Mesopotamia in the Ancient World

Impact, Continuities, Parallels

Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium of the Melammu Project Held in Obergurgl, Austria, November 4–8, 2013

Edited by
Robert Rollinger and Erik van Dongen
Melammu Symposia 7

Edited by Robert Rollinger (Helsinki / Innsbruck)

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Response

Jonathan Valk and Beate Pongratz-Leisten

Introduction

Representations of power operate within particular contexts. The symbols, language, and physical forms used to communicate and legitimize power are by no means arbitrary; rather, they draw upon and refashion a pre-existing tradition. Investigating the traditions that underlie representations of power is thus essential to a full understanding of their meaning and function. It is the task of any scholar studying representations of power to determine why these representations took the form that they did: why were certain elements from a given tradition included and why were others not? How did representations serve to legitimize claims to power? In what ways did representations of power innovate and reinvent the ideological traditions from which they drew? And critically, what were the processes through which the physical representations of power themselves came into being? In other words, recovering the contexts – both ideational and material – that gave rise to specific representations of power is fundamental to understanding them. Recovering such contexts is the most reliable way to shed light on the nature, function, and particular characteristics of traditions of powerholding and the sociopolitical milieus that produced them. All four of this panel’s papers – each in their own way – deal with some of these important problems.

Rocío Da Riva: Neo-Babylonian Landscape Monuments

Rocío Da Riva’s paper on Neo-Babylonian landscape monuments in the Levant raises important questions about the function and purpose of imperial monuments on the periphery of empire. In Assyriological scholarship, the topic of symbolically marking conquered and controlled space by means of landscape monuments and steles was first addressed programmatically by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi in his article *Stele e Statue Reali Assiri*,¹ and further considered by Mario Liverani in his book *Prestige and Interest*.² The earliest attestation of the practice of carving rock reliefs in locations remote from the center of political control – in places regarded as being at the margins of the known world – is from the Akkadian period, when

¹ Morandi Bonacossi, 1998.
² Liverani, 1990.
Mesopotamian rulers campaigned far north into the Anatolian plateau and toward the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, erecting monuments at or beyond the fringes of empire was not standard practice for the many potentates of Mesopotamia, either then or later. In the pre-Persian ancient Near East, the practice is characteristic only of those polities with pretensions to universal dominion, specifically Akkad, imperial Assyria, and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Elsewhere in the ancient Near East before the Neo-Babylonian period, landscape monuments on the periphery of empire are known for Egypt and the Hittites – not coincidentally the two non-Mesopotamian powers that similarly entertained pretensions to universal dominion.

Rocío Da Riva’s paper focuses on a number of landscape monuments associated with the Neo-Babylonian kings Nebuchadnezzar II and Nabonidus. As Da Riva observes, all of these monuments were situated at strategic points in the landscape, “in geographically and culturally significant places”. These include key communication routes and road junctions, valleys, springs, mountain passes, and river passes. As such, the placement of the landscape monuments reveals that they were designed to be seen, so that they could effectively communicate their ideological and political message to their intended audiences.

It would be useful if more detailed attention were paid here to the question of audience: who are the monuments for? Who is supposed to see them, and what message are the monuments supposed to convey? It is possible to identify at least four distinct audiences for the ideological and political message of the Neo-Babylonian landscape monuments discussed by Da Riva, even if some of these might not have been intended and if many of the subtleties of the monuments’ message will have been lost to these audiences. Most obviously, the monuments assert symbolic control over territory against the claims of competing powers and political mastery over distant landscapes. The strategic significance of the sites of the Neo-Babylonian landscape monuments as locations of military encounter and political competition was intensified by the fact that already in earlier times Neo-Assyrian and Egyptian kings had left their signifiers of territorial control in the area – in the case of Nahr al-Kalb, even in the very same place. As Da Riva argues, “by adding his inscription at Nahr al-Kalb, the Babylonian king (Nebuchadnezzar II) entered into negotiation and competition with his rivals, one real and the other symbolic: the Assyrians, historic opponents of his father Nabopolassar, and the Egyptians, his current political opponents in the Levant”. A second identifiable audience is the local population and those travelling through the region, who will have been constantly reminded of the prevailing political power (Babylon) by the sheer physicality of the monuments. Third, it is easy to imagine that Babylonian armies marching past these monuments during some of their frequent campaigns in the region will have felt emboldened by seeing their power and dominance manifest in the landscape. Finally, these monuments will have spoken to the gods and future generations of the achievements of the Neo-Babylonian kings.

