

Letter from Baghdad

D. T. Potts

THERE CANNOT BE MANY LITERATE people left in the world today who have not heard of the appalling looting of the Iraq National Museum earlier this year. This followed the evacuation of the building on April 8 by museum personnel who had been safeguarding the site (in some cases sleeping there) up until that point. What ensued was a nightmare of cultural carnage involving an unknown number of looters who, according to Marine Col. Matthew Bogdanos (head of the Joint Inter-Agency Coordination Group investigating the looting of the museum), made off with approximately 13,500 objects.

How could the Coalition have allowed this to happen? I have no ironclad answer to this, but a British Museum colleague who has been involved in ongoing meetings concerning the looting of the Kabul Museum, and who has had contact with US personnel knowledgeable about both crises, tells me that, according to an American investigator in Afghanistan, a plan for the protection did exist. However, the unit assigned to protect the museum in Baghdad never arrived. It

was stuck in the Mediterranean, a victim of the US government's inability to convince Turkey to allow it to move troops across the Turkish–Iraqi frontier. Whether or not this is apocryphal I cannot say, but it certainly stretches credibility that no plan existed, particularly following the high-profile meetings held in January between American Near Eastern archaeologists and the Pentagon and State Department, at which the significance of the museum was made abundantly clear.

When the news of the looting broke, I was, as one of the few Near Eastern archaeologists in Australia, inundated by calls from the media. Within a few days of giving more interviews than I care to remember, I contacted an acquaintance at DFAT whom I knew from his time in Iran, where I am currently excavating. This led, very rapidly, to a plan (sponsored by the Council for Australian–Arab Relations) to send me to Baghdad with a powerful laptop computer, scanner, digital camera and some database and graphics software to assist the museum staff in reconstituting their record system. This in-

involved figuring out what they had, what was missing, and creating a proper database to hold the information, as well as photographing and scanning documents and objects.

I left Australia on May 11. Five days later, after waiting in Amman for a few days while the Defence Attaché Lt. Col. Rob de Rooy and Ambassador John Tilemann tried to get me on an RAAF flight into Baghdad, I was on a Hercules cargo and troop transport bound for Baghdad. On arrival, I was taken care of by the Australian diplomats who had already arrived to resurrect Australia's embassy there (dormant since the first Gulf War), and spent my time at the museum with Australian film journalist Olivia Rousset, who was shooting a number of stories in Iraq, including one about my work, for SBS's *Dateline* programme.

What I did in the museum was straightforward: I delivered the equipment, spent several hours showing two staff members how to use it, ran through a dummy database I had designed for them to use in order to record the objects in the museum's collection, and gave them as much advice in using the equipment as possible, while recognising that — appreciated as the gift from the Australian government and people unquestionably was — the time was not yet ripe for real work.

Quite simply, the staff was in a state of shock. The museum was experiencing the media frenzy that had been going on for weeks. So thorough had the looters been that most staff members didn't have a chair to sit on; many of them milled around in front of the museum or in the main foyer. The atmosphere was demoralising. With few exceptions, every office door had been hacked into with axes, sometimes removing the lock and door handle, in other cases creating a hole large enough to walk through. Everything had been taken from the offices, apart from large, heavy tables and some filing cabinets, whose contents had been strewn on the floor. The corridors had been cleaned, but the débris had been pushed into great piles of charred papers and books, broken glass and

building wreckage. Fires had been lit throughout the museum. The staff had attached thick foam mattresses to statues and reliefs, and placed more foam on the floors in the galleries, in case bomb shock should cause walls to collapse.

When the looters arrived, there was no power. The galleries and corridors were therefore dark. The foam proved to be an excellent medium for burning and a light source, albeit a toxic one. But there was more than chemical poison in the air: staff members made accusations and counter-accusations about colleagues. Who was a Baathist, who was a *really bad* Baathist? With the most competent people almost entirely absorbed in dealing with the media and the US forces now guarding the museum and investigating the looting, there was no hope of constructive work being done. My stay was brief, a bit less than forty-eight hours, but my aim had been accomplished. There was little more that could be done. One doesn't expect the inmates of an emergency ward to rally and immediately resume their daily routine when a guest arrives.

