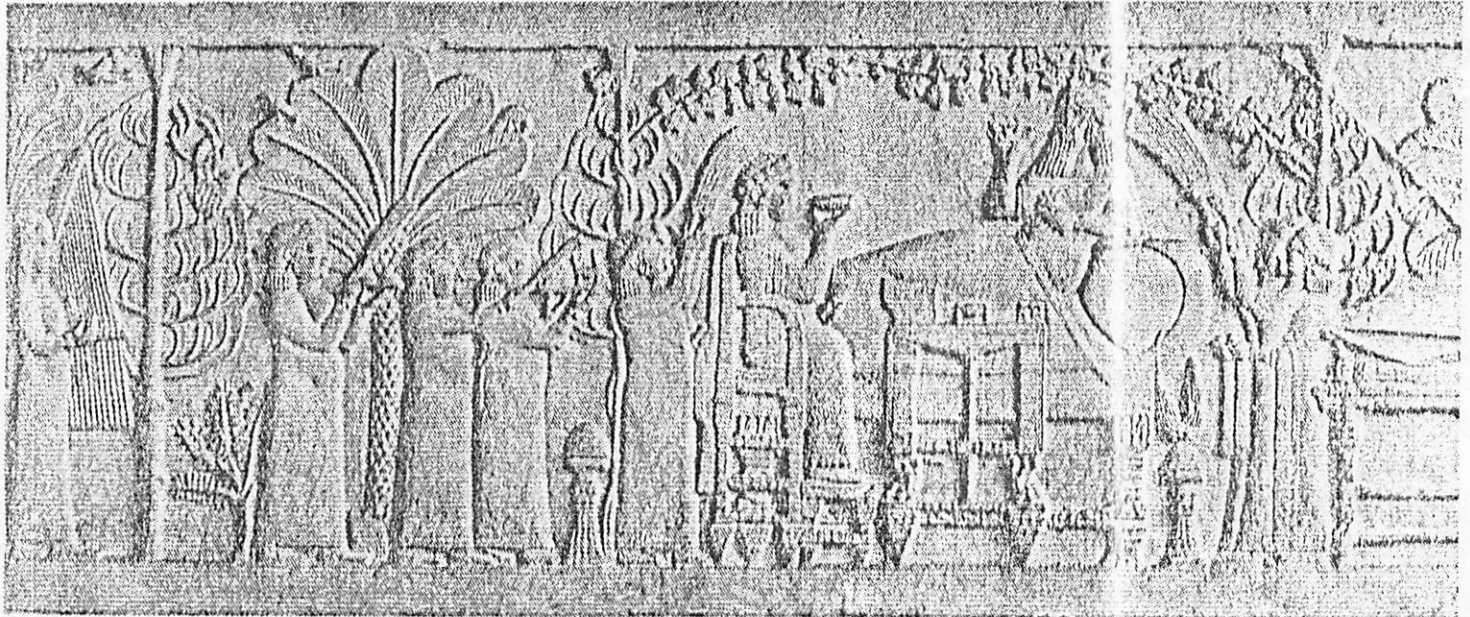


Washington Ways: Laying the groundwork for Queen Elizabeth **2**

David Macaulay wins Caldecott; other book award winners named **2**

Style **5** **7**



Slab depicting a royal banquet at Nineveh in the 7th century B.C.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Fertile History of Modern Babylon

Iraq's Rich Archaeological Heritage

By Ken Ringle
Washington Post Staff Writer

*The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.*

—Lord Byron

If war comes to Iraq, it certainly won't be the first time. It will, however, arrive swaddled in its own unique irony: This time the full industrialized fury of civilization will be turned on the very land that gave civilization birth.

No land anywhere, not excepting Israel, holds more benchmarks in the early social and cultural chronicle of man than Mesopotamia, Iraq's history-steeped heartland between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Man's earliest writings have been found there, his earliest maps, his earliest cities and his earliest codified laws. It was there that man first turned from hunting and gathering to agriculture, from simple conquest to government and administration, from superstition to science.

