

Rediscovering the Past | The birth of archaeology | Biblical archaeology

Connections with biblical events and figures were a major interest of early archaeologists active in the Middle East.

The Christian nations of Europe had long been interested in the Holy Land, and particularly in Jerusalem. Birs Nimrud in Iraq was thought to be the site of the Tower of Babel, destroyed by divine wrath. The Egyptians, Babylonians and Assyrians were known from the Bible as well as from classical sources. Interest in the archaeology of these lands was driven by their biblical relevance. Learned societies dedicated to the study of the Holy Land were founded, such as the Palestine Exploration Fund in the UK in 1865, with the King as Patron and the Archbishop of Canterbury as President. The PEF carried out a detailed survey of an area of 6,000 square miles between 1871 and 1878. The first systematic excavation in Palestine was carried out by William Matthew Flinders Petrie at Tell el-Hesi, thought by him to be Lachish.



Working Number: UK 166

Name: The Black Obelisk of Assyrian King Shalmaneser III

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: Obelisk: 825 BC; photo: 1876

Materials: Stone

Curator Justification: The Black Obelisk of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III was excavated by a British expedition at Nimrud (Iraq) in 1846. There was great excitement when it was found to contain reference to biblical King Jehu. Furthermore, it depicted his image, still the oldest known image of a King of Israel.



Working Number: FR 192

Name: The Stele of Mesha, King of Moab, c. 850 BC. Ruins of Dhiban

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1905-1908

Materials: -

Curator Justification: In 1868 a missionary named Augustus Klein found a stele at Dhiban (Jordan). It is inscribed with a long text describing conflict between King Mesha of Moab and the kingdom of Israel, including a parallel to an episode recorded in the Bible (2 Kings). The following year it was destroyed by the local Bedouin tribe, to prevent the Ottomans gifting it to Germany. The pieces were collected, and restored for display at the Louvre (Paris).



Working Number: FR 193

Name: The Stele of Mesha, Hebrew inscription from 896 BC. 1/16 of original size.

Holding Museum: National Library of France

Date: 1873

Materials: -

Curator

Justification: The Mesha Stele gripped the European reading public. It touched on two areas of enormous

interest: archaeology's relation to the Bible, and ancient languages and writing (in this case, Moabite, an ancient Semitic language).



Working Number: UK 069

Name: The Western Wall

Holding Museum: The Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF)

Date: 1872

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The Western Wall of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, as depicted for the readers of the Illustrated London News by British pioneer war correspondent William "Crimea" Simpson. Simpson's sketches were turned into engravings for publication in the ILN and, being among the most important graphic depictions, helped to introduce Western readers to the present-day appearance of Jerusalem and Jerusalemites.



Working Number: UK 070

Name: Foundations of Haram al-Sharif

Holding Museum: The Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF)

Date: 1872

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Foundations of the south-eastern corner of the Haram al-Sharif, as revealed for the first time by Charles Warren of the British Corps of the Royal Engineers. This tunnel was some 85 feet below ground. Warren's team were experienced mining engineers, and were assisted, as shown in several of this sequence of watercolours by William "Crimea" Simpson, sent to record the expedition for the Illustrated London News, by extremely courageous local Jerusalemites.



Working Number: UK 071

Name: Birtles in Jerusalem

Holding Museum: The Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF)

Date: 1872

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Foundations of the south-eastern corner of the Haram al-Sharif as revealed for the first time by Charles Warren. This tunnel was some 85 feet below ground. Warren's team were experienced mining engineers, and were assisted, as shown in several of this sequence of watercolours by William "Crimea" Simpson, sent to record the expedition for the Illustrated London News, by extremely courageous local Jerusalemites.
