

# THE BIRTH, FALL, AND RENAISSANCE OF THE IRAQ MUSEUM IN BAGHDAD: POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA VS. ARCHAEOLOGY AND ENHANCEMENT IN MODERN IRAQ

Carlo Lippolis

*“Antiques are the most precious relics the Iraqis possess”*

Saddam Hussayn (Sumer, 1979)

Several episodes in the history of Iraq – especially the sack of its museums and the recent destruction of antiquities – have confirmed the place of archaeology in the nation’s cultural and political discourse.

The Iraqi case illustrates how archaeology and history can be used for political purposes by both outsiders and insiders: archaeology contributed to the initial European interest in the region, then to the British delineation of the modern country, and finally to Iraqis’ affirmation of the nation’s sovereignty, independence, and identity.

We therefore would like to briefly retrace, in this paper, the history of the National Museum of Iraq (today also named Iraq Museum) in Baghdad while underlining the importance of archeology in the formation of the Iraqi state, before introducing some of the more recent projects carried out for the requalification and reopening of this important museum.

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIRTH OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRAQ

Following Bernhardsson’s lucid analysis, we may outline three main stages of “archaeology and politics” in Iraq:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past*, 2005, pp. 10-18.

*The international stage extended from the middle nineteenth century until the 1920s was characterized by Western domination. Iraqis played only a small role and nearly all major excavations by Westerners were conducted at pre-Islamic sites (Babylon, Khorsabad, Nimrud, Nineveh, Nippur, Telloh etc...): these sites attracted interest because of their relation to the Bible. Islamic sites and antiquities were neglected because they were considered neither valuable in themselves nor relevant for the reconstruction of “western” ancient history. The only important expedition at an Islamic site were the German excavations at Samarra, carried out by E. Herzfeld (1911-13).*

In this very first stage archaeology was not perceived to be a neutral science – as fortunately it is today (after, maybe, a too long delay) – but an integral part of the imperialist/colonialist enterprise.

We may, for example, consider how the main European illustrated newspapers (in the late 19th and early 20th century) reported any archaeological discovery. They featured images that illustrated the principal – and more symbolic – phases of the retrieval process: the discovery, transportation, and display of objects.

The discovery of objects was illustrated with images of the actual excavation, usually portrayed as occurring in a landscape that had lost its former greatness – an “empty space” now populated by an “unenlightened” population.

The transportation of objects was another popular subject for illustrations. The removal of massive stones from the excavation site and their transportation to Europe by ships was proof of the technological progress of Europeans.

Finally, illustrations depicted objects on display in the “civilized” world, in a western museum or a university where they could be appreciated by enlightened (European) visitors.

The message conveyed by these illustrations was that the Western world was responsible for the discovery, preservation, and display (in Europe or America) of these historical treasures for the benefit of all of humanity.

While the colonial aspect of these enterprises is undeniable, at the same time it must be recognized that these discoveries were the basis of the methodological development of archeology as a scientific discipline. It is therefore always necessary to distinguish between archaeology as a developing science and archaeology as a tool for advancing a political agenda or creating propaganda.



**Fig. 1** Baghdad, the Iraq Museum in the 1930s (SBAH archives).

The second stage of archaeology in Iraq was a transitional one that spanned the interwar years (from the end of the 1920s to the 1940s). The British and the Iraqis quarreled over the ownership of antiquities, and the first signs of a “national” archaeology of Iraq began to appear. During this stage archaeology remained in “Western” hands, but the Iraqis showed some signs of resistance and opposition, as indicated by the stance taken by Sati’ al-Husri, Minister of Education during the 1920s and Director of the Antiquities in the 1930s.

When Iraq became independent from Britain in 1932, the new government passed a restrictive law affirming that all antiquities in the country – both above and below the ground – were the property of Iraq. Historical artifacts took on a “national” significance and became tools used by the state to fashion a new national identity.

It was during this stage that the birth of the Iraq Museum occurred. A national museum organizes and displays its collections in order to construct a simplified interpretation of the history and culture of a country and its people. Such a museum has great potential to foster the state-building process, especially in a recently established nation (such as Iraq in the 1920s) that contains numerous ethnic and religious groups.

However, the National Museum of Iraq [Fig. 1] was not founded by the Iraqis themselves. Rather, its creation was the work of non-Iraqis, particularly British

people, in a period characterized by Western domination in archaeology. And the establishment of a museum in Iraq was seen as a natural development of the British Mandate and of the colonial politics in the country, with an important pedagogical role. Even though the museum was founded in a foreign country, it helped to maintain the 19th-century notion that Europe was the center of civilization.

