

IRAQ MUSEUM INVESTIGATION: 22APR-8SEP03

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In mid-April of this year, it was widely reported that over 170,000 ancient artifacts had been stolen or looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. After fierce fighting, U.S. forces finally secured the area surrounding the museum, and on 16 April, a tank platoon was positioned on the museum grounds to prevent any further damage.

The U.S. government then dispatched a 13-member team from U.S. Central Command, consisting of selected military personnel from the Joint Inter-Agency Coordination Group and agents from the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, to investigate the theft and to begin the recovery of the missing artifacts.

On 16 May, this team issued a preliminary report on the extent of the losses and the status of the investigation. Issued less than one month into the investigation, it necessarily raised as many questions as it posed answers. The goal of this report is to attempt to answer as many of those questions as possible.

From the outset, the primary goal has been the return of these antiquities to the Iraqi people, not criminal prosecution. The methodology was tailored accordingly and comprised four components. First, identify what was missing from the museum.

Second, disseminate photographs and descriptions to the international law-enforcement and art communities to aid interdiction and confiscation. Third, initiate community outreach with religious and community leaders and enlist the media's aid promoting an amnesty program for anyone returning antiquities. And fourth, develop leads on stolen property and conduct raids on that information. Each of these four components has had its own challenges and successes.

Foremost among the challenges has been identifying exactly what is missing. In part, this is because of the sheer size of the museum's collection and because the museum's storage rooms contained not only catalogued items, but also items from various excavation sites that had not yet been catalogued. Problems were also created by the museum's manual and incomplete record-keeping system. Indeed, after almost 5 months, the inventory is still not completed. This, coupled with the many different locations used to store the museum's treasures over the last fifteen years, has transformed an otherwise straightforward task into one of Herculean difficulty. Nonetheless, inventories continue to be compiled and eventually will be completed with the help of Italian, American, and British archeologists and museum specialists.

The second component to the investigation, that of disseminating photographs of the missing items, has also proven

problematic. In many cases, photographs simply did not exist. Or if they did, they were either of poor quality or destroyed during the looting. Nonetheless, photographs and descriptions have been disseminated internationally—if not of the actual artifact, at least of a similar or virtually identical item—to educate and assist law enforcement authorities. The team has also traveled to Kuwait, Jordan, London, and New York to provide detailed briefings on the investigation, sharing all our findings with Interpol, Scotland Yard, Italian Carabinieri, FBI, and the US Attorney's Offices for New York and New Jersey.

The third component, and really the heart of the investigation so far, has been the amnesty or "no questions asked" policy. Toward this end, the team has met with local Imams and community leaders who have assisted the investigation by communicating this policy to the Iraqi public. While it has proven enormously successful—over 1,700 antiquities have been returned so far—there have been challenges here as well. Specifically, the team had to struggle initially with the perception among the Iraqi people of the museum's association with the former regime and with the Ba'ath Party. While this impression among Iraqis has lessened over time, especially after the departure of one of the museum's directors, concerns do remain.

The fourth and final component of the investigation, involving raids and seizures, has also born fruit. Investigative raids on targeted locations in Iraq have resulted in the recovery of over 900 artifacts. This would not have been possible without the overwhelming support received from, and the mutual sense of trust developed with, the Iraqi people in and around Baghdad. Seizures conducted at checkpoints, airports, and international border crossings have been equally successful. Largely as a result of the dissemination of photographs and descriptions of the missing artifacts and the publicity the theft has received, law enforcement has seized over 750 artifacts, with ongoing investigations in four different countries.

Turning now to the chronology of events, we now know that years before IRAQI FREEDOM most of the gold and jewelry kept at the museum was removed in 21 boxes to two separate underground vaults of the Central Bank of Iraq. 16 boxes containing 6,744 pieces of jewelry from the Royal Family Collection were placed in one vault in the Central Bank's old building, while 5 boxes containing the fabled Treasure of Nimrud and the golden bull's head of the Golden Harp of Ur were placed in a vault in the Central Bank's new building.

