Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Violence: Warfare in Neo-Assyrian Art

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Abstract

Warfare is a significant theme in Neo-Assyrian art but it is limited to specific media and contexts, most famously as stone reliefs that once lined the walls of rooms and courtyards in Assyrian palaces dating between c. 870 and 620 BCE. Traditionally, these scenes have been interpreted as having mimetic and propagandistic functions, a selected historical reality intended to intimidate and astonish the viewer. The images are thus understood as visual representations of royal ideology: the successful fulfillment of the king's religious obligation to extend the lands of the god Assur, and a means to glorify the ruler as the embodiment of perfect kingship. Recent work, however, has begun to probe other levels of meaning embedded in the imagery. Among the areas explored are the role of Assyrian scholars in shaping the content of the imagery; the relationship between the violence of battle and that of the hunt; and the important part played by representation in royal ritual where it may have served to link the natural and supernatural world. Indeed, these visual statements of divinely sanctioned violence were themselves performative and essential components of the affective properties of the royal palace.

Introduction

The Assyrians, perhaps more than with any other ancient culture, have been closely associated in the modern mind with warfare. This connection was established long before 1842 when excavations began to reveal the Assyrian capital cities.[1] Up until that time, Assyria had been understood in the West through the accounts of classical antiquity and the Hebrew Bible, with the result that by the early nineteenth century, Mesopotamia was imagined as "a site of sloth, sin, violence, and transgression" (Bohrer 2003: 49). Indeed, the discovery of royal inscriptions, administrative and religious texts and, most dramatically, visual representations of warfare in metal, stone, and paint appeared to confirm the existence of violent and absolute monarchs. The texts revealed that in the early centuries of the first millennium BCE Assyria expanded aggressively from the region of northern Iraq into neighboring territories and by the seventh-century BCE dominated a

[1] The first popular reference to Assyrian warfare was Lord Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib." Published in 1815, it evokes the Hebrew Bible account of the Assyrian military advance against Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

geographical area that stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.[2] This was an imperial mission, and the achievements were represented in text and visual images with extraordinary detail: the artists glorified their king's military successes, focusing on the events of war, including the humiliation, torture, and death of his enemies. Until relatively recently the carved and painted images were understood as non-verbal footnotes or mere embellishments to the written sources. Modern scholarship has, however, challenged this simplistic view, identifying many layers of meaning embedded in the visual representations of war. This chapter explores a few of these levels that are part of a wider and complex intersection between texts and images that combine Assyrian ideas of power and authority with those relating to both the natural and supernatural worlds. The evidence consists primarily of the monumental stone reliefs that lined the palace walls at Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh, but also draws upon the repoussé bronze bands from palace and temple gates at Balawat and fragmentary remains of palace wall paintings from Nimrud and Nineveh.[3]

The scenes of warfare found in Neo-Assyrian art may be divided conveniently into three constituent parts: preparations and advance towards the place of violence; the violence itself – either a battle or siege; and the aftermath of war – a parade of booty and a celebration or triumph, which might include the execution of enemies and/or the destruction of their fortress. As Irene Winter (1981:12) has made clear, it is this "combination of sequence, action, and particularity" that distinguishes Assyrian representations of warfare from earlier Near Eastern examples. This narrative aspect is very clear in both the textual and visual accounts of war; in the latter it may take a variety of forms from "iconic" to "continuous" episodes, often combining separate moments of the action in a single scene. In addition, the artists created very believable worlds; conflict is not masked by treating it as set in mythical time and place, but rather actual historical events are

[2] General surveys of Neo-Assyrian history include Kuhrt 1995; Van De Mieroop 2005; Collins 2008b
[3] For the stone reliefs see: Barnett and Falkner 1962; Barnett 1976; Albenda 1986; Barnett *et al.* 1998; Russell 1998. Wall paintings: Russell 1999; Nadali 2006. Balawat gate bronzes: King 1915; Curtis and Tallis 2008. Warfare is not a theme found in Assyrian carved ivories with a few possible exceptions (Mallowan and Glynne Davies 1970: nos. 55, pl. XVI; and 64, pl. XVIII), and these may be part of tribute scenes, which were favored by the ivory carvers.

described, albeit as heavily selected versions; "a self-censored selection of things that happened in reality" (Reade 2005: 7). The result is that scholars have largely utilized these images as sources for sociopolitical reconstruction in which they are read as visual copies of historical texts and evaluated according to their accuracy. Studies have focused on the discursive content of the images, such as narrative structure (Reade 1979b; Winter 1981; 1983; Russell 1993; Pittman 1996; Lumsden 2004; Watanabe 2004), or their formal aspects, such as compositional strategies (Albenda 1998), and as sources for understanding the organization of the army, its tactics and equipment (Reade 1972; 1976; Postgate 2001; Nadali 2005b; Dezsö 2006, Fales 2010).

