

# Art Loss In Iraq

## NIMRUD, THE WAR AND THE ANTIQUITIES MARKETS\*

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*\* A more detailed report on the status of Nimrud is in preparation for the Austrian symposium papers on Iraqi Heritage: Plündern, Vernichten, Vergessen: Kulturgüterschutz im Kriege und das kulturelle Welterbe im Irak, which was held June 11-13, 2003 in Graz and Vienna. Illustrations have been digitally rendered by Learning Sites Inc., Williamstown, Mass. USA.*

The city of Ancient Kalhu, which we know today by its common name Nimrud, is situated south of Nineveh and Mosul on the eastern side of the Tigris River. After over 150 years of excavation and study, this site is one of the best-known Assyrian sites in northern Iraq. On its citadel are the remains of four major palaces, three smaller palatial buildings, perhaps five temples, three gates, a ziggurat or temple tower of Ninurta, the patron god of the city, and six townhouses - all dating to the period of the Assyrian Empire. The excavations have explored only about 40% of the total area.

Concurrent with foreign excavation efforts after the Second World War, the Iraqis worked alone and with British (Mallowan 1966), Polish (Meuszynski 1976; Sobolewski 1982a and 1982b) and Italian (unpublished) teams. The most recent Iraqi field director is Muzahim Mahmud Hussein. The Iraqis continued to work at the site, even under severe restrictions, until the Third Gulf War, in 2003. Their most recent contributions are in the Northwest Palace's west and south wings extending to the "Upper Chambers," in the area of the temples, east of the Ziggurat. There had also been a great deal of clearing of the excavated portions of the site for a site museum. (Bibliography and summaries in Oates, J and D. 2001; Reade 2002.) Looking at the citadel from the SE corner today, one sees the vast, un-excavated areas awaiting the archaeologist's spade and the back dirt of former projects.

In recent years, this site has drawn the public's attention because, between 1988 and 1990, the Iraqi excavators found four tombs built below the floors of the south wing of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (Fig. 1). The finds, which include jewelry of gold and semi-precious stone and vessels of gold and rock crystal (again, summarized in Oates, J and D. 2002, pp. 78-90, illustrated), were featured in the news media then; and, leading up to the Third Gulf War, have been the focus of several articles in

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popular journals. (ex. Lawler 2001, Luhnnow 2003.) The fate of these treasures worried us, as we knew that they were in the flooded vaults of the Iraqi National Bank in Baghdad; but, what was not known until a National Geographic Team assisted in the draining of the subterranean floors of the bank, was whether they had survived the flooding. They are now safe. (National Geographic Explorer on MSNBC, 8:00 and 11:00 PM, July 6, 2003)



Photo: Barry Iverson/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images;

**Figure 1a.** Gold necklace from Tomb II, a royal grave at Nimrud. IM 105716.



**Figure 1b.** Austrian and Iraqi archaeologists at the entrance of one of the royal graves.

For many years Nimrud had been the focus of considerable restoration and conservation and had been considered by visitors as one of the best-maintained sites, with Nineveh, in northern Iraq. The site museum was a well-kept and well-manicured excavation. The restored and re-erected human-headed door lions and bulls and preserved bas-relief decoration in the rooms of the palace were in good shape, protected from the elements.

But recently, the palace has suffered damage. The stone sculpture has deteriorated due to lack of conservation treatment; conservation of the original mud brick is a constant need; and there was looting, from the storage rooms on the site following the Second Gulf War in 1991 and directly from the site museum following the Third Gulf War this year.

After the Second Gulf War, the storeroom of the site museum of Nimrud was ransacked. The bas-reliefs stolen were from the Northwest Palace of King Ashurnasirpal II - fragments that could not be placed in original settings because the preservation of the rooms were not sufficient to be able to identify the exact positions - and from the very poorly preserved Central Palace of King Tiglathpileser III. Richard Sobolewski and I identified one Ashurnasirpal II basrelief, which was seized by Scotland Yard last fall

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(Fig. 2). This bas-relief is the upper 60% of a slab from the West Wing of the palace, preserving a figure of a human-headed genius before a sacred tree with two ranks of palmettes.



Photo courtesy of the Northwest Palace Archive, Warsaw, Poland.

*Figure 2. Upper left section of a winged, human-headed genius wearing a two-horned helmet, from the Iraqi archaeologist's West Wing excavation in the Northwest of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.*

The other bas-relief fragments that we identified come from the Central Palace of Tiglathpileser III, which is now one of the focuses of my research with Richard Sobolewski, architect and second director of the Polish Mission to Iraq. From 1974 to 1976, that mission re-excavated an area with buildings of Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III, Ashurnasirpal's son and successor, and the Central Palace, rediscovering many of the bas-relief fragments originally found in the 19th century but left behind. We have reported in IFARreports and IFAR Journal about the appearance on the antiquities market of four of the Tiglathpileser III bas-reliefs stolen from the Nimrud storerooms (Paley and Russell, IFARreports 1997; Paley, Sobolewski and Russell, IFAR Journal, 1999).

