

The Baghdad Museum:

A great cultural legacy and perhaps a Casualty of War.

Standing alone in a corridor on the second floor of the Iraq Museum of Antiquities is a copy (the original is in the Louvre) 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 code 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 I walked through the museum a few days ago, 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.

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 produced vivid images of griffons, sphinxes and other mythological beasts when rolled across wet clay. 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 scores of clay tablets on which the ancient Mesopotamians wrote contracts, letters, decrees that give us such a vivid picture of their civilizations.

All in all, the Iraq museum is one of the greatest collections of cultural treasures in our world. And today it stands exposed to possible, even probable, destruction.

The consensus of opinion I found in Baghdad and in Washington is that the American assault on Iraq will begin on or about March 20 with a furious air bombardment. The firepower of the assault will dwarf the London Blitz and perhaps even the destruction of Berlin in the Second World War. In addition to rockets fired from hundreds of aircraft, many of them launched from great heights and far away, American government spokesmen have warned that the attack would include perhaps as many as 400 cruise missiles each day.

Delegations of archaeologists from around the world have petitioned the U.S. Air Force targeteers to take all possible precautions to avoid the museum and other major cultural sites. They have pointed out that in the 1991 Gulf War, considerable damage was done to several major archaeological treasures. The great ziggurat of Ur, towering over the surrounding plain, was hit and the great vault of the Persian palace at Ctesiphon was cracked. In an attempt to protect the treasures of the Baghdad museum, parts of its collection were dispersed to regional museums where some were destroyed or looted.

Basing their petitions on the 1954 "Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," they urged that America had an obligation to do its utmost to avoid bombing or otherwise endangering cultural sites and institutions. Their petitions lost some of their force since America signed but did not ratify the convention.

U.S. Air Force officers charged with target selections received location coordinates of hundreds of sites where significant world treasures are located and have promised to take into account the archaeologists' petitions. However, they and weapons experts have pointed out that perhaps as many as one in each ten cruise missiles will almost certainly misfire or go astray. That equates to perhaps as many as forty each day that could hit the museum.

With this in mind, I called on the museum director 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. One stray missile would "take out" much of our (and the

very best of Iraq's) tangible remains of this cultural heritage. Probably some of the most valuable or at least most movable pieces are stored in the museum's underground vaults. The director did not want to discuss that. But, it was evident that what was displayed in fragile glass cases throughout the museum was a treasure beyond compare.

Apart from the risk of a bomb destroying the whole museum, there was a further danger. About it there was little the museum director or anyone else could do. Even if the museum was not hit by a missile, and even if much of the collection was stored in underground vaults, it is still likely that in the confusion of the invasion, the museum will be looted. 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. Unless the time of the collapse of the Iraqi regime and the arrival of British and American troops is almost miraculously synchronized, there will be days or perhaps even weeks when no one will be able to stop them.

This was the experience in the 1991 Gulf War. Then local looters, some acting in concert with international dealers and even with resident diplomats, took sledge hammers and chain saws to giant statues and wall carvings or simply grabbed what they could from the shattered glass cases of museum collections. An "antiquities mafia" sprang into existence, reaching from 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 the country's museums.

As I walked slowly from room to room, I wondered if I might be one of the last to see that legacy of the works of dozens of generations craftsmen and artists dating back thousands of years. Of all the terrible casualties of war, this would rank among the most costly.

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