

## **DRAWING DISTINCTIONS: ASSYRIANS AND OTHERS IN THE ART OF THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE**

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Between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE, the Neo-Assyrian Empire became the largest the world had yet seen. In the process of imperial conquest, the Assyrian state incorporated previously foreign territories and people into their world. Landscapes, materials, and the labor of conquered bodies became a part of the Assyrian royal palaces of northern Iraq, both as elements of their construction and as themes emphasized within the extensive visual programs of the palace reliefs. Within and through visual depiction of enemy bodies and foreign landscapes, in the process of being (often violently) reshaped by Assyrian hands, Neo-Assyrian kings brought the farthest reaches of their world into the center of imperial power. This article considers how specific strategies of representation in palace art allowed the Assyrian palace to serve as a microcosm of the empire and a map of its borders. Palace art emphasized the remade, reworked, or recreated, defining “Assyrianness” as that which remakes and has been remade. As a central act of remaking, I examine representations of captive or submissive foreigners, whose presence in the reliefs commemorates their humiliation while compounding and enhancing it in the very ways that these figures are depicted: cringing, deficient, and physiologically incorrect. I pay particular attention to examples from the late King Ashurbanipal’s reign, in which foreign leaders are singled out through representation with distinctive facial features. I argue that this act of (literally) drawing distinctions was an inherently imperial process, one that both expressed and enabled an ideology of expansion and control.

What do empires look like and how do they constitute themselves materially? What remains do they leave behind? Within an archaeology of empires, scholars might look for patterns that speak to political arrangements that could be called “imperial.” The distinctive nature of an imperial archaeology might be most visible on the peripheries of control, or in provincial centers of power, where an imperial presence “breaking in” to the space can be especially jarring. But empires also constitute themselves materially in other ways, through the elite art of the imperial center. In this paper, I want to consider the material manifestations of empire in the art of the Neo-Assyrian period, and especially the art of that Empire when it was at its height, in terms of geographical reach, under the last well-attested king, Ashurbanipal, who ruled from 668 to c.631 BCE.

My interest here is in how elite Assyrians who planned and oversaw the creation of palace art understood themselves and others, and how they worked out that understanding through acts of categorization. My title phrase “drawing distinctions” can be taken both literally and figuratively: I want to think about drawing in the sense of, as the Assyrians themselves might say, drawing

(*eṣēru*) on the walls of royal palaces (relief imagery). I also want to consider how the images that were created through this act drew distinctions between foreign and Assyrian in the very act of depicting them. Much of this work happens through visual differentiation which develops in complexity as the empire expands. In the reign of Ashurbanipal, what Paul Collins (2006a) has described as the “development of the individual enemy” sees artistic representations that distinguish enemies by facial features, most famously in sequences depicting the highly distinctive Elamite king Teumman, but also in a more general tendency toward rendering certain foreign leaders with unusual, and incorrect, facial features.

I hold that the very act of categorization inherent in this process can be considered a hallmark of “imperial” thought and practice. The creation of categories, of whatever type enables imperial expansion and explains and orders imperial space. In the case of Assyria, I posit that an increasingly complex system of categories develops over time, based on distinguishing foreign from Assyrian and then, more importantly, foreign leaders from ordinary foreigners. The intersections of certain categorical schema inscribe hierarchies among foreigners, of importance, attention, and usefulness. This tendency, I would argue, is related to the dualistic nature of Assyrian kingship, in which the king must be both violent and merciful, and the nature of an Assyrian imperial conquest in which foreignness is simultaneously threatening and yet pathetic—and despite both these qualities, still a valuable resource for creative manipulation.

### CONSTITUTING ASSYRIAN IMPERIAL POWER, SHAPING ASSYRIAN IMPERIAL SPACE

The Neo-Assyrian Empire emerged in the late tenth century BCE when kings began to expand their territorial control beyond the traditional Assyrian heartland.<sup>1</sup> It expanded rapidly over the course of the ninth century and then much more rapidly between the mid-eighth and the mid-seventh centuries, ultimately disappearing as a political entity by the end of the seventh century. The Assyrian heartland encompassed a region that is now roughly contiguous with northern Iraq’s Nineveh Province and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. At its greatest extent and shortly before its collapse, it was the largest empire the world had yet seen, stretching, as Assyrian kings boasted, “from the upper sea to the lower sea” (usually the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf).<sup>2</sup> During the reigns of its last two well-attested kings, Esarhaddon (681–669) and Ashurbanipal (668–c.631), it extended in the west all the way down the Nile as far as Thebes. In his Nineveh A prism, Esarhaddon boasted in striking terms of his power, and the distress and hopelessness it might evoke in his enemies (Leichty 2011, RINAP 4 1.v.24–25)<sup>3</sup>:

From the midst of the sea, my enemies cry out, saying:  
“Where can a fox go to get away from the sun?”

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1 This echoed a dynamic of territorial expansion that had already occurred at a smaller scale during the Middle Assyrian period, when Assyrian kings started depicting foreigners in art for the first time and began recording their military exploits in long-form prism narratives. Nonetheless, we do not speak of a “Middle Assyrian Empire” because its expansion does not yet warrant it, and occurs within a political context in which other regional powers were making similar attempts at expansion without any one power overwhelming another; the Neo-Assyrian Empire, unprecedentedly vast in terms of its area of control, can reasonably be characterized as an “imperial” entity.

2 See Yamada 2005: 39–42 for other potential meanings of the “upper sea.”

3 Unless otherwise noted, translations from Akkadian are the author’s own, though indebted to the interpretations of the RINAP translators.

*ul-tu qe<sub>2</sub>-reb tam-tim LU<sub>2</sub>.KUR<sub>2</sub>.MEŠ-ia ki-a-am iq-bu-ni*  
*um-ma KA<sub>5</sub>.A la-pa-an <sup>d</sup>UTU e-ki-a-am il-lak*

This is an image of the king as essentially omnipotent, equated not just with the sun but the sun god Šamaš (there is no distinction in the writing in Akkadian), who sees everything.

Yet this discourse of the near-omnipresent king exists simultaneously with other Assyrian understandings of the physical world, in which the sphere of Assyrian control is always in tension with the chaos that surrounds it. It was the job of the Assyrian king to subdue that chaos, primarily through military campaigning. Over the course of the empire's existence, Assyrian elites developed a mental geography of the world which could be adapted to changing circumstances (Machinist 1993: 80–91; Liverani 2001; 2017: 180–208; Pongratz-Leisten 2015: 145–197). As Assyria expanded, it had various means of dealing with newly conquered territories. A region could become a province of Assyria proper, meaning that it was, administratively and politically, Assyrian (or at least became so after a process of “Assyrianizing”; see Fales 2013: 73) or it could become a vassal or client kingdom with varying responsibilities toward the Assyrian state and differing degrees of subjugation to it (Miller 2009: 126–137).

Over the course of the empire's existence, the precise location of the political heart of the Assyrian state changed several times. Ashurnasirpal II built a royal palace at Kalhu (modern Nimrud), moving the center of imperial power and administration from the city of Assur, the residence of the god Aššur. The founder of the Sargonid Dynasty, which would rule Assyria during its greatest period of territorial expansion, the likely usurper Sargon II,<sup>4</sup> built a new city that he named after himself, Dur-Šarrukin (“Fort of Sargon,” modern Khorsabad). After Sargon II's death in battle in 705, the capitol was moved again by his son and successor Sennacherib to Nineveh. Nineveh would remain the Assyrian center of gravity until its destruction in 612 by a coalition of Babylonians, Medes, and other former enemies of Assyria, a moment that signaled the beginning of the end of Assyria as a political entity.<sup>5</sup> Most of the reliefs discussed in this paper come from palaces in Nineveh.

As Alison Karmel Thomason (2005) has persuasively argued, the Assyrian capitol and the Assyrian palace within it served not only as political center of the empire, but also as a microcosm of it.<sup>6</sup> Within the palace, Assyrian kings recreated the distant landscapes that they had conquered.<sup>7</sup> Thomason's work on imperial collecting in Mesopotamia serves as a basis for what I would argue is a related interest in imperial *categorizing*, which we will come to again later in this article. Thomason (2005: 212) explains:

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4 However, for an argument against this interpretation of his rise to power as illegitimate, see Melville 2016: 58–60; Elayi 2017: 27–28.

5 We could choose to date its end to 605, when the last remnants of an Assyrian army, fighting alongside a much stronger Egyptian army against the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar II, disappeared at the battle of Karkemish.

6 See a similar idea in Winter 1981: 19–20, where she discusses how the artistic programs in Assyrian throne rooms and on throne bases serve as a microcosm of the entire empire, in contrast to decorative programs elsewhere in Assyrian palaces that represent it only in part.

