Stage 6 Ancient History: Historical Period
Option C: The Ancient Levant – First Temple Period c. 970–586 BC

Foreign relations with Assyria and Babylon, including:

- The contributing factors and outcomes of the campaign of Assyrian King Sennacherib against Judah in 701 BC

Sennacherib’s campaign against Judah

In the year 701 BCE, the Assyrian King Sennacherib led a campaign against Judah and its king Hezekiah.

What are the sources for this campaign and how can they help us to construct an accurate account of this event?
Map of Israel and Judah during the 8th century BCE

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kingdoms_of_Israel_and_Judah_map_830.svg

Sourcebook for HSC Ancient History
The Hebrew Bible accounts of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah

Source A.

“In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, went on an expedition against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. Hezekiah, king of Judah, sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: ‘I have done wrong. Leave me, and I will pay whatever tribute you impose on me.’ The king of Assyria exacted 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold from Hezekiah, king of Judah. Hezekiah paid him all the funds there were in the temple of the Lord and in the palace treasuries...”

2 Kings 18:13

Source B.

“Then King Sennacherib of Assyria invaded Judah and besieged its fortified cities and gave orders for his army to break their way through the walls....”

2 Chronicles 32:1
The Annals of Sennacherib

Three copies of the annals are known. They are each recorded on a hexagonal clay prism with 500 lines of cuneiform text.

Oriental institute Prism  
Oriental Institute of Chicago

Taylor Prism  
British Museum, London

Jerusalem Prism  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Source C.

“As for Hezekiah the Judean, who did not submit to my yoke, I besieged and took 46 of his strong walled cities as well as the countless small villages in their vicinities… I shut Hezekiah up himself in Jerusalem, his royal city, as if he were a bird in a cage… He had brought after me to Nineveh 30 talents of gold and 800 talents of silver as well as gems, antimony, jewels, large sandu-stones, couches and house chairs of ivory, elephant’s hide, ivory, maple, boxwood and all kinds of valuable treasures, and his daughters, his harem and his male and female musicians to me to Nineveh, my royal city….”

*sandu-stones = possibly a (semi) precious gem-stone

Column 3. 18-49, The Annals of Sennacherib

C. Forbes, Documents of the Assyrian Empire (Melbourne, 1986), p.72
Sennacherib destroyed many Judean cities on his approach to Jerusalem. In a “letter” written to his god Ashur he described the Assyrian destruction of Azekah, one of the fortified Judean towns.

Source D.

Ashur, my lord, encouraged me and against the land of Judah I marched… with the might of Ashur, my lord, the province of Hezekiah of Judah … the city of Azekah, his stronghold… like the nest of the eagle located on a mountain ridge, like pointed iron swords without number reaching high to heaven… Its walls were strong and rivalled the highest mountains…(Azekah was taken) By means of beaten earth ramps, mighty battering rams brought near, (and) the attack by foot soldiers… They had seen the approach of my cavalry and they had heard the roar of the mighty troops of the god Ashur and their hearts became afraid…

Sennacherib’s ‘Letter to God’.
The siege of Lachish

Lachish was another fortified Judean town destroyed by Sennacherib’s army on the approach to Jerusalem. The siege of Lachish was commemorated in a large bas-relief in Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh.


Source E.

The Lachish Relief – main scene detail. British Museum, London. No. 124906
Details of the Lachish reliefs from Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh

Sourcebook for HSC Ancient History
Source F.

“The main scene shows the attack on the gate and walls of Lachish. The protruding city gate is presented in minute detail, with its crenellations and its special reinforcement by a superstructure of warriors’ shields. The battering rams were moved over specially constructed ramps covered with wooden logs. They were “prefabricated” four-wheeled, turreted machines. The scene vividly shows the frenzied fighting of both attacker and defender in the final stage of the battle. In a desperate effort to stop the operation of the battering rams, the defenders fling down lighted torches… The grim outcome of the attack is illustrated by the captured women and children passing by the impaled bodies of prisoners.”


Source G.

