

## Section 8: The Neo-Assyrians

### The Assyrian Infantry



The Assyrians of the first millennium BCE are called the Neo-Assyrians to distinguish them from their second-millennium forbears, the Old Assyrians who ran trading colonies in Asia Minor and the Middle Assyrians who lived during the collapse of civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. There is little evidence to suggest that any significant change of population took place in Assyria during these dark centuries. To the contrary, all historical and linguistic data point to the continuity of the Assyrian royal line and population. That is, as far as we can tell, the Neo-Assyrians were the descendants of the same folk who lived in northeast Mesopotamia in Sargon's day, only now they were newer and scarier. They will create the largest empire and most effective army yet seen in this part of the world, their military might and aggression unmatched until the rise of the Romans. Indeed, the number of similarities between Rome and Assyria — their dependence on infantry, their ferocity in a siege, their system of dating years by the name of officials, their use of brutality to instill terror — suggests there was some sort of indirect connection between these nations, but by what avenue is impossible to say. All the same, if Rome is the father of the modern world, Assyria is its grandfather, something we should acknowledge but probably not boast about.



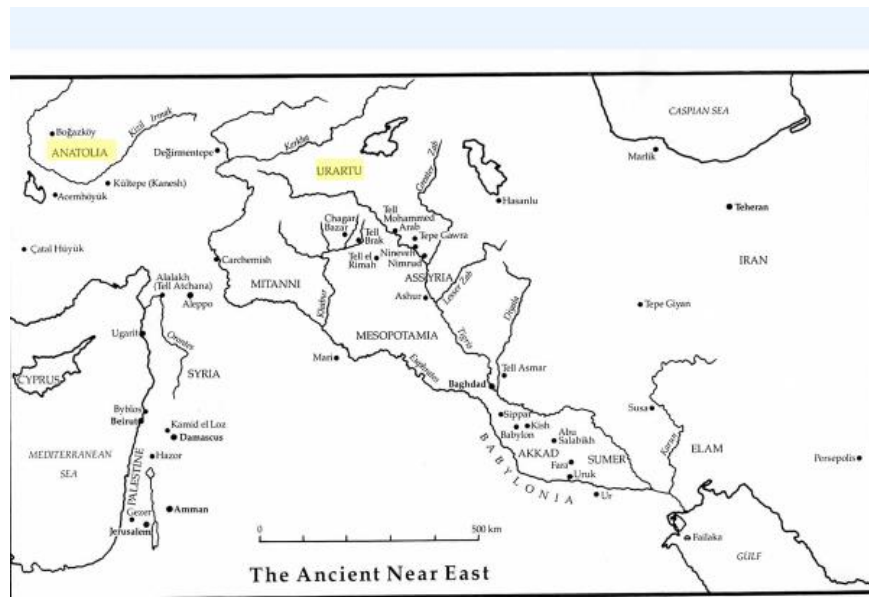
M5-33a

Assyrian Relief:  
 an Aramaean archer (left)  
 and a Palestinian spearman (right)



M8-02

That tough spirit undoubtedly kept the Assyrians united and strong through the worst of the turmoil that roiled the Near East at the end of the second millennium BCE (1077-900 BCE). This must be, at least in part, why they were the first Mesopotamian state to emerge from that dark age once the migrations and disruptions settled down. As always, the records from such a period are obscure to us. Impoverished people like the Sutu and the Aramaeans, who were beset with the sorts of difficulties that usually accompany economic collapse and foreign invasion, rarely keep careful accounts of their business for us to read later. Indeed, many of the migrations that took place during this age look very different from the so-called invasion of Egypt by the Hyksos. Archaeology confirms that in several places there was in fact widespread violence and destruction. Whole populations were uprooted, some extinguished.



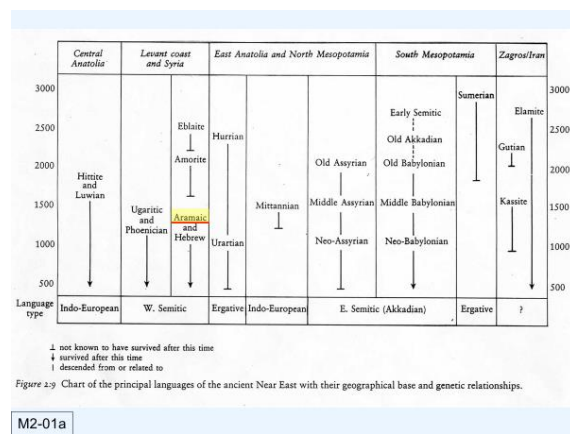
M4-10a

The Phrygians, for instance, moved into parts of Anatolia that the Hittites had once controlled. The Urartians took over regions near Lake Van and Lake Urmia north of Mesopotamia.

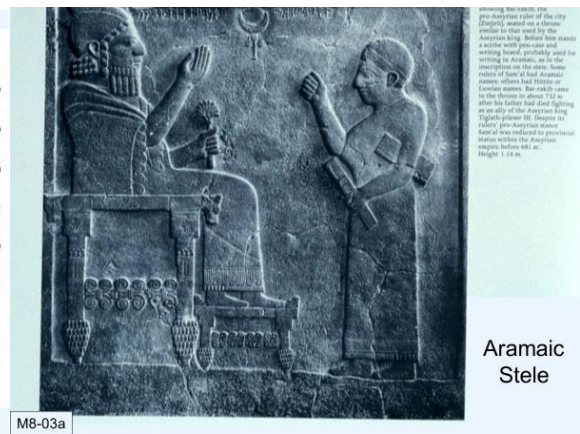
Relief: Aramaean chariot



Other migrations appear to have been more peaceable. The Aramaeans, in particular, infiltrated Amorite lands and slowly became the dominant culture.

