

Preface

This book offers a brief historical and cultural survey of the land of Iraq culminating with the American-led invasion and occupation of that country in 2003. Its focus is on the discovery, management, preservation, and destruction of cultural heritage of all periods, especially pre-Islamic antiquity. To this end, it gives a brief account of the political and social history of the region, with special reference to archaeological discoveries and their interpretation, and discusses modern law governing the exploitation of cultural heritage. It is intended for readers with no prior knowledge of these subjects. Studies of warfare generally overlook its cultural consequences, preferring to focus on victory and defeat, strategy and tactics, and redefinitions of government, economy, and society in the aftermath. Yet often the cultural impact of war, in the long term, far outweighs other considerations. Military victories and defeats are replaced by other victories and defeats, but cultural destruction is permanent and irremediable.

Modern technology and weaponry, and their easy availability to anyone, mean that cultural achievements are increasingly at the mercy of people who wish to force their own vision on a landscape, regardless of consequences. The Gulf and Iraq wars highlight this, as they have taken an as yet unknown toll of the human past of all periods, from the dawn of society to the last century, opening the way to a frenzy of looting of ancient sites and museums in Iraq on a scale the world has never seen. This is far more than scavenging surreptitiously for pots in ancient mounds. Rather, thieves use heavy equipment, large, armed teams of men, satellite telephones, containerized airfreight, and the Internet. Their highly lucrative trade is sustained and paid for by collectors and museums in the Middle East, Europe, the United States and Canada, and Japan for whom the vanity of ownership prevails over all other considerations.

The book is a team effort by an Assyriologist, Benjamin R. Foster (Chapters 1–13), an art historian/archaeologist, Karen Polinger Foster (Chapters 14, 15), and an attorney/archaeologist, Patty Gerstenblith (Chapter 16), to shed light on the cultural and legal consequences of these wars in Iraq. It takes no position on the wars themselves but seeks to answer the questions often asked of us: “So what’s the importance of this looting? What real difference does it make?” Our thesis is that the recent, on-going cultural destruction wrought on Iraq is as important as any strategic, political, economic, or environmental outcomes of these two wars. The loss of cultural memory and achievement is permanent, and much of it could have been avoided even in wartime conditions. The United States military in the Second World War amassed a brilliant record in protecting cultural property and restoring it to its owners, against a background of systematic looting of cultural property by other powers, especially the German and Russian military and governments.

This record stands now in stark contrast to the ignorance, lack of planning, and unwillingness to act in cultural matters, which characterized the American leadership, especially in the Iraq War and during the subsequent American occupation of the country. Unlike many armies, the American forces themselves did little looting in these wars, but they did almost nothing to stop it either. The looting has been done mainly by Iraqis to make much-needed money from the international trade in antiquities and other cultural property. In a few years, as we will show, Iraq went from having one of the best-protected ancient heritages anywhere in the world to one of the worst. No understanding of the American military involvement in the Middle East can be sound or complete without an appreciation of its long-term cultural impact.

Parts of this book originated in the McKee-May Academic Lectures, delivered by Benjamin R. Foster in Greenwich, CT, in the winter of 2004. Our thanks go to Jennifer Vietor Evans of Greenwich for the invitation that made possible this undertaking. Bassam Frangieh of Yale University was characteristically generous with his time and knowledge in discussing and checking the translations from Arabic poetry given here, and for advising on suitable selections. Poetry is widely appreciated in the Arabic-speaking world as a form of cultural and social expression, so the purpose here has been to offer some hint of its enormous richness and variety. Beatrice Gruendler drew attention to the lament of al-Rumi and allowed use of her unpublished translation. Sasha Treiger kindly checked a translation from Russian.

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The book has greatly benefited from discussions with colleagues during several conferences and panels on the issues, among them “A Future for Our Past: An International Symposium for Redefining the Concept of Cultural Heritage and its Protection,” held in Istanbul in June 2004; and three programs, “Iraq Beyond the Headlines,” held at Yale University in April 2003, October 2003, and October 2004. Joanne Farchakh read critically Chapters 14 and 15. Catherine Sease, Dominique Collon, Zainab al Bahrani, Eva Strommenger, and Roger Atwood assisted generously with photographs. Peter W. Johnson digitized the map and designed the cover. The authors are grateful to Kimberly Chua and the staff of World Scientific for suggesting this project and for seeing it through.

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