

# Art Loss In Iraq

## CUNEIFORM INSCRIPTIONS IN THE LOOTED IRAQ MUSEUM

by ROBERT BIGGS

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In spite of being a relatively young national museum (founded in the 1920s, after the establishment of Iraq, 1920), the Iraq Museum in Baghdad owns one of the world's major collections of cuneiform inscriptions. Initial reports of the looting in the Iraq Museum suggested that thousands of cuneiform tablets were among the looted items. There is as yet no official report of the extent of losses, although some of the cuneiform tablets have been reported returned.

The cuneiform writing system (from the Latin word for "wedge") was in use in ancient Mesopotamia for some three thousand years (approximately 3,000 B.C. to the beginning of the Christian era). Individual signs are made up of horizontal, vertical, or oblique strokes with a triangular, wedge-shaped head (see, e.g., Figs. 1 and 2). While many types of material were inscribed with cuneiform (including stone, metal, and ivory), the principal material was a plentiful, durable substance, clay. The relative permanence of writing on clay, whether baked or not, has meant that from ancient Mesopotamia, and other areas of the Middle East which employed clay and cuneiform script, a tremendous quantity of material has survived, ranging from accounts, contracts, legal codes, works of belles letters (such as the Gilgamesh Epic), quantities of hymns and prayers, vast collections of omens, extensive collections of medical texts, astronomical texts, and so on. Covering more than three thousand years of literate culture, these texts throw an unprecedented light on history and ancient society in one of the highly developed cultures of the ancient world.

Although there were extensive nineteenth-century excavations in what is now Iraq, the government's share of finds went to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople/Istanbul, where the museum holds a very extensive collection of cuneiform texts, particularly those excavated at Tello (French expedition), Draham (French expedition), Nippur (American, University of Pennsylvania), Sippar (French), Bismaya (University of Chicago), Fara (German), and Assur (German). The world's largest collection of cuneiform tablets is probably the British Museum's, much acquired in their excavations in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and partly acquired on the antiquities market.

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The size and shape of cuneiform tablets varied greatly depending on the period and area and the purpose of the tablet. A document recording the delivery of one carcass of a sheep might require a tablet only an inch square, whereas a monthly account might require a tablet a foot square with many columns of writing on both sides. Most documents, such as contracts and letters, can be held easily in one hand. Some tablets were far larger than a foot square and could be several inches thick as well. to mention only major excavations producing inscribed materials.

Until approximately 1968 when the antiquities laws were revised, there was a division of finds between foreign expeditions and the Iraq Museum. While reserving exclusive rights to any object considered unique, the Iraq Museum had first choice of which half of the finds to retain. Thus, to mention major components of the Iraq Museum collections stemming from foreign expeditions, we may list the Diyala sites (Oriental Institute, 1930s), Khorsabad (Oriental Institute, 1920s and early 1930s), Nippur (Oriental Institute and the University of Pennsylvania, sometimes with other institutions), Ur (the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania), Nimrud (British), Shemshara (Danish), Uruk/Warka (German), to mention only major excavations producing inscribed materials.

Soundings, normally excavations of brief length, limited objectives, and a smaller staff than required for full expeditions, came under different laws. In the case of soundings, there was no division of finds. Thus all finds from the Oriental Institute's soundings at Abu Salabikh in 1963 and 1965, both directed by Donald P. Hansen and on which I was the epigrapher, are in the Iraq Museum, including the most extensive collection of Sumerian literary and scholarly works of the mid-third millennium so far recovered in Mesopotamia (Figs. 1 and 2).

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Courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

**Figure 1.** Large cuneiform tablet, about 2600 B.C., Abu Salabikh, Iraq, a collection of short hymns to deities. Iraq Museum 70269.



Courtesy of Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

**Figure 2.** Palm-sized cuneiform tablet, about 2600 B.C., Abu Salabikh, Iraq, an account of barley. Iraq Museum 67646.

In addition to foreign expeditions, a number of sites were excavated by various Iraqi institutions, principally the Iraq Museum, the University of Baghdad, and the University of Mosul. Finds from these excavations were all retained by the Iraq Museum, though representative examples were displayed in the regional museums.

