



WHICH IS THE EARLIEST? DESTRUCTION OR PRESERVATION?

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Abstract

The subject matter of archaeology is humankind of the past. It deals with sound, accurate and articulated knowledge of the man since the remote times. Material remains form the bases for the archaeological research as they never contain judgements, statements and evaluations. These remains tell their own history in their own language. Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn compare the archaeologists to the scientists more than to the historians as they collect the evidences, conduct experiments, formulate hypothesis and deliver final explications. In this research paper, an attempt is made to explain two opposite motives viz., preservation and destruction during the ancient to medieval times in different parts of the world. The measures taken by the ancient rulers to preserve their culture and the changes and stages that were involved in destructing the past of other cultures are quoted with examples were in necessary. The attempts made by the ancient kings to restore the residences of the gods by preserving and safeguarding these structures for the future is discussed in detail.

Keywords : Archaeology, Preservation, Restoration, Inscriptions, Destruction, Appropriation.

Introduction

Every civilization in the world owns a past and perceives that past as their basic as they find the roots of their future in it. Each culture for its survival takes preservation as a precautionary measure. The Mediterranean rulers (Egypt and Mesopotamia) have a great will to preserve the past and left strong evidences of protecting their past through various methods. The earliest documentation of preservation dates back to the 15th century BCE. Thutmose IV, the young pharaoh, gathered a team, dig out the first paws of the sphinx and placed the granite slab *dream stele*.¹The stele says that this pharaoh, dreamt of the god Harmakhi Atum who asked the young prince to free the monument from the invading sand in exchange for the kingship.²

Another noteworthy restoration program is recorded in the 13th century BCE when prince Khaemwase, son and successor of Ramses II. Prince Khaemwaset initiated the restoration programs of the royal necropolis, Sun temples of the ancient Memphis, from Saqqara to Medium and from Giza to Abu Gurab. Restoration texts of this prince often refer to him as the “chief of the artificers” or “chief of crafts”. These inscriptions include: the name of the pharaoh who built the monument in the past and the prince who restored it in the present, the endowments of lands and personnel for future preservation. He reminds the ancient pharaohs for their memorable deeds in some of his texts. The involvement of royal officers in the quarrying tasks and the stone removing activities, the notes listing architectural elements helps us to understand the restoration processes were carried in an organized manner.

From these above instances we can understand that the preservation descends from the fact that the condition of the present world lies in its glorious past. The rulers of ancient times believed that these activities could prevent the advancement of negative energy and chaos into their empire. Assigning a team of experts for the restoration works is common in the remote past irrespective of space and culture. These works were not just mere restorations but the acts of reservations and safeguarding the past



culture. In this context I quote a 3000-year-old inscription that says “the memory of the past could not be violated, it had to be venerated and restored for the generations to come”.

The Mesopotamian kings engaged themselves in the restoration of temples in Babylonia and Assyria. They believed that the gods built the first towns as their residences. For instance, the god Enlil of Nippur, in the mythical time, chose that the temple Ekur, “the temple mountain” would be his sanctuary to be built in Duranki, “the link between the star, sky and earth.” According to the ancient Sumerian hymns, humankind was created to serve gods. Yet, in the preservation, the kings of the ancient Mesopotamia have nothing to offer to the world. The Neo – Babylonian kings in the first half of the 6th century BCE accomplished the restoration programs in Babylonia. Largely decayed temples were treated on priority. The kings of Babylon from Nebopolassar to Nabuchodonosor to Nabonidus were inspired by gods, often by the means of dreams. They took keen interest in exploration, excavations near the ancient temples, even tried to find the foundation inscriptions and were sure not to make any mistakes and innovations which would result severe punishments from gods.

The famous temples of Ebabbar of Shamash (sun god) in Sippar, Nabuchodonosor found the foundation inscription of Burnaburiash, the king of Kassite. His successor Nabonidus boasted about finding a 3200 years old inscription of Hammurabi which is 700 years older than Burnaburiash.³In his restoration texts the elements used were mentioned: “*I mixed mortar with beer, wine, oil and honey and anointed its excavation ramps with it...*”⁴ This Babylonian king engaged himself in the excavations of ancient temples and buildings of political importance. Many of the ancient places were explored in Babylonia during his reign. One important among these restoration programs is that while looking for the foundations of the temple Eulmash of the goddess Ishtar in Akkad, he found the statue of Great Sargon.⁵ Nabonidus was described in the inscriptions as the archaeologist of his times.⁶ This great ruler was always surrounded by the experts of ancient Sumerian and Akkadian characters. One of the famous scholars in his team was Nabuzerlishir. The archaeological researches of the Babylonian kings intertwined with political, religious and antiquarian interest.

