



STONES OF ASSYRIA

ANCIENT SPIRITS FROM THE
PALACE OF ASHURNASIRPAL II

March 17, 2001 – December 2002



(front cover) *Winged Guardian Spirit*, ca. 880 b.c., gypsum
Williams College Museum of Art, gift of Sir Austen Henry Layard through Dwight W. Marsh,
Class of 1842.

(above) *Guardian Spirit*, ca. 880 b.c., gypsum
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ON FRIDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 19, 1851, six boxes that had weathered travel over both desert and sea arrived on the campus of Williams College.¹ Two ninth century B.C. Assyrian reliefs, roughly cut into thirds, were carefully wrapped and nestled in simple wooden shipping crates. The reliefs had been removed from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at present-day Nimrud, Iraq, ancient Kalhu.² (see fig. 3) The bustling packing activities had all taken place under the watchful eye of Dwight Whitney Marsh, a young, passionate missionary stationed in Mesopotamia, who had arranged the acquisition and transportation of these antiquities on behalf of his alma mater. Although the shipping material was crude, the contents within were priceless. Over 150 years later, the reliefs number among the most prized possessions of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA), but for altogether different reasons. The fascinating story of the first Assyrian reliefs to come to the United States is also the story of the ever-changing meaning Assyrian antiquities have had for Americans from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. But perhaps the stones' greatest value lies in their ability to give a contemporary audience a glimpse of a once mighty, ancient culture.



In ninth century B.C. Kalhu, these carved slabs of gypsum were but two of many hundreds that lined the walls of the Northwest Palace built by order of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–59 B.C.). The palace, situated within the town walls of Kalhu, served as the seat of the Assyrian empire for a little more than a century. Like other rulers before him, Ashurnasirpal II aspired to create a grand city in his honor and according to his specifications. Prior to the king's building campaign, Kalhu had been a small, sleepy settlement situated between two of the larger cities of the empire—Nineveh and Ashur, two sites that would also yield vast archaeological treasures. When completed, the town encompassed 890 acres, including several temples, as well as the Northwest Palace, which served as Ashurnasirpal II's personal home and administrative headquarters.³ According to an inscription, the palace was inaugurated in 860 B.C. with festivities lasting ten days and drawing 69,574 guests from the far reaches of the empire.⁴

The cause for celebration was not only the elaborate palace, of which WCMA's two reliefs formed a part of the decoration, but also the state of the empire. By 860 B.C., the Assyrians had achieved their goals of reacquiring the heartland lost by earlier rulers and extending the boundaries of their territory.⁵ At its height, the Assyrian empire would encompass present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and parts of Egypt, Turkey, and Iran.⁶ Annual war campaigns resulted in large numbers of captured slaves who could be used to construct massive buildings, and exotic goods from conquered lands made the interiors of these structures richly appointed. All in all, by the time the palace was built, the Assyrian empire was enjoying a position of power that few had ever seen before, and this status was reflected in the grandeur of Ashurnasirpal's palace.

Massive, fantastic, carved creatures flanked doorways, and enormous reliefs decorated the walls of the palace. Besides being beautifully and delicately carved, the reliefs were also brightly painted; traces of pigment are still evident on the feet of both of the carved figures. A cuneiform text, more commonly known as the Standard Inscription, describes, as if in the king's words, the original appearance of the palace.

This text, written across the middle of every relief in the palace, lists the king's lineage, describes his personality as a heroic warrior, chronicles his military might, and finally tells of the building of Kalhu and the Northwest Palace. Ashurnasirpal II states:

I built thereon (a palace with) halls of cedar, cypress, juniper, boxwood, teak, terebinth, and tamarisk (?) as my royal dwelling and for the enduring leisure life of my lordship. Beasts of the mountains and the seas, which I had fashioned out of white limestone and alabaster, I had set up in its gates. I made it (the palace) fittingly imposing. I bordered them all around with bronze studs. I mounted doors of cedar, cypress, juniper and terebinth in its gates. Silver, gold, tin, bronze, iron, my own booty from the lands over which I ruled, as much as possible, I brought (to the palace); I placed it all therein.⁷

