THE ASSYRIANS IN THE EAST HUNDRED YEARS

By EDITH PORADA

Since the first discovery of Mesopotamian remains and the decipherment of cuneiform texts in the early nineteenth century, our knowledge of Mesopotamian civilization has grown to comprise a development that stretches over several thousand years. But this extension of knowledge has not been accomplished through a single-minded pursuit on the part of excavators and scholars. Rather, it has grown in different directions, following the trends of the times; and while the results achieved in each period have naturally formed the stepping stones for the next generation, they are also characteristic documents of their own age. Though it may seem surprising that ancient Mesopotamian studies, which to many appear completely removed from everyday life, had any close relation with the changing spirit of the times, actually their beginnings were followed with intense interest by a wide public.

All that was known of the Assyrians and Babylonians before the early nineteenth century had been derived from the Bible and the Greek historians. But this did not make them an unknown quantity; on the contrary, since at that time people in general read the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, more often than today, they were more familiar with Sennacherib and Shalmaneser than they are at present. Moreover, many of the pictures of the Assyrians that they got from the Bible were based upon the experience of eyewitnesses. The siege of Jerusalem as described in Isaiah and II Kings, for example, gave the romantic poet Byron the inspiration for his “ Destruction of Sennacherib.” As for the Greek authors, the account of the end of the Assyrian empire written by Diodorus Siculus provided Byron with material for a drama, “ Sardanapalus,” published in 1821. Byron created in Sardanapalus an interesting portrait of himself, giving his hero many of his own traits—selfishness, sensuality, and idleness, redeemed by courage, humanity, and wit. Nevertheless, the play is a weak one. This, however, is due to Byron’s inadequacy as a dramatist rather than to any deficiency in the subject matter, for the Greek narrative contains a tragedy of Wagnerian proportions: Sardanapalus, besieged in his town of Nineveh for three years, learns that the waters of the Euphrates (in reality the Tigris) have breached the walls at one point; he realizes that this is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy whereby the city would be doomed once the river turned against it. He therefore causes a great pyre to be built, on which he places his treasures and wives, and just before the enemy storms the city walls the last king of Assyria steps into the flames.

In 1827 Byron’s play inspired Delacroix, another great romanticist, to paint his flamboyant and controversial Death of Sardanapalus (see opposite page). The artist’s main effort was concentrated on the contrast between the impassive Assyrian monarch lying on his couch and the agony of his favorite women, horses, and dogs, who are being stabbed to death before the fire reaches them. Added to these romantic preoccupations with the Assyrians there was in this period a desire for factual knowledge that transformed into scientific endeavors the romantic tendencies of those men who at the beginning of the nineteenth century chose the ancient Near East as their field of activity. Claudius James Rich, “ political resident of the honourable East India Company at Baghdad,” was the first traveler to examine scientifically the mounds which, according to a tenacious tradition, were once the sites of Babylon and Nineveh. Best known among his works are his detailed reports on the site of Babylon
and a trip to Kurdistan made in 1820. Their contents so deeply impressed the secretary of
the French Asiatic Society that he, in turn, conveyed his enthusiasm to Paul Émile Botta,
the young French agent consulaire setting out for Mosul. Botta began excavations in 1843
on the mound of Kujunjik, which covered ancient Nineveh. One day a dyer from the
near-by village of Khorsabad chanced to visit the spot. Seeing that every fragment of brick
and alabaster was carefully preserved, he asked the reason for what seemed to him a
strange procedure. On being informed that Botta and his assistants were in search of
stone sculptures, he advised them to try the mound on which his village was built and in
which, he declared, many such things had been found when the natives were digging
for bricks. After hesitating a little because he had been too often misled by similar stories,
Botta sent a few men to Khorsabad, and soon they found themselves unearthing walls
formed by slabs bearing sculptures of processions, ceremonies, and scenes of battle. They
had come upon the palace of Sargon, father of Sennacherib (see ill. p. 40). Commenting
upon these exciting discoveries, L'Illustration said in 1847 that the French should consider
themselves fortunate—in this century when everything appeared to be known and the
field of discoveries had become sterile—to have obtained specimens of a civilization al-
most as old as that of the Egyptians but "infiniment plus remarquable."

