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Robbing the Cradle of Civilization: The Effects of Warfare on Iraqi Archaeology

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Today, the mainstream consciousness in the United States and abroad knows Iraq as a war-torn nation. For the younger generation, Iraq is a country that only came into importance in March of 2003 when the United States invaded its borders as part of a greater international focus on terrorism and fundamentalism. For older generations, Iraq is remembered as a nation involved in the first Gulf War which broke out in 1991. These people see it as a nation of oil, sand, and funny people in headscarves and kaftans. If one were to take a survey of random people on the street, even at a prestigious college or university, most of those surveyed would recognize Iraq first for its history in war before recognizing the country for its rich archaeological and cultural background. Surprisingly to most, the name “Iraq” is actually an Arabic term meaning “ancient place.” This name is more accurate than most people recognize. Iraq was the site of Mesopotamia, the first civilization on the planet earth, and through the years it was dominated by many powerful cultures; the Sumerians, the Akkadians, and the Sassanid Empire just to name a few. Iraq has the first ever instance of writing in the world at the site of Jemdet Nasr and evidence for engineering and mathematics weighs heavily on the desert sands. The sites we find in Iraq even today are physically far more impressive than the ones we typically see in North America and in Europe. The Middle East has a fantastic environment for preservation much more suited to protecting ancient remains

than the environment in North America. The hot, arid desert climate which makes survival for humans difficult is perfect for clay and stone monuments and intricate artifacts. The enormous ziggurat at Ur, the city of Babylon, and the minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra (fig. 1) all exist to this day thanks to this remarkable preservation and remain testaments to the ingenuity of Iraq’s first citizens.

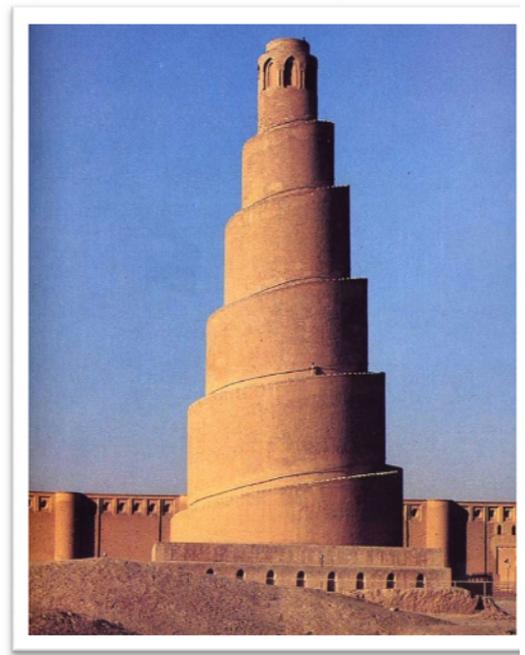


figure 1 - rubens.anu.edu.au

It makes sense then that Iraq has long been an incredible draw for archaeologists and historians both from the “ancient place” and abroad. Whether this has been good or bad, of

course, is debatable. Most of the first archaeologists to visit and excavate in Iraq were not Iraqi but rather European. Europeans, as we all know, have a long-standing tradition of ethnocentrism when encountering a new nation or culture. There are Europeans who treat unfamiliar cultures and sites with respect and great care but the unfortunate fact is that most of the initial contacts by Europeans were fueled by colonization. They were rash and swift before they were delicate. When the Europeans found the United States they immediately colonized and exploited it, believing themselves to be the most qualified individuals to possess the land. In Iraq, they saw the fantastic monuments and believed at once that they were more qualified to care for these sites than the Iraqis were themselves. It is a syndrome quite similar to the White Man's Burden where the Europeans felt that it was their explicit duty to "protect" the fantastic things they found in Iraq. Immediately, antiquarianism took hold as artifacts were taken for their beauty and their value and little importance was placed upon actual research. Those that were researched were carried far away to England and into the United States where they were placed in prestigious museums like the British National Museum in London or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. One is not commenting on the character of these museums but rather the distance of them from the Iraqi people who would have otherwise had ownership of these treasures. While some laws were passed attempting to protect these artifacts and their Iraqi background most were similar to the Ottoman Antiquities Law, a law considered to be incredibly progressive when it was passed in 1874. This law stated that excavators were entitled to a share of the objects and must divide them up appropriately. (Greeley 2003:7) Thus, even the laws that were meant to be protecting the artifacts exploited them as well and history

ran out of Iraq as swiftly as archaeologists could pack it up and send it home. In fact, by the early 1900's, European and American universities had staked their claims to particular sites and beat all Iraqi archaeologists to their own culture. (Lawler 2001:33) Though it was born from an Arabic people that held it in great esteem the history of Iraq became primarily the property of others.

