

CHAPTER ONE

THE MOUNDS OF NINEVEH



On a sweltering day in June 1842 two riders arrived at the gates of Mosul, a provincial town in the Ottoman empire. They came from Baghdad in the south and had taken the customary road that led them through the fertile country east of the Tigris; they reached Mosul itself by crossing a rickety bridge of boats which connected the town on the western bank with the villages across the Tigris. One of the men was a Turkish post-rider, a ‘tatar’, who was on his way to Constantinople more than 2,000 km away with official imperial mail. The other was a young man dressed as a Bakhtiyari, a tribe that lived in Khuzistan, the mountainous south-western corner of Iran. A more observant eye would soon decide that he was a European, however, and indeed, after having parted from his travel companion, who entered the local Pasha’s palace on the river, he went straight to the British Vice-Consulate where he was received as an old friend. He was the twenty-five-year-old British adventurer Austen Henry Layard.

The same day he was introduced to the new French consul in Mosul, the forty-year-old Paul Émile Botta and the meeting between these two men had a very special significance, for it may be said to mark the beginning of the archaeological exploration of ancient Mesopotamia. Botta and Layard were destined to become the discoverers of ancient Assyria.

Mosul was a somewhat unlikely place to meet. Like most of the Near Eastern towns of the time it was a sleepy and shabby place, and in spite of a glorious past it was now reduced to rubble and decay after decades of neglect and misrule, with large parts of the town in ruins (see Figure 1.1). It was the seat of a Pasha, or provincial governor, appointed by the Turkish government at Constantinople, and he ruled over a mixed population of Muslim and Christian Arabs and the Kurds in the mountains. A contemporary traveller described the town in the following words:

Mosul is an ill-constructed mud-built town, rising above the banks of the Tigris, and backed by low hills; in the centre is a tall brown ugly minaret, very much out of the perpendicular; the interior of some of the houses is faced with a translucent stone, called Mosul marble. . . . Part of the old Saracen walls still remain: they are very massive . . . the ground between the



Figure 1.1 The decrepit centre of Mosul, seen from the ruins of Nineveh on the eastern bank of the Tigris. Engraving by E. Flandin, the artist who worked with Botta at Khorsabad.
(From Flandin 1853–76: Plate 30)

walls and town is occupied by stagnant pools, ruins and dead bodies of camels and cattle, which is enough to breed a pestilence; the bazaars are mean and dirty.

(Mitford 1884: I, 280)

Not a nice place to spend the summer, or for that matter any other time of the year. The summers here are marked by a heat that quickly becomes unbearable and which scorches the landscape so that all one sees is a bone-dry, brown steppe; the winters, on the other hand, can be very cold, and violent rainstorms turn all roads and streets into slippery, muddy quagmires. Only the brief spring season turns this land into a paradise, where shoulder-high forests of flowers explode in incomparable colours, while clouds of butterflies slowly glide over the fields.

One hundred and fifty years ago most of the Near East was under Turkish control. The countries were governed from Constantinople where the Sultan, the 'Sublime Porte', sat as the sovereign of a realm which was in rapid decay. It was the 'Sick Man of Europe', and the great powers – England, France and Russia – were already in conflict over which attitude to adopt towards the tottering Ottoman Empire. The Russian Czar saw his interest in the collapse of the Turkish state so that he could divide the remains with England, whereas the British government

had a somewhat unclear policy, which, however, tended to support the authority of the Sultan and his attempts to keep the vast empire intact.

Not many Europeans found their way to Mosul. A couple of British merchants regularly stayed here trying to conduct some trade in weapons or cloth, knives and scissors. There was an English Vice-Consul here, a local Christian Arab called Christian Rassam who was married to an English lady, Matilda Badger Rassam; her brother was a missionary who had lived in the town earlier and who occasionally passed through. One might also meet a somewhat eccentric English doctor and geologist, Ainsworth, who had settled here after having taken part in a naval exploration of the river Euphrates a few years before (Ainsworth 1888; Chesney 1850). He had been sent out on a new assignment by the Royal Geographical Society and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. There were two distinct groups of missionaries: American Presbyterians and a group of Italian Dominican monks led from Baghdad by an intense man called Valerga. These last kept apart from the other Europeans, and especially from the British, who were regarded by them as dangerous heretics (Fletcher 1850). What led Botta and Layard to this God-forsaken place?

