

# Nineveh, that Exceedingly Great City

## *Compiled from Variou Sources*

It was Sennacherib who made Nineveh a truly magnificent city (c. 700 BCE).

### **The Palace**

He laid out fresh streets and squares and built within it the famous “palace without a rival,” the plan of which has been mostly recovered and has overall dimensions of about 600 by 630 feet (180 by 190 metres).

It comprised at least 80 rooms, of which many were lined with sculpture. A large part of the famous “K” collection of tablets was found there (see below); some of the principal doorways were flanked by human-headed bulls.

At this time the total area of Nineveh comprised about 1,800 acres (700 hectares), and 15 great gates penetrated its walls. An elaborate system of 18 canals brought water from the hills to Nineveh, and several sections of a magnificently constructed aqueduct erected by the same monarch were discovered at Jerwan, about 25 miles (40 km) distant.

His successor **Esarhaddon** built an arsenal in the Nabī Yūnus mound, south of Quyunjik, and either he or his successor set up statues of the pharaoh Taharqa (Tarku) at its entrance as trophies to celebrate the conquest of Egypt. These were discovered by Fuad Safar and Muḩammad ḩAlī Muḩḩafā on behalf of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities in 1954.

**Ashurbanipal** later in the 7th century BCE constructed a new palace at the northwest end of the Acropolis. He also founded the great library and ordered his scribes to collect and copy ancient texts throughout the country. The “K” collection included more than 20,000 tablets or fragments of tablets and incorporated the ancient lore of Mesopotamia.

The subjects are literary, religious, and administrative, and a great many tablets are in the form of letters. Branches of learning represented include mathematics, botany, chemistry, and lexicology. The library contains a mass of information about the ancient world and will exercise scholars for generations to come.

**Fourteen years after the death of Ashurbanipal**, however, Nineveh suffered a defeat from which it never recovered.

Extensive traces of ash, representing the sack of the city by Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes in 612 BCE, have been found in many parts of the Acropolis.

After 612 BCE the city ceased to be important, although there are some Seleucid and Greek remains. Xenophon in the *Anabasis* recorded the name of the city as Mespila. In the 13th century CE the city seems to have enjoyed some prosperity under the atabegs of Mosul. Subsequently, houses continued to be inhabited at least as late as the 16th century CE. In these later levels imitations of Chinese wares have been found.

## Outline of the City

### The City Wall

From the ruins it has been established that the perimeter of the great Assyrian city wall was about 7.5 miles (12 km) long and in places up to 148 feet (45 metres) wide; there was also a great unfinished outer rampart, protected by a moat, and the Khawāar River flowed through the centre of the city to join the Tigris on the western side of it.

### The Gates

The 15 great gates that intersected the Acropolis walls were built partly of mud brick and partly of stone. The long eastern sector, about 3 miles (5 km), contained six gates; the southern sector, 2,624 feet (800 metres), contained only one, the Ashur Gate; the western sector, about 2.5 miles (4 km), had five gates; the northern sector, about 1.2 miles (1.9 km), three gates, Adad, Nergal, and Sin. Several of these entrances are known to have been faced with stone colossi (lamassu).

In the Nergal Gate two winged stone bulls, attributable to Sennacherib, have been reinstalled: a site museum has been erected adjacent to it by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. The Adad Gate contained many inscribed tiles, and what may prove to be the Sin Gate contained a corridor that led through an arched doorway into a ramp or stairwell giving access to the battlements.

Most impressive was the Shamash Gate, which has been thoroughly excavated by Tariq Madhloum on behalf of the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. It was found to have been approached across two moats and a watercourse by a series of bridges in which the arches were cut out of the natural conglomerate. The wall was faced with limestone and surmounted by a crenellated parapet, behind which ran a defense causeway. The structure was constructed of mud as well as burnt bricks, which bore the stamp of Sennacherib.

There was an entrance 14.8 feet (4.5 metres) wide in the centre of a long, projecting bastion, which was further strengthened by six towers. Crudely incised stone slabs on the inner side of the gateway depicted the burning of a tower; it is possible that these carvings represented the fall of Nineveh and are post-Assyrian. The internal plan of the gate includes six great chambers lined with uncarved orthostats (upright slabs), which were discovered by Layard and Rassam.