It is important to remember that landscape monuments in peripheral areas are generally located in sites that are only imperfectly controlled by the imperial center.

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On one level, then, these monuments are aspirational – they demonstrate intent to master the regions in which they are to be found and express the ability to permanently mark distant landscapes. They can thus be interpreted as projecting in physical form a level of control over lands that does not in fact exist. Landscape monuments on the periphery of empire were distant from the great urban centers of Babylonia, were there were educated audiences and a broader public more conversant with the subtleties of the monuments’ ideological and symbolic message. While monuments on the periphery of empire do not address the imperial center directly, they should not be regarded as existing in an “alien” context. The longstanding Assyrian tradition of landscape monuments in peripheral areas demonstrates that they constitute an established and important avenue for the dissemination of imperial ideology. Peripheral landscape monuments do cater to a set of audiences distinct from those of the imperial center, but this by no means diminishes their importance or marks their setting as in any way peculiar. After all, mastering the chaos of the periphery is one of the central tasks of kingship as conceived in Mesopotamia, and physically marking the landscape is a clear way to demonstrate such mastery.

The technical and iconographic aspects of the landscape monuments also raise some interesting questions. Remarkably, the Brisa A relief of Nebuchadnezzar displays a Neo-Assyrian royal stance alien to the self-representation of Neo-Babylonian kings – specifically, the image of the king slaying a lion, which constituted the seal of Assyrian kingship. The problem of who actually decided upon the iconography of landscape monuments in regions remote from the political center requires further research. Da Riva points out that Nebuchadnezzar’s Wadi Brisa and Nahr al-Kalb reliefs are written in both Old Babylonian archaic script and in Neo-Babylonian script, suggesting the work of skilled craftsmen and learned scribes. Did these craftsmen and scribes belong to circles whose fathers and grandfathers had worked in this region when it was under Assyrian control and who decided to perpetuate an imagery known to them from long-standing tradition? Or were they brought in from Babylonia specifically to design and create the monuments? If craftsmen were brought in to do the work, why did they reproduce Neo-Assyrian iconography? Fundamentally, what was the role of the political center in the design and execution of these monuments? These are important questions that require further study.

In sum, Da Riva brings together the evidence regarding Neo-Babylonian landscape monuments in peripheral areas and begins the process of interpretation. There are, however, many questions that remain to be answered and further points in need of clarification.

**Dirk Wicke: Assyrian Imperial Art in Southern Anatolia**

Dirk Wicke’s paper asks to what extent Anatolian artistic traditions were influenced by Assyrian models. In cases where Assyrian influence on Anatolian objects is clear, should we consider these objects “Assyrian” or “Assyrianizing”? As Wicke states,

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4 For the importance of Assyria to Syro-Anatolian elites beyond imperial control, see Lanfranchi, 2007.
there is an immediate difficulty in defining and determining what criteria allow classification of an object as “Assyrian”, an intractable question that is very difficult to answer productively. Providing a satisfactory answer becomes all the more challenging when provincial art is being discussed, as the quality of the craftsmanship and remoteness from the political and artistic center can confuse the distinction between crude Assyrian art and local art incorporating Assyrian themes. The problem becomes still more complex when one takes into account the fact that Assyrian art itself changed over time, subject to various fashions and indeed external influence.

Wicke helps advance the discussion of this question by identifying and adopting the sole apparent avenue of productive investigation, namely identifying particular objects, motifs, and combinations of the two that are absent from the Assyrian tradition while being common in Anatolia. When Anatolian artistic combinations alien to Assyria – like funerary stelae with banqueting scenes – also incorporate typically Assyrian features like Assyrian hairstyles, garments, or furniture, then it is possible to assert that an object combines two traditions, Assyrian and Anatolian. As Wicke contends, it is thus also possible to regard this object as “Assyrianizing”. But is the reverse also true? Could some objects be productively regarded as “Anatolianizing”? The Terqa stele of Tukultī-Ninurta II comes immediately to mind: on it, the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta II is depicted in the iconography and style of Syro-Hittite kings, while the royal representation is accompanied by an Assyrian inscription. What we have is a clear example of an Assyrian king being represented in an “Anatolian” style in what on the basis of its inscription is otherwise a standard Assyrian monument.

