

Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient Data-processing

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A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days, and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Deut. 19.15–19 NRSV

IT IS A *TOPOS* AMONG PRACTITIONERS OF ANCIENT HISTORY to present their work in metaphorical terms as some kind of legal investigation. Historians are trained to balance testimonies of various kinds, which often preserve partial and sometimes conflicting views and interpretations of the past. What are the prerequisites for a fair trial, when we aim at balanced and reasonably accurate historical judgement? To begin with, one might think that we should start to collect as much evidence as possible—a basic principle that sounds like a truism but is not always respected. Moreover, the evidence produced should be of various kinds, which means, for instance, that we should not build a case on verbal testimony alone—essential points may never have been mentioned during the interviews, but ultimately build up a case. Furthermore, the pertinence of any single piece of evidence should be evaluated and its relative weight put in balance. The most difficult task, however, will always be to connect various unrelated testimonies so as to bring some order into the process and to understand whether they really belong to the same story. This

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may lead us to conclude that some testimonies should better be disregarded altogether. In many senses, the work of an historian thus resembles that of a detective, as rightly argued elsewhere in this volume by David Ussishkin.

Not a few fellow historians would prefer to go beyond that role and assume the authority of a judge, or possibly a jury. A good judge will aim at understanding what happened (or, in the words of Leopold von Ranke, ‘wie es eigentlich geschehen’). But he or she will know that what happened is generally not exactly what people are aware of, nor what they have kept in their memories and even less what they tell during the audience, especially when they are interested parties themselves. The tasks of a judge and an historian differ, however, when it comes to judgement: while the former *must* divide between true or false and pronounce a sentence, the latter may prefer a more sceptical attitude and refrain from too definitive a judgement. He or she may take a decision, but should not dismiss the possibility that he or she is wrong, and that one would have to revise one’s judgement when new evidence or better arguments allow or ask for reconsideration.

In no way should the historian become an attorney or prosecutor. This, however, is precisely what seems to happen quite often in current debates among ‘biblical historians’, ‘maximalists’ and ‘minimalists’ alike, and we ourselves may sometimes have fallen prey to this—the worst case being that one takes on several roles at once, detective, prosecutor and judge.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the potential use of visual sources, together with the methods employed for studying visual evidence, such as iconography or iconology, for the history of ‘ancient Israel’.¹ It is divided into three main parts: remarks on the theoretical and conceptual framework, particularly the notion of ‘eyewitnessing’; some considerations on method, particularly iconography; and some case examples chosen from monuments which are so well known to historians of ancient Israel that they are well suited to illustrate both the pitfalls of more conventional interpretations and the potential of alternative approaches, more sensitive to the monuments’ peculiar status as visual documents.

1. HISTORY AND VISUAL ART, A MATTER OF EYEWITNESSING?

Historians of ancient Israel are familiar with the many problems involved in the use of texts of various genres as historical sources, whether inscriptions or literary compositions. It is generally to them that we devote most of our attention, even when entering such difficult fields as social history where we

¹ I am aware of the many problems surrounding this concept, on which see Davies 1992.

consider the lives of people, the vast majority of whom could neither read nor write and who did not leave behind any written testimony concerning their works and days. During the twentieth century, students of ancient Israel became used to considering another set of evidence, namely material culture as recovered by archaeological excavations. However amateurish our ways of dealing with archaeology may often be, all books of the 'history of ancient Israel' genre written during the second half of the twentieth century tried to integrate at least part of this additional evidence. To be fair, most of them—and for that matter, most archaeologies of ancient Israel/Palestine as well—attempt to bring the Bible and archaeology into some sort of balance. While opinions diverge over precedence, that is, whether or not archaeology should always have priority over texts, particularly biblical texts² (the other way round being rarely argued though often practised), I see no one who would question in principle that both domains are essential for historical research.

Few have really considered a third witness. Visual sources both monumental and minute provide a testimony of another kind, which deserves to be investigated in its own right.³ The relative neglect of visual evidence in studies of the history of ancient Israel, Judah and their neighbours is surprising only in principle. It may be explained both in terms of medium and genre (conventionally, 'history' refers to a narrative text, be it written or recited), the neglect of iconography by historians in general (images have long been regarded as art and mere illustration instead of independent evidence), the relative dissociation of philological, archaeological and art-historical expertise in modern scholarship, and perhaps also the religious background of most students of the history of ancient Israel (Judaism and Protestantism each having their particular relationship to images, although of course they are neither artless nor aniconic). Some of these points will be discussed below. Students of history, archaeology, biblical studies, or for that matter theology have all learnt how to read and write, but they have rarely been taught in a systematic way how to look at images, how to interpret them and how to evaluate their potential for any particular segment of history they are interested in.

In legal terms and common sense, eyewitness testimony weighs more than the story of someone who happened to hear about something that is said to have happened somewhere at some time. One would therefore presume that visual evidence should attract particular interest among students of ancient

² I have stated my personal opinion on these matters in Uehlinger 2001, 25–39, and 2005b, 282–86.

³ Note the legal metaphor in Keel's title phrase, *Das Recht der Bilder, gesehen zu werden* (Keel 1992).

history. As it stands, however, not only is this not the case, but the metaphor of the eyewitness is part of our problem, as we shall see.

1.1. Disciplinary histories

Before turning to the sources—namely visual evidence that may be related to the history of ancient Israel and Judah—let us briefly consider the state of the art among fellow historians in neighbouring disciplines. The problem is not peculiar to the history of ancient Israel, but is a particular consequence of how knowledge is organized in modern academia. As a matter of fact, many disciplines belonging to the so-called ‘humanities’ (or arts and letters), and particularly those that address issues of ‘culture’ (note the recent rise of a new concept of *Kulturwissenschaften*, hardly defined but unquestionably fashionable, in Germany), give considerable importance to the historical study of their subject, and to their own peculiar history, that is the genesis and development of theories and methods within their discipline. Hence the scholarly study of art has long been concerned almost exclusively with the *history* of art (including the evolution of style, technique, genres, etc.), the study of literature with the *history* of the respective literatures defined according to language or nation, the study of music with the *history* of (mainly Western European) music, and so on. Theology has produced biblical history and ecclesiastical history, while the study of non-Christian religions, for some time much concerned with so-called sacred literature, developed during the nineteenth century into a full-blown discipline called ‘history of religions’. Historians, for their part, have long been trained to work on particular sets of mostly written documents, with an emphasis on archival material or various types of historiography, from ancient to modern. As a result, ‘humanities’ happen as histories.

Libraries in humanities therefore contain histories of virtually any subject of scholarly concern (including, e.g., a learned history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Early Modern Europe, Scholar 2005). Such ‘histories’ are generally defined by the rules of any particular discipline, to the extent that one may well ask what makes them ‘histories’ at all, and whether they have about them something of a lowest common denominator. They generally move within a canon of methods and theories which are recognized within their respective discipline, and thus contribute essentially to the growth and enlargement of intra-disciplinary master narratives. Not surprisingly, then, the history of a certain period and place does not look quite the same to a philologist, an archaeologist, an art historian or an historian *tout court*. The question is whether and to what extent these scholars and disciplines communicate with each other and exchange their relative insights, or whether they expect the primary

sources of the neighbouring field simply to duplicate their own disciplinary master story.

1.2. Visual art and history

During the last two decades, several important conferences have been organized (e.g. Rotberg and Rabb 1988; Tolkemitt and Wohlfeil 1991) and major textbooks published by renowned authors, art historians and historians on how to use pictorial evidence for the purpose of history-writing (most recently, Burke 2001 and Roeck 2004).⁴ They have helped to build bridges between the disciplines in a cultural-historical perspective that tries to combine such different approaches to history as nineteenth-century German *Kulturgeschichte* (minus the latter's philosophical conundra), the French *Annales* tradition and structuralism and the distinctive qualities of an often more pragmatic, less theory-driven English tradition of learning. Although they generally address pictorial material relating to the European tradition from the late Middle Ages to the present, they provide interesting theoretical background and stimulating insights and discussions for their fellow historians of the ancient Near East and ancient Israel as well.

To be sure, historians of the ancient Near East have a long tradition of using visual evidence for their history. However, their studies are often more antiquarian in perspective and rarely address problems of method and theory concerning ancient visual art, at least as far as European scholarship is concerned (Bonatz 2000 is a notable exception).⁵ The reason for this state of affairs is probably that history of art, as an academic discipline that is quite far removed from Near Eastern studies in terms of institutional affiliation, is traditionally concerned first of all with the history of so-called classical (i.e. Greek and Roman) art and the European tradition. Interestingly enough, however, artworks of quasi-canonical status belonging to that tradition have been repeatedly called upon by leading theorists from many other disciplines both in the humanities and social sciences (philosophy, psychology, literary criticism, culture theory, anthropology, etc.). This has generated continuous

⁴ To some extent, Roeck's monograph runs parallel to Burke's, although Roeck (a professor of history at the University of Zurich) goes into more detail and treats the subject in an almost exhaustive, if sometimes less thesis-driven, way. To compare the two books is to learn about two cultures of learning and the different academic environments to which they are indebted. Since this chapter addresses English-speaking readers (and for my own convenience as well), I shall refer more often to Burke, borrowing as much from his insights as from his wording.

⁵ American scholars such as Irene J. Winter, Holly Pittman, Margaret Cool Root and others have regularly dealt with theoretical issues (interestingly enough, this seems to be a field of female scholarship especially). My purpose here is not to single out any particular scholar, but a tendency within a whole discipline, particularly in European research.

alternative academic discourses and even paradigms referring to these works of art, discourses and paradigms which history of art as a discipline could not easily ignore. In comparison, historians of the ancient Near East have been far less exposed to critical theory, and theory *tout court*, whether for better or for worse. A famous episode in the history of research concerns the archaeologist Anton Moortgat's interpretation of Near Eastern imagery in terms of perceived Tammuz mythology (Moortgat 1949),⁶ which met with harsh disapproval from philologists such as F. R. Kraus (1953). Kraus's criticism signalled considerable suspicion against art-historical approaches to ancient Near Eastern material or visual culture in general (see Keel 1992, 20–23 on the Moortgat/Kraus controversy and its consequences). Only in more recent years have practitioners of ancient Near Eastern history (philologists) and ancient Near Eastern art historians been coming closer again, often meeting on common grounds prepared by archaeology.

When considering the relationship of history and visual art, or 'visual history' (Gaskell 1991), we should distinguish between the issue of what one may call *historical imagination*, or how visual art contributes to shape our images of the past, and problems concerning the proper *methods of interpretation* to be applied when we deal with visual documents in an historical perspective. The case examples discussed in section 3 of this chapter have been chosen with an eye to both issues.

Regarding the first issue, historical imagination, we should mention the late Francis Haskell's *History and its Images. Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (1993), which has become a classic on the subject. Haskell (1928–2000) was Professor of the History of Art at Oxford University. The purpose of his book is historiographical in the sense that he presents a history of the use of visual evidence by students of history. From fifteenth-century numismatists to twentieth-century cultural historians or from Petrarca to Huizinga, he asks what kind of images were available to these scholars, what kind of images they privileged for their particular aim as historians, how they approached the sources they relied upon, and how the images they used had an impact on them and contributed to shape their own image of history or historical imagination. Haskell's book provides fascinating background for another narrative, which is better known to students of the ancient Near East, namely how since Napoleon's Egyptian expedition through the discoveries of Place, Layard, Rassam and other early explorers Europe discovered the ancient civilizations of western Asia in the context of imperial competition. The impact on historical imagination of monuments and of their public exposure in

⁶ While Moortgat's approach does not contradict Erwin Panofsky's method of iconography and iconology (on which see below), it was more influenced by the work of Ludwig Curtius (1874–1954), a classical archaeologist with considerable expertise in Near Eastern art as well.

imperial museums has been amply documented, and also the way it modelled the perception of the ancient Near East by Orientalist scholars, whether historians, philologists or archaeologists (see Gunter 1992; Larsen 1996; Bohrer 2003). Within the field of ancient Israelite and Judahite history, images such as that of King Jehu paying homage to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (see below section 3.2. on the Black Obelisk) or the sculptures showing the conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib (see section 3.3.) have left a powerful imprint on the historical imagination of scholars since their discovery and early display in the mid-nineteenth century. Haskell's book demonstrates that the intellectual matrix that determined that perception had already been shaped by a long-standing use of antiquarian evidence for Europe's own history and self-understanding which was ultimately rooted in early humanism, but particularly by modern imperial experiences and nationalisms (see his chapters on 'Historical Narrative and Reportage', 'The Birth of Cultural History', 'The Arts as an Index of Society', and 'Museums, Illustrations and the Search for Authenticity').

1.3. Eyewitnessing

Let us come back to the metaphor of legal investigation, the balancing of testimony, and the particular status of an eyewitness. Peter Burke (1937), Professor of Cultural History at the University of Cambridge, has recently published in the 'Picturing History' series a monograph entitled *Eyewitnessing. The Use of Images as Historical Evidence* (2001). In this book, he brilliantly surveys the potentials and pitfalls of images being used as 'admissible evidence' in critical history-writing. Images, writes Burke, may contain valuable information about unpreserved material culture and the use of particular objects in certain contexts. They may stage social practices such as feasting, hunting or warfare, including details such as camp organization during a military campaign (for each of these categories one immediately thinks of relevant Assyrian sculptures, which are not treated by Burke since the ancient Near East falls outside the horizon of European cultural history). Images can display various aspects of social organization, power and prestige, including codes of gender and age differentiation or ethnic distinctions. They thus provide essential evidence that would otherwise be lacking, and it seems obvious therefore that historians should not ignore their testimony. However, says Burke,

Relatively few historians work in photographic archives, compared to the numbers who work in repositories of written and typewritten documents. Relatively few historical journals carry illustrations, and when they do, relatively few contributors take advantage of this opportunity. When they do use images,

historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions. (Burke 2001, 10)

Whenever available and used, images have an impact on historical imagination and, says Burke, ‘allow us to “imagine” the past more vividly’ (ibid., 13), a point extensively documented by Haskell, as we have seen.

Beyond mere imagination, Burke’s book also offers a fascinating panorama of examples where visual evidence (whether sources or traces) can indeed make a formidable contribution to the work of the historian, provided he or she has learnt how to ‘read’ the pictures (‘reading pictures’ being a very old trope that goes back at least as far as Pope Gregory the Great, c. 540–604 CE), to ask the right questions and to handle the ‘evidence’ with care. Take portraits, for example, a genre which has a particular affinity to ‘documentation’: they are formalized ‘presentations of the self’, not equivalents of a candid camera, and what they record is, writes Burke, ‘not social reality so much as social illusions, not ordinary life but special performances. But for this very reason, they offer priceless evidence to anyone interested in the history of changing hopes, values or mentalities’ (ibid., 26, 28). The testimony of images ‘is essential for historians of mentalities, because an image is necessarily explicit on issues that may be evaded more easily in texts. Images can bear witness to what is not put into words’ (ibid., 31). But ‘what we see is a painted opinion, a “view of society” in an ideological as well as a visual sense’ (ibid., 122).

Still, images as much as texts require ‘source criticism’, since their testimony ‘like that of texts, raises problems of context, function, rhetoric, recollection (whether soon or long after the event), secondhand witnessing and so on’ (ibid., 15). According to Burke, we should always ‘begin by studying the different purposes of their makers’ (ibid., 19—a phrase that seems to echo Michael Baxandall’s ‘patterns of intentions’, on which see below, section 2.2.). While images can sometimes provide insights in spaces left blank by other sources, we should not use them only to answer questions raised but left unanswered by the texts. Visual documents must be contextualized, but they also need to be studied in their own terms. Probably the best thing images may offer to historical research is that they offer a *different*, peculiar kind of evidence and allow *other* questions to be asked than are raised by texts or (other) archaeological and artifactual evidence.

