



Bad joke at the British Museum

10-11



Bad joke at the British Museum

Topic: History

Level: Primary education (10-11 years old)

Concepts: Assyrian civilisation

Time required: +/- 45 min

Summary of the activity: This adventure takes you to the British Museum, where a valuable collection of Assyrian artefacts exists. It introduces you to Henry Austen Layard, the British archaeologist who was one of the pioneers of Assyriology.

Several topics relating to the history of the Assyrians are proposed, which the teachers can modify if they wish to focus on other aspects.

Itinerary/Process Summary: It is a classic itinerary with multiple choices. The correct choice leads to the advancement of the story. The wrong choice leads to an explanation and allows you to review the concept, thus continuing the story.

Material needed: Paper, pen, knowledge about history and... motivation!

1

Introduction

It is 6 a.m. The phone at the London Police Headquarters rings.

"Hello, police? This is the director of the British Museum. We have a big problem. This morning, we were anxiously awaiting the arrival of Henry Austen Layard's journal, the British archaeologist who was one of the pioneers of Assyriology. Everything was almost ready for the opening of the museum's new rooms dedicated to the Assyrians, and the great archaeologist's diary was the most important piece. But when we opened the crate where the diary was sent to us, we discovered that someone had played a dirty trick on us! The pages of the diary are all broken down and, most importantly, for each of them there are two copies that look seemingly identical... but they are not! One must be the original one written by Layard and one must be a forgery!

Someone wants to ridicule our museum, just when the eyes of the whole world are on us! We must solve this problem soon and locate the authentic pages written by Layard! In a very few hours, we have to open the Museum, and the halls will be full of people! Please do something!"

The Police officers are stunned: really a bad joke! To fix the situation, they decide to put together a team of experts and scholars who can help them solve the case, and you are one of them. However, you need to go deeper into the topic first:

- Find out who Henry Austen Layard was.

 **Go to paragraph 6.**

- Learn more about the British Museum's collection.

 **Go to paragraph 13.**



4

Join the team of experts who can help the police

Thank you for your goodwill! Now you joined the team of experts who will help the Police locate the original pages of Layard's diary! He is in a panic because he knows the Museum will be open soon and everyone will want to visit the new hall devoted to the Assyrians. The director turns to you in a desperate tone: "Please, we need to hurry and make sure that the real pages of the diary will be displayed in the cases before the opening! Help me or I will be ruined and the Museum will make a bad impression in front of the world!"

 **Go to paragraph 9.**

5

The first page of the diary: The Origins of the Assyrians

Two copies of the first page look identical. Layard here talks about the origin of the Assyrians.

You start reading them both, hoping to find elements that will make you understand which is the authentic one written by Layard.

He wrote here:

"I was fascinated by everything that came out of the excavations. Finds of palaces, obelisks, rock reliefs, tablets, and so much more have come to light. Everything speaks of a civilisation no one had known before: the Assyrians!"

These words thrill you when you think about what Layard experienced during the excavation!

Continue reading Layard's diary!  **Go to paragraph 2.**

6

Find out who Henry Austen Layard was

In the early 19th century, Assyrian civilisation was virtually unknown.

Henry Austen Layard was an English adventurer and diplomat who began travelling to the Middle East on horseback in 1830. With his excavations in Mesopotamia, he revealed to the world the splendour of Assyria's art and ancient civilisations, particularly finding cities of Nineveh and Nimrud. He contributed to the discovery of the famous Royal Library of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. More than 20,000 clay tablets and fragments of texts dated to the 7th century BCE were found there.

Most of the tablets were brought to England and are now in the British Museum.



- Learn more about the British Museum's collection.

➡➡➡ ➔ **Go to paragraph 13.**

- Join the team of experts who can help the police.

➡➡➡ ➔ **Go to paragraph 4.**

7

Oops, maybe you need clarification! Your textbook on the Assyrians does not list this information, so this is not the correct page! Unlike the Sumerians, Egyptians and Phoenicians, the Assyrians did not bequeath great technological inventions or earth-shattering monuments to the ages, but their historical role was just as important.

