Asia from Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula to Central

CENTURIES later, the Abbasid Caliphs would found their
dominion of

The Assyrian king-emperor Ashurbanipal (669–631BCE) amassed an incredible collection of ‘over 30,000 clay tablets and fragments inscribed with cuneiform’ (Taylor np). This unique library survived the burning of the ancient city of Nineveh (now in northern Iraq) in 612BCE because clay tablets, unlike books or parchment scrolls, do not burn (Taylor np). As Jonathan Taylor, Middle East Curator at the British Museum explains, Ashurbanipal’s library was famous in antiquity and may have ‘inspired the great libraries ... such as the great Library of Alexandria in Egypt’ (np). Centuries later, the Abbasid Caliphs would find their Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom, in Baghdad. The Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754–775CE) planned and built Baghdad, his round City of Peace. It was to be the grand capital of a global empire ‘by now an immense dominion of 5 million square miles stretching from Morocco and the Iberian Peninsula to Central Asia’ (Marozzi, Islamic 161–62). Historians have tried to offer us a vision of what the House of Wisdom was actually like, beyond its fabled reputation as a centre of learning and translation. Sonja Brentjes and Robert Morrison conclude that, although the House of Wisdom is often attributed to the largesse of Harun al-Rashid, data gathered from ‘Arabic sources ... and later books does not ... support such an interpretation’ (569). Brentjes and Morrison show that:

these sources, enriched by poetry, suggest that the Bayt al-Hikma was a library where rare books on history, poetry and strange alphabets were collected and which was established when [Harun al-Rashid’s grandfather] al- Mansur structured the administration of his court and empire along the lines of Sasanian tradition. (569; emphasis in original)

Justin Marozzi describes the ‘royal library’ as containing ‘tens of thousands of volumes’ by the time of Harun al-Rashid’s (786–809CE) caliphate (Islamic 176). Marozzi explains how, by the time of al-Mamun’s caliphate (813–833CE), ‘Baghdad’s lavishly endowed Bayt al Hikma, or House of Wisdom, had become the nerve centre of Abbasid intellectual activity’ (194). He evokes the library as ‘a wonderfully Abbasid hybrid of royal archive, learned academy, library, think-tank and translation bureau, with a professional staff of scholars, copyists and bookbinders’ (194–95).

In the face of contradictory evidence, Dimitri Gutas concludes that the House of Wisdom was unlikely to have been as grand or as prolific as its reputation suggests. It was most likely ‘an antiquarian library’ (Gutas 57). But he concedes that ‘[u]nder [the Caliph] al-Ma’mun it appears to have gained an additional function related to astronomical and mathematical activities’ (58). Whatever the reality of the House of Wisdom, the library continues to be a metonym for a cosmopolitan and learned Islamic society. The era of Baghdad’s House of Wisdom is still Baghdad’s zenith in the popular imagination in the Middle East and beyond. Conversely, even after several decades of war, sanctions, and sectarian violence, the sacking of the House of Wisdom lives on in the contemporary imagination as one of the greatest tragedies in Iraqi history.

The House of Wisdom was famously destroyed when Hulagu Khan’s armies sacked the Abbasid capital in 1258. Ashurbanipal’s clay tablets, however, are now part of the British Museum’s collections in London. I distinctly recall my first visit to the British Museum in the early 1990s, not long after my family
and I arrived in London as Iraqi refugees. My brother and I were overwhelmed, but my mother was outraged throughout our visit. She was particularly enraged at the sight of the Mesopotamian winged bulls, transported by Henry Layard to London in 1852. They were a great sensation in Victorian Britain. Believed to be proof of the Old Testament, their arrival at the British Museum led to a vogue in Assyriana. As we walked around the Museum, my mother kept insisting that the items we marvelled at were almost all stolen. ‘How do you think these Egyptian mummies got here?’ she demanded. Whatever we looked at, she explained that while these collections remained in London, children in West Africa, Mexico, India, and so on would never be able to see these treasures of their civilisations. On my most recent visit to the British Museum in order to experience de Waal’s library of exile (2020), I was reminded once more of my mother’s anger at seeing the treasures of ancient Mesopotamia in the centre of London. My parents were both exiles themselves; they fled Baathist Iraq in the late 1970s after it became clear that their political sympathies were putting their lives, and the lives of their families, in danger. We were in London by the time of the First Gulf War in 1991. As Allied bombs began falling on Baghdad, destroying its infrastructure, we sat glued to the television. Regardless of their stance on the war, displaced Iraqis in cities around the world watched in horror as Allied troops stood by while irreplaceable artefacts from the Iraq Museum and other cultural and educational institutions were plundered during the Allied invasion in 2003. Between 8 and 16 April 2003, the Iraq Museum’s unique collection of Mesopotamian archaeological treasures, left entirely unguarded by Allied troops, was looted. For the first time in her life, my mother was grudgingly relieved that at least the Mesopotamian treasures held in the British Museum remained safe from British and American bombs, and the failures of Allied statecraft. Iraqis were far from alone in being appalled at the looting that was allowed to take place. As Magnus T Bernhardsson points out, it was not only the National Museum that was plundered. The Iraqi National Library and Archives … and the Ministry of Holy Endowments and Religious Affairs … were set on fire and/or looted during this same period. In addition to these major cultural institutions, universities and other research and cultural centers were also subject to considerable damage. (np)

