

## Notes on the looting of antiquities in Iraq and the memory of the West

Emanuel Pfoh\*

### ABSTRACT

The US-led Coalition that invaded Iraq on 2003 paved the road for the looting of cultural and archaeological resources of the country, which were rapidly incorporated into antiquities black markets. A critical view, as a mean to interpret the looting, points at three questions that should be addressed by historians and archaeologists, but also by political researchers: 1) the role of archaeological artifacts in Middle Eastern countries; 2) the ideological place that the West maintains for Eastern antiquities; 3) the policies that should be followed, taking the previous points into account.

### RESUMEN

La invasión a Irak en 2003 por parte de las fuerzas aliadas encabezadas por los Estados Unidos habilitó un acceso indiscriminado a los recursos culturales y arqueológicos de la zona, que prontamente fueron puestos en circulación en los mercados negros de antigüedades. Una consideración crítica sobre la apropiación de estos artefactos nos permite pensar en, al menos, tres problemáticas que deberían ser abordadas seriamente por historiadores y arqueólogos así como por analistas políticos: 1) el rol que poseen los artefactos arqueológicos en los países de Medio Oriente; 2) el lugar ideológico que tienen las antigüedades orientales en Occidente; y 3) qué disposiciones tomar ante las dos problemáticas anteriores.

In March 2003 American troops started the occupation of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The reasons for this occupation were obvious to the political and military leadership of the USA: the assumption that there were weapons of mass destruction made intervention necessary. The later control of the rest of the country, with the subsequent capture of Hussein, had as a result the foreseeable inexistence of such weapons of mass destruction. However, the excuses for the occupation did not seem to be as important as the economic reasons to carry out the occupation – in the colonial way – in the name of freedom and democracy (occidental, of course).<sup>1</sup>

More precisely, what can be observed in the American occupation of Iraq is the subjugation of political institutions and practices that are considered a threat to the American global hegemonic policy, a threat that is not so much the classical and historical Western-

---

\* Bachelor of History / Teaching assistant in the chair of General History I (Ancient East), Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences, National University of La Plata; Coordinator of the department of Middle East of the IRI and Research Grantee in CONICET.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Frachon y Vernet, 2006 [2004], esp. 13-36 y 151-163.

European fear of “what may come from the East”<sup>2</sup>, but an interest to dominate economic resources and strategic geopolitical positions: undoubtedly, the American government – armed with arguments coming from neoconservative think tanks, especially after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001- had the objective of getting control of the country and promoting the creation of the first ‘western’ democracy in the Arabic world, which would be an example to its neighbors. However, it is obvious that this attempt has come up against a series of internal conflicts which, in short, render the American plan, if not impossible, at least a difficult and long dated task. In this context of crisis, of military and also cultural invasion of Iraq, it is interesting to reflect upon the looting of antiquities in a territory that was once considered by an orientalist to be the place where ‘civilization’ had started<sup>3</sup>, an idea that is nowadays still accepted in school and academic books. In fact, the start of this civilization could be no other than the Western’s, because –as such books seem to maintain- studying the Ancient Near East (=our contemporary Middle East) can only have its intellectual justification when it is joined to a historic evolution chain that ends in the Northern West<sup>4</sup>.

Moving on to concrete facts, in a report in the electronic newspaper The Daily Star – Arts & Culture in September that year, the looting process is summarized as ‘the massacre of Mesopotamic archeology’ (Farchakh, 2004). It is true that, in terms of the discipline of Oriental studies, the word ‘massacre’ seems to be quite appropriate, in view of the actions performed by the inhabitants of the place and by the military occupation troops. However, a number of observations of a sociological nature can be made that may give us a perception of this situation from alternative viewpoints and allow us to reconsider these illegal practices.

According to the reports of the news, the looting was carried out by peasants and unemployed people led by ‘poverty, ignorance and greed’. The stage of direct looting, destruction and theft, is the beginning of a commercial circuit that continues with the activity of antique dealers and ends in private collections (as luxury objects of wealthy people) and on display in some museums.

Looting, of course, is not done in an entirely peaceful way. The local dealers buy armed protection from tribal clans, which leads to clashes with occupation forces in charge of the protection of archeological sites and museums, the Italian Carabinieri. At first, these forces managed to reduce the number of looting cases. However, the later irruption of a conflict between the Shia army Al-Mahdi and the Coalition Forces<sup>5</sup> put this protection scheme in jeopardy. It also led the looters to join the rebel forces, giving looting a strong political turn, as a national vindication practice through the appropriation of those objects that are appreciated by the invaders. The irony in this situation lies in the fact that these artefacts will end up eventually in western hands.

