

British Museum's Iraq Scheme helps reunite objects from ancient site of Tello

A group of 8 historic objects from Iraq seized in a Metropolitan Police raid are now going back to Iraq, thanks to the British Museum. The items were suspected to be looted and seized from a now defunct London dealer in a Metropolitan Police operation on 2 May 2003. The dealer failed to supply proof of ownership, subsequently ceased trading and the objects passed to the Crown and then to the British Museum for analysis this year. The objects were identified by Museum experts as being from Iraq, specifically from the site of Tello in Southern Iraq, where the British Museum's Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme has been conducting archaeological excavations since 2016.

These objects were successfully identified as being from the site at Tello thanks to the British Museum's Iraq Scheme, as experts were able to link up investigations into suspected areas of looting in Tello with the objects brought to the Museum for identification in 2018. Three of the objects carry Sumerian inscriptions in cuneiform script which identify their origin as the Eninnu temple at ancient Girsu (modern Tello) in southern Iraq. This temple was sacred to the god's patron deity Ningirsu and is located in the area of Tello known to modern scholarship as Tell A and where current excavations are revealing the plan and extent of this important complex. The other items are also identical to objects known from excavations at Tello and most likely also originate from the same site.

In 2015, a potential crime scene was recorded as part of an initial survey of the site at Tello, and in more detail in 2016 as part of the Iraq Scheme and shown to consist of dozens of shallow pits, usually less than a metre deep and up to three metres across. These are concentrated in certain areas of the site: the largest number are on the northern side in the Sacred City, followed by an area known as Mound of the Tablets where many cuneiform objects had been found previously. The site of Tello then remained untouched until looting began at the beginning of 2003 according to information from the State Board of Antiquities & Heritage authorities (Nasiriyah), Thi Qar archaeological police and local tribesmen.

These 8 objects were removed from the site in 2003. This activity would have been clandestine, probably carried out at night and possibly conducted by a small number of individuals over a limited period of time as the scale is not as extensive or systematic as witnessed at other sites in southern Iraq. This activity corresponds to a phase of widespread looting of particular archaeological sites in southern Iraq between the 1990s and 2003/04 and analysis of the art market shows that similar inscribed cones were offered for sale during the same period. Since then looting was brought to an end with the establishment of the archaeological police of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Iraq, and the site of Tello is now protected once again.

On Friday 10 August, these objects were formally handed over to the Iraqi Embassy in a small ceremony held at the British Museum. From here they will return to Iraq.

Hartwig Fischer, Director, British Museum said 'The British Museum is absolutely committed to the fight against illicit trade and damage to cultural heritage. This is an issue which concerns us all. I am delighted that we are able to assist in the return of these important objects to Iraq, via the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in London. It is a symbol of the very strong working relationships we have with our Iraqi colleagues, developed over many years and extended through the British Museum-run Iraq Scheme. The return of these objects is particularly poignant given the connection to Tello, one of the sites currently being excavated by the Iraq Scheme'.

Dr Salih Husain Ali, Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to the UK said "I would like to express my thanks and appreciation for the British Museum and the staff for their exceptional efforts in the process of identifying and returning looted antiquities to Iraq. Such collaboration between Iraq and the United Kingdom is vital for the preservation and the protection of the Iraqi heritage. The protection of antiquities is an international responsibility and in Iraq we aspire to the global cooperation to protect the heritage of Iraq and to restore its looted objects."

Further information:

Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme

In 2015, in response to the appalling destruction by Daesh (also known as so-called Islamic State, ISIS or IS) of heritage sites in Iraq and Syria, the British Museum developed a scheme which, in the face of frustration and outrage, could offer something positive and constructive. The 'Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme', or simply 'Iraq Scheme', received the support of the UK government, and the Museum was granted £2.9m over five years of Official Development Assistance (ODA) through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). The scheme, which became a pilot project for the Cultural Protection Fund, builds capacity in the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage by training 50 of its staff in a wide variety of sophisticated techniques of retrieval and rescue archaeology.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/museum_activity/middle_east/iraq_scheme.aspx

The BP exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria*

8 November 2018 – 24 February 2019

This autumn, discover the world of ancient Assyria through the life and legacy of its last great ruler, King Ashurbanipal. **The BP exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria*** will transport you back to ancient Iraq in the 7th century BC, when Ashurbanipal became the most powerful person on earth. From his capital at Nineveh, he ruled a vast and diverse empire, shaping the lives of peoples from the shores of the eastern Mediterranean to the mountains of western Iran.