7 The importance of representing foreign landscapes has been written about extensively, both in terms of representation of foreign spaces in Assyrian palace art and in terms of the significance of real gardens and parks in imperial self-fashioning. See Albenda 2018; Seymour 2017; Collins 2004; 2006b; Marcus 1995; Stronach 1990. For interesting parallels in the role of gardens and parks in the Achaemenid Empire, see Tuplin 1996: 80–131, and more broadly, see Tuan 1984: 7–68.

The imperial personae of the Neo-Assyrian kings required them to collect objects, live plants, animals, and tablets from at home and abroad in order to assert their power and attest to their royal abilities in the realms of nature and culture. By bringing the world of the empire to Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh, the kings of Assyria were recreating it in microcosm.

As the above indicates, the Assyrian relationship to foreignness was complex. Kings often emphasized the ways that their own Assyrian palaces involved re-creations of something else, something originally from elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Assyrian parks or pleasure gardens are described as recreating Mount Amanus in north Syria (Thomason 2001: 65). Assyrian kings also boasted about building a type of columned palace called a *bīt hilāni*, which Sennacherib described as “a replica of a Hittite palace” (*tamšīl ēkal Hatti*; Grayson & Novotny 2012, RINAP 3/1 1.82), also a reference to these north Syrian styles. Thomason (2001: 80–91) sees the north Syrian landscape as holding a particular fascination for Assyrian kings, but reliefs and actual finds in palaces suggest the importance of the bounty of many different conquered territories.<sup>9</sup> Seymour (2017: 157) has argued that the landscape of Babylonia is portrayed in Assyrian campaign reliefs as a location similarly full of abundance, fertility, and wonder. Texts and images memorialize the creation of palaces out of materials quarried from conquered spaces and with the labor of conquered foreigners; see, for instance, Sargon II’s reliefs of the construction of Dur-Šarrukīn (AO 19888), or Sennacherib’s depiction of material for colossal bulls being quarried by prisoners of war and the finished bulls moved from the quarry (BM 124820). The bounty of conquest became, in a very literal sense, raw material for the construction of Assyrian palaces. This is true at multiple levels: when images of the foreign being turned to productive use appear in reliefs, the process of deploying the conquered foreigner for the glory of Assyria occurs simultaneously within and outside of the relief image, because the image exists only through this labor and resources gained by conquest, and because the content of the image celebrates that process.

The act of incorporating the other into this imperial heart often involved violent remaking. Famously, Assyrian art lavished attention on the violent subjugation of foreign enemies. These enemies could be killed in battle or, perhaps even better, in executions during victory celebrations. Their physical remains were incorporated into Assyrian celebrations, and even—as in the famous example of Ashurbanipal’s so-called Garden Scene where the severed head of the defeated Elamite king Teumman hangs from a tree in a palace garden—into the physical space of the Assyrian palace. Artistic representations of this activity both depicted the act of violently remaking foreigners and affected that act.

In a study of Neo-Assyrian gardens and their representation in art, Anastasia Amrhein (2015: 91) proposes to look at both real gardens themselves, products of the kind of collecting Thomason describes, and their representation in art “coequally”—something that is possible, she argues, because of the central importance of the concept of “artificiality” as a prestigious, positive characteristic of Assyrian creations, whether in foliage or in stone. Amrhein points out the relationship between artificiality and sacredness, and the significance of sensory pleasure

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8 Zainab Bahrani (2019: 47) has recently suggested thinking about Assyrian collecting practices in terms of “biopolitics,” allowing the sovereign to demonstrate control over life and death and in the process “thinking of objects not only as commodities for economic values, but also as cultural capital”.

9 See Pauline Albenda’s influential 1977 argument for reading the Banquet Relief as a memorialization of Assyrian conquest in part inscribed through depictions of captured booty—including the severed head of Teumman. For real foreign objects at Nineveh found during palace excavations, the most famous example is the many foreign pieces among the Nimrud ivories (see Herrmann, Laidlaw & Coffey 2009; Herrmann 2017).

in spaces that were sacred and artificial.<sup>10</sup> It is also an important element in Assyrian imperialism, in which the king exercises a power that is given to him by the gods to remake and recreate the conquered environment (see Bahrani 2019).<sup>11</sup> Artificiality reveals the god-like power of its maker and his control over the world and its materials.<sup>12</sup> What applies to gardens in Amrhein's argument can be applied to all Assyrian representations, such that the act of representing foreigners can be considered coequally with other ways that Assyrians interacted with foreigners, including taking them prisoner and forcing them to labor, having them brutally executed, or deporting them from one location to resettle them somewhere new. All of these were part of an imperial toolbox for processing the foreign and placing it where it belonged in an ordered Assyrian world.<sup>13</sup> The positive associations with artificiality also remind us of the power of visual representation in Assyria, not as a second-best record of reality, but as a powerful presence whose very artificiality enhanced its prestige. We should bear this in mind going forward when we consider representations of foreigners as both distinctive and physically incorrect: these representations were not merely records of reality, but improvements on the world as Assyrian conquerors found it.

In considering the purpose of the act of “drawing” the foreign, we can turn again to the idea of “Assyrianization,” though this time in a different sense than Fales' use of the term to refer to the political and economic assimilation of conquered territory. Marian Feldman (2011; 2014: 79–110) has identified another kind of Assyrianization. She is interested in the work that Assyrian style does to represent a world that is palatable to Assyria. Looking specifically at the representation of foreign objects in Assyrian art, she argues that the “strong coherent and consistent style produced by the Assyrian state was not simply the expression of a growing empire; rather it was part of an active strategy for maintaining a memory of conquest over the vanquished ‘other’ and at the same time neutralizing the other so it could no longer threaten Assyria” (Feldman 2014: 80).

She gives examples of what it actually looks like to have foreign objects “Assyrianized” in style, including a Tiglath-Pileser III relief showing a West Semitic storm god's cult statue being

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10 As an example of the sort of divine space that was the model for real gardens of gods and kings, she cites Šamaš's garden of jeweled trees in the Gilgamesh epic, with its “brilliant immaculacy, artificiality and calmness [...] The rich, tantalizing colors and flavors of the jewel fruit represent the ultimate artificial exquisiteness of a divine garden, as unattainable as eternal life” (Amrhein 2015: 99).

11 The most forceful arguments for the powerful nature of Assyrian images have been put forward by Bahrani (2003: 149–201; 2008: 50–59). The question of how exactly to describe and assess the “agency” or “realness” of images has been debated, with some scholars accepting, as Bahrani puts it, the “magical” power of images to affect the world while nonetheless arguing caution about presuming all images to be automatically or equally powerful. On this debate, see also Nadali 2012: 583–587; Fales 2009: 25–26; Collins 2013: 636–637; Porter 2009; May 2010.

12 In this case, I argue that the king claimed that divine power by creating images; this forms an interesting contrast to Assyrian attitudes toward the creation of cult statues, where any suggestion that humans have appropriated the divine power to create the statue must be ritually disavowed through the well-known “mouth-washing” ritual. Through this ritual, the hand of the human creator was erased and all agency for the cult statue's creation was assigned to the gods (Walker & Dick 1999). It is clear, however, that whether the king emphasized his role as creator or disavowed it, the creation of prestigious images was an activity linked to the divine world.

13 The act of collecting could be defined as inherently violent in itself, and not just in the abstract. On a practical level, it also required measurable physical violence in order to appropriate foreign goods—and even foreign knowledge. Letters of the period of Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal show us the acts of violence that went into acquiring the knowledge of their southern neighbor Babylon (George & Frame 2005; Parpola 1983). One letter reports on the labor of captive Babylonian scholars (including the son of the *šandabakku*, governor of Nippur). Ordered to copy scholarly texts, they were kept in irons when not working (Fales & Postgate 1995, SAA 11 156).

taken into exile (BM 118931). From the iconography, it is possible to determine that it is indeed a West Semitic storm god but the Assyrian artists have not reproduced West Semitic style; they have Assyrianized this representation. We might say they have “corrected” it, because the Assyrian take on even a foreign storm god is superior to the foreigners’ own take.

Feldman’s idea of Assyrianization is, I argue, an apt description of the entire process of Assyrian representation in royal palaces: to present an image of the world in which the foreign other is centered but simultaneously Assyrianized in just the way that Feldman describes, preserving a memory of its otherness without allowing it into the boundaries of the palace. Or perhaps we could say that the foreign enters only on Assyrian terms, literally corrected through representation in Assyrian style. The link between this kind of visual Assyrianizing and the concept of a political Assyrianizing of conquered territory lies in their shared functions as tools of imperial control and reconstruction.

