

Reviews

Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming A Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, xi + 337 pp, 16 illus, USD 34.00, ISBN 0292709471.

Reviewed by Lamia al-Gailani Werr

In the first paragraph of the introduction Bernhardsson quotes from a 1933 Iraqi newspaper, which questioned whether Iraq had received a fair share of its antiquities, and sets himself to tell the story of archaeology in Iraq from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Whenever scholars and archaeologists want to know anything about the history of excavations or archaeological research or the decipherment of cuneiform script in Iraq, they turn mainly to Seton Lloyd's *Foundations in the Dust*, 1947, revised and enlarged in 1980, and the 1996 *The Conquest of Assyria*, Mogen Trolle Larse's book which is a detailed history of the excavations of Ancient Assyrian sites and the decipherment of the cuneiform script.

The book under review was written by a historian who is interested in modern Iraq and particularly the formation of a new country, thus he looks at archaeology from a different perspective. He considers the political, social and religious events that may have influenced the progress of archaeology in Iraq. He uses different sources for his book which he found primarily in the Public Records Office at Kew and the British Museum Archives so that he has given us a new perspective to the events that lead to the formation of the Iraq Museum and the Antiquities Department in Iraq.

The title of the first chapter: *Early Excavations in Mesopotamia* is self explanatory. It is an introductory chapter to the following four, particularly to chapter two, which discusses the western explorers/archaeologists' acquisitions of Iraqi antiquities to the benefit of the rising European Museums, that went hand in hand with the building of the empires whether British, French or German and later American. Seton Lloyd calls this *the Scramble for Antiquities* in chapter ten of his book.

Chapter two, entitled *World War I and the British Occupation*, follows the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with and the time when Iraq became the share of the British. The dilemma then facing the British was how to manage a balancing act between establishing institutions that work for the benefit of Iraq, while continuing to get the largest share of its antiquities. This is best illustrated by the Samarra Collection episode. About one hundred and twenty six boxes of antiquities excavated mainly from Samarra and other sites in Iraq were shipped by the Germans from Basra. World War I broke out when the ship was off Por-

tugal and as the Captain took refuge there Portugal seized the antiquities and declared it war booty.

There followed a diplomatic crisis of sorts, which involved nearly every major museum in Europe and America, each claiming the loot. The correspondence which Bernhardsson records, shows the prevailing imperial attitude, although some officials in the India Office and Foreign Office in London tried to return the collection to Baghdad. Eventually it was divided among the major museums and only a small sample collection was kept in the British Museum to be sent later when a museum was established in Baghdad. The Baghdad share languished in the BM until the 1930's by which time the Iraqi press started questioning the fate of their share, which according to Sydney Smith was of negligible importance. It eventually formed the nucleus of the Iraq Museum.

Gertrude Bell, who established the Antiquities Department and the Iraq Museum, is well documented in this chapter and chapter three. She devoted much of her time in the last few years before she died to running the Department. Bernhardsson highlights the disagreements between Bell and Sati' al-Husri especially with respect to Iraqi Antiquities Law and the division of antiquities with foreign expeditions. Husri became the Director of Antiquities in 1934 and the author rightly gives a lot of space to him; his legacy can still be attested in the Iraq Museum. In 1936 he amended Antiquities Law from the original of 1924. It was at this time that the present location of the Museum was chosen and the famous model of the Assyrian Gate was designed by Seton Lloyd; it was much seen on television during the looting of the Museum in 2003. Husri also contracted a German architect to design the Museum, a rather unique Art Deco Mesopotamian architecture plan.

The last chapter deals with the period of the Second World War and its aftermath. During this time the Iraqis had complete control of the management of the Antiquities Department with the return of Fuad Safar, Taha Baqir and Faraj Basmachi from Studying in Europe and the United States.

Bernhardsson's weakest section is the conclusion where he tries to discuss Iraqi policy towards the Antiquities in the last half of the twentieth Century. This is understandable as the British had lost control of Iraqi antiquities and so the official records in London do not cover the period. Most records are in Baghdad, but as his research was done in the 1990's, he was unable to obtain sufficient information.

This book is an important and essential reference to both archaeologists and modern historians as Bernhardsson has given a new window to the history of Iraq in the making.