This was curbed, thankfully, in the modern era - but only for a short time. When Saddam Hussein took power in Iraq he placed an incredible amount of importance upon the protection and preservation of Iraqi sites and artifacts. To him these artifacts represented more than beautiful pieces of pottery or curiosities; they were an expression of Iraqi strength and fortitude. Saddam Hussein beheaded any Iraqis caught attempting to loot archaeological sites or harm archaeologists and used oil money to fund archaeological projects richly. Although Hussein himself was not very friendly toward foreigners and the process of entering Iraq was notoriously difficult, he did allow foreign archaeologists to come into Iraq and research for the good of its history. (Nashef 1990:261) Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on what you believe is most important, when the first Gulf War broke out in 1991 nearly all funding was withdrawn from archaeological projects. Looting of regional museums emptied out these great halls of preservation and took history directly from the hands of the people. Foreigners were forced out of the country by Hussein's government and the political climate shifted. (Nashef 1992:302) Most disastrously for some, political pressure was placed upon important museum directors and archaeologists to support Saddam Hussein and join his controversial Ba'ath Party. The freedom of Archaeology was gone. However, despite all of these troubles archaeology pressed on and discoveries continued to be made.

Archaeologists from around the world were still permitted to enter the country albeit with heightened danger and bureaucracy and were permitted to conduct their research until the most disastrous blow to Iraqi archaeology was dealt in 2003.

In March of 2003 the United States invaded Iraq and began fighting their way into Baghdad in one of the most controversial and heavily-debated wars in American history. The United States upon entering the country was not ignorant of the rich history of Iraq. On January 24th a group of educated collectors, archaeologists, and historians met at the Pentagon with defense officials to state their concerns for the treasures of Iraq. Civilians at the Pentagon went on to outline critical sites on March 26th and these important sites included the high-profile National Museum of Iraq at Baghdad as well as others. (Lawler 2008:582) These sites were meant to be protected from bombing and fighting and their great importance was acknowledged. The United States troops had hoped to be able to protect them. However, in the heat of battle when the war really began many of these sites were forgotten or pushed by the wayside in the desire to fight further into Iraq. Sites came to be used as defensive and offensive stations by US military and the Iraqi guard as well. In short, protection was stripped from sites and in some instances they were actually fired upon. Looters were rampant, archaeologists fled the country, and archaeology itself came to a complete standstill in Iraq.

It is this dramatic looting in 2003 that has really created the biggest dent in Iraqi archaeology. When war broke out sites were looted by the dozens as Iraqi citizens stormed the newly-unprotected sites and took what they could find. Jemdet Nasr was one such important site to be looted. Jemdet Nasr is the type site for Early Bronze Age culture in southern Mesopotamia and many of its artifacts

are dated to around 3000 BC. Jemdet Nasr is particularly significant because it contains the earliest written account of any language in the world. (Field and Martin 1935) Unfortunately for Jemdet Nasr, the small nature of many of its artifacts and the fact that it was first excavated in 1926 made it especially vulnerable to looters who could easily carry off cuneiform tablets and the site's famous painted pottery without calling attention to themselves. (Lawler 2001:33) Most of these artifacts from Jemdet Nasr have never returned and they are expected to rest in private collections all over the world.

