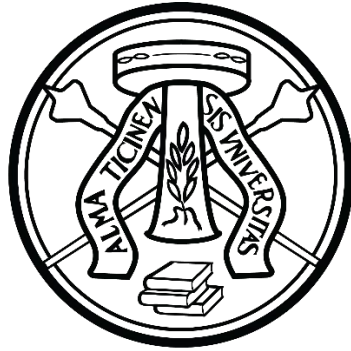




UNIVERSITÀ
DI PAVIA

DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI UMANISTICI

CORSO DI LAUREA MAGISTRALE

THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD:

HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY, & ART

Visuality, Text, and Royal Authority in Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid Art

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My heartfelt thanks go to Jacob VanCura for always helping me and supporting me through this process. I am especially grateful to my mother, whose unconditional support and strength have guided me throughout my life and who will always remain my greatest symbol of courage and perseverance. I also thank my father and my brother, whom I love deeply, for their continued love and support. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Reza Shah Pahlavi for his patriotism, his profound love for Iran, and his role in initiating and enabling the excavations at Persepolis. For his service to our country and its ancient heritage, we will always remain indebted to him and remember him with love and respect.

Preface

My interest in this subject grew from my love of art, antiquities, and my country, together with my longstanding fascination with the ancient histories of Mesopotamia and Iran. This interest could not have developed in the same way without the renewed attention given to Iran's ancient heritage under Reza Shah Pahlavi, particularly through the excavations at Persepolis. These passions motivated me to undertake this thesis, which I also completed in the hope of making my family proud. After extensive research, writing, and revision, I am pleased to present this work as the culmination of my studies at the University of Pavia.

Table of Contents

TITLE PAGE	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & PREFACE	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Orientalism, Ritual, and Narrative	1
1.2 The Political Work of Images	3
1.3 Questions and Claims	6
1.4 Constructing the Ancient Near East: Orientalism and Its Afterlives	8
1.5 Kingship as Political Ideology and State Structure	10
1.6 Monumentality and the Visual Politics of Power	11
1.7 Influence, Indigeneity, and Iranian Continuity	13
1.8 Rethinking the Ontology of the Image	14
1.9 Unresolved Debates in Imperial Visuality	16
1.10 Constructing Imperial Presence	17
1.11 From Assyria to Achaemenid Iran: Comparative Trajectories of Imperial Visibility	19
2 Methodology	22
2.1 Rethinking Sovereignty as Visual Production	22
2.2 Visuality as Presencing: Ontology and Image	23
2.3 Power and the Naturalization of Sovereignty	25
2.4 Agency and Distributed Presence	26
2.5 Methodological Synthesis: Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric	28

2.6	Comparative and Diachronic Method	30
2.7	Chapter Outline	32
3	Esarhaddon and the Production of Sovereignty	35
3.1	The Instability of Reality	36
3.2	The Victory Stele as Visible Hierarchy	44
3.3	The King's Precarious Image	50
4	Neo-Assyrian Art: The Rhetoric of Domination	59
4.1	Introduction	59
4.2	Historical Overview	61
4.3	Monumental Setting and Imperial Visual Grammar	63
4.4	Gesture and Hierarchical Composition	74
4.5	Representation of Enemies and Construction of the "Other"	79
4.6	Text and Image in Neo-Assyrian Art	85
4.7	Ashurbanipal's Lion Hunt Reliefs: Ritual and Violence	94
4.8	Conclusion	102
5	Achaemenid Art: The Iconography of Order and Harmony	105
5.1	Introduction	105
5.2	From Cyrus to Darius: A Watershed Moment	107
5.3	The Monument of the Lie and Its Undoing	111
5.4	The Apadana as a Catalogue of Empire	118
5.5	Hierarchical Order: The King on High	124
5.6	Conclusion	129
6	The Synthesis of Imperial Visibility from Assyria to Persia	132
6.1	Introduction: From Two Visual Grammars to Synthesis	132
6.2	The Evolution of Imperial Visibility from Assyria to Persia	135

6.3	Gesture and Hierarchy in the Visual Order	141
6.4	Enemies, Peoples, and the Ordered Other	150
6.5	Text and Image as Imperial Media	155
6.6	Influence, Appropriation, and Reconfiguration	161
6.7	From Domination to Order: Seeing Power Across Time	167
7	Conclusion	171
7.1	Summary of Findings	171
7.2	Text and Image in the Production of Sovereignty	172
7.3	Transformation of Near Eastern Iconographies of Power	175
7.4	Contribution and Future Perspectives	177
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	180

List of Figures

Chapter 3:

Esarhaddon and the Production of Sovereignty

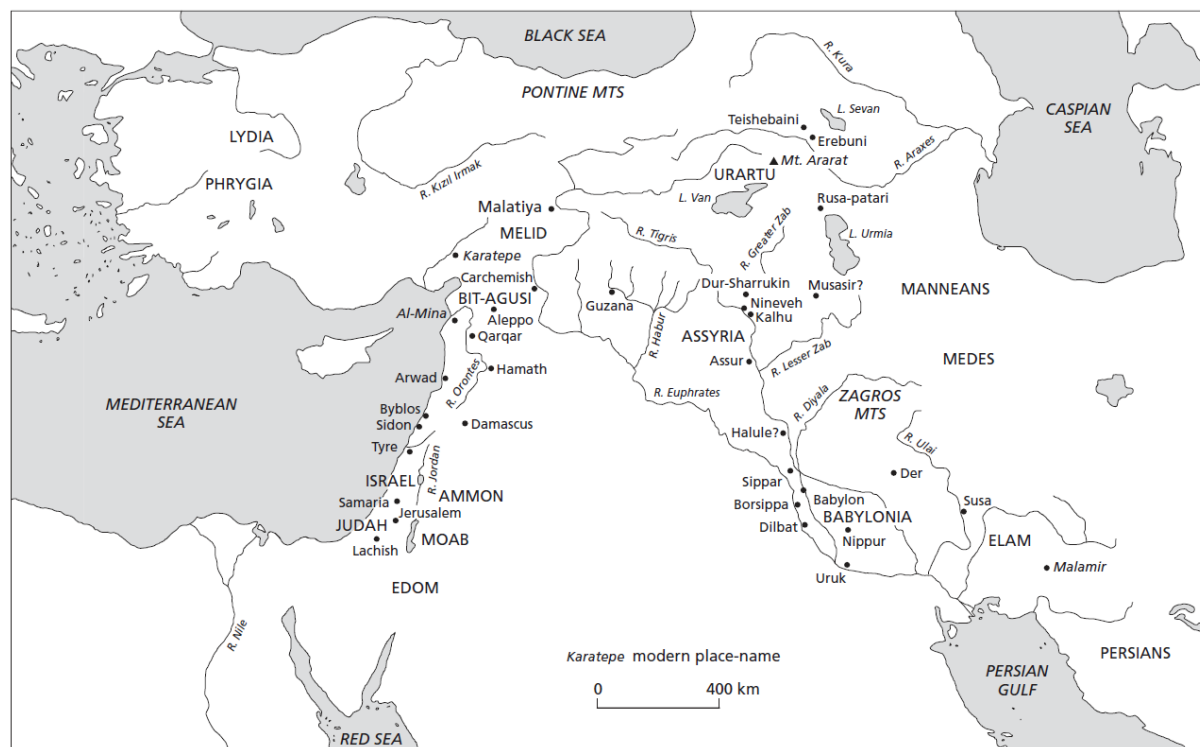


Figure 3.1: Map of the Near East in the early 1st millennium BCE with relevant sites.¹

¹ Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 226, map 11.1.



Figure 3.2: The Vassal-Treaty of Esarhaddon, Treaty with Ramataia of Urukazaba(r)na.²

² D. J. Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," *Iraq* 20, no. 1 (1958): pl. I.

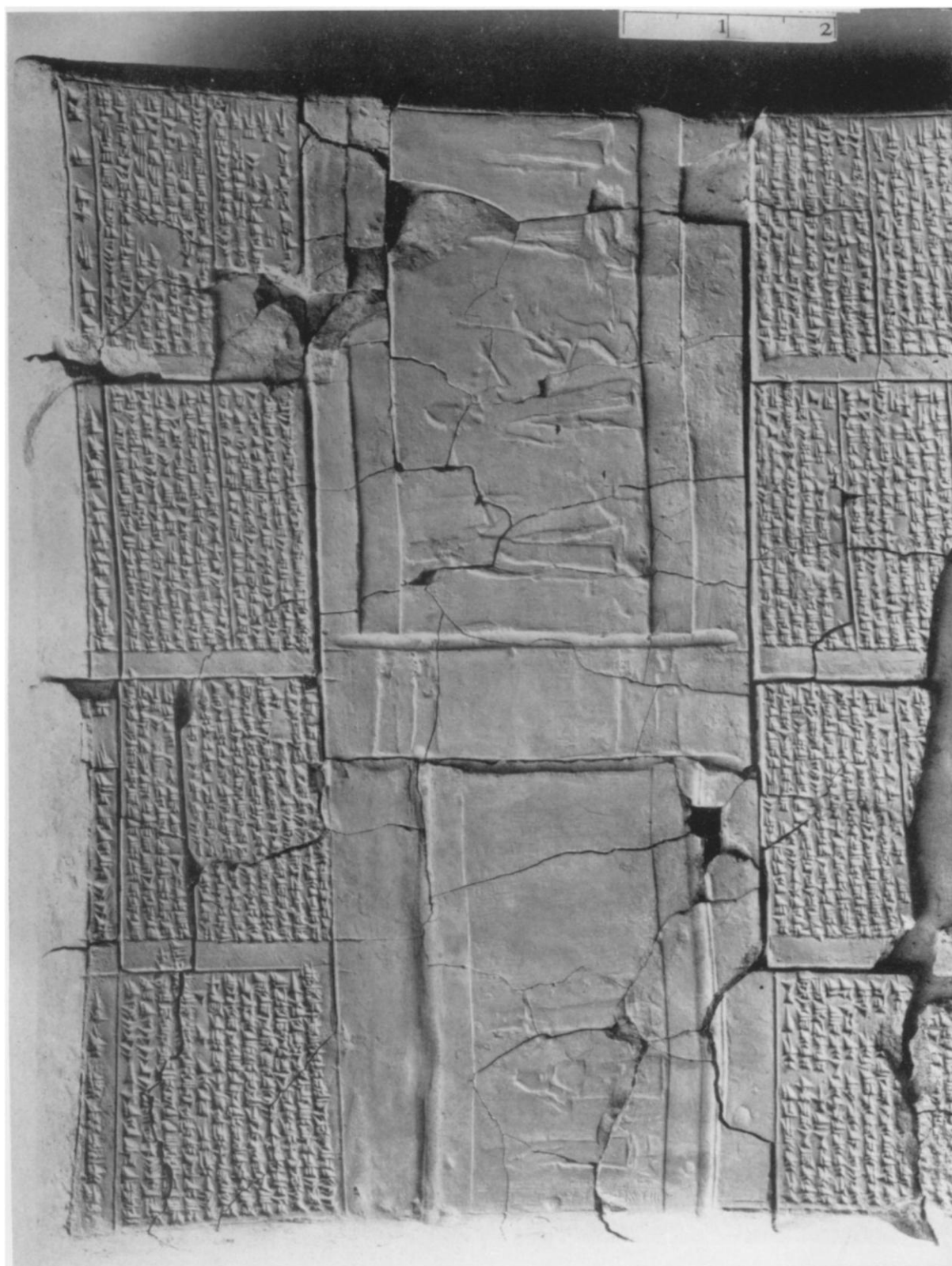


Figure 3.3: The Seal impressions.³

³ Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," pl. III.



Figure 3.4: The Seals of Sennacherib (left) and Ashur (right).⁴

⁴ Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," pl. IV.1.



Figure 3.5: The Middle Assyrian Royal Seal.⁵

⁵ Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," pl. IV.2.



Figure 3.6: Drawing of the Sam'al stele with Esarhaddon and the crown princes.⁶

⁶ Barbara Nevling Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria: Neo-Assyrian Kanephoric Stelai for Babylonia," *Hesperia Supplements* 33 (2004): fig. 13.2; see also J. Börker-Klähn, *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs*, 2 vols. (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1982), vol. 2, fig. 219.



Figure 3.7: Figurine of the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu as basket-bearer.⁷

⁷ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," fig. 13.1.



Figure 3.8: Ashurbanipal as basket-bearing king on a stele from the Esagila temple, Babylon.⁸

⁸ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," fig. 13.3.



Figure 3.9: Ashurbanipal as a basket-bearing king on a stele from the Ezida temple, Borsippa.⁹

⁹ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," fig. 13.4.



Figure 3.10: Shamash-shum-ukin as a basket-bearing king on a stele from the Ezida temple, Borsippa.¹⁰

¹⁰ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," fig. 13.5.

Chapter 4:

Neo-Assyrian Art: The Rhetoric of Domination

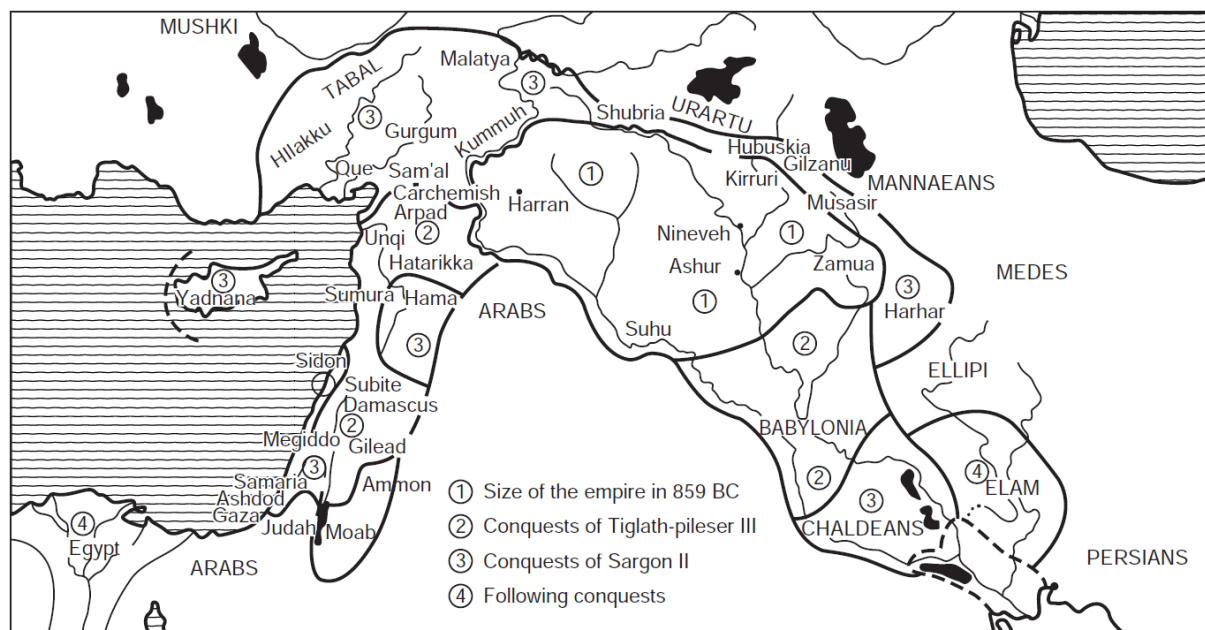


Figure 4.1: Map of Assyrian empire, ninth to seventh century BCE.¹¹

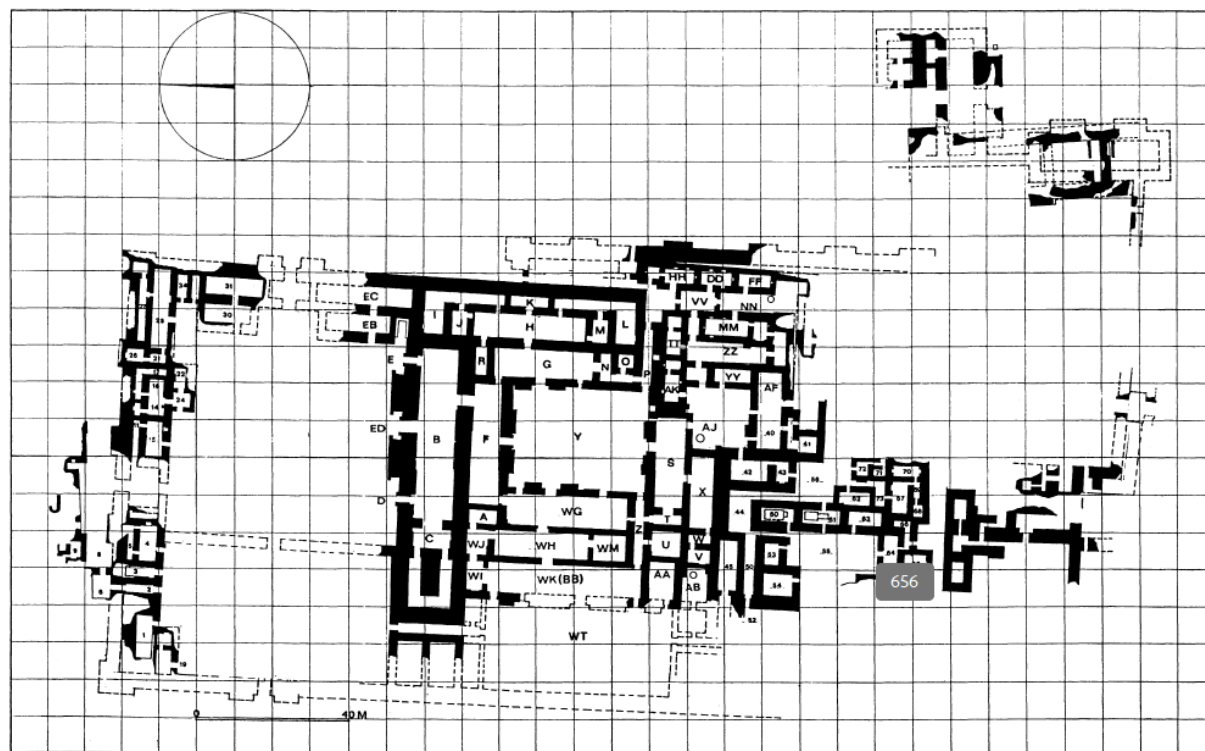


Figure 4.2: Plan of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu.¹²

¹¹ Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy*, trans. Soraia Tabatabai (London: Routledge, 2014), 488, fig. 28.4.

¹² John Malcolm Russell, "The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud: Issues in the Research and Presentation of Assyrian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 102, no. 4 (1998): 656, fig. 1.

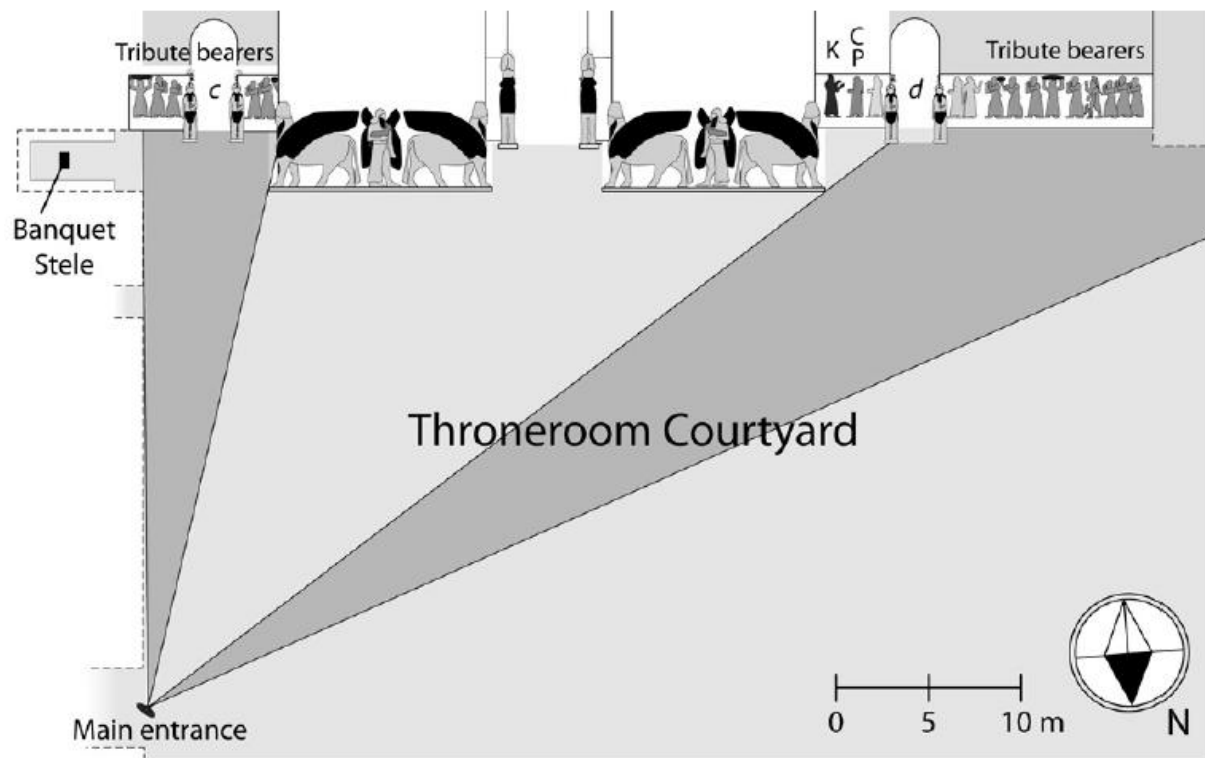


Figure 4.3: Viewer axis and approach to the throne-room suite in the Northwest Palace at Kalhu.¹³

¹³ David Kertai, "The Architectural Presence of the Assyrian King in His Palaces," in *Picturing Royal Charisma: Kings and Rulers in the Near East from 3000 BCE to 1700 CE*, ed. Arlette David, Rachel Milstein, and Tallay Ornan (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2023), 64, fig. 4.1.



Figure 4.4: Human-headed winged lion, lamassu, from the Northwest Palace at Kalhu.¹⁴

¹⁴ Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 168, fig. 21.

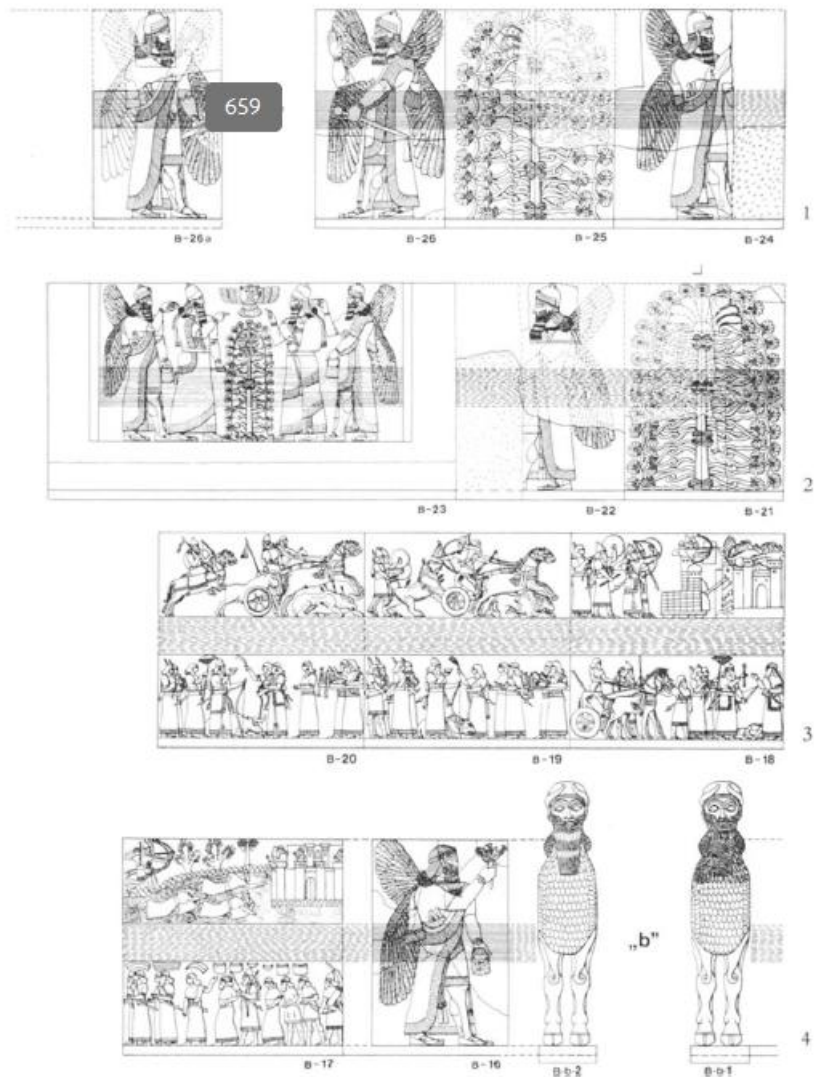


Figure 4.5: Reconstruction of part of the relief decoration of Room B with inscription running across relief.¹⁵

¹⁵ Russell, "Program of the Palace," 659, fig. 3.



Figure 4.6: Ashurnasirpal II facing the sacred tree from Room B of the Northwest Palace.¹⁶



Figure 4.7a: Ashurnasirpal II pouring libation over a dead lion from Room B, Northwest Palace.¹⁷

¹⁶ Chikako E. Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style' in the Narrative Scheme of Assurbanipal's Reliefs," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 107, fig. 4.

¹⁷ Mehmet-Ali Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (2006): 73, fig. 8.



Figure 4.7b: Ashurnasirpal II pouring libation over a dead bull, Room B, Northwest Palace.¹⁸



Figure 4.8: Prostrate enemy before Ashurnasirpal II, panel 18b, Room B, Northwest Palace.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 73, fig. 7.

¹⁹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 75, fig. 10.



Figure 4.9: Reconstruction of Panels 18-20, Room B, Northwest Palace.²⁰



Figure 4.10: Ashurnasirpal II between armed eunuchs, unarmed attendants, and apkallu figures, Room G, Northwest Palace.²¹

²⁰ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 73, fig. 6.

²¹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 80, fig. 16.

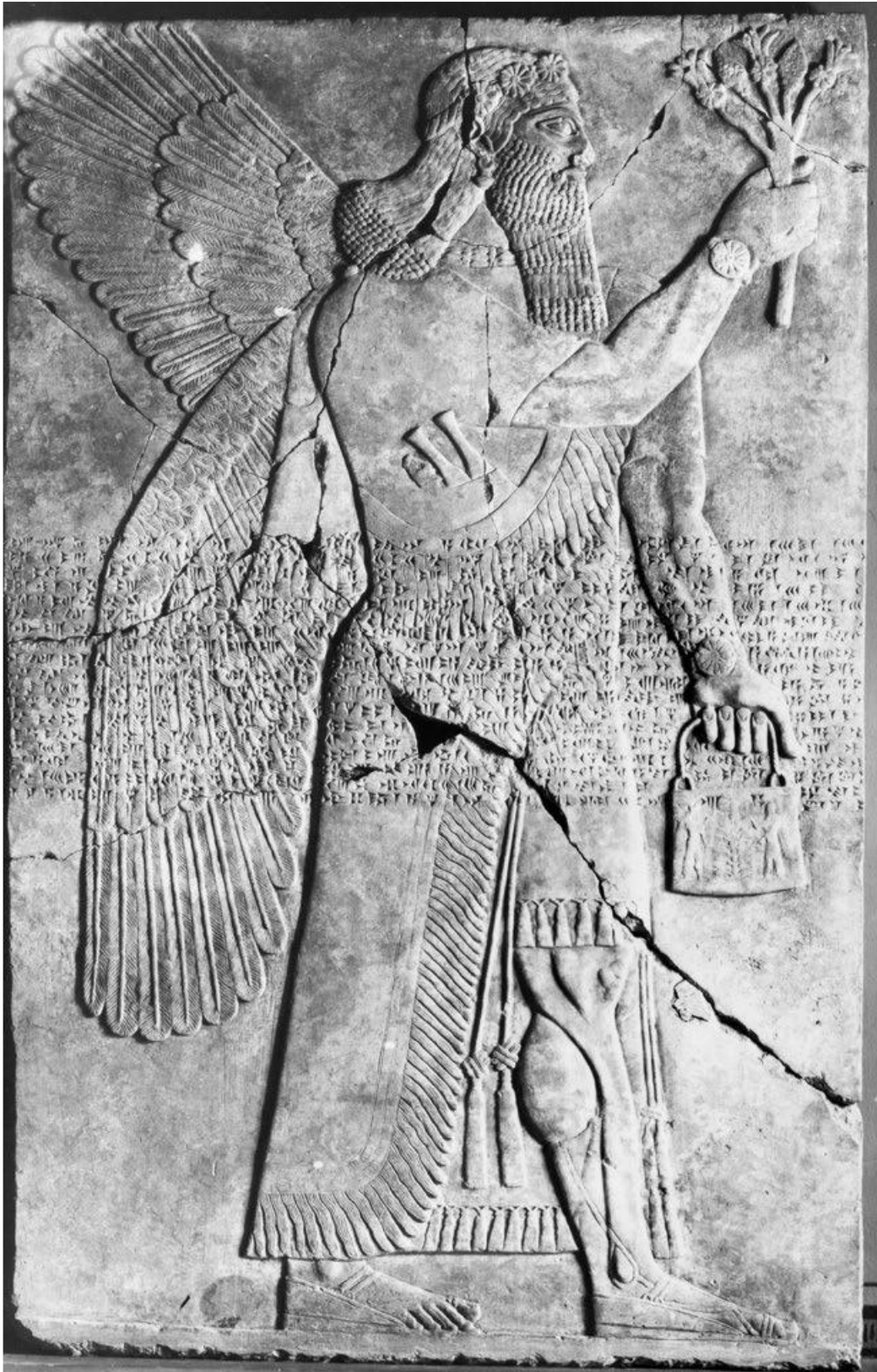


Figure 4.11: Winged genie holding a stalk of alternating tufted rosettes and cones, Room B, Door B, Northwest Palace.²²

²² Ludovico Portuese, "Fear, Concern and Care in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II," *Die Welt des Orients* 51, no. 1 (2021): 41, fig. 4a.

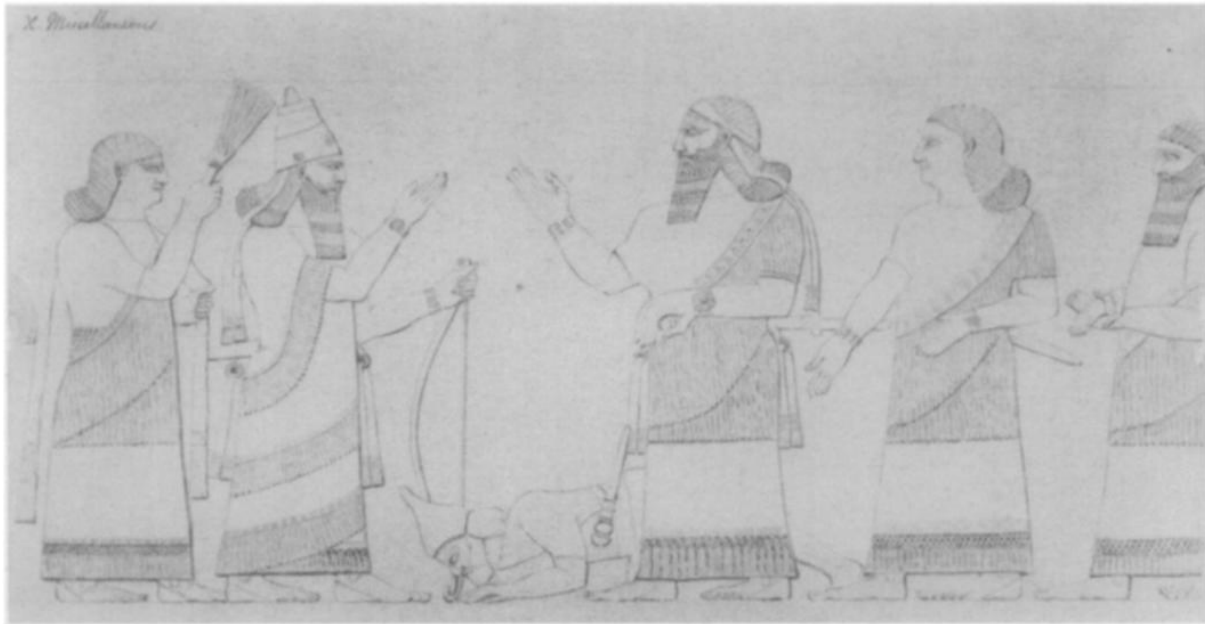


Figure 4.12: Tiglath-Pileser III receiving the submission of an enemy, Central Palace, Nimrud.²³



Figure 4.13: Tiglath-Pileser III trampling an enemy, Southwest Palace, Nimrud.²⁴

²³ Drawing by A. H. Layard. Reproduced from Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92, fig. 42.

²⁴ Drawing by A. H. Layard. Reproduced from Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92, fig. 43.

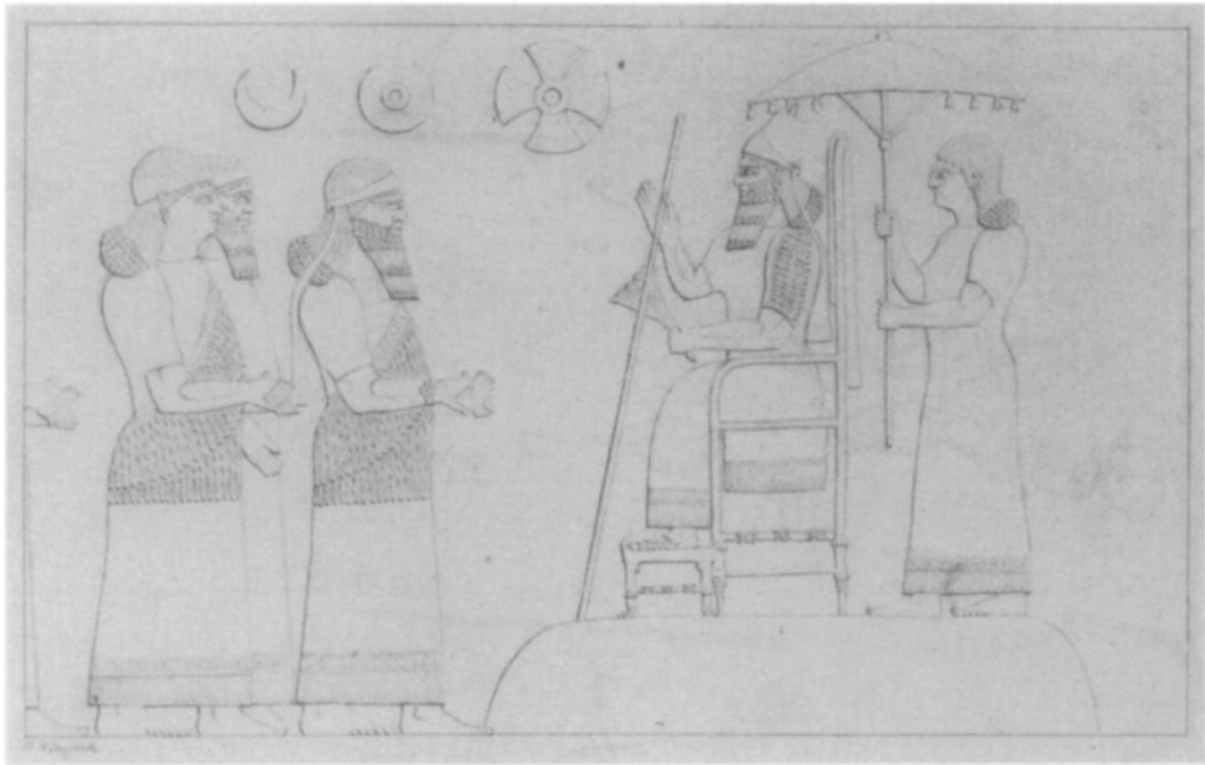


Figure 4.14: Tiglath-Pileser III enthroned receiving a high-ranking official, Central Palace, Nimrud.²⁵

²⁵ Drawing by A. H. Layard. Reproduced from Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 93, fig. 44.

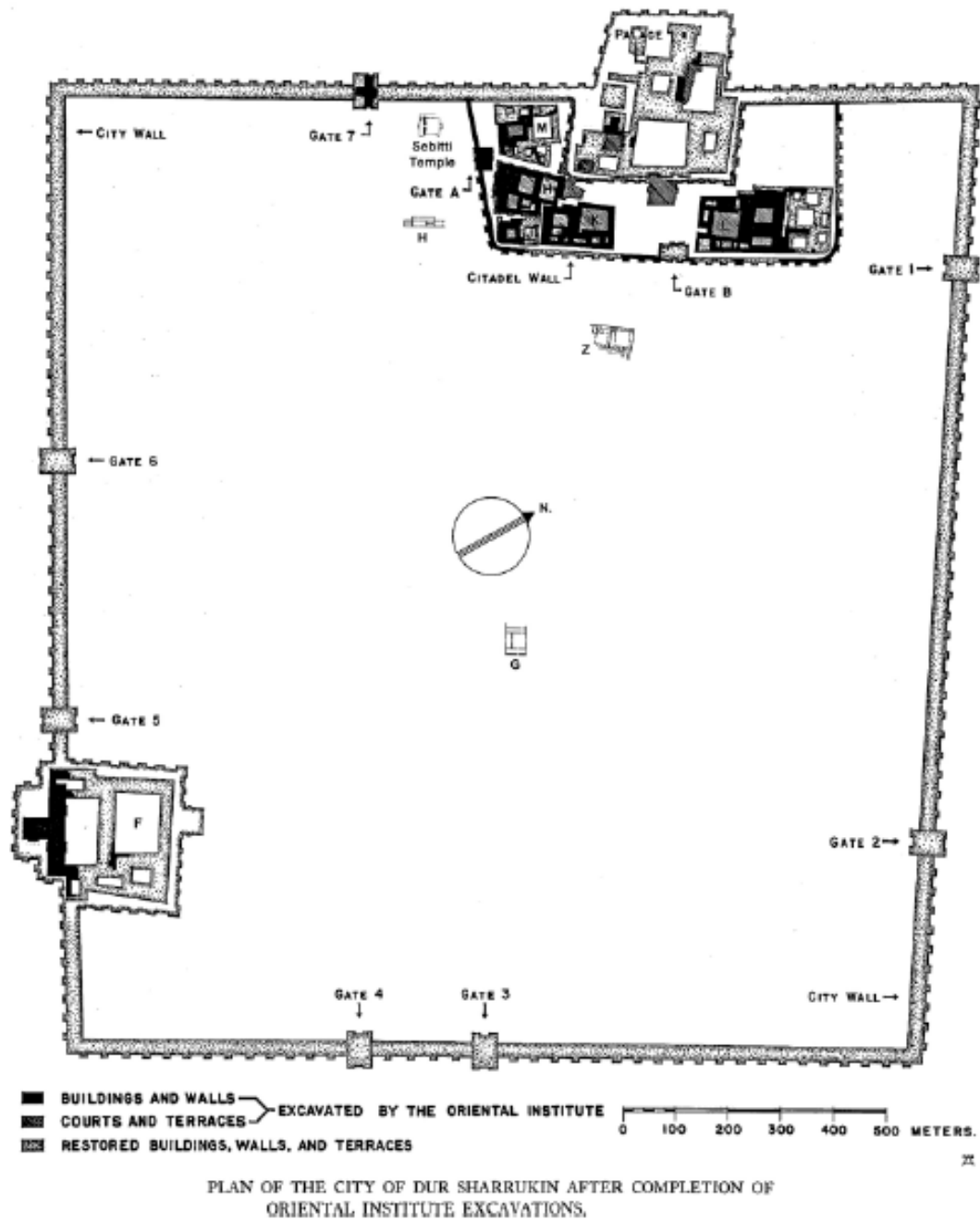


Figure 4.15: City plan of Dur-Šarrukin, modern Khorsabad.²⁶

²⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Cities and Architecture," 443, fig. 23.4; adapted by Russell from Loud 1938, pl. 69.

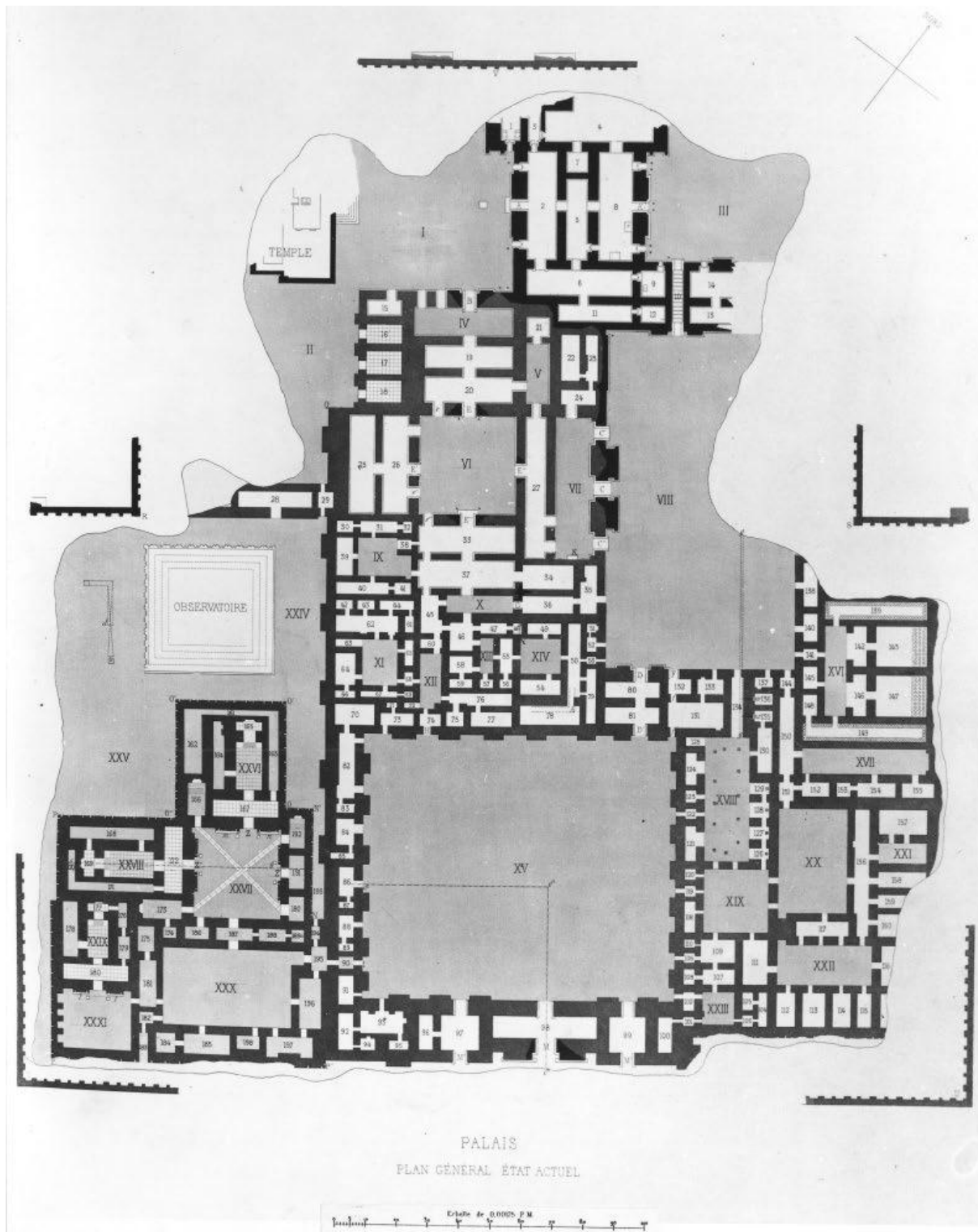


Figure 4.16: Plan of the palace of Sargon II at Dur-Šarrukin, modern Khorsabad,²⁷

²⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Cities and Architecture," 444, fig. 23.5; after Place 1867–70, vol. 3, pl. 3.

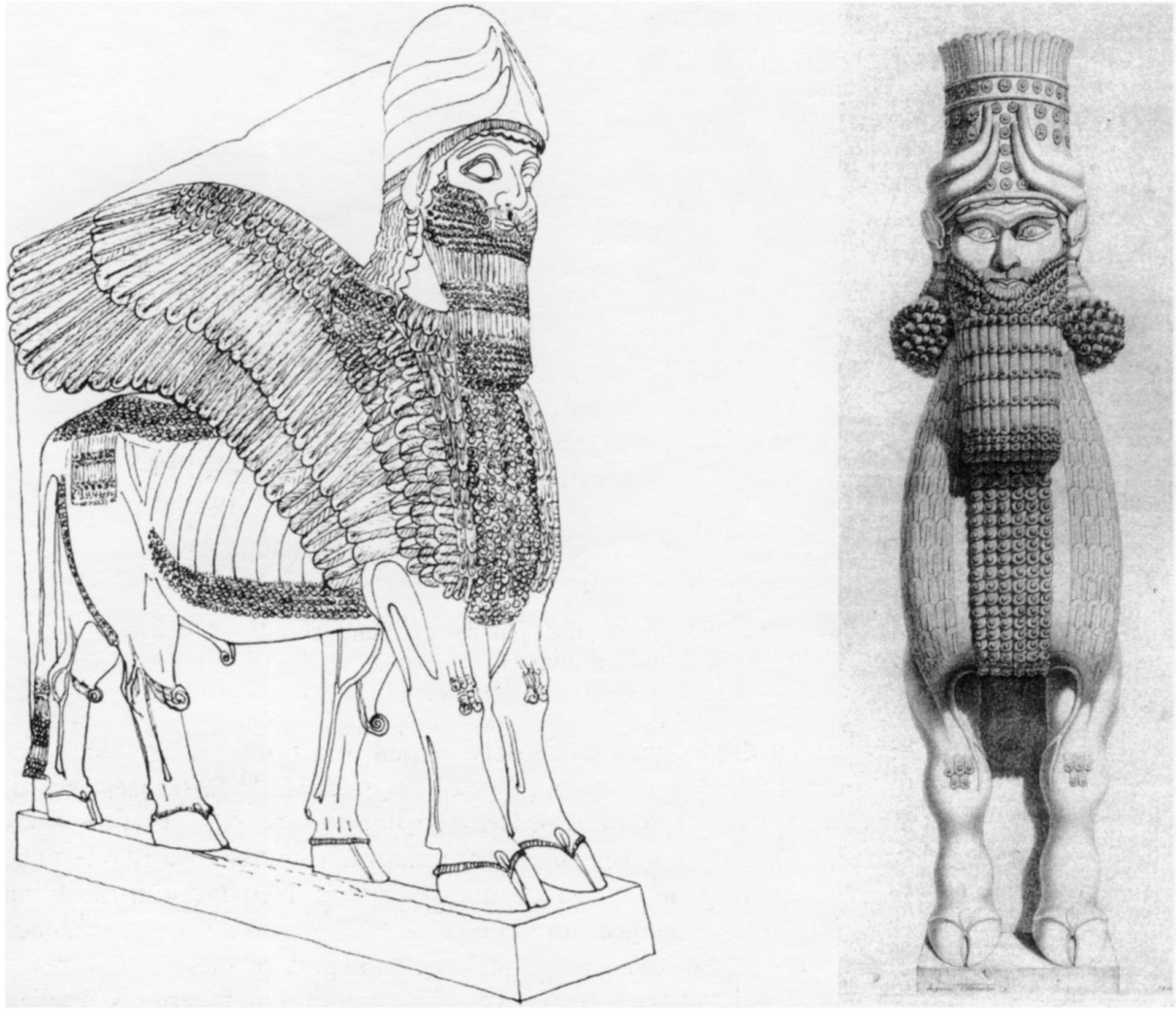


Figure 4.17: Winged human-headed bulls, lamassi, from the palaces of Ashurnasirpal at Nimrud (Madhloom's drawing) and of Sargon II at Khorsabad (Flandin's drawing).²⁸

²⁸ Valérie Danrey, "Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh: Genesis of an Iconographic Motif," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 134, figs. 1–2.

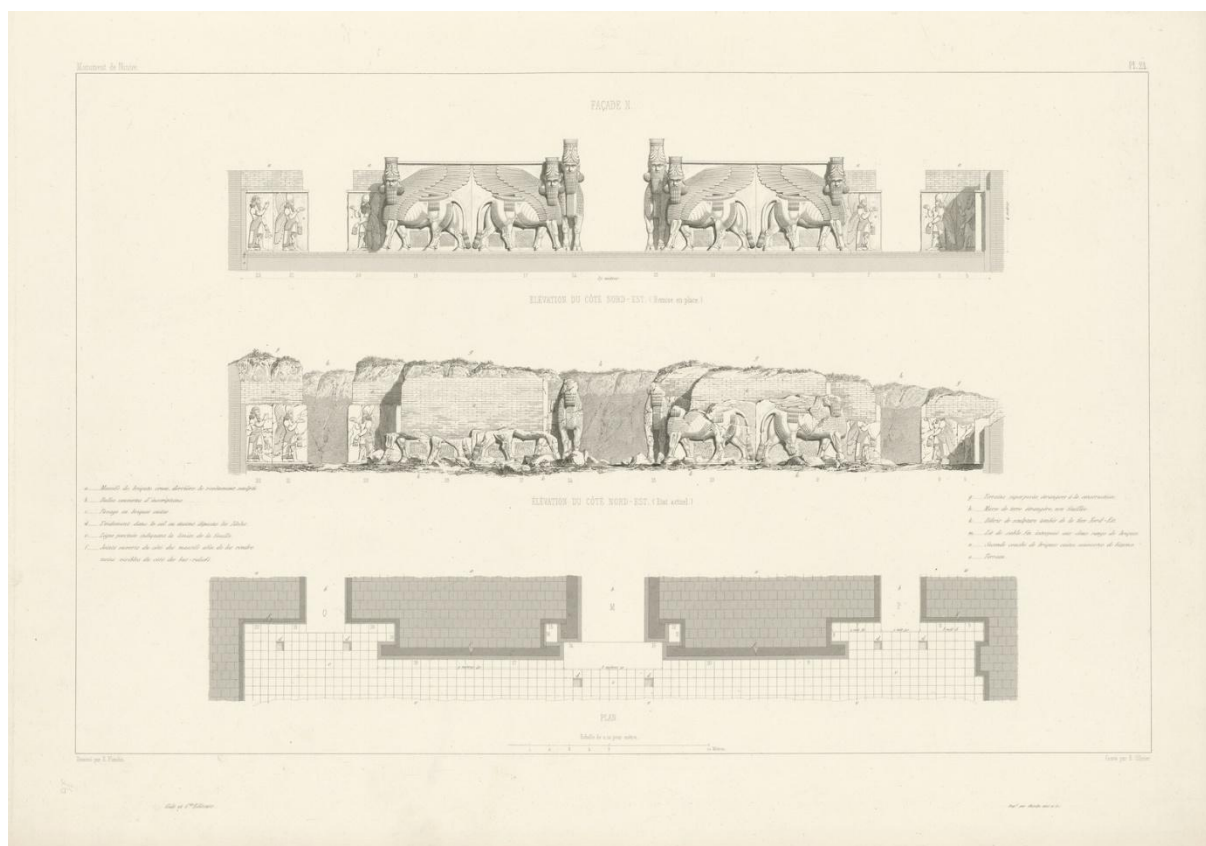


Figure 4.18: Reconstructed arrangement of façade N of Sargon II's palace, Khorsabad.²⁹

²⁹ Musée du Louvre, "Façade N of Khorsabad Palace," *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, drawing by Eugène Flandin, published in Paul-Émile Botta, *Monument de Ninive*, 1849, pl. 24.



Figure 4.19: Relief of Sargon facing a high dignitary, possibly Crown Prince Sennacherib Khorsabad Palace.³⁰

³⁰ Musée du Louvre, "Relief of Sargon," *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, Khorsabad, palace, Façade L, gypsum alabaster, reign of Sargon II, 721–705 BCE, Botta excavations, 1843–1844, Musée du Louvre, AO 19874.



Figure 4.20: Relief of tributaries.³¹

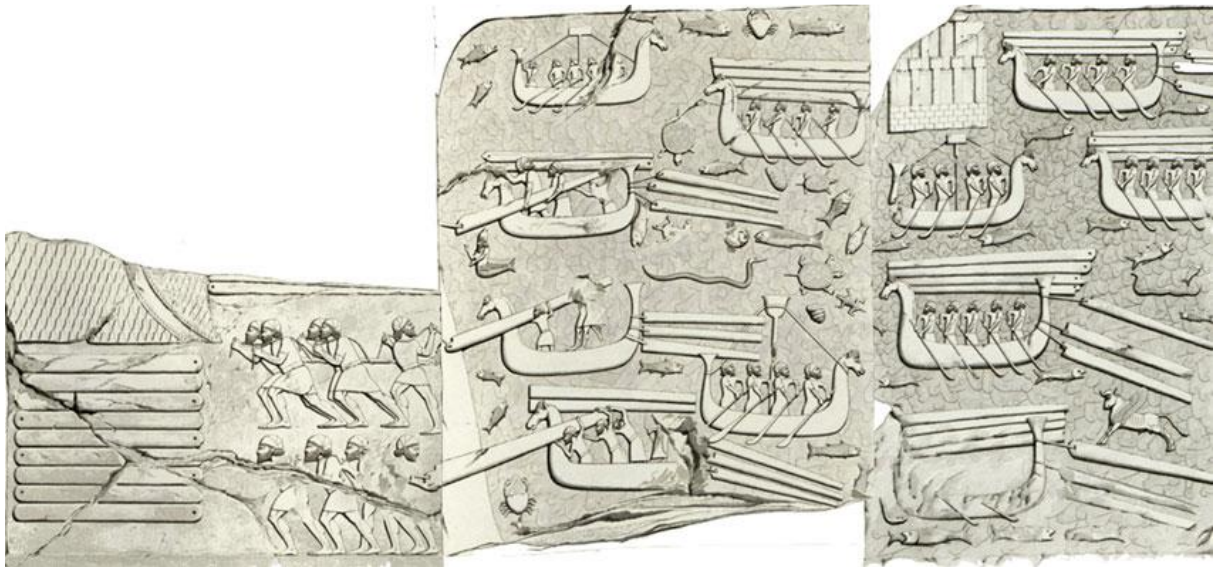


Figure 4.21: Slabs 2–4 (3–5) of façade N in Sargon's Palace, Khorsabad.³²

³¹ Musée du Louvre, "Relief of Medes Tributaries," *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, Khorsabad, palace, Corridor 10, gypsum alabaster, reign of Sargon II, 721–705 BCE, Botta excavations, 1843–1844, Musée du Louvre, AO 19887.

³² J. DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters: Diversity as a Rhetorical Strategy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 114, fig. 3.



Figure 4.22: Relief from Khorsabad showing the transport of timber.³³

³³ Musée du Louvre, "Relief Showing the Transport of Timber," *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, Khorsabad, palace, north façade of the ceremonial courtyard, gypsum alabaster, reign of Sargon II, 721–705 BCE, Botta excavations, 1843–1844, Musée du Louvre, AO 19888.

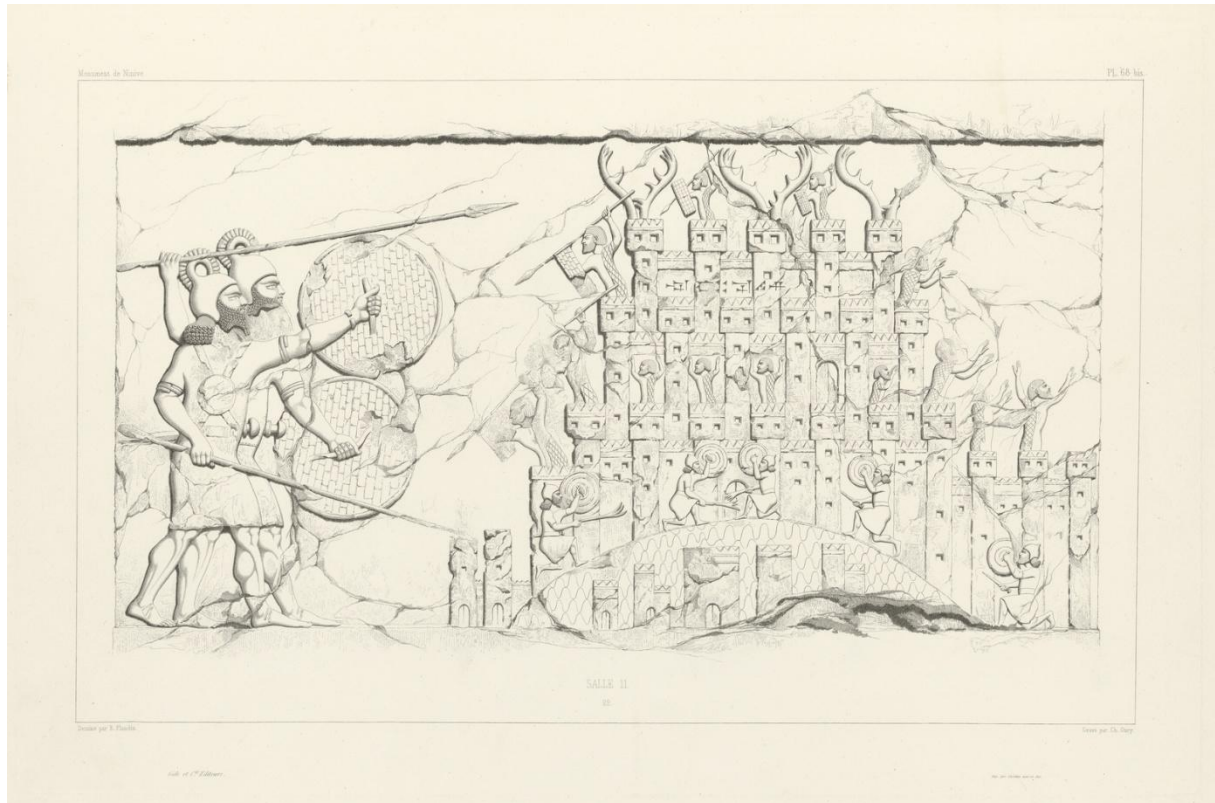


Figure 4.23: Siege scene from Room II of Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, probably representing the siege of the Median fortified city of Kišessim; identification after Balatti.³⁴

³⁴ Musée du Louvre, "Room 2 of Khorsabad Palace," *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, drawing by Eugène Flandin, published in Paul-Émile Botta and Eugène Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, 1849, pl. 68 bis; Silvia Balatti, *Mountain Peoples in the Ancient Near East: The Case of the Zagros in the First Millennium BCE* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), pl. 3.1.

