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History 194S

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Across Many Oceans: The Strange Journey of the Northwest Palace Reliefs

If walls could speak, what sort of stories would they tell? This is a common enough saying, but perhaps never so true as for one relief from the Northwest Palace of King Ashurnasirpal II, now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of contexts by an ever-changing cast of characters. Over the course of its long and interesting history, this relief has served to immortalize a king and cement his legacy in history; later subjects came to view this monument as a symbol of their oppression, and it witnessed its home devoured by flames. It survived. Over time it was forgotten, unearthed, and used by foreign invaders as evidence of their own cultural superiority; its twin guardians became liminal figures, signifying simultaneously the rise of one empire and the fall of another. As Christian and Muslim viewers alike interpreted it as proof of God's triumph over pagan ways, the relief again became a symbol of the triumphant oppressed. A century later, the reliefs suffered under anti-Semitism and their imagery was twisted to support ideas of racial hierarchy and white superiority. Now, located in one of the world's largest "universal museums," the reliefs represent a celebration of our world's great diversity and the hope that comes with greater intercultural understanding. In this paper, I will attempt to briefly guide readers through all of these stages of this monumental journey, taking readers across two oceans and three different continents.

Constructing the Palace:

To truly understand the significance of these reliefs, it is important to understand the forces that marked early Assyrian political development. The majority of the region is incredibly dry and

arid, with limited resources to sustain large populations; however, these same areas were rich in other resources, like gypsum alabaster and clay deposits for building homes. At the same time, the fertile crescent along the Mediterranean and the silty soil between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers provided enough water and nutrients to sustain agrarian societies. Not only were those who controlled these areas less susceptible to the whims of the desert climate, the sedentary nature of these societies allowed for intense specialization and the development of militaries. Thus the groups who controlled these regions were better positioned to exploit the resources of surrounding areas, even at the expense of those who occupied those lands. Competition for the control of these resources was fierce, and warfare was a ubiquitous fact of life. For example, Ashurnasirpal II's father Tukulti-Ninurta II vied for power with a man named Amme-ba'ali, who ruled over the Kashiari hills; Tukulti-Ninurta II was ultimately successful, and Amme-ba'ali became an important source of tribute. One of the earliest campaigns undertaken by Ashurnasirpal II himself was against the rebellious peoples responsible for murdering Amme-ba'ali.¹ This was only one of many successful military campaigns, however. By the end of the 17th century BCE, Ashurnasirpal II and his successors would come to "dominate the entire ancient Near East" from Egypt to the northern Persian Gulf.²

It is in this context that the Northwest Palace reliefs were first commissioned. Upon taking the throne, Ashurnasirpal II began an extensive public works program across the empire. This began with massive renovations to the traditional capitals of Assur and Nineveh, and ultimately culminated in the transformation of Kalhu (modern Nimrud) from a small, provincial village into the thriving seat of royal power. Because the site is situated on the riverbank between

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Ashurnasirpal II: King of Assyria," last edited June 1, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ashurnasirpal-II>. Accessed Jan 22, 2022.

² "Ashurnasirpal II," in *World Eras, Vol. 8 (Ancient Mesopotamia, 3300-331 B.C.E.)*, ed. Ronald Wallenfels, (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2004). *Gale In Context: Biography* (accessed January 17, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K2440210011/BIC?u=ucsantacruz&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=e0e41077>.

two branches of the Tigris, the city is isolated and easily defended from all sides (see Fig. 1), and it is likely that the decision to relocate the palace here may have served military purposes. To decorate the mudbrick walls of the new palace, Ashurnasirpal was the first Assyrian king to commission heavy bas-reliefs carved from locally-sourced gypsum alabaster, a soft stone made of fine-grain calcium sulfate that is common in both Mesopotamia and the low-lands between the Tigris and hills to the east.³ Many if not most of the workers involved in the palace's construction would have been illiterate, but that wouldn't have prevented the reliefs from acting as a terrifying and awe-inspiring symbol of the king's might. Despite the warlike nature of Assyrian society, the army was rarely deployed in full force. Instead, armies were more likely to raze isolated, easily conquerable villages in enemy land and subject its people to horrific violence as an example to the opponent's capital. Their people were raped, flayed, and beheaded, their skins or heads displayed.⁴ Those who survived Assyrian conquest were often taken as slaves and forced to serve as *urāšu*, or "state labourers."⁵ It is likely that these prisoners of war would have been employed in quarrying and transporting the gypsum necessary for the palace reliefs, and the tribute exacted on their peoples would have funded the building of Ashurnasirpal II's palace. Facing such "calculated frightfulness" and economic exploitations, internal rebellions were commonplace despite obvious Assyrian military superiority.⁶ Incidentally, the royal attendants and bureaucrats who would see these reliefs on a daily basis may in fact be a secondary audience, and the real power of this object may lie in what it meant to those responsible for actually *constructing* these monuments. Even if

³ T. C. Mitchell and A. P. Middleton, "The Stones Used in the Assyrian Sculptures," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 54, no. 1 (January 2002): 93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1360046>.

