

Ripping Open Pregnant Arab Women: Reliefs in Room L of Ashurbanipal's North Palace*

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Neo-Assyrian reliefs are known for representing all kinds of violence. The reliefs frequently capture Assyrian soldiers beheading their enemies with a sword, piercing them with a spear, or smashing their heads with a mace. The objects of such violence are exclusively men, primarily soldiers and rulers. The Assyrian reliefs also show long processions of deportees, among them women, who were deported together with their husbands and their children as part of Assyrian booty (Barnett 1976: pl. XVIII, XIX; Barnett and Falkner 1962: pl. VI, VII, XC); however, they were usually not mistreated or shackled as the subjugated men were (Albenda 1987: 20). Relief BM 124927 found in the North Palace of Nineveh represents an exception. It depicts Assyrian troops ruthlessly slaying Arab women (Reade 1998: 227). To emphasize the unusual character of this relief it is helpful to compare it with the treatment of Elamite women that has been preserved on the reliefs of Room F in the same palace (Barnett 1976: pl. XVIII). After the battle the Elamite women hid themselves in marshes. When the Assyrian soldiers find them, the reliefs portray no violence committed against them. The next scene depicts the deportation of the Elamite women, but once again no explicit violence against the Elamite women can be noticed. The opposite is true for the Arab women on the reliefs in Room L.¹ After the battle against the Arabs, the Assyrians turn against the Arab camp. Relief BM 124927 represents four direct attacks against Arab women and two scenes in which we can easily recognize dead female bodies. The most brutal scene of violence against women ever captured on Neo-Assyrian reliefs is on the middle register of this relief. I will argue that this scene depicts the Assyrian soldiers ripping open a pregnant Arab woman. Despite several excellent studies of these reliefs, many questions are still left unanswered. Therefore, before analyz-

¹ Similar treatment of women can be found also on other reliefs, see for example the women depicted after the defeat of Lachish in Room XXXVI of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace; Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: pl. 338.

ing relief BM 124927 I will place this relief in its context. In the first part of this paper I propose a reconstruction of the reliefs in room L. In the second I treat the narrative dynamics of these reliefs and in the last part I apply the results of the previous analyses to BM 124927 depicting Assyrian violence against Arab women.

Reliefs of Room L in Ashurbanipal's North Palace

Relief BM 124927 was found in Room L of the North Palace constructed by Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.).² According to Butcher's plans Room L contained 13 slabs (Fig. 1).

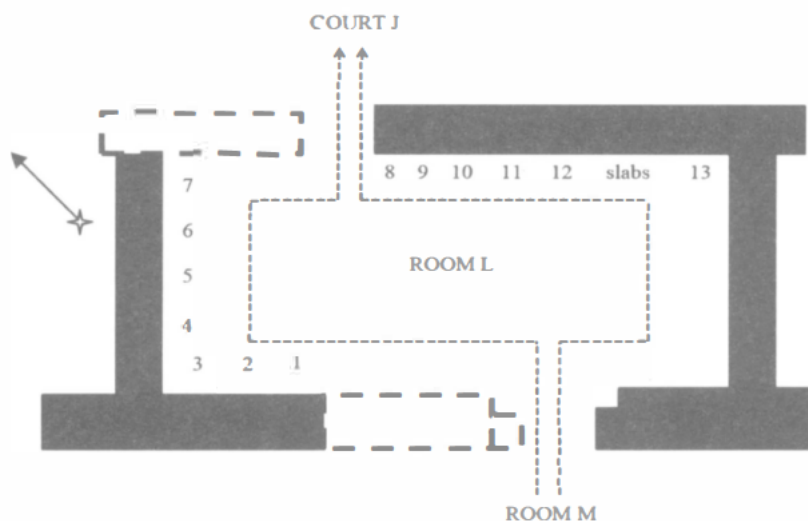


Fig. 1: Layout of Room L in Ashurbanipal's North Palace according to Butcher's drawing; see Barnett 1976: fig. 7.

Slabs 1, 5, 6, and 7 were destined for the Louvre and slabs 10-13 for the British Museum. The rest of the slabs were poorly preserved. Slabs

² The North Palace was discovered by Rassam in 1853. The excavations were performed under the veil of night in order to escape the attention of the French (Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: 9).

destined for the Louvre were lost in the Tigris disaster, but, fortunately, they had been sketched by Boutcher (Fig. 2-3; cf. Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: 16).



Fig. 2: Drawings of slabs 1-3 according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXII.



Fig. 3: Drawings of slabs 4-7 according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXII.

Slab 13 destined for the British Museum was also lost. Therefore, the only preserved reliefs are BM 124925, 124926, 124927, Vatican 14997, Woburn Abbey 114,³ and four drawings of unpreserved reliefs and one woodcut Or.Dr.VII 28 (Fig. 2-7).

³ The probability that this relief belongs to this campaign is very low.



Fig. 4: Slab 9 (BM 124927) according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXIII.



Fig. 5: Slab 10 (Vatican 14997); with the permission of the direction of the Vatican Museums, n. 165957/AF, all rights reserved.



Fig. 6: Slab 11 (BM 124925) according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXIII.



Fig. 7: Slab 12 (BM 124926) according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXIII.

Before offering any consideration concerning the content of the relief, we have to address a question of the organization of the preserved reliefs on the southwestern wall. The following table summarized some data indispensable for this analysis.

Relief	Slab	Dimensions (height × width)
BM 124927	9	137 × 162.6 cm
Vatican 14997	10	39 × 115.5 cm
BM 124925	11	42.5 × 150 cm
BM 124926	12	134.4 × 373 cm
<i>Woburn Abbey 114</i>	13?	47 × 63 cm

Slabs 11 and 12 unquestionably belong together (Barnet 1976: pl. XXXIII). The question mark hovers over slabs 10 and 9. Opitz already in 1931 identified relief Vatican 14997 as slab 10 (Opitz 1931: 8-12). In the following paragraphs I will argue that slab 10 (Vatican 14997) should be joined with slab 11 (BM 124925). There are three elements on both slabs that allow such a connection to be made (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Reconstruction of the missing parts of slabs 10 and 11; with the permission of the direction of the Vatican Museums, n. 165957/AF, all rights reserved.

