



The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum

By Lawrence Rothfield

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On April 10, 2003, as the world watched a statue of Saddam Hussein come crashing down in the heart of Baghdad, a mob of looters attacked the Iraq National Museum. Despite the presence of an American tank unit, the pillaging went unchecked, and more than 15,000 artifacts—some of the oldest evidence of human culture—disappeared into the shadowy worldwide market in illicit antiquities. In the five years since that day, the losses have only mounted, with gangs digging up roughly half a million artifacts that had previously been unexcavated; the loss to our shared human heritage is incalculable.

With *The Rape of Mesopotamia*, Lawrence Rothfield answers the complicated question of how this wholesale thievery was allowed to occur. Drawing on extensive interviews with soldiers, bureaucrats, war planners, archaeologists, and collectors, Rothfield reconstructs the planning failures—originating at the highest levels of the U.S. government—that led to the invading forces' utter indifference to the protection of Iraq's cultural heritage from looters. Widespread incompetence and miscommunication on the part of the Pentagon, unchecked by the disappointingly weak advocacy efforts of worldwide preservation advocates, enabled a tragedy that continues even today, despite widespread public outrage.

Bringing his story up to the present, Rothfield argues forcefully that the international community has yet to learn the lessons of Iraq—and that what happened there is liable to be repeated in future conflicts. A powerful, infuriating chronicle of the disastrous conjunction of military adventure and cultural destruction, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* is essential reading for all concerned with the future of our past.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

On the list of things that went wrong with the Iraq War, the wholesale destruction of that country's archeological inheritance often goes unmentioned. The average newspaper reader may recall that the Iraq National Museum was badly looted in the aftermath of initial hostilities, but very few realize how entirely predictable the looting was, how negligible the Bush administration's efforts were to prevent it and how far beyond the museum the thefts extended, and still continue. In this autopsy of a cultural disaster, Rothfield (*Vital Signs*) breaks down the disaster into its discrete parts, using the looting as a perfect metaphor for the failures of planning and execution that have characterized the conflict thus far. Referencing Colin Powell's famous Pottery Barn rule (You break it, you own it), Rothfield writes, The barn door knocked in by the Americans remains wide open, and Iraq's cultural heritage is being broken day by day.... [T]he loss is not just to Iraq but to us all. It may not carry the bombast and thrill of other war accounts, but this book serves as a frightening cautionary tale. (Apr.)

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Review

"The Rape of Mesopotamia is both a testimony and an appeal. It is a testimony to the cultural disaster which occurred in April 2003 under the eyes of millions of TV viewers. Lawrence Rothfield has carried out what he thought was his duty as a scholar and presented the facts and figures to the reader on what happened to the cultural heritage of Iraq. The book is also an appeal to the conscience of humanity, because the situation in Iraq has, unfortunately, led to continuous looting and destruction of works of art. Because the antiquities of Iraq are still unprotected, this book is coming at the right time to awaken those who are responsible for returning this country to a normal life."

(Mounir Bouchenaki, Director-General, International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property)

"The tragedy of the 2003 U.S. armed invasion of Iraq is endlessly debated. But in decades and centuries to come, perhaps the greatest lasting tragedy will come to be seen as the looting of the Iraqi National Museum and especially the ensuing pillaging of archaeological sites, erasing cultural history vestiges of great civilizations. Lawrence Rothfield in his impressively detailed analysis explains not just what happened but why it happened and why it is likely that similar tragedies may well accompany future conflicts in other archeologically rich countries."

(Kenneth W. Dam, University of Chicago, former Deputy Secretary of State and Deputy Secretary of the Treasury)

"Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum lies a tale, told with brutal candour by Lawrence Rothfield, of gut-wrenching negligence and astonishing incompetence by American (and British) politicians and military leaders, and of their disastrous outcome. He documents in incriminating detail the scale of the disaster, the unsuccessful attempts by archaeologists to avert it, and the crass unconcern of official responses. The lasting and bitter legacy remains a telling indictment of the two allied governments. I defy any citizen who reads this disquieting book to do so without a sense of shame at the failure to avert this predictable and preventable disaster."

(Colin Renfrew, professor emeritus of archaeology and former director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge)

"The definitive book on its topic."

(Tyler Cowen *Marginal Revolution*)

"In this 'autopsy of a cultural disaster,' Rothfield breaks down the disaster into its discrete parts, using the looting as a perfect metaphor for the failures of planning and execution that have characterized the conflict thus far. . . . This book serves as a frightening cautionary tale."

(*Publishers Weekly* 2009-02-09)

"A lucid, well-researched book [that] explains why the sacking of the National Museum of Iraq and the ongoing looting of archaeological sites throughout that country matter so much, and what could have been done to prevent the tragedy."