So, initially, the Iraq Museum was not conceived to enshrine a “metanarrative” concerning Iraqi history and the new nation, rather to be a storehouse for artifacts and a permanent record of foreign archaeological expeditions in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The Iraq Museum was distinguished from Western museums by the fact that it only contained items discovered in the country (and not “war trophies” or other items brought from abroad). In other words, it was not conceived as a “universal collection” like European museums,<sup>3</sup> but as a warehouse for domestic artifacts, even though these artifacts were discovered and initially studied by foreigners. Even today, this is a main feature of the Iraq Museum: it is a museum of the national history of a single country.

When the Iraq Museum opened in 1923 it was small enough to fit into a single room of the Quslah Saray (the Ottoman administrative complex), but by 1926 Gertrude M.L. Bell<sup>4</sup> had found a more appropriate building, in the northern part of Baghdad, that was able to house the increasing quantities of antiquities coming from the many new excavations carried out in the '20s.

By this point the museum held between 3,000 and 4,000 objects, all of which illustrated the pre-Islamic past of the country, as the museum’s collection was curated by Westerners who chose to include artifacts coming from the recent (foreign) excavations, with the aim of depicting a common pre-Islamic past shared by all the peoples of Iraq.

In fact, during the first decade of the Iraq Museum, Islamic history was poorly represented: the Omayyad and Abbasid caliphates and the Islamic period in general were practically absent. It was not until 1936 that the Museum acquired its first Islamic antiquities, when a small proportion of the finds from the German

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<sup>2</sup> Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past*, 2005, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that G. Bell herself, in a letter to her stepmother (march 3, 1926), proudly wrote: “It will be a real museum like the British Museum only a little smaller”.

<sup>4</sup> Gertrude Bell Archive → <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk>.

excavation at the important site of Samarra were returned to Iraq.

Because the collections did not do justice to the Islamic past, the Iraq Museum was initially excluded from Iraqi political and cultural life. And, unlike their neighbors, the Iraqi people initially did not recognize themselves in pre-Islamic history: the government, which had adopted a pan-Arab identity, did not show any interest in the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia.

In the following years, however, the Museum acquired new collections and published a short guide to its holdings, and the number of visitors soon increased.

As already Bernhardsson had observed,<sup>5</sup> in Iraq, the question of how to build a “modern present” based on the past has been answered by two competing and apparently diametrically opposed models: the Iraqist model stresses the ancient and pre-Islamic civilizations that developed in the country, while the Pan-Arab model is less comfortable with the pre-Islamic past. Things would have changed after the Second World War with the third stage.

The third stage in the development of archaeology in Iraq was marked by the struggle for control of the nation’s historical artifacts, which was in effect a symbolic battle against Western cultural and political expansion in the Middle East. After the Second World War, archaeology was no longer a site of imperialist and anti-imperialist contention. In this stage, Iraq gained full control of its archaeology and participated in international collaborations as an equal.

