NO PREP

The Assyrian Empire

Archaeology of a War Machine

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Assyrian Empire: Archaeology of a War Machine

From City-State to Superpower

The Assyrians began as inhabitants of a modest city-state on the upper Tigris River called Ashur. For much of Mesopotamian history, they were one player among many — sometimes dominant, sometimes subject to Babylonian or Mitanni control. But beginning around 900 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire entered a phase of expansion that would make it the most powerful and feared state in the ancient Near East. At its height, the Assyrian Empire stretched from Egypt and the Mediterranean coast in the west to the Persian Gulf and the borders of modern Iran in the east. No empire of comparable size had ever existed before. What made the Assyrians exceptional was not just their military power but the systematic way they used it. Assyrian kings

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Nineveh and the Library of Ashurbanipal

The Assyrian Empire reached its greatest territorial extent under Ashurbanipal, who ruled from 668 to 627 BCE. Ashurbanipal was unusual among Assyrian kings in that he was also a scholar. He claimed to be able to read cuneiform tablets, which was rare for a ruler rather than a trained scribe. He used this knowledge to commission one of the ancient world's most ambitious intellectual projects: a systematic collection of every significant cuneiform text from across Mesopotamia,

gathered from temples, schools, and private libraries, copied, and stored in his palace at Nineveh. The Library of Ashurbanipal contained an estimated 30,000 clay tablets covering everything from religious hymns and omens to mathematical tables, medical texts, and literary works including the Epic of Gilgamesh. Scribes were sent across the empire with explicit orders to copy tablets from existing collections — and, when collections were not surrendered voluntarily, to take them. When Nineveh fell to a coalition of Babylonians and Medes in 612 BCE, the palace burned. But the fire baked the clay tablets rather than destroying them, and British archaeologists excavating in the 1840s and 1850s found them preserved beneath the rubble. The library that had been meant to last forever turned out to have survived precisely because of the disaster that was supposed to destroy it.

Nimrud and the Lamassu

Before Nineveh, the Assyrian capital was Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), built by the king Ashurnasirpal II around 880 BCE. Nimrud was an extraordinary construction project: a walled city covering some 360 hectares, with a massive palace complex decorated with stone relief carvings depicting the king hunting, fighting, and performing religious rituals. Guarding the palace gateways were lamassu — enormous composite figures with the body of a bull or lion, the wings of an eagle, and the head of a bearded human wearing a royal crown. Each lamassu weighed approximately 16 tons and was carved from a single block of stone. The lamassu served as protective spirits for the palace, positioned so that entering officials would see a side view (showing four legs in a striding posture) and a frontal view (showing both legs stationary) — the figures appear to move or stand still depending on the angle. They also served as powerful propaganda, communicating the wealth, power, and divine favor of the Assyrian king to anyone who entered his presence. British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard shipped examples of the lamassu to the British Museum in the 1840s, where they remain among the most impressive objects in the collection.

The Destruction of Nimrud: ISIS and Modern Loss

For more than 2,800 years, the ruins of Nimrud survived in the Iraqi desert, partially excavated and partially still underground. Then, in March 2015, fighters from the Islamic State used sledgehammers, power tools, and ultimately explosives to destroy the site. Video footage spread worldwide showing men smashing Assyrian statues with hammers in the Mosul Museum, and bulldozers rolling over the ruins of

Nimrud. An excavation camp was burned. Reliefs that had survived millennia were reduced to rubble in hours. The destruction of Nimrud and other sites represented both a political act and a cultural catastrophe. ISIS framed the destruction as the elimination of idolatry, but it also served to terrorize, to generate international media attention, and to fund the organization through the sale of smaller portable artifacts on the black market before destroying the larger pieces. For archaeologists and Iraqis, it was the loss of irreplaceable primary evidence about a civilization that had shaped the ancient world. Some relief carvings have since been digitally reconstructed from photographs taken before 2015. The originals are gone.

