

Lost and Found

By Samuel Greengus

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The annual meeting was in its last day. All of my cronies had already gone up to bed, leaving me sitting alone in the hotel bar, finishing my drink before going up to my room. A man called out my name and walked over. I was pleasantly surprised to see that it was a respected British colleague, Howard Fontaine. Howard was one of the top specialists in ancient Mesopotamian history and culture. He was probably the best cuneiform scholar in Great Britain; but he had been passed over for the Professors' chairs at both Oxford and Cambridge. Howard, you see, was an eccentric, too much so even for British tastes.

His being a gay man should not so much be seen as the problem. Howard led a discreet and scandal-free existence. But—he was also a vegetarian, did not drink alcohol, and he belonged to some fringe Protestant evangelical church, rather than being a member of the Church of England. Professors holding the Oxford and Cambridge chairs were also expected to teach in the colleges' programs preparing Anglican clergy. Howard's knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Sumerian was unquestionably of the highest caliber. Howard was indeed one of the greatest experts in the civilizations and cultures of the ancient Bible lands, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. But the Deans of the Oxbridge colleges were nervous about him because Howard sometimes tended to read the New and especially the Old Testament in what they felt to be an uncomfortably *literal* fashion. He was also somewhat disdainful of church hierarchy—you know, dealing with bishops, archbishops, synods, and such. So Oxford and Cambridge passed him by; Howard had to settle for a professorship at one of the Redbrick universities.

I was happy to see him. Howard had reviewed my publications very favorably and even defended me against other scholars who disagreed with my conclusions. He had done this all on his own. It was good to have a scholar of Howard's caliber on your side.

I said "Good evening" and invited Howard to sit down at my little table in the corner of the bar. Howard sat down and ordered a lemonade while I

continued to sip my whiskey and soda. We exchanged some small talk and then Howard leaned a bit closer and said. "You remember that some years back, in a Dutch periodical, you published a fragmentary Babylonian letter from Mesopotamia? That letter was addressed to someone named Sin-abushu; Sin-abushu was told to travel by boat on the Tigris River with his cargo of textiles?" "Of course I remember," I replied. "But that letter was broken; the end of the letter was broken off in such a manner that I was left uncertain whether the boat trip was to be made in a northerly or southerly direction." "Yes," said Howard; "that was difficult to decide; but the cargo was certainly a large one and clearly valuable."

I said: "Well you should know, Howard, that I spent more than a few days going through many drawers in the tablet room at the university; I was looking to see if I might discover the missing portion of that tablet. My fragmentary letter was actually part of a motley collection of clay tablets that had been purchased from a dealer in Baghdad back in the 1920s. I eventually located other tablets belonging to the archive of this same Sin-abushu in collections at several other American universities. It is clear that the dealer in Baghdad had not been aware of their being part of an archive and thus sold off these tablets to a variety of buyers. Really too bad. When I published the letter that I was working on, I added an appendix, listing whatever other related documents I could locate and identify, together with a brief summary of their contents where I was given permission by the curators to further describe them."

Howard replied: "Yes, I know that you did everything that you could to elucidate the context; but the tablet of course was broken." Howard then looked around the empty room and in a low voice said: "I have been thinking about you for a while because I believe that I have found the missing portion of your tablet in the British Museum." "My God" I said; "This is amazing! You have got to tell me more. "

Even before receiving Howard's answer, I should tell you here that I was not surprised that Howard would tell me that he found the missing piece of tablet in the British Museum. Let me tell you why. Howard was a creature of regular habits. He did not teach classes on Fridays; on Fridays it was his custom to travel to London and spend the day reading unpublished tablets and fragments of tablets in the British Museum. Now there are more than a hundred thousand texts in the great tablet room of the Museum, which is filled with floor to ceiling cabinets arranged in rows. Each cabinet in turn is

made up of drawers filled with numbered boxes containing complete tablets or fragments of tablets. Many of these boxes also contain small slips of paper giving museum numbers along with brief notes on the various texts held in these boxes. Some texts have been studied; in this case there are references to the journals or books in which these treatments were published. But the vast majority, even today, remain unpublished, even decades after their being acquired and deposited in the museum. The British Museum tablet collection is so large because for over one hundred years the Museum has served as a repository for treasures coming from the former British Empire, with its many colonies and expeditions in the Middle East.

