Shawn Malley, From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain: The Case of Assyria, 1845-1854

**Shawn Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain: The Case of Assyria, 1845-1854* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012) 220pp. £95 Hb. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2689-9**

In this detailed and rigorously researched study, Shawn Malley examines Austen Henry Layard’s excavation of Assyria, and its subsequent impact upon literary, cultural, religious and scientific spheres. Concurrently, he grapples with the imperialistic repercussions of the removal of antiquities to British institutions (focussing exclusively on the British Museum), and the implications for Layard as a middle-class individual thrust into aristocratic circles on the back of his twin archaeological and political endeavours. *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain* is rich with original archival research, conducted at the British Library, British Museum and Foreign Office, and it is Malley’s unearthing and analysis of such material that makes this monograph so significant within a growing corpus of critical studies dealing with literature and archaeology in this period, complementing such respected works as Frederick Bohrer’s *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe*(2003) and David Gange’s *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822-1922*(2013). Investigating the intersections between biblical archaeology and British imperialism, Malley draws upon postprocessual archaeological theory, bringing together the methodologies of diverse critical fields. Across five chapters, and enhanced by copious illustrations, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain* addresses the potent cultural ripples radiating out from Layard’s archaeological and diplomatic mission.

In Chapter One, Malley explores the careful construction of Layard’s image, through romantic exaggeration and embellishment. This hyperbolic celebration of the archaeologist is by no means exclusive to Layard, yet as Malley’s archival research demonstrates, Layard was, to a degree, *dis*empowered: ‘a pawn in the Great Game of the East’ (9). Archaeology, this chapter contends, was a significant part of a wider imperial project of possession and surveillance, seeking to establish dominance through claims of racial superiority. In the following chapter, Malley further explores institutional power and biases, tracing the development of the British Museum from an exclusive and elite organisation to one whose mission was to educate a socially diverse public audience. Concentrating on the Assyrian galleries which opened in 1852, Malley’s analysis specifically centres on the distinctive human-headed bull and lion statues that stimulated the imaginations of a clamouring public, referring to the theatricality of illustrations of the discovery of such colossal artefacts in Layard’s publications and the periodical press. Indeed, as Malley reveals, it was the popularity of these artefacts that paved the way for the British Museum to assign specific galleries to Assyrian relics, securing Assyria’s place in broader histories of the ancient world.

Chapter Three takes as its focus Charles Kean’s revival of Lord Byron’s *Sardanapalus* at the Royal Princess’s Theatre in 1853, one of many ‘picturesque, quasi-scientific’ spectacles available to those seeking metropolitan entertainment (77). Keane heavily drew upon the British Museum artefacts for props, costumes and even stage directions. Rather than emphasising Layard’s excavatory materials as ‘merely a visual source for Kean’s staging’ however (78), Malley  highlights the way in which the this production and the burlesque it inspired (*Sardanapalus, or The “Fast” King of Assyria*at the Adelphi Theatre) manipulated archaeological meanings, taking into account responses of audiences, museum curators and the archaeologists themselves. An underlying anxiety that Malley exposes through his consideration of these productions is the fear that, like Assyria before it, the British Empire might itself deteriorate and decay, leaving nothing but ruined remains. This fear, as the subsequent chapter demonstrates, had its roots in Britain’s political and imperialistic undertakings. It is at this point that Malley turns to the ways in which the archaeological remnants of ancient Assyria became ‘topical references for criticism of the war abroad and the class war at home’ (11). Analysing sources including Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem ‘The Burden of Nineveh’ and contemporary political cartoons from *Punch*, Malley exposes the ‘uneasy alliance between past and present’ inflamed by British imperial politics and brought to the fore by the Crimean War (110).

Chapter Five returns to the kinds of visual spectacle addressed in Chapter Three, scrutinising ‘Assyriamania’ as it was expressed via the *Diorama of Nineveh*at the Gothic Hall in 1851, and the ‘Nineveh Court’ at the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in 1854. Analysing these exhibits’ commitment to archaeological accuracy (along with Layard’s reservations and frustrations), Malley contends that the ‘Nineveh Court’ was ‘a pleasant distraction from the failures of liberalism, as evidenced by the Crimean War’ (129). Attempting to remove the archaeological site from its political context, the domesticated simulacra of the Crystal Palace - which Malley compares to the glossy, polychrome facades of Disneyland - were spectacles that masked as much as they revealed.

In this study’s conclusion, Malley turns his attention to the obscure TV movie *Manticore* (2005). While engagement with this material certainly demonstrates his interest in the politics of archaeology across culture more broadly, this jump to the twenty-first century is somewhat jarring. The considerable impact of Layard’s discoveries, which Malley examines so thoroughly and in such stunning minute detail in the preceding chapters, sits rather uncomfortably alongside the relative cultural insignificance of a low-budget Sci-Fi Channel film, and indeed, Malley’s references to American military involvement in modern Iraq which creep into the earlier chapters may well irk the reader who comes to *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain* expecting a study whose parameters strictly conform to those defined in the title itself: *1845-1854*. While, to Malley’s credit, there are certainly parallels to be drawn between the American invasion of Iraq and Victorian British appropriation of Assyrian antiquities, at this late stage in the monograph such broad comparisons do not lead to particularly nuanced insights. Nevertheless, the strengths and appeals of Malley’s work far outweigh these departures from the nineteenth-century material which he handles so sensitively, and the multifaceted and complex vision of ancient Assyria he presents - itself carefully pieced together from archival fragments - is an essential and sophisticated contribution to cultural histories of archaeology.

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