

PART I

HUMAN AND ANIMAL ONTOLOGY IN THE
NEO-ASSYRIAN PALACE RELIEFS

I will not tell you about irrational animals, because I have never learned any of their measurements. Draw them from nature, and in this respect you will achieve a good style.

Cennino Cennini¹

The Assyrian animal figures of the seventh century rank among the finest achievements that exist in the visual arts.

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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

NEO-ASSYRIAN PALACE RELIEFS DISPLAY AN INTEREST IN DEPICTING A VARIETY OF animals. These animal figures are often so effective in conveying the physical nature of their subjects that they clearly reflect their artists' keen observation of and familiarity with animal anatomy. Commenting on the rendition of horses on these reliefs, H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort writes: "The draughtsman must have known and lived with them as no Egyptian artist ever did, and with a delicate observation – completely absent in their human figures – could render shades of mood and temperament in sensitive horses' heads, beautifully coordinated movement of neck and body in horses starting to pull up, horses swimming, horses straining up a mountain slope when the rider slackens his rein."³ Representations of animal bodies are not alone on Neo-Assyrian reliefs, however, and are in fact often depicted in association with or juxtaposition to human bodies. Contrary to Groenewegen-Frankfort's statement, the human figure too can be considered to have constituted a focus of anatomical attention for the Assyrian artist.

Although the human body is infrequently shown completely in the nude in Neo-Assyrian art, there is often a considerable degree of bodily exposure in human figures, composite creatures, and genii that incorporate human body parts shown on the reliefs. There are two general categories of exposed human bodies: the first is the partial anatomical exposure of certain body parts, especially legs and arms, belonging to the large-scale human figures, especially the anthropomorphic genii, and always rendered in a distinctively stylized manner (Figs. 1 and 2), and the second, the full or partial nudity of captives and slain enemies (Figs. 3 and 4), sometimes shown in smaller scale, or the Assyrians themselves in certain special situations such as warfare (Fig. 5). In the case of both human and animal figures, the artists seem to have taken the opportunity to exploit, and almost revel in, their capability to render human and animal musculature in a stylized albeit naturalistically vivid manner. The result reflects a consistent and systematic endeavor on their part in creating the visual fabric of human and animal anatomy with which the reliefs are woven.

This part of the present study examines the extent to which the Neo-Assyrian artist may have had a conscious intention not only to juxtapose the human body to the animal on the reliefs, but also to blend their respective anatomies with one another, although rather paratactically, so that the two may be understood as ontologically cognate. It also investigates the possible intellectual ramifications that such configurations may have embodied, especially with regard



FIGURE 1. Human-headed *apkallu* holding a wild goat, Panel Z a 1, Room T, transition to Room Z, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. London, British Museum, ANE 124561. Photo: author.

to a metaphysics of corporeality and essence that can be thought to have been shared and understood among the designers and carvers of the reliefs.

From this standpoint, we should assume, as is maintained throughout this study, that artistic production in the Neo-Assyrian court was an intellectual endeavor, carried out under the supervision of an informed body of scholarly experts. To what extent such scholars would have been involved in the actual carving of the reliefs would be difficult to gauge. However, it would be reasonable to assume that there would have been master artists or master craftsmen who would have belonged to, or have at least been closely affiliated with, such court intellectuals, with a group of lower-ranking craftsmen working under their close supervision. It would also be plausible to postulate a significant degree of involvement on the part of the ruler in the design



FIGURE 2. Detail of Fig. 1 showing the upper body of the *apkallu* and the wild goat. Photo: author.

and content of the art and architecture as well, even though the participation of the king in the design process may have been much more limited than that of the relevant scholarly experts.

A reconstruction of the creative process in Neo-Assyrian architectural and artistic output is not attempted here, although certain scholars have already drawn attention to the involvement of both the king and the court intellectuals in the Neo-Assyrian artistic production.⁴ Detailed discussions of such “mechanisms of creative process” have also been carried out in the study of the artistic program at Persepolis in the Achaemenid Persian period (550–331 BCE).⁵ Within the present framework, suffice it to emphasize the close involvement of a body of scholars, especially in their capacity of including exceptional master craftsmen among them, in the design



FIGURE 3. Assyrian chariot attacking the enemy, Panel 8a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. London, British Museum, ANE 124546. Photo: author.



FIGURE 4. Detail of Fig. 3 showing fallen enemy under chariot. Photo: author.

and production of the Neo-Assyrian artistic programs and the impact of this intellectual elite on the way the iconography was codified and understood. For the sake of brevity and convenience, however, I use the phrase the “Assyrian artist” in referring to the “authors” of the art here under examination, assuming that this designation carries with it all the complexity of the various levels of experts and craftsmen involved both in the design process and its execution. A detailed study of the nature, role, and identity of the Assyrian artists and their intersection with the intellectual elite is undertaken in Part III in relation to this elite’s etiological connection with the sages and demigods of ancient Mesopotamian mythology.



