

NOSELESS IN NIMRUD: MORE FIGURATIVE RESPONSES TO ASSYRIAN DOMINATION

Barbara Nevling Porter

ABSTRACT

In 1980 Carl Nylander proposed that the famous copper head depicting an ancient Akkadian ruler (perhaps Sargon I), discovered at Nineveh in a severely damaged state, had been the victim of deliberate mutilation, probably at the hands of Medes after Nineveh fell in 612 BCE to a joint Median-Babylonian attack. There are also clearly deliberate mutilations in scenes involving Elamites in bas-reliefs at Nineveh, which Julian Reade suggested represent a similar figurative revenge on Assyria, perhaps by Elamite soldiers who helped capture that city. Reade later identified further examples of selective mutilation in Nineveh palaces. Here, I point out figurative mutilations in a second Assyrian city, Kalḫu, focusing on a little-noticed Assyrian bas-relief at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine that shows extensive mutilation, particularly of the face and body of the king, in a pattern echoing and extending the mutilations seen at Nineveh. As Nylander first suggested, such mutilation appears to be an act of “political iconoclasm” by Assyria’s former subjects. In the Bowdoin relief, the winged divinity following the king has also been subjected to mutilation (an apparently unique case). A third figure has also been added, crudely sketched on the stone. This figure, facing the king, appears to wear the hat of an Elamite king. The addition of an image of the much-demeaned (and quite dead) rulers of Elam, placed here in a position of power before the disfigured image of their Assyrian counterpart, went beyond figurative revenge to announce the birth of a new political order, in which the long-conquered peoples of southern Mesopotamia would see their independence, their political identity, and their much-abused honor at last restored.

1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MUTILATION OF IMAGES IN ASSYRIA

One of Simo Parpola’s gifts as a scholar is his strong sense of the humanity of the ancient Assyrians. In Simo’s remarkable translations, the Assyrians cease to be

stilted and wooden figures speaking in a sociolect we seem to reserve for people who are very dead; instead, in Simo's deft and sometimes daring translations, the Assyrians and Babylonians, Medes and Syrians suddenly sound human again, speaking with energy and irreverence, deviousness and courage, gratitude and fear about the issues that mattered to them. Since the mutilated Bowdoin carving of Assurnasirpal II and its mates from Nimrud, which I will focus on here, give a new voice to the grief and anger of long-silenced Mesopotamians, it seems appropriate to dedicate this study to my old friend and lamentably distant colleague, Simo Parpola, as an admiring and affectionate salute from Maine, the Far-away.

1.1 "Sargon's" Mutilated Head

*Thrones and Imperial Powers, off-spring of heav'n,
Ethereal virtues; or these Titles now
Must we renounce, and changing stile be call'd
Princes of Hell?*

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 310–313

In an article entitled, "Earless in Nineveh: Who Mutilated 'Sargon's' Head?" Carl Nylander argued in 1980 that the majestic but severely damaged copper head depicting an unidentified third-millennium ruler (Sargon of Akkad?), that was excavated at Nineveh in the area of the Ishtar Temple in a seventh century BCE context, had suffered deliberate mutilation in ancient times. He suggested the head had been damaged by Medes shortly after the Assyrian capital of Nineveh fell to a combined Median-Babylonian onslaught in 612 BCE, precipitating the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire (Nylander 1980). Whether the head had begun its life as part of a statue erected at Nineveh by rulers of the ancient Akkadian empire¹ or had only arrived at Nineveh in Neo-Assyrian times, perhaps as booty from Elam, is still debated, but Nylander argued plausibly that even if the head had come to Nineveh as booty, it must have been still intact at its arrival, since "there seems no point in assuming the import to Nineveh of an already severely damaged statue" (Nylander 1980: 329 and n. 3). Trying to pinpoint the period when the ancient Akkadian head was damaged, Nylander argues that while "the mutilation could have occurred, of course, at almost any time during Mesopotamia's tumultuous history [...], after an early, disgraceful mutilation the head would hardly have been allowed to 'live on' for another 1700 years before ending up in the debris of Nineveh's final destruction" (Nylander 1980: 330). The attack on "Sargon's" head, he went on to reason, must not have been done by Assyrians, but by their enemies during or just after Nineveh's fall.

¹ Unlikely, if J. G. Westenholz is correct in arguing that the Akkadian rulers did not control Nineveh (Westenholz 2004).

Nylander's examination of the head (now part of the collections of the Baghdad Museum) showed that it had been cut or beaten with considerable force in four areas. This attack left "a gaping hole at the place of the left eye where strong chisel blows have worked themselves through the thick metal into the hollow head," cut the upper part of the nose with "three or more hard chisel strokes," flattened the end of the nose "by several blows with a hammer-like tool," cut off both ears with "strong vertical blows with a hard chisel" (in the process peeling off bits of metal "in large flakes") and broke off both tips of the king's forked beard (Nylander 1980: 229–230). Nylander suggested this deliberate mutilation was perhaps the work of Medes, since the treatment of the head precisely repeats the violent punishments imposed on certain Medes by the Persian king Darius less than a century after the fall of Nineveh, and since Babylonian Chronicles report the Medes were present during the final attack on Nineveh (Grayson 1975: 94, ll. 38–43). Nylander concludes the mutilation of the ancient royal head was an act of "political iconoclasm [...], a selective disfigurement intended to demonstrate the defeat and humiliation of a known and still identifiable character, real or symbolical" (Nylander 1980: 330).²

1.2 Mutilated Bas-Reliefs at Nineveh

In the course of his discussion, Nylander mentioned other cases of what he suspected to be deliberate damage to royal images in bas-reliefs that decorated the walls of palaces at Nineveh. The damaging of these carved images, he suggested, was similar to the treatment of the ancient head and provided additional "clear evidence of intentional, selective iconoclasm, no doubt in connection with the capture of the city" (Nylander 1980: 331).³

A survey of the surviving bas-reliefs once displayed in Assyrian palaces at Nineveh reveals a widespread pattern of clearly deliberate and selective attacks on the carvings. One of the most striking examples is the violent attack on the image showing the enthroned king Sennacherib reviewing booty and captives just taken from the Israelite city of Lachish. This scene was part of a series of narrative carvings portraying incidents in Sennacherib's western campaign of 701 BCE, which had culminated in successful attacks on cities of Philistia and Israel. This visual

² If the head was still part of a statue at this point, the figural attack presumably also included a figural beheading, recalling the images of beheaded enemies and of enemy heads in Assurnasirpal II reliefs, and the scenes of beheading the Elamite king and displaying it with celebration in bas-reliefs of Assurbanipal's palaces at Nineveh. See Bonatz 2004b, Bahrani 2004, and Dolce 2004 for varied comments on figural beheading in Neo-Assyrian Nineveh.

