

**MESOPOTAMIA RE-VISITED**



BY  
**"MILSURGE."**





## Foreword Welcome

**Paul Collins**  
Keeper, Department of the Middle East

I am delighted to be able to introduce the Middle East Department's Newsletter for 2023. It has been another year of wide-ranging achievements reflected in the rich assortment of summaries and reports that fill the following pages. They are grouped under headings that together give a sense of the variety of work undertaken by the Middle East team: displays, working in the region, collections research, public engagement, new acquisitions and publications.

Although there is much to celebrate, I must begin by recording that our activities have been tinged by sadness. We were shocked to learn of the passing of Henrietta McCall in July. She was a close member of the Middle East 'family' who contributed not only great expertise – most especially in the historic reception of Assyria and Persia – but effortless friendship. Henrietta is much missed and we send our condolences to her husband Christopher, with whose support we will be establishing a programme of talks and studentships in her memory.

In December last year Venetia Porter retired after more than three decades at the Museum. I am delighted, however, that she maintains a strong connection with the Department as an Honorary Research Fellow. Venetia's compelling exhibition *Artists Making Books: poetry to politics* has had its run extended to the end of January 2024, which happily allows for an overlap with the publication of her new and very beautiful book on the same subject. This volume was made possible with the support of our CaMMEA patrons, for which I am extremely grateful. As I write, we are in the process of confirming the appointment of two new curators for Islamic art; among their duties will be the key role of building on Venetia's creation of the remarkable contemporary and modern Middle Eastern art collection.

Alongside the changing displays in the Islamic World gallery, the highlight of the year has undoubtedly been the outstanding exhibition *Luxury and power: from Persia to Greece*. Its curation was led by Jamie Fraser, assisted by Henro Cosmo Bishop-Wright and Kelly Accetta Crowe, and the show received rave reviews and attracted large numbers of visitors. It was an elegantly curated combination of extraordinary objects and new research set within a cross-cultural narrative. The

exhibition was accompanied by an exciting Members' study day organised by Jamie and St John Simpson and a conference led by St John, which extended the conversation beyond the Middle East to a region reaching from Scandinavia to Japan.

Jamie's achievements as an archaeologist, as well as a museum curator, have led to him accepting the prestigious post of Director of the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Jerusalem. We are of course very sorry to be losing a marvellous colleague but thrilled for him and wish him every success in his new role. One of his last publications while curator for the Levant and Anatolia was as editor with Irving Finkel and St John of a richly deserved *Festschrift* for the late Jonathan Tubb, my predecessor as Keeper of the Department and before that the curator for the ancient Levant: it contains contributions from friends and colleagues from across the Museum and beyond.

The Department's international work continues apace. Excavation and training in Iraq are producing new discoveries at Girsu led by Sébastien Rey, while St John is focusing on the analysis of his work at Kobeba. Sébastien and Nancy Highcock have also been busy in helping to craft an exhibition on the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal that will travel to venues around the world. We welcomed Mina Megalla from the National History Museum in Sofia, Bulgaria, and Twana Mamand from Salahaddin University in Erbil, Iraq, Kurdistan, for the Museum's International Training Programme, managed for the Department by Zeina Klink-Hoppe. Meanwhile, Irving travelled to Yerevan in Armenia for a week to deliver classes in cuneiform to students and colleagues in the Erebuni Museum, whose director had generously loaned objects to the *Luxury and Power* exhibition. Meanwhile, St John continues to work with UK Border Force to monitor, identify and repatriate heritage objects exported illegally to this country: the Endangered Heritage display case on the upper floor of the Museum that he curates offers insights into not only a range of looted and smuggled objects, but also how their return to their country of origin comes as a result of close co-operation with foreign embassies and international colleagues.

I will end here as the articles speak for themselves. I am indebted to St John and Irving who as editors have produced a really first-class publication, one I hope that you will enjoy and find much of interest.

A recently acquired original photograph shows how the Assyrian reliefs were originally glazed for protection (EPH-ME.9150).



## Display

### Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

#### James A. Fraser

Curator: Ancient Levant and Anatolia,  
supported by HENI, Department of the Middle East

This department has a strong reputation for creating world-class exhibitions which introduce international audiences to unexpected aspects of the cultures of Western and Central Asia: *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia* (2017), *I am Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, king of the world* (2018), *Shattered Glass of Beirut* (2022). The exhibition *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece* continued this tradition, running from 3 May to 13 August 2023 in the Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery in the Great Court. However, rather than focusing on a single region, culture or historical personality, this explored the challenging concepts of luxury and power across different societies from the Balkans to the Hindu Kush.

From about 550 BC to the conquests of Alexander the Great, this region was dominated by a single empire ruled from Iran and Mesopotamia by a dynasty of Achaemenid kings. As Iranian armies marched into Europe, they confronted a loose alliance of Greek city-states in what would become a fifty-year conflict known as the Greco-Persian Wars. Early Greek victories have been written into the pages of western history as seminal moments for the triumph of liberty and restraint over apparent barbarism and luxurious excess. This exhibition did not presume to rectify historical bias or to rehabilitate the reputation of those whom it may have maligned. Simply, it aimed to do what the British Museum does well: use objects to contextualise historical themes within the societies in which they arose. In this respect, the material world – the world of things – provides a different perspective in which we see how styles and forms were shared across ancient cultures in surprising ways despite historical boundaries.

The exhibition had three sections. The first examined the role of luxury in the Persian court and its effect upon the empire. Rather than decadent excess, a distinctive 'Achaemenid Court Style' of portable luxury goods provided a sophisticated tool of imperial statecraft. Objects such as a gilt wine-pouring rhyton featured in the exhibition marketing created a recognisable aesthetic *lingua franca* of luxury which defined rulership across the empire's diverse cultural-linguistic groups.

The second section explored how Achaemenid-style luxury was adopted in Athens, a society in which ostentatious display could betray anti-democratic or even pro-Persian sympathies. Yet over the course of the fifth century BC, increasingly wealthy Athenian citizens adapted eastern styles in innovative ways to make them acceptable within the city's democratic codes. A sard gemstone, for example, is engraved with the earliest depiction of a peacock in Europe. Peacocks were known in ancient Greece as the 'Persian bird', although they had been transported through the Achaemenid empire as items of prestige from their native homelands in India. The peacock on this seal may reference a pair of peacocks gifted to an Athenian diplomat named Ppyrilampes by an eastern ruler in the 440s BC. When he returned, this pair of fabulous, expensive and ultimately useless birds electrified the citizens of Athens, and they would screech across the city each morning from the



walled garden in which they were kept. Yet by opening his garden publicly on the new moon of each month, canny Ppyrilampes transformed his peacocks from dangerous empty vanity to an acceptable luxury shared by all.

The final section explored the Persian world under the rulership of Alexander the Great (357–323 BC) and the Hellenistic kingdoms. Alexander recognised rulership as a tool to legitimate authority, blending Iranian, Greek and local traditions into a new form of luxury, one which was neither eastern nor western but a hybrid. The Panagyurishte treasure was a star loan comprising nine exquisite gold drinking-vessels crafted in the decades following Alexander's death. Discovered in central Bulgaria in 1949, the set blends Iranian, Greek and local styles consistent with the position of Thrace – ancient Bulgaria – as a crossroads between Europe and Asia. We are deeply grateful to His Excellency Marin Raykov (Ambassador of Bulgaria) and Professor Boni Petronova (Director of the National Museum of History in Sofia) for arranging the loan. We also thank Dr Davit Poghosyan (Director of the National History Museum in Yerevan) and Dr Miqayel Badalyan (Director of the Erebusi Museum in Yerevan) for loaning four splendid Armenian objects never before seen in the UK, including an exquisite gold cloisonné pendant and a silver rhyton with the forepart representing a man in Persian riding costume.

The British Museum is one of the few museums in the world which can mount such an exhibition. Our international collections enable us to explore cultural connectivity across ancient and modern borders in ways that most cannot. In an increasingly balkanised world, it is vital that such stories of connectedness and cultural exchange are told. The Vice-President of Bulgaria, Ms Iliana Iotova, opened the exhibition on 3 May – a reminder of how the British Museum lies at the hard edge of soft diplomacy. In a speech subtly anchored in contemporary geopolitics, she reflected on the exhibition's cross-cultural themes:

*'In the anxious world of today, when instead of building bridges we build walls, we need events like this exhibition. Because it is through culture and spirituality that people are brought closer together, and this is the only path that is not mined by hatred and division.'*

The British Museum would like to thank American Friends of the British Museum, BullionVault, Julie Fitzgerald and Stephen Fitzgerald AO, and Steven Larcombe and Sonya Leydecker for their generous support of this exhibition.

The opening of the exhibition by Her Excellency Iliana Iotova, Vice-President of Bulgaria.

Installing objects in the exhibition.







## Display

### The Panagyurishte treasure: a Thracian tale of might and splendour

#### Mina Megalla

Curator, Boyana Church Museum,  
National History Museum, Sofia

The Panagyurishte treasure is celebrated as one of the most important discoveries in Bulgaria and hailed as the ultimate symbol of Thracian luxury and riches. In line with most intriguing archaeological discoveries, it was accidentally stumbled on by three brothers in 1949 near the town of Panagyurishte within a ceramic factory when they were digging clay to make bricks. Once examined by professional archaeologists and experts, it was declared a 'once in a generation discovery' and, just as in the cases of the ship burial at Sutton Hoo mound 1 or Tutankhamun's tomb, became a sensational story which linked Bulgaria with its Thracian heritage and legacy. It consists of nine gold vessels weighing 6.163 kg in all: four rhyta with animal images, three anthropomorphic jugs, a wide phiale and an amphora with handles in the form of centaur heads. The vessels are heavily decorated with embossed scenes from ancient Greek mythology.

This treasure dates to the fourth century BC and was probably commissioned for a Thracian ruler, possibly Seuthes III (circa 331–300 BC), the ruler of the Odrysian kingdom. It gave us a rare glimpse into the mysterious Thracians and their lifestyle, for what we have known about Thrace and its population came to us mainly through Greek historians' accounts and writings. Moreover, the treasure with its unusual style displays an exquisite craftsmanship which conveys both Persian and Greek elements and ironically connect two nemesis worlds often rivalling and colliding with one another.

The impact and connection were successfully highlighted through the display of the Panagyurishte treasure in the exhibition *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece*. The display of such important objects showcases the influence of cultures and civilisations on each other, as well as introducing the Thracians as a part of this story in a different light and theme. As a fellow on this year's International Training Programme at the British Museum from 1 July to 13 August, and a representative of the National History Museum in Sofia, I was privileged to witness first-hand the interaction of the public with this exhibition every time I had the chance to come and wander around the display. It was absolutely mesmerising to see the public, not only impressed by the dazzling objects but learning about the Thracians themselves. Furthermore, displaying it at the British Museum helped promote Bulgarian cultural heritage to a wider audience and public, and connected them to a region which has so much to add. Finally, although the main theme of the exhibition reflects the power of empires, it includes other populations within their orbit. Bulgaria is proud to have been part of this story and having just one layer of its many layers of its history told in this manner. This fruitful collaboration between the British Museum and the National History Museum in Sofia brought a fresh appreciation between the two institutions which encourages diversity and representation of all civilisations and cultures of the ancient world, a reminder of the importance of building bridges between nations through culture that is more than ever important right now.



Gold amphora  
rhyton.

The Panagyurishte  
Treasure.



## Display

### Persian power dressing

**Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones**  
Professor in Ancient History, Cardiff University

Early in 2022 I was invited by James Fraser to meet at the British Museum to go through the ideas he had been developing as the curator for *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece*. As we talked through the concept and viewed a pin-board covered with images of Persian items selected for display, I bemoaned the lack of textiles. This was hardly a surprise as these rarely survive from ancient Iran, apart from some exceptional examples worn by miners trapped in a salt mine at Zanzan. It was politically impossible to proceed with a proposed loan from the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, yet to stage an exhibition on Persian luxury without featuring textiles would be puzzling: after all, when we think 'Persia' at the very least we think 'carpet'.

It was therefore decided, with the enthusiastic support of Jane Bennett, Senior Project Manager for the exhibition, to do something quite new in the long history of British Museum exhibitions, namely create and display physical reconstructions of Achaemenid courtly garments. I have been researching Persian dress, as well as other types of ancient clothing, for several years and realised at once that it was the perfect opportunity to perform some experimental archaeology. I hired a skilled costume-maker, Rebecca Southall, and together we set about looking at ancient construction techniques and purchasing fabrics which best resembled the weight, feel, and look of Achaemenid textiles, and to recreate them we were fortunate to receive funding from the British Museum and British Institute of Persian Studies.

Clothing was an important element of ancient Persian court culture. Its significance could be physical, economic, social, or symbolic; and the function of clothing, moreover, was multiple. It could protect, conceal, display, or represent a person's office or state of being, and the fact that garments could wear out or tear is also important. After all, in the ancient world handmade fabrics were costly, scarce and valuable, and dyes and decoration added to their worth, so their disintegration

or loss was a serious blow to a household economy and personal wealth. The Greeks were fixated by Persian clothing, and generally regarded Achaemenid dress as beautiful, if strange. The exhibition team decided that the Greek relationship with the oddities of Persian dress could be explored as a theme too. And so, it was decided to create two types of the Persian 'look': a court robe and a riding outfit.

We constructed the court robe from a huge double-square of yellow-gold patterned lamb's wool woven by Melyn Tregwynt in West Wales and lined with blue linen. It was richly decorated with ornamented appliqué in the shape of lions' heads. These were made from resin moulds and sprayed gold to look like one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This was the costume of the Great King *par excellence* and he is represented wearing it repeatedly, whether sitting on his throne or actively fighting in battle or killing an animal (mythic or otherwise). The court robe represented Achaemenid power.

