



Syrian-Palestinian Cities on Stone

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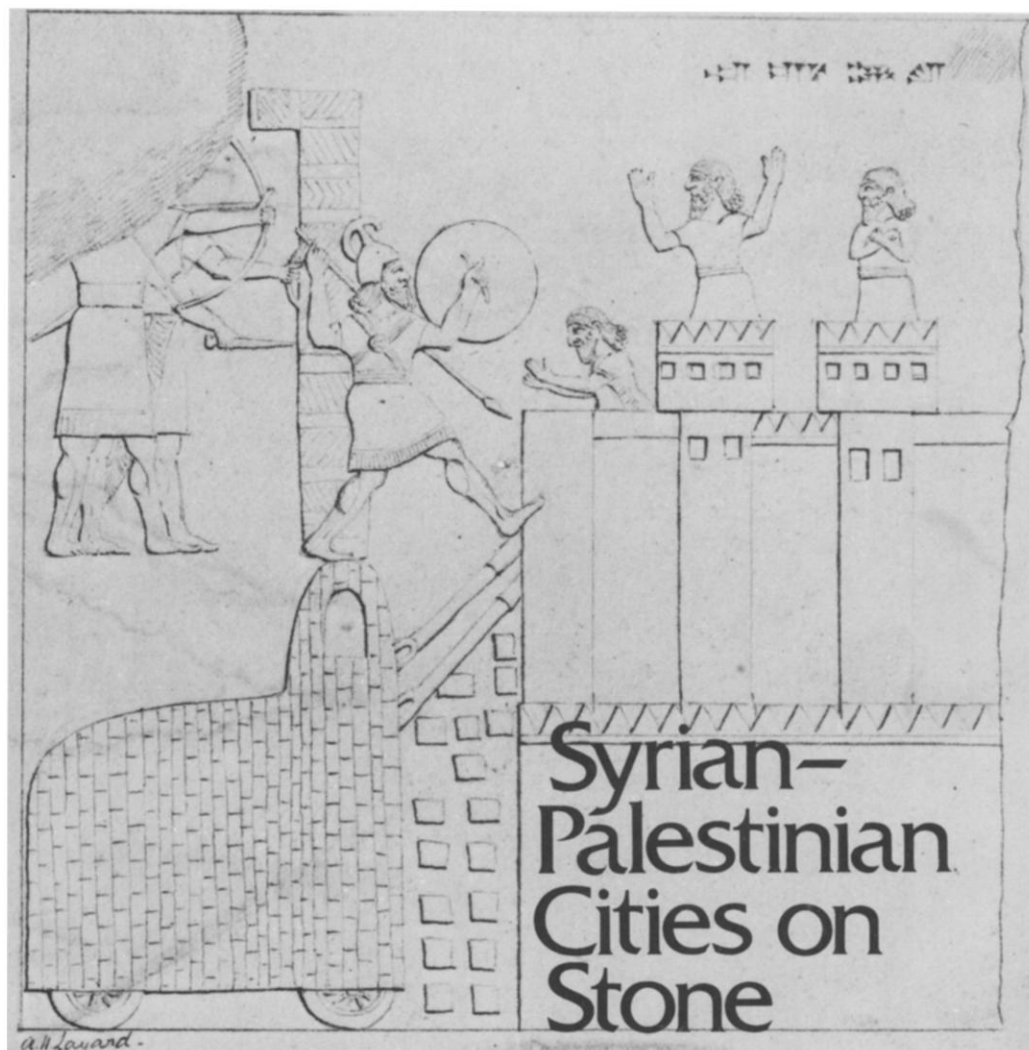
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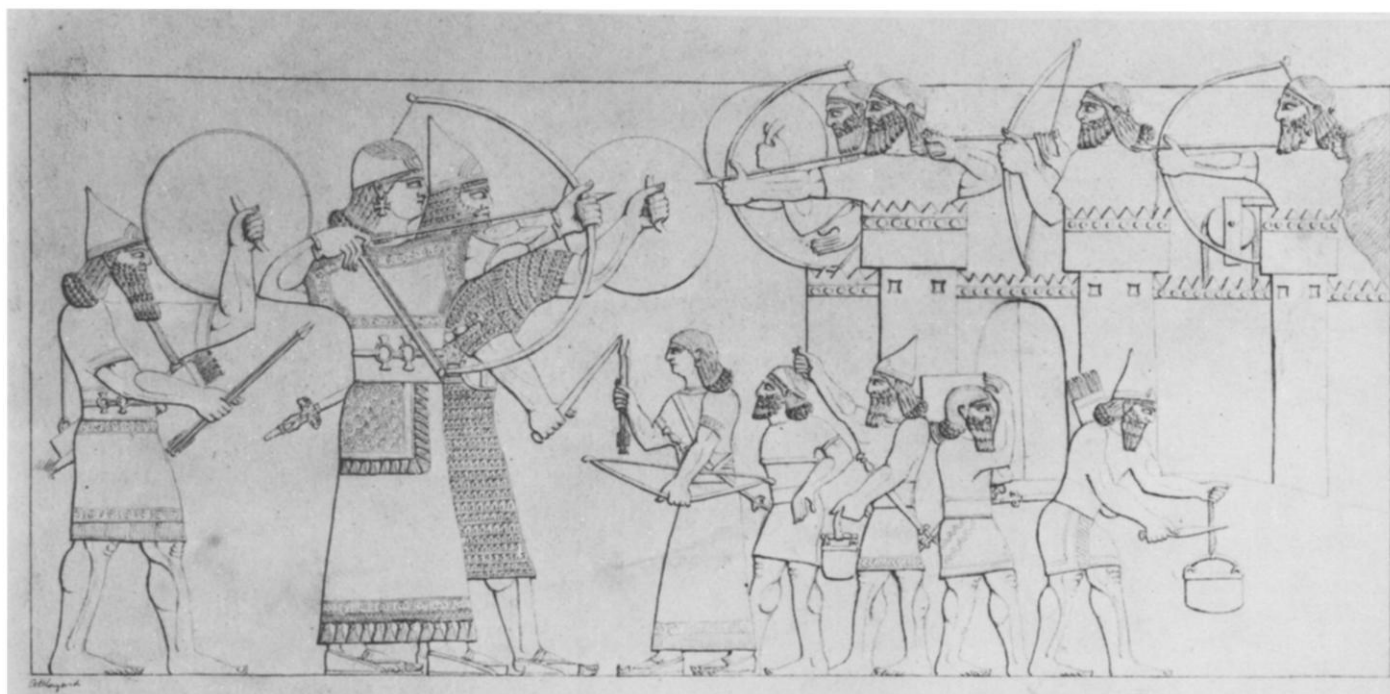
Pauline Albenda

