

The Imagined Landscape

Art and Representation



Neo-Assyrian Art

- Alabaster or gypsum reliefs in the palaces:
 - Recorded military campaigns in detail
 - Royal activities: lion hunts
 - An element of royal propaganda & new in Mesopotamian art
- Three main Neo-Assyrian palaces are:
 - Nimrud: Ashurnasipal II
 - Khorsabad: Sargon II
 - Ninevah: Sargon II's successors



Winged genii, Nimrud

Assyrian Art

- Reliefs lining walls in certain specifically selected rooms
- Compositions in glazed brick
- The obelisk: a standing stone covered with texts & representations on all four faces
- Metalwork with engraved and embossed scenes (e.g. palace gates) in reign of Shalmaneser III



Black obelisk
Shalmaneser III



Ashurnasipal glazed tile,
Nimrud



Balawat gates

Assyrian Art Conventions

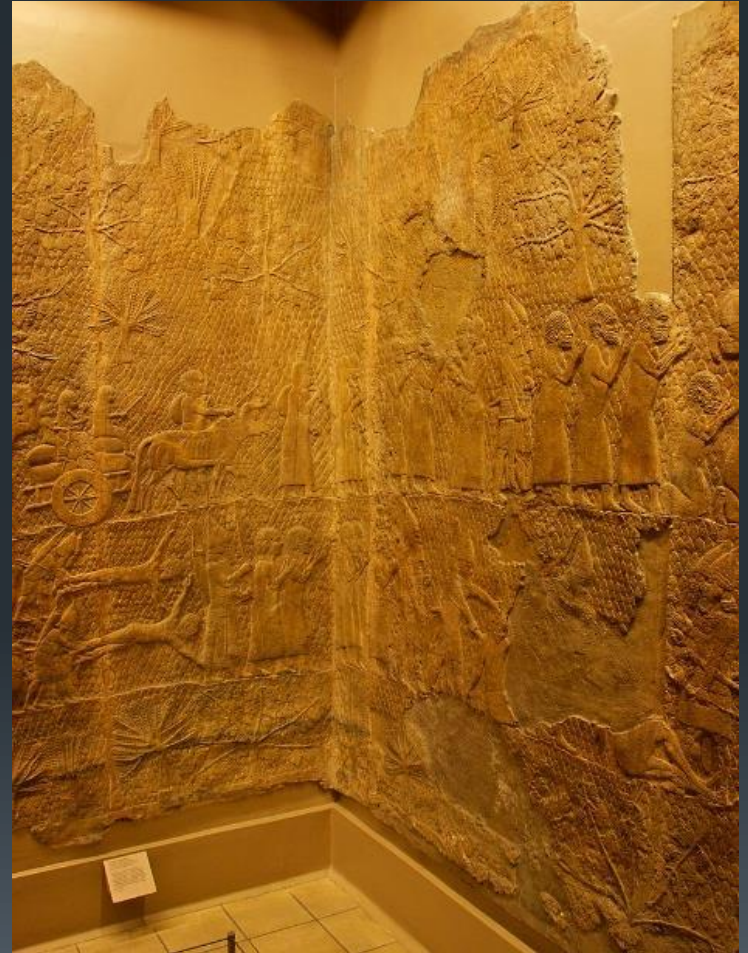
- Carved in high / raised relief
 - Organised in registers
 - Greater use of pictorial field
 - Use topographical details to situate scene
 - Include labels & epigraphs on reliefs
- The essence of Assyrian art is repetition:
 - Conveys the message that Assyrian power is irresistible & shows this power in action



Lachish relief, Sennacherib

Assyrian Compositions

- Limited repertoire of formulaic scenes:
 - Battle scenes
 - Lion hunt scenes
 - Scenes showing king performing religious duties or associated with god Ashur



