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D. G. Rossetti's "The Burden of Nineveh"

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Keywords: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Rossetti- winged-bull- Nineveh- Burden of Nineveh	Abstract <p>Iraqi and Middle-Eastern Archaeological antiquities had been, and still are subjects to burglary by the excavators and looters. In 1850, the British Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1822-1888), made a visit to the British Museum which coincided with the hoisting into the museum of a winged bull from Nineveh and he selected the Nineveh statue as the focus of his musings. This event induced a train of thoughts in the poet and inspired his poem "The Burden of Nineveh" in which he contemplates on the Bull's identity, time and civilizations. The poet goes into the future of London to imagine the sculpture and its new role as a relic in the London Museum. He predicts that in the future, archaeological excavators; travellers from Australia, digging up the massive Assyrian bull-god sculpture from the ruins of London and the British Museum will assume it to be a relic of London rather than of Nineveh and an object of worship by native Britons, representing London's culture and religion. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to shed light on the significance of this poem as an eye-witness on the acts of stealing the Iraqi and the Near Eastern antiquities and conveying them to the British Museum and other museums. It, also, attempts to explore Rossetti's critique of imperial cultures and his concept of time and inconstancy as well as his prediction of an aura of decline and ruin of Western civilization.</p>
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قصيدة "عبء نينوى" لدانتي غيبرل روزيتي

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<p>الخلاصة : كانت آثار العراق والشرق الأوسط وما زالت عرضة لعمليات سرقة وتهريب على أيدي المنقبين واللصوص. في 1950 قام الشاعر والرسام الإنكليزي دانتي غيبرل روزيتي (1822-1888) بزيارة المتحف البريطاني وقد تزامنت هذه الزيارة مع إدخال ثور مجنح الى المتحف بعد نقله من نينوى فاختار الشاعر هذا الثور المجنح موضوعاً لتأملاته. أثارت هذه الحادثة لديه الكثير من الأفكار وأهمته كتابة قصيدة "عبء نينوى" التي يتناول فيها هوية هذا الثور المجنح وعصره والحضارة التي ينتمي إليها. ثم ينتقل الشاعر الى مستقبل مدينة لندن متخيلاً هذا التمثال ودوره حين يتم إكتسافه كقطعة أثرية من آثار المتحف البريطاني. يتنبأ الشاعر أن منقبين آثاريين قادمين من أستراليا - في المستقبل - يعثرون على هذا الثور المجنح في أنقاض المتحف البريطاني فيعتقدون أنه من آثار لندن وليس من آثار نينوى وأنه أحد آلهة البريطانيين ويمثل حضارة وديانة سكان لندن.</p> <p>يحاول هذا البحث أن يسلط الضوء على أهمية هذه القصيدة كشاهد عيان على عمليات سرقة آثار العراق والشرق الأوسط ونقلها إلى المتحف البريطانية والمتاحف الأخرى. كما يحاول بيان نقد روزيتي للثقافة الأمبريالية ومفهومه للزمن والتغير إضافة الى التنبؤ بجو من التدهور والأنحلال والدمار سيشمل الحضارة الغربية.</p>	<p>الكلمات الدالة: -</p> <p>- روزيتي - الثور المجنح - نينوى - عبء نينوى</p> <p>معلومات البحث تاريخ البحث:</p> <p>الاستلام: 2022_1_28 القبول: 2022_2_15 التوفر على النت</p>
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I. Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), English poet and painter who was the major founder and leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood devoted to reviving art before the great Italian Renaissance painter Sanzio Raphael (1483-1520). Born on May 12, 1828, he was the eldest son of an Italian poet, art scholar and political refugee. Italian literature and art, Dante and the early provincial poets, therefore, exercised a profound influence upon Rossetti's life, painting and poetry (Doughty: x) and influenced his imagination which was so powerful that Ford Madox Ford, his friend and Pre-Raphaelite brother, accused him of being a "slave of his imagination -- an imagination of a power and vividness such as I have never seen equaled" (Cary: 198). Rossetti began writing poetry about the same time that he seriously took to the study of painting. Two of his best-known poems, *The Portrait* and *The Blessed Damozel*, were

written in 1842. Rossetti continued to produce paintings and poems until late in his life (*Encarta*, art. 'Rossetti').

