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Artillery and artifacts



[Photos courtesy of Ferrell Jenkins]

Ur, the traditional birthplace of Abraham and site of one of the most well-preserved stepped pyramids, called a ziggurat, is a treasure that archaeologists fear is endangered by the war in Iraq. Last week, the U.S. 141st Mechanized Infantry Battalion was dug in there, according to media reports.

By SHARON TUBBS, Times Staff Writer
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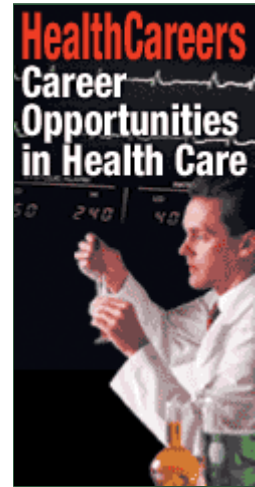
The war in Iraq not only endangers human life. Priceless antiquities lie in the fighting's path, and despite the U.S. military's attempts to spare them, some may be lost.

country that historians call "the cradle of civilization."

Yes, he is praying for those involved in the war and their families.

Ferrell Jenkins removes a piece of clay tablet from the glass case in his Temple Terrace living room. It is thousands of years old, he says, from ancient ruins in what is now Iraq.

He's happy to show the artifact, but he handles his small treasure carefully, much the way he talks about a war in a



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But for him, there's another facet to the war that most Americans have not considered.

"All of our information about the early part of the Bible is in this part of the world," says Jenkins, a minister at the Church of Christ in Carrollwood and a retired biblical studies teacher at Florida College in Temple Terrace. Iraq "is the first 12 chapters of Genesis."

Around the globe, archaeologists and religious scholars like him are on edge about potential damage to Iraq's historical and spiritual relics.

They cringe at the thought of bombs and shell fire near the ruins of Ur, where many believe that Abraham, the forefather of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, was born; and Babylon, home of the ancient King Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the ancient Jewish temple; and Nineveh, capitol of the Assyrian empire thousands of years ago.

"There's just plenty of opportunity to blow up all kinds of history," said James Strange, distinguished professor of religious studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa. It is history that belongs to mankind, he says.

For historians such as Jenkins and Strange, what happens after the war is just as crucial as what happens during it.

The Persian Gulf War a dozen years ago offers a glimpse of what could go wrong. Before the war ended in 1991, Iraq had a massive antiquities department, with staffing and security at museums and excavation sites.

Today, the department is a skeleton of what it was. The poor economy forced archaeologists to move to other countries for work. Staffing and security grew minimal, and looters easily stole artifacts, dividing them into smaller pieces to maximize profits. Pieces and chunks of once large and complete artifacts are now bought and sold on the open market with ease.



The ruins of Babylon as seen on a tour in 1970. The city is noted in the Bible for its wealth and wickedness, and it is one of countless historically significant sites in Iraq, known once as Mesopotamia.

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From the AP Features wire

Jenkins suspects that's what happened with the piece of the clay tablet he was holding. It is scripted with the wedgelike writing the Babylonians used. He got it from a legitimate antiquities dealer on a trip to England a few years ago.

* * *

People for and against the war in Iraq are mourning military and civilian casualties. Mainstream discussions have focused on political ramifications, on which countries will remain U.S. allies after the war is over.

In the scheme of things, concerns about artifacts and shrines may seem marginal. But religion and history are intricately woven into military action in the Middle East.

Historians throughout Europe have decried the potential loss of cultural icons and biblically significant material. Muslims in the Middle East protest battles at or near sacred sites.

Petitions have circulated. Organizations issued statements and sent lists of crucial sites to the U.S. Department of Defense months ago.

From the Boston-based American Schools of Oriental Research's statement on Iraq:

"The undersigned ask countries to take measures to avoid, to the extent possible, damage to Iraq's cultural monuments, museums and archaeological sites and that their military forces respect the integrity of such monuments and sites."



The Euphrates River, with the Tigris and two other rivers, is mentioned in Genesis as the site of the Garden of Eden.

Iraq's Republican Guard has used international concerns for religion and culture as military strategy. It has holed up in mosques and other buildings labeled by international preservation groups as culturally valuable.

The United States has taken heed in some cases. St. Petersburg Times reporter Wes Allison, who is embedded with the 101st Airborne Division, says that

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troops in Najaf were ordered to spare a cemetery and a mosque regarded as one of Islam's holiest sites. Later in Najaf, the unit was nearly attacked by an angry mob of civilian Iraqis who mistakenly thought soldiers were trying to capture the ayatollah or attack his mosque. The unit's commanders had gone seeking the ayatollah's support.

Tiptoeing around culture is not easy in Iraq. Thousands of archaeological sites are thought to be in the country, which is the size of California, said Jane Waldbaum, president of the Archaeological Institute of America. About 4,000 to 5,000 have been identified, and far fewer have been excavated or studied.

"We know that they're there, but it takes a lot of time to excavate a site," she said. "It takes a lot of money."

During a media briefing March 26, Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks, deputy director of operations at U.S. Central Command, relayed the military's efforts to protect cultural sites.

"We remain committed to preserving the rich culture and heritage and the resources of the Iraqi people," Brooks said. "The regime continues to put them at risk. I've showed you before images of MiGs in cemeteries. Today I want to show you an image of military equipment positioned close to a very historic site. . . . This is a part of the ruins of the place called (Ctesiphon). It's about 20 miles southeast of Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris River, and it is a site that has over 2,000 years of history, and it's significant to a number of nations.