The emphasis in Assyrian art on the foreign other, and its centrality to Assyrian imperial identity, is an element that I suspect will not be surprising to scholars of empire in any time or place. It is a truism to say that identity can only be defined in opposition to an “other,” as something that “we” are not. It is equally a truism that defining “others” becomes an especially important means of consolidating identity of the self in rapidly expanding empires, even as concepts of “self” and “other” might seem especially unstable as imperial borders are constantly redrawn. Assyrian palace art provides a good example of this unsurprising, but nonetheless revealing, tendency. In the Assyrian palace reliefs of the eighth and seventh centuries, I would say this tendency is particularly striking. The subjugation of increasingly prominent enemies and the taming of foreign bodies, objects, and landscapes is the great theme of Assyrian palace art in this period—whether those foreign bodies are human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. Furthermore, new means of representing enemy bodies in the reliefs emerge over the course of the Neo-Assyrian period, especially in the seventh century.

### **DRAWING ENEMIES: PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IN ASSYRIAN ART**

Foreigners are drawn differently than Assyrians in the earliest Assyrian reliefs under Ashurnasirpal II in the mid to late ninth century. In reliefs from his Northwest Palace at Nimrud, foreign tribute-bearers are depicted with slouched postures and curved bodies (Fig. 1). Cifarelli (1998: 211) analyzed the meaning of these images as follows:

One of the tenets of the ideology expressed and formulated through the art of Ashurnasirpal—created at a time when Assyria was engaged intensively in building an empire at the expense (literally and figuratively) of its neighbors—was a negative conception of alterity, of the otherness or cultural difference ascribed to foreigners. In this system, the features that distinguish non-Assyrians from Assyrians were understood to be inherently sinister and abnormal.

I agree with Cifarelli’s interpretation of the meaning of these representations of foreign difference as “abnormal.” Lacking any explicit theory of human beauty or artistic normality, we can only draw such conclusions by comparison to other images. Assyrian art never shows Assyrians, or gods, or spirits with these postures. Only foreigners are marked as “other” in

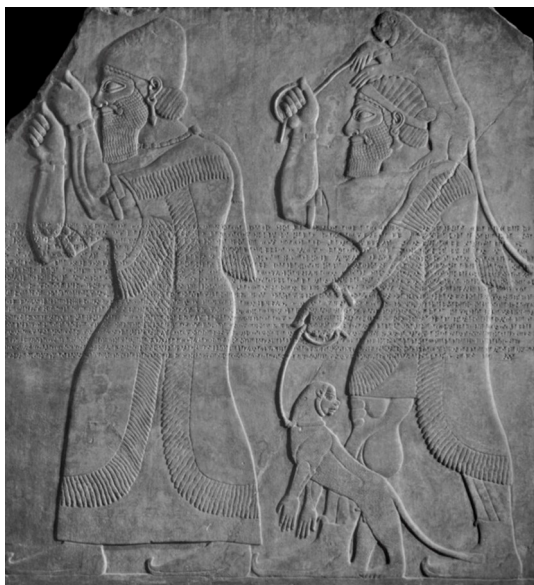


Figure 1 Relief of Ashurnasirpal II depicting foreign tribute-bearers with slouched postures. Nimrud, Northwest Palace Court D, slab 7. BM 124562. Photo: Trustees of the British Museum.

this way.<sup>14</sup> Depictions of foreigners, usually enemies, with physically incorrect forms continue to appear regularly in all Assyrian imagery throughout the period of empire. Foreign *faces*, however, are not rendered as different in any noticeable way until the reign of Ashurbanipal (see Brown 2013: 520–521). Prior to this, foreigners are distinguished in their faces by different kinds of beards and hairstyles, but they are not distinctively portrayed in the same ways that we will see emerge later on. Because difference always accentuates alterity—difference *from* Assyrians, gods, and spirits, from the norm—I think we must also understand that to be different in features is automatically to be “incorrect” simply because it is, by definition, abnormal.

Foreigners are also, from the very beginning of Assyrian art, recognizably drawn as other not just in their postures, but in their activities. Certain gestures, poses, and attitudes are only ever assumed by enemies. A good example is the attitude of “falling.” In reliefs of all era, enemies fall from battlements of besieged cities being taken; from chariots or animal mounts; and even on foot they plunge forwards, injured in the midst of battle. Because only enemies are ever shown falling, a falling body is inherently a foreign, enemy body (an extreme iteration of Cifarelli’s previously discussed identification of the slouching foreigner’s body in opposition to the upright Assyrian). Showing an enemy in the act of falling is part of what makes him an enemy; an Assyrian would never do such a thing or be depicted as someone who would.

Foreigners are also, statistically speaking, far more likely to be depicted as women or children than Assyrians are.<sup>15</sup> Assyrian reliefs very rarely depict Assyrian women or children; the few exceptions come from the reign of Ashurbanipal, and show only elites in settings that

14 As an empire that took in tribute from many different regions, Assyrian elites were, of course, aware of other means of depicting human appearance, and other attitudes toward difference. Levantine ivories, for instance, which were collected in Assyrian palaces, depict curved bodies and faces in many different styles. Nonetheless, these were not significant influences on the aesthetic of Assyrian palace art (see Feldman 2014: 94–95).

15 Foreign women and children are sometimes shown as civilians in siege scenes, but they are most often present as deportees or prisoners, under Assyrian military surveillance. Despite the threat of harm in both these situations, they are not ordinarily shown as victims of violence themselves (see Clancier 2015). The sole exception is a set of Ashurbanipal reliefs depicting Arab women being attacked in their tents and lying dead. As will be discussed later in this article, this is usually taken as indicating the especially “foreign” conception of Arabs in the Assyrian mind.

involve royal gardens and parks.<sup>16</sup> The Assyrians depicted in palace art, apart from the king himself, are almost overwhelmingly elite royal courtiers and attendants, or Assyrian soldiers. Within these groups we find both eunuchs and bearded men, but they are all men.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, a large number of representations of foreigners are representations not of male combatants or elite nobles, but of deportees or civilians in siege situations. Deportee groups always include women and children of various ages, from infants onwards. The effect of this is a masculinizing of Assyrians, and by contrast a general feminizing and infantilizing of foreigners: Assyrians in art are almost always elite men, while foreigners could be anything.<sup>18</sup> Of course, it is the masculinizing of Assyria that stands more in contrast to reality, that is the more artificial construct. But within the norms of Assyrian palace art, and Assyrian imperial ideology, it is the feminizing and infantilizing of the foreign that is marked, while Assyria's monolithically masculine character is unmarked. Assyrian women and children are largely invisible in Assyrian art, which means that in these powerful records of imperial self-image, they might as well not exist.<sup>19</sup> There is a similar and overlapping absence of non-elite and non-military Assyrians of any kind from palace art and, to a lesser extent, from royal inscriptions. This imperial self-image is hardly realist, but this selective presentation is powerful. It reframes the normal constituency of enemy populations as frailty.<sup>20</sup>

Visual representation is, then, an important way of conceptualizing and categorizing the difference between Assyrian and other through drawing the two groups differently. During the reign of Ashurbanipal, there are important innovations in the visual depiction of foreigners, emerging out of these longstanding Assyrian traditions. Brown (2013) has compellingly argued for seeing this as

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16 There are depictions of elite women in other artistic media earlier than Ashurbanipal's reign, such as the bronze image of Esarhaddon's mother Naqia now in the Louvre (AO 20185), as well as a free-standing stone stele (VA 8847) depicting Ashurbanipal's queen Liballi-šarrat, who also appears in his "Garden Scene" relief. For a survey of images of Neo-Assyrian women, see Gansell 2013: 393–397. Some Ashurbanipal reliefs feature beardless attendants who are probably young boys rather than adult men; this is indicated by their small stature in a context in which this does not appear to be a result of either social perspective or the requirements of composition. These boys might be young eunuchs or non-eunuchs; at any rate, they are clearly youthful high-status attendants and not lowly servants.

17 See N'Shea 2016 on the masculinity of Assyrian eunuchs; although the status of eunuchs was different under different Assyrian kings, it is certainly the case that eunuchs were elite and often associated with military prowess, a quality that was associated with masculinity in Assyria. They were not, as they are often conceived of in Western discourses, "un-men."

18 Unlike some (e.g., Chapman 2007: 8–12), I do not think that the foreign men are directly feminized in their representation, but their inclusion in domestic groups associates them with non-threatening women and children and tells us something about the character of foreign peoples as a whole.

19 See Clancier (2014: 31) on how scribes represented women in warfare in the ancient Near East, focusing mainly on Assyrian sources, where he notes that sources' bias against discussing violence against women, "for what are perhaps ideological reasons relating to the duties of monarchs [...] results in a relative absence of women combatants or victims, an absence that is certainly not representative of reality."

20 Although this might seem like the sort of ideological distortion possible only within artistic representation, in fact modern empires have found ways to enact these distortions in practice. Edward W. Said (1978: 42) noted that "when it became common practice during the nineteenth century for Britain to retire its administrators from India and elsewhere when they had reached the age of fifty-five, then a further refinement in Orientalism had been achieved; no Oriental was ever allowed to see a Westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj." A similar dynamic can be attached to gender, where men would always outnumber women as agents of imperialism even where administrators brought families along to establish households, as was the case in colonized India. Building in part on Said's observations, Nadia Atia (2015: 127–134) considers the importance of "prestige," of which this sort of image manipulation formed a part, as a means of maintaining British control in Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century.



