Misfit Objects: Layard's Excavations in Ancient Mesopotamia and the Biblical Imagination in mid-nineteenth Century Britain

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In 1852, an engraved image caught the attention of the readers of the *Illustrated London News*. The engraving showed the impressive entrance of the newly-built British Museum in London (see Fig. 1). A large ramp leads up to the museum entrance and is surrounded by workmen and gentlemen, presumably curators, who witness a spectacular scene: on the ramp, an enormous sculpture of a winged lion is being trundled into the museum. This image became iconic for the successful integration of such archaeological finds into the British Museum. What the engraving did not depict are the difficulties and the failures the excavators and trustees of the British Museum were facing at the excavation site and in the museum. The winged lion was uncovered as part of the excavations of the British adventurous explorer and collecting antiquarian Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894) in Ancient Mesopotamia, a land previously mainly known through the Bible.¹ Layard undertook his first excavation in Nimrud (that he first mistook for Nineveh) in 1845. The shipping of artefacts to Britain, especially of the Great Bull and Lion, was documented as a national event in the *Illustrated London News*. For its readers in Victorian Britain, the lion was thus much more than an impressive and colossal statue. The sculpture was the first of a row of materialised proofs – the most valuable of which were excavated objects bearing inscriptions – that were meant to confirm what had hitherto been subject to peoples' imagination and religious belief. In October 1848 the first cargo arrived at the British Museum. Layard returned to England in the same year, where his book *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849) became a bestseller.² Reviews of Layard's book in the popular press promoted the idea that the Victorians were uncovering their own past by digging in the archaeological remains of places mentioned in the Bible. Above all, the book conveyed the impression that the excavations were designed as a purposeful enterprise with a clear goal. In contrast to the parallel French excavations, for which museum display and the expansion of the national collection was entirely the driving focus, in Britain the enterprise was a mission to trace biblical accounts.

In 1800, the Bible was a virtually unchallenged canonical text in the intellectual and religious life of the western world (geology being the only, but not uncontested, challenger, with respect to the age of the earth). Alongside classical sources the Bible remained the main source for a history of Mesopotamia until 1845 when excavations started. The Victorian view on the biblical land was also shaped by artistic depiction of Mesopotamia: paintings and drawings focussing mainly on Babylon's ambivalent role. The mid nineteenth-century therefore materialised the Bible to a hitherto unknown extent. Besides the excavated objects, photographs of biblical sites also helped shape and alter the imagination of the biblical land.³ These objects and depictions enhanced and prohibited biblical imagination at the same time. On the one hand they seemed authentic guarantors of the biblical past and thus seemingly rectified the imagination. On the other hand, their unstable status – we need to keep in mind that both photography and archaeology were still in their infancy and their ontology was unfamiliar – did not allow clear answers to the question of what archaeological truth, by comparison with imaginative truth, might reveal.

Fig. 1.

"Reception of Nineveh Sculptures at the British Museum." *Illustrated London News* 28 Feb. 1852.

Layard's excavation at Nimrud laid the groundwork for an academic discipline later to be called 'biblical archaeology,' which explored how the Bible related to the discoveries in the region. This discipline would later institutionalise and rationalise the study of the Bible. However, when Layard, in 1853, listed some fifty-five rulers, cities and countries appearing both in the Old Testament and the excavated Assyrian texts in one of his publications, archaeology did not yet exist as a discipline (*Discoveries*). Finding artefacts, nevertheless, made history and the Bible real, tangible, objective and accessible. They offered the opportunity for a reassessment of the imagination while at the same time creating a new image of the biblical lands, based on an increasing knowledge of the objects that were taken to Britain.

Given that Layard hoped to find biblical objects, it is not surprising that research on the excavations has long been preoccupied by the question of how the discoveries in the region related to the Bible. What exactly was it that Layard and the British Museum, which supported the expedition, were hoping to find? And once the objects were in the British Museum, how were they hoping to gain new knowledge through these finds? Indeed, what tends to be less studied is the fact that these objects were initially without a clear status. More than that, they also threatened to destabilise European canons once they became the subject of further investigation. In other words, confirmation of the classical European canon and the proof of biblical truth did not always work. It is such instability that this article will investigate, by paying close attention to two subjects: first, the uncertainty involved in Layard's excavations when 'looking' for suitable objects. Second, the potential these objects had not just to confirm, but also to destabilise, threaten and even dethrone both the European canon and peoples' imaginative understanding of the biblical biblical land.

