



Eckart Frahm, 2023 *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire*, New York: Basic Books, ISBN 9781541674400, pp. xviii + 510, illus. A\$42.

Reviewed by Luis R. Siddall

For the first time in decades the market has an excellent range of popular histories that provide insightful and up-to-date scholarship on the history and cultures of the Ancient Near East in an accessible format. Eckart Frahm's *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire* takes place among other impressive titles, such as Amanda Podany's *Weavers, Kings, and Scribes*, Lloyd Llewellyn Jones's *Persians*, and Eric Cline's two books on the Bronze Age collapse and its aftermath. In this book, Frahm provides a full history of Assyria, from its origins as a small city on the Tigris River to the world's first empire, and then its legacy and afterlife in antiquity, down to the early modern period in Europe. Hence, this book offers more than a narrative of Assyria's political history, as central to Frahm's work is to understand why the Assyrian empire of the first millennium BC should be considered the first world empire, and why it played a crucial role in world history. Of interest to many readers will be Frahm's views about the influence the Assyrians had on the Hebrew Bible, and even the ancient Judeans' conception of God.

Eckart Frahm is professor of Assyriology at Yale. A good deal of his research has investigated the Assyrian empire, often concentrating on the reign of Sennacherib (705–681 BC). Frahm is one of the leading philologists of this generation of Assyriologists, but this book demonstrates his ability as an historian. While those familiar with Frahm's work will recognise that he has weaved a number of his earlier studies into this historical narrative, the text never feels piecemeal and, importantly, some of Frahm's ideas appear in English for the first time. A strength of Frahm's style in this book is to furnish the narrative with a selective incorporation of source materials, both textual and archaeological, and scholarly debate – a method that brings important evidence and competing ideas to readers' attention without losing the narrative thread. The structure of this work is chronological, as Frahm states in the introduction; the change and continuity observed in Assyria's long history helps explain how the city of Ashur grew overtime to become, first a territorial state, then an empire that developed systems of organisation to control its territories. While mostly a political history, Frahm also interpolates his historical narrative with chapters and discussions on Assyrian society, culture, and the experiences of those under and on the edges of the Assyrian empire.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, *The Long Road to Glory*, comprises four chapters that trace the emergence of the city of Ashur on the Tigris River in the late third millennium, and its sporadic transition to a powerful state with a driving imperial ambition in the eighth century. In each phase of the pre-empire era one can see the development of certain attributes of the later imperial state. Chapter 1 covers the Old Assyrian period (c. 2020–1736 BC), in which an archaeologically recognisable culture emerges at the site of Ashur, governed by an assembly-styled political structure dominated by leading families, and conducting long-distance trade with a colony in Kanesh in central Anatolia. By the end of the Old Assyrian period, a new political reality arrived with the Amorite ruler, Shamshi-Adad I (c. 1808–1776 BC), who brought Ashur into his northern Mesopotamian kingdom: 'the idea of having a territorial state ruled by a king, rather than a city-state with civic bodies in charge' (p. 56).

The transition was not immediate, as the city of Ashur receded in significance during the following centuries until the accession of Ashur-uballit I (c. 1363–1328 BC), whose reign marked both the beginning of the Middle Assyrian period, and the formation of the power of the royal institution in Assyria. In Chapter 2, Frahm shows how a number of crucial changes occurred in the early Middle Assyrian period. The new royal court in the palace replaced the City Hall at Ashur and the assembly as the place of decision making and, by the 13th century, the state controlled the economy, replacing the Old Assyrian system of private ventures. More formalised systems of royal authority are also evident in the textual records of

the Middle Assyrian period, with the composition of a coronation ritual, laws, and palace decrees appearing for the first time. Externally, from Ashur-uballit I's time, we see soft-power diplomacy in action in the Amarna period resulting in Assyria being recognised by the Pharaoh as one of the great powers of the era, while also wrestling for authority in Mesopotamia with Babylonia. Ashur-uballit I's successors in the thirteenth century started the first period of Assyrian expansion into the Khabour River region, forming the blueprint for the provincial and administrative systems so characteristic of the later empire era.