The prominence given Botta's excavations caused sufficient funds to be turned over to

The Death of Sardanapalus, replica by Delacroix of his Salon picture of 1827, painted under
the influence of Byron's play. In the collection of Henry P. McIlhenny

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from the confines of Syria by a vast blank stretching from Aleppo to the banks of the Tigris. A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldaea. With these names are linked great nations and great cities dimly shadowed forth in history: mighty ruins, in the midst of deserts, defying, by their very desolation and lack of definite form, the description of the traveller; the remnants of mighty races still roving over the land; the fulfilling and fulfilment of prophecies; the plains to which the Jew and the Gentile alike look as the cradle of their race.”

Layard’s excavations soon turned out to be extraordinarily successful. After having unearthed a number of bas reliefs, he found the head of one of the great winged bulls that had guarded the palace built by Ashurnasir-pal at Calah (see ill. below). Layard’s report on this event is again characteristically picturesque. One day as he was returning to the excavations, he saw two Arabs urging their mares toward him at top speed. As they drew near they stopped, crying, “Hasten, O Bey, . . . for they have found Nimrod himself.”

a young Englishman, Austen Henry Layard, to enable him to continue his excavations at Nimrud (the biblical Calah), where he had begun to dig with private means in 1845. Layard had a great gift for expression and in a passage in which he described why he felt drawn to Mesopotamia we find crystalized the romantic attitude of these early excavators: “I had traversed Asia Minor and Syria, visiting the ancient sites of civilization, and the spots which religion has made holy. I now felt an irresistible desire to penetrate to the regions beyond the Euphrates to which history and tradition point as the birthplace of the wisdom of the West. Most travellers, after a journey through the usually frequented parts of the East, have the same longing to cross the great river, and to explore those lands which are separated on the map

Assyrian relief from Khorsabad, a drawing in “L’Illustration, Journal Universel,” June, 1847

The discovery of the head of a winged bull. Romantic sketch made by Layard in 1846
When Layard arrived at the mound on which his expedition was at work he descended into the trench, and the Arabs withdrew a screen they had made of baskets and robes, disclosing an enormous human head sculptured out of alabaster. Layard saw at once that the head must belong to a winged lion or bull (similar to those found previously by Botta). "The expression was calm, yet majestic, and the outline of the features showed a freedom and knowledge of art, scarcely to be looked for in the works of so remote a period," he wrote. "This . . . head, . . . thus rising from the bowels of the earth, might well have belonged to one of those fearful beings which are pictured in the traditions of the country, as appearing to mortals, slowly ascending from the regions below."

Layard retained the first stage in the transport of one of these winged bulls in a sketch in which he pictured himself as he had actually watched and directed the performance from the top of the earth wall (see ill. above). No detail of the principal action has been omitted. The tilted bull is being gently let down by ropes onto rollers as the supporting beams are removed. Barren masses of earth rise above the white alabaster slabs in effective contrast, and in the distance tiny figures of camels and of Arabs in flowing garments provide appropriate accents.

This sketch is characteristic of the time at which it was made and of the romantic attitude, reflected in the combined rendering of ancient ruins, a strange people, and a foreign landscape. The same features are apparent in the little drawing of the finding of the winged bull's head on page 40, which also shows how well the earlier nineteenth-century English style of drawing lent itself to the reproduction of the classical simplicity of the sculptures of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.) found at Nimrud. On the other hand, the elegant, ornate reliefs of the later king Sargon (721-705 B.C.) from Khorsabad seem the ideal object for the French manner of that period (see ill. p. 40), which satisfied the prevalent taste for long curly black beards, large dark eyes, aquiline features like those of Sargon, plush, and tassels.
In the same way that the spirit of the 1840's and 50's manifested itself in the drawings of Assyrian sculptures, it re-created Assyrian architecture as if it had been intimately related to the style of the Crystal Palace. In fact, the architect who made the reconstruction of the palace of Ashurnasirpal reproduced above actually designed the Nineveh Court in the Crystal Palace. He had little to go by, of course, except for the ground plan, and no more information was forthcoming at that time, for the romantic period of excavation stopped abruptly after Layard and his aides had uncovered most of the palaces at Nimrud and those of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal at Kujunjik and Botta and his successors had done their work at Khorsabad. The reason was the Crimean War, upon which both the English and French Governments concentrated their financial efforts and which drew men like Layard away from excavations. But as the field was deserted by the artistically inclined pioneers, who had all had some training or at least interest in painting and architecture, men of a different type stepped in and took the lead. They were the language and Bible students, whose main interest lay not in the ancient works of art but in the texts.

