

WHO TRAVELS SEES MORE

*Artists, Architects and Archaeologists
Discover Egypt and the Near East*

Edited by

Diane Fortenberry

ASTENE & OXBOW BOOKS

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Colour Plates

1. Some Remarks on the Mesopotamian Travels of Robert Ker Porter

Kai Kaniuth

Robert Ker Porter (Fig. 1.1) led an interesting and eventful life by any standards. A gifted artist, author and diplomat, he was probably among the most widely travelled men of his age. Born in 1777 in Durham, the fourth of five children of a military surgeon who died when Robert was two years old, Porter grew up in modest circumstances. His mother supported the family on her own during the ensuing years and did it remarkably well, judging by the success her children enjoyed later in life. Robert's sisters, Jane and Anna Maria, became well-known writers, while his brother William became a surgeon and his brother John attained the rank of colonel in the army. (For a more detailed biography of Robert Ker Porter see now the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) and Armstrong 1962; for Jane and Anna Maria see the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1992, vol. 116)). The Porter children spent their childhood in the intellectually stimulating climate of Edinburgh after 1780, where one of their closest friends appears to have been Walter Scott. It has been suggested that these formative years left a lasting impression on them, and that well aware of their precarious situation, they actively sought recognition through official positions and the public acclaim gained through their writing (Armstrong 1962).

In 1790 Robert, who had shown considerable artistic talent, moved to London, where he entered the Royal Academy of Arts to study under Benjamin West, its co-founder and its president from 1792 until 1820. His early works were mostly of biblical inspiration and include pieces for Shoreditch Church and St. John's College, Cambridge, but he also joined a group of younger London painters (the 'Brothers'), concentrating on landscape studies. Soon, however, monumental

Fig. 1.1 Portrait of Sir Robert Ker Porter. Original by G. Harlowe, 1808; engraving by W. Burgess, published 1843 (Barnett 1972, pl. 1).



historical paintings were to become his speciality, and in 1799 the *Storming of Seringapatam* (Fig. 1.2), a 128-ft long, 20-ft high (39 × 6 m) canvas showing 700 nearly life-sized figures, which he is said to have painted in no more than 10 weeks, established him as one of the



foremost historical painters of his day. His preference for large formats led one critic to remark that ‘if he was not a great painter he surely painted great pictures’ (Redgrave 1878). This work and a number of others (e.g. *The Siege of Acre* and *The Battle of Alexandria*, both 1801) earned him a commission as historical painter to Czar Alexander I in 1804. He moved to St. Petersburg and worked on the Admiralty Hall there, executing a large-scale ceiling fresco depicting Peter the Great planning Kronstadt.

On a journey to Moscow in 1806, Porter fell in love with Maria, Princess Shcherbatova, but shortly afterwards he was forced to leave Russia under the conditions of the treaty of Tilsit (9 July 1807), which forbade all trade with England and led to the eviction of English nationals from the signatory countries. Porter travelled to Sweden and Finland, where he was knighted by the Swedish monarch with the order of the Polar Star and drew his first travelling sketches, which were published two years afterwards (Porter 1809a). The work did not earn

Fig. 1.2 The Storming of Seringapatam (central portion), engraving by G. Vendramini, 1802, courtesy of the British Library (P779). The original, painted by R. K. Porter in 1799, was lost in a fire. An explanatory sketch to the entire piece is held in the John Rylands Library, Manchester (English Mss. 382/1632, published in Dupouy 1966, xx-xcxi).

him hoped-for acclaim, having little success with the English public:

On the whole, we dismiss Mr P's travels as a book which will seldom find a place in a library, but may lie without offence on a table; which, if not the best, is far from the worst, account of one of the most interesting countries in the world. (*London Review*, November 1809)

Later, Porter joined the Peninsula campaign under General Moore, from which resulted another, this time anonymous volume (Porter 1809b). After Alexander had renounced the Treaty of Tilsit he returned to Russia in 1811 and covered Napoleon's invasion of 1812 (Porter 1814).

In 1812, Porter became related through his marriage with Maria Shcherbatova to Aleksey Nikolaevich Olenin, military engineer, politician, artist and historian, and an eminent figure of early 19th-century intellectual life in Russia. Olenin became the first director of the Imperial Public Library in 1811 and was president of the Russian Academy of Arts from 1817 to 1843. He was an influential figure in Russian learned circles and hosted the country's most important literary salon of the day, with Bryullov, Pushkin, Turgenev, Griboedov and Glinka attending regularly at his estate at Pryukhino, outside St. Petersburg. In contrast to Porter, Olenin was very much interested in ancient art and had been a noted illustrator and engraver in his youth. He suggested that Porter combine a trip to the Middle East with a scientific mission, namely to check on inconsistencies in the drawings of Iranian antiquities brought back by previous travellers. To illustrate the necessity of such a journey, Olenin assembled published drawings of the famous Sasanian investiture scene at Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 1.3).

