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Patterns of Destruction: the Looting of Tūlūl al Baqarat in the last 20 years

Carlo Lippolis

Introduction

Archaeological site looting was almost unknown in Iraq before 1990. In the early 1990s all of Iraq, and especially the south, was suffering hunger, unemployment and poverty. This situation degenerated with the Gulf War. After the 1991 war, southern Iraq was severely impacted by the economic sanctions (embargo) imposed by the international community and a by the political suppression on part of the population carried out by the regime.

According to dr. Donny George, former DG of the Iraq Museum, looting in southern Iraq began to emerge in 1994-1995, especially in that "Heartland of Cities", an area densely settled that corresponds to the central and northern part of ancient Sumer.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon soon spread all over the south of ancient Mesopotamia hitting hardly, in particular, the northwestern part of Dhi Qar governorate, the southeastern part of Qadissiyah governorate and the southwestern part of Wasit governorate (1).

Hundreds of people from the surrounding areas of archaeological sites started to dig, looking for

"treasures" and antiquities to sell. Of course, there were also large-scale looting organized by kingpins. After the 2003 war, with the complete collapse of the government authority, looting increased at an unprecedented rate (2). At the same time, the US-lead coalition had no plan to protect archaeological sites located in remote areas, the only case of regular patrolling and monitoring the ancient sites being the effort made by the Italian Carabinieri in the Dhi Qar province.

Despite the efforts made by SBAH and some individual Iraqi officials of the Antiquities, it is estimated that the amount of looting occurred in the first few months after the 2003 invasion equaled the total amount registered for the previous ten years. And, unfortunately, the looting - even though decreased - did not stop in the following years and, I would say, until very recent times.

As far as it concerns the size of the sites, the satellite images of Sumer make it clear that sites of all sizes were targeted and the looting was not restricted to the largest archaeological areas. On the contrary, many small to medium-size sites in the countryside,

almost always lying unguarded, show evidence of intense looting, while well-known sites (as Uruk, Ur, Girsu, Nippur...) suffered minor damages (probably because more easily controlled by watchmen or local police forces)⁽³⁾.

We may also say that the looters did not selectively target sites dating to particular time periods: however, ancient sites seem to have considered by them more attractive than, for example, Islamic settlements.

The area of Tūlūl al Baqarat: the looting and the recent excavations

We will try to trace the history of looting in the site of Tulul al Baqarat and its immediate surroundings according to the limited documentation at our disposal, and make an updated assessment of the nature of the looting occurred there, together with an estimate of the state of the site today.

In 1999 the SBAH initiated a program of year-round excavations at Tell al Wilaya, a site that had experienced severe looting after 1994⁽⁴⁾. The aim was that of establish a permanent presence in the area (archaeological expeditions and watchmen), hiring workers from the local population and then stopping the looting.

Indeed, the plundering at this site ceased only temporary, and when this expedition was withdrawn, late in 2002, the looters returned and inflicted further damage on this important late III-

beginning of II millennium settlement. Besides, it is likely that the looting continued also at other sites in the surrounding.

Tūlūl al-Baqarat is a modern toponym that refers to a series of mounds of different size and chronology. The area of Baqarat is located about 25 km south of al-Kut and very close to the above mentioned site of Wilaya (around 5 km). It is therefore possible that the looting of the main mound in Baqarat started already in the 1990s (together with the plundering of Wilaya) and then continued in the '2000s.

In order to stop the looting on this important site and prevent further damage, the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage carried out in 2008-2010 three archaeological campaigns that achieved important results⁽⁵⁾. The 2008-2010 Iraqi rescue excavations at Baqarat, on the main mound we named TB1, unearthed a mud-brick temple rebuilt in the Neo-Babylonian period, probably on older structures (late third millennium), accessible by a monumental staircase. To the south of this staircase, an open area excavated by the Iraqis, with some fragmentary structures in baked bricks, to be dated from the Early-Dynastic to the Ur III period, returned meaningful fragments of sculptures and inscriptions. To the north of the Neo-babylonian temple the area of the so-called "ziggurat" (third millennium) was also partially

investigated. The Iraqi excavations therefore revealed the historical and artistic importance of the main mound (TB1) that in antiquity likely hosted an important religious complex on its top.

Since 2013, the team of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino (CRAST) and University of Torino has been carrying out survey and a new excavation project in Baqarat and its immediate surroundings (Fig. 1). The aim of the Italian project in Baqarat is to draw a more complete historical and geographical picture of the whole region. The area of Kut is, indeed, still rather unknown from the archaeological point of view. In addition to the important site of Wilaya, 5 km to the south-west of Baqarat, there are very few data concerning the settlement patterns and historical dynamics in ancient times.

