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The Discovery and Appropriation
of a People's Past:
Mesopotamia Nineteenth to
Twenty-first Centuries

by
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The Discovery and Appropriation of a People's Past: Mesopotamia Nineteenth to Twenty-first Centuries*

Mesopotamian civilization is remarkable for its early urban revolution, its long duration, and its intellectual legacy comprising among other things a voluminous literary corpus and amazing advances in mathematics and astronomy. Mesopotamia bequeathed to the world a division of the day into 24 hours, and the hour into 60 minutes. Like the Egyptians and other early peoples, the people of Mesopotamia used a lunar calendar comprising 12 lunar months (or 12 cycles of the moon) in the year; by the time of Hammurabi, around 1800 B.C., they were adding intercalary months to adjust this year to the cycle of the earth's orbit around the sun. They calculated the solar year to be 365 days, 5 hours and 41 minutes, which is out by just 7 1/2 minutes. As early as the second millennium B.C., they had also grappled successfully with the value of $\sqrt{2}$.

The prosperity of the land, which actually lay in a desert of aridity, came from highly productive agriculture on the Euphrates alluvium, huge herds of goats and sheep, river and marsh fisheries, date palms, and more—a truly broad spectrum of resources. The plains of the Euphrates and Tigris being open to invasions and pastoralist immigration from the steppe and the Zagros ranges, Mesopotamia

*Lecture titled 'The West Discovers Ancient Mesopotamia: Early Nineteenth Century Archaeology to the Destruction of Babylon in the Twenty First Century' delivered at the India International Centre on July 18 by Shereen Ratnagar

saw repeated cross-fertilization of its culture with new peoples, livestock breeds, languages, and even new deities. Here flowered the first known urban civilization, and as early as about 3000 B.C. the cities were comparatively enormous. It was in the cities that other momentous developments occurred, such as in (specialized) craft production and in trade—Mesopotamia lacked mineral resources other than clay, bitumen, and some outcrops of limestone: thus fine stones, metals, and good wood had to be imported. To a large extent, it was the kings of the various city-states who organized these activities, led their people in war against other cities, and also built, cared for, and bestowed wealth on the temples. They recruited the populace for temple building: with only mud being available, the facades could be decorated with multi-coloured clay cones, and the inner walls with inlay panels. No early state can allow its population to handle its own disputes and punishments: the Stele of Hammurabi, a copy of which stood in our National Museum for some years, shows the god Shamash handing the law of the land to Hammurabi to proclaim to his subjects.

The written word was profoundly valued: the written record of temple/palace receipts or disbursements, of work done by personnel and rations allotted, and of the instructions of a ruler to his officials, the latter sometimes encased in 'envelopes'

The written word was profoundly valued: the written record of temple/palace receipts or disbursements, of work done by personnel and rations allotted, and of the instructions of a ruler to his officials, the latter sometimes encased in 'envelopes'. In Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine, besides, were centres that emulated the Mesopotamian writing system and language, mainly Akkadian. Second-millennium B.C. Pharaohs of Egypt, whose inscriptions for domestic reading were in Egyptian, wrote to their contemporaries and clients abroad in Akkadian. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, in Akkadian or translation into a local language, was found on local tablets.

Between 3000 and 300 B.C., the cylinder seal was rolled on containers or written (clay) tablets to protect or authenticate goods/messages. The seal was something like our 'ID card' today. But it was also a work of skilled craftsmanship, and could bear images of divine beings which, in their turn, endowed their owners, it is believed, with power and protection from the god. Among the finest artistic achievements of early Mesopotamia is the iconic Warka Head, a magnificent piece of sculpture.

I come now to the discovery of Iraq's remote past in the nineteenth century. In India, the British engaged in scholarly research, in mapping, in recording ancient monuments and other activities because this was a land to which they were committed as rulers. They needed adequate knowledge of Indian traditions, languages and laws. Their engagement with the Indian past was at least partly based on a conception of India as a traditional society, in which the legal codes or the practice of religion, for instance, went back to ancient times. On the other hand, nineteenth-century Iraq was a province of the Ottoman Empire. So what spurred the Europeans to archaeology in this land?

