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Protecting and Recording our Archaeological Heritage in Southern Iraq

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Recovering the Past

Protecting and Recording our Archaeological Heritage in Southern Iraq

Abdulmir al Hamdani

As the inspector representing the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Dhi Qar Governorate in Iraq, the province which contains most of the great Sumerian cities, including Ur, Eridu, Larsa, Lagash, Girsu, and Umma, it has been my responsibility to do what I could to protect and record the archaeological and historic record of this area. This region has been under attack from organized bands of looters since 1994. Here I will chronicle the nature and causes of the looting, and describe some of the projects that we have undertaken both to curb damage to sites and record new ones.

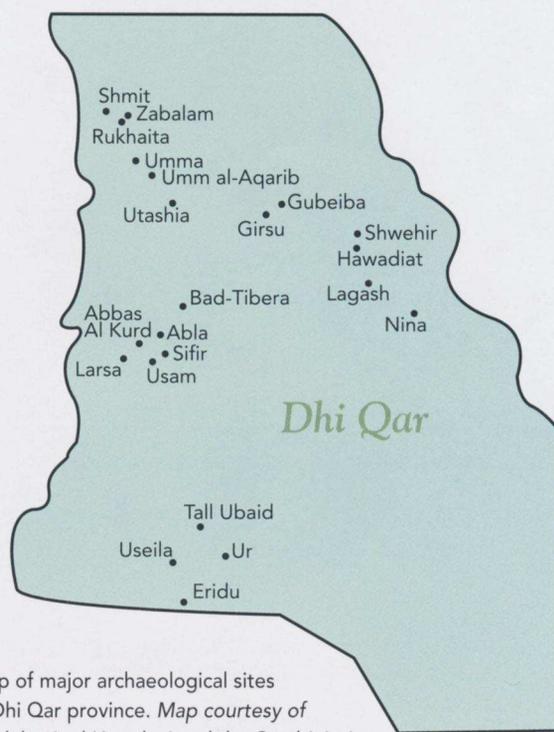
The Extent of Site Looting

In the looting of an archaeological site, groups of men, often armed, will descend on a site. In some instances, they are impelled by the prices offered in nearby towns with thriving antiquities markets, but, at some of the larger sites, entrepreneurs provide transportation, food, and protection for the workers, paying them for their finds on site. The most damaged sites date for the most part to the late-third and early-second millennia BCE. However, some Parthian- and Sassanian-period sites have also been targeted.

One of the oldest sites to have been severely damaged is Umm al-Aqarib, a large, sprawling city dating to the third millennium BCE. Between 1999 and 2002, the Department of Antiquities expedition, directed by Donny George, conducted excavations at this and a number of the other sites targeted by looters. By excavating year-round, the excavators were able to keep the looters at bay, both through their presence and by providing employment to many of the men who otherwise would have resorted to looting to feed their families. In the course of their excavations, an extensive palace/temple complex was uncovered, indicating that this must have once been a major Sumerian center before it was abandoned to the desert. Now,



Map of Iraq, including a map of Dhi Qar province, which has been the special target of looters.



Map of major archaeological sites in Dhi Qar province. Map courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani and the Carabinieri.

Umm al-Aqarib is not only surrounded by old looting holes, but new ones have also been sunk into the recently excavated area.

Other major sites that have been looted were important cities during the Third Dynasty of Ur and were last occupied during the reign of Hammurabi's son, Samsuiluna. One of the most important of these is Umma, a major political and trading center. Like Umm al-Aqarib, the Department of Antiquities excavated the site (until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003) and uncovered a major temple and numerous domestic areas. Apart from the recent work of the Department of Antiquities,



Illegal digging at Umma. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*

the site has never really been investigated by archaeologists, although tablets have been taken from the mound for decades. Never, however, has the destruction been so extensive. Here, the looters often dig tunnels between the existing holes, intent on keeping themselves in the shade during the hot summers.