³ I was surprised to learn after this paper had been submitted that Stefan Maul had presented a paper discussing the mutilation of bas-reliefs at Nineveh at the 52^e Rencontre in Münster in 2006, to be published soon in the RAI proceedings as "Die Rache der Besiegten: Neues zum Untergang Ninives im Jahre 612 v. Chr." I am grateful to Prof. Maul for sending me a copy of his unpublished paper, and I am relieved and delighted to find that we have agreed on almost every point.

account of the campaign was displayed on large stone panels lining the walls of a public room, probably that of a high official, in the South-West Palace, the building constructed by Sennacherib to serve as his residence and governmental center at Nineveh. The climax of the scenes of the western campaign is this image of the victorious Sennacherib, who sits on a high throne as his officers display several kneeling captives to him, while in the distance other people from Lachish are being led away into captivity and their leaders, stretched on the ground near them, are being flayed or beheaded. As Julian Reade pointed out, “the scene is now marred by a wide gash across the king’s face, made perhaps by an enemy soldier ransacking the palace in 612 BC” (Reade 1983: figs. 65–73 and fig. 73 caption).⁴ Close examination of the panel reveals further damage; a deep slash has removed the king’s nose, three cut-marks cross the place where his ears would have been, and his entire face (and perhaps parts of his beard) has been removed, evidently by several blows with a chisel.⁵ Around the king, in contrast, the figures of his Assyrian officers stand quite untouched (Reade 1983: fig. 73).

Carvings commissioned by Sennacherib’s grandson Assurbanipal for display in two palaces at Nineveh provide additional examples of mutilation, directed at the image of the king and at other selected figures as well. In the South-West Palace, used also by Assurbanipal as a royal residence in the early years of his reign, there were deliberate attacks on the images of two Assyrian soldiers portrayed in a large and intricately carved panel that illustrated incidents in Assurbanipal’s defeat of the Elamites at the battle of Til-Tuba (Curtis & Reade 1995: 72–77). Leaving other figures untouched, the mutilator has removed with a single, deep slash the face of an Assyrian soldier who is shown killing the son of the Elamite king by pounding his head with a mace. He has also carefully excised (with a chisel?) the face of a nearby Assyrian soldier who is shown beheading the Elamite king himself (already mockingly portrayed in earlier scenes). The small figures of these two soldiers must have been painstakingly located in the chaotic battle scenes and then deliberately mutilated. On another panel, someone has slashed and then perhaps battered the face of the Elamite Ummanigaš, whom the Assyrian artist had shown being introduced to his compatriots by an Assyrian officer as the Assyrians’ chosen replacement for an Elamite king they had just killed. Ummanigaš’s figure is now left without ears or cheek (Reade 1976: Taf. 21, 2; Taf. 22, 1) Julian Reade argues these particular mutilations, directed at the figures of people engaged in harming or denigrating Elamites, might well be the work of rampaging Elamite soldiers during the final

⁴ The relief was found in Room XXXVI of the South-West Palace at Nineveh, proudly named by Sennacherib the “Palace Without Rival” (Reade 1979: 52; the entire panel is discussed in Reade 1983: 46–52, with drawings that provide a record of sections of the panel that were destroyed in their removal). On this building and the “unusual prominence” accorded this group of reliefs, see Russell 1991: 252–257.

⁵ Although the British Museum photo published by Reade does not show clearly the marks left by the tool that was used to remove the face.

attack on Nineveh, who seized this opportunity to avenge Assurbanipal's savage destruction of the Elamite capital of Susa a few years earlier. "We may perhaps imagine them," Reade muses, "still in their distinctive headbands, slashing angrily at the most offensive pictures as smoke began to blacken the ceiling" (Reade 1976: 105).

Images of King Assurbanipal himself were also defaced in the palace bas-reliefs of Nineveh.⁶ These royal images were part of the carvings made for the North Palace of Nineveh, built by Assurbanipal in his later years. For the decoration of his private apartments in this building, Assurbanipal had commissioned a spectacular set of carvings showing himself engaged in the traditional royal sport of fighting and killing captured lions. Although these panels record incidents that ostensibly took place during a kind of royal sporting event, the images are politically charged, since the king's lion hunts appear to have been not only an opportunity for a public display of his athleticism and courage, but also a ritual fulfilment of the king's traditional obligation to protect Assyria's people from physical dangers, of which the lion was traditionally a visual emblem (Weissert 1997: 339–358).⁷

Here, too, we find a pattern of selective mutilations, in this case defacing pictures that were privately displayed for the pleasure of the king, his family, and his most intimate associates. In the top register of the three-register lion-hunt panel, the upper band is interrupted by the carver to frame the head of the archer-king, who stands poised beside his shield-bearer preparing to fire a final arrow to finish off the wounded lion who leaps toward him. But the eye of this prominent figure of the king has now been cut away, his bowstring has been cut where it crosses his beard, and his right hand appears to have been deliberately damaged where it holds the arrow against the taut bowstring. In the process, the back of the head of his shield-bearer has also been removed – perhaps not accidentally. A single, deep cut has also severed the bow itself. Behind the king, the noses of the two eunuch soldiers holding his reserve arrows have been cut away, although the figures remain otherwise untouched. Aside from these precise disfigurements, all the figures remain intact, their sharply carved, minute details undamaged. The body of the lion, shown in three poses as he advances on his enemy the king, is, in contrast to the king's body, untouched.

⁶ The images of Elamites being killed and tormented were displayed on the walls of the South-West Palace at Nineveh, built by Assurbanipal's grandfather Sennacherib but still in active use in the first half of Assurbanipal's reign, when he commissioned these carvings as an addition to its publicly displayed decorative stone panels. The defaced images of the king himself are found in what was probably the king's private apartments in a palace he built later, known as the North Palace (Curtis & Reade 1995: 72).

