

Cheri L. Boisvert. Ashurbanipal's Legacy: The Rediscovery of the Greatest Library the World had Ever Known. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. April, 2012. 35 pages. Advisor: Rebecca Vargha

In this time of seemingly endless war, it is more important than ever to preserve and study the artifacts left behind by the early inhabitants of the Middle East. In absence of physical artifacts, the only records of history are the mutable oral traditions passed from person to person through the centuries. Like in the children's game of telephone, these stories change with each iteration. Despots can take advantage of this by reshaping the narrative to fit their rhetoric; conceivably changing the perception of the past irreparably within a generation. Without immutable proof, the truth can be lost in the propaganda. The Middle East has undergone this process of benign misinterpretation and malevolent revising for thousands of years; Ashurbanipal's Library represents one of the rare caches of unadulterated truth. It is vital from both a regional identity and a world history standpoint that this truth is preserved for future generations.

#### Headings:

Origins

Rediscovery

Research and Exhibition

ASHURBANIPAL'S LEGACY: REDISCOVERING THE GREATEST LIBRARY THE  
WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN

by  
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## **Introduction**

Ashurbanipal's Library has existed in three distinct, though sometimes overlapping, phases. The first phase, referred to in the following text as origin, consists of the library's initial incarnation as a royal reference library. Though it is likely that the collection existed at least in part before Ashurbanipal ascended to the throne in 668 BCE, it was expanded greatly during his reign and was left to the desert after the fiery fall of Nineveh shortly following Ashurbanipal's death. Thousands of years later, the collection entered its second phase, an age of rediscovery. The British developed a near mania for archeology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, wondering the globe searching for the lost treasures of antiquity. Sir Austen Henry Layard, a young British adventurer, won the admiration of his peers and a place in history when he unearthed Nineveh. His discoveries, and those of the archeologists who came after him, were sent primarily to the British Museum. This ushered the collection into its third phase: research and exhibition. These last two phases overlap, as excavations at Nineveh continue into the modern day. Ever improving technology opens up opportunities for deeper research into the form and meaning of these relics. Research and exhibition will continue far after the last artifacts have been lifted from the sand.

## Origins

### Geography

The ancient empire of Assyria once covered much of the modern day Middle East (see figure 1 on the following page). Early in the third Assyrian empire, referred to as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, territory overlapped the borders of four contemporary Middle Eastern countries: Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. At its height in the seventh century BCE, during which Ashurbanipal's library was formed, the empire stretched from Anatolia to the Nile valley and as far North as Armenia. The metropolis of Nineveh was located across the Tigris River from the modern city of Mosul, Iraq.



Figure 1. Map of the Neo-Assyrian Empire featured in the Ancient History Encyclopedia, uploaded by Jan van der Crabben, illustration by Ningyou.

## **A Brief History of Assyria**

Current knowledge of early Mesopotamian history is somewhat indistinct. The earliest records of settlement in what would become the ancient metropolis of Nineveh were in approximately 5000 BCE. About 250 years later, in 4750 BCE, the Assyrian calendar began with the construction of the first temple of Ashur. By 2500 BCE, Ashur, Arbela, and Nineveh were documented as thriving cities. (BetBasoo, n.d.)

Sargon of Akkad, sometimes referred to as Sargon the Great, consolidated the city-states of southern Mesopotamia in the twenty-third century BCE through conquest of his neighbors. This occurred about six hundred years before the Code of Hammurabi was produced in Babylon. A millennium after Sargon's reign, the First Assyrian Empire was established by Adad-nirari in 1307 BCE. It was followed by the Second Assyrian Empire in 1115 BCE founded by Tiglath-Pileser. Ashur-dan II unified much of the Middle East when he established the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 934 BCE. This lasted slightly longer than its predecessors; it stood until 612 BCE when it fell to attacks from the Medes, Scythians, and Babylon. (BetBasoo, n.d.) It is during this last period that Ashurbanipal created his legendary library.

### **Ashurbanipal**

**Biography.** Ashurbanipal was the son of Esarhaddon, who ruled Assyria from about 680 to 669 BCE. In addition to his kingdom, it appears that Ashurbanipal inherited his enthusiasm for scholarship from his father. This is based on several important surviving informational artifacts. One of these is a letter discovered in Kuyunjik that

discusses the importance and methods of identifying tablets worth preserving for posterity which appears to originate during Esarhaddon's reign (Frame & George, 2005). Furthermore, evidence indicates that "a process of acquiring tablets was evidently already underway long before Ashurbanipal's accession in 668" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 279). It is notable that, "while Esarhaddon did not make the expansive claims to personal scholarship that his son did, he does mention in passing that he could write and evidently had a keen interest in scholarship" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 279).

