



## The Sack of Mesopotamia

What follows is dedicated to a forgotten and lowly Spanish soldier who risked his life to save the Alhambra. The year was 1812, when Napoleonic troops occupying Grenada evacuated the Alhambra, the noble hilltop palace they had used as a fort. Having failed to reform an incorrigible people, and having already demolished two of the Alhambra's towers, the French commander ordered the palace's demolition. Explosives were planted, and one of Islam's architectural jewels would have ended as rubble but for the brave deed of an unsung soldier who cut the hissing fuse.

The soldier's spirit is sorely needed in Iraq. Not only has an American-led occupation failed to protect the many museums and archaeological sites in Iraq, but the pace of looting has accelerated. Regrettably, too little has been made of wholesale pillaging in what was once called Mesopotamia, or Land Between the Rivers, the renowned cradle of what we presume to call civilization. It is scarcely an overstatement to say Iraq is experiencing the wanton plunder of art and artifacts on a scale reminiscent of the scandalous sack of Orthodox Christian Constantinople by Latin Christians during the Fourth Crusade. In Iraq's case, however, the real culprits are not avaricious warriors but the buyers and sellers of undocumented antiquities in a grey market that provides the essential incentive for looters.

Here I must confess a personal interest. Three decades ago, as a reporter at large for the *New Yorker*, I traveled widely through Europe and Latin America to learn firsthand about the international illicit trade in antiquities. The resulting three-part series formed the core of *The Plundered Past* (1973), a pioneering study of the grey market in looted artifacts. My most troubling discovery was the texture of collusion binding peasant pot-hunters (*tombaroli* in graphic Italian) to a network of dealers, collectors, auction houses and some scholars, curators, and museum directors, each having a plausible-sounding excuse for involvement in the illicit traffic. The two commonest rationalizations were: "If I don't buy, somebody else will," and "Seen correctly, we are actually *preserving* great works for posterity."

As archaeologists are quick to respond, these alibis amount to condoning the physical devastation of unexcavated or partially excavated sites, which obliterates the all-important context of finds. The consequent loss of provenance turns artifacts into orphans whose paternity and authenticity are clouded by doubts. These hoary arguments took on fresh life in the 1990s after the Soviet empire collapsed and the rise of a market-oriented China opened long-forbidden lands to the antiquities traffic. One would like to report that despite new temptations, museum boards have become more scrupulous, that UNESCO conventions on cultural property have proved effective, and therefore that the scope and intensity of looting has diminished. With honorable exceptions, the reverse is nearer the truth. So widespread is the pillaging of museums, religious shrines, and lands rich in artifacts that this new century could witness the irreversible erasure of what's left of our buried past.

### *The Case of Iraq*

Few places offer greater temptations to collectors, dealers, and museums than Iraq, which can be likened to a vast archaeological dig with a country attached. Uniquely, Iraq's soil

contains the ruins of five millennia of continuous urban culture. The result is evident in the thousands of hillocks that adorn the mostly level landscape; each is an entombed city. On January 24, 2003, on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom, a delegation of scholars tried to acquaint the Pentagon of the implications. What happened is recalled by an authority on Mesopotamia, McGuire Gibson of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago (full text accessible on the invaluable website of *Archaeology* magazine: [www.archaeology.org](http://www.archaeology.org)):

We pointed out the importance of Mesopotamia. It's not just a desert.... It's the place where civilization began.... We also talked about the great number of sites in Iraq, that every hill in southern Iraq is artificial.... And I told them we could supply them with the exact coordinates of several thousand sites. I was able to deliver, I think it was the next day, a list of 4,000 sites. We later sent another 1,000. I know they put those into their computers, into their mapping systems. And I know they made an effort not to destroy sites.... I [also] made the point the [Baghdad] museum was the single most important archaeological location in the country, and they said we are aware of it and it would be heavily safeguarded and it won't be targeted.

