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978-1-108-06513-9 - Nineveh and its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldaean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil-Worshippers: Volume 1

Austen Henry Layard

Excerpt

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NINEVEH

AND

ITS REMAINS.

CHAPTER I.

FIRST JOURNEY IN ASSYRIA.—ITS RUINS.—KOUYUNJIK, NIMROUD,
AND KALAH SHERGHAT.—M. BOTTA'S DISCOVERIES.—KHORSABAD.
—RETURN TO MOSUL.

DURING the autumn of 1839 and winter of 1840, I had been wandering through Asia Minor and Syria, scarcely leaving untrod one spot hallowed by tradition, or unvisited one ruin consecrated by history. I was accompanied by one no less curious and enthusiastic than myself. We were both equally careless of comfort and unmindful of danger. We rode alone; our arms were our only protection; a valise behind our saddles was our wardrobe, and we tended our own horses, except when relieved from the duty by the hospitable inhabitants of a Turcoman village or an Arab tent. Thus unembarrassed by needless luxuries, and uninfluenced by the opinions and prejudices of others, we mixed amongst the people, acquired

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without effort their manners, and enjoyed without alloy those emotions which scenes so novel, and spots so rich in varied association, cannot fail to produce.

I look back with feelings of grateful delight to those happy days when, free and unheeded, we left at dawn the humble cottage or cheerful tent, and lingering as we listed, unconscious of distance and of the hour, found ourselves, as the sun went down, under some hoary ruin tenanted by the wandering Arab, or in some crumbling village still bearing a well-known name. No experienced dragoman measured our distances and appointed our stations. We were honoured with no conversations by pashas, nor did we seek any civilities from governors. We neither drew tears nor curses from villagers by seizing their horses, or searching their houses for provisions: their welcome was sincere; their scanty fare was placed before us; we ate, and came and went in peace.

I had traversed Asia Minor and Syria, visiting the ancient seats of civilisation, and the spots which religion has made holy. I now felt an irresistible desire to penetrate to the regions beyond the Euphrates, to which history and tradition point as the birthplace of the wisdom of the West. Most travellers, after a journey through the usually frequented parts of the East, have the same longing to cross the great river, and to explore those lands which are separated on the map from the confines of Syria by a vast blank stretching from Aleppo to the banks of the Tigris. A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldæa. With these names are

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CHAP. I.]

MOSUL.

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linked great nations and great cities dimly shadowed forth in history ; mighty ruins, in the midst of deserts, defying, by their very desolation and lack of definite form, the description of the traveller ; the remnants of mighty races still roving over the land ; the fulfilling and fulfilment of prophecies ; the plains to which the Jew and the Gentile alike look as the cradle of their race. After a journey in Syria the thoughts naturally turn eastward ; and without treading on the remains of Nineveh and Babylon our pilgrimage is incomplete.

I left Aleppo, with my companion, on the 18th of March. We still travelled as we had been accustomed ; without guide or servants. The road across the desert is at all times impracticable, except to a numerous and well-armed caravan, and offers no object of interest. We preferred that through Bir and Orfa. From the latter city we traversed the low country at the foot of the Kurdish hills, a country little known, and abounding in curious remains. The Egyptian frontier, at that time, extended to the east of Orfa, and the war between the Sultan and Mohammed Ali Pasha being still unfinished, the tribes took advantage of the confusion, and were plundering on all sides. With our usual good fortune, we succeeded in reaching Nisibin unmolested, although we ran daily risks, and more than once found ourselves in the midst of foraging parties, and of tents which, an hour before, had been pillaged by the wandering bands of Arabs. We entered Mosul on the 10th of April.

During a short stay in this town we visited the

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great ruins on the east bank of the river, which have been generally believed to be the remains of Nineveh.* We rode also into the desert, and explored the mound of Kalah Sherghat, a vast ruin on the Tigris, about fifty miles below its junction with the Zab. As we journeyed thither we rested for the night at the small Arab village of Hammum Ali, around which are still the vestiges of an ancient city. From the summit of an artificial eminence we looked down upon a broad plain, separated from us by the river. A line of lofty mounds bounded it to the east, and one of a pyramidal form rose high above the rest. Beyond it could be faintly traced the waters of the Zab. Its position rendered its identification easy. This was the pyramid which Xenophon had described, and near which the ten thousand had encamped: the ruins around it were those which the Greek general saw twenty-two centuries before, and which were even then the remains of an *ancient* city. Although Xenophon had confounded a name, spoken by a strange race, with one familiar to a Greek ear, and had called the place Larissa, tradition still points to the origin of the city, and, by attributing its foundation to Nimrod, whose name the ruins now bear, connect it with one of the first settlements of the human race.†

* These ruins include the great mounds of Kouyunjik and Nebbi Yunus.