Another site to suffer was the city of Ashur. Ashur was the first capital of Assyria and was once protected by large, imposing barrier walls. This city was not as heavily looted as some due to the difficulty that it took to remove its artifacts but it was, unfortunately, damaged in the war when it was fired upon by tanks and small arms alike. Another city that was heavily damaged was Nimrud and in this case the result was far more disastrous. Nimrud was another Assyrian city located south of Ashur. It has been identified as the biblical city of Kalakh and featured large palaces and a magnificent Queen's treasure that was, thankfully, hidden away before the war by archaeologists who could sense that danger was coming. Unfortunately, Nimrud was heavily damaged in the war and its famous portal guardians which stood at the city's gates were fired upon by tanks. (Lawler 2003:585) Nimrud was used for some time as a stronghold for Iraqi militia and its foundation and was damaged in the fighting that resulted. Figure 2 shows the portal gods at the city gates of Nimrud. The damage to the gods should be evident and while some was created by erosion and time the majority was created by warfare, primarily in 2003.

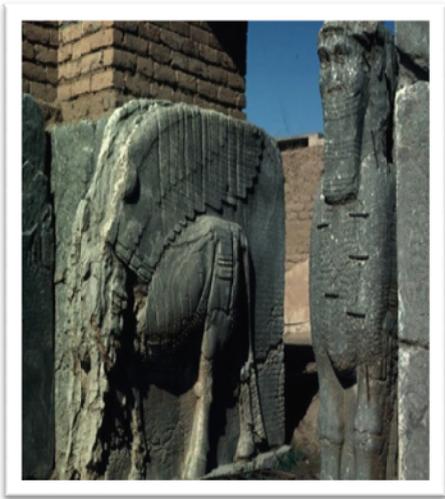


Figure 2 – theodora.com

The most dramatic, and most famous, looting occurred at the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad where 173,000 items were reported missing by April 12th, 2003. (Lawler 2001:32) When war broke out museum staff barricaded the building, protecting it with sandbags and boards and even arming themselves against the militia and civilians they expected to attempt to loot. However, on April 10th they were forced to relinquish their hold on the museum and it was stormed by local citizens and the feared militia alike. Iraqi fighters used the museum to store weaponry and uniforms while artifacts were stolen in rapid numbers. Some of the museum's most precious artifacts, including the infamous Warka Vase which dates to around 3000 BC, were taken in this 48 hour time period. While some have returned and initial estimates (like that of 173,000 artifacts looted) were too high, most of the artifacts stolen have not returned and structural damage was dealt mercilessly to the museum building. In fact, in the battle to capture the museum from militant forces, it was fired upon by United States tanks trying to drive militia out of the museum. Sergeant 1st Class David Richard has been quoted as saying, "We thought they needed a picture window," in reference to the large hole blown through the

museum's façade over the grand archway. (fig. 3) Blood found on the archway is a testament to its effectiveness. (Lawler 2001:34)



figure 3 - news.nationalgeographic.com

As mentioned above, the Warka Vase was also stolen from the museum's main gallery. The Warka Vase dates to around 3000 BC and was crafted from carved alabaster. It depicts life in Mesopotamia on the bottom and a royal procession toward the top of the vase. Unfortunately, it was one of the first items looted in the struggle. It appears in figure 4 in an official museum photo taken before the war;

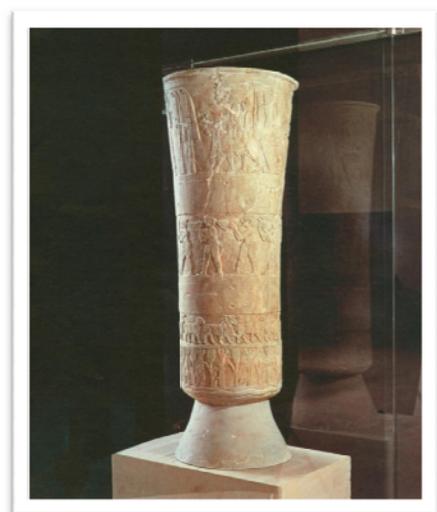


figure 4 – Lawler 2008:29

And in figure 5 as it was returned to United States soldiers when taken from the trunk of an Iraqi car wrapped in a dirty blanket;



Figure 5 – Lawler 2008:29

When it was looted from the Baghdad Museum the vase was forced off of its base in a manner which shattered the alabaster and old cracks were opened while new ones were created. The Warka Vase, though it may not look like much here, is significant because it is one of the first and finest, most precisely crafted pieces of art created in this area of the world and it is incredibly unique. It is also quite indicative of life in Mesopotamia due to its illustrative nature and it is thus indispensable. However, it is only one artifact amongst many. The truth is that the Baghdad Museum held the first pieces of art in the world and thousands of untranslated tablets what we may never be able to decipher. The damage dealt to the Warka vase as well as the thousands of artifacts taken from the Baghdad Museum that will likely never be recovered is simply mind-boggling.

