

NOT FOR SALE

Eine Konferenz der Schweiz und Großbritanniens zum Handel mit Altertümern aus dem Irak und angrenzenden Gebieten

Im Februar 2004 haben die Britische Botschaft in Bern und der British Council Switzerland, eine englische Stiftung für Bildung und Kulturbeziehungen in der Schweiz, gemeinsam mit dem Art Law Centre in Genf die Konferenz NOT FOR SALE ausgerichtet. Die Idee der Konferenz entstand in Reaktion auf die negative Berichterstattung über den illegalen Handel mit Kulturgütern in der Schweiz. Zeitgleich geriet die britisch-amerikanische Operation Iraqi Freedom im Irak auch deshalb in das Kreuzfeuer der internationalen Medien, weil die Einsatzkräfte versäumten, den Schutz des kulturellen Erbes im Irak

sicherzustellen. Zu der Konferenz in Genf kamen auf Einladung der britischen Botschaft internationale Experten aus Politik, Wissenschaft und Forschung zusammen, um die prekäre Lage im Irak und die Aufgaben der Schweiz und Großbritanniens in Sachen Kulturgutschutz zu diskutieren. Das Ziel war, die Situation im Irak und in Europa zu reflektieren und rechtliche, politische und gesellschaftliche Konzepte für den Kulturgutschutz durch die Schweiz und durch Großbritannien anzuregen.

Der folgende Beitrag der Konferenz NOT FOR SALE von Professorin Zainab Bahrani greift die ethischen Fragen der Plünderung und des Handels mit Kulturgütern im Irak auf.

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The destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq

By Zainab Bahrani

Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology at the Columbia University. A native of Baghdad, Iraq, she was educated in Europe and the United States. She received her Master of Arts and doctoral degrees in art history and archaeology from the New York University Institute of Fine Arts. Prior to her appointment at Columbia University, Dr. Bahrani was curator in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Near Eastern Antiquities Department from 1989 to 1992.

The looting of the Iraq Museum in April 2003 was reported widely in the press, and if you will remember, the pendulum swung in both directions. The press first informed us that the entire collection was gone but later insisted that only 33 objects were actually missing.

There was a great deal of discussion of where the responsibility lay, and the blame was shifted around between the US and UK military, the Pentagon, the curators of the Iraq Museum, and so on. Likewise, with the second aspect of the destruction of Iraq's heritage, the looting at the archaeological sites and the appearance of antiquities outside Iraq, the question of responsibility has arisen. Ambassadors Cordone and Bondioli Osio have given the official reports on the situation. But I am told that I am allowed to raise some points for discussion, and rather than going over numbers and figures or summarising the plans being made for the future by the Coalition Provisional Authority or inter-

national NGOs I will instead raise the question of ethical responsibilities involved in the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage from plunder in the post-war situation today, and the theoretical-ideological basis upon which the trade in illicit antiquities from Iraq is functioning. I would also like to suggest that the case of Iraq might make those of us who are experts and professionals in the field of cultural heritage consider new ways of dealing with such disasters when, and preferably before, they arise.

My first point or question is this: How does the legal authority for decision making regarding cultural heritage affect the loss of cultural property?

The looting of the museums occurred because there was chaos, there were no guards, and the continuing looting of the archaeological sites is, of course, a similar situation. There are thus two aspects of the trade in illicit antiquities coming out of Iraq today. The first, well known from the press and television coverage, is the looting at the museums and libraries in April 2003; the second, covered much less in the press, is the horrendous plunder at the archaeological sites. The truth of the matter is that in the past ten months, the cultural heritage of Iraq has suffered an immense number of losses and it continues today. In fact, the extent of the loss, the theft and looting of cultural property in the

past months is unprecedented in Iraq's history. As a historian of antiquity I am painfully aware that there is no historical parallel for the amount of destruction that has taken place over the past ten months. In the Iraqi example of the illicit trade in antiquities, we can circle around the issue of the current looting taking place today, but in the end I think we must confront the fact that it is now primarily a matter of lack of law enforcement.

