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Of Oil and Antiquities, Cuneiform and Kings: A review of the British Museum's "I am Ashurbanipal" exhibition (8 Nov 2018 - 24 Feb 2019)

Abstract

The British Museum's "I am Ashurbanipal" has been rightfully lauded for its exquisite displays and its incredible efforts to bring to light an important player in the history of the ancient Middle East. The exhibition was extraordinary in many of its display strategies, providing a blueprint for developing an attractive setting for curatorially challenging artefacts, particularly cuneiform tablets and large-scale reliefs. Using imposing set design and simple digital overlays, the curatorial team gave these relatively plain items a greater holding power, increasing their effect and the length of time that visitors spent engaging with them. However, the exhibition also uncovered a deeply unsettling undertone that many archaeologically oriented museums still have towards their source communities: one of paternalism. Besides discussing the contentions surrounding exhibition funding, this article also examines the historiographical staging of the collection itself, particularly the use of archival materials to create a narrative of cultural progression and heroism. Considerations surrounding content and ideology are put front and centre, but attention is also given to the more museographical elements of aesthetics and originality in scenography. By presenting the exhibition's interpretive merits, its conceptual issues and its fraught sponsorship, I aim to create a balanced, nuanced and reflexive perspective through which museum professionals and scholars of Near Eastern archaeology can discuss the future directions of our fields.

Introduction

Anyone who was able to travel to London to see the blockbuster exhibition "I am Ashurbanipal" will probably agree that the British Museum once again put on a stunning exhibition. The project curators, Gareth Brereton and Carine Harmand, were certainly able to deliver on the promise to allow visitors to truly "experience the splendour of his palace at Nineveh and the impact of the Assyrian Empire."[1] From the choice of the objects to the placement of the display lighting, everything was designed to present the visitor with a feeling of grandeur and amazement. I certainly felt this while moving around the museum spaces and I could see from the expressions on my fellow museum-goers' faces that they were experiencing the same sense of awe that I was. This level of scenographic mastery is something that few museums accomplish, and it is certainly a major factor in the success of the British Museum's temporary exhibitions. However, it also means that the museum can forego a certain amount of content-related innovation while still retaining its status

[1] Stated by Gareth Brereton in a British Museum press release announcing the exhibition, dated to 19 June 2018.

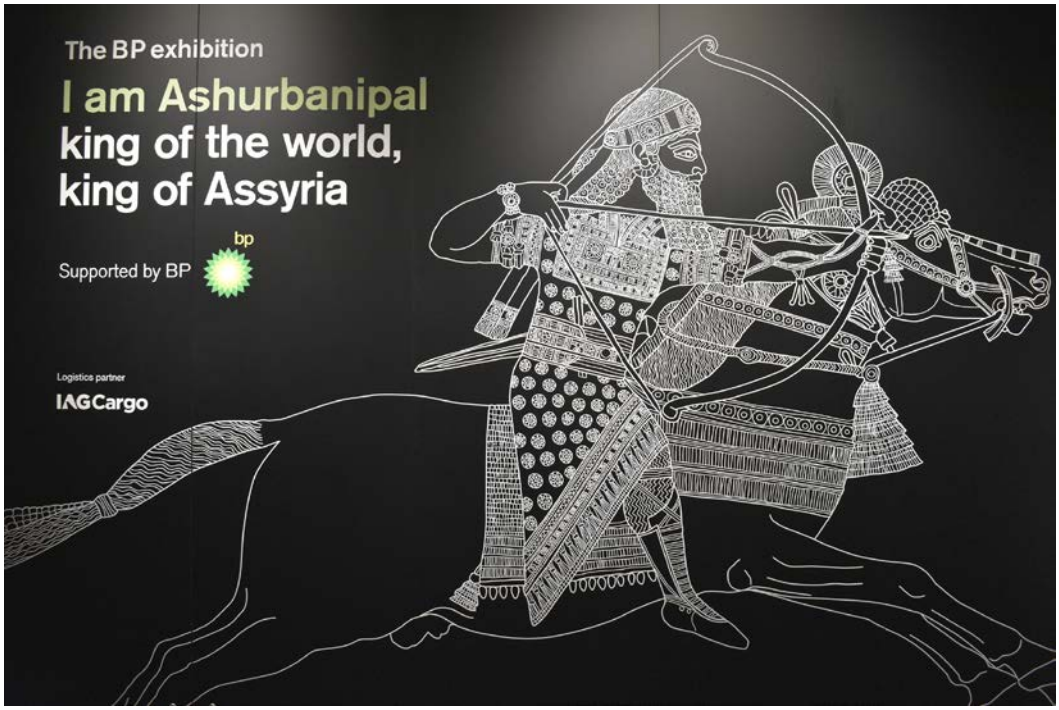

Figure 1. *I am Ashurbanipal* exhibition poster
Photo taken by the author on 27 November 2018.

as a global leader. The story told in this exhibition was, after all, not so very different from the stories of the British Museum's permanent collection on display in the Assyrian Galleries of the western ground floor and the Mesopotamian Galleries occupying Room 55 upstairs. It is a story of power — in this case, focused on its spread and contestation throughout the region during the Assyrian period — but also the control that knowledge provides. Ashurbanipal, his family and his library featured strongly in that story, but they are only one part of a far wider narrative. By taking the reader through some of the successes as well as the challenges of this exhibition, I want to contextualise the exhibition within current trends of Mesopotamian Museology.