We can rule out any curiosity about the antecedents of Islam, any desire to delve into the cultural roots of Islam. A major impulse came from the Biblical connection. There are Mesopotamian elements in the Old Testament or Hebrew scripture, largely narrative drawn from disparate myths, epics, genealogies and other narrative forms between 1200 and 200 B.C., from across the Aramaic-speaking world that encompassed the region from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea. (After 1000 B.C., there was a gradual language shift in Mesopotamia from Akkadian to Aramaic, a language brought in by immigrant pastoralist groups). Sumer, or the region of southernmost Mesopotamia is 'Shinar' in the Old Testament; Uruk is 'Erech'. The Book of *Genesis* says that Abraham set out from Ur of the Chaldees to Harran and then the land of Canaan. In the Books of *Kings* and *Chronicles* are references to assaults on Israel by Assyrian kings. Sennacherib the Assyrian had his assaults on Israelite forts depicted on his palace reliefs. There are also references to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nabuchadnezzar, who deported some of the defeated population to his native Babylonia (central Mesopotamia). Some scholars believe that the writing of the Hebrew scripture, a compilation of material in 36 Books, was undertaken during the Babylonian exile. It cannot but be significant, for the argument of my talk, that the Mesopotamian was the adversary of the Biblical peoples.

In the Books of *Jeremiah* and *Isaiah* are prophecies of the doom and desolation that awaited Assyria and Babylonia. These

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Biblical prophecies were recalled when the Europeans began to explore early Iraq and see its 'formless ruins'. The weathered ziggurat of Borsippa or Birs Nimrud, a second-millennium B.C. town, with vitrified bricks sticking upwards at the top, was mistaken for the Biblical Tower of Babel, as depicted in a watercolour reproduced in Postgate's *The First Empires*.

This book also contains the reproduction of a painted portrait of Austen Henry Layard (1817-1895), a pioneer 'archaeologist'. Layard was an adventurer among the tribes of the Ottoman Empire, learning their languages, making money. Between 1846 and 1855, he excavated at two major Assyrian cities, Nineveh and Nimrud. His digging was chaotic. He would go deeper in search of artefacts and push the earth aside as he did so, so as to pull out the maximum loot with the least time and effort. The winged-bull colossi many of you may have seen in the British Museum came from Layard's activities. These were protector spirits who guarded the Assyrian palaces, keeping jealous demons away from the king. They were more than 3m high, fearful to behold, and, according to Layard, some of his workmen ran away in terror when they appeared from the ground. At Nineveh, Layard found inscribed reliefs depicting Assyrian attacks on Israelite forts. One is of a siege engine, the top of the parapet from where a flaming torch is about to be thrown, and four persons escaping from the door of the fort. Another relief shows the prostration of a Jewish king to Sennacherib.

How were the cuneiform labels read so as to interpret these reliefs? How scholars learnt to decipher cuneiform is an inspiring tale that begins with the decipherment of the famous Behistun inscription of the Achaemenid emperor, Darius. The same message is written in Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite. The alphabetic Old Persian version, with only 40 signs and several counterparts to its names and phrases in Pahlavi, was the first to be deciphered. This was the achievement of the German scholar G. Grotefend, in 1802.

Some of you may recognize the name of H. Rawlinson who had been with the East India Company in India. He was subsequently posted, as Consul, to Baghdad. He sent a lad up in a rope swing toward the rock face to make a paper cast of the Akkadian version, in syllabic cuneiform writing, in around 1840. By 1851, he had deciphered it and published it—a truly outstanding accomplishment.

