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Author(s): E. Porada

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REMARKS ABOUT SOME ASSYRIAN RELIEFS

By E. PORADA

To offer Richard Barnett remarks about Assyrian reliefs is a matter of self-indulgence. I wanted to have the reaction of this scholar most likely to be interested in my ideas about the meaning of the two principal scenes of the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858–24 B.C.); the role of the ziggurat in Assyria, on which I will touch only slightly; and a fragment from the reliefs of Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.). I have had to appeal for his aid for the classification of the latter since he is preparing the publication of the collected reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib with the help of Erica Bleibtreu.

Each of the two scenes at the top of Shalmaneser's obelisk, Plate I, *a–b*, shows a foreign prince kneeling before the Assyrian king with hands and beard touching the ground in the posture of the greatest humility. The lower scene is often reproduced alone because the foreign ruler is Jehu of Israel, whose biblical association is of interest to the general public. The similarity of the two scenes, is unique and invites a search into its meaning. Fortunately, the identity of both foreign rulers is indicated in the inscription above the scenes.¹ The man in the top register was Sua (or Asu)² of the land of Gilzanu, which has been located in the vicinity of Lake Urmia,³ in modern Iranian Azerbaijan. Gilzanu appears to have been the easternmost area of Shalmaneser's campaigns. The Assyrian king received the tribute of Gilzanu from two different persons, Sua or Asu—and Upu,⁴ the latter was probably the successor of the first. In view of this continuity, which actually went back to Tukulti Ninurta II and Ashurnasirpal II, Shalmaneser's father and grandfather,⁵ Shalmaneser seems to have counted Gilzanu among his regular tributaries, though obviously one of the farthest removed. Equally far in the opposite direction from Shalmaneser's residence at Kalhu (the modern Nimrud, near Mosul) was the land of Jehu of Israel who was called "of the house of Omri" in the caption of the relief on the obelisk.⁶ Now the meaning of the two similar scenes, one above the other becomes obvious. By portraying the tribute of these two countries the gigantic extent of the areas covered by Shalmaneser's campaigns and of his sphere of influence is effectively demonstrated. While this is the first such pictorial indication of a geographical distance, the suggestion of distance by the naming of two or more well-known points, far from each other, was common in historical inscriptions, especially in

¹ E. Michel, "Die Assur-Texte Salmanassars III (858–824)", *Die Welt des Orients* (WO) II (1955), p. 141: A, B.

² Michel calls him Sua, W. Röllig in *RLA* III/5, 1968, p. 375, s.v. Gilzānu calls him Asū, following E. Ebeling in *RLA* I, p. 309, s.v. Asū.

³ Röllig, *ibid.*, thought that Gilzanu was situated northwest of Lake Urmia; J. E. Reade, "Hasanlu, Gilzanu, and Related Considerations," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 12 (1979), pp. 175–81, however, places Gilzanu close to the southern shore of Lake Urmia and suggests an identification of Gilzanu with Hasanlu.

⁴ Michel, *WO* II (1956), p. 231 and note 44.

⁵ E. Sollberger, "The White Obelisk," *Iraq* XXXVI (1974), p. 233.

⁶ Michel, *WO* II (1955), p. 141, B and *WO* I (1949), p. 267, lines 25–26, and note 9.

brief indications of the areas involved.⁷ In the extensive reports of Shalmaneser III, however, countries were grouped geographically; there was therefore no opportunity for a textual juxtaposition of Gilzanu with a Western country.

There remains the question of the intent of the differences which can be noted in the two scenes. In the scene with the ruler of Gilzanu the Assyrian king is seen in warlike attire, holding his bow and two arrows, accompanied by two military men and facing two officers. In the scene with Jehu he wears the royal ceremonial fringed mantle and is accompanied by a person holding a sunshade and a second dignitary. The person facing the king seems to hold a large flower and agitates a flywhisk. This scene looks like a ceremony at court, while the upper one has a military character. Whether this was meant to show the different situations under which the respective foreign ruler actually approached Shalmaneser – the Gilzanian after a lost battle, the Israelite having avoided military action – is impossible to say because the inscriptions do not mention any fighting in Gilzanu. If no historical reference was intended, we can assume only that the scenes were differently portrayed to vary the images and – perhaps at the same time – to show that “reasonable” behaviour on the part of a foreign ruler would result in more advantageous circumstances for him.