Born in 685 BCE, Ashurbanipal was both crowned prince and married in 672 BCE when he was approximately 13 years old. In the next year, 671 BCE, Balasi, who was "one of the most prominent scholars attached to Esarhaddon's court" (Livingston, 2007, p. 99), was appointed his tutor. It is not certain if Ashurbanipal was literate before Balasi's tutelage, but he very likely was afterward. Sources disagree on precisely when he came into power, but it was almost certainly in either 669 or 668 BCE. He ruled for about forty years. One of the highlights of those years was his half-brother Samas-sum-ukin's Babylonian uprising, which was defeated in 648 BCE (Livingston, 2007).

**Literacy.** The issue of Ashurbanipal's personal literacy has met with some controversy, though more recent scholars seem to agree that he likely was literate. As one scholar points out, "the whole library project would be far harder to explain, were the claims to literacy and detailed knowledge merely propaganda: Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, scholar in his library" (Livingston, 2007, p. 115). Proof of Ashurbanipal's literacy can be found in "the proliferation of phrases in colophons of tablets in the king's

libraries that insist that the tablets were for his own use, such as *ana tamarti s'itassiya*, 'for my review in reading', *ana tamarti s'arrutiya*, 'for my royal review', *ana taäsisti tamartis'u*, 'for study in his reviewing', *ana taäsisti s'itassis'u*, 'for study in his reading', and *ana tamrirtiya*, 'for my examining'" (Livingstone, 2007, p. 98). In particular, three first person colophons bear Ashurbanipal's name, of which "two are a chemical and technical recipe and a lexical text, while the third is a fragment bearing only a short section of the colophon" (Livingston, 2007, p. 113). These texts are significant because the "three pieces have a remarkably similar ductus and are written in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner in script roughly half a centimeter tall" (Livingston, 2007, p. 113), indicating that they were written by a single individual in the course of their studies.

Further evidence shows that Ashurbanipal's "enthusiasm for reading and writing, which he seems to have shared with his wife, Libbi-ali-sarrat, can be traced back to his youth" (Frahm, 2004, p. 45). Moreover, "from an autobiographical sketch about his intellectual socialization, we know that Ashurbanipal received the education of a future scholar" (Frahm, 2004, p. 45). As autobiographies are not always the most reliable sources, it should also be noted that "many original seventh-century letter and records found at Nineveh mention the copying or collecting of tablets for use by or for the Assyrian king and his scholarly advisors" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 278).

### **Ashurbanipal's Library**

**Collection Methods.** There are two points of view on Ashurbanipal's collection methods: some scholars believe that he confiscated the materials that made up his great library while others find it more "conceivable that many were not so much confiscated as requisitioned temporarily for copying and then returned to their owners" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 283). Copying was a common practice in collecting materials long before copyright became an issue. These duplicates were seldom exact; text could be translated or even edited without controversy. C.H.W. Johns, a prominent Assyriology scholar at the turn of the century, explains the results of this practice as follows:

In constructing a standard text for a critical edition of a work existing in several copies, it is a great advantage when, as in our case, the copies do not deviate except in such small matters as various spellings or different arrangement of lines. The order was the same throughout for all copies. Further, they all began and ended alike. This was absolutely necessary, because each tablet was quoted by its first line and carried as its last line the "catch-line" which was also the first line of the next tablet of the series. But the duplicates might arrange the intervening lines differently as to their columns. (Johns, 1917, p. 61)

Millennia before the advent of the publishing industry, duplication was the most effective way to disseminate texts. Multiple colophons discovered in the Ashurbanipal library collection illustrate the duplication practices of the time, specifically reporting on the "copying of tablets for Sumer, Akkad and Babylon" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 279). This example, amongst others, bears witness to the "large-scaling copying programme at Nineveh during his reign" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 280). He did not invent this practice; in fact, his tablet-copying activities "represent a continuation of his



predecessor's policy, but on a larger and more ambitious scale" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 279). This escalation contributed in greatly to the expansion of the royal library, though the precise extent is lost to history.

In a paper published by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, Jeanette C. Frinke found the following:

The Library Records of early 647 BC, even though none of them is complete, give significant information about Ashurbanipal's acquisition of tablets and writing-boards for the palace libraries of Nineveh: approximately two thousand tablets and three hundred writing-boards were taken from Assyrian and Babylonian private scholars, who gave away compositions they did not need for their professional work. (2004, p. 57)

She further theorizes that, "the initial motive for requiring Babylonian tablets to create his libraries must have been to gain possession of rituals and incantations that were vital to maintain his royal power" (Fincke, 2004, p. 60). Another paper published by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, this one written by Grant Frame and A.R. George, proposed that:

Several fragmentary administrative lists document the transfer of private scholars' tablets to Nineveh during the reign of Ash, especially an enormous influx of Babylonian tablets and writing-boards soon after the failure of Samas-sum-ukin's revolt in 648, which may have been war reparations. (2005, p. 277)

Collection practices are obfuscated further by the fact that scholars are unable to definitively determine the origin of many of the artifacts. This is mitigated somewhat by the small portion of texts that "were specifically stated to have some from Babylonia or from individuals from Babylonian cities: e.g. *Enuma Anu Ellil*, lamentation lore and

dream omens from an exorcist from Nippur; anti-witchcraft material from the scribe of the king of Babylon; and haruspical omens from the town of Bit-Iba” (Frame & George, 2005, p. 278).

