

WOMAN, CHILD, AND FAMILY: THEIR IMAGERY IN ASSYRIAN ART

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Recent studies of women in antiquity have contributed to our understanding of the roles and status of women in ancient Near Eastern society.¹ Generally, these studies have relied upon the textual data uncovered at various archaeological sites throughout Western Asia. Alternative sources of information that can be examined include the material culture obtained from excavations, and the pictorial and plastic arts of Mesopotamia and peripheral regions. From each of the last-named sources, additional details can be gleaned to develop a clearer image of women in antiquity.²

This article confines itself to the depictions of Western Asiatic women in the Iron Age, circa 880-625 B.C., specifically to their occurrences in Neo-Assyrian art. The most important source for this subject remains the monumental stone reliefs which covered the walls of Assyrian palaces at Nimrud, Nineveh, and Khorsabad.³ On the sculpted slabs the theme of warfare is conspicuous. In addition to the narrative battle scenes, there emerged a tendency to describe at length the aftermath of a successful battle, including the taking of booty and the deportation of subjugated peoples. Women, as well as children and family groups, are almost always restricted to the category of deportees. Consequently, they are of minor importance relative to the countless males who are shown engaged in various tasks on the many wall reliefs of the royal residences. Nonetheless, a careful analysis of those scenes which show women and families in open surroundings can furnish insight into contemporary social organizations.

Captive women always appear in small groups segregated from the men. This is the case on a series of 9th century B.C. bas-reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, where women follow the men.⁴ Additionally, a small naked boy accompanies the women, all of whom raise one or two hands to

¹A version of this article appeared previously: "Western Asiatic Women in the Iron Age: Their Image Revealed," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983): 82-88.

²For example, see: P. Albenda, "Mirrors in the Ancient Near East," *Source* 4 (1985): 3-9; B.L. Schlossman and H.J. York, "Women in Ancient Art," *Art Journal* 35 (1976): 345-351.

³The basic references are: R.D. Barnett, *Sculptures from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh* (668-627 B.C.), (London, 1976); R.D. Barnett and M. Falkner, *The Sculptures of Aššur-našir-apli II* (883-859 B.C.); *Tiglath-pileser III* (745-727 B.C.); *Esarhaddon* (681-669 B.C.), from the Central and South-West Palaces at Nimrud, (London, 1962); P.E. Botta and E. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1847-50); E.A.W. Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum. Reign of Ashurnasirpal, 883-859 B.C.*, (London, 1914); A. Paterson, *Assyrian Sculptures in the Palaces of Sinacherib*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1915). Since the present article surveys the pictorial evidence, references to specific works of art are not always cited, nor is a catalog of all the known examples within the respective groups of representation attempted.

⁴Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures*, pl. 23: 2.

their heads in gestures of weeping or mourning. Similar portrayals of captive women are found among the decorated bronze bands from Balawat, dated to the reign of Shalmaneser III.⁵ The iconography of deportees, in which groupings are arranged according to the sexes, persisted through the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. In long processions through the countryside women were readily separated from the men, as exemplified by details of wall reliefs dated to the reigns of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, respectively. In the former instance, Babylonian women advance in front of a backdrop of date-palm trees, and in the latter instance full artistic attention is given to the Elamite women who are drawn large against a plain background. The poses of the women vary somewhat to increase the sense of animation, as they are urged forward by Assyrian militia. In contrast, on the bas-reliefs depicting the respective campaigns of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal in the marshes of southern Babylonia, Chaldean women share the same reed boats as the captive men and their captors.⁶ Despite the restricted area of the boat for all these persons, in each instance the artist has endeavored to isolate the women who are always shown seated, while the men stand except for an occasional oarsman. Other modes of transportation used for the benefit of women and children were mule-driven and ox-driven carts and mules for riding. Women and children never ride horses, as these animals were reserved for Assyrian and foreign militia.⁷

