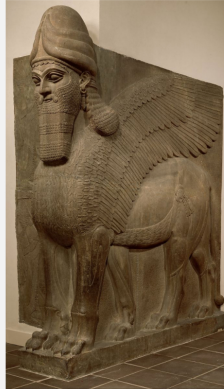


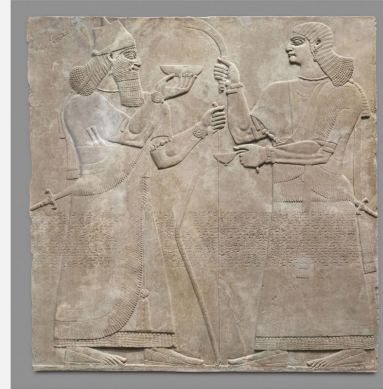
The Rediscovery of Assyria



Human-headed winged bull (lamassu)



Human-headed winged lion (lamassu)



Relief panel



By Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

October 2004

During the nineteenth century, most of the Middle East belonged to the Turkish [Ottoman empire](#). However, people independent of the central authorities in the capital Constantinople controlled much of the region. This made travel for Europeans in the area not only extremely difficult but often very dangerous. Nonetheless, merchants, diplomats, and adventurers occasionally journeyed into this land and returned with tantalizing tales of ancient ruins. Since most educated people in Europe were schooled in the Hebrew Bible and classical authors, they recognized that many of the sites in the Holy Land, and especially Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq), represented the remains of some of the oldest civilizations in the world.

Opportunities for Europeans to explore some of these ancient sites resulted from expanding political interests in the region by the empires of Britain and France following [Napoleon's expedition to Egypt](#) and Palestine and his defeat by British and Turkish forces. Some of the earliest archaeological research was carried out by Claudius Rich (1787–1820), British Resident in Baghdad from 1808 to 1820. The antiquities he gathered formed the basis for the Mesopotamian collections in the British Museum. It was a Frenchman, Paul-Émile Botta (1802–1870), however, who undertook the first major excavations.

In 1842, Botta started digging at [Nineveh](#) in northern Mesopotamia, but a lack of major discoveries led him to shift his attention to the site of Khorsabad. Here he discovered the palace of Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.), built around 710 B.C. The mud-brick walls of the palace had been lined with slabs of alabaster finely carved in relief depicting the king's triumphs. In addition, some of the palace gateways were guarded by massive stone colossi. In 1846, Botta shipped many of these enormous monuments to France.

A year before the reliefs from Khorsabad entered the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the Englishman Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894) had begun digging at the site of [Nimrud \(ancient Kalhu\)](#). Largely funded by the British Museum, he discovered the remains of many palaces of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. built by kings over the 150 years when Nimrud was the capital of [Assyria](#). Between 1845 and 1847, Layard, with the help of an assistant, Hormuzd Rassam (1826–1910), and hundreds of workers, revealed the huge mud-brick palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.), the first such structure decorated with stone wall reliefs. He also excavated

+ [Related Essays](#)

+ [List of Rulers](#)

+ [Chronology](#)

+ [Map](#)

+ [Keywords](#)

+ [Online Features](#)

other royal buildings and temples at Nimrud, while at Nineveh Layard revealed a large section of perhaps the greatest Assyrian palace built by Sennacherib (r. 704–681 B.C.), where he discovered over two miles of sculptured slabs. After a break in London, Layard resumed excavations in 1849, leaving Mesopotamia for good in 1851.

The majority of Layard's finds were sent to the British Museum, but several of the reliefs found their way to other institutions. Some were acquired by American missionaries working in Iraq, who saw the carved slabs as evidence for biblical history. Other sculptures entered private collections such as that of the industrialist J. P. Morgan (six of which are now in the Metropolitan Museum). Layard himself sent some reliefs to the country home of his cousin at Canford Manor in Dorsetshire, England. There they were installed in the "Nineveh Porch," which had cast-iron doors featuring human-headed bull colossi, stained-glass windows composed of patterns drawn from wall paintings found at Nimrud, and a ceiling painted with cuneiform texts. The collection of twenty-six Assyrian sculptures displayed on the walls was surpassed at the time only by the Assyrian relief collection in the British Museum. In 1919, eighteen of the sculptures were sold, and they eventually came into the collection of John D. Rockefeller Jr., who donated them to the Metropolitan Museum in 1932.

After Layard had left for London in 1851, Rassam continued to dig at Nineveh. In 1853, he discovered the palace of Ashurbanipal (r. 668–627 B.C.), which furnished the British Museum with some of the finest sculptured slabs. Meanwhile, the French worked at Khorsabad under Victor Place (1818–1875) until 1855. After that date, however, despite increased archaeological work in the region, no more large palaces with sculptured reliefs were discovered. Although the world of Assyria continues to be revealed through spectacular finds (for example, the discovery of royal tombs at Nimrud by Iraqi archaeologists in 1988–89), none can match the dramatic, romantic discoveries of the earlier generation.

Citation

Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "The Rediscovery of Assyria." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rdas/hd_rdas.htm (October 2004)

Further Reading

Larsen, Mogens Trolle. *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840–1860*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Russell, John Malcolm. *From Nineveh to New York: The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford Manor*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Additional Essays by Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art

- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Assyria, 1365–609 B.C.](#)," (originally published October 2004, last revised April 2010)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Trade between Arabia and the Empires of Rome and Asia](#)," (October 2000)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Ubaid Period \(5500–4000 B.C.\)](#)," (October 2003)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Parthian Empire \(247 B.C.–224](#)

[Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art: Uruk: The First City \(2003\)](#) (originally published October 2000, last updated November 2016)

- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Ur: The Royal Graves](#)." (October 2003)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Ur: The Ziggurat](#)." (October 2002)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Trade between the Romans and the Empires of Asia](#)" (October 2000)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Urartu](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Palmyra](#)." (October 2000)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Nabataean Kingdom and Petra](#)." (October 2000)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Art of the First Cities in the Third Millennium B.C.](#)" (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Ebla in the Third Millennium B.C.](#)" (October 2002)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Uruk: The First City](#)." (October 2003)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Ugarit](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Animals in Ancient Near Eastern Art](#)." (February 2014)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Early Dynastic Sculpture, 2900–2350 B.C.](#)" (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Halaf Period \(6500–5500 B.C.\)](#)." (October 2003)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Sasanian Empire \(224–651 A.D.\)](#)." (originally published October 2003, last updated April 2016)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Colossal Temples of the Roman Near East](#)." (October 2003)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Hittites](#)." (October 2002)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Year One](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Phrygia, Gordion, and King Midas in the Late Eighth Century B.C.](#)" (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Phoenicians \(1500–300 B.C.\)](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Seleucid Empire \(323–64 B.C.\)](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Nahal Mishmar Treasure](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Trade Routes between Europe and Asia during Antiquity](#)." (October 2000)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Akkadian Period \(ca. 2350–2150 B.C.\)](#)" (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[Lydia and Phrygia](#)." (October 2004)
- Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. "[The Achaemenid Persian Empire \(550–330 B.C.\)](#)" (October 2004)



The Met Fifth Avenue

1000 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10028
Phone: 212-535-7710

[About The Met](#)
[Mission and History](#)
[Collection Areas](#)
[Conservation Departments](#)

[Support](#)
[Membership](#)
[Host an Event](#)
[Corporate Support](#)

The Met Cloisters

99 Margaret Corbin Drive
Fort Tryon Park
New York, NY 10040
Phone: 212-923-3700

Press

Follow us



Join our newsletter