

Iraq's greatest antiquities were also targets of Desert Storm war

by Nicholas Powell

Nicholas Powell, Paris correspondent for the Glasgow Herald and the English weekly the Observer, visited the antiquities of Iraq before the war. Many of the sites and objects he saw then have now been destroyed. This article, which originally appeared in the Glasgow Herald and the Paris review L'Idiot International, is reprinted here with the kind permission of its author.

During the Gulf war, coalition planes destroyed a vast panoramic painting entitled "Qadissiya" near the ruins of Ctesiphon, a few miles South of Baghdad. Complete with sound effects, the panorama had supplied the Iraqi public with an ideologically sound view of the battle of the same name, which, in 637 A.D., had assured Arab dominance of the country.

Qadissiya is only one of a large number of cultural casualties which Iraqi authorities, with their telephone communications still unoperational and their road system seriously damaged, are only just beginning to count. A Unesco team of experts from Paris is waiting for a Security Council go-ahead to leave on a mission to Iraq to make a full assessment of war damage to museums, ancient monuments, archeological sites, and religious buildings. Baghdad has already put in a provisional claim to Unesco for \$3 million to help with repairs and has asked that an international fund-raising committee be set up within the organization.

Destruction of artifacts

According to Iraqi reports, 20 mosques, six churches and many of the country's 10,000 archeological sites were damaged in the air raids of Desert Storm. The ensuing civil war, they say, has seen large-scale plundering and destruction of artifacts and art works evacuated from Baghdad last year to provincial museums to escape allied bombing.

Provisional details recently published by the Department of Antiquities in Baghdad confirm that 150,000 items ranging from Paleolithic objects to art of the great Islamic dynasties were taken from the city's National Museum in November last year, and distributed to other museums. Ten of the latter sustained damage in air raids and five were "pillaged and completely destroyed" during fighting between Kurds, Shiites, and troops faithful to Saddam Hussein.

Those in Basrah in the South, and Kirkuk and Dohuk in the North, had all their objects looted and removed—mainly

to Iran, Iraqi authorities claim. Baghdad has asked to help trace the objects when they turn up on commercial art market circuits.

The Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad was damaged, six staff were killed, and 10 injured by bombs aimed at a nearby telecommunications center two days into the war. Two monumental pieces of Assyrian sculpture, the winged Khorsabad Bull and Shalmaneser's Throne, weighing over 70 tons each, and impossible to move, sustained blast damage despite sandbagging.

Damage in the world's oldest city

According to wartime British press reports out of Baghdad, the remains of the city of Ur in the south of Iraq, which was used to house empty aircraft batteries, was unscathed. But the Department of Antiquities now says Ur, the world's oldest city, was hit by bombs and rockets which damaged the famous Ziggurat, a baked brick pyramid built around 2135 B.C., on its northern and eastern sides. Baghdad has also accused French and U.S. troops who occupied the site, of looting pottery and stones bearing cuneiform inscriptions. Some have been returned after Iraqi complaints to the U.N.

Iraqi authorities have also confirmed details of war damage reported to Federico Mayor, director general of Unesco, by Aziz Haidar, the organization's Iraqi ambassador in Paris, as early as Jan. 28. They include severe damage to the castle of Arbil in the North of Iraq, the oldest church in the country, St. Thomas at Nineveh, the Abassid Mosque of Al Dur in the Governorate of Saladin, and the 13th-century Abassid Palace situated next to Ministry of Defense buildings in Baghdad.

The finely restored Mustansiriya University buildings, built between 1226 and 1242, in the center of the city, suffered damage from bombs which destroyed nearby bridges, as did the Khan Murjan, a 14th-century caravanserai.

Iraqi reports, however, are incomplete as regards both the exact extent of damage, and the number of monuments and sites affected. The early 16th-century gold-domed Shiite Khadhimain Shrine just outside Baghdad is reportedly intact. But no mention has been made of the fate of the third-century arch of Ctesiphon just south of the capital, of the ninth-century Abu Duluf Mosque and its famous spiral minaret at Samarra to the north, or the damaged sustained by the site of Babylon.