

A civilisation torn to pieces

Baghdad is a city at war with itself

They lie across the floor in tens of thousands of pieces, the priceless antiquities of Iraq's history. The looters had gone from shelf to shelf, systematically pulling the statues and pots and amphorae of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Sumerians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks and hurling them down on to the concrete.

Our feet crunched on the wreckage of 5,000-year-old marble plinths and stone statuary and pots that had endured every siege of Baghdad, every invasion of Iraq throughout history – only to be destroyed when America came to “liberate” the city. The Iraqis did it. They did it to their own history, physically destroying the evidence of their own nation's thousands of years of civilisation.

Not since the Taliban embarked on their orgy of destruction against the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the statues in the museum of Kabul – perhaps not since the Second World War or earlier – have so many archaeological treasures been wantonly and systematically smashed to pieces.

“This is what our own people did to their history,” the man in the grey gown said as we flicked our torches yesterday across the piles of once perfect Sumerian pots and Greek statues, now headless, armless, in the storeroom of Iraq's National Archaeological Museum. “We need the American soldiers to guard what we have left. We need the Americans here. We need policemen.” But all that the museum guard, Abdul-Setar Abdul-Jaber, experienced yesterday was gun battles between looters and local residents, the bullets hissing over our heads outside the museum and skittering up the walls of neighbouring apartment blocks. “Look at this,” he said, picking up a massive hunk of pottery, its delicate patterns and beautifully decorated lips coming to

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a sudden end where the jar – perhaps 2ft high in its original form – had been smashed into four pieces. “This was Assyrian.” The Assyrians ruled almost 2,000 years before Christ.

And what were the Americans doing as the new rulers of Baghdad? Why, yesterday morning they were recruiting Saddam Hussein’s hated former policemen to restore law and order on their behalf. The last army to do anything like this was Mountbatten’s force in South-east Asia, which employed the defeated Japanese army to control the streets of Saigon – with their bayonets fixed – after the recapture of Indo-China in 1945.

A queue of respectably dressed Baghdad ex-cops formed a queue outside the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad after they heard a radio broadcast calling for them to resume their “duties” on the streets. In the late afternoon, at least eight former and very portly senior police officers, all wearing green uniforms – the same colour as the uniforms of the Iraqi Baath party – turned up to offer their services to the Americans, accompanied by a US Marine. But there was no sign that any of them would be sent down to the Museum of Antiquity.

But “liberation” has already turned into occupation. Faced by a crowd of angry Iraqis in Firdos Square demanding a new Iraqi government “for our protection and security and peace”, US Marines, who should have been providing that protection, stood shoulder to shoulder facing them, guns at the ready. The reality, which the Americans – and, of course, Mr Rumsfeld – fail to understand is that under Saddam Hussein, the poor and deprived were always the Shia Muslims, the middle classes always the Sunnis, just as Saddam himself was a Sunni. So it is the Sunnis who are now suffering plunder at the hands of the Shia.

And so the gun-fighting that broke out yesterday between property owners and looters was, in effect, a conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. By failing to end this violence – by stoking ethnic hatred through their inactivity – the Americans are now provoking a civil war in Baghdad.

Yesterday evening, I drove through the city for more than an hour. Hundreds of streets are now barricaded off with breeze blocks, burnt cars and tree trunks, watched over by armed men who are ready to kill strangers who threaten their homes or shops. Which is just how the civil war began in Beirut in 1975.

A few US Marine patrols did dare to venture into the suburbs yesterday – positioning themselves next to hospitals which had already been looted – but fires burned across the city at dusk for the third consecutive day. The municipality building was blazing away last night, and on the horizon other great fires were sending columns of smoke miles high into the air.

Too little, too late. Yesterday, a group of chemical engineers and water purification

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workers turned up at the US Marine headquarters, pleading for protection so they could return to their jobs. Electrical supply workers came along, too. But Baghdad is already a city at war with itself, at the mercy of gunmen and thieves.