Key Information: The Assyrian Empire

Detail	Information
Peak Period	Neo-Assyrian Empire, c. 900-612 BCE
Greatest Extent	Egypt and Mediterranean coast to Persian Gulf
Capital Cities	Ashur, then Nimrud (Kalhu), then Nineveh
Most Famous King	Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE) — scholar and empire-builder
Library of Ashurbanipal	Est. 30,000 tablets at Nineveh; survived the city's destruction in 612 BCE
Lamassu	Massive winged bull/lion with human head; palace guardian figures at Nimrud
Fall of Nineveh	612 BCE, destroyed by Babylonians and Medes
Modern Destruction	Nimrud and Mosul Museum destroyed by ISIS in 2015

Case Study: Dr. Sarah Chen Watches the News

Dr. Sarah Chen had spent four years of her life on the Nimrud reliefs. Not at the site itself — she worked at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, where her specialty was Assyrian palace decoration. She had studied photographs of every relief panel in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. She could describe the arrangement of figures in each frieze from memory: the king, the attendants, the sacred tree, the eagle-headed protective spirits. In March 2015, she was eating lunch when her phone lit up with notifications. She watched the video of men with sledgehammers in the Mosul Museum, and then the footage of a bulldozer moving across what had been the outer walls of Nimrud. She recognized the context immediately. She sat very still for a long time. Her colleagues came in and out of the office. Someone brought coffee. Someone else said something about how terrible it was. Sarah nodded without speaking, because she was trying to mentally catalog what was in those rooms, and what photographic documentation existed, and whether the 3D scans taken during a 2013 survey were high-resolution enough to reconstruct the lost surfaces. She was already beginning to make a list. 'We can rebuild them digitally,' a colleague said. 'Yes,' Sarah said. 'But that's not the same as the object itself, is it. The pigment residue is gone. The tool marks are gone. Three thousand years of what those stones have been through is gone.' She picked up her coffee and went back to her desk.

1. Sarah focuses on specific types of physical evidence — pigment residue, tool marks — that digital reconstruction cannot preserve. What does this tell us about why the original physical object matters in ways that photographs and 3D scans cannot fully replace?

2. ISIS destroyed Nimrud for both ideological and financial reasons. Based on the reading, what does the combination of public destruction and black market sales tell us about the relationship between cultural destruction and political power?

Multiple Choice

1. The Library of Ashurbanipal survived the destruction of Nineveh in 612 BCE because:

    a) Ashurbanipal had already moved the tablets to a safer location in Babylon

    b) Babylonian soldiers recognized its value and protected it

    c) The fire that destroyed the palace baked the clay tablets and hardened them

    d) The clay tablets were buried in a fireproof underground vault before the attack

2. The lamassu figures at Nimrud were designed so that:

    a) They were hollow inside and could be used as storage for various royal administrative documents

    b) They appeared to be striding when viewed from the side and standing when viewed from the front

    c) They could only be seen clearly from directly in front of the palace gate

    d) They rotated on their bases to face toward approaching visitors

3. Which best describes the Assyrian military strategy of 'calculated frightfulness'?

a) Disguising armies as merchant caravans to approach enemy cities undetected

b) Using cavalry charges to overwhelm enemies before they could assemble into their own defensive lines

c) Paying tribute to neighboring powers to avoid conflict while building strength

d) Extreme violence against those who resisted, combined with generous terms for those who submitted

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Assyria	A) Neo-Assyrian king (668-627 BCE) who built the world's first systematically organized library at Nineveh
2. ___ Lamassu	B) A military strategy of surrounding and cutting off a fortified city until it surrenders or is stormed
3. ___ Ashurbanipal	C) Colossal composite guardian figure with a human head and winged animal body, placed at palace gates
4. ___ Nimrud	D) Ancient Near Eastern kingdom centered on the upper Tigris River that built the largest empire of its era
5. ___ Siege	E) Assyrian capital city built by Ashurnasirpal II around 880 BCE; partially destroyed by ISIS in 2015

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh contained an estimated _____ clay tablets covering subjects from literature to medicine to mathematics.

2. The Assyrian practice of forcibly relocating conquered populations thousands of miles from their homes was designed to prevent _____ by destroying communities' social bonds.

3. In 2015, the Islamic State used sledgehammers and _____ to destroy the ruins of Nimrud, one of the ancient world's most important archaeological sites.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How did the Assyrian policy of 'calculated frightfulness' function as both a military and administrative strategy? What were its advantages and drawbacks?

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2. Why is the Library of Ashurbanipal considered one of the most significant intellectual achievements of the ancient world, and what does its creation reveal about Ashurbanipal's ambitions?

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3. The destruction of Nimrud by ISIS in 2015 has been called a war crime. Based on the reading, make the argument that the deliberate destruction of archaeological sites causes harm that goes beyond the loss of beautiful objects.

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