

February 27, 2003

The Honorable Donald Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Rumsfeld:

I am writing to you as president of the Society for American Archaeology. Like all Americans, we hope that ongoing diplomatic efforts will be successful in resolving the situation in Iraq, but should those efforts fail and should the US take military action, we request that occupying military forces make every possible effort to comply with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and protect Iraq's unique and priceless cultural heritage housed in museums, cultural institutions, and archaeological sites.

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research, interpretation, and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With more than 6900 members, the Society represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. The SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world. Many of its members conduct research in Middle Eastern nations, including Iraq.

Encompassing the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys, Iraq is home to some of the world's oldest civilizations, one of the hearths of agriculture, and the center of one of the world's first written languages. As the center of the Babylonian, Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian empires, Iraq's history is intertwined with Biblical history, indeed, with all human history.

While SAA takes no position as a professional organization on the merits of a military assault against Iraq or any other nation, we hold that war must always be a last resort. Why, then, when human lives are at stake should we care about archaeological artifacts? Certainly, attending to medical, security, and health concerns should be the top priorities of an occupying force. But eventually, hostilities will end and people will return to their daily lives. The artifacts held in museums and that remain to be found in archaeological sites are the documents of a people's history. Those documents connect people to the past and in so doing connect them to the future. For example, the cultural objects held in our Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, and hundreds of museums and sites across the US connect the American people to this land and, in giving us an understanding of the past, direct us to a vision of the future.

Is this a valid concern? Absolutely. After the 1991 Gulf War there was widespread looting of museums and archaeological sites, and pieces of Iraq's cultural heritage found their way to the international black market in antiquities.

Even though the U.S. is not a Party to the 1954 Convention or the 1999 Protocol, the SAA recognizes and greatly appreciates that the activities of our armed forces have in the past been consistent with the

provisions of these documents. We respectfully request that this tradition be continued in the event of military action against Iraq, and, in the case of an occupation, that the military establish units tasked with protection of Iraq's cultural heritage, including museums, libraries, archaeological sites, and other cultural institutions. These units should ensure that looting does not occur. We draw special attention to Article 9, section 1 of the 1999 protocol:

"...a Party in occupation of the whole or part of the territory of another Party shall prohibit and prevent in relation to the occupied territory:

any illicit export, other removal or transfer of ownership of cultural property;

any archaeological excavation, save where this is strictly required to safeguard, record or preserve cultural property;

any alteration to, or change of use of, cultural property which is intended to conceal or destroy cultural, historical or scientific evidence."

The Society for American Archaeology stands prepared to assist the U.S. Government in any way possible. The Society stands firmly behind the imperative that Iraq's history and cultural patrimony remain the property of all the people of Iraq.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Kelly
President