Their meeting was accidental, neither of them knew the other before they met in Mosul, but it turned out they had common interests. Layard was on his way to Constantinople carrying official British mail, but since his companion had business to conduct with the Pasha they had to stay in the town a few days. This gave Layard the opportunity to meet Botta, who was the recently appointed French consul at Mosul.

They were not really interested in Mosul but looked with fascination on the mounds that were located across the river on the eastern bank of the Tigris. A series of enormous ramparts or walls encircle a rectangular area of some kilometres' length and breadth, and in this enclosure lay a couple of large mounds.

Local people called the whole area 'Nuniya', and it was believed to be the location of the ancient Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. Today this name probably means little to most people, but in the nineteenth century it would resonate in the mind of any reasonably educated European, who would know the stories about this city from the Old Testament and from a series of legends told by classical authors. Nineveh had been the centre of one of the largest and most important empires in the ancient world, one whose power according to tradition had covered the entire Near East, including Palestine and Egypt. It was also, however, an empire which had left no concrete traces behind at all. Assyria had disappeared, leaving nothing but myths and legends.

Except that there were these vast mounds close to Mosul, which, according to local legend, covered the ruins of the ancient city. This tradition had actually been known by the learned of Europe, those few who had heard of the place, but it had never been information which had been seen as particularly important or interesting.

Layard had already seen the mounds a couple of years previously, when he had been on his way south towards Baghdad, and he had been 'deeply moved by their desolate and solitary grandeur'. In his *Autobiography* he describes this first visit:

The site was covered with grass and flowers, and the enclosure, formed by the long line of mounds which marked the ancient walls of the city, afforded pasture to the flocks of a few poor Arabs who had pitched their black tents within it. There was at that time nothing to indicate the existence of the splendid remains of Assyrian palaces which were covered by the heaps of earth and rubbish. It was believed that the great edifices and monuments which had rendered Nineveh one of the most famous and magnificent cities of the ancient world had perished with her people, and like them had left no wreck behind. But even then, as I wandered over and amongst these vast mounds, I was convinced that they must cover some vestiges of the great capital, and I felt an intense longing to dig into them.

(Layard 1903: 306–7)

He now revisited Nineveh in Botta's company, and he heard with jealous excitement that the Frenchman had been placed in Mosul for the purpose of opening excavations of the ancient city.

The two men wandered about on the great mounds, took measurements and engaged in speculations. What was hiding in the ground under their feet? Was this really the Nineveh mentioned in the Old Testament? There the city appears as the mighty capital of the Assyrians, from which their empire was governed, home to kings like Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. In the Book of Jonah we hear that Nineveh 'even to God' was a large city, covering a distance of three days' journey, and God estimated the population of this metropolis as 'more than twelve times 10,000 people, who are unable to distinguish right from left, and much cattle'.

As the capital of the Assyrians who plagued Judah and Israel, Nineveh was naturally not mentioned in a positive light in the Jewish Bible; the Prophet Nahum sings a glowingly hateful hymn of ecstatic joy over the final destruction of Nineveh:

Ah! blood-stained city, steeped in deceit,
full of pillage, never empty of prey!
Hark to the crack of the whip,
the rattle of wheels and stamping of horses,
bounding chariots, chargers rearing,
swords gleaming, flash of spears!
The dead are past counting, their bodies lie in heaps,
corpses innumerable, men stumbling over corpses –

(Nahum 3: 1–3)

Many other passages in the Old Testament express the same fathomless hatred of the Assyrians and their enormous capital, for it was from here that the endless campaigns started that eventually crushed Israel and sent the Jews in exile to other provinces in the Assyrian empire. Naturally Assyria, like Babylon, was in the end struck down by God, but only after both countries had inflicted incomprehensible destruction and misery on the Jews and other peoples of the Near East.