Rossetti was regarded as a leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood not only because of the major part he played in establishing the movement, but because almost all his poetry and paintings were typically Pre-Raphaelite. The Brotherhood began as an artistic movement in painting manifesting dissatisfaction with Victorian England and reaction against the Industrial Revolution, both socially and aesthetically. This dissatisfaction resulted in their idealization of the past. The Brotherhood, also, had been characterized by the fusion of painting and literature. Furthermore, most of their poems --especially Rossetti's-- were inspired by pictures and some of their pictures were inspired by poems; "the Burden of Nineveh" is just one of so many examples.

II. Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894)

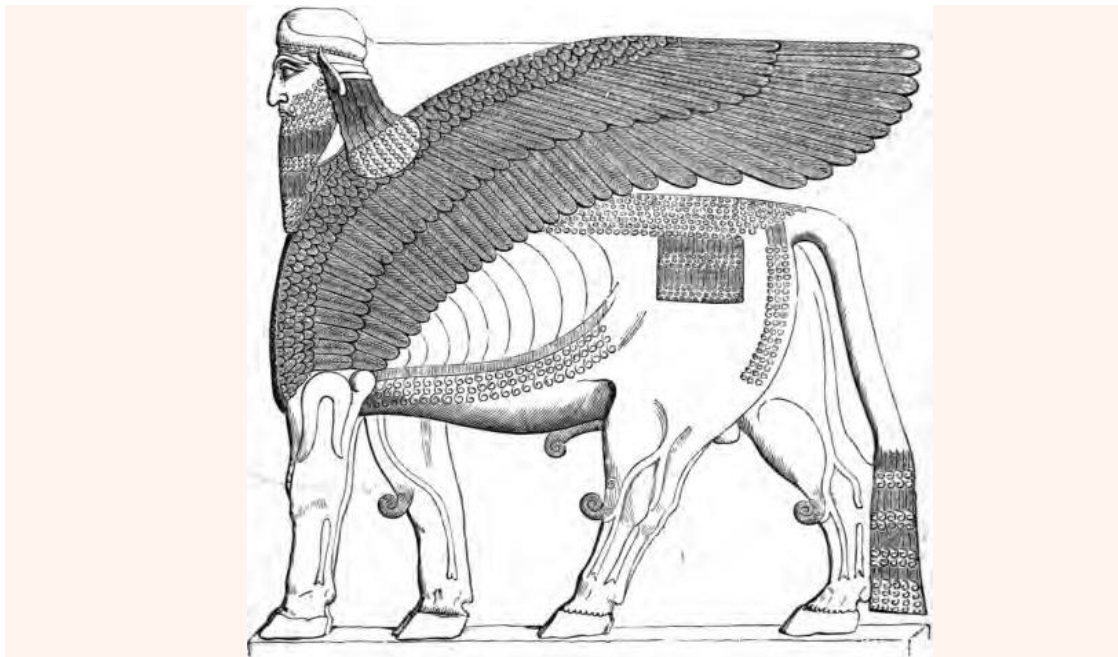
It is not out of place to say something about Layard whose books about the excavations in Iraq were the main source of Rossetti's knowledge about Assyria and its remains. Layard is a French-born Englishman who was famous as "the excavator of Nimrud and of Nineveh". He is also famous for finding and uncovering the major part of the Assyrian palace reliefs as well as the library of Ashurbanipal (Wikipedia). As the title of one of his books indicates, his first expedition of excavations lasted from 1845 to 1847 and after his return to England he published his famous book *Nineveh and Its Remains* in two volumes in 1848-1849 followed by an illustrated volume *The Monuments of Nineveh* (1849). His discoveries were also recorded in *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*.