Rawlinson continued his work at the British Museum, studying cuneiform tablets that were accumulating there from the 'excavations' in Assyria. He had employed one George Smith to help him organize the broken tablet fragments from Nineveh. Smith recognized a few lines on one fragment as mentioning a ship and the setting free of a dove: an echo of the Biblical story of Noah. In 1873, *The Daily Telegraph* offered Smith £1,000 to go out to Nineveh and seek the full version of the Flood. Smith was indeed lucky, and found the eleventh tablet of *the Epic of Gilgamesh* in which the ancient sage Utanapishtim explains to Gilgamesh why the gods decreed the destruction of humankind by a flood, and what he, Utanapishtim did to survive the disaster.

Meanwhile, the French were digging in Khorsabad (Assyria), the Germans at Babylon. At Babylon, Robert Koldewey pioneered the method of excavating mudbrick and deriving a stratigraphy of mudbrick buildings. Mogens Larsen has written about the late nineteenth-century German elite under Wilhelm II, and its fascination with recently discovered tablets. The German Oriental Society was founded in 1898, lectures were held at the palace, Wilhelm II himself authored a book on Mesopotamian kingship. A scholar of Akkadian, Friedrich Delitzsch, said about the Biblical connection that archaeology in far places was not easy but it was necessary as it gave people a sense of their scripture. Parallels were coming up in the cuneiform tablets, to the Flood, the story of the birth of Moses, to the laws in the Book of *Exodus*. Several pamphlets and newspaper articles came out. How could a Bible story be also the story of a different—adversarial—people?

Some scholars suggested that the cuneiform material authenticated the *Old Testament* narratives. (Reasoning could go the other way around as well. A relief has been identified by present-day scholars as the demon Lilith because of the accompanying owls, the lion talons, etc. Lilith is a demon of the night mentioned in the *Old Testament*). Delitzsch's position was that there were parallels not because of a literal truth, but because Israel and Judah were part of the greater civilization of Mesopotamia. Some Germans objected to the idea of the Bible containing derivative material, but today it is realized that both literatures ultimately derived from a fund of oral narrative across a wide region.

As field archaeology began in an organized way in Iraq, the literal truth of the Bible remained a preoccupation. An Englishman, Leonard Woolley, a gentleman

A fifth ingredient I would suggest was petroleum, which had been discovered in south-western Iran in the 1880s. It is important to note that, between 1911-18, the British navy shifted from coal to petroleum as the fuel for its ships

archaeologist, saw the story of Abraham migrating from Ur to the land of Canaan as symbolic of a step up the ramp of cultural development. Digging at Ur in the 1920s and 1930s, he found a stupendously rich royal cemetery dating around 2600 B.C., and excelled at the careful removal of the most intricately constructed treasures such as musical instruments. He deputed the archaeologist Max Mallowan to do the routine digging of 'Pits F and Z', then successfully publicised deposits in them that had been water laid as evidence of the Flood. In his memoirs he implies that the almost 4-m deep water-laid deposit was so obviously the Flood that his wife almost immediately recognized it.

Besides the Biblical connection and the challenge of philology, there was a third ingredient in British interest in Mesopotamia: this was the imperative to *do* archaeology there. On the eve of World War I, Woolley had been recruited by D.G. Hogarth, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, to archaeology-cum-intelligence-gathering in western Asia. Britain had her eye on the Suez Canal and on Ottoman territories. The plan was to foment an Arab rebellion against Ottoman rule.

A fourth ingredient I would list as an imperative to archaeology was the need to guard the route to India. It was a practice for the East India Company to station a representative in Baghdad—one of them, C.J. Rich, in fact excavated at Babylon for a while.

Woolley had joined Hogarth at excavations at Carchemish, an important ancient settlement strategically located for the control of diverse land routes. This was a good place to observe the ongoing German construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railway. T.E. Lawrence was at the excavations, so also Gertrude Bell, author of the path-breaking *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1906). Archaeology was a good cover for Bell and Lawrence's activities amongst the various tribes of the countryside, provoking dissatisfaction and—falsely—promising them independence after the fall of Ottoman rule.

