ART AND EMPIRE
TREASURES FROM ASSYRIA IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM
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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK
DISTRIBUTED BY HARRY N.ABRAMS, INC., NEW YORK
This book has been published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum', held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from May 2 through August 13, 1995, and at The Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, from October 1995 through February 1996.

The exhibition is made possible in part by The Dillon Fund.

It was organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The British Museum. An indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Additional assistance has been provided by N.H. Horiuchi Inc. Tokyo.

ILLUSTRATION ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The photographs on pp. 16−17, 18, 19, 23, 24−5, 27, 28−9, 37, 133 and 132 are by J. E. Curtis. Those on pp. 15 and 112 and the drawing on p. 93 are reproduced courtesy of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. The map on p. 9, the photographs on pp. 14 and 92 and the drawings on pp. 125, 138, 140, 141 and 172 are by Ann Searight.

HALF-TITLE PAGE Protective spirit. Relief from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud, about 875−860 BC (no. 8).

TITLE PAGE Detail of a stone carpet from the throne-room of Ashurbanipal at Kuyunjik, about 645−640 BC (no. 43).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Art and Empire: treasures from Assyria in the British Museum/edited by J.E. Curtis and J.E. Reade; with contributions by D. Collon ... [et al.]: foreword by R.G.W. Anderson.

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
N5370.A78 1995
730'.0935—dc20
94-47101
CIP

Copyright © 1995 The Trustees of The British Museum
Published in 1995 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
100 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011

Designed by Harry Green
Printed and bound in Italy
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Assyria lies at the heart of the so-called Fertile Crescent, the region of the Middle East stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean where some of the world's earliest civilisations, based on agriculture, developed and flourished. Today the ruins of the great cities of Assyria are located in northern Iraq, but the name survives in the modern state of Syria which once formed part of the empire.

What we know of ancient Assyria is derived from many sources. There are references in the Bible and in the early Greek historians, and these ensured that the existence of some such empire was already recognised when the first archaeologists went there. What they found, however, far exceeded all expectations. Digging uncovered extraordinary monuments, architecture and everyday objects, as well as written documents of kinds which can bring some portions of ancient society back to life. They include official royal inscriptions naming kings and telling of their achievements; administrative archives and letters giving the details of diplomacy, politics and taxation; texts about religion, magic, astrology, medicine and mathematics; records concerning property, commerce, marriage, loans, slaves. They are far from complete – we sometimes know a lot about one short period but little about what happened immediately before or afterwards – but they are particularly informative about Assyrian history during its most important period, the ninth to seventh centuries BC, when this small state came to dominate the Middle East, from Iran to Egypt.

Another source of information, providing not the specific details of ancient history but the background within which Assyria evolved, is the modern landscape. It is a region of gently rolling plains and rough hills, dotted with market towns and small villages. There are flocks of sheep and goat, fields of wheat and barley, occasional irrigated orchards. The traditional building material is simple plastered mud-brick, with some rough stone. These and other elements of the basic lifestyle have hardly changed over thousands of years. The land is crossed by large perennial rivers, most notably the Tigris, but farmers rely on the spring rains for most of their crops. To north and east lie mountain ranges, once heavily wooded, that mark the boundaries of Turkey and Iran; to the south-west an increasingly dry steppe stretches towards the deserts of Arabia.

Assyria was just one state among many within the Fertile Crescent. Much of its urban civilisation was derived from Babylonia (originally Sumer), in southern Iraq, where writing itself evolved before 3000 BC. To the west, in Syria and along the Mediterranean coast, at one time or another, numerous cities, states and empires have flourished and
declined. Egypt had a civilisation almost as old as Sumer; Turkey and Iran had populous centres too. Trade among these regions was developing well before 5000 BC. Turkey, for instance, was the prime source of obsidian, the volcanic glass from which knives were made before the introduction of metal, and elaborate networks came to exist for the exchange of raw materials. The location of Assyria encouraged participation in these exchanges, and Assyrians developed far-flung interests. It was a trade in tin and textiles which led, about 2000 BC, to the establishment of Assyrian trading colonies in central Turkey. This was the so-called Old Assyrian period, documented in extensive detail by the chance of archaeological discovery.

The Old Assyrian business documents are written in Akkadian, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic. Semitic languages have been spoken throughout history in most of the lands of the Fertile Crescent, but other languages prevail in the mountains to the north. For many centuries, perhaps millennia, the most important of these was Hurrian, and this was spoken in the empire of Mitanni which had come to dominate Assyria by 1500 BC. At this time the links between states
had grown broader and stronger, and the Middle East was essentially divided among five Great Powers: the empires of Egypt, of Mitanni, and of the Hittites in Turkey, met and clashed in what is now modern Syria, while the Kassite and Elamite empires competed in southern Iraq and Iran. It was an international age, with cultural cross-fertilisation accompanying war, diplomacy and trade. Akkadian became the lingua franca of long-distance communication. There was created then, despite huge local diversities, a common Middle Eastern heritage which Assyria shared.

