


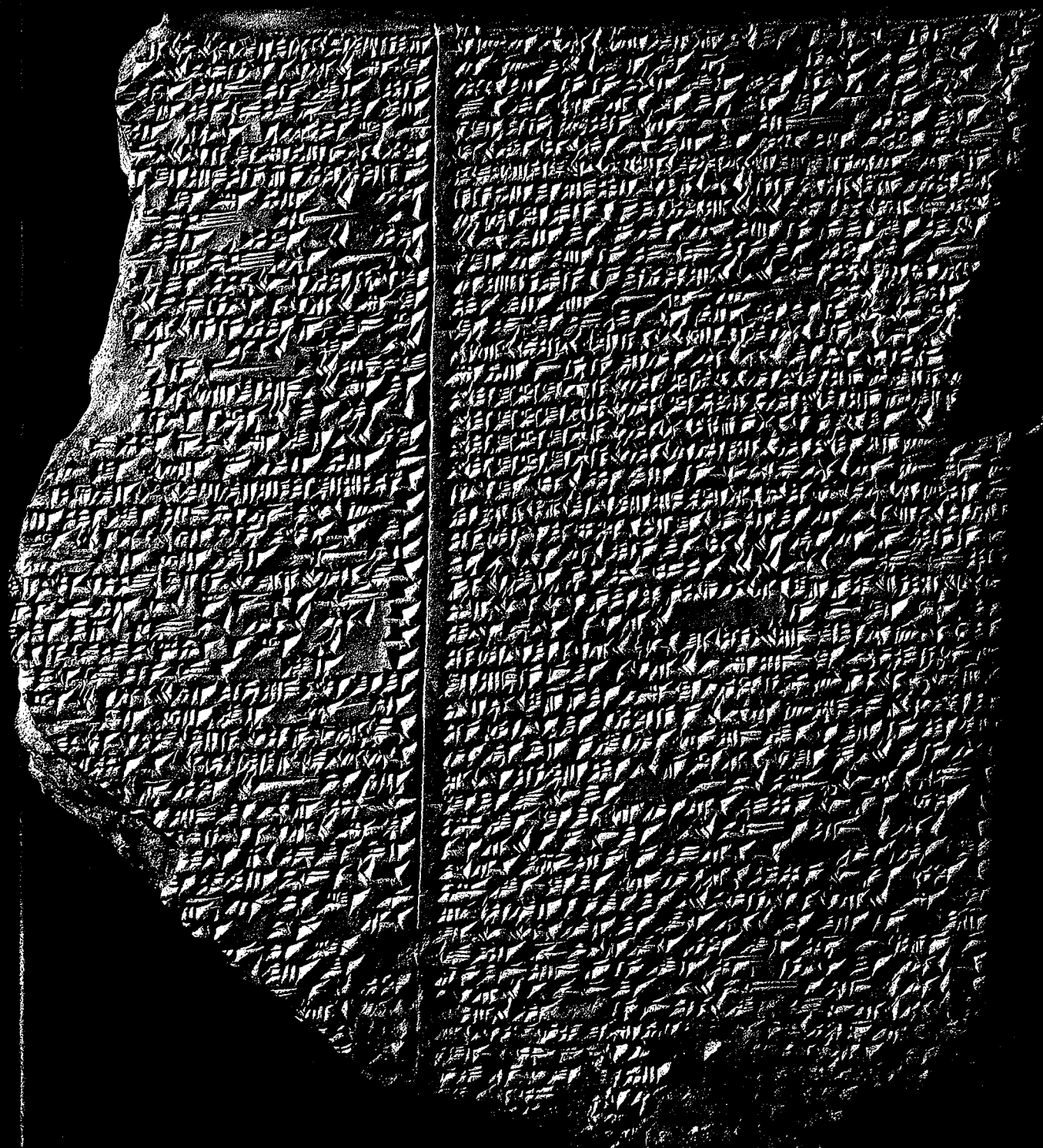
EPIC HERO



HOW A SELF-
TAUGHT BRITISH GENIUS
REDISCOVERED THE MESOPOTAMIAN
SAGA OF *GILGAMESH*—AFTER 2,500 YEARS

BY DAVID DAMROSCH

IN NOVEMBER 1872, George Smith was working at the British Museum in a second-floor room overlooking the bare plane trees in Russell Square. On a long table were pieces of clay tablets, among the hundreds of thousands that archaeologists had shipped back to London from Nineveh, in present-day Iraq, a quarter-century before. Many of the fragments bore cuneiform hieroglyphs, and over the years scholars had managed to reassemble parts of some tablets, deciphering for the first time these records of daily life in