Was the looting an inside job, as the press has often claimed or insinuated? According to Col. Bogdanos and his team, the looters consisted of three different sorts of people. First, there were looters on a mission — those who went straight for certain things, left others and knew what they were after. Presumably, these were people with access to published guides to the galleries, who knew the value of what they were taking, who bypassed less valuable objects or, in some cases, plaster casts (albeit painted to look as original as possible) and headed straight for important pieces. Second, there were random looters who joined in and might have been as happy absconding with a desk chair or air conditioner as a cylinder seal. These people got into two of the three storage areas on the main floor and literally swept objects off shelves — genuine antiquities, plaster casts and fakes (any fakes brought to the museum over the years had simply been put on shelves in storage, not destroyed, and thus were in the building when the looters came). And third, there were one or more persons with definite 'insider knowledge', who used keys to enter a remote corridor leading to five basement rooms. Once through the door, they then breached another door for which they had no keys with a crowbar, and entered four of five subterranean storage rooms where they again bypassed less valuable, but genuine, antiquities, and ransacked a series of plastic fishing tackle boxes holding important finds that had been shown in an exhibition on treasures from the Iraq Museum staged in Turin, Italy, in 1985. Some 10,337 objects, including 4795 cylinder seals, were stolen in this manner.

The extent of the damage was overstated in the media. Nothing like 170,000 objects were stolen. The vast majority of the important works on display had been taken out of their cases before the war and put in a safe place (though not everything, such as the Warka Vase and the beautiful female head of marble dating to *ca* 3000 BC). The extraordinary gold discovered by Iraqi archaeologists in the royal Assyrian tombs at Nimrud had been stored in a bank vault. Almost 40,000 manuscripts were locked away safely in an air-raid shelter. The magazine containing the museum's collec-

tion of cuneiform tablets was missed entirely by the looters. But the museum is, if physically standing, a ruin; and the stolen cylinder seals, many of them exquisite examples of lapidary art in miniature, would alone have a market value exceeding US\$200,000,000.

And what of the US efforts to recover the stolen artifacts? Col. Bogdanos, who has a background with the FBI and the District Attorney's office in Manhattan, is proud of the fact that, as of 11 July, 2935 objects had been recovered. Of these, 1591 had been brought in voluntarily by Iraqis, 500 were seized in Iraq, 400 were turned in by the Iraqi National Congress, and 675 had been seized by customs agents outside Iraq. From what I saw at the museum, admittedly in mid-May, roughly half of everything that had been returned voluntarily, under an amnesty, consisted of fakes and casts, but Col. Bogdanos insists that theft is theft, and he is bound and determined to recover *all* of the Iraq Museum's property, be they antiquities or not. This may be very noble and, in a legal sense, strictly correct, but it heavily dilutes the figures being given out by his group, for the Iraq Museum officials could not care less about the recovery of the casts and fakes.

UNESCO sent several fact-finding missions to Baghdad to investigate the looting of the museum, as well as the wholesale looting of archaeological sites throughout the countryside. It is beginning to mobilise and will undoubtedly provide considerable assistance to the museum. As of mid-May, however, the laptop, digital camera, scanner and software donated by the Australian government was the very first material support received by the Iraq Museum, and their gratitude was palpable.

It has often been said — senior staff at the Iraq Museum make this point — that they are the 'lucky ones'. They are fortunate in the sense that the world's attention has focused so much on their plight, and that aid is forthcoming. But the fact remains that other important cultural institutions, from the Museum of Modern Iraqi Art to the National Library, have been completely gutted, and they are definitely not receiving the kind of attention and assistance that has come to the museum.

By all accounts, Iraq today is a far more dangerous place than it was in May. I doubt very much whether the mission to send me to Baghdad would or could occur in the present situation. There is an enormous amount of work to be done, but none understand better what needs doing, and how to go about doing it, than the archaeologists and museum professionals of the Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities. They simply need the wherewithal to get on with the job and the security to re-establish their national network of offices, site guards and records. Every vehicle belonging to the Directorate was stolen in the looting of Baghdad. We can only hope that the staff is gradually moving from the 'emergency ward' state in which I found it, to one of recovery, recuperation and rehabilitation. It will take years, however, to pick up the pieces. If the experience of the first Gulf War is anything to go by, the chances of most of the remaining objects being returned or recovered are remote indeed.