

Nebi Younus and Nimrud: report on a site visit made in April 2017

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I visited the archaeological sites of Nebi Younus and Nimrud on Monday 3 April 2017 as a member of a group invited by Ms Layla Salih, who was then employed by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage to document the current state of heritage sites in Nineveh Province. At Nebi Younus the group included my colleague Dr Saad Eskander, several members of UNESCO Iraq, two ICONEM staff who were taking drone images of the site of UNESCO, two journalists from the *New York Times*, and archaeologist Dr Muzahim Mahmoud (Figure 1). At Nimrud the group consisted only of Ms Laylah Salih, Dr Saad Eskander, and the two ICONEM staff members, who were documenting the site by drone for UNESCO.¹

The notes I present here represent my informal impressions only and should not be taken as definitive assessments. I am neither an excavation archaeologist nor a structural engineer, and I did not carry out systematic investigations of either site. Nor do I presume to recommend what should happen to either site now: that is for Iraqi experts and stake-holders to decide.

Nebi Younus

History

The destroyed shrine of Nebi Younus sits on top of a high archaeological mound or ‘tell’ in East Mosul. Its great height may represent successive strata of human occupation from the seventh millennium BC onwards if we accept evidence from the larger tell of Kouyunjik, clearly visible just to the north and also within the ancient city walls (Reade 2017: 432).

The site’s best-documented period of ancient occupation was in the four decades c.690–650 BC, when the Assyrian kings Sennacherib, his son Esarhaddon, and grandson Ashurbanipal all commissioned accounts (found at Kouyunjik and elsewhere) of their building work there (Turner 1970). At this period, and likely for at least two centuries earlier, it was a ‘review palace’, Assyrian *ēkal mašarti*, where the army mustered before its annual campaign and stored equipment and booty between times. Esarhaddon also describes

¹ Immediately after my return I discussed my observations and photographs with Professor Ali Yaseen Al-Juboori of Mosul University, Dr Paul Collins of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, Dr John Curtis, former Keeper of the Middle East Department at the British Museum, and Dr Lamia Al-Gailani of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their insights have informed what I write here but they should not be held responsible for them. I would also like to thank Leigh Tiplady of Pilgrims Group Iraq and Rashad Khder of SLS Iraq for providing security services for this visit. This article is based on notes I wrote for UNESCO Iraq on 9 and 14 April 2017 and two talks I gave at the College de France in Paris on 20 June 2017 (Robson 2017) and the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Marburg on 27 July 2017. I am very grateful to Professor Abbas Al-Husseiny for giving me the opportunity to publish them here.

parkland and a royal residential wing as well the building's military functions. The Assyrian building was presumably destroyed and looted in the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC, along with the palaces and temples of Kouyunjik.

The site later became associated with the prophet Jonah (Arabic 'Nebi Yunus'), who had supposedly been buried there. A Sunni shrine was erected on the top of the mound in at least the 12th century AD on the former site of a church. The 'tomb' itself sits under the shrine, dug into earlier occupation levels. Undergoing successive rebuildings, most recently as a concrete structure in the early 1990s, the shrine remained in continuous use until it was blown up by Da'esh on 24 July 2014.

The presence of the shrine and associated structures, as well as the surrounding settlement, has limited antiquarians' and archaeologists' access to the ancient substructures since they were first formally identified in 1820 (Reade 2017: 433). Nevertheless, over the period c.1850–1992 sporadic small-scale excavations were conducted on the periphery of the site (Figure 2). There are two recent (but pre-Daesh) summaries and discussions of research on the Neo-Assyrian strata (Kertai 2015; Reade 2017). A research project led by the late Tony Wilkinson also compiled an online repository of earlier documentation and publications, in English and Arabic (CyArk 2014).

