



Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh: Genesis of an Iconographic Motif

Author(s): V. Danrey

Source: *Iraq*, Vol. 66, Nineveh. Papers of the 49th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Part One (2004), pp. 133-139

Published by: British Institute for the Study of Iraq

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4200568>

Accessed: 29-03-2017 12:38 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



British Institute for the Study of Iraq is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Iraq*

WINGED HUMAN-HEADED BULLS OF NINEVEH: GENESIS OF AN ICONOGRAPHIC MOTIF

By V. DANREY*

More than one hundred monumental sculptures of winged human-headed bulls have been identified among the remains of Assyria's capitals, of which around forty come from Nineveh. When these ancient Mesopotamian stone giants re-emerged they became a symbol of Neo-Assyrian power. This article aims to study the genesis of these emblematic figures by looking at the earliest iconographic examples. This genealogical development will lead us to consider the etymology and iconographic transcriptions of the Akkadian terms traditionally associated with the figures of winged human-headed bulls, and to ponder their evolution in the various fields of artistic production.

Forty-three colossal sculptures of winged human-headed bulls have so far been discovered in Nineveh: two at the Nergal gate,¹ a few fragments from the *Bit Nakkapti*² and around forty monumental sculptures in the remains of Sennacherib's Palace.³ Situated on each side of the main gates, these figures guarded the city and palace entrances. They were carved from monolithic limestone blocks and completed after they had been set up either in gateways, in which case the head is in line with the body, or in the alignment of the walls flanking the entrances, with the head turned at an angle of ninety degrees. Botta suggested that these colossi had originally been surmounted by a straight lintel;⁴ however, Place's excavations in Khorsabad revealed the existence of brick arches built above some of the gates.⁵ Although they played a real functional role due to their position, their presence does not seem to have been architecturally indispensable because other entrances with similar dimensions were not strengthened in this way. Consequently, it would be better to speak of an "active façade".

These figures are all identical within a single building, except for a few variations relating to the manufacture of each piece. The repeated use of these figures in the decoration of the gates should not be considered, according to Place, as "the proof of poverty of invention and taste, but rather as a mark of a wisely settled sobriety."⁶ Acting as pairs, these figures were used as guides within the palace: they oriented and escorted the visitor from gate to gate until he reached the throne room.

The earliest example of a colossal winged human-headed bull was found in the area of the Old Palace at Assur and may date may to the reign of Tiglath-pileser I.⁷ It consisted of fragments buried under the foundations of Sennacherib's palace, and could be identified as belonging to a winged human-headed bull thanks to the elements of a head-dress specific to these figures.

The human-headed bulls found at Nimrud and Khorsabad are more complete examples (Figs. 1–2). Those from Nimrud are distinguished by their head-dress with three pairs of horns surmounted by a round cap. Some were represented with the body and tail of a fish under the belly and with their hair decorated by a fish head.⁸ The winged human-headed bulls from Khorsabad are finer: they wear a cylindrical head-dress with three pairs of horns surmounted by feathers and encircled by a headband of rosettes. These figures have the peculiarity, at first unnoticeable but surprising in three-quarter view, of having five legs. Thus these figures were represented standing if seen from the front and walking if seen from the side. However, from the position of these sculptures and from the dimension of the rooms in which they were installed, it seems unlikely that all five legs could have been seen at the same time.

* ArchéOrient, Lyon.

¹ Finch 1948; Layard 1853b: 120; see *Layard Papers*, British Library, Vol. CLXVI, notes from 17/11/1849 to 26/01/1850.

² Thompson and Hutchinson 1929: Pl. 7; Russell 1991: 84–6.

³ Layard 1853b: 645 and plan facing p. 67; Galter *et al.* 1986: 29, Fig. 1; Danrey 2004: § *Inventaire des taureaux*

ailés androcéphales dans la sculpture monumentale néo-assyrienne.