The copying and returning argument is bolstered by the following claims by Frame & George:

When the Borisspan scholars responded to the king’s demand for texts, they did so by sending him writing-boards rather than clay tablets, perhaps because boards were more precious and thus more fitting for a king, or perhaps because they were easier to transport. Writing-boards normally perish from the archeological record, so it is not possible to tell whether all the boards sent to the king in response to his commission became part of the royal holdings, nor whether those taken by him after the revolt joined them (2005, p. 282).

Regardless of his primary method, it is clear that “Ashurbanipal was very actively behind the collection of scholarly texts from Babylonia and Assyria for the royal libraries at Nineveh, and that the collection of texts was complimented by a major programme of tablet-copying” (Frame & George, 2005, p. 280).

**Formats.** Ashurbanipal’s library collection was comprised of clay tablets and writing-boards, though at this point it is impossible to guess the ration of these different formats within the collection at its height. The bulk of the artifacts recovered from Ashurbanipal’s collection were in the form of cuneiform clay tablets, which have an endurance that other formats available at that place and time, such as wooden writing-boards, lack. At this point it is impossible to guess the ratio of these different formats

within the collection at its height. Linguist Henry Honken describes the process of making cuneiform tablets as follows:

The clay was formed by hand into squarish tablets, flat on one side and slightly convex on the obverse. The signs were scratched out or impressed into the clay by means of a stylus cut from a reed. In the earliest examples, some of the signs are recognizable pictures, but these are eventually all replaced by graphs made up of wedge-shaped (cuneiform) lines. (2009, pp. 20)

According to Charles McNamara, adjunct professor and retired rare books curator at UNC Chapel Hill, the cuneiform symbols were embedded into the still damp clay and then the tablet was air dried to maintain a slight malleability that allowed for future edits (2012). This practice, in addition to carvings and engravings in stone, represent “the two methods of perpetuating their annals adopted by the Assyrians” (Layard, 1854, p. 7). In practical terms, “there could have been no more durable method of preserving the national records” (Layard, 1854, p. 7). It is not just the medium that endured; the cuneiform language “under various modifications, the letters being differently formed in different countries, prevailed over the greater part of western Asia to the time of the overthrow of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great” (Layard, 1854, p. 6). Since much of the early history of the region has passed into legend, “the inscribed walls of palaces and rock tablets have handed down to us the only authentic history of ancient Assyria” (Layard, 1854, p. 7).

**Content.** Records show that, “when Ashurbanipal was collecting the greatest library the world had ever known, he turned for help to the learned and expert scholars of

Babylon and Borsippa” (Frame & George, 2005, p. 283). It is estimated that the library collection contained about fifteen hundred titles with up to six copies of each (Casson, 2001). The majority of the records and materials have been lost; due to this “it is therefore sadly clear that we can only estimate the exact content and full significance of Ashurbanipal’s libraries” (Fincke, 2004, p. 60). Though the subject matters covered in the known collection appear exotic by modern day standards, the topics encompassed the concerns of the day. It consisted primarily of “divinations and religious texts” (Fincke, 2004, p. 60). This includes “the professional literature of experts in Mesopotamian scientific and religious lore, mainly divination texts, such as extispicy, astrological, terrestrial, physiognomic, dream and birth omens, as well as exorcist’s lore, medical texts and lamentation, and also seventeen independent compositions that occur only once in the records” (Fincke, 2004, p. 57).

After Samas-sum-ukin’s failed uprising, there was an influx of Babylonian materials into the Nineveh libraries. These were likely confiscated as spoils of war. The newly acquired texts “can be separated into two different groups: the literary compositions such as divination, religious, lexical, medical, mathematical and historical texts as well as epics and myths, on the one hand, and the legal documents on the other hand” (Fincke, 2004, p. 58). This is just one example of “the great, and rather unique, potential of the texts from Kuyunjik lies in the fact that they reveal to us, more than any other repository of cuneiform tablets ever found, how culture, represented by the first

group of texts, and politics, represented by the second, were related to each other in ancient Mesopotamia” (Frahm, 2004, p. 45).