Although 85-90% of the sites in the region are apparently dated to the late periods ⁽⁶⁾, between the Seleucid-Parthian and the Islamic phases, the presence of two sites such as Wilaya and Baqarat attests that the area was inhabited since the third millennium BC if not before.

The main hill of the Baqarat's archaeological area is named TB1 (coordinates: 32°20'14.86"N - 45°43'17.48"E) and shows stratigraphic sequences of the third and the first millennium BC. It measures about 330 m from north to south and 260 m from

east to west (its size is about 9.8 ha). The maximum height of the mound in its central-western part is around 12 m on the plain.

Other surrounding mounds (mostly aligned in an area of about 2 km in length, and named from TB2 to TB10)⁽⁷⁾ seem to have been occupied for shorter periods, between the fourth millennium BC and the Islamic era.

Concerning the damage occurred to the site during the looting, the western and central sectors of the site were strongly damaged by illicit diggings (Fig. 2) that mixed the archaeological material and sometimes removed the faint traces of the already heavily eroded structures. The site, in fact, suffered from strong wind and water erosion phenomena, particularly to the north and along the sides of the hill.

In 2015 we made a survey of the baked bricks scattered on the surface, most of them likely coming from the illicit diggings and abandoned (Fig. 3). Their number and distribution give an idea of how the archaeological material is today dispersed on the entire surface of the tell and the original context has been irreparably lost.

A satellite image of November 2004 shows that, on TB1, illicit excavations were already widespread at that time and mainly affected the southern part of the site, with significant looting also on the higher central part and at the northern end of the settlement. Between

2004 and 2011 the general situation of the site did not change significantly. When we compare different satellite images (Fig. 4: Google Earth image, November 2004 and a Word view 2, 26/08/2011) we notice that almost the 70-80% of the entire surface of the mound has been affected by clandestine excavation activities in 2004 and probably stopped only after the beginning of the Iraqi excavations in 2008. Once more, the looting concentrated above all in the upper parts of the site and on its western and southern sides.

Now, if we consider the number of holes that are still visible on the ground, their depth (more than 2 meters in some cases) and their size, it is obvious that such work cannot have been done by a few people, but only by organized bands of men who have acted undisturbed for a long time (Fig. 5). The holes are usually circular or oval, but there are also deeper quadrangular digs. Beside the holes, the ceramic material is still present today in large quantities and this means that, because of the action of natural agents (rain, collapses) or mechanical ones (human action), it can be transported at some distance, thus invalidating and compromising the reading of the archaeological deposit.

Two more little mounds, named TB2 and TB3, lie 150 m to the south/south-west of TB1. Indeed, they form a unique tell of relatively small size and with an

approximate height of 4-5m. Both have been heavily damaged by illicit diggings (Fig. 6) and, today, a high quantity of pottery is scattered on the surface. On the top of the tells, damaged walls in square baked bricks (around 23x23x5-6 cm) are also recognizable. The mounds are probably to be ascribed to the Islamic period, according to the fragments of glazed pottery and glass vessels scattered on the surface.

About 250 m to the south of TB1, an elongated and slightly raised area is named TB4. This area, heavily damaged by illicit digging and partially cut by a modern water channel on its northern side, is composed of two small tells at a distance of around 100 m and connected to each other by a flat area: the northern mound is named TB4a and was again significantly damaged by deep illicit diggings (Fig. 7), while the southern mound TB4b remained untouched. This latter is formed, almost entirely, by a large heap of pottery and other material discarded in antiquity. Strata of pottery fragments alternate with layers of ashes. The total absence of structures in this area may explain why TB4b had not been affected by illicit diggings (while the northern part, TB4A revealed, during a small sounding conducted by the Italian expedition, the presence of walls and Scarlet Ware pottery). The chronological horizon of this mound seems almost exclusively associated

with the third millennium (and, in particular, the Early Dynastic phases).

We may add that, unlike TB1 where the illicit digging apparently stopped after the Iraqi and Italian excavation, on TB4 some looting continued further on: new illegal holes have been noticed (always in the northern part of the tell) during a visit in May 2015.

