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Narration. Description. Reality: The Royal Lion Hunt in Assyria

Macomber saw the lion now. He was standing almost broadside, his great head up and turned toward them. The early morning breeze that blew towards them was just stirring his dark mane, and the lion looked huge, silhouetted on the rise of bank in the gray morning light, his shoulders heavy, his barrel of a body bulking smoothly.

Ernest Hemingway, *The Snows of the Kilimanjaro*, 1936

First looks might be deceiving: with regard to the complex and polysemous symbolism of leonine creatures in Mesopotamia, the royal lion hunt is one of the most intriguing and superficially most familiar royal iconographies known. Thus, one is seduced into understanding the royal hunt as the most important visual narrative of the Assyrian kings besides their military campaigns. Nevertheless, its narrativity, which is debatable, depends on the distinct forms it takes, the carriers used, and the contexts known. These forms, carriers, and contexts represent the main focus of this paper that seeks a deeper understanding of why and how the lion hunt was visually mediated in Ancient Mesopotamia. In order to do so, these considerations will base themselves on both, more theoretical observations on the epistemologic category of narrative and a diachronic view on the lion hunt across media in Mesopotamia.

2. Defining Narrative

The question of what a narrative is and how it should be defined, has been the concern, first and foremost, of linguists and literary scholars. The same have at times struggled with the notion that media other than texts can constitute narrative.¹

¹ See, for example, Stanzel 1982; Ryan 2004; Ryan 2007; Fludernik 2008; Klein and Martínéz 2009; Genette 2010; Fludernik 2010; Olson 2011 and many more.

Since the term narrative lacks a broadly excepted definition in ancient Near Eastern studies (at least unknown to me), the question of how to address specific issues such as contexts, carriers, and structures of visual narratives as well as the issue of borders between narrative and non-narrative logically arises.

Visual culture studies conducted, among others, by Wolfgang Kemp for the Middle Ages, by Luca Giuliani and Marc Stansbury O'Donnell for classical antiquity, by Irene Winter for the ancient Near East, or by Seymour Chatman and Neil Cohn for postmodern visual media have dealt with the concept of narration, addressing the issue of visual media that possibly generate narratives.²

Not unlike Wolf Schmid with respect to texts,³ Luca Giuliani discusses two modes of images: describing and narrating.⁴ Giuliani states that narratives are causally determined visual representations with active and decisive protagonists and consist of an initial momentum of tension as well as of closure.⁵ During our conference, he again emphasized that narrative images do not tell the story by themselves.⁶ With his definition, Giuliani comes close to the quite restricted definition of the literary scholar and narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, who emphasizes intelligent agents, purposeful actions, causal chains, and closure. She also focuses on temporal connections, meaningfulness, and audience.⁷

Research into visual narratology with respect to the ancient Near East fell out of fashion in the 1960s, came back into focus in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and has gained attention in recent years.⁸ Summarizing a symposium on narrative, mainly focusing on ancient Near Eastern art, Carl H. Kraeling introduced the idea of narra-

² For analyses concerning visual culture, both ancient and modern, see among others: Chatman 1978; Reade 1979a; Brilliant 1984; Dehejia 1990; Dehejia 1997; Karpf 1994; Kemp 1989; Jäger 1998; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999; Stansbury-O'Donnell 2015, esp. 212; Giuliani 2001; Giuliani 2003; Nadali 2006; Scheuermann 2005/2009; Neil Cohn et al. 2014; Winter 2010 (= Winter 1981). For more literature on the ancient Near East, see below. For studies on visual narratives, see also the contribution of Davide Nadali in this volume.

³ Schmid 2008, esp. 7–9.

⁴ Giuliani 2003, 36. The author would also include another mode – namely, factualizing; in Ch. Wulf's terminology (Wulf 2004), magic presences cf. Wagner-Durand forthcoming, Wagner-Durand 2014 and Wagner-Durand 2015.

⁵ Giuliani 2003, 36. See also Giuliani's definition of description. "Die Beschreibung erweckt beim Rezipienten keine Erwartungen und versetzt ihn auch nicht in einen Zustand er Spannung: Sie beschränkt sich darauf, das vor Augen zu führen, was in der Welt – im Großen und im Kleinen – der Fall ist, ohne Anlass zu geben für Fragen, warum etwas geschieht oder was es zur Folge haben wird" (Giuliani 2003, 36).

⁶ "Nicht-bewegte Bilder können meines Erachtens nicht erzählen..." Giuliani and Scheffer 2005 and Giuliani, oral communication.

⁷ Ryan 2007, 29.

⁸ Narrative visual research on the ancient Near East has been the explicit focus of selective studies; see, among others, Nadali 2006; Nadali 2012; Winter 2010 (=Winter 1981); Reade 1979a; Brown and Feldman 2014; Watanabe 2014; Wagner-Durand 2014; Wagner-Durand forthcoming/2019.

tive art as a representation of a specific event involving specific persons: Historicity was considered to be important, but not essential.⁹ At the very same conference, Hans G. Güterbock implicitly stated that the story must be *told* and not *implied*.¹⁰ Later, Irene J. Winter argued for a merging of the terms story and content, referring to Chatman's concept of discourse¹¹ and an understanding of narrative as specifically structured content¹² that is not generic in its essence.¹³

Based on those and many more definitions, including the one by Garcia Landa and Onega Jaén¹⁴ that comprises all types of media, but in particular on the notion that the story must be visually told and not implied, the following preliminary definition focussing on the narrative quality of visual media will be applied here:

A visual narrative is the visual representation of a series of events belonging to one *story* which is – either completely or in parts – told by iconic sign representations, irrespective of the precise narrative structure applied.* Therefore, the visual representation called narrative must contain several sign representations referring to different events of one causally related story. Furthermore, the story is bound to a particular time and/or space.

Consequently, in order to be a *true* visual narrative, the image not only evokes a known story in the mind of the user but also narrates the story in itself.¹⁵

**discourse* is important, but not restricted to any specific form

⁹ Kraeling 1957, 43: “It has been assumed that narrative art, strictly speaking, could be identified as such only where the purpose of the artist was to represent a specific event, involving specific persons, an event, moreover, that was sufficiently noteworthy to deserve recording. The action and the persons might be historical but would not always necessarily be so. They might belong also to the realm of myth or legend.”

¹⁰ Winter 2010, 4 referring to Güterbock 1957, 62.

¹¹ Chatman 1978.

¹² “While ‘story’ is a major component of narrative, the terms are not synonymous. Story evokes the idea of content. Narrative, however, demands that one address oneself at the same time to both content and what Culler (1975, 244) would call the means by which ‘the end is made present throughout the work’; and what Chatman (1979, 176) has called discourse: ‘the expressional means of presenting content.’ Narrative then, is structured content, ordered by the ‘telling’ which is a necessary condition of the form.” Winter 2010, 3.

¹³ Winter 2010, 5.

¹⁴ “A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way. Films, plays, comic strips, novels, newsreels, diaries, chronicles and treatises of geological history are all narratives in the wider sense. Narratives can therefore be constructed using an ample variety of semiotic media: written or spoken language, visual images, gestures and acting, as well as combination of these. [...]. Therefore, we can speak of many kinds of narrative texts: linguistic, theatrical, pictorial, filmic.” Onega Jaén and García Landa 1996, 3.

¹⁵ Updating a definition (‘*true* narrative’) provided by the author at the 8th ICAANE: Wagner-Durand 2016.

Thus, the potential to be a narrative or, more precisely, the relation to a given narrative may be seen in many visual media. Many of these media may in fact represent abbreviations of actions, but are not *true* narratives since they do not tell the story by themselves.¹⁶

Factual or Fictional Storytelling in the Ancient Near East

According to the definition given and with respect to the matter of intersubjective reality, the story must be either factual nor fictional. This broadening of the narrative content reflects the problem of how to distinguish between fictional and factual in the ancient Near Eastern lifeworlds and whether there existed an emic idea of fictional story telling generally. Zainab Bahrani assumes that conceptions we might refer to as part of an alternate or fictional world, might have been understood by the Mesopotamians as being part of their multilayered reality.¹⁷ In this respect, Martínez rightly points out that the dichotomy between factual and fictional was introduced later, as an outcome of intellectual processes in the realms of the Mediterranean world.¹⁸ As such, older Mesopotamian myths formed part of a reality that only came into being because of the events taking place in these myths. Such stories were understood as factual since they were believed to be true. They might be understood as so-called *Wirklichkeitserzählungen*, narratives of reality.¹⁹ While we will not consider the matter of genre here, it seems not unlikely that the separation between factual and fictional may not be valid, at least to a large extent, in the Mesopotamian lifeworld.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire

Before turning to the discussion of the visual media, our interdisciplinary approach calls for a short introductory note about the Neo-Assyrian Empire, whose core area was situated in Northern Mesopotamia, from where the empire started its expansion in the 10th century. Its supremacy was finally brought to an end during the years 614 and 609.²⁰ These 300 years of Assyrian dominance were characterized by

¹⁶ Wagner-Durand 2016.

¹⁷ Bahrani 2003, 127.

¹⁸ Martínez and Scheffel 2012, 11. “[...] ist das Ergebnis eines über mehrere Jahrhunderte reichenden kulturhistorischen Prozesses, in dessen Folge man eine Welt des Glaubens und der Dichtung von einer Welt der Wirklichkeit unterschied und für fiktiv erklärte.”

¹⁹ “Solche Erzählungen mit unmittelbarem Bezug auf die konkrete außersprachliche Realität nennen wir *Wirklichkeitserzählungen*” Klein and Martínez 2009, 1.

