An Analysis of the Similar Motivations for War Among Assyrian and Persian Kings

(Question 2.)

In the ancient Near East, the conquest for and domination of territory was a significant indicator of the glory, power, and wealth of a kingdom. The larger and more powerful a kingdom became, the more unlikely it was that any other nation could stand in the way of the kingdom. For the nation that rose to the height of known-world domination, fame, wealth, and honor unrivaled was due. While these motivations were central to the expansion of an empire, great and complex empires like the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires discovered a number of motivations that spurred conquest to previously unrivaled heights. Through the analysis of Sargon's Letter to Assur Concerning the Eighth Campaign and Herodotus' *The Histories*, three motivations that appear in common as motivation for warfare for the Assyrian kings and Persian kings include religious motivations, retribution for acts against these empires, and the pursuit of glory and honor. While these three motivations were heavily employed during the advent of each empire, they were effectively manipulated so that they worked to increase territory and wealth for each empire, revealing that territory and wealth were always the two prime motivations for the campaigns of the Assyrian and Persian Kings.

One of the first developments concerning the nation-state anthropologists can identify is the conquest-state. While many different theories on the evolution of collective society and the role war plays in its advancement exist, scholars still hotly debate the best theories. Many scholars are unsure whether war gave rise to the nation-state, or the nation-state gave rise to war. It is sure, however, that the very oldest people-groups advanced their positions, power, and finances through conquest of territory and goods. Sargon and Herodotus both give reliable evidence that the Assyrians and Persians also used war campaigns to increase their territory and wealth. With the Assyrians and Persians some new motivations for warfare came into play as

well, including religiously motivated conquest, conquest for the sake of glory or honor, and conquest for retribution.

Assyria was well-known for its warfare lifestyle; the society's job was warfare, and its livelihood came from yearly conquests of the surrounding kingdoms. Scholars have evidence for these yearly campaigns from Biblical-period texts and later Greek accounts, including Sargon's Eighth Campaign Letter to Assur (Potter, 1/18/2008). The Assyrian army would march out to conquer a neighboring territory, and upon arrival there demand tribute or sack the area and enslave the native people. This was an efficient means of acquiring wealth because Assyrian kings would take the hard-earned goods of another society essentially through fear and bullying tactics. By forcing a nation to pay tribute or become a vassal-state of Assyria, Assyria received a financial contribution that allowed it to continue supporting its campaigns, maintaining an influx of money and thus holding significant status in the ancient Near East (Kuhrt). When societies refused to pay tribute to the Assyrian king, the king would simply take the city and enslave its inhabitants, creating a workforce that kept agriculture and food production high enough to maintain the needs of the army (Kuhrt). Primarily, the Assyrians relied on fear tactics to accomplish widespread control of Mesopotamia. The Persians, on the other hand, while using fear tactics, had to rely more heavily on superior battle stratagems to find success against the Greeks (the lack of superior stratagems is what lead to their eventual downfall to the Greeks) (Herodotus).

Sargon and the Persian kings added several new dimensions to this practical Assyrian model of the conquest-state by creating new motivations for maintained campaigning and territorial expansion. The empires could not continue to expand based on a sole desire to be the biggest and most glorious state in the world; this ambition for power would have undoubtedly

been dangerous and overly proud. The Assyrians had to find new motivations to continue expanding their territory, and the Persians later claims many of these same reasons. The three most influencing motivations for conquest for both Sargon and the Persians were conquering to serve and please the gods, to achieve glory by conquering, and to repay other societies for the evil deeds they enacted against the Persians and Assyrians. (While these themes were probably a part of policy for campaigning states prior to the Assyrians, we see a very strong increase in these motivations beginning with the Assyrian empire.)

Sargon's letter to Assur highlights this first motivation; his entire letter claims to conquer people to punish them for offending the gods. For example, Sargon says of an Armenian king called Ursa who refuses to surrender his territory and pay tribute to Sargon, "...I lifted my hands, praying that I might bring about his defeat in battle, turn his insolent words against himself, and make him bear his sin (81)." Sargon uses the gods, whether genuinely or through exploitation, as a reason to go to war. He paints himself as a king seeking to justify the evils enacted against the gods, and would call himself the servant of the Assyrian pantheon. These tactics were very useful in ancient Mesopotamia because people possessed a genuine fear toward the wrath of the gods and would submit to Sargon's attestations.

