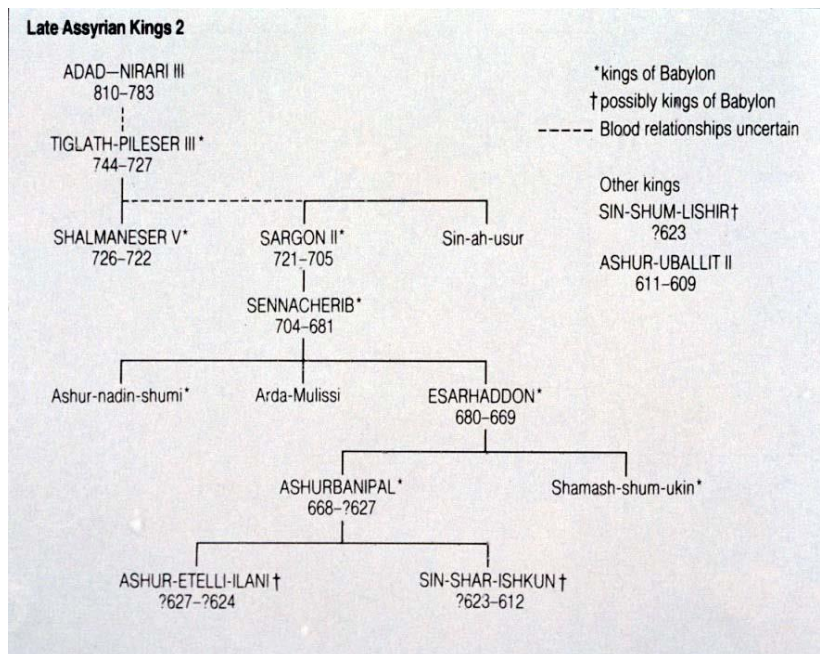
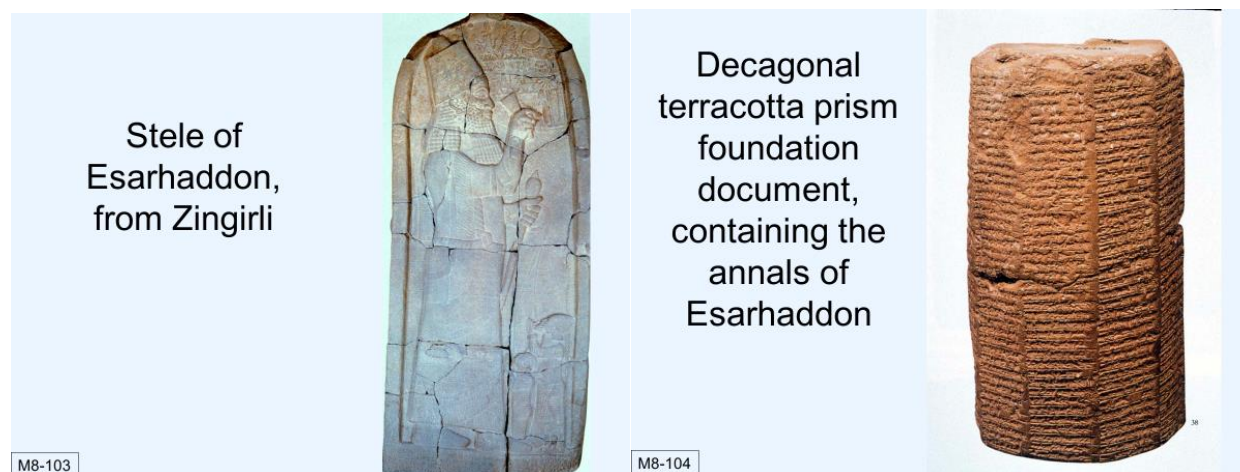


The Neo-Assyrians, Part 3



To choose a younger son as heir over his older brothers has never been a recipe for happy family life. But to leave behind that sort of legacy, an undying curse of enmity and distrust, seems all too appropriate for Sennacherib who had spent so much of life being angry and vindictive. If nothing else, he was consistent right up to the end. Whatever Sennacherib's intentions may have been in preferring Esarhaddon over his siblings, the weight of the world fell hard on his shoulders once his father was gone.



For some reason, before he was assassinated by his own children, Sennacherib had sent Esarhaddon off to a far corner of the empire — either as punishment for some unknown sin or to protect him from court intrigue — in any case, Esarhaddon had to return post haste upon news of his father's sudden demise, if he wanted any chance to claim his rightful throne. And so he did, battling his brothers and ultimately chasing them into exile.

