

The Looting of the Iraq National Museum

Donny George is the former director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq and director general of the National Museum in Baghdad. He now teaches as a visiting professor at Stony Brook University in Stony Brook, New York. The following text, George's Convocation address for the 2008 CAA Annual Conference (read by Nada Shabout), has been edited for publication.

Roughly a year before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, I received information from a reliable source that people in England, including some referred to as “scholars,” were suggesting that the Iraqi people did not understand the value of the archaeological remains in Iraq, that they did not “deserve” them, and that the obvious consequence of this was that the material should be removed—stolen—from Iraq and taken to England. It was reported to me that one person had commented, “I’m waiting for the day that the American troops enter Baghdad. I will be with them and I will go to the Iraq museum and take what I want.” This, in part, is what happened in April 2003.

With the escalation of tension in early 2003, the museum received orders from the Ministry of Culture to assemble teams of men, women, and young people to defend the whole National Museum complex. These teams of between twenty-three and twenty-five individuals were subdivided into groups for first aid, fire prevention and control, and messengers; one group was even given Kalashnikovs to defend the museum compound. Rotas were set up to ensure that the museum compound was protected by these teams, each under the command of one of the director generals of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, at all times of the day and night. At the same time, partially as a result of the intelligence reported above and partly given the experience of looting that had followed the previous invasion of 1991, museum staff had busily removed and stored the majority of objects on display in the National Museum. The only things left in the galleries were objects too large and/or heavy to move, and some replicas.

I was supposed to be in charge of the team protecting the museum during the weekend of April 5–6, 2003. I had decided to move my family from our flat in the Jadiriah area of Baghdad to my parents’ house in Dorah, so we would be all together in one place. I could not get to the museum on Saturday because there was a fierce battle near the intersection of Al-Dorah, where American troops were entering Baghdad from Babylon, and Hilla, where troops were entering from the highway. On Sunday,

April 6, I managed to get to the museum, passing through the remains of the battle where I saw burnt-out Iraqi and American tanks, armored vehicles, cannons, and a variety of other vehicles. I hardly made it between those burnt vehicles as I reached Bayya’ and then the museum. Just over half my team also made it to the museum. Ten were missing, because by then roads leading to the center of the city were blocked. We stayed overnight in the museum, and I slept in my room on a couch.

It is worth mentioning here that on Sunday, Nawala al-Mutawalli, director general of museums, had come to Jaber Khalil’s room, where I was together with Jaber, who is chairman of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage; Muhammed Nabeeh Abdul Fattah, director general of administration; and the late Rabi’ Al-Qaisi, then director general of restoration. Rabi’ said that her brother-in-law was waiting for her outside, that her parents had gone to Ba’qooba, and that the rest of her family were waiting for her to leave. Jaber asked her if all museum doors were locked, and she replied that they were. He repeated the question, and again she responded that all museum doors were locked. Nawala gave the museum keys to Jaber. His final words to her were, “May God be with you.”

The next day, Monday, my team’s duty was finished but I stayed at the museum until after 2:00 PM. I then tried to return to my parents’ house despite the fierce fighting we could hear all around Baghdad. Leaving my large Nissan Patrol in the backyard of the museum, I took a small car—a Mitsubishi pickup—and began to drive home. I tried to reach the same intersection that had seen a battle the previous Saturday, but when I approached the intersection I saw that American troops had returned and occupied the main road—I therefore could not cross that intersection to get back to my family. As it was about 5:30 PM, I decided to head back to the museum. I arrived there and met Dakhel Majhool, director general of the Heritage Department, whose team was on duty. We were told that the minister of information and culture, Hamed Youssef Hammadi, had just arrived, and together we went to meet him at the front door of the museum. I asked the minister if he wanted to go inside but he declined, so we sat together at the main entrance of the building of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. We talked for about fifteen minutes, and he told us that Americans had bombed the Al-Sa’a Restaurant. I did not know at the time why this was so important, but afterward I learnt that it appeared that Saddam Hussein and a good number of his senior officers had been meeting there, and that he had escaped only a few minutes before the bombing. Other senior staff were also present at the museum entrance, including Jaber, Rabi’ Al-Qaisi, Mohammed Nabeeh, and Captain Jasem, who was in charge of museum security.

