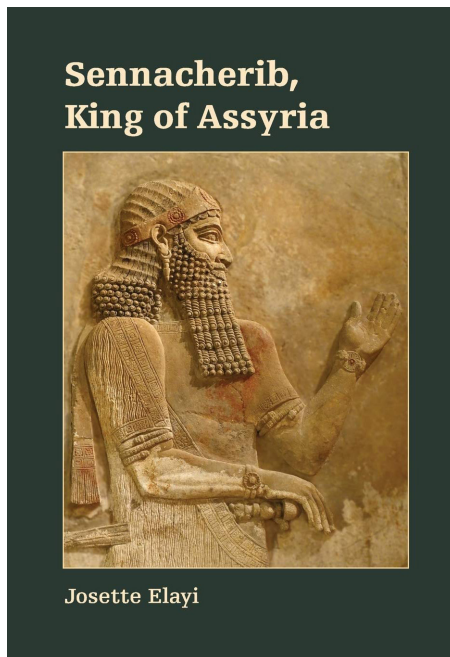


## Reviews



**Josette Elayi, *Sennacherib, King of Assyria*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 24, Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018; pp. 233 + xxii, ISBN: 9781628372175; Paperback, USD37.00.**

Reviewed by Luis R. Siddall

At last a monograph on the life of Sennacherib (r. 705–681 BC), arguably Assyria's most famous king, has appeared. This is Josette Elayi's second book devoted to the life of an Assyrian king and it seems it has been written as a follow-up to her previous study of Sargon II. The fact that biographies of Assyrian kings (and other Ancient Near Eastern rulers) are so rare reveals more about the discipline than the source material, which admittedly has its limits. At the outset, Josette Elayi states that her purpose in this book is to provide the first history of Sennacherib that examines all aspects of his reign from politics to art.

It is worth pondering the nature of the task of writing a cradle to the grave biography of an Assyrian king. Mary Beard (2014: 103–174) has highlighted the difficulties encountered when going beyond accounts of the ancient biographers to write about the lives of the prominent people of the Classical world and questioned the value of repeating accounts of ancient historians when writing about the lives of the Julio-Claudians. Marc Van De Mieroop (2005: 136–145) went further when he drew attention to the difficulty of ascertaining the context of, and motivations behind, the actions of the rulers of the

Ancient Near East. Elayi is all too aware of the difficulty of writing the biography of a Near Eastern emperor, a task more difficult without an Assyrian Tacitus or Suetonius. Elayi describes her approach as one that draws on all factors in a multidisciplinary way (political, military, religious), stays as close to the sources as possible and is followed by an historical synthesis. It is interesting that Elayi structures her book in the manner of a Neo-Assyrian royal inscription, beginning with the royal persona, family background and succession (chs. 1 and 2), the political and military events (chs. 3–6), and reports on building and technological innovations (chs. 7 and 8). She concludes the book with an evaluation of the Assyrian king (ch. 9).

As is customary, Elayi introduces her book with an overview of Sennacherib's life and the sources available for undertaking research into his reign. The latter is particularly well handled and gives a good account of the material and stylistic development of the royal inscriptions. However, Elayi's summary of modern scholarship does not provide an insight into historiography, and this is a feature of the book more generally (as will be discussed below). For instance, the reader gets no sense of the great differences between Kirk Grayson's Sennacherib and that of Eckart Frahm. Recognition of the different interpretations of the king is hinted at on p. 8 when Elayi states that Frahm's psycho-historical approach has received only some level of acceptance, though she does favour Frahm's ideas about the psychological effect of Sennacherib's alleged Father Complex. What results is a study that offers a fairly standard empiricist account of Sennacherib's reign, never straying far from the royal inscriptions and often quoting them.

