

## INTRODUCTION

Austen Henry Layard is celebrated as the discoverer of Nineveh, the legendary Assyrian city of biblical renown. His accomplishments made him a founding father of Near Eastern archaeology. He was also a vivid travel writer, with a predilection for wild landscape and ethnographic detail. His writing shows him in sympathy, emotionally and spiritually, with the lands of the Near East and the people who lived there. He looked beyond Greece and the Old Testament and sensed that in the Near East a Westerner stood in the presence of his cultural ancestors. He was naturally inclined not to adopt a position of superior condescension, as many Europeans and Americans did in the East, but to adapt to local habit and respect native custom. This proved to be an invaluable propensity for a young man whose success depended on the goodwill of local officials, tribal rulers and rural labourers.

Layard was a man without apparent prejudice and treated all alike, Muslim, Christian, high and low, but he did not suffer injury in silence, once getting into trouble for striking a religious authority who disapproved of his excavations. Nor did he hide antipathy. For example, in his 1854 text *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (itself an abridgement of the earlier *Nineveh and Its Remains*), Layard's summation of Mohammed Pasha, an odious governor of Mosul who placed obstacles in his way, is especially effective: 'The appearance of His Excellency was not prepossessing, but it matched his temper and conduct. Nature had placed hypocrisy beyond his reach. He had one eye and one ear; he was short and fat, deeply marked by the smallpox, uncouth in gestures and harsh in voice'.

Layard was not the first to excavate an Assyrian site systematically. That distinction belongs to the Italian-born naturalist Paul-Emile Botta (1802–70), who in 1841 was appointed French Consul at Mosul in northern Iraq with the specific brief to dig for antiquities. Botta began by digging on Kouyunjik, a mound on the east bank of the river Tigris, opposite Mosul. Discouraged by the unspectacular results, he moved his expedition a short distance north-east, to another mound called Khorsabad, later identified as Dur-Sharruken, the capital of Sargon II of Assyria (reigned 721–705 BC). There in 1843–4 he uncovered a magnificent palace whose decorative limestone reliefs now adorn the Louvre in Paris.

## INTRODUCTION

Austen Henry Layard was born in 1817 in Paris, spent his early years in Florence, and was schooled in France before his family returned to England. Unsurprisingly, given such a background, Henry neither found life at English boarding school easy nor settled into work as a solicitor's clerk at his uncle's legal practice. Instead he fled his desk with the ambition of becoming a barrister in Ceylon, where another uncle was a civil servant. He set out overland in 1839 but never reached his goal, for the Near East intercepted him. Its little-explored historic monuments and exotic tribes fascinated him. He journeyed for three years through much of the Ottoman empire, especially what is now Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, and through western Iran. This he did with a single companion, and later alone, often in very dangerous circumstances, which led to him being several times robbed, imprisoned, and in peril of his life from malaria, warfare and native hostility.

As he travelled down the Tigris in 1840 the ancient cities of Mesopotamia buried in their ruin mounds provoked in Layard a wonder and reflection that never left him. They were like nothing he had seen in Asia Minor and the Levant: the mounds did not reveal their splendours, but hid them from sight. He conceived a desire to explore them by digging. When he passed through Assyria again in 1842 a chance meeting with Botta in Mosul turned into a lasting friendship. Botta's enthusiastic plans for excavation confirmed him in his ambition.

The desire to continue to Ceylon had left Layard. Instead he became personal assistant to Sir Stratford Canning, the British Ambassador in Istanbul, who wanted to deploy Layard's intimate knowledge of local conditions in Britain's attempt to mediate in the Turkish-Persian War. During Layard's three years in Canning's service, archaeological news came to him regularly from two like-minded men: Botta in Mosul and Henry Rawlinson in Baghdad. By this time Botta was excavating the Assyrian palace at Khorsabad. Rawlinson (1810–95) was British Resident in Baghdad, in his spare time grappling with the cuneiform writing system. He is most famous for deciphering the trilingual inscription of the Persian king Darius I (reigned 522–486 BC), inscribed high on a rock face at Behistun, near Kermanshah in Iran. He published his decipherment of the Old Persian version of the inscription in 1846, but the Babylonian and Elamite cuneiform gave him much more trouble. Rawlinson sought information on inscriptions and other antiquities that Layard had seen during his travels in Iran. Botta shared his discoveries at Khorsabad. Eventually the Frenchman's success and national pride persuaded Canning in 1845 to finance his protégé's excavation of an Assyrian mound, in the hope that the British

## INTRODUCTION

Museum might thereby outshine the Louvre with more and better Assyrian sculpture.

