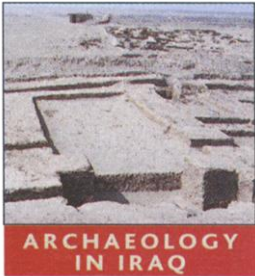


A decade of war, poverty, looting, and isolation has taken its toll on Iraq's once-proud archaeological heritage. But Iraqi researchers and their foreign colleagues are now moving to protect ancient sites and begin new digs

Destruction in Mesopotamia



The past decade has been the worst of times for Iraqi and foreign researchers specializing in Mesopotamia. This special focus section, based on a recent extensive tour of Iraq, looks at damage to museums and ancient sites and at the attempts to rebuild the shattered country's archaeological community and end a long period of isolation.

► INVISIBLE CRISIS FOREIGNERS RETURN DIGGING IN QUEENS' GOLD

Home of the world's first great cities and empires, likely birthplace of writing, and wellspring of many religious traditions, Iraq is endowed with thousands of important archaeological sites stretching across 10,000 years. Steep mounds of buried prehistoric villages, massive pyramidal structures called ziggurats, and splendid medieval desert castles rise above the plains. But 10 years of war, economic sanctions,

BAGHDAD—The world reacted in horror and outrage in March as Afghanistan's Taliban rulers defaced and demolished ancient statues that they considered heretic. United Nations (UN) officials jetted to Kabul to plead for a halt to the destruction, other Islamic nations denounced the actions as barbaric, and U.S. museums made desperate offers to buy the threatened objects. Yet 2000 kilometers to the west, a far more extensive crisis has been unfolding for the past decade with barely a murmur of protest by the international community.

Home of the world's first great cities and empires, likely birthplace of

and resulting poverty have taken a devastating toll on the rich heritage of the area that the Greeks called Mesopotamia—the land between two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates. Mobs looted most of Iraq's museums in the war's aftermath, machine gun-wielding intruders plundered ancient sites with impunity, and the country's once well-funded and proud team of scholars was scattered around the globe.

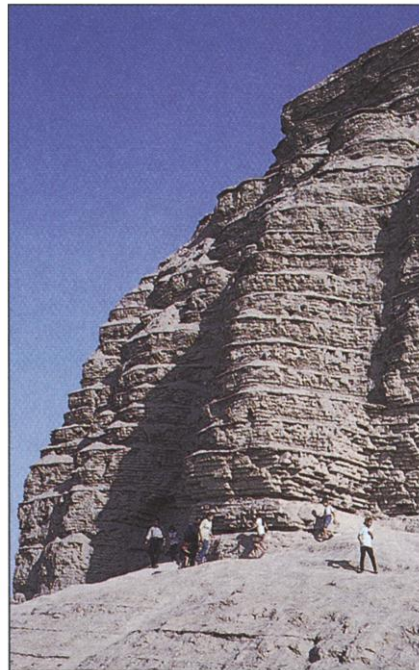
With Iraq's continuing status as an international pariah, there remains little prospect of large-scale outside help. Organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offer only limited aid, while Western governments show scant interest either in addressing the archaeological plight of Iraq or in stemming the tide of ancient objects flowing out of the country; thousands of inscribed tablets, cylinder seals, and stone statues are illegally making their way into the lucrative antiquities markets of London, Geneva, and New York to be sold to private collectors. Pitted mounds littered with spent bullets on

Iraq's vast southern plain are mute testaments to the irrevocable loss.

But thanks to the tenacious lobbying of the few remaining archaeologists, increased oil revenues, and a gradual thawing of ties with other nations, the worst may be over. In the past year, Iraq's archaeological community has begun reorganizing, regaining control over sites formerly the province of looters, and reopening Iraq to foreign expeditions. The researchers' efforts, however, remain hobbled by limited funds and a decade of isolation from their colleagues abroad and from current technologies, theories, and methods.