⁴ Marc Van de Mieroop, "The Rise of Assyria," in *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2016), 248.

⁵ Mattias Karlsson, "Early Neo-Assyrian State Ideology: Relations of Power in the Inscriptions and Iconography of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) and Shalmaneser III (858-824)," (doctoral thesis, Uppsala University, 2013), 99.

⁶ Mieroop, "The Rise of Assyria," 247.

they couldn't read the text on the walls, its mere presence would have served as a poignant reminder of servitude, loss, and oppression long after construction had ceased.

The Standard Inscription

Many of these reliefs depict the king in various activities intended to showcase his might, generosity, and piety. For example, some reliefs depict the king and his entourage engaged in fierce hunts, while others show him leading his armies in battle and still others show him performing religious ceremonies. Running across the center of each relief is the Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II, so-called because it was copied as many as 650 times throughout the palace (though only 245 survive today.)⁷ Oftentimes, this text cuts directly across the complex relief carvings.⁸ Typically, cuneiform texts were produced by pressing the end of a cuboid tool into wet clay. This alone would have been an incredibly laborious process but fairly easy process; however, the reliefs aren't made of clay. They are stone, and carving each individual character would have taken significantly longer than the traditional manner. In addition, the process of copying out each text by hand required multiple stages to complete. By studying variations in the text by superimposing a corpus of 254 extent copies directly on top of one another, Howard discovered 26 texts that share the same variations consistently, and that these variations are found *only* in these texts. Based on this evidence, he concludes that these were likely produced by a single scribe copying out the master text. These 26 texts were then used to produce intermediate copies, which teams of workers would use to transmit the Standard text onto the final stone orthostats, and errors in transmission account for the other textual variations found across the reliefs.⁹ Hundreds of

⁷ J. Caleb Howard, "On Mass-Producing the Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 79, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 65. <https://doi.org/10.1086/707617>.

⁸ Howard, "On Mass-Producing the Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II," 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

workers, broken into small teams of scribes, masons, or a combination of the two, would have then worked from these copies to produce the millions of characters found in the palace.

The text itself describes the many military victories of Ashurnasirpal II as he conquered all the lands of “Nairi, Habhu, the Subaru, and the land Nirbu ... from the opposite bank of the Tigris to Mount Lebanon and the Great Sea, the entire land Laqû (and) the land Suhu ... from the source of the River Subnat to the land Urartu ... from the passes of Mount Kurruru to the land Gi l zānu, from the opposite bank of the Lower Zab to the city Tīl-Bāri ... from the city Tīl- ša-Abtāni to the city Tīl-ša-Zabdāni, the cities Hirimu, Harutu... Mount Babitu to Mount Hasmar...”¹⁰ Such descriptions would have had a two-fold purpose. For any potential enemies within the palace, the omnipresence of this narrative would have had a haunting intimidation factor, promising painful death should they try to attack the king or be too obvious in their distaste. For the king’s supporters, however, these reliefs would have had the opposite effect. After all, the king claimed to walk with the gods: it was not because of his own might that he was victorious, but because he’d been entrusted “[Assur’s] merciless weapon,” and the “help of the gods Samas and Adad.”¹¹ If he truly wielded such divine favor, Ashurnasirpal II would have promised security and stability for his empire, and to turn against him would be to disrespect the gods themselves. The fact that Ashurnasirpal II and his son Sennacherib

Genies, Sages, and Demons: Apkallu and the Apotropaic Function

The gods are not the only supernatural forces from whom the king drew his strength. Depicted in reliefs across the palace are apotropaic figures known as apkallu. These are antediluvian sages and wise-men, both human and chimeric, of Babylonian mythology frequently associated with

¹⁰ Kirk Grayson, *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods Volume 2: Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium B.C.E.*, A.0.101.23, 275.

