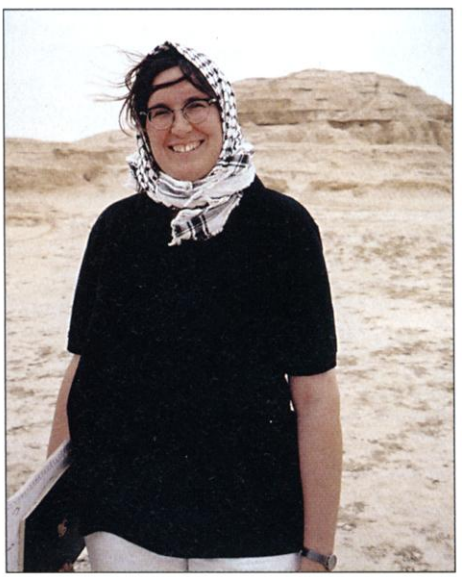
ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRAQ
▶ FOREIGNERS RETURN

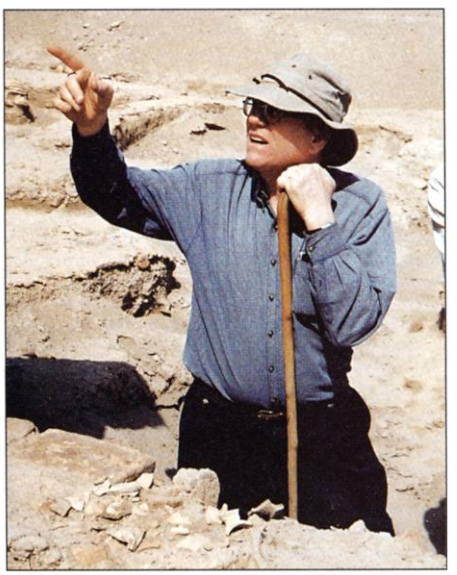
Iraq Opening Sets Off Scramble for Sites

European and Japanese excavators are returning to Iraq while frustrated American and British archaeologists cool their heels

WARKA—A fierce sandstorm blows up suddenly over the hot plain, obscuring the chain of "hills" that punctuates its flatness. These mounds are all that remain of the wall that once encircled the ancient city of Uruk, which legend attributes to King Gilgamesh.



Dry spell. Margarete van Ess is back in Uruk after a decade-long hiatus.



Left behind. Barred from Iraq, McGuire Gibson now digs in Syria.

Head wrapped in a protective scarf, Margarete van Ess of Berlin's German Archaeological Institute doesn't seem to mind the dusty desert wind. The leader of one of several foreign teams now returning to Iraq, she is delighted to be back and digging after a decade of exile.

The return of van Ess and other foreign archaeologists marks an abrupt and dramatic end to Iraq's near-total isolation from scientific circles since 1990, following its invasion of Kuwait. "We welcome our foreign colleagues," says Benham Abu Al-Soof, an Iraqi archaeologist and parliamentarian. "There is room for everybody—we have no barriers." Archaeologists from Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Belgium, and Austria are cautiously taking him up on the offer, preparing a new generation of excavations that will profit from advanced field methods and technologies. "It's very exciting, and we are hoping slowly to begin our work again," says van Ess.

Conspicuously absent are the Americans and the British, long key players in the 160 years of Iraqi archaeology, during which time important sites were claimed by research institutions of various foreign countries. Barred by the stricter policies of their governments, which prohibit travel to Iraq and cultural contacts, U.S. and British scientists are left out of the scramble for prime sites in which their European and Japanese counterparts are currently engaged. "It's awful, it's horrible. We'll be the last ones back," says McGuire Gibson, an archaeologist at the University of Chicago who has devoted much of his professional life to the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur. "It puts our students at a tremendous disadvantage."

Meanwhile, excavators like van Ess are already back in the field or heading that way. Austrians are at work at Borsippa, a site south of Babylon; an Italian team is digging at Hatra, a Roman and Parthian site in northwestern Iraq; and the Japanese recently began work at the Sumerian site of Kish in the south. A Belgian team plans to resume work shortly at Tell ed-Deir, and another group of Italians will likely return to Seleucia on the Tigris. French archaeologists also intend to go back to the Sumerian site of Larsa next year.

German archaeologists have the largest presence of all the foreign teams. For example, they are at Uruk, a city with a formidable history. First excavated in 1912 and subsequently yielding 3 millennia of rich layers of temples, palaces, houses, and walls, Uruk is Earth's oldest known literate city and the site of the only known temple on top of a ziggurat. But the city, called Erech in the Bible, poses a puzzle for archaeologists: Its inhabitants often used clay tablets and pottery as fill, making it tough to place objects in their original context. "It is a rather difficult stratigraphic situation," says van Ess.

