

CHAPTER I

THE FAME OF ASSYRIA PERMEATED THE ANCIENT
WORLD

IN the sacred Scriptures of the Hebrews we read that "out of that land, *i.e.* Shinar or Babylonia, went forth Asshur and builded Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city" (Gen. x. 11). We may be in some doubt as to the exact meaning of these words, and before the discovery and decipherment of the Assyrian monuments it was permissible to conclude that "Assyria was a great and powerful country lying on the Tigris (Gen. ii. 14), the capital of which was Nineveh. It derived its name apparently from Asshur the son of Shem (Gen. x. 22), who in later times was worshipped as their chief god by the Assyrians. Asshur may be regarded as an eponymous hero." In view of modern knowledge as to the early history of Assyria, different translations have been suggested which, without doing too great violence to the

original, will bring out its real value. "Asshur was the earliest capital; Ashur its city god who became the national god of Assyria. Calah or Kalah, as we may write the name, was a later capital, and Nineveh became the capital in the time best known to the Hebrews." It is supposed that Rehoboth represents the *rêbit ali* or "broad places of the city"; Nineveh, its suburbs and extensions. Resen is not yet satisfactorily identified.

In Herodotus (I. 7) Ninus, the mythical founder of Nineveh, appears as the son of Bêlus, the mythical founder of Babylon. It is an interesting but not very profitable occupation to seek to interpret the statements of the Greek writers by comparison with the facts that may have suggested their stories. Their chief value is the eloquent testimony they bear to the lasting impression of greatness which Assyria left upon the imagination of the peoples of Asia Minor, from whom the Greeks drew their information.

It is somewhat different with the statements of Berossus, who, though he wrote in Greek, was himself a Babylonian priest, and had access to ancient and authentic sources of history. Wherever his statements admit of verification they have been found to be reliable, subject to such modifications as are usually necessary in dealing with ancient historians. Unfortunately his writings are only

NATIVE TRADITIONS

3

known to us from the extracts which Eusebius and later writers made from more ancient authorities who had quoted from him.

It would be unfair to assume that the Assyrians themselves were entirely objective and trustworthy witnesses. They, too, indulged in speculations as to their origin and early history which, while they may embody ancient traditions, in some cases founded on fact, must be treated with great reservations. They built upon identifications obviously due to the fancies of folk etymology. They glorified their ancient cities by ascribing to them a foundation in the ages before the Flood. Sargon II. refers to the 350 kings who had ruled Assyria before him. Sennacherib, in a hymn of rejoicing over a triumphal entry into Babylon, appears to deduce his descent from Gilgamesh and Engidu, mythical heroes of a prehistoric age in Babylonia. He also enumerates a list of kings who may some day be proved to have reigned in Assyria and Babylonia. Such names as Egiba, an eponymous hero of a powerful family, well known in later times as bankers and business men in Sippara, Na'id-Ashur, Ashur-gamiliu, Ana-Ashur-taklaku, or Shamash-tsululushu, who may turn out to be important persons in early history, and many more are named.

It will be noted that such traditions are characteristic of a later age. Sargon or Sennacherib,

who had no hereditary right to their throne, might have been glad to believe the stories of court scribes who made out for them a claim to ancient descent. They may in truth have belonged to old and honoured families, and we are not justified in dismissing these references as idle fancies. Without confirmation, however, we cannot use them for historical purposes.

The historical books of the Old Testament make a very solid contribution to the history of the relation of the peoples of Israel and Judah with Assyria. Menahem's tribute, the captivity of the Northern Israelites, the support given to Ahaz by Tiglathpileser, the capture of Damascus, Hosea's subjection to Shalmaneser, the fall of Samaria, the deportation of Israel to Halah and Habor, Sennacherib's invasion of Judæa, the siege of Jerusalem, the murder of Sennacherib by his sons, Assyria's trade with Tyre, the colonisation of Palestine under Esarhaddon, and a crowd of other references or allusions receive substantiation and elucidation from the Assyrian monuments. They also furnish important contributions to the arrangement of events, and were of inestimable value during the early stages of cuneiform decipherment.

The denunciations of Assyria by the prophets, and above all the prophecy of the fall of Nineveh by Nahum, a contemporary and perhaps eye-witness

ASSYRIA'S INFLUENCE

5

of the event, throw considerable light upon the way in which Assyria was regarded by other nations, not without eloquent parallels elsewhere. Assyria indeed laid a heavy yoke upon the nations. The Assyrians were regarded as a set of land pirates.

From the Biblical notices, even when supplemented by the other writers of antiquity, we should acquire a very limited and one-sided view of this really great nation. We could never estimate its real significance in the struggle of the nations, nor duly appreciate the influence it exerted far beyond the limits of its empire. For, in Egypt, in Tarsus, in Cappadocia and Cilicia, in Media and old Persia, in Elam and Armenia, its kings fought and conquered, imposed not only tribute but customs, left monuments and colonists whose influence extended far beyond garrison duties and threats of vengeance on rebellion. Its history has lessons even for our own day, pointedly illustrating the futility of military success without commercial and economic stability.

That history we must learn from Assyria's own monuments, not ignoring the other sources of information, but interpreting its achievements in the light of their avowed purpose and as the expression of the national character and genius.

THE NAME ASSYRIA.—The word Assyria may be regarded as a not inept rendering of Asshurai, the

name given to themselves by the Assyrians. They called their land Asshur.