The vaults themselves were flooded prior to the team's arrival in Baghdad, but with the assistance of Mr. Jason

Williams and his National Geographic crew, and three weeks of pumping to remove the water, the vaults were finally opened. In a moment that can only be characterized as pure joy, all of the boxes were inspected and all of their contents, including the Treasure of Nimrud, were there. A month later, on 3 July, they were placed on display during the museum's one-day opening.

Months before the war, the staff moved 337 boxes containing the museum's 39,453 ancient books, Islamic manuscripts, and scrolls to a bomb shelter in Western Baghdad. On 26 April, the team located the boxes and attempted to return them to the museum. Although local residents were appreciative of U.S. efforts in protecting the items, they expressed concerns about returning them to the museum because of the museum's perceived identification with the Ba'ath Party. After meeting with community leaders who said they would protect the boxes until a new government was instituted, the team received inventories for the boxes and agreed to leave them locked in the shelter, protected by a 24-hour neighborhood watch.

Weeks before the war, the staff moved 179 boxes containing 8,366 artifacts, mostly from the display cases in the public galleries, to a secret storage area used by the staff since 1990. Its location was known only to a select few museum officials who had vowed not to divulge its location until a new government in Iraq was established and U.S. forces left the

country. After weeks of building trust, the team was given access to that secret area on 4 June and confirmed the presence of all 179 boxes and their contents. They remain in storage, to be returned to the gallery floor once the museum is opened and the necessary security is established.

As for the looting period, the evidence shows the following. On 8 April, the last of the staff left the museum. U.S. forces then became engaged in intense combat with Iraqi forces that fought from the museum grounds and from a nearby Special Republican Guard compound. It was during this period that the looting took place, ending by 12 April when some staff returned. The keys to the museum, previously locked away in a Director's safe, have never been found. U.S. forces entered the compound on 16 April and the investigation began on 22 April.

Regarding the losses, it must be stressed that the loss of a single piece of mankind's shared history is a tragedy. But it is clear that the originally reported number of 170,000 was simply wrong. It is equally clear that numbers cannot possibly tell the whole story. Nor should they be the sole determinant used to assess the extent of either the damage done or the recovery achieved. For example, it is impossible to quantify the loss of one of the world's first known marble masks, in this case the mask of a Sumerian female deity or priestess from Warka. On the other hand, a single clay pot recovered at an

archeological site in 25 pieces may—depending on the circumstances under which it was recovered—be catalogued and inventoried as 25 separate pieces. Similarly, each single bead, pin, pottery shard, or piece of ivory, shell, or clay would also be counted as a separate number. Thus, nothing could be more misleading than to use numbers as the only metric. Used appropriately, however, they do offer some quantifiable measure and are as follows.

In the administrative area, all offices were ransacked, equipment stolen, and safes emptied. Indeed, damage in the administrative area far exceeds that seen in the museum.

In the public galleries, the staff had previously emptied all of the display cases. Thus, of the 451 display cases in the galleries, only 28 were broken. Most artifacts had been moved by the staff to other locations; while larger statues, steles, and friezes were left on the gallery floor covered with foam padding or laid on their sides surrounded by sand bags. From the galleries, 40 pieces or exhibits were stolen, most notably the Bassetki Statue (from 2300 B.C.) and the roman heads of Poseidon, Apollo, Nike, and Eros.

Of the original 40 missing items, 10 have been recovered, including the Sacred Vase of Warka, an exquisite white limestone votive vase dating from approximately 3200 B.C. and arguably the most significant artifact possessed by the museum. While it was

damaged during the looting, it should be noted that when the vase was returned on 11 June, it was in exactly the same condition as when it was recovered by German archaeologists at al Samawa in 1940 and subsequently restored. In other words, there was no new damage to the vase, and it will be restored. Also recovered were one of the oldest known bronze relief bulls, two pottery jars from the sixth millennium B.C., and one of the earliest known Sumerian statues. Unfortunately, 30 exhibits are still missing from the main gallery and they are some of the most historically significant pieces possessed by the museum.