The 'riding dress' or 'cavalry costume' was made up of five items of clothing: a felt cap, sleeved coat, sleeved tunic, and trousers with built-in feet. This sort of dress was ideal for a people so dependent on horses for transportation and warfare. Much court etiquette operated around the coat, which is usually shown draped over the wearer's shoulders with the sleeves hanging loosely at the sides. Again, the lambs' wool was created by Melyn Tregwynt, and I was particularly pleased with the bold geometric patterns we used for the trousers that were based on Greek depictions.

In the exhibition space, the main garments were hung from T-bars to show the shape of their construction, but before their installation, we had the opportunity to photograph the clothes on a male model, so that we could explore drape, movement and flexibility. The whole experience, although demanding, was enlightening. The costumes seemed to speak to the visitors of the exhibition and they must have been photographed by thousands! And for me, the project was a wonderful opportunity to put research into practice and I would love to do more.



Reconstruction of a court robe.

Reconstruction of a riding costume.

Attaching the appliqué.



## Display

### Seized, conserved, displayed, returned: the story behind a Sasanian stele from Iran

#### St John Simpson

Senior curator: Ancient Iran, Central Asia and Arabia,  
Department of the Middle East

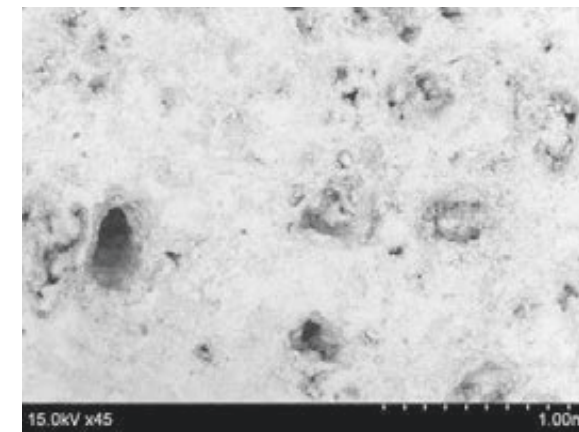
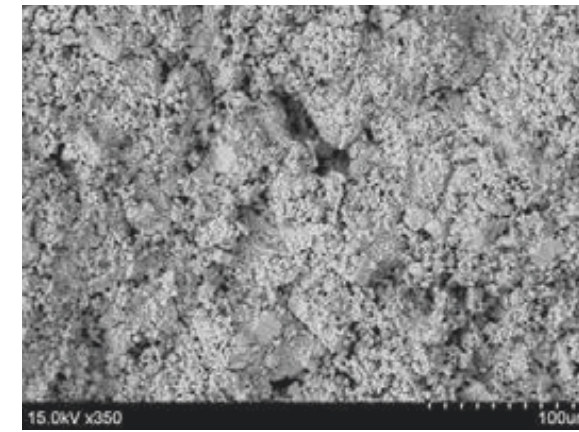
In March 2016 two Border Force officers on duty at Stansted airport were astonished to open a crude wooden crate in the FedEx section and find a broken rock relief packed face-down within. It was accompanied by an invoice from a dealer in Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), dated 10 February 1988 and with a very low valuation, and a certificate of authenticity dated 15 June 2006. The latter stated that it was Achaemenid and described specifically as showing a 'Mede nobleman, sixth–fifth century BC', with its provenance given as 'from an important Persian collector who [sic] living in the U.A.E.'. The certificate does not conform to those issued by the Chambers of Commerce in the UAE, nor is the export of antiquities permitted under Sharjah law. The crate had been sent by a private individual resident in Austria. The manifest declared its destination to be a well-known UK-based online platform, who protested



that they had no prior knowledge of it and disclaimed responsibility. Curious to know its age, Border Force contacted us for verification and likely origin, following our long-established protocol whereby the British Museum identifies any items of cultural origin that they have seized, whether in transit or entry to the UK via freight, fast parcels or personal luggage.

We immediately recognised it to be ancient and no modern fake, that it was of the Sasanian period and most likely to come from southern Iran. It represents a standing bearded male figure wearing a domed tiara with a floral diadem and ribbon ties behind, tunic over loose flowing trousers, beaded necklace, tasselled belt and beribboned shoes, leaning forward slightly as he raises the index figure of his right hand and places his left hand on the pommel of a sword slung diagonally from his belt. There is a possibility of a personal device on the centre of his tiara but surface damage to this part renders this detail unclear. The lack of an inscription prevents certain identification, but his clothing indicates him to be a person of high rank, although of nobility rather than royalty.

Scientific analysis of the stone proved it to be limestone, predominantly calcium carbonate ( $\text{CaCO}_3$ ), and containing microfossils and aerated pockets. The flat surface on the reverse had been recently cut and a thin white paint or lime-wash applied to it: some of this has seeped into the natural pores in the rock but only on the cut surface and nowhere else. The analysis proved that the object was not some form of recent resinous cast as the freshly polished reverse might otherwise suggest. This type of stone is commonplace throughout Iran, although the microfossils within it may one day give a clue to its more precise location. However, given that most of the known Sasanian rock reliefs – around thirty – are found in Fars, their ancestral homeland, its provenance is likely to be in the Shiraz region where a very similar relief is known at Guyum. That relief, still *in situ*, shows the Sasanian ruler Bahram II (reigned AD 276–293), but the present example is unique in its representation of the figure within a semi-circular topped niche framed by slender columns topped with simple volute capitals and supported by plain stepped bases. The only other Sasanian relief to have a quasi-architectural setting is that usually identified with Khusrau II (r. AD 590–628) at Taq-e Bostan, where the main figures dominate the interior and façade of a deep *eyvan* cut into the cliff, with a sufficient number of figural capitals scattered in the vicinity of what is now a tea-garden next to a modern pool to suggest the presence of a monumental complex in the near vicinity of the relief. This is also a feature of the reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam which were enclosed within a fortified enclosure in the Sasanian period. Little attention has been paid to studying the vicinity of other reliefs in order to understand their immediate spatial context, but it may be hypothesised that this relief was intended to be viewed as an integral part of a built environment similarly encompassing the cliff where it was carved. The original toolmarks preserved both around the niche and on the recessed background around the figure shows that it was worked with a tooth or claw chisel, but with no traces, even under microscopic examination, of a stucco underlay for pigment. Another feature of this carving is deliberate foreshortening of perspective, making it look disproportionate when viewed



at eye height but compensated when viewed from below. Moreover, the figure leans forward slightly and the gesture of his raised hand, a sign of greeting and submission, suggests that he was represented in front of his king, suggesting that this was part of a larger composition, with the king on the right and maybe other characters behind; but, if so, where are they and can they be re-united? The partial defacement of the figure's face and attributes, along with signs of weathering, indicate that it had been exposed to the elements for some considerable time. However, the fact that it is previously unrecorded suggests that the place where it was set may have been buried by heavy colluvial activity, perhaps after an earthquake, until being accidentally discovered, possibly through stone quarrying or construction, when the piece was carefully trimmed along the sides and thinned at the back with an industrial saw following felt-tip marks at the angles. It is not the first time that a new rock relief has been discovered: in 2002, a 4.9 m high relief thought to represent Shapur I (r. AD 240–270) hunting a rhinoceros was recorded for the first time at Rag-i Bibi, in northern Afghanistan, not far from where a French archaeological team had been excavating in the 1970s and overlooking a main road leading into Pakistan. Other reliefs are being reported from areas of Iraqi Kurdistan as archaeological teams begin systematic survey there, including new Late Assyrian reliefs near Faida, 50 km north of Mosul; in 1996 a rock-cut relief of king Nabonidus (r. 556–539 BC) was recorded for the first time at Sela in Jordan, despite the site having been known since the 1920s. Iran has had a longer history of archaeological work but new Pahlavi funerary inscriptions were discovered at sites around Persepolis as late as the 1950s, and many regions remain to be systematically surveyed.

Scanning electron microscope (SEM) image showing the natural limestone and micro-fossils.

SEM image showing the cut and whitewashed surface.

The present relief broke in half during unprofessional transit, the bottom right corner detached, with many other smaller areas of surface abrasion. Lack of care over packaging is a feature we have regularly observed in trafficked objects, and proof of how smugglers try to save costs and evade detection by using cheaper materials. An investigation was pursued by the National Crime Agency, who worked closely with ourselves and the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the next steps. Once the stele had been declared forfeit to the Crown, we received permission to conserve it. This involved correctly aligning and positioning the fragments, and joining them with stainless steel dowels as the fragments were load-bearing and too large to be joined simply with adhesive. The sections were joined with an epoxy resin, and missing areas and gaps filled with a paste of Paraloid B72 20% in IMS/acetone and micro-balloons, retouched to colour match the surrounding stone. A pad for the relief was made with acid-free card, aerated block and a paste of Paraloid B72 20% solution in IMS/acetone and an inert filler of micro-balloons, also painted with a tinted emulsion. This work was carried out by Tracey Sweek. We are indebted to a private donor for his generous support in supporting this conservation work and for covering the cost of mounting the stele on a module so that it could be safely exhibited and packed for travel.

We also received permission from the Iranian government to exhibit the stele for three months before the Embassy arranged its return direct to the National Museum in Tehran, where we are delighted to report that it was soon placed on display. It was then that the National Museum of Iran re-analysed the stone using XRF and XRD on prepared thin sections in order to quash febrile speculation on social media that the relief was a modern cast, and reconfirmed our initial findings as to the material and integrity of the joining pieces.

Many questions still remain as to where this important sculpture was found, where it was held prior to seizure, who was involved in its illegal export, and where other parts of it may still be stored. The disclosure of the details presented here may help others find the answers. The export of antiquities from Iran is still strictly prohibited, but we continue to see freshly excavated antiquities appearing in transit, along with fakes, pastiches and objects of other cultures, and so the story continues.



## Working in the Middle East

### The Girsu Project: rescue archaeology in the 'mound of the house of fruits'

**Sébastien Rey**

Curator: Ancient Mesopotamia,  
Department of the Middle East

In the spring 2023 season at Tello-Girsu (Iraq), we carried out a major rescue operation in a key area of the site, so-called Tell K. Also referred to by the first French archaeologists as the 'mound of the house of fruits', this is a large rise on the southern side of the sacred precinct of Girsu, where they explored a long sequence of structures and installations dating to the Early Dynastic period (circa 3000–2350 BC). These turned out to be the remains of successive rebuildings of the main sanctuary of the god Ningirsu before that temple was later transferred to Tell A around the end of the third millennium BC. The first extensive excavations on Tell K were undertaken by Ernest de Sarzec, who focused his attentions there in 1888/89 and again in 1899/1900. Following Sarzec's death, Gaston Cros reopened a series of trenches in and around the mound between 1903 and 1905.

These individuals have often been subjected to harsh criticism. While some is justified, it is important to remember the contexts under which they operated in this part of southern Iraq when it was under Ottoman rule and then part of the British Mandate. They faced difficulties of many kinds, including political obstacles, problems of access and transport, and extreme physical hardship. After what might be conceived as a heroic age of trail-blazing exploration and a lengthy hiatus caused by the Great War, professional archaeology resumed under the Assyriologist Henri de Genouillac and his deputy and successor, the Louvre curator André Parrot. Both were trained scholars, and they arrived with updated methodological approaches which enabled them to formulate new ideas about its history and material

culture. Genouillac was a gifted philologist, Parrot a remarkable art historian, but neither was an experienced archaeologist, and this led to the disaster of the Great Pit in Tell K, excavated between 1930 and 1931. Seeking to replicate the impressive results produced by the deep stratigraphic explorations recently carried out at nearby Ur and Kish, Genouillac and Parrot excavated an enormous trench of 800 square meters on the western slope. Their aim was to reveal a complete sequence through the occupation. An excavation of that size is gigantic by any standards, but Genouillac and Parrot compounded the catastrophe by employing an army of workers to excavate it to a depth of 14 m in just three months. The staggering volume removed represents no less than 11,200 cubic metres of archaeological deposits, but without a single plan, section or sketch to document the operation. The effects of this are felt on the archaeological site to the present day: left open since 1931, it is exposed to constant erosion and creates an enormous rift at the heart of the tell. After every thunderstorm, water runs through the wide ravines which lacerate the exposed sections and trigger section collapses each year. It leaves nothing less than a shameful open scar at the heart of the site.

In spring 2023, we carried out a rescue operation here. The primary objectives were to record collapsing sections, create measured photogrammetric models by drone, and obtain pottery, charcoal, animal bone, shell, mudbrick, soil and phytolith samples. Four areas were prioritised and the team identified superimposed mudbrick platforms and a possible precinct wall belonging to the old sanctuary of Ningirsu, dating back to the beginning of the third millennium BC. A pit dug into a mudbrick platform was also visible, containing the remains of an articulated cow/bull (*Bos taurus*), and thought to be a



foundation offering. The pottery suggests that occupation here spanned over a millennium. Bevelled rim bowls and so-called 'flowerpots' characterise the Late Uruk period (circa 3500–3000 BC), followed in the Early Dynastic I period (circa 3000–2650 BC) by solid footed goblets, ledge rim jars and reserved slip jars. The final period of occupation dates to the Early Dynastic III period (circa 2650–2350 BC), and characterised by conical beakers and conical bowls.

This excavation is a perfect example of what can be achieved in the field using new technologies and non-intrusive archaeological techniques. It shows the huge potential of the site: the Girsu Project team will obtain the first sequence of contextualised radiocarbon dates spanning the third millennium BC in southern Iraq. Moreover, the phytoliths, bones and shells are expected to shed new light on the environmental setting and climate of the site within this part of southern Mesopotamia.

The current phase of the Girsu Project is generously supported by Getty.



General view  
of Tell K.

Recording the  
animal foundation  
deposit.





## Working in the Middle East

### New archaeological discoveries and collaborations in southern Iraq: the latest news from Kobeba

#### St John Simpson

Senior curator: Ancient Iran, Central Asia and Arabia, Department of the Middle East

The site of Kobeba is located in southern Iraq, near the town of al-Rifa'i and 70 km north of Nasiriyah. This region is now the epicentre of archaeology in southern Iraq, with more expeditions working here than ever before in the history of the country. However, this is the only project to be exploring the so-called 'late periods' of the Sasanian and early Islamic periods, and with unexpected results also from the Protoliterate (Jemdet Nasr) period of circa 3000–2900 BC.

