

Milbry Polk and Angela M.H. Schuster (eds), *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The lost legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, New York: Abrams, 2005, xiii+242, plates, figures and tables, USD 35.00, ISBN 0810958724.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

The history and archaeology of Iraq can not be studied at any Australian tertiary institution even though western civilisation can be traced from it. Sumer is included in the ancient history syllabus for years 7 and 8 in some States, but as it is not included in current text books, its study is falling by the way.

Recently Australia has taken up arms against Iraq and as a member of the invading coalition made possible many of the crimes involving Iraqi antiquities. While most people are aware of the looting of the Museum in Baghdad, not many understand the significance of the destruction of sites and antiquities in Iraq and the nature of the destruction. This book aims to remedy the situation and is a good introduction to the history of Iraq.

Although the text was written by a number of leading scholars, the audience is intended to be general. There are many plates of artefacts and sites that would not be out of place in a coffee table book. All contributions have maps but there is a dearth of drawings and plans leaving the text to describe architectural features.

The book begins by setting the scene as it was at the end of 2004. In the forward Donny George describes the looting during the Gulf War and its aftermath when many sites and regional museums were plundered. The recent events were therefore entirely expected. The first chapters continue the theme. Micah Garen and Marie-Hélène Carleton see looting as the product of poverty and a power vacuum, 'After the start of the 2003 war, with the complete collapse of the government, looting increased at an unprecedented rate.' (17) Of the eighteen Sumerian city-states, they claim that the sites of at least five, Isin, Adad, Zabalam, Shuruppak and Umma have nothing remaining in the top three metres.

The bulk of the book describes the history of the Museum and the history of Iraq with an emphasis on the material culture illustrated by specific objects. Usam Ghaidan, Anna Paolini and Lamia Al-Gailani Werr write about the museum and its history. All authors relate first hand accounts that bring their subjects to life, and it is the intimate involvement of the authors with their material that is a strength of the book.

Robert Biggs discusses writing and literature, Fiorella Ippolitoni Strika describes the significance of small finds in the Iraq Museum, and Diana McDonald covers a number of significant objects such as the Warka Vase and the Nimrud Ivories. Babylon and Baghdad are the subject of separate chapters by Zainab Bahrani and Vincenzo Strika

respectively, and Barbara Porter covers selected reading and resources.

The history of Iraq from the Palaeolithic is described by Ralph Solecki, Harriet Crawford, Paul Collins, Julian Reade, Elisabetta Valtz Fino and Alaister Northedge. This sweep of civilisation is good reading and given the speed with which the book was prepared, it is remarkably even. The Islamic period discussion lists the significant remaining buildings and I assume that the reason for treating the Abbasid period with brevity is that little remains in Baghdad from that time.

Anyone reading this history will come to understand the futility of the coalition attempts to stop regional influence in Iraq. Akkadians, Kassites, Hurrians, Persians, Parthians, Sasanians and so on all came from surrounding areas to hold sway in Iraq at one time or another and to add to its cultural tapestry. Until the Mongol invasion Iraq was a land of plenty and sought after by its neighbours; now oil seems to have the same lure to those further afield.

The book, unlike this review, is apolitical and not likely to offend those of any persuasion. The recurring theme is a sadness about the loss of material that would otherwise have yielded knowledge about the civilisation that we have inherited.

It may seem callous to be concerned about antiquities in the light of the human tragedy that has followed the invasion of Iraq. The book is silent on the culpability for the destruction of the world's heritage in Iraq because that is not its purpose. The aim is to educate the electorates of western countries about their heritage which has fallen on such hard times. 'As the looting continues, sadly we are still waiting for the catharsis that will make sense of this sorrow.' (19)