Like any state seat, the Northwest Palace served as both administrative headquarters and visual propaganda aimed at foreign emissaries, subjugated peoples, and the native population. Reliefs such as those in WCMA's collection, together with others found in the palace, played a small but no less important role in a complex decorative program encompassing the entire building. The opulent palace was laid out in a relatively simple plan (see fig. 2) creating both public and private spaces, many of which were decorated with reliefs testifying to the strength of the military, the might and piety of the king, and the empire's prosperity under his reign. The iconography of the palace sculptures also included images meant to ensure the protection of the king and empire. These ideas were made manifest by means of the standard cuneiform text and through the depiction of religious and supernatural creatures and rituals placed throughout the palace.

WCMA's relief, *Winged Guardian Spirit*, (see front cover of this brochure) was originally situated in Room F (see figs. 1 and 2), located behind the throne room in the north wing, the administrative center of the palace.⁸ Reliefs here included religious iconography and images of subjugated peoples paying tribute to the king.⁹ The west wing, from which the museum's other relief, *Guardian Spirit*, (see inside front cover of this brochure) came was poorly preserved when excavated, having been scavenged for building stone even in ancient times, but seems to have been filled with similar religious images as well as depictions of military battles.¹⁰ Although the exact purposes of the rooms in the west wing are not known, one seems to have been a second throne room.¹¹

Both of the figures on the reliefs in WCMA's collection are variants of the *apkallu*, a protective deity. Evidence for this identification comes from ancient Assyrian texts that include information on figurines, buried beneath the floors of homes, that were apotropaic, or used to ward off evil.¹² Such figurines resemble several of the creatures and human-like figures found on reliefs throughout the palace.

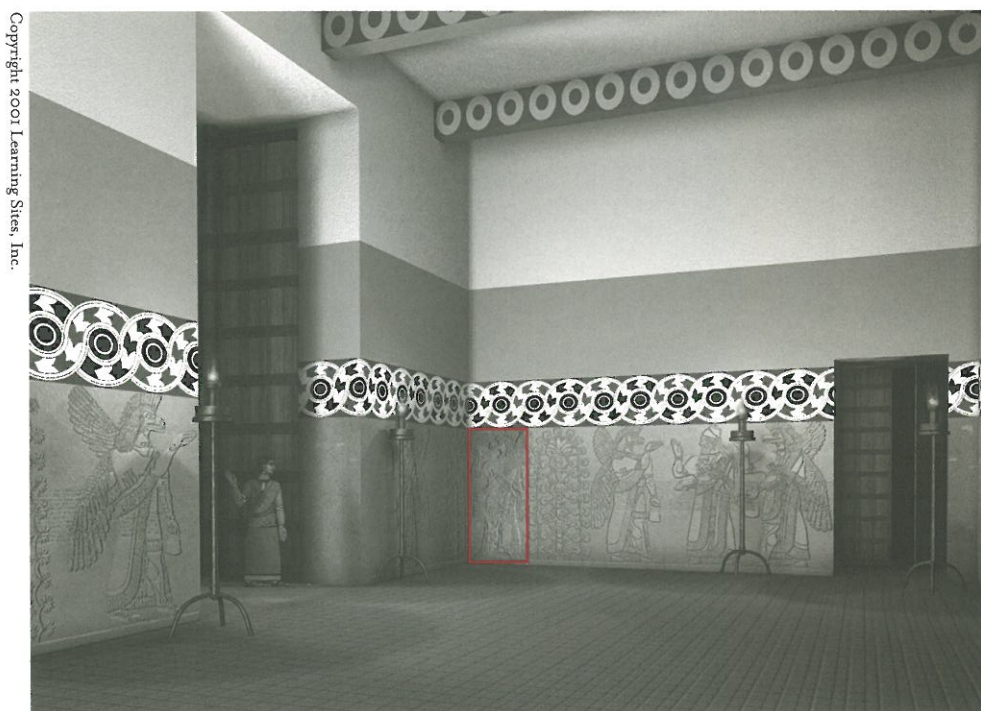


fig. 1 A rendering from the virtual reality model of Room F in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. The location of WCMA's relief is indicated by the red box.