Kobeba was first investigated archaeologically in October–December 2021 under a permit issued to the author by the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and supported by the Museum's Research Board and Friends of the Middle East. I returned there in November 2022 to follow up with a study season. This was also a chance to deliver invited lectures at the Universities of Sumer and al-Qadisiyah, carry out excavations aimed at addressing key questions raised by the first season, and deliver new forms of on-site training and skills sharing. The latter are part of our long-term commitment to help build capacity for the future of Iraqi archaeology. The training was delivered on-site and aimed at young male and female inspectors in order to help build practical sustainable skills which do not require expensive equipment and ease them into a working environment of which they had no prior experience as the women had not previously worked outside their office. These included the drawing of archaeological plans and sections at different scales, with explanation as to why different scales are appropriate for different features or occasions; recording and excavation of deposits, cuts and structures; and the recording and drawing of large objects, including rotary querns, industrial remains and worked brick. This was also an opportunity to recognise vitrified clay waste from the production of 'synthetic basalt' querns, and distinguish it from ground stone; other object classes; understand the basics of geoarchaeological sections, and how and why

to sample deposits for different purposes. It is hoped that this approach can be extended in future to workshops or 'master classes' to larger groups of SBAH employees and university students.

The excavation aims were to complete one sounding to virgin soil (Trench 7), excavate below the latest period of occupation on the summit in order to understand the transition from Sasanian to early Islamic occupation at the site (now designated Trench 8), complete excavation of primary room deposits and the plan of some rooms belonging to the latest period on the summit (Trench 1), and excavate a contemporary archaeological horizon buried in ancient marsh deposits in fields beyond the site (Trench 5). All objectives were met.

The sounding in Trench 7 reached virgin clay at a depth below surface of 3.15 m. The lowest 2.10 m of stratigraphy belongs to the Jemdet Nasr period, and is the earliest occupation at the site. A kiln and unfired clay remains of a solid-footed goblet with a string-cut base discarded by the potter prove pottery production here. Other finds included circular ring scrapers used to thin the walls of pottery jars before firing, a fan scraper made from a modified sherd, a small polished bone celt and a pebble polisher, all probably part of the potters' tool assemblage. The other pottery included solid-footed goblets, coarse conical bowls, ledge-rim jars, conical-spouted jars decorated with cordons around the shoulder, and sandy reddish jars with ledge lug handles attached immediately below the rim. Some other lightly sooted sherds with a brittle reddish-brown fabric may represent cooking wares. The solid-footed goblets were invariably red in colour, with string-cut bases measuring between 3 and 4 cm across and clearly thrown from the hump, a technique well suited to the rapid manufacture of small to medium vessels. These were usually slightly lopsided, wet-smoothed, and sometimes with the potters' fingerprints left as impressions in the wet clay on the exterior, and it is easy to see why they are usually regarded as a single-use successor to the Late Uruk bevelled rim bowl, and their shape would have made them rather difficult

Excavations on the summit of Kobeba, with a bread oven and other features contemporary with the massive wall of a seventh century building (left) and the latest early Islamic level being excavated above.

Pottery from the Jemdet Nasr period at Kobeba.





to clean within. Whereas some of these types have previously been regarded as solely Early Dynastic I (circa 2900–2700 BC), the presence of painted Jemdet Nasr pottery throughout the same contexts calls into question the typological classification originally developed for another part of Iraq in the 1930s. This suspicion has been supported by independent new results of an Italian excavation at the site of Zurghul, south-east of Kobeba, and a combined re-evaluation of the pottery evidence from these, as well as old, projects is now anticipated.

Small fragments of bitumen were found in these deposits, often with reed impressions on one surface. One use of this substance was to mend broken pottery vessels, as attested by a fragment of a bowl which had broken in antiquity and been repaired with smears of

bitumen along both surfaces. The bitumen was most likely from Hit, on the middle Euphrates, but exported samples will allow us to test this hypothesis through a PhD studentship jointly supervised at the Museum and the University of Warwick, whose focus of research will be on the history of practice and economics of bitumen use in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

The outstanding find from the Jemdet Nasr period was a sherd which had been carefully incised after firing with a pictographic inscription. Traces of up to three signs were preserved and, judging by the almost total lack of curvature, were inscribed onto the outside of a large jar. It clearly belongs to the Protoliterate phase of writing in Iraq. The meaning eludes us but must reflect the function of the container. This discovery shows that writing, even

at this very formative stage before the development of cuneiform, was not limited to major cities as pictographic writing was easier to comprehend and may have been used more widely than we suspect.

We know extraordinarily little archaeologically about the small and medium sites in southern Iraq, at any period in fact, as archaeologists have tended to only focus on the remains of large towns and cities. The discovery of tools, complete and reconstructable pottery and proof that it was an important settlement at the beginning of the third millennium BC and at the beginning of the urban revolution in Iraq. It is not *per se* surprising that pottery was being made here at that date as most substantial settlements in Iraq from the Ubaid period onwards were probably largely self-sufficient for their pottery needs,

but finding discarded unfired clay pottery and tools used by the potters is confirmation of the identification of installations and ash deposits as part of this, rather than being domestic ovens.

Deposits corresponding to the later third, second or first millennia BC have not been found *in situ*, but may be limited to the central spine of the site where the mounding is highest, and below the lowest excavated part of Trench 8. The modest height of the mound of Kobeba implies that this site was not continuously occupied, unlike bigger urban sites. Instead, its inhabitants may have moved according to the availability of water and fresh land, and re-settled it at periods thereafter as its raised position protected it from flooding. Urban sites had too much invested in their infrastructure and prestige to



Excavating a stratified marsh deposit next to the site of Kobeba.





be abandoned in such a manner, moreover their rulers often possessed the resources to move the water to the settlement, rather than vice versa. Punctuated, as opposed to continuous, sequences are probably therefore the norm for small to medium sites across the Mesopotamian alluvium and, in this respect, similar to the situation in the dry farming zone of northern Mesopotamia where only a handful of major sites appear to have been occupied continuously for millennia.

The Sasanian occupation hinted at by surface or redeposited finds in 2021 is more deeply stratified than previously suspected, and a sounding now designated Trench 8 shows that this period is overlaid by as many as three building phases of the post-Sasanian and early Islamic periods. The first of these has more massive construction, and it is possible that small fragments of architectural gypsum plaster found in secondary contexts above derive from this period as they appear incompatible with the excavated architecture of the latest phases. The latest two building phases share wall alignments and belong to similar types of domestic architecture, implying strong continuity between these phases, but the small mosque discovered in the first season was only added in the final phase. This raises questions over the religious beliefs of the previous inhabitants and the process of Islamisation.

The Kobeba sequence is now one of the few to show the transition from the Sasanian to Islamic periods, and therefore very important in showing what the change from one period might have been like. It provides a rare opportunity to distinguish Sasanian from early Islamic pottery which is important for re-evaluating the validity of those types previously used to distinguish sites of these periods. It also indicates clear changes in building types between the Sasanian, post-Sasanian and final two building phases, indicating differences in the architectural organisation during these periods and possible breaks or disruptions in occupation at this key transition moment. It shows that the site still has considerable potential and the results from this last season show how much can be achieved, even with a limited budget, if aims and objectives are clear and focused.

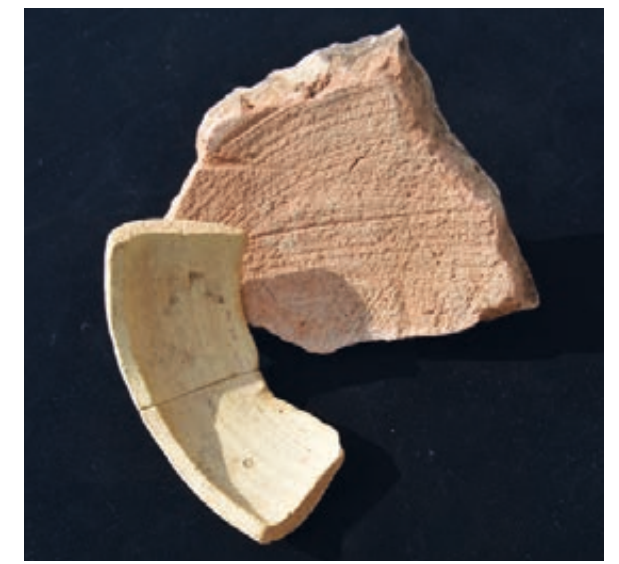
During many, if not all, periods, the inhabitants of Kobeba turned their hand to making objects, and there is evidence for pottery making in the Jemdet Nasr and Sasanian periods, working of copper alloy in the Sasanian period, and small-scale glass-working in the early Islamic period, perhaps for beads, as several ingots, chunks, flakes and molten droplets of glass have been found in Trench 7 and on the surface. It was also during this period that the inhabitants specialised in the production of rotary querns using a high-temperature firing of clay to create vitrified blocks which were chiselled and flaked into their final form. The debitage of this industry litters the site around the edges and it is likely that these areas were the industrial zone, while occupation was limited to the central part. The looting of the site in 2003 targeted the industrial zone, probably because of its higher density of ash, leaving the main part of the site untouched, and a similar looting pattern has been observed by the author at other sites in the vicinity. The date of origin of this highly specialised pyrotechnology is not clear but clearly very ancient. It is not yet clear whether the industry existed at Kobeba before the Islamic period. However, it can now be confirmed that this industry was thriving in the Sasanian period as fragments of rotary querns have been found in earlier contexts and, more importantly, now recorded by the author on the surface of the Sasanian mounds at Kish where there was also evidence for its manufacture.

It is often said that Mesopotamia has no resources and therefore had to rely on trade. This view is much too simplistic and overlooks the rich and varied environmental resources that were to hand, and how earth and water literally provided everything to build, roof, grow, harvest, and adapt. The 'synthetic basalt' industry offers another case of Mesopotamian engineering and problem-solving, showing how Kobeba must have played an important role in a complex network of supply of rotary querns and other manufactured goods to settlements in its hinterland, fulfilling a role as it had done many millennia before with the production of pottery in the Jemdet Nasr period.

Finally, one of two geoarchaeological test trenches excavated away from the site last year indicated the presence of pottery identical to the final period at Kobeba

in a layer stratified within a sequence of marsh and natural soil deposits. During this season, it was decided to apply an archaeological approach to this situation, and an area of 200 sq m was excavated in order to explore this deposit in plan: exceptional permission was granted in Baghdad as it was essential to use a mechanical excavator for this purpose. The results proved that this layer of pottery and shell was very extensive as it extended beyond the trench in all directions, was horizontal, lay at the top of an ancient marsh deposit some 1.60 m below present plain level, and was sealed by a thick clay layer which demonstrated that the marsh later dried up. One hypothesis was that this layer therefore belonged to the refuse of a 'marsh Arab' settlement close to Kobeba which used the same type of pottery as the main township but was abandoned when the marsh dried. However, no features, such as post-holes, were observed in these excavated deposits, there was almost no animal bone, and the horizontal uniformity and extent of the deposit now raise a second hypothesis: that this refuse was discarded here following large-scale clay extraction to service the requirements of the quern manufacturers at nearby Kobeba.

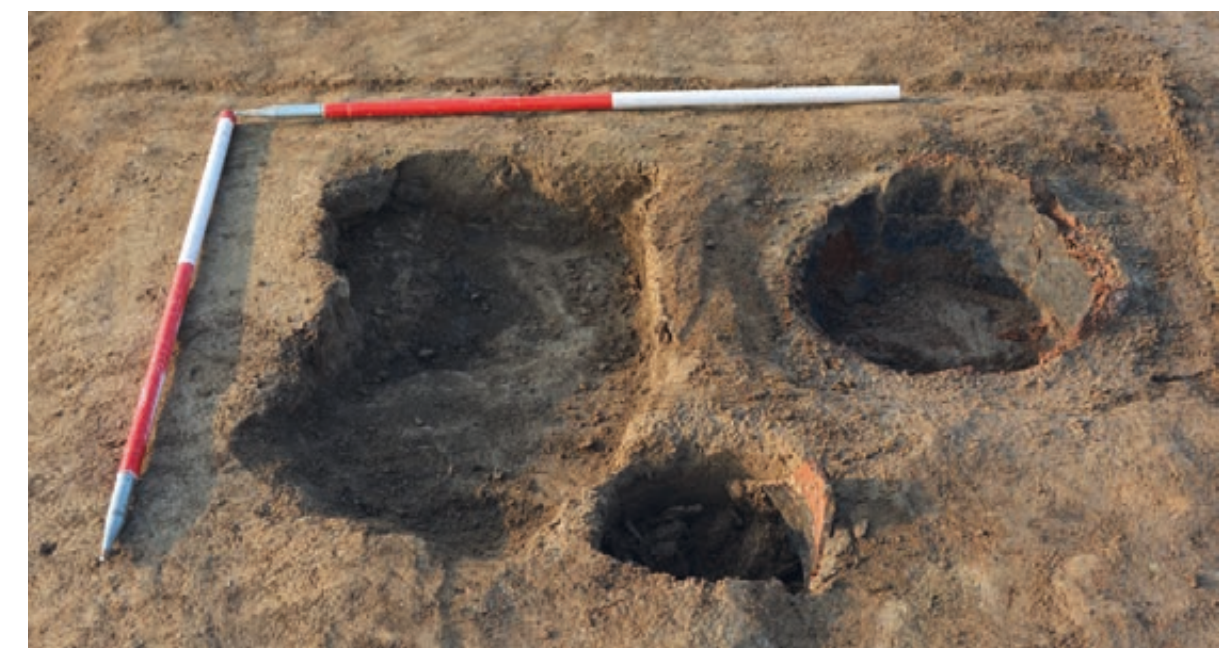
The fact that this sequence shows that the marsh deposits were followed by stiff clay also offers an explanation for the end of occupation at Kobeba, namely that if the occupants in the final period were closely tied to a marsh economy, the drying of the wetland spelled doom for the inhabitants and they may therefore have simply abandoned the site. This would explain why complete and perfectly serviceable objects were left *in situ* on floors of the latest period of occupation, as demonstrated by the excavations in 2021. Refining the dating indicated by pottery stratified at the top of the marsh horizon through a combination of optically stimulated luminescence [OSL] and radiocarbon dates is now planned. Man and environment are closely connected, and always have been. In the case of southern Iraq, water has always been critical to the development and survival of permanent occupation, and settlement has shifted dynamically across the alluvial plains in response to changes in water management.