The first two chapters chart Sennacherib's early life and his rise to power. In chapter 1, the textual evidence is carefully examined to outline Sennacherib's family background, his marriages and subsequent children. This is not an easy task as any effort to reconstruct the period of Sennacherib's life is likely to produce contentious interpretations, such as the assumption that the temple administrator, Hunni, was Sennacherib's tutor (pp. 14, 18), or whether Sennacherib ever resided in the House of Succession (p. 30). The chapter closes with an attempt to identify Sennacherib's personality. Elayi gleans a picture of Sennacherib from his royal inscriptions and the images presented in the palatial reliefs. While she identifies what can be recognised as the key aspects of Sennacherib's personality, she does not explain whether they derived from his individuality or were the result of his engagement with the political and ideological forces of the time. For instance, did Sennacherib really enjoy building and technology more than waging war? Was his emphasis on cultural matters and innovation a response to his recognition that expansion of the empire was beyond his military capabilities with the result that his ideological expression shifted from military expansionism to building and technological innovation. This dynamic is left unresolved.

In chapter 2, Elayi uses the corpus of letters Sennacherib wrote to his father Sargon II to discern what can be known about Sennacherib's early career as crown prince and she concentrates on how he came to be appointed, his undertakings in this role, and what this may tell us about the relationship between Sennacherib and his father. Elayi's account of these years following Sargon's accession to the throne verges on an apology for both Sargon and Sennacherib. The whole affair is framed by her view that Sargon did not usurp the throne. This is a striking interpretation because it flies in the face of a well-understood text, the Ashur Charter, in which Sargon all but states that he usurped the throne from his brother, Shalmaneser V (see Chamaza 1992). This interpretation makes it difficult for Elayi to reconcile her interpretation of Sargon's succession with the 'massive opposition' the new king experienced in Assyria. The more straightforward reading is that the Ashur Charter reports that Sargon's usurpation led to civil strife – a recurring feature of this Assyrian dynasty. Elayi's view also steers her away from considering what Sennacherib's role was in the overthrow of his uncle. This is an unexplored topic in Neo-Assyrian studies, but it stands to reason that those in the royal family who received the highest appointments from Sargon were most likely to have been a part of the faction that overthrew Shalmaneser V. In this light, Sennacherib, as crown prince, and another brother of Sargon, Sin-aḫu-ušur, who became the commander of the western army, stand out as likely co-conspirators.

The third chapter concerns Sennacherib's succession to the throne and his 'priority campaigns' from 704–701. Elayi's treatment of military affairs is excellent. Upon Sargon's death during his Anatolian campaign in 705, the whole empire rose up in revolt. As Elayi outlines, it took four years of campaigning to re-establish Assyrian authority across the Near East. The greater portion of the chapter examines the vexed issue of the third campaign to Syria-Palestine (Hatti), accounts of which reach their climax with the siege of Jerusalem. Elayi handles not only the difficulties of the conflicting biblical and Assyrian accounts well but also provides an excellent coverage of the vast scholarly literature on what has recently been called 'the first world event' (Kalimi and Richardson 2014). Here Elayi's expertise in Levantine archaeology and history come to the fore with her interpretation of the nature of the western campaign: that it was not against a unified revolt but a response to three separate centres of rebellion, namely Tyre, the Philistine cities and Judah. This is an interpretation that runs against the history of western coalitions opposing Assyria from the ninth century.

The fourth and fifth chapters continue the examination of Sennacherib's military career and correctly divides the periods of Sennacherib's wars into those that consolidated the empire (700–695, ch. 4), and the later wars against Babylon and her allies (694–689, ch. 5). The accounts of the campaigns are detailed and often provide insights into the course and nature of the annalistic accounts.

However, there are some explanations of overarching historiographical matters that could have been of benefit to the reader. For instance, the discussion of the how the accounts of the Babylonian wars were rewritten to omit earlier policies and set-backs is dealt with all too fleetingly and matters such as this are often dismissed as mere propaganda. It is a missed opportunity for Elayi to provide an insight into Sennacherib's temperament or, at the very least, an aspect of his ideological point of view.

The narrative of Sennacherib's reign concludes in the sixth chapter, which covers the last eight years of his life until his assassination in 681. The lack of Assyrian inscriptions following the sack of Babylon in 689 makes this the most difficult period of Sennacherib's life to reconstruct. Elayi focuses her attention on the status of Babylon following the destruction and Sennacherib's changing arrangements for successor(s) to the throne. The reader is treated to a meticulous study of the Babylonian chronicles and archival documents revealing that the major cities of the south were able to manoeuvre away from Assyrian authority late in Sennacherib's reign. However, one should be cautious with Elayi's suggestion that the absence of wars between Assyria and Elam in this period is indicative of peace between the two states. Recent research has shown that the contemporary situation in the west of the empire saw Egypt encroach upon regions subject to Assyria in the southern Levant (Zamazalová 2011). Hence, a picture is now emerging of the edges of Sennacherib's empire receding towards the end of his reign.