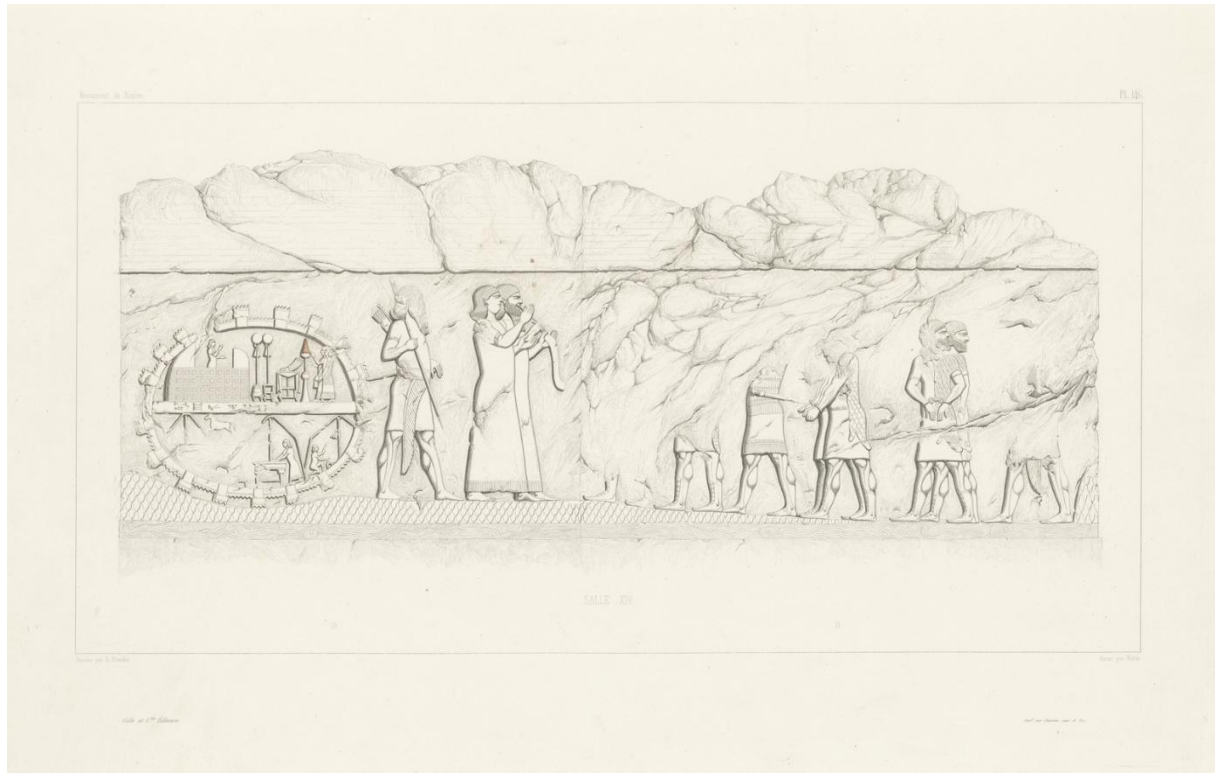


Figure 4.24: Captives presented before Sargon II, Khorsabad; interpreted in relation to the broader Khorsabad imagery of prisoners presented to the king discussed by Root.³⁵

³⁵ Musée du Louvre, “Room 14 of Khorsabad Palace,” *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, drawing by Eugène Flandin, engraved by Varin, published in Paul-Émile Botta and Eugène Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, 1849, pl. 146; Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 207–8.

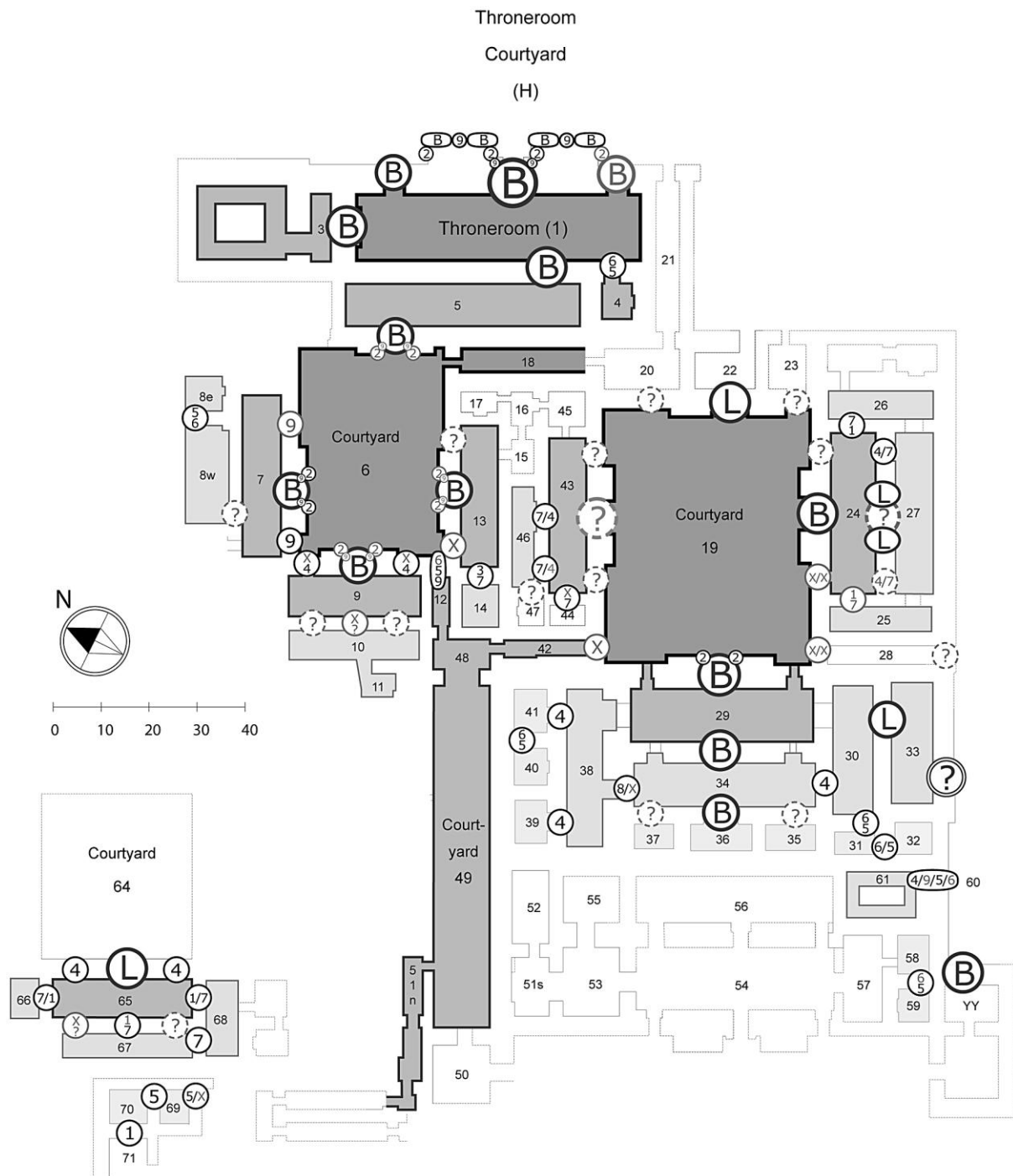


Figure 4.25: Plan of the Southwest Palace of Sennacherib, Nineveh, Room 36 (which corresponds to Room XXXVI) housed the Lachish reliefs.³⁶

³⁶ David Kertai, "The Guardians at the Doors: Entering the Southwest Palace in Nineveh," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 327, fig. 2.

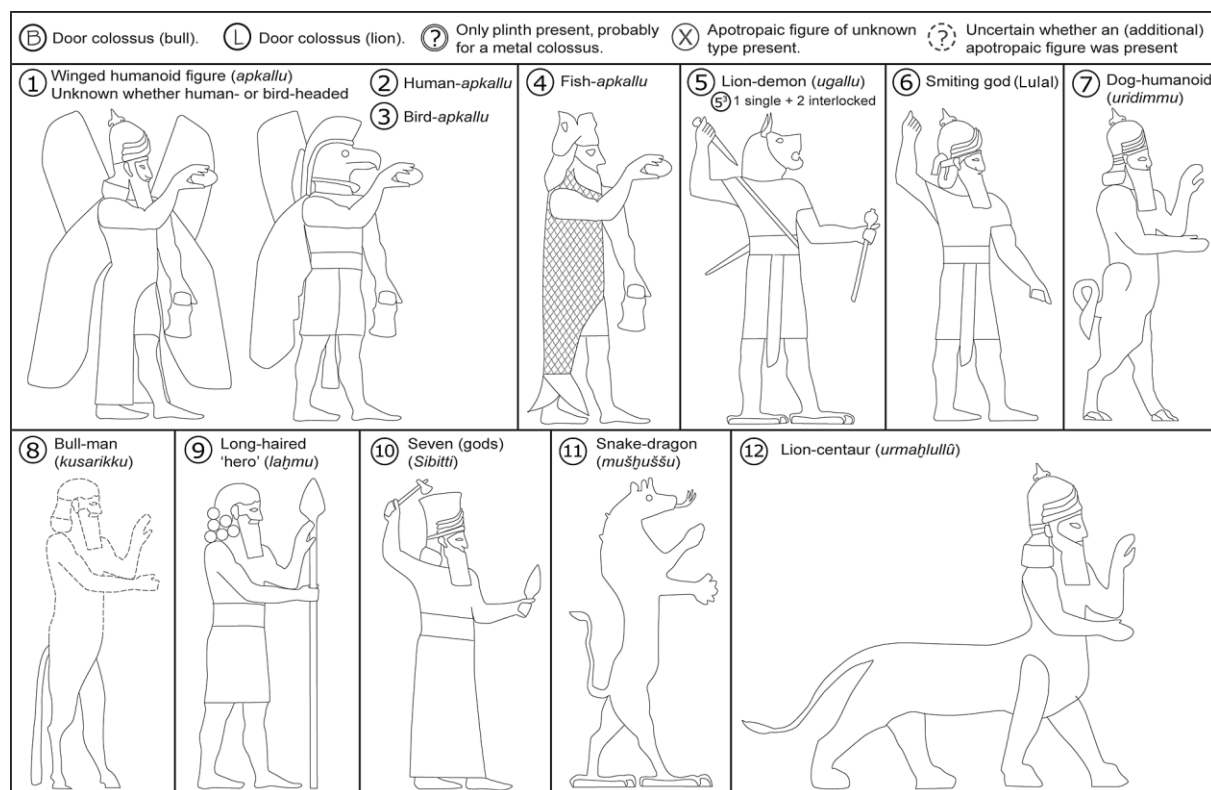


Figure 4.26: Overview and legend of the apotropaic figures of the Southwest Palace, Nineveh.³⁷

³⁷ Kertai, "The Guardians at the Doors," 326, fig. 1.

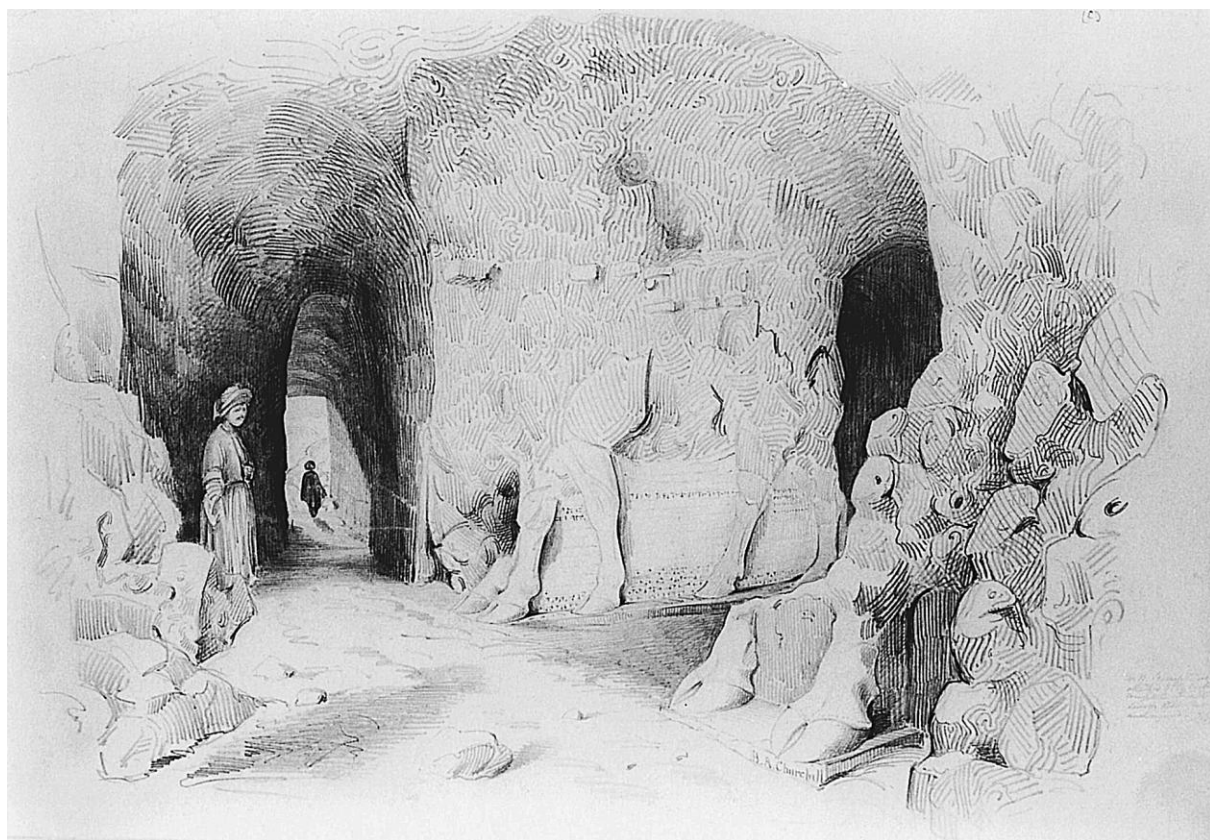


Figure 4.27: Churchill's drawing of a five-legged colossus in Door k of Room 13, Southwest Palace at Nineveh.³⁸

³⁸ Kertai, "The Guardians at the Doors," 335, fig. 7.

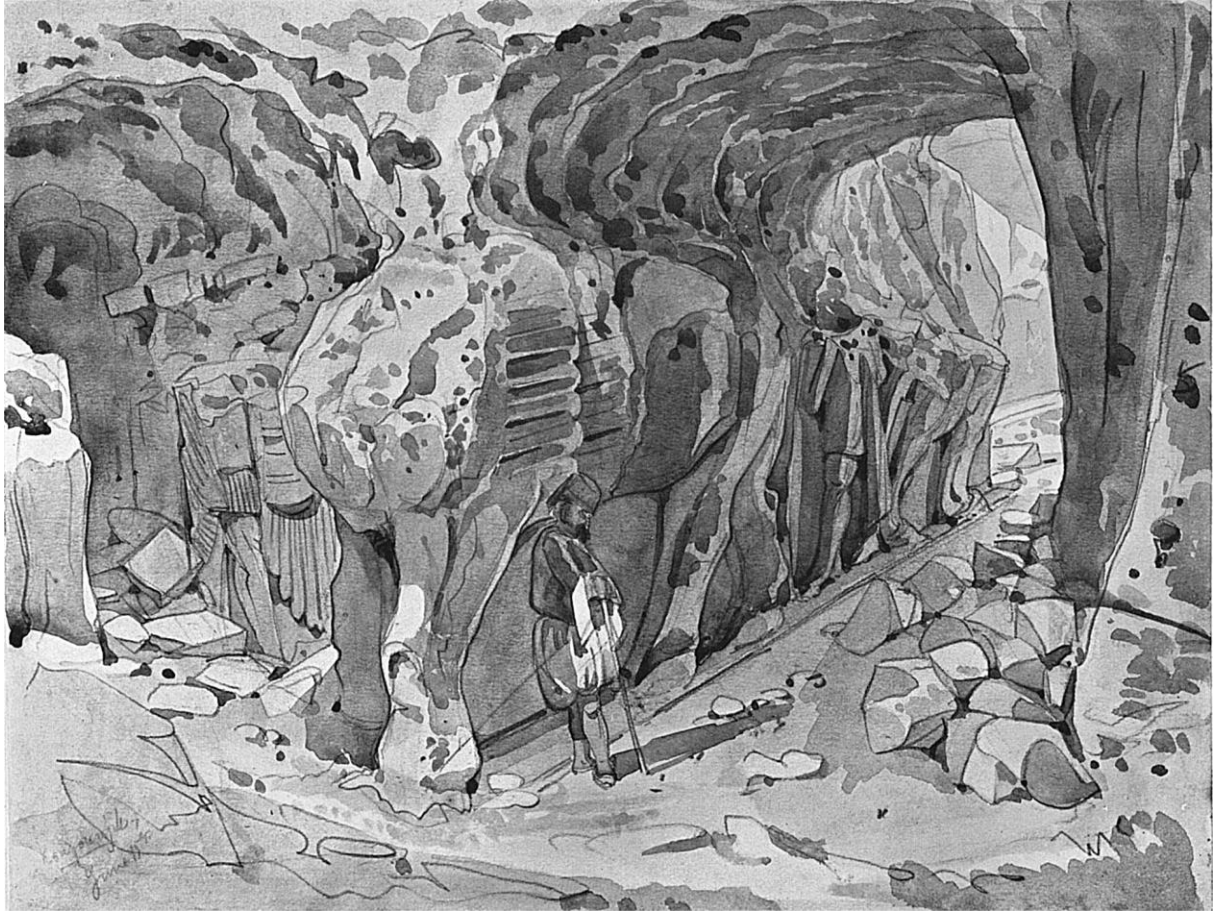


Figure 4.28: Malan's drawing of reliefs 9–12 of the throne-room façade, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.³⁹

³⁹ Kertai, "Guardians at the Doors," 336, fig. 8.



Figure 4.29: Drawing of the human-apkallu on relief 4 of the throne-room façade, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Kertai, "Guardians at the Doors," 337, fig. 9.

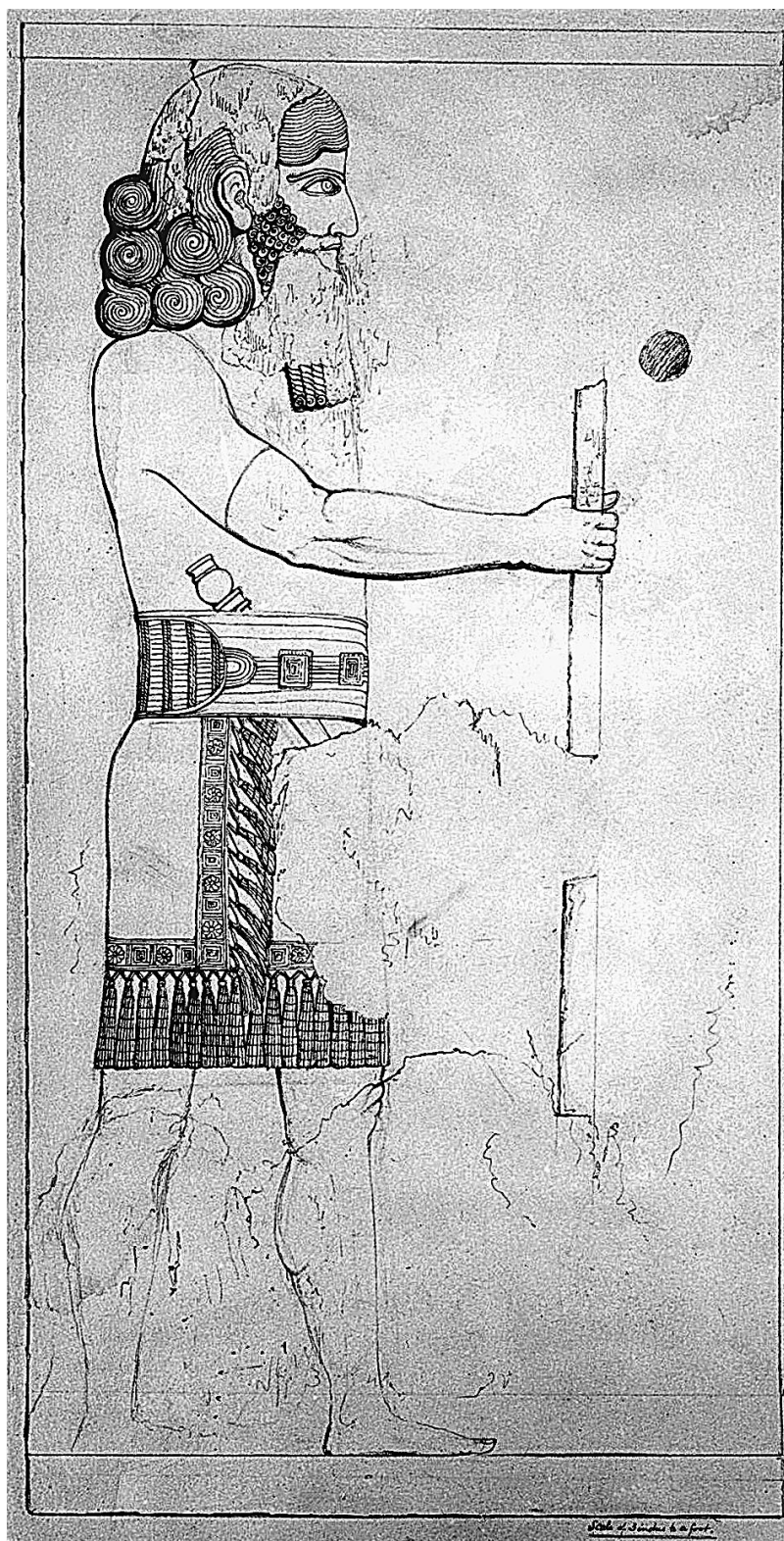


Figure 4.30: Drawing of the laḫmu on relief 5 of the throne-room façade of the Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴¹

⁴¹ Kertai, "Guardians at the Doors," 337, fig. 10.

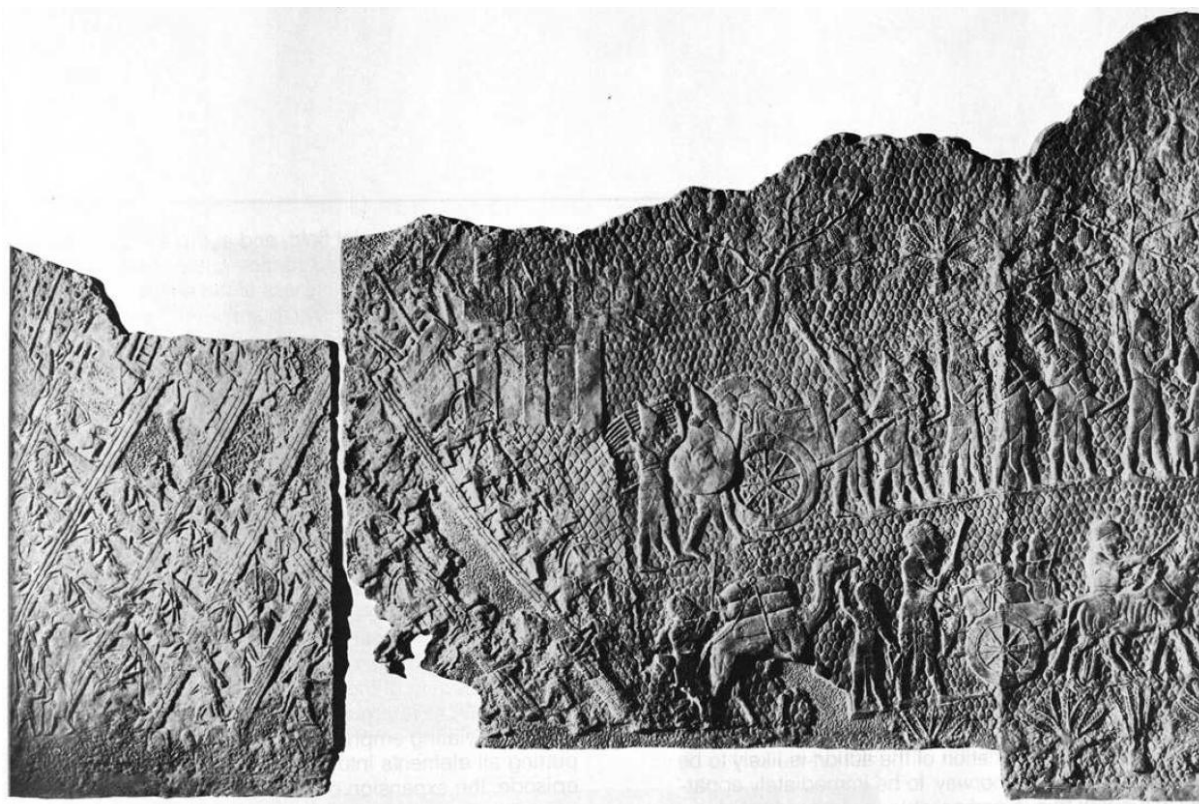


Figure 4.31: Siege of Lachish, Southwest Palace at Nineveh.⁴²

⁴² Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25, fig. 21.



Figure 4.32: A detailed picture of the panoramic relief depicting the siege of Lachish, Southwest Palace at Nineveh.⁴³

⁴³ Van De Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 249, fig. 12.1.



Figure 4.33: Panels 7–10 of the Siege of Lachish and deportation of its inhabitants, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ British Museum, “Wall Panel; Relief,” South-West Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Room XXXVI, panels 7–10, gypsum wall reliefs, reign of Sennacherib, 700–692 BCE, BM 124906–124909, registration no. 1856,0909.14.



Figure 4.34: Panel 7 showing the assault on Lachish, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," South-West Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Room XXXVI, Panel 7, gypsum wall relief, reign of Sennacherib, 700–692 BCE, BM 124906, registration no. 1856,0909.14.



Figure 4.35: Sennacherib enthroned before Lachish as prisoners and booty are brought before him, Panels 11–13, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ British Museum, “Wall Panel; Relief,” South-West Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Room XXXVI, Panels 11–13, gypsum wall reliefs, reign of Sennacherib, 700–692 BCE, BM 124910–124912, registration no. 1856,0909.14.



Figure 4.36: Detailed view of Sennacherib enthroned before Lachish, with prisoners brought before him, Panel 12, Room XXXVI, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ British Museum, "Relief," South-West Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, Room XXXVI, Panel 12, gypsum wall relief, reign of Sennacherib, 700–692 BCE, BM 124911, registration no. 1856,0909.14.

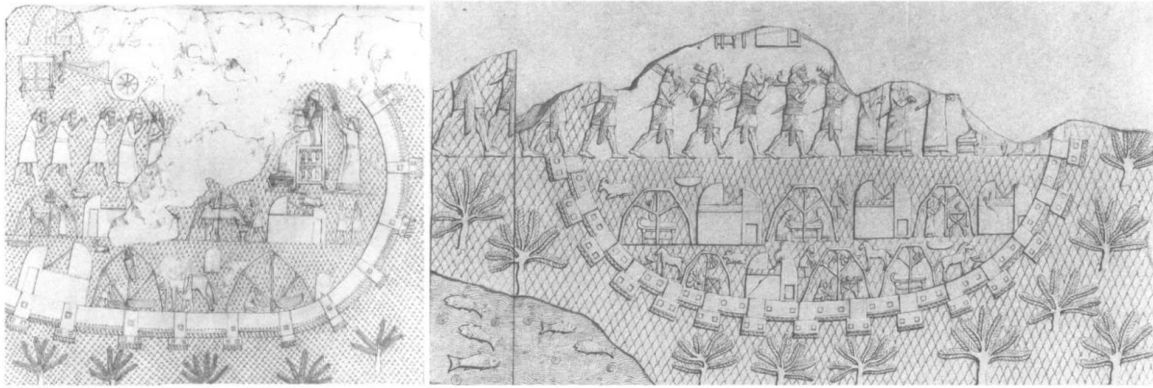


Figure 4.37a: The king inside the camp, Slab 20, Room XLVIII, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.

Figure 4.37b: The king inside the camp receives the officers, unattributed camp scene.⁴⁸

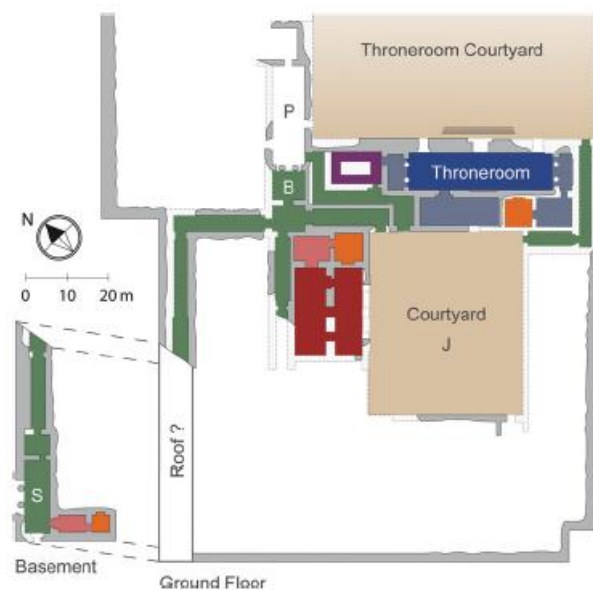


Figure 4.38: Plan of Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh.⁴⁹

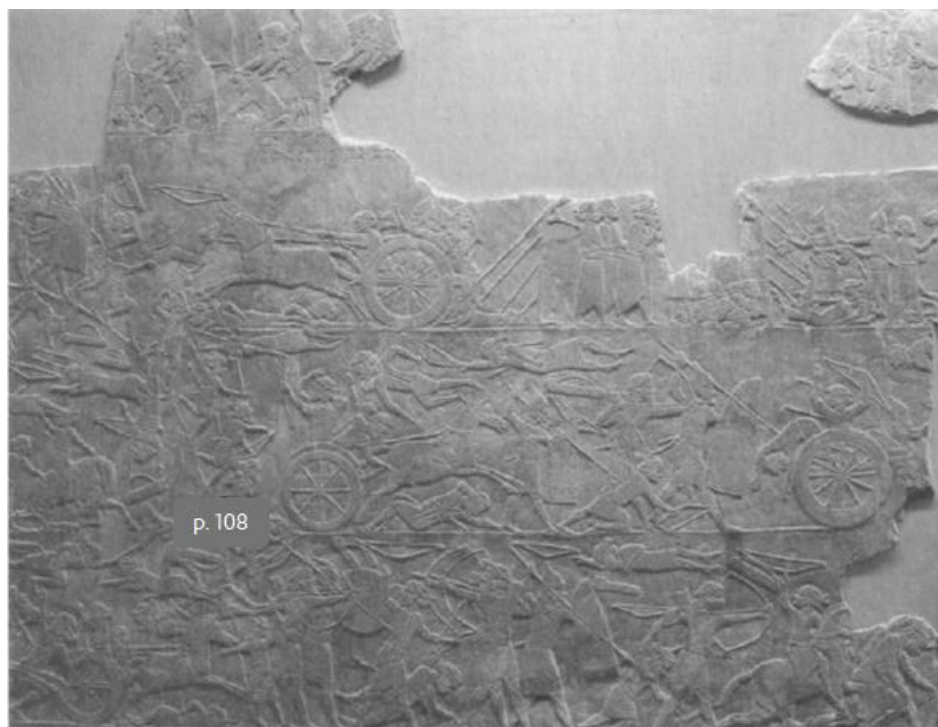
⁴⁸ M. G. Micale and D. Nadali, "The Shape of Sennacherib's Camps: Strategic Functions and Ideological Space," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 166, figs. 3a–b.

⁴⁹ David Kertai, "Embellishing the Interior Spaces of Assyria's Royal Palaces," *Iraq* 79 (2017): 90, fig. 1.



Figure 4.39: Doorway guardians on a slab from a doorjamb in Room B, North Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 91, fig. 40.





Figures 4.40–42: The battle of Til-Tuba, Room 33, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁵¹

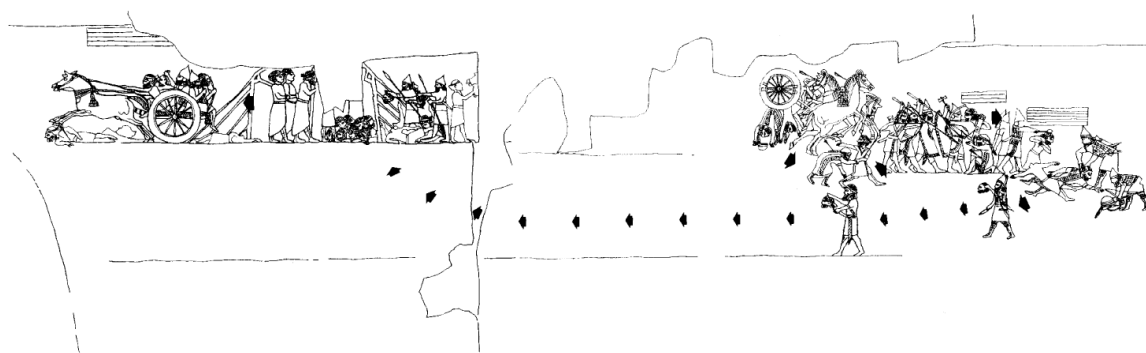


Figure 4.43: Sequence of episodes of the battle of Til-Tuba.⁵²

⁵¹ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 108, figs. 5–7.

⁵² Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 108, fig. 8.



Figure 4.44: The Elamite king wounded and running from the battle, Room 33, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁵³

⁵³ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 110, fig. 10.



Figure 4.45: Execution of Teumman and Tammaritu, Room 33, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 111, fig. 12.

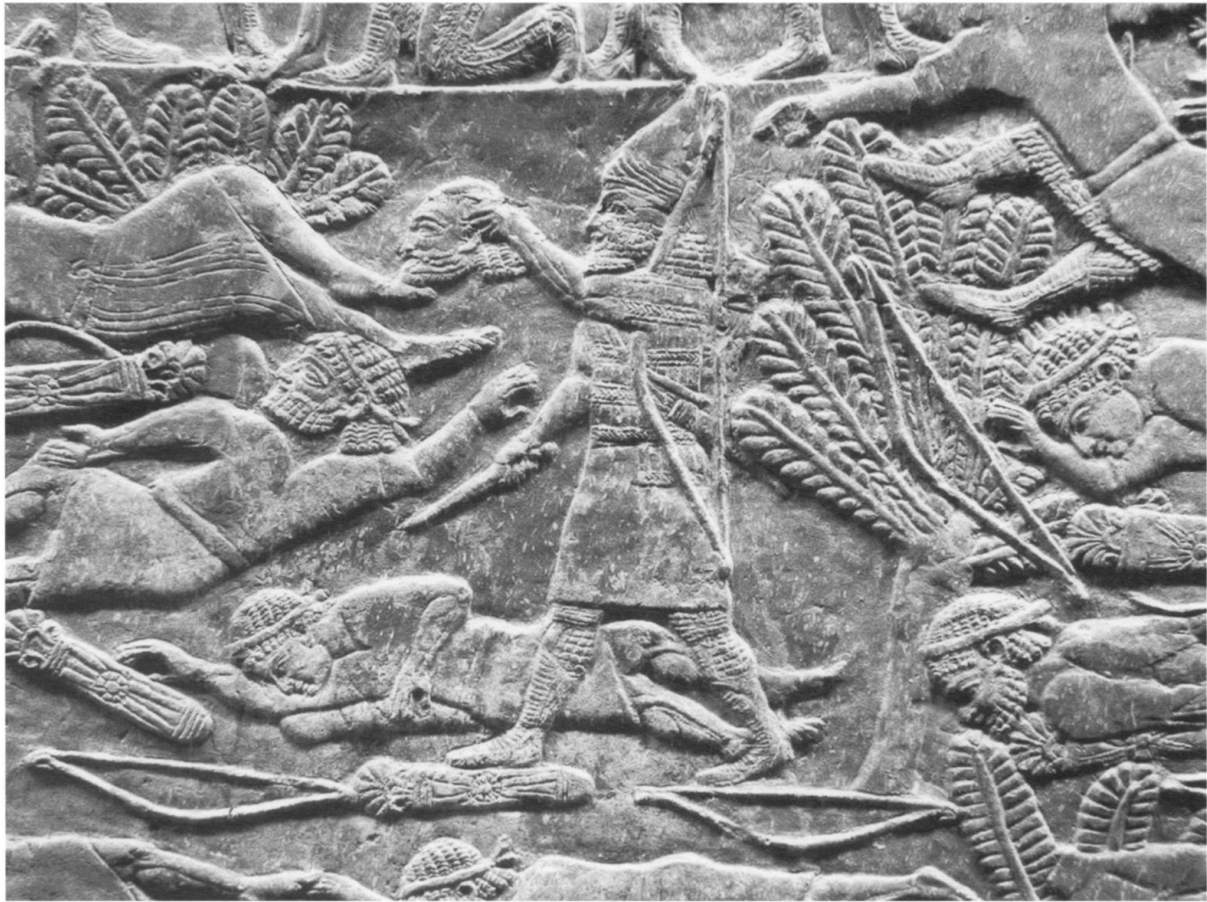


Figure 4.46: Assyrian soldier with Teumman's head, Room 33, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁵



Figure 4.47: Identification of two heads, Room 33, Southwest Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 112, fig. 14.

⁵⁶ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 113, fig. 16.

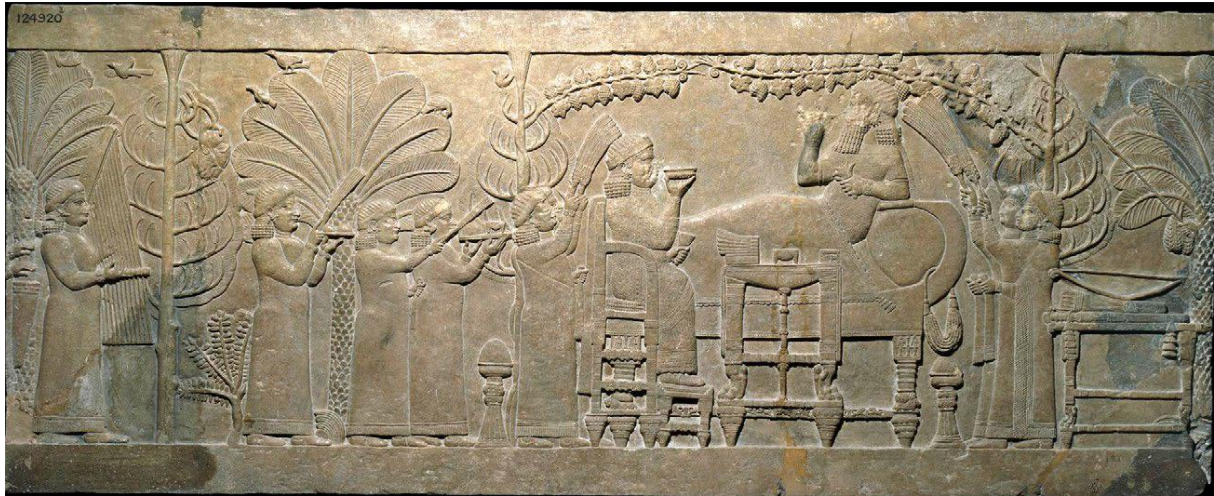


Figure 4.48: Ashurbanipal's garden scene with the hanging head in tree on far left of the scene.⁵⁷

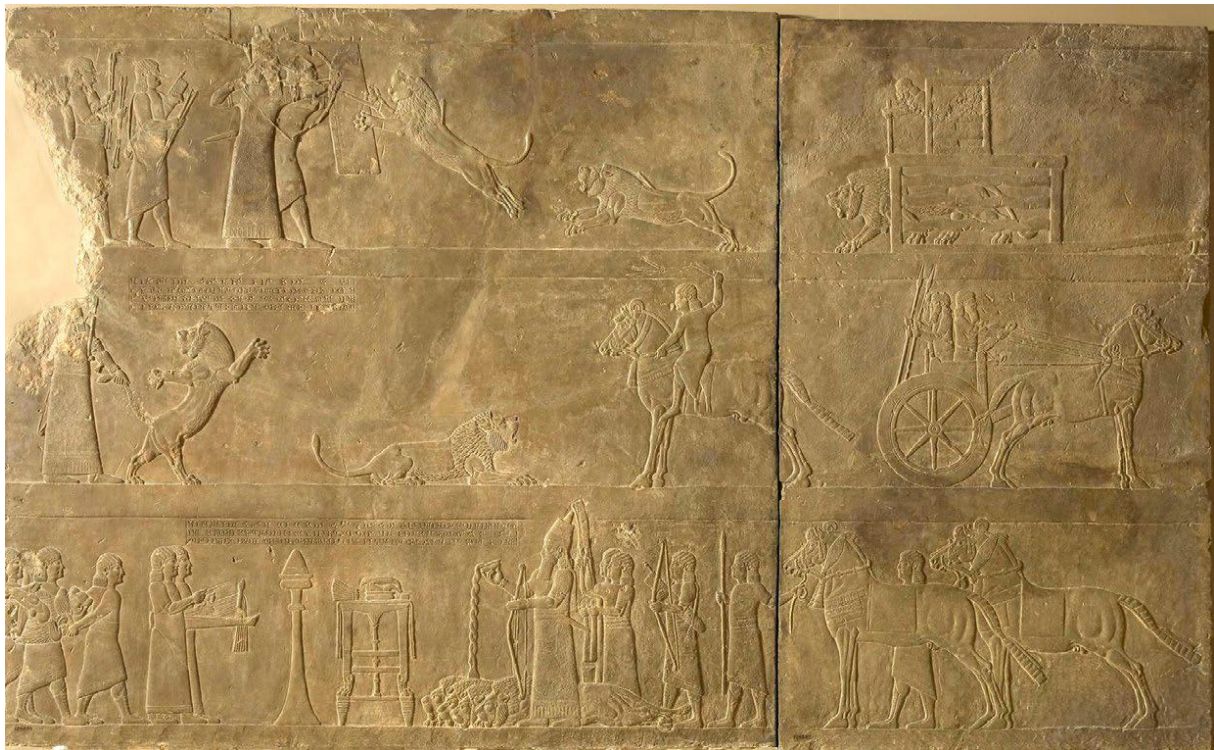


Figure 4.49: Ashurbanipal's royal lion hunt, Room S1, North Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Natalie Naomi May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," in *Mortals, Deities and Divine Symbols: Rethinking Ancient Images from the Levant to Mesopotamia*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Laura Battini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2025), 321, fig. 7.

⁵⁸ May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," 321, fig. 6.



Figure 4.50: Release of the lions within the royal lion hunt, Room S1, North Palace, Nineveh.⁵⁹



Figure 4.51: The wounded or collapsing lions within the royal lion hunt, Room S1, North Palace, Nineveh.⁶⁰



Figure 4.52: Ashurbanipal hunting lions from a chariot, North Palace, Nineveh.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 104, fig. 1.

⁶⁰ May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," 321, fig. 6.

⁶¹ British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, gypsum wall relief, Neo-Assyrian period, reign of Ashurbanipal, BM 124867, registration no. 1856,0909.16.



Figure 4.53: Detail of Ashurbanipal hunting lions atop a horse, North Palace, Nineveh.⁶²

⁶² British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," BM 124867, registration no. 1856,0909.16.



Figure 4.54: Ashurbanipal on foot killing a lion with a sword, North Palace, Nineveh.⁶³

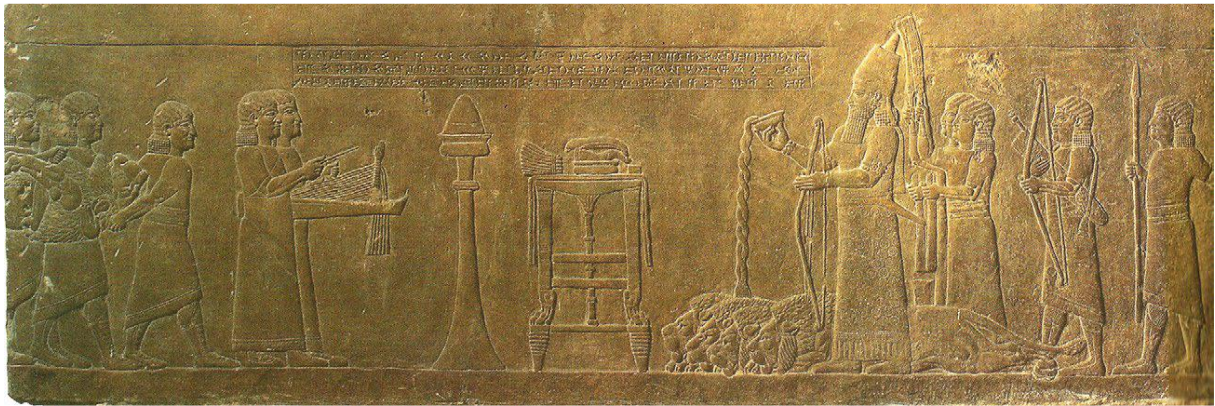


Figure 4.55: Ashurbanipal offering of the hunt prey, Room S1, North Palace, Nineveh.⁶⁴

⁶³ British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, Room S, Panel 8, bottom row, gypsum wall relief, reign of Ashurbanipal, 645–635 BCE, BM 124877, registration no. 1856,0909.48.

⁶⁴ May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," 317, fig. 3.



Figure 4.56: Relief carving of two Assyrian scribes, Central Palace, Nimrud. The first scribe writes Assyrian on a clay tablet with a stylus while the second records the same information in Aramaic on leather or parchment.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Bradley J. Parker, "The Construction and Performance of Kingship in the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67, no. 3 (2011): 362, fig. 2.

Chapter 5:
Achaemenid Art: The Iconography of Order and Harmony

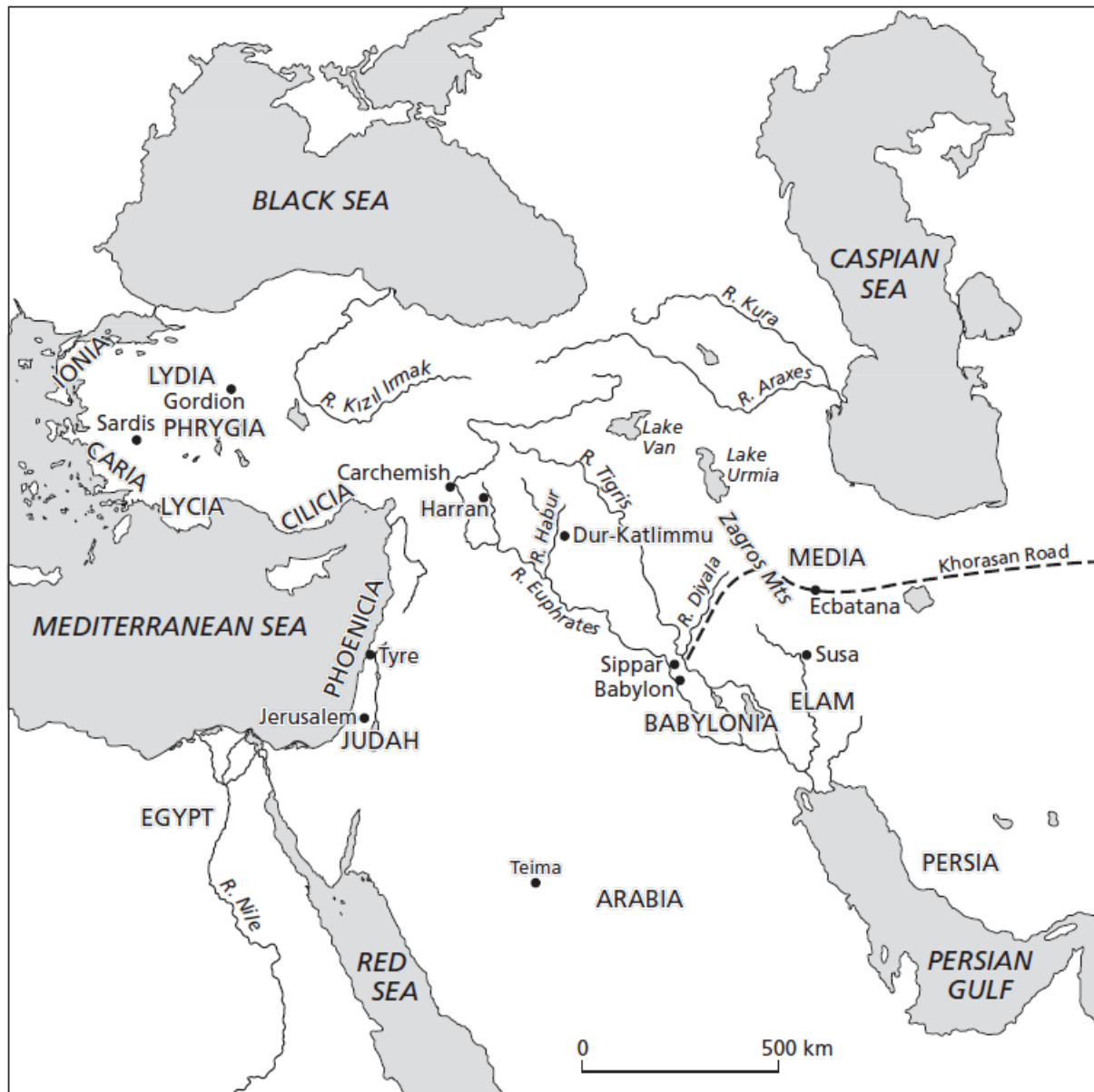


Figure 5.1: Map of the Near East in the 6th century BCE.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Van De Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 290, map 14.1.

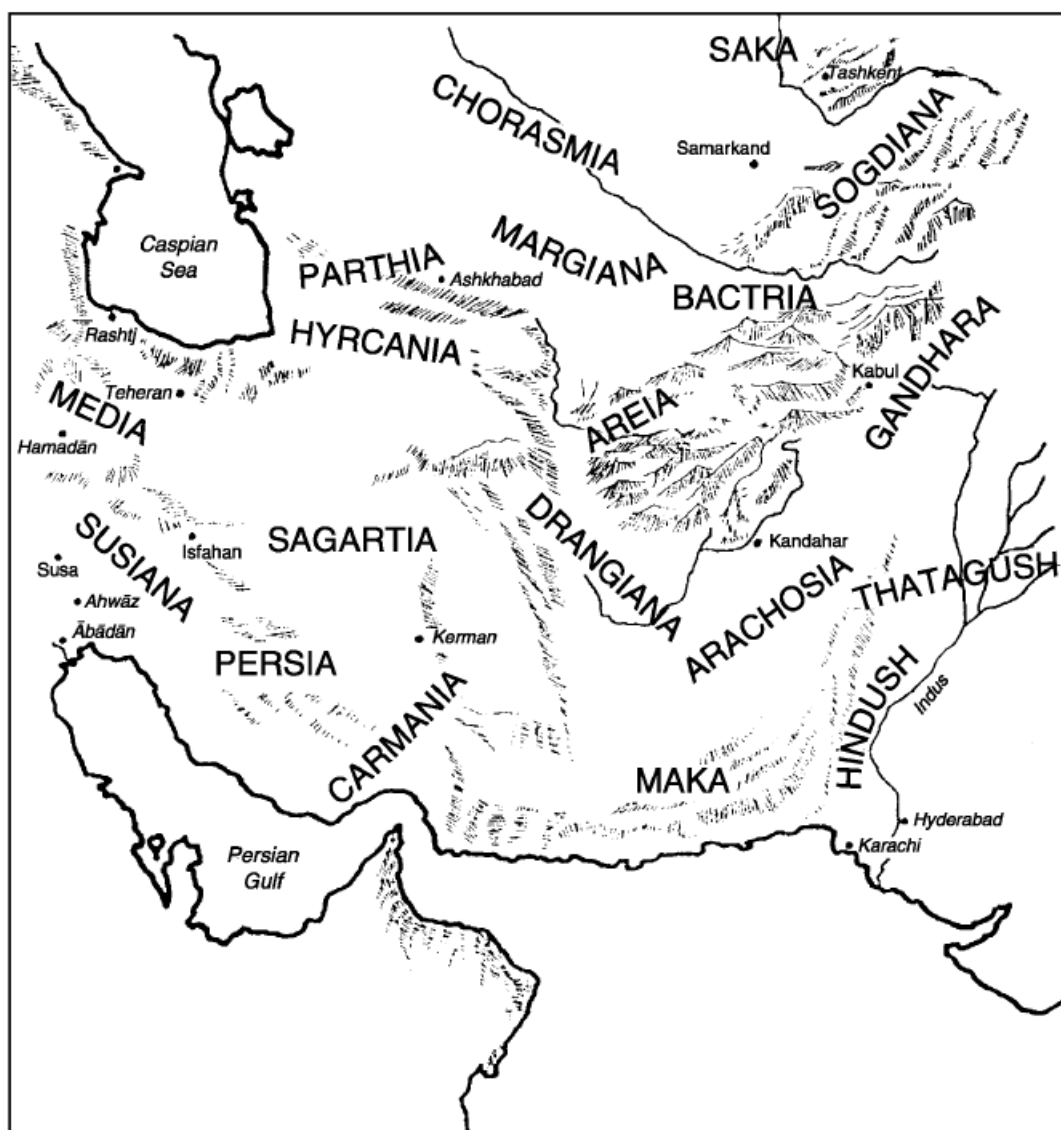


Figure 5.2: Sketchmap of the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2007), 139, fig. 5.1, after Briant 1996a [2002b].

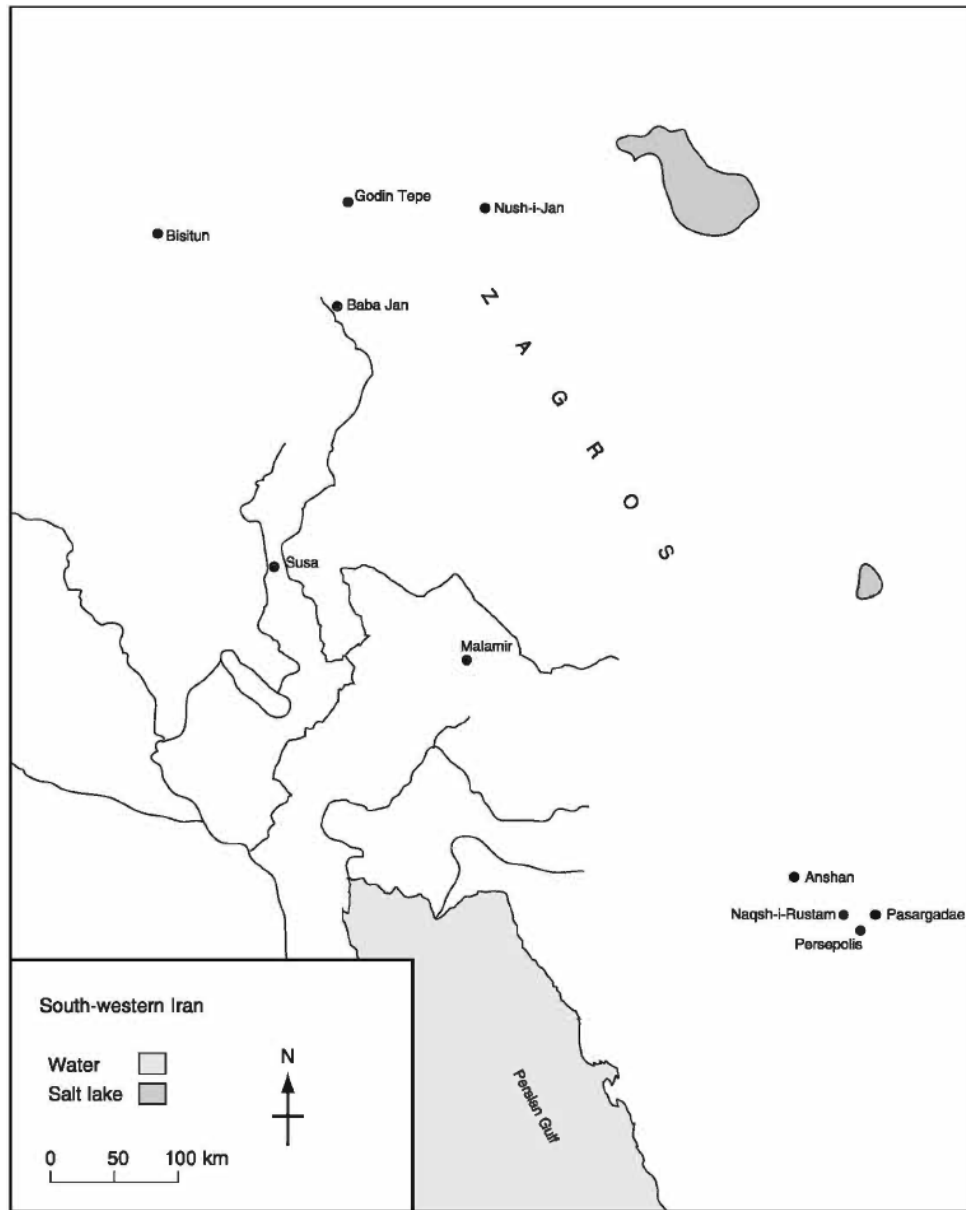


Figure 5.3: Sketchmap of Fars and Elam, showing Pasargadae, Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, Anshan, Behistun, Nush-I Jan, and Godin Tepe.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 52, fig. 3.1, after Potts 1999.

