

Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death

By Erika Belibtreu



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The Black Obelisk

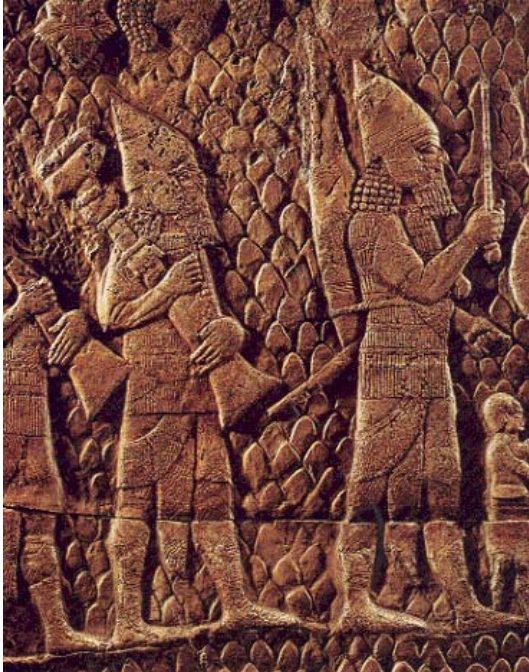
Assyria national history, as it has been preserved for us in inscriptions and pictures, consists almost solely of military campaigns and battles. It is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know.

Assyria emerged as a territorial state in the 14th century B.C. Its territory covered approximately the northern part of modern Iraq. The first capital of Assyria was Assur, located about 150 miles north of modern Baghdad on the west bank of the Tigris River. The city was named for its national god, Assur, from which the name Assyria is also derived.

From the outset, Assyria projected itself as a strong military power bent on conquest. Countries and peoples that opposed Assyrian rule were punished by the destruction of their cities and the devastation of their fields and orchards.

By the ninth century B.C., Assyria had consolidated its hegemony over northern Mesopotamia. It was then that Assyrian armies marched beyond their own borders to expand their empire, seeking booty to finance their plans for still more conquest and power. By the mid-ninth century B.C., the Assyrian menace posed a direct threat to the small Syro-Palestine states to the west, including Israel and Judah.

The period from the ninth century to the end of the seventh century B.C. is known as the Neo-Assyrian period, during which the empire reached its zenith. The Babylonian destruction of their capital city Nineveh in 612 B.C. marks the end of the Neo-Assyrian empire, although a last Assyrian king, Ashur-uballit II, attempted to rescue the rest of the Assyrian state, by then only a small territory around Harran. However, the Babylonian king Nabopolassar (625–605 B.C.) invaded Harran in 610 B.C. and conquered it. In the following year, a final attempt was made by Ashur-uballit II to regain Harran with the help of troops from Egypt, but he did not succeed. Thereafter, Assyria disappears from history.



Erich Lessing

Ancient looters, the Assyrian soldiers carry away their booty after conquering Lachish in 701 B.C., depicted in this detail from a relief in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh. The riches thus acquired provided important funding for the monumental construction programs that the Assyrian kings undertook.

We will focus here principally on the records of seven Neo-Assyrian kings, most of whom ruled successively. Because the kings left behind pictorial, as well as written, records, our knowledge of their military activities is unusually well documented:

1. Ashurnasirpal II—883–859 B.C.
2. Shalmaneser III—858–824 B.C.
3. Tiglath-pileser III—744–727 B.C.
4. Sargon II—721–705 B.C.
5. Sennacherib—704–681 B.C.
6. Esarhaddon—680–669 B.C.
7. Ashurbanipal—668–627 B.C.

Incidentally, Assyrian records, as well as the Bible, mention the military contacts between the Neo-Assyrian empire and the small states of Israel and Judah.

An inscription of Shalmaneser III records a clash between his army and a coalition of enemies that included Ahab, king of Israel (c. 859–853 B.C.). Indeed, Ahab, according to Shalmaneser, mustered more chariots (2,000) than any of the other allies arrayed against the Assyrian ruler at the battle of Qarqar on the Orontes (853 B.C.). For a time, at least, the Assyrian advance was checked.