Howard continued to speak to me in a low voice. “Well” he said, “Let me first tell you that the missing section of your letter actually goes on to instruct Mr. Sin-abushu to travel southward, down the Tigris River, and to deliver his cargo of textiles at a depot located not far from the place where the Tigris River meets the Diyala River. The Diyala River, as you are well aware, is a tributary that flows into the Tigris from the east. Specifically, Sin-abushu was to turn left at that confluence and travel a short distance eastward from the Tigris up the Diyala River to a place called “Kar-Agade.” I said to Howard with great excitement: “Did you say “Kar-Agade?” I was excited because Kar-Agade denoted the “docks of Agade,” suggesting a close proximity to Agade, an important ancient capital city in that part of Mesopotamia that is now Iraq. But Agade’s exact location has been unknown and lost for centuries. This was an epic discovery.

“Howard,” I said, “that location makes sense. The antiquities dealer who sold the tablets mentioning Sin-abushu had told the university professors who bought them that the tablets were found in the Diyala region. The tablets were apparently ‘excavated’ by local farmers who ‘dug around’ looking for antiquities that they could sell to dealers in order to get some extra money. The dealers were smalltime and local; and they often would know the farmers personally as well as the areas where they came from.”

Now, dear friends, I must here remind you that of the Babylonian, Assyrian, and Sumerian tablets now housed in the British Museum, the majority were ‘excavated’ in this same ‘informal fashion.’ Archaeologists like to call these ‘illicit excavations;’ but for the Iraqi farmers this was a spare time ‘treasure hunt,’ not too different from weekend ‘prospectors’ going over historical Civil War battlefields in the USA with their metal detectors. Of course, more recently things have ‘gotten out of hand’ with the breakdown of law and

order in Iraq and Syria and the rise of full-time looting of antiquities by ISIL and other terrorists who need money to fund their soldiers and pay for equipment and military supplies.

Then I said: “Howard, I am puzzled. Because of these dealers’ information, archaeologists began a series of major excavations in the Diyala region. This digging began in 1929 and continued right up to before WW II. How is it possible that with so much activity that their excavations failed to discover the lost city of Agade? How do you put together the reference to the “docks of Agade” with their lack of results in locating the ancient city of Agade? So many ancient sites were uncovered; but none of them was called Agade.”

Howard looked at me and smiled. “Well, you realize of course that all of these pre-World War II Diyala excavations were indeed to the east of the Tigris; but the area of digging took place to the *south* of Diyala River. No excavations were carried out on the north side of the Diyala River! I believe that Kar-Agade was located on the *north* bank of the Diyala River, not very far from the point of its confluence with the Tigris.”

“So Howard” I interposed; “why was there no digging on the north side of the Diyala?” Howard replied: “There was a good reason why. Just after the British army conquered Iraq from Turkey in World War I, the British built a large airfield along with army barracks and military hospital on a large parcel of land to the north of the Diyala River and just east of the Tigris. In 1917 this area was located 35 miles south of what was then Baghdad. The British stayed on in Iraq for many years thereafter. When Iraq became independent in 1932, the Iraqi government wanted to take over this British Royal Air Force military base. The British finally turned over the base in 1938 and the Iraqis then converted the site into what became the Iraqi national military training college—the Iraqi equivalent of West Point or Sandhurst. And that is how it has been ever since, even into the days of Saddam Hussein.”

At this point I interrupted Howard to excitedly ask: “My God, Howard, you are talking about the Al Rasheed Airport!” Now, my friends, I should tell you here that Al Rasheed had served as the main airport for Baghdad until 1980, when Saddam Hussain constructed a new and larger airport to the west of the city. Today that new airport is the international airport for Baghdad. Moreover, during all the years since 1917, the city of Baghdad grew larger; today, Al Rasheed Airport and the nearby military base and college lie at the

edge of the city of Baghdad, only 11 miles from its center. Al Rasheed Airport was in fact used by the US army after the fall of Saddam Hussein and continues even today to be used by the military.”

“That is exactly so,” said Howard, “and so you see, this airport and the military base have been in use continuously since 1920. That is why there were no archaeological excavations in this area. The airport, the military base buildings, the military hospital, and the military college occupy most of the entire area lying north of the Diyala River and to the east of the Tigris! It is my belief that the lost city of Agade is buried under those moderns installations.”

I remained a bit puzzled and even skeptical. “Howard,” I asked, “if Agade is buried under the Al Rasheed complex, how do you explain why nothing more was discovered during its various construction phases? No buildings, no artifacts, and no tablets?” Howard looked seriously at me and then said, “This is a good question and I have thought about it myself. First of all, the construction work on the airfield and complex was being carried out by local Iraqi farmers. Since it was not an archaeological excavation, the project was unsupervised. Whatever might have been found was ‘pocketed’ or ‘removed’ by the native workers, who recognized the value of these objects and knew that these could be sold to dealers for extra money. Your letter may in fact have been one of these documents. The British army was interested only in getting the airfield and buildings built and functioning.”