Another archaeological area in Baqarat is TB5: this is a flat and very large area, about 300m to the south-west of the main mound TB1. The mound originally measured about 400x250 m and was only superficially surveyed during the 2013 expedition, proving to be an area of remarkable archaeological interest as it was probably occupied by a settlement dated to the end of the third - beginning of the second millennium BC and probably related to the main mound TB1. This area also showed significant traces of illicit diggings scattered all over its surface.

Unfortunately, this area has been recently seriously damaged by agricultural works. Baqarat is not the only area suffering of this kind of anthropic intervention. The territory is crossed, indeed, by a dense network of irrigation canals that often cut archaeological mounds. Moreover, levelling interventions of entire archaeological areas are also attested.

When the Italian team returned to the site of TB5, in autumn 2015, the entire archaeological area had been flattened

by bulldozers and tractors, in order to obtain a new cultivable area (Fig. 8). The agricultural works were immediately stopped, thanks to the intervention of SBAH official and the local Police, but the micro-reliefs and the surfaces layers – as well as many archaeological remains – have been already irreparably removed for a depth between 50 and 100 cm. In addition, small ditches to channel the waters have been excavated within this area, reaching even deeper archaeological strata.

Walking on the area, we noticed that many fragments of baked brick with the stamp of Shulgi were scattered on the surface. The inscription, recomposed from several fragments of bricks, declaims:

“d.Shul-gi / nita-kala-ga / lugal-uri5-ma / lugal-[-an-ub-da-limmu2-ba”

“The divine Shulgi, the powerful man (king), King of Ur, King of the four regions”.

Further on, closed to TB5, a modern large channel cut the remains of an ancient wall built in baked bricks (Fig. 9), and demonstrate that this area hid the remains of a building commissioned by the king Shulgi (and now almost entirely destroyed).

Another little tell named TB6, is almost included in the main mound and constitutes its far end to the west. It has been deeply damaged by illicit excavations (Figs. 1, 2). The pottery on

the surface includes sherds of (late?) Islamic period scattered on the surface.

Prehistoric sites, generally speaking for Iraq, have been only partially looted or totally ignored by looters, due to the lack of cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets, statuary, coins etc... that seem to be of more interest of collectors. This is true also for the area of Baqarat, where the only site only partially damaged by the plunders is TB7+TB8, a fourth millennium large rural settlement (TB7 is approximately 280 m in diameter, i.e. 7.6 ha). On the surface only a few clandestine holes are visible. They located above all in the SE, SW and N areas of the site, almost at the edge of it (Figs. 10, 11). Curiously almost no illicit digging is documented in the central (elevated) part of the settlement. It is evident that the absence of materials of interest for the antiquarian market on this site (cylinders, tablets, coins ...) ensure that TB7 was the only site in the area of Baqarat not intensely hit by looters.

Two other mounds lie more to the north and north-west of the main mound TB1. They are both late in date and have been heavily damaged by looting.

Close to the village of Umm el Kheir and 600m to the north-west of TB1, the little tell TB9 has been, again, deeply damaged by illicit excavations (Fig. 12). The pottery from the surface is datable exclusively to middle-late Islamic periods. Some fragments of glass

vessels are present, likely coming from burials heavily damaged by the illicit diggings.

Finally, TB10 lies about 500m to the north of TB1 and to the south-east of the modern village of Umm el Kheir. The hill has an approximate height of 7m on the flat surrounding plain. Severely damaged by illicit diggings, it is composed of two hills, one close to the other (Fig. 13).

On the surface we registered pottery with red or yellow/cream fabrics. Some glazed pottery is also visible, to be dated to the Parthian and Sasanian periods. Many fragments of square baked bricks (32 cm each side) are scattered on the surface.

In conclusion, we may say that the area of Tūlūl al Baqarat has been heavily hit and damaged by illegal excavations. These have probably already begun since the middle 1990s, at the same time as those of Tell al Wilaya, and continued until 2008 when the Iraqi excavation of the Antiquities Department started.

The isolated location of Baqarat kept the looters out of the eye of the security force, but at the same time the site is close enough to populated areas (labor force).

Moreover, the looting in Baqarat was systematic and conducted on a large scale. The main mound is today badly damaged and about 70-75% of its surface is badly compromised, taking

into account that the holes go deep and that the archaeological deposit is not very thick. Around the main tell (TB1), the smaller sites have been even more severely damaged and the whole surface is now scattered with holes. Only the southern part of TB4 and the prehistoric site TB7 remained intact, probably because these areas did not return objects of interest to the black market of art.