Alongside their mimetic roles, the Assyrian representations of war are considered to have functioned primarily as propaganda, "designed to manipulate social forces" (Winter 1981: 22). They were "a sharp reminder of what happened to those who did not submit to Assyrian domination or who attempted to throw off the Assyrian yoke" (Curtis and Reade 1995: 32-3), and were intended "to inspire awe and reinforce the national self-image" (Reade 2005: 7). The identity of the intended audiences of these carved and painted scenes has been much discussed with suggestions ranging from foreigners on business in the palace to court officials.[4] Since propaganda, at least in modern terms, involves the systematic dissemination of information over a wide variety of media, the Assyrian images of war would have had limited impact as they were restricted to the interior walls of palaces. Even here they may not have been easy to "read"; the small scale of the carved figures in relation to the height and gloom of the room, regardless of whether they were painted in bright colors, must have made the scenes difficult to appreciate without the aid of lamps and braziers, especially when visitors moved from the bright light of a courtyard into the darker interior spaces (Roaf 2008: 211). It may have been the very scale and complex design of the reliefs rather

[4] Reade 1979c: 339; Winter 1981: 32; 1993: 31. Russell (1991: 223-240) identifies textual sources for the palace visitors and inhabitants. Holloway (2002: 74-76) concludes that there was no public audience exploited by the imperial image-makers, while Ataç (2010: 87-89) argues that, at least at Nimrud, the principle audience for the reliefs were the very scholarly officials who shaped their content.

than their content that created a sense of awe and even confusion for visitors.[5] Similarly, the detailed imagery and text on the metal bands on the palace and temple gates at Balawat, especially those above eye level, would have been virtually invisible. This is art that was difficult to see. In contrast, the walls of the courtyard that gave access to the throne room, perhaps a more public area of the palace, were decorated with scenes in stone relief or glazed bricks of human tributaries, supernatural figures and images of the king in a religious context (Reade 1963; Paley and Sobolewski 1997). Beyond the palace, the king was represented on free-standing monuments or carved on rock faces situated at sacred and historically important places or set up as markers of diplomatic encounters between Assyria and foreign states.[6] Here the monarch is presented not as a warrior but as the earthly representative of Assur, Assyria's supreme god (Reade 1979a: 32-35; Magen 1986: Taf. 7-11). Yet even these images were installed in places that were difficult to reach or carved in such low relief as to make them difficult to see. Propaganda and intimidation can be only partial explanations for the creation of these representations of war (and peace).

It would be an exercise in reductionism to treat the scenes of warfare as independent of other associated images. Representations of an Assyrian king at war on the so-called White Obelisk from Nineveh (probably eleventh century BCE) are accompanied by separate carved vignettes depicting him hunting wild animals, receiving tribute, and undertaking religious rituals.[7] The organization of the scenes on the obelisk has been much discussed and although the primacy of any one scene is not immediately apparent, the longest registers, which wrap around the monument at the center, depict ritual libations (Pittman 1996). Indeed, Irene Winter's (1981) work on the Northwest Palace throne room reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) demonstrates the importance of considering Assyrian relief cycles in their entirety and, regardless of content, it is always the king who plays the

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[5] While outsiders would have been unable to go beyond a sense of confusion and awe, those who identified with the imagery, that is, were initiated into its meaning, (the king, magnates, scholars, palace staff) participated in their affective properties.

[6] Porter 2000; Kreppner 2002; Harmanşah, 2007; Shafer, 2007; Radner 2010a. Although the primary visual medium of the Neo-Assyrian period was probably seals, worn and displayed, then replicated through their sealings (Winter 2000), representations of war are extremely rare and only a few seals have chariot scenes; Collon (2001: 59-60) suggests that these may have been owned by chariot drivers.

[7] For the problems of dating the White Obelisk see Reade 1975.

principal role.[8] Magen (1989) identifies 14 types or iconographies of royal-representations in Neo-Assyrian art: the king appears as hunter, builder, worshipper, cultic actor, and shepherd, and takes a variety of roles as commander of the army. Taken together, these have been understood as a visual representation of the ideology of kingship as expressed in the royal inscriptions, a means to glorify the king as the embodiment of perfect kingship achieved through the benevolence of the gods.[9] The quasi-historical images of war are therefore intimately bound up with every aspect of the Assyrian worldview, including and most especially the supernatural realm.

The Divine Warrior

In Mesopotamia, weapons and the plundering of cities were considered as divinely bestowed aspects of civilization, and warfare was something that the most powerful gods themselves engaged in.[10] From at least the mid-third millennium BCE, representations of battle were a means through which myth (gods) and history (mortal kings) were integrated (Winter 1985; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 215-218). At Nimrud, Assurnasirpal's throne room reliefs focus explicitly on this relationship; the king is accompanied unambiguously by a god in a winged disk (together with chariots carrying divine standards) on the field of battle and also on his victorious return (Fig. 1) and celebratory review.[11] The deity and ruler adopt an identical pose, so that Assurnasirpal is a mirror of the divine. Indeed, Assyrian kings present themselves in both text and image as the very

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[8] Winter argues that the reliefs recapitulate in both content and structure Assurnasirpal II's "Standard Inscription" that is written over every slab, but this has been questioned by Roaf (2008).
[9] See, for example, Reade 1979c; Liverani 1979. Winter (1997) demonstrates that visual representations of the Assyrian king convey an "official" stylized image of kingship rather than the likeness of an individual in the sense of western realism.
[10] According to the Sumerian poem "Inana and Enki," warfare is among the divine powers passed to the goddess Inana by the drunken Enki (Black *et al.* 1998-2006). Warfare within the divine sphere is represented most dramatically by the "Epic of Creation" (*Enūma Eliš*) in which a male hero-god (Marduk or Assur) defeats in battle the forces of chaos (Talon 2005). A relationship between the Assyrian king, the divine world and violence is highlighted in the Northwest Palace reliefs by fine incised designs on the king's robes, perhaps representing elaborate embroidery, that depict supernatural beings in combat (Canby 1971; Bartl 2005). Such images are also known in Assyrian metalwork (Curtis and Reade 1995: 124-5).
[11] The deity in the winged disk should probably be identified as Assur, although Shamash, the sun god of justice, is another possibility (Collon 2001: 79-81). The divine standards may be those of Adad and Nergal (Reade 2005: 16).

