

Antiquities under Siege

*Cultural Heritage Protection
after the Iraq War*

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Who Are the Looters at Archaeological Sites in Iraq?

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SITTING IN THE BACKSEAT OF THE JEEP, I WAS LOOKING OUT INTO THE DESERT, searching for Umma. I did not understand what the landscape in front of my eyes meant. I saw craters and mounds of sand but could not identify what they were. As we arrived, I saw young men sleeping under the trees. They got up and waved politely as they would when greeting people from the front door of their home. Then they turned and disappeared. When we stopped, I jumped out of the car to catch them and talk to them, but I fell. I was standing in what I refused to realize: I was surrounded by broken pottery, and I had fallen into a looter's dig. Umma was destroyed. Umma was looted. And I wanted to know who did that, and why.

That was in May 2003. The invasion had just ended. I returned to the same sites a year later, only to find out that extensive looting of archaeological sites in Iraq hadn't stopped. As of this writing in 2007, nothing has changed. Sumerian cities have been destroyed. The cradle of civilization is being emptied of humanity's history and treasures.

So who is to blame for this disaster? If the driving force behind the destruction of civilizations is the antiquities market, blame shouldn't fall on the people who are excavating the sites. But since the antiquities collectors are often seen as untouchable, the blame is likely to fall on the suppliers. Simple, isn't it? They are the looters, the "tomb raiders and temple thieves,"¹ the "vandals ransacking the sites,"² or "thieves that have done their work."³ And as is always mentioned, "The Iraqis did it. They did it to their own history, physically destroying the evidence of their own nation's thousands of years of civilization."⁴

The looters are accused of erasing their own history in their tireless search for artifacts. But this brings up a set of questions: Who are these looters whom we accuse of doing damage? Do they consider these monuments as their own heritage at all? My purpose here is not to defend or judge them, but to try to understand their motives. To do so, it is vital to understand their social and cultural background. Talking to a few of them while in southern Iraq gave me insight into their way of thinking. By discussing their responses with guards at archaeological sites, Iraqi journalists and intellectuals, and archaeologists working in Dhi Qar province—people such as Abdel Amir Hamadani and his team; Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, formerly of the Iraq Museum; Professor Jean-Louis Huot;⁵ and Professor McGuire Gibson of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago—and by reading the works of Pierre-Jean Luizard,⁶ I developed a better understanding of the situation.

It is common knowledge to say that living in the same age doesn't necessarily imply sharing the same values. In a way, rural society in southern Iraq is a different world than the one we live in—we perceive history and heritage differently. We look at southern Iraq as the cradle of civilization. Looters in the Sumerian desert do not know much about these ancient peoples. They see themselves as the "lords of this desert and owners of all its possessions."

We see in archaeological sites the heritage of mankind. Many Iraqi peasants see in them "fields full of pottery that you can dig up whenever you're broke," as Ahmad, one of the looters, said when asked about what he was doing. "We come here and dig. Sometimes we find a plate or a bowl that is broken, and then we cannot sell them. But perhaps, if you are lucky, you will find something with some writings on it."

The looters know, as they are told by the traders, that if an object is worth anything at all, it must have an inscription on it. A cylinder seal, a sculpture, or a cuneiform tablet can bring in hard cash. For this, they work all day, hoping to find an artifact that they can sell to the dealer for a mere few dollars. We consider looting dangerous work that is poorly paid. They consider their looting to be part of a normal working day. To them, there isn't much difference between working in the field or digging a site—it's all work. With some luck, the site is much more rewarding than the field. A cylinder seal or a cuneiform tablet earns \$50, and that's half the monthly salary of a regular government employee.

So who are these looters? Are they the declared culprits, driven by the greed of making a small fortune from the selling of the archaeological remains? There may be another side to consider. Most of them are simple peasants living in the villages close to the sites. In their fields they grow wheat, barley, and lentils. A few years ago, under the Baathist regime, they used to sell all their agricultural products to the government and get the cash needed for their families.

If the World Bank definition for the poverty line is anything to go by, all these people live well below it. However, in the social context of Iraq, they survive economically. Most of them are not starving. Agriculture provides for bare necessities, but they do not possess any sort of items that they may consider a luxury, not even running water. They live in mud-brick houses built around a central courtyard. Their houses are divided into rooms, one for each family.

