REIGN OF
SARGON II

Sargon (721–705 BC), who had seized the Assyrian throne by force, founded a new capital city named after himself at Khorsabad, ancient Dur-Sharrukin. It included a magnificent palace decorated with carved stone panels; since this was a French discovery, the British Museum has relatively few examples of his sculptures. Many of them were removed from the palace in antiquity, when it was abandoned on his death. Some of those that survived show war, sport and feasting, as well as the punishment of rebels, but the majority projected a somewhat optimistic image of a peaceful world, an ordered universe in which tribute-bearers from east and west brought their gifts willingly to Sargon’s magnificent court.

The panels are cut in exceptionally high relief. Although their design, general style and subject-matter are unmistakably Assyrian, Sargon mentions that he deported skilled workmen from conquered states to Assyria, and it is possible that the quality of the carving in his palace reflects the experience of men from Syrian cities like Carchemish, where an independent school of sculptors was accustomed to producing sophisticated wall-panels in harder stone.

Human-headed winged bulls supporting an arch, as found by Victor Place in Sargon’s palace at Khorsabad. Photograph taken in the early 1850s by M. Tranchand.
14  Head of a cunuch

This head, which is over lifesize, belonged to a figure of a cunuch, one of the attendants of the Assyrian king. He wears an earring of a classic Assyrian type, and his curled hair-style is intermediate between that of previous reigns and the shorter squared cut which became fashionable in the seventh century. A pattern of rosettes is embroidered on the neck of his robe.

About 710–705 BC
From Khorsabad, Royal Palace, façade n, panel 16(?)
WA 118816
H 64 cm, W 53 cm, extant TH 12 cm
Botta and Flandin 1849–50: 1, pl. 29; Albenda 1986: 167

15  Head of a bearded man

This bearded head of a man, over lifesize, comes from a figure in a procession of tribute-bearers. The turban on his head and the style of his hair and beard identify him as someone from the west of the empire, probably the Syrian coast or Turkey. Processions of tribute-bearers were shown in the main court of the palace and in some domestic rooms. The top of the panel was cut to a rounded shape during the nineteenth century.

About 710–705 BC
From Khorsabad, Royal Palace, façade n, panel 22
WA 118830
H 62 cm, W 53 cm, extant TH 12.5 cm
Botta and Flandin 1849–50: 1, pl. 29; Albenda 1986: 169
Reign of Sennacherib

The palace of Sennacherib (704–681 BC) was constructed to a novel design for the new capital, Nineveh, incorporating both the traditional suites of rooms and others which probably functioned as government offices. Virtually all the excavated rooms in the public part of the palace were decorated with stone wall-panels, mostly showing scenes of warfare. Some walls showed formal processions or public works, and there were magical figures at the doors. The sculptures were severely damaged by fire when Nineveh was sacked in 612 BC. Layard estimated that he had excavated over 3,000 metres of sculpture, with twenty-seven doors flanked by colossal winged bulls or lion-sphinxes. The carving must have necessitated new techniques of mass-production. The narrative reliefs are cut less deeply into the stone than at Khorsabad, and the quality of carving is very variable. A notable feature is that the narrative scenes are no longer divided into two registers with a wide band of inscription between them, as had been normal previously, but fill the entire height of the panels. This change, one with which Sargon’s sculptors had experimented, meant that many more figures, on different scales, could be incorporated within single compositions, and there is consequently much more circumstantial detail. Often a composition occupied an entire room, with the most important scene, such as the attack on an enemy fortress, prominently situated opposite the doorway. The king himself takes a less dominant place within the narrative, and never appears fighting in person, but the compositions always direct the eye towards him, as he stands or sits receiving prisoners and booty.

J.B.R.
16 Episode from a siege (recarved fragment)
All the figures are Assyrian soldiers, with their distinctive pointed helmets and scale-armour on the upper part of the body. On the left a eunuch officer is shooting his bow, probably towards an enemy town. He is guarded by a man resting a large shield on the ground in front. Behind him are two slingers, whirling stones in the same direction; modern slingers in the Middle East are said to have a range of about 100 metres. On the right there are traces of another figure, probably a slinger bending down to pick up fresh ammunition.

