COMPANION GUIDE

The Secret of the Royal Library

Book One of The Mesopotamian Adventures of Iskander Wood



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Can you read these? Page 6 shows you how.

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Words from the Book

Twenty-five words from the book that may be new or unfamiliar. There is a fuller glossary of people, places and gods in the back of the book, on page 197.

alcove A small recess set back from a room. The one at Mar Mattai says Monks Only.

aqueduct A bridge that carries water instead of people.

bazaar A market of many small stalls, covered over. Erbil has one and so does Nineveh.

calligraphy Distinctive handwriting. Nigel calls the obelisk script a strange calligraphy.

campaign A season of war. Esarhaddon dies on campaign, on the road to Egypt.

catacomb An underground passage or chamber, often used for burial.

conical Cone-shaped. Iskander is handed a small conical hat to wear.

conquest Taking land by force. Ashurbanipal says his heart is not in it.

cuneiform The oldest known writing, pressed into soft clay with a cut reed.

emissary Someone sent to speak or act on a ruler's behalf.

inscription Words cut into stone or pressed into clay so they last.

lamassu A winged bull or lion with a human head, set at a gate to guard it.

limestone A pale stone soft enough to carve. The obelisk is black limestone.

magistrate An official who hears disputes and decides them. Hinno and Hanna face them.

obelisk A tall four-sided stone pillar narrowing to a point.

pilgrimage A journey made to a holy place. Schmoni's family goes every year.

procession A formal line of people moving together, usually so everyone can watch.

quay A landing place along a river where boats tie up. Say it "key".

rebellion Rising against a ruler. Ashurbanipal's own brother leads one.

relief A carving cut so figures stand out from a flat wall. Watch for the other relief in the book, the one that means a weight lifting off you.

scribe Someone whose work is writing. In Assyria that made you powerful.

siege Surrounding a city and waiting, to force it to give in.

stylus The cut reed a scribe pressed into clay to make the wedges.

tribute Goods a conquered people sent their ruler every year.

tunic A loose garment like a long shirt, usually belted.

Discussion Questions

For going deeper after finishing the book.

1. At the very beginning, Iskander imagines a crowd chanting his name. What does he want most when the book opens?

2. Iskander doesn't like history at first. What changes his mind? Was there one exact moment, or did it happen slowly?

3. Is Ashurbanipal a villain, a hero, or something in between?

4. Ashurbanipal built an amazing library but also burned other people's cities and books. Can someone do great things and terrible things at the same time?

5. What is Iskander hoping for from Ashurbanipal? If Ashurbanipal listened to Iskander, what would he do?

6. Iskander meets people who were taken from their homes and brought to Nineveh. What do you think their lives were like in the city?