The unlikely researcher, George Smith, made one of archaeology's most sensational finds when he uncovered this cuneiform-inscribed clay tablet containing fragments of a lost Babylonian epic.

Assyria of the 7th and 8th centuries B.C.—references to oxen, slaves, casks of wine, petitions to kings, contracts, treaties, prayers and omens.

As scholars go, Smith, 32 years old, was an anomaly; he had ended his formal education at age 14 when he was apprenticed to a printer, and perhaps it was because of his training as an engraver that he had such a knack for assembling coherent passages of cuneiform out of the drawers and drawers of old rubble. In fact, Smith had already established dates for a couple of minor events in Israelite history, and on this brisk fall day he was looking for other references that might confirm parts of the Bible. Then, on a fragment of a tablet, he came across a story that would soon astonish the Western world. He read of a flood, a ship caught on a mountain and a bird sent out in search of dry land—the first independent confirmation of a vast flood in ancient Mesopotamia, complete with a Noah-like figure and an ark.

Yet he could read only a few lines of the tablet, much of which was encrusted with a thick, lime-like deposit. The museum had an expert restorer on contract, Robert Ready, but he was away on private business. As Smith's colleague E. A. Wallis Budge later recalled, "Smith was constitutionally a highly nervous, sensitive man, and his irritation at

code to the region's history: the complex cuneiform (wedge-shaped) script in which most of the ancient Mesopotamian texts were written. With few established protocols, Assyriology constituted a rare chink in the armor of the British class structure. An inquiring mind with a fresh perspective could be welcomed into the enterprise without a single credential, letter of introduction or family connection. Resources were still pitifully slim, and full-time employment in the field was almost unattainable, so it would be an exaggeration to speak of this as a window of opportunity; it was more of a mousehole of opportunity, but it was all that Smith required.

He was born in 1840 in the London district of Chelsea, at that time a seedy area of grimy tenements and high unemployment. When he turned 14, his father took the sensible route of apprenticing the boy to the printing firm of Messrs. Bradbury and Evans, where he was put to work learning to engrave bank notes.

Working amid the din of printing presses and the smell of damp ink on paper, Smith developed the patience, and keen eye and delicate hand that would later serve him so well in his work with cuneiform tablets. His work also exposed him to a wider world, for Bradbury and Evans had branched

"I AM THE FIRST MAN TO READ THAT AFTER MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF OBLIVION."

Ready's absence knew no bounds." Several excruciating days later, Ready finally returned and worked his magic, whereupon "Smith took the tablet and began to read over the lines that Ready had brought to light," Budge recalled, "and when he saw that they contained the portion of the legend he had hoped to find there, he said: 'I am the first man to read that after more than two thousand years of oblivion.' Setting the tablet on the table, Smith jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement."

What he had uncovered would become known in the West as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the 3,200-year-old account of the eponymous hero's exploits and one of the oldest works of literature in the world. It constituted one of the most sensational finds in the history of archaeology. Smith would go on to become the world's leading expert in the ancient Akkadian language and its fiendishly difficult script, write the first true history of Mesopotamia's long-lost Assyrian Empire and publish pathbreaking translations of the major Babylonian literary texts. All that from a self-taught laborer who had never been to high school, much less college.

Scholars had only recently succeeded in cracking the

out from printing into publishing; they owned the humor magazine *Punch* and published Dickens and Thackeray in lavishly illustrated editions. In the fall of 1860, the 20-year-old Smith, fascinated by ancient history, began to haunt the Near Eastern collections at the British Museum.