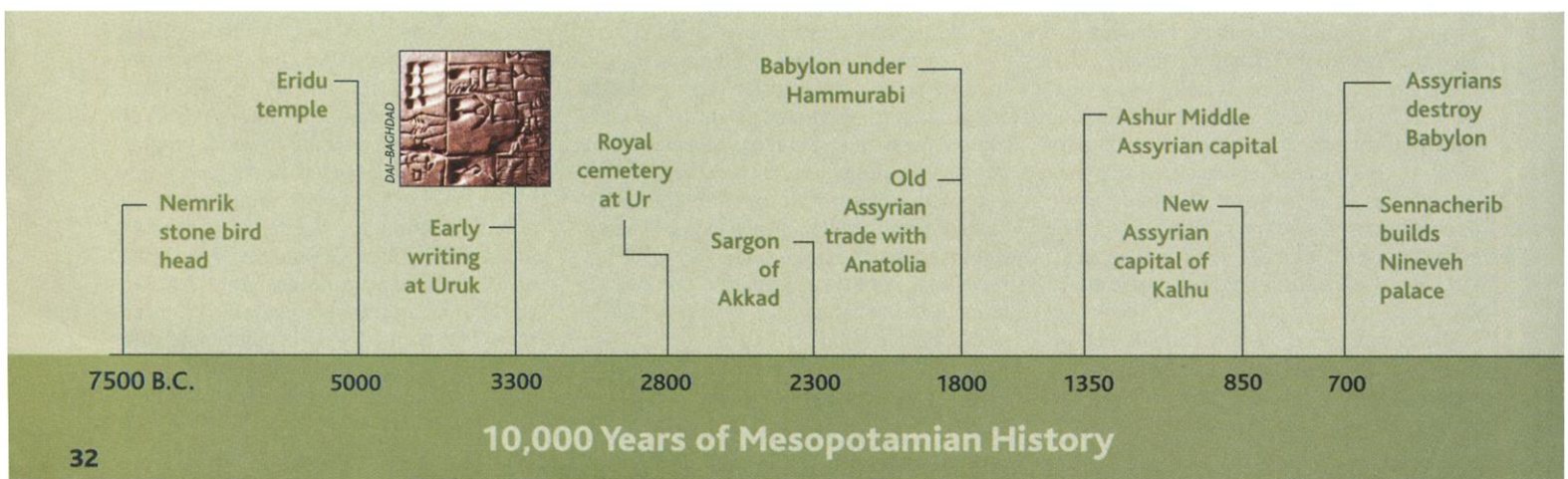
Mute mounds

Few places on Earth have such a long and complex history as Iraq, which for millennia has served as the stage for a vast array of technological innovations, artistic styles, religious and social experiments, and countless invasions—the area has always lacked the natural defenses and stable government that characterized ancient Egypt. Warring kings in shifting alliances competed fiercely for control of trade routes and religious centers. Nomadic invaders adopt-



Crumbling glory. The ziggurat at Aqar Quf, built about 1400 B.C., is one of the best preserved.

CREDITS: (LEFT TO RIGHT) A. LAWLER, JOHN RUSSELL



ed the country's invention of wedge-shaped writing—cuneiform—already more than 2500 years old in Alexander's day. Extensive irrigation systems collapsed without constant maintenance, while the all-important rivers occasionally changed course, leaving vast cities stranded in inhospitable deserts.

European adventurers, noting the vast and mysterious mounds dotting the area, first began to piece together this historical puzzle in the early 1800s. Drawing on Greek chronicles and the biblical mentions of exotic places such as Ur, Babylon, and Nineveh, and, once deciphered, on the treasure troves of cuneiform tablets unearthed across the area, scholars began to uncover an ancient civilization hidden in layers of clay and dirt.

