

HORMUZD RASSAM AND HIS DISCOVERIES

By JULIAN READE*

About 1965 I gave a lift to an old villager somewhere near Shergat in northern Iraq. Hearing that I was English, he said that he remembered the English and produced, instead of some casual polite remark, the very specific comment: "they were *just* people, they introduced fair courts." It was, though he could hardly have known it, a reference to the remarkable work of Sir Edgar Bonham-Carter, who in the early days of the Mandate founded Iraq's School of Law and re-established the machinery of justice, drafting a great deal of the necessary legislation himself and creating a system which in principle still exists. He was one of those British officials whose services in Iraq are indeed memorable, and it is a great honour for me to be giving the eighth Bonham-Carter Memorial Lecture today.

We in the small archaeological world, however, think of Sir Edgar especially as a leading spirit in the establishment of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, first chairman of the Executive Committee, and husband of course of Lady Bonham-Carter who is still one of the School's best friends.¹ So I thought it appropriate that I should devote this lecture to another man who also, in his own way, bridged two cultures (Figs. 1, 2) and who was in fact the first Iraqi archaeologist, with great achievements and discoveries to his credit.

Yet Hormuzd Rassam, instead of being crowned with the honours that were his due, ended his life in disappointment and relative obscurity. His reputation has never fully recovered from the malicious attacks made upon it in his lifetime, and from the failure then to acknowledge his contribution to our knowledge of ancient Iraq. His reputation as an archaeologist in particular has suffered from the vastly improved archaeological techniques which were developed in Iraq a generation after he himself had left the field. He is condemned for not recording and publishing his excavations properly, and for being a treasure-hunter rather than a seeker after truth, when such criticisms might more reasonably be directed at the people who were giving him his orders, or rather at the entire climate of opinion, concerning archaeology and Biblical antiquities, in Victorian England. So the man has become a scapegoat; and in this lecture, besides drawing attention to a few—a very few—of the vast number of discoveries he made, I wish to explore some of his ruling characteristics and some of his relationships with other men. From this may emerge a partial explanation for the bad luck which came repeatedly to sour his moments of triumph.

We have to start with the society into which, in 1826, Hormuzd Rassam was born.² He was a native of Mosul, the city that gave its name to muslin, and his family had originally been designers as the surname suggests, making patterns for the muslin industry. Mosul at this date was a neglected backwater of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, and the Rassams belonged to the Chaldaean Christian community (Fig. 3). This matter of religion is important, because people in the Ottoman Empire were classified primarily by their religious affiliations, and were intensely loyal to their particular sects. In the Mosul

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¹ Lady Bonham-Carter died a few months after this lecture was delivered. It was the last occasion on which I spoke with her at any length, and I should like to pay my own tribute here to an indomitable personality. She was physically small but possessed enormous presence. Some knew her as Lady BC, but I doubt if they dared say it to her face. I first met her at one of the parties which, with characteristic generosity, she used to give after Iraq School meetings. It was at the Anglo-Belgian Club in Belgrave Square; then entering her eighties, she regaled us with an account of a camping trip she had just made to Afghanistan. Discussions such as this would be interrupted by some other engagement, a first night at the theatre or a performance of modern dance; she might well have been travelling there by underground, and returning before the end of dinner. Even from her wheel-chair, the very last time I saw her, greeting friends at the memorial service for Stewart

Perowne, Charlotte radiated more vitality than many people half her age.

² I have listed the sources for Rassam's life, in so far as they are known to me, in my introduction to the *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, Vol. VI (1986), xiii-xiv (henceforward *Catalogue*); a short account of his life, using a source now lost, appeared in the second supplement of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. III, 158-161, and is reprinted in Vol. VII, xii-xv, of the same *Catalogue*. The sources consist largely of his own published writings, and of letters and reports in the archives of the British Museum and the British Library. There is some more elsewhere, including family papers about which Mr Clive Rassam, great-grandson of Hormuzd, has kindly spoken to me, but the crucial diaries and the unpublished autobiography appear to have perished, by fire and flood, in the 1950s.

The present paper is based primarily on the sources listed above. Specific references have been given below only for direct quotations.



Fig. 1 Hormuzd Rassam as an Ottoman subject, probably painted by F.C. Cooper, late 1851.

region, besides Islam which was of course dominant, and other religions, there were then four main types of Christianity practised, and the Rassams belonged to the Chaldaean community which had, over the previous century, largely accepted the authority of Rome. This conversion was due to the presence in the city of a Dominican mission, as the Roman Catholic church was anxious to win the allegiance of the various oriental Christian groups. Rassam's own father was an archdeacon, and there was even a plan to send the young Hormuzd to Rome to study the faith, though this came to nothing because of his religious doubts. But, when Rassam was still a boy, the first Protestant missionaries appeared in Mosul, and the sister of one of them married his elder brother. One can well imagine the spiritual ferment into which Rassam, in his teenage years, was thrown by these competing loyalties. Eventually, under the influence of his brother's English mother-in-law, he became a Protestant too, and remained so, with strong convictions, for the remainder of his life. For him, consequently, a prime purpose of Assyrian and Babylonian excavation was the task of illustrating and confirming the sacred record.

Secondly, and almost as important, there was Rassam's love-affair with England, or rather with a particular vision of England which he had developed in his teens and twenties through the influence of

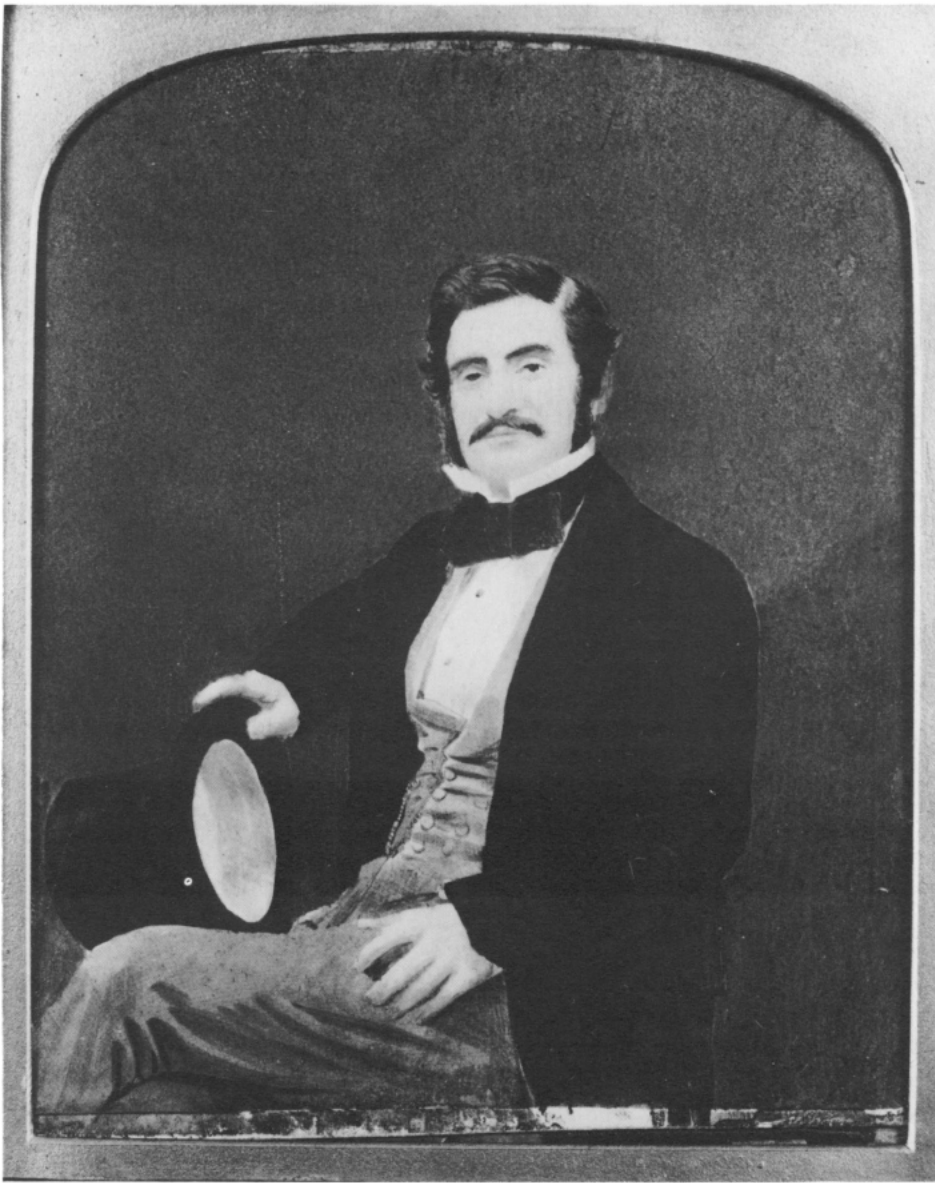


Fig. 2 Hormuzd Rassam as a British subject, probably painted by F.C. Cooper, late 1851.

