



This file photo shows destruction caused by the Islamic State (IS) group at the archaeological site of Nimrud, a few days after Iraqi forces retook the ancient city from IS jihadists. — AFP photos



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## GRAFT AND SECURITY ISSUES FEED THE TRADE IN IRAQ'S PAST

**D**o you want to buy a more than 5,000-year-old Sumerian tablet, listed as the property of a gentleman from Sussex in England and passed down as a family heirloom? On auction site liveauctioneers.com, bidding for the Sumerian clay tablet starts at 550 pounds (\$750). The item weighs just 70 grams (2.5 ounces) but bears traces of cuneiform

antiquity is a real problem in Iraq, where corruption is prevalent and archaeological sites are poorly protected. For some objects, it can be hard to prove that it was not in fact stolen from lands where the Sumerian empire stood in the fourth millennium BC. Chris Wren, from the British firm TimeLine Auctions, parent company of liveauctioneers.com, says they are

Iraq, and that makes it a land of choice for smugglers. It teems with archaeological sites where traffickers engage in "random exhumations", said Laith Majid Hussein, director of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. "We don't have statistics on the number of antiquities that end up as contraband," Majid said. Corruption and the prevalence of armed groups have encouraged the growth of this lucrative business.

In one site in southern Iraq, where the Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations once flourished, a security guard described the challenges he faced. "One day, I saw a truck arrive with three armed men," the guard said, who asked not to be named to protect both himself and the location of the site. "They started digging, and when I intervened they started shooting in the air and shouting at me—'You think you own this place?'" The lack of resources to protect Iraq's ancient sites is dire. In a country where an estimated 27 percent of the 40 million citizens live below the poverty line, the authorities say they have other priorities. Iraq's ancient sites are concentrated in the south, around Kut, Samawa and Nasiriyah.

From there, smugglers transport their booty to the southern marshes, and to Amara, a city not far from Iran, which has become a "hub for antiquities trafficking", according to one archaeologist who asked to remain anonymous. The stolen antiquities are then taken into Iran "to cross the sea in fishing boats to the Gulf countries", he said.

Alternatively, they may be smuggled overland across Iraq's western desert, which borders Jordan, Syria and Turkey. An Iraqi government source said that the

money earned from trafficking feeds criminal networks, in a country where armed groups, some close to Iran, have grown in power. Corruption also plays a role in a state where government officials are poorly paid. Graft watchdog Transparency International ranks Iraq as 160th out of 180 countries listed for corruption.

The group did well from the trade in illegal antiquities, according to a 2020 report published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, a Geneva-based organization. It said that in 2015, "of IS's annual income, deemed to be between US \$2.35 billion and \$2.68 billion, antiquities trafficking and (in-state)



Archaeological findings are pictured inside an underground tunnel dug by the Islamic State (IS) group to carry out archaeological excavations in the heart of the hill that houses the tomb of the Prophet Jonah (Nabi Younes) in east Mosul.

writing—the oldest recorded in the world and is listed as "Property of a West Sussex, UK, gentleman". This example comes with letters of provenance by experts. But the ownership history of some such objects can be harder to prove.

They may not have been handed down but handed on, via smugglers and middlemen. The boom in looted objects from

aware "of the potential for looted, smuggled or other stolen materials" to come onto the market. "We spend a great deal of effort and money in seeking to weed such possibilities out," he said.

### Lucrative trade

Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians all trod on the ancient land that is now



Pottery and other ancient fragments are scattered in the open air at the Tell Al-Ubayd archaeological site, 6Km to the west of the remains of the ancient city of Ur in Iraq's southern Dhi Qar province.



Ancient stone blocks are scattered in the open air at the Tell Al-Ubayd archaeological site.

### Major earner

When the Islamic State group (IS) occupied large swathes of Iraqi territory between 2014 and 2017, the jihadists used bulldozers, pickaxes and explosives to ransack dozens of pre-Islamic sites and their treasures. Nimrud, a jewel of the Assyrian empire founded in the 13th Century BC and located outside Mosul in the north of the country, was one such target. The jihadists "also engaged in smuggling", said one European security expert, speaking on condition of anonymity. "That earned them money—but it affected Syria more."

taxation accounted for US \$20 million". Earlier this month, the United States returned to Iraq about 17,000 archaeological treasures dating back 4,000 years that had been looted in recent decades. Despite welcoming such moves, the Iraqi government source said he believes the problem "lies in neighboring states" that are complicit in the smuggling. "The Iraqi state is weak," he said. "Archaeological artefacts are not a priority." — AFP



A member of the Irish Guards (right) takes part in the Changing of the Guard, in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace.

## Changing of the Guard back on at Buckingham Palace

**S**oldiers in bearskin hats and red tunics marched outside Buckingham Palace in London on Monday for the first Changing of the Guard ceremony since the pandemic began. The elite 1st Battalion Coldstream Guard soldiers performed the colorful tradition in the palace courtyard for the first time since March 2020, when it was halted to avoid spreading infection. Forces News reported that this was the longest



Members of the band of the Nijmegen Company Grenadier Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard.

pause in holding the ceremony since World War II. The Changing of the Guard is a ceremonial handover between guards on duty and those taking over.

Monday's event included a musical tribute to the UK's Olympic athletes with the military brass band playing tunes including "Gold" by Spandau Ballet and

the Olympics theme music, as spectators watched through the fence. Queen Elizabeth II is not in residence at the palace as she is on her annual holiday at Balmoral, Scotland. Garrison Sergeant Major Andrew Stokes, of the Coldstream Guards, who was in charge of the ceremony's return, said: "It's been a long time coming."

Many of the young soldiers had not taken part in the ceremony before, having joined the Guards since it was postponed, he said. For those taking part, "it instils an awful lot of pride knowing that all these people have come to watch these very young guardsmen and musicians." During the pandemic, the Grenadier Guards have helped run virus testing and vaccination centers. The Changing of the Guard at Windsor Castle near London resumed last month. — AFP



Members of the Nijmegen Company Grenadier Guards and the first Battalion the Coldstream Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard.— AFP photos



Members of the first Battalion the Coldstream Guards take part in the Changing of the Guard, in the forecourt of Buckingham Palace, which is taking place for the first time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in London.