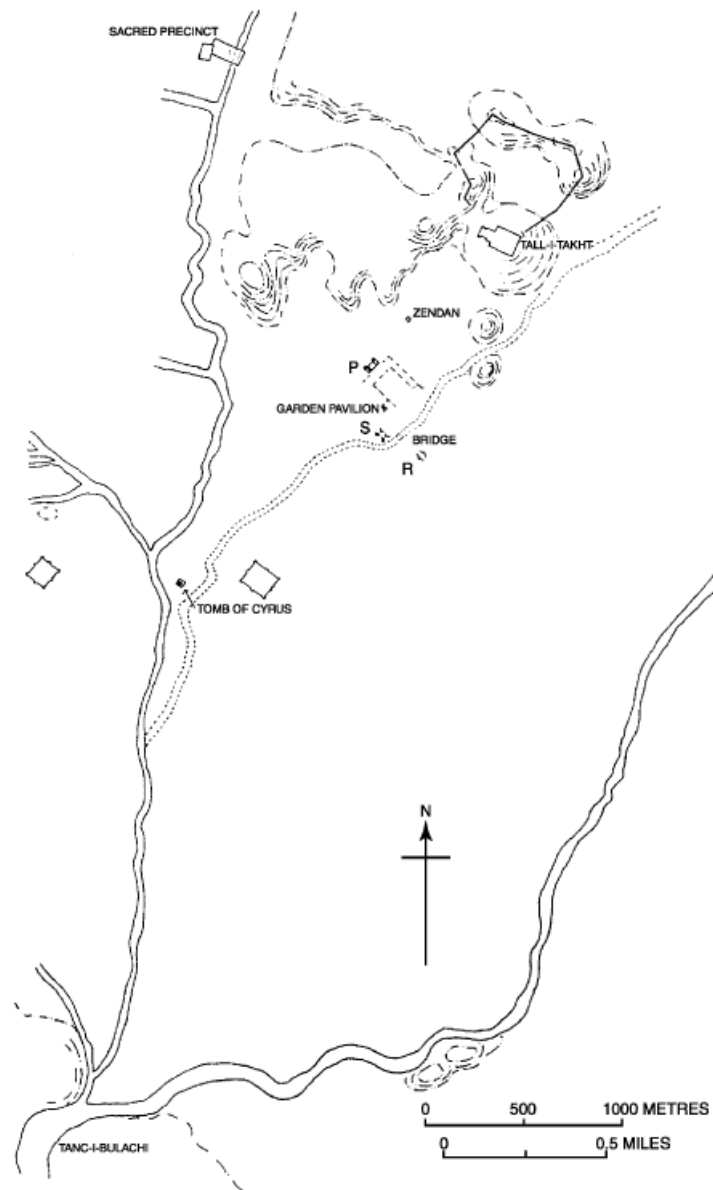


Figure 5.4: Plan of Pasargadae, the city of Cyrus.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 88, fig. 3.5, after Nylander 1970/Roaf 1990.



Figure 5.5: Drawing of the winged figure from Gate R, Pasargadae.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ David Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan: Further Perspectives," *Iran* 51 (2013): 64, fig. 5.

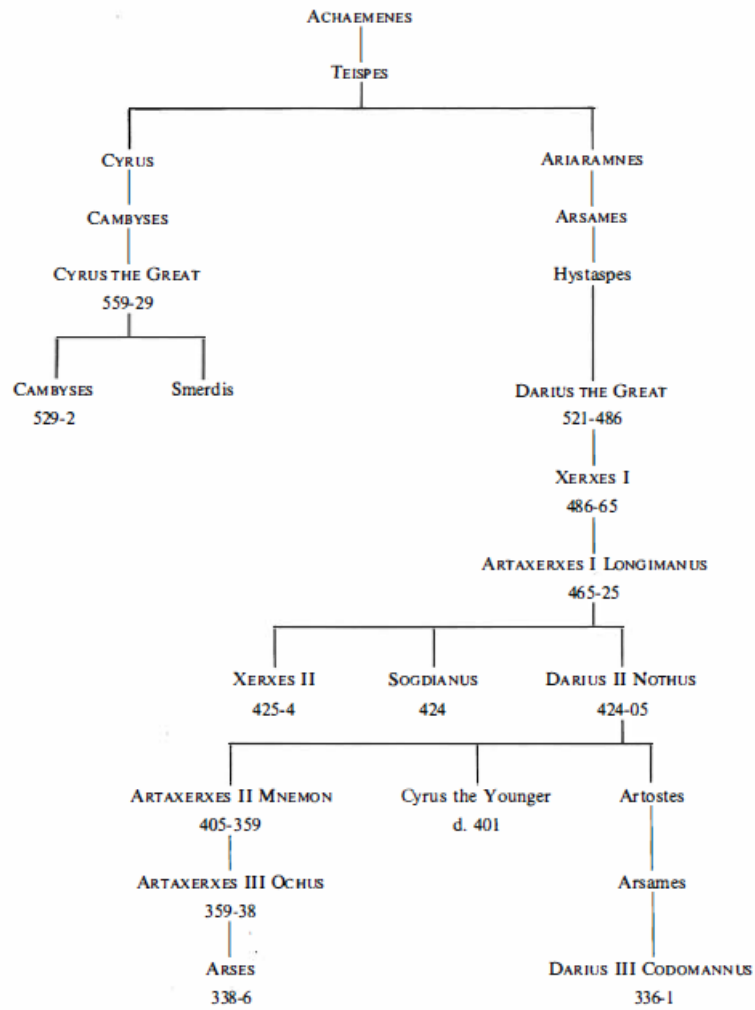


Figure 5.6: Achaemenid dynastic genealogy showing the relationship between Cyrus' Teispid line and Darius' Achaemenid claim.⁷¹

⁷¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 36, fig. 3.

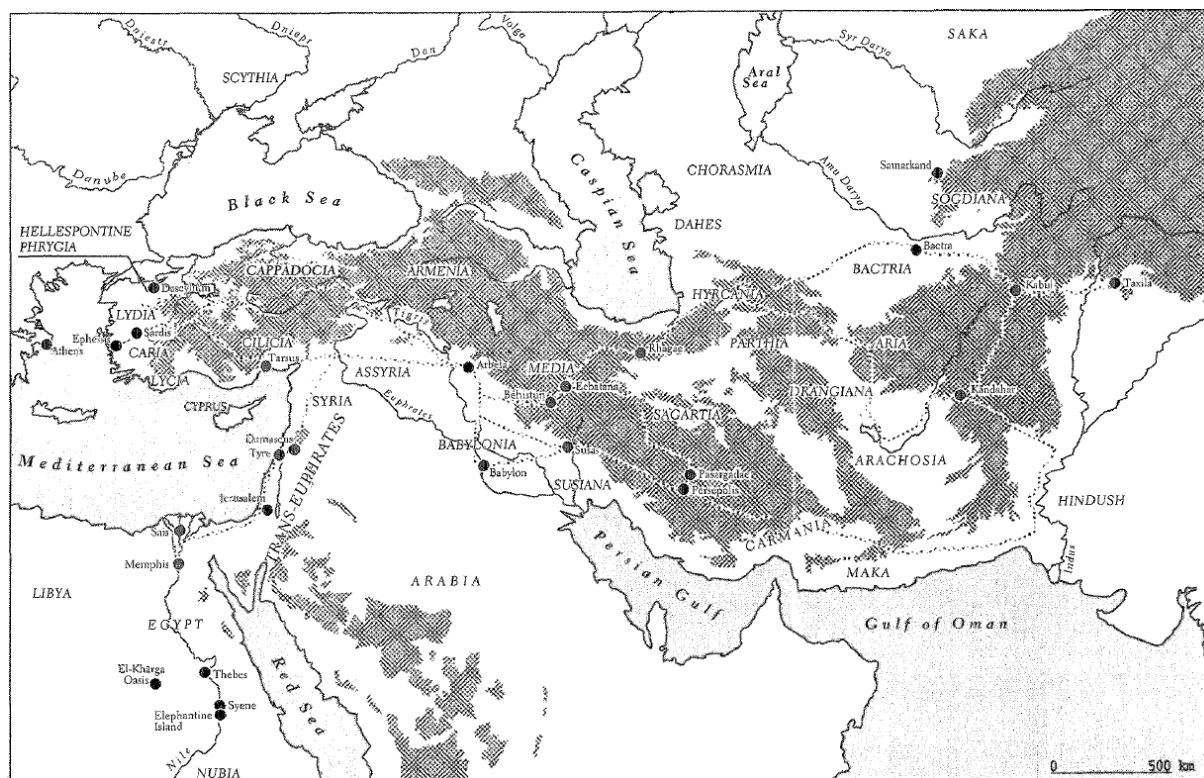


Figure 5.7: Map showing the empire's principal routes with Behistun's location along the major road between Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau.⁷²

⁷² Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 366, map 2.



Figure 5.8: Kūh-e Bisotun/ Mount Behistun rising above the road corridor near Kermanshah, Iran.⁷³

⁷³ Matt Morphy, *Behistun Mount2.JPG*, photograph, July 8, 2010, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0/GFDL.



Figure 5.9: Kūh-e Bisotun and Sarab-e Bisotun, showing the cliff face, water zone, and open area below the rock monuments.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Auoob Farabi, *Behistun*, photograph, 2013, Wikimedia Commons/archived Panoramio, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Figure 5.10: Bas-relief illustrating Darius' victory at Behistun.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Bas-relief of Bisotun," *Bisotun*, photograph by Babak Sedighi, July 14, 2006, © UNESCO, Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO.

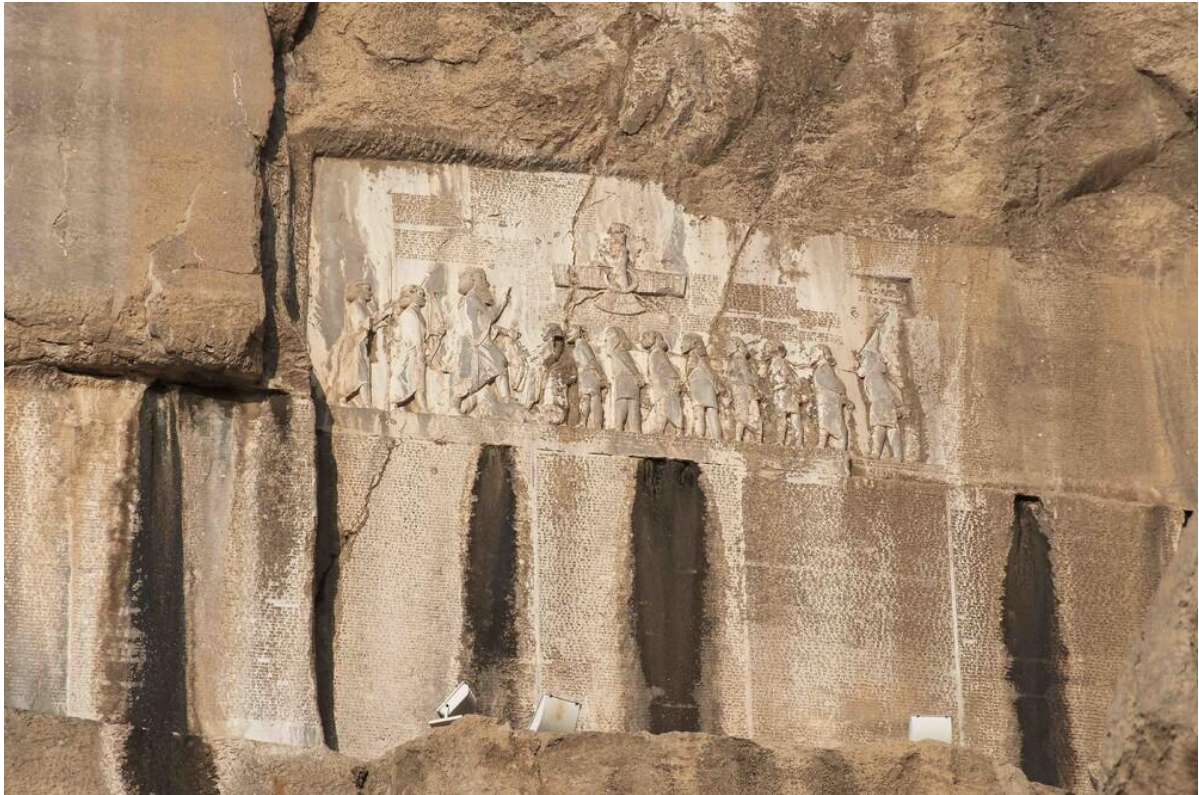


Figure 5.11: Behistun relief and inscriptions, wider view.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Bisotun,” *Bisotun*, photograph by Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, November 26, 2008, © Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, All Rights Reserved, document no. 170204.

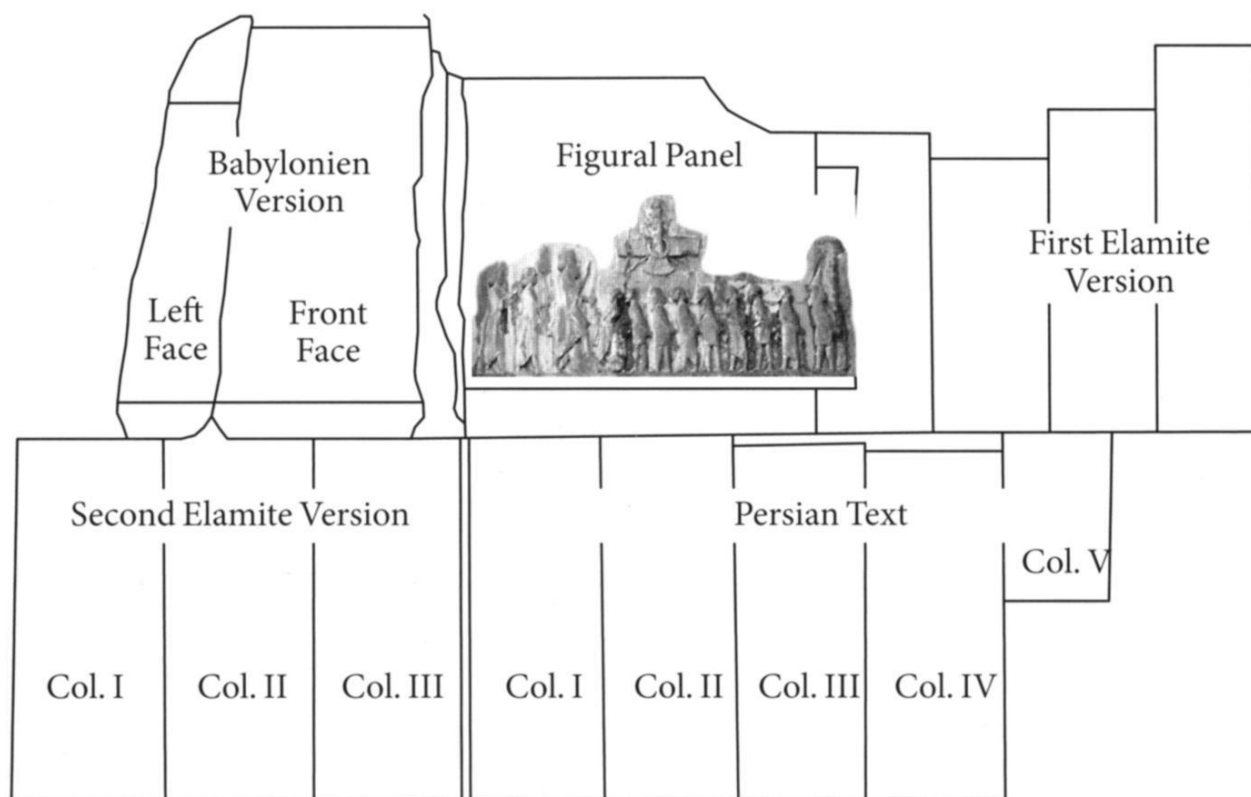


Figure 5.12: Layout of the trilingual inscriptions at Behistun with the relief.⁷⁷

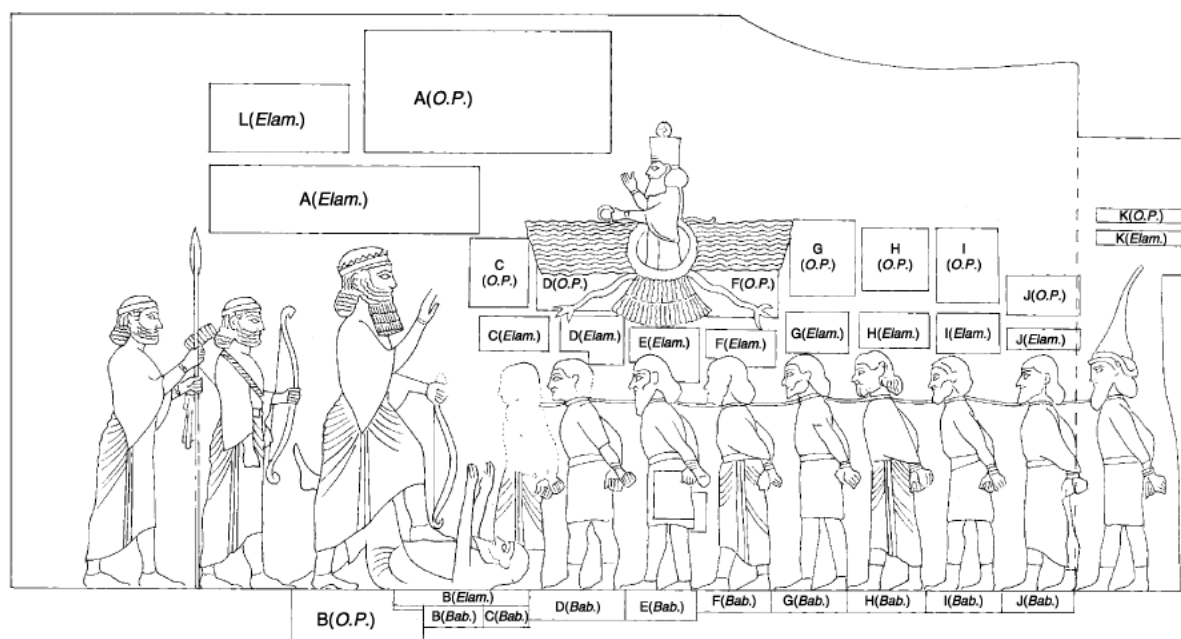


Figure 5.13: Diagram with the detail of Darius' relief at Behistun.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Jennifer Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men: Trilingual Inscriptions and Symbolic Visualizations in the Achaemenid Empire," *Ars Orientalis* 41 (2011): 223, fig. 2.

⁷⁸ Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 150, fig. 5.3.



Figure 5.14: Detail of the bound rebel leaders with Ahuramazda above.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Bisotun,” *Bisotun*, photograph by Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, November 26, 2008, © Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, All Rights Reserved, document no. 170206.



Figure 5.15: Detail of Gaumata beneath Darius' foot with weapon bearers behind.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Bisotun," *Bisotun*, photograph by Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, November 26, 2008, © Ko Hon Chiu Vincent, All Rights Reserved, document no. 170207.

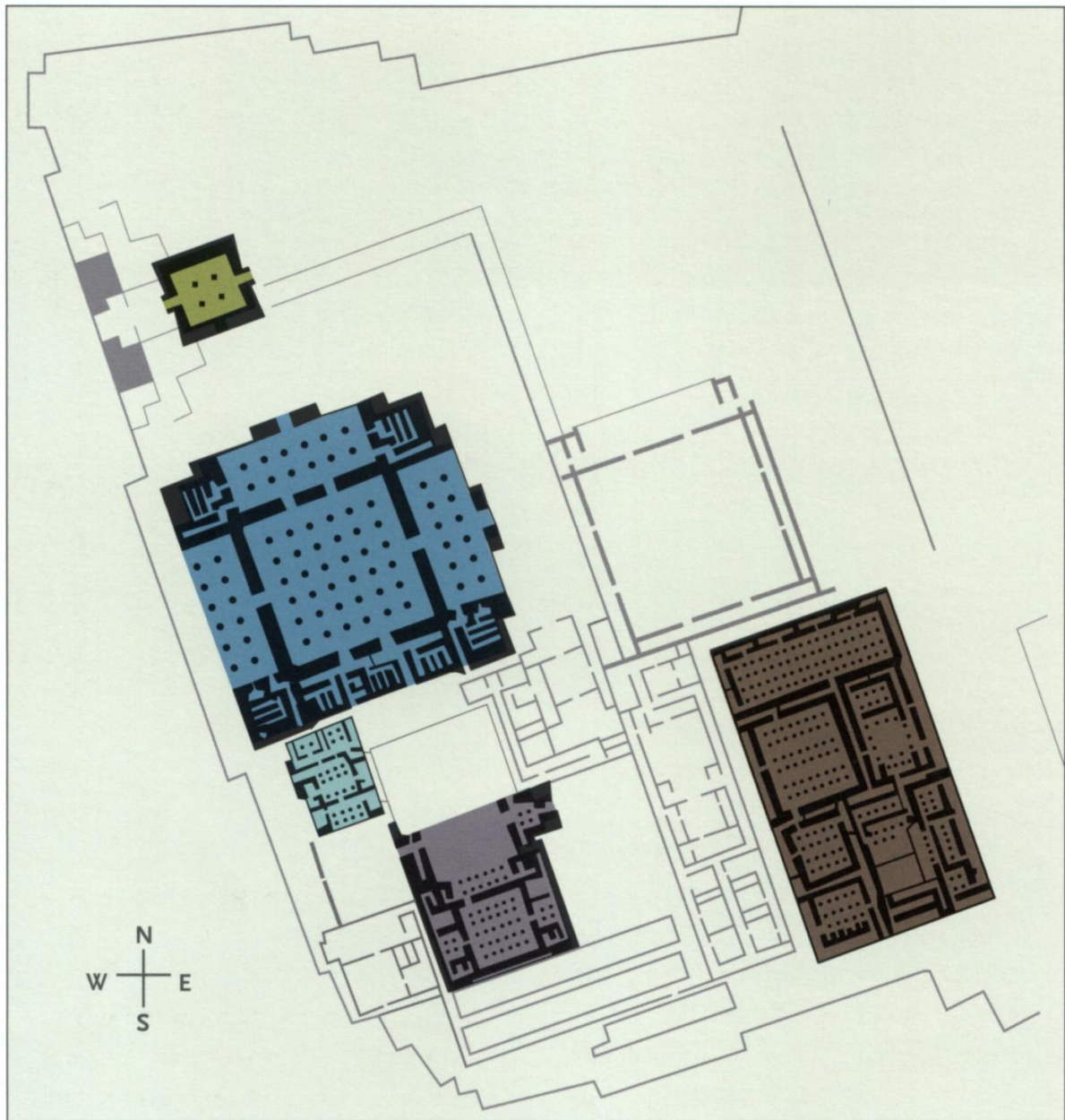


Figure 5.16: Plan of the Persepolis terrace with the Apadana shown in blue.⁸¹

⁸¹ Adapted from Elsie Holmes Peck, "Achaemenid Relief Fragments from Persepolis," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 79, no. 1/2 (2005): 22, fig. 2. Plan after and courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Figure 5.17: Apadana staircase relief with lion-and-bull motif and delegation reliefs, Persepolis.⁸²

⁸² Photograph by Shiva Mohtasham, taken at Persepolis, November 2025. Used with permission.

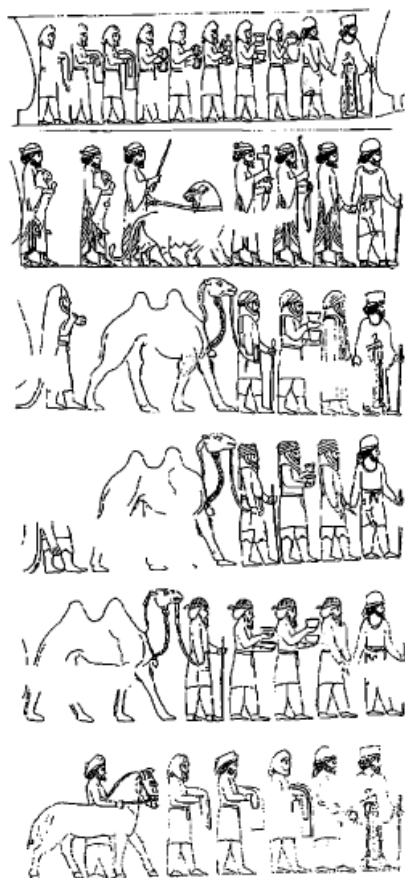


Figure 5.18: Drawings of gift-bearing peoples from the so-called tribute friezes: Medes, Elamites, Parthians, Aryans, Bactrians, Sargatians.⁸³

⁸³ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 175, fig. 12.



Figure 5.19: Apadana delegation reliefs, Persepolis.⁸⁴

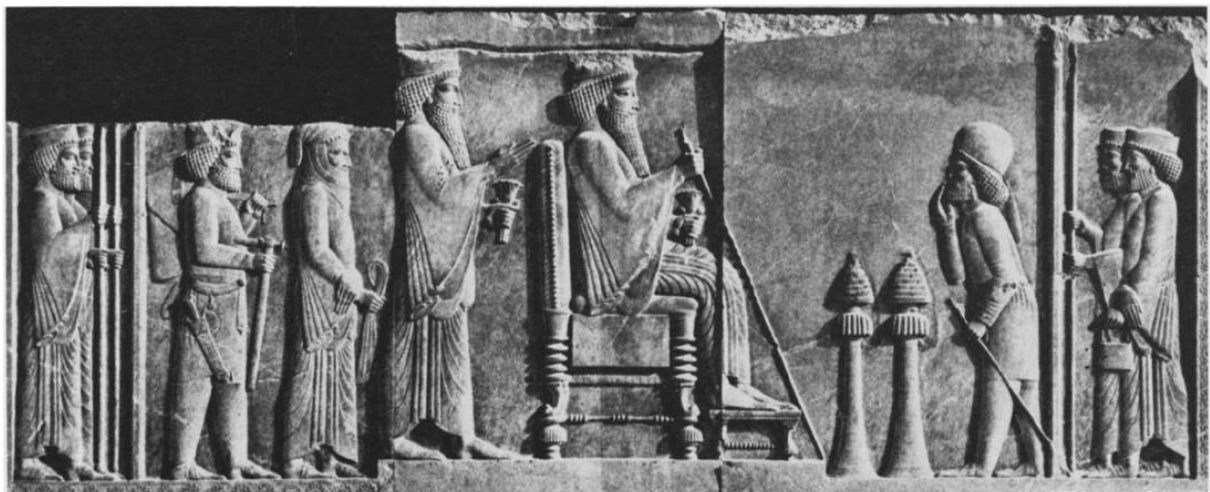


Figure 5.20: Original Central Panel from the North Stair of the Apadana.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Photograph by Shiva Mohtasham, taken at Persepolis, November 2025. Used with permission.

⁸⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 17.



Figure 5.21: Procession of dignitaries on the northern part of the East stairs of the Apadana.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Livius.org, “Persepolis, Apadana, East Stairs, Northern part,” photograph by Harold Hazenberg, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 23, 2020.



Figure 5.22: The Medes on the southern part of the East stairs of the Apadana.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Livius.org, “Persepolis, Apadana, East Stairs, Southern part, Medes (1),” photograph by Marco Prins, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 23, 2020.



Figure 5.23: Armenians on the southern part of the East stairs of the Apadana.⁸⁸



Figure 5.24: Wider view of the tribute bearers on the North Stairs of the Apadana.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Livius.org, "Persepolis, Apadana, East Stairs, Southern part, Armenians," photograph by Marco Prins, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 23, 2020.

⁸⁹ Livius.org, "Persepolis, Apadana, North Stairs, Tribute bearers," photograph by Jona Lendering, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 27, 2017.



Figure 5.25: Persian and Median courtiers from the North Stairs of the Apadana.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Livius.org, "Persepolis, Apadana, North Stairs, Courtiers (1)," photograph by Jona Lendering, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 27, 2020.



Figure 5.26: General view of the North Stairs of the Apadana.⁹¹

⁹¹ Livius.org, “Persepolis, Apadana, North Stairs, General view,” photograph by Jona Lendering, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 27, 2020.



Figure 5.27: Relief of a seated ruler, usually identified as Erbbina (?), under a parasol with suppliants or attendants before him from the Nereid Monument.⁹²

⁹² British Museum, "Relief from the Nereid Monument," museum image 34543001, *The British Museum Collection Online*.



Figure 5.28: Relief of carriers from the Hall of 100 Columns, Persepolis.⁹³

⁹³ Livius.org, "Persepolis, Hall of 100 Columns, Relief of carriers," photograph by Jona Lendering, CC0 1.0 Universal, last modified April 29, 2020.



Figure 5.29: Figures (Persian and Mede) of the Left Side of the base of the Statue of Darius from Susa.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 11.



Figure 5.30: Detail from the Tomb of Darius at Naqsh-e Rostam depicting Darius upheld by carriers.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 13a.



Figure 5.31: Detail from the Tomb of Darius at Naqsh-e Rostam showing Darius below Ahuramazda.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 13b.



Figure 5.32: East doorjamb of the Central Building, or Tryplon, Persepolis.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 25a.



Figure 5.33: South doorjamb from the Throne Hall, Persepolis.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 29a.

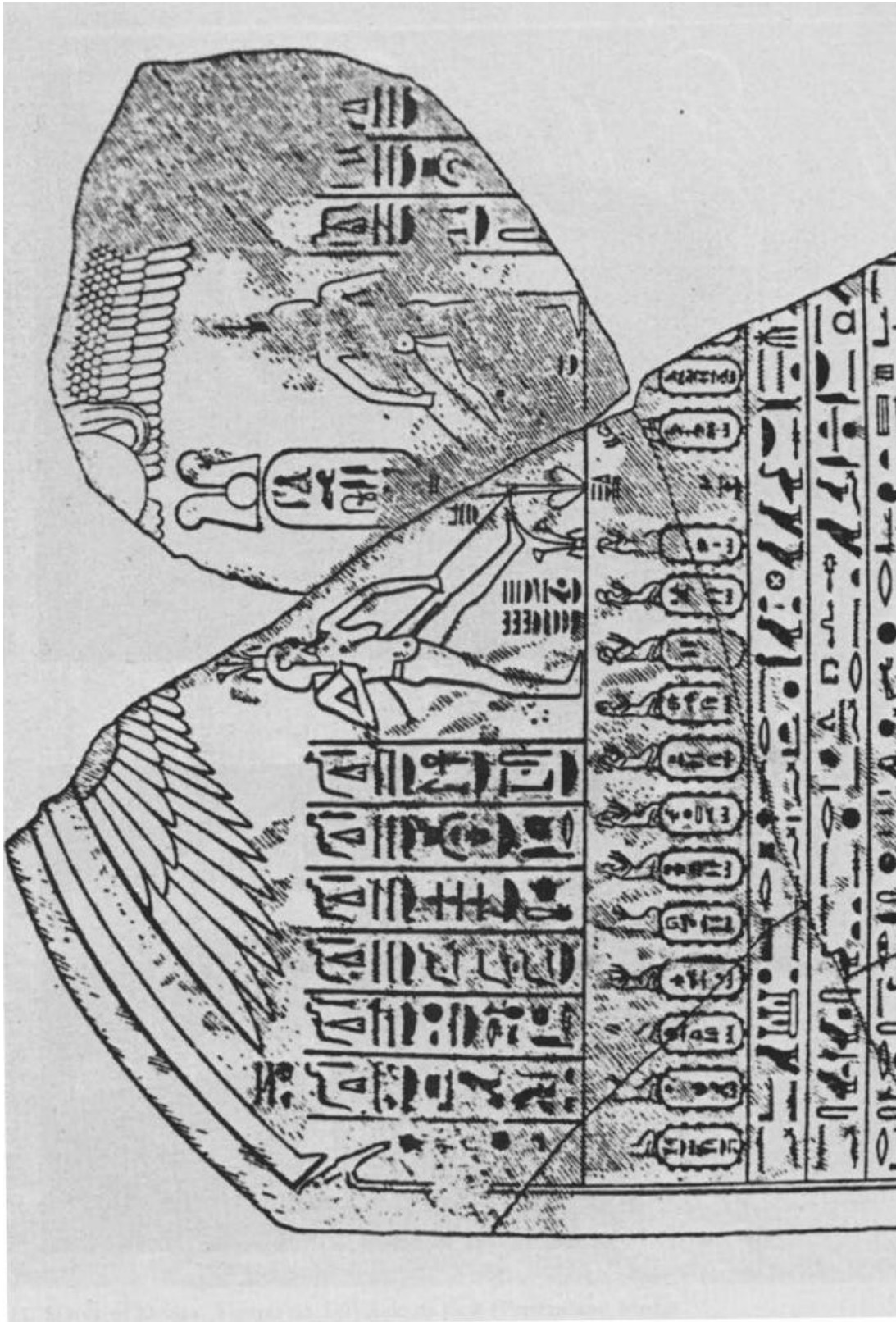


Figure 5.34: Maskhouthah Canal Stele of Darius, Dynasty 27, Obverse Top.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 9.

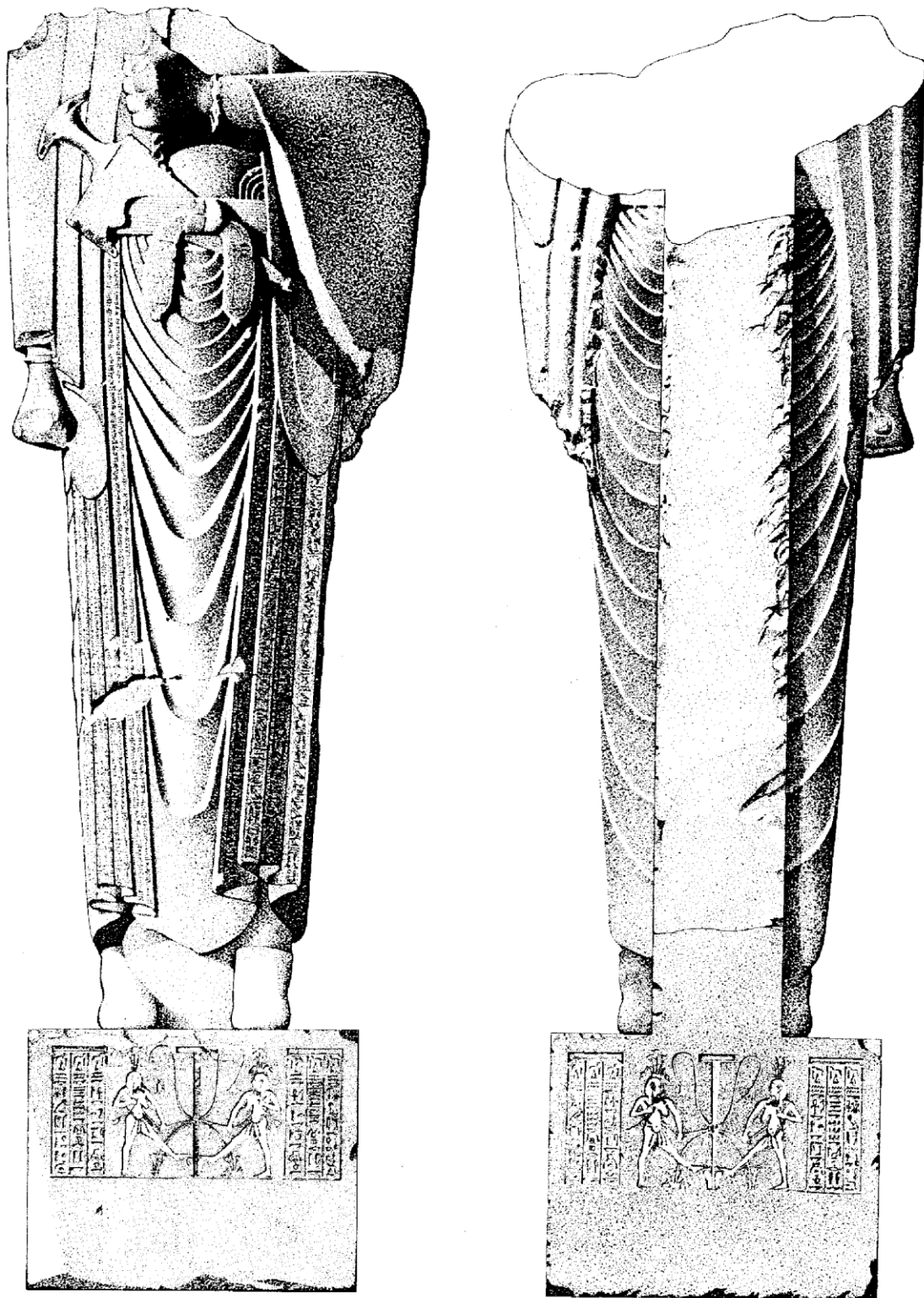


Figure 5.35: Full view of the Statue of Darius at Susa.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, fig. 11.2.

Chapter 6:

The Synthesis of Imperial Visibility from Assyria to Persia

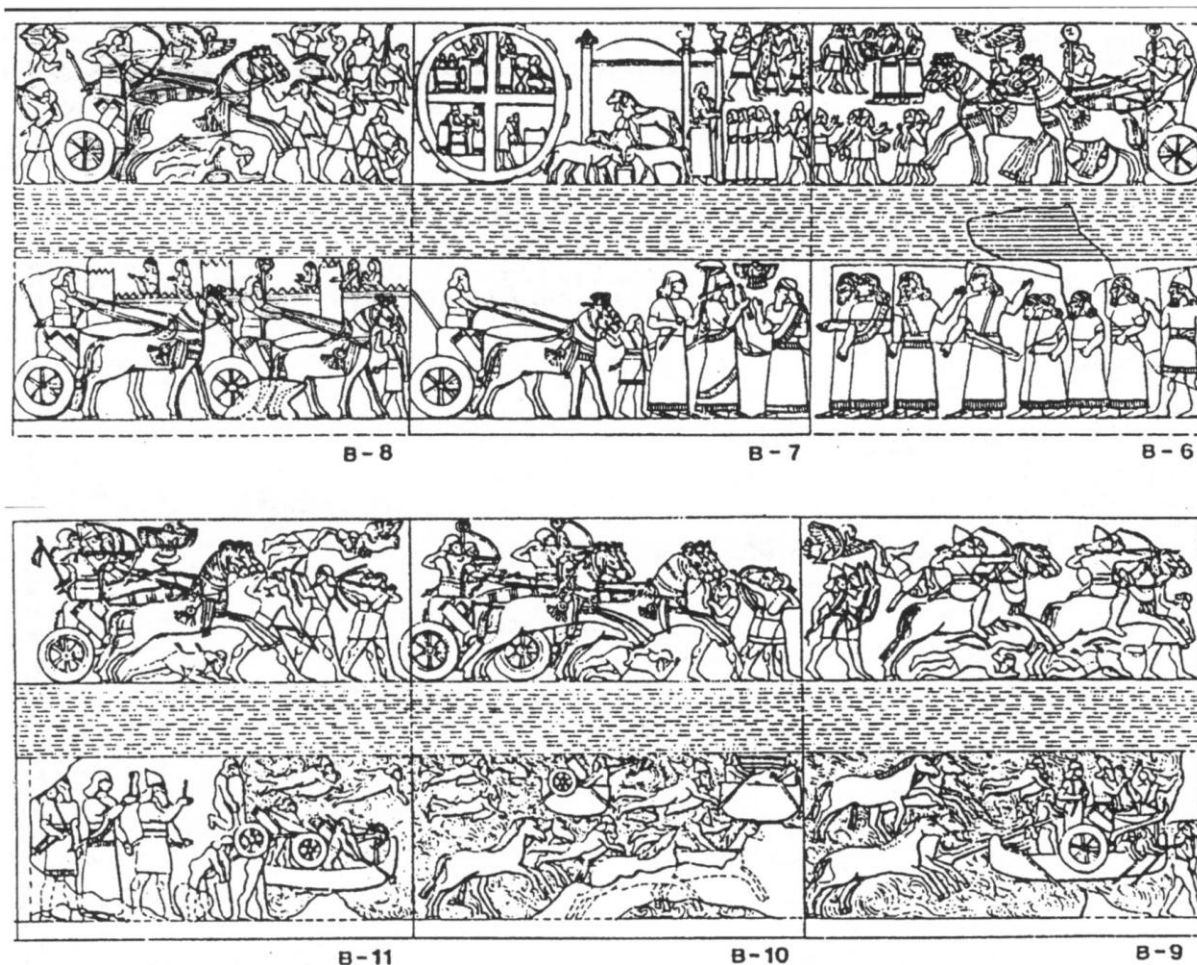


Figure 6.1: Reliefs from the south wall of Room B in the Northwest Palace at Nimrud.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Rita Dolce, "The 'Head of the Enemy' in the Sculptures from the Palaces of Nineveh: An Example of 'Cultural Migration'?", *Iraq* 66 (2004): 121–32, figs. 1–2.

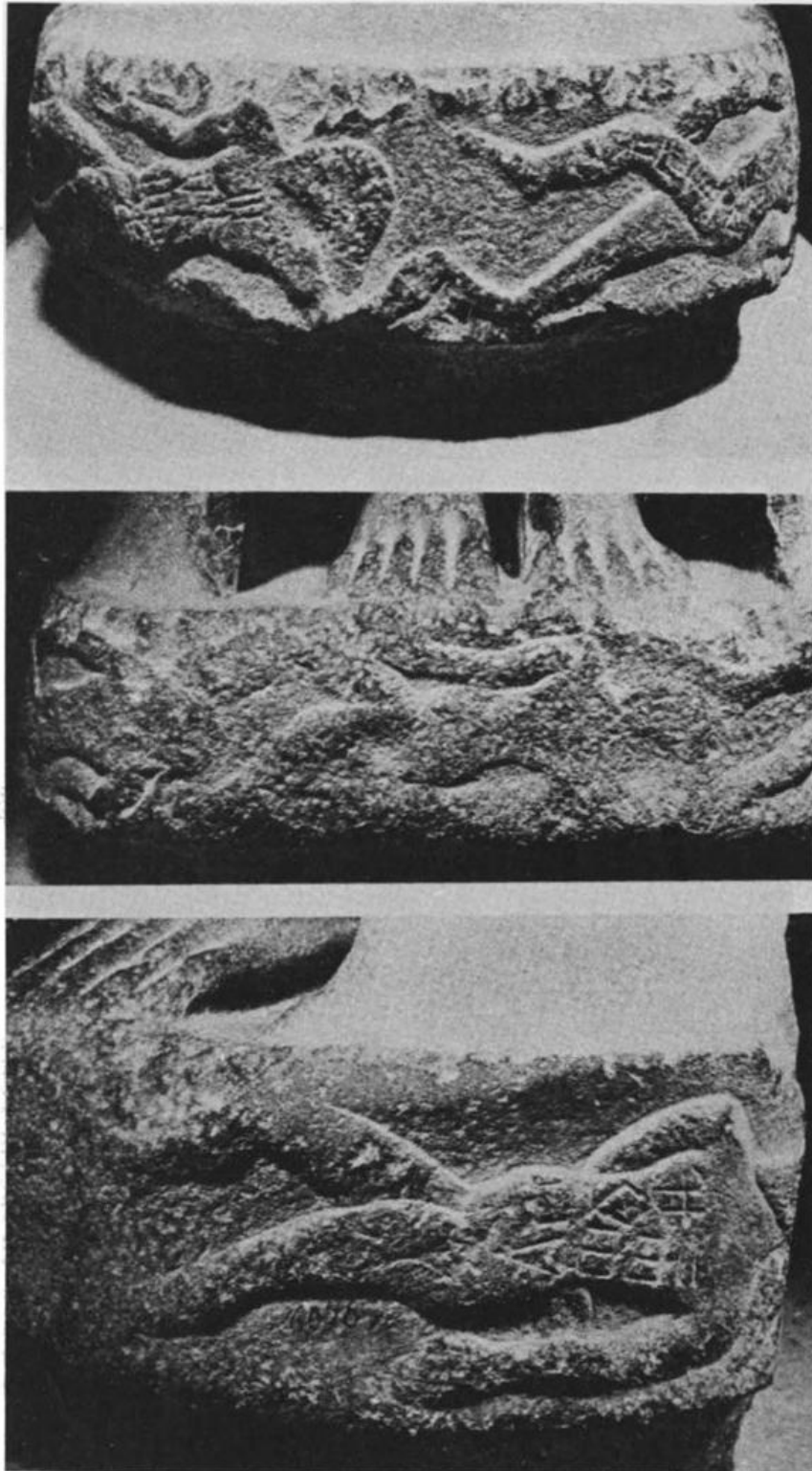


Figure 6.2: Base relief of a statue possibly belonging to Manishtushu from Susa, with nude corpses of conquered enemies beneath the ruler.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 37.



Figure 6.3: Statue of Ur-Ningirsu, ruler of Lagash, with foreign offering-bearers carved around the base.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 38.

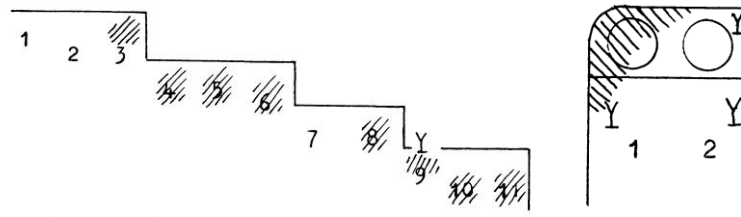


Figure 6.4: Sculptors' marks on the North side of the South East stairs of the Central Building North stairs (left) and sculptors' marks on the West side of the East landing of the Central Building North stairs (right).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Michael Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," *Iran* 21 (1983): figs. 95–96.



Figure 6.5: Tomb of Kheruef, Royal Kiosk with Nine Bows.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 40a.



Figure 6.6: Colossus of Ramses II with Nine Bows from Luxor.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 40b.

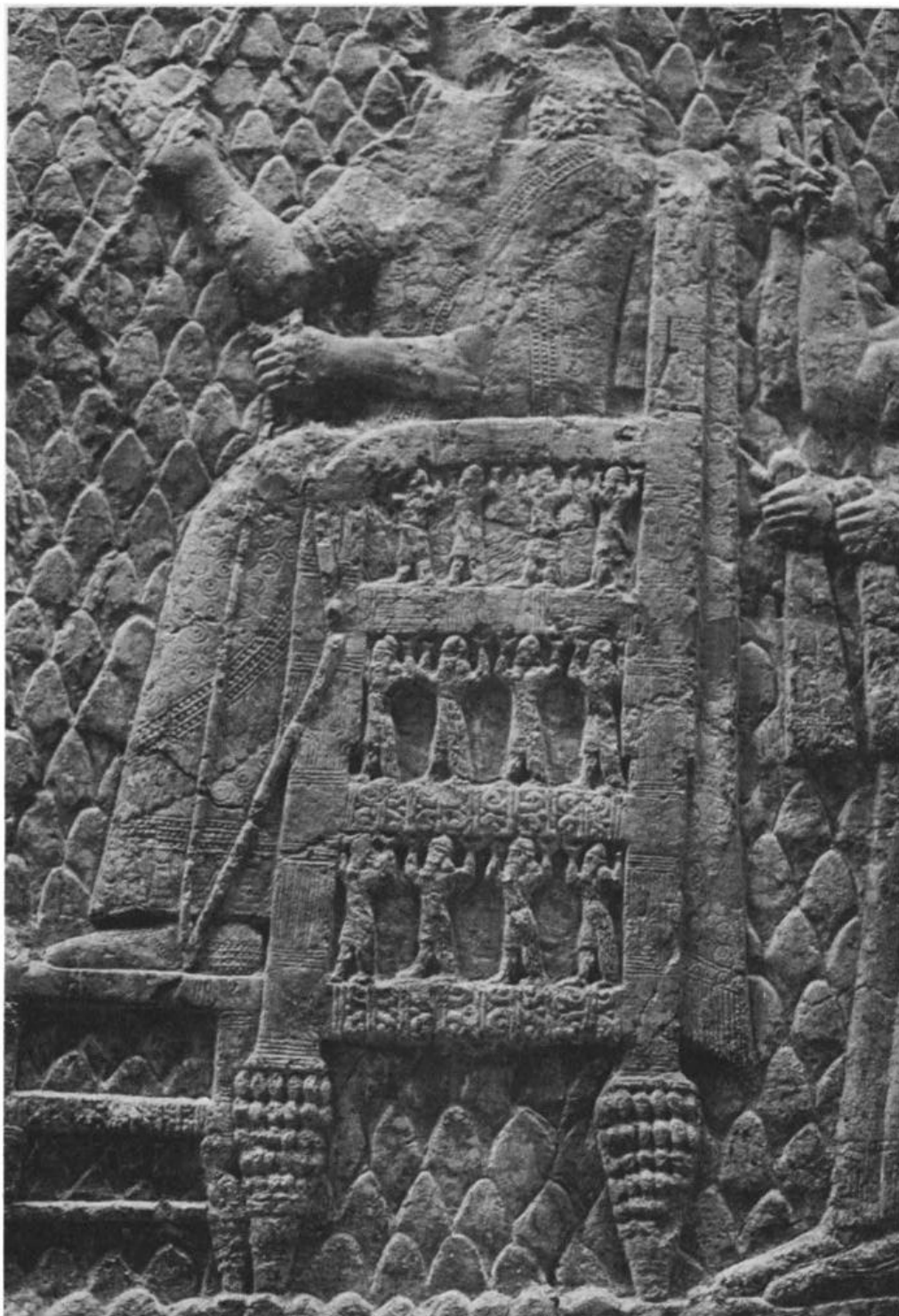


Figure 6.7: Details of Sennacherib's throne on the Lachish reliefs.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 42.



Figure 6.8: Achaemenid Seal with Atlas motif.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 41a.

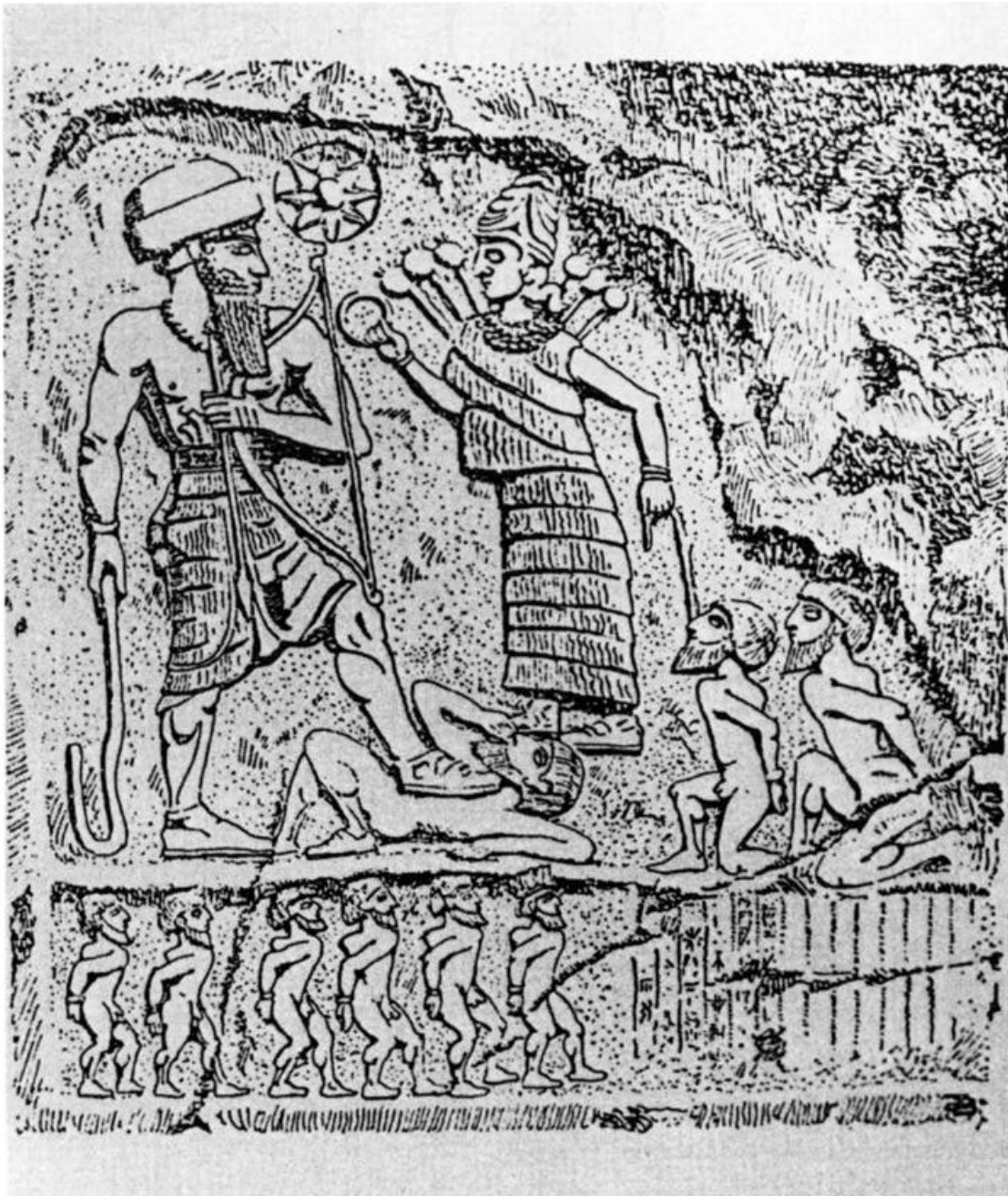


Figure 6.9: Sar-I Pul, Drawing of the Relief of Annubanini.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 49.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Orientalism, Ritual, and Narrative

Orientalist discourse often reduces the East to a timeless and romanticized tableau of exoticism, despotic kings, and passive subjects. It is one of the most entrenched depictions of the Other in the European Western experience, and no discussion “[of] the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism”.¹ Beginning with an imagined geographic split between Europe and Asia, the Orient was also illustrated through characters that represented Asia that show a created and perceived character of the region. The imagined European conception for rationality and moderation are undermined by Eastern excesses and temptations, an image that dates back to classical Greece. Said emphasizes the creation of these representations and ideas by the West, exterior representations, are based upon exteriority and must exist outside the Orient. Thus, when Europeans first found evidence of the antiquity of Near Eastern languages and took a greater interest in the region, their analyses restructured its art through their vision instead of guiding their vision.²

Within this view, the Near East was given the image of the past of mankind and linked to the concept of despotism. These views were also under the umbrella of Western imperialism that utilized the arts and sciences as part of imperial enterprise which gave it an identity that, as Said previously stated, could only have come from an external source. Mesopotamia was an “earlier embodiment of civilized mankind” that removed it from its geographical setting and wove it into the Western historical narrative of the progress of civilization.³ This, Zainab Bahrani has argued, has caused descriptions of Mesopotamian art to be read too often through

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1–4.

² Said, *Orientalism*, 20–22, 57.

³ Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 50–52.

Orientalist paradigms that emphasize its supposed despotism, a concept that is more often accepted than challenged in its function, its stagnant nature, and its irrationality.⁴ These notions imposed external categories that read Near Eastern and Iranian art as inferior and simplistic. Their realities are also comparable, even if aesthetically different, to that of ancient Western public art, allowing for this imposed interpretation that it is stagnant and obscures the actual function within Near Eastern and Iranian societies.

The visibility of kingship was neither arbitrary nor static, but a complex and fluid system with its own internal logic. For Bahrani, visibility is not a theory of mimesis, but a historically and culturally specific system of presencing, in which images and texts operated as signs that were ontologically equivalent to the real thing, producing presence rather than representing an absent original, and structuring relations of knowledge, power, and ontology.⁵ The rhetoric of victory, repetition of imagery, and blur between representation and personal presence was a cultural grammar of power. There is an emphasis on the king's physical presence and his actions, whether carved in relief or inscriptions or present in cult statues or the king himself being physically present. That emphasis underscores Bahrani's insight that sovereignty in Mesopotamia was profoundly embodied through art, an art that produced images that existed in the "same register of reality" as what they depicted.⁶

The king and his representations were not only the head of state, but the axis of cosmic order, the node through which divine will was enacted in the human realm. His body was not private but public, endlessly displayed, ritualized, and replicated. What will be seen from the foundations of Near Eastern and Iranian iconographies and visibility will allow for a greater understanding of how the Achaemenids adopted and molded these concepts into a new

⁴ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 66–68.

⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1, 127.

⁶ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 127.

iconographic language. The following analyses will demonstrate how this embodiment operated at the intersection of image, narrative, and ritual to construct a system that both creates and reinforces itself.

Yet the recognition of this system requires first confronting the modern frameworks through which Near Eastern and Iranian visual cultures have been interpreted. As Said has demonstrated, Orientalist discourse has obscured the political and intellectual sophistication of these systems by recasting them as static, derivative, and despotic. Bahrani's reconceptualization of Mesopotamian visuality as a system of presencing embedded in power and embodiment provides a meaningful way to move beyond these inherited categories. Taken together, these interventions make it feasible to reassess the visual politics of power within Near Eastern and Achaemenid kingship, and to reassess Achaemenid visual culture not as a secondary adaptation of earlier models, but a self-conscious articulation of sovereignty, with a plurality that integrated indigenous and Near Eastern aesthetics.