The name of Assyria is actually derived from the city of Ashur, home of the god of the same name. The city lies beside the Tigris river, on a hill overlooking a fertile plain, and its walls came to enclose some 55 hectares. With its good communications, the settlement may have begun as a tribal and cult centre. One of the principal figures in the government of Ashur was the high-priest of the god, and the offices of high-priest and king were not separate; the king's powers, originally circumscribed in many ways, were eventually to become absolute. Since kings were in the habit of leaving their names on documents buried in the founda-
tions of palaces and temples they had commissioned, and there have been extensive excavations at Ashur and elsewhere, we can sense something of the status of any particular king by the number of his recorded buildings. After 1400 BC, when the empire of Mitanni was falling apart, the kings of Ashur gradually extended their political power and influence into neighbouring territories. Two kings communicated directly with Egypt, causing bitter complaints because Assyria was not yet recognised as a Great Power, and Ashur-uballit I (1363–1328 BC) even intervened in Kassite Babylonia. The expansion is especially associated with Ashur-uballit, whose name, ‘Ashur-has-preserved-life’, was the same as that optimistically taken centuries later by the very last king of the disintegrating Assyrian empire.

The kingdom of Assyria first comprised the Tigris valley in north Iraq, roughly a quadrangle with its corners at Ashur, Nineveh, Erbil and Kirkuk. It continued to grow until it reached the Euphrates river in the west, effectively displacing Mitanni altogether. This was the so-called Middle Assyrian empire, which reached its peak under Adad-nirari I (1305–1274 BC), Shalmaneser I (1273–1244 BC) and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BC). The last of these kings founded a new capital city over 70 hectares in size which was named after himself and contained its own Ashur Temple, decisions which must have been deeply offensive to many people in Ashur itself and were perhaps responsible for his murder.

The growth of the Assyrian empire, as of its commercial interests, had much to do with its geographical location. The hinterland of the city had no clear natural boundaries, and the fertile lands on which it depended were open to recurrent attack from two directions. The inhabitants of the steppe lands to the south-west were tribal herdsmen who, like many others of more recent history, were inclined to raid or otherwise exploit their settled agricultural neighbours; the mountain tribes to the north-east behaved in the same way. This meant that the rulers of Ashur needed to be ready to defend themselves, and all the local notables must have had some responsibility for defence. There was probably a tradition of small-scale annual campaigns to assert Assyrian authority and deter trivial raids. Kings indeed undertook at their accession ceremony to extend the land of the god Ashur. The step from defence to aggression being a small one, sometimes imperceptible, Assyria became periodically locked into the role of aggressor, and ambitious kings saw no limit to their dominion. Moreover, once land had been brought under the nominal sovereignty of Ashur, by conquest or voluntary submission, it was regarded as inalienable, so that any future king had a virtual obligation to recover whatever his predecessors might temporarily have lost.
Towards the end of the thirteenth century, however, there were serious territorial losses. They were part of a pattern of difficulties which affected all the great Middle Eastern powers at this time, and which largely transformed the political map. One principal cause was a straightforward deterioration in the natural environment. In these lands even a minor climatic change, specifically in this case a reduction in the average rainfall over a number of years, can have a significant effect on people’s ability to provide food for themselves and their animals, and to defend themselves successfully. Other people, themselves perhaps the victims of comparable circumstances, may come looking for land or loot. Civilised and centralised states are often inflexible and vulnerable to unexpected problems of this kind, which were to affect Assyria, with varying degrees of severity, over almost 300 years. Some kings, notably Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BC), who was the first ruler to carry Assyrian arms to the shores of the Mediterranean, maintained the prestige of the state, but by the mid-tenth century Assyrian territory again comprised little more than the Tigris valley in north Iraq, with some surviving interests elsewhere. The countryside had been largely infiltrated or overrun by tribesmen of pastoral origin who came from the marginal lands to the south and west; they spoke Aramaic, another Semitic language.

The process of recovery was a long one, assisted by another minor climatic change, this time for the better. From 934 BC until an outbreak of civil war in 826 BC, we have a series of records, incomplete and self-interested but often hugely informative, describing the relentless annual campaigns of five successive kings. First they secured the Assyrian heartland; then they recovered the territories of their Middle Assyrian predecessors; then they extended their influence far beyond, in every direction. Sometimes there was straightforward conquest, followed by incorporation of the conquered territory into a province of what the Assyrians always called the ‘land of the god Ashur’. Sometimes a local ruler accepted Assyrian sovereignty and became a vassal king or governor. Sometimes, in more remote regions, there was what the Assyrians saw as acceptance of Assyrian hegemony, though the local rulers were mainly concerned to maintain or establish discreet good relations.

All this imperial expansion naturally depended on the exercise of force, or on implicit or explicit threats. It is plain from the results that the Assyrian army was effective (the sculptures show it in action), but it was not originally a standing army. We can envisage with some confidence an annual levy, after the spring harvest, with dignitaries across the kingdom assembling the able-bodied men and marching out with the king, joined on the way by other forces which owed allegiance to Assyria. Opponents had the option of submission, in which case they were well treated, or of
resistance; while there was all the brutality common in warfare, defeated enemies could still submit. Only rebels, rulers who had sworn allegiance and then broken their oaths, were ruthlessly suppressed and killed with the maximum deterrent publicity. The population of defeated states could be left in place, but the Assyrians also practised, on a massive scale, a procedure which was eventually to have a deep influence on Assyria itself. This was deportation and resettlement. Not merely skilled craftsmen, who were always in demand, but tens of thousands of ordinary farmers were shifted with their families from one part of the empire to another, to occupy lands awaiting cultivation or those left vacant by other deportees. In this way people were unable to maintain local loyalties and contacts perilous to Assyrian interests; they became instead associated with the central authority itself, tied farmers dependent on the state and subjects of the empire. What the Assyrians could not do was make them speak the official language, Akkadian. The resettlement policy actually encouraged the adoption and spread of a new lingua franca, Aramaic, which many of the deported peoples already had in common.

