

Assyrian Texts

The Inscriptions of Aššurnasirpal II and His Son

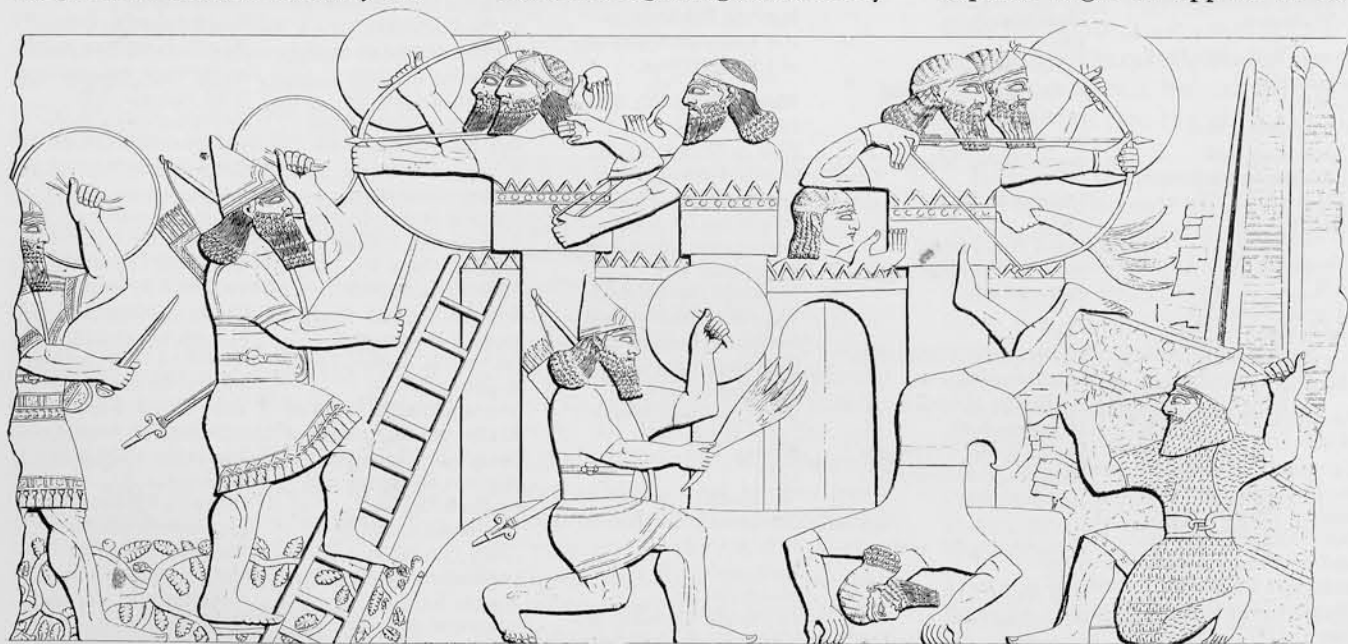
TAMMI J. SCHNEIDER

The existence of written records at a site is viewed with great joy because texts impart information that cannot be gleaned from other material remains. When no such texts are found, the archaeologists and other associated scholars must work that much harder to understand what happened at the site. One way this

is done is by analyzing the remains of the site in light of other contemporary information, as has been done for Hasanlu in this issue. Contemporary sites of Assyria have produced historical texts recounting the activities of the Assyrian kings that not only shed light on the period in general but on the area of Hasanlu in particular. It is only with an understanding of the nature of these texts and their inherent problems that they can be useful for this purpose.

Since the beginning of monarchy

in Assyria, rulers have left royal inscriptions. As early as Shalim-Ahum (ca. 2000 B.C.), formulaic inscriptions stating 'Royal name, vice-regent of Assur built X' were written on tablets, cones, nails, prisms, cylinders and bricks, stelae, weights, door sockets, and statues made of clay and stone. These follow the basic structure already set by the Sumerians in the 3rd millennium B.C. Beginning with Adad-Nirari (1307-1275 B.C.), however, passages recounting military exploits begin to appear in the



I Inscriptions on the palace walls at Nimrud record some of Aššurnasirpal II's numerous military campaigns; these were accompanied by reliefs depicting scenes of warfare. Here, Assyrian forces wearing pointed helmets besiege a settlement. They are armed with swords, daggers, shields, and bows and arrows. (Found in the Southwest Palace, Wall F, but thought to be originally from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud; from Layard 1849:Pl. 29)

Assyrian inscriptions. These accounts become quite lengthy and detailed by the time of Aššurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.) and Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.), the Assyrian kings contemporary with Hasanlu period IVB.