The distinguishing characteristics of women from diverse geographical areas were graphically expressed by types of costume and hairstyle. Striking differences in women's fashions indicate that during the Iron Age each region retained its own customs. Several examples serve to illustrate this point. On two reliefs belonging to different compositions dated to the reign of Sennacherib appear women whose homelands are probably to be located to the north and east of Assyria, respectively.⁸ The women from the north, who walk in pairs, are attired in simple high-necked dresses reaching to the calves, over which is a plain coat with curved ends. Each woman has long, wavy hair that is combed to the back and terminates in a large curl. One woman from the east is shown entire. She wears a long dress beneath a fringed robe, and is barefooted. Her hair is hidden beneath a folded fabric. At her side walks a small naked boy. Women from other geographical regions are depicted on the bas-reliefs of Ashurbanipal. Together with shackled Kushite warriors led away from an embattled city, probably Thebes, are several of their women clothed in identical costumes.⁹ The dress is pleated in front and loosely draped for comfort. A plain shawl is wrapped around the body and covers one shoulder. In all probability this style of dress, most suitable for a hot, dry climate, was made of linen or cotton.¹⁰ The tight-fitting textured cap worn by each woman may serve the practical purpose of protecting the hair from the weather. The characteristic costume of Elamite women, including those among the deportees from the city of Hamanu, consists of a fringed coat with curved ends which covers and extends to the bottom of the long dress.¹¹ When visible, the wavy strands of hair are neatly fashioned into long corkscrew curls that reach to the shoulder. The tight-fitting caps worn by several Elamite women are of the type favored by Kushite women.¹²

⁵L.W. King, *Bronze Reliefs from the Gates of Shalmaneser, King of Assyria*, (London, 1915), pls. 15, 16, 45-46, 75-76.

⁶W. Nagel, *Die neuassyrischen Reliefstile unter Sanherib und Assurbanapl*, (Berlin, 1967), pp. 20, 22, 34-35, pls. 17, 19: 1-2.

⁷On a fragmentary bas-relief formerly in the Borowski Collection, in which a woman and child ride an animal, the horse head with elaborate harness seems to be a modern restoration; see O. White Muscarella (ed.) *Ladders to Heaven. Art Treasures From Lands of the Bible*, (Ontario, 1981), p. 128, no. 85.

⁸British Museum nos. 124786 and 124902. See Albenda, *Biblical Archaeologist*, figs. on pp. 85-86.

⁹Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, p. 47, pl. 36: 17.

¹⁰A similar style of costume persisted into later times; see W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, (Middlesex, 1965), pp. 250-251, pl. 186.

¹¹Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, pls. 18-19.

¹²Especially distinctive is the polos-style headdress worn by Phoenician women; see M. Wäfler, *Nicht-Assyrischer neuassyrischer Darstellungen*, AOAT 26 (1975), pl. 6: 1, figs. 49, 62.

An important aspect of women's role in society that was illustrated many times on the Assyrian palace reliefs is motherhood. The actions of women with their infants and children varied. Small children oftentimes walked alongside their parents, during the long journey. Those youngsters unable to walk are held in the parent's arms or else they sit on the parent's shoulders. In one scene several mothers suckle their infants during the long march,¹³ and there are several depictions of a mother pausing to provide a small child with liquid refreshment kept in an animal skin. And a mother's love is expressed by a kiss to the lips of her infant.¹⁴ There were times when men, too, escorted small children, especially among the Elamites. Such groupings hint at a social structure in which adult male members shared in domestic situations. One isolated group of Elamites, consisting of father, small naked son, and adult (elderly?) male, is urged forward by an armed Assyrian soldier brandishing a long stick.¹⁵ Below them, in a separate episode that nonetheless forms part of the larger composition, is the royal chariot of King Ashurbanipal. Two levels of meaning are indicated here, one iconographic and the other symbolic. Firstly, in displays of public events Assyrian kings were invariably surrounded by males only; thus females remained spatially distant from the royal person. The Elamite males shown in proximity to the Assyrian king may be fortuitous; however, the iconographic structure was probably also a factor in determining the placement of the various human figures. Secondly, from the Assyrian point of view the motif of father and son aligned near the royal personage - above and slightly behind Ashurbanipal in his chariot - may signify that, as a consequence of Assyrian military conquest, the status of the defeated Elamite foes was transformed into that of a woman's.¹⁶