Subject lands paid tax or tribute, which accumulated in palace and temple stores. Little is known of trading practices at this time, and there was no currency as such, apart from silver measured by weight; official establishments fed and housed people attached to them, while small-scale barter is likely to have been commonplace. There were many raw materials and finished goods which Assyria needed but did not produce. For instance, any grand new building required timber from mountainous regions, while many campaigns seem to have had as their prime purpose the acquisition of horses for the army. While Assyria had its own skilled craftsmen, such as iron- and coppersmiths, fine workmanship in luxury items was especially associated with the lands between Assyria and the Mediterranean. The demand for exotic products kept pace with the growth of the empire, and the accounts of some campaigns read like collecting trips, as the Assyrian army displayed its strength and received treasures in return. Successful kings commemorated their achievements by renovating or rebuilding ancient shrines, founding palaces, fortifying cities, and digging canals for irrigation; prisoners of war provided convenient labour. Grand public constructions, besides immortalising kings always conscious of their place in history, enhanced Assyrian prestige, and were intended not only to satisfy Assyrian aspirations but to impress and overawe potential opponents.

When Ashur-dan II (934–912 BC) came to the throne, Ashur was still officially the principal city of the kingdom. It was crowded with ancient temples and palaces, and there was a weight of tradition about the place, inhibiting any king who valued his powers as secular ruler more
highly than his religious status. Ashur was always to remain the formal cult centre of the state, though a goddess of fertility, under many names, was more universally worshipped. Ashur was, however, inconveniently situated on the southern edge of what was now the Assyrian heartland, and was not the best centre for communications, military organisation and administration of the economy. Various references suggest that the city of Nineveh, further north, was no less important. It may even be that Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884 BC) took Nineveh as his capital, naming it after himself as Tukulti-Ninurta I had done with his own new foundation. Once again, any such move must have been bitterly resented at Ashur, but resistance to change seldom lasts indefinitely.

It was the next king, Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), who took definitive action and by so doing established his reputation for all time. He opted for an existing town, located between Ashur and Nineveh, and vastly extended it with no change of name. This was Kalhu (Biblical Calah), whose modern name of Nimrud still recalls that of its principal god, the war god Ninurta. Here, on a raised citadel mound, Ashurnasirpal built a palace that far outshone anything existing in Assyria beforehand; its brilliantly coloured walls were lined with stone panels, every one of which was inscribed with the king’s name and a summary of his achievements. Nearby was a temple area, large but occupying much less ground than the temples of Ashur, and there were palaces for other officials too: such palaces had a range of functions, as ministries, offices, residences, reception suites, stores and so on. The whole town was 360
hectares in area; one record states that the original population numbered 16,000, while 47,000 more were brought to work on the project. It was completed by Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), who added the temple-tower that affirmed Nimrud’s status as a cult-centre comparable with the most celebrated cities of Assyria and Babylonia. Shalmaneser’s most remarkable building, however, was more directly practical in function: sometimes known as Fort Shalmaneser, it was a combined palace, camp, factory, storehouse and arsenal, thoughtfully located a safe distance from the citadel, where the army could be mustered for the annual campaign and supplies could be stockpiled. The construction of this complex acknowledged the growing responsibilities generated by imperial expansion.

In this period there was concurrently a change in the status of the king. Behind him there now stood not only an ancient aristocracy but a new corps of administrators, men who were appointed as state officials or as governors of newly acquired provinces. The governors, especially, were liable to retain their posts for many years, with commensurate influence. Many of them were eunuchs, with a primary loyalty to the system which supported them. There was a contradiction here, between the old Asshur and the new. The ruler himself, with his court and supporters, was increasingly an embodiment of empire rather than ancient kingship, a prototype of the inaccessible despot. So long as the empire continued to expand, success was its own justification, but it did not necessarily win unanimous approval. There was a difference between defending the state, expanding its borders within known terrain, and marching away for months on end to the Mediterranean; there was a difference between loyalty to a traditional local dignitary and to a royal eunuch. At the same time the empire was not monolithic: it was rather a network of royal cities and provincial capitals with variable degrees of influence over each other and the surrounding countryside. Problems of this nature are seldom described in the Assyrian documentary sources, which usually present only the official view of affairs, but they are implicit in the political situation.

Broadly, by 860 BC, the Assyrian empire had recovered all the territories lost around 1200 BC, and expanded a little beyond them. A new king, Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), attempted to maintain the process of expansion. His long reign is a catalogue of expeditions into Babylonia, Syria/Palestine, Turkey and Iran, but at the end there was little to show for it. In Babylon he had supported one ruler against another, but in this ancient kingdom, which was acknowledged as the source of Assyrian civilisation itself, he did not assert formal Assyrian sovereignty: the kings of Asshur and Babylon even appear on one monument shaking hands, a pleasing contrast with the standard submission scene. In Syria/Palestine
and southern Turkey Shalmaneser encountered coalitions of lesser kings who joined forces to oppose him; they were eventually defeated in battle, but the local dynasties survived. In eastern Turkey and western Iran the state of Urartu (Biblical Ararat) presented growing opposition since it too was an expanding empire: Assyrian armies had to march further east into Iran in their perpetual search for horses. Shalmaneser rebuilt the walls of Ashur, but he failed to win its support, and in his last years the problems of the empire expressed themselves in open warfare between two of his sons: it was the first identifiable instance, in this period, of the fraternal rivalries, aggravated by a lack of clear rules on the royal succession, which were ultimately to play a part in the destruction of the empire.