An inscription on a stela from Tell al Rimah in northern Iraq, erected in 806 B.C. by Assyrian king Adad-nirari III, informs us that Jehoahaz, king of Israel (814–798 B.C.), paid tribute to the Assyrian king: "He [Adad-nirari

III of Assyria] received the tribute of Ia'asu the Samarian Uehoahaz, king of Israel], of the Tyrian (ruler) and the Sidonian (ruler).”[†]

From the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III and from some representations on the reliefs that decorated the walls of his palace at Nimrud, we learn that he too conducted a military campaign to the west and invaded Israel. Tiglath-pileser III received tribute from Menahem of Samaria (744–738 B.C.), as the Bible tells us; the Assyrian king is there called Pulu (2 Kings 15:19–20).

In another episode recorded in the Bible, Pekah, king of Israel (737–732 B.C.), joined forces with Rezin of Damascus against King Ahaz of Judah (2 Kings 16:5–10). The Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III successfully intervened against Pekah, who was then deposed. The Assyrian king then placed Hoshea on the Israelite throne. By then Israel's northern provinces were devastated and part of her population was deported to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29).

At one point, Israel, already but a shadow of its former self and crushed by the burden of the annual tribute to Assyria, decided to revolt. Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.), who reigned after Tiglath-pileser III, marched into Israel, besieged its capital at Samaria and, after three years of fighting, destroyed it (2 Kings 18:10). This probably occurred in the last year of Shalmaneser V's reign (722 B.C.). However, his successor, Sargon II, later claimed credit for the victory. In any event, this defeat ended the national identity of the northern kingdom of Israel. Sargon II deported, according to his own records, 27,290 Israelites, settling them, according to the Bible, near Harran on the Habur River and in the mountains of eastern Assyria (2 Kings 17:6 , 18:11).

Later, in 701 B.C., when King Hezekiah of Judah withheld Assyrian tribute, Sargon II's successor, Sennacherib, marched into Judah, destroying, according to his claim, 46 cities and besieging Jerusalem. Although Sennacherib failed to capture Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:32–36), Hezekiah no doubt continued to pay tribute to Assyria.

The two principal tasks of an Assyrian king were to engage in military exploits and to erect public buildings. Both of these tasks were regarded as religious duties. They were, in effect, acts of obedience toward the principal gods of Assyria.

The historical records of ancient Assyria consist of tablets, prisms and cylinders of clay and alabaster. They bear inscriptions in cuneiform—wedge-shaped impressions representing, for the most part, syllables. In addition, we have inscribed obelisks and stelae as well as inscriptions on stone slabs that lined the walls and covered the floors of Assyrian palaces and temples.

In all of these inscriptions, the king stands at the top of the hierarchy—the most powerful person; he himself represents the state. All public acts are recorded as his achievements. All acts worthy of being recorded are attributed only to the Assyrian king, the focus of the ancient world.



Erich Lessing

Impaled on stakes. Two Assyrian soldiers erect a stake with an impaled, naked man beside two others. The heads of these captured men of Lachish sag forward, suggesting that they are already dead. This detail comes from a series of reliefs, found at Nineveh, in which Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.) recorded the exploits of his invasion of Judah in 701 B.C. Lachish was among the 46 cities he conquered.

[†] Stephanie Page, “A Stela of Adad-nirari III and Nergal-eres from Tell al Rimah,” *Iraq* 30 (1968), p. 143.

The annals of the kings describe not only their military exploits, but also their building activities. This suggests that the spoil and booty taken during the military campaigns formed the financial foundation for the building activities of palaces, temples, canals and other public structures. The booty—property and people—probably provided not only precious building materials, but also artists and workmen deported from conquered territories.

The inscriptional records are vividly supplemented by pictorial representations. These include reliefs on bronze bands that decorated important gates, reliefs carved on obelisks and some engravings on cylinder seals. But the largest and most informative group of monuments are the reliefs sculpted into the stone slabs that lined the palaces' walls in the empire's capital cities-Nimrud (ancient Kalah), Khorsahad (ancient Dur Sharrukin) and Kuyunjik (ancient Nineveh).