²⁰ Replaced by the so-called Chaldean dynasty of Babylon. For comprehensive overviews of the culture and history of Assyria, see, among others: Mayer 1995; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2003; Pedde 2012; Fuchs 2013a; Fuchs 2013b; Fuchs 2013c; Fuchs 2013d.

phases of expansion, inner conflicts, reconsolidation, and a fast downfall. Meanwhile, the centralized empire²¹ was massively expanding due to its quest for world dominance. Its highly stratified society cultivated a polytheistic belief system. Our historic knowledge derives from a wide range of written sources, such as economic texts and private and royal correspondence, as well as annals, myths, ritual texts, and epics. Furthermore, we know of countless images comprised of seals and sealings, statuary and stelae, painted and glazed pottery, figurines, ivories, bronze objects of any kind, wall-paintings, rock art, and thousands of meters of relief orthostats.²²

Table 1: The Neo-Assyrian rulers: those of importance here have been highlighted.

Rulers of Assyria from Ashurnāširpal II onwards	
Ashurnāširpal II (Ashur-nāšir-apli)	883–859
Shalmaneser III (Salmānu-asharēd)	858–824
Shamshī-Adad V	823–811/10
Adad-nīrārī III	810/809–783/782
Shalmaneser IV (Salmānu-asharēd)	782/1–773
Ashur-dān III	772–746
Ashur-nīrārī V	754–745
Tiglat-Pileser III (Tukultī-apil-eshshāra)	744–727
Shalmaneser V (Salmānu-asharēd)	726–722
Sargon II (Sharru-kēnu)	721–705
Sennacherib (Sin-aḥḥe-eriba)	704–681
Esarhaddon (Ashur-aḥḥe-iddina)	680–669
Ashurbanipal (Ashur-bāni-apli)	668–631
Ashur-etel-ilāni	630–627
Sin-shar-ishkun	627–612
Ashur-uballiṭ II	611–610/9

The Lion Hunt in Assyria through Time, Media, and Contexts

A Visual Prelude: Before The First Millennium

While the topos of the hunting ruler or hero first visually appeared during the late fourth millennium, its heyday was clearly in the days of the first millennium B.C.

²¹ The terminology and explanation of the centralized variant of the empire can be found in Breuer 1998, esp. 107–108; criteria for empires can be found in Breuer 1998, 106–131. Kingship in Assyria was inherited by a chosen son (mostly but not exclusively the first born); cf. the dynastic-charismatic concept of rule: see Selz 1998, 283. For the tension between god-given and inherited kingship, see Cancik-Kirschbaum 1995.

²² Cf. Wagner-Durand forthcoming; Wagner-Durand 2015.

empires of Assyria, Babylonia²³, and Persia²⁴ and of the Neo-Hittite kingdoms of Syria (**Fig. 1**).²⁵ Nevertheless, as a pictorial subject matter the lion-hunting ruler is not as widespread in the visual world of Mesopotamia as often alleged, especially if we consider that the examples in question cover more than two millennia and almost never appear in large-scale art.²⁶ All in all, the iconographic evidence of the royal lion hunt is quite limited before the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.²⁷ Excluding gods, the so-called six-curved heroes, or hybrid beings,²⁸ the pre-first millennium evidence is rather scanty. Excluding seals with contest scenes, it is virtually non-existent for many centuries.

The oldest example is a diorite stela from Uruk (**Fig. 2**),²⁹ showing two different images of a man hunting lions. Further, we know of late fourth and third millennium seals depicting a hero-like figure who might be considered as the ruler fighting a lion.³⁰ In these early days, the idea of the sovereign as the lion hunter may partly derive from and merge with the topos of the Sumerian shepherd as the perfect ruler. Thus, Gebhard Selz emphasizes the fusion of different topoi concerning the capable ruler as the protector from the wild, the war hero, and the hunter.³¹

²³ E.g. the reliefs of Brisa and Wadi as-Saba/Lebanon: Börker-Klähn 1982, no. 259 and 268; Da Riva 2012; Da Riva 2013, fig. 5. The image of the lion-fighting king in the Neo-Babylonian realm came only into being outside of the core empire; cf. Wagner-Durand 2016; Da Riva 2013, esp. 93.

²⁴ While the motive of the lion can also be seen in the preceding Elamite tradition, the Achaemenid execution is very reminiscent, both in style and content, of the Assyrian tradition. The narrative qualities of these encounters, however, seem quite limited.

²⁵ Obviously using a Hittite legacy influenced by the ruling Assyrian Empire, the Neo-Hittite kingdoms of Syria produced a variety of lion hunts, e.g. in Malatya (Madhloom 1970, pl. VI, fig. 5); in Sakceğözü (Orthmann 1975, no. 360); in Halaf (Oppenheim and Moortgat 1955, pl. 38, 41, 42); in Karatepe (Orthmann 1975, no. 365).

²⁶ With the exception of the earlier Syrian and the later Assyrianizing Neo-Hittite examples.

²⁷ For a general overview of this topic, see Braun-Holzinger 1987–1990; Magen 1986, 33–34; Strawn 2005.

²⁸ E.g. late Uruk up to Akkadian seal(ing)s with related topoi: Orthmann 1975, no. 125d, 124f, 130n–m, 131b, d, h, 134a, c, e–h, k, 135a–b, 41c, 42a–b, d, 43d, f.

²⁹ The lion hunt stela, Uruk /Warka: h. 80 cm, w. 50 cm, IM 23.477: Börker-Klähn 1982, 113–114, no. 1.

³⁰ Late fourth millennium: e.g. Susa: steatite seal (lion hunter with bow and arrow), Susa, AM Teheran: Amiet 1972, pl. 76, no. 603; Third Millennium: Early Dynastic I: e.g. Nippur: sealing ('hero' with a cap seizing a bull approaches lions): Orthmann 1975, 227–228, fig. 41c; Early Dynastic III: shell seal (three lions ripping up a goat, the hero approaching to save the animal), Uruk, IM: Orthmann 1975, 231–232, no. 131i. For Akkadian seals, see Boehmer 1965, pl. 2–14. The question arises whether these early heroes are equated with the king. For the later part of the third millennium, see below.

³¹ Selz 2001, 14: "Der Schutz vor den wilden Tieren verbindet sich dann mit dem Typus des Jägers – die Löwenjagd z. B. bleibt über Jahrtausende zentrales Herrscherritual." Furthermore, he states: "Den Schutz vor den feindlichen Bestien verbindet analoges Denken dann mit der Ideologie des Krieges, der Abwehr des Feindlichen insgesamt."



Fig. 1: Neo-Hittite Orthostats from Tell Halaf (after Oppenheim and Moortgat 1955, pl. 38; A 3,52: BM 117101+pl. 41a: A 3,56: MET 43.135.2).

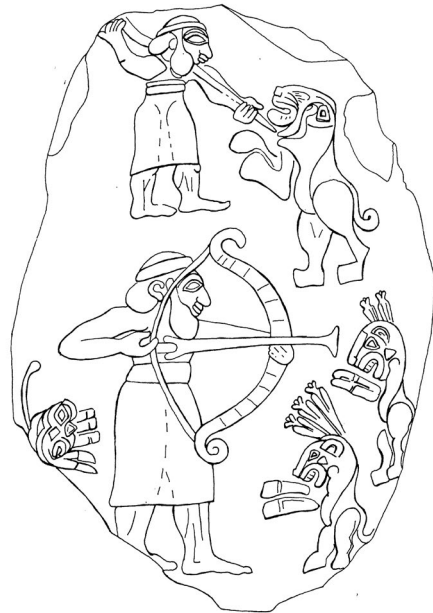


Fig. 2: The lion hunt stela of Uruk / Warka (after Börker-Klähn 1982, no. 1a: IM).

The late third millennium, however, seems iconographically quite silent about the topic of the royal hunt;³² nonetheless several seals show lion hunts in the second millennium.³³ At the same time, we find the topos in neighboring regions such as the Eblaite kingdom in Syria,³⁴ the Hittite town of Alaca Hüyük³⁵, and on the island of Cyprus.³⁶

Textual Evidence

From the late third millennium onward, the textual evidence gives witness to the royal lion hunt, as the Neo-Sumerian hymn B of King Shulgi does very explicitly, naming the hunt as a royal deed:

Shulgi Hymn B line 338–341

The high point of my great deeds is the culling of lions before the lance as if they were garden weeds, the snapping of fierce felines like reeds as if under the carding-comb, and the crushing (?) of their throats under the axe as if they were dogs [...]³⁷

Later on, two Old Babylonian letters clearly refer to the delicate issue of the royal lion hunt³⁸ as a privilege of the king that may better not be usurped.

Old Babylonian letter to Zimri-Lim of Mari by governor Yaqqim-Addu

ARM 2: 106, 4–27

4–5: A lioness was captured in a barn of Bit-Akkaka. 6–7: The next morning, I was told the news, and I left. 7–9: In order that no one killed that lion, I stayed all day at Bit-Akkaka, 9–10: saying to myself: “I must get it (the lioness) alive to my lord.” [shortened:

³² For the Ur III period, see e.g. Porada 1948, pl. 42; cf. Braun-Holzinger 1987–1990, 88.

³³ In Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian times, several seals bear the motive of the ‘hero’ fighting the lion: Old Babylonian: for seals, see e.g. Porada 1948, pl. 52–53; Middle Assyrian: e.g. serpentine seal (naked hero kills rampant lion with a spear), BM: Orthmann 1975, 351, no. 271e.

³⁴ Cult basin: lower register depicting a lion hunt, Ebla, NM Aleppo: Orthmann 1975, 482–483, no. 412a.

³⁵ Orthostat: hunting scene (boar), Alaca Hüyük, AM Ankara: Orthmann 1975, 427–428, no. 345a.

³⁶ LC II ivory handle of mirror (man killing a lion with his sword), Kouklia Palaepaphos, CM Nicosia: Orthmann 1975, 527, no. 473b.

