

The Neo-Assyrian Shield

Evolution, Heraldry, and Associated Tactics



Fabrice De Backer

*with the collaboration of
Evelyne Dehenin*

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Conclusion

The Neo-Assyrians enjoyed many military successes. In deploying certain combat tactics and methods, they made the shield an incomparable asset. The use of this particular piece of equipment, which was precise, light, easy to handle, and efficient, addressed several specific needs, not least, preserving the lives of soldiers.

Each distinct model of shield permitted the bearer to practice a specific type of swordplay, complementing the use of the primary weapon and rendering the shield an offensive weapon as well as an object for protection. Notably, the dual goals of offense and defence were attained, with greater or lesser success, depending on the type of shield used.

A close review of the employment of shields by soldiers in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs allows us to confirm a detail of Neo-Assyrian warfare that, although frequently observed, has never been completely proven, namely, the recurring use of mixed ranks consisting of archers and lancers in the same unit. The scenes that illustrate this basic principle number in the dozens among the Neo-Assyrian pictorial monuments. This binomial principle of combat, the base of a “combat group,” allowed an archer to cover the advance of a lancer who would, in turn, protect them both with the lance and the shield.

I mention in passing that the special and elite forces of modern police often advance in pairings of this kind, the first man bearing an armored shield in order to protect the second who follows, covering with his automatic weapon in urban combat or hostage situations.

Units of the Neo-Assyrian army were organized in groups of ten, fifty, seventy, one hundred, or even one thousand men; and the binomial

structure was perfectly adapted to suit these numbers. The advantage that this tactic offered, for those who knew how to employ it, certainly contributed to many victories for the Neo-Assyrian army. The latter, rarely mentioned as such in the royal annals, allowed this vast kingdom to remain intact for a significant period of time.

Certain types of shields could be considered insignia, perhaps not sacred, though that remains a possibility. Some shields might have even been made with this goal in mind, which could have undermined their potential to serve well in combat. The shields that I have classified as variants of the *hérisson* shield with the head of a lion, seemingly identify a warrior of a higher status.

The Neo-Assyrian mode of combat was extremely advanced, requiring a lot of training that had to be accomplished in the shortest possible time. This seems to have been dictated by practical considerations, as the Neo-Assyrian rulers were part of an agricultural and pastoral society, mostly relying on the cycles of nature. They needed to bring in maximum plunder in the minimum time at the lowest cost possible.

This small book offers a synthesis from which future studies on the topic of Neo-Assyrian armor and weapons may draw. Not everything could be included here, and surely other studies will come to correct or improve its content. If so, the present work will have achieved its main objective.