Chapters 3 and 4 cover the tumultuous centuries from the twelfth century to the 760s, which saw the rise of Assyrian brutality and administrative efficiency under Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III, but also crippling stagnation and territorial reversals by the mid-eighth century. In chapter 3, Frahm details how the Assyrians and Babylonians emerged as two of the few kingdoms to survive the Bronze Age collapse at the end of the thirteenth century. The Levant in this period was dominated by tribal states, but from the mid-tenth century, Assyria's rulers embarked on an aggressive recovery of territories lost during the previous century. Frahm calls this era a 'Reconquista', drawing analogy from the Christian actions against Muslims in Spain. The Reconquista was completed by Ashurnasirpal, whose aggressive warfare was accompanied by characteristically Assyrian solutions to insubordinate opposition: violent coercion, annexation of states, deportation, and resettlement of populations. Ashurnasirpal also built a new political capital, Calah (Kalhu), possibly in an attempt to separate to new royal court from the old powerful families of Ashur.

In Chapter 4, *The Crown in Crisis*, Frahm offers an astute coverage of the problematic years, both for Assyria and modern scholars, from the end of Shalmaneser III's reign to the great revolt of 745 BC. Some see the prominent role of the magnates in this period as reflecting decentralisation and a weakening of the Assyrian royalty; others (like the present reviewer) have argued that the magnates represent an attempt to stabilise the empire. In addition to what the sources suggest is the magnates' loyalty to the crown (none attempted to break away or become king), there was a substantial increase in agricultural production in the territories, with increased settlements along the northern river systems. This was partly due to the Assyrian infrastructure, but also because of the changes in climate with the arrival of the 'Assyrian megapluvial' after 925 BC. A good historical point that Frahm makes is that the era of the magnates occurs, not at the end of Assyrian empire (as was the case in the final era of Rome's Western Empire or Qing Dynasty, China), but immediately before Assyria's greatest era, which bucks the trend in world history.

The main section of the book, *Empire*, looks at the time of Tiglath-pileser III and the Sargonid Dynasty's rule of Assyria (745–610 BC) over ten chapters. This era is the

most common designation of the Neo-Assyrian empire. In Chapter 5, Frahm covers the activities of Tiglath-pileser III and his sons, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, and justifies his view that it is here for the first time that an imperial state is forged in world history. While acknowledging that earlier states may be seen as 'aspirational empires', such as New Kingdom Egypt or Sargonic Mesopotamia, Frahm draws on the definition of empire by Stephen Howe to argue that only with the late Neo-Assyrian period can one observe a state that had a centralised ideology, a complex, provincial system administered over a significantly large region with a highly developed communication network, an organised labour force, and rule over a diversity of cultures, languages, and religions. This last qualification of Howe's is often what distinguished the Assyrian empire from earlier states.

In Chapter 6, Frahm turns to look at the peoples who lived at the edges of the Assyrian Empire and how they engaged with the newly cemented power in the Near East, namely the Phoenicians, Greeks and Cypriots, Arabs and peoples of the Zagros Mountains. Points of particular interest are the carefully couched discussion on the Assyrian role in the orientalising phase of Archaic Greek culture and possible influence of Assyrian epic writings and royal inscriptions on Homer, as well as the echoes of Assyrian conflicts with the Queens of the Arab tribes in later Islamic writings.

Three chapters cover the most significant events of Sennacherib's reign (705–681 BC). Chapter 7, *A Ghost Story*, presents one of Frahm's earlier studies (*Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 51, 1999, 73–90), reconstructing the events of 705 BC, which saw Sennacherib's accession to the throne following the death of Sargon II while on campaign in Anatolia, and the consequences of not being able to retrieve the dead king's body from the battlefield. A clever investigation led Frahm to identify a copy of the twelfth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to have been produced by a leading Assyrian scholar, Nabû-zuqup-kenu. The date of the composition is recorded as 27th of Du'uzu 705 BC, which falls shortly after it is believed Sargon was killed in battle. Frahm suggests that Nabû-zuqup-kenu consulted the epic to help the royal court understand the fate of Sargon's ghost in the afterlife: there will be no rest for the ghost of Sargon, and he would be likely to haunt his residence in the newly built royal capital, Dur-Sharrukin. Frahm connects this alarming interpretation with Sennacherib's decision to abandon Dur-Sharrukin and to build a new centre for the empire in Nineveh.

