

Austen Henry Layard and the periodical press:

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Middle Eastern archaeology and the excavation of cultural identity in mid-nineteenth century Britain.



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## Austen Henry Layard and the Periodical Press: Middle Eastern Archaeology and the Excavation of Cultural Identity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

AUSTEN HENRY LAYARD AND THE PERIODICAL PRESS: MIDDLE EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE EXCAVATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN SHAWN MALLEY The University of British Columbia And did those feet in ancient time WaUc upon England's mountains green? — Wffliam Blake, Milton (Pre face 1-2) To commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Rudyard KipUng wrote what is arguably his most

famous poem, "Recessional." In contrast to the martial pomp and circumstance that crowned sixty years of Imperial rule, the poem warns British revellers to guard against "frantic boast and foolish word" and to reflect upon the passage of ancient empires. Kipling draws his moral by appealing to the memory of lost worlds. He writes, Far-called, our navies melt away; On dune and headland sinks the fire: Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre! Judge of the Nations, spare us yet. Lest we forget — lest we forget! (13-18) In 1897, Kipling's reference to Nineveh carried the weight not only of biblical allusion but also of material history, for the existence of the ancient city had for half a century been established as an archaeological fact by Sir Austen Henry Layard, who unearthed the vanished city during his two expeditions of 1845-47 and 1849-51. Kipling's refrain "lest we forget" is, furthermore, a leitmotif in the lively discoveries and writing. At mid-century, remembering Nineveh was nothing short of a Victorian Review 22.2 (Winter 1996) SHAWN MALLEY<sup>153</sup> national pastime, such that this hitherto obscure and distant world quickly became absorbed into Britain's own historical consciousness. An examination of the response in the periodicals to Layard's excavations will show that the Victorians uncovered the origins of their own culture as they peered into the archaeologically-recovered past of the Middle East. In the account of his first expedition, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849), Layard writes that the British Museum's collection of Assyrian antiquities measured in 1845 a "case scarcely three feet square," which, from Britain's perspective, "enclosed all that remained, not only of the great city, Nineveh, but of Babylon itself!" (1:xxv).<sup>1</sup> By 1849, however, Layard had brought to light the semi-mythical world of ancient Assyria for the British.<sup>2</sup> His finds were spectacular. In October 1848, fifty cases containing the material remains of a once proud and mighty empire arrived at the British Museum from Mosul (located on the west bank of the Tigris River). Among them were colossal reliefs of Assyrian deities and kings; friezes depicting royal hunts, battles, and sieges; entablatures inscribed in an unknown cuneiform (which, when translated by Henry Rawlinson in the late 1850s, became invaluable records of the Assyrian world); the Black Obelisk of Sargon II (fig. 1); and, perhaps most famous of all, monumental sculptures of human-headed, winged lions and bulls (fig. 2). These relics remain the heart of the British Museum's Assyrian collection. Figure 1: The Obelisk<sup>154</sup> Victorian Review Figure 2: Human-Headed and Eagle-Winged Bull Layard's recovery of this lost city stirred a frenzy of public excitement, much as Schliemann's discovery of Homer's Troy would do in the 1870s. The Trustees of the British Museum were, as Layard remarks with a touch of irony in his autobiography, "elated at the success of the first expedition and delighted at the crammed houses which the new entertainment brought them" (1903, 1:191). Victoria at once dispatched Albert to the newly appointed Nineveh room (fig. 3); Prime Minister Lord John Russell, himself awed by the exhibit, ordered a naval vessel to pick up a winged bull and lion that remained at the docks in Basra on the Tigris River (Brackman 227). In fact, the Shipping of the Great Bull was treated as a national event by *The Illustrated London News* (fig. 4), which entreated the government to fund Layard's patriotic work. He ultimately received a small stipend from the Trustees of the British Museum as well as their financial backing for the second expedition of 1849.<sup>3</sup> Figure 3: The Nineveh Room at the British Museum SHAWN MALLEY<sup>155</sup> Layard found himself nothing short of a national hero upon his return to...

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SHAWN MALLEY

*The University of British Columbia*

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
— William Blake, *Milton* (Preface 1-2)

To commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Rudyard Kipling wrote what is arguably his most famous poem, "Recessional." In contrast to the martial pomp and circumstance that crowned sixty years of Imperial rule, the poem warns British revellers to guard against "frantic boast and foolish word" and to reflect upon the passage of ancient empires. Kipling draws this moral by appealing to the memory of lost worlds. He writes,

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