These figures were originally cut at a lower level on the panel, and part of the first version remains. It was replaced by another at a higher level. A possible explanation is that the floor level had to be changed; another is that the carvings on this stretch of wall were simply done at the wrong height through haste or inadequate supervision.

About 700–695 BC
From Nineveh, South-West Palace, Room I, panel 16
WA 124789
H 62 cm, W 74 cm, extant H 11 cm
S. Smith 1938: pl. XLII
17 Episode from a battle
(recarved fragment)

This panel is a striking example of the practical, matter-of-fact way in which the Assyrians solved problems. Sculptured panels from the palaces of Ashurnasirpal, Tiglath-pileser and Sargon were all reused by later kings, but on this occasion a panel has been left in position on its wall but scraped down, and the original carving has been partly replaced with an updated version of a similar subject.

The reeds and water on the left are original, from a scene that showed one of Sennacherib's campaigns in the marshes of Babylonia (southern Iraq). Running vertically down the panel, and drifting right towards the base, is a line of chiselling which deleted whatever was once carved on the right-hand side. What we see there now was carved over half a century later, by Ashurbanipal or one of his sons, perhaps Sinsharrishkun who also campaigned in Babylonia. The distinction between the two periods is clearest at the top, with different treatment of the water and fishes. On the right an Assyrian soldier, in uniform typical of the later period, is pursuing a member of the Babylonian cavalry whose horse rears as it reaches the reeds, integrating the original landscape into the later scene.

The whole appears as a satisfactory unit, with a dramatic effect that has been compared with Chinese art. In fact the battle represents the left-hand end of what must have been a much longer composition, with two registers of fighting separated by a central river in much the same way as narrative scenes had been separated, in panels of the ninth and eighth centuries, by horizontal bands of inscription. The plain left-hand edge of the panel would not have been carved, but masked by the end wall or colossal figure against which it once abutted. The bottom of the panel is also plain, and the original floor would have been roughly level with the line of black bitumen along its face. JER

About 700–695 and 640–620 B.C
From Nineveh, South-West Palace
WA 124773
H 144 cm, W 132 cm, extant TH 12 cm
Read 1967: 42–5, pl. XIX
18 Soldiers of the royal guard
This panel was one of a group found, out of position, somewhere between the palace of Sennacherib and the Temple of Ishtar, principal goddess of Nineveh. They may have lined a bridge or corridor used by the king when visiting the temple, and they represented him and his entourage in formal court dress. The two figures on this panel formed part of his bodyguard, with uniforms that are basically austere but have much fine detail.

The archer on the left is one of the lightly armed soldiers who were probably drawn originally from the recently settled Aramaic-speaking communities in and around the Assyrian heartland. The spearman on the right exemplifies the manner in which the Assyrians incorporated contingents from all parts of the empire into their forces. While his shield is similar to those held by Assyrian soldiers, his turban, fastened by a headband with long ear-flaps, and his short kilt curving upwards above his knees, identify him as coming either from Palestine or from somewhere else nearby. Almost identical uniform is worn by the men of Lachish, in the kingdom of Judah, as represented in panels showing Sennacherib's campaign there in 701 BC. JER

About 700–695 BC
From Nineveh, South-West Palace/Temple of Ishtar
WA 125901
H 160 cm, W 111 cm, extant TH 9 cm
Barnett 1958: 164, pl. 328

19 Face of a sphinx
This probably belonged to the head of a colossal sphinx put together from different materials such as wood and bronze. Sennacherib records that several of the colossal figures in his palace were made in this way, partly overlaid with gold leaf. The practice of making composite statues was long established in the ancient Middle East, but none of any size survives intact. The tradition was carried on to Greece, where some of the finest divine images were described as chryselephantine (ivory and gold). The figure to which this head belonged may have been the base of a giant column, of the type represented by no. 44.