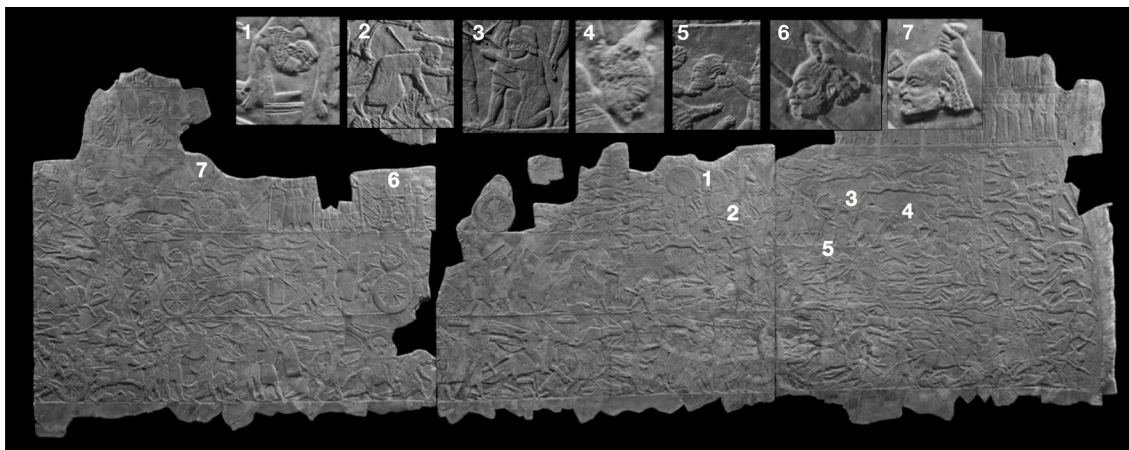


Figure 2 The Til-Tuba battle sequence with the seven appearances of Teumman in this sequence highlighted. Nineveh, Southwest Palace Room XXXIII, slabs 1–3. BM 124801. Main photo: Trustees of the British Museum, annotations author’s own. Inset photos: Trustees of the British Museum (2, 3, 5, 6), Klaus Wagensohner (1, 4, 7).

part of a developing Assyrian interest in “ethnic” differentiation among different foreign peoples as the empire expanded, and a corresponding argument for the distinctiveness of Assyrian identity.<sup>21</sup> At this point, Assyrian art distinguishes with increasing care and detail the characteristic clothing, hair, and headgear of different foreign peoples.<sup>22</sup> Brown argues that there is also increasing interest over the course of the eighth and seventh centuries in the relationship of peoples to landscapes, objects, activities, and traditions—all components of ethnic identities. There is even a hint of attention to group differences in physiognomy in the representation of Egyptians and Nubians (Collins 2006a: 2–3; Albenda 1982; Brown 2013: 528–530). For the first time, too, we find that foreign leaders are represented not just as different from Assyrians, but as distinctive individuals—at the level of facial features, as well as in posture and pose.

The most famous example of this is Ashurbanipal’s representation of the Elamite king Teumman across a series of reliefs in both the Southwest Palace (Room XXXIII; Fig. 2) and the North Palace (now largely lost reliefs from Room I and the hypothetical room S<sup>1</sup>). Paul Collins (2006a) has argued that we can call these images of Teumman the first instance of Assyrian portraiture, the development of the “individual enemy” in Assyrian art. This is the first time ever in the art of Assyria that we see someone who has a face that is identifiable as one specific person, not a type. We cannot know what the real Teumman looked like and so cannot say anything about whether this is an accurate portrait of the real man, but it is certainly the case that “relief-Teumman” can be individually identified every single time that his head appears (ten times in total). In a representative tradition in which human faces are completely standardized, this level of unique individual portrayal is unprecedented.

21 Brown (2013: 516–517) gives a useful overview of the definition of ethnicity and points out that it has often been conflated with race in scholarship on the Near East (as the two concepts usually are in colloquial use), despite clear differences in these concepts as they are usually defined in academic contexts. In brief, ethnicity involves various cultural factors, an idea of a common descent or origin, and often a relationship to a specific geographical space. Later on in this article I will argue that physiological difference in the depiction of select foreigners is *not* an attempt at either ethnic or racial differentiation, but Brown’s wider points about an ethnicizing of foreigners in Assyrian art stands, and his terms are clearly defined.

22 See, for instance, the four highly distinctive foreigners in the Ashurbanipal relief depicting the aftermath of the fall of Babylon, discussed in a recent article by Novotny and Watanabe 2019 and appearing here as Fig. 10.



Figure 3 Close ups showing Teumman at the moment of and after death. Nineveh, Southwest Palace Room XXXIII, details of BM 124801. Lefthand photo: Trustees of the British Museum. Righthand photo: Klaus Wagensonner.

Teumman is not just distinctive, but also noticeably physiologically incorrect (Fig. 3). He has a receding hairline and sloping forehead, squinted and downturned eyes, a short and scrubby beard, and a sharply hooked nose. The strongest indication that these features are incorrect is simply their deviation from how almost everyone else is rendered: Ashurbanipal against whom Teumman has made war, but also gods, spirits, Assyrian soldiers, and even other foreign soldiers, including of his own nation (we will explore this contrast between foreign leader and foreign subject further below).

Because he is an enemy leader, it is especially instructive to consider Teumman's unusual, distinctive features in contrast to the first person in that list: Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian king. The Assyrian king was always perfect and generic; each king looked like the kings before and after him, and also very much like the bearded Assyrians around him, in facial features if not in costume.<sup>23</sup> Winter (1997: 374) describes Assyrian images of the king as portraits of “a king”; the indeterminate and generic aspect is a positive good. The unnatural perfection of the Assyrian king's image is also clearly “artificial,” another positively coded characteristic (Amrhein 2015). Against this standard, the individuality of Teumman can be seen as negatively coded. In drawing a Teumman who is a unique and recognizable individual, the Assyrian artist already tells us that Teumman is imperfect. To draw someone distinctively is inherently an act of drawing them as deviant.

The Assyrian king's perfection is related to his divine election; the gods have shaped his body to this standard, and the royal body is perfect and beautiful (Pongratz-Leisten 2015: 208–210, 219–224). Importantly though, texts tell us that Teumman's body was also shaped by the gods, in a way that might explain why it is represented in such a distinctive way. In Ashurbanipal's Prism B account of the campaign against Teumman, the following passage appears (Novotny & Jeffers 2018, RINAP 5/1 Asb 3.v.4–15):

23 Unlike Egyptian art, which makes use of extreme social perspective for the king in contrast to others, the Assyrian king is usually only slightly larger and slightly more elaborately bearded than those Assyrians around him.

Teumman continually sought out evil; Sîn (therefore) continually sought out evil omens for him. In the month of Du'ūzu, an eclipse which lasted through until dawn (so that) Šamaš saw it; it lasted like this for the whole of the day: (signifying) the end of the reign of the king of Elam, the destruction of his land. The Fruit (i.e. Sîn) revealed to me his verdict which cannot be changed. On that day, an unfavorable incident befell him (i.e. Teumman): his lip became paralyzed, his eyes turned back, a seizure (*gabbāšu*) had taken place within him. (Yet) with all of these deeds which Aššur and Ištar had done to him, he was not ashamed; he mustered his troops.

*mte-um-man le-mut-tu<sub>2</sub>*  
*iš-te-ne<sub>2</sub>-a-a* <sup>d30</sup> *iš-te-ne<sub>2</sub>-a-šu<sub>2</sub>*  
 GIŠKIM.MEŠ MUNUS.ĤUL *ina* ITI.ŠU AN.MI *šat ur-ri* EN ZALAG<sub>2</sub>  
*uš-ta-ni-iḫ-ma* <sup>d</sup>UTU IGI-šu<sub>2</sub>-*ma ki-ma šu-a-tu-ma*  
*kal u<sub>4</sub>-me uš-ta-ni-iḫ a-na qi<sub>2</sub>-it* BALA.MEŠ  
 MAN KUR.ELAM.MA.KI ZAḤ<sub>2</sub> KUR-šu<sub>2</sub>  
*u<sub>2</sub>-kal-lim-an-ni* GURUN EŠ.BAR-šu<sub>2</sub> *ša la in-ne<sub>2</sub>-nu-u*  
*ina u<sub>4</sub>-me-šu<sub>2</sub>-ma mi-iḫ-ru im-ḫur-šu-ma*  
 NUNDUM-*su uk-tam-bil-ma* IGI.II-šu<sub>2</sub> *is-ḫur-ma*  
*ga-ba-šu iš-ša<sub>2</sub>-kin ina lib<sub>3</sub>-bi-šu*  
*it-ti ep-še-e-ti an-na-a-ti ša<sub>2</sub>* AN.ŠAR<sub>2</sub> *u* <sup>d15</sup>  
*e-pu-šu<sub>2</sub>-uš ul i-ba-aš<sub>2</sub> id-ka-a* ERIM.ĤI.A-šu<sub>2</sub>

