

# The development of the Assyrian Reliefs

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## Abstract:

Between the ninth and seventh centuries BC, the kingdom of Assyria in northern Iraq came to dominate the Middle East, its empire at one point extending from Iran to Egypt. The power and wealth of the Assyrian kings is reflected in the magnificent carved stone reliefs that once lined the mud brick walls of their royal palaces. The content and style of the carved imagery was transformed as the empire expanded and resulted in some of the finest sculptures from antiquity

## Resumen:

Entre los siglos IX y VIII a.C. el reino de Asiria, situado en la zona septentrional del actual Iraq, llegó a dominar todo el Próximo Oriente y a extender su imperio, en su momento de mayor apogeo, desde Iran hasta Egipto. El poder y la riqueza de los reyes asirios se refleja en los magníficos relieves que en su día cubrieron las paredes de ladrillo de sus palacios. Los motivos y el estilo de las representaciones fue variando a medida que el imperio asirio fue expandiéndose, dando así lugar a algunas de las obras escultóricas más destacadas de la antigüedad.

The magnificent sculptures displayed in Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum were carved on huge panels of gypsum and limestone between about 875 and 620 BC. During this period the kingdom of Assyria, located in the fertile valley of the River Tigris in what is now northern Iraq, came to dominate a geographical area that stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. As an expression of their piety and power, a number of Assyrian kings undertook vast building programmes at a series of royal centres. Although constructed of mud brick, palaces were made majestic by lining the walls of principle rooms with carved stone slabs which formed part of much wider schemes of decoration that included glazed bricks, wall paintings, textiles and furniture. The imagery embellishing the palaces was rooted in the artistic traditions of Syria and Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq) but had developed from the late second millennium BC as a distinctive Assyrian visual language intended to glorify the king. The earliest scenes are summaries or symbols of royal achievements. By the seventh century BC, however, compositions, sometimes consisting of multiple narratives, might occupy entire rooms. This artistic tradition was brought to a violent end with the destruction of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC, when the palaces were abandoned and the sculptures were buried under decayed mud brick and debris for over two thousand years.



| **Figure 1.** Royal bull hunt

The first Assyrian king to use relief decoration extensively was Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC). When he ascended the throne of Assyria the kingdom was already established as the dominant power in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. The king probably resided at Nineveh but in 879 BC he selected the site of Kalhu (modern Nimrud), an ancient settlement beside the river Tigris, to become his royal centre. Subject rulers, especially in the mountains to the north and east of Assyria, were required to supply him with workers and materials, and vast numbers of people were drafted in to undertake the building work. City walls were constructed enclosing an area of some 360 hectares and a canal was built to water orchards and gardens planted with exotic trees and plants gathered from distant regions and symbolizing the extent of the king's realm. The most impressive buildings were erected on the old settlement mound which was cleared for the construction of temples and Ashurnasirpal's principle residence, known today as the Northwest Palace. It was an enormous building more than 200 metres long and 118 metres wide with state apartments, offices and private apartments organized around separate courtyards.

The throne room of the Northwest Palace was huge; some 45.5 metres long, 10.5 metres wide, and perhaps originally 6 to 8 metres high.

The stone panels that decorated the southern long wall of the throne room, closest to the throne itself, were iconic images of kingship. Each of three adjoining panels was treated as a separate canvas with an action scene in the top register: the king hunting bulls (Figure 1), the king hunting lions, and the king leading an attack on a walled city while three enemies escape across a river by swimming and using inflated animal skins as buoyancy aids (Figure 2). In the lower register of each panel was a 'culminating' scene related to the one above, each a ritual celebration in which the king is shown in turn with a dead bull (Figure 3), a dead lion, and a line of prisoners with booty placed above them as a visual parallel to the written lists of captured goods. Only the essential elements of the scenes are included with little concern about relative scales and perspective; background scenes are simply placed above foreground scenes and the size of figures is often dependent on their importance. Figures stand on the ground line with spatial depth indicated by overlapping. The king is shown the same size or only marginally larger and is distinguished by his dress.