1.2 The Political Work of Images

The importance of moving beyond Orientalist and classicizing frameworks is not only the mischaracterization of Near Eastern and Iranian art. Such frameworks that do not approach these subjects with respect to their cultures will undoubtedly result in interpretations that mischaracterize them. The deeper problem with these Orientalist and classicizing frameworks is the way they shaped the kinds of questions scholars asked of images. Said's critique of Orientalism shows how the "Orient" was produced as an external object of Western knowledge,

while Bahrani has shown that Mesopotamian art was often interpreted through inherited categories rather than through its own historically specific visual systems.⁷

If royal reliefs, inscriptions, stelae, and architectural programs are approached as static reflections of despotism, decorative expressions of court ideology, or secondary illustrations of texts, then their political function is already diminished before the analysis begins because the questions asked of them approach them from a Western perspective. Dolce's discussion of the relationship between visual and textual sources is useful for her emphasis that images should not be treated as subordinate to written documents and instead as visual systems capable of transmitting information through their own forms of legibility.⁸ The image becomes evidence for power rather than one of the media through which that power could be repeated, sustained, and made visible. The problem therefore moves beyond simply correcting inherited bias and becomes a reconsideration of what images were capable of doing within the political and ritual systems that produced them.

This is especially important for Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid royal art, because both visual systems came to encompass world-spanning empires that had incredible need for visual production of kingship that would be accepted across their worlds. Kingship depended on the perception of royal difference, and Parker's analysis of Neo-Assyrian kingship stresses that royal power had to be performed, recognized, and invested in the body of the king.⁹ The king was continually made present through carved bodies, written names, monumental inscriptions, architectural routes, divine symbols, ritualized gestures, and repeated visual forms. Bahrani's discussion of image, name, and presence is crucial for understanding why these media cannot

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 1–4, 20–22, 57; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 50–68.

⁸ Rita Dolce, "Ancient Images in Mesopotamia: Ancient Gaze and Present Observation between Visual Sources and Textual Sources. Questions and Limitations," in *Mortals, Deities and Divine Symbols: Rethinking Ancient Images from the Levant to Mesopotamia*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Laura Battini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2025), 29–31.

⁹ Bradley J. Parker, "The Construction and Performance of Kingship in the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67, no. 3 (2011): 357–60, 375–76.

be reduced to illustration, since images and inscriptions could participate in the presence and efficacy of what they depicted.¹⁰ These media did not operate separately, either, because reliefs structured how the royal body was seen, inscriptions fixed the king's claims into durable material form, architecture controlled movement and access, and repeated compositions taught viewers how different figures were to be recognized.¹¹ The visual field was not political because it contained political themes alone, but because it organized relations of hierarchy, legitimacy, obedience, and recognition.

This does not mean that royal imagery should be treated as transparent record of political reality, since imperial art often presents the world as rulers wished it to be understood. The power of these images, though, lies precisely in the dissonance between political reality and visual order. They are not acting simply as documents of domination, harmony, violence, or reciprocity, and instead construct a field in which such relations become perceptible and meaningful. The question, then, is how each system makes imperial authority coherent, legitimate, and materially present.

The political work of images must therefore be understood as both visual and historical. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments belonged to specific reigns, crises, architectural settings, and imperial formations, but they also participated in longer traditions of royal representation. Winter's analyses of Neo-Assyrian narrative reliefs and Root's study of Achaemenid imperial iconography both demonstrate that visual forms gain meaning through their placement within broader royal programs rather than as isolated motifs.¹² Their

¹⁰ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27, 168–74; Zainab Bahrani, “The King's Head,” *Iraq* 66 (2004): 115–19.

¹¹ Pamela Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs: The Development of the Epigraphic Text,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 40, no. 1 (1988): 1–35; Ludovico Portuese, “Fear, Concern and Care in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II,” *Die Welt des Orients* 51, no. 1 (2021): 28–57; Jennifer Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men: Trilingual Inscriptions and Symbolic Visualizations in the Achaemenid Empire,” *Ars Orientalis* 41 (2011): 219–44.

¹² Irene J. Winter, “Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 7, no. 2 (1981): 2–38; Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 1–3, 86–89, 131–54.

significance emerges from the way inherited forms were repeated, altered, relocated, and reoriented. A gesture, an inscription, an elevated king, a bound enemy, a tribute procession, or a divine symbol did not carry meaning in isolation but gained force through their placement within larger systems of visibility. By treating image, text, architecture, and ritual as mutually constitutive media of sovereignty, this study asks how imperial power was not only represented, but made available to be seen, inferred, and experienced.

1.3 Questions and Claims

The preceding discussion raises the central question of how Achaemenid imperial imagery transformed earlier Near Eastern visual systems of kingship into a distinct visual ontology of sovereignty. This question is not limited to identifying which motifs were borrowed, adapted, or rejected. It concerns the deeper problem of how visual systems produce political meaning across time. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments both rely on inherited mechanics of royal visibility – the enlarged and elevated king, the defeated or subordinated body, the divine symbol, the monumental inscription, the architectural setting, and the ordered arrangement of peoples before royal authority – yet these shared mechanics do not produce identical visual effects.¹³ Their meaning depends on how they are coordinated within a particular imperial system.

The relationship between Achaemenid visuality, earlier Near Eastern models, and Neo-Assyrian visual strategies should not be understood as simple borrowing, direct derivation, or rejection, but as continuity, selection, and reconfiguration.¹⁴ Achaemenid art reconfigured inherited mechanics of royal visibility into a distinct visual system that did not eliminate

¹³ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 2–38; Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3, 86–89, 131–54.

¹⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3; Amélie Kuhrt, “The Achaemenid Concept of Kingship,” *Iran* 22 (1984): 156–57.

domination or violence, but reformulated them through order, processional rhythm, disciplined difference, and the staged support of the peoples of the empire.¹⁵ The result was not a truthful image of consensual and benevolent imperial harmony, but a royal visual ontology that naturalized an Achaemenid vision of sovereignty by making imperial subordination appear as ordered participation in the king's rule.

This formulation also requires a more nuanced understanding of Neo-Assyrian visuality. Neo-Assyrian art should not be reduced to violence alone, just as Achaemenid art should not be reduced to harmony or benevolent inclusion. Assyrian royal imagery could incorporate difference and present empire as a world ordered through royal action.¹⁶ The Achaemenid visual system retained many of these mechanics and reoriented their effect. Instead of repeatedly foregrounding the coercive encounter between king and enemy, Achaemenid monument art often presents hierarchy as already organized into ceremonial approach, differentiated belonging, and visible support that centers the imperial control of the king.¹⁷

The objectives of this study follow from this claim. An examination of Neo-Assyrian royal imagery and Achaemenid art analyzes how sovereignty was produced through various mechanics and then transformed under the Achaemenids. It aims to consider how image, text, architecture, and ritual operated together as media of imperial visibility rather than as separate categories of evidence.¹⁸ The final question it seeks to answer is what changes when sovereignty

¹⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54; Maria Brosius, “Keeping Up with the Persians: Between Cultural Identity and Persianization in the Achaemenid Period,” in *Persian Responses: Political and Cultural Interaction with(in) the Achaemenid Empire*, ed. Christopher Tuplin (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 135–49.

¹⁶ Sarah C. Melville, “Taming the Other: The Manipulation of Foreign Peoples in Neo-Assyrian Art,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 113–32; Allison Karmel Thomason, “Representations of the North Syrian Landscape in Neo-Assyrian Art,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 323 (2001): 63–96.

¹⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54; Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 213–31, 900–901.

¹⁸ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27, 168–74; Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–35; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

is treated not as inherently stable or self-evident, but as something constructed, repeated, and stabilized through visual and material forms.¹⁹

The larger claim is therefore both art-historical and theoretical. Art-historically, the thesis examines the relationship between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid visual systems as one of transformation rather than derivation. Theoretically, it argues that imperial images do not merely represent kingship, but participate in producing the conditions through which kingship becomes visible, legible, and real.²⁰ The significance of this relationship lies in the fact that similar visual mechanics could be reorganized to produce different experiences of royal authority. The same broad ancient Near Eastern language of kingship could make sovereignty perceptible through coercive domination or ordered and controlled participation, depending on how its signs were placed, repeated, changed, and made to act within the visual field of empire.²¹

1.4 Constructing the Ancient Near East: Orientalism and Its Afterlives

The modern study of the ancient Near East and Achaemenid Iran emerged within intellectual traditions that constructed the region through inherited categories of knowledge. Said's critique of Orientalism remains foundational because it deconstructs how the "Orient" was produced as an external object of Western knowledge, defined through that distance, difference, opposition, and uncomfortable similarity.²² In ancient Near Eastern studies, Bahrani has shown how this process shaped the very naming and placement of Mesopotamia within Western historical narratives, where the region could become at once the origin of civilization

¹⁹ Parker, "Construction and Performance of Kingship," 357–86; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 19–27; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27–28, 170–94.

²⁰ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

²¹ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–52; Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38.

²² Said, *Orientalism*, 1–4, 20–22, 57.

and the image of civilization's despotic or irrational past.²³ The problem is therefore not only the bias present within early scholarship, but how its categories shaped what ancient Near Eastern art was thought to be capable of expressing.

This inheritance has been especially significant for Achaemenid studies because the Persian Empire has long been filtered through Greek literary traditions and later European historiography. Briant has emphasized the danger of allowing Greek and Alexandrian sources to make the empire appear as though it had little internal existence before Alexander, while Colburn's critique of modern readings of Achaemenid religion and empire demonstrates that Orientalist and postcolonial problems have not disappeared from contemporary scholarship.²⁴ At the same time, Iranian nationalism and the modern political uses of the Achaemenid past have also shaped the field, especially in relation to Persepolis, Cyrus, and the construction of ancient Iran as a foundation for modern identity.²⁵ The historiographical problem is thus a more complex field than simple opposition between Western distortion and local recovery because classical inheritance, colonial scholarship, nationalism, and modern theory all affect the questions asked of the material.

Recent scholarship has moved significantly beyond the older image of Near Eastern and Iranian art as static, despotic, or derivative, yet the afterlives of those assumptions remain important. They persist whenever Achaemenid art is treated primarily as an eclectic borrowing from older imperial cultures, whenever Neo-Assyrian art is reduced to brutality alone, or whenever imperial images are read as transparent expressions of absolute power rather than as

²³ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 50–68.

²⁴ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 696–97; Henry P. Colburn, "Orientalism, Postcolonialism, and the Achaemenid Empire: Meditations on Bruce Lincoln's *Religion, Empire, and Torture*," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 54, no. 2 (2011): 87–103.

²⁵ Kamyar Abdi, "Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 51–76; Mohammad-Taqi Imanpour, "Re-establishment of Achaemenid History and Its Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2015): 515–30; Touraj Daryaee, "The Study of Ancient Iran in the Twentieth Century," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 579–89.

historically specific systems of visual production. The task is instead to examine how Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid images produced their own political worlds, while remaining alert to the modern frameworks that have shaped their interpretation.

1.5 Kingship as Political Ideology and State Structure

The study of kingship within the ancient Near East and Iran has often moved between two related, but not always fully integrated, approaches: kingship as an institutional structure and kingship as an ideological construction. Political historians have rightly emphasized administration, military power, taxation, court hierarchy and structure, provincial organization, and the practical mechanisms through which empires governed.²⁶ At the same time, scholarship on royal ideology has shown that kingship was never sustained by institutional force alone. Royal titulary, ritual performance, divine sanction, monumental building, and visual display were not ornamental additions to political rule, but part of the system through which rule became recognizable and legitimate.²⁷ The tension, then, is not between “real” political structure and “symbolic” representation, but between the approaches that separate these categories too sharply and approaches that see them as mutually dependent.

This tension is especially important for Neo-Assyrian kingship. Liverani’s work has shown how Assyrian imperial ideology shaped the ways conquest, space, and royal action were narrated, while Parker stresses that Neo-Assyrian kingship depended on performance, perception, and the repeated production of royal difference.²⁸ These approaches do not negate the institutional reality of Assyrian power because they show that institutions of empire required

²⁶ Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 244–83; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 1–33, 340–56.

²⁷ Mario Liverani, *Assyria: The Imperial Mission*, trans. Andrea Trameri (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 99–133; Parker, “Construction and Performance of Kingship,” 357–60, 375–76.

²⁸ Liverani, *Assyria*, 99–133; Parker, “The Construction and Performance of Kingship,” 357–86.

visual and ritual forms through which the king could be recognized as uniquely qualified to rule. The palace, the relief, the inscription, the oath, and the military campaign all belonged to the same political world, even if scholarship has often analyzed them through separate disciplinary frames.

A similar problem appears in Achaemenid studies. Briant, Brosius, and Kuhrt have emphasized the administrative, political, and courtly structures that made Achaemenid rule possible, while also recognizing that royal ideology, ceremony, and representation were central to how that structure was articulated.²⁹ The Achaemenid king was the figure through whom imperial diversity was ordered and made intelligible at the same time as he was the head of an administrative system. This thesis builds from that intersection to treat kingship as a political institution whose stability depended on the functionality of that institution and on visual, textual, architectural, and ritual production. The state and imperial images helped organize the conditions under which the state's hierarchy, authority, and legitimacy could be seen and accepted.

1.6 Monumentality and the Visual Politics of Power

Studies of monumentality have also developed around the question of whether monuments should be treated primarily as reflections of royal power or as active instruments in its production. Earlier formal and iconographic approaches made it possible to identify scenes, motifs, architectural settings, and stylistic developments with great precision, but political interpretation often remained tied to the assumption that monumental art represented an already-established ideology. Winter's work on Neo-Assyrian reliefs marked an important shift

²⁹ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 213–31, 340–56, 900–901; Maria Brosius, *A History of Ancient Persia: The Achaemenid Empire* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 70–103; Amélie Kuhrt, “The Achaemenid Concept of Kingship,” 156–57.

by treating the palace reliefs as a rhetorical system that shaped the meaning of royal action.³⁰ Monumentality, in this sense, did not simply preserve the royal ideology but organized the terms through which it could be seen.

Root's work on Achaemenid art similarly shifted the discussion by approaching Persepolitan imagery as a coherent iconographic program instead of a passive collection of borrowed motifs.³¹ Her analysis of the Apadana, throne-bearing figures, and royal imagery showed that Achaemenid monuments articulated a specific vision of kingship, empire, and the relationship between the king and the peoples of the realm. Yet this also points to one of the unresolved tensions in the field. Monumental programs can be read formally, historically, politically, and ideologically, but these levels are not always brought together. The relief, inscription, palace wall, staircase, or stele may be treated as evidence of kingship without fully examining how its material placement, scale, repetition, and visibility helped produce the experience of power while being evidence of said power.

More recent work on Assyrian palatial and architectural contexts has sharpened this problem by emphasizing that monuments operated within spaces of movement, threshold, protection, access, and controlled viewing. Russell's reconstruction of Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace program, Kertai's analysis of the architectural presence of the Assyrian king, and Portuese's study of protective figures at palace doors all demonstrate that palace imagery was inseparable from the spatial and ritual environments in which it was encountered.³² The visual politics of power and monumentality worked through placement, scale, repetition, architectural framing, and the movement of bodies through space just as they worked through

³⁰ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38.

³¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3, 86–89, 131–54.

³² John Malcolm Russell, "The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud: Issues in the Research and Presentation of Assyrian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 102, no. 4 (1998): 655–715; David Kertai, "The Architectural Presence of the Assyrian King in His Palaces," in *Picturing Royal Charisma: Kings and Rulers in the Near East from 3000 BCE to 1700 CE*, ed. Arlette David, Rachel Milstein, and Tallay Ornan (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2023), 62–75; Portuese, "Fear, Concern and Care," 28–57.

image content. This study helps build from that insight by treating Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments as visual-political systems in which architecture, relief, inscription, and ritual setting worked together to make royal authority durable and experientially present.

1.7 Influence, Indigeneity, and Iranian Continuity

The question of influence has been one of the central problems in the study of Achaemenid art. Since Achaemenid imperial imagery visibly draws on forms associated with Mesopotamia, Egypt, Elam, Anatolia, and the wider Near East, it has often been tempting to explain Persian visual culture through models of borrowing, adaptation, or eclecticism. Root's work remains foundational because it challenged any simple derivative model, arguing instead that Achaemenid court art selected and reorganized available forms into a deliberate imperial iconography.³³ Yet even this model opens a further question. If Achaemenid art is synthetic rather than derivative, then the problem is not only identifying the sources of its forms, but explaining how those forms changed when placed within a Persian imperial system.

This issue becomes more complex when local Iranian, Elamite, and Zagros traditions are taken seriously. Moorey's discussion of the Iranian contribution to Achaemenid material culture emphasizes the difficulty of defining what is "native" in Achaemenid art, especially given the limited archaeological evidence from securely identifiable Median or Persian contexts before Cyrus.³⁴ Stronach's work on Cyrus and the kingship of Anshan likewise shows that early Persian kingship cannot be separated from Elamite and Anshanite political traditions, particularly in the way Cyrus' titulary engaged local and Babylonian expectations.³⁵ Balatti's study of the Zagros further complicates the picture by emphasizing regional forms of political

³³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3.

³⁴ P. R. S. Moorey, "The Iranian Contribution to Achaemenid Material Culture," *Iran* 23 (1985): 21–37.

³⁵ David Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan: Further Perspectives," *Iran* 51 (2013): 55–69.

organization, mobility, and interdependence that predated Achaemenid imperial formation.³⁶ These studies are not replacing influence with indigeneity, but they show that Achaemenid visual culture developed within a field of regional mediation, where inherited imperial forms interacted with local political traditions and Iranian modes of identity.

The tension then moves to Achaemenid art needing to be understood as a movement between foreign influence and Persian originality, rather than a dichotomy between one or the other. Canepa's work on Iranian kingship and transregional visual culture is useful in this regard because it treats royal imagery, architecture, and landscape as developing across shifting imperial contexts rather than within isolated cultural traditions.³⁷ The issue is not whether Achaemenid art borrowed from Near Eastern and Egyptian traditions or elsewhere, nor whether it can be purified into an indigenous Iranian core. The central question is how forms became meaningful through reconfiguration. Influence matters, but only when it is placed alongside political conditions, local continuities, and visual strategies that transformed inherited motifs into an Achaemenid rhetoric of sovereignty.

1.8 Rethinking the Ontology of the Image

A final historiographical tension concerns the status of the image itself. Scholarship on ancient Near Eastern and Achaemenid art has increasingly moved away from treating images and texts as simple containers of information, yet this movement has not been uniform. Some studies approach images and inscriptions as separate bodies of evidence, while others analyze

³⁶ Silvia Balatti, *Mountain Peoples in the Ancient Near East: The Case of the Zagros in the First Millennium BCE* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 1–24, 171–82.

³⁷ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 1–20.

their interaction as mutually reinforcing systems. Winter's work on Neo-Assyrian reliefs, for example, showed that inscription and image could operate together without reducing one medium to the other, while Gerardi's study of epigraphs demonstrates that the development of written labels within palace reliefs changed the relationship between image, event, and royal narrative.³⁸ Finn's work on Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions extends this problem further by treating writing itself as part of an imperial visual field, especially in the way script, language, and monumentality participate in the construction of royal authority.³⁹

A related but distinct question concerns whether images should be treated primarily as representations or as entities that participate in the realities they depict. Bahrani's work is decisive here because it argues that Mesopotamian images and texts could produce presence rather than simply represent an absent original.⁴⁰ This does not mean that all later scholarship has simply adopted her framework. Rather, recent studies have approached the active force of images from different angles. Dolce emphasizes the problem of recovering ancient modes of viewing and the need to consider how visual communication operated through multiple levels of perception and reception.⁴¹ Selz's work on proto-cuneiform likewise challenges a purely logocentric understanding of writing by stressing the intersection of visual and oral communication in the formation of meaning.⁴² McMahon's study of inscribed weapons offers

³⁸ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–35.

³⁹ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

⁴⁰ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27, 168–74; Bahrani, "The King's Head," 115–19.

⁴¹ Dolce, "Ancient Images in Mesopotamia," 29–38; Rita Dolce, "The Multifunctional Power of Visual Communication and Its Reception: Some Suggestions from the Documentation of Mesopotamia," in *Proceedings of the 11th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, ed. Adelheid Otto, Michael Herles, and Kai Kaniuth (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 163–70.

⁴² Gebhard J. Selz, "How Meaning Evolves: Proto-Cuneiform Signs: Considerations on Their Origins at the Intersection of Visual and Oral Communication," in *Mortals, Deities and Divine Symbols: Rethinking Ancient Images from the Levant to Mesopotamia*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Laura Battini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2025), 147–64.

another route into the same problem, showing how the addition of text and imagery could alter an object's affordances and shift it from practical violence into symbolic or ceremonial force.⁴³

This range of approaches illustrates how the field has not moved to a single unified theory of image-presence. Instead, it contains a spectrum of methods that increasingly question the separation between image, text, object, viewer, and action. The unresolved problem is how to bring these insights into a sustained analysis of imperial visual systems across cultural and historical contexts. For this thesis, the ontology of the image is not an abstract theoretical question detached from monuments because it forms the basis for asking how Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art acted within the world of kingship: how they made royal authority present, how they shaped the viewer's recognition of sovereignty, and how they allowed inherited forms to produce new political meanings when reconfigured within different imperial systems.

1.9 Unresolved Debates in Imperial Visuality

Taken together, these historiographical tensions show that the problem is not the absence of scholarship on Orientalism, kingship, monumentality, influence, or image ontology. Each of these fields has been substantially developed. The unresolved issue lies in how these debates are brought together. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art have often been studied through separate disciplinary and cultural frameworks, while the relationship between them has frequently been framed through influence, borrowing, or reaction.⁴⁴ These models are necessary, but insufficient because they do not fully explain how visual systems transform when inherited forms are placed within new political, regional, and ideological contexts.

⁴³ Augusta McMahon, "Tamed Violence: Inscribed Weapons in Mesopotamia," in *Bridging the Gap: Disciplines, Times, and Spaces in Dialogue—Volume 1*, ed. Christian W. Hess and Federico Manuelli (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021), 5–21.

⁴⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3; Kuhrt, "The Achaemenid Concept of Kingship," 156–57; Moorey, "The Iranian Contribution to Achaemenid Material Culture," 21–37.

This gap is especially clear in the study of imperial visibility. Neo-Assyrian programs have been analyzed as royal rhetoric, narrative, and political ideology, while Achaemenid monuments have been studied as coherent imperial iconography, courtly performance, and synthetic visual culture.⁴⁵ Yet the broader question remains open: how do related visual mechanics of kingship produce different experiences of sovereignty across empires? Scale, hierarchy, divine sanction, text-image interaction, architectural setting, and the organization of subject peoples are not unique to one empire, but they do not function identically in every context. Their political meaning depends on how they are coordinated, repeated, and visualized within a particular imperial system.

This thesis enters that unresolved space by treating Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art as connected but distinct regimes of imperial visibility. Its contribution does not argue solely for a view of Achaemenid art as synthetic rather than derivative, nor to replace a basic model of Assyrian domination with an equally simplified model of Persian harmony. Rather, it asks how continuity, selection, and reconfiguration changed the semiotic work performed by inherited visual forms. In doing so, the study treats sovereignty as something constructed through image, text, architecture, ritual, and repetition, and examines how imperial art helped produce the conditions through which kingship could be seen, inferred, and experienced as real.⁴⁶

1.10 Constructing Imperial Presence

The theoretical framework of this thesis brings together Bahrani, Gell, and Foucault in order to explain how imperial images functioned beyond representation alone. Bahrani provides the central ontological premise that in Mesopotamian visuality, images and texts could

⁴⁵ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Russell, "The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud," 655–715; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

⁴⁶ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

participate in the presence of what they depicted rather than merely stand as secondary representations of an absent original.⁴⁷ Gell's theory of art and agency helps operationalize this premise by explaining how material forms can function as indexes of agency, allowing viewers to infer the action, intention, or presence of an agent through the object itself.⁴⁸ Foucault then provides the political dimension of this process, showing how power operates through visibility, classification, bodily arrangement, repetition, surveillance, and the production of knowledge.⁴⁹ Together, these approaches make it possible to ask how royal images, inscriptions, gestures, and architectural settings helped produce kingship as something visible, legible, and real.

Methodologically, this thesis combines close visual analysis with text-image analysis, architectural context, historiographical critique, and synthetic comparison across imperial systems. The analysis begins from the material itself: the placement of figures, scale, gesture, spatial organization, bodily hierarchy, inscriptions, architectural setting, and the relation between image and viewer. These details are then read within their historical and political contexts, including royal succession, imperial expansion, palace construction, ritual performance, and the formation of Achaemenid imperial identity. The aim is not to impose theory onto the monuments, but to use theory to explain the political and semiotic work already visible in the monuments' formal and material logic.

This approach also clarifies what is meant by imperial presence. Presence does not refer only to the physical appearance of the king in an image, nor to the literal presence of a monument in space. It refers to the broader visual and material system through which sovereignty is made perceptible beyond the king's body. This can be through repeated images, inscribed names, divine symbols, architectural routes, controlled access, ritualized gestures, and

⁴⁷ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27, 168–74; Bahrani, “The King's Head,” 115–19.

⁴⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

the classification of peoples. By tracing how these mechanisms operate in Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art, the thesis examines how sovereignty was constructed just as much through military power or administrative structure as it was through visual systems that taught viewers how kingship should be seen and understood.

1.11 From Assyria to Achaemenid Iran: Comparative Trajectories of Imperial Visibility

The argument develops through a movement from theory and method into close analysis, and then from close analysis into synthesis. The second chapter establishes the theoretical and methodological basis for the study by defining how image, text, gesture, architecture, and ritual can be analyzed as mutually constitutive media of imperial presence. Bahrani, Gell, and Foucault provide the central framework for this approach: Bahrani for the ontology of image and text, Gell for the agency of material signs, and Foucault for the production of power through visibility, classification, and ordered bodies. This chapter therefore prepares the method used throughout the thesis by beginning with the formal and material logic of the monuments, then moving to their political function, and finally to the theoretical explanation of how they acted within the visual field of empire.

This study then turns to Esarhaddon as an initial case study for the instability of kingship and the visual, textual, and ritual strategies used to stabilize royal authority. His reign is especially important because the crisis of his accession made Esarhaddon acutely aware of the problem of succession, and his response to that made the fragility of kingship unusually visible. The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Victory Stele show how oath, inscription, image, divine sanction, and dynastic arrangement worked together to produce loyalty and make the royal succession harder to contest. This chapter establishes one of the central premises that will guide the later analysis, that kingship was not self-evident, but had to be repeatedly constructed

and secured through material and ritual forms, while also operationalizing the theoretical framework within a case-study of a single king's reign.

The fourth chapter expands from Esarhaddon to the broader Neo-Assyrian visual system. By analyzing the major palace programs and royal monuments of Ashurnasirpal II, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal, the chapter defines Neo-Assyrian imperial visuality as a rhetoric of domination. However, it will be demonstrated how this rhetoric is not reducible to violence alone. It is a system in which gesture, hierarchy, enemy representation, text-image relations, architectural setting, and ritualized royal action work together to make sovereignty perceptible through conquest, punishment, classification, incorporation, and the repeated staging of the king as the figure who restores or brings order to the world.

Then this research will turn to Achaemenid art in order to define its visual grammar on its own terms before placing it into synthesis with the Neo-Assyrian material. Beginning with Cyrus and Darius, the chapter examines how Achaemenid kingship emerged from a political world shaped by plurality, regional mediation, Elamite and Iranian continuities, and the crisis of Darius' accession. Behistun, the Apadana, the throne-bearing figures, the canal stelae, and the Statue of Darius are analyzed as part of a visual system that did not eliminate domination, violence, or subordination, but reformulated them through order, processional rhythm, disciplined difference, and staged support. The chapter therefore defines Achaemenid visuality as a royal ontology of ordered participation, in which imperial hierarchy is presented as the proper arrangement of peoples, languages, bodies, and spaces around the Great King.

Finally, these two visual systems will be brought into synthesis. It does not treat Achaemenid art as a derivative continuation of Neo-Assyrian art, nor as a simple rejection of it. Instead, it examines continuity, selection, and reconfiguration across several levels: gesture

and hierarchy, enemies and subject peoples, text-image relations, influence and appropriation, and the semiotic experience of kingship. The central claim developed there is that similar visual mechanics could produce different experiences of sovereignty depending on how they were coordinated. Neo-Assyrian visuality made power perceptible through the compelling force of domination, while Achaemenid visuality made power perceptible through the composed force of ordered support. The movement from Assyria to Achaemenid Iran therefore reveals not a linear evolution from violence to harmony, but a transformation in how imperial art made sovereignty visible, legible, durable, and real.

Methodology

2.1 Visual Rhetoric and Sovereignty

This thesis treats Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid imperial art as one of the means through which sovereignty was made visible, legible, durable, and repeatable. Royal reliefs, inscriptions, architectural settings, gestures, and bodily arrangements did not represent a kingship after political power had already been established because they helped construct the conditions through which royal authority could be encountered and recognized as real. For this reason, the study approaches imperial art as visual rhetoric, a system of images, texts, spaces, and viewing conditions that organizes political meaning and makes sovereignty perceptible.

The term visual rhetoric is used here to describe the way monuments persuade through visual and material arrangement rather than through verbal argument alone. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments organize scale, posture, gesture, proximity, inscription, divine symbols, and architectural movement so that viewers are directed toward specific understandings of royal power. Winter's work on Neo-Assyrian royal rhetoric remains important because it shows that reliefs, inscriptions, narrative scenes, and palace space formed part of a broader system through which kingship was articulated visually and historically.⁵⁰ Root's study of Achaemenid art is equally foundational for this thesis because it argues that Achaemenid royal imagery was a deliberately constructed iconography of empire rather than a passive mixture of inherited forms.⁵¹ These approaches make it possible to treat royal art not only as evidence for ideology, but as a medium through which kingship was organized and made recognizable.

⁵⁰ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Winter, "Seat of Kingship," 27–55.

⁵¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–7.

Sovereignty, in this framework, is produced through relations and the king's image. The bodies placed before or beneath the king, the inscriptions that name him, the gods who authorize him, the enemies or rebels who are subordinated to him, the officials and attendants who serve him, and the subject peoples whose movements, gifts, or support define their relation to his rule. This relational approach is essential for comparing Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art because the two traditions often employ similar visual mechanisms while producing different rhetorical effects because they do not have one fixed imperial meaning. Their force depends on the visual system in which they appear.

The purpose of this methodology is therefore to explain how visual forms produce political meaning when they are repeated, rearranged, and recontextualized. The comparison between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art requires attention to continuity, but also to reconfiguration. The same broad Near Eastern repertoire could remain recognizable while being made to serve different models of kingship. The following sections define the theoretical tools used to analyze this process: visibility and presence, productive power and classification, and image agency and inference.

2.2 Visibility as Presencing: Ontology and Image

Zainab Bahrani's reconceptualization of Mesopotamian visibility provides the central ontological premise for this thesis. Bahrani challenges modern approaches that treat ancient Near Eastern images primarily through mimesis, representation, or aesthetic style, arguing instead that Mesopotamian image-making operated within a culturally specific system of presence. Images and texts could participate in the presence of what they named or depicted.⁵² This distinction is crucial for the study of royal art because imperial images were

⁵² Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–52.

simultaneously visual records of kingship and material forms through which kingship could be made present beyond the king's physical body.

This does not mean that every royal relief, inscription, or statue functioned identically, nor that all images possessed the same ritual or ontological status. Bahrani's value for this thesis lies in the broader framework she provides for reading images, names, inscriptions, and represented bodies as active participants in visual culture rather than as passive symbols. Royal images and royal texts could help produce presence through their material form, repetition, placement, and association with ritual or architectural space. The king's body carved on a palace wall, his name inscribed across a relief, or his victory fixed in narrative image could therefore make royal authority encounterable in material and visual terms.

Bahrani's article "The King's Head" demonstrates how this approach can be applied to Neo-Assyrian reliefs. Her analysis of the Til-Tuba reliefs emphasizes that the repeated severed head of Teumman should not be treated only as a historical detail or as an example of Assyrian brutality. The head operates as a message-sign whose force depends on its repetition across image and text.⁵³ The relief and the annalistic account both focus attention on the severed head, making it a visual and textual sign of divine sanction, royal victory, and the defeated enemy's political undoing.⁵⁴ This kind of reading is important methodologically because it shows that the visual element and the text together produce the force of the sign rather than merely illustrating the written account or explaining the image.

For this thesis, Bahrani's concept of visibility makes it possible to analyze Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments as material sites where sovereignty is produced rather than simply represented. The question is not only what an image depicts, but how the image, inscription, name, body, and setting make royal authority present and recognizable. This is why Bahrani's

⁵³ Bahrani, "King's Head," 115–19.

⁵⁴ Bahrani, "King's Head," 117–19.

framework remains foundational for the later analysis of palace reliefs, Behistun, Persepolis, and the Statue of Darius from Susa. In each case, royal power is treated as something made visible through the monument's material and visual operation.

2.3 Power and the Naturalization of Sovereignty

Michel Foucault's account of power and knowledge provides the political dimension of this methodology. For Foucault, power is not only repressive, centralized, or possessed by a ruler, but also productive. It generates categories, norms, forms of knowledge, and conditions of truth through which the world becomes intelligible.⁵⁵ This thesis does not apply Foucault's modern disciplinary institutions directly to the ancient Near East, nor does it treat Neo-Assyrian or Achaemenid royal art as equivalent to the prisons, schools, or military systems that Foucault analyzed. Instead, it uses his broader insight that power operates by organizing visibility, bodies, space, and knowledge.

This distinction is important because royal art helped structure the political reality in which that power could be understood. In Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments, bodies are visible as specific political categories: king, official, enemy, rebel, tribute bearer, subject people, false claimant, divine figure, courtier, or mediator. These categories are produced through posture, scale, placement, gesture, inscription, architectural setting, and repetition. A figure kneeling before the king, standing bound in a row, carrying tribute, guiding a delegation, or supporting the royal throne is assigned a role within the visual order of empire.

Bahrani's discussion of representation and Orientalism helps clarify the usefulness of Foucault for art history. She emphasizes that representation includes broader discursive

⁵⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

operations through which cultures and objects of knowledge are constructed.⁵⁶ That point is useful here, even though this thesis applies it to ancient imperial monuments rather than modern scholarship alone. Royal images and inscriptions construct political knowledge by organizing how bodies and actions should be recognized. The repeated visibility of the king, the classification of enemies and peoples, the narration of rebellion as falsehood, and the alignment of royal action with divine sanction all contribute to the production of sovereignty as a visible and knowable order.

Foucault's framework therefore supports the thesis's analysis of visual rhetoric as a system of classification. It explains why the representation of bodies in imperial art matters beyond iconographic identification. A defeated enemy, a bound rebel, a foreign delegation, or a throne-bearing subject is meaningful because the image defines that body's relation to power. In this sense, imperial art helps produce knowledge of that hierarchy by making political relations visible, repeated, and recognizable. This is the specific Foucauldian contribution to the methodology. Power is analyzed not only as domination imposed on bodies, but as the production of the categories through which bodies become intelligible within the imperial order.

2.4 Agency and Distributed Presence

Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency provides the semiotic dimension of this methodology. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, Gell defines artworks as indexes: material objects from which viewers infer the agency, intention, or power of an agent.⁵⁷ This is useful for the study of imperial art because royal images do not need to contain the king's physical presence in order to extend his authority. A relief, inscription, statue, throne, or architectural

⁵⁶ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 18–19. Bahrani's use of Foucault is especially useful because it distinguishes representation as a discursive operation of power from representation understood only as visual depiction.

⁵⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

setting can act as an index of kingship by directing the viewer to infer royal power from its visible effects.

This framework helps explain how sovereignty could operate through durable visual forms. Kingship was physically fragile because individual kings were mortal and could not be present in every palace room, monument, road, threshold, or viewing encounter. Royal images and inscriptions extended the efficacy of kingship by making the king's agency visible beyond his body. The viewer could infer royal power from enemies placed beneath the king, tribute moving toward him, officials standing in ordered proximity, subject peoples supporting his throne, or inscriptions naming his titles and victories. These images could act because they mediated social relationships between king, subject, enemy, god, and viewer.

Gell's framework is also important because it explains why repeated visual formulas remain powerful rather than merely conventional. Repetition can strengthen the agency of an image by making its relations recognizable across different contexts. Ataç's analysis of the Neo-Assyrian encounter scene demonstrates this principle especially well. The repeated formula of king, official, and intervening body can produce different meanings depending on whether the body between them is an animal victim or a prostrate enemy.⁵⁸ The formula therefore does not have a fixed meaning by itself. Its force depends on how the bodies are related within the scene and what kind of royal agency the viewer is directed to infer from that arrangement.

For this thesis, Gell's concept of the index makes it possible to analyze Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art as systems of inferred agency. The king's authority is not visible only because the king is carved larger, centered, or elevated. It becomes visible through the effects organized around him. This is crucial for the later comparison because similar forms can index different kinds of royal agency when their relations change. A body beneath the ruler can index

⁵⁸ Mehmet-Ali Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning in Neo-Assyrian Relief Sculpture," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (2006): 71–75.

conquest, punishment, cosmic hierarchy, or ordered support. A line of foreign figures can index tribute, deportation, rebellion, or imperial plurality. Gell's theory therefore helps explain how inherited or repeated motifs could remain recognizable while producing different rhetorics of sovereignty.

2.5 Methodological Synthesis: Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric

Taken together, Bahrani, Foucault, and Gell provide the basis for a semiotic method that treats imperial art as an active system of meaning rather than as a passive record of royal ideology. Bahrani's concept of visibility makes it possible to treat image, inscription, name, body, and monument as material forms through which royal presence could be produced.⁵⁹ Foucault's account of productive power explains how those forms organize political knowledge by making bodies and actions visible as specific categories within an imperial order.⁶⁰ Gell's theory of the index clarifies how viewers could infer royal agency from the visible effects arranged around the king.⁶¹ The value of combining these approaches is that sovereignty can be analyzed as something depicted in royal art and produced through visual relations.

This method is semiotic because it asks how signs generate meaning through relation. A royal body, a prostrate enemy, a line of foreign figures, a supporting subject, or an inscriptional field does not carry a single fixed meaning in isolation. Its force depends on how it is placed within a larger system of bodies, texts, spaces, gestures, and viewing conditions. A figure beneath the king can signify defeated opposition, cosmic hierarchy, territorial subordination, or coordinated support depending on the visual system in which it appears. The

⁵⁹ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–52; Bahrani, “King’s Head,” 115–19.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

⁶¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

task of analysis is therefore to identify motifs and determine what kind of political relation those motifs produce when arranged with other signs.

This is also why visual rhetoric is central to the thesis. Rhetoric here includes verbal persuasion as well as the persuasive organization of visual and material forms. Royal art teaches viewers how kingship should be recognized by repeating certain relations. These could be the king above the enemy, god above king, subject peoples before the throne, tribute moving toward the royal center, inscriptions naming royal authority, or architectural thresholds controlling approach. These repeated relations make sovereignty appear stable, legitimate, and hierarchically intelligible. The image does not merely show power and organizes the conditions through which power becomes recognizable as sovereignty.

This methodological synthesis is especially important for comparison. If images are treated only as motifs, then continuity can too easily be mistaken for sameness. If they are treated only as historical illustrations, then visual transformation can be reduced to political change outside the image. A semiotic method allows the thesis to hold continuity and transformation together. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art could employ related signs of hierarchy, conquest, divine sanction, inscription, and ordered bodies, while making those signs produce a different rhetoric through altered relations. The same visual mechanism could therefore remain recognizable while its political meaning changed.

The chapters that follow use this method through close visual analysis, attention to text-image relations, and comparison across historical contexts. Scale, gesture, posture, bodily placement, inscriptional form, architectural setting, and viewing conditions are treated as parts of the same visual-rhetorical system. The goal is not to impose theory onto the monuments, but to use theory to describe how the monuments work. Sovereignty is examined as a visual and material effect produced through repeated arrangements of bodies, signs, texts, and spaces.

2.6 Comparative and Diachronic Method

Since this thesis examines how imperial visual systems changed across historical contexts, its method is both comparative and diachronic. Comparison is necessary because Achaemenid imperial art did not emerge in isolation. It developed after centuries of Near Eastern experimentation with royal image, inscription, palace space, divine sanction, conquest imagery, and the classification of foreign peoples. Neo-Assyrian palace art provides the most developed earlier imperial visual system for this study because its reliefs, inscriptions, thresholds, narrative programs, and architectural settings organize royal authority with exceptional density.⁶² The Neo-Assyrian material therefore functions as an analytical foundation, but not as a single source from which Achaemenid art is assumed to derive.

The diachronic aspect of the method is equally important because visual forms do not retain the same meaning across changing political conditions. A motif, gesture, inscriptional habit, or compositional structure may continue across periods, but its meaning depends on the system in which it is placed. This is why the thesis treats continuity and reconfiguration together. Earlier Near Eastern forms could remain recognizable while being redirected toward new models of kingship. A defeated body, an elevated ruler, a line of foreign figures, or a royal inscription could produce different political effects depending on whether it appeared within the setting of Neo-Assyrian conquest, Esarhaddon's dynastic succession, Darius' restoration narrative at Behistun, or the processional order of Persepolis.

his approach also avoids a linear model of influence in which Achaemenid art is treated as a direct continuation of Assyrian art. The historical world from which Achaemenid kingship emerged was more complex. The Zagros region was a zone of interaction between Mesopotamian imperial pressure, local political structures, pastoral groups, Median traditions,

⁶² Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Winter, "Seat of Kingship," 27–55; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 62–75.

and emerging Persian power. Balatti's work is useful here because it shows that Assyrian involvement in the Zagros did not create a simple unified political system, but contributed to a changing landscape of local hierarchy, fortification, mediation, and regional authority.⁶³ In southern Iran, Persian power also developed in relation to Elamite traditions and to the older political language of Anshan. Waters' work on Cyrus is important because it shows how early Persian kingship could draw on different identities and titles according to context, including Elamite and Babylonian formulas of legitimacy.⁶⁴ Achaemenid art must therefore be studied as the product of a broad and plural imperial environment, not as the result of a single line of artistic transmission.

For this reason, the thesis uses comparison to ask not only where forms came from, but what they do when they are reorganized. Root's study of Achaemenid art remains foundational because it treats Achaemenid royal imagery as a deliberate iconography of empire rather than as a passive collection of borrowed motifs.⁶⁵ This methodological point is central to the present study. Assyrian, Babylonian, Elamite, Egyptian, and Iranian elements matter, but their significance lies in how they are selected, combined, and given new relations within Achaemenid monuments. The comparison between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art therefore focuses on visual operation rather than simple origin. It asks how hierarchy, text-image relations, divine sanction, defeated bodies, subject peoples, and architectural viewing were reorganized to produce different rhetorics of sovereignty.

This method also guards against reducing the comparison to a contrast between Assyrian violence and Achaemenid harmony. Neo-Assyrian art includes protocol, incorporation, tribute, ritual, and the orderly display of foreign peoples; Achaemenid art includes coercion, hierarchy,

⁶³ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 344–50.

⁶⁴ Matt Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," *Iran* 42 (2004): 92–95; Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan," 67.

⁶⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–7, 124, 154.

defeated rebels, and strict subordination. The difference lies not in the presence or absence of power, but in how power is visually organized. Neo-Assyrian monuments often make sovereignty legible through the king's power to conquer, classify, punish, receive, and display. Achaemenid monuments retain many of these mechanisms, but often reconfigure them around ordered plurality, mediated approach, coordinated support, and divinely sanctioned stability. The comparative and diachronic method makes this distinction visible by tracing how related visual mechanisms change meaning when they enter a different imperial system.

2.7 Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow apply this methodology to a selective corpus of Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid royal monuments, inscriptions, and architectural programs. The corpus is not intended to provide an exhaustive survey of all imperial art from either empire. Instead, it focuses on monuments where image, inscription, body, space, and viewing conditions are especially important for the production of sovereignty. The selected material allows the thesis to examine how royal authority was made visible through repeated visual relations and how those relations changed across historical contexts.

Chapter 3 begins with Esarhaddon and the problem of royal succession. This chapter examines how sovereignty was stabilized under conditions of dynastic fragility through treaty, oath, divine sanction, royal image, and the representation of political continuity. The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon and related royal monuments are used to show how text and image could organize obedience, define loyalty, and make the future of kingship appear binding and divinely secured. This chapter seeks to operationalize the theoretical framework outlined in this chapter to establish how sovereignty was displayed through conquest and palace imagery, and also produced through ritualized obligation and the visual and textual management of succession.

Chapter 4 turns to Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and royal inscriptions as one of the most developed systems of imperial visual rhetoric in the ancient Near East. It examines monuments from Kalhu, Khorsabad, and Nineveh in order to analyze how the palace operated as a space of royal presence, conquest, tribute, ritual, protection, and controlled viewing. Particular attention is given to gesture, bodily hierarchy, enemies, officials, foreign peoples, text-image relations, and the movement of the viewer through charged architectural settings. The Ashurbanipal lion hunt reliefs provide a focused case study because they condense many of these concerns into a highly controlled performance of royal mastery, violence, ritual, and cosmic order.

Chapter 5 then examines Achaemenid imperial art, especially Behistun, Persepolis, the Apadana reliefs, the royal tomb facades, throne-bearing imagery, and the Statue of Darius from Susa. These monuments are analyzed as part of an imperial visual system that reorganized older Near Eastern mechanisms of royal hierarchy, divine sanction, subject peoples, and inscriptional authority. Behistun is central because it presents Darius' kingship through revolt, divine election, defeated bodies, and multilingual inscription. Persepolis is central because it shifts the representation of empire toward processional order, mediated approach, differentiated peoples, and coordinated support beneath the king. The chapter therefore examines Achaemenid art as a selective reconfiguration of inherited visual strategies and analyzes them within these new contexts.

Chapter 6 brings the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid material into direct synthesis. Rather than tracing influence as a simple movement from Assyria to Persia, it compares how related visual mechanisms operate differently in each imperial system. Gesture, hierarchy, defeated bodies, subject peoples, text-image relations, architectural settings, and royal elevation are examined as signs whose meanings depend on their arrangement within specific visual systems. This final comparative chapter argues that Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art share a broad Near Eastern repertoire of imperial signs, but that Achaemenid art reconfigured these

signs toward a different rhetoric of sovereignty. The distinction is not between Assyrian violence and Achaemenid peace, but between different ways of making power recognizable as legitimate imperial order.

The organization of the thesis therefore mirrors the method outlined in this chapter. It begins with the instability of succession, moves through Neo-Assyrian palace systems of royal visibility, turns to the Achaemenid reorganization of imperial imagery, and concludes by comparing how sovereignty is produced through reconfigured visual relations. Across these chapters, images and inscriptions are treated not only as sources for political ideology, but as material and visual practices through which kingship was repeatedly produced, recognized, and renewed.

Esarhaddon and the Production of Sovereignty

The reigns of Esarhaddon and his sons offer an unusually clear vantage point from which to observe both the power and the fragility of Mesopotamian kingship. Esarhaddon ruled the Neo-Assyrian Empire from 681 to 669 BCE after he rose to the throne through a violent succession crisis that exposed the instability of royal legitimacy (Figure 3.1). During his rule, he directly confronted the problem at the heart of imperial rule that it was not secured by divine sanction or military success alone, but had to be continuously produced, displayed, reaffirmed, and stabilized through rituals, inscriptions, and imagery. The monuments and ceremonies associated with his reign therefore do more than simply commemorate events or record political decisions. They actively constructed the reality of kingship by staging or framing obedience, legitimacy, hierarchy, and dynastic continuity in order to stabilize the royal order. These very visual and performative mechanisms which sought to stabilize the royal order and succession also revealed its underlying vulnerability. Through the vassal treaties that ritualized allegiance, the monumental imagery that fixed dynastic continuity into visible form, and the later duplication of royal iconography by Esarhaddon's sons, the reign of Esarhaddon exposes a central tension in Mesopotamian visual culture. That is that images could generate and sustain sovereign authority, but their power depended on the continued coherence of the political order they represented. When that coherence fractured, the vitality of royal imagery did not disappear, but instead proliferated and authorized competing claims to kingship. Esarhaddon's reign thus provides a concrete demonstration of how imperial visibility functioned in practice, revealing both the mechanisms through which sovereignty was made present and stabilized and the limits of that presence when the unity of kingship itself came under strain.

This chapter examines Esarhaddon's reign as a case study through which the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter can be observed in operation. Rather than treating royal monuments and texts as passive reflections of political power, it approaches them as active

participants in the production and maintenance of sovereignty. The succession crisis that preceded Esarhaddon's reign, along with the instability that followed his death, provides a historical context in which the relationship between image, ritual, and authority becomes particularly visible. Read through the concepts developed by Bahrani, Foucault, and Gell, the monuments and ceremonies of Esarhaddon's reign reveal how visual representation, performative ritual, and inscribed texts worked together to materialize royal authority and circulate knowledge of the king's legitimacy throughout the empire.⁶⁶ At the same time, they demonstrate the inherent tension within this system because the very mechanisms designed to secure kingship also expose its fragility. Esarhaddon's treaties and monuments stage sovereignty as an absolute, yet their insistence on repetition, visibility, visual hierarchy, and ritual control betrays a persistent anxiety about continuity and loyalty. Examined in this way, the visual and performative program surrounding Esarhaddon and his successors reveals both the power and limits of the representational strategies through which Mesopotamian kingship sought to stabilize itself.

3.1 The Instability of Reality

The *Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* that were issued late in the king's reign were intended to secure the succession of his chosen heir Ahsurbanipal and codify sovereignty through a collective ritual (Figure 3.2). The treaties recount a public ceremony that must be spoken, heard, and witnessed. The signatories, a collection of "scribes, seers, diviners and other religious and palace officials", are compelled to swear fealty in the presence of deities, whose images would have been carried to witness the scene. The divine images are accompanied by the military and representatives of other subject territories present to give the day of the

⁶⁶ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 16; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 13.

ceremony a sense of heightened importance. The significance of the ceremony is further reinforced by the fact that its date was determined through a series of divinations.⁶⁷

The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon make clear from their physical and textual structure that royal authority and succession were not treated as self-evident, but as conditions that had to be actively produced and maintained. Prior to providing the transliteration and translation, Wiseman offers a contextual discussion in sections that correspond to the treaty's physical and textual organization (Figure 3.2). He describes the physical layout as containing a two-line heading describing the seal of the god Aššur and then the treaty contains a small amount of text written into four vertical columns just below that, with the amount varying between copies. A horizontal band of seal impressions is imposed across the surface, described by Wiseman as taking up nearly a sixth of the space, interrupting the columns partway through and dividing the text into upper and lower sections, after which the columns continue uninterrupted to the base of the tablet (Figure 3.3).⁶⁸ The layout does not reflect discrete textual divisions, but rather a continuous columnar arrangement disrupted by a prominent horizontal register of seal impressions that cut across the writing surface.

The seals are an interesting and integral part of the treaty because they visually divide the tablet into sections, and their imagery offers the words inscribed on the tablet a sense of royal and divine authority and timelessness. These seals are: the seal of Sennacherib, the seal of the god Aššur, and a Middle Assyrian Royal Seal (Figures 3.4 and 3.5). The first two seals produce this sense of dynastic continuity with the seal of Esarhaddon's father, Sennacherib, and that this dynastic continuity is divinely-sanctioned under the will of Aššur (Figure 3.4). These two seals visually signal, even before the text is read, that the words inscribed within are of the king's dynasty and the premier god, with their images impressed also acting as a material

⁶⁷ D. J. Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," *Iraq* 20, no. 1 (1958): 3.

⁶⁸ Wiseman, "Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 13–14.

extension of their presence on each copy of the tablet. The presence of the Middle Assyrian Royal Seal is particularly interesting, though, because it would have been an attempt to impress the enduring sovereignty of the god Aššur, who is present in each impression, and, by extension through the presence of Sennacherib's seal, Esarhaddon's house (Figure 3.5).⁶⁹

The authority asserted through the tablet's visual and material features is further reinforced through the treaty's textual organization. Wiseman's discussion of the text's structure demonstrates that the treaty is organized largely in three parts. The first is the introduction, seal impressions, and divine witnesses (Figure 3.2). This is then followed by a series of clauses with stipulations that define loyalty, prohibit rebellion, regulate speech, require the denunciation of dissent, bind participants to protect the king's sons, Ashurbanipal as successor in particular, and extend these obligations to future generations. Lastly, there are the lists of curses for those who should break their oath and not preserve the treaty tablet.⁷⁰ The mechanisms through which this is achieved – oath-taking, divine witnesses, stipulations, curses, and the physical preservation of the treaty tablet – are not unique to Esarhaddon's reign, but are characteristic of Neo-Assyrian practice more generally. What is significant in this context, then, is not the presence of these features themselves, but the way they operate within the Neo-Assyrian imperial system. The treaty does not simply reaffirm loyalty, but organizes a network of obligations regulating vassals' speech, action, memory, and transmission across the empire. This suggests that kingship depends on the continual reproduction of its authority through coordinated textual and ritual practices.

Each clause of the treaty manufactures loyalty through repetition. The text of the treaty itself reinforces this performative structure through relentless repetition. After invoking an enormous list of divine witnesses, the text repeatedly commands the assembled officials to

⁶⁹ Wiseman, "Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 22.

⁷⁰ Wiseman, "Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 22–24.

swear allegiance to the crown prince. One such clause instructs the participants that when Esarhaddon dies, “you will seat Ashurbanipal upon the royal throne.”⁷¹ Their obligations to the crown prince are then repeated through prohibitions: the vassals must not “make rebellion or insurrection against Esarhaddon (...) or against Ashurbanipal,” must not “listen to nor conceal any improper (...) words concerning the exercise of kingship (...) against Ashurbanipal,” and must seize anyone who does so and deliver them to the crown prince.⁷² Through this structure of commands and prohibitions, the treaty ritualizes loyalty through its repetition that uses the same phrasing to command the succession and describe the vassals’ responsibilities to the crown prince.

This accumulation of instructions articulates loyalty while producing a system in which loyalty becomes the only acceptable political knowledge. Clause after clause defines what loyalty to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal must look like, specifying not only that the vassals must support him but also what they must hear, say, and report if rebellion arises. Participants are instructed that they must immediately seize any offender and deliver him to the crown prince. Loyalty therefore becomes a collective responsibility in which each participant monitors the speech and actions of others. This structure resembles a form of disciplinary surveillance in which power operates through the expectation that subjects constantly observe and report deviations from the prescribed order. The treaty functions as a disciplinary discourse by enumerating the behaviors that constitute obedience and thereby produces the truth of Ashurbanipal’s sovereignty.

The oath is reinforced by an even longer series of curses that threaten divine punishment for disobedience. The text invokes the gods one by one, declaring that “May Ashur, king of the gods who decrees the fates, decree for you evil and not good,” while other deities are called

⁷¹ Wiseman, “Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” 32.

⁷² Wiseman, “Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” 34, 66.

upon to inflict disease, blindness, famine, and destruction of entire households.⁷³ These threats expand into a long sequence of simile curses in which the treaty imagines the violator's body and kingdom destroyed in increasingly vivid ways. Each malediction intensifies the last and functions as a ritual technology of intimidation. The repetition of these threats helps make obedience imaginable as the only safe and viable response, transforming the oath into a ritualized catalogue of divine retribution that makes the consequences of disobedience vividly imaginable.

The escalating sequence of curses heightens this divine punishment into a constant psychological presence. By repeatedly imagining the catastrophic consequences of rebellion, the treaty constructs a mental environment in which rebellion appears politically, dynastically, and cosmically catastrophic. The curses function as threats and a technology of political imagination that compels the participants to envision the destruction that awaits those who violate the oath. In this way, the treaty produces obedience through the possibility of punishment and shaping the field of possible actions itself, encouraging subjects to internalize the consequences of deviation before any punishment occurs. The fear of instability within succession articulated through the text becomes part of the ritual's disciplinary structure, embedding the stability of succession within the imagined fate of those who would challenge it.

The text even describes the bodily act of swearing itself, instructing the participants that they must swear "while [they] stand on the place of this oath" and swear the treaty "with [their] lips" their understanding of their responsibilities and that those are conferred to their household.⁷⁴ This emphasis on speech and posture illustrates how the treaty functioned as both a written document to be kept and as the script for a carefully choreographed performance.

⁷³ Wiseman, "Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 60.

⁷⁴ Wiseman, "Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 58.

Loyalty was recorded in the tablet and enacted through the synchronized voices and bodies of the empire's officials.

This choreographed performance illustrates another dimension of the treaty's disciplinary structure. By specifying that participants must stand and verbally affirm the oath, the ceremony regulates the bodies and speech of those present, turning their allegiance into a visible, collective act. The participants do not simply acknowledge the treaty, but enact it through coordinated posture and speech before mortal witnesses and the divinities with their images. Power operates here through the regulation of bodily conduct, producing obedience through ritualized performance rather than through coercion alone. At the same time, the public nature of the ceremony brings together the treaty's earlier mechanisms of power. The spoken oath occurs before witnesses who are themselves bound by the clauses of surveillance and responsibility, while the curses that threaten divine punishment remain present in the background of the ritual. The ceremony therefore functions as a moment in which the empire's officials collectively reaffirm the disciplinary order established by the treaty, publicly reproducing the system of loyalty, monitoring, responsibility, and punishment that secure Ashurbanipal's succession. Yet such ritual performances were inherently temporary. Once the voices fell silent and the participants dispersed, the authority generated by the ceremony required another medium through which it could persist.