1.4. Problems with eyewitnessing

While it may be true to some extent that images ‘record acts of eyewitnessing’ (Burke 2001, 14), Burke himself demonstrates at length that the eyewitness metaphor is not without problems. One may say that images document ways of seeing or looking at and representing reality much more than that reality itself; they do not provide windows to the past but witness to the *gaze* and *mise en scène* on behalf of both ancient image-makers and their modern interpreters. I shall not go into the difficult subject of gaze in more detail here, but limit myself to pointing out that this is a much-debated issue in current art and visual culture criticism. Reception aesthetics—to which artists such as René Magritte have themselves contributed in their own, somewhat provocative way—have long taught us to study pictures not only as pure objects and one-way-decodable messages in themselves, but to give equal importance to ‘the eyes of the beholder’, to the process of ‘looking at’ and to the gaze as active instances in a complex hermeneutic encounter (‘der Betrachter ist im Bild’). In the face of pictures as much as texts, meaning is actively construed by the person who seeks to understand. It is essential therefore to ask how and for what purpose historians use images in their historiographical projects.

In the history of ancient Israel as in any other, the way images are used and discussed tells us at least as much about the gaze, or the way people look at Israelite and Judahite history, as about that history itself. Consider an article published recently in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, focusing on the Israelite exodus from Egypt (fig. 11.1):⁷ drawing on biblical texts, epigraphic evidence (of various origins and dates) and archaeological bits and pieces, the author argues for an early date and a high degree of historical trustworthiness of the so-called Song of the Sea (Exod. 15). We do not have to address this particular argument here. More interesting for our purpose is the way the argument is framed by a massive title (‘Eyewitness testimony’), an assuring subtitle, a lead text—and pictures. The question ‘How old are the Bible’s narratives of the Exodus from Egypt?’ may sound rhetorical when it appears just underneath a subtitle that declares that ‘Parts of Exodus [were] written within living memory of the event’. The main title’s message is supported by visual evidence of the strongest kind: the Black Obelisk and its so-called ‘Jehu vignette’. Of course, this monument has nothing to do with the Exodus; the way of referring to it owes more to present-day tabloid rhetoric than to history and historical scholarship. We should refrain from blaming the author: his text does not even mention the Black Obelisk and he is certainly

⁷ In accordance with bibliographical rules, the article is quoted as Halpern 2003, although the author was probably not involved in the preparation of the visual decorum.

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

PARTS OF EXODUS WRITTEN WITHIN LIVING MEMORY OF THE EVENT

BARUCH HALPERN

How old are the Bible's narratives of the Exodus from Egypt? Can we really date the texts that preserve those narratives? And if so, what is the oldest Biblical text that discusses the Exodus?

To start with the answer, we *can* date Biblical texts. And the oldest text attesting the Exodus dates to sometime between 1125 and 1000 B.C.E.

The Exodus occurred, according to the previous article in this issue by the distinguished archaeologist of Egypt, Manfred Bietak, in about 1150 B.C.E. Most scholars have followed the lead of the Bible in placing the Exodus itself in the late 13th century B.C.E. Bietak's date is somewhat arbitrary, but the formation of an "Exodus tradition" (as he designates it) probably *does* roughly belong to the 12th century B.C.E. So, unlike much other Biblical material, the earliest attestation of the Exodus in the Bible is almost contemporaneous with the very origin of the tradition! This means that when the Exodus texts were composed, some people were probably still alive who participated in the event or remembered it—whatever *it* may have been. (Bietak also thinks that King David began his reign around 1020 B.C.E., while others place the start of that reign around 1000, but the variation in chronology here is small.)

How Bietak arrives at his archaeological datings is a matter for another article. But we can begin, now, to tell the story of how we arrive at reasonable conclusions about the dating of Biblical texts.

Taken together, archaeology, on the one hand, and the study of language development, on the other, permit us to date a large number of Biblical texts with a

considerable degree of certainty. Scholars often cite "inconsistencies" in a text as evidence that portions were added long after its original composition. Sometimes the evidence is strong; more often the "inconsistencies" turn out, on closer scrutiny, to be complexities instead. By and large, then, one can date the major part of a Biblical text—say, the Book of Ezekiel, and more specifically almost all of Ezekiel 1-39—with some confidence to a reasonably limited period of time.

The basic political chronology of the Iron Age (1200-587 B.C.E.) is fixed by lists of Assyrian kings and eponyms (officials appointed one per year). One such list contains a dated reference to the solar eclipse of 763 B.C.E., so we can project regnal lengths forward and backward from that point. This permits us to date reports of military campaigns, often to particular years. Hence, the synchronisms these lists share with kings of Israel and Judah permit the construction of a chronology based on reports of regnal lengths in the two books of Kings. For example, in the sixth regnal year of Shalmaneser III, 853 B.C.E., "Ahab the Israelite" participated in a battle waged by a coalition of Western kings against Assyria. And in 841 B.C.E., Shalmaneser's 18th year, Jehu (king of Israel) paid Shalmaneser tribute. So the 12 regnal years attributed to Ahab's sons must stretch from 853-841, meaning that Ahab died in 853 or so, and Jehu assumed power in 841. Using these dates as a basis, synchronisms between Kings and passages concerning foreign monarchs and international events from Mesopotamian, Aramaic and Moabite sources (as well as the Tyrian annals preserved in the work of the first-century C.E. historian

Figure 11.1 Modern appeal to visual evidence as 'eyewitness testimony' (*Biblical Archaeology Review* vol. 29, fasc. 5, 2003, pp. 50-51).



Flavius Josephus) fit neatly into the chronological web that Assyrian (and, later, Babylonian) sources form. Thereafter, there are synchronisms for a series of Assyrian monarchs and Israelite and Judahite kings—Adad-Narari III and Joash (of Samaria); Tiglath-pileser III and Ahaz (of Judah) and Menahem, Pekah and Hosea (of Israel); Sargon II (721-705 B.C.E.) mentions the kingdom of Judah, and Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.E.) mentions Hezekiah and known rulers of other states. Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.E.) and Ashurbanipal (668-631 B.C.E.) refer to Hezekiah's successor, Manasseh. Although the length of time assigned to Pekah's reign (735-733? B.C.E.) creates difficulties, it still looks as though the Biblical royal chronology is fairly accurate.

All of this chronology will help us to date some Biblical texts.

In fact, the surest dating comes from prophetic texts dealing with politics. Thus, Amos 1-2 (and much of the rest of the book) clearly belongs to the world of the mid-eighth century B.C.E., in that it reflects permanent Assyrian advances into the West. The Assyrian conquest took place definitively under Tiglath-pileser III (745-

CAMELS, MONKEYS, AN ELEPHANT AND A RHINOCEROS, items of tribute that the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.) amassed over his long reign, are depicted on the four sides of the Black Obelisk (left), a 6.5-foot-tall monument to the king's achievements. On the second register (below) from the top, on the side shown here, Jehu, king of Israel, prostrates himself before Shalmaneser. Jehu paid Shalmaneser tribute in the latter's 18th regnal year, or 841 B.C.E.; with this date fixed, Biblical scholars can proceed to date other events described in the Bible and even some of the Biblical texts themselves.

Author Baruch Halpern, in the accompanying article, explains how scholars draw on the history of the ancient Near East and on the evolution of certain linguistic factors (such as changes in pronunciation and spelling) to date texts in the Hebrew Bible, including the earliest accounts of the Exodus from Egypt.



ERICH LESSING

Figure 11.1 cont.

not responsible either for the visual formatting rules followed by the *Biblical Archaeology Review* or for the particular headlines. What is really intriguing and interesting for our concern is the appeal to the eyewitness metaphor together with the conspicuous reference to an emblematic image. It seems as if visual evidence was employed here in order to effectively counterbalance insights of historical-critical Bible research, namely, that the Exodus story is *no* eyewitness testimony at all. An image is used to support a claim for historical truth, a truth claimed via visual evidence and pitted against critical enquiry. Seeing is believing: the logic behind the screen has long been engraved in the cultural memory of the West (and probably far beyond).

The valuation of ‘eyewitnessing’ is itself a cultural construct, which has deeply influenced the way Western historians deal with images of the past. In 381 CE, a lady called Egeria travelled to Egypt and Palestine where she spent three years of her life visiting holy places. When arriving at the ruins of Ramesse (probably localized at Qantir), she was shown a monumental double statue said to have been erected by the sons of Israel in honour of their holy men Moses and Aaron. This at least was the explanation of her local guide, readily accepted by the pilgrim. The actual monument may well have been a double statue of King Ramesses II and an Egyptian god, such as those which have been found by Flinders Petrie at Memphis and Tell er-Retabe or by Pierre Montet at Tanis (Şan el-Ḥagar; see Keel 1994, 156–61). When Egeria saw these biblical characters with her own eyes, her faith and confidence in the founding traditions of the Bible were reinforced. Just as pilgrimage has much to do with eyewitnessing, our search for historical eyewitness testimony sometimes belongs to the realm of intellectual pilgrimage. To be sure, the historical identification of the main characters represented on the Black Obelisk are certainly more pertinent than in the case of lady Egeria’s Moses and Aaron, but the way in which the *Biblical Archaeology Review* article quoted above wants us to relate to ancient history works along much the same lines as pilgrimage, at times to the point of devotion. Such a sense of witnessing and what our eyes should believe does not need to be illusory per se, but it cannot be the critical historian’s point of view.

2. REMARKS ON METHOD

2.1. Iconography and beyond

This is not the place for going into details of iconographical methodology. Suffice it to say that art-historical interpretation of a kind that interests the historian still owes much to the approach to iconography and iconology initiated by the famous German art historian and Renaissance expert Erwin

Panofsky (1892–1968) in close discussion with Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer, among others (on method, see especially Panofsky 1932; 1939; 1957).⁸ Panofsky's scheme of interpretation—which he updated several times during his career, being clearly convinced that it was basically sound—distinguishes three levels of interpretation corresponding to as many levels of meaning in the work itself:

1 pre-iconographical description of motifs, concerned with the primary or natural meaning and consisting of recognizing objects and forms, expressions and actions (such as thirteen men sitting around a table for a meal and conversation);

2 iconographical analysis *sensu stricto*, which aims at recognizing the secondary or conventional meaning of motifs and compositions, not least with recourse to literary tradition (e.g. the Last Supper);

3 iconological interpretation, concerned with so-called 'intrinsic meaning', which for Panofsky meant 'those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion', that is, great ideas and values of a period and its *Zeitgeist*. Considering the individual artwork in symptomatic terms as an expression and medium of *Zeitgeist*, Panofsky was most interested in this third-level operation, basing himself on the somewhat airy concept of 'synthetic intuition'. It is obvious at once that such a scheme could only be designed by a classical humanist (cf. Summers 1995).

More influential than any other method put forward during the twentieth century, Panofsky's approach has stimulated intense discussions (see Kaemmerling 1979; Lavin 1995). While some authors criticized Panofsky's elitist indifference to social context, others objected to his obvious logocentrism: his second level switches too quickly to literary tradition, instead of remaining with the visual evidence itself and the latter's own, peculiar tradition; and the third level of meaning is often construed on the basis of utterly sophisticated philosophical speculations hardly substantiated by the visual evidence on the pictorial documents themselves. As a whole, Panofsky's method 'is too literary or logocentric, in the sense of assuming that images illustrate ideas and of privileging content over form, the humanist adviser over the actual painter or sculptor' (Burke 2001, 41). According to Burke, Panofsky and his colleagues and followers were in fact applying or adapting to images 'a distinctively German tradition of interpreting texts', pioneered a century earlier by the classical scholar Friedrich Ast (1778–1841), who had

⁸ With the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the intellectual heritage of Warburg, Panofsky and others moved to London, where the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* ultimately merged into the Warburg and Courtauld Institute, and to the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, NJ (see Michels 1999).

distinguished three levels in literature, namely the grammatical, the historical and the cultural, and who recognized the ultimate end of interpretation in hermeneutics (see Burke 2001, 36).

Despite much legitimate criticism, however, the general plausibility of Panofsky's scheme is still widely recognized, and rightly so. Not surprisingly, many of the critics have extended or adapted the scheme to their own theoretical preferences, without replacing it altogether (regarding ancient Near Eastern iconography, see for instance Keel [and Uehlinger] 1992, 267–73; Kühne 1999; Bonatz 2000, 5–12). Many authors continue to use the term 'iconography' in a sense that combines Panofsky's levels 1 and 2, and they use 'iconology' as a closely related term, often comparing 'geography' to 'geology' and generally replacing Panofsky's appeal to *Zeitgeist* by a more definite concern for social history, patronage and audience, context, cultural tradition and so on (Ginzburg 1983). Iconography and iconology have thus definitely moved beyond Panofsky's concern for the 'essential tendencies of the human mind' and a prime interest in philosophy and symbolism to more historicized interpretations of visual art and culture. These more recent approaches concur with earlier ones in their conviction that images and iconography contribute more to the history of mentalities, or cultural history, or social history in the *Annales* tradition, than to the history of single events. This being said, there is hardly any historical interpretation of visual documents that would currently not be based on iconography (Roeck 2004, 43).

Having once acknowledged the conceptual displacement from philosophy-driven iconology to social and cultural history or even historical anthropology, we may take stock of the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the humanities and add some of its benefits, particularly from structuralist and semiotic theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, to the iconographical and iconological project. Burke rightly stresses that 'insofar as they do analyse specific elements of images, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and Eco might all be described as doing iconography rather than breaking with it' (Burke 2001, 176; cf. Boon 1995).⁹ In a theoretical, meta-linguistic perspective, images may indeed be considered as formalized visual messages quite analogous to texts or any other medium of symbolic communication. By the same analogy, we could speak of a visual (or pictorial) language (*langue*) that performs as an idiom (corresponding to the *parole* in structuralist terminology) with its proper vocabulary (motives), with iconemes carrying particular semantic values and meanings arranged into scenes, formulae or constellations according to specific syntactical and compositional rules and conventions, rules that may themselves vary according to genre, tra-

⁹ Compare Roeck 2004, 57: 'Ihre eigentliche Wirkung hat die Ikonologie für die Semiotik und für strukturalistische Ansätze gezeitigt.'

dition and context (and that may also on occasion be transgressed). Since images have their own rhetoric and pragmatic, they may even act—as much as speech is said to act (J. L. Austin, J. Searle)—although it would probably be more pertinent to say that people act with and through images (see Bräunlein 2004 on ‘Bildakte’). The latter is particularly obvious when we consider images that were used on purpose as media for political, partly public and to some extent ideology-driven communication, such as the monumental images we shall address later in this chapter.

Although the analogy of images with texts, of visual communication with language, may have its own pitfalls, it can also be helpful to supplement Panofsky’s three levels of meaning with the three basic linguistic categories of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. One could go on including more of modern media and communication theory and terminology (Uehlinger 2005a), but I shall stop at this point. There are so many plain analogies that scholars working in the field of textual and literary analysis should have no difficulties in recognizing the practicability and potential usefulness of visual analysis and interpretation for historical analysis, past polemics notwithstanding. As a matter of fact, a growing number of scholars studying the ancient Near East investigate the reciprocal relationship of images and texts, comparing for instance the visual rhetoric of narrative and formal sculptures and the textual rhetoric of Ashurnasirpal’s annals in the throne-room of his palace at Kalach/Nimrud (see Winter 1981 and Lumsden 2004 with references to earlier bibliography; compare Tefnin 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991 on related issues in Egyptian art and visual communication).

