

Ancient Assyria – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Episode 67

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Karen Radner 00:26

Hi, I'm Karen Radner. I teach the history of the ancient near east at the University of Munich in Germany. And my research focuses on ancient Assyria, that is also the title of my very short introduction, Ancient Assyria. So what is ancient Assyria? It's a kingdom that is situated in Mesopotamia, and that's the region along the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. It corresponds to modern Iraq, Syria, and eastern Turkey. The Kingdom of Assyria is special because its history is documented for an exceptionally long time, of about 1500 years, from around 2000 BC to 600 BC, when that state collapsed. It was never resurrected. And that collapse was an event that has shaped world history. That is because, in the three centuries before, so that's from around 900 to 600 BC, Assyria experienced its imperial period, and decisions that were taken in the kingdom's core region in northern Iraq shaped the fate of millions of people from modern Sudan to Central Asia and all the way to modern Portugal. So in a really, really, enormously big region. Assyria came up with a lot of political and administrative strategies that continued to shape the modern world. For better or worse, it was the pathfinder empire, and, yet, unlike ancient Greece, Rome, or Egypt, very few people know about this important civilization.

Karen Radner 01:58

What got me first interested in ancient Assyria was a visit to Syria with my parents when I was 16 years old. That was the first time I saw clay tablets inscribed in the cuneiform script in the National Museum in Damascus. And that is also when I first visited the ruins of Mesopotamian cities. I was really fascinated because they used to be these bustling, vibrant cities and now they are heaps of disintegrating mudbrick. So when I went to university, aged 18, I took Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Vienna in Austria. That was more than 30 years ago, and I've never looked back. So what do I think people should know about ancient Assyria?

Karen Radner 02:37

To me, the most important thing is an awareness that ancient Assyria existed in the first place, and that for a time of about 300 years, it was the most important state on Earth. The second thing to know is that we have a huge wealth of information about Assyrian culture, which is at once quite familiar, and then also very strange. So just to give you a few examples, I might share the Assyrian taste for a home with good plumbing and an indoor toilet, but I don't insist on having an underground burial chamber that is accessible from my living room. We all value consumer protection and extended warranties, but I don't purchase people and then demand to return them to the seller if they turn out to have a chronic health issue within 100 days of living in my household. I certainly very often use an umbrella because I live in

a very rainy city, but when I do it, I'm not committing high treason, whereas in Assyria, an umbrella was exclusively reserved for royalty and no one else could use them.

Karen Radner 03:39

So how do we know all of this? That's because of archeological excavations. Such digs have taken place in the Middle East since the mid-19th century BC. And they've brought to light the capital cities of ancient Assyria, in what is today northern Iraq, but also provincial centres and also towns and villages in a huge area, stretching from what is modern day Israel all the way to Iran, in these palaces and temples, and also private houses that have been excavated, lots and lots of clay tablets have been found in archives and libraries, and these clay tablets, they constitute the textual sources for our reconstruction of Assyrian history. They date not just to this imperial period from 900 to 600 BC, but to various times throughout a serious, long history. These texts include legal documents, prayers and rituals, royal inscriptions, works of literature and scholarly texts, and a lot of letters, both private and state correspondence. And these letters are really the sources that I most enjoy working with.

Karen Radner 04:54

The third thing to know about ancient Assyria is that because of all of these texts we can bring to life in individuals from a huge variety of societal contexts. I want to give a couple of examples from the seventh century BC when Assyrian society is especially well-documented. It's also one of my favorite periods to research. So on the one hand, we have the royal court and we have the royal family. We know a lot about the kings of Assyria because they have left us with their royal inscriptions. Those are documents that tell us how they wanted to be perceived. But in some cases, we also have private correspondence between members of the royal family, and one such case is King Esarhaddon. He ruled Assyria in the 670s BC. So Assyrian society was monogamous. That means one husband and one wife; the one big exception was the king. Because the royal bloodline was considered so important, the king was the only one who was legally permitted to have several wives, in order to have children, and especially sons. Now Esarhaddon did not conform to this rule, and he only had one wife, and all his children were also his wife's children. When she died, apparently, in childbirth, he was heartbroken and refused to marry again, and that was a constitutional, if you will, problem because the Assyrian queen has an official role within the state. So instead of marrying again, he then had the role filled in other ways. So on the one hand, his mother stepped in, and on the other hand, his eldest daughter fulfilled this role in part. And both his mother and his daughter are very interesting and complicated personalities.