Porter took up Olenin's suggestion, and it proved a brilliant success. The scientific accuracy of Porter's records was owed, at least partly, to Olenin's influence, as a letter from Olenin, written on 4 August 1817, two days before Porter's departure, shows:

dessinez ce que vous verrez avec la plus grande exactitude dans les détails, ne corrigez rien et conservez à vos copies le caractère de l'original... [draw what you see with the greatest precision in detail, do not correct anything and preserve the character of the original in your copies...] (Vasileva 1994, 345)

Porter's Oriental Travels and Publications

Porter left St. Petersburg on 6 August 1817 for Odessa, where news reached him of an outbreak of plague in Constantinople, forcing him to change his route and proceed through the Caucasus. Along the road, he sketched local costumes and mountain landscapes, as well as the cities



Fig. 1.3 Comparative sketch of published drawings showing the investiture of Ardashir I at Naqsb-e Rostam (Iran), by A. N. Olenin (Vasileva 1994, pl. 104).

Сии четыре изображения представляют одну и ту же сцену дарения в Нахширустанской, который в рисунке г-на Керъ-Портера находится на 16 листе.

of Tiflis, Erevan, Tabriz – where he spent the first months of the new year in the company of the crown prince, Abbas Mirza – Teheran, Isfahan and Shiraz. (Several of his works are reproduced in Barnett 1972 and Vasileva 1994.) During an extended sojourn at the Persian court in Teheran, where he received another, Persian knighthood (the order of the Lion and the Sun), he completed his fine portraits of Fath Ali Shah and Abbas Mirza; the former was originally published as the frontispiece to Porter 1821–22. The bulk of his illustrative work,

however, is made up of drawings of the Achaemenid and Sasanian reliefs from Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 1.4) and Persepolis, which were the result of several weeks' work in June 1818 and improved significantly upon the work of his predecessors.

In September 1818, Porter descended along the Khorassan road to Mesopotamia, adding to his portfolio numerous sketches of the Sasanian rock reliefs at Taq-e Bostan. In the alluvial plain of Mesopotamia, his main mission being accomplished, he took up residence with the British representative in Baghdad, Claudius James Rich, and made trips to such prominent nearby sites as Babylon, Aqar Quf, Uheimir and Birs Nimrud. A particular episode from this part of his three-year oriental journey, his visit to Borsippa, is discussed in greater detail below.

After nine more months spent between Tabriz and Teheran, Porter returned via Constantinople, Bucharest and Lemberg to St. Petersburg, where he arrived on 14 March 1820. He donated some of his travel sketches to the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg, earning himself a gift of two diamond rings from the Czar (Vasileva 1994, 242); the rings are now in the State Hermitage Museum. The watercolours based on these sketches, as well as the bulk of his other graphic work, were sold by his sister Jane to the British Museum after his death and are now held by the British Library (Add. MS 14758).

The account of his travels was published (Porter 1821–22) with only a small number of etchings – some 80 pieces – which do not do full justice to his remarkable talents as a painter. Nevertheless, his drawings proved to be much more faithful renderings of ancient monuments than all those preceding them. Among the more immediately apparent scientific results of his journey were the identification of Cyrus' tomb at Pasargadae (as already suggested by J. Morier 1812, 144–46) and the first description of Takht-e Suleiman (Iran), an important Sasanian fire temple.

His literary ambitions were, unfortunately, dampened by a somewhat cool reception in learned circles back home. The review in *Blackwood's Magazine* was devastating:

If we abstract from the two large volumes before us, all that is inaccurate, all that is uninteresting, and all that has been quite as well told by former travellers, the balance to be placed to the credit of Sir Robert Ker Porter might have been comprised in a slender octavo. It is much to be regretted, that his literary friends had not induced him to compress his materials into a more available compass, for really few people have leisure to read so much about so little, as we have here served up for our entertainment.

