

The beginnings of the Iraq Museum

Tuesday 15 November 2016 | [Dr Juliette Desplat](#) | [Records and research](#) | [6 comments](#)

Iraq has very much been in the news lately. Overwhelmed with the war stories, you may have missed the very uplifting news of the [opening of a museum in Basra](#), in one of Saddam Hussein's old palaces. The museum gathers artefacts relating to the history of the city since the Hellenistic period, and is a fantastic place. This took me back to the 1920s and the opening of another museum...



PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS it is convenient to take over both for the preservation of ancient monuments, ancient objects of vertu, & relics movable and immovable of ancient times, hereinafter styled "antiquities," and also for the prohibition of traffic in forged articles falsely asserted to be antiquities:

I, Lieutenant General F. S. Maude, K. C. B., C. M. G., D. S. O., in virtue of the authority vested in me as General Officer commanding His Britannic Majesty's Forces in Mesopotamia, do hereby proclaim as follows:-

1. Throughout the OCCUPIED TERRITORIES all antiquities, to wit, all ancient monuments, ancient objects of vertu, relics movable and immovable of ancient times, which formerly were the property of the Ottoman Government or shall hereafter be discovered, are the property of the Administration of the Occupied Territories acting on behalf of the said Territories.

2. The term "ancient" for the purposes of this proclamation shall be deemed to signify antecedent to the year 1500 A. D.

3. Whosoever having discovered any antiquity fails to inform accordingly the nearest Assistant Political Officer in charge of a district within a period of thirty days shall be liable to a fine not exceeding Rs. 50.

4. Whosoever having discovered any antiquity unlawfully appropriates the same to his own use shall be liable to a fine not exceeding ten times the value of the article discovered.

5. Whosoever negligently or maliciously destroys, defaces or in any way damages any ancient monument or any site which he has reason to believe to contain antiquities, shall be liable to a fine not exceeding Rs. 10,000.

6. Whosoever traffics in or abets the traffic in antiquities except under a license duly issued by the Officer appointed hereto shall be liable to a fine not exceeding Rs. 10,000.

7. Whosoever, whether licensed or not licensed, sells or offers for sale as antiquity any article which he has not reason to believe antique, shall on conviction be liable to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding Rs. 10,000, or both; and his stock of antiquities or pseudo-antiquities shall be liable to be confiscated.

8. Whosoever reports the discovery of an antiquity over which the Administration decides to exercise its right of property shall be duly compensated; & when any such antiquity is relinquished by the Administration, the Administration shall deliver the said antiquity to the possession of the person appearing to have the most proper claim therein, together with a certificate enabling the said antiquity to be transferred in accordance with the terms of this Proclamation.

9. The power vested in the Administration under this Proclamation together with power to perform all necessary acts subsidiary thereto are hereby delegated to the CHIEF POLITICAL OFFICER or such person or persons as he may appoint to act on his behalf.

Signed at Baghdad 22nd Day of May 1917.

F. S. MAUDE Lieut. General,
Commanding the Army of Occupation.

General Maude's Proclamation, 22 May 1917 (catalogue reference: FO 371/3410)

You may think that, during the First World War and in its immediate aftermath, archaeology wasn't very high on the agenda. You would be wrong.

Shortly after capturing Baghdad in 1917, General Maude issued a proclamation to regulate the preservation of archaeological sites and the antiquities trade, and promised high penalties to anyone desecrating an ancient monument (FO 371/3410).

In January 1920, the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad had been warned that the Arch of Ctesiphon, some 22 miles south-east of the capital, was in a 'dangerous state' due to brick pillage. Temporary measures were taken, and the protection and repair of ancient monuments were factored into the budget of the Public Works Department in June, but a more consistent approach was needed. In July, the Foreign Office noted that 'it [would] be a disaster if the great arch at Ctesiphon [collapsed]' and that 'this work must be treated priority' (FO 371/5138).



