

THE ORIGINS OF THE ARTISTIC INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE AND NORTH SYRIA REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the scholarly discussion concerning the origins of the artistic interactions between the Assyrian empire and North Syria. While the theory expressed by Irene J. Winter in 1982 that the Neo-Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) was responsible for the takeover of such elements as sculpted relief orthostats and portal figures for his building program has been widely accepted, new studies suggest a date for the initial interactions already during the reign of Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BC).

1. FLOWERING WITHOUT RISE? BACKGROUND

When the first discoveries of Neo-Assyrian palaces were made in northern Mesopotamia during the mid 19th century, they showed the western world that the Neo-Assyrian empire, already famous for its grandeur through the biblical accounts, had created not only political but also artistic monumentality. The pioneers of Near Eastern Archaeology unearthed cities showing intentional shaping of space, buildings and monuments. These architectural complexes were enormous in size and embellished with numerous relief slabs. Furthermore, every important entrance was provided with gigantic apotropaic figures.

Even if during the late 19th century Neo-Assyrian monumentality was not appreciated for its aesthetic value,¹ it was obvious that those objects, which were put on display in London and in Paris, represented a flowering stage of the Neo-Assyrian art. However, it was not possible to follow the prevalent theory of the time defining artistic periods of Classical Greece (rise, flowering, decline) by J. J. Winckelmann² because no evidence for the rise of the Neo-Assyrian artistic development was yet found. This seemed not to be the pivotal concern of the art

¹ See e.g. Reade 1987.

² The theories of Winckelmann and their reception in the history of ancient art are studied in Potts 1994.

historians at the end of the 19th century.³ After 150 years of research, the origins of Neo-Assyrian art are still elusive and a continuing topic of discussion.

2. ORIGINS IN IRON AGE NORTH SYRIA?

In 1982 Irene J. Winter published an important contribution to the study of artistic interactions between the Neo-Assyrian empire and North Syria. She was not the first scholar to suggest an Assyrian debt to North Syria but she was the first to give more detailed historical settings and argumentation for her hypothesis. This article became a trendsetter – many scholars have quoted its ideas and based their own conclusions on Winter’s (for example, Gilibert 2004). Winter is of the opinion that the Neo-Assyrians were inspired by the North Syrian artistic achievements and adopted such elements as relief orthostats and portal figures to their own architectural structures. According to Winter’s theory:

[...] it was the initial contact of Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884 BC) and his son, Assurnasirpal II (883–859), with the states of North Syria in the first millennium that provided the immediate stimulus for the latter’s major building program at Nimrud – particularly as it can now be demonstrated that some of the Carchemish, Malatya and probably also Zincirli lions pre-date the construction of Assurnasirpal’s palace. (1982: 357).

This pattern, which already existed in earlier works (for example, Madhloom 1970: 101), is accepted not only in many popular handbooks (Curtis & Reade 1995: 40) but also in purely academic reference works and represents more or less the *communis opinio* in Ancient Near Eastern studies.

Over quarter of a century has passed since the publication of Winter’s article. Here I wish to survey what has been written more recently about the origins of the Neo-Assyrian artistic traditions and to discuss some relevant points. No claim of comprehensive coverage is made, so a great bulk of the extensive literature is omitted. Problems concerning artistic interaction in architectural structures called *bīt ḫīlāni* by the Assyrians⁴ and in small portable objects like ivories are excluded.

2.1. Hrouda contra Winter

Despite the widespread acceptance of Winter’s contribution quoted above, a discordant note to the *communis opinio* was published in 2003. Barthel Hrouda writes, against his own earlier opinion:⁵

³ For the judgement of the aesthetic value of Assyrian art in the second half of the 19th century see Bohrer 1998.

⁴ For the *bīt ḫīlāni* – structures see a recent contribution with further bibliography in Novák 2004.

⁵ See Hrouda 1965a: 13 and 1965b: 282: “Herkunftsland der Orthostatenreliefs ist wiederum Nordsyrien bzw. Kleinasien”.