2.2. Patterns of intentions, and the triangle of re-enactment

When analysing visual documents, we nowadays look for cultural codes negotiating meaning in shifting socio-historical contexts rather than for meanings that we could fix on a stable cultural canvas. This is the place to mention one of the classic essays on the historical explanation of art, Michael Baxandall’s *Patterns of Intention* (1985). According to Baxandall, a British art historian (1933) who taught at the Warburg and Courtauld Institute and at the University of California at Berkeley, if one takes pictures as visual artifacts, these should be historically explained as products of patterned intentions, that is, ‘products of purposeful activity, and therefore caused’ (Baxandall 1985, vi). ‘Intention’ is not construed by Baxandall as an individual, historical artist’s particular state of mind, or as an exclusively ‘authorial intention’, but as a ‘relation between the object and its circumstances’ (ibid., 42)—one could as well speak of ‘intentionality’ or ‘purposefulness’, the main point being that these qualities are not only located within

the historical actor's mind but objectively related to the historical object or document: 'it is primarily a general condition of rational human action which I posit in the course of arranging my circumstantial facts or moving about on the triangle of re-enactment' (ibid., 41).

Explaining a visual document of the past requires that one asks questions about the knowledge, skills and abilities required on behalf of its authors, but also about the document's social location, its function as a medium of social communication, the modes of reception it could generate, and so on. Because it replaces the object to be understood in a complex network of past social relations and actors, 'interpretation' or 'explanation' have much to do with re-enactment. 'The maker of a picture or other historical artifact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution. To understand it we try to reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it' (ibid., 13–14). The 'triangle of re-enactment', as Baxandall has coined his procedural framework, is formed by a *problem* (why this picture, required and produced by whom, to what end and in which social and institutional context?), a *culture* (its dispositions, values and expectations, genres and subjects, abilities and competences) and the outcome of the pictorial process, namely, the resulting *work of art*. Accordingly, 'historical objects may be explained by treating them as *solutions to problems in situations*, and by reconstructing a rational relationship between these three' (ibid., 35).

Re-enacting problems, means, situations and solutions of other cultures poses particular challenges, since the problem, the means and the circumstances are all shaped by a particular cultural tradition: 'not some aesthetical sort of cultural gene but a specifically discriminating view of the past in an active and reciprocal relation with a developing set of dispositions and skills acquirable in the culture that possesses this view' (ibid., 62). By consequence, 'a first task in the historical perception of a picture is therefore often that of working through to a realization of quite how alien it and the mind that made it are' (ibid., 115).

2.3. Putting the images back into context, or images as artifacts and media

Such principles are of course well known to students of ancient literature, though not always made as explicit as one might wish when it comes to dealing with canonical literature such as biblical texts, and at any rate rarely taken into account when students trained in literature make use of visual evidence in order to support a particular case for the purpose of historical argument. The historical interpretation of visual documents must not concentrate exclusively on the 'content' or 'subject matter' of an image—what one might call

its semantic aspects—but should always take into account the peculiar potentials and possibilities (or circumstances) of visual representation at a given place and period: the formal constraints (syntax) which are often related to material, style, skill and even genre. Whenever possible, it should also address a document's pragmatic function, that is, the particular position within the total network of social communication of a society. To put it briefly, explaining an image in historical terms requires contextualization and sensitivity for the practicalities of social communication.

Drawing mostly on early modern and modern paintings and twentieth-century photographs, Peter Burke has argued that 'images should not be considered mere reflections of their time and place, but rather extensions of the social contexts in which they were produced' (2001, dust-jacket). His approach to ancient images 'might be described as the "cultural history of images"', or even the "historical anthropology of images", since it is concerned to construct the rules or conventions, conscious or unconscious, governing the perception and interpretation of images within a given culture' (ibid., 180). I think that this is precisely the way we should address ancient Near Eastern images as well. When concerned with Israel and/or Judah, such images may become valuable witnesses for the history of ancient Israel, provided we consider them as testimonies not so much of ancient eyewitnesses but of ancient 'gaze'—'testimonies of past social arrangements and above all of past ways of seeing and thinking' (Burke 2001, 185). When ancient images distinguish between locals and foreigners, for instance, by attributing different costume and attitude to people, we are tempted to look at them as windows to past reality. It would be preferable, however, to consider them first in a more formal way, as indexical signs of distinction and witnesses to peculiar visual taxonomies. As mentioned above, critical discussions of Orientalism have taught us that European images depicting members of 'oriental' cultures and societies tell us much more about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the societies which by means of such images shaped both their stereotypical, prejudiced image of the 'others' and their own value system and identity, than about the 'Oriental' foreigners themselves and their way of life (Burke 2001, 123–39, has a chapter on 'stereotypes of Others'). This is even more obvious in the case of images that show interaction between members of one society, one culture and another. Considered thus, images may indeed become a primary source for the study of past mentalities and realities, but we should carefully consider not just what they represent, but also how they do it, why they do it in their particular way and with what audience in mind. Images tell as much about those who represent as about what or whom they represent. To put it squarely, we should take the images back into their social and historical contexts, where they functioned as media of socially meaningful communication and sometimes even served a recognizable

function within a definite ‘figurative policy’ (a key term I borrow from Porter 1993).

To sum up, practising iconography or iconology in a social-historical perspective means that we consider images not only as pictures and representations of something else, as windows to the past, but in their very materiality as artifacts made by someone at some time, often on behalf of someone else, for a particular purpose and with an audience in mind.

2.4. From casual observer to serious student—once more, on historical imagination

Historians working with visual sources engage in a peculiar way with the past. While art theory has long recognized the essential ‘share of the beholder’ in any perception and interpretation of visual evidence, however acquainted one may feel with a culture or however strange the object to be looked at may be, ‘looking into the past’ exposes the historian working with visual sources more than others to historicist temptations and fallacies. The danger of historicist misunderstandings considerably increased during the twentieth century, with the growing importance gained by photography and film as media of documentation. Hayden White once coined the term ‘historiophoty’ as a complement to the usual ‘historiography’ in order to account for the photography-based representation of history that is so characteristic of the twentieth century (White 1988). Alan Trachtenberg has argued that ‘the idea of the camera has so implanted itself that our very imagination of the past takes the snapshot as its notion of adequacy, the equivalent of *having been there*. Photographs are the popular historicism of our era; they confer nothing less than reality itself’, to the extent that ‘historical knowledge declares its true value by its photographability’ (1985, 1, quoted by Haskell 1993, 4). According to Burke, ‘In the age of photography, the memory of particular events became more and more closely associated with their visual images. (. . .) In the age of television, the perception of current events is virtually inseparable from their images on the screen’ (Burke 2001, 140). While there can be no doubt that new media have a powerful impact on our way of writing and visualizing history, such statements should make us particularly suspicious when, as we have seen, scholarly debates on the history of ancient Israel and the trustworthiness of biblical sources are staged in a public arena according to the rules of tabloid communication.

Many so-called documentaries have been thoroughly criticized for their blatant or alleged non-objectivity. We all know that ‘the camera can lie’ as much as any other medium, particularly in an age where post-production and image manipulation have become banalized everyday operations accessible to

any individual with a minimal exposure to multimedia technology. Perhaps this makes it easier for contemporary scholars to take a (de-)constructivist stance towards their object much in the way described above with reference to Baxandall: images are carefully designed and crafted products of patterned intentions, skills and purposes. Yet to conclude that there may be a liar behind every photographer is a truism as well as a blatant exaggeration.

Somewhat in reaction against reception-oriented approaches that stress the active participation of the beholder's eye in giving meaning to images, post-structuralist theory also takes an interest in 'the ways in which past works of art actually work at prefiguring the shape of their subsequent histories' (Holly 1996, xiii). While vulnerable to misunderstandings and even abuse, images—as much as texts, for that matter—do not under normal circumstances allow for any sort of interpretation; rather, they channel the interpreter towards more or less adequate, or suitable, or at least plausible explanations. This implies that some more or less plain meaning and/or significance *is* encoded in images (one of the more delicate tasks in practice is of course to draw a line between the more and the less). Historians working with visual data should take seriously the questions posed by Michael Ann Holly, a former professor of art and art history at the University of Rochester who is now affiliated with the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA. In the preface to her *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (1996), she asks:

How do works become intelligible to those who write about them? Where does the process of historiographic invention begin? If indeed it is the case that a dynamic understanding of interpretation demands that we as art historians come to terms with what we do to the work, it is equally useful to ask what the work of art does to us: how it sets us (its scholars) up as spectator-historians to see things in certain rhetorically specific ways according to its own logic of figuration. In writing about the past, we may be striving to look at its visual traces without realizing that those works of art are also forever looking back at us (Holly 1996, xiv).

The latter formulation may seem unnecessarily rhetorical to those who are less inclined to consider the object of their study in terms of an active partner engaging in an interpersonal communication. Still, Holly reminds us that images, like texts, have their rhetoric and power of persuasion (one might refer to Freedberg's classic *Power of Images* here), and that dealing with visual sources requires some readiness on behalf of the observer–historian to engage carefully with the strategies of persuasion displayed by the documents. Just how much images have indeed a genuine capacity of their own to direct our perception and interpretation may be illustrated by the fact, for example, that Austen Henry Layard identified face A of the Black Obelisk (see Figs. 11.6–7 below) as the main face since the very day of its discovery.

His opinion has never been questioned since, but may, on the contrary, be easily substantiated by structural analysis. When for Holly ‘the choice seems to be between the objectivity of the objects of art or the subjectivity and subjecthood of their interpreters’ (1996, 7), I would therefore prefer exploring both and choosing a kind of third way in between, combining both the structured message of the document and the structuring intelligence of its beholder.

Again according to Holly, ‘A casual observer can walk away. The historian of art, however, is compelled to repeat, or at least react to, the conceits of positioning in his or her historical account’ (*ibid.*, 9). It is our decision whether, as historians of ancient Israel, we want to remain casual observers or step in and engage seriously with visual sources. In the latter case, keeping in mind what we have learned with Baxandall on re-enactment, we might rephrase our task along the lines of a series of articles by exegete David Clines, well known to Hebrew Bible scholars: ‘Why is there a {Merenptah stela, a Black Obelisk, a Lachish relief etc.}—and what does it do to you when you look at it?’

3. MONUMENTS AND ‘VISUAL HISTORY’—CASE STUDIES

Let us now address a few Egyptian and Assyrian monuments which are of immediate relevance for the history of ancient Israel. I am aware of the fact that royal monuments do not provide the only (nor perhaps the most fitting) visual documentation for a history of ancient Israel. To represent history as the history of the mighty and their enemies would definitely be very old-fashioned historiography (though it still sells well with the tabloids). Much like royal inscriptions, monumental images are of a particular genre and should not be considered in isolation from other sources. The so-called minor arts for instance, such as seals, amulets, various kinds of private luxury objects or terracotta figurines could be called in to tell a much more nuanced and complicated story of their own about values and beliefs, cultural contact and changing orientations in the history of ancient Israel, Judah and their neighbours. But I have chosen my examples from royal monuments with two reasons in mind: first, they are all well known to historians and Bible scholars alike and have been used time and again to illustrate famed episodes in the history of ancient Israel. They have thus acquired a somewhat emblematic status and they have so strongly influenced our historical imagination that they may well serve as patent examples of the more conventional gaze usually practised in our discipline—but still allow for a somewhat deeper understanding. Second, several other contributions to this volume refer to royal inscriptions when dealing with political history. It might be useful, then,

to explore visual information from royal monuments that may be most easily compared to these.

My primary aim will be to investigate the particular pitfalls of approaches that have explicitly appealed to or implicitly resulted from the 'eyewitnessing principle'. In every instance and in contrast to a 'windows to the past' approach, I shall address the monumental images as media of social communication, deliberately used by royal authorities within a formal scheme of figurative policy. Far from being exhaustive, my interpretations should exemplify one or another basic problem faced by historians working with these data: how do we identify the protagonists represented on a monument? How can we correctly decipher the visually encoded message of a monument? How does source criticism operate in visual analysis? To what extent can such monuments, whose very purpose was to give particular rulers a special place in history, tell us something about ancient perceptions of history? As I hope will become clear in the course of my discussion, one major concern for an historian with such images must be what I call the 'data-processing' issue.

3.1. Identification: 'Israelites' on Merenptah's Karnak reliefs?

The first example illustrates a very basic problem in visual studies: how do we identify the protagonists represented on a picture, provided such an identification is actually necessary to fully understand the image's message? How and what, if anything, do images themselves contribute to identification? The very fact that numerous so-called historical-narrative representations, Egyptian and Assyrian alike, are accompanied by texts (ranging from short captions to more elaborate portions that supplement the images as in modern cartoons or comic strips; see Tefnin 1981; Gerardi 1988; Russell 1999) shows that the dual problem of (1) correlation of a scene with a particular event and (2) identification of the main protagonists was already considered by the authors of ancient monuments. On the other hand, information could be supplemented for ancient onlookers in the form of oral commentary, whenever deemed necessary, provided one had a competent guide at hand. In any case, the images delivered messages even to those who could not read the captions (when there are captions at all, which is often not the case)—and regardless of whether all the protagonists were correctly identified or not. Preserving documentary information for later historians was not the primary task of these monuments. Nevertheless, one should not belittle the problem of identification on the ground that images themselves do not always perform well on this matter. The challenge for the modern historian is to extract a maximum amount of information from the sources without, however, pressing them beyond their own means.

The problem may be illustrated with a series of reliefs carved and plastered on the outer western face of the so-called Cour de la Cachette, which is part of the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak. Two expert epigraphers, Frank Yurco (1986) and Kenneth Kitchen (1993, 304–05; 2004, 268–70), have long recognized that these reliefs, which partly run over earlier ones of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE) and were later usurped by other kings, had originally been commissioned by King Merenptah (reigned 1213–1204 BCE). Unfortunately, the wall in question is in a very bad state of preservation, but enough remains of its two-registered visual narrative (Fig. 11.2) that one may recognize three scenes turned left which show the pharaoh conquering towns, while on two other scenes turned right the king is shown binding enemies and leading long rows of captives towards the god Amun. The right end of the composition is presently missing; part of it has been painstakingly reconstructed by Françoise Le Saout (1978–81) from disassembled building blocks on the ground, and the remaining blanks may be roughly filled in by controlled imagination on the basis of comparable standard compositions (for which see now the impressive documentation assembled by Heinz 2001; for the various scenes relating to Merenptah's Asiatic campaign see *ibid.*, 294–97).

One of the towns attacked by the king towards the left (Yurco's 'scene 1', my A1 on Fig. 11.2) has an accompanying text that identifies it as *Ashkelon*. This town is also mentioned in the famous passage containing the earliest reference to date to some collective entity called 'Israel' on the so-called 'Israel stela' from Thebes (Fig. 11.3; see *COS* 2.6 for easy reference). The latter also mentions the towns of *Gezer* and *Yano'am*. Since Merenptah uses the epithet 'binder of Gezer' on another stela from Amada, this king (or someone acting on his behalf) is likely to have conquered Gezer early in his reign. Building upon these initial connections, Yurco correlated the information contained in the Theban stela inscription with that of the Karnak temple reliefs. He suggested that the three towns represented on the sculptures should be identified as Ashkelon, Gezer ('scene 2', my A2) and Yano'am ('scene 3', my B2), respectively, while the fragmentary remains just above the Ashkelon scene ('scene 4', my B1; Fig. 11.4) would represent part of Merenptah's battle against *Israel*, resp. the Israelites (see Yurco 1986; 1990; 1991; 1997). Since the foes on that scene are clearly designated by their costume, hairstyles, beards and so on as *Canaanites*, Yurco considers the relief to provide supporting evidence for one prominent opinion on Israelite origins, namely that the ancient Israelites were originally Canaanites, an argument that has been more fully developed by Lawrence E. Stager (1985, published earlier than Yurco's study but depending on the latter's epigraphical insights which were still unpublished at the time), Michael G. Hasel (1998, 199–201) and others.