The minister left, and that evening I stayed at the museum with about ten or fifteen young men from the museum. I slept in my room again, but the next morning I was awoken at about 5:00 AM by the sound of huge blasts all over the area, very close to us. Most blasts came from the left side of the museum, where we learnt that American troops had arrived and captured the Ministry of Information building and, next door to it, the radio and television station building. That building is not more than four or five hundred meters from the museum. Then we heard fighting on the right side of the museum, where there is a large bus stop.

I was told that Jaber wanted to see me. I went to his room, where all the senior staff mentioned above had congregated except for Nawala, who had left Baghdad on Sunday, April 6. Jaber asked me what I was going to do—would I leave the building or stay? I responded that we should make a collective decision. Pressed for my personal opinion, I said that I would stay with the museum, that I could not leave it in such difficult times. The group asked if this was my final decision, and I reiterated that it was—100 percent. I was confident that as soon as the Americans occupied the whole area, the first thing they would do was to protect the museum. The meeting ended and, within a few minutes, Rabi', Mohammed Nabeeh, and Jasem slipped out the back door of the museum. We heard helicopter gun ships above us; fighting was still going in the area.

Jaber had decided to stay with me, as did Qasim Al-Basri, whose family lived in unreachable Basra. (He lived within the museum compound, along with one driver.) Everyone else had left. We had food and water to survive. Because Jaber had the keys to the museum cellars, we decided to go there, lock the doors, and wait. As we prepared to go into the museum, I left for my room to collect some biscuits. When I returned, Jaber said that we needed to leave the building quickly. Looking out a window, he pointed out—and I saw myself—about four or five militants, Iraqi militants with RPG-7s on their shoulders, firing grenades toward the left side of the museum at American tanks. It was clear that the museum could be caught in the crossfire of a battle, which is why Jaber decided we should leave immediately. We checked that the museum gate and door were blocked and locked, and that the main door of the State Board of Antiquities building was chained and locked. The four of us—Jaber, the driver, Qasim Al-Basri, and I—left through a back door, which we locked. We took the car I had used previously and drove to the eastern side of the River Tigris, with the intention of returning to the museum as soon as possible after everything had calmed down.

At about 3:00 PM the four of us decided to return to the museum. We started crossing the river at 17 July (or Medical City) Bridge, but as we reached the middle we met people and some cars coming from the other side, from the western

side, shouting and preventing us from crossing the bridge. The Americans, they said, had occupied the whole area, and nobody could move on that side. So we returned to the eastern side of the river again and went to the house of Rashid Ali Al-Qailani, which was being used as an ethnographic museum.

We debated what to do: it was clear that it was impossible to get back to the museum. Jaber could not go home because he lives in a part of Baghdad close to the Dorah area, which we knew to be completely occupied by American troops. He decided instead to go to his brother-in-law's house. I suggested that he take the car, as he wanted to check to see if his family was safe and then return. After an hour, the driver came back to me and said he had witnessed a battle close to Jaber's brother-in-law's house; in fact, the house next to it had been hit by a missile and almost completely destroyed. I was unsure where to go myself, as it was clear I could not reach my family in Dorah. I decided to go to my aunt's house, on the eastern side of the River Tigris. The driver took me there and then went home himself. Qasim Al-Basri stayed in the ethnographic museum, since he had nowhere else to go. I remained my aunt's house for all of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, listening to the news and trying to follow what was happening. On Friday I managed to see a friend of mine who had a car; he took me home to my family in Dorah, where some sense of calm had arrived. By this time I had been away from home for six days.