Many of the objects featured in the exhibition come from archaeological sites in Iraq such as Nineveh and Nimrud that have been systematically targeted and destroyed by Daesh (IS). The final section of the exhibition will highlight the challenges faced in protecting Iraqi cultural heritage under threat and will showcase the work of the 'Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme'. In response to the destruction of heritage sites in Iraq, the British Museum developed this scheme to train Iraqi archaeologists in rescue archaeology and emergency heritage management. An overview of the project's training and research will be

presented to visitors through film footage of the excavations and exclusive interviews with participants.

<http://www.britishmuseum.org/Ashurbanipal>

Description of the objects

The group consists of 5 Sumerian inscribed objects, 2 Jemdet Nasr stamp-seal amulets in the form of a reclining sheep or showing a pair of quadrupeds facing in opposite directions, and an Achaemenid stamp-seal showing a reclining sphinx:

- 3 complete fired clay cones, each with an identical cuneiform inscription which is known from many other examples: 'For Ningirsu, Enlil's mighty warrior, Gudea, ruler of Lagash, made things function as they should (and) he built and restored for him his Eninnu, the White Thunderbird'.
- a fragmentary white gypsum mace-head with an inscription in Old Sumerian script which reads as follows: '... ruler of Lagash ... dedicated this (macehead) for him'.
- a polished yellowish river pebble with a cuneiform inscription apparently in Old Sumerian script. The inscription reads as follows: ^dnin
- a white marble amulet pendant in the form of a reclining quadruped, dating to the Jemdet Nasr period (c. 3000 BC).
- a red marble square tabular stamp seal / amulet pendant representing a pair of drilled stylised quadrupeds, facing in opposite directions, each with a separate drilled hole in front and an engraved crescentic line behind, dating to the Jemdet Nasr period (c. 3000 BC).
- a banded white chalcedony stamp seal with a flat oval face engraved with the design of a reclining sphinx facing right, dating to the Achaemenid period.

The first archaeological discoveries

In 1850 William Kennet Loftus (1820–1858) recorded a statue at Tell Hammam which probably originated from Tello. The first excavation season of Ernest de Sarzec (1832–1901) was carried out from 5 March to 11 June 1877, immediately after he had taken up his post as French vice-consul in Basra. On 18 June 1877, the Acting British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, W.F. Prideaux (1840–1914), wrote to Dr Samuel Birch at the British Museum saying that "M. de Sarzec, the French Consul at Basrah, has been making excavations at Táloo, an hours ride from the river Hai. He has discovered the ruins of an ancient Babylonian city – it cannot be Zergulla, but one of the same group, and has dug out several slabs and also some small bronze figures. A very perfect slab and a cone have been given to me and I shall have much pleasure in presenting them to the Society when a favourable opportunity occurs of sending them home. So far as my very limited knowledge enables me to judge, they belong to the very earliest Babylonian period". De Sarzec returned for a second season the following year from 18 February to 9 June. Both excavations focused on Tell A, the largest and highest mound of Tello located at the northern edge of the site, also known as the Mound of the Palace in reference to the Seleucid/Parthian large building unearthed there. According to the French vice-consul's own account, the upper part of the Gudea colossal statue (Statue D) was found in 1877 in a ravine along the north-eastern slope of the mound.

From February to March 1879, Hormuzd Rassam explored Tello, remarking that de Sarzec had operated without a valid permit. He opened several soundings of his own in Tell A where he made a squeeze of the inscription on the upper portion of Gudea statue D uncovered shortly before by de Sarzec and several Gudea cones, which he describes as “curiously-inscribed symbols in the shape of a thick, short tent-peg; but no one has, as yet, found out what these objects represented. There must have been thousands of them in existence at one time, as the whole mound was covered with fragments of them”. In 1880, de Sarzec resumed his work at Tello and a total of 20 excavation seasons were carried out by four French teams, successively led by Ernest de Sarzec in collaboration with Léon Heuzey (1877–1900), Gaston Cros (1903–1909), Henri de Genouillac (1929–1931) and André Parrot (1931–1933).

Further information

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at <https://bit.ly/2Omql3m>