



Iraq's Cultural Heritage: Monuments, History, and Loss

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Uruk Vase, ca. 3300 B.C.
Sculpted libation vase depicting offerings to Inanna, goddess of fertility, during Sacred Marriage festival. Iraq Museum, Baghdad. Photograph: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

The vase was among the thousands of objects looted from Iraqi museums during the war in Iraq. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of museum staff and the U.S. military investigation team, the Uruk Vase was returned—by three individuals in a battered car—on June 11, 2003, after this article was drafted.

Between April 12 and 15, 2003, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad was looted, and many of the most important objects in the collection were stolen. Among them were the famous monumental Uruk Vase of 3300 B.C. that appears in every art survey textbook and is one of the earliest narrative works of art, and the beautifully carved marble female head, perhaps representing the great Sumerian goddess Inanna, also from the sacred precinct at Uruk in southern Iraq and of the same period.¹ Thousands of works of Mesopotamian and Islamic art and artifacts were stolen from the Iraq Museum, but that is not all: in the days before and after, the majority of other museums and libraries in the country were also looted, burnt, and destroyed. For thinking people all over the world, this was a great tragedy. For the people of Iraq, however, it was more than that. It was the theft and destruction of our own history, a history that forms the basis of our identity as the people of this very ancient land.

For myself, hearing of the loss was devastating. The Iraq Museum is the first museum I ever saw, and Mesopotamian antiquities are the first works of art that I ever encountered. It was through works such as the Uruk head and vase that I first came to be fascinated by art, that I first encountered sculpture. Unlike many of my colleagues who came to the study of Mesopotamia and the ancient Near East via other and perhaps distant routes, Mesopotamia formed my very first associations with the notions of history and art.

In my own research and writing I have always been interested in the concept of a historical consciousness, a consciousness that I consider to be distinctive of ancient Mesopotamian culture. It seems an irony, given recent events,

that the majority of Mesopotamian works of art and artifacts were made with an awareness of the future, with an acute awareness of a notion of historical time and its relationship to man-made monuments. Thus we can say that, for the ancient Mesopotamians, works of art were enfolded with memory and identity. And perhaps we still have much to learn from the ancients today. Was their awareness of the relation of monuments and memory, and their incredible anxiety about the destruction and loss of monuments in war, not an anxiety about the loss of both history and identity?

The Mesopotamian anxiety about the safety of monuments, texts, and works of art was so acute that I would go so far as to say that ancient Mesopotamia can be described as a culture of memory. The concepts of history and memory preserved in commemorative monuments, portraiture, and text, were—like so many other aspects of civilization that we consider to be our own in the West—already well developed in ancient Iraq in the fourth and early third millennia B.C.

In prewar news reports on Iraq we could read or hear descriptions of this country as a desert, a place poor in culture, if rich in oil reserves. But Iraq is also the land that archaeologists refer to by the Greek name of Mesopotamia: the land between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the home of one of the world's oldest civilizations. Paradoxically, ancient Mesopotamia is taken to be the past of mankind and even as the place of origin of Western civilization. So, if we remember that Mesopotamia is in fact the name given to the place we now call Iraq, then we should consider this: the ancient history of Iraq has traditionally been claimed as the history of the West, since according to the nineteenth-century

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1. These objects are sometimes referred to as the Warka Vase and Warka Head. Warka is the modern Arabic name for the site of ancient Uruk.





Uruk Vase after its return on June 11, 2003. The vase is badly damaged but mostly intact. Photograph: Zainab Bahrani.

model of the progress of civilization, the torch was passed from Mesopotamia and Egypt to Greece and Rome, and subsequently to the Western world. Sites such as Abraham's city of Ur, the Garden of Eden, Babylon, and Nineveh are thus the cultural heritage of the world.

Many of these sites are indeed of particular interest to the Western world, since it derived certain aspects of its own culture from ancient Iraq, but all are valued and well loved by the people of Iraq, regardless of their significance for the world. The Iraqi people, who live their entire lives surrounded by monuments and ancient sites, identify their land through these familiar landmarks. This is an aspect of Iraqi cultural patrimony that is not often addressed. A destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq is thus not simply a misfortune for global cultural heritage, but also a tragic loss for the people of Iraq. The reason that international laws on cultural heritage (such as the Hague Convention) exist is precisely because people's sense of communal identity is defined in relation to a shared culture and history.

In Iraq the ancient monuments and thousands of archaeological sites are such a major part of the terrain that, for an Iraqi, a conception of the land without them is simply impossible. Families go for day trips and picnics to sites like the Parthian city of Hatra, a wonderful and magical place that dates to the second century B.C., a city where Mesopotamian gods were worshiped alongside Graeco-Roman deities and where the architecture is a fabulous mixture of Assyrian and Roman forms.

