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A General History for Colleges and High Schools *by P. V. N. Myers* in the year 1890

Part I, Ancient History; Section I, The Eastern Nations; **Chapter IV**

CHAPTER IV.

ASSYRIA.

1. Political History.

Tiglath-Pileser I. (1130–1110 B.C.).—It is not until about two centuries after the conquest of Chaldæa by the Assyrian prince Tiglathi-Nin (see p. 43), that we find a sovereign of renown at the head of Assyrian affairs. This was Tiglath-Pileser I., who came to the throne about 1130 B.C. The royal records detail at great length his numerous war expeditions, and describe minutely the great temples which he constructed.

For the two centuries following the reign of Tiglath-Pileser, Assyria is quite lost to history; then it is again raised into prominence by two or three strong kings; after which it once more almost "drops below the historical horizon."

Tiglath-Pileser II. (745–727 B.C.).—With this king, who was a usurper, begins what is known as the Second Empire. He was a man of great energy and of undoubted military talent,—for by him the Assyrian power was once more extended over the greater part of Southwestern Asia.

But what renders the reign of this king a landmark in Assyrian history, is the fact that he was not a mere conqueror like his predecessors, but a political organizer of great capacity. He laid the basis of the power and glory of the great kings who followed him upon the Assyrian throne.

Sargon (722–705 B.C.).—Sargon was one of the greatest conquerors and builders of the Second Empire. In 722 B.C., he took Samaria and carried away the Ten Tribes into captivity beyond the Tigris. The larger part of the captives were scattered among the Median towns, where they became so mingled with the native

population as to be inquired after even to this day as the "lost tribes."

During this reign the Egyptians and their allies, in the first encounter (the battle of Raphia, 720 B.C.) between the empires of the Euphrates and the Nile valley, suffered a severe defeat, and the ancient kingdom of the Pharaohs became tributary to Assyria.

Sargon was a famous builder. Near the foot of the Persian hills he founded a large city, which he named for himself; and there he erected a royal residence, described in the inscriptions as "a palace of incomparable magnificence," the site of which is now preserved by the vast mounds of Khorsabad.

Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.). — Sennacherib, the son of Sargon, came to the throne 705 B.C. We must accord to him the first place of renown among all the great names of the Assyrian Empire. His name, connected as it is with the story of the Jews, and with many of the most wonderful discoveries among the ruined palaces of Nineveh, has become as familiar to the ear as that of Nebuchadnezzar in the story of Babylon.

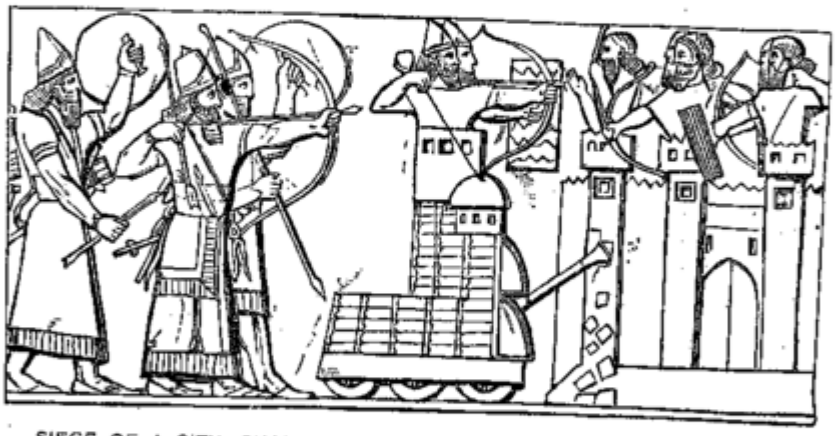
The fulness of the royal inscriptions of this reign enables us to permit Sennacherib to tell us in his own words of his great works and military expeditions. Respecting the decoration of Nineveh, he says: "I raised again all the edifices of Nineveh, my royal city; I reconstructed all its old streets, and widened those that were too narrow. I have made the whole town a city shining like the sun."

Concerning an expedition against Hezekiah, king of Judah, he says: "I took forty-six of his strong fenced cities; and of the smaller towns which were scattered about I took and plundered a countless number. And from these places I captured and carried off as spoil 200,150 people, old and young, male and female, together with horses and mares, asses and camels, oxen and sheep, a countless multitude. And Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round

the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates, so as to prevent escape."[1]

While Sennacherib was besieging Jerusalem, the king of Egypt appeared in the field in the south with aid for Hezekiah. This caused Sennacherib to draw off his forces from the siege to meet the new enemy; but near the frontiers of Egypt the Assyrian host, according to the Hebrew account, was smitten by "the angel of the Lord,"[2] and the king returned with a shattered army and without glory to his capital, Nineveh.