The carved images, each just over one metre high, were separated by a somewhat narrower band carrying a cuneiform text known today as the Standard Inscription because it is repeated on nearly every stone panel in the Northwest Palace. It names Ashurnasirpal II, including his titles and those of his royal ancestors, his role as the priest and ruler chosen by the gods, his successful military campaigns, and the



building work in Nimrud. The inscription was often carved last, obliterating some of the finer incised details of the reliefs. Repetition of text and image was an important element of the decoration of all the rooms at Nimrud, it was as if a giant cylinder seal had been rolled across the walls, sealing the room to ensure its ritual purity and surrounding and enclosing the viewer with the central message that Ashurnasirpal II was the perfect king chosen and blessed by the gods.

More than half the decoration of the entire Northwest Palace as known was religious and apotropaic. The eastern rooms of the palace appear to have been devoted to ritual use and the wall slabs of these rooms were covered with carvings of magical images. Winged humans wearing horned helmets indicating their divinity or with the heads of birds of prey are so-called apkallu protective spirits (Figure 4). Many hold a bucket which was thought to contain holy water, used to sprinkle and purify the king and the Sacred Tree using a symbolic fir cone. The Assyrian king often plays an active part in such scenes holding the weapons with which he maintains divine order or raising a ceremonial bowl.

It is perhaps surprising that, despite the expense and effort involved in embellishing the Northwest Palace with the stone reliefs, Ashurnasirpal does not refer to them explicitly in his building inscriptions. He does say, however, that he decorated the palace 'in a splendid fashion' and that he, 'depicted in greenish glaze on their walls my heroic praises, in that I had gone right across highlands, lands, (and) seas, (and) the conquest of all lands.' When the palace was inaugurated, the king invited some 69,574 people to a celebratory banquet where for 10 days they were given food and drink, bathed, and anointed. It is possible that many of Ashurnasirpal's guests stood in wonder before the huge carvings and reflected not only on the king's obvious power and wealth but also on his benevolence just like that of the gods.

The expansion by Assyrian forces towards the Mediterranean continued under Ashurnasirpal's son Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC). Although there are no carved stone panels from his buildings at Nimrud, we do have the scenes of his conquests on decoration from huge doors erected in his palace at the site of Balawat (about one days march to the north-east of Nimrud). Sixteen strips of bronze were originally nailed to the face of the door leaves (eight on each side). Decorated by hammering and chasing, the bronze bands include images of tribute being presented by the rulers of Tyre and Sidon (Figure 5). These cities on the Mediterranean cost were becoming increasingly wealthy as the centres of manufacture and trade; encouraged through their establishment of colonies in Sicily, north Africa and eventually southern Spain in their search for sources of metals demanded by for the markets of the Middle East, especially the Assyrian empire.

**Figure 2.** Escape across a river



**Figure 3.** Celebration  
after a bull hunt



**Figure 4.** Protective spirit

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**Figure 5.** Bronze door  
decoration





**Figure 6.** Attack on an enemy town

By the middle of the eighth century BC, however, Assyria had lost considerable prestige among the western states, and the northern frontiers were under pressure from the powerful kingdom of Urartu centered on Lake Van in eastern Anatolia. The grim situation ultimately gave rise to rebellions within Assyria and the throne was seized by one of the royal princes, Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC). The new king lost no time in attacking the root cause of Assyria's dwindling authority. Urartu was effectively contained and Syria reorganized into a series of provinces placed under the control of Assyrian governors. Neighbouring rulers now rushed to pay tribute to Tiglath-pileser, including those of Israel, Tyre, Byblos, Damascus and Carchemish. Finally, after several years of conflict, Tiglath-pileser was even able to claim the throne of Babylon.

These remarkable achievements once again gave Assyria access to resources of materials and labourers. However, years of expensive campaigns meant that it was only towards the end of his reign that Tiglath-pileser was able to have his own palace constructed. The so-called Central Palace was built on the citadel mound at Nimrud and, for the first time in some 130 years, carved stone panels formed part of the decorative programme of a royal building. It is difficult to judge the overall scheme of decoration since the palace was possibly never completed and many of the reliefs were later removed for reuse by King Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) in his so-called Southwest Palace. None the less, it is clear from the surviving sculptures, that, although the inspiration for the decoration probably came from the Northwest Palace, the scale of the work was less impressive, perhaps reflecting a rushed job. The lamassu guardian figures, for example, were simply carved in relief rather than almost in the round.