The next day, Saturday, my first day back home, I was listening to the evening news when I heard that the Iraqi Museum had been looted. I immediately decided to go the next morning to the American headquarters, which we knew from news reports was in the Palestine Hotel. That Saturday evening I called Jaber, and we agreed to go together. The next morning I took my car, collected Jaber, and drove to the Palestine Hotel. Normally it would only take half an hour from where I used to live to the hotel. On Sunday, April 13, it took us about three hours to reach not even the hotel but about a kilometer from it. I parked the car as close as I could, and we started walking. When we finally reached the hotel, we approached the main perimeter checkpoint, introduced ourselves and explained who we were, and requested to see somebody senior. They checked our IDs, searched us completely, and then let us through. When we reached the hotel entrance, we were stopped and checked again. Once more we explained who we were and that we wanted to see someone senior, but we were told to wait. Two hours passed until we were sent for. We were escorted to meet a Lt. Colonel Pete Zarcone from the American Marines. I asked him for help to protect the Iraq Museum. He asked me what I thought was a very strange question: Was there was anything left in the museum to protect? There was, I responded, and >



The National Museum in Baghdad, Iraq, in an undated photograph (photograph in the public domain)

we wanted him to organize its immediate protection. He accepted that this was an American responsibility and asked me to show him where the museum was on the map. I was surprised that these American troops had come to Baghdad and did not know the location of the National Museum. We showed him the museum on a map; he took the coordinates and told us that he would immediately send troops to protect it. He asked us if we were going back home or to the museum. After we said we were going to the museum, he gave us a letter for the checkpoints that would allow us to get to the museum compound.

At the museum, we found two employees at the main entrance: Mohsen, who lives in the museum compound; and Al'a Hussein. With them were two or three volunteers who I did not know but who were there to protect the museum. When I headed toward my office, Al'a asked me not to go. I insisted, and three or four times he shouted, "Please, Doctor, don't go to your room." I anticipated what I was going to find there: my room was an example of what had happened to every room in the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage building. Every door was smashed and full of holes. All the rooms were devastated. In my room every drawer had been emptied, and all my books, reports, and paperwork were on the floor in piles nearly two feet high. My desk was dismantled into three or four pieces, my computer was gone, and my safe, in which I had stored eight cameras, was destroyed completely—cameras gone. Even my coffee machine was taken.

I returned to the main gate, and Jaber and I went into the museum to check the galleries. Of course there was no electricity, so we walked into parts of the building lit by daylight. Our first discovery was that looters had broken through a window that we had blocked some years before. In one of the holes I found four glass cutters that looters had left behind. We walked to the Sumerian Gallery. I saw the showcase for the Warka Vase, one of the masterpieces of the museum, smashed on the floor. My heart at that time was pounding; three extremely important pieces were housed in that room: the Sumerian Stella of Lion Hunting, the Warka Vase, and the beautiful mask of the Warka Lady. At that moment I did not know anything about the Warka Lady, but Warka Vase was gone. The Sumerian Stella of Lion Hunting was still there because it was made of basalt on a steel base, which was too heavy to move easily. We went through the museum and saw damage everywhere. We discovered that the statue of Basitki from the Akkadian Gallery was gone; at the end of the Babylonian Gallery a number of terracotta lion statues had been smashed. In the Grand Assyrian Gallery, the statue of the Assyrian king Shlamanessar III was missing, another great loss. In the Hatra Galleries we found more tragedy: three

important marble statues had been smashed and their heads removed; the bronze head of Nike, the deity of victory, had also been taken.

After this brief tour of the galleries, we immediately blocked, with bricks and gypsum, the holes that looters had made through the first window we had seen as well as another small window between an Assyrian Gallery and the Babylonian Gallery in the new part of the museum. Then we went to the Hatrian Gallery, where we discovered that looters had broken into the cellars and the storerooms on the lower floor. They had gone through a small door from the Hatrian Gallery, which I myself had not known about.

According to Mohsen, who had been at the museum all this time, by midday on Thursday, April 10, about three to four hundred people had gathered at the front of the museum compound, outside on the street. They were all armed with hammers, crowbars, sticks, Kalashnikovs, daggers, and bayonets. After realizing they intended to enter the museum, he went to an American tank near the right side of the museum where, through an interpreter, he begged the Americans to move their tanks in front of the museum to protect it. The Americans in the tank radioed somewhere and said they were sorry but did not have permission to move. The crowd then entered the compound and the museum building, smashing the doors. First they came through a back door, and then they opened a small door in the front. People were inside the department building, coming and going from both the back and front doors, taking anything they wanted.