Unlike the human-headed winged lions and bulls, the clean-shaven sphinx is not typically Assyrian, though like them it was regarded as having protective magical powers. It was adopted from the west, where it was at home in Syrian art, and constitutes another example of Assyrian willingness to accept foreign ideas. JER

About 700–695 BC
From Nineveh, South-West Palace
WA 118009
H 60 cm, W 40 cm, D 23 cm
Layard 1853: 610. Strommenger 1970: 30, pl. 21
REIGN OF
ASHURBANIPAL

On the accession of Ashurbanipal (668–c. 631 BC), the South-West Palace of Sennacherib was still the grandest building at Nineveh, and it continued to be used as government offices. In the first half of his reign Ashurbanipal had new sculptures carved on existing wall-panels in this palace, but subsequently built a new palace as his personal royal residence. Further sculptures in the South-West Palace were carved later in his reign, and possibly also in the reigns of one of his sons.

While some of Ashurbanipal's sculptures were mass-produced to fairly stereotyped designs, generally arranged in two or three registers, the quality of the carving is superior to that done under Sennacherib, and they include exceptional pieces which rank among the greatest Assyrian achievements. The Battle of Til-Tuba (nos 20–22) is a composition in which every spare corner is crammed with detail; the traditional Assyrian dislike of empty space is utilised positively to express the chaos of war, with unstoppable movement from one panel to the next. In contrast, in the later sporting scenes, especially those shown on superbly finished panels which probably derive from the king's private apartments (nos 28–9), empty space is employed to create suspense, an air of dramatic anticipation.

20–22 The Battle of Til-Tuba
The Battle of Til-Tuba (or the River Ulai), showing the Assyrians defeating the Elamites of southern Iran, is arguably the finest large-scale composition in Assyrian art. Though the beginning of the battle is lost, the rout of the Elamite army on three adjoining panels forms essentially a complete unit on its own. This was one of a series of about ten compositions, recounting the story of an entire campaign, which lined the walls of a room in Sennacherib's palace but were actually carved for Ashurbanipal. The carvings are described in several clay tablets (see no. 40), which enable us to restore the entire decorative scheme in principle. Some of the incidents in the battle are also described in captions cut on the sculptures themselves, but the tablets give additional details which help to explain what is happening. The battle scene occupies the lower half of these three panels; the upper half, less well preserved, shows a review of prisoners deported after the campaign.

The Assyrians are attacking from the left, where the Elamites have been stationed on a mound. The two armies are clearly distinguished by their equipment.

An Elamite tries to pull a wounded friend to safety. Detail of no. 20.

The defeated Elamites are driven into the river. Detail of no. 22.
The Assyrian cavalry and some of the infantry have pointed helmets and wear scale-armour above the belt; most of them carry spears and shields, as do other infantrymen in crested helmets, and there are lightly armed archers with headbands. They tend to operate in pairs, with an archer protected by a spearman. The Elamites are nearly all lightly armed archers, with headbands tied at the back; their quivers are decorated with palmettes. Some of them are riding carts drawn by donkeys or mules. It is clear that, once the heavily armed Assyrians have forced their way through the Elamite lines, the Elamites cannot operate effectively at close quarters. They stumble back down the side of the mound, and their retreat turns into a rout, which ends as they are driven into the River Ulai. The growing chaos is graphically reflected in the overall arrangement, with the largely horizontal lines of figures losing coherence as they move right, and the river stopping them dead as it cuts across the scene from top to bottom.

Within the battle, critical incidents are picked out, forming an internal sequence of events like a strip-cartoon operating independently of the general progress of the battle. This sequence starts near the centre of the composition, with the crash of the chariot carrying the Elamite king, Tepthubaninshushnak, known to the Assyrians as Teumman, together with his son Tammaritu. Teumman is distinguished by his royal hat and fringed robe; Tammaritu is dressed like the other Elamites. The two are thrown out of the chariot, and Teumman's hat falls off, revealing his receding hairline. Leaving the wreckage with its struggling horses,
One Assyrian soldier cuts off the head of the Elamite king, while another picks up the royal hat. Detail of no. 22.

