

Who's Who In Archaeology?
Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson:
1810–1895

Milton C. Fisher

Sir H. C. Rawlinson seated at his desk with the Behistun Rock behind him.

Imagine yourself standing on the top rung of a ladder balanced on an 18 inch wide shelf 300 feet up a sheer cliff. Then, imagine steadying yourself with your left elbow and holding a notebook in your left hand while you *calmly* make notes character by character with your right hand! All this after having lowered your ladder, all your equipment and yourself down from the rocky crags above with a rope. Now you have some idea what Sir Henry Rawlinson did to make the translation of Akkadian (Old Babylonian) cuneiform possible!

Here is how he modestly (or with typical English reserve?) put it in the introduction to his memoir, "I will not speak of the difficulties or dangers of the enterprise. They are such as any person with ordinary nerves may successfully encounter; but they are such, at the same time, as have alone prevented the inscriptions from being long ago presented to the public by some of the numerous travellers who have wistfully contemplated them at a distance."¹

The degree of Rawlinson's understatement can only be appreciated when one is aware of the physical features of the Behistun Rock. The massive inscription, a combination of sculpted bas-relief figures and incised cuneiform characters, covers a 25 by 50 foot surface more than 300 feet above the base of the cliff. The location is in the foothills of the Zagros Range, the mountains of which rise to a height of 4000 feet. Rawlinson was, in 1835, the first modern person known to touch, examine closely, and make pencil copies of the script.

Today we expect quick, even immediate results in problem solving.

Our computer age contrasts with "the old-fashioned way."

If J.F. Champollion's work with Egyptian inscriptions seemed slow (mentioned in the previous issue of A&BR) - decipherment of Akkadian cuneiform from Mesopotamia was much worse. Champollion had put in eight years of intensive effort, with the 1822 publication of his results coming two full decades after access to the Rosetta Stone — key to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

In 1802, German scholar Georg Friedrich Grotefend had published the first heroic attempts at identifying forms and meanings of Old Persian cuneiform. He had worked with copies of an inscription from Persepolis made by a Danish explorer in 1766. Then, 44 years later, after eleven years of sp...

You must have a subscription and be logged in to read the entire article.

[Click here to subscribe](#)

visitor : : uid: ()