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The White Obelisk and the Problem of Historical Narrative in the Art of Assyria

Holly Pittman

The limestone slabs carved with reliefs that lined the walls of the Assyrian royal palaces are among the most admired works of ancient Near Eastern art. These often beautifully preserved sculptures, bearing scenes of royal conquest, accomplishment, ritual, and hunting, have been renowned since the mid-nineteenth century, when they were first uncovered and displayed before a European public hungry for exotica. The reliefs immediately fascinated scholars and laity alike because they confirmed—through words and pictures—stories from the foundational myths of Judeo-Christian culture.

Not until almost a century after their discovery did these reliefs begin to be integrated into an art-historical discourse.¹ Numerous studies have shown that the two-hundred-and-fifty year development of pictorial narrative preserved in the reliefs holds a pivotal place in the study of Assyrian art.² Despite serious gaps, a skeletal sequence exists for the visual programs of the Neo-Assyrian kings from Aššurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) until Assurbanipal (668–627 B.C.), just before the fall of the Assyrian empire at the end of the seventh century.³ Illustrations of narrative themes embedded in iconic series of apotropaic genii, sacred trees, and hieratic representations of the king confronting the numinous are typical of palace decoration in the ninth century. By the eighth-century reign of Sargon II (721–705 B.C.) the narrative component of the architectural program received greater emphasis. At the height of the Assyrian imperial reach, during the reigns of Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.) and Assurbanipal, entire rooms were lined, often in single compositions, with ever more lively, complex narrative representations of an increasing range of subjects glorifying the king and the empire.⁴

The beginning of this long tradition of wall reliefs is problematic owing to the lack of evidence. The earliest carved stone orthostats in Assyria date to the reign of Aššurnasirpal II, who used them perhaps at Nineveh and certainly in his palace at Nimrud. Because the program at

Nimrud is iconographically and compositionally complex, however, it is unlikely that this was the first attempt by court artists working under the Assyrian rulers to construct such a program. At issue in understanding the development of visual historical narrative in ancient Assyria is whether the earlier stages were native to Assyria as an integral part of the formative stages of the imperial strategy or whether the Assyrians appropriated it from foreign models.

Within the larger context of the relationship between visual and verbal expression in Assyrian art, this study examines specific examples of visual evidence for the early development of historical narrative. In particular, I present here a new interpretation of a single, much debated monument, the White Obelisk (Fig. 1), which has stood in the Assyrian galleries of the British Museum since shortly after its discovery in the middle of the last century. I believe that the White Obelisk carries on its sides a reduced copy of a narrative program that originally lined the walls of a long, narrow room, arguably the throne room of a palace in the Assyrian capital at Nineveh. Although the date of the Obelisk still cannot be exactly determined, there is no question that the original architectural program that it reproduces was earlier, probably dating from between the reigns of Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884 B.C.) and Aššur-bel-kala (1074–1057 B.C.) or Tiglath-pileser I (1115–1077 B.C.). Accordingly, the White Obelisk becomes a critical piece of evidence for the reconstruction of the early stages of Assyrian historical narrative. Furthermore, I argue that the complex compositional and narrative form of Aššurnasirpal II's program, evident in his Nimrud Throne Room, must have drawn directly upon lost Assyrian predecessors, one of which is indirectly preserved in the White Obelisk.

The White Obelisk

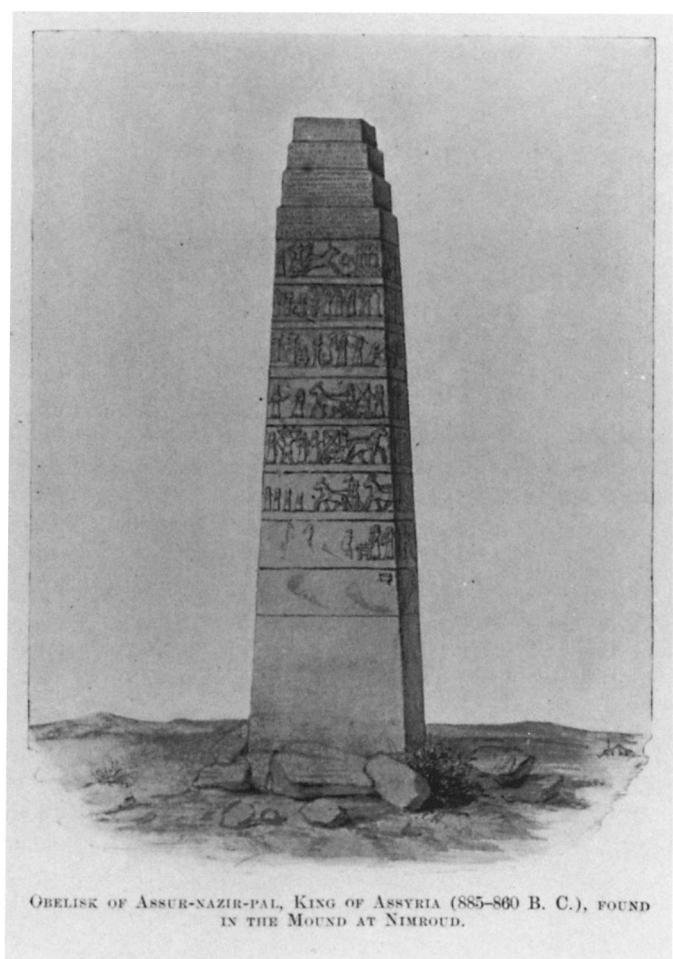
The White Obelisk was found in 1853 in the mounded ruins of ancient Nineveh, the oldest and one of the most important of the great centers at the heart of the Assyrian empire (Fig.

I have presented versions of this study at the Johns Hopkins University, the University of Toronto, and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, as well as at the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Heidelberg, 1992. A summary appears as "Unwinding the White Obelisk," in H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptman, eds. *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten*, Heidelberg, in press. This paper has benefited from substantive and editorial comments of Judith Berman, Jerrold Cooper, Richard Ellis, Donald P. Hansen, Gary Hatfield, Linda Jacobs, Mogens Trolle Larsen, Edith Porada, and Julian Reade. I am particularly grateful to Richard Brilliant for his editorial persistence.

1. Immediately after their discovery, the arts of Assyria were reproduced in monumental surveys of world art; see, e.g., G. Perrot and C. Chipiez, *Histoire de l'art*, Paris, 1884. The first art-historical studies came well after World War II: H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954, Pelican History of Art), 4th ed. rev., New Haven, 1970, 131–99; and A. Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia: The Classical Art of the Near East*, London, 1969, 104–57.

2. There is a considerable bibliography on Assyrian relief sculptures. For a

compelling introduction, see H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement*, London, 1951. For their place in the development of visual historical narrative, see H. G. Güterbock, "Narration in Anatolian, Syrian and Assyrian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology*, LXI, 1957, 62–71. The Assyrian reliefs have been comprehensively studied by J. Reade: for his articles in *Baghdader Mitteilungen* see: "Assyrian Architectural Decoration: Techniques and Subject Matter," x, 1979a, 17–49; "Narrative Composition in Assyrian Sculpture," x, 1979b, 52–110; "The Architectural Context of Assyrian Sculpture," xi, 1980a, 75–87; and "Space, Scale and Significance in Assyrian Art," xi, 1980b, 71–74. See also J. Reade, "Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," in *Power and Propaganda*, ed. M. T. Larsen, Copenhagen, 1979c, 329–43; and idem, "Neo-Assyrian Monuments in their Historical Context," in F. M. Fales, ed., *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological and Historical Analysis*, Rome, 1981, 143–67. The most recent consideration of Assyrian narrative relief art pertinent to this discussion is I. J. Winter, "Art as Evidence for Interaction: Relations between the Assyrian Empire and North Syria," in *Mesopotamien und Seine Nachbarn*,



1 The White Obelisk (from H. Rassam, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod*, Cincinnati, 1897, opp. p. 10)



2 Map of Assyria

The Obelisk, an imposing yet essentially human-scale monument typical of early Neo-Assyrian sculpture (Figs. 3–6), a tapering rectangular pillar some 9 feet 6 inches (2.9 m) in height carved from white limestone.⁷ The stepped top, inscribed with a cuneiform text, evokes the shape of a ziggurat, the staged temple tower that from the mid-third millennium was the primary religious structure of Mesopotamia. The shaft is carved with scenes in low relief in eight horizontal registers (Figs. 7, 8). The bottom 12 inches (30 cm), undecorated and roughly finished, was originally mounted in a socle or pedestal.

The White Obelisk has had a strange history in the scholarship of Assyria. In studies of Assyrian art it has either been ignored or described as a crude work with sketchy representations arranged in an incomprehensible composition, the product of an incompetent craftsman. The inscription, on the other hand, has been frequently discussed, always in regard to the critical problem of its date. After initial publication of the monument in 1883,⁸ the definitive study of it by Eckhard Unger appeared in 1932.⁹ Julian Reade offered the last comprehensive treatment of the Obelisk in 1975,¹⁰ when he presented all the arguments—textual, historical, and visual—and evaluated them in reference to dating. In his conclusion, Reade used the cumulative force of both textual and visual evidence to argue that the White Obelisk must date to before the ninth-century reign of Aššurnasirpal II. Reade's article serves as the starting point for this discussion.

2). The details of its archaeological context are vague; the excavator, Hormuzd Rassam, reports that when digging in the outer court of the palace of Sennacherib and the Ishtar Temple “after we had penetrated about fifteen feet downwards, we discovered, lying flat in the trench, a perfect Obelisk made of white calcarious stone.”⁵ Its original position is unknown. Although certainly worn by the ravages of time, the White Obelisk is complete, having never suffered deliberate damage, the fate of many other victory monuments of ancient Near Eastern rulers, once their domination was overthrown from without or within.⁶

Proceedings for the 25th *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Berlin, 1978), ed. H. J. Nissen and J. Renger, Berlin, 1982, 355–82; eadem, “Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs,” *Studies in Visual Communication*, vii, 1981, 1–38; and eadem, “The Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II,” in P. O. Harper and H. Pitman, eds., *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson*, New York, 1983, 1–31.

3. The dating followed in this article is that given by J. A. Brinkman as an appendix in A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (1964), rev. ed. E. Reiner, Chicago, 1977, 335–48.

4. For the most recent comprehensive sources, see, on Aššurnasirpal II, S. M. Paley and R. P. Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction of the Relief Representations and Their Positions in the Northwest-Palace at Kalhu (Nimrud) II*, Mainz, 1987; on Sargon II, P. Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon, King of Assyria*, Paris, 1986; on Sennacherib, J. M. Russell, *Sennacherib's 'Palace without Rival' at Nineveh*, Chicago, 1991; and on Assurbanipal, R. D. Barnett, *Sculptures from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (668–627 B.C.)*, London, 1976.

5. H. Rassam, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod*, Cincinnati, 1897, 8–9, plan opp. p. 8, pl. opp. p. 10. See also Reade, 1981 (as in n. 2), 143.

6. Virtually all such monuments carry curses warning against violation; on this subject, see C. Nylander, “Who Mutilated Sargon's Head?” in *Death in Mesopotamia*, ed. B. Alster, Copenhagen, 1980, 271–72.

7. It is often compared with a basalt monument called the Black Obelisk found by Layard at Nimrud and inscribed to the reign of Shalmaneser III (858–823 B.C.), which is also in the British Museum; W. Orthmann, ed., *Der Alte Orient*, Propylean Kunstgeschichte xiv, Berlin, 1975, pls. 207–9.

8. T. G. Pinches, *Guide to the Kuyunjik Gallery* [British Museum], London, 1883, 112–21.

9. E. A. O. Unger, *Der Obelisk des Königs Assurnasirpal I aus Ninive*, Mitteilungen der Altorientalischen Gesellschaft vi, nos. 1–2, Leipzig, 1932. Unger (9) was the first to give letter designations to each side.

