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978-0-521-51790-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art

Mehmet Ali Ataç

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THE MYTHOLOGY OF KINGSHIP IN NEO-ASSYRIAN ART

The relief slabs that decorated the palaces of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which emphasized military conquest and royal prowess, have traditionally been understood as statements of imperial propaganda that glorified the Assyrian king. In this book, Mehmet-Ali Ataç argues that the reliefs hold a deeper meaning that was addressed primarily to an internal audience composed of court scholars and master craftsmen. Ataç focuses on representations of animals, depictions of the king as priest and warrior, and figures of mythological beings that evoke an archaic cosmos. He demonstrates that these images mask a complex philosophical rhetoric developed by court scholars in collaboration with master craftsmen who were responsible for their design and execution. Ataç argues that the layers of meaning embedded in the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs go deeper than politics, imperial propaganda, and straightforward historical record.

Mehmet-Ali Ataç is assistant professor of classical and Near Eastern archaeology at Bryn Mawr College. A scholar of the art of the ancient Near East, he has contributed to *The Art Bulletin* and *The Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AB *The Art Bulletin.*
- CAD *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.*
 Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956–.
- CANE Sasson, Jack M., ed. *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East.* 4 vols. New York: Scribner, 1995.
- JCS *Journal of Cuneiform Studies.*
- JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies.*
- KAR Ebeling, Erich. *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts.* 2 vols. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient Gesellschaft 28 (1919) and 34 (1923). Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1915–23.
- LdÄ *Lexikon der Ägyptologie.* Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1972–93.
- OEAE Redford, Donald B., ed. *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt.* 3 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- RIMA 2 Grayson, Albert Kirk. *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC).* The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods. Vol. 2. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- RIMA 3 Grayson, Albert Kirk. *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858–745 BC).* The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods. Vol. 3. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1996.
- RIA *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1932.
- SBV Standard Babylonian Version (of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*)

PROLOGUE

This study is as much about ancient Mesopotamian philosophy as it is about ancient Mesopotamian art. It is also as much concerned with ancient Mesopotamian iconography in a broad sense as it is more specifically concerned with the iconography of one particular period of the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, the Neo-Assyrian Empire (883–612 BCE). The principal objective is to lay out and attempt to interpret a visual, and in essence sacral, language encoded in the art of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and hypothesize the involvement of a scribal-sacerdotal elite, especially in their rapport with master craftsmen who would have been in a supervisory position, in the design and production of this corpus of sculpture.

In this respect, this is an attempt toward a particular method of iconographic interpretation that may have the potential to be applied to other periods and cultures of the ancient Near East and to a certain extent its ancient Egyptian counterpart as well. Inasmuch as such an interpretation depends on contemporary textual sources, and inasmuch as an encoded language is also at stake in the case of ancient Mesopotamian texts, this study also encompasses a degree of textual analysis and interpretation.

In the scholarship of the past several decades, both Assyrian and earlier Mesopotamian iconography have been examined almost exclusively in sociopolitical terms, with the emphasis placed on what one might refer to as the “outward” meaning of this art. Not enough emphasis has been devoted to its “inward” essence, the underlying levels of meaning embodied by this visual corpus. Here, without denying the elements of time and change within the three centuries that witnessed the development of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, I attempt to approach this material as a tradition grounded in certain principles of a fundamental nature and propose to analyze it within paradigms of traditional art, bringing to the fore those aspects that tie together the various phases of its development.

Although the sociopolitical approaches of the 1970s and 1980s addressed a gap in the prior scholarship that attempted solely to explain the religious meaning of ancient Mesopotamian art, it is now time to turn back to that perspective in a more up-to-date manner with the added benefit of the vastly increased amount and precision of textual and cross-cultural data now at our disposal.¹ In carrying out such an attempt, in addition to ancient Mesopotamian and Neo-Assyrian works of art and written sources, I draw on a body of comparative cultural data from a number of other ancient and later traditions comprising Egyptian, Indic, Greek, and Gnostic. In this regard, this study represents a preliminary attempt to decipher the art,

iconography, and, to a certain extent, the texts of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Thus, it is hoped that it will fill a long-standing gap in the study of the art and culture of the ancient Near East.