British Museum

Assyrian headhunters gather their trophies. In a relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, two scribes, standing side by side at right, record the number of the enemy slain in a campaign in southern Mesopotamia. Heads lie in a heap at their feet. The foreground scribe uses pen and ink on a leather scroll; the other scribe writes with a stylus on a hinged writing-board coated with wax.

According to the narrative representations on these reliefs, the Assyrians never lost a battle. Indeed, no Assyrian soldier is ever shown wounded or killed. The benevolence of the gods is always bestowed on the Assyrian king and his troops.

Like the official written records, the scenes and figures are selected and arranged to record the king's heroic deeds and to describe him as "beloved of the gods":

"The king, who acts with the support of the great gods his lords and has conquered all lands, gained dominion over all highlands and received their tribute, captures of hostages, he who is victorious over all countries."[†]

The inscriptions and the pictorial evidence both provide detailed information regarding the Assyrian treatment of conquered peoples, their armies and their rulers. In his official royal inscriptions, Ashurnasirpal II calls himself the "trampler of all enemies ... who defeated all his enemies [and] hung the corpses of his enemies on posts."[†] The treatment of captured enemies often depended on their readiness to submit themselves to the will of the Assyrian king:

"The nobles [and] elders of the city came out to me to save their lives. They seized my feet and said: 'If it pleases you, kill! If it pleases you, spare! If it pleases you, do what you will!'"[†]

In one case when a city resisted as long as possible instead of immediately submitting, Ashurnasirpal proudly records his punishment:

[†] Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden, Germ.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 165.

[†] Grayson, p. 120.

[†] Grayson, p. 124.

“I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile ... I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls.”[†]

The account was probably intended not only to describe what had happened, but also to frighten anyone who might dare to resist. To suppress his enemies was the king’s divine task. Supported by the gods, he always had to be victorious in battle and to punish disobedient people:

“I felled 50 of their fighting men with the sword, burnt 200 captives from them, [and] defeated in a battle on the plain 332 troops. ... With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool, [and] the rest of them the ravines [and] torrents of the mountain swallowed. I carried off captives [and] possessions from them. I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls.”[†]

A description of another conquest is even worse:

“In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword ... I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.”[†]

The palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud is the first, so far as we know, in which carved stone slabs were used in addition to the usual wall paintings. These carvings portray many of the scenes described in words in the annals.

From the reign of Shalmaneser III, Ashurnasirpal II’s son, we also have some bronze bands that decorated a massive pair of wooden gates of a temple (and possibly a palace) at Balawat, near modern Mosul. These bronze bands display unusually fine examples of bronze repoussé (a relief created by hammering on the opposite side). In a detail, we see an Assyrian soldier grasping the hand and arm of a captured enemy whose other hand and both feet have already been cut off. Dismembered hands and feet fly through the scene. Severed enemy heads hang from the conquered city’s walls. Another captive is impaled on a stake, his hands and feet already having been cut off. In another detail, we see three stakes, each driven through eight severed heads, set up outside the conquered city. A third detail shows a row of impaled captives lined up on stakes set up on a hill outside the captured city. In an inscription from Shalmaneser III’s father, Ashurnasirpal II, the latter tells us, “I captured soldiers alive [and] erected [them] on stakes before their cities.”[†]

[†] Grayson, p. 124.

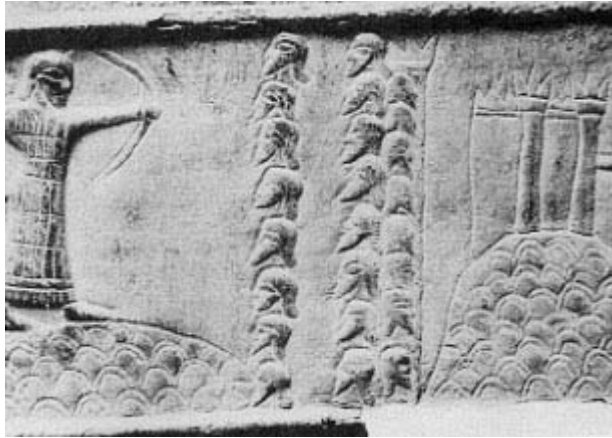
[†] Grayson, pp. 126–127.