10. J. E. Reade, “Aššurnasirpal I and the White Obelisk,” *Iraq*, xxxvii, 1975, 129–50.



3 White Obelisk, side D.
London, British Museum
(photo: British Museum)



4 White Obelisk, side A (photo: British
Museum)



5 White Obelisk, side B
(photo: British Museum)



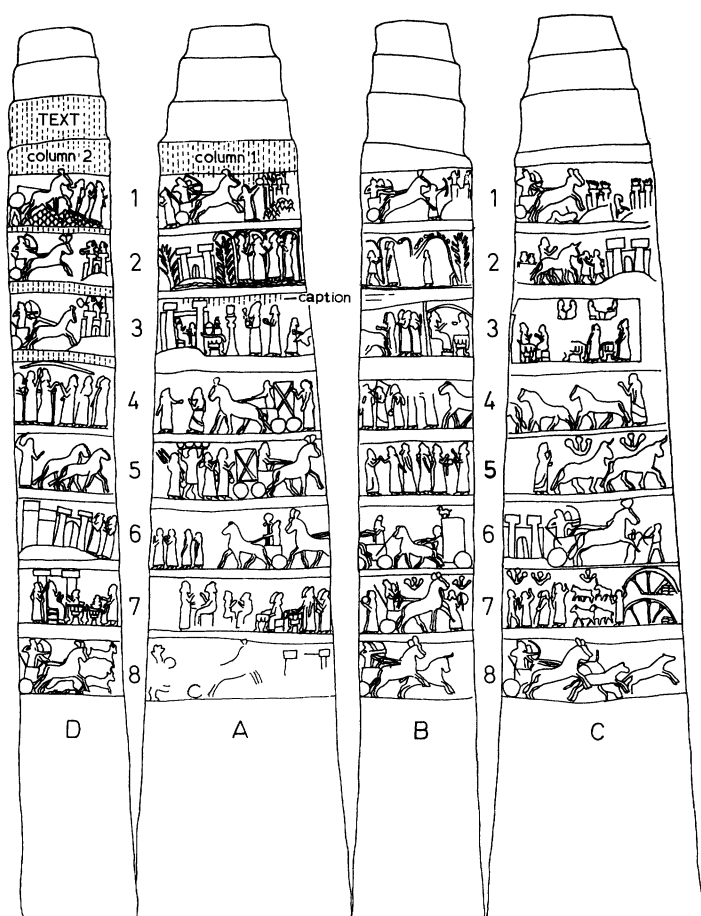
6 White Obelisk, side C (photo: British Museum)



7 White Obelisk, frames 2A, 3A (photo: British Museum)



8 White Obelisk, frames 6B, 7B, 8B (photo: British Museum)



9 The four faces of the White Obelisk (from J. Reade, "Aššurnasirpal I and the White Obelisk," *Iraq*, xxxvii, 1975, fig. 1)

The Inscription

The White Obelisk's inscription both adds to and complicates our understanding of the monument, because textual analysis leads to conclusions that contradict those reached through examination of the visual imagery. Assyriological studies give greater weight to the word and thus conclusions reached through nonverbal evidence are rarely given priority, nor are images used as a guide in the interpretation of text. While the emphasis here, therefore, is squarely on the imagery, the short but problematic inscription cannot go unremarked.

The text is incomplete, perhaps even unfinished, and is somewhat eroded, although there are no traces of deliberate erasure.¹¹ Sides A and D carry multiple lines of text; on side B are unreadable traces of signs as well as rulings for an inscription that was never carved.¹² The inscription has been read beginning with side A, although its starting point is uncertain. The translation by Edmond Sollberger reads:¹³

[In the first year of my reign when] I sat in glory [on the throne], I moved my chariotry and numerous troops; I conquered inaccessible forts all round. I received contributions in horses from the land of Gilzanu; . . . , I es[tabli]shed as regular dues.

[Because] they did not (continue to) s[en]d the horses hither, I be[came angry and] marched against the city of Harira (and) the city of Halhalauš, (cities) of [cri]minal [lo]rds.

These(!) I conquered in the eponymy of Aššurnasirpal: I

took out their goods, their captives, their possessions, their herds, (and) carried them to Assur, my city; their great . . . city, together with its population, I presented to Aššur, my god, my master.

The inscription on side D covers the last step and continues down the side fitted between the figural bands of the first three registers. Side D is translated:

[.] of [.] I reached. The lords [.] whom [I had pursued] into the land of Šupria, trusted [great]ly in [their] massed troops and [.] [.] they occupied.

At the command of Aššur, [the Great Mountain,] the great lord, my master, I moved the chariotry [(and) . . .] of my army: I conquered the city. [(The enemy) abandoned the city, [.] the horses, oxen, [.] ; he made (his) chariotry take up positions.

[I reacted] fiercely: I raised a torch, crossed [quickly] on foot into the Kašari range (and) marched against those cities. [.] During the night I invested their cities [and . . .] by sunrise I fought against numerous chariots and troops (and) made them suffer heavy losses.

I conquered the city of Amlattu, the city of Šaburam, the city of Ruzidak, the city of Bugu, the city of Ustu, rebel cities of the land of Dannuna, set them on fire, <took out> their captives, their possessions, their riches . . .

On side A a three-line caption refers to the scene carved on

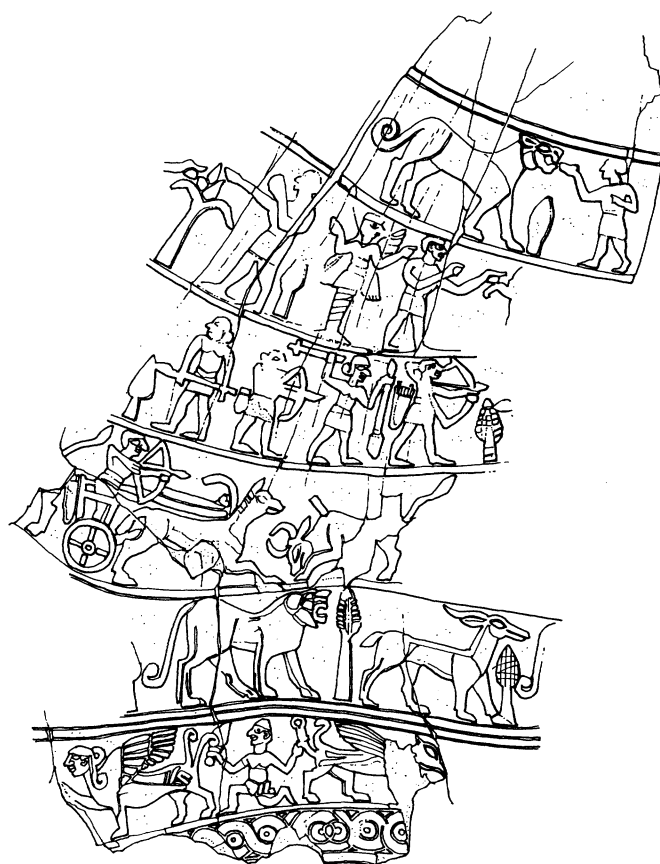
the third register from the top: "The *Bit-nathi* of the city of Nineveh: I performed the wine (libation) and sacrifice of the temple of the august goddess."

Written in the Assyrian dialect of the Akkadian language, the cuneiform inscription describes in the first person the royal victories over cities that had rebelled by withholding their "regular dues," but the king's name is not given. The prevailing Assyriological opinion argues that the weight of accumulated coincidences identifies the king as Aššurnasirpal II;¹⁴ the minority holds that the style of the inscription, the broader historical context, and the nature of the imagery suggest that the monument was commissioned by an earlier ruler, perhaps the obscure king Aššurnasirpal I.¹⁵ Reade first tried to reconcile the two positions by proposing that the inscription was added by Aššurnasirpal II.¹⁶ In his 1975 study, Reade abandoned this idea, and argued that anomalies in the inscription and the evidence of the images support the view that they were contemporary. Except as a mark of usurpation, the practice of reinscribing monuments has scant tradition in the ancient Near East and is in fact strongly discouraged by curses inscribed on such monuments. Most recently, Wolfram von Soden has argued from philological details that the inscription must be earlier than Aššurnasirpal II; he suggests the reign of Tiglath-pileser II (966–935 B.C.).¹⁷

All but one Assyriologist has thought that the text on side A precedes that on side D. Reade has argued that it makes some sense to consider side D before side A.¹⁸ Although the sequence of the scenes cannot confirm Reade's argument beyond question, side D, in my reading, appears consistently to be the initial or terminal face.

The Imagery of the Obelisk

One approaches the White Obelisk with the expectation that its imagery is to be read one vertical face at a time (Fig. 9). Once the scenes are understood, however, it is clear that no visual theme links the stacked registers vertically; rather, the viewer reads continuous scenes horizontally register by register, wrapping around the four faces of the obelisk. The content of the scenes (summarized here in the appendix) echoes the inscription. The king is shown subduing rebellious cities, securing booty, receiving praise from his countrymen, and giving thanks to the goddess Ishtar in her temple at Nineveh. The choice of horizontal organization, fundamental to comprehending the monument, is remarkable because it is not particularly effective. In fact, the White Obelisk is the



10 Drawing of the images carved around a tusk of elephant ivory from Emar (from J. Margueron, "Une Corne sculptée à Emar," in M. Kelly-Buccellati et al., eds., *Insight through Images*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica XXI, Malibu, 1986, fig. 1)

only Mesopotamian monument of its size that is so organized.¹⁹ Horizontal registration in the round is usually reserved for small-scale objects that can be turned in the hand, as clearly exemplified by the approximately contemporary ivory wand from Emar (Fig. 10).²⁰

Of several attempts to read the imagery of the Obelisk, Unger's scheme is the most frequently cited: the registers are seen as a strip cartoon following a boustrophedon order in which alternate lines are read in opposite directions (Fig. 11).²¹ When the images are laid out in this way, the boustrophedon arrangement seems plausible, despite minor inconsistencies. In any attempt to apply this method to the actual monument, however, one is forced to go part way around it, stop, go back, alternating the direction of reading with every

11. The best photographs of the inscription are in E. Sollberger, "The White Obelisk," *Iraq*, xxxvi, 1974, 231–38, pl. 41.

12. Reade (as in n. 10), 135, suggests that these lines might have been initially planned for the inscription that was carved on side D.

13. Sollberger (as in n. 11), 235–38. Conventional Assyriological editorial markings are reproduced from Sollberger's translation: square brackets mean restorations; three dots mean the omission of a few signs or words; six dots mean the omission of a number of words or phrases; italics mean uncertain translation or words in original language; parentheses mean words supplied for sense but not actually in the original.

14. It was the renowned Assyriologist Benno Landsberger, arguing against Unger, who established the philological and epigraphic reasoning for a date in the reign of Aššurnasirpal II; B. Landsberger, *Sam'al I Studien zur Entdeckung der Ruinenstätte Karatepe*, Ankara, 1948, 57–58, n. 144. See Reade (as in n. 10), 129 and passim, for the full bibliography.

15. Unger (as in n. 9), 16–17, passim.

16. J. E. Reade, "The Neo-Assyrian Court and Army: Evidence from the Sculptures," *Iraq*, xxxiv, 1972, 87–112, esp. 88.

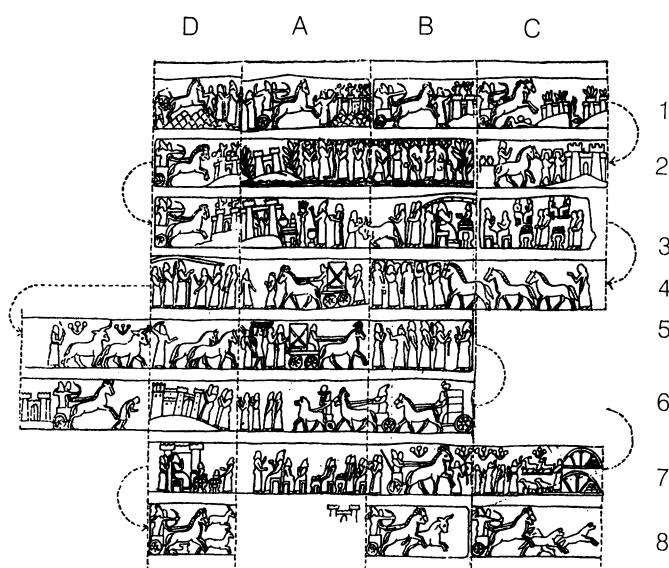
17. W. von Soden, "Zur Datierung des 'Weissen Obeliskens,'" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, LXIV, 1974–1975, 180–91.