¹¹ Grayson, *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia*, A.0.101.23, 275.

exorcists and healers.¹² One series of reliefs in particular is significant because it depicts not one but two sets of these figures, who appear in pairs in two registers separated by the Standard Inscription. The relief in question stands at 90 ½ by 84 ½ inches (229.9 x 214.6 centimeters), and originally stood in a small room to the back of the palace with 31 other nearly identical reliefs.¹³ While it is unclear exactly why the reliefs in this room are different than those in the rest of the palace, but recesses cut into other reliefs from this room were likely used for offerings of food and drink, suggesting the room may have had a ritual function.¹⁴ In this case, it's been proposed that the separation may have been intended to double the amount of apotropaic magical images in the given space.¹⁵ Other researchers have focused on differences in stone quality across various reliefs; compared to the reliefs in which the text cuts directly across the scene, the split-scene reliefs are more mottled and the stone is slightly more translucent. These scholars have argued that these rooms were the first to be decorated and that sometime during construction, decorating conventions changed.

It is unclear as to what exactly the first pair of human-headed apkallu are doing, but the more birdlike pair in the second register are engaged in the artificial fertilization of the date palm. In one hand, each holds a bucket of holy water to sanctify the grounds, and the other hand holds a male date spathe used to pollinate the female plant. This sacred tree is typically identified as a date palm, and is believed to represent the ruler or the state. This is supported by the fact that in at least

¹² Markham J. Geller, "Medicine and Philosophy," in *Ancient Babylonian Medicine*, (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 121.

¹³ Unknown, "Relief Panel," 883-859 BCE, gypsum alabaster, 90 1/2 x 84 1/2 x 6 in. (229.9 x 214.6 x 15.2 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322610>

¹⁴ John Malcolm Russel, *From Ninevah to New York: The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford School*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 21-22.

¹⁵ Unknown, "Relief Panel."

one relief, Ashurnasirpal himself replaces the sacred tree in the apkallu-tree-apkallu construction.¹⁶ The king, by extension, served as the figurehead of the state and a visual representation of all its peoples. Thus while the symbolic purpose of this activity is uncertain, it appears likely that the fertilization of the palms was a metaphor for the prosperity of the empire. For one, the ancient Assyrian word for the date cone means something akin to “purifier;” thus others believe that this relief and others like it may have in fact been intended to purify and cleanse the palace.¹⁷ Secondly, apkallu were frequently associated with exorcists and healers; by including the apkallu in the palace decoration, these figures perpetually exorcise the palace of danger both physical and metaphysical.¹⁸ The apkallu may have also been responsible for consecrating ground prior to and during the laying of temple foundations; this role makes them fitting figures to oversee the founding of a new capital, tying the city’s fate to the sanctity of the gods.¹⁹ Regardless of whether the threat they protect against is physical or metaphysical, both theories agree that by tending to the date palm, the apkallu serve an apotropaic function within the palace.

The appearance of each apkallu themselves would have served to increase the apotropaic qualities of the apkallu. In the upper register, these sages appear as young, muscular human men with birds’ wings jutting from each of their backs; they are perfect mirrors of each other in terms of clothing, hair, jewelry, and even pose. The second pair in the register below are less human. Along with the wings sprouting from their backs, they also have the heads of birds, though they retain the muscular human body. This birdlike appearance of the apkallu in this relief panel is consistent with apkallu in many Neo Assyrian artworks, whose protective power is believed to

¹⁶ John B. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, (Graz : Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1961), 66.

¹⁷ Unknown, “Relief Panel.”

¹⁸ Geller, 121.

¹⁹ Ernst Gombrich, “Writing, Kingship, and Political Discourse in Early Babylonia,” in *History, Texts and Art in Early Babylonia : Three Essays*, (Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), 66.

derive from juxtaposing the isolated body parts from diverse species against one another to create species with no real-life counterpart.²⁰

Fall of the Empire:

Though the reliefs had a protective function, they were unable to protect the palace from the effects of time. Over a century after the palace's construction, Sargon II moved the capital to Dur-Sahrrukin. However, the Northwest Palace continued to be used as a royal residence for another century. Then in 612, following the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the palace was lost to time.²¹ It was eventually buried in the sands, and its grave became a site of mystery. By the nineteenth century, a millennia's worth of legends and rumors had seen the ancient palace transformed into the site of a great iconoclasm by the prophet Abraham and the victory of Allah over the false pagan gods.²² It would remain buried until 1840, when Sir Austen Henry Layard secured permission from the British embassy in Constantinople to begin excavation.

Rediscovery:

By the nineteenth century, very little was known about ancient Assyrian history. In fact, there were only two sources of knowledge available to antiquarians in this period. The first were the writings of ancient Greek historians like Herodotus and Eusebius, and the stories they told were already centuries old at the time of their recording. The other was the Bible, and this source too was full of glaring lacunae: "The Assyrians are not particularly alluded to in Holy Writ, until

²⁰ David Wengrow, "Approaches and Methods of Analysis and Interpretation," in *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Ann C. Gunter, (Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2018), 67. Accessed January 18, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

²¹ John Malcolm Russel, "Program of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud: Issues in the Research and Presentation of Assyrian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 102, no. 4, Archaeological Institute of America, 1998, pp. 655–715, <https://doi.org/10.2307/506096>.