**Security.** There is some debate over the degree of access allowed to Ashurbanipal’s collection. It was definitely not publicly available; the vast majority of the population was illiterate so the general populace would not have used materials in the library even if they had permission to do so. Records indicate that some scholars of the time referenced materials from the collection; whether scholarly access was standard or if it was only by special dispensation from the king is uncertain. Despite this limited user group, the collection was still vulnerable to all the standard security issues.

Theft is always a concern with library collections. Colophons show that the king’s response to this threat, “in accord to the spirit of the times, was to call down the wrath of god on the culprits” (Casson, 2001, p. 13). Inscriptions were often explicit and expansive, calling down often gruesome curses on transgressors and their families. Lionel Casson translated one such deterrent as follows:

Clay tablet of Ashurbanipal, King of the World, King of Assyria, who trusts in Ashur and Ninlil. Your lordship is without equal, Ashur, King of the Gods! Whoever removes [the tablet], writes his name in place of my name, may Ashur and Ninlil, angered and grim, cast him down, erase his name, his seed, in the land. (2001, p. 12)

In case this was not adequate to dissuade would be thieves, there were also more mundane security measures in place. Inscriptions indicate that those who were allowed access to the collection were supervised at all times by representatives of the king (Casson, 2001).

Maltreatment of texts was handled similarly. Inscriptions addressing this range from the general caution that “he who fears Anu and Antu will take care of it [the tablet] and respect it” (Casson, 2001, p. 13) to much more specific warnings such as the following:

He who breaks this tablet or puts it in water or rubs it until you cannot recognize it [and] cannot make it be understood, may Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Adad and Ishtar, Bel, Nergal, Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Arbela, Ishtar of Bit Kidmurri, the gods of heaven and earth and the gods of Assyria, may all these curse him with a curse which cannot be relieved, terrible and merciless, as long as he lives, may they let his name, his seed, be carried off from the land, may they put his flesh in a dog’s mouth (Casson, 2001, p. 14).

Inscriptions such as this must have made research a nerve wracking activity for the scholars of Assyria.

**Storage.** While clay tablets are well suited to long term preservation in desert sands, they are less than ideal for casual handling and storage. They are space intensive, heavy, and vulnerable to chipping. In bulk, this would present a considerable challenge. The libraries of Nineveh were extensive; “the tablets were originally stored in four different buildings: in the South-East Palace, in the North Palace, in the vicinity of the temples of Ister and Nabu, with some additional find spots on and off the mound of Kouyunjik” (Fincke, 2004, p. 55). Of these facilities, “it is the tablet collection of the South-West Palace that formed the library of Ashurbanipal” (Fincke, 2004, p. 55). This is somewhat speculative as the original excavation team did a poor job of tracking the precise location of the finds. After the initial fires as the Neo-Assyrian Empire collapsed

late in the seventh century BCE, these buildings with their precious contents lay largely undisturbed for over two thousand years.

## **Rediscovery**

### **Rumours**

The search for Ashurbanipal's libraries began as a hunt for rumours. In the more than two millennia since the Neo-Assyrian empire fell, the ruins of Nineveh had been lost in the desert sands. Sir Austen Henry Layard, the leader of the expedition to rediscover the city, sums up the remaining historic records he discovered as follows:

A few fragments scattered among ancient authors, and a list of kings of more than doubtful authenticity, is all that remains of a history of Assyria by Ctesias; while of that attributed to Herodotus not a trace has been preserved. Of later writers who have touched upon Assyrian history, Diodorus Siculus, a mere compiler, is the principal. In Eusebius, and the Armenian historians, such as Moses of Chorene, may be found a few valuable details and hints, derived, in some instances, from original sources not altogether devoid of authenticity. (1854, p. 3)

These vague hints provided little guidance for explorers. It is no wonder that it took so many centuries to rediscover the lost city; it is rather surprising that it was found at all.

One of the factors that allowed for this discovery was the terrain. The desert sands of the Middle East have since antiquity been dotted with huge sand mounds from which occasional artifacts had been unearthed. Layard noted that there was "a vague mystery attaching to remains like these, which induces travelers to examine them with more than ordinary interest, and even with some degree of awe" (1854, p. 4). From these mounds, archeologists eventually exhumed the ruins and relics of the ancient empires of Babylon and Assyria.



In finding Nineveh, Sir Layard followed the explorations of an earlier English archeologist who had been posted in Baghdad by the East India Company, Mr. Cladius James Rich. Sir Layard greatly admired his forbearer, calling him “a man whom enterprise, industry, extensive and varied learning, and rare influence over the inhabitants of the country, acquired as much by character as position, eminently qualified for such a task” (Layard, 1854, p. 4). Rich’s earlier explorations and observations provided invaluable guidance for the seekers of Nineveh.