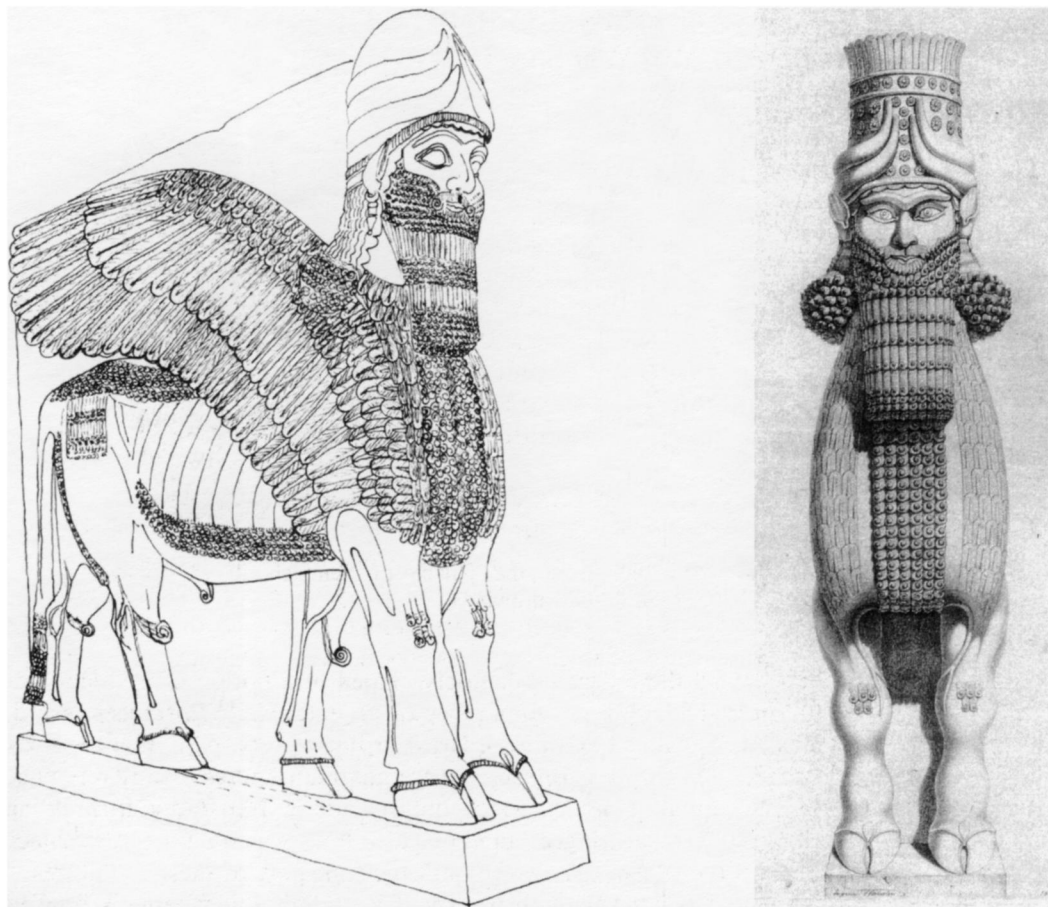
⁴ Botta and Flandin 1849–50 (Vol. V): 65, 67–8, 71–2.

⁵ Place 1867–70 (Vol. I): 261; Caubet 1994 (ed.): 198, Fig. 2.

⁶ Place 1867–70 (Vol. II): 213.

⁷ Preusser 1955: 27, Pl. 23.

⁸ Madhloom 1970: Pl. LXXI, Fig. 1 and Pl. LXVI, Fig. 4.



Figs. 1–2. Winged human-headed bulls from the palaces of Assurnasirpal at Nimrud (Madhloom's drawing) and of Sargon II at Khorsabad (Flandin's drawings).

