

# The Cultural Heritage Protection in Iraq: History, Development, and Challenges

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Through the factual analysis of the beginning, development, setbacks, and challenges of modern Iraqi archaeology and cultural relics protection, this paper carries out the research on different development stages under the current international and domestic political backgrounds, and analyzes the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage and the source of the predicament. There are many reasons for the tragedy of Iraqi cultural heritage, including military conflict, international economic situation, lack of state power, severe poverty, and religious conflict.

*Keywords:* The Iraqi archaeology, cultural heritage, the cultural heritage protection

## The Beginnings of Iraqi Archaeology

People's attempts to legislatively protect Iraqi cultural relics and archaeological sites began with the "1884 Ottoman Antiquities Law" promulgated in 1884 to prevent the frequent archaeological expeditions carried out by European and American archaeological teams in the Mesopotamia which caused damages to Ottoman cultural property. But the sultans of the Ottoman Empire had no real interest in protecting the material remains and historical heritage of the ancient Mesopotamia, but only regarded it as the material property of the empire and the source of its capture of precious metals. Contrary to the indifferent attitude of the Ottoman Empire towards the ancient Mesopotamia cultural relics, European and American countries were very interested in archaeology in the Middle East. In the absence of substantive legal norms, the archaeological expeditions of European and American countries during this period lacked scientific excavation methods. These brought significant damage to Iraq's cultural heritage.

After the First World War, Britain occupied most of Iraq, which was originally Ottoman territory, and established a colonial government controlled by British officials for centuries based on the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire. During the British colonial administration and the early Hashemite dynasty, Iraqi archaeology was in an unprecedented period of prosperity. Many major discoveries of ancient Mesopotamia civilizations were in this period, such as the ancient city Ur which is regarded by Europeans as the hometown of the prophet Abraham and its royal tombs, the early strata of the ancient city of Uruk and the ruins of Jemdet-Nasr which are identified as the source of writing, and the Temple Ishtar of the ancient city of Nineveh. Many European and American countries have participated in this wave of Iraqi archaeology through their academic institutions, the most famous of which are the British Museum and the Oriental Institute of the

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University of Chicago. This is very closely related to relevant cultural relic policies during the British colonial ruling in Iraq. First, the British government incorporated the archaeological project into its overall plan of colonial rule. Archaeologists can serve as advisers to the British government in Iraq or even hold important official positions, and they can exert a greater influence on its policies. Among them, Gertrude Bell and Leonard Wolley are the most typical examples. Bell held an important position in the colonial government and directly influenced British Iraq policy. He also presided over the construction of museums, the formulation of cultural relics laws and important archaeological projects. Woolley was dispatched by the British Museum to carry out the archaeology of the Tolia Peninsula and he made significant academic contributions. In addition, the British government also combined the power of archaeologists with its military activities in the Middle East. As a cultural and academic institution, the British Museum plays a media role in connecting the government and scholars. For example, the British Museum, in the name of protecting the biblical land and the archaeological sites of the Byzantine Empire, dispatched archaeologists to serve in military operations against the Ottoman Empire; also benefited from the British war against the Ottoman Empire, British Museum forces Turkish captives to do hard labor in archaeological digs in Iraq (Bernhardsson, 2005, p. 9). The British archaeological undertaking in Iraq has always been closely related to its official policies and military operations.

Large-scale archaeological excavations have brought an unprecedented large number of ancient artifacts, which involves more complex attribution issues. During the period of British colonial rule, the British government realized that preventing the illegal export of Iraqi cultural relics and implementing the ownership regulations of cultural relics was the most effective way to protect the heritage of its ancient civilization. The ultimate aim has always been to ensure the continuation of the British team's archaeological work in Iraq, as well as to ensure that the British have access to the ancient artifacts. After Britain occupied Iraq, it also asked the defeated Germany for the cultural relics it excavated in Iraq before the war, which shows that Britain regards Iraq and its cultural heritage as its imperial property.

During the period of British colonial administration and the Hashemite dynasty, Iraqi archaeology ushered in a golden age, mainly reflected in the increase in the number of archaeological projects and the adoption of more scientific and systematic working methods rather than brutal and destructive excavations. The antiquities obtained during this period led to a breakthrough in the understanding of ancient Iraqi language, history, and art. However, if we examine the progress of this academic history from the perspective of international relations, it is not difficult to find that the policy towards Iraq during the British colonial rule provided many conveniences for the development of British archaeological projects, and the political environment under British colonial rule also gave various European and American countries freedom to carry out archaeological projects in Iraq and to bring artifacts out of Iraq. The ideological impetus behind the first golden age of Iraqi archaeology has to do with the imperialist perspective of European countries and the historical tradition of the Christian faith, in which the Iraqis played a negligible role.