³⁷ Black et al. 1998–2015. Watanabe, however, refers to another line 76 (line 75 in the ETCSL version). The transliterations of Watanabe and ETCSL differ only slightly; the translations differ more profoundly: Watanabe 1998, 445 and Watanabe 2002 using an edition by Castellino.

³⁸ Watanabe 2002, 83–86.

11–17/18...], the lion died. 19–20: I examined this lioness; she was old and ill. 20–22: My lord may say “Someone must have killed that lion”. 22–24: If anyone has touched this lion, (I should be treated) as if (I had broken) the taboo of my lord [shortened 24–25...]. 26–27: The lion was old and it is (because) of (its) weakness that it died.³⁹

After a gap in our evidence, we find, the kings of the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods wrote about their hunts in several instances.⁴⁰ The most relevant examples are the intensive descriptions of the Broken Obelisk (BM 118898), the Great Hunting Text (K 2867+), and a votive inscription to the goddess Ishtar of Arbela (K 6085) as well as the Hunting Prism (K 82-5-22,2).⁴¹

The Hunting Prism: K 82-5-22,2: 2’–10’

2’ [so that the people of my land] may see: ,[I ...]. 3’ [As (if for) p]leasu[re] 4’ [I we]nt out. In the plai[n, a wide expanse] – 5’–6’ [befo]re my arrival, hug[e lions, a fier]ce [mountain breed, attacked] (there) the cattle-p[en(s)]. 7’ [With] my [single] team, harnessed to [my] l[ordly] vehicle, 8’ [fort]y minutes after daybre[ak], 9’–10’ I pier[ce]d the throats o[f] ragi[ng] l[i]ons, each (lion) with a single arrow.⁴²

By considering the later Assyrian examples, Nathan Weissert has proven that the late Assyrian royal hunt constitutes a written topos subdivided into several components, beginning with the going out to the hunt, moving to the attack of the lion, going to heroic motives of the hunt,⁴³ and usually ending with the defeat of the lion(s).⁴⁴ Reasons for hunting – that is, the impetus for the chain of events – can be manifold. Pleasure is a topos repeatedly named in the later Assyrian period.⁴⁵ Another frequent reason is a concrete threat.⁴⁶ From a narratological point of view, most of the textual evidence shows narrative markers constituting specific but also normative *Wirklichkeitserzählungen*.⁴⁷

³⁹ Watanabe 2002, 85.

⁴⁰ Magen once counted about 19 instances: Magen 1986, 29 with footnotes 1–7.

⁴¹ Translations and summaries can be found in Weissert 1997.

⁴² Weissert 1997, 357.

⁴³ Weissert (1997, fig. 1) has three subdivisions: single team, in short time, accurate shooting.

⁴⁴ Weissert 1997, fig. 1.

⁴⁵ Weissert 1997, 344, fig. 1: Prism A, K 2867+, Hunting Epigraph A.

⁴⁶ These include the attack on the cattle pens (Prism A), shepherds complaining (K 2867+), a raging lion attacking the royal chariot (Hunting Epigraph A): Weissert 1997, 344, fig. 1.

⁴⁷ Klein and Martinez divided *Wirklichkeitserzählungen* into three categories – namely, descriptive, normative, and projective narratives. See Klein and Martinez 2009, 6–7.

The physically strongest written evidence connected to the visual word is the epigraphs. Only the oldest ones from Balawat have true epigraphs briefly mentioning the hunt. The later ones function like small, segmented annals, with a clear relation to the image. While only the Balawat epigraphs are connected spatially to the image and only one of Ashurbanipal's is connected spatially, all others show no such specific connection:⁴⁸

Band R5, palace gate of Ashurnasirpal II in Balawat/Imgur-Enlil

I slew lions on the river Balikh.⁴⁹

Hunting epigraph A: Temporal ligation: Upper story of room S (= S¹), slabs A–B

I, Assurbanipal [shortened...] Nergal who goes in front, caused me to hunt nobly. [shortened...], I scattered the pack of these lions. [Ummana]pp[a, son of U]rtaki, king of Elam, who fled and submitted [to me . . .] a lion sprang upon him [. . .] he feared, and he implored my lordship (for aid).⁵⁰

One of the most intriguing textual features, however, is the relation to the sphere of the cult.⁵¹ This connection concerns the hunt's ritual context,⁵² its mythical connection to gods such as Nergal (see below) and Ninurta,⁵³ and the king's everlasting pursuit of the royal priesthood *shangutu*.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ All explicit hunting epigraphs of Assurbanipal are so-called *anāku* epigraphs, beginning with the first person singular (I = *anāku*). Russell 1999, 201–202. Another epigraph, a so-called descriptive one, has been found in room S¹ (in the reconstructed upper story of room S) that shows no relation between the relief and the written source. Russell 1999, 203–204.

⁴⁹ Translation: Grayson 1991, A.0.101.93 Band R5, Ash II.

⁵⁰ Russell 1999, 201.

⁵¹ Notable in this context is a text describing Nabû replacing Marduk and showing his might and legitimacy by hunting lions near the temples of Nimrud: cf. Magen 1986, 35.

⁵² Weissert sees a clear connection (in K 82-5-22,2, line 11¹) to the *akītu*-festival: Weissert 1997, esp. 346–349, esp. 348; 357.

⁵³ Watanabe explains the connection between the special weapon named ^{gis}*nar'amtū* in the so-called Broken Obelisk, in Co. IV 12 (in which this weapon is used to slay lions) and the cutting off (*ru'umu*) of the wings of Anzu by Ninurta in the Anzu Myth; she also observes further associations with respect to Ninurta in the hunt by chariot and the hunt on foot. See Watanabe 2002, 79–81. She also understands the lion as a surrogate slain by Ninurta: Watanabe 2002, 82; M.-A. Ataç reaffirms the connection between the royal hunt and myth in Ataç 2010, esp. 272.

⁵⁴ Ataç (2010, 272–275) argues more with respect to the visual accounts; for the relationship between king, priesthood, and lion hunt, see Magen 1986, esp. 34–35.

Tiglath-Pileser I. (11th C.): Prism VA 8255

VI 55–69: Tiglath-pileser, valiant man, armed with the unrivalled bow, expert in the hunt: the gods Ninurta and Nergal gave me their fierce weapons and their exalted bow my lordly arms. By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, with my string bow, iron arrowheads and sharp arrows, I slew four extraordinarily strong virile bulls in the desert [...]

VI 76–84: By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, I killed on foot 120 lions with my wildly outstanding assault. In addition, 800 lions I felled from my light chariot.⁵⁵

Some have also analyzed the hunt's procedure as a cult drama⁵⁶ during which the lion was killed as surrogate victim.⁵⁷ The king identified himself with the lion, spreading its power even into the dangerous steppe.⁵⁸ In this respect, one has to add that many Assyrian rulers refer to themselves as raging lions,⁵⁹ mainly referring to their anger and force in combat.

Altogether, the textual evidence conveys the meaning and relevance of the hunting topos in the Assyrian world and is therefore quite significant for understanding its visual arrangements. While the inscriptions of all three millennia reveal the legitimating concept of the royal hero fighting the lion as his counterpart in the wild and therefore fulfilling his duty as the ruler and as the protector of the civilization against the wilds of the steppe, the regular appearance of this motive in visual media is found only in the first millennium, during which several media and contexts with different executions and therefore different meanings were applied. The lion hunt is therefore a topos the Neo-Assyrian kings appropriated iconographically for themselves. At the very same time, their written evidence also outnumbers the older records.

The Iconographical Evidence of The Neo-Assyrian Empire

Among all the different visual media known from Assyria, only a few have images of the royal lion hunter (**Table 2**). The objects that were produced in the largest

⁵⁵ Simplified translation according to Grayson 1991, 25–26.

⁵⁶ Watanabe 2002, 78.

⁵⁷ Discussed by Watanabe 2002, 77 and Dick 2006 (see below).

⁵⁸ “By his lion hunt the Neo-Assyrian king identifies himself symbiotically with his victim and thus, like Erra, becomes the lion, extending his rule beyond the city to *eršetulšēru*.” Dick 2006, 244. Further: “The king as identified with the lion [...] is then a ‘creature of nature’ who rules over his (domesticated people), as a shepherd [...] Because of this identification, the defeated lion is never mutilated [...]” Dick 2006, 244–245.

⁵⁹ The examples are abundant: see, e.g. Grayson and Novotny. 2012, Sennacherib 1: 16 and Sennacherib 17: Col VII, 9 and Leichty 2011, Esarhaddon 1: Col. I, 57’.

Table 2: Non-exhaustive list of Neo-Assyrian images with royal lion hunts
(The bibliography is highly selective. Many images can also be found as original drawings in the portfolios of these drawings in the British Museum).

Ruler	Objects	Museum/ excav. no.	Contexts	Content	Selected bibliography
Since (Anp II) Salm III.	royal seal: stamp sealings	mainly IM and BM, more than 218 ex.	Nineveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, Assur, Samaria	several specimens; king (on foot) stabbing the lion with the sword. Including the slightly different possible precedents of Ashurnāšīrpal II from Assur: Her- bordt 1996, 414– 415; Radner 2008, 487, footnote 12; Nadali 2009/2010, 222.	Herbordt 1992, 414–415; Radner 2008, 487–494; Nadali 2009/2010. Herbordt counted 104 indi- vidual specimens; no variants were included: Herbordt 1992, 124–127.
Anp II	ortho- stats	VAM 959, 962, 964, BM /1124917, NGCO 2919	Nimrud NW-pal- ace, room WI (bath- ing room?)	the heir to the throne (?) chariot hunting with bow and arrow + fragments of lion hunts + fragments of libations/ritual scenes	Reade 1972, P1. XXXIVa, XXXVa; Albenda 1972, fig. 2; Orthmann 1975, no. 205; Rea- de 1985, 210–211, pl. XLIIb–c; Magen 1986, Anp II, 55, pl. 3.2; Paley and Sobolewski 1987, 76; pl. 5; Matthiae 1999, 102.
Anp II	ortho- stat	BM 124579	Nimrud NW Pal- ace, room WM as- sumed	lion hunt by the successor (chariot hunt with bow and arrow)	Paley and Sobolewski 1987, 76, pl. 5; Reade 1985, 211; Ma- gen 1986, Anp II, 54; pl. 3.1; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, fig. 10; Gadd 1936, 140–141: 36; Layard 1849, pl. 31; Albenda 1972, fig. 1.
Anp II	ortho- stat	BM 124534+5	Nimrud NW pal- ace, room B: 19	lion hunt with char- iot; below: libation on dead lion	Meuszyński 1981, 27, pl. 1; Winter 2010, fig. 4–5; Magen 1986, Anp II, 12; 15; pl. 2.7 and 12.5; Gadd 1936, 133: 4A–B; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, fig. 9; Albenda 1972, fig. 3, 9–13; Watanabe 2002, fig. 9 and 11.