18. Reade (as in n. 10), 134–38.

19. Even in a monument like Trajan's Column the helical (rather than registered) presentation of the imagery allows the viewer to understand that the eye is meant to follow the spiral. See R. Brilliant, "The Column of Trajan and Its Heirs: Helical Tales, Ambiguous Trails," in *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1984, 90–123.

20. See J. C. Margueron, "Une Corne sculptée à Emar," in *Insight through Images*, ed. M. Kelly-Buccellati et al., Bibliotheca Mesopotamica XXI, Malibu, 1986, 153–58, fig. 1.

21. Unger (as in n. 9), 55. Unger made two adjustments to this scheme to accommodate the sense of individual scenes.

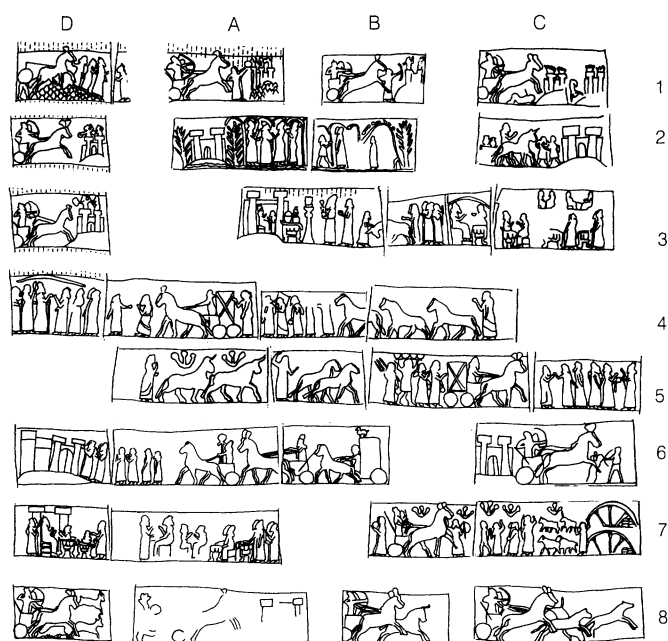


11 Boustrophedon reading of the White Obelisk (from E. A. O. Unger, *Der Obelisk des Königs Assurnasirpal I. aus Nineve*, Leipzig, 1932, fig. x)

register. Visual comprehension of the whole, therefore, becomes extremely problematic.

Rainer-Michael Boehmer and recently Jutta Börker-Klähn have offered alternatives to the boustrophedon hypothesis.²² Both divide the representations into scenes of varying lengths and read them in sequential order from top to bottom. Reade, on the other hand, does not propose a connected reading. He observes a general organizational structure reflected in the top and bottom registers, in which the king is depicted as warrior and hunter; further, he observes that the middle two registers are devoted entirely to the bringing of booty or tribute. In his final evaluation, he asserts that because the logic of the images cannot be discerned, "the arrangement of the subject matter gives an impression of experiment or confusion."²³

In order to grasp the underlying organizational scheme, I have developed a reading that gives priority to the overall compositional structure of the imagery rather than to the apparent narrative flow between episodes (Fig. 12). The smallest compositional unit consists of one rectangular frame or field, extending the width of a single side of the obelisk. Beginning at the top, there is a gradual and regular increase and decrease in the number of fields used to construct a single visually and thematically coherent scene. In the top and bottom registers, in which the king rides in a chariot as warrior and as hunter, each frame contains a single complete episodic event. Scenes of worship, meeting, ritual, and



12 White Obelisk imagery by scene (arranged by author)

festival follow, deployed across two frames in registers two and seven. In registers three and six, related subjects occupy three frames. Finally, in the two registers (four and five) in the middle of the monument, the king receives processions of men with tribute and vehicles. A single narrative scene wraps around the entire Obelisk, encompassing all four rectangular frames.

This pattern reveals that the length of single narrative scenes is neither fixed nor random but is determined by a larger compositional scheme that links them all together. Understanding the compositional logic helps to explain a puzzling visual device: the splitting across two frames of single, thematically important images. For example, the body of the bull brought to sacrifice in register three is divided between frames A and B (Fig. 7, bottom) and in register six, the bodies of the horses that draw the king's wagon are treated in the same manner (Fig. 8, top). This odd solution has been used as proof of the monument's "lack of planning." However, in light of the compositional scheme this remarkable feature provides an important clue for the relationship of the imagery to the monument. Some narrative units, made up of single or multiple episodes, do not correspond to the structure of the four-sided obelisk. This fact makes it clear that the narrative images were not initially conceived for that format. Further, the solution of "wrapping" scenes suggests that these were originally arranged in

22. R. M. Boehmer, "Zum 'Weissen Obeliken' Assurnasirpals I.," *Berliner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*, viii, 1968, 207–9; and J. Börker-Klähn, *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und Vergleichbare Felsreliefs*, Baghdader Forschungen iv, Mainz, 1982, 60–65, 179–80.

23. Reade, 1981 (as in n. 2), 148. This view is reiterated in even stronger terms by Börker-Klähn (as in n. 22), 60–65.

24. It can profitably be compared to narrative programs of other periods as well. One example brought to my attention is the Bayeux Tapestry, which was originally draped around an 11th-century baronial hall in Normandy. See R.

Brilliant, "The Bayeux Tapestry: A Stripped Narrative for Their Eyes and Ears," *Word and Image*, vii, no. 2, 1991, 98–126.

25. See A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil-worshippers . . .*, 2 vols., New York, 1849; and idem, *Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, with Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the Desert*, London, 1853.

26. See Frankfort (as in n. 1), 156 nn. 16, 17; M. E. L. Mallowan, "Carchemish: Reflections on the Chronology of the Sculpture," *Anatolian Studies*, xxii, 1972, 63–85, esp. 66–67; and R. S. Ellis, "Some Observations on

a continuous linear series. Because the linear narrative unit was entirely independent of the obelisk shape, its unmodified imposition on the physical structure of the rectangular monument prevents easy comprehension of its visual text. This relationship between image and ground is directly analogous to that of most cuneiform texts, which are usually inscribed on monuments without regard for their physical structure or the images they carry. What is more important here is that inscriptions are applied in various formats without damage to the integrity of the text. The same principle applies to the integrity of the visual narrative on the White Obelisk.

Since the imagery was not conceived for an obelisk, it must be freed from its physical constraint in order to comprehend the original composition. When this is done, the balanced linear arrangement of images following from one register to another, beginning at the top with side D, becomes clear (Fig. 13). From the top to the middle of the monument coherent narrative scenes gradually increase in length. The lower half of the monument follows the same structure, only in reverse. The first episode in register five is the procession bringing tribute, extended over four frames. In the following registers, the narrative episodes decrease in length from three (register six) to two (register seven) to one frame (register eight). Although the upper and lower halves treat subjects that differ in narrative detail, they are predominantly distinguished by a change in the direction of movement. This directional opposition, and the fact that both the bottom and the top halves of the program are organized according to the same principles, indicate that the top and bottom halves of the monument are essentially mirror reflections of each other in terms of both structure and subject matter.

These relationships strongly suggest that, in terms of overall structure, the top and bottom halves of the Obelisk were, indeed, *meant to be understood* as counterparts to one another. That is, the imagery of the bottom half of the monument was originally conceived as running parallel to, and opposing, the images on the top half of the monument. This understanding allows us to read and comprehend the images on the White Obelisk. They are a version of an arrangement that would originally have been deployed along the opposing long walls of a rectangular room (Fig. 14). Given the historical context of this monument, such a long, narrow room lined with scenes of campaigns and ceremonies immediately brings to mind the Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II, partially preserved in Room B of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud (Fig. 15).

This interpretation of the imagery of the White Obelisk

locates the monument in the larger context of Assyrian art. As the record of a lost architectural program, it can be compared formally both with the Nimrud Throne Room and other programs of the ninth century.²⁴ The monument can also be used to illuminate the poorly known visual traditions of the late Middle Assyrian period. And finally, the architectural source of the program must be taken into account when the Obelisk is considered as a monument in terms of its reading, function, audience, and relationship to other monuments of its type.

Comparison to the Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II

Only a few years after A. H. Layard uncovered Aššurnasirpal II's palace at Nimrud,²⁵ Rassam found the White Obelisk. The monuments were immediately associated because they shared both imagery and the name "Aššurnasirpal." All agree that the Obelisk is the earlier of the two, but not by how much. The range of opinion of art historians and archaeologists reflects that of Assyriologists. The minority, dating the monument early in the reign of Aššurnasirpal II, resort to the notion, first expressed by M. E. L. Mallowan, that it was carved by an "old-fashioned" craftsman.²⁶ As Reade points out, the argument for the "old-fashioned" sculptor cannot, in and of itself, be refuted. However, such a situation seems inconsistent with the innovative thinking about imagery during the reign of Aššurnasirpal II. Further, there is no evidence that intentional archaizing was ever part of Aššurnasirpal's visual strategy.

Most art historians and archaeologists think that the Obelisk must be earlier than the ninth century. Those who have expressed an opinion agree that there are simply too many anachronistic details to be accounted for by the "old-fashioned sculptor" argument.²⁷ The monument is usually placed in the reign of Aššurnasirpal I (1046–1033 B.C.) because of the eponymous name date of Aššurnasirpal in the inscription.²⁸ A comparison of the Obelisk's programmatic composition, fundamental to grasping its logic, reveals profound differences in design, as well as iconography, from ninth-century monuments, and suggests an earlier date for it, opening the possibility that it records an earlier model for the later monuments. There are two types of comparable monuments of Aššurnasirpal II date. Most pertinent are the narrative scenes of the Nimrud Throne Room; there are also the bronze relief bands (Fig. 17) found at Imgur Enlil, modern Balawat,²⁹ and the fragmentary obelisk found at Nimrud, by Rassam, not long after he found the White Obelisk (Fig. 18).³⁰ Both the bronze bands and the Rassam Obelisk share with the White Obelisk the small scale of their imagery, a feature not directly comparable in the Throne Room reliefs.

Mesopotamian Art and Archaeology," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, xcv, 1975, 81–94, esp. 90–92. Winter, 1979 (as in n. 2), 378, n. 69, states a preference for the late date.

27. See Reade (as in n. 10), 144–48, for a summary of the art-historical arguments.

28. Ibid., 134–38. For Assyrian conventions of dating by *limmu* name date, see H. Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, xii, 1958, 22–100.

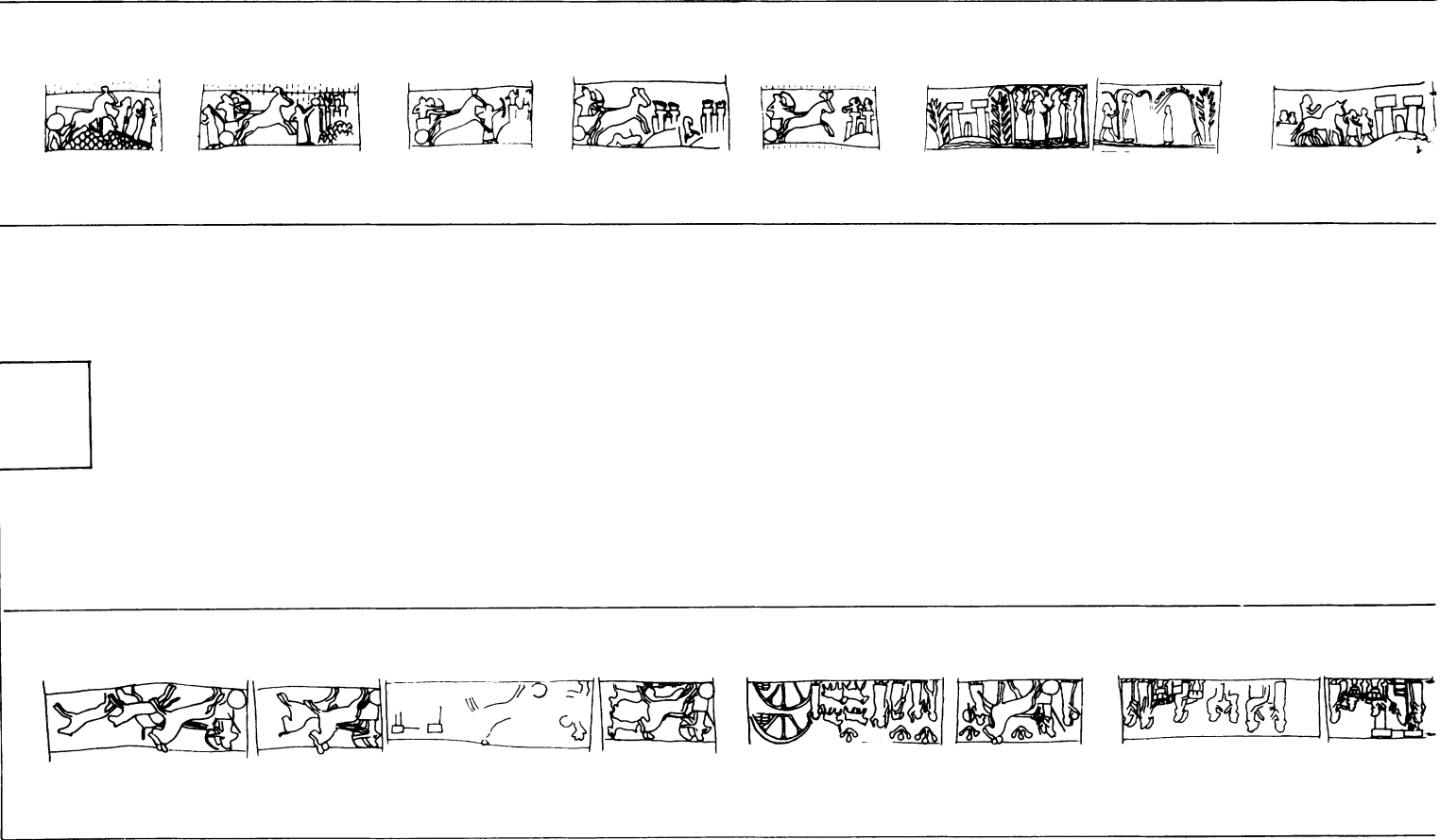
29. Balawat is a small site some fifteen miles southeast of Nineveh that was