[†] Grayson, p. 126.

[†] Grayson, p. 143.



Dismembered and displayed, the victims of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) become grisly ornaments, as shown in this detail from a bronze relief that once decorated the wooden gates of a temple or palace at Balawat, near modern Mosul. Severed heads hang from the walls of Kulisi, at right, as flames (represented by parallel vertical lines) consume this ancient city near the source of the Tigris River. Beside the city we see a prisoner, bereft of hands and feet, impaled on a stake. At left, an Assyrian soldier grasps the hand of a captive whose other hand and feet have been cut off. Dismembered hands and feet litter the ground.



Another detail from the bronze relief from Balawat shows three stakes, each with eight male heads, standing like human totem poles outside an apparently conquered city on a hill. The city is Uppumu, in Shubria, located southwest of Lake Van.

Salmaneser III's written records supplement his pictorial archive: "I filled the wide plain with the corpses of his warriors.... These [rebels] I impaled on stakes.[†] ...A pyramid (pillar) of heads I erected in front of the city."[†]

In the eighth century B.C., Tiglath-pileser III held center stage. Of one city he conquered, he says:

"Nabû-ushabshi, their king, I hung up in front of the gate of his city on a stake. His land, his wife, his sons, his daughters, his property, the treasure of his palace, I carried off. Bit-Amukâni I trampled down like a threshing (sledge). All of its people, (and) its goods, I took to Assyria."[†]

Such actions are illustrated several times in the reliefs at Tiglath-pileser's palace at Nimrud. These reliefs display an individual style in the execution of details that is of special importance in tracing the development of military techniques.

Perhaps realizing what defeat meant, a king of Urartu, threatened by Sargon II, committed suicide: "The splendor of Assur, my lord, overwhelmed him [the king of Urartu] and with his own iron dagger he stabbed himself through the heart, like a pig, and ended his life."[†]

Sargon II started a new Assyrian dynasty that lasted to the end of the empire. Sargon built a new capital named after himself—Dur Sharrukin, meaning "Stronghold of the righteous king." His palace walls were decorated with especially large stone slabs, carved with extraordinarily large figures.

[†] Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago Univ. of Chicago Press, 1926–1927), vol. 1, secs. 584–585.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 1, sec. 599.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 1, sec. 783.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 22.



British Museum

One of the perpetrators. Making a grand appearance, Ashurbanipal II (668–627 B.C.) wears his conical hat surmounted by a point, the special headdress of Assyrian kings, and stands in his ornate chariot as he receives captives and spoils (not shown) from one of his conquests.

Sargon's son and successor, Sennacherib, again moved the Assyrian capital, this time to Nineveh, where he built his own palace. According to the excavator of Nineveh, Austen Henry Layard, the reliefs in Sennacherib's palace, if lined up in a row, would stretch almost two miles. If anything, Sennacherib surpassed his predecessors in the grisly detail of his descriptions:

"I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives (as one cuts) a string. Like the many waters of a storm, I made (the contents of) their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. My prancing steeds harnessed for my riding, plunged into the streams of their blood as (into) a river. The wheels of my war chariot, which brings low the wicked and the evil, were bespattered with blood and filth. With the bodies of their warriors I filled the plain, like grass. (Their) testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers."[†]



Erich Lessing

Written records left by the Assyrian kings supplement and corroborate the brutality depicted in the reliefs that decorated their palaces. These records, written in a wedge-shaped script called cuneiform, have been preserved primarily in three forms: prisms, cylinders and tablets made of clay or alabaster. One of the most famous Assyrian prisms contains the annals of Sennacherib. Among the events crowded onto the six faces of this 15-inch-high, clay prism is a boastful account of Sennacherib's destruction of Judah in 701 B.C. Inscribed in about 691 B.C., the account says in part: "Forty-six of [Hezekiah's] strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages ... I besieged and conquered As for Hezekiah, the awful splendor of my lordship overwhelmed him."

