

The Assyrian Army

The ancient land of Assyria was located in modern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates. Owing to the difficulties of maintaining stable conditions in a country where natural boundaries scarcely existed, it was necessary to rely on a disciplined, organized force, the army, to ensure the safety and prosperity of the state. Nearly every year, the forces were employed in punitive expeditions and campaigns to keep in check the barbarians on the borders. In the palaces of the Assyrian kings many rooms had the lower portions of their walls decorated with slabs of alabaster bearing carved reliefs, which narrated these events. The theme of the military activities of the Assyrians from the 9th to the 7th centuries BC included details of campaigns, types of soldiers, their weapons, dress and equipment. The cities where the royal domains were situated were eventually destroyed in combined attacks by the Medes, Chaldeans and Scythians at the close of the 7th century BC.

The Burrell Collection possesses fragments of relief from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II, 883-859 BC, at Nimrud, ancient Kalhu and from the residences of Sennacherib, 704-681 BC, and Ashurbanipal/668-627 BC, at Nineveh, the position of which is marked by the mound of Kuyunjik. Both sites lie in northern Iraq near the River Tigris. For centuries following their destruction, the locations of these and other vast complexes of buildings were marked by weathered mounds until investigated by 19th century travellers such as A H Layard and P E Botta. In 1845, Layard began digging the site of Nimrud and uncovered the walls of Ashurnasirpal's 'north west palace'. By 1847 he had also opened up the mound of Kuyunjik at Nineveh to reveal a palace of Sennacherib. Work was resumed in 1849 and Layard's assistant Hormuzd Rassam took charge of the excavations in 1851. The following year, Rassam found the remains of Ashurbanipal's palace. He was still in charge of the Nimrud work; but as he was too busy with Nineveh, the former site was taken over by W K Loftus in 1854. Excavations continued to be conducted till the 1870s and it was only some 80 years later that modern archaeological techniques were applied which helped to tie in some of the earlier results and provide important finds such as a large collection of ivory carvings at Nimrud.

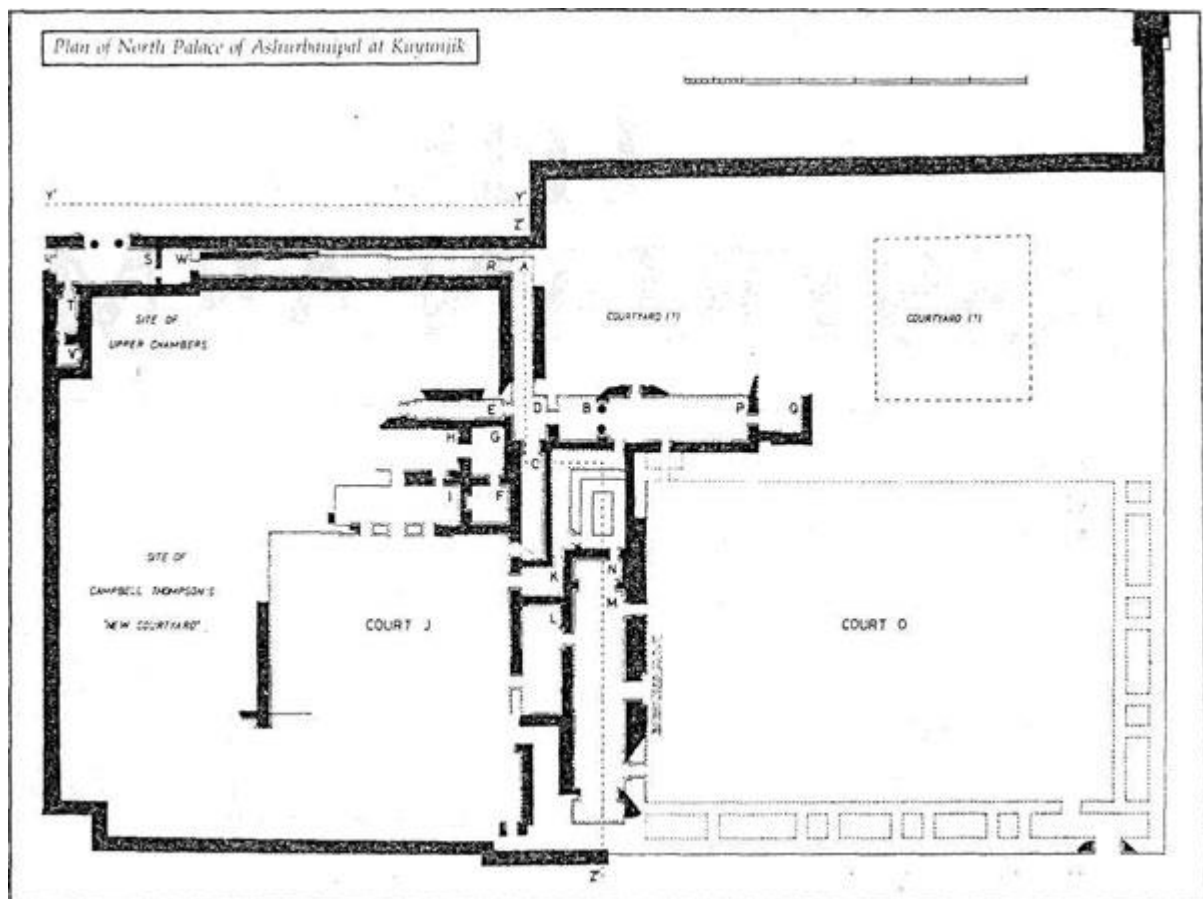
The pioneer work of the early investigators resulted in the tracing of numerous rooms and chambers within buildings of monumental proportions, where hundreds of sculptured slabs were recovered. The aim of the work was the acquisition of antiquities for museums such as the British Museum and the Louvre. Such records and drawings of the material as were made, whilst reasonable for the period, fell short of modern standards. In spite of these shortcomings it is possible to indicate in general terms where some of the pieces were originally placed in the palace apartments.