### **Archaeology in the Saddam Period and Iraqi National Identity**

The political need to revive the ancient Mesopotamia civilization directly promoted the development of Iraqi archaeology. In the years after Saddam Hussein came to power, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party nearly doubled its funding for archaeological projects and established new local archaeological museums in most provinces. The archaeological excavations in Iraq and the professionalism of the team and cultural relics protection institutions

had also gradually improved. Under Saddam's strong push, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party nationalized the Iraq Petroleum Company, which had a monopoly on oil exploration and processing in Iraq at the time, in 1972, and renamed it Iraq National Oil Company. Since then, Iraq's oil industry has ushered in a stage of rapid development, which brought huge financial revenue to the government. The increase in government revenue provided favorable conditions for the development of large-scale public infrastructure construction projects, among which the water conservancy projects based on the Euphrates and Diyala Rivers were particularly valued by the government. Since most of the important cities and their sites of ancient Mesopotamia civilization were located along the Euphrates, Tigris, and Diyala rivers, many ancient city sites would be submerged due to the construction of dams. Therefore, in parallel with the vigorous construction of water conservancy projects, extensive rescue archaeological excavations had been carried out. For example, the Tell-es-Suleimeh and Me-Turan sites in the Diyala River Basin were excavated by a joint archaeological team composed of the Japanese, Danish, and Iraqis (B. R. Foster, K. P. Foster, & Gerstenblith, 2005, pp. 204-205). In addition, at the same time, archaeological teams formed by Italians, British, Japanese and the French also carried out investigations and preliminary excavations at many sites in the Mosul region of northern Iraq.

Through a large-scale archaeological project and cultural reconstruction of the ancient Mesopotamia civilization, Saddam tried to gain cultural confidence for the modern Iraqi state from the ancient Mesopotamia civilization before the rise of Islamic civilization. Of course, Saddam's political pursuits were fundamentally different from those of Assyrian scholars and archaeologists. In addition to praising the ancient civilization of the Mesopotamia and portraying himself as a Babylonian emperor, Saddam also claimed that he was a descendant of the prophet of Islam, thereby incorporating the history of the Abbasid and Hashemite Dynasties of Islamic civilization into the cultural identity system of modern Iraq. All in all, by sorting out the historical facts related to Saddam's shaping of his personal image and his support for archaeology in the Mesopotamia, we can see that he tried to construct a relatively consistent and inclusive historic narrative from the turmoil in the Middle East. The ancient Mesopotamia civilization and Arab nationalism are the two pillars of the narrative (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett, 2001, p. 17), and the utilization of the ancient Mesopotamia civilization is Saddam's political innovation.

During Saddam's reign, the development of Iraqi archaeology achieved a great leap. During this process, Iraqis gradually began to realize the importance of their ancient civilization heritage to national unity, and they were more and more involved in the discovery and research of their historical heritage. Although the financial situation of Saddam's government was strained by the war during the Iran-Iraq War, the major ancient city sites in Iraq still enjoyed the strict protection of the army, and the robbery and excavation of the sites that had been in constant stream since the British colonial government almost disappeared.

### **The Loss of Cultural Relics in Iraq After the Gulf War**

After the Gulf War, Iraq's cultural heritage suffered a long-term catastrophe (Suter, 2008, p. 195), and a larger-scale excavation of ruins was directly related to the Gulf War. The main reasons are as follows:

First, the poverty of Iraqi civilians is the most direct cause of the surge in the frequency and scale of excavations. Saddam's government had been in deep financial crisis since the Iran-Iraq war, carrying nearly \$13 billion in war loans, most of which came from wartime allies such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the rapid development of the oil industry during Saddam Hussein made it the largest pillar of Iraq's national