Layard spent the next six years digging ruin mounds in Mesopotamia. He began work as Canning's agent, working surreptitiously without permission, but his activities were placed on a firmer footing when in 1846 the Sublime Porte issued an official permit and the British Museum agreed to fund his work. He took one year's leave in England in 1847–8, during which he wrote up and published his early excavations. *Nineveh and Its Remains*, which describes the course of his first period of archaeological exploration, was a great success, and already in a third edition by the end of 1849. *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* is its sequel, carrying the story through his second expedition, 1849–51.

The main effort of Layard's excavations went into the exploration of two mounds on the Tigris: Kouyunjik, which had so disappointed Botta, and Nimroud, nearly 19 miles downstream. Layard was so impressed by Nimroud that he thought it must be part of Nineveh, despite the local tradition and scholarly consensus that Nineveh lay opposite Mosul. Eventually Kouyunjik indeed proved to be the citadel of Nineveh (Assyrian Ninua), the capital of Sargon II's son and successor, Sennacherib (reigned 705–681 BC). Nimroud turned out to be Kalakh, the capital of an earlier Assyrian king, Ashurnasirpal II (reigned 883–859 BC). Layard's mistake was influenced by the huge exaggerations of Nineveh's extent handed down by classical historians. This leads to confusion in his published work, for he often cites the ancient name Nineveh when reporting work at Nimroud.

Layard's chief motivation for digging these two mounds was the search for bas-reliefs. Slabs of limestone, sculpted in low relief with varied scenes of conquest, hunting and ritual symbolism, and often embellished with cuneiform text, lined the chambers and corridors of Assyrian palaces. By locating one slab and tunnelling to right and left, Layard uncovered long sequences of reliefs. However, this technique did not work in Babylon, which Layard explored in the winter of 1850–1, for Babylonian palaces lacked stone decoration. His disappointment with the inscribed bricks, magic bowls and other artefacts that he describes in Chapters XXII–XXIII is hardly masked.

Layard drew the Assyrian reliefs *in situ*, and published engravings of his drawings in two magnificent folio volumes, *The Monuments of Nineveh* (1849 and 1853), some of which are reproduced in this Folio Society edition of *Nineveh and Babylon*. The best-preserved slabs were extracted from their positions and sent to the British Museum in London. Some were displayed at the Crystal Palace as part of the Great Exhibition of 1851.

## INTRODUCTION

Other notable sculptures recovered from the Assyrian palaces and now in the British Museum were the gigantic winged bulls that guarded their monumental gateways, and a black stone obelisk that reported, among other things, the submission to the Assyrian crown of ‘Yaua, son of Humri’, i.e. King Jehu of Israel (reigned 842–815 BC), of the house of Omri.

This detail is an example of the new light that Assyrian inscriptions would soon shed on biblical history. They caused tremendous excitement in late nineteenth-century Europe, where in the face of advances in knowledge of geology and human prehistory, and finally Darwin’s evolutionary theory of 1859, many people began to doubt that the Old Testament contained any genuine history at all. But first the language of the inscriptions had to be deciphered. Layard only gradually realised the content and importance of the texts that adorned the obelisk and his other sculptures. Rawlinson, in Baghdad, could see the implications more clearly. In 1846, the year of the obelisk’s discovery, he admitted that he could roughly read the Babylonian version of the Behistun rock-face inscription, but could understand nothing of it. Nevertheless, he was of the view that, in reconstructing a lost civilisation, inscriptions would prove more valuable than images. He was right.

The decipherment of Babylonian seemed slow to those involved, but in retrospect things moved quite quickly. By the time Layard wrote *Nineveh and Babylon*, Rawlinson, in competition with others, especially the Irish clergyman Edward Hincks (1792–1866), had made considerable progress. The name and patronym of Jehu on the obelisk were now correctly understood (as reported on p. 550). Layard’s contribution to the decipherment was to furnish new cuneiform texts, which he did by private letter and in a book called *Inscriptions in the Cuneiform Character from Assyrian Monuments* (1851), put together from his notebooks during his leave in England in 1848. This volume is the first major anthology of cuneiform texts ever published, and all the more remarkable an achievement in that the man responsible for it had, necessarily at that time, almost no understanding of what the texts said and could engage with them only as sequences of individual cuneiform signs.

