

## 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*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62760-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art

Mehmet-Ali Ataç

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62760-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art

Mehmet-Ali Ataç

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# THE MYTHOLOGY OF KINGSHIP IN NEO-ASSYRIAN ART

MEHMET-ALI ATAÇ

*Bryn Mawr College*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62760-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art  
 Mehmet-Ali Ataç  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107627604](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107627604)

© Mehmet-Ali Ataç 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

Reprinted 2013

First paperback edition 2014

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Ataç, Mehmet-Ali, 1972–

The mythology of kingship in Neo-Assyrian art / Mehmet-Ali Ataç.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-51790-4 (hbk.)

1. Relief (Sculpture), Ancient – Assyria. 2. Kings and rulers in art. 3. Art and mythology. 4. Animals in art.

5. Art, Assyro-Babylonian. 6. Palaces – Assyria. 7. Assyria – Antiquities. 8. Assyria – Kings and rulers.

9. Mythology, Assyro-Babylonian. I. Title.

NB80.A83 2010

732'.5–dc22 2009026766

ISBN 978-0-521-51790-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-62760-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.



Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the Millard Meiss Publication Fund of the College Art Association.

## CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xv
<i>Prologue</i>	xvii
<b>PART I: HUMAN AND ANIMAL ONTOLOGY IN THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PALACE RELIEFS</b>	<b>I</b>
Introduction	3
1    Ashurnasirpal II	14
<i>The Anatomy of Death</i>	15
<i>Libation and Prostration</i>	18
<i>River Crossing: Human Bodies, Inflated Animal Skins</i>	20
<i>The Animal as Tribute</i>	22
<i>The Liminality of the Tributary</i>	28
<i>Congenial Contact with Animals</i>	32
2    Tiglath-Pileser III	39
<i>The Anatomy of Battle</i>	40
<i>Liminality and Animal Skins</i>	42
<i>On Camelback</i>	44
<i>Of Cattle and Men</i>	45
<i>Proximity, Overlap, and Analogy in the Art of Tiglath-Pileser III</i>	48
3    Sargon II	50
<i>Hunt or Sacrifice?</i>	51
<i>Horse Leg or Human Leg?</i>	53
<i>Animals and Gender</i>	58
4    Sennacherib	61
<i>Body and Booty</i>	62
<i>The Massacres of Lachish</i>	63
<i>The Carnivore and the Herbivore</i>	66

vi		CONTENTS	
5	Ashurbanipal		70
	<i>The Hounds of Ashurbanipal</i>		71
	<i>Animal, Vegetable, Mineral</i>		76
	Conclusion to Part I		81
	<b>PART II: KINGSHIP AND PRIESTHOOD IN THE ART OF ASHURNASIRPAL II</b>		<b>83</b>
	Introduction		85
1	The King, Nonking		90
2	“La salle dite ‘G’”		96
3	The Mixta Persona		113
4	The King and the “Sacred Tree”		125
5	The Encounter		130
	Conclusion to Part II		144
	<b>PART III: THE SEMANTICS OF SAGES AND MISCHWESEN IN NEO-ASSYRIAN ART AND THOUGHT</b>		<b>145</b>
	Introduction		147
1	Before the Flood		150
2	Fertilization and Purification		159
3	King the Man, The King-Man		167
4	“Tiamat’s Brood”		172
5	The Ancient Mesopotamian Flood Traditions		184
6	Lord of the Netherworld		190
	Conclusion to Part III		201
	<i>Epilogue</i>		203
	<i>Notes</i>		205
	<i>Bibliography</i>		247
	<i>Index</i>		267

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Human-headed <i>apkallu</i> holding a wild goat, Panel Z a1, Room T, transition to Room Z, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	<i>page</i> 4
2. Detail of Fig. 1 showing the wild goat.	5
3. Assyrian chariot attacking the enemy, Panel 8a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	5
4. Detail of Fig. 3 showing fallen enemy.	6
5. Assyrian soldiers crossing a river, Panel 11b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	6
6. Scene from the transport of the colossal winged human-headed bull, Panel 61, Court VI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.	8
7. Detail of Fig. 6 showing sow and its young.	9
8. Ashurnasirpal II hunting wild bulls, Panel 20a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	15
9. Ashurnasirpal II hunting lions, Panel 19a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	16
10. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 18–20, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	16
11. Colossal winged human-headed lion, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	17
12. Detail of colossal winged human-headed bull, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	18
13. Ashurnasirpal II libating over dead bull, Panel 20b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	19
14. Ashurnasirpal II libating over dead lion, Panel 19b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	19
15. Defeated enemy prostrating himself before Ashurnasirpal II, Panel 18b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	20
16. Assyrian soldiers crossing a river, Panel 10b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	20
17. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 9–11, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	21
18. Detail of Fig. 16, Assyrian soldiers crossing a river.	21