a royal residence one day's travel from the capital; both the Temple of Dreams and the small palaces had decorated gates. See L. W. King, *Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, B.C. 860–825*, London, 1915; R. D. Barnett, "More Balawat Gates: A Preliminary Report," in *Symbolae Biblicae et Mesopotamicae Francisco Mario Theodoro de Liagre Bohil Dedicatae*, ed. M. A. Beek et al., Leiden, 1973, 19–22; and J. Oates, "Balawat: Recent Excavations and a New Gate," in Harper and Pittman, eds. (as in n. 2), 40–47.

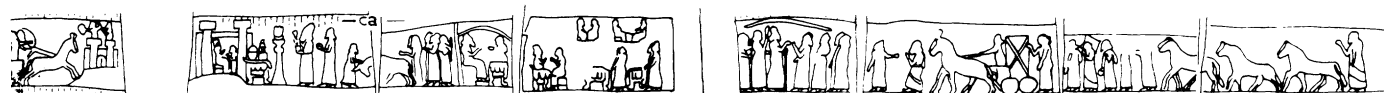
30. See J. E. Reade, "The Rassam Obelisk," *Iraq*, xlii, 1980, 1–22.

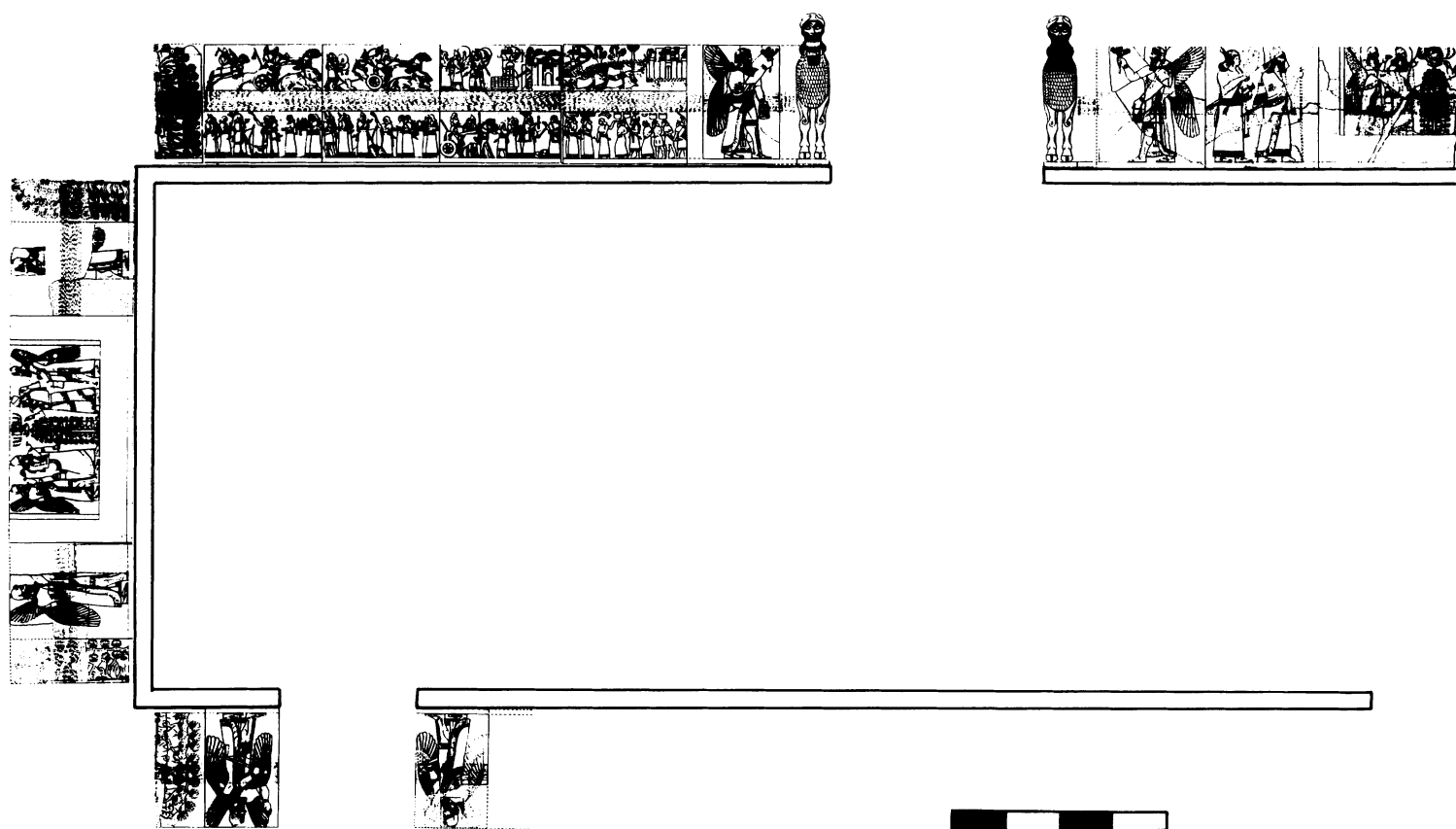


13 White Obelisk imagery in linear format (arranged by author)



14 White Obelisk imagery deployed in a hypothetical arrangement along the two long walls of an Assyrian throne room (arranged by author)





15 Plan showing the location of reliefs in the Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II, Northwest Palace, Nimrud (after I. Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication*, VII, 1981, 1–38, fig. 2).



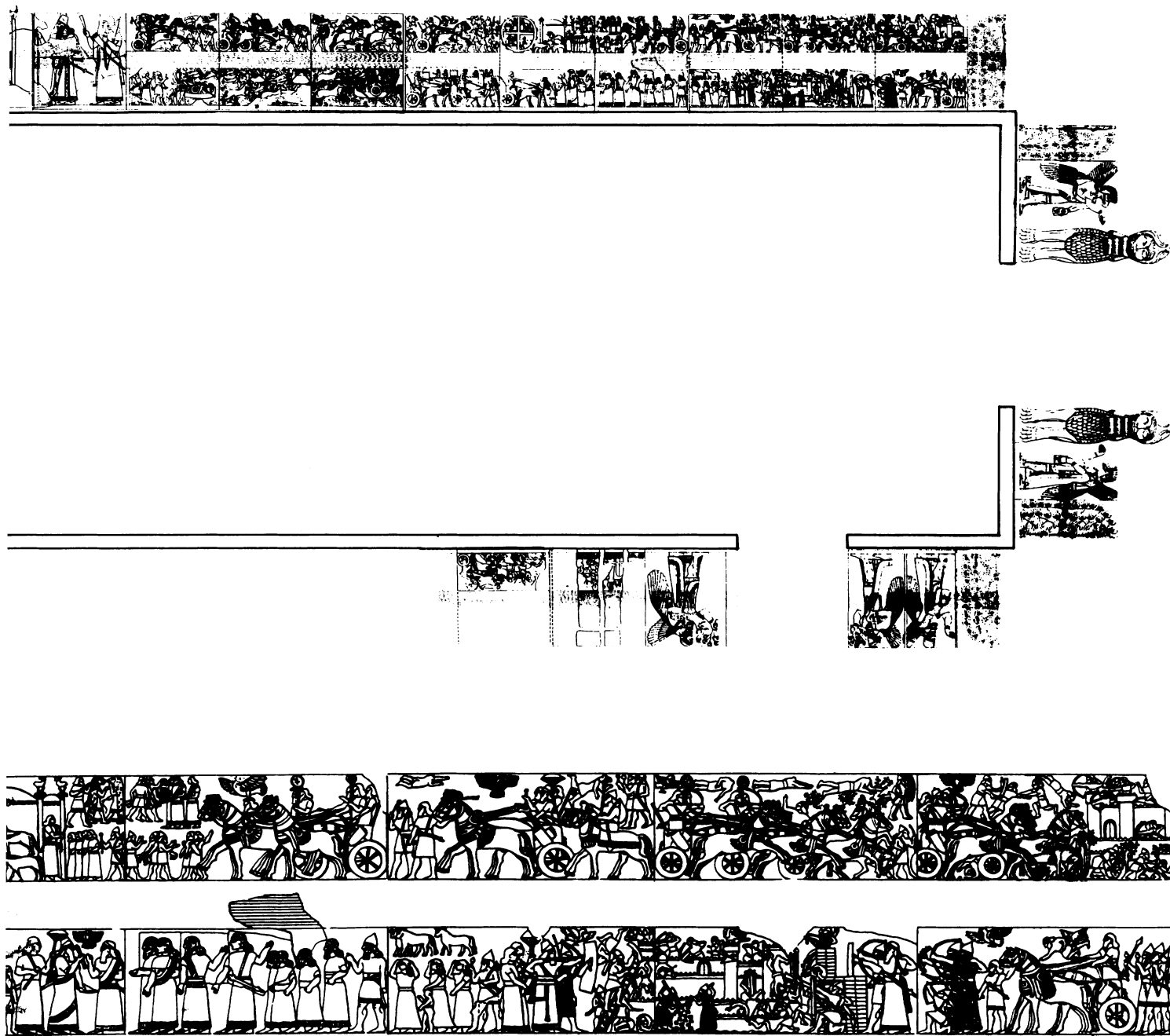
16 Slabs 11 through 3, Northwest Palace Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II (after J. Meuszynski, "The Throneroom of Assur-nasirpal II (Room B in the North-West Palace at Nimrud)," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, LXIV, 1975, 70–71)

Unlike other known rooms in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud of Aššurnasirpal II, the walls of Throne Room B were lined with a combination of iconic and narrative imagery, each presented in a distinct format. The iconic repertory, occupying the full height of the slab (more than 7 ft. [2 m]), consists of apotropaic genii at doorways and sacred trees in the corners of the rooms. The most important of the hieratic scenes is the tableau showing identical images of the king flanking a sacred tree. The actual person of the king enthroned in front of the sacred tree would have been seen receiving a potent royal gesture from either side.

The narrative scenes, carved on slabs of the same height,

are arranged horizontally. They occupy two bands, each just over 3 feet (1 m) high, which are separated by a somewhat narrower zone carrying the Standard Inscription, a commemorative text combining military conquests, building activities, and display texts.³¹ While the slabs vary in length, these registers are all the same height, creating two parallel unbroken horizontal pictorial fields each divided into scenes of varying length according to the imagery.

