

Institution: University College London		
Unit of Assessment: 28 – History		
Title of case study: Nimrud: documenting, contextualising and planning for an ancient Assyrian heritage site in post-ISIS Iraq		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2013–April 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Eleanor Robson	Professor of Ancient Middle Eastern History	September 2013 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>In spring 2015, ISIS/Da'esh released a propaganda video showing their destruction of ancient Assyrian buildings and sculptures at the archaeological site of Nimrud, near Mosul in northern Iraq. Robson's research on Nimrud's ancient and modern history, conducted before and after that event, enabled cultural heritage organisations, news media and policy-makers to understand Nimrud's importance as the world's first imperial capital in the 9th century BC, and its complex, politicised history over the past two centuries. Her research contributed to protection and management plans, raised the international profile of Iraqi experts, inspired artistic responses, and deepened public debates on heritage in conflict, contributing to the decolonization of knowledge practices.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Between 2013 and 2017 Robson, a historian of knowledge in ancient and modern Iraq, conducted research, initially through an AHRC-funded project, "Materialities of Assyrian Knowledge Production: Object Biographies of Inscribed Artefacts from Nimrud for Museums and Mobiles" (2013-2014) (i), to explore how archaeological artefacts are transformed from found objects into specimens for scientific and historical study, and politicised in contemporary public discourse. The project's focus was the ancient city of Kalhu, capital of the Assyrian empire in the early first millennium BC, which is now better known as the archaeological site of Nimrud in northern Iraq. For ancient history, it has global significance as the location of the world's first imperial capital, while for modern history it offers a complex web of rediscovery and reinterpretation, finds dispersal and disposal, embedded in the modern geopolitics of empire. Since ISIS's occupation of northern Iraq in 2014–17, it has gained further notoriety as the subject of one of the terrorist group's propaganda videos.</p> <p>The funded project began at the University of Cambridge in January 2013. When Robson took up her current appointment at UCL in September 2013, the grant did not move with her but was transferred to another PI. She remained associated with the project, however, and this case study draws on only Robson's research relating to the Nimrud Project subsequent to her move to UCL. Robson's historical research traced the production and dispersal of written and material knowledge to and from Nimrud in the early first millennium BC (R1, R2, R3) and in the decades since its discovery in 1850 AD (R1, R4). She found imperially driven exclusions from the production of knowledge in both antiquity and modernity. From the 1850s to the 1950s, British research interests not only controlled who excavated and published at the site, but which individuals and institutions across the world were given access to artefacts, and which stories and histories might be told with them. However, the British acts of gifting ironically produced a loss of knowledge, as archaeological assemblages were dispersed worldwide. Individual artefacts lost their meaning and value, isolated in collections whose curators had neither the expertise nor the resources to make sense of them to museum-goers (R1, R3). From this historical perspective, ISIS's attack on Nimrud's Northwest Palace in 2015 was just the most recent of a series that began in the 7th century BC and intensified over the past 170 years. It was therefore vital to Robson that she map and virtually reassemble as much as possible of that long-term, global dispersal, and make its history accessible through open access online publication (R1, R3).</p>		

In April 2017, at the invitation of Ms Layla Salih, the Iraqi archaeologist who was then in charge of Nimrud, Robson visited the site with her, the first international expert to do so post-liberation. Informed by Robson's research on the history of excavation and looting of the site, Robson's memories and records of an earlier visit, and with her maps of artefact removal in hand (R1), they conducted a preliminary site assessment. This onsite report was subsequently published in the official journal of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) at their invitation (R4). It established that much (but not all) of the supposed terrorist destruction was in fact the result of long-term deterioration, legal and illegal removals in the 19th and 20th centuries, and even ancient damage, restored by archaeologists in the 20th century. Robson concluded that the overall damage was highly concentrated on one particular area of the site and that the intensive destruction there was not replicated elsewhere at Nimrud, as had been feared (R5).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Robson, E., R. Horry, J.J. Taylor and S. Zamazalová, 2013–15. *Nimrud: Materialities of Assyrian Knowledge Production*, <http://oracc.org/nimrud>, Cambridge and London [primary research output of AHRC-funded Nimrud Project (i)]
- R2.** Robson, E., (2018). "Do not disperse the collection! Motivations and strategies for protecting cuneiform scholarship in the first millennium BC," in M. Popović, L. Roig Lanzillotta, and C. Wilde (eds.), *Sharing and Hiding Religious Knowledge in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Boston: de Gruyter, pp. 8–45. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110596601-002> [peer reviewed publication]
- R3.** Robson, E., (2019). *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia*, London: UCL Press. Especially chs 1-4. Open access publication: <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/networks> [peer reviewed publication]
- R4.** Robson, E., (2017). "Old habits die hard: writing and rewriting the excavation and dispersal history of Nimrud," *Museum History Journal* 10/2 special issue, *The Object Habit: Legacies of Fieldwork and the Museum*: 217–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2017.1328913> [peer reviewed journal]
- R5.** Robson, E., (2018). "Nebi Yunus and Nimrud: report on a site visit made in April 2017," *Sumer* 64: 73–98. [official journal of Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage]

