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IRAQ MUSEUM DATABASE

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More than one year has passed since the war on Iraq, the fall of Baghdad, and the looting of the Iraq Museum, but the dramatic events in Iraq continue. Even though the human tragedy rightly gets the most attention, numerous journalists recognize the terrible loss that the ongoing destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage means to humanity.

For us at the Oriental Institute, the question remained as to what to do and how to help. In April 2003 we formed the Iraq Working Group and launched "Lost Treasures from Iraq," a subsidiary of the Oriental Institute Web site that was intended to be a clearinghouse of information related to the loss of Iraq's archaeological heritage. The working group was founded in response to the first reports and pictures from the looted interior of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and the destroyed National Library. The site hosts three projects: an Iraq Museum database, a bibliography of Iraq Museum numbers, and IraqCrisis, a moderated news list. The latter two are coordinated by Charles E. Jones (see Charles E. Jones and John C. Sanders, *Electronic Resources*). In this summary I concentrate on the progress made with our Iraq Museum Database.

To put the purpose of this database in context, I begin my discussion with a quick review of the news coverage that followed the museum looting. During the months following this incident, accounts of the infamous events that took place between April 9 and 11 changed repeatedly. Many may remember initial press reports that decried the total loss of the museum's collection, for which a figure of 170,000 registered objects was frequently quoted. Throughout April 2003 the worldwide press retained a high level of interest in the Iraq Museum, not only in the story about its looting but also in the significance that its priceless collection meant to humanity. Object names such as "Warka Head," "Warka Vase," or "Meskalamdug Helmet" suddenly became household terms and photographs of them almost as familiar as the gold mask of Tutankhamun. By early May, however, different reports began emerging that quoted much lower figures. Not 170,000 but only thirty-nine objects were supposed to be missing. The mistake perpetuated in these reports was an obvious one — thirty-nine was the number of objects missing from the main galleries, excluding any objects stolen from the museum storerooms — but the press was slow to catch up with this fact. For a while scholars who had expressed their outrage at the looting of the museum even became the object of scorn and outright ridicule by certain elements of the press. On July 11, 2003, a commentator for the *New York Post* went so far as to call the whole story about the museum looting "… a result of the utterly hysterical and entirely politically motivated campaign to blame [the U.S.] for the disappearance and/or destruction of these irreplaceable artifacts. Turns out that the total number lost can be counted on two hands and two feet." The guy must have big hands and feet — by the time he wrote his story U.S. Marine investigators, who had been working at the Iraq Museum since early May, had already publicly confirmed the theft of over 10,000 artifacts. Over the summer of 2003, the picture was gradually rectified. By June 12, 2003, the loss of almost all the Iraq Museum's seal collection — with about 4,900 seals and comprising the largest collection of seals from controlled excavations — was confirmed (fig. 1). In his final report, released in September 2003, Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, a U.S. investigator who had conducted an on-site investigation into the museum looting between May and August 2003, had tallied up a figure of 12,000–14,000 missing objects. Almost a year later, however, the museum inventory is still ongoing, and only
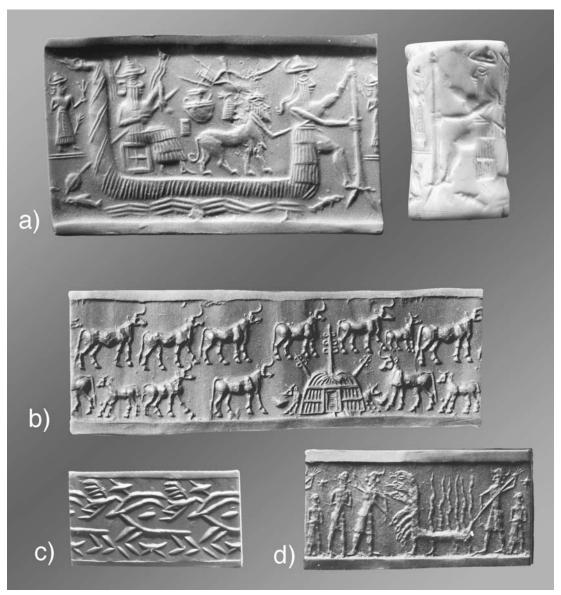
Figure 1. CYLINDER SEALS. (a) Cylinder seal from Tell Asmar (ca. 2200 B.C.) with modern impression of its design (Oriental Institute Museum); (b–d) modern impressions of cylinder seals feared to have been stolen from the Iraq Museum: (b) from Khafaje, ca. 3000 B.C.; (c) from Tell Asmar; ca. 2800 B.C.; (d) from Tell Asmar, ca. 2200 B.C.

after *every* object that remained in the museum after the looting has been checked against a list of all museum objects will it be possible to tell from the number of missing check marks how many objects are really missing. It was therefore not surprising when in March 2004 Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, Director of the Iraq Museum, had to raise the figure of objects still missing to 15,000, despite the fact that numerous objects had been retrieved.

