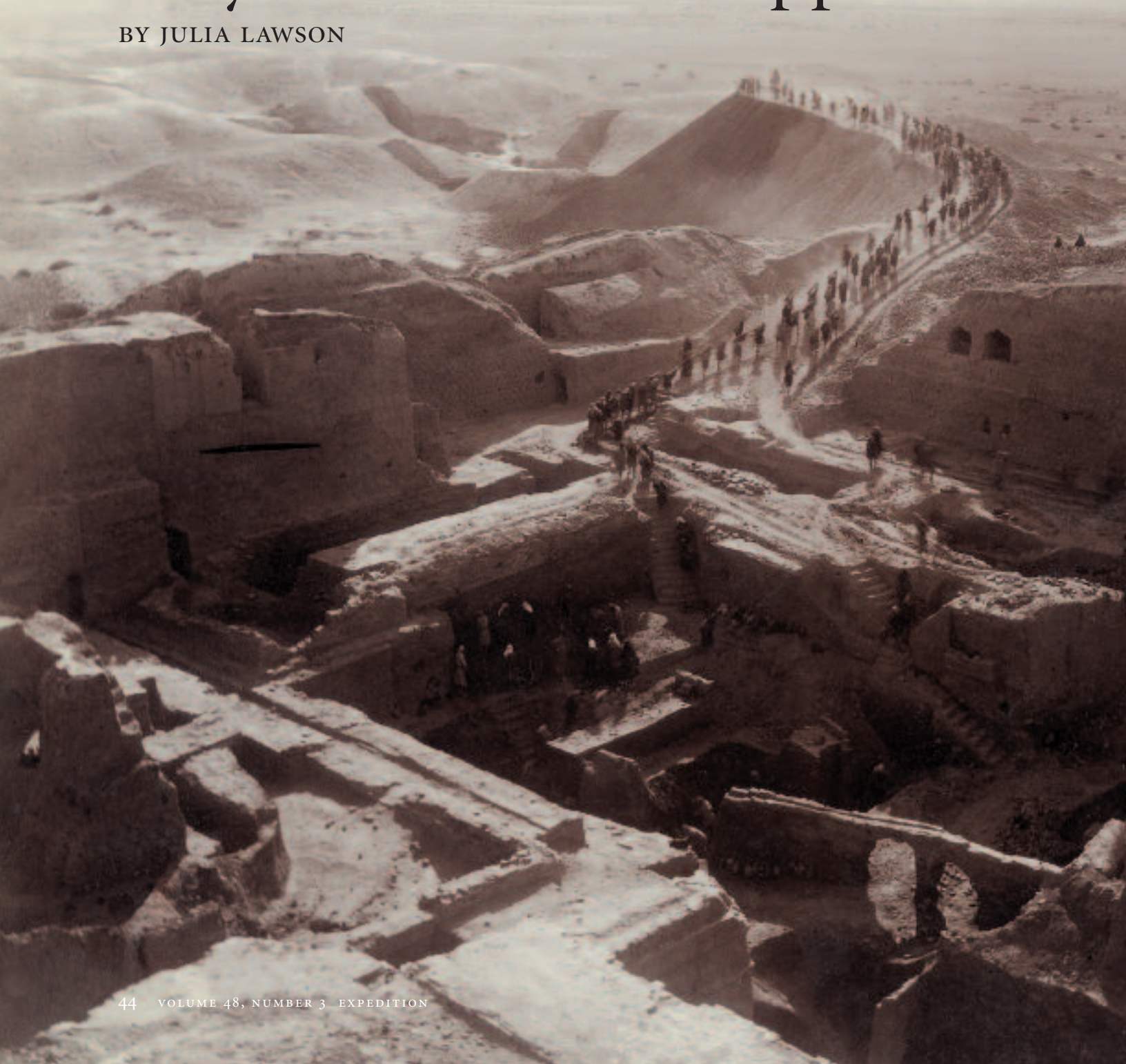


# The Resurrection of Seven Clay Coffins from Nippur

BY JULIA LAWSON





THE MESOPOTAMIAN CLAY coffins from Nippur in the Penn Museum's Near East Section have a long and varied history. They were originally discovered during the University of Pennsylvania's Babylonian Expeditions in the late 19th century (1889–1900). These were the first American excavations in Mesopotamia, as well as Penn's first archaeological expedition outside the United States. Of the approximately 5,200 objects shipped from Nippur to Philadelphia, the coffins presented some of the greatest challenges to both the excavators in the field and to their restorer at the Museum.

The Museum's clay coffins came from Penn's 19th-century Babylonian Expeditions to Nippur, which operated under an agreement with the Ottoman government that allowed the Imperial Ottoman Museum (now the Istanbul Archaeological Museum) first choice of excavated material. UPM Neg. #149990.

## STYLES OF COFFIN

The coffins are of three distinctive styles—referred to as bathtub, trough, and slipper coffins as befits their shapes. The bathtub coffins have flat bases and deep vertical sides with one rounded and one square end. This oldest type, originated in Assyria, or northern Mesopotamia, in the mid- to late 2nd millennium BCE. Its use spread south to Nippur, where it continued to be used into the Seleucid period (late 4th to late 2nd century BCE).

Trough coffins came into use in Babylonia during the late Seleucid period. The troughs are long and narrow with straight shallow sides and two rounded ends. Conquering Parthians introduced slipper coffins to Nippur in the 1st century CE. Presumably the corpse was slid into the large oval opening in the top, rather like a foot into a slipper. A rope tied around the ankles and pulled through a hole at the foot end may have aided this process. Two of our slipper coffins are unglazed and have very simple modeled decoration. A third is glazed and has the more distinctive design with female figures, possibly the deity Inanna, whose image on coffins seems to be exclusive to Nippur.



