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The Great City: Nineveh in the Age of Sennacherib

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Résumé

Selon le livre de Jonas, Ninive n'est ni plus ni moins que "la grande ville." Cette appellation ne relève pas de la fantaisie. En effet, à l'époque de sa plus grande gloire au 7^{ème} siècle av. J.C., alors qu'elle servait de capitale politique de l'empire assyrien, Ninive surpassait toutes les autres cités du monde antique en richesse et en étendue. Cet article fournit tout d'abord quelques données de base sur l'histoire de Ninive jusqu'à fin du 8^{ème} siècle av. J.C., puis décrit les transformations de la ville à l'époque du roi assyrien Sennachérib (705-681 av. J.C.), qui la transforma en une splendide et spectaculaire métropole. Se basant sur les données de l'archéologie, les représentations de Ninive sur les bas-reliefs, de même que sur un important corpus d'inscriptions laissées par Sennachérib, cet article retrace l'élaboration des travaux de construction de la ville ainsi que les implications théologiques de l'immense entreprise architecturale du roi assyrien.

Abstract

The Biblical book of Jonah calls Nineveh "the great city." This is hardly exaggerated. During her heydays in the seventh century BCE, when serving as the political capital of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh surpassed every other city of the ancient world in size and wealth. This article, after providing some background information on Nineveh's earlier history, describes how the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-681 BCE) transformed Nineveh into a metropolis of spectacular splendor. Drawing on archaeological remains, depictions of Nineveh on a number of bas-reliefs, and, most importantly, Sennacherib's royal inscriptions, the article describes how the king's various building projects advanced, and discusses the ideological implications of Sennacherib's massive construction efforts.

Nineveh is among the few ancient cities that were not just centers of urban life but places of almost mythological fame. Assyrian kings celebrated the city as exalted, beloved by her patron goddess Ištar, and filled with ancient wisdom. Her enemies, in contrast, among them the ancient Israelites, despised Nineveh and reviled her, in anticipation of the famous "great whore" metaphor attributed to Babylon in the Revelation to John, as a sorceress and prostitute (Nahum 3:4) – the latter perhaps in allusion to Ištar of Nineveh's notorious role as a patroness of sexual liberty (Da Riva & Frahm 1999/2000, 169-82). Yet even those who hated the city had to concede one thing: that in her heydays, Nineveh's size and power were almost unparalleled. It is an apt description when the Biblical book of Jonah calls Nineveh "the great city": *hā'ēr hag-gēdōlā*, for during the period of her greatest fame, in the 7th century BCE, when most of Western Asia was subjected to the iron-fisted rule of Assyria's Nineveh-based rulers, the city covered no less than 750 hectares and was surrounded by a wall more than 12 kilometers long.

Nineveh had not always been that big, but seems to have been an important city from very early on. The oldest traces of

human settlement, found on the main mound of the city, Kuyunjik, date to the 7th millennium. A deep sounding undertaken in the nineteen-thirties by the British archaeologist Max Mallowan, the husband of Agatha Christie, established that during the Late Uruk period, towards the end of the 4th millennium, Nineveh must have been an administrative center of considerable significance. Apparently, the city participated in the "urban revolution" that took place during this age (Gut 1995).

Like most cities, Nineveh owed its status as an important urban center to its geographical position. It was situated at the intersection of two important roads, one that went down from the source of the Tigris in the north to the lands of Sumer and Akkad in the south, and another that led from the Zagros mountains in the east via the Jebel Sinjar to the bend of the Euphrates and further on to Aleppo and other important cities in the west. In addition, Nineveh offered ideal conditions for a thriving agriculture. Besides profiting from enough rainfall to grow crops, the city was situated in the area where the Ḥosr river flowed into the Tigris, so that an abundant water supply was available at all times (Reade 2000, 364).