Black stone tablet celebrating the restoration of Babylon

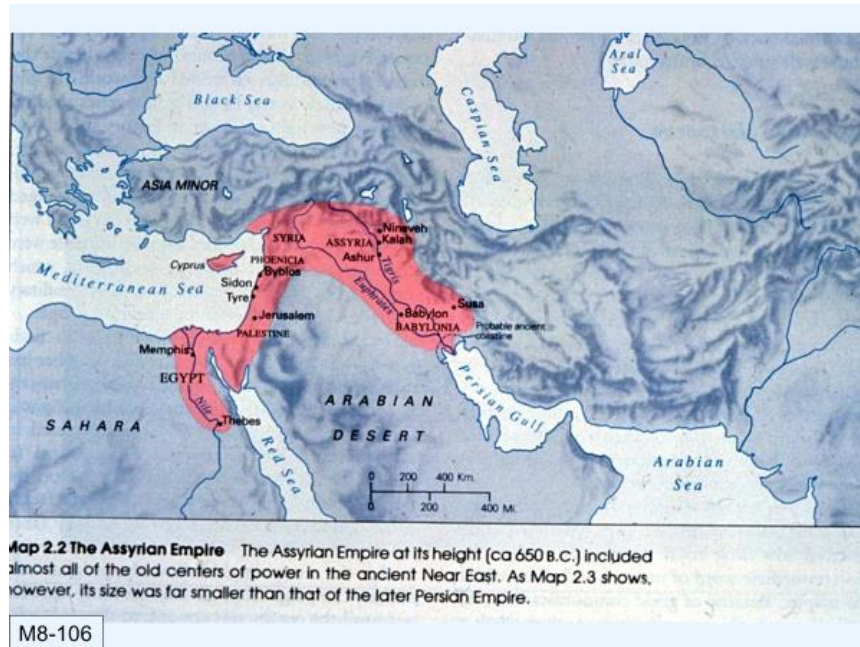


M8-105

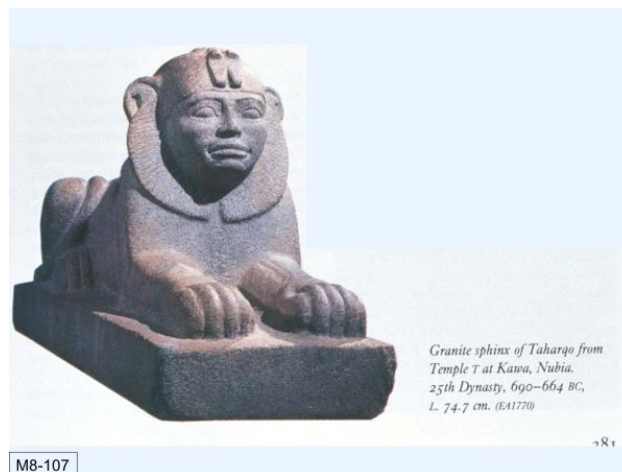
Sennacherib had left things in shambles, particularly relations with Babylon. The city was still the wasteland of his scorching wrath. Even the heavens, it seemed, had turned against the Babylonians, until an enterprising mind found a way to remedy its plight. Roux explains:

The gods in their anger had decreed that the town should lie in ruins for seventy years, but the priests found an easy way of overcoming this difficulty: 'The merciful Marduk turned the Book of Fate upside down and ordered the restoration of the city in the eleventh year,' for in the cuneiform script the figure 70 becomes 11 when reversed, just as our figure 9 becomes 6. (Roux, 325)

Reparations began almost immediately upon Esarhaddon's ascension to the throne, but the devastation was so great and the restoration ended up taking so long that he never lived to see it completed. Indeed, Marduk's statue could not be returned to his native temple until the first year of the next king's reign. But at least the tensions between Assyria and Babylon went quiet for a while, which opened the door to different opportunities and conquests.

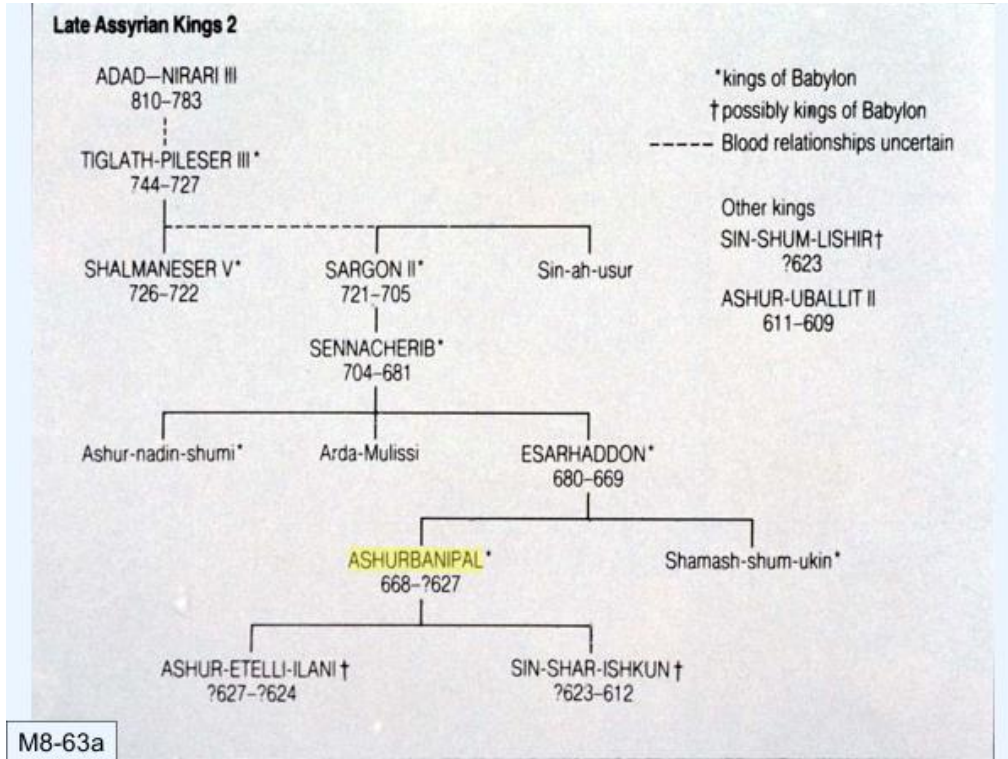


While all this was going on in Babylon, changes were happening all around the fringes of the Assyrian world. New groups of invaders like the Cimmerians and Scythians were prowling around the borders of Mesopotamia, overturning kingdoms and wreaking disorder. Indo-Europeans like the Medes were growing stronger through alliance, so much so that Esarhaddon felt the need to cross the Zagros mountains and invade Iran, which necessitated making peace with the Elamites. That must have stung. But a pacified east meant the west was open for business, and the west meant Egypt.