The narrative segments in the Throne Room at Nimrud were composed to be viewed from two different standpoints. First, the entire program is organized from the perspective of the monarch, who reviewed the scenes beginning at his



throne, proceeding down the south wall and up the north, perhaps following, as Irene Winter has argued, the geographic limits of his vast empire.³² The royal perspective on the narrative is essentially linear. The other perspective is that of the visitor, who entered the room through one of two western entrances along the north wall.

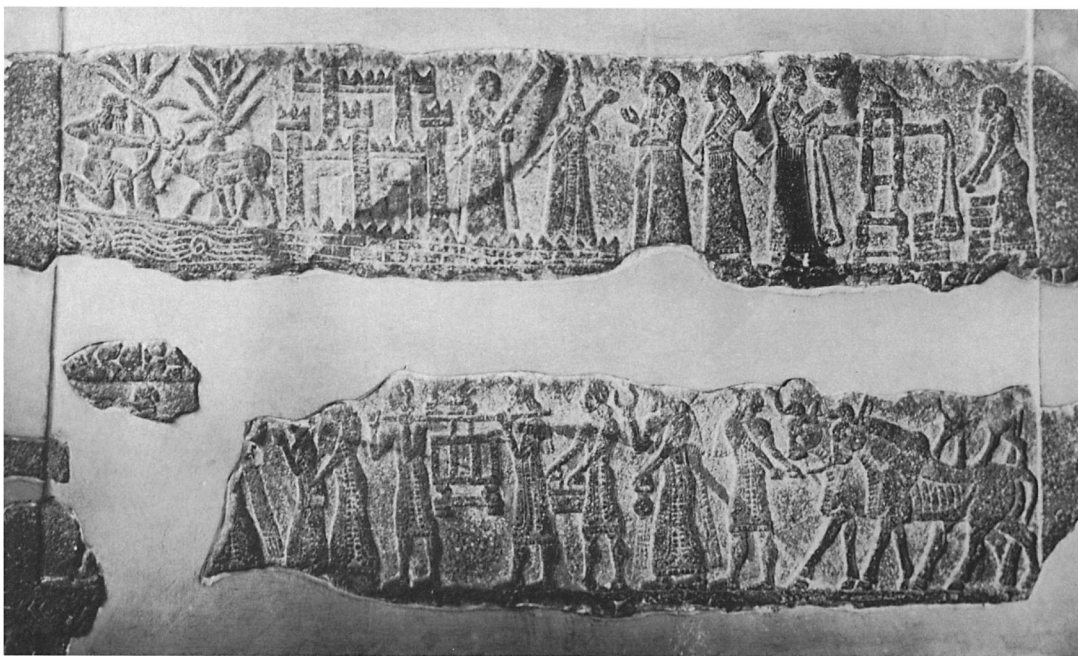
Along the south wall of the Throne Room there are two tableaux of narrative compositions. The shorter one, in the southeast corner of the room closest to the throne dais, consists of four slabs. The first two of these depict, in two separate scenes in the upper register, the hunt of the bull and of the lion respectively (Fig. 19). Each hunt is contained

31. See A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, II, Wiesbaden, 1976, pars. 650–53; and S. M. Paley, *King of the World: Ashur-nasir-pal II of Assyria, 883–859 B.C.*, New York, 1976, 125–44.

32. Winter, 1981 (as in n. 2), 15–31; and Winter, 1983 (as in n. 2), 16–22.



17 Bronze relief bands from the Gates of Aššurnasirpal II at Balawat. London, British Museum (photo: British Museum)



18 Rassam Obelisk, side A, registers 4 and 5. London, British Museum (photo: British Museum)

in a single episode that extends over the length of a single slab. Beneath is the consequence of the hunt, the ritual libation poured over the dead animal. Compared to the hunt scene on the White Obelisk, the Nimrud hunt is iconographically abbreviated. It is possible that the pursuit of gazelles and equids can be restored to the other side of the throne, following the pattern reconstructed here from the White Obelisk.

Following the hunts on the upper register are two single episodes showing attacks on cities. One is a walled city in an undefined setting; the other shows a city (Carchemish?) in a river approached by enemy soldiers floating on animal skins. None of the cities under siege on the White Obelisk is so elaborately differentiated. Below these two episodes is a scene, extending over more than one relief slab, which shows the bringing of booty. As in the hunt scenes, the upper and the lower registers are closely related, each showing a specific action and its consequence. This is an important feature of the Throne Room's composition and is a visually integrating device that cannot exist in a single-register format.

The longer section of narrative panels at the western end of Aššurnasirpal II's Throne Room is also compositionally distinct (Fig. 16). Two types of scene are carved across an unbroken stretch of nine stone slabs: the attack on cities, and the royal receipt of spoils. Unlike the scenes in the shorter section, the top and bottom registers are not semantically connected, so there is no definite action and consequence. However, the upper and lower registers were clearly planned as a visual unit. The top register is divided, with the mid-point marked by what is visually the most dominant feature on the wall, the circular camp inscribed to the full height of the register much like the Egyptian hieroglyph for city. To the right of the camp is an attack on a city, shown in four insistently repeating episodes, three showing the charge of the king's chariots, and a single episode of charging cavalry.³³ This passage establishes a staccato rhythm similar to that in the top register of the Obelisk. But unlike the Obelisk, which depicts the attack on individual cities, Aššurnasirpal II's troops are relentlessly aggressive. These scenes are visually ambiguous; the viewer can see either individual

chariots or one chariot in cinematic movement through space. Such ambiguity was undoubtedly intentional. The chariot wheels continue the circular theme and serve to unify the scene to the right, in which the king's chariot approaches the camp after the defeat of a city in the mountains. At the end of the register, the pace picks up with an intense chariot charge toward a city in the hills.

Along the lower register, two short scenes flanking a longer central one create a staggered structure that serves to knit the top and bottom registers together. The first scene shows an attack on towns, which are reached by forging a river. The swirling, decorative water pattern extends over the full length of the scene and binds together the syncopated rhythm of the chariots above. In the middle scene, two processions converge on the person of the king. To the left, chariots pass by the walls of the defeated town; to the right, captives and their flocks proceed on foot. Compositionally, the middle passage relates directly to the scene above. The eye is arrested by the circle of the camp and then drops down to the king, positioned directly in front. The camp draws the eye to the center of the empire, to the king, to the calm at the center of the storm. The two halves of the upper register are united by the lower scene, which, in turn, is balanced on the circular center point. The final scene in the lower register is of an attack on a city in the Kashiari range.

Although it is impossible to know precisely how Aššurnasirpal II's Nimrud Throne Room would have been experienced as a totality, its program shares several features with that of the posited original as reconstructed from its portrayal on the White Obelisk. In both instances, the parallel long walls were covered with narrative images, probably punctuated with doorways. In the case of the Nimrud Throne Room, these were protected by apotropaic images. Further, we can reasonably conjecture that in each case the length of space available for narrative on the two walls was essentially equal. In the Nimrud Throne Room the south wall has only one doorway, which was certainly meant to be used by the king and his court, while the opposing wall has three. However, the linear feet available for narrative representation is virtually equivalent on both walls because the south wall had a greater number of iconic images. According to my calculations, the south wall at Nimrud has somewhat more than 90 running feet (27 m) of narrative representation. If apotropaic genii were deployed at the doorways of the north wall, a bit more than 75 running feet (23 m) of wall would have been available for stone slabs carrying narrative. Evidence for narrative on the north wall exists in the fragments of slabs remaining next to the western door.

If we now recall the organization of the reconstructed White Obelisk throne room, it becomes apparent that in both architectural spaces the viewer would have experienced approximately equal lengths of narrative on opposing walls while walking from the far end toward the enthroned king. But the experience of the narrative in the two rooms would have been radically different. The Nimrud program would



19 Slab 20 (top and bottom) from the Northwest Palace Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II. London, British Museum (photo: from A. Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia: The Classical Art of the Near East*, London, 1969, figs. 265, 266)

have been understood either as a linear sequence engaging both registers, with action on the top and consequence on the bottom, or as an extended horizontal two-register tableau organized around a strong central point. The Obelisk narrative, when extended along the walls of a long room, employed a different strategy to engage the viewer, situating him in the middle of the narrative and forcing simultaneous comprehension of both walls. This was accomplished through mirrored subject matter and compositional format. Because the viewer had to integrate both sides of the room in order to comprehend the Obelisk narrative, the experience was not that of an external observer reviewing a linear sequence, but of someone placed in the middle of a surrounding scene. The viewer was forced to move his eyes back and forth from side to side, taking in only the four or so panels immediately in front of him, while retaining a sense of the ensemble. Thus, the space of the room became part of the narrative space, and the viewer became a participant in the narrative, engaged in an active relationship with the unfolding drama.

When the Obelisk narrative was deployed along the walls of a long room (in accordance with the reconstruction shown in Fig. 14), two principal points of view would have existed as at Nimrud, one from the perspective of the throne, the other from that of the visitor. The king could read the narrative as a linear record or visual annal that encircled the room as at Nimrud, only without the complexity of the two-tiered format. The Obelisk narrative sends the king out from the throne on campaigns and returns him to the throne via a celebratory hunt. However, even from the king's perspective the parallel segments could have been read together: first,

33. Cavalry is conspicuously absent from the imagery on the White Obelisk. The first mention of cavalry in the Assyrian annals is during the later reign of Adad-nirari II (911–891 B.C.), in one of the campaigns in which an effort to force back the Arameans is made. See Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical*

Lands in Light of Archaeological Study, New York, 1963; and M. A. Littauer and J. H. Crowell, *Wheeled Vehicles and Ridden Animals in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden, 1979.

the siege and the hunt; then the middle section of arrival, ceremony, and thanksgiving; and then the final long stretch of tribute bearers. Probably the king never went further than the point of his own image receiving tribute, mirrored in the two flanking representations. This mirror relationship between image and referent perhaps prefigures that of the hieratic images of the king that are crucial to the organization of the space in Aššurnasirpal II's Nimrud Throne Room.

Comprehension of two sides at the same time was even more clearly demanded from the perspective of the visitor who entered at the far end, opposite the throne. He would first encounter the bringing of tribute, which echoes the beginning of the Obelisk inscription (previously quoted), in which the king justifies his attacks by stating that the rebels had not given their annual tribute. This scene would reinforce the positive message from the same inscription: that if regular tribute is given, all will be stable in the realm.

The relatively modest scale of the room enlivened by the images preserved on the Obelisk allowed the deployment of such an intense and participatory organization. In order to envelop the viewer in such a visual system, only one register could be used; two registers would compete for the viewer's attention and destroy the impact of the composition. In contrast, if a single-register narrative had been deployed across the full height of the slabs at Nimrud, the program would have been physically overwhelming and difficult to comprehend. Thus, the Nimrud program represents a quantum leap in composition that was linked to increase in architectural scale. The mirror composition was replaced by a system of stacked registers whose narrative imagery was linked compositionally and thematically. In the Nimrud Throne Room, because of the double-register deployment and because of its considerable width, the sides of the room were not meant to be comprehended simultaneously. The effect created by surrounding the viewer was replaced by one that overwhelmed him with conceptual and compositional intensity through the use of two interrelated registers. Certainly, while losing something in terms of intimacy, the Nimrud program gained greatly in visual power.

The Balawat Gates and the Rassam Obelisk

The difference in scale that we have just observed between the images of the Nimrud and Obelisk throne rooms cannot be found in other monuments of Aššurnasirpal II that bear narrative scenes. The bronze bands from his Balawat Gates use figures on the same scale as those on the White Obelisk itself. Because the scenes were planned for the gate bands and were not arranged into a narrative sequence of scenes of gradually increasing length, their narrative logic can be

immediately apprehended. The spacing between the figures is generous, and overlapping is rare. Further, there is considerable variety in the posture and gestures of the individual figures on the gate bands, and the narrative presentation, as far as can be determined, is more fully developed than that on the Obelisk. The compositional arrangement of convergence, used so effectively in the Nimrud Throne Room, is employed in three of the five published gate-band strips (Fig. 17). That compositional solution is not used in the White Obelisk program, in which all movement is either toward or away from the king.

