

# Qurnah Disaster

The **Qurnah disaster** was a May 1855 shipwreck at Al-Qurnah (modern Iraq), at the confluence point of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.<sup>[1]</sup> It represents one of the most high profile disasters in the history of archaeology.<sup>[1]</sup>

The disaster took place during a period of civil unrest, during a period of fighting between the Al-Muntafiq confederation and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>[2]</sup> The fighting ended with an Al-Muntafiq leader being appointed as provincial governor and tax farmer by the Ottomans, creating problems with the tribes not allied to their confederation.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Background

Excavations at Dur-Sharrukin were being carried out by the new French consul, Victor Place, and in 1855 another shipment of antiquities was ready to be sent back to Paris.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Antiquities from Rawlinson's expedition to Kuyunjik and Fresnel's to Babylon were subsequently added to the shipment.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Place, who was French consul at Mosul, was unable to attend the shipment himself, as he had been summoned to his new consular post in Moldavia due to the ongoing Crimean War.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

He appointed a Swiss professor named A. Clément as his consular agent and to manage the shipment.<sup>[1]</sup>

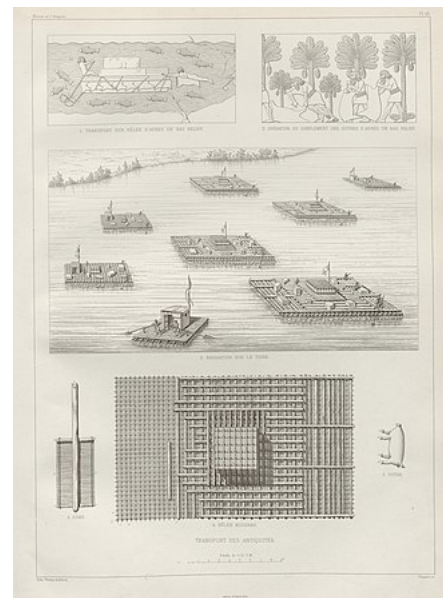
## Cargo

A cargo ship and four rafts were prepared to carry the artifacts, but even this substantial effort was over-whelmed by the sheer number of items to be transported. The cargo included:<sup>[1]</sup>

- 2 winged, human-headed Lamassu bulls, weighing almost 30 tonnes each
- 2 winged genies, weighing almost 13 tonnes each
- Over 150 crates of all dimensions, including basalt and alabaster statues, bas-reliefs, and many inscribed objects in iron, bronze, gold and silver

The cargo which survived the disaster was:

- 1 bull
- 1 winged genie



Convoy of rafts (Keleks) floating down the Tigris river loaded with antiquities in 1855 (V Place 1867)

- 20-28 twenty crates containing bas-reliefs<sup>[6][7]</sup>

## Disaster

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The troubles began once the convoy left Baghdad in May 1855, as the banks of the river Tigris were controlled by local sheikhs who were hostile to the Ottoman authorities and frequently raided shipping sailing by.<sup>[10]</sup> During the journey, the convoy was boarded several times, forcing the crew to relinquish most of their money and supplies in order to be allowed further passage on the river.<sup>[8][6]</sup>

Once the convoy reached Al-Qurnah (Kurnah) it was assaulted by local pirates led by Sheikh Abu Saad, whose actions sank the main cargo ship and forced the four rafts aground shortly afterwards.<sup>[6]</sup>

The entire shipment was almost completely lost with only 28 of over 200 crates eventually making it to the Louvre in Paris.<sup>[1][11][12]</sup>

## Recovery efforts

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Subsequent efforts to recover the lost antiquities, including a Japanese expedition in 1971-2, have largely been unsuccessful.<sup>[6]</sup>

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# The Qurnah Disaster

## Archaeology & Piracy in Mesopotamia

Samuel D. Pfister July 01, 2021 0 Comments 13438 views Share



Sargon II in his royal chariot, trampling a dead or dying enemy, part of a war scene from Khorsabad, Iraq. Photo: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin

In April 1855, a convoy carrying thousands of antiquities from French and British excavations in Mesopotamia set out from the city of Mosul, in modern-day Iraq, along the Tigris River. Most of the antiquities were bound for the Louvre Museum in Paris, but few would reach their destination. Weeks into the journey, the convoy was attacked, the transportation vessels wrecked, and the antiquities on board lost to the depths of the river. The disaster occurred just upstream from the river's confluence with the Euphrates, near the town of Al-Qurnah.