This subterfuge, probably an attempt at realism by the early Assyrian artists, was abandoned in Nineveh where the number of legs became four again. From a general point of view, the winged human-headed bulls of Nineveh (Figs. 3–4) reproduce the model of the Khorsabad colossi. The proportions were lightened to give them a less massive and more dynamic gait. Likewise, more care was taken in the depiction of the feathers and of the curls of hair — details which are the expression of a miniaturist tendency in low-relief art from the time of Sennacherib.

The monumentality and the number of winged human-headed bulls rediscovered in Neo-Assyrian buildings underline the importance of this motif in the decoration of the gates. These figures played more than a decorative or architecturally functional role, they had an important symbolic potential as demonstrated in contemporary Assyrian texts. The terms *lamassu* and *šedu* have become conventional among archaeologists to designate winged human-headed bulls. However, the link between iconography and text is not as direct as it might seem. The Sumerian sign KAL can be read as both *alad* and *lama*. According to Lieberman the term *lamassu* derives from the Sumerian *lama*.⁹ This hypothesis, which is largely accepted today, was preferred to Falkenstein's proposal that *lama* be translated *lama(r)* and not *lama(s)*,¹⁰ thus refuting the link between the terms *lama* and *lamassu*. Von Soden attempted to recognize a Semitic origin for the words *lamassu* and *šedu* which, he believed, symbolized the expression of "vital strength".¹¹ However, according to Landsberger the terms *lama-lamassu* always designated the name of a female deity as opposed to the male *alad-šedu*.¹²

⁹ Lieberman 1977: 373 ff., No. 434.

¹⁰ Falkenstein 1943: 353, No. 237.

¹¹ Von Soden 1964: 148.

¹² Landsberger and Bauer 1927: 218–19, note 2.



Figs. 3–4. Winged human-headed bull from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh (Madhloom's drawings).

From a semantic point of view, all these terms are closely related to a notion of protection: a benevolent spirit attached to an individual, a group, a place or an entrance.¹³ Entrances served, in a way, to define the figures which flanked them in order to protect access. Although the texts do not give any indication concerning the appearance of these guardian figures or any reference to a possible hybrid nature, the term *aladlammu*, which only occurs in Neo-Assyrian building inscriptions, perfectly describes the colossal winged human-headed bulls which flanked the palace gates. The texts describe in detail the shape, the carving and the transport of these sculptures,¹⁴ but no symbolic characteristic is associated with them. Yet if we admit Landsberger's implied reading, ^dalad.^dlamma.meš = ^dalad.meš (ù) ^dlamma.meš, then there is an etymological link between the terms *lamassu-šedu* on the one hand, and *aladlammu* on the other hand.

From the Pre-Sargonic period onwards, the term *lama-lamassu* designated a female protective entity, represented as an anthropomorphic divinity with hands joined in an attitude of prayer. She played the role of an intermediary between men and deities in the transmission of prayers and offerings. The cult of the goddess Lama was very popular in Babylonia and survived until the end of the Kassite period. Thus there was, during the Assyrian period, a radical change in the representation of the *lama-lamassu*, henceforth epitomized by winged human-headed bulls. The latter still seem to have retained part of the original apotropaic role of the goddess, which assigned to them the protection of entrances. This transformation underlines the new orientation followed by art at the turn of the first millennium BC: because religious iconography was progressively taken over by written traditions, it tended to specialise in the representation of apotropaic and prophylactic themes.

The extraordinary infatuation for composite figures which characterised the beginning of the first millennium BC caused Neo-Assyrian artists to turn back to their Mesopotamian heritage. The earliest figures of winged human-headed bulls date from the first half of the second millennium BC. However, it is difficult to establish the exact origin of the motif, especially during this period of intense cultural exchange. The winged human-headed quadruped with a horned head-dress, depicted on the upper part of one of the broad sides of a stele from Ebla, could be a prototype of the theme (Fig. 5),¹⁵ and so could the fragmentary figure that appears on a Kassite impression from Nippur (Fig. 6).¹⁶ It is recognisable by the massive lines of its body, the shape of its hooves and the end of its tail, and appears between two figures on a fourteenth-century Middle Assyrian

¹³ For a summary see "*lamassu*", "*šedu*" in *CAD*, and "*lamma/lamassu*" in *RIA*.