First, the right side of slab 10 depicts a camel fallen on the ground. Its hind leg is partly missing. On the left side of slab 11 there is a hoof and a part of a camel's hind leg. The connection between these two slabs is suggested by the following calculations based upon the depictions of fallen camels on slab 12. On slab 12 we have two fully preserved fallen camels with their hind legs stretched out on the ground: one in the middle register and the other in the lower register. The length of the hind legs is 35 cm (the lower register) and 40 cm (the middle register). On slab 10 the upper part of camel's hind leg measures 7 cm and on slab 11 the remaining part of the camel's hind leg measures 15 cm. All together the preserved part of the leg is 22 cm. If we join both reliefs, then we are missing about 13 cm between slabs 10 and 11. The second element proving the connection of both slabs is the leg of a dying Arab. On slab 11 there is an Arab soldier falling on the ground. His left hand is preserved on slab 11 and his right hand is partly missing. As it is shown on Fig. 8, the palm of his hand is preserved on slab 10 and the missing part can be easily reconstructed. The last element allowing the junction of both reliefs is the foot of another Arab soldier. On slab 10 there is an Arab soldier falling down from a camel. His right leg is captured on slab 10; however his left

leg is partly missing. The foot of his left leg can be seen, even though partly damaged, on slab 11 (Fig. 8). These three elements prove that slab 10 follows slab 11.

Slab 9 thematically follows slab 10 but between them there must have been another part that has not been preserved. We can estimate the missing parts of the reliefs. According to the data given in Barnett's report the length of the preserved part of reliefs 12-9 is 801 cm and the whole southwestern wall is 1189 cm long. This means that we are missing 388 cm of reliefs.⁴ Most of these missing parts are located on the left and on the right parts of slabs 12-9 (Fig. 1). According to Boutcher's drawing a badly damaged slab 8 was situated after slab 9 and some slabs were missing between slab 12 and 13. Since the largest portions of the missing slabs were situated on the left and on the right of slabs 12-8, the portion missing between slabs 10 and 9 should not be larger than 50-70 cm.⁵

It is therefore possible to conclude that the reliefs 12-9 are closely tied together. Slab 11 follows immediately after slab 12. Between slab 11 and 10 we are missing 13-15 cm, whereas between slab 10 and 9 a larger part is missing, but not more than 50-70 cm. This reconstruction constitutes the basis for the study of the content of the reliefs.

Let us start with a few generally accepted data. The scenes on all slabs of Room L are divided into three registers, separated by two horizontal fillets (Barnett 1976: 16). The main motifs of the reliefs are the battle scenes. The enemy has been identified with the Arabs and so Room L is called the Arab Room (Reade 1964: 8). I will argue that the reliefs depict two campaigns against the same enemy; the first is on slabs 1-7 and the second on slabs 9-12.⁶ Accordingly, relief BM 124927 is to be connected with the second war against the Arabs.

First War against the Arabs (Slabs 1-7)

The first battle scenes on slabs 1-7 have been preserved only in Boutcher's drawing. Slabs 1-4 were badly damaged and on slabs 5-7 only parts of the middle and lower registers have been preserved (Fig. 2-3). Despite the

⁴ It is impossible to be more precise because Boutcher's drawings are far from being exact as the following calculation demonstrates: the real length of all preserved slabs 12-9 is 801.1 cm, however according to Boutcher's drawings it should be only 670 cm.

⁵ The size of the part of the missing relief is estimated on the base of the width of the tent on slab 9. If the missing part of the relief contained the rest of the tent depicted on the right side of the lower register, then the missing part is 45 cm.

⁶ I. Eph'al divided the reliefs into two groups: Group I contained slabs 3-7 and Group II slabs 9-12 and perhaps slab 13; see Eph'al 1982: 151.

fact that the slabs were lost, Boutcher's drawings provide sufficient details to reconstruct the development of the narrative.

The war against the Arabs starts on slab 1.⁷ A fragment of this relief has been preserved in woodcut Or.Dr.VII 28 (Gadd 1936: fig. 6). It depicts the Arabs forming for battle.⁸ They hold bows in their right hands and swords in their left hands. This is not a typical fighting position as it can be observed on slabs 3-7, where the Arab archers hold their bows with both hands to discharge their arrows. Moreover, on woodcut Or.Dr.VII 28 the camels are crouching, ready to be mounted. This brandishing of arms and the symmetry of the soldiers and of the camels arrayed for battle show the initial decisiveness of the Arabs prepared for the fight, which is in sharp contrast with the confusion once the battle has started. The lower register of slabs 2-6 depicts close combat of Arabs mounted on camels. On each camel there are two Arab soldiers. The rider in front guides the camel with a stick and the one behind discharges arrows against the Assyrians (Barnett 1976: 15). As the narrative unfolds, the Arabs are progressively loosing ground. Some of them are killed and the rest of them escape to save their lives. Some Arab archers, either sitting in saddles or standing on the ground, fire their arrows to stop the Assyrian troops. The Assyrian cavalry and chariotry mercilessly pursue the fleeing Arabs leaving behind dead Arab bodies. The final battle scene, found on the lower register of slab 6, depicts an Arab soldier on a camel that has lost his co-rider. He has no weapon and his hands are raised. This gesture of pleading for mercy is a sign of the capitulation of the last Arab soldier. The lower register of slabs 6 and 7 depicts the aftermath of the war. On these slabs the Assyrian soldiers cut and tear down the date-palm trees. At this point Room L is damaged and the whole southern wall of the room has not been preserved. Using Boutcher's plans we can reconstruct that at least four slabs are missing.⁹

In this description of the war against the Arabs we can observe some peculiarities that can help us to compare these battle scenes with the second set of reliefs. First, the narrative on slabs 1-7 reads from the left to the right. The Arabs attacked the Assyrians from the right and then fled to the right; whereas the Assyrians attacked from the left and pursued the Arabs towards the right. Another peculiarity of this war is the type of troops

⁷ However, this is not the first slab decorating the northeastern wall of Room L. According to Boutcher's plans there were some slabs on the left of slab 1.