the missionaries and through his acquaintance with other Englishmen, most notably Henry Layard. These people represented, for Rassam, a great political power which was interesting itself in the affairs of his homeland, and which seemed a natural ally and protector of a minority Christian community such as his own. England was also, manifestly, in this period not so long after the Napoleonic wars, a rival of France. So, since England was officially a Protestant country and France a Catholic one, and both powers came to have consulates in Mosul, Rassam's loyalty to his chosen Protestant faith grew to include an intense loyalty to England, and in due course it became his adopted country. As he wrote in 1849, at the age of twenty-three, "I will sacrifice myself for England and worship for ever the pure religion of Great Britain. . . I would rather be a chimney-sweeper in England than a Pasha (a provincial governor) in Turkey".³ His determination to further British interests in his archaeological work, treating the French as rivals rather than colleagues, was not unique—nationalism and archaeology went hand in hand in those days, and still can—but it was liable to cause misunderstanding and embarrassment.

³ Quoted by G. Waterfield, *Layard of Nineveh* (1963), 197–8.



Fig. 3 Tomb ascribed to Rabban Hormuzd at his monastery near Al-Qosh north of Mosul. Photograph by D. Collon.



Fig. 4 Layard (1855). Bust by P. Park, 1855, in the British Museum (MLA.OA 10558).

Thirdly, and continuing throughout his life, there was the great loyalty which Rassam felt towards his friend and mentor, ten years older than himself, Henry Layard. The two probably met some years earlier, but it was in 1846 that Rassam, in his twentieth year, accompanied Layard to his excavations at Nimrud as secretary and accountant. But such a job-description is hopelessly inadequate. Layard (Fig. 4) was making phenomenal discoveries,⁴ and Rassam was his only literate assistant. Layard did not have Rassam's intimate familiarity with the local politics, in an area where government authority was largely confined to the towns. The archaeologist's camp was an island of relative calm in a tribal wilderness, with over a hundred workmen from different groups employed together, and it required huge administrative skill to keep the work running smoothly without bloodshed, to collect supplies, to arrange for the transport of massive objects such as winged bulls from the excavations to the river (Figs. 5, 6), and so on. Much of the practical responsibility fell on Rassam's shoulders. Layard relied on him, for instance, to collect the evidence in legal disputes among local people, which Layard himself was called on to settle. At the same time Layard was developing his own archaeological procedures, and Rassam was learning them with him. In later years, in his own archaeological work, Rassam practised what he had learnt then. What he failed to do was to fix his results in the popular mind, as Layard had done, by prompt, fluently written and exciting books.

When Layard retired from archaeology to politics, responsibility for the British excavations in Assyria passed to the consul in Baghdad, Henry Rawlinson (Figs. 7, 8). It was a difficult responsibility as he was seldom able to travel to Mosul and, though a pioneer in the decipherment of the cuneiform script, he had little experience of digging. In 1852, therefore, the British Museum appointed Hormuzd Rassam as Rawlinson's agent to continue the work of excavation, which he did for eighteen months. It was a striking expression of confidence in the abilities of a young man of Rassam's antecedents, but

⁴C. J. Gadd, *The Stones of Assyria* (1936), remains perhaps the best account of the Assyrian excavations of 1846–1855.

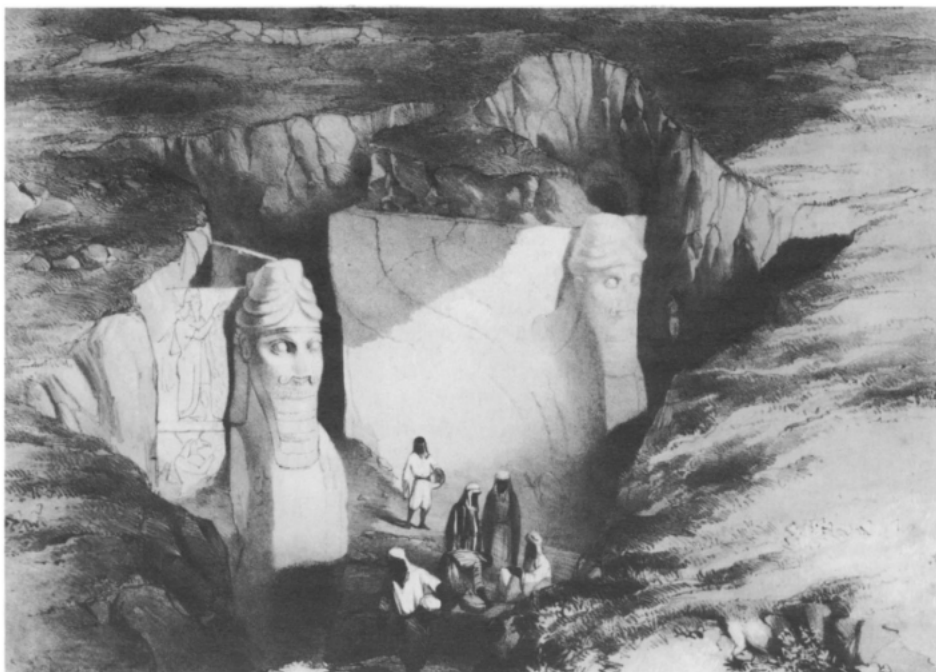


Fig. 5 Excavation of human-headed winged lions at Ninurta Temple, Nimrud. Water-colour by F. C. Cooper. Searight Collection.



Fig. 6 Winged colossus loaded on Tigris raft. Water-colour by F. C. Cooper. Searight Collection.

the Museum was amply rewarded. He himself accepted the honour, as he said, with much reluctance and grief,⁵ certainly in part because of Layard's absence but also perhaps because he knew that he could not earn a living by archaeology. At any rate it was his duty. One of his first tasks was to

⁵ H. Rassam. *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod* (1897; henceforward *Asshur*), 1.