Collins (2006a: 5–6) has suggested that Teumman's squinted eye represents some aspect of that divinely-inflicted stroke, which clearly deformed his face, distorting his eye and lip. This interest in the physiological effects of a stroke derives from the ominous meaning of the event; its distortion of his face was part of the message from Sîn. Preserving Teumman's face as recognizably itself, including these afflictions, therefore also preserves a message of the gods. Collins further points out that the squinted eye only really becomes apparent after Teumman's death. The deader the image-Teumman is, he suggests, the realer it becomes. This is an important point: although Teumman is recognizable as the same person both pre- and postmortem, the tendencies that seem to characterize an unfavorable appearance before his death become more extreme after it. By his "final appearance" in the Garden Scene, as a severed head hanging in a tree, he looks only barely human (Fig. 4).<sup>24</sup> Teumman, Collins argues, is represented as an individual to make his death realer yet: the actual head of Teumman is represented again and again, so that the representation powerfully affects the real historical individual of Teumman. For Collins, this is a move beyond the substitute image and into something even more powerful.<sup>25</sup>

Teumman is the only enemy said to have been the subject of a divine omen written in and on his body in this way, and he is an unusually reviled villain throughout Ashurbanipal's sources, both textual and visual. But although there is a very good reason to single out Teumman for this distinctive representation, I would argue that we need to understand Teumman's distinctiveness in context as part of a wider tendency of Ashurbanipal's reign in how certain foreign leaders were represented. A number of foreigners are depicted as physically wrong in his reliefs, though not quite as characteristically as Teumman. They are less identifiable as one historical

24 This is in line with Teumman's intense dehumanization in Ashurbanipal's textual sources, where he is said to have the "likeness" (*tamšīlu*) of a *gallū* demon Novotny & Jeffers 2018, RINAP 5/1 3 iv 58; 4 iv 37; 6 v 94; 7 v 35; 16 i' 7').

25 On the powerful, magical effects of the repetition of the severed head in these images, see also Bahrani 2008: 50–55.



*Figure 4* Detail of the so-called Banquet Relief of Ashurbanipal showing the head of Teumman hanging from the branch of a fir tree. Nineveh, North Palace Hypothetical Room S<sup>1</sup>, details of BM 124902. Photo: author's own.

individual than they are as one type, looking incorrect in comparison to the standard depiction of human features, generally in similar ways to each other.

The foreigners who were singled out in this way are not perhaps the ones we would expect to be denigrated through unfavorable representation. That is, they were not all reviled arch-enemies like Teumman. For instance, in the North Palace S<sup>1</sup> lion-hunting sequence, we find another Elamite represented as notably physically deficient. He is one of a group of Elamite nobles who had fled to Ashurbanipal's court when Teumman usurped the throne. It might be Ummanappa, whose participation in the hunt is described in an epigraph (Novotny & Jeffers 2018, RINAP 5/1 Asb 54.6–8, in Novotny and Jeffers' translation):

[Umman]appa, a son of [Ur]taku, the king of the land Elam, who had fled and had grasped [my feet, ...]...a lion attacked him and [he ... my] lordly majesty, [...], became frightened, and made an appeal to [my] lordly majesty (for help).

[<sup>m</sup>um-man]-<sup>c</sup>ap-pa DUMU<sup>r</sup> [<sup>m</sup>ur]-ta-ki MAN KUR.ELAM.KI ša<sub>2</sub> in-nab-<sup>c</sup>tu<sub>2</sub>-ma iṣ-ba-tu<sub>2</sub> [<sup>GIR</sup><sub>3</sub>.II-ia] [...]-nu-ti UR.MAḪ ina muḫ-ḫi-<sup>c</sup>š<sub>2</sub> it-bi-ma EN<sup>2</sup>-u-ti<sup>r</sup> [...] ip-laḫ<sub>3</sub>-ma ] <sup>c</sup>u<sub>2</sub>-<sup>c</sup>šal-<sup>c</sup>la-a EN-u-ti<sup>r</sup>



*Figure 5* Detail of a lion-hunting relief shows Ashurbanipal testing his bows while a pathetic Elamite, one of those given sanctuary at his court, kneels and looks on; inset photo showing his face in close-up. Nineveh, North Palace Hypothetical Room S<sup>1</sup>. BM 124878. Photo: Klaus Wagensooner.

Clearly physiology is not the only metric by which Ummanappa is deficient, but as Fig. 5 shows, that is a factor as well. The Elamite, much like Teumman, has a large, hooked nose, a receding chin and forehead, downturned eyes, and, of course, a bent supplicant posture with raised hands.

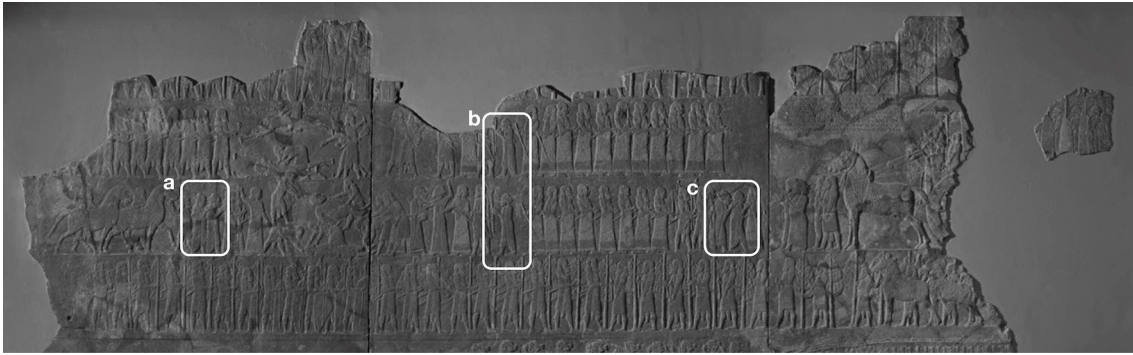
Yet unlike Teumman, in most respects this “perhaps-Ummanappa” has behaved as a foreigner should, in Assyrian terms: supplicating himself to the Assyrian king and offering allegiance. If Teumman is represented as physically distinctive and incorrect in order to make his death and destruction even realer, to punish him through representation, does it make sense that an Elamite behaving essentially correctly should get the same treatment?

We might hypothesize that this unfavorable representation reflects an acknowledgement that many of these Elamite fugitives, given protection by Ashurbanipal, ultimately proved disappointing, and did not exhibit the continued loyalty to Assyria that Ashurbanipal expected in return for offering them sanctuary in Assyria. After the defeat of Teumman, some of these fugitive Elamites (though not Ummannappa specifically, if this is who we see here) would be installed as kings by the Assyrians and prove disloyal in these royal roles. Thus, although behaving correctly now, his features speak of evil to come—if not from Ummannappa himself, then from the group of Elamite royal fugitives as a whole. In this case, there would be a moral dimension to this kind of physical appearance, indicating treachery, untrustworthiness, or evil.

However, I suspect that this is not quite what is happening here. Instead, I think that these features, like Ummanappa’s drastically unsuccessful participation in the lion hunt, simply signal to us his place as a foreign noble. Certainly it is often the case that in Assyrian contexts, to be foreign was synonymous with being evil and treacherous. But here any moral connotation is a secondary aspect of the features which are first and foremost simply othering. Placed in proximity to a series of elite Assyrians, including Ashurbanipal himself, the difference between “Assyrian” and “other” is especially apparent, as it is in the epigraph describing Ummannappa’s failure. These are foreigners who are important enough to be allowed into elite Assyrian spaces but in being there must be represented in ways that signal how inadequate they are to occupy them. This is, perhaps paradoxically, the appropriate way for a foreigner to both behave and look: failing in elite Assyrian events and appearing unlike Assyrians in obvious ways.

As Collins (2006a: 3) also pointed out, the closest that we come to “portraits” like the one of Teumman also involves foreign figures who, like Ummannappa, seem to be behaving in ways particularly appropriate to foreigners. Two unnamed ambassadors from Urartu appear three different times across the post-battle punishment sequences of Southwest Palace Room XXXIII, in the upper register of slabs 4–6, depicting a victory procession in the Assyrian city of Arbela (Fig. 6). Like the supplicant Ummanappa in the lion hunt, they are also foreigners voluntarily recognizing the might of Assyria. However, unlike Ummanappa, they are not Elamites, and have no ties of allegiance to Teumman or any Elamites. And unlike Teumman, who is demonized in a way that none of Ashurbanipal’s other enemies are and was clearly particularly reviled, these should be good foreigners, bringing news of willing submission. Despite this, they are depicted as misshapen and physiologically incorrect, and furthermore as distinctive people, recognizable each of the three times they appear (Fig. 7). We should remember that Ashurnasirpal II’s slouching, “sinister” tribute bearers Cifarelli pointed out are in a similar position: foreigners voluntarily showing their submission, yet still differentiated as they do so.