Display Power

The narrative on display in the exhibition was one of power. Through large scale reliefs and an incredible collection of cuneiform material, as well as an extended display of beautifully worked metal objects, the majesty of the Assyrian rulers was put on display. This points to the power of Ashurbanipal and the Assyrian Empire, but also that of the British Museum. The British Museum has the power to bring archaeology to wide audiences. From 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018 the museum attracted 5.8 million visitors, while its last large-scale archaeologically focused exhibition, *Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia*, held between September 2017 and January 2018, drew

in 132,000.[2] Through their extensive collections, resources and expertise, the museum staff can present the past on a monumental scale and in an attractive way. Their connections also enable them to organise high-value loans that add to the significance and prestige of each exhibition. For many of the loaned artefacts in "I am Ashurbanipal", this was their first time on display in the UK, and for some, it was the first trip outside of their home institutions since their acquisition.[3] They helped to fill gaps in the British Museum's collection, and were particularly useful in emphasising the extended geography and interconnectivity of the Middle East during the Assyrian period, as well as the influence of its motifs further afield. The high quality of the loans allowed them to fit seamlessly into the exhibition aesthetic, their stories woven into the fabric of the British Museum's own collection on display. The museum's status as a world-class institution thus drew in both new objects and new audiences for this exhibition, people who may otherwise never have heard of Ashurbanipal.

Another side to this story is one that has been particularly scrutinised in recent years: that of the colonial context for the British Museum's power.[4] This issue comes to the fore in their collection composition, as well as in their exhibition sponsorship; in the case of this particular exhibition, the involvement of the British Petroleum Company (BP). Oil and gas companies funding exhibitions is nothing out of the ordinary in the museum world,[5] but the regularity of its occurrence does nothing to allay the ethical questions that it raises. Even before this exhibition got off the ground, the inappropriateness of having BP involved in the Museum was being discussed.[6] Besides debates around the company's impact on museum content,[7] the critics also pointed to BP's fraught environmental track record as an indicator of its unsuitability to act as an ethical sponsor.[8] The company's previous sponsorship of the 2016 *Sunken Cities* exhibition had provoked outrage as the oil and gas corporation declared its employees "fellow explorers of the Nile Delta," connecting their commercial activities to present-day maritime archaeological research, a troubling parallel.[9] As classics professor Sarah Bond highlights in her review of the exhibition, "The controversy over the funding of the exhibition is a salient reminder of Britain's long history of taking both oil and objects of cultural heritage from the Middle East." [10] When assessing the place of BP as a sponsor of British Museum exhibitions, it is important to consider this shared context of unequal concessions for both foreign petroleum magnates and archaeological expeditions in the Middle East during the 19th and early 20th century.[11] This is an issue that cannot be ignored when

[2] I have chosen to compare the visitor numbers to this exhibition rather than the *Rodin and the Art of Ancient Greece* exhibition that came after it as the Rodin exhibition was curated by a different department and had a distinct orientation in terms of narratives and artefacts. At the time that this article was written the Ashurbanipal exhibition was still ongoing, so visitor numbers were not yet available.

[3] British Museum 2018.

[4] See for example Lundén 2016; Pearson 2016; Tolia-Kelly 2016; Awan 2017, September 14; Siddique 2018, October 12.

[5] A list of oil company sponsorship among UK museums can be found at http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/institutions. Sponsorship of this kind is also an issue in science museums (Conn 2011, pp. 502–503).

[6] Atwood *et al.* 2016, April 3; Rawlinson 2015, September 13; Vaughan 2016, May 19.

[7] Kendall 2016, May 4; Macalister 2016, April 29; Voon 2016a, May 4.

[8] Besides the Deepwater Horizon crisis of 2010, the company has suffered from a number of explosions and leaks (see, for example, Sherwell and Lawler 2015, 15 April; Reuters 2012, 15 Nov).

[9] Incorporated into an exhibition panel about their sponsorship and reported in Voon 2016b, May 18.

[10] Bond 2018, December 5.

[11] Mathur 2008, p. 121.

Figure 2. Hall in Assyrian palace, restored
General Research Division, The New York Public Library. *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1849. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-46e4-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

considering exhibitions of Mesopotamian materials. However, BP's patronage of the Ashurbanipal exhibition shows that despite these conflicts of interest, the British Museum Trustees remain unconvinced by these concerns.

Engaging Interpretation

As the choice of exhibition sponsorship remains outside the purview of curatorial teams, I will now focus on describing and assessing the work that they were able to accomplish with the Ashurbanipal exhibition and some of the challenges they faced.

The name Ashurbanipal is well known among ancient historians; his artistic and architectural repertoire and his vast collection of tablets ensured his name would go down in history. He is not a household name outside the discipline, however, with major figures from ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome being much better known. By naming the exhibition after the Assyrian king, the British Museum ensured he would gain a wider audience, but the exhibition itself was less focused on the king than the name would suggest. Rather, it was subdivided into several different sections — Nineveh, the Empire, Conflict, Collapse and Revival — that together told the story not of a single man, but of an empire. While this broader narrative could feel stretched for the academic

Figure 3. Coloured relief of the Nineveh gardens
Photo taken by the author on 27 November 2018.

