

The treasure looters of the Iraq wars

Malcolm Edwards

Iraq has a rich store of archaeological treasures. The unrest in the region over recent years has allowed many to be plundered for a lucrative black market.

IT IS WELL KNOWN that in the two recent Iraq wars looters rummaged everywhere in the wake of the invaders as they advanced towards Baghdad. Of course, this kind of illegal activity happens in all wars, most of it being in the category of petty crime. But in both of these conflicts there were a few much more calculating thieves, in their targeting of many archaeological exhibits that were extremely highly valued.

Mesopotamia has been a rich treasure trove for archaeologists, ever since Sir Henry Layard discovered the centuries-old ruins of the ancient Biblical cities of Ashur and Nineveh—ruins that had lain undisturbed for thousands of years beneath huge mounds of desert sand. Major battles had raged in their vicinity without the antagonists

knowing what priceless treasures lay beneath them. Yet, during the time of their dominance, God's prophets confidently foretold the destruction of these great cities. The prophet Nahum

wrote that the mighty Nineveh would become waste (3:7), and Isaiah prophesied that the great and powerful Babylon would eventually be the dwelling place of desert beasts, and avoided by travellers and shepherds (13:19-22).

Amongst the many Layard discoveries, made from 1845 to 1851, were the ruins of two once magnificent Assyrian palaces, one belonging to the Biblical king Sennacherib. The inner walls were still decorated with murals depicting the deeds of Assyrian kings. Also brought to light were human-headed winged bulls, beautifully carved in stone, a great many sculptured wall slabs, and a large library of cuneiform tablets.

Most of Layard's finds were floated down the Euphrates on rafts and then shipped to the British

Reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh depicting the transport from the quarries of huge human-headed winged bulls for the palace doorways.

Courtesy of the British Museum



Picture: Mujtaba Chohan

Museum in London, where they still delight and astonish thousands of visitors annually.

Many archaeological treasures

Mesopotamia, of which Iraq is a large part, is reliably quoted as having *hundreds* of major archaeological sites and *tens of thousands* of smaller ones; hence the looting of such treasures during the ravages of war can offer rich rewards in certain illicit channels of trading. But it was not only during the chaos of battle that this select pilfering took place. It is somewhat ironic that the very economic privations caused by UN sanctions upon Iraq, following the Gulf War, are said to have further promoted this illegal activity. For example, sections of wall-sculptures in the Sennacherib Palace Museum were broken off, had their edges squared, and were expertly mounted as very marketable pieces. It is known that during 1996 secret negotiations took place at a high level to find a market for nine pieces of wall relief all taken from that particular source.

During the more recent US-Iraq war, archaeologists throughout the world were shocked at the news that looters had broken into the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad and stolen thousands of precious antiquities. Iraqi archaeologists complained of looters breaking in with iron bars and other tools, and blamed the advancing US military for protecting Iraqi oil but not their national treasures. As it turned out, these officials had been less than honest about the extent of this plunder. It is very true that valuable artefacts were stolen, and many were broken at that time, but most of the museum's 170,000 exhibits had not been stolen, as the archaeological world had been led to believe. All the valuable and easily removable items had already been removed by these officials and hidden in secret underground vaults in Baghdad. Other priceless items of Assyrian jewellery were safely concealed in the vaults of the city's central bank.

Writing in Reuter's book about this rather sad war, entitled *Under Fire*, correspondent Rosalind Russell tells of a news conference held with a senior museum official, who disclosed that only some thirty-three items of the main collection were missing, plus many recently excavated items from the museum's main storerooms. However, an Akkadian bronze statue from about 1200 B.C.



Picture: Andrew Bossi

Brick stamped with an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar.

Courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia

was stolen, and also a priceless 5,500-year-old marble face of a Sumerian woman. Remarkably, a Sumerian vase of similar antiquity was actually returned in the boot of a car two months later, but broken in pieces.

The Babylon rebuilding project

Finally, it has been said that Saddam Hussein deliberately ordered the rebuilding of ancient Babylon in defiance of what Scripture prophesied in Isaiah 13:20, and that his capture and death providentially prevented this happening. This is most certainly the case. It can certainly be corroborated that Saddam ordered the rebuilding of one of three ancient Babylonian palaces, using 2,600-year-old bricks, each stamped with Nebuchadnezzar's name. However, even if this project were to continue under a new régime, the upper structure of the palace would be mostly guesswork, since almost nothing is known about its original appearance.

Even so, the restoration of such a palace can hardly be termed the rebuilding of the whole city of Babylon. In fact, for such a mighty historic city to be restored to its former glory is impossible, not only because of the sheer magnitude of the task, but, once again, because any concept of what the city actually looked like above ground level would only be, at the very best, sheer guesswork. Were such an unlikely project ever to happen, we can be sure that whatever materialised would be nothing approaching the great Babylon of old.

"[Babylon] shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there" (Isa. 13:20,21).