There are three thematically focused but conceptually interrelated principal parts to this study. Part I, “Human and Animal Ontology in the Neo-Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” examines a series of visual configurations in which human and animal anatomy are juxtaposed and blended into one another in the relief programs of the five principal Neo-Assyrian kings who built palaces of their own in the three consecutive capital cities of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BCE), Sargon II (721–705 BCE), Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), and Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE). It is intended both as an introduction and an orientation to the Neo-Assyrian palace relief corpus examined throughout the study and as an initiation into the method of interpretation adopted therein. This part of the study is the only section in this work in which the entire range of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs is analyzed, albeit selectively, by moving vertically in the chronology. In this respect, it is also meant to provide a basic historical overview of some of the major developments in the establishment, growth, and collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Part I in essence posits that certain elements of human and animal anatomy found on the reliefs run in the form of a visual discourse throughout the scenes of Neo-Assyrian palace decoration, possibly revealing an understanding of the ontological kinship of man and animal likely prevalent among the designers and carvers of the sculpture, if not generalizable to the broader Neo-Assyrian public. The presence of this mode of visual discourse in a variety of forms throughout the reliefs that belong to the entire three centuries of the Neo-Assyrian period discloses to what extent common threads of morphology and visual rhetoric underlie an artistic tradition that also reflects significant elements of diversity and change. Further, the disclosure of this mode of visual discourse is the first step here toward laying out the subtle philosophical contents of the Neo-Assyrian reliefs – contents that surely transcend a visual documentation of contemporary military and political events.

Following this broad visual survey, Part II, “Kingship and Priesthood in the Art of Ashurnasirpal II,” focuses on the art of one particular king, the first in the series of five examined in Part I, Ashurnasirpal II, the founder of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, who reigned in the first half of the ninth century BCE. This part argues that the relief decoration of this king’s palace, the Northwest Palace on the citadel of Nimrud, ancient Kalhu, is a highly emblematic and “hieratic” art woven with philosophical, mythological, and cosmological symbolism that constituted the conceptual backdrop to the sense of history present in this decorative program. This symbolism primarily entails two sources: the ancient Mesopotamian antediluvian tradition expressed through the winged figures of the antediluvian sages and what one may understand as the dialectics of the military and the sacral in the traditional philosophy of kingship, expressed here in a distinctively Assyrian idiom.

The historical element in the art of Ashurnasirpal II manifests itself through representations of what must have been the chief military events of this king’s reign, primarily in the throne room of the Northwest Palace. It would be misleading, however, to think of the historical and emblematic-hieratic components in the art of Ashurnasirpal II and his successors as two conceptually separate modes of thinking, achieving two different things but regardless placed side by side in the decorative programs of the palaces. Rather, what we see especially in the art of Ashurnasirpal II is to what extent the Neo-Assyrian historical tradition was not an affair independent from the sacral and philosophical paradigms that were expressed primarily through the emblematic-hieratic mode of representation, but one fully integrated with it. In this respect,

one first needs to understand thoroughly what this emblematic-hieratic mode entails before attempting to analyze the historical narrative present in the relief programs. Given that this study does not attempt to be a comprehensive history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its art, its specific focus and emphasis are the emblematic-hieratic mode of relief representation and the implications of its content. Future work, however, should investigate more closely how the reliefs depicting the contemporary military events and thus playing into the long-standing Assyrian historical tradition, which reaches back to the Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1350–1000 BCE) and beyond, relate to the mythical and philosophical paradigms presented by the emblematic-hieratic mode.

Among other themes, the visual analysis carried out in Part II is primarily organized around configurations of duality and union, understood as the duality and the union of the *regnum* and the *sacerdotium*, the royal and the priestly, treated as fundamental philosophical concepts found in traditional societies, regardless of whether one can talk about the presence of a full-time professional priesthood in ancient Mesopotamia or the Neo-Assyrian Empire. I argue that the art of Ashurnasirpal II is richly and continuously emblematic in the expression of these concepts, with many details, themes, and variations offering an extremely rich ground for visual analysis.