The pictorial art unearthed at the Assyrian royal palaces provides invaluable information about various aspects of ancient life, particularly architecture, topography, military operations, and foreign peoples. For students of Syria-Palestine, the bas-reliefs depicting Assyrian military campaigns into the area are well worthy of careful study.

The Assyrian army assaults the Philistine city of Gezer. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Written documents from the 2nd millennium B.C. attest that Assyrian rulers made sporadic incursions to the West. One early ruler, Shamshi-Adad I (ca. 1780 B.C.), reached the Mediterranean Sea, where "my great name and my memorial stele I set upon the coast of Lâban." Later kings note only that they ventured as far as the city of Carchemish on the Euphrates River.

Beginning with the reign of Tiglath-pileser I (1115-1077 B.C.), more aggressive campaigns to the West were undertaken. This ruler boasted that he received the tribute of Gebal (Byblos), Sidon, and Arvad (a small island off the Mediterranean coast). Underlying Tiglath-pileser's journeys to the Mediterranean area was the need to obtain timber such as boxwood, cedar, cypress, juniper, and



Assyrian soldiers attack a city. One soldier severs a bucket from a rope. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

pine, to be used for the construction of Assyrian temples. Henceforth, Assyrian rulers also imposed taxes upon conquered territories. Adad-Nirari II (911-891 B.C.) records that during an expedition to the Mediterranean coast he “embarked in ships of the Arvadites and slew a *nahiru* (dolphin) in the Great Sea,” surely a remarkable feat for an Assyrian king.