The Assyrians' most essential innovations concerned the art of warfare: rams, assault towers; and iron weapons and armour. In any case, the Assyrian Empire is remembered for being the first genuinely universal empire: at the time of its most significant expansion, it encompassed all the most important peoples, like the Egyptians, Babylonians, Hebrews, Phoenicians and Arameans!

After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the journal.

 **Go to paragraph 22.**

8

Correct! Certainly, this is the right information, so this is the first authentic page of Layard's journal!

Assyrians and Babylonians are two peoples who are consistently named together. Why is that? First, because they inhabited the same region, Mesopotamia (the northern and southern parts, respectively). They spoke two very similar languages and wrote with the same cuneiform characters. Moreover, they shared a kindred culture and belief in some common deities.

Good job; you can continue by analysing the second page!

 **Go to paragraph 16.**

9

Begin your work

The director provided you with the materials in the crate sent to the Museum.

One thing was immediately apparent to you: on each page of the diary, in which the archaeologist wrote down his findings about Assyrians, two versions at first glance look the same! But indeed, only one of them is real! The forger did a very thorough job!

Your task will be to analyse the diary pages and determine which ones are authentic and which are not!

Because the forgers' goal was to make the Museum look bad, one of the two copies must not be correct. Spotting the errors will enable you to figure out which are the real and fake pages! Indeed, Layard could not have written something wrong about the Assyrians, as he was the one who reconstructed their existence through his excavations!

Are you ready? Analyse the two copies of the first page of Layard's journal.



Go to paragraph 5.

10

Right! The Assyrians were a warrior people greatly feared by neighbouring peoples.

When they conquered a new city, they would destroy and plunder it, stealing all its wealth. The populations of the conquered cities were enslaved.

You managed to find the right page! Continue as follows.

You can now go to the next page.



Go to paragraph 26.

11

The sixth page of the diary: The King Assurbanipal

An unexpected noise from the window behind you makes you jump in your chair! You get up to look out, and what you see shocks you: a huge crowd is flocking to the entrance of the Museum! In the front row there are photographers and camera operators just waiting to film and capture the pages of Layard's journal! You cannot afford to fail! The clock is ticking... Hurry up and get back to work! The next page is about King Assurbanipal: "The Assyrian empire reached its greatest expansion with Ashurbanipal (668 BCE - 631 BCE). Ashurbanipal went down in History as a conqueror and, more importantly, as..."

You notice at this point that the two pages are different! Which one reports the correct information and is, therefore, the authentic one?

- Learned and wise king.  **Go to paragraph 23.**
- Demigod, so much so that a famous Epic recounts his mythical exploits.  **Go to paragraph 29.**

12

You may not remember exactly – check your textbook on the Assyrians and find the correct information.

The economy of the Assyrians was based mainly on agriculture. During wars, the countryside became depopulated because farmers became soldiers, so deported prisoners were used to cultivate the land.

In addition, the very large empire constantly needed new buildings, roads, and bridges. The prisoners served as workers for those constructions.

After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the diary.

 **Go to paragraph 3.**

14

Oops, you must be confused! Perhaps, it's better to review this topic... Since this information is wrong, this page was written by the forger, who got distracted and wrote something inaccurate!

In fact, in your e-handbook, you also read an interesting paragraph: Assyrians and Babylonians are two peoples who are consistently named together. Why is that? First, because they inhabited the same region, Mesopotamia (the northern and southern parts, respectively). They spoke two very similar languages and wrote with the same cuneiform characters. Moreover, they shared a kindred culture and belief in some common deities. After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the journal!



Go to paragraph 16.

15

Great! You have discovered the error!

Unlike the Sumerians, Egyptians and Phoenicians, the Assyrians did not bequeath great technological inventions or earth-shattering monuments to the ages, but their historical role was just as important.

