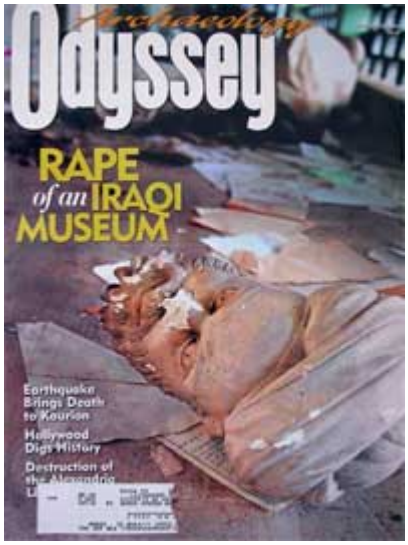
LOOTING BAGHDAD MUSEUM – WHY WE SHOULD, OR SHOULDN'T CARE

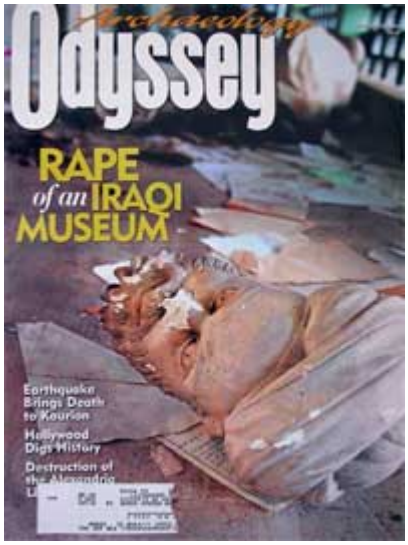


We want stories rather than things!

Just got the July/August issue of Archaeology Odyssey.

Cover – "Rape of an Iraqi museum"
Photo – a turbaned head rolling on the floor amidst scattered papers and debris.

A headline and image of crime and destruction.



We have heard a lot about this in the media since April – looters ransacking the National Museum in the wake of the fall of Baghdad, the loss of priceless treasures, the failure of the occupying forces to protect the museum and its collections. Here are three sites that cover the issue well.
Francis Deblauwe's pages and links
Iraqcrisis – a moderated list
uggabugga blog

Yes – anyone with a sense of cultural value should be concerned. So much of what is left of thel past is disappearing because of urban development, new roads and civil engineering projects, but also because of the looting of sites to supply the art and antiquities markets. The MacDonald Institute at Cambridge and David Gill and Chris Chippindale pull together information and the issues. Third largest illegal business after drugs and organized crime, the trade in antiquities may amount to 4 billion dollars turnover a year (Neil Brodie at the MacDonald Institute). Cultural tourism – visiting landscapes, sites, museums, other cultures – is, after all, one of the biggest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world.

But note this is not just an open and shut case of contemporary barbarians trashing civilized culture.

The story in the background is one of old nineteenth-century ideas about cultural evolution.

Scenario. Iraq is presented as the cradle of civilization; western European nations are its descendants and heirs. Archaeologists discover the sites and treasures of the past. Museums are where many of these priceless items of cultural capital are

held in safe-keeping. They need protection from the uneducated, the uncivilized, the unscrupulous, the poor, the criminal who would sell them to selfish private interests simply for monetary gain. They might even, in ignorance and in spite, destroy them.

The evolutionary ideas are those of the nineteenth century – that history is a story of progress, of the emergence of the civilized west out of barbarism. That archaeologists discover treasure is as old and discredited a story as the one that has history a story of the evolution of cultural excellence. Not much that archaeologists find is remotely treasure-like, and rather than discover the past, archaeologists actually simply work on the tatty remains of what is left, attempting to address some rather interesting questions (such as what it was it like in the past).

Look how this scenario is perfect for justifying western intervention in the Middle East. Oil is another international resource for all humanity and needs protecting. Police action is required to deal with threats to such resources. Not brutal war between nations, but surgical strikes and smart bombs targeted upon criminal elements. Against the powers of darkness and barbarism.

Hence the criticisms of occupying forces failing to act against the looting of a national museum have force. At least in this scenario, where protecting such civilized interests, values and resources was the whole point of the invasion.

Anyone with a passion for collecting, any archaeologist interested in understanding the past, has an insatiable hunger for information. You want to know where an item came from, what it was found with, where it has been. Was it from a dump, or a room in a home, or a temple, or a grave? For an archaeologist this kind of information is crucial when you want to reconstruct past lives. It makes for good stories. The richness is in the detail.

Just think of many museums where little information is presented to the visitor, little out of which to make stories that involve the things the visitor is looking at. Many museum artifacts are, of course, very beautiful. But like many others, I find museums tiring, even tedious, because the visitor is expected to bring knowledge along with them to help decode the things on display. So often, however, our reaction is simple, routine, and repetitive. Wow – a fine piece! Mmm yes,

another sensitive piece. A great work of art. And another. Ah, that's not so good …. Objects standing alone tell us very little. They don't make for great stories.

Do I care about the treasures of the Baghdad Museum? As an archaeologist? Not really. But my answer needs qualification. I don't really care because objects out of context, even so-called cultural treasures, tell us very little. Many of those in the museum have little information about where exactly they were found at a site, and with what, in what circumstances. What stories do they tell? What response do they evoke? Stories of the possessions of great kings. A beautiful piece of sculpture from the third dynasty. Another fine example of sculpture from the third dynasty. Not such a fine example from the third dynasty. There is often little more to say about these artifacts other than they are incredibly beautiful and accomplished (or not), and a testament to human skill and aesthetic sensibility (or not).

I have to stand against the model of archaeology and the past embodied in museums like that in Baghdad. Against these stories of the evolution of civilized culture that belongs to all humanity and yet is supposed to find its happiest home in those western imperialist powers that invented this story in the nineteenth century.

What is really wrong here? The idea that culture is property.

I think we want stories rather than things!

(have a look at an article in Critique of Anthropology back in 1994 (Volume 14(3) pages 263-284) – Susan Pollock and Catherine Lutz, "Archaeology deployed for the Gulf War".)