By the turn of the century, European and U.S. universities were staking their claims to particular sites. The discovery in the mid-1920s by Britain's Leonard Woolley of delicate gold objects in the Royal Tombs of Ur renewed public attention and helped stimulate private support. Baghdad's Iraqi Museum, founded in the 1920s by British pioneer Gertrude Bell, grew into a critical resource for Mesopotamian scholars around the world. Similarly, the archaeology school created at the University of Baghdad in the 1950s laid the foundation for what University of Chicago archaeologist McGuire Gibson calls "the best trained cadre of researchers in the Middle East." During the 1960s through the 1980s, Iraq's oil-rich government allocated substantial resources to archaeology, carefully planning salvage projects in advance of new dams and even paying some of the expenses of foreign expeditions engaged in such salvage.

Still, excavations in Iraq have always been a challenge. Obtaining visas, permits, and other documents from the country's bu-

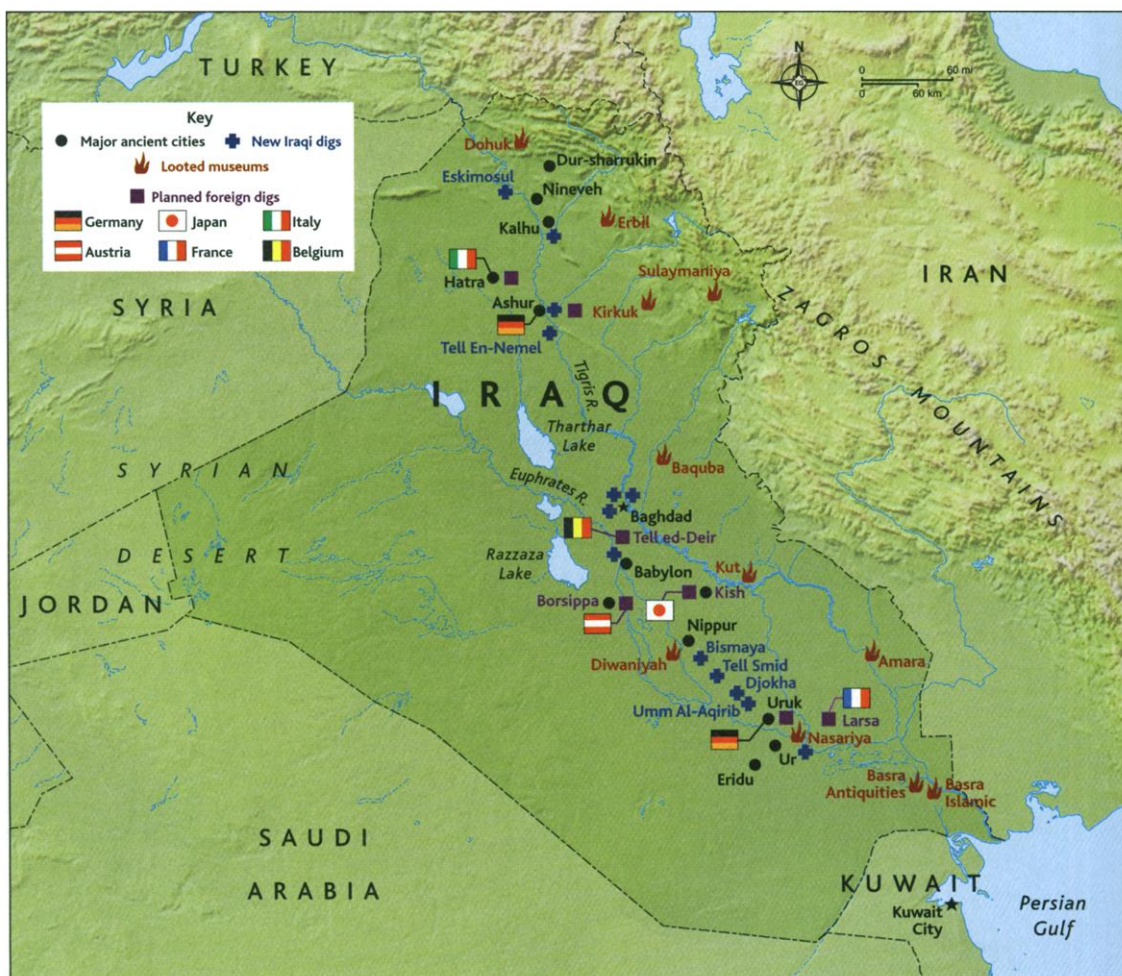
reaucracy has been notoriously difficult since Ottoman times, and the fiercely hot summers and drizzly winters limit the duration of work seasons. Yet except for the two world wars and an occasional period of unrest, digging by both Iraqi and foreign expeditions continued largely unabated, even during the brutal Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