Despite their often poor finish the clarity of design of the reliefs is very effective. Images are formed from strong outlines, often emphasized by deep cutting of the stone. Generally, figures are shown standing on a ground line and fill the whole space of a slab or a register. Sometimes, however, they are arranged in two or three rows without ground lines and, although their height on the panel represents depth of field, the resulting impression is that some figures are floating in space. Compared with Ashurnasirpal's sculptures, the compositions have a less formal organization in which symmetry of design is often absent; this may suggest that there was not as much consultation as previously between scholars and the sculptors. The result, however, is a more varied repertoire of imagery. Symbolic statements of conquest and triumph are largely replaced by representations of the defeat of actual enemy tribes, cities and individuals (Figure 6).



**Figure 7.** Head of a bearded man

Like his father Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II (721-705 BC) spent much of his reign on campaign. He had claimed the throne from his brother, Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC), probably in a violent coup, and completed the conquest of Samaria, capital of the kingdom of Israel which was turned into an Assyrian province. However, Assyria continued to face pressure from neighbouring powers: Babylonia made an alliance with Elam in southwest Iran throwing off Assyrian authority and, at the same time, Urartu continued to threaten Assyria, establishing links with Phrygia which dominated central Anatolia under king Midas. In 717 BC a revolt in Carchemish instigated by Midas was crushed by Sargon and vast amounts of booty from the great trading city was carried to Nimrud and stored in the refurbished Northwest Palace. In 714 BC Sargon led his army into Uratian territory, plundering the wealthy frontier state of Musasir, and four years later he reclaimed the throne of Babylon.

Sargon's hard won status was mirrored by an enormous royal centre he had constructed on land purchased from local communities some 20 kilometres northeast of Nineveh. The city was named Dur-Sharrukin ('Fortress of Sargon', modern Khorsabad) and was surrounded by a wall 7 kilometres long. It was built on an artificial terrace and contained temples and a magnificent royal palace of over 240 rooms, many decorated with stone reliefs. The court moved to the new capital in 707-6, even though the construction was not completely finished.

As was the case with his father's palace, the inspiration for the layout and decoration of the new building at Khorsabad was probably the Northwest Palace at Nimrud. Huge five-legged, human-headed winged bull lamassus carved almost in the round guarded the city and palace gateways. Reliefs of both winged and wingless protective spirits also stood at doorways but the large amount of wall-space devoted to magical and ritual imagery at Nimrud was replaced at Khorsabad with formal scenes of processions of larger-than-life courtiers and tribute-bearers that occupied the entire height of the slabs lining the walls of courtyards and many of the rooms in the palace (Figure 7). Such images represented an ordered world as established by Sargon in which tribute came to him from east and west; images of the king flank doorways to receive the bearers who progress towards him from both directions. The sculptures are all cut in exceptionally high relief and this may reflect the influence of workers from Syrian cities like Carachemish with its long tradition of sculptors working in hard stone; according to Sargon's inscriptions, he deported such craftsmen to Assyria following his western conquests.

The interest in focussing on the defeat and punishment of individual enemies known from Tiglath-pileser's palace sculptures continues at Khorsabad and such scenes are often highlighted by captions. In addition, the prominent role of the king is maintained and he can appear at both the beginning and the end of narratives to start and complete a story. These carved episodes were made more specific by differentiating the ethnic physiognomies of enemies, a technique which may have developed under Egyptian



**Figure 8.** Face of a sphinx

influence. The representation of different landscapes is expanded at Khorsabad to underscore the varied world being conquered and ordered by the king. The mountains of Musasir, for example, are represented by the traditional scale pattern, and in a series of remarkable sculptures, now in the Louvre Museum, multiple figures, shown moving planks of cedar wood along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, are placed against a background of swirling water and scale patterns that cover the entire height of the panels so that objects and humans no longer appear to float in space.