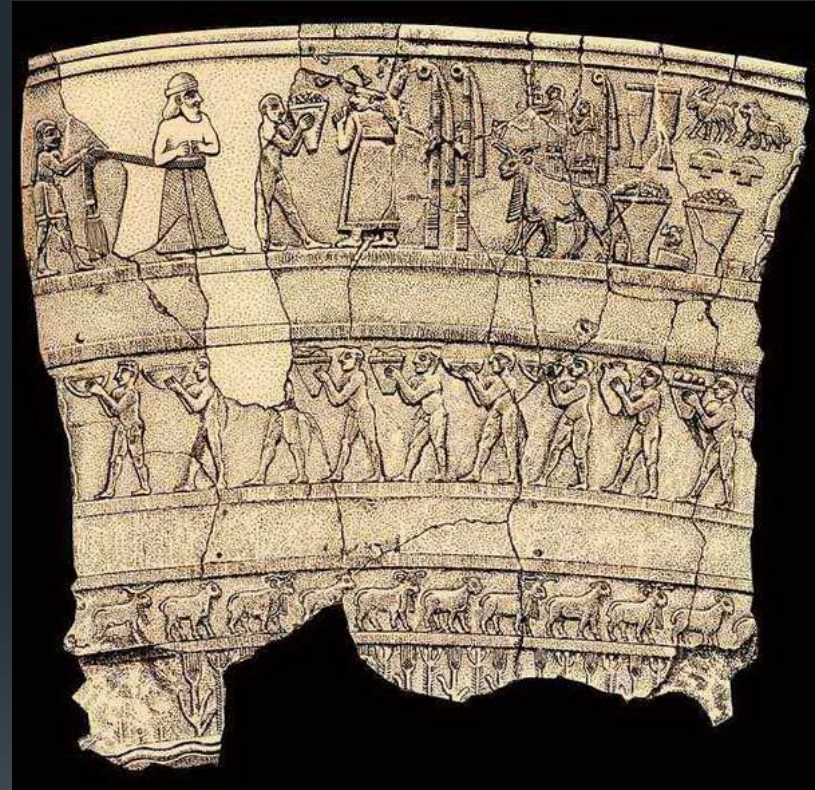
Lachish reliefs

Mesopotamian Gardens

- Political role of the garden in the Near East during the early 1st millennium BC
- Assyrian monarchs created gardens to highlight the accomplishments of their reign
- Garden epitomised the fertility of the land & thus reiterated one of the key roles of the king in ensuring the fruitfulness of his kingdom
- Gardens were intrinsically associated with Near Eastern temples, not just as a location for outdoor rituals, but also “as a bounteous ambience in this a god would wish to walk abroad” (Stronach 1990, 171)

Origins of Mesopotamian Gardens

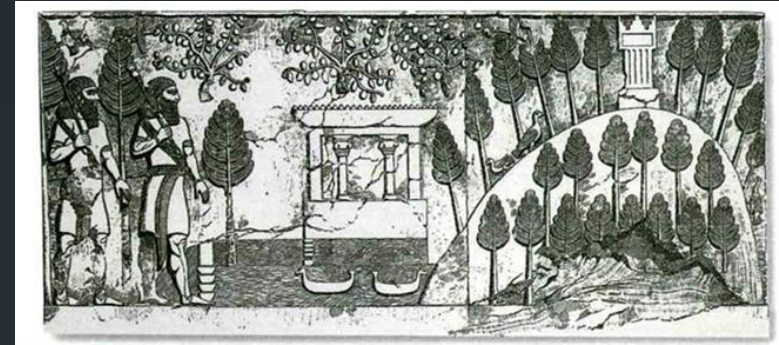
- Fertility: proper management of the domesticated landscape
- Early references to gardens in Mesopotamia in myth & historical sources
- Occupation of gardener (**nukaribbu**) attested in all periods:
 - Some receive rations from the king
 - Most in private employment.
 - References to women gardeners



Uruk vase

Gardens as Propaganda

- Symbol of foreign conquest:
 - Ashurnasipal II (883-859): exotic tree cuttings & seeds retrieved on campaigns & planted in garden of palace at Nimrud
 - Sargon II (722-705): creates “a park like unto Mount Amanus...with every tree of the Hittite land & the plants of every mountain” at his new capital of Khorsabad
 - Sennacherib (704-681): moved palace to Ninevah & laid out “a great park unto Mount Amanus”