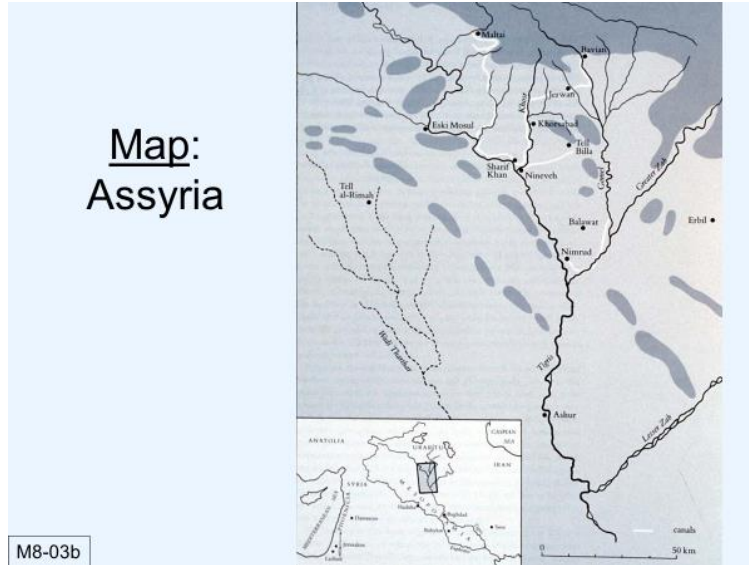


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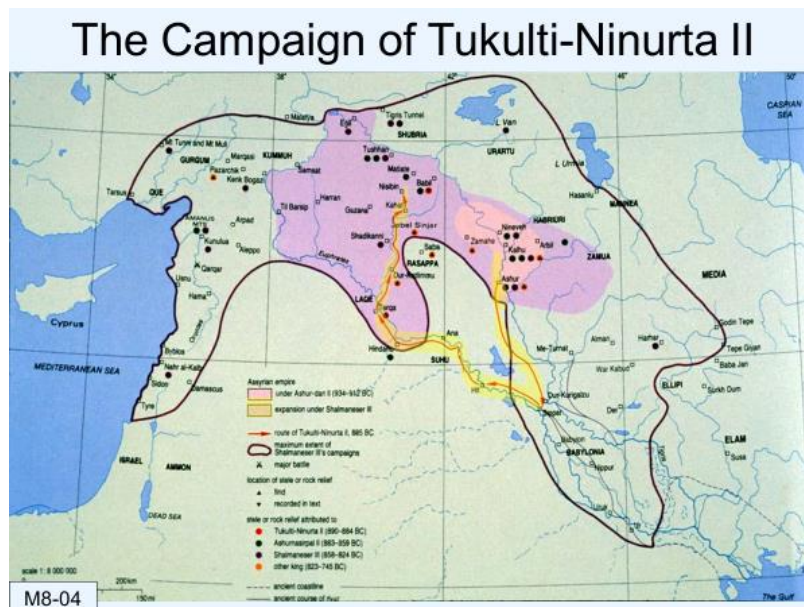


Aramaic Stele

As we noted before, the Aramaeans' language which belongs to the same Semitic family as Amorite and Hebrew would eventually prevail over all other tongues in the region, enduring as a living tongue into the time of Rome. There are records that an Assyrian king who lived toward the end of this dark age, Adad-Nirari II (ca. 911-891 BCE), drove these encroaching Aramaeans from traditional Assyrian territory, but that's virtually all we know about him. No monuments, no artwork is connected with his name. We don't even know the city where he lived.

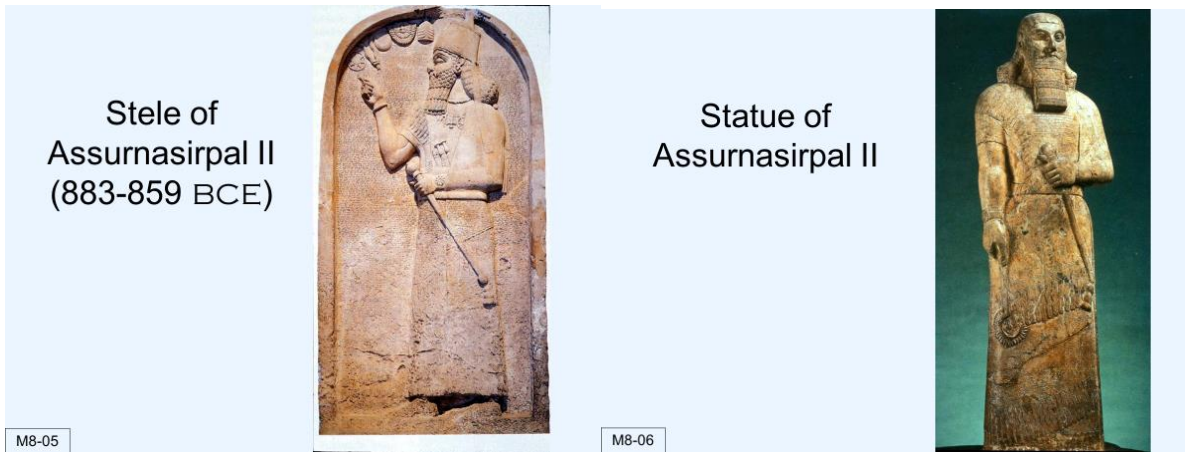


In this time, Assyria had become little more than a kingdom about a hundred miles wide and fifty across. Huddled on the east bank of the Tigris, it was a mere shadow of the empire Shalmaneser I, Tukulti-Ninurta I and Tiglath-Pileser I had ruled two centuries before, but it was a long shadow, a silhouette which remembered its former triumphs and stirred up passion in those still thirsting for conquest. By clinging to control of their main city Ashur, the Neo-Assyrians had managed to maintain a stable dynastic line going all the way back to a king named Ninurta-epal-ekur who reigned around 1192 BCE.

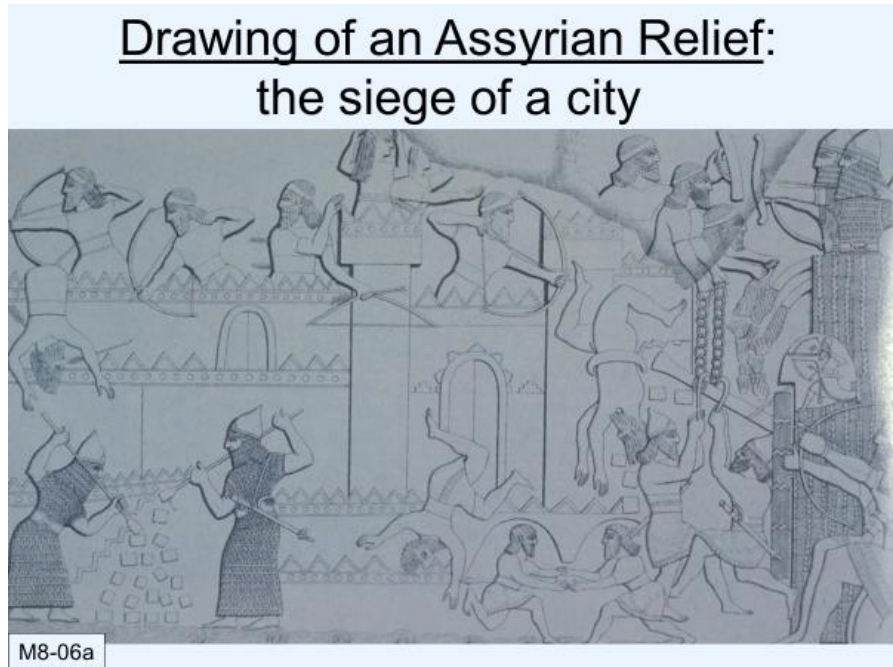


Adad-Nirari II's son and successor was Tukulti-Ninurta II whose reign, though very short, less than ten years, began a trend of expansion which prefigured things to come. He pushed the boundaries of Assyrian territory to the south and drove the Aramaeans west across the Al-

Jazirah. This paved the way for a true conqueror, his son, Ass(h)urnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), who is often seen as the first great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.



