

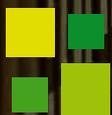
# NINEVEH THE GREAT CITY

Symbol of Beauty and Power

edited by  
L.P. Petit & D. Morandi Bonacossi

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# Nineveh, the Great City. Symbol of Beauty and Power

*Lucas P. Petit and Daniele Morandi Bonacossi*

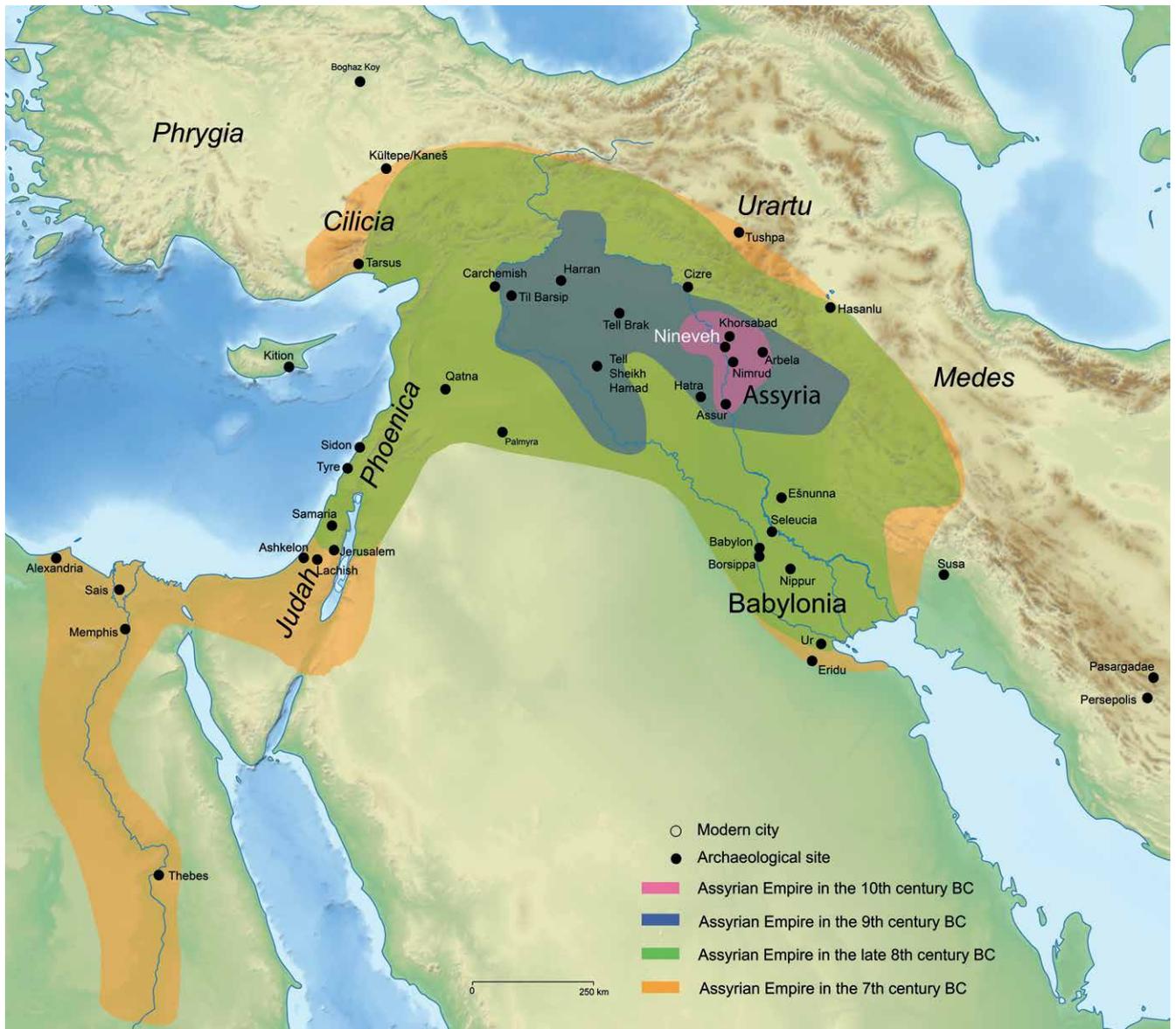
The remains of Nineveh, surrounded and partly encroached upon by the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, have lain for more than 9,000 years on the eastern bank of the River Tigris. Although the site encompasses a wide area of more than 700 ha, it contains but a few ruins that attest to its former beauty and power. Mentioned in classical and religious texts, the city remained known after its total destruction in 612 BC, and it was one of the first archaeological sites in the Middle East to attract travellers and scholars. Its antiquities, whether collected out of scientific interest or for commercial reasons, were transported to museums all over the world, where they continue to inspire visitors to this day. Passing by wall panels and other antiquities, however, few realize that Nineveh is not simply a city from the past, but that it is still producing history today, as sadly shown by the recent destructive events. This volume, written by scholars from all over the world, discusses the occupation history of Nineveh, the diversity of its material culture, how the city has inspired artists and archaeologists, and the way in which the site is maintained and perceived today.