Grants:

- i. The research project "Materialities of Assyrian Knowledge Production: Object Biographies of Inscribed Artefacts from Nimrud for Museums and Mobiles" was funded **GBP89,537.42** by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/K003089/1) for the period January 2013–March 2014. The grant was awarded to Eleanor Robson at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. She moved to UCL on 1 September 2013, where she continued the research and delivered impact through QR funding. This case study treats only Robson's research relating to the Nimrud Project subsequent to her move to UCL.
- ii. Robson now leads "The Nahrein Network: New Ancient History Resources for Education in Iraq and its Neighbours," funded by an AHRC-CGRF Network+ grant (AHRC/R005370/1) for the period October 2017–September 2021), **GBP1,852,910**.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Robson's research on Nimrud's ancient and modern history has helped cultural heritage organisations, news media and policy-makers understand Nimrud's importance as the world's first imperial capital in the 9th century BC, and its complex, politicised history over the past two centuries. Her research has contributed to documentation, protection and management plans, raised the international profile of Iraqi experts, inspired internationally renowned creative responses and deepened cultural and philosophical debates on heritage in conflict.

Putting ISIS's destruction into context via cultural engagement

Before, and in the immediate aftermath of, an ISIS terrorist attack on Nimrud in spring 2015, Robson's work helped publics worldwide deepen their understanding of the wider social and cultural impact of cultural heritage destruction in the Middle East. In the early days of ISIS's occupation of northern Iraq, prior to the attacks, she outlined the risks in an article for *The Conversation* – "Fears grow for safety of Iraq's cultural heritage under ISIS" – that reached 5,014

readers and was shared over 1,000 times on social media (A). In the week of 4 March 2015, the day ISIS released video footage of its attack on Nimrud, the Nimrud Project's website's page views increased tenfold from 516 page views a week in the first two weeks of the year to 5,032 page views, mostly to Robson's pages on the site's modern history. These pages explain the long history of illicit and official removal and neglect (as well as restoration) of cultural artefacts from the so-called Northwest Palace, the main focus of the ISIS attack, which international journalists had assumed had been in pristine condition until then. The website achieved 194,238 page views from its launch in January 2014 to the end of 2020, averaging 550 page views a week (B).

In the days following ISIS's attack on Nimrud in March 2015, Robson provided expert comment for major news outlets such as the Guardian (553 shares), the BBC World Service and Agence France-Presse TV, contextualising the events and explaining their cultural, historical and political significance and reaching an audience of over 25,000 (A). International political rhetoric at the time drew heavily on a simple dichotomy between international saviours of heritage and local destroyers; Robson explicated the valuable roles of local expertise and audiences in the Middle East itself and regularly connected journalists to her Iraqi colleagues. Robson was commissioned to write an article for the *Times Literary Supplement* (2015 print circulation 25,214), which appeared on the front page of its website (B). In it, she argued that saving Iraqi lives and rebuilding the intellectual infrastructure of heritage in Iraq should take precedence over restoration of sites such as Nimrud, which, her research (R1, R4) showed, could and should be stabilised and attended to at a later date. The American Schools of Oriental Research, the USA's pre-eminent learned society for ancient Middle Eastern history and archaeology, quickly reiterated this advice in their report, "Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for safeguarding cultural heritage sites in Syria and Iraq" (C). BBC journalist and producer of the radio and podcast series, *Museum of Lost Objects*, Maryam Maruf, consulted Robson and her research in preparation for 2 episodes of the programme, first aired 9 March 2016 and 10 June 2017. *Museum of Lost Objects* explores the histories of destroyed or looted antiques and Maruf explains that "I would have struggled to make those programmes without her insights (R1)... As a non-historian, it gave me a thorough and instant grasp of that period of Mesopotamian history and was also incredibly useful when it came to fact checking for my 2016 episode." Maruf notes that the podcast "was in the iTunes top 10 chart for most downloaded podcasts, and when it launched it scored a rating of 86% in a BBC-conduct audience appreciation poll – which was the highest rated programme on Radio 4 that week." One listener commented that the episodes "stand alongside our actual Museums as essential cultural documentation" (D).