In Chapter 8, Frahm looks at the vexed question of Sennacherib's third campaign and the siege of Jerusalem. The outcome of the siege of Jerusalem has troubled scholars for 150 years. After presenting a careful reconstruction of the phases of the third campaign, making clear the difficulties of the evidence, Frahm argues that Sennacherib decided to end the siege of Jerusalem using a cost-benefit analysis. Once Hezekiah agreed to pay

tribute to the Assyrian king, Sennacherib returned with his army to Nineveh. As Frahm states, this was a feature of Sennacherib's reign as distinct from his predecessors: consolidation of the empire over continued expansion. It is also important to understand Sennacherib's decision in the context of the years after 705 BC. Following the death of his father, Sennacherib had spent the first four years of his reign quelling the rebellions that broke out across the empire. Regaining authority over Judah and the southern Levant at the end of the 701 BC campaign season without annexing the rebellious state would have made good sense at this stage of Sennacherib's reign.

Chapter 9 continues with Sennacherib's foreign policy and turns to the other major event: the destruction of Babylon. The complexity of Assyria's relationship with Babylon is raised earlier in the book, but Frahm's adaptation of Horace's comment on Greece and Rome sums up the relationship perfectly: 'captive Babylonia took captive her savage conqueror' (p. 215). However, by the end of the chapter, one can only conclude that Frahm should have added to the end of the line 'and brought her arts to (rustic) Assyria' (Horace's line is quoted in full in n. 3 on p. 459). After a series of failed attempts to rule Babylon with puppet rulers and installing his son, Ashur-nadin-shumi, on the throne, Sennacherib decided to raze the centre of Babylon to the ground. Interestingly, Sennacherib is the only king of this era to have treated Babylonia in the same manner as any other state of the Near East. At face value, sacking a city that not only revolted regularly, but also allowed the Elamites to abduct and presumably murder the king's son, should, according to Assyrian strategy, be attacked and annexed. However, the lofty position of Babylon in Mesopotamian culture caused a problem for the Assyrian court, and Frahm provides a fascinating coverage of the way Sennacherib's scholars filled the cosmic and intellectual voids left by the assault on Babylon. What took place was a literary and public campaign to denigrate Marduk, the head of the Babylonian pantheon, and largely replace him with the Assyrian god, Ashur, in key mythological texts. Similarly, the New Year's Festival was relocated and refocused on Assyria and Ashur, as was a program of redeveloping Ashur's temples according to Babylonian style. Hence, Assyrian religion was 'Babylonianized', and the irony of Horace's view of Greece and Rome is indeed fitting.

Chapter 10 looks at the significant royal women of the era. Most of the queens (and nearly all princesses) of Assyria have disappeared from history. But some remarkable evidence for a number of royal women from the empire period has survived, from Esarhaddon's aunt, Abi-ramu, serving as a governor, to the names and graves of a series of Assyrian royal women discovered by Iraqi excavations in the 1980s. The most prominent of these women is Naqia, Sennacherib's queen, and the mother of Esarhaddon. Her rise to prominence seems to have come in the wake of her husband's assassination, and her activities probably even extended beyond Sammu-

ramat's, who went on campaign with her son, Adad-nirari III (c. 803 BC). Like, Sammu-ramat, Naqia's importance might be the result of the conflict that preceded her son's accession and helped ensure the success of his reign. The written evidence attests to the extent of her activities: she commissioned a palace for Esarhaddon at Nineveh, her receipt of a share of tribute delivered to the Assyrian court, and she seems to have been consulted regularly by the administration on political and military matters. For Frahm, she might have been the architect of Esarhaddon's restoration of Babylon. Naqia may have needed to take such a leading role on account of Esarhaddon's debilitating illness, which often affected his reign. Another point of interest is the number of Assyrian queens, like Naqia, who have West Semitic – perhaps Hebrew – names. Other such queens attested for this period are Yabâ, wife of Tiglath-pileser III, Atalya, wife of Sargon II, and Ra'imâ, wife of Sennacherib. Frahm is non-committal, but shows sympathy for Stephanie Dalley's theory that these three women could have been from the Judean royal house.

