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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XXIV. Nineveh and its Remains

CHAPTER XXIV.

NINEVEH AND ITS REMAINS.

Difficulties in the Way of my Visiting Nineveh—The Site of that Ancient City—*Savans* disagree as to its Size—Sketch of Modern Explorations—Inscriptions upon the Walls of its Palaces—The Cuneiform Language—An Unknown Character of an Unknown Tongue—Significance of the Word "Cuneiform"—Ancient Civilization of Assyria and Egypt—Biblical Accounts confirmed by Modern Discoveries—The Behistun Rocks—Records of Darius, "the Great King"—Peculiarities of Cuneiform Writing—Bricks of Babylon and Nineveh—Translation of a Babylonian Cylinder—George Smith, the Discoverer of the "Deluge-Tablets"—His own Account of this Remarkable Discovery—His recent Book of "Assyrian Explorations"—Extracts from the Flood Series of Legends—The Chaldean Account of the Deluge.



O visit the site of Ancient Nineveh, before leaving this country, had been my earnest desire. But as my journey was not one of exploration or scientific discovery, I was obliged to forego the satisfaction of standing upon the spot identified with so many historical associations, which could only be enjoyed at the expense of much personal discomfort and loss of time.

The modern town of Mosul is situated upon the western bank of the Tigris, nearly

opposite the ruins which mark the site of Nineveh, and about three hundred miles north of Bagdad. The rapid current of the river makes its upward navigation impracticable, and Mosul can only be reached from Bagdad by a horseback journey of ten days, which, during the hot season, with recent Babylonian experiences fresh in my mind, is not an attractive excursion. Add to this the probability that the plague, if it spreads to Bagdad, will cut off my retreat down the river to the Persian Gulf, and I think the most enthusiastic antiquarian would come to the conclusion that in this case, "discretion is the better part of valor."

But as I am here in Babylonia, with the atmosphere of the *antique* all around me, I shall venture to give a short and necessarily imperfect sketch of the explorations and discoveries, which within the last thirty years have attracted the attention of the civilized world, and opened a new chapter to the student of ancient history.

Although the site and identity of these ruins with ancient Nineveh is unquestioned, yet *savans* differ as to the extent and size of the city when visited by the prophet Jonah, and described by him as "an exceeding great city of three days' journey."

Rawlinson maintains that "a city of three days' journey may be one which it requires three days to traverse from end to end, or one which is three days' journey in circumference, or, lastly, one which cannot be thoroughly visited and explored by a prophet commissioned to warn its inhabitants of a coming danger, in less than three days time." And he adds, that if Nineveh was in Jonah's time a city of even one hundred and twenty thousand people, it would deserve the title of "an exceeding great city," and the prophet might well be occupied three days in traversing its squares and streets. His theory is that the walls which can now be traced on the plain, and are only eight

miles in circuit, once enclosed the whole of that great capital of the Ninevite kings. This would give much more limited dimensions to the city than would seem consistent with the Biblical account, unless one adopts the ingenious explanation above given.

Layard maintains that three other great palace-mounds lying on the east bank of the Tigris, which, if connected, would have required walls over fifty miles in circuit, should, also, be included as portions of the site of a city so grand and populous as Nineveh is represented to have been by both sacred and profane historians.

Heaps of earth, and grass-grown mounds, with no signs of habitation, and no indications that they cover the ruined palaces of great kings whose empire extended for a thousand years over the larger portion of the then known world, can now be seen scattered over this great area. There are immense trenches and excavations in these mounds, through which, under the direction of Layard and other explorers, hundreds of Arabs dragged with ropes the colossal winged bulls that guarded the entrances of these grand palaces. The British Museum and the Louvre at Paris are enriched with splendid collections of Assyrian marbles, and although but a small fraction of these long-buried antiquities have as yet seen the light,



SENNACHERIB.

after nearly thirty centuries of entombment, it would almost seem as if the proud capital of the Chaldean monarchs had been transferred to the banks of the Thames and the Seine.

The first explorations at Nineveh were made by M. Botta, the eminent French *savant*, who was appointed French consul at Mosul in 1842. Mr. Layard commenced operations in 1845, and the interesting account of his explorations has made the subject familiar wherever the English language is spoken. Then came Colonel, (now Sir Henry) Rawlinson; and more recently the "Assyrian Discoveries" of Mr. George Smith, of the British Museum, in 1873-4, have thrown much additional light upon the history, language, manners, and customs of ancient Assyria and Babylonia.

