



THE OXFORD POSTGRADUATE CONFERENCE IN ASSYRIOLOGY

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In an address that declared the Oxford Postgraduate Conference in Assyriology 2015 open, Dr Jacob Dahl, Associate Professor of Assyriology at the University of Oxford, gave a poignant reminder of the critical importance of this field of study following recent acts of cultural heritage destruction in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State organisation: “The best way to preserve the history of Mesopotamia is through the digitisation of source material here [in Oxford and other academic institutions] and, as we have seen in recent weeks, in the countries of origin.”

The conference, held on 24-25 April 2015 at Wolfson College, Oxford, covered a wide range of fields of Assyriological study, from close textual and linguistic analysis, to the art, architecture and history of ancient Mesopotamia. The annual conference is held as a forum in which postgraduate students from around the world can discuss working theories and present papers in a more relaxed setting to a doctoral viva. Attendees and speakers had come from as far afield as America and Japan, as well as from traditional centres of Assyriological study in Germany and France.



Attendees of the Oxford Postgraduate Conference in Assyriology 2015

A common thread among the lectures was the breadth of the field of Assyriology still to be explored. Dr Dahl, in his address, recounted the surprisingly short history of Assyriology at Oxford: a readership was only established at the turn of the twentieth century, compared to the creation of the Laudian chair in Arabic in the seventeenth century, and the Regius chair in Hebrew in 1546. In delivering their papers, many of the students identified gaping holes in the field: the translation of repeated idiomatic expressions and common regnal styles; the practical use of tablets inscribed with text; or the origins and extent of Sumerian culture.

The capacity for significant advances still to be made in the field of Assyriology emphasises the critical need to prevent the destruction of ancient Mesopotamian antiquities and archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria.



A clay tablet etched with the tangled wedges of the cuneiform script may well have been photographed, transliterated and even translated, but in a captivating lecture at this year's conference Klaus Wagensohn, of the Universities of Vienna and of Oxford, demonstrated the importance of being able to re-photograph the clay fragments in new positions as a way of revealing the original shape and size of a tablet and, by extension, its possible function. New technological advances will also allow tablets to be subjected to novel analytical techniques, such as infra-red scans, or chemical analysis to determine the geographic origin of the clay. None of this will be possible for tablets that have been destroyed in museums or ancient sites, or stolen for sale on the black market where they are put beyond the reach of scholars.

The same is true for the study of the ruined palaces and cities and Nimrud and Nineveh, where the statuary has been smashed by Islamic State and the archaeological sites ravaged by looters burrowing small potholes in search of antiquities.

The precarious state of the archaeological record in Iraq and Syria, especially in the face of the threat from Islamic State, underscores the importance of the field of Assyriology. The new generation of Assyriologists unlocking the secrets of ancient Mesopotamia at the University of Oxford last week have their parts to play; but, as Dr Dahl noted, now is also the time for redoubling efforts to preserve and to study Mesopotamian heritage in the countries of origin.

George Richards, Senior Fellow at Iraq Heritage, attended the Oxford Postgraduate Conference in Assyriology 2015. The Conference was founded in 2012 and is organised with the support of the Oriental Institute at the University of Oxford, the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, the Lorne Thyssen Research Fund for Ancient World Topics, and Wolfson College.





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