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B. HROUDA · H. OTTEN · W. VON SODEN

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Another Look at the "Stelenreihen" in Assur.

By P. A. Miglus — Göttingen

During the excavations carried out in Assur by the German archaeological expedition, groups of stone stelae were discovered.¹ They were found in the course of the excavation of the city walls. They were situated inside the double ring of Shalmaneser III's fortifications, at the south turning of the outer wall reaching the New Town (squares hC1111-iB11111 in the plan of the city). About 140 stelae were discovered in an area ca. 100 m long running from east to west. Some of them were found *in situ*, however the majority were found overthrown in the vicinity of their original site. They are generally of similar shape: rectangular, sometimes semicircularly worked in the upper part. Their height varies, the average being approximately 2 m. The tallest stele was 4.47 m high. The majority of stelae bear inscriptions on a small rectangular surface. In each case the text starts with the words: *šalam* PN "image of PN" or *ša* PN "belonging to PN". Then, the functions performed by the respective person are enumerated and most frequently the names of his father (and grandfather) follow. A few inscriptions mention the name only, preceded by *šalam* or the determinative pronoun *ša*. The oldest stele dates from the 14th cent. B.C., the latest from the 7th. It turned out that the stelae grouped in the northern part of the area were, with three exceptions, of Assyrian kings. The identity of 16 has been established. The stelae of high state officials were situated in the southern area.

The above description presents the situation encountered by the excavators. We will now discuss the various interpretations of the whole group.

¹ W. Andrae, *Die Stelenreihen in Assur* WDOG 24 (1913). Some remarks on the chronology and identification of the objects may be found in: H. A. Fine, *Studies in Middle-Assyrian Chronology and Religion*, in: *HUCA* 24 (1952/53) 187-273; 25 (1954) 107-168; C. Saporetti, *Onomastica medio-assiara* = *StudPohl* 6 (1970); *Some Considerations on the Stelae of Assur*, *Assur* 1/2 (1974) 1-8.

W. Andrae, who discovered the group, presented an interesting but highly hypothetical interpretation.² He stated that the stelae arranged in two rows had formed a monumental calendar. The northern row composed a list of kings, while the southern one was a corresponding list of eponyms. The calendar had a double function: a monument constructed gradually throughout centuries, and a device of purely practical use for the inhabitants, i. e. to help to count the years in trade contracts.

On the other hand, W. F. Albright thought that the stelae had been the posthumous monuments of the kings and aristocracy.³ In his work on the neo-Assyrian kings' stelae, H. Genge⁴ came to the conclusion that they had been, together with other forms of recording names, one of various means serving the aim of attaining immortality through magical practices. This problem has also been discussed at length by J. V. Canby.⁵ She tried to find links between the stelae from Assur and those discovered on several sites in Syria and Palestine such as Gezer, Hazor, Tell Halaf, Tell Huēra, Byblos. Formal similarity of the stelae led her to the conclusion that they all had a common function and, based on the western stelae, she also identified those from Assur with the biblical *maššēbôt*. She proposes that the custom might have penetrated to Assur from the west during the foundation of the city, and it would have survived as something outstanding if viewed against the culture of Mesopotamia. As far as their function is concerned, Canby thinks that the stelae commemorated important historical events.⁶

These explanations are not very convincing, since in each case only part of the complete archaeological context of the stelae has been taken into consideration. Let us start with Andrae's hypothesis. He interprets the southern row of the stelae, belonging to state officials, to be the stelae of eponyms — *limmu*. The *limmu* office was always bestowed on the highest officials by order of rank. Hence it is not surprising that persons whose names are

² W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur* (1938; 1977²) 52. 103–108 (81 f, 145–151²).

³ *The High Place in Ancient Palestine*, in: *Suppl. VT 4* (1957) 243. Albright held the same view as E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, I/2 (1913³) 423 f.

⁴ *Stelen neuassyrischer Könige*, I (1965) VI ff, XX.