What the text reveals is not yet an exceptional crisis, but the ordinary ideological response to a structural problem and the underlying logic of Neo-Assyrian kingship itself. Kingship depended on repetitive acts of differentiation. The future king had to be named, enthroned, defended, and remembered in ways that were unavailable to everyone else, which served to construct and reinforce his status as ontologically distinct and hierarchically superior. The treaty's written clauses, ritual performance, repetition, surveillance, and curses are part of that broader ideological repertoire. Under ordinary conditions, such strategies function to

stabilize royal authority by continually reaffirming the distinction between the king and his subjects. In the context of Esarhaddon's reign, however, their operation becomes more visible. The treaty's concentrated focus on succession and its exhaustive regulation of potential threats foreground the extent to which royal continuity depended on the continual reproduction of authority through these highly-coordinated textual, ritual, and social practices. In this way, the text does not introduce new mechanisms of power, but instead exposes the labor required to sustain those that already existed. What appears as ideological stability elsewhere within Neo-Assyrian history can here be read as the product of ongoing processes of differentiation, enforcement, and recognition, that are all aiming for sustainability. Rather than these features being exceptional to this case, instead they're analytically visible here due to the specific historical conditions under which they are deployed.

Yet the processes through which this authority was continually reproduced were not confined to the moment of the ritual performance. The treaty's material form allowed the obligations articulated in the ceremony, including the requirement that the tablet itself be preserved and unaltered, to persist beyond the immediate presence of its participants. As the variation between surviving tablets suggests, the oath was reproduced across multiple copies distributed throughout the empire, each functioning as an extension of the ceremony. In this way, the authority generated in a single ritual moment could endure.

An Assyrian provincial version of the succession treaty discovered in modern Turkey provides a concrete example of this system of replication in practice, demonstrating how the authority produced by the ceremony extended into the periphery and endured beyond the moment of its performance.⁷⁵ Its language mirrors the canonical VTE, with the same injunction to guard Ashurbanipal's kingship, the same catalogue of gods, and the same curses. The

⁷⁵ Jacob Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 64 (2012): 87–123.

inscription frames the oath as perpetual, and Lauinger's translation makes a note of the phrase "Keep this *adê!*" because of its ambiguity regarding whether the phrase refers to preserving the tablet in the way one would the image of a god or to keep the stipulations inscribed in the tablet as if they were divine words.⁷⁶ This succession treaty being found in the inner sanctum of a temple tells us that official treaties were kept in temples, which makes such an ambiguity harder to define.⁷⁷ Gell's work can aid in deciphering which of Lauinger's possible meanings was most likely, which would shed light on how this text has a visual component through its recollection of a very public ceremony.

Gell's notion of "manifestation of agency" clarifies this through the object being given agency as a "source of such potent experiences of the 'co-presence' of an agent as to make no difference".⁷⁸ In this way, not only would later readings of the text carry Esarhaddon's will and words, if later readings were thought necessary, but simply storing it in the temple would allow it to carry the king's will beyond his physical presence. The clay tablet, although not a self-sufficient agent because it cannot initiate causal events on its own, becomes the vehicle through which such agency is channeled. In this context, the agency that is channeled is the sovereign's authority and voice in his absence. The tablet acts as the physical embodiment of the oath, likely signifying that the phrase "Keep this *adê!*" carried both meanings Lauinger proposed: the tablet itself as the manifestation of the ceremony, and the preservation of the power of that ritual as if it were a god's image and the words were to be treated as divine. It couples the object that is the tablet, something that in reality has no power over human agency, with the agency of the king to allow the reading of the tablet and its preservation to act as a visual recollection of the ceremony that imbued it with such power. This ultimately highlights the king's anxiety about

⁷⁶ Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," 117.

⁷⁷ Jacob Lauinger, "Approaching Ancient Near Eastern Treaties, Laws, and Covenants," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 1 (2016): 129.

⁷⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19.

loyalty to his sovereignty and the continuation of his dynasty when he is physically absent. In this way, the tablet preserves the authority generated by the ceremony and allows the king's presence and command to persist beyond the moment of the ritual itself.

3.2 The Victory Stele as Visible Hierarchy

This anxiety over loyalty finds its visual analogue in Esarhaddon's victory stele, which both depicts and details through its inscriptions the victorious military campaigns of the Assyrian king. Neo-Assyrian kingship required the continual articulation of legitimacy through performances and representations that constructed and reinforced royal authority before imperial audiences. As Parker demonstrates, royal ideology and legitimacy were actively produced through such performative displays that maintained the hierarchical structure of Assyrian rule.⁷⁹ Monumental imagery therefore formed another arena in which these ideological concerns could be made visible. Porter analyzes this stele within the context of the vassal treaties of succession that were just discussed, arguing that the monument gives further insight into, and visually articulates, Esarhaddon's intended status for both of his sons.⁸⁰ In doing so, the stele illustrates the power and limitations of royal imagery and visibility. While it attempts to stabilize the hierarchy between the princes, the events that followed Esarhaddon's death reveal the instability that such visual declarations could not ultimately resolve.

The monument itself commemorates Esarhaddon's campaign against Egypt in 671 BCE, a military victory that resulted in the defeat of the Kushite ruler Taharqa, the capture of Memphis, and the temporary incorporation of Egypt into the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Figure

⁷⁹ Parker, "Construction and Performance of Kingship," 365.

⁸⁰ Barbara Nevling Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria: Neo-Assyrian Kanephoric Stelai for Babylonia," *Hesperia Supplements* 33 (2004): 266–67.

3.6).⁸¹ Such victories were typically memorialized through royal monuments that celebrated the king's triumph over foreign rulers and reaffirmed Assyria's dominance over its enemies. Yet Esarhaddon's victory stele takes the opportunity to record more than imperial conquest. The composition places the king's sons within the monumental scene to shift what otherwise might just be a record of military success into a statement about the dynastic order that would follow the king's reign. It was in the previous year that the previously-discussed VTE were concluded while his sons were still minors, and they were not present during the Egyptian campaign. Their presence on the monument therefore retroactively incorporates them into the victory itself, encoding within the scene the dual succession that Esarhaddon had already attempted to secure through the treaties.

At its center stands the king rendered on a monumental scale, his figure dominating the composition in both size and position (Figure 3.6). He is placed along the central vertical axis of the stele, with his right hand raised in a gesture towards the divine emblems positioned above him and his left hand holding ropes that pass through the nose-rings of his defeated enemies, one an Egyptian crown prince and the other a Syrian city-state governor. These cords extend diagonally downward, visually linking the king to the bound figures below. The defeated rulers are shown at a significantly smaller scale with their bodies turned slightly and positioned lower within the composition to reinforce their subordinate status. The contrast between the king's rigid, upright posture and the constrained, downward orientation of the captives establishes a clear visual hierarchy that organizes the most visually present scene within the stele.

The divine emblems reference cosmological and timeless concepts for which the king acts as the bridge, with his gesture of the raised cup visually reinforcing that ideology of the

⁸¹ Anthony Spalinger, "Esarhaddon and Egypt: An Analysis of the First Invasion of Egypt," *Orientalia*, n.s., 43 (1974): 302–3.

king's divine sanction and connection.⁸² The depiction of captive rulers held by nose-rings physically bound to the king through the ropes he holds transforms the scene of him into a visual articulation of divinely-ordained imperial domination in which the bodies of conquered rulers become extensions of royal authority.

Flanking Esarhaddon on either side are his sons, with Ashurbanipal on his right and Šamaš-šumu-ukīn on his left, and both of them depicted in a similar scale that is larger than the captives but smaller than the king himself. Their figures stand in close proximity to the central axis, yet remain distinctly separated from one another by the king's body. With this placement, both princes could be seen together with the king but never in relation to each other. They are positioned so that each is visually aligned with Esarhaddon rather than with the other, forcing the viewer to encounter each prince through the mediating presence of the king, preventing a direct visual relationship between the two heirs. This arrangement ensures the viewer's gaze moves from each prince inward toward the king, rather than across the composition between the two heirs.

This controlled separation is reinforced through additional visual strategies that emphasize both distinction and unity. The pairing of the two princes can be understood in relation to broader Near Eastern concepts of dual kingship. While this idea is known from the Egyptian notion of the unification of two lands, it has an analogue in Mesopotamia between Assyria in the North and Babylonia in the South. The dress of the princes reflects this unity as well. Ashurbanipal wears the same garments as Esarhaddon, reflecting his position as the king's successor, while Šamaš-šumu-ukīn is depicted in Babylonian royal dress.⁸³ This compositional strategy emphasizes unity while maintaining hierarchy. It reinforces the idea that both sons

⁸² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94.

⁸³ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 78.

derive their authority from Esarhaddon himself and prevents the viewer from imagining direct rivalry between them that could come from any independent claim to power.

Their scale would suggest a degree of parity, yet the dress of the figures, as already discussed, and their directional orientation establishes a more subtle hierarchy. Ashurbanipal is positioned facing the king and participates directly in the royal presence, while Šamaš-šumu-ukīn stands behind Esarhaddon, occupying a more mediated position within the composition. The directional orientation reinforces their intended hierarchy and their unequal relationship to the sovereign figure. Ashurbanipal is aligned with and facing the king while Šamaš-šumu-ukīn is positioned behind and partially obscured by him.⁸⁴ Through the combined use of scale, orientation in relation to the king, and dress, one can see how the monument constructs a hierarchical but balanced relationship between the princes, visually articulating Esarhaddon's intended succession and sovereignty of his kingdom. There is a clear visual hierarchy between the sons, but their similar scale and inability to be seen together with each other, only being able to be seen with the king, promotes Esarhaddon's desire for a hierarchy between them but one that remains balanced. It visualizes what the treaties legislate. It presents a hierarchy that contains rivalry through controlled differentiation rather than open opposition.

What emerges is not an exceptional departure from Neo-Assyrian royal ideology, but is a particularly clear articulation of its underlying logic. The visual strategies employed in the stele, its hierarchical scale, clear subjugation of others, controlled orientation, mediated visibility, and the differentiation of royal roles, belong to a broader ideological repertoire through which kingship was continually produced and maintained. These strategies function to construct the king as a figure distinct from all others, whose authority is grounded in divine

⁸⁴ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 267.

sanction, military dominance, and dynastic continuity. In this sense, the monument participates in the ordinary ideological work of stabilizing royal power.

At the same time, it is the historical context surrounding Esarhaddon's reign and succession that make visible the conditions that necessitate the strategies deployed in the stele. His tumultuous rise to power would make him acutely aware of the possible instability of his position. When his health began deteriorating due to chronic illness, Esarhaddon was then faced with the problem of ensuring a smooth succession, and the division of kingship between his sons was shaped by his own contested accession to the throne. This surrounding historical context renders legible what remains less visible in other contexts. The careful regulation of how the princes are seen as always mediated through the figure of the king and never in direct relation to one another does not introduce instability into the system, but reveals the extent to which it must be actively managed. What appears elsewhere as stable and standard ideological convention can here be read as a response to a structural condition of kingship itself. The king, though human, must be continuously produced as politically and ontologically distinct from all others. The monument thus stabilizes this distinction while simultaneously exposing the fragile conditions that make such stabilization necessary.

These visual strategies depict hierarchy while actively producing it through the organization of the image itself. To understand how the stele generates this effect, how it transforms visual arrangement into political authority, it is necessary to turn to theoretical frameworks that account for the capacity of images to produce presence, agency, and social relations.

The compositional dominance of Esarhaddon's figure is a visual articulation of royal ontology in which Mesopotamian royal images participated in the king's being. The enlarged scale of the monarch distinguishes him from the surrounding figures and manifests the king's

sovereign presence within the image itself. Thus, the monument both represents the hierarchy and produces it by embedding the king's supremacy into the spatial structure of the scene. This supremacy is also further reinforced through the king's control over his enemies, which is articulated through the ropes that pass through the nose-rings of the defeated rulers. These physical lines visually connect the bodies of the captives to the sovereign figure, transforming the monument into a diagram of imperial domination in both its spatial structure and imagery. The captives signify conquest while their bound bodies become extensions of the king's agency within the image. In this sense, the stele functions much like how Gell describes the materialization of social relations through art objects. The monument renders the king's domination tangible, allowing the viewer to perceive imperial power as a physical and embodied reality.

The positioning of the princes on either side of the king also reinforces this hierarchical order while simultaneously managing the potential instability of the succession, a reality that Esarhaddon was already familiar with from his own reign. Each prince is visually aligned with Esarhaddon rather than with the other, meaning that the viewer encounters them through the mediating presence of the king, as already mentioned. The composition therefore prevents any direct visual relationship between the brothers and instead structures their authority through the monarch himself. In Foucauldian terms, the image produces a political order by regulating the field of visibility. The princes appear not as independent actors, but as figures whose legitimacy is solely derived from their proximity to the sovereign body.

This compositional precision, though, discloses unease about the succession that clearly harkens back to Esarhaddon's initial rise to power. The need to display this hierarchy so overtly so that the succession goes smoothly signals the instability it attempts to remove. As Bahrani

argues, Mesopotamian royal images *are* the king, participating in his ontology.⁸⁵ The stele's perfection replicates, in a more consistently visible fashion than the ceremony depicted in the treaties, the sovereign will of the king in his absence. If, as Foucault suggests, power exists through knowledge, knowledge that must be circulated, then the more the image circulates, the more it acknowledges the possibility of dissent and encouragement against it. The stele creates the knowledge that the succession is an uncontested fact, and that knowledge, upon circulation, would seem to become reality. Monuments such as this, or royal building projects, played a key role in communicating the king's authority beyond the court itself and disseminating royal ideology to a wide audience.⁸⁶ Through hierarchical scale, controlled visibility, and embodied domination, the stele attempts to stabilize the dynastic order by embedding it within the visual grammar of imperial sovereignty. Yet, as the events following Esarhaddon's death would demonstrate, the authority produced through such imagery remained contingent upon the fragile political realities it sought to secure.

3.3 The King's Precarious Image

The instability Esarhaddon sought to contain became visible only after his death. Porter recounts how both of his sons replicated their father's imagery and ritual gestures, things that allowed Esarhaddon to be the strong and unified figure he was. Each commissioned stelae depicting himself as the "basket-bearing king," carrying the builder's basket to complete their father's work in reconstructing the Esagila temple in Babylon.⁸⁷ Such imagery was used successfully by Esarhaddon, who used it to embody pious legitimacy with a practice and visual form that had a long tradition as seen in the basket-bearing imagery used by the Sumerian king

⁸⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 145.

⁸⁶ Parker, "Construction and Performance of Kingship," 374.

⁸⁷ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 268–269.

Ur-Nammu (Figure 3.7). However, the duplication of this imagery by his sons created an ambiguity that can be seen most clearly in the near-identical visual and textual programs of their respective stelai (Figures 3.8–3.10). This ultimately undermined Ashurbanipal's control of Babylonia by raising the specter of the Babylonians choosing between what appeared to be two kings of Babylonia.⁸⁸

The intention of this duplication was unlikely to have been to incite a rivalry between the brothers. Instead, it may have been a continuation of Esarhaddon's own ideological program within Babylon and possibly even show of solidarity between the sons to reinforce Šamaš-šumu-ukīn's inferior position to Ashurbanipal, although that latter point is highly speculative. Esarhaddon had performed the ancient basket-bearing ritual to inaugurate temple construction for the Esagila temple as an act of solidarity with the Babylonians to convey that he would not be a foreign conqueror who took the same punitive measures as his father. This was accompanied by written inscriptions that were favorable to Esarhaddon's role in the temple's rebuilding along with figurines representing the ruler with both hands raised to support a workman's basket on his head.⁸⁹ When Esarhaddon was the sole ruler of the empire, such measures were politically advantageous, and there was no possibility for duplication to raise the specter of choice.

Upon Esarhaddon's death, the transition of power took place and the sons were installed into their designated positions. Ashurbanipal formally installed Šamaš-šumu-ukīn as king of Babylonia, permitted him to claim Babylonian royal titles, and to accompany Marduk during the god's return to Babylon following Esarhaddon's death. At the same time, Ashurbanipal continued the work of his father and began further repairs to Esagila and performed the basket-bearing ritual, effectively claiming a figurative aspect of Babylonian kingship while also

⁸⁸ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 270–71.

⁸⁹ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 260–264.

portraying himself as his father's heir in Babylonia by performing the ritual in the same location (Figure 3.8). By doing so, Ashurbanipal had claimed an aspect of Babylonian kingship and unknowingly created the possibility of choosing between two kings of Babylonia during a time when Babylonia's loyalty to Assyria was already precarious.⁹⁰ By assuming a legitimate claim to Babylonian kingship, Ashurbanipal had unknowingly created two competing claims to kingship.

The duplication that emerges in this context becomes visible not only at the level of historical action, but in the material and visual form of the stelai themselves. Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukīn's stelai closely present corresponding visual and textual programs that both depict the ruler in the standardized pose of the "basket-bearing king", an image associated with temple construction, royal piety, and legitimacy in Babylonia. In both cases, the king is shown standing in a stable, upright, and in a radical departure from convention, front-facing posture with his body aligned along a central vertical axis that organizes the composition (Figures 3.9 and 3.10). Porter claims the front-facing posture is meant to allow the posture in this reliefs to resemble the figurines that Esarhaddon had buried but these stelai were instead displayed.⁹¹ The king's arms are raised to support a construction basket, a gesture that is symbolically charged as a visual expression of the king's role in sustaining the sacred architecture, divine order, and traditions of Babylon.

This pose is particular to Babylonia and differs from more familiar imagery of Neo-Assyrian royal domination, where the king is typically shown overpowering enemies or receiving tribute, as was seen on Esarhaddon's Victory Stele (Figures 3.6–3.10). The emphasis here is on construction as an act of ritual solidarity. The king's body is contained and stabilized within the act of bearing the weight of the workman's basket as if it were his crown as part of

⁹⁰ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 268–271.

⁹¹ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 268–273.

a ritual of him literally bearing the weight of participating in temple construction. This shift in visual language aligns the ruler within this specifically Babylonian tradition of kingship, in which the legitimacy of the king is closely tied to his relationship with Marduk and his role in maintaining the cultic and architectural integrity of Babylon, which was very politically expedient after the ongoing resistance during the reign of Sennacherib. The basket-bearing gesture thus operates as a marker of pious legitimacy, signaling the king's desire for peaceful rule with participation in a ritual act that affirms his rightful place within the Babylonian religious and political order.

The inscriptions accompanying these figures reinforce this visual claim. Each text identifies the ruler as responsible for the restoration or completion of Esagila, framing the act of construction as both a continuation of Esarhaddon's work and a fulfillment of royal duty. The language of the inscriptions emphasizes continuity, legitimacy, and divine favor to present the king as the chosen agent through whom the temple is restored. Text and image function together to produce a unified statement that the king is not merely depicted performing the ritual, but is constituted through it as the legitimate ruler of Babylonia.

What is particularly striking, however, is the degree of similarity between the stelai of the two brothers. The compositional structure, the pose of the figure in front-facing relief, the gesture supporting the basket as if it were the crown, and the inscriptional claims written across the relief and the figure all follow the same visual and textual logic. There is little within the imagery itself to distinguish one ruler's claim from the other aside from Ashurbanipal's depiction wearing his Assyrian crown and royal dress. Still, both figures occupy the same symbolic role and perform the same ritual action that articulates the same relationship to Esagila and Babylonian kingship. The visual and textual language that had previously served to establish legitimacy under a single ruler is here reproduced across two separate figures.

This near-identical repetition alters the function of the imagery. In the case of Esarhaddon, the basket-bearing image operated within a unified political framework, where the act of temple construction reinforced the authority of a single sovereign. Under his sons, however, the same image appears in multiple instances without a clear visual hierarchy to differentiate them. The result, then, is not the reinforcement of a singular claim to legitimacy, but the emergence of parallel claims articulated through the same visual form. The stelai therefore do not simply replicate an established iconography, but reproduce it in an already precarious context in which its meaning is no longer singular and invites choice.

The material and visual qualities of the stelai thus make visible a shift in how royal imagery operates. The stability conveyed through the controlled posture, central alignment, and ritual gesture of the basket-bearing king remains intact at the level of individual representation. Each image, taken on its own, presents a coherent and persuasive claim to legitimacy. Yet, when considered together, the duplication of this imagery introduces a new dynamic. The same visual language that once unified kingship under Esarhaddon now exists in multiple, equivalent forms, creating a situation in which legitimacy is no longer anchored to a single, unambiguous figure.

What becomes visible here is a transformation in how an established visual and ideological strategy operates under altered historical conditions. The basket-bearing image, as employed by Esarhaddon, functioned within a unified framework of authority, where the ritual of temple construction served to reinforce the legitimacy of a single sovereign and successfully articulated his relationship to Babylonian kingship as a means of pacification. Its effectiveness depended on this singularity. The image helped to produce legitimacy by aligning the king with the divine order, architectural renewal, and cultural continuity of Babylon.

In the context of his sons' reigns, however, this same strategy no longer operates within a unified field. The duplication of the image across two rulers does not diminish its symbolic

power, but instead extends it in multiple directions at once. Each king's participation in the ritual remains legible and persuasive, yet no longer exclusive. The visual and ritual language that had once secured legitimacy for a single figure now articulates that legitimacy for more than one. Rather than stabilizing sovereignty, the repetition of the same form across multiple claimants produces a situation in which the recognition of sovereignty itself becomes distributable.

The result, then, is not simply the presence of two rulers. Instead, competing claims are articulated through an identical visual grammar. The image no longer anchors authority to a singular referent, but allows it to be recognized in more than one figure simultaneously. In this way, the very strategy that once resolved the problem of legitimacy now exposes it. What had functioned as a mechanism of stabilization under Esarhaddon becomes, under his sons, a condition in which the distinction between legitimate and competing authority can no longer be clearly maintained.

The similarities in the visual and ritual grammar of the two kings' stelai signified choice rather than the unity that Esarhaddon had wished to convey with his victory stele and treaties. This duplication of image and ritual by the next generation leading to fractured leadership underscores how powerful imagery was in Mesopotamian kingship can be further understood through the concepts of Bahrani, Foucault, and Gell, but also how fundamentally unstable and precarious they could be and the instability they wished to prevent through such resolute iconography. In Gell's terms, the king's image is an "index" of agency only so long as its referent remains unambiguous.⁹² Once that referent splits, the image's agency proliferates uncontrollably, something that authorizes rivals as easily as it can affirm a sovereign.

⁹² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 27.

Esarhaddon's reign and the instability at the beginning of Ashurbanipal's reign are a case study that exposes the psychological dimension of royal representation. Oaths, treaties, and images are expressions of confidence, but also instruments of anxiety because they are ritual technologies for managing the fear of fragmentation. Each medium attempts to affirm the same truth: that kingship is stable, divinely sanctioned, and eternal. Yet every repetition and depiction shows that as a fragile truth because the power of the king exists only insofar as it is constantly re-performed and constantly seen.

This exemplifies the Foucauldian principle that power is relational and unstable, produced through the very mechanisms that secure it. Esarhaddon's vassal treaties perform obedience in front of an audience by choreographing the bodies and voices of the empire, the victory stele performs a divine order through the measured arrangement of figures in stone. When considered with Bahrani's visuality and Gell's 'index', this principle becomes clearer when the images are granted the same political force as the allegiance ceremony itself through the repetition of the king's image and the ontological presence of his imagery. This, however, depends on the viewer's assent, and the moment that assent falters, as demonstrated through the duplicate "basket-bearing images", the instability of the system is on full display.

It is here that Bahrani's concept of the ontology of representation, the notion that the image participates in the real, finds its paradoxical limit.⁹³ While images are not lifeless, they can fail. If royal images possess presence and agency, they should inherently stabilize kingship. Yet the basket-bearing stelai demonstrate that the vitality of images cannot guarantee political unity. In the example given by the "basket-bearing images", that failure was due to the inherent power and vitality of images, further articulating that paradoxical limit because the very mechanisms that give these images power are also what make them vulnerable to

⁹³ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 12.

reinterpretation. When two rulers reproduce the same ritual gesture and iconography, the images ceases to stabilize sovereignty because it multiplies it.

This paradox becomes clearer when considered through the theoretical frameworks of Gell and Foucault. In Gell's terms, the king's image functions as an index of agency, materializing the sovereign's authority in visual form. However, the effectiveness of such an index depends on the stability of its referent. When two rulers claim the same visual language of legitimacy, the index no longer points to a singular source of authority. Instead, the agency embodied in the image proliferates, allowing the same iconographic form to authorize competing claims to sovereignty.

Foucault's conception of power further clarifies why this proliferation produces instability. Power does not inherently reside within the image itself but emerges through the network of relations that recognize and sustain it. Royal imagery therefore operates as a technology for producing political knowledge by presenting sovereignty as something stable and unified, divinely sanctioned and eternal. Yet the authority of such knowledge depends on collective recognition. When the same visual grammar is reproduced by rival kings, the image can no longer organize the field of visibility into a coherent hierarchy. It instead exposes the relational character of power by revealing that sovereignty exists only insofar as it is continually acknowledged and reproduced by those who see it.

In this way, the basket-bearing stelai do not contradict Bahrani's claim that images participate in reality. Rather, they reveal the conditions under which that participation becomes unstable. Images possess agency and presence, but that agency is embedded within the social and political networks that interpret them. When those networks fracture, the vitality of royal imagery does not disappear, but multiplies the very instability it was designed to suppress.

The Victory Stele and Vassal-Treaties are complementary technologies that attempt to render kingship tangible by securing it through performance and image. This very insistence on a tangible and secure kingship, however, reveals how sovereignty is a psychological construct sustained by performance, which makes it naturally insecure. Kingship depended on the continual reproduction of loyalty, ritual affirmation, and visual coherence in its language. When that coherence fractures, as it did with the basket-bearing stelai of Esarhaddon's sons, the same visual language that once stabilized imperial authority exposed its fragility. The Neo-Assyrian visual program therefore reveals both the extraordinary power of royal imagery and its fundamental limitation that images could articulate sovereignty, but they could never fully secure it.

Neo-Assyrian Art: The Rhetoric of Domination

4.1 Introduction

Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs constitute one of the most sustained visual programs of kingship in the ancient Near East. Carved across the walls of palaces at Kalhu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh, these monuments organize the subjects of campaigns, hunts, tribute, punishment, and ritual into a palace-centered rhetoric of domination in which sovereignty is presented as the power to classify, subordinate, punish, incorporate, and ritually order the world around the king.⁹⁴ Neo-Assyrian royal power was therefore constructed and coordinated through the use of relief, palace space, bodies, gesture, inscription, and viewing.

This chapter argues that Neo-Assyrian art transformed domination into a repeated visual and architectural condition. Its forms were not entirely new. Guardian figures, sacred symbols, royal hunts, tribute scenes, punitive violence, and inscriptions all drew on older Mesopotamian and wider Near Eastern traditions.⁹⁵ What is distinctively Neo-Assyrian is the scale and consistency with which these forms were concentrated in the palace, coordinated with one another, and made part of the viewer's movement through royal space.⁹⁶ In that environment, domination was not presented only as military victory or bodily violence, even if those elements remained central within the iconography. It appeared as the proper arrangement of rulers and subjects, humans and animals, enemies and gods, text and image, center and periphery.

That system is traced within the chapter through several connected stages. It first situates the major palace programs within the historical development of the Neo-Assyrian empire, since

⁹⁴ John M. Russell, "Assyrian Art," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 453–54, 472–92; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–70, 79–80, 92–95; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18–19, 25.

⁹⁵ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–70, 92–94; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 453–54; Tallay Ornan, "The Defeat of the Lion: A Visual Trope Promoting Ancient Near Eastern Kings," in *Picturing Royal Charisma: Kings and Rulers in the Near East from 3000 BCE to 1700 CE*, ed. Arlette David, Rachel Milstein, and Tallay Ornan (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2023), 35–44.

⁹⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–92; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 63–66; Mario Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy*, trans. Soraia Tabatabai (London: Routledge, 2014), 513.

changes in capital, administration, territorial reach, and royal self-presentation shaped the monuments themselves.⁹⁷ It then establishes the principal relief programs before turning to the mechanics through which they operate: gesture and hierarchy, the representation of enemies and construction of the “Other,” and the relationship between text and image. The chapter then concludes with Ashurbanipal’s lion hunt reliefs, where the broader logic of the chapter appears in especially concentrated form. In that sequence, dangerous force is released, confronted, killed, displayed, and ritually processed, making the rhetoric of domination visible as ordered violence contained and controlled by the king.⁹⁸

Taken together, these analyses will help show that Neo-Assyrian palace art helped structure the conditions under which kingship could be encountered as necessary, universal, and its hierarchy naturally ordered. Before turning to the monuments themselves, it is therefore necessary to situate them within the historical development of the Neo-Assyrian empire, where the expansion of royal power and the increasing scale of palace display developed together.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Eckart Frahm, “The Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 1000–609 BCE),” in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 161–87; Daisuke Shibata, “Assyria from Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashurnasirpal II,” in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East, Volume IV: The Age of Assyria*, ed. Karen Radner, Nadine Moeller, and D. T. Potts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 217–22; Heather D. Baker, “The Assyrian Empire: A View from Within,” in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East, Volume IV: The Age of Assyria*, ed. Karen Radner, Nadine Moeller, and D. T. Potts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 298–308.

⁹⁸ Russell, “Assyrian Art,” 490–92; Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 94–98; Chikako E. Watanabe, “The ‘Continuous Style’ in the Narrative Scheme of Assurbanipal’s Reliefs,” *Iraq* 66 (2004): 103–14; Ornan, “Defeat of the Lion,” 41–44; Ludovico Portuese, “Live and Let Live Images: Metaphor and Interpictoriality in Neo-Assyrian Art,” in *Researching Metaphor in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Marta Pallavidini and Ludovico Portuese (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 130–34.

⁹⁹ Frahm, “The Neo-Assyrian Period,” 161–87; Russell, “Assyrian Art,” 453–54, 472–92; Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 487–89, 513.

4.2 Historical Overview

The palace reliefs examined in this chapter belong to changing historical conditions rather than to a single stable phase of Assyrian rule. The relevant movement is from recovery and consolidation, to territorial empire, to the mature monumental culture of the Sargonid capitals. This will help augment the visual argument because each phase altered how kingship, conquest, space, and royal presence were articulated in palace art.

Ashurnasirpal II's reign provides the foundational point of departure. After the territorial losses and political contraction of the late 2nd millennium, the late 10th and early 9th centuries saw Assyria gradually reconsolidate its power, but Ashurnasirpal's reign gave that recovery a new monumental form. His foundation of Kalhu as a capital, the Northwest Palace, the systematic use of relief and guardian figures, and the dense repetition of inscriptions all belong to the same process of reconstituting Assyrian rule around a centralized royal presence.¹⁰⁰ Although not yet the capital of the later territorial empire, Kalhu created an early large-scale palace program in which kingship became architecturally pervasive. This helps explain why Ashurnasirpal's reliefs are so formal, dense, and programmatic, since they monumentalize a restored and expanding kingdom through this visual system.

A new phase began with Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BCE. His reign followed a period in which powerful magnates and provincial officials weakened royal authority, and his reign marked the beginning of Assyria's full imperial phase. Tiglath-pileser reasserted central control, reorganized provincial administration, expanded direct annexation, and revived the monumental repertoire of inscriptions and palace reliefs after a long lapse in their full use.¹⁰¹ For this chapter, his reign is significant because of the expansion of the visual articulation of

¹⁰⁰ Frahm, "Neo-Assyrian Period," 161–62; Shibata, "Assyria from Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashurnasirpal II," 217–22; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–74.

¹⁰¹ Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 487–88; Van De Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 266–67; Frahm, "Neo-Assyrian Period," 176–83; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 484–85.

kingship occurred alongside the expansion of a more aggressive territorial and administrative project. His reliefs thus stand between the highly formulaic 9th century language of Ashurnasirpal and the later Sargonid programs, retaining older palace forms while moving toward a more historically mobile and geographically expansive imagery of imperial domination.

Sargon II's reign marks another transformation because political power was re-centered through the foundation of Dur-Šarrukin. The circumstances of his accession remain debated. Liverani treats him as a usurper while Baker is more cautious and prefers to emphasize that the precise circumstances remain obscure.¹⁰² In either case, the fresh monumental field of the new capital detached royal power from older centers and allowed Sargon to project a reorganized imperial order. Dur-Šarrukin was planned with unusual regularity and conceived as an imperial project that drew upon labor and resources from across the empire.¹⁰³ The reliefs therefore operate at a different scale from those at Kalhu. They still classify peoples, materials, and conquered places in relation to the king, but they do so within a much greater political horizon shaped by annexation, administrative integration, and Assyria's claim to world-encompassing rule.

Sennacherib's move to Nineveh changed the monumental field again. Unlike Dur-Šarrukin, Nineveh was already an important center that Sennacherib transformed into a true metropolitan capital of the empire through enlarged walls, expanded infrastructure, royal roads, gardens, and the Southwest Palace.¹⁰⁴ The reliefs of this palace belong to this more expansive urban and imperial setting, and their broader, more panoramic narrative fields correspond to a

¹⁰² Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 488; Heather D. Baker, "The Assyrian Empire: A View from Within," in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East, Volume IV: The Age of Assyria*, ed. Karen Radner, Nadine Moeller, and D. T. Potts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 298–300.

¹⁰³ Baker, "The Assyrian Empire," 299–301; Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 488–89; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 485–86.

¹⁰⁴ Baker, "The Assyrian Empire," 307–08; Frahm, "The Neo-Assyrian Period," 184–85; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 488–90.

capital imagined as a gathering center point of the empire. Under Ashurbanipal, this Ninevite monumental culture reached one of its highest points of technical and conceptual refinement, especially in the Elamite cycles and lion hunt reliefs. The later collapse of Assyria should not be read back simplistically into these monuments, but it does sharpen their historical position. The reliefs from Kalhu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh were produced across the arc from reconsolidation to imperial expansion and monumental culmination. They are therefore best understood as visual responses to changing political conditions rather than as a single unchanging Assyrian style.¹⁰⁵

4.3 Monumental Setting and Imperial Visual Grammar

Against this historical background, we can now turn from an overview of the Neo-Assyrian state to the monuments through which that expansion was made visible. The monuments come primarily from the royal centers of Kalhu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh, where carved orthostats lined the walls of reception rooms, throne-room suites, courtyards, and corridors that correspond to successive moments in Assyria's political expansion (Figure 4.1).¹⁰⁶ They are the most substantial surviving monumental settings in which Assyrian kingship was staged. These reliefs were arranged in carefully structured architectural settings that depicted royal power through tribute, military campaigns, punishments, hunts, ritual scenes, and formal encounters between the king and attendants or subject peoples.¹⁰⁷ In antiquity, they were also painted, which would have made them even more vivid than their present stone surfaces suggest. Rather than depicting a single, unchanged formula, they show the rhetoric of Neo-Assyrian rule moving from the tightly ordered programs of 9th century

¹⁰⁵ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–92; Frahm, "Neo-Assyrian Period," 186–87; Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 103–14.

¹⁰⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–89; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 488, fig. 28.4.

¹⁰⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 453–54, 488–89; Parker, "Construction and Performance of Kingship," 368.

Kalhu to the expanded and self-conscious imperial display of Khorsabad and then to the panoramic, historically explicit, and emotionally charged relief cycles of late Assyrian Nineveh.¹⁰⁸

The first major surviving program of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs comes from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu, modern Nimrud. The palace occupied the northwest quarter of the citadel and was organized around major state apartments, throne-room spaces, courtyards, and doorway sequences (Figure 4.2). Russell emphasizes that the decoration should be understood through both iconographic type and distribution according to architectural setting and room function.¹⁰⁹ This is especially clear in the approach to the throne-room suite, where the viewer entering the throne-room courtyard encountered a structured field of tribute bearers, guardian colossi, doorways, and royal images before reaching the inner ceremonial space (Figure 4.3). The palace thus established kingship and that one was entering a ceremonial space before the viewer gained access to the throne-room itself, showing how access was shaped through the reliefs, the threshold, and their line of sight.

The threshold figures at Kalhu are central to this spatial logic. Human-headed winged lions and bulls, lamassi, stood at major entrances to mark passage into royal space through bodies that were at once supernatural and protective while also serving an architectural function (Figure 4.4). Their position at the doorway is also significant because they controlled the symbolic transition from one zone of access to another. Inside the throne-room suite, the wall reliefs extended this logic across the surface of the room. The reconstruction of Room B shows how the Standard Inscription ran horizontally across different scenes and figures to bind sacred-tree imagery, ritual, hunt, tribute, and military display into a continuous inscribed field (Figure

¹⁰⁸ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 453–54, 485–89; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 79, 92.

¹⁰⁹ Russell, "Program of the Palace," 655–57, 656, fig. 1; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 64, fig. 4.1.

4.5).¹¹⁰ The result is a curated environment in which text, image, and architecture repeatedly direct the viewer back to the king as the organizing center of palace space.

Within Room B, the throne-room program becomes denser and more varied. The sacred-tree composition places Ashurnasirpal II in a symmetrical ritual arrangement, facing the tree and attended by winged figures beneath the divine winged disc above (Figure 4.6). The scene establishes the king within a ritual order in which the sacred tree acts as a stable central axis around which the king, the protective beings, and the winged disc are aligned.¹¹¹ This compositional stability matters because it is placed beside scenes of the king acting upon conquered or mastered bodies. In the libation scenes from Room B, Ashurnasirpal pours offerings over a dead lion and a dead bull (Figures 4.7a–b). Ataç notes that both lion and wild bull are marked in Assyrian royal language by the adjective *ekdu*, meaning “fierce” or “ferocious,” a term also associated with the king’s own predatory force.¹¹² The animals thus function as trophies while their dead bodies allow the king’s violence to be translated into a ritual action, giving the scene a sense of a controlled act of offering instead of disorder.

Panels 18–20 of Room B show how this logic is extended to enemy bodies. In the reconstructed sequence, the upper register moves through chariot hunt, defeated animals, and the approach toward a fortified city, while the lower register organizes attendants, tribute, chariotry, and submission beneath the same inscribed band (Figure 4.9). The prostrate enemy before Ashurnasirpal is especially important because the body of the defeated enemy is placed low near the king’s chariot and beneath the surrounding vertical bodies of attendants and soldiers (Figure 4.8).¹¹³ The composition therefore is using the posture and placement to define political status: standing bodies are meant to serve, approach, or guard, while kneeling and

¹¹⁰ Russell, “Program of the Palace,” 657, 659, fig. 3; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 168, fig. 21.

¹¹¹ Watanabe, “Continuous Style,” 107, fig. 4.

¹¹² Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 73–75, figs. 7–10.

¹¹³ Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 73, fig. 6; 75, fig. 10.

prostrate bodies register submission and defeat. The Standard Inscription running through these panels intensifies that effect by repeating the king's titles and conquests across scenes whose subjects shift from ritual to hunt to battle. Text here is not interrupting the imagery and instead binds these different actions to the same royal identity.

The same coordination of bodies appears in more formal interior spaces. In Room G, Ashurnasirpal sits between armed eunuchs, unarmed attendants, and apkallu figures, so that the king is surrounded by human service and supernatural protection within a single courtly arrangement (Figure 4.10). The figures around him are not interchangeable and all occupy different roles, but they are placed in relation to the seated king. Doorway figures help sharpen this spatial distinction further. The winged genie from Room B, Door B, holding a stalk of alternating tufted rosettes and cones, belongs to the threshold environment of the palace, where protective and purificatory figures marked passage between spaces (Figure 4.11).¹¹⁴ In Kalhu, then, royal power is distributed across throne-room compositions, doorway guardians, inscribed panels, ritual scenes, hunted animals, prostrate enemies, and the controlled movement of bodies through the palace to center all power on the king and his image.

A later, but important, bridge within Kalhu is the work of Tiglath-pileser III. He revived monumental wall reliefs after a period in which the older celebrative repertoire had not been pursued on the same scale. The reliefs from the Central and Southwest Palaces do not have the same preserved architectural density as Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace, but the surviving drawings preserve a set of highly concentrated royal encounters. In one scene, Tiglath-pileser III receives the submission of an enemy whose body is lowered beneath the standing ruler and surrounding attendants (Figure 4.12). In another, the king directly places his foot on a fallen enemy while attendants frame the action from either side (Figure 4.13). The contrast of these

¹¹⁴ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 80, fig. 16; Portuese, "Fear, Concern and Care," 41, fig. 4a.

scenes with the enthroned reception scene is instructive (Figure 4.14). In it, Tiglath-pileser receives a high-ranking official. The encounter is formal and balanced, with the king seated beneath astral signs and the approaching figure standing upright before him.¹¹⁵ These three scenes condense different modes of subordination in Neo-Assyrian royal art: submission and defeat can be staged through prostration, bodily contact, and trampling, or a ranked political encounter through the controlled courtly approach. The shift from Ashurnasirpal to Tiglath-pileser does not require a long historical digression because its significance lies in that the same palace-centered repertoire of royal centrality, ranked bodies, and subordinating gestures remains available, but is expressed in sharper and more isolated formulas.

With Sargon II, this study shifts to the late Assyrian capital of Dur-Šarrukin, modern Khorsabad. The broader historical significance of this new capital comes from Sargon founding the city after a contested accession, and his reign was a period of major expansion and consolidation. Dur-Šarrukin matters above all within this analysis as a palace environment in which earlier Neo-Assyrian forms were reorganized on a larger scale. The city and palace plans show a planned royal complex set into the northern side of the city walls, with major courtyards, gateways, reception spaces, and temple areas arranged within a single monumental project (Figures 4.15–4.16).¹¹⁶ Russell notes that Dur-Šarrukin is the most fully excavated and published of the Late Assyrian capitals, which makes it especially useful for tracing how royal imagery was distributed through ceremonial and reception spaces.¹¹⁷

The threshold program at Khorsabad represents an enlarged deployment of already-established palace visual composition. Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace had a complex façade system of guardian figures and doorways to control the viewer's approach from the courtyard

¹¹⁵ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92–93, figs. 42–44.

¹¹⁶ John M. Russell, "Assyrian Cities and Architecture," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 443, fig. 23.4.

¹¹⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Cities and Architecture," 442; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 485–87.

(Figure 4.3). At Khorsabad, Sargon placed this logic within the setting of a much larger royal capital and palace with a monumental complex of courtyards, gateways, reception spaces, and temple areas (Figures 4.15–4.16). The comparison between lamassi from Nimrud and Khorsabad demonstrates the continuity of the guardian type, while the reconstructed arrangement of Façade N shows how colossal lamassi, protective figures, and multiple doorways continued to structure entrance into royal space at Sargon’s palace (Figures 4.17–4.18).¹¹⁸ This system was integrated into a broader decorative environment that included painted ceilings, glazed brick, decorated temple thresholds, and bronze fittings to all compose a façade that coordinated one’s movement and experience.¹¹⁹ The difference lies less in a new entrance formula than in the significantly-expanded scale and setting.

The palace also expands the range of encounters and actions as subjects for royal display. On Façade L, Sargon faces a high dignitary, possibly Crown Prince Sennacherib, in a seemingly balanced encounter in which both figures stand upright, are richly dressed, and formally composed (Figure 4.19). The balance of the scene is not equality, and it organizes the rank of the figures, both in relation to each other and the viewer through their proximity, dress, gesture, and access to the king. The Medes tributaries from Corridor 10 extend this principle to foreign peoples. The relief arranges Median figures, horses, lances, and architectural models identified by the Louvre as city models into a processional sequence of tribute and approach (Figure 4.20).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Valérie Danrey, “Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh: Genesis of an Iconographic Motif,” *Iraq* 66 (2004): 134, figs. 1–2; Musée du Louvre, “Façade N of Khorsabad Palace,” in *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, drawing by Eugène Flandin, published in Paul-Émile Botta, *Monument de Ninive* (1849), pl. 24.

¹¹⁹ Russell, “Assyrian Art,” 486–87.

¹²⁰ Musée du Louvre, “Relief of Sargon,” *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, Khorsabad, palace, Façade L, gypsum alabaster, reign of Sargon II, 721–705 BCE, Botta excavations, 1843–1844, Musée du Louvre, AO 19874; Musée du Louvre, “Relief of Medes Tributaries,” *Khorsabad: The Palace of Sargon II*, Khorsabad, palace, Corridor 10, gypsum alabaster, reign of Sargon II, 721–705 BCE, Botta excavations, 1843–1844, Musée du Louvre, AO 19887.

Khorsabad also uses the subject of imperial logistics and movement to demonstrate the king's power. The seascape from façade n and the timber-transport relief from the north façade of the ceremonial courtyard shift attention from battle to controlled circulation across water, the movement of resources, and the practical processes through which empire supplied the palace (Figures 4.21–4.22). The campaign imagery preserves the coercive edge of this program. The Room II siege scene, probably identified with the Median fortified city of Kišessim, places Assyrian soldiers against a fortified settlement in a mountainous landscape (Figure 4.23). A related Room XIV scene shows figures moving through mountainous terrain and can be read in relation to the broader Khorsabad imagery of prisoners and captive presentation discussed by Root (Figure 4.24).¹²¹ Taken together, these Khorsabad reliefs broaden the repertoire without changing its basic political structure.

Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh continues the palace-centered development. The plan of the palace establishes the scale of this setting, while also helping to place Room 36, or Room XXXVI in the Lachish relief literature, within the larger complex (Figure 4.25). Kertai's mapping of the apotropaic figures demonstrates how protective beings were distributed throughout the palace doorways to mark access and passage across the complex (Figure 4.26).¹²² This palace-wide threshold system provides the architectural setting for the Lachish reliefs, whose narrative sequence is a major surviving example of Sennacherib's campaign imagery.

The throne-room façade and doorway material continue the established threshold logic, and the range of protective bodies is especially clear at Nineveh. The five-legged colossus from

¹²¹ J. DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters: Diversity as a Rhetorical Strategy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 114, fig. 3; Musée du Louvre, "Relief Showing the Transport of Timber," AO 19888; Musée du Louvre, "Room 2 of Khorsabad Palace," pl. 68 bis; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, pl. 3.1; Musée du Louvre, "Room 14 of Khorsabad Palace," pl. 146; Root, *King and Kingship*, 207–8.

¹²² David Kertai, "The Guardians at the Doors: Entering the Southwest Palace in Nineveh," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 326–27, figs. 1–2.

Door k of Room 13 belongs to the same basic tradition of guardian figures controlling entry through royal spaces (Figure 4.27). The throne-room façade added further protective supernatural forms, including human-apkallu and laḫmu figures, arranged across the façade and around the approach to major royal spaces (Figures 4.28–4.30).¹²³ These figures frame the military narratives that follow and mean that the viewer’s encounter with them was structured by these guardians.

The Lachish reliefs continue the Neo-Assyrian campaign imagery tradition and develop it through an unusually sustained narrative treatment of a single conquered city. While earlier palace reliefs used the different portions of campaign imagery – the sieges, submissions, deportations, and tributes – the Lachish sequence joins these elements into one extensive visual progression. The broad view of the reliefs shows the assault on Lachish and the deportation of its inhabitants with siege engines moving up ramps, defenders on the walls, deportees leaving the city, and booty and prisoners moving away from the captured settlement toward the king (Figures 4.31, 4.33, and 4.35). The assault itself is clearer in the detailed view of Panel 7, where the siege engines advance while soldiers attack from below and defenders respond from atop the walls (Figure 4.34). In the following panels, Sennacherib sits enthroned as prisoners and booty are brought before him (Figure 4.35). The detailed view of Panel 12 depicts the final movement focusing on the enthroned king with prisoners presented before him (Figure 4.36). The narrative moves continuously from siege to removal to reception. Conquest is treated as the whole process through which a city, its goods, and its inhabitants are brought into the king’s presence and placed under his judgement.

The camp scenes from the Southwest Palace add another dimension to this same logic. In the scenes discussed by Micale and Nadali, the king appears within the camp and receives

¹²³ Kertai, “Guardians at the Doors,” 335–37, figs. 7–10.

officers, shifting attention from conquest to organized the military space administering the campaign (Figures 4.37a–b).¹²⁴ These scenes prevent the Lachish sequence from being read only as destruction because they present the army as an ordered extension of the king's authority within the camp. This works to reinforce the king's authority within the Lachish reliefs from this extension of the king's authority, illustrating how every aspect is centered on him.

Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh brings this palace-centered development to its most technically refined surviving form. The plan of the North Palace shows a complex organized around courtyards, throne-room areas, reception rooms, and decorated suites, while the doorway guardian slab from Room B demonstrates that protective figures continued to frame passage through the complex (Figures 4.38–4.39).¹²⁵ The North Palace set this threshold logic beside some of the most elaborate surviving Neo-Assyrian narrative reliefs, especially the Elamite cycles and the royal lion hunts.

The battle of Til-Tuba is central to this late Assyrian expansion of narrative form. The surviving slabs show a crowded battlefield of chariots, soldiers, fleeing enemies, collapsing bodies, and repeated episodes arranged across a continuous field (Figures 4.40–4.43). Watanabe's reconstruction of the sequence is especially useful because it shows how separate moments of the battle were organized within one extended narrative surface.¹²⁶ The treatment of Teumman sharpens the political force of the sequence. The Elamite king is shown wounded and fleeing, then executed with Tammartu, while his severed head is carried away and identified within the larger aftermath of the battle (Figures 4.44–4.47). The enemy king's

¹²⁴ Maria Gabriella Micale and Davide Nadali, "The Shape of Sennacherib's Camps: Strategic Functions and Ideological Space," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 166, figs. 3a–b.

¹²⁵ David Kertai, "Embellishing the Interior Spaces of Assyria's Royal Palaces," *Iraq* 79 (2017): 90, fig. 1; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 91, fig. 40.

¹²⁶ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 108–13, figs. 5–16.

multiple depictions hint at an importance of not just showing defeat, but showing his body broken, transported, and reinserted into later scenes of triumph.

The movement from battle to aftermath also appears in Ashurbanipal's garden scene. The scene shows how late Neo-Assyrian art could carry violence beyond the battlefield into the spaces of royal leisure and celebration through the Elamite king's severed head hanging in the tree (Figure 4.48).¹²⁷ The enemy's body becomes part of the palace's image of victory and, in this respect, Ashurbanipal's reliefs extend the logic already seen in Lachish. Conquest is not completed when the enemy is defeated. It is completed with the arrangement of bodies, captured goods, and royal ceremony by the king within the palace environment.

The lion hunt reliefs should be introduced here because they preserve the same basic structure as the campaign reliefs: a dangerous body is confronted, contained, subdued, and then processed through royal ceremony. In the North Palace, the hunt cycle moves from the release of lions to their pursuit, wounding, collapse, royal attack, and ritual offering (Figures 4.49–4.55).¹²⁸ The difference with campaign scenes is that the enemy has been symbolized as a dangerous animal whose violence must be brought under the king's control. These reliefs will be analyzed more in-depth later in this chapter, but they, along with the rest of Ashurbanipal's North Palace, are the culmination of several earlier strands of Neo-Assyrian palace art: guarded thresholds, extended battle narrative, enemy humiliation and coercion, royal ceremony, and the hunt as a controlled theater of kingship.

¹²⁷ Natalie Naomi May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," in *Mortals, Deities and Divine Symbols: Rethinking Ancient Images from the Levant to Mesopotamia*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Laura Battini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2025), 321, fig. 7.

¹²⁸ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 104, fig. 1; May, "Whose Head Is Hanging from the Tree?," 317, 321, figs. 3, 6–7; British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, BM 124867, registration no. 1856,0909.16; British Museum, "Wall Panel; Relief," North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, Room S, Panel 8, bottom row, BM 124877, registration no. 1856,0909.48.

These monuments establish the material ground from which a broader definition of Neo-Assyrian visual rhetoric can be drawn. Neo-Assyrian palace art was distinctive because inherited forms were reorganized into a sustained palace program, not because its constituent elements were entirely new. Many of these elements had deeper Mesopotamian and wider Near Eastern antecedents, and Ataç is especially useful on this point because he treats the emblematic and formulaic dimension of Neo-Assyrian relief as part of a longer visual continuum rather than as a sudden invention. What is distinctively Neo-Assyrian is the concentration, intensification, repetition, and architectural coordination of these forms within the palace. Russell's survey of Assyrian art shows how these varied media were coordinated through palace settings, while Liverani emphasizes that the relief cycles addressed viewers admitted into palace space, including foreign envoys confronted with Assyrian victory, punishment, and rank.¹²⁹

The resulting rhetoric of domination therefore keeps violence as a central theme but cannot be reduced to it alone. Domination operated through repeated visible contrasts: the standing king and lowered enemy, the enthroned ruler and approaching official, the stable royal body and the collapsing animal or enemy body. Ataç's distinction between the "historicizing" narratives of Neo-Assyrian relief and their more timeless, hieratic elements is useful here because the reliefs may narrate specific events, but those actions repeatedly turn to the king as the figure that makes the order seem permanent rather than contingent.¹³⁰ The chapter thus turns to the mechanics through which that rhetoric of domination is constructed: first through gesture and hierarchical composition, then through representation of enemies and foreign peoples, then the relationship between text and image, and finally a concentrated case study of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt.

¹²⁹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–70, 79–80, 92–94; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 453–54, 472–89; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 513.

¹³⁰ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

4.4 Gesture and Hierarchical Composition

We have established the monumental settings in which Neo-Assyrian royal imagery operated, and now we can turn to the internal mechanics by which those settings made sovereignty visible. Across the reliefs, the king appears in ritual, courtly, military, hunting, and ceremonial contexts. This range matters because the royal body remains composed across scenes whose subjects otherwise differ sharply. Ataç's discussion of Neo-Assyrian relief as a system combining formulaic, emblematic, and historicizing elements helps clarify this, since the king repeatedly anchors scenes that range from timeless ritual order to specific narrative.¹³¹

The Victory Stele of Esarhaddon offered a concentrated version of this logic in the previous chapter, because the king's body acted as the mediating center through which the surrounding figures of his sons, the captives, and dynastic hierarchy were to be read. The palace reliefs extend that principle so that different settings have the same royal capacity to discipline the world under divine sanction.¹³² The visual ordering responds to a structural condition of empire. Neo-Assyrian rule depended on incorporating a vast and diverse imperial population while maintaining that order flowed from a single divinely sanctioned royal center. Gesture and hierarchical composition helped resolve that tension by translating imperial rule into bodily relation. Proximity, posture, access, and movement all define whether a figure belongs within the king's order or appears as a body to be subordinated by it.¹³³

Courtly and ritual scenes convey how hierarchy is often produced through controlled variation within repeated encounter types. Ataç's analysis of Ashurnasirpal's Room B reliefs proves useful because the same basic arrangement of the king, official, attendant, and acted-upon body changes meaning through posture, implements, and proximity. In the libation scenes,

¹³¹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–70, 92–95.

¹³² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–73, 75, 79–80, 92–95.

¹³³ Parker, "Construction and Performance of Kingship," 357–60, 364–67; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 513.

Ashurnasirpal and the headbanded official face one another around the dead lion or bull, while the king's bowl, the animal body, and the position of the officiating figures define the scene as ritual action (Figures 4.7a–b). In the neighboring prostration panel, the encounter's formula remains similar, but shifts register so that the king now holds arrows, the enemy body is lowered before him, and the official's gesture participates in a scene of submission rather than libation (Figure 4.8).¹³⁴ The repeated arrangement and present figures are altered according to the subject, but the same visual structure appears and allows the king to move between ritual mastery and political subordination.

The same principle helps clarify later courtly scenes, while giving more insight into how asymmetry is depicted. Tiglath-pileser III's enthroned reception of a high-ranking official organizes rank through formal approach, seated authority, and controlled gesture (Figure 4.14) while Sargon II's encounter with a high dignitary, possibly Crown Prince Sennacherib, on Façade L produces hierarchy without dramatic scale difference or contrasting posture (Figure 4.19). Both figures are upright and richly dressed to give a sense of balance, but Sargon's staff and royal dress distinguish his rank in relation to the dignitary, and the dignitary's exception proximity distinguish rank within the scene and mark the viewer's exclusion from that privileged access. Kertai's emphasis on the architectural presence of the king in palace space helps clarify the point that rank is reinforced through the viewer's own restricted relation to royal access.¹³⁵

The repeated encounter with guarded access also gives the images a behavioral force. Bahrani's account of Mesopotamian images as participating in the presence of what they depict helps explain why these repeated arrangements mattered within the palace. In the palace, the viewer did not encounter this hierarchy once, and the visuality of these images meant they were

¹³⁴ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 71–75.

¹³⁵ Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 64–66.

viewed as physically enacting that hierarchy within the palace space. Gell's language of indexical agency is also useful, because repeated courtly and protective figures help symbolize hierarchy by pointing to royal agency as something extended through these figures and architectural routes. The viewer encountered this asymmetry repeatedly within the palace, and this repetition turned hierarchy into a spatial experience. The viewer learned rank through the scene, but also by moving through a palace in which approach to the king was continually filtered, guided, guarded, and staged.

Ritual gesture gives this hierarchy a ceremonial form. The sacred-tree composition from Room B places Ashurnasirpal in a stable ritual arrangement, aligned with the tree, winged disc, and attendant protective figures (Figure 4.6). The composition relies on symmetry and a sense of stillness in which the king occupies a fixed position within a divine and protected order with privileged proximity. The libation scenes over the dead lion and bull extend that order into the aftermath of violence (Figures 4.7a–b). Ataç notes the connection between the lion, the wild bull, and the royal language of ferocity, but the images bring ferocity under the king's control rather than leaving it uncontrolled.¹³⁶ The dangerous animal body is dead and ritually processed. The king's gesture converts that violent mastery into a ceremonial action, while the surrounding figures are ranked by their closeness to the rite.

The opposite of privileged proximity is the lowered or subordinated body. In Room B at Kalhu, the prostrate enemy before Ashurnasirpal lies beneath the standing figures around him to turn defeat into posture (Figure 4.8). The later Nimrud reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III continue this distinction between submission and coercive contact. In one scene, the defeated figure lowers himself before the ruler, while in another, the king places his foot directly on a fallen enemy (Figures 4.12–4.13).¹³⁷ These gestures are related but not identical. Prostrates models

¹³⁶ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 73–75.