Shawn Malley explains that this was especially troubling for the archaeological community, because the US Department of Defense was urged by a leading group of archaeologists prior to the war to protect antiquities in the major museums and archaeological sites from looting. (20)

As Lawrence Rothfield argues, America’s enemies had done better in similar situations: Russian communist revolutionaries had secured the Hermitage; the Iranian revolutionaries in 1979 had recognized that the fall of the shah’s regime created an atmosphere of chaos that posed a threat to Tehran’s museums and sent students with guns to guard them; even Saddam, on the first day of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, had posted guards in front of the Kuwait National Museum to prevent looting. Yet somehow the United States and its allies had failed to take similar steps. (2)

Wafaa Bilal’s 168:01 is at least in part a response to the losses that Iraq’s cultural institutions, and in particular its libraries, suffered during the Allied invasion of 2003. 168:01 consists of a series of plain white shelves containing row upon row of white books with blank white pages. Each of the library’s 1,000 white volumes was crafted by Bilal. 168:01 was first installed at the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, where it was curated by Srimoyee Mitra in 2016. Since then, it has been exhibited at numerous locations including the New Orleans Museum of Art, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, and the New Observatory in Liverpool, UK.

In 168:01, Wafaa Bilal imagines Baghdad in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion of 1258, which destroyed the city and ended the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphs. The Mongols destroyed Baghdad’s sophisticated irrigation system, devastating the city’s ability to grow food and prosper for many centuries to come. Hulagu’s men raped, pillaged, and murdered Baghdad’s inhabitants after they had surrendered. Figures for the number of people killed by Hulagu’s armies vary, but Justin Marozzi explains that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century historians suggest around 800,000 people died in the invasion (Baghdad 143), while Firas Alkhateeb puts figures...
at anywhere between 200,000 and 1 million (137). Various gruesome theories abound as to the fate of the Caliph himself. In one, Hulagu Khan’s men are said to have wrapped the body of al-Mustasim (1242–1258) in a carpet and had him trampled by horses in order to avoid the prohibition against spilling royal blood. Other stories describe how he was imprisoned in a tower and left to starve with only his gold to eat. These, perhaps apocryphal, stories remain legendary. The Mongols’ most iconic and infamous act of destruction, however, was the sacking of the House of Wisdom. Mongol troops are said to have emptied the contents of the Abbasid library into the River Tigris, perhaps using its scrolls and manuscripts to create a bridge that enabled them to cross to the other bank. The story goes that such was the volume of ink that the river’s waters ran blue for a full week. As Bilal explains, a week is 168 hours. Thus, 168 hours and one second transports us to the very first second after the scrolls of the library had bled their ink into the River Tigris. In 168:01, we are located in the moment after the world irrevocably lost centuries of knowledge and learning. In this instant of great loss, Bilal insists, there is also hope. After all, the first second after the end of an era is also the beginning of a new age, no matter how dark. As Bilal describes,

The first minute after grief becomes the starting point from which 168:01 takes its name — signalling the struggle to move forward and the beginning of a cross-cultural encounter between individuals contributing to a globally distributed effort to rebuild anew. (’168:01’)

It is hope for a better future that in part fuels Bilal’s interactive exhibition. Bilal’s 168:01 does not dwell on the destruction of the places that were. The momentum of 168:01 is forward looking. It is not about what has happened, but what happens after the fall of a great city. As such, while the experience of 168:01 cannot fail to serve as a reminder of what was lost, it also demands that we move forward, rebuild, and look to the future.

