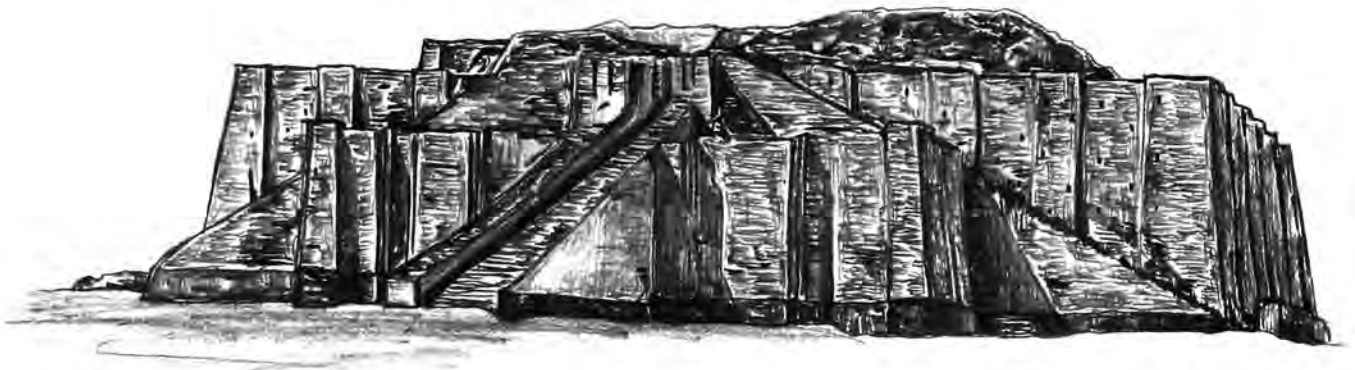


# Baghdad Museum: slowly recovering from its darkest days

The National Museum of Iraq is struggling out of the debris of war, **Theera Nuchpam** reports

**M**esopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is generally regarded as the “Cradle of Civilisation”. The land largely corresponds to modern-day Iraq, though it also covers parts of Syria and Turkey, as well as the Khuzestan Province of Iran. Spanning the Bronze and Iron Ages in history, it is the birthplace of several ancient empires, including those of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, before it came under the Persian rule, which lasted from about 550 BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when the Iranian Sassanid Empire succumbed to an Islamic conquest.

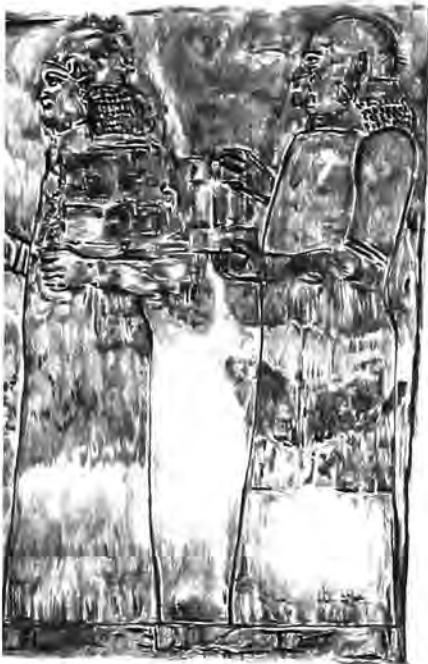


*Ziggurats of Mesopotamia*

It is the Mesopotamian civilisation that gave us writing and literature, including the first literary epic; science and technology, especially astronomy, mathematics, and medicine; and architecture, as exemplified by the Ziggurats, or the temple towers in the form of terraced pyramids of successively receding levels; and other cultural achievements.

Located near the Tigris and Euphrates, Baghdad, now the second-largest city in the Arab world (Cairo being the biggest), can rightly claim to be a modern-day centre of the Mesopotamian civilisation. This claim can also be justified by the presence in this city of the National Museum of Iraq that contains priceless relics of this civilisation.

