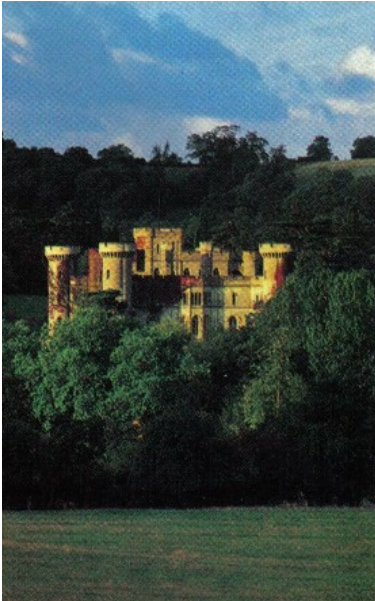


## Assyrian Reliefs Found Again

*Carvings from the Palaces of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal Turn up in England's Green and Pleasant Land*



Two seventh-century B.C. Assyrian reliefs from Nineveh, in present-day northern Iraq, have been found in an English manor house.

For over a century, the carvings had rested in the cavernous cellars of Eastnor Castle, Herefordshire. They were found behind an old stove by guests of the Hervey-Bathurst family, the owners of the castle, and have since been authenticated by Julian Reade of the British Museum.

Lying near the tablets were letters from Austen Henry Layard, who had found the reliefs at Nineveh, in 1850, and later presented them to his friend and benefactor Charles Somers, Viscount Eastnor, an ancestor of the Hervey-Bathurst family. In a letter to Somers, Layard described the "deep mystery" hanging over things Assyrian: Although the Assyrians dominated the Near East in the first half of the first millennium B.C., controlling a territory that at times stretched from Iran to Egypt, little physical evidence for their empire had been found. (The situation has not vastly changed.)

So mighty were the Assyrians that several of their kings and cities, including Nineveh, are mentioned in the Bible. Jonah, for instance, is commanded by God to warn the Ninevehites to abandon their evil ways. Layard's discoveries appeared to confirm the historicity of biblical accounts—at a time when many scholars had come to think of the Bible as merely a collection of myths. Layard presented his finds to the public in *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849), a book that soon became the world's first archaeological best-seller.

Somers, an avid traveler himself, sponsored several of Layard's expeditions. To ensure future financial backing, Layard often gave fragments like those found at Eastnor to his friends and benefactors.

The smaller of the two Assyrian reliefs is from Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh, built around 645 B.C.; it shows a eunuch greeting an Assyrian officer. The larger relief (pictured), from a palace of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.), shows manacled Babylonian prisoners. Mentioned in the Bible (2 Kings 20:12-19; 2 Chronicles 32:31; Isaiah 39), the Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah and besieged Jerusalem. The Judahite king Hezekiah (727-698 B.C.) apparently was able to withstand the siege because he had constructed an intricate underground water system (see "Jerusalem's Underground Water Systems," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 1994). Cuneiform texts recognize that the siege was ultimately unsuccessful.

Many of Layard's finds are now in the British Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum. Layard also gave numerous antiquities to his cousin Lady Charlotte Guest, perhaps best known for her translation of the Welsh King Arthur legends. To house her Assyrian art, Lady Guest built the famous Nineveh Porch on the grounds of her estate, Canford Manor, in Dorset. In 1994, one of Layard's Assyrian reliefs was found at the estate, now a school, and sold to Japan's Miho Museum for nearly \$12 million. —Ronan James Head