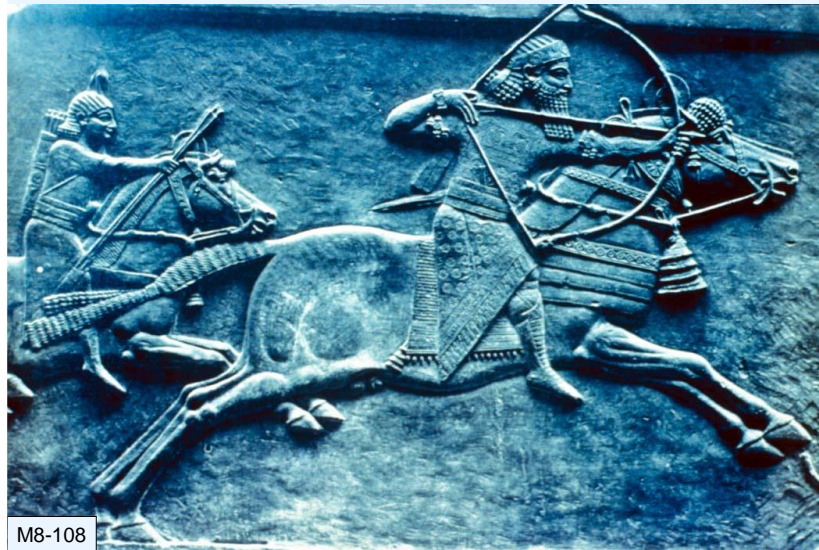
Sennacherib's campaigns in the Levant, especially his siege of Lachish, were still fresh in the minds of many Syro-Palestinians who had for the most part been complacent since 701 BCE. But the Egyptians were always ready to foment rebellion anywhere against Assyrian control of the region, and their constant disruptions in the Levant caught Esarhaddon's attention. He decided to invade Egypt, but his first attempt failed due to weather. The next year he tried again, and this time he captured the delta. A third push won him Memphis, forcing the reigning pharaoh

Taharqa to flee south to Thebes. Esarhaddon could now claim the honor of being the first man in history to rule both Egypt and Mesopotamia. But it didn't last long. Two years later, Taharqa reclaimed Memphis. While Esarhaddon was headed back there for a fourth foray against the Egyptians, he unexpectedly dropped dead before even leaving the Levant.



Like his father Sennacherib, before he died, Esarhaddon had chosen an heir. And like his father, in doing so, he only created dissension. Upon Esarhaddon's death, there followed yet another round of sibling rivalry, something he had foreseen — he should know, he had to fight his own brothers for the throne — and had tried to tamp down the same sort of conflict after he died by giving each of his sons distinct roles. The problem was they weren't put in positions of equal power or prestige. One son became the king of Assyria, the other the viceroy of Babylon. It was a novel experiment in co-regency, to divide the imperial government between brothers, and it worked at first. The preferred son, Ashurbanipal III took his father's throne and became the last great king of Assyria, arguably its greatest king ever. His brother and rival, Shamash-shum-ukin shuffled off to Babylon where he served as glorified provincial lord. There he sulked, waiting for a chance to rebel.

Assyrian Relief: Ashurbanipal III hunting



M8-108

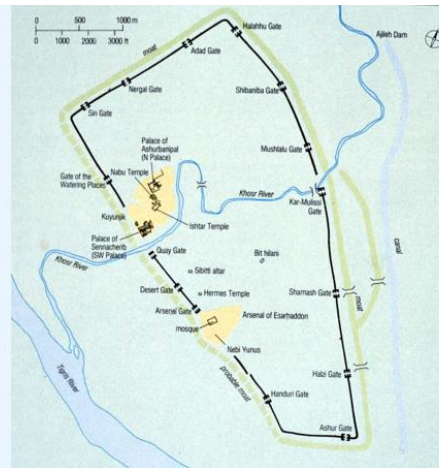
Ashurbanipal was about as ready to be king as any Assyrian could be. Right from the start, he presented the typical posture of brutality and militarism characteristic of Neo-Assyrian royalty since the days of Ashurnasirpal II. Image after image shows him riding, hunting, slaughtering things. But though he was clearly trained to fight, the data suggest he actually never went on any campaigns in person. But rest assured, he was always there in Nineveh to receive the spoils of war when the army returned and to claim the lion's share of the glory and have his portrait engraved overseeing the celebrations. But dirty his hands in combat? Not so much.

Ashurbanipal III

from the Northwest
Palace at Nineveh



M8-109



M8-110

And his image is everywhere, both at the Southwest Palace built by his grandfather Sennacherib and at the North Palace he built for himself, which Hormuz Rassam excavated in the nineteenth century, followed later by George Smith. That the artwork in several areas was still unfinished when Ashurbanipal came to the throne left him plenty of room to brand the place with his own reflection and style.

Assyrian Relief: lion-hunt (Ashurbanipal III)



M8-111

In particular, reliefs depicting lion hunts filled these palaces. Pictures of the king shooting or spearing a charging beast, often wounded and angry, evidently resonated with the Assyrian public. The “King of the World” fighting the king of beasts, even though the battle was hardly fair, reinforced a metaphor that clearly appealed to a people who had battled against nature and their neighbors for so long.

Early Assyrian Relief: lion-hunt



M8-112

Assyrian Relief: lion-hunt (Nimrud)



M8-113

For millennia, as far back as the Jemdet Nasr period, hunting lions had been a privilege reserved for kings in Assyria.

Assyrian Relief: lions in garden (Nineveh)



M8-114

This combative relationship between man and nature, however, went further than simple carnage. Reliefs also show lions not just posing as dangerous enemies but also lounging in parks, awaiting their upcoming slaughter, no doubt. Their strength and nobility as a foe, not just their terrifying lethality, seems to have been an important element in their prominence on these reliefs.

