

Preserving Iraq's Battered Heritage

Archaeologists have feared for Iraq's unique archaeological treasures since war began 5 years ago. Now, despite continued unrest, a team returning from southern Iraq bears surprisingly good news

IN THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT OF 7 JUNE, an international team of archaeologists examined the ancient settlement of Tell al-Lahm in the flat and fertile plain of southern Iraq for signs of looting. Then three pickup trucks with armed men suddenly arrived on the scene. What followed was a brief but welcome confrontation: The men were part of a security team tasked with protecting such lonely sites from artifact thieves.

Five years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein plunged the country into chaos and sparked a looting spree, a semblance of order is returning to the home of humanity's first writing system, cities, and empires. The team—the only group of scholars allowed to visit the area since the summer of 2003—found guards patrolling several sites and little evi-

Ground truth. John Curtis documents damage to a Kassite structure at Ur, next to a U.S. air base.

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Overturned. Looters decimated the ancient Sumerian city of Kisurran in southern Iraq, as seen by turned earth (brown) in the second satellite image.

dence of extensive theft in recent years. "It's really good news after so many years of doom and gloom," says archaeologist and team member Elizabeth Stone of Stony Brook University in New York state.

That good news extends to Amman, Damascus, and New York, where investigators succeeded recently in recovering thousands of artifacts stolen from Iraq after the invasion. European governments are also moving, albeit slowly, to help rehabilitate Iraq's shattered museums, rebuild fences at exposed sites, and provide remote-sensing data to researchers. Serious difficulties remain. Iraqi archaeologists trying to protect priceless artifacts and ancient settlements still face intimidation and even jail time (see sidebar, p. 29). Allied troops damaged some of the most famous cities of the ancient world and have yet to address the problems. And the international market in Mesopotamian antiquities continues to thrive, likely fueled by continued looting at smaller and more remote sites. But archaeologists are finally gaining access to the region, allowing them to make realistic appraisals and recommend action.

Sky view, ground truth

Before the trip, archaeologists had already seen signs of widespread looting, primarily with the help of satellite data. In a paper in



the March issue of *Antiquity*, Stone used remote-sensing images to examine 101 square kilometers of archaeological sites in southern Iraq. She found nearly 16 square kilometers of looting holes in that area—four times the amount of legal excavations conducted in the same areas during the past century. Much of the looting appears to have taken place during two periods. The first was in the mid-1990s—a time of desperate poverty in southern Iraq—and the second during the spring and summer of 2003, when allied troops were fighting Saddam's army and then the growing insurgency.

But until last month's expedition, no team of foreign archaeologists had actually been on the ground in southern Iraq since mid-2003. The group, which planned to reveal its findings at a 4 July press conference in London, included researchers from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, as well as two Iraqi officials. They were sponsored by the British military, which provided a helicopter and security team. During their 3-day visit, the researchers visited and assessed eight major sites, including Eridu, home of an early temple complex, and Uruk, where legend says the world's first writing system, cuneiform, was developed. "It was not as bleak as we feared," says John Curtis, an archaeologist at the British Museum in London who took part.

The major exception was Ur, famed center of a Sumerian city-state 4 millennia ago and home to a partially reconstructed ziggurat. A large American air base sits immediately adjacent to the site, which has drawn hordes of visiting American soldiers. The result is extensive wear and tear, team members say. For example, a building from the Kassite era, circa 1400 B.C.E., is in danger of collapse. "One of the earliest arches in the world is going to fall down," says Stone. American engineers also bulldozed a nearby 2nd millennium B.C.E. site as part of a base expansion between August 2004 and August 2005, team members say.

The base's location violates a decree by Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage mandating a 500-meter-wide protective zone around archaeological sites. But U.S. State Department spokesperson William Olson in Baghdad refused to comment on any damage sustained at Ur or on whether the U.S. government intends to fund security or restoration projects there. Curtis says the British government may seek money to fix some of the most egregious damage at Ur and other southern sites.