† "He (Nimrod) went out into Assyria and builded Nineveh, the city Rehoboth and Calah, and Resen, between Nineveh and Calah; the same is a great city." (Gen. x. 11, 12.) The ruins of Nimroud had been identified with Resen, of which Larissa was believed, first, by Bochart, to be a corruption, arising from the (presumed) use, by the inhabitants of the country, of the common Shemitic article "al" before the word.

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Kalah Sherghat, no less than Nimroud, was an Assyrian ruin: a vast, shapeless mass, now covered with grass, and showing scarcely any traces of the work of man except where the winter rains had formed ravines down its almost perpendicular sides, and had thus laid open its contents. A few fragments of pottery and inscribed bricks, discovered after a careful search amongst the rubbish which had accumulated around the base of the great mound, served to prove that it owed its construction to the people who had founded the city of which Nimroud is the remains. There was a tradition current amongst the Arabs, that strange figures carved in black stone still existed amongst the ruins; but we searched for them in vain, during the greater part of a day in which we were engaged in exploring the heaps of earth and bricks, covering a considerable extent of country on the right bank of the Tigris.* At the time of our visit the country had been deserted by the Arab tribes, and was only occasionally visited by bands of plunderers from the Shammar or Aneyza tents. We passed the night in the jungle which shuts in the river, and wandered during the day undisturbed by the tribes of the desert. A Cawass, who had been sent with us by the

It may be observed, in the first place, that the philological grounds are inadequate; and, in the second, that if this were Resen, no room would be left for the site of Nineveh, a still greater city.

* A memoir on our visit to these ruins by Mr. Ainsworth will be found in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. xi. I shall give a fuller account of the place when I describe the excavations and discoveries which I subsequently made there.

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pasha of Mosul, alarmed at the solitude, and dreading the hostile Arabs, left us in the wilderness, and turned homewards. But he fell into the danger he sought to avoid. Less fortunate than ourselves, at a short distance from Kalah Sherghat, he was met by a party of horsemen, and fell a victim to his timidity.

Were the traveller to cross the Euphrates to seek for such ruins in Mesopotamia and Chaldæa as he had left behind him in Asia Minor or Syria, his search would be vain. The graceful column rising above the thick foliage of the myrtle, the ilex, and the oleander; the gradines of the amphitheatre covering the gentle slope, and overlooking the dark blue waters of a lake-like bay; the richly carved cornice or capital half hidden by the luxuriant herbage; are replaced by the stern shapeless mound rising like a hill from the scorched plain, the fragments of pottery, and the stupendous mass of brickwork occasionally laid bare by the winter rains. He has left the land where nature is still lovely, where, in his mind's eye, he can rebuild the temple or the theatre, half doubting whether they would have made a more grateful impression upon the senses than the ruin before him. He is now at a loss to give any form to the rude heaps upon which he is gazing. Those of whose works they are the remains, unlike the Roman and the Greek, have left no visible traces of their civilisation, or of their arts: their influence has long since passed away. The more he conjectures, the more vague the results appear. The scene around is worthy of the ruin he is contemplating; desolation meets desola-

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CHAP. I.]

NIMROUD.

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tion: a feeling of awe succeeds to wonder; for there is nothing to relieve the mind, to lead to hope, or to tell of what has gone by. These huge mounds of Assyria made a deeper impression upon me, gave rise to more serious thought and more earnest reflection, than the temples of Balbec or the theatres of Ionia.

In the middle of April I left Mosul for Baghdad. As I descended the Tigris on a raft, I again saw the ruins of Nimroud, and had a better opportunity of examining them. It was evening as we approached the spot. The spring rains had clothed the mound with the richest verdure, and the fertile meadows, which stretched around it, were covered with flowers of every hue. Amidst this luxuriant vegetation were partly concealed a few fragments of bricks, pottery, and alabaster, upon which might be traced the well-defined wedges of the cuneiform character. Did not these remains mark the nature of the ruin, it might have been confounded with a natural eminence. A long line of consecutive narrow mounds, still retaining the appearance of walls or ramparts, stretched from its base, and formed a vast quadrangle. The river flowed at some distance from them: its waters, swollen by the melting of the snows on the Armenian hills, were broken into a thousand foaming whirlpools by an artificial barrier, built across the stream. On the eastern bank the soil had been washed away by the current; but a solid mass of masonry still withstood its impetuosity. The Arab, who guided my small raft, gave himself up to religious ejaculations as we approached this formidable cataract, over which