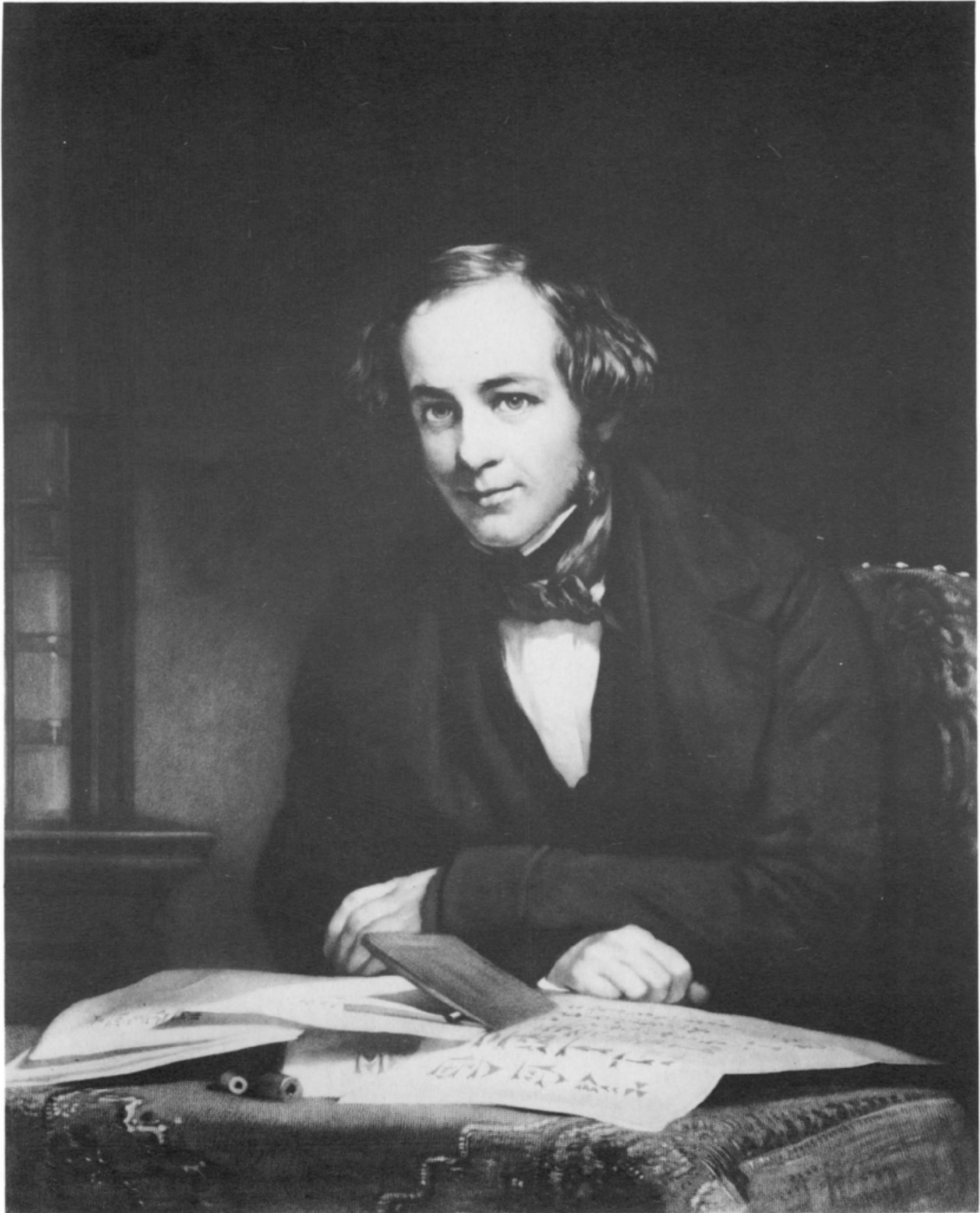


Fig. 7 Henry Rawlinson (1850). Engraving by S. Cousins after a painting by H. W. Philips.

dismantle and send to England a set of stone wall-panels that showed the capture, by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, of the Biblical city of Lachish (Fig. 9). Layard had found these but left them in position, as the fire which destroyed Sennacherib's palace had split the stones and reduced much of the carved surface to powder. The peculiar interest of the subject-matter led the Museum authorities to ask for a special effort to rescue this series, and the panels, now surviving as a unit, were among the first fruits of Rassam's expedition.

Rassam's efforts were not restricted to rescuing things that he and Layard had found previously.

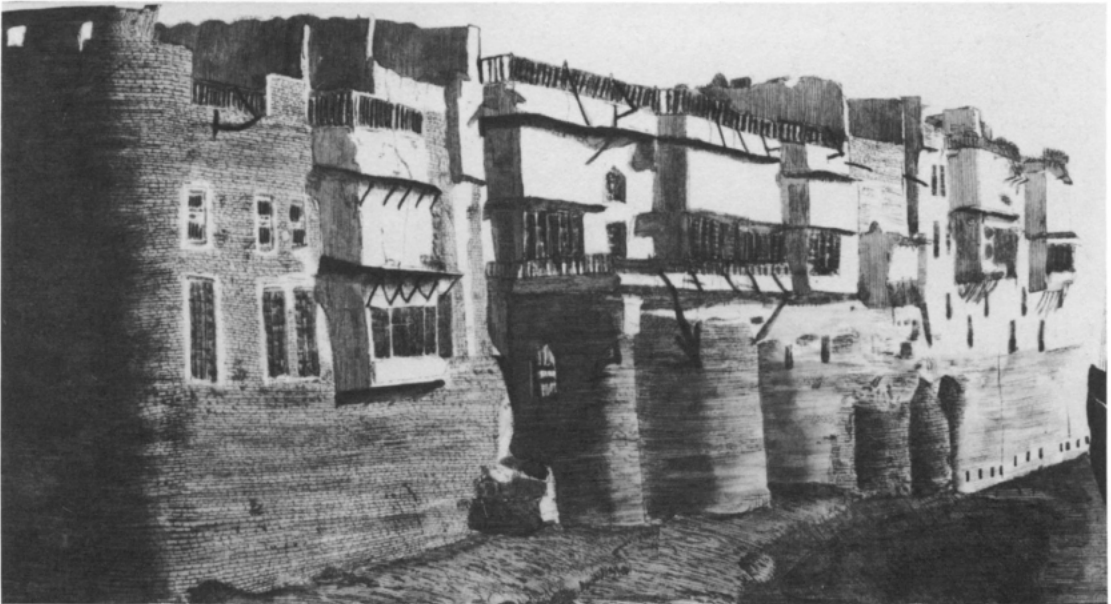
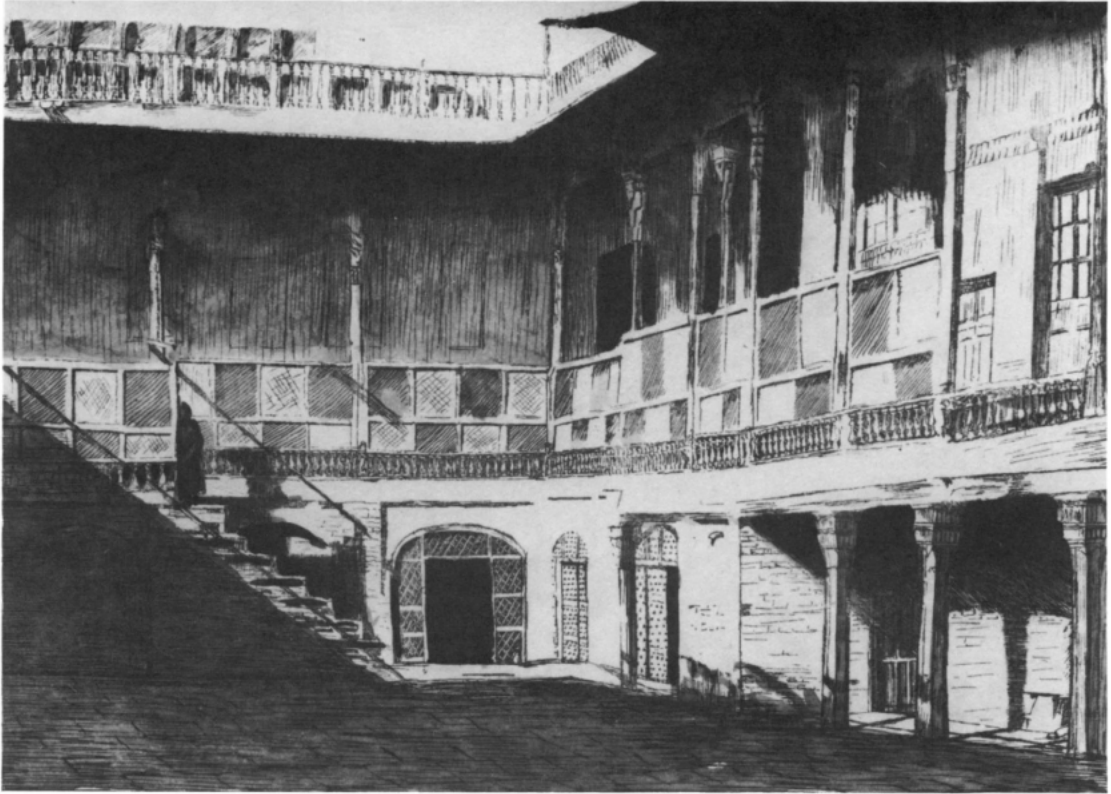


Fig. 8 Above: courtyard of the British Residency, Baghdad, about 1850. Below: river frontage of the Residency, with adjoining houses to south. From photographs by J. M. Hyslop, in Felix Jones, *Memoir on the Province of Baghdad, Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government* 43 (1857).