At some point between July 2014 and December 2016, when East Mosul was liberated from Da'esh occupation, an extensive network of looters' tunnels was dug into the mound immediately underneath the shrine, removing vast quantities of archaeological material (whether fill or artefacts), exposing large stone structures, and jeopardising the concrete foundations of the ruined shrine immediately above. Substantial leaks from damaged water pipes have further compromised the stability of the tunnels. The current state of the site was first formally documented by Ms Layla Salih during a visit she made on 4 February 2017 (Salih 2017).

Observations

The extensive and winding network of looters tunnels starts at the site of former excavations on the east side of the mound, as shown by comparison with SBAH photographs from 2005, taken during reburial of artefacts uncovered in 1987–92 (Figures 3–5). These show an Assyrian bull *lamassu*-colossus and relief figure to the left of it, made of stone blocks, positioned to the south of the tunnel. As Reade (2017: 458) notes, these were already becoming visible in early 2014, as their earth coverings eroded away. These re-emerging monuments must have been a clear indicator to even the most casual observer of the presence of an archaeological site on this spot. They are now missing. However, close inspection reveals that the photographs show the same location from a similar viewpoint. Note the position of the lamppost behind the concrete wall, and the slight change in the height of the wall behind the tunnel entrance. I was not able to determine whether or not their remains formed part of the huge rubble mounds in front of the tunnels. These spoil heaps from the looters diggings almost certainly contain some valuable archaeological data, however.

The tunnel network runs immediately under the concrete foundations of the modern shrine, at the same level as Jonah's tomb. Indeed, those foundations have cut into the backs

of two monolithic stone *lamassus*, or winged bulls, somewhere near the tunnel entrance, which are likely to have been uncovered by previous excavations Figure 6). Likewise, the chamber lined with undecorated stone panels matches descriptions of finds from the official excavations in 1989–90 (Reade 2017: Fig. 13, reproduced here as Figure 3).

The new looters' tunnels begin to the south of the previously excavated area and wind their way confusingly through the mound, with multiple branches.² We got lost a few times and had to retrace our steps. The tunnels intersect with the medieval 'tomb' of Nebi Younus but do not seem to extend further west of it (Figure 7). The passages nearest the entrance are littered with rubbish but further in they are clean. The walls are covered with fresh pick marks and appear to have been dug with some expertise. Almost no stratigraphy is visible, with the exception of a few small carbonised lumps (Figure 8). Rather, the whole appears to be largely collapsed mud brick, with few signs of violent destruction as one would expect from a building sacked in 612 BC. Occasionally the floors are coincident with ancient paved floors, comprising stone blocks. In some areas typical flat, square Assyrian baked bricks are evident too, and in one section we saw two complete vessels resting on the floor (Figures 9–10). I am no pottery expert but their form and fabric appear to be similar to classic Neo-Assyrian palace ware, although not as fine as the examples from Nimrud that I am familiar with.

Now and again the tunnels follow the length of isolated stone panels, of the type designed to line the walls of reception spaces in Neo-Assyrian palaces. The reliefs and inscriptions had all been systematically exposed and cleaned; brickwork and pottery had been excavated carefully. But the looters were not able to trace the walls of the palace in the antiquarian style of Botta and Layard's generation. The slabs do not form coherent sequences, and the short inscriptions on them are typically upside down; one is at 90°. Such inscriptions were normally carved into the back of sculptured panels but as they are still embedded in their mud-brick matrix it is currently impossible to tell what is on the other side (Figure 11). The seven inscriptions, all of Esarhaddon, have now been published by Professor Ali Al-Juboori of Mosul University (2017). They each begin É.GAL maš-šur-PAP-AŠ 'Place of Esarhaddon' and then give the king's genealogy and a variety epithets. None has any narrative content.

Two waist-high panels featuring unique face-on female figures have attracted most public comment. They appear to have originally belonged together but are now separated by several metres in different tunnels and one is upside down (Figures 12–13). Both show signs of exposure to intense heat, as the surface of the marble has turned into soft, white chalk (calcium carbonate, CaCO₃), and parts of the surrounding walls are very sooty. On visual inspection it is impossible to date when this happened. The looters had judiciously chosen to leave a thin layer of mud-brick to support the potentially fragile calcified surface. There are no signs of attempted iconoclasm (as for instance at Nimrud): the women's faces are all undamaged.

