“I FELL UPON HIM LIKE A FURIOUS ARROW”: TOWARD A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ASSYRIAN TACTICAL SYSTEM*

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Introduction

Between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE, the Assyrians forged and presided over the largest empire the Near East had yet seen.1 Incorporating the ancient seats of power in Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon, and stretching its reach even to Egypt, the neo-Assyrian empire was built on the application of massive and sustained violence to the diverse populations of these regions. The Assyrian Royal Army was an ideal tool for this task, a fearsome war machine that for centuries rampaged across the Near East, pouring “awesome terror over the land,” as the Assyrian royal inscriptions put it.2

Sources of information about the Assyrian army are sufficiently abundant to make it the earliest army scholars can investigate in any systematic detail. Its organization and equipment, the ethnicity and appearance of its soldiers, its logistics, the political ideology underpinning its deployment, and the course of individual campaigns have all been subjected to

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close scrutiny.\(^3\) Specific sieges or military engagements have also been investigated.\(^4\) While all of this work has been enormously beneficial in bringing the Assyrian army to life, the tactical system the Assyrians employed in open-field battles remains a matter of considerable uncertainty.\(^5\) In the case of military campaigns, for instance, the tendency has been to focus more on the political and strategic aspects of Assyrian


\(^5\) In many works cited supra nn. 3 and 4, the tactical system is either perfunctorily reconstructed—if it is at all—or examined only in specific engagements.