²² Sir Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains: The Gripping Journals of the Man Who Discovered the Buried Assyrian Cities* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing Incorporated, 2013), 34.

the period when their warlike expeditions to the west of the Euphrates brought them into contact with the Jews...”²³ It was perhaps this mystery that drew Layard toward Western Asia. In 1842, he traveled to Constantinople, where he became acquainted with Sir Stratford Canning, the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Shortly after, Layard also made the acquaintance of Paul-Émile Botta, the current French consul and archaeologist responsible for discovering the first Assyrian monuments in Khorsabad.²⁴

Botta’s discoveries lit a fire under Layard, who entreated the British ambassador Sir Stratford Canning to fund his own excavations in Mosul. In 1848, Canning granted Layard a grant of £100 to begin excavations, with the promise of more funds should his efforts uncover anything of note.²⁵ Armed with “a variety of guns, spears, and other formidable weapons,” Layard set off with Henry J. Ross, a Turkish cawass, and a servant, claiming that they were going to “hunt wild boars in a neighbouring village.”²⁶ The secrecy of the mission and the violent opposition the party expected reflects the cultural significance of these sites: many of the sites that Layard visited were sacred sites tied to the life and deeds of Abraham. For example, the mounds where he first began excavation were said to mark the location where Abraham had struck down the idols of Nimrod.²⁷ For this reason, Layard had been expressly forbidden from excavating by the Egyptian Pasha Muhammed Ali.

The secrecy may also in part be explained by the fact that Layard set out on his quest at a time of intense political unrest in the Ottoman empire. Due to a combination of decentralization

²³ Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 14.

²⁴ Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 25.

²⁵ John Malcolm Russel, *From Ninevah to New York: The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford School*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 35.

²⁶ Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

and increasing regional autonomy of local leaders, the Ottoman Empire had been in decline for some time before Layard set out. Britain and France took advantage of this situation as global powers in order to exert pressure on the Empire and exploit the rich natural resources there. Then, in 1840, Mohammad Ali rebelled against the Ottoman sultan and successfully opened the way toward the capture of Constantinople. This effectively alienated Ali from Europe, and under threat of war, he was forced to formally accept a peace treaty. Nevertheless, his followers continued to attack the Levant, and Layard's reflects the fear he must have had as a European in territory still controlled by Ali's followers. In addition, Ali had a deep distrust for archaeologists more generally, and frequently stood in the way of Layard's excavations. He believed that Layard intended to send "to the palace of [the British] Queen, who, with the rest of the unbelievers, worships these idols."²⁸ Layard was forced to regularly re-apply for permission to excavate.²⁹ Local Bedouins and townspeople also posed a problem, as they frequently attacked the site, believing them to be treasure hunters seeking gold, or else looking for proof of previous Frankish rule in order to justify colonial occupation.³⁰

When Ali seized control of the land, he issued land reforms that allowed him to seize these lands from regional authorities like the ulama, sheikhs, and wealthy landowners, and to redistribute them to the *fallahin*, or peasants, who sold their surpluses back to the state.³¹ Dispossessed of their homes, many of the sheikhs resorted to semi-nomadic lifestyles or lived amongst ruins. According to Layard's own writings, it is one of these dispossessed sheikhs who

²⁸ Gabriel McKee, "Austen Henry Layard and the Early Exploration of Nimrud," Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, May 7, 2015, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://isaw.nyu.edu/library/blog/Layard>.

²⁹ Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 84.

³⁰ McKee, "Austen Henry Layard and the Early Exploration of Nimrud."

³¹ Betty Anderson, *Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues: A History of the Modern Middle East*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), 71.

actually deserves recognition for discovering the Northwest Palace: a man named Awad, formerly of Jehesh. According to Layard's journals, he met Awad at one of the ruined mounds near Mosul, and upon finding that he had taught himself to speak Turkish, hired him as the superintendent of the workmen.³² On the first day of excavations, Awad first discovered the pieces of alabaster poking up through the sand. These "proved to be the upper part of a large slab" and the team "laid bare ten more" by the end of the day.³³ These "slabs" were the carved wall panels of Ashurnasirpal II's palace.

