

THE WINGED HUMAN-HEADED LIONS

(From Nineveh and Its Remains)

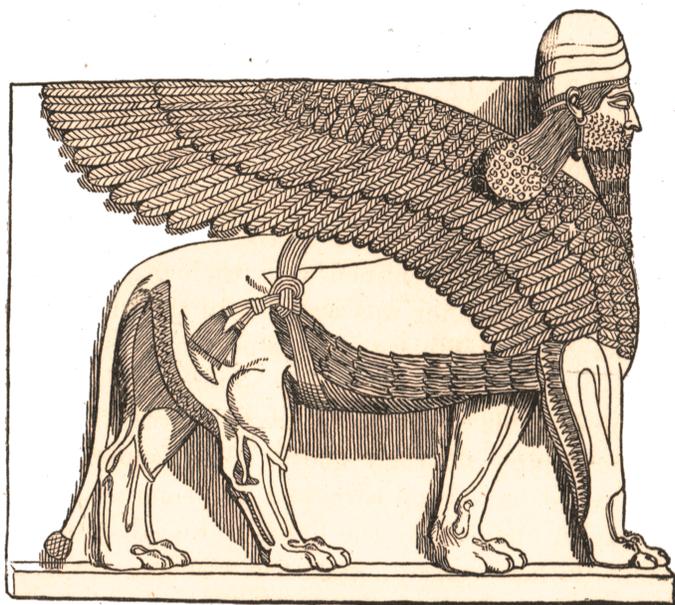
By Austen Henry Layard

ASCERTAINED by the end of March the existence of a second pair of winged human-headed lions, differing from those previously discovered in form, the human shape being continued to the waist and furnished with arms. In one hand, each figure carried a goat or stag, and in the other which hung down by the side a branch of three flowers. They formed a northern entrance into the chamber of which the lions previously described were the southern portal. I



completely uncovered the latter, and found them to be entire. They were about twelve feet in height, and the same number in length. The body and limbs were admirably portrayed; the muscles and bones, although strongly developed to display the strength of the animal, showed at the same time a correct knowledge of its anatomy and form. Expanded wings sprung from the shoulder and spread over the back; a knotted girdle, ending in tassels, encircled the lions. These sculptures, forming an entrance, were partly in full and partly in relief. The head and fore-part, facing the chamber, were in full; but only one side of the rest of the slab was sculptured, the back being placed against the wall of sun-dried bricks. That the spectator might have both a perfect front and side view of the figures, they were furnished with five legs; two were carved on the end of the slab to face the chamber, and three on the side. The relief of the body and three limbs was high and bold, and the slab was covered, in all parts not occupied by the image, with inscriptions in the cuneiform character. These magnificent specimens of Assyrian art were in perfect preservation; the most minute lines in the details of the wings and in the ornaments, had been retained with their original

freshness. Not a character was wanting in the inscriptions.



I used to contemplate for hours these mysterious emblems, and muse over their intent and history. What more noble forms could have ushered the people into the temple of their gods? What more sublime images could have been borrowed from nature, by men who sought, unaided by the light of revealed religion, to embody their conception of the wisdom, power and ubiquity of a Supreme Being? They could find no better type of intellect and knowledge

than the head of the man; of strength, than the body of the lion; of rapidity of motion, than the wings of the bird. These winged human-headed lions were not idle creations, the offspring of mere fancy; their meaning was written upon them. They had awed and instructed races which flourished three thousand years ago. Through the portals which they guarded, kings, priests, and warriors had borne sacrifices to their altars, long before the wisdom of the East had penetrated to Greece, and had furnished its mythology with symbols long recognized by the Assyrian votaries. They may have been buried, and their existence may have been unknown, before the foundation of the eternal city. For twenty-five centuries, they had been hidden from the eye of man, and they now stood forth once more in their ancient majesty. But how changed was the scene around them! The luxury and civilization of the mighty nation had given place to the wretchedness and ignorance of a few half-barbarian tribes. The wealth of temples, and the riches of great cities, had been succeeded by ruins and shapeless heaps of earth. Above the spacious hall in which they stood, the plough had passed and the corn now waved. Egypt has monuments no less ancient and no less wonderful; but they have stood forth for ages to testify her early power and renown; while those before me had but now appeared to bear witness in the words of the prophet, that once “the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches and with a shadowing shroud of a high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs—his height was exalted above all the trees in the field, and his boughs were multiplied, and his branches became long, because of the multitude of waters when he shot forth. All under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, and under his shadow dwelt all great nations;” for now is “Nineveh a desolation and dry like a wilderness, and flocks lie down in the midst of her; all the beasts of the nations, both the cormorant and bittern, lodge in the upper lintels of it; their voice sings in the windows; and desolation in the thresholds.”