likeness of a god and through the Neo-Assyrian period they increasingly develop divine-like properties.[12] This relationship between armed aggression, the supernatural world and kingship is made explicit in the Coronation Hymn of Assurbanipal (669-ca. 631 BCE). The king is described as the image of the god Assur, and the deity provides him with a scepter to extend his dominion over land and peoples (Livingstone 1989: 26-28). Building on the achievements of their ancestors, Assyrian kings are defined in both texts and images by their military successes, but these are achieved only with divine support and direction. The intimate connection between gods and royal conquests has led Steven Holloway (2002) to develop a contentious idea that the expansion of Assyria was driven by religious imperialism with the expected outcome that subjugated people would accept Assur as their king; this interpretation has been challenged by, for example, Oded (1992: 187) and Fales (2010: 19, 69-94) .

It seems very likely that the Northwest Palace reliefs incorporate many esoteric meanings (Roaf 2008: 209, 213). Perhaps designed by scholar-priests, the carvings may mask a complex philosophical rhetoric; Mehmet-Ali Ataç (2010) argues that the court artists and scholars interpreted versions of ancient religious and literary texts to create representations of the ideal.[13] Through depictions of successful warfare, the active support of the gods is made manifest, and this is especially evident by the visual interest in the king's weapons that, the royal inscriptions make clear, were granted to him by the gods (Bahrani 2008: 189-97). The bow was the most prestigious weapon used by kings throughout the Neo-Assyrian period.[14] Other weapons wielded by the king, or by officials in close proximity to the monarch, have ritual or religious significance: maces

[12] Assurnasirpal is the first king since Naram-Sin to use the term "semblance" (*tamšilu*) in this context (Westenholz 2000: 110-111, n.56). For the god-like aspects of Neo-Assyrian kingship see Holloway 2002; Machinist 2006; Ornan 2007; Winter 2008; Radner 2010b: 16.

[13] Ataç (2010: 83-144) considers possible metaphysical aspects of kingship, suggesting that Assurnasirpal is fundamentally presented as both god and human in his throne room reliefs.

[14] The bow has been interpreted as a symbol of dominance when the Assyrian king is depicted holding it with the string turned outwards (Wilkinson 1991: 86)

(topped by divine rosettes), swords (decorated with images of lions), siege-engines (associated with powerful animals – see below), and perhaps even the royal chariot, horses and soldiers.[15]

The religious and esoteric nature of the imagery is less evident in reliefs of the mid-eighth century BCE onwards, when extended historical narratives depicting military violence and its aftermath, set within specific landscapes and accompanied by written captions, become the norm. (This development may, however, be more apparent than real given that comparable scenes are known from the ninth-century BCE gate decoration from the site of Balawat.) Nonetheless, the presence of the supernatural world remains important. For example, Sennacherib (704-681 BCE) reviews booty from the successful siege of Lachish while seated on a throne supported by rows of supernatural figures (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 335), and a divine standard with a deity ringed by stars (probably Ishtar) is mounted on the pole of Assurbanipal's chariot during a campaign in Babylonia (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 207).[16] The god-like nature of the monarch becomes more evident after around 700 BCE when the king is no longer depicted engaged in battle but he is situated at the end of the narrative and presented as the ultimate source of power, overseeing life and death; as the gods' substitute, chaos is apparent in the ruler's absence from scenes, while his presence signals the restoration of order.

Warfare is presented not only as a divine act that restores order to the world but also as an activity infused with ritual, even a ritual act in its own right, that maintains the essential relationship between the king and the gods. Julian Reade (2005: 15-22) has documented the variety of rituals that occur within a military context on the reliefs. Important among these are representations of fortified camps – perhaps a proxy for the ceremonial royal palace when the king was on campaign – that feature scenes of offering or sacrifice alongside ceremonial chariots and standards. These camp

[15] Purification rituals were performed on weapons after battles, and temples could both house the weapons of the gods and rent out weapons for income (Magan 1986: 81-84; Heimpel 1996). For the religious significance of specific royal weapons see Ataç 2010: 104-105 (sword); Porter 2010: 145-48; and Collins 2010: 186 (mace).

[16] A comparable standard is mounted between the heads of two horses on a chariot of Sennacherib; the chariot is positioned between the seated king and the military camp with its officiating priests (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 348).

scenes, found in the reliefs of Assurnasirpal II, Tiglath-pileser III (744-722 BCE), Sargon II (721-705 BCE), and Sennacherib, include two priests shown as standing side by side and facing an incense burner and a table of offerings (Reade 2005: figs. 11-17). Some of these men may be involved in interpreting omens that have been provided by the gods in the specific shape and color of internal organs belonging to sacrificed animals. Divination, which Zainab Bahrani (2008: 183-88) identifies as one of the essential technologies of Assyrian warfare, was a means of knowing the past in order to change the present as a way of establishing a future that had already been determined by the gods in the past. These scenes of sacrifice are therefore often placed in close proximity to the king at the end of the narrative, where the past and future (linked via circularity) have been accomplished in the restoration of order by the monarch (Fig. 2).[17]

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The Heroic Warrior

A mythological and heroic aspect of kingship lies at the heart of Assyrian representations of warfare. While the images may hold documentary weight and religious significance, the ever-victorious, heroic, and courageous king is a central concern; indeed, this can be recognized in Mesopotamian art as early as the Akkadian empire (Westenholz 2000). In the words of Assurnasirpal: "I am a hero, I am a warrior, I am a lion and I am virile" (Grayson 1991: 195). It is this self-image that is depicted visually on his palace walls at Nimrud. Assyrian rulers presented themselves as the heroic kings they aspired to be and in so doing deliberately tied themselves to a mytho-historical past.[18] For example, one of the earliest known versions of an Assyrian royal hero (13th century BCE) appears on a small, round, black stone lid from the New Palace at Assur, and combines a scene of battle and ritual that derives from both contemporary Assyrian and third

[17] In the Northwest Palace throne room reliefs, the victory celebrations and the scene of omen taking are placed at the centre of the scheme rather than at the end, emphasizing the order reestablished by the king as the most important aspect of the narrative (Lumsden 2004: 369).