Layard read Rawlinson’s and Hincks’s translations of his discoveries, and decided for himself which were more plausible. An example is given in Chapter VI: by 1853 it was clear to Hincks that an epigraph on a bas-relief from Sennacherib’s palace at Kouyunjik provided another reference to biblical history, specifically the Assyrian king’s occupation of the Judean town of Lachish reported in 2 Kings 18–19. Layard follows Hincks in rendering the epigraph thus: ‘Sennacherib, the mighty

## INTRODUCTION

king, king of the country of Assyria, sitting on the throne of judgement, before (or at the entrance of) the city of Lachish (Lakisha). I give permission for its slaughter' (p. 138). The translation of 1853 shows us how far understanding of Babylonian had improved since 1846, but, as we shall see from a position of hindsight, it also illustrates that there was some way yet to go.

The basic decipherment of Babylonian was accepted as achieved in 1857, though radical improvements to knowledge of the script and language continued to be made for many decades after this. The epigraph on p. 138 is now translated, 'Sîn-ahhe-eriba (i.e. biblical Sennacherib), king of the world, king of the land of Assur (i.e. Assyria), sat on an arm-chair while booty from Lakisu (i.e. biblical Lachish) passed before him.' Comparison of this and the rendering of 1853 shows how much was still misunderstood when Layard wrote, and serves as a clear warning not to use his books as sources of definitive statements about ancient history.

It was Sennacherib's palace on Kouyunjik that gave Layard the greatest bounty and exceeded even Rawlinson's appetite for new inscriptions. For here, in 1850, in a room that Layard called the Chamber of Records, he came across a great heap of clay tablets inscribed in the cuneiform script. The find is described in Chapter XVI. Layard could not read the tablets but recognised them as precious, and packed them for despatch to the British Museum. There they languished for more than fifteen years, until Rawlinson, by this time one of the museum's trustees, persuaded the museum to employ a young man to sort through the twenty thousand fragments. The heap of cuneiform turned out to be the remnant of the Assyrian royal archives, which were developed by the last great king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–627 BC), into a comprehensive collection of Babylonian and Assyrian scribal knowledge, the first deliberately comprehensive library in history. This library became the foundation stone of Assyriology, enabling George Smith in 1872 to piece together parts of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and other mythological narrative poems. Because of an abiding paucity of Assyriologists and research funds, its decipherment and cataloguing are still not completely achieved. Nevertheless by means of it, and further finds at other sites, scholars have been able to reconstruct much of the literature, religion, scholarship and scientific achievement of the Babylonians and Assyrians, as well as the political, social and economic history of the last Assyrian empire.

Layard returned from his second expedition in 1851, leaving his assistant Hormuzd Rassam to continue his work on Kouyunjik. He abandoned active archaeology, wrote further books about his travels

## INTRODUCTION

and discoveries, was honoured with the Freedom of the City of London, and served with distinction as a Liberal Member of Parliament for first Aylesbury and then Southwark. The British crown appointed him ambassador to the court of Spain in 1869 and to the Sublime Porte in 1877. He was knighted in 1878. Two years later he retired to Venice to collect Italian paintings and write about them. He died in London in 1894.

Layard's life encompassed a period when knowledge of the ancient civilisations of the Near East increased exponentially, and his work played a very great part in making that happen. He knew that the ruins of Assyria and Babylonia are the personal heritage of all who reflect for a moment on the passage of time, as he surely did when contemplating sunset from a spot near Tel Afer, west of Mosul, in March 1850:

On all sides, as far as the eye could see, rose grass-covered heaps marking the site of ancient habitations. The great tide of civilisation had long since ebbed, leaving these scattered wrecks on the solitary shore. Are those waters to flow again, bearing back the seeds of knowledge and of wealth that they have wafted to the West? We wanderers were seeking what they had left behind, as children gather up the coloured shells on the deserted sands. (p. 222)

Like the children of his metaphor, Layard grew out of collecting coloured shells, but he would no doubt have been delighted that, generations later, his collection is still intact, still being studied and augmented, and still important to those who value the past as mentor of the present.

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