In each of their three appearances, they are depicted witnessing acts of punishment performed upon allies or officials of Teumman. These scenes serve to depict the two appropriate roles for foreigners: voluntary, cringing supplicants to Assyrian power, or targets of brutal punishment.



*Figure 6* A victory procession in Arbela in which Urartian ambassadors appear three times, as annotations show. Nineveh, Southwest Palace Room XXXIII, slabs 4–6. BM 124802. Photo: Trustees of the British Museum, annotations by author.



*Figure 7* Detail of the reliefs in Fig. 6 showing the two Urartian ambassadors with highly unusual—and incorrect—facial features and postures. BM 124802. Photo: Klaus Wagensohnner.

One of the scenes of punishment that the Urartians witness is an incident in which the leader of the tribe of Gambulu, Dunanu, is forced to wear the head of Teumman around his neck, while his brother Samgunu wears the head of another Elamite ruler, Ištar-nandi of Hidalu. Both Gambulians are roughly handled, slapped, and spat upon (see Fig. 6, annotation b). The Urartians watch this with hands raised in a gesture of submission. An Assyrian soldier gestures backwards, presenting the scene for their viewing. What is particularly interesting about this scene is that the Urartians are in fact the most visually distinctive players in it; though the Gambulian Samgunu has a distinctive scraggly beard, he is not nearly as deficient, in either stature or facial normativity, as the Urartians.<sup>26</sup> The foreigners who are being punished are less physiologically incorrect than those who are merely forced to watch. Here it is clear that it is not necessarily the foreigners who are the most criminal who are physically most differentiated.

<sup>26</sup> We cannot see the face of Dunanu because it falls in a broken section of the relief.

Finally, I want to consider an image also from the Southwest Palace XXXIII reliefs, from the lower register of slabs 4–6, in which an Assyrian *šūt rēši* installs the Elamite noble Ummanigaš as king in Madaktu, an Elamite region (Fig. 8). The *šūt rēši* in this scene, a eunuch, has entirely standard and correct facial features and stands straight and tall. The Elamite subjects, in contrast, are pathetic. Adult men grovel, their bodies bent and hands raised; the only upright figures are a procession of musicians and singers, including women and children, who welcome their new overlord(s): Ummanigaš, but also the very clear hand of Assyria in the person of the *šūt rēši*. This is an example of foreigners distinguished by postures that are inherently un-Assyrian, and by a “civilian” demographic make-up. Nonetheless, while they have distinctive Elamite hair and, in the case of some of the men, distinctive short beards, the facial features of these cringing Elamites are uniform and “correct” by Assyrian standards even if their posture and attitudes are essentially un-Assyrian. Unlike his new Elamite subjects, the Elamite leader Ummanigaš’s face stands out (Fig. 9). This is difficult to recognize now because his image has been later defaced, presumably by the conquerors of Nineveh who saw him as a puppet of Assyrian power or had some other grudge against his image. Yet, around the gash where his face should be, it is still possible to make out the characteristic sharply hooked nose we have seen in other instances of “incorrect” enemy faces, along with a pronounced bent posture and submissive raised hands. I suspect that, in the parts of his face now destroyed, we would have found the same downturned eyes that usually accompany this nose.

Ummanigaš would ultimately rebel, siding with Šamaš-šumu-ukīn in his revolt of 652–648; it is unclear exactly when this relief was created, but probably around 650, when this betrayal was already known. Thus, although at this point in the narrative Ummanigaš is Assyria’s man, perhaps the wrongness of his body, face, and pose in the relief is looking forward to that treachery, as could possibly also have been the case with the Elamite participant in the lion-hunt scene. But once again, I think there is something more going on, a depiction of an Assyrian taxonomy. This tableau illustrates well a series of distinctions: differentiating between a powerful Assyrian military leader, cringing foreigners with incorrect posture in a group that includes women and children (feminized and infantilized as a populace), and finally a foreign leader who alone is represented with facial features that are distinctive and incorrect. The fact that he has become the lone defaced figure in the relief now strangely serves to enhance the Assyrian attempt to signal his difference from his fellow Elamites.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear then, from the contrast between Ummanigaš and the Elamites he is installed to rule, that these distinctions in foreign appearance are about picking out foreign, non-Assyrian leaders, and not about typologizing enemy races or nations in any racial or ethnic sense.<sup>28</sup>

27 I think it is important that in all these three cases—the lion-hunt Elamite, the Urartian ambassadors, and the installation of Ummanigaš—the physically deficient foreigner is correctly submissive, yet being shown in the act of witnessing the consequences of defying Assyria. In the first instance, the foreigner watches Ashurbanipal murder a fierce lion who fought against the king; in the second, the pair of foreigners watch captive combatants being brutally tortured and murdered; in the final instance, Ummanigaš is positioned to “see” not only his newly submissive subjects, but also the dead bodies of Elamite combatants floating in the river below Madaktu. Always there is tension between submission and an alternate potential fate.

28 This is not to say that ethnic differentiations of peoples is not at all of interest to Assyrian elites, only that physiognomy is not relevant to defining ethnic identities in Assyrian art. As discussed already, Brown (2013) has convincingly argued that ethnicity is a worthwhile concept to apply to Assyrian depictions of the foreign, and that Assyrian art becomes increasingly interested in defining foreign peoples by ethnic differences over the course of the ninth to seventh centuries. I find Brown’s arguments compelling in their broader form; however, I think that the physiological “incorrectness” I am interested in here is not at all a part of this process and therefore not an element of the ethnicization he describes.



*Figure 8* The installation of Ummanigaš in Madaktu; he is led to the city by an Assyrian *šūt rēši* and greeted by a procession of bowing Elamites and marching musicians. Women and children participating in the musical procession are not visible in this image, but are present farther to the right on Slab 6. Nineveh, Southwest Palace Room XXXIII, slabs 5–6. BM 124802. Photo: Trustees of the British Museum.

Incorrect features do not represent physiological tendencies of entire foreign peoples or tell us anything about the physical or moral character of foreign peoples *en masse*. Otherwise we would expect all Elamites to have these features, and we would not expect an Urartian and an Elamite to share the hooked nose, downturned eyes, and receding foreheads that stand out as deviations from the norm in all these depictions.

This is important because without the presence of these physically distinctive Urartian ambassadors, we might well conclude that Elamites alone were distinguished in this way. During Ashurbanipal's reign, Elam was a major source of conflict, and its criminality was emphasized in the sources his scribes and artists created. Although Ashurbanipal fought many campaigns against other enemies, Elamites seemed to provoke unusual ire. There may have been many reasons for this, including possibly a perception of Elam as a more powerful rival than other regions, perhaps particularly when it came to influence in southern Mesopotamia. As I have acknowledged already, Teumman is treated completely uniquely among foreign leaders; no such elaborate attention, or such special opprobrium attaches to any other enemy of Ashurbanipal's (Waters 1999: 473–477). What is true for Teumman is, to a lesser extent, true for the other Elamite royals (sometimes as a knock-on effect of the attention paid to Teumman; the Ummanigaš relief scene, for instance, concludes the narrative opened in the reliefs depicting the humiliating defeat of Teumman). But the way that the Urartians are also singled out as visually distinctive shows that it is not only because Elamite leaders were treated differently than others. Rather than telling us something about Elamites as a group or as excessively villainous enemies, this visual practice tells us about a “kind” that is more in keeping with Assyrian typologizing of the seventh century, in which named foreign leaders from many regions were increasingly a focus of (generally negative) attention.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> This tendency begins before Ashurbanipal's reign with a noticeable expansion from the time of Sargon II onwards in the complexity and detail applied to descriptions of enemy leaders' names, backgrounds, and crimes in royal inscriptions. See Zawadzki 2014: 768–769; Fales 1982: 431; Collins 2006a: 1–2.





Figure 9 Detail of Fig. 8 showing Ummanigaš. BM 124802. Photo: Klaus Wagensonner.