Since Israelite origins are always a matter of intense debate, it comes as no surprise that other scholars, among whom Anson F. Rainey has taken the

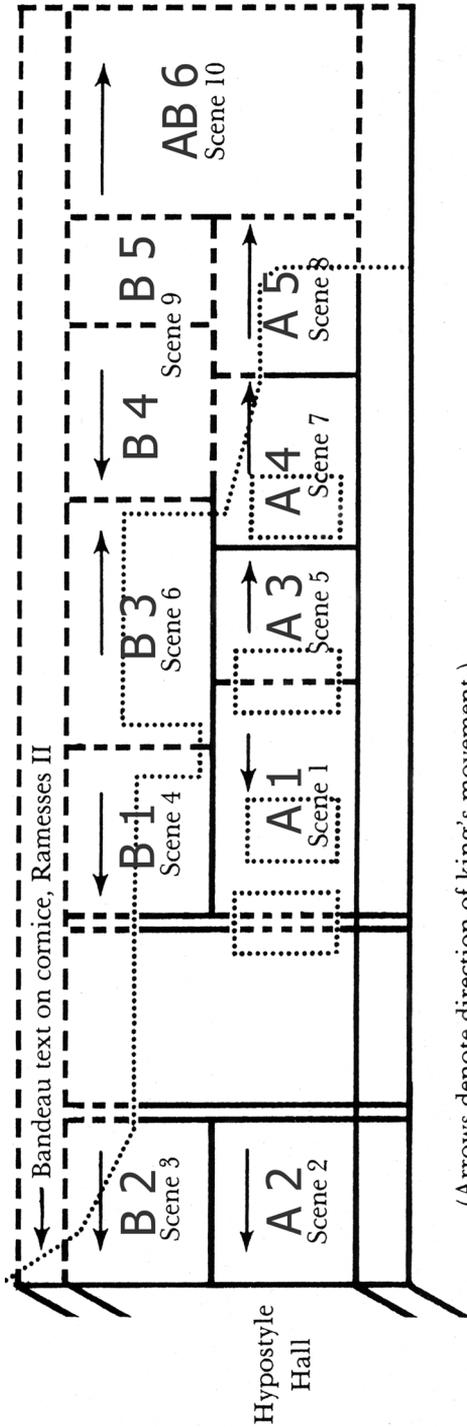


Figure 11.2 Karnak, Great Temple of Amun, location of monumental wall reliefs relating to Merenptah's campaign to Canaan, outer western face of the so-called Cour de la Cachette (end of thirteenth century BCE; based on Yurco 1986: 191 fig. 1b, additional tags by author).



Figure 11.3 So-called 'Israel stela' from the mortuary temple of Merenptah at Karnak (year 5, 1208 BCE; Mitchell 1988: 41 doc. 12).

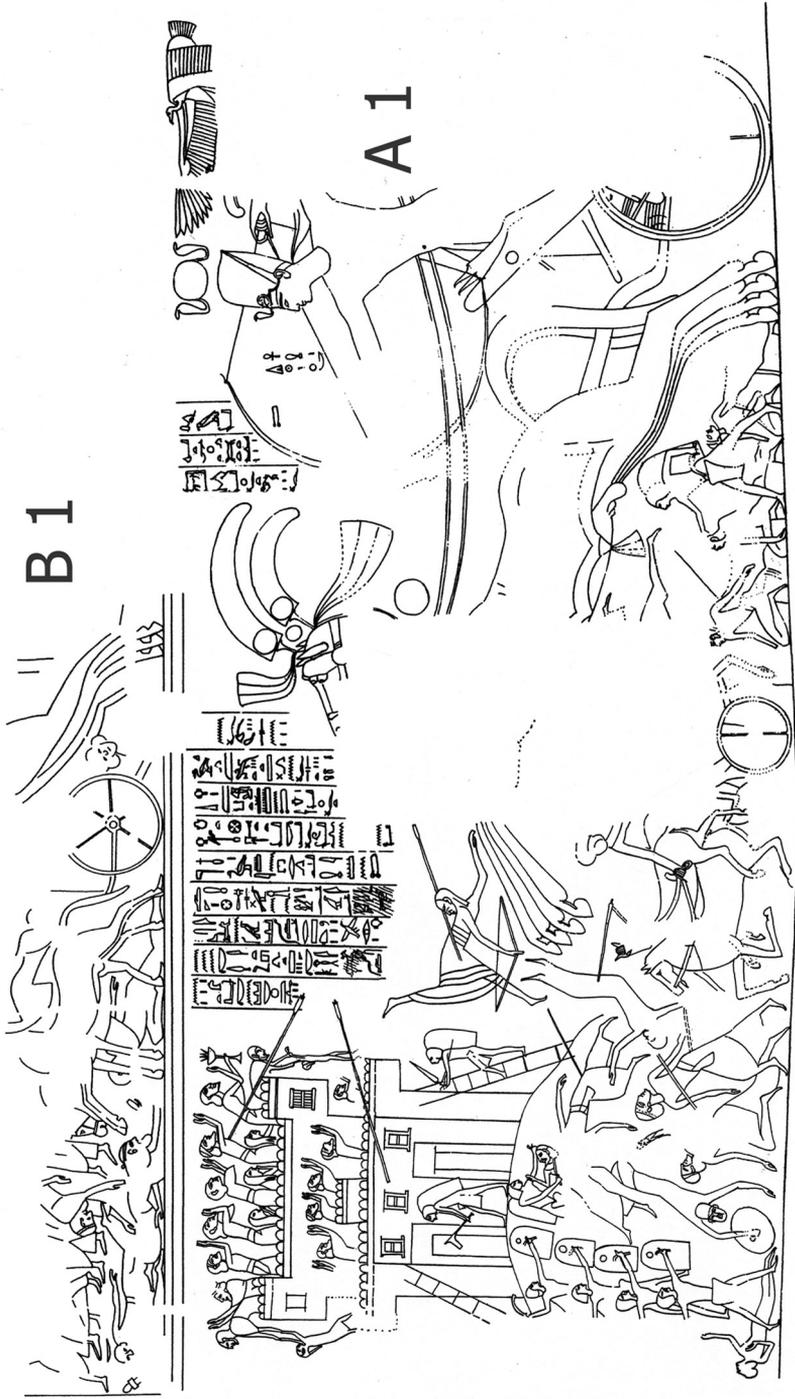


Figure 11.4 Scenes from Merenptah's wall reliefs from the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak (see Fig. 11.2 for location). Scene A 1: conquest of 'Ashkelon' (identified by caption); scene B 1: royal team pursuing a "Canaanite" chariot and men in open field (author's montage based on Wreszinski 1923: pl. 58f [lower register] and Heinz 2001: 296 No. 1.6 [upper register]).

lead, should oppose Yurco's interpretation and suggest alternative explanations (see Rainey 1991; 2001). According to Rainey, we can indeed identify Israelites on the sculptures but must look for them on the right side of the wall ('scenes 5–8', my A3–5; Fig. 11.5). They should be identified among the *Shasu*, that is, another social segment of ancient Canaan's population. In contrast to urban Canaanites, *Shasu* are generally represented on Egyptian reliefs as a non-urban population encountered in the open countryside, although there are exceptions to the rule. Modern scholars describe them as rural peasants or pastoral nomads or both, depending on their favourite societal model for Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age Palestine (see Staubli 1991, 35–64; Hasel 1998, 217–36).

Who of Yurco or Rainey is right, if either? Or in terms of tabloid historiography: 'Can you name the panel with the Israelites?' (Rainey 1991; Yurco 1991). Should we look for Merenptah's 'Israel' to the left or the right, close to town or in the open countryside? The basic question, in my view, is whether we should look for 'Israel' at all when studying the Cour de la Cachette reliefs. Being inclined to side with Rainey in this particular debate, I think that the point should be argued in a somewhat more sophisticated way.

For the present purpose, I should like to stress that in spite of their radically different conclusions, Yurco and Rainey have much in common when it comes to their methodology and approach to images. *First*, they both take as their starting point the final passage of the stela, a textual document which is physically unrelated to the sculptures under discussion. They are searching the reliefs for 'Israel' because they think it must be there, which is a questionable assumption that would need solid arguments to be sustained. Let us recall that the so-called 'Israel stela' was found by Flinders Petrie in the king's mortuary temple on the opposite, western side of the Nile. The stela's conventional designation is a misnomer, since Israel (and for that matter, the Canaanite towns) are mentioned only in a few short phrases towards the end of the inscription. These are part of the laudatory conclusion of a text that is otherwise concerned with Libyan invaders. Neither Yurco nor Rainey study the textual reference in its own context, and they do not try to establish the relative weight of the 'Israel' reference in the overall context of Merenptah's inscriptional discourses (contrast the more contextual and genre-sensitive approach of Kitchen 2004). *Second*, both Yurco and Rainey clearly impose an a priori interpretative grid on the visual evidence, instead of first and foremost analysing the latter in its own right and according to its peculiar visual semantics, syntax, composition and rhetoric (though in all fairness, it must be stressed that Yurco has a number of very pertinent observations on compositional details). *Third*, it is obvious that both authors draw heavily on external evidence, arguments and theories when they link up

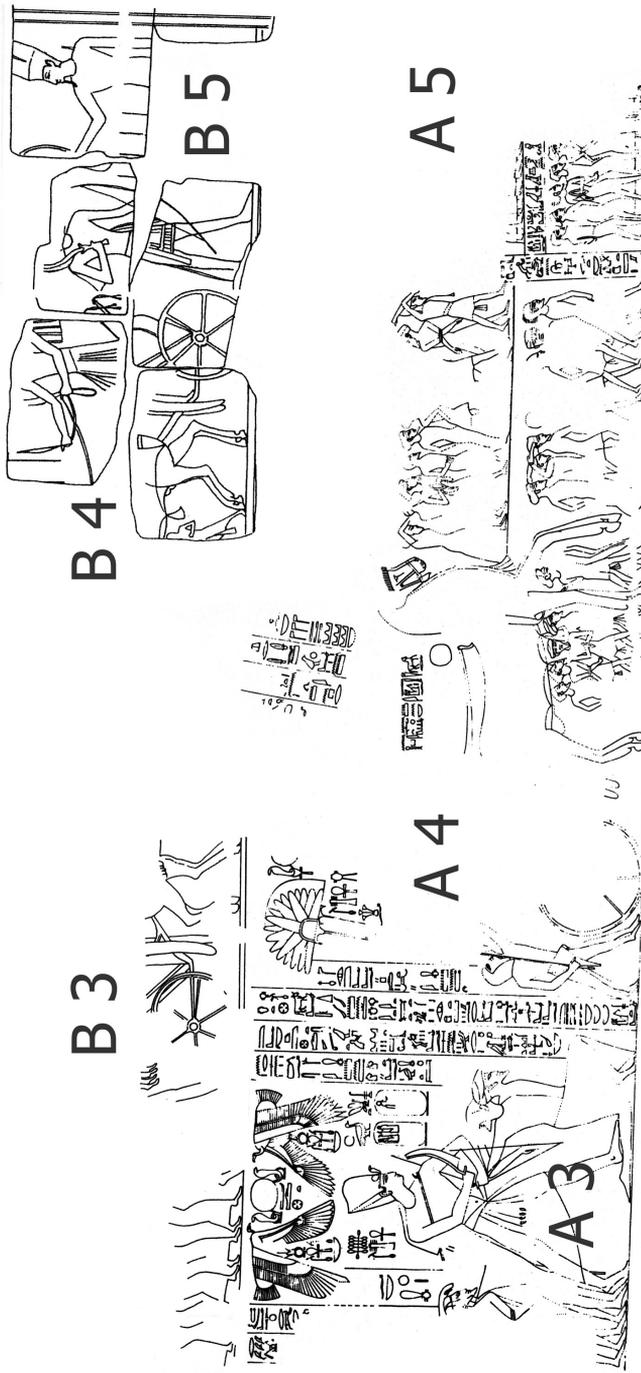


Figure 11.5 Scenes from Merenptah's wall reliefs from the Great Temple of Amun at Karnak (see Fig. 11.2 for location). Scenes A 3–5: Shasu prisoners captured by king Merenptah and led to Egypt; scenes B 4–5: king instructed by Amun and leaving for the campaign (author's montage based on Wreszinski 1923: pl. 58b [lower register], Heinz 2001: 296–97 nos. I.8, I.10 and I.11 [upper register]).

the reliefs with the debate on ancient Israel's ethnicity and origins. *Fourth*, both have obscured contradictory evidence instead of critically accounting for it: why, *pace* Yurco, are there no Shasu mentioned on the stela if there was such a close link between the reliefs and the stela as he pretends? And why, *pace* Rainey, should we identify the various Shasu represented on the relief with just one entity called 'Israel'? Or else, if we should not, that is, if 'Israel' may be *among* the Shasu but not represented by all of them, why then are no other Shasu groups mentioned in the stela? Finally, if the early Israelites were Shasu (or Canaanites, for that matter), why does the stela make no reference at all to their putative ethnic identity?

The really critical point lies in the correlation of one single text with one single, and physically removed, series of images—or rather, some bits taken from here with some others from there. As argued by both Yurco and Rainey, such isolated, de-contextualized correlations are highly arbitrary. Since both conclusions are based on insufficient and partly circular argument, neither of them can be considered to have made a convincing case. What we would need instead is a step-by-step argument advancing more carefully from two sides: the inscriptional and the visual evidence, both considered in their own artifactual context, particular taxonomy and historiographic tradition. The stela from Thebes needs to be put into the context of other inscriptional data, including the duplicate on another, interior wall of the Cour de la Cachette (see Kitchen 2004, who rightly argues that all extant inscriptions of Merenptah should be considered for a convincing argument). The reliefs should first of all be studied for themselves, free of any textual canvas, and the visual evidence evaluated according to its own rules: rules of semantics and taxonomy in distinguishing various population groups living in Canaan; rules of syntax and rhetoric in order to understand the proper sequence of individual scenes. The reliefs should also be compared to earlier, closely related reliefs of Sethos I and Ramesses II on the walls of the nearby hypostyle hall, which seem to have provided the closest models for Merenptah's sculptors (see Heinz 2001, 242–46, 265–70). And of course we should add to our understanding of the reliefs the information contained in their own captions and accompanying texts, long before turning to any other text such as the 'Israel stela'.

All this cannot be done within the limits of this chapter. To cut a long argument short (Uehlinger, forthcoming a), it is probable that the final part of the stela inscription and the reliefs ultimately go back to a common source and hence may correlate with each other to some extent (in order to be more specific, one must, however, resort to source criticism and reconstruct the data-processing chains). Such a common source granted, the reference to 'Israel' on the stela may indeed be considered as a kind of functional complement which runs parallel to Shasu representations on monumental reliefs.