But, although the walls of these palaces were covered with inscriptions, they were in an unknown tongue, and as mysterious and unintelligible as was the handwriting on the wall to the priests of Belshazzar. To decipher the unknown characters of an unknown language is no easy task, and Prof. Grotefend was the first to find a clue to the mysteries of the *Cuneiform*, or *Arrow-head* language.

The word *cuneiform* is derived from the Latin *cuneus*—a wedge—and in this style of letter are all the monumental records of the ancient empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. The accidental discovery of the famous Rosetta Stone, (now in the British Museum) furnished the key to decipher the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt, by means of which a flood of light has been thrown upon the history and civilization of the Pharaohs. The patience and perseverance of Rawlinson, Layard, and others have rescued the *Cuneiform* from the position of a "dead language," and have made it one full of life and interest to the antiquarian student.

Pliny declares that it is to the Assyrians we owe the

invention of letters; and it would seem probable that simple perpendicular and horizontal lines, of which the *Cuneiform* is composed, preceded the rounded or cursive forms, being better suited to letters carved by a primitive people on stone tablets, or the smoothed faces of rocks. The great antiquity of carved documents on stone is shown by the Bible. The Divine commands were first given to mankind on stone tablets, and in early ages this was considered the most appropriate and durable method of perpetuating records. The *cuneiform* inscriptions on most of the monuments of Assyria and Persia were formed with great neatness and care. The letters were evidently cut with sharp implements of iron or copper, and on the seals, gems, and small cylinders of stone the characters were so elaborately made and so accurately minute, that only an instrument of the most delicate construction could have produced them. It is said that no implements or tools of iron or steel, but only those of copper have been discovered among the ruins of ancient Egypt. But the cutting-tools of the Egyptians, as well as of the early Asiatic nations, were not of pure copper, nor were they of *bronze*, according to the modern acceptance of that term. They were made of copper with an alloy of about five per cent. of tin, which gave them the requisite hardness for use.

We know little of the civilization of the Assyrians, except what can be gathered from the casual notices scattered through the works of the Greeks. It is evident that they attained a high degree of culture at a very remote period. The testimony of the Bible, and the monuments of the Egyptians, on which the conquests of that people over the Asiatic nations are recorded, lead to this conclusion. There is a great discrepancy in the date assigned by *savans* to the earlier monuments of Egypt, but very few ascribe

them to an epoch later than that of the foundation of Nineveh, about 2,000 years B. C. It is probable that the Assyrians at that time shared in the arts and sciences which had already reached so high a degree of perfection in Egypt. They copied nature carefully, and gave more scope to taste and invention than their Egyptian rivals, who were restricted by certain prejudices and superstitions to a conventional style, from which it was not lawful to depart.

The exact date of the destruction of Nineveh, the proud capital of the Eastern world, by Cyaxares, king of the Medes and Persians, as fixed by the concurrent testimony of Scripture and Herodotus, was about 608 years B. C. It did not occur before the death of Josiah, King of Judah B. C. 609, because a "King of Assyria" is mentioned at that time; and Zephaniah in a prophecy delivered in the reign of Josiah predicts the destruction of Nineveh as a future event. But the prophecy of Jeremiah, written in the first year of the captivity of the Jews, B. C. 605, enumerates all the "Kings of the North," far and wide, and "all the Kingdoms of the World," and among these Nineveh is not named. The statement of Herodotus that in the year 608 B. C. Cyaxares conquered Assyria to revenge his father's death is remarkably consistent with the accounts of Scripture. The destruction of Nineveh was so complete that when Xenophon passed over the remains of that city in his retreat, some centuries later, with the "Ten Thousand Greeks," its very name had been forgotten, and he describes it as a vast uninhabited city, called Narissa, anciently inhabited by the Medes. Lucian speaks of it as so completely laid waste, that not an inhabitant nor scarcely a vestige remained of the magnificent palaces, once the dwelling-place of the Assyrian Monarchs; and in modern times, so utterly was it forgotten, that skeptics of the last century even denied its very existence.

Mr. Layard, speaking of the results of his own important discoveries, and of the utter destruction which had visited this once magnificent city, wrote :

“The ruins of Nimroud had been again covered up, and its palaces were once more hidden from the eye. The sculptures taken from them had been safely removed to Busrah, and were now awaiting their final transport to England. The inscriptions, which promise to instruct us in the history and civilization of one of the most ancient and illustrious nations of the earth, had been carefully copied.