Together with the destruction perpetrated by illegal digging, a further problem is today the agricultural exploit of the land. The cultivated areas widen more and more, every year, and sometimes obliterate completely or partially the archaeological sites. Despite the efforts of the SBAH it is difficult to control these large and isolated areas, which are not easy even to reach.

The presence of an archaeological mission can however help to monitor a part of this territory and, in particular, to enter in contact and dialogue with the local communities of farmers. It is, indeed, essential again (like in the past) the involvement of local communities in the protection of archaeological areas: they must understand the historical importance of this heritage and collaborate for its protection.

In these last five years the Italian mission has completed the work of surveying (topography) the Baqarat area, in order to document (even with

modern technologies such as the laser scanner at TB1) the excavated structures that are rapidly decaying for the atmospheric agents and those already damaged by illegal excavations. It is a fundamental intervention that had to be done and that must be necessarily have priority over the proper extensive excavation activity.

Footnotes

1- Russell 2008, 31.

2- Garen, Carleton 2005, 17.

3- Stone 2008, 75.

4- The site of Wilaya was already partially excavated in the late 1950s by Madhloom: see Madhloom T., 1960, "Excavation at Tell al-Wilaya", *Sumer* 16, 62-92. More recently, see: Hussein S. Y., Altaweel M., Rejeb Z. 2009, "Report on excavations at Tell al-Wilaya, Iraq. Information on the 1999 and 2000 seasons". *Akkadica* 130/1, 3-42; *Idem.*, 2009, "Report on "Excavation at Tell al-Wilaya", *Sumer* 16, 62-92. More recently, see: Hussein S. Y., Altaweel M., Rejeb Z. 2009, "Report on excavations at Tell al-Wilaya, Iraq. Information on the 1999 and 2000 seasons". *Akkadica* 130/1, 3-42; *Idem.*, 2009, "Report on Excavations at Tell al-Wilaya, Iraq. Further Information on the 1999 and 2000 Seasons", *Akkadica* 130/2, 113-166; Rumaiydh S.S., 2015, "Excavations at Tell Wilaya",

Zeitschrift für Orient-Archäologie,
Band 8, 62-89.

5- The excavations were headed by Ayad Mahir Mahmud.

6- The data is detected from the tells' surface surveys (but only a few of them have been systematically conducted). As far as I know, only at Wilaya and Baqarat excavations, trenches and soundings have been carried out.

7- At present there is no conformity between the Iraqi and Italian topographic codes for the identification of the mounds, because at the beginning of the project we did not dispose of the preliminary reports made after the Iraqi excavations. The 2008-2010 excavation, unfortunately, remains still unpublished. In general: TB1 corresponds to the Iraqi map code 6, TB2 to the Iraqi code 4, TB5 to the Iraqi code 5, TB7 to the Iraqi code 2, TB9 to the Iraqi code 8 and TB10 to the Iraqi code 7.

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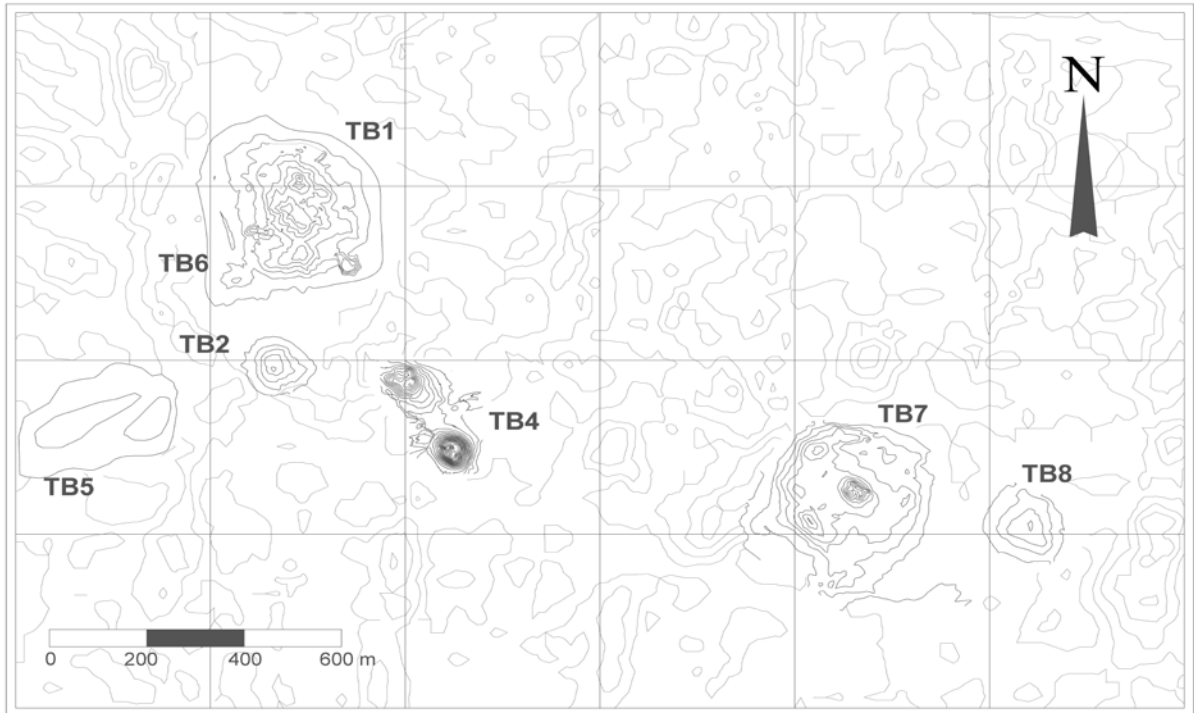