When this civil war ended, the new king, Shamshi-Adad V (823–811 BC), found himself again the ruler of a state of Middle Assyrian dimensions, with independently minded governors in many of its prov-
inces and with powerful neighbours in Urartu and Babylonia. He took
the imperialist stance, and set about the process of conquest all over
again, campaigning perhaps as far as the Caspian Sea, but died within
a few years. He was succeeded by a child, Adad-nirari III (810–783 BC).
The early years of Adad-nirari’s reign were dominated by his mother
acting as regent, the first of two Assyrian queens to succeed in imposing
their personalities on history; this one was Sammuramat, whose reputa-
tion as Semiramis survived into Greek legend. From this point, for
about sixty years, Assyrian foreign policy followed a somewhat different
line. There were still the annual campaigns, but they seem – unless this
is purely the result of military failure – to have been pragmatic rather
than systematically aggressive. Occasional marches into Babylonia and
Syria maintained Assyrian prestige without imposing Assyrian rule;
expeditions to Iran collected horses; there were wars with Urartu. Mean-
while, away from the capital, local governors had their own agenda,
building up power through prosperity, encouraging agricultural settle-
ments and production. Babylonia had suffered severely at the hands of
Shamshi-Adad V, and remained in turmoil, but its culture was deeply
respected by the Assyrians, and there is evidence for growing Babylonian
influences on Assyrian intellectual life. Probably there were many Baby-
lonians, prisoners or refugees, in Assyria itself. The most notable build-
ings of Adad-nirari III’s reign are indeed temples to Nabu, originally
the Babylonian god of writing – ‘Trust in no other god’, as one inscrip-
tion says – and though it is difficult to correlate this kind of development
directly with other trends, we may detect some shift away from the
official Assyrian devotion to a cult centred on the aggressive qualities
of Ashur or Ninurta. There almost certainly existed, concurrent with
belief in magic and evil spirits, an acknowledgement that different gods
could be alternative facets of a single divine authority variously and
inconsistently manifested. There were political advantages in associating
the state with one supranational divinity, and Nabu seems to have been
acquiring this status.

By the mid-eighth century, Assyria’s position was that of a power
with great resources whose status was being challenged. The northern
kingdom of Urartu had grown much as Assyria had done, through
conquests and alliances, and was expanding into Assyrian spheres of
influence in both Syria and Iran, threatening Assyrian territory itself.
An effective response came at last with Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC),
who seized the throne after a revolution. For the next forty years he,
his son Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), and a third king, Sargon (721–
705 BC), who deposed Shalmaneser, were vigorous and successful
exponents of the old aggressive policy. By 705 BC Urartu was confined
to its mountains in the north, and Assyrian rule extended from the Gulf
to the Mediterranean, with vassal kingdoms, including the island of Cyprus, around the edges of the empire.

While local rulers survived if they had submitted in time, with Assyrian advisers to ensure compliance, most of the region consisted of provinces paying regular tax under Assyrian governors. The governors were under stronger control than previously, and the royal forces had grown into a permanent army. A network of roads with posting stations ensured rapid communications across the empire. Representatives of the government were everywhere; some were secret agents, concerned with state security. Everyone was answerable to the king as absolute authority, but the king himself lived in a court surrounded by individuals, men, women and eunuchs, with ideas and ambitions of their own. Rival queens, for instance, promoted the interests of their own progeny. The preferences and personality of the king were critical. This was the system that provided the model for many subsequent empires, dependent for its survival on force rather than loyalty.

One way to stabilise the imperial structure and integrate its population was by propaganda, and one of the forms this took, after the example of Ashurnasirpal’s Nimrud, was magnificent public works. Tiglath-
pilesr III, the first king of the revived empire, did indeed build himself a new palace at Nimrud, but this may have been a practical expedient since the existing one, over a century old, was probably decrepit as well as old-fashioned. It was Sargon who took the more drastic step of founding an entirely new capital city, named after himself and now known as Khorsabad. It was not far from Nineveh, and was basically an imitation of Nimrud. It included a citadel complex and a separate arsenal or camp. Just as at Nimrud, the citadel incorporated a royal palace, its associated temple quarter and temple-tower, several other palaces for high officials and a large Nabu Temple. While Khorsabad was overall slightly smaller than Nimrud, only 320 hectares within its walls, the palaces were bigger. Sargon inaugurated the new capital shortly before he was killed on campaign. This disaster, a consequence of the convention that Assyrian kings usually led the army in person, was the worst kind of propaganda, and was ascribed by some to divine displeasure. Khorsabad suffered the fate of other artificial foundations, and was abandoned. Sargon’s son, Sennacherib (704–681 BC), facing a crisis which might have led to the collapse of the entire empire, resolved it with courage and imagination.

Within Assyria, Nineveh was probably by now the major centre of population; Ashur could no longer compete. It was accordingly Nineveh which Sennacherib chose as his capital, and during his reign he converted it into a city bigger and better than anything his predecessors had known. When he had finished, its walls enclosed 720 hectares, and an elaborate network of canals brought water from the mountains to irrigate its parks and orchards. Sennacherib was particularly proud of his technological innovations. The royal palace containing government offices on the citadel was built to a new design, and it is probable that the entire civil administration was centralised in this building, instead of being split as previously among several palaces. An odd feature of one series of wall-panels showing public works is that many eunuchs appear as labourers, and it is possible that the king deliberately attempted to reduce the court influence of this important body of people; if so, however, there is no clear documentary support, and this is just one example of the way our evidence is always defective – here full of detailed information, there demanding that we read between the lines, elsewhere perhaps leaving us wholly ignorant of some major development.