Consistent security has helped preserve nearby Uruk, where King Gilgamesh is said to have reigned. One guard is paid by the

ON IRAQ'S FRONT LINES

First Abdel-Amir Hamdani was charged with theft and kidnapping. Then his home was searched. Finally, the director of antiquities in the Nasiriyeh region of southern Iraq was thrown into jail for 3 months. His crime? Opposing plans by unscrupulous developers intent on building a dozen brick factories on top of an important archaeological site. But Hamdani, who was ultimately cleared of all charges and released, says his harrowing ordeal was worth it because the developers eventually abandoned their plans. "The result was good," he said during a recent visit to the United States. "If you gave me a choice between jail and brick factories, I would choose jail."

Hamdani's tribulations reflect the precarious state of the country's archaeological heritage 5 years after the war began (see main text). "This is what we have to do as archaeologists to protect Iraq's heritage," says Donny George, former chair of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Baghdad and now a professor at Stony Brook University in New York state.

Shy, soft-spoken, and rail-thin, the 40-year-old Hamdani is an unlikely archaeological hero. But since the U.S. invasion began, he has tried to find ways to protect the vast region he oversees in south-central Iraq. Intensive looting began as soon as Saddam Hussein's forces retreated and the U.S. military rolled north to Baghdad in March 2003, he says. The region is littered with thousands of ancient settlements, which represent a treasure trove of salable goods to an impoverished population. Hamdani has worked with a succession of American and Italian military officers to ensure that archaeological sites were patrolled; he even traveled to the holy city of Najaf to explain the dire situation to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a powerful figure in mostly Shiite southern Iraq. Al-Sistani quickly issued a fatwa forbidding the pillaging of ancient sites. Hamdani is also currently surveying sites exposed in the past decade after Saddam drained the marshes of southern Iraq.

Such work is complicated by continued fighting, however. The museum's offices were ransacked and the adjacent library burned in a May 2004 clash between militia and the Italian forces who replaced the Americans. "We lost everything," recalls Hamdani. The Italians later renovated the museum, but this spring attacks destroyed vehicles and damaged the museum's façade and roof.

Hamdani's biggest challenge was deflecting a 2005 proposal by the Nasiriyeh city council to build 12 brick factories just outside town, between the ancient Sumerian cities of Ur and Ubad. The site of very early settlement dating to the 6th millennium B.C.E., Ubad gives its name to an entire era known as the Ubadid period. Ur was a large city during the first florescence of urban areas in the 3rd millennium B.C.E., as well as the legendary home of Abraham. When Hamdani conducted a required survey, he discovered that the site was littered with ancient Sumerian material. "We need these factories," he says, "but not on top of an archaeological site." So, representing the Baghdad antiquities department, he denied permission for construction.

In February 2006, Hamdani says that those supporting the site location struck back with a memo to a local judge alleging that he had stolen gasoline from departmental tanks, that he was involved with a kidnapping, and that his son was an antiquities smuggler. Police searched his home and found nothing suspicious, but that April Hamdani was jailed. He calls the accusations absurd, given that the department has no gasoline tanks in Nasiriyeh and that his son was 2 years old at the time. And he denies any involvement in kidnapping. George confirms the tale and says that Hamdani's success in putting looters in jail led to the reprisal. After officials in Baghdad intervened, Hamdani was cleared of the charges and released that June.

The experience has not cowed Hamdani, who studied archaeology at Baghdad University. But he feels lucky to have escaped the ordeal with his life. "I could have been shot like so many others," he says. "There is an underworld there like the Mafia. Sometimes you forget being an archaeologist, and you work as a policeman."

—A.L.



Setting his sights. Hamdani searches the Iraq marshes for ancient settlements.

German government, and 15 more are part of the Iraqi Facilities Protection Service (FPS) set up in 2003 to protect Iraqi government sites. Margarete van Ess, an archaeologist at the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin and the third Western member of the team, was delighted to find her pottery and excavation materials intact in the dig house. "I guess I could go there and restart my research," she says, adding that she hopes to return once the situation is less dangerous.