⁷ An image of the king victoriously stabbing a rampant lion was chosen as the motif for the official royal seal of Assyria used on clay bullae and docketts (Oates & Oates 2001: 221, and figs. 127 and 221; Herbordt 1992: 123–145). A large wall-carving erected in the Ninurta temple at Nimrud by Assurnasirpal II shows that god (of whom the Assyrian king was the representative and executive power on earth) fighting a winged lion-monster (Black & Green 1992: fig. 117).

It seems obvious that the damage to these carvings, as well, is deliberate and was the work of the Assyrians' contemporaries. The mutilations on this panel seem designed to disarm and denigrate the formidable archer-king, damaging his eye and hand and rendering his bow useless, then making him further vulnerable by blinding the two soldiers who stand by to assist him. (Below, in the second register, the king's head and shoulders are missing, but this may be due to accidental damage to the edge of the panel when it was removed from the wall.) In the space just beyond this second figure of the king, however, there is an obviously deliberate and mocking mutilation. The king is shown brazenly tugging on the tail of a lion who leaps away from him – but, as Reade points out, “It is notable that much of the lion's tail has been chipped away, so that the lion has been, as it were, set loose; this defacement was probably the action, at once humorous and symbolic, of some enemy soldier busy ransacking the palace in 612 BC” (Curtis & Reade 1995: 87 and figs. 28–29).

Our last example of a carving mutilation in Assurbanipal's North Palace is a clear case of figurative revenge on the king by his former subjects. In this famous carving, Assurbanipal sits in a garden, reclining on a chaise lounge while he and his wife, seated on an ornate high chair beside him, appear to sip at drinks from the bowls held in their raised right hands. Here, too, the abused Elamites play a significant role. In the background on a tree hangs the recently removed head of the Elamite king Teumman, a kind of bizarre garden ornament *cum* war memento, and to one side of the scene, as servants advance wielding fly whisks and bringing food and drink, the Assyrian artist has depicted two captive Elamite kings, identified by their customary fringed robes and bulbous crowns, who, Reade suggests, are “being forced to carry a fly-whisk and perhaps a bottle of wine for their Assyrian captor [...]; Assyrian courtiers hustle the Elamites with fly-whisks, and throw themselves at their feet in mock obeisance” (Reade 1976: 104 and Taf. 28, 2).⁸

The figurative counterattack on this mocking carving was selective and thorough. The face of the nonchalantly reclining Assyrian king has been hacked away methodically with chisel blows that have removed his nose, his mouth, his ear, and most of his right hand as it supports the cup. His wife's mouth and nose have similarly been erased with a chisel. These mutilations seem designed to ensure that, symbolically at least, the king and his wife would never enjoy food or drink again. Nor would they be cosseted and served. The servant immediately behind the queen, who holds a fly whisk, has suffered damage to her eye and has had her nose removed (again, not accidental damage, since the rest of her face and the face of the servant beside her are untouched). One of the servants who follows has had an eye entirely removed, another has a damaged eye, and the nose of the harper in

⁸ For clear detail photographs of various sections of the relief, now in the British Museum (WA 124920), see Nylander 1980: fig. 11; fig. 60; Fales & Postgate 1992: 30, 109, 138, figs. 8, 26 and 33; Curtis & Reade 1995: 122. For an over-all photo, Parrot 1961b: 52, fig. 60.

the procession also appears to have been damaged. Those who chose to serve the Assyrian ruler suffer with him here (figuratively at least) after his defeat. Aside from these careful defacements of selected parts of the king, his queen, and their servants, the panel is beautifully preserved.

This survey of the Nineveh carvings makes it clear that there is a pattern of systematic and deliberate mutilation of selected images in the palace bas-reliefs in this city. The repeated choice of the figure of a king as the target of often painstaking mutilations, and the careful avoidance of adjacent figures, make it clear, if there had been any doubt, that the damage to the carvings we have been considering was not due to erosion, a fall, or other accidental damage, but was instead the result of quite deliberate human action.⁹ Although it is sometimes suggested that such mutilations were made in the modern era by local Muslims offended by these representations of the human figure, this is hardly likely, since in every case, nearby faces and human figures remain quite untouched. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these selective defacements were the action of angry contemporaries who had suffered under Assyrian rulers and were now striking back by damaging the self-laudatory images Assyrian kings displayed on the walls of their palaces at Nineveh.

1.3 Figurative Murder?

In her recent study of visual representation in ancient Mesopotamia, Zainab Bahrani proposes a different interpretation of the ancient mutilations, arguing that such attacks on carved images were understood by Assyrians, Babylonians, and their contemporaries to be actual attacks on the king represented in them. What we see as a visual representation of the king, she suggests, ancient Mesopotamians understood as an alternate form or “repetition” of the king, “another way that the person or entity could be encountered” (Bahrani 2003: 137). “In ancient Iraq,” she argues, “the king’s image represented himself, the specific person, not just as a representation or even a symbol, but as a substitute, a double. Statues of kings were regarded as real things” (Bahrani 2003: 171). As a consequence, she asserts, the mutilation of a royal image attacked that king “not just symbolically but literally” (Bahrani 2003: 182).

To support this contention, she begins by discussing other examples of substitution in ancient Assyria, such as medically treating a clay image of a sick person as a means of healing him (Bahrani 2003: 173); the practice of selecting

⁹ Frankfort, for example, suggests the “Sargon” head was damaged in a fall (Nylander 1980: n. 4). Reade suggests some of the damage at Nimrud, discussed below, should be attributed to local modern iconoclasts. Other ancient damage was not due to angry attacks; Reade notes that panels were sometimes erased, moved, and reused by the Assyrians themselves. In addition, stone panels from Assyrian palaces have served as sources of local limestone even in recent times (Reade 2000: 614–615).

a person to become, through a ritual, a “substitute king” (*šar pūḫi*) when omens showed the king to be in danger (Bahrani 2003: 130–132); the use of garments or parts of garments, such as the fringe of a cloak, to represent an individual in judicial settings (Bahrani 2003: 130), and (the most pertinent case for us here) the performances of a “Mouth Opening” ritual on carved wooden statues of the king in order to “bring them to life” so that they could be installed in a temple to pray perpetually to the gods as a replacement for the king himself (Bahrani 2003: 171–172; Winter 1992).