visitor who may have been more interested in exploring single topics, like the cuneiform sources, in more depth, it provided important context for a wider audience. It chronologically, spatially and thematically framed their encounter with the materials of the Assyrian Empire. The story was further supported through a system of colour and wall-paper coding the different rooms. A green backdrop featuring the Nineveh parklands relief[12] enlivened the first section about one of the Empire's greatest cities. A blue section plotted the riverine landscape of the Assyrian Empire in map form, showing the vast extent of Assyrian influence. The conflict area featured cuneiform words, each one befitting the theme, written out in red and running down the wall like blood. A small green section gave space to the garden banquet scene. In the back corner, a black room with a projection of fire and smoke told the story of the fall of the empire. Finally, the white walls of the exhibition heralded a section on the site's rediscovery and modern work in Iraq. Each area also had a number of coloured relief screens, simulating the interior architecture and décor of an Assyrian palace, reminiscent of Layard's illustration of a hall within an Assyrian Palace. The look and feel of the exhibition enhanced its immersive capacity, distinguishing it from the very neutral-toned and traditionally mounted displays in the permanent Assyrian Galleries nearby. It also changed the focus from an empire evoking fear, through its intense displays of violence and brutality, to one evoking awe, through its use of colourful and detailed decorative schemes.

This exhibition's other distinguishing element was the inclusion of several digital media features, set up to engage the viewer beyond the standard practice of museum browsing. These were not interactive per se, and in many ways, they were very subtle and circumscribed. The curatorial staff had clearly considered the importance of any digital elements being used as tools to enhance the artefacts, rather than focuses of the exhibition in and of themselves. The first of these digital interventions that I want to discuss is the colourful animation of Mesopotamian reliefs using projectors. This technique had been used previously in a similar context within exhibitions such as *The Wonders of Mesopotamia* (Melbourne Museum 2012), *Mesopotamia: Inventing Our World* (Royal Ontario Museum 2013) and *Nineveh* (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden 2017–2018), but never before at this scale. Several reliefs had colour gradually projected onto them, as though in the process of being painted, in order to simulate the original polychrome appearance of the palace walls.[13] Garden scenes were filled in with blue canals and lush green grass, while attendants were dressed in white robes and bright headgear. The gradual addition of the colour not only indicated the disconnect between the current and past appearances of these reliefs, highlighting the transition from in-situ and integrated architectural décor to individually aestheticised museum pieces, but also made them more eye-catching within the space. The creative use of lighting was not intrusive, but rather it increased the attraction and holding power of each relief, providing important contextual information, while improving the likelihood that visitors would choose to read the surrounding interpretive material.[14]

Besides this colouring-in, the Battle of Til Tuba reliefs from the palace at Nineveh were also animated, but in a different way. Rather than lending colour to this large-scale depiction of bellicose brutality, the team chose to highlight different areas of the relief, projecting brief explanations

[12] Inventory Number BM 124939a (1856,0909.36).

[13] Verri *et al.* 2009. A video of one of the projections was posted by the British Museum onto their social media and can be accessed at https://www.facebook.com/britishmuseum/videos/2169703599909020/.

[14] Monti and Keene 2013, p. 226.

for the events occurring across the slabs: Ashurbanipal's forces meet those of Elam and Babylon on the Ulai River; Ashurbanipal's army defeats their foes; heads of the enemies are carried off, et cetera. The lighting up of different sections and the provision of projected text elucidated an element of military strategy and storytelling within the reliefs. It helped distinguish the different elements of the relief, increasing its legibility, and bringing the viewer into a narrative scene that would otherwise have appeared chaotic, due to its non-linear structure. The interactive display also provided a necessary break from label reading, as many of the object labels were placed low to the ground in fairly dim lighting, and after an hour in the gallery, it could be quite a strain to continue reading. The narrative was then continued without the additional technologies in a small stand-alone exhibition sub-space with bright green walls that displays the garden banquet scenes from the same series. These spatially separated scenes appeared bucolic at first glance, until one noticed the Elamite king's head hanging from a tree. The stark opposition between this clear and ordered relief and the chaotic scenes of Til Tuba presented an interesting insight into the self-projected image of the Assyrians, one in which the Empire's martial might and its violent tactics provided a crucial path to order for the large realm.

Beyond animating the reliefs, a digital feature was also used to show the spatio-temporal context of the Assyrian Empire. One of the problems that occurs in many of these exhibitions about dynasties or empires is that they can give the impression of a singular moment in time. They may feature a map presenting a monolithic, unchanging entity that rarely reflects the dynamic reality of empire building. Maps are never neutral and, to a trained eye, they betray the intentions of their creators.[15] The Ashurbanipal exhibition indeed had a static map of this type at its beginning, presenting the Assyrian Empire at its zenith under Ashurbanipal. This map was a visual representation of the exhibition subtitle: "King of Assyria, King of the World". It presented the vastness of the Assyrian Empire and its domination over the other great powers of the ancient Middle East. The exhibition itself largely reflected this picture, with its rich palatial scenes and furnishings, but there were more nuanced elements and the curators also made sure to highlight the long-term territorial fluctuations and the ultimate waning of Assyrian power. The main way in which they did so was via an animated time-lapse map of the Empire. This map stood at the centre of the section on the Assyrian territories and their neighbours. This room was a great strength within the exhibition, both in terms of the wealth of artefacts displayed within it, and the scenography deployed to frame their stories. A map of the region was laid out on the floor with cases placed atop different areas — the Aramean Kingdoms, Babylonia, Urartu, Elam, Western Iran, Cyprus and the Southern Levant. Each case was slightly different in its contents depending on the strengths of the British Museum's collection, the availability of high-quality loans and the extent of past research within the region. An impressive amount of metalwork was on display, from horse-riding gear to elaborate banqueting materials. This created a very eclectic view of the Assyrian Empire, with a mix of materials ranging from silver goblets to column bases to cuneiform tablets. While each region clearly had its own distinct traditions, there were also similar motifs that could be discerned across the different materials; for example, lions, griffins and sphinxes, as well as the common use of cuneiform.

