

## Exhibition review

# The new Basrah Museum: dedicated to the archaeological and historical inheritance of Basrah and Iraq

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Located in the Fertile Crescent and at the head of the Persian/Arabian Gulf, the city of Basra is steeped in history. Close to the heart of ancient Mesopotamia, the territory of modern Iraq was occupied variously by Achaemenids and Seleucids, Parthians, Romans and Sassanids, before the arrival of Islam in the early middle ages. In more recent history, the city's strategic position near the Gulf coast has made Basra a site of contestation and conflict. This exposure to so many different cultures and civilisations has contributed to the rich identity of Basra, a wealth of history that demands a cultural museum able to present all of the historical periods together in one place. The original Basra Museum was looted and destroyed in 1991, during the first Gulf War. The destruction and loss of so much of Iraq's history and material culture prompted official collaboration to build a new museum that would represent the city of Basrah and showcase its significance in the history of Iraq. The culmination of an eight-year collaborative project between the Iraq Ministry of Culture, the State Board of Antiquities and the Friends of Basrah Museum, the new museum was opened initially in September 2016. Already established as a cultural landmark in the city, with up to 200 visitors a day and rising, the museum was officially opened on 20 March 2019. The author was fortunate to be present for this event and able to explore the new galleries (Figure 1).

### The new museum buildings

The buildings that house the new museum are former presidential palaces located at Shat Alarab in central Basra. They have their own colourful history, having been occupied by Saddam Hussein, and suffered



Figure 1. The opening of the Basrah Museum.

damage from American aerial bombardment during 2003 when they housed the Iraqi intelligence agency; in the post-war period, the British army occupied them on account of their high-security features. In 2012, restoration work commenced to convert some of the buildings for use as a museum (others now house the University of Basrah). The museum building features large halls split over two storeys that perfectly accommodate the new museum galleries. Combining wood and brick, the style of the building is unique, having been designed as a fusion of Ottoman architecture and the Basrian Iraqi style known as *al shanasheel* (finely crafted bay windows with intricate wooden lattice work) dating back to the sixteenth century.

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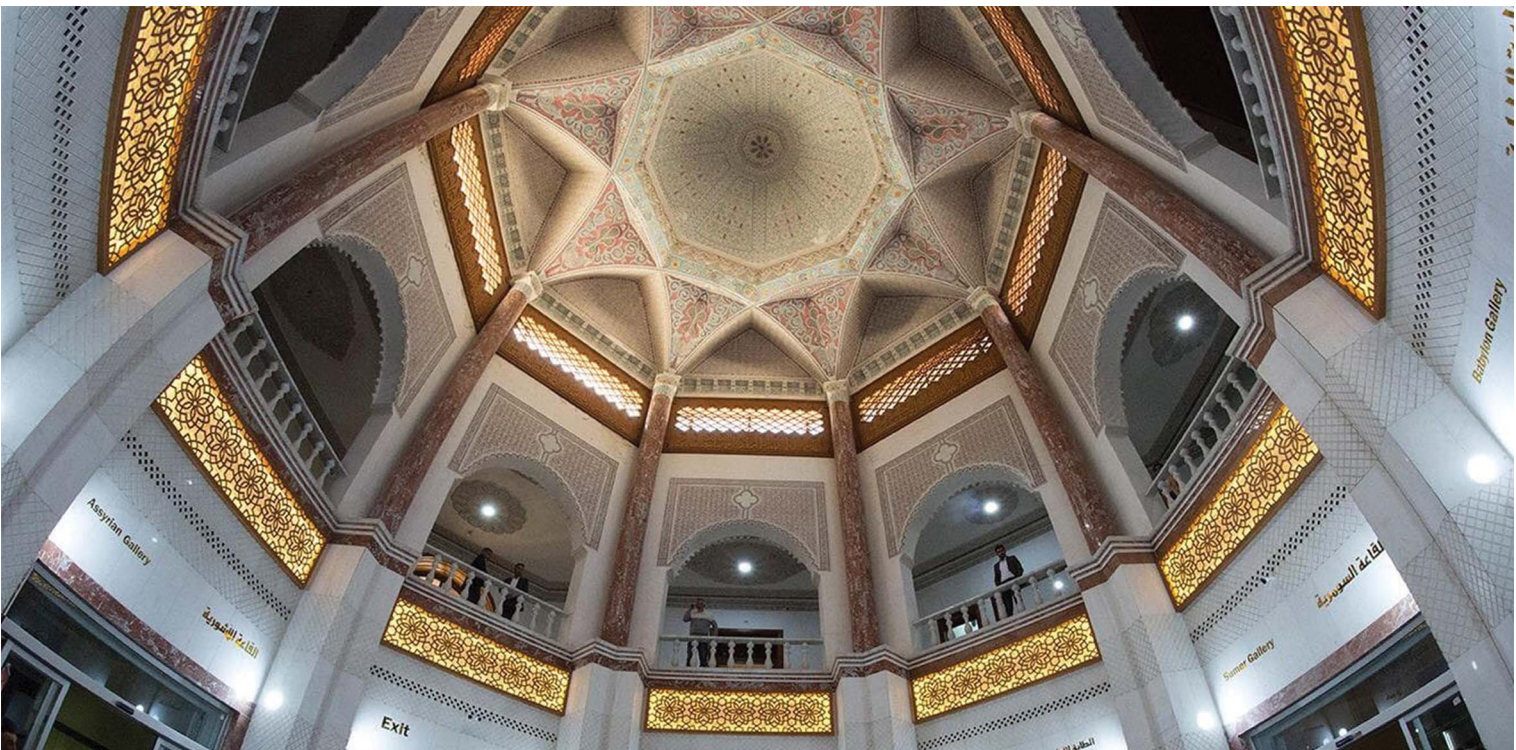


