

New Research on Old Collections in
Southwest Asian Archaeology



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New Research on Old Collections in Southwest Asian Archaeology

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Edited by
**Mette Bangsborg Thuesen
and Giulia Russo**

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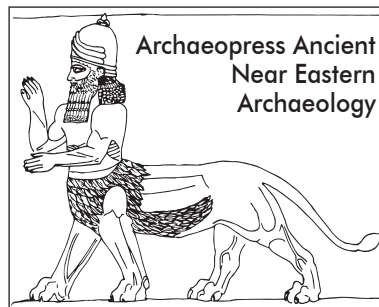
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Cover: Old crate with finds from Nimrud.



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Preface

St John Simpson

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this collection of papers arising from the workshop held in the British Museum from 31 July to 2 August 2023 on the subject of ‘New Research on Old Collections in Southwest Asian Archaeology’. This was jointly organised by PhD researchers at the British Museum and Freie Universität Berlin, and the event highlighted in a Museum Newsletter (Bangsborg Thuesen and Rodzinka 2023) and an online blog (Bangsborg Thuesen 2023). The organisers were particularly anxious to address the question of sustainability in archaeology and how old collections held in museums and archives might offer viable alternatives to initiating or maintaining resource-hungry fieldwork projects abroad. These are questions which also underpinned the 13th ICAANE conference in Copenhagen in May 2023, and seem ever more important at a moment of increasingly fragile world politics and threats to the world economy.

Research is fundamental in developing society, even if archaeology and museums are a very small part of the global research community. We know why we do it, but how is governed by personal experiences and interests, as well as changing research agendas and funding priorities. The outbreak of COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and the second-term election of President Trump have demonstrated in the past five years alone how easily these can be challenged and threatened by governments or other factors completely outside our control.¹ Studying old collections bring other challenges. Not all are easily accessible or indeed readily traced. Museums are under constant pressure to make their collections accessible but their own priorities, resources and programmes do not always allow easy physical access, few are fully or intuitively searchable online, and there are costs for the researcher in terms of travel and accommodation which require considerable pre-planning and successful grant applications.

Old collections vary in size and reflect a combination of archaeological opportunity and antiquity laws, with the recovery and retention policies of different excavators and subsequent partage agreements strongly shaping what could be exported. The examples and case studies given below are from the British Museum but can equally apply to many other international museum collections, for which there is a growing

¹ In 2019 a bilateral agreement was signed between the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK and the Russian Foundation of Basic Research and fruitful discussions initiated on areas of joint research following a two-day workshop held in London on 21–22 October 2019 on the topic of ‘British and Russian Identities and Cultures in a Comparative and Cross-cultural Perspective c. 1800–2000’ (Simpson 2020). These ended abruptly with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

amount of literature (e.g. Emberling and Petit 2018; Pedde 2015; Raja 2023; Van de Ven 2022). Some may include entire tomb groups or complete trench assemblages, as is the case with finds from the excavations by Kathleen Kenyon at Jericho (Ashmolean Museum, British Museum, Manchester Museum, and University College London), with most of the relevant archive held in Manchester Museum. Archival studies, an essential part of archaeological and provenance research, hold even more challenges. In other cases, the selection is more representative of the whole site. This is true for Lachish, Siraf and Tell es-Sa'idiyeh where almost all of the exported finds were deposited with the excavation archives: a detailed handlist (but without illustrations) was published for the Lachish collection,² and the Siraf collection catalogued and photographed for the Museum's Collection Online database while work continues on the archive (Simpson 2019). In the case of the author's excavations at Merv, the opportunity was given to export a large representative sample of pottery, duplicate small finds and samples, whereas complete objects, coins and most of the fired clay figurines were transferred to the National Museum in Ashgabat and the Mary Regional Museum, and other bulk finds buried at the site. The exported finds from the British Museum excavations at Nineveh directed by Reginald Campbell Thompson (1876–1941) from 1927/28 to 1930/31 were divided between the British Museum, Ashmolean Museum and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, whereas those from the British School of Archaeology in Iraq excavations at Nimrud were dispersed more widely, although a major proportion of the finds are registered within the British Museum. In the case of Ur, about half of the finds remained in Baghdad with the remainder allocated to Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) as the project director to divide fairly and evenly between the British Museum and Penn Museum as his two official sponsors. He was also awarded discretion to allocate small subsets to other sponsors, including the Ashmolean Museum, Birmingham Museum, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and private individuals named and acknowledged in the archives. Most finds were divided at the end of each season, with the initials 'L' and 'P' being used to indicate the intended final destinations of those not in Baghdad, but there were exceptions and, in a letter to Kenyon, Woolley strongly recommended that