Important changes take place in the art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the eighth and seventh centuries, which witness the growth of Assyria into a cosmopolitan superpower in the Near East. Within this line of development, although the said historical mode acquires a much more expansive and panoramic quality with greater specificity in the depiction of contemporary military affairs, the emblematic-hieratic mode that is our focus here becomes less continuous and more discrete, especially in the palaces of the Sargonids of the seventh century in Nineveh, Sennacherib, and Ashurbanipal. In other words, whereas the art of Ashurnasirpal II may be thought of as continuously and consistently emblematic, the art of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal are only discretely so, and hence much less susceptible to the kind of rigorous visual analysis conducted on the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II.

And yet the semantic aspects of this later emblematic component, especially inasmuch as they relate to the ancient Mesopotamian intellectual tradition and its relevance to art, are so important that they deserve a lengthy conceptual treatment. It is hence in this conceptual and semantic direction that the last part of this study is orientated, because the discrete figures of the *Mischwesen*, a German term meaning “mixed being,” found especially in the palaces of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal by no stretch of imagination parallel the almost endlessly continuous and rich variations in detail displayed by the emblematic reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II. A thorough inventory of all these figures that appear in various parts of the palaces, primarily doorways, to search for principles and patterns of organization in their placement is a vast and difficult project, especially given that the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh is still not well understood, and such a task lies beyond the scope of the present project. Future work, when the archaeological record is more complete, perhaps with the help of computerized technology as well, would shed more light on principles and patterns of placement of the figures of *Mischwesen* in the Neo-Assyrian palaces.

Part III, “The Semantics of Sages and *Mischwesen* in Neo-Assyrian Art and Thought,” hence probes the levels of meaning behind this most directly mythological and emblematic vocabulary of Neo-Assyrian iconography: representations in the *Mischwesen* form of “antediluvian sages,” the *apkallus*, in the art of Ashurnasirpal II, and especially those of the “rebel gods,” depicted in a variety of forms combining animal and human, who fight against the organizers

and rulers of the cosmos according to the mythological saga related by the Babylonian poem of cosmogony, in the palaces of the Sargonids in the seventh century BCE. To date, in iconographic studies, these representations have been thought of as primarily apotropaic, without much investigation into their deep philosophical and cosmological allusions that also include the ancient Mesopotamian flood traditions.

Part III presents a basic survey of major extant figures of the *Mischwesen* in the Neo-Assyrian palaces, identifying the figural types and indicating their locations. An important argument this part of the study makes is that these mythical beings stand for a former generation of suppressed or bound gods who are now the concealed agents of initiatic knowledge, or “gnosis,” and with whom the scribal-sacerdotal elite of the Assyrian court must have associated themselves. Thus, the presence in art of representations of these mythical beings should be understood as self-referential on the part of the court scholars elite and master craftsmen who were involved in the design and execution of this iconography. Part III hence attempts to contextualize further the entire effort undertaken in this study within the ancient Mesopotamian intellectual tradition, which the Assyrians traced back to a mythological proto-history that entailed the handing over of the arts and crafts of civilization from spirits and demigods to the humanity of the present time.

In sum, the principal common denominator among the three main parts of this study is the analysis of visual discourses that underlie and transcend what have received attention so far as the external and the most obvious aspects of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs. On this common ground, however, each of these three parts has also its own distinctive agenda and flavor. In the case of Part I, the material is a vast array of scenes that include battles, deportations, tributary processions, and hunts – in a way the building blocks of the “historical narrative” that Neo-Assyrian art is known for. The target here, however, is not “historical narrative” per se but a putative discourse in human and animal ontology that on the one hand transcends the subject matter of the scenes in which it is found, but on the other renders the deeper messages of those scenes more complex and meaningful. In Part II, the material is the vast array of emblematic scenes that depict Ashurnasirpal II in what has been understood as a variety of his roles in the company of eunuch officials and antediluvian sages, and the target is a proposed discourse in the fundamental dialectics of kingship and priesthood that again transcends the historical career of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. Finally, the material of Part III is the body of highly emblematic representations of the supernatural beings of the Neo-Assyrian palaces, and the target is their semantics that on the one hand transcend their obvious apotropaic function and on the other render that function more efficacious and meaningful. In all three parts of the study, each of the three underlying visual discourses speaks to the fact that this art is the creation of the minds and skills of exceptional master craftsmen, or master supervisors, who would have been very much part of the scholarly and intellectual milieu of the Neo-Assyrian court.

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