

## “Have To” History: Ashurbanipal

*Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)*

### Three Big Things:

1. The world's oldest known librarian – or at least the driving force behind the world's oldest known library. *And it was a big one.*
2. King of Assyria (Mesopotamia) during its zenith, but educated with the assumption he'd never actually assume the throne.
3. Collection includes the oldest surviving tales of Creation, the Great Flood, and other suggestions the Old Testament might have borrowed a bit from prior cultures. This occasionally leads to hostility and inflamed passions as history and theology rub one another the wrong way.



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### Background

Mesopotamia was one of the earliest civilizations in all of world history – maybe *the* earliest. Agriculture up and down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers evolved over 5,000 years ago, roughly the same time those strangely postured people from Egyptian paintings were learning to grow stuff up and down their own little creek, the Nile. Mesopotamia was harder to defend than other early “river valley civilizations” – it lacked the geographical protection provided to Egypt or India, and consequently tended to brew a far more diverse population while navigating a greater variety of threats than its peers. It also changed cultural hands every so many centuries.

The first major civilization there was the Sumerians, who developed cuneiform – an uber-old type of writing in which little triangles and crescents and an overabundance of golf tee-shapes were etched onto clay tablets. It's one of the earliest forms of written *anything* known to us, and one of several systems in which something approaching an alphabet began evolving from tiny pictures used to keep records for trade, taxes and such.



Eventually the magic of written language grew up big and strong and branched out to include accolades for various rulers, religious stories and rituals, general histories of major events or important individuals – even medical advice or observations regarding the mysteries of the earth and stars. It would be a few years before Harry Potter or Hester Prynne come along, but the road was at least under long, slow construction – much like a literal road, only with fewer people in orange vests just standing around.

The Sumerians were overthrown around 2300 B.C. by the Akkadians, under the rule of Sargon of Akkad. They were in turn supplanted by the Babylonians circa 1900 B.C., the best-known of which was Hammurabi – the guy with the giant pillar of laws posted on his front lawn. The Assyrians still had their own kings during these times (the modern concept of national boundaries or settled maps was nowhere near fruition and things were almost always messy), gradually building their power and influence, so that by the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when Ashurbanipal came into power, the Assyrians were running the largest empire the world had seen up to that point.

Ashurbanipal grew up with less-than-traditional kingly training and education. He learned the usual horsemanship, chariot-driving, hunting and soldiering, royal etiquette and expectations, like any good “prince.” He was gradually assigned a smattering of kingly responsibilities as he grew up – a sort of mentorship system practiced by foresighted monarchs in anticipation of unforeseen circumstances. But he also devoted much of his formative years to studying mathematics, reading, writing, and something called “oil divination” – a mystical art of some sort and precursor to a lifelong interest in the magical or supernatural. By the time he inherited the throne around the age of 17, he could read and write in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Aramaic, and was well-versed in the cultures and knowledge not only of

his own people, but of those around them as well.

These weren't skills most rulers had in those times – they had people for that sort of thing. These were specialized fields, and it simply wasn't necessary, nor was it always a good use of royal time and energy. Ashurbanipal was thus something of a Renaissance Man, if one ignores the fact that it would be another 2000 years before that term even meant something. He was well-versed and *he knew it*.

### King Ashurbanipal

Ashurbanipal was a popular ruler – good to his subjects, especially brutal to his enemies, and successful at maintaining and expanding his empire. That's not why he's most remembered, however. His crowning achievement (as it were) goes back to that non-traditional education he received, and what he did with it.

Ashurbanipal put together a library. A big one. As in “WOW, boss – that's a BIG OL' LIBRARY!”

It was discovered in the 1850s by British archeologists and is still being translated and categorized today over a century and a half later. Something like 30,000 clay tablets and fragments thereof were recovered, although those silly Brits didn't exactly record what was filed where or which ones were actually from other places altogether. So... not to be narky, but bollocks on that, mate. It can leave modern historians a bit knackered.

Most are in cuneiform, and organized by type. Many are agricultural records, administrative documents, contracts or other official correspondence. Researchers love those sorts of things, but they're not very exciting for the rest of us to talk about. Others are more colorful. A collection of “omen texts” sought to correlate natural events or phenomenon with signs from the gods. Anonymous authors pondered the complex motions of the galaxy and what it all might mean. Still others recorded prayers, rituals, fables, and a variety of “religious education” type texts.

