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Sculpted Warriors: Sexuality and the Sacred in the Depiction of Warfare in the Assyrian Palace Reliefs and in Ezekiel 23:14-17*

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Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag zeigt auf, dass die ästhetischen Prinzipien, die der mesopotamischen Kunst im allgemeinen zugrunde liegen, auch bei der Darstellung militärischer Gewalt in den Belagerungsszenen der assyrischen Palastreliefs bestimmend sind. Im besonderen ist es der gezielte Einsatz von Schmuck, der den assyrischen König und seine Armee als die Kraft hervorhebt, die mit dem Göttlichen und mit dem aktiven, männlichen Blick übereinstimmt. Ein festes Repertoire an gewaltsamen Bildern einschließlich sexualisierter Entblößung, Zerstückelung und Penetration des männlichen Feindes markieren ihn als das bildlich gefangene und verweiblichte Objekt des kollektiven Blicks von Bildhauer, assyrischem König und Reliefbetrachter. In jedem Belagerungsrelief vermitteln die aufweisbaren ästhetischen Regeln einen von den Göttern erfochtenen Sieg für den assyrischen König und eine sexualisierte Demütigung des männlichen Feindes.

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The place of violent images within a definition of visual aesthetic values can never be clearly defined. What one considers violent and how one responds to violent images remains culturally constrained. This paper explores the aesthetics of violence in the visual imagination of the ancient Near East, specifically focusing on violent images represented in the Assyrian palace reliefs. While the palace reliefs include depictions of Assyrian kings as builders, worshippers, hunters and warriors, this study will examine a subset of the reliefs containing scenes of military siege and battle. These siege and battle scenes are examples of state-sponsored art in which violence is depicted with skill and even beauty in order to communicate what the Assyrian kings referred to as the “radiance” and “awe” of their weapons. According to Assyrian royal inscriptions, the radiance of a king’s weapons was a gift transferred to him by the gods and a power that brought terror and defeat to the enemy. When we turn to the visual records of warfare depicted on the palace reliefs, we find repeated visual tropes. These tropes depict, on the one hand, the awesome splendor of the

Assyrian king's divinely empowered weapons. On the other hand, they show the terrifying violence that left the enemy male sexually exposed, dismembered, and penetrated by Assyrian weapons. The sculptors' choices regarding how to depict military power and violence reveal an indigenous royal vocabulary for the aesthetics of empire that intersected with the power of both the sacred and the sexual.

The primary sources for this study include the siege and battle scenes of the Assyrian palace reliefs dating from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II in the mid-ninth century through that of Ashurbanipal in the late seventh century BCE. In addition to the art historical record, I will also turn to the Assyrian royal inscriptions for textual descriptions of the king, his army, his weaponry, and the violence the king claimed to have inflicted upon the enemy in battle. Finally, I will include one biblical example from Ezekiel 23:14-17 of what I term "an imagined moment of aesthetic appreciation for Babylonian military state art." This example, despite its focus on Babylonian rather than Assyrian military art, will help us to consider a viewer's response to skillful and ornate depictions of military conquerors and their victims.

Defining the Aesthetics of Violence for the Neo-Assyrian Period

The Assyrian palace reliefs were discovered and excavated in the nineteenth century by European archaeologists. Sculpted on enormous limestone panels and mounted on the palace walls, the reliefs formed a visual narrative asserting the Assyrian king's legitimately earned power. As state-sponsored art, the reliefs functioned on an ideological level communicating each king's divinely sanctioned rule over what Assyrian inscriptions termed "the four corners of the world."¹ Several types of scenes are present in each of the palaces for which there is an intact excavated record. These include depictions of the king tending to the sacred tree and worshipping the gods, hunting scenes in which the king defeats lions and bears, images that record the building and decoration of the palaces and temples, and finally, visual records of the king's military campaigns. As a whole, the reliefs formed what art historian Irene Winter has termed a "decorative program" that asserts the king's legitimately earned power.² For our study of the siege and battle reliefs, it is important to note that these battle scenes were often placed within the reception suites of the king's palace.³ Thus, if one were awaiting an audience with the king, one would be viewing the king's military conquests of foreign lands.

Defining the aesthetics of violence and the function of the depiction of violence in the Assyrian palace relief siege and battle scenes necessarily involves an exploration of the application of the term “aesthetics” to the ancient world in general and to the palace reliefs in particular. Similarly, because the term aesthetics has always encompassed the “viewer” of a work of art, we will also need to consider the intended audiences of and the hoped for responses to the Assyrian siege and battle scenes. Finally, there has been an unfortunate history of associating all Assyrian art with violence and correlating such violence to crude artistic abilities and a lack of aesthetic judgment. This history requires that we contextualize the siege and battle scenes within the larger repertoire of Assyrian royal art.