Despite experiencing occasional phases of neglect, Nineveh remained over long stretches of time an urban center of great religious, economical, and political significance. In the 23rd century, the Sargonic king Maništušu, if we are to believe later tradition (for a skeptical view, see Westenholz 2005), performed construction work on Nineveh's main temple, the Emašmaš of Ištar (Reade 2004), indicating that the city was under the jurisdiction of the Akkad dynasty during the latter's days of glory. Two centuries later, Tišatal, "the man (i.e., ruler?) of Nineveh," a Hurrian, and the city's main goddess, now likewise called by a Hurrian name, Šauška, are mentioned in documents from the Ur III period (Beckman 1998, 1, Whiting 1976), which leaves little doubt that Nineveh was subjected to a strong Hurrian influence during this era. In the 18th century, the Amorite ruler Šamši-Adad I incorporated Nineveh, which had previously belonged to the state of Nurrugûm, into his newly created Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia, and reconstructed the city's Ištar temple (Ziegler 2004). Hammurapi, having defeated his northern rival, claims in his famous law code to have provided for this sanctuary as well (Roth 1995, 80, iv 59-63). In the wake of the badly documented and therefore rather dark 17th and 16th centuries, during which Nineveh seems to have belonged to the state of Mittani, experiencing yet another phase of Hurrian domination, the city reemerged as an important center of the Middle Assyrian kingdom, even though the capital and religious heart of the latter was not Nineveh but the city of Aššur further south. Several Middle Assyrian rulers, for example Tukulti-Ninurta I and Aššur-nāšir-pal I, worked on the Ištar temple of Nineveh, and Mutakkil-Nusku, Aššur-reša-išši, and Tiglath-Pileser I seem to have built palaces in the city (Tenu 2004). Various kings of the Neo-Assyrian period, among them Tukulti-Ninurta II, Aššur-nāšir-pal II, Adad-narari III, and Sargon II, performed construction work in Nineveh as well, even though none of them chose the city as his main residence (Matthiae 1999, 49-57). But many of the military campaigns that made the Neo-Assyrian state the first true empire in human history started in Nineveh (see, for instance, Grayson 1991, 200, i 101-04), where large parts of Assyria's standing army were stationed.

Considering Nineveh's undeniable importance over long periods of time, it must be admitted that, on the whole, comparatively little is known about the details of the city's earlier history. The archaeological evidence for most of the aforementioned building projects is scanty as well. The reason for this is quite simple: When Nineveh, at the end of the 8th century BCE, finally became the capital of Assyria, the city was subjected to one of the most ambitious building programs of ancient times. It was completely transformed, and of the earlier palaces and temples, especially on the main citadel of Nineveh, Kuyunjik, little remained.

Responsible for the creation of the new Nineveh, Jonah's "great city," was king Sennacherib, Assyria's ruler from 705 to 681, who is most famous for having besieged the Judean capital Jerusalem in 701. It is Sennacherib's construction work at Nineveh that will be described at greater length on the

following pages. Since I have recently provided a complete overview of the textual evidence relating to Sennacherib's life and reign (Frahm 2002), and detailed information on the archaeology of Nineveh can be found in Reade 2000, it seems appropriate to limit the bibliographical references provided in this article to the most essential.

Sennacherib was born around 745 BCE. His father Sargon was a son of king Tiglath-Pileser III, but did not hold the position of crown prince, so that we can assume that Sennacherib, while certainly a member of Assyria's *jeunesse dorée*, did not originally expect to ever ascend the throne himself. Sennacherib seems to have spent most of his youth in Kalḫu (Nimrud), a city of splendid palaces and temples (Oates/Oates 2001), which had become the main residence of the Assyrian kings, replacing Aššur, under Aššur-nāšir-pal II during the second quarter of the 9th century.

Sennacherib's life received a completely new direction when his father Sargon, unexpectedly and against significant opposition, became the Assyrian king in 722. Suddenly, Sennacherib, Sargon's eldest surviving son, found himself in the role of heir designate to the Assyrian throne. Especially during times when his father was absent, Sennacherib's new position required him to perform various important official tasks. He fulfilled some of his obligations in Kalḫu, but seems also to have resided in Nineveh at times, probably in a palace on the northern side of Kuyunjik.