(Julia Keller *Chicago Tribune*)

"Rothfield puts into play some critical--and until now largely ignored--questions about the role of cultural expertise in 21st century warfare. . . . It is one of the merits of Rothfield's meticulous account that it shies away from a simple explanation. Instead, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* shows, again and again, how mutual suspicion between archaeologists and museum officials prevented the formation of a more unified front for dealing with the byzantine Washington bureaucracy."

(Hugh Eaken *The National*)

"Rothfield's mournful probe blends fact-finding and distillation of published work. Short and terse, it's a manual for policymakers about a colossal failure, and a reminder that enforcement could have minimized looting of the country's cultural treasures."

(David D'Arcy *San Francisco Chronicle*)

"Rothfield's sobering account shows not only how fragile a nation's past truly is but that national history is typically at the bottom of the list when collateral damage from military operations is being considered. . . . A curt yet serious indictment of our post-9/11 age."

(*Library Journal*)

"A blow-by-blow account, unsparing to most of the players while praising a very few, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* builds its own kind of momentum as we watch the unfolding of yet another appalling crime against humanity's common heritage."

(*The Toronto Star*)

"*The Rape of Mesopotamia* is an important book and one that should be read by anyone interested in the Iraq War, US foreign policy or modern history, as well as by members of the cultural heritage community. The book is not primarily about cultural heritage per se, but is above all a political history of an important event in recent world history, and as such should be of as much interest to the general as to the academic reader."

(*Times Higher Education*)

"[I]t . . . completely upends the heroic World War II narratives that still shape our notions of the inevitable benevolence of American military interventions."--Benjamin Moser, *Harper's*

(*Harper's*)

"Lawrence Rothfield has produced an exposé that is all the more powerful for its calm tone. . . . His conclusion: Americans in positions of power and responsibility are collectively culpable for the destruction of the Iraqi cultural heritage, a 'pervasive policy failure.'"

(Alexander Bevilacqua *N+1*)

"Its blow-by-blow account, unsparing to most of the players while praising a very few, builds its own kind of momentum as we watch the unfolding of yet another appalling crime against humanity's common cultural heritage."

(Hans Werner *The Star*)

"While Rothfield's book recounts a mostly sorry tale of official failure and insouciance, he is to be thanked for his own painstaking work of historical reconstruction."

(*Al-Ahram*)

"An important book and one that should be read by anyone interested in the Iraq War, US foreign policy or modern history, as well as by members of the cultural heritage community. The book is not primarily about cultural heritage per se, but is above all a political history of an important event in recent world history, and as such should be of as much interest to the general public as to the academic reader."

(Johan Franzen *THES*)

"*The Rape of Mesopotamia* is a sobering account of the looting of antiquities in Iraq. I well recognize the depiction of obstacles encountered by various actors trying to prevent this disaster from happening. Rothfield's description of the mind-numbingly bureaucratic civilian/military setting is deftly handled. I did not previously appreciate the competing interests of various private organizations in this area, and the glaring conflict of interest on the part of those in the private sector who seek to keep looted antiquities flowing their way. Rothfield has performed an invaluable service in writing this book. One can only hope that the next time around (god help us!) vastly greater attention on the part of planners and occupiers will be paid to the need to protect and safeguard our common heritage no matter where it may be threatened." (Ambassador Brandon Grove (ret.))

"Rothfield tells this story with clarity and precision. . . . Even today there are those who deny that anything of value was lost or that sites were significantly damaged, despite the overwhelming objective evidence to the contrary. . . . This book shows that the claim that the damage could not have been anticipated, and the refusal to believe it actually happened, are inexcusable."

(Paul Zimansky *Times Literary Supplement*)

"One of the many tragedies that resulted from the arrogance and poor planning that preceded the Iraq invasion was the lack of foresight in protecting the irreplaceable artifacts that represented the rich millennial culture of Iraq. Lawrence Rothfield has written a remarkable account of the looting that occurred and the efforts in the aftermath to recover the invaluable representations of an important historical culture that may be lost forever. This is a must read for all those who value our heritage and the need to preserve it during conflicts that threaten it."

(General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC (Ret))

About the Author

Lawrence Rothfield is the former director of the Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago and associate professor of English and comparative literature. He is the author of *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and the editor of *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Musselwhite:

This The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum are generally reliable for you who want to be a successful person, why. The explanation of this The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum can be one of several great books you must have is definitely giving you more than just simple reading through food but feed anyone with information that maybe will shock your prior knowledge. This book will be handy, you can bring it all over the place and whenever your conditions throughout the e-book and printed people. Beside that this The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum forcing you to have an enormous of experience such as rich vocabulary, giving you test of critical thinking that we know it useful in your day activity. So , let's have it and revel in reading.

Mary Davis:

The particular book The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum will bring you to definitely the new experience of reading a book. The author style to describe the idea is very unique. In case you try to find new book to study, this book very acceptable to you. The book The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum is much recommended to you you just read. You can also get the e-book from official web site, so you can quicker to read the book.

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