Methodologically, I am indebted to the work of Irene Winter who has begun to address the problematic issues related to applying an 18th- and 19th-century European term like “aesthetics” to the ancient Mesopotamian context. Her working definition for ancient Mesopotamian aesthetics will form the starting point for my consideration of the aesthetics of violence in Assyrian military state-sponsored art.⁴ The work of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit entitled *Forms of Violence* and Zainab Bahrani’s *The Graven Image* will also inform and interrogate my understanding of the function of violence in the Assyrian palace reliefs.⁵

There is currently no scholarly agreement on the definition and use of the term “aesthetics.” There is a modern/postmodern debate over the role of beauty in aesthetic judgments and over the place and attitude of the spectator. Irene Winter begins her discussion of aesthetics by rejecting any universalized notion of “beauty,” and any notion of a disinterested spectator.⁶ Winter then offers her own working definitions of the terms “art” and “aesthetics” that she argues can appropriately account for and be applied to the art of ancient Mesopotamia. For Winter, “art” includes “works of human agency, for which skill is required and to which standards of correctness have been applied, a portion of the function of which is to be visually and emotionally affective.”⁷ “Aesthetics” is concerned with “the properties of, investment in, and appreciative response to works of human agency, for which skill is required and to which standards of correctness have been applied, a *portion* (but not all) of the function of which is to be visually affective and emotionally affecting.”⁸ The final phrase of this definition contains Winter’s alternative to the requirements of beauty and disinterestedness. Rather than be beautiful, a work must be visually affective, and rather than be disinterested, the spectator should be emotionally affected.

In order to determine how people of ancient Mesopotamia might have judged the visual and emotional response elicited by a work of art, Winter seeks to establish an “indigenous vocabulary” for responses to works of art in Mesopotamia. She draws this vocabulary exclusively from written texts of ancient Mesopotamia. Surveying a broad range of Akkadian texts, Winter identifies six terms or qualities that define an ancient Mesopotamian concept of aesthetics. These include: the capacity to elicit a powerful emotional response, the ability for the work to elicit “joy” or “wonder,” the attribute of “light” and/or “radiance,” the value accorded to “ornament,” fitness for the intended task or role to be played, and “beauty” as understood and articulated in its ancient Mesopotamian context. She also adds that, “no sources separate aesthetic experience from experience of the wondrous and/or of the sacred.”⁹

Violence and Aesthetics in Assyrian Siege and Battle Reliefs

Figure 1: Ashurnasirpal II’s assault of a city. Nimrud, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, B.M. 124536 (from E. A Wallis Budge, ed., *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: Reign of Ashur-Nasir-Pal, 885-860 B.C.*, plate XIII).

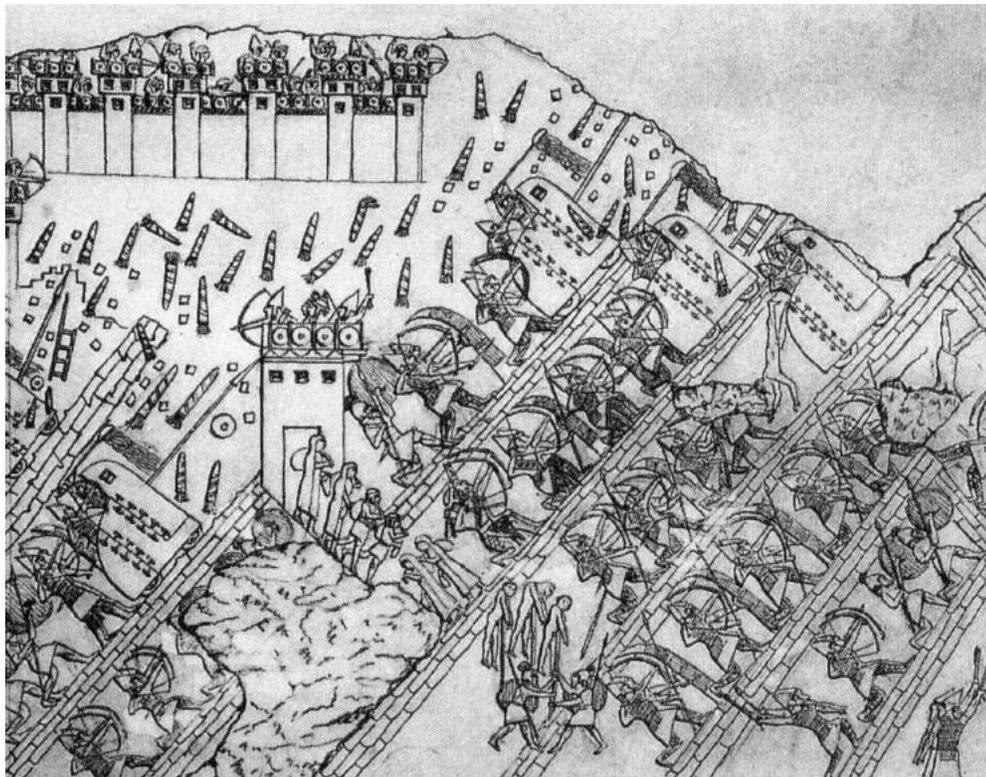


Visual Tropes of Violence

Turning to an examination of the reliefs themselves, we find that if we compare several siege reliefs, we can identify repeated tropes of violence that seem to form necessary components of the battle narrative: a battering ram actively breaking into the walls of the besieged city, speared men falling to their deaths from their city’s walls, the beheading and flaying of enemy soldiers, the stripped and dismembered bodies of dead soldiers, and finally the naked, impaled bodies of enemy soldiers. For example, in a siege scene from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (figure 1), we note the battering ram penetrating the walls of the tower, which is anthropomorphically animated by the head and upper torso of the enemy