There is no electricity in Baghdad – as there is no water and no law and no order – and so we stumbled in the darkness of the museum basement, tripping over toppled statues and stumbling into broken winged bulls. When I shone my torch over one far shelf, I drew in my breath. Every pot and jar – “3,500 BC” it said on one shelf corner – had been bashed to pieces.

Why? How could they do this? Why, when the city was already burning, when anarchy had been let loose – and less than three months after US archaeologists and Pentagon officials met to discuss the country’s treasures and put the Baghdad Archaeological Museum on a military data-base – did the Americans allow the mobs to destroy the priceless heritage of ancient Mesopotamia? And all this happened while US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld was sneering at the press for claiming that anarchy had broken out in Baghdad.

For well over 200 years, Western and local archaeologists have gathered up the remnants of this centre of early civilisation from palaces, ziggurats and 3,000-year-old graves. Their tens of thousands of handwritten card index files – often in English and in graceful 19th-century handwriting – now lie strewn amid the broken statuary. I picked up a tiny shard. “Late 2nd century, no. 1680” was written in pencil on the inside.

To reach the storeroom, the mobs had broken through massive steel doors, entering from a back courtyard and heaving statues and treasures to cars and trucks.

The looters had left only a few hours before I arrived and no one – not even the museum guard in the grey gown – had any idea how much they had taken. A glass case that had once held 40,000-year-old stone and flint objects had been smashed open. It lay empty. No one knows what happened to the Assyrian reliefs from the royal palace of Khorsabad, nor the 5,000-year-old seals nor the 4,500-year-old gold leaf earrings once buried with Sumerian princesses. It will take decades to sort through what they have left, the broken stone torsos, the tomb treasures, the bits of jewellery glinting amid the piles of smashed pots.

The mobs who came here – Shia Muslims, for the most part, from the hovels of Saddam City – probably had no idea of the value of the pots or statues. Their destruction appears to have been the result of ignorance as much as fury. In the vast museum library, only a few books – mostly mid-19th-century archaeological works – appeared to have been stolen or destroyed. Looters set little value in books.

I found a complete set of the Geographical Journal from 1893 to 1936 still intact – lying next to them was a paperback entitled Baghdad, The City of Peace – but

Robert Fisk » It seemed that Baghdad would fall in hours

thousands of card index sheets had been flung from their boxes over stairwells and banisters.

British, French and German archaeologists played a leading role in the discovery of some of Iraq's finest treasures. The great British Arabist, diplomatic schemer and spy Gertrude Bell, the "uncrowned queen of Iraq" whose tomb lies not far away from the museum, was an enthusiastic supporter of their work. The Germans built the modern-day museum beside the Tigris river and only in 2000 was it reopened to the public after nine years of closure following the first Gulf War.

Even as the Americans encircled Baghdad, Saddam's soldiers showed almost the same contempt for its treasures as the looters. Their slit trenches and empty artillery positions are still clearly visible in the museum lawns, one of them dug beside a huge stone statue of a winged bull.

Only a few weeks ago, Jabir Khalil Ibrahim, the director of Iraq's State Board of Antiquities, referred to the museum's contents as "the heritage of the nation". They were, he said, "not just things to see and enjoy – we get strength from them to look to the future. They represent the glory of Iraq".

Mr Ibrahim has vanished, like so many government employees in Baghdad, and Mr Abdul-Jaber and his colleagues are now trying to defend what is left of the country's history with a collection of Kalashnikov rifles. "We don't want to have guns, but everyone must have them now," he told me. "We have to defend ourselves because the Americans have let this happen. They made a war against one man – so why do they abandon us to this war and these criminals?"

Half an hour later, I contacted the civil affairs unit of the US Marines in Saadun Street and gave them the exact location of the museum and the condition of its contents. A captain told me that "we're probably going to get down there". Too late. Iraq's history had already been trashed by the looters whom the Americans unleashed on the city during their "liberation".

"You are American!" a woman shouted at me in English yesterday morning, wrongly assuming I was from the US. "Go back to your country. Get out of here. You are not wanted here. We hated Saddam and now we are hating Bush because he is destroying our city." It was a mercy she could not visit the Museum of Antiquity to see for herself that the very heritage of her country – as well as her city – has been destroyed. ♦