The name Ashurnasirpal means “The God Ashur is the Guardian of the Heir,” suggesting he was the crown prince and destined for the throne. He certainly acted that way. He is known to have led Assyria’s armies west into northern Syria all the way to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and to have brought the naval empire of Phoenicia into his domain.



He then swung north and attacked the Urartians near Lake Van, and then turned back east to confront the Elamites. Yes, the Elamites, they were still a force to be reckoned with after two millennia. In his wake, Ashurnasirpal replaced local rulers with Assyrian governors, but was this, as it often is, a sign of a burgeoning empire? It turns out not.

Assyrian Relief:  
Assurnasirpal II  
on campaign



M8-07

Ashurnasirpal was in many ways the prototype of Assyrian kings to come: brutal, unpredictable, he often attacked with warning, provocation or pretext. Every spring he set out with his army just to brutalize the neighboring lands, usually in the Zagros or Taurus mountains. The point of all this seems less to conquer than to show a strong and aggressive posture. His army was indeed renowned for its fitness and ability to cover hundreds of miles in a summer's campaign.

Assyrian Relief:  
Judean  
Captives being  
impaled



M8-08

Assyrian Relief: the flaying of local kings



M8-09

Moreover, the brutal treatment of captives and all who happened to fall in his way soon became the stuff of legend. As captured kings begged for mercy, they were slowly flayed in public — if you don't know what flay means, look it up — and their skin spread across the walls of the cities they once ruled. Ashurnasirpal burned down fields, tortured people, demanded obedience, and he got it. The mere rumor of his army's approach caused panic and could depopulate a region. Locals handed over everything they owned without a fight. The king's message could not be clearer: "Give me tribute or everyone will die."

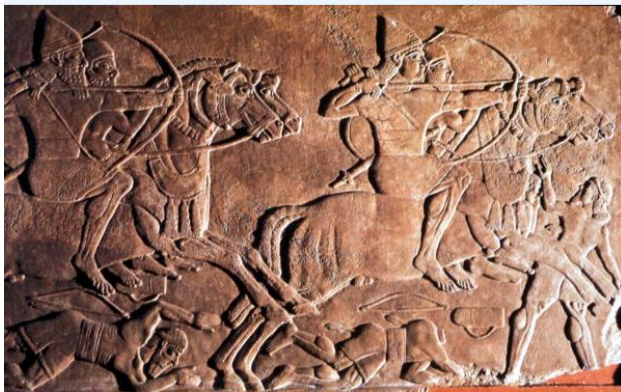
Below Limestone relief found in the well in the Temple of Ashur. It shows a god carrying plants, which are being nibbled by two goats. The scale pattern on the god's dress and hat may indicate that he was a mountain deity, perhaps Ashur himself. Below are two goddesses with flowing vases. Height 1.36 m.



M8-10

Why? Why this ferocious terrorism? The only answer we get from the Assyrians is “to protect the land of our god Ashur, to make him god of all gods and our king kings of all kings.” So this outburst of violent wrath was a form of religious fanaticism? A fixation fed on centuries of abuse that bred desperate paranoia in a downtrodden, disorganized people who finally turned on the world and paid back their purported suffering with the same sort of torment and treatment they believed they’d suffered? As any psychiatrist can affirm, violence breeds itself, and abused children all too often grow into adult abusers. But is it that simple?

Assyrian Relief: the Cavalry on Campaign



M8-11

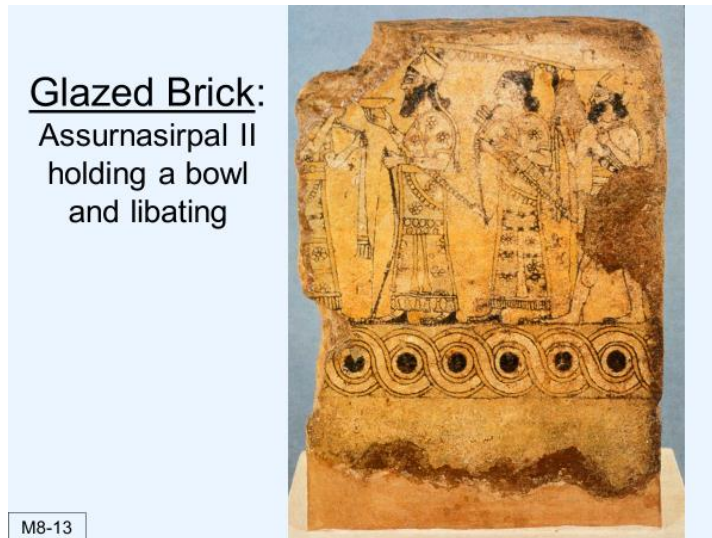
Assyrian Relief: Campaign on the Euphrates