In the interest of maintaining pressure on the illicit trade in these antiquities, and that they not be lost in the confusion of the present crisis, I am bringing to the attention of this readership three additional fragments that have appeared on the market since the publication of our earlier articles. Also, now that I have seen several stolen fragments on the market, one can perceive a growing pattern in their presentation to prospective buyers: 1) as is, that is, as the individual piece was found; 2) cut down to obscure origin; and 3) broken apart by a sledgehammer.

## I. SLABS AS FOUND

Figure 3b (N-A/17/1975) shows four pieces of a multiregister slab of which only part of the lower register is preserved. It was part of a scene of tribute bearers leaving a city in Anatolia, the embattlements of which are partially preserved on the left of the scene. The Polish excavation found three adjoining fragments of this scene. The robed and bearded figure wearing a pointed turban and shoes with upturned toes at the end

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of the line to the right of the city walls holds a large bowl in his lowered right hand and a small bowl in his raised left hand. The similarly dressed figure next to him to the right (his garments have additional tassels on the "jacket" and he wears only a head band) carries a bag over his shoulder. Only the turbaned head of the figure in front of him is preserved. The fragment that appeared on the market is the head and upper torso of the figure carrying the bag and the head of the figure in front of him. The scene, originally found and drawn in the 19th century by the British excavator Austen Henry Layard, was re-discovered by the Poles.



**Figure 3a.** (above left) Drawing by A. H. Layard of a bas-relief from the palace of Tiglathpileser III, Nimrud shown as discovered and preserved in Layard's mid-19th century excavations



Photo courtesy of the Polish Center of Archaeology, Warsaw.

**Figure 3b.** Field photo of bas-relief as found by the Polish mission to Iraq in 1975. The upper left section is on the antiquities market. Barnett and Falkner *Pl.XLVII*, p. 96 with NA/17/1975.

Figure 4 (N-A/22/1975) shows a fragment of the upper register of a two-register bas-relief depicting a royal attendant without a beard. Although badly eroded, this piece was also offered on the market as is. Another case of a slab (N-A13/75) offered on the market as it was found was published in IFARreports (Paley and Russell 1997, Fig. 3).

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Photo Courtesy of the Polish Center of Archaeology, Warsaw

**Figure 4.** (above left) Field photo of an eroded bas-relief depicting a royal attendant, a eunuch, from the palace of Tiglathpileser III, Nimrud, as found by the Polish mission to Iraq in 1975. The entire fragment is on the antiquities market. N-A/22/1975.



Photo Courtesy of the Polish Center of Archaeology, Warsaw.

**Figure 5.** (above right) Field photo of the left side of a two-register bas-relief depicting (upper register) two grooms leading a royal chariot and (lower register) a royal attendant, a eunuch, holding a fly whisk, ministering to King Tiglathpileser III, as found by the Polish mission in 1975. N-A/5/1975.

## II. CUT DOWN TO OBSCURE ORIGIN

Figure 5 (N-A/5/1975) shows a large piece of the left side of a two-registered bas-relief with an un-inscribed band between the registers. The upper register depicts two soldiers leading a chariot drawn by a pair of horses. The rears of the horses and the chariot are not preserved. The lower register depicts a beardless royal attendant with a flywhisk and a piece of a long cloth over his shoulder, standing behind the partially preserved figure of King Tiglathpileser III. The attendant alone was offered on the market. The upper register, the un-inscribed band and the king were completely cut off as was the preserved plinth of the slab.

A second example of a bas-relief cut down to obscure origin, discussed previously in IFAR Journal (see Paley and Russell, 1999, Figs. 1-4), is a two-registered bas-relief (N-A/12/76), from the corner of a room in the palace of Tiglathpileser III. A band of inscription separated the upper register - depicting a soldier, probably part of a war scene - from the lower register, depicting a soldier accompanying tribute or booty bearers. A fragment of this bas-relief - the upper warrior and inscription - was offered on the market. Most of the top and the bottom register were cut away.

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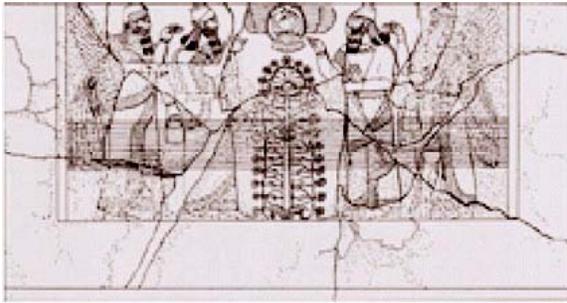
A figure of a wingless genius holding a flowering branch standing before a figure of King Tiglathpileser III (NA-43/76) was also published in IFAR Journal. The looters cut away the king, the lower part of the genius's torso and the hand with the flowering branch (Paley, Sobolewski and Russell 1999, Fig 5).