Nearby lies Zabalam, a town located on the nexus between what were once a series of major watercourses. Nearly the entire surface of Zabalam, together with nearby Tell Shmit, was completely pitted by 2000, prompting the Department of Antiquities to reclaim these sites by excavating there year-round between 2000 and 2002. In the course of this work, they uncovered another major temple with columns decorated with spiral or palm tree designs at Zabalam, as well as residential districts at both Zabalam and Shmit.

Of real concern here is that so many of these badly damaged sites, although well-known, never received the attention of archaeologists before the looters got to them. This is also true of both Bad Tibera, a large site dating to the early-second millennium BCE, and Tell Jidr, dating to the first millennium CE. Both of these sites were very heavily pitted; Bad Tibera, no doubt, for tablets and Tell Jidr for coins, glass, and jewelry, which have been found at the latter site.

In addition to these major sites are hundreds of small and medium-sized sites, many of which have been pitted. Elizabeth Stone, who has examined site looting using satellite imagery (Stone 2007) informs me that 36 percent of all of the known



Excavations at Umm al-Aqarib in the 2000 season. *Photo courtesy of Donny George.*

sites in our province show some signs of looting (to which we should add the marshland sites) and the nearly seven-square kilometers of looting holes there represents 14 percent of the total archaeological surface area. Indeed, this estimate is likely too low since she rarely has recent imagery.

What Makes the People Loot?

To understand why looting has become such a way of life in this area, we must consider two elements. The first, of course, is the demand for antiquities. It is well known that this comes not so much from within Iraq, but from collectors and dealers in the West and in some places in the Persian Gulf and Japan. But the greed of these collectors and dealers relies on the local conditions, which requires lawlessness, a lack of regard for cultural heritage, and the need for cash. These conditions were manifested in Dhi Qar Province after the first Gulf War. Thus, though it is certainly the case that looters are mostly made up of the local population, one of the factors that lies behind this activity was government projects conducted by the Ba'ath regime, which led directly both to the destruction of the sites and to the impoverishment of the local population.

Over the past four decades, the regime carried out many construction projects—building irrigation canals, drainage ditches, roads, bridges, railroads, and military camps—without concern for their impact on the archaeological sites in the area. Even before 1990 when the Department of Antiquities was still strong, it was rarely consulted or considered when these projects were implemented. For example, the government built the Third River, a huge drain that runs through the middle of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates, flowing under the Euphrates south of Nasariyah before making its way to the Persian Gulf. This project took no account of any

archaeological sites that might be in the vicinity, destroying eighteen archaeological sites in the seventy-kilometer stretch between the provincial capitals at Nasariyah and Larsa.

More recently, the regime worked to drain the marshes, at least in part because they served as a refuge for those who had rebelled against the regime after the failed uprising following the first Gulf War. Not only did this project destroy a way of life that can be traced back to the earliest stages in Mesopotamian civilization, but in the process they also constructed a series of lakes that destroyed twenty-five sites in the area near Eridu. When the government showed so little concern for its antiquities, the local people, who had seen artifacts and ancient monuments bulldozed by their government, began to feel that looting archaeological sites was acceptable.

Moreover, these local people now had a real need to find new sources of income. The campaign to drain the marshes, conducted between 1992 and 1998, removed water from the entire area between Kut on the Tigris and Suq es-Shuyukh on the Euphrates, turning what was once agricultural land into desert and depriving the local people of their grain fields and date orchards. This resulted in the displacement of many people from the countryside to the towns and cities, where—especially during the time of the economic embargo—they were unable to find work. The international trade in illegal antiquities, when it moved into Iraq around 1994, found many people who, without an adequate social safety net, were eager to earn an income by any means possible.

The willingness of these people to take up looting comes in part from the connection that they make between the state and Iraq's deep past. At the reconstructed palace in Babylon, the original part of the wall has bricks with the stamp of Nebuchadnezzar on them. Above them, a new wall was



Illegal digging at Zabalam. Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.