One of Sargon's major achievements was the creation, made possible by the acquisition of massive spoils of war, of yet another enormous capital, a completely new city called Dur-Šarrukin, "Fortress of Sargon" (Caubet 1995). Sennacherib seems to have personally coordinated some of the building activities that took place there. In his later inscriptions, he alludes to how challenging it was to move the massive bull colossi destined to guard the entrances of Sargon's new royal palace across the Tigris (Frahm 1997, 73 and 81, ll. 38-49). Undoubtedly, Sennacherib acquired an unusual degree of competence in the technicalities of undertaking complex building projects during his involvement with the work on Sargon's new capital.

It took many years to build Dur-Šarrukin. When, in 706, the construction work was eventually completed, Sargon, now about 60 years old and a most successful empire-builder, could have easily settled down in his new capital to spend the rest of his days enjoying the peace and quiet. But this was not a prospect fancied by the king, a most proactive and energetic man. In 705, Sargon decided to undertake yet another military campaign. It ended in complete disaster. Far away in the mountainous terrain of Tabal, a country in Anatolia, a local chieftain called Gurdi ambushed the Assyrian camp, defeated Sargon's troops, and killed the king. Sargon's body was never recovered.

When the news of the failed expedition reached the Assyrian heartland, it caused shock and distress almost everywhere. The 12th tablet of the Gilgamesh epic was consulted to explain the death of the king, and some scholars linked his end to religious sacrileges he might have committed. None of

this prevented Sennacherib from ascending the throne, apparently without facing any internal opposition. But terrified by Sargon's gruesome demise, he thought it very important to distance himself from his father, whose name, with one possible exception, Sennacherib never mentions in his royal inscriptions (Frahm 1999).

The most important step Sennacherib undertook to assert his independence from Sargon was to move the royal court from Dur-Šarrukin to Nineveh, which was to become the new political capital of the Assyrian empire. While Nineveh's privileged geographic location and the fact that Sennacherib had resided there before probably played a role, the fear of living in the palace of an ill-starred ruler like Sargon may well have been the main factor in Sennacherib's momentous decision to henceforth rule from Nineveh.

Unlike Dur-Šarrukin, Nineveh was a city of ancient tradition, and the existence of earlier buildings, for example the famous Istar sanctuary, prevented Sennacherib from erecting his new palaces and temples wherever he wanted. Nevertheless, his ambitious building program transformed the city thoroughly.

Our knowledge of Sennacherib's efforts to make Nineveh the largest and most impressive city of his age is quite detailed and comes from various sources. First of all, there are the material remains of Sennacherib's main palace, his new city wall, and various other structures from his times that were excavated in the middle of the 19th century and in the course of various later archaeological expeditions (bibliography: Reade 2000, 392-94). Second, a few bas-reliefs from the time of Sennacherib illustrate aspects of his reconstruction program (Russell 1991, 94-116), while others from the reign of his grandson Assurbanipal show us Sennacherib's Nineveh in its completed state (Reade 2000, 398, 400). And finally, the excavations in Nineveh and Assur unearthed large numbers of inscriptions in which Sennacherib, or rather his ghostwriters, provide detailed accounts of the king's many building projects (Luckenbill 1924, Frahm 1997). Because we have inscriptions from various years of his reign, we can follow the progress of the construction process very closely, more closely, in fact, than that of any other building project ever embarked on in the ancient Near East.

