

ASSYRIAN FEAST IN THE GARDEN: NARRATIVE, ART, AND NATURE¹

Katia Maria Paim Pozzer²

Abstract

In the Mesopotamian world, stone relief was one of the most important artistic manifestations. The imposing amount of scenes and its own continuity indicate a largely documentary function. The cultural practice of creating these monumental reliefs is associated with the political moment of making great empires. In this article, we examine the relief of the banquet of Assurbanipal and Libbāli-šarrat since the perspective of art history and the foundations of iconology.

Keywords: History; War; Art; Mesopotamia; Ashurbanipal.

Resumo

No mundo mesopotâmico, o relevo sobre pedra foi uma das mais importantes manifestações artísticas. A imponente quantidade de cenas e a sua própria continuidade, indicam uma função amplamente documental. A prática cultural de criação destes relevos monumentais está associada ao momento político de construção de grandes impérios. Neste artigo examinamos o relevo do banquete de Assurbanipal e Libbāli-šarrat a partir da perspectiva da história da arte e dos fundamentos da iconologia.

Palavras-chave

História; Guerra; Arte; Mesopotâmia; Assurbanipal.

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² Associate Professor – Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil
E-mail: katia.pozzer@ufrgs.br.

The Assyrian stone reliefs constitute one of the richest iconographic sets of Mesopotamian art. Over more than two centuries, Assyrian monarchs developed the cultural practice of creating monumental reliefs which covered the interior walls of palaces, depicting an idealized historical narrative; they were made of alabaster, a malleable stone divided into two or more parts, which could exceed 2 meters in height. Material evidence of this type of relief dates from the reigns of Ashurnazirpal II (883–859 BCE), Shalmaneser III (853–824 BCE), Teglathphalassar III (745–727 BCE), and Sargon II (722–705 BCE) in Nimrûd; Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.E.) and Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.E.) in Nineveh. The impressive number of scenes and their continuity indicate a largely documentary function, since the wall reliefs correspond to the Assyrian annals (Moscatti, 1985: 38; Frankfort, 1996: 157).

Creation of these monumental reliefs was associated with the political moment of building great empires. Most of the scenes depicted evoked the war and military campaigns waged by the Assyrians against their enemies. According to historian Jean-Jacques Glassner (1993:111):

At this time, Assyrian imperialism, convinced of its universal ideology, equates war with a struggle against the forces of evil. Conceived as an ordeal, war became a constituent element of the cosmic order. She saves the people, the king being the instrument of divine justice, and the god Assur incorporating a warrior figure. (...) The enemy's status as hostile and negative makes destruction and devastation seem positive. The Assyrian king is always good and just; the enemy a liar, evil, and unclean.³

To investigate these images, we conducted a formal and symbolic analysis of a particular relief known as the "Banquet under the Vine." For this, we use a methodology based on Erwin Panofsky's work which divides the process of visual analysis in iconography and iconology into three stages: pre-iconographic description, i.e., the enumeration of artistic motifs for each theme; conducting an iconographic analysis, i.e., identifying images, stories, and allegories; and conducting an iconological interpretation, which is the discovery and interpretation of the symbolic values in the images. Iconography is the theme and meaning of works of art as opposed

³ A cette époque, l'imperialisme assyrien, fort de son idéologie universaliste, a assimilé la guerre à une lutte contre les forces du mal. Conçue comme une épreuve ordalique, la guerre est devenue un élément constitutif de l'ordre cosmique. Elle sauve la civilisation, le roi étant l'instrument de la justice divine, et le dieu Assur se parant d'une figure guerrière. (...) Le statut d'inimitié et de négativité de l'ennemi fait que les destructions et les ravages prennent un caractère positif. Le roi assyrien est toujours bon et juste, l'ennemi menteur, mauvais et impur. Les historiens assyriens, serviteurs zélés du prince, répercutent cette idéologie officielle.

to their form; iconology is the study of icons or symbolism in visual representation (Panofsky, 2007: 47).

An artistic image

According to Barnett (1976: 56), the relief known as the Feast under the Vine “is one of the most famous reliefs that shows Ashurbanipal reclining on a chair” and was found was formed by a series of fragments, the most famous of which is the slab showing Ashurbanipal reclining on a couch, his queen (Ashur-sharrat) beside him seated upright on a throne in an arbour”. It was found in Room S, on the upper floor of the north palace in Nineveh, during archaeological excavations conducted between 1852 and 1932 (Curtis; Reade, 1975; Russell, 1995: 295). (Fig 1.)



