

**SPATIAL NARRATIVES:
SOCIAL MEMORY AND ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE
IN EARLY IRON AGE KARKAMIS**

College Art Association 94th Annual Conference - Boston February 22-25, 2006
Art History Open Session: Western Asian Art, Chair: John Russell
February 24th, 2006 Friday, 2:30-5 pm. Hynes Convention Center Third Level Ballroom C

In her recent provocative study on the archaeological landscapes of the ancient Greece, Susan Alcock has cogently argued that “memories are embedded and supported within a material framework”. The idea of a shared past is constructed and maintained in the collective imagination through commemorative ceremonies, social performances and bodily practices that continuously inscribe themselves on monuments, landscapes and architectural spaces. Buildings are therefore inherently narrative with their technologies of production, symbolism of their representational surfaces and the texts embedded within their walls.

[Map] The architectural practice of using finely dressed sculpted wall slabs in monumental buildings, displaying textual and pictorial narratives, is usually understood as an idiosyncratic phenomenon of Upper Mesopotamia during the Iron Age. The Early Iron age in particular, roughly between the 12th and 9th centuries BC, represents a period of new urbanization in Upper Mesopotamia, both in Assyria, and among the Syro-Hittite regional states, where several new cities were constructed with new ideological affiliations and a new socio-economic framework. Following the ubiquitous decline of Bronze Age cities in the 13th and 12th centuries BC, the cultural landscapes of Upper Mesopotamia were fundamentally transformed through two major geo-political processes. One is the transformation of the Assyrian state from being a small regional kingdom in the arid Middle Tigris region into a territorial state of the fertile Upper Tigris, with ambitious claims over the entire Jazira. The

second process contemporaneous with the first is the formation of a constellation of Luwian, Aramaean and Phoenician-speaking regional states especially in south-central and south-east Anatolia and North Syria. These small scale polities formed a multi-lingual network new rival states that shared various aspects of material culture, social practices and state ideologies. One common aspect of these regional processes was the foundation and re-foundation of cities in the newly settled landscapes, both at the core of these polities and in their territorial frontiers. The construction of new urban centers involved large-scale building projects that were considered festive social events and acted as the grounds for technological innovation, and the exchange of architectural and craft knowledge.

[Ortho] Precisely in the architectural context of these projects, the idea of using upright stones (the so-called orthostats) as a wall cladding technique became a remarkably widespread and gained the status of royal insignia both in the Syro-Hittite world and in Assyria. The architectonic surfaces of orthostats were gradually transformed into fields of pictorial and textual representation, featuring monumental inscriptions and commemorative relief-sculpture. These complex visual programs animated the newly fashioned urban landscapes as ceremonial spaces of state spectacle and of ritual activity. I argue in this paper that the urban spaces of the Early Iron age cities were structured and re-structured through commemorative building activity, extensively directed towards the construction of social memory, either through the inscription of political ideologies of the ruling elite, or the cult practices of the society.

[Map] The urban renewal program at Karkamis in the 10th and early 9th c. BC offers an excellent paradigm for the monumental building projects of the early Iron age, due to the complexity of the building operations in the city at this time. Scholars have convincingly argued that the city of Karkamis played a pivotal role in the reconfiguration of the political

landscapes in North Syria during this transition. This was not only because of its geo-political and socio-economic position in Bronze Age Syria as the most prominent Euphrates-crossing, center of craft-production and port of trade, but also due to its role as a major ceremonial center of the Hittites in the 13th and 12th centuries BC when the empire's geo-political center of gravity gradually shifted southwards from the Central Anatolian plateau (Hattusa) to the South-central and Southeastern Anatolia (Tarhuntassa-Karkamis). The epigraphic and archaeological evidence suggests that a substantial transformation of the urban space at Karkamis took place under the kings of the so-called Suhis-Katuwas dynasty, **[Dyn]** who took over the rule at Karkamiš from an earlier dynasty who called themselves “Great Kings” following the Hittite tradition, and adopted a new royal title “Karkamišean Country Lords”. David Hawkins reconstructed the dynasty of 4 rulers at Karkamiš, Suhis (I), Astuwatamanzas, Suhis (II) and Katuwas. An overwhelming majority of inscribed monuments found at Karkamis dates to the last king of the dynasty Katuwas, and I argue that it was at the time of this ruler, the central ceremonial public space was fleshed out in the urban landscape.