In the Neo-Assyrian period the military exploits are inscribed on large wall reliefs that accompany the pictorial representations adorning the palace walls. The inscriptions are also found on royal statues which rulers erected all over their kingdom, on colossal bulls found in palaces, and even on cliff faces along the Tigris River. The purpose of these accounts is basically propagandistic: they glorify the ruler and cause all who view these texts to fear the might of the monarch and of Assyria. Because they have a political function, they cannot always be trusted to be what 20th century historians would consider 'accurate.'

The length and number of military inscriptions reflect to some degree the power of the monarch and the amount of campaigning he did. It is therefore only fitting that Aššurnasirpal II, the Assyrian monarch who in the 9th century B.C. burst out of the traditional boundaries of Assyria and laid the groundwork for the Neo-Assyrian empire, would leave extensive military accounts. He successfully campaigned as far as the land of Kut-muhu in the Upper Tigris valley. In the west, he invaded as far as the Aramaean kingdom of Bit-Adini, causing its ruler to bring tribute and give up hostages. He is also the first Assyrian monarch since the time of Shamshi-Adad I (1813-1781 B.C.) to make the claim "I made my way...to the Great Sea of the land Amurru [Mediterranean]. I cleansed my weapons in the Great Sea (and) made sacrifices to the gods" (Grayson 1976:143, par. 586).

The importance of Aššurnasirpal II for modern scholars lies not only in the large area of land he conquered, but also in the detail of his exploits, recorded in various styles. He was the first Assyrian king to record more than one campaign in what is known as the "annalistic style" (Grayson 1976:114). These annals are chronologically arranged

narratives describing the king's activities. He also employed the oldest type of military inscription, the display text. This form of inscription tends to list campaigns based on where they were located geographically, grouping together campaigns in the same region even if they did not occur at the same time. Some texts combine both chronological sequences and geographic sequences.

The styles differ slightly in orientation, but the information they contain is very similar. The standard format begins with an epithet section describing the king. Although all the preceding monarchs have such a section recording their titles, the deities that helped them, and their lineage, Aššurnasirpal II has one of the longest epithet sections of any Assyrian king. This list contains not only the usual terms such as "strong king, king of the universe, unrivalled king, king of all the four quarters...beloved of the gods" (Grayson 1976:119, par. 537), but also contains such vividly descriptive terms as "capturer of hostages...ferocious dragon...encircler of the obstinate...lofty (and) merciless hero...destructive weapon of the great gods...the king who has always acted justly with the support of Ashur and the god Shamash the gods who help him and cut down like marsh reeds fortified mountains and princes hostile to him..." (Grayson 1976:120, par. 537, 539).

The text then details the king's itinerary. Often, in order to arrive at his destination or to pursue his enemies, the king had to traverse difficult terrain: "a rugged mountain which was unsuitable for chariotry (and) troops, I cut through with iron axes (and) I smashed (a way) with copper picks" (Grayson 1976:132, par. 565). The most helpful passages for modern scholarship are those which record for us the mountains or rivers crossed in order to arrive at a destination, as well as the cities that lay in the way. These sections are crucial for trying to discern the exact location of the ancient cities.

The descriptions of the battles and the trials undergone by the inhabitants are some of the most

gruesome and violent narratives from antiquity. Aššurnasirpal II not only "razed, destroyed, (and) burnt the cities" (Grayson 1976:123, par. 546), but he also flayed prisoners alive, erected piles of heads, burned adolescent boys and girls, cut off extremities and "died the mountain red with their blood (and) filled the ravines (and) torrents of the mountain with their corpses" (Grayson 1976:135, par. 573). In order to avoid such a fate many cities offered tribute in goods and gave over children as hostages:

They took fright before the brilliance of my weapons and the magnitude of my dominion (and) I received harnessed chariots, equipment for troops (and) horses, 460 harness-trained horses, two talents of silver, two talents of gold, 100 talents of tin, 100 talents of bronze, 300 talents of iron...1,000 linen garments with multi-coloured trim, dishes, chests, couches of ivory (and) decorated with gold, the treasure of his palace—(also)...his sister with her rich dowry, (and) the daughters of his nobles with their rich dowries.