In several rooms of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh, severed heads are represented; deportation scenes are frequently depicted. Among the deportees depicted, there are long lines of prisoners from the Judahite city of Lachish; they are shown pulling a rope fastened to a colossal entrance figure for Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh; above this line of deportees is an overseer whose hand holds a truncheon.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 254.

British Museum

A multitude of slaves, prisoners of war from different parts of the Near East, labor probably to adorn Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh. In both details, three rows of men pull on heavy ropes, dragging large stones to the palace. Hovering over them, Assyrian overseers stand poised to strike with their truncheons. The men in the middle row of each detail appear to be Judahite captives, for they are dressed similarly to the deportees from Lachish in other reliefs at Nineveh. These details come from reliefs in Court VI of the palace.



Drawing of relief.

Sennacherib was murdered by his own sons. Another son, Esarhaddon, became his successor. As the following examples show, Esarhaddon treated his enemies just as his father and grandfather had treated theirs: “Like a fish I caught him up out of the sea and cut off his head,”[†] he said of the king of Sidon; “Their blood, like a broken dam, I caused to flow down the mountain gullies”;[†] and “I hung the heads of Sanduarri [king of the cities of Kundi and Sizu] and Abdi-milkutti [king of Sidon] on the shoulders of their nobles and with singing and music I paraded through the public square of Nineveh.”[†]

Ashurbanipal, Esarhaddon's son, boasted:

“Their dismembered bodies I fed to the dogs, swine, wolves, and eagles, to the birds of heaven and the fish in the deep.... What was left of the feast of the dogs and swine, of their members which blocked the streets and filled the squares, I ordered them to remove from Babylon, Kutha and Sippar, and to cast them upon heaps.”[†]

When Ashurbanipal didn't kill his captives he “pierced the lips (and) took them to Assyria as a spectacle for the people of my land.”[†]

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 511.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 521.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 528.

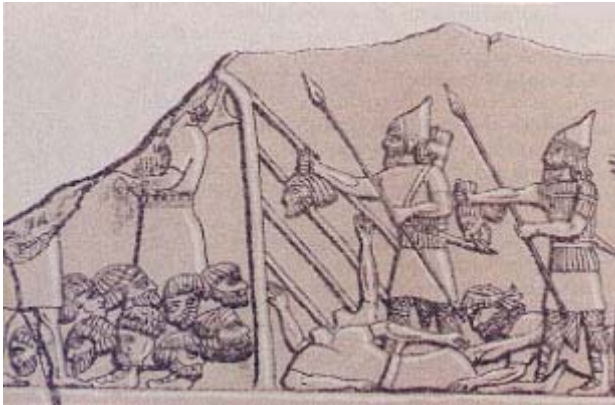
[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, secs. 795–796.

[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 800.

The enemy to the southeast of Assyria, the people of Elam, underwent a special punishment that did not spare even their dead:

“The sepulchers of their earlier and later kings, who did not fear Assur and Ishtar, my lords, (and who) had plagued the kings, my fathers, I destroyed, I devastated, I exposed to the sun. Their bones (members) I carried off to Assyria. I laid restlessness upon their shades. I deprived them of food-offerings and libations of water.”[†]

Among the reliefs carved by Ashurbanipal were pictures of the mass deportation of the Elamites, together with severed heads assembled in heaps. Two Elamites are seen fastened to the ground while their skin is flayed, while others are having their tongues pulled out.



Assyrian headhunters. Piled heads appear in a relief from the reign of Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.), seen here as drawn from the original. In this scene the heads are collected inside a tent, at left. Outside the tent, two Assyrian soldiers carrying additional heads wade through the decapitated bodies of their Elamite enemies.

