

ASSYRIA'S FIGHTER KINGS

WARRIORS BUILD AN EMPIRE

A proud warrior, Ashurnasirpal II, draws his bow against an enemy town, fighting beside his men. He wears a long, woolen tunic, and his tall, “flowerpot” hat tells us that he is the Assyrian king. To his left, a soldier in a pointed helmet holds the royal shield. An attendant carries the king’s quiver of arrows. Another holds a bannerlike shade to protect the commander-in-chief from the blazing desert sun. This battle scene churns with action as soldiers fight with daggers, swords, torches, and rocks. Some of the Assyrians scale the city wall on ladders while others tunnel under it. Two enemy soldiers fall to certain death, while over their heads, a vulture awaits his feast.

The Assyrians used battering rams to break through the walls of their enemies. After the battle, they would have stormed into the city, taking prisoners and stealing all the

“ SCULPTURES AND INSCRIPTIONS FROM A PALACE IN IRAQ, THE BLACK OBELISK OF SHALMANESER, AN ASSYRIAN KING’S INSCRIPTION, AND THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

“ Relief from Ashurnasirpal II’s palace at Calhu in Iraq, 883 BCE



Chefs prepare a feast, cooking and making wine (top), while priests sacrifice an animal in order to “read” its internal organs (bottom). The priests may be determining the best time to fight.



wealth they could find. Soldiers were allowed to keep some of the loot, but most of it belonged to their king.

The king of the city under attack had probably refused to pay the tribute money that Assyria demanded of its subjects. Ashurnasirpal, a fierce warrior, would have destroyed the city as an example to the whole kingdom and to return the land to Assyria’s control. The Assyrians believed that their victory made the god Ashur happy.

After the fighting and pillaging, the army would have returned, exhausted, to the camp. There, they’d be greeted by the men who traveled with the army but didn’t fight: cooks, the men who groomed the horses, workers who repaired the soldiers’ broken spears and armor, and divination experts who tried to interpret the will of the gods.

The army brought great wealth to the empire. When an Assyrian king conquered a city, he demanded that a “tribute” be paid each year. This payment, often made in silver, guaranteed that Assyria would protect the conquered city against its foreign enemies, but it also served as a sort of insurance policy against further attack from the Assyrians themselves. In an inscription recording the first year of his reign, Ashurnasirpal boasted that he took his enemy’s

In ancient times, the god Ashur had the same name as the empire where he was worshiped. To avoid confusion, we call the god Ashur, the empire Assyria, and its people Assyrians.

silver, his gold, . . . dishes of copper, . . . the women of his palaces, . . . the gods together with their possessions, precious stone from the mountains, his chariot with equipment, his horses, . . . garments of brightly colored wool and garments of linen, . . . his wagons, his cattle, his sheep, his heavy spoil, which like the stars of heaven could not be counted.

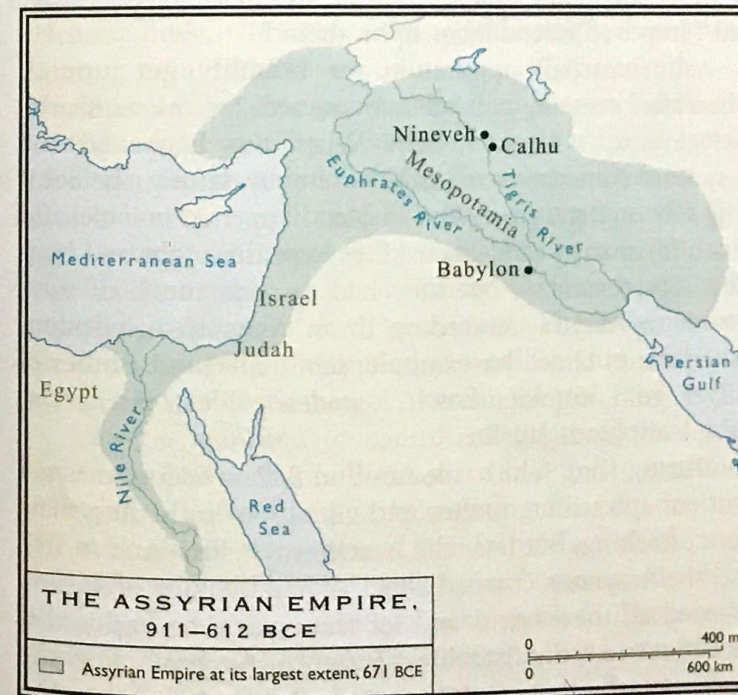
66 Ashurnasirpal II, royal inscription, ninth century BCE