This looting continued for three days, Thursday to Saturday, April 10–12. On Sunday, I went with Jaber to the American headquarters and then returned to the museum. Sunday through Tuesday, April 13–15, were extremely hard days for us as we stood guard in front of the museum with sticks and clubs in our hands, trying to protect what was left inside. We could see looters roaming the premises, waiting to strike again. On one occasion, one of them waved a Kalashnikov at us, and we were afraid another large wave of looters would come. Our most pressing concern was that the mob would set fire to the whole building, as had happened to many other government buildings.

One development that helped us greatly was that on Sunday, April 13, at about midday, the media started to arrive. During the next few days, reporters from around the world descended on us once the news had spread about the looting

of the museum. I believe the media generally did an excellent job by exposing what had happened to the museum, by bringing to the attention of the whole world the humanitarian and cultural tragedy that had taken place. What we had in the museum—and in archaeological sites across Iraq—was not only Iraqi heritage but also the heritage of humankind that we held in trust. It was this global heritage that was looted, disturbed, and smashed—that is a great loss to all humankind. There were, however, some misunderstandings by the media. The biggest of these was, in one of those early days, when a reporter asked me about the amount of material in the Iraq Museum. I said we had over 170,000 objects, which was taken to mean over 170,000 objects were missing from the museum. Everybody wanted to know how much had been looted from the museum. During those early days, of course, we could not give precise numbers because we had to check the storerooms, look through all the shelves, and search all the boxes. After a few months, we estimated with some degree of certainty that over 15,000 objects were missing from the museum.

On Tuesday, April 15, people from the UK's Channel 4 visited a second time and asked me if I wanted to talk to John Curtis, keeper of the Middle East collections at the British Museum. I said "of course" but had no idea how it would be possible. They had a satellite phone with them, something I had never seen before, and contacted Curtis immediately. I told him what had happened to the museum and about my fears of another wave of looting. My biggest fear was still that the mob would set fire to the museum. We are doing everything we could in Baghdad, I told him, and pleaded with him to do something. He said he would do everything he could. At 7:30 AM the next morning, Wednesday, April 16, American tanks surrounded the entire museum compound and allayed any fears about further looting, vandalism, and arson.

I learned later, when I traveled to London for a meeting on April 29, that just after I had talked to Curtis he went to Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, and repeated to him what I said. Immediately MacGregor telephoned Tessa Jowell, the British secretary of state for culture, media, and sport. She, apparently, immediately contacted 10 Downing Street and asked Tony Blair to do something at once for the Iraq Museum. I learned that the Pentagon and the US State Department had been contacted, and that immediate orders were given to deploy forces to protect the museum.

Once the museum was protected, we were able to take stock. It quickly became clear that many looters originated from the area immediately surrounding the museum. We went to mosques in the area and asked them to start preaching to the

people about the looted antiquities, explaining that they were the heritage of all Iraqis, that they should not have been stolen in this way, and that they should be returned to the museum. Within a few days people started bringing objects to these mosques. Among these returned objects were some important ivories.

One day, in the period after the looting but before the museum was protected by the American military, two young Iraqi men asked to speak with Jaber and me. When we met them, they asked to speak to us in private. They told us that they had been in the museum during the looting. They felt sorry about what was happening but could not do anything because most looters were armed. The two men decided to take objects from the museum to their houses for safekeeping—and to return them as soon as possible after they saw that the museum had been secured. They told us not to ask for their names or addresses but rather to depend on their word of honor. We thanked them and accepted their word of honor, and they left. A few days later, when American troops were living within the museum compound, someone told me about people outside the main gate who wanted to deliver antiquities. When I went out there, I saw the same young men who had come earlier. I let their car into the compound, and they returned nine important objects they had taken from the galleries. Among them was the aforementioned statue of the Assyrian king Shalmanesser III. It had been knocked down from its base onto the floor, they said, and had broke into five pieces, which they collected and took to their house. They returned a relief made of bronze from the Sumerian Early Dynastic period, which had been originally found in Tell Al-Ubaid, in the southern part of the country.