The Qurna Disaster, as the incident became known, is infamous in Mesopotamian archaeology. This appalling loss of cultural artifacts from some of the region's most notable historical sites was so devastating that it extinguished French archaeological endeavors in the region for decades and remains a teaching point in classrooms today. The story is one which lends itself to the fantasies we often associate with early archaeology—featuring tremendous archaeological relics, colonial ambition, logistical improprieties, and even pirates!

### Excavations at Khorsabad



Paul-Émile Botta by Charles-Émile-Callande de Champmartin, Paris, musée du Louvre

In the mid-19th century, archaeological work in Mesopotamia tended to focus on the identification and excavation of places mentioned in the Bible, such as the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) or Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). This was happening at a time when the science of archaeology was closely tied to the elucidation and verification of the Bible. So, in the 1840s, a French diplomat in the Ottoman Empire, Paul-Émile Botta, was searching for biblical Nineveh (Genesis 10:11–12; Jonah 1–4) around his consular posting in the city of Mosul. After receiving a tip from a local that a nearby mound contained massive stone statuary buried in the ground, Botta began his excavations at the site of Khorsabad in 1843. His efforts were immediately rewarded.

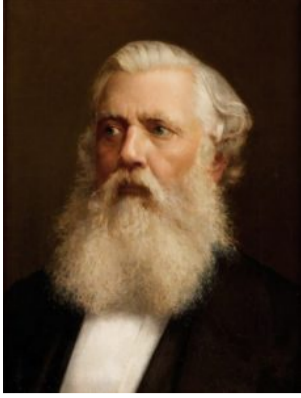
After only a few weeks of excavation, Botta uncovered scores of huge relief carvings, troves of cuneiform tablets, massive stone statues, and other archaeological artifacts.

The monumental reliefs showed lavish royal processions, while the stone statuary depicted a divinity, known as lamassu, with the head of a human, the wings of a bird, and the body of a bull. The archaeologist-diplomat was convinced that he was excavating the city Nineveh, reflected in the letters he wrote bragging about his efforts. However, later scholars confidently identify the site of Khorsabad as Dur-Sharrukin, the capital city of the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II.

At the same time that Botta was digging at Khorsabad, another pioneering European archaeologist, Austen Henry Layard, was excavating the nearby site of Kuyunjik—which is historical Nineveh—on behalf of the British. Although these archaeologists sometimes shared resources, a sense of competition underpinned their respective expeditions.



Human-headed winged bulls from Sargon II's palace in Dur-Sharrukin, modern Khorsabad (Louvre)



Portrait of Austin Henry Layard by unknown artist. 19th century. (c) Government Art Collection; Supplied by The Public Catalogue Foundation

The 19th century was a time of great national reckoning in Europe, where the collection and presentation of the most fantastic oddities and antiquities from colonies around the world was a point of national pride. Acting on behalf of the French and British respectively, Botta and Layard were not just archaeologists but national agents, charged with bolstering the coffers of their countries' burgeoning imperial museums—the Louvre in Paris and the British Museum in London. Mesopotamian archaeology in the 19th century was, at its core, a race for relics.

And the French were winning that race. By 1855, the excavations at Khorsabad had uncovered more than 200 rooms of Sargon II's royal palace as well as several monumental statues of human-headed bulls and other mythological figures; relief scenes of warfare, hunting, and processions; sculptures of large winged-genies; paintings of landscapes and figures on glazed tiles; and hundreds of other artifacts of ceramic, bronze, and stone. It was a fantastic assemblage—one that would affirm the Louvre as the zenith of European cultural achievement.

### Down the River

But the collection still needed to get to France. So, on April 29, 1855 Victor Place—Botta's successor as consul—loaded eight keleks, or wood framed barges buoyed by inflated sheep skins, with the archaeological materials from Khorsabad and set sail from Mosul to Basra. There the convoy would rendezvous with a larger vessel to take the loot overseas to Paris. Place had intended to stay on with the convoy until it reached Basra, but when the rafts stopped in Baghdad on May 4, he received instructions to report immediately to his new consular posting in Moldavia. The diplomat entrusted another French citizen in the party, a teacher named Clement, to see the convoy to its destination.