Asshur was originally the name of a city, which gradually dominated its neighbours and so became the nucleus of a state. How it came by that name is not easy to decide. The national god was Ashur. In later times his name is written precisely like that of the country, but earlier, A-Shur, as distinguished from the city Ash-Shur. Still earlier, his name was Ashir. We may therefore have to do with a gradual assimilation of names originally distinct.

Asshur, like most of the old states in Babylonia, had many names, all used to denote the same place, but doubtless originally pronounced differently and embodying somewhat different conceptions. A very old name was A-USAR, which may have meant "along the river bank." Another name was SHÀ-URU, possibly "the city of the heart," though it may have merely meant "metropolis." Yet another was PAL-TIL-KI, which may be "the place of the old regime." A name like URU-DUG-GA, "the good city," was possibly a term of affection, but being also the name of a southern Babylonian city, Eridu, some fancy it bears witness to an immigration from the south. It is not, however, an early name, and seems rather to be poetical in its use. However written, it is generally

EARLY POPULATION

7

agreed that these names could always be read Asshur, than which we know of no other native name.

EARLY INHABITANTS.—A very difficult question is raised when we seek to draw conclusions as to the original inhabitants of Assyria. The names of the temples in Assyria, as well as these old names for Asshur, admit of interpretation as being Sumerian words. Now the whole culture of Assyria was founded upon that of Babylonia, where it is certain that a Semitic people took over the culture of the Sumerians, an older folk. Although these Semitic Babylonians spoke a Semitic tongue, they regarded Sumerian as a sacred language. They kept Sumerian names for gods and temples, and used Sumerian words in a modified form for many things besides those directly connected with religious rites. Now as far back as we can go the Assyrians wrote and spoke Semitic, only differing from Babylonian in dialectic forms, and they evidently derived all their literary apparatus from Babylonia. Whether they were Semites or not, with the Babylonian language, they took over the Babylonian use of Sumerian. Whether they named the temples themselves or found them already erected and named, they kept the Sumerian names in their writings. Their use of Sumerian may be compared in some respects to the use of Latin in mediæval Europe. There is, however, no proof that they did not read these

Sumerian names by their corresponding Semitic names. Hence we can argue little from this use.

NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS.—The Assyrians differed markedly from the Babylonians in national character. They were more robust, warlike, fierce, than the mild industrial people of the south. It is doubtful whether they were much devoted to agriculture or distinguished for manufactures, arts and crafts. They were essentially a military folk. The king was a despot at home, but the general of the army abroad. The whole organisation of the state was for war. The agriculture was left to serfs or slaves. The manufactures, weaving at any rate, were done by women. The guilds of workmen were probably foreigners, as the merchants mostly were. The great temples and palaces, walls and moats, were constructed by captives. The sculptures and statues were possibly the work of native artists, as they have a style of their own, but the costlier articles of household use and the chief wealth of the people were the spoils of other nations. For the greater part of its existence Assyria was the scourge of the nations and sucked the blood of other races. It lived on the tribute of subject states, and conquest ever meant added tribute in all necessities and luxuries of life, beside an annual demand for men and horses, cattle and sheep, grain and wool to supply the needs of the

THE CITY ASSHUR

9

army and the city. The army overshadowed everything else, and its demands and needs made incessant expeditions imperative to keep it content. Any prolonged inactivity on the part of the king endangered his throne, and while he often was able to send trusty generals to carry on distant campaigns, a victorious general was too often the next successor to the throne.

THE CITY ASSHUR.—Like the city states of Babylonia the kingdom of Assyria developed from a city, Asshur, geographically separated from them by a wide interval, but assigned, by tradition and analogy alike, an early history similar to theirs. There is, however, no record of Asshur's struggle for supremacy with neighbouring city states. In the days when Nippur, Erech, Ur and Isin became kingdoms in Babylonia, we do not know of any relations which they had with the district afterwards to become such a powerful state. It may well have been included in Sári, or Syria, and the march of the Babylonian or Sumerian conquerors to Mesopotamia probably followed the course of the Euphrates and so left Asshur aside. In those days its relations may have been rather with Elam and the north.

The earliest Semitic immigration into Babylonia, which occupied the north and reached its climax in the empire of Sargon of Akkad and his son Naram-

Sin, probably deeply affected Asshur. We can scarcely imagine that it lay outside the empire of such mighty monarchs. It was, however, a mere provincial state. When that dynasty fell the revival of the Sumerian power in the south must have left Asshur to its own development. Doubtless, the conquests of the Sumerians drove many Semites northwards, and Asshur may have received a considerable influx of fugitives from the south.

The rise to power of the Amorite dynasty in the north of Babylonia was certainly due to a large influx of Semitic folk, whose presence even in the south is monumentally attested. The dynasty of Isin included monarchs like Ishme-Dagan, whose name is the same as that of more than one ruler of Asshur. We can hardly resist the conclusion that Amorites had also invaded Asshur. The great Hammurabi, whose rule was acknowledged in Asshur and Nineveh, seems to imply that his power there had been established by force of arms, but he does not claim to have conquered the land himself.

We gain the impression that Asshur was so early flooded by Semitic immigrants that only the merest trace of non-Semitic races ever survived. When we are able to examine its own literature it appears to be simply a province of Babylonian culture.