Table 2: Non-exhaustive list of Neo-Assyrian images with royal lion hunts (*continued*).

Ruler	Objects	Museum/ excav. no.	Contexts	Content	Selected bibliography
Anp II	ortho-stat	Museum Hove Sussex England	Nineveh Nabû-temple area	fragments: king hunts lion with arrow and bow from chariot	Magen 1986, Anp II, 62; pl. 3,4; Thompson and Hutchinson 1929, 118; Thompson 1934, 101; Weidner 1939, 104–106, fig. 86.
Anp II	ortho-stat: garments	MM 32.143.4	Nimrud NW palace, room G: 8	garment (king holding a bowl): heir to the throne fights with a lion (royal seal motive)	Magen 1986, Anp II, 31a, pl. 1.1; Layard 1849, pl. 8; see also Bartl 2014, tab. I.
Anp II	ortho-stat: garments	VAM 939c	Nimrud NW palace, room G: 16	garment (king holding a bowl): man leading horse, the heir fighting the lion + another lion	Magen 1986, Anp II, 49c; Bartl 2014, pl. 23; Layard 1849, pl. 49.1.
Anp II	ortho-stat: garments	NY Carlsberg 836a	Nimrud NW palace, doorway P: 4	garment (<i>apkallu</i>): king hunting a lion by chariot (arrow), + a gazelle by horse	Magen 1986, Anp II, 36a; Bartl 2014, pl. 28a.
Anp II	ortho-stat: garments	Baltimore 21.9	Nimrud NW palace; doorway P: 2	garment (<i>apkallu</i>): soldiers(?) and the heir (?) hunting a lion on foot with bow and arrow	Layard 1849, pl. 49.3; Bartl 2014, pl. 30b.
Anp II	bronze bands	BM 124698–9	Balawat, gate A, bands 5	king lion hunting with epigraphs	Magen 1986, Anp II, 58, pl. 3,3; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, 52, fig. 17; Russell 1999, 56; Barnett et al. 2008, fig. 16.
Ash	Cyl. sealing	ND 7080	Nimrud Review Palace	king stabbing a lion	Watanabe 1993, no. 2.2: 110–111; pl. 2; Radner 2008, 487.
Ash-Asb	wall painting	mostly reproductions in the Louvre	Til Barsip bathroom XXVII	panel a: bleeding lion, pierced by arrow, chariot?; c: king hunting (horse); e: lion hunt with horses and chariot	Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936, 22–23; 59–60; pl. LIII; Tomabechi 1983, 71–72; 74; Magen 1986, Ash 14–15, pl. 3,7 and 4,6.

Table 2: Non-exhaustive list of Neo-Assyrian images with royal lion hunts (*continued*).

Ruler	Objects	Museum/ excav. no.	Contexts	Content	Selected bibliography
Ash-Asb	wall painting	----	Til Barsip bathroom XLIV	traces of a hunting scene (lions?) (traces of lions have also been found in XXIV)	Tomabechi 1983, esp. 74.
Asb	orthostats	BM 124886–7; AO 19903, + OrDr.	Nineveh N palace, room S ¹ , (upper story collapsed)	the small lion hunt: 3 registers series with complex series: different hunt events, libation, preparation, with epigraphs	Orthmann 1975, no 242; Winter 2010, fig. 23; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, fig. 3; Bibliography p. 31: note 3; Barnett 1976, 53–55; pl. LVI–LIX; Magen 1986, Asb 27–32; pl. 4,5; 1,8; 1,9; 2,1; Gadd 1936, 203; pl. 37; 38, Meissner and Opitz 1940, 51; 567; pl. XVI, Watanabe 2002; fig. 15; Matthiae 1999, 141; 148; 169; 193.
Asb	orthostats	BM 124872–882 VAM 963, 960 + OrDr.	Nineveh N palace, room S, <i>in situ</i> , entrance (columns)	the heir hunting: 3 registers: series with complex series of events: different hunting events, libation, further: hunt by boat	Orthmann 1975, no. 243; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, fig. 4–4a; fig. 29; Bibliography p. 31: note 4; Magen 1986, Asb 18–21; 22–25; Pl. 2,8; 1,3; 4,31,4; 1,5; 4,7; 1,6; 1,7; 5,1; Meissner and Opitz 1940, 20–30; pl. III, VI–VIII; IX; Barnett 1976, 49–52; pl. XLIV–LIV; Magen 1986, Asb 26, pl. 5; Watanabe 2002, fig. 18; Matthiae 1999, 128; 141; 172–173; 194.
Asb	orthostats	BM 124850–70	Nineveh N palace, room C	the large lion hunt in the arena: complex sceneries (two large parts preserved)	Orthmann 1975, 244–245; Magen 1986, Asb 5; 6–7; 8; 9, pl. 3,8–10; 4,4; 4,2; Barnett 1976, 37–38; pl. V–XIII; Watanabe 2002, fig. 13–14; 67–68; Matthiae 1999, 146; 150–152; 174–179.
Asb	orthostat	BM 124888–124899	Nineveh N palace, Corridor R	men carrying dead lions and other animals and hunting equipment	Barnett 1976, 48–49, pl. XXX–IX–XLIII; Matthiae 1999, 144–145; 198; Meissner and Opitz 1940, pl. 4, 2.
Asb	clay model	BM 93011	Nebi Yunus	fragmented model, king stabbing lion with lance	Reade 1979b; Curtis and Reade 1995, 41; Barnett 1976, 35; pl. I; Matthiae 1999, 209.

quantity, but which have the ‘lowest’ narrativity, are the so-called royal seals. The second most frequently attested carriers are the orthostat reliefs, which show the most distinct narrativity. Related are the wall paintings, only known from Til Barsip, but which must have existed in other places. Also to be considered as more widespread are the bronze door bands, of which two with lion hunts are known.

The State Seal

Starting point⁶⁰ of my observation is the royal seal, also called the palace or state seal (**Fig. 3**).⁶¹ These stamp seals, only known from their impressions,⁶² mainly found in the heartland of Assyria⁶³ and mentioned in written sources,⁶⁴ continuously took a similar form over centuries, only varying in their details and inscriptions. They show the king stabbing a rampant lion with his sword. This stamp seal with its royal legitimatizing power is understood by Irene Winter as the seal of kingship;⁶⁵ this corresponds to the definition of visual narrative given here, and is in accordance with that of Nadali, who describes its imagery as “atemporal and non-narrative”.⁶⁶



Fig. 3: The State seal: An impression of Sargon's seal (after Nadali 2009/2010, fig. 1: BM SM.2276).

⁶⁰ As Nadali (2009/2010, 218) argues, those seals basically date even back to the period of Ashurnasirpal II; the starting point used here applies not only with regard to content but also from a chronological point of view.

⁶¹ Nadali 2009/2010, 217.

⁶² No seal itself has been found. Nadali 2009/2010, 215–216. Presumably, some were made of gold.

⁶³ For example, in Nimrud, Khorsabad, Kujunjik, and only once in Samaria; see also Nadali 2009/2010, 227: he counts 217 sealings from Kujunjik, 1 from Samaria, 17 from Nimrud, 11 from Khorsabad. They altogether comprise 187 specimens, both uninscribed and inscribed, depending on their different use: either the seal was inscribed or the sealed object or both, script being obligatory. Nadali 2009/2010, 223.

⁶⁴ Nadali 2009/2010, 217. See for example K6332+ line 17.

⁶⁵ Winter 2000, 57.

⁶⁶ Nadali 2009/2010, 215.

In fact, it is the very opposite of narrative: by its presence, the sealing *de facto* establishes kingship wherever it is seen.⁶⁷ The power of kingship unfolds through the act of sealing and the presence of the image. Hence, any lion hunt, regardless of its level of narrativity, is a non-narrative presence of Assyrian kingship.

Ashurnasirpal II's Royal Hunts⁶⁸

These non-narrative sealings seem to stand in stark contrast to other visual media: king Ashurnasirpal II deeply altered the visual world of Assyria by introducing the orthostat reliefs. While these wall decorations pass through changes over the centuries, some facts affecting narrative issues persist. First, the reconstruction of complete visual series remains largely impossible. Second, we do not know how the imageries were painted and how this influences our understanding of sequences and spatiotemporal notions. Third, unreconstructable paintings above the orthostats once added to these relief series. And fourth, cutting off the relief and distributing them to different museums made it virtually impossible to reconstruct their former visual and emotional effects.