Given the importance of this “cradle of civilisation” site with its archaeological richness, the museum’s collections are among the most important in the world. It contains invaluable artefacts from the more than 5,000-year long history of Mesopotamia in 28 galleries and vaults.<sup>1</sup>



*Khorsabad relief*

The Museum’s Assyrian Gallery, for example, is breathtaking. Stone panels from Khorsabad run along the walls. Khorsabad was the fourth capital of the Kingdom of Assyria. Located 15 kilometres to the northeast of Mosul (Iraq), the capital was built by King Sargon II (722-705 BC) as a centre of his reign.<sup>2</sup> The carvings on the friezes depict daily life in the Assyrian royal court, whose power at its height about 3,000 years ago stretched over a territory covering much of the modern Middle East. One panel depicts a distinctly regal king looking at his subjects while he is being fanned by a courtier. Another panel shows priests performing religious rites.

The carvings on the friezes are works of delicate craftsmanship, which are brought to life by the museum’s carefully placed spotlights. Once

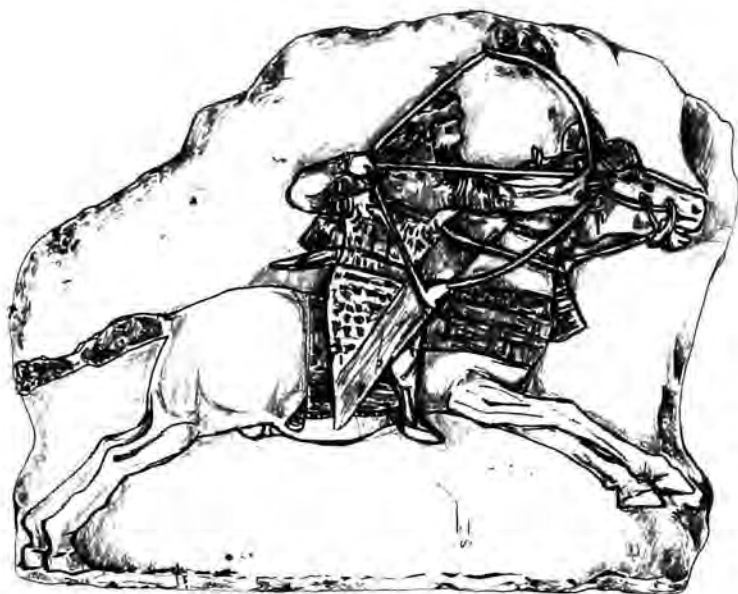
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<sup>1</sup> “National Museum of Iraq”, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Museum\\_of\\_Iraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Museum_of_Iraq)

<sup>2</sup> “Khorsabad, Iraq”, *AtlasTours.Net* <http://www.atlastour.net/iraq/khorsabad.html>

in the hall, the visitors have the impression of being transported back to ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup>

During the Gulf War in 1991, the museum was closed out of concern about U.S. air-strikes. It was not until 28 April 2000 – a birthday anniversary of former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq – that it was re-opened. However, it was accessible only to Saddam's personal friends, and thus became known as "Saddam's personal treasure chest".<sup>4</sup>



*Assyrian palace artefact*

In the months leading to the 2003 Iraq war, which started in March that year, various antiquity experts, including representatives of the American Council for Cultural Policy, asked the Pentagon and the British government to protect the museum from combat as well as looting. Having given no assurance, the U.S. forces did nevertheless avoid bombing the site.

Only a few weeks following the start of the war, all the staff left the museum, which was then used, in violation of Geneva Conventions, by the Iraqi forces in their engagement with U.S. troops. Looting took place between 8 and 12 April, when some of the museum staff members returned.<sup>5</sup> Evidence suggests that some of the thefts were the work of insiders. Although U.S. officers insisted that no American forces had been involved in the lootings, the U.S. government was criticized for doing nothing to protect the museum after its forces occupied Baghdad.

