

## **“Source of the Tigris”: royal rhetoric and commemorative monuments in the Upper Mesopotamian landscapes of the Early Iron Age**

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“Theoretical & Anthropological Approaches to Near Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean Art and  
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“Abandoned cities, *alāni nārâte* which during the time of my fathers had turned into ruined hills” announces Aššurnasirpal II, the 9<sup>th</sup> c. Assyrian king, “I took in hand for renovation (and) settled therein many people. *ekalli mahrâte*, ancient palaces throughout my land I built anew. I decorated them in a splendid fashion (and) stored grain and straw in them.” Aššurnasirpal’s statement does not refer to a particular building project but summarizes a pervasive landscape policy that meant to transform the built environment that he claims to have inherited. His rhetoric evokes a collective and admirable past-world which has declined and which he sets out to restore to the social imagination. As Susan Alcock puts it, the king is actively engaged in the construction of social memory.

Societies of the ancient Near East developed cross-culturally shared strategies to structure the landscapes of their territorial states. Such strategies varied from region to region and across time, but the Upper Mesopotamian kingdoms of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages had a special interest in shaping their environments: from the foundation of new cities to the plantation of orchards, the construction of irrigation systems to the carving of rock reliefs at strategic locations. These material practices were often further articulated by the Hittite, Assyrian, Urartian and Syro-Hittite elites in narrative form, fashioning a discourse over their historically significant accomplishments which I will refer here as the royal rhetoric. [Chart 1] In one definition, royal rhetoric is a discursive practice with distinct social interests and in the Near Eastern context, it is associated with construction of the narrative accounts of historical events in textual and pictorial form, often displayed in monumental contexts. [Chart 2]

Nevertheless, contemporary anthropological approaches adopt a wider definition of royal rhetoric, in which the rhetorical discourse is not limited to the confines of language and imagery, but refers to all kingly “signifying” activities in the public domain. As such, rhetorical acts include commemorative building programs and public spectacles, such as state ceremonies, sacrificial rituals, and royal hunts. [Chart 3] All are articulate monumental “gestures”, forms of social power and public performance that shape political landscapes in close reciprocity with their reception in the cultural realm of the public. [Chart 4] It is argued in this paper 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 landscapes into these narratives, through commemorative building activity.

Landscapes are constituted of a network of socially significant places and landmarks, represented in a variety of ways: *imagined, mythologized, marginalized or contested*, therefore referred as “sites of memory”. Sites of memory are socially demarcated places that exist by virtue of their relationship to specific historical events and persist through commemorative practices. Commemoration is a performative spectacle of reviving the past and a way of “socializing” the world: it creates a narrative account of history and relates it to a particular *locale*. In sum, the social production of space involves the monumentalization of a constellation of places in the landscape, their reconfiguration over time and their incorporation into historical narratives through commemoration and other spatial practices. By definition, commemorative practices are ideological: sites of commemoration serve as eventful public places in which elite and local ideologies are brought to play. They constitute *loci* of power display and its material embodiment, through which local histories are negotiated and written. In this presentation, I will illustrate the Assyrian practice of raising commemorative monuments in peripheral geographies, and how these monuments were incorporated into a spatial narratives of imperial landscapes in texts, visual representations and architectural practice. A remarkable example of such commemorative activity takes place at the so-called “Source

of the Tigris” where a symbolically charged landscape was discovered, materially transformed and conceptually demarcated by means of *place-making* practices.

In 1899, German philologist Ferdinand Lehmann-Haupt accompanied by Waldemar Belck visited the impressive site of the “Tigris Tunnel” or the “Source of the Tigris” as it is known in Near Eastern studies today [Lehmann-Haupt dwgs]. The site had already been discovered in 1862 by J. E. Taylor, but Lehmann-Haupt was the first Assyriologist to publish the inscriptions and reliefs from the site. The so-called “Tigris Tunnel” is a series of natural caves through which one of the tributaries of the Tigris river, namely Birklinçay emerges in the mountainous zone approximately 70 km Northeast of modern Diyarbakır, and not very far from the town Lice. [Map] The site is located immediately above a well-protected agricultural valley watered by Birklinçay, delimited by Inceburun mountains north of the Diyarbakır plain. A series of rock reliefs and monumental inscriptions are carved at the entrances of two caves here, and Lehmann-Haupt was able to identify the monuments belonging to the Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser I (who reigned between 1114 and 1076 BC) and Shalmaneser III (858 - 824 BC). The inscriptions and reliefs were carved on a number of different occasions over a long stretch of time during the Early Iron Age.

