Reclaiming Iraq’s Past: Life on the Front Lines

Three foreign scholars in Iraq are helping repair, protect, and rejuvenate the country’s shattered artifacts, ancient sites, and institutions.

When the Bush Administration was preparing to invade Iraq in March 2003, many archaeologists had a personal stake in trying to avert the conflict. They feared for the safety of their Iraqi colleagues and worried about the impact of modern warfare on the innumerable ancient sites that dot Mesopotamia’s landscape. The subsequent looting 1 year ago of cultural institutions such as the Iraq Museum and the continuing pillage of sites around the country confirmed their worst fears. Profoundly shocked, many scholars who study this region denounced the U.S.-led coalition forces for failing to control the looters.

But after Saddam Hussein was toppled, archaeologists had to decide whether to make common cause with the very coalition forces they had criticized. Three researchers, including two U.S. archaeologists and one raised in Iraq but living in London, chose to plunge into the maelstrom of occupied Iraq. Each was skeptical about the rationale for trying to invade Iraq in March 2003, but not Al-Gailani. Born in Iraq but raised in London, she returned to the country nearly every year for research into ancient Mesopotamia to help Iraqis at the universities of Baghdad and Mosul rebuild their shattered archaeology and environmental health departments. Directing a $10.9 million, 3-year grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Stone is shuttling back and forth to Iraq to set up educational programs and computer systems. This summer she departs this summer. She’s also trying to revive Iraq’s only archaeology journal, Sumer, which was published sporadically during the 1990s. And she is starting to raise money for exhibitions, despite the lack of immediate plans to reopen the museum to the public. “The begging bowl,” she notes, “is out.”

Al-Gailani feels a great sense of urgency. “It’s give-back time,” says Elizabeth Stone, an archaeologist at Stony Brook University in New York. A vocal opponent of the U.S. invasion, she has shed her academic research into ancient Mesopotamia to help Iraqis at the universities of Baghdad and Mosul rebuild their shattered archaeology and environmental health departments. Directing a $10.9 million, 3-year grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Stone is shuttling back and forth to Iraq to set up educational programs and computer systems. This summer she plans to bring home a half-dozen students who hope to get their Ph.D.s and become the vanguard of a new generation of Iraqi archaeologists.

The peripatetic 55-year-old speaks as quickly as she moves. In one recent 2-week trek she traveled from New York to Baghdad to Oxford to Paris to Berlin and back home, a pace that leaves little time to worry about away before U.S. bombs arrived in 1991. “Quite a lot of the ivories”—many from the 9th century B.C.E. Assyrian capital of Nimrud—“had completely crumbled, and the beautiful Halaf pottery was covered in black mold,” she recalls. “It is awful to remember.”

Today, hundreds of the museum’s most precious objects hidden since before the 2003 war remain in an undisclosed location and in an unknown state of preservation. They’ll stay there until the museum finishes upgrading its security and climate systems. Italian conservationists have refurbished the museum lab that was vandalized during the looting and are working with a handful of Iraqi specialists to restore objects smashed or damaged during the looting and during the decade of neglect. But Al-Gailani says a much more intensive effort is needed to save the large number of objects that are in a precarious state of preservation.

When soldiers brought back the famed Be-setki statue to the Iraq Museum last fall, it was covered in excrement. The looters who took the 4300-year-old massive bronze sculpture—one of the museum’s most prized objects—hid it in a cesspool outside Baghdad. But Iraqi-born Lamia Al-Gailani, who met the soldiers at the museum door, wasn’t repelled by the strong odor. “It is an absolutely super piece; it has long been my favorite,” she says with enthusiasm.

That moment was one of the few happy ones in the past year. As a consultant to the Iraq Reconstruction and Development Council, which is funded by the ruling coalition, Al-Gailani’s job is to help museum employees reorganize both the hundreds of thousands of artifacts and the institution itself. Beyond the orgy of looting in April 2003, the museum also suffers from years of neglect. “By last April, there was no official photographer, no specialist in Sumerian art, and no one who knew anything about Greek, Roman, or Sassanian coins,” she told a packed auditorium of archaeologists at a meeting last month in Berlin.