7. The medallion reads "Memento Vivere," remember to live. By the end, what does Iskander decide it means?

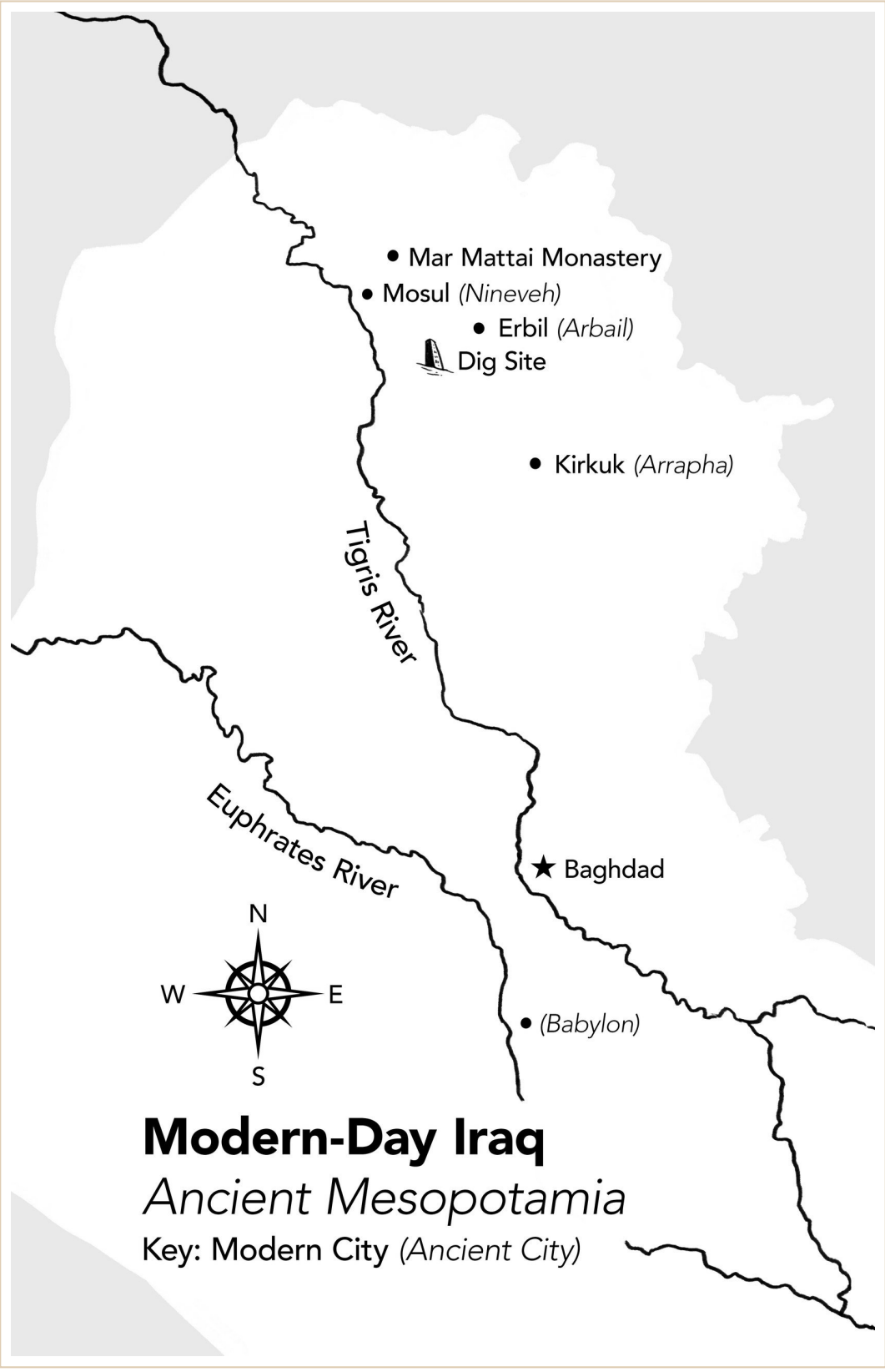
8. Raban Gorgis tells Iskander that the person who changed wasn't the king, it was Iskander. Were you expecting that? Why do you think the story doesn't let Iskander fix the past?

9. What is the secret of the Royal Library?

10. Iskander's medallion takes him "to the moment that needs him." If yours could take you to any moment in history, where would you go, and why?