The form of the obelisk, the top of which was shaped like the stages of a ziggurat, may reflect the special appeal which these temple towers appear to have had for the Assyrians, as noted by H. Frankfort.⁸ The earliest work of this type is the so-called broken obelisk, Pl. IIa, which may provide an explanation for the later versions. In a relief on the front of the obelisk the Assyrian king stands as the largest figure at the left, facing two foreign rulers, who stand humbly before him, and behind them two smaller figures which seem to accompany the rulers. From a winged disk above the rulers extend the hands of a deity whom one may assume to be embodied in the winged disk and perhaps also in the ziggurat. One hand holds a bow; the other is extended in the direction of the king, probably in a gesture of support.

The association of the deity with the ziggurat on top may be indicated by the close relation of this and of the ziggurat-shaped top of the white obelisk to the actual ruins of early ziggurats with which they share a rectangular plan, rather than the square one of the Neo-Assyrian ziggurats, as pointed out by Th. Dombart.⁹ The example which can be cited is the ziggurat at Tell al Rimah¹⁰ whereas the one at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta is square.¹¹ A relation which appears with the ziggurat of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, however, is the way in which the cult-niche of the temple is accommodated within the mass of the ziggurat, like the scene with the Assyrian king cut into the mass of the miniature ziggurat on top of the broken obelisk which seems to enclose the scene as if it were protecting it. Possibly such a protective function (derived from the god for whom the ziggurat

⁷For example the statement of Tiglathpileser I (1114–1076 B.C.): “Twenty-eight times (I fought) the Ahlamu peoples and the Arameans, (once) I even crossed the Euphrates twice in one year. I defeated them from Tadmara (Palmyra) which (lies) in the country Amurru, Anat which (lies) in the country Suhu as far as the town Rapiqu which (lies) in Kar-Duniash (i.e. Babylonia),” quoted from the translation by A. L. Oppenheim, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts...* ed. J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1950, p. 275.

⁸H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. Penguin Books, fourth (rev.) impression with additional bibliography 1969, p. 69.

⁹Th. Dombart, “Zur Frage der Böschung am Babel-Turm,” *Afo* VII, 1931–2, p. 256.

¹⁰D. Oates, “The Excavations at Tell al Rimah,” *Iraq* XXIX, 1967, pp. 70–96; Pl. XXX.

¹¹W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur*. 9. Sendschrift d. Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 1938; reprinted 1977, p. 136.

was erected) was thought to be inherent in the shape of the ziggurat, and for that reason this was used for the top of the obelisks on which were portrayed the king's important actions in the Middle Assyrian examples and the tribute of subjected peoples in the extant Neo Assyrian obelisks.¹²

The appeal of the ziggurat was also expressed by its appearance in the form of cakes in two Middle Assyrian representations: a cylinder seal from Tyre and one of the scenes of the white obelisk, Plate II, *b, c*. On the cylinder seal from Tyre the cakes sit on a table which stands before the statue of a god on a two-tiered platform.¹³ The table has lions' feet and is covered with what I believe to be a stiffly pressed tablecloth, which bends up on one side and down on the other, a typical feature of Middle Assyrian representations. A similarly shaped table is seen before a temple on the white obelisk, where the king is seen in a gesture of prayer before a censer and the table, on which one ziggurat-shaped cake can be recognized. I owe to N. Postgate and S. Dalley the reference to a baker of ziggurat-shaped cakes mentioned in a Middle Assyrian text.¹⁴ The cakes and the reference in a Middle Assyrian text may add to the evidence for dating the reliefs of the white obelisk in the Middle Assyrian period, whereas the unevenly written unfinished inscription may belong to a later period.¹⁵

The third item to be discussed here is a fragment of a relief of Mosul marble in the Honolulu Academy of Arts,¹⁶ showing four men with Assyrian beards walking in a row (Pl. III). The men doubtless formed part of the retinue of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.). Characteristic of the style of the reliefs of that king is the orderly yet slightly varied alignment of figures, with great attention given to the details of attire and weapons. The mens' hair rests in a bunch on their necks and shoulders, a criterion of a date in the late eighth or seventh century B.C. The beards have about six rows of tight short curls in the upper part and three tiers of short corkscrew curls below. All wear shirts, but only the necklines are visible. Likewise, all probably carried their short swords on baldrics but only the one of the second man from the right can be clearly seen. Armlets, probably worn by all four, are discernible on the first man on the left. The precise form of the fringed kilt is difficult to determine. An upward-curving line of fringe is visible in the front part of the garment and the fringed end of the material falls between the figures' legs. The men are barefooted, a not uncommon state even among long-robed bearded officials who obviously had some standing in the army or administration.