The earliest royal inscription available to us probably dates to the year 702 (Frahm 1997, 42-45, Frahm 2003). It talks in great detail about the construction of the so-called Southwest palace, the large new residence Sennacherib erected in the southwestern area of Kuyunjik. Some of the construction work described in the inscription was probably completed by the time the text was drafted. An older and smaller palace had been torn down, a watercourse eroding parts of the mound redirected and enclosed, and a terrace for the new palace raised to a height of 160 layers of brickwork. But there is little doubt that all the features above the level of this terrace, which Sennacherib's earliest inscription claims were finished by the time of its composition, were in reality still in their planning stages. This can be gauged from another text, also written in 702, which claims that the aforementioned palace

terrace was raised by twenty layers of brickwork later in the year (Luckenbill 1924, 100, l. 54), something that could not have been achieved had there already been a superstructure.

At first glance, it comes as a surprise how detailed Sennacherib's early accounts of the construction of the Southwest palace are. One passage reads as follows:

I adorned the large door-leaves (made) of cypress ... with bands of shining copper and set them up in their gates. I had a windowed hall, patterned after a palace of the Ḫatti-land, which they call a *bīt ḫilyni* in the language of Amurru, constructed inside for my lordly pleasure. And (as for) eight massive lions ..., which were made of 11.400 talents of shining copper with the workmanship of the god Ninagal, I established two columns, arranged in pairs and cast out of 6000 talents of copper ..., and two great cedar columns firmly upon (those) mighty lions (Luckenbill 1924, 96-97, ll. 81-84).

We can be quite sure that not a single item described in these lines had actually been created by the time the inscription was written. So from where did the specifics referred to here actually derive? There is an obvious answer to this question: The passage draws heavily on building inscriptions from the reign of Sennacherib's father Sargon, related to the construction of this king's new palace in Dur-Šarrukin. To illustrate the intertextual links in question, I quote from Sargon's so-called "Display inscription," highlighting the parallels through bold type:

I adorned the large door-leaves (made) of cypress and musukkannu wood ... with bands of shining copper and set them up in their entrances. I had a windowed hall, patterned after a palace of the Ḫatti-land, which they call a *bīt ḫilāni* in the language of Amurru, constructed opposite of its (the palace's) gates. And (as for) eight massive lions ... (made) of (officially) assayed 4610 talents of shining copper, which were formed with the expertise of the god Ninagal ... I established four cedar columns arranged in pairs, whose thickness amounted to one *nindanu* ... firmly upon (those) mighty lions (Fuchs 1994, 238-39, 353-54, ll. 161-64).

The juxtaposition of the two passages leaves little doubt that the later one depends to a significant extent on the earlier. I have argued elsewhere that the scribe who drafted Sennacherib's first inscriptions was the famous scholar and royal advisor Nabû-zuqup-kenu (Frahm 2003, 148, 157-60), and it is quite possible that he also composed the royal inscriptions, so similar on many levels, from the later period of the reign of Sargon II. Be this as it may, we definitively have to take into account, when reconstructing the progress of the construction work in Nineveh, that Sennacherib's earliest building inscriptions, which were destined to be put into the foundations of the Southwest palace, are proleptic. They describe a Nineveh that existed, to a large extent, only in the king's and his advisors' imagination.

In the years following 702, however, the new buildings on Kuyunjik, and especially the new palace, really began to take shape. Inscriptions dated to 700 BCE were found built into the

walls of the palace's throne room (Reade 1986), showing that those walls were being raised during this time.

A little later, artists seem to have started to work on the famous bas-reliefs adorning many of the palatial rooms (Barnett/Bleibtreu/Turner 1998). Covering a length of altogether more than three kilometers, the reliefs show scenes from Sennacherib's first five campaigns, which took place between 704 and 697, but not of any later military activities (Russell 1991, 152-74, Russell 1999, 283-92). Sennacherib mentions the reliefs, which were over two meters high, briefly in his inscriptions, claiming that he made them objects of astonishment: *ana tabrâti ušâlik* (Frahm 1997, 76, 82, ll. 140-45).

Finally, the enormous bull and lion colossi so characteristic of Late Assyrian architecture were set up in the palace gates (Russell 1999, 261-82). The war-related portions of their inscriptions, written between their legs, end with reports about military campaigns that took place in the years between 697 and 694, thereby indicating when exactly the huge sculptures were completed.