As a monument, the Rassam Obelisk (Fig. 18) is closely related in form to the White Obelisk. However, its narrative structure is entirely different. Although thematic continuity obtains in the horizontal registers, the scenes were designed to be comprehended face by face. Each register is surrounded by a narrow border enclosing the narrative in a rectangular panel. In addition, the subject matter is fundamentally different from that of the White Obelisk. Only one theme is presented on the Rassam monument: the king receiving tribute. Several types of bearers are shown, each bringing different goods. Although vignettes such as the weighing of gold and the leaping dog give a sense of immediacy, the representations do not tell a story but rather present a visual list that complements verbal lists preserved on the same monument.

The White Obelisk in a Middle Assyrian Context

Comparison of the White Obelisk to the ninth-century Neo-Assyrian monuments has shown that the latter have greater compositional complexity and interrelatedness, indicating that the White Obelisk antedates them. However, establishing a terminus post quem for the Obelisk in the late Middle Assyrian period is far more difficult,³⁴ because the preservation of the archaeological and historical record is so abysmally poor. At the same time, from the little that remains it is apparent that during the Middle Assyrian period, the Assyrian crown initiated extraordinary innovations in both visual and verbal expression that are wholly consistent with the Obelisk's narrative program.

In the fifteenth century B.C. the Assyrians did not have a distinctive visual language. They were dominated by the Mitanni, who in turn competed with the Hittites and the Egyptians. When the kingdom of the Mitanni collapsed around 1350 B.C., the Assyrians filled the power vacuum in the northern Mesopotamian steppe. The fourteenth and thirteenth centuries were ones of close international contact.³⁵ The Amarna letters found in Egypt at the capital city of the heretic king Akhenaten document the intense inter-

34. The most recent study of the material culture of the Middle Assyrian period gives the White Obelisk an 11–10th-century date, but does not discuss the monument in art-historical terms: F. B. Guardata and R. Dolce, *Archeologia della Mesopotamia: L'età cassita e medio-assira*, Rome, 1990, 205–6.

35. For the history, see *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3d ed., II, pt. 2, London, 1975, 443–81; and *ibid.*, III, pt. I, London, 1982, 238–440. See also, most recently, W. A. Ward and M. S. Joukowsky, eds., *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From beyond the Danube to the Tigris*, Dubuque, Iowa, 1992; and J. N. Postgate, "The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur," *World Archaeology*, xliii, 1992, 247–63.

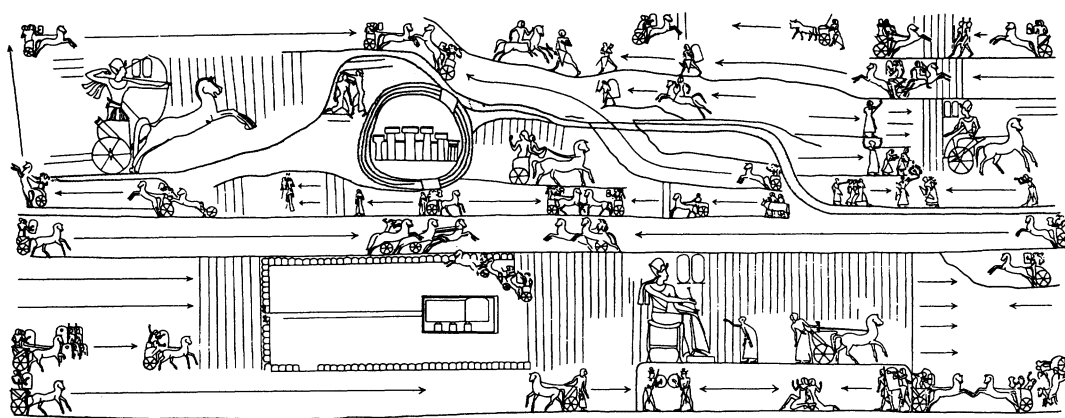
36. We learn, among other things, that the Middle Assyrian king Aššur-

uballit (1365–1330 B.C.) depended on gold from the Egyptians to make his palace at Assur glimmer. See D. B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton, N.J. 1992, 214–41.

37. For example, the gold bowl from Ras Shamra (Orthmann [as in n. 7], pl. I); and the ivory wand from Emar (here Fig. 10).

38. In order to understand the development of historical narrative so important to the expression of Neo-Assyrian imperial identity, it is imperative to evaluate the impact of these artistic developments in Egypt. For still the most comprehensive survey of the visual data for the international period, see W. S. Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the*

20 Schematic drawing of the Battle of Qadesh. Rameses II. Abu Simbel (from W. S. Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Relationships between the Arts of Egypt, the Aegean and Western Asia*, London, 1965, fig. 217)



change between the great powers.³⁶ In material culture this contact is manifest through the fusion of distinct stylistic and iconography themes into an “international” artistic expression seen most clearly in the Levant.³⁷

A pivotal event took place in 1285 B.C. when the Egyptian army, led by Rameses II, and the Hittites, led by Muwatalli, clashed for the last time outside the city of Qadesh on the Orontes River on the boundary of their spheres of influence. The battle resulted in a standoff, maintained by a treaty that secured a peace during which the Assyrians consolidated their control of the Jezira. That both the Hittites and the Egyptians preserved textual records of the battle testifies to the importance of the contest. In Egypt, the great battle was commemorated visually through a series of relief representations on temple walls that depict, in varying degrees of detail, a narrative of the actual battle. As works of art, these reliefs build on a short-lived but vigorous tradition of historical narrative that began with the monuments of Seti I (ca. 1320 B.C.).

Each relief is a complex visual presentation of the entire battle (Fig. 20). The narrative begins just prior to the battle, when Rameses II learns through captured spies that he has been tricked by the Hittite king. It follows with the sack of the Egyptian camp by the Hittites who, delayed through their greedy looting, gave Rameses II time to muster reinforcements and to force the enemy from the city, although he was unable to capture it for himself. The structure of the enormous visual narrative is episodic, the passage of time denoted through sequential scenes. Change of setting is marked by landscape features. Social constructions are represented by large and clearly legible geometric forms—the square for the Egyptian camp and the circle defined by the river for the city of Qadesh. The theme of the warrior pharaoh charging in his chariot, dominating and destroying the enemy, determines the movement of the eye through the

complex narrative representation. Certainly, the scribes and other Assyrian emissaries stationed in Egypt remarked in their letters and reports on the powerful visual stories told on the gigantic billboardlike pylon gates in front of the major Egyptian temples. That the Middle Assyrian kings would emulate their largest and most powerful competitor, Rameses II, is a natural response for a fledgling imperial power.³⁸

By the reign of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 B.C.), the “Land of Assur” included all of the territory of the Mitannian kingdom in the Habur to the Euphrates, where a frontier existed with the Hittites.³⁹ For the next 130 years the borders secured by Tukulti-Ninurta I were successfully defended against the ever-increasing pressure from the seminomadic transhumant Arameans, who competed for pasture land with the settled Assyrian-held farming communities of the rainfed steppe lands of the Jezira.⁴⁰ Between 1104 and 1087 B.C., Tiglath-pileser I went west to the land of the Amurru, where he twice received tribute from the Neo-Hittite city state of Melid (modern Malatya in eastern Turkey). There he would probably have seen the stone orthostats carved with ritual representations lining the public buildings. To commemorate this achievement, Tiglath-pileser I had his image carved on a rock face high above the banks “at the source” of the Tigris.⁴¹

The line of Tiglath-pileser I continued through Aššur-bel-kala,⁴² and through his grandson, Aššurnasirpal I, whose obscure reign is known only from a brick inscription from his palatial residence at Assur.⁴³ Not until the reign of Aššur-dan II did Assyria begin the expansion that was secured under Aššurnasirpal II. In this interval the Neo-Hittite and Aramean city states in inland Syria at, for example, Carchemish and Zincirli, flourished. Major architectural monuments erected in stone testify to their short-lived independence.

Relationships between the Arts of Egypt, the Aegean and Western Asia, New Haven, 1965.

39. P. Machinist, “Provincial Governance in Middle Assyria and Some New Texts from Yale,” *Assur*, III, no. 2, 1982, 1–37.

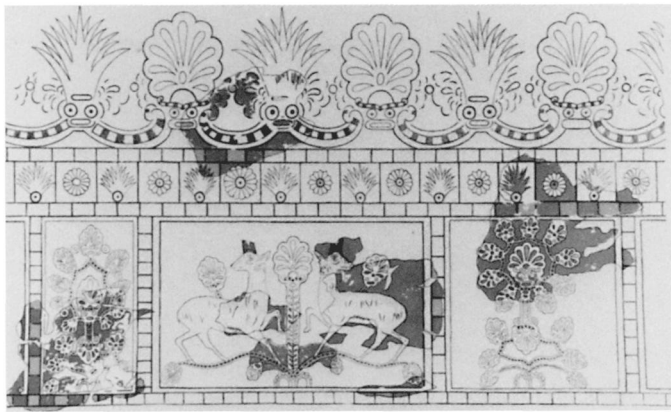
40. For the complex situation of the Arameans, see H. Sader, “The Twelfth-Century B.C. in Syria: The Problem of the Rise of the Arameans”; and T. L. McClellan, “Twelfth Century B.C. Syria: Comments on H. Sader’s Paper,” both in Ward and Joukowsky (as in n. 35), 157–63; and 164–73.

41. Fragments of cuneiform inscription were found by Woolley at Carchemish. D. Ussishkin, “Observations on Some Monuments from Carchemish,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, xxvi, 1967, 87–92, esp. 89–90, suggests that

they date to the period of Tiglath-pileser I.

42. The Aramean threat, felt in the south in post-Kassite Babylonia, was certainly a major factor in the short-lived but real reconciliation and cooperation between the two adversaries during the reign of Aššur-bel-kala; *Cambridge Ancient History*, II, pt. 2 (as in n. 35), 466. Aššur-bel-kala also married the daughter of the Babylonian ruler.

43. John Russell reports (personal communication) that during the 1989 excavations at Nineveh by Columbia University and the University of California at Berkeley an inscription from the reign of Aššurnasirpal I was found. There had previously been no evidence of that king from the site.



21 Reconstruction of wall painting from Kar Tukulti-Ninurta (from W. Andrae, ed., *Coloured Ceramics from Ashur and Earlier Ancient Assyrian Wall-Paintings*, London, 1925, pl. 2)



22 Symbol sockel of Tukulti-Ninurta I from Assur. Berlin, Staatlich Museen (from Moortgat, *Art of Mesopotamia*, fig. 246)

The Art of the Middle Assyrian Period

During the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C., several distinct trends can be detected in the art of Assyria, known almost exclusively through the glyptic.⁴⁴ One is a curvilinear dynamic style in which the form and movement of the animals in landscapes reflects influence from the west, both Egypt and the Aegean. Another is a more decorative tradition based on textiles seen in wall paintings from the palace of Tukulti-Ninurta I at his capital at Kar Tukulti-Ninurta (Fig. 21). Distinctly Middle Assyrian mythological subject matter makes up a third group, in which vigorous heroes and bird-headed griffin men dominate mythical or real animals or grapple with plants. These combative themes become increasingly prevalent in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries, perhaps reflecting a growing militancy. The beginnings

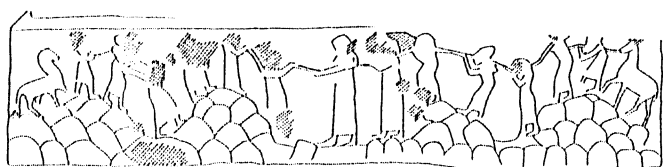
of Assyrian interest in visual historical narrative are evident in this last group.

Unlike the battle of Qadesh, the historicity of the events shown in the Middle Assyrian representations is uncertain because only rarely are the monuments inscribed with the details of historical events. Although frustratingly rare, such representations are known both in relief sculpture in stone and in the miniature format of glyptic art. The classic example is the representation on the symbol socle of Tukulti-Ninurta I (Fig. 22), on which the king is shown bareheaded, in obeisance, performing a ritual. He approaches and kneels before a divine symbol of the god Nusku mounted on a socle identical to the object itself. The image becomes a literal re-presentation of the ritual. The one tantalizing hint of the simultaneous development of secular historical narrative is preserved in the base of another symbol socle from Assur (Fig. 23). The small format of the representation (Fig. 24) may have been conducive to visual experimentation. Although the low relief is difficult to decipher because of its poor condition, converging processions of men march over a hilly terrain.

