

## CHAPTER 18

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## ASSYRIA AT WAR: STRATEGY AND CONDUCT

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At the height of her power Assyria dominated the core areas of all the great ancient Near Eastern civilizations, from Egypt to Iran, from Babylonia to Anatolia. The territories under her direct, as well as indirect, rule represented a huge land mass, which surpassed all former empires by a factor of at least four. We should ask ourselves what led to this unprecedented expansion. Obviously it cannot be attributed to an intrinsic advantage on the Assyrian side. The Assyrian heartland was of moderate size only, its population neither more numerous nor significantly more productive than its enemies. Assyria was not fanaticized by new ideas or ideologies either, and every advance in military technology was immediately shared by all Near Eastern contemporaries. The Assyrian kings were no charismatic leaders and their wars did not produce a military genius—there was no Assyrian Alexander, Genghis Khan, or Bonaparte whatsoever. According to the Assyrians' own official point of view, the help of their gods was the main reason for their success, but there was no shortage of supportive gods among their enemies either.

In fact, the rise of Assyria can be explained by the peculiar historical setting of the later 10th century and the developments leading to it. Assyria had already been a great power centuries before, but in the 13th–12th-century political context Assyria had been just one Near Eastern empire among others and by no means the most powerful one. The universal decline of the 11th century and the political chaos of the 10th deprived the empires of their power bases and some even disappeared completely. Assyria did not emerge unscathed from the crisis years either but at least her core area and her institutions had survived more or less intact. Even in her weakened condition Assyria now towered like a giant over a multitude of dwarfs. The revival of Assyria began during the last decades of the 10th century. Her armed forces developed slowly but steadily and they grew in size faster than the armies of the newly emerging rival powers. The Assyrian kings used their armies cautiously and successfully, giving their troops a lead in numbers, experience, and competence, advantages which they maintained for no less than three centuries.

## THE SOURCES AND THE IDEAL IMAGE OF THE KING AT WAR

We have almost no information on the Assyrian army of the 10th century. For the 9th the situation is much improved by inscriptions and pictorial evidence from the reigns of Assurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BC) as well as Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BC), but almost nothing survives from the first half of the 8th century. The bulk of information comes from the heyday of empire between 745 and 638 BC. The kings of this period again left inscriptions with detailed accounts of their campaigns and depicted their victories on low-relief stone carvings all over the walls of their palaces. But in addition to such official reports, which were meant to commemorate royal achievements for generations to come in the most favourable light possible, original documents from the imperial administration as well as day-to-day correspondence between officials at different levels of the military hierarchy have come down to us. These include letters by the king himself as well as powerful magnates, provincial governors, and many army commanders of lesser rank.

By far the most impressive sources are the royal inscriptions and the palace reliefs. Taken together, they provide detailed information on soldiers, weapons, and all kinds of equipment. We can follow the Assyrian army on its marches and crossing rivers, and have a look at the soldiers in their camp. Most dramatic are the battles, sieges, and, last but not least, the merciless pursuit of the fleeing enemy. Together these sources construct an extremely one-sided picture, showing the Assyrian monarchs as they wanted to be seen by future generations. At the very heart of the ideological message is the tale of the irresistible, ever-victorious, heroic, and completely reckless king (Figures 18.1a, 18.1b). As an example, take the following part of a report on a battle given by an inscription of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BC). The king is confronted by the numerous forces of a vast enemy coalition:

I raged like a lion. I put on the coat of armour; I placed upon my head the helmet, this ornament of fighting. I quickly mounted my excellent battle chariot, which smashes the foe, in the anger of my heart. I seized in my hands the mighty bow, which the god Aššur had given me; I grasped the life-cutting arrow. Against all the hosts of wicked enemies I raised my voice like a thunderstorm; I roared like the storm-god Adad. At the order of Aššur, the great lord, my lord, I charged like the onset of a hurricane at their flanks and front. With the weapons of Aššur, my lord, and my furious onslaught, I made them waver, I forced them to flee. I mowed down the enemy host with arrows. (Borger 1979: 84, ll. 67–81; author's translation)

Leading every single attack in person and from the front, omnipresent, throwing themselves happily into the very midst of battle, rushing on, yelling, shooting, killing, in breathtaking races to glorious victories: that is how Assyrian kings wanted to be remembered. But the conspicuously small number of Assyrian kings actually killed in battle tells us that reality must have been different. Danger freaks, such as the king sketched by Sennacherib's inscription, would have died early and in rapid succession.



**FIGURE 18.1** (a) The heroic king in court dress, leading the charge. (b) Chariot crew in full armour, a rare and probably rather realistic depiction of the fighters and their equipment. Details of a stone relief from Assurnasirpal's Northwest Palace at Kalhu, modern Nimrud, Iraq, 9th century BC. (Drawings by A.H. Layard (*Or. Dr. III: S.W. VII*), reproduced from Barnett and Falkner 1962: pl. CXVI)

A disillusioning glimpse of royal Assyrian behaviour in the real, mundane world is provided by a courtier's or magnate's admonition to Esarhaddon (r. 680–669 BC):

Of course, the king, my lord, should not go to the midst of battle! Just as the kings, your ancestors, have done, take position on a hill, and let your magnates do the fighting! (Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002: no. 77, rev. 3–8; author's translation)

This message was written without propagandistic intent, for it was meant not for future generations but for the king's eyes (or ears) only. Here we have the voice of reason. Because the Assyrian empire was focused to a large extent on the person of its monarch a king's demise was always critical. Even if the question of succession had already been resolved, the king's sudden death on the battlefield was likely to plunge the whole system into complete disarray. In their own inscriptions the kings portrayed themselves as fighting maniacs, bereft of any sense of danger, but to behave like that in real life would have been irresponsible madness which jeopardized the whole empire. Esarhaddon's father, Sennacherib, was certainly among those ancestral kings mentioned by the mag-nate. So even if we cannot exclude the possibility that Sennacherib indeed raised his voice and roared in battle, as claimed by his inscriptions, we can definitely say that if he had done so he must have roared from a safe distance!