⁵ The "Stelenreihen" at Assur, Tell Halaf and *maššēbôt*, in: *Iraq* 38 (1976) 113–128.

⁶ *ibid.* 128.

found on the stelae, are also known as *limmu* from other documents. In the inscriptions on the stelae themselves, however, there is no mention of this office held by a given person.

There were about 100 stelae of officials found in the area in question. Assuming that the custom dated back to the 15/14th c., one would expect that almost 700 stelae had been erected there. Since only 100 were found, 600 would have been destroyed or removed. No fragments of such missing stelae have been found in the area of the city and its surroundings. It should also be noticed that the stelae were not placed in chronological order, against the assumption of the discoverers.⁷

According to Andrae's supposition, the rows of stelae were set up gradually, the new stones being added during the lifetime of a given king or official. The main, eastern, part of the group of officials' stelae dates from the period of Eriba-Adad I to Tiglathpileser I. This group contained 41 stelae out of which 32 can be dated. They were found on the same level in middle-Assyrian context, below neo-Assyrian levels. A considerable number of stelae were discovered in the foundations of Shalmaneser III's walls. Those situated towards the east were found under the floors of houses. There were many graves in the neo-Assyrian level. During this period, the building level of the city rose here by 1-2 m.⁸ The second group of 17 stelae was situated to the north-west of the first group in the neo-Assyrian level. 9 steles can be dated - the oldest to 873, the latest to 748 or 738 B.C.⁹

It clearly follows that the southern row of stelae never existed as a whole because those dating from the 2nd millenium were located beneath those of the neo-Assyrian period. It is not certain whether any stelae of officials were erected in the 7th c. B.C. during the rule of the Sargonids. The publication gives an indescisive description of the stratification of the western area. Table V/4 in WVDOG 24¹⁰ shows that the oldest neo-Assyrian stele (no. 50) was found below the late-Assyrian level. It follows that the stelae of the 9th and 8th centuries also were found low later ones.

⁷ Saporetti, Assur 1/2, 8.

⁸ W. Andrae, Die Festungswerke von Assur = WVDOG 23 (1913) 138.

⁹ The dates are from the list of eponyms. Adad-bél-ukin to whom stele no. 37 belonged, was an eponym twice. See A. Ungnad, Die Eponymen der Stelenreihe, in: RIA II (1938) 439.

¹⁰ = Andrae, WVDOG 23, Pl. LII/4.

The situation is different in the case of the kings' stelae. All of them (with two exceptions) were found on the same level. They were situated on the bed-rock in the western part of the row upon the remains of the old-Assyrian fortifications in the east. The oldest of the stelae identified was that of Adad-narāri I and the latest – of Assur-nāšir-apli II. The row ended with three stelae of women: queen Sammū-ramat and two ladies-in-waiting of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal. It is difficult to decide when the stelae here were set up. The area seems to have been levelled for that purpose. Most probably, this happened in the neo-Assyrian period. The place where stelae 27 and 28 were found justifies such a supposition. Stele 27 belongs to Eriba-Adad II.¹¹ Stele 28 has not been identified because its inscription is unintelligible. Both stelae were situated on approximately the same level with the middle-Assyrian stelae of officials. It follows that originally all stelae – those of kings and of state officials – had been on the same level. The kings' stelae had then been taken away to a new place. The terminus post quem would be Eriba-Adad II's reign (1055–1054 B.C.), the other limit being the period of the construction of Shalmaneser III's walls. Since the area where the officials' stelae had been situated was built over with the walls, it seems possible that at that date the kings' stelae were transported to the new site prepared in advance, within the double ring of walls where the town area did not reach.