In short, with very few exceptions, we still do not know for certain which objects are missing and which have been accounted for. By the time a final list is available, however, it will be pointless to publish the objects in a database — many items will have disappeared for good in

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"Lost Treasures from Iraq"

http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq.html

Visualization

Iraq Museum Database: An illustrated database of objects from Iraqi museum collections:

http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/Iraqdatabasehome.htm

Documentation

Preliminary Bibliographies of books documenting the contents of the Iraq Museum, the National Library and Archives, and the manuscript collection of the Ministry of Religious Endowments — all in Baghdad — as well as of other damaged or destroyed collections in Baghdad or elsewhere in Iraq including Mosul, Basrah, Suleimaniyeh, etc.:

http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/IraqBibs.html

Communication

IraqCrisis: A moderated list for communicating substantive information on cultural property damaged, destroyed or lost from Libraries and Museums in Iraq during and after the war in April 2003, and on the worldwide response to the crisis:

https://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/iraqcrisis

Oriental Institute homepage

http://oi.uchicago.edu

Web-based resources on the Oriental Institute's homepage in response to the cultural crisis in Iraq following the 2003 war

illicit collections. For these reasons we decided that it was worth continuing our work on the database.

Most of the key characteristics of our database were outlined in last year's report in great detail; since little has changed in our principal ideas, I refrain from excessive repetition. As stated last year, the primary purpose of creating an online Iraq Museum Database was to aid the recovery of stolen objects, hoping to create a useful reference tool for customs officials and law enforcement agencies. At the same time, however, we recognized the great interest and concern for Iraq's cultural heritage that had emerged in the general public after the looting of the Iraq Museum. By building educational components into our database we hoped to cater to this interest; our Web site could be used as an educational tool by schools, universities, and the interested public. We hoped that by stimulating public interest in the archaeology of Iraq we could help create the public pressure needed to push legislative measures through Congress that would ban the illicit trade of Iraq antiquities in the U.S. In other words, with our database we wanted both to *gather* and *disseminate* information from users, a point that had to be considered in the database structure and in the layout of its menus and browser screens. The multiple audiences targeted with our database impacted the descriptive elements we had to add, exemplified here by the entry for the Warka Head, for example, probably the most famous object from the Iraq Museum (fig. 2).

To identify an object only its physical characteristics, such as size, material(s), and a rough description are necessary. Find or museum numbers that were written on the objects are also unambiguous identifiers. Since the numbers could easily have been erased, however, their absence cannot be taken as proof that a suspicious object does not come from the Iraq Museum. Some controversy arose about the inclusion of external data such as the date and provenance of an object. Neither element helps with visual identification, and some even feared that giving the date of an object might in fact help to increase its value on the market. Sophisticated dealers willing to handle stolen antiquities, however, tend to have good reference libraries themselves and would hardly need our Web site to obtain such information. If, on the other hand, we were serious about reaching the public by integrating educational components into the layout of our
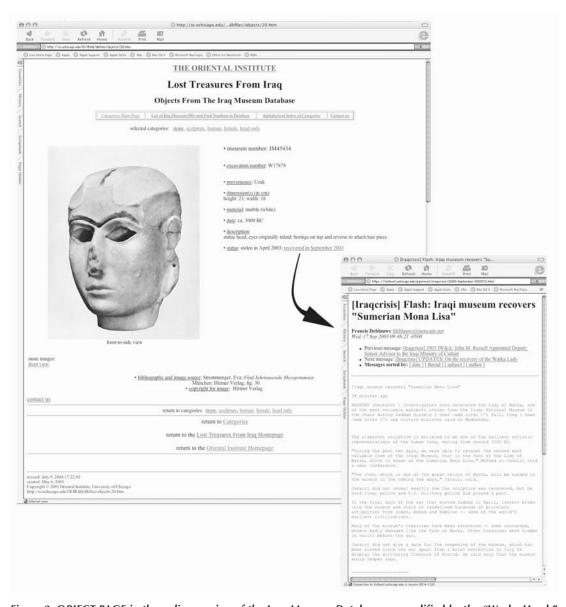
*Figure 2. OBJECT PAGE in the online version of the Iraq Museum Database, exemplified by the "Warka Head."
A hyperlink in the "status" field connects to information concerning the retrieval of this artifact posted on
IraqCrisis, displayed in a separate window*