## **From a village to the world's largest city**

Nineveh is characterized by two artificial mounds, or 'tells': Kuyunjik and the smaller mound of Nebi Yunus, both rising abruptly out of flat plains. Most of the excavations were carried out on these two hills, which contained the remains of temples and palaces. The area that was formerly occupied was many times larger, however, if we assume that the walls formed the outer limits of the Assyrian capital in the seventh century BC. A small river, the Khosr, which brings water from the mountainous area to the north, divides the site in two before joining the Tigris immediately west of Nineveh. The large southern part includes Nebi Yunus and is today partly covered by concrete houses, whereas the northern part remains relatively undisturbed.

The ancient city of Nineveh is situated in an area that is able to support a large population. The plains around the city are extremely fertile, and there is certainly enough precipitation to allow for rain-fed agriculture. With the kilometres-long irrigation channels constructed by the Assyrian kings, the inhabitants were able to survive long periods of drought. The city also occupied a strategic position along two rivers and formed one of the most important trade routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Considering all of these factors, it is hardly surprising that Nineveh became one of the most important cities in the world during the first millennium BC.

More than 2,000 years earlier, the site had already been home to a regional sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Ištar. Early cuneiform texts mention the importance of this town to the area, and excavations have revealed evidence, albeit sparse and patchy, of pre-historic and early historic occupation. In the second millennium and at the beginning of the first millennium BC, the inhabitants of present-day Northern Iraq – the Assyrians – gained in economic and political importance, and Nineveh, together with other Assyrian



cities, grew to be a symbol of beauty and power. Its impressive temples and large palaces were visible from far and wide, and the whole city, including its many domestic buildings, open places and agricultural land, was surrounded by a massive stone and mud brick wall. Busy roads led from fourteen gates to other cultural and economic centres in the Assyrian Empire, which stretched from present-day Egypt to the deepest interior of Iran.

It was Sennacherib (reigned 705/704–681 BC), son of the great Assyrian king Sargon II, who moved the empire’s capital to Nineveh shortly after his father died on the battlefield in 705 BC. The young king turned his back on Sargon’s capital Dur-Šarrukin, afraid that this city would bring him misfortune. The body of his father was never returned and buried – a fate the Assyrians would not wish on their worst enemies. Sennacherib immediately ordered the construction of public and private buildings, the interiors of which not only survived successive kings, but also the sack of Nineveh and beyond. The kilometre-long scenes on wall panels provide a wealth of information for historians and archaeologists. Scenes showing construction techniques, the landscape, clothing, warfare, campaigns, ceremonies, means of transport and even daily life were meticulously cut into the limestone slabs.

*The extent of the Assyrian Empire with the main sites mentioned in this volume. Topographic map © Sémhur/ Wikimedia Commons.*



*The site of Nineveh, May 2008.  
Photograph by Diane Siebrandt.*

But there is more that makes Nineveh a heavenly site for archaeologists and historians. Tens of thousands of clay tablets addressing a wide range of topics were discovered in the palace rooms. Many of them had belonged to the famous library of Ashurbanipal (reigned 668 – c. 627 BC), founded by a grandson of Sennacherib and one of the few Assyrian kings who was literate and highly learned. He gathered wisdom in Nineveh on a completely new scale, from every part of his empire and in every field of knowledge. Unfortunately for him, the Assyrian Empire could not be saved by knowledge alone. The many campaigns and oppressive actions of the Assyrian army caused a coalition of its former subject peoples to annihilate Nineveh in 612 BC, thus marking the end of almost 1,500 years of Assyrian domination. In the years that followed, only a few survivors remembered its great history, and soon after that, even this history became blurred. The ancient city of Nineveh became part of a lost past.