All in all, according to the title “which is the earliest?” restoration preceded the destruction as the rulers believed that innovating the ancient temples and protecting them for future generations helps in preventing the advancement of chaos in their kingdom.

The appropriation and destruction of others past

When did it happen that a culture, took hold of another culture and made it its own? The most famous example for the earliest literary record about destructing others culture can be seen in the expression of poet Horace in the time of Augustus: “*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latium*”⁷(Greece, conquered by Rome, conquered her wild winner, and introduced arts in the rustic Latium). Every town in Greece was adorned with famous sculptures and paintings of Rome. In the later period, when Egypt became a part of the Roman empire, despite the heavy transportation difficulties many obelisks are brought from Thebes and Heliopolis. Past is always the subject of destruction and devastation because others’ past can be refused and hated beyond the imagination.

The incidents of destruction intensified when the attitude of mankind towards the past of other cultures changed and when they contacted the faraway worlds. Kings like Alexander, the great strived hard to broaden their horizons. Alexander’s successors dominated a large geographical area from the Mediterranean to western India and parts of Afghanistan. They first admired and appreciated the monuments from Egypt and Babylon. They inculcated themselves with the new material culture to



create a new set of ideology and tradition. For instance the Gandhara art in India can be taken as a mixture of the Greek and Indian architecture. Destruction thus took part in the later days due to political, religious and ideological motives. The ancient rulers ached to annihilate the cultures which they hated or envied for their identity. In 689 BCE, Sennacherib of Assyria razed Babylon, diverted the streams of river Tigris and made it a forlorn place which is only fit for wild animals. Nebuzhadnezzar, a Babylonian king in 586 BCE destroyed Jerusalem, razed the Solomon's temple.

The edicts of Asoka in India, record the war of Kalinga and its destruction which led to the conversion of Asoka as a staunch follower of Bouddha dharma in 3rd century BCE. Scipione, the Emilian king in 146 BCE conquered Carthage and split salt over its ruins to prevent any forms of life. Rome, during the 5th century CE suffered three dreadful blows viz. in August 410 CE by Goths, in 455 CE by Vandals and in July 472 CE by the Visigoths, Burgandians and Ostrogoths respectively. Consequently, many masterpieces of Greek arts that are exposed in Rome were lost. The voluntary destruction continued even in the medieval period. Each and every culture of the globe, tiny or huge in geography, involved in wars and destructed the glorious culture of others.

For some rulers, the artifacts of the other cultures are nothing but mere pillages yet they are hateful and foreign. They certainly damaged them to an extent by transporting them to the distant lands from their primary context but did not completely destroy them. In return, they created a new context in the new culture. This can be understood with this instance when the first Moghul rulers of India seized several miniature paintings as they appreciated this Iranian art form and wished to follow that great art which is completely foreign to their history. Thus they created a new form of appropriation of works of the past. The dreadful pillage of Constantinople by the Christian kings in 1204 CE was caused by political reasons. The Mongols ransacked the Baghdad and destructed the library of wisdom⁸ in 1258 CE. It is said that they have thrown away thousands of Arabic manuscripts into the Tigris making it black.

In the recent centuries, ideological and religious motives caused severe destructions rather than the political motives. The destruction of the Buddha's statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan⁹ and the Sunni sanctuaries of Timbutku in Mali, Africa can be cited as examples to the severe destructions on religious motives. Today in the modern times the creation of great museums across the globe like, the Louvre Museum of Paris, the British museum in London, the Staatliche museum of Berlin, the Pergamum Museum, the Museum of Saint Petersburg and the Metropolitan Museum of New York are developed on an analogous logic of exhibiting the masterpieces from every space and time. The countries that conquered several other cultures and landscapes felt they were the heirs of everything that is beautiful produced by the ancient humans.

Conclusion

Thus, in conclusion, humankind in every part of the planet on the one hand took care of the past, engaged in its protection and transferring its testimony to the future generations, tried to maintain its identity to the longest, and on the other hand, they destroyed it and wiped its memory. Archaeology, aims at recovering the past of any time and space, bears as its scope, the rediscovery, preservation beyond any cultural, political and religious distinction. Thus, in this presentation, we have learnt that the preservation of the past was the function of political, religious and ideological interests which is very far from the perspective of the modern archaeology.