The site has a fairly complex topography: approaching the site through a unexpectedly spectacular gorge, one arrives to the lower tunnel through which Birklinçay still flows. Right at the mouth of this tunnel is where the first set of the reliefs and inscriptions are found. Immediately outside the exit of the tunnel and in a prominent position is the relief image of Tiglath-pileser I, who is depicted performing the so-called *ubana tarasu*, “stretching the finger” gesture, with the raising of the right hand. This is a significant prayer gesture known from textual sources and apparently very common in the iconographic repertoire of Assyrian monuments. According to Ursula Magen *ubana tarasu* can be understood as a gesture of speech that established a positive communication between humans and gods, putting the king in direct contact with the

divinities. The brief 10-line inscription on the left hand side of the image refers to Tiglath-pileser's campaigns to the Nairi lands, mountainous landscapes located to the East and North of the site. **[TP Inscript.]**

Shalmaneser's inscriptions are less obviously visible and were more difficult to photograph, as they are located further inside the cave. The two distinct groups of reliefs and inscriptions of Shalmaneser III were dated to his 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> regnal years, 852 and 844 BC, and they were obviously raised during multiple visits to the site in the course of at least two separate expeditions. The earlier inscription is a brief account of campaigns to the Lands Gilzānu and Nairi, while the later and longer inscription summarizes campaigns to Babylonia and his confrontation with the twelve kings of Hatti from coastal Syria. The inscriptions were accompanied by a worn image of Shalmaneser who performs a similar gesture as his predecessor.

**[Sketch map]** To see the other set of inscriptions and the relief of Shalmaneser III, one has to climb northwards over the rock outcrop to the mouth of a larger cave, on a higher elevation. The relief and two sets of inscriptions of Shalmaneser, again dated to his 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> regnal years, but not replicas of the lower cave inscriptions, are carved on the Northern face of the cave's entrance, which is 15-20 m. wide. The lighting conditions and the state of preservation of the carvings did not allow me to photograph the Upper cave monuments: but the outline of the relief and bits and pieces of the inscriptions can be easily detected. In 1984, British Institute of Archaeology team was able to discover further reliefs unnoticed by Lehmann-Haupt as they were covered with lichen. There has not been an archaeological survey of the area, therefore it is difficult to assess the relationship of the monuments with any settlement remains in the vicinity. However, Dr Andreas Schachner of the University of Munich has informed me a few weeks ago that they will be starting a new archaeological project at the Tigris tunnel in the summer of 2005, and this survey will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of the monuments.

The idea of setting up rock reliefs and commemorative monuments to demarcate symbolic landscapes was an interregionally shared practice in Upper Mesopotamia during the transition from Late Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age. In Anatolia and North Syria, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Hittite rulers of Hattuša and Tarhuntašša, and several rulers of the Syro-Hittite Iron age produced monumental inscriptions on stone monuments and rock faces, especially in Luwian using the “Hittite” hieroglyphic script. The Hittites were particularly fond of constructing elaborate cultic installations at prominent rocky landscapes and sacred springs. More significant paradigm for the present discussion is the Early Iron Age kingdom of Malizi/Melid, which evidently was a crucial polity in the political landscape of the Iron age. Settled in the intermontane Malatya-Elbistan and Tohma Su basins, immediately West of Birkliñçay valley, the 12<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> c. Country Lords of Malizi raised quite a number of commemorative monuments, including stelae and rock reliefs featuring pictorial imagery as well as hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions, such as this 11<sup>th</sup> c. BC stele from Izgın. Tiglath-pileser I, the first king who had his image carved at the Tigris sources, visited Melid in the course of his expedition to the lands of Nairi and Daiēni in Eastern Anatolia, and received the yearly tribute of lead ore. Urartian rock carved monumental inscriptions in cuneiform along territorial frontiers are also attested from 9<sup>th</sup> c. onwards. The practice of carving rock reliefs that structured imperial landscapes seems to have been a part of a cross-culturally shared rhetoric among Near Eastern polities of the Iron age.