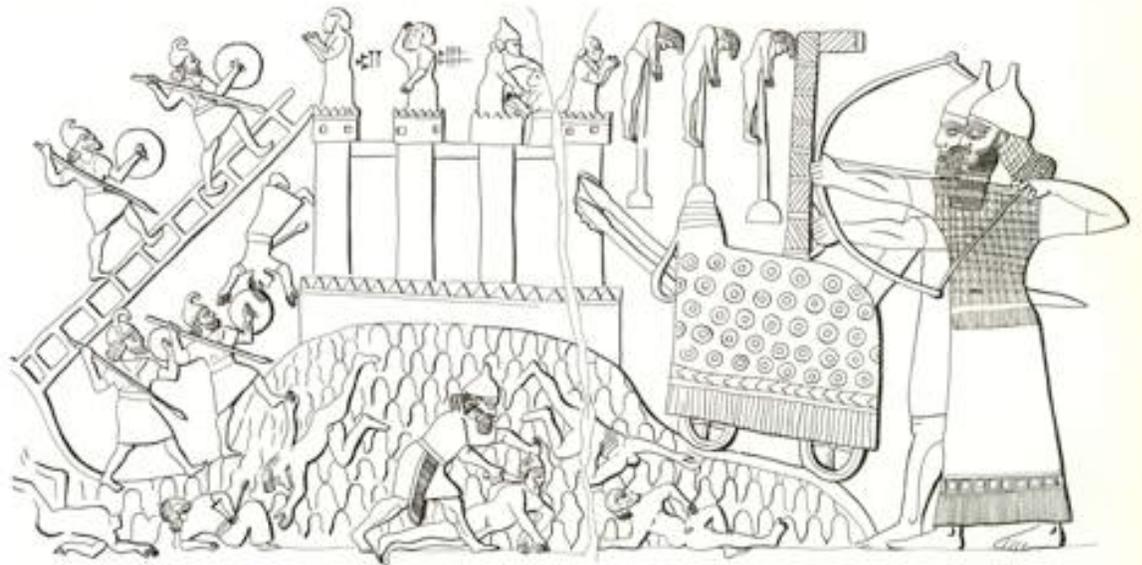
soldier emerging from the top of the tower. In the scene of Sennacherib's siege of the Judean city of Lachish (figure 2), we see multiple battering rams ascending to the walls of the city in cross-diagonal directions. Impaled men hang just outside their city's gate. Finally, in Tiglath-pileser III's siege of an unnamed city (figure 3), we note the battering ram, again penetrating the human-headed tower of the city, three impaled enemy soldiers hang limp in the background, one speared soldier falls to his death, and several naked and dismembered dead are strewn outside their city's walls.¹⁰ A cursory view such as this could lead one to conclude that the violence against the enemy was senseless and indiscriminate, but here is where we must also take note of who and what in the battle reliefs did not become a victim of violence. It is well known, for example, that the Assyrian palace reliefs do not show any casualties on the Assyrian side. The Assyrian king and his army remain clothed, upright and in charge. What we also find, however, is that enemy women and children are not shown as victims of violence. In fact, many siege scenes take care to show the viewer that enemy women, together with their children, remain clothed and unmolested.¹¹ Statues of the gods of the captured foreign city are likewise taken into exile but remain physically unharmed in the reliefs.

Figure 2: Sennacherib's Siege of Lachish. Nineveh, Palace of Sennacherib (drawing from Archibald Paterson, *Assyrian Sculptures – Palace of Sinacherib*, The Hague, 1917, Pl. 68-78).



Decisions about which forms of military violence one depicts and which forms one brackets from view provide clues for developing a preliminary understanding of the role of violence in the aesthetics of the Assyrian siege and battle reliefs. The interest in showing the unmolested state of foreign women, children, and gods in deportation lines suggests an Assyrian state aesthetic that would not be served by the depiction of violence against women and divine statues. Similarly, when one looks at the enemy men who become the recipients of violent actions, it is important to note that a limited set of violent actions seems to represent constituent aspects of the Assyrian narrative of military conquest. By “constituent aspects,” I mean repeated scenes of violence that appear in the battle and siege scenes of each of the Assyrian kings for whom we have battle and siege reliefs. Each of these stock elements is present within the scene of Tiglath-pileser III’s conquest of an unnamed city (figure 3): the spearing of the enemy soldier, stripping him, dismembering him, and impaling him.¹²

Figure 3: King Tiglath-pileser III leading the storming of a city. Nimrud, Central Palace, B.M. 118903 (from *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: From Shalmaneser III to Sennacherib*, plate XIV): Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, Eisenbrauns Winona Lake 1997, fig. 132