Looting spree

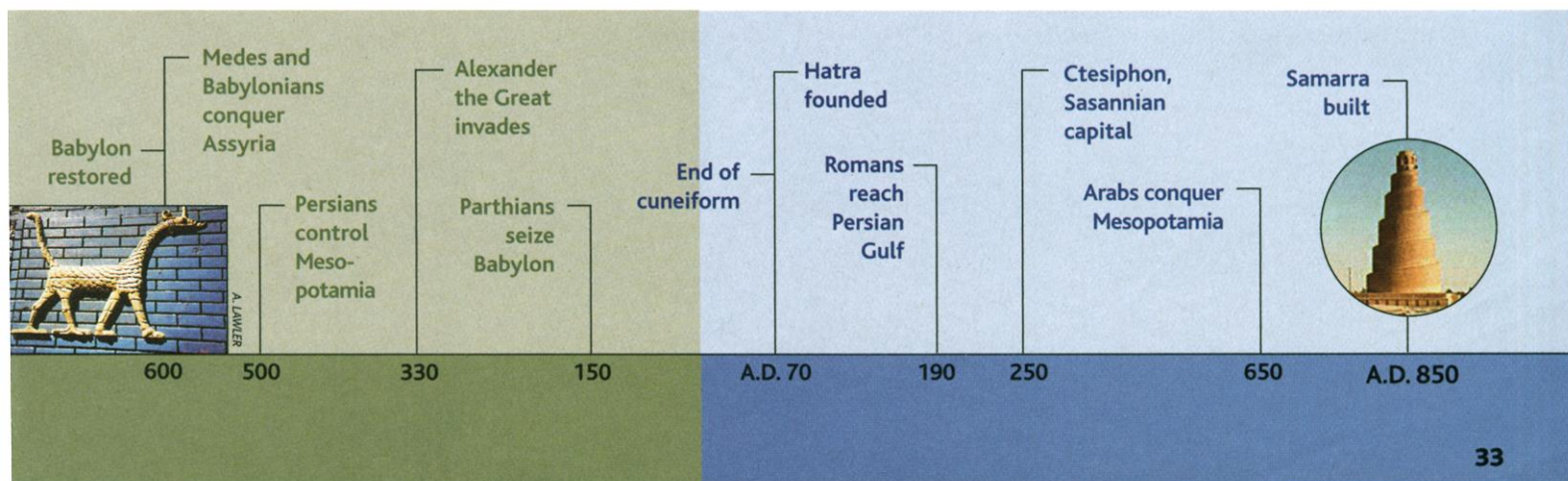
All that changed on 2 August 1990, when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered his troops to invade Kuwait. As the Western allies' response took the war into Iraq

proper, foreign archaeologists fled the country while their Iraqi colleagues rushed to find safe places for tens of thousands of objects in the vulnerable Baghdad museum—located next to a telecommunications center that was a prime wartime target. Officials considered the dozen regional museums located in other major cities and important historical sites to be less threatened—a tragic miscalculation.