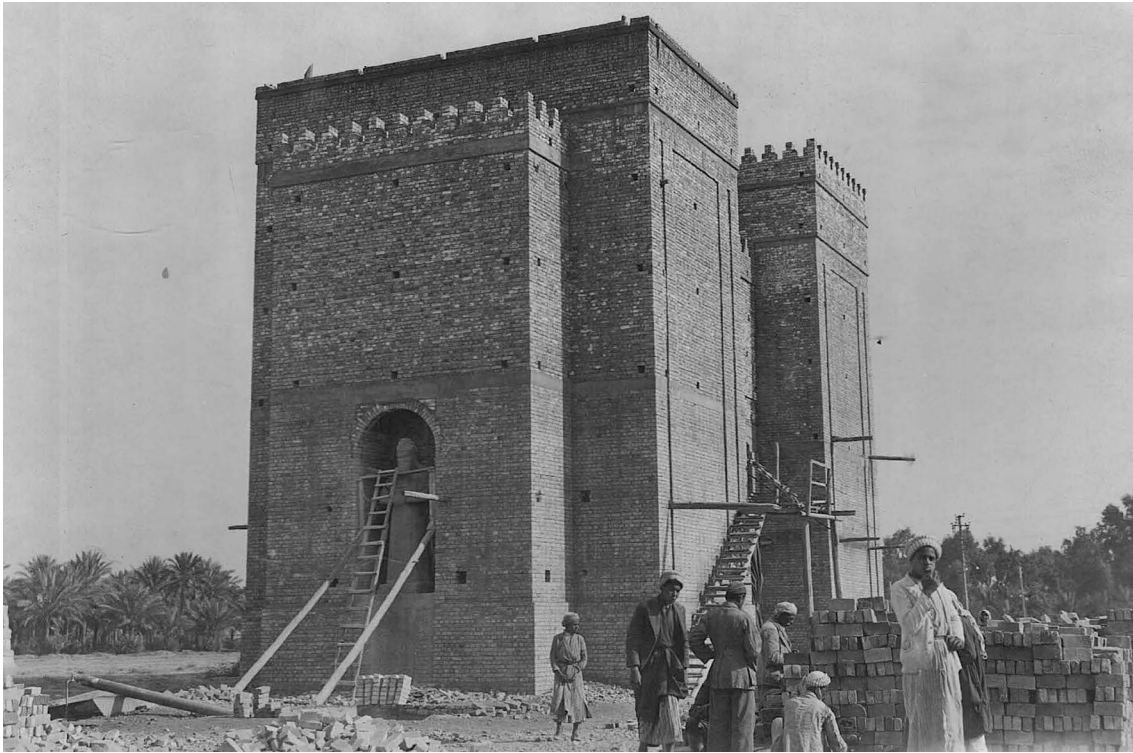
The Museum continued to grow and in the 1940s a new building was commissioned. A German architect designed an *art deco* structure that followed the plan of traditional Iraqi houses. The new museum would be built in Salihiya, on the west bank of the river. Soon afterward, replicas of an Assyrian gate (one of the city gate of Khorsabad [Fig. 2]) and of the statue of the “Lion of Babylon” were erected at two corners of the grounds of the new museum (today, they are still in place). Yet the construction of the Museum itself would continue until the end of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, the vibrant archaeological scene in Iraq and the importance of the Museum in the Iraqi cultural and political life inspired one of the greatest

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<sup>5</sup> Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past*, 2005, pp. 5-8.

<sup>6</sup> The new museum, in those premises that still today host the collections, the Archaeological Library and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, was inaugurated and opened to the public in 1966.



**Fig. 2** Baghdad, reconstruction of assyiran city gate (Khorsabad) at the entrance of the Iraq Museum (1940s: SBAH archives).

architects of any period to propose the construction of an innovative and futuristic museum. In 1957 the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright included in his project for a “Greater Baghdad” the design of an elongated Iraq Museum – a magnificent utopian project that will never be realized.

## **ARCHAEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA**

Between the late 1950s and 1960s and, in particular, under Saddam Hussayn’s leadership, a rising “cultural nationalism” gave priority to pre-Islamic history (of course without neglecting Islamic history), stressing Iraq’s leadership role in the Arab world (and its hegemony in the Gulf). The government associated itself with archaeology **[Fig. 3]**, with the aim of promoting nationalism under a strong centralized state. At the same time, the Iraq Museum of Baghdad, following the reorganization of its staff and that of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, became the favored venue for the expression of the propaganda and ideology of the regime.



**Fig. 3** Babylon, ceiling of a room of the Saddam Hussein's Palace (2012: photo by the author).

In the 1980s the museum doubled in size, as a new annex was built that maintained the original design of courtyard and porticoes surrounded by exhibition rooms. The government also promoted archaeological culture by organizing seminars and group tours of archaeological sites and museums. At the same time, as Baram stressed, the co-optation of Iraq's contemporary artists in the 1980s and 1990s succeeded in filling Baghdad with monuments and sculptures inspired by scenes and symbols of the Iraqi past that the ruling regime considered essential for the education of the nation.<sup>7</sup>

Saddam Hussayn also implemented museum projects in various regions of the country. This marked the fulfillment of a program that was planned in the 1940s and 1950s (see, for example, the Mosul Museum) but never realized. The new local museums were usually conceived as small-scale structures, but their chief purpose was not to illustrate the cultural specificity or the main historical period of the region they represented.<sup>8</sup> Rather, each of these museums was con-

<sup>7</sup> Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-89*, 1991, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Fales, *Saccheggio in Mesopotamia*, 2006, p. 165.

ceived as an Iraq Museum in miniature, whose purpose was to depict the entire path of Mesopotamian history. In Babylon, for example, three museums as such were envisioned (respectively dedicated to Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar, and Alexander the Great), but only one was constructed. Paradoxically, at the new Babylon museum only a few original objects were on view; almost all the pieces were casts or maquettes or “replicas”. In a nation with a strong centralized government such as Iraq was, “culture” too was centralized: almost all of the genuine artifacts remained in the Baghdad Museum. In any case, these reproductions were sufficient for the educational and propaedeutic role that the regional museums had to fulfill.