All the colossi excavated in the palace are made of stone. Their manufacture and transport to their final destination are depicted on a series of wall slabs from Court VI of the Southwest palace (Russell 1991, 94-116). The slabs show, among other things, the quarries where large groups of workmen were occupied with hewing out the colossi. Those quarries were situated in Balaḡaya, a village on the eastern side of the Tigris probably close to the city of Eski Mosul about 50 kilometers to the north of Nineveh, so that the colossi did not have to be transported across the Tigris any more, as under Sargon, but could be dragged along over land on sledges, still in a roughed out state. The final carving of the sculptures, which were up to five meters high and weighed up to 50 tons, seems to have taken place immediately before they were placed in the palace gates.

The excavators of Nineveh did not find any traces of bull or lion colossi made of precious metals in the Southwest palace. Such colossi are, however, described in great detail, as we have already seen, in Sennacherib's inscriptions, and they are probably also depicted on a relief from the reign of Aššurbanipal (Frahm 1997, 99, Reade 2000, 398). The relief shows the western walls of Nineveh and of its citadel, Kuyunjik, and, towering above them, in the entrance area of the palace, sculptures of bull and lion colossi on which huge columns, presumably made of bronze or wood, were standing. All the metal sculptures and columns in the palace were probably removed, because of their great value, when Nineveh was conquered in 612, leaving only the stone colossi behind.

Sennacherib's accounts of his work on the Southwest palace also inform us about other architectural features that did not leave archaeological traces. They report, for example, that the palace was roofed with cedar and cypress from the Amanus and Sirara mountains in the West, and that it was adorned with silver and bronze pegs in the interiors and glazed bricks outside, and illuminated through numerous windows. The most detailed description of the palace, no longer

proleptic but probably quite accurate (Luckenbill 1924, 103-16), can be found on clay prisms from 694, when a large amount of the construction work was completed. These clay prisms were buried, not in the foundations or walls of the Southwest palace, but in the city wall of Nineveh, whose construction they describe as well.

The final measurements of the palace are recorded in various inscriptions on bull colossi (Frahm 1997, 270-72). According to these texts, the palace, when completed, stood on a terrace ca. 450 m long and 220 m broad. Barely half of this area has been excavated (Reade 2000, 391, fig. 2). Among the parts that were unearthed are the throne-room, two huge courtyards, and a large suite probably used for formal administration and famous for its bas-reliefs, which depict Sennacherib's siege of the Judean city of Lachish (Barnett/Bleibtreu/Turner, Pl. 322-52). Another, more private palace quarter, situated towards the northwest, contained the chambers of the lady who was Sennacherib's main wife during the 690's, Tašmetu-šarrat. Inscriptions on stone lions found in this area describe the suite as a place "of love, happiness, and joy," and, using the first person plural, articulate the hope that Sennacherib and his "beloved spouse" might both live a long and healthy life in it (Borger 1988, 5, 9-10). Such intimate confessions are rare in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions.

Originally conceived as a building quite similar to Sargon's palace in Dur-Šarrukin, Sennacherib's Southwest palace displayed, in the end, many innovative and original features. A few of them should be briefly mentioned here. First, there are new elements, both in terms of subjects and style, in the bas-reliefs lining the walls of Sennacherib's palace. Thus, while the reliefs from Sargon's palace in Dur-Šarrukin frequently depict the king in close proximity to members of the Assyrian aristocracy, those from Sennacherib's new residence normally show a king who towers above everybody else in his chariot, in almost god-like aloofness (Matthiae 1999, 102-06). Another difference is that the bas-reliefs from Sargon's reign are often split into two registers separated by a longer inscription, with the observer looking at them from a sort of worm's perspective, whereas Sennacherib's wall slabs, no longer divided by bands of inscriptions, show larger scenes, and invite more of a bird's eye view (Russell 1987). There is, furthermore, a certain trend towards a greater degree of naturalism in the art from Sennacherib's reign. This is most obvious in a change that concerns the bull colossi. While those from Sargon's palace in Khorsabad have, as a rule, five legs, so that one would see four from the side and two when standing face to face with them, the colossi found in Sennacherib's Southwest palace have only four legs.