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we were carried with some violence. Once safely through the danger, my companion explained to me that this unusual change in the quiet face of the river was caused by a great dam which had been built by Nimrod *, and that in the autumn, before the winter rains, the huge stones of which it was constructed, squared, and united by cramps of iron, were frequently visible above the surface of the stream.† It was, in fact, one of those monuments of a great people, to be found in all the rivers of Mesopotamia, which were undertaken to ensure a constant supply of water to the innumerable canals, spreading like net-work over the surrounding country, and which, even in the days of Alexander, were looked upon as the works of an ancient nation.‡ No wonder that the traditions of the present inhabitants of the land should assign them to one of the founders of the human race! The Arab was telling me of the connection between the dam and the city built by Athur, the lieutenant of Nimrod, the vast ruins of which were now before

* This dam is called by the Arabs, either Sukr el Nimroud, from the tradition, or El Awayee, from the noise caused by the breaking of the water over the stones. Large rafts are obliged to unload before crossing it, and accidents frequently happen to those who neglect this precaution.

† Diodorus Siculus, it will be remembered, states that the stones of the bridge built by Semiramis across the Euphrates were united by similar iron cramps, whilst the interstices were filled up with molten lead.

‡ These dams greatly impeded the fleets of the conqueror in their navigation of the rivers of Susiana and Mesopotamia, and he caused many of them to be removed. (Strabo, p. 1051. ed. Ox. 1807.) By Strabo they were believed to have been constructed to prevent the ascent of the rivers by hostile fleets; but their use is evident. Tavernier mentions, in his Travels (vol. i. p. 226.), this very dam. He says that his raft went over a cascade twenty-six feet high; but he must have greatly exaggerated.

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us — of its purpose as a causeway for the mighty hunter to cross to the opposite palace, now represented by the mound of Hammum Ali — and of the histories and fate of the kings of a primitive race, still the favourite theme of the inhabitants of the plains of Shinar, when the last glow of twilight faded away, and I fell asleep as we glided onward to Baghdad.

My curiosity had been greatly excited, and from that time I formed the design of thoroughly examining, whenever it might be in my power, these singular ruins.

It was not until the summer of 1842 that I again passed through Mosul on my way to Constantinople. I was then anxious to reach the Turkish capital, and, travelling Tatar, had no time to explore ruins. I had not, however, forgotten Nimroud. I had frequently spoken to others on the subject of excavations in this and another mound, to which a peculiar interest also attached; and at one time had reason to hope that some persons in England might have been induced to aid in the undertaking. I had even proposed an examination of the mound to M. Coste, an architect who had been sent by the French Government, with its embassy to Persia, to draw and describe the monuments of that country.

On my arrival at Mosul, I found that M. Botta had, since my first visit, been named French Consul there; and had already commenced excavations in the large mound on the opposite side of the river, called in the country Kouyunjik. These excavations

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were on a very small scale, and, at the time of my passage, only fragments of brick and alabaster, upon which were engraved a few letters in the cuneiform character, had been discovered.

Whilst detained by unexpected circumstances at Constantinople, I entered into correspondence with a gentleman in England on the subject of excavations; but, with this exception, no one seemed inclined to assist or take any interest in such an undertaking. I also wrote to M. Botta, encouraging him to proceed, notwithstanding the apparent paucity of results, and particularly calling his attention to the mound of Nimroud, which, however, he declined to explore on account of its distance from Mosul and its inconvenient position. I was soon called away from the Turkish capital to the provinces; and for some months numerous occupations prevented me turning my attention to the ruins and antiquities of Assyria.

In the meanwhile M. Botta, not discouraged by the want of success which had attended his first essay, continued his excavations in the mound of Kouyunjik; and to him is due the honour of having found the first Assyrian monument. This remarkable discovery owed its origin to the following circumstances. The small party employed by M. Botta were at work on Kouyunjik, when a peasant from a distant village chanced to visit the spot. Seeing that any fragments of brick and alabaster uncovered by the workmen were carefully preserved, he asked the reason of this, to him, strange proceeding. On being informed that they were in search of sculp-