In this society, individualism is an unexciting notion. The father is the leader of the group; his sons help him achieve the goals he sets for the entire family. When a son is married, if he has the financial ability, he can move to a house nearby. But this separation is superficial since he still blindly follows his father's decisions. This patriarchal scheme is a small prototype of the tribal system that today controls large parts of Iraq, especially in the south.

The house, or *bayt*, actually represents the first basic cell of the tribe, or the *qabila*. Eventually the sons will marry, enlarge the house, and form what is known as *al-fakhdh*, which is the union of all these families under the authority of one *shaykh*, whom they choose. The union of all the *fakhdh* creates the *ashira*, or the clan. It is led by one *shaykh*, the *shaykh al mashyakha* or the overall *shaykh*, who in consensus with the *shaykhs* of the *fakhdh* make the major decisions that involve all members of the clan. Decisions like going to war, establishing peace, banning habits, or following a religious leader are all made here.

The power of the *shaykh al mashyakha* must not be underestimated. Saddam Hussein, in a message addressed to them on March 25, 2003, asked them to use their weapons "because the enemy did not violate only Iraq but also their clans and tribes."⁷ Saddam knew what he was doing. When a *shaykh* refers to the power of his tribe, he would say (as one of them told me in April 2003 in Nasiriyah) "we represent one hundred thousand guns in this district. No one would dare touch a hair of one of our sons, because they know we will revenge them." And since dignity, honor, and loyalty are the rules of life in this part of the world, no one would dare to defy such a statement.

So, with the blessings of one of the *shaykhs* in the region, who ordered members of his clan to protect us, I went out to witness the looting of archaeological sites in 2003. We drove in a convoy of three cars. Each was equipped with machine guns and men who knew how to use them. We were told that the sites were guarded by armed looters who would fire on any "unfriendly" vehicle. But when the looters saw us coming with members of powerful tribes, they rapidly abandoned the site. Shapes of men carrying their shovels blended into the desert in the distance. In their silent language of power, they understood each other. And that's what makes the tribal system simultaneously so strong and dangerous. At times they are even more powerful than governmental institutions.

In 2004, when we returned to southern Iraq, we went again to Umma. This time we were escorted by a police unit. Sitting in the back of a truck, they sported their guns. When we arrived on the site they started firing over the heads of looters, who quickly fled. Yet they refused to go to visit the home of the *shaykh* of the local tribe. They were afraid of his reaction. In response, he came to them. With one car, he blocked the way. Then he gently stepped out of his vehicle and asked the lieutenant to do the same. Calm and composed and in a barely audible voice, the *shaykh* asked the police lieutenant to release his relatives who had been taken into custody a few days earlier when they were caught digging at Fara (ancient Shuruppak), an archaeological site near Umma. The lieutenant tried to tell him that he could not do so because they were looting an archaeological site and therefore they had to be imprisoned. That's when the *shaykh* put his hand gently on the lieutenant's shoulder and asked him to change the report and write that they were just working in their field growing barley. Then he left. When I asked the policeman what he intended to do, he replied that he will try to keep the *shaykh's* relatives imprisoned for a few more days, but he then had to release them. Otherwise, he would risk a direct confrontation between this tribe and his own. He had to compromise, and archaeology had to pay the price.

What is important to understand is that the *shaykh* did not ask him to release his relatives because he wanted them to loot the archaeological site. He knew that their work was illegal, and in normal circumstances he would have been helping the government assert law and order.

It is this kind of tribal support that the tribes gave archaeologists from 1998–2002, during archaeological site rescue operations in southern Iraq. At the time, archaeologists working for Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage were trying to stop looting by excavating archaeological sites and hiring the local peasants as workers. Tribal leaders gave them full support because they saw in this an economic benefit for their communities. But in the current situation and since coalition forces are not buying the farmer's agricultural products, forbidding people from looting archaeological sites would mean condemning them to starvation.

In the eyes of the looters, excavating an archaeological site is not a crime. Even in local police records looters are not written up as thieves, but as people digging for artifacts. This is because within a tribal society, to be called a thief is a tremendous insult. Everyone responds according to the rankings of his or her own values, and the looters' cultural backgrounds come from the tribes to which they belong.