“On looking back upon the few months that I had passed in Assyria, I could not but feel some satisfaction at the result of my labors. Scarcely a year before, with the exception of the ruins of Khorsabad, not one Assyrian monument was known ; almost sufficient materials had now been obtained to enable us to restore much of the lost history of the country, and to confirm the vague traditions of the learning and civilization of its people, hitherto treated as fabulous.

“It had often occurred to me, during my labors, that the time of the discovery of these remains was so opportune, that a person inclined to be superstitious might look upon it as something more than accidental. Had these palaces been by chance exposed to view some years before, no one could have been ready to take advantage of the circumstance, and they would have been completely destroyed by the inhabitants of the country. Had they been discovered a little later, it is highly probable that there would have been insurmountable objections to their removal. It was, consequently, just at the right moment that they were disinterred ; and we have been fortunate enough to discover the most convincing and lasting evidence of that magnificence and power which made Nineveh the wonder of the

ancient world, and her fall the theme of the prophets, as the most signal instance of divine vengeance.

“Without the evidence that these monuments afford, we might almost have doubted that the great Nineveh ever existed, so completely ‘has she become a desolation and a waste.’”

The earliest records of the Assyrians, like those of most other ancient nations, were probably monumental, and these are all in the arrow-head, or *cuneiform* character. There are three dialects or forms of these letters—the Assyrian or Babylonian, the Median, and the Persian, and to one of these may be referred all the *cuneiform* inscriptions that are known to exist. The Babylo-Assyrian alphabet contains about three hundred letters, while the Persian *cuneiform* has but forty. The former is supposed to be of much more ancient date, as in this dialect are all the inscriptions found in Nimroud and Nineveh, belonging to a period preceding the Persian domination.

The element of all the characters in the three different dialects of the *cuneiform* is the *wedge*; and they differ only in the combination of wedges to form the letters. In many of the records of the Persian monarchs the three dialects occur in parallel columns, representing three languages.

The most remarkable inscription in this tri-lingual *cuneiform* character is that on the sacred rocks at a place called Behistun (“God’s Place”) on the western frontiers of Persia. Here Darius, “the Great King,” inscribed his conquests and the most important events of his reign. Until within a few years this immense tablet has been a wonder and a puzzle to the most learned antiquaries, and to the few European travelers who have visited these remote regions. The labor of deciphering an unknown character, probably representing an extinct dialect, if not an extinct language,

must be very great. To Sir Henry Rawlinson, whose ingenuity and perseverance have given an accurate translation of the inscription at Behistun, we are indebted for this valuable addition to the written records of the ancient world.

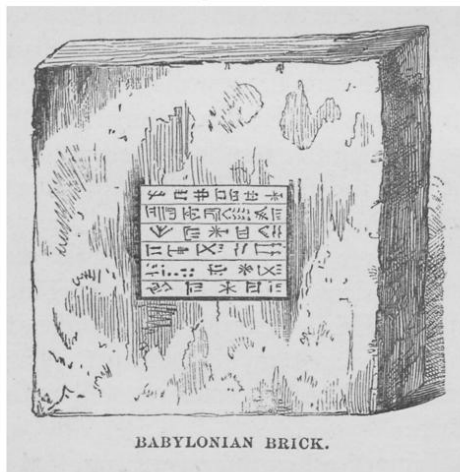
Here upon the main road between Assyria and Persia, the rocks rise abruptly from the plain to the height of nearly seventeen hundred feet. The inscription covers several hundred square feet. It is unrivalled in extent, beauty of execution, and correctness, especially the Persian, which is said to be superior to any engraving of the kind, even that on the tomb of Darius, at Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia. It is about three hundred feet above the base of the rock, and its inaccessibility has preserved it from the iconoclastic fury of the Mahometans. It is probable that after the inscription was completed the rock beneath was cut away, so that the whole immense face is nearly vertical. The rock is limestone, and a coat of silicious varnish is yet visible on the tablet, which was designed to protect it from the atmosphere.

Darius begins by proclaiming his genealogy and titles, tracing his descent from Adam. He then enumerates the provinces of his empire, which in extent would seem to entitle him to the name of "the great King." After these follow the great events of his reign, the reform of the national faith, his victories over the rebels in Assyria and Babylon, and the suppression of insurrections in other parts of his vast empire. He also engraves his thanksgiving to Ormuzd on this sacred spot, and in many particulars this record corroborates the Mosaic accounts as well as the writings of Herodotus.