In addition to repelling evil, both *apkallus* participate in what many believe was a purification ritual involving a stylized tree, representing the date palm tree, images of which were adjacent to these figures.¹³ Each *apkallu* holds in its right hand a fir cone, or "purifier," as described in Assyrian texts, and a bucket filled with either water or pollen in the left.¹⁴ The tree's symbolic meaning is still unknown, but many speculate that it represents the prosperity and strength of the empire. The figures, therefore, not only purify the tree but protect it and, by extension, the empire at large. Protect the empire they did, but only for a limited time.

Although the Assyrian empire once ruled vast territories, internal fighting, a succession of incompetent kings, and enemy attacks reduced it to mere ruins by 610 B.C. Assyrian cities such as Kalhu were abandoned and eventually disappeared, obscured by overgrowth. While the reliefs were indispensable to Ashurnasirpal II for protection and religious purposes, they would prove equally useful in the battle to save blaspheming souls in the United States over two thousand years later, or so one man thought when he saw them piled like debris near the 1850 excavation site of Nimrud.



Dwight Whitney Marsh was a man possessed with a passion for the Almighty Lord. In 1850, as a newly stationed missionary in Mesopotamia, Marsh devoted himself to the salvation of what he considered to be heathen souls and the continued preservation of those who had "seen the light." While in Mosul, in present-day Iraq, Marsh met and struck up a friendship with the British adventurer and amateur archaeologist Austen Henry Layard, then busy excavating Nimrud, ancient Kalhu. As Marsh recounts in his letters, "He [Layard] was very polite to me—calling upon me inviting me to dine with him in the city or at other times in his tents on the mound of Kuyunjik or at Nimrud 20 miles below."¹⁵ Perhaps it was at one of these repasts that Marsh first spotted dozens of discarded reliefs from the palace and subsequently made a request of his friend. "I suggested to him one day that Americans read his work with great interest and that any of our colleges would highly appreciate some specimens of the slabs of old Nineveh."¹⁶ As a passionate, religious man, Marsh undoubtedly saw the possibility that such antiquities could play an important part in the growing rift between American religious conservatives, liberals, and skeptics.

For many individuals the discoveries at Nimrud could not have come at a better time. Nineteenth-century America was in the midst of a religious crisis stemming from an increasingly liberal public that was gradually ceasing to use religion and the Bible as means of regulating their lives. Even religious institutions were questioning strict adherence to doctrine. Furthermore, advances in biology and chemistry added to the skepticism that academics were beginning to level at sacred biblical truths. The reliefs' discovery was a godsend, literally. In 1857 Edward Hitchcock, president of Amherst College, stated, "Every new discovery of these lost cities is a new testimony to the truth of Scripture...Blessed be God that he opened this new source of Biblical history just at the period when infidelity supposed that history was proved to be false."¹⁷ To conservative religious leaders, the stones of Assyria added positive proof to the veracity of the Bible: how could the Bible be false if civilizations discussed in its pages were later discovered by esteemed men of science, such as Layard?

Adding to the religious appeal of these relics was the fact that the Assyrian empire was cruelly destroyed by fire, traces of which were evident to Layard.¹⁸ Such destruction matched the biblical description of the Assyrian empire's downfall, prompted by God's displeasure at its idolatrous ways and the destructive, horrific sieges it laid on others. For this reason, the Assyrians' fate could be used as an admonition to those who might feel tempted by earthly pleasures. Many people saw the relics' discovery as the perfect opportunity to tout the historicity of the Bible. Indeed, the Reverend Henry Lobdell, a missionary-physician, stated, "These mounds are perpetual monuments of wicked nations and of the truth of Scriptural prophecies."¹⁹

Besides adding necessary evidence to this ongoing debate, Marsh saw the reliefs as powerful tools that could persuade many a young man to follow the religious path in life and remind all who saw them of the everlastingness of God and the mortality of man.