[...] daß die Assyrer auf ihren Kriegszügen die Orthostatentechnik in Nordsyrien und Kleinasien kennengelernt und von dort nach Assyrien importiert haben, muß wohl aus drei Gründen ausgeschieden werden. (2003: 5)

The three points in Hrouda's line of reason are the following:

- (1) Stone slabs used in North Syria and Assyria are not comparable as technical and architectural structures;
- (2) North Syrian/Anatolian slabs are much smaller in size;
- (3) North Syrian/Anatolian slabs, which should have served as examples for the Assyrians, bear iconographic details that according to Hrouda are Assyrian in origin and thus should be dated later than their Assyrian counterparts (Hrouda 2003: 5–6).

Hrouda concludes then that the initial idea for the extensive use of the orthostats came from the textile crafts (Hrouda 2003: 6).

There are two points in Hrouda's argumentation that deserve brief comments. Firstly, in suggesting that perishable textiles could have stimulated the creation of relief surfaces for stone slabs, he is following the trend of scholars who have studied the role of other small-scale, portable objects (ivories, metal objects, seals) rather than for us inaccessible textiles in supplying iconographic material for monumental art (Bonatz 2004a with further references). Such comparative studies are very welcome and badly needed because most of these images circulated both in small-scale and large-scale media and formed together the visual environment for the first craftsmen to draft Neo-Assyrian palaces. On the other hand, since the practice of wall paintings is relatively well documented for the period before the reign of Assurnasirpal II, we should not overestimate the impact of textiles even if their significance as furnishing elements in shrines has perhaps not been much studied.⁶

Secondly, Hrouda returns to an old theory in which the Assyrians – because of their military superiority – would not have accepted influences from “inferior” areas and thus the flow of any iconographic details was in one direction only, in this case from Assyria to North Syria.⁷ Today we can state with some confidence, that many pieces of the North Syrian reliefs which were thought to have been executed under Assyrian influence, in fact antedate the building of Nimrud by Assurnasirpal II (Aro 2003: 293–297). This was actually demonstrated as early as in 1972 by

⁶ See Price 1988: 76 for a woollen curtain “adorned with Assyrian woven patterns and Phoenician dye” dedicated in the temple of Zeus Olympia by the Syrian king Antiochus IV c. 167 BC. Price assumes that this woollen curtain was a spoil from the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem and could thus represent a Near Eastern tradition in large-scale textiles hanging on walls and used as room dividers.

⁷ This theory is represented clearly for example in Mallowan 1972: 65: “[...] it seems historically improbable that the royal court of Assyria in the 9th century took as its model a slightly earlier provincial art of north Syria and decided to improve on it. This is not the way the art progresses”.

David Hawkins (1972: 106; see also Hawkins 2000: 76–78). Furthermore, as already proposed by Anton Moortgat in 1930 while studying the representations of the battle scenes with chariots (1930: 851) and recently stated by Dominik Bonatz for the griffin-head genii (2004a: 388–389), the common iconographical repertoire is to be explained as deriving from the shared cultural background of the Late Bronze Age, chiefly from the Mitanni-Hurrian realm, which is mainly discernible in seal art only.⁸ This theory has lately been modified to suggest that the Late Bronze Age northern Levant formed a fulcrum of cultural activities, which still had strong impact on the artistic development of Iron Age North Syria and Assyria. This issue is briefly dealt with below.

3. ASSURNAŞIRPAL II, THE PIONEER?

Neo-Assyrian monumental and representational art does not have any clearly traceable beginnings. The studies devoted to Assyrian building programs and their complex ideological messages are legion, but they do not tackle the question of their origins.⁹ The recent entry in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* by Rainer Maria Czichon lists the various finds pre-dating Assurnasirpal II and describes the emergence of the relief orthostats as an amalgamation of the North-Syrian tradition with the Middle Assyrian wall painting tradition (Czichon 2005). He does not reject a foreign influence but he does not seem to stress its importance. John M. Russell, in his own contribution to the same lexicon, sees a clear connection between the chronological closeness of the first campaigns of Assurnasirpal II in North Syria to the first appearance of the sculptured wall slabs after his return from Carchemish (Russell 1998–2001: 245).

3.1. Relief orthostats and portal figures: Parts of a larger concept?

Considering the North Syrian counterparts of city-gates and representational buildings, one of the most important features is that orthostat slabs with reliefs and the figures flanking the entrances often belong closely together. Whereas the quite sudden appearance of the relief slabs could get a cogent explanation by supposing that the much earlier Assyrian tradition of wall paintings was transformed into stone engravings, the Assyrian portal figures were thought not to be represented by any clearly datable predecessors.¹⁰ During the 1990's two contributions suggested that these assumed borrowings from North Syria were parts of a larger concept of the Neo-Assyrian urban constructions, which can be connected to Winter's hypothesis.

