

## **Plundering the Past**

**Author:** [Hussein Ali](#)

Freedom brings surge in looting of antiquities from Ur and other Mesopotamian sites.

Gold rings flash on the fingers of Muhsin Abu al-Fashesh, nicknamed the "Lizard" for his skinny appearance.

Outside the mini-market he recently opened sits a new BMW. The car was paid for by the many long hours the 36-year old former shoe repairman has spent digging up antiquities from Iraq's rich past.

"I worked for months in the desert, and I achieved my ambition in life - to be rich," said Fashesh. "And when I became rich, I stopped digging."

From the fall of Saddam Hussein until recently, Fashesh spent his days working with three friends he hired as labourers, digging in the "tells", or archaeological mounds, of the nearby 5,000-year-old city of Ur.

Sometimes, the work brought only modest gain. The bread-and-butter trade was in cuneiform seals which he could sell to a middleman for 50 US dollars a time. These would go for 700 dollars a time in neighbouring Jordan, Fashesh said.

Fashesh finally hit the jackpot when he discovered a gold statuette of a cow and four calves, which he sold for nearly 50,000 dollars .

Iraq has always had a roaring trade in smuggled antiquities, but before the war only the well-connected could make a profit.

"Under the old regime, there was a trade in relics, but it was secret and limited to people who worked with the regime," said Ali Zair, an officer in Nasiriya's police station. For others, he added, "the legal regulations were very harsh at that time, and could include the death penalty."

Abdulmir al-Hamdani, 40, the official in charge of archaeology in Nasiriya, said a lot of damage to Iraq's heritage was done by the likes of Saddam's son Uday, who once sold 2,000 pieces of pottery which the state is still trying to recover.

Another philistine was Ali Hassan al-Majid - the infamous "Chemical Ali" - who built himself a palace on top of an ancient Assyrian site.

Since the war, smaller-scale looters have had open season on Ur and other ancient sites.

Al-Hamdani says the sites of between 15 to 20 ancient cities are particularly at risk, including the fourth millennium BC Sumerian cities of Uruk and Fara, and the second millennium BC Amorite city of Larsa.

Police officer Zair says the trade has taken off because such historic sites are no longer guarded properly. In addition, hardship has driven many local people to seek some extra income.

Today, much of Ur - a series of tells spreading over the desert south of Nasiriya - is open to anyone who wants to visit it. A nearby United States and Italian military base visible from the top of the mounds is not much of a deterrence.

"For the past year, police have been unable to control the historical areas, because they are remote and in the desert, and also because they lack cars and weapons," said police officer Muhammad Amir, 40. "Some areas are controlled by the tribes, and the police are unable to confront them,"

Hamdani continued, "In a site known as Isin, a city established in 1900 BC, 150 guys armed with knives and some with automatic weapons started digging from sunrise to sunset, shifting ancient relics out every hour.

"We did have guards there, but now they've either been sent packing by the gangs, or else they are working one way or another with the thieves, at this and other sites. It's all a consequence of the chaos and the absence of law".

Residents of the town of al-Fajr, close to Isin, told IWPR that vendors can be found hawking statues and cuneiform seals near the site.

Archaeologist Hamdani recalled, "One day I was sitting in a café, and there was a man sitting behind me holding a bag, and apparently waiting for someone. After half an hour, another man came and sat beside him. As I listened in, the first man took something that looked like a large oval piece of jewellery covered in cuneiform writing out of his bag, and asked 5,000 [dollars] for it."

A local man, grocer Saif Hameed, 50, recalled watching a group of people turning up to dig at the Isin site. "There was a man who'd worked as a guard at the site for years. He had a Kalashnikov but he did not stop them," he said.

When IWPR spoke to the watchman, 45-year-old Jasim Muhammad, he retorted, "What can I do on my own? I can't arrest all the villagers, and even if did, what would I do with them?"

Meanwhile, many young men hope to emulate success stories like the Lizard's.

"When the regime fell, because there was no work, I found that this work suited me and was easy," said digger Ali al-Muamen, 27. "I haven't got anything of value from excavations [yet], but I'm keen to get hold of some statues."

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