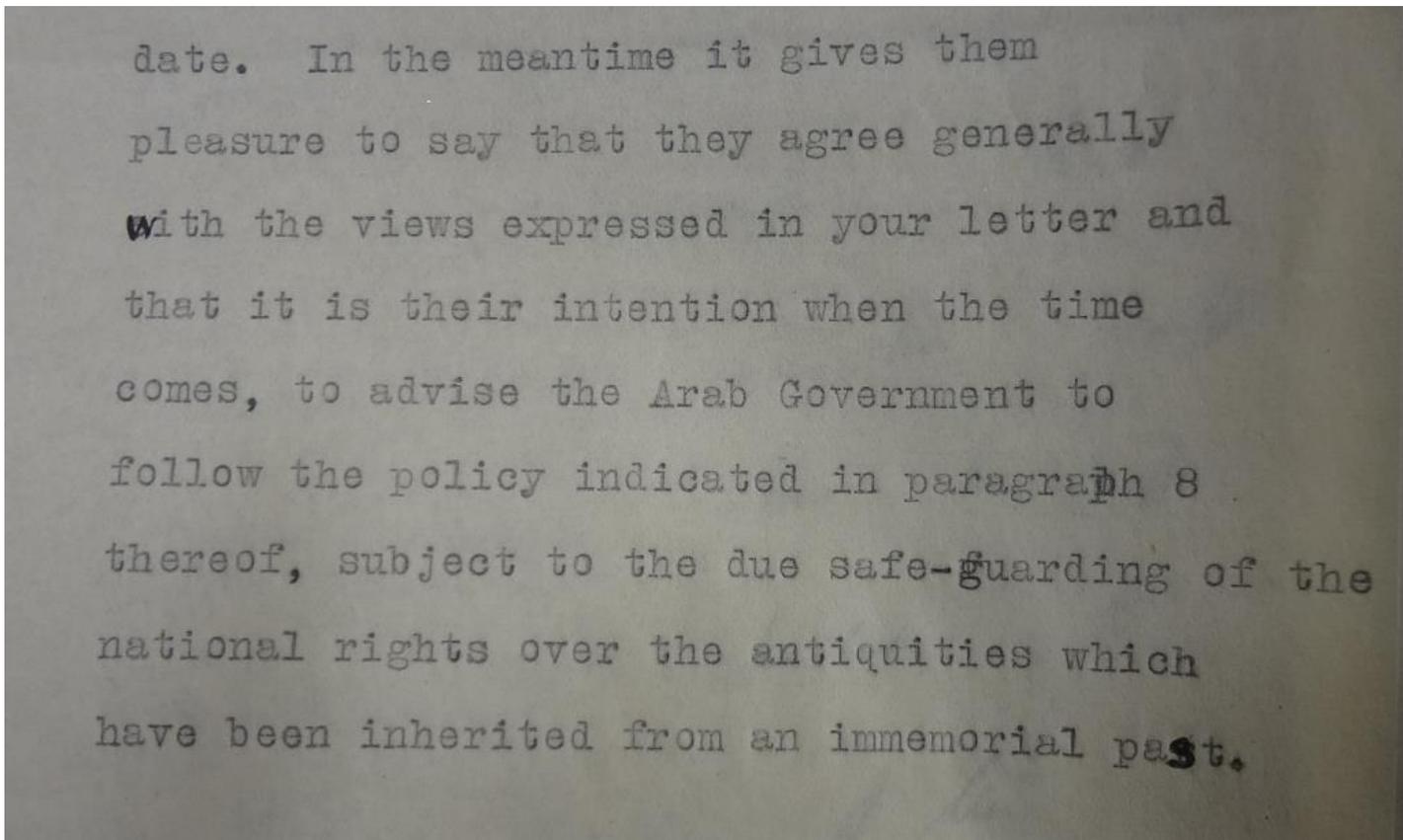
The Arch of Ctesiphon (catalogue reference: FO 925/41384)

In April 1920, as the Treaty of Sèvres was still being negotiated with the Ottoman Empire, the Joint Archaeological Committee wrote to the India Office. They acknowledged all the efforts made by the military and civil authorities to safeguard antiquities and ancient monuments, but they wanted them to go further. They urged the formation of an efficient Department of Antiquities in Mesopotamia which would 'allow the resumption of archaeological research under proper regulations' (FO 371/5138).

All along 1920 and 1921, universities and museums applied to resume excavations. The British Museum, Oxford, Philadelphia, Chicago, Yale... all were anxious to start digging at the earliest possible date. Albert Tobias Clay, Professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature at Yale, also

wanted to open a school and library for archaeological research in Baghdad. Writing to the Foreign Office, he advocated the creation of 'an archaeological museum for the preservation and exhibition of the antiquities' (FO 371/5138).

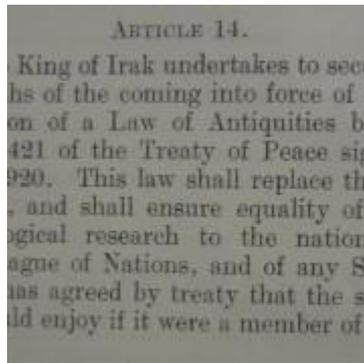
They all received the same reply. The authorities in charge were very much in favour of archaeological research and of 'the due safeguarding of the national rights over the antiquities which [had] been inherited from an immemorial past', but new excavations couldn't possibly be permitted until adequate arrangements had been made for regulation and control. James Breasted, at the University of Chicago, was allowed to take an 'archaeological expedition' to Mesopotamia in February 1920 to inspect potential sites, but only because the letter of refusal took too long to arrive (FO 371/6362)!