[15] Harley 1989; Newman 2014, pp. 8–9.

Hands-on Interaction

While this room was certainly the most striking, the most interactive element to the exhibition was actually not within the gallery itself. Instead, it was the handling desk stationed right outside the exhibition door. These kinds of hands-on interactives are now an entrenched part of the British Museum's gallery animation, and they provide an excellent way to bring people in contact with the gallery's story, while also providing opportunities to bring different objects out of storage and into the public eye. The benefit of having the handling desk outside the exhibition door rather than within its walls was that it ensured wider accessibility to — as well as greater awareness of — the collection and the exhibition. People without a ticket could still gain information that was perhaps of use in their traversal of the permanent collections. Or, indeed, their interactions with the authentic objects may have provided the necessary motivation to purchase a ticket during their visit. The objects chosen for the handling desk varied in material and technique, but they were all in some way linked to the themes of the exhibition: power, knowledge and inter-connectivity across the ancient Middle East. They created a set of visual markers that visitors could identify throughout the galleries. Allowing accessibility to museum objects in a tactile way has also been proven to aid in retention and increase perceptions of relevance, further promoting the curatorial team's aim to help museum visitors gain awareness of the Assyrian Empire and its material culture.[16]

Handling desks, while open to all audiences, tend to be particularly attractive to families with children. These kinds of interventions are important for this exhibition, as interpretation for children within the gallery itself was quite minimal and often difficult to distinguish from the regular labelling alongside it. Both texts were in white with a similar format, a black label with white lettering, slightly tilted from a horizontal orientation and often placed at adult hip-level,[17] though the children's section had a slightly larger font. A white line drawing of Ashurbanipal about to shoot an arrow during a lion hunt was also used to mark the children's route. The labels did not always engage with the objects themselves, however, focusing rather on the section theme. Through the inclusion of a question, the team tried to encourage discussion among their visitors — part of an effort to make the interpretation part of a wider social engagement, a good idea when considering that children tend to come as part of school or family groups. The colourful and engaging design elements of the exhibition like the animation of reliefs and the floor map, as well as the handling desk, provided highlights that younger audiences could focus on, but visitors with children wanting some guidance on interpreting the exhibition would have been best off downloading the teaching resource from the British Museum website.[18] The British Museum learning team also developed a whole slew of family-oriented activities for the half-term period, so there was clearly a great deal of thought that went into the presentation of this theme for younger visitors.[19]

[16] Andre *et al.* 2017; Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2008.

[17] This placement was extremely problematic for visitor progression within the exhibition, as visitors tended to bunch up around and block low and dimly lit panels, causing severe bottlenecks. This was not the first time that a British Museum temporary exhibition suffered from this design flaw. See for example Masséglia 2013, May 8.

[18] This can be accessed at https://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/ashurbanipal/schools.aspx.

[19] The museum also planned a Little Feet event for under fives within the exhibition that included role-playing and crafting activities linked to a visit to the galleries.

The exhibition itself, however, was clearly developed for a more mature audience, which fits with the demographic trends of past blockbuster exhibitions. No exhibition appeals to every audience, and choices must be made in order to ensure the visual coherence of the interpretation and the smooth progression of its narrative.

Libraries on Display

The one thing that visitors of all ages could relate to was the tablet library display, which was given pride of place within the exhibition. The tablets were placed vertically in a large, open, dramatically lit case, divided into four different sections — from right to left: questions and answers, magic and medicine, literature and learning, and records and letters. An extraordinary display in many ways, the structure of the case was reminiscent of a Billy bookshelf from IKEA and it definitely had an air of familiarity about it. For many, including me, this also had to do with frequent visits to Room 55, the Mesopotamian Gallery, where the tablets are displayed using similar subdivisions into cubicular shelves, but on a reduced scale in a smaller case.[20] Another difference could be found in the set-up. While the Room 55 display included additional tablets stacked along the top shelf, reminiscent of a present-day crammed library, the Ashurbanipal display was more stylised. The tablet interpretation was also handled differently across the two spaces. It is always extremely difficult to interpret texts that are illegible to the average visitor, but it is even more difficult when the texts themselves just look like decorated chunks of clay. Their contents need to be explained in an interesting and relevant way, a demand that is in direct contrast to the urge to provide full translations. In the permanent collection, interpretive text is placed directly below the cases, while a single interesting quote from the tablet is integrated into the 'library' display itself. Breakaway cases, instead, are used to consider the rediscovery, translation and reception of these documents. The Ashurbanipal exhibition, on the other hand, gave no interpretation within the displays, instead using the massive series of tablets to highlight the scale and significance of writing in this era, while providing a photogenic tableau for visitors. Interpretation was confined to a breakaway corner with a case for each of the four themes, highlighting a few interesting case studies, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for literature. While this did increase the visual accessibility of the central case, it also created a frustrating bottleneck, as the corner cases tended to be overcrowded. Due to the large scale of many of the other works on display, these kinds of bottlenecks were largely avoided, but this was a particularly vexing one considering the centrality of the library to the exhibition's narrative about the connection between knowledge and power across the Empire.