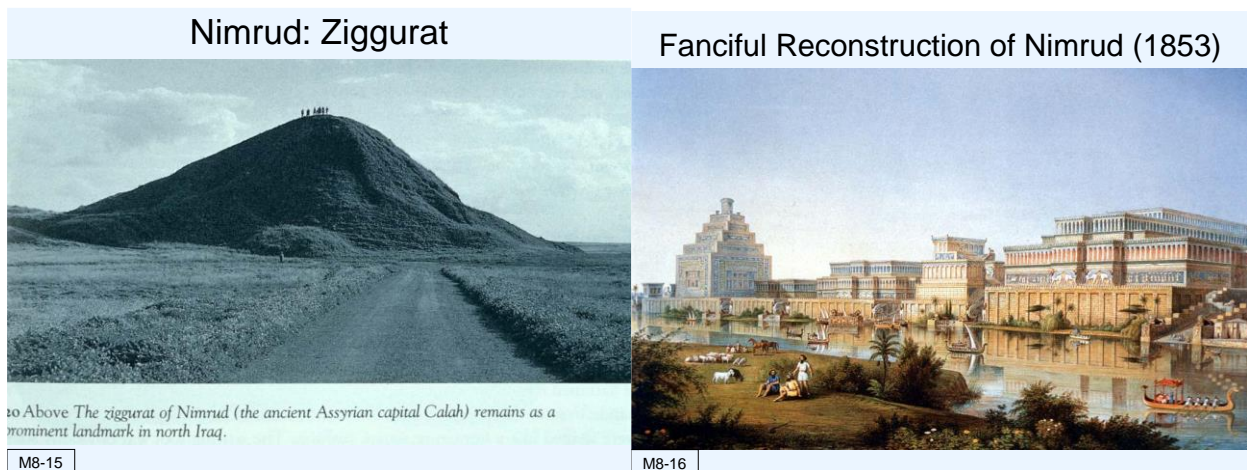
M8-12

This behavior was clearly not just berserker rage. Ashurnasirpal kept careful and elaborate records of his campaigns. In his great assault on Syria in 877 BCE, his army marched twenty miles a day to get there, so he says. It was the first such major expedition since the days of Tiglath-Pileser I two centuries prior and has earned its own term in modern history, *razzia*, which is based on the Arabic word for “raid.” This was clearly no mission of conquest to gain foreign territory and build an empire. Its purpose was pillage and terror and rape and taxation, followed by retreat and the proud recollection of the violence committed. Roux writes “It is difficult to say which is more shocking: the atrocities themselves or the detailed, methodical,

self-gratifying way in which the chief executioner describes them.” Another scholar adds, “The contrast between the art and what the art depicts is very striking.” Brutality and terrorism, yes, but still is it that simple?



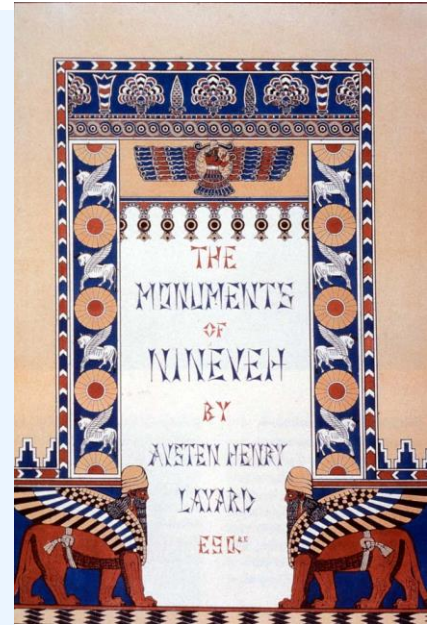
In his records, Ashurnasirpal presents himself as a civilized man, an amateur botanist who collected specimens of the plants and native wildlife wherever he went.



He was also a great builder. His palace at Nimrud (or Kalhu), which the Bible calls Calah, became the seat of a thriving capital with monumental architecture funded by the growing wealth of Assyria. Situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Zab rivers, Nimrud was a showcase for the Assyrians’ rising fortunes and a site where archaeologists have found many precious objects such as gilded bronze bowls, probably loot from Phoenicia.



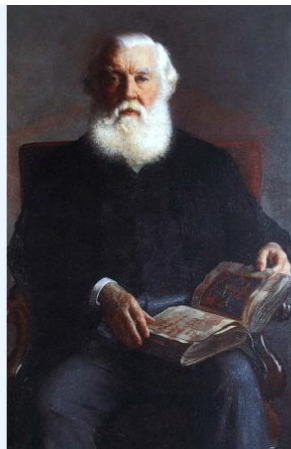
Austen  
Henry  
Layard  
(in contemporary  
Persian dress)



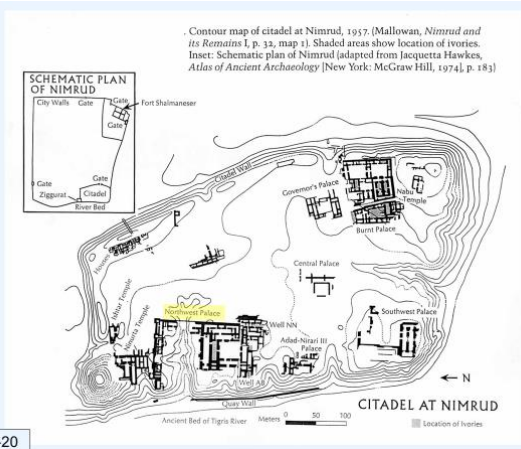
M8-17

The city was important not only in its day but ours. Nimrud was the first major Assyrian site to be excavated, and its discovery engendered a broad interest in Mesopotamia among Europeans. The first archaeologist to dig there, Austen Henry Layard, oversaw work at Nimrud from 1845-1851, all while operating under the mistaken belief it was Nineveh as the title of his book shows. He sent many of the treasures he uncovered there to the British Museum in London where they are still housed.

The older  
Austen Henry  
Layard

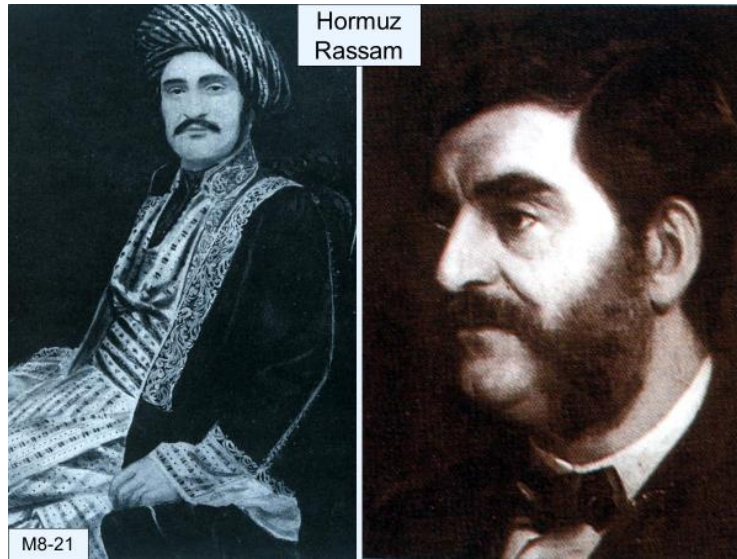


M8-18



M8-20

Layard focused primarily on one building complex in this enormous site, the Northwest Palace, what was the king's official residence, and at that Layard worked on only the southern part of the structure. The construction of this building was begun in the sixteenth year of Ashurnasirpal's reign.