Three of the men hold maces; the one held by the person at the far left is not discernible. Each grasps his mace below the mace head, not in the manner in which he would be carrying a weapon but, instead, as an emblem of authority which it had become in Assyrian times. The staff held by the second man from the left may have been an additional emblem of that type. The variety of the hand gestures of the men should be noted, especially the fact that one of them

¹² For a survey of Assyrian obelisks see J. E. Reade, "The Rassam Obelisk," *Iraq* XLII (1980), pp. 20–21.

¹³ E. Porada, "Appendix A: The Cylinder Seal," in Patricia M. Bikai, *The Pottery of Tyre*, London, 1978, pp. 77–82.

¹⁴ Dr. S. Dalley mentioned the text *VS* 19, 33, cited by N. Postgate in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* XXXVII, 1980, p. 68, in which an oil presser was to supply sesame(?) ziggurats.

¹⁵ For the date of the inscription in the time of Ashurnasirpal II, see E. Sollberger, "The White Obelisk," *Iraq* XXXVI, 1974, pp. 231–8. For the earlier date of the reliefs see J. E. Reade, "Ashurnasirpal I and the White Obelisk," *Iraq* XXXVII, 1975, pp. 129–50.

¹⁶ Honolulu Academy of Arts Acc. No. 490514–2; length 72 cm., height 67 cm. Gift of Mrs. C. M. Cooke Sr., Dec. 1932.

grasps the end of the sheath of the short sword belonging to the man next to him. This action, which would be understandable especially if two men stood side by side, and the way in which their feet are placed suggest that they were meant to be walking beside, not behind, each other. Such an alignment of what may have been palace guards would be logical in a scene such as the one preserved in the Kuyunjik Gallery of the British Museum, Pl. IV, which shows King Sennacherib in his rickshaw-like vehicle pulled by two young men, as he watches the construction of his palace.¹⁷ Dr. Barnett was able to associate the fragment in Honolulu with one belonging to a related scene in the Ashmolean Museum, as Dr. Erica Bleibtreu kindly informed me. The Ashmolean fragment was published by J. E. Reade, who placed it among scenes showing Sennacherib inspecting public works.¹⁸

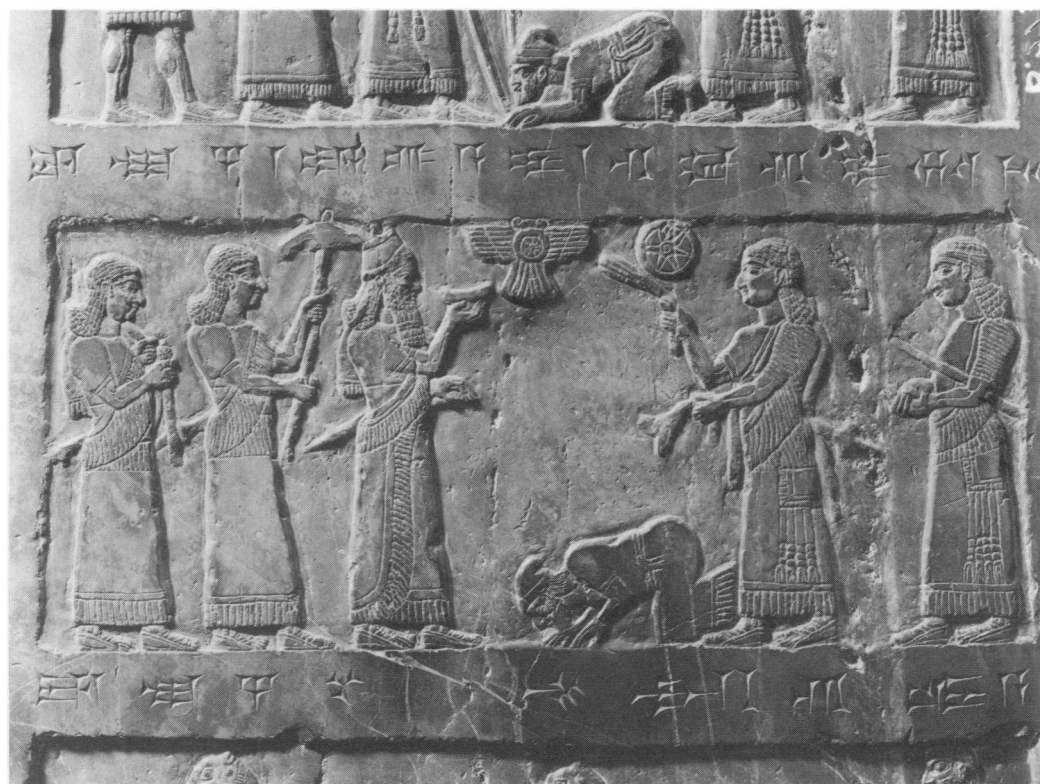
Despite the poor state of preservation of the relief in Honolulu and the small size of the fragment of what was once a large wall panel with the extensive display of Assyrian technology, so dear to Sennacherib, the piece conveys some of the interest and immediacy of reporting actual events which characterized the style of that Assyrian king, whose reliefs will form Dr Barnett's next great work.