In his books, Layard gave detailed accounts of his daily work, the following is just an example:

The first sculpture discovered still standing in its original position, was a winged human-headed bull carved out of yellow limestone. On the previous day we had found the human head belonging to the corresponding bull on the opposite side of the entrance, which had fallen from its place and was broken into several pieces. This head is now in the British Museum. I lifted the body with difficulty; and discovered under it sixteen copper lions, of admirable execution, forming a regular series, diminishing in size from the largest, which was above one foot in length, to the smallest, which scarcely exceeded an inch. A ring was attached to the back of some of them. When these lions were brought to England and cleaned, it was found that upon them were short inscriptions in the cuneiform character, and in cursive Semitic or Phoenician letters. The cuneiform inscriptions contain the name of Sennacherib, to whose reign consequently these objects are to be referred, and specially the weight of the lion, which is also stated in the Phoenician writing. In addition lines or notches on the side of the lion correspond with the number of manæ mentioned in the inscriptions... (Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, 89).

Though he was behind rediscovering the ancient ruins of Nineveh such as the lost palace of Seennacherib and the library of Ashurbanipal which contained more than 22.000 clay tablets including the Epic of Gilgamesh, (Gilgamesh, Nineveh, and Sir Austen Layard <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/gilgamesh-nineveh-and-sir-austen->

[henry-layard-faq.htm](#)), he was responsible for conveying thousands of archaeological findings from Iraq to the British Museum. His intentions of burgling the findings were felt by the local Ottoman rulers who "posed problems for Layard, particularly Mohamed Pasha, the tyrannical Ottoman governor of Mosul, and the *Kadi* of Mosul, an Ottoman official who believed Layard wished to send Assyrian sculptures "to the place of your Queen, who, with the rest of the unbelievers, worships these idols." (Layard: *Nineveh and its Remains*, 84). However, Layard shipped most of his findings to London, where they formed the essence of the British Museum's collection of Assyrian antiquities such as two colossal winged lions, winged bull, thousands of clay tablets and small findings (<https://isaw.nyu.edu/library/blog/lyard>).



This Bas-Relief is in the British Museum (Layard: *Nineveh and its Remains*, 88)

III. The Burden of Nineveh

The main source for D. G. Rossetti's poem was Sir Austen Layard's two books *Nineveh and Its Remains: During the Years 1845, 1846, 1847* (1849) and *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh*, the abridged edition of 1851 which he made use of when he revised his poem (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1850.raw.html>). Rossetti most likely began writing "The Burden of Nineveh" in October or November of 1850 shortly after the enormous Assyrian bull bas-relief arrived in London (Stauffer 45). The poem therefore, was composed in the fall of 1850 as a draft, revised in 1856 and published in August 1856 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. It was also revised in 1870 to be published in his volume entitled *Poems*. (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1850.raw.html>)

In "The Burden of Nineveh", Rossetti's imagination led him to the East. His "Historical Knowledge this time comes from the descriptions of Sir Austen Henry Layard of his excavations in *Nineveh and its Remains*, (1849) and *A Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh* (1851)" (Lang: 501). The poem is the outcome of an actual visit made by the poet to enjoy the relics of Greek art in the Museum, but as he exits

the museum into the busy streets of London, he is stopped by a winged-bull being brought into the museum:

Sighing I turned at last to win
Once more the London dirt and din;
And as I made the swing-door spin
And issued, they were hoisting in
A winged beast from Nineveh. (Rossetti: ll. 266)

The poet says he left "Dead Greece" and the modern dirty London and turned to a different culture partly to find a fresh source of inspiration, and to discover a new means by which he can indirectly attack contemporary England. One should not ignore Rossetti's association of London here with "dirt and din" because the whole poem may be looked at as an extension of his abhorrence of contemporary London.