The nakedness of children means they are very young, and where the sex of the child is clearly indicated, it is male. Clothed children are somewhat older. Upon one series of wall reliefs where Judean families are seen departing from the embattled city of Lachish, an event that occurred in 701 B.C., teenage boys and girls are separated from one another and wear garments similar to those worn by the respective parent behind whom they march.¹⁷ This implies the existence of a social structure which dictated that, once having attained a certain age, boys were considered part of the male population and could no longer remain with female members of the family in public.

How individual women ranked within a town, city, or region is not revealed on the Assyrian reliefs. There is no way of determining whether some of the foreign women were members of the leading families in the community or were active in cultic affairs. Women's daily occupations or skills associated with various crafts are likewise not depicted on the wall reliefs, with rare exception. However, women and older children were afforded opportunities to develop special abilities, as demonstrated by an episode within a panoramic composition depicting the Assyrian battle in 653 B.C. against the Elamite king, Teumman; his defeat and death; and the installation of his successor, Ummanigash. In one section there appears a procession of male musicians, behind whom Elamite women and girls play musical instruments, sing, and dance in unison.¹⁸ These men and women may

¹³Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, pl. 19.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pl. 29.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 59-60, pl. 68.

¹⁶In this regard, ancient texts furnish clues into the meaning of "womanhood". An inscription of Tukulti-Ninurta I (c. 1250 B.C.) states, in part, "He who destroys my inscription and my name, may Dinitu, my lady, destroy his kingdom, may she shatter his weapons, may she turn his manhood into womanhood, into the hands of his foes may she give him." D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1926; repr. 1968), para. 192. A variant translation gives the phrase, "cause his manhood to dwindle away"; see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1972), no. 753. A letter to an Assyrian king (Esarhaddon [680-669 B.C.]) enumerates propitious events, including "Old men dance, young men play music, women and maidens gladly perform the task of womanhood, procreation is common..." R.H. Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria*, (New Haven, 1935; repr.), letter 177. On the symbol of womanhood, see Albenda, *Source* 4 (1985): 3.

¹⁷Paterson, *Palace of Sinacherib*, pls. 68-76.

¹⁸R. D. Barnett and A. Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture in the British Museum*, (Toronto, 1975), pls. 159-161.

belong to the palace personnel of the Elamite king. In support of this conclusion, Assyrian texts do mention that the palace staffs at Babylon and Jerusalem, as well as at Nimrud and Nineveh, included female musicians.¹⁹

From the evidence on the Assyrian wall reliefs, general conclusions may be drawn concerning Western Asiatic women. In scenes of deportation, the appearance of women and children conveyed the message that entire populations were affected. The passive role assumed by women in the defense of a town, city, or region, usually assured their safe conduct leading to resettlement in distant lands. On a related matter, scenes describing civic works confirm that women were not among the large labor forces required for construction projects undertaken by Assyrian kings.²⁰ Furthermore, anecdotal views of military camp life give no indication that the Assyrian army included female camp followers.²¹ With one exception, women are not mistreated or shackled, as subjugated men often are. The single exception appears on a series of wall reliefs from the palace of Ashurbanipal, depicting a foray against Arabs who fight on camels. One scene shows Assyrian militia storming into the tents of the enemy, ruthlessly slaying the women within, and afterwards setting the tents afire.²² The Assyrian historical texts which recount the Arab campaign explain that the people of Adia, queen of Arabia, were slaughtered, her tent was burned, and she herself was captured alive.²³ From the scene on the bas-relief it is clear that the Arabs, lacking permanent fortifications, were ill-protected by their tent-abodes during direct attacks.