¹⁷Cf. Pinches, *Guide to the Kuyunjik Gallery*, pp. 105–7, and A. Paterson, *Palace of Sennacherib*, Pl. 29.

¹⁸*Iraq*, XXXIV, 1972, Pl. XXXIV, b.



(a) The topmost register of the so-called Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III showing the ruler of Gilzanu before the king (BM 118885).



(b) Second register of the Black Obelisk showing Jehu of Israel before the king (BM 118885).



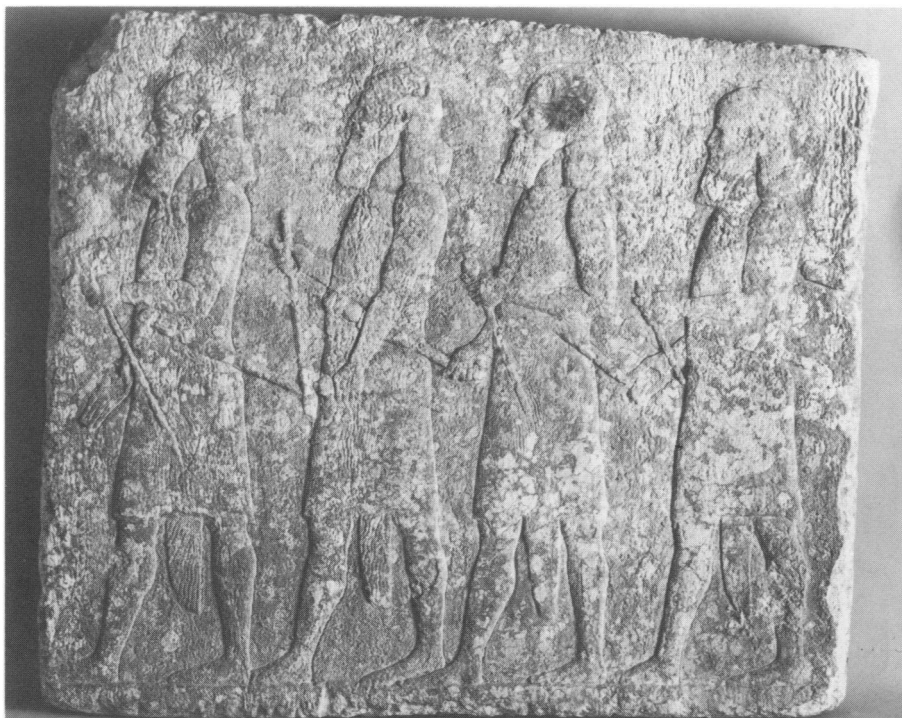
(a) The Broken Obelisk showing an Assyrian king of the 11th century B.C. receiving two foreign rulers and their officers (BM 118898).



(b) Cylinder seal from Tyre, photographs courtesy of the excavator, Patricia M. Bikai



(c) Detail from the so-called White Obelisk, showing before a temple a table bearing a ziggurat-shaped cake and a vessel.



(a) Relief from the Palace of Sennacherib in the Honolulu Academy of Arts, No 490514-2.



(b) Detail of the relief in the Honolulu Academy of Arts.



Sennacherib standing up in his hand drawn chariot supervising the work upon his new palace; attendants behind the chariot resemble those portrayed in the Honolulu fragment.