A fifth ingredient I would suggest was petroleum, which had been discovered in south-western Iran in the 1880s. It is important to note that, between 1911-18, the British navy shifted from coal to petroleum as the fuel for its ships. The Berlin-

Baghdad railway was viewed as a potential threat to British access to the oil reserves near the head of the Persian Gulf.

At this point, let me tell you about Gertrude Bell. Gertrude Bell was an aristocrat: wealthy, and, as every internet entry will tell you, the first woman to read history at Oxford. She spoke many languages, including Arabic and Turkish. During World War I, the British occupied the vilayats of Basra and Baghdad. In 1917, the Ottoman Empire was militarily defeated and by 1920, the British obtained a Mandate over Iraq—meaning both the right to rule and an assumed obligation to care for the subjugated people. Percy Cox was the first British High Commissioner. Bell had lobbied hard for the sons of the Sharif of Mecca and Medina (the Guardian of the Holy Places) to be placed on the thrones of Transjordan and Iraq, and in 1921, Faysal I was installed as ‘constitutional monarch’ of Iraq. When, under the Mandate, each ministry was appointed a British adviser, it is obvious that Faysal’s own adviser would be his benefactor, Gertrude Bell.

Bell set up a department of antiquities, and in 1922 Faysal declared her its director. In 1923, she set up a small museum in Baghdad. This aristocrat who travelled with a small entourage sometimes on camel back, and who chain-smoked and dined with shaikhs, was a colourful person, and certainly an able administrator. Bell drafted and had passed an Antiquities Act in the face of Iraqi opposition, a fact often glossed over in hagiographies and British accounts of Bell and early Iraqi archaeology. This law ensured that there would be no more looter-archaeologists, such as Layard, on the scene: each excavation team must have qualified persons including experienced excavators, qualified architects, epigraphists et al. Further, that all finds must be numbered and registered. (Anyone who has seen Michael Jansen’s publication of field registers from Mohenjo-daro would agree that John Marshall’s work and legacy would have benefited from a supervising presence like Bell.)

Commendable as all this was, the troublesome part about Gertrude Bell’s law concerned the division of excavated finds. Westerners were doing almost all the digging in Iraq and they obviously wanted rewards for their work. On this aspect

The British position agreed with the principle that nations were owners of their own antiquities. However, as the level of education in Iraq was low and local expertise limited, Bell wrote that the interests of science dictated that important finds be sent out of Iraq

of the law, Bell was advised by F. Kenyon, Keeper in the British Museum, as well as a Joint Archaeological Committee in London. The British position agreed with the principle that nations were owners of their own antiquities. However, as the level of education in Iraq was low and local expertise limited, Bell wrote that the interests of science dictated that important finds be sent out of Iraq. I have benefited greatly from a reading of M Benhardsson's *Reclaiming a Plundered Past* (published in 2005) and the careful review of this work by MacGuire Gibson in 2006. From these and Hind Haider's dissertation of 2001 from McGill University, it is evident that British perceptions were to avoid the kind of legislation that had been enacted in India (with the Indian Treasure Trove Act of 1878 and the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904); that Western interests should be assured, and the export of excavated antiquities be legalized. The archaeologists in England pressed for the start of excavation and, in 1920, Kenyon suggested that Westerners be allowed to take all finds back to their respective countries, 'under covenant to return one half to Mesopotamia if and when required to do so.' Apparently, the British government was reminded that the British Museum was at the centre of the empire. However, in order that Britain not appear as pillaging, it was decided that excavated antiquities be divided halfway. The Iraqis objected, citing the laws of other countries where antiquities remained the property of their people. But Bell prevailed on King Faysal, her puppet, to have the law passed in 1924.

Bell not only devised the law, she implemented the division of excavated objects herself, going to the sites at the close of each season with her English assistant; no Iraqi was ever present at such divisions. It appears that men like Leonard Woolley were quite persuasive at such division meetings. Woolley excavated on behalf of the British Museum at Ur, but much of the funding came from the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Significantly, the latter authority had declared it did not have a competent field excavator to send to Iraq and asked the British to name the project Director. These exquisite treasures are all either in the British Museum or in the University Museum, Pennsylvania—half the total finds from Ur went to these two institutions.