Third River drainage. Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.

constructed with bricks stamped with the name of Saddam Hussein in Arabic and cuneiform. In addition, among the ubiquitous pictures of Saddam Hussein, many showed him dressed as one or another of the ancient rulers of Mesopotamia. The intervention of the regime into all aspects of people's lives made the people hate their government, and their appropriation of the symbols of ancient Mesopotamia led to an association between Iraq's past and modern regime in the minds of the people. The looters used this association to overcome the shame that would otherwise have been meted out to those involved in such an illegal activity. Moreover, after the 2003 war, the looters spread the word of religious fatwas, which allowed the trade in antiquities, especially pre-Islamic ones, acceptable if the money raised was used to aid the insurrection. No such fatwa actually existed.

As discussed above, the looting began in 1994 and the Department of Antiquities fought back between 1999 and 2002 by conducting year-long excavations at some of the sites that had suffered the worst damage, like Umma, Umm al-Aqarib, Zabalam, Shmit, Bismaya, and Wilaya. This strategy was successful in curbing the looting when the archaeologists were present, especially since they were employing the impoverished population of the area. However, when the archaeologists were withdrawn during the run-up to the 2003 war, they left behind an unemployed mass of workers who had been trained to recognize valuable artifacts. During the chaos that followed the fall of the former regime, these people served as the core of the new groups of looters who took over where the archaeologists left off. In some instances, the tribal system, which was the only remaining government in the south after the fall of the regime, served to protect the looters. In other instances, such as in the area around Uruk, Lagash, and Eridu, the tribal sheikhs acted to protect these sites.

Fatwa against Fatwa

Since I am only an archaeologist, I have little ability to help solve the problems of poverty in my area. However, what I can do is work to change hearts and minds both through moral persuasion and active protection of sites. I mentioned above the fake fatwas that made the local population believe that looting archaeological sites is sanctioned by Allah. Legitimate fatwas can only

The following questions were sent to the office of Al-Said Al-Sistani in the city of Najaf. We had the reply as follows:

1) As you know, after the fall of the former regime, a large quantity of antiquities from the Iraqi museum in Baghdad were looted, some of which have been smuggled out of Iraq.

a. Is it permissible for any person who has those antiquities to retain them or give them to others?

Answer: Absolutely not! (They) must be returned to the Iraq Museum.

b. What is the religious opinion on whether these can be bought or sold, whether inside Iraq or abroad?

Answer: Absolutely not! and does not become the property of the buyer, and it must be returned to the Iraq Museum

c. Is it permissible to pay money to save these antiquities?

Answer: This is permissible, but they must be returned to the museum, as I mentioned earlier.

2) There are some people who are digging in the archaeological sites in various parts of Iraq, recovering artifacts and selling them within Iraq and/or smuggling them out of Iraq. Is this permissible?

Answer: Sistani has prevented those activities.

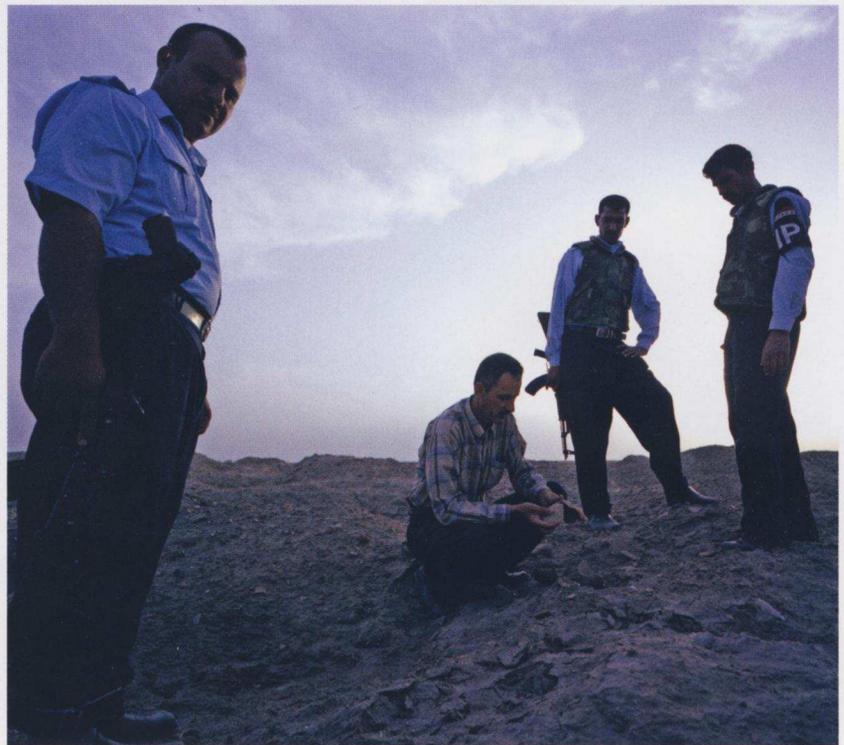
3) Does religious opinion make a distinction between artifacts considered in the previous paragraphs between Islamic and non-Islamic antiquities?