Assyrian Relief: lion-hunt sequence



M8-115

Assyrian Relief: Ashurbanipal III kills lion



M8-119

Note also that these hunts are not typically safaris out into the wild, though some are. More often they're carefully staged dramas meant to demonstrate the king's power over the world. A lion is released from a cage. It's shot with arrows and roused into a fury. It charges at the king who stabs it through the heart. It dies. The king pours wine over its corpse and thanks the gods. It's more like a ritual, a mass in which a real Jesus is killed at every celebration. And note, too, the sequential action: the release, the attack, the impalement. The relief almost moves in front of the viewer's eyes. The thrill of the moment is cinematic.

Assyrian Relief: dying lion



Assyrian Relief: dying lion



The lions' deaths are recorded with the precision of a surgeon's eye. Animals stagger from the shock of the arrows piercing their vital organs, they vomit blood, their toes are curled in pain. Someone knew exactly what it looks like to see a lion die of its wounds.

Assyrian Relief: dying lioness



One particularly poignant image shows a lioness whose back legs have been paralyzed, howling in pain and dragging her limp hind quarters. Blood pours from her wounds. Is the artist's careful attention to the agonies of her death born of sympathy for the animal, or is it just a prurient fascination with pain? Is this a picture of wanton destruction alone, or a replay of creation where gods eviscerate the natural world to make room for humankind? Whatever it was, it's theatre, a spectacle of death and horror, the fantasia of those who have known and seen humanity's worst side and have no qualm in showing what the world has turned them into. This is PTSD on crack.

Assyrian Relief: onager hunt (Ashurbanipal III)



M8-120

And it's not only lions but the whole environment of larger mammals. In this relief above, Ashurbanipal chases a herd of onagers (wild donkeys). On the right, a mother donkey looks back in fear for her baby. The theme is clearly terrorizing nature. The Assyrians would have said terrorizing it back.

Assyrian Relief: siege of an Egyptian town



M8-121

Egypt pushed back after the Assyrian conquest of Memphis. Under new leadership — Taharqa had died in 664 BCE — its forces recaptured all the land from Thebes north to Memphis. But the Assyrian backlash was equally ferocious. Ashurbanipal's army pushed all the way down to Thebes and put Egypt's holiest site to the torch. Roux says, "The great city never recovered from

the devastation.” Accordingly, at this point in history Manetho starts a new dynasty, the twentieth-sixth, which would end up, it’s important to note, outliving the Neo-Assyrian empire and bringing new life back to the country. But the Egyptians were not the real foes of Assyria. Those sat closer to home: the Elamites and the Babylonians.

The campaign in the west had diverted important resources from the east which meant that Ashurbanipal had to ignore cries of help from his allies, the Lydians who were being attacked by encroaching Cimmerians. Elamites also took advantage of the Assyrians’ inattention to Mesopotamia and, in the words of one account, “overran Akkad like a dense swarm of grasshoppers.” And, worse yet, the Egyptian affair did not pan out well in the long run. Local rebellions and insurrection eventually forced the Assyrians to abandon the country completely. Egyptian insurgents even chased their retreating Assyrian overlords all the way to Ashdod in the Syro-Palestinian area. Put succinctly, in the words of one historian, “Ashurbanipal had to give up Egypt in order to save Mesopotamia.” The error of fighting simultaneous wars on two fronts is a lesson many conquerors, among them Napoleon and Hitler, have learned much to their sorrow.

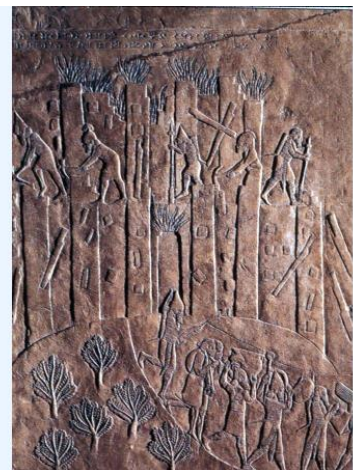


Stung by these setbacks, Ashurbanipal turned the full fury of Assyria on the Elamites. He marched his army across the Zagros mountains and threw its full might at them. At a battle site called Til Tuba, he smashed the Elamite army and killed their leader.



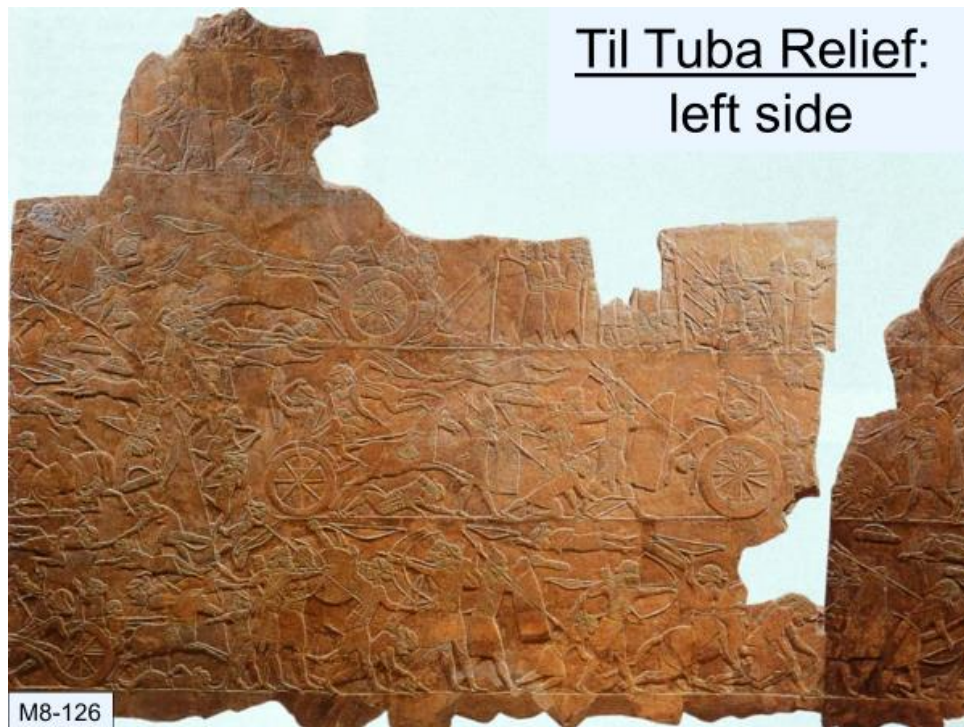
3 The Elamite city of Madaktu. From Nineveh, about 660–650 BC. M8-124

