

“Picture Not Found”

Reports on the Pillaging of Iraq’s Antiquities in Leading German Print- and Online-Media

It may sound impolite but I would like to start this paper with a little information about me to help you understand the position I am in while talking to you.

I am a prehistorian, and a journalist. I work for the online-department of one of Germany’s public broadcasting companies. In April and May 2003 I reported several times on the ransacking of Iraq’s National Museum and on Iraq’s near-legendary heritage. My archaeological experience helped me to make good interviews. At the same time my journalistic knowledge showed me clearly what could and should have been worked better – for journalists to help them in their work, but even much more for archaeologists who wanted the world to understand what was happening in Iraq.

To talk about that is the reason why I’m here.

On April 11th 2003, 26 minutes after 6 PM central-European time news-agencies reported that the archaeological museum in Baghdad was being ransacked at that very moment. The story was only 13 lines long and came in many cases too late to be published that evening. But with it all the fears that had made intellectuals and scientists warn the world with impressive words for months became reality.

In the following days editors received updated news several times a day – sometimes every few minutes: reports on statements of the museum director in Baghdad, rumors about the ransacking of Mosul’s museum, a portrait of Mesopotamia, considerations about the security of the safes in Baghdad’s central bank, the search for the guilty, increasing hints regarding well-planned thefts, continuously changing estimations of the number of stolen objects, demands from UNESCO and other organizations, statements from politicians, intellectuals and archaeologists, emergency plans etc.

In those chaotic days news agencies even stated that the original of Hammurabi’s law had been in Baghdad and was now lost.

For some days all leading newspapers, magazines and websites¹ in Germany (and many, many other countries) published detailed reports on the endangered objects and sites of Iraq. Archaeology moved from the arts pages to the front pages and so into the focus of general interest.

To make the scale of what had happened understandable to an interested but archaeologically inexperienced public was one of the journalist’s jobs. Therefore they needed to be in close cooperation with archaeologists.

The general public primarily associated Iraq with news about terrorist activities, oppression, and bitter misery. Now archaeologists were telling them that with the theft of 170.000 objects (a number that came from the London Times) a “fundamental cornerstone of western civilization”² was lost. Scientists called the destruction a “crime against humanity”³ and compared the plunder with the big cultural catastrophes of humanity. These sentences and others were repeated like mantras in many articles.

¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Die Welt, Focus, Spiegel, Süddeutsche, Stern, Zeit. ard.de (websites of the Association of the Broadcasting Organisations under public law in the Federal Republic of Germany), tagesschau.de, heute.t-online.de (websites of two main TV-news-programs)

² John Russell, Massachusetts College of Arts

³ Michael Petzet, ICOMOS president

In the first days after this news broke, the main German print- and online-media used primarily the material from news-agencies I mentioned above as the basis of their articles. Some days later, some newspapers, magazines and websites published interviews with German and international scientists who knew Iraq and could assess the situation – of course based on the rumors emanating from Iraq and changing from day to day.

Journalists worked under high time-pressure: Not only did they have to investigate and write their texts but they also had to update them several times per day when something new was said or had happened.

Not only do editorial offices receive much of their information from news agencies but also often the pictures associated with it.

Pictures are an essential part of every good journalistic article. They structure long text-passages optically and help to prevent what print journalists call "lead-deserts": dense, intricate accumulations of letters. First of all and especially in this case pictures help to explain and underline what is said in the text.

It is not difficult to find a picture. It is difficult to find a picture with the permission to publish it. Normally either the author of an article looks for the pictures he or she needs, or in some editorial offices there is a special picture editor who looks for pictures according to the instructions of the author.

In this special case the situation concerning the sources of the pictures was completely different from the text sources' situation. DPA (German Press Agency) and other news agencies offered about 15 pictures taken in the ransacked museum. But journalists who looked for pictures which could have illustrated all the terms that the shocked archaeologists had given them – Babylon, Mesopotamia, cradle of civilization, immeasurable loss –always got the same answer from their database query: "picture not found". No single photo of a cuneiform tablet, no photo of a statue, no photo of any jewelry, of a ziggurat, of a Babylonian temple – nothing.

As a consequence almost all of the articles in leading German print- and online-media looked identical. Readers saw devastated rooms, empty showcases, helpless museum employees and the few remaining exhibits. All of Germany stared at the same, continuously repeating pictures. They illustrated very well what had happened in the museum, but nothing else.

Long background articles explaining why the past of Iraq was so meaningful for all of humanity often had to be published without any supporting picture – or weren't written at all because of the lack of illustrating material.

There were only a few exceptions. Some journalists asked their interviewees to give them some pictures for publication. The "Süddeutsche Zeitung" was allowed to print pictures taken from a book. Also the "Spiegel" published in one of its magazines some photos of precious objects. But all that required a lot of intensive research, which editorial offices often don't have time to do.

When some of the stolen objects were detected some days later at the border of Syria, some news agencies reported that the number of lost artifacts was not more than 40 pieces, and most newspapers decided either to not report on this or to do it in a very abbreviated way. The topic seemed to have lost any importance.

War in Iraq challenged the media very much – like all such grand events do. If an editor has limited personnel and time, and if he or she has to make decisions about what to write and what not to write it may be that this decision is not only based on the story's importance but also on how fast it can be produced.

When I searched for pictures I asked the Pergamon-Museum in Berlin, and I also asked the Unesco whether I would be allowed to use pictures from their databases. The Pergamon-Museum answered two days later and just gave me another contact but not the answer I needed. Unesco didn't answer at all. I didn't find any German museum with Mesopotamian collections that would offer pictures to download and use. The pictures I could show came from the German Press Agency and from my interviewees' private collections. Additionally, the Austrian University of Innsbruck gave me some reconstruction pictures of Babylon.

My editor wouldn't have given me permission to report again about this ongoing process. To write that stolen objects were found in an airport but only illustrating this with pictures of the interior of the looted museum in Baghdad doesn't make sense. So the decision was made to stop reporting on this aspect of the Iraq conflict.

I don't want to say that archaeologists should have done more to support the media. But it would have been in their very own interests to do more.

Even if editorial departments don't have the money to pay for a picture they always can indicate the picture's source. If only one big museum had put a dozen, subtitled pictures on the internet and informed the news agencies the result would have been impressive: not only this would have been a big advertisement for the museum but also it would have changed the press' interest in reporting on the looting radically.

Archaeologists should know what the media need to be able to report in an adequate way about things that happen. At the same time the media have to learn a lot concerning the way how they report about science. There is definitely an urgent need to bridge this gap.

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