The visiting scholars also pointed out that after the first Gulf war, regional museums were sacked and sites plundered, so that a sequel was to be expected. So what went wrong? Gibson's explanation is the most charitable: "I think it had to do with the fact that they just had too few troops on the ground." Indisputably, the sacking of the Baghdad museum dramatized the vulnerability of Iraqi artifacts, but to no avail. Stung and embarrassed, administration defenders made much of the fact that initial reports claimed that looters grabbed 170,000 items, an erroneous, inflated figure. But undeniably, the museum's prize collection of cuneiform tablets was rifled, and holdings like the incomparable Sumerian harp were wantonly stripped of their gold leaf. What happened next is described by Abdul Amir Hamadani, the Iraqi digger responsible for the artifact-rich district of Nasiriya (the full text of Joanne Farchakh's important report can be found on the website of the Lebanon *Daily Star*: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb>):

A cylinder seal or cuneiform table brings in under \$50 on the site for the looter from the dealer. The dealer then sells them at ten times the price. More than 100 Sumerian cities [circa 2500 B.C.] have been destroyed by the looters since the beginning of the war. It's a disaster that we are all keeping watch on but about which we can do little. We are incapable of stopping the looting. We are five archaeologists, some hundred guards, and occasionally a couple of policemen—and they are a million armed looters, backed by their tribes and dealers. We are in danger every time we go on a tour to an archaeological site. A couple of weeks ago, while on site, six vehicles surrounded our cars and we were shot at. After that, we were assured that the next time, we would be killed.

And who or what is to blame? Certainly not impoverished looters who mine the soil out of primal need. Nor are coalition occupying forces primarily culpable, since they are stretched thin protecting living Iraqis, much less past remains. The disheartening answer is spelled out by Zainab Bahrani, the Edith Porada Associate Professor of the Ancient Near East at Columbia University (the full text can be found in the indispensable *IFAR Journal* published by the New York-based International Foundation for Art Research, which regu-

larly compiles a stolen art alert and maintains an authoritative website at <http://www.ifar.org>): “The plundering of sites, which has reached an extent previously unimagined in Iraq, is spurred on by the fact that the looters are able to sell their plunder very easily. The primary market is not Iraq; it is in the United States, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. After the 2003 war, a United Nations resolution banning the trade in Iraqi antiquities was passed, but objects continue to appear outside Iraq.”

Which states the matter very mildly.

### *The True Culprits*

And which brings us back to the unsung Spanish soldier who saved the Alhambra in 1812. It is a revealing paradox that over and over again ordinary people and humble museum personnel have taken great risks in preserving art and artifacts while their supposedly educated betters either do nothing or become active accessories to looting.

Thus in occupied Paris during World War II, a low-ranking Louvre curator kept track of treasures stolen from French museums and exported to adorn Adolf Hitler's fantasy museum in Linz, the fleshier nudes going to the overweight Luftwaffe chief, Hermann Goering. In the war's final days, the Führer or his lieutenants, in a spasm of barbarous spite, ordered the destruction of Nazi-looted art in scattered salt mines in Germany and Austria; the order was thwarted by humbler underlings. And when Italy's Monte Casino became an Allied target, the abbey's most precious art was transported to safety by German officers who falsely claimed they were a gift to Goering. In any fair reckoning of looting in that conflict, dealers, collectors, art historians, and museum directors either collaborated with occupiers or for the most part took as few risks as possible. (An exception were the museum men on the U.S. Army's Monuments and Fine Arts Commission who successfully campaigned against U.S. confiscation of Germany's art treasures, in contrast with the Soviet looting of everything from the gold of Troy to the Pergamum Altar.) And in the same tradition, lesser keepers of the national museum in Kabul stored archaeological treasures in hiding places to avoid their destruction by the Taliban regime.

The final chapter in the sack of Mesopotamia has yet to be written. How splendid if President Bush personally appealed to American dealers and collectors to abide by various Hague conventions and Security Council resolutions and abstained, just this once, from fueling the trashing of Iraq's past. Such a gesture would astonish everybody, including me. ●

—Karl E. Meyer

### *Correction*

In an error for which the above-signed is responsible, the Coda in our last issue erroneously reported that Iran's population was an impossible 170 million. Around 70 million is nearer the mark; thanks and my blushes to readers who spotted the mistake.