### **III. SMASHED BY A SLEDGEHAMMER**

A war scene from the Central Palace at Nimrud, depicting a charioteer and two soldiers moving left away from a city under siege, is probably the most disconcerting example (see Paley and Russell, IFARreports, 1997, Fig. 1). Polish excavators in the 1970s discovered and documented two of the panels. One panel, showing the chariot (N-A/12/75), has appeared on the market. The robbers smashed off the upper right corner and then broke off most of the two soldiers behind the chariot.

The results of the looters' raids following the Third Gulf War were not extensive but were nevertheless damaging. In the throne room a restored bas-relief depicting the king performing a religious act at the "sacred tree" crowned by the god in a winged disk was broken apart and the god was stolen (Fig. 6b). We must be on the lookout for the figure of the god in the winged disk. From Room I, a bathing area in the east wing, which was broken into (Fig. 7), fragments of bas-relief, a winged genius and sacred tree from part of a single slab, perhaps I-9, were stolen from the set of well-preserved slabs on its southern wall. And finally from Room S (Fig. 8), an audience hall that fronts the harem (or south wing) of the palace, the looters tried to steal another relief depicting a winged, human-headed genius. In the course of breaking apart the restored fragments, a piece of the face broke off and shattered. The looters left the bas-relief behind presumably because the damaged piece was no longer valuable.

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**Figure 6a.** (above) Reconstruction of the bas-relief by H. Lewakowa for J. Meuszynski's publication of the throne room (Room B; the bas-relief is in position B-13) of the NW Palace of the King Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. The bas-relief depicts the king and a divine attendant at a royal ritual before the "sacred tree" surmounted by a god in a winged disk.

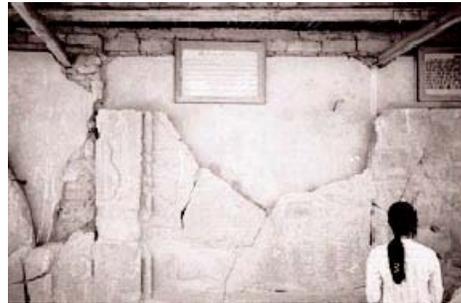
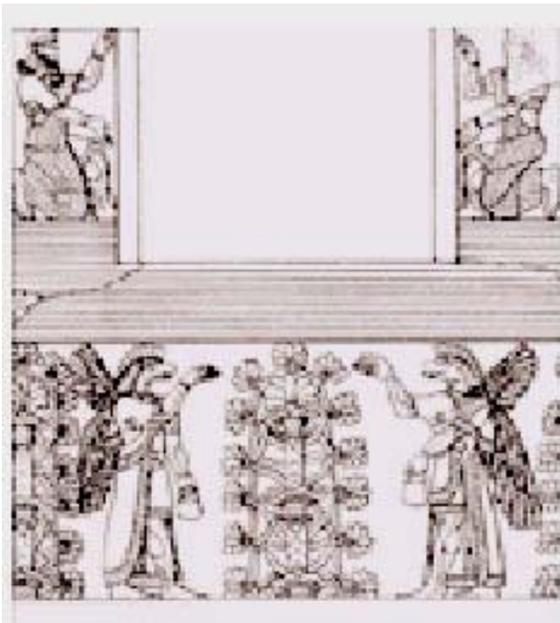


Photo courtesy of Mark Altaweel.

**Figure 6b.** (above) May 2003 in situ photo following an attack by looters at the NW Palace site museum. The top of the tree and the god in the winged disk are missing. The heads of the king and the divine attendant to the right, were removed by Layard in the 19th century and are now in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay. The British residents of Bombay removed the heads from the packing crates that Layard was sending to London. B-13.; Warsaw; Meuszynski 1981, plate 2:1.



**Figure 7a.** H. Lewakowa's drawing of the bas-relief in position 9 in Room I. I-9: After Paley and Sobolewski 1987, plate 1:3.



**Figure 7b.** Bas-relief in photo of I-9 taken in the early 1970s for Meuszynski's records of the NW Palace. Photo courtesy of the Northwest Palace Archive, Warsaw.

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The rest of the most recent damage is in the form of bullet holes from a gun battle between the Nimrud guard and the looters - on a bas-relief from Room F and in an inscribed slab from the southeast corner of the central courtyard.

The site of Nimrud has had enough damage and enough pillage for this still-new century.



Photo courtesy of Mark Altaweel

*Figure 8. May 2003 in situ photo of the complete, restored bas-relief in position 20, Room S. The genius is facing left toward a sacred tree in the corner of the room. Photo shows face of figure splintered by looters.*

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