19.	Tributaries with gifts, Panel 7, Courtyard D, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	23
20.	Reconstruction drawing of the Panels 1–8, Courtyard D, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	24
21.	One of the faces of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing Bactrian camels, an elephant, apes, and tributaries.	25
22.	Detail of Fig. 21 showing the elephant and apes.	26
23.	One of the faces of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing tributaries and two human-headed quadrupeds.	27
24.	Detail of Fig. 23 showing the human-headed quadrupeds.	28
25.	One of the faces of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing scenes of submission, two Bactrian camels, a wildlife scene, and tributaries.	29
26.	Detail of Fig. 25 showing the submission of Jehu, two Bactrian camels, and the wildlife scene.	30
27.	One of the faces of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing tributaries and horned animals.	31
28.	Detail of Fig. 27 showing the horned animals and some of the tributaries.	33
29.	Human-headed <i>apkallu</i> holding deer and twig of flowers, Panel 30, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	34
30.	Detail of Fig. 29 showing the upper part of the <i>apkallu</i> and the deer.	35
31.	The “Sacred Tree,” Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	35
32.	Assault of the City U[pa?], Series B, Panel 15a, Central Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III at Nimrud.	41
33.	Assyrian cavalrymen charging with bird of prey, Panel 3, Wall n, Southwest Palace at Nimrud.	41
34.	Assyrian military camp scene showing soldiers playing catch with decapitated heads and a victory celebration, or “mummery,” Panel 7a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	42
35.	Detail of Fig. 34 showing two men wearing lion skins performing a “mummery.”	43
36.	Captured Babylonians, Panel 8, Room XXVIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.	44
37.	Assyrian cavalry pursuing an Arab on a camel, Series A, Panel 1b, Room III, Central Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III at Nimrud.	44
38.	Assyrian officer leading Bedouin captives, Series A, Panel 6b, Room XIII, Central Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III at Nimrud.	45
39.	Ashurnasirpal II and his soldiers attacking a fortified city and deporting its inhabitants, Panel 5b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	46
40.	Deportation scene, Series A, Panel 8a, Room XV, Central Palace of Tiglath-Pileser III at Nimrud.	46
41.	Urartian(?) rider escaping Assyrian horsemen, Panel 10a, Wall a, Southwest Palace at Nimrud.	47
42.	Tiglath-Pileser III in his chariot, Southwest Palace at Nimrud.	49



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ix

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 43. A wingless genius carrying a flower and a wild goat, Panel 4, Façade m, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.  | 52 |
| 44. Three Assyrians in a forest hunting small animals and birds, panel from the “room in the detached building,” Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.     | 53 |
| 45. Scene from the assault and capture of the Elamite city of Hamanu, Panel 8, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.                        | 54 |
| 46. The king’s horses brought to be harnessed, the Royal Lion Hunt, Panels 7–8, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.                       | 54 |
| 47. Horses and grooms, Panels 28–30, Sloping Passage LI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.   | 55 |
| 48. Attendants with hounds, Panel 13(?), Room E, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.  | 56 |
| 49. Musicians and lions, Panel 5, Room E, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.   | 57 |
| 50. Horses and attendants, Panel 12, Room S, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.  | 57 |
| 51. “Lion Combat,” Panel 13, Room S, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.  | 59 |
| 52. Doorway guardian figures, an <i>ugallu</i> (left) and a “house God,” West jamb of door o, Room XXXI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.   | 62 |
| 53. Assyrians recording booty, Panels 10 and 11, Room XXVIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.  | 63 |
| 54. Sennacherib enthroned reviewing the booty of Lachish, Panels 12 and 13, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.                    | 64 |
| 55. Detail from the Siege of Lachish, Panels 9–11, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.   | 64 |
| 56. Detail from the Siege of Lachish, Panels 9 and 10, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.   | 65 |
| 57. Assyrian military camp in the mountains. Drawing of Panel 20, Room XLVIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.                             | 65 |
| 58. Drawings of scenes from Assyrian military campaigns, Panels 5–7, Room XLV, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.                             | 67 |
| 59. Captives and cattle advancing toward the right along a row of palm trees, Panels 5 and 6, Room XXVIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh. | 69 |
| 60. Doorway guardian figures, Room B, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.   | 72 |
| 61. Doorway guardian figures, Room B, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.   | 72 |
| 62. Huntsmen and attendants with hounds and nets going to the hunt, Panel 7, Room R, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.                          | 73 |
| 63. Detail from the return from the royal lion hunt, Panel 10, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.  | 74 |
| 64. Attendants carrying home dead lions, Panel 10, Room C, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.  | 75 |
| 65. Scene from the Battle of Til Tuba on the River Ulai, Panel 3, Room XXXIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.                             | 77 |
| 66. Ashurnasirpal II assaulting a city, Panel 3a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 78 |

