for artifacts: holes had been dug every few metres then connected by tunnels to ensure maximum artifact “extraction.” The loss of data as well is enormous: architectural remains are destroyed and artifacts are collected with no record of their context. Archaeological samples of tremendous scientific value (pottery, tools, animal bones, plant remains, or charcoal) are tossed aside since they have no “market value.” As a result, the archaeological history of Sumer, mostly explored at the beginning of the 20th century with inadequate techniques, will never be fully known.

By 2006, the security situation had so deteriorated that many archaeologists were forced to flee the country, including Donny George himself who left that summer for the United States, settling in as a visiting professor at Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York.

Not surprisingly, unlike two decades ago, today's antiquities market is well “stocked” with Mesopotamian artifacts—mostly cylinder seals and cuneiform texts written in Sumerian or Akkadian (i.e. Babylonian or Assyrian language). The fact that very few of them can be traced back to The Iraq Museum confirms that most of them originate from clandestine excavations. These items present law enforcement officials and archaeologists with considerable challenges: the origin of an illegally excavated artifact is difficult if not impossible to prove, and the burden of proof remains with the prosecution. While an artifact stolen from a museum usually was registered in some form during accession (which can be used as evidence in court), no such documentation exists for an illegally excavated artifact.

Still, a few bright spots did emerge during this period of general gloom and despair. One was the interest and dedication shown by numerous U.S. soldiers who contacted us, sent us photographs of seized antiquities, and even offered to check up on nearby archaeological sites—occasionally at great risk to them and not always with the approval of their superiors. The unusual alliance between scholars and common soldier—with these young men and women serving as our eyes and ears in the field—will remain one of the most remarkable memories of those days.

More recently, things have begun to improve. The gradual rebuilding of Iraq's antiquities service has curbed site lootings. The Iraq Museum had been repaired and its galleries refitted with the help of international expertise, though it has yet to be reopened permanently. Some 8,000 artifacts have been retrieved. Large



The Gold Lyre from Ur (shown here, before and after) was stripped of its gold cover during the looting. It will never be the same.



groups of young Iraqi archaeologists have been and are being trained in Iraqi and international training programs. Archaeologists gradually have been returning to Iraq with German, French, British, Italian, and North American universities and museums making plans to return. Though the losses incurred through museum and site lootings are irreplaceable, after more than 20 years, archaeological work in Iraq might finally return back to normal.

Fate, unfortunately, did not permit the one person to return who more than anyone was waiting for this chance: on March 11, 2011, Donny George died while visiting Toronto—a city to which he had developed a strong connection since his 2003 visit. The challenge remains for the rest of us to continue the work that for many years he had carried on with so much dedication. o

The blockbuster *Mesopotamia* opens at the ROM in June 2013, bringing to Toronto an extensive collection of the British Museum's extraordinary artifacts from Iraq's ancient cultures. Next year also marks the 10th anniversary of the looting of Iraq's national museum at the beginning of the 2003 Iraq War. Staff members of the Royal Ontario Museum are currently producing a special retrospective of the realities and devastation of years of nationwide looting and the consequences for Iraq's precious archaeological and cultural heritage.