Sennacherib used previously untapped sources for the procurement of building materials (Frahm 1997, 277). As already mentioned, he opened up new quarries for the stone he needed for the wall slabs and colossi of his palace. Besides those in Balaḡaya close to Eski Mosul, quarries in Kapridargilâ, exploited since 700 BCE, and in the region of mount Nipur, the modern Judi Dağh in Turkey, are mentioned in

Sennacherib's inscriptions. The wooden beams used for pillars and roofing came from the Lebanon, Amanus, and Sirara mountain ranges in the West.

Trees and plants for the royal gardens planted by Sennacherib by the side of the palace and in the area north of Nineveh arrived from various regions as well. *Sindû*-trees and cotton plants mentioned in some texts may have been imported from as far away as India (Frahm 1997, 277-78). Another source tapped by Sennacherib's landscape architects was the land of Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia. In a series of inscriptions drafted between 697 and 695, Sennacherib writes:

I planted by its (the palace's) side a park (*kirimahhu*) ... wherein all kinds of herbs and fruit-trees, trees supplied by the mountains and the land of Chaldea ... were gathered (Frahm 1997, 76, 82, ll. 146-49).

An inventory found at Babylon (CT 14, 50) lists herbs cultivated in the gardens (*gannāti*) of Sennacherib's Babylonian opponent Marduk-aplu-iddina II, a Chaldean king whom the Assyrian ruler had defeated in 702, and it may well be that these gardens served as a model for Sennacherib's own horticultural ambitions. Some years ago, it has been claimed that the classical tradition of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon had originally nothing to do with Babylon at all, but went back to stories about Sennacherib's fabulous gardens at Nineveh, described in considerable detail in various inscriptions of the king (Dalley 1994). The aforementioned inventory, however, proves the existence of royal gardens in Babylonia (most probably, in fact, in Babylon) and makes it less likely that one needs to look at Nineveh to find the "real" Hanging Gardens (see now also Bichler & Rollinger 2004).

New technologies introduced during Sennacherib's reign, and described in the king's inscriptions, include innovative methods to cast bronze, which were applied to create colossi and door-leaves (Dalley 1988), as well as new ways to lift water to greater heights. There has been some discussion recently over a passage in Sennacherib's inscriptions that might indicate that the king and his engineers used the principle of the "Archimedean screw" in order to transport water from the Ḥosr river up to the mound of Kuyunjik to irrigate the park the king had created by the side of his palace (Dalley 1994, Bagg 2000, 201-03).

In addition to the Southwest palace, Sennacherib realized a number of other building projects in Nineveh, some of them equally ambitious. Around 690 BCE, having torn down a previous structure, the king built a second large palace on the southern citadel mound of Nineveh, Nebi Yunus. This mound is now the location of a mosque dedicated to the prophet Jonah, and hardly anything of it has been excavated. Our information on the Nebi Yunus palace, called *ekal māšarti* or *ekal kutalli* in Akkadian, derives for the most part from Sennacherib's inscriptions, which report that the building, while also having a residential area, served primarily as an arsenal where military equipment was stored and parts of Assyria's standing army were stationed. Large areas of the military section of the building complex were apparently used

to train horses, which were of paramount importance for the Assyrian war machine and had to be imported. Iraqi excavations in the vicinity of Nebi Yunus have unearthed horse troughs standing on a floor made of precious stones, which the Assyrians thought possessed auspicious qualities, a detail that illustrates the enormous significance the cavalry had in 7th century Assyrian military strategy (Turner 1970, McGinnis 1989).