From the reign of Ninurta-tukulti-Aššur (1134–1133 B.C.) comes the earliest evidence for chariot scenes in the arts of Assyria. Although the king in the chariot is an age-old topos in Mesopotamian art, the specific form of this motif is unquestionably based either directly or indirectly on the visual production of Ramesside Egypt.⁴⁵ Apart from a few seal impressions, the only visual remains from the reign of



23 Symbol sockel from Assur, with carved relief panel on base. Istanbul, Ancient Orient Museum (from Moortgat, *Art of Mesopotamia*, fig. 247)



24 Drawing of relief carving on base of Fig. 23 (from Smith, *Interconnections*, fig. 149)

Tiglath-pileser I are his image carved at the source of the Tigris and broken bits of monumental stone animal figures. Assigned to the reign of Aššur-bel-kala, his son, is the Broken Obelisk (Fig. 25), on which the king is shown, in a scene closely comparable to that on the White Obelisk, receiving the defeated enemy.⁴⁶

Although lacking in actual remains, the achievements of Tiglath-pileser I are preserved through his annals recorded on clay cylinders. The royal annals are the single most important source for the history of the Assyrian empire. Since the beginning of the second millennium, the annals were used as the vehicle for the justification of the imperial enterprise and for reporting the royal accomplishments, both military and religious. The narrative form of the annals evolved over the centuries, treating the chronological and spatial dimensions of military and building activities according to different patterns. Tiglath-pileser I introduced substantial changes in the structure of the annals, establishing the form that would be used through the Neo-Assyrian empire. And he reports to us in these annals, the prime vehicle for imperial justification, that he also achieved important innovations in the realm of visual narrative: namely, the representation of his military victories on the walls of royal buildings.

Before durable stone slabs guaranteed their survival, the decorative and figural programs that enlivened many types of Mesopotamian buildings were rendered in paint, in terra cotta, or glazed brick. From the earliest times, the most dangerous spaces, doorways, consistently received special treatment and were marked by protective images.⁴⁷ From the Middle Assyrian period, we have fragments of wall paintings from the capital city of Kar Tukulti Ninurta. Essentially contemporary wall paintings decorated the Kassite Babylonian palace at Dur Kurigalzu with processions of male figures wearing fezzes.⁴⁸ The most significant evidence for architectural decoration relevant to the White Obelisk imagery comes, however, not from material remains in the archaeological record but from the annals of Tiglath-pileser I. In addition to the stone replicas of exotic animals brought

from the far reaches of the empire that he erected in his palace and temples,⁴⁹ he tells us that at Nineveh he dug a canal, planted a garden, and next to the temple of Ishtar built a palace; he “portrayed therein the victory.”⁵⁰ No architectural traces of that glorious palace remain, but there are fragments of glazed brick from Assur, Nineveh, and Nimrud with narrative imagery that could well have come from such a late Middle Assyrian palace.⁵¹ One fragment, from Assur, is inscribed to Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884 B.C.), the father of Aššurnasirpal II (Fig. 26). This brick tile is a large, vertically oriented rectangle more than 25 inches (66 cm) high, and 13 inches (35 cm) wide, ample space when arranged in a horizontal register “for real pictures.”⁵² From



25 The Broken Obelisk of Aššur-bel-kala from Nineveh. London, British Museum (photo: British Museum)

44. The most comprehensive survey of Middle Assyrian glyptic to date is D. M. Matthews, *Principles of Composition in Near Eastern Glyptic of the Later Second Millennium B.C.*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis Series Archaeologica VIII, Göttingen, 1990.

45. R. Mayer-Opificius, “Bemerkungen zur mittel-assyrischen Glyptik des 13. und 12. Jhdts v. Chr.,” in Kelly-Buccellati et al., eds. (as in n. 20), 161–70.

46. Moortgat (as in n. 1), pl. 250.

47. In the Assyrian context, the earliest preserved examples are from the Old Assyrian city of Qatara, Tell al Rimah, where large basalt orthostat blocks carved with protective images (a goddess standing near a palm tree, and a Humbaba face) flanked the entrance to the temple; D. Oates, “Excavations at Tell al Rimah,” *Iraq*, xxix, 1967, 70–96, esp. 74–75, pl. 31a,b.

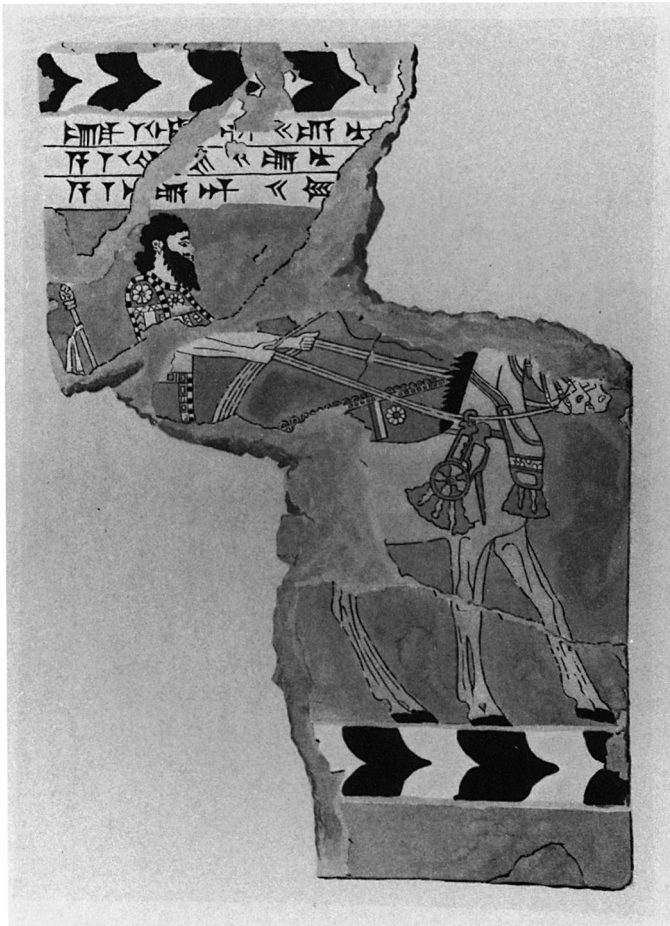
48. T. Baqir, “Iraq Government Excavations at ‘Aqar Quf: Third Interim Report, 1944,” *Iraq*, viii, 1945, 73–93.

49. Grayson (as in n. 31), par. 103.

50. Ibid., par. 126.

51. See W. Andrae, ed., *Coloured Ceramics from Ashur and Earlier Ancient Assyrian Wall-Paintings*, London, 1925, 28–36; fragments of glazed brick from the early excavations at Nineveh could easily belong to a period before Aššurnasirpal II. See also A. Nunn, *Die Wandmalerei und der glasierte Wandschmuck im alten Orient*, Leiden, 1988.

52. They were found reused in a later context; Andrae (as in n. 51), 25, pls. 7–9. The date of these fragments is assured through the three-line inscription, which reads: “(Property of) the palace of Tukulti-Ninurta, strong king, king of the universe, [king of] Assyria, son of Adad-nerari (II), strong king, king of the universe, king of Assyria, son of Ashur-dan (II) [(who was) also] king of the universe (and) king of Assyria”; Grayson (as in n. 31), par. 505. Other fragments belonging to this series, although painfully small, document the existence of important iconographic details such as the pointed helmet of the foot soldiers, which is never worn by the foot soldiers on the White Obelisk. Further, there is clear evidence of the use of informal registration of the pictorial field; Andrae (as in n. 51), pl. 10.



26 Glazed brick fragment from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta II from Assur. London, British Museum (from Andrae, *Coloured Ceramics*, fig. 7)

the texts, therefore, it is clear that by the reign of Tiglath-pileser I representations of military victories lined the palace walls at Nineveh, probably most elaborately in the throne room.⁵³ The material remains suggest that these were rendered on glazed brick tiles of a scale only somewhat smaller than that of a single narrative register in the Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II.

Although Tiglath-pileser I reports that he lined his palace at Assur with uncarved basalt and limestone slabs,⁵⁴ there is nothing to contradict the generally held impression that Aššurnasirpal II was the first of the Assyrian kings to use stone as the medium for narrative images, a practice believed to have had its origin among the Hittites.⁵⁵ This architectural

decoration was continued into the tenth century at the capital centers of the Neo-Hittite and Aramean kings after they had successfully challenged the late Middle Assyrian hegemony.⁵⁶

Current scholarly opinion usually separates Imperial Hittite priority in the use of carved images on stone building blocks from its priority in narrative representations.⁵⁷ However, David Hawkins implies and Winter explicitly argues:

while it is certainly true that Assyria developed narrative relief—especially with regard to military scenes—to an unprecedented degree, with a fresh look at the chronology of the Neo-Hittite States on the basis of the inscriptions as well as style, the old assumption of Assyrian priorities [for narrative relief] must be abandoned once and for all.⁵⁸

Such a position does not account for the relevant, if fragmentary, data from the late Middle Assyrian period reviewed here. And it ignores the existence of the White Obelisk.

The clues in the archaeological and textual record suggest that the Neo-Assyrian form of both historical annals and visual narrative generated by the court of the Assyrian kings was established at least from the time of Tiglath-pileser I. Interest in the representation of historical narrative arose from an Assyrian and not from a North Syrian consciousness. By the late twelfth and eleventh centuries, stone animals were on display in the court of Ashur, and victory narratives decorated the interior of the Tiglath-pileser I's palace at Nineveh, certainly rendered in bright colors in paint or glazed bricks. These would have been fully visible to all in the capital and must have been a part of the aura of emerging empire of the glorious late Middle Assyrian court.

Given the paucity of late Middle Assyrian visual evidence, there is little that can be added to iconographic details, gathered by Reade and others, that place the White Obelisk images in a late Middle Assyrian context. Only one of the most significant of those details, the headgear of the king, deserves further comment here. It has long been pointed out that the king on the White Obelisk wears a conical fezlike cap with a cone protruding from the top; that is, the same headgear as Aššurnasirpal II and later Assyrian kings.⁵⁹ However, unlike the later representations in which the king alone wears this conical cap, on the Obelisk figures closely associated with the king also wear the fez, but without a central cone.⁶⁰ Throughout the history of Mesopotamian representation, headgear is a signal attribute of rank. By the late thirteenth century, both Kassite and Middle Assyrian

53. Further, we know that Tiglath-pileser I refurbished the palace of his father, Aššur-reš-iši (1132–1115 B.C.) with glazed bricks. He states: "I raised its walls and tower-gates and made (them) fast, like a . . . , with bricks glazed (the colour of) obsidian, lapis lazuli, *pappardilû*-stone, (and) *parûtu*-alabaster. I installed on its towers replicas in obsidian of date palms (and) surrounded (them) with knobbed nails of bronze. I made high doors of fir, made (them) fast with bronze bands, (and) hung (them) in its gateways"; Grayson (as in n. 31), par. 125.

54. *Ibid.*, par. 102.

55. The consistent use of monumental stone portal figures and relief scenes on massive building stones at the Hittite capital of Hattusha, modern Bogazkoy, and their equally impressive analogues in the carved faces of the stone walls at the late imperial site of Alaca Huyuk is clear testimony to the priority of the imperial Hittite practice. See Güterbock (as in n. 2), 62–66;

and Orthmann (as in n. 7), pls. 339, 344, 345.

56. The orthostats are fully published in W. Orthmann, *Untersuchungen zur spät-hethitischen Kunst*, Bonn, 1971.

57. J. D. Hawkins, "Building Inscriptions of Carchemish: The Long Wall of Sculpture and Great Staircase," *Anatolian Studies*, xxii, 1975, 87–114, esp. 106.

58. Winter (as in n. 2), 1979, 364. The dating that Winter refers to is that offered by Hawkins for around 900 B.C. for the "Late Hittite" orthostats from Carchemish.

59. R. M. Boehmer, "Kopfbedeckung," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, Berlin, 1980–83, vi, 207–8; and Paley (as in n. 31), 29–31.