[Plan] Karkamis was built on the west bank of the Euphrates at the northern end of the wide and fertile river basin. The elongated citadel mound overlooks the river, while the fortified upper town and the lower town extend successively towards the south-west of the citadel. Stretching from the so-called “Water Gate” by the bank of the Euphrates to the so-called “King’s Gate” in the approximate center of the Upper town, an impressive urban ensemble accommodates a series of monumental structures and an articulate public space that connects various urban components of the city. The core of the urban ensemble is a roughly triangular public plaza defined by monumental terrace walls. **[Plan]** The entire complex was surrounded with basalt and limestone orthostats with relief representations of

cultic, mythological and historical subject matter, as well as monumental hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions, apotropaic gate sculpture, ancestor images and other commemorative monuments. In this way, the urban complex was reconfigured as a dramatic ceremonial space, where major cultic activities of the city were focused, and precisely in the same spatial realm, political and historical narratives of the imperial elite were communicated with the society. In the early Iron Age, the social space here was progressively constructed as what I call a “spatial narrative” inscribed in the urban landscape through a performative intermingling of cult practices and state spectacles.

The western limit of this main public square was defined by a spectacular orthostat façade, the so-called “Long Wall of Sculpture”. [Map-plan] The limestone and basalt orthostat faces were carved with representations of **military and cultic processions**, and commemorative inscriptions. The southern sector of the program features processions of foot soldiers and processions of war chariots. [Long wall] The infantry and the chariot processions are divided by a lengthy inscription of Suhis II, presenting a narrative account of the king’s military achievements in the first half of the inscription and his raising of commemorative monuments in the second half [Text]:

When I came forth
I myself made this *assemblage* of the gods,
and this potent Tarhunzas, I made stand,
and with him I made these gods stand.
And for myself my statue I[...]

[Next] On the northern sector of the Long Wall, the subject matter of the representations abruptly switches to a cultic procession, but connected to the southern sector by means of an inscription and seated figure of BONUS-tis, the wife of Suhis II. BONUS-tis is then led by a solemn procession of the five gods of Karkamiš including Kubaba, Karhuhas and led by the Storm-God Tarhunzas, who all climb the monumental steps of the Great Staircase. In

the pictorial narrative program of the Long Wall of Sculpture, one finds precisely what Suhis II narrates in his inscription: the commemoration of military achievements and the *assembly* of the Karkamišean divinities. The historical narrative, presented in both text and image, incorporates the cultic procession of the city's pantheon who is literally joined by the military force of the king, the king himself and his wife. The text is therefore a hybrid representation, where historical and mytho-poetic subjects belong to the very same narrative field.

[Next] Now, behind the Long Wall of Sculpture and on a raised platform is the temple complex of the Storm God Tarhunzas, accessed through a door halfway on the Great Staircase, immediately after the orthostat slab that depicts the Storm God himself, leading the procession. So the Karkamišean pantheon is indeed depicted ascending towards the cult complex. [Next] The temple itself was raised to the north-western corner of the courtyard. The wall surfaces of the shrine were lined with finely carved but plain orthostats. The basalt orthostat door jambs of the doorway bears the building inscriptions of Katuwas, commemorating the construction of the temple.

In another inscription of the same king, this time from the King's Gate at Karkamiš, Katuwas commemorates the construction of a temple to Tarhunzas, the Storm-God:

But I myself then constructed the temples with luxury for Karkamišean Tarhunzas
 for him I established ARASI-bread.
 And these gates of my grand-fathers passed down to me
 When I built the holies of the temple
 these orthostats "came after" me,
 these gates I "orthostated"
 they were very costly
 I built them (also) with wood
 and these *upper floors* for Anas my beloved wife as TAWANI-apartments I made...

The word translated here as "orthostat" by David Hawkins is associated with Hittite *kutt-*, "wall" while *kuttesar*, a Luwoid word for "wall, walling" also attested in Boğazköy texts. Following Hawkins's translation, the context makes it perfectly clear that here it is

used for orthostats, the “overturning” of which was cursed later in the same inscription. Orthostats here are understood as elements of an architectural technology of high socio-symbolic value, presented here as part of the ruler’s royal rhetoric. Orthostats appear not simply as components of an outstanding architectural ensemble but as personified powerful agents who bolstered the king’s socio-political power.