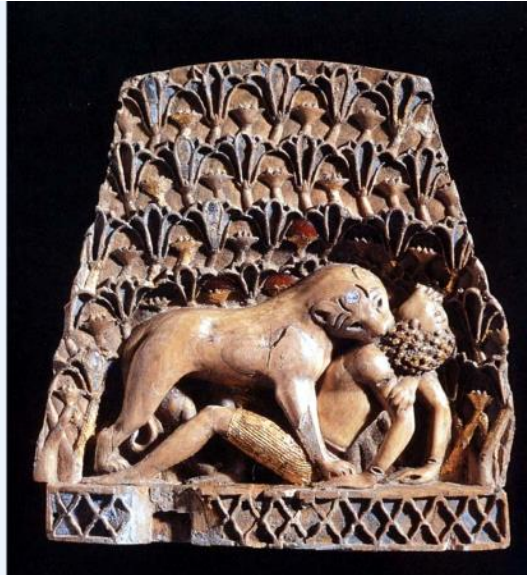
No person in one lifetime could have completed a dig this large and complex — Nimrud is huge — so Layard left the rest for others to work on, notably a native of the area, Hormuz Rassam (1826-1910). During the digging season of 1852-1854, Rassam excavated the North Palace at Nimrud which was used by a later king Assurbanipal III, and also the much older Abu Temple.



Yet another archaeologist, Kenneth Loftus, later dug at a smaller palace, the so-called “burned palace,” where he discovered ivory decorations. The force of the fire which destroyed Nimrud at the end of the seventh century is still visible in the burn stains some of the artwork bears.

Inlaid Ivory  
Plaque:  
a lioness  
killing an  
African

M8-24

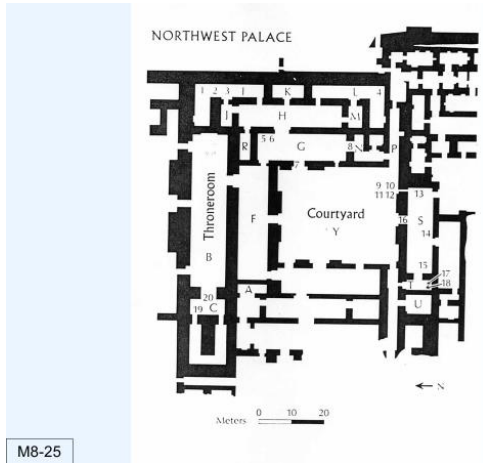


These so-called “Loftus Ivories” were inserts made to be placed into furniture to hold up pieces like armrests. Some even have Phoenician letters scratched on their back as guides, no doubt, to their assembly once their parts have arrived in Assyria. The craftsmanship is excellent as in the one above which depicts a lion killing an African. Note that here a few of the original carnelian jewels inset above the figures are still preserved, as is a little of the gold foil overlay. These small masterpieces were found at the bottom of a well where they had been dumped by Babylonian soldiers looting the site during its sack and destruction in 614 BCE. In that age, ivory was considered of no real value, little more than a plastic material good for carving images to be covered with gold and jewels. So lucky for us, the looters threw many of the ivory pieces away.



FIG. 5.  
Sir Max Mallowan  
supervising the excava-  
tion of a mud-brick  
pavement at Nimrud.  
(Photo courtesy of  
Joan Oates)

For over a century, excavations continued at Nimrud. One of the archaeologists who worked there in the twentieth century was Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie’s husband. We mentioned him earlier in the course.



M8-25



M8-26

M8-26 Aerial shot of Nimrud, with ziggurat in foreground

Following in Layard's footsteps, Mallowan continued excavating the north courtyard of the Northwest Palace, a remarkable structure most notable for having no enclosure wall. Clearly, the only protection Ashurnasirpal felt he needed was his army. It was around this same time that the Spartans in classical Greece were doing the same.



M8-27

Among the most notable discoveries at Nimrud were large orthostates, around six feet tall, carved into the shape of human-headed winged bulls with lion's feet and horned tiaras. Called lamas(s)u in Assyrian, they represent protective deities and were usually placed at the entrance to important places. Those at Nimrud were probably carved by Aramaean subjects of the Assyrian empire since Aramaeans are known to have been good stoneworkers and orthostates are a traditional feature of Aramaean architecture. People often remark on the appearance of these

lamasu, in particular, that they seem to have five legs, but clearly the intended effect here is of looking at them from two different perspectives simultaneously, from the front and the side. The beards of some recall the bronze head often cited as a bust of the legendary general Sargon of Akkad. This is not the only affinity visible between the Neo-Assyrians and the Akkadians who were by then a legend in Mesopotamian culture and renowned for their military might.

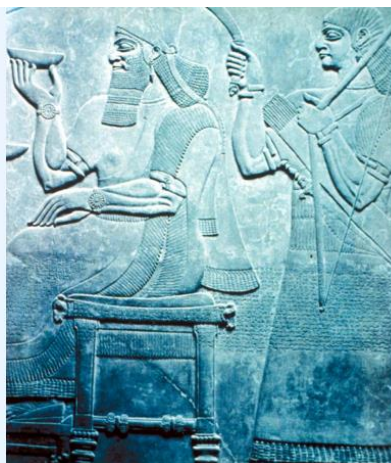
Assyrian Relief  
(from Nimrud):  
Bird-headed  
deity



M8-28

As archaeologists dug, other reliefs from Nimrud emerged from the ground, like this one depicting a winged bird-man who carries a bucket as he performs some sort of ritual. If there is a pattern in all these Assyrian monuments, it is their constant appeal for divine protection from a long retinue of guardian deities. Conquest seems only to have made the Assyrians increasingly paranoid about the fickle world that had kept them down for so long and then had suddenly handed them supreme power. To them, control was clearly a fragile thing, given and taken with inexplicable speed at the unpredictable whims of great cosmic forces. That timid cynicism and deep distrust of fate will go on to play a crucial role in the eventual collapse of their empire.

Assyrian Relief:  
King and Eunuch



M8-29

Assyrian Relief: Eunuch in chariot



M8-30

Assyrian reliefs also depict government in action, in particular, the king and his administrators who were often eunuchs. You can always tell them from other men in Assyrian reliefs because they don't have beards. Eunuchs ran much of the bureaucracy of the empire. Being childless,

they were thought to be trustworthy and have no ambition to overthrow a king and try to build their own dynasty. For that reason, their loyalty was deemed unquestionable.

### Assyrian Relief: King hunting bulls



In 879 BCE to celebrate the completion of construction on the Northwest Palace, Ashurnasirpal held a feast in which, according to his own account, he fed 69,574 guests over the course of ten days. This included the Aramaeans who had helped work on the building and whom he sent home after the party. These actions, so at odds with typical Assyrian ferocity and terroristic tactics, are part of what makes the Assyrians so hard to put a handle on. Brutal one minute, beneficent the next, they are the embodiment of human inconsistency, a living oxymoron that seems designed to evade definition and frustrate historians.

## Shalmaneser III, seated on a throne



M8-32

By the time he died, Ashurnasirpal II had overseen an enormous expansion of his domain and power. In Assyrian history, that's all too often a sign that disaster looms ahead. His son and successor, Shalmaneser III, would reign for almost thirty years (859-824 BCE) in a period characterized by wide-ranging razzias not all of which were successes, such as his army's failure at one point to capture the city of Damascus. Indeed, by the 820's things have become so bad that it's hard for historians to see what was going on in Assyria at all.

