

levels of building, the first possibly antedating the great flood recounted in ancient religious texts, and the last built a few years after the likely invention of writing. And they landed in Ubaid, cradle of a culture that thrived from about 5000 to 4000 BC, and Lagash, the original abode of some of the most spectacular artifacts now in the Louvre in Paris.

The experts toured only in the south, and visited only a tiny fraction of Iraq's thousands of archaeological

sites. They did find some damage. The worst instances were a dozen trenches dug in the mound at Ubaid by Saddam Hussein's forces in 2003 to disguise tanks and armored personnel carriers. The archaeologists also spied a few paper food wrappers that American troops had left behind at Tell el Lahm, and they found that the landscape of Ur had been marred by large numbers of troops tramping over the site in desert boots.

The team leader, John Curtis of

the British Museum's Middle East department, told Bailey that greater damage may have been forestalled by several watchtowers built with Italian assistance in 2003, roving police teams, and the continuing vigilance of local guards. Perhaps equally important was economics. With art dealers and customs inspectors around the world on the lookout for the contents of the National Museum, the international market for Mesopotamian antiquities has almost dried up.

OTHER NATIONS

The Battle of the Caspian Sea

THE SOURCES: "The Caspian Sea: Rivalry and Cooperation" by Mahmoud Ghafouri, in *Middle East Policy*, Summer 2008, and "The Iraq War, Turkey, and Renewed Caspian Energy Prospects" by Paul A. Williams and Ali Tekin, in *The Middle East Journal*, Summer 2008.

THE WELLHEAD OF THE OIL INDUSTRY in 1900 was not the Middle East but the Caspian Sea. Half of the world's oil came from Baku, Azerbaijan, where "liquid black gold" brought wealth in the 19th century and war in the 20th. In 1942, the German Army was lunging for Caspian oil when Hitler launched the Battle of Stalingrad, which cost as many as two million Soviet and German lives.

The area still contains one of the world's largest reservoirs of oil and natural gas, most of it beneath the 640-mile-long Caspian seabed. About 90 feet below sea level and

less than 16 feet deep in much of its northern basin, the Caspian is an icy, stormy body of water. Development has been hindered because the five riparian nations, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, can't agree, among other things, on whether it is a lake or a sea.

As a sea, it would be subject to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows states to extend mineral claims to the edge of their continental shelves. If the Caspian were a lake, the seabed could be divided up, with

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Kazakhstan claiming the largest portion because of its longer coastline. Russia and Iran, whose predecessor states agreed that the Caspian would be a Soviet-Iranian sea, no longer share that view. Russia—worried about Western petroleum giants muscling in on its oil flanks—is looking out for itself and some of its former Soviet republics. Iran, with the shortest coastline, wants mineral resources to be prorated, like the costs in a condominium building, or doled out equally, 20 percent to each state.

Such differences are blocking the full development of oil resources just as potential returns are growing more lucrative. The region now produces roughly 2.3 million barrels of oil a day, and it has reserves that may be as great as 257 billion barrels. Development, however, will need unanimous consent, asserts Mahmoud Ghafouri, an assistant professor at Shahid Bahonar University in Kerman, Iran. And before the "Caspian five" nations can truly capitalize on their reserves, the poisonous relationship between Iran and the

United States must be repaired. The “second oil rush in the Caspian” requires pipelines or other pathways to get the oil to market, and the Western firms with the easiest access to capital are denied some of the most viable routes—through Iran—by U.S.-Iranian enmity.

Iran’s loss has been Turkey’s gain. The Iraq war, instead of opening floodgates of Iraqi oil, initially did the opposite, providing an unforeseen boost to Caspian oil. Pipeline projects that skirt both Russia and Iran attracted more interest with each uptick in oil’s price. Turkish oil and gas transport projects that seemed far-fetched in the 1990s have proven successful, and new ones have gotten increased impetus, write Paul A. Williams and Ali Tekin, professors at Bilkent University in Ankara. As the three recently independent Caspian states stand poised to become major players in the world economy because of their energy reserves, Turkey, the area’s energy have-not nation, has already benefited from increased energy transit fees and better access to oil for its own economy.

Ghafouri concludes that the lure of oil wealth can go a long way toward promoting international cooperation in the Caspian. After years of rivalry in the Persian Gulf region, the joint development of offshore oil and natural gas resources is under way. And if the states in the volatile Persian Gulf can swallow their differences in the interest of making money, can the Caspian be far behind?

OTHER NATIONS

Ability Grouping

THE SOURCE: “Why Children Work, Attend School, or Stay Idle: The Roles of Ability and Household Wealth” by Marigee P. Bacolod and Priya Ranjan, in *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, July 2008.

THE SPECTER OF A 10-YEAR-OLD hauling bricks or stirring a vat of boiling liquid is far from eradicated in the developing world, where the International Labor Organization estimates that 218 million children are working at least part time instead of concentrating on school. But the reality of child labor is much more nuanced than such images suggest, according to new research by Marigee P. Bacolod and Priya Ranjan, economists at the University of California, Irvine. Poor children are not always consigned to work. New research from Cebu City in the Philippines shows that a significant percentage of children who are not in school are simply idle.

One of the main differences between children who go to school and those who don’t is academic ability. Children with high IQs—but with parents in the bottom third of the income scale—are nearly as likely to attend school (88 percent) as those from the most affluent third (89 percent), according to a study of 3,000 children in randomly selected Cebu City districts. Asked why their offspring were not in class, parents were most likely to respond that their children had “no interest” (36 percent). Even within the same poor family, children with high ability

were more likely to attend school than their less able brothers and sisters. Clearly, Bacolod and Ranjan say, some parents faced with paying the costs of education for children with low ability decide not to send them to work but to allow them to stay home. More than one in every 10 children in the study went to school and worked at the same time.

Richer families were more likely than poor ones to send their children with lower IQs to school. And parents were also more likely to dispatch their young of all ability levels to school if the facilities were better—judged by the presence of electricity, running water, toilets, and a usable blackboard.

An outright ban on child labor, which is often proposed as a solution to the horrors of the brick-yards and tanning factories, may have a perverse effect, according to the researchers. Parents who now send children to school while they are also working may respond to such a ban by pulling them out of school entirely and choosing the option of idleness.

OTHER NATIONS

India’s Sick Democracy

THE SOURCE: “India’s Parliament as a Representative Institution” by Jessica S. Wallack, in *India Review*, April–June 2008.

THE RECENT DEBATE OVER THE Indian-American nuclear cooperation agreement didn’t do a lot for the bottom-feeder image of the Indian parliament. Chanting, raging legislators heckled speakers and stormed