² ICONEM have mapped the tunnels using drones for UNESCO Iraq but that data is not yet public, to my knowledge.

Discussion

In recent years both David Kertai (2015) and Reade (2017) have pieced together descriptions of past excavations at this site, from the 1850s to 1990s, although neither write has had the opportunity to visit in person. Kertai (2015: 152) suggests that the area immediately outside the tunnels, and the first chambers as one enters them, represented the entrance to an Assyrian palace throne room, but concludes:

This façade combined colossi of different dates, styles and techniques. The entire ensemble does not resemble the standardized organization of other monumental façades. Its hybrid nature suggests that fragments from different buildings and/or periods were combined to form a new ensemble. Such a mode of additive construction is not otherwise attested. The unfinished nature of some of the colossi moreover suggests that the façade was never finished. The bulls are unlikely to have been left unfinished for several decades. This suggests a very late date, either within Ashurbanipal's reign or perhaps that of a later king, most likely Sin-sharru-ishkun. (Kertai 2015: 152)

The details of Kertai's reconstruction (Kertai 2015: 152, fig. 9.6) do not fit what I observed on site in that it does not account for the chamber lined with uncarved stone panels. Nor does it correctly show the locations of the pair of exposed *lamassus*.

Reade (2017: 445, fig. 13; here Figure 3), meanwhile, pieces together a more detailed and accurate plan of this same area, based on numerous photographs of the late 20th-century excavation taken by Stevan Beverly and John Russell.³ He too concludes that the 'exasperating jumble of evidence' points to a throne room facade but dates its origins some eighty years earlier than Kertai, to the reign of Sennacherib, with remodelling done for both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal (Reade 2017: 454–5). He suggests that the layout of the palace at Nebi Younus was based on that of Sargon's Palace F at Dur-Sharruken (Khorsabad).

Whatever the rights and wrongs of these proposals—which cannot be verified on present evidence—it is important to note that:

- the layout of this throne room facade, as documented by both excavations and tunnels, is confusing and may not represent a coherent ensemble of rooms;
- whatever we are dealing with, it comprised of a bricolage of repurposed monuments that span the 7th century BC; and
- it was probably never finished.

Similarly, it appears that the isolated stone panels found in the tunnels do not represent the coherent remains of a functioning ancient Assyrian palace. They may instead represent either Sin-sharru-ishkun's (or another late Assyrian king's) unfinished attempts at bricolage construction; and/or a later re-use of these building materials, simply as structural elements,

³ Reade's (2017) article includes photographs of the some of the inscriptions edited by Al-Juboori (2017). Reade (2017: figs. 15–16) show Al-Juboori (2017: ms C) while figs. 18–19 may show ms B (both Esarhaddon); and Reade (2017: fig. 21) shows Al-Juboori (2017: 9: ms b) (Ashurbanipal).

by people to whom the inscriptions and imagery were unimportant or meaningless — perhaps in Hellenistic times, or in the very early first millennium AD.

Nimrud

History

In 2013-15 I led an AHRC-funded research project on the ancient and modern history of Kalhu-Nimrud (Robson *et al.* 2013–15). An open-access website at <http://oracc.org/nimrud> presents the findings of our research and collects together a vast number of online resources on the site. The summary below is based on that data. Oates and Oates (2001) also presents a clear overview of the ancient city, as uncovered by 20th century excavations; Curtis *et al.* (2008) re-evaluate the results of that archaeological work, with a particular emphasis on presenting Iraqi projects.

The archaeological site of Nimrud represents the remains of the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu. It comprises the high royal citadel—which has been the focus of most academic and public attention over the years—and a second mound popularly known as ‘Fort Shalmaneser’, both were encompassed by an extensive walled lower city. The citadel represents many millennia of occupation, confirmed by isolated archaeological finds from the third millennium to the second century BC. It became the seat of Assyrian royal power in the early 9th century BC, when king Ashurnasirpal II adopted it as a new imperial centre, moving the court and army from the nearby city of Assur.