"I would say we moved more than 150,000 pieces," recalls Donny George, research director of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities. The most valuable objects in



MAP: ALEXANDER/EQUATOR GRAPHICS



Baghdad, such as the bronze head of an Akkadian king and the hoard of gold jewelry found in Nimrud shortly before the Gulf War (see p. 42), were placed in a bank vault for safekeeping, where they remain today. The 70-odd pieces too heavy to move, such as the invaluable carved slabs from Assyrian palaces, were wrapped in sponge, George says. "Then we placed hundreds and hundreds of sandbags all around."

The 6 weeks of intensive bombing that began on 16 January 1991 ultimately did little damage to Iraq's archaeological works, but the same cannot be said for the campaign's aftermath. Civil war broke out in March. While Kurds eager for independence mobilized in the north, Shiite Muslims opposed to Saddam's Sunni-dominated rule revolted in the south. Rioting mobs in the large southern city of Basra forced their way into the museum there, destroying or carrying off hundreds of precious artifacts. In nearby Amara, when the museum director's son tried to prevent a crowd from entering, he was killed on the spot and the building was burned. All told, 11 of Iraq's 13 regional museums were looted.

Saddam's Republican Guards quickly and brutally suppressed these largely spontaneous revolts, but the damage they had caused to Iraq's archaeological heritage was irreversible. Muayad Damerji, who was director general of antiquities at the time and now is antiquities counselor to the culture minister, says that 4800 objects—ranging from Sumerian-era statues to medieval Islamic pottery—vanished in the turmoil. Western researchers estimate that at least

3000 significant objects were lost. As order was restored, George and his colleagues quickly fanned out across the country to salvage what they could, but with modest results. "We've recovered maybe a few pieces, but no more," says Muayad.

Cratered landscape

The war and riots presaged an even darker period for Iraqi archaeology. The resulting economic dislocation and the application of sanctions by the United Nations shut off the funding spigot for antiquities, which once enjoyed virtually open-ended annual budgets thanks to oil wealth. Monthly salaries of antiquities workers plummeted, and dozens

of highly trained specialists moved to Europe, the United States, and other parts of the Arab world.

"In the aftermath of the war, the situation was critical," says Muayad. "There was a growing lack of equipment and vehicles for archaeological activities, and we lost new blood in the field. For at least 6 years, conditions were severe." And conditions at archaeological sites deteriorated alarmingly through the mid-1990s. With most foreign excavators gone and little domestic support, all digging stopped.

For rural people being squeezed further into deep poverty—some of whom had worked for archaeologists and were knowledgeable about where to find valuable goods—abandoned and unexplored sites proved tempting targets. The government's loss of control over many rural areas made it hard to curb looting, and the antiquities department lacked money for guards and am-

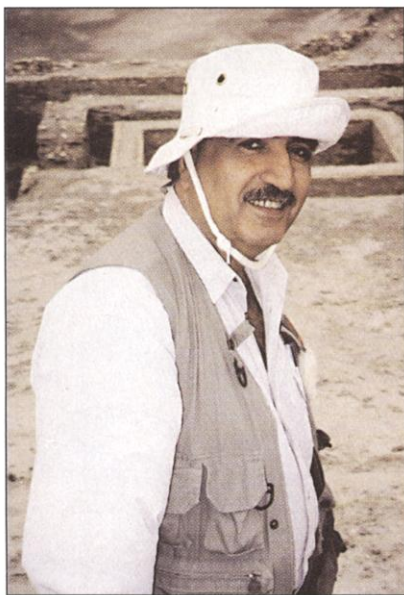
munition. "Since 1994 and 1995, the real threat has been at the archaeological sites," says Muayad. Adds George: "We knew it was very organized: People showed up in five or even 10 pickups, with a couple of them filled with people armed with medium- or heavy-sized machine guns. They would protect the diggers."

The result is all too apparent at sites such as Djokha in southern Iraq, where the looters methodically stripped an ancient and unexcavated Sumerian city of its clay tablets, statues, and cylinder seals. U.S. and European archaeologists say that large numbers of smuggled goods from this site are now appearing in antiquities markets abroad and even on the Internet's eBay. During a recent visit, an area of several hectares at the center of the city was pocked with dozens of deep pits, leaving behind a lunar landscape. Walls, floors, and potsherds, which have negligible economic value but would have provided important data for archaeologists, were severely damaged or destroyed.