The reign of Ashurnasirpal II (833-859 B.C.) initiated the many great invasions that were emulated by succeeding Assyrian rulers, all aimed at controlling vast territories and subduing troublesome opposition. The vivid accounts of these military

exploits enable us to trace the expansion of the neo-Assyrian Empire over the course of several centuries.

Innovations in the pictorial arts also occurred under Ashurnasirpal II. For the first time, the king’s activities in the hunt and war began to be displayed on a grand scale. These narrative scenes, carved on stone, appear only in the throne room of Ashurnasirpal’s residence at Nimrud (Calah). Of these bas-reliefs, a number were discovered reused in the South-West Palace of Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.), a much later king. Elsewhere in the many chambers of Ashurnasirpal’s residence the walls were faced with limestone slabs upon which were carved religious subjects. However, excavated finds from Nimrud, Nineveh, and Khorsabad (Dur-Sharrukin) indicate that warlike

subjects comprised the main idea for the stone reliefs that decorated the numerous walls of the royal residences in later periods.

At the time of the discovery of the Assyrian palaces in the mid-19th century, drawings were made of the decorated stone slabs unearthed at the various sites. In many instances the bas-reliefs were exposed in poor condition, and circumstances often made it difficult or impossible to transport the better-preserved sculptures. Still other bas-reliefs never completed the combined land-and-sea voyage to Europe. Therefore, in addition to the written reports prepared by the excavators—E. Botta, A. H. Layard, W. Loftus, and H. Rassam—those drawings made on the spot remain an invaluable record of the royal art of Assyria.



Narrative scenes from the bas-reliefs of the 9th century B.C. consist of well-defined compositions which describe events in a general manner. By the end of the 8th century B.C. this mode of representation was transformed into detailed, panoramic views that extended over large areas of wall surface. This later art yields an abundance of information concerning architecture, topography, military tactics, and foreign peoples.

The military scenes from Ashurnasirpal's palace are uninscribed, thus presenting problems of identification. Nonetheless, one bas-relief deserves attention. Pictured among the combatants of a walled city under siege is an Assyrian soldier who severs a bucket attached to a rope and pulley. The mechanical contrivance, known as a *čerd*, serves the purpose of raising water from a well. The act of cutting the bucket loose from the rope may imply that the besieged inhabitants are deprived of the main source of water from an important water system within the city.

Excavations of biblical cities (e.g., Taanach, Gibeon, Hazor, Megiddo) have revealed that large underground water systems within fortified cities were constructed in the 2nd and 1st millennia B.C. The bas-relief may illustrate a punitive attack against one such city encountered during an Assyrian expedition to the Mediterranean coast. Ashurnasirpal II had, at that time, crossed the Orontes River and traveled south along the Lebanon Mountains. Assyrian raids against cities in the land of Luhuti were made to sustain the army and animals. Ashurnasirpal subsequently proceeded west to the Mediterranean Sea and journeyed north through the coastal cities of Phoenicia and to the Amanus Mountains.

Ashurnasirpal's son and successor, Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.), campaigned actively against his western neighbors. The kingdoms of Aram (Damascus) and Israel, together with their allies, joined in an alliance under Irhuleni of Hamath which met Shalmaneser at Qarqar on the Orontes River in 853 B.C. The

coalition opposed the Assyrian army again in 848, 847, 845, and 841. It was only after the last of these campaigns that Shalmaneser accomplished the submission of the western states.

While no bas-reliefs from the period of Shalmaneser III have been recovered, the military exploits and triumphs of his reign are contained in scenes embossed and chased on a series of bronze ornamental bands. These excellently preserved bands originally covered the cedar doors of a temple at Balawat, a site not far from Nineveh. The bands are divided into two registers, each about 27 cm high. Their subject-matter stresses the relentless movements of the Assyrian militia: the long marches, violent battles, sieges, and subjugation of defeated peoples. The scenes showing besieged cities conform to a schematic formula that was familiar in the preceding period. Generally, Assyrian soldiers flank one or both sides of the walled city and are drawn almost to the height of the register. In contrast, the city is reduced in size to



Left: decorated bronze band, showing an Assyrian assault against the city of Ashtamaku. **Right:** continuation of the bronze band, depicting an ailing ruler of a city in Hamath imploring for mercy (above) and the defeated inhabitants being led away in disgrace (below). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

accommodate its main features and topographical setting.