## BATTLE REPORTS—FACTS OR FICTIONS?

Sennacherib's inscription, as cited above, exemplifies how combat was portrayed in order to leave a lasting impression of the king's glory to future generations. For the composers of such heroic constructs, realism and accuracy were not amongst their top priorities. But what about the non-propagandistic sources, as for instance the messages that the kings received directly from their field commanders? The following extract of a report, sent to king Assurbanipal in about 650 BC, gives some impression of Assyrian small-scale warfare. Bel-ibni, the sender of the letter, was an Assyrian general based in the Sealand (the gulf coast of southern Iraq), whose task was to devastate the Elamite territory (modern southwest Iran) situated on the opposite shore of the Gulf:

When I sent 150 (men) against the districts of Akbanu and Ale, on the opposite bank of the river Takkatap, they killed many soldiers there and took 130 prisoners. They burned down Akbanu and Ale. But when Amurru-zera-ibni, Yadadanu, Bihayatu, the son of Mahiranu, sheikh of the Halat-people, as well as Laqe, son of Hallalla' and their troops, 400 bows altogether, figured out the route of the servants of the king, my lord, they took a position behind the river Nahal to ambush the servants of the king, my lord. The servants of the king, my lord, therefore took another road and made use of a ford 3000 cubits upstream of them. Here they accomplished the crossing of the river until (all of them) had reached the other side. Afterwards they went straight for them. When the servants of the king, my lord, realized the great number of the soldiers downstream of them, and since they would have their hands full (once the fighting had begun), they killed all the prisoners they had taken. And they said to each other: 'We are 14 double-miles from the Sealand! If we have to die, let us die with an honourable reputation!' Since the gods of the king, my lord, stood by his servants, they killed 17 soldiers of them and hit 60 or 70 more (before) they (i.e., the enemy soldiers) fled. Among the



servants of the king, my lord, only 20 soldiers have been hit. (Vaan 1995: 266–267, obv. 9–rev. 10; author’s translation)

At first glance, this seems to be a truly authentic report, but the heroic elements of the story must arouse our suspicion. Moreover, the report on the event, a skirmish won against all odds, was the result of at least two interventions, both of them made by subordinates who could hope to rise in their master’s favour if their success was noticed. The returning soldiers certainly tried to impress their general; the general in turn seized the opportunity to please his king. It has always been a courtier’s most important skill to know how to exaggerate his merits to maximum effect without carrying it too far. As for the report just quoted, no independent source is available to help us to estimate Belibni’s abilities as a courtier or the deviation of his report from the actual event.

Now, if the generals and soldiers exaggerated their victories, what about the king’s own advisors (Radner in this volume)? Can we assume we get reliable information from those men, at least, who helped the ruler to make his decisions? For an answer take the following example. When Esarhaddon made plans to invade the Mannean kingdom in western Iran, a possible intervention by Cimmerian warriors had to be taken into consideration. Assyrian diplomats had already reached an agreement with the Cimmerians, but these strange horse nomads, who seemed to come from the back of beyond, could not be trusted. A certain Bel-ušeziḫ advised his king, Esarhaddon, how to avoid an ambush:

If the king has written to his forces: ‘Invade (the territory of) Mannea!’ not all the forces should invade; only the cavalry and the seasoned troops should invade! As for the Cimmerians who said: ‘The Mannaeans are at your mercy, we will keep out of this!’ perhaps this was a lie; they are barbarians to whom an oath sworn by god or a treaty means nothing! The chariots and baggage train should stay side by side in the pass, while the cavalry and the seasoned troops should invade and plunder the countryside of Mannea and come back and take position in the pass. If, after they have invaded and plundered once or two times, the Cimmerians have not advanced against them, the whole force can enter and throw itself against the cities of Mannea. (Parpola 1993: no. 111, obv. 9—rev. 4; author’s translation)

We can easily imagine the mountain pass and the less mobile army units waiting there, while detachments of cavalry and skirmishers swarm out in order to lure the enemy into a premature attack by which he would reveal both his position and his true intention. But how close was all this to the real situation in Mannea? The advice seems plausible and we might think of Bel-ušeziḫ as a military expert who knew the local terrain by heart. But in fact he was not even a member of the armed forces. His many letters to the king make it clear that he was a scholar working in Nineveh, whose advice was based on the interpretation of astrological omens! As he admits later on in the same letter, he did not have the faintest idea about the realities of the Mannean landscape:

I am writing to the king, my lord, without knowing the exit and entry of that country. The lord of (all) kings should ask an expert on the country, and the king should

(then) write to his forces as he deems best. (Parpola 1993: no. 111, rev. 9–13; author's translation)

Suddenly we find the armchair strategist in full retreat! Perhaps he had realized that he might have jeopardized his own comfortable position at Esarhaddon's court: if his advice proved right, others would step in afterwards to share the success. However, if the scheme misfired, the sole advocate of the idea was likely to fall out of favour with the king. So it was well advised to find additional supporters for one's own ideas, preferably people of sound competence on to whom responsibility could be shifted in case of trouble.

We do not know how the 'expert on the country' assessed Bel-ušeziḫ's advice, or even if his idea was discussed at all. There are certain hints that in 676 a campaign against Mannea was broken off after initial success, and we know for sure that the kingdom of Mannea was not defeated in Esarhaddon's reign. Bel-ušeziḫ was just one out of a multitude of experts and advisors. He certainly tried to do his best but at least in this special case, his advice did not lead to victory.

## MISLEADING PICTURES

Similar problems affect the reliability of the pictorial evidence. For example, according to Sennacherib's inscription quoted above, the king put on his helmet and his body armour before going to battle, but for the artists it was of primary importance to identify the king by his royal insignia. Therefore, in images, kings are always shown wearing their ceremonial gown, even in combat scenes. Another example is the way chariots are depicted. Probably for mere reasons of artistic economy, no more than one type of Assyrian chariot is ever shown on the reliefs made for any one king, whereas administrative sources list the names of several chariot types (Dalley and Postgate 1984: 34; Postgate 2000: 96). Of course, portraying a chariot was a rather ambitious task, so perhaps the artists were happy to have mastered the difficulty of depicting just one type and reused their drafts whenever needed.