After the British left (1932) and Iraq joined the League of Nations, Sati al Husri became Director of Education, and in 1934, Director of Antiquities (Bell had died

in 1926). He amended the antiquities law. Following the Egyptian model, it was decreed that all artefacts more than a certain age were the property of the Iraqi state and that the Director-General could allow the excavating country copies or casts, and half the duplicate items, to be exported with a special permit.

Iraq is the home of Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Armenians; of Shia, Sunni, Jew, Christian and Yezidi; of feudal lord, nomadic herder, town merchant, and peasant. Since the time of Faysal there had been thinking about the 'glue' that would hold this nation together. Sati al Husri realized the importance of language, and had the medium of instruction in schools changed from Turkish to Arabic. He ordered the replacement in the school curriculum of English history by teaching on Babylon and Assyria. He set up the Arab Antiquities Museum (1937). He headed a tussle for a return of the antiquities excavated by Germans in Samarra (and seized by Britain as war booty), the great Abbassid capital, a tussle in which the actions of the British Museum emerge as particularly shabby. Samarra has nothing to do with classical Mesopotamia. But the case is of interest to us as it brings to focus a sixth ingredient in the British engagement in Iraqi archaeology: avarice, or the idea of entitlement.

In 1958, Iraq overthrew its monarchy and some years thereafter, the Ba'ath party came to power. Not only was the issue of nation building a continuing one, Saddam Hussein also had to legitimate himself and his various actions. He repeatedly referred to the greatness of Babylon, and to invasions from Elam (today in Iran). Most internet sites will tell you how Saddam Hussein ordered the use of bricks stamped with his own name, in the restoration of Babylon. In his time, the Ishtar Gate with its coloured bricks was restored and set up in a different location from the original. However, this should not obscure the fact that he ordered restoration to follow on most excavations, that he allowed many foreign excavators into the country, and that many provincial museums were opened under his rule. He encouraged folklore and folk festivals and the recitation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. By then, many Iraqis were accomplished cuneiform scholars and diggers. The Iraq Museum was rebuilt and splendidly endowed. Finally in 1967, the division of antiquities came to an end. Well before that time, it was rued that there were more cuneiform tablets in the collections of western universities than there were in Baghdad.

In the academic realm, concern for the truth of the Bible endured: some Larsa-period (1900 B.C.) houses in Ur were restored for a visit in 1997 of Pope John Paul II, who wanted to 'worship in the birthplace of Abraham'. There is yet another dimension to the paradigm of 'roots': with the accumulation of knowledge about Mesopotamia (and Egypt) and with Gordon Childe's magisterial sweep of the Bronze and Iron ages of the old world, Mesopotamia and Egypt remain in scholarly perception the foundations on which the cultures of Greece and Rome—in their turn the foundations of Europe's rationality, architecture, aesthetic norms—were built. (This in spite of Colin Renfrew's *Before Civilization* (1971) that emphasized the early dates of many European cultures). Such lineages have endured. In 2000, J. Bottero titled a book on Mesopotamia, *Ancestor of the West*. In that year, S. Parpola (brother of Asko) gave a lecture in Harvard entitled 'The Mesopotamian Soul of Western Culture'. The great Egyptologist, J.H. Breasted, conceived for the entrance to the Oriental Institute at Chicago (founded 1919) a relief in which an Egyptian handed over the gift of civilization to a Western man.

The puzzle then arises, if Mesopotamia was the seed bed in terms of scripture and of cultural development, why did the West allow its heritage to be so shamefully pillaged? Why was the Iraq Museum left unguarded after the US invasion of 2003, between 11 April and 16 April? Why did the US set up a military camp complete with concreted surfaces, helipad, barracks, etc. on top of the site of Babylon, the greatest city of the world in the sixth century B.C.?