The Assyrians' most essential innovations concerned the art of warfare: rams, assault towers; and iron weapons and armour. In any case, the Assyrian Empire is remembered for being the first genuinely universal empire: at the time of its most significant expansion, it encompassed all the most important peoples, like Egyptians and the legacy of Babylon, the Hebrews, the Phoenician cities, the proud Arameans of Syria and the peoples of Turkey!

You can go to the next page.



Go to paragraph 22.

16

The second page of the diary: The Assyrian Society

On the second page of his diary, Layard wrote about the Assyrian society based on what he managed to reconstruct:

"The head of the society was the king, who had absolute power. Society was divided into two classes, one consisting of army commanders, nobles, and priests and the other consisting of peasants, shepherds and artisans. Enslaved people were prisoners of war and..."

The two pages differ on this point. Which one is correct?

- They lived in the king's palace to serve him.

 **Go to paragraph 12.**

- They worked the land.

 **Go to paragraph 18.**

17

You check your textbook on the Assyrians. This is not the correct answer: Assur was the god of war!

He is usually represented by a bearded god figure, placed in the middle of a winged disk and in the act of drawing a bow. In the military campaigns of the kings of Assyria, his statue pulled on a chariot accompanied the army everywhere because they believed it protected them. The god's statue was also placed in the middle of conquered cities as a sign of annexation to the Assyrian empire.

After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the diary.

 **Go to paragraph 11.**

18

That's right!

The economy of the Assyrians was mainly based on agriculture. During wars, the countryside became depopulated because farmers turned into soldiers, so deported prisoners were used to cultivate the land. In addition, the empire, which was very extended, constantly needed new buildings, roads and bridges. The prisoners served as workers for those constructions.

You can analyse the next page of the diary.  **Go to paragraph 3.**

19


The seventh page of the diary: The cause of the end of the Assyrian empire

You hear a knock at the door! It is the director of the Museum who is sweating and very pale!

"Damn! We are minutes away from the opening of the Museum, and everyone is expecting the opening of the new halls dedicated to the Assyrians! If we cannot display Layard's diary, we will be a laughingstock!"

You feel like reassuring the director: there is only one page left! But you still need a few minutes.

Quickly, you skim through Layard's reported words. Here, the archaeologist is talking precisely about the end of the Assyrian empire. But which of the two pages reports the correct information?

- The Assyrians allied with the Medes to fight the Babylonians but lost the battle in 612.  **Go to paragraph 24.**
- Assyria, occupied partly by the Babylonians and partly by the Medes, finally fell to Cyrus at the end of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty in 612 B.C.

 **Go to paragraph 27.**

20

That's right! The Assyrians were polytheists, believing in multiple deities with a violent and cruel character. The priests had the task of interpreting the will of the gods.

The most potent god was Assur, vengeful and bloodthirsty, a god of strength and power. He is usually represented by a bearded god figure, placed in the middle of a winged disk and in the act of drawing a bow. In the military campaigns of the kings of Assyria, his statue pulled on a chariot accompanied the army everywhere because they believed it protected them. The god's statue was also placed in the middle of conquered cities as a sign of annexation to the Assyrian empire.


You can now turn the page.  **Go to paragraph 11.**

21

The director looks like a child who has received the most desired gift when you hand him Layard's diary pages, assuring him that these are original and authentic!

He would like to hug you in joy but has to rush to give instructions and place this priceless find in the display cases where the whole world will admire it!

The Museum is saved thanks to your valuable work! This satisfaction is great and repays you for all the sacrifices you made in school and had to study, sometimes hard. Back then, it seemed almost pointless to you to spend afternoons over books, giving up games and walks in the fresh air. But now you understand how important that study was!

Find out what happens the next day.  **Go to paragraph 28.**

22



The fourth page of Layard's journal: The expansion of the Assyrian empire

Layard continues to reveal his findings on the fourth page of his journal. But even in this case, there are two very similar pages, where however there are two different pieces of information.