Further, there are qualitative as well as quantitative differences in the equipment of Assyrian and enemy soldiers as seen on the palace reliefs. While the Assyrians generally appear well armed, the enemy warriors are shown badly equipped and unprotected, even unarmed or naked. This is in clear contradiction to the evidence provided by the written sources, which tell us that the Assyrians and their enemies used the very same range of weapon types and armoury. At this point, we have to remember the intention behind the images as well as behind the official texts. There was never any intention to convey a precise picture of real events. Instead they depict only the key episodes, which, taken together, tell us not what actually happened, but what should have happened. As a consequence, enemies had to be depicted as ill equipped and badly armed in order to avoid the slightest doubt about the outcome of the battle shown.

## THE GODS AT WAR

Only people with no personal experience of war could be convinced of Assyria's invincibility by the images of the hero king and the impressions of clean and happy warfare shown on the wall reliefs in the royal palaces. For those who actually took part in the campaigns and shared the risks and uncertainties of real warfare, these images were no more than expressions of their wishes and may be interpreted even as magical invocations of future victories.

Of course, the Assyrian troops and their leaders made extensive use of all possible religious means to guarantee supernatural support for their dangerous business. From the army's departure until its return every stage of a campaign had to be accompanied by rituals and sacrifices to please the gods, and afterwards the priests expected a substantial share in the loot carried home by the soldiers. Such gifts were expressions of gratitude as well as advance payments for future services. But for those fighting, divine support had to be even more concrete and practical. The gods, in the form of standards showing their images, accompanied the soldier on the march; they rested with him in the same field camp; and they fought side by side with him. To this purpose, each standard had its own chariot on which it could be mounted. In battle, the god stood in his vehicle and charged, visible to all (Pongratz-Leisten, Deller, and Bleibtreu 1992: 351, 2.2.1.1.).

In addition, secret knowledge offered ways to get significant advantages over the enemy without physical combat. Scholars who specialized in a bewildering range of highly diversified magical practices accompanied the king on his campaigns. Some could read specific signs warning of impending dangers, while others mastered the rites necessary to get answers from the gods on questions regarding matters such as the enemy's next moves or the outcome of an ongoing operation (Starr 1990; Koch in this volume). And last but not least there were those who knew how to incite the gods' wrath against the enemy, in order to bring upon him disease, despair, and disaster, even fire raining down from the sky (Fuchs, 2010: 417–419).

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we might laugh at all of this apparently naïve mumbo jumbo. But even if the underlying assumptions were complete nonsense by our standards, these ideas and behaviours had massive repercussions in the real world. Certainly the rituals calmed fears, bolstered confidence, and convinced the soldiers to fight for a just cause, while the practice of secret knowledge must have strengthened confidence even in the most desperate situations. Without doubt, for a fighting force such morale boosts are at least as valuable as any superiority in numbers or technology. In those cases, therefore, the ideals shaped reality.

## THE 'HUGE HOSTS OF AŠŠUR'

From the end of the 10th century the Assyrian kings steadily increased the numerical strength of their forces and improved their equipment. By the second half of the 8th century the army's strength was enough to deter all but the most powerful enemies and

coalitions from risking a pitched battle against the Assyrian juggernaut. According to the language of royal propaganda, the invading ‘huge hosts of Aššur’ could now cover an enemy’s territory to its full extent, like ‘a swarm of locusts’ or ‘a fog’.

The Assyrian armed forces were not a national army in the modern sense. The troops of the Assyrian heartland proper were always reinforced by additional forces from the outside, and when the empire grew in territory the proportion of provincial troops and armies of vassal kings increased accordingly. But not even the provinces of the extended empire could meet the insatiable need for soldiers. Therefore prisoners of war, even complete armies of defeated states, as well as various auxiliaries were incorporated (Dalley 1985). As a result, the armed forces of Assyria became a rather colourful, multi-ethnic entity whose heterogeneity as a side effect helped the kings to maintain control over their forces. Separated by their different backgrounds, the constituent parts of the army probably kept each other in check and competed for the king’s favour instead of forming an alliance against him. In the 7th century soldiers of almost a dozen different ethnic backgrounds served in the palace guards. The principle of divide and rule seems to have worked: so far as we know, no Assyrian king ever met the fate of so many Roman emperors and Abbasid caliphs, who ended up as mere puppets of their own armed forces (Fuchs 2005: 51–55).

In fact, the ‘huge hosts of Aššur’ consisted of several armies, which differed considerably in size, structure, origin, and combat value. The core was the ‘royal contingent’, which comprised the elite units led by members of the royal family. Each of the great cities of the Assyrian heartland contributed an army unit and the same was expected of every powerful magnate and every province (Dalley and Postgate 1984). Vassal kings commanded their respective armies, while the warriors sent by allied tribes formed small ethnic contingents of their own. As for the soldiers recruited within the empire, the relative proportions of conscripts and volunteers are unknown. Most soldiers probably received a piece of land in return for their services, but there must have been some forms of payment in cash for mercenaries and for auxiliaries of nomadic origin. As in most armies, the main incentive to fight at all must have been the soldier’s share of the expected spoils of war. In this respect, however, the prospects were more than promising, because the Assyrians were usually the winners. The king was also expected to take care of those who had lost their health in his service. Sennacherib, for instance, was proud to call himself ‘the one who gives help and assistance to the cripples’ (Borger 1979: 68, I 5–6).