Archaeologists also have been active within the Quyunjik (Acropolis). Since 1966 restoration has proceeded on the throne room of Sennacherib's palace and some of the adjoining chambers. All the entrances to the two main chambers were found flanked by winged bull colossi, and a series of orthostats not recorded by any of the 19th-century excavators has been recovered. One such slab illustrates a foreign city, heavily defended by towers, surrendering to the Assyrian army. Adjoining the throne room is a stone-paved bathroom, and the great antehall contained no fewer than 40 carved orthostats. The subjects represented include Sennacherib's campaigns against mountain-dwelling peoples, besieged cities, and units of the Assyrian army.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Nineveh-ancient-city-Iraq>

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Nineveh was the largest city in the world prior to its destruction in 612 B.C.E.

### **Archaeology**

Today, Nineveh's location is marked by two large mounds, Kouyunjik and Nabī Yūnus "Prophet Jonah," and the remains of the city walls (about 12 km/7.5 mi in circumference). The Neo-Assyrian levels of Kouyunjik have been extensively explored.

The other mound, Nabī Yūnus, has not been extensively explored because there is a Muslim shrine on the site. However, Iraqi excavations on Nabī Yūnus in 1990, exposed a number of large Neo-Assyrian sculptures that appeared to be the entrance to a palace.

In the nineteenth century, the French consul at Mosul began to search the vast mounds that lay along the opposite bank of the river. These excavations uncovered the royal palace of Sargon II (722–705 B.C.E.), which was largely explored for sculptures and other precious relics.

In 1847, the young British adventurer Sir Austen Henry Layard explored the ruins. In the Kuyunjik mound in 1849, Layard discovered the glorious edifice of Sennacherib, the "Palace without Rival," with many rooms and colossal bas-reliefs.

He also unearthed the famous library of Ashurbanipal with 22,000 cuneiform clay tablets.

The work of exploration was carried on by George Smith, Hormuzd Rassam, and others, and a vast treasury of specimens of Assyria was incrementally exhumed for European museums.

Palace after palace was discovered, with their decorations and their sculptured slabs, revealing the life and manners of this ancient people, their arts of war and peace, the forms of their religion, the style of their architecture, and the magnificence of their monarchs.

The mound of Kuyunjik were excavated again by the archaeologists of the British Museum led by Leonard William King, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their efforts concentrated on the site of the Temple of Nabu, the god of writing, where another cuneiform library was supposed to exist. However, no such library was ever found. Most likely, it had been destroyed by the activities of later residents.

The excavations started again, in 1927, under the direction of Campbell Thompson. Some digs were carried out on the mound of Nebi Yunus and along the outside walls. Here, near the northwestern corner of the walls, the archaeologists found almost 300 fragments of prisms recording the royal annals of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal.

After World War II, several excavations were carried out by Iraqi archaeologists. Nineveh was also revisited by British archaeologist and Assyriologist David Stronach of the University of California, Berkeley beginning in 1981. He conducted a series of surveys and digs at the site from 1987-1990, focusing his attentions to the several gates and the existent mud brick walls, as well as the system that supplied water to the city in times of siege.

## **City Wall and Gates**

Examining an inscription at Sennacherib's palace on Kuyunjik.

The ruins of Nineveh are surrounded by the remains of a massive stone and mudbrick wall dating from about 700 B.C.E. About 12 kilometers in length, the wall system consisted of a stone retaining wall about 6 meters high surmounted by a mudbrick wall about 10 meters high and 15 meters thick. The retaining wall had projecting stone towers spaced about every 18 meters. The stone wall and towers were topped by three-step battlements.

The wall's 15 monumental gateways served as check points on entering and exiting the city and were probably used as barracks and armories. With their inner and outer doors closed, the gateways were virtual fortresses. Within each gate structure, a stairway led from one of its interior chambers to the top of the city wall.

Five of the gateways have been explored to some extent by archaeologists:

### **Mashki Gate.**

Translated "Gate of the Watering Places," this entrance was probably used to take livestock to water from the Tigris River, which currently flows about 1.5 km. to the west. It has been reconstructed in fortified mudbrick to the height of the top of the vaulted passageway and seems accurate as far as it goes. The Assyrian original may have been plastered and ornamented.