¹⁴ See "*aladlammu*" in *CAD*; Russell 1991: 94–116.

¹⁵ Matthiae *et al.* 1995: 390, Fig. 236.

¹⁶ Legrain 1925: 296, Pl. XXIX, LII, No. 560; Matthews, 1992, No. 130.

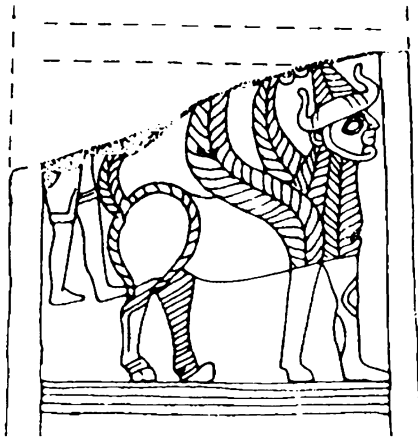


Fig. 5. Detail of the Ishtar Stele (c. 1800 BC) from Temple N at Ebla (Idlib Museum 3003; basalt; Ebla expedition drawing).

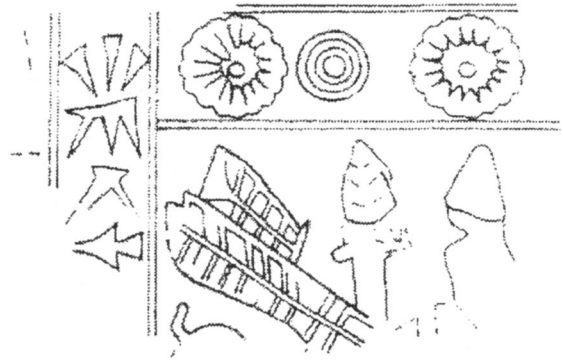


Fig. 6. Kassite (14th century BC) seal impression from Nippur (University Museum, Philadelphia, CBS 14268; Matthews' drawing).

seal (Fig. 7).¹⁷ A similar scene also appears in the first millennium where this bull monster was often depicted between two “heroes” who seem to strike it and pin it to the ground (Fig. 8).¹⁸ Its appearance in contest scenes with different types of hero was especially popular during the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods (Fig. 9).¹⁹

This variation on an identical theme was sometimes interpreted as an illustration of the fight of Gilgamesh against the Bull of Heaven. This creature, called GUD.AN.NA, was created by Anu to destroy the city of Uruk at the request of his daughter Ishtar who wanted to take revenge on Gilgamesh. It is related that the Bull of Heaven charged into Uruk and attacked Gilgamesh and Enkidu who, after overcoming it, offered its heart to the sun god and its horns to Lugalbanda. However, all versions of the epic offer only a few details concerning the appearance of the GUD.AN.NA. The element GUD indicates that it belonged to the bovine family. The text insists on the bull's strength and on the thickness of its coat,²⁰ but does not contain any reference to a human head. Moreover, this transposition raises problems relating to the traditional identification of Enkidu with the bull-man and to various details of the texts which do not correspond to the scenes represented. Furthermore, based on fragments of the Third Dynasty of Ur found at Kish and Nippur, Offner has suggested a connection between the episode of the Bull of Heaven and the contest scenes of the Akkadian period representing the nude hero fighting the long-horned water-buffalo.²¹

The winged human-headed bull appeared in various fields of Neo-Assyrian art. Beyond the borders of the empire, it was influenced by local traditions. Although they lack the monumentality of the Assyrian colossi, the winged human-headed bulls from Tell Hajaja, exhibited in the Museum at Deir-ez-Zor,²² display a more refined and graceful style.