Bahrani then considers the practice of abducting and defacing royal images in wartime, arguing that “royal images [...] were taken into captivity and punished as if live beings because of a complex and philosophical world-view in which representation by image was a real, not a symbolic, substitution, and having control of a person’s image was one more way of having control of that person” (Bahrani 2003: 182). As an example, she cites Assurbanipal’s account of punishing a statue of King Hallusu of Elam, who had fought against his grandfather: “The statue of Hallusu [...] the one who plotted evil, [...] his mouth which had been slandering I cut off, his lips which had spoken insolence, I pierced, his hands, which had grasped the bow to fight against Assyria I chopped off” (Bahrani 2003: 171). When Assurbanipal carries off the statue of one of his own enemies, Bahrani draws the conclusion that, “having Tammaritu’s statue was a valid substitute for taking Tammaritu himself, and having control of Tammaritu’s image gave Ashurbanipal control of Tammaritu” (Bahrani 2003: 179).

But here Bahrani goes too far, overlooking distinctions between the king in his organic body and the king in various substitute forms that were drawn by the Assyrians themselves, both explicitly and in their practices. An instructive example is described in a letter to King Esarhaddon from his chief chanter (SAA 10 339). This official is making arrangements for an annual procession of gods that took place in the city of Kurba’il, probably their procession to the city’s *akītu* temple, and he writes to ask the king to turn over his *kuzippu* garments (some kind of cloak or wrap)¹⁰ so that they can be sent to Kurba’il to take part in the procession. In other cities, the king may have participated personally in the *akītu* procession¹¹, but apparently in Kurba’il it was traditional that his garments should represent him instead. The chanter describes the arrangement to the king, explaining that it is

¹⁰ CAD s.v. *kuzippu*, esp. b), *re* cultic and ceremonial contexts.

¹¹ Parpola in 1983 cited the letter ABL 1197 as evidence that at Kilizi, the king in person participated, together with priests, in a procession with the god Adad and entered the *akītu* house with them (Parpola 1983: 262). I am grateful to M. Luukko for pointing out to me that in SAA 13 189, the reading of the relevant (partly broken) line in that letter (r.2) has now been changed, with the result that the king causes the two priests to go, rather than going with them in the procession. I have not found other evidence to indicate that the king did participate in such processions in some cities. As a result, although Parpola’s original proposal remains plausible, it is at present unsubstantiated.

standard procedure: “[The gods] of Kurba’il set off (for the *akītu* temple) under my [directi]on, and the garments of the king go (along). Year after year they go on like this.” At the conclusion of the procession, “The penitential psalm is performed over them, (and the gods) bless the king, my lord.”¹²

Although the king’s garments do appear to be accepted in this particular situation and ritual as an effective substitute for the participation of the king in person, it also seems clear that the garments are not understood as a complete, multipurpose, alternate form of the king. Their substitution for the king here is a partial and circumscribed one, occurring on a single yearly occasion and in effect only within the context of that one ritual procedure: there is no suggestion here that the people of Kurba’il expected in the future to be ruled by the king’s *kuzippu* garments! The clothes are evidently an acceptable and by now traditional substitute for the king’s personal appearance in the procession at Kurba’il, but do not in any sense act as a full replacement for him. The language of the letter in fact implies a clear sense of the distinction between the king’s loaned garments and the “king himself”: the penitential psalm is recited over the garments (“over them”), but the resulting blessing will be conferred on the king himself (“the king, my lord”), that is, the king in his corporal body who is receiving the letter in Nineveh. Although Bahrani argues persuasively that for Mesopotamians, “substitution through images [...] is a doubling, or a multiplication [...] a repetition, another way that the person or entity could be encountered” (Bahrani 2003: 137), such doubling appears in practice to have been a quite circumscribed and limited presencing of that person, one that was moreover understood to be in effect only within a specified moment and procedure.

The case of ritually enlivened royal statues (and perhaps of other images, since they are all referred to by the single term *šalmu* in Akkadian) makes the limited role of substitutes even clearer. Certain statues of kings, as Winter has described at length (Winter 1992) and as Bahrani again argues here, were transformed into “living beings” by the performance of a several-day ritual in which the statue was bathed, “born,” and had its mouth “opened” symbolically so that it could eat and receive food offerings. But this did not make such statues full equivalents of the king in his corporal body. Life-as-a-statue was limited and contingent. An enlivened royal statue only stood, prayed and received food offerings; it could not rule, marry the daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh, or lead the Assyrian army, nor is it ever proposed that it should do so. Its limited activities as king take place in a single, restricted setting, standing on a pedestal before the statue of a god in that god’s temple (Winter 1989: 53). Bahrani asserts that the one step required to

¹² The text is LAS 271 = ABL 29 = K 1204. For the transliteration and translation used here, see SAA 10 339. On the idea that “the king’s person was present in his clothes even if he himself was absent,” see the discussion of the substitute king ritual in Parpola 1971: 62. For discussion of the text, Parpola 1983: 262.

make an image into a “valid substitute image” for the person it represented was attaching the name of that individual to the image, orally or in writing.¹³ But the elaborate instructions for performing the Mouth Opening ritual to enliven a statue suggest that in Assyrian and Babylonian eyes, it was instead the performance of this ritual that was considered to be the one action that could make an image, carved or painted, able to function as a living being, even in a restricted sense. Records of actual performances of the ritual are few, suggesting that only a few images were actually enlivened (Walker & Dick 1998: 58–67; CAD s.v. *pītu* A 2. 3’d).¹⁴ Since the instructions for that ritual and the incantations recited during it refer only to the carving of wooden statues (with repeated references to the trees from which the objects had been made and the axe, hatchet, and saw used in constructing them¹⁵) and to the subsequent ritual enlivening of those particular objects, it is unlikely that the images we are considering here, carved in bas-relief on palace walls, had ever been ritually brought to life. Despite Bahrani’s arguments, the mutilations of selected royal images at Nineveh do not appear to have been understood to be acts of murder of a living king fully present in an alternative figural body (however dead already in his corporal body), but more simply, furious attacks on images representing the hated Assyrian kings.¹⁶ In the light of the evidence we have so far considered, the mutilations of carved images of the king we have seen at Nineveh recall the recent fiercely joyful and bitter moments when the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down by American soldiers and then beaten and trampled by Iraqis shortly after the fall of Baghdad to invading forces – a moment of political iconoclasm, speechless symbolic revenge, and propaganda, but not an assassination.