Howard then added: “There may also be an important second reason. The city of Agade was not anciently built on an older foundation. King Sargon, who built the city, wanted to build a new city; he founded it on a pristine site, strategically located from where he might govern his new empire. According to the ancient chronicles, Sargon’s rule and that of his dynasty only lasted for a little over 100 years. The city was then destroyed, overthrown by barbarian invaders from the north of Iraq; and the city was never again rebuilt. Agade’s short existence was insufficient to leave behind a tell or mound of ruins rising high above the flat landscape. There was only a single layer of occupation and over time, the mudbrick ruins crumbled and reverted back into a field of clay.”

I ruminated a bit on what Howard told me. He certainly was correct about the habits of poor Iraqi farmers in the absence of supervision. Objects tended to disappear even in regular archaeological digging where local labor rather

than students or trained volunteers were being employed. Howard was also correct about the short-lived existence of Agade. Sargon in 2300 BCE had burst upon Mesopotamia like a meteor; he conquered a vast empire, which had never been seen before and not again duplicated until Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE. That is evidently why he built a new capital city to straddle his domains. Sargon boasted about his warriors washing their swords in the Mediterranean Sea off of the Syrian coast. He also claimed victories against cities located in what is now Iran and further south along shores of the Persian Gulf. Cylinder seals of Sargon's time have actually been found in the excavation of Mohenjo-Daro, seat of a contemporary empire located on the Indus River in what is now Pakistan. Moreover, if Howard Fontaine was correct in his identification, he was looking in a likely location. Future capitals in Mesopotamia would in fact come to be located nearby, on the banks of the Tigris within a 35 mile stretch to the north of the confluence of the Diyala with the Tigris. There was Seleucia on the Tigris in the time of the Seleucids, Ctesiphon for the Parthians, and then Baghdad for the Abbasids. So it made sense that the lost city of Agade might very well also be in that same vicinity.

I took a moment to let the ancient story go through my mind. The ancient story was written in Mesopotamia several centuries after the destruction of Agade; but it is all that we have. The story explains what must have been its spectacular downfall by weaving a tale that tells of how the gods destroyed Agade because of the hubris of one of its greatest kings. According to that story, Sargon's new capital city, Agade, was dedicated to the great goddess Inanna (who was later also called Ishtar). The story is recounted in terms of the ancient theology, so it was the goddess who decided to place her earthly domain in a temple in that city. Under Sargon all was well and the city of Agade enjoyed great prosperity, receiving tribute from all of the conquered lands of the empire. These divine blessings continued into the reign of Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, who filled the city with unbounded riches and plenty. As recounted in the ancient tale:

Inanna (that is, Ishtar by her Sumerian name) then filled Agade's stores for (brown) emmer wheat with gold, she filled its stores for white emmer wheat with silver; she delivered copper, tin, and blocks of lapis lazuli to its granaries She endowed its old women with the gift of giving counsel, she endowed its old men with the gift of eloquence. She endowed its young women with the gift of

entertaining, she endowed its young men with martial might, she endowed its little ones with joy.¹

But, according to the ancient tale, then came trouble. King Naram-Sin was arrogant; he disrespected and desecrated the great temple of the god Enlil, who in the ancient pantheon, was imagined to be the chief god of the universe and senior to all other gods. Enlil was furious with Naram-Sin. And so, one by one, the other gods abandoned Agade, removing its rights to crown, throne, wisdom, and weapons. Even Inanna, patron goddess of the city, removed her presence from Agade. Agade was now helplessly exposed to the full wrath of Enlil, who brought down the Gutians from the northwest. As the ancient tale recounts:

Enlil brought out of the mountains those who do not resemble other people, who are not reckoned as part of the Land, the Gutians, an unbridled people, with human intelligence but canine instincts and monkeys' features. Like small birds they swooped on the ground in great flocks. Because of **Enlil**, they stretched their arms out across the plain like a net for animals.²

Agade did not recover from this attack. The city was totally destroyed; its harbor and docks were silted up, its population massacred or dispersed; and thus, again in the words of the ancient tale:

When someone decided, 'I will dwell in that city!' he could not enjoy the pleasures of a dwelling place. When someone decided, 'I will rest in **Agade!**' he could not enjoy the pleasures of a resting place!

Thus, by 2200 BCE, after a century of glory, the city of Agade was no more; its site was abandoned and eventually disappeared from all living memory.

So I turned to Howard and excitedly asked him: "Howard, when are you going to publish this missing fragment? It will make a splendid article and gain world attention. Imagine pointing the way to the rediscovery of the great city of Agade after so many centuries!" "That's just it," said Howard, now with a long face. "I don't think the world is ready for the rediscovery. I actually found the tablet fragment during the years while Saddam Hussein

¹ "The Curse of Agade" ll. 25ff, *Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature*.

