

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

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Magnus T. Bernhardsson. *Reclaiming a Plundered Past, Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. 327 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

Titles can be sometimes too broad or misleading, leading to believe that the book behind the title deals with a broad picture and this is where subtitles come to help. The purpose of the subtitles is to correct possibly wrong impressions. The title of this book implied that the past of Iraq had been plundered. In the book we learn that it was done by European and American museums, and the author supposes to tell how the Iraqis made efforts to reclaim their plundered objects, called here “past.”

The author explains in the subtitle that archaeology and nation building in Iraq were connected together and the struggle for an independent Iraq was echoed by the struggle for independent archaeology. He could have been, perhaps, more correct had he replaced the word *archaeology* with *antiquities*. Archaeology is the *study* of ancient artifacts as well as ancient cultures and not merely the artifacts. So instead of dealing with archaeology—history of the study of ancient cultures—as the subtitle promises, the author deals with the objects, the artifacts and with the formation of the laws to keep them in Iraq.

The struggle for independent archaeology was in his view, an important aspect of the general struggle against western colonialism and imperialism. However, the governmental officers in Middle Eastern countries who are in charge of the antiquities in their countries are Director of Antiquities and not of directors of archaeology. Their job is to safe guard the antiquities in their countries and not to carry out the study of it. They are the curators of their national heritages. Archaeology is a study done at research institutions, universities and colleges world wide, not necessarily in the countries of the origin of the artifacts. Using this definition Bernhardsson could have saved his long description of the development of archaeology which has almost no relevance to his subject matter in the book. Since this book is developed from a Ph.D. dissertation, it was perhaps required for a purpose irrelevant here. It is true that archaeological research is more developed in places where there are collections. But there are countries with high level of research and no collections, and on the other hand, particularly Middle Eastern countries, have large collections with none or little local archaeological research done. Why is it so? The author does not attempt to answer.

Thus, this book does not deal with the research of Mesopotamian ancient history but with the destiny of some of the artifacts and the formation of antiquities laws in Iraq.

Chapter one surveys the history of archaeological research and states that “Archaeology, as a science and philosophy, was one outcome of the ideas of the Enlightenment, the economic prosperity brought by colonialism, and the inventions of the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions” (p. 20). Again this is correct only if we do not consider archaeology the excavations at Pompeii in the 16 century and the interest of Renaissance architects such as Brunelleschi, Bramante and Michelangelo in Roman antiquities, and the Revival of classical Roman and Greek art and architecture during this period. Archaeology has its roots in the renaissance. However, if archaeology means retrieving past relics from the ground, than the first archaeologist was actually Helen the mother of Constantine the Great who excavated for the true cross in Jerusalem already in the 4th century.

According to Bernhardsson, Richard Stoneman relates the word Archaeology to an 18th century French physician named Jacob Spon. However *archaeologia* is mentioned already by Plato. Spon must have read Plato.

This book should have serve better its purpose had it provide the history of Antiquarianism. This, however, exist from time immemorial. The Romans were fascinated with Egyptian and Greek artifacts. The Emperor Dioclitian had at his early 4th Century palace at Split (Spoleto) sphinxes “plundered” from Egypt. The Byzantine emperors hauled huge obelisks from Egypt to adorn their Hippodrome in Constantinople and an over than life size bronze statue of a four horses chariot “plundered” from Greece which was plundered again in the fourth crusade by the Venetians and is seen today in St. Mark cathedral in Venice.

Trophies are as old as wars exist. The famous Hammurabi’s stele was not discovered in Babylon, Hammurabi’s hometown, but at Susa the Elamite capital. The Venetians plundered also the skull of St. Mark from Alexandria and made it a symbol of Venice and the Byzantines plundered the right arm of St. Andrew and kept it in Constantinople until it was plundered in the fourth Crusade and brought to Scotland and made the patron Saint of the England and Scotland. However, not every dig was made for plundering purposes. In the 15 century BCE, Tuthmoses IV dreamed that the sphinx had told him that, in return to digging and cleaning it up, he would become the next Pharaoh.

The story of the Mesopotamian archaeology did indeed begin as antiquarianism and ended up in a serious archaeological research that overshadows its infancy stages.