Bilal encourages members of the public viewing the exhibition online, or visiting the exhibition in person, to exchange one of the blank white books that line its shelves for one of the many books on the wish list of the University of Baghdad’s Faculty of Fine Art. As the New Observatory in Liverpool where 168:01 was exhibited in 2017 described, ‘the
University of Baghdad’s College of Fine Arts lost its entire library of more than 70,000 books — set on fire by looters’ (Bilal, ‘168:01, 2016’). As a result of donations stemming from 168:01, more than 5,000 donated books have already been shipped to Baghdad to replenish the Faculty of Fine Art’s library, replacing those which were stolen or destroyed. The stream of books continues, as the exhibition is ongoing and it is still possible to donate to it online. Bilal’s row upon row of blank white books, with their blank white pages, are evocative of the many thousands of scrolls once held in the House of Wisdom, whose ink had flowed into the waters of the Tigris leaving only parchment. Faced with these rows of books empty of content, the viewer/participant is actively reminded of the cost of violence not just in people’s lives and in corporeal damage, but in the loss of knowledge, culture, and beauty. However, as each bare text is replaced by one that will be read and used by real students in Iraq, the ghostly white shelves become more and more populated with life and colour. With each new donated book, we move beyond the white shells of books and into a future filled with texts and ideas, gifted by one reader to another. These books are not only art; they will form the foundation for a new generation of artists, writers, and intellectuals. As such they will be part of a new Iraqi future, which insistently moves us beyond the well-known ground of the country’s violent past and the uncertainty of its present.

Edmund de Waal’s library of exile shares with Bilal’s 168:01 the aim of replenishing the collections of a destroyed Iraqi library. With the closure of the exhibition at the British Museum, its contents are to be shipped to Mosul, where they will replace the library destroyed by Islamic State or daesh fighters in recent years. As Andrew Curry explains, under ISIS occupation, ‘centuries-old manuscripts were stolen, and thousands of books disappeared into the shadowy international art market’ (np). The university library was razed in December 2014, and Mosul’s public library blown up, ‘together with thousands of manuscripts and instruments used by Arab scientists’, in late February 2015 (Curry np). library of exile consists of four white walls, but in each case the stark white canvas is created by using liquid porcelain to paint over gold leaf, so that only the white is left visible to the viewer. This white porcelain base is then inscribed in pencil in the artist’s own handwriting ‘with the names of libraries lost or destroyed, from the ancient
The large pencil letters are not always easy to make out. The script marking 'Baghdad and Timbuktu' appears only faintly, giving the impression of being as ephemeral as the now destroyed libraries of which it reminds us. The British Museum’s information boards explain that inside this relatively small space (only three visitors at any one time could be accommodated under social distancing guidelines) are ‘over 2,000 books written by people who have experienced exile — either forced to leave their own country or displaced within it’. You are encouraged to sit and contemplate them, and to write your name inside them, to mark your fleeting presence in the space. A small display of wooden pencils instructs visitors:

You leave your country and you take your words with you. Please sit and read.
Find a book that means something to you – a book in your language, a book from your county – and write your name on the Ex Libris page alongside those who have come before you.
Remember those who have been exiled and those who are still in exile.
Celebrate their writing. (library of exile, British Museum)

There are no seats inside the library, but there are ledges large enough to perch on. As I sit on one, my eye is drawn to novels by exiled Iraqi authors such as Iqbal al-Qazwini, who has lived in Germany since the 1970s when she went to a conference and was never able to return home. Or Inaam Kachachi who has lived in Paris since going there to complete her doctorate in 1979. On other walls sit the more widely recognisable works of Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and many others.