2. THE MUTILATION OF CARVINGS AT NIMRUD

In addition to the mutilations of bas-reliefs at Nineveh that we have just examined, there are additional cases of deliberate defacing of images of the Assyrian king that have been curiously unnoticed in the current discussions. Some are remarkably revealing of their mutilators’ intentions. One in particular, the mutilated image of a ninth-century Assyrian king followed by the mutilated image of his protective divinity, a carving in the collections of The Bowdoin College Museum of Art in

¹³ “The valid substitute image required a series of links to the represented, including most particularly the inscription and the utterance of the name. Otherwise, the image remained simply a partial signifier” (Bahrani 2003: 204).

¹⁴ The Mouth Opening ritual should be distinguished from the Mouth Washing ritual, which appears to have been a ritual of renewal and purification for living statues and other divine objects, but not the ritual that was understood to make them become living beings.

¹⁵ E.g., Walker & Dick 1999: 99 (l. 15); 100 (l. 64).

¹⁶ In contrast to the case of a statue found in Syria buried formally in a tomb, whose chest had been pierced by a deep hole, an act that does appear to have been a figurative murder (Roobaert 1996).



Fig. 1. The mutilated image of King Assurnasirpal II and his divine attendant. From Nimrud. (1860.3: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick Maine. Gift of Dr. Henri B. Haskell)

Brunswick, Maine since 1860, shows a more extensive pattern of mutilations than any stone panel so far examined. The obviously selective mutilations of the king's body in this piece make it clear that the attack was not an impulsive gesture, but rather a deliberate and time-consuming action, precise in its selected targets and complex in its figurative message. In addition, the mutilated Bowdoin carving comes not from Nineveh, but almost certainly from the Assyrian city of Kalḫu (modern Nimrud), as we will see, establishing that mutilating images of the king was not restricted to the capital but was rather a program of symbolic attack also carried out in other cities as the empire collapsed.¹⁷

The mutilated carving at Bowdoin is impressive, covering the entire face of a gypsum slab 4'5" high and 6'6" wide (Fig. 1.). It depicts the ninth-century Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II, identified in the cuneiform inscription carved on the slab, who is dressed in the long, fringed tunic and shawl that constituted royal formal dress in that period, and who wears on his head the fez-like hat with a point on its top and streamers falling down the wearer's back that identified the king in Neo-

¹⁷ In a related figurative attack, a statue that "may well have been the god Ashur in person" was "hurled into oblivion" down a well when the city of Assur fell (Reade 2000: 613 and n. 35).

Assyrian iconography.¹⁸ The king's open right hand is lifted before his face in the gesture with which the king in other Nimrud carvings greets approaching tribute-bearers or salutes a god. His left hand grasps the top of a large bow, already strung for action.

The king is followed by a heavily muscled, two-winged figure wearing the horned cap of a god, known from its description in ritual texts to be a minor guardian deity. In his lowered left hand the figure holds a ritual bucket and in his right, an oval object, perhaps an aspergillum shaped like a date palm flower cluster, which he extends toward the back of the king's head in a traditional gesture of protection, purification, and blessing.¹⁹

Crudely chipped into the field before the king is the outline of an oddly-shaped head and shoulders; in front of it, a roughly etched, flattened-v-shaped object almost touches the fingers of the king's extended hand. This half-figure was clearly a later addition, since no stone had been left for sculpting a third figure in bas-relief here. Its outline was simply chipped into the blank field before the king's face and raised hand.

The king's figure has been extensively and methodically defaced. Careful chiselling has entirely removed his nose, eyes, and ear, and has cut completely through the right wrist. Further chiselling has damaged his beard, fingers, right toes, and bowstring. In an unexpected departure from the Nineveh pattern, the minor deity who follows the king to protect and purify him has also been mutilated, losing his face, toes, and right wrist to chisels.²⁰

The inscription, carved in unusually large cuneiform signs, crosses the two figures from shoulder to ankle; it begins by announcing the piece was placed in a "palace of Assurnasirpal, king of Assyria" (Ross 1974/1977: 166–168; Stearns 1961: 23). Assurnasirpal II, pictured here, was a ninth-century ruler renowned for his inexorably successful military campaigns that largely created the Assyrian empire. Other inscriptions of Assurnasirpal record the construction of palaces at Nineveh and in the small provincial site of Abu Marya, but report that his main residence was in the city of Kalḫu, which he had transformed from a provincial

¹⁸ For earlier discussions of this carving, see Stearns 1984: pl. 6 and 23–24 and Porter 1989: 12–13. Regarding the hats of Neo-Assyrian kings, see also Reade in this volume.

¹⁹ On the much-debated significance of this minor god and its characteristic gesture and instruments, seen here and in many other carvings in the Northwest Palace, as well as on seals, see Porter 2003 and Giovino 2007, with further bibliography.

²⁰ There are additional sharply cut patterns and marks on the slab which appear to me to have been made by a different sharp instrument, probably at a later date. When the slab was recently cleaned and restored in the process of moving it to a new setting in the museum, an additional ancient mutilation that had been covered up with plaster in earlier restoration was discovered. This will be formally announced, with new photographs, in an article discussing all the mutilations of the piece, now being prepared by Prof. James Higginbotham of Bowdoin College. I would like to thank Higginbotham for his astute comments as we examined the carving together at Bowdoin.

town into the resplendent new capital of his emerging empire, enhancing it with several temples and palaces, the most important known later to its excavators as the Northwest Palace.