The usual plan of a palace consisted of a series of narrow rooms grouped round the sides of two open courts. The area occupied by palaces even where the entire layout has not been recovered is impressive. For example the north palace of Ashurbanipal at Kuyunjik measured at least 195 metres by 120 metres. The relief slabs decorating the walls were some 7 feet tall on average. Apart from the figures of kings and deities, which occupy the full height of a slab, most scenes were contained in two horizontal registers of equal size.

Persons of some prominence in domestic, hunting and warfare scenes, were attendants, who accompanied the king in processions and on the battle field. The example displayed depicts the head of an attendant on part of a slab from the north west palace at Nimrud. Often such members of the royal entourage acted as shield and arms-bearer, variously equipped with spear, bow and quiver of arrows or carrying a mace. On other occasions attendants stood beside the king with a sun shade or fly-whisk.



Royal Attendant, palace of Ashurnasirpal II 28-35





Camp scene - a soldier in his tent 28-70

Records of campaigns were kept by scribes who were depicted in the reliefs. Two men, from the south west palace at Nineveh of either Sennacherib or Ashurbanipal, are shown both holding a wax covered, hinged writing board and a stylus. If, as is likely, this fragment is part of a scene where a city has been stormed, the pair could be recording booty or making a tally of captives.

The Assyrian army was an organization containing various categories of troops. As represented on the monuments it is possible to recognize three main groups: firstly Assyrians, secondly Auxiliaries and lastly Provincials. An Assyrian soldier wore a pointed hairnet, had his hair bunched square and his beard square cut. There were units of chariotry, where each vehicle drawn by a pair of horses, carried an archer, a driver and one or two shield bearers. Cavalry operated in pairs being armed with spear, bow and quiver. A fragment bearing the heads of two men and a horse derive from the north palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. It may have come from a throne base. It is from this king's residence that most of the Burrell reliefs come. The infantry comprised archers, spearmen or shield bearers and slingers. An interesting facet of the military life occurs on a slab showing a camp scene. This belongs to a series of reliefs illustrating episodes in the capture of the city of Hamanu in Ashurbanipal's campaign in Elam, south west Iran, in 646 BC. Within a tent a soldier is adjusting his armour while a servant stands holding the man's bow and offering him a drink. A bed has been made up and hanging from the central tent pole and crossbeam are flasks (?) and other objects. Such tents usually stand inside a fortified enclosure which allowed animals, such as the two sheep depicted, to browse safely. In the bottom right corner of the fragment is part of a screen supported on posts and steadied by guy ropes. Possibly the screen was erected round the king's quarters and so the soldier whose tent was pitched in close proximity could have been a high ranking officer. Other troops were employed on mining operations and worked breaching engines during sieges of enemy cities.



Helmeted head of an Assyrian soldier 28-65



Scribes using writing boards 28-33



A Persian Auxiliary Bowman 28-61

Auxiliaries tended to be more expendable in battle and performed guard duties at Nineveh in peace time. They consisted of archers, slingers and spearmen. Of these, the archers were of two types. The more barbaric kind had long hair either worn loose or tied up in a headband, pointed beards, a shoulder strap and short kilt. They were barefoot or had sandals and were equipped with a sword, narrow quiver and bow. The second type were to a large extent Assyrianised, that is their hair was bunched square, and beards were square cut. A headband with flaps, chest armour, long kilt and boots completed their dress; while similar weapons with a wide quiver were issued to the members of these units.

Some of these details may be seen on two fragments in the Collection showing Persian auxiliary bowmen marching in a triumphant procession celebrating the king's victory over Elam. Most distinctive are the

feather head-dresses which the men wear and even these show slight differences in the number of feathers, fringed tabs, etc. The broad waist band with the point of the skirt falling downward between the knees is a common Assyrian feature of dress. The bows and quivers which these men carry have been considered as Elamite types and it suggests that they are Persian tribesmen, previously enlisted with the Elamites, who have rebelled, surrendered and joined the army of Assyria.

Provincial troops, forming the third part of the army, were equipped as spearmen and archers. They wore native dress and varying forms of head-dress. Spearmen had headbands with ear flaps, or caps covering the back of the head, for example among Sargon's troops in Syria and Palestine. Archers wore headbands and tunics belted to create a bunched effect at the back.

Among the Burrell reliefs is a splendid example of an Elamite archer. He is identified by his headband, short hair and trimmed beard as an enemy. His attire would be completed by a short sleeved tunic, a narrow waist band, and knee length kilt. He went bare footed. The long series of Ashurbanipal's military exploits culminated in the defeat of his old enemy Elam in 639 BC, when the New Year festival was celebrated.

The relief fragments in the Burrell Collection form a small but interesting record of the army with which the mighty kings of Assyria established their empire.



An Elamite Archer 28-73

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