Her team has just begun a 5-year survey designed to provide a general stratigraphic picture of Uruk's layers, determine how the city was divided into quarters, and reveal how ancient citizens may have moved along its streets and canals. She expects to begin a series of small excavations around 2003 to gather more specific data.

Another group led by Peter Miglus of the University of Heidelberg in Germany intends to start work this fall at Ashur, the ancient Assyrian capital that juts out into the Tigris valley north of Baghdad. German digs at the site date back to 1903 but stopped in 1990; the new team intends to begin excavation at a temple on the western edge of the site. Miglus has been working on smaller projects in cooperation with the University of Baghdad since the late 1990s

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Old digs. German researchers at Uruk have been uncovering temples, palaces, and the earliest cuneiform since 1914.

Sale of Nineveh Fragments Exposes Looting Network

MOSUL—When invading Babylonians and Medes attacked ancient Nineveh and burned the palace of Assyrian King Sennacherib here in 612 B.C., they didn't know they were ensuring his posthumous fame. The upper stories of what was called "the palace without rival" collapsed, burying hundreds of massive stone slabs in the throne room under meters of debris. Excavated in the 1840s, these elaborately carved slabs caused a sensation with their lively depiction of the king's victorious campaigns in the Near East.

What the enemy troops failed to destroy 2600 years ago, looters encouraged by the Western and Japanese thirst for antiquities have been vanquishing in the past 10. On a recent visit, smashed stones littered the ground where whole slabs once stood. Even the protective metal roof was gone, victim of scavengers. John Russell, an archaeologist at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston who has meticulously documented the site for 2 decades, calls the devastation "the final sack of Nineveh."

The sad fate of Sennacherib's palace transformed Russell from mild-mannered professor to antiquities activist. Blocked from further digging at Nineveh because of U.S. restrictions, he instead has exposed a network of local Iraqis and shadowy dealers eager to take advantage of easy pickings and the country's political and economic isolation. Thanks to his efforts, at least one fragment from the palace is scheduled to be returned soon to Iraq from London.

Before and after. This Sennacherib slab was intact in 1989, but by this spring it was destroyed.

But other pieces from the palace—likely numbering more than a dozen—are out of the reach of Iraqi authorities and archaeologists eager to understand the art, politics, and social life of Assyria. And what remains on site has been diminished in value. After a March visit to Nineveh, Russell estimated that of the 100 or so exposed slabs there, about one-third have been seriously damaged.

Occupied by humans for 9 millennia, Nineveh served as the last and grandest Assyrian capital, boasting 12 kilometers of walls with 18 gates enclosing more than 7 square kilometers rich in carved stone and clay tablets. The modern city of Mosul, originally confined to the opposite side of the Tigris, now sprawls within the old city walls.

In this desperately poor region, the temptation of nearby treasure is hard to resist. There's big money involved: The 1994 sale of an Assyrian sculpture—that had long been at an English private school—brought nearly $12 million from a Japanese dealer, a record price for an antiquity. Ironically, it was Russell who identified it as an original rather than the plaster cast it was taken to be. The high price fetched at the auction occurred just as serious looting began in Iraq, according to foreign and Iraqi scholars.

The following year, Russell identified through photos several fragments from Sennacherib's palace that were in place as late as 1990 but that are now in the possession of a London collector, who claims not to have known they were stolen. Russell's reporting of the looted pieces ultimately led to an unusual British court battle between the collector and the Iraqi government. One slab fragment is slated to be brought this year to Baghdad—but only because Iraq reluctantly agreed to compensate the collector for the alleged original purchase price of $14,000.

Russell and other archaeologists say that hundreds if not thousands of looted objects from Iraq are circulating around the West and in Saudi Arabia and Japan. Two or three other Iraqi objects from various sites have been returned by the British, but tense relations between Iraq and most Western nations leave little room for joint efforts to curb the looter-dealer-collector network. Still, Russell's efforts—which include a book and several articles—have put a spotlight on the problem. "It has touched a nerve in him," says David Stronach, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who led dig teams at Nineveh in the 1980s. "And though it is an enormously uphill struggle, he is doing a great service."

–A.L.

CREDITS: JOHN RUSSELL

in order to ease the way back into Iraq. "We wanted to find out how this would work," he explains.

Meanwhile, Germany's Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz has been playing an important role in conserving and repairing damaged metal and stone objects, as well as in training Iraqis at its state-of-the-art conservation lab. Michael Müller-Karpe, an archaeologist at the museum, has close contacts with his Iraqi colleagues, having worked extensively at the Iraqi Museum throughout the 1990s.