At the time when the objects Layard had excavated arrived in London, the museum's trustees began to lay out the plan for the modern structure by dividing the museum into different departments and appointing keepers to look after these specialised sections. This, however, was a difficult undertaking as far as the finds from Mesopotamia were concerned. Though the winged lion aroused remarkable

interest at first, many other items from Mesopotamia did not go on display because the trustees of the museum did not know where to put them nor what to do with them. These objects – some of them oddly shaped, curious sculptures, others illegible and undeciphered cuneiform tablets – seemed not to fit already existing ideas of display and canon formation previously shaped by art objects from places such as Greece or Egypt. Lacking preparation in respect to their display and cultural contextualization, the imaginary role the objects Layard had excavated were supposed to take on had to be defined and created upon their arrival.

Therefore, in looking again at the the image of the lion's entrance to the British Museum from the *Illustrated London News*, what is more interesting for the purposes of this article are the broken pieces in front of the building hardly visible on the foreground. The impressive façade of the museum is less intriguing than its doorsteps, representing the threshold between the outside and the inside of the museum, of which the objects were meant to become a part. This article will therefore focus more on the chaos in the museum's storage area than the organised exhibition space visible to museum visitors. The article will thus not discuss curatorial decisions about where the lion would be displayed once in the museum, but rather that of the curators wondering where to 'place' it both actually and epistemologically, indeed how it might be characterised and imagined. In examining the arrival of archaeological objects within the realms of peoples' imagination of biblical truths, this article thus examines the period when the objects had just been excavated but were not yet part of a systematic collection in the museum. It is obvious from the excavation's archives that neither instruction before nor after the excavation followed a clearly determined logic. Contemporary histories of the expedition, for example Layard's own *Nineveh and its Remains*, retrospectively narrated the finds and their arrival as an organised and well-thought out event. But it is clear that the excavations formed a temporal and spatial event during which the excavated objects seemed to have 'no status' and their meaning was still negotiable. Indeed, this negotiation did not stop when the objects left Mesopotamia but continued once they had arrived in Europe.

On the Building Site

The historian Krzysztof Pomian claims that objects entering a museum start their second life: they become 'semiophors' (carrier of signs): objects with two faces that mediate between the visible and the invisible to which they refer (32). But the state of the British Museum between 1850 and 1870 reveals that the meaning of objects after they had been excavated was neither neutral, static nor clear once they had entered the museum or the exhibition space. The museum was just another step in the selection and classification process of the Mesopotamian finds; it was in a way an extension of the field. This became particularly apparent in an incident that took place around the same time as Layard left London for Mesopotamia. In 1843 Christian Jorgensen Thomsen, keeper of the new National Museum of Denmark, visited the British Museum. Thomsen was famous for having introduced a new chronological scheme (the Three Ages Classification System of prehistoric chronology) that he used for classification when new objects arrived at his museum. Thomsen instituted a standardised record for each group of finds. This approach was new, and it sought to turn archaeology into a measurable practice.

In London, however, things were different. When Thomsen visited the metropolis he was unimpressed "by the British antiquities everywhere covered in dust and not much esteemed" (qtd. in Briggs 227-226).⁴ Furthermore, he reported that the

staff at the museum was lacking expertise. It remains unclear if Thomsen had advertised the Three Age System properly, but it is likely that the chaotic state of British archaeology would have left it unable to respond. However, Thomsen dealt with the keeper of Antiquities, Edward Hawkins, who was also part of the Central Committee of the British Archaeological Association. This association had to struggle with disputes and conflicts due to its disorganised and undefined structure, which soon led the association to split into two parts. The internal conditions of London's new and old Antiquarian societies and institutions were thus far from favourable when Thomsen visited London. When his younger colleague J.J.A. Worsaae visited London three years later, his report was equally unflattering: "There was absolutely nothing in the way of a generally accepted archaeological system. [Most archaeologists were] utter dilettantes, who had no concept of the chronological sequence of the monuments and antiquities [. . .] I think I can state without being immodest that my trip was a sort of archaeological Viking raid, which served to establish the foundations of the [. . .] Danish system's influence on the British Isles" (qtd. in Rowley-Conway 108-09). Worsaae was shocked by the organisation of the museum:

The British Museum is an utter shambles! Only the Egyptian and Roman antiquities are beginning to be improved [. . .]; but there is no prospect of this for their national antiquities. I demonstrated at length to Hawkins [. . .], about the importance of paying them more regard than has previously been the case. They promised they would, but the situation is awkward. (qtd. in Rowley-Conway 796)⁵

Worsaae concluded that British archaeologists must take greater care in recording the location of excavated items. His visit shows that practitioners at the British Museum were clearly aware of the Three Age System but felt no need to adopt it. Thomsen and Worsaae found themselves and their ideas entangled within conflicted groups: a complex network of associations and societies that could not even agree on the most trivial decisions. It was therefore less surprising that the reactions to new classification systems came across as apathetic and uninterested. What is more, the Assyrian finds that were to arrive were certainly no easier to classify than anything already held by the museum. This incident illuminates the context for Layard's excavations and the arrival of his excavated objects. But how did the excavations in 1845 at what he thought was the biblical city of Nineveh actually work?

Objects Without Status

In 1845, with archaeology still without disciplinary foundations, methods of excavation were precarious and knowledge on the site and the finds very much restricted to the imagination. What exactly Layard and his team imagined they would find in Mesopotamia is not obvious. Certainly the main inspiration for the excavations was the Bible itself, intertwined with mostly sumptuous fine art images of an ambiguous Mesopotamian past. But how would the discovered objects themselves fit with this image? How were selection criteria to be defined, if knowledge on the objects was unknown and the inscriptions on the many clay tablets and slabs were unreadable because they had yet to be deciphered? Processes of familiarization with the finds and new excavation criteria happened gradually. Layard and the trustees in London at the British Museum had to figure out step by step what it *was* they were actually interested in according to their vague idea of an imaginary biblical orient. The objects were not supposed to create a new imaginative view of Mesopotamia.

Rather they were supposed to fit neatly with what had previously been shaped by scripture and art.

In 1846, Layard informed the British Museum about the discoveries he made at Nimrud and in the neighbourhood (CMM 9 Aug. 1845-17th April 1847).⁶ When describing the nature of the objects, his terminology was vague and general. Layard reported, for example, that "sculptures of interest had been discovered in the excavations," (CMM 11 Nov. 1848) that nothing "of importance" was discovered or that he had "discovered eight chambers, but found nothing capable of being transported to England," (CMM July 1847)⁷ but the meaning of the adjective 'capable' in this context remained unclear. Layard thus refrained from being more specific in terms of what exactly it was he was looking for or what he had imagined he had found; perhaps because it was not clear to himself.

According to the museum the selecting process required "an experienced eye" (Letter To Unknown Recipient 20 July 1848). But the kind of experience that was needed was not specified. Soon the museum realised that Layard – though a respected Antiquarian with an interest and knowledge in Western art – had no expertise in order to fulfil the different tasks that were required, such as drawing sculptures or choosing clay tablets with inscriptions and copying them. Lacking an alternative, however, they asked him to do so nevertheless. Being aware of his shortcomings, Layard admitted that he was not "accustomed to the copying of cuneiform inscriptions, and that therefore some steps should be taken for the preservation of the monuments he might discover, otherwise they would be entirely lost" (CMM 29 Jan. 1848).