Rich began his investigations in the mounds outside of Hillah, an area local to his home base of Baghdad, Iraq. He examined the site carefully, opening trenches in several of the mounds with the hope of discovering important artifacts of the region’s past. This met with some success; his findings included items of “considerable interest, consisting chiefly of fragments of inscriptions, bricks, engraved stones, and a coffin of wood” (Layard, 1854, p. 4). Of possibly more interest were the meticulous notes he took on the topography of the site. These notes were used by subsequent archeologists, including Sir Layard, in evaluating Babylonian sites for possible significance.

In 1820, Rich stopped over in Mosul and was intrigued by mounds located on the opposite bank of the Tigris River. These bore a marked resemblance to those he excavated near Hillah. Local inquiries turned up rumours that at “some time previous to his visit, a sculpture, representing various forms of men and animals, had been dug up in a mound forming part of the great inclosure” (Layard, 1854, p. 5). This unearthed artifact apparently fascinated the local population. Unfortunately, this fascination came to the

attention of the Ulema, the moral and religious authority of the area. He declared the figures carved into the artifact to be the idols of infidels. On his command, “the Mohammedans, like obedient disciples, so completely destroyed them, that Rich was unable to obtain even a fragment” (Layard, 1854, p. 5).

Rich decided to excavate the site that would later be determined to be Nineveh for himself. His efforts met with little success; “with the exception of a small stone chair, and a few remains of inscriptions, Rich obtained no other Assyrian relics from the site of Nineveh” (Layard, 1854, p. 5). He soon gave up on the site, never realizing that the disappointing sand mounds contained the ruins of the ancient city. It was another forty years before the site was properly excavated and identified. This failure is mitigated by Layard’s observation that:

“It is indeed one of the most remarkable facts in history, that the records of an empire, so renowned for its power and civilization, should have been entirely lost; and that the site of a city as eminent for its extent as its splendor, should for ages have been a matter of doubt: it is not perhaps less curious that an accidental discovery should suddenly lead us to hope that these records may be recovered, and this site satisfactorily identified.” (Layard, 1854, p. 4)

In light of this, it is remarkable that the site was discovered at all.

## Adventures in Digging



Figure 2. Artist's rendering of Nineveh excavation, Popular Archeology June 2011

Before Sir Layard arrived at the site, a section was excavated by Paul-Emile Botta, the French consul at Mosul. His initial efforts were very limited in scope, and only turned up “fragments of brick and alabaster, upon which were engraved a few letters in the cuneiform character” (Layard, 1854, p. 10). Botta persevered and was rewarded for his persistence with “the honor of having found the first Assyrian monument” (Layard, 1854, p. 10). The monument was found in a separate site, this one beneath a nearby village. Layard credited this discovery to a series of chance events. According to his version of events, Botta was advised to investigate the mound located underneath a village named Khorsabad by an unnamed peasant who visited his previous dig site. Despite “having been frequently deceived by similar stories” (Layard, 1854, p. 10), the

peasant's account of artifacts recovered in his home village was so convincing that Botta sent agents to investigate. Their findings proved promising enough that he relocated his entire operation. Once a wide trench was excavated at this new site, Botta discovered "a chamber, connected with others, and surrounded by slabs of gypsum covered with sculptured representations of battles, sieges, and similar events" (Layard, 1854, p. 11). The monument eventually unearthed represented a completely new history; it was the first step in rediscovering the lost Assyrian empire.

Layard was able to obtain funding to mount his own expedition to the promising sand mound across the Tigris River from Mosul in the autumn of 1845. A deal was made with Sir Stratford Canning, who "offered to incur, for a limited period, the expense of excavations in Assyria, in the hope that, should success attend the attempt, means would be found to carry it out on an adequate scale" (Layard, 1854, p. 12). This funding, limited though it was, supplied the expedition adequately and allowed them to hire on local workmen. The foreman they hired, a local named either Awad or Abd-Allah, was a dispossessed sheikh of the Jehesh who had taken refuge in a ruined village on their route. He was apparently so pleased with the prospect of regular employment, that "he volunteered to walk, in the middle of the night, to Selamiyah, a village three miles distant, and to some Arab tents in the neighborhood, to procure men to assist in the excavations" (Layard, 1854, p. 14).

The dig ran into a variety of problems. Obstructive bureaucracy is a universal issue; the political climate of the Middle East in the nineteenth century brought this to

absurd levels. Layard came to the region in which Nineveh was discovered fully expecting opposition from local authorities. To counter this, he kept his intentions secret until he was certain that the site was important. The administrator of the area at the time that digging began was Mohammed Pashaw, also known as Keritli Oglu. He was described as unprepossessing in appearance and conduct; Layard observed that “nature had placed hypocrisy beyond his reach” (1854, p. 13). The governor was further depicted as having “one eye and one ear; he was short and fat, deeply marked by the small-pox, uncouth in gestures and harsh in voice” (Layard, 1854, p. 13). This distinctly unflattering portrayal is undoubtedly influenced by the reputed unpleasantness of Keritli Oglu’s character.