The question that so many historians and politicians alike have attempted to answer seems very simple; Why? Why did the Iraqis loot their

own history out of the museums and archaeological sites? Why did Iraqis take their own sites for military measures? One would think that stealing their own heritage would hurt the average Iraqi citizen and they would not feel comfortable doing this to their own people. Let us also consider also that Iraq is a predominantly Muslim country and that the Qur'an, the holiest book in Islam, has choice words regarding those who steal:

"As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime: and Allah is Exalted in power."
(Qur'an 5:38)

Considering that Islam lays down such a strict punishment for those who steal (and the Iraqi government heeded this punishment) it would be expected that the people of Iraq would be even more hesitant to steal than the people of a country that was not Islamic. However, when war broke out thousands of Iraqis freely looted their regional museums and archaeological sites as well as businesses and homes. Why? Well, there are a couple of theories to explore. One theory suggests that the Iraqis may have been experiencing a misunderstood sense of duty. With Americans invading the country and their local treasures in danger it is possible that Iraqis may have feared that the invading army would harm them and stole their own treasures with the intention to keep them safe. This is a theory that was proven during World War II when Nazi troops stormed Poland. Polish Catholics robbed their own churches of paintings and crystal goblets as well as other treasures in order to keep these objects safe from the brutal invading armies. Perhaps many of these stolen artifacts are safe after all, merely hidden away in Iraqi homes and bank vaults. Two other theories on the matter are much less optimistic – one theory suggests that Iraqis may have been feeling a

sense of revenge at this time. Faced with invading armies and a brutal government they were looking to lash out at whatever they could get their hands on. This was a theory proven when Hurricane Katrina struck the United States in 2005. It was observed that hurricane victims in Louisiana looted local businesses freely and for things that they did not need. For example, why would anyone need a big screen television in the midst of a disaster zone? When questioned many of the looters reported that they felt as if they needed revenge for what had happened to them and statistics show that these victims primarily looted businesses that were not local, meaning they were lashing out against “them,” a third party that they saw as oppressors. (Associated Press Sept. 2005) While the Iraqis stole from their own heritage it was also a heritage that was, in some instances, over 5000 years old. A lack of connection to these items may have resulted in their free looting of them.

Finally, the third theory that perhaps holds the most weight is the theory that the changing importance of artifacts under the two regimes, first Saddam Hussein’s and then that of the United States, is what created the rampant looting through opportunism. One of the most famous quotes to come out of the US invasion of Iraq is that which was made by Former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld on April 11, 2003 during a press briefing at the White House where he said, in reference to the looting, “Stuff happens! ...It’s untidy, and freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.” (Department of Defense 2003) Rumsfeld essentially believed that the Iraqi people were looting because they could and this is a theory that carries more weight than one might imagine. Under Saddam Hussein, as we have mentioned before, looters and thieves were punished to the full extent of the Qur’an and

Iraqi law. Their hands or even heads were chopped off and little mercy was given to those who stole. When the United States took over, however, their neatly outlined list of priorities was important but it was not given as much weight as the protection of human life. The United States military focused on protecting its soldiers and reaching Baghdad before it protected archaeological sites. Due to the shifting focus of importance the Iraqis were free to loot with much less stringent punishments over their heads and this may be the real reason why they looted so freely.