An Assyrian soldier, sitting in an Elamite chariot pulled by a donkey or mule, waves the head of the enemy king. Detail of no. 20.
the two hurry off right, but Teumman is hit by an arrow. His son shoots back, but the two are surrounded and killed. The Assyrians killing them do not use ordinary weapons of war but axes and maces; there is symbolism here, as maces represented authority and were employed for executions. Then the Elamites’ heads are cut off. An Assyrian soldier recovers Teumman’s hat from the ground, and another rushes back left, waving Teumman’s head in the air. The head next appears further left, held by an Assyrian in front of a tent where Elamites, some of whom were on the Assyrian side, are being employed to identify the dead. Finally an Elamite cart drives off left, with an Assyrian soldier in it waving the head triumphantly. The head was taken to Assyria, where Ashurbanipal had sensibly remained, and was subjected to various indignities.

Two other specific incidents are shown, in the central row below Teumman’s chariot. On the right an Elamite noble is cutting his bow in token of surrender, while an Assyrian threatens to kill him, and on the left a wounded Elamite calls to an Assyrian to cut off his head. Both incidents are described in the clay tablets, from which we also learn that the prisoners in the upper register, men, women and children, belong to the Gambulu tribe of Babylonia which had broken its oath to Assyria and supported the Elamites. In one detail at the left, men are forced to kneel in front of querns; they are members of the ruling family, and are being forced to grind up the bones of their ancestors. Two small fragments, mounted to the right of the tent, show similar scenes of punishment.

The date of Ashurbanipal’s war with Teumman is uncertain, with suggestions ranging from 663 to 653 BC. It was the first of a series of wars which culminated in the destruction of the ancient Elamite capital city of Susa. When Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BC, there were men who still recognised the scenes depicted in this composition. The heads of the Assyrian soldiers cutting off those of Teumman and his son have both been defaced, presumably by Elamite soldiers or ex-prisoners rampaging through the palace.

The panels are carved in a fossiliferous limestone, not the standard gypsum. The stone was brought by Sennacherib down the Tigris from the Judi Dagh, near Cizre in modern Turkey, where he observed it on campaign. Several Assyrian kings note with pride their imports of unusual materials such as this.

A wounded Elamite invites an Assyrian to kill him. Detail of no. 21.

About 660–650 BC
From Nineveh, South-West Palace, Room XXXII, panels 1–3
20 WA 124801a
H 182 cm, w 199 cm, th 15 cm
21 WA 124801b
H 173 cm, w 172 cm, th 15.5 cm
22 WA 124801c
H 204 cm, w 175 cm, th 17.3 cm
Layard 1853: pl. 43–6, Rosde 1976: 99–100, pl. 21, 2; 1979: 96–101, 107
A city, perhaps Nineveh

Soldiers of an Iranian army

This panel probably shows part of two independent compositions, in upper and lower registers. The division between the scenes has been treated flexibly, however, and the river between them could be regarded as belonging to both.

Above is a city which is unmistakably Assyrian and may be Nineveh itself. It has massive triple walls with one small central gate visible; the two outer walls may represent a two-tiered main city wall, while the inner wall surrounded a citadel.

At the top, inside the citadel, there is a building decorated with colossal human-headed winged bulls and with columns supported by bases in the shape of lions. It corresponds tolerably well to Sennacherib’s description of the South-West Palace at Nineveh, which he had built about fifty years previously (see no. 37), and may represent this very building. The lion column-bases would have been made of bronze (compare no. 39), supporting a portico in front of one of the main façades; columned porticoes of this nature were introduced to Assyria from the west. Sennacherib was particularly proud of the technological skill displayed in casting the bases. The winged bulls are on the façade of the building proper. They are striding, with four visible legs, whereas those made by Sennacherib were slightly different, with only three legs visible from the side. Winged bulls with four legs visible from the side were represented in Sargon’s palace at Khorsabad, and since he too commissioned bronze lion-bases there is a possibility that it is really his palace shown on this panel. On the other hand, Khorsabad had been largely abandoned many years previously, and it is usually unwise, in interpreting Assyrian art, to place too much reliance on details which may simply reflect artistic licence.

