

Image of a God: Adoration of the King's Image in Assyria

There are periods in human history characterized by an intention of worshipping a human ruler. These periods are always connected with the imperial expansion, but the perception of divinity does not always permit a direct deification of an emperor.

I would argue that the evidence represented here proves the existence a form of divinization of an emperor in the Neo-Assyrian Empire in a specific way of worship of the king's image, particularly typical for the periods of the most aggressive territorial expansion.

All the venerated royal images were engraved upon steles or stele-formed rock reliefs. We need to understand the meaning of steles in Mesopotamian tradition in order to comprehend the place of this phenomenon in the Neo-Assyrian period.

Steles are one of the most ancient media in Mesopotamia. In general the aim and place - temples and borders - of their installation remained the same from the beginning of the Mesopotamian civilization until the fall of Babylonia. From the very start and on until a short period of time in 15th c. BCE when the Middle Assyrian kingdom was a weak and mostly not even independent political unit, all steles were commissioned by kings. In the Neo-Assyrian period (10th-7th cc. BCE) the privilege of setting a stele was reserved for kings only with an exception of a short time span of deterioration of the central power within the eighth century BCE. Through all the Mesopotamian history only **royal** steles and rock reliefs bore figurative depictions, but in the Neo-Assyrian period they were actually reduced to the representation of the kings themselves. A typical Assyrian stele or rock relief bore a huge figure of the king in full ceremonial attire performing a gesture of worship towards the gods usually represented by their symbols in the upper part of the depiction (fig. 1).

Steles played an important role in the Neo-Assyrian imperialism. First of all they were installed in the lands conquered or invaded by the Assyrian army, but their function was far more important than a simple manifestation of military presence. In my view imperialism

in Mesopotamia, in which the victory of a king is in first place the victory of his god/dess, without religious imperialism is impossible. It is of course far from the militant monotheism of *jihad* or Crusades, but it is equally far from Hellenistic syncretism. A special kind of 'theological imperialism' existed in Mesopotamia already in the third millennium BCE. The numerous peoples of the Assyrian Empire and its vassals were not deprived of their own gods, but were obliged, as I will show, to worship their mighty oppressors, both divine and royal.

I will argue for the existence of the royal cult in the Neo-Assyrian period and try to define its specific form. As for the imposition of this cult outside Assyria in the provinces, it probably went hand in hand with conquest itself, but what was its expression in reality?

What were the particular expressions of the imposition of the royal Assyrian cult inside and outside the empire we can learn from the sources analyzed below.

Written Sources.

Texts use two terms regarding **royal images**: *šalam/šalmū šarri* and *šalam šarrūtija*. Their literal translation should be very close, but their meanings as *termini technici* differ.

Separate exploration of the usage of these two terms could lead to their more accurate understanding.

A. Šalam šarri (fig. 2)

There are four cases of usage of *šalam šarri* to designate deified royal image:

1. *An image of a king appears in the inventory lists of images of gods in the temples. These lists were part of the ritual text of the New Year festival. Šalam šarri in these lists is written ideographically always **with determinative of divinity**.*

2. In Late Assyrian provincial documents an image of a king occurs as a divine witness to contracts along with gods and humans both **with and without determinative of divinity**.

3. ^dŠalam/Šalmu-šarri as the theophoric element in the name Šalam-šarri-iqbi (an extremely frequent Assyrian name meaning ‘the royal image has commanded’: compare Adad-iqbi etc.) written ideographically or phonetically **with or without divine determinative**.

4. Sacrifices are brought before the image of a king, written **without determinative of divinity**.

A king makes a sacrifice before the king’s image in course of the Assyrian New Year festival:

The king ... sacrifices a sheep(?)
in front(?) the image of the king (he) sacrifices.

The text is not dated, but it most probably belonged to the late 8th c. BCE. Three more cases of sacrifices before the king’s image are known from Babylon: one dating to the reign of Nabonid (545 BCE) and two to Achaemenids (492 and 486 BCE). I believe that this phenomenon emerges in Babylon as a result of the Assyrian influence.

B. Šalam šarrūtija (fig. 3-4).

This expression was interpreted as a royal image ‘on stelae or rock reliefs representing stelae, referring to the entire monument’, but more precise and literally translation is the “image of my kingly self”, or better, “image of my (office of) kingship”. The term *šalam šarrūtija* was not necessarily applied to two-dimensional reliefs, but could

also be used regarding statues in the round. The identical iconography of rock reliefs and stelas is described by the same term *šalam šarrūtija*.

