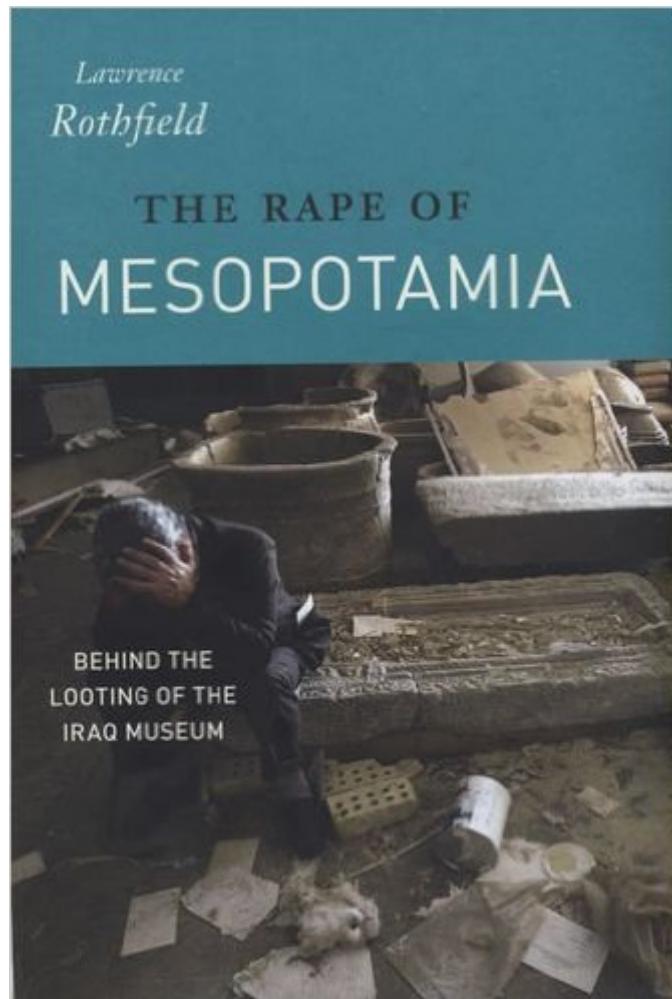


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# The Rape Of Mesopotamia: Behind The Looting Of The Iraq Museum



## Synopsis

On April 10, 2003, as the world watched a statue of Saddam Hussein come crashing down in the heart of Baghdad, a mob of looters attacked the Iraq National Museum. Despite the presence of an American tank unit, the pillaging went unchecked, and more than 15,000 artifacts—“some of the oldest evidence of human culture” disappeared into the shadowy worldwide market in illicit antiquities. In the five years since that day, the losses have only mounted, with gangs digging up roughly half a million artifacts that had previously been unexcavated; the loss to our shared human heritage is incalculable. With *The Rape of Mesopotamia*, Lawrence Rothfield answers the complicated question of how this wholesale thievery was allowed to occur. Drawing on extensive interviews with soldiers, bureaucrats, war planners, archaeologists, and collectors, Rothfield reconstructs the planning failures—“originating at the highest levels of the U.S. government”—that led to the invading forces’ utter indifference to the protection of Iraq’s cultural heritage from looters. Widespread incompetence and miscommunication on the part of the Pentagon, unchecked by the disappointingly weak advocacy efforts of worldwide preservation advocates, enabled a tragedy that continues even today, despite widespread public outrage. Bringing his story up to the present, Rothfield argues forcefully that the international community has yet to learn the lessons of Iraq—and that what happened there is liable to be repeated in future conflicts. A powerful, infuriating chronicle of the disastrous conjunction of military adventure and cultural destruction, *The Rape of Mesopotamia* is essential reading for all concerned with the future of our past.

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## Customer Reviews

At the outset, let me say that I have read the kudos given this work on this site; these come from various important publications. But I beg to differ strongly with the favorable impression they create. Personally, this was a very difficult read. Harking back to my days as a professor, I was reminded of how it recalls very bad doctoral dissertations, of the type that I would either have rejected or insisted on the author's doing a rewrite. The research is outstanding and comprehensive, but the presentation is worse than pedantic. Rothfield is drunk on alphabet-soup organizations to the extent that the reader becomes totally lost and confused as they are continually cited. Yes, bureaucracy malfunctioned worse than ever here, but the point does not need to be made on every other page. This book is a missed opportunity because the American public needs to know what happened and did not happen in re: the looting of the great Baghda Museum. For that reason, there should be some popularization of this topic because the disaster there cries out for widespread publicity. Although Rothfield does not so state, there is implicit anti-intellectualism in the failure to pay absolutely no attention to the museum. American military indifference, ineptitude, and incompetence need to be chronicled in readable fashion. Recent works describing the looting of Italy in WW II provide examples of how readable accounts can be handled. I do not want to labor this critical view, but in closing let me say that I am amazed that the University of Chicago Press let this book be published with little if any evidence of the work of a serious editor. Finally, this book's main value seems to be largely as a reference work for the wealth of data it contains. As a narrative of the disaster in Baghda, it is a total failure.

In straightforward prose, Lawrence Rothfield follows the trail of indifference, misplaced memos, and incompetence that ultimately indicts -- not the US military -- but rather the Bush administration's lack of interest in cultural preservation -- for the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghda in the early days of the Iraq war. This is truly a revelation. For perhaps the first time in US history, we learn of an administration so callous and indifferent to history and culture that it took almost no precautions to protect the cultural heritage of the country under attack. The "lapse," which ramified in the looting of thousands of antiquities not just from the museum but from many archaeological sites as well, was first blamed on the military by the broadcast media, an error that Rumsfield was not quick to correct. But here in a compact text salted with documentary photos we get the full story of how this singular tragedy was caused by a failure of American and British foreign policy. The best book on the subject, by far.

I have read quite a few critical appraisals of the Iraq invasion and occupation. With most, there are several anecdotes of people that tried to warn the war planners and commanders of the invasion force. This is followed by details on how these concerns were pitched and what reaction was gotten from those in power. This book misses that final step. The story told in this book is seemingly one of concerned archaeologists writing desperate missives to the Pentagon that went inexplicably un-returned and un-considered. The author did report on allusions by some in command that museum protection was "way down the list;" this kind of answer is so glib and general that there is no utility in printing it. After all, in the course of executing any large operation, there are many tasks on the list but all of them, if important enough to be on the list at all, should be resourced and adjudicated to some level of satisfaction. After reading all 160 pages and the foot notes, I have no better an idea of why the Pentagon did not plan to guard the Baghdad Museum and countryside dig sites than I did before I started reading the book. Was it laziness? Cultural arrogance? Rumsfeld's emphasis on keeping the invasion force as lean as possible? Unusually, and legitimately unexpectedly heavy combat conditions that prevented forces from performing the civil security role? The book just does not provide any information for the reader to come to a conclusion. This is just not acceptable for a book published so many years after the fact about a tragedy that has been so widely covered.

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