Sargon II's park, Khorsabad



Sennacherib's Garden

Royal Gardens

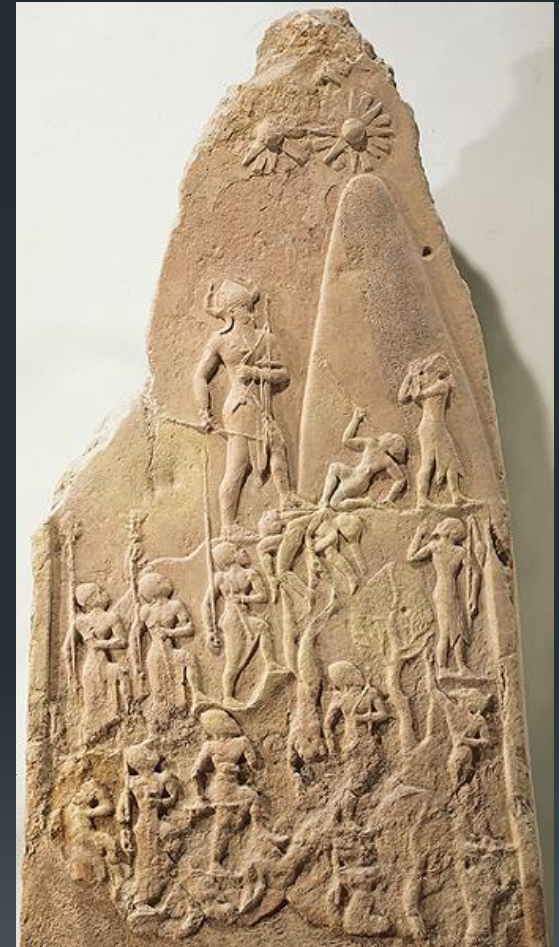
- Gardens illustrate the king's cosmic role in assuring the fertility of the land:
 - Tree of life
- Stronach (1990): the interest in the exotic as aspect of imperial expansion might be paralleled by the Victorians
 - Sargon II wanted to plant widest possible range of botanical specimens, including Syrian trees on an artificial hill, depicting Mount Amanus



Tree of life: Ashurnasipal II

Use of Topoi

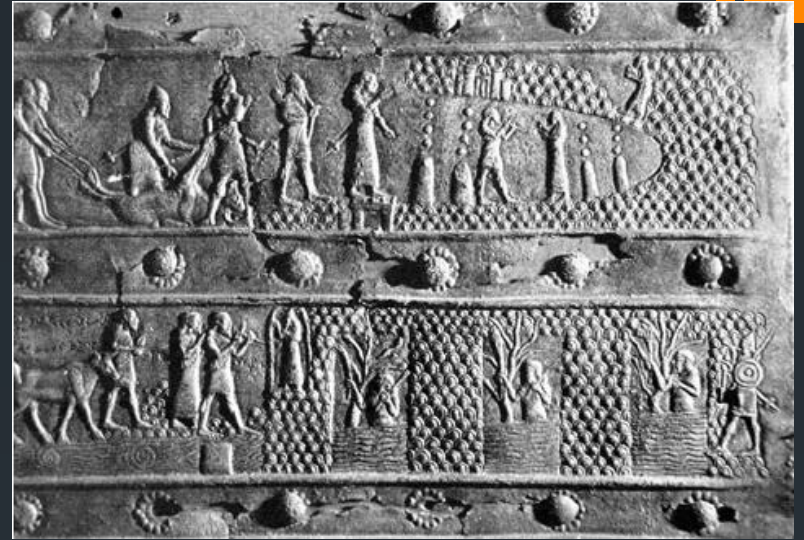
- Repeated images which serve as markers in development of historical narrative
- Well established in Near Eastern art
- Stela of Naram-Sin:
 - Physical mapping of a known geography
 - Trees & mountains act as markers of time & place
 - Clear reference to a place/landscape dominated by the ruler
 - Represents the emerging ideology of Mesopotamian kingship
- Assyrians exploit topoi & details of foreign landscapes to mark place & event



Stela of Naram-Sin

Assyrian Landscapes

- Reliefs: window onto the perception of the Assyrians of the different peoples, cities & landscapes encountered in military campaigns
- Other landscape representations include images on the Tell Balawat gates
- Transformation of the physical landscape at the Source of the Tigris Monument: Inscriptions & reliefs



Tell Balawat, detail



Dibni Su sources at Birkleyn

Representations of Landscapes

- Early reliefs: minimal depiction of landscape
- More detailed & complex from the reign of Sennacherib
- Throughout Neo-Assyrian period changing representations reflect changing relationship between Assyria & the imperial periphery



Garden of Ashurbanipal

Representations of Landscapes

- Increasing experimentation:
 - Late 8th century: battle narratives are less of a focus in reliefs
 - 7th century: increasing references to the North Syrian landscape
 - 7th century: representations of Assyrian gardens modelled on North Syrian landscape
 - Use of epigraphs & also details of foreigners (eg. dress) to identify place