"What you see with the yellow lines is military equipment, communications equipment, positioned right beside that. On top of the building, as the sign shows, this is marked with an international symbol of being an historic place."

* * *

Many Americans know Iraq only for its oil. They are ignorant of the country's cultural heritage and how it ties to people around the world.

"I think a lot of people don't realize that modern Iraq is just about synonymous with ancient Mesopotamia," Waldbaum said.

In school, Americans learned about the "fertile crescent," but few associate it with the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and still fewer associate it with Iraq. Documents, artifacts and historical sites found there have dated to about 4500 B.C., Waldbaum said. The finds show early signs of people living in cities and following organized religion, she said.

Some scholars believe that the Garden of Eden was in Iraq, based in part on on a passage in Genesis 2 that mentions four bodies of water near Eden, including the Euphrates and the Tigris.

And although some people recall the story of the biblical prophet Jonah whom God summoned to warn the Ninevites to change their evil ways, few know that the ruins of Nineveh are near the city of Mosul in northern Iraq.

"This is history that is important to all of us, not just the Iraqis," Waldbaum said.

Perhaps the most famous site in Iraq is Babylon, an ancient city near Baghdad.

The Tower of Babel was believed to stand there. Religious groups say the tower was a terraced pyramid, or ziggurat, built against God's wishes.



This Babylonian artwork of a bull now is in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, Turkey.

King Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon, capturing Jerusalem in or near 597 B.C. Destroyed was Solomon's Temple, the elaborate worship center and symbol of Jewish culture and religion.

Since becoming ruler of Iraq in 1979, Saddam Hussein has called himself "the new Nebuchadnezzar." Hussein's efforts to rebuild the excavated city of Babylon in the 1980s and 1990s into a park-style complex and his fascination with Nebuchadnezzar have spurred prophecies and analyses in religionism.

Rick MacInnes-Rae, senior correspondent of Canada's CBC Radio's international magazine, wrote in an August 2002 commentary that he had visited the shabbily rebuilt Babylon.

"A plaque on the wall outside Babylon makes it clear Saddam sees himself as the Nebuchadnezzar of his generation," MacInnes-Rae wrote. "He plainly believes rebuilding Babylon makes him its modern-day patron, and a modern-day king. But the bricks of Babylon did not survive the onslaught of time and neither will Saddam."

The Mysteries of the Bible Foundation published a 1998 essay titled "Saddam Hussein: A Psychological Profile Part I: The Nebuchadnezzar Factor." The essay describes Hussein as a man motivated by a desire to conquer Israel and become great throughout the Middle East.

Speakers at religious conferences and authors have likened the rebuilt Babylon and the current war as signs that the apocalypse foretold in the Bible's Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation is coming soon.

Others dismiss apocalypse theories that are based on current events in Iraq. This, from the recently released Iraq: Babylon of the End Times? by C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays: "(Saddam) is a heartless, cold-blooded killer, one who well epitomizes the meaning of evil. Yet evil has been with us for some time now, and Saddam's evil character does not automatically qualify him as the one to fulfill biblical prophecy in the end-times."

* * *

Whether the United States has avoided cultural sites remains to be seen. All historians can do at this point is wait and see. Most American archaeologists have not been in Iraq for decades because of political tensions between the countries.

"We have no idea what's going on," said Rudolph Dornemann, executive director of the American

Schools of Oriental Research.

Waldbaum said she has heard that troops are taking steps to protect the sites. But she fears that things could get tougher in Baghdad, home to the Baghdad Museum. The museum has massive collections of ancient history and is on par with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, she said.

"The building is surrounded by sensitive government offices that themselves may become targets," Waldbaum said. Even if the museum is spared, reverberations from fire and bombing could do damage. After the Gulf War, there was little damage to the museum, she said.

"We are hoping for the best," she said.

Some culturally significant sites are marked, sometimes with symbols on rooftops, so military can identify and avoid them when possible.

A major coup for archaeologists would be to find little or no damage to Iraq's cultural sites and to restore the country's antiquities department to its pre-Gulf War glory.

Dornemann's organization has a committee looking into ways it can help. Waldbaum said that her group is offering assistance, too.

American archaeologists are ready to help those in Iraq conserve and restore monuments but only if Iraqis agree, she said. "We don't want to impose."

President Bush's estimates for reconstruction are already in the billions of dollars. How much of that, if any, will be set aside for archaeology is unclear and could largely depend on what damage may have occurred.

Historians worldwide use media accounts to speculate what that damage might be. Nicholas Postgate at the University of Cambridge and Eleanor Robson at the University of Oxford designed a Web site with extensive lists of places at risk and updates of treasures in harm's way.

One page they titled "The threat to world heritage in Iraq: heritage in the firing line." Postgate and Robson have scoured media reports and matched them with

sites of archaeological significance:

The US 141st Mechanized Infantry Battalion is camped at Ur, according to the Guardian on 1 April 2003. They are described as "burrowed in," which may imply some archaeological damage.

There has been a major battle very close to ancient Babylon, according to Canada.com and many other sources, on 1 April 2003.

Shrines in the Shi'a holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala are at risk, according to a report in the Independent on 1 April 2003.

Iraqi military and communications equipment is being stored at Ctesiphon.

The Iraq Museum in Baghdad is adjacent to telecommunications installations which have been heavily targetted by US bombs. Its current state is not clear.



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