1st Wave Reception

Though a genuine appreciation for Assyrian art and history may have motivated Layard, his sponsors were primarily concerned with the objects' use as political pawns. The Ottoman Empire was in decline; Ali's successful rebellions against the sultan and subsequent annexation of Egypt had proven that. The British government took advantage of this weakened state to exert their own power over the sultanate. A letter written by Sir Canning to the Ottoman Grand Vizier lobbying for Layard's exclusive right to the Nimrud site illustrates this point: "The British Ambassador has asked that there shall be no obstacles put in the way of [Layard] taking the stone which may be useful to him... The sincere friendship which firmly exists between two governments makes it desirable that these demands be accepted."³⁴ The dictatorial language of the letter itself elucidates the uneven power balance between the Ottoman Empire and the British Crown: this "sincere friendship" is dependent on the sultan's acquiescence to British demands, and there is a sense that any objection by the sultan would be met with violent retribution. Such thinly veiled threats are typically made only by those assured of victory. Canning's goal is clear

³² Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, 33.

³³ Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, 35.

³⁴ Letter from Sir Stratford Canning to the Ottoman Grand Vizier, quoted in Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 35.

then: to secure the removal of the stones as an explicit demonstration of military and economic dominance over the weakened Ottoman empire through ownership of not only its lands and resources but its very heritage as well.

Though the Ottoman Empire may have been the object of British oppression, the seizure of its cultural artifact was primarily intended as a display of superiority over France. In its weakened state, the Ottoman Empire had become the stage for imperial competition among Britain, France, and several other European countries. Outright war was undesirable, however. To legitimize involvement in the region, European leaders instead militarized religion and science; classrooms and archaeological sites became the primary battlegrounds. Rather than demonstrations of dominance, the extraction of antiquities was recast as devotion to illuminating the truth of the “Holy Writ” and preserving the memories of what had happened. Whoever did so best would become preeminent not only on the global stage but the Holy one as well. When Botta discovered Khorsabad, France had taken the lead and dealt a severe blow to British claims of superiority. Layard’s findings represented the first discoveries made by an Englishman in the region. By successfully lobbying for Layard to receive exclusive rein of the Nimrud site, Canning secured a chance for the English to strike back.

Outside the political realm, the objects from Ashurnasirpal II’s palace received little attention. Upon unearthing the reliefs, Layard was overcome by their beauty. To him, they were “immeasurably superior to the stiff and ill-proportioned monuments of the Pharaohs.” However, due to a lack of sufficient funding, Layard could not afford to have the most impressive monuments of Nimrud shipped to England.³⁵ The objects that *did* make it to England - 7 objects, including 5 smaller sculptures - in 1847 failed to live up to this description and were met with disappointment

³⁵ A.H. Layard, *Athenaeum* 1, no. 2 (1845): 120-21.

or outright distaste. Their failure to conform to the in-vogue classical Graeco-Roman aesthetic meant the objects were of little value to the Victorian antiquarian, except insofar as they were recognized as the descendent of Egyptian art and the “true” descendent of Greek art.³⁶ In fact, the dominating view of the sculptures was that their chief value lay only in the historical information the inscriptions might reveal should they ever be translated, or else in the realm of “Biblical Curiosity.”³⁷ They were displayed in a small hallway to the left of the museum’s main entrance with a small collection of other antique miscellany - a suboptimal viewing location reflecting this inferior artistic status.³⁸

The Reliefs Come to Canford / Second Wave Reception

With Layard unable to afford the shipment of Nimrud’s more impressive objects, the museum objects’ lack of popularity may have condemned the palace of Ashurnasirpal II to obscurity were it not for the intervention of Lady Charlotte Guest, baronet of Dowlais. Despite being her first cousin on his father's side, Layard first made Lady Charlotte’s acquaintance on March 2, 1848, when Sir Canning (a close personal friend to Lady Charlotte) presented him at a dinner party she was hosting. Layard had only just returned from his first trip to Mosul, and it was here that Lady Charlotte became enchanted with his work on Assyria.³⁹ After only three days, she agreed to fund a series of 200 plate folio drawings of the statues that had been left behind.⁴⁰ Lady Charlotte would also begin accompanying her cousin to the museum, helping him to unpack and copying some of the drawings for her own use. While awaiting the arrival of the reliefs, Lady Charlotte continued to purchase smaller Assyrian statues both from the Museum and directly

³⁶ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 38.

³⁷ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 37.

³⁸ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 36.

³⁹ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, ??