No explicit record survives of the city in which Bowdoin's mutilated carving was discovered, but a letter written by Henri Byron Haskell, a Bowdoin graduate and medical missionary who worked in the 1850's in Mosul, a city located at the site of ancient Nineveh, reports "I have just returned from Mosul, Assyria, where I have some very fine slabs from Nineveh which I shall be pleased to present to Bowdoin (Stearns 1961:15)." (Haskell's reference to Nineveh tells us little, since the excavator of both Nimrud and Nineveh was at first unsure of which Assyrian cities he was working in, and the confusion was echoed in later reports.) In response to Haskell's letter, Bowdoin's trustees agreed to pay for shipping, and five carved Assyrian panels duly arrived at Bowdoin as Haskell's gift and are registered as acquisitions of the museum in 1860. Among these was our mutilated carving. Its brief inscription is silent about the city and building in which it was erected except for the comment that the piece stood in a palace of Assurnasirpal (Stearns 1984: 23–24; Paley 1976: 154, sec. 30). Several of Haskell's other slabs, however, carry a well-known inscription of Assurnasirpal II found on hundreds of slabs in the Northwest Palace. Our carving's different inscription and its unusually large cuneiform signs indicate it was not part of that palace, but the explicit mention of Kalḫu in the inscriptions carved on the other slabs that accompanied ours to Bowdoin make it likely that our carving comes from somewhere in the same city.²¹

Like the Nineveh reliefs, the Bowdoin carving was probably mutilated during the two-year period in which the cities of the Assyrian heartland were attacked and finally captured by Medes and Babylonians. Kalḫu lay some 35 km south of Nineveh in the valley of the Tigris and appears to have suffered heavy damage during the initial invasion of Assyria in 614 by the army of the Medes. Although the city is not named among those that fell in that first campaign, a Babylonian Chronicle reports that the Medes advanced on Nineveh, captured nearby Tarbiṣu, and then turned down the Tigris to attack Assur, a path that put Kalḫu directly in the way of the Median advance. Excavations at Kalḫu reveal heavy damage of one of the city's gates in a major early attack whose impact the city was still trying to repair when the city fell to a joint attack by Medes and Babylonians in 612 (Oates

²¹ The large signs and the little-known inscription link it to four, perhaps five, other carved slabs with similar, but not identical inscriptions (Paley 1976: 154, Ross 1974/1977). These seem to be related to the Bowdoin carving and may come from the same (unidentified) building, but probably not from the same room, since the inscriptions are laid out in different numbers of lines on the various slabs, and since the Bowdoin scribe uses different signs (for writing "king" and "king of kings" for example) than the scribe of the slabs now in the Alexandria Seminary, for example. It seems likely in the light of recent excavation that it came from a badly damaged building in the center of the citadel at Nimrud, known as the "Central Building," perhaps a temple, which was built by Assurnasirpal II and later restored by his son (Meuszyński 1976: 37–39 and 43).

& Oates 2001: 25, 148–152, 257). That joint campaign ended with the capture and burning of Nineveh, essentially bringing the Neo-Assyrian empire to its end. The carving at Bowdoin was probably defaced either in the immediate aftermath of one of the two attacks, or sometime shortly after the city fell, when Medes and Babylonians occupied the cities they had just taken, and Assyrian squatters slowly returned to take up their lives in the ruins of Kalḫu.²²

The mutilation of the king's figure in the Bowdoin carving is unusually extensive. Seen in the light of royal ideology, the mutilations here represent a gesture calculated both to symbolically punish and humiliate the king, treating his image as he had once treated his enemies, and at the same time to figuratively strip him of every vestige of royal power and deny him forever the divine protection that had made his power possible.

The king's eye has been cut out, blinding him, his nose has been cut off, his right ear is gone, and his right hand has been slowly and methodically severed at the wrist. Where Nylander had proposed such mutilations of the "Sargon" head reflected general patterns of legal punishments still practiced in parts of the Middle East today and more specifically reflected punishments the Persians inflicted on later Medes, the pattern of mutilation in the Bowdoin carvings suggests a source closer to home as a correlation for this figurative action. The mutilations of the Bowdoin image clearly re-enact figuratively punishments that Assyrian kings had inflicted on their more recalcitrant enemies. King Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE), for example, reports that he dealt with certain fugitives by cutting off their hands, nose, eyes, and ears – precisely the treatment meted out here to the head of Assurnasirpal's carved figure (Borger 1956: 106, iii 24). Assurnasirpal himself boasts in his Ninurta temple inscription, displayed at Nimrud, that having killed 3,000 soldiers in one engagement, he burnt some and took others alive to punish, evidently as an example to other cities: "[...] from some I cut off their arms (and) hands, from others I cut off their noses, ears, (and) extremities(?). I gouged out the eyes of many troops" (Grayson 1991a: 201, ll. 116–117). The same punishments are here enacted on Assurnasirpal's carved image, symbolically turning the tables on a long line of punitive Assyrian kings.

Each of the individual mutilations has more specific symbolic implications within Assyrian culture as well. In Middle Assyrian law, for example, removal of the nose was a particularly demeaning punishment, inflicted on people such as thieving slaves, or women who had stolen and whose husbands were unwilling to redeem them (CAD s.v. *appu* A 1; Roth 1997: 156, sec. 4 and 5; 158, sec. 15). A noseless king was thus not only a horror to behold, he was a person forever visibly stripped of all social respectability.

²² Oates & Oates 2001: 148–149 and 152, Grayson 1970: 92–94 (Chr. 3).

The loss of his nose in addition made it unseemly for the king to approach his gods in the traditional posture of praise and self-abasement, hand raised to the nose. In numerous references, this is the gesture made by Assyrian kings as they approach a god with requests and prayers (CAD s.v. *labānu* B). That it was a mark of the humility with which a king approached his divine masters is suggested by the fact that this gesture (in Akkadian, *labān appi* and *appa/u labānu*) was also made by the minor gods as they approached Marduk, and was made by human supplicants as they approached great rulers; in one notable example, the Mannean king Ullusunu and his nobles, approaching Sargon with a request for help, make this gesture while “crawling on all fours like dogs,” and the gesture was similarly made by the terrified rebel king of Šubria to King Esarhaddon’s accusing messenger as the rebel king knelt on the walls of his city pleading and beseeching mercy.²³ This traditional self-abnegating gesture of submission, a necessary aspect of an Assyrian king’s application for help to the gods, is now denied him.