economy. Due to the damage to Iraq's cruise ships and various oil production equipment caused by the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq's post-war gross national product was down nearly 50% compared to that before the war. The trauma suffered by the Iraqi economy during the Iran-Iraq War directly led to the occurrence of the Gulf War and the further deterioration of the Iraqi economy. Unable to repay the war loan, Saddam's government invaded and quickly occupied Kuwait on the pretext of Kuwait stealing Iraqi oil resources through sidetracking. Four days later, the United States launched economic sanctions against Iraq, and Iraq's foreign trade was almost completely banned. This was a devastating blow to the Iraqi economic system that relied on exporting oil. The successive Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War, as well as the long-term economic sanctions that followed, have plunged the lives of the Iraqi people into unprecedented poverty. Moreover, the archaeological sites of the ancient Mesopotamia civilization are all over Iraq, and the most numerous remains of these sites are cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals. The ancients would dry or bake them after writing on the tablets. The clay tablet is extremely hard and can be buried deep underground for thousands of years and still remains intact. The preservation of the cylinder seal is the same. Therefore, once it is discovered, it can be sold at a high price in the cultural relic market without any repair work. Under the economic conditions of post-war Iraq, stealing intact, small, portable tablets and seals from ruins and resealing them seemed to be the quickest and most convenient way to obtain wealth for survival.

Recent studies evaluating the looting of archaeological sites across Iraq have shown that looting after the Gulf War is directly linked to the prosperity of the international market for cultural relics. For example, in Iraq at that time, cultural relics needed to pass relatively fixed routes and organizations to flow to the international market. The towns of Afaq, Rifa'I, and al-Fajr in Southern Iraq were the centers of the activities of such illegal trade organizations. A survey of archaeological sites showed that the cities that suffered more looting in the years following the Gulf War were concentrated around these three cities, while archaeological sites in Northern Iraq, even as famous as the ancient city of Babylon, were less damaged than those in the south (Stone, 2008, p. 67). Not only did Iraqi civilians contribute a large amount of goods to the cultural relic market by directly robbing the ruins, even the high-level officials of Saddam's government also participated in the sale of cultural relics to make huge profits. Saddam's son, Uday Hussein, for example, sold stone bowls stolen from Roman-era strata at the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon (Foster et al., 2005, p. 208). In addition, the collections of the archaeological museums in Iraq's provinces continued to be looted by city dwellers.

In the early 20th century, a well-preserved cylinder seal was sold for over \$400,000 in the New York antiquities market (Lawler, 2008, p. 582); at the same time, public auctions for the Moore Collection and the Erlenneyer Collection have aroused the enthusiasm of major museums and universities in the United States and have greatly increased the value of the ancient Mesopotamia cultural relics such as cylinder seals (Gibson, 2008, p. 13). Since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1970s, the rise in oil prices caused by the wars in the Middle East countries triggered a chain reaction of economic recession in the United States, leading to inflation and the outflow of a large amount of private investment from traditional industries. For American investors during the recession, purchase of valuable cultural relics was an effective means of preserving the value of property. It can be said that the Iraqi people would not be able to obtain wealth by looting cultural relics if it were not for the pursuit of cultural relics in ancient Mesopotamia by European and American cultural relics collectors, which made the value of such cultural relics soared in the international market. Thus, the problem of robbery in Iraqi archaeological sites has always been a complex crux caused by the intertwining of international and domestic

factors (Khalaf, 2020, p. 52). Shortly after the Gulf War, from archaeological sites and museums to Iraqi borders and countries in the Middle East, and finally to auction houses and private showrooms in European and American countries, a fairly complete set of cultural relics circulation routes was formed. Civilians in Iraq and Middle East countries, some dignitaries, cultural relics dealers, as well as collection institutions in Europe and the United States, were all involved in this circulation, forming a huge illegal trade network.

Under the interaction of the three conditions of widespread poverty in Iraq, the demand of the international cultural relics market, and the maturity of illegal smuggling routes, the looting activities of archaeological sites have new characteristics compared with those before the establishment of the Republic of Iraq: The looters are often organized armed groups, a large proportion of which are Iraqi civilians hired from the immediate vicinity of the site; excavations using more efficient heavy equipment had greatly increased, so as the size and depth of the damaged sites; and these changes were often capital-driven and Iraqi civilians who participated in robbery activities were often passively dominated by capital. That is, wealthy cultural relic collectors in Europe and the United States could even directly book a specific type of cultural relics, for example, a relief sculpture from the Neo-Assyrian period. Then they could hire someone to steal directly from the Nineveh ruins, rather than passively selecting goods in the cultural relic market (Gottlieb, 2003, p. A16). The transformation of site looting after the Gulf War has caused irreversible damage to Iraq's historical heritage.

