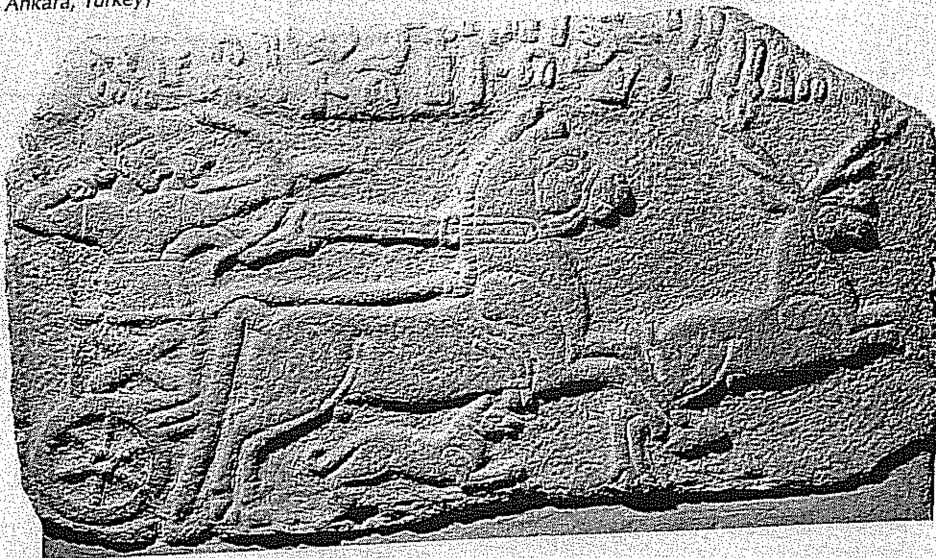
From City-State to Empire

Developing military force was the key to transforming a city-state into an empire. City-states already had their offensive and defensive powers: walls, moats, soldiers and troops, and, for those situated at the water's edge, ships and sailors. The literature from Mesopotamia, pre-imperial China, ancient Greece, and Mayan Mesoamerica abounds with evidence of fighting among city-states. From Gilgamesh onward, the rulers of city-states were builders of city walls and commanders of armed forces, famed as much for their military prowess as for their administration. They were engaged in incessant warfare.

Military force turned these city-states into empires. Almost 4000 years earlier, Sargon of Akkad (*c.* 2330–2280 B.C.E.) had set the example. His victories over the quarreling city-states of Mesopotamia around 2250 B.C.E. created the first empire recorded in history.

Sargon's troops were apparently equipped with the usual weaponry of the day: wooden spears with sharp points made of stone or bone and a range of perhaps 150 feet, simple bows and arrows with a range of somewhat more than 300 feet, leather slings capable of hurling stones with deadly force up to 600 feet, and war chariots—rough wagons with solid wooden wheels, pulled by asses—bearing their spear hurlers and quivers filled with arrows. We do not have visual evidence of Sargon's armies, but we do for the Sumerians whom he defeated. The military standard from Ur depicts not only the foot soldiers, chariots, and weapons of the victors, but also the defeated enemy soldiers, some already dead, some awaiting their fate. Sargon's armies were probably not much different from Ur's in their equipment, but they were greater in numbers, organization, skill, and energy.

Sargon proceeded to conquer the cities of the middle and upper Euphrates and moved on into southern Anatolia. Then he turned eastward to dominate Susa in western Iran, the capital city of the Elamites. Sargon's empire lasted for only about a century, but from his time onward,