The pre-Islamic capitals of Ctesiphon and Babylon are also popular tourist destinations for all. Young children are taken on school trips to these ancient cities and to the local museum collections: the medieval Islamic city of Baghdad, founded in A.D. 762, was consciously modeled upon these earlier, legendary capitals. Some ancient sites are simply part of daily life. The walls of cities, such as the Nineveh of biblical fame, can be seen every day by the local people as they go about their daily lives. Rock reliefs carved by the sculptors of the Assyrian kings mark the terrain across the northern Iraqi countryside.

While ancient sites in Iraq are the local cultural patrimony, there are moments of Iraq's past that were certainly events of world-historical significance. The first of these is the Uruk phenomenon of the fourth millennium B.C. This phenomenon can be described as the first cultural revolution, comprising the development of the first cities, the first monumental architecture, and, perhaps most important, the invention of writing.

The second significant world event in the history of Iraq is the period of the Islamic rule of the Abbasid dynasty, between the eighth and tenth centuries A.D. This was when Baghdad became the center of the development of the arts and sciences, the place in which the Greek texts of classical antiquity were preserved through translations and copies. It was in the universities of Baghdad, under the patronage of the Abbasid kings, that mathematics, astronomy, physics, and medicine developed. This period of scholarly achievement was at its height in the eighth to the tenth centuries, but Baghdad continued as the center of scholarship, at least until it fell to the Mongol invasion of Hulagu Khan in A.D. 1258.

Both the Uruk and the Abbasid periods are truly remarkable because the innovations that took place in Iraq at those times influenced the state of knowledge and views of reality well beyond the narrow geographical region of the

Tigris-Euphrates river valleys. In both periods intellectual innovations in this land had long-term effects on the development of scholarship and world views throughout what we now call the Middle East, North Africa, and a large part of Europe, as well as, to a certain extent, southern Asia. These moments are thus comparable to turning points in world history such as the Italian Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, all of which had significance well beyond the local, all of which became part of world history.

Yet we should not forget that cultural heritage and monuments, despite their significance to the world, are a powerful basis of local histories and identities. Historical artifacts, works of art, and monuments are the agents of memory and even of a sense of self. Their loss is psychologically devastating well beyond the loss that is calculated at the market value of antiquities. I would like to draw a parallel that many readers will be able to relate to. All New Yorkers can understand this sense of loss, since many of us still mourn the missing World Trade Center structures themselves. While their destruction was certainly an event of world significance and people everywhere saw it as a tragedy, New Yorkers felt it in a different way, not only because we lost friends and fellow citizens, but because the towers were part of the horizon of our daily lives, part of the identity of our city. It was exactly this power of monuments and their relationship to a sense of local identity that the Mesopotamians seem to have understood very well.

Many works of sculpture exemplify this ancient Mesopotamian understanding of the importance of the place of memory and identity in works of art and monuments. During the second half of the third millennium B.C., an unparalleled number of images of the human figure in the form of sculpture in the round were produced in southern Mesopotamia at places such as Lagash and Ur. These statues are generally unlike images in two-dimensional narrative art, whether political or religious, and they are also unlike images of deities or supernatural beings known primarily from the glyptic arts. Above all, what sets these statues apart is not so much the medium of sculpture in the round as their function: they are images of real, historical people who lived in antiquity and were represented in an image. The fact that these are statues of individuals places them in a genre of sculpture that is categorized in art-historical terms as portraiture.

But using this descriptive term “portrait” immediately brings up a number of concerns. In the standard Western division of genres, mimetic resemblance is the first criterion of portraiture. I believe that the images from Mesopotamia representing historical individuals are indeed portraits because they represent the person in an image, even if they do not mimetically imitate the features of the person. The Mesopotamian portrait is actually linked to the person represented in much closer ways than the later tradition of external resemblance or approximation with which we are most familiar.

In terms of function, it has long been known that such statuary represented the individual as a worshiper and was to be placed in a temple. A number of these images, both male and female, have been discovered in situ, in temples. Numerous others bear inscriptions that dedicate them to specific deities for the life of the patron, the patron’s family, and sometimes also for the life of the ruler.

The two statues here are fine examples of the type. A Sumerian inscription on the back of the basalt statue from the Iraq Museum tells us that it represents a man called Dudu, a high priest and scribe of Urnanshe, the ruler of Lagash

**The scribe Dudu, 2400 B.C.
Basalt statue. 17½ in. (45 cm)
high. Iraq Museum, Baghdad.
Photograph: Eric Lessing/Art
Resource, N.Y.**



about 2400 B.C. The statue was placed in the Temple of Ningirsu at Girsu, Telloh, in order to represent Dudu continuously in front of the deity. Its compact, blocky style of carving seems to emphasize durability. Here is a work of art in which style and function are closely linked, since the statue represented Dudu for all time and thus needed to convey durability.