Figure 1 – Ashurbanupal banqueting with his queen Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Height: 1.34 m Width: 1.53 m. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Source: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

It is a historical narrative of rare beauty, set in a garden on the royal estate, and featuring several naturalistic elements in its composition. In a garden of palm trees and pines, under a fruit-laden vine, King Ashurbanipal and his wife, Queen Libbāli-šarrat, attend a banquet whose composition is quite atypical, since the royal couple is alone, isolated by two incense burners and surrounded only by servants. The scene can be understood as the apotheosis of the glorification of Ashurbanipal’s power.

In both ancient and contemporary Eastern imagery, gardens play a fundamental role in urban planning and everyday life. In Mesopotamia, gardens emerged alongside cities and the need for communities to cope with the aridity of deserts and steppes. They developed irrigation

technology that brought life to gardens with fruit trees and ornamental trees. The tree of life mentioned in Genesis 2:8 became a symbolic image of paradise. One example is the image below, which shows a fragment of an Assyrian relief from the time of Ashurbanipal, followed by a colorized reconstruction of it (Figures 2 and 3). We can identify a garden with irrigation channels fed by an aqueduct. (Jardins d'Orient, 2016).



Figure 2 – Garden with aqueduct (fragment). Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Height: 1.32 m Width: 0.58 m. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Source:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-36

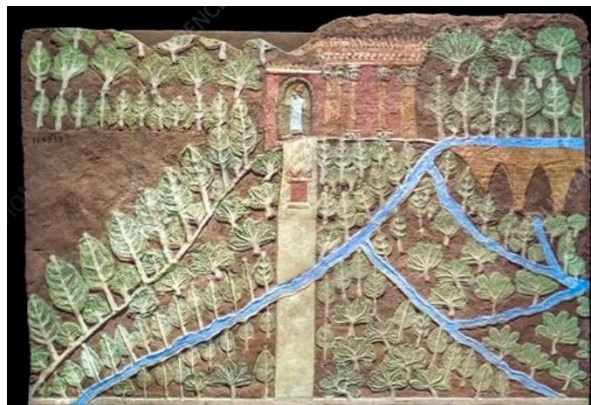


Figure 3 – Colorized reconstruction of the Garden with aqueduct relief. Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise#cite_note-2

In the royal garden, from left to right, we see the hands of a musician with a drum and a harpist among the conifers (Figure 1). On the upper left corner, on the tree branches, several birds and even a grasshopper are depicted. We see female servants wearing long tunics, headbands, jewelry,

and shoes on their feet. Two of them carry trays with food while others carry fans and hand towels, and all are walking toward where the king and queen are standing.

The central figure in the scene is the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, reclining on an elongated armchair, and before him is the Assyrian queen Libbāli-šarrat enthroned. Notably, this iconographic program is unprecedented in Mesopotamian art and, according to Nylander (1999: 82), would revisit themes present in Elamite cylinder seals. Ashurbanipal wears a tunic adorned with symbols and is covered by a cape that falls just below his waist. His right arm is raised, holding a chalice to his mouth, while his other arm rests on the furniture and his left hand holds a lotus flower, a symbol of royalty.

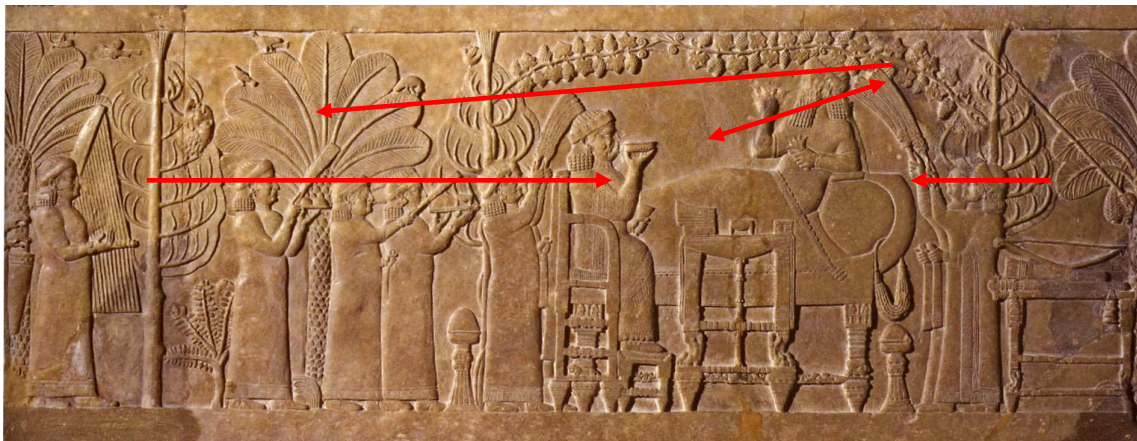


Figure 4 – The Banquet under the Vine. Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Height: 1.34 m Width: 1.53 m. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