Assyrian Relief:
the capture and
burning of an
Elamite city

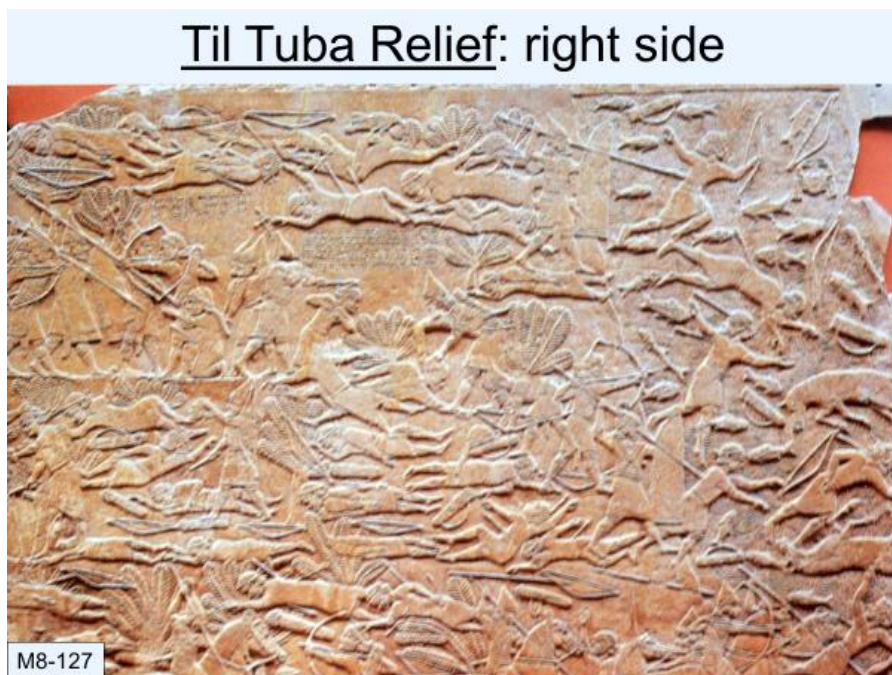


M8-123

The Elamite campaigns are recorded in profuse detail on the walls of Ashurbanipal’s palace at Nineveh, with particular focus on the violence and destruction wrought.



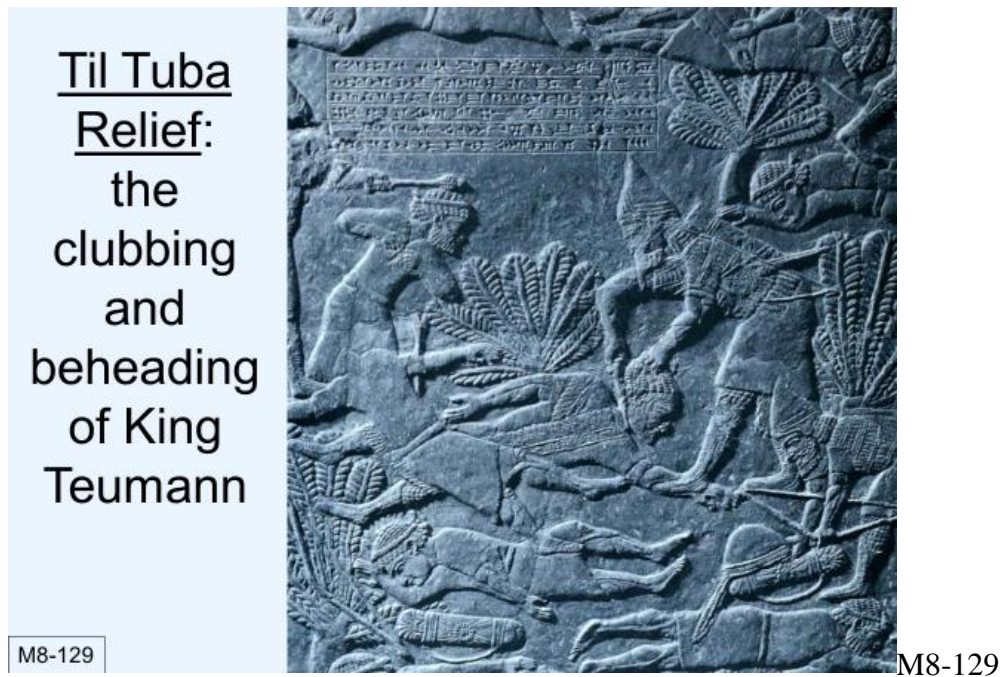
In particular, the Til Tuba relief recalls one of the earlier battles in this decade-long war. It is by itself enormous and packed with scenes of action recording the progress of the conflict.



Here, the Assyrian army drives the Elamites into a river.



Here, Teumann, the Elamite king, is thrown from his chariot. He's seen hanging from the railing with his helmet off, revealing his receding hairline.