The Persians, on the other hand, also hold paramount religious reasons concerning their motivations for combat. Herodotus, however, gives us more explicit reasons for the Persian engagements. For example, during Darius' reign, the Greeks had attacked Sardis and desecrated some sacred land. Xerxes cites this as one of the reasons for which he feels it necessary to reengage with the Greeks by land after a crushing naval defeat (7.8). Herodotus tells the reader that the other determining factor behind Xerxes' decision to march on Greece by land was the result of a dream where a god told Xerxes which course of action he should take (7.17).

Additionally, various Persian leaders in *The Histories* display reverence for dreams and oracles of both Persian and Greek origin. Astyages, the grandfather of Cyrus, tries to kill him based on a dream foretelling Cyrus' kingship (1. 108).

While the Persians seem to have had more concrete reasons within the general scope of religious conflict to go to war, it is difficult to conclude that their passion for religious retribution was unadulterated. Sargon simply says that his enemies have offended the gods, without giving concrete examples of their trespasses. Herodotus, on the other hand, does cite the specific reasons that the Persians find fault with the behaviors of the Greeks. Despite these specific problems Xerxes and his leaders have, Herodotus makes it clear that some people within Xerxes' ring of advisors exploited the religious motivation to campiagn. Herodotus tells us that Mardonious, one of Xerxes' advisors, persuaded Xerxes to re-attack the Greeks on land because Mardonious thought he would become the governor of Greece when the Persians took it over (7.6). We can conclude from Sargon's letter and Herodotus' portrayal of the Persian kings that while religious motivations come to the front of these two societies' campaigns, they are not as genuine as one would think. In fact, religious motivation for war is really a façade for the two other new motivations that arise with the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires.

The second emerging reason to campaign in both the Assyrian and Persian empires was the quest for glory or honor. Sargon never directly says that he wants glory or honor, but we know these things are important to him because of some tones he assumes in the Eighth Campaign letter. Sargon says of a certain king whom he was trying to conquer, "…a worker of sin and iniquity, who broke the oath by the gods and recognized no rule, a wicked mountaineer, who sinned against the oath taken by Assur, Shamash, Nabu and Marduk and revolted against me, halted the return march of my expedition, (he failed to come bringing) his ample gifts, nor

did he kiss my feet (92-3)." That Sargon takes offence at the lack of tribute and "kissing of the feet" is key; he expects the people he comes in contact with to naturally respond to him this way, and when they do not, he is dishonored. This self-exalted view of Assyrians permeates Sargon's letter. When those he conquered were not kissing his feet, they were giving him tribute, fearfully handing over control of their territory, or being severely conquered and fleeing for their lives. Sargon never mentions a time when he is not victorious in battle. The letter is in one sense a type of political propaganda, because Sargon omits his own faults, flaws, and failures, and instead impresses on the reader that he is perfect. At the same time though, it is clear that Assyrian kings liked glory and honor, and would inflate their empire with praises to receive these two rewards.

The Persians equally were interested in glory and honor. Herodotus takes a different approach to the glory and honor of the Persians, however. Herodotus is able to point out the various mistakes in strategy, flaws in ideology, etc. that yield to the failures of the Persians. He also points out the times they do achieve in battles and negotiations. With the interactions between the Persians and the Greeks, it becomes clear that neither party demands glory and honor from the other unless it is somehow merited; the Persian king doesn't go around forcing everyone to kiss his feet (though he would not mind it if someone offered). The Persians seem more concerned with conquest to gain territory and wealth, or to make amends to any wrong done of them. In *The Histories*, we largely see only their interactions with the Greeks, Phoenicians, and peoples of Asia Minor like the Lydians. The Persians expect tribute from these people when they have conquered them, but they do not demand to be fawned over in the same way that Sargon does. Most of the campaigning for glory or to gain honor comes from wanting to justify a previous dishonor by one of these people-groups. For example, Mardonious tells

Xerxes concerning the Athenians, “Master, it’s wrong for the Athenians to go unpunished for all the harm they’ve done to Persia…you ought to march against Greece. It will enhance your glory and reputation, and also make people think twice in the future before attacking your territory (7.5).” Here, Mardonious tells Xerxes not to attack solely to achieve glory, but because the achievement of glory will be advantageous for the Persian king, and be a fitting payment for the Athenians who had transgressed the Persians.