A revered *šalam šarrūtija* appears in Assyrian royal inscriptions in one particular situation. It is installed by a victorious king in a temple or sacred place of a conquered city.

1) The most discussed and also the most explicit example of *šalam šarrūtija* as a deified royal image is found in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser III (727-744 BCE). It specifically stresses the fact that the royal image was counted among the gods of the land of Gaza:

The image of the ((great)) gods, my lords and the image of my (office of) kingship (*šalam šarrūtija*) out of gold I fashioned. In the palace/temple of Gaza [I set it up]. I counted it among the gods of their land.

Nevertheless the practice of the appointment of a *šalam šarrūtija* among the gods of the conquered land was started by Assyrian kings much earlier, when the grounds and the guide lines of the empire were being laid. The inscriptions of Shalmaneser III provide four further examples of *šalam šarrūtija* being installed in temples and sacred places:

2) In the year 856 BCE the outmost north-west point was reached in the campaign east of the Upper Euphrates. The *šalam šarrūtija* was placed in this land in a sacred plot of the city of Saluria:

I made a colossal image of my (office of) kingship (*šalam šarrūtija*), inscribed thereon the praise of Ashur, great lord, my lord, and the victory of my might (and) set (it) up in the lower city of Saluria, in (its) sacred place.

3) In the same 856 BCE on the campaign to Urartu Assyrians reached ‘the Sea of Nairi’ (Lake Van or Urmia) and placed the *šalam šarrūtija* in the city temple:

I made a colossal image of my (office of) kingship (*šalam šarrūtija*), (and) inscribed thereon the praise of Ashur, the great lord, my lord, and the victorious conquests which I had been achieving in the land of Nairi, (and) placed (it) in the middle of his city in his temple.

4) In 838/7 BCE the *šalam šarrūtija* is set in a temple at the city of Maruba in Phoenicia:

A colossal image of my (office of) kingship (*šalam šarrutija*) in Maruba, his (Ba'il, king of Tyre – *N.M.*) fortified city, in its temple I placed.

5) Late in the year 828-827 BCE, campaign to the land of Patin, the *šalam šarrūtija* is erected in the 'house of gods' at the city of Kinalua:

Dajjan-Aššur, the field marshal... created a colossal image of my (office of) kingship (*šalam šarrutija*), placed (it) in Kunalua, his (i.e. the defeated king's – *N.M.*) royal city, in the house of his (i.e. the defeated king's – *N.M.*) gods.

Moreover already Shalmaneser III's father, Ashurnasirpal II (883-859), uses another term for royal image (*šalam bunnannija* – lit. 'the image of my likeness') in a literary text describing the same action of its installation in the temple of a client king in the conquered city. This indicates that the practice of installing the revered royal image at the temples of the conquered lands originated in this initial period of the Assyrian expansion:

The city Carchemish I(!) approached, which is in the land of Hatti, in order (to show) the strength of my rule the possessions of his palace I plundered. A valuable image of my likeness, for his temple I glorified.

Thus, the textual evidence unequivocally shows that royal images were adored in the same manner as were images of gods. Nevertheless, there is a sufficient difference in the use of the terms *šalam/šalmu šarri* and *šalam šarrūtija*.

In all but one attestations of ^d*šalam šarri* both in the Assyrian heartland and in the provinces are not associated with any specific king. They belong to the Late Assyrian period (8th-7th cc. BCE). The tradition of the sacrifices to the king's images also goes on later in the Late Babylonian-Achaemenid periods.

The situation is different with the worshiped *šalam šarrūtija*, established in the conquered lands. The glorious conqueror-king erects the ‘image of his (office of) kingship’. This practice starts with Ashurnasirpal II and ends in the time of Tiglath-Pileser III and is characteristic of the most periods of the most aggressive of imperial expansion of the early Neo-Assyrian period.

Archaeological and Pictorial Evidence

Two patterns of displaying the cult of the royal image occur in these kinds of sources. The first one reveals a stationary altar installed before a stele. The second represents religious rites performed before the royal effigy engraved upon a stele or a rock relief.