There is one peculiarity of all *cuneiform* writing, that it reads from left to right; while the ancient languages composed of rounded forms of letters (the Arabic, Hebrew,

and Persian), read from right to left. These characters are stamped or engraved, according to the nature of the material, on all the ruins of the great cities of Assyria and Babylonia—on the bricks of all the public buildings—on the walls of the temples, palaces, and other edifices, on stone slabs and bas-reliefs, on vases, gems, seals, and small cylinders, some being so minute as to require a microscope to decipher them.

I have before mentioned that the bricks of Babylon are uniform in size, and that all have stamped upon them the standard inscription of Nebuchadnezzar. It gives his name and titles, describes the wonders of the great city, and invokes the gods to grant duration to the temples and other great edifices which he had built. The inscriptions on the Babylonian bricks are always enclosed in a small square, and are formed with considerable care and nicety. They appear to have been impressed with a stamp upon which the entire inscription, not isolated letters, was cut in



BABYLONIAN BRICK.

relief. This art, so nearly approaching the modern invention of printing, is proved to have been known to the Egyptians and Chinese at a very remote period. The Pharaohs stamped their names on bricks, the stamps used

being of wood, and several are preserved in European collections. But all the impressions on Egyptian bricks, unlike

those of Assyria are in relief. The Babylonian bricks are about fifteen inches by three inches thick. They are made of a very tenacious clay, mixed with chopped straw and burnt hard in a kiln. They were always laid face downward in a cement of bitumen so hard as to make it almost impossible to remove one entire.

The bricks from Nineveh are also rectangular, but somewhat thicker than the Babylonian. The inscriptions on these Assyrian bricks appear to have been made in single *cuneiform* letters, and sometimes the workmen seem to have been careless in stamping them.

Among other antiques from Babylon which I was fortunate enough to secure is a small black cylinder of very hard stone with an exceedingly fine grain. It is an inch long by about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, and was picked up in the sand among the mounds of the ancient city. The surface of the cylinder is completely covered with an inscription in minute *cuneiform* letters very finely cut. A copy is given below, the letters being considerably magnified. For the translation I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. Smith, of the British Museum.



[“ The seal, or amulet, of a man named Kizirtu, son of the woman Satumani, servant (or priest) of Ishtar and Nana.”]

Mr. George Smith, in his recently published work entitled “ Assyrian Discoveries,” gives an interesting account of the progress made by himself during the eight years that

he has been engaged in the study and translation of the *cuneiform* inscriptions. He says, "Everyone has some bent or inclination which, if fostered by favorable circumstances, will color the rest of his life. My own taste has always been for Oriental studies, and from my youth I have taken a great interest in Eastern explorations and discoveries, particularly in the great work in which Layard and Rawlinson were engaged." "In 1866, seeing the unsatisfactory state of our knowledge of those parts of Assyrian history which bore upon the history of the Bible, I felt anxious to do something towards settling a few of the questions involved." Through the kindness of Sir Henry Rawlinson he was granted permission to examine the large collection of paper casts of *cuneiform* inscriptions in his work-room at the British Museum.

For several years Mr. Smith devoted himself to this study with an assiduity and perseverance that evinced his eminent fitness for this class of scientific investigation, and was rewarded with discoveries that attracted much attention from *savans* both in Europe and America. "In 1869," he says, "I discovered, among other things, a curious religious calendar of the Assyrians, in which every month was divided into four weeks, and the seventh days or 'Sabbaths' were marked out as days on which no work should be undertaken." But the discovery which has especially made him famous, and which has linked his name with the men most eminent in *cuneiform* research, is that of the celebrated "Deluge Tablets." I give his account of this fortunate discovery in his own words.

"In 1872 I had the good fortune to make a far more interesting discovery, namely, that of the tablets containing the Chaldean account of the deluge. The first fragment I discovered contained about half of the account; it was the largest single fragment of these legends.

"As soon as I recognized this, I began a search among the fragments of the Assyrian library to find the remainder of the story.

"This library was first discovered by Mr. Layard, who sent home many boxes full of fragments of terra-cotta tablets, and after the close of Mr. Layard's work Mr. Rassam and Mr. Loftus recovered much more of this collection. These fragments of clay tablets were of all sizes, from half an inch to a foot long, and were thickly coated with dirt, so that they had to be cleaned before anything could be seen on the surface. Whenever I found anything of interest, it was my practice to examine the most likely parts of this collection, and pick out all the fragments that would give, or throw light on the new subject. My search for fragments of the 'Deluge Story' was soon rewarded by some good 'finds,' and I then ascertained that this tablet, of which I obtained three copies, was the eleventh in a series of tablets giving the history of an unknown hero, named Izdubar; and I subsequently ascertained that the series contained in all twelve tablets. These tablets were of remarkable interest, and a notice of them being published, they at once attracted a considerable amount of attention, both in England and abroad."