From the firm's offices just off Fleet Street, a young man in a hurry could thread his way among a dense press of carriages, horse-drawn streetcars, window-shopping pedestrians and hand-drawn carts full of cabbages and potatoes to the museum in 20 minutes, probably eating as he walked, so as to spend his lunch break poring over the enigmatic tablets in the museum's collection.

At the time, the dominant figure in British cuneiform studies was Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson. Haughty, ambitious and accustomed to command, Rawlinson had been knighted after a distinguished military career in India, Persia and Iraq. Though not a museum employee, Rawlinson was a frequent presence in the department's workroom. It was he who had made the decisive breakthrough in the decipherment of cuneiform writing; 50 years of age in 1860, he had just published the first volume of his *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*.

Everyone sensed that there were exciting discoveries to be made in the chaotic mass of tablets, and newspapers

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Lost Treasure

In *Gilgamesh*, scholars unearthed literary gold

such as the *Illustrated London News* published dramatic reports of every new confirmation of a biblical name or date. Yet the museum's professional staff were not particularly well qualified to make these discoveries themselves. The head, or "keeper," of the Department of Oriental Antiquities was a learned Egyptologist, Samuel Birch, who had no direct expertise in Mesopotamian studies and left the supervision of the cuneiform collection to his sole assistant, a young classical scholar named William Henry Coxe.

At first, Birch and Coxe paid little attention to the quiet but persistent young engraver. But it gradually became apparent to the two men that Smith could read the tablets better than they. In time, Birch brought him to Rawlinson's attention.

Rawlinson was impressed by the young man's ability to piece tablets together, a task requiring both exceptional visual memory and manual dexterity in creating "joins" of fragments. A given tablet might have been broken into a dozen or more pieces that were now widely dispersed among the thousands of fragments at the museum. Rawlinson persuaded the museum to hire Smith to work on sorting and assembling tablets—a job involving more manual labor than scholarship. As Budge noted, Smith "worked for some years for a salary that was smaller than that then received by a master carpenter or master mason."

But Smith made the fullest use of his new position to increase his command of the language and its script, and by the mid-1860s he was making real discoveries: identifying Hebrew monarchs mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions and giving new detail to biblical chronology. In 1866 Smith published his first article, and he received an important promotion when Rawlinson persuaded the museum's trustees to hire him as his assistant for the next volume of his *Cuneiform Inscriptions*. "Thus, in the beginning of 1867," Smith later recalled with quiet pride, "I entered into official life, and regularly prosecuted the study of the cuneiform texts."

In addition to tablets and fragments, the museum held many paper "squeezes"—impressions that had been made by pressing damp paper onto inscriptions too big to move. It was an extraordinary trove, if only it could be read, but the problems were not only linguistic. The squeezes deteriorated on handling and were further damaged when mice got at them. Unbaked clay tablets could crumble, and even those that had been baked, giving them the heft and dura-

The first great masterpiece of world literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, recounts the adventures of a legendary king and is based in all likelihood on an actual historical figure, Gilgamesh, the ruler of the Babylonian city of Uruk around 2700 B.C. Credited with erecting the massive wall around Uruk, the first major city, Gilgamesh emerged over the centuries as the hero of a cycle of poems, and eventually of the 3,000-line epic, which reached final form around 1200 B.C. In it, Gilgamesh defeats a forest demon, spurns the advances of Ishtar, goddess of love, and falls into despair when his beloved friend Enkidu is struck down by the enraged Ishtar. Abandoning Uruk, Gilgamesh sets off

to discover the secret of immortality; he hopes to learn it from a distant ancestor, Uta-napishtim, to whom the gods granted immortality after he survived a great flood that had inundated the earth centuries before.

After various travails, Gilgamesh finds Uta-napishtim, who recounts the story of the Flood. The questing hero, however, is denied his heart's desire: the gods will never again confer immortality upon any human. The epic concludes with the king's return home, where he resolves to take comfort in his saga, engraved on tablets and buried in the city's walls.