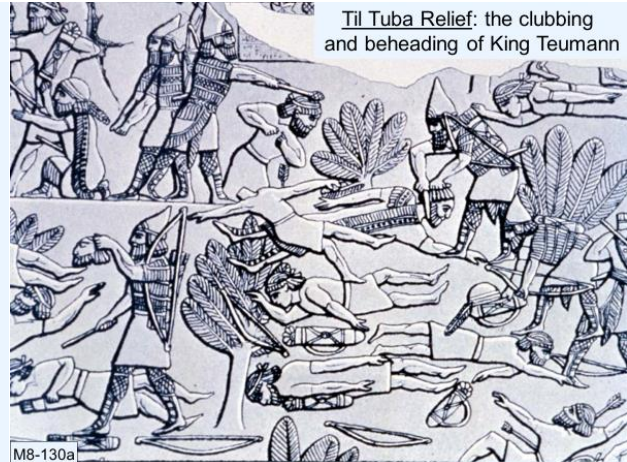


Here, an Assyrian soldier clubs the king with a mace and cuts off his head, while another picks up the king's helmet.

Til Tuba Relief:
the
clubbing
and
beheading
of King
Teumann



M8-130



Til Tuba Relief: the clubbing
and beheading of King Teumann

M8-130a

Note the sequential action. This is the Assyrians' way of making a movie.

Til Tuba Relief: Assyrian soldiers in Teumann's chariot



M8-131

Assyrian soldiers then climb into Teumann's chariot and ride around the battlefield, showing the king's head to his army. Bodies lie scattered everywhere.

Assyrian Relief: Elamite king as servant



In the wake of a different battle, a surviving Elamite king, Ummanaldash, is marched off into captivity. He's the one wearing a crown that looks like a globe.

Til Tuba Relief: capture of Ummanaldash



In another relief, a king waves back scornfully to someone, perhaps a betrayer, then is forced into an Assyrian chariot. More sequential action. And note in the bottom left corner of the relief, a lioness stalks a wild goat, surely a metaphor for the Assyrians hunting down the Elamites. At

this very same moment in history, the Greeks are decorating vases that feature similar visual comparisons, and the poet Homer is fixating on similes in his poetry, often between warriors and predatory animals. Ashurbanipal's inscription on one of these reliefs reads:

The sepulcher of their earlier and later kings who did not fear Ashur and Ishtar, my lords, and who had plagued the kings, my fathers, I destroyed, I devastated, I exposed to the sun. Their bones, I carried off to Assyria. I laid restlessness upon their shades. I deprived them of food-offerings and libations of water. For a distance of a month and twenty-five days' journey I devastated the provinces of Elam. Salt and *sihlu* (a prickly plant) I scattered over them . . . The noise of people, the tread of cattle and sheep, the glad shouts of rejoicing, I banished from their fields. Wild asses, gazelles and all kinds of beasts of the plain I caused to lie down among them, as if at home.

Roux concludes: "Thus were avenged countless insults and settled a three-thousand-year-old quarrel between Elamites and Mesopotamians." It was the end of a very long story.

The Garden-Party Relief: Assurbanipal on couch



The Garden-Party Relief: the queen drinking from a bowl



The reliefs in Ashurbanipal's palace also show the celebrations that followed victories of this sort. Here in the one above, the king reclines on an elegant raised couch — note the ivory inlays adorning its feet — with his favorite wife seated like a goddess on a throne at his side. They toast the destruction of Elam as eunuchs brush away flies with feathery whisks. The amount of detail is striking. Birds sing in the trees. Harp players provide light background music. Note too that the king has hung his large necklace on the end of the couch. It was probably too hot that day to wear a heavy piece of jewelry like that.

The Garden-Party Relief



M8-135



M8-135a

The full scene reveals another notable detail. The Elamite king Teumann's head hangs in a tree nearby, strung up by a large metal ring skewering his lower jaw. It's the Assyrian version, I suppose, of Chinese lanterns at a picnic. Or had they just finished a game of Assyrian volleyball?