⁸ This scene was first interpreted in the sense that the Arabs dismounted from their camels and fought behind them; *ibid.* 11. Later on this interpretation was abandoned; Eph'al 1982: 151; Nadali 2004: 66.

⁹ Probably scenes of deportation decorated this part of Room L.

employed by the Assyrians. The Assyrians used chariotry, cavalry, and spearmen for the combat. All the Assyrian soldiers had pointed helmets and the spearmen used only large round shields. The chariots contained four soldiers and had massive wheels. The corpses of the dead Arabs are in an unnatural position. The right hand of the dead body is stretched out and the left hand is attached to the body. Finally, the date-palms form the background of the war scenes. Reade (1964: 8) suggested that the Arabs retreated to the oasis and the last part of the battle took place in the oasis. The cutting down of the palm trees can be understood as an efficient way for uprooting the resistance of an enemy as well as a damaging punishment having strong impact upon following generations (Cole 1997).

Second War against the Arabs

The first slabs depicting the beginning of the second war against the Arabs are missing. Slabs 12-9 depict the moments when the Arabs seek refuge in escape and this leads us into the midst of the battle. The Arabs on these reliefs are fiercely fighting against advancing Assyrian chariotry, cavalry, and infantry. The composition of the Arab troops is similar to the previous set of reliefs. Two Arabs ride a camel: while one holds the reins and guides the camel with a stick, the other discharges his arrows against the Assyrians. Similar to the previous set of reliefs, the Arabs while escaping the battle-field fire their arrows against advancing Assyrians. Slabs 11-12 are crowded with dying or dead Arabs. The corpses of the dead Arabs have the right hand stretched out and the left hand attached to the body as in the previous set of reliefs. The above argued connection of slabs 11 and 10 permits the inference that slab 10 depicts the final part of the battle and the Assyrian punitive measures against the Arabs. The right part of slab 10 depicts a camel falling down together with its rider. The left side of the slab presents the aftermaths of the war: an Assyrian soldier sets fire to an Arab tent in which two male dead bodies lay. The aftermath of the second war is fully depicted on slab 9 (BM 124927).¹⁰ The Assyrians devastated the Arab camp, killed men and women and set the tents on fire. The last slab on the southwestern wall is marked on Boutcher's plans as slab 8. It is marked in yellow, meaning that it was found severely damaged and that there is no drawing of it.

A close examination of both sets of reliefs brings to the surface several differences between the representations of the battles against the Arabs. Whereas the narrative depicted on slabs 9-12 reads from the right to the

¹⁰ It was suggested that this slab is the last slab of this series; Gadd 1936: 195.

left, the one on slabs 1-7 moves from the left to the right. This way both narratives move toward the doorway between Room L and J.

Moreover, whereas the Assyrian soldiers on the first war reliefs have pointed helmets, those on the second war reliefs wear three different types of helmets and some archers have no helmets at all. Again, the Assyrians on the second set of reliefs use two types of shields, namely large round shields and large rectangular wicker shields, whereas on the first set of reliefs only large round shields are seen. This suggests that other ethnic groups and ranks of soldiers were employed in the second war.

The most important difference between the two sets of reliefs concerns their background. Whereas date-palm trees form the background on the first war reliefs, the second war reliefs have a blank background (Biga et al. 1996: 84). This may indicate that not only was each war led on a different terrain, but also that each war ended with different kinds of punishment of the rebels. On the first set of reliefs the Assyrians cut down the palm trees. The second set of reliefs depicts them destroying the Arab camp itself.¹¹

Hence, the Assyrians fought the battles on different terrain, employed various kinds of troops and weapons, and punished the Arabs in different ways. The most plausible explanation for these differences is that reliefs of Room L depict two campaigns against the Arabs. This proposal can be further buttressed by the organization of the narrative. On the first series of slabs the narrative starts with the Arabs arraying for battle, followed by the battle itself, and finally the aftermath. The first slabs of the second set of reliefs were lost, but this narrative obviously follows the same sequence starting with the battle and ending with the aftermath. Both narratives thus represent two series of continuous scenes depicting the events in chronological order. If the narrative is read as a continuous sequence of one single battle from slab 1 to slab 12, then it would be hard to explain why at the end of this battle (slab 7) the observer has to follow the same battle scenes again.

Identification of the Wars

The next step of this study is to place both wars against the Arabs into the context of cuneiform documents describing Ashurbanipal's campaigns

¹¹ This difference is particularly noticeable on slabs 10 and 6 even if on both slabs the aftermath scenes directly comes after the combat scenes: on slab 6, immediately after the last combat, follows the scene depicting the Assyrians cutting down the date palms, on slab 10, after the last combat, follows a depiction of the destruction of the Arab camp.