(*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1824, no. 91, vol. 16, 140)

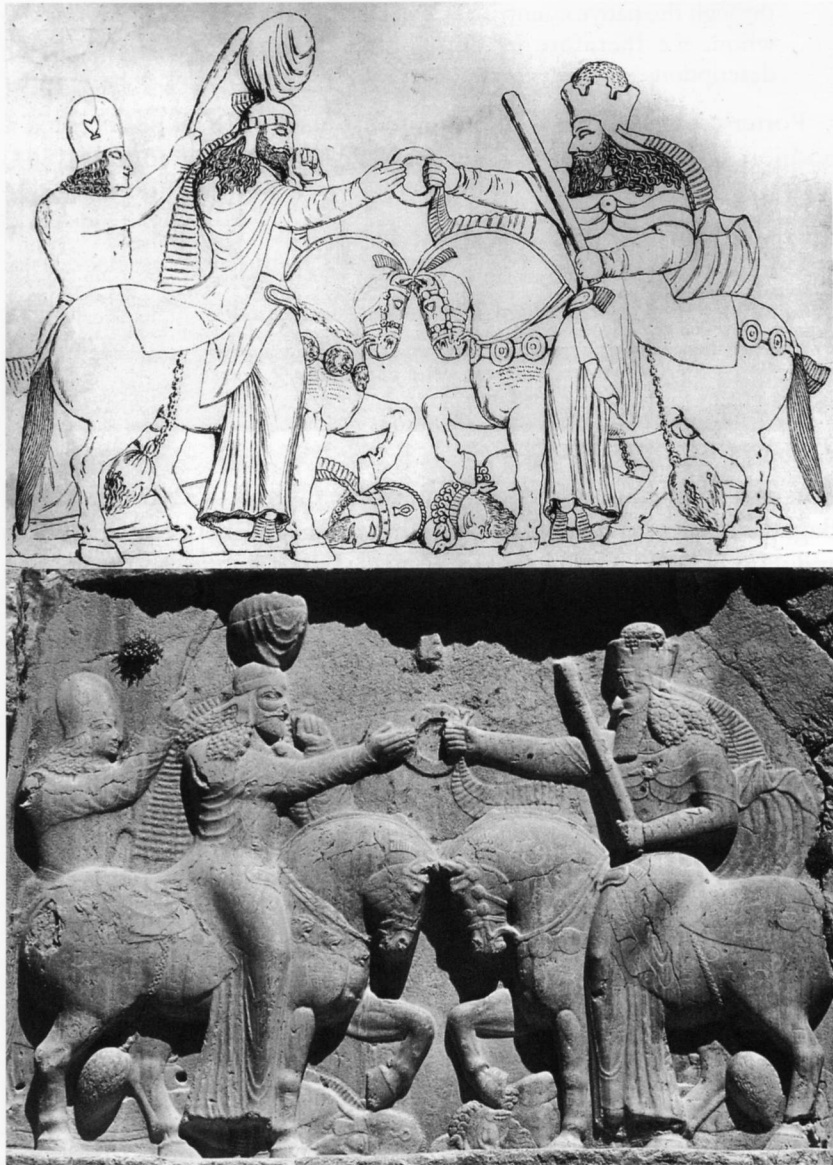


Fig. 1.4 Drawing of the investiture of Ardashir I at Naqsh-e Rostam by R. K. Porter, from a folio held in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (after Vasileva 1994, pl. 105,1), and a photograph of the same relief (Koch 2001, fig. 132).

The *Monthly Review* (at the time apparently produced by J. Porter, so we may consider this a sort of in-house review) concludes that

were we inclined to season our commendation with any rebuke, we should condemn the inflated style of Sir Robert Porter; a fault which was strikingly conspicuous in his former travels through Russia and Sweden. We feel, however, more than usually disposed to be charitable towards ornamental and turgid diction, in a traveller whose route lay

through the native country of Oriental hyperbole and exaggeration, and whom we therefore pardon for being somewhat Asiatic in his descriptions. (*Monthly Review* 1821, no. 96, 15)

Porter's further life is of minor interest here: in 1825, he accepted a position as British Consul in Caracas, where he remained until 1841, befriending (and painting) Simón Bolívar and witnessing the emergence of the state of Venezuela after the Liberator's death in 1830. The circumstances surrounding this episode of his life are reasonably well covered in his Caracas diary (Dupouy 1966). Porter died shortly after returning from South America, during a visit to St. Petersburg, on 5 May 1842.

The Site of Borsippa

Borsippa is situated in modern Iraq, some 60 miles (72 km) south of Baghdad and 10 miles (12 km) south of Babylon, between the Hillah and Hindiyah branches of the Euphrates. It is one of the largest archaeological sites in Mesopotamia. The oldest textual reference to the site dates to the late 3rd millennium BC. A city wall was built in the 19th century BC, and during the Neo-Babylonian empire of the early 1st millennium BC, Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) vowed to make it a 'second Babylon'. (For a summary of the site's pre-Islamic history see Unger 1928 (for cuneiform evidence) and Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaften* 3, 735 (for Classical authors)).