Brief captions identify the striking episodes from the campaigns of the Assyrian king. Several registers concern the military operations against cities of the land of Hamath in 848 B.C. In one section the Assyrian chariotry, led by King Shalmaneser, advance behind rows of archers who assault the double-walled city of Ashtamaku, the capital of Hamath. The demise of its inhabitants is graphically described by the severed heads and ruined orchards which line the banks of the river beyond the wall. The Assyrian army is next depicted attacking another citadel of the land of Hamath, where the ailing ruler reclining on his bed and other inhabitants implore mercy. The aftermath of these battles is displayed in the lower register, where shackled naked men, together with their wailing women, are shown being led away.

Elsewhere on the bronze bands, the Phoenician coast is represented. Above this scene an inscription states,

"I received the tribute of the ships of the men of Tyre and Sidon." Standing before a large walled city situated on a rocky island in the Mediterranean Sea, a Phoenician ruler and his wife oversee the transport of goods and wares by ship and, on land, by attendants.

Following the reign of Shalmaneser III, internal dissensions caused a decline in Assyria's western expansion. A punitive expedition against the West was made by a general of Shamshi-Adad V (823-810 B.C.), and, much later, Adad-Nirari III (805-782 B.C.) marched against Palashtu (Palestine) and Aram. Tribute and taxes were imposed upon the king of Damascus at this time. In his annals, Adad-Nirari III boasts the submission of the lands of Hatti, Phoenicia, Humri (Israel), and Palestine. However, no pictorial versions of these events are known.

The resurgence of Assyrian power was launched in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.). His intense military campaigns attempted

to consolidate the lands of the West, as far as the border of Egypt. The cities of Phoenicia and Judah, and the queen of Arabia, submitted to the Assyrian king. Tiglath-pileser III invaded Moab, Gilead, and Galilee, and defeated the Philistine cities of Ashkelon, Gaza, and Gezer.

Episodes from his western expeditions are illustrated among the wall reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III discovered in his Central Palace at Nimrud. The upper scene of a bas-relief divided into two registers depicts the capture of Astartu (Ashtoreth-Karnaim in Gilead). The walled city stands on a platform built on the summit of an acropolis. Within the town rises a citadel with an arched door. Astartu is deserted. Its inhabitants, dressed in the characteristic garments of the region, together with fat-tailed sheep are led away by Assyrian soldiers. The Assyrian king is portrayed triumphant in his chariot in the lower register.

Another bas-relief from the same series displays the assault against an impressive triply fortified city. Be-



Above: decorated bronze band. The ruler of a Phoenician city located on an island oversees the transport of tribute. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Below: the army of Sargon II advances toward a Philistine city. Courtesy of the Musée du Louvre. **Opposite:** bas-relief (**above**) and original drawing (**below**) depicting a triply fortified city in Palestine under attack by the Assyrian army. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

sieged by the advancing Assyrian militia, its male defenders counter-attack with bows and arrows, while behind them wailing women stand upon the walls. The pile of corpses beyond the outer wall and the booty being carried away by Assyrian soldiers suggest that the capture of this unidentified city is imminent.

The display of another city taken by assault is preserved in a drawing. In the upper corner is an inscription which reads "the city of Gezer." A battering ram demolished the stone masonry protecting the citadel, hastening the defeat of Gezer by the Assyrian soldiers.