This does not mean, however, that the 'Israel' group *were* actual Shasu. It simply means that for Merenptah's sculptors, who probably worked without any precise visual information concerning the physical appearance of the 'Israel' group, the Shasu type provided a traditional and convenient visual formula when they sought to represent a population group perceived in the documents they had at hand as somehow distinct from urban Canaanites.

As this example should demonstrate, identification is a serious problem for scholars using visual evidence in historical research. The main reason for this is that pre-Hellenistic images (if not images in general) do not perform very well in matters of individuation and identification. If not supported by a caption, identification of a given scene with a particular historical episode is a difficult task. Nor is it always possible to correlate such scenes with information preserved in contemporary inscriptions. When such correlations are possible, they require a sophisticated argument which should be deemed plausible only on the condition that it respects the relative discretion and autonomy of both media. Moreover, we should recall that identity and identification always function within a taxonomic system. The latter is partly conditioned by the constraints of a medium and the circumstantial need for (and/or capacity and skill of) differentiation employed by scribes and artists operating on the basis of established conventions within the framework of their particular task and purpose. We should not expect the taxonomies of images and texts to coincide in every case. On the contrary, such a plain correspondence would be the exception rather than the rule.

3.2. Visual propaganda in context: the Black Obelisk in historical perspective

Things seem to look easier when we turn to the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, king of Assyria (858–824 BCE). This emblematic monument was discovered in 1846 at Nimrud (ancient Kalchu) by A. H. Layard (fig. 11.6) and has been exhibited at the British Museum since 1848.¹⁰ Its date of composition can be established on the basis of an annalistic inscription (Grayson 1996, 62–71, no. 14) which runs over the obelisk from top to bottom on all four sides. This represents the latest known recension of Shalmaneser's annals, reaching to Shalmaneser's 31st *palû* which was actually his 33rd year of reign (= 826/5 BCE; see Yamada 2000, 25–27 for details regarding the chronology). It is tempting to consider (Smith 1977, 85) that

¹⁰ The following builds on (and occasionally corrects) Keel and Uehlinger 1994 and Uehlinger 2001 (both with earlier literature). I plan to come back to this rather extraordinary monument in a separate study. See Börker-Klähn 1982, no. 152 for good photographs of the vignettes (although some of them are wrongly labelled).

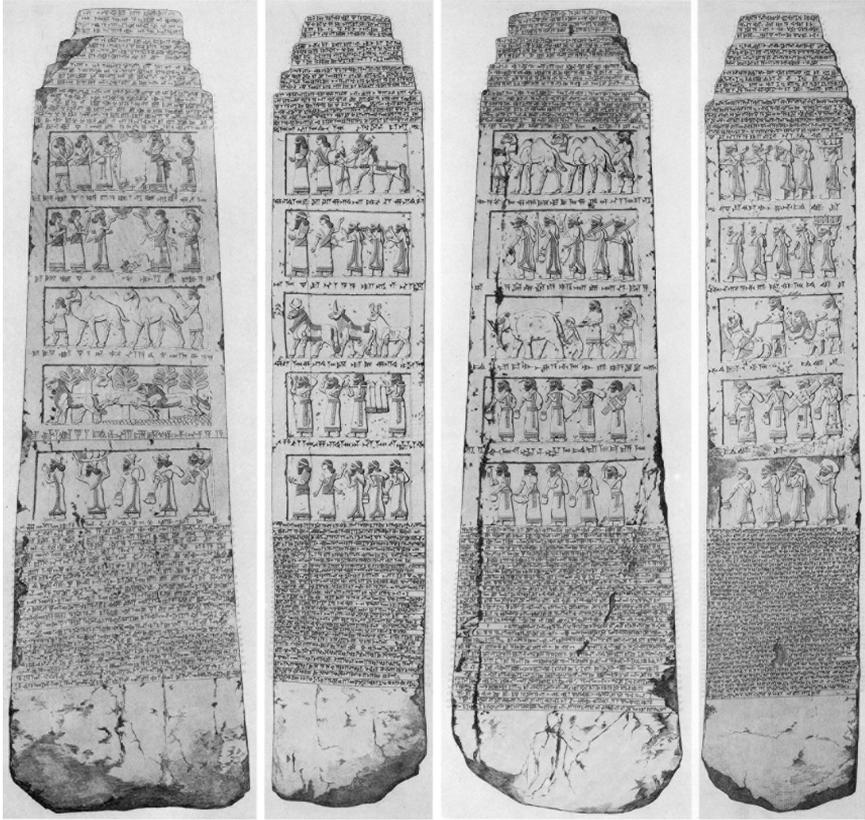


Figure 11.6 Black Obelisk from Kalchu/Nimrud, regnal year 33 of Shalmaneser III (826/5 BCE; Börker-Klähn 1982: no. 152 after original drawing by A. H. Layard; see Layard 1851: pls. 53–56).

the monument was erected for special jubilee celebrations during that year, when Shalmaneser took over a second eponymate (see Finkel and Reade 1995) in the midst of pressing domestic difficulties (on which see below).

Fig. 11.7 gives a graphic explanation of the disposition of texts and images on the monument, an aspect rarely discussed in detail in the secondary literature. The annals first take eighteen lines of inscription from the top (seventy-two lines altogether when counting faces A–D). They are then interrupted by a series of twenty pictorial vignettes, arranged in five registers on each face. Each pictorial register is accompanied by a single-line legend running above the vignettes all around the monument. Following the fifth register of images, the annals continue for another 118 lines disposed on all four sides.¹¹ Following Baxandall's re-enactment approach, one step towards making sense of the Black Obelisk as a whole could be to consider the rela-

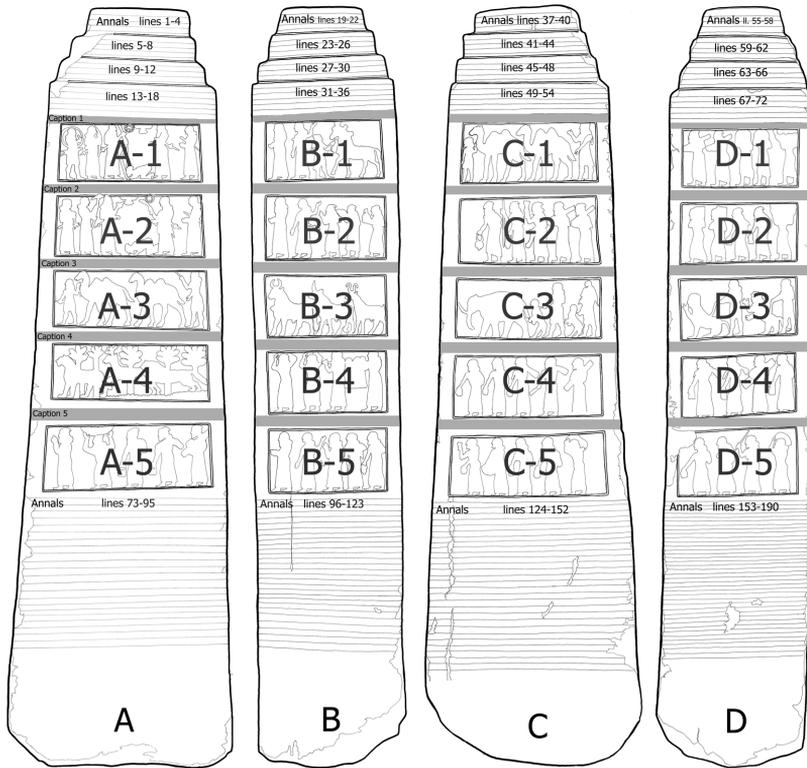


Figure 11.7 Location and layout of texts and images on the Black Obelisk (author's montage based on a drawing by Ulrike Zurkinden-Kolberg, Fribourg).

tionship of images and texts in the way they were carved on to the monument: once the general disposition had been sketched on the stone, the images were sculpted first, then the captions added, and the annals were apparently inscribed last. Incidentally, this sequence fits well the way the monument

¹¹ Face A comes with twenty-three lines, quite generously spaced, in contrast to the other faces where the scribes experienced growing difficulties to account for the required text (face B: twenty-eight lines, face C: twenty-nine lines, face D: thirty-eight lines!). In contrast, the line count at the top of the monument is constant, although the disposition of the text seems to have been designed with particular care on face A: lines 1–14 appeal to the great gods of Assyria ‘who decree destinies, who aggrandize my sovereignty’, while the following lines introduce Shalmaneser as ‘king of all people, prince, vice-regent of Aššur, strong king, king of all the four quarters, sungod of all people, ruler of all lands’, but also as heir of Ashurnasirpal, ‘exalted priest, whose priesthood was pleasing to the gods and who subdued all lands at his feet’, thus providing the divine and the dynastic legitimation for the ruling king (Grayson 1996, 63–64).

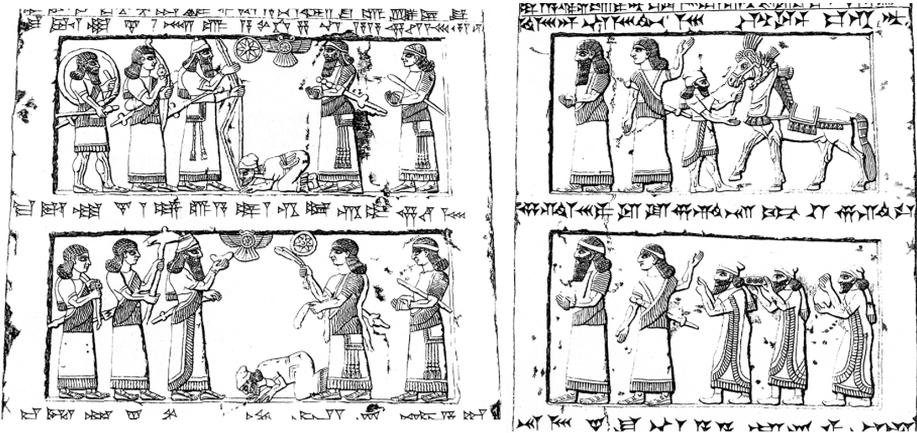


Figure 11.8 Black Obelisk, registers 1 and 2 (details from Layard 1851: pls. 53–56)

is apprehended when it is approached from some distance and looked at progressively, step by step, with some leisure and patient curiosity.

According to caption 1 (Grayson 1996, 148–49, no. 87), the first row of images shows tribute (*madattu*, i.e. compulsory payment) received from King Sua (= Asû) of Gilzanu. Caption 2 (*ibid.*, 149, no. 88) mentions tribute of King Jehu ‘son of Omri’ (a much-discussed phrase that should be translated as ‘the heir of the royal house of Omri = the legitimate ruler of Israel’, since Israel was at that time often referred to as Bit-Ḥumri, literally ‘the House of Omri’, by Assyrian scribes). Captions 3–5 refer to further tribute from other rulers and regions (Mušri/Egypt, Suši and Patina), which we can ignore for the present purpose. Registers 1 and 2 (fig. 11.8) are distinguished from the subsequent ones and given particular prominence by their uppermost position, the twice-repeated representation of the Assyrian king with his entourage, the figuring of individuals bowing down in front of the king and additional details. A-2, the ‘Jehu vignette’, is often hailed as ‘the only known visual representation of an Israelite king’. Not infrequently, modern viewers look at it as if it were a press photograph, showing the very moment when the Israelite king submitted to his Assyrian overlord (see above, section 1.4, on the use of this image in an ‘eyewitnessing’ argument). We learn from earlier annal recensions that Jehu had submitted in Shalmaneser’s 18th *palû* (i.e. 841 BCE) at a place called Ba’li-ra’si.¹² Since no other encounter of the two kings is

¹² The relevant textual sources are presented and discussed (with much earlier bibliography) by K. Lawson Younger in his contribution to the present volume.

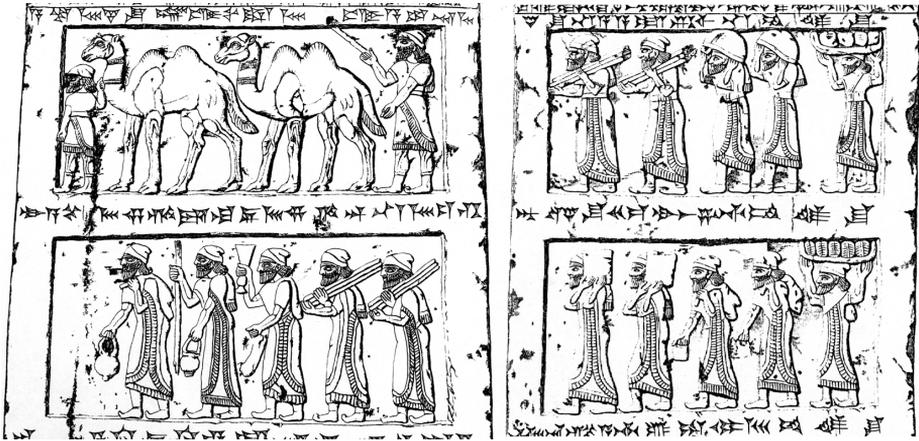


Figure 11.8 cont.

known from textual sources, scholars tend to identify the scene represented on the obelisk with Jehu's submission in 841. But instead of giving way to such a 'snapshot-type gaze', let us step back for a while and consider what the Black Obelisk can tell us about ancient Israelite history, and what it cannot.

To begin with the latter, A-2 is certainly no portrait of Jehu (*pace* Smith 1977, 72: 'that unique portrait which survives of the reigning Israelite monarch Jehu'), and we should expect nothing of the kind from Assyrian sculptors. As a matter of fact, nothing distinguishes 'Jehu' from 'Sua' in terms of their physiognomy, hairstyle, even clothing (note that both kings have taken off their mantle and are shown almost as appearing in their underwear). The same holds true for their accompanying delegations, whose costumes are largely identical; the garments worn by the 'Israelites' on vignettes B-2 to 4 cannot therefore be considered as trustworthy renderings of Israelite costume of the time (Wäfler 1975, 72–76). Some scholars have argued that the two figures bowing down on the face A vignettes could actually represent emissaries rather than the two kings mentioned in the caption. However, they are so conspicuously singled out from their respective delegations that they must be more than just common first-in-lines. Taken together, images and captions leave no doubt that the two individuals are indeed meant to represent Sua/Asû and Jehu, regardless of the fact that the images do not lend them individual traits or costume.

No clue is given by the image as to whether we should relate Jehu's submission to any particular occasion: when, where, and why? Was it a totally peaceful event, as Shalmaneser's celebrating attitude and civil retinue seem to imply, in contrast to his more bellicose appearance on the upper vignette? This would fit the encounter of the two kings at Ba'li-ra'si. But again, it would be better to refrain from looking for any particular occasion at all. The 'Sua' and 'Jehu' vignettes quite clearly complement each other, which means that one vignette not only stands for itself and in line with its own register but is bound to work in tandem and thus to communicate some details which are lacking from the other. The relationship of the two main vignettes on the obelisk is clearly one of synthetic parallelism, and we should not look at a single line (still less, a single vignette) in isolation.

Let us ask, then, what these images *can* tell us: they convey an idealized image of the Assyrian king, powerful as a warrior chief (A-1: note weapons and weapon-bearers) and trust-inspiring as a ruler of peace (A-2, note the towel, the umbrella and the flywhisk, which are emblematic of ceremonial court etiquette). To this splendid king of kings, foreigners submit from various parts of the world. With regard to potential audience, it is interesting to notice that the images give far greater attention to the distinction of functional role and hierarchical status among Assyrians than among foreigners. Regarding attitude in detail, 'Sua' touches the king's feet and looks towards him, while 'Jehu' has no physical contact and looks down to the ground. This detail is certainly intentional; it could signal different settings of the two submissions, though the distinction could as well be contextual and fit the respective bellicose or peaceful environments. Note, however, that both foreign rulers submit without being forced.

