

The Middle East at SOAS

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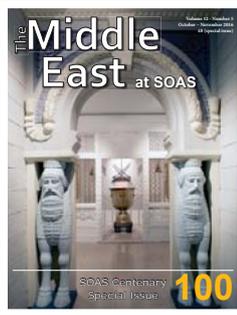


Image of the Inner sanctum of a Zoroastrian fire temple modelled on the front entrance of the Manekji Navroji Seth fire temple, Mumbai, for *The Everlasting Flame, Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* exhibition held in the Brunei Gallery, SOAS from 11 October to 14 December 2013 ©SOAS, University of London

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The Middle East in London

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Contents



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5 EDITORIAL

6
INSIGHT
**Freedom of speech on campus
makes a university a university**
Paul Webley

THE STUDY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

8
**The contours of Middle East
politics and its study**
Charles Tripp

10
**The importance of Palestine
studies**
Gilbert Achcar

12
**Traditional and critical
perspectives on Iranian studies**
Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

14
**Understanding the role of the
Gulf States**
Adam Hanieh

16
**Cuneiform tablets: every cloud
has a silver lining**
Andrew George

18
**Studies of Iran and the Persian
language: a global perspective**
Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

THE MIDDLE EAST & SOAS 21

**A century of Persian studies:
from Finsbury Circus to the
heart of Bloomsbury**
Narguess Farzad

23
**Falling between the cracks:
the academic study of
Zoroastrianism and Iranian
languages**
Almut Hintze

25
Studying North Africa at SOAS
George Joffé

27
SOAS and Islamic archaeology
Scott Redford

29
London, my second home
*In conversation with Ehsan
Yarshater*

Contents continued



LONDON
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32
**The Brunei Gallery, SOAS
1996-2016**
John Hollingworth

35
**Cataloguing Islamic
manuscripts at SOAS library**
Peter Colvin

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT
38
**The mutation of the Turkish
state: the long view**
Deniz Kandiyoti

40
Gender, power and violence
Nadje Al-Ali

42
**Borders and nations: Sykes-
Picot as destiny?**
Sami Zubaida

44
The revival of the Arab Jew?
Yair Wallach

46
Revisiting the Silk Road
Stephen Chan

48
**The use and abuse of early
Islamic history**
Hugh Kennedy

50
**Middle East water security:
some knowns that have to be
unknowns**
Tony Allan

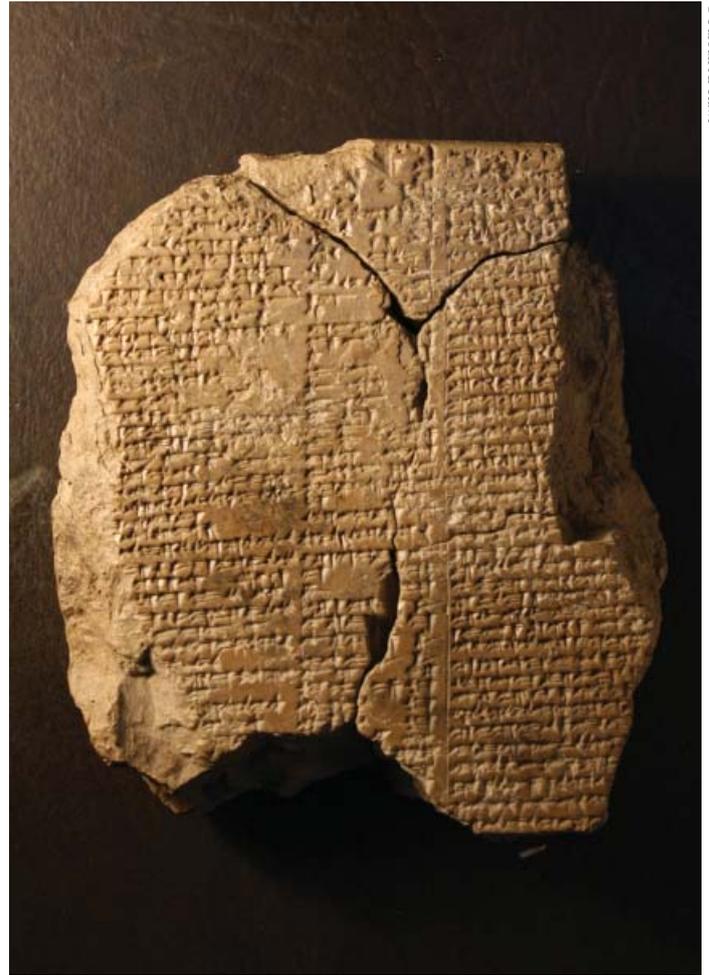
52
Communications and conflict
Dina Matar

54
**SOAS Books on the Middle
East, 2015-16**

59
EVENTS IN LONDON

Andrew George on the Monkey Tablet and other unprovenanced antiquities

Cuneiform tablets: every cloud has a silver lining



© Farouk Al-Rawi

Obverse of the 'Monkey Tablet'. Cuneiform tablet T.1447, Suleimaniyah Museum, 2012

In October 2015 the *Times* newspaper ran a splash on Gilgamesh, headlined 'Ancient epic yields new chapter'. It was part of a brief period of media attention generated by the emergence of an important fragment of the Gilgamesh Epic in Suleimaniyah Museum, Iraq. The original discovery was made in 2011 by SOAS Research Associate Farouk Al-Rawi. He invited me to collaborate in

publishing it, which we did in vol. 66 of the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* (2014). Like other compositions from the worlds' oldest literature, the Gilgamesh Epic is still in the process of reconstruction. Its text remains gap-ridden. The sources are cuneiform tablets, seldom undamaged and often fragmentary, from Iraq, Syria and Turkey. I had the privilege of capturing

all the known tablets of Gilgamesh in my critical edition of 2003 (*The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, OUP), but since then repeated new discoveries of text in museums and elsewhere have increased knowledge of this magnificent poem still further. So the appearance of a tablet in Suleimaniyah was, professionally speaking, almost routine. That may explain why Farouk and I did not issue a press release and were surprised by all the media attention 18 months later.

