



Editorial Op Ed, Seattle Times, April 18, 2003
GRIEVE FOR THE LOSS OF IRAQ'S HISTORICAL SOUL

I am grieving today for our cultural history destroyed in Iraq. Yes, it is our heritage as well as the Iraqis. When looters armed with axes, rifles, pistols, knives and clubs stormed the museum last weekend, they stole and destroyed thousands of the world's treasures.

In spite of desperate requests to the US military from museum staff, the looters came back to the National Museum day after day. But this was not simply a mindless mob of desperate people. This was organized by people who knew what they wanted. After the first Gulf War 9 of Iraq's 13 regional museums were plundered.

In the early years of empires, generals fought their enemies, but those who revered the culture of the people whom they overcame are most respected today. Assurbanipal, the Assyrian warrior from what is today Northern Iraq, was a fierce fighter, but he also collected historical texts, records and hymns including the Epic of Gilgamesh, the great Sumerian poem. His interest in culture and art has survived more than his military exploits.

Our military failed to heed warnings about the dangers to the cultural heritage of Iraq. Art is an expression of individual people, of freedom. It is democracy at work. Guarding the museum with even a single tank would have prevented the pillage. It would have shown the Iraqi people that we respected them, and the importance of culture.

The looters broke the heads off of priceless statues that could not be moved. They gathered thousands of ancient pots, jewels, gold work and sacred objects that will never be recovered. They also took extraordinary treasures: an Uruk alabaster vase about four feet high from 5300 years ago with the first known representation of a ritual procession offering sacrifices. A rare example of a female head in white marble the "Lady of Warka", from 4200 years ago is gone. The oldest surviving example of writing on a clay tablet is missing.

The Sumerians lived in the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They established small city states each with a patron god and developed irrigation systems, trade, systems of measurement, numerology and cosmology. They wrote down the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Sumerians carved distinctive stone statues with large eyes (originally inlaid) and graceful feathered skirts. Unique objects in bronze such as a chariot pulled by four wild asses only 2 inches high or a vase in the form of wrestlers cannot be sold. They will probably be melted along with the many unique gold pieces stolen from the museum.

Around 4300 years ago the Akkadians, a Semitic language group, settled near the city of Babylon, not far from today's Baghdad. Sargon, an Akkadian general became king. A bronze head, probably a portrait of Sargon, is another priceless treasure of the Baghdad

Museum. And the great Hammurabi of Babylon who ruled 3800 years ago left behind a codex of the first recorded system of laws; the location of those tablets is currently not known.

Smaller, less famous works such as ornamented pots and seals by ordinary people can be as exciting as admiring masterpieces made in homage to great leaders by great artists. Each piece broken is a type of death, a loss of a soul who was speaking to us from thousands of years ago.

The State Department had promised scholars that they would protect the antiquities. Archeologists warned the Pentagon of the continued danger to the National Museum. On April 10 NBC had a story about vulnerable archeological sites. On Saturday NPR spoke of the looting spreading to the museum. There was plenty of time to protect what was left.

But no. The National Museum of Iraq was emptied of hundreds of thousands of artifacts. We will never see most of those stolen art works again. And now, despite the outrage at the looting of the museum, we hear that the National Library has also been looted and burned.

As we are grieving for the thousands of men, women, and children who have died and been wounded in this war, we must also grieve for the cultural heritage that has been destroyed. The route of the United States Army was near more than a dozen of the major archeological sites in Iraq. It is an area that has seen warring armies for centuries. But through it all, these treasures from past cultures survived. Until now.

Museum officials are calling for a moratorium on the purchase of Iraqi antiquities; scholars are planning a fact-finding mission to Iraq. Perhaps one solution is for the Louver, the British Museum, and American museums to send back some of their Middle Eastern treasures. These collections were taken from Iraq by archeologists before international laws prevented the removal of cultural artifacts.

We must restore the heart of history and the soul of Iraq.

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Since this article was published we have ravaged the entire country, built soccer fields on archeological sites, and allowed the vast looting of sites all over the country, in many cases raising money for arm. Donny George, the top cultural official and President of the State Board of Antiquities, resigned in early August 2006, citing the “lack of funding and growing interference from the radical Shiite party now in control of the government ministry.” US troops were reported to have used bulldozers to create a soccer pitch on the site of Hindanu, an ancient Assyrian port on the Euphrates.” “ US troops used bulldozers

to flatten part of Tell Al_Dhiba' on the outskirts of modern Baghdad, the site of the Babylonian town of Uzarlulu. “

There is no money to pay police who have been guarding archeological sites “without which looters will be given free reign” George said. “Iraq’s top cultural official resigns,” *The Art Newspaper*, September 2006, 1.



Behnam Keryo writing cuneiform script at the British Museum Summer 2006

In the summer of 2006, in London, I met Behnam Keryo from Iraq, working in Southern France. He told me that he has a website <http://maisonduscribe.site.voila.fr/index.htm> and a museum where he preserves cuneiform tablets. He was in tears of anger over the war in Iraq that has destroyed so much culture. He makes cuneiform tablets and gives workshops in order to preserve a tradition. He writes cuneiform in the Aramaic language with a stylus in clay. (the Assyrian Babylonian language is Semitic). He spoke of

Aramaic as a language like musical notes, 4 notes, up and down, like 4 lines of music on a musical scale, indicated by diacritical marks.