The motif also appears on various Neo-Assyrian reliefs. In a scene from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, a winged human-headed bull is shown against a background of sea, as a protective figure looking after the good progress of a maritime convoy of cedars of Lebanon.²³ The relief-sequence from Court VI of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh illustrates the different stages of the transport of these bull colossi from the quarries at Balatai to the palace where they were erected.²⁴ In the British Museum there is a fragment of a slab from Tiglath-pileser III's palace at Nimrud,²⁵

¹⁷ Vollenweider 1967: 61, No. 62, Pl. 32, Figs. 1–2.

¹⁸ Pittmann and Aruz 1987: 68, No. 60 and 71, No. 69.

¹⁹ Collon 2001: No. 14 and see also Nos. 277, 302 and 340.

²⁰ Tournay and Shaffer 1994: 152–4 (tab. VI, col. III, ll. 36–7; tab. VI, col. IV, ll. 25–7).

²¹ Offner 1956: 117–19; Offner 1954: 180–1.

²² Layard 1853b: 276; Kühne 1988: 141; Mahmoud 1992: 101, Pl. 42.

²³ Botta and Flandin 1849–50 (Vol. V): 101–2, Pls. 31–5.

²⁴ Layard 1853a: Pls. 12–17; Layard 1853b: 106.

²⁵ Layard 1849a: Pl. 95a:8; Layard 1849b (Vol. I): 399; Layard 1849b (Vol. II): 23.

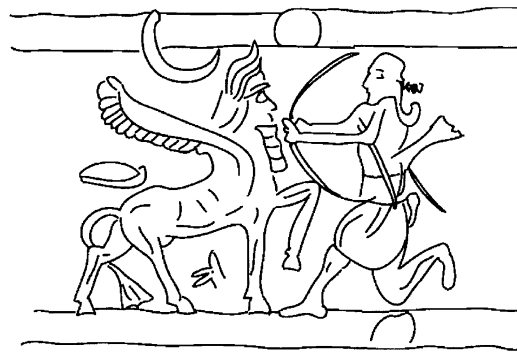


Fig. 7. Middle Assyrian (14th century BC); Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, 1874/0.3; quartz; 12 × 28 mm.

Fig. 8. Assyro-Babylonian (8th century BC); New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cherkasky Collection, 1987.96.10; chalcedony; 14 × 34 mm.

Fig. 9. Neo-Assyrian (9th–8th century BC); London, British Museum, ANE 89621; serpentine; 16 × 41 mm.

with the head of a colossal winged human-headed bull uniquely carved in relief. A monumental figure of a winged human-headed bull was found on a wall painting from the same king's palace at Til Barsip, in the passage linking rooms 24 and 25.²⁶ It demonstrates the transposition into two dimensions of the monumental sculptures of winged human-headed bulls. It is painted in bright colours and gives an idea of the original appearance of the bull colossi in the palaces.

Winged human-headed bulls appear on some eighth-century cylinder seals as a support for apotropaic figures (Fig. 10),²⁷ and also on various Uartian bronzes. The motif of the winged human-headed bull was directly borrowed from the Assyrian repertoire, and reproduced on various metal objects made in the Mannai and Luristan regions of western Iran.²⁸ These figures are deprived of their original meaning, and are the result of purely aesthetic fantasies, testifying to the meeting of several artistic trends.

Excavations of the Iraq Department of Antiquities in Mosul have revealed two monumental winged human-headed bulls at Nineveh among the remains of Tell Nebi Yunus.²⁹ An inscription allows them to be dated to the reign of Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal. Their general shape is close to those from Sennacherib's Palace, but they present a major difference: they were not carved out of the customary monolith, but were made from limestone blocks of various dimensions, assembled by tenon and mortise, laid about six courses high, from the plinth to the animal's withers, and up to ten or twelve blocks in length. These sculptures are of great interest because they are the last examples of colossal winged human-headed bulls found in Assyria.