One noteworthy difference between Herodotus’ portrayal of the Persian kings and how Sargon paints himself is the difference between failures and successes. Sargon, because he is writing his own account, fills it with much political propaganda, and continually discusses how amazing he is. Sargon’s political propaganda sends the reader the message that he reaps much honor from his campaigns, because he never fails. The Persians themselves are not writing their own account of the Persian wars, where one might expect to see more of the Sargonid-style of self-praise. If a person outside of the Assyrian empire had written an account of Sargon’s campaigns, he would most likely have included some examples of less honorable battles and engagements. One possible conclusion of this acknowledgement is that there is a stark difference between the Assyrian and Persian kings; the Assyrian culture engrained a need for praise (even self-praise) to have honor. Conversely, the Persians found their honor through their successes alone.

For the Persian kings, the motivation to campaign for glory and honor is closely tied to the motivation to campaign for retribution. This is also present in the Sargon account. The Persian and Assyrian kings are very similar in that they make people pay (or try to make them pay) for any battle the Assyrians or Persians might have lost, any dishonor suffered by them, or any other situation where they felt wronged. This point is difficult to see in the Eighth Campaign

account because Sargon never admits to losing any engagements; he just trashes any city that refuses to submit to his authority. In *The Histories*, Herodotus does give several examples of Persian kings acting to gain retribution. In fact, in *The Histories*, all three of these emerging motivations for warfare and conquest are directly tied together: because the Greeks deface sacred lands in Sardis, the Persians king Xerxes is dishonored and seeks retribution (Book 7).

When the Persian Empire rose to domination over the crumbling Assyrian one, the Assyrian one had over-expanded itself. The kings of the empire had not looked to the maintenance of such a vast territory; instead they had been mostly consumed with making the empire bigger and bigger, obtaining more and more wealth. The Persians took over the Median kingdom, then the Lydian one, and continued to expand slowly until they were more powerful and larger than the crumbled Assyrian state had been. Again, the Persian Empire became too focused on obtaining more territory and wealth, outstretching it's reach a bit too far, and found itself later beaten down by the Greeks and eventually Alexander of Macedon. The two great empires had become too greedy; instead of being content with a very large empire, each had sought glory to the point of failure.

The reality one discovers in exploring these new motivational themes for conquest on behalf of both Assyrian kings and Persian ones is that they were probably just new ways to justify gaining more territory and wealth. While the kingdoms did to some extent act on behalf of the religions they represented, religious motivation was an easy excuse for expansion. Repayment of iniquity too functioned in this fashion; grudges unresolved became the reason to launch battles that probably should not have been fought. Both the religious and retributive motivations in the Eighth Campaign account and in *The Histories* appear to be excuses to extend the empires and control of native peoples, yielding great wealth. It seems that "glory" is deeply

tied to the natural desire of the conquest-state to expand. Why did the Assyrian and Persian kings both continuously campaign until their empires were too large to maintain, lending rise the end of their eras and new dominions from other people groups? It would appear that no matter how big an empire got or how much wealth one man controlled, there was never an amount that was sufficient. The key development with both the Assyrian and Persian kings was that this need to expand to prove oneself honorable and worthy found ways to hide behind many different facades, including religious, retributive, and generally selfish and greedy motivations. Unfortunately, these facades are not permanent; the Assyrian ones gave way to the Persian ones, yielding way to the Macedonian Empire and then the Roman one. The cycles of power appear to be unending; even today, nations rise and fall with the reach to which they overextend themselves.

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