The three rows below show soldiers from Iran, probably from Elam, on foot, on horses and in carts. They are charging to the right, and give the impression of people in good heart, perhaps setting out on campaign. Although the Elamites more usually appear as enemies of the Assyrians, as in nos 20–22, there were warring parties within Elam itself, and whichever of them was losing seems to have been inclined to look to Assyria for support. Elamite documents have been found at Nineveh, and the Assyrians welcomed political refugees who might be useful at a later date. Other Iranian soldiers served in the Assyrian army. This, then, is probably an expedition on which the Assyrians posed as liberators, and had a substantial Iranian force helping them.

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Room H
Panel 7(?)
WA 124938
H 192 cm, W 118 cm, extant H 110 cm
Barnett 1976: 49, pl. XL

JER
24 The capture of an Elamite king

Ummanaldash, king of Elam, lost his throne and took refuge in the mountains of Luristan, in a small state whose ruler then handed him over to the Assyrians. This fragment of a lost composition incorporates a sequence of events in which the protagonist appears more than once (see also nos 20–22 and 28–9). A caption explains what is happening.

On the left Ummanaldash, with his distinctive high royal hat and long robe, turns back with a reproachful wave towards a figure who is mostly lost but can be seen to be wearing shoes turned up at the toes. This must be one of the mountaineers who have refused him asylum. An Assyrian officer holds Ummanaldash by the wrist, and three other Elamites who have also been surrendered walk in front of the pair, their arms raised imploringly. Another Assyrian leads two horses, perhaps those ridden by the emissaries on their mission. On the right Ummanaldash is being forced into a chariot, and an Assyrian seems to be pulling his beard roughly. The charioteer waits to drive off to Assyria.

The mountainous terrain is represented conventionally by a scale pattern, with stylised trees. Below, to the left, a lioness creeps up on a wild goat. There may be symbolism here, a parallel with the Assyrians ineluctably stalking their prey. There is a contrast between the relative formality of the capture of Ummanaldash and the drama of the hunt in the wild: the Assyrian sculptors often seem to have been better at representing animals than people. The Assyrian pushing Ummanaldash into the chariot has been partly recut. He was originally carved standing in front of the chariot wheel. This would have been wrong in reality, because he must have stood behind the wheel in order to propel his prisoner through the door at the back of the cab. The anomaly would not have disturbed an Assyrian sculptor of the ninth or eighth century, but on this occasion someone decided to rectify it and to recut the wheel so as to obscure the lower half of the man’s body.

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace
WA 124793
H 73 cm, W 129 cm, extant TH 4.7 cm
Barnett 1976: 49, pl. XI. Reade 1976: 104, pl. 28, 1
25 Prisoners in camp
This represents a group of Babylonians, perhaps members of a Chaldean tribe from the marshes of southern Iraq. They are encamped, and at the top a kneeling woman reaches towards a log fire. Behind her are traces of a seated animal, perhaps a sheep, and of another kneeling woman. Below, to the right, a seated man holds a skin of water or some other liquid, and he is drinking with a friend. Two central figures are seated on bundles, gesticulating, and one of them turns to address two women, who are standing with more bundles over their shoulders.

On the left an Assyrian soldier in crested helmet stands on guard, and the scene will have been part of a long composition showing conquest and deportation. Probably the king was represented nearby, reviewing the fruits of victory. It was common Assyrian practice to deport defeated populations for resettlement in areas where they could not cause trouble. The bundles carried by these people are all the possessions they have.

About 645-640 B.C
From Nineveh, North Palace
WA 124788
H 29 cm, W 69 cm, extant H 2.5 cm
Barnett 1970: 49, pl. xl
26 Lions in a garden
A lion and lioness relax peaceably in a garden, beside a tree, perhaps a cypress; the trunk of a palm-tree is visible too, and a vine with bunches of grapes is draped over both of them. There are flowers which may be lilies to left and right, and a plant with flowers like daisies grows behind the lioness; there is also a plant beside her tail.
This is perhaps the most attractive of all Assyrian sculptures, suggesting a love of nature belied by the lion-killing scenes which were displayed nearby. Apparently the Assyrian kings did sometimes keep lions as pets, and one painting shows a lion by the royal throne, but the progeny of this contented pair may well have been destined for the arena.