This pattern of thefts has been repeated throughout southern Iraq, say a number of Iraqi and foreign archaeologists familiar with the territory. And some sites in northern Iraq, such as Nimrud and Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh, have been seriously vandalized as well (see p. 37).

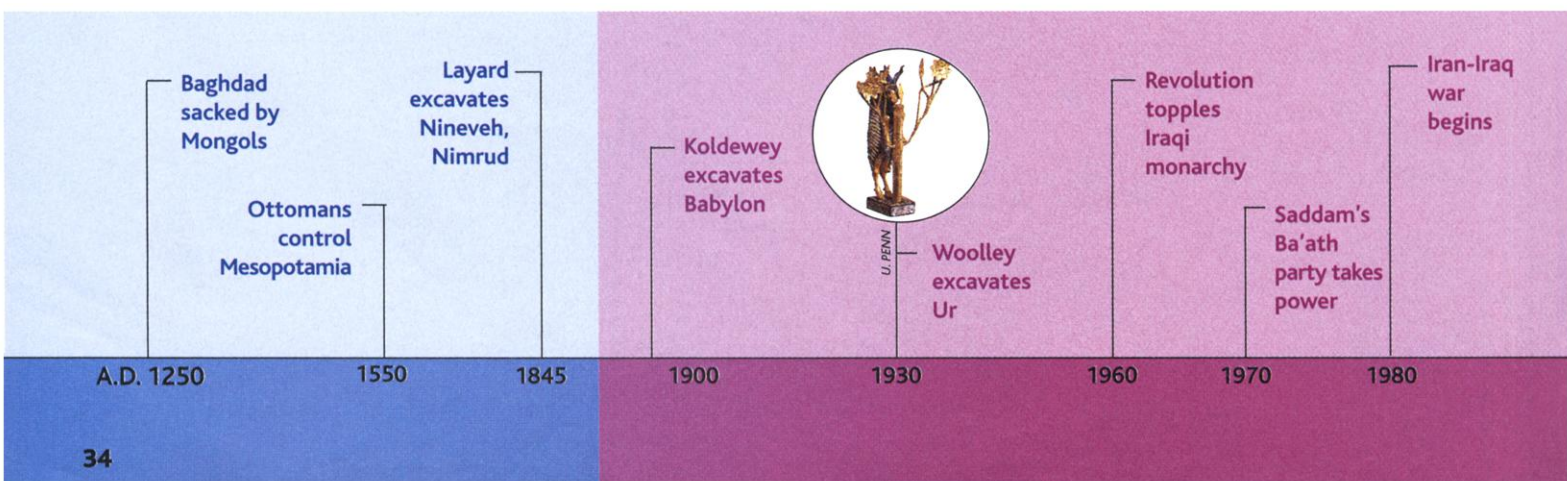
The looting continues despite draconian punishments. In 1997, a group of Iraqis from near the northern town of Mosul raided the nearby ancient Assyrian capital of Khorsabad. They sawed a massive stone head off its body, cut the head into pieces, and tried to sneak them across the border for Western collectors. "It was the crime of the century," fumes George. In 1999, the head was recovered and 10 of the 12 perpetrators were captured. Conservators in Baghdad are preparing to reassemble the broken head, but there is no chance of rehabilitating the looters: All 10 were executed.

Another serious threat results from the desperate effort to boost the food and water supply in a country under an international economic embargo. Emergency dam and irrigation projects sped forward in the



Self-supporting. Muayad Damerji has had little international help.

CREDIT: A. LAWLER



NEWS FOCUS

1990s without the usual time-consuming archaeological salvaging by domestic and foreign researchers, causing untold losses. A major drainage canal running from near Baghdad to the far south, for example, was built without extensive archaeological salvage, and innumerable smaller projects have damaged many sites, according to Iraqi and Western researchers.

