

# AN ASSYRIAN PALACE

about A.D. 1900

---

*Gaston Maspero*

---

Sargon II ruled Assyria in the last decades of the eighth century B.C. During his reign Sargon extended the Assyrian empire and built a great palace, Dur Sharrukin (“Sargon’s Fortress”), near present-day Nineveh, Iraq. Modern excavations at the site have uncovered a mile-square city, fortified gates, and impressive statues. In the following passage, French archaeologist Gaston Maspero reconstructs a picture of Sargon’s palace and the life within its walls.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying**

According to Maspero, what was life like for the women at Sargon’s palace?

---

The royal palace is upon the northeast side of the city, half within, half without the inclosure. [It is set upon a lofty esplanade of brick work], a hillock raised by the labor of man which raises the foot of the walls far above the surrounding roofs. It is accessible from the city only: pedestrians reach it by a double staircase constructed in front of the platform, horsemen and carriages by a greatly sloping ascent. The king dwells there as in a turret, whence he can see the whole country, and which he could defend long after the city had been taken. [At the two chief gates are high masts with the royal standard, and giant sculptured bulls guard the sides of the portals.]

The immense court into which the gates open is a public place which tradesmen of every kind, suppliants and even mere sightseers, enter without the least difficulty. Thousands of persons are attached to the sovereign’s household: some as chamberlains, treasurers, scribes, eunuchs, military chiefs: others as footmen, soldiers, and cooks. There is a perpetual movement of detachments relieving guard, couriers coming or going with dispatches: officials going to or coming from an audience: files of donkeys with provisions: and morning and evening hundreds of male and female slaves descend in procession to draw from the tributaries of the Khosr [river] the water needed by such a multitude. . . . [There are vast storerooms, and magazines for weapons, and provisions around this court.]

A small door in the southern angle of the court leads to the harem. Assyrian women of the lower class enjoy almost unlimited independence, but [women of higher rank possess next to no liberty. The queens are the greatest prisoners of all] they remain invisible during most of their lives, receiving only their family and household.

When Sargon founded his city he had three legitimate wives, and to each he granted a separate establishment: his harem therefore contained three compartments

or rather three houses. The internal arrangements of these houses is precisely similar: an anteroom wider than it is long, a drawing-room, of which one half is unroofed, the other half is covered with a semidome, a staircase with eleven steps, and the bedroom. The walls are coated with white stucco, and covered with a black plinth: the floor is flagged or carefully bricked: here and there are carpets, stools, armchairs, low tables, and in the alcove a wooden bed, raised upon feet with its mattress and coverings.

After marriage the life of the queens is passed in this prison: dress, embroidery, needlework, and housekeeping, long conversations with their slaves, the exchange of visits, and the festivals, with dancing and singing—with which they entertain one another—serve for occupation and amusement. From time to time the king passes some hours among them, or invites them to dine in his gardens. . . . [Notwithstanding this monotonous life a thousand intrigues are carried on: the wives are always at war among themselves: the eunuchs take sides: and sometimes a rival is taken off by poison.]

**Source:** Excerpt from *Life in Ancient Egypt and Assyria* by Gaston Maspero (New York: D. Appleton, 1892), p. 202.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER**

According to Maspero, life for Assyrian women varied according to rank. Maspero states that the lower class of women enjoyed "almost unlimited independence." However, Sargon's wives were virtual prisoners of the palace. Although they lived in luxurious surroundings, the queens were not allowed to go outside the palace.