An all-round central administration comparable to that of modern armies, painstakingly registering every aspect of military life down to the last bit of equipment, did not exist in the ancient Near East. Instead, every unit was to some extent an organism, each with resources of its own. For instance, an Assyrian governor was completely responsible for his province’s contingent. He was to provide equipment, food, housing, and payment, and was expected to keep his contingent at a certain numerical strength through recruitment. The men probably served on a rota: every year, a certain proportion of the troops, led by the governor in person, joined the field army, while their comrades stayed behind under the command of the vice-governor to keep up public order and to defend the province if necessary.

The ‘huge hosts of Aššur’ were far too heterogeneous to have a standardized structure. At least among the core troops such ranks as ‘commander of ten’ or ‘commander of fifty’ suggest units of standardized strength. Moreover, contingents of 2000 foot soldiers appear frequently. The written sources mention four different armed forces, identified by the Assyrian military jargon as ‘wheels’ (chariots), ‘horses’ (cavalry), ‘bearers of the bow’ (bowmen fighting on foot), and ‘bearers of shield and spear’ (spearmen fighting on foot). The ideal composition of a substantial Assyrian force at the end of the 8th century is provided by an inscription of Sargon II (r. 721–705 BC), who deployed in his endangered northwestern provinces ‘150 wheels, 1500 horses, 20,000 bearers of the bow and 10,000 bearers of shield and spear’ (Fuchs 1994: 179 n. 410). Accordingly, the ideal composition of an Assyrian army regarding chariots, cavalry, and infantry seems to have been 1:10:200, while among the foot soldiers the ratio between long-range fighters and close combat troops was 2:1. A numerical strength of more than 30,000 men may seem extraordinary, but it has to be remembered that this force was a detachment only, albeit a very strong one. The size of the main army must have been even more impressive, but for its overall strength no reliable numbers are available.

## THE STRATEGIC LEVEL: ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES AND IN DIFFERENT THEATRES OF WAR

Surrounded by enemies on all sides, Assyria never had the privilege of being able to concentrate on just one foe alone. Most of the time, the strike power necessary to guarantee success could only be achieved if the available forces were concentrated into one single army. As a consequence, within any given year Assyria’s armed forces could be present in no more than a single theatre of war. Before the beginning of each campaigning season, the objective had therefore to be chosen wisely. Once the army was on the move, any attempt to redirect it to another region would have resulted in a lamentable waste of time. After northern Mesopotamia had been brought under firm control, the Assyrian kings engaged in several theatres of war, each with its own distinctive features.

To the north there was the kingdom of Urartu, Assyria’s main rival in Iran and Syria. The Urartian army was no match for the Assyrian forces, and the Urartian kings were wise enough never to attack the Assyrian heartland directly. But their own mountainous realm was accessible only via difficult passes and they had studded their entire territory with numerous castles. These could not be taken by force and neither was it possible to starve them out, because the Assyrians always had to retreat before the onset of winter closed the high mountain passes with snow and ice.

To the west, in Syria and the Levant, numerous highly civilized kingdoms of moderate size and power were just the victims the Assyrians wished for. The Syrian kings were rich but constantly at loggerheads and therefore unable to coordinate their well-equipped but small armies into joint defence for any substantial period of time. However, they had

invested some of their riches in surrounding their cities with massive fortifications, and to reduce just one of them could take the Assyrians up to three years. Nevertheless it was in the west that the Assyrian military machine achieved its most lasting victories.

To the south of the empire stretched the endless wastelands of the Syrian and Arabian deserts. In these waterless ranges the army fulfilled police duties in order to keep in check the nomads, who, from the Assyrian point of view, were nothing but thieves and bandits living in tents.

To the southeast, in modern-day southern Iraq, several holy cities—among them the prestigious city of Babylon itself—plus half a dozen Chaldaean tribal kingdoms and many dozens of Aramaean tribes together constituted the confusing political mess called Babylonia. The rivalries between the various leaders of all these cities and tribal groups always ruined any effort at united defence. Moreover, their troops may have been numerous but were of inferior quality and easy to rout. But they never gave up completely and in each generation Babylonia had to be conquered anew. Even worse, their eastern neighbour, the powerful and well-organized kingdom of Elam (in modern southwest Iran) made a habit of supporting Babylonian war efforts against Assyria. Once the sizeable Babylonian rabble was reinforced with professional Elamite troops such a combination could be a real challenge even to the battle-hardened Assyrian veterans. Taken together, Babylonia and Elam were the most troublesome of Assyria's many opponents.

To the east, on the Iranian plateau, the Medes inhabited a vast territory. They comprised numerous chiefdoms, almost every one of which seemed to specialize in horse-breeding. But extreme political fragmentation made them easy prey to Assyrian forays, even those carried out by forces of minor strength. Right up to the very last years of Assyria, absolutely no danger at all was to be expected in this area.

At greater distances, the mountain ranges of the Taurus were crossed in order to fight against several enemies in central Anatolia, while in the southwest the temporary conquests of Egypt by Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal (r. 668–c. 630 BC) marked peaks in Assyria's prestige.

## THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL: THE ART OF CAMPAIGNING

According to the fiction propagated by their inscriptions, the Assyrian kings led their army to victory in every single year. Reality was somewhat different, as at least some years can be identified for almost every Assyrian ruler in which the army stayed at home. But even so, it was quite normal for Assyria to be at odds with several of her neighbours at the same time. Small-scale raiding along the common border of two bickering great powers was the normal state of affairs, while large-scale warfare set in if one side achieved successes intolerable to the other or if one adversary, usually the Assyrian king, had an overwhelming advantage over his enemy and decided to get rid of him once and for all.



As soon as the king had decided which of his enemies was to be attacked, he had to summon his troops, who were distributed all over the empire between campaigns. Initially the army was formed near the capital. Later on, after the empire had grown in size, the troops could be ordered to assemble at a border fortress. As long as the army units moved from one province or vassal kingdom to the next, they made good progress, since all cities and fortresses of any importance functioned as supply depots and no time was lost foraging. Once outside home territory, however, the situation changed completely.