Answer: There is no difference made between them in the foregoing paragraphs.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 سئل: بعد سقوط النظام السابق في العراق، تم تهريب كميات كبيرة من الآثار العراقية من المتاحف العراقية في بغداد إلى دول أخرى، وقد تم بيعها في السوق السوداء. هل يجوز بيع هذه الآثار؟ وهل يجوز شراءها؟ وهل يجوز استخدامها في البيع والشراء؟
 الجواب: لا يجوز بيعها ولا شراؤها ولا استخدامها في البيع والشراء، بل يجب إعادتها إلى المتاحف العراقية.
 سئل: هل يجوز شراء هذه الآثار من السوق السوداء؟
 الجواب: لا يجوز شراءها، بل يجب إعادتها إلى المتاحف العراقية.
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The fatwa of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani indicating that the looting of archaeological sites was not permitted and that all artifacts should be returned to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.



Abdulmir al Hamdani and Iraqi police inspect a recently looted archaeological site in southern Iraq, March 2004. Photo courtesy of Micah Garen/Four Corners Media.



The archaeological site of Umma in southern Iraq has been heavily looted. These stones were placed by the looters to mark their territory. July, 2004. Photo courtesy of Micah Garen/Four Corners Media.



Looted objects, including two thousand cuneiform tablets, at the Iraqi police headquarters in Baghdad, June 2004. Photo courtesy of Micah Garen/Four Corners Media.

be written by those at the top of the religious hierarchy, of whom no one is more revered than the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. I therefore sent queries to the office of al-Said al-Sistani and explained the problem of site looting. He immediately propagated a legitimate fatwa indicating that the looting of archaeological sites was not permitted and that all artifacts should be returned to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage.

Fighting Back

At the time of the 2003 war, my headquarters was in the Nasariyah Museum. Like all local residents, I stayed home during the battle for Nasariyah, but when I returned to work I found that my museum had been taken over as the headquarters



Cuneiform tablet dating to Early Dynastic II period (ca. 2900–2700 BCE). *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



This stone plaque depicting a lion fighting a snake dating to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1900–1595 BCE) was among the looted objects that have been recovered. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*

for the United States Marines stationed in Nasariyah. This gave me the opening to urge them to include archaeological site protection within their mission. The first few days were a little tense, but, after some time, they began to listen to me, and, in early May 2003, we first introduced them to the serious condition of the sites. Since then, joint patrols have been conducted to examine the state of the archaeological sites.

As time went on, these patrols became more regular and led to the arrest of a large number of looters, although we were mostly only able to arrest those doing the actual digging, not the real criminals who were behind them. One aspect that complicated our work was the 2002 Antiquities law, which has yet to be revised and made looting a capital offense. No one is keen to put to death large numbers of impoverished men who are engaged in this activity. The looters were therefore generally jailed overnight and released with a warning.

As time went by, we were able to make increasing numbers of regular patrols, especially after the Italian Carabinieri took over for the Marines in the summer of July 2003. In Italy, one of the tasks of the Carabinieri is to protect Italy's rich archaeological past, so I was now working with a group that was already experienced in this work.

In addition to regular patrols, they developed effective ways of rounding up large numbers of looters. After establishing a series of look-out points on the major sites, we also conducted raids. In our most successful sorties, we used multiple helicopters, so that the forces from one helicopter drove the looters into the hands of the others. Moreover, after 2004, those arrested were no longer let go with a warning. Now, they were getting longer sentences and were fined for the cost of the antiquities stolen. Together, these efforts have been successful in slowing the site looting in Dhi Qar since the end of 2003.