Like all ancient Mesopotamian literature, the epic of Gilgamesh was lost to historical memory with the eclipse of the ancient cultures of Assyria and Babylonia in the centuries before Christ. Only in the mid-19th century did British and French archaeologists begin to explore the mysterious mounds in present-day Iraq that held the remains of the first urban societies. A particularly rich find was the library of Ashurbanipal, last great king of Assyria: in the 1850s, British archaeologist Austin Henry Layard and his Iraqi associate, Hormuzd Rassam, unearthed it in the ruins of Nineveh. They shipped 100,000 tablets and fragments home to the British Museum; gradually scholars began to piece them together and decipher the ancient texts.

In 1872, the young curator George Smith created a sensation when he unearthed *Gilgamesh's* broken tablets in the museum's collection. Smith immediately perceived that the character of Uta-napishtim, Gilgamesh's ancestor, constituted an early version of the Bible's Noah—a striking parallel at a time when Victorian debates over religion and science were at their height. How much prehistory recounted in the Bible was true? Was life on earth the product of divine creation, or the result of blind chance, as Charles Darwin's radical theories implied? Smith, entering this debate with his corroboration of the biblical account of the Flood, used his dramatic discovery to launch one of the most meteoric careers in the history of archaeology.

—DAVID DAMROSCH



A relief (c. 700 B.C., above) likely depicts Gilgamesh.

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bility of terra cotta tiles, had often been broken amid the ruins of Nineveh. Tablets were stored loose in boxes and sometimes damaged each other; items under active consideration were laid out on planks set on trestles in a dimly lit room. (Fearful of fire, the museum's trustees had refused to allow gas lighting in the building.)

Eager to become a full-fledged archaeologist, Smith longed to go to Iraq to excavate. But museum trustees felt that they had more than enough Assyrian and Babylonian artifacts and wanted Smith at work on the premises. He had no way to support himself in a distant



The Victorian public, eager to glimpse finds excavated in Mesopotamia, thronged the British Museum's Assyrian Gallery (c. 1900, viewing monumental sculpture unearthed at Nineveh).

province of the Ottoman Empire, or even to pay his own way there, as he was now supporting a wife and a growing family on his slender wages. Discouraged, he wrote to a friend in February 1872 that the "Government will not assist the movement in the least, at present, in fact I think they will not give a penny until something is discovered." It was then that Smith began systematically surveying the museum's collection for texts that might shed new light on biblical studies. In chancing upon the Flood story, Smith felt he had found the passport to the land of his dreams.

WORD OF THE FIND spread rapidly, and Prime Minister Gladstone himself was in the audience when Smith presented a lecture to the Biblical Archaeology Society on December 3, 1872. Edwin Arnold, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, promptly put up the sum of a thousand guineas to fund Smith on an expedition—much as the *Telegraph* had successfully sent Henry Morton Stanley to find the explorer-missionary David Livingstone in Central Africa, after Livingstone had ceased to be in contact with England during a long journey of exploration begun in 1866. In January 1873, Smith was at last on his way.

As eager as Smith had been to go to Iraq, he was completely unprepared to do so. He couldn't speak Arabic, Turkish or Persian, and apart from a couple of brief research trips to Paris, he had probably never before set foot outside England.

In his first Middle Eastern port of call, the Turkish city of Smyrna, he was jostled by crowds, upset by noise and confusion, and appalled by the local cuisine. But if Smith chafed under travel's discomforts, he loved the landscape and the sense of connection to the ancient history he had studied so long. As he traveled through remote villages, he was struck by a sense of continuity with the past: he saw clay-brick houses whose style he recognized from ancient reliefs and encountered a threshing machine "similar to those which are found in prehistoric deposits."

On March 2, 1873, he finally approached his life's goal, outside the provincial capital of Mosul. "I started before sunrise, and arrived about nine in the morning at the ruins of Nineveh. I cannot well describe the pleasure with which I came in sight of this memorable city, the object of so many of my thoughts and hopes." It consisted of vast, flat mounds whose featurelessness had astonished British archaeologist Austin Henry Layard when he first saw them in 1840. Kouyunjik, the largest of these, was 40 feet high, a mile long and a third of a mile wide. It was pitted with various trenches and holes dug by Layard and his Iraqi assistant Hormuzd Rassam years before, when they had uncovered more than two miles' worth of sculptured reliefs. (It was Layard and Rassam who would transport to England the tablets Smith would one day decipher.)