Ears were also ideologically significant in Assyria. The word for “ear” (*uznu*) also meant by extension “wisdom,” “understanding” or “intelligence” (AHw. s.v. *uznu*), and “to make the ears wider” is the Akkadian phrase meaning “to make wiser, or more intelligent” (CAD s.v. *rapāšu* 4b 4’; AHw. *uznu* B2 and *rapšu* I 5a), an essential quality of good kingship. But further wisdom is denied the king pictured at Bowdoin; his ears are gone.

The methodical chipping away of the king’s right hand was a particularly potent symbolic gesture. In ancient Mesopotamia, the hand (*rittu*) was cut off to punish the soldiers of polities that had resisted an Assyrian demand for capitulation, or thieves, or a son who had struck his father (CAD s.v. *rittu* A 1. 3’), suggesting that the removal of his hand was intended to demean the king even further. Even more significantly, in losing his hand, the king was deprived of the organ that Mesopotamians associated with exercising authority over others, caring for them, taking possession, or having jurisdiction, and the one that further symbolized his personhood (CAD s.v. *qātu* 1b and 6).²⁴ The right hand (Akkadian *imittu*) had further special connotations; it was the sword hand, the hand used by the king in

²³ For references see CAD s.v. *labānu* B, esp. 1.2’b. The incident involving Sargon is reported in TCL 3, l. 55, and the incident involving Esarhaddon’s messenger, in Borger 1956: 103, the “Letter to a God,” i 5. Ursula Magen, reviewing both visual and textual evidence for the gesture, argues on the basis of the Sumerian equivalent that the phrase means “to touch or stroke the nose” (p. 104) and after reviewing the evidence concludes that the meaning proposed by von Soden, “to throw oneself down humbly,” is excluded (p. 61), opting instead for a meaning that stresses praise and glorification (p. 55). She notes further that the visual evidence seems to indicate the gesture when made by kings involved the use of an object which she argues represents a date palm shoot (p. 55) (Magen 1986: 55–65, 104–110, and pls. 10 and 11). The two incidents cited above, however, suggest the gesture, even when made by kings, had an element of humility and self-abnegation as well as praise.

²⁴ In addition, one of the words for hand in general (*qātu*) was used as the term for “the self”; to say “he comes to you in person” you said literally, “with his two hands he comes to you” (CAD s.v. *qātu* 4, citations provided by Parpola).

gestures of greeting or blessing, and a required tool in the performance of certain rituals (CAD s.v. *imittu* A 2). Lacking his right hand, the king has been deprived of the organ that represents his person, and the one that permits him to fight, to greet and bless, and to control, care for, and have authority over others. In short, he has lost an essential instrument of his royal power.

To complete stripping the king of his powers, the mutilator has gone on to damage the now detached hand with which the king once greeted subordinates and gods, as well as damaging the beard that marks his masculinity, the fingers with which he grasps his bow, and the toes that allowed him to “tread on the necks of all enemies,” as his inscriptions boast. Just to be sure, the mutilator has also cut the king’s bowstring.

The deep chiselling that severs the king’s wrist not only breaks his hold on his bow, leaving him defenseless, but also removes the rosette on his wristband. This emblem, which decorated the king’s bracelet in carvings throughout the Northwest Palace, was the sign of Ištar, goddess of war and one of Assurnasirpal’s chief deities (Seidl 1989: 100–101; cf. Black & Green 1992: 156). The removal of this emblem symbolically severs him from her protection and denies him the divine support which, he says, had made him win in battle.

To add insult to injury, the mutilator has also attacked the king’s divine attendant, chiselling out his eye so that he can no longer see the king he is meant to protect, damaging his foot so that he cannot walk behind the king to care for him, and chipping at his wrist and fingers, so that he can no longer firmly hold the purifying object that is his tool for protecting the king.²⁵

Humiliated, helpless, and without divine protection, the figure of the Assyrian king now stands stripped of royal power, and even of his dignity.

Elsewhere at Nimrud we find a few other mutilated images.²⁶ On the wall directly behind the throne in the Northwest Palace, the king’s nose, mouth and part of his beard have been deliberately damaged, with chunks the size of a quarter chopped out of the beard and mouth (Reade 1983: fig. 30). In a highly significant gesture, the extended right forefinger of the king, raised as if to touch the image of his god, who hovers over the tree-like object before him, has had a chip neatly cut out of it, in effect preventing the king from reaching his nation’s patron god – this in the most prominent image of the king in his principal palace.²⁷ Aside from this single

²⁵ There is a somewhat greater possibility that the carved images of these divine protectors in palaces were thought to be living and that some had undergone a Mouth Opening ritual to produce that effect (B. Mallowan 1983; for a fragment of the consecration ritual for apotropaic figures on “a fragmentary slab accompanying” the carving of one type of them, Wiggerman 1992: 97). If that were in fact the case here, this attack would have been understood to remove divine protection from the walls of the palace.

²⁶ Meuszyński mentions these in his introduction, but they have otherwise not attracted notice (Meuszyński 1981: 2).

²⁷ Magen discusses the significance of this gesture (Akkadian, *ubāna tarāṣu*) and lists other examples of it in visual evidence (Magen 1986: 45–54; 94–104).



Fig. 2. King Tiglath-pileser III enthroned, his staff now deliberately damaged. From the Central Palace at Nimrud. (A 1934/6. Copyright: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden)

figurative attack, the other images of the king and of his soldiers, both in the throne room's narrative carvings and in carved panels in the inner apartments, appear untouched. What we see here is the selective defacing of key elements in the most prominent public image of the king.

On a stela that stood in a niche just outside the throne room, the king's face has been hacked with deep strokes, removing his nose and ear; his staff, an emblem of royal power, has also been cut (Oates & Oates 2001: fig. 18). In the ashes and debris at the base of the stela was found a delicately carved, small ivory panel depicting Assurnasirpal in ceremonial dress; on it, the king's eye, nose, and mouth have been cut away (although they have now been restored in wax) (Oates & Oates 2001: fig. 19).

A carved stone panel, found in the Central Palace at Nimrud and now at Leiden, shows King Tiglath-pileser enthroned (Fig. 2.). His staff has been neatly cut; the rest of the panel is untouched.²⁸ The mutilation of this piece, displayed in a third palace, bespeaks a certain thoroughness on the part of the Nimrud mutilation team.