In stark contrast to their official boasting of recklessness, the Assyrian rulers handled their army with great caution. This is not surprising, after all: if your very existence depends on the only army you have, you had better think twice before taking unnecessary risks. On enemy territory, the Assyrians built fortified camps at least at each stage of their advance, perhaps even for each night, but the sources are not clear on this point. While the bulk of the army was usually kept together as closely as possible, small detachments and raiding parties swarmed out, in search of food supplies as well as to observe the enemy's movements.

Campaigns sometimes covered extreme distances. For instance, the Assyrian troops who sacked Thebes in Egypt in 664 were operating 1800 km away from their capital city of Nineveh (Eph'al 1983: 99). According to the descriptions the Assyrian kings commissioned, three, sometimes four, campaign types can be distinguished: raids, conquests, sieges, and naval operations.

## Raids

The army advanced deep into enemy territory, plundering, killing, and burning all along the way in order to destroy the enemy's livelihood. Leaving their supply depots far behind, the troops had to live entirely from the land, so the advance proceeded with the highest possible speed in order to give the enemy no time to organize their defence or to secure their precious food stores, which were also desperately wanted by the invaders. The attackers were always on the move; they could not afford to stay anywhere for any length of time. Therefore it was the open countryside which suffered most; fortresses and cities could only be taken by surprise or had to be ignored completely. Shalmaneser III's campaign to the Mediterranean in 858 (Yamada 2000: 77–108) and Sargon II's deep advance into Media in 713 (Fuchs 1994: 121–122, 184–190) are examples of such raids. Both operations covered large distances—Sargon's even reached the eastern fringes of the known world—and both caused considerable damage but they did not result in lasting gains.

## Conquests

The king campaigned within a more limited area, usually not far from the nearest supply depot on the Assyrian border, with the intention of incorporating the attacked region into his empire. The efforts put into conquests were more intensive than those directed to raids, and successive campaigns could be necessary to complete the subjugation of the local population. Since rebellions were to be expected before the new territory became an

integral part of the empire, local settlements, favourably situated on movement avenues—fords and mountain passes—were soon transformed into Assyrian strongholds. Between the campaigning seasons the garrisons of these fortresses were expected to hold in check any remaining enemies and to gather stores of food, oil, wine, and fodder from the surrounding countryside. An example that can be followed in detail is the conquest of Zamua, a rather small stretch of land of modest wealth in the mountains of modern Iraqi Kurdistan. Adad-nerari II (r. 911–891 BC) and Tukulti-Ninurta II (r. 890–884 BC) made some efforts in this direction, building a powerful fortress in the midst of Zamua. Even so, it took Assurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BC) two campaigns in 881, one in 880, and probably an additional one in the very last years of his reign, as well as the construction of a second fortress, to complete the conquest of Zamua (Liverani 1992: 45–56). Military operations always revolved around the same few clusters of settlements, which had to be conquered time and again until the surviving inhabitants gave in at last.

## Sieges

Of all military operations, the most ambitious task by far was to besiege a large and well-defended city, whose inhabitants were ready to endure the hardships of war. Accordingly, large-scale sieges were regarded only as a last resort and avoided whenever possible. The reasons are obvious: any direct assault against city walls resulted in heavy losses so, in most cases, there was no alternative but to starve the defenders out. As a result, an army conducting a siege operation had to settle down in one single place for a prolonged period of time. The increased logistical burden and the crowded living conditions within the besiegers' camp often combined to make hunger and disease the defender's most fearsome allies. In 701, for instance, Sennacherib was forced to lift the siege of Jerusalem because of the outbreak of an epidemic among his soldiers. As a solution to these problems, the Assyrians withdrew the army as soon as possible and left behind no more than a small force, which could be supplied with ease. These troops were distributed over siege castles built around the beleaguered city by the army prior to its withdrawal. Based in these fortifications, the detached force continued to harass the defenders and denied them the use of the surrounding countryside until they were ready to surrender (Fuchs 2008: 57).

## Naval operations

As a mere land power, Assyria had no navy at all. Whenever the need arose to fight at sea, the Assyrians had to rely on the fleets of their seafaring vassal kingdoms along the Mediterranean coast. When Sennacherib planned a surprise attack via the Persian Gulf against the coast of Elam, his transport fleet was built by Phoenician shipbuilders and manned by Phoenician sailors. The Assyrian king himself never set foot in his ships and when the fleet set sail for the Elamite coast he stayed behind and watched this spectacle from the safety of the shore (Frahm 1997: 14).

## MILITARY INTELLIGENCE AND THE TRIUMPH OF SARGON II

Great significance was attached to military intelligence as a prerequisite for victory. We know, for instance, that when Sennacherib was still crown prince he evaluated intelligence reports coming in from the northern frontiers and summarized them for his father, Sargon II. The Assyrians maintained an efficient spy system and on campaign their reconnaissance usually seems to have been ahead of the enemy's (Dubovský 2006). This lead in intelligence gathering was the basis for outwitting the enemy by deception. Its importance is evident from the extremely successful operations carried out by Sargon II in 714. He had been at war with the Urartian king Rusa I almost since he had come to power over ten years earlier, but had seen no significant success. In 714, however, Sargon twice managed to lull his enemy into a false sense of security, and the resulting victories decided the century-old rivalry between the two empires once and for all in Assyria's favour.

The campaign of 714 took place in the mountainous regions of northwestern Iran, where both sides were trying to expand their spheres of influence. Urartian territory had been attacked from this direction the year before, so when the Assyrian army appeared on the scene again the Urartian king was expecting a second Assyrian invasion and had his own troops ready. But then the Assyrian marching columns surprisingly changed direction and took a road leading to the lands of the Medes. The Assyrian king, so it seemed, had chosen another victim, and for this year at least, Urartu would be spared (Mayer 1983: ll. 1–50).