Most but not all books in the library are in translation. De Waal explains that when he first conceived of the library at the Venice Biennale in 2019, being in Venice helped him to see ‘that this whole project was a reflection on the power of translation’. library of exile,
his website elaborates, is a way of ‘exploring the idea of language as migration’. Over ninety languages are represented on its shelves, and the library is still incomplete (de Waal et al np). In Venice it contained only thirty-two languages. The library de Waal first created is growing all the time. Virtual visitors can suggest more exilic books to add to its shelves online. Those of us who are able visit library of exile in person can see for ourselves that its books are of different colours and ages. A handful of leather-bound volumes sit alongside the more common paperback and hardback editions that line the walls of the pavilion.
Among its many volumes are spaced four of de Waal’s vitrines: *Psalms I–IV*. Each vitrine contains vessels of porcelain, marble, and steel, which are arranged to echo the composition of Daniel Bomberg’s 16th-century edition of the Talmud — a central text of Judaism printed in Venice and notable for holding the Hebrew text, Aramaic translation and commentary on a single page. (British Museum)

Commenting on the original exhibition of the *Psalms* in Venice, de Waal explains that ‘the psalms work as songs of exile from the city’ (*A Library of Exile* np).
Although the iconic Jewish diaspora is embedded at the heart of the library, and in de Waal’s motivation for the library, he insists on the plurality of exilic experience. After all, as he explains, psalms are ‘cornerstones of all three Abrahamic traditions’. While diaspora and exile are far more readily associated with Judaism, migration and dislocation are also foundational to the Muslim faith. We might consider the importance of the prophet Mohammed’s hijra, or flight, from Mecca to the city that would become Medina (originally medinat-al-nabi, or city of the prophet) in 622 — a key event for the Islamic faith. Created in muted tones, the shapes contained within the vitrines call to mind empty cups and glasses in cabinets that line the walls of ordinary homes. Each one might once have been at the centre of a family home, but now they are historical relics in a museum. These everyday containers, rendered in porcelain, are ghostly presences of the domestic among the volumes that line the walls of de Waal’s library. Deeply incongruous (there are no cups inside most libraries), they serve as eerie evocations of countless abandoned lives. Like all the empty homes left when people flee, these white, grey, and occasionally pale-yellow vessels sit permanently unused, gathering dust. Remnants of lives not lived, lives left behind. As the Museum’s boards explain, ‘[t]he library forms both a record of repression and a celebration of the writing of the dispossessed’.

In order to access de Waal’s library of exile, the visitor passes first through impressive rooms that once housed King George III’s library, gifted to the public in 1823 and housed in the British Museum’s collections until 1997 when the British Library was relocated to its current premises in St Pancras. As an information panel tells visitors, ‘thousands of thinkers studied in the Reading Room in the Great Court including Karl Marx, Mahatma Gandhi and Virginia Woolf’. In this very different library, the Museum turns its attention to the European Enlightenment. At the centre of the room is a display containing the newly relocated bust of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), ‘the most famed collector of [his] day’, which once held a far more prominent place literally on a pedestal in the Museum’s collections (Delbourgo 18). Sir Hans Sloane’s vast collection formed the foundation of the British Museum. Coincidentally, in the days before the British Museum reopened its doors on 26 August 2020, a headline in the British press read: ‘British Museum removes bust of slave-owner founder Sir Hans Sloane’ (Simpson np). As the Museum’s director Hartwig Fischer explained to The Telegraph, ‘We have pushed him off the pedestal.’ The estate of Sir Hans Sloane posthumously sold his large and eclectic collection to the nation in 1753 in return for the sum of £20,000 to his estate. In order to raise money for its purchase, parliament created a public lottery. As specified in Sloane’s will, the British Museum was founded in 1759 to showcase this extraordinary collection from around the world, though some of it would later find its way to the collections of the Natural History Museum and the British Library, among other institutions (Delbourgo 19–30). Sloane’s collections are doubly entwined with the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. Sloane travelled to the royal colony of Jamaica as personal physician to the governor of the island, Christopher Monck, in 1687. After his return, he married Elizabeth Langley Rose, a widow whose fortune derived from the sugar plantations of Jamaica. While in Jamaica, Sloane collected many plant, animal, and other specimens. As the Natural History Museum’s website, where many of Sloane’s botanical collections are now held, explains, ‘enslaved people assisted Sloane in acquiring some of his precious specimens, meaning they were fundamental to his long and prosperous collecting career’ (Pavid np). Reading about Sir Hans Sloane’s collection and its bloody provenance as I approached de Waal’s library of exile seemed particularly apt. Though the links are by no means explicitly made by the Museum itself, Sloane’s bust is a timely reminder of the fact that the transatlantic slave trade led to one of the most horrendous forced migrations of people the globe has ever seen. As Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic (1995) shows, the trade in human lives created the diasporic black cultures of the United States, the Caribbean, and Britain, among other places. These black settler communities formed what Gilroy calls ‘compound culture[s] from disparate sources’ (15). As Gilroy insists,

there are large questions to be raised about the direction and character of black culture and art if we take the powerful effects of even temporary experience of exile, relocation, and displacement into account. (18)