¹³⁷ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 75, 92–93.

the bodily grammar of submission, while trampling intensifies domination through physical contact. In the Lachish reliefs, lowered posture becomes part of the longer sequence of deportees and prisoners moving from the conquered city toward Sennacherib (Figures 4.33–4.36). Foucault’s attention to the political ordering of bodies helps clarify the visual logic here because the reliefs are displaying how subordination is performed before authority through this repeated presentation.¹³⁸

The movement from royal composure to bodily disorder becomes clearest in scenes of enemies and animals. The Elamite battle reliefs make this bodily logic clear: enemy bodies crowd, flee, collapse, and break apart across the battlefield (Figures 4.40–4.43). Teumman, however, should be singled out because his body becomes the narrative focus of defeat. He is shown wounded and fleeing, then executed with Tammaritu, then decapitated, and finally carried into the aftermath as a trophy head (Figures 4.44–4.47). The Til-Tuba sequence shows these moments as a continuous narrative of linked episodes, and the focus on Teumman’s body throughout the episodes is a similar, but more intense, version of the treatment of defeated bodies seen in the Lachish reliefs.

Animal bodies perform a related function in hunting material. The dead lion and bull in Room B and the later lion hunt scenes of Ashurbanipal placed dangerous bodies in very dramatic and uncontrolled postures during their collapse, exposure, and ritual processing (Figures 4.7a–b and 4.49–4.55). The contrast with the king’s body is decisive in the same manner as it is during his composure in military scenes: he remains composed, active, or ceremonially controlled while enemies and animals twist, fall, flee, or are broken apart. This repeated contrast allows the royal image to function as an index of royal character in which the

¹³⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 170–94.

king's body both acts within and constitutes the space as disciplined, controlled, and commanding, before the viewer ever encounters the living ruler.¹³⁹

Gesture and hierarchical composition therefore do more than distinguish rank inside individual scenes, because it helps define how that imperial domination and rank should look and function in practice. They arrange bodies into a broader opposition between controlled proximity and unstable exclusion. Officials, attendants, protective beings, and tribute bearers belong to the palace order insofar as their gestures and positions are disciplined around the king and ordered in rank according to their proximity to him and participation in his presence. Enemies, captives, deportees, and dangerous animals appear through lowered posture, displacement, bodily collapse, or coercive handling. These images repeatedly display the king as centered, frontally privileged, or compositionally resolved as the final point toward which all movement inevitably trends.

The rhetoric of domination depends on this repeated contrast. Assyrian power is very much presented as military power on the surface, but also as the capacity to arrange bodies into a world ordered by the sovereignty of the king. Gesture and visual hierarchy provide the bodily foundation for domination being expressed as the king's ability to convert difference, violence, and disorder into controlled relation.¹⁴⁰ This does not yet exhaust the problem of alterity or the mechanics for how Neo-Assyrian imperial visual rhetoric was constructed, but it prepares it. The next section turns from the organization of bodies as such to the specific ways Neo-Assyrian reliefs classify enemies and foreign peoples through their dress, posture, movement, punishment, and incorporation.

¹³⁹ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 108–13.

¹⁴⁰ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–70, 92–95; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Parker, "Construction and Performance," 357–62.

4.5 Representation of Enemies and Construction of the “Other”

The previous section illuminated how Neo-Assyrian reliefs organized sovereignty through gestures, proximity, centrality, and hierarchical composition. This allows us to turn to the manner in which the Neo-Assyrians visually constructed and classified the world around them in relation to themselves. The notion of “otherness” for them is not simply an ethnic label. Dress, physiognomy, language, and geography can mark ethnic difference, but the more decisive question is whether that difference has been incorporated into the king’s order, approaches it in submission, resists it, or is destroyed by it. The closest category to “us,” then, is the disciplined participation in Assyrian royal service. The relief of two scribes from the Central Palace at Nimrud depicts this, as one scribe records in Assyrian cuneiform on a clay tablet while the other records the same information in Aramaic on leather or parchment (Figure 4.56). Parker’s point here is significant because it shows that imperial expansion brought non-Assyrian soldiers, scribes, administrators, and officials into Assyrian service. In the relief, that incorporation is visualized through the shared administrative action, where the only distinction between who is Assyrian and who is not being shown through the different languages being written.¹⁴¹ Difference remains present, but it is subordinated and controlled within the larger Assyrian order.

Foreign tributaries occupy the next position outward. At Kalhu, this relation between foreignness and controlled approach was already built into palace placement. Tribute processions appeared on the exterior threshold of the throne-room suite, where foreign bodies were directed toward royal space before the viewer entered the throne-room itself (Figure 4.3).¹⁴² The façade framed this alterity as ordered approach. The Medes tributaries from Khorsabad continue this logic within a later setting. They remain visibly foreign through their

¹⁴¹ Parker, “Construction and Performance,” 360–62.

¹⁴² Russell, “Assyrian Art,” 472–74; Kertai, “Guardians at the Doors,” 331–32.

dress and tribute objects, but their movement is organized into a processional relation to Sargon (Figure 4.20). DeGrado's discussion of diversity at Khorsabad also explains why such visible depiction of diversity held political influence. Foreign difference illustrated the imagined reach of the empire, but only because that difference has already been arranged around the Assyrian center.¹⁴³

The prostrate or captive body occupies a more subordinated relation. In Ashurnasirpal's Room B relief, the enemy before the king is not defined primarily by ethnicity, but the removal of their autonomous status (Figure 4.8). The placement of this scene inside the throne-room suite matters, because if the façade could present foreign peoples as tributaries approaching royal space, the interior brought the defeated enemy into a more direct relation with the king's action. In the later reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III, one enemy lowers himself before the ruler while another is trampled beneath the king's foot (Figures 4.12–4.13). These scenes assign relation through the condition that the enemy is no longer a foreign participant in ordered approach, but a body whose resistance has already been overcome.

The same logic appears in Khorsabad's prisoner imagery and in the Lachish reception panels, where captives and booty are brought before the enthroned ruler (Figures 4.24 and 4.35–4.36). Root's discussion of prisoners presented before the king becomes significant here because the captive bodies help define kingship by placing foreign defeat directly before royal presence, both in the reliefs and in the palace space.¹⁴⁴ Bahrani's concept of visibility helps explain how the defeated body reactivated a military victory within the space of royal encounter while the captive also functions as an index of royal agency. The viewer would then not only see a prisoner, but the effect of the king's action materialized as a body placed before him.

¹⁴³ DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–16.

¹⁴⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 207–8.

The Lachish reliefs expand this relation from individual enemy bodies to a conquered population. Here the sequence itself matters. The city is assaulted, defenders occupy the walls, siege engines press against the fortifications, deportees leave with possessions, and prisoners and booty move toward Sennacherib's reception (Figures 4.31–4.36). Van de Mieroop's description of the Lachish reliefs identifies two distinct fates placed within the same visual field: the broader population is deported with families and belonging while local officials that organized resistance are punished with exemplary violence.¹⁴⁵ This demonstrates how the reliefs did not treat every foreign body identically. Resistance by the ruling elite brings terror, and the broader population is detached from its city and converted into a managed imperial population.

That distinction is significant because it shows how deportation was not simply a punitive measure. Van de Mieroop explains that Assyria greatly expanded the practice of deportation after the mid-8th century and used it to reduce opposition in peripheral regions, move labor, and populate the great cities founded in the Assyrian heartland.¹⁴⁶ Parker clarifies the administrative side of the process, stating that Assyrian rule depended on the movement and use of people across the empire, including non-Assyrians brought into military, scribal, and administrative service.¹⁴⁷ The Lachish reliefs give that structural practice a visual form in the palace in which the inhabitants are visually translated from a local community anchored to its walls into a population ordered under Assyrian management.

Khorsabad also demonstrates another category within this spectrum, that of foreign peoples and conquered spaces being represented through labor, material movement, and logistical control rather than through submission or punishment alone. The timber transport

¹⁴⁵ Van De Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 249.

¹⁴⁶ Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 249.

¹⁴⁷ Parker, "Construction and Performance," 360–62.

relief is important for this reason (Figure 4.22). Bagg notes that timber was scarce in Assyria but necessary for roofing and construction, and that cedar had to be brought from distant regions before being moved by land and water towards its final destination.¹⁴⁸ Van de Mieroop's discussion of Dur-Šarrukin's construction provides the scale behind such imagery. The project involved dozens of provincial governors and drew resources from across the empire.¹⁴⁹ The relief presents another aspect of dominance by presenting imperial rule as the capacity to command distance, labor, materials, and technical movement. In the palace context, this subject matter can still belong to the same rhetoric as scenes of tribute, siege, and captive presentation because the king's dominance is not only shown by what he is capable of doing to the enemy, but by the fact that the imperial world under his order can be made to move, build, and supply under his rule.

The farthest point of opposition is the defeated enemy ruler. In the Til-Tuba sequence, Elamite bodies fill the battlefield, but the figure of Teumman carries the political weight within the narrative because his kingship itself is physically dismantled (Figures 4.40–4.43). He is wounded and fleeing, executed, decapitated, and then reduced to a head carried into the aftermath (Figures 4.44–4.47). This continuous narrative keeps the focus on the Elamite king, and his body and later severed head become a focal point of the composition as they appear across the relief in a way that disrupts simple linear narration.¹⁵⁰ As much as the head is a detail of violence, it is also used as the concentrated sign of defeated sovereignty and Assyrian dominance. The garden scene gives it further weight because it depicts Teumman's head hanging from a tree within a setting of royal leisure (Figure 4.48). It can be read as an index of Assyrian royal agency because of this. The severed head continues to point back to the king's

¹⁴⁸ Bagg, "Assyrian Technology," 518.

¹⁴⁹ Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 251–52.

¹⁵⁰ Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 108–13.

victory as evidence of Assyrian triumph within the palace, both on relief and in the garden, even after Teumman's living body has disappeared.¹⁵¹

The contrast with Lachish is important. In the Lachish reliefs, the local elite may be punished while the broader population is moved into imperial management. In the Elamite material, the enemy ruler's body is treated as the primary object through which foreign sovereignty is broken by Assyrian order. Yet even here, alterity is not simple annihilation. In a related scene presented near the Ulai battle, the new Elamite king is installed before Elamite troops, who kneel before him in recognition.¹⁵² This conveys how Ashurbanipal's handling of Elam also involved the installation of dependent rulers after victory, so that foreign kingship could continue only as an extension of Assyrian intervention.¹⁵³

Visually, this matters because the destruction of Teumman is followed by the reordering of Elamite political authority under Assyrian royal sovereignty. The enemy king's body is fragmented and displayed, but kingship in Elam is reauthorized only through Assyrian intervention. Liverani's account of Ashurbanipal's policies clarifies the political logic behind this imagery. Urtaku's sons were placed in different Elamite centers in the hope that fragmented, dependent rule would keep the region under Assyrian control.¹⁵⁴ "Otherness" therefore comes from a foreign ruler being destroyed, displayed, deported, or reinstalled, but never as an equal center of power. The line between "us" and "them" can only be crossed when foreign authority is remade as an extension of Assyrian victory.

This spectrum also extends beyond bodies to spaces. Fortified cities, mountainous terrain, roads, rivers, and camps locate the foreign world as something to be entered, crossed,

¹⁵¹ Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 108–13; Bahrani, "The King's Head," 115–19.

¹⁵² Pauline Albenda, "Landscape Bas-Reliefs in the Bīt-Hilāni of Ashurbanipal," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 225 (1977): 30.

¹⁵³ Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 530–31.

¹⁵⁴ Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 530–31.

attacked, extracted from, or reorganized by Assyrian dominance. Khorsabad's Median and mountain imagery, the Lachish sequence, and the Til-Tuba reliefs all treat landscape as part of imperial classification (Figures 4.20–4.24, 4.31–4.36, and 4.40–4.47).¹⁵⁵ The Median and mountain imagery places foreign peoples within landscapes that mark distance from Assyria to highlight the dominance of Assyria in that distance being penetrated by Assyrian movement. The Lachish reliefs turn the city into an object of imperial action as it and the surrounding terrain structure the movement from assault to deportation and royal reception. The Til-Tuba reliefs similarly have the battlefield landscape become the field through which Elamite sovereignty is broken and reordered. Thus, the foreign world itself is classified not only through the appearance of bodies, but through the treatment of the places those bodies inhabit.

Taken together, these examples show how Neo-Assyrian art constructs the “Other” through a gradient of relation rather than essence. Difference can be incorporated into Assyrian service and depicted as diverse when arranged into tributary approach, transformed into labor and material circulation, reorganized through deportation, concentrated in the punished body of an enemy ruler, or reauthorized as dependent rule.¹⁵⁶ Every possible relation is defined through Assyrian command. This is how the representation of enemies and foreign peoples contributes to the rhetoric of domination, since domination keeps violence central to it but is not only expressed through violence.

It is also expressed through the conversion of difference into imperial relation. Khorsabad's labor and transport scenes maintain the tone of domination but shift attention from punishment to organization while still presenting the empire as a world whose resources,

¹⁵⁵ DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–16; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, pl. 3.1; Root, *King and Kingship*, 207–8; Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 249; Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 25, fig. 21; Watanabe, “The ‘Continuous Style,’” 108–13; Bahrani, “The King's Head,” 115–19.

¹⁵⁶ Parker, “Construction and Performance,” 360–62; DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–16; Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 249; Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 530–31.

peoples, labor, and distances can be mobilized under royal authority.¹⁵⁷ Lachish and Til-tuba then show the harder edge of this same logic by depicting defeated populations being managed while enemy rulers are punished or replaced.¹⁵⁸ The foreign world is continually brought into Assyrian terms, which is the gradient along which it defines alterity, whether through service, tribute, labor, deportation, punishment, dependent restoration, or spatial reordering. Turning away from solely analyzing imagery, a study of inscriptions and epigraphs will also help fix these relations by naming the peoples, rulers, places, and victories that the reliefs arrange around the king.

4.6 Text and Image in Neo-Assyrian Art

A facet of these visual programs not yet discussed but still central is the medium of text. The Neo-Assyrian palace programs did not treat writing as something external to the image, and understanding the relationship between text and image is vital. Text appears across the face of relief slabs, between registers, above enthroned kings, beside labeled cities, on freestanding monuments, and on guardian figures at thresholds.¹⁵⁹ At the most basic level, this allows one to ask whether words and images agree between texts such as annals and royal reliefs, and where the two diverge. But the monuments demand a deeper question as well. Text in these settings is not only verbal content but part of the visual field. It interrupts, frames, anchors, and sometimes helps to reorganize the image itself. Bahrani's warning against separating text from image is crucial, because Neo-Assyrian reliefs often require the viewer to encounter writing as part of

¹⁵⁷ Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 251–52; Baggs, “Assyrian Technology,” 518.

¹⁵⁸ Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 249; Bahrani, “The King's Head,” 115–19; Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 530–31.

¹⁵⁹ Russell, “Assyrian Art,” 472–86; Samuel M. Paley, “The Texts, the Palace, and the Reliefs of Assurnasirpal II,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 81, no. 4 (1977): 533–43; Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–6; Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 18–19; Shibata, “Assyria from Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashurnasirpal II,” 219–22.

the image's material and visual structure.¹⁶⁰ The integration of text and image in Neo-Assyrian art therefore operates on at least two levels at once. It can reinforce or complicate what is shown, and it can also function as a visual medium in its own right, working within the architecture of imperial display.

Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Kalhu offers a clear starting point because the architectural relation between text and image is here both explicit and highly structured. The Standard Inscription was carved across the middle of each slab on the throne-room façade and on the palace orthostats more broadly, naming the king, setting out his genealogy and titles, summarizing his conquests, and describing the founding of Kalhu and the building of the palace.¹⁶¹ In Room B and other spaces, the inscription formed a narrow horizontal band across the face of the slabs to divide the upper and lower register as it cuts across the visual field (Figure 4.5).¹⁶² This arrangement is significant because the text becomes one of the elements through which the reliefs are formally organized.

The text's placement as part of the visual medium means that its contents can be implied to support or elaborate upon the imagery, regardless of one's level of literacy. The king's military campaigns, the ritual acts, tributaries, and hunts are all seen through a band of writing that continuously asserts who he is, where his authority comes from, and what he has done.¹⁶³ Paley's study shows that the Standard Inscription belongs to the production history of the reliefs themselves and that the carved inscription, relief design, and chronology of the palace program's production are interrelated problems rather than separable categories.¹⁶⁴ The significance here is not where in that chronology the inscriptions were carved, but that their

¹⁶⁰ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 168, 203.

¹⁶¹ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–74; Paley, "The Texts, the Palace, and the Reliefs," 533–43; Shibata, "Assyria from Tiglath-pileser I to Ashurnasirpal II," 219–22; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18–19.

¹⁶² Russell, "Assyrian Art," 473–74.

¹⁶³ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18–19.

¹⁶⁴ Paley, "The Texts, the Palace, and the Reliefs," 533–43; Russell, "The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud," 671–97.

production was considered as part of the overall visual production of the palace's decorative program.

The effect is that the Standard Inscription works architecturally as it runs through varied types of imagery and sculpture to make them part of a continuous inscribed environment (Figures 4.5–4.6, and 4.9–4.11). A viewer moving through the palace would have encountered military campaigns, ritual acts, tribute scenes, hunts, protective figures, and sacred-tree compositions as part of that continuous inscribed environment. These scenes and figures were repeatedly crossed, framed, or accompanied by a text that asserted the same royal name, titles, genealogy, victories, and building claims.¹⁶⁵ In this limited sense, Foucault's emphasis on the production of knowledge through repeated and ordered discourse is on display through the Standard Inscription repeatedly defining the categories through which the king's authority is to be known. Similar to the king's presence across imagery acting as a visual connection between various subjects and scenes, inscription helps to provide another visual connection across the palace space that displays the king's power and authority while being an active element in its production. This means that the inscription is performing several functions at once. It is a formulaic statement of royal identity, historical summary, building inscription, and visual register organizing the wall. Even where its full content was not read or able to be read, the carved band marked the image as part of a sanctioned royal discourse and made the viewer see the relief through the physical presence of royal writing.¹⁶⁶

Yet this does not mean that the inscription and the reliefs simply duplicate one another. Winter's discussion of Ashurnasirpal's throne-room reliefs demonstrates that the Standard Inscription is highly condensed, whereas the more complete Ninurta Temple inscription

¹⁶⁵ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–76; Russell, "Program of the Palace," 671–97; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 63–66; Barbara Nevling Porter, "Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 129–39.

¹⁶⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–74; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 168, 203.

preserves annalistic accounts of specific campaigns, which she argues may have been a foundation upon which the Standard Inscription and the reliefs were based. When she compares the verbal campaign reports to the relief sequences, she notes a striking structural parallel: the textual accounts move through the same three-act structure that the visual sequences enact.¹⁶⁷ This structure does not make the reliefs illustrations of the annals, but suggests that the reliefs could have been perceived as sufficiently particularized scenes that utilized recognizable symbols or imagery to identify specific places, campaign types, and consequences of victory. At the same time, Winter resists collapsing one medium into the other. She explicitly argues that the annals or the Standard Inscription should not be seen as “behind” the images, as though the reliefs were simply illustrated texts. Rather, they are separate but parallel systems.¹⁶⁸

That distinction is crucial. At Kalhu, text and image reinforce one another without perfect overlap. The Standard Inscription abstracts the king’s identity and achievements into a repeated titulary and building claim, while the reliefs particularize conquest and ritual in visual form.¹⁶⁹ The relation is therefore one of discursive reinforcement without strict equivalence. The same point helps explain the rest of Ashurnasirpal’s palace. Winter argues that the abbreviated decorative scheme of the non-throne-room spaces, the repeated genii, sacred trees, and standing or seated kings, can be understood as a visual resume of the Standard Inscription’s core claim of the articulation of the right order in the universe through the king.¹⁷⁰ In other words, the text acts as a caption for the image while repeating the broader ideological formula that the image then restages in more specific, ceremonial, or narrative ways.¹⁷¹

Ataç’s work then adds a temporal implication to this arrangement through his distinction between historicizing narrative elements and more timeless royal or emblematic forms that can

¹⁶⁷ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 15–17.

¹⁶⁸ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 15–19.

¹⁶⁹ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 18–19; Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 73.

¹⁷⁰ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 18–19.

¹⁷¹ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 18–19.

be extended from the royal body to the inscribed royal personage.¹⁷² A relief scene may focus on a specific event while the text alongside or running through the scene repeats the king's names, titles, genealogy, and claims in a formulaic register not bound to that single event. As mentioned before with this formulaic inscribed text functioning alongside the king's presence to act as a visual connection between different subjects, that connection is what supports these elements also functioning as timeless or emblematic forms across different, more temporally defined, elements. This adds another function to the use of text, as it is both historicizes and stabilizes the royal presence within the palace wall. The result is a structure in which royal action is able to be presented as historically specific while royal identity remains continuous.

The same question of parallel media develops further in the later 8th century, when palace reliefs begin to combine the older visual structure of the inscribed register with more scene-specific textual anchoring. This is especially clear under Tiglath-pileser III. Russell notes that the military reliefs of the Central Palace at Nimrud retained the older slab format of two relief registers separated by a central register of text, but the inscription was no longer a short repeated formula like Ashurnasirpal's Standard Inscription. Instead, it was a long annalistic text that continued from slab to slab, apparently around the room, while at least one series also included brief captions naming the cities shown.¹⁷³ This is an important formal development. The text band still organizes the visual field, but it now does so as an unfolding historical narrative rather than a repeated royal summary, changing the way the viewer interacts and encounters the inscription.

Writing begins to move with the images rather than act as a stabilizer for them. The scenes of submission, trampling, and royal reception preserved from Tiglath-pileser's Central Palace show the kinds of royal encounter and domination that this more annalistic format could

¹⁷² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92–95.

¹⁷³ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 484; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6.

visually frame (Figures 4.12–4.14). The effect is not the replacement of image by text because the image presents the scene while the inscriptional system gives the sequence a more explicitly historical and, in the instance of campaign sequences, geographic frame. The result is a tighter coupling of campaign sequence and historical inscription, and a greater capacity for the text to particularize what the viewer is seeing.¹⁷⁴

Khorsabad expands this relationship even further. Sargon II's palace retained the format with a long annalistic inscription between relief zones in many rooms, while expanding the range of subjects shown in relief. Punishment scenes, tribute processions, military campaigns, hunts, and banquets often appeared in slab formats divided by these long bands of text, and that defeated cities in the military scenes were labeled.¹⁷⁵ This shows text and image working together as visual and informational systems without collapsing into one another. Tribute, transport, siege, and prisoner scenes stage different forms of imperial control (Figures 4.20 and 4.22–4.24).¹⁷⁶ The accompanying inscriptional system anchors some scenes historically, identifies some places, and gives broader context, while the reliefs select, intensify, and sometimes preserve visual information that the annals do not emphasize in the same way.

This is where discrepancy between text and image at Khorsabad can be analytically useful. Some of the labeled places depicted in reliefs are also mentioned in the accompanying annals, which allows the scenes to be identified more securely, while others appear only in the reliefs. This lead Reade and Russell to suggest that the visual program can actually augment the written record of Sargon's reign.¹⁷⁷ This is one of the clearest cases of the labor of each medium, because they both select and organize royal action differently. The reliefs are not simply

¹⁷⁴ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 484; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92–95; Liverani, *The Ancient Near East*, 488.

¹⁷⁵ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 485–86; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6.

¹⁷⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 485–86; DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–16; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 117; Root, *King and Kingship*, 207–8.

¹⁷⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 486; Reade, cited in Russell, "Assyrian Art," 486; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6.

subordinate to the annals and instead preserve their own historical and ideological selections. The visual field can specify something the annalistic record omits, while the annals can provide broader campaign context that the reliefs do not fully narrate.¹⁷⁸ Discord between text and image does not necessarily mean contradiction and can instead reveal a division of labor between media.

The clearest case of scene-specific epigraphic anchoring comes from the Lachish reliefs in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh. The reliefs were installed in Room XXXVI and presented the sequence from the battle to its aftermath (Figures 4.25 and 4.31–4.36). Winter argues that Sennacherib fully exploits the epigraph, meaning the written label inscribed directly onto the relief to identify the action taking place.¹⁷⁹ Her example is the inscription placed with the enthroned king, which states that "Sennacherib, king of the universe, king of Assyria, sat upon a chair while the booty of Lachish passed before him" (Figures 4.35–4.36).¹⁸⁰ The surrounding panels already depict the battle and its aftermath, but such epigraphs function as captions and anchor the image by focusing its meaning and minimizing ambiguity for a literate audience (Figures 4.33–4.36).¹⁸¹

However, Winter also notes that this explicitness in writing parallels a broader increase in explicitness in the reliefs themselves.¹⁸² The images became more historically specific, panoramic, and more narrative while the writing responded by becoming more directly identificatory. This is precisely why the Lachish case is so revealing for us. Winter notes elsewhere that Lachish is clearly identified by label on the relief, yet the site is not even mentioned in Sennacherib's annalistic account of the campaign.¹⁸³ The discrepancy is not

¹⁷⁸ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 485–86.

¹⁷⁹ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6.

¹⁸⁰ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25.

¹⁸¹ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25.

¹⁸² Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25.

¹⁸³ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 17, 25; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 95 n. 2.

trivial. It shows that the relief program could fix on a single memorable and visually effective event even where the annals pursued different rhetorical priorities. The images in this case are not mere mirrors of the text just as the text does not exhaust the image. Rather, each medium selects, anchors, and emphasizes royal action differently.

This helps explain why writing itself had to be understood as part of the visual rhetoric rather than an external supplement. A final point sharpens why this is methodologically important for studying Neo-Assyrian reliefs. Bahrani argues directly that the assumption that text is not part of an image is itself a Western concept and not an adequate starting point for Mesopotamian material. More importantly, she argues that in the portrayal of individuals, a valid substitute image required multiple links to the represented person, especially the inscription and utterance of the name.¹⁸⁴ This becomes extraordinarily important for Neo-Assyrian monuments, because it means that the writing helps constitute the represented person.

Bahrani's discussion of the mutilation of reliefs at Nineveh makes the point concrete. On the Lachish relief, Sennacherib's face was deliberately gouged out and the epigraph above him was attacked so that his name and title were removed (Figures 4.35–4.36). The same pattern appears elsewhere, where specific royal or politically charged figures were singled out for mutilation rather than the relief surface in general.¹⁸⁵ This implication of this is clear: image and text were both required for the full presence of the represented subject, and their coordinated destruction reveals their coordinated efficacy.

Taken together, these examples show that writing in Neo-Assyrian palace art was one of the media through which the rhetoric of domination was coordinated, visually and narratively. The Standard Inscription works as an architectural register that crosses the relief surface and binds various scenes to the same royal name, titulary, genealogy, conquest

¹⁸⁴ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 203.

¹⁸⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 151–52.

summary, and building claim.¹⁸⁶ Winter's analysis conveys how text and images share structures and claims while retaining different capacities.¹⁸⁷ Under Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II, annalistic bands and brief labels bring the writing closer to specific scenes and places without eliminating that division of labor, and even at times having the media work to augment the historical record.¹⁸⁸ Lachish especially clarifies this, as the epigraph anchors the enthroned king and names the event, yet the relief sequence and annalistic record still organize the campaign differently.¹⁸⁹ Thus, inscription could occupy the image surface, shape the viewer's movement through palace space, and hold royal action between named event and repeated royal presence.¹⁹⁰

This brings the broader political meaning into view. The integration of text and image is one of the ways in which Neo-Assyrian art responds to the inherent structural instability of kingship while also being a defining mechanism of its rhetoric of domination. Writing can summarize the king's titulary, territorial expansion, and building works just as images can particularize campaigns, rituals, enemies, and submission. Labels and epigraphs can tie a scene to a named place or event while the physical arrangement of text bands can impose royal discourse across the entire visual field.¹⁹¹ When the two media coincide, they multiply the force of the same ideological claim. When they diverge, they reveal that different aspects of kingship required different forms of articulation: summary in one medium, specificity in another, or timeless formula in one and event-based memory in the other.¹⁹² Domination, then, is seen in

¹⁸⁶ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–86; Paley, "Texts, Palace, and Reliefs," 533–43; Shibata, "Assyria from Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashurnasirpal II," 219–22.

¹⁸⁷ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18–19; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 92–95.

¹⁸⁸ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 484–86; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6.

¹⁸⁹ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 17, 25; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 95 n. 2.

¹⁹⁰ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 168, 203; Bahrani, "The King's Head," 115–19.

¹⁹¹ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–86; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 15–19, 25.

¹⁹² This is an inference from the different formal uses of repeated inscriptions, annalistic bands, city labels, and epigraphs across the palace programs. See Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–86; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 15–19, 25.

writing through it fixing royal action as sanctioned knowledge within the palace. In every case, the point that sovereignty cannot rely on one sign alone remains the same.

4.7 Ashurbanipal's Lion Hunt Reliefs: Ritual and Violence

Among the many surviving Neo-Assyrian reliefs, Ashurbanipal's lion hunt reliefs are uniquely suited to serve as a focused case study. The sequence is coherent and extensive, allowing meaning to be traced across multiple panels rather than reconstructed from more isolated scenes (Figures 4.49–4.55).¹⁹³ Its subject also centers on a ritualized royal activity that is not tied to historical contingencies, making the underlying grammar of kingship, ideology, and power easier to isolate.¹⁹⁴ At the same time, the hunt had deep ancient Near Eastern roots and clear Neo-Assyrian precedents, especially in the earlier lion hunt imagery of Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu.¹⁹⁵ Modern scholarship continues to treat the lion hunt reliefs of Ashurbanipal as one of the most refined and concentrated statements of late Neo-Assyrian kingship and visual language.¹⁹⁶

Precisely because the subject is so controlled, centered on royal confrontation with dangerous animals rather than the more socially crowded fields of tribute or siege, the ideological logic of the sequence becomes especially transparent. The hunts show how meaning is constructed across repeated formal visual choices that concentrate how power is made visible

¹⁹³ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91.

¹⁹⁴ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

¹⁹⁵ Pauline Albenda, "Ashurnasirpal II Lion Hunt Relief BM 124534," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 31, no. 3 (1972): 167–78; Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 37–44; Portuese, "Live and Let Live Images," 130–34.

¹⁹⁶ Mogens Trolle Larsen, "The Archaeological Exploration of Assyria," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 590; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91.

in Neo-Assyrian art. This power is shown through domination depicted in the bodily contrast, spatial sequencing, ritual closure, and the conversion of danger into ordered royal display.¹⁹⁷

From the outset, their placement within the North Palace is central to that effect. A group of passageways leading from the throne-room area toward the exterior was lined with hunt-related subjects, including processions to and from a lion hunt, tame lions, and the king hunting lions, gazelles, and wild horses, while additional hunt reliefs had fallen from an upper story into some of these spaces.¹⁹⁸ This distribution gives the hunt a processional character within the palace space, as the viewer follows their own procession down the passage. The viewer followed these scenes through a chain of related moments from the preparation, release, confrontation, killing, transport of carcasses, and the ritual aftermath (Figures 4.38 and 4.49–4.55).¹⁹⁹ Thomason's discussion of Ashurbanipal's "urban hunt" shows how the hunt was presented as a controlled arena in which nature is witnessed, contained, and mastered before an Assyrian audience.²⁰⁰ That is important narratively and conceptually because the hunt itself was a ritualized royal activity. The reliefs therefore blur the line between performance and representation because they aren't simply depicting an already completed action but restaging it in the palace space to make the act of the hunt available again as an enduring royal act.²⁰¹

The formal arrangement of the reliefs intensifies that effect. In the North Palace, the military reliefs are generally arranged in two registers, whereas the hunting reliefs are typically arranged in a single register but with exceptions, and the figures in the hunting scenes are at times arranged more freely across the relief surface than in the more firmly grounded military

¹⁹⁷ Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 41–44; Portuese, "Metaphor and Interpictoriality," 130–34; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

¹⁹⁸ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91.

¹⁹⁹ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91.

²⁰⁰ Thomason, "Representations of the North Syrian Landscape," 79; Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 41.

²⁰¹ This is an inference from the placement of the hunt scenes in the passageways and the ritualized nature of the hunt sequence described by Russell and Ataç. See Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74, 94–95.

compositions.²⁰² This difference is not arbitrary either. The two-register military relief lends itself to segmentation, comparison, and the organization of action across the layered fields. The hunt, by contrast, produces a more continuous and concentrated visual field that could break into multiple registers either for ease of comprehension, showing parallel moments, or amplifying the intended effect.²⁰³ The result is that the violence of the hunt unfolds less as divided historical reportage than as a ceremonial sequence.²⁰⁴ Even when ground lines remain operative, the hunt allows more visual fluidity, which suits a subject defined by speed, collision, and pursuit (Figures 4.49–4.54). Yet that fluidity never dissolves into chaos. The movement of the lions may be violent and abrupt, but the composition keeps returning the viewer to a royal center that is stable, legible, and controlled.²⁰⁵ This is where the formal arrangement begins to show its place within the rhetoric of Neo-Assyrian art, as violence is shown in motion, but its movement is repeatedly brought back under royal control.

That contrast is clearest in the treatment of the bodies. The lions are rendered with extraordinary anatomical intensity and detail: they leap, twist, rear, lunge, convulse, and collapse.²⁰⁶ Their bodies are all strain, rupture, and unstable force (Figures 4.51–4.54). The king's body, by contrast, remains measured. Whether in the chariot, in direct confrontation, or in the aftermath of the hunt, he is not absorbed into the same disorder that defines the animals.²⁰⁷ The difference goes beyond one of victor and victim because it is a formal contrast between two kinds of embodiment. The lions signify violent, untamed motion while the king signifies disciplined mastery. The lion hunt extends the logic of gesture and hierarchy discussed earlier

²⁰² Russell, "Assyrian Art," 491.

²⁰³ Watanabe, "Continuous Style," 104–8; Portuese, "Live and Let Live Images," 131–34.

²⁰⁴ This is an inference from Russell's distinction between the general two-register military format and the more typical one-register hunting format. See Russell, "Assyrian Art," 491.

²⁰⁵ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 491.

²⁰⁶ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 140–41; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91.

²⁰⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91.

in the chapter. The king's bodily poise is itself a sign of sovereignty, just as the lions' torsion and collapse are signs of a threatening force of chaos that must be subdued.²⁰⁸

The symbolic force of that contrast depends on the lion's complex position within Assyrian royal metaphor. The lion could be associated with kingship itself, since Assyrian royal texts and images repeatedly use leonine language to express strength, ferocity, and heroic power.²⁰⁹ Yet in the hunt reliefs the lion also become the object of royal violence. Nadali and Portuese show that the king-lion relationship is not a simple 1:1 symbol because the lion can evoke royal force, dangerous nature, enemy power, and the king's own heroic qualities, depending on context.²¹⁰ In Ashurbanipal's reliefs, that ambiguity is visually managed by making the lion both formidable and defeated (Figures 4.52 and 4.54). Its violence is intense enough to make the king's action meaningful, but its repeated collapse ensures that leonine force is subordinated to royal control.²¹¹

This is also where the hunt enters the visual logic of the "Other," though in a specifically symbolic rather than human form. Earlier reliefs constructed the "Other" through personifying imagery and elements. In the lion hunt, otherness is more abstract and displaced onto the untamed natural world. The lion is not a foreign tributary or a rebel who can be deported or incorporated, but it occupies a more concentrated form of dangerous force. It has an analogous ideological position as the visible embodiment of dangerous alterity, a chaotic and wild force that must be faced, mastered, conquered, and brought within order.²¹² Ornan's study of the

²⁰⁸ This is an inference from the bodily contrast visible in the hunt sequence and from the chapter's earlier analysis of gesture and hierarchical composition. See Russell, "Assyrian Art," 489–91; Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 104–8; Portuese, "Metaphor and Interpictoriality," 130–34.

²⁰⁹ Davide Nadali, "Aššur Is King! The Metaphorical Implications of Embodiment, Personification, and Transference in Ancient Assyria," in *Researching Metaphor in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Marta Pallavidini and Ludovico Portuese (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 72–74; Stéphanie Anthonioz, "The Lion, the Shepherd, and the Master of Animals: Metaphorical Interactions and Governance Representations in Mesopotamian and Levantine Sources," in *Researching Metaphor in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Marta Pallavidini and Ludovico Portuese (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 20, 24.

²¹⁰ Nadali, "Aššur Is King!," 72–74; Portuese, "Metaphor and Interpictoriality," 130–34.

²¹¹ Portuese, "Live and Let Live Images," 133–34; Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 41–44.

²¹² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

defeat of the lion clarifies why this matters, since royal combat with the lion is part of a long ancient Near Eastern tradition in which the animal stood for rival power, human enemies, and the foes of the goddess Ishtar.²¹³ The relation between lion and enemy is not a direct equivalence, but the analogy is central to the reliefs' political logic. Just as human enemies can be made to stand for their actions against the Assyrians, the lion acts as a symbolic image of the chaos of the natural world.²¹⁴ In both cases, the king's role is defined as the one who brings ordered reality out of dangerous opposition.

Ataç's reading is especially useful here because he shows why the lion hunts hold such significance within the later Assyrian corpus. He argues that the dense hieratic texture so prominent in Ashurnasirpal II's art had, by the Sargonid period, largely receded from the main narrative fields, surviving most strongly in doorway guardians and selected discrete moments, while broader panoramic and more "historicizing" scenes took over much of the palace surface (Figures 4.39 and 4.43).²¹⁵ Ashurbanipal's lion hunts, however, preserve a far more overt symbolic density. They are, in Ataç's words, the "most hieratic component of the entire relief corpus of the king."²¹⁶ That makes them crucial for this chapter, because they allow one to see with unusual clarity how late Neo-Assyrian art could still concentrate formulaic, timeless, and ritually charged meanings within an otherwise highly developed narrative language.

That symbolic density becomes clearer when the hunt is read through its mythic and ritual dimensions. Ataç, drawing on Watanabe and others, connects the royal lion hunts to the ritualized reenactment of the defeat of dangerous mythological beings associated with primordial or chaotic force.²¹⁷ Ornan and Portuese sharpen the political implication by stating

²¹³ Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 35, 41–44; Portuese, "Live and Let Live Images," 130–34; Anthonioz, "Lion, Shepherd, and Master of Animals," 20, 24.

²¹⁴ This is an interpretation grounded in the symbolic reading of the lion hunt in Ataç and in the chapter's earlier discussion of the "Other." See Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

²¹⁵ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–77, 94–95.

²¹⁶ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95; Portuese, "Metaphor and Interpictoriality," 130–34.

²¹⁷ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95; Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 104–8.

that the defeat of the lion belongs to a longer Near Eastern visual tradition in which the animal's defeat by the king could stand for victory over rivals, enemies, or forces opposed to divine order.²¹⁸ Its power comes from the convergence of myth and politics, where the king's triumph and the lions' body resonates as both a real body in motion and symbolic and cosmological form of disorder.²¹⁹ The king's triumph over the lions resonates beyond the immediate act of killing and becomes a visible analogue for his role as guarantor of order in a world otherwise vulnerable to violent disruption.²²⁰

The libation panel from Room S1 makes that convergence especially clear (Figure 4.55). In this bipartite composition, the king and his military entourage occupy one side of an altar and incense stand, while on the other side unarmed attendants carry the dead lions, preceded by musicians, toward the ceremony.²²¹ The central cultic furniture visually divides the panel and binds the two sides into one field. Ataç, following Watanabe, notes that the left side may be read as temporally antecedent to the right, the lions being brought in toward the king for the rite that follows.²²² Yet even if one does not insist on a strict temporal reading, the composition unmistakably binds violent action to ritual closure. The altar and incense stand divide and hinge the panel. The result of this visual hinge is that combat and ceremony are viewed as parts of one continuous royal act.²²³

The depiction of this ritual scene is where Rendu Loisel's work on ritual presence is useful. Her concern is not the lion hunt reliefs themselves, nor does the evidence require treating these palace panels as ritual objects acted upon by officiants. Rather, her work clarifies why the

²¹⁸ Ornan, "Defeat of the Lion," 35, 41–44; Portuese, "Live and Let Live Images," 130–34; Anthonioz, "Lion, Shepherd, and Master of Animals," 20, 24; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

²¹⁹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

²²⁰ This is an inference from Ataç's discussion of mythological victimization and the ritual significance of the hunts. See Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–95.

²²¹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

²²² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

²²³ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

ritual elements represented in the panel should not be reduced to visual decoration. In Mesopotamian ritual, sound, smell, substances, gestures, and handled objects could participate in making divine or supra-human presence perceptible. In the Room S1 relief, the musicians, incense stand, altar, procession, and dead lions visually indicate that the hunt's aftermath has entered that sensory and ceremonial field.²²⁴ Bahrani's concept of visibility helps explain how this gives that ritualized royal act a continuing visual presence while Gell sharpens the material logic, since the dead lions and ritual apparatus function as indexes of both royal agency and ceremonial action. They are visible traces through which the viewer encounters the king's power after the moment of killing has passed.²²⁵

The arrangement of figures on either side of that central cultic furniture is also important. On the king's side stand armed attendants while on the opposite side are unarmed attendants and musicians to escort the dead lions.²²⁶ The contrast is between living and dead, human and animal, and conceptually between the martial and ceremonial worlds that the king alone can mediate. What earlier Kalhu reliefs had shown across different royal modes is condensed here into a single hunt scene. The king stands at the crossing point between weaponized action and ritual management.²²⁷ That is why the aftermath is significant and must be depicted. It is not enough that the lions be killed. Their defeat must be handled, displayed, and ritually absorbed into order. The visual logic of the panel insists that domination is complete only when violence has passed through ceremonial control.²²⁸

Even the compositional anomaly noted by Watanabe and discussed by Ataç becomes meaningful in this light. The usual sequence of altar and incense stand is reversed, and

²²⁴ Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel, "Beyond the Visible: Feeling the Divine Presence in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Mortals, Deities and Divine Symbols: Rethinking Ancient Images from the Levant to Mesopotamia*, ed. Benjamin Sass and Laura Battini (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2025), 584–86.

²²⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–27; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

²²⁶ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

²²⁷ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74, 77.

²²⁸ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

Watanabe takes this as an intentional device used to unify the two halves of the composition into a single scene.²²⁹ That reversal prevents the viewer from reading the rite too narrowly as a simple offering to some absent entity and instead makes the whole composition feel deliberately integrated around Ashurbanipal's act through an equilibrium pulled into one field ordered by the king.²³⁰ The king thus appears as both destroyer of dangerous beings and mediator who restores order after their destruction and gives that destruction legitimate form.

The king's appearance within the hunt reinforces this point. In certain royal hunt scenes, the king appears in the "princely" guise associated elsewhere with the headbanded figure, and that hunting texts themselves speak of the activity as *ina mūlūti rubūtiya*, "while I was carrying out my princely sport."²³¹ This shows that the hunt had a princely and sacerdotal valence where the king enters the hunt as a warrior and figure whose relationship to violence is inflected by ritual and proximity to the sacred.²³² That is why the lion hunt can hold together so many dimensions of kingship at once, the princely, martial, cultic, and cosmological. The reliefs isolate royal ideology because it shows in distilled form how these aspects are co-present elements of his sovereign identity.

As a sequence, the lion hunts move through a tightly organized progression from contained danger, released threat, violent confrontation, bodily collapse, transport of slain animals, and ritual closure.²³³ That sequence makes them a powerful case study because it allows one to watch the full transformation of threatening otherness into ordered royal meaning. In the military reliefs, enemies can be conquered, punished, deported, or subordinately reinstalled. In the hunt reliefs, dangerous force is killed and then ritually processed.²³⁴ That

²²⁹ Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 104; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74.

²³⁰ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74–75.

²³¹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 77.

²³² Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 77, 94–95.

²³³ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74, 94–95.

²³⁴ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91.

difference is as important as the underlying similarity. In both cases, sovereignty is shown as the capacity to confront what lies outside order and convert it into an intelligible, ordered, and controlled aftermath.

The political force of the sequence emerges from that formal logic. The lion hunts present this domination as ordered violence, violence measured by spatial hierarchy, stabilized by gesture, and completed by ritual.²³⁵ The king's bodily composure, his fixed centrality within the most intense scenes, the distinction between armed and unarmed attendants, the symbolic handling of the carcasses, and the progression from confrontation to ceremony all make the same point in different ways that royal authority is the power to turn killing into order rather than merely the power to kill.²³⁶ The lion becomes the most concentrated symbolic and abstract "Other" because it is not manageable through diplomatic or administrative means. The hunt therefore exposes royal ideology at a particularly stripped-down level. It shows what Assyrian kingship claims to be when no social negotiation is available: the direct victory of order over chaos through the king.

4.8 Conclusion

Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs constitute a palace-centered visual program through which domination is organized, repeated, and made to appear as the natural structure of the world. Across Kalhu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh, inherited Mesopotamian and wider Near Eastern forms were gathered into a concentrated monumental system that placed the king at the center

²³⁵ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74, 94–95; Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91.

²³⁶ This is an inference from the sequencing and compositional logic of the hunt reliefs discussed above. See Russell, "Assyrian Art," 490–91; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 74, 77, 94–95.

of an ordered universe. What makes this rhetoric specifically Neo-Assyrian, then, is the scale, consistency, and architectural saturation with which these elements were made to operate.²³⁷

The analyses in this chapter have shown the several mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which that rhetoric of domination functions. In the monumental programs, the king is distinguished through bodily composure, centrality, hierarchical placement, and privileged access to ritual and military action. Domination becomes explicit in the representation of the populated world of the Assyrians through graded forms of submission, punishment, deportation, and controlled incorporation, while the lion hunt translates the same logic into symbolic form through the king's victory over the dangerous alterity of the natural world. The integration of text and image then extends this rhetoric across media, so that sovereignty is reiterated through inscriptions, annals, labels, and epigraphs that help to anchor, stabilize, and intensify the visual field.²³⁸

Thus, the Neo-Assyrian material performs crucial work by providing an exceptionally clear and programmatic articulation of an imperial visual language centered on domination. The case study of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt reliefs brought that logic into especially sharp focus, showing how the broader grammar of Neo-Assyrian rule could be condensed into a single ritualized and symbolically dense sequence.²³⁹ This chapter therefore establishes the terms of comparison for what follows. By defining how sovereignty was constructed in one of the most expansive and explicit visual regimes of the ancient Near East, it becomes possible to see more clearly how Achaemenid art selected, transformed, and reoriented inherited imperial forms. If Neo-Assyrian visibility made power perceptible through the compelling force of domination,

²³⁷ Russell, "Assyrian Art," 472–92; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–80, 92–95; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 63–66; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 513.

²³⁸ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18–19, 25; Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 168, 203; DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–16.

²³⁹ Watanabe, "The 'Continuous Style,'" 103–14; Ornan, "The Defeat of the Lion," 41–44; Portuese, "Metaphor and Interpictoriality," 130–34; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 94–98.

the next chapter turns to the different ways Achaemenid art organized sovereignty through hierarchy, ordered participation, and the disciplined display of imperial plurality.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–61; Henry P. Colburn, *Archaeology of Empire in Achaemenid Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 33–36; Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 53–60.

Achaemenid Art: The Iconography of Order and Harmony

5.1 Introduction

Achaemenid imperial art gives visual form to a problem at the center of early Persian kingship: how a ruler of many lands, peoples, languages, and traditions could present that multiplicity as a single ordered whole. The monuments considered here do not seek to avoid difference or present the empire as an extension of one regional or ethnic identity. Instead, they construct a visual language in which plurality is visibly disciplined into order under the divinely sanctioned authority of the Great King. Difference remains visible, and purposefully so, but it is not treated as chaotic or something to force into submission. However, this rhetoric should not be mistaken for being purely benevolent or consensual in its vision. It is presented through hierarchy, processional rhythm, support, spatial distance, and a ritualized order of reciprocities.²⁴¹ Achaemenid visual grammar uses these as the active means through which its kingship, legitimacy, and imperial unity are made visible.

The formation of this visual grammar must begin with the transition from Cyrus to Darius. Cyrus' rise took place within a political world shaped by Fars, Elam, Media, Mesopotamia, and the wider Iranian plateau, and the chapter therefore begins with a discussion to situate the early Achaemenid project within the broader Near Eastern and Iranian contexts (Figures 5.1–5.3). Cyrus' foundational reign appears to have drawn strength from political flexibility across several fields of legitimacy, but the precise relation between these identities must be treated with caution due to their evidence being uneven, retrospective, or mediated through later royal claims.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131, 144–46, 153–54; Christopher Tuplin, “War and Peace in Achaemenid Imperial Ideology,” *Electrum* 24 (2017): 36–37; Maria Brosius, *The Persians: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 74–75; Elsie Holmes Peck, “Achaemenid Relief Fragments from Persepolis,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 79, nos. 1–2 (2005): 20–22.

²⁴² Waters, “Cyrus and the Achaemenids,” 94–99; Stronach, “Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan,” 63–65; Ali Bahadori, “Achaemenid Empire, Tribal Confederations of Southwestern Persia and ‘Seven Families,’” *Iranian*

Darius would inherit this plurality, but the context of his accession also shaped its codification into a more formal language of legitimacy. His claim to Cyrus' line, his emphasis on Persian and Iranian identity, and his use of text and image to produce knowledge of his narrative all belong to the same process by which his contested power was transformed into imperial order.²⁴³ Behistun is the clearest early statement of this with its sacred and highly visible location, narrative of truth against the Lie, imagery of Darius, Ahuramazda, and the rebels making legitimacy visible as an ordered relation between king, god, rebel, text, and landscape.²⁴⁴

At Persepolis, this language shifts from Darius' personal legitimacy to the representation of imperial stability. The Apadana reliefs transform the peoples of the empire into a carefully organized catalogue in which each delegation remains distinct but is drawn into a shared processional rhythm directed toward the king. The same logic continues in Achaemenid images of royal elevation, where subject peoples, guards, courtiers, and throne-bearing figures all participate in the visual maintenance and support of kingship. Hierarchy remains central, but it is repeatedly expressed through support and ordered and controlled participation. Across these monuments, Achaemenid art presents empire as a system in which many peoples can remain visibly different while being harmonized and arranged within a single cosmic and political order under the Great King.²⁴⁵

Studies 50, no. 2 (2017): 173–76; Josef Wiesehöfer, “The Medes and the Persians: The State of Things,” in *Continuity of Empire (?) Assyria, Media, Persia*, ed. Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, Michael Roaf, and Robert Rollinger (Padua: Sargon, 2003), 392–95.

²⁴³ Waters, “Cyrus and the Achaemenids,” 94–99; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 167–72, 344; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 107–13; Root, *King and Kingship*, 183–94; Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953), 116–35.

²⁴⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 183–94; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 110–13; Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2007), 141–58; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

²⁴⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131, 144–46, 153–54; Michael Roaf, “The Subject Peoples on the Base of the Statue of Darius,” *Cahiers de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Iran* 4 (1974): 73–160; Peck, “Achaemenid Relief Fragments,” 20–22; Elspeth R. M. Dusinger, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 199–202; John Boardman, *Persia and*

5.2 From Cyrus to Darius: A Watershed Moment

The rise of Darius the Great represents a pivotal moment in Achaemenid kingship and visual language through his systematization of an imperial language that will be discussed in subsequent sections. The choice of Darius' reign as a key moment to focus on is due to the manner in which his reign codified the visual and ideological systems that underpinned kingship. To arrive at this point, however, we must first understand the very context of flexible political language within Achaemenid kingship associated with Cyrus' rise that existed when Darius came to power. Cyrus' reign established the conditions from which Darius' program could emerge: rule over many regions, the use of multiple traditions of legitimacy, and the ability to present Persian power through locally meaningful forms. The maps of the Near East, the Iranian plateau, and Fars-Elam help geographically situate this development while the plan of Pasargadae shows the early monumental setting in which Cyrus' kingship began to take architectural form (Figures 5.1–5.4).²⁴⁶

How Cyrus enacted such a rapid expansion of the empire is stated by Matt Waters as one of the great conundrums of his reign. His success is often explained through a series of alliances that would have allowed a “seemingly obscure Persian from Fars [to challenge] the might of the Median, Lydian, and Babylonian empires” in such a short span of time.²⁴⁷ The way that Waters frames Cyrus' rise promotes a vision that the Persians were small players that somehow toppled much greater powers, and such a statement should be read with caution as a retroactive spin on history.

It is a useful formulation, but it should not become a simple story of an obscure outsider suddenly overthrowing greater powers because the evidence is uneven, often retrospective, and

the West: An Archaeological Investigation of the Genesis of Achaemenid Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 130–45.

²⁴⁶ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 52, fig. 3.1, 88–91, figs. 3.5–3.7; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 13–27, 84–89.

²⁴⁷ Waters, “Cyrus and the Achaemenids,” 92.

shaped by later attempts to explain Cyrus' rise. Different sources mention Cyrus marrying Cassandane, an Achaemenid, and Amytis, the daughter of Astyages, the Median king, showing that Cyrus may have engaged in polygamy to at once link himself to a powerful Persian clan while promoting himself as a legitimate Median king. However, these must be treated with caution because while they may preserve a memory of political integration, they cannot be treated as a fully secure reconstruction of policy.²⁴⁸ The stronger evidence lies in Cyrus' titulary and public presentation. His use of the title "King of Anshan" shows the impact of Elamite tradition while adding to his legitimacy to the native Elamites. His use of other titles demonstrate that he also followed Near Eastern formulas for titulary, such as "king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters" and "builder of Esagil and Ezida", which itself was something that Esarhaddon had also done to appeal to the Babylonians.²⁴⁹ These political moves by Cyrus are examples of his ability to promote various identities according to what the situation demanded, and that would be instrumental in his rise to power and the formation of the Achaemenid imperial language.

Pasargadae gives this flexibility a visual setting. The site was able to act as an early monumental landscape for Persian kingship to draw together architectural, garden, and sculptural forms from several traditions. The winged figure from Gate R is especially useful here, if handled carefully (Figure 5.5). While identification as Cyrus is uncertain, it still belongs to his Pasargadae program and combines visual elements associated with Elamite dress, Assyrian winged guardian imagery, and an Egyptianizing crown. That composite quality shows that early Achaemenid visual language could claim authority through the selective use of

²⁴⁸ Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 92–95; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 13–27, 31–49; Wiesehöfer, "Medes and Persians," 392–95.

²⁴⁹ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 47–52, 70–75; Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 94–95; Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan," 63–65.

prestigious older traditions without reducing the figure to simply borrowing those traditions and not yet being the more formalized system associated with Darius.²⁵⁰

Cyrus' flexible political language was not only a personal strategy because it reflected the regional world from which Persian power emerged. Balatti describes the Zagros as politically differentiated: small, unfortified villages in the Eastern Taurus and Zagros, a large confederacy centered on Ecbatana as a gathering place for the Central Zagros and Northwestern Iranian Plateau, and the interdependence between pastoral groups and state structures in the South. The importance of why such a strength was derived from this plurality and how this would have had a significant impact on the Achaemenids can be seen specifically the South in the province of Fars, where Balatti describes the interdependence between the pastoral groups and the Elamite state as a relationship that had been present for several centuries.²⁵¹ This strength from plurality, one that had origins in the socio-political organization of the Persians' home province and acted as the very vehicle that Cyrus built his power from, will be reflected in the imperial language that Darius would systematize during his reign.

This was the political world that Darius inherited when he came to power after the crisis in 522, and it would lead to a revision and codifying of Achaemenid kingship and visual language that drew upon the foundation laid by Cyrus. However, the events that led to his accession must be outlined to comprehend why such a significant innovation was necessary. According to Darius' own account, Cambyses II had secretly killed his brother Bardiya, after which Gaumata the Magian seized power by impersonating Bardiya. Darius claimed that he and six Persian nobles then killed Gaumata and restored rightful rule, and this initial succession crisis was followed by subsequent revolts. Modern scholarship has long treated this account

²⁵⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 301–4; Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan," 63–65; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 88–91, figs. 3.5–3.7.

²⁵¹ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples in the Ancient Near East*, 344.

with suspicion, and the precise circumstances of the accession remain uncertain. Immediately, two things are clear: Darius must legitimize his reign, through ideology of restoration and force if necessary, and that the nobles who supported Darius must be placated. These two things were intertwined because most of the empire revolted against Darius' reign, and he used military force to quell them while placing the noblemen who helped him ascend to the throne in key positions to aid in maintaining control as well as placating them.

To promote himself as legitimate, Darius had to establish a connection to Cyrus. Darius' claim to Achaemenid descent and his inscription of Cyrus into that line is part of the larger strategy of dynastic construction, which is made visible through the relationship between Cyrus' Teispid line and Darius' Achaemenid claim (Figure 5.6). Kuhrt's corpus and Finn's table of inscriptions convey that the Pasargadae inscriptions defining Cyrus as an Achaemenid are not securely dated to Cyrus and were likely added by Darius.²⁵²

While Elamite political influence was much more relevant during Cyrus' reign, it had dissipated by the time Darius came to power and led the Persians to identify more with other Iranian groups like the Medes, although Darius' model of empire was still close to the Elamite and Mesopotamian model.²⁵³ One of the clearest innovations that would remain after Darius' reign is the shift away from the Elamite identity, signified through titulary. Darius would emphasize his Persian identity, seen in his title as "king of Persia", and he would promote Cyrus' Persian identity through the Achaemenid line as a claim to legitimacy. Waters describes it as "the creation of that dynasty" that "was not on a par with Cyrus' royal line until Darius made it so", which demonstrates the significant shift that had occurred.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 177; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 230–31; Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 95–99; Root, *King and Kingship*, 36, fig. 3.

²⁵³ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 172.

²⁵⁴ Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 95.

Waters' description of Darius' connection to Cyrus as an invention is useful not only as a historical claim, but as a way of understanding how legitimacy was produced. Darius' retroactive incorporation of Cyrus into his own Achaemenid genealogy helped explain his right to rule, but it also helped to create the dynastic knowledge through which that right could appear continuous and self-evident. In this sense, Foucault's relation between power and knowledge is useful for understanding this. Darius' claim became politically effective because it organized the past into a form that could authorize the present. Yet that claim remained unstable until it was attached to more tangible institutional power and media of authority. This means that although it does produce knowledge of his legitimacy and power and reinforce them to appear self-evident, there are practical limits to this self-reinforcing relationship. Those media of authority – inscription, image, divine sanction, and monumental display – help to stabilize such a claim. Behistun is the first major monument where this process can be seen in full.