In a letter of 1855 he recounts his motives:

*My great desire and prayer is that students who look upon the relics of the past may think wisely of time and be led to take a deeper interest in the effort made to rescue the degraded from the beastliness of their present life, and the eternal dangers impending. Would that every active imagination would hear the stones cry out. "Asia has claims upon New England."...May they remember that God is older than the ages—that the glorious future of America is not eternity.*²⁰

His hope to inspire other students to become missionaries is understandable when one considers the large role Williams College played in the missionary movement in America.

Williams College must have seemed more than fitting as a home for these reliefs as it was undoubtedly the setting of Marsh's own religious transformation. As a graduate of the class of 1842, Marsh was affected by the zealous missionary spirit that pervaded the campus, which had its roots in the legendary Haystack Incident of 1806. During a summer thunderstorm, five members of a religious group prayed while taking refuge under a haystack. Their overwhelming sensation was of, "the burden of a world perishing in sin... One of them said that he believed the time had come for them to go to the heathen with the word of life."²¹ From this informal but heartfelt meeting sprang the American Christian missionary movement under the sponsorship of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which eventually placed missionaries throughout Asia.²²

With Marsh's request and Layard's assent, two Assyrian reliefs were reduced in size first by having three-quarters of their thickness sawed off²³ and secondly by being cut horizontally into thirds. Packed into six crates, each weighing three hundred pounds, they were lashed onto camels that traveled more than four hundred miles of desert to Beirut, where they were shipped to America.²⁴ While Layard's adventures had been recounted prior to 1850, the fascination with Assyria intensified between 1850 and 1855 with the publication of several more of Layard's books and numerous articles on the excavation of Nimrud and Assyrian culture in general. This publicity, coupled with the reliefs' religious implications, prompted the Williams College administration to acquire another relief from Marsh in 1855.²⁵ Although Layard had already left Nimrud to pursue a political career in Britain, Marsh was granted permission by Layard's successor to secure another stone. Having three Assyrian reliefs, however, was enough for Williams, and Marsh could not persuade the college to accept more of the antiquities. As he remembers in 1874, "I could easily have sent more and other Oriental curiosities to Williams, but the tone of letters from Williams had none of the interest and appreciation felt at Amherst and I was constrained to feel that they had enough."²⁶ This seeming disinterest foreshadowed the fate of the reliefs at Williams at the beginning of the twentieth century.



As prized possessions as these pieces were in the mid-nineteenth century, by the early 1900s they were regarded as little more than cumbersome relics. In 1908 the stones were relegated to an unknown storage facility, out of public sight when their home, the Lyceum of Natural History in Jackson Hall, was torn down. In fact, they remained out of public view until 1926, when Lawrence Hall became the art museum of the college. All three reliefs remained in the museum until 1941 when one was sold.

For Karl Weston, then director of the museum, the decision to sell the sculpture must have been an easy one. Not only was Assyrian art rarely taught, its aesthetic merit was questioned by some art historians. Between 1926, when the museum opened, and 1941, when the third relief was sold, the art of Mesopotamia, in which Assyria would have been included, is mentioned in only six course descriptions.²⁷ That Assyrian art was rarely studied at Williams is not surprising considering that it did not fall within the standard art history curriculum of colleges across the country, which, more often than not, focused on the Western art tradition. Furthermore, some scholars and museums even went so far as to place Assyrian artistic achievement in a subcategory, valuing it

only as a precursor to the supposed pinnacle of artistic achievement—ancient classical Greek works of art. In this, now outdated, theoretical framework, Assyrian objects were viewed merely as a developmental stage toward a more civilized and sophisticated art form such as that of classical Greece. It was this last premise that made Williams' relief so appealing to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and informed its decision to buy the work of art.²⁸