This “promotion” (i.e. instrumentalisation) of archaeology and history during the last decades of the 20th century is the prelude to the episodes of 1991 and 2003, when archaeological sites and museums were targeted by the general populace. These “raising” and plundering were not caused only by the monetary value of the objects (even if for the 2003 sack the economic aspect is to be kept in mind, considering the desperate conditions of a population under embargo for over a decade), and surely not by a new anti-imperialist or anti-western reaction.<sup>9</sup> Rather, these episodes were a reaction to the previous governmental policy and propaganda.

### **THE SACK AND THE REQUALIFICATION WORKS IN THE IRAQ MUSEUM OF BAGHDAD (2003-2017)**

In 2003, before its sack, the museum housed more than 200.000 inventoried objects: a figure that well illustrates its importance. As the meaningful artifacts of Mesopotamian culture are preserved in the Iraq Museum, it is easy to understand the need and the cultural and social importance of an intervention.

This is not the place to talk further about the looting of the Iraq Museum, which was also the first media event that marked as well the birth of a sort of “voyeurism” on the destruction of the Near Eastern cultural heritage. I rather would like to use this second part of my paper to quickly illustrate the Italian re-qualification works we carried out immediately after the looting.

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<sup>9</sup> Fales, *Saccheggio in Mesopotamia*, p. 76.



The project of the rearrangement of part of the Iraq Museum – together with the laboratories, looted and irreparably damaged and a series of training courses for restorers – have been planned since 2003 by the Italian Ministries of Heritage and Culture and of Foreign Affairs and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, together with the Centro Scavi di Torino (CRAST)<sup>10</sup> and Monumenta Orientalia (MO).

The first work phase of the project foresaw the reorganization of the galleries around the main courtyard where unmovable objects are exhibited. Given the difficulty of staying for long time in Baghdad at that time, the choice was to entrust the work to a local enterprise, coordinating the project from Italy and planning regular inspections in Iraq (several times a year). Aware of the difficulties in dealing with such a complex museological project, we decided to focus on simplicity and feasibility of the interventions. The decision to maintain the existing exhibition facilities, simply enhancing them and making them more functional and up to date, resulted to be correct and effective.

Since the beginning, we paid attention also to the Islamic section of the Museum. Indeed, the first interventions were planned exactly in the Islamic gallery, a single large room with pieces going from the Abbasid to the Ottoman period. The space was divided into main chronological sections thanks to partition walls that now help the visitor to have a better fruition and to distinguish the different historical phases.

Close and connected to this gallery, recently a new wing of the museum has been created and finally inaugurated in 2017. This new wing has been internally shaped to reproduce the historical Mirjaniya's *musalla* of Baghdad (demolished in the 1950s) and its original decoration, already stored in the Iraq Museum, is now correctly displayed on its walls.<sup>11</sup>

Substantial interventions were carried in the Great Assyrian hall, which displayed the great reliefs from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad (8th century BCE). These monumental slabs in relief (each one around 3-4 tons) were originally lined up and exposed without any connection with the architecture of the

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<sup>10</sup> CRAST has been continuously working in Iraq since 1964, both with excavation or restoration projects and training at the Italian-Iraqi Cultural Center for Archaeological Sciences and Restoration in Baghdad. For info about CRAST and the ongoing projects see: → [www.centroscavitorino.it](http://www.centroscavitorino.it).

<sup>11</sup> The Mirjaniya project was carried out by arch. R. Parapetti (Monumenta Orientalia) and executed by the local enterprise of Eng. Ala' Anbaki.

hall. They stood detached from the walls, limiting the effect that originally they had inside a royal palace. So after their restoration and cleaning, the reliefs were displayed, trying to recall more their original location. Due to the fact that they were unamovable (they are cemented in the floor), we decided to “move” the hall around them, creating lateral walls to narrow the hall and giving the effect of a unique elongated room (as in the Assyrian palaces). Similarly, above the two monumental human-headed bulls – the divine guardians of the main entrances of the Assyrian palaces – an arched covering has been recreated, following the ancient architectural model.