Although most of the texts are concerned with military matters, other activities are mentioned. Aššurnasirpal was well-known as a builder. One of his most famous endeavors was the rebuilding of

the ancient city Kalach...which had become dilapidated; it lay dormant (and) had turned into ruin hills. I rebuilt that city. I dug out a canal from the Upper Zab...I planted orchards with all (kinds of) fruit trees in its environs. I pressed wine...I rebuilt the wall...I founded therein a palace as my royal residence and for my lordly leisure for eternity. (Grayson 1976:154, par. 619)

I made (replicas of) beasts of mountains and seas in white limestone and parūtu-alabaster (and) stationed (them) at its doors. I decorated it in a splendid fashion; I surrounded it with knobbed nails of bronze. I hung doors of

cedar, cypress, daprānu-juniper, (and) meskannu-wood in its doorways. I took in great quantities and put therein silver, gold, tin, bronze, iron, booty from the lands over which I gained dominion. (Grayson 1976:166, 167, par. 653)

To celebrate this event Assurnasirpal held a banquet for which he left behind the menu, as well as the guest list, which included emissaries from many lands (Grayson 1976:176, par. 682). He also claims to have built

temples which had previously not existed....cities, which during the time of my fathers had turned into ruin hills, I took in hand for renovation (and) settled therein many people. Ancient palaces throughout my land I built anew. I decorated them in a splendid fashion (and) stored grain and straw in them. (Grayson 1976:175, par. 679, 680)

The texts also refer to Aššurnasirpal as a hunter and collector of animals. Aššurnasirpal II the hunter appears in pictorial reliefs accompanied by text on the walls of his palace in Kalach. This side of the monarch further enhanced his role of the physically strong, skilled, and courageous leader. His interest in animals led him to gather "wild bulls, elephants, lions, ostriches, male apes, female apes, wild asses, deer, ayalu-deer, female bears, leopards...beasts of mountain (and) plain" and he "in my city Kalach....displayed (them) to all the people of my land" (Grayson 1976:149, par. 598). His attitude toward the "zoo" makes clear that

the decoration of the palace and the texts were not only for aesthetic purposes but to impress and instill fear in those who entered the palace, for clearly only a very powerful person in the good graces of the gods could achieve such things.

His son Shalmaneser III campaigned for 25 of his 31 years of rule and extended the kingdom farther than his father had. Though his texts follow the same general pattern as his father's, he was more interested in economic matters, and thus the texts have a much different tone. Gone are most of the long and gory accounts. Instead, Shalmaneser III formalized his accounts, relying more on the annalistic style which incorporated a new system of dating. These systematic accounts listed the places visited and how the king arrived there, but in most cases without the poetic description of the hardships. The stock phrase "I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire" (e.g., Cameron 1950, col.i:50-51) comes to replace the vivid massacre accounts of Aššurnasirpal II. Whether this reflects a change in policy or simply the way the monarch wanted to be remembered is unclear. It is also unclear whether the monarch actually destroyed a city when he made that claim, since often times the king had to return to the very same area and again destroy it.

These inscriptions are important for understanding the general period in which Hasanlu IVB existed, as well as the source of some of the motifs and their inspiration. Though Hasanlu was clearly an important site in antiquity, its ancient name has not come down

to us. Our only clues are in the geographical information included in the texts of the Assyrian kings Aššurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III. Unfortunately, although we have a general idea of the names applied to the region of Hasanlu, exact boundaries cannot be drawn with certainty.

The causes for the uncertainty are many and complicated. The texts that are arranged geographically provide certain information, such as which places are near each other (e.g., Grayson 1975:124, par. 547). Although we may get an understanding as to where these areas are in relationship to each other, we cannot necessarily place each on a map. The stable geographic features such as mountains and rivers that the kings often mention traversing in order to reach their destination help in locating the general region of most of the place names. But, although the modern names of most of the rivers mentioned in the texts are known, the specific mountains and especially the passes in them are still difficult to identify. This is further complicated by the fact that the texts tend to generalize or, as we have seen, to wax poetic in their discussion of the journey. It therefore becomes very difficult to know exactly where one area ends and another begins. What is clear is that the entire area surrounding (and perhaps including) the site of Hasanlu IVB was visited by both Assyrian rulers. Although different tactics, of the varieties mentioned above, were applied to such places, the final result was that they all eventually paid their tribute to the Assyrians. 2

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Tammi J. Schneider

received her B.A. in Hebrew from the University of Minnesota in 1984. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Ancient History Department of the University of Pennsylvania; her

dissertation will be an historical and literary analysis of the annals of Shalmaneser III. She has excavated at the Philistine site of Miqne/Ekron in Israel for 3 summers and will return again this year.