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Our first clue comes from a private letter of Breasted who conceived the Oriental Institute portal showing the (humble?) reception of civilization by the West from the Orient. That same Breasted wrote in a private letter in 1935, 'our job is to educate a small group of these ignorant and fanatical Iraqis and I propose to undertake it.' Zainab Bahrani points out that in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the Royal City of Susa in 1992, neither Iraq nor Iran was mentioned in either the maps or the signage. The idea of a civilizational ancestor obviously does not go with any respect for the heirs of that civilization, those heirs constituting a population of subjugated people. M. Liverani terms western archaeology in Western Asia an 'appropriation'; R Matthews uses the term 'hi-jack'.

My eyes were opened to the true depths of this situation when some British Mesopotamianists wrote a joint letter to *The Independent* in 1991 during the bombing of Iraq in the First Iraq War. This letter requested the military forces of the Western coalition to create a *cordon sanitaire* around the Iraq Museum and refrain from bombing it because of its very precious antiquities. But what the letter omitted was even a token or hypocritical regret for the loss of Iraqi lives.

Western allegations that Arabs are not interested in their pre-Islamic heritage are proved wrong by Saddam Hussein's policies and by recent events in Cairo. Are locations such as the Louvre, the British Museum, the Berlin Museum, the only safe havens for antiquities? Do only uneducated Orientals loot their sites? While Gertrude Bell admitted that she could not stop the looting of sites during her tenure, her successor, one Richard Cooke, was caught smuggling antiquities. And the glorious Paul Getty Museum, the papers now tell us, 'chased illicit masterpieces' for four decades, finally surrendering several of them to the authorities and spending millions on its legal defence. Significantly, a large stone guardian figure from Boghazkoy, the capital of the Hittites, that the Germans took to Berlin 'for restoration' in 1917, was returned only this year, 2011, after pressure from the Turkish government.

The most alarming case is reported by the annual report (2011) of the Netherlands Institute for the Near East, Leiden. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets, some thousands in number, loaned in the early 1930s by the Government of Iran to the Oriental Institute Chicago (OIC) for translation and study, are now under threat. The Republic of Iran, having been seen as the culprit behind terrorist attacks in Beirut (1983) and Jerusalem (1997), is required to pay \$3.5 billion in restitution to the victims. A case is on in the US demanding that these antiquities be sold to raise the money, should the Government of Iran not comply with the demand for restitution. The OIC Director, Gil Stein, has condemned such a move, but this incident proves among other things that antiquities taken out of their own countries do not necessarily carry cultural value. They often assume the function of commodities.

As for the British Museum, we have seen that its record is hardly impeccable. Keepers such as Wallis Budge (1883-1924), says Julian

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Reade, would not allow scholars from outside to study the best antiquities in the western Asiatic collection, which were listed in his black notebook. This included such outstanding scholars as Alan Gardiner. Worse, Budge openly stated his preference for purchased antiquities (he acquired a lot of these and obviously they came from a trade that was condemnable if not illegal) over excavated finds. The latter, he said, carried too much baggage (data) and were often damaged. He had them (tablets, ivories, bronzes) packed into boxes and put away.

To set the perspective right one needs to mention the admirable work of the current Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities, John Curtis, who in 2008 made a joint survey with Iraqi, European, and American archaeologists, of eight southern sites, to check up on their state of preservation. This work was done by RAF helicopters in great heat and at some risk to life. Some sites had suffered from the activities of looters and quarriers. Significantly, however, it was found that the site of Uruk was unharmed because the Germans have faithfully carried out their responsibility for paying for security at the site. Another large site, Lagash, is also unharmed because it is the local Beni Said tribe who are caring for it and making their own arrangement for its protection.