These young men epitomized the positive side of the Iraqi people. When they brought the antiquities back to the museum, I began to feel that, because such honest people were around, everything would turn out all right, that we would have many stolen objects returned. At the same time, I was fearful that some objects had already been taken out of the country, and these fears have since been realized. Fortunately, many objects have been returned: more than 4,000 objects taken from the museum, and more than 17,000 objects looted from archaeological sites.

In the weeks and months that followed, we received help from all over the world, including additional checking at airports and known crossing points and at official borders. There is now good information that American authorities have recovered over 2,000 objects from within the US, and that Jordanian authorities have recovered over 2,000 objects in Jordan and along the border. (These are now in the safekeeping of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.) Arrangements to have them returned to the Iraq Museum were underway when I left the country in

September 2006, but these are still to be returned. We also have information on what has been seized officially in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Unfortunately we have had no information if other countries bordering Iraq have seized any antiquities: nothing from Iran nor Turkey. More positively, from outside the region, I understand that 250 objects were found in Switzerland and that more than 100 clay tablets were recovered by the Italian Carabinieri in Genoa. More recently, we received information that additional clay tablets were seized in Spain. I hope all these works can be returned as quickly as possible to the Iraq Museum, as soon as the security situation permits.

The Iraq Museum holds an important place within Iraqi culture, receiving huge support from around the world. In the US, private donors, institutions, and the State Department are all helping the museum to get back where it was before the looting, or even better. UNESCO is coordinating a huge number of projects with money coming from donors in Europe and Japan. In addition, individual countries elsewhere are helping the museum. Many projects relate to physical infrastructure—for example, the replacement of the museum's lighting system, special cupboards for storing clay tablets, and the donation of books—but much support has come in the form of opportunities for educating and training our staff. Twenty-three young Iraqi archaeologists are going to the US for short courses, and another fifteen to France. Six have been offered places to study for their master's degrees in New York. (Germany arranged for the provision of four PhD scholarships at the University of Heidelberg, though this has since been canceled.) In all, approximately 300 staff members of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage were trained outside the country in 2004, and over 360 more in 2005.

The Iraq Museum had never had such a level of support in its entire existence. We do thank all these people, countries, and institutions for their support. I am sure the time will come when the generosity shown can be repaid, perhaps when the Iraq Museum becomes one of the best museums in the world and a place where people can come visit and wonder.

The following sections were not read at Convocation but appear in print here.

LOOTERS, GOVERNMENTS: WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Who were the people who looted the Iraq and other museums in 2003? Who looted, and who continues to loot, archaeological sites across the country as I write in 2007? What follows is based mostly on my personal experience of thirty years of working in the field and in the headquarters of the State Board of

Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq. It is not my intention or role to blame the foreign forces that occupied Iraq after April 2003; nor do I blame antiquities dealers outside the country, in Europe or the US; and nor do I blame Iraq's neighboring countries. These roles are already known. Rather, I delve into the economical, educational, and political systems of Iraq to search for reasons that led to the large-scale looting of museums and archaeological sites.

POLITICS

Since the Second World War, Iraq has experienced many changes in politics, the economy, and education, all affected by wider changes in systems used to rule the country, from monarchy to republic to dictatorship. Some governments followed Western ideas; others, Eastern ones. From the first revolution of 1958, again in 1963, and once again in 1968, each recent revolution introduced different ideas and ideologies—Communism, Arab nationalism, and Arab Ba'athist ideology—that were imposed on the Iraqi people without considering their needs, thoughts, or ambitions. The Iraqi population had always been told that its wealth was for the Arab nation first, second for those who governed and their families, then the military, and lastly the people. The population accepted this political hierarchy while the government was strong. However, an awareness that the people came last in the minds of the governing elite, that the general population was the last to be taken care of, led to an understanding that it was acceptable, when possible, to take things from the government. In other words, it was socially acceptable for people to steal government property. No one was educated that what the government had was, in fact, the wealth of the people, administered and protected on their behalf. In this way, contents of museums and archaeological sites, especially those protected by guards paid by the government, were considered the property of the government, just like contents of any other government office or building. Consequently it was completely reasonable to take these artifacts, just as people were taking—looting—from other government institutions and offices.