While not confined to the leaders of one region then, it is nonetheless important to recognize that this distinctiveness does not characterize all Ashurbanipal depictions of foreign leaders. There are many examples of foreign leaders in Ashurbanipal's reliefs who do not have facial features that stand out. That said, even where the facial features are more uniform, we still find foreign leaders whose differentiation from Assyrians in hair, beards, and clothing is very striking. For example, we may consider the four foreigners who appear in the Southwest Palace relief sequence depicting the surrender of Babylon following the Šamaš-šumu-ukīn rebellion. This group stands out in dress, hairstyle, stature, and even in facial characteristics as strikingly "different" from those around them, both Assyrians and ordinary Chaldean prisoners (Fig. 10; see Novotny & Watanabe 2019). Clearly there is, as Collins (2006a: 2–3) has argued, a growing interest in individualizing foreigners, whether by features or by more careful representation of distinctive costume or hairstyles. And despite their differences in dress or hairstyle, foreign leaders are often more like each other than any of them are like their own people, at least in how they all stand out together.<sup>30</sup>

### CATEGORIES AND KINDS AS AN IMPERIAL TOOL

We could think about this kind of representation of foreigners as an act inherently tinged with imperial violence, both because it is inextricably linked with images that show enemies humiliated, tortured, and dismembered, but also because of how it makes so clear that foreigners, in the very way that they look, in the very way that they are drawn, are on the other side of a divide between conqueror and victim/supplicant. Foreign leaders are "drawn differently" from everyone else, and as a result our attention is drawn to them, where we find a stark demonstration of what is wrong with them.

<sup>30</sup> In this sense, physical differentiation in art can serve a similar purpose as the epigraphs that help highlight key moments in Ashurbanipal's narrative sequences; when a figure stands out in appearance, they are usually the correct place to focus our narrative attention.



Figure 10 Nineveh, North Palace Room M, slabs 12–13. BM 124945–6. Photo: author’s own.

This artistic tendency also reflects what I think we can call an imperial interest in categorization, an activity that goes hand-in-hand with the imperial practice of collecting, as discussed already (Thomason 2005; see Gahtan & Troelenberg 2019). This tendency has been extensively studied in regard to Western imperialism, where the link between Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scientific discourse and the age of exploration and imperial expansion is clear. The relationship was mutually reinforcing. Exploration of “foreign” locations and study of climates, flora, fauna, and peoples led to scientific discourses that justified and encouraged imperial expansion, while imperial expansion led to scientific activity that reified the new imperial order. The two were often linked in other ways: academics serving as agents of imperialism and vice versa (Lorimer 2013: 59–99; Levine 2008; 2010; Harries 2005; Staum 2003; Haraway 1984; Dickason 1977). The imperial nature of categorization discourses can perhaps be seen most clearly in the invention and development of race science during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emerging from earlier theories of human difference (Pagden 2015: 97–119; Lorimer 2013: 3–16), and more generally in the development of the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, and biology. These disciplines played roles in categorizing human beings in ways that emerged from, kept pace with, and even dictated imperial dynamics.<sup>31</sup> Certainly the link between imperial power and collecting, categorizing, and acquiring knowledge is readily apparent in the “conquest of Assyria” by European diplomats-cum-excavators in the nineteenth century CE (for a start, see Bahrani 1998; Larsen 1989; Stolper 1992; Cooper 1992; Holloway 2001). Edward W. Said’s foundational 1978 study of Western attitudes to the Orient, *Orientalism*, considered this process in its fullest sense, tracing how Orientalism as “a system of knowledge about the Orient” (Said 1978: 6) produced:

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31 As just one example, it would be hard to find a more succinct expression of the relationship between collecting, academic categorization, and imperial might than an editorial in the journal *Nature* occasioned by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley. Called “Primitive Races within the British Empire,” it concluded that: “For the solution of problems of administration, as has been said on many occasions, the necessity for study of the people themselves on scientific lines is equally urgent, while on no other conditions will it be possible to attempt a decision of their ultimate place as members of the Empire” (1924: 847).

a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character. (Said 1978: 7–8)

Academic disciplines and their scholars, like imperial administrators, were part of the colonial project: “To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact” (Said 1978: 39).

To be clear, I do not argue here that Assyrian categorization of human others is the same as nineteenth-century imperial or scientific discourses, nor do I relate the Assyrian interest in physiognomy expressed in the physical depictions of foreigners to race science, modern anthropology, or ethnography. As I have argued above, the Assyrian examples we have looked at are explicitly *not* about the differentiation of “peoples” (Uartians from Gambulians from Elamites).<sup>32</sup> But I do argue that categorization of kinds serves a similar imperial role in Assyria as it did in an imperially hungry Europe. Hence my designation of categorization as an imperial activity important not only in modern empires but in ancient empires as well—just as Thomason showed was true for collecting.

It is notoriously difficult to define what an empire is, but it might be easier to identify tendencies that are “empire-ish,” such as collecting, categorizing, and creating hierarchies and differentiations among categories.<sup>33</sup> This allows us to think of imperialism as a quality that some political systems or historical configurations of power have to different degrees, and not as an absolute that a particular political entity is or is not. This is in line with Prasenjit Duara’s suggestion that we think of empire “as an object of inquiry shaped by a series of overlapping similarities, rather than unified by a single common feature” (Duara 2014: 384). Imperialism can express itself in patterns of control and domination in political and military senses but also in representation, in monuments, and in architecture: some patterns of material construction are “imperial.” This includes, I would argue, the act of drawing physical distinctions (literally and figuratively).

## WHY DISTINGUISH CERTAIN FOREIGNERS?

To say that there is a relationship between categorization and colonization might be entirely justified, but it is a point that is too general to tell us much that is actually very revealing. What I want to argue here then is something that might initially sound like a distinction without a difference: namely, that processes of *sub-categorization* have an inherent relationship to imperial power. I think this is an important way of expressing the drive toward increasingly complicated ways of understanding and representing difference in Assyrian art.

In his study of French geographers’ role in French imperialism, Martin S. Staum (2003: 88–90) discusses the ways that race sciences were used not only to separate “self” from other, colonizer from colonized, or increasingly what could be called a “white race” from other races, but also to create distinctions *among* the colonized, differentiating between those who could

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32 Although I agree with those who see the beginnings of group differentiation by physical appearance in the depiction of Egyptians with distinctive group facial characteristics that modern Western observers generally read as a depiction of “black African” features (Collins 2006a: 2–3; Albenda 1982), I see this as an unusual and exceptional tendency and not a schema that is widely adopted.

33 Analysis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century imperialism takes it for granted that imperialism does not necessarily require an “empire” in the classical sense. See Duara 2014; 2011; Pagden 2006.

be civilized and those who were beyond such attentions. According to Staum (2003: 98), for explorers and geographers “the graduated scale of physical features corresponding to mental faculties could construct an ‘other’ fit for guidance and French tutelage or so remote from the European ideal as to be uncivilizable and meriting little benevolence.”

Assyria had always had an interest in situating foreigners along a spectrum of difference, linked to both geographical and social distance (Reade 1979: 333–334; Brown 2013: 534). The most dramatic illustration of how such distinctions manifest in visual representation again comes from the art of Ashurbanipal in his North Palace reliefs depicting an attack on an Arab encampment. In these reliefs, we find the only known Assyrian instance of women as direct victims of physical violence, and the only representation of dead women.<sup>34</sup> This has been seen as indicating the extreme alterity of Arab society as perceived by Assyrian observers; to urban, settled Assyrians, their apparently nomadic lifestyle clearly made Arabs different from other foreigners,<sup>35</sup> and this had major consequences for what kinds of violence it was acceptable to depict being used against them.<sup>36</sup>

Imperial discourses about otherness are often complicated in this way by a spectrum of difference or by intersections of different ways of being different: was the foreigner a man or a woman? A combatant or a civilian? These things matter. I would argue, too, that the more an empire expands, the more complicated such discourses are likely to become. This is a process that Brown (2013) documents in the art of Assyria, as he traces increasing interests in differentiating foreign peoples and relating them to their landscapes, their material culture, and their characteristic activities. The sort of details that we find in the reliefs of Ashurbanipal “went beyond merely differentiating people, instead categorizing them in ways that draw upon a cluster of definitive identifying features” (Brown 2013: 530).

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34 The nature of the violence represented has been variously interpreted. Some have seen it as a representation of rape (Marcus 1995: 202), although I think there is insufficient evidence to conclude that this is what is shown. More convincing to me, looking both at the imagery in the reliefs themselves and considering other Assyrian tropes, is an interpretation that associates the images with a textual trope of “ripping open pregnant women” (Dubovský 2009; see also Cogan 1983). On the usual absence of explicit reports or depictions of direct physical violence against women, see Reade 1998: 223–227; Crouch 2009: 122; Fuchs 2009: 71–72. It is also worth noting that Arab tribes had traditions of powerful female rulers, as acknowledged in Assyrian texts. This was likely both another aspect of their disconcerting otherness and a dynamic that disturbed gendered norms when it came to representing conflict.

35 In fact, the Arab tribes in question were, it is now apparent, not strictly nomadic (Magee 2014: 256–257), and the fact that there were large fortified settlements in Arabia was known to the Neo-Assyrian kings. A Sennacherib inscription mentions Dumat al-Jandal, ancient Adummatu, as a location to which the Arab queen Te’elḥunu escaped (Grayson & Novotny 2012, RINAP 3/135 r 53’–59’). Nonetheless, Assyrian perceptions of Arab society seem to have been in line with a wider tradition in urban Mesopotamian societies of seeing nomadism as the extreme of alterity, dating back at least to the late third millennium. This perspective is exemplified in the Sumerian text “The Marriage of Martu” (ETCSL c.1.7.1), which “ironically sketch[es]” (Vanstiphout 1999: 461) the life of the nomadic Martu. See also Edzard 1981.