Though few obvious traces of their civilizations are visible today, the Sumerians and Assyrians dwelt in Iraq, which houses as well the earliest roots of Judeo-Christian culture. One of Saddam Hussein's air bases lies near Ur, the birthplace

of Abraham. Another adjoins the legendary site of the fiery furnace where the biblical angel shielded Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from Nebuchadnezzar's flames.

What does it mean that an oil refinery, at Basra, now occupies a purported site of the Garden of Eden? What does it mean that, if war breaks out, we're almost certain to bomb it?

The storied city of Nineveh was in Iraq. So were the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The tomb of Jonah—as placed by legend—lies near one of Hussein's chemical warfare plants.

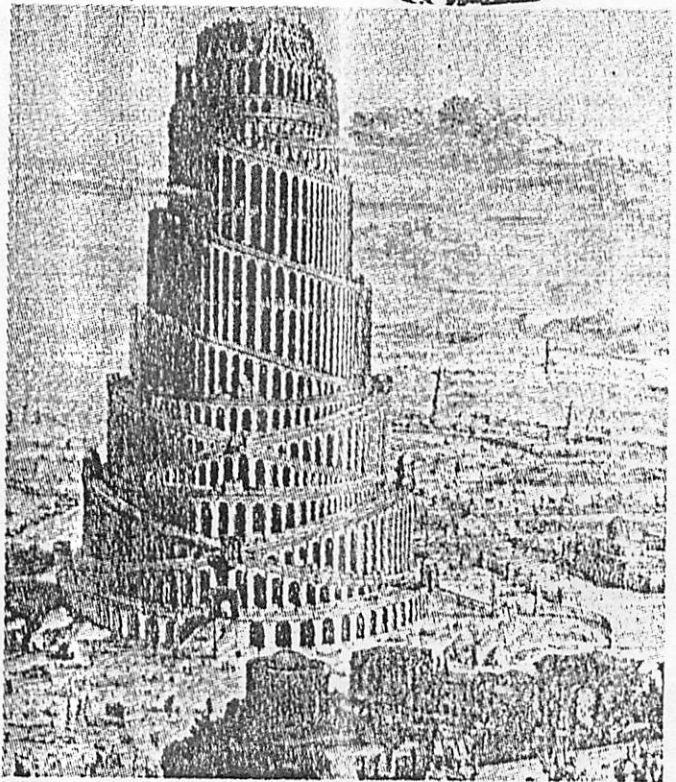
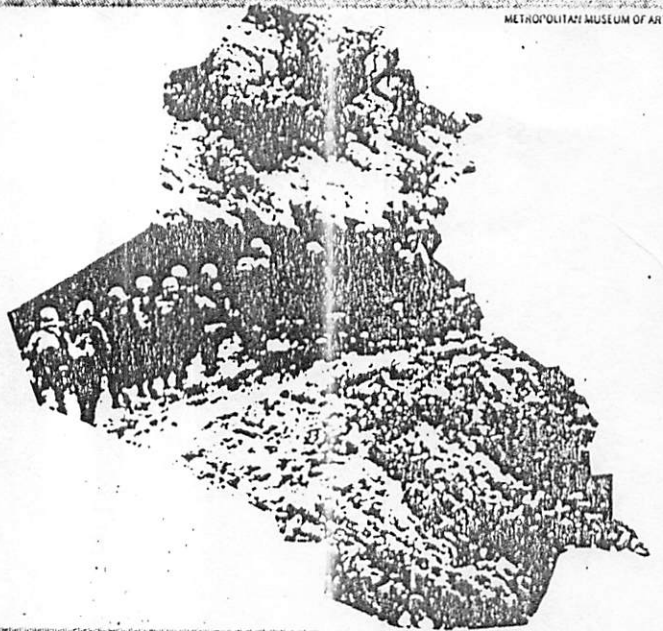
Is there, one wonders, a communications center near the Tower of Babel?