While it has been claimed that Sennacherib was, on the whole, a less religiously inclined man than many other Assyrian rulers (Reade 1978, 47), it is nonetheless clear that he also built or rebuilt a number of temples in Nineveh, among them one situated on Kuyunjik that was dedicated to the moon god Sîn, the deity invoked in the king's own name. It is possible that it was, somewhat ironically, precisely in this temple that Sennacherib was killed by two of his sons in 681, an event mentioned in the Bible, in 2 Kings 19:37 and Isaiah 37:38 (Frahm 1998, Frahm 2002, 1121).

A small and fragmentary stone inscription found fairly recently in the vicinity of Nineveh's Nergal gate tells us that, in 690, Sennacherib embarked on the construction of a so-called Akītu house situated not far from the respective gate (Ahmad/Grayson 1999, Frahm 2000). Apparently modeled on the Akītu house in Babylon, the building seems to have been conceived as a final destination for out-of-town processions of the god Aššur and his wife Mullissu. It is likely that the project was abandoned when Sennacherib decided, in the 680's, to build another Akītu house for the god Aššur in the outskirts of the city of Assur, Assyria's ancient religious capital.

The most massive building project Sennacherib realized in Nineveh was the expansion of the city towards the south and the erection of the huge city walls, still partly visible today, that have already been mentioned before (Reade 2000, 397-403). These fortifications consisted of an outer wall made entirely of limestone, and an inner brick wall erected on a limestone foundation. The wall, surrounded by a moat, was up to 25 meters high and 15 meters thick. The enormous work necessary to build this structure was probably undertaken both by deportees and by groups of workmen levied in various Assyrian provinces. The name of one of the city gates, "gate of the work sector of (the province of) Māt-Barḥalzi" (*abul pilku māt Barḥalzi*), is a clear indication of the role the provinces played in the construction work at Nineveh.

By 690, the wall of Nineveh, after at least ten years of intensive work, was essentially completed. It now contained 18 enormous gates, some of which have been excavated. Each of these gates had two names, a more common one, for example, "Šibaniba gate," called, in this case, after the city towards which the gate was oriented, and a ceremonial name that propagated an ideological message, such as "Long live the viceroy of Aššur" (Frahm 1997, 273-75). The gates marked the transition between the chaotic space outside and the ordered space inside the city. It has been argued that it may not be by chance that bas-reliefs from the North palace depicting king Aššurbanipal's lion-hunt, a symbolic fight against chaotic forces, show exactly eighteen lions, just as many as there were

city gates in Nineveh (Weissert 1997, 351-55).

The citadel of Kuyunjik had a wall of its own, and anyone who wanted to ascend the “forbidden city” on the top of this mound needed to have authorization, sometimes issued in the form of a sealed document. The main entrance to the citadel from the city was through a gate on its eastern side that was programmatically called “Entrance for the inspection of the people” (*nēreb masnaqti adnāti*). This gate was the location where Aššurbanipal, a man of sometimes rather gruesome taste, used to humiliate and torture his enemies, with a large crowd witnessing the action. Rebel kings were forced to grind the bones of their fathers, or were put into fetters together with pigs, dogs, and bears (Frahm 1998, 117-21).

The lower town of Nineveh is for the most part unexcavated, and we know fairly little about it (Reade 2000, 420-21). In his inscriptions, Sennacherib claims to have provided it with a house for one of his sons, a bridge crossing the Ḫosr river, and a number of streets, of which the so-called royal road was clearly the most impressive. More than 25 meters broad, this road ran from the Aššur Gate in the south to the Sîn Gate in the north of the city. It was flanked by large steles with depictions of the king and inscriptions stipulating that any citizen who should build a house extending onto the street should be impaled on the roof of his illegally expanded residence (Luckenbill 1924, 152-53).