But as soon as Sargon was sure that the Urartian scouts had lost contact, he changed direction again and headed back towards Urartu. An extended detour via remote paths helped to conceal the secret approach, so when the Assyrian army finally reached enemy territory the Urartians were taken completely by surprise. Rusa now hastened to reassemble his army, which he seems to have disbanded in the wake of the false all-clear. While the Urartian reconnaissance was failing to gather precise information on the whereabouts of the invaders, the Assyrian scouts had located the exact rallying point of the Urartians and found out that their army was not yet ready for action. Without hesitation Sargon took his chance, rushed forward with his troops, and fell upon his enemy, who was yet to reorganize his troops. Taken by surprise again, the Urartian forces suffered a crushing defeat (Mayer 1983: ll. 51–160).

The Assyrians followed up the destruction of the enemy's field forces with an extended and devastating raid straight through Urartian territories around Lake Urmia. The destruction of the Urartian army had left them undefended, but now the highly efficient Urartian warning system proved its worth. Wherever the Assyrian raiders appeared the inhabitants had already been evacuated, together with their movable possessions (Mayer 1983: ll. 162–305). Accordingly the amount of booty taken was smaller than expected, which was frustrating for Sargon because the prospect of extensive looting was necessary to keep his soldiers happy. Fortunately he found an opportunity to comply with his men's wishes. Not far from the return

route, the ruler of the small kingdom of Musasir, situated between Assyria and Urartu, was trying to maintain good relations with both his powerful neighbours. Consequently both suspected him of treason. Finding a reason for sacking the city was no problem (Mayer 1983: ll. 309–312), but if the king of Musasir realized Sargon's intention in time, the inhabitants would flee as the Urartians had done and the Assyrians would find nothing but empty houses. So once again, the hunter had to creep up on his prey.

After they had left behind the Urartian territory, the 'huge hosts of Aššur' used the main road to return home. Any observers sent by the king of Musasir could see endless marching columns of chariots, horsemen, carts, and foot soldiers thudding back to Assyria. Occupied by this reassuring sight, no one noticed the detachment of selected troops, led by Sargon himself, which was secretly approaching the city of Musasir via difficult and rarely used mountain paths. Again the surprise was complete: the city was taken without resistance and all the treasures of her palace and her famous temple fell into Assyrian hands (Mayer 1983: ll. 313–410). In every respect, the campaign had developed into a stunning success.

## WEAPONS AND BATTLE TACTICS

For the whole period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the bow was by far the most prestigious weapon. An Assyrian king conquered foreign lands not with his sword or his spear, but with his 'mighty bow'. The bow was the weapon of the chariot fighter, it was used on horseback and the bulk of the foot soldiers were bowmen too. Slings also fought at long range, but they are rarely mentioned. Javelins were in use by less developed people only, such as Nubian warriors and some inhabitants of the Zagros mountains to the east of Assyria.

The melee weapons—single-handed spears, short swords, daggers, and maces—all allowed the use of the shield, the most common defence weapon, which appears in a great variety of sizes and shapes. The Assyrians never invented heavier, two-handed melee weapons; even their maces lacked the spikes necessary to puncture armour plates. Hence it seems likely that body armour was rarely encountered. Helmets of different shapes existed, but most soldiers probably had to do without them. The most expensive lamellar cuirasses consisted of bronze or iron rectangular scales attached to a leather underjacket. These must have been worn only by the chariot troops and perhaps a few selected cavalry and infantry units.

The Assyrian military establishment was technologically rather conservative (Zutterman 2003). Traditional, well-known equipment was steadily improved, but during 300 years of constant warfare not a single new weapon was invented. Likewise, new ideas and concepts developed by others were adapted only hesitantly. The Assyrians had no lead over their enemies in the use of iron weapons. A horseman armed with shield and helmet is depicted in the palace of an upper Mesopotamian Aramaean petty king already in about 950 BC, whereas in Assyrian sources cavalry troops are neither mentioned nor depicted before the 9th century.

The most prestigious piece of equipment was the chariot, a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by two or three horses in the 9th century, and later by four horses. The minimum crew consisted of an archer, who was the commander and sometimes even the owner of the chariot, and the driver. Up to the 9th century, the chariots' cab provided no protection against incoming missiles. In battle the crew as well as the horses were clad in armour. The crew members' armour covered the whole body down to the ankles and must have been extremely cumbersome, especially as military operations usually took place in the searing heat of the Middle Eastern summer. But the armour's protective strength considerably lowered the risk of getting wounded or killed, which mitigated all such inconveniences. For further protection, the crew was augmented by a shield bearer, who functioned as 'intelligent armour'. During the 8th century the chariot's size was increased and it was now drawn by four horses. Successive enlargements of the wheels, to greater than human height in the 7th century, improved the vehicle's ability to move in difficult terrain. The 'intelligent armour' was extended by adding a second shield bearer to the team. The men replaced their long armoured shirts with shorter and more comfortable ones that reached only to the waist because the front and side screens of the cab were now strong enough to protect their lower bodies. By this very late stage of its development the chariot resembled to some extent a modern tank.

The new design enhanced the chariot's suitability for cross-country driving and defence against missiles, but no attempt was made to increase its offensive abilities: long-range strike power was still provided by a single archer. The chariot was now more expensive than ever and the price of just one vehicle must have been sufficient to equip dozens of bowmen fighting on foot instead. The Assyrian decision to maintain a force of at least hundreds of these costly weapons is a clear indication that the chariot must have been much more than a movable platform for a Bowman. In fact, it should be seen as a weapon system in its own right: its huge, threatening appearance, the arrows shot by the archer, the speed of its approach, and its apparent invulnerability must have combined to shake the morale of an already wavering enemy.