The Written Record of Royal Boasts

While Winter attempted to articulate a working definition of aesthetics that was broad enough to encompass the whole range of ancient Mesopotamian art, I would like to use her

definition to begin to focus very specifically on the aesthetic values that governed the depiction and bracketing of violence in the military siege and battle scenes of the Assyrian palace reliefs. Keeping in mind Winter's indigenous vocabulary for aesthetics, we can locate several defining traits of ancient Mesopotamian aesthetics within the siege and battle reliefs. One of the first assertions we can make is that these battle and siege scenes with their copious depiction of violent death are indeed appropriately considered works of art governed by aesthetic principles. The palace reliefs are the product of skilled craftsman, and their construction required an enormous outlay of resources and time. The palace reliefs formed a coherent program of ideologically motivated decoration in each king's palace, and the palaces as a whole were thought to embody the wondrous power of the king.¹³ We cannot, therefore, separate the depictions of violence from the overall artistic program of the reliefs. To put it another way, we cannot consider a work of art apart from its function. Therefore, we must include depictions of violence as part of the desired, projected wonder of the king and his palace.¹⁴

When we examine the siege and battle scenes in detail, we see that the aesthetic value of ornamentation is clearly visible and ideologically targeted. Returning to the relief of Tiglath-Pileser III (figure 3), we see that the Assyrian king's uniform, his military machinery, and to some extent his army are all clearly marked through exquisite ornamentation. In other siege and battle reliefs the Assyrian gods are present as ornamented symbols, or when embodied, as in figure 4, as ornamented human figures. The detail accorded the enemy, on the other hand, seems to homogenize enemy soldiers into a single, un-ornamented other.¹⁵ The stripping of the enemy takes this lack of ornamentation to its extreme.¹⁶

Assyrian royal inscriptions provide a royal accounting of the desired effect of this ornamentation, namely the qualities of "light" and "radiance", terms Winter identified as part of the indigenous written vocabulary for aesthetics. In the battle narratives of Assyrian kings, the kings repeatedly refer to the "splendor" (*puluhtu*), "radiance" or "brilliance" (*melammu*), and "terror" or "awe" (*šuribtu*) of their weapons.¹⁷ These aesthetically descriptive words communicate a power that was thought to originate from the gods, be transferred to and embodied within the figure of the king, and find expressive power through the king's weapons.¹⁸ It is in the transference of these qualities that we see the ideological alignment of the king, the national deities, and the king's weapons - the sacred,

the royal, and the violent. For example, in a standard inscription of Ashurnasirpal II, the king refers to the gods as having, “granted to his dominion their fierce weapons (and) made him more marvelous than (any of) the kings of the four quarters with respect to the splendour of his weapons (and) the radiance of his dominion.”¹⁹ When Ashurnasirpal II described his first move in a battle, he did so by reporting, “I unleashed against them my lordly radiance (*melam bēlutīya*).”²⁰ The narrated response to the brilliance of the king and his weapons was fear as we see in this report from Ashurnasirpal’s inscriptions. Describing his attack on the nobles of a conquered king, Ashurnasirpal II claims:

“They took fright before the brilliance of my weapons and awe of my dominion (*namurrat kakkīya šurbat bēlut īya ēdurumā*).”²¹

In Sennacherib’s third campaign, which included his description of the siege of Jerusalem and his capture of King Hezekiah, his royal inscriptions report, “As for Hezekiah, the terror of the splendor of my lordship (*pulḥi melammē bēlut īya*), overcame him.”²² The same construct chain that combines and thus intensifies the vocabulary of royal radiance and terror is used to describe Sennacherib’s encounter with King Lulê of Sidon:

In my third campaign I went against the Hittite-land. Lulê, king of Sidon, – the terror of the splendor of my lordship (*pulḥi melammē bēlut īya*) overcame him and far off into the midst of the sea he fled and died.²³

While the medium of sculpted stone reliefs may not have been able to capture fully the qualities of the radiance and terror-inducing splendor of the king and his weapons, the selective application of ornamentation may have communicated precisely this radiance.²⁴ The affective power of the king’s radiance became visible through the depiction of violence against the enemy. The violent, humiliating and total death of the enemy testified to the radiant, divinely bestowed power of the king’s ornamented weapons.