[18] Texts and images were a means by which a heroic king's name might be perpetuated for posterity and, since a person's name was believed to be linked to their very essence, this ensured a continuation of the king's spirit beyond death (Radner 2011a: 39-43).

millennium BCE Babylonian imagery (Moortgat 1969: 117-18; Collins 2008a: 21-22). Here again is a reference to the circularity of past and future as well as that of conflict and victory but, in this particular object, the imagery is arranged literally within a circular frame.[19]

Just as historical battles are portrayed in literary texts as the fight between a supernatural hero and monstrous rivals (Weissert 1997a: 197), so too might the carved and painted images of warfare be understood on mythological levels. The most interesting of such fusions of myth and selected reality involves two of the greatest masterpieces from the ancient Near East of the seventh century BCE: the literary Epic of Gilgamesh and carved stone panels depicting the battle of Til-Tuba and its aftermath (in about 653 BCE) from Nineveh.[20] There are clear parallels between the death of the demon Humbaba in the fifth tablet of the Epic and the death of the enemy king Teumman in the reliefs: both individuals are killed and decapitated in a woodland setting using a mace and axe; their severed heads are carried over long distances from a mountainous foreign land to Mesopotamia; and the heads are displayed at gateways and consecrated to the gods (Bonatz 2004: 100). The two Assyrian soldiers responsible for dispatching Teumman presumably stand in for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. We might have expected Assurbanipal to play the heroic role but, as indicated above, by the seventh-century BCE the Assyrian king is no longer portrayed in battle with humans – and it is known that he did not participate in this particular campaign. Nevertheless, Assurbanipal makes the claim in the epigraph accompanying the scene of decapitation that it was he who cut off the head of the Elamite king (Barnett *et al.* 1998: 95).

Military campaigns were the perfect vehicle to illustrate age-old heroic qualities and this could be demonstrated visually in a number of ways. The approach to battle took the army over long distances through varied landscapes that were used by the Assyrian artists to express territorial

[19] On the stone lid action moves from right to left in the top register while, in the lower register, victory celebrations move from left to right, just as Winter (1981: 14) noted for the later Northwest Palace throne room reliefs. A similar use of direction to signal victory is found on the Til-Tuba reliefs from Nineveh in which the enemy Elamite king flees to the right but his severed head is carried in triumph across the field to the left (Watanabe 2004; Collins 2008a: 97).

[20] For the Humbaba/Huwawa stories see George 1999: 39-54, 149-166. For the Til-Tuba reliefs see Barnett *et al.* 1998: pls. 286-319.

expansion and with it the incorporation of a potentially bountiful world (Marcus 1987, 1995; Thomason 2001); Assurnasirpal states how he depicted on the palace walls his "heroic praises, in that I had gone right across highlands, lands, (and) seas, (and) the conquest of all lands" (Grayson 1991: 289-90). This was a world where heroes of the past had reached the Mediterranean Sea and washed their weapons, or ventured into mountains to discover resources and sacred places (Harmanşah 2007; Shafer 2007). It was, however, the overcoming of physical obstacles on these military campaigns that was especially important for the heroic image. Mountains presented no challenge to the king, who is shown effortlessly leading his army over the traditional scale patterns; the designers of Sennacherib's reliefs make full use of their expanded canvases to depict deep valleys and rivers that have to be traversed (Fig. 3). The importance placed on overcoming the challenges presented by these landscapes is evidenced by the depiction of the crossing of a major river, probably the Euphrates, in a series of reliefs from the throne room of Assurnasirpal at Nimrud: while the Assyrian soldiers swim or float on animal skins alongside their horses, the king crosses the river in a boat, standing majestically in his war chariot (Gadd 1936: 134-35). The near nudity of the soldiers has been interpreted by Ataç as reflecting the liminal state of these men, "between two shores, between safety and danger" (Ataç 2010: 22). Their nakedness might also indicate the ease with which the king leads his forces across the obstruction – the men are shown leisurely undressing and preparing the inflated skins in contrast to the enemies depicted on a relief panel from the same wall (at the same level but closer to the throne) who flee before the Assyrians by swimming fully dressed across a river (Curtis and Reade 1995: 48-49).[21]

Of all military operations the most significant impediment to a restoration of divine and royal order was the time it took to besiege a well-defended city (Fuchs 2011: 391). This might take months or even years but in the reliefs time is conflated to make the achievement a single event. In the ninth-century BCE imagery it is the Assyrian king who leads the attack on a city, but by the seventh century BCE, he views the event from a distance or is situated in an adjacent register on the

[21] Reade (2005: 20) suggests that this scene may be an example of Assyrian humor (see below). A comparable river crossing by Assyrian soldiers is represented on a series of Assurbanipal's reliefs from Nineveh (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 192, no. 273a).

relief. These sieges are presented as moments of frenetic activity since action is essential to underscore the dangers being confronted and overcome. Where historical events failed to deliver such excitement they were sometimes excluded from the decorative program of the palace in favor of those that did: for instance, Sennacherib's blockade of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, in which no military action occurred, was ignored in favor of the visually thrilling siege and capture of Lachish (Nadali 2009).