The site of Borsippa is today dominated by two hills: the settlement mound of Ibrahim al-Khalil, with a sanctuary dedicated to Abraham on its summit, and the remains of a Mesopotamian ziggurat (temple tower), today known as Birs Nimrud (Fig. 1.5). The latter structure captured the attention of countless European travellers, for until the 1850s, Birs Nimrud was a strong contender for the site of the original Tower of Babel. The ziggurat was built by Nebuchadnezzar II on an earlier structure of unknown date. It consists of a 90 × 90-m (295 × 295-ft) square mass of unfired mudbricks with a baked brick casing and a lower temple at its foot. The whole complex was dedicated to the scribal god Nabu. The tower consisted of at least four, and possibly seven stages, upon which a shrine had originally stood; its preserved height is 47 m (154 ft). The peculiar shape – with a secondarily baked mudbrick mass (this is the 'tower' shown on many drawings published by 19th- and 20th-century travellers) – is the result of a great conflagration that probably took place some time late in the 6th century AD (Becke 1987).



The site, which was always highly visible, attracted numerous European visitors. A partial list of early travellers includes the usual suspects, as well as a number of surprise candidates: Benjamin of Tudela between 1168 and 1171, B. Oxenstierna in 1618, C. Niebuhr in the winter of 1765/66, J. Beauchamp in 1782, J. M. Kinneir between 1808 and 1813, C. J. Rich in 1811 and again in 1817, J. S. Buckingham in 1816, R. K. Porter in 1818, G. Keppel in 1824, R. Mignan in 1827, Lt. Ormsby in 1830, J. B. Fraser in 1835 etc.

Fig. 1.5 Photograph of the ziggurat of Birs Nimrud (right) and the Ibrahim mound (left) from the north (photo: author).

Porter's Visit to Borsippa

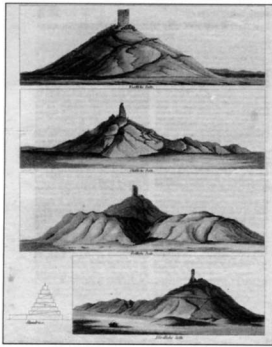
Robert Ker Porter set off from Hillah to Birs Nimrud on the morning of 12 November 1818, protected by a mounted guard provided by the authorities, since the areas west of the Euphrates were at best under only nominal control of the local government (Porter 1821–22, 305–31); encounters with wild Arab tribes had already prevented C. Niebuhr from thoroughly inspecting the place in 1766. Upon approaching Birs Nimrud, a troop of horsemen was observed to the left of Porter's party, also making for the Birs. The commander of his guard assured Porter that

there were none of the pasha's warriors, save ourselves, on this side of the Euphrates; therefore [he deemed it] advisable to proceed circumspectly, that we might not lose the advantage of a fair start; he being certain that it would prove the enemy far outnumbered us.
(Porter 1821–22, 307)

Fortunately, one of the horsemen turned out to be the Kiahya (mayor) of Hillah himself, who had come out with a strong escort to meet them

at the tower. Porter assumed that the Kiahya was driven by curiosity, since

it is a common idea with the Turks here, that the true object with Europeans, in visiting the banks of the Euphrates, is not to explore antiquities, as we pretend, but to make a laborious pilgrimage to these almost shapeless relics of a race of unbelievers more ancient than ourselves; and to perform certain mysterious religious rites before them; which excite no small curiosity amongst the Faithful, to pry into.
(*ibid.*, 309)



Robert Ker Porter's sketch of Birs Nimrud. See Colour plate 1.

After formalities were exchanged, Porter set out to measure the circumference of the tower. He describes its appearance in detail, including observations on the laying of the different types of bricks, the mortars used and the drainage system employed on the ziggurat, and he created some fine drawings of the building from all sides, reproduced here in a coloured print published several years later in Germany (Colour pl. 1).

In his description of the site, Porter quotes the evidence of Herodotus (1.181) and Strabo (16.1) and is ready to identify Birs Nimrud as 'the very tower of Babel' and the temple of Belus – an idea current at the time (*e.g.* Niebuhr 1774–78; Rich 1818) and only disproved by Rawlinson's reading of the cuneiform inscriptions found during his excavations (Rawlinson 1861):

So high a mass of ruin as the mound presented, can hardly be supposed to cover anything less than the remains of a fortress, a palace, or one of those enormous piles consecrated to religion and astronomy, which appears to have been erected in every city of Babylonia.
(Porter 1821–22, 327)

We are also given measurements of the Ibrahim mound, and Porter's opinion that it must have housed more temples and priestly dwellings, for 'the Sabian idolatry multiplied them to a number equal, and of like characters, with those of Greece and Egypt' (*ibid.*, 324). Only two nearly ruined buildings, called Makam Ibrahim Khali[] and Makam Saheb Zeman, still occupied the summit of the hill (*ibid.*, 325).