Chapter 11, *671 BCE*, looks at the contradictory nature of the reign of Esarhaddon. Echoing back to p. 1 of the introduction, this year near the end of Esarhaddon's reign saw the king successful campaign against Egypt, while at the same time battling the seemingly constant challenges from rival claimants to the throne. So significant was the conspiracies against the king that, while the empire had expanded to its greatest extent, Esarhaddon had to execute many officials in 670 BC – an act that, Frahm rightly points out, most likely contributed to a political and administrative weakening of the empire. But should this drama and contradictory state be limited to a discussion of Esarhaddon? It seems that the Assyrian empire's military activity and territorial administration had been its strength from Tiglath-pileser III onward, but the frequent assassinations, plus an inability to find a consistent approach to either competitions between princes, or to relations with Babylon, suggest that the dichotomy of this era should be seen as a particularly intense period of the general nature of the Assyrian empire.

Chapter 12, picks apart the reign of Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC), the last great king of the empire. Scholarship has typically been kind to Ashurbanipal, often emphasising the fact that his library at Nineveh was hitherto the greatest known repository of knowledge, and that his palace at Nineveh reflected the political strength of the empire during his reign. This has resulted in some Assyriologists calling Ashurbanipal 'enlightened' (Labat), an 'economic expert' (Fink), and an ancient version of a 'humanist' (Ito). But Frahm is more critical. His method of examining the imperial correspondence and economic documents reveals a king who ruled over a long decline. Frahm challenges the common view of Ashurbanipal on a number of fronts. First, Ashurbanipal's warrior image comes under heavy scepticism. For Frahm, the famous military victory over Elam came long after initial losses

in both Elam and Egypt early in his reign, and a four-year civil war against his brother, Shamash-shum-ukin, who ruled Babylon. He was also unsuccessful in establishing a long-term alliance with Gyges of Lydia, who soon opted to support Psamtik I against Assyria. This meagre military career is also critiqued in the light of the unusual statements in Ashurbanipal's annals that the goddess Ishtar requested for him to remain in the palace while she herself went to fight the Elamites. Ashurbanipal's later inscriptions do not include this passage, but Frahm is right to point out that this episode is a striking departure from the norm of Assyrian royal inscriptions. Similar scepticism is laid against the depictions of Ashurbanipal as a lion hunter. Careful study of economic texts shows that after 650 BC there were serious signs of drought and crop failure, in the 640s there were signs of heavy inflation, and from the 630s there are records of people needing to sell their own children. Hence, a far fuller picture of Ashurbanipal's reign emerges, which sheds light on significant problems for the late phase of the Empire.

Chapter 13 looks at daily life in the Assyrian empire. Here, Frahm goes beyond looking at the day-to-day socio-economic aspects of life and the family unit in Assyria, and includes details of the rougher edges too: death and grieving, family breakdown, bawdiness, and local hostility are all featured. Roles of women are also detailed, and when read in connection with Chapter 10, provides a good survey of women in the Assyrian social structure.

The last chapter of the second section looks at why the empire fell. As is common in ancient history, when states and empires fall, the sources become scant. Despite this, Frahm is able to piece together a general narrative of the political turmoil of Ashurbanipal's successors, and the military events that saw the Medo-Babylonian alliance conquer the Assyrian capital cities from 614–609 BC. Frahm follows an idea of Karen Radner that sees this conflict as a 'world war', as it was fought on a scale not seen before, drawing all large states of the time: Assyria, Babylonia, Iranian Medes and Manneans, Elam, Arab groups, Egypt, and Judah, with secondary theatres of war on the upper Euphrates and eastern Anatolia. The strength of this view is that the conflict saw these states combine through alliances, and that the war certainly would have reached 'total war' status on most of the home fronts. But no major event in history occurs for a single reason, and scholars have long questioned why this one conflict saw the fall of the world's first empire. Frahm considers the varying theories of modern scholars about the causes of the fall: climate pressures that disrupted the economic system; the Herodotean idea of the Scythian invasion that wiped out the western provinces; and ideas about political factors, such as the Assyrian empire needed to continue to expand to maintain the system, or that a series of poor decisions by the rulers set in play crucial weaknesses. For Frahm, none of these ideas stand on

