Baghdad looters rob museum of priceless ancient treasures

Baghdad Last week's ransacking and plundering of Iraq's National Archaeological Museum, one of the most important museums of Middle Eastern antiquities, may have robbed the world of some of its most important treasures. These include one of the oldest known clay tablets bearing cuneiform script — probably the first written language — which had not yet been deciphered.

Iraq was the home of the Sumerian civilization — one of the oldest known to archaeologists — and has been the subject of extensive research over the past century. The national museum and its stores were packed with artefacts, many of which had not yet been examined. More than 170,000 items are estimated to have been stolen.

The museum was reopened only three years ago after repairs following damage incurred during the last Gulf War, when some 4,000 artefacts were also stolen. Other stolen items include bronze statues, religious statuettes, Sumerian gold jewellery and a 4,000-year-old harp.

Museum staff believe that, besides the local looters, specialists are targeting and stealing items of particular historical value.

Scientists blast European vote to limit stem-cell work

Brussels **A European Parliament vote to restrict research on human embryonic stem cells may go beyond the parliament's remit, according to sources in the European Commission.**

The proposed new rules, which would seem to prohibit therapeutic cloning, were inserted by a German-led cross-party group of politicians as an amendment to a directive on transplantation. The directive was approved by the parliament on 10 April, but health commissioner David Byrne, who proposed the plan with the aim of controlling the quality and safety of transplant tissues, said last year that the intention was not to comment on the type of cells involved. Sources at the commission confirm that ethical issues of this type cannot be addressed by the European Parliament, and have to be resolved by national governments.

The vote has precipitated a storm of protest from European scientists. "A small minority want to overturn the rights of individual member states to make democratic decisions about human embryonic stem cells," says Robert May, president of Britain's Royal Society. The amended directive will next be considered in June, at the Conference of European Health Ministers in Oslo, Norway.

Stuffed Dolly not starved of attention

Edinburgh Even in death Dolly continues to hog the limelight. The famous sheep — cloned from an adult cell by a research team led by Ian Wilmut (pictured) — went on display last week at the Royal Museum in Edinburgh.

Dolly's skin has been pickled, tanned, washed and stretched over a fibreglass frame. Soft tissue and muscles have been replaced with plasticine. Her nose has been touched up with pink paint, and her eyes replaced with glass replicas.

"We had to try about four or five pairs before we got the right shade of yellow," says Andrew Kitchener, curator of birds and mammals at the National Museums of Scotland. She was also "extremely bouffant-looking after the process, so we had to matt her fleece up a bit", he adds.

M. MCDONALD/PA

Britain shuts door on extra neutron source

London News of the almost certain demise of a planned European neutron source was tempered last week by funding boosts to two existing facilities.

The UK Strategy for Neutrons, released by the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils on 10 April, confirmed that Britain will not support the proposed European Spallation Source. The decision, which has been anticipated for several months (see *Nature* **421,** 563; 2003), may be the end for the facility, which was designed to be the most powerful neutron source in the world.

In the short term, Britain will instead increase its commitment to the Institut Laue-Langevin's neutron facility in Grenoble, France. It will also invest in its own neutron source at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory near Oxford, where more than £100 million (US$157 million) will be spent over the next five years to build a second neutron target. Researchers use neutron sources to study the structure of matter, and the new target will allow them to focus on areas such as colloids and biomolecules.

Human genome finished in time for DNA's golden jubilee

Washington **The curtain finally fell on the Human Genome Project on 14 April, with the announcement that the sequencing of the three billion bases of human DNA is complete. The 15-year project was finished just in time for the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the discovery of DNA's structure.**

The sequence is finished according to the standards agreed upon by the International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium — there is no more than 1 error per 10,000 bases, and no gaps except for those that cannot be closed with existing technology. "Finishing off those recalcitrant gaps will be done in an individualized tinkering fashion," says Francis Collins, head of the project and director of the National Human Genome Research Institute in Bethesda, Maryland.

The project published its draft sequence in 2001, at the same time as one produced by the private company Celera. Only the public project went on to finish the sequence. Further analyses of the finished sequence are expected to be published over the course of the year.

Smile, it's the world's biggest digital camera

Hawaii The world's largest digital camera was unveiled last week at the Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope atop Mauna Kea in Hawaii.

The 340-million-pixel, US$100-million MegaPrime camera is roughly 100 times more powerful than a commercial digital camera, say its creators. The telescope's unusually broad field of view will allow the device to photograph huge panoramas.

"This camera will allow us to do some unique stuff," says Christian Veillet, executive director for the telescope. For example, researchers plan to use the camera to look for the distant explosions of dying stars and also to observe the Kuiper belt, a ring of asteroid-like objects beyond the orbit of Neptune.

www.cfht.hawaii.edu

CANADA-FRANCE-HAWAII TELESCOPE

One of the MegaPrime camera's first starry shots.