So, what happened here? Did the United States truly drop the ball or was there anything they could do? The opinions on this question are many and varied and arguments for each side have grown bloody. According to some, the United States did all that it could do. Lt. Gen. William Scott Wallace, when asked about the protection of cultural sites, said “We were still fighting our ass off as we went into Baghdad and our first responsibility was to defeat the enemy forces.” (Lawler 2003:582) The United States maintains that it gave its all in the protection of Iraqi sites but that there was really only so much that could be done in such a volatile environment. Other evidence, like that which proves that knowledgeable archaeologists, collectors, and curators met with the defense deputy assistant secretary on January 24th to discuss the safety of these sites and artifacts, suggests otherwise. If the United States was warned, they challenge, then why did they not protect these sites? On the 26th of March priorities were, in fact, defined by the Pentagon – they merely fell by the wayside. (Lawler 2008:582) Is this the fault of the United States? Or is it just a result of a very brutal war? Without having been in Iraq at the outbreak of war in 2003 one cannot say with much justification where the real truth lies and even those who were in Iraq at this time (or

especially those who were there to witness the war's first days) are too biased to make a judgment. Did the United States try to protect Iraq's ancient history? Yes, certainly. Did it try very hard? Well, that matter is up for debate.

Something that is very important to explore before we label the Iraqis as thieves, however, is the importance of archaeological history to the Iraqis as a means of cultural identity. In the United States most of our older history is found in Native American sites. While we think these are interesting and some of us are very passionate about them it is not so common for an American to be passionate about the history of their country as it is for an Iraqi. This is due mostly to the fact that we are distanced from our own history through race and progress while the Iraqis are the race that founded their nation, not the invaders. In Iraq, history and identity are strongly linked and young children growing up in school are taught a great deal about these sites. Cultural sites remain relevant to mainstream life in Iraq and the Iraqis find an incredible amount of glory in knowing that it was their people who built the first civilizations on the planet Earth. Because of this the loss of these sites has been a tremendous blow to the national confidence of the Iraqis. The *New York Times* called the looting of Iraq's national museum and important sites "one of the greatest cultural disasters in recent Middle Eastern history." (Lawler 2003:582) It is hard, given the importance of these archaeological sites and history to the people, to see the Iraqis as looters when we consider that many of them have described losing their cultural sites and artifacts in these emotional terms as well. For the Iraqis, these sites and artifacts are what once defined their nation. Now, they find themselves stripped of them in some instances and the loss is felt deeper than one might expect. As mentioned previously, archaeology was and is extremely

important to the government of Iraq as well as a means of nation-building and entitlement. While this does remind us of some aspects of the Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler in World War II which also focused heavily upon archaeological discoveries, there is no denying that archaeology has been incredibly influential in the nationalism and the politics of Iraq since the inception of a republican government. (Gibson 247) The loss of these sites and artifacts is felt all throughout Iraq then; In the people, in the history, and in the government as well.

But we should not be so ignorant to think only of the Iraqis in this matter. In fact, the loss of their heritage is the loss of our own heritage as well. We have said many times that the first civilizations were founded in Iraq but perhaps we have failed to recognize that these civilizations are the ones that spawned our own. Around 1790 BC the Code of Hammurabi was created and outlined on a massive seven-foot tall diorite stele called the Stele of Hammurabi. (fig. 6) This stele detailed the first written legal code in the world and from it we have derived many of our own laws and practices.

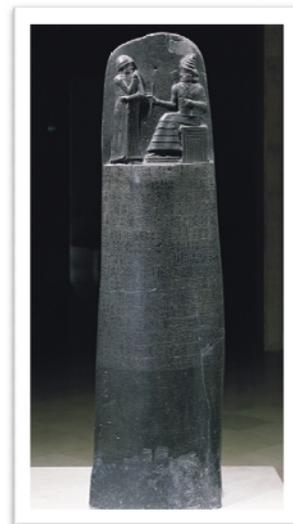


figure 6 – employees.oneonta.edu

The Bust of Inanna which dates back to 3200 BC and which is depicted in figure 7 was

the first three-dimensional piece of art created in the world. It was once inlaid with jewels and turquoise and marks a great artistic innovation.