Birkliñçay valley was part of an extensive region rich in metal resources, including the Upper Tigris and other tributary river valleys. In the late second-early first millennium

BC, it was a critical and complex frontier zone between the Assyria, Šubria and Urartu, as well as the Syro-Hittite states such as Malizi and Bit Zamani. It is reasonable to think that these territorial and regional states had material interests in the region, considering the significant concentration of iron, copper and silver ores in the area. Ergani Maden immediately to the West of Tigris sources has always been one of the best known copper sources for Northern Mesopotamia in antiquity. The lower plains south of the Tigris sources, the Upper Tigris basin was an important Middle and Neo-Assyrian frontier region, where the Assyrians attempted to control agricultural production through the regional capital of Tušhan on the Tigris (modern Ziyarettepe) and a series of frontier fortresses across the region. The rock monuments at the source of the Tigris essentially marked the Northern limit of this fertile and politically contested geography.

Birkinçay caves were evidently a site of major symbolic significance in the Early Iron Age, repeatedly visited by certain Assyrian kings and these visits involved a multiplicity of commemorative activities. Assyrian landscape commemorations involved not only the carving of the king's image and inscriptions, but also cultic activities such as sacrificial rituals, washing and raising of the sacred weapons of Aššur, and plenty of feasting. We know from the other monumental inscriptions of Shalmaneser III, that this was the case for the commemoration at the source of the Tigris:

In my seventh regnal year... I went as far as to the source of the Tigris (*rēš<sup>u</sup> ēni ša<sup>u</sup> Idiqlat*), the place where the water comes out. I washed the weapon of Aššur therein, made sacrifices to my gods, (and) put on a celebration banquet. I fashioned a splendid royal image of myself (*salam šarrūtīya*), inscribed thereon the praise of Aššur, my lord, (and) all the heroic deeds which I achieved in the lands, (and) set (it) up therein.

This is an excerpt from yet another public monument, known as the Black Obelisk, that was raised in Kalhu, probably in a public setting. Likewise Assyrian annalistic texts make occasional references to raising monuments with both text and imagery, and quite consistently identify them as *narû* "stela or inscribed monument". The pictorial component was usually described as *šalam šarrutiya* "the image of (my) kingship" or

*ṣalam bunnannîya*, “the image of (my) physique”. While *narû* signified the entire monument itself, either a free-standing stone stele or a rock carved monument, *ṣalmu* referred to the pictorial image of the king represented within the monument. The image of the king appears as a “culturally mediated, conventionally coded” representation of kingship, an idealized rather than a naturalistic likeness of the king’s body. The commemorative inscriptions on the other hand, narrate the historical circumstances for the making of the monument and place it in a narrative context. In the progress of a military expedition, the making of the *narû* monuments were apparently introspective moments, when the king, his scribes and craftsmen had to articulate the grand narrative of their expedition in verbal and visual form. The pictorial representation and the texts together communicated a complex royal rhetoric.

From the Early Iron age onwards, these Assyrian monuments appear overwhelmingly in peripheral contexts, being used to mark rural landscapes at strategic locations such as mountain passes or stone quarries, or symbolically charged places such as springs or sources of the rivers. In addition, they are raised at the newly renovated or newly founded urban centers, where the ideological presence of the Assyrian kingship had to be maintained and communicated with the local societies. A significant aspect of the *narû*-commemorations is the fact that the sites of these monuments are visited repeatedly: as a matter of fact, discovering the monuments raised by former kings and deciphering their inscriptions was considered a major accomplishment: the king would then proceed to raise his own monuments right next to those of his ancestors. For instance Aššurnasirpal II, claims that in the course of his second campaign he had his craftsmen fashion his royal image at the source of the Subnat river, beside the images of the former kings Tiglath-pileser I and Tukulti-Ninurta II. In the site of Kurkh, south of Diyarbakır, J.E. Taylor discovered in 1861 two steles on the ancient mound, one belonging to Aššurnasirpal and the other to Shalmaneser III. In this way, the sites of commemoration were transformed into mnemonic repositories of textual and visual narratives, and become spaces of social memory maintained through continuous

construction activities and related ceremonies. Furthermore, as Ann Shafer concluded in her dissertation, the *narû* monuments of urban and rural landscapes acquired explicit ritual function once they were raised, and they served as sites of elaborate cult activities.

