

5 Gertrude Bell and Archaeology in Iraq: from World War I to the ‘War on Terror’

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Gertrude Bell was an extraordinary woman. Although she died at only 58 her life was one of achievement and adventure, and she was, “. . . in her time, the most influential figure in the Middle East” (Howell 2006, 3). Despite the fact that she became a household name during and after WW1, Bell has been largely forgotten, and sadly eclipsed, by the fame of her friend and colleague, T.E. Lawrence. This article will explore Bell’s work in Iraq during and after WWI and discuss her legacy for archaeology in the country and what has happened there since her death.

Bell, a traveller from a young age, made at the turn of the 20th century the first of several expeditions into the Arabian Desert (Winstone 1978, 58; Howell 2006, 99), beginning a love affair with the Middle East which was to last a lifetime. Between 1900 and 1914 Bell made 6 journeys into the desert during which time she studied and recorded ruined Abbasid and Byzantine architecture and learned the ways of the desert (Winstone 1978, 58-108, Burgoyne 1958, 212-48 & Howell 2006, 99-124). Bell’s final, and perhaps most famous, expedition before WWI broke out was her 1913-4 journey from Damascus to Hayyil (Winstone 1978, 127; Lukitz 2004). It was her most dangerous journey to date because of the volatile nature of her destination (Lukitz 2004; Howell 2006, 166). Its purpose was to gather information for the British Government about the rival tribes of Wahabi and Shammar (Lukitz 2004; Howell 2006, 166). In terms of exploration her journey was not particularly notable but for the information Bell gathered, about the Rashids and the Ottoman regime, it was of immense diplomatic importance (Lukitz 2004). This contributed to the decision made at the beginning of WWI which took Bell back to the Middle East.

Between her intrepid journeys Bell also made quite a contribution to archaeology. At 33 years old Bell, unsatisfied with her achievements to date, had decided that archaeological work would meet with her own exacting standards for accomplishment (Winstone 1978, 90). During her 1905 trip to western Syria and Anatolia, Bell conducted her customary surveys of the ruins she encountered but it was for Binbirkilisse, the Thousand and One Churches, which she made her journey (Burgoyne 1958, 221; Winstone 1978, 98; Lukitz 2004 & Howell 2006, 113-5, 119). The book resulting from Bell’s work at Binbirkilisse, completed with Sit William Ramsay (ecclesiastical archaeologist and epigraphist), is described by Ousterhout and Jackson in the 2008 edition as “one of the most enduring works of scholarship on the Byzantine monuments of Asia Minor” (2008, ix) and it is still, 100 years after its first publication, considered the standard work on this subject (Howell 2006, 127). Bell’s other important contribution to archaeology is her book *The Palace and Mosque at Ukhaidir* (1914), considered by some to be “her most important contribution to archaeology” (Lukitz 2004).

Bell found Mesopotamia in a state of dissent when she arrived in April 1917 (Burgoyne 1961, 57). She was there as part of the War Office and based in Baghdad (Burgoyne 1958, 15-55; Howell 2006, 220-273). As one of the only Westerners to have travelled extensively through Palestine and the Levant Bell’s

knowledge was unique, making the documents she compiled invaluable to the administration of Mesopotamia during the 1920s (Burgoyne 1961, 30-1, 58; Winston 1978, 96-8, 161). Bell's political role, at which she worked tirelessly, helped to bring Prince Feisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca, to the throne (Howell 2006, 352), but it is her archaeological work that she took up after the war which is the focal point of this article.

Once an Iraqi government was in place Bell began, gradually, to focus on archaeology again. In October 1922 the Cabinet appointed Bell honorary Director of the new Department of Antiquities which was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Works (Bell 1930, 527; Winstone 1978, 243; Howell 2006, 410). This change in her focus was prompted by the attempt made by Sir Percy Cox and T.E. Lawrence to move artefacts found before the war by a German team under Dr Herzfeld, from Samarra to the British Museum (Winstone 1978, 242-3). Bell began by writing a Law of Excavations which was passed at the end of 1922 (Bell 1930, 528). The more stable political climate had brought requests to conduct excavations at Iraq's many archaeological sites flooding in from all corners of the world and so the need for updated antiquities legislation was desperate (Howell 2006, 410; Fagan 2007, 284).

By October 1923 Bell was working with the Ministry of Works on a proposal for a museum to display the antiquities she claimed for Iraq (Bell 1930, 543). According to Howell (2006, 410) Bell soon had "the richest collection in the world of objects representing Iraq's early history" displayed in a few rooms near the palace in Baghdad (Fagan 2007, 287). By March 1926 Bell had acquired a more suitable building for her museum (Bell 1930, 601-2, 607; Fagan 2007, 287). The first room of the museum, the Babylonian Stone Room, was officially opened by King Feisal in June 1926 (Bell 1930, 615-8; Fagan 2007, 288).