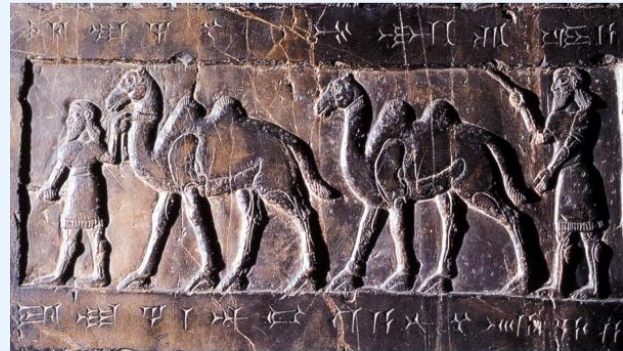
## The Black Obelisk

10 The 'Black Obelisk', a tall block of black stone discovered by A. H. Layard at Nimrud in 1846, decorated with twenty small reliefs and with cuneiform inscriptions recording campaigns of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (c. 858-824 BC). This side shows tribute from the eastern part of his empire, including Bactrian camels, an Indian elephant and apes; see also Fig. 11. Ht 1.98 cm.

M8-33



## The Black Obelisk



M8-34

One of the most famous artifacts from this age is the Black Obelisk, a six-foot-high block of black alabaster with multiple registers that documents events which took place in the seventh year of Shalmaneser's reign. It focuses on his campaign against Aramaean groups living along the Tigris river, and most of the text consists of typical boasting about the weight of tribute and the exotic commodities he was given, like two-humped camels from Iran, as shown above.

The Black Obelisk



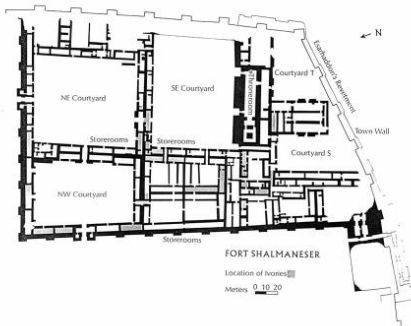
M8-35

The Black Obelisk



M8-36

Other registers portray foreigners bringing tribute: buckets, tables, cauldrons — metal objects were especially prized (above left). Another depicts the Hebrew king Jehu prostrating himself in deference to the king and his eunuchs (above right).



Plan of Fort Shalmaneser [from Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains*, maps, VIII]. Shaded areas show location of ivories

M8-36a

FIG. 25. Tents in Fort Shalmaneser kept the sun from those areas where large groups of ivories were found. (Photo courtesy of Prudence O. Harper)

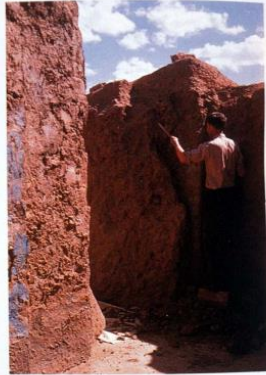


M8-37

Shalmaneser also oversaw the construction of a complex of buildings at Nimrud called Fort Shalmaneser. It's here where the famous Loftus Ivories were found.



## Fort Shalmaneser



David Oates, director of the 1962 excavation, inspecting mud-brick architecture in Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud.

M8-38



FIGURE 8 Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud after the conclusion of excavations by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq.

M8-39

This structure clearly served several purposes: as an archive, as an armory and as a residence. It was also fully fortified. Paranoia by now had trumped bravado. But why was there the need for such a fortress? The simplest answer is that bigger empires need bigger storage. That the king himself lived in this space would only have driven home the message that he was in charge of the wealth stored there and the army that had procured it.

## The Balawat Gates (reconstruction in the British Museum)



M8-42

## The Balawat Gates: sheathing over the pivots



M8-43

Another important artifact dating to this period is a pair of doors originally built as a gateway in Balawat, a site near modern Mosul between Nimrud and Nineveh. It marked the entrance to a secondary residence the king used as a country house of sorts. Its ancient name was Imgur-Bel. It was discovered and excavated by Hormuz Rassam in 1878, and later by Max Mallowan. There were actually two sets of gates found, one dating to the time of Ashurnasirpal II and one to Shalmaneser III. The wood of these tall doors had long since decayed and disappeared, but the metal sheathing that originally held the timbers together was well preserved. Turning on large pivots, these gates had curved metal bands that wrapped around their posts and extended toward the center. The impression is one of registers, which was surely part of their appeal. Each of these seven strips of metal is made of beaten bronze, one sixteenth of an inch thick, eight feet long and eleven inches high. The technique used to create the images on them is called repoussé (French for “pushed out”), meaning the metal was hammered into shape by laying it over bitumen moulds. The surface was then engraved with details.

The Balawat Gates:  
the King on campaign



M8-44

The Balawat Gates: Syria



M8-46a

The Balawat Gates are a treasure trove of images recording events in the day, for instance, the king on campaign as he defeats Babylonians, Urartians and Phoenicians (ca. 860-849 BCE). The conquest of the Phoenicians is particularly detailed, especially the capture of Tyre, a fortified city in Syria situated on an island off the Mediterranean coast. It's notable that the Phoenicians surrendered before the city was taken by force. The gates don't show that.

The Balawat Gates: a siege machine



M8-45

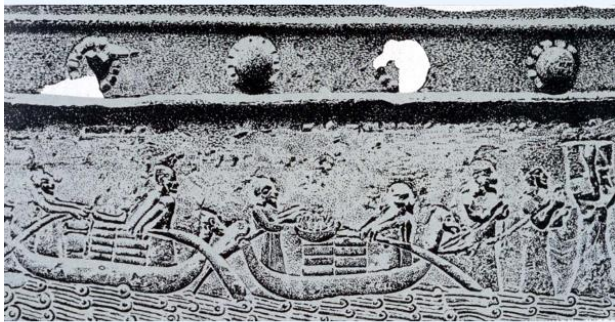
The Balawat Gates: Syria



M8-46

Details of combat abound. War machines such as battering rams are carefully drawn, along with other siege techniques. Camps are depicted as circles as if it were an aerial photo, just like on Ramses' relief depicting the Battle of Qadesh.

The Balawat Gates: Babylonia



M8-47

The Balawat Gates: Babylonia



M8-48

The conquered bring tribute in boats as Assyrian chariots parade against a backdrop of palm trees and local flora.

The Balawat Gates: a city on fire



M8-48a

The Balawat Gates: cruelty to victims



M8-48b

Cities are set on fire to keep the residents from rebuilding their lives or their resistance to the king's will.