How did Sennacherib justify his decision to make Nineveh his new capital? A key passage attested in many of his inscriptions provides some information on how the king conceived of the city. It praises Nineveh as

the exalted cult center, the city beloved of Ištar, wherein are all the rites of gods and goddesses, the everlasting foundation, the eternal base, whose plan had been designed from of old, and whose structure had been made beautiful along with (or: in accordance with) the celestial writing (*šitir burūmê*), a fine-looking place, a dwelling of mystery, where all kinds of artistic craftsmanship and all the rituals, the secrets of Lalgar (a synonym of Apsû, the subterranean abode of Ea), had been brought together (or: were studied) (Frahm 1997, 72, ll. 1-10).

This poetic description depicts a Nineveh that is of ancient origins, the cult center of a famous goddess, and the repository of many secret rites and procedures. It also claims that the outline of the city corresponded to “celestial writing.” This latter statement is perhaps an oblique reference to the constellation *Ikû* (Pegasus), a square of somewhat uneven proportions, which ancient scholars might have regarded as a prefiguration of the essentially rectangular shape of many Mesopotamian cities. One must admit, however, that Nineveh looked more like a square before than after it experienced Sennacherib’s great urban transformation.

The architectural history of Nineveh did of course not come to an end with Sennacherib’s great building projects. Construction work in the city continued for nearly 70 more years. Esarhaddon (680-669), Sennacherib’s successor, apparently a rather paranoid character, decided to concentrate his

building efforts on the palace complex on Nebi Yūnus, where he might have felt safer than on Kuyunjik, the location of his father’s murder in 681. He also lived, for a number of years, in a well secured military compound of palatial proportions in the southeast of the city of Kalḫu. During the reign of Esarhaddon’s son Assurbanipal, Sennacherib’s grandson, who ruled from 669 to c. 630, Nineveh experienced its last phase of glory. The new king first lived in the Southwest palace for some time and then built yet another new residence on Kuyunjik, the so-called North palace (Reade 2000, 416-18), where his artists created some of the finest Assyrian bas-reliefs ever made. Especially the scenes depicting Aššurbanipal’s lion hunt, already mentioned, have been praised for their remarkable beauty. Assurbanipal also started a large program of accumulating clay tablets in his palaces on Kuyunjik (Frame/George 2005). His goal was to establish a universal library, where all the literary, religious and scientific texts Mesopotamian civilization had ever produced were to be collected. The largest part of this library, which was mostly based on tablets the king bought or confiscated in Babylonia, was located in a room on the second floor in the center of the Southwest palace, which collapsed when the palace was destroyed in 612. The tablets were found in the rubble, broken into thousands of pieces, when Austin Henry Layard’s excavated the palace in the 1840’s. Their discovery marked the beginnings of the field of Assyriology.

Later Greek and Roman traditions associate the downfall of Nineveh with Assurbanipal, who is called Sardanapallus in the relevant sources. In reality, it was only under Aššurbanipal’s son Sîn-šarru-iškun (622-612) that Nineveh fell prey to an enemy. In 612, a coalition of Medes and Babylonians, both victims of earlier Assyrian aggression, besieged the city and finally conquered it. Their troops managed to enter Nineveh through some of the large gates, now a strategic liability, that Sennacherib had built in better times (Reade 2000, 428).

The conquest of Nineveh, an event that left a lasting impression on the historical memory of the Babylonians, Judeans, and Greeks, marked the end of Assyria’s statehood. Even though there are some traces of continuing settlement (Dalley 1993), Nineveh had lost forever its status as an urban center of more than regional importance. When Xenophon passed the city with his Greek mercenaries in 401, more than two hundred years after its downfall, he admired its still impressive walls, but did not even know its name (*Anabasis* III 4-10).

The origins of Nineveh were, however, not completely forgotten. The ruins on the southern citadel of the city became the location of a sanctuary erected in honor of the prophet Jonah, whom god had sent to Nineveh, according to the Bible, to preach to its 120,000 inhabitants. The city’s place in the sacred history of the three monotheistic religions guaranteed that Nineveh’s location was never completely forgotten in the centuries to come.

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