Porter's departure from Borsippa is described in no less dramatic terms than his approach:

...a fog came suddenly on, and with such denseness, that objects scarcely two hundred yards from me became instantly obscured, and the Birs itself totally veiled from my sight. The effect was most extraordinary: and, thus abruptly interrupted in my observations, I descended into the area, very unwillingly, to prepare for my return. In vain, at several times, I looked back for another even shadowy glimpse of the sublime tower; it was as much lost as if the whole had been a mirage of the desert. (*ibid.*, 328)

Robert Ker Porter and Modern Archaeological Work at Borsippa

That the attention of early travellers was centred exclusively on the temple mound is quite understandable, but it set a very unfruitful pattern in that only a few 19th-century archaeological missions ever ventured beyond it into the lower town (excavations were conducted by A. H. Layard in 1850, F. Fresnel and J. Oppert in 1852, H. C. Rawlinson in 1854 and H. Rassam in 1880). When such soundings were made, they often remained unpublished, as was the case for the French Expédition Scientifique, whose finds sank unceremoniously in the Tigris while being transported to Basra. The most important excavations were those of Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, a central figure in the decipherment of cuneiform writing and British resident in Baghdad, who established the name of the site (Rawlinson 1861), and those of Hormuzd Rassam, who recovered a large number of cuneiform tablets for the British Museum (Rassam 1897). Between November 1901 and

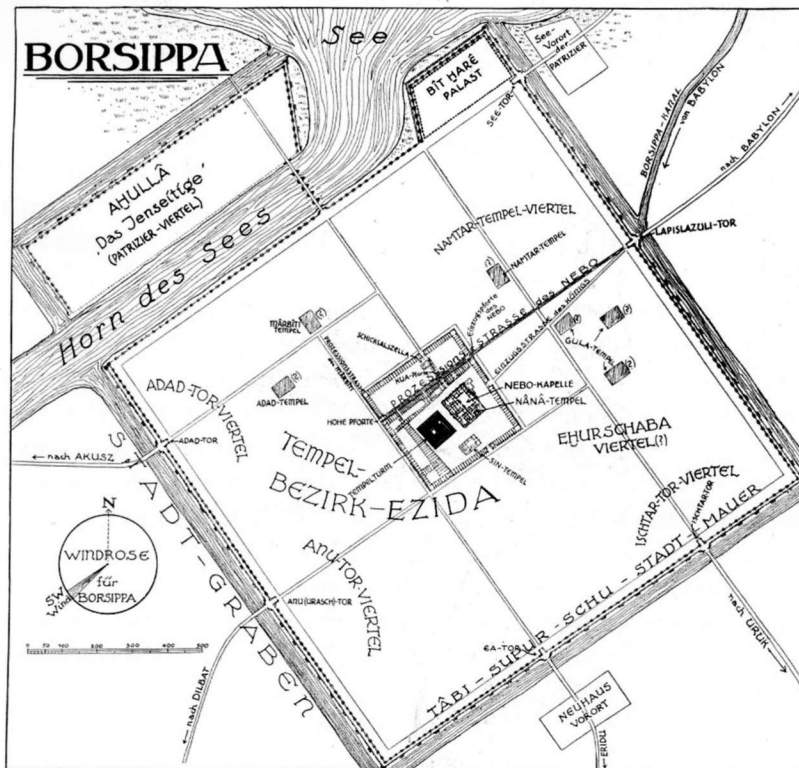


Fig. 1.6 Schematic plan of Borsippa (after Unger 1928).

