



## THE LOOTING OF THE BAGHDAD MUSEUM

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By now, everyone who has been following the news knows the basic story. On April 9, Baghdad fell to American-led coalition forces. Over the following two days, the social order in the city broke down, as typically happens after the overthrow of a government, and uncontrollable mobs rioted in the streets, looting shops, government buildings, and most disastrously, the national library and museum of Baghdad. Arson fires gutted the library, destroying countless books, many of them irreplaceable and of great historic importance. The looters who attacked the museum attempted to torch that building as well, but thankfully failed. They did, however, seize masses of paper from museum offices to use for kindling, thus making a hopeless mess of the museum's low-tech, non-computerized inventory system. Some of the looters were simply bent on destruction, and perhaps revenge on Saddam Hussein's government, and they smashed objects, glass cases, and furniture. Others may have been religiously motivated iconoclasts who regarded the pre-Islamic art in the museum as idolatrous, much like the Taliban fundamentalists who destroyed Buddhist art in Afghanistan. Some were amateur thieves, perhaps hoping to strike it miraculously rich. And some were professional thieves who knew exactly what they were doing and what they wanted, going right to the objects of greatest value that would be possible to sell. Some museum employees may have been involved

in the thefts, since some cases and vaults were apparently opened with keys. However, many of the objects initially believed to have been looted have since been recovered from bank vaults off the premises, demonstrating that the museum's staff, far from robbing their own collection, had taken responsible measures to safeguard its most valuable possessions when they realized that war was inevitable. Some objects, however, had to remain in the museum's public galleries, because they were too large or too fragile to move. Looters broke or cut up some of the large sculptures and carried off the heads, hoping that these fragments would be salable even in their incomplete state, and perhaps, indeed, easier to sell if purchasers could not readily identify their original context. Other objects like clay tablets and cylinder seals probably remained in the museum's vaults because the curators had to give their first priority to the most valuable works of art. These objects, however, though perhaps of less monetary value than the gold jewelry from Ur and Nimrud, are very collectable. As the thieves knew, these works could bring high prices from connoisseurs of ancient art who were not overly scrupulous about the provenance of their purchases.

Initial reports of the looting put the losses at 170,000 objects. This number has since turned out to be an enormous exaggeration, but the news media were reporting the incomplete information that they had, rather than deliberately attempting to deceive. On the morning after the looting, the museum was empty of all its holdings. No one knew how many objects had been carried off, but the museum had originally owned 170,000 objects, all of which were apparently missing. Since some objects were in safe (or relatively safe) storage, however, that number was obviously incorrect. The official American estimate of losses a few weeks after the episode was about 25 to 30 objects, but museum curators put it at several thousand. With the inventory records in chaos, the exact figure will take many months, perhaps years, to determine. Some of the missing objects have since been returned under amnesty, probably after the more amateurish looters realized

that very well-known and unique objects like the alabaster vase of Uruk (figures 1 and 2) were much too “hot” to sell to anyone. The vase is a little the worse for wear, but at least all the original pieces of the vase (which was found in fragments, pieced together by conservators and then broken apart again by the looters) have been recovered. A frightened informer led authorities to another treasure, the marble face of a statue known as the “Mask of Uruk” (figure 3), which had been wrapped in cloth and buried in a farmer’s field, but survived its misadventure relatively unscathed. Nonetheless, even though the news about the losses is better than initial reports indicated, let us put this in perspective. The worst and costliest art theft in American history was the 1990 robbery of 12 paintings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston. At the very *lowest* estimate of the losses, the looting from the Baghdad National Museum was more than twice as bad as that.

