ARTH201: Ashurnasirpal II’s Northwest Palace

Ashurnasirpal II’s Northwest Palace was completed in 879 BCE in Kahlu (modern-day Nimrud, slightly north of Baghdad, Iraq). As one of several building projects that transformed Kahlu from a small provincial town into the new Assyrian capital, it was part of a larger citadel that included several temples and a ziggurat. The Palace covered approximately 696 feet from north to south and 394 feet from east to west and was organized around two large courtyards connected by a massive throne room. Administrative offices were located around the courtyard to the north of the throne room, and other official rooms around the southern courtyard. Farther to the south were the royal residential quarters and harem, and in the southwest corner of the palace, archaeologists have also uncovered the graves of three royal Assyrian women.

Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) depicted on a relief from the Northwest Palace, The Louvre Museum

Two hybrid lamassu guardian figures from the Northwest Palace, The British Museum

The sun-dried, mud-brick walls of the palace were decorated with a series of large stone slabs carved in relief with scenes of figures and with inscriptions recording important historical events during Ashurnasirpal II’s reign. These and the large hybrid animals that served as door guardians throughout the Northwest Palace were carved from alabaster; details on the reliefs were later inscribed. The shallow reliefs were
composed of symmetrical compositions with figures depicted in profile against a flat plane. The inscriptions and reliefs traced the emperor’s lineage, recorded his military victories, told of the creation of the new capital, and established the boundaries of Assyrian rule; other reliefs depicted the king hunting or with protective deities. The pictorial program of the reliefs was designed to highlight the king’s supremacy, his role as a mediator between gods and men, and to instill fear and awe in those visiting the palace.

The site of Kahlu and the Northwest Palace was excavated by A.H. Layard in the 1840’s. Although many of the reliefs went to the British Museum, by various means others entered private collections and other museums in Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Reliefs from Ashurnasirpal II’s Northwest Palace displayed in the British Museum.