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LAYARD ENTERPRISE: VICTORIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND INFORMAL IMPERIALISM IN MESOPOTAMIA

Through an analysis of Foreign Office (FO) memoranda dealing with the “recovery” of Assyrian artifacts, I argue that archaeology served important diplomatic and propagandistic functions in the eastern Ottoman Empire in the years leading up to the Crimean War. Dovetailing excavation with imperial issues of defending national honor, securing commercial markets, deploying troops, and even spying, these documents represent an underground genealogy for Austen Henry Layard, the key British agent in the FO’s secret plot to transport archaeological trophies to London. This evidence implicitly challenges the romantic narrative of discovery and the paternalistic ideology of Western stewardship so firmly embedded in narrative histories of British Assyriology. Comparing the Victorian experience with a contemporary instance of archaeological propaganda—the playing cards issued by the U.S. Department of Defense to troops stationed in Iraq as part of a 2007 training program in archaeological stewardship—this essay contends that archaeology continues to rationalize Western imperialism in Mesopotamia.