⁴⁰ A digital version of this work can be found on the New York Public Library website:
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-monuments-of-nineveh-from-drawings-made-on-the-spot-by-austen-henry-layard#/?tab=about>

through Layard.⁴¹ That same month, Layard wrote to Ross, who he'd left in charge of the dig in his absence, requesting 3 large reliefs be shipped to Lady Charlotte: the relief in question (depicting in the top register two attendants kneeling before the sacred tree and in the bottom the two eagle-headed apkallu), one depicting the king with two attendants, and the third showing a large winged figure.⁴² These reliefs were transported from Nimrud to Basra by river, where it was picked up by the naval sloop *Clive* and transferred to Bombay. From Bombay, the reliefs were transferred to the *H.M.S. Meeanee* and finally arrived in England in August 1849. In October, the reliefs at last arrived at Canford - over a year and a half since her original order - where they would remain until 1919.⁴³

Shortly before the monuments reached their final destination, Lady Charlotte found a publisher for Layard's works. In 1849, the drawings were published by John Murray in the two-volume collection *The Monuments of Nineveh: From Drawings Made on the Spot* alongside his *Eastern Journals*, now titled *Nineveh and Its Remains*.⁴⁴ The book was an overnight success. The zeal of his narrative voice captivated the audiences, and the book sold nearly 8000 copies within a year.⁴⁵ One reviewer raves: "Now that Egypt is ransacked of its treasures, now that the light of day and Miss Martineau peer at will into her sepulchres ... a new field of antiquarian romance is opened in the East."⁴⁶ Layard's drawings and the once-neglected museum items became the basis for sets and costumes on Byron's 1853 play *Sardanapalus*, which received such critical acclaim that it was staged 92 times over the next two years. The artifacts even appeared in person a year

⁴¹ Ibid., ??

⁴² Ibid., 53.

⁴³ Ibid., 54-55.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43-53. The book's title is based on the mis-identification of the Nimrud site as Nineveh. The Palace was actually located in ancient Khalhu. The true Nineveh was discovered in 1847 later at Kouyunjik.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁶ Unknown Author, "Layard's Nineveh," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* (1849): 32, 232.

later when the Crystal Palace opened its Nineveh Court, a reimagining of a traditional Assyrian palace.⁴⁷

The objects arrived badly damaged, however, the alabaster having been reduced by fire to brittle lime before their burial and broken during the excavation. Throughout October, Lady Charlotte spent much of her time repairing the reliefs. She had amassed the largest private collection of Assyrian artifacts in Europe at a time when Assyrian objects were considered valueless; now over a year and a half later, due almost single-handedly to the success of Layard's book, these objects were in vogue.⁴⁸ In 1851 lady Charlotte received permission from her husband to build an extension onto the manor in order to display her prized "Nineveh" Marbles. In March of 1852, the reliefs were placed in the newly constructed Nineveh Porch alongside 17 new sculptures from the palaces of Assurnasirpal II and Sennacherib, and the Ninurta Temple.⁴⁹ To Lady Charlotte Guest, the artifacts were more than just a means of achieving social status (though they certainly served that purpose as well, based on the frequency at which they were shown to Dowlais scholars, ironworkers, and elites).⁵⁰ For her, they were a tangible reminder of her Christian faith. She herself was impressed by their Biblical associations to figures such as Ezekiel and Nisroch, the bird-headed Ninevite god in whose temple Sennacherib was murdered.⁵¹

The reliefs would remain at Canford for the next 67 years. In 1894, Layard passed away at 77, leaving the sculptures he still owned in Lady Charlotte's possession, but she followed only a few months after in 1895. The reliefs were passed on to her son, and then to her grandson Sir Ivor

⁴⁷ Russel, *From New York to Nineveh*, 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁹ Russel, 78, 83-85. These later acquisitions proved to be quite controversial. Layard had excavated these sculptures on a loan from the Museum, but claimed many of the duplicate reliefs for his own. However, when shipping these objects to England, Layard's own crates had gotten mixed in with the Museum shipments, and once released to the Museum, could not be retrieved without explicit permission from the museum's Trustees. Thus prompted much debate about the ownership of these objects and Layard's right to claim the duplicates for his own.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Churchill, Viscount of Wimbourne. It is unlikely that Churchill had ever seen the reliefs, and thus they represented little more than a commodity. In 1919, he sold ten reliefs to the art merchant Dikran G. Kelekian, likely to raise funds to pay the inheritance tax on his father's estate.⁵² Included among these was the bipartite relief featuring two pairs of apkallu.