Sennacherib employed the closing years of his reign in the digging of canals, and in the erection of a splendid palace at Nineveh. He was finally murdered by his own sons.



SIEGE OF A CITY, SHOWING USE OF BATTERING-RAM. (From Nimrud.)

Asshur-bani-pal (668–626? B.C.). — This king, the Sardanapalus of the Greeks, is distinguished for his magnificent patronage of art and literature. During his reign Assyria enjoyed her Augustan age.

But Asshur-bani-pal was also possessed of a warlike spirit. He

[1] Rawlinson's *Ancient Monarchies*, Vol. II. p. 161.

[2] This expression is a Hebraism, meaning often any physical cause of destruction, as a plague or storm. In the present case, the destroying agency was probably a pestilence.

broke to pieces, with terrible energy, in swift campaigns, the enemies of his empire. All the scenes of his sieges and battles he caused to be sculptured on the walls of his palace at Nineveh. These pictured panels are now in the British Museum. They are a perfect Iliad in stone.

Saracus, or Esarhaddon II. (?–606 B.C.).—Saracus was the last of the long line of Assyrian kings. His reign was filled with misfortunes for himself and his kingdom. For nearly or quite seven centuries the Ninevite kings had lorded it over the East. There was scarcely a state in all Western Asia that had not, during this time, felt the weight of their conquering arms; scarcely a people that had not suffered their cruel punishments, or tasted the bitterness of their servitude.

But now swift misfortunes were bearing down upon the oppressor from every quarter. The Scythian hordes, breaking through the mountain gates on the north, spread a new terror throughout the upper Assyrian provinces; from the mountain defiles on the east issued the armies of the recent-grown empire of the Aryan Medes, led by the renowned Cyaxares; from the southern lowlands, anxious to aid in the overthrow of the hated oppressor, the Babylonians, led by the youthful Nebuchadnezzar, the son of the traitor viceroy Nabopolassar, joined, it appears, the Medes as allies, and together they laid close siege to the Assyrian capital.

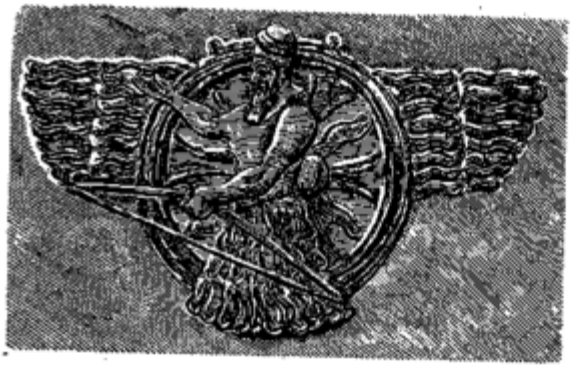
The operations of the besiegers seem to have been aided by an unusual inundation of the Tigris, which undermined a section of the city walls. At all events the place was taken, and dominion passed away forever from the proud capital[1] (606 B.C.). Two hundred years later, when Xenophon with his Ten Thousand Greeks, in his memorable retreat (see p. 156), passed the spot, the once great city was a crumbling mass of ruins, of which he could not even learn the name.

[1] Saracus, in his despair, is said to have erected a funeral pyre within one of the courts of his palace, and, mounting the pile with the members of his family, to have perished with them in the flames; but this is doubtless a poetical embellishment of the story.

2. Religion, Arts, and General Culture.

Religion. — The Assyrians were Semites, and as such they possessed the deep religious spirit that has always distinguished the peoples of this family. In this respect they were very much like the Hebrews. The wars which the Assyrian monarchs waged were not alone wars of conquest, but were, in a certain sense, crusades made for the purpose of extending the worship and authority of the gods of Assyria. They have been likened to the wars of the Hebrew kings, and again to the conquests of the Saracens.

As with the wars, so was it with the architectural works of these sovereigns. Greater attention, indeed, was paid to the palace in Assyria than in Babylonia; yet the inscriptions, as well as the ruins, of the upper country attest that the erection and adornment of the temples of the gods were matters of anxious and constant care on the part of the Assyrian monarchs. Their accounts of the construction and dedication of temples for their gods afford striking parallels to the Bible account of the building of the temple at Jerusalem by King Solomon.



