

## CHAPTER 5

---

# NEO ASSYRIAN ROCK MONUMENTS: A NEW APPROACH INTO THEIR SOCIOPOLITICAL COMPLEXITY AND CONTEXT

VASIA FRONTZOU

## VASIA FRONTZOU

### NEO ASSYRIAN ROCK MONUMENTS: A NEW APPROACH INTO THEIR SOCIOPOLITICAL COMPLEXITY AND CONTEXT

---

Vasia Frontzou: Neo Assyrian Rock Monuments: A new approach into their sociopolitical complexity and context, in: Yannis Chatzikonstantinou (ed.) (2024): *Archaeozooms: Aspects and potential of modern archaeological research*. Heidelberg: Propylaeum 2024, 102-117. <https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1319.c19007>

## Abstract

The Neo Assyrian Empire flourished from the 10th to 7th century B.C.E. and expanded its borders to an area covering modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, and Iran. Almost all Neo Assyrian kings conducted military campaigns in order to increase the empire's territories and founded new cities or restored existing ones. These campaigns were documented in detail on various media, among others, on stone stelae and rock reliefs located in different areas of the empire. Until very recently, the academic research of rock monuments constituted mainly of typological treatises and generalized catalogues which clustered the objects largely under the same type and treated them as one material corpus based on iconography, technique, chronology, and geographical distribution. In this way, the interpretations of the reasons behind the construction of each monument, its function, and its socio-political role remained superficial and one-dimensional, resorting to propagandistic explanations. Modern research, however, approaches rock monuments anew under the scope of multifunctional objects that offer distinct experiences, materialize, and express complex human thoughts, social aspects, and motives by being incorporated into a wider and unique environment with which they interact and converse. This article aspires to be the springboard to shedding light on the complexity, uniqueness, and intertemporal character of the construction and installment of each rock monument by underlining the main principles and the appropriate methodological tools of research.

# Introduction

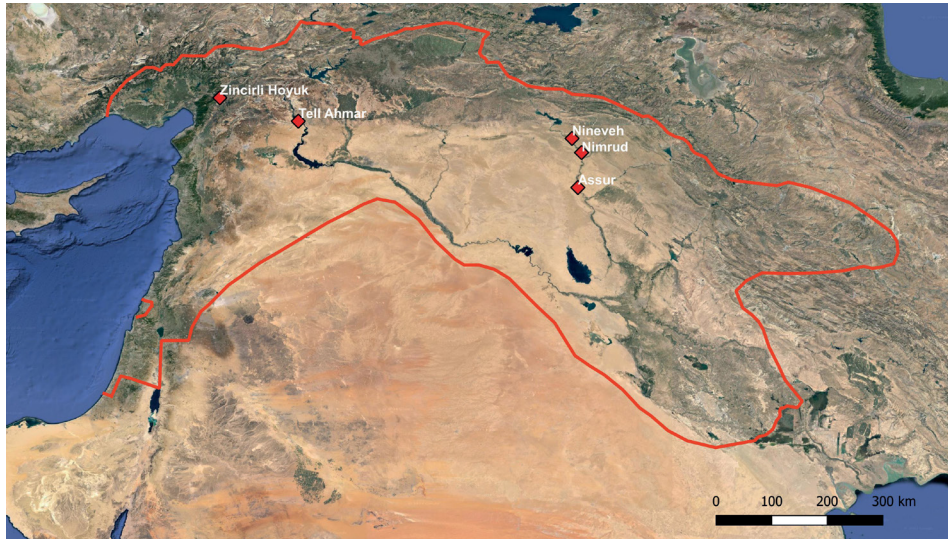
## NEO ASSYRIAN EMPIRE: GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND CHRONOLOGY

The Neo Assyrian Empire is the last imperial phase of the Assyrian civilization, covering the periods from the 10th to 7th century B.C.E. At its maximum extent, the empire incorporated in areas of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, and Iran. The imperial core was located in northern Mesopotamia, nowadays Iraq, where most imperial capitals were unearthed (Assur, Nineveh, Nimrud). (Map 1, 2)



---

Map 1: The Neo Assyrian Empire in the 7th century B.C.E. (image created by the author)



Map 2: The cities of the empire mentioned in the text. (image created by the author)

