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Chicago's Assyrian Winged Bull: A Problematic Recent History, Briefly

by Michael K. O'Malley

(Art 2211)

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away (Shelley).

Like the poem quoted above, the winged-bull or *lamassu* displayed in Chicago is housed in a problematic construct. P.B. Shelley likely intended his piece to illustrate (among other things) the radically shifting contexts that inevitably occur as objects traverse the course of time; questions do arise, though, when considering whether or not Shelley intended his piece to be exemplified in an undergraduate research paper. It is not the poem (or bull) itself in question, rather it is the *couching* that generates filters through which original meaning becomes increasingly opaque.

The human-headed, winged-bull image is the most characteristic element of Assyrian sculpture (Loud, "Part II" 47). Many such statues have been unearthed and are today housed in museums throughout the world including the Louvre, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and British Museum. Chicago's bull-- in the Oriental Institute (OI) at the University of Chicago--is flanked by six, 10-foot tall stone reliefs that originally stood near it in the throne room of the Assyrian king, Sargon II who ruled from 721-705 BCE (see figs. 1,2) ("Edgar and Deborah"). Before the excavation of Sargon II's palace, all that had been known about the Assyrians was learned from the Bible and Greek historians (Porada 38).

Frenchman Paul Émile Botta, appointed Consul General of France for Mosul in 1842, led the first formally sponsored excavation in the Near East at the modern site of Khorsabad, Iraq; Botta thought he had found the Biblical site of Nineveh (Guralnick 23). On a subsequent French expedition to Khorsabad in 1851, Victor Place and Félix Thomas mapped the area and translated cuneiform inscriptions found there to reveal that the site was not Nineveh but was instead *Dur-Sharrukin*--the City of Sargon (Loud, "Part II" ix). Place was charged with completing the Khorsabad excavations and shipping a representative sample of artifacts back to Paris; in fact, the Louvre began exhibiting Place's shipments starting 1 May 1847 (Guralnick 23).

Between 1851-1855, Victor Place's archaeological team was digging in the palace of Sargon II. The excavators turned a corner into a room that Place's notes label "Court VII." In this court, the team unearthed the front legs "broken off just above the knees" of the human-headed, winged bull that today stands in Chicago. The French workmen used pickaxes to attempt to remove the fragment

from its surroundings but abandoned the project, possibly because of a lack of equipment (Loud, "Part I" 42).

The statue remained underground until 1929 when, after a J.D. Rockefeller-funded, preliminary site-visit by Oriental Institute founder J. H. Breasted, Dr. Edward Chiera (also from the OI) arrived to Khorsabad with his crew to find that the local people were using the head of a *lamassu* statue as a modern grind stone, and that they were using a statue fragment of a bearded head of one of Sargon's officials as a chopping block. Upon purchasing the items from the local people, Dr. Chiera commented: "that such an outrage had been committed against these fine reliefs was irritating to say the least," and that "it is far better that [the artifacts] should find their way to some museum rather than to some lime burner or a native house" (Loud, "Part I" 13).

In April 1929 as Dr. Chiera's team, following Place's diagrams, came across Court VII in Sargon II's palace, they uncovered the same broken front legs seen by Botta and the French 82 years ago. The OI team knew the French had been there, for they could see the pickaxe marks on the bull's legs. As the excavation revealed that the winged-bull had been broken into three pieces, the team was surprised to find that the French archaeologists had not reached the other two fragments of the bull. The head had fallen directly onto the palace floor; presumably, it fell due to water seepage. Except for the broken tip of one ear, it was completely intact even though its impact had crushed the pavement below (Loud, "Part I" 44). The largest piece was found last and consisted of the bulk of the body; it weighed about 15 tons. Dr. Chiera was uncertain what he should do with the bull, so he wired his boss, J. H. Breasted: "WINGED BULL FIVE METERS BY FIVE FACE TURNING SIDEWAYS GOOD CONDITION STOP SHIPPING POSSIBLE MONTH MAY ONLY STOP COST TRANSPORTATION ABOUT TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS STOP DIVISION APRIL TWENTY SIXTH STOP SHALL WE ASK FOR BULL" ("Excavations"). Breasted replied promptly to tell Chiera to ask for the bull during the division and make arrangements to bring it to Chicago. Artifacts at this time were commonly divided under a system called *partage* (or division) where Iraqi officials chose what objects would stay in the national museum, and foreign archaeologists were given the rest in exchange for conducting the excavations. The system was disbanded more than 30 years ago; archaeological artifacts are no longer allowed to leave the country (Burghart 4G).