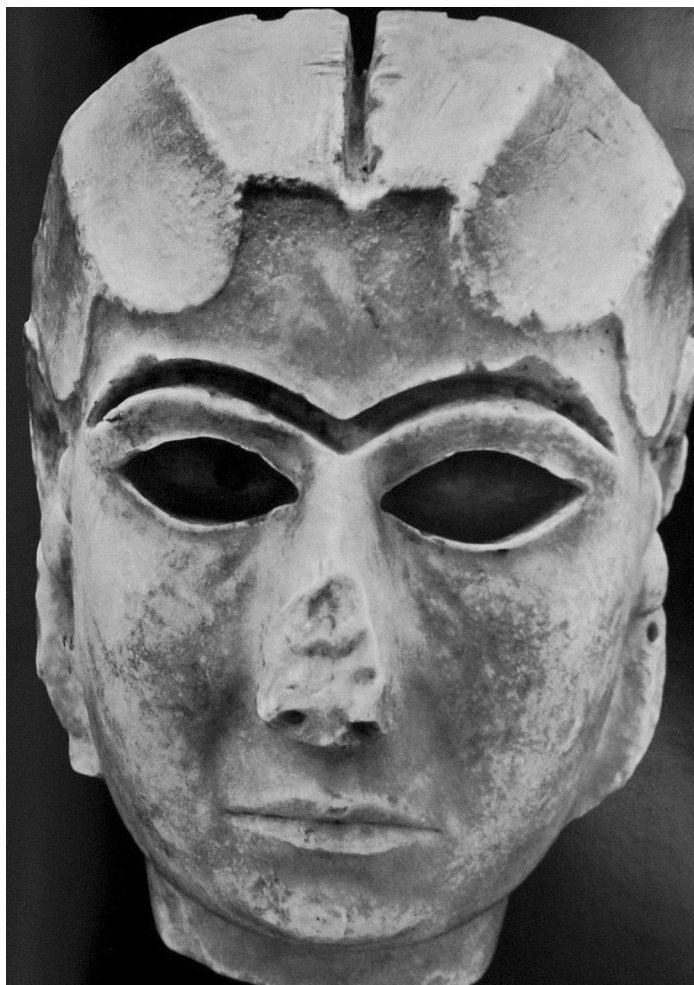
How did this happen? Obviously the looters themselves must bear the brunt of the blame, but that does not absolve others from failing to foresee and take precautions against this situation. Looting of this sort is entirely predictable in the chaos that follows an invasion and the fall of a government. George Bush’s father could have told him that the same thing happened in Panama City when U.S. forces deposed Manuel Noriega. Before the invasion of Iraq, scholarly groups from around the world warned the American government about the importance of preserving Iraq’s archaeological heritage, and gave the Pentagon lists of UNESCO-protected monuments that should at all costs be shielded from bombing. The Department of Defense, however, was committed to its “shock and awe” policy of a small, efficient fighting force. These troops, as is now widely acknowledged, were adequate to win the war, but not to maintain order in its immediate aftermath. During the riots, U.S. forces in Baghdad stationed a tank outside the museum that kept looters at bay for several hours, but then had to abandon their efforts to protect the museum because their numbers were stretched too thin elsewhere in the



*Figure 1:* Alabaster vase from Uruk, Eanna temple precinct, predynastic period, ca. 3500 B.C. Photo after Giovanni Garbini, *The Ancient World*, New York/Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1966, figure 6.



*Figure 2:* Same, other side. Photo after Winfried Orthmann, *Der Alte Orient*, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte Vol. 14. Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1975, plate 69b.



*Figure 3:* Alabaster face from a statue, probably of the goddess Inanna, from Uruk, ca. 3500 B.C.  
Photo after Orthmann, plate 13.

city. According to some accounts, loyalists to Saddam Hussein had occupied the museum, using it as a fortress from which to fire on American troops. This was of course an unspeakably cynical act, since these guerillas surely must have known the importance of the museum to their country's heritage. Obviously, they were counting on the Americans to respect the UNESCO status of the building by not returning overwhelming fire. Nonetheless, if U.S. troops had been able to secure the building immediately after they captured Baghdad, guerilla fighters might not have been able to enter it. Better planning for the occupation of the city and the aftermath of Saddam's fall might have enabled them to do so. The same pattern has repeated itself throughout Iraq, as the museums at excavation sites like Nimrud and Nineveh suffered looting, and as the archaeological sites are openly strip-mined by treasure seekers. Let me emphasize, however, that the troops on the ground in Iraq are not to blame. It is their commanders who did not plan adequately for the occupation that would follow the invasion.