Most prominent for Ashurnasirpal's II time are the reliefs of his throne room B⁶⁹ from the NW palace⁷⁰ in the ruler's new residence, Kalḫu (**Fig. 4**). Room B itself is a complex but also traditional throne room with a long rectangular shape and several entrances⁷¹. If attendants approached the enthroned king and turned their eyes to the right of the ruler, they observed several slabs of reliefs, one of which contained the royal lion hunt in the upper register and the libation poured out on the dead lion in the lower one. These form part of a series of slabs depicting different events. Whether they belong to a succession of events – that is, a story – and how they should be read is still up to debate.⁷² While other historical scenes such as the historical narrative slabs B3-B11 show difficult progressions that cannot be timed and followed with any certainty, the sequence here seems superficially quite readable: each slab is to be viewed from top to bottom. Whether the relation between

⁶⁷ In this vein, it even exceeds the power of the word, since we know that there were grants, and decrees written but unsealed, probably implying that either the decree or grant was never released or that these were copies to be kept in the palace. Nadali 2009/2010, 218 and note 4.

⁶⁸ The White Obelisk (BM 118807), showing gazelle, wild horse, and bull hunts, is often mentioned in the context of hunting scenes in Assyria. No lion hunt is depicted. Börker-Klähn 1982, 179–180, no. 132.

⁶⁹ For room B, see table 1; further, see Nadali 2006; Winter 1981; Reade 1985, esp. 208, 212–213; Reade 1979a, 57–64; Meuszyński 1981, 17–25, pl. 1–3.

⁷⁰ A palace whose construction started in the fifth year of his reign, when the king shifted his residence from Assur to Nimrud.

⁷¹ For an overview of elongated Neo-Assyrian throne rooms, see Matthiae 1999, 137.

⁷² May interprets many of the slabs of room B as a field war ritual. May 2012, esp. 464–466; 474–476.

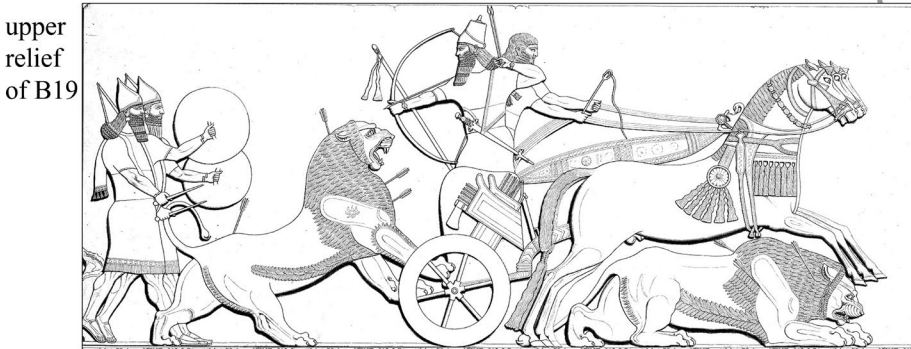
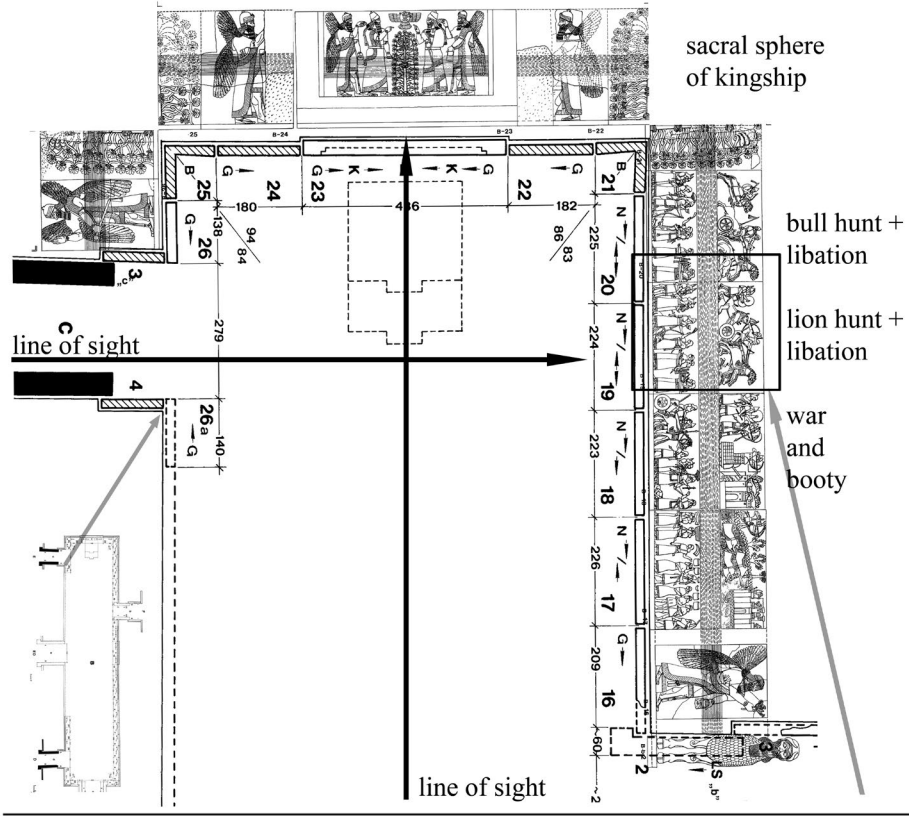


Fig. 4: The royal hunting slab B19 (BM 124534) in context (based on Meuszyński 1981, pl. 1 and plan 3 and Layard 1849, pl. 10).

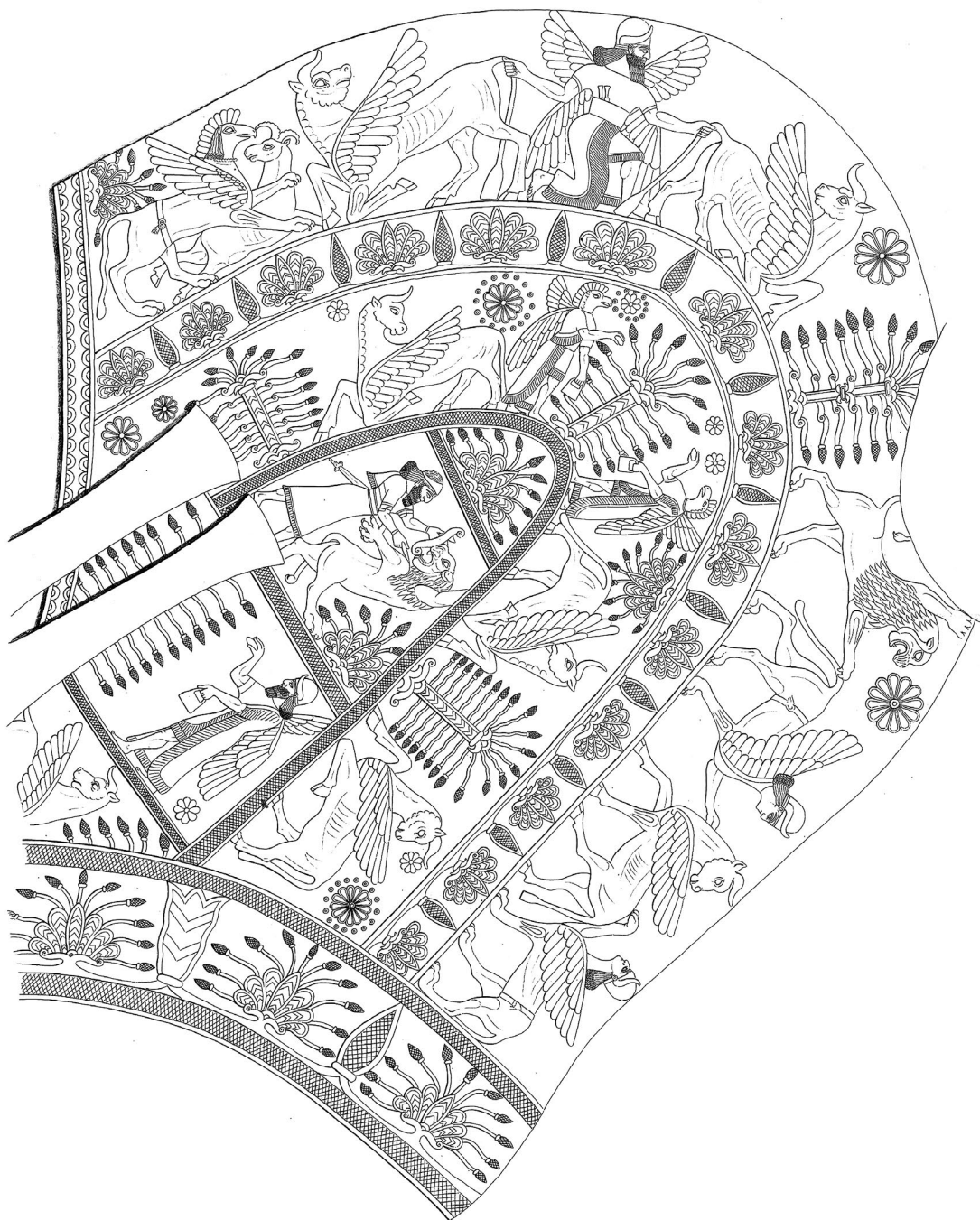


Fig. 5: Detail of slab 8 (MET 1932.143.4) / room G / NW-palace: Incised garment of the king showing the royal heir stabbing the lion with a dagger (Layard 1849, pl. 8).

the neighboring slabs is temporal, running from left to right or from right to left remains debatable. The upper registers depict either the active hunt from the chariot or war scenes; in the lower ones we observe the corresponding rituals, the king either ritually handing over two arrows to his successor or pouring out a libation. The question remains whether the two events, the king hunting and the king performing a libation truly constitute a narrative sequence tied to a particular time and place.