Equally remarkable is to find the making of *narû* monuments, represented in pictorial narrative programs on certain Assyrian monuments. In the visual narratives, not unlike the annalistic texts, commemorations appear as culminating ceremonial events in the course of the royal expeditions, marking emotionally heightened moments of state spectacle. A notable illustration of this is the representation of the Source of the Tigris events on a series of bronze strips from the site of Tell Balawat in Assyria. Tell Balawat, ancient Imgur-Enlil, was founded by Aššurnasirpal as a medium sized, orthogonally-planned settlement, located 15 km Northeast of Kalhu. Limited archaeological work at the site has uncovered a temple complex dedicated to Mamu, a deity associated with dreams and dream oracles. Two sets of bronze strips, that fastened monumental wooden gates were excavated in a palatial building: the earlier and more fragmentary set dates to the time of Aššurnasirpal, while the better preserved set dated to Shalmaneser III.

Finely decorated in *repoussé* technique, Shalmaneser's bands depict a narrative account of his first 13 expeditions to various lands. Each band had two horizontal registers of pictorial imagery, which were occasionally captioned with brief epigraphs that identified the scenes. The overall layout of the narratives were arranged geographically rather than chronologically, as argued by Michelle Marcus, suggesting that the entire visual program acted as a narrativized map of the king's travels across the empire's frontiers. The episode on the relief panel 10, which narrates the king's 7<sup>th</sup> year campaign, is culminated with a ceremonial scene, understood as Shalmaneser's visit to the Source of the Tigris, where he received the submission of local kings, made offerings to the gods, celebrated a banquet and had his craftsmen carve his images and inscriptions on the rock faces at this location. In this outstanding scene, the cultic and ceremonial activity is depicted with great detail, while the rock faces, the river and the caves from

which the Tigris river emerges are represented in an articulate spatial specificity. In the upper register, a sacrifice takes place while within a large cave like space, the image of the king is being carved with the attendance of a high Assyrian official standing on a raised platform. In the lower register, while a series of sacrificial animals are being led to the scene from the left, the stela-shaped image of the king is being carved by the artisan on the rock face. With the knowledge of the actual topography of the Birklinçay caves, it is compelling to interpret this scene: the cave on the upper register represents a large and clear cave space just as it is in the Upper cave at Birklinçay, whereas the topography of the lower register reminds us the multiple breaks in the bedrock that covers the river. The spatial representation on Balawat bronze bands looks remarkably commensurate with the topography of Birklinçay caves.

This idea brings us back to the spatial articulation of the Source of the Tigris monuments: the creation of the dual topography of the site with upper and lower cave monuments during the campaigns of Shalmaneser must have intended precisely the same kind of spectacular quality: the reconfiguration of a mytho-poetical landscape into a landscape of commemoration which eventually took its place in the multiple narratives of geographical power. My intention here is not necessarily argue for a one-to-one correspondence in the Assyrian textual and visual representations and architectural practices, all of which were in the end artifacts of the same cultural domain, but rather to suggest that the royal rhetoric was essentially guided by the narrativization of historical events and spaces. Eviatar Zerubavel in his recent work on collective memory, referred to the idea of shaping the past as the coagulation of “noncontiguous patches of history into a single, seemingly continuous experiential stream.” The narrativity was not only accomplished by means of the textual and visual media with the formulation of a complex royal rhetoric, but also in the configuration of social space through commemorative building activity. In the case of the Source of the Tigris monuments, the spectacular natural topography of the Birklinçay caves was co-opted

into the spectacle of the state while the commemorative activities of the Assyrian rulers at the site generated localized spatial practices at this marginal landscape. Landscapes are active components of the processes of social signification: they are the domain of social practices and cultural representations in every sense, materially produced and mentally constructed in a collective manner, but they also hold the agency to affect the social constitution of culture.