The three pieces of the winged-bull weighing a total of about 30 tons had to make the trip from Khorsabad, in the upper-northeastern section of modern Iraq, down the Tigris River to Basra, in the southeastern-most part of the country, where they could be loaded onto an ocean-traversing ship (Loud, "Part I" 44). Members of the OI team made a trip to Baghdad to purchase wooden planks, iron supports, and other supplies to make custom, protective cases for the pieces, but when the ship carrying the supplies they ordered from Baghdad caught fire, supplies had to be instead improvised from local materials, for there was no time for another trip to Baghdad ("Loud, Part I" 46). Nearby Kurds were hired to assist the team to build hoists which lifted the fragments of the bull while cases were constructed around them. A shelter had to be constructed over the ironworkers because the sun was so hot that the iron became untouchable (Loud, "Part I" 50).

Dr. Chiera's greatest obstacle was getting the heavy cases out of the trench and down to the river. A 3-ton truck found in Mosul sufficed to get the two smaller fragments to the river--an all-night trip. To carry the largest piece, a trailer was custom-build using the axle and wheels left over from a wartime cannon (Loud, "Part I" 50). The trailer bent under the weight of the heavy case as it was initially lowered. The case was repositioned on the trailer for another try, but this second attempt failed as well. Finally, after repair, repositioning, and the help of a winch, the case was driven out of the trench. In the meantime, workers rebuild the main road to the river in preparation for the heavy load that would traverse the route (Loud, "Part I" 52). The truck and trailer were repeatedly failing and being repaired; eventually, the rig was almost completely rebuilt as an axle from the truck was relocated to support the case's weight on the trailer. The procession to the river was very slow, moving only 6 (of 12) miles in the first 24 hours of transport. After five days of travel, the truck

became completely disabled only 300 meters from the river, so it was dragged the rest of the way through a plowed field. Nine days out of Khorsabad, the final case was on the boat (Loud, "Part I" 53).

A July 1929 New York Times article reported that the items from the expedition had arrived in Basra and were awaiting shipment to Chicago and that Dr. Chiera had returned to tell of the excavations: "...the prize item which will come to Chicago is a great stone bull which will weigh forty tons and will measure 17 by 18 feet when assembled" ("Uncovers palaces"). The *lamassu* experienced too-narrow railroad tunnels as it made its way off the ship and into Chicago (Pridmore 36). The piece was so large that a wall of the OI Museum was left unfinished so that a crane could install the bull in the museum in 1931 (Loohaus H1). A specially-constructed brick and steel support system was built to reinforce the floor on which the winged-bull now stands--over 6,000 miles from its place of origin (Mullen 1Metro). The statue had become *Chicago's Assyrian bull*.

When one views this colossal figure as it stands restored at the end of the great Egyptian hall of the Oriental Institute Museum, he cannot help but be impressed with awe at the scale of it; he is instilled with respect for the king whose palace was so magnificent as to contain such adornment, and with admiration for the designer and sculptor responsible for its conception and execution. But little does he realize what great credit is due those who undertook its removal and who under great difficulties succeeded to such extent that it now stands in Chicago unscathed but for the damage caused by its fall when the collapse of the palace walls pushed it forward into the court (Loud, "Part I" 42).

-Dr. Edward Chiera

Chicago's bull seems to have been on display undisturbed since 1931; then, in April 1991, Michael Bourbon, master conservator from Paris, arrived in Chicago to create a silicone and plaster cast of the *lamassu*. A replica of Chicago's bull was made and displayed at the Louvre (Associated Press C2). In 1996, the OI Museum was closed for expansion construction and renovation. During this time, the winged-bull was cased, and at least part of it was disassembled, cleaned, and examined in order to gather data about the statue and its place of origin (see fig. 3) (Harris). In October 2003, the newly renovated museum reopened; the winged-bull stands at the end of the hall evoking a "...feeling of grandeur and power of the palaces and temples of the mighty Assyrian Empire;" a reported 50,000 annual visitors come through the gallery and view the *lamassu* ("Edgar and Deborah"; Emberling 189). The stated benefits of the bull's presence in Chicago are innumerable, but a question could be asked about whether the positive knowledge/benefits are a result of the statue's presence or the result of a curator's interpretive choices, for "the art historian is always present in the construct she or he produces" (Bal and Bryson 175).