These large bookcases were not the only places, however, in which tablets could be examined within the exhibition. They were in fact dotted throughout every room, fully exploiting the British Museum's rich collection. They provided a great offset for the brutal scenes depicted in the conflict area and presented the empire as one of writing as well as war and wealth. The tablets also helped to bring the characters described within the exhibition to life. This was particularly the

[20] For more on the development of this display see Finkel and Fletcher 2018. Besides being a reference to a modern library, it is also reminiscent of the material recovered at Sippar by Walid al-Jadir (1998).

Figure 4. Cuneiform tablet display cases
Photo taken by the author on 27 November 2018.

case for the letters that travelled between members of the royal family and their entourage: suddenly the Assyrian elites were transformed from stylised shallow reliefs to fully rounded characters with motivations and opinions, operating in a complex social and political sphere. Though there was still a clear trend in these tablets of presenting an authoritative voice, they gave a greater sense of connection between past and present. One issue with the mass of tablets on display, however, was museum fatigue among visitors. Unlike other artefacts, there was no visual clue for the average visitor as to their content, so most museum-goers had to read the interpretation to understand them.[21] It is here that some form of digital interactive could have been useful — not necessarily a stationary one, as this would have caused further bottlenecks, but perhaps one that could be downloaded to mobile devices. The concentration of benches in the conflict room could then have be divided among the tablet-heavy areas, giving people an opportunity to sit and deepen their interactions with the tablets through less-traditional visual or auditive features. The literary links were also taken out of the realm of text through the exhibition programming. Besides the usual lectures and gallery talks on the Assyrian empire, there were additional artistic events that engaged with the written word; in particular, the performative storytelling of Zipang Mesopotamia and the Gilgamesh myth retold by the Crick Crack Club. These initiatives gave extra voice to these 'mute' objects, animating them for the visitors.[22]

Narratives of (re-)Discovery

A final, significant concern with the exhibition lay in its final sections, particularly the rediscovery and revival of ancient Assyria. At first glance, I was happy to see that these themes had been included in the exhibition. They provide an opportunity to challenge the collections and introduce the often-muddled process of acquisition and interpretation. Full advantage was not, however, taken of this opportunity. This was partially due to spatial constraints associated with Room 30 in the British Museum. The exhibition already incorporated multiple themes and several large-scale collection pieces, particularly the monumental reliefs on display in the first three sections, which must have guided the physical partitioning of the exhibition. Unfortunately, this left little room for an explanation of how this material was uncovered and what processes of interpretation had been applied to it. The result was a lacklustre and simplified exposition of a complex period of archaeological history. The publications and illustrations gave the impression of a purposeful, well-organised and goal-oriented series of events focused on the acquisition of knowledge, but in reality, these expeditions were antiquarian and not archaeological in nature, more political than scientific.[23] The removal of the Assyrian objects from their contexts of use was fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies, with crates of material from Mesopotamia being lost to the museum in transit and documented artefacts being cut up and sold off before their arrival.[24]

[21] Those visitors who could read the sources could sometimes be spotted sitting on a foldout chair in front of a tablet case with a notebook in hand attempting to decipher the lines of cuneiform etched upon it.

[22] Challis 2012; Parkinson 2017.

[23] Brusius 2012; forthcoming; Malley 2012; Matthews 2013, pp. 1–10; Reade 2018.

[24] Brusius 2012; forthcoming; Reade 2018.

One way in which this could have been addressed within the rest of the exhibition was a more critical labelling of the reliefs within the garden banquet section. The small display incorporated several reliefs[25] that suggest early procurements by souvenir-hunters outside the purview of proper scientific excavation and straightforward acquisition. This set of six reliefs are identified in the catalogue as having been purchased by the British Museum Trustees from Philip Allen in the spring of 1969. They were previously owned by the Birmingham Oscott Catholic Seminary, a gift from former student and missionary W. R. Wilson in 1858.[26] This gift, and thus the rediscovery of the reliefs by the wider Assyriological community, came two years after the acquisition of two larger pendant pieces[27] from the formal excavation at the North Palace of Nineveh. These fragments all come from Room S[1], likely the upper floor of a large hallway. Though the lower reliefs remained in situ, the reliefs in this upper room had long fallen in on themselves. It is difficult to reconstruct the relief plan within the space, as the archaeologists did not record the exact location or orientation of any of the fallen pieces, simply noting them as belonging to Room S.[28] Added to the confusion surrounding the precise archaeological context for the fragments is the disconnect between the dispersed relief fragments themselves. Unlike the excavated pieces, the Oscott College pieces are cut into a rectangular shape, most commonly focusing on the figure's head. They are each carved with a roman numeral, but these numbers did not seem to have any relationship to their original placement within the room, more likely being added later, after the reliefs had already been removed from their contexts. The trimming of each of the reliefs into a rectangular form means they can no longer be matched up with the larger excavated chunks, and huge swathes of relief are still unaccounted for. Specific sections would have been chosen by those acquiring them for their marketability, accessibility and portability rather than for any independent scholarly interest. In the case of our garden banquet fragments, the collapse in this area of the excavation likely aided in the fragmentation of the large-scale reliefs into marketable fragments, making it an ideal location for procuring well-preserved individual images. These detached snippets are not uncommon for early relief acquisitions from the Middle East and Lindsay Allen describes a similar trend of decapitation for the reliefs of Persepolis. She highlights that marketability requirements meant that "plunderers of sculpture focused on the heads and upper bodies of processional figures." [29] Beyond this, John Malcolm Russell describes how fragments were squared off to give travellers the impression that they were buying "complete, self-contained compositions."[30] However, this practice completely decontextualises these pieces from their original setting, disallowing any narrative analysis of the kind provided by the large-scale Til Tuba relief. This distinction could have been made clear within the exhibition of the garden banquet reliefs, providing the public with important and interesting insights into the acquisition of the reliefs and its complexities.

