



The Campaigns of Sargon II, King of Assyria, 721–705 B.C. by Sarah C. Melville.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. xvi, 300. ISBN 978-0-8061-5403-9.

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Studying the military history of the Ancient Near East before the Greco-Persian wars (499–479 BC) has always been complicated by the paucity and heavily biased nature of the extant primary sources. Non-specialists know of the eighth-century Neo-Assyrian Empire mostly from biblical accounts, which present the Assyrians as powerful and brutal conquerors and focus on their activities in the Israelite kingdoms. Through a meticulous reexamination of the source material, historian Sarah Melville (Clarkson Univ.) constructs a much fuller, better balanced picture of the campaigns of Sargon II, one of the most powerful and successful Assyrian kings, especially the political and logistical systems that helped make them possible.¹

Melville draws on archaeological finds, sifts through correspondence between Assyrian government officials, distinguishes reliable information from propaganda in official declarations, and taps relevant external sources. The result is a remarkably readable and comprehensive account of Sargon's reign that will instruct general readers as well as specialists.

The author begins by describing the Assyrian military system and the political, social, economic, and cultural factors that shaped and supported it. In her reconstruction, the Assyrian army was a highly sophisticated force comprising a core of professional soldiers supplemented by militia, various allied contingents, and mercenary specialists. It combined heavy and light infantry, cavalry, charioteers, and siege engineers equipped for all types of combat. Sargon and his commanders astutely tailored armies to specific terrains, climates, and opponents. They campaigned successfully in mountains, plains, deserts, marshlands, and cities alike, while often coping with shortages of manpower, food, horses and draft animals (and their fodder), in bad weather and rough terrain.

While most of her sources concern ruling elites, Melville teases what she can from them to convey something of the ordinary soldier's experience. She discusses, for example, combat injuries and epidemic diseases, noting that kings and nobles enjoyed an access to personal healers unavailable to common soldiers. In the following passage, she taps an unlikely source in describing wound treatment:

The Assyrian medical literature deals with both disease and wound treatment, but it contains little (if any) reference to military personnel. Interestingly, the curse formula of a Neo-Assyrian treaty contains some hint of normal wound treatment: "When your enemy stabs you, may there be a dearth of honey, ginger, and cedar resin to put on your stab wounds." As honey and cedar resin are natural antiseptics, the wound victim would have stood some chance of recovery. Normally, regular soldiers probably had to treat each other with whatever medicaments they carried, without the aid of an expert. (42–43)

An extraordinary blending of background knowledge, mastery of sources, and common sense characterizes Melville's approach throughout.

1. An established authority in her field, the author has previously written "Neo-Assyrian Royal Women and Male Identity," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124 (2004) 37–57; "Sargon II," in Mark W. Chavalas, ed., *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006) 33–42; "Win, Lose, or Draw? Claiming Victory in Battle," in Hans Neumann et al., eds., *Krieg und Frieden im Alten Vorderasien* (Münster: Ugarit-Verl., 2014) 221–35; and [with D.J. Melville], "Observations on the Diffusion of Military Technology," in Micah Ross, ed., *From the Banks of the Euphrates* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 145–68.

The author stresses that the Assyrians often relied on diplomacy and spectacle as much as military might to build and maintain their empire. Besides directly controlling core areas and certain key outposts, they ruled largely through intimidation and tribute, using local rulers as surrogates who would pay tribute and serve as loyal allies when called on. Without the human and material resources to maintain large permanent garrisons and field armies, the Assyrians efficiently deployed the forces they could recruit and support to enforce the loyalty of their clients. Adeptly using inscriptional evidence, Melville shows this system at work in Mannea, a frontier zone between Assyria and its principal rival, Urartu, early in 715 BC:

At this point, the Assyrians backtracked and met the Manneans in Sirdakka, where Ullusununu tried to convince Sargon to help him against Urartu. After feeding the Assyrian army and paying additional tribute, Ullusununu dutifully asked Sargon to approve the formal investment of the Mannean crown prince. Finally Ullusununu and his magnates, "crawling before me [Sargon] on all fours like dogs," begged the Assyrian king for military aid. Playing the benevolent overlord, Sargon "took pity on them and paid attention to their entreaties." As part of the formalities, he threw a banquet for Ullusununu and "exalted his throne above that of Iranzi his father who begot him." In causing "those people to sit down at a joyous table with the people of Assyria," Sargon aimed to demonstrate Ullusununu's obligation to him, awe the Mannean elite, and forge tighter bonds of loyalty. (125)

Melville goes on to place Sargon's actions within the contexts of his larger strategy and Near Eastern customs, noting that the Mannea campaign seems to have cowed some neighboring rulers into offering voluntary submission to Sargon.

Not all rivals, of course, could be intimidated in this fashion. The most dangerous of them, the mountain kingdom of Urartu, north of Assyria, regularly challenged Assyrian hegemony between the Zagros mountains and the Mediterranean. Shortly after the meeting with Ullusununu, Sargon won a pitched battle against Urartu, already weakened by a recent defeat at the hands of the Cimmerians (130–33). Sargon followed this up by raiding Urartu's territory and picking off some of its clients. He did not, however, attempt to occupy the kingdom, which would have been beyond his capacity. Instead, he took advantage of Urartu's decline to turn his attentions to expanding his influence to the south and east in Babylonia and Media.

Where necessary, Melville suspends the flow of her narrative to interject more detailed analysis; she discusses in detail, for instance, the problematic chronology of the Urartu campaign that has so exercised scholars, concluding that the incomplete sources render all interpretations a matter of guesswork.² That said, her own well-grounded position must be taken seriously.

The final sections of the book trace Sargon's continued expansion of his power and his construction of a new capital city at Dur-Sharrukin, which he occupied in 706 BC. At the peak of his success, he died in a minor battle a year later, leaving his son Sennacherib the task of holding the empire together. Prominent in the Bible for his siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC, Sennacherib was a competent ruler, but not the conqueror his father had been. For reasons unexplained in the sources, he abandoned Dur-Sharrukin and returned the seat of government to the former capital, Nineveh. He left behind a set of palace murals chronicling Sargon's reign, which remained undisturbed until discovered by archaeologists in the nineteenth century. By deductions made from those murals and an array of other sources, Sarah Melville has succeeded in rescuing Sargon II from relative obscurity and presenting him as a talented military leader and worthy precursor of the Achaemenid Persian kings and Alexander the Great.

2. She devotes a substantial appendix (207–23) to assessing competing interpretations and stating the merits of her own.