Smith knew that Rassam hadn't been able to finish excavating the North Palace library, from which he thought the *Gilgamesh* tablets had probably come. In fact, he had sold the idea of the expedition to the *Daily Telegraph* on the rather slender hope that he might be able to find a missing piece of the Flood tablet, some three inches on a side, which he felt should still be lurking among the tons of accumulated rubble at the site. Yet he had to know that this would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. The clay fragment would be almost indistinguishable from the debris around it, assuming it hadn't been pulverized in antiquity or tossed out by Rassam's men during their excavations 22 years earlier.

Actually, the very difficulty of the quest was an advantage for Smith: the longer the piece stayed missing, the more ex-

cavating he could do. Smith wanted to begin digging the very day he arrived, but he was delayed by local officials who, suspicious of his purposes or desiring bribes (or both), refused to honor his permit from the Ottoman government. He had to travel 200 miles down the Tigris to Baghdad to straighten things out. On returning with his authority confirmed, Smith hired laborers from Mosul and surrounding villages and began to enlarge Rassam's old pit. Work began on May 7, 1873, and remarkably, within a week, lightning struck again: Smith found a scrap of tablet containing the missing part of the Flood story, describing the provisioning of the ark: "Into the midst of it thy grain, thy furniture, and thy goods, thy wealth, thy woman servants, thy female slaves . . . the animals of the field all, I will gather and I will send to thee, and they shall be enclosed in thy door." He telegraphed word of his find back to the *Daily Telegraph*; thanks to the laying of the first successful transatlantic telegraph line just seven years before, his feat was reported in newspaper stories around the globe.

Smith would later describe his find in his *Assyrian Discoveries*, published in 1875, in scholarly terms: "On the 14th of May. . . . I sat down to examine the store of fragments of cuneiform inscription from the day's digging, taking out and brushing off the earth from the fragments to read their con-

ON MAY 14, 1873, LIGHTNING STRUCK AGAIN: SMITH FOUND THE MISSING PART OF THE FLOOD STORY.

tents. On cleaning one of them I found to my surprise and gratification that it contained the greater portion of seventeen lines of inscription belonging to the first column of *The Chaldean Account of the Deluge*, as Smith first titled the epic, and fitting into the only place where there was a serious blank in the story . . . and now with this portion I was enabled to make it nearly complete." Smith is almost excessively matter-of-fact here—he was famous for his modesty, and once blushed to the roots of his hair when a woman asked him if she could shake hands with "the great Mr. Smith."

TO SMITH'S DEEP REGRET, the *Daily Telegraph* immediately recalled him, no doubt so as to save money, now that they had their media coup. Not wanting to admit this, however, the paper perfidiously altered the phrasing of Smith's telegram to suggest that he himself had chosen to end his mission. Still fuming over this deception two years later, Smith protested in *Assyrian Discoveries* that "from some error unknown to me, the telegram as published differs materially from the one I sent. In particular, in the published copy occurs the words 'as the season is closing,' which led to the inference that I considered that the proper season for excavating was coming to an end. My own feeling was the contrary of this."

As it happened, the fragment Smith so rapidly found

was not from *Gilgamesh* at all but was from what scholars now know to be the opening of an even older version of the Flood story, dating from perhaps 1800 B.C. (An account of a catastrophic flood is found in sources throughout ancient Mesopotamian literature.) Had he realized this, Smith might have been able to argue that his assignment hadn't been completed, though he actually had gotten what he was sent to find, the beginning of the story.

Violence was flaring up around Mosul, with warfare between rival Arab tribes; refugees were streaming around the mounds where Smith was digging. Smith, oddly unperturbed, reserved his outrage for the Turkish government's refusal to protect the antiquities in the lands under its rule. Ultimately, Smith had to sail from the Mediterranean port of Alexandretta in July 1873 without his treasures; weeks later they were released by Turkish customs officials and safely shipped to England.

Back in London, Smith found himself famous. The *Daily Telegraph* had run articles trumpeting

"THE DAILY TELEGRAPH'S ASSYRIAN EXPEDITION
COMPLETE SUCCESS OF EXCAVATIONS
THE MISSING PORTION OF THE DELUGE
TABLET DISCOVERED.

