

*Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

Isaiah 2:4

Mighty Fortresses

Elizabeth Adams

The human-headed winged bull regarded me with a skeptical eye: a cold and stony bearded enigma, two and a half times my height, with five legs, carved to appear natural either from the front or the side. “Well, we are both foreigners,” I said, “but you have been here a lot longer than I.”

146 years, to be exact. There’s an engraving of this enormous sculpture being hauled up the front steps of the British Museum in 1854: the end of an arduous journey from Assyria, a new prize for the Empire.

In an 1852 watercolor, a pair of these winged monsters flank the gateway of a partially-excavated Assyrian palace. Today, the winged bull guards the entrance to one of the Museum’s most highly-prized treasures, the stone relief carvings from the Assyrian royal palaces at Nineveh. Assyria was an area along the Tigris, north of Baghdad, in the northern part of what is now Iraq. The Assyrian Empire dominated the entire Middle East, from Iran to Egypt, between about 900-600 BC.

One set of carvings, designed to cover the walls of an entire room, shows a royal lion hunt. The other, from the palace of Sennacherib, King of Assyria from 705-681 BC., depicts in detail the siege of Lachish, which was one of the principal cities of Judah in eastern Palestine. The walled Judean cities, including Jerusalem, were seen as rebellious against the Assyrian king. Sennacherib was determined to subdue Judah, and he sent his army to attack Lachish. This siege, which is described in both 2 Chronicles and 2 Kings, occurred just prior to Sennacherib’s unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC.

The stone panels show, in stark detail, what happened. We see the phalanxes of Assyrian stone-hurlers and archers and the advance-guard ascending ramps to make their assault on the walls of Lachish. We see the armored siege-engines pushed ahead of the troops, the Judean archers on the parapets of the city. And then comes the exodus, as the Judeans are led away captive through a landscape of vineyards, figs and olives: families with children and a few belongings, on foot or donkey; Assyrian soldiers with booty piled on camels. In the final panels, Sennacherib sits in judgement, and high Judean officials considered responsible for the rebellion are tortured and executed. In another

fragment, three prisoners playing lyres are marched under guard beneath palm trees, presaging the words of Psalm 137, lamenting the later fall of Jerusalem: “they that carried us away captive required of us a song.”

While I sat on a bench, trying to take in the magnitude of what I was seeing, a young rabbi entered the gallery with a group of students. He pointed out artifacts behind glass: cuneiform tablets recording the deportation of 200,150 people; iron arrowheads; and round stone projectiles found beneath the city walls, identical to those depicted, nestled in the tops of the stone-hurlers’ lacrosse-like hurling sticks. This was not just art. It was history, it was real.

On another day, I stood beneath a piece of the Roman wall which surrounded the original settlement of London, in 1 AD., trying to imagine a time when a wall like this, tall and strong though it was, could have felt like real protection. Yet the distant outpost the Romans called “Londinium” not only survived, but became, centuries later, the center of a great empire. Strangely, this fragment of the original Roman wall stands in the part of London hardest hit by German bombs during WWII.

By some great irony, on that day in late 1999 when I sat among the Assyrian reliefs, my country and Britain were bombing the modern country of Iraq. There was a great deal of opposition in Britain to the war, and threats of terrorist attacks. The next day, I passed an angry demonstration at the War Ministry on Whitehall. At night, in the hotel room, we heard the disquieting, unusual sound of helicopters circling low over Covent Garden... and wondered.

Centuries come into being, and fade away, and with them empires, ancient and modern. As I pondered the bombs falling on modern Iraq, and the rain of arrows, the forsaken captives, the triumphant king on his throne in ancient Nineveh, I saw two parallel human desires clearly chiseled in the stone: the passions that lead to war, and the hunger for that day when war will be no more.

After conquering Lachish, Sennacherib sent his army to Jerusalem, and messengers shouted to the people on the walls to forsake their God and their leader, Hezekiah, king of Jerusalem. Hezekiah did not know what to do, and so he put on sackcloth and went to his soothsayer -- a man named Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied that God would put fear into the army, and tell them to go home. That is what happened, and Jerusalem did not fall that day.

When Isaiah wrote his eternal verses about beating swords into plowshares, he was thinking of battles like the one on these walls. And he wrote another prophesy about Sennacherib and all humans who think to reign forever by the power of the sword:

“I planned from days of old...that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded...But I know your rising and your sitting,

your going out and coming in, and your raging against me, and your arrogance has come to my ears. I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth; I will turn you back on the way by which you came.” 2 Kings 19:25-28

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