Sargon II (721-705 B.C.) conducted military operations in the same aggressive manner as his royal predecessors. His energetic ventures were illustrated on the wall reliefs that decorated his new palace at Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad). Hall V of this residence was devoted to the campaigns of 720 B.C., when the Assyrian king successfully fought against the rebellion of North Syrian cities led by Yaubidi, a commoner who seized power in Hamath. These

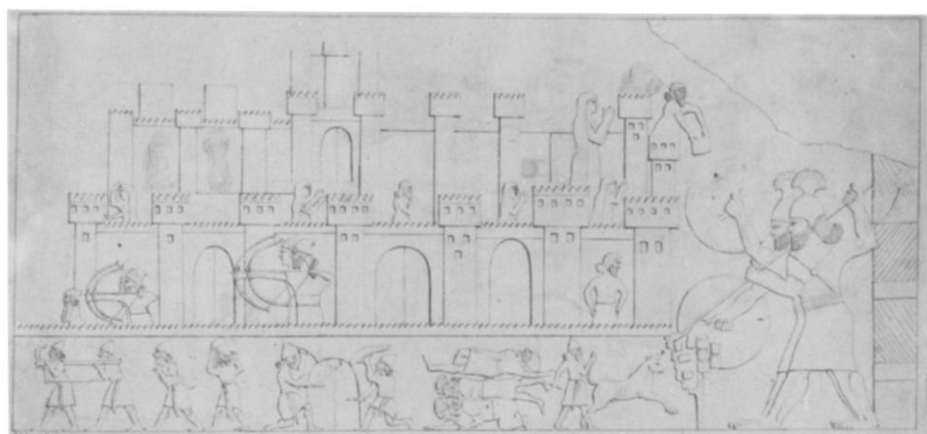
cities were recaptured, to be followed immediately by an Assyrian conquest of the Philistine coast.

Among the reliefs in Hall V, at least seven cities under siege were displayed. Of these, one is identified by a caption as the city of Amkaruna (Ekron). Another city in the series may be Gaza, whose king, Hanno, united with Egyptian troops to battle the Assyrian army. This event occurred at Rapihu (Raphia). The insurgents were defeated, Hanno was captured, the Pharaoh of Egypt sent tribute, and the city of Raphia was destroyed in a conflagration. As the relief shows, the Philistine city consists of a terraced citadel situated on a high, irregular acropolis. A lofty tower and a tree, probably signifying a grove, appear nearby. Distinctive for their hooded garments, the city's inhabitants make a brave defense against the Assyrian forces. The latter are represented by a soldier drawn oversize and two battering rams that destroy a section of the lower wall.

It has been suggested that another city of southwest Philistia displayed in Hall V is to be identified

with Raphia. This citadel is constructed on a high mound whose massive wall lacks crenellations. Defenders along the walls of this Philistine city use spears against Assyrian archers and shield-bearers. The futility of escape is suggested by the demise of one inhabitant outside the city wall.

When Sargon II met his death in battle in the northern frontier of Assyria, his son Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) ascended the throne. In 701 B.C. the Assyrian ruler fought successfully against Syria and the city of Sidon, whose king, Lûli, thereupon fled to Cyprus, where he may have died. Sennacherib's army then proceeded to battle Egyptian troops which had joined forces with the city of Ekron. The Egyptian kings brought "the bowmen, the chariots, and horses of the king of Meluhha (Ethiopia), a countless host." In the battle that ensued, which occurred near the city of Altakû (Eltekeh), the Egyptian forces were defeated. The Assyrian army then advanced to Ekron. This city was defeated, its leaders captured and killed. The Assyrian army next



invaded Judah in a campaign against its king, Hezekiah. Jerusalem was besieged and numerous Judean cities and towns were captured and plundered. Hezekiah himself escaped, but later sent tribute to the Assyrian king.

Events from this prolonged military operation provided the subject for several groups of wall reliefs that decorated Sennacherib's South-West Palace at Nineveh. In each chamber of this palace the wall decorations seem to have been confined to a single military event, in which the main phases of action were pictorially unified: the advance of the Assyrian militia, the attack, the defeat of the enemy, the taking of booty, the submission to the king seated on his throne or standing in his chariot. In one large chamber the wall reliefs, mostly in fragmentary condition when discovered, described the Phoenician coast and an Assyrian attack against its cities. Two contiguous slabs, now lost, showed a citadel along the seashore and double-banked galleys in the Mediterranean Sea, rich with marine life. On one

side of the scene men and women hasten to escape in a Phoenician vessel. In the distance the deserted palace displays an entrance framed by columns topped with proto-ionic capitals.