"The distinguished Assyriologue," as Smith was now anointed in the press, was in demand as a speaker, and the British Museum experienced an upsurge in attendance. And just as Smith had hoped, the acclaim surrounding his Stanley-and-Livingstone-style success did finally induce the museum's trustees to provide further funds—one thousand pounds. Smith left London in November 1873, determined to make the most of the few months still allowed for excavation by his permit from Constantinople.

Though he deeply missed his family, his letters home overflow with excitement. "I have all sorts of treasures," he wrote to his wife, Mary, after several months of work, "historical, mythological, architectural &c &c. I expect to bring home from 3,000 to 4,000 objects, you must come to the Museum and see them, it will be nothing to me if you do not share my success." Smith invariably sent love and kisses to "the little cherubs," Charley, Fred, Cissie, Arthur—nicknamed Twopenny—Bertie and Ethel. He asked after the older children's studies and the younger ones' progress in walking and talking, and he drew for them comic sketches: of his seasickness when crossing the English Channel, of riding on horseback brandishing a sword, and precariously perched atop a camel.

Now he dined with ambassadors in Constantinople, wealthy travelers in Aleppo and military officers in Bagh-

dad, and even at his mound outside Mosul he was able to make a home away from home. He had a house constructed to his specifications, marking out its foundations himself, and he had an excellent English cook. "Except that I have not you with me," he wrote Mary, "I am as much at home as in England and like it a good bit better and I can here do as I like and have power and influence."

Still, local officials were less pleased to have Smith doing as he pleased. Convinced that he must have spirited away some ancient treasure on his first trip, they threw up a succession of bureaucratic roadblocks. In the end, they impounded several hundred tablets, and Smith had to return home with much less than he had found. In his 1925 *Rise and Progress of Assyriology*, Budge was inclined to lay the blame at Smith's own feet. "His guileless soul did not understand the use of Bakshish [bribes]," Budge wrote.

Nonetheless, Smith arrived in England in early June 1874 with a large collection of tablets. Soon he had begun to decipher the full Flood story as well as the epic of *Gilgamesh* in which it appeared. Working at a furious pace, he published his translation at the end of 1874, and the next year he finished no fewer than four more books, including *Assyrian Discoveries* and a large collection of translations of all the major literary texts he'd found. No longer able to link this more varied group of texts to the Flood story alone, he simply expanded his biblical frame, titling his new book *The Chaldean Account of Genesis: Containing the Description of the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Deluge, the Tower of Babel, the Times of the Patriarchs, and Nimrod; Babylonian Fables, and Legends of the Gods; from the Cuneiform Inscriptions*. (Chaldean, a generalized term, refers to the mythologies of ancient Fertile Crescent cultures.)

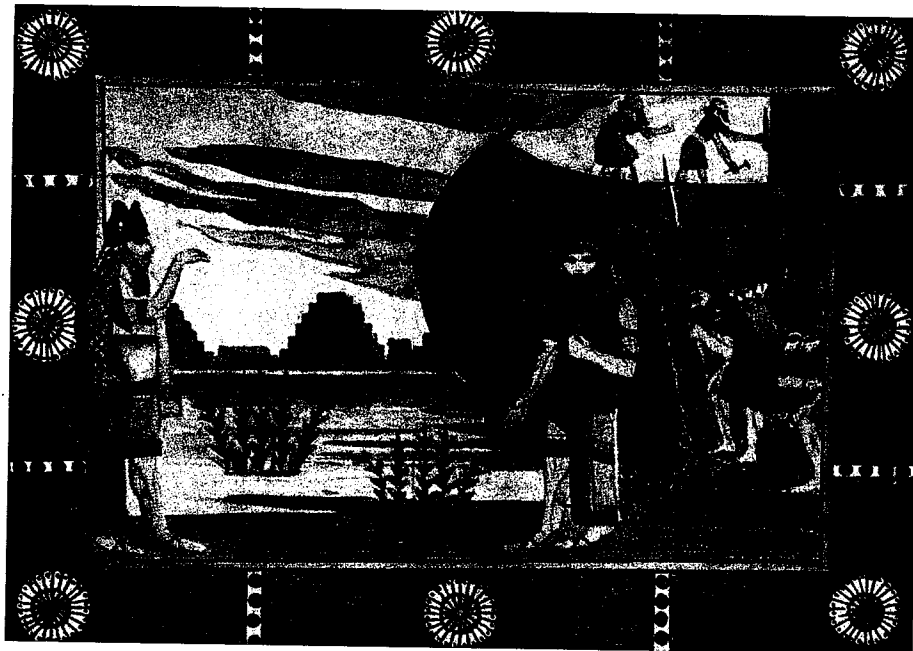
Smith read *The Chaldean Account of the Deluge* not only for its parallels to the Bible. As he began to reconstruct the body of the epic leading up to the Flood narrative, Smith sought a unifying theme in the saga of the hero Gilgamesh's adventures. Smith located the heart of the epic in Gilgamesh's journey to a distant cedar forest in Tablet 5, where he and his companion Enkidu defeat a demon called Humbaba.