In consequence of the wide interest taken in these discoveries, the proprietors of the "*Daily Telegraph*" newspaper came forward and offered to advance the sum of one thousand guineas for fresh researches at Nineveh, in order to recover more of these interesting inscriptions.

This liberal offer was accepted, and Mr. Smith, having obtained six months leave of absence from the trustees of the British Museum, started for the East in January, 1873.

The records of this journey and of the subsequent expedition in 1874, are given to the public in the book already referred to. Mr. Smith encountered much difficulty, and had

every possible obstacle thrown in his way by the local Turkish officials, but he persevered, and ultimately succeeded in excavating at Kouyunjik, near Nineveh, many additional portions of these inscriptions, which he calls the "Flood series of Legends."

I was shown by him one of these terra-cotta fragments of the "Deluge Tablets." It was about a foot long by eight inches in width, and completely covered with *cuneiform* characters. The initial design at the head of this chapter is a *fac-simile* copy of a fragment of one of these "Deluge-Tablets."

Beside giving the Chaldean account of the deluge, they form one of the most remarkable series of inscriptions yet discovered. These tablets record the adventures of a hero whose name is given as Izdubar, who has given no inconsiderable amount of employment to the learned. Mr. Smith is of opinion that this fabulous personage is the same as the Nimrod of the Bible, and that these legends were composed more than 2,000 years B. C. The translations of these Izdubar legends seem to be literal, but they are very fragmentary and disconnected in form. So far as they are preserved they represent Izdubar, or Nimrod, as a mighty hunter, or giant, whose mission it was to destroy "the divine bull," and other fabulous monsters and wild animals, and who in the height of his power ruled over all the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, from the Persian Gulf to the Armenian Mountains. Mr. Smith says, "During the early Babylonian monarchy, from B. C. 2500 to 1500, there are constant allusions to these legends. The destruction of the lion, the divine bull, and other monsters by Izdubar, is often depicted on the cylinders and engraved gems, and Izdubar in his boat is also on some specimens. The legend of the flood is alluded to in inscriptions of the same epoch, and the 'city of the ark' is mentioned in

a geographical list, which is one of the oldest *cuneiform* inscriptions we possess."

I give below but a few extracts from the "Flood Legends" to show the outlines of the story :

"And he spake to me . . . Make a ship after this . . . I destroy the sinners and life . . . Cause to go in the seed of life, all of it to the midst of the ship . . . Into the deep launch it . . . I entered to the midst of the ship and shut the door . . . The raging of the storm in the morning . . . The bright earth to a waste was turned . . . The surface of the earth like . . . it swept. It destroyed all life from the face of the earth . . . Six days and nights passed. . . . The wind, deluge, and storm overwhelmed . . . On the seventh day in its course was calmed all the storm and all the deluge . . . The sea he caused to dry, and the wind and deluge ended . . . I sent forth a dove and it left . . . The dove went and turned and a resting place, it did not find and it returned . . . I sent forth a swallow and it left . . . The swallow went and turned, and a resting place it did not find, and it returned . . . I sent forth a raven and it left . . . The raven went, and the corpses on the water it saw, and it did eat, it swam and wandered away, and did not return . . . I sent the animals forth to the four winds . . . I poured forth a libation . . . I built an altar on the peak of the mountain."

The few extracts above given are not consecutive, but they show a remarkable similarity of this traditionary account of the Flood with the Biblical record of that event. The question of *priority*, or which is the *editio princeps*, I will not here discuss. What are traditions but unauthenticated history?

The facility with which Mr. Smith reads the *cuneiform* lan-

guage is very remarkable. The fine inscriptions upon the cylinder before mentioned, and upon other antiques which I submitted to him, he copied and translated at sight, as readily as a Professor of Greek would read a sentence in that language. A lexicon of the *cuneiform* I presume has yet to be made. For thousands of years these inscriptions were an unknown tongue. An attempt to do justice to the wonders which the key to the *cuneiform* inscriptions has unlocked would occupy volumes. I can only hope in this chapter to call attention to a subject on which very little is known to the mass of the people. This is an age of scientific research, and while our *savans* are opening new fields of knowledge, it seems eminently proper that they should recover from the remote past whatever of value is already recorded upon tables of stone.