Sexuality and the Aesthetics of Violence

Penetrating the Enemy

In addition to the indigenous vocabulary for aesthetics that Winter proposes based on written texts, I would argue that repeated images of violence in the siege and battle scenes

constitute a visual indigenous vocabulary for aesthetics that communicated the king's power. These scenes, as I have mentioned, include speared, impaled, stripped and dismembered enemy soldiers. Returning to the royal inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II, we find numerous examples of his unabashed, even boastful description of the violence he has inflicted upon his enemy. One typical example describes his conquest of an enemy city as follows:

“In strife and conflict I besieged (and) conquered the city. I felled 3000 of their fighting men with the sword. I carried off prisoners, possessions, oxen, (and) cattle from them. I burnt many captives from them. I captured many troops alive: from some I cut off their arms (and) hands; from others I cut off their noses, ears, (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.”²⁵

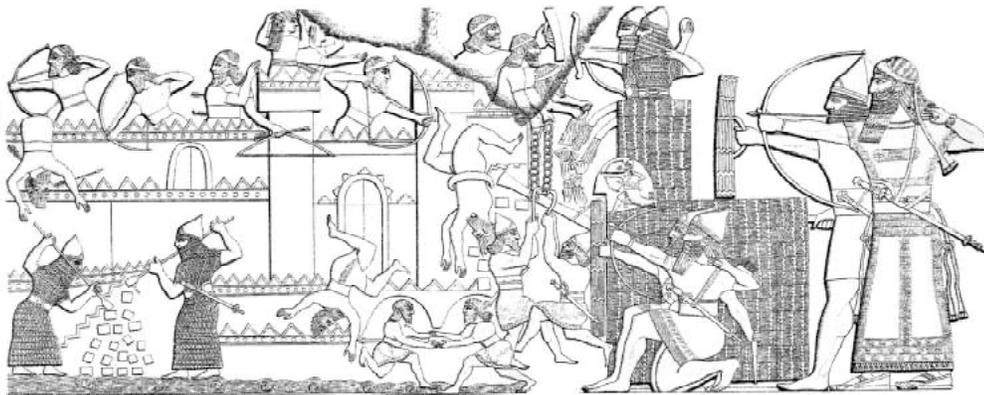
Physical penetration of the enemy with a spear or dagger represents another frequent royal boast. Sennacherib's inscriptions include a lengthy account of his battle against an allied “enormous vassal host” of states including Babylonia.²⁶ Faced with such an organized and formidable enemy, Sennacherib prayed to his gods for victory and reported that they “speedily gave ear to my prayers and came to my aid.” Then using storm god language, Sennacherib described his divinely bestowed weaponry:

The mighty bow which Assur had given me, I seized in my hands; the javelin, that pierces lives [lit.: slits throats] (*pāri' napsāti i*), I grasped... Like Adad I roared... With the weapons of Assur, my lord... I decimated the enemy host with arrow and spear. All of their bodies I bored through (*gimri pagrēšunu upalliša*).²⁷

Most acts of violence depicted in the siege and battle scenes have written counterparts in the royal inscriptions. The one repeated visual trope of violence in the palace reliefs that has no clear correlation to a written royal inscription is the image of the stripped enemy soldier. We do not have Assyrian royal inscriptions in which the king reports, “I stripped the enemy and exposed him before my army.” It is possible that the image of the stripped soldier corresponds to the royal claim to have “plundered” the enemy. If, however, we examine the trope of nakedness in the depiction of violence against an enemy, it becomes clear that the images are communicating more than simple plundering of the enemy. First,

the naked enemy male is almost always positioned such that his genitalia face the viewer, and in many cases are also within the gaze of the Assyrian king. Corresponding to the written boast of having pierced or bored through the enemy, the naked soldier is often depicted visually being penetrated by a weapon, sometimes in a clearly sexual way (figure 4).²⁸ The idea that the violent depiction of the enemy soldier within a work of art might contain a sexual dimension should not surprise us in that the sexual and the erotic are often brought into the service of aesthetics.²⁹ Bersani and Dutoit noted the erotic element of narrative violence in Assyrian battle reliefs and argued that the visual narrative was deliberately paced such that the object of desire, the city or the enemy male, was isolated. The narrative then moved toward the desired object in a series of what they termed “explosive climaxes.”³⁰

Figure 4: Sexually exposed soldier falling from his city’s wall with weaponry aimed at his exposed buttocks. Nimrud, Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, B.M. 124553 (from *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: From Shalmaneser III to Sennacherib*, plate XIII): Austen Henry Layard, *The Monuments of Niniveh from Drawings Made on the Spot*, vol. 1, London 1849, Pl. 19



The Iconic Capture and Feminization of the Enemy

In an article entitled, “Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror,” Allen Feldman discusses the sexual power of the gaze in what he terms a “scopic regime.”³¹ While he is referring to the camera lens and the rifle scope of the modern world, much of

what he asserts concerning the “militarized gaze” is helpful in understanding the dynamic of power that is operative within the depictions of sexual exposure and violent penetration of the enemy male in the palace reliefs. First, Allen argues that visual appropriation becomes a metonym for dominance over others.³² In this sense, the simple depiction of an enemy city appropriates it into the empire. Sculpting into rock the figure of the Assyrian king gazing over the conquest of a city secures his dominance of that city eternally. The placement of the sculpted relief in the reception suites of the royal palace serves as a secondary level of symbolic appropriation of a foreign city into the boundaries of the king’s empire. A “scopic regime” for Feldman involves “the agendas and techniques of political visualization.”³³ Proscribed modes of visualization allow one to establish truth claims. For the Assyrian kings, there was a repeated vocabulary of visual conquest that established the “truth” of the Assyrian king’s dominance and control over the known world. The violent decimation of the enemy and the undisturbed ornamented presence of the king communicated the radiant and divinely endowed power of the king’s weapons.