The Balawat Gates:  
heads  
nailed to  
walls



M8-48c

The Balawat Gates: the carving of  
reliefs in caves (northern Iraq)



M8-49

Fruit trees are hacked down just out of spite — what does it profit anyone to destroy a source of food? — and captives are impaled on tall spikes to die slowly as their bodies slide down the sharpened pole. The heads of murdered rulers are nailed to their city walls as a reminder of what resistance to Assyria brings. Perhaps the most interesting panel shows sculptors carving images of the king into the walls of caves, thus branding his portrait on the land itself. Shades of Naram-Sin, and another sign of the Assyrians' connection to their Akkadian forbears. One interesting note here: an inscription on one of the pivots records that the king collected tribute in the form of “silver, gold, wood and ivory.” Are those mentioned in that order because it represents their relative value? Being much rarer in Egypt, silver cost more than gold, and in the unforested regions of the Nile Valley, wood was more expensive than ivory. Was the same also true in Mesopotamia?

Statue of  
Assurnasirpal II:  
drawing  
(n.b. bracelet) →



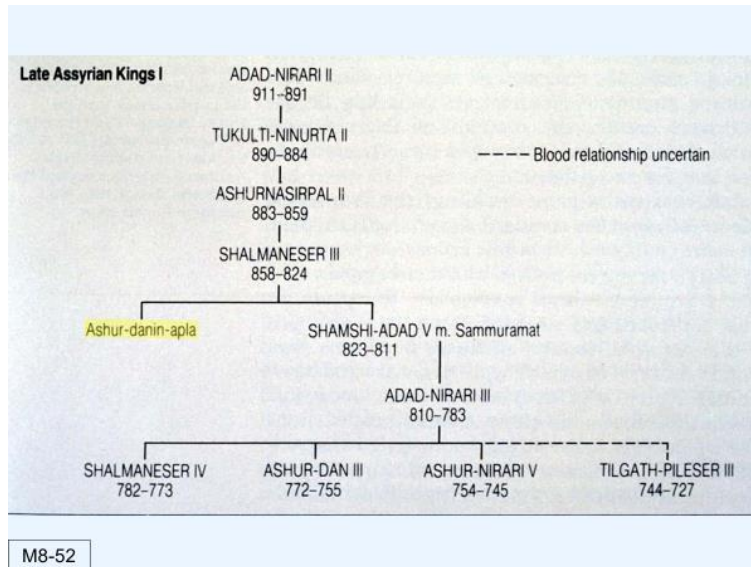
M8-50

Assyrian  
bracelet



M8-51

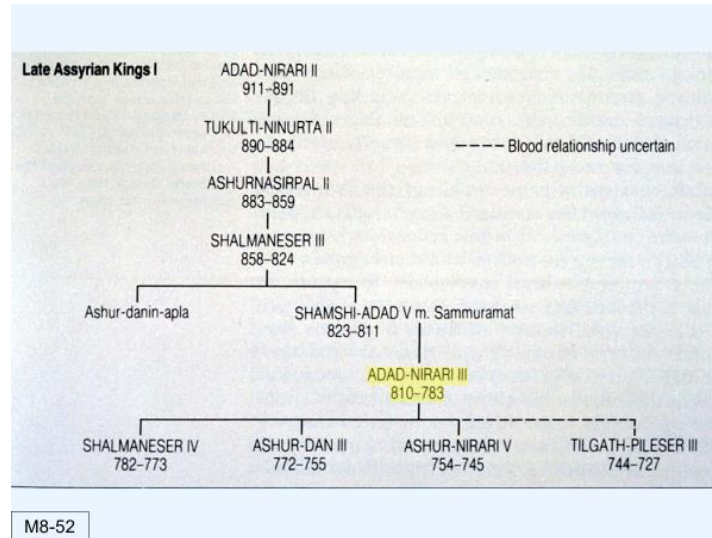
This early phase of Neo-Assyrian hegemony came to an end with Shalmaneser III, whose reign appears already to have descended into disorder even before his death. But he left his countrymen with a taste for riches and luxuries gained through taxation and the exploitation of the lands around Assyria. This thirst for a wealth which showed no concern for the plight of conquered, brought nothing good to the area but instead produced widespread hardship and economic stagnation. As Roux says, “The Assyrians took much and gave very little.”



Toward the end of Shalmaneser III's reign, one of his sons, Ashur-danin-aplu, led a revolt and was joined by several major cities including Ashur and Nineveh. While the old king hunkered down in Nimrud, he sent out another son named of all things Shamsi-Adad — that's about as old an Assyrian name as there is — to quell the rebellion. The result would be a civil war that would last almost a century.



Shamshi-Adad ultimately defeated his upstart brother and became Shamshi-Adad V (r. 823-811 BCE), ruling for only a decade or so, most of it spent in a futile quest to restore peace and order.



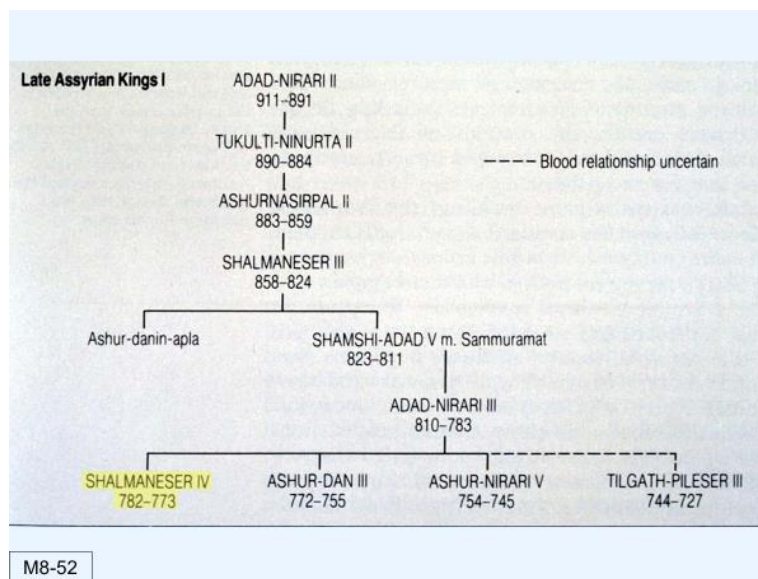
Dying early, he left the throne to his young son Adad-Nirari III whose long reign was overshadowed by another powerful presence, his mother Sammuramat, also known as Semiramis. Whether she was his regent or just a powerful queen mother, she wielded enormous influence at court, again making it impossible to draw simple conclusions about the Assyrians like they were uniformly sexist. Her real legacy, however, is that she has lent her name to a series of legends exemplifying the Assyrians' excesses, particularly their lust and violence. How these obvious distortions of fact arose is debatable, but later Babylonian writers who hated the Assyrians for the atrocities they committed against their city surely played some role in forging this propaganda. Herodotus, who was always on the lookout for stories of sexual scandals, eagerly lapped up and enshrined these tales in his *Histories*. The later Greek historians Diodorus Siculus and Ctesias followed suit. In the long run, the result was cheesy opera — Rossini composed a *Semiramide* which is heralded as a classic, but frankly I find it unlistenable —and little truth. But there is another potential culprit here, the Medes who also hated the Assyrians and whom Sammuramat's armies may have fought and humiliated. Or maybe it was both? Does gossip have to have just one parent?