The inversion of Venus and the sun, which appear high between the Assyrian king and the submitting ruler, has occasionally been commented upon (Lieberman 1985). Taken 'literally' (or rather, astronomically), it signals that the upper encounter (A-1: Venus left of sun, i.e. as evening star) is orientated westwards, which befits a ruler approaching from the east, while the other (Venus right of sun, i.e. as morning star) concerns a ruler approaching from the west. As a result, vignettes A-1 to 2 stress that rulers from east and west submit to Shalmaneser (or have submitted, though images tend to imply present tense rather than preterite). This is a clear instance of what Edith Porada has called a visual 'merism' (as reported by Liebermann 1985; see Porada 1983), while Michelle Marcus, who has studied the use of geography as an organizing principle on the monuments of Shalmaneser III, uses the concept of 'visual polarity' (1987, 88). Parallelism, merism and polar structures are conspicuous figures of style, which were often used in Near Eastern literary compositions, but could operate as well on the level of visual communication.

The result is obviously to the benefit of Assyria, since riches of the world are brought from all quarters to Assyria. In sum, the Assyrian king stands uncontested at the centre of a peaceful world. We may perhaps read some kind of *modus potentialis* into the images: should anyone want to challenge the authority of the king, this might temporarily disturb the flow of goods towards Assyria, but the king would no doubt be strong enough to repel his rivals (note the hint at the strength of the lion in vignette A-4!).

To this story, here only briefly summarized, we can now add various layers of contextual evidence, starting with the captions, which serve to enhance the audience's understanding of the pictures and of the monument as a whole. *First*, the captions are phrased following a standard scheme known also from annalistic and summary inscriptions. They refer to *madattu* ('tribute') received by the king (first person singular, as usual in royal inscriptions) and specify various goods brought along such as (in the case of 'Jehu') silver, gold, various gold vessels, tin, a royal sceptre and some sorts of javelin. Some of these items are represented on the vignettes, but others are not. Generally speaking, images and captions were certainly meant to echo each other, although they do not completely correspond to each other when it comes to the details—a typical problem of information management and data-processing when the execution of a task requires the competences of more than one individual. *Second*, the five captions mention the origins of the tribute: Gilzanu, a country situated north-east from Assyria in the Zagros Mountains, in register 1; Bit-Ḫumri, far to the south-west, in register 2; and Muṣri/Egypt, Suṣi and Patina for the remaining three registers. Captions 1 and 2 thus confirm what we have already perceived as a polarity of east and west; the visually designed synthetic parallelism or merism is enhanced and supported by the textual information. *Third*, only two foreign kings are pictured whereas the names and origin of four foreign kings are mentioned in the captions. Once again, images and texts do not fit completely, but concentration on only two foreign rulers supported the intended visual effect of polarity much more effectively than a rendering of four, which would have appeared rather repetitious.

Why did the sculptors specifically single out these two kings, Sua/Asû and Jehu? The first reason may again be geography, since Gilzanu and Bit-Ḫumri stand for the furthest extensions of the Assyrian empire under Shalmaneser III (Green 1979, 35–39; Porada 1983, 15–15; Marcus 1987). Another reason may be that both kings (but probably those who are mentioned in the other captions as well) submitted 'voluntarily' to Shalmaneser (Elat 1975). In the case of Sua/Asû, who had submitted to Shalmaneser as early as 856 BCE, the assumption is supported by Shalmaneser's inscriptions; as for Jehu, the case is less clearly established, if the general logic of the Black Obelisk does not itself point toward such a hypothesis. In any case, in comparison with former

Omride policies, Jehu seems to have taken a definitely different option with regard to Assyria, considering Shalmaneser as a protective ally rather than an enemy. It stands to reason that he chose to submit to the Assyrian king in order the better to secure his domestic position in Israel.

We still have not clarified the precise meaning and significance of the symbolic gesture involving prostration of a foreign king at the feet of the king of Assyria. Scenes representing this gesture are generally read as icons of submission and humiliation. The 'Jehu' vignette, which is often illustrated in isolation in books on the history of 'Ancient Israel', has therefore been understood as an emblem of imperialistic oppression and forced submission. However, such an explanation does not tell the whole story. A more image-sensitive interpretation should go beyond phenomenology (prostration being a conspicuous way of 'playing the death', in ethological terms) and compare our vignettes with other scenes of prostration as depicted in Assyrian visual art. Several such scenes appear on monumental sculptures of Ashurnasirpal II and Tiglath-pileser III, on the bronze strips from Shalmaneser's Balawat gates, on a wall painting of Esarhaddon from Til-Barsip (Smith 1977, 76–79; Keel and Uehlinger 1994, 406–14) and on an unprovenanced neo-Assyrian helmet (Born and Seidl 1995, 18 Abb. 9, 25 Abb. 22, 44). On some of these, the man humbling himself is clearly an Assyrian soldier or officer; when he is shown wearing his weapon, the figure must have been in a position of particular confidence with the king. On other scenes, the man prostrating himself is a foreigner (always unarmed, and rather basically clothed). On one of the latter scenes, the king puts his foot on the fallen man's neck and raises a spear as if about to put him to death. The scene has been interpreted as representing utter humiliation or even a death sentence, as if the foreign ruler were about to be killed by the Assyrian king. However, as always in human ethology and cultural anthropology, we must distinguish between a phenomenological meaning of a gesture (its etymology, so to speak), its symbolic meaning for the semantics of ritual and a ritual's pragmatic function. The particular case mentioned here, which appears on a slab of Tiglath-pileser III, can arguably be related to a famous incident involving King Hanun from Gaza (see Uehlinger 2002 for detailed demonstration). Well-documented in the royal inscriptions, the scene does not show an execution, but a kind of symbolic or 'virtual' death experienced by the fugitive Hanun after his return to Gaza and submission to the Assyrian king. The only doubts concerning the interpretation of the scene concern the question whether it should be understood on an exclusively symbolic level (as a telescoped representation of submission and reinstallation), or whether it shows an actual ritual once performed by Tiglath-pileser and Hanun. The same holds true for the 'Sua' and 'Jehu' vignettes on the Black Obelisk. More important, however, if the two kings are represented in an attitude of prostration or 'seizing the feet' of

Shalmaneser, they are not simply humiliating themselves in general terms, but also appear in a *privileged position* vis-à-vis the Assyrian king, not to say as the latter's favourites! *He who humbles himself will be rewarded*: the meaning of these scenes can only be understood once we put them in the wider context of others and establish the rules and conventions of Assyrian visual rhetoric.¹³

Let us finally recall the actual findspot of the Black Obelisk, the piazza in front of the royal palace of Kalchu (Gadd 1936, 147–48; Sobolewski 1982, 336 and fig. 9; and see Reade 1979; 1980; 1981 for the interplay of monuments, architectural context, ideology and propaganda). It is interesting to note that while the monument's position allowed close inspection, so that any viewer who wished to do so could examine its four sides in detail, face A clearly contained the key scenes and actually delivered the essential message of the whole pictorial narrative *in nuce* to those who passed more quickly. To the literate among them, face A of the obelisk's stepped top (the introductory lines of the annals) would have delivered a particular 'theopolitical' message, namely the king's legitimation on behalf of the great gods of Assyria.¹⁴ It seems obvious that this obelisk, like earlier ones by Ashurnasirpal erected in similarly conspicuous places, was intended to communicate an exclusively positive, one might say 'idealized', image of the king and of the benefits of his reign for Assyria, well in line with the generic properties of Assyrian obelisks. In order fully to appreciate this message of peace and welfare, we must finally take into account the political context of Shalmaneser's year 33: in spite of jubilee celebrations, this was actually a time of political crisis and unrest, with the king's own son Ashurdanapli leading a civil war against his father and the latter's general and second-in-command (*turtanu*) Dayyan-Ashur.¹⁵

Historians of ancient Israel are used to mentioning vignette A-2 of the Black Obelisk in association with King Jehu's first encounter with and submission to Shalmaneser at Ba'lirasi in 841 BCE. However, it is doubtful that Assyrian scribes and sculptors would have given such prominence to that

¹³ Smith 1977, 90 has noted seven instances in Shalmaneser's inscription where 'reference to *madattu* is combined with verbiage expressing the theme of grasping the king's feet (. . .), and on two additional occasions Šlm [Shalmaneser] III goes even further to note that the setting up of a king followed the former gesture (. . .); these were persons who had not been among the rebels who withheld *madattu* but rather who saw that it was "received"'.
¹⁴ See above, n. 11.

¹⁵ Note that Yamada 2000, 321–34 attributes the second eponymate not to Shalmaneser himself, but to Dayyan-Ashur, and he argues that the Black Obelisk may have been commissioned by the *turtanu* himself. The latter suggestion cannot be tested on present evidence. One should observe, however, that while the text of the annals does indeed lend conspicuous prominence to Dayyan-Ashur, it does not diminish the king's own position instead, and the pictorial message certainly proclaims the king's more than anyone else's glory.

particular moment as late as 826/5 BCE, when the agenda was set by much more pressing needs. As a matter of fact, the annals inscribed on the Black Obelisk give a ‘significantly truncated version’ of the 18th *palû*,¹⁶ according to Younger,¹⁷ a version which does not even mention Jehu. I do not think, therefore, that we should identify the tribute represented on the vignettes and/or mentioned by the caption with the one offered in 841 BCE at Ba’lirasi. But why then should Jehu appear at all on the Black Obelisk? Two explanations may be suggested: either those who commissioned the monument had studied earlier documents and wanted to highlight Jehu’s submission as an *emblematic* event, since it concerned the westernmost ruler who had actually and personally submitted to Shalmaneser (in contrast to the Egyptians, who had only engaged in economic exchange and diplomatic relations). This explanation could be supported by the parallelism of registers 1 and 2. Alternatively, the submission of both Sua/Asû and Gilzanu may be viewed in *paradigmatic* terms, as examples of ‘voluntary submission’ that had lasted over many years until the very time when the Black Obelisk was commissioned. One can hardly imagine these images being planned and put on public display if neither Sua/Asû nor Jehu had remained loyal to Shalmaneser during the latter’s entire reign.

That Jehu’s loyalty should have such an emblematic and/or paradigmatic significance for Shalmaneser and be symbolically valued and recognized as such in public as late as 826/5 BCE, during a jubilee shattered by civil war, certainly adds an interesting nuance to our perception of both Assyrian *and* Israelite history. This was not only late in Shalmaneser’s reign, which would come to an end two years later, but also relatively late in Jehu’s career, which is thought to have lasted until 818 BCE. In contrast to the kings of Damascus, who had their own hegemonic ambitions in southern Syria as can best be studied for the reign of Hazael, the kings of Israel seem to have entertained a rather cooperative relationship with Assyria since the earliest days of Jehu. The latter must have remained a loyal vassal from 841 BCE through the remaining years of Shalmaneser until the end of his own reign, and his successors continued that policy. Incidentally, it may well be that their cooperation with Assyria even led to some kind of artistic emulation: among the fragmentary wall-paintings of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, dated c. 800 BCE, one piece stands out which must once have belonged to some narrative composition with a military subject matter (Beck 1982, 48–49 [= 2000, 147–48]), very much of the type which had become en vogue in Assyrian palaces during the ninth century.

¹⁶ The relevant lines appear on face B in a context generally characterized by truncation; since lack of space is not yet an issue here, this truncation must have occurred during the pre-inscriptional process of redaction.

¹⁷ See his contribution to the present volume.

3.3. Data-processing and source criticism: why Lachish, and why that way?

With Merenptah's Karnak reliefs and Shalmaneser's Broken Obelisk we have taken a position distant enough from the history of events to be sure that even when ancient Near Eastern images were meant to represent specific occasions in history, we should not regard them as eyewitness documents. We can now briefly address the famous Lachish sculptures from Room XXXVI of Sennacherib's Southwest palace in Nineveh (Figs 11.9–11.10). Over the years, David Ussishkin has built up an elaborate interpretation of these sculptures based on his intimate knowledge of the site's topography and archaeology. He has ventured so far as to suggest that the sculptures are not only based on eyewitness evidence, but that they represent the city of Lachish as it would appear to an Assyrian onlooker (actually the king himself supervising the assault on the Judahite town), from a precisely located spot on the hill south-west of Tell ed-Duweir (see Ussishkin 1980; 1982; 1990; 1996). I have exposed elsewhere in detail why I consider this theory untenable (Uehlinger 2003). Ussishkin's interpretation is ultimately based on erroneous premises: it relies on a partly incorrect assemblage of the sculptures, runs against some basic rules of Assyrian iconography and submits the sculptures' visual evidence to constraints of archaeological information much in the same way as Yurco and Rainey have superimposed textual information on Merenptah's Karnak reliefs. I shall not repeat my discussion here, but focus on the issue of source criticism.

To begin with, it is well known that the Assyrian visual and textual records about the 701 BCE campaign to Phoenicia, Philistia and Judah differ in one major regard, which we could summarize as 'Jerusalem vs. Lachish'. The royal inscriptions concentrate on Ekron and Jerusalem but make no reference at all to Lachish.¹⁸ In contrast, the royal sculptures highlight the conquest of Lachish as a particularly significant event, but seem to ignore Jerusalem. The Lachish reliefs occupy a particularly important place in Sennacherib's palace and may be regarded as the climactic composition among all the sculptures concerned with the 701 campaign, indeed one of the most sophisticated compositions throughout the palace. Regarding the Assyrian siege against Jerusalem, the *communis opinio* argues that Sennacherib did not represent it on the sculptures because it had been a failure. This

¹⁸ The latter town could have been mentioned in a 'report to the gods' drafted after the campaign. But the relevant fragmentary tablet which is thought by many to represent part of that document refers to Azekah and to another, neighbouring town (probably Gath) but does not preserve a reference to Lachish. The attribution of this document to Sennacherib remains a matter of dispute (see Frahm 1997, 229–32, who favours Sargon II).