The clay coffins *in situ* at Nippur. UPM Neg. #148755

It was no easy task to salvage these large degraded clay objects. John Henry Haynes—who was largely responsible for the excavation of the clay coffins—and his assistant Joseph Meyer often mentioned that the coffins were “badly broken.” Another description stated that the “porous yellowish (green) terra-cotta is so rotten that although about 3/4 of an inch thick, it is easily broken in the hand.” W. K. Loftus of The British Museum had previously noted at Uruk that he only succeeded in removing similar coffins “after many fruitless attempts and the demolition of perhaps a hundred specimens.”

Haynes benefited from Loftus’s experiments in coffin moving, and he successfully employed Loftus’s method of facing the coffins inside and out with thick layers of paper and paste. This consolidated their structure sufficiently to support their weight during the journey by various boats, caravans, and steamships to Istanbul and, eventually for some, to Philadelphia. Haynes sent at least 20 coffins to Istanbul during the 1893–94 season and “over 30 large, well-preserved sarcophagi” during the 1895–96 season.

So it was that objects from Nippur, including several coffins, came to Penn and were prominently displayed in the Bough Pavilion and adjoining Semitic Gallery for the Museum’s grand opening in 1899, where they were featured for the next several decades.

Meanwhile, Penn’s presence in the Near East greatly expanded and moved on to several other sites, including Ur of the Chaldees, where, soon after its discovery in the late 1920s, the Great Death Pit of Ur created a considerable public sensation. As a result of this discovery by C. Leonard Woolley, an exhibition of treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur soon overshadowed the old Semitic Gallery. By 1940, changes in the collections, academic scholarship, and exhibit design rendered the original Nippur gallery obsolete. The outmoded Victorian displays were dismantled and the clay coffins were sent to a sub-basement storage area to make way for a bright, new, comprehensive Babylonian exhibit.

The Near Eastern galleries were updated again in the 1950s, employing the stylish “less-is-more” design aesthetic which left no physical or intellectual room for the large clay coffins.



The difficulty in removing coffins at The British Museum's excavation at Uruk may have had something to do with W. K. Loftus's work crew! Photo from *Travels and Researches in Chaldaea and Susiana* by William Kennett Loftus (London: James Nisbet, 1857), frontispiece.



The coffins were prepared for shipment to Istanbul, and then Philadelphia, using a process much like papier-mâché. UPM Neg. #148759.



The original (1899) Museum display of the coffins was in the Baugh Pavilion. UPM Neg. #22428.

They remained in the sub-basement, neglected and largely forgotten as older curators and other staff retired or left the Museum.

Eventually, a curious young intern, Chrisso Boulis (now, appropriately, a Museum registrar), decided to track down “lost” Near Eastern objects for an early computer inventory in the 1980s. Armed with an old catalog and a flashlight, she peered into the Museum’s nooks and crannies and finally located seven clay coffins in their basement alcove. Later in the mid-1990s, when word reached Boulis that Associate Curator, Richard Zettler was inquiring after lost coffins, she was able to lead him and the Near Eastern Keeper, Shannon White, on a small adventure into the bowels of the Museum. Zettler was thrilled to see the coffins but horrified at their deteriorating condition. He recognized the importance and rarity of such objects outside of Baghdad and, with White’s encouragement, he advocated to the Museum’s Senior Conservator, Virginia Greene, that they be resurrected.

A Conservation Project Support grant proposal was submitted to the Institute of Museum and Library Services in 2002 and, mercifully, the funds were granted for the conservation of the clay coffins. One by one they were eased out of their not-quite-final resting places, along with the loose fragments gathered by White as they had fallen in recent years, and rolled off to the Conservation Laboratory, where they were put under my care.


My initial concern for the coffins was that soluble salts (exacerbated by sub-basement conditions and dripping water) were causing the clay fabric to disintegrate. However, a cleaning of the coffins and a thorough examination revealed that it was mainly just the previous restoration material that was failing. Further investigation disclosed that most of the holes and gaps in the coffins had been filled by an earlier restorer with a material similar to papier-mâché, and that water-soluble glue had been used to make many mends. Neither of these restoratives aged well in the dampness of the sub-basement. A cellulose nitrate adhesive—a convenient new adhesive product a century ago—had also been used, but most of it had now reached the end of its useful life. Fortunately, the original



Before their conservation, the coffins were in a sad state.

restorer also employed a plethora of staple-like wire ties across the joins between fragments, and most of these had held over the century, preventing total collapse.

To begin the new conservation effort, I painstakingly cleaned the coffins of sooty dust, disintegrated fills, and unmentionable subterranean debris. I also removed any excess fill material and paint that obscured original surfaces. I then consolidated and mended the coffins using stable adhesives, fills, and paints—a process that sometimes challenged my puzzle-solving skills. My final step was to construct wheeled storage supports so the coffins could be taken to their new home in a Near Eastern storage area where they can now be accessed for study.

Hopefully, in the next incarnation of the Mesopotamian galleries, at least a few of these unusual objects will be put on display, as Richard Zettler and I agree with Henry Haynes that they are “a valuable possession for any museum to have.” 

JULIA LAWSON is the Museum's Assistant Conservator.

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#### For Further Reading

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After conservation, the coffins are now, once again, available for study.