Oblique Aerial photograph of Tel Lachish

Source H.

Remains of the Assyrian siege ramp, Tel Lachish

Source I.

Assyrian slingers from the Lachish relief

Source J.

Sennacherib and Jerusalem

Source K.

“Afterward, King Sennacherib of Assyria sent his officers to Jerusalem – he and all his staff being at Lachish – with this message to King Hezekiah of Judah and to all the people of Judah who were in Jerusalem: ‘Thus said King Sennacherib of Assyria: On what do you trust to enable you to endure a siege in Jerusalem?’”

2 Chronicles 32:9-10, Hebrew Bible

The defense of Jerusalem.

A fortifying wall was built around the city of Jerusalem to strengthen the existing wall during the time of Hezekiah.

Source L.

Remnants of the fortifying wall. Jerusalem

Sourcebook for HSC Ancient History
Source M.

“You took note of the places where the walls of Jerusalem needed repair. You inspected all the houses in Jerusalem and pulled some of them down to get stones to repair the city walls.”

Isaiah 22:9-10, Hebrew Bible

Siloam tunnel

To create lasting access to fresh water from within the city walls, water from the Gihon Spring (outside the city) was diverted through a 520m tunnel into the “Pool of Siloam” located within the city walls. This tunnel is known today as the “Siloam tunnel” or “Shiloah tunnel”.

Source N.

The Gihon Spring

Source O.

“In order to store water, you built a reservoir inside the city to hold the water flowing down from the old pool.”

Isaiah 22:10-11, Hebrew Bible
Source P.

“And the rest of the events of Hezekiah and all his mighty deeds, and how he made the conduit and the pool, and he brought the water into the city, they are written in the book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah.”

2 Kings 20: 20, Hebrew Bible

Source Q.

“And he took counsel with his officers and his mighty men to stop up the waters of the fountains that were outside the city, and they assisted him. And a large multitude gathered and stopped up all the fountains and the stream that flowed in the midst of the land, saying, ‘Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?’”

2 Chronicles 32: 3–4, Hebrew Bible

Modern scientific analysis of the tunnel supports a date consistent for the time of Hezekiah.

Source R.

“The radiometric Siloam Tunnel age of about 700 BC agrees well with the palaeographic age suggested for the Siloam Inscription… Our dating agrees well also with the date commonly assigned to King Hezekiah, whom the biblical text describes as having constructed the Siloam Tunnel. The three independent lines of evidence—radiometric dating, palaeography and the historical record—all converge on about 700 BC, rendering the Siloam Tunnel the best-dated Iron-Age biblical structure thus far known.”

Siloam tunnel inscription

In June 1880 an inscription recording the process of constructing the tunnel was discovered in a town called Silwan (or Siloam), just east of Jerusalem.

It contains 6 lines of text written in Paleo-Hebrew script. Study of the writing style (paleography) dates the inscription to the 8th century BCE, consistent with the time of Hezekiah.

Today the inscription is on permanent exhibition at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum.

Source S.
Transcription:


Translation:

[1] [. . .] the tunnelling; and this was how the tunnelling was completed: As [the labourers employed] [2] their picks, each crew toward the other, and while there were still three cubits remaining, the voices of the men calling out [3] to each other [could be heard], since it got louder on the right [and left]. The day the [4] opening was made, the stonecutters hacked toward each other, pick against pick. [5] And the water flowed from the source to the pool [twelve hundred cubits], [6] (and) the height of the rock above the stonecutters' heads was one hundred cubits.

Source T.

“The Bible informs us that Hezekiah, in a precautionary measure against a possible siege by the Assyrians, brought water into the city of Jerusalem... The tunnel was therefore the work of Hezekiah and it was cut sometime before 701 BCE, the generally accepted date for the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem. The text of the inscription must have been inscribed shortly after the completion of the tunnel. Aside from the palaeographic evidence, the graphic and fresh description of the breaching of the tunnel strongly supports this conclusion.”


Source U.