Like all reasonably well-educated Europeans, Botta and Layard knew their Bible and the Greek and Roman classics. They were aware that the very first account of the Assyrian ruins was given by the Greek general Xenophon who led 10,000 mercenaries to Babylonia and back in the years 401–400 BCE. His army camped one night on their return journey close by the Tigris on a ruin he calls ‘Larissa’ – which must be the mound now known as Nimrud, a place that occupies a central role in this book. Xenophon thought that this ‘large deserted city’ had been built by the Medes, an Iranian people. The following day the army reached another ruin which Xenophon described as ‘a large undefended fortification near a city called Mespila’. This name must be a strange version of ‘Mosul’, and the ruins he described must be the same ones which so occupied Botta and Layard. Xenophon wrote:

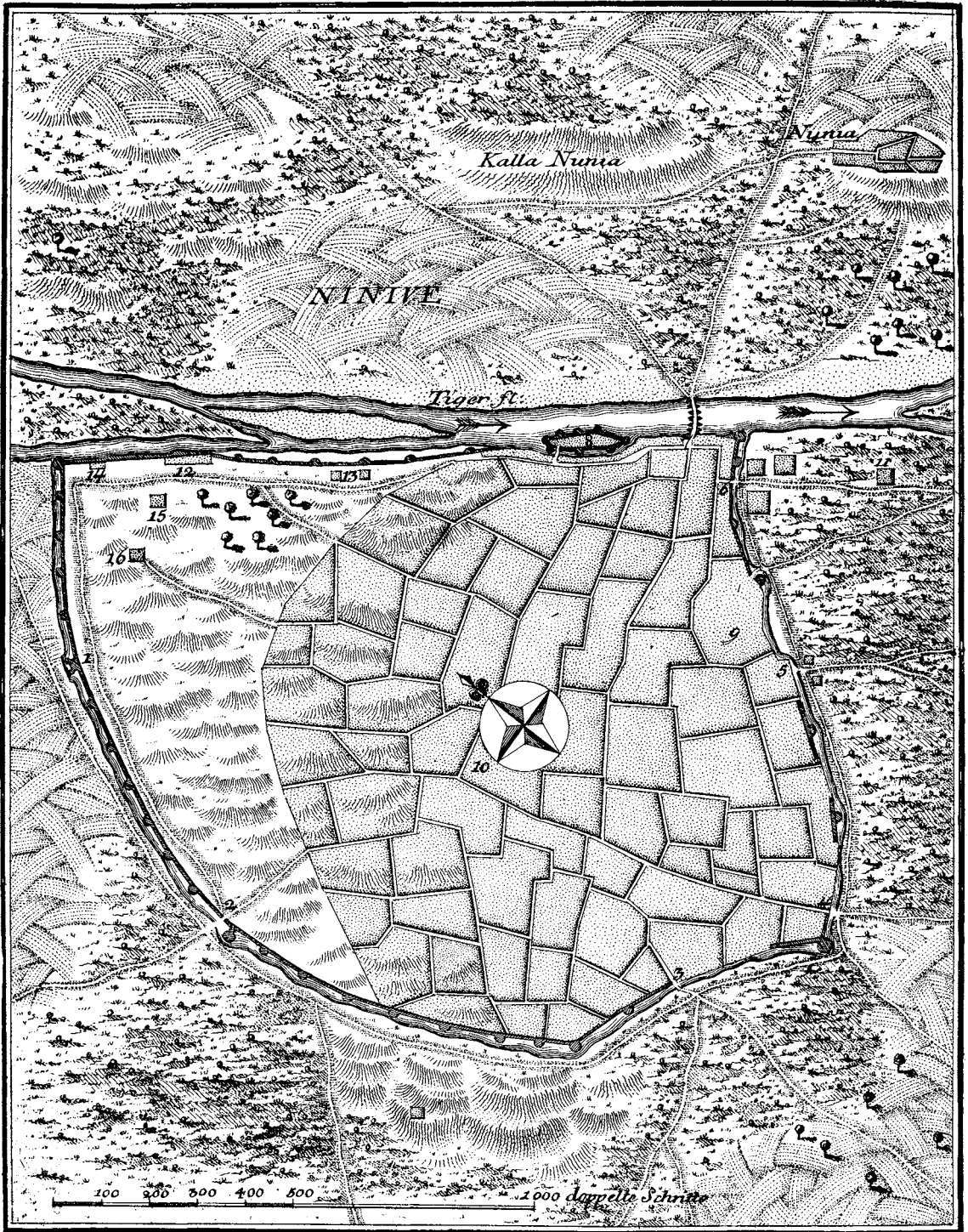
The base of this fortification was made of polished stone in which there were many shells. It was fifty feet broad and fifty feet high. On top of it was built a brick wall fifty feet in breadth and a hundred feet high. The perimeter of the fortification was eighteen miles.