against the Arabs (Wäfler 1975: 149-153; for the identification of the wars, see Reade 1998: 228-231). For almost one hundred years, scholars have been studying these documents.¹² Streck (1916: pl. CCLXXIX-CCLXXXV) proposed the two-war theory which was later revised by Weippert (1973), who also reedited some of the cuneiform texts; then Eph'al (Eph'al 1982: 46-59, 125-169) reconstructed the historical events described in the cuneiform documents and, ultimately, Gerardi (1992) reviewed the historical and textual problems. The most important result of their analyses is the distinction between the historical and textual problems. The texts describing Ashurbanipal's campaigns against the Arabs seem to have gone through several redactions. Annals B and D dated to 649 and 648 B.C. respectively represent the oldest documents. These annals describe only one war against the Arabs. The second stage of redaction produced annals K and C, composed in 647 B.C.. These two annals follow versions B and D, adding episode *k*, which describes the capture of the Arabian queen Adiya, and episode *m*, which recounts Natnu's rejection of Yatua'. Both redactions deal only with the first Assyrian campaign against the Arabs. According to these redactions the Arabs launched an attack against the Western Lands. The Assyrians promptly intervened and defeated the Arab troops. The Arab camp was sacked and burnt down. The third edition of the Assyrian campaigns against the Arabs can be found in Ashurbanipal's Letter to the God Aššur. This letter follows the narrative plan of the previous annals but adds the second campaign against the Arabs (episodes *p-t*). Moreover, it connects the first campaign with the Assyrian war against Shamash-shumu-ukin and Elam (episode I). According to this redaction the Arabs attacked the Western Lands in support of Shamash-shumu-ukin's rebellion against Assyria (652-648 B.C.). Hence the first war is interpreted as an Assyrian response to the attack of the Western Lands. Episodes *p-t*, added at the end of the Letter, describe the second war against the Arabs which came as a response to the attempt of the Arab leader Yatua' in orchestrating another revolt. The last redaction of this complicated period of Assyrian history is preserved in annals A, composed in 643 B.C.. It represents a radical revision of the previous redactions: new material is added covering episodes II, III, IV, *fā*, *u*, *v*, *w*;

¹² The relevant texts for identifying the wars are:
 Prism C IX 90' – X 87 = *BIWA* 113-117/243-245
 Prism B VII 93 – VIII 63 = *BIWA* 113-117/243-245
 Prism A VII 82 – X 5 = *BIWA* 61-69/245-249
 Prism G1E II' 1'-6' = *BIWA* 115-116/244-245
 Letter to the God Aššur I 1 – IV 10 = *BIWA* 77-80 (Weippert 1973: 75-85)

episodes from the first campaign are moved to the second (episodes *e, f*); episodes within the first campaign narrative are also rearranged (episodes *j-p*) (Gerardi 1992: 88).

This short presentation of the *status quo* of the Neo-Assyrian documents allows us to connect the episodes described in the annals with those depicted on the reliefs. As discussed above, slabs 10 and 9 depict the Assyrians setting Arab tents on fire. The cuneiform documents offer two passages to connect the conflagration scenes of the reliefs with historical events. The first passage is taken from episode *d*: “The tents, their dwellings, [they se]t on [fire] and allotted (them) to the flames.” (B VIII 11; Letter I 52; A VII 121-122; the English translation is from Gerardi 1992: 73). All the redactions connect episode *d* with the Assyrian first campaign. This conflagration of the Arab camp is described as a response to Yatua‘’s attack on the Western Lands. Another conflagration of the Arab camp is described in episode *k*. As regards this episode, annals A, K, and C as well as the Letter briefly summarize a battle against the Arabian queen Adiya. These versions report that the queen was taken captive, brought to Assyria, and her tents were burnt down. According to all the extant versions, this battle also took place during the first campaign (G1E II’ 1’-6’; Letter II 45-49; A VII 24). The Assyrian documents thus describe two moments when the Assyrians burnt down the Arab tents: the first in episode *d* (the battle against Yatua‘); the second in episode *k* (the battle against the queen Adiya).¹³ Since all the redactions connect both conflagrations of the Arabs tents with the first campaign, one can safely conclude that the second set of reliefs represents Ashurbanipal’s first campaign against the Arabs. The Assyrians fought several smaller battles and in two of them, i.e., the battles against Yatua‘ and Adiya, they even burnt down the Arab camps. The first conflagration was attributed to Assyrian troops, whereas the second to Ashurbanipal himself.

The connection of the scenes depicted on the first set of reliefs with the events described in the cuneiform text is more difficult to establish because the reliefs were preserved only in the form of drawings. Therefore in the following paragraphs I offer two hypotheses.

According to slabs 3-7 the final part of this battle was conducted on a plain and perhaps in an oasis containing date-palms. It follows that the first and most likely hypothesis is to connect these battle scenes with the

¹³ It was suggested that the woman on the left of the middle register of slab 9 could be identified with Adiya. However, this identification is unlikely, because the woman on the slab was killed and not captured; see Nadali 2004: 73.

Assyrian intervention against the Arabs who supported Shamash-shumu-ukin's rebellion. The basis for this claim is the sensibility of the Assyrian sculptors towards landscape details. They carved on their reliefs various types of trees: date-palms with high trunks, palm-bushes with low trunks, trees with leaves, and reeds. The high trunk date-palms with heavy fruit hanging from the crown are typical for the scenes of Shamash-shumu-ukin's submission and the deportation of the Babylonian prisoners as well (Barnett 1976: pl. XXIX, XXX, XXXIV, XXXV). On the other hand, the bushes with similar palm branches but shorter trunks form the background of mountain landscapes (ibid. pl. XXXIV). Since the date-palms with high trunks in the North Palace have been found only in the context of the Assyrian campaigns against Babylonia, it is possible to connect the first set of reliefs with the Arab support of the Babylonian revolt as it is described in the later versions of the annals (episode I: Letter I 37-47; A VII 97-106).

The second hypothesis is meant to identify the date-palm oasis depicted on the first set of reliefs with an oasis mentioned in the annals describing the Assyrian second campaign against the Arabs. This campaign took place in Syria and is described in episodes *p-s*. According to the later editions (Letter III 12–IV 10; A VIII 73–IX 24) the Assyrians marched through the Syrian desert and found places with water to drink, that is, a necessary condition for growing date-palms.

For our purposes it is important that the second set of reliefs be connected with the first Assyrian campaign against the Arabs. Since slab 9 depicting the Assyrian violence against the Arab women is a part of the second set of reliefs, the scenes of this slab can be connected with the first Assyrian campaign against the Arabs. I have suggested that the Assyrians burnt down the Arab tents twice. On both occasions this was a response to Yatua's revolt. He broke the treaty with Ashurbanipal, refused to pay tribute, incited a revolt in Arabia, and repeatedly plundered the Western Lands (Amurru). The Assyrian troops dispatched by Ashurbanipal quickly defeated Yatua and burnt his camp. During this punitive campaign the Assyrians and their allies also defeated other Arab leaders. One of them was the queen Adiya, whose tents were also burnt down. According to the earlier editions the campaign during which the Arab tents were burnt was not originally connected with Shamash-shumu-ukin's revolt and it could have taken place before the Babylonian revolt (Gerardi 1992: 70).