Piecing together this account as best he could, Smith engaged in a brilliant piece of detective work, building plausibly on external evidence to make sense of the fragmen-

tary text. His accomplishment is all the more impressive given that he built some of his interpretations on guesses about words that no one had ever deciphered, in lines that often were only fragments of their full selves. Smith's writings are full of discoveries that have stood the test of time, often involving intuitive leaps beyond literal surfaces.

George Smith was now at the peak of his powers, with ambitious plans to write a series of books on Assyrian and Babylonian history and culture. He had left Iraq, moreover, vowing never to return, and could very well have spent decades working at the museum with his thousands of tablets, with no need ever to venture abroad again. Yet he was nagged by the sense of opportunities not taken, and when the museum proposed a third expedition to Iraq at the end of 1875, Smith agreed to make the trip.

He encountered months of delay, first in Constantinople to get his permit, and then in having it honored in Mosul.



A central figure in the epic, Uta-napishtim (depicted as purple-garbed, above, in an illustrated 1924 edition) recounts the outfitting of an ark and the coming of a great flood.

His travels east through Syria and then in Iraq itself were greatly delayed by civil unrest and spreading disease. In June 1876, his companion, Karl Eneberg, a Scandinavian archaeologist, died of cholera as the pair approached Baghdad. Writing home to Mary from Aleppo in Syria, he tried to make light of his mounting difficulties: "The plague is sweeping part of the very district I ought to visit; now do not be alarmed, you are not aware that the plague was in the country when I was here last although then it was not spreading so fast but as it is I am very cautious although there is no real danger, I have stopped my journey & remain for the present at Aleppo to see how it goes—people here are alarmed and naturally so for last year they lost in this city 8,000 people out of a population of 100,000 by cholera, that however has disappeared."

In Mosul, Smith encountered still more bureaucracy, and by the time he was allowed to start digging it was July, and the heat was too intense to proceed. Smith contemplated cutting his losses and coming home early. As he wrote to Mary: "I do not enjoy my stay here, although I live well I am certainly thin, and often I feel I would sooner have cold mutton!!! at home than be here, the truth is I do not do very well as a single man, I have been married too long, it was all very well in the first expedition, but the gilt was soon off the gingerbread and if I had not been pledged I would not have come now. . . . Kiss all our pets and tell them Papa will soon come back and look one of these days to see my cab drive up to the door. If I am successful this year I will come home in July and leave the excavations in charge of my assistant who is a very good and likely party."

Smith then wrote to the museum, announcing this plan; while that letter hasn't survived, the museum's reply has.

Writing in a tone one might use to scold a lazy servant, the secretary of the museum, McAllister Jones, expressed his surprise that Smith would consider leaving his post prematurely. "This the Trustees consider to be very objectionable," Jones wrote. "It is not stated that Mr. Matthewson's labours would be equally efficient with your own, and if not equally efficient it is clear that such excavating ought not to be left to his superintendence excepting in cases of absolute necessity. The Trustees will be glad to receive your explanation for this." Jones tried to close in a more sympathetic vein:

"I am very sorry to hear from your last letter that the plague is increasing to so great an extent. This will require every precaution on your part."