The Heroic Hunter

The royal battle has been recognized as analogous in Assyrian art to the royal hunt: both are connected with ritual slaughter and trophies, and may to a certain extent be thought to involve sacrifice (Pongratz-Leisten 2007). This relationship is very apparent in the Northwest Palace throne room reliefs, where the representations of dying and dead bodies of lions, bulls and humans are interchangeable beneath the wheels of Assurnasirpal's chariot (Ataç 2010: 16). In the ninth century BCE, scenes of hunting are placed in visually significant locations: adjacent to the throne in the Northwest Palace and at eye level on the palace gate bronzes from Balawat (Curtis and Tallis 2008: 29).[22] Lions in particular were closely connected with notions of kingship, sometimes on a mythological level (Watanabe 1998; Ataç 2010: 93), and these animals may have been hunted as ritual acts relating to military triumphs (Reade 2005: 20); figures wearing the skins of lions appear as part of the victory celebrations of both Assurnasirpal II (Fig. 4) and Tiglath-pileser III (Reade 2005: Fig.19).[23] Although the image of the king killing a lion was circulated among state administrators through the official government seal from the ninth century BCE onwards (Millard 1965; 1976; Nadali 2011; Radner 2008), it is only with Assurbanipal that the royal lion hunts again

[22] The Mamu temple gates do not show scenes of hunting; the focus is primarily on tribute-bearers (Curtis and Tallis 2008: 72)
[23] The lion garbed figures may be related to the god La-tarāk (Black and Green 1992: 33, 116)

figure significantly in both carved reliefs (North Palace, Nineveh) and wall paintings (Til Barsip).[24] Reade (2005: 24) suggests that Assurbanipal may have been reviving an antique ritual practice. If so, a connection with warfare and the hunt is also revived: Assurbanipal dedicates the dead animals to the warrior goddess Ishtar by pouring a libation of wine over their bodies (Collins 2008a: 134-35) just as he poured wine over the head of Teumman (Bonatz 2004: 96-98; Reade 2005: 21).

Similes and metaphors that connect animals with warfare abound in Assyrian texts, and the same appears to be true for the visual representations. A few examples will suffice: in Assurnasirapal's throne room reliefs, an eagle, symbol of bravery and fierceness, accompanies the divine standards into battle, and hovers above both the king and crown prince (or senior magnate) as they lay siege to a city; a fourth eagle carries an enemy's severed head before the divine standards (Fig. 4) and the triumphant king.[25] One of Tiglath-pileser III's siege towers is given the abstract form of an elephant, with two battering rams representing the animal's tusks (Fig. 5), while on one of the bronzes from the Balawat gates of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE) a siege engine has the likeness of a crocodile (King 1915: pl. L). On scenes of the aftermath of war, people are paraded like herds and flocks (Cifarelli 1998: 220). Finally, in a relief of Assurbanipal, the capture of an Elamite king by the Assyrians is visually compared with wild goat being stalked by a lioness (Curtis and Reade 1995: 80).

God's Enemies

Rebellion against or opposition to Assyria was understood as an attack on the god Assur and it was the king's duty to punish the blasphemers. Although the king, as the instrument of the gods, is the focus of the reliefs, the identity, differences and role of enemies within the narratives is of

[24] For the Nineveh lion hunts see Barnett 1976: pls. VI-XIII, XLIX, LI, LVI-LVII. The Til Barsip lion hunts paintings (reproduced in Parrot 1961: pl. 344) are dated by Reade (2005: 24) to the reign of Esarhaddon, while Albenda (2005: 71-73) prefers Sennacherib, for which see comments by Winter (2007a: 379), who favors Assurbanipal.

[25] For example, in the account of his accession to the throne, Esarhaddon tells us, "Like a winged eagle, I attacked in order to scatter my enemies" (Strawn *et al*. 2006: 354).

considerable interest to the Assyrian artists. It is clear that a number of visual markers were used to distinguish non-Assyrians from Assyrians: clothing, headgear, facial hair and hairstyle as well as types of military equipment. Marian Feldman (2011: 139) proposes that these were rendered in an Assyrian court style as a means of creating an imperial self-portrait through the depiction of otherness. These markers do not, however, identify these people *per se* as enemies of the state since non-Assyrians can appear in the reliefs as tributaries and increasingly, during the eighth century BCE, as members of the army (Nadali 2005a; Kaplan 2008). An enemy of Assyria is most recognizable by his actions (Bahrani 2006). This may occur in the context of a battle or siege itself – he will be shown as falling, crouching and running away from or being slain by Assyrian forces. Enemies can also be recognized in the aftermath of war as the individuals being tortured, executed, and shackled. That these moments were intended to be greeted with satisfaction, even enjoyed, by the audience of the reliefs is suggested by Julian Reade who points out that "most jokes in [Assyrian] narrative art... are provided by the problems, contortions and maltreatment of dead or doomed enemies" (Reade 2005: 20).