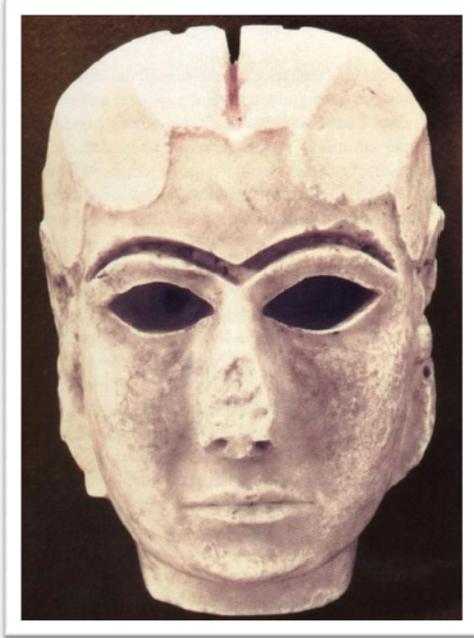


Figure 7 – kathyreba.com

Cities in Iraq have also been identified as important sites in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Thus, even if we do not feel a personal connection to the people who founded the civilizations of Iraq we can at least look to it and see reminders of it in our own society. Without the civilizations of Iraq our laws, art, and religion might have been very different than they are today. We all have roots in Iraq and we all owe it a debt of gratitude for that the Mesopotamian cultures have given us. The archaeology and culture of Iraq is more relevant to our own history than we may believe. We do, to a certain extent, owe it a debt of protection and honor.

Thankfully, although culture was largely pushed to the wayside at the start of the war in 2003, Iraqi archaeology is now attempting to make a comeback. Cultural awareness programs have been launched throughout the United States military to educate soldiers on the

importance of Iraqi history to their own lives and to the people that they are living amongst. These programs include lectures, courses, and even playing cards that feature the names and information of a number of important archaeological sites and vulnerable artifacts. Local amnesty programs have also been launched with the cooperation of the US military and the basic premise is that anyone can return an artifact, big or small, without any penalty at all. Many artifacts have been returned through this program including the infamous (and sadly damaged) Warka Vase featured above. This vase is an example of another manner through which artifacts are being recovered which is the fact that these artifacts are simply too high-profile to be sold even on the black market. Because they cannot be hidden or successfully dealt many important museum pieces have been returned because the danger of possessing them is too high. Below, Figure 8 shows the recovery statistics for recovered museum artifacts as of July 28, 2003 according to Andrew Lawler:

Recovery of Artifacts Looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad as of July 28th, 2003

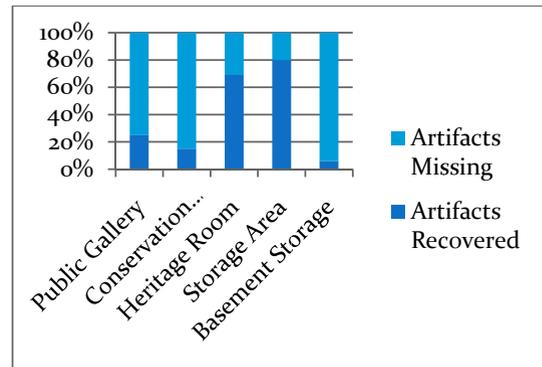


Figure 8 – Lawler 2003:584

What is important to note about this graph is the high-profile nature of the various rooms that were looted. The Public Gallery and

Heritage Room featured the most high profile artifacts in the museum, including the Warka Vase. The Conservation Room was a workspace that did not feature incredibly high profile objects. The Storage Area and Basement Storage held artifacts of the lowest profile. However, it is interesting to note that more artifacts were returned from the Storage Area than from the Basement Storage. This could be due to many factors but it is important to note that Basement Storage contained very small objects such as cuneiform tablets and seals that could be easily walked off with and concealed. These objects, which often resemble small pieces of carved chalk, are very easy to sell. Though this data is outdated it is important to note that even recent reports do not show a great increase in the return of artifacts to the museum. Most high-profile artifacts have returned it would appear but smaller artifacts that may seem insignificant to the untrained eye do not show much hope of coming back.