Fig. 1. Map of the mounds in Tūlūl al Baqarat area (Italian expedition CRAST).



Fig. 2. General view of Tell Baqarat 1 (TB1), from SW (Italian expedition CRAST).



Fig. 3. TB1, distribution of baked bricks on the surface (2016, Italian expedition CRAST).

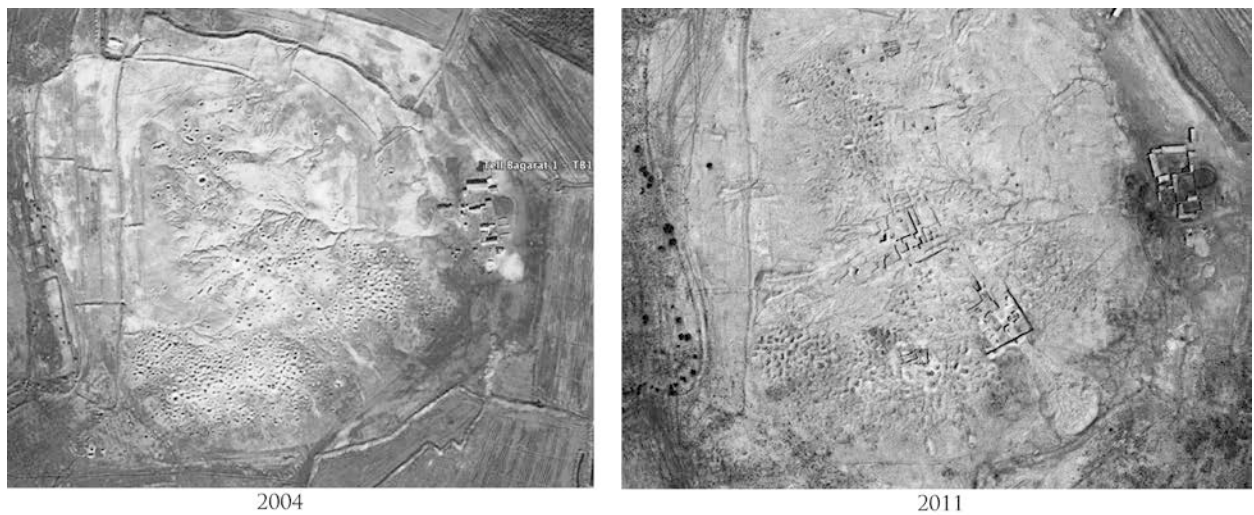


Fig. 4. TB1, satellite images (Google Earth, 2004; Worldview 2, 2011).



Fig. 5. TB1, surface of the western part of the tell (2015).



Fig. 6. TB2, after looting (drone image, 2016: Italian expedition CRAFT).



Fig. 7. TB4, looting holes (drone image, 2016: Italian expedition CRAFT).



2004



2015

Fig. 8. TB5, satellite images (Google Earth 2004 and Pleiades 2015).



Fig. 9. Brick wall cut by a modern water channel near TB5 (Italian expedition CRAST, 2018).



Fig. 10. TB7, satellite image (Google Earth 2004).



LEGENDA
 ● clandestine dig

Fig. 11. TB7, topographical map with distribution of the clandestine diggings (Italian expedition CRAST 2017).



Fig. 12. View of TB9 surface, from the south (2015).



Fig. 13. View of TB10 surface, from the south-west (2015).