An abrupt end to a 3,500-year story

Some of the glorious art in this study of Mesopotamia was destroyed by Isil as it was being written. By Andrew Robinson

MESOPOTAMIA: ANCIENT ART AND ARCHITECTURE
by Zainab Bahrani

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Some of the ancient cities and works of art that we have covered in this book were destroyed even while the book was being written.” This bleak sentence comes from the final paragraph of Mesopotamia: Ancient Art and Architecture. It appears next to a photograph of a life-size, second century AD marble statue of a Parthian king from Hatra in Iraq with his right hand raised in reverence, destroyed in 2015 during the attack on the Mosul Museum by Isil. The book’s author, Baghdad-born Zainab Bahrani, a former curator of Near Eastern antiquities at New York’s Metropolitan Museum, Slade professor in the fine arts at Oxford University in 2010-11 and currently professor of art history and archaeology at Columbia University in New York, was appointed a senior adviser to Iraq’s Ministry of Culture in 2004, during the Iraq war. She therefore writes with inside knowledge of both ancient Mesopotamia and the present-day threat to that heritage.

Her gloriously illustrated large-format history begins with the city of Uruk in the mid-fourth millennium BC, which created the world’s first writing, known since 1818 as cuneiform: the wedge-shaped script used throughout Mesopotamia for three millennia, inscribed on everything from clay tablets to monumental statues. Then, in chronological order, Bahrani guides the reader through 3,500 years, though regrettably without providing an overall chronology – such are the scholarly uncertainties over dating in this field. She describes the visual cultures of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Achaemenid Persians, and the Hellenistic period after the capture of Babylon in 331 BC by Alexander the Great that gave us the Greek name Mesopotamia, “the land between two rivers” (Tigris and Euphrates) – in addition to many lesser-known cultures – and ends at the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD.

This region of modern Iraq and Kuwait, eastern Syria, south-eastern Turkey and the Iraq-Iran border is, of course, regarded by the West as the “cradle of civilisation”. Yet its art is a lot less familiar to most Europeans than, say, the art of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. “It is more important now than ever before,” concludes Bahrani, “to sustain... historical knowledge of this fascinating past, so that future generations may not forget it, or imagine that there never was such an ancient world.”

Her reading of ancient history does offer some hope that Mesopotamian art might be resilient enough to survive some centuries of neglect. Unlike the Hellenistic-style work to be found in the region during the centuries after Alexander, the Islamic art that later flourished in Mesopotamia grew out of more ancient traditions and was executed by indigenous artists and architects. The Great Mosque of Damascus, for instance, built in AD 706 – one of the oldest and most beautiful mosques in Islam – stands on the site of what was once a Christian church, before that a Roman temple of Jupiter and before that, in the second millennium BC, a site sacred to a Mesopotamian storm and rain god, Hadad. The mosque draws on pre-Islamic architecture
and decorative elements, taking its cue from the cultural continuity so characteristic of ancient Mesopotamia.

Whereas most historians and archaeologists of ancient Mesopotamia ask what its art can tell us about society, politics, religion or trade, Bahrani deliberately differs. Her focus is on art for art's sake. Ancient Mesopotamian human figures certainly inspired the sculptors Henry Moore and Alberto Giacometti, she notes; and in 1936, ancient Near Eastern art was cited as an influence on abstract expressionism in the opening exhibition of New York's Museum of Modern Art, "Cubism and Abstract Art".

Not coincidentally, a few years before this exhibition, probably the most astonishing archaeological discovery ever made in Mesopotamia had been excavated between 1928 and 1934: the Royal Cemetery of Ur. Sixteen Sumerian tombs constructed around 2500-2400 BC were found filled with finely made objects of precious materials, such as lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, along with numerous sacrificed human attendants dressed in ample jewellery, including exquisitely drilled carnelian bead necklaces imported from as far afield as the Indus Valley.

The most celebrated of these objects are reproduced in this book: for example, a gold, lapis lazuli and carnelian headdress of Queen Puabi, a musical lyre with a lapis-and-gold bull's head, and an inlaid box known as the royal standard of Ur vividly depicting a royal banquet. Bahrani notes that the techniques of the goldsmith, such as repoussé and filigree, hammering and chasing later found in Islamic-era metallurgy, are first observed among the Sumerians.

Such funerary objects were designed to be buried and invisible to human spectators. By contrast, most of the art here was meant to be viewed, whether by kings and courtiers or all and sundry. Famous examples include the giant Assyrian human-headed, winged bulls and lions from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud; the Ishtar Gate of Nebuchadnezzar II at Babylon decorated with bulls and dragons in polychrome terracotta bricks; and the massive Achaemenid relief celebrating Darius I carved into a high cliff at Bisotun in the Zagros Mountains that divide Mesopotamia from the Iranian plateau, alongside a trilingual inscription in Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian cuneiform, which provided the key to deciphering that last, long-forgotten script in the mid-19th century.

These, and scores of other works, are analysed by Bahrani in great detail that is revealing if occasionally perplexing, when she draws our attention to details that we cannot see in the illustrations, such as the invisible "Israelite prisoners" and "horses" in an Assyrian relief at Lachish. Overall, though, the book will undoubtedly persuade even a sceptical reader – if not, alas, an Isil fanatic – of the artistic allure of ancient Mesopotamia.

Andrew Robinson is author of The Indus: Lost Civilisations (Reaktion).

To order a copy of Mesopotamia: Art and Architecture from the Telegraph for £40, call 0844 871 1515

Westerners think of it as the ‘cradle of civilisation’, but we know little of its art
Visual feast: the Sumerian Royal Standard of Ur (2550-2400 BC), above; top left, an 1850s print imagining the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (ruled 883-859 BC) at Nimrud; below right, detail from a relief of the lion hunt of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (ruled 668-627 BC)