In the displayed records, there was also a portrayal of a public appreciation of these pieces. The narrative here was one of 'Assyriomania' as a logical and instantaneous response to the transferral

[25] Inventory Numbers BM 135115-135120 (1969,0416.1-6).
[26] Barnett 1976, pp. 57–58.
[27] Inventory Numbers BM 124920 (1856,0909.53) and BM 124922 (1856,0909.56).
[28] Cojocaru 2016, p. 137.
[29] Allen 2013.
[30] Russell 1998, p. 48.

of these objects to the UK in the late 1840s/early 1850s. The reality is that there was no immediate successful integration of these objects into the nations that had subsidised the excavations. When first transferred to the British Museum, Assyriological texts were illegible and the material culture did not fit into the existing museum taxonomy or canon.[31] What began as a few individual bricks and panels brought in by antiquarian traders and diplomats soon became crates of unintelligible objects that could only receive minimal interpretation. When the complex cuneiform script was finally deciphered and the hitherto mysterious Assyrian texts came to be translated, they were understood according to a classical or biblical narrative. This narrative did not always fit as well as the scholars had hoped. Translation in itself was not an easy task, and many objects had to be "read" without the aid of text. This meant that even after the decipherment of the region's various ancient languages, the interpretation of these collections was a long and difficult process. These issues were significant in the early formation of the British Museum, and can be effectively illustrated through the Museum's archives, including various scholarly letters debating the textual contents of the artefacts as well as logistical documents related to their uncertain and contested incursion into the museum.[32] Putting these documents on display might have helped the curators to challenge the narrativisation of the removal of artefacts as a triumphal endeavour. This trope was continued in the final area discussing the Iraqi training project. Here the British activities in Iraq were once again presented as heroic salvage. The relationship still appears as an uneven one, where foreign knowledge of the region is increased through the foreigners' own scientific endeavours and local researchers benefit from being trained in skills they lack. While there were some additional elements of multi-vocality here that should absolutely be applauded — like the interviews with trainees — the external voices still echo the same teleological narrative, rather than providing a variety of meanings and approaches. Instead of presenting the training program, a focus on local interpretations of the site and its materials could have given local voices the weight that they deserved. Equally, a more inclusive view of the Assyrian sites could have been presented by incorporating narratives that fall between their original occupation and archaeological reinterpretation by foreign powers. Such an approach could have made room for a more complex narrative, highlighting knowledge of the Assyrian empire, and particularly the site of Nineveh, expressed in local terms to counterbalance the biblical, Hellenistic, French and British views that are included in this section.[33]

Conclusions

The blockbuster exhibitions at the British Museum continue to be very visually progressive and engaging. The exhibition curators were able to achieve a great deal within the physical, technological and conceptual space provided. The objects chosen were exquisite. Imposing lamassus,

[31] Bohrer 2003; Brusius 2012; forthcoming; Malley 2004; Reade 2018.

[32] These collections include letters between key figures in the excavation and decipherment of these documents, including August Henry Layard, Hormuzd Rassam, George Smith, Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, Edward Hincks, Julius Oppert and William Henry Fox Talbot.

[33] Both Felix Jones and August Henry Layard describe the inclusion of the sites of Nineveh and Nimrud in the works of local geographers, the most well known being 12th-13th century writer Yaqut ibn 'Abd Allah al-Hamawi (Yaqut *Mujam* I: 92) (Layard 1849, p. 194; Jones 1855, p. 37).

detailed metalwork, delicately carved ivories, expertly inscribed tablets and beautifully rendered palatial reliefs were expertly placed within the galleries. They were dramatically lit, with clearly written textual supports that helped bring them to life. The narrative of military might, intellectual undertakings, imperial interconnectivity and regional change were supported by the exhibition's scenography, from the colours of the walls, to the cuneiform quotes they carry, to the almost architecturally positioned cases. Elements like the library cases, the animated map and the projected relief colouration ensured that visitors leave feeling in awe of this great empire, and the king who ensured it would be remembered. All that being said, the British Museum as an institution continues to suffer from a relative resistance to self-reflection, as evidenced by its continued reliance on BP sponsorship. This same attitude has in some cases led to a stagnation in elements of this exhibition's content, particularly when it came to discussing the uncovery and reception of the collections. The narrative of heroic western archaeologists saving antiquities from obscurity is an outdated one. It suggests a desire for self-justification rather than genuine engagement with the complex histories of the materials. The focus of modern museum practice should be on encouraging genuine co-creation, a narrative told through multiple voices and perspectives. The British Museum, with its strong international collections, extensive expertise and impressive collection has the potential to become a true leader in this transformation, and I hope to see them step up to meet this challenge in the future.