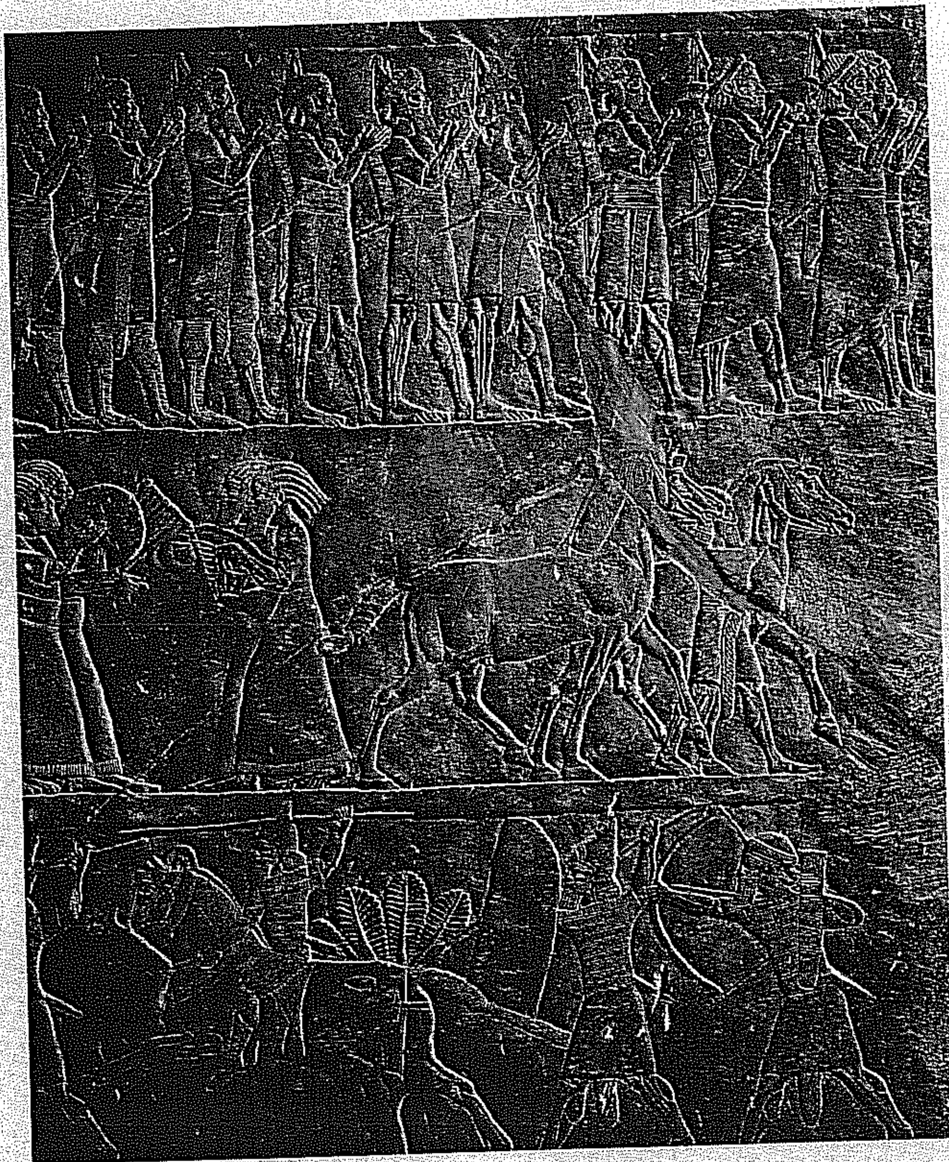
Deer hunt relief, Hittite, 9th century B.C.E. Stone. (*Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey*)

Macedonian troops in formation, after a painting by G.D. Rowlandson.

Mesopotamia was usually ruled by one empire or another, most frequently an invading force, like his own, but sometimes a revolutionary army arising from within. City-states did not return.