'the fragments of stone vases, other than those selected for exhibition, should be held over for the time being; there is always the possibility, a fairly strong one, that we may recover another part of the same hoard, and the work of fitting together pieces found in different seasons will be made very difficult of those of this year are scattered between London and Philadelphia'.³

² Magrill 2006. This collection totals some 17,500 items transferred from the Institute of Archaeology, University of London [later UCL] in 1980. Prior to then, the ancient Levant collection mainly consisted of a tomb group from Jericho presented by Kathleen Kenyon and a sherd type series donated during the time of the Palestine Mandate, with the displays divided between a small Palestine Room on the ground floor and the Syrian Room upstairs (Tubb 2023).

³ British Museum/Central Archive/Woolley papers: WY/1/1/96, letter dated 13 August 1923.

The proportions of object types divided between institutions sometimes also varied, thus Woolley commented that Baghdad took the most complete painted pottery from the cemetery at Tell al-Ubaid but ‘we have a type series of plain pottery, half of the stone vases and of the beads, and the bulk of the copper implements and vessels’, continuing that

‘of the Diqdiqqah objects, I surrendered the bulk of the cylinder seals, which have small value for London or Philadelphia, and kept the whole series of terracottas, which are of far greater importance, and the beads, including some 500 gold beads’.⁴

In other cases, the collection may include only a small proportion of the complete assemblage, selected by the excavator to be what he or she considered to be a representative group. In the case of items excavated at sites in the Eski Mosul dam in Iraq, very little survives outside a small amount of complete objects in the Iraq Museum, as foreign teams were generally not permitted to export, there was no official designated storage facility and directors therefore obliged to discard their bulk finds at the end of the project. Selected finds were deposited in the Mosul Museum and Tel ‘Afar museums but lost when those were destroyed by Daesh in 2015 (Shaheen 2015), and those deposited by Iraqi teams in a separate discreet storage location in Mosul also lost during that period of occupation. The exception is a small selection of 289 sherds from 14 sites excavated by the British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq, for which export was permitted, and which are now registered in the British Museum. This offers a unique snapshot of occupation history from a submerged section of the upper Tigris valley and illustrate changes of ceramic technology over eight millennia from the Hassuna to the Late Islamic periods.⁵ Sherd assemblages like these are invaluable for direct comparison and a number have already been sampled for scientific analyses of clays and glazes. The author’s work at Merv mentioned above offers another example as high-value finds, coins, inscriptions and complete objects were consigned to the museums in Turkmenistan, but as there was no desire to store fragments or samples long-term it was agreed that a selection of these could be exported, hence deposited and registered into the Museum collection.

Inevitably, the quality and quantity of the documentation associated with these objects varies greatly. In some cases, there may at best be a field number marked on

⁴ British Museum/Central Archive/Woolley papers: WY 1/3/29, letter dated 8 March 1924.

⁵ The collection consists of pottery from the following sites investigated as part of the contribution made by the British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq to the rescue project: Tell Abu Dahir, Gir Matbakh, Kar Hasan, Seh Qubba, Shelgiyya and Siyana Ulya, excavated under the direction of Warwick Ball (2013,6029 collection); Grai Darki (1987,0412.63–81), Khirbet Deir Situn (1988,0515.99–240), Khirbet Khatuniyeh (1987,0412.1–62), Khirbet Qasrij (1984,0512.25–67), Qasrij Cliff (1984,0512.1–24) and Tell Deir Situn (1987,0412.82–101), excavated by John Curtis; Kharabeh Village, excavated by Trevor Watkins (1988,0515.1–10); Babneet Village and Qara Dere, excavated by the author under the direction of Michael Roaf (1988,0515.11–98), and exported with permission from Baghdad by Warwick Ball, John Curtis and St John Simpson respectively.

the object: here the type and colour of ink offer clues, as the French excavators at Susa and the Germans at Assur, Babylon and Ctesiphon invariably used red ink, whereas for some reason the British used black. In other cases, findspots are marked on the objects in pencil, presumably jotted at the very moment of discovery, and other collections or dealers can be recognised by their own types of adhering paper label but here there is only the label to give a clue as to the source. In contrast, the excavated pieces may be associated with linear metres of archive, but this in itself usually requires lengthy study in order to secure any additional stratigraphic information. Moreover, objects, archives and libraries are rarely kept in proximity and access to each may require different procedures and places of study. The results of Sir Aurel Stein's (1862–1943) fieldwork in Iran offer a good example of this as the finds are in the British Museum, the field notebooks in the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford (MSS. Stein 1-458), and the photographs in the British Library.⁶