Dignity and righteousness are essential ingredients for an honorable tribesman. Their cultural heritage is the legacy of Arab poetry. At night, religious stories are often told, as well as the stories of heroes and wars between

clans. They all know the legendary stories of their greatest hero, Antar Ibn Chaddad, but they have never heard of Gilgamesh. They are the descendants of the Arab tribes that settled in this land after the huge bedouin immigration of the late eighteenth century.⁸

People in southern Iraq feel that their allegiances go first to their own tribes, and therefore abide by the decisions of their *shaykhs*. In the rules of a tribe “members are equal no matter what their relationship is to the *shaykh* and the priority of decisions is for the benefit of the all the members of the clan.”⁹ Primarily for these reasons, people may not want to leave the tribal system completely and put their faith in a nation where they may become just another number and an ordinary, equal citizen with no real power or support. Besides, a nation may not satisfy their basic needs.

No individual can survive alone in the desert. Families sharing a common ancestry and centuries of knowledge can deal with the challenges of life. For them, there is no real kinship other than blood relation. A common saying—blood never becomes water—depicts exactly this. And this blood relation unites not only families, but also tribes and clans. Somehow they are all cousins; their origins can be traced back to one forefather. This is what binds them. Members of different tribes communicate almost nonverbally; they all know each other, and they know each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

Members of the tribe follow their *shaykh* more than anyone else, even when it comes to the choice of religious leaders. In the Shiite Muslim faith, any religious *shaykh* or *sayed*—a *shaykh* descended directly from the family of the prophet Muhammad—can make so-called fatwas, or religious edicts, that forbid or allow certain activities of followers. Since each group can choose its religious *shaykh*, people within that group become independent of leaders and decision-makers in the cities. So there’s a difference in the sense of belonging between Iraq’s urban and rural societies that stretches back to the eighteenth century and the migration of the bedouins. Urban societies in Iraq were never interested in the changes taking place in the desert or in the battles that tribes were launching against one another. The only link that existed between the two societies was an economic one, mainly to provide the necessary agricultural products.

The separation between the two worlds ended with the 1920 revolution, when both societies allied against British forces. However, this did not last long enough to give birth to social changes. The gap remained until the 1958 coup d’état and the birth of the Republic of Iraq. With Abdel-Karim Qassem, the prime minister of Iraq from 1958–1963, came the first “socialization” of the tribes through social reforms, and the maintenance of that system continued to form part of the plans of any government taking control in Baghdad until the Iraq war in 2003.

From 1958 to 1990, Iraq's understanding of its past changed. After centuries of decline, Baghdad was again the capital of culture in the Arab world. Its status was so great that people used to say that Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads. On the one hand, books were written about Iraq's history and the civilizations that lived in this land, and on the other, people showed real interest in knowing and preserving archaeological sites and visiting museums. The rise of this intellectual society was the beginning of the death of the tribal societies and their search for their history. The rich Baathist government was offering job opportunities for every Iraqi. The sense of Iraqi citizenship—and pride that Iraq was an emerging power in the region and a rich country that could provide its inhabitants with many forms of security and development—slowly deadened the need to be part of a tribe and to be dependent on the *shaykh's* authority, especially when people had paid allegiance to the *Rais* (Saddam Hussein) themselves. Life in the cities fascinated the peasants who were getting needed education in their schools where the history of Mesopotamia was taught.

Rural Iraq did not know any real law enforcement until after the revolution of 1958, and effectively only after the Baath Party took power. The Baathist government introduced measures to revive Iraq's rural areas, hoping to induce within the population a stronger notion of belonging to a wider group than the tribe and the clan. At the time, the Baath Party stressed the concept of citizenship and the importance of governmental laws.

The history of Mesopotamia had been taught in schools since the 1930s, and education was made obligatory for both boys and girls. However, before the Baathists this was not strictly enforced. Under Saddam, unfortunately, history lessons were greatly politicized. Saddam Hussein was represented as the modern-day version of Hammurabi, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and Saladin. Past civilizations were not only part of history; they now had an extension into modern, everyday life: one was made to feel Sumerian or Babylonian.

Since the 1958 revolution, looting of archaeological sites was a crime punishable by fine or imprisonment. This brought an end to the looting of antiquities. However, after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, following the looting of thirteen regional museums in the country, the antiquities trade was revived and looting began again in desert areas of southern Iraq.

Two factors influenced the rapid resumption of looting. One was Saddam's bloody suppression of the 1991 Shia uprising, which led to the complete alienation of the population and the UN's subsequent imposition on Iraq of a no-fly zone from the 33rd parallel southward. This no-fly zone deprived Saddam of control of the countryside and allowed for the revival of tribal power. The other was the impoverishment of the population by UN sanctions. The renewed plundering of archaeological sites became a sort of revenge against the

system. Peasants sought to destroy something dear to Saddam's heart, and at the same time they were making money. The antiquities market, as always, was there to take full advantage of people's ignorance, hatred, and suffering.

