



# NINEVEH THE GREAT CITY

Symbol of Beauty and Power

edited by  
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## 66. The Iraq Museum in Baghdad

*Carlo Lippolis*



Figure 66.1 King Feisal I.



Figure 66.2 Relief depicting an Assyrian war camp; Iraq Museum, Baghdad (IM 31065).



Figure 66.3 Baghdad Museum in 1926. Reproduced from BASOR 22.

The Iraq Museum in Baghdad was founded in 1923, when Iraq had only recently become an independent state. Great Britain, the main architect of the creation of a unified Iraqi state, but at the same time exercising significant political and economic control over the country, favoured the ascent to the throne of King Feisal I (1883-1933; fig. 66.1), who belonged to the same clan as the Jordanian royal house. The creation of Iraq was the result of a difficult process that brought together a population not only divided in terms of its religious diversity, but also in its ethno-linguistic character. For both the British and the Iraqi leadership, it was absolutely essential to try to identify and emphasize those features that were shared by the entire Iraqi population, in order to reinforce a country that was in fact characterized by a high degree of diversity.

The archaeological excavations carried out in Mesopotamia by European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century and the treasures stored in the museums of Paris, London and Berlin had already spread knowledge of the great Mesopotamian tradition far and wide. The recovery and enhancement of this tradition appeared to be an appropriate way to create a sense of national unity. Mesopotamian heritage and history would become the bearers of a message of national unity, and at the same time they would evoke a distant (pre-Islamic) past, devoid of any elements that could lead to conflict or be considered disagreeable by some components of Iraqi society.

The creator of the Baghdad Museum was a woman, Gertrude Bell (fig. 15.1). Born in 1868 to a wealthy British family, after graduating in History at Oxford in 1888, she travelled throughout Europe and in 1898 arrived in Constantinople. This city inspired her to explore the Near and Middle East, and she began to travel throughout Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and Persia. During her journeys, Bell met the great personalities of the age who were staying in those countries, such as Lawrence of Arabia and the archaeologist Leonard Woolley (1880-1960), and she visited all the major archaeological excavations then in progress. She described the places, emotions and memories of these trips in a series of books, which brought her international renown (Cooper, this volume).

When the Iraqi Ministry of Education had to choose a British consultant for the design of the Baghdad Museum, Bell was the obvious choice; already a well-known writer, an expert on archaeology and well established both at the British administration and at Feisal's court. In 1924, the first law on the protection of archaeological heritage was promulgated in Iraq. Bell played a key role in defining this law, which entailed a fair division of the findings between Iraq and the country that had sent the archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia. While in other countries, exporting any archaeological find was already forbidden, this Iraqi law was favourable to foreign countries. It was thanks to this law that the number of archaeological expeditions sponsored by European and American universities and museums increased considerably, whilst the collections of the Baghdad Museum could increase as well. Gertrude Bell obtained new headquarters for the museum in 1926, but even these were too small for the increasing number of archaeological artefacts (fig. 66.3). In the early 1930s, the Iraqi king supported the project to give the museum a larger location (it would have been on Ma'moun Street), but a severe economic crisis and then the Second World War prevented the fulfilment of this aim.



Figure 66.4 Interior of the renovated Iraq Museum in 2006. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 66.5 Reopened Iraq Museum in 2015. Courtesy of the author.

In the 1950s the king of Iraq, Feisal II, once again gave his support to the enlargement of the Museum. In 1957 the architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), no less, was asked to design a project. However, the coup that devastated Iraq in 1958 and overthrew the monarchy prevented the construction of the new museum. The work only began in 1960, in a very different political situation, but one that was still favourable to promoting Mesopotamian archaeological heritage. In the years between 1964 and 1966, when the archaeological artefacts were waiting to be placed in the new museum's headquarters, a large travelling exhibition (Cologne, Berlin, Lisbon, Paris and even Turin) was established, bringing the collections from Baghdad to Europe for the first time. The new museum, designed by the German architect Werner March (1894-1976), was finally inaugurated in 1967; the building still houses the Iraq Museum in Baghdad today (fig. 66.5). The museum was home to the most significant finds in Iraqi history, from the most ancient prehistoric and protohistoric periods to the Islamic age.

From 1979, Saddam Hussein (1937-2006), due both to his wish to make Iraq the leading country in the Middle East and to his overwhelming yearning for supremacy, used ancient Mesopotamia as an instrument of propaganda. The long-lasting Mesopotamian political and cultural dominance over large areas of the ancient world became an ideological justification for the Iraqi claim to superiority over the Middle East. Saddam therefore promoted the 'enhancement' of Iraqi archaeological heritage, albeit in accordance with a vision involving invasive restorations and massive reconstructions.

On the day following the entry of the occupying troops into Baghdad (9 April 2003), several clashes in front of the museum forced many managers and guards to leave the building. This was followed by three days of destruction and looting within the museum, transmitted by media all over the world. Those distressing images represented the first evident act of destruction of cultural heritage, which is still crumbling under the blows of barbaric devastation.

Thanks to a well-established relationship with the Iraqi authorities, Italy was able to intervene immediately after the looting. Planning on the project to renovate part of the Iraq Museum started in 2003 by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, together with the Centro Scavi of Turin and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq. The project, funded by the General Directorate for the Mediterranean and the Middle East of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, received further contributions from the Department for Research, Innovation and Organization of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Foundation of the National Bank of Communications, with the constant support of the Italian Embassy in Baghdad.

The works started in 2006 and initially involved the Assyrian monumental sculpture gallery, the Islamic architectural decoration gallery and the central courtyard. The two main galleries were renovated, with a new distribution of spaces and a new lighting system. In the great Assyrian gallery, after restoration and cleaning, the reliefs of the palace of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Šarrukin) were placed along the walls of the room, recalling their original location (fig. 66.4). Similarly, above the two monumental human-headed bulls, the guardians of the main entrances to the Assyrian palaces, an arched covering was recreated, based on the original architectural model.

Since 2012 a new project has been underway, including the establishment of a second large gallery on the ground floor (the so-called Middle Assyrian Gallery) with materials from Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), along with other objects dating from the second half of the second millennium and the first millennium BC. In addition to the structural works, the objects have been replaced on suitable supports and within showcases in a room with opaque windows. The most delicate operation has been the placing of two human-headed bulls from Nimrud, each weighing more than three tons, which were previously exhibited in a secondary wing of the museum. Educational panels have been designed in both English and Arabic, on the history of the museum and the research and on the main historical and artistic developments in Mesopotamia. The Baghdad Museum was officially reopened to the public in February 2015 (fig. 66.5).