"It puzzles and distresses me to hear people talk as if Iraq was simply an empty desert with some oil wells," says Robert McC. Adams, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. "There seems to be little general understanding of the extraordinary contributions of Mesopotamia" in lifting mankind above the beasts.

Adams, who has spent more than 25 years of his life on archaeological pursuits in Iraq, confesses unease in fielding prewar questions about the cultural riches of the country: He doesn't want to sound like an apologist for Saddam Hussein or like someone who thinks the things that might be lost in the war are more important than the lives.

But neither nightly newscasts nor front-page stories, he's noticed, give any

See HISTORY, C4, Col. 1



A 17th-century depiction of the Tower of Babel.

DETAIL FROM "TURRIS BABEL" BY ATHANASIUS KIRCHER

Babylon Revisited

HISTORY, From C1

hint that the Western world has any stake in Iraq beyond petrodollars.

"The archaeological treasures in the museum in Baghdad are, in a very real sense, the property of all the peoples of the world," said David Stronach, professor of Near East archaeology at the University of California at Berkeley. "If it were suggested somehow that it was necessary to bomb Athens in a war, there would be a very large outcry from the scholars of the world that the Acropolis should not be put in such danger. It seems appropriate to me to point out the equal danger of our cultural patrimony in Iraq."

Though the earliest traces of man himself have been found far to the south, in Ethiopia and southern Africa, it is in Iraq that archaeologists have found the earliest evidence of organized human society—more than a century older than comparable artifacts in Egypt and a thousand years before any found in China.

Stone Age skeletons found in Shanidar Cave, in northern Iraq, show the earliest evidence of ritual burial. A 6,000-year-old temple unearthed at Abu Shahrein, about 80 miles north of the Kuwaiti border, is the oldest religious structure known to man. Iraq, some scholars argue, even gave rise to the concept of a single god.

"The history of Mesopotamia dominates much of the Old Testament because much of the Old Testament happened there," said Frank Van Develer, professor of biblical language and theology at Virginia Theological Seminary.

The language, mythology and customs of the Mesopotamian peoples, as well as their armies, heavily influenced Jewish culture, which still bears their traces today, he said. "In fact, the Great Talmud," the major sourcebook of Jewish law, "was written in Babylon," Van Develer said. "When the Babylonians carried the Israelites into captivity, many of them never came back. Babylon maintained a huge Jewish community and was a major center of Jewish culture right through the early Christian period."

Commerce, as well as religion, had its pioneering aspects in Iraq. Installation-plan purchasing has been documented upon some 2500 B.C. clay tablets found not far from the Iraqi fighter base at Jalibah.

"I don't want to make it sound like all these things necessarily spread from Mesopotamia to the rest of the world," Adams said. "Concepts like monotheism were evolving elsewhere as well. There were trends in these directions in places like Egypt."

But for reasons still hotly debated by archaeologists and historians, they appear to have flowered first in "the fertile crescent" stretching along the mountains of Kurdistan to the Persian Gulf—the heart of present-day Iraq.

"My own guess" why, Adams said, "is they emerged due to the particular climatological and geographical features of Mesopotamia at that time. It was a very fertile area, but only if people were cooperating—some irrigating the plains, some as shepherds in the steppes, and so on—in specialized roles. And that required and rewarded social organization . . . writing, messages, the accumulation and transfer of knowledge, hierarchical social structure and the like."

Less explainable, and perhaps more wonderful, he says, is that "these advances were not just linear and utilitarian. They were accompanied by tremendous creative surges in areas like sculpture, carpentry, ceramics and architecture—all the decorative arts" that evidence a flowering of the human spirit as well.

From the emergence of the Sumerian civilization, about 3000 B.C., to the overthrow of the Babylonian empire, about 1600 B.C., Adams said, "such learning as the world had achieved up to that time was to be found in the scribal schools and libraries of what is now Iraq. They were teaching the Pythagorean theorem [of geometry] there a thousand years before Pythagoras."

