King Ashurbanipal: Champion of the Library

The day was breaking as the sun began its long hot descent into the sky. There were lots of noises outside of the palace as people were excitedly talking about the great victory their king had brought them in this year of 647 BCE (Mark). The palace hall leading to the library rooms was quiet save for the footsteps of an imposing figure. As the king walked toward the library admiring the beautiful architecture of his palace he stopped before the two giant bas-reliefs of the fish-god Dagon. These bas-reliefs were there to remind anyone who entered the library to be respectful of its belongings because King Ashurbanipal considered the library a priceless treasure of knowledge and should be treated as one.

A man smaller than King Ashurbanipal quickly approached him with great excitement. It was one of the library scribes. He informed Ashurbanipal that his guests have arrived. These were learned men of government, medicine, and religion. The king informed his scribe to show the men into the library room that was filled with government and military documents. He would be waiting for them in the room. The scribe replied quickly with a courteous yes and rushed off to inform the men.

When the learned men came into the library Ashurbanipal was looking over the clay tablets with his scribe who specialized in the subject of government. The king turned around when he heard his guest enter the room. The men all greeted their king with high respect and asked for details of his miraculous journey. Ashurbanipal was more than willing to share his tale with his friends for he was a strong king in government and battle who prided himself with his accomplishments. Ashurbanipal told them of the bloody conquest over the people of Susa. He explained how they were victorious in his military campaign and how he showed dominance over their land by salting the earth over the Susa ruins. He even severed the head of one of Susa's leaders. Then he made the man's surviving brother wear the severed head around his neck as one would wear a necklace. With this comment the men let out a hearty cheer and laughter at the destruction and humiliation of the Susa people (Damrosch, p. 190).

The men were enthralled by Ashurbanipal’s story of conquest as they hung onto every word the king said. When the story ended a governmental official spoke up and asked what treasures were acquired from his siege against Susa. The king explained about the many types of riches they acquired, but his favorite items were the many tablets that would be added to the library. When Ashurbanipal had answered all the questions about his battle he turned to the royal scribe standing in the room and told him to record his words so that they were on clay tablets. Then the scribe was to make several copies of the document. The scribe listened carefully as the king spoke these words:
"The voice of man, the steps of flocks and herds, and the happy shouts of mirth I put an end to them in its field which I left for the asses, the gazelles and all manner of wild beast to people" (Dunlap, p. 12).

The men again cheered the king for his accomplishments in battle. When King Ashurbanipal finished his speech he offered to show the learned men his library, which was his pride and joy. The guests were delighted to have such an honor as to be given a guided tour of the royal library by the king himself. They went into different rooms each containing different topics that Ashurbanipal excitedly pointed out to the men. There are about 10,000 different works on about 30,000 tablets on a variety of topics. There were biographies of officials and kings; geography, laws, agriculture, astronomy, biology, mathematics, legends, and medicine. The religious texts contained hymns, omens, and incantations (Harris, p. 20-22).

A religious man asked Ashurbanipal how such a collection was managed. The king smiled at the scribe in the room and pointed to him. He explained how this was one of many trusted royal scribes assigned to the library. Before they were allowed to work in the royal library the scribes were in training for several years in the writings of cuneiform. They were taught languages of the foreign lands so that they were proficient in translating the tablets and information the king and his soldiers acquired from other lands. For example, this scribe standing before them could translate a Sumerian and Babylonian document into the Assyrian tongue. Many of the scribes had been taught in specialized areas as mathematics or astronomy in order to understand the materials which they were organizing and copying (Harris, p. 22-24).

As they went into another room Ashurbanipal paused and informed his guests that he has also contributed to the library. He ordered a scribe to bring him a poem which he wrote. As the scribe was retrieving the document the king explained the meaning of this poem. It was about how he was making an appeal to the patron god of writing, Nabu, to help him in his confused suicidal state. The scribe returned with the clay tablet and Ashurbanipal read a part of it:

"Often I go up to the roof in order to plunge down
but my life is too precious, it turns me back.
I would hearten myself, but what heart do I have to give?
I would make up my mind, but what mind do I have to make up?
O Nabu, where is your forgiveness,
O son of Bel, where is your guidance?" (Damrosch, page 185).

When they reached the room with the medical tablets a man of medicine spoke up and asked Ashurbanipal if he could stay awhile to read from the vast amount of information while the others continued the tour. Ashurbanipal was pleased with this man's eagerness to use the library and granted him the wish. The man informed the king that he had not yet had the privilege to use the library and was left in the dark about how to use it. Ashurbanipal called forth a nearby scribe who was organizing the tablets and ordered him to help the man of medicine. The scribe offered to get the man the tablet he desired, however the man of medicine was amazed at how quickly the scribe could retrieve the
documents that he wanted. So, the man asked to learn more about how the library rooms were designed. The scribe then explained, "The clay tablets inside the rooms of Ashurbanipal's library are kept in earthen jars, and the jars in turn are kept in orderly rows on shelves. Each tablet bears an identification tag, indicating the jar, shelf and room of its location. On the walls of each room, beside the door, [is] a list of the works to be found in that room." Located in each room was a catalog tablet listing the items inside the room including titles, the number of tablets for each title, and the first lines of the works (Harris, p. 20).

The man was delighted to hear about the library's organization process. He then asked to look at a couple of clay tablets about a specific nature in medicine. After about a half hour the man of medicine was ready to leave, but his curiosity got to him. So, he asked the scribe if the king was worried about theft or vandalism. The scribe pointed to an inscription and read it to the man:

"Clay tablet of Ashurbanipal, King of the World, King of Assyria, who trusts in Ashur and Ninlil. Your lordship is without equal, Ashur, King of the Gods! Whoever removes [the tablet], writes his name in place of my name, may Ashur and Ninlil, angered and grim, cast him down, erase his name, his seed, in the land"

(Casson, p.12).

The man of medicine gave an uneasy smile towards the scribe and excused himself, stating that he would like to catch up with the rest of the group to enjoy Ashurbanipal's tour of the rest of the magnificent library. The scribe with a slight smirk upon his face put the tablets back in their proper places and continued his work of organizing the room.

When the man of medicine caught up with the rest of the guests Ashurbanipal was speaking to the group about his role in developing the royal library. The king recalled that:

"Palace of Ashurbanipal, king of the world...who has possessed himself of a clear eye and the choice art of tablet-writing, such as non among the kings, my predecessors, had acquired. The wisdom of Nabu, the ruled line, all that there is, have I inscribed upon the tablets, checking and revising it and that I see and read them, have placed them within my palace.” (Dunlap, p. 12).

The men applauded the king, (but not as exuberantly as before, because the king's ego was getting annoying) for his vast knowledge and the role in creating and adding to the royal library. The king informed his guests that he was pleased to have shared his tales of victory and especially pleased to have shown off his royal library. However, the recent battle was long and tiring and now that he was back home in the Royal Capital of Nineveh that it was time for him to rest. He would meet them again this day when the sun was almost set for a victory feast, but for now all Ashurbanipal wanted to do is to curl up with a couple of good clay tablets of The Epic of Gilgamesh before he slept. He bid his guests farewell for the time being and encouraged them to enjoy and respect his library.
Works Cited


