

Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq

Magnus T. Bernhardsson

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“Stuff happens.” United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s laconic comment on the widespread looting triggered by Baghdad’s fall in early April 2003 arguably marks the lowest point in Iraqi archaeology, a field already stained and tarnished by the ugliness of international geopolitics. Priceless treasures were plundered by well-informed gangs of thieves who smashed or ignored replicas on display and went straight for the concealed originals, while the more opportunistic looters simply made off with whatever they could seize. Despite briefings by archaeologists before the war, the American government did not order its military to intervene, and thereby allowed the damage to Iraq’s cultural patrimony to accelerate beyond repair.

In a fitting introduction, Magnus Bernhardsson uses this preventable disaster as a segue into the theme of his work: the largely unfortunate sublimation of the archaeological record to nationalism and nation building. As he aptly notes, “nationalism influences the kinds of questions archaeologists have been willing to ask and determines what sort of historical sites to exca-

vate and uncover. Nationalist ideologies can lead and have led archaeologists to present history as a nonproblematic, linear progression of a people often validating a specific nation-state's interpretation of its own history" (p. 6). In the Middle East, where the British and French occupiers cobbled together unstable new nations on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the utility of archaeology in this regard is particularly evident.

Bernhardsson devotes his first chapter to examining the early European fascination with the Orient's history and people, as well as its role in the European imagination as the Biblical heartland. He also offers a standard history of early archaeological theory and an overview of Islamic views on Mesopotamian history. His presentation of the former two subjects is sadly truncated and notably narrow, especially in the arena of European art and literature, where the bounteous French and German offerings on the imagined Middle East are passed over mostly in silence. However, his treatment of Orientalism and archaeological theory provide a helpful initial stepping stone to a fuller inquiry. The author does a more thorough job concerning the rare Islamic treatment of ancient Mesopotamia, although it would have been interesting to learn of the medieval Muslim scholars' overt rejection of the value and interest of Mesopotamian civilization as well, if only to get a fuller picture of how they understood the relics in their midst.

Bernhardsson is much better when relating the history of archaeological exploration in Iraq. Practically everyone of any significance is included, from Pietro della Valle and Carsten Niebuhr to Paul Emile Botta, A. H. Layard, and the tragic Gertrude Bell. While detailing their frenzied, sloppy, and sometimes dangerous peregrinations through the cradle of civilization, the author does not stint on providing the necessary diplomatic, political, and cultural contexts. His research into Ottoman antiquities law is valuable and does much to move antiquarianism away from its stolidly Eurocentric approach.

Real archaeology is covered in the second through fifth chapters, which detail work in Iraq from the late nineteenth century to the rise of a truly independent Iraqi archaeology in the 1940s. While passing mention is made of improvements in excavation, stratigraphy, and artifact analysis, the real focus is on modern Iraq's formation and its inhabitants' struggle to control their own heritage. Bernhardsson shines in detailing the complex diplomatic wrangles by which Iraq was brought into being and its first antiquities law created. Using the correspondence of various British government offices, museums, archaeologists both European and American, Iraqi politi-

cians, and the country's early newspapers, the author provides a comprehensive and coherent picture of archaeological compromise and conflict between a fading imperial Britain and the young Iraqi state.

Archaeology was (and remains) a powerful tool to bind the multiethnic Iraqis together, as some of the country's early leaders were not slow to recognize. This made it imperative that some sort of agreement be reached between foreign excavators and the inexperienced Iraqis, who did not start running their own projects for several decades. Bernhardtsson is excellent at describing and carefully analyzing the conflicts that quickly arose between prestige-hungry foreign excavators, a cautious British government, and Iraqi politicians balancing on a high-wire of sectarian tensions.

Two contentious issues were what percentage of finds could be exported by foreign teams and which finds were too important to let out of the country. At the center of the conflict were the directors of antiquities (foreigners until 1934) and Iraqi leaders hunting for symbols to unite a fragile nation. Such people as Gertrude Bell, who created the first Iraqi antiquities law, and Sati' al-Husri, first Iraq's director of education and later its first Arab director of antiquities, clashed frequently with each other and with archaeologists over the first right of possession of antiquities. Amid smuggling and confrontations, a series of messy compromises were worked out until Iraq assumed full control of its own archaeology and banned antiquities exports at mid-century.

Bernhardtsson attempts to end the book on an uplifting note by remarking on how far Iraqis have come in controlling every aspect of their sovereignty and suggesting that archaeology offers a way out of the current bout of sectarian strife. However, this is extremely dispiriting, for if Iraqi archaeology must remain at best a nationalist crutch rather than a field of objective scientific inquiry, it will remain tainted by politics and beyond the full control of its rightful owners.

Reclaiming a Plundered Past is highly recommended. It is an important work, one that is well-researched, scrupulously fair-minded, and could serve as a valuable supplementary text for a course on archaeological method and theory. In addition, it is an enlightening guide to a dim and ill-visited corner of Middle Eastern nationalism.

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