The Assyrian civilization is conventionally divided into three chronological periods: the Old Assyrian (ca. 2025-1720 B.C.E.) (Veenhof & Eidem, 2008), the Middle Assyrian (1350-1180 B.C.E.) (Düring, 2020) and the Neo Assyrian (934-609 B.C.E.) (Liverani, 2014). Assur (modern Qal'at Sherqat) on the west bank of the Tigris River in modern-day north Iraq was the Assyrian civilization's uninterrupted political, cultural, and religious center. It seems that the city was already inhabited from the 3rd millennium B.C.E (for the first excavations of the city, see Andrae, 1909; 1922), while during the Old Assyrian period, Assur evolved into some sort of a city-state with essential commercial activity and strong presence in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Anatolia (modern Turkey) (Liverani, 2014: 212; Veenhof & Eidem, 2008). This complex trade network collapsed during the 18th century, while over the following centuries, the shrunk Assyrian civilization fell under the influence of the Mitannian kingdom (For more information on the kingdom of Mitanni, see Liverani, 2014: 290-302). In the 14th century, the Assyrians became independent under the king Assur-uballit I (1363-1328 B.C.E.), the first important Middle Assyrian king. It was not until king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243-1207 B.C.E.) that the Middle Assyrian state reached its peak by conquering even Babylon in south Mesopotamia for a short period of time (Düring, 2020: 43-7; Liverani, 2014: 347-63). Over the following centuries, due to

internal issues but also because of the collapse of other civilizations of the Ancient Near East and the more significant crisis in the region, the Middle Assyrian state, even though it continued to exist in some form, did not manage to maintain its sovereignty.

During the 10th century B.C.E., the Assyrian kings, such as Assur-dan II (934-912 B.C.E.) and Adad-ninari II (911-891 B.C.E.), focused on reclaiming the lost territories of the empire, marking the beginning of the Neo Assyrian period. Crucial kings of this period, such as Assurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.E.), recorded in detail their military campaigns as well as their infrastructure projects, documenting comprehensively in this way the restoring of the empire to its Middle Assyrian and the founding of new capitals or the renovation of existing cities on the other (Liverani, 2014: 475-81).

The empire reached its maximum extent during the 7th century B.C.E. under king Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.E.), who marched and conquered Egypt even for a short while (Liverani, 2014: 491-3). His successor, Assurbanipal (668-629 B.C.E.), known for creating the so-called library in his palace in Nineveh, was the last significant king of the empire before its decline and final collapse at the end of the century.

## THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEO ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Religion and the memory of the Middle Assyrian state were the two pillars of the development and growth of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian pantheon comprised many traditional Mesopotamian gods, such as Ishtar, Shamash, and Adad, with the god Assur at the top of the pantheon. Each king functioned as Assur's human "proxy", designated to convey god's mandate and execute his command during his kingship (Liverani, 2014: 510; 2017: 12).

The divine mandate and, therefore, each king's mission was the expansion of Assyria's land, as it was revealed in a hymn used possibly during the coronation of the Middle Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076 B.C.E.), and with a similar phrasing in the coronation ritual of the Neo Assyrian king Assurbanipal (Liverani, 2017: 12-3). By projecting as their obligation to impose the divine order, stated already in the Middle Assyrian period, the kings would frequently organize military campaigns for territorial expansion. The same practice was passed down to the next period as well, since all Neo Assyrian kings, to revive the Middle Assyrian state and to execute Assur's command, would carry out multiple military campaigns, even after regaining a large part of the Middle Assyrian territories (Liverani, 2014: 476).

# History of Research

## ROCK MONUMENTS: RELIEFS AND STELAE

The Assyrian kings would document in detail in cuneiform writing their achievements, from a successful military campaign to the construction of a new palace, as a kind of annals. These recordings were primarily kept as a continuous text, mainly on clay objects such as tablets and prisms, or accompanied by an iconographic depiction of some sort, on stone objects in principle.