Confiscated glass pots, jars, bottles, and cups. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*

As the term for the presence of the coalition forces neared its end, the Department of Antiquities received funding to develop a new force, their own archaeological police. Since it was the Italian Carabinieri in Nasariyah who had arrived with training in the curbing of looting and who had developed effective tactics against the looting situation in Iraq, they were the people given the task of training this new force both in basic policing and in the tactics that had been successful in protecting archaeological sites.

Once this new force, the Facilities Protection Service (FPS), was not only fully trained, but also equipped with guns, GPS, communications, and vehicles, they were ready to take over from the Carabinieri, not only in the Dhi Qar Governorate, but throughout the country. The FPS now numbers approximately twelve hundred men, some of whom serve as site guards at the most threatened sites, while the remainder remain mobile and conduct raids to deter looting in all areas. Unfortunately, the

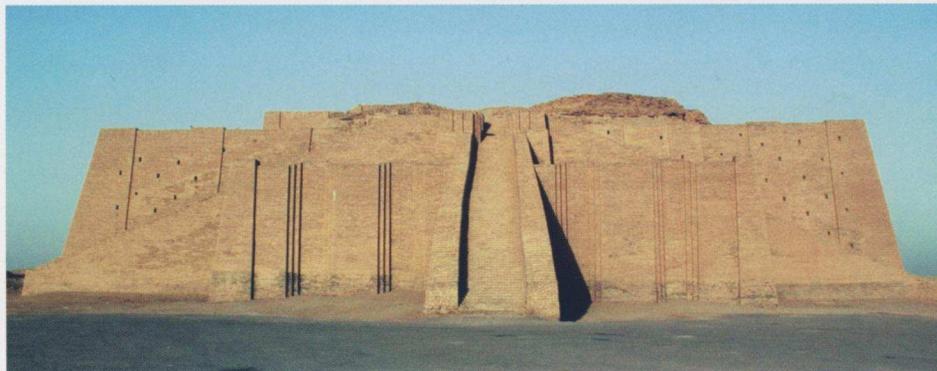
government has not seen fit to provide the FPS with fuel since 2006, which has severely limited their effectiveness.

Artifact Recovery

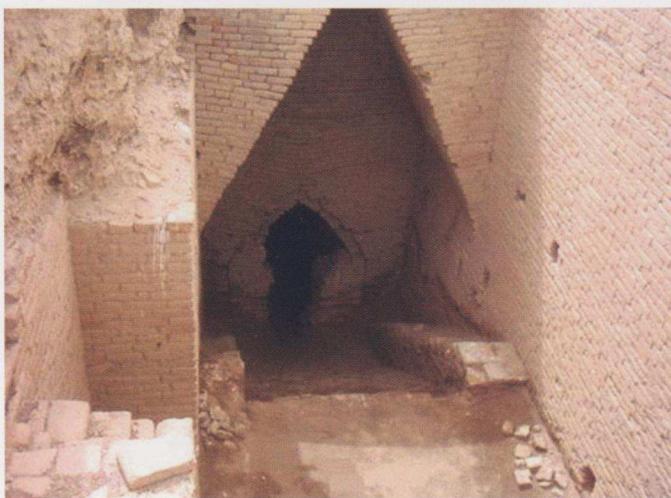
Preventing the looting of archaeological sites has only been part of our work; we have also been successful in retrieving looted artifacts. Some of these were collected when we arrested the looters on the sites, but most of the objects came from raids on homes of the looters' organizers, most of whom live in the market centers at al-Fajr and al-Rifa'i. For this to be successful, we needed to take a page out of the counter-espionage manual, developing a network of spies and informers who told us where we would find the artifacts.