This pattern is highly relevant today. It shows the resilience and adaptability of long-term occupation in Iraq, and how many small and medium sites were occupied and abandoned periodically rather than being occupied continuously like the cities.

This finally brings us to the environmental economy of Kobeba. I am hugely grateful to the authorities in Baghdad for allowing the export of samples from the first season. These included copper alloy, glass and bitumen for scientific analyses as collaborations with the Universities of Cambridge, Cranfield and Warwick. The animal bone, seeds, charcoal and pollen are being analysed in collaboration with the CNRS, National Museum of Natural History (Paris), Max Planck Institute and the University of Durham in a systematic environmental programme for periods not previously attempted in southern Iraq or, more surprisingly, even attempted at many ancient sites in the region.

This latest season was entirely supported by the Friends of the Middle East to whom we are very grateful.



Pottery ring scraper and the inside of a jar showing identical marks made in production.

Ovens and a hearth in an early Islamic house



On certain forged Babylonian tablets

Irving Finkel

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Forged cuneiform tablets have bedevilled collectors since the far-off days of Claudius James Rich, whose collection assembled in the 1830s already included spurious examples of both tablets and barrel cylinders. As with the Rich specimens, the majority of nineteenth century cuneiform forgeries were produced with the help of impressions from real inscriptions using Iraqi clay, and in many cases can only be detected by an experienced cuneiformist.

In 1970 the late Professor Erle Leichty (1933–2016), afterwards a great cataloguer of our own tablet collections, published an article about a group of 120 fragments of forgeries which he had recently encountered in the University Museum at Pennsylvania. These objects (CBS 192-311) had been purchased as a group from the shop of the Baghdadi antiquities dealer Joseph Mordecai Shemtob in London on 21 July 1888 by a youthful Robert Francis Harper (1864–1914). The inscriptions showed them to be Neo-Babylonian legal and economic documents, but he recognised that these particular texts exhibited unexpected features:

- there were many duplicates
- many duplicated published texts in the British Museum, for example, the obverse of CBS 192 obverse duplicates BM 41402 (a court case concerning a slave, reign of Nabonidus), while the reverse duplicates BM 41399 (a field-sale contract, reign of Neriglissar)
- many of the double-sided fragments turned the wrong way in comparison with ancient texts, i.e. from left to right instead of from top to bottom, and some even at right angles

At first these had been considered an unusual and mysterious type of school text. Further examples in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Free Library in Philadelphia showed similar characteristics. Those in Chicago had also been purchased from Shemtob in London by Reginald Campbell Thompson (1876–1941), himself once of the British Museum, and presented by him in 1908. These exhibit a range of peculiarities comparable to the Philadelphian material, with the difference that many were complete. The Yale Babylonian collection includes both complete and fragmentary Shemtob casts of this type. It was only when certain of the Chicago pieces fell into two halves, as recorded in 1970, that their true nature, as forgeries moulded from genuine tablets, became apparent.

Further examination suggested a plausible picture. Since casting tablets in the round was obviously less straightforward, obverse and reverse were produced separately, fused together, trimmed and bevelled at the edges, with seal impressions sometimes added to enhance authenticity and disguise the seams. When casting was less successful, it was thought, the forger simply cut away the un-fused portion and sold the remainder as a fragment. For greater realism the forger

could sometimes apply a thin black slip to his best pieces, imitating real tablets in his possession. The Philadelphia forgeries were less carefully finished than the Chicago examples, with mould marks still visible. The picture here is something of a smooth-running cottage industry, with access to and familiarity with real tablets, and the right sort of clay to produce a convincing result.

Surprising confirmation of this picture is provided within T.G. Wakeling's book, *Forged Egyptian Antiquities*, thanks to information supplied by George A. Reisner (1867–1942), Egyptologist and Assyriologist, whom Wakeling knew personally in Egypt:

*'On another occasion, Dr. Reisner tells us, 'I was once looking through the stock of a dealer, now dead. Suddenly I caught sight in the back of a drawer of what appeared to be a Babylonian object. The dealer, who happened to know that I have some knowledge of Babylonian antiquities, was very reluctant to show me the object, protesting openly that it was a forgery. I persuaded him, however, and he produced a dozen or more very beautifully made Babylonian sculptures, but all perfectly impossible. He said that he received them from a Persian, an agent who came through Cairo every year, and left him a certain number of pieces to sell on commission. I tried to buy one of these pieces, offering as high as £5 for it, against the £40 he demanded, but he refused. When I came back in the spring, he told me with a grin that he had sold them all at his own price to various travellers.*

*I afterwards learned the forger's name, and that he lived in Baghdad, from an excavator who had been working in Mesopotamia. This man also forged cuneiform tablets, and I have seen examples of his work in other shops in Cairo besides the one I have mentioned. He first began his forgery of the cuneiform tablets by making moulds of the two sides, pressing clay into the moulds and sticking the two halves together before baking. These forgeries were always discernible by the shallowness of the little wedges of which the writing is composed. This seems to have been pointed out to him, for after a time he began going over these tablets with a pointed stick before baking, and thus deepening the wedges. Finally, with the practice thus gained, he even went so far as to copy tablets freehand; and I even know of at least one large tablet in a European museum which he made freehand without any tablet to copy from. It has all the appearance of one of the great tablets from the temple at Telloh, but the writing has no meaning'* (Wakeling 1912: 122–24).

In June 1988 I discovered a group of 74 further examples of such forgeries here in the British Museum, buried out of the way at the bottom of a wooden crate which contained three layers of objects, effectively kept distinct by folded sheets of strong cartridge paper:

- layer 1: quantities of small or very small fragments of real Babylonian tablets, some marked as belonging to the Rassam 1881,1103, 1883,0118 and 1882,0918 tablet collections, including pieces of school, lexical, business and administrative texts, letters and miscellaneous others



A box of assorted fragments of forgeries.



- layer 2: quantities of small or very small fragments of real Babylonian tablets, some marked as belonging to the Rassam 1882,0918 collection, of matching categories to level 1. Other fragments marked SH (for Shemtob); three upward-stray Leichty-type forgeries from layer 3b below, and a label in the writing of T.G. Pinches – who knew long before his colleagues in America what was what when it came to cuneiform on clay – for he stated, in decisive script: 'Forgeries. Fragments of casts of tablets made in the East'
- layer 3a: '4,700 K fragments' from Nineveh, originally in a green box
- layer 3b: the other 69 Leichty-type forgeries

All examples in the British Museum are fragments rather than complete tablets, although, if mixed up with real sources, they could easily mislead readers even today. At least four authentic British Museum tablets have been identified, thanks to Cornelia Wunsch, as having engendered these forgeries:

- BM 41399 (1881,0625.10); 5R 67,1
- BM 41402 (1881,0625.13); *Nbn* 13
- BM 41406 (1881,0625.17); *Nbn* 178; dupl. BM 33089 (1879,0419.1)
- BM 41454 (1881,0625.65); ZA 3 150

By the end of 1897 Pinches was already acting on behalf of Lord Amherst of Hackney, who was then building up his substantial collection of cuneiform tablets. Seven cases of tablets at that time were on offer from the agent W.T. Burbush, of Castle Bromwich near Birmingham, who, in partnership with a Mr Menni, acted for the Baghdad firm of A. Messayah and A. Auraha. Lord Amherst wonders in the surviving correspondence whether forgeries were included among them, suggesting that he had been bitten once before, and was informed in reply by Pinches that there were some 45 forgeries in box 4, and two in boxes 1–3. Burbush wrote:

*'With regard to the business part I must acknowledge my disappointment at your report, and that there should be so many forgeries, verily these Eastern people are beyond belief mongers'* (letter dated 30th December 1897).

Here fakes were added in the chain between Baghdad and London, confirming the process implied by the

preceding discussion, and in this case Messrs Messayah and Auraha, if not they themselves, salted forged specimens among the genuine in their bumper export bundles. Although the Burbush fakes have disappeared from sight, their very number makes the same efficient workshop likely. The well-oiled system did not stop there. BM 88472 (1901,0209.189), another example of this workshop or its technique, came to the British Museum in 1901, twenty years later, among tablets collected from the Paris-based Iraqi dealer Ibrahim Elias Géjou (1868–1942), who also supplied a cast of the real tablet BM 41402, in unbaked clay and considerably smaller than the original, to the Rijksmuseum in Leiden (numbered LKA 1158). Further examples no doubt exist in many collections that originated in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

The master copies which could generate ample 'descendants' out of Iraqi clay must have been prepared from or at least starting with the originals before they were sold on by Shemtob in London to the British Museum and elsewhere, in the case of our specimens certainly before June 1881. It is a thousand pities that Wakeling did not record for us the name of his Iraqi tablet forger. The forgeries hidden away in the munitions box must have arrived at the British Museum mixed up in one of Shemtob's consignments, only to be firmly weeded out prior to registration. We can hardly establish at this point whether Shemtob himself promoted the fake side of the trade, and whether he knew that some of the plenteous material passing through his hands was spurious, for, as Leichty admitted, 'because of the high quality of the clay used and ... the fact that the forgeries are actually casts rather than copies, the tablets appear to be absolutely authentic on first impression.' Harper (in 1888) and Campbell Thompson (before 1908) were certainly taken in by them but Shemtob was not responsible for their manufacture himself, as originally suggested by Leichty, nor were they made in the last century by a British Museum conservator for private resale, as he later, rather wildly, proposed.

In 1984, Leichty is quoted by M. deJ. Ellis as being 'of the opinion that the casts he described in *Expedition* 12 (1970) 17–21, both those at the University Museum and the very different-appearing ones in the Oriental Institute. Casts of certain tablets in plaster were sometimes produced for sale in the British Museum by members of the Ready family, but



their productions bear no resemblance at all to the commercially-led, bulk-buy, mould-formed forgeries under discussion, and this second suggestion can be rejected out of hand'.

There is no question that the original tablets from which the copies derived were supplied by Shemtob, but we can doubt that he himself promoted the fake side of the trade, knowingly or unknowingly. Shemtob was much respected by Pinches, and too canny and experienced a dealer to endanger his secure business relationship by such activities. Such evidence as we have suggest that the forgeries were produced in Iraq and, while the Babylonian sculptures which so impressed Reisner were probably moulded figurines, whose production using local clay would resemble the process used to make new cuneiform tablets.

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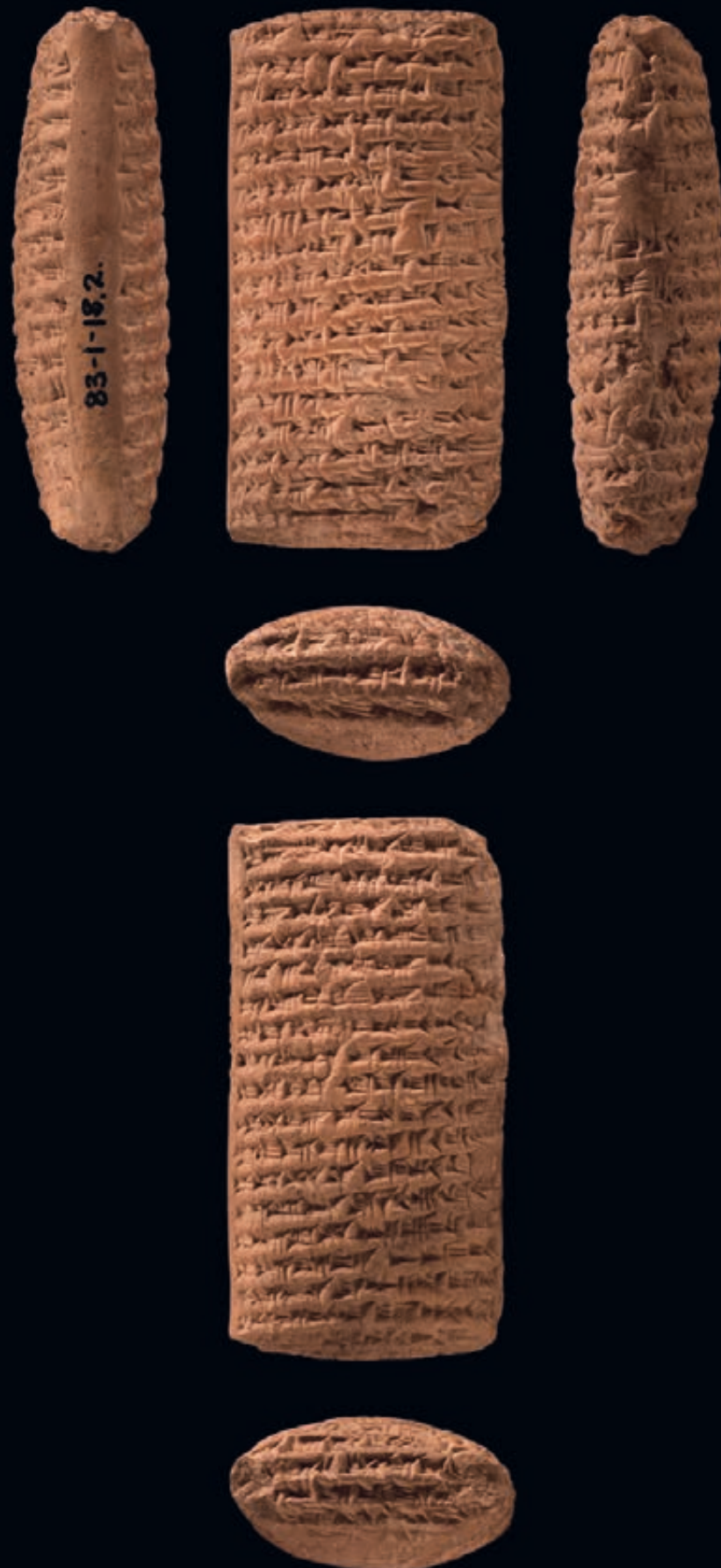
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BM 41402 and three forged 'duplicates'.