The narratives of battles and sieges focus on named enemies, perhaps a coalition of states or a single city or tribe, but often it is an individual rebel leader who is held accountable for provoking the Assyrian king to violence; they are marked out for a special appearance in the imagery and named in accompanying texts. For example, on one of Shalmaneser III's bronze bands from Balawat, the ruler of the rebellious city of Hamath in Syria, perhaps Urhilina, is depicted lying on a couch in his fortress while his army is being defeated by the Assyrians (King 1915: pl. 77). From the eighth century BCE, it is the punishment and execution of such enemy leaders that becomes a significant feature of the visual narratives. Following an attack on Hamath by Sargon II, some 150 years after Urhilina, the city's king Yau-bi'di was depicted on a relief at Khorsabad being flayed alive (Albenda 1986: 75, pl. 78). The scene parallels a description in the Assyrian royal annals and is emphasized on the relief itself by an epigraph identifying the victim and the method of his execution (El Amin 1954: 26-27). A comparable scene of execution is found in the reliefs of

Sennacherib and Assurbanipal from the Southwest Palace at Nineveh (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pls. 339, 302). The later of the two images depicts the aftermath of the battle of Til-Tuba and shows the torture of two Elamites and two Babylonians; the nationality of the victims can be identified by their distinctive hairstyles. A text alongside the Babylonians informs us that they are being flayed and having their tongues torn out. A space has been left at the start of the inscription probably for the addition of specific names to highlight the individuals involved.[26] By the seventh century BCE, this interest in the role of the individual enemy produces some startling innovations: they are given a voice in the epigraphs so that text and image together creates a believable personality, perhaps even a real presence (where the doubling of the victims may be of significance beyond historical accuracy, see below).

Under Assurbanipal (and perhaps earlier) certain groups of non-Assyrians are depicted with distinctive facial characteristics. This is especially clear in representations of Nubians and perhaps derives from the influence of Egyptian art (Albenda 1982). Other people are also defined by their physiognomies: two ambassadors from Urartu are distinguished by large hooked noses and high cheekbones (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 312). The Assyrians never used racial difference as characterized by physical features as a reason for violence against their enemies (Bahrani 2006); the interest in describing the physiognomies of certain "others" may be related to the intellectual developments of the seventh century BCE where the rationalization of data, especially in the field of divination, touched on all aspects of the natural and supernatural worlds (Rochberg 1999, 2004). This concern for recording the message-signs of the world led to the portrayal of individual enemies through their specific facial features. Of particular interest in this regard is the depiction of the Elamite king Teumman. In a total of ten representations he is consistently shown with a hooked nose, a sharp chin, a tightly cropped beard and, when he loses his distinctive hat, a prominent receding hairline with long rows of hair falling behind (Fig. 6).[27] Although he wears the Elamite

[26] The names Mannu-ki-ahhe and Nabu-usalli appear on a cuneiform clay tablet in a variant of the same epigraph (Gerardi 1988: 13, n. 32).

[27] Teumman's features are consistently depicted across two independent relief programs at Nineveh: the Til-Tuba reliefs from the Southwest Palace, and the famous "garden party" relief from the North Palace (Collins

royal robes, Teumman's physical features may be an additional pictorial device to help single him out to the viewer. Nonetheless, Benjamin Foster has highlighted how in Babylonian literature the features of a person's face and hair determined their character and even their success or failure in life: "Thin hair portended failure, while shaggy hair and a dark complexion betokened a villain. A long chin suggested a troublemaker. Qualities of leadership were thick hair and a handsome, radiant face" (Foster 2011: 121). With Teumman we see these notions translated for the first time into a visual medium. This includes the depiction of the king's tightly closed eye that contrasts with the eyes that blindly stare from the majority of other severed heads on the battlefield and may be a depiction of the injury caused by a stroke or tumor that, according to Assurbanipal's annals, had afflicted Teumman before the battle (Luckenbill 1927: no. 858). Bahrani (2008: 46-47) recognizes this as an ominous sign that was sent by the gods to announce Teumman's inevitable doom. The result is in effect a visual portrait based on an individual's (real or imagined) physical features.

Although the enemy is presented as cowardly, weak and evil, what the reliefs and captions of the Til-Tuba battle also emphasize is a warriors' death could be reputable and praiseworthy. Utakku, the in-law of Teumman, is portrayed as a valiant warrior who does not seek to escape but prefers to die an honorable death on the battlefield – he is clearly a foil to his cowardly relation. Utakku's request to have his head cut off might indicate this form of execution was limited to the elite and that he was worthy of the "honor" (Radner 2011a: 47), although the number of severed heads depicted in Assyrian scenes of battle and their aftermath might argue against such an interpretation.

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The bodies of enemies (alive and dead) are important elements of victory parades and/or celebrations that signal the end of violence, often with more violence. Like the royal hunts, there is a strong ritual element to these events (Reade 2005). Three themes emerge: the humiliation, torture and execution of the enemy; the display and/or mutilation of the enemy's body or body parts; and a

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2008a: 136-37); a further representation of Teumman's head appears on a badly damaged relief from the North Palace (Place 1867: Pl. 41; Barnett 1976: pls. XXV-XXVI).

parade of booty.[28] Violence to the enemy at this stage in the narrative takes different forms and might involve impalement, dismemberment or flaying (Bleibtreu 1991). Like the destruction of a person's name, this was a way of obliterating their spiritual essence; Assurbanipal, for example, takes revenge on his enemy's ancestors by having their bones disinterred and ground to dust (Barnet *et al.* 1998: pl. 289). One of the most significant forms of violence depicted in the reliefs is the decapitation of enemy combatants after which the heads become the focus of ritual and political attention, displayed in piles or used in the ritual humiliation of the defeated: Assurnasirpal's soldiers play catch with heads (Fig. 4), and Assurbanipal has the severed heads of his enemies suspended from the necks of other rebel leaders (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 306) while he personally mutilated the head of Teumman, perhaps to prevent him from receiving funerary offerings (May 2010: 109, n.6). As was suggested above in the example of Utakku, it is possible that only members of the enemy elite were decapitated; their heads were clearly trophies that are held aloft by triumphant Assyrian soldiers as evidence of the dead individual (Radner 2011a: 49-50). Bahrani (2004: 117; 2008: 41) argues that these heads should be understood as message-signs, at once the sign of a just war and also inevitable victory.

