

7. Investigating Nineveh: a Great Adventure

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When Paul-Émile Botta's (1802-1870) spade hit the site of Kuyunjik in December 1842, little did he know that this marked a new era in the discipline of archaeology: the beginning of controlled excavations in the Middle East (although it is debatable whether the word 'controlled' can justifiably be applied to archaeology at this time). Having found 'nothing but bricks and insignificant fragments', he moved shortly afterwards to the site of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Šarukkin). Despite this intermezzo, Nineveh, including the strategic settlement mounds of Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus, did not have to wait long for new devotees. The spectacular material from Khorsabad that the public could admire in Paris evoked great pride and enthusiasm in France, but also feelings of rivalry in Great Britain; the British wanted a similar collection. In 1844, the British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894; fig. 7.1) was given permission to start fieldwork on the Assyrian site of Nimrud, which he believed to be ancient Nineveh. He revised his opinion shortly after he started extensive excavation work on Kuyunjik in 1849, exposing the immense treasures of Sennacherib's palace. This had to be ancient Nineveh. It brought him fame and recognition, but only a few years later – after an unsuccessful attempt to excavate Babylon – he transferred the Nineveh project to his younger partner, Hormuzd Rassam (1826-1910). The British Museum continued to explore the immense site of Nineveh until Reginald Campbell Thompson (1876-1941) left the site in 1932.

Quarrels over Nineveh marked the continuing rivalry between France and Great Britain; in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeological excavations became deeply interwoven with politics and international disputes. Although hampered by shipping accidents, local problems and sickness, archaeologists continued to unravel Nineveh's history. The focus of the investigations shifted from object-oriented studies in the nineteenth century towards a more historical-based project by Thompson and Max Mallowan (1904-1978), the husband of Agatha Christie. After World War II, talented Iraqi archaeologists – backed by their own Iraqi Department of Antiquities – continued to explore the ancient remains at Nebi Yunus and Kuyunjik, and managed to save the site from modern construction works by restoring the impressive ancient walls and towers. Foreign expeditions to the site were rare, with one exception being the project directed by David Stronach (1931) of the University of California between 1987 and 1990. At the Halzi Gate, this American team uncovered a battleground with multiple victims, probably the last survivors of Nineveh before its total destruction in 612 BC.

Exploring the site of Nineveh was and still is an adventure for both Western and local scholars. In the past, many of these explorers were politically engaged or instructed by their home country to survey the position on the ground. Nineveh, strategically located close to the important city of Mosul, became not only a battleground for archaeologists, but was also the site of disputes between France and Great Britain in the nineteenth century, the territorial division of the Middle East, the construction of the Baghdad railway and, more recently, the destruction of its heritage by ISIL.



Figure 7.1 Austen Henry Layard at Nineveh. Drawing by Solomon Caesar Malan, 1850.