Egypt also established an empire early on, by moving southward, above the first cataract—one of a series of impassable rapids—on the Nile River, into Nubia, a land famed for its gold. As early as 2500 B.C.E., the Egyptians built a city at Buhen, just below the second cataract, in an area not much populated at the time, and held it for centuries as a basis for mining and trade, until it was taken by Nubians. During the twelfth dynasty (1991–1786 B.C.E.), however, Egypt returned to the area. The Egyptians secured passage for ships around the first cataract by constructing a canal and added a parallel land route over the desert sands. At Buhen Egyptian engineers directed the construction of one of the greatest fortresses known to ancient history. Low, outer walls and towering inner walls were each protected by ditches and crenellated on top with loopholes for archers and spear- and stone-throwers. The fortress housed soldiers' barracks surrounded by their own walls, a market, government offices and residences, and, later, a temple dedicated to Horus. Buhen served as the chief outpost of Egyptian military activity, administration, and trade in Nubia. It was once again conquered by Nubians after Egypt itself was defeated by Hyksos invaders, probably from across the deserts of Sinai, about 1600 B.C.E.

At about that time, new instruments of war were being introduced into the fertile crescent by new immigrant groups, probably from the mountains to the northeast. The most significant was a new two-wheeled war chariot, light, fast, easily maneuverable, pulled by horses and commanded by archers in bronze



The Assyrian army and musicians, from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, 7th century B.C.E. Limestone relief. *(Louvre, Paris)*

armor shooting bronze-tipped arrows. This chariot powered the armies of the Middle East for a thousand years. The first to use it successfully were the Mitanni, centered on northern Mesopotamia, about 1500 B.C.E. They were succeeded by the Hittites, based in their capital of Hattushash (Boğazköy) in eastern Anatolia from about 1650 to about 1200 B.C.E. The Hittites, in particular, also developed the use of iron and even steel for use in weapons—defensive armor and offensive spear-, arrow-, and sword-points—and in farm tools that increased agricultural productivity.

Although chariots, horses, and asses were employed by early armies, the mainstay of most was the infantry: Greek hoplites, protected by their heavy bronze armor and massed in phalanxes several rows deep; Roman legions, less heavily armed, and grouped into smaller units for greater mobility; and Chinese foot soldiers, also by the thousands. Chinese historical records are abundant in their descriptions of armies and warfare, but archaeologists were nevertheless astonished to uncover in 1974 a ceramic army of 7000 life-sized soldiers and horses (see p. 206) arranged in military formation and armed with bronze weapons, spears, longbows, and crossbows (a Chinese invention). In 1976 a second excavation uncovered the cavalry, 1400 chariots and mounted soldiers in four military units. The next year a much smaller pit was discovered, holding what appeared to be a terra cotta officer corps. These thousands of figures were not mass produced. Each figure was modeled and painted separately, even down to its elaborate hairstyle that symbolized its specific military office. The figures apparently represented the elite of the imperial troops, and were fashioned to accompany the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221–210 B.C.E.), to his own tomb and afterlife.

War took place on sea as well as land. In the eastern Mediterranean, in the fifth century B.C.E., the trireme (see p. 145) was the principal warship of both the Persians and the Greeks as they contested for power. With approximately 170 oarsmen arranged about equally in three tiers along each side, these ships could reach speeds of up to nine knots per hour. When such speeds were not necessary, the ships might hoist square-rigged sails and travel with the wind.

The trireme's hull was of light wooden construction, with the Greek ships usually somewhat lighter than

the Persians'. This enabled faster speeds but it also left the ships vulnerable to the bronze-covered rams that they carried as an offensive weapon. At first, spearmen and archers accompanied the rowers. By the end of the fourth century B.C.E., the construction changed, as decks were introduced to accommodate the armed soldiers, and multiple rows of oarsmen replaced the tiers.

