

The Assyrian Military Machine



The Assyrians achieved a reputation for possessing a mighty military machine. They were able to use a variety of military tactics and were successful whether they were waging guerrilla warfare, fighting set battles, or laying siege to cities. In these three selections, Assyrian kings boast of their military conquests.

King Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.E.) Describes a Battle with the Elamites in 691

At the command of the god Ashur, the great Lord,
I rushed upon the enemy like the approach of a
hurricane. . . . I put them to rout and turned them back.
I transfixed the troops of the enemy with javelins and
arrows. . . . I cut their throats like sheep. . . . My
prancing steeds, trained to harness, plunged into their
welling blood as into a river; the wheels of my battle
chariot were bespattered with blood and filth. I filled the
plain with the corpses of their warriors like herbage. . . .
As to the sheikhs of the Chaldeans, panic from my
onslaught overwhelmed them like a demon. They
abandoned their tents and fled for their lives, crushing
the corpses of their troops as they went. . . . In their
terror they passed scalding urine and voided their
excrement into their chariots.

King Sennacherib Describes His Siege of Jerusalem in 701

As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke,
I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts, and the
countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered
them by means of well-stamped earth-ramps, and

battering-rams brought thus near to the walls combined
with the attack by foot soldiers, using mines, breaches, as
well as sapper work. I drove out of them 200,150 people,
young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys,
camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and
considered them booty. Himself I made a prisoner in
Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.
I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest
those who were leaving his city's gate.

King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.E.) Describes His Treatment of Conquered Babylon

I tore out the tongues of those whose slanderous mouths
had uttered blasphemies against my god Ashur and had
plotted against me, his god-fearing prince; I defeated
them completely. The others, I smashed alive with the
very same statues of protective deities with which they
had smashed my own grandfather Sennacherib—now
finally as a belated burial sacrifice for his soul. I fed their
corpses, cut into small pieces, to dogs, pigs, . . . vultures,
the birds of the sky, and also to the fish of the ocean.
After I had performed this and thus made quiet again the
hearts of the great gods, my lords, I removed the corpses
of those whom the pestilence had felled, whose leftovers
after the dogs and pigs had fed on them were obstructing
the streets, filling the places of Babylon, and of those
who had lost their lives through the terrible famine.



Based on their own descriptions, what did Assyrian kings believe was important for military success? Do you think their accounts may be exaggerated? Why?

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treatment of Babylonia showed remarkable restraint and wisdom. Babylonia was made into a Persian province, but many government officials were kept in their positions. Cyrus also issued an edict permitting the Jews, who had been brought to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E., to return to Jerusalem with their sacred temple objects and to rebuild their Temple as well.

To his contemporaries, Cyrus the Great deserved to be called the Great. He must have been an unusual ruler for his time, a man who demonstrated considerable

wisdom and compassion in the conquest and organization of his empire. Unlike the Assyrian rulers of an earlier empire, he had a reputation for mercy. Medes, Jews, and Babylonians all accepted him as their legitimate ruler.

Cyrus's successors extended the territory of the Persian Empire. His son Cambyses (kam-BY-seez) (530–522 B.C.E.) undertook a successful invasion of Egypt. Darius (duh-RY-uss) (521–486 B.C.E.) added a new Persian province in western India that extended to the Indus River and then moved into Europe, conquering Thrace and