This way, for those entering the gallery today, the impression is that of a large royal throne hall, with the sculptured decoration along its walls.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the new lighting system enhances the relief of the sculptured figures and the details of these masterpieces [Fig. 4].

Since 2012, a new project concerning the setting up of a second large gallery at the ground floor (the so-called Middle Assyrian Gallery) started.

For this second intervention, we took more care about the aspects related to the presentation of the objects (adequate supports, lightened showcases, opaque glasses fixed to the windows to shade the too much intense light from the outside...) and to the content of the communication [Fig. 5]. The most delicate operation was the moving of two human-headed bulls from the Ashurnasirpal's II North-Western palace in Nimrud (9th century BCE), each one weighing more than 4,5 tons, previously almost not visible for the visitors. This operation was delicate, since one of the two colossi had been reassembled by various fragments (several decades ago). In addition, the weight of the giants could damage to the floor of the museum itself and therefore we had to study the most suitable path to move these monumental sculptures for about 150 meters inside the museum.

Today the two sculptures are placed at the center of the second Assyrian gallery, mainly displaying materials from Nimrud, with a light metal superstructure that reproduces the arch of the original entrance to the throne room of the Ashurnasirpal's palace.

In front of them are placed the two “small” *lamassu* which originally flanked

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<sup>12</sup> We have to mention that the sequence in which the sculptured slabs are displayed in the room, is not completely philologically correct: the slabs, placed in the '50s, have been lined up without taking into consideration their original disposal along the walls of the huge palace of Khorsabad.



**Fig. 4** Baghdad, the Great Assyrian Gallery in the Iraq Museum after the requalification works (2013: archive of Centro Scavi Torino).



**Fig. 5** Baghdad, the Middle Assyrian Gallery in the Iraq Museum after the requalification works (2014: archive of Centro Scavi Torino).

the entrance to the temple of Ishtar at Nimrud and that were excavated by Iraqi archaeologists in 2000-2001. These two hybrid creatures now protect the entrance to a space surrounded by showcases displaying the objects from Iraqi, English and Italian excavations at Nimrud.

One of the main problems of the Iraq Museum, today, is not to be yet fully equipped with an adequate educational apparatus (panels, tags, brochures...) that can even briefly explain what is exhibited in the rooms.

Besides, it should be noted – as already observed by the former director of the Museum Donny George – that the Iraqi educational system foresees the teaching of the ancient (mesopotamian) history, but is not particularly effective in primary and secondary school students.<sup>13</sup> The communication between the museum and its young visitors – who, during the scholastic path, are able to acquire only a few concepts related to the oldest history of the country – can be therefore complicated.

For this reason, in this last project we also took care about the communication. For example, a lightened timeline (4 mt long) has been fixed at the beginning of the room, illustrating the ancient chronology and history of Mesopotamia, with references to the main objects exposed in the relevant gallery. Educational panels, both in English and Arabic, on the history of the museum and of the research and on the main historical and artistic developments of Mesopotamia have been specifically designed for this hall, both for adult visitors and for children – as in the case of the dresser/drawners [Fig. 6]. Further on, a series of comics with stories that have children as main characters and that are set on the archaeological excavation or in the museum, have been recently planned in the frame of an European project (named EDUU: *Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq*) involving the Universities of Bologna (as the leading institution), Torino, Baghdad, Kufa and Qadissiyah and, of course, the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (together with some local museums) as partner.

In February 2015, a few days after the destruction of the Mosul's museum by Da'esh, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad was officially reopened to the public. It was a strong signal affirming the importance of history and the need to protect the

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<sup>13</sup> George, "The Looting of the Iraq National Museum", in: P.G. Stone and J.F. Bajjalj (eds.) *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, 2008, p. 106.



**Fig. 6** Baghdad, Iraq Museum: drawer with coloured didactic panels in one of new galleries of the museum (archive of Centro Scavi Torino).



**Fig. 7** Young visitors at the Iraq Museum of Baghdad, after its reopening in 2015 (photo by the author).

common cultural heritage of mankind, against the senseless barbaric destruction of the Past. Entire school classes are now visiting again the Iraq Museum of Baghdad (one of the first to reopen in the city and, in general, in the whole country), after around 25 years of closing [Fig. 7]: the new generation could again appreciate and understand their own history and their own past, getting awareness of their past heritage and – we hope – perceive the need to preserve it and transmit it to the future generations.

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