These have been so far the news reports. We could now pose three questions that arise when this situation is considered in a critical way, questions in which the academic sphere cannot break away from the world of politics in the Middle East:

1. What is the role of artefacts and antiquities in the countries of the Middle East?
2. What place do these artefacts have in the memory of the West and why?
3. What new academic and political regulations must be put into consideration?

---

<sup>2</sup> A fear that may have its origin in the progressive expansion of the Persian Empire towards the West during the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC.: cf. Bengtson, 2002 [1965]. Nowadays, this fear is represented by Islamism, see the contributions in U. Eco *et al.*, 2005 [2002]. Cf. also Said, 1994 [1978].

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, 1959. In other words, this can still be seen in much more recent works; cf. the summary in Nissen, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of this view, cf. Pfoh (in press)

<sup>5</sup> The particular events of the clashes between the resistance factions and the occupation forces cannot be fully understood or explained without understanding the close relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East. On this subject, see Zeraoui, 2004.

1. This first question is, in truth, ambiguous, and depends on the places and essentially the socioeconomic and political conditions that we take into consideration. For example, countries like Egypt take advantage of the cultural riches in its territory to stimulate archeological and historical studies and investigations; also to encourage its exploitation as international tourism sites<sup>6</sup>. In the modern state of Israel, archeology is almost a national hobby. The relationship between biblical archeology and the consolidation of the national memory of the country, especially during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been close; therefore, archeological tourism is seen as a revision of Judeo-Christian memory and the religious origins of the West<sup>7</sup>. It is also relevant to consider that the archeological and historical accounts of the farthest (i.e. biblical) past of the country constitute the essence and ultimate foundations of the national politics: if there is a state of Israel, it is partly due to specific sociological and historical circumstances that gave rise to the emergence of Zionism in Europe and the subsequent immigration of Jews towards Palestine and partly due to the biblical idea of a state of Israel that was once, millennia ago, established by King David in the region. The relationship between the historical (and archeological) past and the political present may not be immediately seen but, from a general point of view, it constitutes the ideological structure that supports political life in modern Israeli society. Likewise, it is interesting to note the use that the Palestinian National Authority is making nowadays – and has been for many years, incidentally- of its farthest past through a similar appeal to the historical and archeological practice in recent years. So, there is no longer only a Palestinian Israeli conflict in strictly political terms; now, the struggle is also ideological over the ownership of the past of the region and the definitive assignment of its material manifestations, that is, the archeological artefacts (cf. Pfoh, 2005).
  
2. In general, the importance of the eastern world for the western imaginary can be taken back to the time of Alexander the Great (4<sup>th</sup> century BC), when his conquest of the East set the foundations for the main cities of the region to share, in a later time, a common culture that united strictly eastern aspects and the Hellenistic world, thus creating a geographic scene that contained the origin of western civilization within its bounds. This heritage was later bequeathed to the Roman Empire, especially its eastern section. Around the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, approximately, Empress Flavia Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, institutionalized the religious nature that certain places (such as the Holy Sepulcher in 325 AD, approximately) had for the West. The milestone in this account of the origins of the West, is constituted by the notable discovery in 327 AD of the True Cross, the piece of timber on which Jesus Christ might have been crucified. From then on, the western link with the city of Jerusalem was strengthened and gave way, in medieval times, to the Crusades, as a continuation of this spiritual, intellectual and - not least – material appropriation of these territories, encompassing places, artefacts and all that could refer back to the history of Christianity<sup>8</sup>. This symbolic importance of Jerusalem is maintained to the present day, not only on account of it being the capital city of the modern State of Israel, but also because it is highly charged with religious and cultural meanings for the West that could hardly be separated from the geopolitical reasons (cf. Whitelam, 2003; Bar, 2004).

---

<sup>6</sup> This is a forceful reason to maintain a policy of repatriation of looted cultural heritage to their source countries (these are usually developing countries). A cultural goods exhibition, by means of the appropriate infrastructure, could imply a (maybe modest, but ideologically important) means of strengthening the internal economy through cultural tourism, of which Egypt is an example.

<sup>7</sup> A recent treatment of the subject, with special attention to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, can be seen in Abu El-Haj, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hindley, 2004 [2003], esp. pages 33-48 for a revision of the cultural and religious causes of the Crusades.