² Ll. 150ff.

was ruling Iraq. Well, he was a megalomaniac; he built his own palace on top of the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon; he added bricks with his own name to the excavated remains of the Ishtar Gate in Babylon; and when Iraqi archaeologists discovered the treasures of jewelry in the tombs of the Assyrian princess at Nimrud, Saddam had these removed, re-strung, and taken to his summer palace. This jewelry was only recovered after the American army went through the place. And today, the situation is even worse; the Iraq Museum has only opened on a limited basis after twelve years since it was plundered! The Jihadists are looting museums in Syria and in Mosul. The Iraqis themselves are at war with each other. Who knows what will happen if the splendid lost treasures of Agade were dug up? Who will protect them from looting and maybe even destruction by religious extremists?"

"Howard," I said, "I don't know what to tell you. You are absolutely right about the dubious safety of archaeological finds in Iraq. The situation there does not fill me with any sense of confidence. I can understand why you are holding back. But what if another scholar comes to the British Museum and reads this tablet fragment? What will happen if he or she reads the line mentioning the "docks of Agade" and reconstructs the link with the tablet that I published? Will that scholar want to hold back news of this discovery?"

Howard, now looking cautiously around the room to be certain there was no one nearby, replied in a low voice: "That is indeed my dilemma; and thus I have taken steps to prevent this from happening by removing the tablet from the British Museum." "You did what?" I said, barely able to keep my voice down to a whisper. "How did you accomplish that?"

"Well" said Howard, "you know that I am a long-time 'regular visitor' at the British Museum. All of the guards and attendants know me. No one bothers anymore to check my bag or briefcase. I just slipped the tablet into my pocket and went home. Before leaving the tablet room, I wrote out a slip stating that the tablet had been withdrawn for conservation. It is listed in the provisional catalogue as "an unidentified fragment. To my knowledge, no one has ever asked to see it. The box has been sitting empty and unvisited."

My friends, you can understand how completely puzzled I was at this point. Why was Howard telling me all of this, if the tablet was unavailable and he was unwilling to have its information disclosed? This in fact is the question

that I then put to Howard: “Howard, why indeed are you telling me about the missing portion of my letter? What am I supposed to do with this still secret information?” Howard slowly replied to my question. “I have been holding on to this tablet fragment now for almost twenty years—and I am now an old man. Since I have no spouse or children, I have asked my solicitor to set up a small trust to continue to pay the rental for a safety deposit box in a London bank where I keep the tablet. My solicitor holds a duplicate key to that deposit box. I am now asking you to agree to serve as my successor trustee. You well understand the importance of this tablet fragment; and I believe that I can rely upon you to determine when it may be the proper time to return the tablet to the British Museum and release its significant information about the location of Agade. I have left a letter with the tablet explaining what has taken place and absolving you or any future trustee you might appoint of any blame in the circumstances of my removing the tablet from the British Museum. I have also deposited a draft of my article on the fragment and have made its return to the museum conditional upon you or a future trustee having the right of revising and jointly publishing my article. A copy and photograph are also deposited in that same safety deposit box. So, will you now agree to do this for me—to hold this legacy for future scholars and historians?”

After hearing Howard’s story, I felt an obligation to agree to his request. He clearly had thought through his course of action and had placed his future reputation ‘on the line’ in order to serve a higher cause. The present situation in Iraq was a perilous one and delay was in order. At the same time, however, I was not eager to be associated with a theft—even a well-intentioned one—from the British Museum. But Howard Fontaine was after all, a person of otherwise unblemished integrity, and a much admired scholar. We said goodnight and each of us went to our rooms at the hotel. Both of us left the next morning; I went home to await hearing further from Howard.

But the letter that I was expecting from Howard and his solicitor never came. And not long afterwards, news came to me that Howard had suddenly taken ill and died. I was left with no other information. I do not know if Howard died before he could make these arrangements—or perhaps decided to appoint a different trustee. I don’t know the name of his solicitor; but even if I did, how could he speak with me about Howard’s private affairs? I doubt if the British Museum would credit my story about their long-time devoted,

scholarly colleague; and I lack knowledge about reliable contacts among the Iraqi archaeologists.

Dear friends, where does this leave me now? Well, I, too, am now getting older and my successions of tomorrows seem less certain than before. So I am sharing this story with you, a small group of wise, reliable, and judicious persons. I ask you to hold in confidence with me this story about Howard Fontaine and the data pertaining to the site of the lost city of Agade. I ask that you join together with me to wait for that future, more propitious time, when the world will be ready to receive this information and likely to treat these precious, historical findings with appropriate care and respect. Will you do this for me?