If we try to relate the mental attitude of these men to the prevailing spirit of the times, we cannot turn to any movement in art or literature but have to look at the development of historical thought and scholarship in the humanities. In the introduction to his *Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee described this development as the industrialization of historical thought, characterizing it as the type of scholarship which sees its main task in the assemblage of raw materials—inscriptions, documents, and the like. He speaks of "a generation in which the prestige of the industrial system imposed itself upon the 'intellectual workers' of the Western World."

Egon Friedell, in his often unscientific but sometimes entertaining *Kulturgeschichte des Altertums*, stresses an aspect that was perhaps especially characteristic of the German scholarship of the time. In a reflection on the changes in historical authority, he notes that
in the Middle Ages only those authors were considered reliable who were based on the inspired writings; in the Renaissance only those who were based on the classics—Livy, Sallust, and others. As historical research in the later nineteenth and the early twentieth century depended mainly upon administrative and diplomatic records, Friedell drew the conclusion that the Middle Ages relied on the authority of the Church, the Renaissance upon antiquity, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries upon bureaucracy. A few titles of the studies for which the Assyrian material later lent itself—“Assyrian Laws,” “Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire,” “Bureaucracy in Assyria”—are sufficient to indicate the influence of this approach.

For the tale of how the western world came to discover the key to the texts written in Assyro-Babylonian cuneiform, we have to take a step backward. In 1812 Grotefend, a German school teacher and cipher expert who liked to occupy himself with acrostics, rebus, and so forth, became interested in the cuneiform inscriptions of the Persian kings, some of which had been published. They were obviously written in three languages, but in one of them the signs were far simpler than in the other two. Grotefend had learned that the inscriptions of the Persian kings always began with “So and so, the great king, king of kings, son of So and so.” By fitting the names of the best-known kings into these signs, he found that one of the inscriptions named Darius, son of Hystaspes, and another Xerxes, son of Darius. He thus obtained the equivalent of a number of Persian cuneiform signs.
Assyrian couch made in 1909. Although it was copied after an Assyrian relief, it conforms to the prevailing gingerbread style of interior decoration.

Using the same method, Henry C. Rawlinson, a young British officer, began work in 1835 on the great trilingual inscription of Darius carved on the almost inaccessible rock of Behistun in Persia. He copied it as he stood on the topmost step of a short ladder, having only his left arm to steady himself while his left hand held the notebook and his right the pencil. Rawlinson was soon able to read large parts of the Persian inscription, and he and others proceeded to decipher the accompanying Babylonian one by combining their knowledge of the Persian text with what little had hitherto been learned about the Assyro-Babylonian tongue and script. Almost twenty years passed, however, before the Babylonian signs could be read with reasonable certainty. Just when this point had been reached, around the middle of the century, Ashurbanipal's library was discovered at Nineveh. Its thousands of tablets, containing religious, literary, mathematical, philological, and administrative texts, to name only some of the categories represented, provided material for generations of scholars. Moreover, Babylonian excavations, which had been begun as a result of the success of those carried out in Assyria, produced additional masses of tablets. However, the results of the scholarly work done with this material contained little that would have interested the layman. Not until 1872 did the Assyro-Babylonian records have an interlude of wide popularity, when an assistant at the British Museum, who was engaged in cleaning, reading, and fitting together the tablets, found an Assyrian text containing an account of a deluge somewhat similar to the one in the Bible. Even Gilbert and Sullivan took account of this popular interest and had the Major General in their "Pirates of Penzance" say, "I can write a washing bill in cuneiform."