Chapter one deals also with the early excavations in Mesopotamia and with the discovery of Mesopotamian cultures and artifacts and relates the history of archaeological research and museums. After an introduction about Mesopotamia and the apocalypse and Mesopotamia in art the author proceeds to describe western archeologists in Mesopotamia during the 19th century and adds new information to what has been known hitherto particularly from the classical book of Seton Lloyd, *Foundations in the Dust*. Penguin and Oxford University Press 1947. Bernhardsson follows the famous rivalry and competition between the French Emile Botta working on behalf of the Louvre and the English Henri Austen Layard working for the British Museum, which resulted in the large collections in the two museums. However, the author does not devote the space deserves for the German enthusiastic archaeologist Richard Koldewey who excavated Babylon and transferred the great gate of Ishtar to Berlin during turn of the twentieth century.

Interestingly enough the author does not attempt to answer the question why the first explorers of Mesopotamia were not Muslims, and why the spirit of explorers such as Ibn Batuta, Al Muqadasi and other Medieval Muslims disappeared. What actually went wrong?

Chapter 2 deals with the aftermath of WWI, the British mandate over Iraq and the state of affairs since 1900. The author elaborates on the role of Gertrude Bell, a British lady who devoted her life to Mesopotamian antiquities. She became the first director of Antiquities of Iraq, founded the Baghdad Museum and worked to form the first antiquities law.

Bernhardsson noted correctly that, the colonial era came to an end with WWI. He did not mention the fact that the west European empires, Great Britain and France, realized that keeping colonies impoverishes their treasuries, on the one hand, and the Americans demanded to end colonialism on the other hand which stimulated this process. Similar to the democracies that had been established in Europe at the aftermath of WWI, the League of Nation was hoping to turn the former Ottoman provinces into democratic states. Thus, Iraq did not become a British colony but a different system was experienced; the League of Nation bestowed upon the Allies a mandate which aimed to prepare the countries for independence. Iraq gained its total independence in 1941 which means that the preparation era to statehood lasted 22 years. However, this was enough to Iraq, and in fact to most of the Middle Eastern countries, to feel a qualified member to the group of countries considered to be liberated from the colonialism and are termed today Post Colonial. This is rather unfortunate label since it puts the guilt of the failing new states on the shoulders of the Europeans and Americans, rather on their own poor ability.

Post Colonial mentality sends a negative message that everything can be “understood” and “forgiven” and the West should carry the cross for their centuries long exploitation

and wrong behavior. If there was colonialism in the Middle East it was of the Islamic Empire of the Ottomans.

The 22 years of quasi-colonialism of Great Britain in Iraq was not all dark age. After all Britain inherited neglected provinces in the decaying Ottoman Empire and turned in a remarkable short period of time, into a state with strong sense of statehood, state institutions and even a museum, truly, not without a struggle with the Iraqis to end the occupation earlier. Historian should always see the process from the beginning and not compare results to contemporary societies with different backgrounds and histories. Working like the Book of Genesis, from void to existence is always a good example to follow.

Chapter 3 deals with transition from an Ottoman province into the early stages of statehood and is called *From Mesopotamia to Iraq: Politics during the Mandate (1921–1932)*. The author views the terms Mesopotamia and Iraq metaphorically, Mesopotamia is the name the Europeans (following ancient Greeks) have given to this region and Iraq was the Arabic name for the banks of the rivers now being the name of the nation. During the state building of Iraq the terminologies changed from a region called Mesopotamia to a country and a state called Iraq. The author divides this period into a few subdivisions. The years 1921–1932 were the golden age of archaeological activity in Iraq. It was not only a period of great discoveries such as the royal tombs of Ur, but also a period where many expeditions flourished in this country and worked almost without disruption.

As a practicing field archaeologist, I am due to some reservations to Bernhardsson’s concept of archaeologists. According to him “Archaeologists’ reputations are not restricted to the soundness and brilliance of their scholarship; objects and finds that they uncover are in some cases just as important. Although the procession of archaeology has progressed methodologically and archaeologists have become increasingly careful in their scientific approach, the most stunning and famous archaeological discoveries, such as Schliemann’s and Layard’s, were by persons whose methods would be considered crude and unscientific by today’s standards.

The most famous archaeologists are not necessarily known for their rigorous methods or brilliant exposition, but for the value and spectacle of their finds” (p. 141). This is, of course, only partially and superficially true. Schliemann’s popularity was gained, perhaps due to the discovery of the “Treasure of Priamus” and perhaps also to his colorful personality but his place in archaeology was gained because he was the first to say that Greek mythologies were not legends. George Grote, the eminent Greek historian began his monumental *A History of Greece* in the year 776 BCE, the first year of the Olympic Games. Whatever preceded this date is a myth, he explains in first of his ten volumes published in 1848 and continued to be published in the time of Schliemann. Schliemann pushed the date of Greek history a millennium earlier with his discoveries and the proper identification of Knossos and Troy.