Sennacherib decided that there should be no more foreign expansion, and the annual campaigns came to an end. Sargon may have been working towards this conclusion, but with Sennacherib it is clear-cut. Assyrian prestige was maintained by aggressive retaliation when imperial interests were threatened. Assyria now had five powerful neighbours: Egypt, ruled by a Nubian dynasty, which occasionally entered into

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**FIGURE 14 (top)** The ruins of Khorsabad, as seen in 1970.
intrigues with rulers in Syria/Palestine; Phrygia in modern Turkey, home of the legendary Midas; Urartu to the north, various small states and tribal groups in central Iran, which were soon to be united under the Medes; and Elam in southern Iran. Also significant, as an unpredictable threat on the northern frontier, were hordes of mounted tribesmen such as Cimmerians and Scythians, coming from the steppes of eastern Europe. Tributary neighbours included the Biblical kingdom of Judah with its capital at Jerusalem, the Phoenician cities with their commercial links across the Mediterranean, and a range of Arab tribes with links towards Yemen and Oman. The maintenance of satisfactory relations with these various states and interests was never easy, but the most complicated area of all was Babylonia.

Assyrian attempts to dominate the rich and independent city of Babylon had taken various forms, including alliance, the imposition of nominee kings, and the appointment of the Assyrian king himself as king in Babylon. None had really worked, since the Babylonians themselves were proud, and there were so many rival tribes in Babylonia — and indeed rival cities — that there was always someone anxious to profit by disruption. Moreover any Babylonian leader could look east for support, to the kingdom of Elam, which had its own interests in the region and no wish to see Assyria strong. The Assyrians themselves were concerned with Babylonia not only because of ancient history, but also because of its strategic position: it adjoined the main route to central Iran, and would be dangerous in enemy hands. Other motives are possible, such as a wish to profit from Babylonian wealth and commerce, and it is likely that many individuals at the Assyrian court had their own links with Babylonian affairs.

Sennacherib dealt with the problem at its heart. After two disastrous experiments with other methods, he destroyed the city and incorporated the worship of Marduk, who was regarded in Babylon as supreme god, into the cult of Ashur. This seems comparable with the promotion of Nabu by Adad-nirari or Sammu-rat. Sennacherib was creating what was effectively a new imperial cult, one to which Babylonians too would perhaps subscribe. With Ashur as supreme god and Nineveh as cosmopolitan metropolis, with the provinces consolidated and peaceful, the Assyrian empire could be viewed as the natural and proper World Order, something with which all subject peoples could identify.

In destroying Babylon, Sennacherib was probably influenced by emotion, for the Babylonians had betrayed his own eldest son to his death, and it seems that emotion was also responsible for a decision that undermined his otherwise far-sighted policies. He appointed Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) as his official heir, and Esarhaddon was such a bad king, besides being sickly and superstitious, that it is difficult to believe Senna-
cherib could have chosen him had it not been for the influence of Naqia, the young man’s mother. Naqia went on to influence the choice of Esarhaddon’s successors too, and stands beside Sammuramat as exemplar of an Assyrian queen controlling the course of events. Sennacherib himself was murdered by another son, in a failed attempt on the throne. During Esarhaddon’s reign, problems on the western frontier escalated to an Assyrian invasion of Egypt, an enormous undertaking without long-term success; the Medes grew to dominate central Iran. Meanwhile Esarhaddon was rebuilding Babylon; he arranged that on his death one of his sons should be king of Babylon while a second ruled the Assyrian empire as a whole – an invitation to civil war. In 670 BC Esarhaddon is recorded as executing many senior Assyrians, presumably for fear of treason. At the end of his reign he was busy with an abortive attempt to remove the Assyrian capital from Nineveh back to Nimrud.

The reign of Ashurbanipal (668–c.631 BC) is sometimes seen as Assyria’s golden age. Sculptures from the palace which he built at Nineveh represent the finest and most imaginative surviving examples of Assyrian art. He was himself a cultivated man, patron of temples and collector of ancient writings, a devotee of Nabu and literate in an age when the skills of literacy were mainly restricted to a special class of intellectuals. He was an admirer of his grandfather Sennacherib, whose empire had survived the ineptitude of Esarhaddon with its administrative structure intact, and ambassadors came to Nineveh from as far west as Lydia, on the Aegean Sea, and from Fars (Persia) in central Iran. Nonetheless Ashurbanipal was unable to cope with events as they unfolded.

There was a war with Elam, and eventually Elam helped Babylon to rebel. The capture of Babylon was followed by Assyrian invasions of Elam, in the course of which the ancient capital city of Susa was destroyed, and a succession of rival claimants to the Elamite throne found themselves prisoners at Ashurbanipal’s court. This was a disaster that the Elamites had brought on themselves through dynastic squabbling, but the collapse of Elam left the eastern frontiers of the Assyrian empire even more exposed to Median expansion. Meanwhile Phrygia and Urartu were overrun by nomadic hordes, which threatened the empire from the north and west. Egypt, recovering its independence, was soon to resume its old interest in Syria/Palestine.

