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# ASSURNASIRPAL AS LITERARY STYLIST

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## **SUMMARY**

*Remarks on elements of the “Standard Inscription” of Assurnasirpal II, King of Assyria, with consideration of its roots in the past and its literary originality and appeal to the ruler’s vision of his own reign as a new departure in Assyrian expansion, governance, and architecture, as well as a dramatic innovation in the deployment of text and image.*

## **KEY WORDS**

*Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu, Standard Inscription, Assyrian literature.*

## **RESUMEN**

*Presentamos unas observaciones sobre los elementos de la “Inscripción estándar” de Assurnasirpal II, rey de Asiria, con consideración de sus raíces en el pasado y su originalidad literaria, y su apelación a la visión del gobernante de su propio reinado como un nuevo punto de partida en la expansión, el gobierno y la arquitectura asirios, así como una innovación dramática en el empleo de textos e imágenes.*

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu, Inscripción estándar, literatura asiria.*

The American historian A. T. Olmstead, writing at the height of World War I, introduced the memorable phrase “calculated frightfulness” to refer not only to the atrocities of Assurnasirpal II, but also to his fervid boasting of them in his *Annals*. Squarely in the tradition of writers who judged ancient rulers by the extent of their subdued territories, Olmstead deemed Assurnasirpal unsuccessful:

To no small degree, the reign of Ashur nasir apal must be deemed a failure. Assyria was enriched by booty, fine palaces were erected, but it was small return for the loss of the native Assyrian peasantry kept away from their homes, with the consequent falling off of the birth rate, so that their places must be taken by serfs deported from foreign countries. Assyria was too small to sustain so great a draft of men and ultimate collapse was inevitable (Olmstead 1918: 254).

Unpacking Olmstead’s historical perspective in the context of his time would offer an adventure worthy of a historian of the Rome School, such as my longtime friend and colleague M. Giovanna Biga, who once delved into the inscriptions of Assurnasirpal herself (Badali et al. 1982). But my purpose here is to make a small excavation into the ruins of Kalhu in search of another aspect of that Assyrian king: certain creative aspects of his commemoration.

Already Olmstead suggested that the move of the Assyrian capital had more than practical significance, including, in his words, “a desire to be free from the memories of former generations” (Olmstead 1918: 256; for the relationship of the move to a growing preference for Standard Babylonian, Frahm 2014: 145), perhaps a rather negative view of originality. But von Soden was more balanced, characterizing Assurnasirpal as both “*brutaler Eroberer und Förderer der Kunst*”, and here what Olmstead dismissed in two words as “fine palaces” comes to the foreground. For von Soden, the conception and craftsmanship of the palace at Kalhu and its reliefs bespeak a proud and personally motivated aesthetic inspired

by the reliefs and fierce, massive orthostats of the palaces encountered by the Assyrians in their westward campaigns, but brought to a much higher level of sophistication (von Soden 1956: 86-87; more modern survey of the reign by Grayson 1982: 253-259). Russell (1999) lamented that the highly complex and revealing relationships among the inscriptions on the fronts and backs of the wall slabs, small tablets buried in the walls, door sills, and colossi had been obscured by modern philologists who were not interested in their architectural contexts and were further obscured by composite editions that made it nearly impossible to associate any given text passage with a specific original. He began the task of reuniting the writing with the original surfaces. Howard (2017) undertook a study of the variants of the “Standard Inscription”, allowing for occasional truncation of the text to fit individual slabs (edition Grayson 1991: 275-276). He concluded that there must have been a “master copy” subsequently edited into a second “master copy”, and that several intermediate copies can account for certain variants. Copies were made of these individual copies and, furthermore, it sometimes happened that when the individual inscriptions were actually carved, unique mistakes were made. It is no stretch of the imagination, therefore, to see the king personally approving at least the first master text, as read to him by his *ummānu* (Russell 1999: 193) in what must have been a delicate audience. This was to be the king’s definitive and relentless self-presentation of his deeds and palace, both visible to human eyes and hidden from view. The cuneiform signs of the hundreds of repetitions of essentially the same statements, engraved, again and again, on the faces of the wall slabs were painted in dramatic blue over the colorful images (Thavapalan 2020: 410-411), perhaps to suggest lapis, running around the full circuit of grand palace rooms at a level for easy reading. The visual effect of the ensemble must have been one of overwhelming self-glorification and forceful projection of power.

