

The MPs Do It Again: Two More Antiquities from the Top 30 Are Back in the Iraq Museum

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The brilliant sleuthing and dogged persistence of the 812th Military Police Company, which, along with a team of Iraqi police, recovered the famed Warka mask in September, paid off again on November 3rd when they recovered two more masterpieces from the "30 Most Wanted List" of antiquities stolen from the Iraq Museum. The pieces are numbers 2 and 28 on the list: the copper statue from Bassetki and the wheeled brazier from Nimrud.

The Nimrud brazier was found when the MPs raided a house at 5:30 that morning. They arrested three people and seized two AK47s, a light machine gun, and a pistol. After questioning, the three men revealed that they knew where the Bassetki statue was, coated with axle grease and submerged in a cesspool. It was fished out later the same day, covered with excrement but undamaged.

Both are unique objects of tremendous artistic and historical importance. The copper Bassetki statue is so called because it was discovered accidentally in the 1960s near the town of Bassetki, during the construction of a road between Dohuk and Zakho in Iraqi Kurdistan. Only the lower half of the statue survives, from the waist down, depicting a man seated on the ground. The body above the waist is lost, but it originally held a standard or doorpost, the bottom of which is preserved. Similar figures are represented in other media sporting hair arranged in six large curls. This is a type of heroic mythological figure associated with guarding doorways.

The piece dates to the Old Akkadian period, around 2300 B.C., a time when the representational arts attained a degree of naturalism and perfection that has never been surpassed. An inscription in the Old Akkadian language on the base states that this statue once stood in the door of a palace of the great Akkadian king Naram-Sin in southern Iraq. How it found its way to Bassetki, hundreds of kilometers away, is one of the many riddles of antiquity, now forever a mystery since the mudbrick building in which it stood was destroyed by the construction work. It is cast in pure copper, a difficult procedure that requires a higher temperature than bronze, and weighs 150 kg.

The brazier was discovered by an Italian archaeological mission in the mid-1990s at the Neo-Assyrian capital



The Bassetki statue being brought into the museum fresh from the cesspool (© J. Russell)



The Bassetki statue after cleaning (© J. Russell)



The Nimrud brazier being brought into the museum by Captain Kuhner and MPs (© J. Russell)

city of Nimrud, 20 km south of Mosul. It is made of wood clad with bronze. The preserved part is about 80 cm wide and was one side of what was originally a square box with four spoked wheels. It is the only known example of the sort of mobile firebox that the Assyrian kings used to warm themselves in the winter.

The existence of such braziers had been suspected since the beginning of archaeological research in Iraq in the mid-19th century, when excavators reported grooved “tramlines” of limestone slabs running down the center of Assyrian throne rooms. These tramlines typically run from just in front of the throne base at one end of the room to

the middle of the room where there would have been a second throne base placed in front of the main door. The brazier could be wheeled along the tramline to wherever the king happened to be seated.

This example, which was found sitting on such a tramline in a throne room in the palace of King Salmeser III (reigned 858-824 B.C.), is the first actual example to be discovered, and its details present a delightful surprise. The sides of the firebox are decorated with the crenellated towers of a city wall, similar to the pictures of torched enemy cities in the battle scenes on the stone murals that lined the palace walls. With a cheery fire licking above its crenellated sides, this happy image of a foe’s fortress in flames would have warmed the king’s heart, as well as his feet.



The Nimrud brazier on display (© J. Russell)

The 812th Military Police Company, under the command of Captain Vance Kuhner, has an incredible record of working with Iraqi police to track down antiquities stolen from the Iraq Museum. In addition to bringing in the Warka mask, they have also recovered two more groups of antiquities prior to this latest seizure. Kuhner attributes their success to good intelligence and perseverance, coupled with the thieves’ greed. He says that thieves holding objects in the top 30 are desperate to unload them because they’re way too hot to handle. The thieves are optimistically on the lookout for that daring collector who wants to buy them now for a lot of cash, and they get careless. That’s when Kuhner and Company move in.

Press Event Marks Return of Antiquities to the Iraq Museum

A press conference was held at the Iraq Museum on November 11th to celebrate the return this past week of a large number of antiquities stolen from the museum in April. A group of 820 small objects, including jewelry, figurines, plaques, and hundreds of cylinder seals, most of them with Iraq Museum numbers, was recovered through the efforts of the Iraqi Italian Institute of Archaeological Sciences. Also on display were the Bassetki statue, the Nimrud brazier, and a group of Babylonian stone vessels



Display case with 820 objects recovered by the Iraqi Italian Institute of Archaeological Sciences (© J. Russell)



Display case with objects found by a farmer near Babylon (© J. Russell)



Speakers at the press conference, from left: Ambassador Bondioli Osio, Captain Vance Kuhner, Colonel Safa Salih, Minister Mufeed Al-Jazairi, and Dr. Donny George (© J. Russell)



Minister Mufeed Al-Jazairi (left) and Dr. Donny George discuss the Bassetki statue (© J. Russell)



The press at the press conference (© J. Russell)

and terracotta sculptures found by a farmer near Babylon. Speaking at the event, which was well attended by the press, were Mr. Mufeed Al-Jazairi, Iraq's Minister of Culture; Dr. Donny George Youkhana, Director General of Museums; Ambassador Mario Bondioli Osio, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Culture; Colonel Safa Adeen Mahdi Salih, Precinct Commander of the Al-Qanot Police Station; and Captain Vance Kuhner, Commander of the 812th Military Police Company.

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