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Gareth Brereton (ed.), *I am Ashurbanipal: King of the World, King of Assyria*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2018. 288pp. ISBN: 978-0-5004-8039-7

My many visits to the *I am Ashurbanipal* exhibition motivated me to read the associated exhibition catalogue to better understand the biographies of the objects on display. I was also keen to compare the museum's narrative style across the two outputs.

The British Museum's exhibition catalogues are known for their high quality, incorporating stunning images[1] and the commentary of expert scholars. The *I am Ashurbanipal* volume is no different. Edited by exhibition curator and Assyriologist Gareth Brereton, the volume is a beautiful expansion on the information provided in the exhibition, as well as an appealing stand-alone work.

The volume is divided into four sections: 'Nineveh: The Centre of the World', 'Ashurbanipal's Empire', 'Violence to Order' and 'Collapse, Rediscovery and Revival'. As these titles suggest, the catalogue covers a broad array of themes pertaining to the Neo-Assyrian period.

As a researcher in museology, I would have liked a curatorial introduction prior to the section about Nineveh to better connect the exhibition and the catalogue. I understand that keeping the catalogue archaeologically but not museologically connected to the exhibition encourages a larger market for the book, but I feel that a short curatorial introduction would have provided important context without detracting from the book's attractiveness to wider audiences. It would have also provided an opportunity for commentary by Carine Harmand, who acted as project curator for the Ashurbanipal exhibition and yet is surprisingly absent from the volume.

The first chapter, written by Gareth Brereton, covers the history of succession from Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) to the early reign of Ashurbanipal, which began in 669 BCE. Quoting a number of cuneiform sources from the Neo-Assyrian Period, Brereton crafts a very accessible introduction to Ashurbanipal and his empire. Brereton rightly notes the subjective nature of the cuneiform accounts and their attempts to create an image of divinely pre-ordained power; however, the precarity of Neo-Assyrian primacy in the region still emerges in the descriptions of regional conflicts and violent battles of succession.

This text-oriented chapter is followed by an exploration of Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh by Julian Edgeworth Reade (ch. 2). There is a slight chronological disjunction as we jump from the 660s to the 640s BCE after Ashurbanipal's conquests in Babylonia and Elam.[2] While the author gives a good overview of the buildings on site, most of the chapter is devoted to the reliefs and their connections with possible room or area functions. An interesting addition is a short section on the signs of destruction and re-use on the site, visible across the reliefs and architecture. This chapter is illustrated with various maps, plans and reconstructions that give context to the buildings being described; however, as most of these remain unattributed, it is difficult to understand their place within the excavation and interpretation of the site.

[1] Objects from outside the exhibition have been included, further exploring the material wealth of the Assyrian Empire.

[2] A solution to this could have been inserting Paul Collins' chapter between the two as his first reference is to Ashurbanipal's succession in 669 BCE (p. 34).

Paul Collins' section on the Assyrian court (ch. 3) similarly highlights the palaces, but has a broader scope, extending the analysis to multiple forms of decoration across the different sites of Assyrian power. Collins highlights the importance of the palace decorations and furnishings in "affirming this relationship" (p. 34) between the ruler and the gods. He takes the reader on a journey through the palace, focusing on different elements that they might encounter on the way. By bringing text and material culture together, Collins creates a convincing and vibrant image of palace life.

We return to Reade in Chapter 4, with an exposé on the theme of the royal hunt, and more specifically the lion hunt. He briefly places this iconography within earlier historical contexts before going into depth on the neo-Assyrian evidence, both textual and in the form of relief images in palatial context. The ending to this chapter includes a fascinating account of the reception of these reliefs in post-Renaissance Europe.

The next two chapters are dedicated to Ashurbanipal's designation as scholar-king. The first, by Irving Finkel (ch. 5), describes the themes, languages and styles of the cuneiform tablets and boards. Finkel also accounts for the way in which the ancient library of Ashurbanipal was managed — its acquisitions, administration and organisation — as well as the ways in which its material has been transferred to us and the lacunas that likely exist within our corpus. Jon Taylor (ch. 6) uses the texts from this library to construct an image of how writing was used across the neo-Assyrian Empire. From the construction of the royal road in order to easily convey knowledge, to the use of cuneiform to record oracles, the cuneiform sources were a means of control. As Taylor's chapter makes clear, under the rule of Ashurbanipal, scholarship and politics were very much intertwined.

The next section, beginning with an overview of neo-Assyrian empire-building from the editor (ch. 7), provides us with a whirlwind tour of the Empire, moving from the Levant (ch. 8 by Jonathan Tubb), to Cyprus (ch. 9 by Thomas Kiely), to Urartu (ch. 10 by Paul Zimansky), to Western Iran (ch. 11 by Yousef Hassanzadeh and John Curtis) and, finally, the strong rival kingdom of Elam (ch. 12 by François Bridey). The connectivity of the Ancient Middle East, as well as its diversity, is deftly explored by each author, using a range of textual sources and exquisite elite goods. The section presents the neo-Assyrian Empire as a truly inter-regional one, defined by strong networks of political, economic and cultural exchange, as well as royal appropriation as the result of war.

The following section provides the flipside of regional cross-fertilisation: the spirit of competition and rivalry that it engendered. Here we first get a general overview of Ashurbanipal's campaigns, written by Jamie Novotny (ch. 13). Novotny primarily uses the annals to construct this narrative, a strategy he admits is fraught with difficulties due to their fragmentation, idealised nature and geographical rather than chronological organisation. In response to these problems, Novotny organises his chapter according to region, focusing on Egypt, Babylon, Elam and the Arab tribal groups. He finishes with an imagining of Ashurbanipal's death through Greek sources on Sardanapalus, an odd addition considering the rest of the section's focus on official cuneiform sources.