Most foreign archaeologists are reluctant to criticize their hosts publicly. But not Al-Gailani, whose Baghdadi family roots go back to a famed medieval philosopher. In fact, she was the first Iraqi woman to participate in excavations, and she worked for the museum for 8 years before leaving in 1970 to earn a Ph.D. at University College London, where she still lives. An independent researcher, she returns to Iraq nearly every year for research on Babylonian cuneiform seals, many of which were stolen in last year’s looting. “I’m not counted as an outsider,” she says.

Al-Gailani feels a great sense of urgency. “It’s not an exaggeration to say that thousands of objects need work, from metal ones to pottery,” she says. And that urgency goes back to the first Gulf War. In 2000, Al-Gailani was there when museum officials opened boxes of artifacts hastily packed...
One year ago, John Russell was decrying the havoc wreaked on Baghdad’s cultural institutions in the midst of the U.S. invasion. Now Russell, from Boston’s Massachusetts College of Art, is finishing a sabbatical during which he has tried to reassemble some of that heritage.

For the past 9 months, Russell has lived in a trailer beside Saddam’s former palace in central Baghdad, protected by U.S. soldiers and an American-issued bulletproof vest while serving as an adviser to Iraq’s Ministry of Culture. When he was asked by U.S. officials to take the job, Russell hesitated before deciding that he couldn’t leave his Iraqi friends and colleagues in the lurch. Now he is wrapping up a most unusual sabbatical year. “I’m on the floor,” he apologized during a recent phone interview. “We just got bombed; every few evenings we get a hit.”

Russell’s earlier work documenting the remaining carved friezes at King Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh near Mosul led to the return of at least one part of a slab from a British collector who had benefited from the looting that became widespread after the first Gulf War. He has been outspoken in criticizing the antiquities trade. But reining in that trade in today’s Iraq is proving a tough task; devastating looting remains a daily occurrence.

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As he prepares to return home, he’s not optimistic about the chances of slowing the destruction of the country’s heritage. “No one wants to hear this, but it is going to be impossible to win this battle the way things are now,” he says. Russell took a helicopter tour of southern sites in January to document the looting, which has left many ancient sites resembling a slice of Swiss cheese. But that devastation, he notes, began during the mid-1990s, when the lure of digging for antiquities—particularly in the vast and unruly south—proved too tempting for a nation in an economic tailspin.

Carabinieri in charge of the southern region now patrol “aggressively” using helicopters and conducting raids, Russell says. But the economic ruin makes looting a profitable business, and looters simply avoid guarded sites and go elsewhere.

“Now they are using floodlights to dig at night,” he adds. “It’s a problem that the coalition can’t reasonably be expected to turn around in 1 year.”

Russell prays for more legal excavations and more prosperity in the southern region. But neither seems very likely. Legal digging is difficult and dangerous, although a team of Austrian archaeologists quietly continued working as recently as last fall at Borsippa, an ancient city southwest of Baghdad. Only a handful of southern sites—where the bulk of Iraq’s mounds exist—are secured. An American military base surrounds the ancient city of Ur, and a German and an American research team continue to pay for guards at, respectively, Uruk and Nippur, important Sumerian cities that flourished in the third millennium B.C.E. But the vast majority of sites—most of which have never been legally excavated—are vulnerable, and few archaeologists plan to visit them anytime soon.

Russell hopes that a few hundred archaeological site guards now being trained will go at least partway to restoring order. Some of his Iraqi colleagues propose more drastic measures, such as bombing the trucks and buses that take looters to sites every day. Russell demurs, saying, “Americans don’t do that.” But he wouldn’t mind confiscating such vehicles. In the meantime, he savors small victories, such as a new protective roof over Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh and armed guards to patrol the beloved site.

—Andrew Lawler

Grassroots effort. Elizabeth Stone, shown on a dig in eastern Turkey, hopes to provide opportunities for Iraqi students.

John Russell: Fighting Against Impossible Odds