Narrative Dynamics of the Reliefs in Room L

Ashurbanipal's reliefs in the North Palace display a series of innovations. The best known is the technique of "continuous narrative". Con-

tinuous narrative is a method of presenting narratives in which a specific event enacted by particular characters is captured in different series of subsequent scenes which create one unified image (Watanabe 2004: 103). This narrative dynamic can be observed on the reliefs of Room L. Two major studies dedicated to the dynamics of composition styles in Room L prove that the continuous style of composition cannot be read only as a linear succession of battle scenes (Albenda 1998; Nadali 2004). The sculptors also tried to move the narrative elements from one register to another and thus created a special optical effect (Albenda 1998: 10). It is therefore necessary, in order to understand the narrative on these reliefs, to read them in both horizontal and vertical perspectives.

Horizontal Composition

The narrative of the reliefs is divided into short scenes depicting no more than two subsequent battle scenes tied around the same type of Assyrian soldiers. On all slabs it is possible to identify two types of linear continuous narrative: two-scene compositions (two subsequent scenes one after the other) and one-scene compositions (one scene depicting one or more episodes).

Two-scene composition: The best example of this composition is preserved on the middle register of slab 12 which shows two Assyrians (a spearman and an archer) attacking two Arabs on a camel. (Fig. 9). The next moment of this battle scene presents the outcome of this combat: one Arab is pierced by an arrow and lies dead in the field under the camel. The battle continues in the second scene where the same pair of Assyrians is again portrayed as killing an Arab archer, probably the one who escaped from the previous combat. At this point the narrative moves to a different battle scene where an Assyrian horseman kills an Arab on a camel .

A similar short continuous narrative can be observed on the lower register of slab 12. An Assyrian horseman is discharging an arrow against two Arabs riding a camel. The Arabs are hit and the camel falls down. A following scene captures both Arabs standing on the ground making a gesture of capitulation. The Assyrian horseman, having won the first combat, does not stop fighting but immediately attacks two other Arabs riding a camel. The subsequent episode of the same scene shows an Arab falling down dead (Fig. 9).

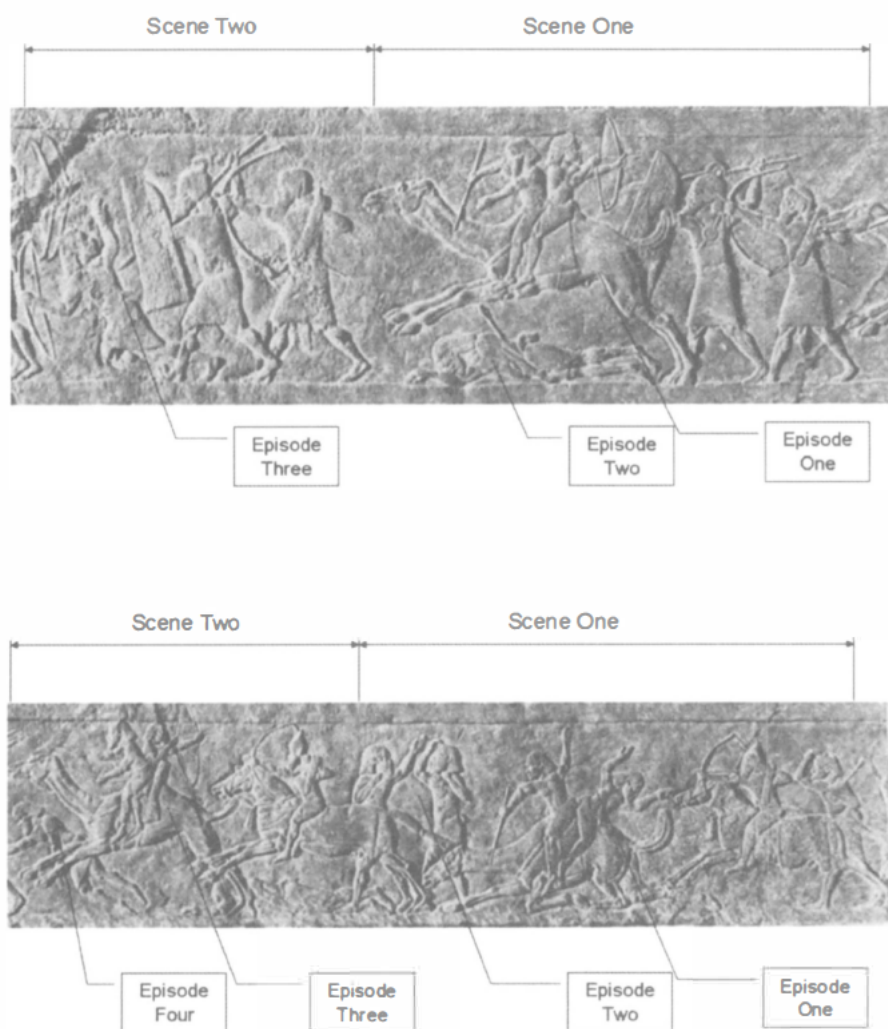


Fig. 9: Slab 12 (BM 124926), two examples of a two-scene composition according to Barnett 1976: pl. XXXIII.

Another short continuous narrative starts on the lower register of slab 12. Two Assyrian infantry men with wicker shields and spears are piercing an Arab on the right side of the lower register of slab 12 (Fig. 7). The scene continues on slab 11 with two surrendering Arabs. A similar group of Assyrian infantry men, one with a bow and the other with a spear, are moving ahead to attack the Arab riding a camel (Fig. 6).