Musicians & tame lion in garden, North palace
Ninevah, 7th century

Political Use of Gardens & their Representation

- Thomason (2001): Assyrian kings commissioned scenes of the North Syrian landscape to assert & demonstrate it was part of their territory
- “The focus is on the representation of the floral and faunal elements of the North Syrian landscape because these elements, as deliberately constructed images, seem to have played a particularly important role in ideology and royal legitimation” (Thomason 2001: 69)



Ninevah garden scene

Three North Syrian Topoi

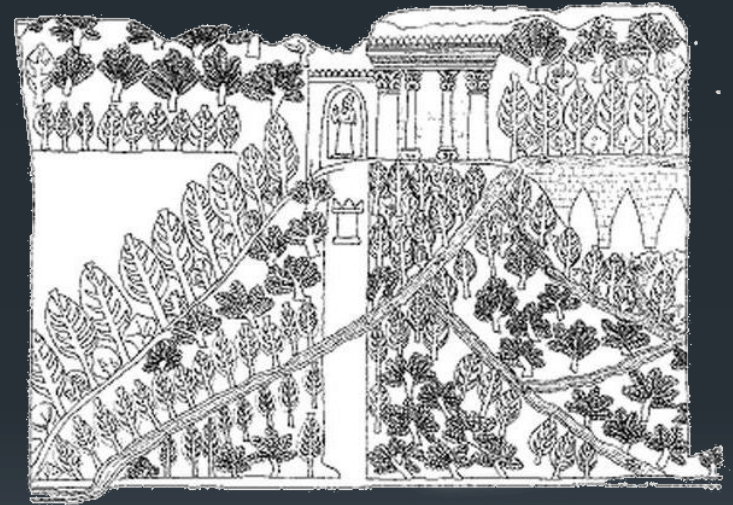
- (Ashurnasipal II-Tiglathpileser III)
- Diversity of North Syrian floral landscape:
 - Variety of wild trees & vegetation
 - Not generic but used to indicate “specificity of place” (Winter 1999: 72)
- Diverse exotic faunal landscape of North Syria:
 - Tame but exotic animals, symbolically incorporated into the empire as tribute
- Lion hunts:
 - Control over nature
 - Lions symbolised abundance, virility, & uncontrolled chaos of nature



Details of Ashurbanipal's reliefs

Topos 4: Garden Modelled as Mount Amanus

- Landscape of North Syria imagined as lush, abundant, diverse & embedded in Mesopotamian psyche
 - Mt Amanus: the original exotic site to emulate
 - Bounty, fertility and diversity
 - Source of cedar wood



Detail of garden relief, Khorsadab

Topos 4: Garden Modelled as Mount Amanus

- “in which all the aromatic herbs of Hatti & fruit trees of the mountains were planted” (Thomason 2001: 80)
- “Thus the mountainous region to the west of Assyria was a consistent source of mystical intrigue & pleasure in Mesopotamian history, a diverse & tantalizing place worthy of emulation in the heartland” (Thomason 2001: 81)



Detail of garden relief, Khorsadab

Topos 5: Landscape of North Syria

- Triumphant victory, pleasure & fertility
- Image of fertility. An idyll within the exotic landscape supplied by a beneficent ruler:
 - Grapevines with extremely large, succulent grapes
 - Flamboyant flowers
 - Lions depicted in peaceful repose



Khorsabad

Topos 5: Landscape of North Syria

- “Its image was deliberately construed & shows the Assyrian imagining of peacefulness & fertility connected with an exotic landscape that was above all supplied by the beneficent king to the Assyrian heartland” (Thomason 2001: 89)
- “a rhetorical act that helped to cement political aims & substantiate the deeds & claims of the king as the maintainer & restorer of pleasure and prosperity in the empire. By acquiring & creating through images & live displays within the heartland such a wonderfully diverse & lush environment, each Neo-Assyrian king was presented as the legitimate, beneficent, & fit leader” (Thomason 2001: 92)



Khorsabad

Ashurbanipal Garden Feast

- Tamed garden landscape populated with luxurious vegetation & wild animals
- Musicians & attendants in the background
- Royal garden replicates the imagining of the North Assyrian bountiful landscape



Summary

- Thomason's five topoi share a constant theme
 - Landscape of North Syria was depicted & recreated as diverse and fertile world
- Incorporation of the North Syrian landscape into Assyrian royal ideology & iconography as a very public spectacle
- Symbolised royal power/prestige, & royal duties
- Embedded in very ancient conceptions of North Syria as source of wealth & luxury