67.	Assyrian archers in chariots attacking the enemy, Panel 4a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	78
68.	Reconstruction drawing of Panels 3–5, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	79
69.	Hunting stags with nets, Panel 22(?), Room S, North Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nineveh.	79
70.	Rows of captives advancing toward the right along a row of palm trees, Panels 4 and 5, Room XXVIII, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.	79
71.	Plan of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	87
72.	Drawing of the Stela of Esarhaddon from Zincirli.	91
73.	Detail showing sword handle with lion protome, Panel 4, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	93
74.	Reconstruction drawings of Panels 1–5, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	97
75.	Ashurnasirpal II seated in ceremonial activity, Panels 2–4, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	98
76.	Detail of Panels 2–3, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	99
77.	Detail of Panel 2, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	100
78.	Reconstruction drawings of Panels 7–20, Room I, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	100
79.	Detail of Panel 3, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	101
80.	Detail showing protome on human-headed <i>apkallu</i> , Panel 2, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	103
81.	Detail showing protome on human- <i>apkallu</i> , Panel 4, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	103
82.	Detail of <i>apkallu</i> in Figs. 1 and 2 and decorated garment.	104
83.	Detail showing protome on the left arm of Ashurnasirpal II, Panel 3, Room G, Northwest Palace at Nimrud.	105
84.	Reconstruction drawings of Room G, Panels 1–16.	106
85.	Detail showing protome on the right arm of Ashurnasirpal II, Panel 6, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	107
86.	Detail with figure of the king at left, the “Sacred Tree” scene, Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	107
87.	Detail showing lion protome, Panel 3b, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	108
88.	<i>Apkallu</i> figure on Panel 12, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	109
89.	Detail of Fig. 88 showing protome on the <i>apkallu</i> figure, Panel 12, Room G, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	110
90.	Detail of human- <i>apkallu</i> at left, the “Sacred Tree” scene, Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	110
91.	Reconstruction drawings of Panels 1–17, Room H, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	111
92.	Lintel of Amenemhat I from his pyramid temple at Lisht, Twelfth Dynasty.	115

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

xi

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 93. Monumental door frame of King Amenemhat-Sobekhotep from Medamud, Thirteenth Dynasty.   | 115 |
| 94. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 6–8, Room C, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 116 |
| 95. Reconstruction drawings of Panels 4–7, Room N, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.   | 117 |
| 96. Reconstruction drawings of Panels 18–33, Room H, Northwest Palace at Nimrud.   | 118 |
| 97. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 1–17, Room L, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.   | 119 |
| 98. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 5–17, Room F, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.   | 121 |
| 99. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 2–5, Room S, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 122 |
| 100. Reconstruction drawing of the “Sacred Tree,” Panel 13, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 122 |
| 101. Ashurnasirpal II hunting lion, Panel WFL 14, Room WG, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.   | 123 |
| 102. Reconstruction drawing of Panels 2–12, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 124 |
| 103. Detail of the figure of the king at right of the “Sacred Tree” scene, Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.                             | 127 |
| 104. Detail showing winged disk and index fingers of the two figures of the king, “Sacred Tree” scene, Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. | 128 |
| 105. Detail of human-headed <i>apkallu</i> at right of the “Sacred Tree” scene, Panel 23, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.                        | 129 |
| 106. Encounter between the king and the “crown prince,” Panel 7a, Room B, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.  | 131 |
| 107. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal impression depicting Gilgamesh and Enkidu menacing the Bull of Heaven.   | 135 |
| 108. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal impression with two logograms, “Dingir,” and “Lú.”   | 137 |
| 109. Pharaoh making an offering in front of seated Osiris and standing Horus, Temple of Sety I at Abydos, Nineteenth Dynasty.  | 141 |
| 110. The Purification of Ramesses II, relief from the Temple of Sety I at Abydos, Nineteenth Dynasty.  | 142 |
| 111. Ashurnasirpal II flanked by bird-headed genii, Room F, Northwest Palace, Nimrud.  | 142 |
| 112. Coronation of Ramesses II from the south wall of the Great Hypostyle Hall of Karnak, Nineteenth Dynasty.  | 143 |
| 113. Fish- <i>apkallu</i> on a wall panel from the Temple of Ninurta at Nimrud.  | 151 |
| 114. Ritual basin with figures of a bearded god holding flowing vase flanked by fish- <i>apkallus</i> , eighth and seventh centuries BCE.                                | 153 |
| 115. Sety I erecting the <i>djed</i> pillar, Temple of Sety I, Abydos, Nineteenth Dynasty.   | 163 |