The rescue efforts that followed the museum thefts of April 2003, and the US military investigation into the looting conducted during the summer months have received a great deal of coverage in the media and the rescue efforts of the US military, as I have said elsewhere, are not only commendable – they can only be described as Herculean. The progress in recovery of objects from the museum has really been tremendous, but the cultural heritage of Iraq Museum in Baghdad, the Mosul Museum of Antiquities, the Museum of Modern Art and a number of important libraries and collections of manuscripts were also looted and damaged. Although a cursory report on libraries was submitted by a Library of Congress team that was in Iraq for a few days last November, thorough and methodical assessments of losses to these collections have yet to be made. Most of the rescue effort has focused on the Iraq Museum and plans for the renovation of the museum are under way, funded primarily by the US State Department, but a thorough inventory of the collections will take years to complete. Only then can we know the exact amount and nature of missing objects, so that we can stop their movement across borders and repatriate those objects that have appeared outside Iraq.

The other part of the looting is taking place at the over 10,000 archaeological sites in Iraq. The illicit looting at these sites has reached a previously unimagined extent. Several ancient cities have been destroyed completely in this way in recent months. Antiquities from these Iraqi sites are then sold on the international black market.

These Mesopotamian or Iraqi antiquities end up in the United States, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. My second point of discussion is this: that we must confront the theoretical, political and ideological basis upon which this market flourishes and upon which collecting illicitly acquired antiquities, far from being socially considered as the international crime that it is, is so often lauded as an elegant humanist pastime of the highly cultured individuals.

I would like to stress that the looting of antiquities is an export business. It is not for local museums or private collections in the source country. Museums and collectors, the consumer end of the market, when they are not careful to take steps to check provenance, ought to bear much of the responsibility for the destruction. This destruction is not simply limited to the loss of objects that might be found and repatriated at a later time. What is worse even than the loss of the objects is the destruction of the context in the process of the plundering, buildings, cities, artefacts, scientific information, settlement patterns, archival data. History itself is destroyed.

Ironically, the illicit antiquities trade is ideologically supported by the notion of 'global cultural heritage' itself. Cultural artefacts have been considered the available realm of free market enterprise because, collectors and dealers argue, they belong to all of us, and that they value and protect them when they buy them for their own collections. More importantly now we have the added ideological arguments of antinationalism. Nationalism has been criticised and for very good reason; however, the antinationalist - arguments have been very serviceable for the illicit trade in antiquities. The new situation in Iraq has brought this issue to the fore. I have heard it said, even by seemingly liberal thinkers, that these antiquities are not actually the rightful property or heritage of the people of Iraq since Iraq is an artificial postcolonial nation state with borders drawn by colonial powers after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Obviously, such arguments work very well in the service of the illicit antiquities trade. These new discussions regarding the allegedly proper or correct identification of the geographical area, Iraq, of Mesopotamia, have had an unacknowledged impact on the illicit trade in antiquities.

The exploitation and consumption of other peoples' cultural heritage can thus be articulated in political and economic terms.

It is not simply a matter of organised criminal activity; it is a matter of ideological belief in the right of ownership of cultural property. Then there is the problem in the source country, Iraq. Artefacts are sold in Iraq and are going across the border. Archaeological sites are plundered for antiquities, and entire cities have been destroyed this way. Some archaeological sites are being damaged by development and construction as well as by expanding military installations. Since April 2003, the authority to make decisions about Iraq's cultural heritage has been in the hands of the Coalition Provisional Authority CPA. International laws regarding the responsibility for cultural heritage during the occupation exist, but it seems to me that the ethical and moral thing to do, regardless of international laws, is to protect the cultural heritage of the world, a heritage which is our joint history and for which we bear the responsibility to future generations to protect. It is also the responsibility of international experts in the fields of cultural heritage management as well as scholars and intellectuals to call for a greater effort in the protection of this cultural heritage. In conclusion my two main points are: first, that the ideological politic-economic basis of the trade in antiquities needs to be confronted and discussed; and second, the ethical and moral duties of occupying authorities in times of war must be clarified. In peacetime it is easy to uphold ideals of culture and its protection; it is precisely when it becomes difficult to do so, in times of chaos or upheaval, that we must make a greater effort to protect cultural heritage.