The palace, ziggurat and associated temples at the northern end of the citadel all represent Ashurnasirpal’s work, some of which was completed by his son Shalmaneser III. Their global importance lies in the fact that they represent the material remains of the heart of the world’s first territorial empire, whose ideals and ideology are depicted on a vast number of carved stone bas-reliefs that served as a sort of stone wallpaper lining the reception areas of the palace and some of the temples.

Kalhu remained the imperial capital for some 170 years, until Sargon II briefly relocated to Dur-Sharruken (modern Khorsabad), followed by his son Sennacherib’s move to Nineveh in c.690 BC. Nevertheless, Kalhu remained an important royal residence and provincial city. Many other royal buildings and elite residences were erected on the citadel over the three centuries before its destruction in 612 BC, including the beautiful temple of Nabu, god of wisdom, on its southeast corner.

The site of Nimrud has been the subject of antiquarian and archaeological investigations for some 200 years. Over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, vast quantities of sculptural reliefs were removed from its palace and temples by explorers and entrepreneurs, which now reside many different collections worldwide (Englund 2003; undated). A formal excavation and conservation programme began on the citadel in the late 1940s, run by a number of different international and Iraqi teams. Twentieth-century archaeological projects documented the remains of earlier digs, completed excavation of the major buildings on the citadel, and uncovered the famous queens’ tombs and their treasures. Fort Shalmaneser, the city’s arsenal, was the findspot of most of the renowned Nimrud ivories, which had been stored there as booty from military campaigns of territorial conquest

in the west. The British excavations alone, which ran from 1948 to 1963, recorded some 13,000 archaeological finds across Nimrud, including around 5000 inscriptions and cuneiform tablets. They are now distributed amongst museum collections in some 20 different countries. At a rough estimate, perhaps a little less than 20% of the original programme of sculptural bas-reliefs were left in situ on the palace walls (Figure 14).

Nimrud came under ISIS/Da'esh occupation in summer 2014. In March 2015 ISIS/Da'esh released a propaganda video showing attempts to manually attack some of the figural sculpture still in situ in Ashurnasirpal's palace, followed by detonation of large quantities of explosives around the sculptured walls of its central reception area, apparently centred on Rooms H and S. The video also included footage of figural reliefs being pushed into a pile by a mechanical earth-mover. Later it became apparent that the earthen core of the long-ruined ziggurat had also been bulldozed. The site was liberated in November 2016. Since then UNESCO Iraq has funded a new fence for the site, along with cabins for the site guards. The Smithsonian Institution's Nimrud Stabilization Project has been working closely with archaeologists from Nineveh Province to document, stabilise and secure onsite the loose sculptural fragments that were scattered by the Da'esh blast (Smithsonian Institution 2017).

Observations

As I understand it, I was the first expert on Nimrud to visit the site since its liberation. I did not conduct a systematic survey, in part due to concerns about unexploded ordnance, and in part because there simply was not time.⁴ I focused my attentions on the area around the throne room at the northern end of Ashurnasirpal's palace and on Nabu's temple on the southern end of the citadel (Figure 15). I did not enter the palace beyond the throne room (so I have not seen the tombs) and I did not examine the ziggurat or northern temples.

The central reception area of the palace, immediately to the south of the throne room, is where ISIS/Da'esh detonated a series of explosives in March 2015 in order to destroy the remaining figural reliefs still present there. The whole area is now covered with the collapsed brick walls and roofs erected in the late 20th century to protect the standing sculptures (Figures 16–17). It is impossible to tell what state those sculptures are now in, except that it is clear there that they must have sustained considerable damage. However, the floors and the ground plan of the palace are essentially intact. Whatever remains of the sculptures are protected from the weather by the modern collapse on top of them.

The southern end of the palace, which contained no figural sculpture in antiquity or modernity, had not been directly attacked, so far as I could tell, but the reconstructed walls have sustained blast damage.