“A good case can be made on the basis of the palaeography to date the inscription in the Iron Age. The inscription itself, on the other hand, does not tell us this. It is only a secondary source, which in this case may be right but which can also be wrong, because nobody can really say on the basis of this anonymous inscription whether it was Hezekiah or some other Judean king from the eighth or seventh century who constructed the tunnel.”


Source V.

“The Siloam Tunnel and the inscription incised on its rock wall have, since the inscription’s discovery in 1880, been considered the work of King Hezekiah, and have served as a chronological anchor for the late Iron Age in Judah. The authors’ recent excavations in the City of David near the Gihon Spring and the northern end of the tunnel have yielded new archaeological data that bear on the date of the construction of the tunnel and the incising of the inscription. Their evaluation of these data suggests that the completion of the tunnel should be set back several decades to at least the early part of the 8th century BCE, which would mean that the tunnel predates Hezekiah’s reign.”

Source W.

Seal impression (bula) of King Hezekiah unearthed in the Ophel excavations in Jerusalem.
[Copyright: Dr Eilat Mazar; photo by Ouria Tadmor]

The Ophel site in Jerusalem outlined in red.

*Sourcebook for HSC Ancient History*
News release:


Watch the video detailing its discovery and importance:


Jar handles with seal impressions that read “for the king” (lmlk) have been discovered at many sites, including Lachish, Ramat Rahel, Ophel and Azekah, suggesting the stockpiling of food and supplies for the impending siege of Jerusalem.

These seals date to the time of Hezekiah.

Source X.

Lmlk jar seal from Tel Azekah.
Tel Aviv University excavation in collaboration with Macquarie University, 2015.
Source Y.

“Lmlk seal impressions designate that the contents of the jar (probably wine or oil) were part of a tribute exacted by Hezekiah to stockpile food and supplies for Jerusalem.”


Source Z.

“That night the angel of the Lord went forth and struck down 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp. Early the next morning, there they were, all the corpses of the dead. So Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, broke camp and returned to Nineveh...”

2 Kings 19:35, Hebrew Bible

Source AA.

“She then King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz prayed about this and called out to God for help. The Lord sent an angel, who destroyed every valiant soldier, commander and officer in the camp of the Assyrian king, so that he had to return shamefaced to his own country...”

2 Chronicles 32:20-21, Hebrew Bible
In his attempt to throw off Assyrian control, Hezekiah had made an alliance with neighbouring leaders including the Egyptian Pharaoh Taharqa (Dynasty 25). It is thought this may be the same incident Herodotus refers to when telling the story about Sennacherib’s campaign more than 200 years later (5th century BCE).

“As he [Egyptian king] lay there facing the Assyrians, thousands of field-mice swarmed over them [the Assyrian troops] during the night and ate their quivers, their bowstrings and the leather handles of their shields, so that on the following day, having no arms to fight with, they abandoned their positions and suffered severe losses during their retreat.”

Herodotus, *Histories*, Book II, 141
Source DD:

“It seems that Sennacherib, given the choice, did not intend to conquer Jerusalem by force… Lachish was the main military stronghold of Hezekiah, the leader of the rebellion. Sennacherib was determined to conquer and destroy Lachish before turning to deal with Hezekiah in his capital. By doing so, he intended to achieve two aims: first, to cripple Hezekiah’s ability to fight; and second, to demonstrate just how terrible and mighty was the military power of Assyria. Both these aims were fully achieved.”


Source EE:

“The Kingdom of Judah absorbed heavy blows from the Assyrians when the cities of the Shephelah and the Jerusalem region were destroyed, the capital besieged and the very existence of the monarchy threatened. Then suddenly, some factor or factors, whose exact nature is obscure but which certainly did not emanate from internal Judean causes, forced the Assyrian army to retreat. Jerusalem, the Judean hill country and other regions not yet conquered were thus saved.”


Source FF:

(Paraphrased)
The Assyrian campaign was progressing well but during the siege of Jerusalem Sennacherib had to suddenly return to Nineveh because there was a declining political situation in Babylon.