Although this motif seems to have been definitively abandoned after Assurbanipal's reign, it showed up fleetingly a century later in Persian art. We find it on both sides of the monumental

²⁶ Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936: 57, Pl. XLVIII.

²⁷ Collon 2001: 142, Pls. XXIII, XL, XLIII, No. 277.

²⁸ Godard 1950: 20 (Fig. 10), 26 (Fig. 16), 111–12 (Fig. 97), 113 (98); Amandry 1996: 111–13; Musée du

Louvre: AO 12953, AO 19797, AO 20393, AO 20528, AO 20530.

²⁹ Cf. Manhal Jabr's presentation at the 49th R.A.I.

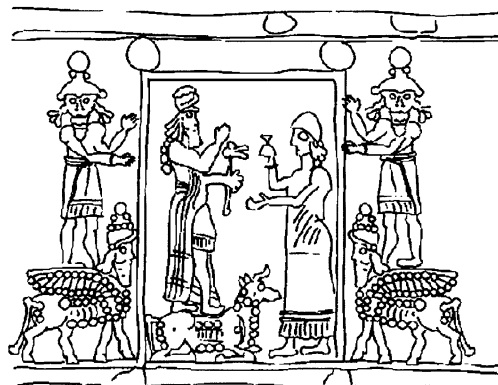


Fig. 10. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal (8th century BC); London, British Museum, ANE 132257; chalcedony; 10.4 × 34 mm.

gate F in Pasargadae³⁰ built during the reign of Cyrus II, and on the uprights of the so-called gate “of all Nations”³¹ built in Persepolis by Darius I and Xerxes. The latter are of heavier proportions, balanced by the grace of the wing shape. The original significance of these figures was obscured by an ideological and political agenda. The choice of the colossal winged human-headed motif, the symbol of the splendour of the Assyrian constructions, is not accidental: in reusing this heritage, the Persian authorities attempted to recover the strong aura and prestige of the great Assyrian kings.

The aim of this paper has been to clarify the origin and development of the winged human-headed bull figures of Nineveh. As far as we know, this motif seems to appear during the first half of the second millennium BC. Above all this figure developed in the Assyrian world and was successful in the field of monumental sculpture. The sudden disappearance of these sculptures in Assurbanipal’s reign is as surprising as the mastery of the early examples. No other figure came to substitute the winged human-headed bull at the gates of the last Neo-Assyrian buildings. This motif seems to have reached its highest level of perfection in Nineveh before disappearing without a real declining phase. Its disappearance has sometimes been attributed to the lack of large stone blocks in Assurbanipal’s time. However, it is difficult to see the real reasons for this break which is probably linked to the evolution of religious symbolism during the period of profound change characterising the end of a great empire.

Bibliography

- Amandry, P., 1996. A propos du trésor de Ziwiyé. *Iranica Antiqua* 6, 109–29.
 Botta, P.-E. and Flandin, E., 1849–50. *Monument de Ninive*. Paris.
 Caubet, A., 1994. (ed.) *De Khorsabad à Paris*. Paris.
 Collon, D., 2001. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum V*. London.
 Danrey, V., 2004. Le taureau ailé androcéphale dans la sculpture monumentale néo-assyrienne: Réflexions sur un thème iconographique. *Aegeo-Anatolica* (TMO 39). Lyon (in press).
 De Clercq, L., 1903. *Collection De Clercq. Catalogue méthodique raisonné. Antiquités assyriennes II*. Paris.
 Falkenstein, A., 1943. Keilschriftforschung: Review of N. Schneider, *Die Götternamen von Ur III* in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 46, cols. 350–5.
 Finch, J. P. G., 1948. The Winged Bulls at the Nergal Gate of Nineveh. *Iraq* 10, 9–18.
 Galter, H. D., Levine, L. D. and Reade, J., 1986. The Colossi of Sennacherib’s Palace and their Inscriptions. *Annual Review of the Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Project* 4, 27–32.
 Godard, A., 1950. *Le trésor de Ziwiyé*. Haarlem.
 Herzfeld, E., 1938. *Altpersische Inschriften* (AMI ergänzungsband 1). Berlin.
 Herzfeld, E., 1988. *Iran in the Ancient Near-East*. New York.
 Kühne, H. and A., 1988. *Die Ausgrabungen auf dem Tell Agaga/Shadikanni* (DaM 3). Mainz.
 Landsberger, B. and Bauer, T., 1927. Nachträge zu dem Artikel betr. Asarhaddon, Assurbanipal usw. o. S. 61 ff. *ZA* 37, 217–22.
 Layard, A. H., 1849a. *Monuments of Nineveh*. London.