Likewise, in the throne room and the northernmost courtyard, almost of all the damage appears to be a result of the explosion, not of direct attacks (with two iconoclastic exceptions). Large fragments of sculpture have fallen off the walls along the lines of ancient breaks and restorations (Figures 18–19). Careful (but not systematic) comparison with photographs taken by myself and others from 2001 onward shows no sign of new breaks, even in the large pile of sculptural fragments made by the earth mover (Figures 20–22).

⁴ See Muehl (2015) for a systematic analysis of the destruction depicted in the Da'esh video.

There has been no attempt to systematically remove sculpture from the walls: significant pieces remain in place. It was not feasible to audit all the fallen fragments but my sense is that little, if anything, has been taken or completely destroyed. In two places there have been attempted defacements: on the recessed sculpture, still largely *in situ* on the southern wall of the throne room, king Ashurnasirpal's face and beard have been attacked (Figure 18). On a large piece in the northern pile of sculpture, originally from the western end of the northern facade, one eye of a visiting foreign dignitary has been gouged (Figure 21).

The south-eastern temple of Nabu — which contained very little structural figural sculpture, either in antiquity or modernity — has been left largely intact. Inside the temple itself, all ancient stone fittings, floors and walls are in place, though the brick walls above them have crumbled badly since they were last photographed in 2009, perhaps through reverberations from the explosion in the central palace (Figures 23–24). The main gate of the temple, heavily restored with modern brickwork in the 20th century, has suffered most, but I could not tell if that was the result of deliberate attack or shock from the blast. In antiquity the entrance gate was flanked by two stone 'mermen', found headless and in bad condition by mid-20th century archaeologists, and re-erected in later restoration work. The left-hand merman was visible amongst the rubble, and seemed to have suffered no further damage. I was not able to see the right-hand one.⁵

Although I did not look systematically, I saw no sign of looters' pits across the site as I walked around.

Discussion

ISIS/Da'esh do not seem to have attempted an exhaustive destruction of the standing remains on the citadel of Nimrud. Rather, their aim was to make a spectacular propaganda video, designed to shock. In this, as we saw from the more hysterical media reactions at the time, they were almost entirely successful (Robson 2015). This means that the damage they wrought, though highly destructive to the central reception area of the palace, and to the ziggurat, was not nearly as extensive or systematic as it might have been.

In the northern courtyard and throne room, it will be possible to re-erect fallen sculptural pieces if wanted, and to fill in any missing or irrevocably damaged pieces with replicas based on the extensive photographic record of the site. At the eastern end of the throne room, it may even be possible to deploy the results of Factum Arte's scanning and replication project to erect replicas of many of the sculptural elements dispersed in the 19th and 20th centuries (Factum Foundation 2014). It remains to be seen what, if anything, is salvageable from the central courtyard and surrounding reception rooms once the rubble is cleared. But as the floors and ground plan are still intact, this work is unlikely to entail any new stratigraphic archaeology.

From what I can tell, remedial work on the temples will primarily consist of repairs to brickwork, and the re-erection of some fallen or dislodged elements of stonework. Again, if wanted, one could replicate the sculptural reliefs and monumental stelae from the northern suite of temples, now mostly in the British Museum, as well as the statues of divine

⁵ Unfortunately the battery in my mobile phone ran out on the way to the temple of Nabu, so I was unable to take photographs.

attendants from Nabu's temple, now in London and Baghdad. Note that the altars from the northern temples remain in the front courtyard of the otherwise completely devastated Mosul Museum, unremarked by media documenting the damage to the interior of the museum (Irvine 2017).