Curtis, Van Ess, and Stone say they were heartened by the FPS guards who confronted them briefly at Tell al-Lahm. FPS has been accused within Iraq of becoming a militialike organization, but archaeologists say they are grateful for their presence. "It is very encouraging that the efforts to protect sites really have worked," adds Stone. But Abdel-Amir Hamdani, Iraq State Board of Antiquities inspector in the Nasiriyeh region, says the Iraq government has refused to provide fuel since 2006 for FPS patrols, hampering their effectiveness.

Spy operation

The three archaeologists agree that their limited visit provides little new data on the host of other sites in southern Iraq that satellite data suggest may still be plagued by looting. Hamdani says that smaller and more remote sites are especially vulnerable. The international team was unable to visit any of these sites, although Stone confirmed that remote-sensing images show widespread damage to ancient settlements in the area.

Lacking the firepower to take on the often-armed bands that denude sites, Hamdani has tried to recover some of their plunder and catch the ringleaders by posing as a buyer at two villages known as centers of the black market, El Fajir and Albhagir, on the northern border of Dhi Qar governate. During one visit, a village boy asked him what kind of artifacts he wanted—gold objects, tablets, statues—and led him to the appropriate dealer. Hamdani was then able to tip off Italian soldiers and Iraqi police. In a single home, they discovered 600 artifacts, including pots and cuneiform tablets. Albhagir was once a typical small and impoverished southern Iraqi village, says Hamdani.

Now it boasts large homes that he suspects are funded with money from the illegal trade. "Some 70% of the population work in looting and smuggling artifacts," he estimates. "He's now running a spy operation" using informants, says Stone with admiration.

But sometimes a successful sting operation isn't enough. In November 2004, for example, a truck carrying recovered looted material on its way to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad was hijacked, the driver and guards

toms officials will be turned over soon to the Iraq Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, efforts are under way to restore Iraq's fraying network of regional museums. Italy is working to rehabilitate several, and Curtis says the British military may provide \$20 million to convert one of Saddam's palaces in Basra into a museum.

One of the most frustrating tasks confronting archaeologists concerns the ancient capital of Babylon, located 85 kilometers south of Baghdad. It was a major player in Middle Eastern history from the 23rd century B.C.E. until just before the time of Christ. American and Polish troops damaged parts of the metropolis while building a military base there, according to a 2005 report by Curtis. As an exhibit on the city's historical impact opened in Berlin last week, researchers from around the world gathered nearby to discuss how to manage the decaying site and stave off plans for development, including new parking lots and a hotel. The rescue effort has been stymied for years by changes in the archaeology leadership in Baghdad and bickering between Americans and Europeans. "It is very disappointing it has taken so long to agree on an assessment," says Curtis, who visited the site in 2004. "Only after that is done can we move forward." The U.S. government intends shortly to announce a \$700,000 contract with the World Monuments Fund to begin work on the management plan.

Archaeologists may learn more during an upcoming U.S.-sponsored visit to sites in central or northern Iraq, according to spokesperson Olson and archaeologist Diane Siebrandt, also of the State Department in Baghdad. Olson declined to discuss the trip, however, citing "operational considerations," and Siebrandt would not provide details about any U.S. efforts to cope with the damage and looting resulting from the war.

Stone, meanwhile, sees a silver lining in the havoc. The focus on satellite data may help archaeologists unable to work on the ground understand ancient Mesopotamian settlement patterns and architecture, she says, gaining fresh insight into how its inhabitants once lived.

—ANDREW LAWLER



Market of thieves. These looted antiquities were confiscated in a small town in southern Iraq, where business in artifacts is brisk.

killed, and the artifacts stolen.

Thousands of looted objects have slipped across Iraq's porous borders since 2003, stolen from the Iraq Museum or looted from illegal digs. Now some, at least, are on the road back to Iraq. Syrian officials in April seized 700 artifacts from smugglers and dealers and sent them back to Iraq. Just last week, Jordan announced the repatriation of 2400 artifacts seized by customs authorities in antismuggling operations. John Russell, an archaeologist at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston who is consulting with the U.S. State Department, says that about 1000 artifacts—including tablets, cylinder seals, and glass bottles—intercepted by cus-