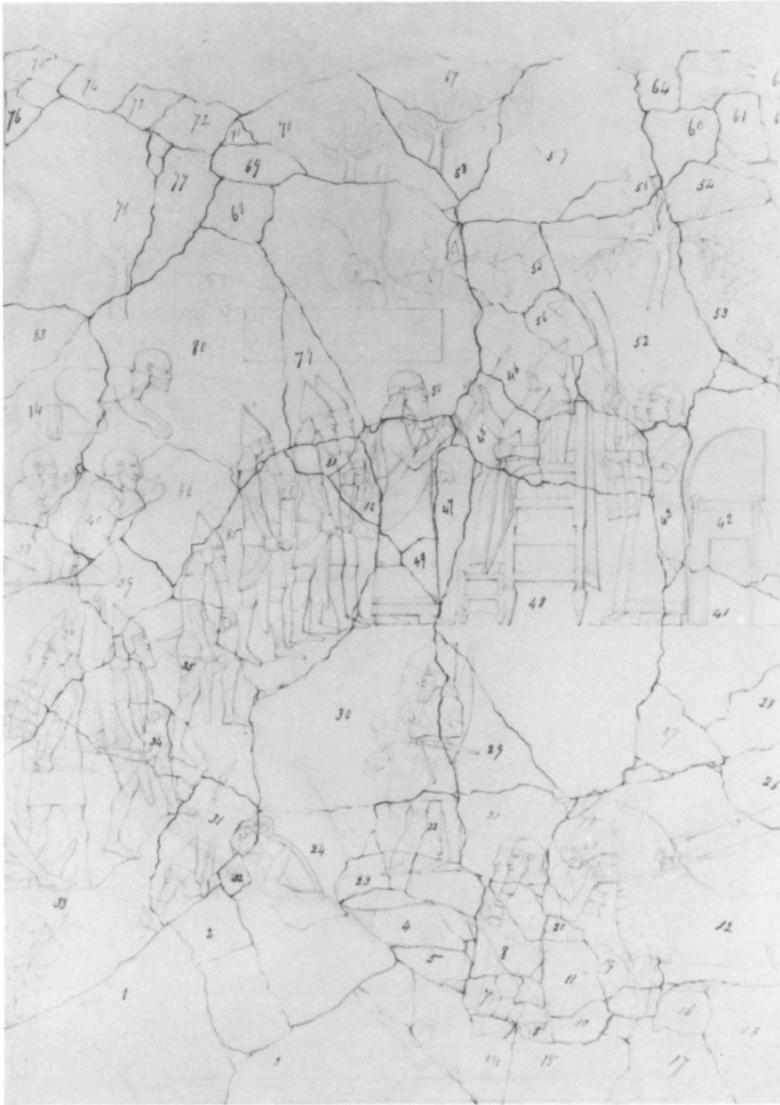


Fig. 9 Key sketch of Lachish panel from Sennacherib's palace, drawn by C. Hodder before dismantling (*Original Drawing II, 8*).

Elsewhere at Nineveh he excavated the Temple of Ishtar, goddess of love and war. There was a procession of musicians; complete and broken obelisks; a statue of a woman which was and remains the only known life-size Assyrian nude (Fig. 10). These finds were matched by others from a temple at Nimrud devoted to Nabu, the god of writing. Here there was a royal stela, and free-standing figures of attendant gods (Fig. 11). The latter bore inscriptions which urged the reader to rely on Nabu alone, "trust in no other god", and the same inscriptions had the earliest contemporary reference to a queen named Sammuamat, a powerful figure who was to be recognized as the original behind the legendary Semiramis of Greek legend.

Today such discoveries would make an archaeologist's name, whether he recorded them properly or not, but Rassam was worried and dissatisfied. What frustrated him was his inability to excavate in a particular area of Nineveh that he regarded as highly promising. The problem was one which reached back several years, and it concerned the rights of the French and British to excavate one another's sites.

In 1843 the French consul Paul-Emile Botta had begun the first excavations in Assyria with trenches dug into Kuyunjik, the main mound at Nineveh. He abandoned these when he made his great discovery of an Assyrian palace at Khorsabad, some miles away. Botta then left, though in 1846 he wrote to Layard mentioning that he planned to return to work at Kuyunjik. Another French consul dug there the



Fig. 10 Naked figure from Ishtar Temple, Nineveh (WA 124963).



Fig. 11 Divine attendant from Nabu Temple, Nimrud (WA 118888).

same year, and maintained that the whole mound was French property. Layard did not accept this. "Their claims to Kuyunjik are groundless," he wrote. "This is an immense mound, which has been known to contain antiquities and has been dug into for generations."⁶ In due course this was where Layard discovered the palace of Sennacherib from which, for instance, the Lachish carvings came.

According to Rassam, "it was an understanding, and indeed it is an acknowledged etiquette, that no agent of any museum was to intrude in the sites chosen by the other."⁷ But what was a site, when there might be several mounds close together, and what was the situation when one party had excavated and gone away again, or had paid some kind of rent or protection money to a local chief who might not have legal ownership of the site in question? Layard sent a team to Khorsabad when the French seemed to have abandoned it. So there was clearly ample scope for misunderstanding, and on at least three

⁶ Waterfield, *op. cit.*, 143.

⁷ *Asshur*, 23.

occasions during 1852–4 Rassam's workmen came or nearly came to blows with others working on behalf of the new French consul, Victor Place. The evidence suggests that Rassam and Place, with poor control of their supporters, were equally to blame.

It was therefore particularly galling for Rassam to know that, as a result of a private agreement between Place and Rawlinson, the northern part of the mound of Kuyunjik had been reserved for the French. It was an area that had been tried without success in the past, but Rassam felt it deserved further research. The existence of the agreement was well known, but the French made no attempt to dig there. Moreover it was the English who were paying rent to the landlord of Kuyunjik, and Rassam considered that neither Rawlinson nor the French had any rights over it. Eventually,⁸ in December, 1853,

‘‘When the time of my departure was drawing nigh, I ordered my tents to be pitched on the mound of Koyunjik, showing thereby that I was ready to start for Europe; but my reason for doing so was to be able with greater facility to excavate at night at the northern corner of the mound without being detected. After having waited a few days for a bright moonlight night, I selected a number of my old and faithful Arab workmen who could be depended on for secrecy, with a trustworthy overseer, and gave them orders to assemble at a certain spot on the mound about two hours after sunset. When everything was ready, I went and marked them three different spots on which to dig. There had been already a number of trenches dug there on a former occasion, but at this time I directed the workmen to dig across them and go deeper down; and having superintended the work myself till midnight, I left them at work (after telling them to stop work at dawn) and went to bed.

‘‘The next morning I examined the trenches, and on seeing some good signs of Assyrian remains, I doubled the number of workmen the second night, and made them work hard all night. As usual, I superintended the work till midnight, and then went to bed, but had not been asleep two hours, before my faithful Albanian overseer came running to give me the good tidings of the discovery of some broken sculptures. I hurried immediately to the spot, and on descending one of the trenches, I could just see in the moonlight the lower part of two bas-reliefs. . . . On the third day the fact of my digging at night oozed out in the town of Mossul, which did not surprise me, seeing that all the families of the workmen who were employed in the nocturnal work knew that they were digging clandestinely somewhere; and moreover, the workmen who were not employed at night, must have seen their fellow labourers leaving their tents and not coming to work the next day. Not only did I fear the French consul hearing and coming to prevent me from digging in what he would call his own ground but, worse than all, that it should be thought I was digging for treasure by the Turkish authorities and the people of Mossul, who had always imagined that we were enriching ourselves by the discovery of fabulous treasures: consequently, on the third night, I increased the workmen, and resolved to remain in the trenches till the morning, superintending the work. It can be well imagined how I longed for the close of the day. . . .’’

and so on. And so it was by moonlight that the great lion-hunt of Ashurbanipal emerged from the soil (Fig. 12). When the French consul came to protest, Rassam was ready for him:⁹

‘‘On my explaining matters, and telling him that Sir Henry Rawlinson had no power to give away ground which did not belong to him, and that it was evident, as the owner of the mound was indemnified by us, it was but right that the British nation should benefit by any discovery made in it, he seemed to be quite satisfied with my reasoning, and before we parted he congratulated me on my good fortune. . . .’’