BM 41399 and six forged 'duplicates'.





"The king, my lord, keeps on saying to me: "Why do you not diagnose the nature of this illness of mine and bring about its cure?": text from a letter sent by the chief physician Urad-Nanaya to Esarhaddon regarding the nature of the king's disease.

Gold amulet depicting the dog of the healing goddess, Gula, from Kish, circa 700–500 BC.

## Collections and context

### Introducing Assyrian medicine: the Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia Project

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Among the remains of the great 'Library of Ashurbanipal' are clay tablets detailing an intriguing facet of Mesopotamian medicine: therapy. These texts, along with other compositions containing information about diagnostic and prognostic practices, physiognomy, and the healing properties of substances, constitute a rich and varied corpus; a kind of medical library assembled by Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–circa 630 BC), king of Assyria at his capital, Nineveh. We still do not understand exactly what lay behind Ashurbanipal's preoccupation with the medical profession. Was it because he had to witness his mighty father, Esarhaddon (reigned 681–669 BC), finally succumb to a sickness which had plagued his existence for well over a decade? Whether it was this particular experience or some other reason that drove Ashurbanipal's fascination with medicine, we have him to thank for creating the most standardised, structured and systematised corpus of medical literature prior to the first Greek medical treatises.

Boasting a total of around 13,000 lines, around the same length as the *Odyssey* and organised into twelve interconnected treatises comprising fifty chapters, the 'Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia' represents the centrepiece of Ashurbanipal's medical collection. This was an impressive compendium of information, a great achievement even by his standards, which immortalised his accomplishment in the form of a colophon written at the end:

*'The pinnacle of scholarship, which work none of the kings who went before me learnt, prescriptions (organised) from the head to the (toe)nail, gleanings from extraneous materials, technical lore (and) whatever pertains to the greatest medical expertise of Ninurta and Gula, I have written on tablets, checked and collated, and deposited in my palace for my reading and recitation.'*

This colophon was devised specifically for the Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia, and in it Ashurbanipal relates the circumstances of producing it. We learn that human

anatomy provided the structural framework. Dedicated to healing the entire body, each treatise centres on diseases affecting a specific part of the body. Moving from head to toenails, they include plant- and mineral-based remedies, medical incantations, healing rituals, and drug inventories for treating the head (1) in general and different parts of the head area in particular: eyes (2), ears (3), neck (4), nose (5), and mouth (6). Then the text turns to the rest of the body. The remainder collect prescriptions against respiratory (7), gastro-intestinal (8) and abdominal (9) diseases, as well as against the ailments of the renal (10) and rectal (11) areas of the body, and finally the legs (12).

Established by the most seasoned scribes at the Neo-Assyrian royal court in the seventh century BC, the Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia was the culmination of a 2,000-year Mesopotamian medical tradition. We are now reconstructing and editing it to make it freely and fully accessible to anyone interested in the early history of medicine. This is a major undertaking, considering that as many as 6000 lines are available and can be read today. In the course of a three-year project, generously funded by the Wellcome Trust in the form of a Research Resources Award, we have been identifying the broken fragments of the composition, piecing the tablets back together, and producing open-access online editions with plain English translations. Now we can all read Ashurbanipal's deluxe edition of the Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia at <http://oracc.org/asbp/ninmed/>.

The Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia project is supported by the Wellcome Trust.





Collections and context  
**Reading beneath the lines**

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 Scientist, Department of Scientific Research

**Daniel O'Flynn**  
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The Museum holds and curates one of the world's most important collections of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform writing. Traditionally, scholars have focused on the writing itself, and the texts reveal rich details of life during the first two-thirds of recorded history. The material on which the texts were inscribed – the clay tablets themselves – has received less attention, due to a divide in specialisations. Archaeologists excavate tablets, but are rarely trained to read them. The tablets are passed to an Assyriologist, who can read the text, but is seldom trained in archaeological approaches. Valuable information is missed in this way. More recently, however, attempts have been made to exploit material aspects of tablets to understand how and where they were made. In 2019, we developed a pilot project with Jon Taylor to study tablets from the famous library of Ashurbanipal, and perhaps the world's first attempt to assemble all serious knowledge. By detecting groupings within this vast body of some 32,000 surviving tablets and fragments, we can learn vital information such as how the library was assembled, and where the tablets came from. After a pause due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we completed the pilot in 2022 and published our results.

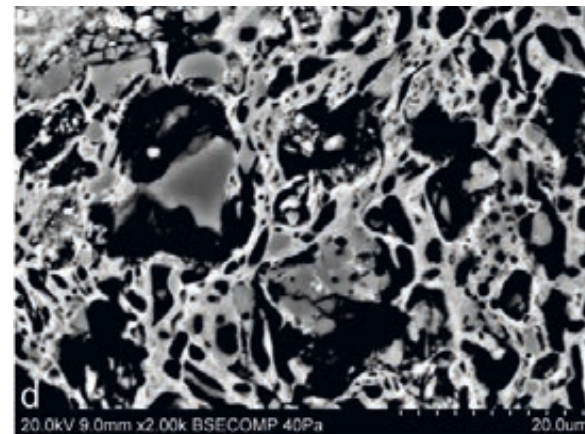
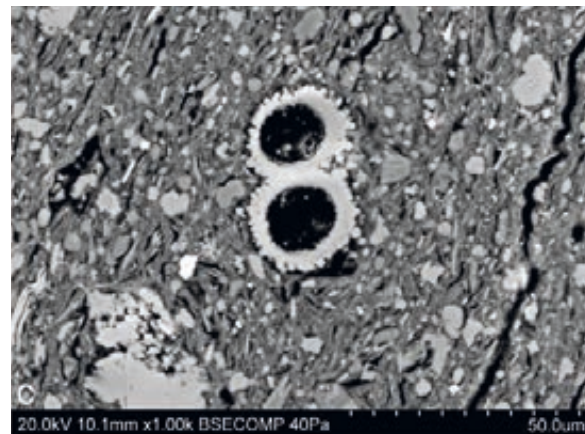
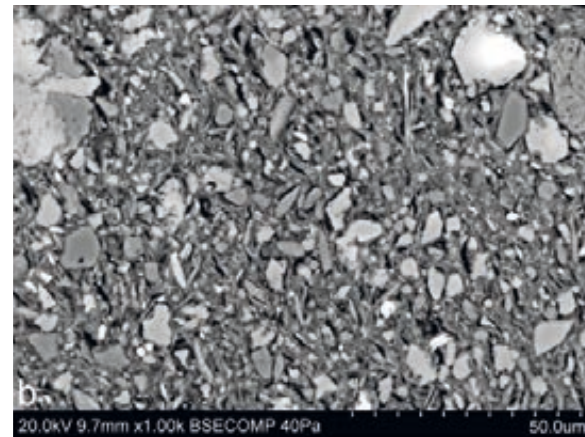
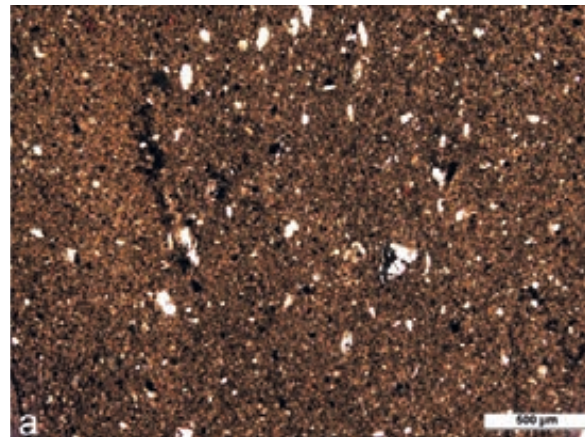
X-ray computed tomography [CT] scanning creates a three-dimensional view of the internal structure of an object, formed after acquiring many X-ray images from

different angles. The image contrast in a CT scan of a tablet relates to the different densities of the materials present inside, allowing dense materials (such as mineral inclusions) and voids (from the prior presence of organic material) to be distinguished from the surrounding clay matrix.

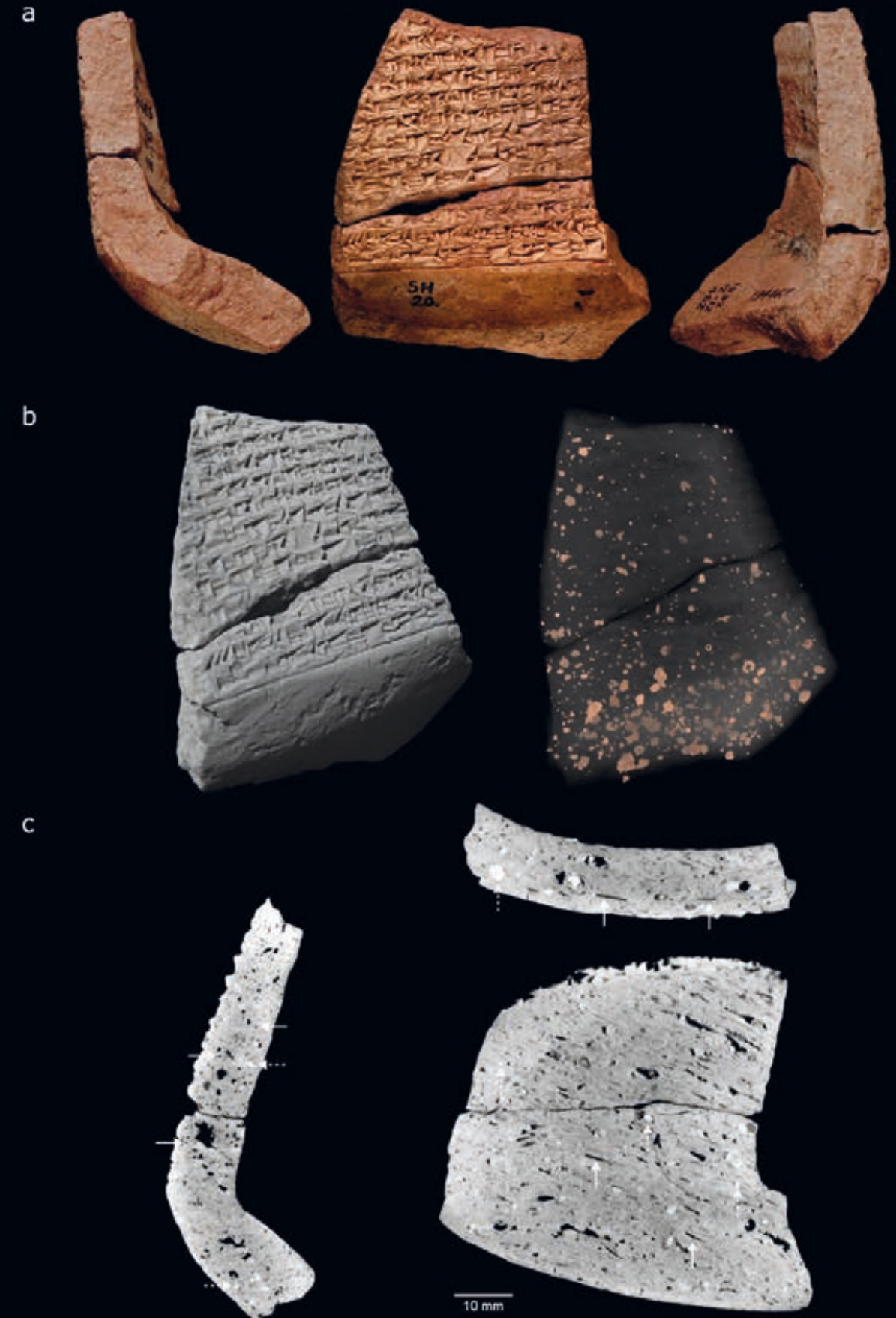
To examine how the tablets were made, we sampled twenty objects of different types from Nineveh, Nimrud (both Iraq) and Tell Halaf (Syria), by cutting off a <0.5cm slice in an inconspicuous location. The slices were prepared as thin sections glued to microscopy glass slides and ground to a thickness of circa 0.03mm. Polarised light microscopy of these tell us about raw material selection and processing, any surface treatments applied, and allow an estimate of the firing temperature. SEM-EDX [scanning electron microscope with energy-dispersive spectrometry] measures the chemical composition of clays and mineral inclusions, and provides a better understanding of firing conditions.

Most tablets were found to be made from well-prepared and levigated clays; some were tempered with plant matter, a few were made from untreated clays, and some had polished surfaces. All were baked: those from Nineveh at over 800°C, perhaps in the fires that consumed the Assyrian palaces in 612 BC. Our results suggest that groupings within the library will be illuminating. Building on the success of our pilot study, this year we will be joined by a Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow, who will undertake an intensive two-year study of the tablets from the library.

Photomicrograph of (a) thin section of a tablet from Nineveh showing a levigated fabric; scanning electron microscope (SEM) images of (b) the same tablet at high magnification; (c) of a low-fired tablet with a microfossil from Nineveh and of (d) a highly-fired Babylonian letter from Nineveh.



X-ray imaging of a tablet:  
 a) photographs; b) X-ray CT volume renders, revealing dense mineral inclusions (highlighted in orange); c) X-ray CT slice images in side, top and front views, revealing voids from organic matter (solid arrows) and mineral inclusions (dashed arrows).





**Materialising the lost textiles of Late Assyrian palaces**

**Nancy Highcock**

Curator: Ancient Mesopotamia,  
Department of the Middle East

The ancient sensory experience of an Assyrian palace would have encompassed a rich spectrum of colours, light and shadow, noises, smells, materials and textures. While few traces of these experiential aspects are present in the archaeological record, others may be partially reconstructed from iconographic and textual evidence. One such feature of Assyrian palaces, and indeed of the wider interconnected world of the ancient Near East, is textiles. A vital component of local and interregional exchange, textiles such as upholstery, wall hangings, blankets, and rugs would have brought colour and comfort. The intricate patterns and fine craftsmanship of these soft furnishings were material reminders of the king's wealth and control over far-flung trade routes and places.