After that no effort was made to appeal to the public which in Layard's time had so enthusiastically received the Assyrian monuments and so avidly read his lively and informative accounts. Most of the excavations made between 1860 and 1914 were carried out in Babylonia (southern Mesopotamia) and were reported in special periodicals or in
Mesopotamian antiquity. As in the early nineteenth century, the public experienced a passionate interest in man's past, but this time in a past that went beyond the historical remains of the Assyrian empire to the very beginnings of human evolution. This development is almost too near to permit objective comment upon its causes, but it seems to be rooted in a pervasive feeling of having reached a final summit in human achievement. This confidence found a characteristic expression in Gordon V. Childe's book *Man Makes Himself*. American, English, French, and German excavators now all concentrated on sites which promised to yield remains of the earliest civilizations. These included Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, where rich treasures were found in the so-called royal tombs dating from about 2500 B.C., and mounds in southern and northern Mesopotamia, under which there were discovered traces of settle-

Head of a human-headed bull, about 2600 B.C., ancestor of Assyrian composite monsters. *In the University Museum, Philadelphia*

oversized monographs. Although the ancient works of art discovered during these decades antedated the Assyrian, none received widespread attention. One reason for this was that they were little publicized, another that neither the prevailing schools of art, such as impressionism, nor the popular taste had any affinity with them. The interest of laymen, which was of course shared by many scholars in the ancient Mesopotamian field, still favored the "Assyrians" and found an amusing expression in an article published in *Der Alte Orient* in 1909. The learned writer pointed out that various objects copied from Assyrian reliefs, including the couch reproduced here on page 44, could take a place of honor at the side of the most select products of the modern furniture industry.

After the end of the first World War a fundamental change took place in the approach to Mesopotamian antiquity. As in the early nineteenth century, the public experienced a passionate interest in man's past, but this time in a past that went beyond the historical remains of the Assyrian empire to the very beginnings of human evolution. This development is almost too near to permit objective comment upon its causes, but it seems to be rooted in a pervasive feeling of having reached a final summit in human achievement. This confidence found a characteristic expression in Gordon V. Childe's book *Man Makes Himself*. American, English, French, and German excavators now all concentrated on sites which promised to yield remains of the earliest civilizations. These included Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, where rich treasures were found in the so-called royal tombs dating from about 2500 B.C., and mounds in southern and northern Mesopotamia, under which there were discovered traces of settle-

Head of a woman, about 3000 B.C., one of the earliest Mesopotamian sculptures. *In the Iraq Museum, Baghdad*
bring Mesopotamian monuments out of their former seclusion. Contemporary artists immediately accepted and appreciated the art of the rediscovered civilizations, particularly the sculpture. Perhaps this was due in the main to the fact that one of its characteristic traits is restriction to essentials, which is the avowed goal of modern art. In addition, the reaction against the individualistic and emotional tendencies of romanticism had brought about a demand for discipline in modern sculpture, for the submission of the individual to the general and of the moment to permanence. Such a discipline was ever present in Mesopotamian art, of which one of the earliest examples is the head of a woman on page 45.

While the early Mesopotamian monuments were valued, studied, and cited by modern artists and their critics and thus came to interest a wide public, Assyrian sculptures slipped into the background. It was almost as if they were discarded because they were associated with an outmoded school of nineteenth-century art.

Even to archaeologists they were of interest only as the last link of the chain that began at the “dawn of history.” The chief importance of the ninth- to eighth-century Assyrian bulls—to quote only one example—was, that they showed the ultimate transformation of a fantastic monster created by Mesopotamian artists at the beginning of the third millennium B.C. (see ill. p. 45). Typical of the archaeologist’s attitude towards the late Assyrians was the fact that the expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago used Khorsabad as a place where different methods could be tried out before they were applied to the second- and third-millennium site of Eshnunna, the excavation of which was the “main task of the expedition.” Nevertheless the methods employed produced excellent results. Some of them consisted in the reinterpretation of the ground plans drawn by Botta and his successor, Victor Place. For example, the series of rooms which Place had determinedly identified as a harem turned out to be a complex of temples; and a chamber which had obviously puzzled

The winged bull in the Metropolitan Museum. One of a pair of monsters given by John D. Rockefeller in 1932

ments dating back respectively to the fourth and fifth millenniums. The evidence thus obtained, together with that provided by even earlier finds in Palestine, permitted scholars to reconstruct, despite some gaps, the story of human development “from the Stone Age to Christianity.”

In addition to this interest in the beginnings of civilization, another factor helped
Botta because of its seclusion was found to be the king’s bathroom.