Another 16 pieces were damaged, notably the Golden Harp of Ur—although its golden bull's head had previously been removed to the bank vault and is now safe. A dozen clay pots lining the corridors were also damaged. According to the staff, all damaged pieces are capable of being restored.

In the Heritage Room, consisting of more recent scrolls and Islamic antique furniture and fine porcelain, 236 pieces were stolen. To date, 164 of these items have already been recovered, leaving 72 pieces still missing.

Another 199 smaller pottery pieces, metal tools, and beads were also stolen from boxes contained in the restoration and registration rooms that were also used as temporary storage areas. 118 of those have been recovered, with 81 still missing. It was here that the Golden Harp of Ur and several delicate

ivories were kept and subsequently damaged.

The museum also has 8 storage rooms. Only 5 were entered, and only 3 had anything missing. Because these rooms contain tens of thousands of clay pots, pottery shards, copper and bronze weapons and tools, statuettes, and the like from museum-sponsored and individually-registered excavation sites, a complete inventory of items missing from these rooms will take more time. We have, however, made some findings based on the current inventory.

The first and second-level storage rooms were looted, but show no signs of forced entry on their shared exterior steel doors, either on the door leading from the museum floor to the storage area or on the door leading from the storage area to the back alleyway. The keys to these doors were last seen in the Director's safe and are now missing. Some shelves were disturbed and many boxes turned upside down, their contents emptied on the floor. In these two storage rooms, 2703 excavation-site pieces (jars, vessels, pottery shards, statuettes, etc.) were stolen, of which 2449 have been recovered and 254 remain missing. Several dozen clay pots were also broken and strewn about the floor.

It was in the second-floor storage room the investigation discovered evidence of use as a firing position. The team found a window-slit broken open from the inside with boxes against the

wall placing the window opening at shooter's height. This particular window is one of only two that affords a clear field of fire onto the street that runs along the western side of the museum. Found near this window were RPG parts, an ammunition box, an AK-47 magazine & grenade pouch, and a dud grenade.

This is consistent with the discovery of a box of RPG's on the roof of the museum library and another box of RPG's on the roof of the Children's Museum. The latter—the Children's Museum—was the building from which RPG's were fired at U.S. forces.

These findings are also supported by the team's discovery of more than fifteen Iraqi Army uniforms and additional RPG's in the museum's garage. The investigation has uncovered no evidence that any fighters entered the museum before the staff left on 8 April and no evidence that any member of the staff assisted Iraqi forces in entering the museum or in building the various fighting positions found inside and surrounding the museum.

In the basement-level storage room, on the other hand, the evidence strongly suggests not random looters, but thieves with an intimate knowledge of the museum and its storage procedures. For it is here, they attempted to steal the most trafficable and easily transportable items stored in the most remote corner of the most remote room in the basement of the museum. The front

door of this basement storage room was intact, but its bricked rear doorway, accessed through a remote, narrow, and hidden stairwell, was broken and entered. This storage area actually has four rooms, three of which were untouched. Indeed, even the fourth room was virtually untouched except for a single corner where 103 small plastic boxes originally containing cylinder seals, loose beads, amulets, small glass bottles, and jewelry had been emptied, while hundreds and hundreds of surrounding larger, but empty, cardboard boxes were untouched.

The thieves here had keys that were previously hidden in the museum. These keys were to 30 storage cabinets that lined that particular corner of the room. Those cabinets contained arguably the world's finest collection of extraordinary cylinder seals and tens of thousands of unparalleled Greek, Roman, Hellenistic, and Islamic gold and silver coins. Ironically, the thieves appear to have lost the keys to those cabinets by dropping them in one of the plastic boxes. There was no electricity in the museum at the time of the looting. So, they lit the foam padding for light. After frantically and unsuccessfully searching for the keys in the fire-lit room, breathing in the noxious fumes, and throwing the boxes and their contents in every direction, they left without opening any of the cabinets. We ultimately found the keys under the debris after a methodical, fully lit, and hours-long search.

