

A Novice at Nimrud

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Imagine you have just left school with a gap of nine months before taking up a place at university. You have done a bit of digging, some of it rather cold and muddy, on Roman sites in England, and you have got an offer to go to an excavation in Iraq to glue fragmented carved ivories for three months or more. Keen for adventure, you say `Yes!'. But where is Iraq? What kind of a dig is it?

That's me, taking one of many unexpected opportunities, off to Nimrud to join David Oates' excavation in 1962, to live in a shared army tent, a short walk from a splendid unisex loo looking out over the citadel walls at glorious setting suns and ferocious thunderstorms; bath once a week on Fridays in a tin tub followed by wonderful curry, a dish I had never experienced before. Walks at dusk among a thousand croaking frogs. Not a house or a road in sight. The substantial remains of the great North West Palace with its colossal winged bulls at the entrances, and the (temple tower) dedicated to the war-god Ninurta, whose name is preserved in a later form as Nimrod.

I loved it, despite working indoors all day with a resin-like glue of polyvinyl acetate – the mixture has happy-making fumes. Occasionally I was allowed out to get up a ladder and clean a section of Assyrian wall-painting. The ivories had intriguing designs that meant nothing to me at the time. They were published in fine detail in several splendid volumes by several colleagues during the next 50 years.

I became aware that unbaked clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform were being discovered, and wondered why I had never learned at school that there was literature and administration in writing before the Greeks, apart from the Egyptians. I had no premonition at the time, that I would publish with a colleague, 22 years later, some of those cuneiform texts found during my first experience of Iraq.



The ivories and clay tablets were found in Fort Shalmaneser, a huge complex of buildings and courtyards used for marshalling troops and storing loot. The big excitement was the discovery of a throne room of a type well known from other Assyrian palaces. Upon its floor, which lay very deep within well-preserved walls of mud brick, was a huge sculptured stone platform, its top lightly incised with a honeycomb pattern, a base for a throne which had impressed its four feet on that surface. But most remarkable was the relief sculpture around the sides which showed the 9th-century king of Assyria, Shalmaneser III, clasping hands with his contemporary Marduk-zakir-shumi king of Babylon.



They stand together beneath a fringed canopy, and their names are given in cuneiform as a label. On either side of them are courtiers and gift-bearers; cuneiform inscriptions give informative labels about some of the king's military campaigns and the loot he won from them.

Much more recently, an alabaster urn in the Damascus Museum was found to have the same scene of the two kings clasping hands incised on it. One can imagine that the occasion of the accord was marked with a great celebratory feast at which the leitmotif for some of the tableware was the handshake of the two great kings.

That extraordinary scene on the throne-base stayed in my mind's eye for the next 50 years, during which I pondered the appearance of friendship between two powers that were so often described by modern scholars as enemies, frequently at war. Of course, that impression of endless enmity was bolstered by the royal inscriptions of every Assyrian king, an important part of the image that he projected in order to keep control of his subjects and conquered peoples. Looking back on early European and American scholarship on ancient Mesopotamia, I began to realise the weakness of literal understanding, how much interpretations were guided by current or recent events in western Europe, and by the thundering rhetoric of biblical prophets. There had been scholars who had drawn their interpretations from the idea of rival priests, for which I could see no evidence in the cuneiform records, but perhaps drew its inspiration from the rivalry of Christian and Islamic sects. Alternatively, the two World Wars of the 20th century, fought between nations with firm boundaries, gave a questionable paradigm for the campaigns of Mesopotamian kings. Assyria was seen as a nation of warriors, so it came

as a surprise to find that there were well-organised Assyrian traders using customs posts, storehouses and excellent communications, information that could be teased out only gradually from administrative texts. The handshake represented friendship and co-operation between the two greatest powers of the 9th century BC. I became a specialist in reading Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform texts, and kept in mind the very different ways in which they can be interpreted.

The huge monument had to be lifted out of its deep trench and transported to the National Museum in Baghdad, where it can be seen to this day, too heavy for looters to carry off. The task was beyond the strength of the expedition's workforce. To the rescue came a bulldozer and its Kurdish driver, and a large crane, generously lent for the purpose by the Iraq Petroleum Company. The bulldozer made a firm track up to the edge (but not too close) of the trench, and gently lifted the throne base up and out on to a large lorry.



Joining in the spirit of this highly unusual operation, the bulldozer driver offered to give turns (under instruction) at driving his vehicle to make the track, so to my delight I had the thrill of driving it.

The building complex, Fort Shalmaneser, in which many ivories as well as the throne base were found, had a second phase of glory after the 9th century. In the 7th century the Assyrian king Esarhaddon added to the structure using beautifully cut stone as well as mud brick, and increased its security by narrowing the entrance, taking on extra security staff during his troubled reign.



Several different types of horses for chariotry and cavalry were sent to Nimrud at that time, marshalled and registered in the huge courtyards of the Fort. Especially prized were Nubian 'Kushite' horses of a type which had enabled the Nubian Pharaoh Taharqa to invade Egypt. He was pushed back up the Nile from Memphis by Esarhaddon in 671 BC. Another type of horse came from the land of the Medes, to which Esarhaddon had fielded an expedition to secure his supply.

A group of letters, written on clay to the king by an official in Nimrud, lists the various types of horse supplied on different days, in their tens and their hundreds. They have been published by a group of scholars working for the remarkable Neo-Assyrian project based in Helsinki. They give evidence for great activity within the huge courtyards. Many ivory bridle-harness ornaments found in Fort Shalmaneser, and published promptly in 1967, bear witness to the importance of chariotry and cavalry in Assyrian warfare, evoking the ceremonies that play such an important part in military life.

Such an enormous amount of information came from that one building that it has taken many decades and the work of many scholars in different parts of the world to publish the evidence from the British excavations. Meanwhile interpretations have changed, and new evidence has come to light. At the time of those excavations, whenever evidence of destruction was

discovered, it was dated to the fall of the Assyrian empire around 612, with the assumption that the whole city was flattened; no more than squatter occupation was expected. But subsequent digging by an Italian team showed that Fort Shalmaneser was in use after the fall of the Assyrian empire, and new evidence from elsewhere showed that Assyrian scribes continued their activities for many years in other cities. The cataclysm painted by the rhetoric of biblical prophets could not, therefore, be taken at face value. And during the lifetime of the building some serious rebellions amounting to civil wars took place in which considerable damage is likely to have occurred. Dating can be subjective.

As for the great citadel at Nimrud, it rises high above the plain, so that you look down from its wall to the site of Fort Shalmaneser, which lies within the outer city. The height of the citadel implies a very long history before Assyrian kings put palaces and temples on top. Recently the name of Nimrud, which was Kalhu in Assyrian times, has been identified in texts from the time of Hammurabi, early in the second millennium BC: it was Kawalhum, and had a significant ruler named Arriwuk. A fragment from an inscription records the 'foundation' of the city, but we know that the event was a re-foundation celebrated when great new buildings were planned.



Image 1 - stone inscription recording the (re)founding of the city

Whether anyone will find an opportunity to dig beneath the Neo-Assyrian ruins to look for the city that existed there more than 1,500 years earlier may be doubted; but thank goodness for the cuneiform tablets that can take us there in our imagination, envisioning the growth of a famous city through two millennia.