As stories of the discoveries spread, theft became a major issue. Locals who had been content to leave the artifacts laying in the sand became acquisitive once the value that the English placed in these objects became apparent. Rumours spread rapidly through the area; before Layard could return to inform the regional governor of their progress, “reports of the wealth extracted from the ruins had already reached Mosul, and had excited the cupidity and jealousy of the cadi and principal inhabitants of the place” (Layard, 1854, p. 16). This led the governor, who was by all accounts more than a little paranoid even in the best of circumstances, to assume that the archeological team was purposefully holding out on him. Layard’s assurances to the contrary were met with a great deal of petulance before he was able to placate Keritli Oglu with promises of

gilded artifacts. This eliminated the official thefts but did little to quell the efforts of enterprising individuals.

The task of excavating Nineveh and other, similar sites was also complicated by the local folklore, which attributed to the sites “exaggerated accounts of wild beasts, who haunted the subterraneous passages, and of the no less savage tribes who wandered among the ruins” (Layard, 1854, p. 4). Layard was not immune to the atmosphere of the ruins of Nineveh; he describes in detail a “great vitrified mass of brick-work, surrounded by the accumulated rubbish of ages” (1854, p. 4) which he points out “was believed to represent the identical tower, which called down the divine vengeance, and was overthrown, according to an universal tradition, by the fires of heaven” (Layard, 1854, p. 4). He does not indicate by whom this legend was believed; the Judeo-Christian language used in the description implies that it was likely members of his party, possibly including Layard himself.

### **Loot**

On arriving at the site, the excavation team found that “broken pottery and fragments of bricks, both inscribed with the cuneiform character, were strewn on all sides” (Layard, 1854, p. 14). The local workmen had no concept of the relative values of the artifacts, so at least initially brought the British archeologists every piece of stone, clay, or metal small enough to carry. It was not long before a significant find was discovered. Layard described this first major discovery as follows:

Awad led me to a piece of alabaster which appeared above the soil. We could not remove it, and on digging downward, it proved to be the upper part of a large slab. I ordered all the men to work around it, and they shortly uncovered a second slab. Continuing in the same line, we came upon a third; and, in the course of the morning, discovered ten more, the whole forming a square, with a slab missing at one corner. It was evident that we had entered a chamber, and that the gap was its entrance. I now dug down the face of one of the stones, and an inscription in the cuneiform character was soon exposed to view. Similar inscriptions occupied the center of all the slabs, which were in the best preservation; but plain, with the exception of the writing. (1854, p. 14)

In another part of the mound, an excavated trench led directly to a cuneiform inscribed wall. This showed clear evidence of burning, which left it fragile under the strain of excavation efforts. It soon became evident that “the remains of buildings of considerable extent existed in the mound; and that although some had been injured by fire, others had escaped the conflagration” (Layard, 1854, p. 15).

This productive digging was complicated by fact that “the soil, mixed with sun-dried and baked bricks, pottery, and fragments of alabaster, offered considerable resistance to the tools of the workmen; and when loosened, could only be removed in baskets to be thrown over the edge of the mound” (Layard, 1854, p. 17). The workmen persevered over these unfavorable conditions and, over the course of excavation, the British unearthed about twenty-six thousand tablets and fragments of tablets at Nineveh (Fincke, 2004). Most of these objects were found in the citadel mound of Kuyunjik (Frahm, 2004) and were largely “heterogeneous regarding the nature and age of the tablets they contain” (Frame & George, 2005, p. 279).

The excavation of Nineveh lasted far beyond Layard's lifetime. Even today there are parts of the ancient city as yet unexplored by modern scholars. One of the most notable later excavation efforts was led by British archaeologist and author Reginald Campbell Thompson from 1927 to 1931. His primary interest was in uncovering the remains of the library of the Temple of Nabu. In addition to unearthing thousands of cuneiform tablets, sculptures, and fragments of both, his team "cleared the Nabu temple and found the remains of another colossal temple dedicated to the goddess Ishtar" (British Museum, n.d.a., pp. 2). This expedition is particularly notable for the presence of renowned mystery novelist Agatha Christie, who accompanied and assisted prominent archeologist Max Mallowan (British Museum, n.d.a.). The artifacts discovered by this group joined those from Layard's excavations at the British Museum.