Such threats aren't fading: A large area around the ancient Assyrian capital of Ashur, for example, would be flooded by a dam proposed for the Tigris. "I'm worried; this is a very important area," says Peter Miglus of the University of Heidelberg in Germany, who plans to begin digging at the site this fall. "We may have to find a way to surround Ashur with a wall," says Muayad. Smaller sites are even more vulnerable.

Isolation and self-reliance

A less dramatic but more intractable problem for Iraqi archaeologists is their continuing isolation. Economic sanctions against Saddam's totalitarian regime still curtail foreign involvement in Iraqi activities: In the case of the United States and Britain, even travel to Iraq is forbidden. Flights in and out of Baghdad are barred by the United Nations, which means that most visitors must endure a bone-rattling 10-hour trip over the Syrian desert from Jordan. Basic archaeological equipment—from film to conservation glue—is hard to obtain.

Isolation, however, has prompted introspection. "We discovered that we could not lean on UNESCO or even private institutions," says Muayad. "We have to support ourselves. We are doing what we can in very limited conditions and capacities, but we are doing our best."

Although the Iraqi economy remains in a shambles, the situation has improved somewhat since 1996, when the UN approved oil sales in exchange for food and medicines, and recent talks at the UN may lead to an easing of sanctions along with a warmer po-

litical climate. Meanwhile, there are now more government revenues in Iraq, a high-level recognition there of the looting problem, and a political push to broaden contacts with the outside world. Also, a new generation of students is emerging from schools and universities, which were moribund during much of the 1990s; and after years of being shut, the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad recently reopened.

All these factors are contributing to the

tion and former acting board chief. "And we hope that will increase," he adds. One of the board's key tasks is to rebuild the sadly denuded field with a new generation of University of Baghdad graduates—including a number of women; elderly archaeology workers now are forbidden from retiring so that they can pass on their expertise.

Meanwhile, at more than a half-dozen sites in the north and south, Iraqi excavators are back at work after nearly a decade's hiatus.

And a number of foreign teams are also reentering the country (see p. 36). Looters are being discouraged by the increased activity at remote sites, the addition of armed guards at others, and the cooperation of the local sheiks who control much of Iraq's rural areas. Muayad and George add that a new and harsher set of penalties for looting is due to be put in place this year, laying out specific fines and, in the case of serious theft and collaboration with foreigners, ordering jail terms and even the death penalty.

Muayad verges on ecstatic when describing times to come.

"The future of archaeology in

Iraq is glorious, because we have 10,000 sites, some of them monumental," he says. "More than 70 big towns and cities in ancient history are still waiting for excavators, and there are certainly enough places for the next generation to excavate."

That optimism, however, must be tempered by the irrevocable loss of data, objects, and intellectual capital during the past decade of neglect, vandalism, and poverty. "There has been a tremendous amount of damage," says Michael Müller-Karpe, an archaeologist at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, Germany. This era, say researchers, will long be remembered as a sad and terrible chapter in Mesopotamian history. Laments Yale University's Harvey Weiss: "This will be known for centuries to come as a period of archaeological devastation." —ANDREW LAWLER



Moonscape. Looters denuded this ancient Sumerian site.

revival of Iraqi archaeology. Local researchers are starting a slew of challenging excavations while attempting to lure back foreign teams as well. The old department of antiquities has been reconstituted in recent months as a higher profile state board, which archaeologists say will have more bureaucratic muscle. A new president, Jabbar Hadithi, was just named in June, and George is the new head of the board's research and publications directorate. Muayad himself was moved upstairs to the minister's office. The reorganization has won approval from the highest levels. "Now we have the complete support of [Saddam] himself," says George.

And indeed, the current budget for archaeological activities is at a level comparable to those from before the Gulf War, says Rabia al-Qaisi, director general of restora-

CREDIT: A. LAWLER