Moreover, the chariot's improvements tell us something about contemporary infantry troops and their ways of fighting. Designed to survive the approach to the enemy lines under heavy defensive shooting, the chariot was perfectly suited to disperse enemy units that mainly consisted of bowmen, who were dangerous when fighting from a distance but helpless when caught in the melee. On the other hand, the whole concept of the Assyrian chariot was utterly useless against a Greek style phalanx of well-armoured spearmen fighting in close ranks. To approach such a foe the elaborate protection provided by the chariot was unnecessary, but at close range the vehicle and its crew would be in serious trouble. So even if the written sources provide no hints about the exact formation of the foot soldiers 'carrying spear and shield' in combat, the very existence of the Assyrian chariot and its continued improvements seem to exclude battle tactics comparable to those practised by the Greek hoplites in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. In the Near East during the Neo-Assyrian period, spearmen seem to have been of secondary importance. In battle they may have fulfilled a somewhat static, mainly defensive role. In scenes showing siege warfare they can be seen protecting archers with their shields, which hints at rather loose formations.

The specialization of the chariot—its reduction to the single task of attacking under heavy barrages of arrows and stones—was due to the development of cavalry troops, which relieved it from former tasks requiring higher speed and mobility, such as reconnaissance and foraging. The 9th century was the experimental stage of the Assyrian cavalry, when its origins in the chariotry were still clearly visible. Two horsemen fought closely, side by side, one of them holding the reins of both horses in order to allow the other one to use his bow with both hands. This was the minimum chariot crew of driver and archer, who had left their vehicle behind to ride on horseback instead. In the 8th century mounted archers learned to control their horses without additional help. Besides them we now find other horseback troops fighting with spears. They did not hold their weapons underarm, as in the couched lance style known from the European high Middle Ages, but are depicted thrusting them downwards like the Norman knights on the Bayeux Tapestry. In the 7th century, reliefs from Assurbanipal's palace show heavy cavalry with armour-clad horses. In spite of these developments, chariotry was never replaced by cavalry but they complemented each other, each concentrating on specific tasks of its own.

Assyrian civilization left no military treatises or manuals. Since the overwhelming majority of the military establishment most probably could not read or write, even in alphabetic Aramaic, such manuals would have been of little use anyhow. Unfortunately the main aim of royal propaganda, which provides us with the bulk of information on Assyria's ways of warfare, was to glorify the aftermath of battles already won. The pursuit of the defeated is celebrated, not combat itself. As a result, there are no pictures or reports on what happened in battle before victory had been achieved. For this reason, the course of not a single battle fought by the Assyrians can be reconstructed in any detail and we can only guess about the deployment of the different armed forces and their effects in combat. Ancient Near Eastern battle tactics may have been similar to those the English used to great success in several battles of the Hundred Years War and in the Wars of the Roses: a battle certainly began with hails of arrows exchanged by the masses of foot archers on both sides, who sent their missiles into the enemy formations in order to soften up their defences. At a certain point—perhaps when the enemy lines could be seen to waver or after some units had been already disrupted or forced to retreat by the relentless shooting—the chariots were sent in. Their charge decided the battle, putting the enemy to flight at last. The cavalry might have supported the chariots and the swift horsemen were certainly put to deadly effect when they hunted down the fleeing enemy. The ultimate, if rarely accomplished goal in every battle was not just to beat the enemy forces but to annihilate them completely.

## WEAPONS AND SIEGE TECHNIQUES

The considerable difficulties in capturing a well-defended city or fortress were due to the low technological standards of the time, which gave a clear advantage to the defender. The Assyrians used the most advanced techniques then known but they had by then



already been in use for more than a thousand years. What is true for military technology in general goes for siege machinery too: the Assyrians invented no new principles or pieces of equipment. If possible, the Assyrians preferred to take cities by means of peaceful negotiations, by intimidation, or through ruse and treason. They tried to catch the defenders by surprise or to exploit disagreements among them. Only if all these ‘cheaper’ ways failed was the costly procedure of a siege proper to be ventured.

The main problem was the lack of any kind of artillery whatsoever, which could have destroyed fortress walls from a safe distance. Accordingly, nearly all siege activities had to take place within range of the defender’s bowmen, and any direct approach required time-consuming preparations. Several methods were at the attacker’s disposal: siege towers and siege mounds provided elevated positions for bowmen, allowing them to combat the defenders on the ramparts more effectively, thereby covering the approach to the fortifications on the ground. The walls could then either be left intact and surmounted by ladders, or they had to be breached. Breaching could be accomplished either by battering rams, protected by wheeled roofs against enemy missiles, or by use of tunnels and undermining (Figures 18.2a, 18.2b). A third but rarely used method was to dam up a huge reservoir of water, which was released in one big rush in order to wash away parts of the fortifications. In any case the final assault must have been a most bloody affair: coming to grips with a resolute defender via ladders could prove suicidal and the attempt to capture a breach would certainly result in a desperate melee. And afterwards, the fighting could well continue within the crooked and narrow streets so typical of ancient Near Eastern cities (Fuchs 2008: 53–59; Eph’al 2009).

However, the preconditions of such an assault were often not met at all. Mining required suitable soil conditions; siege towers, siege mounds, and battering rams were useful only if at least one part of the fortress was accessible via level terrain, and the chances of using water in the manner described above were even smaller. In most cases, there was no choice but to blockade the fortress until the defenders ran out of supplies. Some places, however, such as the Urartian mountain fortresses or the island cities of the Phoenician coast, were inaccessible as well as immune to blockade—they were impregnable in every respect.