There is perhaps little value at this point in pursuing the question of who was most to blame for this cultural disaster, although I find it deplorable that only one member of the Bush administration, Colin Powell, has expressed any regret for the episode. Donald Rumsfeld, indeed, seemed to shrug off its significance, by saying that "free people are free to make mistakes," as though 6000 years of human history were worth no more than a sofa burned by beer-fueled students after a football game. The United States does now have an important moral obligation, however, to crack down on illegal trafficking in antiquities, to watch vigilantly for such objects entering this country and to prosecute smuggling to the fullest extent of the law, as well as to assist in the recovery of the stolen objects elsewhere in the world. There may be little that individuals can do besides supporting such efforts, but those of us who study ancient art can at least help to dispel what we might describe as the "Rumsfeld fallacy," that the contents of the Baghdad museum were just a few dusty old pot-sherds of no great

importance. Here, then, are a few of the highlights of that museum's collection. Unless specifically indicated, every object that I describe here is, or was, in the collection of the Baghdad Museum.

## *Mesopotamian Prehistory*

"What use are a few old dusty pots?" This is a rhetorical question that I have often heard in the weeks since April 11. To an archaeologist, the answer is easy: for the era before the invention of writing, they are our chronological record. Pottery is not the only man-made material that people of the new Stone Age and early Copper Age produced, but it has the advantage of being virtually indestructible. Textiles and basketry decompose and metals corrode, but once clay has been fired, it may break, but it won't disappear. Archaeologists, therefore, can count on one type of artifact in every archaeological site that will provide a clear index of advancing technologies and changing tastes in form and design. Early potters usually decorate their wares by scratching or pressing designs into the soft surface of the clay before firing. But as they gain mastery of the kiln, they learn how to apply slips and glazes that produce a variety of colors. Painted decoration usually requires firing at higher temperatures than unpainted ware, as well as sophisticated control of oxygen flow to the fire. Not surprisingly, therefore, these developments often accompany the early discovery of metals, as people learn how to smelt ores in the same sorts of furnaces. In addition to their historical value, many of the vessels from Iraq of the 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C. display exquisite workmanship—or perhaps I should say, "workwomanship," since crafts like these in a village culture are usually women's work. We can see how the potters impose order on nature, just as they were attempting to do in their fields and towns, by organizing animal and plant forms into elegantly stylized geometric designs. At some periods, for example in the "Samarra Style" of about 5000 B.C., the potters de-

light in pinwheel-like designs that make birds, animals and dancers appear to whirl in a centrifugal pattern around the center of a bowl. The slightly later “Halaf style,” on the other hand, is static, arranging precisely drawn flower patterns into a neat checkerboard grid, but still displaying a delight in color and form.

## *The Predynastic Period*

When true cities begin to emerge in Mesopotamia, societies become larger, more complex, and more stratified. There are now professional classes of artists, rather than the village folk artists of the earlier periods. Pottery declines somewhat in quality: the “Scarlet Ware” style of the Diyala valley is still colorful, as the name implies, and vibrant in its designs, but its human and animal figures are larger and more carelessly drawn than those of earlier eras. There is a good reason, however, why pottery receives less loving attention than it used to: more sophisticated crafts are available, like metal work, stone carving, and mosaic. Stone was never plentiful in Mesopotamia, especially in the southern area known as Sumeria, but Sumerian craftsmen learned how to make scarce materials go a long way. The most important ceremonial vessels now were usually made either of metal or of lathe-turned stone. The body of a stone vessel might be a relatively inexpensive material like limestone or sandstone, but inserts of mother-of-pearl, carnelian and lapis lazuli gave the vessels color and luxurious splendor.

No life-sized statues survive from this period, but several small statuettes do, giving us a glimpse of how these people presented themselves and their gods. Statuettes of naked men and clothed women usually show the figure’s hands clasped in front of the chest, the enlarged and intense eyes directed upward in prayer. We assume that most of these little figures represent priests and priestesses, but some may simply be worshipers who wished to dedicate permanent stand-ins for themselves, to worship the city’s patron god or goddess in per-