The final collapse of the Assyrian empire took some twenty years, from Ashurbanipal’s death or abdication to the last recorded mention of an Assyrian army in 609 BC. What happened is obscure, as the foundation records and other texts, which are so informative about earlier reigns, grow increasingly rare; the historical framework begins to depend on Babylonian rather than Assyrian records. There were at least four kings in this period, two of them brothers and one possibly a
eunuch; the successions may have been disputed. There is a Greek story of a Median attack on Nineveh, perhaps about 626 BC. What did happen in that year, however, was the seizure of the city of Babylon by a southern official. This man was Nabopolassar, founder of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty and father of Nebuchadnezzar. By 620 BC Assyrian garrisons had been driven out of Babylonia. Nabopolassar continued striking north-west, and the chaos of these years is reflected in accounts of Egyptian and Iranian troops operating on the Euphrates. The Assyrian cities hastily repaired their walls. In 614 BC a Median force ransacked the countryside and destroyed Ashur. In 612 BC it was probably Babylonian engineers who helped direct the waters of Sennacherib’s canal system against the walls of Nineveh itself. Assailed by a combined force of Babylonians and Medes, the city was captured, and the king, Sinsharrishkun (c. 626–612 BC), was killed. A last Assyrian king, Ashur-uballit II (c. 611–609 BC), briefly retained control of some western provinces, looking to Egypt for help, but the empire was gone.

Biblical prophets, writing soon afterwards, rejoiced over the fall of Nineveh. They gave the Assyrians a reputation for callous barbarism which was to receive ample confirmation when the royal palaces, with their endless scenes of warfare, were rediscovered in the nineteenth century. Now that we can read the original records of the time, we recognise that the Assyrians were no worse than other men in this respect. What is more significant is the legacy of the empire. By their policies of centralisation and deportation, the Assyrians united much of the Middle East, and this cultural and linguistic unity survived through centuries. The Persian empire, reaching from India to Greece, was a grander version of what the Assyrians had put together, and owed much to their example. Assyrian art, science, literature and technology, integrated from many sources and revealed by excavation, represent a synthesis of ancient Middle Eastern civilisation as a whole, to which much of the European tradition owes its origin.
Of all the surviving artefacts which make Assyrian civilisation so distinctive, the best known are certainly the colossal stone gateway figures and the carved stone slabs which lined the mud-brick walls of the palaces of various kings between Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) and Ashurbanipal (668–c. 631 BC), and which provide a vivid picture of war and peace in Assyria. The British Museum has the largest collection of these reliefs outside Iraq, and those illustrated in the present catalogue have been carefully chosen to represent the principal types. They include scenes depicting ceremonies at the Assyrian court, the Assyrian army on campaign and the king hunting lions. We see how the reliefs developed between the ninth and seventh centuries BC, with the stiff, rather wooden art of the ninth century giving way to a more flexible and more naturalistic treatment in the time of Ashurbanipal. The appearance of the human figures, however, remains characteristic throughout: the men wear large beards, squared-off at the bottom, and the arm and leg muscles are exaggeratedly pronounced. When the reliefs were discovered in the mid-nineteenth century it may well have been the solid, respectable appearance of these figures that appealed to the Victorian public. Here were people with whom they were able to identify, the representatives of an ancient people who were not only proud and successful but were also mentioned in the Bible. Just as distinctive as the human figures on the reliefs are the gateway figures, gigantic stone bulls or lions with bearded human heads wearing horned caps, a sign of divinity.

The barbarous and callous character of the Assyrians has often been stressed, and was even noted by Layard himself. It is true that the reliefs show their enemies being treated in a brutal fashion. We see people impaled on stakes, being flayed alive and having their heads cut off, and similar acts of cruelty are described in Assyrian written sources. But it would be quite wrong to condemn the Assyrians on these grounds. There is no reason to suppose they were any more or less cruel than their contemporaries, and evidence for similar barbarous acts can be found in many ancient cultures, both eastern and western. Indeed, such brutality is by no means restricted to the ancient world. But why did the Assyrians apparently revel in it and depict it in such graphic detail in their art? For an answer to this, we have to consider the purpose of the reliefs. They were set up in rooms of state and were meant to be seen by visitors to the Assyrian court. Their purpose was crudely propagandistic. They extolled the virtues of the Assyrian king, they celebrated his conquests and they demonstrated his prowess at hunting lions. They
FIGURE 16 Assyrian workmen carrying spades, pick-axes and saws for cutting stone, from a relief of Sennacherib, c. 700–695 BC (WA 124823).

were also intended to serve as a sharp reminder of what happened to those who did not submit to Assyrian domination or who attempted to throw off the Assyrian yoke.

Assyrian narrative art was by no means restricted to the stone bas-reliefs. For example, similar scenes appear on strips of bronze nailed to wooden doors. The most famous of these are from Balawat (nos 42–3), but examples have also been found at most of the other main centres. Clearly this sort of art – both the reliefs and the bronze gate-bands – is
monumental, that is, it is found only in important public and religious buildings in the principal Assyrian cities of Nimrud, Nineveh, Khorsabad, Ashur and Balawat. Not surprisingly, archaeological excavations in Assyria in the last 150 years have tended to concentrate on these centres and on large, important buildings therein, as these represent the best chance of finding important and significant material. This has to some extent distorted our view of Assyrian culture, as industrial quarters in cities and small settlements or villages dependent on agriculture have been largely overlooked. It is almost certain that skilled craftsmen and artisans would have worked in the major Assyrian centres, and even if we do not have archaeological evidence for their presence there we know of it from other sources. For example, one of the gates at Ashur was known as the Tabira Gate, or Gate of the Foundry-Workers (Dalley 1988: 97–8). Probably specialist craftsmen were grouped together by trade in particular parts of the city, as they are nowadays in places such as Baghdad and Mosul. We know a little about how these craftsmen were organised and their working practices, but we are much more familiar with their products, a selection of which are illustrated in this book. Full descriptions are given in the catalogue, but here it will be useful briefly to consider the main categories of material.