## THE CONDUCT OF WAR—ASSYRIA’S DARK SIDE

Wars are terrible affairs and have always been, but in the ancient Near East the concept of war crimes as we now understand them was completely unknown. Moreover, people were convinced that their gods legitimized and approved the king’s rule and his policies. Accordingly, the king’s wars were wars of justice. Fighting against his gods’ enemies, he was entitled to punish and mistreat them as criminals and sinners with unrestrained brutality. The Assyrian kings openly boasted of their atrocities and made a show of them. Collecting the severed heads of enemy soldiers killed in battle was a gruesome but yet comparatively harmless habit (Figure 18.3). Far worse, the soldiers also cut off the noses,

(a)

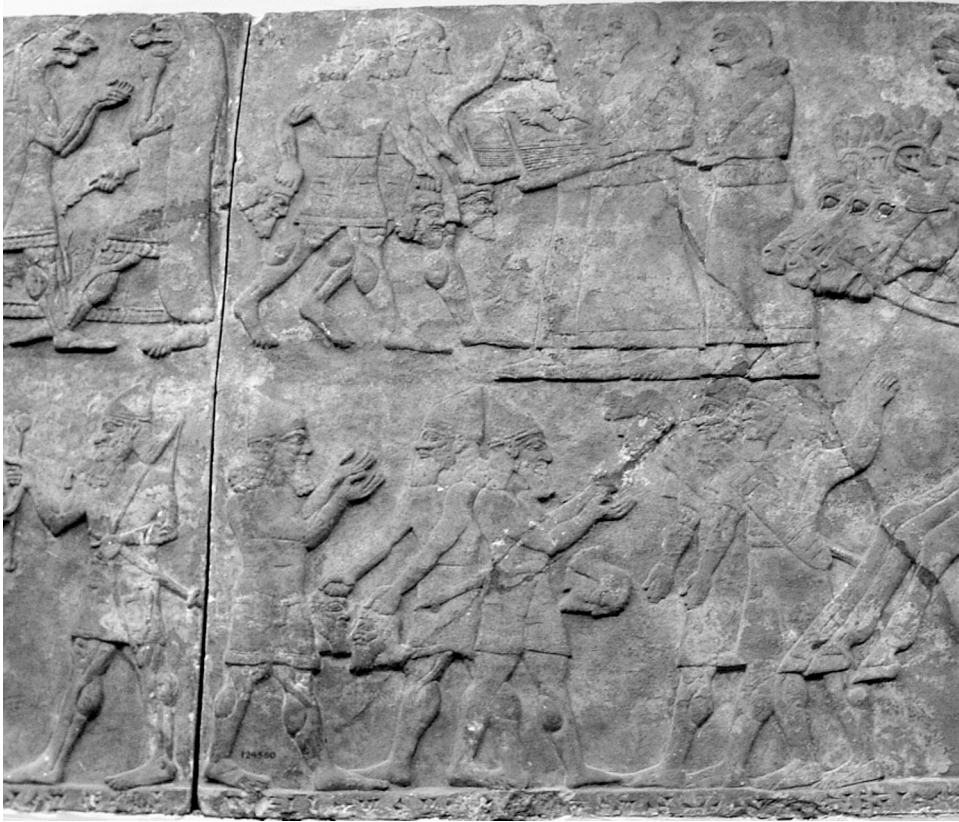


(b)



**FIGURE 18.2** (a) Armoured battering ram at work, with bowmen on a siege tower in the background: detail from panel 17 (top register) in the throne room (Room B) of Assurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Kalhu, modern Nimrud, Iraq, 9th century BC (British Museum, ME 124536). While the interest in accurately representing technical details is obvious in this instance, the king is shown in an idealized way, without any armour. (Photo by Karen Radner. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)

(b) An awkward depiction of another battering ram: detail of the top register of bronze band IX of Shalmaneser III's Balawat Gates, ancient Dur-Imgur-Enlil, Iraq (British Museum). In reality this weapon was probably similar to the one depicted in (a) above, but here it resembles a bloated crocodile on wheels: it seems as if the artist never saw or understood the workings of the device. (Reproduced from King 1915: pl. L)



**FIGURE 18.3** Assyrian soldiers celebrating victory, dancing with severed enemy heads and wearing lion costumes: detail of a stone relief from Assurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Kalhu, modern Nimrud, Iraq (British Museum, ME 124548). (Photo by E. Robson. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

lips, ears, hands, and feet of their victims when still alive, or they blinded, burned or beheaded them. The fate of captured rebels was especially harsh. They were paraded through the streets of several Assyrian cities and exhibited under humiliating conditions before they were impaled, disembowelled or skinned alive in public—the skins to be displayed on the city walls. Such atrocities were not restricted to the treatment of enemies alone. The Assyrians used the same methods to enforce discipline and obedience among their own troops, as the following order sent to a cavalry commander shows:

This is a royal order of great emergency! Assemble the commanders and the horsemen of your cavalry unit immediately! Whoever is late will be impaled in the middle of his own house and his sons and his daughters too will be slaughtered, which will then be the fault of his own! Don't delay! Drop everything and come straight away! (Parpola 1987: no. 22, obv. 6–rev. 10; author's translation)

At this point we might argue that the crimes and cruelties committed by the Assyrians were surpassed by later epochs of human history in every respect. And we might add that at least racism, religious persecution, and genocide were phenomena unknown to the Assyrians, but such friendly remarks are not enough to lighten the dark side of Assyrian warfare and power politics, which are revealed by the Assyrian sources with blunt naivety. To the countless victims of Assyrian expansionism these niceties would have been no consolation at all.

## CONCLUSION

The Assyrian army, which had been developing since the end of the 10th century, was never beaten. It suffered temporary setbacks; it had to be used with caution; there were clear limits when fighting in difficult terrain; sieges were always a problem; and sometimes Assyria's only force was faced with too many different theatres of war at once. But of all the numerous and very different foes it encountered over the centuries not a single one ever managed to inflict a substantial defeat on her. In the end, the 'huge hosts of Aššur' met their doom fighting against themselves in the protracted power struggles following the demise of Assurbanipal in (probably) 631 BC. Already in 615 BC, when the up and coming Medes joined the Babylonian rebels, the Assyrian heartland was defended by a mere shadow of what had been the world's most formidable war machine for more than three centuries.

## FURTHER READING

An exhaustive and satisfactory study on the Assyrian ways of warfare is not yet available. Insights into the Assyrian army of the late 8th century are provided by Dalley (1985) as well as by Dalley and Postgate (1984). For a provincial contingent and the role of chariotry and cavalry see Postgate (2000). Several aspects of campaigning are discussed by Eph'al (1983). Assyrian siege warfare is examined by Eph'al (2009). For Assyrian archery see Zutterman (2003).

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