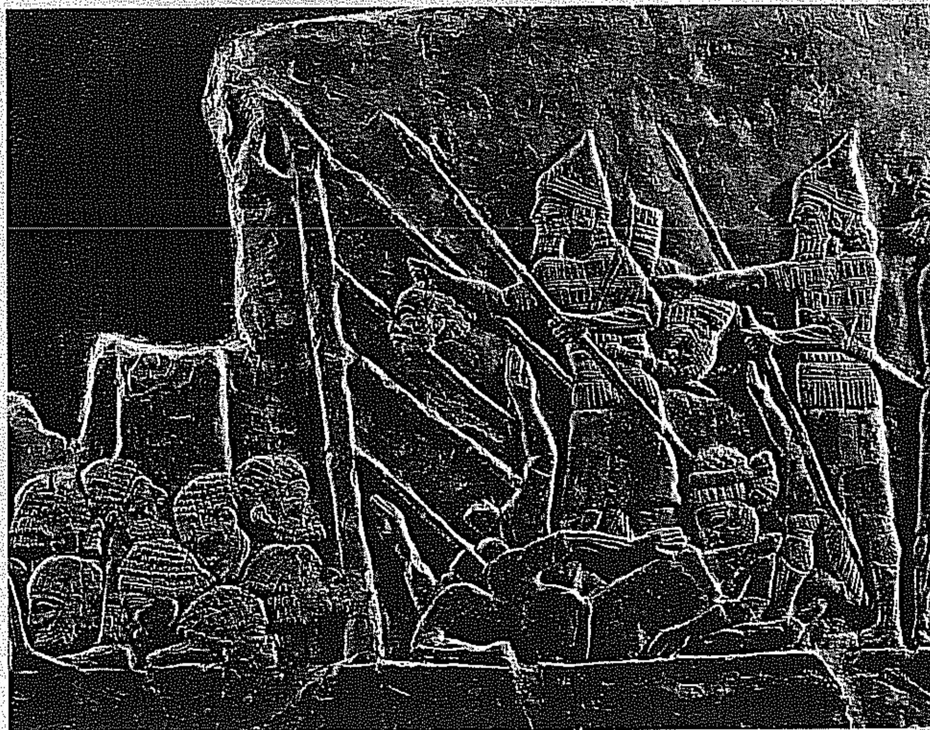
Psychological weapons had their place as well. One of the earliest and most common was the use of sound and instruments in urging on one's own troops—and providing communication among them—while frightening and confusing the enemy. There are ancient references to the use of trumpets and other instruments as accompaniments of warfare. The Bible includes instructions in their use as the Hebrews traversed the desert in their exodus from Egypt. As they finally reached their promised land, their leader Joshua's assault on the walled city of Jericho was accompanied by trumpeters blasting on rams' horns that, according to the Book of Judges, caused the city walls to collapse.

The legendary founding of the Persian Empire was recorded long afterwards by the tenth-century C.E. poet Firdowsi in Iran's national epic the *Shah-nameh* ("Book of Kings"). Beloved by its readers, the epic describes the victory by Rustum, one of the legendary founders of the Persian nation, over his arch-enemy Turani. The epic also captures the sounds of musical instruments used in battle.

The written record of warfare is filled with the images of death, destruction, and captivity, from virtually all imperial conquests. One of the closing scenes depicts corpses from the warfare of Mesopotamia, the earliest and most continuous site of imperial battles. The lamentations over the destruction of the third city of Ur, Ur III, is one of the earliest ever recorded, between 2000 and 1500 B.C.E. It reminds us that empire building is deadly business:

O Father Nanna, that city into ruins was made; the people groan.
...
Its walls were breached; the people groan.
In its lofty gates, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about;
In its boulevards, where the feasts were celebrated, scattered they lay.
In all its streets, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about;
In its places, where the festivities of the land took place, the people lay in heaps.
...
Its dead bodies, like fat placed in the sun, of themselves melted away.

(Pritchard, p. 459)



Battle of Til-Tuba between the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and the king of Elam, from the palace of Ashurbanipal, 645 B.C.E. Stone relief. (*British Museum, London*)

QUESTIONS

1. How important are warfare and murder in the construction of empire?
2. How closely can you correlate the development of new weapons of warfare with the creation of new empires?
3. What kinds of skills and powers, beyond the military, are necessary in the construction of empires?