(Xenophon 1979: 162–3)

Xenophon can give this dry, factual description, but he does not even know the name of the site. Yet he was here only two hundred years after the fall of Nineveh, which happened in 612 BCE when a combined force of Medes and Babylonians stormed its walls and destroyed the city; it appears that in the short span of time Nineveh had been forgotten and that, although the ruins themselves could hardly be overlooked, the ancient names of these cities, not to speak of their history, were gone from ordinary memory. That knowledge lived on in the Jewish legends and amongst Greeks who were more learned than Xenophon. Maybe he did not ask carefully, for it is obvious that much later travellers were aware that these ruins were the remains of Nineveh.

A visitor from Europe, the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, passed by here as early as 1173 and saw Nineveh’s ruins – ‘now quite decrepit’ – and a few more had visited them after him (Pallis 1956). In March 1766, some seventy-five years before Botta and Layard met in Mosul, Carsten Niebuhr had spent a few days here on his way home from the disastrous Danish expedition to Arabia Felix (Hansen 1962; Rasmussen 1990; Niebuhr 1774–8). We know that Botta had read the great account of this journey published by Niebuhr, but it is unclear if Layard had heard of him. Niebuhr gives a map of Mosul (see Figure 1.2) which shows an area he calls Nineveh across the river; he has marked the two large mounds: the smallest to the south is shown as a modern village, which bears the name ‘Nuniya’, whereas the larger one to the north is called ‘Kalla Nuniya’, that is, ‘the Castle of Nineveh’. Niebuhr says that there was a village located also on this mound and it was called ‘Koindsjug’; this is obviously the same name which is now given to the mound as such, ‘Kuyunjik’, under which it appears in the archaeological literature.

The long lines of fortifications, the vast walls of ancient Nineveh, are not to be found on Niebuhr’s map; they run around the entire area and was the only feature noticed by Xenophon, but Niebuhr simply did not see them when he rode through the area on his way to Mosul. He presumably first took them for natural hills, and since he never had an opportunity to measure them carefully he naturally had



to ignore them on his map. As a child of the Enlightenment he could not simply invent or guess and draw some lines where they might have been. He does give a special view of the village he calls Nuniya, which he says was built around a mosque that according to Jewish and Muslim tradition contained the grave of the prophet Jonah (Niebuhr 1774–8: II, 360, 392). This is another memory of ancient Nineveh of course, for Jonah – the prophet in the belly of the Whale – was sent by God to Nineveh to warn its inhabitants to abandon their sinful lives.

Niebuhr's drawing and map, although not very correct or aesthetically pleasing, was a major advance, but the real study of the site began with Claudius Rich, who was the 'Resident' in Baghdad, where he represented the interests of the great East India Company in the early nineteenth century (Lloyd 1955). In 1820 he made careful measurements of the whole of Nineveh and produced a remarkably accurate map in the report which was published in 1836, after his death. Here we find both the major mounds and the fortifications, walls which surround an enormous area and which are easily traceable in the landscape. We find the two mounds now called Kuyunjik and Nebbi Yunus, that is, the Arabic name for the southern mound, which means 'the Prophet Jonah'. Rich recounts that he was told that local people had, a few years earlier, found 'an immense bas-relief, representing men and animals, covering a grey stone of the height of two men'. He also says that 'all the town of Mosul went out to see it, and in a few days it was cut up or broken to pieces'. On Nebbi Yunus he saw large blocks of stone with inscriptions in some of the houses, some of them apparently still in their original place.

One of these, a piece of a slab of alabaster with cuneiform writing on it, was located in the kitchen of a miserable house, and it seemed to be part of the wall in a small passage which is said to continue far into the mound. Some people dug into it last year, but since it passed underneath the houses and they were nervous lest they undermine these, they filled it up again with rubbish and only the part of the passage which was completely opened, and which forms part of the kitchen, can now be seen.

(Rich 1836: 39)

Rich spent many years in Baghdad and visited ruins in all of the country that is now Iraq, making measurements and collecting finds. He had already published a booklet containing his measurements of the ruins of Babylon (Rich 1813; Rich 1818). He had managed to put together a small collection of antiquities from the country, and after his death this was sold to the British Museum by his widow. Here the antiques were displayed in a glass case as one of the extremely few concrete testimonials to the existence of the ancient cultures in Assyria and Babylonia. Layard had seen the collection in the museum, and we know that the publication of Rich's book had played a role in the decision taken by the French authorities to send Botta to Mosul in order to excavate Nineveh.