Stone stelae and rock reliefs are part of the latter category, constituting a large part of the Assyrian material culture. Almost all Neo Assyrian kings constructed stelae and reliefs, either at the core or at the periphery of the empire, usually after the end of a successful military campaign. Stone stelae stand free in space and are located primarily in urban locations, such as the so-called “Great Monolith”, a stele of Ashurnasirpal II set up in his royal capital, Nimrud (anc. Kalhu) in modern Iraq. The stele was erected on a podium at the northern entrance of the Ninurta temple, which Ashurnasirpal built or restored as part of his extensive construction program in Nimrud (Mallowan, 1966: 87). Rock reliefs, on the other hand, are engraved on natural rock and are found in rural settings, such as the reliefs at the “source of the Tigris” or “Tigris tunnel” which were carved in an upper cave area, as well as in a lower tunnel, close to where the river flows (Harmanşah, 2007). When looking at a stone stele or a rock relief, in most cases, the viewer would view one or more male figures (the king, the king, and a god, the king with captives, the king with successors, etc.) in the middle, various divine emblems on the top and a descriptive cuneiform inscription, which would describe in detail the successful military campaigns of the portrayed king, but also his greater achievements in public and civil life. (Fig. 1, 2)



Figure 1: The stele of Ashurnasirpal at the temple of Ninurta in Nimrud. (© The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\) licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).)



Figure 2: The relief of Tiglath-pileser I in a cave at the Tigris river. (Schachner, 2009: 175)

## HISTORY OF PAST RESEARCH

Certain rock reliefs and stone stelae are already briefly mentioned by Sir Austen Henry Layard, an expeditionist and amateur archaeologist of the 19th century, during his excavation expeditions in Nineveh and Nimrud (Layard, 2002: 207-16, 351-6). However, for a long time, they were outshined by the Assyrian palace reliefs, considered more spectacular to the western public then. These reliefs were carved panels decorating the walls of the palaces, portraying an elaborate narrative and decorative program on the military achievements and the sociopolitical deeds of the kings (for more information, see, for instance, Cohen and Kangas, 2010). Since then, more rock reliefs and stelae have surfaced, leading to relevant academic treatises, including examinations of such monuments investigating them separately or in subgroups depending on their geographical location (Levine, 1972; Taşyürek, 1975; 1979). In the meantime, certain scholars noticed the exterior similarities between reliefs and stelae. They took the initiative in categorizing them mainly under the same type and treating them as one material corpus, heavily decontextualizing the monument in question as a result, either from a textual point of view (see, for example, the study of Genge, 1965) or from an archaeological one (see Börker-Klähn, 1982).

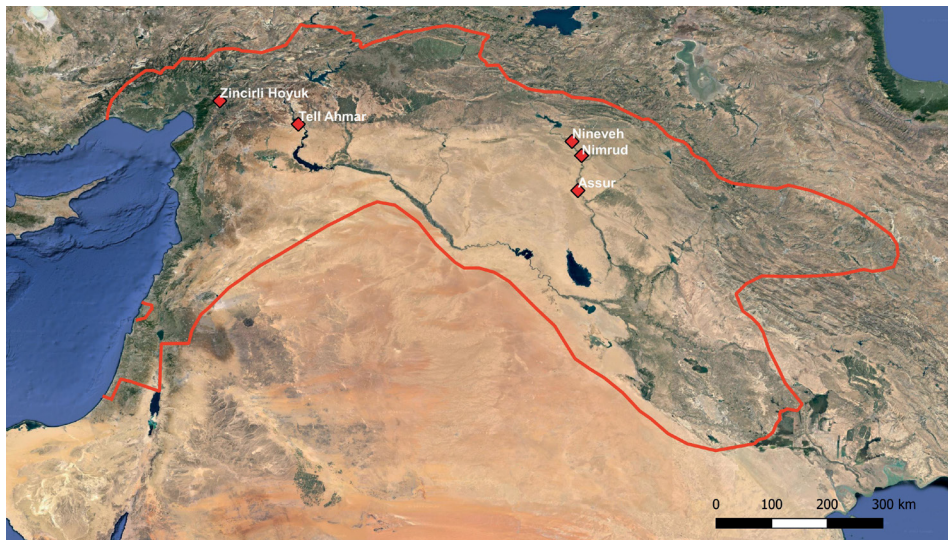
Over the past few years, the holistic approach has prevailed in the studies of the archaeological material corpus, with researchers becoming more inclusive and emphasizing the multifunctional character of the rock monuments. For example, several studies by Harmanşah have made an essential contribution in pointing out the deep connection



of the rock monuments to their surrounding environment (Harmanşah, 2007; 2015), be that an artificial construction or a natural setting, as well as the intention and the motive of their creator in placing them or constructing them in this particular location in this specific moment.