To further explore this notion, it may be helpful to consider as a parallel André Malraux's *le Musée Imaginaire* in which pieces of art were photographed for the purpose of being widely distributed in order to foster a "massive expansion of art beyond the classical canons of taste ...[so that one might]...embrace works of every time and place that had previously been unknown or unappreciated" (Barker 9). The photographs produced by this initiative have a homogenizing effect on the art by imparting a "family likeness to objects that have actually but slight affinity" (Barker 9). This effect also takes place in relation to form by stripping objects of "scale, texture, [and] color" (Barker 9). This process of de-contextualizing artworks by presenting them in photograph form parallels the de-contextualizing of the winged-bull by presenting it in a museum display thousands of miles from its origin thereby transforming the object so that it is appreciated for its "formal qualities...with [little] regard to the setting for which it was made or the function it once fulfilled" (Barker 9).

Here, a concession is due to the Oriental Institute staff and faculty for striving to present the winged bull along with appropriate information in an attempt to help the visitor approach the statue as the Assyrians did; however, the bull's separation from its "socio-historical context hinders critical understanding [and] cannot be remedied by didactic display," for such a presentation--surrounded by abundant cultural/contextual information--is somewhat demeaning to the object, "reducing it to a mere cultural artifact--something lacking inherent value, something interesting only as part of a culture that is the other, remote, and ultimately unknowable" (Forster 463; Barnet 30). It is impossible to experience the *lamassu* as the Assyrians once did. Even though the Oriental Institute scholars attempt to recreate the context, there are inevitable and unwitting projections of current attitudes into the constructed past (Barnet 29).

Additionally, the condition of being displayed--connoting that the primary purpose of the object is to be looked-at--is fundamental to the museum's presentation of the winged-bull, and each display (necessarily produced and installed by curators/designers) is "informed by definite aims and assumptions and evokes some larger meaning or deeper reality beyond the individual work on display--it becomes a mode of representation as well as a mode of presentation" (Barker 13). When the winged-bull is displayed de-contextualized, for the purposes of aesthetic contemplation, it encourages viewers to project "meaning and values that have no real basis in the object itself" (Barker 15).

Evidence of these aims, assumptions, and projections can be observed in the following examples that demonstrate how reactions to and interpretations of the Assyrian winged-bull in Chicago are often inconsistent with the object's culture and original context: Upon the bull's initial installation, the New York Times reported that "...the great winged bull that looks with steady gaze into a strange world may be but an earthly dream of human flight--the man's face appearing above the wings, the strength of the bull suggesting the power of the motor that has taken the place of beasts of burden" ("East and west"). Next, a recent publication declares that the bull (and it's newly renovated, surrounding display) is a monument to Oriental Institute archaeologists, scholars, and beneficiaries as well as the cultures of the ancient Near East (Barbanes). A third example is the Oriental Institute's official press-photo of the *lamassu* synecdochically positioned behind Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute (see fig. 4). Finally, the editor of University of Chicago Magazine appointed the winged-bull as a "symbol of the University of Chicago" when she commissioned an origamist to recreate the bull as origami (see fig. 5) (Lang). One striking element about the preceding examples is how the winged-bull's meaning shifted from its original purpose of intimidating audiences of Sargon II and guarding his palace to being "unquestionably the most characteristic single element of Assyrian sculpture" (Loud, "Part II" 47) to becoming a symbol for the Oriental Institute to eventually symbolizing the institution of the University of Chicago.

Contextual change may be inevitable over the course of time. Even the statue in Shelley's poem had experienced drastic contextual change; however, unlike the winged-bull in Chicago, Shelley's statue was not excavated and shipped 6,000 miles to be displayed in a museum. The last 200 years of the *lamassu's* history have been colorful and controversial, and although it was dramatically discovered and transported early within this time frame, the statue's more recent history may be its busiest yet. Chicago's Assyrian winged-bull is an example *par excellence* of the debate surrounding the ownership, meaning, and display of antique artifacts.



Figure 1. The Assyrian Bull is flanked in a new installation by relief-carved stone slabs. (photo: Oriental Institute Exhibition Photos, University of Chicago News Office)



Figure 2. View of the Yelda Khorsabad Court looking towards entrance from Assyrian bull. (photo: Jean Grant, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago)



Figure 3. Alison Whyte, Assistant Conservator, and Monica Hudak, Contract Conservator, clean the 300-pound fragment of a winged bull. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)



Figure 4. Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute, stands with the Assyrian Bull. Oriental Institute Exhibition Photos, University of Chicago News Office



Figure 1. An oragami rendering of the winged bull. (photo: Dan Dry, University of Chicago Magazine)

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