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# Iraq's Ancient Ruins Face New Looting

By **STEVEN LEE MYERS**

DHAHIR, Iraq — The looting of Iraq's ancient ruins is thriving again. This time it is not a result of the “[stuff happens](#)” chaos that followed the American invasion in 2003, but rather the bureaucratic indifference of Iraq's newly sovereign government.

Thousands of archaeological sites — containing some of the oldest treasures of civilization — have been left unprotected, allowing what officials of Iraq's antiquities board say is a resumption of brazenly illegal excavations, especially here in southern Iraq.

A new antiquities police force, created in 2008 to replace withdrawing American troops, was supposed to have more than 5,000 officers by now. It has 106, enough to protect their headquarters in an Ottoman-era mansion on the eastern bank of the Tigris River in Baghdad and not much else.

“I am sitting behind my desk and I am protecting the sites,” the force's commander, Brig. Gen. Najim Abdullah al-Khazali, said with exasperation. “With what? Words?”

The failure to staff and use the force — and the consequent looting — reflects a broader weakness in Iraq's institutions of state and law as the American military steadily withdraws, leaving behind an uncertain legacy.

Many of Iraq's ministries remain feeble, hampered by corruption, the uncertain divisions of power and resources and the political paralysis that has consumed the government before and after this year's election.

In the case of Iraq's ancient ruins, the cost has been the uncountable loss of artifacts from the civilizations of Mesopotamia, a history that Iraq's leaders often evoke as part of the country's once and, anticipating archaeological research and tourism, future greatness.

“The people who make these decisions, they talk so much about history in their speeches and conferences,” said the director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Qais Hussein

Rashid, referring to the plight of the new police force, “but they do nothing.”

The looting today has not resumed on the scale it did in the years that immediately followed the American invasion in 2003, when looters — tomb raiders, essentially — swarmed over sites across the country, leaving behind moonlike craters where Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian and Persian cities once stood.

Even so, officials and archaeologists have reported dozens of new excavations over the past year, coinciding with the withdrawal of American troops, who until 2009 conducted joint operations with the Iraqi police in many areas now being struck by looters again. The antiquities police say they do not have the resources even to keep records of reported lootings.

Here in Dhahir, the looting is evident in the shattered bits of civilization — pieces of pottery, glass and carved stone — strewn across an expanse of desert that was once a Sumerian trading town known as Dubrum.

The bowls, vases and other pieces are destroyed and discarded by looters who seek gold, jewelry and cuneiform tablets or cylinders that are easy to smuggle and resell, according to Abdulamir al-Hamdani, a former antiquities inspector in Dhi Qar Province. The nearest city, Farj, is notorious for a black market in looted antiquities, he said.

“For me, for you, it is all priceless,” he said, “but for them it is useless if they can’t sell it in the market.”

The Dubrum site — which stretches for miles in a sparsely populated region — is pocked by hundreds of trenches, some deeper than 10 or 12 feet. At the bottom of some is the brickwork of tombs, marking the area as a cemetery. Mr. Hamdani said tombs were the most highly valued targets — of archaeologists and looters alike.

Many of the trenches date to the postinvasion chaos, but others have been freshly dug. Just last month someone used a bulldozer and plowed a two-foot-deep gash in the desert, unearthing the brick and bitumen remains of a stairway possibly leading to another cemetery. The materials dated it to the Babylonian period in the seventh century B.C.

The precision of the new looting indicates expertise. “The thief is in the house,” Mr. Hamdani said, suggesting that many of those involved worked on the sites years ago when legitimate archaeological excavations took place, before the war that toppled [Saddam Hussein](#).

A Bedouin reported the new excavation to the local police in Dhi Qar, but officers there could do little except to draw public attention to the problem.

Mr. Hamdani's successor as antiquities inspector for the province, Amir Abdul Razak al-Zubaidi, said he did not even have the budget to pay for gas to drive to the sites of new looting.

"No guards, no fences, nothing," Mr. Hamdani said. "The site is huge. You can do whatever you want."

Until the creation of the antiquities police in 2008, responsibility for protecting archaeological sites rested with the Federal Protection Police, created, equipped and trained by the American military. The federal police, however, also guard government officials and buildings, like schools and museums. The ruins, some just desolate patches of desert, slipped down the list of priorities.

Rather than filling the gap, the creation of the antiquities police deepened it. Iraq's various military and police forces simply left the issue to an agency that effectively still does not operate, nearly two years later.

Mr. Rashid, director of the antiquities board, also said his agency's request for a \$16 million budget in 2010 had been slashed to \$2.5 million. The police officers promised by the Ministry of the Interior simply have yet to materialize, despite an order last year from Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#).

"Not everything the prime minister requests from his ministers is obeyed," he said. A spokesman for the Interior Ministry declined to comment on the status of the antiquities police.

Mr. Rashid went on to complain that the looters in some southern provinces — including Dhi Qar and Wasit — operated with the collusion of the law enforcement authorities. "The hand of law cannot reach them," he said.

The extent and lasting impact of the looting in sites like Dubrum may never be known, since they have never been properly excavated to begin with.

Mr. Zubaidi, the inspector in Dhi Qar, compared the current crisis to the looting of the [National Museum](#) in Baghdad, a convulsive ransacking that shocked the world into action. The museum's fate continues to attract far more attention from the government and international donors.

"Most of the pieces that were stolen from the National Museum will come back," Mr. Zubaidi said. "Each piece was marked and recorded." Nearly half the 15,000 pieces looted from the museum have been returned. "The pieces that were stolen here will never be returned," he said. "They are lost forever."

*Khalid D. Ali contributed reporting.*