This winged-bull's outward appearance is briefly described in the second stanza

A human face the creature wore
And hoofs behind and hoofs before
And flanks with dark runes fretted o'er.
(ll. 11-13)

In the second stanza, the poet briefly describes the outward appearance of the bull, then he states his symbolic impression of the sculpture as a "mummy of buried faith" (l. 16) looking at it as an Assyrian god. It is also a symbol of the dead civilization of Nineveh, "the very Corpse of Nineveh" (l. 20). The sculpture brings back recollections in the poet's mind of the golden days of Nineveh when the winged-bull had witnessed marriage vows, religious rites, prayers and maiden songs. However, after a long period of silence, for ages, in well-fortified courts, guarded by such sculptures of winged-bulls and winged-lions that even the wind was unable to pass or intrude till the English excavator broke the silence of Nineveh:

What vows, what rites, what prayer prefer'd,
What songs had the strange image heard?
In what blind vigil stood interr'd
For ages till an English word
Broke silence first at Nineveh?
(ll. 26-30)

In stanza 5, the sun shines for the first time on the winged-bull because it had been buried under the ground for ages. In this concern, Julie Flygare points out the influence of Layard on Rossetti's poem especially in this stanza which talks about the shadow of the bull. "it is noted" says Flygare, 'in Layard's *Nineveh [and its Remains]* that "during the excavations, the Tiyare, Tiyari workmen held their services in the shadow of the great bulls" (<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/flygare5.html>)

On London stone our sun anew
The beast's recovered shadow threw
(No shade that plague of darkness knew
No light, no shad, while older grew

By ages the old earth and sea.)
.....
From their dead past thou livest alone;
And still thy shadow is thine own,
Even as of yore in Nineveh.
(ll. 41-45, 48-50)

However, the shadow here may have other implications; it may stand for the bull's power and its influence;

The bull is the only survivor from the dead, glorious past of Nineveh. The poet, then, recalls the Biblical story of Jonah who was swallowed by the whale and cast away near the city gates of Nineveh "sheltered by a gourd" and he recalls the golden days when King Sennacherib (705-681 BC) used to kneel in shadow of the winged-bull, or when Semiramis used to bring her golden belt and incense to the bull, asking him for grace in times of peace and for support in times of war; and in the last year, the excavator "the Christian" knelt in the bull's shadow:

Within thy shadow, haply, once
Sennacherib has knelt, whose sons
Smote him between the alter stones;
Or pale Semiramis her zones
Of gold, her incense brought to thee,
In love for grace, in war for aid: ...
(ll. 70-75)

Historically speaking, Sennacherib "was murdered by one or more of his sons in 681 BC (Encrta, art. "Sennacherib"). As for Semiramis, she is the Shammuramat (Semiramis) historical Assyrian queen, wife of Shamshi-Adad V of Assyria, who, after her husband's death served as regent from 811–806 BC for her son, Adad-nirari III and was in real control of the vast Neo-Assyrian Empire (911-605 BC). She ruled successfully "stabilizing and strengthening the empire after a destructive civil war...until she was turned into a mythical figure" (Wikipedia, art. "Semiramis").

The winged-bull, which is a symbol of pomp, pride and glory, is then addressed by the poet as "poor god" because it is imprisoned, powerless, in the curtained hall of the museum where school-pupils will come in holidays to view it as an emblem of the transience of life and grandeur and the inconsistency of greatness and power. In the eyes of the visitors there will be no distinction between the three great empires of Rome, Babylon and Nineveh; all these empires had demised and been ruined by the conquering time and so will be the fate of the British colonial empire:

While school-foundation in the act
Of holiday, three files compact,
Shall learn to view thee as a fact
Connected with that zealous tract:
"Rome, -- Babylon and Nineveh"
(ll. 76-80)

