

Neglect, Not Looting, Threatens Iraq Sites, Study Says

James Owen in London
for [National Geographic News](#)

August 12, 2008

Fears of the continued plunder of ancient antiquities in war-torn [Iraq](#) may be laid to rest, according to a new survey of eight of the most important archaeological sites in the south of the country.

An international team of scholars who visited the historic sites in June found no obvious evidence of recent looting, according to a report recently published by the British Museum in London.

The findings came as a surprise to antiquities experts and scholars who had expected continued destruction of Iraqi heritage sites after the U.S. invaded in 2003.

"We didn't see any new looting at the eight sites, which was really very, very encouraging," said team member Elizabeth Stone, a Mesopotamia specialist from Stony Brook University in New York.

While the study team cautions that the situation may be very different elsewhere in Iraq, the findings suggest a dramatically improved situation at the eight locations since 2003, when widespread illegal digging was recorded in the region.

The survey, however, uncovered other significant damage to ancient Mesopotamian monuments caused by neglect and military activity.

The British Museum-led expedition to Basra and three other southern provinces was supported by the British Army, which provided armed security and helicopter transport.

Using high-resolution satellite images from 2003, Stone, a [National Geographic Society grantee](#), identified extensive looting at more than 200 sites in southern Iraq.

Larsa, an important second millennium B.C. city nearly 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of modern-day Baghdad, was among the badly looted sites visited by the team.

"If there was major recent looting there we would have expected to find it," Stone said. "But I didn't see anything that was there in late 2003 or early 2004."

Looting activity identified at other southern sites, including Tell el-'Oueili, Tell al-Lahm, Lagash, and Eridu, is also thought to have occurred at least four years ago.

Sumerian Capital

Other types of damage were revealed at sites such as Ur, capital of the Sumerian civilization from 2100 to 2000 B.C.

Famous for its terraced temple, called a ziggurat, and royal tombs, Ur was hit during the bombing of the adjacent Tallil Airbase in the first Gulf War (1990-1991).

Stone says one of the temples, the Kassite temple next to the ziggurat, has "deteriorated considerably" since she last inspected it in 1992.

She now suspects the bombing may have cracked a protective concrete covering, allowing water to erode the temple's ancient brickwork.

The team additionally found that walls of the royal tombs have begun to collapse.

"In places like Ur we're seeing this kind of wear and tear," Stone said.

Damage to monuments caused by Iraqi defensive positions dug prior to the 2003 invasion and subsequent potentially harmful uncontrolled access by coalition troops was also highlighted in the report.

"Tens of thousands of military boots tramping over an archaeological site is not what we want," observed team member Paul Collins, curator of later Mesopotamian collections at the British Museum.

But, overall, the most serious threat is neglect, Collins said.

"The ongoing problem is not so much looting or military damage, it is the fact that these sites have faced 30 years of neglect," he said. "The lack of resources for the Iraqi Department of Antiquities means they simply haven't been able to inspect the sites or do conservation or restoration work."

Many ancient buildings "are simply eroding away," Collins said.

The apparent halt to looting at the study sites may be partly due to better security since Iraq's Facilities Protection Service (FPS) was set up with Italian assistance in 2003, Collins said.

The FPS started as a unit of 4,000 government-building guards and by 2006 had grown into a paramilitary force of nearly 145,000. U.S. officials have repeatedly called it unreliable.

However, Collins said the research team found the FPS to be very effective. "They turned up, fully armed, at several of the sites we visited," he said.

At some sites local tribes have taken responsibility for guarding ancient artifacts from potential looters, he added.

Not the Whole Picture?

Collins stresses that the study gives only a limited snapshot of the current situation in Iraq.

"It's just eight sites out of tens of thousands of archaeological sites, most of them unexplored," he said.

Similar surveys need to be undertaken across Iraq to "really get a picture of what did happen and what the situation is now," he added.

Lawrence Rothfield, director of the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago, believes there are good reasons why the sites visited by the team didn't show evidence of recent looting.

Some sites were located near or within coalition bases, while others "did not contain artifacts of interest to collectors," Rothfield wrote in an email.

"There is plentiful evidence that serious plundering of sites since 2003 has occurred," Rothfield said.

He noted, for instance, that Polish and Italian forces in Iraq have reported "widespread looting" and "continuous and methodical illicit digging."

"We know that as of 2006, 17,000 artifacts looted from unregistered archaeological sites had been recovered, surely only a fraction of what has been lost," Rothfield said.

"If there is any grounds for optimism from this report," he said, "it is that it shows that an intelligently devised anti-looting policy by the military could have prevented much of the looting that has occurred, and that future looting can be controlled as well, if the Iraqis can get the support they need to do the job."