## **Research and Exhibition**

### **British Museum**

**Collection Highlights.** The Epic of Gilgamesh is the best known artifact in Ashurbanipal's Library Collection. It is "the longest piece of literature in Akkadian" (British Museum, n.d.d.). The tablets tell the story of the quest for immortality undertaken by Gilgamesh, the legendary ruler of Uruk. The Flood Tablet is the eleventh tablet in the tale and tells the story of Utnapishtim and the great flood (British Museum, n.d.d.). It is featured as object sixteen on *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (British Museum, n.d.c.). The most entertaining aspect of this tablet is the reaction of George Smith, the assistant who identified it in 1872. According to museum legend, "on reading the text he... jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself" (British Museum, n.d.d.).

The Epic of Creation takes the form of "a series of tall narrow cuneiform tablets that tell the story of the creation of the gods Apsu and Tiamat out of primordial waters" (British Museum, n.d.e.). The featured tablet tells a violent tale of a brawl between the gods in which there are several casualties. It ends with humankind's creation from the fallen blood. This Epic had ceremonial use; it was read during the New Year Festival of Babylon (British Museum, n.d.e.).

Another tablet conveys the legend of Etana. He was the mythic king of Kish, a southern Mesopotamian city. The legend is a highly symbolic tale of the king's quest for

the plant of life, guided by an injured eagle. The god of the sun and justice, Shamash, and the goddess Ishtar play a significant role in the adventure. Unfortunately, the ending is missing, presumed destroyed. The modern world may never know how Etana's journey ended (British Museum, n.d.f.).

**Exhibition.** Artifacts from the Ashurbanipal's Library are exhibited in Room 9, the Assyria: Nineveh Gallery of the British Museum. This room is located on the first floor adjacent to the Ancient Egyptian sculpture (Room 4) and Assyria: Nimrud (Rooms 7-8) Galleries. Related artifacts are featured in nearby galleries, including Assyrian sculpture & Balawat Gates (Room 6) and Assyria: Lion hunts, Seige of Lachish, and Khorsabad (Room 10). Other Mesopotamian artifacts are exhibited on the third floor in Rooms 55 and 56, Mesopotamia 1500-539 BC and Mesopotamia 6000-1500 BC respectively (British Museum, n.d.c.).

### **Dispersal**

The artifacts from Ashurbanipal's Library are housed primarily in the British Museum, but a significant minority of the tablets have made their way to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. This began in 1928 when "several hundred cuneiform texts were purchased by E. Cheira in Mosul, from a local dealer, and it can hardly be doubted that they originated from clandestine digging at Nineveh during the excavations of R. Campbell Thompson at the site" (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 84). Other fragments of similar provenance have been added to the collection in the intervening years. This presents problems for scholars, since "the dispersal of the texts between

London and Chicago has prevented physically joining fragments which seem to belong together” (Cogan & Tadmor, 1988, p. 84). The tablets are too valuable and fragile to be transported. Improvements in 3D imaging technology may provide a solution to this issue, but it will prove a major undertaking.

The Iraq Department of Antiquities constructed a site museum, called the Sennacherib Palace Site Museum, around the parts of Nineveh that remained in place in the 1960s. This mostly consisted of walls and relief sculptures; objects too large to conveniently carry off (Russell, 1996). Despite this effort, in an October 2010 report the Global Heritage Fund listed Nineveh “among the top 12 sites in the world most ‘on the verge’ of irreparable loss as a result of looting, development encroachment, and insufficient management of its cultural resources” (McLerran, 2011, pp. 7). The tumultuous state of the region’s politics makes preservation a low priority for those in the immediate area, who lack the funds to properly care for the site, and too dangerous for foreign involvement. As removal is also beyond the realm of practical possibility, the site remains in a state of entropy, separated from the bulk of the library collection.

### **Ashurbanipal Library Project Phase 1**

In 2002, the British Museum began a major project on the Ashurbanipal Library collection in collaboration with the University of Mosul in Iraq. The preliminary purpose of this project is “to document the library as fully as possible, and to carry out a range of investigations aimed at better understanding it as a whole, as well as the individual works within it” (British Museum, n.d.b.). It is currently in phase one, which “is focused on the

Babylonian texts in order to establish the compositions involved and their relation to the rest of the Kouyunjik Collection and to the collecting activities of Ashurbanipal” (Fincke, 2004, p. 55). The project also aims to make the collection available to scholars worldwide through high quality digital imaging of the tablets. Eventually there are plans to augment these images with “electronic transliterations and translations of all texts, further widening access to one of the most remarkable repositories of knowledge the world has ever known” (British Museum, n.d.b.).