It is here that the study of old collections can throw light on the quality of object retrieval (and thus indirectly on the quality of excavation) simply by means of assessing object size and type and comparing with other collections. In the case of 19th century excavations in Iraq, there are complete and semi-complete vessels but the remainder are decorated sherds, mostly from Assyria, including the first example of what was later termed Ninevite 5, Assyrian glazed wares, imported Eastern Sigillata, and pottery of the Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian and Islamic periods. This is clear evidence of a selection process based on picking distinctive types: although their chronology was then unknown (although doubtless the excavators recognised the similarity of the Sigillata to that found at Romano-British sites), it demonstrates a desire to retain examples of ancient craftsmanship beyond the simple removal of sculptures, confirmed by the retention of fragments of ancient glass and even more modest finds.

Aurel Stein's pioneering surveys across southern Iran between 1932 and 1936 were aimed at exploring connections with India, and as part of this he excavated test trenches at sites he believed were promising. The sherds and selected small finds were divided between Harvard and London, as agreed by Tehran: a large proportion of the latter collection from his third and fourth expeditions consists of some 9,000 sherds of painted pottery from 5th millennium BC (Bakun) sites in southern Iran. In these cases, average sherd size is some 4 cm, consistent with the level of recovery to be expected from sieving and implying very careful attention to finds recovery, an observation supported by the high proportion of lithic debitage to finished tools

⁶ These were successfully combined in an AHRC-funded PhD re-analysis by Helen Taylor of the Bakun pottery. The written archive of Stein's aerial survey of Roman and other sites in northern Iraq is also held in the Bodleian Library, but other papers dispersed as his measured plan of the site of Eski Mosul is in the archive of the Royal Geographical Society (mr Jordan S.1) and others, including his plan of Singara, are held in the Department of the Middle East in the Museum where they were bound into a large volume of other archival plans and published maps.

from the same sites.⁷ In contrast, averaging measurements taken of the sherds in the (mostly Halaf painted) assemblage selection in the Museum – a sample of 386 in all – from Mallowan’s single season of excavations in the upper levels of Tepe Reshwa (better known as Arpachiyah) in 1933 gives a mean of 5.9 cm, implying a more selective recovery process, with a greater potential compromise of results of any quantitative study of motif type (Mallowan and Rose 1935; cf. Hijara 1980; 1997; Melville 2005; Spataro and Fletcher 2010).⁸ In both cases, there is an overwhelming preponderance towards decorated pottery, as this was the means then considered key to understanding relative chronologies, but appreciating how common this was within the overall pottery assemblages requires comparison with more recent excavations (Miki 2022). That said, one sherd from Samarra belongs to dark-faced cooking ware with a pot mark incised on the exterior,⁹ and a high proportion of the painted open bowls from that site have ancient use-wear along the outer rims and partial sooting on one or more surfaces in a few cases. It should be noted that nine sherds in this Samarra assemblage are partially or heavily overfired,¹⁰ proving that they were locally made (and the frequency with which kilns have been found at prehistoric village sites implies that this was probably customary; Simpson 1997), and macroscopically the petrofabrics of the entire group appear much more homogeneous than that of Arpachiyah where other studies have already drawn attention to the variety of petrofabrics present (Davidson and McKerrell 1980; Spataro and Fletcher 2010).

Another point to note is the evidence for ancient repairs across these different assemblages, with evidence for drilled perforations on six sherds and bitumen applied to old breaks as a form of adhesive on another six pieces at Arpachiyah,¹¹ with similar repairs on two sherds from Samarra,¹² two more on Hassuna and Halaf sherds from Tell Hassuna,¹³ and a further 23 – thus 0.25% of the total – in the Stein assemblages from Fars (although none of these have any traces of bitumen mastic). Although the sample size is limited, almost all are painted wares and in each case the perforations are unidirectionally drilled from the outside, thus at the expense of the design but minimising the area of the aperture on the interior and reducing the possibility of seepability of liquid contents. Similar evidence is said to have been common at Tell Sabi Abyad, leading to the suggestion that they ‘may have signalled that the object was old and valuable enough to merit restoration’ (Dooijes and Nieuwenhuys 2007: 11). The different regional patterns of repair imply different practices of curation

⁷ This material is long overdue detailed study and comparison with assemblages from subsequent excavations.