EMBLEM OF ASSHUR.

Not less prominently manifested is the religious spirit of these kings in what we may call their sacred literature, which is filled with prayers singularly like those of the Old Testament.

As to the Assyrian deities and their worship, these were in all their essential characteristics so similar to those of the later Chaldæan system, already described (see p. 45), that any detailed account of them here is unnecessary. One difference, however, in the two systems should be noted. The place

occupied by Il, or Ra, as the head of the Chaldæan deities, is in Assyria given to the national god Asshur, whose emblem was a winged circle with the figure of a man within, the whole perhaps symbolizing, according to Rawlinson, eternity, omnipresence, and wisdom.

Cruelty of the Assyrians. — The Assyrians have been called the "Romans of Asia." They were a proud, martial, cruel, and unrelenting race. Although possessing, as we have just noticed, a deep and genuine religious feeling, still the Assyrian monarchs often displayed in their treatment of prisoners the disposition of savages. In common with most Asiatics, they had no respect for the body, but subjected captives to the most terrible mutilations. The sculptured marbles taken from the palaces exhibit the cruel

ASSYRIANS FLAYING THEIR PRISONERS ALIVE.

tortures inflicted upon prisoners; kings are being led before their conqueror by means of hooks thrust through one or both lips;[1] other prisoners are being flayed alive; the eyes of some are being bored out with the point of a spear; and still others are having their tongues torn out.

An inscription by Asshur-nasir-pal, found in one of the palaces at Nimrud, runs as follows: "Their men, young and old, I took prisoners. Of some I cut off the feet and hands; of others I cut off the noses, ears, and lips; of the young men's ears I made a

[1] See 2 Chron. xxxiii. 10–13 (Revised Version).

heap; of the old men's heads I built a tower. I exposed their heads as a trophy in front of their city. The male children and the female children I burned in the flames."

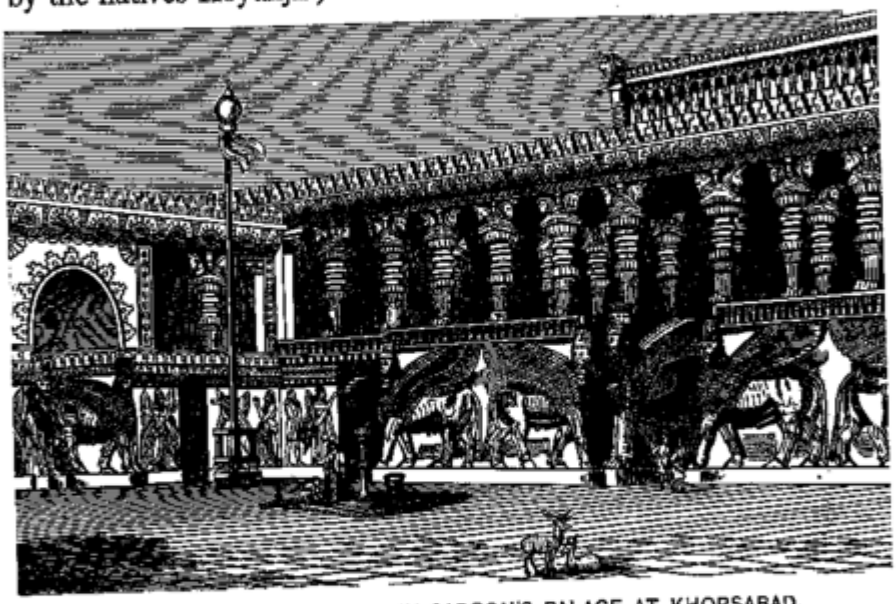
Royal Sports. — The Assyrian king gloried in being, like the great Nimrod, "a mighty hunter before the Lord." The monuments are covered with sculptures that represent the king engaged in the favorite royal sport. Asshur-izer-pal had at Nineveh a menagerie, or hunting-park, filled with various animals, many of which were sent him as tribute by vassal princes.

LION HUNT. (From Nineveh.)