Figure 2. The central hall and hub of the museum.

## The galleries

The museum is entered via the central hall, which acts as a hub linking all the other galleries and the upper and lower levels of the building. It is also the administrative centre of the museum with guides and signage to orientate the visitor. Visually arresting, this entrance has a beautifully ornate ceiling and Islamic inscriptions covering the walls (Figures 1–2).

There are a total of eight halls in the museum, distributed evenly between the first and second floors. The Babylon, Sumerian and Assyrian Halls present finds from each of these three major periods of Iraq's history. Another—the Basrian Hall—is devoted to the history and archaeology of the city of Basra. There is also an educational space that will facilitate school groups and younger visitors to the museum, and a library, funded by the British Academy, which will accommodate specialist volumes on history, archaeology, monumental architecture and other related sciences. Another hall provides space for workshops and temporary exhibitions, and a conservation laboratory, funded by the French government, will enable the museum's manuscripts and objects to be restored on site.

Between them, the Babylonian, Sumerian and Assyrian galleries house over 2500 artefacts. The Babylonian gallery features objects from the entire period with a focus on the Kassite era (*c.* 1600–1100 BC). The Sumerian Hall displays material dating from the Halaf civilisation (5550 BC) to the third dynasty of Ur (*c.* 2000 BC). In the Assyrian Hall there are a number of rare objects, most of which date to the New Assyrian era.

The Basrian Hall is the largest in the museum. The artefacts are exhibited in an arc around the room; the main focus is on Islamic-period finds from Basra, but there are also Sasanian, Parthian and Hellenistic objects and material from other cities in southern Iraq such as Wassit and Najaf. Printed descriptions in Arabic and English accompany the exhibits in the Basrian Hall. The objects represent a diverse range of material culture, including a variety of ceramics and a large numismatic collection in the centre of the hall. Most of the coins are from Islamic periods, although Saluki currency from Hellenistic Basra is also represented in the collection. Larger exhibits in the Basrian Hall include three sarcophagi belonging to the Sassanid and Parthian periods. Alongside these are architectural fragments made of gypsum that are believed to have been part of the entrance to a small Islamic palace dating from the Alabasi era. These objects were found during the excavations at Basra in the 1970s.

The opening of the museum signals the global recognition of the importance of Basra's heritage and has been welcomed by the international cultural and academic sectors. It is a testament to the hard work and cooperation of many people that the archaeological and historical inheritance of Basrah, and Iraq, have a new home that not only safely accommodates the archaeological finds, but will also serve as a hub of research and education to promote awareness of the history of Mesopotamian civilisation. I would like to acknowledge especially the efforts of Qahtan Abed Ali, the director of the Basra Museum, and his assistant, Jawad Abdul Kadhem.