As it becomes evident, rock monuments are not treated anymore as decontextualized objects, placed arbitrarily in a generic setting, but rather as objects that incarnate, express, and materialize thoughts, motives, and sentiments from their creator to their recipient, utterly intertwined with their wider surroundings.

A representative example of this approach is the research by Porter (2000), which focuses on two seemingly identical and contemporary stelae placed in two different provincial capitals of the Neo Assyrian Empire, modern Zincirli Höyük and Tell Ahmar. (Map 2, Fig. 3, 4).



Map 2: The cities of the empire mentioned in the text. (image created by the author)





---

Figure 3: Esarhaddon's stele in Zincirli Höyük  
(Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Vorderasiatisches Museum,  
Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer)



---

Figure 4: Esarhaddon's stele in Tell Ahmar.  
(Porter, 2000: 149)

In the cross-examination of the stelae carried out by Porter (Porter, 2000: 143-76), she illustrated that even though the stelae appeared to share the exact iconographic depiction, namely king Esarhaddon and two smaller figures, possibly captives, a closer look at the individual features of each stele brings to light essential differences in the composition of the scene in both cases. For example, the scenes differ in the garments of the figures in a way that one stele stresses more than the other the cultural background and political identity of each figure. At the same time, there are differences in the tone of the inscription, which, in one case, is entirely threatening and foreboding.

In contrast, in the other case, it expresses the prosperity and the good grace a loyal subject enjoys from his king. This contrast proves how Esarhaddon would adjust both the visual and textual details and context of his stelae to convey a suitable message depending on the prior relationship of the two cities with the empire. In this example, Esarhaddon reserved a more moderate message for the city, which probably remained loyal to the empire throughout the years. In contrast, he addressed a hostile message to the city for which there is evidence of local uprisings. Overall, this study illustrates that the composition of each stele was not random or entirely standardized but was instead subject to adjustments by the creators depending on its location and the specific audience of this particular historical moment.

### IMPERIAL PERIPHERY AND ROCK MONUMENTS

The Neo Assyrians, until the middle of the 8th century B.C.E., did not fully incorporate the conquered territories outside of the so-called Assyrian core. Still, instead, they turned them into vassals by forcing them to pay tribute, allowing, however, in a way, their autonomy and independence. This situation changed after the reforms of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 B.C.E), who expanded the provincial system outside the Assyrian core and transformed those previously independent kingdoms into provinces (Liverani, 2014: 505). This meant that the newly conquered territories were now Assyrian provinces with capitals and an appointed Assyrian governor in charge of the private and public affairs of the province (Liverani, 2014: 505).

Until recently, scholars recreated the political, economic, and social structure of ancient empires, such as the Neo Assyrian, heavily influenced by recent European colonialism and imperialization. As a result, generalized interpretational models of sorts in order to

explain ancient imperialism and how, as a consequence, imperial expansionary ambitions have affected the annexation of other nearby regions (for example, see Münkler, 2005; Wallerstein, 1974). These models presented the imperial core as the protagonist, an influential, powerful, and superior political and cultural center, which exercises absolute control over the newly annexed regions, rendering, thus, the regions of the “periphery” subordinate, dependent, underdeveloped victims of great power.

In the same line as the above, the discovery of rock monuments far from the imperial core was partly interpreted as additional evidence for the powerful Assyria’s political superiority and cultural dominance over an inferior territory, which became the latest victim of the Assyrian mightiness. In several modern publications, many of these rock monuments were even clustered all together under the broad term “*Assyrian peripheral monuments*” or “*Assyrian royal monuments on the periphery*”, (see Shafer, 1998; 2007), eliminating as a result any possible diversity among the monuments and the respective locations they were discovered.

Current studies, however, under the light of new archaeological evidence or in the process of re-examining older findings and re-considering outworn theories, have become more inclusive by adopting a more decentralized approach and stressing, even more, the fluid dynamics and the significant variation among the annexed regions across the empire. In this way, imperial studies have overturned the polar opposites of a loud active core and a silent passive periphery to a relationship of mutual support, cooperation, and co-dependency between the center of the empire and the newly incorporated regions during what could be now seen as the co-creation of an empire (see for example Düring, 2020; Tyson and Herrmann, 2019).