Remains of Assyrian Cities. — Enormous grass-grown mounds, enclosed by crumbled ramparts, alone mark the sites of the great cities of the Assyrian kings. The character of the remains arises from the nature of the building material. City walls, palaces, and temples were constructed chiefly of sun-dried bricks, so that the generation that raised them had scarcely passed away before they began to sink down into heaps of rubbish. The rains of many centuries have beaten down and deeply furrowed these mounds, while the grass has crept over them and made green alike the palaces of the kings and the temples of the gods.[1]

[1] Lying upon the left bank of the Upper Tigris are two enormous mounds surrounded by heavy earthen ramparts, about eight miles in circuit. This is the site of ancient Nineveh, the immense enclosing-ridges being the ruined city walls. These ramparts are still, in their crumbled condition, about fifty feet

Palace-Mounds and Palaces. — In order to give a certain dignity to the royal residence, to secure the fresh breezes, and to render them more easily defended, the Assyrians, as well as the Babylonians and the Persians, built their palaces upon lofty artificial terraces, or platforms. These eminences, which appear like natural, flat-topped hills, were constructed with an almost incredible expenditure of human labor. The great palace-mound at Nineveh, called by the natives Koyunjik, covers an area of one hundred acres, and



RESTORATION OF A COURT IN SARGON'S PALACE AT KHORSABAD.
(After Fergusson.)

is from seventy to ninety feet high. Out of the material composing it could be built four pyramids as large as that of Cheops. Upon this mound stood several of the most splendid palaces of the Ninevite kings.

The group of buildings constituting the royal residence was

high, and average about one hundred and fifty in width. The lower part of the wall was constructed of solid stone masonry; the upper portion of dried brick. This upper and frailer part, crumbling into earth, has completely buried the stone basement. The Turks of to-day quarry the stone from these old walls for their buildings.

often of enormous extent; the various courts, halls, corridors, and chambers of the Palace of Sennacherib, which surmounted the great platform at Nineveh, covered an area of over ten acres. The palaces were usually one-storied. The walls, constructed chiefly of dried brick, were immensely thick and heavy. The rooms and galleries were plastered with stucco, or panelled with precious woods, or lined with enamelled bricks. The main halls, however, and the great open courts were faced with slabs of alabaster, covered with sculptures and inscriptions, the illustrated narrative of the wars and labors of the monarch. There were two miles of such sculptured panelling at Koyunjik. At the portals of the palace, to guard the approach, were stationed the colossal human-headed bulls.

SCULPTURES FROM A GATEWAY AT KHORSABAD.

An important adjunct of the palace was the temple, a copy of the tower-temples of the Chaldæans. Its position is marked at present by a lofty conical mound rising amidst and overlooking the palace ruins.

Upon the decay of the Assyrian palaces, the material forming the upper part of the thick walls completely buried and protected all the lower portion of the structure. In this way their sculptures and inscriptions have been preserved through so many centuries, till brought to light by the recent excavations of French and English antiquarians.

The Royal Library at Nineveh. — Within the palace of Asshur-bani-pal at Nineveh, Layard discovered what is known as the Royal Library. There were two chambers, the floors of which were heaped with books, like the Chaldæan tablets already described. The number of books in the collection has been estimated at ten thousand. The writing upon some of the tablets is so minute that it cannot be read without the aid of a magnifying glass. We learn from the inscriptions that a librarian had charge of the collection. Catalogues of the books have been found, made out on clay tablets. The library was open to the public, for an inscription says, "I [Asshur-bani-pal] wrote upon the tablets; I placed them in my palace for the instruction of my people."

Asshur-bani-pal, as we have already learned, was the Augustus of Assyria. It was under his patronage and direction that most of the books were prepared and placed in the Ninevite collection. The greater part of these were copies of older Chaldæan tablets; for the literature of the Assyrians, as well as their arts and sciences, was borrowed almost in a body from the Chaldæans. All the old libraries of the low country were ransacked, and copies of their tablets made for the Royal Library at Nineveh. Rare treasures were secured from the libraries founded or enlarged by Sargon of Agadê (see p. 42). In this way was preserved the most valuable portion of the early Chaldæan literature, which would otherwise have been lost to the world.

The tablets embrace a great variety of subjects; the larger part, however, are lexicons and treatises on grammar, and various other works intended as text-books for scholars. Perhaps the most curious of the tablets yet found are notes issued by the government, and made redeemable in gold and silver on presentation at the king's treasury.

From one part of the library, which seems to have been the archives proper, were taken copies of treaties, reports of officers of the government, deeds, wills, mortgages, and contracts. One tablet, known as "the Will of Sennacherib," conveys to certain priests some personal property to be held in trust for one of his sons. This is the oldest will in existence.

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