The Iraq Museum was spared any looting in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, though most of the regional museums were thoroughly looted. A major discovery in recent years (by an expedition from University of Baghdad) was the library of cuneiform tablets at Sippar. Discovered in 1986 at Sippar, the home of the Babylonian sun god, Shamash, the cuneiform tablets were found still arranged on shelves. These tablets, datable to the Achaemenid Period of Persian rule in Babylonia, included a wide range of Babylonian literary and scholarly works. It has been confirmed that these tablets were not among the objects looted from the Iraq Museum in the aftermath of the recent war.

At this writing, there is still considerable uncertainty about the status of the other collections (from various sites) of cuneiform tablets in the Iraq Museum. Not so with one of the most famous inscribed pieces in the Iraq Museum, the Bassetki statue base of Naram-Sin of Akkad (about 2350 B.C.) (Fig 3). Discovered by accident in northern Iraq in 1975 during road construction, this bronze statue base (only the legs and part of the torso of the human figure are preserved) is definitely among the looted objects. Too heavy to move to safe storage (it weighs hundreds of pounds), it was left in the museum galleries. It was apparently dragged

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by the looters down a marble staircase, breaking each of the marble steps in the process. So far no word has surfaced on the fate of this unique work, surely of incalculable monetary value if it ever surfaced on the illicit antiquities market.



*Figure 3. Bronze base and fragmentary human figure, about 2350 B.C., bearing an inscription of Naram-Sin, King of Akkad, Bassetti, northern Iraq, looted from the Iraq Museum. Published Sumer 32 (1976).*

Another major category of objects which might bear cuneiform inscriptions are cylinder seals. Seals are small, usually an inch to two inches long, normally made of semi-precious stone, and engraved with figures, geometrical patterns, and, sometimes, inscriptions indicating ownership. They could be rolled on a damp clay document as signature or on lumps of clay to seal shipments of goods or to secure doors from undetected entry. Contrary to most museums where the majority of the seal collections were purchased on the antiquities market, nearly the entire collection in the Iraq Museum was from controlled excavations, thus assuredly authentic (the only other major collection largely from authorized excavations is in

the Oriental Institute, Chicago). It has now been confirmed that the Iraq Museum's entire collection of seals accessioned before 1990 has been looted. The Director of the Iraq Museum, Dr. Nawala al-Mutawalli, has stated that 4,795 seals were stolen. Typical examples, illustrated with modern impressions, from the Oriental Institute's excavations in the 1930s, are given in Figures 4—6.

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Courtesy Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

**Figure 4.** Modern impression of a lapis lazuli cylinder seal, two figures with star and crescent moon between them, early second millennium B.C., Tell Asmar, Iraq, presumably looted from the Iraq Museum.



Courtesy of Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

**Figure 5.** Modern impression of a gray stone cylinder seal, seven-headed Hydra, Akkadian period, about 2350 B.C., Tell Asmar, Iraq, presumably looted from the Iraq Museum.



Courtesy of Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

**Figure 6.** Modern impression of a limestone cylinder seal, a deity in a boat, surrounded by stylized animals and birds, about 2400 B.C., Tell Asmar, Iraq, presumably looted from the Iraq Museum.

Prior to the Gulf War of 1991 and the imposition of international sanctions, theft from ancient sites in Iraq was negligible. After that war, considerable quantities of antiquities, including cuneiform tablets, were apparently excavated from ancient sites, which the Department of Antiquities staff was unable to stop. These have reportedly entered a number of private and public collections in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Israel, sometimes with suspicious provenances listing old European collections.

While there may be a technical difference between looting and theft, for most people, the terms are synonymous. By any normal standards, what has happened (and is continuing to happen), by whatever legal name, is the destruction of Iraq's ancient past.