In the West – as we have already noted – the archeological artefact (both monetary and cultural) is considerably appreciated because it encapsulates an epic past in a fetichized way: the object is the past. Also, this bivalence is presented as a two-faced Janus of paradoxical consequences: the antiquity traffic in the black markets of the world is caused by, and is partly encouraged by the museums' need of them. The existence of specific places that – beyond the general educational and expositive role that they play - constitute the appropriate shelters for these artefacts ironically engenders the criminal practice that is diametrically opposed to their ultimate objectives.

3. In close relationship to the previous paragraph, the answer to the third question will never be definitive; it might be the hardest to find. The importance that the archeological and historical artefacts have for the West is obvious: the ubiquitous existence of antiquity black markets, as well as museums, constantly indicates this. On the other hand, these artefacts are originally situated, in most cases, in non-western countries. It would be incorrect to maintain that these artefacts do not belong, in the first place, to the present inhabitants of the territory where they were found. Likewise, resorting to presentations that show the little importance that the artefacts are given, on certain occasions, in eastern countries, does not justify either the cultural expropriation. What is the answer, then? It might not be a definitive starting point, but to champion the end of certain imperialistic appropriation practices by the West, of those material repositories of culture, as well as making the context in which this appropriation is made explicit and intelligible can be an appropriate beginning. The artefacts can be considered to be of cultural interest both to the East and West, though in different ways. Even so, the National Sovereignty of the countries where the archeological sites are situated should be respected, because - in the final analysis – we do not have the authority to make a previous appreciation to the one made by the inhabitants of that country themselves.

This last point can be seen if we take up again the specific case of post-Hussein's Iraq. Incidentally, it is significant that many of the artefact and relic looters are rural inhabitants of the region where the sites are. Saddam Hussein compared himself once with King Nebuchadrezzar and his Babilonic Empire (6<sup>th</sup> century BC), but the inhabitants that have benefited the least from his regime do not seem to have felt part of that past – even when, in the West, we can find remnants and direct continuities through the milleniums – and, consequently, the looting and destruction of the material remains of civilizations that inhabited the same territory as them, their predecessors, offers better opportunities to escape the consequences of war. In fact, this should not surprise us, given that the cultural heritage that is in danger – or that has disappeared, or has been destroyed or is in one of the most important International Museums – is dear especially to the West and to the elites in the Middle East countries that have been culturally brought up in the Western way in relationship with its own experience of the construction of a cultural identity, a - western – experience, that is many times similar to a historic nostalgia for the origins. Is it that the savage Iraqis are unable to appreciate the cultural value of the archeological artefacts that they dig up or steal and offer to the highest bidder? It could be said that – undoubtedly – the cultural value varies from society to society, from community to community, and that what is really at stake here is the looters' own material subsistence, not their considerations on their farthest past or their cultural identity, as can be represented by these artefacts. The modern West promotes the emergence of socioeconomic situations, happenings and conditions that later turn against it: the cultural value of artefacts that have a place in the western construction of its original memory becomes commercial value by actors who are foreign to this self-perception, but who are led by the conditions that the West imposes on the region. Similar reflections can be made, for example, regarding the circumstances in which the Dead Sea Scrolls in Israel and the Christian documents of

Gnostic nature coming from Nag Hammadi in Egypt, were made known<sup>9</sup>: what the native inhabitants may think or feel about such manuscripts is not important – in fact, they consider them an exchange item that has no intrinsic cultural value in their society –; the West needs them because they concern their own evocation of the past and, in this way, it divests symbolically and, especially, materially those who should be the ultimate owners of these “memory-artefacts” (even when they do not appreciate these “cultural goods” the way the Western academy would). What is more, we should ask ourselves, regarding the ancient history of Israel: why do we care so much about the past of this eastern people? Or rather, why is the archeological practice of the Palestinian territories and modern Israel so politically controversial? (cf. Abu El-Haj, 2001) On the one hand, the authorship of the biblical writings – which, in the shape of religious canon, marked the ideal of the western conduct during practically the last two millennia – and the role that they played in the later ideological, religious and cultural constitution of the western societies should be a satisfactory answer. On the other hand, the importance that this account of historical evocation has in relation to the present existence of the State of Israel and the possibility of a Palestinian state in the region should be recognized<sup>10</sup>.