The Reliefs in the 20th Century

Finding a new buyer proved challenging for Kelekian. Because of their immense weight, the reliefs couldn't be displayed on typical floors without causing severe structural damage. Buyers were unwilling to purchase the reliefs unseen, however, and the only photographs Kelekian had were of poor quality. As a result, Kelekian stored the reliefs in the Manhattan Storage Warehouse until 1924, when Dr. Gordon of the University Museum of Philadelphia agreed to display them on the condition that Kelekian cover the cost of shipping.⁵³ Unfortunately, Gordon passed away three years later, and the museum could not afford the considerable price Kelekian asked. Once more, Kelekian was forced to seek out potential buyers. Fortunately, this time it didn't take nearly as long; in 1928, John D. Rockefeller Jr. purchased the Wimbourne reliefs and immediately began searching for a venue to display them.⁵⁴

To this end, Rockefeller enlisted the help of James Henry Breasted. Two main candidates emerged: the Oriental Institute in Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The question of which museum to choose continued the debate that had started when Layard first sent the first shipments to the British Museum: was the reliefs' value primarily artistic, educational, or scientific? Breasted firmly believed in the latter and advocated heavily for placement in the Oriental Institute on the basis that the Institute already possessed many artifacts from the ancient

⁵² Russel, *From Nineveh to New York* 128.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

⁵⁴ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 143-148.

Near East and thus would be better equipped to interpret the reliefs. If placed in the Met, he argues, their primary value would be artistic; to fully realize their educational potential, the museum would have to build an entirely new gallery and purchase many more objects to accompany the reliefs.⁵⁵

I find the classist implications of this debate fascinating. While Breasted's arguments that the Oriental Institute was better equipped to interpret the reliefs by placing them in conversation with other objects is valid, it rests on a rather disingenuous foundation. One of his requests for the Metropolitan Museum was that they hire a new curator and a team of cuneiform scholars to interpret the texts.⁵⁶ However, the Standard Inscription borne on the reliefs had already been translated and thoroughly translated, interpreted, and disseminated among antiquities scholars since their discovery; any further study would have been redundant. Moreover, the Metropolitan Museum of Art boasted a far greater public audience than the Oriental Institute. By cloistering the reliefs within the Oriental Institute, Breasted would have restricted access to these objects and their insights into history to a rather small minority of antiquarian scholars. If Breasted had had his way, the relief would have only helped to perpetuate the system in which "science" was a luxury of the wealthy and thus undermined his own claims of furthering knowledge about the past. However, Rockefeller ultimately sold the reliefs to the Metropolitan Museum in 1930. Over the course of the two years he spent in correspondence with Breasted, he had acquired 55 other artifacts from the ancient Near East - more than enough to fill the brand new gallery that Breasted has requested.⁵⁷ In 1933, the lamassu colossi were placed at the entrance to the Museum's Great Hall, flanking the entrance to the Cypriot exhibit, and the reliefs were placed in small rooms to the east of the gallery.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 143-148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵⁷ Russel, *From Nineveh to New York*, 161-62.

⁵⁸ Vaughn E. Crawford, introduction to *Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Palace Reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II and Ivory Carvings from Nimrud*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art), 4.

Unfortunately, by the time the Near Eastern exhibition opened, World War II was on the horizon. By this time, a hierarchical understanding of race had already solidified and the racist pseudoscience of eugenics was gaining credence among a minority of scholars. The Anti-Semitism that had existed for centuries cemented into brutal pogroms and the persecution of Jewish people across the world; a minority of historians legitimized this view through biased ethnographic comparisons that stressed Semitic Assyrian inferiority to their Aryan neighbors.⁵⁹ It is hardly surprising then that the Assyrian reliefs soon became entangled in debates surrounding race and ethnicity. Even in cases where reviewers praised the statues and seemed to challenge anti-Semitism in their writing, they tended to do so by perpetuating other harmful ideologies. For example, Aline Loucheim, writing in 1949 for the *New York Times*, praises the controlled forcefulness and directness evinced by the sculptor, but then goes on to say that they are “in many ways richer and more sophisticated” than those of the museum’s Aztec and African artworks.⁶⁰ Her praise is thus reliant on a hierarchy that degrades the artworks of peoples she perceives as being further removed from her own European ancestry. The fact that she goes on to lament that such items are “so little in vogue,” further suggests that her appreciation for Assyrian artistic conventions is a minority view. If Assyrian artwork had ceased to be fashionable and could only be appreciated by setting aside the elusive Euro-American standard, it follows that the museum reliefs would have suffered a decline in popularity.

In 1949, the museum appears to have either relocated the reliefs or renovated the gallery in which they were displayed. In the same article, Loucheim reports that the Ashurnasirpal and Sennacherib reliefs had been “given more adequate ‘living-room’ than previously. They have also

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⁶⁰ Aline Loucheim, “Near Eastern Art Placed on Display: Metropolitan Shows Works that Date to 5,000 Years Ago,” *New York Times*, 4 March, 1949, accessed February 26, 2022, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1949/03/04/96446903.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&i=0

been treated to more adequate lighting so that the sparkle of pattern (especially in the script which runs across the forceful figures) makes the impact which was surely intended.”⁶¹ Such changes perhaps signaled an attempt to challenge this anti-Semitism following the horrors of the holocaust. If the supposed “inferiority” of Semitic art could be used to support narratives that degraded their descendants, then showcasing their technical prowess and innovations could be used to celebrate and uplift as well.

