

Early Discoveries in Mesopotamia

A hundred years ago little was known concerning the ancient history of Assyria and Babylonia. Temples and palaces lay in ruin, buried in the dust of the mounds dotting the plains of Mesopotamia, along the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Nineveh was forgotten, the true location of Babylon was almost unknown, its famous tower was erroneously identified with that of the Nabu temple at Borsippa. Fabulous legends of Ninus, Semiramis and Sardanapalus, collected by the Greek historians, were accepted as authentic by all travellers from the days of Herodotus to the early part of the nineteenth century. Biblical traditions on the origin of man, the Deluge, the dispersion of peoples, placed in Mesopotamia the very cradle of humanity. But it was not until 1842 to 1845 that the first great excavations of Botta and Layard at Khorsabad, Nimrûd and Kouyunjik brought to light the splendid remains of the Assyrian palaces, which are now in the Louvre and the British Museum. At Khorsabad, Paul Émile Botta discovered the palace of Sargon. At Kouyunjik, the site of Nineveh on the east bank of the Tigris—facing Mosul on the west—, Austin Henry Layard unearthed the palaces of his successors, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, with inscribed tablets of the library, and at Nimrûd, the old city of Calah, more palaces of Assyrian kings of the eighth century B.C., among them the palaces of Ashurnasirpal and the temple of the god Nabu. Such discoveries created an extraordinary enthusiasm in the archaeological world, and their striking illustrations and confirmation of the Biblical history appealed to the keen interest of large religious communities. For over twenty years French and English excavations kept that interest alive. Paul Émile Botta, the French consul at Mosul, was succeeded by Victor Place; Rawlinson, "the Father of Assyriology," and Hormuz Rassam successfully completed the work of Layard.

Excavations in Babylonia proper, in southern Mesopotamia, failed to arouse the same enthusiasm. Discoveries were rather disappointing. The absence of stone monuments, reliefs, stelae, or statues, the prevailing use of mud bricks, crude and baked as a building material, the enormous accumulation of débris due to a longer occupation, prevented at first a true appreciation of the remains and historical meaning of this incredibly old and forgotten civilization. Pioneer work was done by W. K. Loftus at Nippur and other Sumerian cities, also at Shushan in

Elam, in 1849-1853; by J. Oppert at Babylon in 1851; by J. E. Taylor, English consul at Basra, at Muqayyar, which he proved to be Ur of the Chaldees, in 1854; and by Rawlinson at Borsippa in the same year. But it was only after 1877 that the discovery of monuments of pure Sumero-Babylonian art at Tello-Lagash revived the interest in and established the importance of excavations in southern Mesopotamia. Life-size statues in the round of the local ruler Gudea, now in the Louvre Museum, were found in quick succession by Ernest de Sarzec, French consul at Basra, together with many inscribed documents in the Sumerian language, all dated in the third millennium B.C.; also stelae and plaque reliefs of earlier rulers of Lagash, much older than anything recovered in Assyria. Since de Sarzec's first almost clandestine excavations, numerous ruined cities have been thoroughly explored by large expeditions sent to Babylonia by European nations.

Nippur

The interest of the American public in Oriental research is proved by the foundation of the American Oriental Society in 1842, the very year of Botta's discoveries at Khorsabad. Its first volume contains a paper on "The Persian Cuneiform Inscription and the Study of Egyptian." But nearly half a century elapsed before public opinion matured and was ripe to enter the field of Mesopotamian archeology. The first large-scale expedition to leave this country was the Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania. It was organized in 1888 and supported by "The Public-spirited Gentlemen of Philadelphia." Funds were subscribed and a corporation formed with Provost William Pepper as President and E. W. Clark as Treasurer. Other members were C. H. Clark, W. W. Frazier, C. C. Harrison, J. D. Potts, Maxwell Sommerville, Richard Wood, Stuart Wood, Prof. Langley (of the Smithsonian Institution) and Prof. Marquand (of Princeton).

The site selected for the expedition was the mounds of Niffer or Nippur (*Figure 2*) in the middle of the Babylonian plain, a hundred miles south of Baghdad. Dr. John Punnett Peters was the Director in the field, assisted by J. H. Haynes. Prof. Herman Hilprecht, secretary of the expedition, whose name was henceforth to be intimately connected with Nippur, served as Assyriologist.