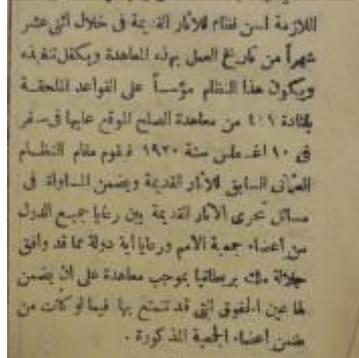
date. In the meantime it gives them
pleasure to say that they agree generally
with the views expressed in your letter and
that it is their intention when the time
comes, to advise the Arab Government to
follow the policy indicated in paragraph 8
thereof, subject to the due safe-guarding of the
national rights over the antiquities which
have been inherited from an immemorial past.

India Office to University Museum, Philadelphia, August 1920 (catalogue reference: FO 371/5138)

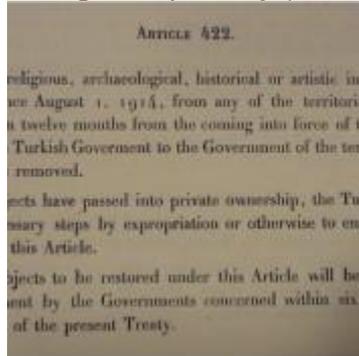
Aware that something had to be done, and given antiquities had been mentioned in the Treaty of Sèvres, the necessity of a Law of Antiquities was included in the Anglo-Iraq Treaty of 1922. Iraq had a year to 'ensure the execution of a Law of Antiquities based on the rules annexed to article 421 of the Treaty of Peace signed at Sèvres' (CO 730/167/1).



Article 14 of the 1922 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty (catalogue reference: CO 730/167/1)



Article 14 of the 1922 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty (catalogue reference: CO 730/25)



Article 421 of the Treaty of Sèvres (catalogue reference: FO 93/110/81b)

Shortly after the treaty was signed, a Department of Antiquities was created. At the request of King Faisal himself, Gertrude Bell, then Oriental Secretary, was appointed as Honorary Director. There wasn't enough money for a fully equipped department, but it was a good start, and she immediately started drafting a new law (CO 813/1).

NOTIFICATIONS, ETC.

By the Ministry of Communications and Works.

72. It is hereby notified for the information of all concerned that the prohibition against the importation by parcel post into Iraq of articles of gold or silver and jewellery has been withdrawn with effect from the 4th October, 1922.

73. The Department of Antiquities is attached to this Ministry for all purposes with effect from October 26th, 1922.

Appointment.

Miss G. L. Bell, C.B.E., is appointed Honorary Director of Antiquities, with effect from October 26th, 1922.

All correspondence intended for the Honorary Director of Antiquities should be addressed to the Honorary Director of Antiquities c/o Secretariat of H. E. the High Commissioner, Baghdad.

The following telegraphic address has been registered for the Honorary Director of Antiquities :—

"ANTIQUITY," BAGHDAD.

74. The Public Works Department Transport Store at Ramadi has been closed.

Gertrude Bell's appointment in the Official Gazette (catalogue reference: CO 813/1)