60. Moortgat (as in n. 1), 99–100; and Paley (as in n. 31), 40 n. 4.

61. Best exemplified in the kudurru in the British Museum assigned to the time of Marduk-nadin-ahhe; J. Oates, *Babylon*, London, 1979, 106, fig. 73.

royal figures wear the fez. Although there is no evidence that Tiglath-pileser I or Aššur-bel-kala wore the coned headgear, some of the contemporary post-Kassite Babylonian kings of the house of Nebuchadrezzar I wore a conical headgear with straight sides, a feathered rim, and a cone protruding from the top.⁶¹ If the addition of the cone to the Assyrian royal headgear was related to the dynamic, complex, and long-standing relationship between Babylonia and Assyria,⁶² then the merger of the fez and the cone may have marked the moment when the two nations, faced with the Aramean threat, joined forces toward the end of the reign of Aššur-bel-kala.⁶³ Between the time of the carving of the White Obelisk, on which the cone distinguishes the king from his countrymen, and the relief program of Aššurnasirpal II at Nimrud, a further change had taken place with regard to headgear in court etiquette. By the ninth century, the fez, now always combined with the cone, could no longer be assumed by anyone but the king.

Conclusion

Finally, we must return to the Obelisk itself to address the question of how the imagery that it bore was understood. Texts report that stone monuments stood in the courtyards of the temples and palaces of Mesopotamia for millennia, retaining their original political and historical meaning.⁶⁴ Certainly, the individuals who saw the White Obelisk at Nineveh knew that it recorded in pictures the victories of an Assyrian king. Further, they would have known that those scenes of victory originally encircled the interior of a glorious throne-room, perhaps even after the building itself was lost. Knowing this, the viewer would have approached the rectangular pillar with, in his mind's eye, a long, narrow room along whose walls were parallel narrative compositions. The viewing of the obelisk would have begun in the middle at eye level (Fig. 6), as it does now at the British Museum. That initial encounter would be the equivalent of entering at the far end of the room opposite the throne. Then the viewer would work up and down the monument one register at a time, experiencing a movement equivalent to the side-to-side transition that was required in the original throne-room setting. By the time he reached the extremes of the monument, taking in the scenes of royal siege and hunt, the pace of the viewing would have intensified, as it did in the throne room, quickening through relentless repetition of identical images which drove directly toward the center of the empire, to the king himself.

In terms of a distinctive organization that wraps and ascends, and the propagandistic purpose of the monument,

a close analogy is the Roman Column of Trajan. A fundamental difference between the two monuments is that the Roman narrative was specifically composed for the column. This is clear because, although its narrative is linear, the placement of the individual episodes was planned first of all for the columnar format.⁶⁵ On the White Obelisk, such conscious manipulation of charged images, in particular those of the king, cannot be readily detected. The only obvious concession to the obelisk format made by the sculptor when transferring the images from the wall to the Obelisk was to turn the imagery of register five one frame to the left. The reason for this was not ideological but formal, allowing the loaded wagons and the animal herds to be perceived on the same face so that their dynamic opposition could be immediately grasped. The White Obelisk belongs to a long-lived class of monuments variously described as stelae and obelisks that first appears with state and urban society around 3200 B.C.⁶⁶ These monuments bear images rendered in bas-relief whose subject is, with few and usually early exceptions, royal. Upright stones were the prerogative of power. Stacked registers are the most common format for their representations, a compositional solution that goes back to the foundations of Mesopotamian art.⁶⁷ None of the extant examples, however, are read in the same manner as the White Obelisk. Rather, they are read face by face, either from top to bottom or from bottom to top, or both. This is not the logic of the White Obelisk. In previous considerations the logic of its registered sequence has gone unobserved and the choice of format has been understood as the result of experiment, incompetence, or confusion. Although it was a solution that was not employed again, and to that extent can be considered unsuccessful, the artist who created the monument was neither incompetent nor confused. Its pictorial organization may instead reflect what were two conflicting or at least incompatible purposes of the monument: on the one hand, the Obelisk stored in a compact form the throne-room images depicting the victories and celebrations of an Assyrian king; on the other, the Obelisk was a monument in its own right made of permanent material and erected in a prominent position in a public space.

Many questions about the White Obelisk remain open, but some light can be cast on its reason for being. To what degree was it conceived as a monument in its own right and to what extent was it meant to be a compact re-representation of another visual document? From the third millennium B.C. on, techniques for the transmission and preservation of texts

62. See Paley (as in n. 31), 30, nn. 3–9, for the suggestion that the relationship between Babylon and Assyria was reflected in the headgear.

63. Grayson remarks on Babylonian influence on Assyrian royal epithets in the Middle Assyrian period; A. K. Grayson, "Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: Literary Characteristics," in Fales, ed. (as in n. 2), 35–48, esp. 41.

64. Such monuments were taken, along with statues of the gods, as tangible evidence of victory. Although such captured monuments thereby accumulated new meaning, their original significance was never lost. In fact, it was emphasized to increase the magnitude of the victory. The classic example is the Codex Hammurapi, which was originally erected in Sippar in the 18th century B.C.; captured by the Elamites in the 12th century B.C., it was taken to Susa, where it stood for unknown centuries but never lost its original meaning; Moortgat (as in n. 1), pl. 209.

65. Brilliant (as in n. 19), fig. 3.4, 99.

66. For a useful survey of the monuments and their political and ideological significance in the Assyrian imperial context, see D. Morandi, "Stele e statue reale assire: Localizzazione, diffusione e implicazioni ideologiche," *Mesopotamia*, xxiii, 1988, 105–55.

67. Before the middle of the third millennium B.C., on the Standard of Ur, there is no question that a sequentially read narrative is depicted, although probably without specific historical referents; Orthmann (as in n. 7), pl. viii. Not long after that, on the Stele of the Vultures, we have specific historical narrative that is meant to be read from top to bottom or bottom to top, depending on the interpretation one finds most convincing; *ibid.*, pls. 90, 91. The outstanding exception is the Stele of Naram Sin whose creator dissolved registration through an ingenious use of space; *ibid.*, pl. 104.

were developed and executed within the framework of the scribal schools. The selection, refinement, preservation, and transformation of the canonical texts through copying formed the core curriculum whereby the art and craft of writing and cultural memory were constructed, preserved, and transmitted. There is little evidence for the similar preservation of comparable visual material. In Mesopotamian society, images were valued for their consistent associations and so they were retained and repeated from period to period both within and across media for as long as they remained potent. A monument such as the White Obelisk suggests that images were, like texts, transferred directly from monument to monument, without the need for intermediaries such as pattern books.

With the explosion in extended visual narrative during the late Middle Assyrian period, the variety in the imagery expanded enormously. Historical narrative, requiring specific details to denote spatial and temporal differences, demands far greater space than emblematic expression, whose meaning is packed in connotative layers. The storage and transmission of such narrative representations presented a challenge to the artists of the late Middle Assyrian period. Beginning no later than the reign of Tiglath-pileser I extended visual narrative representations were executed in the perishable medium of paint on wall plaster and glazed brick. These visual narratives served both to decorate the palace according to age-old custom, and to narrate the victories of the king. People who entered into the throne room actually saw the illustrations of the victories that were recorded in the annals. Those who had no access to the throne room would have been aware of the narratives either through reading or hearing a recitation of the annals, or through hearsay. A monument like the White Obelisk would serve several purposes: it would make the visual program available to those who did not have direct access to the throne room itself, and it would reinforce the verbal account of the stories themselves. Further, it recorded an extended visual program, preserving it for posterity.

As demonstrated by the tenacity of certain motifs, the artists of the Assyrian court drew heavily on the existing visual traditions. The master who conceived the narrative program that encircled the Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II at Nimrud had access to a richly documented tradition of visual historical narrative. One of the monuments to which he must have referred when planning for the fabulous new "portrayal of victories" was the White Obelisk, standing long after the original program might have been damaged or destroyed. Thus, the Obelisk not only transmitted the wonders of its referent throne room to a wider late Middle Assyrian audience but also stored those images, making them available essentially in their original form, to be drawn upon when the next developmental step was taken in this great symbolic form.

This interpretation of the imagery on the White Obelisk is of fundamental significance because it adds to the small but immensely rich corpus of monumental architectural programs that were so important to imperial presentation during the height of the Neo-Assyrian empire. That mode of presentation, together with the texts, marks a breakthrough

to the achievement of fully historical narrative and a fully imperial consciousness. The Obelisk served to disseminate and to store the legendary images. The fact that its visual logic cannot now be readily comprehended means that it originally stood in close relationship with the tacit knowledge of the viewer, a relationship available to us only through reconstruction of past artistic practices in the context of imperial propaganda and the visual conventions that served it.

Appendix

The Imagery of the White Obelisk

Register 1: Four scenes whose length is essentially a single frame (Fig. 12.1).

Frame 1D: The king and two kinsmen proceed on foot over a mountain in front of a chariot. A single figure follows behind. At the far left of frame 1A, a single figure faces toward the group descending the mountain.

Frame 1A: The king rides toward the right in a chariot. In front stand two archers, who take aim at a walled city on a hill.

Frame 1B: A virtual repetition of frame 1A. The shorter length of this frame is accommodated by overlapping.

Frame 1C: The king in the chariot approaches two cities on hills. An enemy is under the rearing horses.

Register 2: Three scenes: two are single episodes, each one frame in length; one is a single episode extended over two frames (Fig. 12.2).

Frame 2D: A repetition of frame 1A.

Frames 2A and 2B: A ceremony takes place out of doors under an arbor of trees beside a river. The king with courtiers is approached by six ranks of men; to the left a city flanked by trees stands on a low rise. A similar tree marks the end of the scene to the far right.

Frame 2C: Soldiers and horses approach a city on a hillock. Behind them is a laden table.

Register 3: Two scenes. One is a single episode that fills one frame. The other consists of two episodes extending over three frames (Fig. 12.3).

Frame 3D: A repetition of frame 1A.

Frames 3A, 3B, 3C: From right to left: the first episode, over one-and-a-half frames, the king is seated under a baldachin out of doors in front of a table. A courtier stands directly in front of him. In two registers, to the right, individuals are seated facing each other, and figures stand in front of laden tables. In the second episode two ranks of individuals stand behind a bull being brought to sacrifice. The body of the bull is divided between frames 3B and 3A. In front the king, accompanied by a servant, approaches cultic apparatus in front of a building on a low hill. Inside the structure the king stands without his headgear before the cult image of a seated goddess. Above the scene is the epigraph quoted above designating the scene as a ritual for the goddess Ishtar.

Register 4: One scene occupies all four frames (Fig. 12.4).

Frame 4D: To the left, the king, standing under a baldachin, is approached by three ranks of dignitaries.

Frame 4A, 4B, 4C: Gesturing right to the procession, a figure leads an enemy preceding a horse-drawn wagon. Behind are six ranks of figures carrying goods, followed by three ranks of horses driven by a single figure. The bodies of the leading horses is split between frames 4B and 4C.

Register 5: As in register 4 directly above, one scene in one episode extends over four frames. The movement in this register proceeds from left to right (Fig. 12.5).

Beginning in frame C, the organization as well as the subject of register 5 repeats that of register 4. The king stands in frame B and receives four ranks of individuals. They are followed by an enemy and a horse-drawn wagon that precedes, as in register 4, a group of individuals carrying booty. Following are two horses, a horse driver, and two bulls with a herdsman bringing up the rear. The location is marked by two three-stemmed plants.

Register 6: Two scenes. One is in a single frame. The other consists of two episodes extending over three frames (Fig. 12.6).

Frame 6D, 6A, 6B: One scene that, like register 3, can be divided into two sequential episodes. To the right, three horse-drawn chariots proceed to the left following four ranks of figures. In front, the king and courtiers walk up a hill to the city gate.

Frame 6C: A variation of frame 1A that shows the king in a

charging chariot moving away from a city. Two figures cower at his approach.

Register 7: Two scenes each composed of two episodes extending over one-and-a-half frames (Fig. 12.7).

Frames 7D and 7A: A repetition of the scene in register 3. To the right, a banquet or meeting of both seated and standing figures. To the left, in frame D, the king sits in front of laden tables.

Frames 7B and 7C: The king's chariot proceeds to the right in the same landscape as register 5 approaching a group on foot. Behind the group are two registers of sheep, a herdsman, and two tents.

Register 8: Four scenes in the same arrangement as register 1 (Fig. 12.8).

Frame 8D: The king in a chariot hunts caprids.

Frame 8A: (eroded) The king approaches a city in a chariot. Behind the chariot is a lion rampant with spread paws.

Frame 8B: The king hunts bulls from a chariot.

Frame 8C: The king hunts equids from a chariot.

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