As in each and every other scholarship, it is not the discovery but the ability to analyze it and see its significance what matters and what would make a scholar famous. The American, Johns Hopkins University scholar, W. F. Albright made an insignificant site in southern Palestine the key site for understanding ancient Levant and rightfully entitled him as the founder of Biblical Archaeology. The British archaeologist K.M. Kenyon, whose father, the curator of the British Museum features in Bernhardsson's book, was the third to excavate Jericho but she was the first to analyze properly the site and see its real significance. The Israeli Y. Yadin gained his fame in excavating Masada, the last Jewish stand in the revolt against the Romans. Yadin did not discover Masada nor was he the first archaeologist to dig it, but he was the one to turn it into a national monument. In fact this is true to each and every scholarship and even Einstein's theory of relativity for example, is by no means any different.

Chapter 4 deals with the same period but describes the foundation of the museum in Baghdad.

Chapter 5 entitles *Independent Nation—Independent Archaeology (1932–1941)*. This period is featured by decline of international archaeological activity in Iraq due to political unrest. The fact that the law of antiquities has changed in 1936 and fewer artifacts could make their ways to museums outside Iraq was crucial but perhaps did not put an end to the digs.

When attempting to see the picture in a broader sense Bernhardsson slips sometimes into some improper analogies and historical mistakes. Such is the following passage: "The return of cultural property is becoming at the beginning of the 21 century one of the more pressing issues facing governments, museums, and universities alike. Particularly in the wake of the discussion surrounding the claims of Holocaust survivors and their descendants for their art and gold, plundered by the Nazis and stored by the Swiss and others, the controversy and debate over returning cultural property have reached new heights and intensity" (p. 204). This is rather a cynical analogy. Digging and transferring ancient Mesopotamian artifacts to Europe did not violate any contemporary laws. The property the Nazis stole was illegal even in the norms of WWII, and in most cases it was private property, cash money, and valuables, such as gold tooth fillings, which obviously bear no "cultural" importance. Except for an odd case during WWII, these valuables were not supposed to be presented in museums such as the ancient artifacts excavated in Mesopotamia. Retrieving Nazi's stolen property is done on individual basis and not as an effort to return it to a Jewish national museum which does not even exist.

Retrieving ancient artifacts and the struggle to keep them in Iraq may have been an aspect of "liberation" of Iraq

but curiously enough this struggle did not penetrate all the ranks of the society. Bernhardsson did not follow up the aftermath of the struggle on archaeological remains and did not present the picture of the day after, which means, how the victory on keeping Mesopotamian antiquities in Iraq was translated into education about ancient Mesopotamia.

In other words, what actually was done in the field of education? How many classical publications on Mesopotamia, by world known scholars had been translated into Arabic? How many editions were printed of these books? How was it accepted? What books were written in Arabic on the archaeology of Iraq? What appears in the curriculum? Did the Gilgamesh story become a part of school curriculum, once most of cuneiform tablets remain in Iraq? How much of the ancient history of is known in Iraq? Did the fact that the museum stored about 170,000 object played a role on the education system? How many visitors came to see the museum each year? What do children learn in the museum? Usually museums instigate an interest in public and academia which leads to research and study. What has been done in Iraq? Did archaeology conquer the hearts and minds of Iraqis? Or was it only another battle ground with West for the sake of the battle? Until we have an answer to these questions we can never know whether the plundered past was indeed reclaimed as the title of the book suggests. Bernhardsson chapter on *Arab History and Archaeology* (pp. 201–203) does not provide an answer.

Islamic theologians teach that the era prior to Islam was an era of "ignorance" (*Jahilia*). This is a major and important statement. Since there is nothing to learn from ignorance there is any use to study about it and accordingly, there is nothing to learn about Iraq in the period prior to Islam. What role this approach played in the interest, or in fact the lack of it, of Iraqis to study their pre-Islamic history? I wish Bernhardsson would have answered.

After a long deliberation Bernhardsson comes to the sad conclusion that "It is an ironic twist that some of the predictions by Hill, Breasted and others from the 1930's have sadly come to pass" (p. 217). Hill, Breasted and other scholars tried in vain to put pressure on the politicians to influence the Iraqi government to practice more liberal laws concerning exportation of Iraqi antiquities excavated by western expeditions. They advocated that the Iraqis have actually very little interest in the cultural aspects of the artifacts and regard only their market value. Accordingly, these antiquities would better serve the purpose of education and study would they be housed in the great museums of the west. Apparently they were right. In March–April 2003 when the museum in Baghdad was plundered, it became apparent that the mission of the Iraqi museum to educate the people failed.