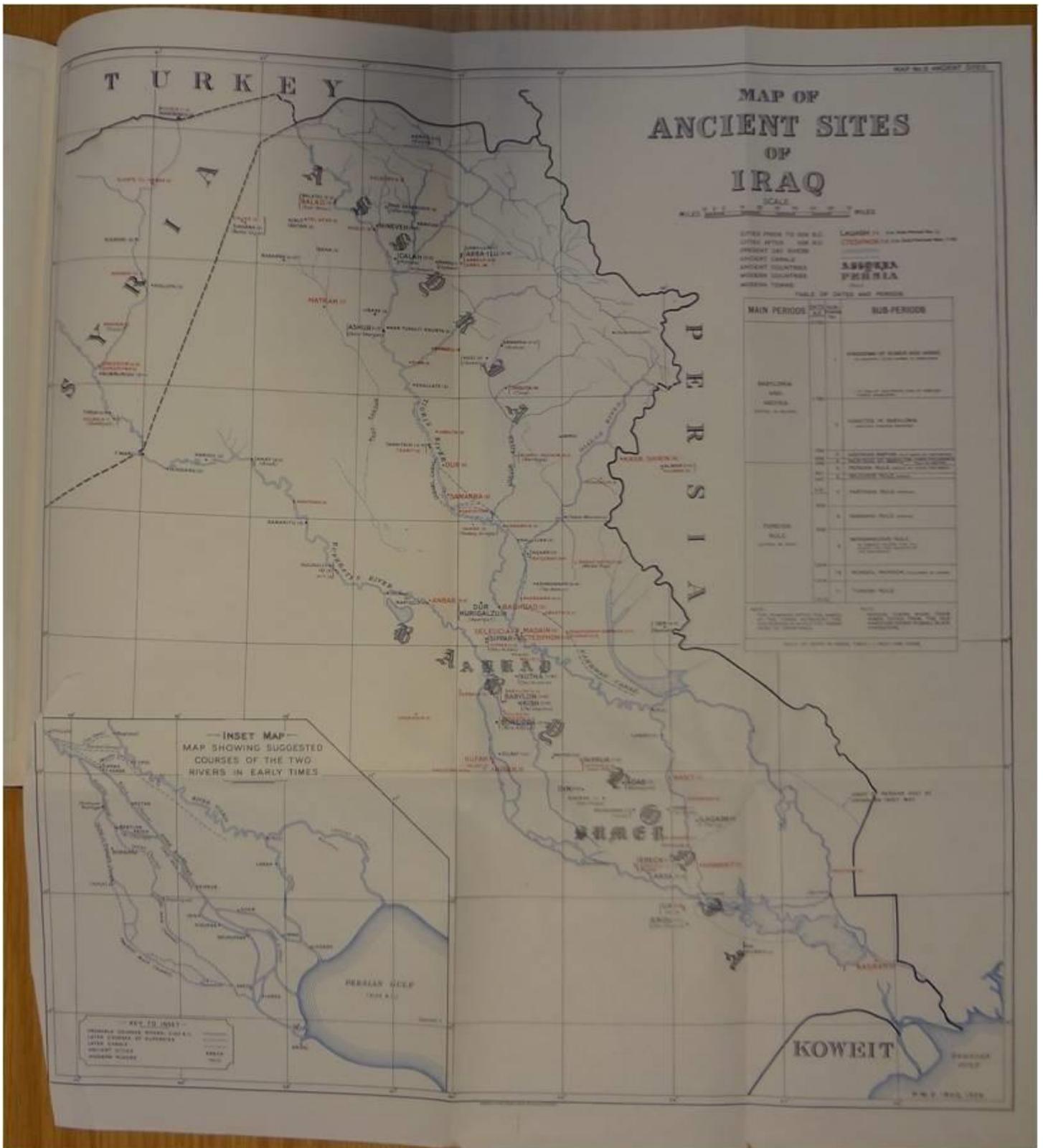
Before the law was even passed, foreign expeditions were allowed back into Iraq. The British Museum started excavating in Ur in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania; Oxford and Chicago joined forces at Kish. These two teams achieved tangible results very quickly, including (in Ur) 'a headless statue of Ur Ungur of Lagash and a quantity of jewellery of the Achaemenid period' (FO 371/10095).

Under the law as it still stood, half the objects found were to remain in Iraq. By 1923, antiquities starting piling up and something had to be done with them. Gertrude Bell managed to convince the administration to give her a room in one of the Government Offices. In the small, rather confined space, she laid out the Iraqi share of the Ur finds, each object carefully labelled in both English and Arabic. On the opening day, Leonard Woolley, the lead excavator at Ur, gave a very popular public lecture and, by all accounts, the day was a success (FO 371/10115).

The intelligence report for January 1924 described the main finds in great detail, and even the Foreign Office conceded: 'the report on the excavations is very interesting' (FO 371/10097).

The Law on Antiquities was finally passed in June 1924. Perhaps unsurprisingly, and in line with similar laws passed in neighbouring countries, it stated that the Iraqi government would be able to appoint representative to keep an eye on the excavators and that the Director of Antiquities could select whatever they wanted for the Iraq Museum. It was, however, very generous towards foreign archaeologists, allowing them to receive a substantial share of the artefacts uncovered and to export this share more easily than it had been under Ottoman law.

These very lenient dispositions made Iraq very attractive to foreign expeditions, and archaeology thrived in the 1920s.