To better understand the dynamics of “Assyrianizing” and “Anatolianizing” art, we must return to one of the questions asked about Neo-Babylonian landscape monuments in the Levant: who produced the art? Was it the product of local craftsmen or made by craftsmen from the imperial center? Michelle Marcus’ study of seals from Hasanlu concluded that they fit into three broad categories: seals displaying iconography alien to the Assyrian tradition, seals incorporating Assyrian themes, and seals indistinguishable from those of Assyria proper. Marcus found that seals in the last category – fully Assyrian – had been imported from Assyria, while those of the other two categories were produced locally. That there was cultural contact is thus abundantly clear – but is it also conceivable that for larger projects, Assyrian or Anatolian elites would have brought not only Assyrian objects but also Assyrian craftsmen to the periphery? If Assyrian craftsmen were brought to the periphery to produce certain objects for elites, then what are the implications for the interpretation of objects combining Anatolian and Assyrian styles and features? Are such combinations an indication of the coexistence and possibly the cooperation of Assyrian and Anatolian craftsmen, who influenced one another directly?

Further questions abound. Parts of Anatolia and North-Syria were under direct and indirect Assyrian rule at different stages, and it is clear that at certain times local

\[5\] Marcus, 1988.
Assyrian governors enjoyed much freedom from the political center. Might some of these governors have adopted certain local practices and artistic conventions, and commissioned “Anatolianized” Assyrian art or Assyrian art on objects that were not part of Assyria’s standard artistic repertoire? It is important to remember that while there is a clear cultural and political context that enabled the spread of Assyrian influence from the imperial center into Anatolia, the reverse is also true, even if not as immediately obvious. Certainly, Assyrians in Anatolia cannot have remained immune to the influence of the cultural norms and artistic preferences of the people among whom they lived. Further, it must always be kept in mind what the intended audience for any object might have been. If the audience was comprised of Anatolian elites, then the Assyrian administration or its craftsmen may have produced “Anatolianizing” art to more effectively communicate their message. It should also be noted that some of the Assyrian governors were themselves of local origin: did they simply incorporate Assyrian motifs and symbols into the local art forms with which they were familiar?

Of course, when we are dealing with objects that can be identified with indigenous Anatolian rulers or elites but exhibit Assyrian characteristics, this is clearly a scenario in which “Assyrianizing” is to be understood. The question, then, becomes why? Why would Anatolian rulers adopt Assyrian artistic practices? As Wicke observes, there is no evidence of any enforced “Assyrianizing” directed by Assyria or its agents, nor is there good reason to suppose that there was. To find out why there was any “Assyrianizing” art at all, we need to ask to what extent “Assyrianizing” was politically meaningful. In other words, is “Assyrianizing” art a conscious political decision making a statement of allegiance or subservience to Assyria, or does it simply reflect changing fashions and artistic trends influenced by Assyrian political success? The answer to that question must be determined on a case by case basis, if it is answerable at all. Wicke is right, however, to conclude that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the most attractive explanation for “Assyrianizing” art is elite emulation – a process attested in most times and places and perfectly natural given the prevailing political conditions in eastern Anatolia. With this sound conclusion, Wicke helps us move beyond arguments about the motives that produced “Assyrianizing” art, which are largely conducted on the basis of meager or nonexistent evidence. The default explanation of elite emulation also provides us with a basic interpretative framework that should be contested only where there is a solid evidentiary basis from which to do so.

**Christoph Schäfer: Seleucid Royal Representation**

Christoph Schäfer investigates the royal representation of the Seleucid dynasty and sheds light on its basic parameters. Given that Seleucid power was based primarily in Mesopotamia, it is interesting to ask whether any special effort was made by the Seleucids to incorporate the region’s traditions into their own representations of power. The key insight of Schäfer’s exposition is that the main thrust of Seleucid

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royal representation is focused on the right of Seleucus – and by extension his descendants – to inherit the vast realm of Alexander the Great. This is not surprising given that Alexander’s conquests constituted the basis of Seleucus’ right to rule, and it was therefore essential that Seleucus be represented as Alexander’s legitimate heir. Indeed, the wars that followed Alexander’s death were fought between numerous rivals, all of whom laid claim to Alexander’s legacy and presented themselves as his legitimate successor. Seleucus was but one of them, even if he was arguably the most successful.