But what of the text itself? What traits of his master’s vanity and self-perception did the *ummānu* seek to appeal to and in what ways? One of them, I argue here, was surely a sense of originality of expression in comparison to such inscriptions of the king’s predecessors that the *ummānu* may have seen. Assyrian commemoration derived from a centuries-old tradition (Grayson 1980; Bach 2020), within whose frameworks and expectations the author worked, but which provided certain niches, such as the choice of epithets and titles, as we will see below, where the composer of the text had considerable discretion as to how to present and please his patron (for considerations of method and theory of reading Assyrian royal sources Tadmor 1997; Porter 2000; Frahm 2014; Lenzi 2019: 72-76). If for Porter the Standard Inscription, intended for a broad readership, was “so bland as to be boring” (Porter 2000: 115), in deliberate contrast to the gory Annals, intended for a warrior deity and his devotees, it nonetheless offers points of literary interest that partake of the overall innovative and dynamic character of their setting (for the last, Winter 1981, 1983).

At the outset, Assurnasirpal is given two epithets (different in some variants; I have preferred the version given here) presumably invented by the author for a specific purpose, rather than drawn from an ancient repertory: *nišīt dEnlil u dNinurta* and *narām dAnim u dDagan*. Their ingenious inclusive parallelism suggests lords of earth and heaven and of the lower and upper lands of the Mesopotamian world, in the reverse of their expected order, the latter presumably for literary effect. The parallelism is tightened by reference to a physical gesture by the gods towards the king to lead (refurbishment of *nišīt ēnē*) complemented by their emotional cherishing of him as a person, with a hint of an allusion to Ninurta mythology, whereby a dutiful hero defended established authority: the king followed Ninurta’s heroic example by Enlil and Ninurta’s own choice. Thus the author opened with a concise, sophisticated, and original statement of Assurnasirpal’s universal dominion and divine favor.

Moving his focus now in traditional fashion from heaven to earth, the author situates the king within the ruling tradition of the land of Assyria itself by using three ancient epithets or titles (*kašūš ilāni rabūti*, *šarru dannu*, *šar kiššati*: destructive weapon of the great gods, mighty king, king of the universe), in ascending order of both claimed importance and antiquity, though the author may not have been aware of the latter point. This brings him to the genealogy of the king himself. His progression from the cosmos to the wide world to the family to the individual, with its ingenious mix of old and new, reinvents a more straightforward but similar pattern, as found, for instance, in the opening lines of the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, which climax with the birth of the hero-god Marduk.

Assurnasirpal, now a “valiant young man” (*eṭlu qardu*, an epithet, like *kašūš ilāni rabūti*, going back to the warrior king Tukulti-Ninurta I, whose literary tradition the author surely knew of, on this issue Frahm 2010: 154), makes his way (*ittanallaku*) with the support of his lord, Assur; among the sovereigns of the four world regions (*ina malkī ša kibrāt erbetta*) he has no rival (*šānin la išu*), surely another case of refurbishment of an ancient expression, this one going back to the Akkadian period; so too, the youthful Marduk had no rival in strength.