From the numerous sculptures discovered, those selected were deemed to deserve a place in the museum. What made them achieve this status is not accounted for in more detail. Once Layard reported that "a very fine and well-preserved pair of human headed winged bulls had been discovered," and expressed hopes that the trustees would authorise the attempt at "moving [...] those splendid specimens". He further reported a "curious discovery" of sixteen copper lions, all in one spot, and number of alabaster vases with cuneiform inscriptions (CMM 29 Nov. 1848). Decisions on what, how and when such objects would be transferred back to Britain were mainly subject to chance. Located both under the ground and also beyond peoples' imagination of the biblical land, it was impossible fully to imagine the quantity, quality and the nature of the material that might, in theory, be discovered. Lacking criteria for selection, comparison to objects Layard had already excavated and their reception in London was the only 'tool' available. External forces, such as the competition with the French, were also an important factor and made the selection of objects appear random. At one point Layard was sure that the "excavations had been attended with considerable success, that his finds were exhausted but that he was afraid to leave off, as the French Consul would immediately carry on the work" (CMM 11 March 1848). Uncertainty did not only concern the other colonial power, but also the degree of discovery, so that Layard could only guess at the location of any future excavations. He reported that "only a portion of the great Mound at Nimrud had yet been explored, and that several similar Mounds existed from which it was reasonable to expect that many most interesting objects might be obtained" (CMM 11 Nov. 1848).

While the excavators were thus slowly familiarizing themselves with the surroundings and the finds, the actual problem was that the mere excavation of the finds did not suffice in making sense of them. In order to accommodate the finds to peoples' beliefs and already existing cultural imagination, their semantic value had to be recognised and defined. This process did not take place without obstacles.

Elsewhere in this volume, Shawn Malley has shown how the excavated objects were ultimately reanimated and imposed with meaning through writing. In poetry and other texts the silent objects were brought to life and Victorians offered the opportunity to imagine the context and the surroundings from which they derived. But these ideas were still committed to literary frameworks and detached from the actual finds. The objects themselves remained a challenge that nobody knew how to face. Moreover, the fact that some of them bore inscriptions made them more obscure and resistant to either rational categorization or the imagination.

Hidden Evidence

Besides the monumental sculptures ornamenting the gates of the palace, Layard was mainly instructed to send inscribed slabs back to the British Museum (CMM 24 Oct. 1850). Other than the 'curious' sculptures, inscribed slabs and the clay tablets had an immediate cultural value for people in Britain. The problem that hindered this value, however, was that nobody could read the script. First attempts at cuneiform decipherment had only just started and fundamental historical and biblical questions remained unanswered. It was not known which language these wedge-shaped scripts (impressed into clay with a reed) represented, and it was uncertain to which linguistic family they belonged. As items carrying inscriptions they all appeared alike and remained impenetrable. Thus, no valuable insight could be gained from their first appraisal, which is why they were classified and determined according to their origin and specific visual features.

This was also the reason why the selection of objects (as far as the clay tablets were concerned) was more a matter of chance than procedure. For Layard, it was the potential of the exhumed objects that counted. But even the nature of this potential could not be named; though it was clear that it could be manifold in theory. Hence, the uncertainty on the status and value of the finds applied especially to the undeciphered clay tablets. Several finds offered more uncertainty than proof. Some important biblical figures that were expected to appear, for example, remained entirely untraceable. That said, it would be misleading to assume that the excavators had not the slightest idea what they expected to find. Rather they imagined finding proof of a particular and canonical idea, such as a significant biblical narrative. The objects, however, seemed to resist any such imaginary frameworks and instead took on a life on their own. As agents in an already unstable environment, they were especially powerful because their meaning was hidden in the realms of undecipherable texts that required knowledge and expertise in order to be understood.

After Layard had returned to Nineveh, he discovered some 30,000 cuneiform tablets and fragments, located in and around the palace and neighbouring buildings. These tablets became known as the significant Koyunjik Collection, named after the main mound at Nineveh. Lacking decipherment skills to read the clay tablets, however, the excavators did not have a clear procedure for dealing with these objects. Layard accordingly noted that the walls were covered with "inscriptions in an unknown language." He used the visual criteria of form and outline in order to make conclusions about the objects' value. Even though he tried to find corresponding structures, the inscriptions looked "precisely similar" to him (Layard, *Nineveh* 34, 29, 332). That said, excavations did not take place in order to decipher. Rather, decipherment was an unexpected and additional challenge of the expedition.