FIGURE 5. Assyrian soldiers crossing a river on inflated skins, Panel 11b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. London, British Museum, ANE 124541. Photo: author.

The emphasis on anatomy in Neo-Assyrian representations has been noted time and again by scholars. For instance, regarding the way aspects of human anatomy are rendered in the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, Samuel M. Paley writes: “Other lines added to the character of the figures: the profile of the face, the rendering of the arms and legs, showing the muscles of the arm from two angles on a single plane, and the cutaneous vein running down the side of the shin below the bundle of the muscle of the leg. The conventions adopted were those of a robust, warlike people accustomed to hard work and exercise, and perhaps very proud of their own musculature.”⁶ Yet the deployment of this anatomical emphasis on the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs in constructing a continuous visual discourse of a potentially philosophical character has not received enough attention.⁷ This part of the study hence attempts to lay out the mechanics and semantics of such a visual discourse.

Before laying out the basic grammar of the visual language of human and animal anatomy in the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, however, it is important to discuss ancient views of man and his relationship with animals to establish a more enhanced conceptual background for the putative philosophical rhetoric on the ontology of man and beast found in Neo-Assyrian art and traced with examples in this text. This attempt would help place this visual discourse within the context of ancient Mesopotamian literature and draw comparisons between the ancient Near East and certain other ancient religious traditions.

In addition to a brief discussion of notions of kinship between man and animals in this regard, what follows is especially concerned with the one instance in ancient Mesopotamian poetry in which the relationship between man and animals is crucial, the creation and “civilization” of Enkidu in the Standard Babylonian Version (SBV) of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (I 188–98). This particular redaction of the epic is known primarily from tablets found in the so-called Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh.⁸ The poem would thus have been a widespread intellectual source and period ethos among the Neo-Assyrian elite, including the designers of the art themselves.

One of Sennacherib’s reliefs from Court VI of the Southwest Palace at Nineveh depicts the king and the royal entourage traversing a marsh area (Figs. 6–7). The Assyrian procession occupies the lower two registers of the composition, whereas, separated from them, a glimpse of the fauna of the area is shown in the upper two registers. In contrast to many Assyrian scenes traced below that bring human and animal bodies together, in this instance the animals are segregated from the Assyrians as the latter pass along. The human intrusion to the animals’ habitat is perhaps best expressed by the sow and its young, seen on the second register from the top, that seem to be making their way into the marshes away from the king and his entourage (Figs. 6–7). The absence of horses from the king’s chariot further sharpens the distinction drawn between nature and the human intrusion to it shown in the lower registers.⁹ One can take this composition as a cue to introduce some of the ideas regarding the bond and distance between man and animal to be explored in greater detail in the following visual survey.

The incorporation of an animal into human communities depends on the nature of the animal. To be domesticable, animals must possess certain behavioral characteristics such as “the toughness to survive in man-made environments, the temper to live in gregarious situations and to accept the herder as master, the absence of an instinct to flee at the slightest danger, and a disposition of placid acceptance.”¹⁰

As much as human-animal closeness is contingent on the nature of the animal, it is also directly related to how close man views himself to the animal world. Modern man’s relationship with animals in general is more one of alienation than bonding. Albert de Pury argues that



FIGURE 6. Scene from the transport of the colossal winged human-headed bull, Panel 6I, Court VI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh. London, British Museum, ANE 124824. Photo: author.

this is because of the three current “degenerate” relations between humans and animals, “la chosification de l’animal, l’infantilisation de l’animal, et la réduction de l’animal à l’exotique, au bizarre ou au monstrueux.”¹¹ In the first case the animals are treated as a material product at the disposal and service of man; in the second they are “what the Anglo-Saxons call ‘pets,’ the *petits êtres ronronnant* whose raison d’être is consumed in the caresses they receive from their owners”; and in the third animals are seen as manifestations of the exotic and the other.¹²

Animals may be thought to have been in genuinely closer terms with human beings in ancient times when people could not have avoided interacting with them, given also the lack of the constraints of modern technology and modern urbanism on man’s natural environment. Animals would have been everywhere, and humans and animals would have shared a limited amount of space.¹³ Perhaps ontologically man would also have been considered close in formation to animals. The most salient support for the existence of such an idea in the ancient Near East is Enkidu’s relationship with animals as depicted in the SBV of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Despite the multiple layers of meaning that may underlie the themes in the poem, at a basic reading, the creation of Enkidu, and his initiation to “civilization” in Tablet I are emphatically described in association with animals as well as sex. Here are the relevant sections from Tablet I in translation:

When Aruru heard this
 She made in her heart the word (*zikru*) of Anu
 Aruru washed her hands
 She pinched clay and threw it in the wilderness
 He created the man Enkidu the warrior.