Feldman also discusses the way that the militarized gaze is linked to if not identical to the male gaze. By male gaze, he means the gaze that is active, appropriating, defining and controlling a field of vision. It is also a gaze that penetrates into the private space of the enemy. The “iconic capture” of an image by whatever means often involved the depicted person, whether male or female, receiving what he terms the “vener of iconic femininity.”³⁴ In other words, the very act of depiction feminizes the subject insofar as femininity has been correlated ideologically to passivity and immobility.³⁵ When we look at the siege scenes such as this one of Tiglath-Pileser III (figure 3), the one problem is that the king himself is iconically captured and visually appropriated into the image of battle. This is why it is so significant that the king stands outside of the battle scene, gazing over it. The depicted image operates on two levels. First, it is an image of a king who gazes over the image of a decimated city, which he has militarily and visually appropriated. The king’s eyes become the sculptor’s eyes, and therefore, he is not feminized through depiction. Second, when we turn to the enemy soldiers, their sexually exposed and violently penetrated bodies seem clearly feminized through their total passivity and immobility. The averted gaze of the enemy male also marks him as iconically captured. Repeated images of identical forms of violence represent an additional, non-verbal set of indigenous royal Assyrian vocabulary depicting conquest. Exposure, penetration, and dismemberment form part of the Assyrian aesthetic of violence that communicates the wonder and radiance of the

king's divinely endowed power. Violence, sexuality, and the sacred power of divine weapons were brought into the service of royal truth claims.

The Role of the Spectator: Ezekiel's Use of Sexuality, Violence and the Sacred

As mentioned above, the response of the spectator to a work of art constitutes a foundational element of any definition of aesthetics. With that in mind, I would like to turn to a recorded moment of aesthetic appreciation of military violence found in the book of Ezekiel. It would be especially tidy from a historical perspective, if I could turn to the account of Judean emissary X who had viewed this panel of Tiglath-Pileser III's conquest of a city (figure 3) and had recorded his response to the image in a diary. Unfortunately, when we are dealing with ancient history, we rarely have that kind of neat correlation. In Ezekiel, chapter 23, however, the prophet remembers the Assyrian conquest of Samaria and anticipates the later Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem.³⁶ He then captures that memory in the form of a narrative vision. His vision of two sisters, personified capital cities, whoring after foreign lovers and ultimately being maimed and killed by them, combines the prophet's obvious relishing in images of violence, the feminine, and the erotic. Within this vision-encapsulated memory, the prophet also captures a secondary layer of aesthetic appreciation. In this case, his imagined Jerusalem, a woman he names "Oholibah," gazes upon the sculpted reliefs of Babylonian warriors and responds with unabashed lust. The text reads:

“And she [Oholibah/Jerusalem] continued her whoring, looking at men sculpted upon the wall, images of the Chaldeans sculpted in red. Belted waistcloths upon their loins, flowing turbans upon their heads, all of them looking like elite officers, a picture of the Babylonians whose birthplace is Chaldea. She lusted after them with a look in her eyes, and consequently sent messengers to them in Chaldea. So the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoring. And after she became unclean through them, she turned away from them in disgust.” (Ezekiel 23:14-17)

This is the only reference in the Hebrew Bible to the viewing and appreciation of some form of Babylonian military art. Whether Ezekiel himself had actually seen carved Babylonian or Assyrian reliefs, we can never know, but he had at least heard of them and could imagine a feminized Jerusalem being sexually aroused by the sculpted and brightly painted images of Babylonian military officers.³⁷ The name *Oholibah* means “my tent is within her,” a reference to the wilderness tabernacle and to the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple. In this sense, Ezekiel understood the military threat against his city to involve not only the sexual allure of foreign military officers but also the sexually defiling presence of those same officers in the sacred space of his god. Vision, the gaze, violence, the sacred, and the sexual are all present in this multi-layered narrative of conquest.

In Tiglath-Pileser III’s siege of an unnamed city, it is his actively penetrating gaze that iconically captures the city and its inhabitants. His power and dominance as a male warrior-king is confirmed and enhanced through the sculpted representation of his conquering gaze. In Ezekiel’s vision, it is the gaze of the female gendered Jerusalem that iconically captures the passive and immobile images of Babylonian military officers. The affective power of her gaze is demonstrated when it results in the physical delivery of those same officers into the confines of her kingdom, her capital city. The importation of the Babylonian military officers onto Jerusalem’s “bed of love” parallels the secondary level of appropriation in the Assyrian palace reliefs. Namely, the Assyrian king captures and kills actual enemy soldiers on a physical battlefield and then permanently appropriates them into his empire by having their limp, penetrated forms sculpted in permanent immobility on the walls of his capital, the heart of his empire. The female-gendered Jerusalem’s active and sexually appropriating gaze upon sculpted Babylonian warriors results in actual physical specimens of those warriors being brought into the confines of her kingdom. It is here, however, that the parallels between the two images cease. For what we find is that the active and sexually appropriating gaze of a female-gendered Jerusalem renders her sexually transgressive and prefigures her ultimate demise.³⁸ To discover whose gaze actually controls this vision, we need only look at the chapter as a whole to realize that it is Ezekiel’s gaze, his divinely channeled vision that appropriates and iconically captures both Jerusalem and her Babylonian lovers. Whereas in the siege scenes of the Assyrian kings, the gaze of the gods is aligned with that of the king, the gaze of the Israelite god is aligned with the prophet visionary against Jerusalem.