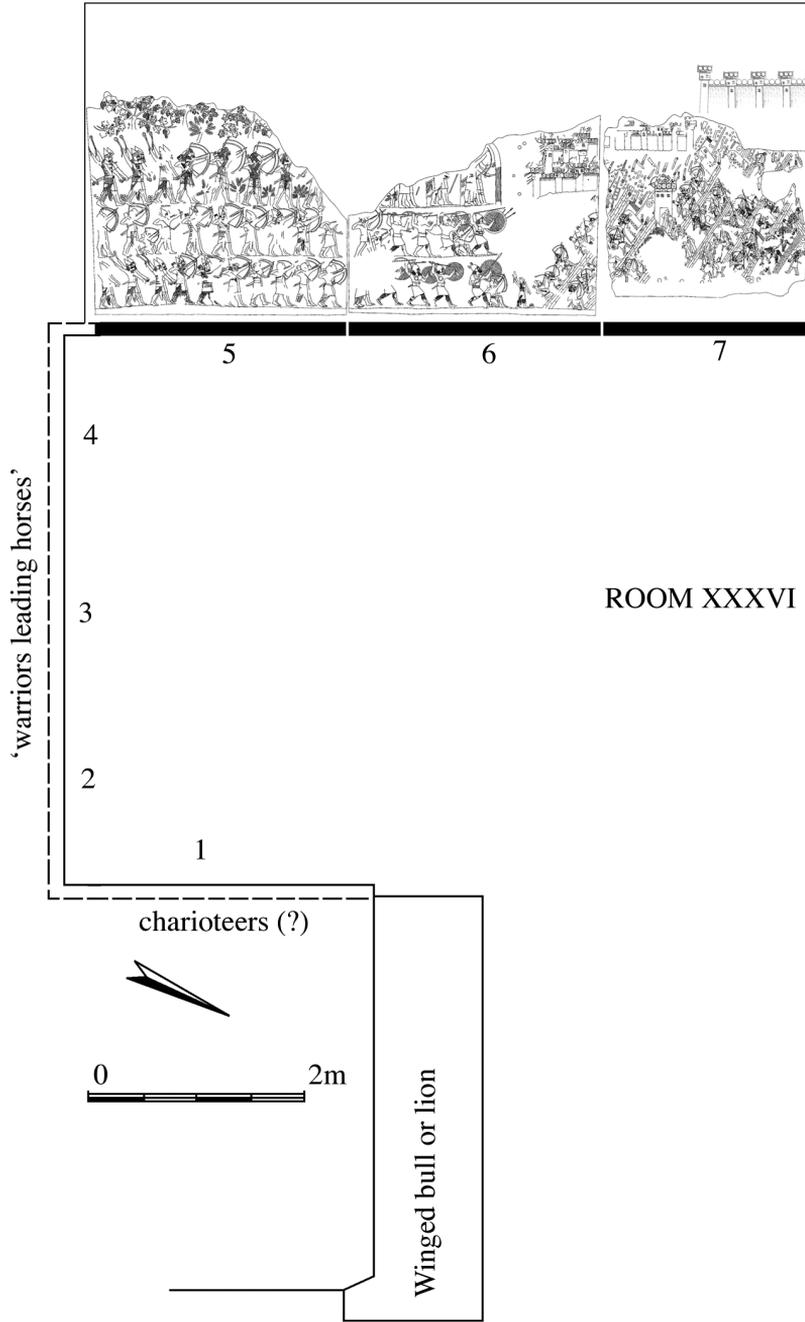
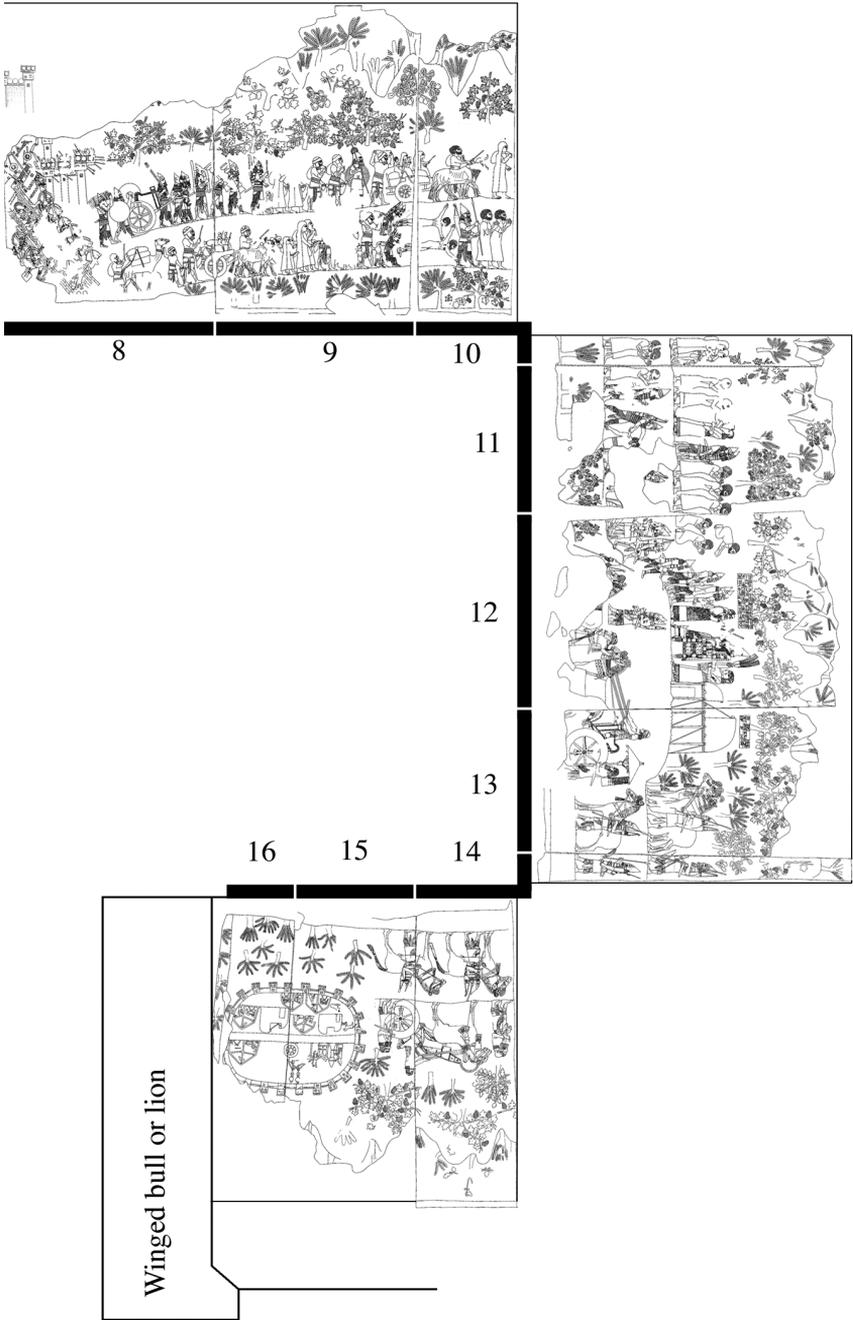


Figure 11.9 Plan of room XXXVI of Sennacherib's Southwest palace at Nineveh, with location of sculptures



recovered by A. H. Layard (Uehlinger 2003, 269, fig. 7).

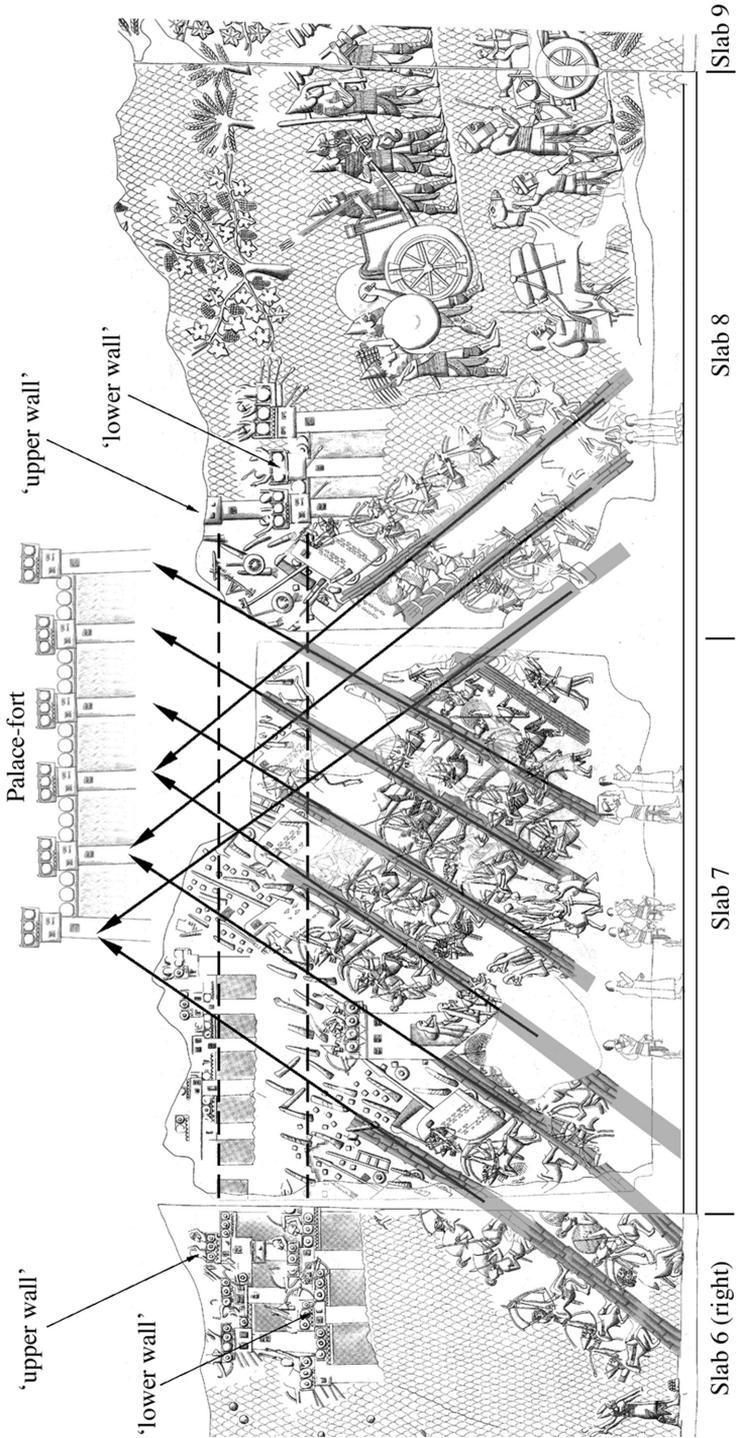


Figure 11.10 Sennacherib's Southwest palace at Nineveh, central slabs of room XXXXVI showing the conquest of Lachish (see Fig. 11.9 for location; Uehlinger 2003, 269, fig. 7).

explanation is, however, heavily dependent on the biblical tradition. One should not a priori exclude alternative explanations:

- (a) The siege of Jerusalem and surrender of Hezekiah may have been omitted from the sculptures because the king himself did not participate in the operation.
- (b) The siege against Jerusalem was apparently a minor operation in military terms, which would have made it unfit for inclusion in the heroic schemes of palace reliefs. From a military point of view, the conquest of Lachish and the battle of Eltekeh represented much more important, even climactic events of the 701 campaign.
- (c) An important caveat against speculating too far on the reasons for Jerusalem's absence from the sculptures is that we do not know for sure whether the episode was or was not depicted in Sennacherib's palace. A number of slabs, including episodes from the 701 campaign, have not yet been positively identified with locations mentioned in the inscriptions; one of them might possibly relate to Jerusalem (see Uehlinger 2003, 293–303).
- (d) However, the episode may be lacking on the sculptures because Hezekiah's submission to Sennacherib was essentially a post-campaign event according to the combined testimony of the annals and the Books of Kings. As a post-campaign episode, it would not have been recorded in the field diaries nor possibly in the 'report to the gods'. Since these were the primary source for the officials and artists who designed the palace decoration, Jerusalem would simply not have appeared in their records.

The latter point brings us to what we may call the 'historiographical process' as it unfolded at the royal Assyrian chancellery. In order properly to interpret complex pictorial documents such as the Lachish reliefs, we need to consider the way information about any particular subject was registered, stored, transmitted and eventually rendered by scribes and sculptors. The extent of what, how and with what authority things should be reported varied according to media, genre, purpose and context of a document. Described in very general terms, both ancient scribes and sculptors faced a similar problem when trying to accomplish their task at their best: what should they include, how should they present it, and on what documentary basis? To explore these questions requires that the historian adopt a 'data-processing approach'.

When analysing images and monuments such as the Lachish sculptures, historians should—in partial adoption of Baxandall's 're-enactment' model—consider the task, namely to represent an historical event and its significance on the walls of a major palace suite on the basis of available information. What were the actual procedures involved in the commissioning and execution of this task? Much of what we can answer derives from indirect evidence and argument, and a good deal of historical and artistic imagination. But a hypothetical account of how the Lachish reliefs came into

existence may well prevent us from too naive and historicist readings of their subject matter (see Uehlinger 2003, 274–77 for an earlier account).

The issue is particularly vexed because of the probable intersection of verbal and visual information and media (see chains of data-processing from event to final document summarized in Fig. 11.11). In my earlier study I have argued with particular reference to the fortifications of Lachish as they appear on the sculptures (a monumental gate bastion and two heavily fortified walls), that since the visual rendering of the town conflicts with the archaeological facts, the primary data collected by Assyrian expedition members could not be sketches drawn by field artists but were probably memoranda drawn up by scribes, that is textual information. Following a campaign, such memoranda and field diaries were organized, synthesized and expanded into more or less embellished, literary presentations, which would lead up to the rather colourful genre known as ‘letters to the gods’. Missing data may have been occasionally supplemented through active memory by officials who had participated in a particular campaign. It is quite unthinkable that the conquest of Lachish should not have figured in such a report although, as we have seen, there is no document that preserves the relevant passage. At some point in the redactional process leading from diaries to the ‘reports to the gods’, information was handed over to officials who were in charge of choosing the subjects to be displayed on the sculptures. A little later, the textual chain of data-processing entered the subsequent stage of annalistic redaction. Lachish and other episodes were now removed from the record and compressed into a summary reference to forty-six Judahite towns and villages. In contrast, the Lachish episode was preserved in the data-processing chain that led towards the visual representation of the campaign. The king himself was probably involved at several stages of this procedure. Once the general topic had been selected and its architectural environment designated, senior designers must have conceived the way in which the particular event would be rendered on the sculptures. For that purpose and only at that stage, they now had to transpose the textual information, occasionally supplemented by oral testimony, into another medium, namely pictorial narrative.

Before even addressing issues of subject matter, the designers had to face important formal constraints, most notably architectural context, layout and macro-syntactical considerations (see Fig. 11.9). While clearly to be ‘read’ from left to right, the visual programme of room XXXVI of Sennacherib’s palace displays a thoroughly planned composition, aiming at spatial symmetry, starting and ending with static processions of horsemen and chariotry and focusing on the intense, almost ecstatic attack on the city represented exactly at the centre of the room’s main long wall. Under normal lighting conditions, the siege would probably be seen across the preceding room(s)

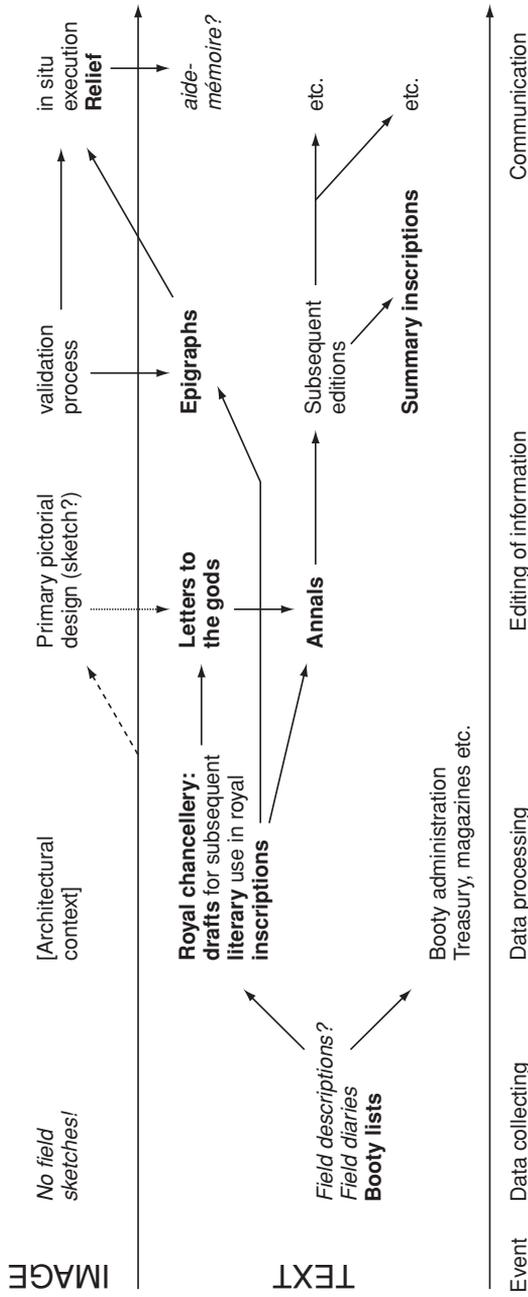


Figure 11.11 Chain of information processing from event to historiographical account in text and images (author's reconstruction based on pre-served documentation and circumstantial evidence).

and doorway(s). Emphasis along this room is on reversal, with slabs to the left showing orderly placed Assyrian attackers while booty and captives are led away on the slabs to the right. The city itself appears in an almost symmetrical disposition, set slightly off-centre in accordance with the general movement of the scenario to the right. The compositional axis is stressed by people leaving the gate tower following a zig-zag line alongside a famous detail, which shows three naked enemies being impaled by a pair of Assyrian soldiers. Once a visitor had entered the room and considered the sequence of attack, onslaught and submission, following the trail of captives and booty would lead him towards the Assyrian king, conspicuously enthroned in the centre of the main short wall to the right and conveniently placed on eye-level. To be sure, the layout of the Lachish sculptures owes much more to the intentional *mise en scène* and investment of the architectural context, than to real-life knowledge gathered by putative eyewitnesses at Lachish in 701 BCE.

