



**O**n April 10, the world helplessly stood by as it witnessed the wanton destruction of Iraq's National Museum, no doubt one of the world's greatest repositories of cultural treasures. Only weeks before, I had walked its corridors, marveling at the wealth of material on display. Standing alone in a corridor on the second floor of the Iraq Museum of Antiquities was a copy—the original is in the Louvre—of a stone stele depicting Hammurabi, the eighteenth-century B.C. ruler of Babylon, receiving one of the first-known codes of law 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 was too striking to miss.

I passed gigantic Assyrian wall carvings, some 15 meters long and about five 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.

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.

With this in mind, I had 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?"

He knew then that even if the museum was spared bombardment it was likely that in the confusion of the invasion and its aftermath, the museum would be looted. When law and order break down, and people are driven to desperation, some certainly will 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 were miraculously synchronized, there would be days—or perhaps even weeks—when no one would be able to stop the pillage.

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 of craftsmen and art-

# The Baghdad Museum

## A CASUALTY OF WAR?

by WILLIAM R. POLK

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 gryphons, 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 clay tablets on which the ancient Mesopotamians wrote contracts, letters, and decrees that give us such a vivid picture of their civilization.

Before the war, cultural leaders from around the world had petitioned the U.S. Air Force targeteers to take all possible precautions to avoid the museum and other major cultural sites. During 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.

Basing their petitions on the 1954 *Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, they

ists, dating back thousands of years. Of all the terrible casualties of war, this would rank among the most costly. Clearly, our worst fears have been realized. Gone are the holdings and, equally important, the thousands of records from nearly a century of excavation and scientific research. Conflicting reports make the scope of the loss hard to assess.

It is thought that many of the most valuable, or at least most movable, pieces were stored in the museum's underground vaults. Some have suggested that the most important material may have been spirited out well before the museum was sacked by the masses. Although we may never know for sure, 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 sledgehammers and chainsaws to giant statues and wall carvings, and 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.

In the wake of the most recent conflict and ensuing chaos, precious finds from the cradle of humanity have already begun to appear on the international art market or have been intercepted at the border; few know the fate of the sites that bore such fruit. ■

# Iraq in the Crosshairs

## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE PAST

by JOHN MALCOLM RUSSELL

Archaeologists are often criticized for drawing attention to the toll of warfare on human heritage, rather than focusing on human lives at stake. “How,” we are often asked, “can we be concerned with protecting monuments when people are dying?” When the question was posed recently to Lyndel Prott, for many years head of UNESCO’s cultural heritage division in Paris, she responded quite simply, “People in these countries ring us up and say, ‘Please protect our monuments.’ If people feel that strongly about their heritage, we don’t feel the international community can simply stand back and say, ‘It’s not important.’”

Mesopotamia, that cradle of civilization between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now modern Iraq, is a land of firsts. It was here that the first cities were established, and here that writing—and subsequently poetry and epic literature—came into being. It was also in this most ancient of lands that we find the first temples and evidence of a

codified religion, and, ironically, the first organized warfare. Much of the biblical book of Genesis is set here, a work that may have taken its final form during the Babylonian Captivity of the early sixth century B.C.

Our Mesopotamian past is not recorded in any book passed down from antiquity to the present. In fact, until 1845, we knew little about pre-Greek Mesopotamia. Everything we know about this foundation of who we are comes from archaeological research.

Virtually all of Iraq is an archaeological site. Some ten thousand sites already have been identified; many more—perhaps half a million—await discovery. Each site has its own story, each is irreplaceable, each is crucial. Our archaeological heritage is a nonrenewable resource—when part of it is destroyed, that part of us is lost forever.

Herewith is a list of some of Iraq’s most important sites, whose fate, in the wake of conflict and chaos, remains uncertain. Ancient names appear first, modern towns in parentheses. ■

**1. ADAB (BISMYA)** 3000–1750 B.C. In the early years of the twentieth century, Edgar James Banks and his University of Chicago team unearthed numerous temples, palaces, private homes, and graves at the Babylonian city of Bismya. Within these remains, they recovered a wealth of objects, including marble statues; objects of gold, copper, and ivory; children’s toys, and thousands of clay tablets.

**2. ARPACHIYEH** 5500–4700 B.C. Excavated by Max Mallowan in the 1930s, this site near Mosul appears to have been a specialized artisan village that produced fine polychrome pottery. The settlement had cobbled streets, rectangular buildings, and circular structures with domed vaults. In addition to ceramics, other finds from the site include steatite pendants and small stone discs, the latter thought to be early stamp seals.

**3. ASHUR** 2500 B.C.–A.D. 250. Political and religious center of Assyria, the equivalent of Athens for the Greeks and Rome for the Romans. It is the first well-documented mercantile center in the ancient world. Excavations undertaken since 2000 have begun to uncover a new Assyrian palace and many private houses, but this work has ceased because of war.

**4. BABYLON** 2500 B.C.–A.D. 1000 Capital of the world in 1700 and 600 B.C., foundations of its temple tower, which inspired the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, are still visible. Many buildings at the site have been heavily restored, but the original remains of the Ishtar Gate are still the site’s most spectacular feature.

**5. BORSIPPA (BIRS NIMRUD)** 1800–400 B.C. Southwest of Babylon, the ancient city of Borsippa became an important religious center, with Nabu as its patron deity. Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 B.C.) built or rebuilt the Ezida temple here, dedicating it to Marduk, the national god of Babylon. During Nebuchadrezzar II’s reign (605–562 B.C.), Borsippa reached its apogee. Borsippa was destroyed by the Achaemenian king Xerxes I in the early fifth century and never fully recovered.