For Assyriologists, the interest in the Suleimaniyah tablet lies in the content. Some 20 lines are entirely new. They

Following the breakdown of law and order during the Shi'a uprising of 1991, the antiquities' market was flooded with small finds

The best reaction to the looting of cuneiform tablets is to document them meticulously, quickly and publicly

restore one of the long-standing gaps in a passage where Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu arrive at the Cedar Forest in Lebanon and stand awed by its sight. Babylonians were unacquainted with forests, and the poet uses his imagination to describe it. Assyriologists, conditioned by familiarity with the evergreen forests of the north, had previously imagined the Cedar Forest to be a place of silence and stillness. The Suleimaniyah tablet describes instead a veritable jungle, in which the squawks of birds, hum of insects and shrieks of monkeys form a cacophonous orchestra to entertain the forest's guardian. That's why we called it the Monkey Tablet.

The interest of the media was only partly in the Monkey Tablet's content. There was also a backstory, for the tablet was not excavated by an archaeological team. The Suleimaniyah Museum bought it from a dealer. The purchase was not a one-off, and the museum has amassed hundreds of cuneiform tablets in this way. Though classified as 'unprovenanced', their textual content leaves little doubt where they come from: the south of Iraq.

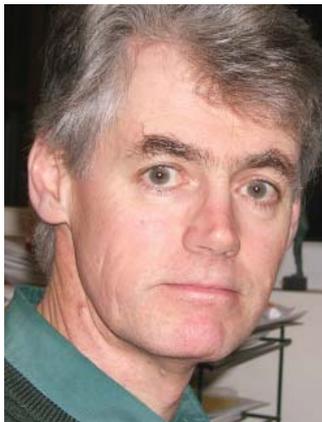
Following the breakdown of law and order during the Shi'a uprising of 1991, the antiquities' market was flooded with small finds from Iraq, apparently freshly excavated by local people and thus illicitly acquired. Understandably, the archaeological community was appalled by the looting of ancient sites and museums and concomitant loss of cultural heritage. The common media response was to reiterate their outrage. The mood of cultural catastrophe has deepened recently with the self-styled Islamic State's terrible destruction of monuments in Iraq and Syria. After years of increasingly negative stories about the fate of antiquities in the Middle East, the media seized on the Monkey Tablet as a good-news story. In this it is not alone.

Many have noted the coincidence of, on the one hand, the renewed looting of archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria, and, on the other hand, the rise – in the Middle East, Europe, America and the Far East – of private collections holding large numbers of cuneiform tablets. There are some who hold it proper for scholarship to have nothing to do with any object that has emerged on the market in the last 40

years without cast-iron archaeological provenance or documented collection history.

I hold to another view. Cuneiform tablets are written documents. They always bear information additional to that provided by archaeological context, so have considerable scientific value even when that context is unknown. Moreover, tablets in private collections do not enjoy the stability of objects in public museums. They are always vulnerable to sale and disappearance. The Assyriological community has responded to this crisis with a concerted effort to publish cuneiform tablets in all large private collections, mostly as volumes in the series *Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology*: 29 volumes of texts since 2007. My own part in this work has focused on literary, religious and royal genres, four books so far.

The glut of cuneiform tablets that came on to the market in the 90s, whatever its origins, is producing many gains in new knowledge. Some single tablets, like the Monkey Tablet, have changed understanding of the cultural legacy of ancient Iraq in major ways. But progress springs not just from individual documents. As work on private collections goes on, new perspectives open up. Administrative tablets from Adab and Garšana have brought important leaps forward in the study of society and economy in third-millennium Sumer. Tablets from Tigunatum in north Mesopotamia, Dur-Abiešuh in eastern Babylonia and the Sealand in the south-east – all places unknown 30



years ago – have dramatically improved our understanding of the intellectual and political history of the second millennium BC. Tablets from the 6th century document for the first time the lives of Judaeans in Babylonian exile. All this new knowledge shows that the cloud really does have a silver lining.

The ethical issue remains: tablets cannot be unlooted. Where illegal export can be proved, objects should be returned to their countries of origin. But they cannot be restored to their archaeological contexts. The destruction by looters of sites in Iraq and Syria is deeply lamentable. But for me the best reaction to the looting of cuneiform tablets is not to expel from sight and mind objects lacking provenance or under suspicion of illegal export, but to document them meticulously, quickly and publicly. In this way the considerable information they still hold is not lost or ignored, but is made available for working into the great synthesis of knowledge that is the ancient history of Iraq.

Crying over spilled milk is not the only response. It is also helpful to clear it up.

Andrew George, Professor of Babylonian, has taught Akkadian and Sumerian at SOAS since 1983. Best known for his Penguin translation of The Epic of Gilgamesh, he was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2006