While Layard was unable to decipher such objects, the then consul in Baghdad, Henry Creswick Rawlinson was an emerging expert in decipherment, if not in excavation. The trustees had hoped that through Rawlinson's knowledge, given he

worked on the decipherment of the script at the same time, the finds "may be soon made to contribute to the increase of historical knowledge" (CMM 24 April 1847). Not having the expertise himself – especially as far as the cuneiform inscriptions were concerned – it was thus not Layard, but Rawlinson, who was supposed to make sense of the finds. But this semantic process did not take place before the objects arrived in the museum. They had to be selected first. Until then, and even when they were in the museum, their meaning had to be evoked and imagined.

After 1852, when decipherment progressed and knowledge about the finds increased, expectations of which finds might be of particular interest became more specific. Layard thus expected "the removal to England of several series of bas-reliefs remaining in different chambers at Kojunjik, and amongst them the Sculptures representing the Siege of Lachish." As well as some "fine pavement inscriptions from Nimrud" (CMM 12 June 1852) Layard described the finds as "valuable and interesting", one chamber representing the Siege of Lachish "with the name of the King himself". He ensured that "the slabs can easily be removed; and that the cost will be inconsiderable: and above all that the matter is more urgent in as much as the Agents of another power are now near the spot" (CMM 22 Jan. 1853). The other power Layard meant was, of course, the French and to surpass them was especially significant in this case. Lachish was one of the chief cities of the kingdom of Judah. It was captured by the Assyrian King Sennacherib (704-681 BC) and mentioned in the Bible, which is why in Layard's view the sculptures were "among the most important which have been excavated." The next goal consisted of finding other objects "of great interest" and "more material alike." Even though he could not read cuneiform, Layard made transcripts of the inscriptions that were sent to the museum. This implied errors in the copying process. Some of the inscriptions were therefore preferably detached from the original sculptures or, if not bodily removed, photographed or even cast. Layard, who had perhaps consulted cuneiform experts in London, later stated that he was satisfied "in respect to the identity of the King, and to the general accuracy of the interpretation of the inscriptions" (CMM 12 June 1852).

When Layard retired from archaeology in 1853 and took up politics again, Rawlinson took over responsibility for the British excavations in Assyria. Rawlinson regarded the excavations of sculptures as exhausted. His interest lay clearly in the inscriptions. Rawlinson was thus the immediate pioneer of a shift from object-based to text-based archaeology in Mesopotamia. The inscribed slabs and tablets became a challenge of an even greater extent for re-assessing the imagined biblical lands. The meanings of the inscriptions were ultimately less ambiguous than the images or sculptures and therefore gave the promise of truth about the imagined sites of biblical narratives.

Accordingly, in 1855 an official rule demanded that artefacts were selected, "according to quality, state of preservation, legibility, historical and scientific value, variety, chronological succession as aim."⁸ Explicitly looking for ways of identifying the kings who constructed the palaces, the British Museum encouraged Rawlinson "to make any use he thinks proper of the information he derives from the Antiquities which pass through his hands" (CMM 9 Jan. 1847). Expectations that the inscriptions would match the imaginary scenes evoked by biblical narratives were thus high. Yet some finds offered more uncertainty than proof: prior to 1850, for example, King Pul was considered to be the first Assyrian conqueror, followed immediately by King Tiglath-Pileser, based on biblical testimony. However, he remained untraceable in all excavated objects. Therefore some believed him to be identical with Tiglath-Pileser.⁹ Such sources did not only challenge the exclusivity of European canonical traditions

and became problematic events in Western intellectual discourse, they also challenged the imagination and provoked a reassessment of the imaginative biblical land and biblical narratives.