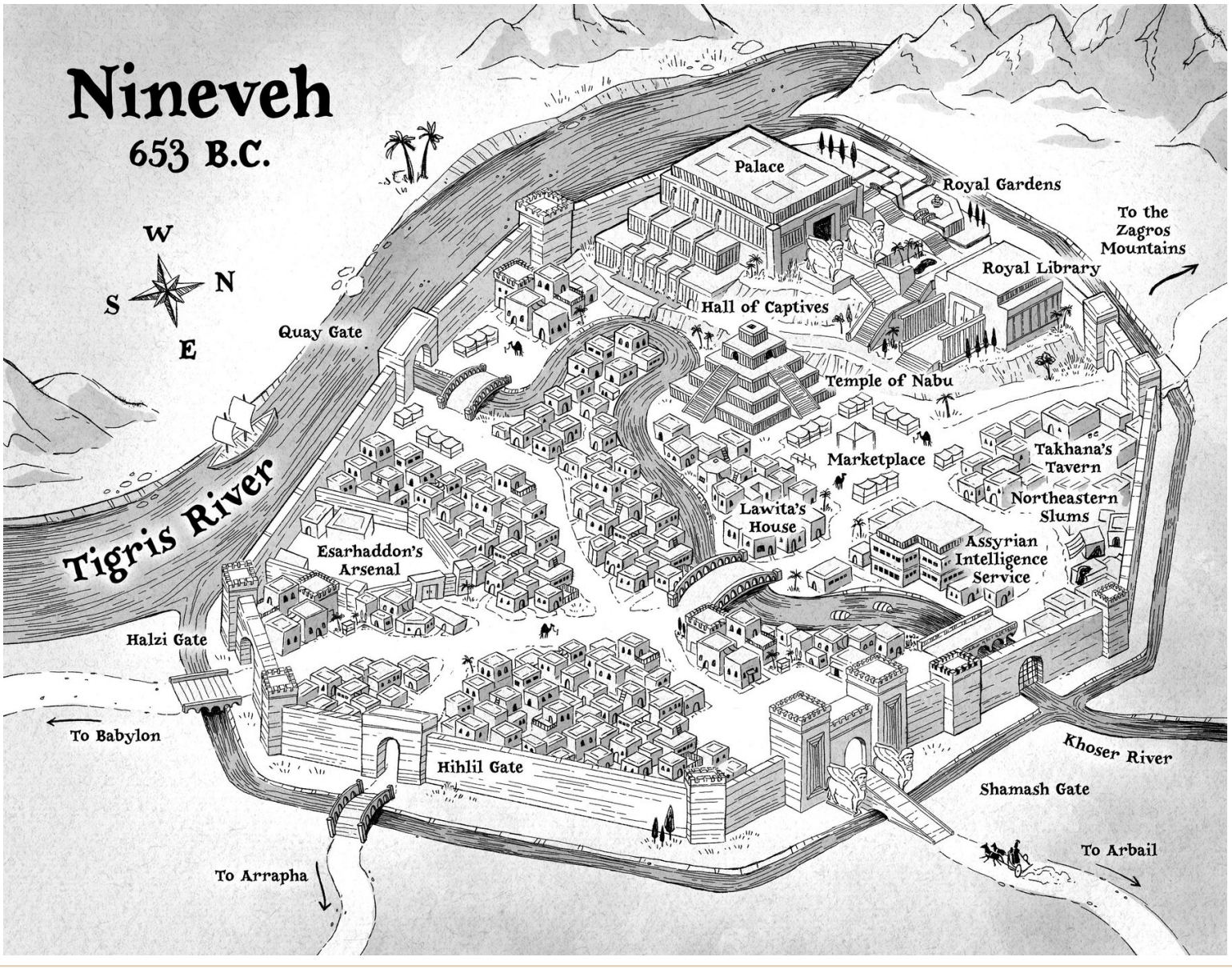
Modern Iraq, Ancient Mesopotamia

Iskander lives in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which the Assyrians in their day called Arbail. Nineveh, also an ancient city, is in modern-day Mosul, about an hour and a half's drive from Erbil. Mesopotamia is called the land between the rivers, which is what the name means in Greek, after the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the fertile land around them.



Nineveh, 653 BC

Based on archaeological records. The real city, the most populous in the world at the time, held a good deal more, but this map focuses on the real locations Iskander interacts with, and a few fictional ones. Illustration by Bailey Vidler. Can you trace Iskander's journey and find small details along the way that remind you of things in the book?



Assyrian Numbers

The mark at the start of every chapter in the book is not decoration. It is that chapter's number, written the way a scribe in Nineveh wrote numbers. Up to fifty-nine, the whole system is two marks.



ONE

A thin vertical wedge, pressed straight down.



TEN

A corner wedge, pressed in with the tip of the reed.

One to nine · stack them in rows of three



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Tens · corner wedges, side by side



10 20 30

A scribe just kept going. Fifty is five corner wedges.

Together · tens first, then ones



12 25 33

Turn to chapter 25 in the book and compare. It is the same mark, because it is the same number.

Your turn · anything from 1 to 59

your age

the chapter you stopped at

people in your house

Past fifty-nine the Assyrians counted in sixties rather than tens, which is why an hour still has sixty minutes and a circle three hundred and sixty degrees.

Write Your Name in Cuneiform

Cuneiform is not an alphabet. A sign does not stand for a letter; it stands for a whole syllable, like ba or ki. So there is no way to spell an English name across letter by letter. What Assyrian scribes did instead is more interesting.

Their records are full of foreign names, and the method was always the same: listen to the name, find the closest syllables Assyrian had, and write those down. The name came out sounding a little Assyrian. That could be one explanation of how Iskander ended up with the name Iskand-ki-Ashur ☺

Four steps

1 **Say your name out loud and break it into chunks that each end in a vowel.**
Emma is e-ma. Sophia is su-pi-a. Every sign on the chart ends in a vowel, so your name will too.

2 **Swap any sound Assyrian did not have for the nearest one it did.**
See the box below.

3 **Find each chunk on the chart on the next page and copy its wedges.**
Left to right, in the order you say them.

4 **Put the person-mark in front.**
One wedge for a man's name, the other for a woman's. Scribes did this so a reader would know a name was coming.

