

Giovanni Battista Lanfranchi

The Sack of Nineveh in 612 B.C.: Fall of an Empire?

ABSTRACT

The lecture is aimed at discussing the applicability of the term “empire” to the governmental structure commanded by the Neo-Assyrian kings during the first four centuries of the first millennium BC, and the modalities and consequences of its disappearance after the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC, both terms being usually associated in the commonly adopted historical formula “fall of the (Neo-)Assyrian Empire”.

As regards the term “empire”, the discussion centres on the purely institutional meaning of this term as a governmental structure to be accurately distinguished from “normal” (territorial and hereditary) monarchy due to some specific internal characteristics — a crucial question, much debated in contemporary historical research. The problem is approached considering the definitions of the Assyrian governing institutional structure in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, taken as a reliable product of self-perception and self-definition expressed according to well-defined and often traditional ideological patterns. The analysis of the texts from the eighth to the seventh centuries BC shows that, notwithstanding the dramatic expansion of the Assyrian dominion, the basic concept and definition of Mesopotamian monarchy remained unchanged, and no new institutional title or epithet was adopted/invented for the king with the aim of characterizing his unprecedented power.

Some hints to a change in the self-perception of the Assyrian monarchy is to be found in the adoption of variants in some epithets traditionally attributed to the king, and especially in the institutional treatment of Babylonia and Egypt, two major kingdoms in the Near Eastern history, when they were annexed to the Assyrian territory. Both local monarchic titles were not abolished, as it was the rule in Assyria, which had the control a territory assigned to a governor after annexation. From Tiglath-pileser III onwards, the Assyrian kings irregularly adopted the title of “King of Babylon”/“king of Babylonia”, and with Esarhaddon the new title “king of kings of Egypt” was coined, which represents a unicum in the Mesopotamian tradition. Under Ashurbanipal, the term “king of (all) kings” was adopted, an extremely important innovation indicating that the self-understanding of the Assyrian royalty was changing according to the unprecedented extension of the territorial dominion, and introducing a tradition which was to be followed by the Achaemenid kings until the fourth century BC.

As regards the term “fall”, the discussion is centred on an important discrepancy. On the one hand, the disappearance of an Assyrian dynasty and of a government centred in the Assyrian heartland like in the past; on the other hand, the long-term continuity and resilience of the political and institutional unity of the largest part of the Near East which was produced by the Assyrian kings’ conquests. Actually, there was no fragmentation of the territory subject to the Assyrian kings after the sack of Nineveh, and the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires simply “absorbed” in their structure the territories of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, even extending it to unprecedented dimensions. The concept of “shift of power” between governmental centres and reigning dynasties is introduced, aiming at reconciling resilience in territorial (and institutional) unity and mobility in the localization of governmental centres and in reigning dynasties.

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Career

1992–2015. Tenured Professor (“Professore Ordinario”) at the University of Padua, Dept. of Scienze storiche, geografiche e dell'antichità; regular courses in “History of the Ancient Near East”, of “Semitic Philology”, and of “History of Hebraism”.

Member of the “Accademia Galileiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Padova” (Padova).

Member of the “Ateneo Veneto” (Venice).

Member of the Advisory Board of “The Melammu Project. The Heritage of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East”.

Member of the Honorary Board of the international volume series “Classica et Orientalia” (Wiesbaden).

Co-editor of the international scientific journal “State Archives of Assyria Bulletin (Padova).

Co-editor of the international scientific journal “KASKAL. Rivista di storia, ambienti e culture del Vicino Oriente Anti-co” (Padova).

Co-editor of the international volume series “History of the Ancient Near East/Monographs” (Padova)

Co-editor of the international volume series “History of the Ancient Near East/Studies” (Padova)

President of the Committee for the Publication of the Sources dealing with the History of Venice (“Comitato per la pubblicazione delle fonti relative alla storia di Venezia”) (Venezia)

Member of the Committee for the Improvement of “Villa Giusti dell’armistizio di Mandria” and for the Commemoration of the Armistice Signed on November 3rd, 1918 (“Comitato di valorizzazione di Villa Giusti dell’armistizio di Mandria per la commemorazione dell’armistizio del 3 novembre 1918”) (Padova & Venice)

Select Publications

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2021. In cooperation with R. Rollinger, “Some General Considerations on Assyria and North-Western Iran from a Historical Perspective”, in S. Heinsch & W. Kuntner & R. Rollinger (eds.), *Befund und Historisierung. Dokumentation und ihre Interpretationsspielräume* (Araxes. Studies in the Archaeology & History of the Caucasus Area & Adjacent Regions, Vol. 1), Brepols, Turnhout, pp. 57–72.
2021. “Training for Empire. The Assyrian Pressure on Western Iran (IXth–VIIth Cent. BC)”, in T. Daryae & R. Rollinger (eds.), *Proceedings of the First and Second Payravi Lectures on Ancient Iranian History*, UC Irvine, March 23rd, 2018, & March 11th–12th, 2019 (Classica et Orientalia, Vol. 29), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, pp. 133–148.