The composition, which is a partial fragment of a larger ensemble⁴, reveals that the two main characters are on a higher level than the others and on a larger scale (Figure 4). But differences remain between them, for Ashurbanipal, despite being in the middle ground, is on a much higher level than the queen who, in turn, is on the foreground and looks up at him. We can follow the unfolding of the action through the characters' gazes: the servants and the queen turn their gaze to the king, and he, in turn, looks at the decapitated head of Teumman, the ruler of Elam. Ashurbanipal and Libbāli-šarrat are framed by two pine trees, two incense

⁴ Of the entire collection, only the drawings made and published by the archaeologists who discovered them have survived. Researchers believe that the stone pieces were lost in a shipwreck on the River Tigre while being transported to London in the 19th century (Larsen, 2001: 328).

burners on the ground, and a vine, setting them apart from the background (Pozzer, 2011: 12).



Figure 5 – The Banquet under the Vine. Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Height: 1.34 m Width: 1.53 m. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

The repetition of female figures, forming a veritable procession of servants, helps to infuse the composition with rhythm. We observe many vertical elements—a rectangle and a triangle—which also contribute to highlighting the royal couple (Figure 5). Following the norm of Mesopotamian art, human figures display strong laterality. The birds on the treetops lend a certain lightness and movement to the scene, creating an illusion of birdsong.



Fig. 6 – The Banquet under the Vine. Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Source: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

The king has a long, thick beard and wears a crown decorated with concentric circles, while his curly hair falls to his shoulders—a representation of the male gender which emphasizes the king's maturity and sexual vigor. He also wears earrings and bracelets on his wrists. His

garment is adorned with star shapes, similar to one of the representations of the sun god, Šamaš (Black; Green, 1998: 182).

Queen Libbāli-šarrat wears a dress that ends in fringes, richly embroidered with small circle motifs. She wears earrings, bracelets, and a crown shaped like a wall, decorated with towers and battlements, over her wavy hair that falls to her shoulders. Her feet are shod and rest on a stool. Both the king and queen do not touch the ground with their feet, indicating their superior social status. With her right hand, the queen raises a cup to her mouth, while holding a bouquet of flowers in her left hand. The royal couple's clothing and accessories indicate their extremely high social status and help to identify the characters.

The furniture depicted in the relief is highly sophisticated, decorated with lion⁵ figures and ivory plaques carved with female portraits. The legs of the furniture are tapered and decorated with floral scrolls. The chair on which the king is reclining, supported by a large cushion, has a rounded backrest, from which hangs an Egyptian breastplate, alluding to the conquest of Egypt in 667 and 663 BCE. Meanwhile, the queen sits on a beautifully carved throne (Benoit, 2011: 403; Reade, 2006: 88).



Figure 7 – The Banquet under the Vine. Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Source:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

Before the two guests is a table covered with a tablecloth, whose legs end in the shape of lion paws (Figure 7). On the table is a stack of napkins, a tripod vase, and a small box decorated with the figure of two *lamassu*.⁶ In

⁵ The lion is an animal that symbolizes royalty and strength (Black; Green, 1998: 118).

⁶ The Mesopotamians believed that this anthropomorphic deity possessed apotropaic power. These winged androcephalic bulls, wearing a tiara with horns—an attribute of divinity—were commonly represented in monumental architecture (Black; George; Postgate, 2000).

the right corner of the relief we see a small table on which Ashurbanipal's weapons are laid: his bow, quiver, and sheathed sword, suggesting a moment of rest and relaxation, far from the battlefield.