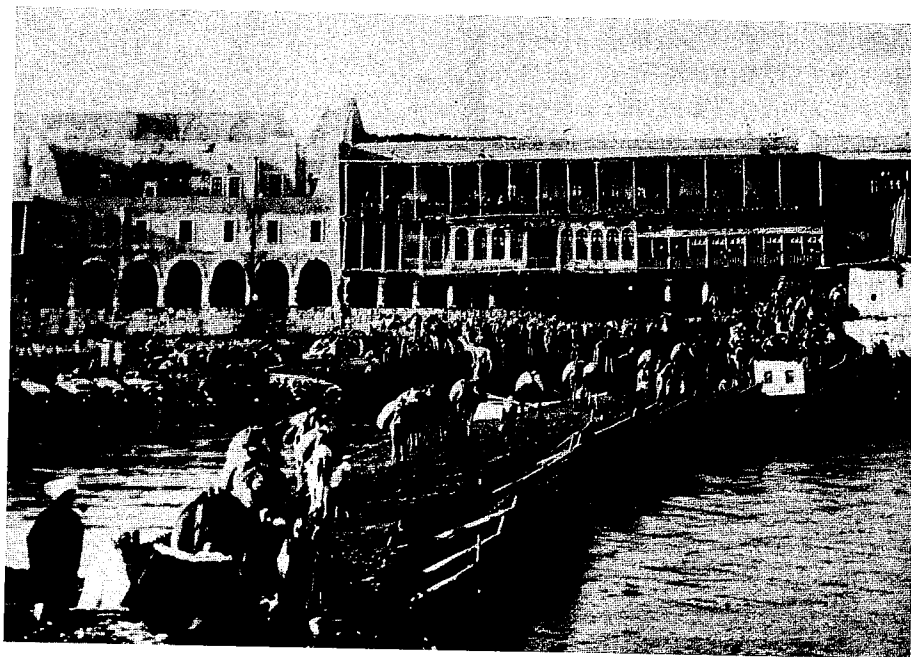
Of course the best precaution would have been leaving the plague-ridden area immediately. Instead, reprimanded, Smith stayed on far too long, to no useful purpose. By the time he and his assistant, Peter Matthewson, finally headed west through the desert, having collected only a single trunk's worth of items, a plague quarantine had precluded the simpler way down the Tigris from Baghdad and then home by steamer around the Arabian Peninsula.

As they made their way through Syria in August, Smith took sick with dysentery; as he gradually weakened, he became unable to ride his horse, and they halted at a village called Ikisji, 40 miles from Aleppo. Matthewson then rode ahead to Aleppo, where he sought out the closest thing to an English-speaking doctor he could find, a dentist named

John Parsons. Parsons returned with Matthewson to Ikisji and did what little he could for Smith, then helped transport him in a conveyance called a *tatravan*, a kind of mule-drawn sedan chair, to Aleppo.

IN THE BRIEF DECADE after he "entered into official life" in 1867, Smith had written eight important books. All modern scholarship on Babylonian literature stems from his pathbreaking work, and at the time of his illness he did at least know that his accomplishments would live on, both in his own books and in the work of those who would follow in his footsteps.

These considerations figure prominently in the last entries in his small black field notebook, three and a half by six inches. In them, his mind wanders between family, duty, Assyrian history and two bronze statuettes that he had stored among his belongings:



In 1873, when Smith first arrived at Mosul (c. 1900, above), across the Tigris from Nineveh, he described the ancient ruins as the longed-for "object of so many of my thoughts and hopes."

"My collection includes some important specimens includ[ing] the two earliest bronze statuettes known in Asia before the Semitic period. They are in my long boots beside in my trunk there are about thirty-five tablets and fragments about twenty valuable some unique including the tablet of Labir-bari-Kurdu the Laborssoarchus of Berossus, there is a large field of study in my collection, I intended to work it out but desire now that my antiquities and notes may be thrown open to all students. I have done my duty thoroughly." Then the entries trail off in the final few broken phrases, appropriately enough for the great restorer of fragments. Smith died in Aleppo on August 19, three days after his last journal entry, just four years after he had been the first person to read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in 2,500 years.