Later, in the 1870s, the status of biblical account reached its highlight when the most problematic event concerning biblical proof took place: the discovery of an Assyrian account of a 'Deluge' myth (now known as the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh epic) by George Smith.¹⁰ Smith had identified fragments of a broken version of the story of the flood described in Genesis and had been employed by the British Museum to join fragments of the flood tablet. This Assyrian-Babylonian flood myth bore some very close resemblances to the flood described in Genesis. Consequently, public interest was high and Smith was paid by the *Daily Telegraph* in 1873 to travel to Mesopotamia to search for further flood-related material. The narrative on the tablet, however, proved to be substantially different from that of the Bible in key details and thus challenged the Old Testament account as testimony of a unique, worldwide event, which (according to some) had left traces in the geological record. The tablets containing the flood myth are one example of how inscriptions resided unremarked within the museum until someone started working with them. At the time of their excavation, their value laid merely in the *potential* of the script, which made them both valuable and dangerous at the same time. Still, around 1900, for example, one of the curators of the collection of Henry Wellcome admitted: "[my] knowledge of cuneiform is so slight that it was difficult to tell the best to buy. I based my judgement however to a large extent on the condition they were in, and the legibility of the characters." Wellcome had no "idea as to whether they will be worth working on or not" (Thompson).¹¹

From the Transit Zone to the Museum

"A large Bull and Lion entire, the Obelisk described in a former letter, between 70 and 80 Bas reliefs, the copies and impressions of a considerable number of inscriptions, and an interesting Collection of bronzes, pottery, and small objects of Assyrian art, and should have above two hundred, probably about two hundred and fifty drawings almost all of complicated and highly interesting subjects" (CMM 24 April 1847). This list contained what Layard had forwarded to Bagdad in 1847. The challenge began, as Julian Reade points out, much earlier, before objects entered the museum. They began during transportation due to "the sheer difficulty of lifting, packing, handling and conserving small unstable antiquities, since the expertise did not yet exist and treatments were speculative" (18). The logistics of the Empire provided further challenges. Layard packed the finds and hoped for the cases to be floated to Baghdad where they proceeded to Bombay to be shipped, as soon as the river rose. The bull and lion, however, were thought to weigh nearly 20 tons and thus remained in Bussorah due to insecurities about how these should be transported to England. Some proposed that the heavy sculptures and reliefs should be sawn in pieces and rejoined in England. It happened frequently that Layard reported of objects that had been "destroyed by the shameful manner in which they had been treated at Bombay" or that "some valuable objects" had been stolen. Many of them simply went astray (CMM 29 Jan. 1848).

The British Museum was also constantly short of money and space as the excavations took place, and the trustees did not know how to handle the arrival of new objects. They had to limit the import of new artefacts by trusting recommendations of colleagues in the field. In order to do this, workers were at one point instructed to gather only those objects that "either from superiority of workmanship, or from

historical connection, or from elucidation of the peculiar manners of the age are most remarkable." The trustees concluded that anything merely equal or inferior should not be sent to Britain (Rawlinson, Letter to Ellis). The definitions of inferiority and superiority were ill-defined. The Mesopotamian objects were just an additional problem in an already cramped collection. The challenges did not therefore end once the objects had arrived in Britain; in some ways they had only just begun. The problem the trustees in London were now facing was how to organise, classify and store all the new objects.

The first hurdle consisted of finding an appropriate space for the finds (Reade 617-18). The excavated items were first exhibited in the British Museum, though its trustees were not properly prepared for their storage or display. Ideas related to the question how these objects could be displayed were rather conflicted due to their exotic origin. As Frederick Bohrer aptly notes, "they were something between a proper object of study, a trophy, and a curiosity" ("The Times and Spaces" 203).¹² Display became a serious problem, not only in terms of space, but also in terms of intellectual organization. It was not obvious how the objects could be arranged, especially in relation to Hawkins's "scientific principles," a chronological arrangement in which collections of Ancient Sculptures, and "the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Grecian Monuments would be placed in three parallel lines through which Visitors would pass in succession" (CMM 24 Oct. 1850, 12 April 1851). But should the Assyrian objects be with the Egyptian sculptures? Did they deserve to be right next to the Greek marbles? Or right in between the two? Bohrer thus infers: "The works were still essentially a curiosity in the British Museum, if not actually a burden" ("The Times and Spaces" 204). Were they art at all or mainly entertainment?