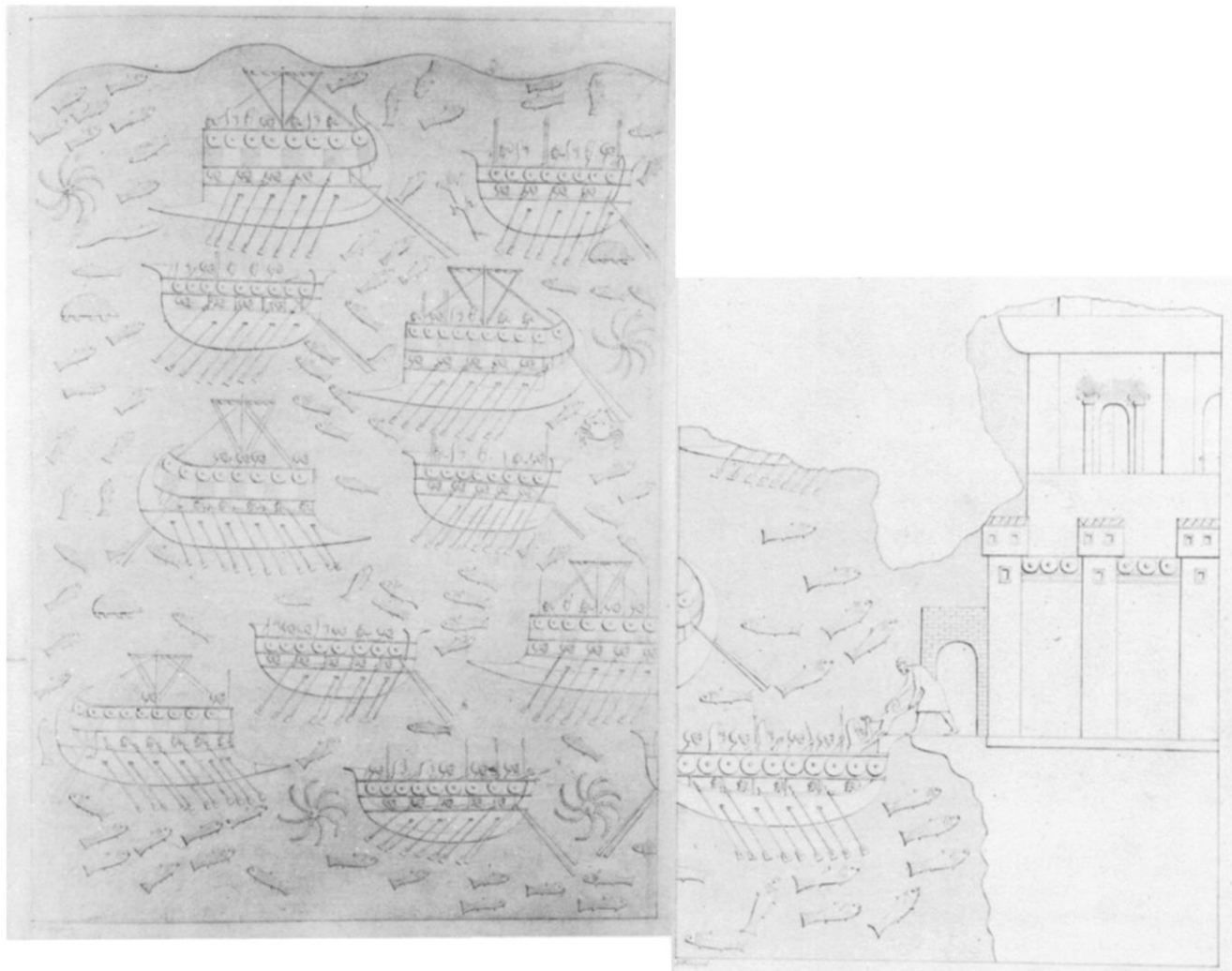
The sculptures discovered in another chamber recorded the siege of a walled city, divided in two parts by a river, whose women were distinguished by high rounded turbans similar to the costume of the women in the Phoenician ships. Another view of a walled city divided by a broad river was found in still another chamber of Sennacherib's palace. The city is situated on a hilly terrain overlooking the watered valley and is surrounded by forests and vineyards. The city is protected by a long, low wall with equidistant towers. Within the walls are square buildings whose windows, immediately below the roof, are formed by small columns with capitals in the form of the proto-ionic volute. This capital type is related to the Phoenician capital with vertical volutes. It provides evidence suggesting that the besieged city is