Upon inspecting the cabinets, opening each one in fearful apprehension, we discovered that none of the cabinets had been entered. Thus, a catastrophic loss—that of the priceless collection of coins and cylinder seals—was narrowly averted.

The contents of those plastic boxes, however, were removed. While not of the same caliber as those items stored in the cabinets, they were nonetheless still valuable. From those boxes, 4795 cylinder seals and 4997 pins, beads, pendants, and necklaces were stolen. An additional 545 smaller pottery pieces, metal tools, beads, and small glass bottles were also taken. From this single room alone, 10,337 separate items were stolen, of which 667 have been recovered.

The team did recover several sets of readable fingerprints from the doors of the cabinets themselves. Those prints were sent to the FBI lab for comparison against all known U.S. databases, to include U.S. military personnel. The team also fingerprinted those staff members known to have had access to that basement storage room. There were no matches, but the prints remain on file for future use.

Thus, and viewing the evidence as a whole, the antiquities stolen from the museum appear to fall into three broad categories, strongly suggesting three distinct dynamics at work.

First, are the 40 exhibits stolen from the public galleries. Here the thieves appear to have been selective and

discriminate in their choice of artifacts, stealing the more valuable items, while bypassing copies and less valuable items.

Second, are the 3,138 pieces stolen from the storage rooms on the first and second floors. The pattern here was indiscriminate and random: entire shelves and sections were untouched, while others, without any discernible method, appear to have had their contents swept into bags or boxes for transport. For example, an entire shelf of fakes was emptied, while an adjacent shelf containing authentic pieces of infinitely greater value was untouched. Some boxes in the aisles were completely emptied of their contents, while others were missing only handfuls. Indeed, in many cases, groups of artifacts taken from one area of these storage rooms were dropped elsewhere in the same room. As a further indication of the non-organized dynamic involved here, virtually of all the items returned under the amnesty program have come from these storage areas.

The third category comprises the 10,337 pieces stolen from the single basement storage room. It is simply inconceivable that this area was found, breached, and entered or that the unmarked keys were found by anyone who did not have an intimate insider's knowledge of the museum and its storage practices in general and of that corner of the basement and the contents of those specific, unmarked, non-descript cabinets in particular.

None of this is intended to suggest that there is not some overlap among the categories. For example, both the indiscriminate looters and those with inside knowledge may have also stolen some of the more valuable items from the public galleries. Nor is it intended to suggest that there is or is not a connection among the separate groups. For example, the "professional" thieves, that is, those who knew what they were looking for, may well have intentionally left the museum doors open to enable the indiscriminate looters to enter in the expectation that such destruction would also destroy any evidentiary trails.

Rather, this differentiation among the separate categories of thieves offers an analytical basis upon which to fashion a methodology to recover that particular group of antiquities. Thus, those items stolen by the looters are more likely to be recovered locally in Iraq through the amnesty program and other community outreach initiatives, as well as through developing local informants and conducting targeted raids. Indeed, 99% of all items recovered in Iraq have come from this category of artifacts.

The higher-value, more recognizable exhibits, on the other hand, demand a different approach. Because they have a far more limited market, one of the primary ways to recover those items would be through identifying and monitoring buyers and by

continuing to develop confidential sources within the art smuggling community in order to track, recover, and return these pieces. Thorough border inspections and searches should also play a crucial role in interdicting these items in transit.