The ultimate triumph of the king over his enemies is represented by a parade of booty, which under Ashurbanipal appears to have been transformed into a national triumph tied to religious festivities (Reade 2005: 28). These events include long lines of men, women and children being marshaled by Assyrian soldiers. Counted like cattle, these people are not depicted as enemies but rather as part of the acquisition of wealth by the Assyrian king; they were once the material property of a defeated ruler and are shown on the reliefs alongside items of furniture, vessels, textiles and flocks and herds (Feldman 2011: 139). [29] Such parades might also include the cult statues of the enemy's gods, underlining the religious dimension of war that involved the domination of foreign cults by Assyrian deities (Fig. 7).

[28]Banquets should also be considered as elements of victory celebrations (Reade 2005: 25-27; Radner 2011a: 53, n. 39)

[29] The analogy of captive humans with captive animals in the Assyrian reliefs and inscriptions is taken by Cifarelli (1998:220) as a method of dehumanizing the non-Assyrians, but there is no visual evidence for this (Ataç 2010: 46-47).

Warfare and the (Re)creation of Order

Vast amounts of materials and workers that were accrued by Assyrian kings as a consequence of military expansion (initially as booty and tribute, later as taxes) were invested in the creation of royal centers with extensive palaces. As Irene Winter (1993: 36) has argued, these palaces served as metonyms for the ruler and the state, "an integrated architectural, pictorial and textual representation of the institution of kingship and the ideal of the Neo-Assyrian state." As we have already seen, the images of war play a significant role as the source and vehicle for the ideology of kingship and the state. As part of this, they describe the mechanism by which the palace, and by association the state, was created and maintained. Although royal inscriptions credit the Assyrian king with this role, it is very clear from the reliefs and contemporary archival texts that the ruler was at the apex of a collective of high officials (Radner 2011b). Directed by this group of men, tens of thousands of people were involved on a regular basis in military campaigns, either as soldiers or through the provision of their equipment and supplies. Enormous numbers of workers, especially prisoners of war and deportees from defeated regions, were drafted for the creation of the palaces. The buildings thus stand for the creative energy of the ruler. Sennacherib's reliefs at Nineveh highlight this through the depiction of a multitude of male prisoners of war, guarded by soldiers and directed by the king and his officials, hauling materials to create the very palace and sculptures in which they are displayed; the reliefs reference their own creation (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pls. 91, 96-126, 414-23). The result is a representation of a creative act at the center of the state using resources acquired through the defeat of chaos.[30] During the seventh century BCE if not earlier this activity has the potential to be understood in a mythological dimension: in the "Epic of Creation" the forces of disorder are defeated by the god Assur (or Marduk in the Babylonian

[30] Russell (1991: 260-62) explains the layout of the Southwest Palace reliefs in relation to their perceived function as propaganda: in the public spaces were images of conquest that highlighted the risks involved in rebellion, while the images of construction in the more private inner parts were intended for insiders to show the benefits of good government.

version) who then creates humans from the body of his enemy to become the workers who will construct his temple and work the land (Noegel 2007).

The Power of Images

The palace was the stage for a complex set of material strategies that maintained the state through a range of ceremonies and rituals involving the king and his officials. As part of the fabric of the palace, representations of war participated in these systems of practice and belief that were shaped by the building's architecture and internal furniture and fittings (as well as the crucial intangible aspects lost to us: sound, smell and light/color); these all merged with the "human actors, extending and diverting their social agency beyond the physical confines of the body" (Wengrow 2007: 30). The wall reliefs and paintings were thus part of the socially affective properties of the palace, its psychological arsenal. They were also an index of royal agency, "making visual the verbal account of the ruler's ability to act" (Winter 2007b: 50). With the gods as the prime agents (it is from them that the king received his power to act), the reliefs and paintings mediated the flow of agency from deities to the king and served as a link between the supernatural and natural worlds; by lining the walls of rooms they created liminal spaces within which the rituals of state might be effective. Indeed, like the figures that guarded the entrance to these spaces, it is possible that wall sculptures (and the gate bronzes) were themselves performative, that is "a means of effecting an apotropaic and invocational magic" (Bahrani 2008: 52).

The performative nature of representations of war and violence has been stressed by Zainab Bahrani, who considers that the Mesopotamians thought of visual images "not as imitating the natural world but as participating in it and affecting it in supernatural, even magical ways" (Bahrani 2008: 57). She identifies repetition as significant in this, so that the images act like the performative

ritual statements in incantations that are repeated and built upon to achieve a magical result.[31] The repetition of the severed head of Teumman in the Til-Tuba reliefs is therefore something more than just a narrative device (as when children tell a story, "and then, and then, and then") but had for the Assyrians a real presence, "making the Assyrian victory inevitable and enduring… and replay[ing] itself into eternity" (Bahrani 2008: 52-55).[32] In Mesopotamia, Bahrani argues, images were perceived as living objects. Portraits of kings functioned as substitutes so that damage to these images represented a genuine attempt on the life of the living or dead ruler.[33] When Nineveh fell in around 612 BCE to invading Babylonians and Elamites it was therefore possible for them to take revenge on Assurbanipal (who had died some twenty years before) by defacing his image on the reliefs just as the Assyrian king had actually mutilated the head of Teumman.[34]