petuity. As for the statues of those gods, we can guess from a few fragments what they might have looked like. A life-size marble fragment from ancient Warka (figure 3) represents the face of a beautiful woman, whose hair was originally attached in a separate material, and whose eyes were inlaid into the empty sockets, probably in shell and semiprecious stone. The eyes were large and intense, their simple, almond form emphasized by the sweep of the arched eyebrows that meet over her nose. These eyebrows were also inlaid, probably with black bitumen, although only the hollowed grooves for the inlay now survive. The cheeks and lips, however, demonstrate extraordinary sensitivity of modeling and subtle observation of anatomical forms that contrasts with the intensity of the stylized eyes. A scholar at a seminar that I once attended admirably described this marble head as the most erotic work of ancient sculpture he had ever seen, observing that “the cheeks beg to be caressed and the lips kissed.” The body probably consisted of some perishable material such as wood. Thus, the sculptors saved their precious white stone for the exposed skin areas of the statue, and enriched the figure’s beauty with a mixture of colorful inlays and attachments. Only a few lucky worshipers, the kings and high priests of Warka, were probably ever permitted into the inner sanctum of the temple to see this remarkable work, but she embodied and provided a home for the spirit of the goddess Inanna, who protected the fertility of Warka’s people, animals and fields.

The mighty goddess Inanna appears again on another work of sculpture from the same site: a four-foot tall alabaster vase with four registers of delicate relief sculpture that represent a religious procession. (Figures 1–2) In the lowest frieze, stylized stalks of wheat and barley form an orderly, repeating pattern around the vessel. Above them is a row of domesticated animals: the cattle, sheep and goats upon which the Sumerians also depended for their survival. The next register, taller and larger, shows a procession of naked priests, each carrying a jar or basket of offerings. In the largest, topmost register, the chief priest approaches a larger-than-life female

figure who raises her hand to him in greeting. The two pillars behind her, decorated with fluttering streamers, identify the sacred precinct of Inanna, while the attendants behind her display the emblems of her power: offering vessels like the one on which these reliefs appear, cattle, sheep, and temple buildings.

People of these early cities were rapidly developing the symbols and trading tokens that eventually became the written form of their language. Therefore, the later Early Dynastic period also goes by the name of the Proto Literate period. As their economy became more complex, Sumerians needed ways to identify their property and to ratify legal agreements. The solution they discovered was engraved seals. The earliest might have been stamp-seals, like the intaglios on a signet ring, but a more versatile and practical object that eventually became very common in this region was the cylinder seal. These little cylindrical beads, seldom more than two inches long, carried designs carved into their surfaces that could produce a continuous frieze when rolled out into a soft material like clay. If a land-owner used a strip of clay to secure the lid on a jar of olive-oil or beer before sending it to a purchaser, and then rolled his cylinder seal along the strip, no would-be thief could open the jar without leaving a tell-tale gap in the repeating pattern. The earliest of these seals were exquisitely carved, modeling their tiny figures with remarkably three-dimensional detail. Later engravers tended to make their seals more hastily, with less finesse, but as the demand for these objects increased, the artists must have been under pressure to produce them faster. One can hardly blame them for a little carelessness, since these were practical objects first and works of art second. Even the more hastily carved seals were unique, since they were hand-made, and could identify their owner's property beyond question.

## *The Early Dynastic Period*



*Figure 4:* Votive statue of a worshiper or god, from the temple of Abu at Tel Asmar. Early dynastic period, ca. 2800–2600 B.C. Limestone, painted. Photo after Orthmann, plate 18.

Prior to about 3000 B.C., each Sumerian city state had been self-governing, with its own priest king and warrior king. In the early second millennium, however, the wealthy and powerful city of Ur emerged as the “400 pound gorilla” of Sumeria, demanding tribute and loyalty from other cities of the region, and scribes began to keep track of time by recording the name of the king of Ur and the year of his reign. These “king lists” are the bane of students grappling with the history of the ancient Near East, but they are vital for making sense of the period’s chronology. The emergence of a written language, of course, now allows us to speak of real history, no matter how sketchy, rather than of an archaeological record pieced together from artifacts.

During this period, many worshipers of the vegetation god Abu dedicated statues, either of themselves or sometimes of the god himself, in his temple at Tel Asmar. (Figure 4). Periodically, the priests had to clear out the votives to make room for new ones, but of course every gift to the god required respectful

treatment. The older offerings, therefore, were carefully buried below the dirt floor of the sanctuary, to the delight of archaeologists who later found a large cache of them when excavating the site. None of these figures are very accomplished works of sculpture; the forms are clumsy, and the artists make beginner's mistakes, like separating the legs of the figure so that the weight of the stone form rests on rather spindly supports. As a result, some of them broke in antiquity and were repaired, stone being much too valuable to waste. But with their huge, intense eyes staring upward in awe, and their hands grasping the cups for the ceremonial feast that worshipers shared with their gods, these statuettes present us with a powerful image of ancient piety.