Yet despite the bustle of activity and Al-Soof's open-armed invitation, many researchers are only too aware that politics or war could force them to beat a hasty retreat, as happened in the 1980s and then again in 1990. "After the [Iran-Iraq] war, people thought it would be easy to come back, but now there's a little more caution," says Arnulf Hausleiter, an archaeologist at Berlin's Free University. And Iraq's years of isolation combined with its red tape make patience a necessity. "The Iraqis are not used to foreign missions yet," he says. "They are always nice and helpful, but everything takes a long time."

Such troubles would be welcome to American and British researchers. "The French see the vacuum we've left, and their government is encouraging cultural contacts with Iraq," says one frustrated

British archaeologist. "They've got their foot in the door."

For the time being, Gibson is cooling his heels in Syria, just 8 kilometers from the Iraqi border, where he has been digging at an ancient site at Hamoukar. But he yearns to return to Nippur, in southern Mesopotamia. In 1990, he had just uncovered a temple to Gula, goddess of medicine, when the Gulf War broke out. He had planned to excavate both the temple and its neighborhood to understand their relationship. "We left in late March of 1990, intending to come back in a few months," he says.

The site survived both the war and the subsequent chaos unscathed. But in 1994 Gibson learned that part of his dig house had been torched during a local tribal dispute. Although he has returned to visit the site several times, he cannot fix the dig house roof, much less excavate, until the United States eases its stance on Saddam's regime.

Iraq's loss has been two other countries' gain. Without access to Iraq, Americans like Gibson as well as Europeans have done a good deal of work in Turkey and Syria in recent years. And it has produced significant results; the archaeologists have identified towns and cities of the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. that were larger and more complex than previously known.

But Iraqi archaeologists are confident their colleagues eventually will all return from the rim to the heartland of Mesopotamia. "The American and British groups working in Syria and Turkey will finish up and come back to Iraq again," predicts Muayad Damerji, antiquities counselor to the Ministry of Culture. "They will come back, I am sure."

–ANDREW LAWLER

ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRAQ

▶ DIGGING IN

New Digs Draw Applause And Concern

Iraqi archaeologists are back in the field and making significant finds. But Western researchers worry about their methods after years of isolation

UMM AL-AQIRIB—Iraqi archaeologists working last year on an ancient Sumerian site in this remote area in southern Iraq heard a rumor that looters were ready to pounce as soon as work stopped for the summer. So they took no chances. The researchers and a team of 30 local diggers worked straight through the ferocious summer, enduring temperatures that regularly soared past 50 degrees Celsius.

Their efforts paid off: The excavators uncovered a rare cemetery, a huge complex of buildings in an unusual configuration, and a 7-meter-high wall in remarkable condition—all of which challenge current assumptions about city development in the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C. "It's astonishing," says McGuire Gibson, a University of Chicago archaeologist. These findings "will rewrite the history of architecture in ancient Mesopotamia."

Gibson was part of a team of Western researchers visiting Iraq this spring, the first such group to size up some of the 15 Iraqi excavations begun in the past 18 months after nearly a decade's hiatus. A new generation of Iraqi archaeologists has fanned out to six sites in the south, five in the north, and four in the area around Baghdad—mostly places threatened by looters, irrigation-canal construction, or the rising waters of new dams.

New finds such as those at Umm Al-Aqirib—"Mother of Scorpions" in Arabic—and nearby Djokha are causing ripples of excitement among Near Eastern specialists. But Western scientists also worry that their colleagues' economic troubles, long isolation, and emphasis on restoration—trying to reconstruct ancient sites rather than simply preserving what remains—may pose a threat to important and fragile ruins.

At Al-Aqirib, which comprises 5 square kilometers of sand dunes, the team led by Iraq antiquities research director Donny George excavated a palace or administrative building from the 3rd millennium B.C. that is 50 meters square. Jars in the structure still contained the residues of wheat and barley. Nearby, the team has uncovered what appears to be a temple, 38 meters by 28 meters with a 7-meter-high wall, that may date to before 3000 B.C. and that is nearly flush against the base of a platform or ziggurat—an unusual arrangement for that period, says George. On the other side of the platform is a large area of graves dating from roughly the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C.

The extent of the cemetery, which has been partially looted, remains uncertain, but excavators have opened 18 graves so far and generally found either one stone or one copper bowl next to human remains. In the tomb of one woman, apparently someone of means, were 46 pieces of lapis lazuli. Although Mesopotamian burials typically were under homes, one British scholar speculates that Al-Aqirib was a Sumerian religious center and therefore a popular burial place. Other

Fine work. Iraqi excavators at Ashur, left. At Djokha, Nawala Al-Mutawalli has found unusually good building methods.

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