

German hostage was saving Iraq digs

Susanne Osthoff — the German archaeologist kidnapped in Iraq last month — was a lone force against looters, according to researchers in the field. They say that she was fighting to protect archaeological sites from the plundering that has been rife in the postwar chaos.

Field work in Iraq had to be abandoned after British and US troops invaded two years ago. And although the looting of the Iraqi National Museum in April 2003 received widespread media attention, the continuing loss of artefacts from more distant field sites is less appreciated. Osthoff was being “heroic” in trying to bring public attention to the crimes, says Michael Müller-Karpe, an archaeologist at the Roman–Germanic Central Museum in Mainz, Germany.

Hundreds of sites are being looted by ordinary citizens trying to make a quick profit, says Elizabeth Stone, an archaeologist at Stony Brook University in Long Island, New York. In a way, this widespread ransacking is worse than the looting of the museum, because the antiques being removed have never been catalogued, she says.

At first, little action was taken to protect the remote sites. But in the past few months about 1,000 Iraqi police have been deployed in the Dhi Qar province in the southeast of the country to look after them. “This has begun to have an effect,” Stone says. She has started to map the sites using satellite imagery, and hopes to make pictures available to Iraqi officials in Baghdad and in Nasiriya, the province’s capital.

IMAGE
UNAVAILABLE
FOR COPYRIGHT
REASONS

In the field: archaeologist Susanne Osthoff (left) was trying to publicise the looting of digs in Iraq before she was kidnapped late last month.

Osthoff studied archaeology at the University of Munich, and in the late 1980s worked at a site in Isin, south of Baghdad. Now that field work is so dangerous, “a whole generation of students has not been involved in Mesopotamian archaeology,” laments Joan MacIver of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, based in London.

Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly, a Beirut-based archaeologist, met Osthoff in April 2003 in Baghdad, when Osthoff was on her way to Isin

with a German television crew to report on the looting problem. Farchakh Bajjaly describes her as “a very courageous, strong woman”, saying such attributes are necessary for tackling a strong, well-organized mafia of antiques traders. Osthoff was aided by her fluent Arabic and her connections with a local tribe that helped to protect her, says Farchakh Bajjaly.

Osthoff’s kidnapping has raised the profile of the problem — but at a very high price, say archaeologists. As *Nature* went to press, she was still being kept hostage.

Andreas von Bubnoff

Cowrie study strikes a blow for traditional taxonomy

WASHINGTON DC

It may be too early to use a technology called DNA barcoding to speed the identification of species, says an analysis released last week.

DNA barcoding involves collecting and comparing genetic sequences from many species. Some proponents believe that bypassing the slower techniques of traditional taxonomy will identify unknown species and categorize the world’s biodiversity more

quickly. But a study by Christopher Meyer and Gustav Paulay of the University of Florida in Gainesville shows that barcoding works well only for species that are already much studied.

The scientists examined a database of marine snails called cowries, which have been studied since the nineteenth century because of their valuable shells. By analysing the sequence of a gene called *cytochrome oxidase 1* from a cowrie specimen, then comparing it

with the entire database of genetic sequences, the scientists correctly identified cowrie species with less than 4% error.

But Meyer and Paulay hit trouble when they reconfigured their database to examine how barcoding works for less well studied groups. They used a method pioneered by other barcoding scientists to pinpoint new species. This method compares diversity among members of the same species and diversity between different species.

They showed that in species that have been less studied, the barcoding method misidentified unknown specimens up to 20% of the time (C. P. Meyer and G. Paulay *PLoS Biol.* 3, e422; 2005).

Some scientists view the high success rate for known species as a triumph for barcoding. They also say that the field is very young, and is still working out the best ways to deal with organisms about which there is little information. “This was a very ambitious test for the technique,”