Karen Radner 06:54

And just to give you an example, there's one letter where the Royal Princess scolds her sister-in-law, the wife of her brother Ashurbanipal, who would go on to become the next king of Assyria. And she says that her sister-in-law really should pull her weight when it comes to school, she should really take her studies more seriously. She was basically a disgrace to herself, to her the daughter of Esarhaddon. So you can imagine that the situation can't have been entirely happy in such circumstances. And that would have had repercussions throughout courts as well. We also know a lot about people that are very far removed from the royal court that, people that would not have met the royal family in person, but who nevertheless oriented themselves and modeled their tastes on the heart of the Empire. One such example are the people in Assur, and I want to focus especially on the wine merchants and the

investors. So wine drinking was very much something that people in Assyria, who could afford it, enjoyed.

Karen Radner 08:14

Now, northern Iraq is not really a wine-growing area, and so therefore, the wine had to be imported. At that time, there were a couple of really good wine regions within the provincial system of Assyria. And the Assyrians came up with the notion of terroir, that is that wine is intimately linked to the region where it's grown. Yeah, like Bordeaux. Now, so they came up with this notion, and to them the best wines came from two regions: on the one hand, Hebron, in what is today Israel, and, on the other hand, [Izala], which is the border region between Turkey and Syria. And the people in the city of Assur, they imported wine from [Izala]. And they did that through a subscription system. So there were these merchants who organized this and they organized caravans into the wine-growing region, and then have the wine brought back. And people could subscribe to this. And what is quite interesting is that a lot of women do this, and they clearly want to make sure that they have the wine they want to enjoy themselves and therefore invest their disposable income into that.

Karen Radner 09:33

One section of society that I enjoy investigating are the scholars of ancient Assyria. The best job you could have as a scholar was in the entourage of the king, as one of his advisors. The king needed the scholars to help him steer the country and especially draw on their expertise in order to make decisions so, like we today, in order to make decisions for the future, all sorts of things were monitored: the economy, the weather, water levels of the rivers, but also the stars. So astrology was considered very, very important. In the seventh century, Assyrian society, as I said, it's very, very diverse. That's because this is after the big conquest of Assyria, and certain regions with a very, very strong scholarly tradition had come under the influence of the Assyrian king. And therefore the Assyrian king no longer just drew on experts from Assyria, but also included scholars from Babylon and from Egypt into his entourage. Now, that was new, because up to that point, there had been these scholarly families in Assyria, they were very closely entangled with the royal family itself, and for hundreds of years, the sons of these scholarly families had been raised in the expectation that if they prove themselves, they would too become advisors of the king, like their father and grandfather before them. And in the seventh century, that was no longer the case. The competition was quite intense and so we have a lot of scholars with frustrated ambitions around.

Karen Radner 11:24

So because they are academics, they like to write, and we have quite a lot of the letters, and just to give you one example, there is this one letter where a scholar who had hoped to become a member of the king's entourage, but never made the cut, grumbles to the king, who he's known for a long time, because as I said, they basically grew up together, that he has to watch his competition drive by on chariots, and he is reduced to walking because he can't even afford a donkey. So this feels very familiar, this type of grumbling and venting frustrations. And I hope you noticed that I really, really enjoy engaging with ancient Assyria, and the people that make up this ancient society. You could check out the Assyrian collections of, say, the British Museum, the Louvre in Paris, or the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and if you can't visit in person, they have really good websites. Do have a look at some artworks and see whether you can relate to me finding Assyrian culture endlessly fascinating. Goodbye.

Rebecca Parker 12:44

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