5.3 The Monument of the Lie and Its Undoing

Following the suppression of revolts throughout the majority of the empire, Darius commissioned a monument to be inscribed in the Kūh-e Bīsotūn mountain in the modern-day province of Kermanshah, near the modern village of Bīsotūn. With the immediate threats to his throne defeated, Darius began an ideological war as well to dissuade anyone from the idea of his reign as illegitimate. The first major project that will be analyzed is that of the Behistun, with its inscription and visual language communicating in concert the new iconographic program that would come to define the Achaemenid program. As has already been demonstrated, Achaemenid imperial language drew strength from its plurality, something that can be traced back to its socio-political roots in Fars. Behistun will demonstrate through its relief, trilingual inscription, and landscape setting working together to present the crisis of 522

BCE as the restoration of rightful order and discipline by Darius under the authority of Ahuramazda.²⁵⁵

Behistun's placement is itself part of its significance within the rhetoric of Achaemenid imperial ideology. From a practical perspective, this monument is situated along the Great Khorasan Road in the portion that links Mesopotamia and Media (Figure 5.7).²⁵⁶ It would have also connected to roads that led to the capitals at Persepolis and Pasargadae, placing Darius' account along a highly-trafficked corridor. With the relief being carved 100m high up on the rock face, it would have been incredibly visible to anyone passing by.²⁵⁷ By having this monument be exceptionally visible within the landscape, it is yet another example of Foucault's power-knowledge relationship functioning as a work that creates Darius' power and sovereignty while also being a clear result of his status (Figures 5.8 and 5.9, 5.11). Along with this, viewers passing below could recognize the basic hierarchy of the scene even without knowledge of the specific identities and events being depicted. This would make the monument an active agent of Darius' power, legitimacy, and sovereignty as it is a physical projection of that upon the landscape.²⁵⁸

The choice Behistun monument's site also has a sacred dimension. The name Bisotun likely originates from the Old Persian Bagastana, meaning "place of the god(s)", and this is corroborated by the Greek term for the place Βαγιστάνων ὄρος ἀνδ Βαγιστάνη, which means boundary of Bagastan and Bagastan, and was used by Diodorus to describes the place as 'best fitting for the gods'. The sacred nature of the place is also supported by remains of a 'Median' fortress and terrace being found that lead to the possibility of its use for worship in pre-

²⁵⁵ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 124; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 141–58; Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 95–99; Tuplin, "War and Peace," 33–36.

²⁵⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 185; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 124.

²⁵⁷ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples in the Ancient Near East*, 18.

²⁵⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 185–89; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 221–27; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28.

Achaemenid times. Early Iranian worship practices like those hypothesized for Behistun often took place in the natural landscape rather than a constructed temple, which helps preface Darius' choice to use the site for his monument as well as the development of the Achaemenid *pairidaeza* tradition (Figure 5.9). The practice of open-air sanctuaries being used is also attested in the provinces of Xūzestān and Fārs dating back to at least the 2nd millennium BCE, which is when the earliest rock reliefs at sites like Naqš-e Rostam were realized.²⁵⁹ This is quite significant because the monument's visual rhetoric operates through the sacred associations of the site itself alongside the carved relief and inscription.

The choice of a sacred site not only shows the influence of Iranian and Elamite practices, but also is a statement made by Darius about his power. The site being sacred, similarly to its placement along a major road, ensures that it will be frequented by people and that the monument will be seen. The decision to place the monument in nature and specifically at Kūh-e Bīsotūn mountain, which was believed to be a liminal space connecting this world to the gods, creates a cosmologically ordered environment through imagery, inscription, and location. It visually connects Darius to that sacred location and makes his reign appear ordained by the gods, an effect that is increased by the height of the inscription giving its visibility a transcendent quality, which is something that we will see is further emphasized by its message. Much like the visibility of the monument produces the knowledge of Darius' power and legitimacy while being a very physical result of it, the use of a sacred location for this monument produces the knowledge that Darius has divine favor while also being the physical symbol of it, with the images and message within acting as the embodiment of his divine favor personified.

Shifting to the imagery and text of the monument, the Behistun monument stands as an historical-artistic work that recounts the events leading to Darius' reign while producing the

²⁵⁹ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 124; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 18, 300; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 565.

knowledge that justifies and legitimizes his rule (Figures 5.10 and 5.11). Its inscription presents Darius' historical narrative, with him acting as the mediator between history and his description of history. It claims that Cambyses II had secretly killed Bardiya and that Gaumata then seized power by falsely presenting himself as Bardiya. Darius' account frames his own rise as the restoration of divine truth (*arta*) against deceit (*drauga*), with Gaumata and the rebel leaders being at once political opponents and followers of the Lie. In Foucauldian terms, the distinction between *arta* and *drauga* is central to the inscription's ideological program because it transforms the categories through which Darius' accession is to be known. The rebellion turns from a political problem into a moral and cosmic disorder that Darius, with the support of Ahuramazda, has corrected and brought order to.²⁶⁰

Darius linked his narrative to the will of Ahuramazda, with each phrase detailing the sequence of battles ending with "Ahuramazda bore me aid", making his victories appear as the visible result of divine support, therefore confirming that Darius upholds the divine truth.²⁶¹ His military suppression of revolt is narrated through this lens of restoration of truth, order, and rightful rule, a demonstration of Darius' role as mediator between history and the narrative of history. It authorizes one version of events as truth, a divinely-supported truth, and organizes the viewer's understanding of Darius' kingship around that claim. He posed his victories as restorations of dynastic continuity and ethical truth, which culminated in his declaration at DB IV.63–64: "What I desire of Ahuramazda is this: that the weak may not suffer harm from the strong" (Figure 5.12).²⁶² This moral statement is not separate from the violence that precedes it, instead it presents that violence and Darius' kingship as the force that restrains disorder, protects the weak, punishes deceit, and restores the world to proper order.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Kent, *Old Persian*, 116–35; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 126.

²⁶¹ Kent, *Old Persian*, 126–28.

²⁶² Kent, *Old Persian*, 159–62.

²⁶³ Kent, *Old Persian*, 126–28, 159–62; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 126; Tuplin, "War and Peace," 33–36.

The sense of order that Darius wished to communicate and enact through this monument is greatly reflected through its visual language. The relief depicts Darius standing, facing right in Persian robe in a larger scale than the others, with the alleged usurper, Gaumata, under his foot (Figures 5.10–5.15). The captive rebel leaders of those that rebelled during Darius’ first year are depicted in the smallest scale before him, while two weaponbearers stand behind Darius depicted in a medium scale. Ahuramazda appears within the winged disc hovering above the rebel leaders and facing Darius (Figures 5.14 and 5.15). A final captive rebel leader, identified by his traditionally Scythian pointed cap, was added later after Darius’ successful suppression of the Scythian rebellion in 519 BCE (Figure 5.10). Ahuramazda delivers the symbols of abstract and concrete power through him holding the ring, a symbol of power, and through his placement above the prisoners signifying him delivering the rebels to Darius for punishment. Automatically this visually communicates that Darius, as the pious king, is upholding the truth of the gods by “exterminating the followers of the Lie”.²⁶⁴ In this way, the imagery follows the text in being a compressed tableau of judgement that Darius is divinely sanctioned to enforce.

This is where Bahrani becomes useful, since relief and image produce the presence of Darius’ kingship in material form. The text names historical actors and defines their moral positions while the relief arranges them as visible hierarchy. Root’s distinction between illustration and illumination is itself illuminating because the relief is not a reproduction of the sequence of events narrated in DB I–III (Figures 5.12 and 5.13). It compresses the violence into a single visual order without removing it entirely. The compression then turns these multiple conflicts, places, and enemies into one scene of restored hierarchy.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 185–89; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 126; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

²⁶⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–27, 168–74; Root, *King and Kingship*, 187–89; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

Gell's theory of art and agency clarifies how that visual order acts and strengthens the use of Bahrani's concept of visibility. Behistun can act as a material index of royal agency placed above a major route and fixed into a sacred landscape. Darius' body, Gaumata beneath his foot, the bound rebel leaders, Ahuramazda's gesture, and the surrounding inscription all direct the viewer toward the same inference: that the king's power has already acted and defeated disorder to restore the world to proper order. It thus extends Darius' agency beyond the immediate moment of military victory and makes that victory durable, visible, and repeatable in the landscape.

There is another dimension to this sense of order that is not emphasized by what is depicted, but through the written language and use of space within the monument (Figures 5.12 and 5.13). The Old Persian script was a conscious invention by Darius I within a cuneiform script. Its reduced number of uniform, easily legible signs and symmetrical design made it distinct from Babylonian or Elamite models. The geometric precision and standardized use of dividers transformed writing into a visual system of order, allowing the Achaemenids to turn the inscription itself into a statement of sovereignty and graphic symbol of power and identity.²⁶⁶ This allowed Darius to fix his claim across several written traditions (Figure 5.12). The use of space on the monument, both in its inscriptions and reliefs, heighten the sense of order created by the inscriptions and reliefs. On the monument, there are certain areas that seem intentionally left empty, where no inscriptions or figures appear (Figure 5.13). These blank spaces, which are often positioned beside the inscriptions and above the figures, appear to function as a deliberate negative space to emphasize the contrast and hierarchy within the composition. This use of negative space seems to add to the order that Darius claims he brings within the monument, and the spatial distance between these visual elements can be compared

²⁶⁶ Kent, *Old Persian*, 10–19.

to those in the Apadana reliefs, which will create a visual continuity for what can be considered the Achaemenid iconographic program realized by Darius.

The work on the Behistun monument began and was only truly completed after Darius had undergone significant efforts to logistically secure his rule. This highlights how iconography and ideology alone cannot make a ruler's position secure, but there is still an interdependence between practical consolidation of power and ideological production that allows logistical success to become enduring legitimacy. Practical consolidation quells immediate resistance, but it is the agency of these visual and textual forms that produces legitimacy and makes authority perceived and felt, which ultimately allows it to endure, especially among those who might otherwise harbor dissent.

This is why Behistun is foundational for Achaemenid imperial rhetoric. The monument does not hide this coercion. Gaumata remains beneath Darius' foot, the rebels remain bound before him, and the king's legitimacy is built through the imagery of their defeat being turned into a visual order. That ordering is reinforced by divine sanction, as Darius' claim was said to be supported by Ahuramazda's aid against the Lie, converting his contested accession into a restoration of rightful order.²⁶⁷ The Old Persian text contributes to this same program through its visual regularity and formal clarity that makes the writing itself visually part of the monument's claim to disciplined sovereignty. The visual elements therefore organize coercion through scale, the ordered line of the bound rebel leaders, divine authorization, and the graphic order of the written field.²⁶⁸

The landscape heightens this effect and allows us to further clarify the Achaemenid visual strategy at work. Behistun's placement along a major road, on a highly visible rock face,

²⁶⁷ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 124–26; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 141–58; Kent, *Old Persian*, 116–35; Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 95–99.

²⁶⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 185–89; Kent, *Old Persian*, 10–19, 116–35; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 221–27; Tuplin, "War and Peace," 33–36.

within a site that was already deemed sacred, meant Darius used the landscape itself as part of the monument's claim of authority. Every part of the larger whole creates and reinforces the knowledge of Darius' power, legitimacy, and divine favor that order the relation between king, god, rebel, text, and landscape, and they act as physical agents that projects this sovereignty onto the landscape. Behistun therefore defines crucial aspects of Achaemenid visual rhetoric in which power is made durable by arranging conflict into a hierarchy of order, defeat is turned into the victory of divine truth, and royal authority is projected through material forms of processional rhythm that continue to act in the landscape.²⁶⁹

5.4 The Apadana as a Catalogue of Empire

The compositional and ideological strategies employed at Behistun find their continuation and amplification in the reliefs of the Apadana at Persepolis (Figure 5.16). The Behistun monument used scale, spatial distance, and visibility at a sacred site along a major road to assert Darius' legitimacy, authority, and divine favor. The Apadana reliefs employ careful spatial organization and iconographic hierarchy to communicate imperial order within the controlled architectural space of a palatial context. Where Behistun foregrounds Darius' personal legitimacy and pious triumph over rebellion, the Apadana translates this into a broader representation of the empire's stability. It depicts the submission of subject peoples as distinct but in a harmonized and ordered rhythm under the king's sanctioned (Figures 5.17 – 5.24). The negative spaces, figure placement, abstract personification and proportioned scale of the delegations at Apadana echo the compositional innovations at Behistun, demonstrating a

²⁶⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 185–89; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–27, 168–74; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

continuity of visual agency in which imagery is an active participant in the production of royal legitimacy while being a shift in what Bahrani terms the “visual field of power.” The delegations remain subordinate to the king, but at the Apadana it is expressed through procession, mediation, gift-bearing, and differentiated participation.²⁷⁰ Here, the imagery acts as an “index” of royal agency, its compositional order making power not only visible but materially enacted through the viewer’s embodied experience of procession and approach.

Thus, the Apadana can be understood as a carefully constructed stage on which the Achaemenid vision of kingship and empire was visually and politically performed. The building, begun under Darius I and likely finished during the reign of Xerxes, was a colossal structure at Persepolis that was striking in its magnitude and designed as a grand audience hall that could physically embody the relationship between the king and his subject peoples as a physical symbol of cosmic order (Figure 5.16). Its sculpted staircases, in Root’s reading, function as a catalogue of empire. They were a visual enumeration of the peoples and lands that composed the Persian realm, ordered into an idealized procession converging on the figure of the monarch.²⁷¹

Yet the catalogue is not a neutral inventory. The north and east staircases of the Apadana display the famous tribute-bearing delegations arranged in long files that wind their way up toward the hall in an ordered courtly procession in which imperial diversity is legible through repeated movement toward the king. Roaf’s analysis of the stairway reliefs helps clarify the mechanism as 18 of the 23 delegations were carved on the main façade, while 5 were placed on

²⁷⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Tuplin, “War and Peace,” 33–36; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 171, 185–86.

²⁷¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–87.

the smaller southern stair slope (Figure 5.18). Each delegation is led by a Persian or Median usher who takes the leader by the hand and introduces him into the royal presence.²⁷²

The delegations are also differentiated with care. Costume, hairstyle, or the specific tribute they carry – textiles, precious metal objects, animals, jewelry, and weapons – mark each group as distinct (Figures 5.19 and 5.21–5.24). Root emphasizes that this differentiation exists within a strict visual order.²⁷³ The delegates march calmly, their bodies are fully upright, their gestures are quite composed, and their progress remains steady. The repetition of similar poses creates a rhythm of harmonious diversity.²⁷⁴ The visual system operates as a taxonomy of imperial order where difference is preserved within a repeated visual order. The categorization of bodies, distinguished yet harmonized, constitutes a visual knowledge that defines the empire through the disciplined representation of difference. Persian and Median ushers mediate the transition between subject peoples and the royal center (Figure 5.19, lower register).²⁷⁵ The relief does not merely reflect the organization of imperial space; it produces it and makes the viewer's recognition of order a function of the king's power.

As mentioned earlier, that use of space is similar to that of the reliefs at Behistun, in which the spatial distance between the bound rebel leaders mirrors that of the delegations, leaving the viewer with a sense of order that was created by Darius. The Apadana processions depict and reinforce this as one of the central ideological tenets of Achaemenid rule: the empire as a collection of distinct peoples whose individuality is acknowledged, and whose roles are choreographed into a larger order under the king. The more coercive language of Behistun is

²⁷² Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–87; Michael Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," *Iran* 21 (1983): 47–48; Peck, "Achaemenid Relief Fragments," 22, fig. 2.

²⁷³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89.

²⁷⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 88–89.

²⁷⁵ Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," 47–48; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 175, fig. 12.

recast into one of attendance, offering, and controlled reciprocity within a hierarchy that makes this legible through bodily placement.²⁷⁶

This is why Root cautions against reading the Apadana reliefs as a literal historical record of delegations, such as a New Year's festival or an actual tribute ceremony. Their force lies in their archetypal quality as an ideal image of empire in which the diverse peoples are always already arriving, differentiated, and ordered toward the king (Figures 5.19–5.21, 5.24 and 5.26).²⁷⁷ Gell's notion of the distributed person is useful, because the reliefs extend the king's personhood into material form and transform representation into action. The Apadana reliefs depict the empire's subjects and act on their behalf and on the viewer, continually re-enacting the order they represent. They assert the philosophy of the Achaemenid vision of order through this processional rhythm in which the king sits enthroned as the center while the empire converges upon him in ordered relation (Figures 5.20 and 5.26). This is crucial to Root's method because she treats the Apadana reliefs as an iconographic program that sought to present kingship as eternal, ordered, and divinely sanctioned rather than as a specific historical record. The Apadana's image of empire is therefore not only descriptive but operative. It materializes controlled diversity as order and makes that continually present within the palace setting as something the viewer sees and moves alongside.²⁷⁸

The place of the Medes within this system is significant, not only for their role but for what they tell us about the rhetoric of Achaemenid iconography through their depiction. Darius wished to emphasize his Iranian identity through iconography, and he included the Medes as an indispensable part of that. It would be wrong to state this was evidence of equality within the imperial hierarchy or benevolent inclusion. More practically, the Medes were the closest and

²⁷⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 187–89; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–27, 168–74.

²⁷⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 95.

²⁷⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–27.

largest power within the Persian realm, and securing their allegiance was paramount to stability in the empire's heartlands. This has roots in Cyrus II's rule and the plurality of his allegiances and identities according to the context, and its form was cemented by Darius in his use of the title "King of Persia and Media and the other lands". Along with this, cavalry clothing is associated with the Medes, whose importance is seen in them being depicted as the first tributary group in the procession on the eastern staircase, as courtly figures, and as ushers mediating the movement of other peoples (Figures 5.22 and 5.25). While the Achaemenids would follow more Elamite and Mesopotamian forms, Darius' construction of this close cultural connection that was likely born out of political reasons became an ideological foundation for the empire's iconography, meaning the Medes' depiction makes the different aspects of Achaemenid art especially visible.²⁷⁹ The Apadana figures act as ethical mediators between multiplicity and unity, producing a distinctly Persian articulation of visual agency.

This is where Root's idea of "creative receptivity" becomes useful for defining the Achaemenid's imperial logic. The Apadana gathered motifs, materials, craftsmen, and subject peoples and depicted their multiplicity as distinct and differentiated under the controlled order and hierarchy of the Great King.²⁸⁰ The Apadana thus becomes a productive apparatus of power because it does not repress but materializes imperial ideology through the ordering of vision. Its images participate in what Bahrani calls the construction of visibility, while functioning, in Gell's sense, as indices of royal agency that extend Darius' sovereignty into the sensory and spatial experience of the court.

This materialization of imperial ideology operated beyond the delegations. Roaf's work on Persepolis' sculptural production conveys how carefully planned the reliefs were, even when

²⁷⁹ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 170–72; Wiesehöfer, "Medes and Persians," 392–95; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," 47–48.

²⁸⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 95, 133, 161.

executed by multiple teams, while Peck's discussion of Persepolis relief fragments shows how the delegation motif continued to define Achaemenid royal imagery beyond the original Apadana stairways.²⁸¹ Morgan's analysis of the Apadana bulls adds another layer, because the building's architecture and animal imagery also participated in the display of Darius' authority, elite status, and claims to protective order (Figure 5.17).²⁸² The architecture, sculptural planning, animal imagery, courtly figures, and subject peoples together create a palace environment in which imperial hierarchy appears as a stable and repeatable order.

Modern scholarship has confirmed and expanded Root's insights. Elspeth Dusinberre notes that the Nereid Monument in Anatolia, thought to be the tomb of the Lycian ruler Erbbina, has a relief of the ruler, possibly Erbbina, under a parasol wearing Persian military dress while figures in Greek dress stand before him in a fashion that may be a specific reference to the Apadana reliefs at Persepolis (Figure 5.27). This shows how the iconography of ordered diversity was portable and adaptable across the empire as a means of exporting the Achaemenid imperial ideology.²⁸³ The broader "International Achaemenid Style" makes the same point at the level of objects, stating that Achaemenid forms were widely circulated, but their local uses could vary according to regional context.²⁸⁴ Maria Brosius likewise emphasizes that this dignified depiction of the delegations of the empire's subjects was a strategy of imperial legitimation through a depiction of peace that results from a symbiotic relationship in which the king has kept the peace for his people while his kingship is being kept in place by the support of his people.²⁸⁵ These studies echo Root's recognition that the Apadana's iconography had a

²⁸¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 95, 133, 161; Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," 96, 144; Peck, "Achaemenid Relief Fragments," 20–22.

²⁸² Janett Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls? Royal Power and the Persepolis Apadāna," *Iranian Studies* 50, no. 6 (2017): 787–88, 803–4.

²⁸³ Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy*, 199–201.

²⁸⁴ A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The International Achaemenid Style," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s., 7 (1993): 111–12; Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy*, 199–201.

²⁸⁵ Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75.

programmatic function, shaping perceptions of Persian power both within the court and across the provinces.

Thus, the Apadana reliefs are more than decoration: they are a monumentalized catalogue of the empire and a record of its imperial ideology. Each delegation, distinct yet harmonized in their disciplined participation, embodies the Achaemenid claim that diversity and order coexist under the divinely sanctioned authority of the Great King. At the same time within this ideology, that very hierarchy is visualized as what allows for such diversity and order to coexist, so the hierarchy must be maintained.

5.5 Hierarchical Order: The King on High

The ordered movement of the Apadana delegations leads directly into one of the central principles of Achaemenid royal imagery: the elevation of the king. Across Achaemenid monuments, hierarchy is communicated through scale and centrality, but also through height, support, distance, and ritualized access. The king is repeatedly placed above the peoples of the empire, whether enthroned or on a platform, set upon a dais, or carried by figures who personify the lands under his rule.²⁸⁶ This elevation acts as a visual metaphor for cosmic and political order where the perception of height and distance constructs a metaphysics of political rule. Seeing the king elevated is tantamount to participating in his supremacy. This imagery possesses distributed agency, where the sculpted hierarchy performs the act of elevation, shifting a visual metaphor into a material enactment of political theology.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–61.

²⁸⁷ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–27, 168–74; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

On the Apadana reliefs, the king occupies the central axis of the composition and is enthroned on a raised platform raised above the approaching delegations. In the Throne Hall doorjamb reliefs, the Persian and Median guards support the king by being beneath him, while the doors themselves depict the king being carried on his platform with personifications of the subject lands carrying the throne platform (Figures 5.28 and 5.33).²⁸⁸ This elevation is also observed in the East doorjamb of the Central Building at Persepolis (Figure 5.32). The king's figure is magnitudes larger than the supporting figures to keep the visual focus on his position within the imperial hierarchy but maintains the language of the staircase reliefs as part of the broader language of imperial support and reciprocity ordered and harmonized by the king.

Although the discrepancy in the size of the figures is not as drastic on the original Central Panel from the North Stair of the Apadana as the doorjamb reliefs, it communicates the same message within a different setting while encoding ritualized behavior (Figure 5.20). Behind the king stands the crown prince and behind the prince stand court officials with staffs and folded hands. Before the king, courtiers approach with gestures of respect, and each layer of the composition reinforces hierarchy, from the height of figures to their size relative to one another. The king is physically above the prince, the prince above officials, the officials above courtiers, and, lastly, the courtiers above subject peoples. The Apadana reliefs are therefore not only ideological statements but prescriptive images, reinforcing norms of conduct through art. This visual codification becomes part of a micro-physics of power, where the regulation of posture and movement inscribes hierarchy into the very field of vision. The entire relief becomes an ideological diagram of imperial society and protocol for conduct before the king, conveying how hierarchy can be expressed through regulation of bodies as well as elevation.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 153–54.

²⁸⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–33; Roaf, *Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis*, 47–48.

Root's analysis shows that Achaemenid visual hierarchy presents royal elevation as superiority expressed through ritualized height, measured distance, and ordered support.²⁹⁰ He is elevated above the subject peoples, but that elevation is visually dependent on the structured participation of the empire beneath him. The king appears as the highest figure within the composition to dictate his position of creating order, yet the visual system also emphasizes the structured cooperation of those who uphold, approach, and recognize him (Figures 5.20 and 5.28–5.33).²⁹¹ In this sense, Achaemenid royal elevation manifests a vision of cosmic equilibrium as the king stands above the empire, but the empire is also shown as participating in the maintenance of that order.

The Achaemenid use of elevated royal imagery maintained the religious dimension of kingship. Pierre Briant has argued that the exaltation of the king was inseparable from the administrative and religious systems of the empire, with elevation symbolizing the monarch's mediating role between Ahuramazda and humanity.²⁹² At Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis, Darius is depicted as being supported by carriers while Ahuramazda sits above them (Figures 5.30–5.32). The mediatory role is an index of agency that acts as an active conduit between the human and divine spheres. Behistun had already established a hierarchy in which Darius appears larger than all human figures while Ahuramazda occupies the highest position above the scene (Figure 5.10). The Achaemenid visual hierarchy performs the theological dimension of visibility, where the act of seeing the elevated king becomes a mode of recognizing divine order. Persian visual hierarchy retains that divine element, and places its emphasis on reciprocities as the illustration of that order: the divinely ordained king provides administration

²⁹⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–32.

²⁹¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 133–38.

²⁹² Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 222–23; Root, *King and Kingship*, 185–89; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

and protection for his people, while enjoying their support in terms of revenue, labor, and political support.

This logic becomes especially clear in representations of the king carried by throne-platform supporters. Root stresses that this hierarchical arrangement communicates a legitimacy grounded in the act of support.²⁹³ The Atlas posture was a recognizable motif across several ancient visual traditions, so the pose carried a traditional symbolic force that communicated the act of raising, sustaining, and ceremonially supporting an elevated figure, as seen in its Egyptianizing use on the base of the Statue of Darius from Susa (Figure 5.29).²⁹⁴ In Achaemenid reliefs, this posture becomes part of the imperial language of reciprocal order within the hierarchy (Figures 5.28–5.34). The supporting figures appear as participants in the visual and metaphysical elevation of the king. Interpreted through Gell’s framework, the Atlas posture materializes distributed agency. The physical strain and act of support of the figures indexes the metaphysical burden of and participation in sustaining kingship itself. Their gesture is not symbolic alone, but a cultural index manifesting the empire’s support as a tangible act of bearing up the cosmic and political order.²⁹⁵

The same motif appears in the canal stelae of Dynasty 27 and the aforementioned Statue of Darius from Susa (Figures 5.29 and 5.34–5.35). These monuments demonstrate how this aspect of Achaemenid imperial ideology could be expressed either beyond the imperial core or as a major royal center just outside the Persian dynastic heartland while still remaining recognizably part of the same visual grammar. The canal stelae are Persianized Egyptian monuments from Dynasty 27 that depicted figures of subjects from all the lands of the empire paying homage to their king. These figures are presented with dignity as they stand atop their

²⁹³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 147.

²⁹⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 147–48, 149–51.

²⁹⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–61; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 53–60.

name-rings, a recognizable Egyptian motif, raise their hands in praise, and visually participate in the king's elevation (Figure 5.34). They employ Egyptian conventions and the visual language of homage, but the figures of the imperial lands are integrated into an Achaemenid vision of ordered support for the Great King.²⁹⁶

Although Susa retained a distinct Elamite cultural background that distinguished it from the Persian dynastic center of Persis, Darius transformed it into one of the principal royal and administrative centers of Achaemenid rule. Therefore, the statue of Darius is the articulation of Achaemenid ideology within a centrally important court context that is neither core Persian nor provincial adaptation, but a major court center whose political centrality outpaced its cultural assimilation into the Persian dynastic heartland. The statue of Darius from Susa also has subject peoples on its base quite similar to the canal stela in proportions and physical characteristics (Figures 5.29 and 5.35). The figures inscribed in the statue's tall base have upturned palms that are holding up the king and cartouches with the names of imperial provinces. Root makes note of the hand gesture on the Darius statue to point out how it conveys the notion of holding up, carrying forward, and presenting as a show of symbolic support.²⁹⁷ These specific examples are excellent for demonstrating how this visual hierarchy would have also been conveyed across the empire. Such material replication exemplifies the Foucauldian apparatus of power because it represents a network of images, gestures, and materials that imperial order is disseminated through and maintained. These monuments operate as agents within that system by extending the performative act of elevation across the empire as a reproducible imperial structure.

The earlier discussion of the Nereid Monument showed how local elites could assimilate elements of Achaemenid imperial ideology into regional visual programs. Now, these two

²⁹⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 144–46; Colburn, *Archaeology of Empire in Achaemenid Egypt*, 33–36; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 228–31.

²⁹⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, 144–46; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 477–80; Colburn, *Archaeology of Empire in Achaemenid Egypt*, 33–36.

examples show a much more top-down approach in which the imperial ideology is adapting local conventions to fit the Achaemenid iconographic program. In these cases, the Achaemenid visual hierarchy is adapted across different settings while remaining recognizably tied to the same iconographic program. The king is politically superior, central, and the mediating axis between the divine, imperial administration, and the peoples of the realm. His elevation is both the fabricating the subject it orders and making the vision of hierarchy inseparable from its enactment. This is achieved through the visual ontology of kingship in which seeing the king elevated creates both an aesthetic and theological experience of empire. Hierarchical order is thus both descriptive and prescriptive: it represents how the empire is structured and enacts how it should function.

5.6 Conclusion

As it emerges from the monuments analyzed here, Achaemenid imperial visual grammar is built around the ordering of plurality. The movement from Cyrus to Darius shows why such a grammar was necessary. Cyrus' political strength depended on flexible identities to allow him to operate across multiple spheres of legitimacy. Darius transformed and codified that flexibility into a more formalized imperial language after the crisis of 522 BCE, when the need to secure his kingship required the production of a durable visual and textual claim to rightful rule beyond military consolidation. His construction of dynastic continuity, his appeal to Ahuramazda, and his opposition between truth and the Lie all show the different manners in which Achaemenid kingship's dependence on making legitimacy visible, repeatable, and materially present was enacted.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 95–99.

Behistun gives this process its most direct early form. Its recounting of Darius' accession reorganizes a contested history into a political order that restores cosmic order (Figures 5.8–5.15). The choice of the site and its sacred associations, the trilingual inscription, the Old Persian script, and the relief composition all work to make Darius' version of events appear as the truth of the empire that has been divinely ordained. The king stands on the rock face as the agent of Ahuramazda's divine order, Gaumata is placed beneath him as the embodiment of deceit, and the bound rebels are visible evidence of disorder brought under control. The entirety of the monument turns the instability of Darius' accession into a statement of legitimate sovereignty projected onto the landscape.²⁹⁹

The Apadana expands beyond personal legitimacy to the stability of the empire through its archetypal image of imperial order (Figures 5.17–5.26). The peoples of the empire are clearly differentiated to highlight their diversity, yet the repetition of pose and movement binds them into a single visual rhythm. The image of empire materializes that diversity as order, the same order Darius brought at Behistun, and continually re-enacts the ordered plurality it represents. The treatment of the Medes within Achaemenid titulary and iconography sharpens this principle as it demonstrates how political necessity, something seen during Cyrus' rise, became an ideological foundation for imperial identity. The Apadana's catalogue of peoples thus makes multiplicity visible without allowing it to become fragmentation due to the order and control of the Great King.³⁰⁰

The motif of the king on high completes this by turning hierarchy into a structure of support. The Great King is elevated above the peoples of his empire, but his elevation is repeatedly depicted as dependent on their ordered participation. This reciprocity is a key aspect of Achaemenid imperial ideology: the people support the Great King with revenues, manpower,

²⁹⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 186–87; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 901.

³⁰⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 170–72.

and political support while the Great King benefits from that and provides them protection, stability, and order. This is exemplified by the visual hierarchy illustrating the king's elevations as dependent, but it should not be viewed as consensual (Figures 5.28–5.35). Throne-bearing figures, subject peoples, guards, courtiers, and provincial adaptations of royal imagery all contribute to this system. The canal stela, the Statue of Darius from Susa, and the Nereid Monument show the ways in which Achaemenid visual hierarchy could operate across different regional and provincial contexts while remaining tied to a recognizable imperial program (Figures 5.27, 5.29 and 5.34–5.35). The result is a visual rhetoric in which order is both descriptive and prescriptive: it shows how the empire is structured and enacts how that structure should function.³⁰¹

The analysis has shown that Achaemenid art's internal logic must first be recognized as one of hierarchy, divine sanction, and ordered pmechalurality centered on and ordered by the Great King before it can be placed in direct comparison with other imperial traditions. Rather than simply stating Achaemenid art to be an accumulation of inherited forms or a derivative continuation, Achaemenid visuality must first be established. With that grammar in place, the following chapter can comfortably begin a cross-analysis between the Neo-Assyrians and Achaemenids, asking what the nature of the relationship between their iconographic programs was to determine the nature of Achaemenid visuality.

³⁰¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131, 144–46, 153–54; Dusinger, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy*, 199–201.

The Synthesis of Imperial Visibility from Assyria to Persia

6.1 Introduction: From Two Visual Grammars to Synthesis

The visual systems analyzed in the preceding sections do not stand in isolation from one another. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid imperial art both confront the same fundamental problem of kingship: how sovereignty can be made visible, repeated, accessible, and accepted across an empire of many peoples, regions, and political traditions. This problem exists because kingship is never self-evident. The king is human, yet must be made politically, ritually, physically, and cosmologically distinct from ordinary persons. Imperial art becomes one of the principal means through which that distinction is produced and stabilized. Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs construct royal authority through a highly explicit visual language of domination, in which the king's body, the ordering of palace space, the gestures of subjects and enemies, the punishment of rebels, and the movement of tribute all make imperial power appear as the force that conquers, classifies, and controls the world.³⁰² Achaemenid art, particularly under Darius, develops a different visual solution. Its monuments still depend on hierarchy, submission, divine sanction, and the organization of subject peoples. However, they present these elements through a rhetoric of order, harmony, and disciplined plurality, where the peoples of the empire are made visible as differentiated participants within a larger imperial whole.³⁰³

The task of synthesis, then, is not to ask whether Achaemenid art simply borrowed from Assyrian art, nor to treat the two traditions as opposed systems with no meaningful continuity between them. The evidence demands a more careful approach. Neo-Assyrian visual rhetoric already contained more than punitive violence alone. Its depictions of tribute, foreign peoples, landscapes, and exotic goods could make diversity itself a demonstration of the king's universal

³⁰² Megan Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity in the Art of Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 210–28; Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 69–101.

³⁰³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54; Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75.

rule. DeGrado's work is especially useful here, because it shows that Assyrian representations of cultural diversity were not only markers of alterity, but also a rhetorical strategy through which the empire's scale and the king's control over the "four quarters" were made concrete.³⁰⁴ At the same time, Cifarelli's analysis of gesture and alterity demonstrates that foreign bodies in Assyrian art were often made legible through postures and gestures that marked submission, weakness, or deviation from Assyrian norms.³⁰⁵ Assyrian visuality therefore held together two related claims: the empire encompassed the diversity of the world, and that diversity became meaningful only when ordered under Assyrian royal power.

Achaemenid art inherits the problem of imperial diversity but reorganizes its visual terms. The Apadana reliefs do not eliminate hierarchy, nor do they make the peoples of the empire equal to the king. They transform the visibility of subject peoples into an ordered catalogue in which difference is preserved, regularized, and directed toward the Great King. Root's interpretation of Achaemenid art as a deliberate iconography of empire remains crucial here, especially because it moves the discussion beyond older assumptions of derivation and toward the question of how visual forms were selected, reorganized, and made to serve a new imperial program.³⁰⁶ Morgan's reading of the Persepolis Apadana likewise emphasizes that the building's architecture and relief sculpture were designed to reflect and reinforce the power and status of the Great King, while later scholarship following Root has increasingly understood Achaemenid art as a coherent and deliberate design expressing the unity and order of empire.³⁰⁷

The same problem appears in the relation between text and image. Neo-Assyrian reliefs, inscriptions, annals, epigraphs, and treaty documents were not a separate media that repeated the same message and instead participated together in the production of royal authority.

³⁰⁴ DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 107–25.

³⁰⁵ Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 210–28.

³⁰⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54; Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 789.

³⁰⁷ Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 789.

Winter's work on narrative and palace space is important because it shows that Neo-Assyrian images created structured visual fields in which historical action, royal rhetoric, cosmology, and architectural setting worked together.³⁰⁸ Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions similarly require attention not simply as texts but as visual and spatial instruments of kingship. Finn's analysis of Darius' trilingual program at Behistun and elsewhere shows that the trilingual inscription defined political, geographic, and cosmic boundaries while functioning as an index of the king's power, his dominion over imperial peoples, and his relationship with Ahuramazda.³⁰⁹ In both traditions, text and image describe sovereignty and help make sovereignty present.

The sections that follow therefore trace imperial visibility as an evolving visual and discursive system. Gesture, hierarchy, the representation of enemies, subject peoples, and the Others, text-image relations, architectural setting, and the relationship with inherited motifs will be examined as mechanisms through which sovereignty was made visible across time. The aim is not to collapse Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art into a single developmental line, but to show how Achaemenid visual language emerged through selective continuity, transformation, refusal, and local influence. By placing these systems into synthesis, the distinction between domination and harmony becomes more than a difference in style or tone. It becomes a way of understanding how imperial power could be seen differently while continuing to operate through related mechanics of visibility, embodiment, spatial order, and material agency.

This distinction also opens onto the larger discussion of the chapter about the relationship between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art that moves beyond questions of influence, appropriation, or reconfiguration, though those remain essential. It is also a question of how different imperial rhetorics responded to the same structural instability of kingship with ideological strategies that shaped how sovereignty was perceived and embodied. The final

³⁰⁸ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Winter, "Seat of Kingship," 27–55.

³⁰⁹ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

movement of this chapter returns to the theoretical framework to explain why these different ideological responses, and the relationship between them, matter semiotically: images, text, gestures, and spatial arrangements do not only represent kingship, but act in the world to produce the conditions through which kingship becomes visible, legible, and real.

6.2 The Evolution of Imperial Visibility from Assyria to Persia

The movement from Neo-Assyrian to Achaemenid imperial visibility cannot be reduced to simple transfer of forms from one empire to the next because the Achaemenid Empire did not emerge as a direct continuation of Assyria, nor did its visual language develop by softening or reversing Neo-Assyrian models alone. Assyria already had one of the most powerful monumental systems of empire and imperial art in the ancient Near East centered on the palace, the royal body, military victory, tribute, deportation, inscription, and the classification of foreign peoples. Yet the Persian imperial formation developed from a different political and cultural ground, shaped by Fars, Elamite traditions, Iranian identities, and the Zagros as a long-standing zone of interaction between Mesopotamian empires and local political structures. The shift from Assyria to Persia needs to be read as an evolution in the conditions of imperial visibility, rather than as a linear replacement or adoption of one iconographic system by another.³¹⁰

Neo-Assyrian kingship was rooted in the expansion of the “land of Aššur,” where political authority was closely tied to the god Aššur, the city of Aššur, and the king’s obligation to extend divine order through conquest. The Assyrian king acted as Aššur’s representative, vicar, and cultic-administrative agent.³¹¹ This ideology gave Assyrian kingship a fundamentally expansionist orientation. The king ordered, enlarged, and protected the world of Aššur through

³¹⁰ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 344–50; Waters, “Cyrus and the Achaemenids,” 91–102.

³¹¹ Nadali, “Aššur Is King!,” 76–78.

campaign, punishment, tribute, and resettlement. The palace gave this ideology an incredibly concentrated monumental form. Winter emphasizes that the Mesopotamian palace as an institution with administrative, bureaucratic, ceremonial, industrial and residential functions, a “Great House” from which kingship and state order were exercised.³¹² Its iconographic program therefore worked within an institution where kingship was repeatedly encountered through exercise and display.

This becomes especially clear from Ashurnasirpal II onward. His transformation of Kalhu into a royal center and the relief program of the Northwest Palace marked a crucial moment in the monumental staging of Assyrian kingship. Russell describes the palace decoration as expressing a fourfold ideology of military success, service to the gods, divine protection, and Assyrian prosperity, while also arguing that the subjects of the reliefs were shaped by the functions of the architectural suites in which they appeared.³¹³ Kertai similarly emphasizes that the palaces at Kalhu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh formed the three primary royal residences used by the Assyrian court during the major Neo-Assyrian period, showing how royal authority became tied to successive monumental centers.³¹⁴ In these contexts, the king did not need to be physically present for royal power to be encountered. The viewer moved through spaces where image, inscription, guardian figures, and architectural threshold worked together to produce the experience of royal power.

The empire’s expansion intensified this visual structure. From Tiglath-pileser III onward, Assyrian rule required more systematic mechanisms of provincial control, deportation, tribute extraction, and administrative integration. Liverani emphasizes that the Neo-Assyrian provincial system required submitted lands to provide resources, and that refusal led to plunder,

³¹² Winter, “Seat of Kingship,” 27–55.

³¹³ Russell, “Program of the Palace,” 655–715.

³¹⁴ Kertai, “Architectural Presence,” 62–75.

meaning that tribute and booty became two sides of the same imperial machine.³¹⁵ Radner's discussion of deportation sharpens this further by stating that while deportation had earlier precedents, the Assyrians molded it into a complex resettlement scheme, orchestrated by the central administration intended to exploit imperial resources, reduce the possibility of rebellion, and integrate populations across regions.³¹⁶ These policies affected the visual culture because they shaped the world that the palace reliefs presented. Assyrian art visualized this conquest as an imperial system in which peoples, goods, bodies, cities, animals, landscapes, and materials were brought into relation with the king and made available to the royal center.

This is why Neo-Assyrian imperial art should not be reduced to cruelty alone. DeGrado's argument is especially important here because he shows that Assyrian depictions of foreigners, exotic goods, materials from the different reaches of the empire, and tribute concretized the scale of Assyrian power by making the empire's reach visible. Diversity became evidence of the king's reach.³¹⁷ This does not negate the violent and coercive dimensions of Assyrian art. Assyrian kingship was made visible through domination, but that domination could take on several forms: the destruction of enemies, the punishment of rebels, the reordering of populations, the receipt of tribute, the display of foreign diversity, and the transformation of distant regions into resources available to the imperial center. The Neo-Assyrian world within this visual system was not a world that was simply conquered, but one that made it visible how it could be classified, moved, extracted, and displayed.

Assyria's fall did not erase the political and visual conditions that it had helped to create. In the Zagros, Assyrian expansion had already influenced local political structures. Balatti argues that Assyrian officials and institutions likely encouraged more hierarchical forms of

³¹⁵ Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 507.

³¹⁶ Karen Radner, "Economy, Society, and Daily Life in the Neo-Assyrian Period," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 210; Liverani, *Ancient Near East*, 507.

³¹⁷ DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 107–25.

government among local groups, allowing local leaders to mediate between their populations and Assyrian imperial structures, which in turn contributed to the construction of defensive structures as both defensive tools and symbols of new local power.³¹⁸ However, this did not result in the production of a single unified state, like a unified Median state, in the simple sense often imagined. Ecbatana may have become an important gathering place and common center for a wider confederacy, but its role should not be overestimated as the sole center of power in the region.³¹⁹ The Zagros, then, was more than a corridor through which Assyrian influence passed into Persia because it was already a politically and culturally diverse contact zone through which imperial pressure, local leadership, pastoral mobility, and regional traditions interacted.

The same complexity shaped the southern context from which Achaemenid power emerged. In Xūzestān and Fārs, long-standing relationships between pastoral groups and the Elamite state created part of the socio-economic and political basis for the establishment of the Achaemenid Empire.³²⁰ Persian kingship arose from a world in which Mesopotamian imperial forms were known, but it was not produced by Mesopotamian inheritance alone. Assyrian imperial pressure, Elamite institutional memory, Iranian group identities, Zagros confederacies, pastoral structures, and local sacred landscapes all formed part of the context in which Achaemenid kingship developed. This makes the Achaemenid use of inherited visual forms more complex than simple borrowing. The iconography that Darius later monumentalized was already shaped by plurality, and its art had to make that plurality appear ordered without presenting it only as defeated foreignness.

³¹⁸ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 344.

³¹⁹ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 344–45.

³²⁰ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 344–50.

Cyrus' reign reflects this earlier, more flexible phase. Waters emphasizes that Cyrus' titular and political representation were deeply context-dependent. "King of Anshan" reflected an Elamite orientation, while the Cyrus Cylinder presents him through expanded Babylonian titular after his conquest of Babylon.³²¹ Cyrus' power grew through the ability to operate across several divergent conceptions of political legitimacy without reducing them to a single fixed identity. He could be Persian, Elamite, Median-connected, Babylonian restorer, and ruler of a rapidly expanding empire at once. In this earlier phase, imperial visibility had not yet been fully codified into the monumental system that would be defined during Darius' reign. It remained more adaptive, situational, and tied to the political needs of specific regions.

Darius transformed that flexibility into a more systematic imperial program. His inscriptions shifted emphasis toward Achaemenid descent, Persian identity, and, in later inscriptions, broader Iranian identity. Darius' claim that Cyrus' Teispid line belonged to the Achaemenid line allowed Darius to incorporate Cyrus' royal prestige into a dynasty that Darius had to define after taking power.³²² Due to his contested accession, legitimacy had to be made durable through text, image, genealogy, divine sanction, and monument. Behistun, the invention of the Old Persian script, the emphasis on Ahuramazda, the organization of conquered rebels, and the later architectural programs at Susa and Persepolis all belong to this process of systematization.³²³

The Achaemenid political problem was therefore different from the Neo-Assyrian one. Assyrian kingship had long been grounded in the obligation to expand Aššur's order through conquest, and its visual system repeatedly staged the king as the one who dominates and reorganizes the world. Darius, by contrast, had to make a contested accession appear as rightful

³²¹ Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 94–96; David Stronach, "Cyrus and the Kingship of Anshan: Further Perspectives," *Iran* 51 (2013): 67.

³²² Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 96–99.

³²³ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 222; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 11–12.

kingship over a vast and internally plural empire whose plurality was foundational to its power. His visual language had to make sovereignty appear powerful, legitimate, divinely sanctioned, and capable of holding multiplicity together under his rule. Finn's analysis of Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions argues that Darius introduced a "new cosmic order" through kingship, one expressed through trilingual inscriptions and the relationship between Ahuramazda, the king, and the people.³²⁴ Darius' imperial visibility in this sense was cosmological as well as territorial and administrative.

Persepolis further marks this transformation. Mousavi emphasizes that Darius founded Parseh/Persepolis in the dynastic heartland of Fars as a project to mark his kingship "for his own time and for posterity" on the Persian heartland.³²⁵ The Apadana, the stairway reliefs, the throne-bearing figures, and the architectural organization of the terrace all participated in this program of presenting a visibly differentiated empire as an ordered whole. Their difference is arranged through courtly approach, gift-bearing, disciplined sequence, and the relation to the Great King. Achaemenid hierarchy is therefore not less real than Neo-Assyrian hierarchy. It is reformulated through ceremonial order rather than through the repeated display of collapse, punishment, violent coercion, or flight.

The production of Achaemenid art reflects this same imperial structure. Royal projects employed craftsmen from across the empire, including Babylonians, Greeks, Lydians, Medes, Egyptians, Lycians, Assyrians, Syrians, and Carians, with Egyptian craftsmen especially prominent in royal workshops.³²⁶ The monuments that represented imperial plurality were also produced through it. This does not make Achaemenid art derivative due to these influences.

³²⁴ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

³²⁵ Ali Mousavi, "Persepolis in Retrospect: Histories of Discovery and Archaeological Exploration at the Ruins of Ancient Parseh," *Ars Orientalis* 32 (2002): 211.

³²⁶ Zohreh Zehbari, "On the Participation of Egyptian Artists in Achaemenid Art," in *Bridging the Gap: Disciplines, Times, and Spaces in Dialogue – Volume 1*, ed. Christian W. Hess and Federico Manuelli (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021), 59–62.

Rather, it shows that the empire's visual grammar emerged from the same political structure it wished to represent, which was a system where varied peoples, skills, materials, and traditions were gathered into a unified royal project.

The evolution from Assyrian to Persian imperial visibility should therefore be understood as a shift in the visual management of empire. Assyria made imperial power visible as a world conquered, classified, extracted, relocated, protected, and displayed under the authority of the king. The Achaemenids inherited the broader Near Eastern problem of making universal rule visible but did so from a different historical position. Their empire was built from political plurality, and Darius' kingship required a visual language that could transform that into a source of order as legitimacy rather than present it only as a field of domination. The difference between Neo-Assyrian domination and Achaemenid order is not a difference in artistic style alone or a simple binary between violence and harmony, because it emerged from changing historical conditions of kingship and imperial formation.

6.3 Gesture and Hierarchy in the Visual Order

The historical conditions previously outlined shaped how Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art organized bodies around royal authority. Neo-Assyrian reliefs used gesture, scale, posture, and controlled proximity to distinguish the king from officials, attendants, enemies, tribute bearers, and foreign peoples. Achaemenid art retained many of these mechanics while changing the relations they produced. In the Northwest Palace at Kalhu, Ataç's analysis of the "encounter scene" shows that the same basic formula of king, official, and mediating body could shift in meaning according to context. The dead bull or lion in libation scenes belongs to royal action, while the prostrate enemy in Room B turns the space between king and

official into a field of submission (Figures 4.7a–4.9).³²⁷ The concept of the image as an index clarifies how the formula is depicting the king's authority and allowing that authority to be inferred through the bodies arranged around him in a formulaic manner.³²⁸

The animal, enemy, official, and royal bodies each direct the viewer toward a different relation of ritual participation, service, or subordination within the same formula. Cifarelli's study of Ashurnasirpal's reliefs shows that raised hands, bent bodies, and prostration help mark alterity and submission, while DeGrado's refinement demonstrates that prostration is more than an ethnic marker because it defines political relation to the king, whether the figure is foreign, defeated, dependent, or courtly.³²⁹ In this sense, Foucault's account of power as productive illustrates the political force of these repeated formulas because they produce the knowledge of hierarchy through how these bodies are visible in relation to each other.³³⁰ Neo-Assyrian gesture therefore operates through graded access to royal power.

Achaemenid art preserves this concern with bodily relation and reorganizes it through different settings of royal visibility. At Behistun, hierarchy remains openly coercive. Darius stands above Gaumata's body, the bound rebels are arranged in sequence before him, and Ahuramazda occupies the elevated divine position above the scene (Figure 5.10). Root places Behistun within a broader Near Eastern tradition of victory imagery, and its compressed arrangement translates the rebellion into a visible hierarchy already forced beneath and before the king rather than depicting the victory through narrative.³³¹ The active force of ancient images allows the relief to refer to Darius' authority elsewhere and materially present that

³²⁷ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 71–75.

³²⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

³²⁹ Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 210–28; DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–17.

³³⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

³³¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226.

authority through the king's raised body, Gaumata's coerced submission, and the ordered line of restrained rebels.³³²

The Apadana reliefs at Persepolis shift these same mechanics into a courtly environment. The delegations are still subordinate to the king, but they are not shown as collapsed, prostrate, or explicitly submissive. They approach through ordered files that are guided by ushers and distinguished by dress and gifts, making them visually absorbed into the rhythm of a ceremonial sequence centered on and ordered by the Great King (Figures 5.19–5.26). Root's discussion of the Apadana emphasizes the differentiation of peoples within this arrangement before the king while Morgan's analysis of the Apadana stresses how the architecture and relief program together magnify royal power through ordered display rather than narrative conquest.³³³

What makes this significant when placed against Neo-Assyrian tribute reliefs is the environment these delegations existed in. Reliefs of tribute-bearers at Kalhu helped order courtly protocol, but they ordered the entrance into a throne-room and palace environment saturated with the dominant presence of the king in narrative campaigns, ritual scenes, and hunts (Figures 4.3 and 4.5–4.10). At Khorsabad, the depiction of the Median tributaries exists within an environment in which the viewer encounters depictions of the organization of materials and labor, campaigns, and prisoners presented to the king (Figures 4.20–4.24). At the Apadana, the role of the Medes and environment of the reliefs provide a sharp contrast. Just as in the Neo-Assyrian palaces, the delegations depict courtly protocol and the diversity of peoples under imperial control. These images at Persepolis are encountered in an environment in which the emphasis is not on the coercion of diversity into order, but one that has already been brought into order and mediated. The Medes make this mediation especially visible because they appear

³³² Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–48.

³³³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 787–817.

as courtly figures and ushers helping to regulate movement of other peoples towards the royal center alongside Persian figures (Figures 5.22 and 5.25).³³⁴ Their role shows that Achaemenid hierarchy is present within the procession, but is framed by an environment that presents imperial diversity as already disciplined into ceremonial order under the king's rule, rather than as imagery complementing depictions of a world subdued by the king.

The Apadana extends this control of bodily relation into architecture, like the controlled environments of Neo-Assyrian palaces. Morgan argues that the building's reliefs, porches, columns, and bull-lion threshold panels worked together to shape the approach to royal space.³³⁵ This recalls Neo-Assyrian guardian and threshold imagery, where colossal figures, doorways, and palace movement charged the passage toward royal presence with political and protective force (Figures 4.3, 4.5, and 4.18). Yet the Achaemenid mechanism is redirected. The viewer still moves through a charged architectural environment structured by powerful threshold images, but the threshold opens onto processional order, rhythm, and controlled courtly recognition rather than common visual formulas of campaign, royal violence, ritual, or punishment (Figures 5.17 and 5.26). The bull-lion panels, delegation reliefs, and monumental approach of the Apadana therefore reinforce the same bodily logic as the processions: access to the king is mediated and disciplined before the royal body is encountered.

The comparison here does not oppose Assyrian and Achaemenid programs as violence and harmony. It shows how these similar visual mechanics are redirected and reconfigured. In the Neo-Assyrian examples, gesture often exposes the moment when hierarchy is imposed as the enemy falls, bows, is trampled, is led forward, or is placed between king and official as visible proof of submission (Figures 3.6, 4.8, and 4.12–4.14). In the Achaemenid examples,

³³⁴ Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 170–72; Wiesehöfer, “Medes and Persians,” 392–95; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis,” 47–48.

³³⁵ Morgan, “Who Has the Biggest Bulls?,” 787–817.

hierarchy remains central, but the body is depicted after it has already been absorbed into order as rebels are delivered to Darius by Ahuramazda while delegations at Persepolis approach according to protocol (Figures 5.10, 5.19–5.20). Roaf’s work on Persepolitan sculpture helps explain the force of this regularity, since the repeated forms and carefully controlled execution of the reliefs show that bodily order was built into the production of the monument itself through the sculptors’ marks identifying work crews, assembly instructions, or track labor (Figure 6.4).³³⁶ This repetition strengthens the agency of the image because the relief does not depend on a single dramatic action and can work through the accumulated effect of many bodies arranged according to the same imperial logic.³³⁷

The clearest Achaemenid transformation of inherited hierarchy appears in the “King on High” motif. Root’s analysis remains central because she demonstrates that Achaemenid art repeatedly places the king above personifications or representatives of the lands of the empire. This occurs on the Statue of Darius from Susa, the royal tomb facades, the Central Building, and the Throne Hall (Figures 5.28–5.35). The basic representational structure of the king elevated above figures associated with his realm has clear Near Eastern precedents. Root notes that earlier Near Eastern versions of this structure often express an antagonistic relationship between ruler and domain, where the figures below the king are defeated, subdued, or symbolically dominated. In the Achaemenid version, however, the relation is reworked into a relationship of reciprocities. The king is still above and the hierarchy is unmistakable, but the figures beneath him are not crushed enemies because their posture suggests that they are bearing and upholding the king is more of an active participation in his elevation.³³⁸

³³⁶ Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis,” 103–49.

³³⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

³³⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–38.

The older Near Eastern examples display why this change matters. A statue base probably belonging to Manishtushu from Susa, where nude corpses of conquered enemies appear beneath the ruler, is an example of a Mesopotamian structure of “pious subjugation” in which the king’s elevation is connected to victory performed on behalf of the god (Figure 6.2). The statue of Ur-Ningirsu offers a different, but still useful, comparison because the figures around the base are foreign offering-bearers whose approach suggests ritualized acknowledgement rather than bodily collapse (Figure 6.3).³³⁹ These define the range of meanings available when bodies are placed around an elevated ruler: defeat, offering, tribute, pious action, and recognition of superior authority. This provides an important foundation for understanding the manner in which Achaemenid art reconfigured this notion of hierarchical depiction.

Egyptian royal imagery gives the Achaemenid adaptation another important precedent. The Nine Bows tradition depicts personified foreign lands or enemies bound to the king’s throne, or footspace, so that royal elevation is built on the visible subjection of named peoples (Figures 6.5–6.6).³⁴⁰ The Achaemenid use of related forms on the Canal Stelae and the Statue of Darius from Susa changes this inherited structure without removing its hierarchy (Figures 5.29 and 5.34–5.35). The figures associated with the imperial lands are below the king and identified as ruled peoples, but they are not captives nor their bodies distorted. Their raised hands and supporting posture make subordination appear more as ordered support in the king’s elevation.³⁴¹

This is a case where form is retained but the meaning of it is substantially altered. The Achaemenids kept the old visual grammar of vertical hierarchy to preserve the distinction

³³⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 133–38.

³⁴⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 138–44.

³⁴¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 144–46.

between sovereign and subject, but the bodies below the king are no longer primarily bodies of defeat or submission. They are the means through which kingship is elevated, and what once showed subjugation now shows support. This does not erase the asymmetry of power on display, but it does change how superiority is naturalized. Rather than being conveyed through the enemy's collapse beneath the ruler, it is done through the coordinated bodily participation of the empire's peoples. The difference therefore does not lie in domination, but in the different ways of making dominated peoples visually useful to kingship.