The palace to which the lion-hunt carvings belonged had been built for the last of the great Assyrian kings in the years around 645 B.C. The carvings are unquestionably among the most accomplished ever found in Assyria, combining technical skill, imaginative composition, and dramatic intensity in a way that was quite unexpected by Europeans accustomed to thinking that real art began with the Greeks. The carvings were also packed with information about Assyria and neighbouring cultures. There were carvings of scenes from Egypt to Iran, including for example Arab warriors and an Elamite temple-tower or ziggurat, and a so-called Architecture Room which showed buildings of kinds that influenced the early Greeks. There was also another magnificent set of carvings with the hunting of wild ass and gazelle, besides more lion-hunts and the king picnicking, which were discovered after Rassam had left the field. It was an extraordinary culmination to the period of ten years during which the first Anglo-French excavations in Assyria lasted.

Yet of all this, at the time, next to nothing was published. Why?

The straightforward reason is that, soon afterwards, Rassam obtained a permanent post with the British authorities in southern Arabia, and he remained in that part of the world, occupying several positions of growing responsibility, until 1868. He probably had no time to write, he had no libraries to consult, and anyway the drawings of his finds were in London. He may also have been reluctant,

⁸ *Transactions of the Society for Biblical Archaeology* 7 (1882), 39–40. ⁹ *Asshur*, 27.



Fig. 12 Hunting dogs on an Ashurbanipal Palace panel (WA 118915).

since he had little formal education in English, to push himself before the public. He was also outraged, evidently, by what happened to his Ashurbanipal sculptures after all the trouble he had taken to acquire them. For, though the British Museum did get the lion's share, it had no money to pay for their transport to England, and little space to accommodate them. So Rawlinson, in return for free transport in a French ship, allocated many of the sculptures to France after all, and most of these were lost forever through mismanagement, when the failure of the French to pay proper protection money to a local tribe led to their being dumped in the River Tigris on their way to the sea.

All these were reasons for not writing. The most important, however, may simply have been that the publication of archaeological discoveries was not yet seen as a serious obligation. Many explorers did write books, for pleasure or money or fame, but it was not incumbent on them to do so. Hormuzd Rassam had fulfilled his duty to the British Museum by making these marvellous discoveries. That was all that was asked of him.

What he cannot have anticipated at the time, since it was entirely contrary to his expectations of English behaviour, was that his discoveries would tend to be attributed to other people. Yet within a

few years, for instance, the historian George Rawlinson, in a widely read work,¹⁰ was to ascribe the discovery of the palace of Ashurbanipal not to Rassam but to his own brother Henry, the very man who had not only almost thwarted the discovery in the first place but had then succeeded in losing or giving away a large part of it. What Rassam had not realised was that members of the British establishment were, in their own way, just as capable of devious and worldly behaviour as the Ottoman administrators from whom he had escaped. The contrast between the British and Ottoman Empires was not the one Rassam had imagined, between a noble Christian world and a corrupt Muslim one, but between different societies whose leaders often had much in common, among other things personal ambition and a ready mistrust of outsiders. Rassam in Turkey was a member of a suspect minority; in England, however hard he tried to make himself an Englishman, he seemed to many people suspiciously oriental. So it was only natural that credit for what he found should go to the respectable Englishman who had been nominally in charge.

In due course, however, Rassam did write a book, albeit on a completely different theme.¹¹ This concerned his embassy to the unfortunate emperor Theodore of Ethiopia, part of one of those strange

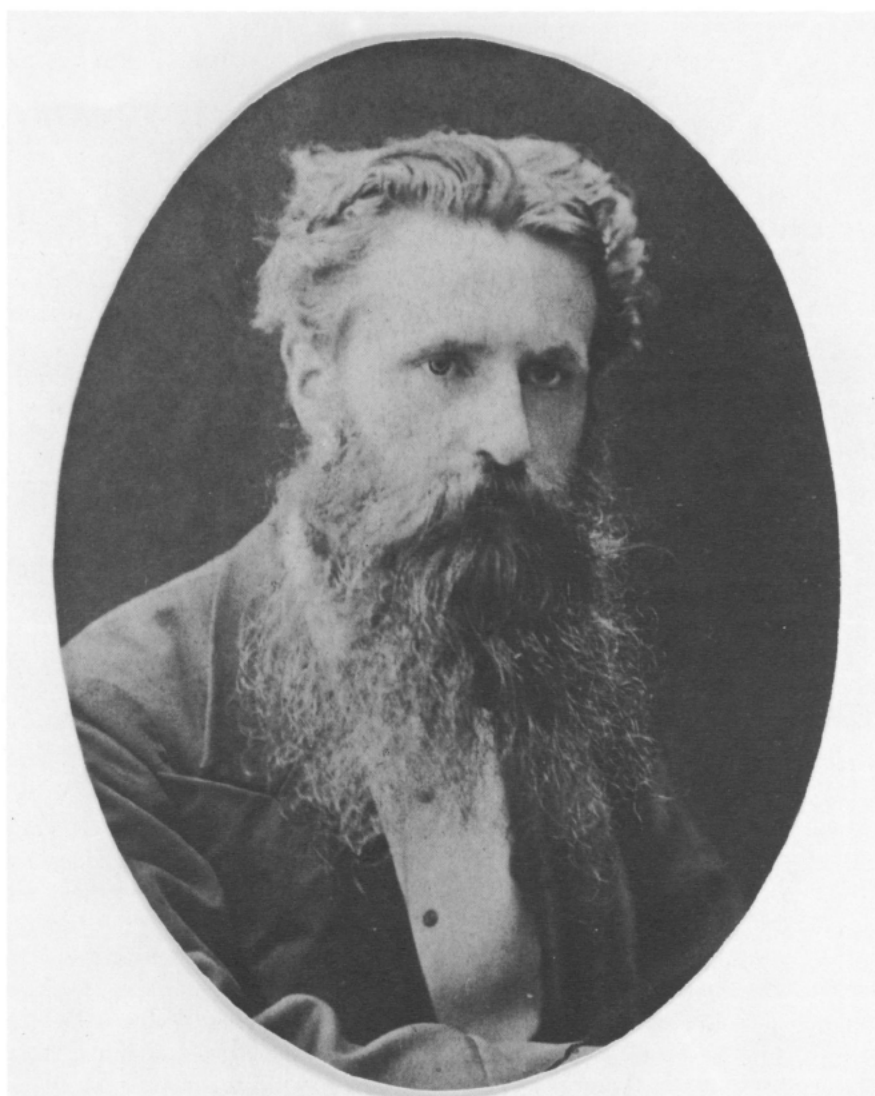


Fig. 13 George Smith.

¹⁰G. Rawlinson, *The History of Herodotus*, Volume I (1858), 484 n. 7.

¹¹*Narrative of the British Mission to Theodore, King of*

Abyssinia (1869). There is an excellent general account of this affair by Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile* (first published, 1962).

diplomatic encounters where failure to communicate between two cultures, in this case the British and Ethiopian empires, led to a quite unnecessary war. Rassam's job had been to prevent hostilities, which he nearly succeeded in doing. In the event he became the victim of scurrilous attacks in the British press, and the book was one way of justifying his actions. It is sad but characteristic that, in this his first really public exposure, he was already forced on to the defensive. It seems most unlikely that a native Englishman would have been attacked in the same fashion.

While Rassam was absent from the world of archaeology, research continued on the vast number of inscribed clay tablets which he and Layard had found at Nineveh. There were steady improvements in understanding the script, and in 1872 George Smith (Fig. 13), Rawlinson's assistant at the British Museum, announced his celebrated identification, on one of the fragments, of a broken version of the Biblical story of the Flood. The editor of *The Daily Telegraph* immediately invited Rassam to go out at the newspaper's expense to hunt for the missing piece, only to find that the owners of the newspaper had invited Smith. Though there was talk of them going together, it is clear that the two men did not like one another; so Smith went alone, on three expeditions, dying on the last. Then, in 1876, Rassam was asked if he would go instead, and accepted.¹² "Although I had fully intended, when I retired from the Indian Civil Service, not to separate from my family, nevertheless, when I thought of my former work, I felt I could not refuse an employment in which I took so much interest, and thus I did not hesitate to accept the proffered honour."