Informing official agencies' plans to document, protect and manage the site

After the liberation of the archaeological site of Nimrud in spring 2017, Robson helped the experts and agencies responsible plan for its protection, stabilisation and future management. After her site visit in April 2017, Robson's research (R1, R4), site photos and further advice were "extremely helpful to contextualize, guide and prioritize UNESCO safeguarding activities at Nimrud," according to its then Director (E). For instance, Robson's work informed UNESCO Iraq and the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities' (SBAH)'s joint decision in summer 2017 to fence the site and install a cabin for 24-hour guards working there, to prevent further looting. Robson's research (R1, R4) also spurred the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI) to establish, in the words of its President, a new "core strategic activity": compiling and providing free online access to "a catalogue of some of the most significant Nimrud excavation records and that are held at the British Museum," which is now available open-access on BISI's website (F). This ongoing work (2016–present) will eventually result in open-access digital copies of the records themselves, enabling the development of long-term site management plans, and informing decisions around stabilisation, conservation and reconstruction. It has made the site accessible in new ways to audiences whose access was previously restricted. As BISI's President notes, "such information was especially important for Iraqi scholars and heritage professionals whose access to it had been made impossible by decades of conflict and sanctions" (F).

Meanwhile, Robson's website (R1) was 'foundational' to the Nimrud Rescue Project (2017–present) (G). This collaboration between SBAH, the Iraqi Institute for Conservation and Heritage, and the Smithsonian Institution has trained 29 Iraqi archaeologists to create detailed documentation of the current state of the site, and to safeguard vulnerable elements in anticipation of restoration at a later date. The website (R1), the Head of Conservation at the Smithsonian

Institution reports, “gave [Smithsonian staff and interns] an effective entry into the self-education we needed at the start” and was later shared with trainees “who are doing the actual recovery and stabilization of the Neo-Assyrian sculpture and architecture at the site,” while Robson’s invited membership of the project’s Stabilization Guidance Committee (2017–19) enabled her to contribute ongoing advice and expertise (G). This was particularly important in the early phase of the Rescue Project, when its US directors were not allowed to access the site for security reasons. For Maruf, Robson’s advice ahead of Maruf’s site-visit in 2017 “was not only editorially useful, it was also life-saving. For instance, Eleanor provided me with a map of Nimrud after the IS destruction and explained which parts of the site were safe, and which were no-go areas and potentially mined” (D).

Inspiring artworks to engage large public audiences in Europe, the Middle East and America with the loss of Nimrud’s cultural artefacts

World-renowned Iraqi-American sculptor Michael Rakowitz has been deeply influenced by reading Robson’s research. Rakowitz is winner of the GBP100,000 Nasher Prize 2020-21, awarded by the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas to “living artists who have profoundly impacted sculpture.” He notes to Robson that “I continue to be so grateful, inspired and awed by your work. So much of what I do, and the thinking that supports it, owes a great deal to your research” (H). This influence is especially visible in the production of “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,” a series of artworks which reconstructs historically looted and recently destroyed Iraqi antiquities using modern Middle Eastern newspapers and food packaging. It includes Rakowitz’s fourth plinth sculpture at Trafalgar Square of an ancient Assyrian winged bull destroyed by Da’esh, recreated with date-syrup cans (March 2018 – March 2020), which received an estimated 15,000,000 visitors annually, and associated maquettes displayed at the National Gallery just behind it.

Other artefacts in the series include reconstructions of sculptural panels from the devastated palace throne room at Nimrud. These were first exhibited at Rakowitz’s Whitechapel Gallery show in summer 2019, which attracted 7,227 visitors (I), and have since been shown at eight influential galleries in Europe, the Middle East and America, including the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai, Malmo and Tensta Konsthalle, Sweden, and Wellin Museum of Art, New York. Rakowitz states that Robson’s research article (R2) on the excavation and dispersal history of Nimrud “served as my blueprint not only in understanding Nimrud’s history but also in how our perceptions of its destruction elides many voices and truths... The clarity of this essay helped me imagine my work as presenting a palimpsest of displacements” (H). This was reflected in the artefacts and their presentation. Rakowitz explains: “Not only would I reappear in full scale the rooms that ISIS destroyed, but I would show the gaps representing the panels taken by Western missionaries, archaeologists, adventurers, and thieves (the latter term applies to the former three as well). Each gap was coupled with the provenance information of each panel, its inventory number, as well as its present location” (H).