36 See also Dubovský 2009: 416–418 on potential justifications for the extreme violence in these reliefs. It is hard to say whether it also had consequences for the kinds of violence it was actually acceptable to *do* to them. Taboos against representing or discussing certain violent acts might not tell us much about whether those acts really did occur. At the very least, it is without doubt that noncombatants of any gender or age would have suffered severe violence and privation as a result of military encounters with the Assyrians (for instance, on forced deportation marches, which must have killed numerous people). Becoming enslaved or otherwise subservient to new Assyrian overlords in the aftermath of a war would also have made individuals vulnerable to sexual violence, either incidentally or by design, though we have no direct acknowledgement of this in textual or visual sources.

I would suggest that intellectual discourses in which categorization is an important aim are almost *inherently* likely to become more and more complicated over time.<sup>37</sup> The cuneiform scholarly tradition amply attests to the ways that certain kinds of intellectual discourses must, by definition, constantly move forward, building on what has come before. The types of intellectual elites who drafted Ashurbanipal's texts and probably also planned his images participated in a tradition of scholarship characterized in this era by a growth of increasingly elaborate traditions of commentaries to texts and nested and self-referential works (Frahm 2004; on scholarly traditions in art, see Gilibert 2018; Ataç 2018: 151–178). In cuneiform scholarship of the first millennium, one point can always give rise to another.

It makes sense that within such an intellectual tradition, the act of distinguishing foreigners by their posture, as Cifarelli identifies in the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century, might ultimately lead to further distinctions: among foreigners of different locations, or among foreigners of different kinds within the same location. It is also not surprising that it would lead gradually to an interest in finding new ways of *marking* distinctions—for instance, not just of dress, beard, or posture, but also of facial features. Collins (2006a: 6–7) has suggested that some of this interest in the art of the later Assyrian kings derived from contact with Egypt: as Assyria conquered Egyptian territory and saw its art, they encountered new ideas about how to mark difference that had long been present in Egypt. Imperial expansion, then, could give rise to both the intellectual climate and the actual face-to-face contact that inspires such innovations.

Ultimately, imperial classification would not be very useful if it simply identified “self” and “other.” We could instead see it as classifying various kinds of selves and others in relation to how they stand on a range of metrics: usefulness, deviance, danger, and inadequacy. Enemy leaders become singled out for punishment because they were both better and worse than the ordinary people of their nations. This was not a recognition of them as worthy opponents; that should be clear from the way that they are depicted as even more inadequate than their countrymen through their distinctively wrong physiology and behavior. We could see foreign leaders as positioned in an opposing quadrant to the Assyrian king; they were at the top of an inverted hierarchy of difference.

## THE FOREIGN LEADER AND THE FLOCK

In the royal inscriptions of the Sargonid kings, punishments are increasingly restricted to enemy leaders and nobles, while the ordinary peoples are often said to have been dealt with “mercifully”—usually meaning that they were incorporated into the Assyrian world through deportation and forced labor, including on royal building projects, or transformed into subjects of an Assyrian province (see Fales' concept of political “Assyrianization”). Meanwhile, leaders were incorporated into the Assyrian world in a very different way as spectacles of incorrectness, as we have seen in the examples discussed here, whether as captives humiliated and violated in elaborate victory processions or as ambassadors offering voluntary submission in public ceremonies. They are also incorporated into the Assyrian palace through artistic rendering as a physically distinctive (and wrong) category of people.

The distinction between leaders who are punished and ordinary enemies who are shown mercy reflects a certain dualism in Assyrian kingship. The king needed to serve simultaneously as a shepherd to the peoples of the world (Pongratz-Leisten 2015: 198–218) and as a warrior who violently

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37 Any academic who has watched the growth of a simple scheme from, say, Text Type A to Text Types A1, A2, A3 will understand this complicating tendency in scholarly theories of categorization.

subdued and punished enemies. The dual nature of this role and its effect on Assyrian art has been discussed in complementary terms by both Stephanie Reed (2007) and Ludovico Portuese (2016). Reed (2007: 102) highlights a tendency in Assyrian reliefs of the seventh century to depict foreign captives in ways “that are not purely hostile and demeaning but suggest an element of ‘good shepherd’ protectiveness.” She further points out that these images, generally involving depictions of family groups or captives interacting with one another, are often juxtaposed—in terms of physical proximity in the relief—with images of danger or death to other foreign captives. She thus argues:

From a modern perspective, the artistic treatment of Assyria’s opponents, especially in the reign of Ashurbanipal, suggests conflicting perceptions of the enemy which may indicate conflicting motivational values at work within the imperial propaganda. (Reed 2007: 102)

For Reed (2007: 113), the conflicting values here are two aspects of the king’s divinely mandated role to serve as both pious shepherd and fierce military conqueror. The conflicting perceptions of the captives track this duality in the royal role. More recently, Portuese has identified a similar dynamic in the art of Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century. Studying the reliefs program of the throne room at the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, he identifies imagery on one half of the room as exemplifying a political message of “mercilessness and cruelty,” opposed by another message in the same room of “benevolence and paternalism” (Portuese 2016: 179–199; 2017: 118). He argues that the latter is expressed in iconography that depicts the king in the role of shepherd with a characteristic long staff.

Both Reed and Portuese detect a tension in this duality. But I would argue that it is not the king whom we should see as bifurcated in his role. Through the act of subcategorizing enemies into different kinds of foreigners (“leaders” on the one hand and their soon-to-be-Assyrian “flock” on the other), this potentially threatening sense of duality is shifted from the king’s role to the foreigners themselves. If it seems that there is an inconsistency in royal behavior, look again: the inconsistency responds to the needs of different kinds of foreigners, who are, of course, notoriously inconsistent and unreliable.

Thus, we find that identifying foreign kinds is a crucial aspect of explaining the complicated nature of Assyrian kingship. A more complex typology of foreigners allowed for a kingship that was more complex, that incorporated the king’s need to fulfill different roles in different circumstances and be all things to all foreigners. At the same time, it provided a unity to that identity. What might look like two opposing aspects of the royal role became one harmonious aspect, responding to a diversity of foreign kinds.

## CONCLUSION

Assyrian artists had a long-standing interest in how to best represent the foreign. From the earliest reliefs, foreign peoples were drawn in ways that emphasized their failure to attain the standards that Assyrians in art always achieve. This act of drawing foreigners differently than Assyrians helps to explain how they fit into an Assyrian world, and it forced them into the roles that Assyria chose for them.

Yet, the art of the Assyrian Empire does not take a straightforward, “us vs. them” attitude to the depiction of foreignness. For one thing, Assyrian art emphasizes the usefulness of foreign raw materials, which can be Assyrianized in constructive ways. Foreign bodies, lands, goods, and scholarship are important elements of a correctly Assyrian palace. The act of transforming the conquered other is one of the ways that the empire constituted itself and celebrated its creative and transformative power. Transformation was often violent, and many foreigners in

Assyrian palace art are depicted in a process of being “remade” through violent mutilation, as is certainly the case with the severed head of Teumman.

Later in the empire, an ideology developed in which different kinds of foreigners were useful in different ways. Foreign leaders increasingly stood out from their people, whether violently punished, as Teumman is, or correctly showing deference before such punishment was warranted. One of the ways that these foreign leaders were singled out is through an entirely new strategy of representation in which their facial features were rendered distinctive and incorrect. Although Teumman is the most striking example of this innovation, we find other foreigners with incorrect faces in the art of Ashurbanipal, as well as foreigners whose alterity is signaled by more traditional Assyrian means (posture, poses, and gesture, for instance).

The Assyrian differentiation of facial features in these cases does not reflect an interest in a physiognomy of different “ethnicities” or “races.” Yet, the function it performs is, like Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment racialization, an inherently imperial one. That is, it is a discourse that emerges from imperial expansion, as an empire seeks to understand and categorize its world in the face of its own increasingly complex and heterogenous identity—in part by displacing heterogeneity onto the foreign. It is also an activity that *enables* imperial expansion and control. In the case of Assyria, it created a theory which distinguished between “killable” and “reusable” foreign others: leaders, who would always stand out whether they submitted voluntarily or were punished for their resistance, and the flock, who may be foreign but who could, with a change of hairstyle or costume, blend in with any anonymous crowd, even an Assyrian one. This sub-categorization also helped to resolve a potentially difficult aspect of the king’s role as imperial conqueror. As in empires in many times and places, Assyrian artists wielded their chisels to distinguish the categories and kinds of the other. In the process, Assyria emerged as a unified and harmonious self, even where we might originally think that we see conflicting messages about Assyrian power and its relation to the foreign.

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