FOREIGNERS RETURN

Sale of Nineveh Fragments Exposes Looting Network

Andrew Lawler

MOSUL—When invading Babylonians and Medes attacked ancient Nineveh and burned the palace of Assyrian King Sennacherib here in 612 B.C., they didn't know they were ensuring his posthumous fame. The upper stories of what was called “the palace without rival” collapsed, burying hundreds of massive stone slabs in the throne room under meters of debris. Excavated in the 1840s, these elaborately carved slabs caused a sensation with their lively depiction of the king's victorious campaigns in the Near East.

What the enemy troops failed to destroy 2600 years ago, looters encouraged by the Western and Japanese thirst for antiquities have been vanquishing in the past 10. On a recent visit, smashed stones littered the ground where whole slabs once stood. Even the protective metal roof was gone, victim of scavengers. John Russell, an archaeologist at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston who has meticulously documented the site for 2 decades, calls the devastation “the final sack of Nineveh.”

The sad fate of Sennacherib's palace transformed Russell from mild-mannered professor to antiquities activist. Blocked from further digging at Nineveh because of U.S. restrictions, he instead has exposed a network of local Iraqis and shadowy dealers eager to take advantage of easy pickings and the country's political and economic isolation. Thanks to his efforts, at least one fragment from the palace is scheduled to be returned soon to Iraq from London.

But other pieces from the palace—likely numbering more than a dozen—are out of the reach of Iraqi authorities and archaeologists eager to understand the art, politics, and social life of Assyria. And what remains on site has been diminished in value. After a March visit to Nineveh, Russell estimated that of the 100 or so exposed slabs there, about one-third have been seriously damaged.

Occupied by humans for 9 millennia, Nineveh served as the last and grandest Assyrian capital, boasting 12 kilometers of walls with 18 gates enclosing more than 7 square kilometers rich in carved stone and clay tablets. The modern city of Mosul, originally confined to the opposite side of the Tigris, now sprawls within the old city walls.

In this desperately poor region, the temptation of nearby treasure is hard to resist. There's big money involved: The 1994 sale of an Assyrian sculpture—that had long been at an English private school—brought nearly $12 million from a Japanese dealer, a record price for an antiquity. Ironically, it was Russell who identified it as an original rather than the plaster cast it was taken to be. The high price fetched at the auction occurred just as serious looting began in Iraq, according to foreign and Iraqi scholars.

The following year, Russell identified through photos several fragments from Sennacherib's palace that were in place as late as 1990 but that are now in the possession of a London collector, who claims not to have known they were stolen. Russell's reporting of the looted pieces ultimately led to an unusual British court battle between the collector and the Iraqi government. One slab fragment is slated to be brought this year.
to Baghdad—but only because Iraq reluctantly agreed to compensate the collector for the alleged original purchase price of $14,000.

Russell and other archaeologists say that hundreds if not thousands of looted objects from Iraq are circulating around the West and in Saudi Arabia and Japan. Two or three other Iraqi objects from various sites have been returned by the British, but tense relations between Iraq and most Western nations leave little room for joint efforts to curb the looter-dealer-collector network. Still, Russell's efforts—which include a book and several articles—have put a spotlight on the problem. "It has touched a nerve in him," says David Stronach, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who led dig teams at Nineveh in the 1980s. "And though it is an enormously uphill struggle, he is doing a great service."