Another statue (stolen from the Iraq Museum in April) is a diorite statue

from Ur that represents Enmetena, the ruler of Lagash, Tell al Hiba, about 2350 B.C. The statue bears an inscription on the back and on the right shoulder dedicating the image of Enmetena to the god Enlil. The inscription tells us about Enmetena's lineage and how the gods favor his rule. It also tells us of his many accomplishments and pious acts, the many temples that he had built for the gods. The end of the inscription reads: "At that time, Enmetena fashioned his statue, named it 'Enmetena whom Enlil loves,' and set it up before Enlil in the temple. Enmetena who built the Eadda, may his personal god Shulutul forever pray to Enlil for the life of Enmetena."

These portraits were thus substitutes of sorts. They stood in the place of the person represented and could function as a very real form of presence of that person. They were therefore linked to the person in ways much closer than our notion of portrait, since an essence of the person continued to exist in the image, a fact demonstrated in numerous ancient texts through which we can see that for the Mesopotamians an image had agency and was therefore a powerful object.

With the Akkadian period it becomes clearer that portraits, as well as large-scale monuments such as stela, were imbued with agency. The famous copper head of an Akkadian ruler, perhaps Naramsin, who ruled the entirety of Mesopotamia in 2254–2218 B.C., is a fine example of this type and fortunately has survived the looting. It is life-size and hollow-cast in the lost-wax method, a technique that would be used by the ancient Greeks almost two thousand years later. The head was part of an entire statue that was most likely made of various materials. It is sensitively modeled to portray the aquiline nose and almond-shaped eyes of the king. The long, braided



Head of an Akkadian ruler, perhaps Naramsin, from Nineveh, ca. 2500 B.C. Copper. 12 in. (30.7 cm) high. Iraq Museum, Baghdad. Photograph: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

hair and curling beard are depicted as decorative and orderly patterns of luxurious excess indicating his ideal beauty and virility. The eyes themselves were originally inlaid with another material, which has unfortunately been lost. The head was found in Nineveh in northern Iraq and seems to have suffered an attack. The eyes, ears, and bridge of the nose all seem to have been deliberately attacked in antiquity, most likely during some ancient battle, and done deliberately in order to annihilate the agency that was thought to inhere in the Akkadian king's image.

Both the monuments and the images of kings suffered similar fates in wars throughout antiquity. This treatment of images occurred because the ancient Mesopotamians saw images and monuments as social agents, as an index linked to the real essence of the person represented. In this case it is the king, and therefore the image is linked to the land itself. Its loss would have dire consequences for all the land, just as it is recorded that the loss of cult statues during wars indicated defeat and destruction for the city from which they were taken.

Many of the Mesopotamian works of art that now reside in museum collections took on a totemic power through the millennia, and their destruction or

loss was considered to have terrible and negative consequences for the country. The loss of the objects from Iraqi museums and libraries today would have been understood by the ancients as a sign of destruction of local identity; in their own cultural and historical contexts the artifacts would have been considered social agents of cultural memory. So it is perhaps not an irony, but rather a profound understanding of the relation of artifacts and memory, that so many aspects of what we in the third millennium A.D. consider to be our own civilized lives and ways of thinking in fact originated in the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia.

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An Estimate of Losses

To the great joy of the author and scholars everywhere, the alabaster Uruk Head was recovered in mid-September. Acting on a tip, Iraqi police and U.S. troops unearthed it on a farm just north of Baghdad. Many other objects from the Iraq Museum, however, remain missing. The following numbers are based on the account by Col. Matthew Bogdanos, head of the U.S. military investigation into the Iraq Museum looting, at a Pentagon briefing on September 10, 2003. The numbers were confirmed by Dr. Donny George, director of the Iraq Museum.

Number of missing objects:

from the galleries: 40 (11 recovered)

from conservation: 199 (118 recovered)

from the heritage room: 236 (164 recovered)

from the old storage room: about 2,703 (2,449 recovered)

from the new storage rooms: about 10,337 (about 700 recovered)

About 1,731 pieces were recovered through the local amnesty program in Iraq, and 1,679 were recovered through international seizures and local raids. It is important to note that the numbers of objects missing from the storage rooms are approximate and must remain so until an inventory is completed. The total number of objects still missing from the Iraq Museum is now estimated at between 10,000 and 14,000.

This estimate does not include objects lost from other museums in Iraq. Museums at Mosul, Basra, and Kirkuk were looted, as were major archaeological sites, including Isin, Umma, Adab, and Nippur. The greatest concerns now are the continuing looting of the more than ten thousand archaeological sites in the country and the urgent need for the conservation of delicate ancient objects damaged by looting and floods. —Z.B