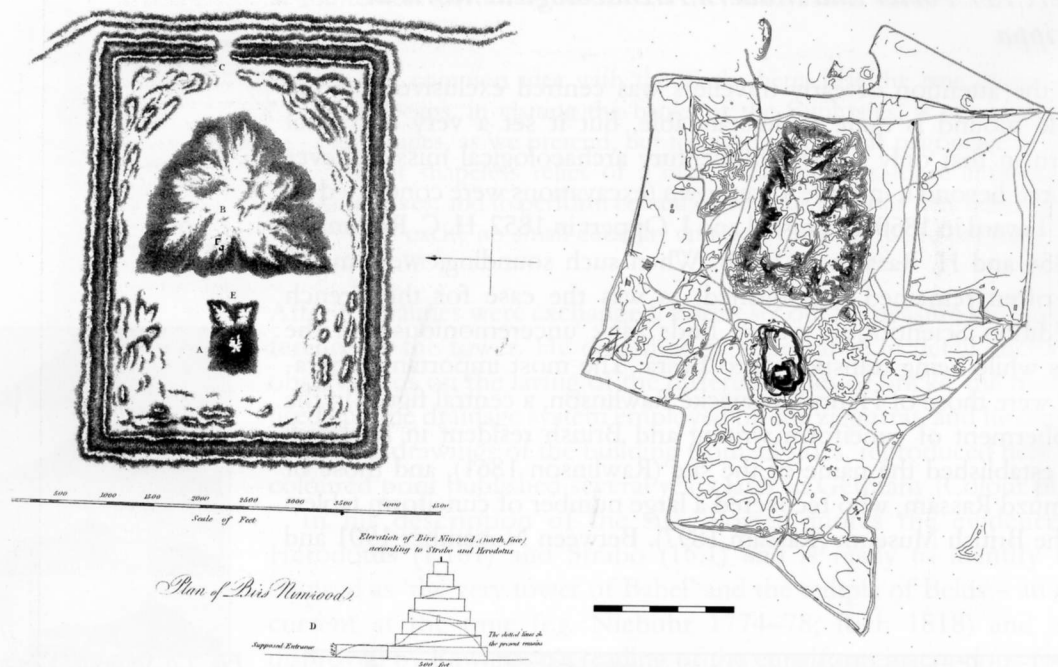


Fig. 1.7 Left: sketch plan of the site of Borsippa (Porter 1821–22, pl. 71). Right: topographical plan of Borsippa produced in 2002–03, scale: 500 m (courtesy of G. Gungam and U. Roettger).

May 1902 the German expedition to Babylon worked at Borsippa, concentrating almost exclusively on the sacred precinct of ziggurat and lower temple; the same area was then re-investigated by the Austrian Archaeological Expedition to Iraq from 1980 onwards (Trenkwalder 2003).

The initial challenge of a new research program undertaken by the University of Innsbruck/Austrian Archaeological Expedition to Iraq in 2000 was to establish an overview over the entire site. A topographical plan was drawn up between 2002 and 2003, but it was difficult to gain an appreciation of the original layout of the city because irrigation measures had destroyed unknown parts of the site over the course of two and a half millennia. The events in Iraq in 2003 have put an end to further fieldwork and leave us with few possibilities to further clarify the size and inner organization of the town.

The ancient Mesopotamian documents relating to the site were assembled by E. Unger in 1928, and though dated, his article constitutes the most complete survey of the cuneiform evidence. Unger published a sketch plan of the site (Fig. 1.6) showing gates, temples, the major quarters and suburbs and an important canal linking Borsippa with the