their own. Rather, Assyria most likely suffered a 'perfect storm' after 630 BC; Assyria had no imperial mission beyond accumulation of wealth and territory and failed to develop a meaningful Assyrian-orientated identity for those incorporated into the empire. The environmental pressures exacerbated the internal and external pressures, all of which enabled a total military victory for Babylon and her allies by 609 BC.

The final section of the book, *Afterlife*, comprises four chapters, each of which cover topics seldom discussed (in depth) in popular histories. Chapter 15, *Assyria's Legacy on the Ground* looks at what can be traced of the Assyrians after the fall of the empire in the late seventh century. Assyrians are still evidenced in former centres and some regional areas during succeeding periods, down to the Sasanian empire. Striking is the 'Assyrian renaissance' under the Parthian empire, when residents of Ashur had traditional Assyrian names, the old state gods were worshipped, and the local governors produced stelae in the fashion of the royal monuments of the empire period. Frahm also sensitively discusses the continuation of Assyrian identity among Iraqi Christians in the modern era.

However, Frahm states that the strongest legacy of the Assyrian empire was the idea and practice of imperialism in succeeding empires of the first millennium. It is often stated by historians that the Babylonians and Persians adopted and adapted the Assyrian model of empire, and in Chapter 16, Frahm demonstrates that this was the case. There are two important observations in this chapter: first, that the Babylonians were uninterested in fully adopting the Assyrian's system of tight control of regional areas and turning main cities into imperial capitals. Instead, the Neo-Babylonian rulers kept the temples as the dominant institutions, which led to a 'fragmentation of power', and the risk of open revolt. The second observation is that the Persian empire shifted back to the Assyrian system because it minimised the risk of revolt, which both Darius and Xerxes had to manage in Babylon itself. In fact, the Assyrian universal imperial ideology better suited the ambitions of the early rulers of the Persian empire. Hence, Assyria's legacy was confirmed by the Persian adoption of their provincial system of satrapies and organisation of power structures.

In Chapter 17, *Distorted Reflections*, Frahm considers how Assyria came to be seen in biblical and classical sources, and how later Europeans adopted the orientalist and biblical view of the Assyrians up to the nineteenth century. What may be thought controversial, at least in more conservative biblical circles, is Frahm's discussion of the way Assyrian imperialism shaped Deuteronomy, and by extension the Deuteronomical portions of the Hebrew Bible. Frahm also contends that, in the face of Assyrian domination, the ancient Israelites and Judeans projected the power of the Assyrian king onto their own god with 'specific qualities of Assyrian authority' (p. 393). While not an entirely new thesis, it remains to be seen if

this will impact biblical studies and scholarship on the Deuteronomist historian.

The final chapter looks at the effects of the Islamic State's control of northern Iraq and Assyrian sites. By analysing a 2015 article published by ISIS in *Dabiq*, Frahm argues that the destruction of Assyrian monuments and sites was not merely religiously inspired, but also because Assyria had served as a nationalising identity in modern Iraq, particularly under the Ba'ath Party. The silver lining, if there is one, from ISIS control of Mosul is that their tunnelling at the site of Nineveh has uncovered more of the palace structures, which are currently being excavated by a joint Iraqi-German team.

This is a nicely produced book, and Frahm's written style is straightforward, which will hopefully result in *Assyria* reaching a wide audience. There is no question that this is a clear and balanced presentation of the current state of knowledge of Assyrian history. While reading this book for review, I used the chapters on Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem and his conflict with Babylonia in my Year 11 Ancient History class. My students' questions, discussions, and written work showed that Frahm's book provided them with historical insight and a depth of understanding of the source materials.

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