Figure 1.2 The map of Mosul and Nineveh made by Carsten Niebuhr in March 1766. The city had shrunk within its medieval walls, and across the river, linked with a fragile bridge of boats, is the area of ancient Nineveh with the two mounds. (From Rasmussen 1990: 284)

So, a little was known about ancient Assyria, but the glass case in the British Museum could not prepare anyone for the reality of Mosul. The total desolation of Nineveh, and of the other ancient ruins in all of Mesopotamia, had condemned them to silence, even in the already extensive European literature concerned with the ruins of the Near East. There was quite simply nothing to see here, only grass-covered mounds, and no remains which could evoke memories of past greatness. The mighty ruins of Persepolis – the rows of tall pillars, the delicately carved reliefs and inscriptions which were plainly visible – made it possible for visitors to relate directly to the ancient grandeur; the ruins of Palmyra in the Syrian desert had inspired Count Volney to tearful musings about the fate of human labours (Volney 1822); and, of course, the pyramids and the Egyptian temples could be visited and climbed, and there was a centuries-long scholarly tradition which had tried to find a way to understand them, penetrate to the core of their secrets.

At all of these places the past and its glory was tangible, but in Nineveh the visitor needed a very lively imagination in order to conjure up images of splendour and beauty from the silent and oddly anonymous mounds. ‘Où sont-ils, ces remparts de Ninive?’ asked Volney, repeating a question which had been asked since the time of the Greek and Roman writers (André-Salvini 1994). Layard wandered among grass-covered hills and cornfields surrounded by long rows of collapsed walls, wondering whether they were really the remains of Nineveh; if they were, what then was hidden underground? Here must be the glorious palaces of the Assyrian king and temples to his gods, and perhaps it would be possible to uncover some of all this, finding concrete evidence of a past which had left so few traces that it appeared to belong to the realm of myth rather than of fact.

The task contemplated by Botta and Layard was much more complicated than they could possibly imagine. Field archaeology was in its most tender infancy in Europe, and it is obviously a much simpler proposition to tackle a Bronze Age barrow than starting on a mound which covers the ruins of an entire city. The difference in size alone is staggering: Kuyunjik is about 15 m high and almost a kilometre long, and Nebbi Yunus is not very much smaller. The entire area encircled by the walls of Nineveh is some 2.5 km wide and c. 5 km long. Excavating a mound like Kuyunjik in its entirety using adequate recording and digging techniques is a task that would demand centuries for a substantial workforce. Yet they were envisaging a total uncovering of the ancient city.

In southern Italy a kind of excavation had by then been conducted for a very long time at the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and it is probable that Botta and Layard saw their task as comparable to the work carried out there. However, the two Roman cities had been covered by lava and burning ash which had sealed them in a kind of time-warp; excavating them was simply a matter of removing the cover, revealing the ruins underneath. The Assyrian mounds constituted a quite different kind of challenge, for a site like Kuyunjik is the result of the activity of millennia. People had lived here practically forever, and the mound contains the remains of buildings in a complex pattern, situated on top of each other, ruins of villages, towns, temples and palaces, which followed each other during a span of time which in this particular case covers at least 7,000 years. Sometimes individual houses had been knocked down, the walls pushed over so that a new house could



Figure 1.3 Flandin's engraving of the mound Niebuhr called Nunia, and which was later generally referred to as Nebbi Yunus. The mosque with the grave of the prophet Jonah is the prominent feature, and in the distance one can see the walls of Nineveh. (From Flandin, 1853–76, plate 35)

be constructed on the spot; at other times the entire settlement had been destroyed and resettled after a while. The result of all these individual acts and events is the creation of a kind of insane layered cake constructed by a mad pastry chef. But who can see that, walking around on these grassy mounds?

Actually, there were pointers, for some villages could still be found on top of some of the ancient mounds. In a few cases whole cities were still perched on a mound, giving an indication of how they had been accumulated – while at the same time obviously hindering archaeologists from doing their thing. Yet it is reasonable to maintain that Botta and Layard really could not know what a complex and intricate puzzle was hiding under their feet.