The question now is to ask, what is still missing? Well, perhaps the most tragic losses of all involve not what we know we have lost but what we do not know. Thousands of cuneiform tables taken from Jemdet Nasr and other sites in Iraq were stored in the basement of the Baghdad Museum and have not been seen since the looting. Most of these tables were untranslated and now it is impossible to say what they might have depicted. It is impossible to really measure what we've lost since no one is quite sure just what was written on those tablets. In addition to the loss of these tablets, an incredible amount of illicit digging also occurred after the war broke out and was conducted both by archaeologists and amateurs alike. Who can say what these people found or lost in the mayhem of war? How can we say that objects are lost or safe when we're not quite sure who has them or, in many cases, what they may be? The sad truth is that an illicit digger might have uncovered a

cache of treasure or even an old manuscript that may answered hundreds of important questions. Whether that digger was an archaeologist or a common looter the chance that those finds will be revealed before the war is over is quite low. In addition to these troubles, sites were reburied and bombed beyond recognition in the first stages of war. Optimistically, many archaeologists and researchers hope that wise foreigners and Iraqis alike have hoarded missing objects and that perhaps they will start turning up in foreign bank vaults like so many objects did after World War II. But it is simply impossible to say now, even seven years after the invasion began, just what is lost and what will remain lost long after war ends.

Naturally, the challenges to rebuilding Iraqi history and archaeology are great and many. Danger is obviously a very real threat to the archaeologists who dig in Iraq first of all. One archaeologist, a German woman named Suzanne Osthoff, was kidnapped while practicing her profession in Iraq after the war. (Associated Press Nov. 2005) But might there also be danger to the artifacts themselves? Some archaeologists believe so. Some, particularly in the United States and Europe, believe that Iraqi archaeologists have been cut off from the rest of the world for far too long to be trusted to perform excavations themselves. These archaeologists fear that the Iraqis are behind on techniques and methodology and may harm their own sites whilst trying to preserve them. Perhaps, however, this is an ethnocentric viewpoint in and of itself from archaeologists in more developed nations who believe that they have more skill. For now, however, it is a valid concern. Unfortunately, doing archaeology in Iraq is not merely a matter of danger or technology but also a very real problem of money. Iraq has not escaped the war just yet. It is an embattled nation and it is having incredible difficulty receiving any amount of funding at all

from foreign investors concerned about sending their money into the troubled country for such research. (Lawler 2003:33) Something that we have not yet examined, however, is the possibility that perhaps it is unwise for archaeologists to return at all at this time. While there is certainly a great deal of care for these objects and this culture is it truly worth risking one's life in order to save them? Do all archaeologists have the country's welfare at heart or are they merely acting selfishly by wishing to return to Iraq? One notable researcher, McGuire Gibson from the University of Chicago, with a great deal of experience in Iraqi archaeology commented on the fact that European archaeologists are being permitted to return first by saying, "It's awful, it's horrible. We'll be the last ones back." (Lawler 2001:33) Keep in mind that this is a phrase spoken by an American man about a country currently gripped in warfare even before the real Iraqi war began. The eagerness by archaeologists like Gibson and Osthoff, who refused to leave Iraq when war broke out, suggests perhaps some ignorance of the real dangers involved in digging in Iraq. Perhaps it is unwise at this time to dig at all. One has to wonder if archaeologists eager to return to Iraq recognize the danger at all or if they are, like some conservative news outlets have suggested, acting foolishly by wishing to return so soon.

The incredible cultural importance of the history found in Iraq to the country itself as well as to nations all over the world simply cannot be denied. Without those first civilizations to settle into Mesopotamia and create laws, art, and religion, our world today would have been a very different place. Mesopotamia created the perfect "cradle of civilization," the perfect place for culture to be born and to evolve into something fantastic and complex. Unfortunately for the Mesopotamians, the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates has been gripped by

warfare and conflict since times before any historian can truly recall. Even the days of Hammurabi were conflicted and dangerous. Today, however, our tanks and weaponry have a greater potential to deal destruction and our ethnocentrism has robbed Iraq of its national treasures. It is hard to say where Iraq and the people who love it will go from here but one thing is clear; that they have a great deal of work to do in order to repair the damage dealt from 1991 onward.

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Figure 4

Lawler 2008:29

Figure 5

Lawler 2008:29

Figure 6

employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/Images/ARTH200/politics/hammurabi.jpg

Figure 7

kathyreba.com/_gallery/d/375-2/Head+of+Inanna+-+Uruk.jpg

Image Citations

Figure 1

rubens.anu.edu.au/raider6/iraq_heritage/photos/samarra0.jpg

Figure 2

theodora.com/wfb/photos/iraq/assyrian_statues_nimrud_iraq_photo_unesco.jpg

Figure 3

news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/03/photogalleries/baghdad-