site, then date and provenance *had* to be part of an object's description. Every one of us who has
given a tour of an archaeological site or exhibit knows about the public's fascination with how
"old" things are. Archaeological provenance may not exude the same fascination to some
members of the public, but it is the scholar's most basic and valuable tool in establishing an
object's date, its function within a systemic context, and ultimately in proving its authenticity.
Adding this information also allowed us to highlight why objects recovered in controlled
excavations have a much higher scientific value to us than those that appear unprovenanced on
the antiquities market, giving us a chance to rationalize our vehement opposition to clandestine
excavations and illegal antiquities trade before the public. The final element of information in
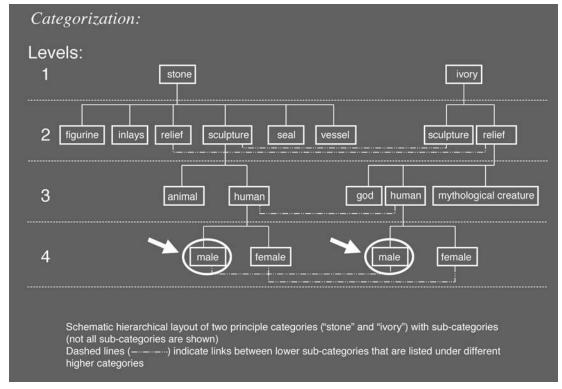
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Figure 3. CATEGORIZATION OF OBJECTS in the Iraq Museum Database: hierarchical relationship of category and sub-category entries, exemplified by entry "human"

our database is the object's current "status," that is, its whereabouts. This is trickier than it may sound at first because we have to keep in mind that at present no one knows which objects from the Iraq Museum are actually missing. We therefore decided to define the content of our database as "objects known to be property of any of Iraq's Museums." In other words, the presence of an object in our database does not necessarily imply that it was stolen, but law enforcement agencies should be contacted immediately if any of these objects are encountered outside of Iraq. The "status" entry in the database indicates whether an object is known by us to be missing, damaged, or has been recovered, the default entry for all others being "unknown." Should an object be retrieved, it is not be removed from the database but its new status is annotated, so that the fate of an object can be tracked later on. In cases where information on the recovery of an object has been posted on the Web the "status" field provides a hyperlink to this source. The entry for the Warka Head in figure 2, for example, relates that it was stolen in April 2003 but retrieved in October 2003; a hyperlink opens up a message from the IraqCrisis archive that describes the circumstances of the recovery of the sculpture. Below the image, the source of the image and the copyright information are provided — no image is posted without explicit permission from its copyright holder. The reason for providing full bibliographic citations for the images goes beyond the proper acknowledgment of copyright and intellectual ownership. Should an object from the antiquities market with no museum number actually be identified with an object from our database, it would not suffice in court to point to a Web-address on our site to prove that this is a "stolen" object. To prove the ownership of this object in a contested case, a prosecutor will have to provide more substantial evidence, such as a book or catalog that lists this object as part of the Iraq Museum's collection or to produce an eyewitness who can to swear

that he saw, studied, or photographed the object in the Iraq Museum; unless the object has been excavated by an Oriental Institute expedition, however, we may be unable to provide such information. To facilitate the work of law enforcement agencies and to avoid time-consuming delays that would come from answering queries for source information, we decided to post the necessary bibliographic data along with each object. For objects with more than one photograph we added subsidiary pages that are hyperlinked from the object's primary page. The more photographs we can provide, the better the chances of positive, unambiguous identifications.

Eventually our list of objects will be far longer than the actual list of stolen items, but we felt that our resources are better used by adding more objects and information than by reevaluating every day whether an item in our database should still be listed in it.

A few words about the organization of the data: in order to keep the large number of entries manageable, the objects need to be broken down into manageable groups or categories, which themselves are broken down in subcategories (fig. 3). On the Web site, these categories are displayed in "category" pages that contain small previews of the actual object photographs, linking to the objects' description pages. A logical primary category is the objects' material, marked "Level 1" in figure 3; so far the categories comprise "clay," "bronze/copper," "gold," "ivory," "shell," and "stone." Within each one of these groups, objects are broken down into what could be termed "principal object types," such as "figurines," "inlays," "jewelry," "metal vessels," "pottery," "sculpture," "reliefs," and "seals," marked "Level 2" in figure 3. Within these secondary categories, other subdivisions are possible. "Sculpture," for example, is subdivided into topical subcategories such as "animals" and "human"; "human," in turn, breaks down into "male" and "female." This, however, is where things get tricky: many of these subcategories are not unique to their category strings. "Sculpture," for example, is not only a subcategory of "stone" but also of "ivory"; "human" is a subcategory of both "stone-sculpture" and "ivory-relief" while "male," among others, is a subcategory of "stone-sculpture-human" and "ivory-relief-human." Since a user might start a search with a search item "male," which we classified as a Level 4 category, we cannot automatically bounce him only to those that, for example, are part of the "stone-sculpture-human" category chain. A relational database can handle same-name subcategories of different name higher categories with no problem. In our display screens on the Web, however, we would have created a terrible mess if we had put all entries for "human," irrespective of their higher categories, onto one screen. The solution was to create separate display screens for each category string and to add links to display screens of subcategories with the same name but different higher categories. The display screen for "stone-sculpture-human-male" will have a link to "ivory-relief-human-male" and vice versa.