A view of Shatt Al-Arab from the northern part of Basra city

While in Baghdad, most of the cargo was transferred from the barges onto a large commercial ship, while four massive stone statues—two depicting winged-genies and two representations of lamassu—were fastened to small rafts that would accompany the vessel. More antiquities from other archaeological excavations in the region were also added to the load. These included approximately 40 crates from French excavations at Babylon and Nimrud, 41 crates from the British excavations at Kuyunjik that were donated to the Louvre, and approximately 80 crates that were bound for Berlin as gifts from the British mission to the Prussians for their financial backing. Although, unfortunately, no master-log of the convoy was ever recorded, it is estimated that the cargo included at least 235 crates, or 30 tons, of antiquities and materiel.



author at Lamassu from Dur-Sharrukin. University of Chicago Oriental Institute. Syrian limestone Neo-Assyrian Period, c. 721–705 BCE

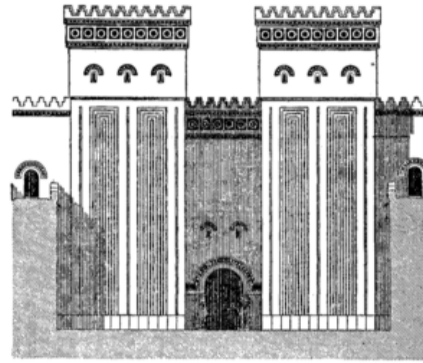
The consolidation of the British and French antiquities in the convoy was the result of an active attempt to quell the competitive hostilities growing between the two national archaeological missions. Years earlier, French and British delegations had agreed to partition the site of Kuyunjik—the French could excavate the northern half; the British, the southern. Despite this agreement, in 1853 a British archaeologist named Hormuzd Rassam dug on the French side and made some fantastic discoveries, including an impressive relief carving of a lion hunt and a trove of cuneiform tablets belonging to the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. Naturally, the French archaeologists were upset over Rassam's breach of the agreement. As recompense, Sir Henry Rawlinson—another of the region's foremost Assyrologists—agreed to provide a portion of the British excavation's finds to the French.

Indeed, the convoy now comprised one of the most exceptional collections of Assyriological artifacts ever accumulated. But the great assemblage also meant that the vessel that was chartered to bring the antiquities to Basra was overburdened by the outstanding weight of so many treasures. The convoy, led by Clement, steered out of Baghdad on May 13 and began its slow, fateful journey downriver.

## Piracy and Plunder

In addition to the antiquities, the ship was also endowed with ample cash and gifts to pay off the riverine patrols of local sheikhs who frequently extracted bribes for safe passage. But these gifts would prove insufficient. Within a week of leaving Baghdad, the plundering began. The ship was boarded several times by different groups of bandits in the nearly 500 kilometers (c. 310 mi) of river between Baghdad and Al-Qurnah. Each time they took money, food, and commercial goods that the ship was carrying, but, for the most part, they left the antiquities alone. Though the weakly armed European archaeologists were easy targets, the tribal gangs saw no inherent value in the ceramic and stone objects which so fascinated the Europeans.

Soon Clement was out of cash to pay tolls and, still with a long way to travel through lands patrolled by hostile tribes, he sent two representatives on foot to Al-Qurnah to get more cash. One returned with the money, but the other held back to alert the local ruler, Sheikh Abu Saad, of the convoy's presence. The Sheikh was a powerful local ruler, and his Al-Muntafiq tribe was particularly hostile towards the Ottoman Empire, who they believed were too friendly with the European intruders. Like the patrols the convoy had encountered further upriver, Sheikh Abu Saad was not interested in the antiquities, but the cash, lumber, and other commercial goods the archaeologists carried made them a ripe mark.



Palace of Dur-Sharrukin Encyclopedia Britannica 1st edition volume 2 page 375

When the convoy entered the waters near Al-Qurnah, a ship under the sheikh's command appeared. The attack began when the marauders rammed into the cargo vessel carrying the bulk of the antiquities, nearly capsizing it in the middle of the river. Armed pirates swarmed the ship in numbers that nearly sunk the already encumbered transport as the archaeologists and sailors on board scrambled to abandon ship. The crash of the wooden hulls, the roar of the quick river's current, and the terrifying shouts of the armed marauders must have made for a frantic situation. In the excitement, one of the attackers commandeered the helm of the transport and steered the ship into the western bank of the river, where the stern of the vessel quickly descended into the river, leaving only the tip of the bow above the waterline. Crates of antiquities spilled into the current and sunk to the silty riverbed.

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The four rafts carrying the additional stone sculptures managed to escape the initial attack and regroup further downriver. But Abu Saad's ship was not far behind. Past the confluence of the rivers at Al-Qurnah, the marauders ran one of the rafts aground and stripped its wood. The winged-genie sculpture it carried was dumped on the riverbank where it still lies today, an eroded, unrecognizable boulder. Another raft was stripped of its wood, but continued downstream for another day before sinking. The other two rafts, carrying a winged-genie and a lamassu sculpture respectively, ran aground by the town of Al-Maqil, close to the port of Basra.