As Schäfer makes clear, there are a host of stories associating Seleucus with Alexander. One group represents Seleucus with the diadem of Alexander, signaling his legitimacy by linking him to the physical symbol of Alexander’s rule. Appian tells the story that when Alexander was still alive, a gust of wind blew his diadem off of his head, only for it to land by some reeds near the tombs of the Assyrian kings (Appian, *Syriake* ix.56). Seleucus went to retrieve it, and put it on his head as he swam back to the boat to keep it dry. This tale is said to presage both the death of Alexander, as the diadem landed by the tombs of the Assyrian kings, and Seleucus’ legitimate succession, as it was he who retrieved the diadem and it was upon his head that the diadem was placed, even if it was Seleucus himself who put it there. This representation – promoted in the body of royal representation that depict Seleucus wearing Alexander’s diadem – signals Seleucus’ selection by the gods. It is important to point out that comparable stories circulated about other individuals who sought to inherit Alexander’s realm, among them Lysimachus; it is thus plain that we are dealing with an episode of dubious historicity at best, which was promoted to link the subject to Alexander and legitimize the subject’s claims to succeed Alexander. We must also be careful not to accept at face value the many accounts of the personal bravery of Seleucus – the possibility that they are literary constructs needs to be considered seriously. Following the death of Seleucus, the emphasis of Seleucid royal representation focuses more on the figure of Seleucus himself, descent from whom formed the new basis for royal legitimacy. As Schäfer indicates, a cult of Seleucus was instituted, the genealogy of Seleucus was manipulated to include links to gods and heroes, and his deeds were glorified.

One difficulty that emerges from Schäfer’s presentation is the relative absence in Seleucid royal representation of material obviously intended for the consumption of an indigenous Mesopotamian audience. Almost none of the surviving representational material produced by the Seleucids spoke directly to traditional Mesopotamian audiences. With the exception of the problematic Borsippa cylinder, there are no Seleucid cuneiform inscriptions, no monuments in the tradition of Mesopotamian kingship, no clear indication that the Seleucids, with their devotion to Apollo, made any effort to fulfill the paramount religious roles of traditional Mesopotamian kingship. It is true that the figure of Seleucus was linked to the divine and a cult of Seleucus established, but this was done in explicitly Hellenistic terms. As for Alexander, there is no indication that he was particularly highly regarded in Mesopotamia outside of Hellenistic circles or that he was considered to be a source for legitimacy of any sort. The pervasive appeals of Seleucid royal representation to Seleucus’ status as the legitimate heir of Alexander cannot, therefore, have been
targeted at an indigenous Mesopotamian audience. The predominance of a Hellenistic mode of representation is truly striking – particularly in light of the fact that the transmission of ritual texts like the New Year Festival in Uruk and Babylon appears to indicate a different reality, in which the ruling monarch complied with some of the longstanding traditions associated with Mesopotamian kingship.7

The question of audience is again central. For whom was the discourse of Seleucid royal representation intended? The evidence indicates that the answer to that question is primarily for the Hellenes and those associated with them. Only for them was the question of Alexander of any real interest, only they understood the Hellenistic terms in which Seleucid royal representation was formulated, and it is they who constituted the Seleucid elite that could either threaten or secure the power of the Seleucid dynasts. While Schäfer helps shed light on the contours of Seleucid royal representation, there is still much work to be done to improve our understanding of Seleucid interaction with Mesopotamian tradition, and to explore how indigenous Mesopotamian elites interacted with their Seleucid rulers.

