

## BOOKS



## 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*

376PP, THAMES & HUDSON, £45



★★★★★

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

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

### Westerners think of it as the 'cradle of civilisation', but we know little of its art

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,



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 Ashurnasirpal (ruled 883-859 BC)

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



BRITISH MUSEUM. GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY

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

### Paperbacks



256PP, FRANCES LINCOLN, £14.99

★★★★★

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ELSEWHERE

by *Richard Bradford*

Posterity has soured Philip Larkin. For those who love his poetry, the posthumous disclosures of his petty racism and seedy interest in schoolgirls have been depressing. Fortunately, the only revelation in this handsome selection of his many photographs is that he had great talent behind the lens. Best of all are his tender portraits of Monica Jones.



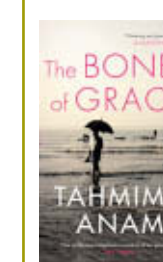
272PP, NEWORLD, £9.99

★★★★★

### ONE CHILD

by *Mei Fong*

The Chinese government claim that the one-child policy has stopped 400 million lives being lived, saving the world precious resources. Fong's account, grim but fascinating, casts doubt on these statistics and reveals the human cost to whatever benefit there may have been: forced sterilisation, child confiscations and the pain of those parents, known as "shidu" or "lose only", whose one child has died.



432PP, CANONGATE, £8.99

★★★★★

### THE BONES OF GRACE

by *Tahmima Anam*

This exquisite novel about fragmented selves is the last in Anam's Bengal Trilogy. Zubaida studies paleontology at Harvard and is engaged to a nice young man back in Dhaka, but she still feels as though she's "a fake, a ghost". Hunting in Pakistan for the 50-million-year-old fossil of a whale-like creature, she stumbles upon her own history.

## Pick of the week

### STASI WOLF – DAVID YOUNG

This week's choice is *Stasi Wolf*, a suspenseful Cold War thriller from *David Young*. Sent to investigate the disappearance of baby twins, Karin Müller and her colleague arrive in the eerie town where the crime has taken place – and find someone waiting for them.

As Schmidt drove round the nameless road that fringed the Wohnkomplex, Müller counted off the numbers, determined not to let this new town and its twilight of nameless streets and near-identical homes defeat her. The apartment blocks here formed a continuous, unbroken curve, one merging into the next.

"I can't see 953 anywhere," complained Schmidt. Neither could Müller. What she did see, parked at the side of the road, was a red Lada saloon. Something about it seemed odd. The driver was just sitting there, as though he was watching something, or waiting for someone. As they passed, he turned his head and looked straight into her eyes. His flashed in the fading sun just for an instant, and Müller found herself shivering slightly. Perhaps it was just all the perspiration evaporating, making her body colder. But she felt she'd just been appraised – the same way a fox might stare down a human if suddenly, unexpectedly, it's caught out in the open. "What do you want to do?"

Shall we stop and ask someone?" Müller scanned left and right. The street was deserted. Then she remembered the Lada driver. She turned her head, expecting to see the car in the distance, still parked by the roadside. But it wasn't. The driver had started the car – and now appeared to be following them. If that was the case, and it wasn't just coincidence, she had a good idea who the driver might work for.

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NEXT WEEK: *The Hanging Club* by Tony Parsons

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## Telegraph bookshop

### Citizen Clem A Biography of Attlee by John Bew

The gallons of ink spilled on Winston Churchill – and the huge appetite for books about him – have created something of an imbalance in our understanding of 20th-century Britain. Not only does Clement Attlee's life deserve to have a rightful place alongside the Churchill legend. It is also more emblematic, and more representative, of Britain in his time. It is difficult to think of another individual through whom one can better tell the story of how Britain changed from the high imperialism of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1897, through two world wars, the great depression, the nuclear age and the Cold War, and the transition from empire into commonwealth.

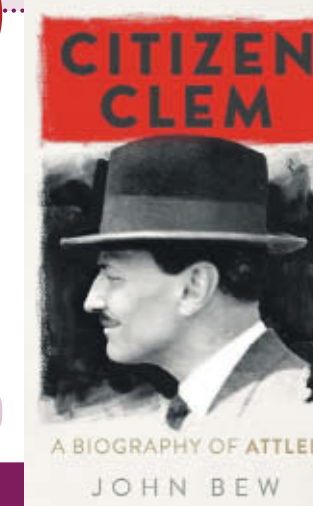
The story of Attlee is also much more dramatic than he himself ever made out – and not without an element of heroism. Here was a man born in the governing class who devoted his life to the service of the poor; who was carried off the battlefield three times in the First World War; who stood shoulder to shoulder with Churchill at

Britain's darkest moment, and then triumphed over him at the general election of 1945. His government of 1945-51 included Ernest Bevin, Herbert Morrison and Nye Bevan and was the most radical in history, giving us the NHS, National Insurance, NATO and the atomic bomb. In many ways we still live in a world of Attlee's creation.

This book will pierce the reticence of Attlee and explore the intellectual foundations and core beliefs of one of the most important figures in 20th-century British history, arguing that he remains under appreciated, rather than simply underestimated. It will reveal a public servant and patriotic socialist, who never lost sight of the national interest and whose view of humanity and belief in solidarity was grafted onto the Union Jack.

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