There is no reason to doubt the historical accuracy of these portrayals and descriptions. Such punishments no doubt helped to secure the payment of tribute—silver, gold, tin, copper, bronze and iron, as well as building materials including wood, all of which was necessary for the economic survival of the Assyrian empire.

In our day, these depictions, verbal and visual, give a new reality to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. and to Sennacherib’s subsequent campaign into Judah in 701 B.C.

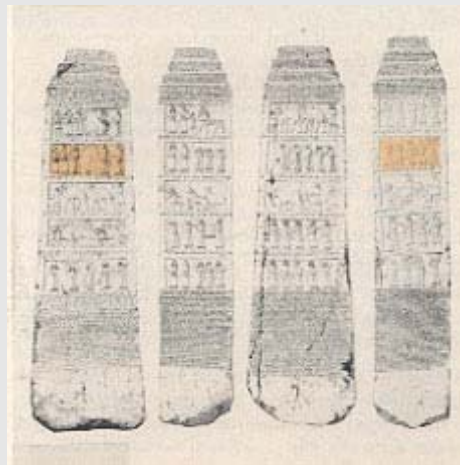
[†] Luckenbill, vol. 2, sec. 810.

The Black Obelisk



British Museum

Discovered in Nimrud in 1846 by Austen Henry Layard, this 6.5-foot-high, four-sided monolith, known simply as the “Black Obelisk” (above), records ancient Israel’s obeisance to Assyria during a turbulent period in Israel’s history.



British Museum

It all began with a coup d’etat. A garrison commander named Jehu marched his troops from Ramoth-Gilead, in northern Transjordan, to Samaria and seized the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel in about 842 B.C. After killing the reigning king Jehoram, he proceeded to eliminate all possible claimants to the throne by slaughtering the royal family, the courtiers and even Ahaziah, king of the southern kingdom of Judah, and his brothers (2 Chronicles 22:8–9). Jehu managed to do all this because he had the support of the army, of the poor and of prophets such as Elisha (2 Kings 9:1–3), who opposed the royal house and wanted to extirpate the Tyrian cult of Baal from Israelite religious life. Once in power, Jehu purged the cult by executing the prophets of Baal and destroying the temple of the god.

However, Jehu's coup weakened the triple alliance of Israel, Judah and Tyre, a situation that the Arameans, a people in the vicinity of Damascus, tried to exploit. To protect himself from Aramean pressure on Israel's northeastern border, Jehu turned to Assyria for help, paying to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) a rich tribute recorded on the Black Obelisk. Jehu's strategy proved temporarily successful, as the Assyrians embarked on a campaign against the Arameans, thus relieving the pressure on Israel from 841–838 B.C. But the Arameans soon recovered and conquered all of Israel's territory to the east of the Jordan River, as far as the Arnon valley (2 Kings 10 :32.33). Jehu nevertheless continued to reign until 814 B.C.



Erich Lessing

The obelisk displays 190 lines of text distributed above and below five rows of reliefs that wrap around the four-sided stone (drawing, at top). This text describes the major events in 31 military campaigns conducted by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The tribute that Shalmaneser exacted from five kingdoms is highlighted in the five rows of reliefs on the obelisk, with one row devoted to each tributary. A line of text above each relief—like a photo caption in a modern magazine—identifies each panel. The reliefs in the second panel from the top on each face of the obelisk, according to the caption, depict “The tribute of Jehu, son of Omri,” an event dated to about 841 B.C. This tribute comprised “silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king [and] purukhti fruits.” (The tinted panels in the drawing correspond to the photos in this sidebar.) Since Jehu was a usurper, not descended from King Omri (882–871 B.C.), the phrase “son of Omri” is interpreted as a short way of saying “son of the house of Omri,” which was a conventional form meaning “Israelite.” The first panel (above) shows Jehu, or one of his representatives, bowing before Shalmaneser. Standing behind the bowing man and continuing on the other panels in the row is a long line of tribute bearers (below).



Erich Lessing