### **The Loss of Cultural Relics During the Iraq War in 2003**

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and occupied the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. The fall of Baghdad coincided with the looting of the Iraq National Museum, and in just one week, about 170,000 artifacts were stolen or destroyed, of which about 10,000 artifacts remained unaccounted for (Lawler, 2008, p. 582). Since George Bush came to power in 2000, he had begun to implement a more radical Iraq policy. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, launching a war against Iraq has become one of the main issues of his administration. In the face of such an international situation, the cultural departments in the Iraqi government and the staff of the National Museum have done their best to reduce the loss of cultural relics. Outside Iraq, a group of American archaeologists, cultural relic collectors, and museum practitioners smelled the Bush administration's Iraq policy, and lobbied many American military officials jointly. They also made great efforts to protect Iraqi cultural heritage (Campbell, 2009, p. 424). It can be said that the cultural tragedy in April 2003 was not unexpected, but with the unremitting efforts of all sectors of society, it still could not be avoided. This article will analyze the root causes of the hijacking of the Iraqi National Museum in 2003 on the basis of sorting out the relevant events before and after the outbreak of the Iraq War.

In October 2002, McGuire Gibson, a professor of Mesopotamia Archaeology at the School of Oriental Studies at the University of Chicago, submitted a report to the U.S. State Department, stating that when formulating a military plan for Iraq, it was necessary to make conservation efforts precisely, because of the surge in the loss of cultural relics after the 1991 Gulf War: During the war alone, about 5,000 artifacts from regional museums in Iraq's provinces entered the international market for cultural relics, and countless archaeological ruins were destroyed. In February of the following year, a team of archaeologists and heads of collections lobbied to Defense Deputy Assistant Secretary Joseph Collins, reaffirming that the museum should be recognized and paid attention in combat operations. Collins agreed to issue a formal order prohibiting the theft or destruction of Iraqi artifacts by U.S. troops (Lawler, 2008, p. 583). In addition, in the final moments

before the war, an anonymous U.S. official approached Central Command with a willingness to deploy mobile forces to provide security for the museum as needed. However, during the implementation of the relevant orders, officials of the U.S. Department of Defense experienced mutual shirking of responsibility, resulting in the failure of the U.S. military to effectively defend the major museums in Iraq during the war. According to the Washington Post, the U.S. military's instructions on how to protect Iraqi cultural heritage institutions from further looting and destruction in wartime were still in "working draft" status, but U.S. Department of Defense officials said that the plan in the document had already begun to be implemented in the U.S. military (Cogbill, 2008, p. 205). The scandal over the hijacking of the Iraqi National Museum had caused an international sensation through TV news, and the White House had to admit the seriousness of the problem. Nearly a week after the National Museum was looted, the tanks of the U.S. Army to protect the museum finally arrived, and the tragedy caused by the war could not be reversed.

By combing the event process, we can see the crux of the problem. Although long before the U.S. military invaded Iraq, the protection of its cultural relics had received extensive attention in the United States and the international community, including scholars, media, cultural relic collectors, ordinary people and even U.S. government officials; the attitude of the U.S. Department of Defense and the White House after the incident showed that the relevant instructions to guide the actual operations of the military failed to enter the implementation process because they failed to receive the high attention from the U.S. military. This phenomenon shows that in the issue of wartime cultural relics protection, the concerns and interest demand between the military and the government, academia and society are inevitably inconsistent. To put it into practice, the cooperation between the government, the military and academia needs to be systematically guaranteed by establishing a more complete relevant system.

### Summary

Through the factual analysis of the beginning, development, setbacks, and challenges of modern Iraqi archaeology and cultural relics protection, this paper studies different development stages under the current international and Iraqi domestic political backgrounds, hoping to analyze the source of the cultural heritage dilemma of Iraq in this way. During the period of British colonial administration and the Hashemite Dynasty, although the British scholar Gertrude Bell devoted himself to constructing a historical tradition belonging to Iraq and made a pioneering contribution to modern Iraqi archaeology and cultural relic protection, the prosperity of Iraqi archaeology during this period was constrained by the international situation. A large number of unearthed cultural relics have not only failed to become the cultural cornerstone of modern Iraqi national identity, but have flowed into European and American countries in large quantities, becoming the spoils of imperialist cultural aggression. From the founding of the Republic of Iraq to the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991, the political value of ancient Mesopotamia civilization to modern Iraq was highlighted, which not only further promoted the development of Iraqi archaeology, but also accelerated the integration of its cultural heritage into Iraq's political history narrative. The Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003 caused a multi-dimensional devastating blow to the country's archaeology and cultural relics protection, the most notable of which were the robbery of ruins, the smuggling of cultural relics, and the destruction of museums. The reason for the tragedy of Iraqi cultural heritage involves many aspects, including military conflicts, international economic situation, lack of state power and severe poverty, and religious conflicts.

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