Sounds Assyrian did not have

o	use u
f	use p
v	use b
th	use t
ch	use sh
w	use u
j	use i plus a vowel, so Jay is i-a
e	five e signs exist; if yours is not one, use i

Worked out

Emma	e-ma
Liam	li-a-mu
Grace	ga-ra-si
Ryan	ra-i-a-nu
Sophia	su-pi-a
Daniel	da-ni-lu
Lily	li-li

Longer, and a bit more Assyrian. That is the right answer, not a wrong one. There is more than one right answer, too: scribes spelled the same name several different ways.

The person-mark · goes first, before the syllables

 before a man's name

 before a woman's name

Finished · what you are aiming for



Emma woman's mark, then e-ma



Ryan man's mark, then ra-i-a-nu

The Chart, and a Tablet to Write On

	a	i	u
–	 a	 i	 u
b	 ba	 bi	 bu
d	 da	 di	 du
g	 ga	 gi	 gu
h	 ha	 hi	 hu
k	 ka	 ki	 ku
l	 la	 li	 lu
m	 ma	 mi	 mu

	a	i	u
n	 na	 ni	 nu
p	 pa	 pi	–
r	 ra	 ri	 ru
s	 sa	 si	 su
sh	 sha	–	 shu
t	 ta	 ti	 tu
z	za	zi	zu

e sounds
e · me · ne · she · te

Those five only. For any other e, use the i sign.

Two squares are empty. When the chunk you need is not here, use the nearest sound that is. An Assyrian scribe writing down a foreign name did exactly that (this was their version of the proverbial Ellis Island experience; ask your parents about that!).

This is a starter set of the simplest signs. A scribe in the Royal Library also had signs for syllables that end in a consonant, and several hundred more that stand for a whole word.

Your tablet

· person-mark first, then your syllables, left to right

Write your name in pencil first. Scribes worked in soft clay for the same reason.

Extra Fun Facts

The book has so many fun facts, and we could only include twelve in the book (page 205). Here are nine more.

1 **Counting in sixties** EVERY CHAPTER NUMBER

Past fifty-nine, the Assyrians counted in sixties rather than tens, which is why an hour still has sixty minutes and a circle three hundred and sixty degrees. In this way, Assyrian math and time are still with us today.

2 **A feast for 69,574** CHAPTER 19

Ashurbanipal boasts that one of his ancestors fed nearly 70,000 people. He did. A carved stone found at Nimrud in 1951 records King Ashurnasirpal II feeding 69,574 guests for ten days to celebrate his new palace.

3 **Beer through a straw** CHAPTER 14

Ashurbanipal drinks his beer through a reed straw. The oldest known beer recipe, a hymn to the goddess Ninkasi, comes from Mesopotamia. Beer then was nothing like modern beer: thick and grainy, and handed out to workers as part of their pay. Some Sumerian beers were likely much less alcoholic too, closer to kvass or kombucha. People drank it through long reed straws to get past the husks floating on top.

4 **A king who could read** CHAPTER 7

The young Ashurbanipal says he is learning Sumerian, Akkadian and texts from before the Flood. The real king boasted of the same thing in his own inscription: that he had studied difficult Sumerian and Akkadian, and inspected writing on stones from before the flood.

5 **King of the Universe** CHAPTERS 7, 12 AND 18

It sounds like bragging, and it was, but it was also his official title. Tablets in his library were stamped: palace of Ashurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria.

6 **A poem about Erbil** CHAPTER 16

Hinno has heard the king wrote a poem about Arbail. A real poem about the city survives in Assyria's royal archives. It begins: "Arbela, O Arbela, heaven without equal, Arbela! City of merry-making, city of festivals." Arbail is Erbil, the city where the author lives today.

7 **Guards at play** CHAPTER 27

The soldiers pass the time with a board game. Real Assyrian guards did too. They played the Game of Twenty Squares, a race game with dice, and scratched its board into the bases of palace sculptures. One giant winged bull in the British Museum has a game board carved between its hooves.

8 **Lachish** CHAPTER 17

The destruction of Lachish is mentioned in the book. Lachish was a real city in the kingdom of Judah. Sennacherib's army besieged it in 701 BC and carved the whole siege across the walls of his palace at Nineveh. Those carvings are now in the British Museum, and the siege appears in the Bible too, in 2 Kings 18.

9 **Esarhaddon's arsenal** CHAPTER 29

The arsenal where Hadi's partner sold their goods was a real building. The hill it stood on in Mosul is still called Nebi Yunus, which means the prophet Jonah, after a shrine to Jonah built on top. Nigel jokes about Jonah in chapter 1.

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