Mario Fales: The Implications of Sennacherib’s Self-Representation

Mario Fales’ paper analyzes Sennacherib’s so-called “religious reform” by examining closely two pieces of evidence from his reign, namely the monumental complex near Khinnis and Sennacherib’s seal of destinies. Fales adds to a substantial body of literature on the character of Assyrian royal representation and manages to demonstrate clearly the extent to which Assyrian representations of power reflect political realities. The ideological character of Sennacherib’s exaltation of the god Aššur at the expense of the cult of Marduk is evident in the imagery of both the Khinnis complex and the seal of destinies, in which the Assyrian king is shown alone facing the god Aššur in a posture of obeisance while Aššur’s consort Mullissu stands behind him. As Fales observes, the imagery evokes the king’s uniquely intimate position with the supreme god Aššur in a new way. The Bavian inscription in turn demonstrates that this new representation of power followed upon and was tied to Sennacherib’s destruction of Babylon.

Fales’ study recreates not only the ideological landscape in which the imagery of the Khinnis complex and the seal of destinies should be understood, but also helps make sense of the consequent innovations in Assyrian royal representation. In particular, Aššur can be seen to usurp the mythological role of Marduk, as is clear from the association of the tablet of destinies with him rather than with Marduk. In the Babylonian *Enûma Eliš*, it is of course Marduk – and not Aššur – who captures the tablet of destinies from Qingu and Tiamat. By claiming the tablet of destinies for Aššur and the seal of destinies for himself, Sennacherib appropriates supreme power for his god and presents himself as the chosen enforcer of Aššur’s will on earth. As Fales rightly concludes, the chosen iconography of Sennacherib demonstrates how

seemingly innocuous changes to royal representation can be laden with meaning. Sennacherib subtly manipulates an established tradition, reinventing it to sanction and promote change in the present. The chief observation that one should come away with is that Mesopotamian traditions of royal representation – for all that they are often depicted as static and unchanging – are in fact dynamic, ever-changing, and the source of much insight on the sociopolitical conditions that produced them. Representations of power in the ancient Near East draw upon tradition, but are also in constant dialogue with it, reshaping it to meet the needs of the present, reinvent the past, and imagine the future. Fales’ case study is a clear and timely reminder of this.

Conclusion

All four of this panel’s papers are important contributions to scholarship on representations of power in the ancient Near East. As research progresses, the following questions on representations of power should be emphasized and kept in mind by all scholars. Who is commissioning representations of power? Who is designing and crafting them? Who is their intended audience? Which iconographic and ideological traditions are they drawing on, and how do they innovate within them? Answers will vary from case to case, but it is only when these questions are satisfactorily answered that particular representations of power can be properly understood.

In the interest of parallels, the broadening of our chronological and geographic scope, and the question of relevance raised by Erik van Dongen at the beginning of the symposium, we offer a final – perhaps more frivolous – observation about representations of power, involving the parallel between those of the ancient Near East and their contemporary counterparts. In South Dakota the colossal heads of four US presidents have been carved into the face of Mt. Rushmore, surveying the wilderness and subduing it by their mere presence – not unlike the landscape monuments of the ancient Near East. In much of the world, portraits of political leaders continue to be ubiquitous. This is certainly true for the modern Near East. Portraits of rulers like Jordan’s King ‘Abd-Allah welcome the traveler into the country, and accompany her or him throughout their journey. Frequently, these portraits depict rulers in highly symbolic and ideologically charged situations: ‘Abd-Allah commanding the army, ‘Abd-Allah building roads, ‘Abd-Allah taking care of children, ‘Abd-Allah on the hajj to Mecca. More ominously, one thinks of the vast and highly ideological propaganda output of the North Korean regime. Both the founder of North Korea, Kim Il-Sung, and his son and successor Kim Jong-Il have been all but deified since passing away, and numerous stories are promoted about the miraculous feats they continue to perform from the grave. Kim Jong-Un, the current ruler of North Korea and heir to his father and grandfather, is, like the previous Kims, often depicted smiting enemies, achieving the impossible, and ensuring justice and prosperity for his people. Indeed, all three Kims are said to have supernatural abilities, to excel in all things, and to possess unrivalled charisma – modern day melammu, if you will pardon the comparison. As may be apparent, representations of power of the kind produced for the Kim dynasty in North Korea – as well as those produced elsewhere in today’s
world – offer a striking parallel to the representations of power of many ancient Near Eastern potentates. The sociological, political, and cultural similarities between the two merit thorough investigation, and remind us that although historical contexts change, some tropes and modes of representation aspire to eternal life.

**Bibliography**