Ezekiel describes the conquest that his god, Jerusalem's forsaken husband, will bring upon the overly forward, female Jerusalem. First, he uses surprisingly literal military language describing how the Israelite god will bring the Assyrians and the Babylonians against her. The text reads:

“And they shall come against you from the north with chariots and wagons and a host of peoples; they shall set themselves against you on every side with buckler, shield, and helmet.” (Ezekiel 23:24)

Ezekiel clearly emphasizes that the Assyrians and Babylonians who are brought in as conquerors are the same “desirable young men” whose sculpted bodies had aroused her (Ezekiel 23:23). After using literal military language to describe the set-up of the attack, Ezekiel reverts to the metaphorical language sexualizing violence to describe the conquest:

“They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your fine jewels.” (Ezekiel 23:25-26)

Dismembered, stripped, and bereft of her children, Ezekiel's imagined Jerusalem stands in sharp contrast to the conquered women depicted on the Assyrian palace reliefs who together with their children remain clothed and unmolested. Instead, Ezekiel's female-gendered sacred city resembles the feminized conquered male soldiers of the reliefs who are likewise dismembered, stripped, and shamed before their families. What both sets of images share is an aesthetic sense that the sculpted male warrior is radiantly alluring in his divinely empowered masculinity while victims of violence are feminized through sexual exposure and penetration. Repeated images of sexualized violence constitute an indigenous vocabulary for an aesthetic depiction of earned power.

* For Irene Winter, my professor and mentor, who introduced me to Mesopotamian art history in general, and specifically to the Assyrian palace reliefs. As is clear from this article, her scholarship continues to shape my work.

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¹ For a complete history of the archaeological excavation of Iraq and the concomitant establishment of the museum as a state institution in Europe and America, see Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 2005); Mogens Trolle Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land, 1840-1860* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

² Irene Winter, “Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs” *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 2-38.

³ John Malcom Russell, *Sennacherib’s Palace without Rival in Nineveh* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991); Pauline Albenda, “Expressions of Kingship in Assyrian Art,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 2 (1969): 41-52.

⁴ Irene Winter, “Defining ‘Aesthetics’ for Non-Western Studies: The Case of Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, eds. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002), 3-19.

⁵ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (Schocken Books, 1985); Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 66-72.

⁶ Winter, “Defining ‘Aesthetics’ for Non-Western Studies,” 7-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-19.

¹⁰ The dates for the reigns of these Assyrian kings are Ashurnasirpal (885-859 BCE), Tiglath-pileser (744-727 BCE), Sennacherib (705-681 BCE).

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the significance of the unmolested presence of women on the palace reliefs, see my *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 46-47.

¹² While Assyrian siege and battle scenes contain a limited set of violent images, Assyrian royal inscriptions are much more detailed and diverse in their descriptions of all manner of violence.

¹³ Winter, “The Seat of Kingship/A ‘Wonder to Behold’: The Palace in the Ancient Near East” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 36-38; Russell, *Sennacherib’s Palace without Rival*.

¹⁴ I stress here that violence is only a *part* of the overall decorative program of the palaces. I agree with the work of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit as well as the more recent work of Zainab Bahrani that cautions against equating violence with the Assyrian king and extending that violence descriptively to the Assyrians as a whole. As in all state-sponsored, military art, depictions of violence serve the ideological purpose of communicating the power of the ruler. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence*, 6-7; Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria*, 66-72. For a summary of early European reactions to the artistic quality of the siege and battle reliefs and the conclusion that they were not “art,” see “But is it art?” in Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria*, 99-107 where the following quotation by Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson appears as an early British response to the Assyrian siege and battle reliefs: “Your cases arrived all right and we have been regaling our antiquarian appetites on the contents ever since... The battle pieces, Seiges(sic) etc. are curious, but I do not think they rank very highly as art. Ross is altogether disappointed with the specimens and I must confess I think the general style crude and cramped but still the curiosity of the thing is very great, if not a full compensation,” 102.

¹⁵ For a discussion of clothing versus nakedness in the palace reliefs of Ashurnasipal II, see Megan Cifarelli, “Gesture and Alterity in the Art of Assurnasipal II of Assyria” *Art Bulletin* 80 (1998): 219.

