

The Baghdad Museum:

A great cultural legacy became a Casualty of War.

In a great arch stretching from the northern parts of what is today Iraq to the Mediterranean, a revolution occurred slowly but inexorably as men learned to select from among edible wild plants seeds that promised to grow into dependable harvests. Soon they also learned how to channel water to the seedlings to increase their yield. The agricultural revolution had begun.

As agriculture grew more sophisticated, it required the services of large numbers of people to dig irrigation canals, harvest grain, process it into flour, store it for future use and trade it with areas not so fertile. So what had originally been just temporary campsites grew into villages. As each became more numerous, it found itself compelled to organize one after another the stages of the new economy. Workers had to be marshalled, records had to be kept of obligations and what had been customary had to be codified. All these efforts took vast amounts of labor. Accomplishing them in turn fostered the growth of new skills. And, gradually those with skill and cunning rose above the more mundane tasks to become professional. As they accumulated wealth, this new elite wanted more than food. Arts and crafts inevitably followed. Thus, also slowly but inexorably, what we can call civilization was born along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their network of tributaries.

It was the record of that remarkable set of steps, over some eight or nine thousand years, that the Baghdad Museum of Antiquities documented. It was not just a record of what happened in Iraq but also a witness to the growth of the very seedbed of civilization

itself. We can honestly say that it was there, along these great rivers, that life as we know it today began: there people first began to speculate on philosophy and religion, developed concepts of international trade, made beauty into tangible forms and, above all, developed the skill of writing.

Finding, assembling, recording and interpreting this unique record was the work of hundreds of scholars from all over the world for over a century. Now it has been scattered, smashed and stolen. What happened in Baghdad in a few days in April 2003 is an incomparable loss to the entire world. I feel this with particular sadness because, fortuitously, I was one of the last people to see the collection in its breath-taking entirety. Let me tell you what I saw then and what this beautiful volume, *Loss and Memory*, commemorates and attempts to recapture.

Standing alone in a corridor on the second floor of the Iraq Museum of Antiquities is a copy (fortunately, the original is safe in the Louvre in Paris) of one of the most remarkable treasures of the ancient world. It is a stone stele depicting Hammurabi, the 18th century B.C. ruler of Babylon, receiving one of the first known codes of laws from the sun god and god of justice, Shamash.

Shamash instructs Hammurabi “To cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong may not oppress the weak.” Proudly, Hammurabi took as his title, “king of justice.” The parallel with Abraham, said to have been born in Mesopotamia centuries later, receiving his laws from the Hebrew god Yahweh is too striking to miss. As they did in so many things, the early people of the Tigris and Euphrates led the way in helping the whole world to understand how to deal with one another in justice and with their conception of the purpose of life in divinity.

As I walked through the museum, I passed gigantic Assyrian wall carvings, some 15 meters long and about 5 meters tall, showing ceremonies in ancient Nineveh and Ashur. Giant human-headed winged bulls that had once guarded the gates of the Assyrian capitals, loomed overhead. Buried for thousands of years, they blazoned forth as though carved only yesterday to proclaim the majesty of the greatest empire in the ancient world. Unconsciously, Cyrus, Ashoka, Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon would tread the path the Assyrian emperors had staked out with their monuments.

Scores of glass cases displayed thousands of tiny masterpieces of the earliest Mesopotamian craftsmen. In some cases were hundreds of stone cylinders, each the size of a child's finger. Painstakingly incised in reverse, they captured vivid images of griffons, sphinxes and other mythological beasts when rolled across wet clay. Some were more mundane, but therefore more valuable: they give us the earliest forms of writing, recording the names of those who wore them or serving as records of their deeds. One collection has been called the first state archive.

In other cases were some of the earliest known pieces of elaborate pottery, jewelry and statues from Ur, Babylon, Nineveh, Nimrud, Ashur and the score of cities scattered along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Still other cases contained examples of clay tablets on which the ancient Mesopotamians wrote contracts, letters, decrees that give us such a vivid, such a fresh, picture of their civilizations.

All in all, the Iraq museum was one of the greatest collections of cultural treasures in our world. And today it is no more.

Foreseeing the terrible danger posed to the museum by the American invasion, I called on the museum director in Baghdad just a few days before the war began to ask

him what precautions he had taken to protect his irreplaceable collection. In reply he simply raised his hands and eyebrows in a gesture of resignation, saying, “what can I do?” And he was right. He did manage to store some of the most valuable (commercially) or at least most movable pieces in the museum’s underground vaults. The director did not want to discuss that. But, it was evident that even humble clay tablets displayed in fragile glass cases throughout the museum were, as a record of the origins of civilization, more valuable than mere golden statues; they were, literally, a treasure beyond compare.

I wanted to try to organize a rescue operation, to move the collection as a whole to a safe place where it could be kept by a competent trustee under the supervision of an international committee of museum directors. Alas, I was too late. And, in any event, under the shadow of attack, the government of Iraq was in no mood to think of saving clay tablets when they rightly foresaw the doom of their government, their city and themselves.

As it turned out, the museum was not hit by any one of the hundreds of bombs that rained down on Baghdad. But, there was a further danger. About it, there was little the museum director or anyone else could do. In the confusion of the invasion, the museum was looted. Everywhere, when law and order breaks down and people are driven to desperation, some will certainly take the opportunity to seize what they can to sell for food or just to enrich themselves. In Baghdad, gangs of looters swarmed into the museum. Some appear to have been professional, acting in concert with international dealers and even with resident diplomats. They knew what they wanted and rushed to get what was most saleable. Others, probably amateurs, took sledge hammers and chain

saws, or even small bulldozers, to giant statues and wall carvings, dynamited the underground safes or simply grabbed what they could from the shattered glass cases of museum collections. An “antiquities mafia” sprang into existence, reaching from Zurich, London and New York down to villages all over Iraq. Thousands of treasures flooded the markets of Europe and America, never again to be seen in Iraq’s museums.

Of all the terrible casualties of war, the destruction of the Baghdad museum would rank among the most costly.

Bits and pieces of the collection have been retrieved. Doubtless more will come to light as time passes, but, as a collection, the museum is no more. That is why a group of outstanding scholars have decided to create what we might think of as “virtual” museum, not a collection of scholarly papers, but a personal and visual record of what they devoted much of their lives to create and which, now, can probably only exist in this form.

The editors decided that to give the reader as complete a picture of the great collection as possible, they would begin with the earliest periods, when the peoples of the area first began to accumulate the basis of settled life; then show where and how their hard work and new skills enabled them to lay the foundations of the fabled cities of the Tigris-Euphrates network of waterways; then illustrate how the growing wealth and sophistication of the new urban society enabled it to turn its attention to art, religion, law and philosophy.

Each of the authors in this collection is a specialist. But this is not a book for specialists. Rather, the editors have asked each “expert” to make use of his assured expertise for a different purpose. The editors wanted each author to share his

appreciation of his subject in a way scholars rarely have the leisure to do: to take the reader into his or her heart.

For each of us, that has been the goal. Producing this book has been a labor of love, a requiem for a departed companion of many rewarding years, a tribute through memory to our devastating loss.

The book is, in the full sense of the word, the closest we have been able to come to a “virtual” Baghdad Museum.

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