When, for example, the bull and other antiquities arrived, Hawkins wished them in the centre of the famous West Wing, but the spaces were occupied. The Trustees thus directed the bull to be placed temporarily in the Hall. While the Nineveh slabs were thought to be "invaluable" and protected by glass, the exotic sculpture was to be "protected by a sufficient fence" (CMM 26 June 1852, 8 Oct 1850). This promoted the idea that it was not only the bull who had to be protected from visitors, but also that visitors had to be protected from the bull. The fluid and polysemantic nature of both the sculptures and tablets, however, made them even more valuable as objects containing several potential meanings simultaneously.

Hawkins's plans did not take shape for several years, partly because the new objects kept arriving and the exhibition space became more and more crowded. It was noted several times that "immediate preparations for the erection of an adequate Gallery" for the Assyrian objects should be made (CMM 18 Aug. 1851), but Hawkins's power was limited and had to be exercised in accordance with the wishes of the trustees, who seemed to rely on Hawkins when nobody quite knew how to proceed. Hawkins, for example, asked the trustees for instructions as to where the large Bulls and Lions from Assyria were to be erected." The trustees stated that they were "unable to give any definite instructions until they receive from Mr Hawkins a detailed report of the manner in which he proposed to arrange the Assyrian Antiquities." They demanded that Hawkins "should without delay suggest for the consideration of the Trustees, the places in which he deems that those large objects may be most advantageously placed" (CMM 11 Oct. 1851). It seems that everyone tried to shift the problem to another authority. A sub-committee was formed to solve the ongoing problems (CMM 22 Nov. 1851). While they were still looking for solutions another bull and lion arrived, so that space now had to be created with "as little delay as possible" (CMM 28 Feb. 1852).

While the large sculptures and slabs were at least comparable to previous museum objects from Egypt or Greece, one problem remained. How should the small cuneiform tablets be displayed? On the one hand they were of immense cultural value due to their content, but was the museum an appropriate place to exhibit script that no museum visitor could read? Hawkins and the trustees consulted cuneiform experts to enquire what might be the best mode of exhibiting smaller objects from Nimrud and Koyunjik, but the clay tablets never found a proper home outside the walls of the museum storage, where experts continued their work of decipherment (CMM 9 June 1855). The problem of placement continued for years, and when in 1856 another 94 packages of Assyrian Antiquities arrived, the museum was urged to re-think its structure in order to display at least a portion of the newly arrived Assyrian Sculptures (CMM 12 April 1856). There was simply too much material and too few ideas about the meanings of the objects, either in the present or in a more enlightened future.

The production of visual imagery that contextualised the objects was one way of trying to bring order to this confusion. Their function was to evoke and enhance the image that Layard's reports described in words. They were meant to rationalise and control the hybrid meanings of the finds. The pictures, however, actually set yet another imaginary framework: of an ordered, Orientalist project. One watercolour drawing by Frederick Charles Cooper depicts the scene described in Cooper's diary: the lowering of the Winged Lions in the Palace of Ashurnasirpal (see Fig. 2).¹³ The drawing emphatically visualises the clarity and goal-directedness his diary entries suggest. The image contains an illuminated group lowering the gateway in the centre of the image, a second group of workmen in the front of the image, decoratively arranged locals on camels on the left, and a differently dressed person with a cap briskly outstretching an arm just above the lowered figure on the right; presumably Layard. Its precise, almost symmetrical composition suggests a clearly organised space. As Bohrer has rightly articulated, Cooper's images with workmen usually standing in groups clustered according to their function make his images a "paradigm of the well-ordered worksite," with the work itself being placed under authority and carried out in a sequence (*Orientalism* 189). They were thus far more than documents of an archaeological expedition: they encompassed the visual report of a travelling witness to the Orient. Images of this kind mark the fact that the British had been there while at the same time accounting for the popular imagination of what constituted the Orient. They did not, however, offer any fresh truths about the objects depicted, but rather provided yet another imaginatively constructed layer of meaning. These pictorial accounts, then, did not stabilise the meaning of the objects but reinforced their statuslessness and their imaginative plurality.

Fig. 2.

Frederick Charles Cooper, *Winged Lions in the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud*. Watercolour. n.d.