¹⁶ Bersani and Dutoit discuss the Assyrian sculptors’ use of “the principle of anonymous human alignments as a visual contrast to the isolated individualized king.” Bersani and Dutoit, *Forms of Violence*, 5-6. It is also interesting to note that when enemy men and women are clothed, the details of their clothing mark their ethnicity; when naked, this ethnic distinction is lost.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the quality of “radiance” as an aesthetic value in ancient Mesopotamian art, see Irene Winter, “Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (with some Indian Parallels),” in *Art: The Integral Vision: A volume of essays in felicitation of Kapila Vatsyayan* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994), 123-32; Elena Cassin, *La Splendeur Divine: Introduction à l’étude de la mentalité mésopotamienne*. Civilisations et sociétés 8. (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968).

¹⁸ Winter, “Radiance,” 124-26.

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- ¹⁹ “A.O.101.1” in A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114-859 BC)*. The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods Volume 2. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991), column i, lines 26-27.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, column ii, line 112a; column iii, line 25.
- ²¹ CAD (= Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) Š, 344.
- ²² Translation adapted from Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1924), 31-34, lines 73-83, 1-49. See also CAD P, 504. A more natural English rendering of the construct chain, “the terror or the splendor of my lordship,” is “the terrifying splendor of my lordship.” I have opted for the more literal translation to show the effect of piling on vocabulary of royal radiance.
- ²³ Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib*, 29, lines 37-40.
- ²⁴ There is evidence that at least some of the reliefs were originally painted. If this is the case, then the radiance of the king, his weapons, and the gods could have been depicted through color as well as ornamentation.
- ²⁵ “A.O.101.1” in A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114-859 BC)*, Column 1, lines 115-17.
- ²⁶ Luckenbill, *Annals of Sennacherib*, 44-45, lines 63-88.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45, lines 71-81.
- ²⁸ Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare*, 159-63.
- ²⁹ See e.g., Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Graham L. Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 1-40.
- ³⁰ Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit. *The Forms of Violence*, 40-41. Bersani and Dutoit, however, did not see the element of the erotic in the sexualized exposure and penetration of the enemy male. Instead, they located “aesthetic pleasure” in the geometrically shaped spaces formed by the interlocking bodies and weaponry, shapes which created, in their words, “interstitial sensuality” (108). In light of the naked, penetrated and dismembered body of the enemy male, I find Bersani and Dutoit’s emphasis on erotic geometry forced.
- ³¹ Allen Feldman, “Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror,” in *Violence and Subjectivity*, eds., Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univ. of Calif. Press, 2000), 46-78.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 49.

³³ Ibid., 49.

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ Ann Kessler Guinan has discussed the ideological social status reduction of males through sexual penetration with reference to Mesopotamian sex omens in “Auguries of Hegemony: The Sex Omens of Mesopotamia,” *Gender and History* 9 (1997): 462-73; see also my discussion of the feminization of the enemy soldier in Neo-Assyrian curses, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, 48-58.

³⁶ This chapter of the book of Ezekiel has been dated anywhere from the mid- 7th century BCE to the period just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE based on the language that suggests Judah as an independent kingdom engaging in serial alliances with Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt. For a discussion of the dating of this chapter see, Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh’s Wife* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), 112-15; and Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 482-83.

³⁷ Several scholars have conjectured what Ezekiel might have been referring to when he mentioned men “sculpted upon the wall,” but there is simply not enough evidence from the text or from the scant archaeological records of Babylonian art to know what Ezekiel’s referent might have been. Ezekiel is, however, assuming that his audience is aware of sculpted and painted images of Babylonian military officers. The various explanations for Ezekiel’s sculpted men include Walther Zimmerli’s conclusion that the reference to sculpted men remains “obscure” (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 486); Eichrodt’s suggestion that the Judean penchant for all things foreign may have indicated that Babylonian-style military frescoes were in the houses of the Judean elite (Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970], 325; Silvia Schroer’s investigation of the specific vocabulary of the text demonstrating its links to texts on the Solomonic temple and to features found on painted reliefs of both Mesopotamia and Egypt (Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* [Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987], 179-83); Moshe Greenberg’s attempt to identify archaeological finds that exhibit various aspects of the described soldier’s uniforms (Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 478-79; and Margaret Odell’s suggestion that Assyrians may have had a practice of showing foreign emissaries, including those from Judah, their palace

reliefs of defeated Chaldeans as an object lesson aimed at deterring rebellion (Odell, *Ezekiel* [Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2005]), 302.

³⁸ Julie Galambush discusses the role of the active gaze of the woman Jerusalem as a reversal of her being a passive object of the gaze in Ezekiel chapter 16 (Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 116); Margaret Odell characterizes Ezekiel's use of military, sexual and bestial imagery as Oholibah's "crossing the boundary from order into chaos" (Odell, *Ezekiel*, 303). I would add that one of the ways that Ezekiel characterizes chaos is through the transgressively active gaze of his female-gendered Jerusalem (cf. S. Tamar Kamionkowski who sees gender reversal in Ezekiel as a whole as a symbol of "cosmic chaos." Specifically, with regard to Oholibah, Kamionkowski emphasizes the passivity of Jerusalem in this chapter in contrast to the female-gendered Jerusalem of Ezekiel 16 (*Gender Reversal and Cosmic Chaos: A Study of the Book of Ezekiel*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 368 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 140-46).

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