Figure 8 – The Banquet under the Vine. Alabaster. Iraq, Kouyunjik (Nineveh) – British Museum, London. Reign of Ashurbanipal (668-631 BCE). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Source: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/237000001>

But the most intriguing element of this scene is Teumman's head, the king of Elam, hanging from a tree (Figure 8). Both historical records and the reliefs located on the walls of Room XXXIII of Sennacherib's southwest palace report that Teumman, who was at war with Assyria, was beheaded in the middle of the battle of Til-Tuba in 653 BCE, and his head was carried on a triumphal war chariot to the city of Arbela in northern Assyria. It was then sent to the palace in Nineveh to compose the decoration for the banquet celebrating the Assyrian victory. We can therefore interpret this relief as a banquet commemorating a battle that ended with the capture and death of the Elamite king, with the head symbolizing proof of victory throughout the narrative as it is the body part that confers one's identity (Curtis; Reade, 1995: 74; Watanabe, 2008: 325).

Iconoclastic intervention

We also note that part of the relief has been damaged: the faces and hands of the king and his consort have been hammered away. This iconoclastic action was carried out some forty years after its construction. Researchers believe that it was undertaken by the Elamites (the enemies defeated in the relief narrative) when the coalition composed of the Median, Elamite, and Babylonian armies conquered Nineveh in 612 BCE, bringing an end to the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Alvarez-Mon, 2009:134).

Bodily mutilation was a practice attested in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, both in iconography and texts. The identity of the dead enemy and the social group to which he belongs is highlighted (Minunno, 2008: 249). Among the possible mutilations, decapitation is the preferred method because “the head is the expression of personality,” unique and individual; when it is exposed, no one can doubt that death has occurred. Cutting off hands is another type of mutilation widely used, especially in Egypt. Hands are also a mark of personality, and cutting them off is a symbolic act of great strength. Mutilation thus becomes a political propaganda tool. Enemy beheading was an indispensable element in Assyrian warfare. After the battle, they were displayed as trophies and bore witness to the prestige and quality of the victorious army. The accumulation of heads was a means of displaying military power, and it was rare for a head to be named. In the Neo-Assyrian period, the symbolic connection between the head as a human trophy and the image of power was most evident in Ashurbanipal’s reign (Bonatz, 2005: 96).

To understand this iconoclasm, we need to reflect on the nature of images in ancient Eastern art. We must consider that art in the ancient Near East is multiple and diverse, like the peoples who lived there. Different historical periods and regions each had their own characteristics and development, conditioned by the environment, raw materials, and external influences, due especially to long-distance trade and wars of conquest. Generally, representation systems were not naturalistic, but rather idealized according to stylistic conventions with attributes that conveyed specific meanings and transmitted particular messages to the observer (Bordreuil; Briquel-Chatonnet; Michel, 2008: 42).

The idea of visual representation in Mesopotamia was a fundamental issue in the history of art in the ancient Near East. They believed in the power of signifiers and their status as an integral part of reality. This point is closely related to the written word; the cuneiform writing is defined as symbolic because the signifier (material support) is interpreted as capable of carrying a direct meaning (mental image). Each sign, having a pictographic and phonetic value, has the potential to evoke other referents (objects) that it contains (Bahrani, 2008).

Conclusion

In ancient Mesopotamia, images were not natural replicas, but rather an agreed-upon code subject to cultural mediation, an idealized representation of reality. Thus the notion of *mimesis*, of representation as a

means of imitating real things in the world, is not sufficient to understand the art of the ancient East. We started from the idea that the image was not considered similar to an original reality presented elsewhere (a meaning for the word representation), but rather reality itself. The mutilation of the depicted faces and hands of Ashurbanipal and Libbāli-šarrat should be understood as an attempt to erase the memory of this historical event by destroying the gestures of celebration, and as the express desire to consign these figures to historical oblivion, a terrible punishment for the Mesopotamians considered worse than death.

“Enki and the world order” is a Sumerian myth that lists the main attributes of civilization, among which is the art of war and that of holding banquets (Bottéro; Kramer, 1993). Thus, the relief analyzed here comprises these two important elements of Mesopotamian imagery. We can understand these artistic-historical narratives as political, social, economic, and religious propaganda with a strong ideological slant, which aimed to legitimize the power of rulers before their subjects. But they could also be the object of admiration by royalty themselves, in an attempt to perpetuate their image and, thus, their power (Marcus, 2000).

These monumental reliefs were displayed on the interior walls of palaces and, therefore, their viewing was restricted to the king’s guests and foreign diplomatic delegations. The Assyrian kings built palaces to serve as administrative centers but also as propaganda tools, decorated in such a way as to impress upon visitors the overwhelming power of Assyria. This decoration essentially served to exalt the king’s person and evoke his great deeds for his contemporaries and for history.

As a powerful means of communication, the images presented a mythologized historical narrative while evoking reality and thus preserving the historical memory of the Assyrian royalty.

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