Assyrian troops chasing Arabs on camels



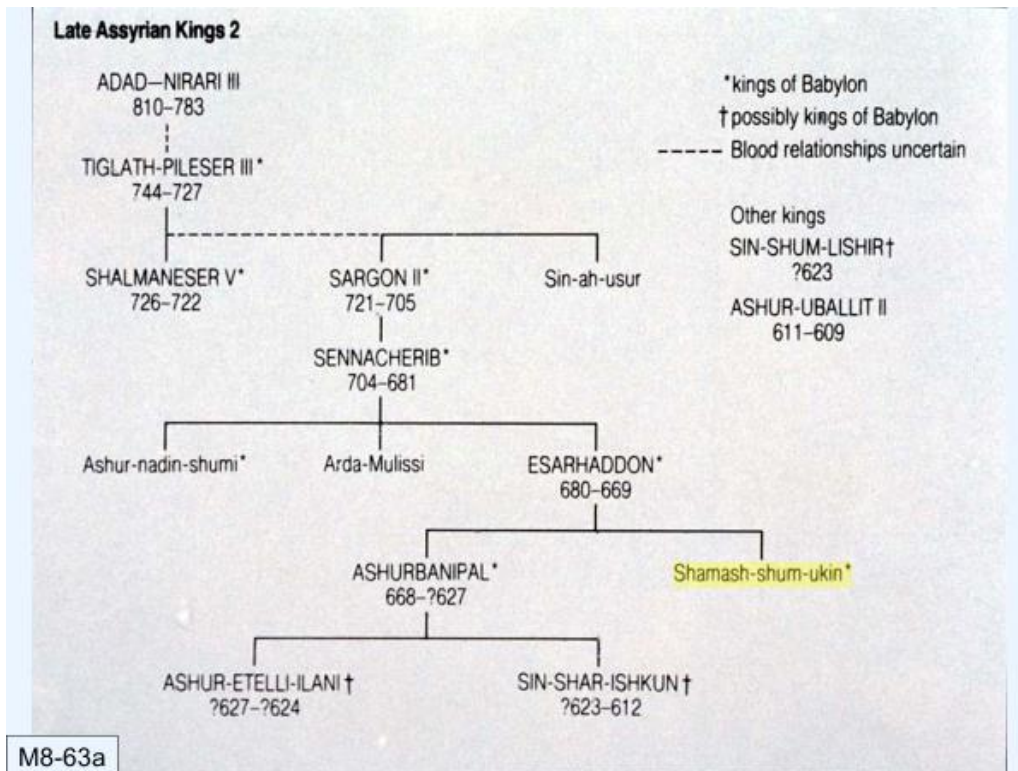
M8-136

Assyrian troops fighting nomads



M8-137

Reliefs also show Assyrian soldiers fighting nomads from the desert where one inscription says, “there are not even birds of the sky.” The Assyrians were at war with the whole world, and for the moment they were winning.

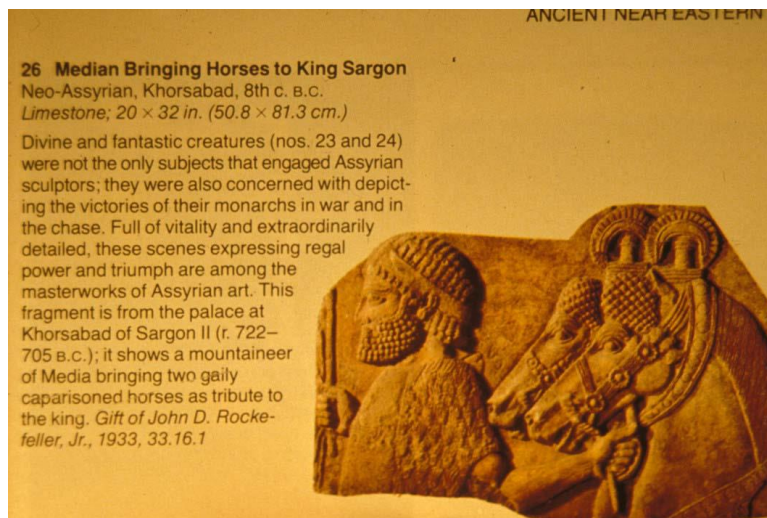


The real test would come over a decade into Ashurbanipal’s reign, and not so much from outside forces as at the hands of the Assyrian royal family itself. Watching conquest after conquest, the king’s brother Shamash-shum-ukin had stayed safely ensconced in Babylon playing viceroy for ten years, but eventually his sense of patience and humility ran dry. Seeing his brother claim victories across the Near East, Shamash-shum-ukin finally threw in with the Babylonians and led

a rebellion against his own homeland Assyria. As Roux says, “gradually the virus of Babylonian nationalism overtook him.” The war would last three years and end with his suicide in 648 BCE. As he watched in despair his brother’s army set fire to the city he’d overseen throughout the 660’s and 650’s — the second time that had happened within living memory — he threw himself into the flames. Ashurbanipal had now lost his brother and his only real rival for the throne, and he stood alone on top of the world, or what was left of it.

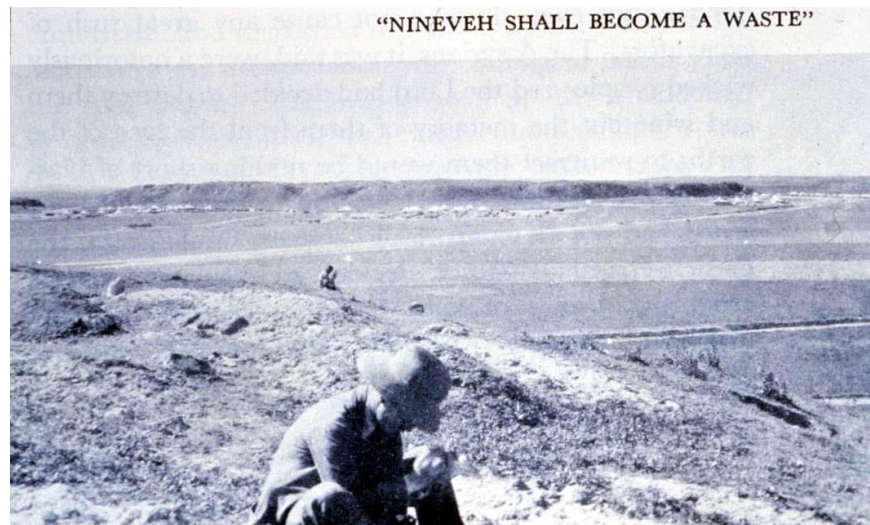


Recalling, no doubt, his father’s goodwill toward an earlier Babylon that had also once lain in ruins at Assyrian hands, he immediately set about refurbishing the city. But it was too little too late to rebuild any sense of good will with the Babylonians and most of the nations around him. Egypt was lost, Elam in shambles, Babylon scarred and biding its time until it could fight back again. The Assyrian army itself stood to the brink of exhaustion. It had been waging campaigns almost constantly since Sennacherib’s day. In one historian’s words, Assyria was “overtired, overextended and overdue for catastrophe.”



Moreover, a seemingly endless stream of new fresh enemies were always massing on the horizon. It’s hard not to think the Assyrians could feel looming disaster in their bones. Their

religion, after all, was focused on warding off demons but the evil was now so close, so imminent. Many must have wondered if even the great Ashur could save them from this.