Stone-carving finds its finest expression in the bas-reliefs, but many smaller items were also made of stone. We know that colossal figures, and perhaps also reliefs, were carved, or at least roughed out, at the quarry, but smaller artefacts must have been produced in urban centres. Whether the stonemasons who fashioned reliefs also undertook other work is unknown, but it is likely that they did. This would not have included seal-engraving, however, which was a specialist craft in its own right. Assyrian seal-engravers produced a large number of cylinder and stamp seals in various kinds of stone and occasionally in other materials as well. As described in section 8 of the catalogue, many of these seals are in styles that can confidently be recognised as Assyrian.

Metalworking flourished in Assyria. Large quantities of bronze and ironwork have been found, testifying to the productivity of Assyrian smiths. Some very elaborate projects were embarked upon. Excavations have uncovered monuments such as the Balawat Gates, but from written sources we know of even more ambitious ventures. For example, Sennacherib claims to have set up in his palace at Nineveh colossal bronze lions each weighing an extraordinary 11,400 talents or approximately 42 tons (Curtis 1988: 92). The range of existing bronzework is large, embracing most areas of Assyrian life. Many of the objects are utilitarian, not much different from those in use in other parts of the Ancient Near East, but some are characteristically Assyrian in style or iconography. Such objects are easy to recognise, and are sometimes found far beyond
the borders of Assyria. Thus, some of the bronze objects found in the Temple of Hera on the island of Samos off the west coast of Turkey are clearly Assyrian (Jantzen 1972). They include statuettes of male figures and horse cheekpieces.

Iron was also plentiful in Assyria, perhaps even more so than bronze. In one single room of Sargon’s palace at Khorsabad, Place found a huge hoard of ironwork weighing in total about 160,000 kilograms, or about 157 tons. Iron was used mainly for tools and weapons, and there is some evidence that Assyrian blacksmiths employed techniques such as carburising and quenching to improve the quality of their material and make it slightly harder and more durable than ordinary wrought iron (Pleiner and Bjorkman 1974; Curtis et al. 1979). The quantities of bronze and iron that were in circulation are of course an indication of the great wealth of the Assyrian empire, but this is demonstrated even more clearly by the recent discovery of the tombs of some Assyrian queens at Nimrud containing very large and hitherto unsuspected amounts of goldwork. The contents of these tombs also testify to the high level of technical competence reached by Assyrian goldsmiths.

The ubiquitous material in Mesopotamia is clay, and not surprisingly we find many objects made from this material. The clay was either sun-dried, as in the case of the apotropaic dogs buried beneath thresholds (nos 73–7), or it was fired in a kiln (terracotta), like the corbels, the so-called ‘hands of Ishtar’, that were used as architectural decoration (nos 53–5). In common with other contemporary cultures the Assyrians made large amounts of pottery, much of it in a style that is distinctively Assyrian (see nos 123–52). Sometimes it was made at small village centres, as we know from the discovery of a pottery kiln at Khirbet Qasrij in the Eski Mosul area (Curtis and Collon 1989). The wide range of Assyrian pottery types includes some distinctive glazed wares (nos 141–2). Here the technology overlaps with that of glassmaking, and we are in the fortunate position of having cuneiform texts, mostly from Nineveh, which describe the manufacture of glass in Mesopotamia (Oppenheim et al. 1970). However, it is difficult to recognise Assyrian products with certainty, and there has even been speculation that the most famous glass vessel found in Assyria, the so-called Sargon vase (no. 115), may be a Phoenician product.

Two other industries, ivory-carving and woodworking, were probably closely related, but unfortunately we have practically no surviving specimens of carved wood. Ivory, on the other hand, is well represented in the archaeological record. Ivories in Assyrian style, as opposed to those that are clearly Syrian or Phoenician, which were obviously imported in bulk, were presumably carved by native Assyrian craftsmen using imported ivory. Their products, although neither so numerous
nor so splendid as the Phoenician ivories in particular, are nevertheless outstanding works of art in their own right.

The artefacts described above have been found mainly at the sites of Assyrian capital cities. Life outside these main centres is less well documented, but with the excavation of smaller village sites in the recent Haditha and Eski Mosul dam projects the balance is beginning to be redressed. We know that the people in these rural areas lived in mud-brick houses with mud roofs, constructed in the same way but without the expensive decoration of the splendid palaces and temples in the towns. They used artefacts of exactly the same type, particularly pottery and tools, as their urban counterparts. Naturally, however, luxury goods were much scarcer.

In many fields of material culture Assyria shared a common legacy with its southern neighbour, Babylonia. Their inhabitants spoke the same language, Akkadian, written in the same cuneiform script, although naturally there were some slight differences of dialect and script between the two areas. We are extremely fortunate in that many clay tablets survive from Assyria. Large groups have been found at Nimrud and especially at Nineveh. Many of the latter come from a royal library or libraries established by Ashurbanipal (see page 198). Various texts were collected together, and some were specially copied for inclusion in the library. Altogether, these tablets provide an unparalleled insight into the life and workings of an ancient society, and their importance cannot be overestimated. They include letters, usually dealing with affairs of state: others are concerned with various kinds of business transaction or with medicine, mathematics and other technical matters. There are also copies of Babylonian literary works such as the Myth of Creation and the Epic of Gilgamesh (no. 214). Particularly important from an historical viewpoint are the royal inscriptions, which include annals written on cylinders and prisms. These describe the main events of a king’s reign and are an invaluable historical record.