<sup>3</sup> Crispin Thorold, "Baghdad Museum's Slow Recovery", *BBC News*, 14 December 2007 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle\\_east/7144701.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/7144701.stm)

<sup>4</sup> "National Museum of Iraq", Wikipedia

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

The national collection in the museum was devastated by the looters: the only items that were saved were either too heavy to carry, like those in the Assyrian Gallery, or were being stored elsewhere at the time, like the Nimrud treasures. As a consolation, some important artefacts have been returned.<sup>6</sup>

Forty pieces were stolen from the galleries, mostly the more valuable. Thirteen of these have so far been recovered, including the three most valuable: the Sacred Vase of Warka (though broken into the original 14 pieces, i.e., in the original form when it was first excavated), the Mask of Warka, and the Bassetki Statue. Moreover, the museum's above-ground as well as underground storage rooms were also looted. Approximately 3,100 pieces were stolen from the above-ground storage rooms. These included pieces, from excavation sites, such as jars, vessels, and pottery shards. Over 3,000 of the stolen artefacts have been recovered. The theft in the underground storage compartment occurred only in a single corner of the furthest room, from which 10,000 small objects were stolen. Nearly 2,500 of the stolen items have been recovered.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, the Iraqi National Museum conducted a ceremony in Baghdad to receive about 700 artefacts that had been looted after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The returned objects included gold necklaces, daggers, clay statues and pots, which the Syrian authorities had seized from traffickers.

It was said to be the largest mass return of artefacts since 2003, and Iraq's acting state minister of tourism and archaeology was reported to have said that he would visit Jordan soon to persuade its authorities to hand back over 150 items.



*The Assyrians ruled over  
a vast empire*

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<sup>6</sup> Thorold, "Baghdad Museum's Slow Recovery"

<sup>7</sup> "National Museum of Iraq", Wikipedia



*Assyria offers a glimpse of  
ancient Iraq*

Initial reports on the extent of the looting amidst the “fog of war”, which presented the impression that the museum’s 170,000 items had been stolen, have been disputed. Although the exact figures of the losses have not yet been firmly established, official and other sources now seem to agree that 3,000 remain unaccounted for (of these, 47 were the main exhibition artefacts), along with 10,000 other items that are mostly tiny or simply fragments.<sup>8</sup> Approximately 50 of the missing artefacts are considered to be of great historic importance. The items may never be returned, and there are persistent reports that archaeological sites in Iraq continue to be looted.

Since then the museum has been undergoing challenging times. Its doors have rarely been opened. A recovery, however, has been taking place, though still very slowly. Now only small groups of visitors are being let in, and it is not yet known when the public will be allowed to return. Apart from the Assyrian Hall, the only other gallery that is open is the one containing ancient Islamic artefacts. It is not known when the whole museum will be opened.

The museum actually has many galleries, such as the Sumerian Hall, the Akkadian Hall, and the Balylonian Hall. These are unfortunately closed off from view. The city remains unsafe, even while a lot of reconstruction work has been carried out, and Baghdad’s security situation has somewhat improved. The museum director, Donny George Youkhana, fled to Syria in August 2006, because the “pressure to follow a radical Islamic agenda in the preservation of Iraqi antiquities made his position impossible” (he is now a visiting professor in the Anthropology Department of the Stony Brook State University of New York).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*



*Sculpture of ancient bull with eagle wings and human head at the Assyrian Palace*

This is perhaps why the Assyrian Hall is so stunning; indeed so impressively unexpected in Baghdad at this time. Not only is it one of only two galleries that are open to visitors to the museum, it has also undergone important renovation, including the addition of a modern arch flanked by ancient bulls with eagle wings and human heads. The arch forms the entrance to the hall,

which evokes in the visitors a sense of walking into the Assyrian Palace.<sup>10</sup>

Most significantly, it may now be one of the only few things that could give the Iraqi people, who are fiercely proud of their cultural heritage, some consolation at this time of political and social dislocations. Despite the traumatic experiences of the past several years, the National Museum of Iraq remains for many Iraqis a symbol of a glorious past, and a hope for a better future that the country so urgently deserves.

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Illustration by **Sakulchat Chatrakul Na Ayuddhaya**

<sup>10</sup> Thorold, "Baghdad Museum's Slow Recovery"