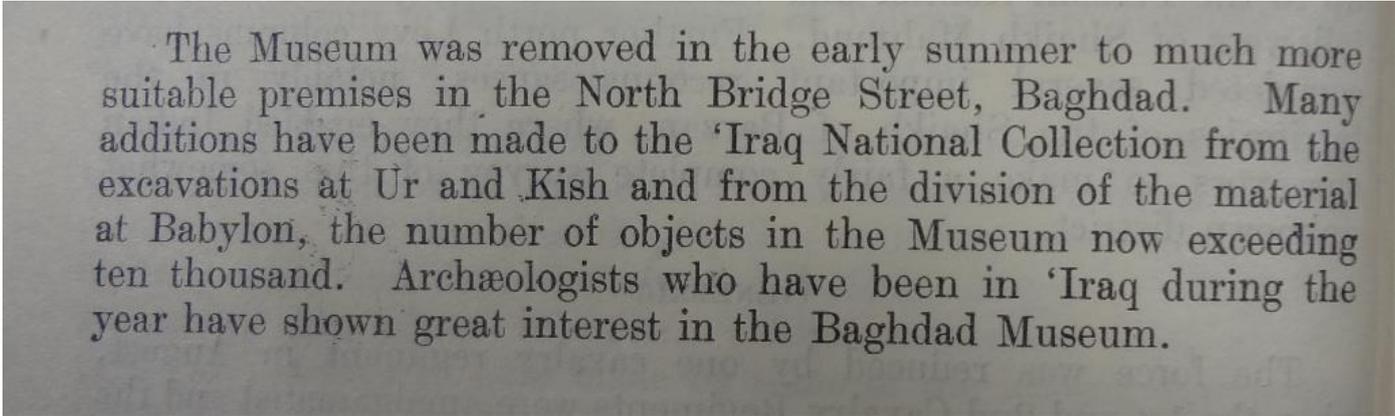


Map of ancient sites of Iraq (catalogue reference: FO 925/41384)

Overflowing with fantastic discoveries, the museum had to move to a bigger space, where the antiquities could be preserved properly. In 1926, Gertrude Bell, who had been looking for suitable

spaces since the end of 1923, finally found the right place. Never one to exaggerate, she [wrote to her mother](#): 'it will be a real museum, rather like the British Museum only a little smaller'.

In June 1926, the museum moved to its new location in the North Bridge Street. To the objects found at Ur and Kish were added those which had been excavated by the Germans in Babylon before and during the war. Bell managed to persuade King Faisal to open the museum – or rather to open the one functioning room as the rest was still being built ([CO 730/115/1](#)).



The Museum was removed in the early summer to much more suitable premises in the North Bridge Street, Baghdad. Many additions have been made to the 'Iraq National Collection from the excavations at Ur and Kish and from the division of the material at Babylon, the number of objects in the Museum now exceeding ten thousand. Archæologists who have been in 'Iraq during the year have shown great interest in the Baghdad Museum.

A new location for the Museum (catalogue reference: [CO 730/115/1](#))

Sadly, Gertrude Bell didn't have much time to enjoy the result of her work: she died on 12 July 1926. The High Commissioner reporter 'the grief which [swept] over the land at the news of her death' ([CO 819/2](#)). The Report on the Administration of Iraq for 1926 noted that her early demise would leave in the Antiquities Department 'a blank which it [would] be very difficult indeed to fill' ([CO 730/115/1](#)).

At King Faisal's insistence, the right wing of the museum she had been so devoted to was named after her, and a brass plaque was unveiled in the summer of 1927, reading:

'Gertrude Bell, whose memory the Arabs will ever hold in reverence and affection, created this museum in 1923 being then Honorary Director of Antiquities for the 'Iraq. With wonderful knowledge and devotion, she assembled the most precious objects in it and through the heat of the summer worked on them until the day of her death on 12 July 1926.' ([CO 730/124/14](#))

GERTRUDE BELL

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being then Honorary Director of Antiquities for the 'Iraq.

With wonderful knowledge and devotion

She assembled the most precious objects in it

and through the heat of the Summer

worked on them until the day of her death

on 12th July, 1926.

King Faisal and the Government of 'Iraq

In gratitude for her great deeds in this country

Have ordered that the principal wing shall bear her name.

And with their permission

Her friends have erected this tablet.

Brass plaque in the memory of Gertrude Bell (catalogue reference: CO 730/124/4)

Since 1926, the Iraq Museum has changed a lot – except in spirit. Looted several times, it is still standing and aiming at protecting the archaeological heritage of Iraq from loss and destruction, just like the new Basra Museum. And, surely, this is a glimmer of hope at the terrifying time when large-scale looting and intentional destruction is leaving 'a blank which it will be very difficult indeed to fill'.