Rifle-Toting Researcher Fights to Protect Ancient Sites

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BAGHDAD—Early one morning at the end of the Gulf War, Donny George was driving home to Baghdad after examining the ancient city of Hatra for signs of bomb damage or looting. A couple of allied jets roared over his car; the Iraqi archaeologist thought nothing of it until minutes later, when he came upon the bullet-pocked wreckage of a group of vehicles attacked by the same planes.

George has had more than his share of such Indiana Jones-style adventures. He kept a constant vigil at the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad during the Gulf War, catching a nap in the cellar in between air raids; he organized opposition to the truckloads of armed looters who scoured the countryside in the mid-1990s; and he later survived a brutal assault by an unknown assailant. All the while, George has played a critical role in keeping his field alive during a traumatic time. “He really has been cradling Iraqi archaeology for years,” says Michael Müller-Karpe, an archaeologist at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, Germany, who has known George for some 25 years. “Archaeology owes a lot to him.”

George, 50, started his career working in the museum storeroom; recently, he was named director general of research and publications in the newly created State Board of Antiquities. In that capacity, he is overseeing a series of new excavations, struggling to revive scholarly publications and conferences, and encouraging a new generation of researchers to enter the field. His fluent English—his father was an accountant at the British consulate—and skills at cutting red tape have been major factors in easing the return of foreign excavators.

A senior member of a northern tribe, George earned all his degrees in Baghdad; his Ph.D. was on grave goods from a 6th-millennium-B.C. site. Later he served as field director at Babylon and then as the scientific and technical assistant to the chief of the old department. In the past decade, however, he has had little time to dig and do research. Instead, his job has been a study in continual crisis management.

In 1991, he helped organize the massive effort of boxing and storing the thousands of antiquities in the Iraqi Museum prior to the Gulf War; he and colleagues remained in the museum. “We had 24-hours shifts, and every night there was bombing,” he says.

After the bombing period ended, George immediately set out for places like Hatra—a Roman-influenced city built of stone in the first centuries A.D.—to examine potential damage. Looting of regional museums was widespread, and some museum personnel were killed in the Kurdish north and Shiite south. Then came devastating inflation. The bulk of Iraq's archaeologists, facing drastic reductions in their real income, fled the department for jobs elsewhere; even paying for guards was difficult. Excavation work was at a standstill.

By the mid–1990s, looting was rampant at remote sites. In one unexcavated Sumerian city, George says, “a large force of some 50 to 70 looters appeared, and there was a full day of fighting between our government forces and the looters.” At Larsa, an ancient site dug by French researchers, a guard was killed in a similar fight. And a guard at Warka (ancient Uruk) killed a looter. “I'd say we've had a dozen of our people injured and killed in these fights,” he adds.

George himself was likely the victim of a looter reprisal. Coming home from work one night, he was struck three times with a blunt object. The assailant made no attempt to steal his wallet or car but fled when George—who is short but burly—resisted. He recovered with 14 stitches to his head. George's
Donny George has had narrow escapes in the course of duty. CREDIT: A. LAWLER

colleagues, both Iraqi and foreign, say there is little doubt his antilooting policies antagonized the organized groups who had enjoyed a largely free hand for years.

Shortly after that 1999 attack, and with reluctant approval of the presidential palace, George and some of his colleagues began to dig at a few remote looted sites to recover what they could while discouraging further damage. There was no resistance—thanks in part to careful diplomacy with the local sheiks who have day-to-day control over the rural areas of Iraq. “We’ve managed to maintain very good relations with the sheiks,” says George. “We visit and talk frequently with each other; when they have funerals we go and pay respects. Sometimes people come from outside the area and test our control, and of course we have 24-hour armed guards, and I also have ‘ears’ in the area.” George himself kept a Kalashnikov rifle handy during a recent visit to the south.

His local sources tell him that the looters have given up where the government has reasserted a presence. “The dangerous part is that they simply switched to other sites,” he says. “But it’s tough; we can’t dig everywhere.” Meanwhile, new digs have begun, including his own at Umm Al-Aqrib (see p. 39), and he is training a new generation of researchers—which boasts a high percentage of young women—to assist in the work. And he hopes to increase his department’s research credibility by expanding its number of publications.

“He’s effective,” says Müller-Karpe. “And if there’s a problem, he solves it.”

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