### **Issues in ownership**

**Availability.** According to the U.S. Department of State travel advisory website, “the United Kingdom is politically stable and has a modern infrastructure” (n.d.c.). It also notes that “overall crime rates have decreased over the past decade” and that “tourist facilities are widely available throughout the United Kingdom” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.c.). In 2010, the U.K. was visited by just shy of thirty million (29.803 million) people, which is about average for the past decade (VisitBritain, 2011). Due to these factors, plus a very successful international branding campaign by the institution, the British Museum received an unprecedented number of visitors in 2010/2011, totaling at about 5.8 million (British Museum, 2012). This is an increase of almost five percent over the previous year. Barring unforeseen catastrophe, this popularity is quite likely to continue.

Iraq is another story entirely. It is featured on the travel warning section of the department website, which means that it is considered a high risk area in which to travel

for the foreseeable future. The site goes so far as to warn against “all but essential travel to Iraq given the dangerous security situation” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.b.). This is certainly discouraging for the cultural tourism industry, which, though important in a broad sense, can hardly be considered essential travel. There are no tourism statistics currently available for Iraq, as it is virtually nonexistent. The Iraq Museum is located in Baghdad, which is listed as a particularly violent area in the generally dangerous country (U.S. Department of State, n.d.a.). The museum has been closed to the public for most of the past two decades due to ongoing warfare in the region. It was cautiously reopened in February of 2009 and remains open in a limited fashion for VIP tours and student groups (Iraq Museum, n.d.).

**Preservation.** The safety of artifacts in the Iraq Museum is a serious concern. This is not simply due to the levels of the violence discussed in the previous section, but includes the added threat of looting. The worst incident in recent history occurred in 2003 as U.S. troops stormed Baghdad. Between April 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, museum staff valiantly attempted to hold off looters regardless of orders to evacuate. Despite their efforts, it is estimated that 15,000 items were taken before U.S. troops arrived to guard the facility on April 16<sup>th</sup> (Iraq Museum, n.d.). Out of the artifacts lost in this time, “less than half have been found and approximately 4000 were illicitly exported out of the country” (UNESCO, 2012, pp. 6). The loss would likely have been even worse if not for staffers’ foresight in secreting many artifacts in secret storage vaults before war broke out (Iraq Museum, n.d.).

**Context.** Context for historical collections is complicated. There are cultural, geographical, and chronological frameworks in which artifacts exist. These factors act like coordinates on a map, intersecting at a singular place in time and space. A collection can only be organized by one of these factors at a time; objects that share cultural and geographical designations but differ chronologically do not match up with objects that occupy the same points on the chronological continuum but vary culturally and geographically. For instance, using Ashurbanipal's Library as the intersect point, either an Olmec greenstone plaque, created in Mexico in the seventh century BCE, and a bronze statue of Saddam Hussein would provide some context for this collection, but the two do not relate to each other in any reasonably direct manner.

Iraq, and particularly the National Museum of Iraq, would seem the most obvious location in which one could find context for Ashurbanipal's Library collection. It shares geographic location with the core of the long defunct Neo-Assyrian Empire. Cultural context is more difficult to determine, as ancient Assyria is far removed from the modern world by time and conflict, but the inhabitants of contemporary Iraq would represent the closest equivalent. The Iraq Museum is "dedicated to the collection and interpretation of the history of Iraq and its environs" (Iraq Museum, n.d., pp. 5). This would seem to indicate that Iraq is the most appropriate location to provide context for the collection, but there are other factors to consider.

The British Museum features items from all parts of the world and contains man made artifacts created over the past two million years. This provides context within the

world's timeline, which is particularly important for a collection of global significance. Ashurbanipal's Library was "the greatest library the world had ever known" (Frame & George, 2005, p. 283) at the time of its creation. While everything that's ever existed is part of world history, this distinction makes it a significant component in chronicling the past. Thus, the contextual importance goes both ways. It does not mean that this form should necessarily take priority, but it could be argued that both locations have claim to the collection.

### **Conclusion**

Though Ashurbanipal was not the first king to collect written texts, many scholars agree that his library was the greatest the world had ever known. This significance has been magnified by the long and at times adventurous history that resurrected the collection from its sandy grave and makes it the marvel it is today. From functioning royal library to buried treasure to museum exhibit, this collection has fascinated scholars for millennia. With proper preservation, it will continue to do so for millennia more.

Ashurbanipal's Library represents is an integral part of history. As the British Museum's Keeper of Ancient Near East Antiquities John Curtis said on the British Museum's controversial partnership with the Iraqi government despite the United Nations sanctions against the country, "culture and the world's heritage are more important than politics" (Alberge, 2002, p. 16). As the dust slowly settles from decades of protracted conflict, the world needs this regional history to get past the tragedies of war. Iraq is more than just the violence and poverty it has born in recent years; it was once a center of culture and scholarship such as the world had never seen. With this history to guide and inspire the people of the region, perhaps it can attain this role again.



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