From cuneiform texts we learn a great deal about Assyrian religion and beliefs, although much still remains obscure. There are tablets describing rituals and incantations, and large numbers of omen texts showing that the Assyrians attached significance to natural phenomena of all kinds. They believed in a pantheon of gods, each of which had a different function. Foremost amongst these were Ashur, the Assyrian national god, and his consort Mullissu; Shamash, the sun god; Sin, the moon god; Nabu, the god of writing and scribes; Adad, the god of storms; and Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. As well as being mentioned in texts they are represented in art; for example, on a series of rock reliefs at Maltai in Iraqi Kurdistan they are shown in procession standing on the backs of real or mythical animals.
No discussion of Assyrian civilisation would be complete without some reference to the pre-eminent position that Assyria enjoyed in the contemporary Near East. This resulted in luxury goods of all kinds flowing into the kingdom, whether as booty, tribute or through normal trade channels. For example, on his eighth campaign, in 714 BC, Sargon claims to have removed vast quantities of material from the temple of Musasir in Urartu (Thureau-Dangin 1912). Large numbers of foreign artefacts have been found at the Assyrian cities, particularly Nimrud. We may single out ivories as the best example of this phenomenon, and beautifully made Syrian and Phoenician panels and plaques belonging to various types of furniture as well as other items have been found in abundance. But equally large amounts of gold, bronze, glass and so on presumably reached Assyria, and, once there, were put to active use rather than being locked away in storerooms. In this sense, then, the imported goods became an integral part of the material culture of Assyria, and reflect Assyrian civilisation just as vividly as indigenous Assyrian products.
**CHRONOLOGY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BC</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10,000–3500</td>
<td>Evolution of agricultural communities throughout the Near East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3500–3000</td>
<td>Evolution of writing in Babylonia</td>
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<tr>
<td>3000–2500</td>
<td>Contacts with Assyria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2500–2000</td>
<td>Ninevite 3 period: long-distance trade passing through Assyria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–1750</td>
<td>Growth of Assyrian cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Old Assyrian period: Ashur a major trading centre with merchant colonies in Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400–1200</td>
<td>Assyria within empire of Mitanni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200–900</td>
<td>Growth and decline of Middle Assyrian empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>930–830</td>
<td>Spread of Aramaic tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>830–745</td>
<td>Growth of Late Assyrian empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>830–745</td>
<td>Ashurnasirpal II refounds Nimrud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>745–700</td>
<td>Consolidation of empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>745–700</td>
<td>Attacks from north (Uruatu)</td>
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<tr>
<td>700–640</td>
<td>Further expansion of empire to Mediterranean and into Babylonia, Iran and Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td>700–640</td>
<td>Sargon II founds Khorsabad</td>
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<tr>
<td>640–610</td>
<td>Consolidation of expanded empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>640–610</td>
<td>Periodical frontier wars and internal problems, especially in Babylonia</td>
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<tr>
<td>640–610</td>
<td>Sennacherib refounds Nineveh</td>
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<tr>
<td>640–610</td>
<td>Invasions of Egypt and Elam</td>
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<tr>
<td>640–610</td>
<td>Palace of Ashurbanipal built at Nineveh</td>
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<tr>
<th>BC</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>609</td>
<td>Last reference to an Assyrian army</td>
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**ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE CATALOGUE**

- D: depth
- DIAM: diameter
- H: height
- L: length
- TH: thickness
- W: width
- WT: weight

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**KINGS OF ASSYRIA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1132–1115</td>
<td>Ashur-resh-ishi I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1114–1076</td>
<td>Tiglath-pileser I</td>
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<tr>
<td>1075–1074</td>
<td>Asharid-apil-Ekur</td>
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<td>1073–1056</td>
<td>Ashur-bel-kala</td>
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<td>1055–1054</td>
<td>Eriba-Adad II</td>
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<td>1053–1050</td>
<td>Shamshi-Adad IV</td>
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<td>1049–1031</td>
<td>Ashurnasirpal I</td>
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<td>1030–1019</td>
<td>Ashurnasirpal II</td>
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<td>1018–1013</td>
<td>Ashur-nirari IV</td>
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<tr>
<td>1012–972</td>
<td>Ashur-rabi II</td>
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<td>971–967</td>
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<td>966–935</td>
<td>Tiglath-pileser II</td>
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<td>934–912</td>
<td>Ashur-dan II</td>
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<tr>
<td>911–891</td>
<td>Adad-nirari II</td>
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<tr>
<td>890–884</td>
<td>Tukulti-Ninurta II</td>
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<td>883–859</td>
<td>Ashurnasirpal II</td>
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<td>858–824</td>
<td>Shalmaneser III</td>
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<td>823–811</td>
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<td>810–783</td>
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<td>782–773</td>
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<td>772–755</td>
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<td>744–727</td>
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<td>726–722</td>
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<td>721–705</td>
<td>Sargon II</td>
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<tr>
<td>611–609</td>
<td>Ashur-uballit II</td>
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*Note: A few dates, particularly those of the later kings, are uncertain.*