The sanctions regime created demand for black markets; it also created tribes that specialized in illicit trade. These tribes would deal in anything that could bring in cash, gradually targeting the attractive antiquities market. But Saddam, as a reaction to the revival of the looting and trade, introduced the death penalty in the 1990s as a revision of Iraqi antiquities laws. The penalty was carried out in some cases, but the government lacked the ability to halt the looting of sites in the southern countryside. Only occasionally could smugglers be apprehended along the unfenced borders of Iraq. So the digging and selling of antiquities became a relatively safe way to support cash-strapped families. Slowly but surely, looting archaeological sites transformed itself from a hobby into a profession. People started developing techniques for looting and began using heavy equipment. For those not involved with the smuggling of black market Iraqi oil, antiquities represented a good alternative. Whole tribes were living off of this illicit trade.

At the end of the 1990s, Saddam tried to regain the support of the tribes and clan leaders by giving them full control over the areas where their members lived. This resulted in a powerful resurrection of the tribal system. Saddam's government supported and funded programs to stop the looting of archaeological sites. It offered peasants regular jobs as workers for Iraqi archaeologists. The strategy worked, and the looting stopped. But with the beginning of the war in March 2003, the workers turned into professional diggers: they were able to be paid extra money for digging the sites because they knew how to excavate without breaking the objects. It is important to mention that since no "training" on the value of archaeological sites and antiquities were given to these workers, they did not see a problem in their "new job." They did not see the difference between an archaeological mission and the looting of a site. For them, in both cases it concerns objects that are looked for and are taken away, and whether these antiquities end up in a Baghdad museum located very far away from their homes or another one in the West, the equation is still the same. With time, the tribes of southern Iraq were becoming the "organized killers of civilization": a principle that the West had led them to decades before.

During the late nineteenth century, local tribesmen were aware of pottery and other artifacts in the mounds near their fields. Western explorers in the region at the time were discovering Sumerian civilization and showed interest in learning more about it by buying cuneiform tablets. Spurred by the foreign interest, the peasants began looting the site of Umma, which yielded thousands of cuneiform tablets that were sold in Baghdad. Until the government brought

a halt to the practice in the 1950s, the farmers would, from time to time, go to this and other mounds to dig for objects to sell. Looting could be compared to playing the lottery in our modern civilization: a little effort that might bring fortune. But with the recent expansion of the art and antiquities market and with the increasing demand for Sumerian artifacts, the scale of looting has changed, especially after in the aftermath of the Iraq war. What had started more than a century ago as the "tradition" to make extra money is developing today into the eradication of history.

As long as there is no other economic alternative, people will keep digging at archaeological sites. The objects found represent real revenues as long as the buyers are there, and those are constantly increasing since the trend of owning an archaeological object is growing by the day. Well-established antiquities shops and auction houses in the West are testimony to this.

As in the West, there is also a proverb in the Arab world that history always repeats itself, and one tends to refuse to see the difference in context between events. For anyone who believes this proverb, digging at an archaeological site under the Ottoman Empire and selling objects to European travelers or to the Turks is equivalent to an Iraqi living under American occupation selling objects to a dealer who will eventually sell it to a foreigner. So the questions that remain are why the world did not learn the lessons of history and to what extent are we all responsible for the industrial-scale looting of the archaeological sites and the loss of Mesopotamia.

NOTES

1. Luke Baker, "Archaeologists Mourn Plunder of Iraq's Treasures," Reuters, April 5, 2004.
2. Deborah K. Dietsch, "Robbing the Cradle of Civilization," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2005.
3. Robert Fisk, "Raiders of the Lost Iraq," *Independent [UK]*, June 3, 2003.
4. Fisk, "Raiders of the Lost Iraq."
5. Professor emeritus at the Sorbonne University and previous director of the IFAPO (Institut Francais de l'archéologie au Proche Orient), he was the head of the French mission excavating at Larsa in Iraq from the 1970s to 1990.
6. Middle East specialist and researcher at the French National Research Center (CNRS). His books on Iraq are considered a reference: *La formation de l'Irak contemporain* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002); *La question irakienne* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).
7. The full text of this appeal may be found at http://www.albasrah.net/maqalat_mukhtara/khetab_sdm_250303.htm.
8. Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain*, 65.
9. Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain*, 67.