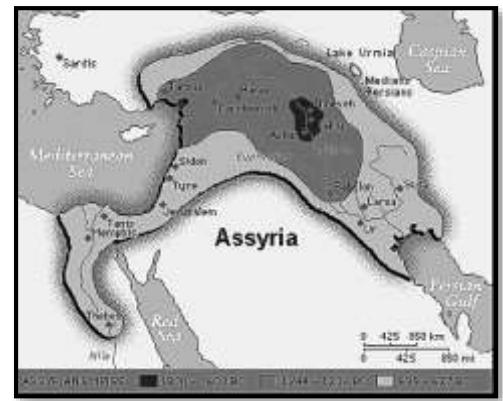
But then there's the good stuff. For example, the Enuma Elish – the “Epic of Creation” – the tale of the first man's creation from the blood of a rebellious deity and his curse to forever labor in service of the gods. Several elements are directly reflected in the Genesis account of creation, although other parts are certainly quite different – leading to all *sorts* of interesting discussions. Also discovered was the “Epic of Gilgamesh,” in which large hairy men become close after wrestling one another, then set off to kill a demon, who is apparently quite terrifying despite the name “Humbaba.” And on Tablet XI of that Gilgamesh epic is the oldest known story of a great flood and the man who survived it – again complicating the whole “Old Testament as Word of God” issue for those who choose to go there.

Such controversy almost overshadows the Annals of Ashurbanipal – his amazing adventures in both war and peace, foreign policy and domestic triumphs. What kind of librarian doesn't start with their own autobiography? Besides, what's *most* impressive is that not all of the texts are native to the Assyrian capital. As the empire expanded, Ashurbanipal had trusted servants copy and incorporate the various texts found in newly acquired regions.

Sometimes he negotiated with other monarchs to gain access to their written records to copy. Some of the Nineveh tablets are copies of much older texts from other civilizations altogether, transcribed into clay for storage and permanent reference.

That anyone would even think that way is... amazing.

There's much we don't know about Ashurbanipal and his world, but we know that he valued learning and the maintenance of knowledge long before most even conceived of such a thing. Whether he did it for personal amusement or glory, or whether he saw it as a philanthropic gesture for future generations really doesn't matter. Ashurbanipal gave us books.



## You Wanna Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}

**Ashurbanipal never expected to be king.** It wasn't for lack of lineage – his father was king following the assassination of his grandfather, also king, probably by family members (royalty wasn't always known for healthy relationships). But Ashurbanipal had two or three older brothers, depending on how you counted – one who was definitely the intended successor to the throne, and one by another mother who was just as royal and a few years older than Ashurbanipal. That's probably a large part of why so much of his education was able to be spent on non-traditional subjects – no one anticipated him actually having to run the whole mess (o'-potamia! Ha! Get it?!)

As dad aged, Ashurbanipal's eldest brother was placed on the primary throne of Assyria, which was in Nineveh. (You may remember a big fish special-delivering a prophet there at one point). A second brother was on the throne in neighboring Babylon. When bro-1 died unexpectedly – presumably from natural circumstances – Ashurbanipal was given his place by Daddy. This was a bit of a dis on bro-2, but kings get to do what kings do. Records indicate periodic drama resulted from this decision, but that's hardly a surprise – nor would it have been rare for the times. Sorry, bro-2 – you're not in the band.

**You Mad, Pastor Bro?** For those who find historical precursors to popular stories in the Old Testament in some way threatening or offensive, it might make you feel better to know that one of the stories recovered from Ashurbanipal's library, "The Poor Man of Nippur," reappeared well over a thousand years later as part of *One Thousand and One Nights*. At least the Hebrews were essentially contemporaries, historically speaking.



**Ask Your Manly Pal!** Q: Dear Ashurbanipal – We keep reading about this library of yours, but no one seems sure what drove you to go to so much trouble and do all of this to begin with. Now that you've been dead for two-thousand-plus years, what's the scoop? Signed, Get2 duPoint.

A: Get2 – Great question. Allow me to quote from one of my own tablets from that library you mention:

*I, Ashurbanipal, within the palace, understood the wisdom of Nabu, the god of learning. All the art of writing of every kind. I made myself the master of them all. I read the cunning tablets of Sumer and the dark Akkadian language which is difficult to rightly use; I took my pleasure in reading stones inscribed before the flood. The best of the scribal art, such works as none of the kings who went before me had ever learnt, remedies from the top of the head to the toenails, non-canonical selections, clever teachings, whatever pertains to the medical mastery of Ninurta and Gala, I wrote on tablets, checked and collated, and deposited within my palace for perusing and reading.*

*I, Ashurbanipal, king of the universe, on whom the gods have bestowed intelligence, who has acquired penetrating acumen for the most recondite details of scholarly erudition (meaning none of my predecessors had any idea about any of this sort of thing), I have placed these tablets for the future in the library at Nineveh for my life and for the well-being of my soul, to sustain the foundations of my royal name.*

*Peace out,*

*~Ash~*