Amplifying Iraqi expertise in global contexts

Robson’s research on the geographically situated nature of archaeological and historical knowledge, along with close collaboration with Iraqi colleagues, led her to argue for the value of the past in constructing post-conflict futures in the Middle East, driven by local agendas and led by local practitioners with international support. Wherever possible, Robson has directed international media to her Iraqi colleagues in order to help audiences understand the role of local expertise in cultural heritage protection, and the enormous social and cultural value of heritage in Iraq.

In 2017 Robson established the AHRC-GCRF-funded Nahrein Network (ii) to support locally led interdisciplinary research in the role of history, heritage and the humanities in the sustainable economic and social development of post-conflict Iraq and its neighbours, and to advocate for this approach internationally. Robson’s primary role is to facilitate and promote the work of Iraqi heritage professionals, in a concerted attempt to decolonise the production of knowledge about Iraq’s past, both in and outside universities. As Rakowitz explains, “The foregrounding of Iraqi decisions seems simple. However [...] decolonization necessitates giving up power to establish mutuality. The Nahrein Network is exemplary in this regard as a reciprocal imperative” (H). To date the Network has funded and mentored 24 research projects in the region, and 15 short-term professional development scholarships to the UK, all on topics put forward and led by Iraqi,

Lebanese or Turkish practitioners. The network has provided many Iraqi PIs with their first experience of leading research groups and being recognised internationally for their expertise, as well as in their own institutions, e.g., through promotion and career development. Two of its first fundees, Dr Jaafar Jotheri of Qadissiyah University and Dr Rozhen Mohammed-Amin of Sulaimani Polytechnic University, are now Co-Is of the whole network and members of the AHRC's international peer review college. Together with Nahrein Network researcher Dr Mehiyar Kathem, in 2019 they ran a series of highly successful academic writing workshops at Iraqi universities, funded by a GBP20,000 grant from the British Academy (i).

The Network has also enabled Iraqi experts to advise major international agencies, funders and think tanks on rationales and mechanisms for developing people-centred, rather than building- or site-based, rationales for supporting cultural heritage in Iraq and other post-conflict countries, facilitating these organisations' access to and use of a wider knowledge base and encouraging the development of new funding strategies. Since 2019 an influential series of round-tables and webinars co-organised with Chatham House's Iraq Initiative, featuring many Iraqi members of the Network, has placed cultural heritage at the heart of this state-building agenda. Its most recent event on the political barriers to effective support for Iraqi cultural heritage was reported by UAE's widely read English-language daily newspaper, *The National*, on 25 November 2020 (A). Robson's Network is dramatically recentring the geography of knowledge production about the past of Iraq, back towards Iraq itself (R1), demonstrated by its recognition by a think tank and the British Council. In 2019 Robson made major contributions to a British Council report on developing collaborations between UK and Iraqi universities. The Network is held up as a successful collaboration with Iraqi stakeholders to achieve "the restoration of Iraq's cultural heritage" and "curriculum development and research capacity building" (J). In autumn 2020, Robson secured an GBP11,000,000 gift to continue the Network's activities until 2031, announced in February 2021 (J).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Media bundle including: Robson, *The Conversation*, 10 July 2014; Shaheen, K, "Isis attacks on ancient sites erasing history of humanity, says Iraq," *The Guardian*, 9 March 2015; Robson, Modern war, ancient casualties. *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 2015; 2015 circulation figures; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/middle-east-and-north-africa-programme/iraq-initiative> ; and M. Aldroubi, "Iraq's cultural heritage negatively impacted by sectarian politics experts say," *The National*, 25 November 2020
- B. Google Analytics for <http://Oracc.org/Nimrud>
- C. M.D. Danti et al., "Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for safeguarding cultural heritage sites in Syria and Iraq," American Schools of Oriental Research, 30 March 2015.
- D. *Museum of Lost Objects*, BBC World Service, "The genie of Nimrud" (9 March 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b072mq8v>) "Nimrud and Hatra," featuring Dr Muzahim Mahmoud Hossein and Ms Layla Salih (10 June 2017) — Robson is credited on the website <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0557vmq> — and letter from producer Ms Maryam Maruf
- E. Letter from Director of UNESCO Iraq, 2016-2019, 21 October 2020.
- F. <http://www.bisi.ac.uk/content/nimrud-archives> and letter from President of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq
- G. Letter from the Head of Conservation at the Smithsonian Institution and PI of the Nimrud Rescue Project
- H. Email and letter from Professor Michael Rakowitz; Email from the Director of Education and Public Programmes at Whitechapel Gallery
- I. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/> and <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/iraq-publishing-workshops>
- J. C Raban, "Prospects for partnership: collaboration between British and Iraqi Universities," British Council Iraq 2019; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/anonymous-donor-gives-11m-to-london-s-ucl-to-fund-study-of-ancient-mesopotamia-1.1158378>