The wars fought by Sargon II resulted in a relatively stable empire that allowed his son and successor Sennacherib (704-681 BC) to initiate his own building programme within years of coming to the throne. However, his father's inauspicious death in battle combined with the somewhat artificial creation of Khorsabad, led Sennacherib to establish his royal centre at the ancient and venerable city of Nineveh. Here the king set about creating a capital worthy of an empire that now dominated the Middle East. The new city occupied an area twice that of Khorsabad and was enclosed by a wall twelve kilometres long with eighteen gates. Canals were built to bring water up to seventy kilometres to feed extensive farm and park lands in and around the city. Sennacherib's palace, built over some fifteen years, was constructed on the old settlement mound (modern Kuyunjik). Known today as the Southwest Palace, the building was immense, indeed much larger than any earlier Assyrian palace. It included a huge throne room with adjoining chambers, an inner court surrounded by reception rooms, and a second inner court – a feature not found before – surrounded by more rooms. The majority of chambers were panelled with reliefs; up to 70 such spaces and about three kilometres of sculpted slabs were uncovered in the nineteenth century (representing perhaps only half of the palace).

Sennacherib tells us in his inscriptions that he intended the palace to be without rival, an incomparable building which he had created for the 'astonishment of all nations'. The stress on nations rather than peoples reflects the scale of the empire the king now ruled, one that would require a palace to match its dimensions. The Assyrian world view had expanded with its territories and the decorative scheme of the palace was adapted accordingly. Large-scale processions of court officials and tribute-bearers disappear from the sculptures and new features were introduced to express the extent of the empire: columns from Syria, and new forms of protective spirits from Babylonia and Syria including examples made from different materials (Figure 8). Traditional gateway bull-lamassus were now carved on a truly massive scale and were



**Figure 9.** Episode from a battle (recarved fragment)



**Figure 10.** Soldiers of the royal guard

no longer conceived, as at Nimrud and Khorsabad, from the combination of two-dimensional images but rather as three-dimensional animals with four legs. They thus appear more believable.

The novel features of the palace decoration also extended to the relief panels which are highly innovative in style and subject. The narrative scenes are no longer divided into two registers with a band of inscription between them, but fill the entire height of the panels (though features in a landscape, such as a river, are sometimes used to divide the imagery into two or more registers). Although there were a few experiments with this approach in Sargon's palace at Khorsabad, at Nineveh it became the norm. The increased size of the stone canvas gave Sennacherib's artists space to incorporate considerably more information within single compositions: many more figures could be included, often at different scales and arranged in horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines to direct the eye towards crucial moments in the narrative. The depiction of diverse landscapes is methodical with entire backgrounds filled by details of vegetation and physical features representing the varied world controlled by Assyria (Figure 9).

The most common theme of Sennacherib's reliefs is military campaigns and nearly every room in his palace was devoted to a battle or siege. The crushing of a western revolt among the cities of Phoenicia, Philistia and Judah in 701 BC included the siege and capture of Lachish. Although not mentioned in the royal inscriptions, the fall of Lachish is recorded in reliefs which lined the walls of a room located at the very heart of the palace and which was approached through three successive gateways each guarded by pairs of bull colossi; Sennacherib presumably considered the capture of this city worthy of special attention. Some of the conquered people were resettled in other areas of the empire where they were put to work on agricultural or building projects. Some people of the western provinces were incorporated into the Assyrian army and are even represented among the royal guard: Figure 10 shows an archer and spear