Perhaps, Clement was lucky to escape with his life, but the unfortunate events that took place on the river left him perturbed. He had only been given charge of the convoy weeks earlier and now the entire haul, more than a decade of archaeological work from several of the region's most notorious historical sites, was swamped beneath the rapid waters of the Tigris. The catastrophe also sunk the French mission's archaeological primacy over the British. In fact, more than two decades would pass before another French archaeologist conducted systematic excavation in Mesopotamia.



Tributary scene from the Royal Palace at Khorsabad, Iraq.

## Recovery Efforts

In the months after the disaster at Al-Qurnah, various agents and local authorities made attempts to recover the lost treasures. Clement, working out of Basra, managed to recover a few crates of assorted antiquities from the shallows around the wreck of the cargo ship, but he was unable to salvage most of the load that capsized when the stern of the vessel sunk. Many of the crates had already been swept away in the current; some were too deep; others were too heavy to be successfully rescued. The Wali of Basra, Hacı Darbaz Agazâde Veysî Pasha, also managed to recover seven crates from the raft that sunk in the middle of the river and a few miscellaneous antiquities from the other vessels. A Belgian Colonel, Mesoud Bey, who was advising the Turkish army at the time, coordinated with Clement to purchase further antiquities from locals who had scavenged the wrecks or found bits of the cargo washed ashore.

In all, only about 28 crates of antiquities, including the winged genie and the human-headed bull statues from the rafts that made it to Al-Maqil, were recovered. They were loaded aboard another vessel and, almost a year after the attacks on the convoy commenced, arrived at Le Havre, France, before being taken overland to Paris.

Another salvage attempt in 1971–1972 by the Japan Mission for Surveying the Underwater Antiquities at Qurnah used innovative underwater survey techniques to probe the riverbed around Al-Qurnah in search of further evidence of the wreck. Although they were able to identify some archaeological material in the samples they took from the bottom of the Tigris, the team concluded that, 117 years after the disaster, the sunk vessel and its cargo were undetectable, carried off by the river and distributed further down the watershed.

Relief from the north wall of the Palace of king Sargon II at Dur Sharrukin, 713–716 BC

Today, many of the antiquities salvaged from the Qurnah Disaster can be seen on display in the Mesopotamia Wing of the Louvre. Over time, further excavations were conducted at Nimrud, Kuyunjik, and Khorsabad—all resulting in more fantastic discoveries. The lamassus, winged-genie statues, and other archaeological artifacts from these excavations are displayed at the British Museum, the Louvre, the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the University of Chicago Oriental Institute.

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[Well-Hidden Ivories Surface at Nimrud](#) by Alan R. Millard

Late in the seventh century B.C., Babylon began a military campaign that would destroy the once-powerful Assyrian empire that had dominated the Near East for 200 years. In 612 B.C. the Babylonian and allied Median armies reached the Assyrian royal city of Calah, now Nimrud, destroying, looting and then setting aflame the gorgeous Assyrian palaces.

[Abraham's Ur: Did Woolley Excavate the Wrong Place?](#) by Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt

The ancient woodwork has perished, the metal has been stripped from the walls,” Sir Leonard Woolley wrote in 1936. “The ruins which excavation lays bare are but skeletons from which the skin and flesh have gone, and to re-create them in imagination we must use such evidence as the ruins may afford, eked out by descriptions in the cuneiform texts. A king will boast how he overlaid the doors of a sanctuary with gold, and amongst the ashes on the threshold of a temple gateway there may be found shreds of gold leaf overlooked by plunderers who sacked and burned the building; a fallen scrap of painted plaster can give a hint as to the adornment of a ceiling.”

[Exploring the Deep: New technologies transport us thousands of feet beneath the ocean's surface—allowing archaeologists to survey ancient \(and modern\) shipwrecks](#) by Aaron Brody and Anna Marguerite McCann

Oceans cover 71 percent of the earth, and a whopping 97 percent of these waters are beyond the reach of conventional scuba divers, who can reach only about 200 feet below the surface of the sea. The vast majority of the world's shipwrecks, therefore, cannot be excavated or even found.

# Place:Al-Qurnah

From HandWiki

**Al-Qurnah** (**Kurnah** or **Qurna**, meaning connection/joint in Arabic) is a town in southern Iraq about 74 km northwest of Basra, that lies within the conglomeration of Nahairat. Qurna is located at the confluence point of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to form the Shatt al-Arab waterway.<sup>[2]</sup> Local folklore holds Qurnah to have been the original site of biblical paradise, the Garden of Eden and location of the Tree of Knowledge.