As I have tried to illustrate, commemorative inscriptions portray the building project as an accomplishment of the ruling elite, fashioning an articulate narrative discourse that I will refer as the royal rhetoric. **[Chart1]** In one definition, royal rhetoric is a discursive practice with distinct social interests, and in the Near Eastern context it is associated with the narrativized accounts of historical and mythological events, therefore manifests the king’s active engagement with the construction of social memory. **[2]** I adopted a wider definition of royal rhetoric, to refer to all kingly “signifying” activities in the public domain, including commemorative building programs and public spectacles that involve production of textual and pictorial narratives. **[3]** All are articulate monumental “gestures”, forms of social power that shape political landscapes in close reciprocity with their reception in the cultural realm of the public. Commemorative monuments were raised at critical moments during the history of the city, marking the urban landscapes with dynastic commemorations and re-structuring both the social space and social time in the collective memory. **[Chart 4]** Sites of memory are created, as Pierre Nora called them, sites where memory crystallizes and secretes itself. I suggest that the imperial rhetoric is essentially *spatializing* as much as it is *narrativizing*: it creates its own narratives of history, but it also attempts to incorporate the space of cultural representations into these narratives. The resulting representational structure of the urban space offers a hybrid text, an amalgamation of political ideology, ancestral worship, ritual performances and a collectively shared mytho-poetic past.

[Plan] At Karkamis, another orthostat program suggests such hybridity: To the south-west of the triangular public square, yet another monumental gate complex was constructed, the so-called “King’s Gate”, which connected this middle terrace with the lower part of the Upper Town. The quadrangular area in front of the gate was labeled as the “Processional Entry”, due to the subject matter of the orthostat reliefs on the eastern façade. This wall is interrupted by a recessed gateway with a staircase, leading into a raised building complex behind this façade, the area of the so-called “Hilani”. [Next] The alternating basalt and limestone relief program to the south of this gateway, represents an intriguing festival procession, lead by a seated figure of a goddess, usually identified as Kubaba, sitting on a lion and holding a pomegranate and a mirror. She is followed by a solemn procession of fifteen priestesses, draped in a similar way as the goddess and carrying sacred paraphernalia. They are followed by ten male figures carrying sacrificial animals. The festive articulation of the public space is further reinforced by the depiction of musicians on two orthostats facing the stairway recess, suggesting that the destination of the procession was intended for the area behind the stairway. Two door-jamb inscriptions of Katuwas that were re-used as pavement slabs in the King’s Gate make an interesting reference to such a sacred procession:

I myself beheld my lord Karhuhas’s and Kubaba’s procession
I myself seated them on this podium...

Based on all these references and compared to the architectural layout of the Storm God complex, it seems probable that the building complex behind the recessed stairway was indeed the Temple of Kubaba, identified with the monumental Hilani building, raised on a platform immediately to the south-east of the triangular public square. Since the building was preserved only on the foundation level, no identification was offered by the excavators. It is an impressive square shaped structure with a single room and an *in-antis* porch, and surrounded with finely carved plain orthostats and paved with stone slabs. With its

architecture and decor, it immediately reminds us the Storm God temple and suggests that it must be interpreted as a temple as well.

The building program that was carried out at the time of the Suhis-Katuwas dynasty at Karkamis, not only fundamentally transformed the urban landscape of the city through the construction of a series of ceremonial gate structures, and monumental temples, but also reconfigured this eloquent space with symbolic building technologies and pictorial narrative schemes that offered the society with a specific version of social memory. The urban space at Karkamis is narrativized as a new socio-spatial framework, defining collective identity and historical consciousness, intimately linking the dynasty's ideological claims to the city's past. The act of the urban foundation appears as a monumental accomplishment of the governing elite in the historical record, and presents its audiences a non-ambiguous image of the new city as a landscape of power and spectacle. The complexity of the building construction as a social practice only lends itself to a careful parsing of the phenomenon into its components of state ideology, cultural politics, economic strategy, cult practice and building technologies.

Paul Connerton has argued that social memory, or the recollected knowledge of the past is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances and commemorative ceremonies. If social memory is not simply a passive representation of a collectively shared past, but indeed constructed and maintained by such social actions, then I would like to suggest that memory is not simply stored but indeed performed. The social action by definition creates spaces that are marked with such commemorative content – architectural production appears as one major material practice through which societies established their relationship with history.