(ll. 82–6)



FIGURE 7. Detail of Fig. 6 showing sow and its young. Photo: author.

He did not know people and land
 He was dressed like Shakkan
 With gazelles he ate grass
 With cattle he frequented the drinking place
 With wild animals he was good with water
 (ll. 91–5)

He constantly goes on the mountains
 Constantly with cattle he eats grass
 Constantly he places his feet in the watering hole
 (ll. 109–11)

Gilgamesh spoke to him to the trapper
 Go trapper lead with you the harlot Shamhat
 When the cattle approach the drinking place
 Let her strip off her clothing and open her sexual appeal
 He will see her, he will approach her
 His cattle that grow in the wilderness will be strange to him
 (ll. 144–49)

A first day, a second day they sat at the watering hole
 The cattle reached the watering hole and drank
 The wild animals arrived and their hearts were good with water
 And Enkidu, the offspring of the mountain
 Who ate grass with gazelles
 Drank with cattle at the watering hole
 With wild animals his heart was good with water
 (ll. 154–60)

For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused, he impregnated Shamhat
 Until he was sated with pleasure
 He turned his face to the wilderness, to his cattle
 When they saw Enkidu, the gazelles ran away
 The cattle of the wilderness distanced themselves from his body.
 (ll. 176–81)¹⁴

After his creation by Aruru and before his initiation into “settled life,” Enkidu is in a liminal state, between man and animal. In this state, he has a natural affinity with animals; he spends time with them, eats and drinks with them, and wears an animal skin. It is noteworthy that his ultimate estrangement from animals is the result of his intercourse with the harlot. This sexual union causes the animals to distance themselves from his body. Once he moves over into the “civilized” human realm, Enkidu’s affiliation with animals is destroyed.

The interpretation of these passages has often been carried out with the modern bias that animals do not belong to human “civilization,” and if they do, they are part of it in Albert de Pury’s model outlined earlier. Moreover, some important concepts implanted in the epic are generally overlooked or not given due prominence in the service of an emphasis on Enkidu’s humanization and initiation to “civilization,” and Gilgamesh’s facing the truth, becoming “normal,” “growing up,” and in turn becoming “socialized” to rule as king over Uruk.

One of the central problems in the epic may not be that Enkidu’s separation from animals places him in the human realm but rather that this separation is not enough to place him in the realm to which Gilgamesh belongs, even though Enkidu has the divine determinative dingir before his name, and Gilgamesh is one-third man. In other words, Enkidu’s initial state is somewhat of an “edenic” position, but one that is difficult to sustain once mingled with the circumstances of civilization. It may still be possible to see Enkidu as a primitive or natural man, *lullú*, whatever this Akkadian word precisely signifies, and Gilgamesh as the civilized or cultural man.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one can well take Enkidu as man in the biological sense of the word, and Gilgamesh as a demigod in distinct opposition and yet in complement to the latter, as discussed further in the following parts of this study.

In the SBV of the poem at least, Enkidu was meant to be Gilgamesh’s equal, but it is as if that equality were disturbed with the transformations that the former underwent, transformations that instead resulted in his early death, perhaps understood as an indirect outcome of these circumstances in addition to other factors. From this standpoint, Enkidu’s “humanization” may not be the festive affair that most scholars seem to celebrate, just as they almost always chide Gilgamesh for “not growing up.”¹⁶ The problem is rather a metaphysical one: man, situated between animal and god, is a problematic being; it is better off either to remain among animals in a quasi-edenic state or to become a full demigod, albeit mortal in the flesh, like Gilgamesh. A similar understanding can be detectable in the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament in which there are also two phases for man. The first is when Adam is naked and close to animals, and the second is when he becomes “humain, c’est-à-dire vêtu, frustré, souffrant, séparé du monde animal,”¹⁷ with his new partner, whether or not she can be considered a substitute for the intended partnership of man with animals, which apparently did not work.

The idea of man’s ontological kinship to animals is found in most ancient or traditional cultures long before one encounters the relevant passage in Ecclesiastes,¹⁸ or Darwin, who demonstrated that the human species descended from the species of animals and that it belonged directly to the animal world.¹⁹ “Perhaps in no other civilization in human history has the association between humans and animals been as intimate or intense as in pharaonic Egypt.”²⁰ In the ancient Egyptian view, humankind did not command a superior position in creation over the animal kingdom. Instead, there existed a partnership between man and animal. Both were created by the gods, and both were bearers of life. Therefore, animals were entitled to respect and care.²¹

As for early Greek philosophy, Pythagoras and his followers were known to have been strictly against animal sacrifice and meat-eating. Pythagoras left no writings, and our information