Another two-scene composition can be reconstructed on the upper register of slab 12 as well. The right part of this register still shows a part of a wicker shield, probably an Assyrian soldier attacking two Arabs on a camel. A next episode of the same scene represents one of the Arabs already dead under the camel. Then the narrative continues with the next scene depicting the Assyrian soldier with a wicker shield piercing the Arab, probably the rider of the camel whose companion has been killed in the previous scene (Fig. 7).

This dynamic can be observed also on the drawings of slabs 1-7. The lower register of slabs 4 and 5 depicts an Assyrian infantry man with a round shield and a spear in two combat scenes. In the first scene he attacks two Arabs on a camel and in the second scene he pierces the camel driver that has fallen down from the camel (Fig. 2 and 3).

One-scene composition: A single battle scene can be noted on the upper register of slab 12. An Assyrian chariot with four soldiers brings down an Arab camel and its two riders. This scene is delimited on the right by an Assyrian infantry man with a wicker shield and on the left by two infantry men, one of whom having a round shield (Fig. 7).

One-scene compositions are more common on slabs 4-7. On the middle register there are three one-scene compositions. The first depicts the combat of an Assyrian cavalryman, the second the combat of an Assyrian chariot, and the third again shows the combat of an Assyrian cavalryman. Similarly the lower register contains two one-scene compositions. The first depicts a scene of combat with an Assyrian cavalryman and the second shows an Assyrian chariot in combat (Fig. 3).

The narrative string of the horizontal linear composition: The episodes of combats depicted in the form of one- or two-scene compositions are arranged in a narrative sequence. On slabs 10-12 a sequence of scenes alternating between falling and running camel groups is visible. On the upper register of slab 12 there is first a scene depicting Arabs on a camel in full combat, then a scene showing dead Arabs on a fallen camel. There follows a scene with Arabs on a camel in full combat. A similar sequence of alternating scenes can be observed on the middle register of slab 12. First the camel-riding Arabs appear in full combat, and then they are shown falling down. The connection of slabs 12-10 shows the dynamic of the alternation mentioned above along the lower register of the three slabs, i.e., slab 12: Arabs falling down, Arabs in full combat; slab 11: Arabs in full combat; slab 10: Arabs falling down (Fig. 5-7).

The narrative thus alternates between one- and two-scene compositions in a narrative string. This creates a powerful visual effect. The observer can be simultaneously present at different spots of the scene in order to follow the various episodes of single combat without losing track of the whole battle.

Sinusoid Composition

In addition to simple horizontal movements, it has been observed (Nadali 2004: 66-71) that the figures move diagonally on the reliefs as well (Fig. 10).

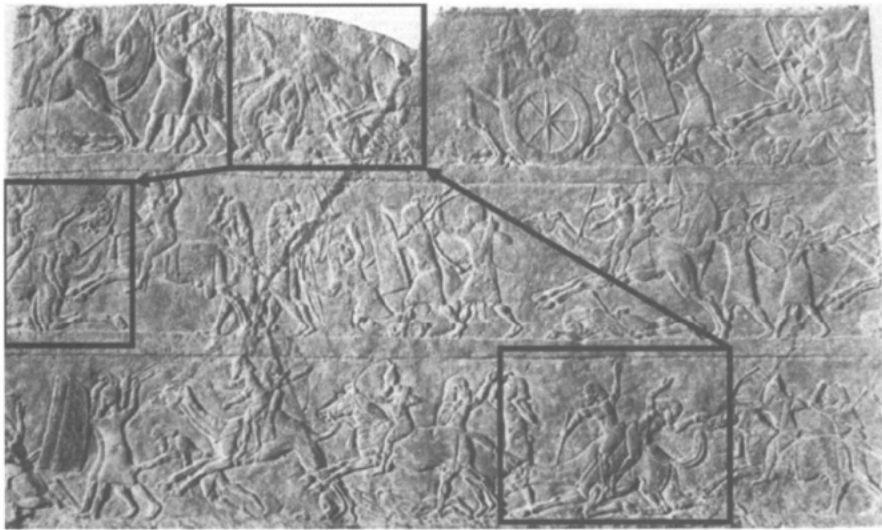


Fig. 10: Sinusoid compositions on slab 12; Barnett 1976: pl. XXXIII.

This technique was summarized by Winter (2010: 37) as follows:

Where Sennacherib had more or less done away with the double register on a slab in order to enlarge scale and focus attention on the all-encompassing action, Assurbanipal plays with both register and field, combining figures in great density [...]. Visual rhythms that aid the reading of the narrative are established not only across a single register, but from register to register, as in the case of his battle against the Arabs [...].

This visual rhythm of the reliefs in Room L takes the form of a sinusoid curve. The first sinusoid curve exhibits a camel with its riders discharging their arrows and fully involved in the combat. On slab 12 a camel with two drivers is represented on the upper register in the right. Then a similar group of figures appears in the middle register: It moves to the lower register, and, at the end, moves back to the upper register (Fig. 10).

Similarly a composition of a falling camel with their two Arab riders moves through the registers on slab 12. In contrast to the first group of figures, the Arabs show no resistance and they, or their camels, fall down. This group first appears on the lower register of slab 12 on the right. From here it moves to the upper register of the same slab and then to the middle register of slab 12 (Fig. 10).

A similar vertical movement of figures has been observed on the drawings of slabs 4-6 as well. (Winter 2010: 66). An Assyrian cavalry man moves from the upper register of slab 4 to the middle register of slab 5. Then it appears in the lower register of slab 5 and, finally, in the middle register of slab 6 (Fig. 3).

Narrative string of the sinusoid composition: Not only the horizontal composition but also the vertical composition brings the narrative plot to its resolution. The Assyrian and Arab soldiers moving up and down through registers bind the single scenes into one large battle scene. This creates a very powerful effect. The observer can perceive the ferocity of combat in single battles. The same observer can also see how the single episodes combats fit into the larger battle context and how each individual combat scene, in its turn, contributes to the final victory of the Assyrians. Moreover, the overlapping of the curves of fighting and falling Arabs creates an optical effect of alternation between resisting and surrendering Arabs.