116. The Egyptian <i>djed</i> pillar surmounted by the solar disk as represented on an amulet.	164
117. The Egyptian <i>djed</i> pillar surmounted by the solar disk as represented on an amulet.	165
118. Fragment of panel depicting a scorpion man, <i>girtablilu</i> , Central Building of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	173
119. Detail of scorpion man, <i>girtablilu</i> , showing <i>mušbuššu</i> phallus, Central Building of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	174
120. Detail of the <i>mušbuššu</i> bracelet from a slab depicting a wingless genius holding lion, Panel 46, Façade n, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.	174
121. <i>Lahmu</i> holding lion, Panel 2, Façade a, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.	175
122. Detail from a scene of transport of wood showing a <i>lamassu</i> amid the ships, Panel 2, Façade n, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.	176
123. Detail from a scene of transport of wood showing a winged bull amid the ships, Panel 2, Façade n, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad.	176
124. Doorway guardian figure, <i>Lahmu</i> holding spear, lower part of Panel 21, Court VI, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.	177
125. Panel depicting an <i>ugallu</i> with a raised dagger from Gallery XLIX, Southwest Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.	178
126. Chiastic <i>ugallu</i> pairs holding raised daggers and maces (upper register); lion-centaur ( <i>urmahlullû</i> ) (lower register), Panel 2, entrance b, Room T, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.	179
127. Slab showing three gods, perhaps part of a group of seven known as the <i>Sibittu</i> , Court O, North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.	179
128. Babylonian stone <i>kudurru</i> showing the lion-staff of Nergal.	181
129. Drawing of the Neo-Assyrian rock-cut relief in Maltai, reign of Sennacherib.	181
130. Relief panel depicting Ninurta chasing Anzû or Asakku from the Ninurta Temple of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud.	195

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study originated as part of my doctoral dissertation submitted to the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University in 2003. My greatest intellectual debt is to my advisor Irene J. Winter, who observed and guided the development of the project from its beginning in the form of a seminar paper to its completion as a doctoral thesis. Her interest in it and its offshoots has extended to my professional career, and I am most grateful for her sustained advice and support in my continuing endeavors to understand and interpret aspects of the visual language of the ancient Near East.

I am also grateful to Gloria Ferrari Pinney and Paul-Alain Beaulieu, both of whom advised the dissertation at various stages, and both of whose scholarship has opened up new avenues of perception and thinking in my research.

Special thanks go to A. A. Donohue who read substantial parts of this study during the revision of the dissertation and offered incisive criticism and feedback.

I am grateful to Paul Collins, curator of Later Mesopotamian Art in the British Museum, for facilitating my access to parts of the museum to take photographs of many of the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs there in November 2008 and for providing digital images of some of the reliefs; many of these have been included as illustrations in this book. I am further grateful for generous funding from Harvard University and the Hetty Goldman Fund from the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology at Bryn Mawr College that enabled me to travel to London, Paris, and Berlin a number of times over the last decade to study and photograph the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Vorderasiatisches Museum. I am further indebted to the Lucy Shoe Meritt Fund from the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology for support in obtaining a number of the illustrations, and to Bryn Mawr College for a junior faculty research leave for the academic year 2007–8 during which the final form of the book manuscript was produced. I am especially grateful to a grant from the Millard Meiss Publication Fund awarded by College Art Association for supporting the cost of the illustration program of the book.

I would like to thank Samuel Paley and Richard Sobolewski for their generosity in giving me permission to reproduce their reconstruction drawings of the reliefs from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud, still unparalleled in quality and comprehensiveness, in this publication as well as in others.

For many stimulating discussions and criticism on occasions when I had the opportunity to share the results of my research with mentors and colleagues, I would like to thank Tzvi Abusch,

Jülide Aker, Andrew Cohen, Elif Denel, Amy Gansell, Holly Pittman, Beate Pongratz-Leisten, John Russell, Piotr Steinkeller, Benjamin Studevent-Hickman, and Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir.

Last but not least, I thank my family for their continuing interest in my scholarly activities and for their emotional support over the years in which this study was carried out and finalized.

## 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*)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62760-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art

Mehmet-Ali Ataç

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62760-4 - The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art

Mehmet-Ali Ataç

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

THE MYTHOLOGY OF KINGSHIP IN NEO-ASSYRIAN ART