EDUCATION

The educational system in Iraq comprises twelve years of study in three stages: elementary (six years), intermediate (three years), and secondary (three years); some young people go on to a university. Most children start the elementary stage at age six. Within this system, Iraqi pupils began to study history in the fifth year of the elementary stage, that is, when they are ten years old. They continue studying history until they finish high

school, for a total of eight years. The history syllabus is centrally controlled, and pupils first explore the history of the Arabs before Islam, followed by the history of Islam. This content is then enlarged, expanded, and repeated in following years.

One year is dedicated to European history (mainly German and Italian), and another, the first year of the intermediate stage, is dedicated to ancient Mesopotamian history, which means that children study Mesopotamian history when they are twelve years old. This is the only opportunity that pupils have to study ancient Mesopotamian history. Imagine children of twelve being stuffed with all this new information on ancient Mesopotamia: new names of sites and cities, kings, and a few pictures of antiquities and sites. Everything is completely new to them, as if this is the history of a civilization that comes from outer space. They are taught about it, just for one year, before it stops; most pupils forget about it completely, because they study only to pass the end-of-year examination. Even more problematic is that even this part of the syllabus was only added in the last twenty years. Before then, almost no reference to ancient Mesopotamia was made in the school curriculum.

As people working in the field of Mesopotamian history and archaeology, in the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and in the universities, we worked hard for many years with the Ministry of Education to expand the study of Mesopotamian history and archaeology. With at least three years in the intermediate stage, pupils could be taught about this past more gradually and over a longer period of time, in an attempt to produce students who would be more open-minded when they finished the intermediate stage at age fifteen. All this effort—talking to individuals, working through special joint committees, always at our request—served for nothing, as the Ministry of Education never accepted our suggestions.

As a result of our efforts, however, we did manage to have pupils visit both the National Museum in Baghdad and regional museums in the major provincial cities in large numbers (only two provinces, Kerbala' and Samawa, had no museum). In this way, many children in Iraq were exposed to real antiquities. Our primary aim here was to educate pupils ourselves, supplementing the limited exposure to the Mesopotamian material they received at school. However, these visits could achieve only so much because most students visited once and never returned with their families.

ECONOMY

With its oil and other mineral resources, water, fertile land, and large working population, Iraq is one of the richest countries in

the world. But, as noted above, only a fraction of these resources were allocated for the welfare of the general population. Taking the example of oil: most oil revenue was spent on the military, palaces, and the president's family. Less than 5 percent of oil revenue, it has been suggested, reached the people of Iraq, meaning fewer initiatives in education, health, or agriculture. Given that the majority of the Iraqi population depends on farming to support their families, the failure to supply regular, safe, and secure water for arable and pasture agriculture was critical, especially for those communities in the southern parts of the country.

This economic failure produced something impossible to imagine in such a rich country: a high level of acute poverty and starvation. During an excavation at Um Al-Agareb near Al-Rifai', I noticed that a worker was moving very slowly. The foreman told me that this man, his wife, and three children had not eaten for four days because he had nothing to plant, no money, and no supplies left at home. This family was lucky, as we were able to help them.

Now imagine this man in such a situation, living beside an archaeological tell, with no excavation team there to help him feed his family. It would be only natural that he would dig and sell whatever he could find in order to feed his family, especially given the lack of education as described above. But this was not the case of one family only but rather of hundreds of families, especially in southern parts of the country. Considering the ease of selling the things they find to get easy money to feed their families, it is not surprising they continue to loot archaeological sites, especially when there is no protection.

If we start to consider the issues mentioned above—the huge gap between the people and the government; the extreme lack of awareness of the importance and cultural value of the ancient Mesopotamian past by the majority of the people, especially in the southern part of the country; and the impossible individual economic situation and the grinding poverty of the whole community—these factors combine to create a highly volatile situation. In such a situation it is perfectly understandable that large-scale looting can happen at any time, unless the country is controlled by a strong police force. Even this can never be enough—or the best solution—for a country like Iraq, with over twelve thousand archaeological sites.

Given this context, it must be asked where the real blame lies for the mass looting of museums and archaeological sites in Iraq? I do not present excuses for the people of Iraq who looted but provide the real reasons that led them to do what they did. ■