⁸ See also Orthmann 2002: 157 reflecting different possibilities for the adaptation of the griffin-head genii in Aleppo.

⁹ One of the most recent is Ataç 2006 with further references.

¹⁰ For fragments with uncertain dating see below pp. 16–17.

Guy Bunnens, referring to the 1982 article of Winter, is of the opinion that the general layout of Neo-Assyrian town-planning might also have its roots in the West (1996). Laura Battini on the other hand, investigates the new features in the Assyrian city-gates of the 1st millennium and is convinced of the basic similarities of the Assyrian structures with the North Syrian and Anatolian examples (1997).

3.2. Monumental inscriptions: Additional part of the concept?

Nevertheless, if we see that the concept of royal buildings with the above mentioned two specific elements – sculpted orthostats and portal figures along with perhaps an even larger program of city planning and gate structures – was adopted from North Syria by the Assyrians, we should perhaps add a third distinct element to form the concept, i.e., the use of Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions on both the orthostats as well as on the portal figures.¹¹ For Early Iron Age South Anatolia and North Syria we do have evidence that all three of these elements were applied together (Mazzoni 1997) but the fact that many sites underwent refurbishments and rebuilding hampers us in getting a coherent picture of the original plans and the ideological background of the North Syrian rulers.¹² A project to produce and analyze three-dimensional computer reconstructions of relevant structures might be rewarding.

For the Neo-Assyrian practice of adding cuneiform inscriptions on the orthostats as well as on the gate figures, there already exist many studies. John M. Russell has skilfully emphasized the concealed linkage between the Assyrian art and script but while supposing that Assurnasirpal II's direct source for sculptured wall slabs and portal figures was Carchemish, he refrains from naming a source for the practice of including numerous inscriptions on the monuments (Russell 1999: 229). Looking at the building constructions known to us to have been built at Carchemish before the reign of Assurnasirpal II, it becomes obvious that the sequence of slabs on the so-called Long Wall and on the King's Gate, further combining sculptured slabs with inscriptions and the portal lion of Suhis II with an inscription on the body of the animal (Hawkins 2000: 83–100, pls. 3–12), could have served as models for Assurnasirpal II. The mere fact that Assurnasirpal II exaggerated the number of inscriptions on his own construction obscures the connection to Carchemish.

3.3. Assurnasirpal II visiting Carchemish?

Further questions and comments must be presented considering the widespread assumption that Assurnasirpal II was able to visit Carchemish before deciding

¹¹ See Gilibert 2004: 379 pointing out the combination of sculpture and script.

¹² For an attempt to define the royal agenda in Carchemish see Denel 2007.

about his building program in Kalḫu. Did Assurnaširpal II ever get an autopsy of the monuments in Carchemish? Whereas the basic assumption that a tangible effect of the Assyrian military campaigns to the West would have been the adaptation of the building program is in itself plausible, problems of interpretation still exist. One of the abstruse points is that we have no information on how receptive an Assyrian king was to adapting ideological programs and we have no knowledge of the specific qualities of the officials that followed Assurnaširpal II on his military campaigns. Did he intentionally take architects, draftsmen and craftsmen with his army – in anticipation of bringing back not only tribute in goods but also ideas for his future construction works as well? Furthermore, the accounts of Assurnaširpal II receiving tribute from the North Syrian rulers are formulaic and do not reveal any details of the physical site or of other circumstances of exactly where tribute was paid. Alessandra Gilibert seems to be certain that the homage paid by Sangara, king of Carchemish, to Assurnaširpal II, perhaps depicted on one of the walls of the Northwest Palace in Kalḫu, took place in the city of Sangara. She continues:

Assurnasirpal und seinem Gefolge können bei dieser Gelegenheit die Zyklen von Relieforthostaten, die zu diesem Zeitpunkt den zeremoniellen Aufstieg zu den repräsentativen Bereichen der Stadt säumten, nicht entgangen sein. (Gilibert 2004: 375)

It seems, however, a bit odd that Sangara would have arranged an official reception within his city walls for a foreign ruler whose hostile attack was only prevented by paying him tribute. In Assurnaširpal II's account there is no mention of him *entering* Carchemish and generally we cannot imagine an Assyrian king with his troops would act like a benevolent visitor even if Assurnaširpal II mentions having had foreign envoys attending the famous banquet of Kalḫu (Grayson 1991a: 293). More likely Sangara delivered his silver and other goods outside the city walls in order to maintain his own status and dignity among the people of Carchemish.