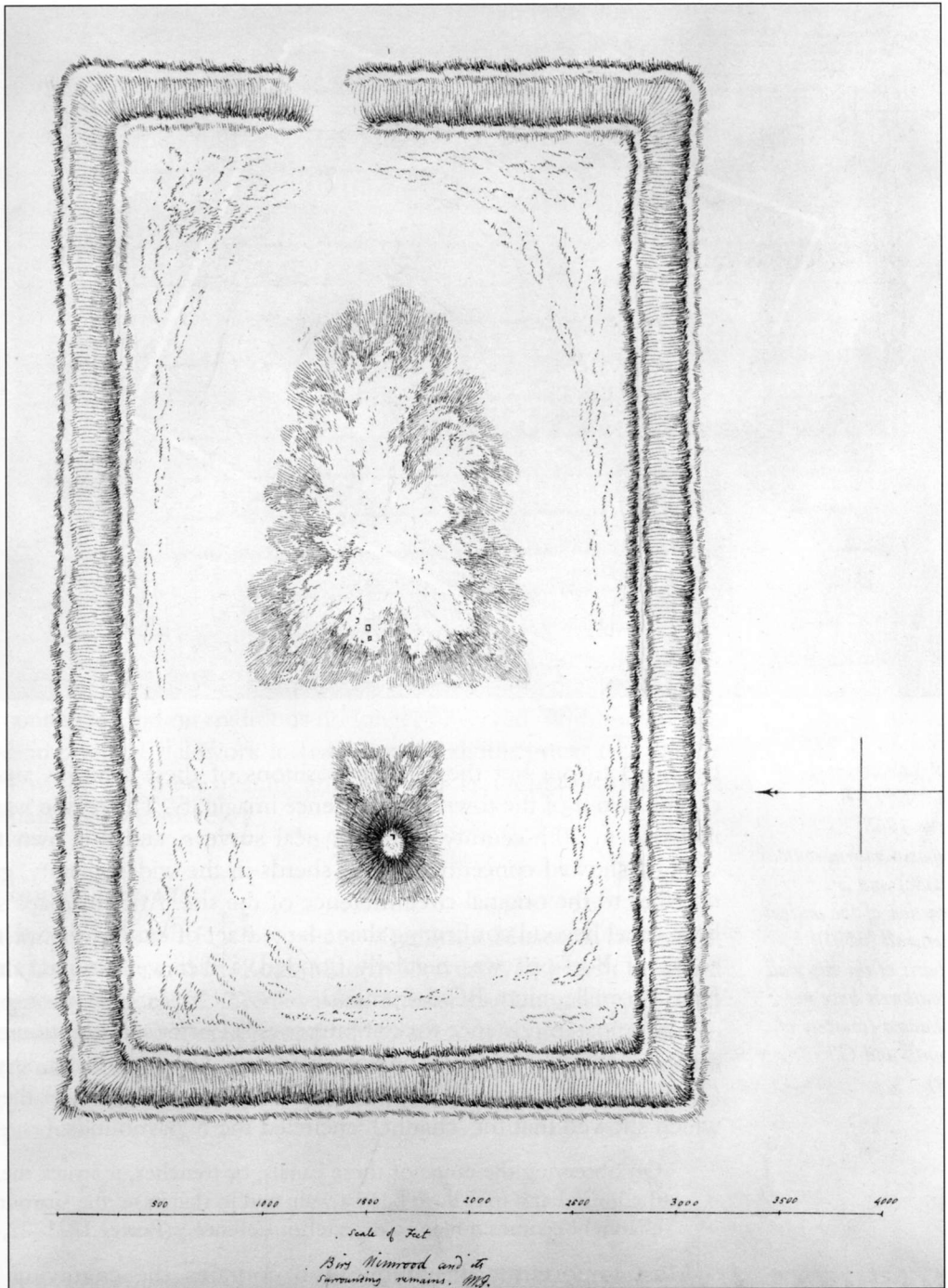


Fig. 1.8 Porter's original sketch of Borsippa. By kind permission of the British Library, Add. MS 14758, f. 144.



Fig. 1.9 Satellite image of Borsippa (KH 4B, Corona® 1968) superimposed with a contour map (black) and a reconstruction of the ancient perimeter wall (white); visible parts of the city wall in the southwest have not been enhanced (courtesy of K. Kaniuth and G. Roettger).

capital Babylon; but the relative positions of these features and the overall layout of the town are in essence imaginary. The region was not included in 20th-century archaeological surveys, and our own field-walking showed concentrations of sherds in the wider vicinity, giving no clues to the original circumference of the site. Ancient maps show little detail beyond confirming that a large tract of land to the west and south of Borsippa was regularly flooded, a fact well known already from 1st-millennium BC documents.

Of utmost importance for our purposes is Porter's description of his arrival at the site, in which he notes passing by a canal some 30 yards (27 m) in width, as well as his description of the views from the top, which showed that the 'channel' encircled the high mounds:

On observing the range of these canals, or trenches, it struck me, that the inner bank may have been a wall; and in that case, the surrounding channel becomes a feature of exterior defence. (Porter 1821–22, 308)

Most importantly, his publication contains the engraving of a topographical sketch plan – the earliest plan of the city known, and the only one covering it in its entirety – which shows the rectangular double

enclosure around the hills of Ibrahim al-Khalil (B) and Birs Nimrud (A) (Fig. 1.7). When comparing this published version with our topographical plan, and assuming that our modern one is more accurate, we notice a number of differences. The width of the Ibrahim mound is much bigger on the earlier plan, which at first seems to argue against the alleged reliability of Porter's drawings. In fact, the process of engraving has introduced a considerable distortion. The proportions of the original drawing, contained in the British Library volume of original sketches, are different in precisely this respect (Fig. 1.8): there is only a 5 percent difference in measured distances, a remarkable degree of accuracy given the instruments available at the time.

By combining the modern topographical plan of the site's remains with satellite images (from the Corona® 1968 and Quickbird® 2004 programmes), and using Robert Ker Porter's unique glimpse into the early-19th century terrain, it is possible to give a good approximation of the extent and layout of the site (Fig. 1.9). Accordingly, the overall layout of the city walls in the early 1st millennium BC would appear to have been rectangular, enclosing an area of *c.* 240 ha.