⁸ A substantial collection of his pottery was also deposited by Mallowan at the Institute of Archaeology (now UCL) for teaching purposes.

⁹ BM 1924,0416.175.

¹⁰ BM 1924,0416.20, 29, 51, 63, 75–76, 129–130, 180.

¹¹ BM 1934,0211.131, 142, 161, 245, 252, 264 (bitumen only), 13, 40, 234, 241, 284 (repair holes only), 300 (bitumen and repair hole).

¹² BM 1924,0416.84 (splashes of bitumen over the rim), 214 (bitumen repair).

¹³ BM 1962,0725.9, 1962,0725.22.

in antiquity between Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau. This perhaps reflects greater sentimental value for particular (and perhaps imported) pots at Arpachiyah, or the temporary unavailability of substitutes at Samarra in the winter months as pre-industrial pottery production was small-scale and seasonal with limited scope or need to stockpile out of season. To what extent this is a feature particularly of these late prehistoric communities, when painted pottery was more time-consuming to make and the designs imbued with encoded meaning, would be instructive to test by closer comparison with fully quantified assemblages from more recent excavations of later periods when pottery becomes more utilitarian and generally of lower status.

Moving to other periods and another category of object, it might be added that evidence for bitumen repairs is often found on Elamite fired clay figurines from Susa. This is a feature of the assemblages both in the Musée du Louvre and the British Museum, in the latter case from excavations carried out both by W.K. Loftus and R. Ghirshman.¹⁴ The figurines all belong to mould-pressed types representing a female figure with their hands cupping their breasts and wearing nothing but an elaborate necklace, bracelets and anklets, clearly cultic items rather than simple toys. Figurines are easy to break, and usually snap at the weak points of the neck, ankles or waist as replication experiments have demonstrated (Wandowicz 2023), and one of the excavators of Mohenjo-daro remarked that ‘if accidentally broken, these figurines would naturally have lost their sacred nature as the abode of a deity’ and thus discarded (Mackay *et al.* 1976: 259). However, the frequency with which those from Susa were repaired seems relatively high compared with those in Mesopotamian assemblages. This again implies different curation practices at work, even though the exact function and place of use of these figurines remain a matter of discussion.

Returning to Ur, there is a wealth of complete, but largely plain, pottery in the Museum’s collection from Woolley’s excavations there from 1922 to 1934. Woolley himself was fascinated by pottery from an early age. This explains why his publications – from Carchemish to Ur and Tell Atchana – reflect this (Woolley 1914; 1934a; Woolley and Barnett 1952: 227–37, pls 66–69 (Carchemish); Woolley 1934b: 387–91 (third millennium BC); 1955: 23–29, pls 58–64 (Jemdet Nasr/Ubaid); Woolley 1965: 97–100, pls 38–46 (Kassite, Late Assyrian); Woolley and Mallowan 1962: 88–100, pls 38–59 (Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid); 1976: 186–93, pls 95, 101–13 (Old Babylonian), and his desire to create robust chronological typologies and proportions of different wares led to a pioneering approach to quantification by level at Atchana (Woolley, Gadd and Barnett 1955: 306). He was also a staunch supporter of a proposal to create a systematic typology of Mesopotamian pottery across all the foreign expeditions then working in Iraq, although this was not achieved. The Museum has a large number of complete pots from his nine seasons of excavations at Ur, plus a smaller amount of sherds from his deep sounding and other specific contexts, and a further sherd

¹⁴ BM 1853,1219.21, 23–41, 43–44, 83–86, 1420a, 1428–1434, 1437, 1439 / 91822–91833, 120448 (Loftus collection), 2022,6018.3–4 (Ghirshman collection, presented by his former architect, Ian Weatherhead).

assemblage from Atchana, the latter being the subject of several studies triggered by A. Yener's more recent excavations there (eg. Bergoffen 2005; Sconzo 2013). The fact that the individual findspots of the complete vessels from Ur were not recorded has meant that this assemblage has received less attention. Yet the work by Luca Volpi (2020) shows that there is great potential when integrating their typologies into the excavation records, and a comparative study of vessel typologies, use-wear and vessel capacities would undoubtedly offer important new information.