The materials recovered from these raids provide a clear indication of the types of artifacts that have been targeted by the market. The simplest items are of baked and unbaked clay. Since Mesopotamia lacks stone, most of our ancestors

owned clay figurines, usually of women or animals, plaques whose decoration ranged from simple figures to elaborate scenes, as well as model beds, chairs, chariots, boats, and the like. The materials of unbaked clay are cuneiform tablets, which might record accounts, letters, contracts, and such. Of special importance seem to have been items of stone dating to the late-third and early-second millennium BCE. These include many stone vessels and cylinder seals, but also a unique stone plaque depicting a lion fighting a snake. But, as indicated



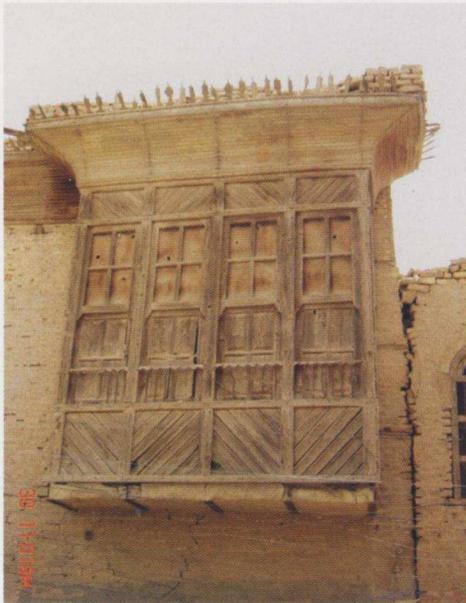
The front façade of the ziggurat of Ur. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



The tomb of King Shulgi in the royal cemetery at Ur. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



Mud houses at the Shmit site. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



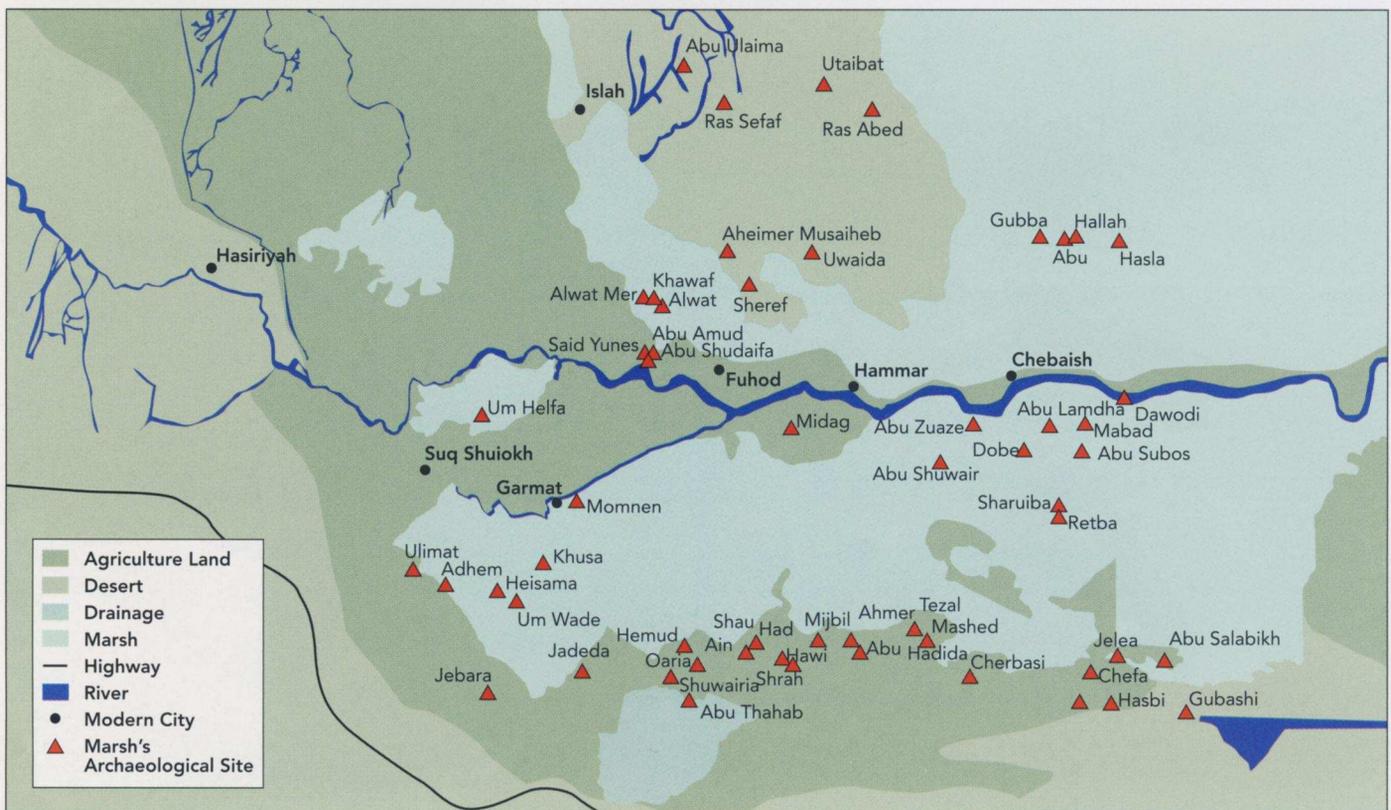
Heritage building in Nasiriyah city dating to late Ottoman period. Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.