Ashurnasirpal used some of the wealth from his military campaigns to build a fancy palace in his new capital city at Calhu. When the palace was finished, he threw a huge party and invited 69,574 people who feasted for 10 days. Ashurnasirpal wrote in a palace inscription that they ate “1,000 fattened head of cattle, 1,000 calves, 10,000 stable sheep, 15,000 lambs, . . . 500 stags, 500 gazelles, 1,000 ducks . . . 10,000 fish, . . . 10,000 eggs, 10,000 loaves of bread.” Ashurnasirpal’s guests would have left the party full of food, drink, and stories about the rich and powerful Assyrian king.



LATER IN ROME . . .

In the first century CE, the Roman Empire grew even larger than the Assyrian Empire had been. It stretched east-west from Syria to Spain and north-south from Britain to southern Egypt. The Han dynasty, which flourished in China from 206 BCE to 220 CE, also controlled a great empire.



The kingdom of Assyria, located in the rolling hills in northern Mesopotamia, had existed since the second millennium BCE and had captured considerable power by 1300 BCE. And even though Assyria grew weak during the dark age that began around 1200 BCE, it never disappeared as a kingdom. By the 10th century BCE, the Assyrian kings began to dream of recapturing their former greatness. They attacked their neighbors and claimed that they were just taking back land that had once belonged to Assyria.

They believed it was a man's duty, and especially a king's duty, to be strong, brave, and warlike. When Ashurnasirpal II wasn't fighting, he liked to hunt dangerous lions and other wild animals.

During the 9th century, Assyrian kings gradually pushed beyond their old borders. They conquered many foreign peoples in order to take their gold, animals, timber, and other natural resources. Ashurnasirpal actually bragged in his royal inscriptions about his own cruelty: "I slaughtered great numbers of them [the inhabitants]... and carried off their possessions. I burned their cities with fire... and I imposed forced labor upon them."

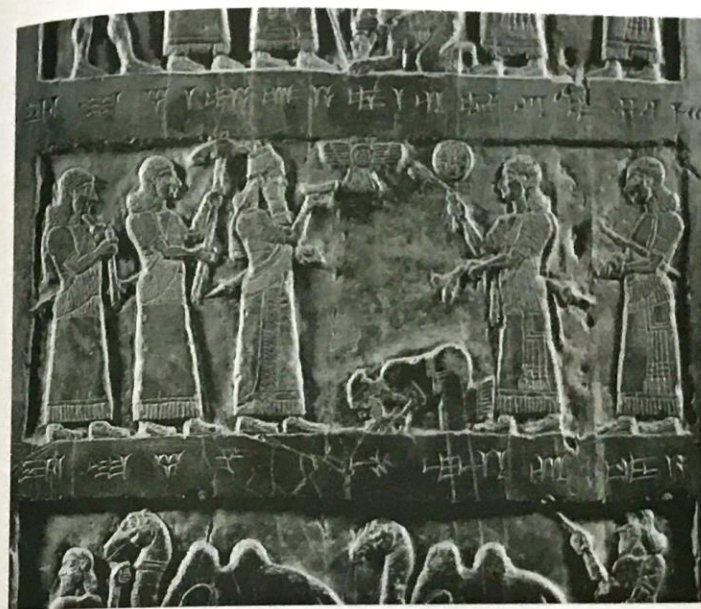
Ashurnasirpal's reputation for brutality got around. Often after one city had been conquered, the others nearby just gave up without a fight. When this happened, the Assyrians sometimes rewarded them by letting the local king stay on his throne. This is what happened in Israel and Judah for many years. Their kings kept their jobs and handled local business, but they had to send much of their wealth to Assyria. According to an Assyrian inscription, King Jehu of Israel, for example, sent expensive tributes of "silver, gold, a golden bowl,... golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, [and] javelins."

During King Jehu's rule (around 842 to 815 BCE) Israel sent enough tribute money and gifts to keep the Assyrians from attacking, but later the Israelites rebelled. And in 722 BCE, the Assyrians crushed Israel. "Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land,... and for three years he besieged it [and] carried the Israelites away to Assyria." For the Assyrians, this was a minor victory. But for Israel, it was a

66 Ashurnasirpal II, royal inscription, 9th century BCE

66 Black obelisk, Iraq, 9th century BCE

66 II Kings, Hebrew Bible



King Jehu of Israel bows down to Shalmaneser III of Assyria, bringing tribute to him. Behind Jehu stand two Assyrians.