The 10,000 smaller cylinder seals and pieces of jewelry stolen from the basement storage rooms, however, require a different approach. Because they are not necessarily and immediately recognizable as contraband or evidence of criminality, the first goal here must be the education of international, national, and local law enforcement authorities in the identification of these artifacts. We must make the missing items universally recognizable among the international law enforcement and art communities, using all available tools, to include web sites, international media, and local law enforcement officials. This will enable such authorities to conduct effective interdiction operations at border crossings.

Thus, we have provided digital photographs and details of the investigation to several of the most widely used art-loss websites in the world, specifically Interpol, the US Department of State, the FBI, US Customs, and the Art Loss Registry, all of whose websites now reflect the missing items.

To further assist law enforcement by making these items immediately and universally recognizable, we have also prepared a poster of the 30 most significant missing artifacts. These

will be disseminated to the law-enforcement and art communities throughout the world.

A second goal must be a greater level of cooperation and communication between the law enforcement and art communities, as well as increased and focused inspections of local art dealers and galleries. The reality is that in order for these items to be sold profitably, they must be authenticated by an acknowledged expert in the art community. In order, therefore, enlist the active assistance of the art world, we recently, and at the invitation of the British Museum, presented the findings of the investigation to more than 300 of the world's leading ancient near-eastern archaeologists, professors, and dealers.

Indeed, I must commend the efforts of the staff of the British Museum and of Professors Selma Al-Radi & Zainab Bahrani from New York, Henry Wright from Michigan, and McGuire Gibson from Chicago. They have used their expertise to assist the investigation and their courage to inspect the museum and various archaeological sites throughout Iraq. We get paid to be shot at; they do not.

Turning to the recovery efforts, several facts bear noting. Of the 3,411 pieces recovered so far, 1731, or almost half, have come from Iraqi citizens pursuant to the amnesty or "no questions asked" policy. Most stressed their desire to return these items to U.S. forces for safekeeping until a lawful Iraqi

government is elected. But it is not just Iraqi's who have responded to the call. On a recent trip home on leave in Manhattan, I was contacted by an individual who learned of the investigation and had a package he wanted to turn over. A meeting was arranged and a 4000-year-old Akhadian tablet is now back in the Iraq Museum where it belongs.

The remaining 1679 items recovered are the result of sound law-enforcement techniques, from investigative raids in Baghdad to random car-stops at checkpoints throughout Iraq to increased vigilance at international borders. For example, over 400 pieces were returned by Dr. Ahmed Chalabi after Iraqi National Congress forces stopped a car at a checkpoint near Kut in southern Iraq. Altogether, 911 pieces have been recovered in Iraq, while another 768 have come from numerous seizures in Jordan, Italy, the UK, and the US. On 12 August, a journalist was arrested for smuggling into the US three cylinder seals stolen from the museum.

In total, the number of artifacts now known to be missing from the museum now stands at slightly over 10,000. As it has over the last 5 months, it is sure to change on a daily basis. The numbers of missing items may increase as the inventory is completed with the assistance of foreign archeologists and their own excavation records. And the numbers will decrease as more recoveries are made throughout the world. Thus, numbers

accurate today will be inaccurate tomorrow.

This team's mission was to conduct a preliminary investigation into the theft and to begin the process of restoring Iraq's past, preserving her heritage for future generations. This phase of the investigation is now substantially complete, and the evidentiary findings will be provided to the Iraqi government for appropriate legal action. But justice is also about process. And the team's other goal was to cut through the unproductive rhetoric and bring unvarnished objective truth to the story of the museum's looting.

Nor have we acted alone. In addition to the superb efforts of Supervisory Special Agent Steve Mocsary and his Customs agents, I commend the staff of the Iraq Museum and the residents of Baghdad who gave us their time, their trust, and their hospitality.

The majority of the work remaining—that of tracking down each of the missing pieces—will likely take years. It will require the cooperative and concerted efforts of all nations, to include their legislatures, their law enforcement officers, and their art communities.

The missing artifacts are indeed the property of the Iraqi people; but in a very real sense, they also represent the shared

history of all mankind. I speak for all when I say we are
honored to have served.