In a sale negotiated by the dealer Joseph Brummer, the relief was sold to the Minneapolis museum in exchange for works of art from Brummer's gallery and \$2,085 in cash. With this money, Weston acquired other objects²⁹ making the total of money exchanged, plus the value of the objects at the time, \$8,122.50,³⁰ about \$81,888.06 today adjusted for inflation. This is a small amount when one considers recent sales of similar Assyrian antiquities that garnered exorbitant sums. Newspapers reported the sale and Weston's justification of it, stating that the recently acquired works better served the school and community at large since they were smaller and could be "studied and handled for practical teaching purposes."³¹ Furthermore, by ridding itself of "duplicate material,"³² the college filled gaps in its art historical record, acquiring objects from other cultures and periods not represented. Following the sale of the third relief, an attempt was made to sell yet another one in 1959. For unknown reasons, however, the trustees turned down the request. It was during this postwar period that attitudes toward Assyrian art began to change, when its inherent value and beauty were recognized. For this reason, Assyrian art was propelled into the realm of "fine" art and now enjoys a place of esteem in museums throughout the world as well as in the curricula of art history survey classes everywhere.



Today the Assyrian reliefs are proudly displayed in the museum for all to see and are used by introductory and ancient art history classes. It is a fine ending to the story of Assyrian stones that arrived in rough crates carrying tales of an ancient empire and the hopes of a lone missionary. So, like ghosts from the past, the spirits of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II still haunt us today, whispering secrets of a forgotten land, nineteenth-century America, and the ever-changing attitudes toward Assyrian art.

