

“THE MASSACRE OF MESOPOTAMIAN ARCHAEOLOGY”

More reports of the damage done to cultural heritage in the Middle East in The Daily Star (Lebanon)

NASIRIYA, Iraq: In the southern Iraq desert, the standing structures of ancient archaeological cities dot the horizon – majestic monuments to times long gone. Untouched for thousands of years, historic temples, palaces, tombs and entire dead cities are the sole witness of the passing of time.

Properly excavated, these cities could reveal valuable knowledge on the development of the human race and resolve the big mysteries of history. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to happen. The Sumerian cities have been destroyed, ravaged by the incessant looting that started with the American invasion of Iraq. Once considered historical treasures, today crater-filled landscapes compete for space with hills of shredded pottery and broken bricks.

Looters – mainly farmers or jobless Iraqis of all ages – have destroyed the monuments of their own ancestors,

erasing their own history in their tireless search for artifacts.

They leave their homes and villages seeking financial rewards. Poverty, ignorance and greed force them to change their lives and become tomb raiders – and they actually live on the sites they are robbing for months at a time. A cylinder seal, a sculpture or a cuneiform tablet can bring in desperately sought hard cash. They work all day long hoping to find an artifact that they can sell to the dealer for a mere few dollars. It is tough, dangerous work for bad pay.

“A cylinder seal or a cuneiform tablet brings in under \$50 on the site for the looter from the dealer. The dealer then sells it at ten times the price,” explains the archaeologist responsible for the district of Nasiriya, Abdul Amir Hamadani.

“More than 100 Sumerian cities have been destroyed by the looters since the beginning of the war,” says Hamadani, who was appointed at the war’s end by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq. “It’s a disaster that all we are keeping watch on but about which we can do little. We are incapable of stopping

the looting. We are five archaeologists, some hundred guards and, occasionally, a couple of policemen – and they are a million armed looters, backed by their tribes and the dealers.”

I commented last year on the ideas of cultural property revealed in reactions to the looting of the Baghdad Museum, [complaining that the values espoused in the shocked reaction actually fuelled the trade in illicit antiquities – the motivation for stealing stuff from museums and archaeological sites.](#)

[But the destruction of so many archaeological sites in the wake of war and civil unrest is a simple tragedy for which there is no repair.](#)