In the decades following World War II, the object has been used primarily for educational purposes. In 1956, the Museum officially created the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, marking the final phase in the relief’s lifetime (so far).⁶² When the department was expanded in 1961, two new galleries were opened in the Museum’s North Wing. One of these was the Assyrian Sculpture Court (Gallery 401) in which the Ashurnasirpal reliefs have stood to this day.⁶³ Though the Assyrian Sculpture Court is modeled on the Northwest Palace in Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), it is not meant to be a reconstruction; after all, the reliefs come from different palaces, and even those from the same palace come from various rooms within. Instead, the gallery is meant to evoke a similar impression to what scholars imagine the emotional effect must have been in the palace.⁶⁴ This same year, John Stearns and a team of researchers conducted a comprehensive study of every known relief uncovered in the Northwest Palace, including those still in place as well as specimens in museums and private collections across Europe and the U.S. In his findings, Stearns cataloged a total of 86 eagle-headed apkallu comprised of 2 variants in 57 reliefs across 5 rooms. Of these reliefs, 30 are identical to the one analyzed earlier in this paper, all found in Room I of the palace.

⁶¹ Loucheim, “Near Eastern Art Placed on Display.”

⁶² Museum Trustees, “Ancient Near East,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 27 February, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/general-information/2010/ancient-near-east>.

⁶³ Crawford, *Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories*, 4.

⁶⁴ Museum Trustees, “The Assyrian Sculpture Court,” Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 27 February, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nimr_2/hd_nimr_2.htm

As of 1961, not much was known about the significance of these figures, though some suggested they served as an “attractive illustration of the monstrosity of heathen gods.”⁶⁵

Looking Forward

Today, scholars continue their quest to better understand the significance of these artworks and the role they may have played in their ancient context. On February 10, 2022, the Metropolitan Museum announced a massive overhaul of its Near Eastern and Cypriot Art collections. This renovation will bring the Near Eastern and Cypriot collections into conversation with one another for the first time since 1949. It will also serve as a bridge between the Asian Art displays to the north and the Islamic Art and European Painting galleries to the east. In a quote to the online magazine *City Life*, Max Hollein, the museum’s Marina Kellen French Director, explains that the reason for this change was to “...present new scholarship and reflect diverse narratives, re-centering regional cultures and perspectives... [and] extend those links to nearby galleries presenting Asian, Islamic, and 19th-century European art, as well as to galleries across the Museum.”⁶⁶ The reference to 19th-century European artworks is especially promising – the role of European imperialism in the displacement of these objects has often been overlooked or downplayed in the museum setting, allowing museums to ignore their roles in perpetuating these systems. If done properly, such renovations may provide a venue for discussions of the nuanced relationships between colonialism/imperialism and the reception and reproduction of Eastern motifs in the West.

⁶⁵ John B. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, (Graz: Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, 1961), 65-67.

⁶⁶ City Life Org, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art to Renovate its Galleries for Ancient Near Eastern and Cypriot Art,” *City Life Org* (New York), *February 10, 2022*, accessed Feb 26, 2022. <https://thecitylife.org/2022/02/10/the-metropolitan-museum-of-art-to-renovate-its-galleries-for-ancient-near-eastern-and-cypriot-art/>

Other scholars are looking to recontextualize these ancient artworks through virtual reality projects and digital reconstructions, allowing modern audiences to experience these objects as they appeared in their original context. For example, in response to glaring flaws in 19th-century drawings and centuries' worth of manual reproductions, the Citadel of Nimrud Project has compiled an impressive collection of publications involving computer visualization.⁶⁷ Feeling that their reconstructions were “cold and antiseptic,” these models have been repopulated with people and objects based on archaeological evidence (for example, lamps sourced from the tombs of queens) and imagery from the bas-reliefs themselves.⁶⁸ In the future, such living reconstructions will allow users to experience these breathtaking spaces for themselves in living color in order to promote a greater sense of appreciation, curiosity, and intercultural conversations.

⁶⁷ Samuel M. Paley, “The Northwest Palace in the Digital Age,” in *Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnirsipal II: A Cultural Biography*, ed. Ada Cohen and Steven E. Kangas, (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art and Dartmouth College and Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2010), 215.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 218-219.

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