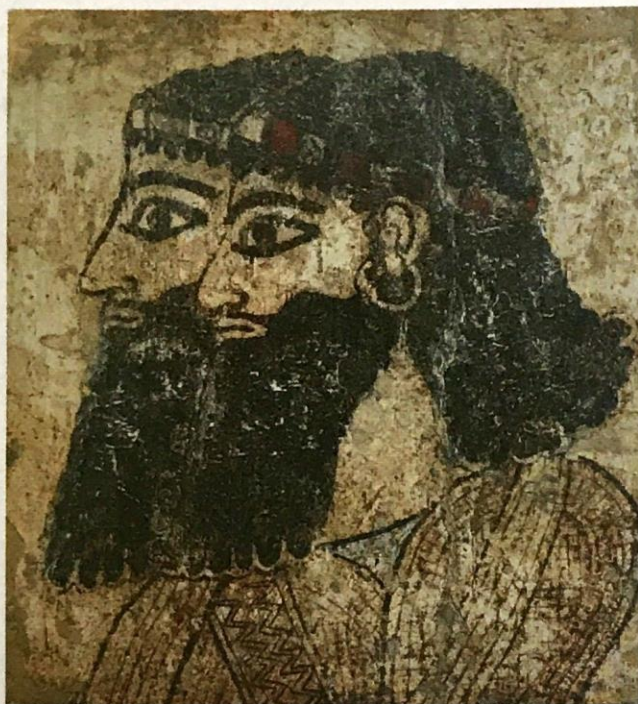
A ROYAL BOOKWORM

One of the last Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal, was quite a different character from the earlier king Ashurnasirpal, even though their names are a lot alike. Ashurbanipal, who ruled from 668 to around 627 BCE, could read and write, and he loved to collect stories, which his scribes copied on cuneiform tablets. These tablet-books were arranged on shelves in Ashurbanipal's palace in Nineveh and included literature—some written long before Ashurbanipal's lifetime—from all over Mesopotamia. This was the world's first library. (To remember which king is which, think of the B that begins the word "book." The library-book king was Ashurbanipal.)

massive defeat. Their king was imprisoned, and countless Israelites were forced into exile. For the authors of the Hebrew Bible, who were from neighboring Judah, it was a turning point in history.

Most of the Israelites managed to stay in Israel. They continued to worship God according to ancient Israelite tradition and became known as Samaritans. Over time, the Israelites who were forced to move lost contact with those who remained in Israel and Judah. They became known as the "10 lost tribes of Israel." Many of them continued to practice Judaism in their new lands. The Israelites who lived in tiny Judah continued to worship God. But Judah, too, lived within the grip of Assyria's control.

Assyria managed to control its huge territory partly because it had such a well-organized system of government. The king didn't rule just by trusting his own instincts. He took advice from experts who formed a type of cabinet of advisers and scribes. And in each major city of the empire, a governor ruled in the king's place. These governors reported to the king. They collected taxes, drafted soldiers for the army, and kept the roads safe for merchants



Two Assyrian officials attend their king. Like most men at that time, they had pierced ears and wore large hoop earrings.

and other travelers. The governors wrote to the king to keep him up-to-date about what was happening in their regions. The Assyrian kings kept the letters from their governors, as well as those from other advisers and family members. Archaeologists eventually found these letters at the palaces of the Assyrian kings.

During King Sennacherib's rule from 704 to 681 BCE, the Assyrian

Empire was not only the biggest in the world, it was the biggest that had ever existed. Sennacherib's power stretched over a huge empire—about the size of modern Europe. But he was a brutal, cowardly man. He bragged in his inscriptions that he had savagely destroyed the beautiful city of Babylon. "I attacked it and, like a storm, I overthrew it . . . Its inhabitants, young and old, I did not spare. I filled the streets of the city with their corpses." This cruel king suffered a violent death himself—stabbed by one of his own sons.

King Sennacherib was not typical of Assyrian kings. Their methods worked so well that later rulers of other empires used many of Assyria's techniques: dividing the empire into provinces ruled by governors, stationing troops all over the empire, and controlling rebellions through swift military action. Even though the Assyrian Empire collapsed in the late seventh century, the spirit of its kings lived on in the rulers of the Roman Empire, who imitated their methods six centuries later.

“ Sennacherib, royal inscription, 7th century BCE