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Room E, panels 7–8
WA 118914
H 98 cm, W 178 cm, extant TH 10 cm
Barnett 1976: 39, pl. XV
27 Going to the hunt

This wall-panel comes from a series along a corridor which led to a postern gate out of the palace; possibly the king passed this way as he went out to hunt, and the panels showed him and his attendants, with their animals and equipment.

The dogs are ferocious mastiffs, not so different from a kind of shepherd’s dog one sometimes sees today in rural Turkey. The man or eunuch holding the lead is beardless, but his hair ends in a row of plaits, in a simpler style than that of his companion; men leading donkeys in this procession have similar plaits, which may have been worn by people of lower status at the Assyrian court. The Assyrian eunuch in front is carrying a net and stakes, and there is another bundle of stakes over the shoulder of the figure in front.

Another Assyrian sculpture (below) shows how this equipment was used in hunting deer. Apparently, once the herd had been located, it would be hunted with dogs, but a net would have been laid across the path which the herd was likely to take. Once the animals were entangled, huntsmen would emerge from their hiding places to take charge. This was the Assyrian version of a technique reaching far back into prehistory, when animals were trapped in so-called ‘desert kites’, stone walls of great length which gradually directed fleeing animals into small enclosures where they were killed.

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Room R, panel 7
WA 124893
H 157 cm, W 118 cm, extant TH 10 cm
Barnett 1976: 49, pl. XE

Relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh showing huntsmen trapping deer in nets (WA 124871).
28-9 The killing of lions
Ashurbanipal records that in his time there was ample rain in Assyria and lions abounded. He took much pleasure in the traditional royal sport of killing them, which was frequently done after they had been captured or possibly reared in captivity. This is the subject here, on panels which probably decorated one of the king’s own private apartments. The king is shown wearing full regalia, though a comparable series elsewhere shows him in more practical dress.

The top register consists of a sequence of events. On the right a lion is being released from its cage by a small boy or eunuch, who is himself protected from the lion by a smaller cage. The lion advances left, and is hit by arrows shot by the king. They fail to kill it, and it leaps at the king who continues shooting, guarded by a shield-bearer; eunuchs with spare arrows stand behind him. The final act, on another panel to the left which is now in the Louvre, Paris, showed the lion confronted face to face, in the attitude of the Assyrian royal seal (see no. 191), with the king, who stabs it with his sword.

The central register is again read from right to left. On the right an Assyrian horseman, guarded by spearmen in a chariot, distracts a somewhat uninterested lion. The king comes up from the left and stops it by the tail; the king’s right hand, not visible here, held a mace ready to strike the lion over the head, as described in the accompanying caption. It is notable that much of the lion’s tail has been chipped away, so that the lion has been, as it were, set loose; this defacement was probably the action, at once humorous and symbolic, of some enemy soldier busy ransacking the palace in 612 BC.

In the lower register dead lions are brought from the left. A musician with a plectrum plays a triumphant tune on a seven-stringed horizontal harp; there is another man beside him, perhaps a singer, unless we are to envisage a second harp. The tall stand is for burning incense. An elaborate table or altar, laid with a cloth, holds a bowl containing a leg of meat and a jaw, what may be a bunch of onions, and a smaller container. The king himself is pouring a libation, which the caption tells us is wine, over the bodies of four lions. Behind him stand attendants with fans and towels, his bodyguards, and grooms with the royal horses. JER

About 645–630 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, fallen into Room S
28 WA 124886
H 160 cm, W 169 cm, extant TH 17 cm
29 WA 124887
H 159 cm, W 95 cm, extant TH 13 cm
Barnett 1976: 54, pl. LVII
30 The dying lion
This lion, hit by an arrow and dying, derives from a scene in which Ashurbanipal was shown hunting from his chariot. It has long been acclaimed as a masterpiece. Curtis (1992: 113) has described it as follows:

