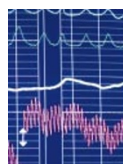




Taking the strain
Database set up
to combat drug-
resistant bacteria
p791



Deep freeze
Tonnes of Atlantic
cod killed by icy
Canadian waters
p792



Truth test
US refuses to pull the
plug on lie detectors
for lab scientists
p793



Summing up
Mathematicians
excited by potential
of Poincaré proof
p794

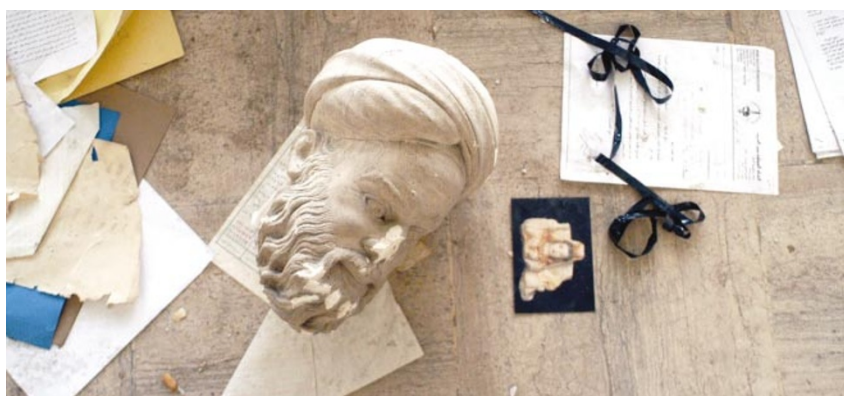
Historians pool resources to halt trade in Iraq's stolen treasures

Hannah Hoag, Washington

Archaeologists are rallying in an international effort to create a catalogue of the objects stolen from the National Archaeological Museum in Baghdad earlier this month. Images and descriptions of the artefacts will be entered into a database to help law-enforcement agents crack down on illegal trafficking.

Within days of US forces entering Baghdad, looters ransacked the museum in what many archaeologists suspect was an organized raid. The museum held some 180,000 artefacts including cuneiform tablets, statues, pottery and jewellery.

McGuire Gibson, an archaeologist at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, is spearheading production of the catalogue. Graduate students at the institute are scanning images and extracting detailed information about each object from archived expedition records, manuscripts, books and catalogues. The effort is being supported by universities and institutions in the United States, Britain, Germany, France and Japan.



A shattered statue lies among the debris in Baghdad's museum following the recent looting spree.

"Everything that was excavated in Iraq since the 1970s was in the museum," says Elizabeth Stone, an archaeologist at the State University of New York in Stony Brook.

Gibson was one of 30 international experts who last week convened at the Paris headquarters of UNESCO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,

to coordinate efforts to compile information on the lost collection. UNESCO director-general Koïchiro Matsuura told the meeting that he would seek a UN resolution to impose an embargo on the acquisition of all Iraqi cultural objects, and demand the return of those already exported.

Many archaeologists are pushing for a more extensive embargo that would temporarily ban the trade of all Middle Eastern antiquities, and for amnesty and rewards for Iraqis who return stolen goods. The latter proposal is "controversial, but we have to be pragmatic", says archaeologist Tony Wilkinson of the University of Chicago.

The fast reaction of the archaeologists is an attempt to salvage a situation they originally sought to prevent. Gibson visited the Pentagon in January, when he stressed the importance of the Baghdad museum. "I told them that it was likely to be looted and that the army would have to move in fast if the guards ran," he says. He says that Pentagon officials assured him that the museum would be protected.

Last week, three members of President Bush's Cultural Property Advisory Committee, which advises the White House on measures to prevent the illicit trade in cultural property, resigned in response to the looting. In his letter of resignation, chairman Martin Sullivan cited the failure of the US military forces "to plan for and to try to prevent indiscriminate looting and destruction" of the museum.

US debates future of Iraqi scientists

Erika Check, Washington

Ten years after the South African bioweapons programme was officially dismantled, some of its expertise and materials are still at large, prompting concern about similar programmes in other nations, such as Iraq.

The Washington Post reported on 20 April that Daan Goosen, a founding director of the lab that did research for South Africa's bioweapons programme, offered the FBI a vial of genetically modified *Escherichia coli* bacteria. According to the newspaper, he promised to turn over a cache of other weapons in exchange for money and a US passport, but was refused.

The fact that scientists from the programme are still seeking to exploit their knowledge alarms non-proliferation experts who are now looking at the situation in Iraq.

Jonathan Tucker, a senior fellow at the US Institute of Peace, a government-funded think-tank in Washington DC, says that the Bush administration should establish programmes in Iraq similar to those that the government has set up to employ former weapons scientists in Russia and the Ukraine. Earlier this month, Congress rejected a proposal to spend \$50 million on such 'cooperative threat reduction' programmes outside the former Soviet Union.

Others experts says that such programmes won't be necessary in Iraq, whose biological-weapons programme was far less extensive than that in Russia. "The concern will be, can we encourage these scientists to stay in Iraq and help build a biotechnology industry which is good for their country?" says David Franz, a former United Nations weapons inspector.