Conclusion

Even though the excavators did not know exactly what they were looking for, the retrospective reports that were communicated to the public made excavation look ordered and rational. Layard's publications and the visual material involved in these retrospective narratives support this idea. Like the text in Layard's books and numerous newspaper articles, the pictorial images shaped the reception of the archaeological enterprise. The pandemonium and uncertainty involved during the event itself do not enter these retroactive recordings. Literary and visual tools were needed to account for prevailing ideas of an imagined biblical Orient but did nothing to enable a greater understanding of the independently existing finds.

Though the museums embodied the reconfiguration of the order of objects, in London, the story continued. Thomsen's and Worsae's reports of their visits reflect the disorder and dispute between antiquarian societies, but also the ongoing conservatism and apathetic reactions of the trustees in the museum whose attitude seemed defiant. Furthermore, the complex relationship to the collection curators, commissioners and the public denied the potential for change (Bohrer, *Orientalism* 111). The museum was also facing major problems in defining the status of the new objects, but also in organizing the collections, keeping track of their origins, and even appreciating that these finds represented a thoroughly new artistic and cultural tradition. When Hawkins took Prince Albert on a tour through the museum he explained that these objects were "without a price"; nobody could buy them and they cost the country nothing (Larsen 111, 92). Pearson's description of the institution might be partly right: "In London, the disorder and chaos of the excavations was symbolically transported from primitive origins as Nineveh arrived in packing cases

and overflowed from the steps of the British Museum. [. . .] The newspapers, the reviews, and the exhibited reconstructions all enter into a network of cultural relationships with the attempt at a 'disciplined' Museum display" (58). The objects were certainly meant to enter a "larger world for reasons of physical as well as ideological efficacy," where they could be evaluated, studied and circulated (Bohrer, "The Times and Spaces" 216). The practical transposition of these high aims was challenging and disorder continued within the walls of the museum. This applied especially to the vast Koyunjik collection of cuneiform tablets, which was characterised by disorder from its inception (Walker 186-87). Though presenting a historically significant part of the collection, hardly any tablets were on display. The museum thus created its own Assyrian reality, distinct from the actual interests of antiquarians concerned with biblical record and decipherment. But in the storage area an efficient system to allow the handling of the objects did not exist either. In short, when the objects arrived in the museum, they by no means entered a 'disciplined' space that opposed the disorder of the excavations. The collection at the British Museum thus remained a set of polysemantic items; the museum itself made it impossible for objects to remain uncontested in their meaning and even in their importance. The problems this caused for the imagined biblical and Oriental world was precisely their intransigent nature as museum objects: they were not imaginary accessory parts, not semiophors, nor metaphors, not analogies nor even symbols. They were simply the very things themselves: objects without singular status that might exist within the cultural imaginary but whose multiple instabilities and their resistance to knowledge placed them in a position of such ambiguity that even the imagination failed to make sense of them.

Notes

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1. See also Malley, "Nineveh 1851: An Archaeography" in this volume and his recently published book: *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian England: the Case of Assyria, 1845-1854*.

2. For visualization and ancient Mesopotamia, see Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* and Reade, "Nineteenth-Century Nimrud: Motivation, Orientation, Conservation." For Layard's drawings, see Malley, "Austin Henry Layard and the Periodical Press: Middle Eastern Archaeology and the Excavation of Cultural Identity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain." For the excavations, see Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840-1860*.

3. See Brusius.

4. See also Rowley-Conwy, *From Genesis to Prehistory: the Archaeological Three Age System and its Contested Reception in Denmark, Britain, and Ireland*.

5. See also Malley, "Nineveh 1851: An Archaeography" in this volume.

6. The abbreviation "CMM" refers to the British Museum Committee Meeting Minutes held on microfilm at the British Museum, London. See bibliography.

7. See also Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains* 343.

8. See Rawlinson.

9. An assumption which was later confirmed by the German Assyriologist Eberhard Schrader. See Holloway, "The Quest for Sargon, Pul and Tiglath-Pileser in the Nineteenth Century" and "Biblical Assyria and Other Anxieties in the British Empire" 8-12.

10. See Damrosch.

11. Thanks to Ruth Horry.

12. See also Larsen, 99-107.

13. See also Curtis.

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