It was during this time that Bell wrote "I always feel, when I'm back to archaeology, that I'm nothing better than an antiquarian at heart" (Bell 1930, 603). This may refer to her lack of formal training, for despite her obvious talent for archaeology she had had little instruction apart from a few weeks spent with Dr David Hogarth in Greece while on holiday in 1898 (Burgoyne 1958, 59; Winstone 1978, 66-7). I would suggest, however, that Bell was too modest and self-critical. The very fact that she was a Western archaeologist fighting the corner of the origin country for so many priceless objects makes her much more than an antiquarian. As Bell's political role diminished the sense of Iraqi nationalism that had guided her politics transferred into her archaeological work during the last years of her life. Although she was not the instigator of nationalist ideas in the country, for they were already emerging before WWI (Fagan 2007, 276), she gave the people of Iraq control over their antiquities and therefore control over their past. This gave the Iraqis a sense of national identity, embodied in the museum she set up (Fagan 2007, 341), an essential component for a new country to be successful.

The large-scale excavations run by a single archaeologist of Woolley and Bell's era were being replaced by teams of specialists working at a slower pace on a smaller scale (Fagan 2007, 310). Likewise, Bell's work was instrumental in bringing an end to the activities of "self-taught amateurs and treasure hunters" who dominated research in the Middle East before WWI (Fagan 2007, 155). Iraq's relatively settled political atmosphere during the 1920s-early 1930s was an important factor in the success of Bell's work and the new methods of excavation being developed (Fagan 2007, 311). This time "marked the end of a heroic

era in archaeology that saw unlicensed treasure hunting replaced by scientific digging focused on solving specific historical problems” (Fagan 2007, 307, 309). Although Bell had no role in the development of such new techniques she set up the infrastructure which created favourable conditions for these excavations while putting control of them in the hands of the Iraqi people.

The approach of antiquarians of earlier centuries, such as Austen Henry Layard, had resulted in Arabian artefacts languishing in foreign collections (Fagan 2007, 284). Bell’s love for the country and its people allowed her, as a Westerner, to understand the importance of these objects to the nation’s hitherto non-existent national identity. If Iraq was going to be a nation it needed a national identity which it could only get from its past. Bell dedicated the last years of her life to this cause. Bell’s law encompassed the rights of both the country and the excavator (Bell 1930, 521; Howell 2006, 410). Armed with her new law and accompanied by Major J.M. Wilson (Ministry of Public Works) Bell began the important task of travelling to archaeological sites at the end of each season in order to divide the finds between Iraq and the archaeologist (Winstone 1978, 243; Howell 2006, 410-11). It was a difficult task for although, by rights, the most precious pieces should remain in Iraq often they required special preservation for which Bell’s facilities could not yet cater; for example at Kish, where she allowed the archaeologist to keep an early Babylonian copper stag (Bell 1930, 557). Bell also visited sites that were not under excavation and if she discovered locals digging them, as at the southern Babylonian city of Erech, she often purchased objects they found (Bell 1930, 549). Bell was changing the way archaeology was managed in order to protect Iraq’s heritage.

Bell died in July 1926 at the age of fifty-eight from an overdose of sleeping pills (Fagan 2007, 288). A plaque dedicated to her and a bust of her were erected in her museum after her death (Howell 2006, 415; Fagan 2007, 288). Bell’s legacy in Iraq is ongoing although it has been severely affected firstly by the extreme nationalism of successive Iraqi governments and secondly by the two gulf wars. King Feisal died in 1933 and was succeeded by his son Prince Ghazi (Fagan 2007, 319). But Ghazi was young and inexperienced and the government was soon under the control of Iha al’-Watana or the National Brotherhood Party (Fagan 2007, 319). Their hard-line nationalism was carried through into the Department of Antiquities by the new director, Sati al-Husri, who disliked the presence of foreign excavators (Fagan 2007, 319). He condemned Bell’s Law of Excavations, claiming it allowed the theft of Iraq’s antiquities and set about re-writing the law so that it became increasingly difficult for foreign excavators to export finds (Fagan 2007, 319). This had the desired effect; most foreign archaeologists left the country or did not return for new seasons of work (Fagan 2007, 319). The only one to fight these restrictions was Woolley who demanded to be able to export several important finds from Ur on the grounds that Iraq did not, at the time, have the appropriate resources for restoration (Fagan 2007, 319-20). Sati also built a new museum, with a grand Assyrian-style entrance, to replace Bell’s simple government buildings (Fagan 2007, 320). By the end of the 1930s the Iraqis were taking on ever greater responsibility for research in their country and had even built facilities for conservation (Fagan 2007, 320).

