Ten Millennia of Culture Pilfered Amid Baghdad Chaos

Not since the Spanish conquistadors ravaged the Aztec and Inca cultures has so much been lost so quickly. Scholars are calling last week's looting of Baghdad's Iraq Museum, the chief repository for all archaeological research in the country since 1933, the most severe single blow to cultural heritage in modern history. "This is like destroying all the museums on the Washington Mall all at once," says Eleanor Robson, an Assyriologist at the University of Oxford, U.K. "It's an unparalleled collection of the world's earliest and greatest civilizations."

The destruction came after U.S. forces swept into Baghdad last week, and it spread to the country's National Library and Central Bank—where some of the most precious artifacts were kept—as well as to museums in Mosul and Basra. The objects—clay tablets, statues, jewelry, manuscripts—represented 10,000 years of human culture. And there is growing suspicion among some U.S. government officials and archaeologists that much of the looting may have been orchestrated by individuals or organizations eager to sell the assets on the antiquities market.

It was no ordinary mob scene, according to many accounts. "It resembles a professional bank robbery," says one U.S. Army source in Iraq. The storerooms that held the bulk of the objects—most of which had been stored for safekeeping—were opened with keys and not explosives. And the destruction of the cards containing the catalog information makes it harder to trace objects. "It does mean that the objects were targeted before the fall of the city," says this source.

Another source in Iraq says that U.S. soldiers allowed looters to pass checkpoints near the museum, located on the west bank of the Tigris not far from the central railway station. A Marine commander, one Army official says, observed the museum looting and did nothing. Also looted, although the extent of the theft is not clear, was the Central Bank, which contained one of Iraq's most valuable caches of ancient objects—the Nimrud gold grave goods (Science, 6 July 2001, p. 32). The National Library was reported last weekend to be in flames.

As Science went to press, Iraqi officials were pleading with the U.S. military to provide guards at the museum. "All I can say is that the situation up there is very confused," says the Department of State's John Limbert, who is responsible for cultural heritage matters as part of the Future of Iraq team. Reached in Kuwait on 14 April, he said, "all I know is reports I'm getting from [U.S.] academics and the media."

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, speaking 13 April, sharply dismissed critics who blame the U.S. military. "We didn't allow it. It happened," he said, adding that looting takes place anywhere there is disorder. The next day, however, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell pledged "to not only secure the facility, but to recover that which has been taken, and also to participate in restoring that which has been broken."

It is a Herculean task. Between 150,000 and 200,000 objects filled the display cases and large storerooms in the Baghdad museum. As many as 25,000 of those were ancient clay tablets, many unpublished. The vast collection of note cards cataloging the collection—and a huge amount was not cataloged—also was reportedly destroyed in the looting. Much of what was not taken, such as large statues, was smashed. Of 4000 objects stolen during the chaos following the first Gulf War, only a handful have been recovered.

Archaeologists want the U.S. government to control the borders, offer rewards for recovering objects, and ask the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities for help. State Department officials agree but add that offering cash rewards would require approval from Congress and take time. Arthur Houghton of the New York–based American Council for Cultural Policy, which represents curators and collectors, says that the antiquities market in this field "should be shut down" and the...
POLITICS AND BIOMEDICINE

Studies of Gay Men, Prostitutes Come Under Scrutiny

Last month, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) conducted a site visit of an investigator at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), whose studies of sex workers have been the target of a recent inquiry by Congress. Although there is no hard evidence that the inquiry and the site visit are linked, the events have concerned researchers at UCSF and some in government who worry that the Bush Administration and congressional Republicans are intensifying their scrutiny of research on sensitive topics.

Program staff at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), for example, have warned grant applicants to cleanse certain terms, such as “transgender” and “prostitutes,” from their grant applications. The reason, according to an NIH staffer who asked not to be identified, is to reduce the projects’ visibility. “What’s frightening” is that NIH staff feel grantees need to disguise their work, says Alfred Sommer, dean of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

HHS spokesperson Bill Pierce denies that the department is targeting research on certain topics. “We do nothing like that,” he says. John Burklow, NIH spokesperson, says that the site visit was for “administrative issues,” not “scientific content,” and that there was nothing unusual about it.

The controversy centers on research by AIDS researcher Tooru Nemoto, whose projects include preventing HIV infection in Asian sex workers and in “transgender” men who are planning or have had a sex change operation. HHS officials inquired about Nemoto’s research in early January, according to Regis Kelly, UCSF vice chancellor for research. Kelly says that Nemoto also had support from another HHS agency, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and that HHS apparently wanted to be sure there was no “double dipping.” UCSF supplied information to clarify that there was no wrongdoing, Kelly says.

A few weeks after HHS’s call, NIH told the university that several agencies planned a site visit to discuss Nemoto’s grants. That step was “very unusual,” according to UCSF grants and contracts manager Joan Kaiser, who says normally such questions are addressed by phone or in correspondence. In late March, four officials from NIH and SAMHSA spent 2 days at UCSF asking about procedures and going “all over San Francisco” to hear scientific talks by Nemoto’s team, Kaiser says. She says that UCSF officials “haven’t heard back” but assume the grants were in compliance.

UCSF officials thought no more of it until they learned last week about a memo from the House of Representatives to NIH. The 13 March e-mail memo, from staffer Roland Foster of the House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources chaired by Representative Mark Souder (R-IN), raised concerns about two NIH-funded studies of sex workers—Nemoto’s and another led by a researcher in Miami. The memo, which HHS routinely forwarded to NIH director Elias Zerhouni, argues that by attempting to protect the health of sex workers, the studies “seek to legitimize the commercial sexual exploitation of women.” This runs counter to a February directive from President George W. Bush to reduce international sex trafficking, the letter claims.

Foster’s memo asks for detailed information about the two grants, including the names of study section members who approved them and the scores they gave. It also requests information on all NIH studies of prostitutes over the past decade. HHS is now asking the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to list studies it funds of sex workers, a CDC spokesperson says. Foster says he played “no role” in the UCSF site visit but is “interested in what may be found.”

NIH program officials who handle grants in these areas are worried about the rumored surveillance. Four staffers contacted by Science declined to be interviewed. But one NIH scientist confirmed that some program staff have been telling grantees to reword grants to avoid terms such as: “needle exchange,” “abortion,” “condom effectiveness,” “commercial sex workers,” “transgender,” and “men who have sex with men.”

Changing words in proposals may not shield researchers from scrutiny, however. On 11 April, Foster fired off another letter to NIH raising questions about a UCSF grant to prevent HIV in gay men and demanded a list of all HIV-prevention studies.

—ANDREW LAWLER

POLITICS AND BIOMEDICINE

Two decades of ocean drilling

Coronaviruses’ day in the sun

Poincaré conjecture solved?

Hot zone. Health studies that involve prostitutes are getting critical reviews.