In the Bible, the Book of Nahum (3:7,15,19) catches well the sense of the times:

And it shall come to pass
that all they that look upon thee
shall flee from thee,
and say: 'Nineveh is laid waste:
who will bemoan her? . . .
There shall the fire devour thee;
the sword shall cut thee off,
it shall eat thee up like a cankerworm. . .
There is no healing of thy bruise;
thy wound is grievous: . . .
for upon whom hath not thy wickedness
passed continually?

Gloating over the fall of a mighty foe is certainly no habit to be admired, but after everything the Assyrians had perpetrated on the world, some sense of relief and joy at the collapse of their regime is completely understandable from their beleaguered subjects.

It was only a few years after Ashurbanipal's death that the end came for this once mighty kingdom. The last ten years of his reign are shrouded in mystery. For some cause unknown, Assyrian records simply stop. Was it plague? Was it climate change? Was it pressure from Medes and Scythians constantly pacing the edges of Assyria's empire and fomenting rebellion? Was there such a bitter civil war among Ashurbanipal's successors that all government business came to halt? Or is that explanation just a desperate attempt to use well-attested patterns in the Assyrian past and replay what is by now an all too familiar saga of internal discord and sibling rivalry? The real answer lurks in the darkness.

Around 626 BCE the lights of history begin to come up again, if only dimly and not this time in Assyria but Babylon. By then, Ashurbanipal is gone. Those who succeeded him are nothing but names, amputated from events and achievements. In Babylon, however, a new and important name appears, Nabopolassar (*Nabu-apla-usur*, “May the god Nabu protect the heir”), a man who hailed most likely from the Chaldean (*Kaldû*) clan based in Sumeria.

By 616 BCE things come into better focus. Nabopolassar is running the show in the southern Mesopotamia, with enough military might to dare making an attack on the Assyrian heartland. His first assault in 615 BCE is rebuffed but he regathers his forces, allies himself with the Medes and tries again the next year. Ashur falls. Two years later so does Nimrud, then Nineveh. The last known Assyrian king Ashur-Uballit II flees with his remaining army in the only direction he could go, west to Harran. In utter desperation, these last vestiges of the Assyrian empire make a pact with Egyptian troops in the area. It’s hopeless. He and his forces disappear from history. Roux wryly notes, “No one, as far as we know, sat on the ruins of Nineveh to write a lamentation.” The horror was over, that horror at least.



From the Assyrian perspective, the demons had won, gods of sterility like Pazuzu, the embodiment of desiccating wind. His statue reads “I am Pazuzu, son of Hanbi, King of the evil wind-demons.” Ironically, it’s very likely the small bust of Pazuzu above (right) was used by Assyrian women in childbirth as an apotropaic emblem to protect them from infertility. Evil harnessed to ward off evil sums up the Assyrian mindset, the paranoia and superstition that drove them toward atrocity. It fueled their conquests and fed them the myth of their own eventual doom. To die by flame and sword one day was exactly what they were taught to expect, and that can only have accelerated their demise. I wonder if some Assyrians didn’t feel a certain sense of satisfaction as their palaces began to burn. They were witnessing their beliefs fulfilled. They were dead but they were right.

One historian has called them “the Nazis of the ancient world, pure and simple.” But Nazis, horrifying as they were, lasted a mere two decades at most. Assyrians brutalized their world for two centuries on and off. Nor did Nazis put up pictures of death camps to adorn government buildings in Berlin so that ambassadors from foreign nations, some of them brutalized by Hitler’s thugs, had to walk down hallways festooned with pictures of burning Jews and Luftwaffe strikes. Nazis were a pale shadow of the real thing, Assyrians.

Some scholars push back and argue that the Assyrians must be seen in context, that atrocities like theirs are documented throughout ancient Mesopotamian history. Narmer beheads and castrates prisoners of war and mounts a picture of the carnage on a palette, an instrument for making cosmetics. Imagine that on your lipstick case. And the art the Assyrians produced is, without doubt, one of the greatest achievements of early humankind. What's more, to be fair, our information is heavily slanted toward the highest echelons of their society, their kings and priests. What about the common Assyrian? Could he have been so brutal too? How much of this projection of what one historian calls "calculated frightfulness" trickled down into regular life? Were all Assyrians as bad as their kings claimed to be?

On top of that, Assyrians were not without their achievements in various fields of learning. They could calculate the square root of 2 to six digits (1.414213), which is off by only one (1.414214). They were aware of the principles of algebra. They knew the quadratic equation, so they clearly like numbers for their own sake. They were also excellent hydraulic engineers. They even invented concrete, an achievement the Romans are often wrongly credited with.

Assyrian dog statuettes



M8-144

And their superstitions have almost a sweetness and innocence about them. Above are five small figurines of dogs which were found in a niche on one side of the door leading into the palace of Ashurbanipal III. They were put there as magical guardians to fend off enemies. Inscriptions on each tell us their names: "Expeller of Evil," "Catcher of the Enemy," "Biter of his Foe," "Loud is his Bark" and, my personal favorite, "Don't Think, Bite!" Sure beats Lassie and Beethoven.

In the end, the Assyrians may have died but not their culture completely. They left behind a heritage visible in later civilizations. Their use of a professional army, their ferocity in a siege, their love of bloody public spectacles, their merger of state and religion — these are all features seen later in classical Rome, as is their use of a dating system in which a year are is named after

a certain official called a *limmu*, a person who held high office during a certain time. Romans, too, would refer to an event as having happened, for instance, “in the consulship of Pompey and Crassus.” Medieval fiefdoms, mounted cavalry, and vassals who own other vassals all harken back to Assyria, too. The people may have disappeared in the blink of an eye, their language may even have gone extinct, but somehow their legacy carried on, their way of life still ringing in our ears. If we condemn them for their atrocities, who are we really shaming? Were they monsters? Yes! No! I don’t know, but one thing I do know. I wouldn’t like to meet one.