Alternating Compositions

If the proposal of two campaigns against the Arabs is accepted, then the impact of the alternating horizontal and vertical compositions upon a visitor of Room L will be observable. The linear sequence develops the

narrative from the left to the right on slabs 1-7 and from the right to the left on slabs 12-9. The vertical compositions move the narrative from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top. These narrative movements are further emphasized by the layout of Room L. The depictions of both campaigns are located along the walls as far as the southern door leading to Courtyard J. The aftermaths of both campaigns are depicted at the slabs situated close to this door. In the first case the war finishes with the destruction of the orchards, probably followed by the deportation; in the second case it ends with a complete destruction of the camp. A visitor who walks from Room M to Courtyard J through Room L can follow on both sides of the room the campaigns against the Arabs. The depiction of the campaigns starts at the entrance connecting Room L with Room M and stops at the other entrance connecting Room L with Courtyard J (Fig. 1). The visitor, leaving Room L, can witness the complete annihilation of the Arabs: their orchards as the source of their sustenance cut down; their tents as their dwelling places burnt down; and the population, i.e., men and women, including unborn babies, massacred.

Ripping Open Arab Women (Slab 9 = Relief BM 124927)

Before starting the analysis of slab 9 (Fig. 4), two questions concerning the content and the context of this relief should be addressed.

First question: what does the relief depict? For Unger (1927: 43) the bodies lying in the tents represent sleeping Arabs who were caught by surprise. Gadd (1936: 195) followed this line of interpretation. However, this idea was dismissed by Opitz (1931: 8), who read the relief as an Assyrian attack on an Arab camp. His interpretation enjoys general acceptance among scholars today (Eph'al 1982: 15; Nadali 2004: 72-75).

Second question: is this relief related to the first set of reliefs or to the second? As I have argued above, this relief should be connected to the second set of reliefs. There are several features of this relief that are typical for the reliefs depicting the second war against the Arabs: (1) the Assyrian soldiers on this relief wear both pointed and crested helmets — in the first war reliefs they wear only pointed helmets; (2) the Assyrian infantry are seen using large rectangular wicker shields in this relief — in the first war reliefs the Assyrians have only large round shields); (3) even though the Assyrians surrounded the Arab tents on both sides, the main attack, as can be observed in the middle register on the right, comes from the right — in the first set of reliefs the Assyrian attacks always come from the left. Moreover, the structure of the Arab tent is similar to the one on slab 10 which, as argued above, should be connected to slab 11.

It can therefore be concluded that slab 9 is one of the last slabs of the second set of reliefs depicting the first Assyrian campaign against the Arabs. The analysis demonstrates that the narrative and its compositional dynamics follow not only horizontal but also vertical movements.

Horizontal Composition

Slab 9 is divided into three registers and all together contains seven one-scene compositions. The specificity of this relief is that each scene takes place in one tent and thus we have seven tent-scenes. The first two are preserved in the upper register. The first tent-scene on the right side of the upper register presents an Assyrian soldier attacking with his spear an Arabian woman falling on the floor (Fig. 11). The woman has her hands lifted up as if pleading for mercy. The grasp of the spear of the Assyrian soldier is not typical for combat (Dubovský 2006b: 62). Rather, it indicates that he is using a spear, or a knife, to slit the woman's womb from down upwards. The second tent-scene is located on the left side of the upper register (Fig. 4). A man and a woman are inside the tent. The Assyrians are on both sides of the tent to block the exits. The woman is running towards her husband.



Fig. 11: Close-up of slab 9, the tent-scene in the upper register on the right; photo P. Dubovský.

Two tent-scenes are also preserved in the middle register. The right scene depicts a woman held by two Assyrian soldiers (Fig. 12). The soldier on the right is holding her head and arms; the one on the left is inserting his hands into the woman's belly. The posture of the latter suggests that he is wresting a fetus out of the woman's womb. Even though the relief is worn out, the woman's open womb is still visible upon closer inspection. The Assyrian soldier on the left inserts his hands deeply into the woman's womb. His right hand has been sufficiently preserved to recognize that he holds an object. One part of this object is still inside the womb and the other is already outside. It is possible, in my opinion, to interpret this object as the leg of an unborn child. The right side of the tent is crowded. An Assyrian soldier is piercing an Arab dashing into the tent to stop this brutality (Fig. 4).



Fig. 12: Close-up of slab 9, the tent-scene in the middle register on the right; photo P. Dubovský.

The second scene on this register depicts two women (Fig. 4). The woman on the left is on her feet while an Assyrian soldier, from behind, hits the back of her head with his right hand. The other woman in this tent is almost lying on the ground. An Assyrian soldier with a large wicker shield, one foot trampling her womb, strikes her head with a spear. Both women have their hands raised in pleading position. Nadali suggests that this scene depicts two episodes of a short continuous narrative. First, the

woman on the left is hit from behind and then the same woman is depicted as being attacked by a spear (Nadali 2004: 76).

The lower register of the relief depicts the aftermath. Three tents are set on fire and on the ground lie dead bodies. In the right tent are preserved only the legs of a man,¹⁴ in the middle tent there are a dead man and woman and in the left tent there is a dead woman (Fig. 4).

Sinusoid Compositions

The specificity of Ashurbanipal's reliefs is that "it is intended to be read across three registers at once" (Winter 2010: 76). In the case of the reliefs in Room L this effect is achieved by arranging the narrative sequences not only along horizontal registers but also diagonally across the registers. This movement from one register to the other can be observed on slab 9 as well. The narrative here moves from the upper register to the lower.

The first diagonal narrative depicts the ripping open of an Arab woman. In the right tent of the upper register an Assyrian soldier is slitting a woman's womb. In the middle register the Assyrian soldiers are removing the fetus of the woman (Fig. 12), supposedly while an Arab comes hastily to her aid. In the lower register the woman and the man are dead and the tent is set on fire.