The faltering authority on the frontiers of the empire were certainly compounded by Sennacherib's shifting succession policy and the king's untimely death at the hands of his son(s). The difficulty in establishing the accession order of both of Sennacherib's crown princes and his marriages is handled as well as the sources allow but Elayi perhaps relies too heavily on the eventual successor, Esarhaddon, who gave an account of his time as crown prince and the assassination, allegedly at the hands of his brothers. While there seems to be a correlation between Esarhaddon's account and biblical reports (II Kings 19:37 // Isa. 37: 38 and II Chron. 32: 21), in recent years there have been some serious challenges to Esarhaddon's innocence, which are not considered by Elayi (e.g. Dalley 2007: 38–46; and Knapp 2015: 320–324).<sup>1</sup>

The seventh and eighth chapters shift away from the military narrative and consider the impact Sennacherib had on the empire. The interest in how Sennacherib balanced Assyrian traditions with his own reforms (ch. 7) is where we find the greatest level of interpretation and at times one feels Elayi may be making more of Sennacherib's character than the sources support. Elayi paints Sennacherib as a great reformer of the empire in the areas of royal ideology away from legitimacy via genealogy, and imperialism centred on consolidation over expansion; as well as pragmatically developing the army, economy, and the administration. Due to the relative lack

of archival documents from Sennacherib's reign, there is little hard evidence for the practical reforms to the empire. Further, Sennacherib's shift away from genealogy as a point of legitimacy may be a reflection that his early inscriptions were often copied verbatim from Sargon II's annals, as discovered by Frahm (1997: 42–43), and thus they were more formulaic than an innovative statement of ideology. Elayi is on firmer ground in her discussion of Sennacherib's religious reforms, which saw the state god, Ashur, promoted to the head of the pantheon over Marduk, following the destruction of Babylon in 689BC. The discussion is well supported by the evidence and provides a clear account of Sennacherib's actions, particularly regarding the role the religious reforms played in compensation for a lack of military expansion.

Sennacherib considered himself a master builder and a technocrat. Appropriately, Elayi pays the same meticulous attention to Sennacherib's building programme and technological innovations as she does to his military affairs. An excellent coverage is given to the nature, extent, and chronology of his construction work at the new capital, Nineveh, and other centres of the empire. Readers are treated to a discussion of Sennacherib's claims of technological advances in artistic styles in palace art, bronze smelting, and hydraulic engineering. While Elayi does not discuss these feats in this light, it is in these chapters that the reader will get a sense of the legacy of Sennacherib's reign as the monarch who built the world capital of his time, managed to construct aqueducts long before the Romans, and might have even developed the Archimedean screw.

Elayi concludes her study by asking the question that all biographers must: who actually was the subject? The picture that Elayi paints draws together the main findings presented throughout the book but her final statements go beyond what is demonstrable and lack consistency. For instance, could Sennacherib have been 'not very interested in warfare' and also a 'realist' who recognised that the empire needed to move to a period of imperial consolidation? Further, how well can we ascertain that Sennacherib had a complex relationship with his father that affected his adulthood and his reign? To return to a point raised at the beginning of this review, how well can we know an ancient Assyrian ruler? Without private documents and diaries, we will always struggle to write a biography. Yet, to this end, Elayi has produced a book that goes a long way to providing a biographical study of Sennacherib. While the reviewer may be at odds with some of Elayi's reconstructions and conclusions, he acknowledges that she has produced a treatment of Sennacherib that will leave her readers with the knowledge that there is far more to the Assyrian king than Byron's 'wolf on the fold.'

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1. Disclaimer: The reviewer with Stephanie Dalley have published a new edition of the text at the centre of the debate and a new historical reconstruction in the forthcoming edition of *Iraq*. Elayi could not have known of our study.