In the 5th century B.C., Iraq fell to the Persians, and two centuries later to the Greeks, and its ancient civilizations became a memory. But with the coming of Islam, the Arab conquest and the



rule of the Abbasside caliphs (A.D. 750 to 1250), Iraq once again became the world center of learning. While Europe was largely mired in barbarism, Baghdad was the globe's most cosmopolitan city, the Baghdad of "1,001 Nights" and "The Rubaiyat", pouring forth a blaze of philosophical, scientific and lit-

erary achievements still remembered as the pinnacle of Arab culture.

"Try to think of another country which has produced two such long-lived periods of comparable richness, more than a thousand years apart, from entirely separate cultural traditions," Adams said. "There are none."

Of course, not all the contributions

of Iraqi history have been intellectual. From biblical times the country's conquerors and rulers have coupled their mental and administrative capacities with continuous warfare and extraordinary cruelty.

The caliphs liked to slice people up with scimitars or pull them apart with horses. The Assyrians, arguably the fiercest of Iraq's rulers through the millennia, were more draconian than that. Recent excavations at Nimrud, just 20 miles south of the Iraqi jet base at Mosul, uncovered an inscription apparently dating from the reign of King Assurnasirpal II in the 9th century B.C.:

"I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men . . . and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes . . . and I cut off the limbs of the officers."

Why compare Hussein to Hitler, when he has national ancestors like that?

Likewise, it was another Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.), who developed the governmental notion of maintaining a standing army under a permanent civilian bureaucracy—the world's first military-industrial complex. That brought the Assyrian empire to its pinnacle of power, with dominion over all lands from the Armenian mountains to Egypt. The system he inaugurated, however, was so cruel it ultimately pushed desperate subject people to rebel, bringing on the destruction of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. and the end of the Assyrian empire.

The fall of mighty—but ungodly—cities like Nineveh and Babylon serve as object lessons and metaphors throughout the Bible and, in fact, continue to fuel apocalyptic visions of fundamentalist Christians to this day.

And He will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desolation and dry like a wilderness, says Zephaniah 2:13.

And . . . all they that look upon thee shall flee . . . and say Nineveh is laid waste; who will bemoan her? adds Nahum 3:7.

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms . . . shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, says the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 13. The wild beasts of the desert shall . . . cry in their deso-

late houses; and dragons in the ant palaces . . .

To read such exhortations at a map of present day Iraq struck by the despairingly quality of Middle Eastern con-

cerned eerie metaphorical par-

What was the Iran-Iraq war play of Assyrian conflicts? Medes and Persians 2,600 years ago. How much are Israeli anxieties Iraq heightened by the tribal of captivity in Babylon?

There is even an Iraqi chemical or biological warfare cated in the city of Samarra—in a famous Arab proverb, De its appointment.

And for George Bush and U.N. diplomats, there is the story of Jonah, who received his journey in the belly of the whale in effect negotiating the fate of

Told by God to "Arise and go, evenh, that great city, and cry for their wickedness," Jonah sea to escape the assignment, promptly swallowed by the whale.

his avoidance. Coughed up on the other realizing his mistake, he then he was ordered, traveling to wandering the streets, decrying and warning its citizens that would be destroyed in 40 days.

The people of Nineveh, threatened to Jonah, and on order their king, "turned every one evil way and from the violence hands", put on sackcloth and God for forgiveness. And God ed of the evil that he had said: do unto them, and did it not."

God's change of heart, h "displeased Jonah exceedingly he had prophesied destruction evenh, was ready for it and had mind. But God, noting the w penitence in the city, ask "Should I not spare Nineveh, th city, wherein are more than thousand persons . . . and al cattle?"

Nineveh eventually was de of course, but not for another turies. Today its ruins can be the west bank of the Tigris from the city of Mosul, site of Iraqi air base and of a chemical or biological warfare facility

Whether anyone is wandering streets, crying warning: known.