—ELYSE GONZALES,
co-curator, *The Stones of Assyria*, special projects assistant

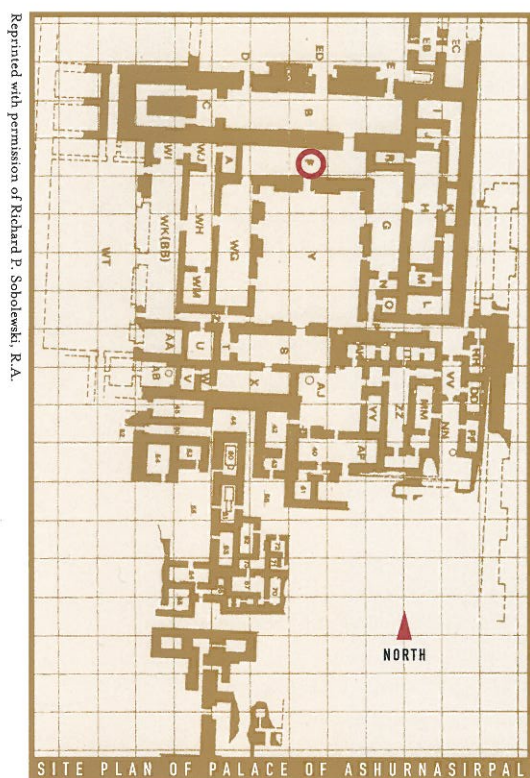


fig. 2

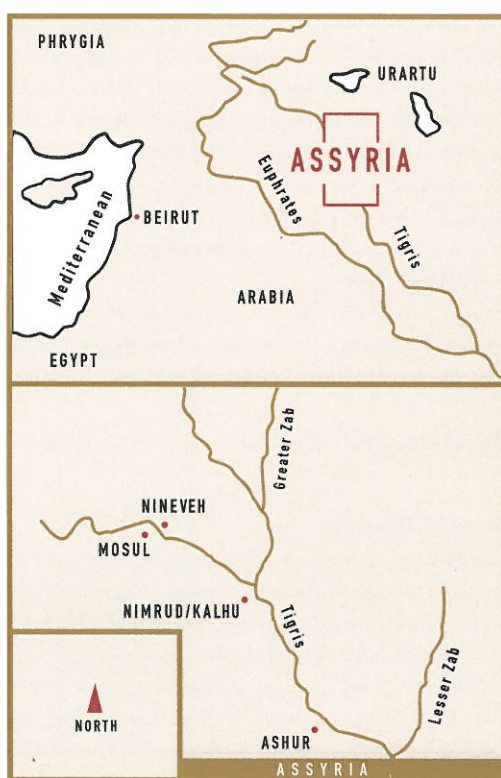


fig. 3

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "Arrival Extraordinary at Williams College," *North Adams Transcript*, December 25, 1851.
- 2 Kalhu is referred to in the Bible as Calah in the book of Genesis.
- 3 Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 34 and Prof. Samuel M. Paley, Department of Classics, The University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Elyse Gonzales, Special Projects Assistant, WCMA, February 3, 2001, e-mail correspondence.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 5 J. E. Curtis and J. E. Reade, *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 24.
- 6 After John Malcolm Russell, *From Nineveh to New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 18 and Prof. Samuel M. Paley, Department of Classics, The University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Elyse Gonzales, Special Projects Assistant, WCMA, February 3, 2001, e-mail correspondence.
- 7 Samuel Paley, *King of the World Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria 883–859 B.C.* (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1976), 132–33.
- 8 J. Meuszynski, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen und Ihrer Anordnung im Nordwestpalast von Kalhu (Nimrud)* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1981), 36–7.
- 9 Russell, 23.
- 10 Prof. Samuel M. Paley, Department of Classics, The University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Elyse Gonzales, Special Projects Assistant, WCMA, February 3, 2001, e-mail correspondence.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Barbara Parker Mallowan, "Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs," in Prudence O. Harper and Holly Pittman, *Essays in Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983), 33–39.
- 13 Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1992), 46.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 46, and Mallowan, 33.
- 15 D. W. Marsh, N. H. Griffin, September 1, 1874, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 16 *Ibid.* Near the beginning of his excavations, Layard referred to all Assyrian discoveries as coming from "Nineveh," believing it was an ancient culture encompassing cities such as Nineveh, Khorsabad and the more recently discovered Nimrud. Russell, 15.
- 17 Hitchcock, as quoted in John B. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, Archiv für Orientforschung Beih. XV (Graz: Ernst F. Weidner, 1961), 3. By this time several other small colleges had acquired Assyrian reliefs such as, Amherst College, Bowdoin College, Dartmouth College, and Union College (whose were later sold to Yale University). Like Williams, these small colleges were religious and interested in the relics' connections to the Bible and religion.
- 18 Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, vol. 1 (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), 55–57.
- 19 Lobdell as quoted in Stearns, 3.
- 20 D. W. Marsh, Mark Hopkins, August 7, 1855, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 21 Calvin Durfee, *Biographical Annals of Williams* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd; New York, Lee, Shepherd & Dillingham, 1871), 117.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 23 D. W. Marsh, N. H. Griffin, September 1, 1874, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 24 D. W. Marsh, A. L. Perry, November 29, 1882, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 25 D. W. Marsh, Mark Hopkins, August 7, 1855, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 26 D. W. Marsh, N. H. Griffin, September 1, 1874, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 27 See course catalogs from 1931–32 to 1936–37. Weston's notes from a lecture on Assyrian art in November 1931 are located in the Williams College Archives and Special Collections.
- 28 "An Assyrian Relief from Nimrud," *The Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, 30, no. 28 (November 1, 1941), 138–142: "In the history of artistic achievement it stands as one of the most vigorous of the arts that contributed to the Greek tradition which was to become, in turn, our own." (142) And, "This relief represents an important addition to the permanent collection, since Assyria...played a major part in the shaping of the Greek tradition" (138).
- 29 Some of the works of art acquired included a Roman mosaic, Egyptian bronzes, an Aztec mask, an Oskar Kokoschka watercolor, a Winslow Homer watercolor, and old master prints. Rachel Tassone, Registrarial Assistant, Vivian Patterson, Associate Curator, August 8, 1997, memorandum, object file, Williams College Museum of Art.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 "Williams College Recent Accessions," *Springfield Union Republican*, October 12, 1942.
- 32 *Ibid.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Photos by Michael Agee.

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