**6. CTESIPHON** 100 B.C.–A.D. 950. A fragile vaulted arch is all that is left of an audience hall at the sixth-century A.D. Sasanian city of Ctesiphon, located in suburban Baghdad. Severe cracking occurred during the Gulf War.

**7. DILBAT** 2900 B.C.–A.D. 600. American excavations initiated at this major Babylonian city in 1989 were cut short by the Gulf War.

**8. DUR-KURIGALZU (AQAR QUF)** 1600–300 B.C. Capital city of the Kassite Empire, the site’s ziggurat and palace are now crumbling from neglect.

**9. ERBIL** 6000 B.C.–present. One of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, Erbil was settled more than 8,000 years ago. Its citadel, which rises some 25 meters above a surrounding city of 750,000 inhabitants, boasts a plentiful supply of groundwater, which sustained Erbil’s population through millennia of enemy sieges. Alexander the Great defeated the Persian king Darius III on Erbil’s surrounding plains in 331 B.C., in one of the most famous battles of antiquity. During the





**16. NEMRIK** 8500–7500 B.C. Believed to be one of the world's first villages, the transition from hunting and gathering to domesticated plants and animals was documented here. Beautiful stone sculptures of animals were found, one in the hand of a person who tried unsuccessfully to rescue it from a burning house.

**17. NIMRUD (CALAH)** 5500–150 B.C. Assyrian imperial capital. Gold-filled tombs of Assyrian queens, discovered here in 1989, have been hailed as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time. Included on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*

**18. NINEVEH** 6000 B.C.–present. Imperial capital of the Biblical king Sennacherib. His palace was plundered after the Gulf War; its sculptures have appeared on the art market. According to the Bible, Jonah prophesied here. Site of American excavation until the Gulf War. Included on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*

**19. NIPPUR** 5000 B.C.–A.D. 1000. City at the heart of ancient Babylonia. Seat of Enlil, king of the gods. An American expedition had worked here for decades until the Gulf War.

**20. SAMARRA** ninth century A.D. Early Islamic capital. The Great Mosque with its spiral minaret is one of the world's most famous buildings.

**21. TELL AL-RIMAH** 4000–1000 B.C. The site of Tell al-Rimah lies at the northern edge of the Iraqi Jazirah. It is noted for its ornate Old Babylonian temple and its unique third-millennium B.C. vaulting techniques.

Islamic period, Erbil was home to important Muslim poets, historians, and scholars, and later served as a cultural and administrative center of the Ottoman Empire. Included on WMF's 2000 and 2002 lists of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*

**10. ERIDU (TELL ABU SHAHRIN)** 5000–300 B.C. Mythical home of Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom. Investigation of the site by Iraqi archaeologists in the 1940s yielded abundant information on the Ubaid period, the earliest period of settlement on the southern Mesopotamian floodplain.

**11. HATRA** 150 B.C.–A.D. 250. Parthian city, one of the most beautiful sites on Earth. The site, which has a very well-preserved temple precinct with marvelous sculptures, was looted during the Gulf War.

**12. GISHA (JOKHA)** 5000–1600 B.C. This site was plundered with bulldozers after the Gulf War. Looted artifacts from Gisha have flooded the art market. Recent Iraqi excavations have uncovered huge public buildings at the site.

**13. KHORSABAD (DUR SHARRUKIN)** 717–612 B.C. This Assyrian royal capital was built northeast of Nineveh by Sargon II (721–705 B.C.). The gateways of the city wall, citadel wall, and palace were lined with colossal guardian statues of human-headed winged bulls.

**14. LAGASH (AL-HIBA)** 5000–1800 B.C. This powerful Sumerian city-state was the site of the first recorded war, a battle with Umma (see 25).

**15. MASHKAN SHAPIR** 2400–1700 B.C. Prior to the Gulf War, an American expedition was uncovering a great Old Babylonian city here.

**22. TELL LAHM** 3000–300 B.C. This major Sumerian city has never been excavated, although military trenches were dug through it during the Gulf War.

**23. TEPE GAWRA** 6000–1000 B.C. Excavated by Ephraim Speiser in 1927, this site boasts some of the earliest architectural remains found in northern Mesopotamia.

**24. UKHAIDIR** A.D. 7000 This early Islamic palace is one of the most spectacular buildings in Iraq.

**25. UMMU (UMM AL-AQARIB)** 5000–1600 B.C. Umma was the enemy of Lagash in the first-known war. The site was plundered with bulldozers after the Gulf War. New Iraqi excavations have uncovered an Uruk period (3000 B.C.) temple with walls more than 20 feet high, several residential districts, and a large cemetery.

**26. UR (TELL AL-MUQAYYAR)** 5000–400 B.C. Reputed birthplace of the biblical patriarch Abraham, Ur boasts one of the best-preserved ziggurats in the ancient Near East. Excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934, the site yielded a series of lavishly furnished burials dating to the mid-third millennium B.C. Finds from the excavations were divided between the British Museum, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Iraq Museum. The site was bombed and strafed during the Gulf War; an Iraqi airbase lies nearby.

**27. URUK (WARKA)** 4500 B.C.–A.D. 300. The first large city in Mesopotamia, Uruk was the home of the legendary goddess Inanna/Ishtar and the king Gilgamesh. Some of the earliest-known writing has been found here.



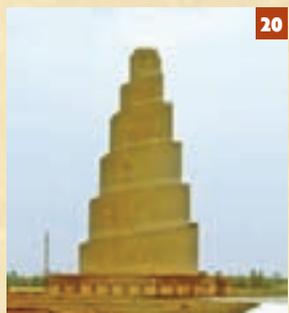
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