Sound complicated? Well it is, but more for us in writing the programs to create these screens than for the end user to utilize. Figure 4 shows how a user can browse the data on the Web through successive category overview pages, exemplified here by the category string "ivory-relief-mythological creature-griffin." Every page also contains a link to an alphabetical listing of all categories, irrespective of their placement in the category hierarchy, and a list of all known museum and find numbers.

So far we are still using a local relational database, from which the data is exported on a regular basis to HTML pages for display on the Web. Critics may rightly point out that by putting our dynamic data into static pages we are taking away the possibility of dynamic searches in the front of our database. While this is true, the advantage of HTML pages lies in the fact that every Web-browser in the world, irrespective of the version used, can read them. This is an important factor when trying to reach an audience in countries with a lower level of
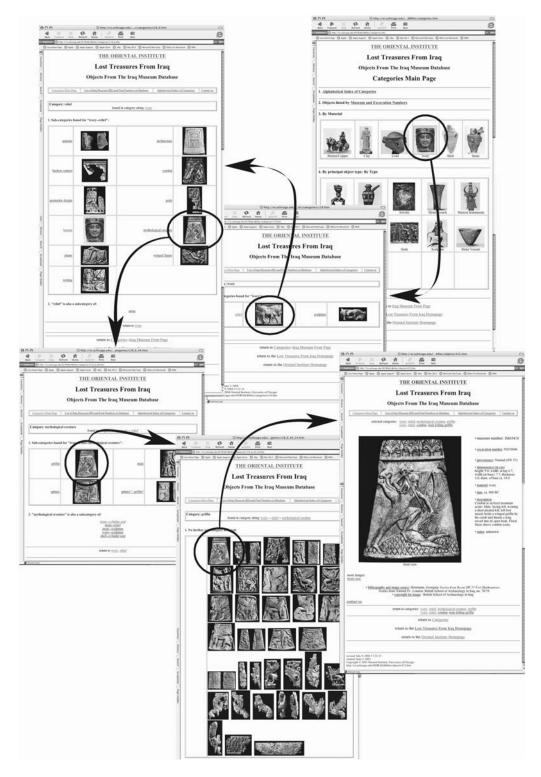
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Figure 4. CATEGORY PAGES ONLINE. Example of navigation from category overview page (top right corner) to an object page through category and sub-category overview pages in the online version of the database (category string "ivory — relief — mythological creature — griffin")

computerization than the U.S. or those countries that have been stuck with technology embargoes.

At present we have 2,300 objects in our local database and 914 objects in our online database — we are certainly far from being done. In the past year we have mostly added data for cylinder seals, ivories, and sculpture. This is the time to thank my volunteer force: Almost all the data entry and much of the scanning was done by Karen Terras, whose unrelenting enthusiasm and commitment to her work no money could buy. Calling her the "backbone" of the operation would not be an overstatement.

In the past year, many stories about the large-scale looting of archeological sites in Iraq for artifacts have been published (see McGuire Gibson, *Nippur*). This catastrophic loss of provenanced archaeological data in the cities of Sumer and Babylonia has reached apocalyptic dimensions to a point where a vital part of human history will soon be irretrievably lost, sacrificed to the appetite of an ever-hungry market for antiquities. Compared to this ongoing tragedy, the museum looting last April has started to feel like a "minor" incident, and some people may question why we spend so much time on an event in which the damage at least has been "contained," as opposed to trying to stop the looting of archaeological sites in Iraq. Considering the current political and military situation in Iraq, however, archaeologists can do little aside from continuing to draw attention to the problem and lobbying hard to convince political and military leaders to do more to protect archaeological sites. The main incentive for us to continue work on our Iraq Museum Database is that for these objects Iraq's legal ownership can be ascertained since we have documentation to prove it — a case that unfortunately is much more difficult to make for objects removed during a clandestine excavation that were never documented in the field.

During the past year we received feedback from numerous institutions worldwide, our Web site continues to be frequently visited, and we have been contacted by law enforcement agencies on numerous occasions regarding specific objects. To what degree we have contributed to the recovery of stolen objects from the museum we will probably never know, but our site clearly gets used by the people for whom we primarily intended it.

I do not want to close this discussion without thanking our numerous donors who have supported our work financially during 2003/2004. Their help and the public recognition of our work are greatly appreciated, have greatly helped us, and will encourage us to go on.

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