## Stele of Adad-nirari III (810-783 BCE)

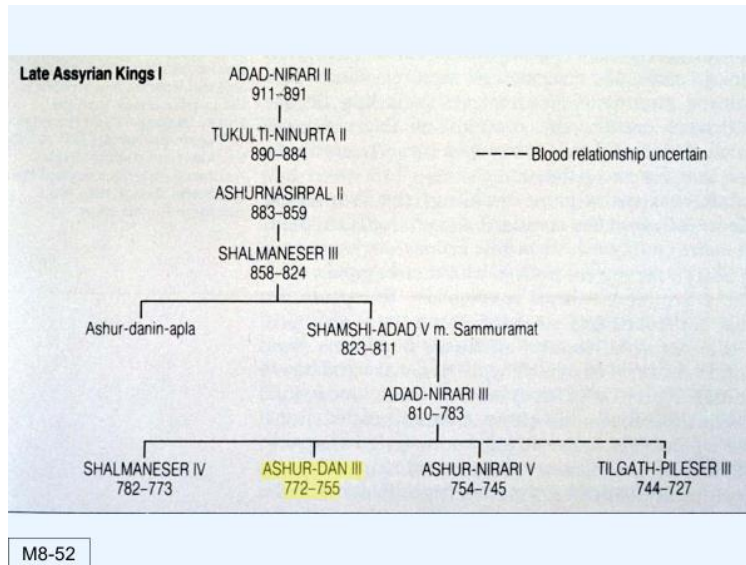


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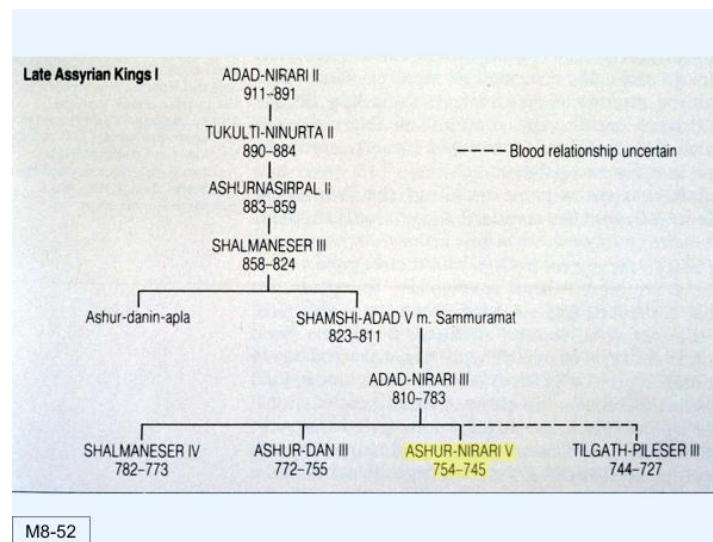
Adad-Nirari III at first appeared to be on the verge of reclaiming Assyrian glory. In grand old style, he attacked Syria and exacted tribute, even counting the king of Babylon among his subjects. But these turned out to be just *razzia*, raids, not true conquest which generally aims at possession, not just carnage and mayhem. In the end, Adad-Nirari III died in middle age, leaving a weak successor.



Shalmaneser IV was the first of three sons of Adad-Nirari III who would eventually become kings of Assyria. Very little is known about him, other than he was a weak ruler. His own governor at Til-Barsip boasts in one record that he, not the king, conquered the Urartians. Shalmaneser's name does not even come up. He, too, died relatively early in life, handing the crown to his brother, Ashur-Dan III, yet another weak king.

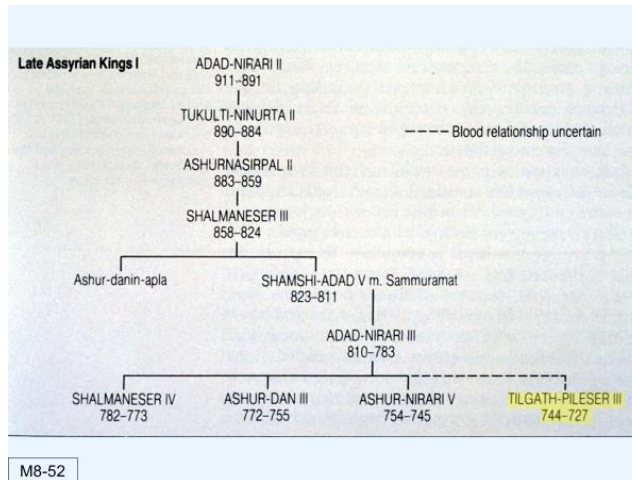


The records of Ashur-Dan's reign include accounts of unsuccessful campaigns in Syria and Babylonia, and a plague that struck the city of Assur. But far and away, the most important detail preserved from his time on the throne is the notation of a solar eclipse which must date to June 15, 763 BCE. Knowing this and using the limmu dating system which carefully records years by officials' names — we'll talk more about that in a later lecture — scholars have been able to create a secure system for dating Neo-Assyrian history going back to the tenth century BCE. The case can be made that this is the single, most significant piece of information we have about this period.



Ashur-Dan, too, must have died fairly young because yet another brother and son of Adad-Nirari III, a man named Ashur-Nirari V, followed him on the throne, completing a string of three weakling rulers. About him little is also known other than it's possible he was overthrown in a revolution and assassinated.





Ashur-Nirari V's short reign left the door open for a more powerful leader to step forward, and he did, Tiglath-Pileser III, an ambitious and capable king who may represent a change of dynasty. Documents refer to him as the son of Ashur-Nirari V, but the claim is made only in documents from later in his life, hinting that it's propaganda made up to secure his dynasty's claim to the throne.

And that's where we'll leave things for now. In the next lecture we'll pick up with a re-energized Assyrian empire in the hands of one of its best commanders, Tiglath-Pileser III. But now it's a different Assyria: well-run, well-organized, marking a return to the brutal practice of warfare that characterized the glory days of Ashurnasirpal II. Mesopotamia will once more cower under the shadow of terror from the north.