As such, we must never lose sight of the ways in which the violence of the slave trade continues to shape our
contemporary societies and culture. The forced exile of enslaved people was an integral part of the formation of diasporic black cultures. It is also, therefore, central to all societies of which their descendants are a part. Hans Sloane’s bust is an important reminder that the collections of the British Museum and many other British cultural institutions were made possible by the money and cruel and unfair practices of the British Empire. In his case, they were also funded and enabled by the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. The pain and suffering of enslaved people are sewn into the fabric of the Museum because their forced dislocation and dehumanisation literally form part of its foundation. With this reminder fresh in one’s mind, approaching the sparseness of de Waal’s library is all the more poignant.

Though library of exile and 168:01 begin from quite different places, I am struck by the similarities to be found between these two installations. Most obviously, both have an end goal of replenishing books that Iraqi educational institutions have lost in the violence that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the downfall of the Baath regime. Though Bilal’s 168:01 does not overtly engage with the idea of exile, as Bilal has discussed, his practice is always rooted in his own dislocation from Iraq, the country of his birth, and his feeling of belonging to two homes simultaneously. As he puts it, his work is a reflection of my life in these two ... ‘zones’. One is a comfort zone of the United States and the other is the conflict zone of Iraq. I feel that I belong to these two places and live in these two places whether it is mentally or physically. (Esker Foundation)

As such, Bilal’s artistic practice is profoundly invested in the ideas that de Waal’s library highlights. Both projects also stem from deeply personal losses. In Bilal’s case, 168:01 is already helping to rebuild the library of his own Alma Mater, but it is also part of a broader effort to draw attention to Iraq’s losses and to begin to build institutions and facilities that will allow Iraqis to move on from the wars of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He has spoken openly of how the death of his brother by drone strike in Iraq has been a motivating factor in his approach to making art that bridges the chasm between American and Iraqi lives. 168:01 is part of his continued commitment to highlight Iraqi suffering to American and other Western audiences. Edmund de Waal cites his great grandfather’s dispossession as one of the things that drive him to think about exile. ‘It does go back to a central loss’, he explains in an interview in the Financial Times, of a library in Vienna in 1938, and to my father, sitting, as a child in England, with his grandfather; and his grandfather reciting Virgil to him. He didn’t have his books, but he’d brought, in his head, poetry — he’d held that. (Atkins np)

With this in mind, we might read the words that greet visitors to library of exile in a new, more personal light: like de Waal’s own grandfather, exiles may be forced to leave their country, but they take their words with them. One of the handwritten sentences on the outside of de Waal’s pavilion reads, ‘I’m making this for my great grandfather Viktor, who saw his library stolen’ (Atkins np). Finally, in each of these works, the participant/viewer is integral. Whether it be in suggesting books for the library of exile, adding their names to hundreds of others in the ex libris pages of the library’s texts, or perhaps by donating a book to Bilal’s 168:01, they must engage with the library for it to function fully.

In different ways, each of these works of art will form part of the healing process for the losses, both in human life and in cultural capital, that Iraq has suffered since 2003. It is no coincidence that Wafaa Bilal’s 168:01 draws parallels between this most recent destruction and the Mongol invasion in 1258 — the archetype of devastation and chaos in Iraqi history. But while Bilal’s white pages are certainly physical representations of the sheer volume of loss in Iraqi society in the last two decades, a blank page is also a new beginning. Equally, de Waal’s white walls are filled with the names of destroyed libraries, reminding us of their splendour and significance as well as their eventual destruction. In his library, too, loss and hope intertwine. The exiles whose words line the walls of the library lost one home, but they made others. Their books stand as testimony to the possibility of building new lives when old ones have been destroyed. Both de Waal’s and Bilal’s libraries have toured the world — highlighting their respective causes and bringing them global attention. In February 2015, despite continued fears for the safety of its collections, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad reopened. Showing remarkable foresight, the museum’s staff had hidden almost
8,000 of its most precious items, and it is estimated that around a third of the 15,000 artefacts stolen have now been recovered (‘Looted Iraqi Museum’; Lawler). As both 168:01 and library of exile never allow us to forget, there is always a moment after even the most unimaginable of catastrophes when a new world becomes possible.

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