And what of Assyrian women? It is not surprising that, with one important exception, nowhere can they be identified on the Assyrian reliefs.²⁴ Since the main themes were apparently intended to glorify the military supremacy of Assyria over all other peoples, genre scenes involving Assyrian citizens would serve no purpose and thus were not included on the wall reliefs. The only occasion where Assyrian women appear is on the famous bas-relief illustrating the banquet of King Ashurbanipal and his consort Ashur-shurra.²⁵ The locale is a garden situated in the queen's harem where only female servants are engaged to look after the royal couple. The faces of the royal couple were mutilated in antiquity. Despite this damage, Queen Ashur-shurra is a model of ideal beauty and her portrayal evokes an aura of luxury and majesty. The maidservants in the banquet and nearby park scenes carry out different tasks, and the renderings of these women provide clues to support the idea of a harem hierarchy.²⁶ For example, the full-bodied attendants wear plainer apparel yet they, too, display some richness of dress. Furthermore, the more intricate embroidery on the garments of the fan bearers suggest that these women enjoyed a higher rank within the harem.

¹⁹See: Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1927; repr. 1968) paras. 234, 260; J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1955), p. 288; V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Nimrud Wine Lists. A study of men and administration at the Assyrian capital in the Eighth Century, B.C.*, (London, 1972), pp. 76-77.

²⁰See: B. Hrouda, *Die kulturgeschichte des assyrischen Flachbildes*, Saarbrücker Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 2 (1965), pls. 53-54; E. Strommenger, *5000 Years of the Art of Mesopotamia*, trans. by C. Haglund (New York, 1964), pls. 232-233.

²¹See: R.D. Barnett and M. Falkner, *Sculptures of Tiglath-pileser III*, pls. 60, 63; Barnett and Lorenzini, *Sculptures in the British Museum*, pl. 86; Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, pl. 66: a-c.

²²Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, p. 45, pls. 32-33.

²³Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2 (Chicago, 1927; repr. 1968), paras. 820, 1083, 1084.

²⁴See the study of C. Saporetti, "The Status of Women in the Middle Assyrian Period," *Sources and Monographs on the Ancient Near East* 2/1 (1979): 1-20.

²⁵Barnett, *North Palace of Ashurbanipal*, pp. 56-58, pls. 63-65. For an art-historical study of the banquet scene, see P. Albenda, "Landscape Bas-Reliefs in the *Bit Hilani* of Ashurbanipal," part 1. *BASOR* 224 (1976): 49-72, part 2. *BASOR* 225 (1977): 29-48. Queen Ashur-shurra is also portrayed on a stela from Ashur, and Queen Naqi'a is depicted on a fragmentary plaque of bronze; see: *RIA* 1, p. 225, pl. 36 a; A. Parrot and J. Nougayrol "Asarhaddon et Naqi'a sur un bronze du Louvre (AO 20.185)," *Syria* 33 (1956): 146-160, pl. 6.

²⁶On the *šakintu*, see J.N. Postgate, "On Some Assyrian Ladies," *Iraq* 41 (1979): 99-100.

In summation, within the limits imposed by stereotyped modes of representation, the renderings of women were objective and concentrated mainly upon outward appearances. Many of the women's activities were directed to domestic tasks and related to motherhood. Here, we may add that portrayals of mother and child, as well as family groups, recurred elsewhere in the arts of Western Asia, especially on stone reliefs discovered at various sites in North Syria.²⁷ The pictorial record probably reflects contemporary social patterns in which women's activities were generally restricted to the female sphere; but this restriction was countered by the acknowledged respect for women's roles in family matters. Assyrian art works demonstrate that warfare and diplomacy were the concerns of men. Indeed, the pictorial record strongly suggests that women and children were not molested or abused by their Assyrian captors. Only when foreign women participated in military and political struggles between Assyria and its adversaries were they treated harshly.

²⁷For example, see: E. Akurgal, *The Art of Greece. Its Origins in the Mediterranean and Near East*, trans. by W. Dynes (New York, 1968), pp. 129-132, 136, 138, pls. 28 (Marash), 29 (Marash), 35 (Karatcpe); D. G. Hogarth, *Carchemish. Report on the Excavations at Djerabis on Behalf of the British Museum Part I* (Oxford, 1914; repr. 1969), pls. B 7-B 8.