

The Asahi Shimbun Displays *No man's land*

Thursday 22 November– Sunday 27 January 2019
Room 3, free

Supported by the Asahi Shimbun

The British Museum presents a new display that will explore present and ancient perspectives on the territories, landscapes and borders of the Middle East. While the first acknowledged borders were natural, human society replaced these with man-made borders that have led to inevitable conflict throughout history. This new Asahi Shimbun display, *No man's land*, brings together a selection of objects separated by over four thousand years that embody human's inability to exist comfortably within agreed borders.

On display will be three objects that tell the story of the first recorded example of prolonged conflict over a disputed border. 4500 years ago, in what is now southern Iraq, the neighbouring city states of Lagash and Umma fought bitterly over the tract of land called Gu'edina, 'Edge of the Plain'. The ancient objects showcased here document the perspectives of the opposing sides, with both territories invoking divine sanction and precedent to justify their claim over the land.

New research has been carried out on British Museum objects especially for this display. The Lagash Border Pillar has been in the collection for 150 years and this show marks the first time that the inscribed text has been deciphered. Dating to 2400 BC, King Enmetena of Lagash set up this white stone pillar to mark his territory, and its glistening surface would have shone out brightly and assertively under the sun beating down on the plain.

Alongside this will stand the Umma Mace-Head made for King Gishakidu of Umma, Enmetena's contemporary and enemy. Long regarded as a vase, it is now understood that this is a symbolic mace-head which has always been displayed upside down - until now. On top is a black-painted representation of the battle-net that was used by the gods to immobilise enemies for execution. The Ur Plaque also on display in this show illustrates a tradition followed by Lagash and Umma in which offerings were made at the border shrine under the protective eye of the Moon God.

These ancient objects are juxtaposed with two series of photographs by Ursula Schulz Dornburg. Over the last decades she has created a body of photographic work exploring past and present histories of the Middle East and captures visible traces of the region's shifting borders and cultures. Both series in this display were taken during a journey through southern Iraq. The first, *Mesopotamia*, records the sites of ancient Mesopotamian cities that were once magnificent centres of art and culture. One of these was taken on the river Shatt al-Gharaff, bordering the ancient city-states of Umma and Lagash.

The second, *Marsh Arabs*, captures the fragility of the Iraqi marshlands that survived largely unchanged from c.2400 BC until they were drained and rendered uninhabitable during and after the First Gulf War.

Vividly demonstrating the manipulation of land for political gain is the Sykes-Picot map, lent by the National Archives for this show. Drawn up in secrecy in 1916 by Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the map divided the Middle East into zones of control for the benefit of Britain and France. These artificial borders that decided the fate of the Middle East over 100 years ago contributed to conflicts which continue to this day.

The Asahi Shimbun Display *No man's land* brings to light the fragility of borders throughout history. The ancient and contemporary works exhibited address the issues around the human desire to dominate land, and allude to the brutality and turmoil borders have invoked on those that inhabit them as well as the landscape itself.

A book published to accompany this display, available in the bookshop, provides further information.

Notes to editors

The Asahi Shimbun Displays

No man's land

Room 3, free

Supported by the Asahi Shimbun

Opening times: Saturday–

Thursday 10.00–17.30, Friday

10.00–20.30

No man's land: an introduction to the display

Wed 12 Dec, 13.15, Room 3

A gallery talk by Irving Finkel, British Museum.

Free, just drop in

No man's land: an introduction to the display

Tue 15 Jan, 13.15, Room 3

A gallery talk by Irving Finkel, British Museum.

Free, just drop in

Drawing lines in the sand: borders and conflict

Thu 24 Jan, 13.15, Room 3A

gallery talk by Michael Raymond, British Museum.

Free, just drop in

Related exhibition

The BP exhibition *I am*

Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria

Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery

8 November 2018 – 24 February 2019

Exhibition supported by BP

Logistics partner IAG Cargo

This autumn, discover the world of ancient Assyria through the life and legacy of its last great ruler, King Ashurbanipal. The BP exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria* will transport you back to ancient Iraq in the 7th century BC, when Ashurbanipal became the most powerful person on earth. From his capital at Nineveh, he ruled a vast and diverse empire, shaping the lives of peoples from the shores of the eastern Mediterranean to the mountains of western Iran.

Tickets £17,00 children under 16 free, concessions and group rates available

The Asahi Shimbun Displays are a series of regularly changing displays which look at objects in new or different ways. Sometimes the display highlights a well-known item, sometimes it surprises the audience with extraordinary items from times and cultures that may not be very familiar. This is also an opportunity for the Museum to learn how it can improve its larger exhibitions and permanent gallery displays. These displays have been made possible by the generous sponsorship of The Asahi Shimbun Company, who are long-standing supporters of the British Museum. With a circulation of about 6 million for the morning edition alone, *The Asahi Shimbun* is the most prestigious newspaper in Japan. The company also publishes magazines and books, and provides a substantial information service on the Internet. The Asahi Shimbun Company has a century long tradition of staging exhibitions in Japan of art, culture and history from around the world.

Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme

In 2015, in response to the appalling destruction by Daesh (also known as so-called Islamic State, ISIS or IS) of heritage sites in Iraq and Syria, the British Museum developed a scheme which, in the face of frustration and outrage, could offer something positive and constructive. The 'Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme', or simply 'Iraq Scheme', received the support of the UK government, and the Museum was granted £2.9m over five years of Official Development Assistance (ODA) through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). The scheme, which became a pilot project for the Cultural Protection Fund, builds capacity in the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage by training 50 of its staff in a wide variety of sophisticated techniques of retrieval and rescue archaeology.



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For more content follow the British Museum blog at blog.britishmuseum.org

Further information

Contact the Press Office:

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High resolution images and caption sheet available at <https://bit.ly/2RLiLlf>