located in Phoenicia or Palestine. Detached houses located on the near side of the river likewise possess open balustrades. Flames issue from the city and dwellings. Assyrian soldiers marching in long lines carry away the spoil of the city. One group is laden with furniture: chairs, stools, beds, and tables, ornamented with heads and feet of animals.

The sculptured records of Sennacherib's campaign against Lachish were contained in one small chamber. The siege and capture of this city occupy 13 slabs that cover all walls of the room (ca. 11.6 x 5.5 m), relieved only by the entrance. This spectacular, panoramic event is preserved almost in its entirety. Armed Assyrian warriors are drawn up before the besieged double-walled city. The massive onslaught against Lachish is heightened pictorially by the numerous rows of sloping man-made ramps converging to the upper level of the city. Upon these constructions advances a multitude of Assyrian soldiers and battering rams. The Lachishites, amassed along the ramparts and protected by round shields, defend themselves with fierce determination. At their moment of victory against the Judean city, Assyrian soldiers, burdened with booty and prisoners, issue from the gateway in a procession reaching to the presence of the enthroned king, who receives them. Behind the king is the royal tent, his chariots and horses, and beyond is the ground plan of a fortified camp. It has been argued that the fury of the battle of Lachish and its subsequent conflagration are confirmed by archeological evidence.

In the reign of Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.) the Phoenician seacoast and Syria were organized into an Assyrian province. Twenty-two kings of the West—Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Judah, Philistia—were required to furnish and transport to Assyria cedar and cypress beams, as well as breccia, limestone, and marble quarried from mountains in the region.

The Assyrian king's tenth campaign was directed toward Egypt. With the aid of camels supplied by Arabian tribes, the Assyrians traversed the desert and reached the royal city of Memphis. This city was attacked vigorously and plundered.



The assault against another city of Egypt, most probably Thebes, was the subject of a bas-relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.) at Nineveh. The scene may record the defeat of the Kushite monarch, Tanoutamon, at the capital city of Upper Egypt in the year 664/663 B.C. The Egyptian city is shown located on a low, flat hill a short distance from the Nile River and is protected by a wall reinforced with pylon-shaped battlements.

The bas-relief conveys the full extent of the Assyrian army's superiority; many archers and spearmen mount the scaling ladders, while other Assyrian soldiers break through the base of the wall and prepare to set the city on fire. From the city gate Egyptian and Kushite men and women are led away. The

shackled Kushite leaders are differentiated from other Theban citizens by the tall ostrich feathers worn in their hair.

Fifteen years after the death of Ashurbanipal, Egyptian troops went to the support of Assyria when that country was attacked by the king of Akkad and the Manda-hordes. It was a futile effort. In 612 B.C. the joint military forces of the Babylonians, ruled by Nabopolassar, and the Medes, under their king Cyaxares, marched against Assyria and conquered the city of Harran. This city had become the royal residence of the last Assyrian king, Ashurballit II, when the cities of Ashur and Nineveh were overtaken and destroyed a few years earlier. The Assyrian king was unable to reconquer the city of Harran. Assyrian cities and towns

were attacked and reduced to ruined mounds. Shortly thereafter the Assyrian Empire disappeared forever.

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Opposite: two original drawings have been connected and illustrate a city located on the Mediterranean coast. Its inhabitants flee in Phoenician ships. **Top:** the defeat of a city located on a hilly terrain in Phoenicia or Palestine. **Middle:** the city of Lachish under attack by Sennacherib's military forces. **Bottom:** the attack against a city in Egypt, probably Thebes. All photographs and drawings courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



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