above, the early sites were not the only ones targeted by the looters. From later sites we recovered many early coins, glass vessels, and pieces of jewelry.

One factor that has complicated this process is the antiquities dealers, who, not satisfied with the large amounts of material that have been dug up, turn their attention to creating fakes and smuggling. If you have one tablet, why not make many more that say (more or less) the same thing? If you have one figurine, why not make more? In most instances, however, these items are quite easily distinguished when examined by trained archaeologists. It becomes more difficult to distinguish fakes from real objects, however, when we see objects that lack good parallels with known objects, especially when they show up in shops far from Iraq.

Documentation

Not all my work has been devoted to the plague of site looting. Part of my responsibility is to fully document all antiquities within the Dhi Qar Province. Because of the embargo, very few digital cameras were available in Iraq until after the 2003 war. The advent of digital photography provides opportunities to document fully all aspects of archaeological and historic sites in ways that would have been prohibitively expensive when using film. Therefore, I initiated a program to document some of the major archaeological sites. I began with Ur, since there are many standing monuments there, some of which are suffering from erosion. We have taken some digital images of the site, recording details of both the major buildings, like the ziggurat and its associated buildings, the royal tombs, and the domestic areas. We have extended this project to the sites of Shmit and Umma. There, we have documented both the



Map of archaeological sites in the southern Iraq marshes. Courtesy of Abdulmir Hamdani.

areas that were excavated by the archaeologists from the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and traces revealed by the looters. This way, even the damage from the looting can provide significant data of archaeological interest.

Archaeological sites are not the only part of Iraq's heritage that are endangered in the current, lawless climate. In Nasariyah, there are many old structures that are no longer well protected by the laws designed to preserve them. Thus, we have visited many of these houses and mosques, using digital photography to record details of their construction and decoration, both inside and out.

Archaeological Surveys

As part of the general work that I and the Carabinieri undertook to protect the archaeological sites, I also conducted a survey throughout Dhi Qar province, adding some 650 new sites to the combined inventory of sites surveyed by Adams, Nissen, and Wright in the area, as well as those already present on maps belonging to the Department of Antiquities. Here, I mostly worked in areas that were well known to archaeologists, identifying sites that were either slightly outside the older survey areas, or, in some cases, identifying smaller sites that had been missed previously.

The Dhi Qar Governorate used to have large sections of marsh until the recent program of drainage. This included the largest marsh, Hammar Lake, which extended to the south and east of Nasariyah and Suq-es-Shyuk. Although it has long

been understood that many of the islands that modern marsh dwellers used for habitation were in fact archaeological sites, the surrounding reeds and water meant that few archaeologists had penetrated the area. The flat terrain of southern Iraq means that an area that is marshland today was not necessarily so in the past, as was demonstrated by the success of the regime in draining the marshes between 1992 and 2002.