Example 1. Stele of Ashurnasirpal II with an altar in front of it

This is the only evidence for the cult of a royal image, preserved in the archaeological record. While excavating the Ninurta temple at Nimrud (Calah), a stele of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE), standing to the right of the temple’s portal (fig. 5) was uncovered. It is a typical monument of its kind (fig. 6). Before the stele was an altar. The year of the creation of the stele is 879 BCE.

Example 2. The relief of Ashurbanipal (c.649 BCE; fig. 7)

The relief from Northern palace of Ashurbanipal (669-26 BCE) is a depiction of the above described evidence found in the archaeological record (example 1; figs. 5-6). A crenellated altar is standing in a path before a stele adjacent to or carved upon a wall of a separate structure at the entrance to a freestanding building represented by a columned façade (fig. 8). This type of a building, is usually interpreted as temples or as parts of them. An arched aqueduct connects the complex atop the hill (fig. 9) with a triple walled city identified as Nineveh.

The important conclusion here is that adoration of the king's effigy in a form of relief sculptured upon a stele, and erected at the entrance to a temple, existed in the Assyrian heartland at the rise as well as at the culmination of the empire. The expressions of this phenomenon were identical: an altar in front of royal stelae.

Example 3. Balawat Gates (848 BCE), band X (fig. 10).

The band depicts an expedition to what the Assyrians considered to be the source of the Tigris (853/2 BCE). The lower register contains a scene showing the cutting of a royal effigy above the entrance to the Tigris tunnel, which Assyrians believed to be a source of the river. A relief designed as a stele with a king's image is being chiseled by an artist represented at work. Below it a rectangular object emerges from the waters of the stream, probably representing an altar (fig. 11). Two soldiers drive a sacrificial bull and a ram towards the cave mouth with the freshly executed image of Shalmaneser III. The king himself arrives behind them riding a horse, followed by his chariot and by his army.

Example 4. Balawat Gates (848 BCE), band I.

Among the representations of Shalmaneser III's Urartian campaign (859/8 BCE) there is a scene (figs. 12-13) of sacrificial rites performed in front of the royal stele and symbols of gods on the shore of the 'Sea of Nairi' (Lake Van or Urmia).

The ceremony represented on this band includes libation, offerings, animal sacrifice and incense burning performed by the king and three priests, and accompanied by music. The king's particular part in this ritual is the libation. The offerings are presented to **the royal stele** and the divine emblems. The pictorial narrative unequivocally displays the symbols of royalty and divinity as equally venerated.

Two more representations describe a picture of the same kind as that on Balawat Band I, but in abbreviated form.

Example 5. Fragment of a bronze band N (fig. 14), most probably from Balawat.

This representation resembles closely that of the Band I in Example 4. This piece is often attributed to the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III as connected to his march against Tyre and Sidon in the course of campaign to the Mediterranean Sea coast (858 BCE). A conventional effigy of the king is depicted upon an object shaped as a stele. In front of it stand two divine symbols and an incense burner. The rest of the band is broken away.

Example 6. Cylinder seal (fig. 15). Sargon II's time (722-705).

This seal bears an image of a beardless Assyrian official, with his hand raised in a gesture of prayer before the king's image upon a stele. Between the stele and the worshiper is a stylized tree with a winged disk which hovers above it. The tree and the winged disks are divine symbols as well as are the disks on posts on the bands I and N. Behind the worshiper a goat and two bush-looking objects are represented. They might be an abbreviated form of a sacrificial fire or incense burner, while the goat symbolizes an animal offering.

The most important feature in examples 4-6 is the representation of the king's image **worshiped along with the divine symbols**. The visual evidence provided here shows that the perception of the act of the veneration of the steles and divine symbols was the same as that of the adoration of gods, which is especially strengthened by the almost identical depictions of the Balawat Gates, band I and of the White Obelisk.

Unlike the textual evidence, the depictions and practice (example 1) of the veneration of a royal effigy under Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III (9th c. BCE) do not differ from those of the Assyrian Sargonids (8th-7th cc. BCE).