### **Famous, but lost**

Classical writers were in agreement that Nineveh had been impressive, and that it was maybe even the largest city ever built. Diodorus of Sicily and Xenophon used exaggerated measurements to describe the ancient city, though, which already lay in ashes at that time. News of the destruction of Nineveh reached the Mediterranean and was described in numerous sources. At the time of the imaginary king Sardanapallos, Nineveh had been besieged by an alliance of forces, among them the Babylonians and the Medes. Described as an oriental king who had more time for earthly pleasures than the serious business of governing, Sardanapallos was naturally destined to lose this battle. In the classical literature, Nineveh became a city of the past.

The image of Nineveh as an impressive oriental city whose final destruction was caused by bad governance and the indulgence of its avaricious king and inhabitants



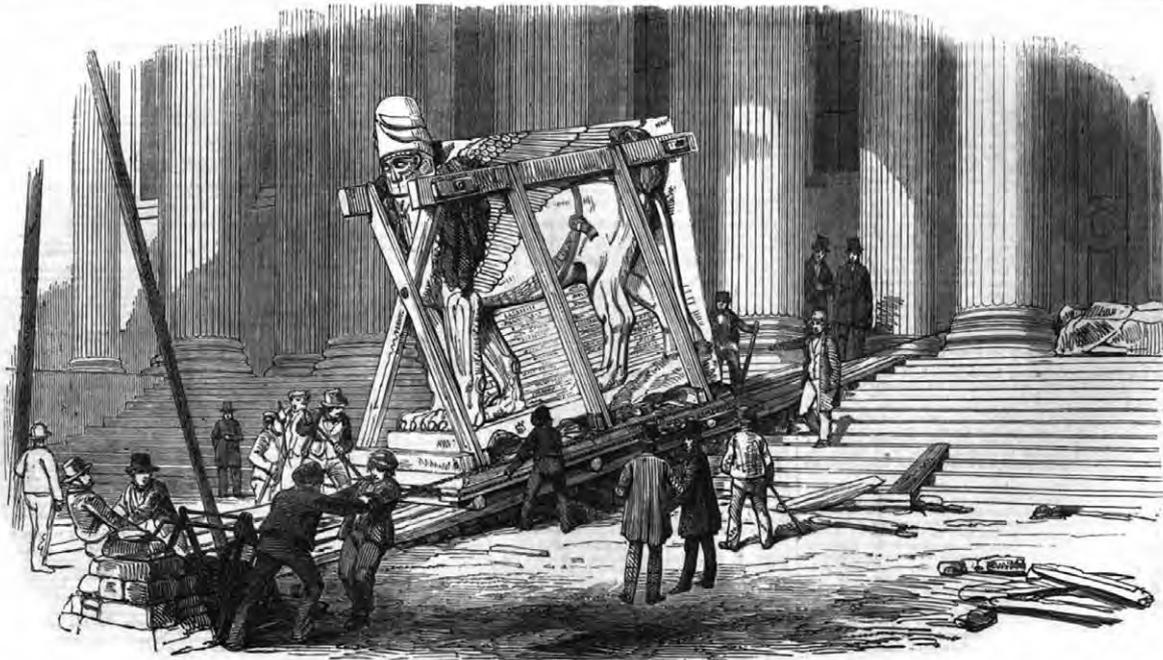
*The archaeological site of Nineveh surrounded and partly encroached by the modern city of Mosul (Neo-Assyrian walls in red).*



*Computer reconstruction of the Assyrian upper town (Kuyunjik) of Nineveh. Courtesy of Learning Sites, inc.*

would be remembered and repeated long after. Raging Neo-Assyrian kings from the city of Nineveh appear frequently in biblical and early Christian traditions, although they were not all-powerful, according to the narratives. In an echo of classical accounts, the city of Nineveh was described as a symbol of arrogance, idolatry and atrocity, but God showed the Ninevites his mercy because of their unexpected repentance. Nevertheless, Nineveh fell in the end, as the prophet Jonah had so ardently hoped.

Medieval writers and early Western artists echoed these biblical and classical ideas. Nineveh had been, in their view, a large oriental city that deserved its complete destruction, owing to the dishonest behaviour of its inhabitants. But information about the city's layout or outlook remained scarce and based on rumour. European representations of Nineveh were highly westernized, hardly distinguishable from any regular European city of the time. No one knew what this huge, important city might have looked like before its total annihilation. Shortly before the first explorations at Nineveh, several artists, poets and writers used the enigmatic story of Nineveh in their works. John Martin depicted the city's last, distrustful king Sardanapallos and the apocalyptic burning of Nineveh marvellously in his work *The Fall of Nineveh* (1828), and Lord Byron's tragedy *Sardanapalus* (1821) is just as well known.