Robert Ker Porter's account has proved to be an invaluable asset in our approach to the ancient Mesopotamian city of Borsippa, and may yet do so in other instances. Early travelogues deserve our full attention for the window they open on long-lost landscapes and the monuments they contained, and on traditions no longer observed. With the hoped-for resumption of fieldwork in Iraq, the expedition's next task will be to follow up on these results and test our assumptions through a systematic surface survey.

Acknowledgements

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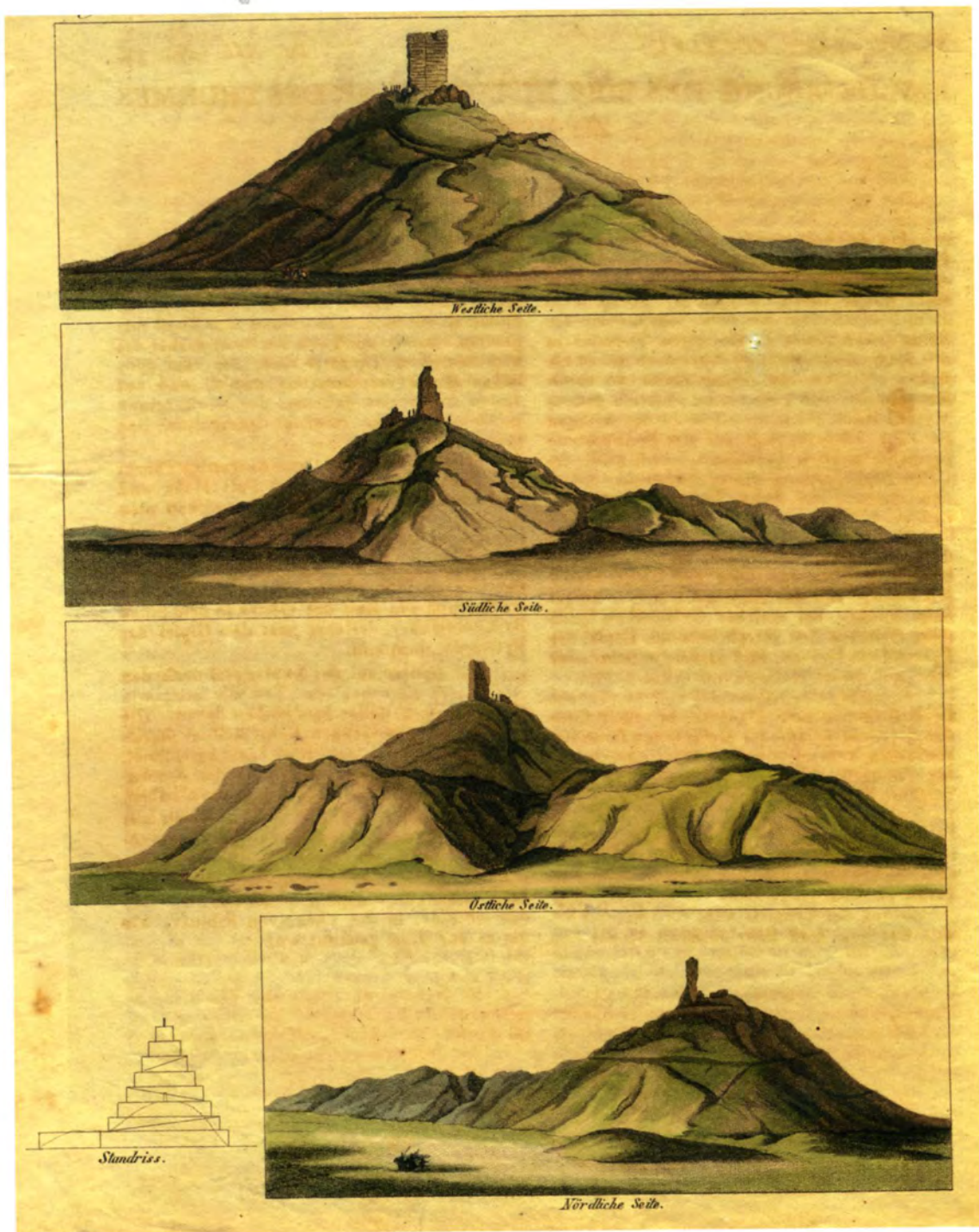


Plate 1. Coloured etching of Porter's sketch of the four sides of Birs Nimrud. From an unknown German publication (author's original).