References



1. *Dream stele* installed by Thutmose IV.

2. The Sphinx god Harmakhi Atum with *dream stele* after restoration.

COLUMN II.

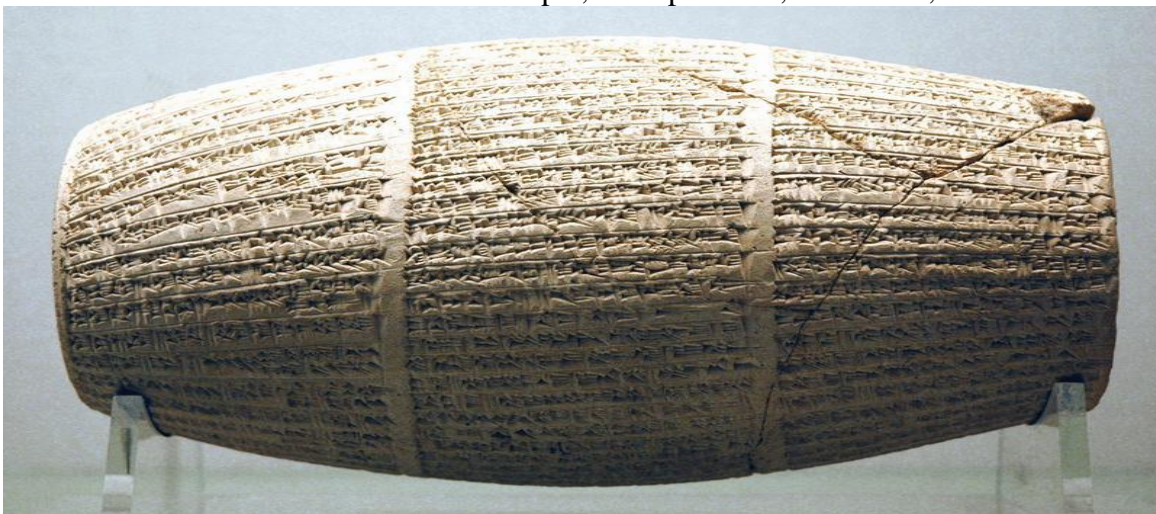
LINE 55. bit su - a - tim ad - kl - e - ma
 that temple I excavated

LINE 56. te - me - en - su la - bi - ri u - ba - ma
 its ancient foundation stone I sought,
 15 ammati ga - ga - ri
 fifteen square cubits

57. u - sap - pi - il - ma te - me - en - na
 I dug down [for] the foundation stone of
 D.P. Na - ram D.P. Sin abil D.P. sar - gi - na
 Naram - Sin the son of Sargon

58. sa 3 x 1000 + 2 x 100 mu - an - na - mes ma - na - ma
 which for three thousand two hundred years no
 sarru a - lik mah - ri - ya li - i - mu - ru
 king my predecessor had seen.

3. Cylinder of Nabonidus from the Shamash temple, Mesopotamia., Column II, lines 55 -58.





4. Cylinder of Nabonidus from the Shamash temple, Mesopotamia., Column II, lines 15 -25.



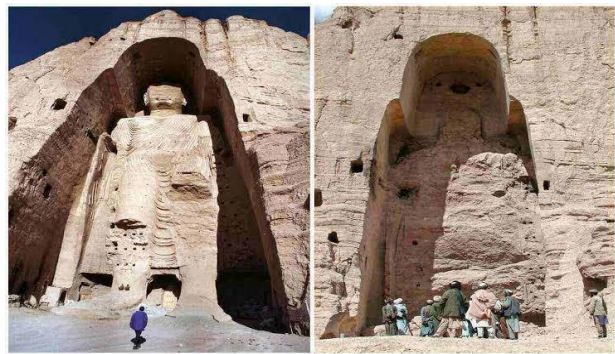
5. The statue of Great Sargon found in the Eulmash temple of Akkad dynasty.

6. Silverberg, Robert *Great Adventures in Archaeology*, University of Nebraska Press, ISBN 9780803292475,1997, p.viii.

7. Horace, Epistles (Book II) Epistle I, lines 156-157, 14 BCE.



8. Picture depicting the destruction of the Wisdom library in Baghdad.



9. Destruction of Buddha's statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan due to religious and ideological motives.