RECEPTION OF NINEVEH SCULPTURES AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

### Investigating Nineveh: a great adventure

After the ruins of Nineveh were discovered by Western travellers, most famously Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), it would be another 54 years before the first scientific prospection was carried out. Claudius James Rich (1786-1821), a British consul, explored the ruins in 1820 and drew the first reliable map of the site. He paved the way for Layard, Rassam, and all the other scholars who, perhaps with the exception of Botta, were equally impressed by the beauty of this once-flourishing city on the banks of the Tigris River. They were excavating not only a city, but also a symbol of wealth and power, struck down by God's wrath at its citizen's behaviour. In Nineveh, early Western excavators found the ideal case to which all known sources at that time, as well as Christian traditions, could be applied.

Work at Nineveh continued in the twentieth century, when increasing urbanization around the city of Mosul slowly enclosed and partly incorporated the ancient ruins. The impressive restoration work on the city wall and some of the gates by Iraqi archaeologists protected a large part of the site from further urban development. The people of Mosul were involved in maintenance and protection, and several initiatives transformed the site back into a symbol of its glorious past.

### Heritage in times of crisis

In 2014 and subsequent years, we realized that the story of an archaeological site is a never-ending one. The deliberate destruction of the last standing ruins of Nineveh, once a symbol of civilization and cultural progress, was another tragedy in its 9,000 years of history. Coming in the wake of similar destruction at Hatra, Nimrud and Palmyra, it provoked worldwide calls to safeguard our past. Although it is a great good that heritage seems to matter to so many people in so many countries, at the same time, this degree of focus exposes heritage to 'cultural cleansing'. The more we study and try to safeguard the world's heritage, the higher the chance that this heritage will eventually be targeted by fundamentalists and looters. It is a quandary from which there seems no way out:

*The arrival of an Assyrian lamassu at the British Museum in London. This sculpture with a weight of more than ten tons was discovered at the site of Nimrud, erroneously identified in 1852 as ancient Nineveh. Reproduced from The Illustrated London News, 28 february 1852.*



*Nebi Yunus and the modern city of Mosul, May 2008. Photograph by Diane Siebrandt.*



*The destruction of the Maški Gate in 2016.*

should we highlight the great importance and value of the remains of archaeological sites, exposing them to future treasure-hunters, or should we preserve a state of historical ignorance in order to save such sites for an unknown future? We – a term that includes urban planners and cultural entrepreneurs – have to learn to live in a globalized world where historical remains are valued and appreciated differently. For some, they are symbols of beauty and power, symbols of a civilized world; for others, they are a means of attracting attention to a cause or simply raising money. It seems that we still have a long way to go.

One source of hope is that the study of the past is a way to safeguard our future. Since 200 years, Nineveh has been studied intensively by travellers, archaeologists, historians, Assyriologists and many other scholars from all over the world. The deliberate and systematic destruction of our common heritage remains tragic and is to be condemned, but information about the tangible and intangible heritage of ancient Nineveh has been

and still is being saved. This publication started as an exhibition catalogue,<sup>1</sup> but it grew into a more systematic study of the site itself and its surroundings, as seen from different perspectives. It highlights the tremendous and impressive heritage of Nineveh and is dedicated to all of the inhabitants who lived and are still living in and around the ancient site.

### **Acknowledgments**

The editors are greatly indebted to all the authors of this volume for their willingness to share their detailed knowledge of Nineveh and the Assyrian culture. It was a joy for us to follow the process that started with short papers and ended with this volume. In each case where we have used images, we have received permission to do so or have done our best to contact the person or organization that we thought is the copyright holder to gain permission. The editors greatly appreciate the many photographs of Nineveh in more recent years provided through the courtesy of Dr. Suzanne Bott, University of Arizona, USA. We also would like to express our gratitude to Karsten Wentink and his colleagues from Sidestone Press for their support and for the design and production of this publication. We thank Vivien Collingwood and Jeroen Rensen for their careful editing work.

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1 The blockbuster exhibition 'Nineveh. Hoofdstad van een wereldrijk' was held in Leiden by the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities between 19 October 2017 and 25 March 2018. More than 250 objects were exhibited on loan from 25 institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, Musée du Louvre and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin. For more information, see the Dutch exhibition catalogue Petit & Morandi Bonacossi 2017.