## Conclusion

The present article is a brief version of the basic principles of my doctorate thesis, which examines the complexity and the multifunctional character of the Neo Assyrian rock monuments, contrary to the dominant and unilateral point view as imperial and propagandistic constructions. More specifically, the rock monuments in this study are approached under the scope of inclusivity and uniqueness, following modern research

methods. Every selected object is examined in its original location, firstly in connection with its direct surroundings, such as an adjacent gate or a river, and secondly, on a macroscopic level, focusing on the different areas hosting the monuments, taking as a given that these selections were not random, but rather constitute parts of the same unique and multisensory experience. The approach mentioned above, in the same line with current researchers, is being practiced for the first time on this specific material corpus and aims at constituting a vital part of this new holistic approach and examination of the ancient material culture. By being part of this collective publication of *Archaeozooms*, I intended to present a modern and multidimensional methodological approach to the remains of an ancient civilization.

## Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Yannis Chatzikonstantinou, the brains behind the “*Archaeozooms*” initiative, the person who brought together a number of young researchers from various backgrounds and countries and created this valuable, collective publication. Furthermore, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Florian Janoscha Kreppner, for providing guidance, support and feedback throughout this project. And last but not least, I would like to say a special thank you to my family and friends for their deeply appreciated support and help.

# Bibliography

Andrae, W. 1909. *Der Anu-Adad-Tempel in Assur*. WVD OG 10. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs.

Andrae, W. 1922. *Die Archaischen Ishtar-Tempel in Assur*. WVD OG 39. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs.

Börker-Klähn, J. 1982. *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs*. Baghdader Forschungen 4. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern.

Cohen, A., and S. E. Kangas, ed. 2010. *Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II: A Cultural Biography*. New Hampshire: University Press of New England.

Düring, B. S. 2020. *The Imperialisation of Assyria: An Archaeological Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Genge, H. 1965. "Stelen neuassyrischer Könige: Eine Dokumentation und philologische Vorarbeit zur Würdigung einer archäologischen Denkmälergattung, Teil I: Die Keilschriften." Ph.D. diss., Albert-Ludwigs-Universität zu Freiburg im Breisgau.

Harmanşah, Ö. 2007. "Source of the Tigris: Event, Place and Performance in the Assyrian Landscapes of the Early Bronze Age." *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (2): 179-204.

Harmanşah, Ö. 2015. *Place, Memory, and Healing. An Archaeology of Anatolian Rock Monuments*. Oxon: Routledge.

Layard, A. H. 2002. *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon; With Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the Desert*. New Jersey: Gorgias Press.

Levine, L. D. 1972. *Two Neo-Assyrian Stelae from Iran*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.

Liverani, M. 2014. *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy*. Translated by S. Tabatabai. London: Routledge.

Liverani, M. 2017. *Assyria: The Imperial Mission*. Mesopotamian Civilizations 21. Indiana: Eisenbrauns.

Mallowan, M. E. L. 1966. *Nimrud and its Remains*. Vol. 1. London: Collins.

Münkler, H. 2005. *Imperien: Die Logik der Weltberrschaft - vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten*. Berlin: Rowohlt.

Porter, B. N. 2000. "Assyrian Propaganda for the West: Esarhaddon's Stelae for Til Barsip and Sam'al." *Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement* 7: 143-76.

Schachner, A. 2009. *Assyriens Könige an einer der Quellen des Tigris: Archäologische Forschungen im Höhlensystem von Birkleyn und am sogenannten Tigris-Tunnel*. *IstForsch* 51. Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth.

Shafer, A. 1998. "The Carving of an Empire: Neo-Assyrian Monuments on the Periphery." Ph.D. diss., Harvard University.

Shafer, A. 2007. "Assyrian Royal Monuments on the Periphery: Ritual and the Making of Imperial Space." *In Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. J. Cheng and M. H. Feldman, 133-59. Culture and History of the Ancient Near East Vol. 26. Leiden: Brill.

Taşyürek, O. A. 1975. "Some New Assyrian Rock-Reliefs in Turkey." *AnatSt* 25: 169-80.

Tyson, C. W., and V. R. Herrmann, ed. 2019. *Imperial Peripheries in the Neo-Assyrian Period*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.



Veenhof, K., and J. Eidem. 2008. *Mesopotamia: The Old Assyrian Period*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 160/5. Fribourg: Academic Press.

Wallerstein, I. 1974. *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*. New York: Academic Press.