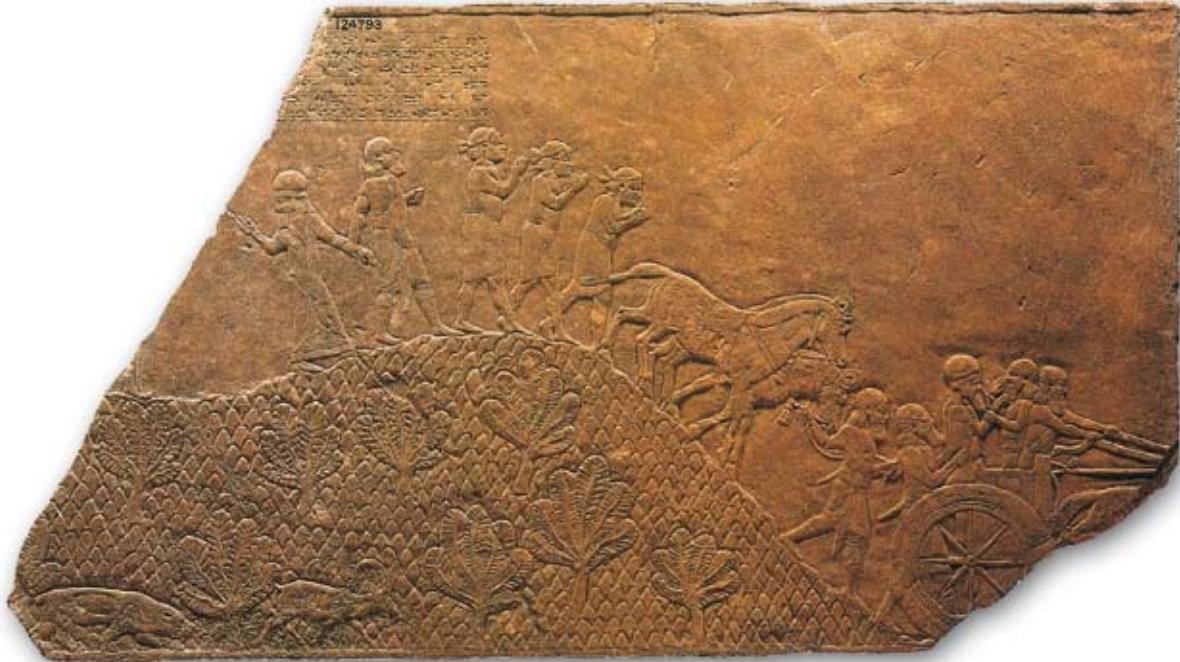


**Figure 11.** The Battle of Til-Tuba

bearer. The latter wears a distinctive headband with long ear-flaps, an almost identical uniform to that worn by the men of Lachish.

The last great king of Assyria was Ashurbanipal (669-c.631 BC) who resided for most of his reign in the Southwest Palace at Nineveh. With his brother established as the king of Babylonia, Ashurbanipal was able to effectively confront the two main powers opposing Assyria at its western and eastern borders: the 25th dynasty rulers of Egypt were forced out of that country in 664 BC and replaced with a more amenable king; and the Elamite king Teumman was killed in battle around 653 BC. Assyria was at the height of its power and this was reflected in the creation of a series of remarkable reliefs in the Southwest Palace depicting the defeat and death of Teumman at Til-Tuba in southwest Iran (Figure 11). The reliefs are carved on slabs of beautiful limestone which Sennacherib had obtained from sources some 200 kilometres to the north of Nineveh. These sculptures are among the greatest achievements of Assyrian art. Every part of the composition is packed with details of soldiers, animals and chariots to produce what appears at first sight to be a meaningless explosion of figures which, nevertheless, wonderfully expresses the chaos of war. Closer inspection, however, reveals a tightly controlled vision, with Assyrian soldiers forcing the enemy Elamites down a hill in an unstoppable movement across the panels to the right. In the centre of the scene several narratives are played out along a series of parallel ground lines: Teumman tumbles from his chariot and, fleeing to the right into a seemingly claustrophobic woodland, he is caught and decapitated. In triumph, an Assyrian soldier carries the severed head left across the field. These chilling images are carefully captioned with incidental details and even speeches by the enemy. The registers of narrative dissolve on the far right and the Elamites tumble into a river which, along with the hill, acts to frame the entire composition.