Questions over the reliability, representativeness or ethical concerns of old data lead some researchers to eschew the study of old collections in favour of new fieldwork. However, the latter add to the problem of responsible storage and long-term access as mountains of paper are replaced by gigabytes of data held hostage by computer software, server capacity and means of electronic transfer. The new data are more vulnerable than the old, and it is hardly likely that all current projects will publish their results in full or in ways which allow for re-analysis in the foreseeable future. Few countries now permit any export of archaeological materials, except occasionally as samples for scientific analysis and even then often on a temporary basis. Local and national museums cannot cope and re-burial of bulk finds at the sites they came from is, therefore, pursued as a policy in some cases, as in Iraq. However, the author's experience from there shows that even this does not allow even medium-term retrieval and study, as water, salts and rodents speed the breakdown of the contents of even sealed containers. Recent events in Khartoum show that the shipping containers used to store the bulk finds and equipment belonging to different projects are equally vulnerable at times of conflict and looting (Ahmed 2025).

So what are the answers? The first is that there is no simple solution. To stop undertaking new fieldwork is to deny the possibility of new discoveries, the development of new techniques, testing of new research questions, or the ability to survey and excavate sites or landscapes at risk from development and climate change. Moreover, these projects open new avenues for training, testing classroom-based teaching in the field, sharing approaches and results with other teams, and developing a sense of community archaeology by communicating this work in-country with local stakeholders, whether they be politicians, archaeologists, students or the public. New excavations also raise questions over the dating, function or provenance of objects in old collections, and this is where there becomes a synergy and virtual circle between the new and the old. The author's work at Kobeba is a good example of this as it has triggered new research on the existing collection, not only in the Museum but also related collections in the Musée du Louvre. It has also demonstrated occasional conscious recycling and curation of objects in antiquity (including an Isin/Larsa-period toy rattle from an early Islamic context and a 1st millennium BC Lamashtu amulet from a much later refuse deposit), and helped challenge traditional assumptions over the distinction between Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic I pottery with major implications for the interpretation of surface survey data (Simpson 2022;

2023). Making the results accessible within Iraq was another goal of that project, achieved partly through TV and social media posts and a lecture tour in 2025, but also through the production and free dissemination of colourful Arabic leaflets discussing the project, key research outputs and the importance of cultural heritage (Simpson, in press).

The safeguarding, documentation, display and interpretation of collections are fundamental parts of museums. At times of conflict, curators have been forced to hide and/or move collections, sharing little and acting quickly, as in Iran at the moment of writing. Effective disaster planning and information-sharing among professionals has led to many remarkable stories emerging long afterwards in countries such as Afghanistan (Ambers *et al.* 2014), Iraq (Schuster and Polk 2005) and Syria (Abdulkarim 2023), as high-value pieces were concealed for years in the face of accusations of looting by officials or other agencies, and others remained untouched. Documenting, digitising and creating secure external backups of such inventories is a priority, although ethical questions remain over the wider accessibility and intellectual ownership of the information or the long-term viability and maintenance of databases built with foreign and leased software packages.

All museums have some form of backlog but generally have managed them quietly and steadily within departments. However, the Museum was almost overwhelmed in the 19th century as crates of sculptures, pottery and natural history specimens arrived, initially storing the sculptures excavated by Sir Charles Newton (1816–1894) from the mausoleum of Halicarnassus, Branchidae and Cnidus, followed by others from Cyrene, in glass sheds erected along the east and west colonnades on either side of the main entrance to the Museum.¹⁵ Moreover, this was a period when a flood of books entered the collection as Antonio Panizzi (1797–1879), the Principal Librarian (as the Museum Director was then known), ensured that a copy of every publication be deposited in the Museum as a result of the 1842 Copyright Act. Documentation and cataloguing are core curatorial activities but easily de-prioritised under pressures or distractions of exhibitions, research projects or changing museum priorities, and working directly with objects in collections has generally declined with reliance instead on existing computerised inventories or online resources.

The future of research is in collaboration, bridging disciplines, crossing borders and maintaining political neutrality: the bridge of culture is the one which should never be burnt. The integration of old collections into new research projects connects international partners, museums and university research with the powerful potential outreach to a much bigger audience that the museums enjoy. Bringing students into study rooms and galleries helps engage both sides, but through display and media we can reach a much bigger world, and continue to surprise, challenge, educate and delight all of our public in equal measure.

¹⁵ *BM Return 1860*: 13; *BM Return 1862*: 15.

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