One object type often considered a proxy for now lost carpets and tapestries is the elaborately carved stone thresholds that appear in the late eighth and seventh century BC palaces of the royal capitals at Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh. There are four of these in the British Museum collection, three currently displayed in the Assyrian galleries. They are characterised by an outer border of tassel-like lotus flowers and buds, and a varying number of rows around a central grid of geometric or floral design. These so-called 'stone carpets' were used to embellish important thresholds of the palaces and act as hard-wearing alternatives to their more delicate woven inspirations in areas of closing doors and high footfall. One was part of the BP exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria* exhibition at the Museum in 2019, and will travel as part of a touring version in 2024/25. This was excavated in one of the doorways leading into the throneroom of the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (reigned 688–631 BC) at Nineveh, and comprises the lotus and bud fringe border surrounding an interior band of rosettes and a central field of interlocking circles which create the effect of six-petalled flowers.

For the tour, the curatorial team decided to display this threshold mapped in colour, not to reconstruct its original appearance but provide an impression of missing textiles. Unlike other Assyrian reliefs, there is no pigment visible on these carvings and it is unclear if they were ever painted at all as their function as thresholds would

have made maintaining a painted surface impractical. The colours selected are based on three main lines of evidence: wall paintings from the site of Tell Ahmar (ancient Til Barsib) in Syria, painted pottery also presented in the exhibition, and Assyrian textual sources describing the sources and colours of dyes.

Til Barsib, located on the eastern bank of the Euphrates river 100 km north-east of Aleppo, became an important provincial centre after its conquest in 856 BC by Shalmaneser III (reigned 859–824 BC). Excavations directed by François Thureau-Dangin between 1929 and 1931 revealed that thirteen rooms of the royal palace were painted with dynamic scenes of royal life, constituting the most complete set of Assyrian wall paintings to survive. Fragments of these paintings are in Paris and Aleppo, but the majority of scenes are known only from black and white photographs and full-scale watercolours made by Lucien Cavro in 1930. Of interest for reconstructing the colours of Assyrian palace carpets are the scenes depicting lotus flower and bud tassel borders and a rug on the back of the king's throne. Black, dark red and blue are prominent in these paintings, colours also known on Assyrian wall reliefs.

Similar motifs to those of the carved thresholds and Assyrian wall paintings are known from pottery as well. The lotus and bud motif originated in Egypt and spread across the eastern Mediterranean and Near East in the first half of the first millennium BC. Likewise, the designs on a sixth century BC jar from Cyprus include sphinxes, lotus flowers and rosettes, all part of an iconographic tradition shared and re-imagined across the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. The interlocking circles forming six-petalled rosettes can be seen in a band encircling the lid of the jar, and the same pattern constitutes the clothing painted onto the torso of a monumental votive statue (heavily reconstructed) from Salamis, also in Cyprus. These designs are painted in white, black and red and one could imagine that colour schemes represented on the pottery, particularly in the case of the votive statue, may relate to colour schemes in other media such as textiles.

More concrete evidence concerning the colours of Assyrian floor coverings comes directly from the Assyrian palace archives. One scholar has collected all Neo-Assyrian textile-related terminology and, in addition to identifying the likely terms for rugs, carpets and the professionals involved, has also highlighted the types of dyes used to colour textiles. Dyed wool is attested in several different colours, including several shades of red, purple-red, blue-green, and blue-purple. Madder, used to colour wool red, was a common ancient dye source while murex was used in the Levant for purples and blues. Visual and textual evidence indicate that textiles were brought to the Assyrian heartland through trade, conquest and the deportation of those who wore them, but palace archives also demonstrate that textiles of all kinds were produced within Assyrian institutions as well. The colours chosen for the hypothetical reconstruction of such a carpet were therefore selected not only for their visual contrast and accessibility for the visitor, but also to represent the wider world of shared motifs, textile movement and colour choice.



Stone threshold from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, 645–640 BC.

Colour projection on the threshold as a reconstruction of a hypothetical textile, created by New Angle.





The gods and goddesses of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt



**Paul Collins**  
Keeper, Department of the Middle East

The confrontation between a king and a lion was a motif closely associated with Assyrian royal authority. This is perhaps most obvious in the image of the monarch grasping and stabbing a rampant lion that was engraved on seals used by the Assyrian empire's most senior officials from at least the ninth century BC. King Ashurbanipal (r. 668–circa 630 BC) exploited such images as never before in both literary texts and magnificent images. Wall reliefs depicting the king killing lions lined the corridors of his so-called North Palace at Nineveh, highlighting the notion of a powerful king at the very heart of the empire.

The relief panels of one large passageway had scenes of the king hunting lions from a chariot. In one episode the king, wearing his tall crown, is armed with a bow and arrows and the slaughter takes place within an area enclosed by armed soldiers. We know from Ashurbanipal's inscriptions that this hunting field was actually in Nineveh and was dedicated to Ishtar, the powerful goddess of sex and war. The same text suggests that we are witness to a ritual in which the killing of the eighteen lions is a magical way of protecting the eighteen gates of the capital city. The religious aspect of the scene is emphasised by depictions of Ishtar herself on the royal chariot: she appears on the axle of the wheel and the chariot pole, standing in profile facing left with a disk from which multiple rays with rounded ends emanate, and evoking her association with the bright celestial body we know as the planet Venus. A third image of the goddess – now damaged – adorns the top right corner of the chariot cab and probably shows Ishtar standing on the back of a lion, her sacred animal.

Ishtar was held in enormous esteem by Ashurbanipal. In his inscriptions he praises two separate aspects of the great goddess: Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Arbela (modern Erbil). They are his divine protectors with slightly different but related roles. Ishtar of Nineveh is described as Ashurbanipal's mother who suckled him as a baby. She was also known as Mullissu when she took the role of the wife of Assyria's chief god Ashur. Ishtar of Arbela served as Ashurbanipal's nanny, caring for him and protecting him, appearing in accounts of military activity using a bow and a sharp sword to do battle for the king.

One of the most remarkable images from the North Palace shows Ashurbanipal grasping and stabbing a rampant lion, mirroring his imperial seal. In this scene, however, he wears not the high crown but a diadem with tasselled bands at the back, the traditional regalia of the Assyrian crown prince. We know that this is Ashurbanipal from a description of the event in a



Detail of gypsum wall panel, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh.

Details of the goddess Ishtar, gypsum wall panel, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal.



cuneiform tablet so, given that the North Palace was constructed midway through his reign, why did he have himself depicted as the heir to the throne?

The answer may lie in his close connection with the gods. Although Assyrian rulers were never considered as divine in their own right, by the seventh century BC kings and queens had acquired god-like attributes and associations. As we have seen, Ashurbanipal's inscriptions indicate that he could be understood as the offspring of the supreme deities Ishtar/Mullissu and Ashur. As such it was possible for him to be equated with their son and crown prince, Nabu, god of writing and wisdom. Indeed, while earlier Assyrian rulers were shown with a dagger in their belt, Ashurbanipal has instead two styli, the writing tool of scribes – in his texts he presents himself as a great scholar and, of course, one of Ashurbanipal's great legacies is his famous library at Nineveh. It seems possible therefore that Ashurbanipal is presenting himself in these hunting scenes as the mortal counterpart of Nabu. Other divine connections may also be intended since Nabu was himself associated with the god Ninurta, a warrior, hunter and farmer who acted as secretary for his father Ashur, inscribing his decisions. Ninurta is the archetypal Mesopotamian prince, young, vigorous and strong, a paragon of hunting and learning – everything Ashurbanipal wanted to be.

Significantly the king also wears the diadem of the crown prince on the occasion of a banquet with his queen that takes place in a luxuriant garden setting. The scene mirrors a seventh century BC text containing love lyrics of Nabu and his wife Tashmetu, where the sexually charged descriptions include the delight of shade provided by cedars and junipers while birds twitter in the trees. At the same time, the scene marks a celebration following a



successful battle that the royal inscriptions inform us was conducted by Ishtar on behalf of Ashurbanipal, the king having been advised by the goddess to 'stay in the place where you are currently residing. Eat food, drink wine, make music, and revere my divinity'.

Such Assyrian images, whether of lion hunting, battle or victory celebrations, therefore incorporate complex religious and mythological meanings. Rich in symbolism and ritual import they equate the king, and his queen, with the power and majesty of their gods.

Detail of gypsum wall panel, Room S, North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh.

Detail of gypsum wall panel, fallen into Room S, Palace of Ashurbanipal.



## Collections and context

### Fit for an icon: re-imagining the niche in Ashurbanipal's lion-killing scenes

#### St John Simpson

Senior curator: Ancient Iran, Central Asia and Arabia,  
Department of the Middle East

Visitors to the Museum have long questioned why, at a critical point in the visual narrative of Ashurbanipal's so-called 'lion hunt' reliefs, there is a semi-circular niche cut deep into one of the relief slabs presently exhibited in Room 10a. What was its purpose and why was it cut into the relief, rather than through the wall above? There has never been a satisfactory explanation for either question until now, but some things are clear. Assyrian palaces did not have windows as these are not a feature of mudbrick architecture and window-glass had not yet been invented. One esteemed colleague has recently suggested that its position corresponded to an area of the palace which was close to a toilet, and that it may therefore have been cut to allow fresh air to vent through a porthole, but this does not address why such an important sculptural narrative was cut for such a mundane purpose. It certainly cannot significantly post-date the installation of the reliefs in the reign of Ashurbanipal as Nineveh was sacked in 612 BC and not re-occupied for at least three centuries, by which time this palace was a forgotten ruin heap. So what could it be?

First principles lead us to a closer re-examination of the niche itself. It is semi-circular, measures 39.5 cm across and 43 cm high. Its original depth is uncertain as the reverse of the slab was sawn away by the excavator in order to facilitate its removal, but is at least 8 cm. The niche is framed by a deliberately chiselled area, 6.5 cm across on either side and 5.5 cm along the bottom, with a low, 1 cm high, rebate along the lower exterior edge. Such a treatment is typical of wall surfaces or objects which have been prepared to receive a skim of plaster or an overlay. In this case, there are no traces of plaster or pigment, and it is more likely that it was originally covered with an overlay, presumably of sheet gold or silver, which served to frame the niche itself. The effect would have completely

transformed it visually, like a heavy frame around an icon. But what could have been set within?

The shape of the niche is that of a stele which, allowing for a shadow gap and careful positioning, would have measured some 40 cm high and 36 cm across at the base. A much larger stela of taller proportions is represented on another part of this scene, shown on top of a hill overlooking the scene of Ashurbanipal's ceremonial lion killing, and memorialises the event by showing the king in his chariot and in the act of despatching a lion. The larger scenes are very carefully arranged, with one part showing the king shooting arrows to paralyse and mortally wound the lions and lionesses, while another shows him despatching each with his sword or spears, and framed along the top by a low raised border, 4.5 cm wide. The niche is centrally placed in the only part of the narrative where the king's chariot is repeated in mirror fashion, each racing toward the other, with the rear of one cab being attacked by a lion while on the other the lion is entangled within the chariot wheel as it is despatched. Another rearing lion is transfixed between the two, a lioness lies slain in the upper right, and the niche is situated in the upper left. According to our re-interpretation, the niche was therefore part of the original design and a fundamental part of the composition. The stela within can hardly have been for a simple inscription or another representation of Ashurbanipal, but must have been of Ishtar herself, the warrior goddess whom Ashurbanipal owed his divine protection, a true icon for the king.

The sack of Nineveh in 612 BC was marked by systematic defacement of royal imagery. In this room of Ashurbanipal's palace, the first act must have been the taking of the central icon, thus removing divine protection, followed by the clinical blinding of the king and his chariot-driver on the reliefs, so that the proverbial blind led the blind, and his despatching arrows rendered meaningless shots in the dark. The next act was a scene of ultra-violence as the niche was split in two with a massive blow

from above, a destructive feature seen on many of the Late Assyrian stela destroyed at this time, and other reliefs shattered into tiny fragments, finally explaining the loss of context for the many smaller fragments in circulation. Hormuzd Rassam, the excavator of this room, remarked how he found the centre to be filled with tablets 'of all shapes and sizes', and this probably represents its final desecration as smashed tablets from Ashurbanipal's

'library' were dumped here, transforming a powerful ritual space celebrating Ishtar into one of complete power reversal and erasure of Assyrian might. Finally, scorch marks centred on the chariots and sooting still visible above attest targeted hotspots of the final torching of the rooms before the tall mudbrick walls collapsed and buried the lower parts of the rooms to await their excavation in the nineteenth century.



The carefully prepared niche.



Detail of the lion-killing scene showing how the niche is part of the design.



## Collections and context

### Cutting edge research: a new look at Iron Age swords from Iran

#### Alex Rodzinka

Cranfield University / ISIS Neutron and Muon Source  
doctoral student

Over recent years, a large assemblage of metallic artefacts from Iran has been intercepted by the UK Border Force and, thanks to our colleagues in Tehran, we have the opportunity to research these in great detail prior to repatriation. Among the objects are bracelets, pins, horse trappings and numerous weapons such as axe heads, arrowheads, spearheads, daggers and swords. The latter two categories, defined as bladed weapons, were chosen as the focus of a PhD project jointly funded by Cranfield University and ISIS Neutron and Muon Source, entitled *Complex Metallurgy of the Bronze Age-Iron Age Transition in Iran: Archaeomaterials and Forensic Investigations*. Being complex objects, swords lend themselves very well to investigations of ancient metal production and how that changed when bronze technology reached its peak in the region and iron began to be used for utilitarian purposes. The research explores bronze casting techniques, alloy choices, and bimetallic technology in the early Iron Age (circa 1250–550 BC).