More skillful and certainly more spectacular works came from another famous archaeological site of this period, the royal cemetery at Ur. Queen Pu-Abi, Prince Meskalamdug and several other important members of the ruling family lay in rectangular burial chambers, decked in fabulous jewelry and surrounded by magnificent possessions, many of them in precious materials. The rulers of Ur obviously thought they could take it with them, and to the distress of many squeamish modern scholars, the list of things they took with them included people. The bodies of many human sacrificial victims lay in the passageways leading to the burial chambers, each victim decked in jewelry or magnificent parade armor, depending on the sex of the person. There were no signs that they had died violently: instead, the gold cups scattered among the bodies suggest that they committed suicide by drinking poison. Why would they willingly do a thing like that? The jewelry of the women, perhaps, gives us a clue: each one wore a headdress of gold leaves and flowers, with a crest of gold, jeweled flowers rising above her head. Perhaps they believed that giving their lives and "planting" themselves in the earth like seeds would guarantee them a glorious rebirth, either an afterlife in some next world or a reincarnation in this one. Groups like the "Heaven's Gate" cult in California have been known to harbor similar convictions in much more recent times.



*Figure 5: Bull's-head finial of an ancient lyre from the Royal Cemetery at Ur. Inlay of gold, shell, lapis-lazuli and carnelian. Early Dynastic period, ca. 2600 B.C. Photo after Sir Leonard Wooley, *The Art of the Middle East*. New York: Crown, 1961, photo page 73.*

A British and American team of excavators discovered the tombs of Ur. As a result, many of the finds now reside in the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. Some objects remained in Baghdad, however, including a lyre with inlaid decoration of gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli and shell. (Figure 5). The wooden frame of the lyre had of course disintegrated, but skillful excavation techniques enabled its discoverers to preserve its form by pouring plaster of Paris into the hollow that the perishable parts of the object had left behind, and thus preserving the inlay intact. A golden bull's head with a stylized beard formed the finial of the sounding box, probably representing the "voice" of the instrument.

The lyre was large, and its long strings would have given it a deep pitch rather like the deep, lowing voice of a bovine. During the looting of the museum, however, thieves stripped the gold from the lyre. Even in the unlikely event that it is ever recovered, the delicate workmanship, especially of the beautifully detailed bull's head, will be lost forever.

## *The Akkadian Empire*

Sargon the Great of Akkad conquered and united Mesopotamia under a single ruler for the first time in about 2340 B.C. For the next 160 years, his dynasty controlled the region, but in 2180, they became the first of many empires to discover that a region without defensible natural boundaries can never remain under a single government's control for long. An invading mountain tribe from Iran known as the Gutis shattered the power of Akkad and ended the rule of its kings. The Akkadians' cultural impact on the region was more long-lasting than their political power, however. For centuries, Akkadian remained the international language of politics and diplomacy in the Middle East, much as Latin later provided a common language for Medieval Europe long after the fall of Rome. Art and craftsmanship enjoyed a golden age of achievement under the Akkadian rulers, as perhaps best illustrated by a magnificent bronze head that was excavated in Nineveh. (Figures 6–7). The head probably once belonged to a full length statue of a king, perhaps Sargon himself. The man has a serious, even slightly sad face, his eyebrows drawn up to a steep arch in the middle of his forehead, and his brow creased with anxiety. His long, strong-boned face shows very sensitive and naturalistic modeling, especially in the cheekbones and full, sensuous lips. Balancing the psychological expressiveness and physical naturalism of these features is the elegantly patterned treatment of his hair and beard. The sculptors apparently sought to portray the king as wise, thoughtful, but also possessing superhuman beauty and splendor. Like so much political propaganda, however, no matter how well executed, this public image did not impress everyone. Someone, probably the invading Gutis, attacked the statue, tore out the eyes and attempted to hack off the ears and nose, much as modern Iraqis vandalized the statues of Saddam Hussein.