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## History

File:Confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates near Al-Qurnah.tif Local folklore holds Qurnah to have been the site of the Garden of Eden and the location of a city built by general Seleucus Nicator I.<sup>[3][4]</sup> An ancient tree is celebrated locally and shown to the tourists as the actual Tree of Knowledge of the Bible.<sup>[5]</sup> The tree died some time ago and replacement trees were planted.

The tomb of Ezra is also described to be nearby and found further upstream on the river Tigris.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

In 1855, Al Qurnah was the site of the Qurnah Disaster, in which local tribes attacked and sank a convoy of a ship and rafts carrying 240 cases of antiquities discovered by Victor Place's mission to Khorsabad, Rawlinson's to Kuyunjik and Fresnel's to Babylon.<sup>[8][9]</sup> The loss of priceless antiquities was a notable disaster for those researching the antiquities of the region.<sup>[8]</sup> Subsequent efforts to recover antiquities lost in the Qurnah Disaster, including a Japanese expedition in 1971-2, were largely unsuccessful.<sup>[10][11]</sup>

The town experienced the Battle of Qurna during the Mesopotamian Campaign of World War I, when the British defeated Ottoman troops who had retreated from Basra in 1914.<sup>[12][13]</sup> The Battle of Qurna secured the British front line in Southern Mesopotamia, thereby protecting Basra and the oil refineries at Abadan in Persia (now Iran).<sup>[14]</sup>

<div>Al-Qurnah</div> <div>القرنة</div>	
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Country	<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> Iraq
Governorate <div>(<span>Template:Italic correction</span>)</div>	Basra Governorate
District	Al-Qurna District
Elevation <div><sup>[1]</sup></div>	16 <span> </span> ft (4 <span> </span> m)
Population <span>(2018)</span>	
<span> </span> • <span> </span> Total	286,073
District total	
Time zone	UTC+3 (GMT +3)
<span> </span> • <span> </span> Summer (DST)	UTC+4 (GMT +4)





River rafts loaded with antiquities floating down River Tigris (V Place, 1867)

In 1977, Thor Heyerdahl sailed a reed boat from al Qurnah to show that migration between Mesopotamia with the Indus Valley civilization was possible.<sup>[15][16]</sup> The voyage proved complicated because of the wars in the region and the vessel was eventually lost off Djibouti.<sup>[17][18]</sup>

After the First Gulf War (1991), the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein diverted river water away from the local marshes causing them to be completely desiccated.<sup>[19]</sup> The wetlands have since shrunk to 58% of their pre-drainage area and are projected to drop below 50%.<sup>[20]</sup> This loss has also been a result of Turkish and Iranian damming of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.<sup>[21][22]</sup> The *United Nations* has reported that the combined volume of these rivers has been reduced by 60%.<sup>[23]</sup> These developments are said to have made the area more vulnerable to degradation and desertification.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Recent developments

The river front Qurnah Tourist Hotel was built during the Ba'athist period to encourage tourism for the region.<sup>[25]</sup>

Majnoon Island near Al-Qurnah is a center for oil production of the giant Majnoon Oilfield. The area was built out of sand dunes and mud to create pathways for oil pipelines. The island was held by Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war before Iraqi chemical weapons were deployed.<sup>[26]</sup>



1994 map of the Al Qurnah area showing drainage of Marshes



Al Qurnah is said to be location of the Tree of Knowledge.

As of the start of the 2003 Iraq War, conditions of the city were reportedly woeful.<sup>[27][28]</sup> Cracked pavements and bullet holes in local properties, the looting of the local hospital<sup>[29]</sup> and the poor condition of the tree of knowledge<sup>[30]</sup> made the return of tourism to the area a challenge.<sup>[31][32]</sup>

## Notable people

- Nuri Ja'far, (1914 – 7 November 1991) psychologist and philosopher of education.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Gallery



Basra area map.



Farm outside Al Qurnah



Shrine in Al Qurnah



Ezra's Tomb in Kurnah



Rafts used for transport on the River Tigris



Depiction of rafts (Keleks) loaded with antiquities that sank near Al Qurnah in 1855 (Victor Place, 1867)

## See also

- Qurnah Disaster
- Battle of Qurna (1914)
- Operation Kheibar (1984)
- Battle of Qurna (Iraq War)

- West Qurna Oil Field
- Draining of the Mesopotamian Marshes
- Ezra's Tomb

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## External links

- Iraq Image - Al-Qurnah Satellite Observation
- The Capture of Qurna in 1914 - about the Battle of Qurna



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