Nevertheless, we have a record of Assurnaširpal II entering other cities roughly in the same region, for example Aribua, a “fortified city” of Lubarna, ruler of Pattina, where he says to have arranged a banquet in the palace of Lubarna (Grayson 1991a: 218: A.0.101.1, iii 81–83) and where he is thought to have stationed Assyrian troops to keep control over the area (Na'aman 2002).

Thus, reading the accounts of Assurnaširpal II, we remain unsure if the king or his officials were actually able to get any closer impressions of the urban city planning or decorative elements inside the city walls of Carchemish or any major capital residence of the North Syrian rulers. A concise study of the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions pursuing this issue would be desirable.

4. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL: TIGLATH-PILESER I, THE PIONEER?

The main reason for Winter and other scholars, then, to date the origins of the orthostat reliefs and the portal figures to the reign of Assurnasirpal II has been the almost total lack of findings earlier than the 870's BC. Also, the shaky and often very low datings given for the North Syrian evidence (Aro 2003: 293–297) have created distorted relative and absolute chronologies that have prevented us from seeing the monuments in their correct relationship with each other. However, new findings and new studies have made an alternative proposal possible. Ömür Harmanşah has published an article where the origin of the orthostat technique, i.e. working of uncarved, finely dressed upright slabs, is correctly traced back to the Middle Bronze Age Syrian area (2007). He further suggests that a cultural *koiné* was formed during the 14th–13th centuries BC in the eastern Mediterranean, which shared the practice of erecting orthostats and using them as media for imperial urbanism (Harmanşah 2007: 87–89).¹³ According to Harmanşah, the key figure in the transmission was Tiglath-pileser I, who also had visited the North Syrian cities in early 11th century and brought the concept to Assyria. Furthermore, by quoting building accounts of Tiglath-pileser I and Katuwas, king of Carchemish, he suggests that there is a common ideological background for erecting orthostats attested in their royal inscriptions as well (2007: 82–87). While Harmanşah considers only the transmission of the orthostats, Winfried Orthmann anticipates the possibility that the portal figures have their roots in late 2nd millennium North Syrian pieces (Orthmann 2004: 461).

The recent archaeological research – even if many discoveries are not yet fully published – seems to support the theory of Harmanşah. We cannot yet determine exactly the paths of the artistic interactions between the Anatolian Hittites and the North Syrians during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Bonatz 2002, Richter 2002, Özyar 2006) but at least we can state that the practice of portal lions and sphinxes was not restricted only to the Hittite capital Ḫattusas and to Alaca Hüyük. The excavations at the Anatolian sites Maşat Hüyük (Tapikka), Kuşaklı (Sarıssa) and Ortaköy (Sapinuwa) have so far not yielded substantial amounts of additional or comparative material¹⁴ but a Hittite stone quarry with unfinished portal lions has been located in Savcılıbeyit near Kirsehir indicating that further discoveries are possible (Sevinç 2001). Additionally, the Kerkenes Dağ excavation team has recently published photographs and reconstructions of two Late Bronze Age lion bases from Karakız, rendered with five feet – the typical feature for most of the Neo-Assyrian gate figures (Summers & Summers 2007: 8–9 with figures). The closest parallel so far from the Hittite realm could be the water basin from Ḫattusas (Bittel

¹³ A general idea of an international cultural *koiné* in the Late Bronze Age Ancient Near East has been developed by Feldman 2006.

¹⁴ See a slab with relief figure in Ortaköy in Süel 2005: 693, fig. 4.