The following three chapters discuss the war-related palace reliefs. Chikako Watanabe presents a general overview of the palace of Nineveh (ch. 14), considering the techniques developed in Ashurbanipal's time to render complex events in a single scene, while continuously expressing a

clear message of victory and power. He analyses reliefs of the royal lion hunt, the fall of Babylon and the Battle of Til-Tuba. The other two chapters, one by Davide Nadali (ch. 15), and the other by Ronnie Goldstein and Elnathan Weissert (ch. 16), are solely concerned with the Til-Tuba reliefs. Nadali once again emphasises the narrative ingenuity of Ashurbanipal's sculptors, particularly their ability to highlight strategy, contextualised within the architecture of the southern palace. Goldstein and Weissert, on the other hand, focus on the historical context of the battle, and the parallels between the reliefs and the textual sources. The latter include not only the tablets, but also the captions inscribed in the walls themselves, and parallel textual traditions like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Exodus 14 in the Bible.

The final section of the volume spans all of Assyriology from the death of Ashurbanipal to the present day, a tough bill in 40 pages. It begins with a section by John MacGinnis on the fall of Assyria and its immediate aftermath, understood through archaeological remains and cuneiform texts (ch. 17). Though excellently written, this chapter would probably have been better suited to the conflict section, as its focus is on the Assyrian-Babylonian conflicts that heralded the weakening of the neo-Assyrian Empire.

Reade returns for the 18th chapter, where he is given the task of describing the inhabitation, exploration and excavation of Nineveh. Taking a chronological approach, Reade weaves a story of antiquarian succession, from Claudius James Rich's early cuneiform souvenirs to August Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam's exploration of Nineveh and the more recent excavations of David Stronach. The early excavation stories are integrated into the imperialism of the time. The British are seemingly in constant competition with the French, driven in their antiquarian efforts by the aim to uncover "wonderful things for the museum display" (p. 291). While Reade expresses some of the complexities of this triumphal narrative, highlighting the loss of objects, the financial deficiencies and the curatorial quibbles, the story still emerges mostly as one of western progress, which is a shame considering the richness of Reade's writing.

In chapter 19, Henrietta McCall provides a similar narrative, but this time from the point of view of those viewing the objects back in London. Her focus is on the reception of Assyria in the UK, acknowledging the use of Assyrian artefacts as romanticist constructions full of biblical references. From Layard's publications to the 1951 Crystal Palace exhibition and the subsequent commercialisation of Assyrian history and iconography, the chapter presents the Assyrian reliefs as an instant international hit, desirable artefacts heralding from a "vanished civilisation" (p. 310). While this chapter acknowledges the manipulation of the materials to fit the expectations of the public, it commits the same errors as Reade's contribution, indicating a lack of reflection on the continuity of these populist trends in attitudes towards Iraqi archaeology in modern cultural economies.

The final chapter (ch. 20) by Jonathan Tubb, Falih Almutrb and Sebastian Rey attempts to bring the Assyrian sites into their more recent contexts of Iraqi excavation, and subsequent destruction due to the activities of Daesh. Its inclusion in this volume is important and laudable as it acknowledges the fragility of cultural heritage, even monumental structures, and the use of that fragility as a tool of modern political manoeuvrings. However, the authors missed an important opportunity here to present the impact of the destruction as felt by the people in the region. They only give a brief indication of what this site means to locals on the ground, instead opting for a "'cradle of civilisation' that must be preserved" narrative that might be considered western-centric and even self-congratulatory (p. 314). While the British Museum's work in this region is certainly

admirable, it is not the only framework within which to view the present and the future of Iraq, and the account could have been supplemented by a wider variety of voices and viewpoints.

This last observation is also largely true for the broader volume: it would have been strengthened by more diversity among the scholarly voices being presented. This is not to say that these scholars are in any way unequipped for the task of writing about the Assyrian Empire; on the contrary, they are some of the best-known names in the field. It is evident, however, that diversity of authors, backgrounds and perspectives was not a primary concern when preparing the volume. Assyriology has long suffered from being a relatively homogenous field in terms of the demographics of those who practise it. European men dominated the oversight of early 'excavations' within the Assyrian heartlands and the collections that they engendered. The discipline is changing, however, and there are a number of high-profile Assyriologists who do not conform to this image who have intensively researched cuneiform texts, Ninevite gardens and the historiography of Mesopotamian archaeology, among other areas. More co-authored chapters may have resulted in a more diverse perspective.

The king lists at the end of the book are a useful inclusion for those who are not familiar with the chronology of the period or who simply struggle to distinguish between all the different neo-Assyrian kings whose names start with "Ashur-". The bibliography provides an excellent overview of influential and recent literature in Neo-Assyrian studies, and alongside the glossary, it provides a superb resource for anyone desiring to immerse themselves further in any of the volume's themes.

In books like this, it can be very difficult to strike a balance between being an expert resource and a public one, but this volume manages to offer something for both audiences. While not all themes are given the same amount of space within the volume, the last section being particularly truncated, the scholarship is of consistently high quality, while also being engagingly written. The book is highly recommended for anyone looking to gain a general understanding of the neo-Assyrian Empire and its material culture.

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