The reconstruction which one of the architects of the Chicago expedition made of the façade of the temple of the god Nabu (p. 43) presents a striking contrast to the reconstruction of Ashurnasirpal’s palace on page 42. Actually, Assyrian architecture was fairly uniform and only minor features could have differentiated the external aspects of the palace at Nimrud from the temple at Khorsabad. The contrast in the two reconstructions is therefore due first to the greater knowledge of Assyrian architecture possessed by the modern draughtsman and secondly to the difference in architectural ideas. Probably it will be fifty years before we shall know how much of Rockefeller Center went into the reconstruction of the façade of the Nabu temple at Khorsabad or whether our present interest in sanitation has misled us into finding bathrooms adjoining most of the sleeping rooms in the Assyrian residences. After all, although Place’s efforts toward objectivity were no less sincere than those of modern excavators, his romantic interest in the Near Eastern harem caused him to make an erroneous statement concerning the Assyrian palace at Khorsabad.

The second World War once again put an end to most excavations. However, certain trends in the Mesopotamian field which have made themselves felt in the last few years deserve mention. One is the tendency of photography, which since the last war has laid its accent on line, light, and texture, to turn frequently to Mesopotamian monuments for subject matter. And works of photographic art like those on these two pages lead us to look at these monuments in a new manner, to note details and effects which have so far escaped us altogether. It seems possible that with such photographs the Assyrians may be brought back into popular favor.

The other trend concerns the scholars’ present approach to the Assyro-Babylonian material, especially to the texts. Instead of merely assembling facts, recent studies have aimed at combining these facts, archaeological as well as philological, and have tried to reconstruct from them the pattern of the civilization which they record. An example in point is the far-reaching synthesis by W. F. Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity, the title of which was used above as the most appropriate definition of the scope of discoveries made in the last decades.

In several other studies published in the last few years the complete objectivity and
impersonality that were the goal of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been somewhat modified.

One of these studies is "The Rise of the Assyrian Empire" ("Der Aufstieg des Assyrien"), which came out in Berlin in 1939. Here Wolfram von Soden comments on the destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib in words which recall the vocabulary of the Ministry of Propaganda: "This feat has so far been unilaterally regarded as the destruction of irreparable cultural values and has been accordingly censured, but it constitutes, politically speaking, an incredibly courageous attempt not only to destroy an external enemy but also to counteract the interior disintegration of the empire which was being brought about by the Assyro-Babylonian cultural counterpoint." Further along in the article he suggests that warlike traits in the Assyrians which he greatly admires should be ascribed to Indo-Aryan racial influence.

As a contrast we have an article published in America in 1943 by a Danish professor, entitled "Primitive Democracy in Mesopotamia." In this article the word democracy is used in its classical sense "as denoting a form of government in which internal sovereignty resides in a large proportion of the governed, namely, in all free, adult citizens without distinction of fortune or class." The article contains evidence that prehistoric Mesopotamia was organized along such democratic lines. Obviously both the Dane and the German chose those themes and materials which conformed to their own ideologies.

As we have seen here, Assyriology and ancient Mesopotamian archaeology are no ivory towers that afford mental protection against the upheavals of the second World War and the period preceding it. Like all other humanities this field is subject to the influences of the times, and the results achieved bear their imprint. This is true of the pioneer excavations and first decipherments of the romantic period, of the painstaking collections of material of the industrial age, of the revealing discoveries of the decades after the first World War, and of the syntheses, the studies, and appreciations of the present. It seems almost commonplace to conclude that only the sum total of all these different approaches and their results can give us an ever-widening view of the ancient Near East, in which lie the sources of our Western civilization.

The history of the discoveries in the field of the ancient Near East has been made the subject of several studies, the most comprehensive of which is H. V. Hilprecht and others, Explorations in Bible Lands during the Nineteenth Century (Philadelphia, 1903).

More specialized studies are R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, A Century of Explorations at Nineveh (London, 1929); C. J. Gadd, The Stones of Assyria (London, 1936); and Sir Wallis E. A. Budge, The Rise and Progress of Assyriology (London, 1925). An extremely useful survey, which comprises the course of the most recent discoveries, is contained in the first chapter of W. F. Albright's book From the Stone Age to Christianity (Baltimore, 1940), which has been mentioned in the text.

The illustration on page 39 is reproduced through the courtesy of Henry P. McIlhenny; those on pages 43 and 45 through the courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the University of Chicago Press respectively from Khorsabad (Chicago, 1938), part 11, plate 44, by Gordon Loud and Charles B. Altman, and More Sculpture from the Diyala Region (Chicago, 1943), figure 1, and plate 49 b, by Henri Frankfort.