*Figure 6: (left) Bronze head from a statue of a king, possibly Sargon the Great of Akkad. Ca. 2250 B.C. Photo after Pierre Amiet, *Art of the Ancient Near East*. New York: Abrams, 1977. Plate 48.*

*Figure 7: (below) Bronze head of a king, profile view. Photo after Orthmann, fig. 48.*



## *The Assyrian Empire*

From 1100 B.C. to 612 B.C., a ruthless but efficient military empire dominated Mesopotamia and a large swath of the Levant. The Bible describes the Assyrians as blood-thirsty warriors and iron-fisted tyrants, an image that the Assyrian kings might not have found objectionable. The clear intent of the art that decorated their great palaces and fortresses was to intimidate the peoples under their control. Frieze after frieze from the citadels of Nimrud, Dur Sharrukin and Nineveh depicts military campaigns in precise, almost journalistic detail, setting the scene of each battle with elaborately carved backgrounds that demonstrate whether the unlucky opponents lived in marshes, desert, or a walled city. In every case, of course, the outcome is inevitable and brutal, as cities are put to the torch, opponents slaughtered and captives marched off to slavery, the king of the defeated country executed, and his head displayed as a gruesome trophy at the victory feast. Many of these friezes still survive intact in the British Museum, the Louvre, and various American collections, but the Baghdad Museum also possessed Assyrian sculptures, including a number of the huge guardian figures, known as Lamassu, that flanked gateways of citadels and doorways within palaces. These creatures had the bodies of bulls, wings of eagles, and heads of humans, sometimes with the hind paws of a feline. The tall headdresses that they wore, decked with multiple sets of bull's horns, identified them as divinities, although most visitors who saw these creatures looming above their heads as they entered the gates would have required no explanation of their supernatural meaning. These huge sculptures, often as tall as 9 feet, had to remain in the galleries of the museum, being much too heavy and unwieldy to move, and were attacked by looters.

Other finds from the Assyrian palaces, fortunately, survived the riots thanks to the foresight of curators. An assemblage of gold jewelry from tombs at Nimrud was recovered from a flooded bank vault. I do not yet know the fate of the ex-



quisite ivory reliefs from Nimrud. Workshops of talented Phoenician and Syrian craftsmen evidently had their ateliers within the Assyrian palaces, where they supplied carved inlays for royal furniture. The ornaments included plant, animal and human patterns. A particularly popular motif was a square plaque in the form of a window that frames the face of a beautiful woman. One of the finest and best known of these ivory inlays went by the affectionate nickname of “The Mona Lisa of Nimrud,” thanks to the woman’s alluring smile. (Figure 8) Art historians are not sure whether these faces represent the goddess Ishtar herself or the temple prostitutes who served her as priestesses and contributed the profits of their highly lucrative profession to the temple. Another furniture inlay represents an African man sprawled on the ground as a lion bends over him to sink its teeth into his neck. (Figure 9). The stylized background of lotus flowers sets the scene in the north of Africa, suggesting that the Assyrian kings hoped to conquer and annex this area, and that the lion represents their unstoppable military might. As with so much Assyrian art, one can deplore its message while admiring the extraordinary skill of the artisan who created the work.

## *Conclusion*

For those of us who teach and study ancient art, many of those works, like the marble face of the goddess from Uruk, the bronze head of the king and the “Mona Lisa of Nimrud” were old friends, and we felt real emotional pain about their possible loss. And photographs of lost objects are NOT good enough; there is never any substitute for the original object. I have not tried to conceal my admiration for the beauty of many of these objects, and unless they are damaged by smugglers who do not understand how to handle them, that will remain intact. But their importance goes far beyond the fact that they are exquisite examples of human skill and imagination. The history of humanity is written in more than words. Artifacts and works of



*Figure 8:* Ivory furniture inlay showing a woman's face, known as the "Mona Lisa of Nimrud." Phoenician workmanship for Assyrian patrons, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.  
Photo after Orthmann, Plate XXVII.



*Figure 9: Ivory furniture inlay of a lion attacking an African man. Phoenician work for Assyrian patrons, found at Nimrud, later 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Photo after Garbini, fig. 84.*

art are rich sources of information, about religion, politics, and society. But without their contexts these objects lose much of their value to archaeologists and historians. If a cylinder seal from the Baghdad Museum finds its way into the hands of a collector someday who does not know where it was excavated, or what other sorts of objects came to light along with it, he will have to guess about its date, origin and much of its meaning. The looting of the Baghdad museum was a cultural disaster that the United States now has a strong obligation to help correct in any way possible.