4.5: Neo-Assyrian Civilization

Neo-Assyrian Civilization

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-610 BCE or 912-612 BCE) was, according to many historians, the first true empire in the world. The Assyrians had expanded their territory from the city of Ashur over the centuries, and their fortunes rose and fell with successive rulers and circumstances in the Near East. Beginning with the reign of Adad Nirari II (912-891 BCE), the empire made great territorial expansions that resulted in its eventual control of a region which spanned the whole of Mesopotamia, part of Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt. They fielded the most effective fighting force in the world at that time, the first to be armed with iron weapons, whose tactics in battle made them invincible. Their political and military policies have also given them the long-standing reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness.

Assyrian Arts and Politics

The Assyrian state proved masterful in promoting their ruthlessness and vigor through visual representation.
Lion Hunts

Lion hunter was one role of the Assyrian king. We know this primarily from lion hunt steles located in Nineveh dating back to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II. These steles illustrate the king capturing and killing lions. Without a doubt, these steles functioned as propaganda, promoting the virility and might of the king through his ability to conquer the fiercest of beasts.

Political Servitude

The Assyrians made public their dominance over lesser nations by illustrating the kings of conquered nations bowing before the Assyrian king. In the relief above from the Black Obelisk Inscription, the stele portrays the Israelite king Jehu of Israel paying tribute to the Assyrian king and bowing in the dust before the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The cuneiform text on the obelisk suggests that "Jehu the son of Omri" brought gifts of gold, silver, lead, and spear shafts as a sign of loyalty to the Assyrian state. (19)
Mass Deportation

Figure 2-10: Lachish Inscription by Mike Peel is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

On conquering lands in rebellion, the Assyrians would regularly relocate the conquered peoples from their home territory to another portion of the empire. This became known as exile or mass deportation. The stele above represents the Assyrian deportation of the population of Lachish, following their defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 701 BCE.
The Assyrian Capital of Nineveh

Figure 2-11: Nineveh map city walls & gates by Fredarch is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

Nineveh was an ancient Assyrian city on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, and the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Its ruins are across the river from the modern-day major city of Mosul in Iraq.

Today, Nineveh's location is marked by two large mounds, Kouyunjik and Nabî Yûnus “Prophet Jonah,” and the remains of the city walls. These were fitted with fifteen monumental gateways which served as checkpoints on entering and exiting the ancient city, and were probably also used as barracks and armories. With the inner and outer doors shut, the gateways were virtual fortresses. Five of the gateways have been explored to some extent by archaeologists.

Nineveh was an important junction for commercial routes crossing the Tigris. Occupying a central position on the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, Nineveh united the East and the West, and received wealth from many sources. Thus, it became one of the oldest and greatest of all the region's ancient cities, and the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The area was settled as early as 6000 BCE, and by 3000 BCE had become an important religious center for worship of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar.

It was not until the Neo-Assyrian Empire that Nineveh experienced a considerable architectural expansion. King Sennacherib is credited with making Nineveh a truly magnificent city during his rule (c. 700 BCE). He laid out new
streets and squares and built within it the famous “palace without a rival”, the plan of which has been mostly recovered. It comprised at least 80 rooms, many of which were lined with sculpture. A large number of cuneiform tablets were found in the palace. The solid foundation was made out of limestone blocks and mud bricks. Some of the principal doorways were flanked by colossal stone-door figures that included many winged lions or bulls with the heads of men. The stone carvings in the walls include many battle and hunting scenes, as well as depicting Sennacherib’s men parading the spoils of war before him.

Nineveh’s greatness was short-lived. In around 627 BCE, after the death of its last great king Ashurbanipal, the Neo-Assyrian empire began to unravel due to a series of bitter civil wars, and Assyria was attacked by the Babylonians and Medes. From about 616 BCE, in a coalition with the Scythians and Cimmerians, they besieged Nineveh, sacking the town in 612, and later razing it to the ground.

The Assyrian empire as such came to an end by 605 BC, with the Medes and Babylonians dividing its colonies between them. Following its defeat in 612, the site remained largely unoccupied for centuries with only a scattering of Assyrians living amid the ruins until the Sassanian period, although Assyrians continue to live in the surrounding area to this day. (19)

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