Nergal Gate. Named for the god Nergal and excavated in the nineteenth century, this gate may have been used for some ceremonial purpose, as it is the only known gate flanked by stone sculptures of winged bull-men.

### **Adad Gate.**

Named for the god Adad, this gate was partly reconstructed in the 1960s by Iraqis. The result is an uneasy mixture of concrete and eroding mudbrick, which nonetheless does give one some idea of the original structure. The original brickwork of the outer vaulted passageway is well exposed, as is the entrance of the vaulted stairway to the upper levels.

### **Shamash Gate.**

Named for the Sun god Shamash, this gate was first excavated by Layard in the nineteenth century and partly reconstructed in the 1960s. Its structure projects outward about 20 meters from the line of the main wall, the only gate with such a significant projection. Its size and design suggest it was the most important gate in Neo-Assyrian times.

### **Halzi Gate.**

Located near the south end of the eastern city wall, exploratory excavations were undertaken on this gate by the University of California expedition of 1989-90. It features an outward projection from the main city wall, though not as pronounced as at the Shamash Gate. Human remains from the final battle of Nineveh were found in the passageway.

## **Kuyunjik**

The ruin mound of Kuyunjik rises about 20 meters above the surrounding plain of the ancient city. It is quite large, measuring about 800 m x 500 m. Its upper layers have been extensively excavated and several Neo-Assyrian palaces and temples have been found there. A deep sounding revealed evidence of habitation as early as the sixth millennium B.C.E.

A small area of undisturbed post-Assyrian remains was identified in 1990 near the southwest corner of Kuyunjik.

## **1990**

Since 1990, the palace chambers have received significant damage by looters. Portions of looted relief sculptures were seen on the antiquities market by 1996. Photographs of the chambers made in 2003 show that many of the fine relief sculptures of these palaces have been reduced to piles of rubble.

## **Nebi Yunus**

Nebi Yunus, located about one kilometer south of Kuyunjik, is the secondary ruin mound at Nineveh. On the basis of texts left by Sennacherib, the site has traditionally been identified as the "armory" of Nineveh, and a gate and pavements excavated by Iraqis in 1954 have been considered to be part of the "armory" complex. Excavations in 1990 revealed a monumental entryway consisting of a number of large inscribed orthostats (stone slabs set at the base of a wall) and "bull-man" sculptures, some apparently unfinished

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2014 and 2017

In the days of the Greek historian Herodotus, 400 B.C.E., Nineveh had become a thing of the past; and when Xenophon the historian passed the place in the Retreat of the Ten Thousand the very memory of its name had been lost. It was buried out of sight.

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**Nineveh was the flourishing capital of the Assyrian empire (2 Kings 19:36; Isa. 37:37).**

The book of the prophet Nahum is almost exclusively taken up with prophetic denunciations against it.

Its ruin and utter desolation are foretold (Nahum 1:14; Nahum 3:19). Its end was to be strange, sudden, tragic (Nahum 2:6–11). It would become a "desolation."

The prophet Zephaniah 2:13–15 predicted its destruction along with the fall of the empire of which it was the capital.

Before this catastrophe, however, Nineveh, as the capital of Assyria, fulfilled a providential purpose: namely to punish the kingdoms of Judah and Israel for their sins.

In 722 B.C.E., the Assyrian army conquered Israel under King Hoshea, deporting many of its leading citizens and sending Assyrian colonists to take their place.

**Later, Sennacherib nearly conquered Judah as well, capturing every major city except Jerusalem.**

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But a city of this magnitude doesn't last without the resources to sustain it. King Sennacherib understood this.

### **Aqueducts**

One of Sennacherib's inscriptions tells us that he brought water to the site by tearing open mountain and valley, creating canals to provide the city with a constant supply, pointing to an early mastery over one of the region's scarcest resources.

Of course, an imperial capital must have style as well as substance. Sennacherib undertook a number of major projects, embellishing Nineveh with parks and orchards, and created a reed marsh, like those found around Babylon to the south.

It is even possible that Nineveh was the location for the famous Hanging Gardens – one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.