Completing the catalogue of mutilated carvings at Nimrud, the image of a god in a winged disc in a glazed brick panel high on a palace wall "had been shattered into particularly small pieces, probably by an arrow" (Reade 2000: 613), evidently a more spontaneous kind of mutilation.

3. WHO DID IT?

Who was responsible for all this? Quite likely, several different individuals and groups. As we have seen, Nylander suggests "Sargon's" head at Nineveh was defaced by angry Medes, Reade proposes that angry Elamites mutilated the Nineveh scenes denigrating Elamites, and Meuszyński suggests Medes and Babylonians attacked carvings at Nimrud.²⁹ Sir Max Mallowan, the excavator of Nimrud from 1949–1957, proposed that here the Medes in particular had played a major role in the violence within the city when it fell. Sixty years earlier, King Esarhaddon had imposed formidably threatening vassal treaties on a number of Median rulers, in which more than 200 lines of cuneiform text were devoted to describing the horrific punishments the gods were to impose on any ruler who broke the treaty, such as

²⁸ Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, A 1934/6.1, published in Barnett & Falkner 1962: pl. 19 on p. 67, discussed on pp. 10–11. I am grateful to Mr. Heikki Pauts, Registrar, and Prof. Dr. Peter Akkermans, Curator of Assyrian Antiquities, for allowing me to examine the piece and to publish a photo of it here, and for their gracious helpfulness.

²⁹ Reviewing Meuszyński's study of the Northwest Palace in 1984, Reade was aware of only a few slight mutilations of Nimrud reliefs and suggested that since the Medes would presumably have been more thorough had it been their work, these were more likely due to "local Arabs mutilating exposed faces" (Reade 1984: 483). The Bowdoin carving and the other examples of mutilating carefully selected parts of images seen here suggest that at Nimrud as at Nineveh, the mutilations are ancient after all.

“may they strangle you, your women, your brothers, your sons and daughters with a cord,” and even more pertinent to our subject, “Just as the *Cursers* sinned against Bel and he cut off their hands and feet and blinded their eyes, so may they annihilate you ...” (SAA 2 6:414–663, esp. ll. 606–607 and 626–631).³⁰ The clay tablets recording the Medes’ oaths accepting the imposition of those treaties had been stored in Nimrud’s Nabû temple. When that building was captured and burned, someone went to the trouble of identifying the offensive tablets, bringing them out into the temple’s throne room, and then smashing them into hundreds of fragments in front of the throne dais in a frenzy of anger that carried pieces into the adjoining room. Found with the tablet fragments were smashed ivory carvings showing the king and his vassals, which had been crushed and were then burned in the conflagration that consumed the temple.

“Who but the Medes,” Mallowan comments, “can have more eagerly welcomed the opportunity presented to them in 614 B.C. of mutilating the treaties imposed on Iranian princes by force 60 years earlier? To consign to the flames the pictorial records of Assyrian triumphs as well as the inscriptions must have caused them no less additional satisfaction, and at the time of their revenge they were appropriately associated with the Babylonians, traditional enemies of Assyria, who had long suffered with them” (Mallowan 1966: 261). Mallowan is surely correct in his suggestion that some of the most violent damage to carvings at Nimrud, as at Nineveh, should be attributed to enemy soldiers – Medes, Babylonians, Elamites and others – rampaging through palaces and temples as the city fell.

Bahrani points out, however, that “rampaging soldiers” can be only part of the picture. Since the images of particular people were carefully identified and singled out for mutilation, and since the body parts and objects subjected to mutilation appear to have been carefully chosen for their symbolic impact, she is surely correct in arguing that “in the days following the capture of Nineveh, when it was still occupied by the invading army, one or more people went around the palaces identifying specific people by reading the inscriptions or through their regalia and other attributes, and set about gouging out their faces. The act was not done in the frenzy of battle” (Bahrani 2003: 152). In a few cases, such as the Lachish scene, the king’s name was excised from the accompanying cuneiform caption, suggesting that mutilation teams sometimes included a scribe. The painstaking chiselling of the wrist of the Bowdoin king to a depth of almost an inch is further evidence of such deliberation.

³⁰ I am grateful to Mikko Luukko for bringing to my attention the accidental omission of “your brothers” in the translation of the treaty in the SAA 2 edition.

4. THE ADDED FIGURE: BEYOND REVENGE TO RESTORATION

The Bowdoin carving offers one further clue to the intentions of the mutilators who worked at Nimrud. In the blank space that had been left in front of the face of the Assyrian king, the image of a head and shoulders has been crudely chiselled into the stone, no more than a sketched outline. But the oddly rounded shape of the back of the figure's head is surely significant: it is a rude version of the bulbous crown worn by Elamite kings (Reade 1976: 103). In front of the face, whose eye stares at the blinded figure of the Assyrian king, the mutilator has also chiselled-in a v-shaped mark, as if to suggest that the Elamite king now lifts *his* hand in the gesture of greeting with which Assurnasirpal had once received subservient tributaries at Nimrud.

In the mutilated carving of the king at Nimrud, the Elamites, brutally attacked by Assurbanipal in their capital at Susa and then mocked and denigrated in his carvings at Nineveh, have found their final revenge, at least in figurative terms. Elam had by now disintegrated into "small kingdoms of no political influence" (Zawadzki 1988: 20–21, Waters 2000: 102–107), but Elamite memories of Assyria's violence were surely still vivid, and their recent degradation was still painfully underlined in Assurbanipal's palace carvings. Although no longer significant opponents, the Elamites lived in Assyrian culture as an emblem of all that was alien and dangerous; this is clear in an Assyrian incantation against witches, for example, in which the malevolent witch is characterized as an Elamite: "The witch is a Sutean, strong is her grip, the 'Deceitful One' is an Elamite, seizure by her means death" (Schwemer 2007: 30). The Elamite king added to the Nimrud carving surely stood for all of Assyria's foes.

In the mutilated carving at Bowdoin, Assyria's united enemies not only took figurative revenge, stripping the king of every vestige of power and protection. They went one step further, transforming the carving into an image of a hoped-for new order in which Assyria's long-oppressed southern and eastern subjects would see their independence, their political identity, and their much-abused honor at last restored. The humiliated and helpless figure of the Assyrian king now faces the figure of his ancient enemy, the Elamite, who rules again.