Accordingly, armed with a letter from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he presented himself at the British Embassy at Constantinople, to ask for help in obtaining the requisite permit. After two months, he had not even succeeded in obtaining an interview with the ambassador. Something rather similar was to happen a few years later, when Rassam was working at Nineveh and felt that a later ambassador was not exerting himself properly on his behalf. Rassam always felt that the British ambassador was in a position to get whatever he wanted from the Sultan if he set his mind to it, and deplored the vacillations by which Great Britain frittered away her influence in Turkey. In the following year, however, 1877, there was a complete change. Henry Layard became ambassador in Turkey, a post he was to hold for three years. This was a man who understood the country and the language, besides being Rassam's friend, and he first obtained permission for renewed work in Assyria and then an exceptional permit which allowed excavations, for up to four years, in an area covering much of what is now Eastern Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. "I had much more difficulty in obtaining this Firman," wrote Layard (Fig. 14)¹³ "than in getting possession of Cyprus." It was the beginning of the second astonishing phase of Rassam's archaeological career.

The background to the renewed public funding for excavation lay not only in the Flood story but also in the appearance on the market of what was almost a new type of cuneiform tablet. There had been a few examples of them before, dumpy objects referred to by the Baghdad Europeans as "love-letters", but now they were emerging in tens and hundreds. Many were commercial documents, records of sales, loans, leases and so on, and were dated in the reigns of kings like Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus, Darius and Artaxerxes and Antiochus, men whose names were familiar in both Biblical and Classical records. They offered novel prospects for understanding the economy of the ancient world. Other tablets contained astronomical reports, rituals, magical and medical procedures, myths and historical records. Their importance was clearly comparable with that of the Nineveh tablets already in the British Museum, but this time they were coming not from Assyria but from southern Iraq, Babylonia. This was the start of the serious antiquities trade in Iraq, controlled by men like Joseph Shemtob (Figs. 15, 16).

What had been happening is not hard to reconstruct. The city of Babylon contained huge public buildings built by Nebuchadnezzar in baked brick, and the remains of these buildings had been quarried for generations. Even much of Baghdad is said to have been built with Nebuchadnezzar bricks. From time to time, obviously, interesting small objects had emerged from the ruins; but about 1872 enough cuneiform tablets were being found to attract the attention of the merchant communities in Hillah and Baghdad. First came some of the economic texts, then a few years later a massive hoard of scientific and literary ones. Many of course were broken when found; others were deliberately broken by the diggers, as two fragments were more valuable than one, though there are also examples of fragments

¹² *Asshur*, 54.

¹³ *Catalogue*, xvii.

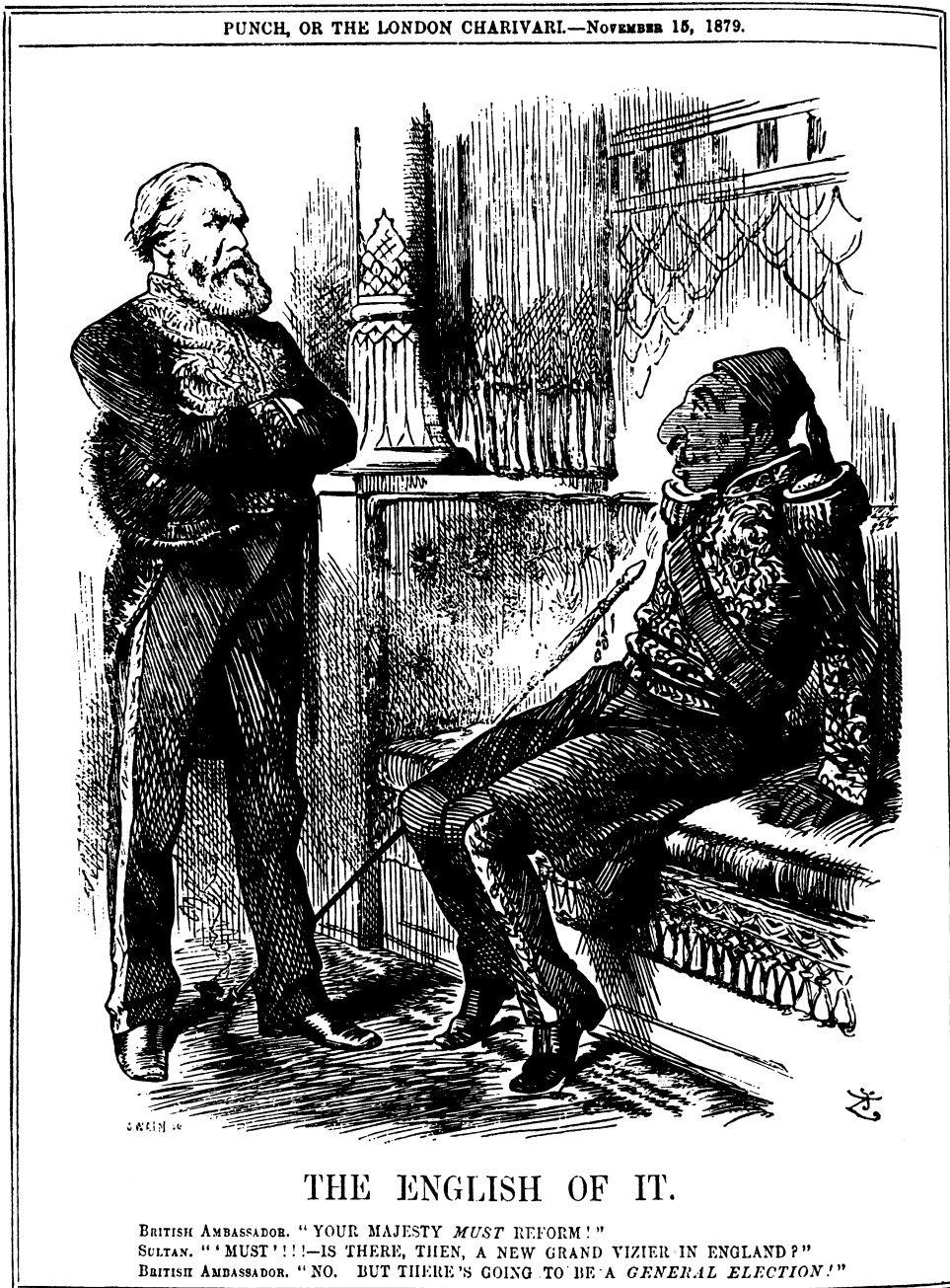


Fig. 14 Layard as ambassador in Constantinople.

reaching the market stuck together in impossible relationships (Fig. 17). One Baghdad merchant wrote of having 1640 pieces available, for a fixed price, with another 5000 still in the hands of his suppliers. The men who dug these things up, however, were paid a pittance for them, their main income coming from bricks.

What Rassam did was to pay the diggers regular wages to work under his direction, allowing them to keep any bricks they found for disposal in the traditional way, while tablets and other small antiquities were surrendered to him. He enlisted the support of the guardians of the small Shia shrines which still preserved the sanctity of the ancient temples, by employing them as guards and contributing to the maintenance of their buildings. And he was careful to identify the promising places from which tablets



Fig. 15 Yusuf Shemtob. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Dr I. L. Finkel.