At the very least, they seem temporally and causally linked and they are of importance for those participating.⁷³ Using tablet K.9923, the copy of a war ritual and its reverse mentioning the pouring of a libation on a lion's forehead, Nathalie May has argued that the hunt and the libation constitute parts of staged ritual battles – war rituals – and form part of the royal triumph enacted by these performances. Thus, she understands several reliefs with lion hunts as visualizing the royal triumph.⁷⁴ Whether we observe a war ritual or any other staged or unstaged hunt with these reliefs, they obviously relate to royal abilities that may culminate in the ultimate royal triumph, which is only possible through the fulfillment of the royal duty. This duty has included the lion hunt since the distant past. Altogether, we witness an equation of both the active royal deeds and the equivalent ritualized acts. Thus, they generically stand for the king's power and obligations.⁷⁵ Based on the textual evidence, one possible interpretation moves away from a purely historical narrative dimension to the continuous validation of the royal *šangutu* and authority.

Returning to the spatial context of the hunting slab B19, we will again focus on the attendant moving towards the king seated on his throne. There, he or she looked at clearly ritualistic and heraldic scenes directly behind and surrounding the king. Those images of the king with the tree of life as well as *genii* hint at the implicit understanding that the hunting scenes are generic, lacking temporal and spatial specification.⁷⁶ Thus, the depiction in question might constitute a polysemous and polyfunctional image. First, it forms part of what Winter calls the overall semantics of the room and its images, visually reproducing the king's titles and epithets;⁷⁷ second, in relation to her ideas of the royal portrait,⁷⁸ and in accordance with the notion that images, the akkadian *šalme*, might be not just depictions but

⁷³ If we extend the question of the narrative setting to the other slabs, the question arises whether the hunts (bull and lion) can be considered as parts of one story or even as the aftermath of the battle.

⁷⁴ May 2012, esp. 463; 466.

⁷⁵ Therefore, the war progression might not relate to a specific historic event but to the king as a war hero. Winter (2010, 11) understands these images as showing the king as a “vigorous–and–victorious–hunter” and as “master of the animals”.

⁷⁶ Winter 2010 11: Lacking “the specificity of time or place required for the truly historical narrative”.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Winter 1981, 31. She also understands the hunting scenes as part of the visualization of the royal titles and epithets.

⁷⁸ Winter 1997. See also Winter 1989.

magic presences⁷⁹, we may not witness the individually portrayed king but the presence of kingship as well as royal priesthoods and divine-royal relations. On a third level, it may also constitute a somehow historic or pseudo-historical validity, generally telling the king's heroic deeds.

That the hunting imagery is more than just one random story of the king's deeds to be told is also confirmed by the incisions on garments worn by kings and genii, visible on the orthostat reliefs in the NW palace (**Fig. 5**).⁸⁰ These mainly ornamental incisions also contain figural arrangements, among them several lion hunts. They show both the atemporal hunting imagery of the royal seal as well as longer sequences. Whether these images had an apotropaic or legitimizing function or both remains to be discussed. Due to their low visibility, a purely narrative function seems implausible.

Further fragmented orthostats showing the heir to the throne hunting lions were found in the area of the so-called west wing; their exact attribution remains mostly unknown, but rooms WM and WI are mentioned.⁸¹ The latter one is said to be a bath.⁸² Interestingly, the later wall paintings of Til Barsip also were found in so-called bathrooms.⁸³ Their fragmentary remains show the king hunting lions. Their narrative quality, however, may be comparable to the aforementioned orthostats, but their fragmentary condition allows only preliminary statements to be made. It is unlikely that these scenes were made for pure enjoyment, to be looked at while bathing; rather, the rooms may have been used for cleansing rites connected to the ritual character and function of the hunt, intended for the king and the heir to prove their ability to protect the land of Assur.⁸⁴

The Royal Hunt from Ashurbanipal's North Palace

The reliefs of the king Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria, are among the most famous sceneries known. Hunting and related scenes were found in one tract of the North palace in Nineveh, in rooms S and C, corridors R and A, and in the chamber above room S (S¹).⁸⁵ To elucidate some considerations, we shall

⁷⁹ Wagner-Durand 2014.

⁸⁰ See table 2.

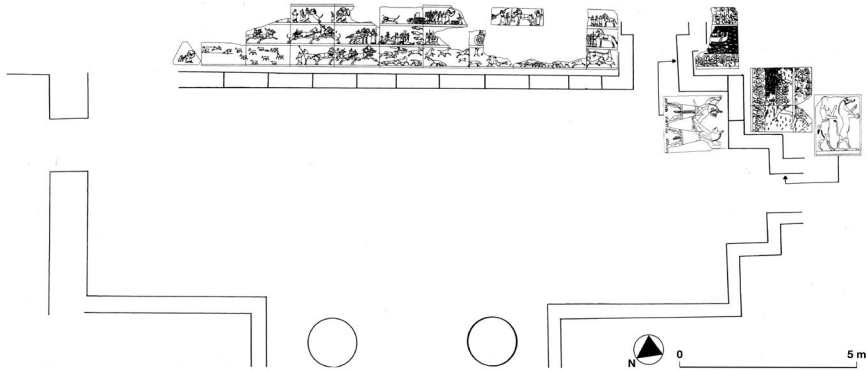
⁸¹ Reade states that the scenes known stem from the rooms WI and WM: Reade 1985, 210–211.

⁸² Paley and Sobolewski 1987, 72.

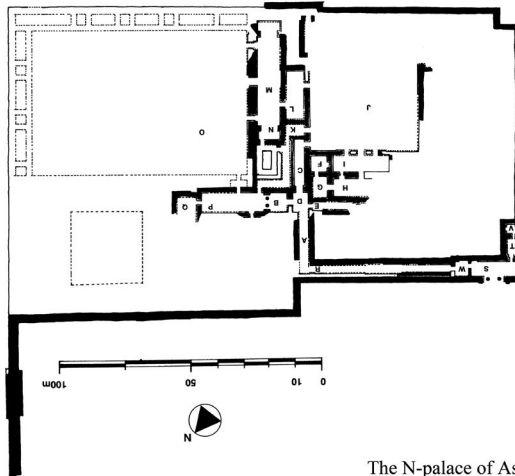
⁸³ See also table 1.

⁸⁴ Still, all scenes found there lack the broader contextuality needed to understand whether they are narratives or not or how high their narrativity is.

⁸⁵ The fact that all these rooms (S, the upper story of S, the adjacent corridors R and A, the large room C) were also covered with hunting scenes or with hunting related topoi argues for a distinct function of this tract of the palace. While the scientific terminology of the great and the



room S



The N-palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh

Fig. 6: Room S in the North palace Nineveh (montage based on Matthiae 1999, 113+172).

focus on the first, the entrance room S. A wide doorway with two columns led into this room, also called a back entrance.⁸⁶ Entering the room, the visitor first saw the lion hunt. While not all orthostats are preserved, it seems that the whole room was devoted to this subject. Among all the hunting sequences depicted in room S, we concentrate on the largest and best-preserved one, focusing on some possible narrative sequences within. Several factors both influence and hinder our understanding: first, the royal hero appears about nine times during the story in question; second, the directions of movements change; third, there is no constant

small hunting scene generate the idea of complete scenes, this is never true. We cannot state with certainty that we have all aspects preserved of any of them.

⁸⁶ According to Matthiae (1999, 171), the entrance was most likely used for going to the hunt.

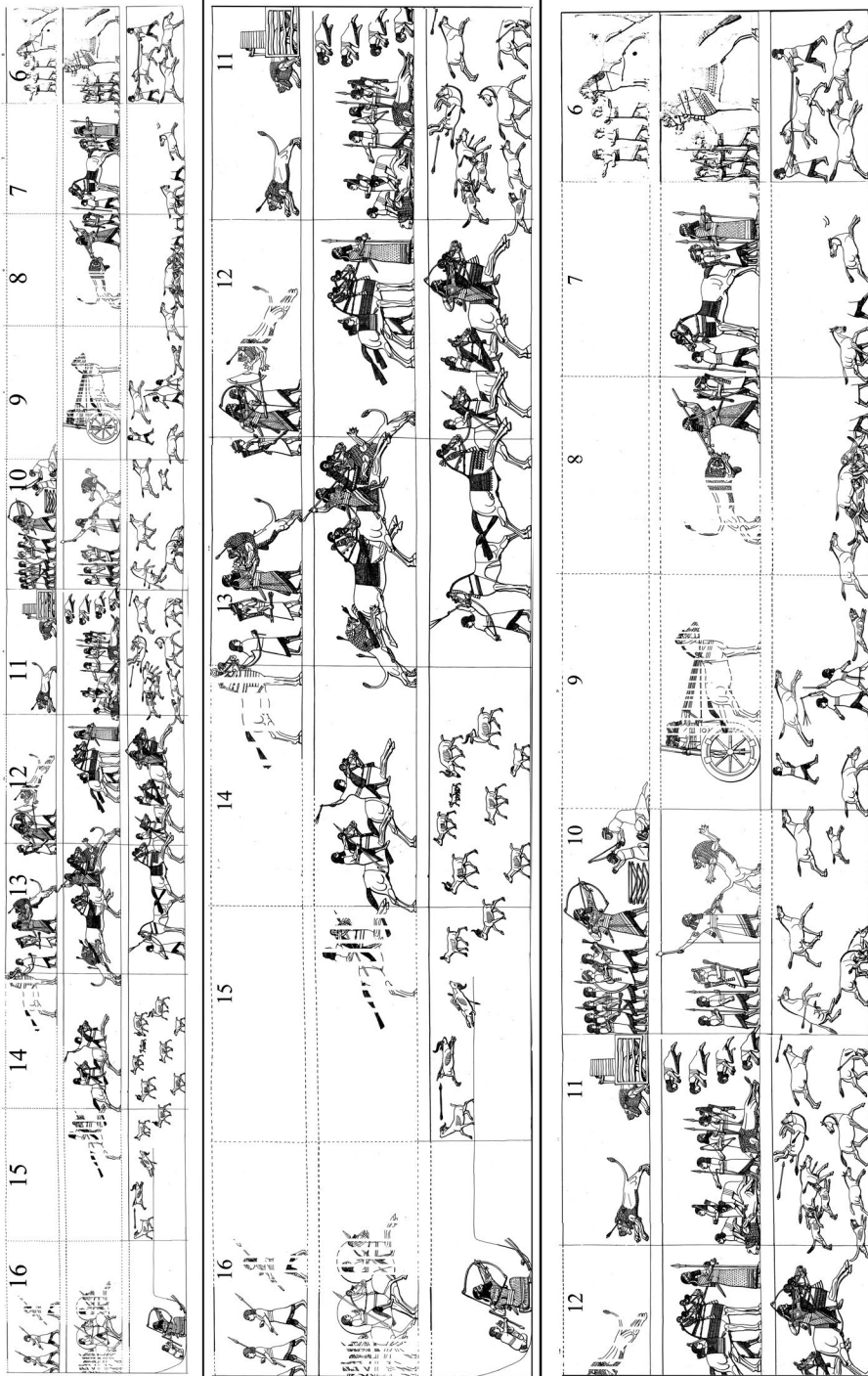


Fig. 7: Drawings of the lion hunt in room S (after Meissner and Opitz 1940, pl. 3 and Barnett 1976, pl. XLVI-XLVIII)

progression from left to right or from right to left; fourth, while the registers suggest a clear partition, temporal gaps with respect to content are observable.