As the objects had been trafficked, the first challenge was to work out their possible provenance. In Iran, weapons are predominantly found in burial contexts but it is impossible to say whether they were looted from known sites or a new location had been discovered and illicitly excavated. Stylistically the swords can be linked to sites in Luristan, Kermanshah, Gilan and Western Azerbaijan, but there are a few objects which still elude identification. It is likely that they were collected over north-west Iran from different dealers, changing hands multiple times.

Scientific methods implemented in this project include LA-ICP-MS in an artefact chamber, X-ray  $\mu$ CT, p-XRF as well as Neutron Tomography and Neutron Diffraction at ISIS Neutron and Muon Source. So far, these

techniques have revealed that a significant number of recovered swords are pastiches, which unfortunately is quite common with Iranian weaponry sought by private collectors.

While the most common methods of studying ancient metals involve metallography, SEM or LA-ICP-MS, which all require sampling, this project focuses on non-invasive techniques. Neutron Tomography allows us to study the internal structure of an object and is complementary to X-ray Tomography. In cases of modern repairs or pastiches, it reveals glue and corrosion products which would be invisible to X-rays due to their high hydrogen content. Neutron Diffraction is applied to examine the crystalline structure of materials, allowing for identification of iron phases without sampling the object, which can reveal whether the metal was hot- or cold-worked, and if there is evidence for intentional carburisation. An entire object is placed inside the instrument equipped with detectors that measure the scattering of the neutron beam and provide diffraction patterns which are then interpreted. With this technique, we were able to analyse an iron tang inside a bronze hilt completely non-invasively.

A paper discussing pastiches discovered during this project is due to be published soon and a small display at the British Museum is planned to showcase a few examples of pastiches alongside Neutron and X-ray Tomography images showing their internal structure and the extent of modifications. It will highlight the issue of heritage crime in Iran and the Museum's role in raising awareness of artefact trafficking. Hopefully, it will also introduce the public to the use of neutron science in archaeology and the heritage sector.

This research is jointly funded by Cranfield University and ISIS Neutron and Muon Source, Science and Technology Facilities Council.



Analysing Neutron Tomography scans of a bimetallic sword at ISIS Neutron and Muon Source.

Bimetallic pommel and an X-ray  $\mu$ CT slice through the object showing an iron tang and casting flaws.



## Collections and context

### Researching acquisition histories: Persian and South Asian paintings in the British Museum

#### Emily Hannam

Curator: South Asia, Asia Department,  
The Victoria & Albert Museum

The British Museum's system of registering objects requires every object to have a number. These numbers traditionally start with the year, then the month, then the day of the Trustees' meeting to which it was reported and accepted – a useful detail when investigating the history of the collection, although leading to duplication of numbers between different departments submitting objects at the same meeting.<sup>1</sup>

More than 500 Indian paintings were re-registered and given new numbers in this manner on 17 September 1920, when they moved from the British Museum Library to a new sub-department of the Prints and Drawings Department (known as 'Oriental Prints and Drawings'). On 17 June 1974, a further 1,000 pages of Persian and South Asian paintings and calligraphy were re-registered when they transferred from the British Museum Library to the separate Department of Oriental Antiquities. These were the albums that remained in Bloomsbury when the majority of the Library's 'Oriental' volumes left to enter the collection of the new British Library. The 1920 and 1974 numbers confuse the vast majority of researchers who assume that the museum actually acquired these important works of art in these years. During my months at the British Museum, I made it my mission to research the acquisition and provenance histories of Persian and South Asian paintings in the collection and to update the database accordingly in order to dispel this general misunderstanding.

The results of my study, unsurprisingly, reflect the history of Britain's incursions into South Asia. A portraits album of Indian royal figures, of a type produced for European merchants, was among Sir Hans Sloane's 1753 bequest to the nation, the founding collection of the museum. Most Persian and South Asian volumes acquired in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had arrived in Britain from India or Iran with East India Company officials. These include a Qajar album of paintings and calligraphy acquired as part of a vast collection of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Syriac, Armenian, Greek and Carshuni manuscripts purchased in 1825 from Mary Rich, the widow of East India Company officer and diplomat Claudius Rich (1786–1821). Previous owners of other paintings and albums in the collection include Sir Elijah Impey, Sir John Malcom and Sir Charles Murray. For many decades, these 'Oriental volumes' were the least organised in the museum library due to a lack of cataloguers.

In 1868, the museum acquired an album of portraits from the collection of Colonel George William Hamilton (1807–1868) who had served in India from 1823 to 1867, along with 351 other volumes, 'very many [of which] were rescued by him from destruction during the Indian Mutiny, especially at Lucknow, several bearing the vermillion stamp of the library of the Kings of Oude'. At the time of this large acquisition, the Trustees of the British Museum created a new Department of Oriental Manuscripts within the library, with the Swiss Orientalist Charles Rieu (1820–1902) as its first Keeper. Under Rieu, the

Portrait of Nawab  
Amir Khan  
Bahadur (d. 1747)  
from an album of  
Indian portraits  
purchased in April  
1868 from the  
widow of Colonel  
George William  
Hamilton.

Seated dervish,  
from an album  
formerly in the  
collection of  
Claudius James  
Rich, purchased  
in 1825 from his  
widow, Mary Rich.



collections were organised and properly catalogued for the first time. It was also under Rieu that the library received its first Indian album from a South Asian donor, one Zuhur ul-Din Ahmad Khan. In 1880, the museum acquired another 450 Indian paintings, transferred from the disbanded Indian Museum. These remained separate from the library however (perhaps Rieu considered them more ethnographic than literary or artistic). The paintings still have 1880 numbers but no records of how they came to Britain. Such information might be found in the India Museum inventories kept in the Asia Department of the V&A where I now work: a further research project with colleagues in South Kensington is evidently required.

<sup>1</sup> This system changed when collections were put online so that each department was given a unique numerical code to follow the year of acquisition, and objects were no longer reported to Trustees for approval as the due diligence process devolved to curators. When an object was internally transferred, some departments retained the number but changed its sub-database PRN on the Museum's electronic database, but others simply re-registered them in the manner described here.





More than scraps



Embroidered and appliquéd felt pot holders, Yomut Atabay Turkmen, Iran, 1940s-1960s.

Boy's amuletic coat, Penjikent, Tajikistan, 2013-2014.



**Zeina Klink-Hoppe**

Project curator: Modern Middle East, Department of the Middle East

In recent years, trends of recycling and upcycling clothing have become increasingly popular. Due to cost-of-living crises and increased environmental awareness, these trends seem to counteract notions of 'fast fashion', the term used to refer to and define highly profitable business models where trendy garments are mass produced, cheaply priced, rapidly discarded and easily replaced. This has led to over 80% of unsold items ending in rubbish dumps or landfills, creating long-term environmental damage which is largely irreversible and may contribute to the effects of climate change.

With many textiles being so easily discarded, it is often difficult to imagine the notion of valuing textile fragments. Today, there is renewed interest in upcycled textiles from around the world, whether these be patchwork quilts, *sashiko* and *boro* textiles from Japan, or *molos* from Colombia and Panama. These are admired for the communal effort that goes into them, as well as for notions of thrift, artistic creativity and individual aesthetic. However, these are not a new phenomenon. Scraps of fabric have been appreciated for generations in Central Asia. A combination of pre-Islamic beliefs merged over time with Islam to create a cultural and religious system of values specific to the Central Asian context that guided people's lives. And here textile fragments played a central role as small pieces have been traditionally used to embellish clothing and furnishings, make amulets for people and animals to ward off malevolent forces, and mark pilgrimages and visits to shrines and sacred places.

Throughout Central Asia, triangular amulets (*tumor* or *doga*), often stuffed with grains of salt or paper inscribed with Qur'anic verses, are used in a variety of settings, attached to the clothing of brides or young children to protect against harm, animal trappings to appease

supernatural forces, or placed in living spaces of nomads and urban dwellers alike to maintain harmony and avert evil. The Turkmen pot-holders depicted here and shaped like two triangular amulets linked by a strip of fabric were made by brides as part of their dowries, alongside matching pouches for bread. They were intended to keep illness and harm away from the food being prepared for the family or guests and, by extension, away from the people themselves. Each triangle is in turn embellished with added pieces of fabric in contrasting colours for good measure, displaying at the same time the young woman's creativity and needlework skills.

The child's coat from Penjikent is made of strips of brightly coloured fabric with shiny lurex thread and sequins sewn onto white fabric. The fabric strips were collected from wealthy or successful families with healthy children. A mother would knock 'at seven doors' to gather textile fragments in order to create such a garment in the hope of transferring the blessings of health, wealth and success to her child. At the same time, the shiny fabrics and rustling noise they make were intended to keep evil at bay, and the pocket on the shoulder could hold a verse from the Qur'an, all for added protection. Such coats were usually made by mothers mourning a son lost in infancy in the hope of protecting their future offspring from a similar fate.

These pieces highlight the symbolic meaning attached to scraps of fabric and thus to the larger textiles they are part of. This value was also visible when a textile became worn and was cut into pieces for future recycling and reuse, or when a piece of a recently deceased person's clothing was cut into strips and distributed among mourners for remembrance. Scraps of fabric become more than the threads of which they are made or the colours with which they are dyed. They embody a cultural and religious system of values, holding memories of the past and prospects for the future, maintaining harmony, keeping evil at bay, and marking joyous moments as well as sad ones.



**Music for children: a fired clay rattle from Ur**

**Enrica Inversi**

Assistant Collection Manager, Collection Care /  
Department of the Middle East

When we think about Ur, the imagery often recalled is that of precious materials like those found in the Royal Cemetery. However, the excavations led by Sir Leonard Woolley also brought to light a large number of terracottas. Among these were a few zoomorphic rattles, mainly representing animals which were part of everyday life, including pigs, oxen, birds and hens. Most came from the site of Diquiqqah, mainly found on the surface by workers on their way to work at Ur, but test excavations were inconclusive as to their context.

A fine example of this class of objects is a fired clay rattle in the form of a pig with incised lines on back and sides, modelled ears and tail and pierced eyes which was excavated in the 1923/24 season. As many other rattles, it consists of a hollow body with small balls of clay within. Zoomorphic rattles have also been found at many other sites, including Kish, Nippur, Tell Brak and Carchemish, and in different contexts such as shrines and graves, as well as private houses, leading to different interpretations of their use. Zoomorphic rattles, as well as those with a 'pie crust' shape, became more common at the end of the third millennium BC, although the great majority were produced during the Isin-Larsa period (circa 2025–1763 BC).

Rattles have often been classified by archaeologists as religious objects or musical instruments. Woolley took into account the hypothesis that they could also be toys but was inclined to consider them temple offerings based on one he found in the Hendursag chapel in Ur. Nonetheless, when looking at this particular rattle, it is very difficult to

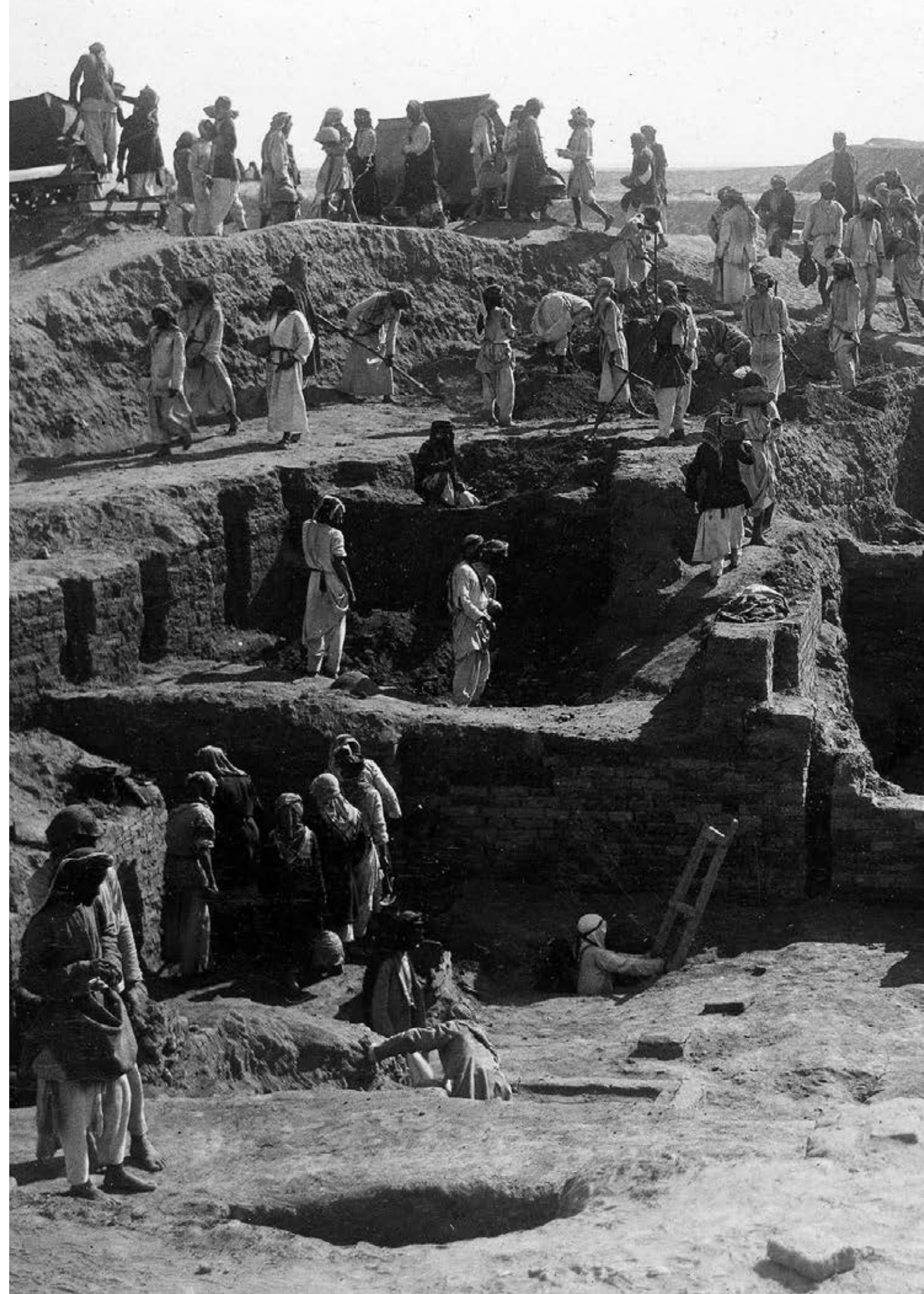
discard the hypothesis that these objects were also toys, at least when found in domestic contexts. In Mesopotamia a baby's cry would have distracted everyone. It is well known how incantations and/or lullabies were a necessary intervention to keep babies calm. Rattles might have had a similar function and the boundary between toy and apotropaic object is consequently blurred. As previously mentioned, almost all the zoomorphic rattles from Ur were found in residential areas, which supports the idea that these objects were also toys, without excluding a parallel use as apotropaic and ritual objects. Despite this, many archaeologists still tend to classify rattles as exclusively religious objects.