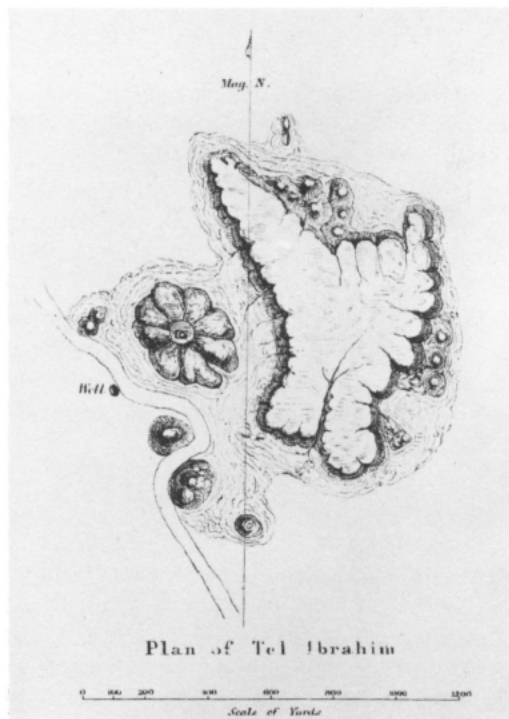


Fig. 16 Tell Ibrahim, ancient Kutha, a typically eroded mound inviting antiquity-hunters. Plan by W. Collingwood (1861-2).



Fig. 17 Composite Shemtov "tablet" (WA 46043).

had been coming. At Babylon, it seems, there were two main areas. Mounds near Jumjuma probably produced most of the commercial documents, ranging in date from the seventh century to the first. The neighbouring Amran mound, site of the temple of Marduk, supreme god of Babylon, was probably the main source for the scientific and literary ones. It is unique material that is still being pieced together, and while much has been published there are undoubtedly revelations still to come for generations of scholars. As one example of Rassam's finds from the Marduk Temple, I would merely cite the Cyrus cylinder, a document which gives the official justification for the conquest of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus in 539 B.C. It is a model of benevolent autocracy, guaranteeing justice and religious rights. If it tells us little about how Cyrus did behave, it is a historic recognition of how he thought he ought to.¹⁴

Not far from Babylon, the ruins of Birs Nimrud or Borsippa are dominated by a hulk of vitrified brickwork, the remains of a temple-tower traditionally identified with the Tower of Babel. It is worth noting how far European conceptions of such a place changed during Rassam's lifetime. At the start there was nothing much wrong with a late medieval or renaissance vision, at the end there was the sober architecture of the German scholar Koldewey. It was Rassam who gave us the first architectural plan of a classic Babylonian temple.¹⁵ This was the Temple of Nabu, to which the Borsippa temple-tower belonged. Here too was part of the Temple library, consisting of beautifully made tablets, and records of how the building was restored by kings from the Assyrians to the Greeks.

The extensive site of Borsippa had produced tablets before Rassam went there, and the local man who was sometimes left in charge was liable to shift the workmen away from this temple to what he regarded as more promising areas. The belief that Rassam was only after tablets was a natural one, and tablets indeed were what he had been sent to find, but in fact he aimed to make as full a record of his buildings as Layard had before him. The problem was the difficulty of identifying mudbrick walls, one with which

¹⁴ Translation: e.g. T. Fish, in D. Winton Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times* (1958), 92-4. ¹⁵ *Asshur*, plan opposite p. 224.

any archaeologist who has worked in Iraq will sympathize. "The workmen", he once remarked at Babylon, "are obliged to dig at haphazard as every trace of the old walls is lost."¹⁶ Moreover, whereas in the past he had had a trained artist to help him, he was now even worse off than Layard on his first expedition, reponsible *alone* for all the intelligent recording and administration. The results can consist of amateurish sketches¹⁷ of Assyrian buildings he excavated, though even these can be extended, with the help of modern knowledge, into acceptable temple plans. But he learnt by experience. The plan of Borsippa is his best work, probably because the building had been burned, which makes mudbrick walls easier to distinguish, but there is also an informative plan of one of his most important discoveries, the temple at Abu Habbah or Sippar, together with an elevation of some of the facade decoration, and a section through the walls.¹⁸ When the University of Pennsylvania sent out its first expedition to Babylonia a few years later, experienced men from Babylon and Borsippa were the ones they employed to dig.¹⁹

Besides the tablets, there was the real embarrassment of treasure. Several silver hoards were found, and Rassam's practice was to hand the bulk of them over to the local authorities, while retaining the most informative items. A good illustration of the climate in which he worked is provided by the story of a bronze door-sill which he found at Borsippa. To begin with, there was no problem. But as soon as Rassam had left the site, and the door-sill had to be transported to Baghdad, a rumour circulated that it was solid gold. An armed escort brought it into the city, and a committee of seven goldsmiths was appointed by the governor to identify the metal. They ruled that it was bronze, and so it came to the British Museum. Yet years later there was still a malicious story circulating that Rassam had found, and somehow appropriated for himself, a solid gold gate.



Fig. 18 Abu Habbah and its surroundings—From *Surveys of Ancient Babylon*, by W. B. Selby *et al.*, 1860–5 (published 1885).

¹⁶ *Catalogue*, xix.

¹⁷ *Transactions of the Society for Biblical Archaeology* 7 (1882), plans following pp. 52 and 56.

¹⁸ L. De Meyer (ed.), *Tell ed-Dēr* III (1980), plan 3.

¹⁹ J. P. Peters, *Nippur* (1897), I, 221; II, 110–1.

Far better than gold, but almost as embarrassing, was Rassam's discovery of Sippar, Abu Habbah (Fig. 18). He reckoned that he excavated some 60 or 70,000 tablets there in the space of eighteen months. They were nearly all unbaked clay, and he had to bake them in the field to make them fit to travel. His excavations at this site penetrated levels of the third millennium B.C., and his finds were of many periods. But, however much he found, Rassam did not pretend to be an expert interpreter of the past. His task, as he saw it, was to find the monuments for others to analyse.



Fig. 19 Iku-Shamash, king of Mari, about 2500 B.C., from Abu Habbah (WA 90828).

This also is how the Museum regarded him. He implored them to send him a linguist to deal with the inscriptions which were sometimes crumbling before his eyes, but there was no money for that kind of luxury: he was told to send everything home. Similarly there was no money for a camera, since the value of archaeological photography was not yet widely recognized. When Rassam wanted pictures, he had to try to find a professional photographer in the nearest town. So there are several shots of important objects, but a total of no more than three excavation photographs for this entire period.²⁰ They are far from uninformative. One showing an arch at Nimrud is not so different from one showing a similar subject taken during the contemporary French excavations at Telloh (Figs. 20, 21).

Much the most remarkable characteristic of Rassam's excavations in the period 1878–1882, however, is one that I have not yet discussed. This is that he himself was usually absent. Besides the Babylonian

²⁰ *Asshur*, opposite pp. 222, 226, 376.



Fig. 20 Rassam with workman in archway at Nimrud.



Fig. 21 Workman with arch at Telloh (E. de Sarzec, *Découvertes en Chaldée*, Pl. 57 bis, no. 1).

sites which I have named, he initiated excavations at Telloh in southern Babylonia, various other Babylonian sites, Nineveh, Nimrud, other Assyrian sites, Toprak Kale near Lake Van, two sites on the Syrian Khabur, and perhaps other places too (Fig. 22). Nearly all the excavations were directed most of the time by trusted overseers.

Once again it was a system used by Layard, though Layard had never used it on such a scale. And it is one for which Rassam has been roundly condemned. What is less generally known is that he condemned it himself at the time. He was, as I have tried to emphasize, a man of great loyalty. He had intended, on leaving Ethiopia and marrying an Englishwoman, to stay settled for the rest of his life, and he devotedly wrote home twice a week. But he could not resist the call of duty when his services were requested. All the same, he had made it abundantly clear that he was not available for an indefinite length of time. His function was to start the excavations, appoint overseers, and entrust the overall supervision to British consular officials who were, after all, Crown Servants just as he felt himself to be. Thus his first stay in the Babylon area lasted some six weeks; it was over a year before he came back from England, and throughout this time supervision was minimal. But the reason for Rassam's absence was not carelessness on his part. He had announced in advance that he would resign on his return home, and this is what he did. It was up to his employers to find someone competent to replace him.

Samuel Birch (Fig. 23), of the relevant Museum Department, did try to find this replacement, but was unable to do so. In the end Rassam was induced to go out again. And exactly the same thing happened, all over again. Rassam, in good time, wrote a detailed letter explaining that, for family and



Fig. 22 Sites excavated by Rassam, or on his instructions, 1878–1882. Drawn by Ann Searight.