These improvements were facilitating new and exciting research. In 1936 Fuad Safar, one of two Iraqi archaeologists trained in America, returned to Iraq, giving the Department of Antiquities its first chance to sponsor Iraqi-led excavations (Fagan 2007, 320). The department’s first large-scale excavation took place at

Tell 'Uqair in 1940 and "gave the Iraqis the confidence and training to conduct excavations without foreign support" (Fagan 2007, 320-1). These excavations continued allowing the Iraqis to make their own discoveries whilst training their own archaeologists, and later conservators and curators (Fagan 2007, 321-3, 2329). Their work helped to extend the knowledge of Iraqi society further and further into the past (Fagan 2007, 323) "By the 1970s Iraq... had one of the best cultural heritage organisations in the world" but it was virtually impossible for foreign archaeologists to gain excavation permits (Fagan 2007, 327, 329). The Department of Antiquities, now the Antiquities Authority, had a new museum, now the Iraq National Museum, boasting twenty galleries with more than 10,000 objects portraying 10,000 years of Iraq's history (Fagan 2007, 333, 329). Iraq also boasted thirteen regional museums and exhibits at many archaeological sites (Fagan 2007, 329). The placement of 1,600 guards at sites across the country had halted looting by local people and archaeologists alike (Fagan 2007, 329-30). In 1974 the antiquities law was tightened yet again, restricting export to scientific samples and study materials only (Fagan 2007, 330). Exciting finds continued but all excavation was halted with the invasion of Kuwait and the First Gulf War (Fagan 2007, 330, 333).

The First Gulf War, through the United Nations sanctions imposed after it, condemned Iraq's heritage metaphorically and the Second Gulf War, through an unsuccessful attempt to secure the Iraq National Museum early in the conflict (Fagan 2007, 335-6), allowed its physical decimation. In 1991 the Antiquities Authority was dismantled causing a loss of personnel resulting in looting at nine of the country's thirteen regional museums (Fagan 2007, 334). The Iraq National Museum itself was damaged by bombing and flooding (Fagan 2007, 334). When Operation Iraqi Freedom broke out in 2003 the Iraq National Museum was at the top of a list of buildings to be secured as soon as Baghdad was taken, but the Iraqi Republican Guards occupied it as a stronghold and during the battle that followed more damage was caused and up to 400 looters gained entrance (Fagan 2007, 335-6). In the months that followed it was discovered that about 14,000 objects had been stolen, of which 5,500 have since been returned (Fagan 2007, 337-8). Since then there has been little excavation conducted in Iraq, the museum remains closed and there is heated debate over how Iraq's heritage should be managed (Lawler 2009, 570). But there are those who are working tirelessly to return the looted items to their proper place and slowly but surely some of the many missing artefacts are being returned (Lawler 2008, 30). It is a dangerous task however; in November 2004 a truck carrying confiscated items on its way to Baghdad was hijacked, its driver and guards killed and the artefacts stolen (Lawler 2008, 30).

This loss of their past is to the Iraqis devastating (Fagan 2007, 341). The Iraq National Museum "... has been a symbol of [their] emerging identity for all Iraqis, regardless of religious or tribal affiliation" and the looting of it and its continued closure damages their national identity (Fagan 2007, 341) and therefore the national unity that, as a nation of tribes and factions, Bell helped them to establish in the 1920s. Bell's legacy, which began as an interest in archaeology while on holiday, became the achievement of unity for a people who live in separate factions but has been halted by war. Bell's nationalist position combined with her knowledge and understanding of both the Iraqi people and their ancient history allowed her to revolutionise the way archaeology was managed in Iraq and begin to return control of it to the people. She wrote

the legislation which kept the antiquities in the country and controlled how excavations were conducted from 1922 onwards and although it became more extreme to the point of excluding foreign archaeologists (something I believe Bell would have condemned), Bell nonetheless set in motion the chain of events which gave control of their past to the Iraqi people. Her museum, which although on a different site and on a much grander scale, was tangible proof of this control and gave the Iraqi people, as nothing else could, a sense of national identity and national unity. But now the museum is closed, the bust of its extraordinary founder put into storage (Fagan 2007, 288) and there is little consensus of how or when Bell's legacy may continue. Let us hope that the museum is restored to its former glory as "one of the great cultural repositories of the world" (Fagan 2007, 334) and that research and discovery recommence soon.

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