It is unclear, however, how far this notion of substitution can be extended to all Assyrian visual representations.[35] Only certain classes of objects were conceived as having their own agency and this "was archived largely through ritual consecration, in a system that allowed for the ritual transfer of personhood and/or divinity into physical matter" (Winter 2007: 42). Thus substitute kings could be created through a ritual transfer of identity during times of danger for the living monarch (Parpola 2007: XXII-XXXII), and cult statues were accorded agency through ritual animation and were thereby targets for abduction during war just like living people (Fig. 7).[36] The calculated attack on the images of Ashurbanipal may be better understood as tied to the intellectual

[31] Bahrani 2004. Michalowski (2009: 115-16) suggests that repetition of images in the reliefs would have been important for making the significant elements of the designs easier to "read" in rooms that were filled with people and objects.

[32] For a detailed explorations of this concept see Bahrani 2002 and 2003

[33] The notion that an image might act as a substitute for a specific king would seem to be at odds with an understanding that the royal *salmu* conveyed a stylized image of "kingship" (above note 8). It is perhaps the intersection of image and text that was crucial in establishing the individual substitute, since it is in the accompanying cuneiform inscriptions that the king (and his enemies) is named.

[34]Iconoclasm and its meaning in ancient Assyria has been discussed by Nylander 1999; Bahrani 1995, 2004; Porter 2009; May 2010.

[35] One wonders if images carved in stone, and thereby made to last, had greater performative qualities than those in more ephemeral paint. Did the magical presence created by imagery need to be cancelled ritually when, for example, Esarhaddon removed reliefs from the Central Palace of Tiglath-pileser III for use in his unfinished palace at Nimrud (Barnett and Falkner 1962: xiv-xv)?

[36] Winter 1992, 2007b; Bahrani 2003. Irene Winter (2007: 42-43) warns us that "one must distinguish between agency ascribed by the analyst of a given work from agency marked by cultural practice, and even grammar, within the originating culture, if we are to fully understand the historical role(s) accorded the artwork."

and political developments of the late seventh century BCE, especially in relation to Assyria's relationship with Babylonia (Lambert 1997); under Assurbanipal, traditions were created and new religious texts were composed (Bonatz 2004: 99-100; Ataç 2004: 71). This was a time when representation moved beyond the abstract to the real (as suggested by the interest in Teumman's physiognomy and the provision of a voice for enemies through captions), which may have served to perpetuate magically the death of the enemy and the victory of the king.

Conclusion

Assyrian visual representations of warfare have been traditionally viewed as reportage, celebration and propaganda. As with all ancient art, however, the palace wall reliefs and paintings were created to function at a number of interrelated levels and carried complex political, ideological and esoteric messages and were filled with performative imagery. These visual representations were fully integrated into the lived experiences of the elite imperial classes and although, in a general sense, they convey the same messages across three hundred years of the Neo-Assyrian period, these images responded to and were informed by changing political developments and intellectual currents. The scenes of warfare represent a subtle fusion of history, myth and magic, and they were the medium through which the symbiotic relationship between the king and the god Assur was established. Since enemies had by their rebellious actions broken divine law, the gods were entitled (through the king) to undertake a just war against them. The reliefs and paintings on the palace walls thus presented an enduring image of a judgement against an illegal act and its proper punishment. In a sense the images helped to justify war (Bahrani 2006: 57); Assurbanipal, for example, depicts in his reliefs a scene where two Elamite nobles (witnesses) are required to show visiting ambassadors the insulting tablets (evidence) that initiated the war against Teumman and his allies (Barnett *et al.* 1998: pl. 312). Violence, as in so many societies, past and present, was thereby "sanctioned as an accepted, correct and even valorized form of behaviour" (Bahrani 2008: 12). This

legitimized war as the lived experience and naturalized a worldview, bringing together in the social realm the institutionalizing powers of the Assyrian world: the gods and the king and their resources: humans, animals, plants and materials (Radner 2000). As Irene Winter has summarised, such images encoded propositions about existence (a divinely ordered world) and the action intended to change (restore) it: "the excitation generated by the work lies in the interaction between the two" (Winter 2007b: 62).

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Image captions

Fig. 1. Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) returns from a victorious campaign accompanied by a god in a winged disk. Northwest Palace, Nimrud, about 875-860 BCE, BM124551, © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 2. An Assyrian fortified camp with tents and two priests standing beside an incense stand, table of offerings, and a chariot with divine standards. Southwest Palace, Nineveh, about 700-695 BCE, BM 124915, © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 3. Drawing made at the time of excavation of a relief from Room XXXVIII, Southwest Palace, Nineveh, Or.Dr.I.43, BM2007,6024.45, © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 4. A victory parade includes a chariot with divine standards, soldiers playing catch with the severed heads of enemies, and figures dressed in lion skins. Northwest Palace, Nimrud, about 875-860 BCE, BM124550, © Trustees of the British Museum

Fig. 5. An attack by the army of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BCE) on the city of U[pa?]. Central Palace, Nimrud, about 730-727 BCE, BM115634+118903. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 6. Teumman and his son fall from their chariot and flee into the woods during the battle of Til-Tuba. Southwest Palace, Nineveh, about 650 BCE, BM124801b. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 7. The siege of a city and Assyrian soldiers carrying captured statues of gods. Central Palace, Nimrud, about 730-727 BCE, BM118934 © Trustees of the British Museum.

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