The basic decipherment of Akkadian cuneiform script and language by Edward Hincks between 1846 and 1852 paved the way for scholars to start publishing the cuneiform inscriptions and, more importantly from the public’s point of view, to prepare translations of them. Hincks, Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, Jules Oppert and Henry Fox Talbot were leaders in this new research (Cathcart and Donlon 1983; Daniels 1994, 2009; Larsen 1996, 1997; Cathcart 2007–2009, 2011). The early translations are usually ignored but, as will become apparent in this paper, an examination of them is often rewarding and frequently a chastening and humbling experience.

In April 1853 Hincks entered into an agreement with the trustees of the British Museum to prepare transcripts (‘into English character’) and translations of certain cuneiform inscriptions. The trustees requested that he should commence with ‘the Nimroud inscription thence passing to those which treat of Sennacherib’ (Cathcart 2008: 199–200). Hincks immediately sent them a specimen transcript and translation of some lines from the inscription on Bellino’s cylinder, which describe Sennacherib’s second campaign (Cathcart 2008: 200–202). The contract with the trustees was for one year from 1 May 1853 and in May 1854 Hincks sent to Henry Ellis, Principal Librarian at the British Museum, his ‘transcriptions’ and translations which he wrote in two hardcover books.1 The first book, entitled ‘The Inscriptions of Sennacherib’, also included the annals of Shalmaneser III, and the second book contained ‘The Inscriptions of Assur-yuṣura-bal [Ashurnasirpal II]’. In the latter Hincks gives a translation of the annals found in the inscriptions on the large pavement slabs of the temple

1 In the British Library the books are catalogued as one manuscript: MS Add.22097. The first book, received on the 6th May 1854, = ff. 1–27 (Hincks numbered the pages 1–53); the second book, received on the 20th May 1854, = ff. 28–56 (Hincks’s pages 1–58; due to a mistake during the stitching of the pages, pp. 28 and 31 are out of order: f. 41 = pp. 26–27; f. 42 = pp. 29–30; f. 43 = pp. 28, 31).
of Ninurta at Calah, the royal residence built by Ashurnasirpal II. He omits the beginning of the inscription but provides a complete translation from i.43b to the end. It was the first translation of this very important inscription to be made and another would not appear for twenty years.2

The Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III

During the period in which Hincks was preparing the translations for the trustees of the British Museum, he published a translation of the inscription on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (1853b: 420–426). Rawlinson (1850: 430–449) had already published a translation some years earlier, but Hincks soon found deficiencies and flaws in it. In his introduction, Hincks discusses the deities listed in lines 1–14 and the royal name and epithets in lines 15–21 but does not give a translation of these lines. This was probably due to the uncertainty of the readings of the names. However, he translates remarkably well the greater part of the inscription, beginning with the twenty-second line. For the fourteenth year of Shalmaneser’s activity, he gives a translation of the longer account found in the Bull inscription, ‘as it is peculiarly interesting’. He also chooses for translation the fuller account of the eighteenth year in the Bull inscription. In presenting the longer accounts where he deems it useful, he is adopting a procedure followed already by Rawlinson (1850: 430–449) and used in modern times by Oppenheim, for example (ANET 277–281). At the end of his article, Hincks describes the contents of the five epigraphs, which record the tribute of the five kings or peoples, but does not translate the epigraphs. The translation of the Black Obelisk which he sent to the trustees of the British Museum in the following year is a slightly revised version and it gives the short accounts of the fourteenth and eighteenth years found in the obelisk. On this occasion he gives a translation of the five epigraphs. He also provides a translation of the annals on the Bull inscriptions that cover the first fifteen years of Shalmaneser III

2 See, for example, Ménant (1874: 64–92); Rodwell (1874: 37–80). For a modern edition of the text with a translation, see Grayson (1991: 191–223). It is an interesting exercise to compare Hincks’s translation with Grayson’s.