An alternative way to look at these objects and investigate them would imply a multidisciplinary approach going beyond the mere findspot and taking into consideration the multifunctionality of these objects and their cultural biographies. A rattle might have been at the one time a musical instrument, an apotropaic object, and a toy. This multifunctionality may also not be by design, but the interaction between rattle and toddler might have transformed the object into a toy. As a last reflection, and a caveat, we should also ensure that when making these considerations we take into account our contemporary 'adultcentric' views and the biases possibly deriving from them, including assigning functions to objects which they did not possess.



Fired clay rattle from Ur.

Excavations in progress at Ur, 1928/29, with houses of the early second millennium BC next to the temenos wall on the left.





## New acquisitions

### 'Milsurge', Mesopotamia Re-visited (Bombay 1918)

#### St John Simpson

Senior curator: Ancient Iran, Central Asia and Arabia,  
Department of the Middle East

The acquisition of objects, whether by purchase or donation, is an important way of showing and sharing curatorial expertise. The Museum has long followed the relevant antiquities laws and developed a stringent due diligence process and acquisition policy. In the case of our department, the pace of acquisition has slowed considerably in the past year as we have not acquired any Contemporary Middle Eastern art and our focus is now on registering a backlog of ethnographic acquisitions, audits and other curatorial work. However, we are delighted to report on the following new acquisition for our library.

#### 'Milsurge', Mesopotamia Re-visited (Bombay 1918)

This rare book was listed in a catalogue by the antiquarian dealer, Shapero Rare Books, and immediately caught our eye as it included, as its frontispiece, a previously unknown photograph of Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), seated with an un-named English VIP couple and British army officers at an undisclosed location in Baghdad. The book was privately published in Bombay and no other copy is listed in a UK public library. It was acquired with special funding from the library budget and is now catalogued. It is concerned with a high-level official tour of sites, battlefields and cemeteries in the immediate aftermath of the British defeat of the Turks in Mesopotamia. The book describes how the party visited Babylon on 11 April 1918, accompanied by General Maude and travelling 'in three Vauxhalls escorted by two L.A.M.B. [Light Armoured Motor Battery] cars followed by twenty Ford vans with our luggage and servants', and records 'our thanks to Miss B[ell] for explaining all this and more to us on the spot. Otherwise, one could not have imagined a more dull sight-seeing expedition'. The author goes on to say that on 'leaving the Kasr we walked down to the German House situated in the pretty village of Kuwairish, where Koldewey and his fellow diggers lived till March 8th, 1917. There is a museum attached to it, but it has now been bricked up to prevent the contents being looted by tribesmen and others'.

The identity of the anonymous couple can now be revealed as Lord and Lady Willingdon, and their purpose was caring for the wounded and fallen from the Mesopotamian Campaign. Willingdon was the Crown Governor of Bombay and his wife had organised the Women's Branch of the Bombay Presidency War and Relief Fund only two years previously. He had been one of the first to greet Mahatma Gandhi on his return to India, and was later to become Viceroy and Governor-General of India, when he imprisoned Gandhi and outlawed the Indian National Congress for their role in organising the Civil Disobedience Movement.

This book has particular resonance for us as the Director of the Museum during the First World War was the Biblical and Classical scholar Sir Frederick Kenyon (1863–1952), who fought on the Western Front, lost his only son there in 1915, took over the training of military officers and was probably partly responsible for the creation of Archaeological Officers within the British army. He corresponded with the British military and civilian authorities in Baghdad and Basra over the safeguarding of archaeological sites and the advisability of exporting and dividing the finds left by the German excavators of Samarra. Kenyon had already posted two of his curators to Mesopotamia, supported the choice of Ur as the centre of the Museum's flagship project in southern Iraq, and later chaired a highly influential Archaeological Committee drawing together all the main organisations in the UK. Less well-known is the fact that Kenyon wrote a seminal report, adopted by the Imperial War Graves Commission less than two months before the date of this visit, entitled *War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad Will Be Designed*. This drew on numerous military, religious, artistic, literary and personal views, extending also to landscape gardeners. It added that 'It will be understood that where our Mohammedan, Hindu, and other non-Christian fellow subjects lie (and care has always been taken to bury them apart) their graves will be treated in accordance with their own religious beliefs and practices, and their own religious symbol will be placed over them'. The poignancy of this report and these personal connections is underlined now as war continues to wage in Ukraine and WWI cemeteries added this year to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.



Gertrude Bell (centre) with Lord and Lady Willingdon and members of the British army, Baghdad 1918.

## Events

### New research on old collections: a student workshop



#### Mette Bangsborg Thuesen

Freie Universität Berlin

#### Alex Rodzinka

Cranfield University / ISIS Neutron and Muon Source  
doctoral student

In early August 2023, the Department hosted a three-day workshop entitled 'New Research on Old Collections in South-west Asian Archaeology'. This was a joint project organised by PhD students based in Berlin and London, in which we welcomed students from various research institutions across England, Germany, and Belgium to present their work.

Our workshop aimed to show how the re-evaluation of old collections in museums and archives can bring new ideas and further our understanding of past societies. The participants all had in common the study of objects from museum collections and archives, which they consider an undervalued resource deserving greater attention. Throughout ten different presentations, a wide range of case studies was covered, from Chalcolithic pottery production in Syria, through life-biographies of Mesopotamian statues to Late Antique and early medieval brass-making in Iran and Iraq.

We also addressed some of the challenges of collection-oriented research. In recent years, sustainability has increasingly become a topic of debate within archaeology, both regarding the potential of ancient resource management and building techniques to tackle climate change, but also the environmental impact of archaeology and museum research. This requires a fundamental rethinking of our practices, both in academia and field archaeology. In this workshop, we therefore wanted to highlight what can be gained from investigating an already excavated group of material as an alternative to initiating new and resource-demanding fieldwork projects. Museum collections and archives are suitable starting points, as they contain a wealth of archaeological material accumulated over decades of work in south-west Asia, which often has never been published. There are, however, certain methodological issues when dealing with objects from an old collection

which often lack adequate documentation or provenance. This is something which all participating students showed can be overcome, by approaching the material with the scientific methods and anthropological ideas, which they presented in their papers. This included the use of scanning electron microscopy to trace the trade and distribution of Islamic glass bangles, research on the making of fired clay figurines from Ur, and use-wear analysis of Sasanian pottery to identify storage and cooking practices.

The presentations were followed by tours offered by the British Museum curators of storage facilities, galleries, and the Department of Scientific Research, which provided some insights on how to best store and present our collections and what can be learned about them with the latest scientific techniques. On the final day, the workshop was concluded with a round table discussion, in which we addressed the future of archaeological research and museum practices. A recurring theme was the essential role of 'recycling' our collections in sustainably producing more archaeological knowledge and reassessing what is already in storage rooms and what can be learned from these objects. Two other issues raised were accessibility and inclusivity. This involves ensuring that external researchers can more easily find and access objects and documentation within museums and archives, and that the results of our research are available to the public, regardless of their background.

We are grateful that the museum, and particularly the staff within the Department of the Middle East, have been so supportive of our event, and we appreciate that an institution like the British Museum gives us, young researchers, a platform to connect and share our research. With this initiative, we hope to strengthen the relationship between early career researchers within the British Museum and other cultural institutions in Europe. For now, we are working on publishing the proceedings of the workshop and are planning to keep the discussion going in future meetings.

The event was made possible with funding from the Berliner Antike Kolleg and The Berlin Graduate School of Ancient Studies.

Group photo with all the participants.



## Events

### Annual Vladimir G Lukonin Memorial Lecture and conference: Gold, silver and glass from the Middle East to the Eurasian steppe

#### St John Simpson

Senior curator: Ancient Iran, Central Asia and Arabia,  
Department of the Middle East

Our exhibitions are an ideal opportunity to explore ideas in more depth through the public programme and the perfect vehicle for organising a related conference and the papers gathered into published proceedings. From the outset of the *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece* exhibition, we discussed how we might do this and who we would invite to speak. The result was a careful construction, beginning with the revived Annual Vladimir G. Lukonin Memorial Lecture, launched in 1988 with the support of the late Mary Anna Marten (1929–2010), and now delivered on 16 June by Professor Henri-Paul Francfort, an archaeological veteran of five decades of directing field projects across Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. He spoke with customary aplomb about Persian and Greek arts in the world of the Scythians, developing a paper he gave us at the *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia* conference in 2017 and published in a volume entitled *Masters of the Steppe* (Archaeopress Archaeology, 2022). The next day, a Saturday, was a one-day Members' Conference. Museum speakers included

James Fraser on the concept behind the exhibition which triggered these events, Tom Harrison on multiple layers of Persian influence on Athens, and author on cases of give and take across the ancient world from Assyria to the Seleucid empire. It was a revelation to hear our long-time colleague, Dr Despina Ignatiadou, curator of sculpture at the National Archaeology Museum in Athens, talk about the use of coloured glass inlays set within the Parthenon sculptures, while Professor Tim Taylor (Bratislava) entranced us as he unpicked the iconography on the Gundestrup cauldron found in Denmark, quietly demolished concepts of Celtic art and took us to Mauryan India and back through the Balkans. Dr James Colburn (Hostra / Kelsey Museum of Archaeology) introduced us to the fungibility of Achaemenid silver, while Jack Ogden (UK) opened our eyes to details of Achaemenid goldworking of which he has unparalleled expertise.

On Sunday we reconvened for another packed day, beginning with presentations by colleagues from loaning museums in Sofia and Yerevan on their collections relating to ancient Thrace and Armenia. These were followed by Dr Marina Daragan (Kyiv) who threw our gaze on golden dragons in the Scythian fantastic bestiary, and

a mesmerising double act by Dr Yasuko Fujii (Rome) and Professor Hidetoshi Namiki (Japan) on their painstaking reconstruction of the processes used to replicate the famous Canosa gold-glass bowl in the British Museum, using a technique known in Japan as *kirikane*. Dr Julien Cuny (Musée du Louvre), Dr Benoît Mille (Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France) and Dr Aude Mongiatti (Department of Scientific Research) detailed their results of new scientific analyses of Achaemenid toreutic. We then turned eastwards as our last two speakers took us to Kazakhstan and China with presentations by Saltanat Amirova (Cambridge) on Saka goldsmithing and Dr Yan (Fiona) Liu (Institute of Culture and Heritage, Northwestern Polytechnical University / Tang Center for Early China, Columbia University) on gold ornaments found in pre-imperial Qin tombs in Shaanxi.

The opportunity of having so many specialists of Achaemenid and Central Asian precious metal in the department was too great to be lost, so on the following Monday we had a small workshop where we discussed details surrounding the Oxus Treasure, with part of the collection available for closer inspection as we had already removed it from display earlier this year as part

of an ongoing project of scientific analysis and during a moment in a case rotation as part of a temporary gallery closure scheduled within our Gallery Maintenance Programme. This workshop had to be managed particularly sensitively, and limited to speakers and colleagues from our Department of Scientific Research, but was a unique chance, threw new light on a number of individual pieces, and opened up discussion on how we may develop new collaborative research around this highlight of our collection.

The whole event was one of the most intellectually stimulating conferences I have been part of: it quickly sold out, a real testimony to the speakers, topics and the hunger of the public to engage with our research in even greater detail. The international line-up was testimony to our contacts: America, Britain, France, Greece, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan, China and Japan, although sadly travel restrictions prevented the attendance of close colleagues invited from Russia. We are planning to publish the proceedings and will gather all of the papers into a single volume. In the meantime, we are most grateful to the Friends of the Middle East for their support of the travel and other costs of this conference.

Some of the speakers and attendees at the conference.





## New publications

Research is a core part of the work we do across the department, and the published outputs continue to be very impressive, from peer-reviewed books to papers on a wide variety of topics in journals, exhibition catalogues, festschrifts and online platforms. The following list of publications over the past year includes those by staff and our PhD students.

### Books

#### 'To Aleppo gone ...':

#### Essays in Honour of Jonathan N. Tubb

Finkel, I L, Fraser J A & Simpson St J, eds (Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2023)

#### Luxury and power: Persia to Greece

Fraser, J, Llewellyn-Jones, L & Cosmo Bishop-Wright, H (London: British Museum Press, 2023)

#### The Assyrian Rock Relief at Yağmur (Evrihan) in the Tur Abdin

Genç, B & MacGinnis, J (Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology, 2023)

#### Artists making books: poetry to politics

Porter, V (London: British Museum Press, 2023)

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Gwyther, H, 2023. 'Making a mark: evidence for cattle branding on the Nimrud ivories', *'To Aleppo gone ...': Essays in Honour of Jonathan N. Tubb* (Finkel, I L, Fraser, J A & Simpson, St J, eds): 120–23. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology.

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McCall, H, 2023. "'I am the Bull of Nineveh": a monument on the move', *'To Aleppo gone ...': Essays in Honour of Jonathan N. Tubb* (Finkel, I L, Fraser, J A & Simpson, St J, eds): 215–17. Oxford: Archaeopress Archaeology.

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