1937: Pl. 8,1-d). In South Anatolia and North Syria, old and new investigations at such sites as Tilmen Hüyük (Duru 2003: plate 20,1 and 45,1-2), Emar (Finkbeiner 2001: 43 and 2005: 44) and Tal Bazi (Otto & Einwag 2007) portal lions from gate and temple structures have been discovered. One of the latest and perhaps most striking addition to the sculptural works is the set of sculptured orthostats from the citadel of Aleppo which once embellished the famous temple of the Storm-god of Aleppo (Gonnella, Khayyata & Kohlmeyer 2005). Beside the plain Middle Bronze Age orthostats described by Harmanşah (2007: 76–77), Kay Kohlmeyer, the excavator of this stunning temple of the Storm-god, has recovered relief orthostats and Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions, tentatively dated to ca. 1100 BC (Gonnella, Khayyata & Kohlmeyer 2005: 92–93). Since the Hieroglyphic Luwian inscription by the otherwise unknown ruler Taita of Patasatini is not yet published, it remains to be seen if the suggested dating will be definitive. If so, then we have proof of flourishing building activities in North Syria that are contemporaneous with Tiglath-pileser I. In the Assyrian heartland itself, traces of artistic continuity between the reigns of Tiglath-pileser I and Assurnasirpal II are scanty but according to Michael Roaf (2001) the most important traditions between Bronze and Iron Age Assyria were kept alive also during the obscure period between 1100 and 900 BC. The total number of objects that are placed in the period before Assurnasirpal II is still limited, but we can nevertheless trace a faint line from Tiglath-pileser I to Assurnasirpal II. Holly Pittman has examined the pictorial program on the White Obelisk and suggests that the ideological concept of Assurnasirpal II's reliefs already developed earlier, probably during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser I and Tukulti-Ninurta II (Pittman 1996).¹⁵ She also refers to the orthostat blocks carved with protective images from Tell al-Rimah belonging to the Old Assyrian period to show that carved figures in stone slabs were not totally unknown for Bronze Age Assyria (Pittman 1996: 351 n. 47). Many contributions refer to the inscription of Tiglath-pileser I that records the construction of a palace in Assur with figures of exotic animals made from basalt and apparently flanking an entrance (Grayson 1991a: 44, A.0.87.4, 67–71). According to Julian Reade, these are conscious emulations of the Syrian works (1981: 145) and tiny fragments of carved basalt actually found in Assur were first attributed by Ernst Weidner to these figures (1958). Furthermore, Paolo Matthiae suggests in his monograph on Assyrian art that an inscription of Tiglath-pileser I from Nineveh refers to the depiction of a victory of the king, although Matthiae considers slabs of clay more likely than the alabaster orthostats (1996: 5).¹⁶ Also in Assur, a torso of a portal figure and a fragmentary head were

¹⁵ Contra Grayson 1991a: 254 who attributes the White Obelisk, on the ground of a study of Edmund Sollberger, to Assurnasirpal II. The most recent examination of the dating of the White Obelisk is in a paper given by Eckart Frahm at the RAI in Würzburg on July 22, 2008, in which he convincingly demonstrated it to be a monument of Assurnasirpal I.

¹⁶ Matthiae does not give any reference to the inscription but he is probably referring to A.0.87.10 in Grayson 1991a: 55, 71–88.

found. Their exact chronological setting is uncertain but the re-evaluation of the old excavation documents does not exclude the possibility that they were made before the time of Assurnāširpal II (Marzahn & Salje 2003: 125–126, figs. 7–8).¹⁷

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It appears that even if the suggestions made by Winter in 1982 were well founded and could perhaps still be regarded as the most plausible explanation for the emergence of the Neo-Assyrian tradition of monumental architecture, other alternatives should be given serious scrutiny as well. More detailed insights into the organization and mechanics of artistic production are needed. Further excavations in the Assyrian heartland, which could elucidate our picture of the monuments before the time of Assurnāširpal II, are currently impossible, but one can hope that, for example, the archaeological investigation of the Assyrian provincial centres, such as Ziyaret Tepe (Assyrian Tušhan),¹⁸ will provide new material for the picture.¹⁹ Furthermore, a clearer and more accurately established chronological frame for the Anatolian and North Syrian settings will probably emerge and will possibly make the transmission of the discussed elements already during the reign of Tiglath-pileser I plausible.

¹⁷ See also Danrey 2004, esp. pp. 310 and 334.

¹⁸ Assurnāširpal II renovated a palace in Tušhan, see Grayson 1991a: 202 (A.O.101.1, ii 2b–12a). For the latest archaeological report see Matney 2007.

¹⁹ Reade 1979: 17 assumes that “fragments of earlier series [of orthostats], had they existed, would surely have been found at Ashur”. See, however, Marzahn & Salje 2003 demonstrating the potential of the mound for further investigations.