Fig. 23 Samuel Birch.



Fig. 24 Wallis Budge.

other reasons, he did not intend to return to the east, and that a substitute must be found. Still, there was no one suitable readily available, and it may be that this time Birch was less worried by the resignation, reporting astutely to his seniors that, after a few months of life at home, Rassam might well be persuaded to go out again. And so he was.

Evidently, for Rassam, there was always the lure of new revelations. "My aim" he once wrote,²¹ "was to discover unknown edifices, and to bring to light some important Assyrian monument for the gratification of the British public, especially those who valued such discoveries for their Biblical or literary studies." But these repeated visits to the east also entailed sacrifice. For Rassam had turned himself into a thorough-going Englishman. He expected the best accommodation in inns where he stayed the night. He expressed surprise when he found Lady Anne Blunt, in Baghdad, dressed "whimsically" in the "old-fashioned and clumsy" Arab dress.²² "I have always found all nationalities in an Oriental country pay more respect to the Europeans who adhere to their mode of dressing than when they change it for the costume of the country." He himself, to illustrate the powerful heat of southern Iraq in May, reported from his camp at Abu Habbah that he was writing in his shirt "without coat or waistcoat",²³ from which we must conclude that he was normally attired on excavation as he would have been in the streets of London or Brighton. Another time, we have a vision of him in northern Iraq, in a ferocious rainstorm, riding across country holding an umbrella. He had become perhaps more English than the English themselves. But the Turks and the English officials with whom he had to deal were conscious of his background and did not fully accept the transformation.

Rassam was therefore a ready victim for the strange sequence of events which followed his final return to England in 1882. I do not propose to enter here into the hotchpotch of disreputable libels which were directed at him over the next ten years, for various reasons, by a man named Wallis Budge (Fig. 24). What is worth noting is Rassam's reaction. As sometimes happens with honest men,—Layard called him "one of the honestest and most straightforward fellows I ever knew"²⁴—he gives the impression of having been incapable of coping with dishonourable behaviour, let alone with the English xenophobia which accompanied it. At one stage he even appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the figure who embodied both Protestant Christianity, the guiding principle of Rassam's life, and the protection which England was meant to offer to oppressed minorities and others in need of justice. Surely, even if British protection was no longer meaningful in Turkey, here in England justice would be done. The appeal was

²¹ *Asshur*, 200.

²² *Asshur*, 284.

²³ *Catalogue*, xxiv.

²⁴ *Waterfield*, *op. cit.*, 478.

ineffective. A libel suit was no more than modestly successful. Rassam had a loyal circle of English friends, including Theophilus Pinches, the country's finest Assyriologist and another victim of the unscrupulous Budge, but it seemed that the public was no longer interested in him. He could not even find a publisher for his archaeological memoirs in England. Having devoted his best years to maintaining British interests, Rassam spent the remainder of his long life—he died in 1910—embittered and officially neglected (Fig. 25). Another book, his autobiography, still remained unpublished, and has since perished.

It is more satisfying to step back in time, to 1878, and close with a glance at one more of Rassam's discoveries, characteristically disputed by Budge, namely the Bronze Gates of Balawat. These were bronze bands that decorated two pairs of doors in a town near Nimrud. Fragments of them, probably found by grave-diggers, were seen by Rassam on the market, and he tracked them to their place of origin. In excavating, he had to negotiate with two sets of well-armed villagers, whose graves covered a large portion of the mound, a problem which Lady Mallowan, our President, will remember from the School's own work there in 1956–7.²⁵ The embossed decorations on these bronze bands are among the most informative and circumstantial illustrations of ancient campaigns and warfare in existence (Fig. 26). As with so many of the things Rassam found, an hour would be far too short a time to discuss these monuments. It is pleasing to recall that, at Balawat, the Iraq School played its own part in the vindication of Hormuzd Rassam, demonstrating once again the integrity of his records. Without his work, for all its shortcomings, we would be far poorer today.

²⁵ M. E. L. Mallowan, *Twenty-five Years of Mesopotamian Discovery* (1956), 79–80.

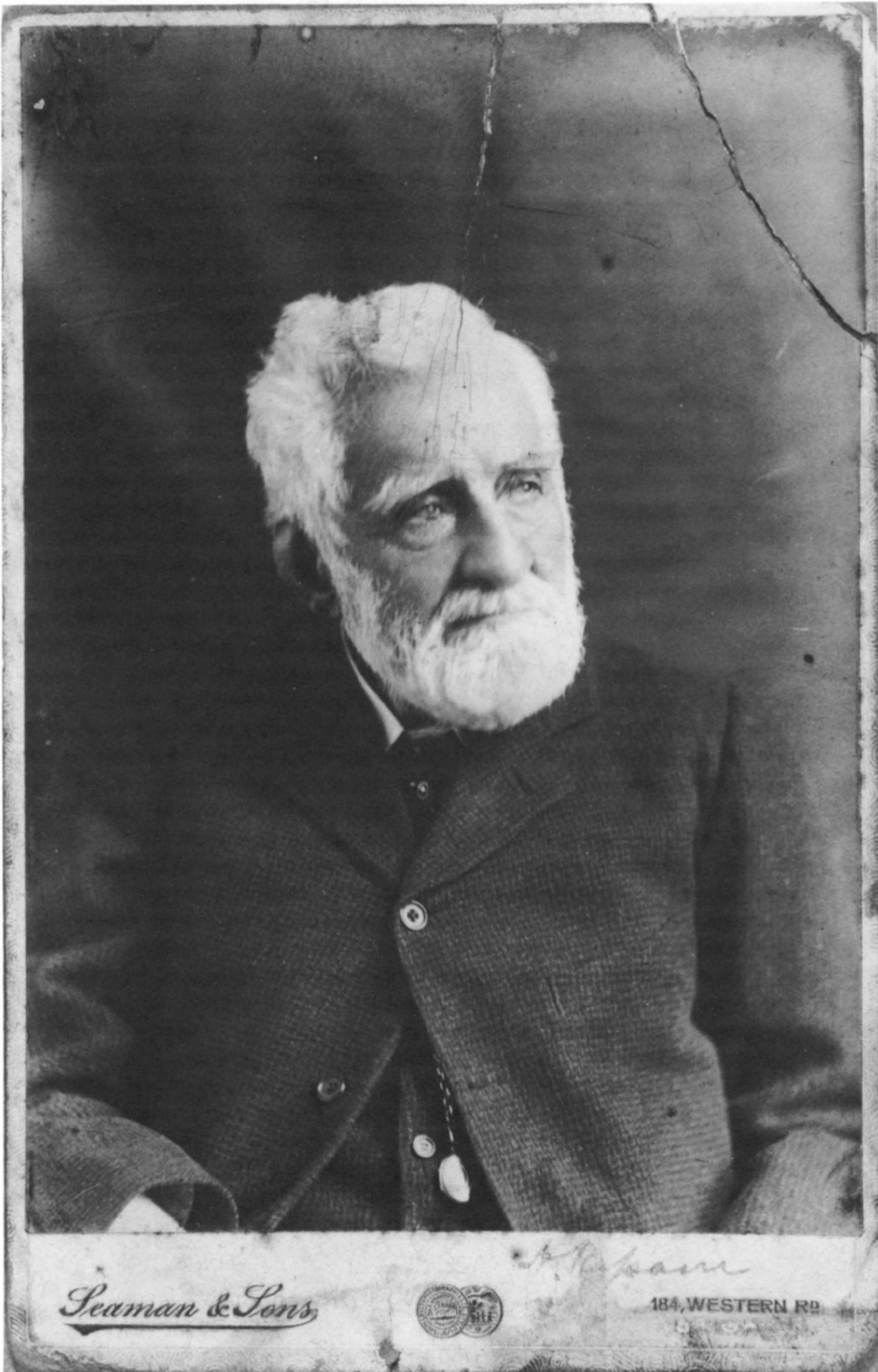


Fig. 25 Hormuzd Rassam towards the end of his life. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Dr I. L. Finkel.



Fig. 26 Detail from Balawat Gate relief, showing the construction of a bridge of boats (WA 124660).