Following the crushing of a rebellion by the Babylonians and the defeat of their Elamite and Arab allies between 652 and 646 BC, Ashurbanipal ordered the construction of a new palace on the citadel at Nineveh (the so-called North Palace). As in the Southwest Palace many of the rooms were lined with reliefs depicting warfare, generally arranged in two or three registers which are now, however, clearly defined by lines. Although many were mass produced, the quality of the carving is superior to that done under



**Figure 12.** The capture of an Elamite King

Sennacherib. The throne room was decorated with scenes of Ashurbanipal's triumphs in Elam (Figure 12) placed opposite scenes of victories in Egypt and which thus stood for the extent of the empire from East to West. As in his grandfather's reliefs, the king is never shown engaged in fighting and indeed Ashurbanipal is entirely absent from the battle scenes. This probably reflects the real situation but, although literalness has become an important element of the reliefs, the imagery continues to be heavily selected. There is an increasing interest in the suffering and humiliation of the enemy rather than a focus on the activities of the king whose main role is to receive defeated people and booty.

The finest sculptures from the North Palace are, without doubt, the scenes of Ashurbanipal hunting and killing lions, the most powerful and dangerous animals in Assyria (Figure 13). The theme of the royal hunt was closely associated with the notion of Assyrian kingship and had been a popular motif in royal inscriptions and imagery from the second millennium BC onwards; indeed the king grasping and stabbing a rampant lion was carved on seals that had been used for centuries by the palace administration. However, Ashurbanipal exploited the image as never before in both literary texts and magnificent images. Reliefs depicting the king hunting lions decorated some of the more private areas of the palace and reinforced the notion of the powerful king at the very heart of the empire. The carved slabs in one room had scenes of the king hunting lions from a chariot within an arena. Unlike the Til-Tuba reliefs with their densely packed imagery, the sporting scenes play with large areas of empty space to evoke the arena itself as well as the drama of the spectacle. We know from Ashurbanipal's inscriptions that the hunting field was actually in Nineveh and was dedicated to the warrior goddess Ishtar. The wild animals were brought to the arena in cages from the neighbouring plains. The use of a continuous narrative in which a lion is shown in multiple images rushing from his cage towards the king is a truly masterful use of a single space to explore the excitement of the confrontation. Perhaps more than any other quality of these superb reliefs is the remarkable ways in which the sculptors have captured the naturalism of the animals as well as their terrible suffering. The aim of the artists was not to generate pity for the dying creatures but rather to highlight their raw, dangerous presence and to show how they, like the evil Teumman, collapse in agony at the hands of the Assyrian king who, through the support of the gods and the skill of his weapons, brings civilization to the chaotic and disordered world that the animals represent.

Although the images of animal hunts evoked a vigorous and powerful monarch, this was perhaps in



**Figure 13.** The killing of lions

contrast to reality. The years of military campaigns had severely drained Assyria's resources and with the burden of supporting a huge bureaucracy there would be no further expensive major military campaigns to maintain the vast empire, which had begun to fray at the edges. The ruler of Egypt, Psamtek, had extended his authority and begun to advance in the north through Philistia. In Judah, Josiah (640–609) undertook religious reforms and established his control over the former territories of Israel. And, although Assyria's hold over much of Syria remained secure, pressures on the northeast frontiers were unrelenting. Some time around 631 BC Ashurbanipal died and he was succeeded by his son. However, the Assyrian throne was contested and for a brief period even an official was able to claim it. Eventually, another of Ashurbanipal's sons, Sin-shar-ishkun, became king but by this time Assyria was losing its hold on Babylonia. New claimants for the Babylonian throne had emerged including a man called Nabopolassar. Initially the Assyrians were able to keep his forces at bay, but in 626 the Assyrian army suffered a reverse at Babylon and Nabopolassar was crowned king in Babylon. Gradually Nabopolassar extended his authority and by 616 he began to launch attacks on Assyrian territory. With Nabopolassar's campaigns diverting Assyrian resources to the defence of the homeland, the Medes, tribal groups from Iran, swept into Assyria in the summer of 614 and plundered the city of Ashur. A treaty was agreed between the Babylonians and the Medes (according to a later tradition it was sealed through the marriage of a daughter of the Median king with Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar). The two armies joined forces and in 612 they began to besiege Nineveh. After three months the great city fell and with it the Assyrian empire. However, such was the perceived significance of the images of kingship decorating the royal palaces, it was somebody's job from among the Babylonian and Median armies to seek them out and have them mutilated. By gouging out the king's face in the stone reliefs, as well as that of other important Assyrians and their allies, the presence of Assyria itself was thought to be obliterated.