³⁰ Herzfeld 1938: 5.

³¹ Herzfeld, 1988: Pls. L–LII.

- Layard, A. H., 1849b. *Nineveh and its Remains*. London.
- Layard, A. H., 1853a. *A Second Series of the Monuments of Nineveh*. London.
- Layard, A. H., 1853b. *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*. London.
- Legrain, L., 1925. *The Culture of the Babylonians from their Seals in the Collection of the Museum*. Philadelphia.
- Lieberman, S. J., 1977. *The Sumerian Loanwords in Old-Babylonian Akkadian I* (Harvard Semitic Studies 22). Missoula, Montana.
- Madhloom, T. A., 1970. *The Chronology of Neo-Assyrian Art*. London.
- Mahmoud, A., 1992. Eine neue Lamassu-Figur aus Tell Agaga/Shadikanni. *Von Uruk nach Tuttul — eine Festschrift für Eva Strommenger — Studien und Aufsätze von Kollegen und Freunden*. Munich, 101–2.
- Matthews, D. M., 1992. *The Kassite Glyptic of Nippur* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 116), Freiburg (Switzerland) and Göttingen.
- Matthiae, P., Pinnock, F. and Scandone Matthiae, G., 1995. *Ebla. Alle origini della civiltà urbana — trent'anni di scavi in Siria dell'Università di Roma*. Rome.
- Offner, G., 1951. Le « GUD-AN-NA » dans l'iconographie. *RA* 45, 117–19.
- Offner, G., 1954. L'épopée de Gilgamesh a-t-elle été fixée dans l'art? In P. Garelli (ed.), *Gilgamesh et sa légende* (Compte rendu de la VII^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale), Paris, 175–81.
- Osten, H. H. von der, 1957. *Altorientalische Siegelsteine der Sammlung Hans Silvius von Aulock* (Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia 13). Uppsala.
- Pittman, H. and Aruz, J., 1987. *Ancient Art in Miniature: Near Eastern Seals from the Collection of Martin and Sarah Cherkasky* (Metropolitan Museum of Art), New York.
- Place, V., 1867–70. *Ninive et l'Assyrie, avec des essais de restauration par Félix Thomas*. Paris.
- Preusser, C., 1955. *Die Paläste in Assur* (WVDOG 66). Berlin.
- Russell, J. M., 1991. *Sennacherib's Palace without Rival at Nineveh*. Chicago/London.
- Seidl, U., 1994. Der Thron von Toprakkale. Ein neuer Rekonstruktionsversuch. *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 27, 67–84.
- Thompson, R. C. and Hutchinson, R. W., 1929. *A Century of Exploration at Nineveh*. London.
- Thureau-Dangin, F. and Dunand, M., 1936. *Til Barsip*. Paris.
- Tournay, R. J. and Shaffer, A., 1994. *L'épopée de Gilgamesh*. Paris.
- Von Soden, W., 1964. Die Schutzgenien Lamassu und Shedû in der babylonisch-assyrischen Literatur. *BagM* 3, 148–56.