The second diagonal movement from the upper to the lower register is clear from the remaining three tent-scenes which show a sequence of assaults by spear. In the upper register on the left a tent is attacked and a man is pierced by a spear. The middle register shows the Assyrians soldiers attacking a woman in the tent: a soldier hitting her and another striking her with a spear. Finally, in the lower register, the dead body of the woman is shown while the tent is set on fire.

These two diagonal sequences form one larger curving movement held together by the female figures and the Arab tents. As it has been demonstrated above, the technique of curving movements of figures not only binds together independent episodes, but also creates a very powerful effect on an observer. The observer can, on the one hand, contemplate various episodes which took place in the different parts of the Arab camp. On the other hand, the curving movement of the figures allows the observer to combine the independent scenes into a larger narrative in order to perceive the full extent of the destruction of the Arab camp: men,

¹⁴ All Arab women on the reliefs wear long skirts. Since the legs are not covered with a skirt, it can be safely concluded that the legs belonged to a man.

women, and even unborn children were put to death, and their bodies have been burnt in their tents.

Why such Violence against the Arab Women?

A similar treatment of women has been found in a Middle-Assyrian heroic poem celebrating the victories of Tiglath-pileser I (Cogan 1983). However, among the numerous Neo-Assyrian documents no such violence has been so far identified. Slab 9 represents the only relief depicting this kind of violence. The most plausible explanation is that the Arabian women played an important role in Arab society (Nadali 2004: 73). The Arabian queens were known in the Assyrian inscriptions as enemies on par with male adversaries. Among the best known Arabian queens are Samsi and Adiya. Samsi joined the anti-Assyrian coalition organized by Damascus and Samaria in the 8th c. B.C.. Tiglath-pileser III quickly intervened and took her by surprise (Dubovský 2006c). Then he plundered her camp and set her tents on fire (Tadmor 1994: 225-230). Similarly Adiya participated in the rebellion orchestrated by Yatua'. The queen was defeated by the Assyrian troops, her camp plundered, and her tents burnt down (*BIWA* 244-245). Since the Arabian queens played an important role in ruling the Arabian tribes, they were treated in the same way as their male counterparts. Burning down tents that were dwelling places of the Arabs had the same effect as burning the cities of the rebels who refused to surrender. (Dubovský 2006a: 180-185). This theory explains why the Assyrians killed Arab women together with Arab men and why they set Arab tents on fire. However, the question can still be asked why Ashurbanipal's soldiers ripped open pregnant Arab women.

I would suggest that the most likely explanation of the Assyrian violence is that it was a reaction against the Arab resistance. The ferocity of the Arabs is described in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions. In the first editions of the annals the Assyrian scribes mentioned that the Arabs who refused to surrender did not hesitate to devour their own children (B VIII 23-30). The next stage of reflection upon the atrocities committed during these campaigns is preserved in Ashurbanipal's Letter and in the annals A. These documents also affirm that the Arabs were so obstinate that, while suffering famine, they did not hesitate to slit their camels and drink their blood as well as to eat their own children (Letter II 6-23; A IX 53-74). All the editions agree that the Arabs themselves, in their obstinate resistance against the Assyrians, resorted to the most barbarous acts. As depicted on slab 9, the Assyrians responded with uncommon cruelty as well.

The last question to be answered is about how the Assyrians justified such cruel acts. Their behavior contradicts the moral standards as codified

in the collections of the laws in the ancient Near East (e.g. the Code of Hammurabi § 209-214). According to these laws an unborn child, even the child of a slave, is to be protected and violators are liable to severe penalties. Even though these laws do not explicitly deal with war situations, it can be inferred that in such situations unborn life has to be safeguarded all the same. Once again I would argue that the justification of this behavior can be found in the Assyrian annals.

The cruelties committed during these campaigns were of such a level that the Assyrian scribes considered them to surpass “normal” war cruelties and put into the mouth of the Arabs the question why such evil befell Arabia (B VIII 23-30). The answer follows a typical Neo-Assyrian interpretative pattern: since the Arabs had broken the treaty with the gods, all the curses written in the treaty fell upon them. According to the logic of the Neo-Assyrian scribes, if a vassal break a treaty concluded with the Assyrians, the gods will strike the violator. The curses listed at the end of the treaty include invocations to the gods to strike down the rebels, to lead them into captivity (SAA II 1:16'-19') and to deport them (SAA II 2:10'-21'), to behead and mutilate them (SAA II 2 i 21'-28'; 29'-35'), to make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters (SAA II 2 iv 8-16; 6:449-450), to devastate their dwellings (SAA II 2 v 1-7), to turn their women into prostitutes (SAA II 2 v 8-15) and to destroy their posterity (SAA II 6:435-439). The following three curses taken from the Neo-Assyrian corpus relate closely to the cruelties depicted on slab 9:

Just as [thi]s ewe has been cut open and the flesh of [her] young has been placed in the mouth, may they make you eat in your hunger the flesh of your brothers, your sons and your daughters. Just as young sheep and ewes and male and female spring lambs are slit open and their entrails rolled down over their feet, so may (your entrails and) the entrails of your sons and daughters roll down over your feet. (SAA II 6:547-555)

Just as the honeycomb is pierced with holes, so may they pierce your flesh, the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters with holes while you are alive. (SAA II 6:594-598)

Just as the inside of a hole is empty, may your inside be empty. (SAA II 6:641)

To sum up, the Neo-Assyrian scribes foresaw such cruelties as a part of the divine punishment for disloyalty. The Assyrian troops were only applying the penalties which were already stipulated in treaties. From the strategic point of view these atrocious actions most likely aimed at eradicating Arab resistance. Evidently, the Assyrians eliminated not only their actual enemies but also potential ones: those not yet born, who might seek to reclaim the land or orchestrate another revolt.

Since this kind of atrocious act is attested only in one relief and in no extant Neo-Assyrian inscription, we can conclude that such violence was performed only in an extreme case. It was then justified as the divine punishment falling upon the perpetrators for their egregious disloyalty.

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