The poet goes on his speculations saying that some of the Egyptian mummies in the museum might have visited this Assyrian god when they were alive, and now the mummies, their Egyptian gods and the Assyrian winged-bull are all mere relics in the museum

And now,-- they and their gods and thou
Are relics here together,-- now
Whose profit? Whether bull or cow,
Isis or Ibis, who or how
Whether of Thebes or of Nineveh?
(ll. 116-120)

Symbolically speaking, in the museum, there is no geographical, historical or temporal separation between nations and civilizations; they are mingled in the rooms of the museum. The museum becomes a unifying element of cultures and civilizations of old as a critique of the British Empire's colonial expansion and as a warning that it will face the same destiny.

The winged-bull is described as the only remaining evidence of the dead civilization, "From their dead past thou livest alone" (l. 48), the bull that has wings and eyes but can neither fly nor see, is "a symbol of a culture" as Jerome Buckley argues, "neither Greek nor Christian, a civilization destroyed by its own material pomp and pride" (Buckley: 133). The poet's intention is to suggest that what had befallen Nineveh would be the inevitable doom of England's material pride and imperialistic power, or, as Algernon Charles Swinburne in his review of Rossetti's poem in 1870 saw it, Rossetti dreams of "a chance by which in the far future this God, found again a relic in a long-ruined city, might be taken for the God of its inhabitants... and no dead idol, but a living deity" (Swinburne: 262). Rossetti predicts this state saying:

To pass, till on my sight should burst
That future of the best or worst
When some may question which was first
Of London or of Nineveh. (ll. 177-80)

The poet's imagination takes him into the future to envisage excavators from abroad (like those who excavated the Iraqi archaeological remains), coming from Australia; they dig the ruins of the British Museum and find "the massive Assyrian bull-god sculpture from the British Museum and assuming it to be an object of worship by native Britons" (Skilton). Thus, the winged bull will be found as a relic of London, not of Nineveh, and like what Layard had done when he shipped the bull from Iraq to England, this time it will be shipped to Australia. The poet's Choice of Australia may be due to the fact that Australia was a British colony and this suggests that the British Empire is doomed to degenerate and Australia is to be more powerful than England. Hence the Sculpture will be shipped to Australia on board of "unknown" vessels:

So may he stand again; till now,
In ships of unknown sail and prow,
Some tribe of the Australian plough
Bear him afar,-- a relic now

Of London, not of Nineveh!
(ll. 76-80)

This image, long hence, may be found where it now stands, and be mistaken for a British god. The future generations will think that the British people have rejected Christianity and worshipped the winged-bull instead

This form shall hold us for some race
That walked not in Christ's lowly ways,
But bowed its pride and viewed its praise
Unto the God of Nineveh.
(ll. 187-190)

According to John Masefield, men read the last stanza of the poem with differing interpretations; but it is read by some as a question: "Is it not a British god? Certain points in its appearance are quoted as evidence that it is, or was then, very like some of the objects of popular worship" (Masefield:54). The poet's intention is to show that what had befallen Nineveh will be an inevitable doom of England.

IV. Conclusion

Rossetti's poem "The Burden of Nineveh" sheds light on the systematic burgling of Iraqi archaeological findings by excavators encouraged and materially supported by their imperialistic governments. This process deprived Iraq, the cradle of civilization of the great monuments of its glorious past. The poem shows Rossetti's knowledge of Mesopotamia, its culture and its history whose main sources were Layard's books as well as the Bible. Rossetti implicitly criticizes England's colonial attitude during the Victorian period. The poem also suggests the transience of time and power through the image of the winged-bull. The bull as a symbol of pomp and glory is now a powerless relic of the Assyrian Empire and consequently, will be a relic of the British Empire in the future. However, what the European excavators have done, of looting archaeological findings, in the nineteenth century is done in the twenty-first by terrorist ISIS fighters who bulldozed and looted the ancient city of Nimrud, Hatra city, Nabi Yunis and many other sites.

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