The Atlas posture is an integral part of this transformation, because the Achaemenid use of the motif of these supporting figures draws on a wide range of older traditions that have Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Urartian, and Egyptian precedents. The pose had ritual and cosmic associations in Egypt and Mesopotamia, while Assyro-Babylonian thrones could use atlas-like figures as vertical struts. An Achaemenid Seal shows how they retained these cosmic associations, with the motif appearing in support of Ahuramazda (Figure 6.9). Sennacherib's throne at Lachish offers a formal parallel in the tiered arrangement of supporting figures along the furniture (Figures 4.36 and 6.8). Root's analysis of these figures is careful not to reduce the Achaemenid throne-platform figures to direct copying because the Achaemenid reliefs enlarge and reorganize the motif by making subject peoples themselves the supporters of the royal platform (Figures 5.28, 5.30, and 5.32–5.33).³⁴² The form remains recognizable, but its scope and function have shifted. What had often belonged to mythological supports, divine furniture, or ornamental struts now becomes a statement about the different relationship between king and empire.

The significance of this change lies in the bodily logic of support. The supporting figures are placed beneath the king to signal inferiority, but their arms, shoulders, and posture make

³⁴² Root, *King and Kingship*, 147–51.

support visible as a coordinated action. The physical strain implied by the Atlas pose illustrates the hierarchy of empire in bodily relation. The king's elevation depends on the ordered labor of those beneath him, while their position beneath him confirms his superiority. This makes the motif especially important for the synthesis because the Achaemenids were not fully adopting a Near Eastern form, they were using a charged preexisting visual sign to articulate a different relation between sovereignty and subjecthood. The pose indexes royal agency through the bodies of the empire's peoples. It also helps produce the knowledge imperial order by assigning each people a stable place and function beneath the king. Royal elevation is therefore not stated abstractly and given visible and material form through the repeated bodies that physically bear the throne. The motif remains legible because it belongs to a wider Near Eastern repertoire, but its Achaemenid reconfiguration changes what the viewer is asked to understand from it.

Behistun occupies a more complicated position within this development. Its hierarchy is much closer to older Near Eastern victory imagery than the Apadana or throne-platform scenes. Darius is larger than the bound rebels, Gautama lies beneath his foot, the defeated claimants stand in a row before him, and Ahuramazda appears above delivering the rebels and the symbolic objects of kingship (Figure 5.11). Using scale, elevation, bodily restraint, and vertical divine sanction, the monument makes Darius' kingship visible after crisis while preserving more of the punitive logic associated with older Mesopotamian and Assyrian victory monuments. Yet even here, the composition is not a simple repetition of those older forms. The rebels are arranged as an ordered sequence where each is made legible within Darius' account of the lie and its defeat. The image is less a panoramic narrative of conquest, as we see in the Lachish reliefs or the reliefs from the south wall of Room B, than a compressed diagram of restored rule where the hierarchy is still violent, but also classificatory (Figures 4.31 – 4.36, 5.10, and 6.1). It does not yet possess the ceremonial calm of Persepolis, but it already points

toward an Achaemenid concern with arranging political disorder into a visible ordered structure.³⁴³

Placed beside the Apadana and King on High motif, Behistun reveals ways that Achaemenid visual hierarchy did not move in a straight line away from earlier Near Eastern forms. Different contexts activated different parts of an inherited repertoire. When kingship had to be asserted against revolt, the visual language of defeated bodies, vertical superiority, and divine sanction remained available (Figures 4.13, 4.24, and 5.11). When kingship was represented as an enduring imperial condition, the same broader mechanics of hierarchy could be redirected toward procession, elevation, and support (Figures 4.3, 4.20, 4.36, and 5.19–5.26). This distinction is crucial because it avoids treating Achaemenid art as uniformly peaceful or Assyrian art as uniformly violent. Both systems use hierarchy, but they select and intensify different aspects of it depending on the kind of royal relation that needed to be made visible.

Gesture, threshold, scale, and hierarchy show that the transition from Neo-Assyrian to Achaemenid art was a change in how hierarchy was made operative. Neo-Assyrian palace imagery often defines royal power through the contrast between the composed king and bodies made to approach, serve, submit, flee, or fall within environments surrounded by conquest, ritual, tribute, and punishment. Achaemenid art retains these mechanics of bodily ordering but redirects them according to the context. At Behistun, the rebel body remains coerced and classified. At Persepolis, delegations, ushers, thresholds, and throne-bearing peoples make subordination visible as mediated approach and disciplined support within a stabilized and hierarchical imperial order. The shared repertoire remains recognizable, but its operation changes. The body before or beneath the king stands as evidence of defeat or submission as well as displaying how the empire is arranged, controlled, and made to sustain royal authority.

³⁴³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 121–22.

6.4 Enemies, Peoples, and the Ordered Other

If gesture, threshold, scale, and support define how bodies are positioned around the king, the representation of enemies and peoples defines what those bodies are made to mean within the empire. The category of the “Other” is more than a simple opposition because both Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art classify bodies according to relation. Cifarelli’s analysis of Ashurnasirpal’s reliefs show how foreign bodies can be marked through posture, gesture, weapons, and narrative outcome, while DeGrado’s work is important because it shows that Assyrian art also used diversity as a sign of imperial reach.³⁴⁴ This means Assyrian art cannot be reduced to exclusion and Achaemenid art inclusion. What can be seen is a change in the dominant visual relation through which difference becomes useful to kingship.

Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs present this classification across a wide range of visual contexts. At Kalhu, foreign and subordinate bodies appear in ritual, hunting, battle, and throne-room environments where the king’s presence organizes the visual field (Figures 4.5–4.10). At Khorsabad, Media tributaries, labor, materials, siege imagery, and prisoners presented before Sargon II appear within a palace environment that makes foreign peoples and resources visible as objects of imperial reach and control (Figures 4.20–4.24). DeGrado’s point that Assyrian diversity could be displayed as evidence of rule over the “four quarters” is especially useful because the Medes, tribute bearers, and foreign dignitaries are subordinate and their difference is made productive.³⁴⁵ Costume, animals, goods, and regional attributes translate foreignness into evidence of the king’s command over distant lands.

³⁴⁴ Cifarelli, “Gesture and Alterity,” 210–28; DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–17. Cifarelli is especially useful for the bodily marking of alterity in Ashurnasirpal’s reliefs, while DeGrado complicates the binary by showing that foreign diversity could also function as evidence of imperial scale.

³⁴⁵ DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 107–25. DeGrado argues that the display of different peoples, animals, goods, and landscapes could concretize Assyrian control over the “four quarters,” making diversity a rhetorical tool of universal kingship rather than merely a sign of exclusion.

Yet Neo-Assyrian art also preserves a harsher pole of classification where the enemy body is reduced into over proof of domination. The prostrate enemy in Ashurnasirpal's Room B, the enemies trampled or received by Tiglath-pileser III, and the captive figures on Esarhaddon's Victory Stele show different ways in which the defeated body becomes the visible site of restored order (Figures 3.6, 4.8, and 4.12–4.14). The reliefs from the south wall of Room B intensify this logic through severed heads, counted bodies, and the "excellent head" carried off by a vulture (Figure 6.1).³⁴⁶ The flaying of Yau-bi'di of Hamath at Khorsabad also belongs to the same punitive register because the defeated rebel's body is transformed into an exemplary object of royal punishment.³⁴⁷ In this register, alterity becomes bodily degradation. The enemy is defeated and cut, counted, exposed, stripped, or displayed so that political resistance becomes visible as physical reduction.

Behistun stands closest to this coercive register within Achaemenid imagery, but it changes the visual work performed by the defeated body. Darius' foot fixes Gaumata beneath him, the rebel leaders stand bound in sequence before the king, and Ahuramazda appears above as the elevated divine source of sanction (Figures 5.10–5.11). Root treats Behistun as unique within Achaemenid art and as deliberately engaged with older Near Eastern traditions, especially the local model of Sar-I Pul, while Kuhrt, Finn, and Briant clarify the monument's relation to kingship, divine sanction, and the opposition between divine truth and the Lie (Figure 6.9).³⁴⁸ The rebels are displayed as ethnographic representatives of peoples to make them

³⁴⁶ Rita Dolce, "The 'Head of the Enemy' in the Sculptures from the Palaces of Nineveh: An Example of 'Cultural Migration'?", *Iraq* 66 (2004): 121–32. Dolce identifies Ashurnasirpal II as the first Neo-Assyrian ruler to introduce defeated enemies as beheaded corpses, severed heads being counted, and the "excellent head" carried off by a vulture in the throne-room reliefs of the Northwest Palace.

³⁴⁷ Paul Collins, "The Development of the Individual Enemy in Assyrian Art," *Notes in the History of Art* 25, no. 3 (2006): 1–8; Francesca Minen, "Flaying the Enemy in Assyria: A Brief Study on Neo-Assyrian Archaeological and Textual Evidence," in *Proceedings of the 11th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, ed. Adelheid Otto, Michael Herles, and Kai Kaniuth (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 233–39. Collins cites the Yau-bi'di flaying scene through Pauline Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon, King of Assyria* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1986), 75, pl. 78.

³⁴⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Kuhrt, "Achaemenid Concept of Kingship," 156–60; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 221–27; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 900–901. Kuhrt summarizes Root's treatment of Behistun as the unique Achaemenid image of the king as victor and notes Root's argument that the monument's location and

embodiments of political disorder through the narrative of their false claims. Their bodies are coerced and reduced, but the relief does not emphasize flaying, mutilation, or the spectacular destruction of the enemy. Their defeat has already occurred, and the relief emphasizes their subordination, naming, and placement before Darius' sovereignty.

This is where the comparison with Neo-Assyrian rebellion and treaty logic becomes useful. Esarhaddon's succession treaties defined loyalty as a sworn obligation to bind rulers and officials to the Assyrian king and his heir, and disloyalty is framed as a violation of this already binding political order.³⁴⁹ The Sam'al stele gives this logic a visual form as Esarhaddon towers over captive enemies while holding ropes tied to their nose-rings, and the crown princes appear as smaller figures on the lateral faces (Figure 3.6).³⁵⁰ Behistun draws on the same broad logic of violated order restored by the king, but its visual resolution is different. Neo-Assyrian images often resolve rebellion through the exemplary domination of the enemy's body. Behistun resolves it by arranging rebel bodies into a disciplined sequence of named false claimants. The defeated body remains central, but its force is classificatory as much as punitive.

The Apadana shifts the problem from defeated enemies to subject peoples. Its delegations are the empire itself, differentiated by costume, hairstyle, gifts, animals, vessels, weapons, and regional attributes, and arranged in a repeated processional order (Figures 5.19–5.26). Root's reading of the Apadana as a catalogue of empire remains central because the reliefs enumerate peoples and lands without imagery of historical campaign narratives.³⁵¹

motif relate it to earlier traditions, especially Sar-i Pul. Finn is useful for the way Darius' image and trilingual inscriptions organize kingship through divine sanction and symbolic visualization. Briant's discussion of "Truth and Lies at Behistun" is useful for the centrality of *drauga* and the relation between Darius, Ahuramazda, inscription, and relief.

³⁴⁹ Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," 87–89. Lauinger describes the Assyrian *adê* as an important mechanism for expanding influence and maintaining internal stability by binding lesser kings and royal officials to the Assyrian king through loyalty oaths.

³⁵⁰ Porter, "Ritual and Politics in Assyria," 266–67. Porter describes Esarhaddon as towering over captive enemies on the face of the Sam'al stele, while Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukīn appear as smaller but equal crown-princely figures on separate lateral faces.

³⁵¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 227–84.

Brosius' emphasis on the calm and ordered appearance of the delegations is useful if kept cautious: the Apadana is not an image of equality or benevolent inclusion, since the delegations still approach a royal center and remain subordinate to the Great King.³⁵² Its difference from Neo-Assyrian tribute imagery lies in the visual setting of that subordination. At Kalhu and Khorsabad, tribute and diversity exist within the palace programs alongside campaign, punishment, extraction, and royal domination. At Persepolis, the subject peoples are abstracted from those narrative conditions and presented as already placed within the ceremonial order.

The Medes are important within this because they complicate any simple Persian/non-Persian division. In Assyrian imagery, Cifarelli notes an Aramaic-writing scribe can become visually indistinguishable from a cuneiform-writing Assyrian colleague when he functions as an imperial official, showing office can override visible origin.³⁵³ Achaemenid art handles this incorporation differently. The Medes are not made visually identical, and their distinctiveness becomes central to the construction of the imperial core. Root's discussion of Medes and Persians emphasizes the importance of their paired identity within Achaemenid visual culture, while Balatti's discussion of Median and Persian interaction helps explain why this relation mattered politically as well as iconographically.³⁵⁴ At Persepolis, Median figures are courtiers and ushers, members of the courtly structure that regulates the movement of others toward the royal center (Figures 5.22 and 5.25). Their difference is preserved, but it is not treated as external alterity. It becomes part of the machinery through which imperial order is mediated.

Beyond the Persian-Median core, the subject delegations are also differentiated. Roaf's detailed analysis of the delegations shows how the costume, gesture, gifts, and differences

³⁵² Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75. Brosius emphasizes the calm and ordered appearance of the delegations and Persian nobles, reading this as part of a royal image of an empire at peace; here, that claim is useful only if balanced with the continued hierarchy and subordination built into the Apadana reliefs.

³⁵³ Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 214–15.

³⁵⁴ Root, "Medes and Persians," 1–16; Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 170–72. Root is useful for the visual pairing and distinction of Medes and Persians in Achaemenid art, while Balatti provides the broader political context for Median-Persian interaction and the problem of treating "Median" identity as a simple unified political category.

between the north and east stairways preserve the specificity of each group while placing them within a repeated visual system.³⁵⁵ This is the Achaemenid counterpart to the Assyrian display of diversity, but the classification works differently. In Assyrian palace reliefs, foreign goods and bodies often demonstrate the king's ability to extract tribute, punish revolt, receive submission, or reorganize conquered populations. At Persepolis, gifts still move toward the king and the diversity demonstrates the king's power and authority. However, the difference lies in the emphasis on processional rhythm as it converges on the king to highlight the king's dominance rather than more explicit imagery.

This distinction also clarifies the relation between Behistun and the Apadana. Achaemenid art clearly does not abandon coercive hierarchy after Behistun, nor does it represent all non-Persian peoples in the same way. It separates rebels from subject peoples by assigning them different visual conditions. The dangerous "Other" in Achaemenid imperial art is the rebel, liar, false claimant, or one whose actions threatens the order authorized by Ahuramazda and, by extension, the king (Figures 5.10–5.11 and 5.19–5.26). Subject peoples remain other in dress, gift, and regional identity, but their difference is contained within the sanctioned structure of the empire.

Thus, the contrast with Assyria is more nuanced, because Assyrian art could incorporate foreigners, display diversity, and make tribute or service into signs of universal rule. Achaemenid art could also show coercion. The difference lies in the dominant visual organization of imperial humanity and environment or the reliefs themselves. Neo-Assyrian palaces often kept the consequences of conquest close to the visible body. The enemy is cut down, counted, flayed, led forward, deported, or made to bring goods into the king's presence.

³⁵⁵ Roaf, "Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis," 116–17. Roaf's analysis of the Apadana delegations is especially useful for the controlled repetition of costume, attributes, and group identity across the reliefs, while also showing the specificity preserved within the larger processional system.

Achaemenid monumental art separates the rebel body from the subject body more sharply. Rebellion is classified as falsehood and defeat, while subject peoples are classified as differentiated components of an ordered imperial whole. In both systems, the “Other” is defined by relation to the king. What changes is the visual criterion of classification. Peoples in Neo-Assyrian art are often defined through conquest and submission. Peoples in Achaemenid art defines imperial peoples through their assigned place within a catalogue of ruled difference.

This prepares the next level of synthesis because these classifications are never visual alone. Severed heads, flayed enemies, tribute bearers, rebels, Median ushers, and Apadana delegations all become more legible and realize their full impact through inscriptions, epigraphs, labels, titles, and royal texts that identify what kind of body the viewer is seeing. The transition from enemy to rebel, tribute bearer to subject people, and foreigner to incorporated official therefore depends on the relationship between image and text.

6.5 Text and Image as Imperial Media

Text belongs within the same system as the visual mechanisms previously discussed, but it requires careful treatment because writing is able to operate both semantically and visually. It can name, narrate, authorize, classify, monumentalize, and anchor what the image shows, but it can also shape the visual field through placement, repetition, scale, script, language, and architectural setting. both Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments, writing and image work as interdependent imperial media, though the organization of that relationship changes.

In Neo-Assyrian art, this relationship developed from the repeated monumental presence of royal inscription to more scene-specific forms of anchoring. The Standard Inscription cuts across the relief field so the viewer encounters royal titles, genealogy, conquest,

building, and carved bodies on the same surface (Figures 4.5–4.6 and 4.9–4.11). Paley’s work on Ashurnasirpal’s reliefs and inscriptions treats the texts, slabs, and palace program as a coordinated system, while Marchetti emphasizes that the architectural, visual, and verbal contexts of the Northwest Palace were conceived together rather than as separate media.³⁵⁶ Later Neo-Assyrian reliefs increasingly used labels and epigraphs to attach scenes to named places, campaigns, or enemies. Gerardi’s study of epigraphic development shows that the epigraphic text sharpened the identification of what the relief had already made visible.³⁵⁷ The Lachish epigraph above Sennacherib’s throne works in this way because the relief already shows siege, deportation, booty, landscape, and royal reception, while the inscription fixes the events as Lachish and attaches the whole sequence to the king’s historical victory (Figures 4.31–4.36).³⁵⁸ Neo-Assyrian text-image relations therefore move between saturation and specification. Inscription can surround the viewer with royal speech, or it can label the image so that bodies, cities, and events become more precisely legible as elements of Assyrian domination.

Achaemenid monuments retain this broad Near Eastern understanding of text and image, but reorganize it through spatially expansive and multilingual forms. Behistun is the key example. Like Neo-Assyrian reliefs, the image organizes bodies before the king (Figures 5.10–5.12). The inscription similarly utilizes the form of the repetitive formula seen in the Standard Inscription to state Darius’ own claim and turn the bound rebels into a historical and moral catalogue of false claimants. Root’s discussion of Behistun treats the relief and inscription as mutually dependent rather than as image plus explanation, while Finn shows that the trilingual

³⁵⁶ Paley, “Texts, Palace, and Reliefs,” 533–43; Nicolò Marchetti, “Texts Quoting Artworks: The Banquet Stele and the Palace Reliefs of Assurnasirpal II,” *Revue d’Assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 103 (2009): 85–90. Paley is useful for connecting the working methods, inscriptions, and placement of Ashurnasirpal’s reliefs, while Marchetti argues that the architectural, visual, and verbal contexts of the Northwest Palace should be evaluated as an integrated program.

³⁵⁷ Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–6. Gerardi traces the development from repeated royal inscriptions toward epigraphic labels more closely attached to specific scenes, places, and events.

³⁵⁸ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 25; Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–6.

inscriptions create a political and cosmic order through the relationship between Ahuramazda, king and peoples.³⁵⁹ The relief spatializes rebellion through the subordinated rebel leaders while the inscription formulaically names them, defines their claims as lies, and places their defeat inside of Darius' account of the truth being restored. This is where the theoretical framework has force. Text and image are together producing the categories through which the viewer understands the bodies as king, rebel, liar, false claimant, and divinely-sanctioned ruler.³⁶⁰

The comparison with Neo-Assyrian epigraphy clarifies the shift. Assyrian labels usually anchor an image to a place, campaign, enemy, or royal action. Behistun does this and uses the text to visually structure the relief (Figures 5.11–5.13). The writing occupies a larger field than the relief and surrounds the image with Darius' account of lineage, crisis, divine support, punishment, and restored kingship (Figure 5.12). The trilingual arrangement matters visually because Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian are languages of rule ordered within a single royal statement. Behistun introducing Old Persian alongside Elamite and Babylonian, already well-attested languages of rule, gave the trilingual arrangement symbolic and practical dimensions as a statement and visualization of the monumental language of Achaemenid imperial order, while the sacred location of the relief gave the trilingual field a cosmic audience as well.³⁶¹ The same logic that arranges the bodies into a line before Darius also arranges these imperial languages into a monumental field beneath his authority as a textual and visual statement of Darius' sovereignty and vision of empire.

³⁵⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

³⁶⁰ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–48. These concepts are useful here because the relief and inscription operate together as material signs of royal agency, while the naming and ordering of bodies produces knowledge of political categories.

³⁶¹ Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–24, 239–42. Finn argues that Darius' trilingual inscriptions were part of a broader program of imperial iconography, monumental architecture, and epigraphy through which he defined his empire socially, religiously, and politically. She emphasizes that Behistun introduced Old Persian as a previously unattested written language within a trilingual field including Elamite and Babylonian, and that this arrangement created both practical and symbolic audiences, including a “cosmic” audience. Her argument is useful here because it treats text not only as semantic communication but as imagery whose script, language order, and monumentality participated in the visualization of Achaemenid imperial order.

The Harran inscriptions of Nabonidus help clarify the broader Near Eastern background without turning Behistun into a direct derivative. The Harran inscriptions of Nabonidus, for example, combine divine command, human resistance, disorder, restoration, and royal legitimacy in a temple setting. Gadd's publication of the Harran stelae makes clear that these monuments were inscribed royal objects associated with the rebuilding and refurnishing of the Moon-god's temple, and that their reliefs and inscriptions together staged royal piety in a sacred architectural context.³⁶² The similarity with Behistun does not lie in direct visual form alone. It lies in a broader inscriptional logic in which the king narrates disorder, divine sanction, and restoration in a way that turns his rule into the necessary solution to crisis. Darius inherits the Near Eastern capacity of royal inscription, but relocates and reformulates it. At Behistun, the sacred mountain, road-facing monument, relief, and trilingual inscription transform royal narrative into a landscape-scale visual and textual assertion of sovereignty.

The Statue of Darius from Susa and the Canal Stelae extend this Achaemenid strategy into an Egyptian setting. On the statue, the cuneiform trilingual inscription and Egyptian hieroglyphic texts are attached to a royal body whose base depicts the lands of the empire through Egyptian personifications and name-rings (Figures 5.29 and 5.34–5.35). The statue is a quadrilingual object whose cuneiform and hieroglyphic components participate in the same imperial discourse while remaining formally distinct.³⁶³ Kuhrt's translation of the statue makes the political point clear: the cuneiform text identifies the statue as ordered by Darius in Egypt so that viewers would know that "the Persian man holds Egypt," while the Egyptian texts translate Darius into pharaonic language of divine election to rule and prosperity over Upper

³⁶² C. J. Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," *Anatolian Studies* 8 (1958): 35–42, 79–85. Gadd's publication is useful here because the Harran stelae combine royal image, inscription, divine sanction, temple setting, crisis, and restoration, offering a broader Near Eastern comparison for Behistun's visual-textual account of disorder and restored authority.

³⁶³ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 240–41.

and Lower Egypt.³⁶⁴ Root's analysis of the Egyptian name-ring tradition shows the visual side of the same process for the personifications of empire's subject lands. These lands are subordinated beneath the king but not rendered as crushed corpses or chaotic enemies (Figure 5.29).³⁶⁵ The Achaemenid text-image system, similarly to the trilingual arrangement at Behistun, translates sovereignty across these visual and textual traditions to make Persian rule speak through Egyptian forms while keeping those forms subordinate to Darius' imperial order.

Persepolis shows the other side of this system because its processional reliefs do not provide the same visual formatting as the Standard Inscription at Kalhu, the annalistic bands of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II, or the labels of Sennacherib (Figures 4.5, 4.24, and 4.36). The Apadana delegations are not identified by epigraphs above each group, yet their bodies, dress, gifts, animals, and sequence classify them within the empire (Figure 5.18). Text remains crucial, but it works at the level of architecture and royal framing rather than also as narrative caption. Achaemenid inscriptions at Persepolis repeatedly name the king, invoke Ahuramazda, define building, and present kingship through fixed royal formulas.

This gives the inscriptions at Persepolis an interesting relationship with the textual systems of the Neo-Assyrians. Finn's catalogue of Darius' trilingual inscriptions show how royal titulary, divine invocation, territorial claims, and building formulas recur across the Achaemenid monumental program, while De Chiara's discussion of Achaemenid royal inscriptions stresses their formal typology, repetition, and differentiated functions.³⁶⁶ Text appears strategically throughout the Persepolis Terrace at thresholds, staircases, doorjambs, windows, and other architectural elements to accompany movement. While not the same in how

³⁶⁴ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 477–78.

³⁶⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 61–71, 144–46.

³⁶⁶ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 230–39; Matteo De Chiara, "Persepolis and Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions," *Iran & the Caucasus* 20, no. 1 (2016): 143–52. De Chiara's review of the DARIOSH publications is useful for the formal classification of Achaemenid royal inscriptions, their fixed models, repetitive formulas, and differentiated textual functions.

the text was integrated into the architectural space as seen at Kalhu, the visual strategies at Kalhu and Persepolis are similar.

What ultimately differs is how their content shapes the rhetoric for their respective kingships. The various inscriptions at Persepolis were composed of foundation inscriptions, royal sovereignty, monumental genealogy, and ideological and divine legitimacy in an almost formulaic manner. Their repetitive nature is a reconfiguration of the royal formula of the Standard Inscription, which repeatedly asserted royal power through summarizing royal titles and genealogy, describing building projects, blessings and curses, royal achievements, and accounts of military victories. In the Standard Inscription, the emphasis is on asserting royal power through conquest and achievement alongside genealogy and divine sanction. At Persepolis, that emphasis on genealogy and divine sanction is retained while the focus on conquest is redirected to accentuate the structured hierarchy of obedience and organized totality. As a result, readers or those having the inscriptions explained to them encountered two different models of kingship being expressed through broadly similar visual mechanisms.

The synthesis, then, is not that Neo-Assyrian art uses text while Achaemenid art uses image, or that Assyrian inscriptions narrate while Persian inscriptions symbolize. Both traditions use text and image as imperial media that name, classify, authorize, and materialize royal power. The difference is in the organization of the relationship. Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs attach writing to a palace-centered rhetoric focused on the king's explicit dominance through explicit violence, ritual and divine sanction, or his overt ability to control the peoples and labor of his empire, whether through repeated inscription across the wall or labels that anchor events and bodies to named campaigns. Achaemenid monuments reorganize that capacity to dominate, control, and order peoples through multilingual fields, monumental script, landscape, and regional translations in which the coercion has already occurred to emphasize the king's divinely elected authority within the structured hierarchy of organized plurality. In

both systems, the writing is seen as well as read, and the Achaemenid use of writing as a visual and textual system clearly inherits from Near Eastern and Egyptian predecessors. What changes is how text is visually and textually oriented to emphasize different conceptions of imperial sovereignty.

6.6 Influence, Appropriation, and Reconfiguration

As has been demonstrated, the relationship between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art is full of complexity, and it cannot be reduced to direct borrowing, rejection, or simple continuity. The Achaemenids inherited a visual world in which empire had already been made legible through various mechanisms and motifs: scale, hierarchy, procession, royal centrality, enemy subjugation, architectural setting, and text and image as mutually reinforcing media.³⁶⁷ Yet the mechanisms do not produce the same rhetoric once they are placed in different contexts. Neo-Assyrian art was one of the most important and fully developed expressions of that world when it was inherited by the Achaemenids, but it was not the only source available to the Persians. The Achaemenid visual system also emerged from Elamite, Iranian, other Zagros, Babylonian, Egyptian, and wider Near Eastern traditions, as well as from the political conditions of Persian imperial formulation itself. Influence, therefore, cannot be imagined as a straight line where Persian art is wholly derivative of preceding forms.

Achaemenid art should thus be treated as a consciously formed program through a complex system of cultural influences in which carefully chosen motifs were selected, reworked, and manipulated to create a distinctive visual language of kingship.³⁶⁸ This provides

³⁶⁷ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 71–75; Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 210–28; DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–17; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 182–226, 227–84.

³⁶⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–3; Kuhrt, "Achaemenid Concept of Kingship," 156–57. Root frames Achaemenid art as a coherent imperial program produced through a complex cultural system of influences, while Kuhrt emphasizes Root's argument that Achaemenid rulers consciously reworked selected foreign motifs into a distinctive iconography of kingship.

the best framework for the synthesis of the previous sections. The question then is not whether a motif, posture, inscriptional habit, or compositional structure has a Neo-Assyrian, Egyptian, Elamite, or Zagros precedent. The more important question is what happens to that form when it is placed inside an Achaemenid visual system.

The most basic continuity is the organization of the world around the royal body. Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs repeatedly make the king the point through which everything becomes intelligible, a structure already visible in the architectural and ideological organization of the Northwest Palace at Kalhu and later royal residences (Figures 4.2, 4.16, 4.25, and 4.38).³⁶⁹ This organization could be violent, ritual, administrative, ceremonial, or protective, but it consistently made royal authority visible by showing the world brought into relation with the king (Figures 4.6–4.10, 4.12–4.14, 4.24, and 4.35–4.36). Achaemenid art retains this king-centered structure. At Behistun, Darius' authority is established through the bound rebels arranged before him, Gaumata beneath his foot, and Ahuramazda above delivering the rebels to him (Figures 5.10–5.15). At the Apadana, subject peoples approach the royal center through disciplined procession (Figures 5.19–5.26). In the throne-bearing motif, representatives of the empire physically sustain the elevated king (Figures 5.28–5.35).³⁷⁰ The difference here then is not an abandonment of hierarchy, but changing the dominant condition in which hierarchy is shown. Neo-Assyrian imagery often presents royal order as something imposed, demonstrated, or enforced, while Achaemenid imagery more often presents that order as already stabilized, mediated, and made ceremonially visible.³⁷¹

This distinction is clearest in the treatment of bodies. Neo-Assyrian art uses the body to make political relation immediately visible. Enemies bow, flee, are trampled, counted, flayed,

³⁶⁹ Winter, "Seat of Kingship," 27–55; Russell, "Program of the Palace," 655–715; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 62–75.

³⁷⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 182–226, 227–84; Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 787–817.

³⁷¹ Ataç, "Visual Formula and Meaning," 71–75; Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 787–817.

or led before the king. Tribute bearers and dignitaries turn foreignness into evidence of royal reach. Officials and attendants stand within graded proximity to royal power (Figures 3.6, 4.8, 4.12–4.14, 4.20–4.24, and 6.1).³⁷² The range of bodily treatment is much wider than simple domination as violence. Achaemenid art preserves the same concern with bodily relation, but reorganizes its visual consequences. The rebel body at Behistun remains coerced and subordinated and the violence is not removed, but it is arranged into a classified sequence of false claimants rather than shown through a narrative of defeat or displayed through mutilation (Figures 5.10–5.12).³⁷³ At Persepolis, the delegations are still subject to royal authority, but they are guided, differentiated, and made comparable within a ceremonial order (Figures 5.19–5.26).³⁷⁴ In the King on High motif, subordination becomes support where the bodies beneath the king signal inferiority while visibly sustaining the king's elevation (Figures 5.28, 5.30, and 5.32–5.35).³⁷⁵ Particularly in the King on High motif, the Achaemenid manipulation of recognizable motifs is manipulated to shape their distinctive iconographic ideology. Their transformation retains the dominant elements of Neo-Assyrian art and changes the way the dominated or subordinated bodies are made useful to kingship.

The representation of enemies and peoples develops the same point at the level of imperial identity. Neo-Assyrian art is not a single undifferentiated “Other”, since foreignness can be marked depending on the figure's relation to royal authority.³⁷⁶ This classification allowed difference to be degraded, displayed, extracted, incorporated, or made into evidence of universal reach.³⁷⁷ The gradient of exclusion to inclusion in Neo-Assyrian art depicts the sequence by which one becomes part of Assyrian order. Achaemenid art inherits this but

³⁷² Cifarelli, “Gesture and Alterity,” 210–28; DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–17; Dolce, “Head of the Enemy,” 121–32; Minen, “Flaying the Enemy,” 233–39.

³⁷³ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Kuhrt, “Achaemenid Concept of Kingship,” 156–60; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27.

³⁷⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 227–84; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors,” 116–17; Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75.

³⁷⁵ Root, *King and Kingship*, 61–71, 144–46; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors,” 103–49.

³⁷⁶ Cifarelli, “Gesture and Alterity,” 210–28.

³⁷⁷ DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 107–25.

separates the rebel from the subject peoples more sharply. Behistun still requires the defeated rebel body and remains close to older Near Eastern victory formulas, including local Zagros prototypes, and Neo-Assyrian modes of victory.³⁷⁸ The Apadana distinctly separates its imagery from narratives of defeat or rebellion and defines subject peoples through their depictions while keeping their procession ordered as a stable sequence organized into the imperial catalogue.³⁷⁹ The contrast here is the visual criterion of classification that comes from this sharper separation between rebel or enemy and subject peoples. Neo-Assyrian art will often keep conquest, punishment, tribute, and displacement close to the foreign body, while Achaemenid art more often transforms imperial difference into plurality ordered under the king.

Architecture and setting are equally important to this transformation. The Neo-Assyrian palace was an environment in which conquest, tribute, ritual, protection, inscription, threshold, and royal movement were concentrated around the institution of kingship.³⁸⁰ The viewer encountered foreign peoples and royal power within spaces saturated by campaigns, guardian figures, courtly protocol, ritual scenes, and inscriptions (Figures 4.3, 4.5–4.10, 4.18, and 4.20–4.24). Persepolis uses comparable mechanisms of controlled access, charged thresholds, relief sequence, and monumental approach, but redirects them towards a different effect. Morgan's analysis of the Apadana is especially useful because it shows that reliefs, porches, columns, threshold imagery, and architectural approach worked together to magnify royal power through ordered display rather than narrative conquest.³⁸¹ The Apadana makes the empire appear as a disciplined ceremonial totality whose diversity has already been arranged. This is why the same broad mechanism of architectural movement produces different rhetoric while keeping the

³⁷⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 221–27; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 900–901.

³⁷⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 227–84; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors,” 116–17.

³⁸⁰ Winter, “Seat of Kingship,” 27–55; Russell, “Program of the Palace,” 655–715; Kertai, “Architectural Presence,” 62–75.

³⁸¹ Morgan, “Who Has the Biggest Bulls?,” 787–817.

emphasis on submission. In the Neo-Assyrian palace, movement often leads through the king's capacity to conquer, punish, protect, and receive. At Persepolis, movement leads through an already ordered world converging on the king.

Text and image reveal another level. Neo-Assyrian inscriptions repeatedly bind royal speech to the visual and architectural field, with this most clearly seen at Kalhu, where the Standard Inscription saturates the wall surface.³⁸² Later epigraphic labels sharpen this relation as more specific identification without replacing the visual force of the reliefs themselves.³⁸³ Achaemenid inscriptions retain the power of these royal formulas, but Darius' trilingual program and the invention of Old Persian alter its imperial function. Old Persian primarily being reserved for monumental use rather than as an administrative tool made it more visually and textually significant because of this selected use, while its placement beside Elamite and Babylonian added to this because it would be viewed in the same context as well-established administrative languages. The Statue of Darius from Susa and the Canal Stelae translate Persian sovereignty through Egyptian and cuneiform systems. They attached Darius' rule to Egyptian visual and textual forms while keeping those forms within an Achaemenid imperial order (Figures 5.29, 5.34–5.35).³⁸⁴ Persepolitan inscriptions frame the architectural space with repeated claims of royal identity, divine election, building, and ordered empire rather than narrating the Apadana procession as a single event.³⁸⁵ The transformation here lies in how the Achaemenid inscriptions make the multilingual order part of imperial meaning while retaining the use of text and repetitive formulas to repeat, authorize, and anchor that meaning within imperial space.

³⁸² Paley, "Texts, Palace, and Reliefs," 533–43; Marchetti, "Texts Quoting Artworks," 85–90.

³⁸³ Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 25.

³⁸⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 61–71, 144–46; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 240–41; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 477–78.

³⁸⁵ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 230–39; De Chiara, "Persepolis and Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions," 143–52.

The result is a relationship of selective reconfiguration wherein the Achaemenids did not simply adopt nor replace Neo-Assyrian forms and violence with Persian harmony because they chose to retain many of its most powerful mechanisms. They drew from a wider Near Eastern and Egyptian repertoire in which scale, the ordered body, the classified subject, the defeated enemy, the elevated throne, the divine sanction, the monumental inscription, and the royal building as a field of power already had powerful visual histories.³⁸⁶ These inherited possibilities were then reorganized to meet the political needs of Achaemenid kingship. Behistun preserves the coercive language of victory because Darius' accession had to be defended and legitimized against rebellion and false kingship.³⁸⁷ Persepolis emphasizes procession, mediation, support, and ordered plurality because it presents kingship as an enduring imperial condition.³⁸⁸ The same empire could use both forms because the visual rhetoric changed according to the royal relation being made visible.

This is why such a synthesis must remain more nuanced than a mere contrast between domination and order. Neo-Assyrian art centered Assyrian domination, but it was not only violent. It could display diversity, incorporate officials, stage courtly protocol, and make foreign goods and peoples into signs of universal rule.³⁸⁹ Achaemenid art was not simply peaceful, because its hierarchy remained unmistakable, its subject peoples were subordinate, and Behistun explicitly preserved the coercive image of rebellion defeated.³⁹⁰ What differs is the dominant visual operation. Neo-Assyrian art often makes sovereignty visible through the king's power to overtly impose order, whether on bodies, cities, enemies, resources, or landscapes. Achaemenid art retains the notion of the king's power to impose order, however it more often

³⁸⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 61–71, 144–46, 182–226; Kuhrt, "Achaemenid Concept of Kingship," 156–60; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 900–901.

³⁸⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 221–27; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 900–901.

³⁸⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 227–84; Morgan, "Who Has the Biggest Bulls?," 787–817; Ali Mousavi, *Persepolis: Discovery and Afterlife of a World Wonder* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 70–76.

³⁸⁹ DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 107–25; Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 214–15.

³⁹⁰ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 182–226, 227–84; Brosius, *Persians*, 74–75.

makes sovereignty visible through the presentation of an empire already organized into stable relations beneath, before, and around the king as already authorized by Ahuramazda. The shared repertoire remains recognizable, and that is a purposeful selection by the Achaemenids. However, the rhetorical effect changes because the bodies, texts, thresholds, and motifs are manipulated to produce different modes of imperial kingship.

The importance of tracing these continuities and reconfigurations is not only that certain motifs moved across imperial traditions. It is that the same visual mechanisms could produce different concepts of sovereignty when their relations were altered. A prostrate body, a line of foreign figures, an inscriptional field, a royal throne, or a supporting figure does not have one fixed imperial meaning. Its force depends on identifying this reconfigured repertoire to explaining how visual rhetoric produces sovereignty through repeated arrangement of bodies, signs, texts, and viewing conditions.

6.7 From Domination to Order: Seeing Power Across Time

The significance of this synthesis is not only in how Achaemenid art preserved, selected, or transformed elements of a wider Near Eastern repertoire. It is that these transformations show how visual rhetoric produces sovereignty through relations. A motif does not carry a single political meaning by itself because that meaning changes according to the bodies, texts, architectural settings, and viewing conditions that surround it. The prostrate enemy, the bound rebel, the tribute bearer, the subject delegation, the throne-supporting figure, the royal inscription, and the elevated king all become meaningful because they are placed within a system of relations that tells the viewer what kind of authority is being encountered. This is the

methodological value of a semiotic approach: it allows continuity to be recognized without treating repeated forms as unchanged meanings.³⁹¹

This is where the concept of the image as an index is most useful. An imperial image resembles royal authority while directing the viewer to infer royal agency from visible effects arranged in stone.³⁹² The difference between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid rhetoric lies partly in what kind of agency the viewer is asked to infer. In the Neo-Assyrian palace, royal agency is often inferred from the visible consequences of action. Subordinated bodies, punished enemies, conquered cities, tribute being received, protected spaces, and foreign materials are drawn toward the king. In Achaemenid monumental art, royal agency is more often inferred from the visible condition of order. Differentiated peoples are already positioned, rebels already classified, languages already arranged, and support already coordinated beneath the king. Both systems make royal agency active, but they differ in whether that agency is most often inferred through the imposition of order or through the presentation of order as an already structured imperial condition.

This shift also clarifies the role of classification. The previous sections showed that Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monuments both sort bodies into political relations, but the theoretical significance is that this sorting does not merely reflect imperial knowledge but helps produce it. Power becomes visible as a system of categories that teaches the viewer how political reality should be recognized: who can approach, who must submit, who has rebelled, who belongs to the imperial core, who supports the king, and who only exists as defeated

³⁹¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–48. The point here is that inherited forms do not function as fixed symbols; their force depends on the relations through which they direct inference and produce presence.

³⁹² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19, 27. Gell's concept of the index is useful here because it explains how the viewer infers agency from a material sign rather than from direct encounter with the agent himself.

disorder.³⁹³ Visual rhetoric communicates sovereignty while producing the terms under which sovereignty appears to be true. Neo-Assyrian art often makes those terms legible through the transformation of bodies by royal action, while Achaemenid art more often makes them legible through the placement of bodies within an already ordered hierarchy. The rhetorical difference is therefore semiotic before it is tonal because the signs teach the different ways of recognizing what imperial order is.

The same applies to text and image. If images and inscriptions participate in presence rather than merely representing an absent king or event, then repetition, placement, script, and material are not secondary supports for ideology. They are part of how sovereignty is made present.³⁹⁴ Neo-Assyrian text-image practice produces royal presence cumulatively through the repeated royal name, inscribed wall, epigraph, carved body, and architectural route that densify the viewer's encounter with the king's power. Achaemenid text-image practice reorganizes that capacity by distributing royal presence across multilingual inscription, sacred landscape, Egyptian and cuneiform systems, and architectural formulas of imperial order. The visual and material arrangements produce different conditions of authority in which the written sign becomes part of the imperial order it names.

This is why the relationship between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art matters beyond influence and character and must be framed carefully. Its significance lies in identifying Achaemenid art as a synthesis rather than derivation and the altered semiotic work performed by inherited forms. The same broad visual mechanics could be retained while their indexical force changed. They gain force through relation, repetition, context, and the field of knowledge

³⁹³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94. Foucault's account of productive power is useful here because the reliefs do not merely depict already-existing categories; they help produce knowledge of political categories through visibility, placement, repetition, and bodily relation.

³⁹⁴ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–52, 168–74; Bahrani, "King's Head," 115–19. Bahrani's concept of visibility is useful here because it treats image, inscription, name, and represented body as participating in presence rather than only referring to an absent original.

in which the viewer encounters them. Neo-Assyrian art can show courtly protocol, incorporation, tribute, and diversity, but those signs often operate within a field where royal power is made legible through conquest, extraction, punishment, and enforced submission. It makes kingship experientially real by presenting the world as conquered, classified, and reordered through the king's agency. Achaemenid art can similarly show coercion, hierarchy, and subordination, but those signs often operate within a field where kingship is made experientially real by presenting the world as already ordered and differentiated into disciplined plurality, mediated approach, and coordinated support under the Great King's divinely sanctioned authority. Both systems focus on order, but they produce different experiences of sovereignty because they train different forms of recognition.

Therefore, this synthesis shows what kings claimed to be while demonstrating how imperial art helped produce the perceptual world in which those claims could be recognized as true. Images, texts, scripts, gestures, spaces, and bodies worked as material signs through which royal agency was inferred, political knowledge was organized, and royal presence was made available beyond the king's physical body. The transition from Assyria to Persia reveals not only a transformation in imperial style, but a transformation in how sovereignty could be made visible and real in how it is experienced.

Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has examined how Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid imperial art produced sovereignty through the arrangement of images, inscriptions, bodies, spaces, and viewing conditions. Its central argument has been that royal art participated in making authority visible, repeatable, and recognizable. This approach builds on theories of visibility, image agency, and productive power by treating monuments as active material and visual systems rather than as passive reflections of royal ideology.³⁹⁵ By approaching imperial monuments through visual rhetoric, semiotics, and text-image relations, the thesis has shown that sovereignty was produced through forms that organized how kingship, divine sanction, enemies, subject peoples, and imperial order could be seen and understood.

The comparison between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art has therefore not been framed as a simple question of influence or stylistic inheritance. Nor has it been reduced to a contrast between Assyrian violence and Achaemenid harmony. Neo-Assyrian art could incorporate foreign peoples, ritual protocol, tribute, and ordered display, while Achaemenid art could still represent coercion, hierarchy, defeated rebels, and strict subordination.³⁹⁶ The distinction lies instead in how each imperial system organized power visually. Neo-Assyrian art often makes sovereignty recognizable through the king's capacity to impose order: enemies are defeated, bodies are subordinated, tribute is received, cities are conquered, and royal action is repeated across palace walls and inscriptions.³⁹⁷ Achaemenid art retains many of these mechanisms, but frequently reconfigures them around the presentation of an already structured

³⁹⁵ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 1–6, 121–52; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28, 170–94.

³⁹⁶ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 2–38; DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–17; Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 182–226; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

³⁹⁷ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 2–38; Kertai, “Architectural Presence,” 62–75; Paley, “Texts, Palace, and Reliefs,” 533–43; Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–6.

imperial order: peoples approach through protocol, difference is preserved but regularized, rebels are classified as disorder, and the king is elevated above a coordinated imperial whole.³⁹⁸

The thesis has argued that this transformation should be understood as selective reconfiguration. Achaemenid imperial art depended on a broad Near Eastern repertoire of signs, including royal elevation, divine sanction, defeated bodies, processional order, throne support, monumental inscription, and the arrangement of foreign peoples.³⁹⁹ Yet it's been demonstrated how these signs did not carry a fixed meaning across time because their political force depended on the visual systems in which they appeared. A prostrate body, a bound enemy, a royal inscription, a line of subject peoples, or a throne-bearing figure could produce different meanings depending on how it was positioned in relation to king, god, text, space, and viewer.⁴⁰⁰ The movement from Neo-Assyrian to Achaemenid visual rhetoric was therefore a transformation in how sovereignty was made recognizable. It was a shift from a system that often emphasized the king's visible capacity to impose order through conquest, punishment, and display, to one that more often presented the king's capacity to impose order as an already structured relation among king, god, subject peoples, rebels, texts, and spaces.

7.2 Text and Image in the Production of Sovereignty

One of the central findings of this thesis is the manner in which text and image functioned as interdependent media of sovereignty. In both Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid imperial art, inscriptions and images did not do independent labor. Their force came from the way they worked together to name, classify, authorize, repeat, and materialize royal power. This

³⁹⁸ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54, 182–226; Morgan, “Who Has the Biggest Bulls?,” 787–817; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis,” 103–49; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

³⁹⁹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–7, 124, 154; Winter, “Seat of Kingship,” 27–55; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

⁴⁰⁰ Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 71–75; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54.

relationship is especially important because sovereignty had to be made durable beyond the king's physical body and beyond the immediate event of conquest, ritual, or accession. Image and text allowed royal authority to be fixed on palace walls, cliffs, statues, tablets, tombs, and architectural settings where it could be encountered repeatedly.⁴⁰¹

In the Neo-Assyrian material, this interaction is especially visible in the palace context. The Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II, repeated across the reliefs of the Northwest Palace, saturates the palace space with the king's name, titles, genealogy, military success, divine favor, and building achievement, making the relief field itself a surface of royal assertion.⁴⁰² Later Neo-Assyrian epigraphs and labels develop this relationship further by anchoring scenes to particular campaigns, places, enemies, or victories.⁴⁰³ The result is a cumulative environment in which text, image, architecture, and viewer movement reinforce the repeated presence of the king's authority.

The Achaemenid material reorganizes this relationship rather than abandoning it or wholly adopting it. At Behistun, the image of Darius, Gaumata, the bound rebels, and Ahuramazda cannot be separated from the monumental inscription that surrounds and explains the scene. The relief establishes a visual hierarchy of king, god, defeated usurper, and rebels, while the inscription names the rebels, narrates their false claims, and defines Darius' kingship through divine election and the restoration of order.⁴⁰⁴ The trilingual field is also significant because script and language become part of the monument's visual and political work. Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian transmit the same content to different audiences while their arrangement helps visualize empire as a structured plurality of languages, traditions, and political subjects organized under Darius' authority. The introduction of Old Persian at Behistun

⁴⁰¹ Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–52; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27.

⁴⁰² Paley, "Texts, Palace, and Reliefs," 533–43; Marchetti, "Texts Quoting Artworks," 85–90.

⁴⁰³ Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs," 1–6; Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38.

⁴⁰⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

heightens this by being a statement about the new imperial order and its interaction with older forms.⁴⁰⁵

The same principle appears in different form in the Statue of Darius from Susa and in the Persepolitan inscriptions. The Statue of Darius brings Egyptian and cuneiform systems into contact within a single royal object, translating kingship across distinct visual and textual traditions while subordinating them to the figure and name of Darius.⁴⁰⁶ At Persepolis, the inscriptions do not label each delegation in the manner of an ethnographic catalogue. Instead, they operate at the level of royal formula, similarly to the Standard Inscription in function, architecture, and dynastic statement, repeating the king's relation to Ahuramazda, lineage, building activity, and the ordered extent of empire.⁴⁰⁷ The absence of delegation labels is therefore not a lack of textual control because it instead reflects a different organization of text-image relations. The processional bodies produce ordered plurality visually while the inscriptions frame the architectural complex as a royal and divinely sanctioned achievement.

Across both imperial systems, writing is therefore visual, spatial, and material, and must be considered alongside imagery. Its placement, repetition, language, scale, and relation to carved bodies shape how sovereignty is encountered. Neo-Assyrian text-image practice often intensifies royal presence through accumulation or specific labels: the inscribed palace, the repeated royal name, the campaign label, the annalistic claim, and the carved body all draw the viewer into a dense field of conquest, construction, ritual, and control. Achaemenid text-image practice often reorganizes that capacity through multilingual monumentality, regional translation, and formulaic statements of divine sanction and imperial order. The transformation lies not in the abandonment of older Near Eastern inscriptional habits, but in their

⁴⁰⁵ Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–24, 239–42.

⁴⁰⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 477–79.

⁴⁰⁷ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89; De Chiara, "Persepolis and Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions," 143–52; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 239–42.

reconfiguration within a different visual system. In both cases, text and image produce sovereignty by making royal authority legible, material, and repeatable.

7.3 Transformation of Near Eastern Iconographies of Power

The transformation traced in this thesis concerns the changing relations among inherited signs of kingship. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid imperial art share a broad repertoire of royal elevation, divine sanction, bodily hierarchy, foreign peoples, defeated enemies, processional movement, architectural framing, and inscriptional authority.⁴⁰⁸ Yet we have seen that the continuity of these signs does not mean that they produced the same political meaning. The central issue is not one of borrowing or rejection, but how recognizable mechanisms of power were reorganized into a different visual system.

In Neo-Assyrian art, imperial power is often articulated through the visible consequences of royal action. The king appears with incredible agency as the one who conquers cities, defeats enemies, receives tribute, hunts lions, crosses landscapes, and imposes hierarchy on bodies and spaces.⁴⁰⁹ Foreign peoples and enemies are not represented in a single way, since Neo-Assyrian art includes tribute bearers, dignitaries, deportees, defeated enemies, and incorporated officials.⁴¹⁰ The iconography of power here is cumulative as it builds sovereignty through the repeated display of the king's capacity to act upon the world and to make that action visible in bodies, inscriptions, architecture, and narrative sequence.

Achaemenid art transforms this repertoire by reorganizing the relation between royal power and imperial difference. Behistun still uses defeated bodies, divine sanction, and

⁴⁰⁸ Winter, "'Seat of Kingship'/'A Wonder to Behold,'" 27–55; Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–7, 124, 154; Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men," 219–75.

⁴⁰⁹ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2–38; Kertai, "Architectural Presence," 62–75; Bahrani, "King's Head," 115–19.

⁴¹⁰ Cifarelli, "Gesture and Alterity," 210–28; DeGrado, "King of the Four Quarters," 111–17.

monumental inscription to define kingship through the suppression of rebellion.⁴¹¹ In that context, coercion remains central because Darius' authority is presented through the defeat and classification of false claimants. However, Persepolis and the related Achaemenid royal monuments shift the dominant emphasis toward imperial arrangement. Delegations approach through controlled protocol, peoples remain differentiated by costume and gift, and throne-bearing figures support the elevated king as parts of a coordinated imperial structure.⁴¹² The subject body remains differentiated and placed within a hierarchy that makes difference serve the visual production of order.

This is why the distinction between Neo-Assyrian domination and Achaemenid order must be understood as a rhetorical and semiotic distinction rather than as a stylistic or moral contrast. Neo-Assyrian art does not simply represent violence, and Achaemenid art does not simply represent harmony. Both systems visualize hierarchy, subordination, divine sanction, and imperial control. The difference lies in the dominant organization of those elements. Neo-Assyrian art often makes sovereignty recognizable through the king's power to impose order on enemies, cities, animals, officials, and foreign peoples. Achaemenid art often makes sovereignty recognizable through the presentation of those relations as already arranged within a stable imperial whole.⁴¹³

The transformation of Near Eastern iconographies of power therefore occurs through selective reconfiguration rather than replacement. Achaemenid art did not abandon older signs of conquest, elevation, inscription, divine sanction, or foreign submission. It selected and manipulated them according to different political needs: the stabilization of Darius' contested accession at Behistun, the display of imperial totality at Persepolis, and the translation of

⁴¹¹ Root, *King and Kingship*, 182–226; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

⁴¹² Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54; Morgan, “Who Has the Biggest Bulls?,” 787–817; Roaf, “Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis,” 103–49.

⁴¹³ Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 71–75; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 19–27; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27–28.

kingship across regional traditions in monuments such as the Statue of Darius from Susa.⁴¹⁴ In each case, the inherited repertoire remains visible, but its rhetorical force changes because the relation among signs has changed. Power is no longer presented primarily as the repeated demonstration of what the king can do to the world, but as the ordered condition produced by the king's divinely sanctioned rule over a differentiated empire. Subordination, hierarchy, and the king's incredible agency remain central but are experienced differently.

This transformation is the main conclusion of the thesis. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art belong to a shared Near Eastern history of imperial visibility, but they do not use that history in the same way. The Achaemenid visual system depends on inherited forms while altering the conditions under which those forms signify. The iconography of power therefore changes not because one empire had power and the other had peace, but because each system made sovereignty recognizable through different arrangements of king, god, body, text, architecture, and viewer.

7.4 Contribution and Future Perspectives

The contribution of this thesis lies in its treatment of imperial art as a system that produces sovereignty through visual, textual, spatial, and material relations. Studies of Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art have long examined royal rhetoric, palace reliefs, kingship, inscription, iconography, and imperial identity.⁴¹⁵ This thesis builds on that scholarship but brings these fields together through a method that emphasizes how sovereignty is generated through the interaction of image and text, body and inscription, architecture and viewer, continuity and reconfiguration. Its aim has not been to replace iconographic, historical, or

⁴¹⁴ Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54, 182–226; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

⁴¹⁵ Winter, “Royal Rhetoric,” 2–38; Bahrani, *Graven Image*, 121–52; Root, *King and Kingship*, 1–7; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75.

philological analysis, but to show how those approaches can be connected through a semiotic and visual-rhetorical framework.

This contribution is especially important for the comparison between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid art. The relationship between the two traditions cannot be understood only through influence, borrowing, or stylistic continuity. Nor can it be adequately explained through a contrast between domination and harmony. The thesis has instead shown that both imperial systems used related visual mechanisms while organizing them differently to create different experiences of imperial sovereignty. Neo-Assyrian art often concentrated royal agency through conquest, punishment, tribute, ritual, and palace display. Achaemenid art retained many of the same mechanisms but reconfigured them into a visual system that emphasized ordered plurality, mediated approach, divine sanction, and the king's position above a coordinated empire.⁴¹⁶ This argument clarifies how Achaemenid art could be deeply connected to older Near Eastern traditions while still producing a distinct imperial rhetoric.

The thesis also contributes to the study of text-image relations in ancient imperial art. Rather than treating inscriptions as explanatory supplements to images, it has argued that writing was itself an active participant in the visual field. In Neo-Assyrian palaces, repeated inscriptions, epigraphs, labels, and annalistic claims intensified royal presence within architectural space.⁴¹⁷ In Achaemenid monuments, multilingual inscriptions, royal formulae, and regional textual systems reorganized that capacity by placing different languages and traditions under the authority of the king.⁴¹⁸ Text and image therefore functioned together as media through which sovereignty was named, authorized, classified, and made durable.

⁴¹⁶ Root, *King and Kingship*, 86–89, 131–54, 182–226; Morgan, “Who Has the Biggest Bulls?,” 787–817; DeGrado, “King of the Four Quarters,” 111–17; Ataç, “Visual Formula and Meaning,” 71–75.

⁴¹⁷ Paley, “Texts, Palace, and Reliefs,” 533–43; Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs,” 1–6; Marchetti, “Texts Quoting Artworks,” 85–90.

⁴¹⁸ Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men,” 219–75; De Chiara, “Persepolis and Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions,” 143–52; Root, *King and Kingship*, 131–54.

Future research could extend this method in several directions. One possibility would be to examine how later imperial traditions inherited, transformed, or rejected Achaemenid strategies of visual order. Hellenistic, Parthian, Sasanian, and later Iranian imperial contexts all raise questions about how royal elevation, divine sanction, foreign peoples, inscriptional authority, and architectural display continued to change after the Achaemenid period. Another possibility would be to expand the regional scope of the analysis by examining how local audiences, provincial monuments, seals, coins, and smaller objects participated in the production of sovereignty beyond the major royal centers. This would allow the relationship between central imperial rhetoric and local visual practice to be studied more fully.

The broader implication of the thesis is that imperial power cannot be understood only as something represented by monuments. It must also be understood as something produced through them. Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid royal art arranged bodies, texts, gods, kings, enemies, subject peoples, and viewers into systems that made political order visible and intelligible. The forms changed across time, but the problem remained constant: sovereignty had to be made recognizable. By tracing how that recognition was produced, repeated, and reconfigured, this thesis has shown that imperial art was not merely a record of power. It was one of the media through which power became sovereignty.

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