The main protagonist of this sequence (slabs 16-6, **Fig. 6**) is not the king but the heir to the throne.⁸⁷ Before turning to the visual content, I would like to call attention to the lack of spatial specifications. That lack relates this precise hunt to the so-called arena hunt of room C and separates it from the other slabs of room S, which show spatial connections through a distinct display of landscapes. The arena hunt of room C also lacks any clue as to the landscape, except for the depiction of the arena placed on a hill. This in turn suggests that the heir's hunt was staged in an arena quite like the arena of Ishtar mentioned in the written sources (see above). While Woolley considered this bare setting as an index of the universal and generic validity of the lion hunt,⁸⁸ others emphasize its staged aspect,⁸⁹ which coincides with the idea of the ritual drama. In view of the temporal flow, we start with those sequences I consider to be the first: Since the lion hunt is the most prestigious one, it belongs to the later sequences. Therefore, gazelle and onager / wild horse hunts go first.

It seems likely that the gazelle pursuit in the left section of the lower register marks the beginning of the chain of events (**Fig. 7**). Like all broader sequences, it is subdivided into several sub-events. While the temporal starting point is marked by the pursuit of the gazelles from the left, the heir – awaiting the animals – shoots from right. The moving gazelles spatially cover one area but follow at least two timelines, one moving peacefully towards the right and one moving agitatedly back to the left. One feature, a register-line, which alters the spatial arrangement and the perspective of the herd in the plain, also helps the viewer to understand the shift. Only by visually grasping the whole event can the complete sequence be comprehended; but only by coming closer can the continuous narration⁹⁰ – that is, the repetition of agents in several different sequences in a temporal order – be understood.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Schmidt-Colinet 2005; Matthiae 1999, 172.

⁸⁸ Woolley, cited by Strawn 2005, 166. Strawn himself perceives this assumption as a symbolic overreading.

⁸⁹ Cf. Strawn 2005, 167.

⁹⁰ Sequences such as these have already been interpreted by others as a series of sequential actions. Watanabe calls it the continuous style or continuous actions, referring to Wickhoff's study on Roman art and on narrative in the late 19th century: Watanabe 2004, 106. She also discusses this style again in 2014: Watanabe 2014, 347. Unger called this phenomenon cinematographic narrative and Reade called it a strip-cartoon effect: Unger 1933 and Reade 1979a, 106–109. Both were also cited in Watanabe 2004, 103–104 and Watanabe 2014, 347. Matthiae (1999, 173), in contrast, understands the scene as depicting different gazelles. Clear definitions of continuous, synoptic, sequential (formerly linear), monoscenic narrative can be found in Dehejia 1990 and Dehejia 1997. For a short overview, see Brown 2001.

⁹¹ The connection to the next sequence is created by the overlapping horse tails in the middle of the lower register, giving a hint as to the viewing sequence but being temporally impossible.

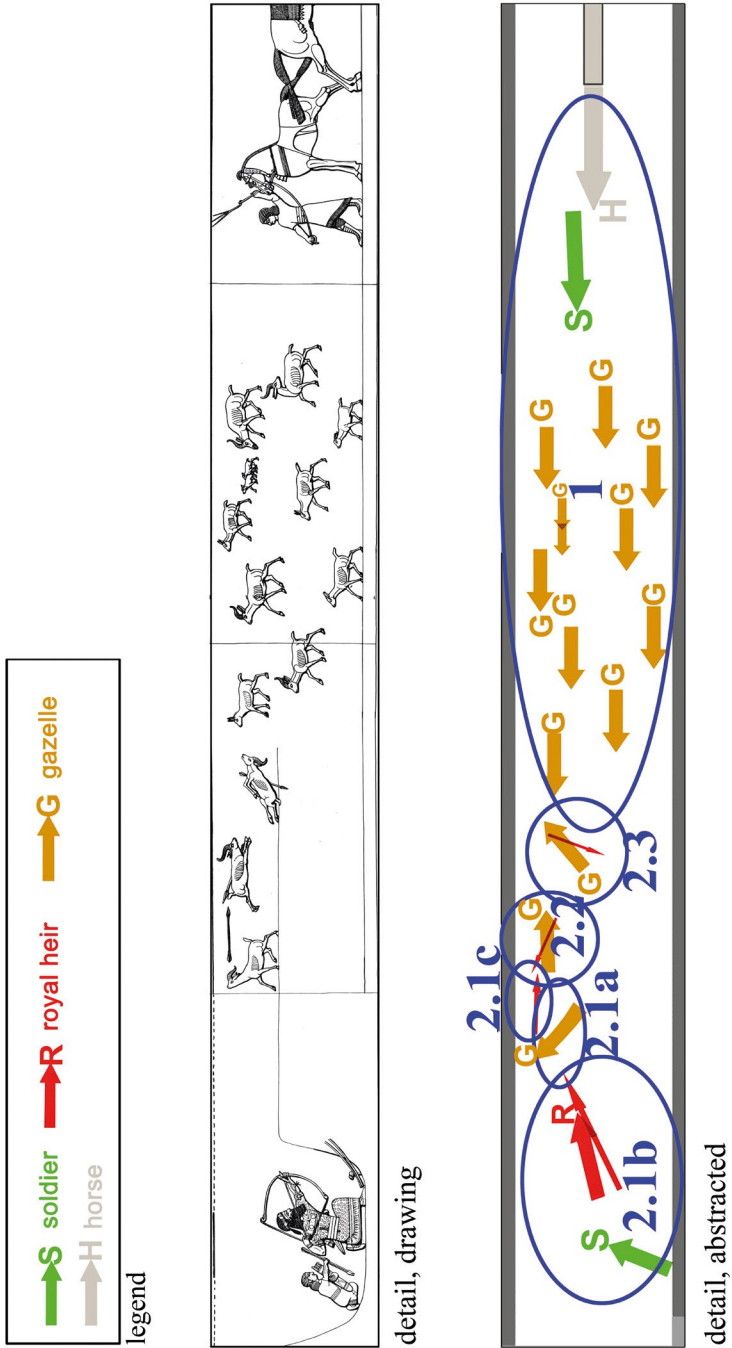


Fig. 8: The lion hunt of room S simplified into actors and actions I: The hunt begins (continuous narrative) (collated by the author based on Meissner and Opitz 1940, pl. 3 and Barnett 1976, pl. XLVI–XLVIII).

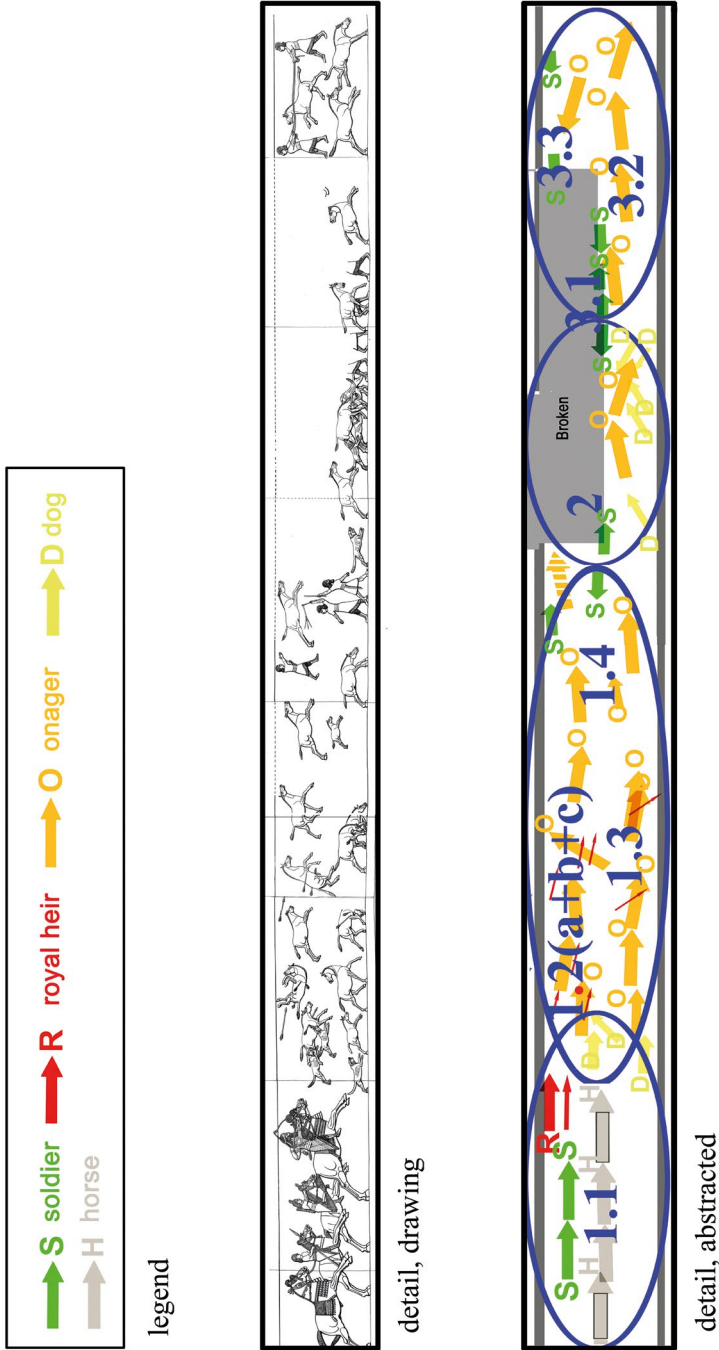


Fig. 9: The lion hunt of room S simplified into actors and actions II: Further progress (continuous [and synoptic?] narrative) (collated by the author based on Meissner and Opitz 1940, pl. 3 and Barnett 1976, pl. XLVI–XLVIII).