Conclusions

The divine entity of kingship, which descended from heaven, was fundamental to the Mesopotamian world view from the earliest days. A king of flesh and blood was deified only

in the most ancient times and for very short periods. It finds its expression in art only during the reign of Naram-Sin of Akkad and the Ur III dynasty – the first Mesopotamian empires. But if Naram-Sin explicitly demonstrated his divinity by pictorial means, it is by representing himself wearing the horned crown of gods (fig. 16): the kings of Ur III did it in much more modest and indirect ways.

Neo-Assyrian kings never officially deified themselves. In the Neo-Assyrian period a very specific form of adoration of royalty in a form of a king's image - *šalam šarrūtija* - can be traced. The king's effigy upon steles symbolized the very essence of the divine royal power and was venerated as such. But the Assyrian *šalam šarrūtija* is a depiction of the king in his certain function: a king performing by the command of gods his office of kingship, which is first and foremost the adoration of the gods.

Nevertheless, the epigraphs accompanying the depictions, which represent stelae or rock reliefs, call them *šalam šarrūtija*, so it is textual evidence pointing to the iconography of those monuments as an image of the king in his royal office and definitely not as an image of gods. There are rock reliefs that do not even bear divine emblems, but only the effigy of the king in gesture of worship. So the one, which is represented in the process of being carved on Band X of the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III (fig. 17). The same situation is found in the visual depictions of steles, which are in miniature, and have only the figure of the king visible, not the divine symbols. The king is the main protagonist of the imagery of steles and rock reliefs and though presented in gesture of adoration, he is the active party, and not the gods, who have been reduced to the scale of emblems.

The representations of Bands I and N, as well as the seal, demonstrate the *šalam šarrūtija* being worshiped along with the divine symbols. Let us examine the existence of further parallelism between those two categories of objects.

There are numerous archaeological records of installing royal stelae at the sides of gateways and entrances. It is supported by the visual sources, including those discussed above (figs. 5-15). The wall relief of Sargon's II shows the stele with the image of the founder of the besieged city, Tiglath-Pileser III set up at its gates (fig.18).

The extremely damaged relief (fig. 19) of Ashurbanipal (669-26 BCE) displays the divine emblems flanking the gate of a palace or a temple being worshiped in exactly the same manner as are those placed together with the royal image on Band I (fig. 12-13).

The images upon the royal stelae/rock reliefs being an object of cult suggest that they were deified. The monuments bearing those images have been treated as sacral themselves. The appearance of stelae/rock reliefs alongside divine symbols and in situations in which divine symbols appear indicate parallelism between the significance and function of the divine emblems and the stelae. Deification of the cult symbols of gods was widely practiced in all ancient Near Eastern religions. The depiction of the king upon a stela/rock relief is *šalam šarrūtija*, 'a king in his office of kingship', a king performing his kingly obligations – **the symbol of kingship itself**. That is why a king is represented in a gesture of worship before gods, who delegated to him his office and whose worship is his primary and most important duty.

Both pictorial and written sources show that the images (*šalam šarrūtija*) of the living king, the conqueror were installed in the palaces, temples and the most sacral geographical spots in the lands of their vassals by Ashurnasirpal II, Shalmaneser III and Tiglath-Pileser III in the periods of the construction of the Assyrian Empire.

The *šalam šarri*, probably in the form of a stele, was revered in the temples of the Assyrian heartland also in the time of the Sargonids (8th -7th cc. BCE). It was the abstract symbol of divine kingship, since it is almost never known which king is actually aimed at.

The obscurity of the texts on this matter, which actually never mention the name of a king represented by *šalam šarri* suggests that it was not of importance.

In the western tradition the steles were adored, which is well evidenced by the Bible and other sources. The West Semitic adoration of stones was well known in Mesopotamia. Before the Neo-Assyrian period we do not have any direct evidence of worshipping the steles in Mesopotamia itself, though they were installed within the sacred area of the temple since the earliest periods. It occurs to me that one hand the phenomenon of cult of royal steles in the Neo-Assyrian Empire was influenced by the West-Semitic practices and on the other it was one of the aspects of the Assyrian religious imperialism using as its tool habits of the new vassals.

Assyrian propaganda, especially visual, changes in provinces in accordance with local conditions. It seems correct that major differences existed also between Assyria itself and its provinces and vassal countries in matter of adoration of the royal image. While in Assyria divine kingship was worshiped in the rather abstract form of the royal effigy, the very specific king, who subjugated the land, installed there his *šalam šarrūtija* had to be adored by his new subjects.