No one can deny that Western intervention has meant a huge accumulation of knowledge. Mesopotamia is an exciting field to be in, whether one is engaged with the early state or the interdigitation of steppe and field, the urban revolution or the labour revolution, or the archaeological correlates of empire. The Chicago Oriental Institute has in recent weeks completed the 22-volume *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. Yet the imprint of Orientalism survives in translations that rush to find harems, eunuchs, and veils on the heads of women, as M. van de Mierop has remarked. Even worse is the inevitable counterpart to a rapacious engagement in which Professors of Assyriology are, as the Indian Income Tax authorities would put it, living in a style incompatible with their known sources of income. This counterpart is the kind of research article that is still churned out: 'Cylinder Seals in the Collection of Mr. XYZ', or the 'ABC

Collection of Tablets’—what possible coherence can such seals/ tablets have, unless Mr XYZ can actually vouch that he dug them out from the same house floor or temple cache?

Interventions continue. Unable to dig extensively in Iraq, several French, British, American, and Italian archaeologists are busy in Syria, especially where dams are being built. This makes them the active partners; the local villagers and local departments of archaeology, the passive partners. Obviously it is the former who set the agenda. Is this another form of subjugation?

I will end by asking, what does all this have to do with us?

First, let us not be taken in by any future statement made by a Director of the British Museum that his institution holds the world’s heritage ‘for the world’. If such a statement is made in the future to an Indian audience, we can prepare to start rapping our spoons against our lunchboxes to express our scorn. Or else, we can ask that Director: How are the Amaravati sculpted gateways the cultural property of 99 per cent of Andhravadus who cannot examine them at close quarters or from the angle they prefer, because they cannot travel to London and do not have access to the internet (on which one or two images may at best be projected)? How are they the property of the people of southern India when they were pulled out of the context in which they had stood for centuries, and are now enshrined in a building whose architecture does not hold much meaning for south Indians?

However, we can also learn from the Mesopotamian experience. When local communities are taught about sites and are empowered, they can and do (as at Lagash) care for their own sites. Not only that, Ajay Dandekar and I have found in Gujarat that farmers are full of ideas about aspects of the sites, eager to be given maps of their areas, knowledgeable about how their own areas are distinct in land use from the regions of other sites. Perhaps, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) should cease to treat them as daily-wagers and chowkidars. It should recruit the most intelligent men and women on salary, to play a useful role in at least educating visitors to the sites.

Gertrude Bell has taught us something—even in the 1920s, in Iraq there had to be thorough registration of antiquities. Has John Marshall, with his emphasis on extending the area dug, and scant routinization of the annotation process, left a spurious legacy in the ASI?

Gertrude Bell has taught us something—even in the 1920s, in Iraq there had to be thorough registration of antiquities. Has John Marshall, with his emphasis on extending the area dug, and scant routinization of the annotation process, left a spurious legacy in the ASI? Are we satisfied with the standard of the cataloguing at our major sites?

Saddam Hussein too taught us that when you give an archaeology department muscle, when you raise the salaries and bureaucratic ranks of its officers and give them greater autonomy and finances, the department will do better. Its employees acquire a new confidence. And please do not forget that Zahi Hawass, until a few days ago Director of Antiquities in Egypt, was a full-fledged member of the cabinet of ministers. (Now, however, there will be a reversion to the old Supreme Council of Antiquities. And certainly many Indians have been somewhat shocked at the wholesale subjection of the Egyptian heritage to masses of ignorant and uncaring tourists from the rest of the world.) Does not our present state of affairs in India reflect our ignorance about the importance of our own heritage? Does not our Director-General deserve greater powers? And should this post not always be filled by a qualified archaeologist?

The most important lesson we have learnt is that globalization may get me or you a freebie to California but it gets us neither enlightenment nor respect. We become clients to be patronized overseas.

Professor Shereen Ratnagar, known to students as the author of *Understanding Harappa*, took a three-year postgraduate course in Mesopotamian archaeology and then spent a year in Iraq with the British School of Archaeology. She returned to Iraq twice thereafter, for museum studies and excavation.



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