"In 1200 B.C. the Assyrians began to expand into the Babylonian empire. They were indeed strongly attracted by their riches.

The city of Babylon was conquered in 1146 BCE.

The Assyrian empire was then founded and Nineveh became its new capital. With the Assyrians, for the first time in History, the entire Near East came under one power. In fact,...

- The Assyrians were a people of strong warriors. At the head of the Assyrian army was the king.  **Go to paragraph 10.**
- The Assyrians were a people aimed at peace, above all thanks to the king who worked to safeguard it.  **Go to paragraph 25.**

23

Exactly! Ashurbanipal was a king known for his courage in battle but also for his education; in fact, he was one of the few kings who had been educated as a scribe and thus could read and write. He beautified the capital city of Nineveh by constructing grand buildings and imposing statues so that the city became as famous as Babylon.

He founded a library in his palace in Nineveh, in which more than thirty thousand texts were collected in the form of clay tablets in cuneiform writing.

You can go to the next page.


 **Go to paragraph 19.**

24

You check your textbook on the Assyrians. Maybe you got confused, things didn't go that way... This page contains errors and cannot be the real one!

Assyria, occupied partly by the Babylonians and partly by the Medes, finally fell to Cyrus at the end of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty in 612 B.C. Thus, the Assyrians disappeared forever.

This was the last page of Layard's diary! You managed to finish your work in time for the inauguration! You decide to call the director immediately!

Give Layard's diary to the director.  **Go to paragraph 21.**

25

Fortunately, your handbook on the Assyrians helps you this time, too! You find that this information is incorrect.

The Assyrians were a warrior people whom neighbouring peoples greatly feared.

When they conquered a new city, the Assyrians would destroy it and plunder it, stealing all its wealth. The populations of the conquered cities were enslaved.

After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the journal.

 **Go to paragraph 26.**

26



The fifth page of the diary: The religion of the Assyrians

As you continue reading the diary, you discover that Layard had also understood important information about the religion of the Assyrians.

You notice, however, another difference between the two copies.



"The Assyrians represented their deities with human forms; in honour of the gods, they built ziggurats in the centre of their cities. ..."

- They were a polytheistic people. The most powerful god was Assur, god of War.  **Go to paragraph 20.**
- They were a polytheistic people. The most powerful god was Assur, god of rain, lightning, and storm.  **Go to paragraph 17.**

27

Correct! That's exactly how things went down!

The Assyrians, annihilated by the Medes and Babylonians, thus disappeared forever from history.

Good job! This was the last authentic page of Layard's diary! You managed to finish your work in time for the inauguration! You decide to call the director immediately!

Give Layard's diary to the director.

 **Go to paragraph 21.**

28

The next day, the news of the exhibition opening is all over the newspapers. Visitors were fascinated by Layard's diary, described by many as 'a truly amazing find'.

You read that the director publicly thanked the invaluable team of experts who made the event possible, which had been jeopardised by mysterious criminals' intent on damaging history.

You smile reading his thanks: it was a fascinating job!

The end



Check your textbook on the Assyrians. This is not the correct information!

These words must refer to Gilgamesh, a mythical king of the Sumerians!

Instead, Ashurbanipal was a king known for his courage in battle and his education; in fact, he was one of the few kings who had been educated as a scribe and thus could read and write. He beautified the capital city of Nineveh by constructing grand buildings and imposing statues so that the city became as famous as Babylon.

He founded a library in his palace in Nineveh in which more than thirty thousand texts were collected in the form of clay tablets in cuneiform writing.

After this little review, you can analyse the next page of the journal.

 **Go to paragraph 19.**





Designed by 6 European organisations, the project intends to create efficient, engaging pedagogical materials and tools for teachers in order to implement an innovative gamified Homework methodology with pupils. In doing so, we wish to contribute to boosting their efficiency and engagement rate in remote work and, more specifically, in Homework.

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