Botta had already begun his archaeological task before Layard's arrival and had become aware of the difficulties of his venture, although the first problems he faced were not really of an archaeological nature. He had placed a few workmen on Nebbi Yunus in order to investigate the old stone foundations which, as Rich had

seen, regularly appeared underneath modern houses, but he had to give up this work because of violent opposition from both the Pasha and the local religious leaders, who feared that his activities could violate or destroy the sacred mosque with the grave of the prophet Jonah. This religiously motivated opposition was to develop into a real nightmare for both men in the years that followed.

When he started his archaeological activities Botta had little to go on. The investigations of Rich helped, of course, and his account made it clear that ruins in fact did exist here, so there was reason to trust the traditional view that this was Nineveh. But what exactly was he to look for? There were many stories about stones with images and strange writing, but where were they? When Layard came to Mosul, Botta was unable to show results from his efforts so far.

Having been forced to abandon Nebbi Yunus he seemed hesitant when faced with the challenge of Kuyunjik, so he concentrated for some time on collecting antiquities and gathering information about where finds had been made previously. Even in this field his results were modest, and he was convinced that very few finds had in fact been made in the vicinity of Mosul. He concluded that Rich had collected most of the antiquities which had been discovered here.

On his earlier visit to the area Layard had been especially fascinated by an enormous mound known as Nimrud, which was located close to the Tigris south of Mosul. He had stopped here and dreamt of uncovering the palaces of the past which he was convinced had to be hidden here. Since that visit he had seen many other ruins in Babylonia to the south and in the Iranian mountains, and he had had several opportunities to speak with persons who were deeply interested in the past of the country. He therefore had much to tell Botta and it seems likely that the enthusiasm of the young Englishman helped keep Botta's activities alive.

The brief three-day visit became the beginning of a personal friendship between two men who obviously admired and respected each other. Their relationship was free from both the personal and nationalist-chauvinistic rivalry which otherwise came to mark the work of archaeologists in ancient Mesopotamia during the years that followed.

Layard went on to Constantinople — where he remained as a member of the ambassador's staff, as I shall explain later. While he immersed himself in new adventures in the Turkish capital, Botta continued his fruitless activities and regularly wrote to Layard about his work. He in turn attempted to encourage Botta to go on and suggested that he should try his hand at Nimrud. In December 1842, half a year after Layard's visit, Botta finally placed a group of workers on Kuyunjik where they dug some trenches, but even here he had no luck. We are told that he found nothing, which means that he only found things which meant nothing to him: potsherds, fragments of stone, bricks, sometimes with inscriptions. 'It was impossible to recognise a plan or any construction in the chaotic disturbance of buildings which had once crowned this site', wrote Botta's later assistant (Flandin 1845). Potsherds, the largest single group of finds for the modern archaeologist, could not possibly speak to Botta or his workmen; they had to find something monumental in order simply to become aware that there was anything to find, and to begin with Nineveh did not offer anything useful. He therefore had little to tell in his letters to Layard, and it was not until April of the following year, 1843, that

he could write anything truly positive about his activities; then it was on the other hand a sensational message he could send out: he had finally discovered ancient Assyria!

Already when his workmen first began excavating on Kuyunjik he received a visit from a man who came from a village called Khorsabad; he explained that this settlement, some 25 km from Mosul, was built on top of a mound and that stones with images and inscriptions had been discovered here on several occasions. Botta had received many such visits and heard stories which always turned out to be pure imagination, so he did not take the man from Khorsabad seriously. In March, after months of fruitless toil on Kuyunjik, he had become so frustrated that he decided to find out if there was any reality behind the story. He sent a team of workmen to Khorsabad where they were to dig some holes, and three days later he received a message saying that they had found both reliefs and inscriptions. Even then Botta was sceptical and sent one of his servants out to make a drawing of one of these inscriptions, and it was only when he returned with something that looked genuine that Botta finally decided to move his operations to Khorsabad.

On 5 April he could send a letter to Paris in which he announced that he had uncovered 'the ruins of a monument which is remarkable both for the number and the nature of the sculptures which adorn it'. Triumphantlly he could conclude:

I believe I am the first to discover sculptures which may be assumed to belong to the time when Nineveh was still flourishing.

(Mohl 1845: 2, 10)

This message, which Botta sent to Paris through Constantinople, where Layard read it with enthusiasm, became the start of a hectic phase of discovery with excavations in several mounds over the entire country. A civilisation which had disappeared suddenly emerged from the ground.