Conclusions

Over the course of their occupation of northern Iraq in 2014–17 ISIS/Da'esh did unprecedented, irreparable damage to lives, communities, and cultures in the region. Their attacks on ancient Assyrian heritage—which included destruction and looting in Mosul Museum in 2015 and the bulldozing of the reconstructed gates of Nineveh in 2016—were part of a much wider pattern of desecration and abuse. These acts of terrorism appear to have been driven by a complex web of ideological, propagandistic and financial motives, which will doubtless be the subject of academic debate for many years to come. But in focussing too closely on the perpetrators we risk losing sight of the victims: not only the artefacts and sites themselves but also the people who have worked on them, valued them and loved them. The loss of heritage entails the loss of many decades of expert, dedicated work that went into their discovery, documentation, conservation, and interpretation, as well as all the excitement and joy that went into experiencing them. We should mourn this very human loss that is entwined with the material and intellectual losses that are perhaps easier to identify.

For now, Nebi Younus—one of Assyria's least researched royal sites—remains exposed, vulnerable and contested. The immediate fate of the looted strata will depend on the complex politics and priorities of post-conflict reconstruction in Mosul (Figure 25). Meanwhile, the citadel of Nimrud, much better known to scholarship, is relatively good hands. Archaeological sites are by no means an infinite resource but it is important to remember that there are likely many undisturbed occupation strata beneath the current surfaces of both badly compromised sites, which represent many millennia of ancient history and pre-history. They represent hope for future generations, whom we hope will approach the discovery and interpretation of the Assyrian past with ever more sophisticated and less destructive methods than these battered yet beautiful places have so far had to endure.

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Figure captions

- Figure 1: Muzahim Mahmoud greets Louise Haxthausen and Sami Al-Khoja of UNESCO Iraq at Nebi Yunus, 3 April 2017 (photo by Eleanor Robson)
- Figure 2: Satellite photo of Nebi Yunus, showing sites of official Iraqi excavations in the 1980s and 1990s. The looters tunnels under the shrine start at the western side of the western excavation site.
- Figure 3: Schematic plan of the palace facade revealed by official excavations in 1989–90 (Reade 2017: fig. 13). The entrance to the looters' tunnels is between features 14–15 and 16–17.

- Figure 4: SBAH photograph taken in June 2005, showing the bull colossus and standing figure, to the south of the excavation entrance, before being recovered with earth to protect them (photo courtesy of Layla Salih)
- Figure 5: The entrance to the looters' tunnels in April 2017, on the same spot as the official excavations: note the location of the lamppost and the slight change in height of the wall above. The enormous spoil heaps hinting at the vast volume of earth removed (photo by Saad Eskander)
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- Figure 7: The medieval crypt of the shrine, accessible via the looters' tunnels and at the same depth as them. Louise Haxthausen and May Schaer of UNESCO Iraq record the stairs up to the modern shrine (photo by Saad Eskander)
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- Figure 14: Layard's original plan of the throne room and reception suite of the Northwest Palace, with schematic representation of the sculptural elements still in situ before 2014. Dark grey = mostly preserved; mid grey = partly preserved; orientated to north at the top (made by Eleanor Robson for Robson *et al.* 2013–15)
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- Figure 17: The collapsed mud brick walls of Room F, looking west, with a UNESCO tarpaulin covering exposed sculptural remains in Rooms WI/WJ (photo by Eleanor Robson)
- Figure 18: The state of panel B13 on the southern wall of the throne room, protected by a UNESCO tarpaulin. The breaks are all old ones and the gap at top left represents a fragment that has been in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum of Western India), Mumbai, since the mid-19th century (Englund 2003; undated). There is some manual damage to Ashurnasirpal's face and the central fragment has fallen from the wall (photo by Eleanor Robson)

- Figure 19: Looking south to the northern facade of the throne room of the Northwest Palace (Rooms D, ED and E), with exposed fragments of sculpture protected by UNESCO tarpaulins (photo by Eleanor Robson)
- Figure 20: Leigh Tiplady, Eleanor Robson and Layla Salih inspecting the sculptural remains that had fallen from the face of Rooms D, ED and E in the Da'esh blast of spring 2015 and subsequently deposited in this large pile (shown under tarpaulin in Figure 20) (photo by Saad Eskander)
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