The next portion of the inscription uses the language of hymnography and royal epic (further Frahm 2010: 148-149), as it comprises no fewer than eight original expressions, *rē’u tabrāte* “shepherd of wonders” (a refurbishment of and word play on *abrāte* “of the human race”?); *edū gapšu* “mighty flood wave”; *zikaru dannu* “mighty male”; then three epithets in progressive parallelism of motion, intensity, and plurality of objects, expanding from captured rulers to defeated foot soldiers: *mukabbis kišād ajjābīšu* “who treads on the necks of his enemies”; *dā’iṣ kullat nākirī* “who tramples down all foes (as if on a threshing floor”); for this figure, attested for Tukulti-Ninurta I, Bach 2020: 216); *muparriru kišrī multarhī* “who scatters the forces of the vainglorious”. The overall poetic effect is rounded out by an original *figura etymologica*, *mušakniš lā kanšūte* “who forces unyielding to yield” and a word play, *šābit līṭi* “taker of hostages” with *šākin līte* “victorious”, the former attested here for the first time. Although this striking passage recalls the fulsome rhetoric of the Middle Assyrian warrior kings Adad-nerari and Tukulti-Ninurta I, it stands out in this composition for its richness. Two of these phrases, *edū gapšu* and *muparriru kišrī multarhī*, were reused in the inscriptions of Assurnasirpal’s son and successor, Shalmaneser III.

A second textual niche available for creative content occurs after the conquest narrative, which recalls, wittingly or not, a summary pattern inaugurated by Naram-Sin the Akkadian (Salgues 2011: 258), thus rooted in the deep past, and ends, as Olmstead noted, with a new concept (and terminology) of imposing Assyrian governance on the defeated lands, one by one (*altakan*): *urdūti uppušū* “they performed service”. This passage includes two or possibly three refurbishments: *ušumgallu ekdu* “fierce dragon” (as opposed to the traditional unmodified “dragon”) and *mula’iṭ ekšūte* “who snaffles the untamed” (rendering more vivid a traditional Middle Assyrian usage, *mula’iṭ lā māgirī*, “who snaffles the unwilling”, Seux 1967: 148-149). Allowing that the author may have read Hammurabi in school, he may have consciously expanded Hammurabi’s *šulūl mātim* “protection of the land” into a grander *šulūl kibrāte* “protection of the world”. The noteworthy *murīb anunte* “who sets battle aquiver” is surely a coining of the author, and *šar tanadāti* “king renowned (above all others)” may include an oblique self-reference to the author’s role in praising him (Foster 2019: 16-17). His final extravagance claims that not only does the king stretch his protection like a canopy over the entire civilized world, his very command breaks down (*šuharmuṭu*, another innovative usage of the author) the distinction between the mountains and seas that border it by forcing even the most barbarian rulers, east and west, to accept his authority. One may readily surmise that Assurnasirpal listened to this hyperbolic encomium with pleasure.

Russell (1999: 41) has observed that the last part of the text, or building account, links the narrative with the direct experience of anyone present in the edifice. The royal builder saw this structure not only as a residence and treasury but also as the locus of his pleasure and recreation (*multa 'itu*), giving us a concise definition of an Assyrian royal palace. Students of this structure must acknowledge that the architectural features of it that the king singled out for special comment were neither the reliefs nor their inscriptions, perforce the preoccupation of modern scholarship, but its colossi, statuary, and doors. As in many architectural traditions worldwide, the entry and doors were evidently the cynosure of the structure, but of the doors themselves nothing remains. Here too the author allows himself an artful manipulation of a list of trees (incorporation of lists being a well-known literary device). Seven trees are named in descending order of prestige from the largest and brought from the greatest distance (cedar, juniper, and cypress, used for beams and doors) to boxwood and rosewood (used for furniture), terebinth, and last the humble tamarisk (used for such modest items as wall pegs and ordinary utensils).

In short, the resourceful author grounded his praise of Assurnasirpal in the tradition of the Middle Assyrian warrior kings, which was often one of expansion and “recovery” of territories that should have been under Assyrian rule (*ana mišr mātiya utēr*), and drew liberally from the rather ripe rhetoric of that long bygone age. Yet he clearly strove to surpass his predecessors by refurbishing old phrases and inventing striking new ones to honor his patron, some used later, the majority as such not. His favored literary devices and psychological strategy included hierarchy, progressive parallelism, and logical progression from above to below, as befit tribute to a ruler. Since the king was beyond compare, he preferred metaphor to simile. Thereby the composition of the Standard Inscription may be read as another salient aspect of the great initiative at Kalhu, the threshold to a new phase of Assyrian culture.

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