The next stage in the shaping of the series would then be to define details. Scaling does not seem to have been considered a major issue on the Lachish sculptures: the scale of the protagonists is defined according to the requirements of compositional complexity (see Fig. 11.10). Micro-syntax and vocabulary were conditioned by pictorial conventions more than anything else: one may note that Assyrian soldiers usually operate in pairs, a compositional device that emphasizes discipline and coordination and can easily be replicated; too stereotyped rows may occasionally be broken up by slightly irregular features. A major purpose of the composition was to display the whole spectrum of weaponry and stratagems that the Assyrian army could employ in order to overwhelm its opponents. Movement and onslaught could be translated by the sequential juxtaposition of marching, descending, kneeling, or kneeling, rising and running. Finally, stock material would be used to fill in compositional blanks (note, for instance, a pair of stone slingers turned right on the bottom right-hand of slab 7, who do not have a recognizable target).

It should be clear from this brief exercise in historical and artistic imagination that the constraints of pictorial conventions were considerable even for such gifted artists as the Lachish sculptors. We should therefore abandon any naive approach to these reliefs as windows to an ancient event. Rather, they occur to us as a conspicuous example of what Baxandall has called 'patterned intentions'. This being said, I totally agree with Ussishkin when he stresses the extraordinary wealth of valuable information about ancient Israelite (rather, Judahite) history and society conveyed by these sculptures. To my knowledge, no other document offers us a comparably differentiated image of a complex Levantine society of the Iron Age, with members of the elite and the state apparatus clearly distinguished from the general population, military from civilians, men from women, children and babies taken care

of by their elder sister, mother or father according to gender and age, and so on. All this, I think, should be regarded as essential evidence pertaining to the social history of Judah in the late eighth and early seventh century BCE—although we should not forget that our gaze follows the eyes, minds and chisels of *Assyrian* sculptors, whose gaze, as we have seen, was conditioned by Assyrian, not Judahite, perceptions and conventions.

3.4. A place in history: rock reliefs at Nahr el-Kelb from Ramesses II to Esarhaddon

It seems to be a huge step from such technical aspects of data-processing to the much broader issues of historical consciousness and ideological framing, but even the latter has its procedural logic which may partly be reconstructed or 're-enacted' by the critical historian. A single example must suffice again, and it will be brief. Just south of Nahr el-Kelb, some 12 km north of modern Beirut, a rocky promontory blocks the coastal road and for millennia it has presented an important obstacle to armies moving north or south. Having vanquished this narrow and difficult pass, a number of foreign rulers decided to leave their mark, several of them in the form of monumental reliefs and inscriptions. The oldest examples are three monuments going back to the reign of Ramesses II (Fig. 11.12a), but six Assyrian royal rock stelae have also survived. Two of them have a rectangular frame, the other four a rounded top much like a royal stela. One of the latter is securely dated to the reign of Esarhaddon (Fig. 11.12b), both by an inscription running over the king's mantle and on stylistic grounds. The date of the other five is disputed, with suggestions ranging from Ashur-resh-ishi and Tiglath-pileser I, to Ashurnasirpal, Shalmaneser III and Tiglath-pileser III down to Sennacherib (see Börker-Klähn 1982, 211–12 nos. 211–16 for the details; and Shafer 1998, 295–98, 317–21).

Earlier scholars who suggested these datings would not conceive that one sovereign could have commissioned a whole series of rock stelae at one location. This assumption may be challenged, however, since such series are well attested, for example for Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. Jutta Börker-Klähn (1982, 212) has therefore suggested that all the round-topped stelae should be attributed to Esarhaddon. We may add that at least three of them, among which is the one which was definitely made by Esarhaddon's sculptors, were positioned close or next to the earlier Egyptian reliefs of Ramesses II. In a recent study on the interaction of art and politics between Assyria and Egypt in the seventh century BCE, Marian H. Feldman has qualified this juxtaposition as 'a visual dialogue between the Egyptian and Assyrian representations' (Feldman 2004, 143). Following Feldman, I would hypothesize

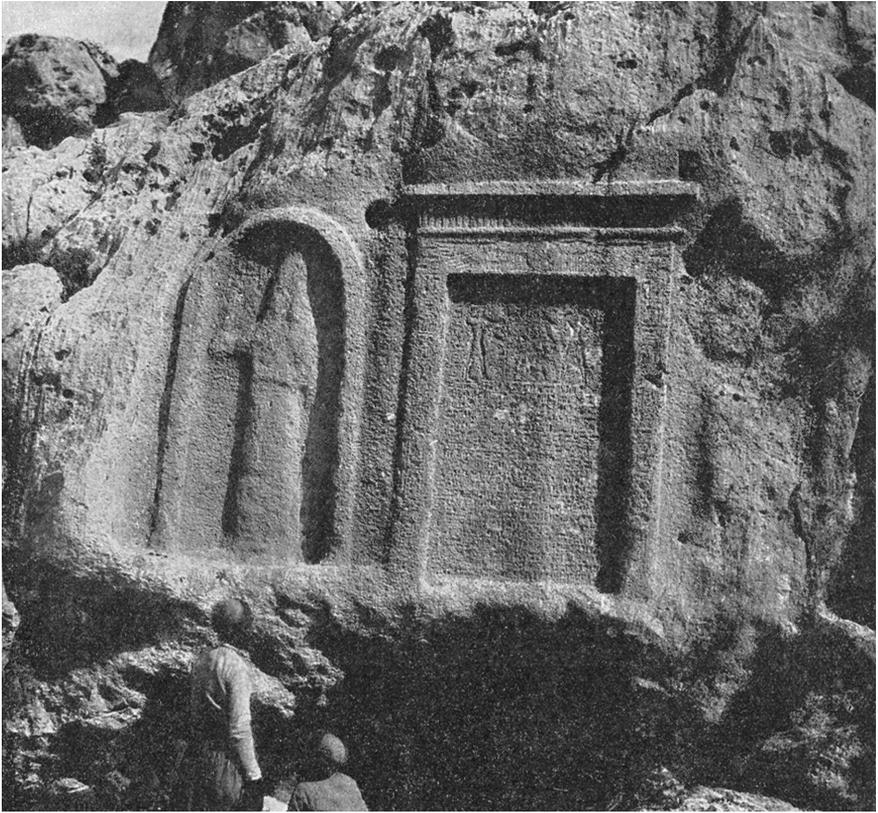


Figure 11.12a Rock sculptures and inscriptions at Nahr el-Kelb, modern Lebanon. Left: Assyrian rock stela, possibly the reign of Esarhaddon (c. 670 BCE); right: Egyptian monument dated to the reign of Ramesses II (after 1274 BCE; Weissbach 1922: 20 Abb. 5).

that the juxtaposition of the Assyrian and the Egyptian stelae should be interpreted as a deliberate attempt by Assyrian artists to establish a formal connection between the famed Egyptian power of the past and the newly established Assyrian hegemony during the reign of Esarhaddon. By this procedure, the Assyrians ‘call attention to their position as both inheritors and supplanters of the Egyptian tradition’ (Feldman 2004, 148). The most conspicuous date for such a programmatic situation would be the years between Esarhaddon’s two campaigns to Egypt (671 and 669 BCE). It is well known that the subjugation of Egypt by Esarhaddon was prepared, accompanied and followed by a number of intense operations on the symbolical level, ranging from prophetic legitimation to figurative policy, from monuments to mass media (cf. Weisberg 1996; Uehlinger 1997, 316–20; Eph‘al 2005).

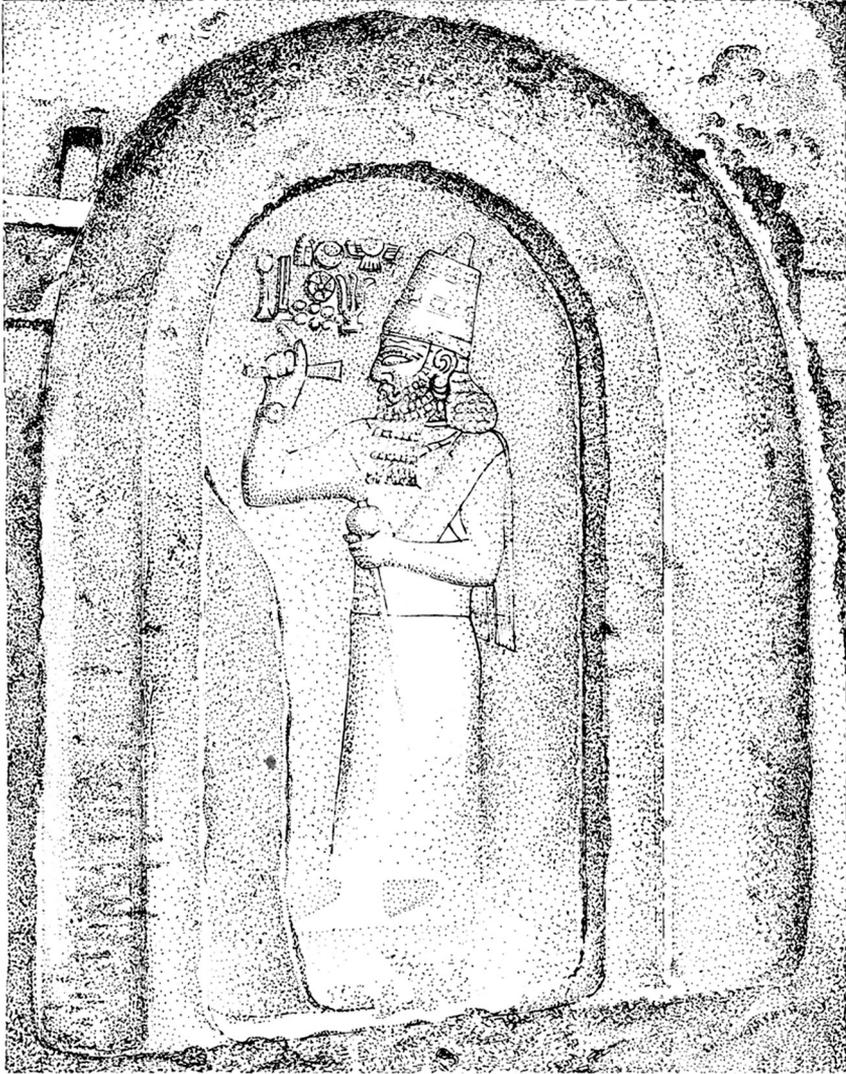


Figure 11.12b Assyrian rock stela and inscription at Nahr el-Kelb, the reign of Esarhaddon (c. 670 BCE; Börker-Klähn 1982: no. 216).

The sculptures of Nahr el-Kelb provide a rare example of historical consciousness being prompted by geography itself. At the same time, they hint at the conscious interpretation and symbolic manipulation of a peculiar historical conjuncture by the ruling power. Clearly this is a spectacular case of

interaction between Fernand Braudel's three levels of history, the *longue durée*, social history and the history of events.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Coming to an end and getting back once more at Burke's *Eyewitnessing*, let me quote some of his conclusions before presenting my own:

1. The good news for historians is that art [or, preferably, 'visual documents', C.U.] can provide evidence for aspects of social reality which texts pass over, at least in some places and times (. . .).
2. The bad news is that representational art is often less realistic than it seems and distorts social reality rather than reflecting it, so that historians who do not take account of the variety of the intentions of painters or photographers (not to mention their patrons and clients) can be seriously misled.
3. However, returning to the good news, the process of distortion is itself evidence of phenomena that many historians want to study: mentalities, ideologies and identities. The material or literal image is good evidence of the mental or metaphorical 'image' of the self or of others. (Burke 2001, 30)

Art history has stressed the importance of viewers' expectations and previous knowledge for their understanding of an image in terms of a 'message'. It is the eye of the beholder that organizes the visual field and makes sense of it according to established rules of visual communication. The task of the historian is to reconstruct the rules of communication on the basis of the primary data. Such rules may be better understood, and validated, when we consider not only the finished product but the whole process from commissioning to design and to the actual execution of a visual-rhetorical programme.

History-writing ever was and basically remains a matter of data-processing. Historians more than other scholars should be aware of the many difficulties inherent in the recording, storage, transmission and restitution of historical data in ancient sources. In order to interpret ancient documents correctly, we should always consider these difficulties in very practical terms, regardless of whether we are dealing with texts or pictures.

To conclude, then, historians have always been children of their own time. It is only natural that our expectations regarding the informative potential of images should be influenced and may be biased by the use made of images of all kinds in our contemporary societies. Among the paradigms en vogue among present-day analysts of ancient Near Eastern monumental (and, we

¹⁹ On this and the *Annales* tradition in general, see Hans M. Barstad's contribution to this volume.

may add, political) art, the notions of ‘propaganda’ versus ‘eyewitnessing’ are widely used, as if they were self-explanatory but mutually exclusive. In my own view, however, the monuments we study are neither exclusively documentary nor exclusively propagandistic in character, but both—or at least, they attempt to be both, within the necessary constraints of the medium and ancient data-processing procedures. I fully concur with Peter Burke (quoted above in section 2.2) that such images should not be viewed as mere *reflections* of their time and place, but rather as *extensions* of the *social contexts* in which they were commissioned and produced. Their visual discourses bear witness to complex processes of public communication negotiating the ever-precarious legitimacy of political power and the difficult, though necessary, representation of its opponents.

It may well be that we are today going through a considerable epistemological revolution. New imaging technologies defy our handling of reality itself, whether past or present. The ‘eyewitnessing qualities’ of photography and film are progressively contested, to the extent that they are no more received as undisputable evidence in court. To some extent, Big Brother is a fantasy of the past. At the same time, virtual images allow for a new and much more visual sensing of the past (no wonder, then, that the ways of historiography are today supplemented by a new approach, called ‘virtual history’, cf. Exum 2000). If handled with care, these new developments may enhance critical insight into just how and to what extent images can be manipulated—and in turn manipulate audiences—as easily as words and texts. The challenge faced by critical historians is thus two-sided: that we should take into account visual documents as an essential facet of historical testimony seems obvious; at the same time, however, we must resist the temptations of eyewitnessing, which images by their very nature always tend to impose on us.

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