Today, a new program has been established in which this area will be reflooded and a new Marshland National Park created. The hiatus between the draining and reflooding of these marshes provided us with the opportunity to conduct an archaeological survey in Fall 2007 before the waters came back.

Access to the sites was difficult; sometimes we could use boats, but more often we had to wade through the water to reach the sites. I give full credit to my team for their fortitude



The riverbed that once flowed beside Eridu is visible in this photo. Many of the sites documented by the author were located along this ancient branch of the Euphrates. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



Archaeological site of Jebara in the marsh of Suq Asheukh. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*



Part of a façade of a temple revealed by a looter's hole at the archaeological site of Abu Thahab in the marsh of Chebaish. *Photo courtesy of Abdulmir al Hamdani.*

in working in such difficult conditions. We were able to document fifty-five new sites in the area, many of them quite large. The sites date from Early Dynastic through Islamic times. An ancient bed of the Euphrates can be seen quite clearly in this area and represents the eastern extension of the river bed that once flowed beside Eridu. Many of the third- and second-millennium BCE sites that we identified were located along this ancient branch of the Euphrates, extending our knowledge of Mesopotamian settlement closer to the Persian Gulf. We might have expected that these sites, given their remote location, would have escaped the looting that affected so much of the south. However, the draining of the marshes removed the water that had once protected them and here too we found evidence of the work of the looters, although not to the same extent as in the desert. These looting holes revealed the importance of these sites, including one hole that uncovered part of the façade of another temple, like that at Zabalam, decorated with half columns with spiral and date-palm trunk motifs.

Future Priorities

The previous pages have outlined the various steps that we have tried to take to protect and record our archaeological heritage. Today, now that the FPS force is in place and deployed, the damage to at least the larger sites has abated, although we have been hampered in our efforts to protect other sites by our lack of fuel. As we look to the future, I and my extraordinary team hope to be able to shift our attention increasingly towards research and documentation rather than protection. Our first priority, however, must continue to be the protection of what we can and to record all details of our shared past, whether these were uncovered by looters or by archaeologists.



Looted landscape at the Early Bronze Age site of Bab edh Dhra', Jordan. Only by curbing the demand for artifacts will we win the war against the looting of archaeological sites. *All illustrations courtesy of Morag M. Kersel unless otherwise indicated.*

A Focus on the Demand Side of the Antiquities Equation

Morag M. Kersel

In his article on protecting and recording the cultural resources of Iraq, Abdulmir al Hamdani illustrates eloquently the archaeological situation on the ground in Iraq—why and how looting of archaeological sites is taking place and what is being done to protect the archaeological heritage of the region. While the general population may be more attuned to the situation in Iraq—given the daily updates in the media—the looting of archaeological sites is not limited to Iraq. Collecting of Near Eastern archaeological artifacts transcends both ancient and modern borders and with the advent of the Internet, sales can take place within the comfort of your own home. You don't even have to get out of your pajamas to buy that third-millennium cylinder seal.

In response to al Hamdani's piece, I would like to focus on a salient point that he makes regarding looting, namely, that in order to combat looting we must first tackle the demand for archaeological artifacts. Traditionally, when engaging with issues of illegal trade, most measures, including those highlighted in al Hamdani's article, are directed at looters, those considered to be the source of the problem. The reasons for this are manifold. The identification of the "bad guys" in the fight against the looting of sites is much easier than identifying a nameless purchaser on eBay. Excavating without a permit is illegal in most countries, while the purchasing of archaeological material with dubious provenience (known archaeological find spot and ownership history) is not illegal per se, however ethically suspect. Additionally, the "bad guys" are usually un- or underemployed locals with little political clout or cultural power. An excellent example of this is the recent purchase of Dead Sea Scrolls fragments by a noted scholar. Despite being in direct violation of Israeli law, he was exonerated of all charges after the Archaeological Council of Israel intervened, while the suspected looters—local Bedouin—were charged (Kersel, Luke, and Roosevelt 2008). Collectors—that is, museums, educational institutions, as well as tourists and other individuals—frequently have friends in the corridors of power. Protecting borders against the import and export of archaeological material is easier than developing social programs