In conclusion, without acquitting the acts of looting and destruction - and the implicit violence in those acts – it becomes necessary to perceive the social and cultural realities that the praxis of contemporary politics deals with – and the conflict spaces that politics itself creates – with a supportive disposition towards the “native perspective”, speaking in terms of field anthropology. Territorial occupation, dictated by geopolitical considerations and encouraged by economic and political interests causes deep social and cultural crises for the native people. The negligence of the occupation forces with respect to the valuation of the looted artefacts operates in the same way as the sociological causes that lead the inhabitants of the place to feed the commercial circuit of antiquities in the world. If we focus only on the cultural aspects of this looting, it is obvious that it is the West that encourages the looting, given that the artefacts involved end up in its hands; and those who benefit the least from this activity are, inevitably, the looters themselves, condemned by the same institutional authorities that use them to do the ‘dirty work’. It is this reality that social investigators must be critical of. In truth, the valuation of the intellectual reproduction of the farthest past of the West has a price, and that price is the dignity of the people affected by this task.

### Bibliography

- Abu El-Haj, N. *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self Fashioning in Israeli Society*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2001.
- Bar, D. Re-creating Jewish Sanctity in Jerusalem: Mount Zion and David’s Tomb, 1948-67. En: *The Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 23, 2004, pp. 260-278.
- Bengtson, H. (ed.) *Griegos y persas. El mundo mediterráneo en la edad antigua, I*, (Historia Universal Siglo XXI, vol. 5), Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2002 [1965].
- Candau, J. *Antropología de la memoria*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 2002 [1996].
- Eco, U. *y otros Islam y Occidente. Reflexiones para la convivencia*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 2005 [2002].

---

<sup>9</sup> An old, though useful journalistic report on the discovery of the Scrolls can be found in Wilson, 1995 [1969]; see Schiffman, 2005 and especially VanderKam and Flint, 2002. On the Nag Hammadi manuscript, cf. Pagels, 1996 [1979], esp. pages 11-39

<sup>10</sup> In fact, an ideological palestinian-israeli conflict – beyond the exclusively political one, if such distinction can be made – can be seen regarding the social identity of the past of the region. (cf. Pfoh, 2005). The interpretative ambiguity that both sides show in their political speeches is also notable. But, in fact, the ambiguous and biased way in which a certain past is dealt with is, precisely, the habitual way in which societies record their cultural memory. On this subject, and in general, see Candau, 2002 [1996].

- Farchakh, J. The Massacre of Mesopotamian Archaeology: Looting in Iraq is Out of Control. En: The Daily Star – Arts & Culture, September 21<sup>st</sup> 2004. En internet: [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=10&categ\\_id=4&article\\_id=8536](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=4&article_id=8536).
- Frachon, A. y Vernet, D. La América mesiánica. Los orígenes del neoconservadurismo y las guerras del presente, Barcelona, Paidós, 2006 [2004].
- Hindley, G. Las cruzadas: peregrinaje armado y guerra santa, Buenos Aires, Ediciones B / Javier Vergara Editor, 2004 [2003].
- Kramer, S.N. History Begins at Sumer, Nueva York, Doubleday, 1959.
- Nissen, H.J. Ancient Western Asia Before the Age of the Empires. En: Sasson, J.M. (ed.), Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, vol. II, Nueva York, Scribner's Sons, 1995, pp. 791-806.
- Pagels, E. Los evangelios gnósticos, Barcelona, Crítica, 1996 [1979].
- Pfoh, E. La historia antigua de Palestina a la luz de las recientes revisiones de la historia antigua de Israel. Aspectos políticos e ideológicos en torno al conflicto palestino-israelí. En: Relaciones Internacionales, vol. 28, 2005, pp. 107-126.
- Pfoh, E. ¿Para qué estudiar historia antigua? Hacia una pedagogía de la tolerancia. En: Revista Cambios y Continuidades (en prensa).
- Said, E.W. Orientalism, Nueva York, Vintage, 1994 [1978].
- Schiffman, L.H. Inverting Reality: The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Popular Media. En: Dead Sea Discoveries, vol. 12, 2005, pp. 24-37.
- VanderKam, J.C. y Flint, P. The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 2002.
- Whitelam, K.W. Imagining Jerusalem. En: Thompson, Th.L. (ed.), Jerusalem in Ancient History and Tradition, (JSOTSup, 381 / CIS, 13), Londres, T & T Clark International, 2003, pp. 272-289.
- Wilson, E. Los rollos del Mar Muerto. El descubrimiento de los manuscritos bíblicos, (Breviarios, 124), México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995 [1969].
- Zeraoui, Z. Islam y política. Los procesos políticos árabes contemporáneos, 3ra ed., México, Trillas, 2004.

Translated by Eugenia Sardina

Translation from *Revista Relaciones Internacionales* [on line]. dic/2006 mayo/2007. n° 32  
ISSN 1515-3371