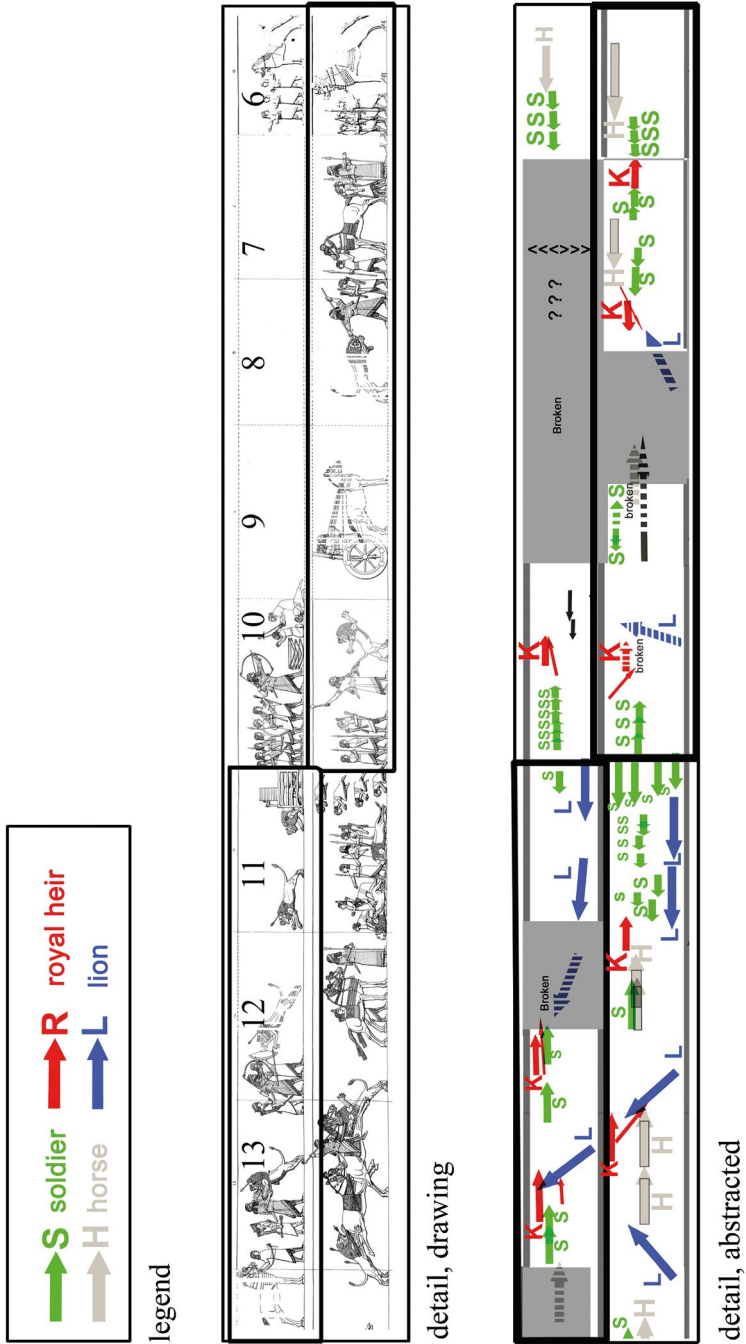


Fig. 10: The lion hunt of room S simplified into actors and actions III: The climax (sequential and continuous narrative) (collated by the author based on Meissner and Opitz 1940, pl. 3 and Barnett 1976, pl. XLVI–XLVIII).

According to Nadali, it was Assurbanipal who first used exactly this image in the orthostat reliefs.⁹² That in turn is put into perspective by the fact that the royal garment incisions in the early reliefs of Ashurnasirpal also show this kind of hunt; in this case, however, it is the hunting heir proving his ability to succeed to the throne.⁹³ While the chariot hunt, however, was the traditional large-scale image, the topos of the king and rampant lion, in a fight *mano-a-mano*, relates explicitly the legitimizing power of the hunt. Still, it is the chariot hunt that ends or even constitutes the royal hunts in Prism E, K 2867+, Hunting Epigraph A, and K 6085.⁹⁴ In contrast, it is the hand-to-hand combat with a dagger (upper register C), with a spear (middle C), and with a mace (middle D) that constitutes parts of the Hunting Epigraph C-D in room S¹.⁹⁵ Supplemented by the mention of the cage release and the hunt by bow and arrow (top D) as well as the libation over the dead lions (bottom D), all those epigraphs of slabs C-D in the upper storey above our room S clearly refer to the visual account they belong to and help the observer to read the succession of events: 1. the release; 2. the bow hunt (unsuccessful); 3. the killing of three lions by a) dagger, b) spear, and c) mace (the sequence of the spear and mace fight is not beyond doubt); and 4. the libation.⁹⁶

We return to the sequence of the lion hunt: In the upper register, the lion is released from the cage; it moves towards the shooting heir (**Fig. 10**) in a continuous narrative. Subsequently, the hero stabs the lion with a sword; the lion itself is already pierced by three arrows. In an act of more, yet not quite, linear-sequential storytelling, using the registers as frames, we move down to the middle where the heir hunts a lion, once with a spear and once with a mace. As the Hunting Epigraph C mentioned above reveals, the killing must not have been successful the first time:

Excerpt of a Hunting epigraph from the Upper story, slab C (top):

On foot, three times I pierced him with an arrow, (but) he did not die. At the command of Nergal, king of the plain, who granted me strength and manliness, afterward, with the iron dagger from my belt, I stabbed him (and) he died.⁹⁷

⁹² Nadali 2009/2010, 220. Nadali (2009/2010, 222) states that it was “a direct quotation of the iconography of the state stamp seals”.

⁹³ For the heir and the lion hunt, see Schmidt-Colinet 2005.

⁹⁴ Weissert 1997, fig. 1.

⁹⁵ Russell 1999, 201–202 and fig. 70–73.

⁹⁶ There is no reading direction given by the registers; surely the upper registers suggest a reading of events from right to left and the lower one from left to right; thus, the direction of the middle one is open to discussion.

⁹⁷ Russell 1999, 201.

If we further compare the lions hunted on the different reliefs of the North palace, we come across some peculiarities: The number of lions brought to the king in the so-called small lion hunt of the upper chambers (only slabs C–D)⁹⁸ corresponds to their number in the attached epigraphs that explain the progression of the hunt. Therefore, we might consider the two lions brought dead to the heir in room S as the literal number of killed lions. Thus, the heir kills fewer lions than the king in the small hunt, and he kills only a small percentage of the number of lions that the king slays during the large lion hunt of room C. As the textual records prove, these numbers are not arbitrary. Weissert explained that the 18 lions shown in the royal hunt of room C refer to the eighteen gates of Nineveh, ritually defended by the king; each lion embodies the threat to one gate of Nineveh.⁹⁹

Without doubt, our series of events ends with the dead lions brought to the heir to the throne, with no libation shown – this may be the privilege and duty of the king. Whether the scene on the left of the closure really is the temporal antecedent remains speculative. The royal horses led behind the heir in the closing event link it to the preceding mounted hunt (**Fig. 9**).

If we turn back to the overall context, the narrative imagery described here, whether its progress is linear, continuous, or synoptic, is immediately perceived when entering the room from the outside. The central event the attendant looks at is the conclusion of the chain of events. Thus, it forms the centerpiece that also accumulated non-narrative meaning in a narrative visual representation.

The narrativity of the orthostats also depended on the distance of the viewer: the closer one came to the image, the more a single sign representation could be understood in the same ever-present legitimating way as the royal seal. Therefore, it may be both the function – either telling the story or being the presence – and the distance that, among others, determined the narrativity. There might be a narrative sequence spotted from afar, but inside this sequence we may observe a generic and atemporal image of the ruler.

Narration, Description, Reality

Klein and Martínez stated that *Wirklichkeitserzählungen* are temporally organized successions of events with reference to reality¹⁰⁰ that can be divided into three categories: descriptive, normative, and projective narratives. Thus, the terms named in this contribution's title – Narration, Description, and Reality – come close to what the lion hunt images might have once been about. Considering the Assyrian

⁹⁸ Slabs A–B of the upper story are quite broken and the epigraphic evidence only mentions a group of lions: Russell 1999, 201.

⁹⁹ Weissert 1997, 355.

¹⁰⁰ Klein and Martínez 2009, 1.

self-image, the way texts operated, and the manner in which images were made and perceived, they might have not exclusively been understood as descriptive, but as normative narratives of reality constructing the world as it should be. If the king does not live up to it, he loses legitimation and utterly fails.

Thus, the visual world of the lion hunts, either in images or in real life, constitutes the ultimate narrative description of a normative reality.

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