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 Nasiiryeh 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 Nasiiryeh city council to build 12 brick factories just outside town, between the ancient Sumerian cities of Ur and Ubaid. The site of very early settlement dating to the 6th millennium B.C.E., Ubaid gives its name to an entire era known as the Ubaid 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 Nasiiryeh 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.