The lion itself is squatting on its haunches, facing right. It has been mortally wounded by an arrow that has penetrated deep into its chest from above the shoulder. Blood is gushing out of the mouth of the beast, and it is straining every muscle and sinew in a last futile attempt to glaze over, and it is desperately gripping the ground with its claws. Although the suffering of the animal is horrible to behold, the sculptor has perfectly captured the animal in its death-throes, and we see here a naturalism that is rarely encountered in Assyrian art.

It has been suggested that scenes such as this imply that the artists had some degree of sympathy with the victims of the Assyrian king, rather than with their patron as a mighty hunter. Lions were regarded, however, as symbolising everything hostile to urban civilisation, and it is more probable that people looking at scenes like this were meant to laugh, not cry.

JER
About 645-640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace. Presented by Miss L.M. Boucher
WA 1992-4-4.1
H 16.5 cm, W 30.6 cm, extant TH 2.5 cm
Curtis 1992

31 Protective spirits
At the top of this panel are three examples of the ugalu, 'Great Lion', with one broken figure who may be the House God. Underneath is an urmahilu, 'Lion-Man'. They are all good spirits, whose presence was intended to protect the palace from evil and bad luck, just as Ashurnasirpal's palace had been protected over two centuries previously (see nos 8-9), though the identity of the spirits has changed. The Great Lions wear a simple Assyrian kilt, and make threatening gestures with daggers; their maces symbolise authority. They have eagles' claws for feet, and high, alert ears. The House God is better preserved on no. 32. The Lion-Man makes a more pacific gesture, but its import is the same. The horns on his helmet show that he is a god; horns were a divine symbol from the remotest past in Mesopotamia, when wild bulls were among the most powerful of natural forces encountered by men.

JER
About 645-640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Room T, door b, panel 2
WA 118912
H 14.6 cm, W 111 cm, extant TH 11 cm
Barnett 1976: 53, pl. LV
32 Set of protective spirits
These spirits are, from left to right, a lahmu (see also nos 65-6), an ugallu or 'Great Lion', and probably the House God. The hair of the lahmu is arranged in elaborate ringlets; this was an ancient style, seen on semi-divine figures struggling with animals on cylinder seals over 2,000 years previously. The tassels hanging from his kilt also indicate divine status. He balances a spear on the ground, and the sheath of his dagger is carved with an animal's head. The Great Lion is similar to the ones on no. 31, but the details of his kilt are finer, and red paint is visible on his head. The House God on the right, if correctly identified, has the horned helmet of divinity and another hair-style inherited from remote antiquity. All the features of figures like these conformed with precise rules, and these three were a set. The supernatural protection of the palace was probably designed with great care by the king's most experienced magicians.

The upper halves of the two right-hand figures are shown as viewed from the front, while their heads are in profile. This was a standard Assyrian convention for representations of the human body. JER

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Room B, door a
WA 118918
H 157 cm, W 189 cm, extant TH 9.5 cm
Barnett 1976: 36, pl. iv; Green 1983: 90–92, pl. x1d

33 Three protective spirits
These three figures are all that survive of the decoration on the façade of Ashurbanipal's throne-room. Each carries a small axe in his raised right hand and a wide-bladed dagger in the left, but traces indicate that originally there was a bow in the left hand. The bows have been erased, leaving slight depressions in the stone; this alteration is clearly original Assyrian work, and must reflect either a mistake or a change of mind about the appropriate magical requirements. The high, flat, horned crowns, possibly feathered at the top, are a grander version of the horned helmet worn by many other protective spirits. It has been suggested that these are three of the Sibitti, seven gods corresponding to the modern constellation of the Pleiades. JER

About 645–640 BC
From Nineveh, North Palace, Court O, panel 4
WA 124918
H 87 cm, W 90 cm, extant TH 7 cm
Barnett 1976: 48, pl. xxxviii