An empire thrived in the 7th century B.C. in the Middle East; Assyria, growing through conquest and annexation. At its centre was a highly developed literary and visual culture, with monuments, works of art and historical documents of the highest significance. It soon fell victim to destruction by previously oppressed states and sank into the sand of the desert. Excavations 2400 years later brought back to light the splendid ancient remains, some of the objects being taken to great museums in Europe.

The rediscovery and exploration of the Assyrian empire triggered the deciphering of cuneiform and thus the discovery of a glorious past. In the 20th century, systematic excavations led to the reconstruction of cities, temples, palaces, houses and markets, and to the establishment of the National Museum in Baghdad, presenting the finds as part of the national heritage of the then newly-founded Kingdom of Iraq.

In the wake of prolonged conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s, driven by far-reaching power confrontations and the struggle for raw materials, some of the most important historical sites, but also museums and objects, were destroyed by the short-lived radical regime of Daesh. Today, in collaboration with the great museums and research institutes of the world, and with the financial support of foundations and governments of numerous countries, Iraq is working on the rescue of its damaged sites and collections, and the preservation of cultural heritage to overcome the trauma. The lecture will survey the fascinating history of this effort.
The Nineveh Gallery, The British Museum, in 1853

Etching and engraving from *Illustrated London News*. Courtesy: The British Museum