The question arises as to the previous site of the kings' stelae. The line of the city walls dating before the 9th c. B.C. may help to clarify the issue. In the area examined, no remains of walls have been found.¹² Shalmaneser III's fortifications repeated the line of the old walls of the New Town. Thus, the latter must have continued towards the north from the point where Shalmaneser's walls turned to the west and joined the outer wall. Since the Inner Town had a single ring of fortifications in this earlier period, the New Town's wall most probably had to join it somewhere toward the west from tower no. 33. If at that time the kings' stelae had been set up in the place where they were later discovered, they would have been outside the walls, while the officials' stelae would have been inside. This is hardly possible. Thus, it should be assumed

¹¹ Andrae supposed the stele was Eriba-Adad I's (WVDOG 24, 41), but B. Meissner has proved that it belonged to Eriba-Adad II (AOB I 38 n. 5).

¹² Andrae, WVDOG 23, 136.

that before the foundation of Shalmaneser III's walls, all the stelae must have been situated to the east of the stretch joining tower no. 33 and the corner of the outer walls, where the stelae 27 and 28 were found.

To sum up the following arguments can be put forward to disprove the theories of the "Stelenreihen" from Assur representing either a calendar or commemorating historical events:

- no such objects are mentioned in historical sources;¹³
- the row of the officials' stelae did not contain all Assyrian eponyms for the 14th–8th centuries B.C. (or 7th c., however the only two stelae from this century [no. 1 and no. 4] are of women).
- no proper care was taken of the monuments. The difference in treatment of the kings' and officials' stelae is striking;
- there was no attempt to preserve the whole group;
- there never existed two correlated rows of stelae. We may refer only to different groups of stelae.

What then was the function of the stelae? We can reject the theory of posthumous monuments. Nothing in the inscriptions would suggest such an interpretation. What is more, the stelae were not accompanied by any burials. Nor did such a custom exist in any other Assyrian town. On the other hand, linking the stelae from Assur with those from Syria and Palestine seems to be based on a misunderstanding. The proposed ties of Assur with the west, particularly of religious and traditional character, are based on very weak foundation and they are very speculative.¹⁴ The only common feature of the stelae is their formal similarity. However, the Assyrian stelae, contrary to those from the west, bear inscriptions. If we were to connect the tradition with strong western influence at the time of the foundation of the town, how, then, could we account for a "revival" of an ancestors' custom in the middle-Assyrian period, after an interruption of several hundred years?

Near the area where the stelae were erected, several stone bases were found. They are cubical in shape with a deep hole in the middle. They served as bases for the stelae. Several officials' stelae had narrow ledges which were fixed in a base. Other well

¹³ E. Weidner supposed that the rows of stelae were called *šimārâte*: Die Feldzüge und Bauten Tiglatpileser's I., in: AIO 18 (1957/58) 346, n. 19. This term appears in the inscription of Tiglath-pileser I about the rebuilding of the walls of the New Town (KAH II 68; AIO 18. 344; ARI II LXXXVII 3. 39). See W. v. Soden, AHw. 1237 *šimaru* ("= *šigaru*?").

¹⁴ H. Lewy, Assyria c. 2600–1816 B.C., in: CAH I Ch. XXV (1966) 40.

preserved stelae had a carefully levelled bottom surface and their lower part tended to be wider. This proves that they were to be set up on a levelled hard surface. However, they were found sunk into the ground. The stone bases of the neo-Assyrian officials' stelae were gathered nearby. This clearly shows that the place where the stelae were found was not their original site. The so-called rows of stelae in Ashur were groups of objects whose function and meaning were originally connected with an entirely different place.

It is difficult to say, with any degree of certainty, where that place has to be looked for. We can only put forward some suggestions. The rows of stelae may represent the grand *favissa*, a collection of objects placed originally in a temple. The majority of inscriptions on the stelae starts with the word *šalmu* – “statue, picture, image”.¹⁵ The stelae were to represent the people whose names were written down on them. Their form did not change through the centuries and must have been connected with a very strong, definite tradition. Only the latest stele – of the lady-in-waiting from Ashurbanipal's court – had an image embossed on it, and there was also one statue found among the kings' steles. There are some records of the *šalmu* of the kings or other persons which were usually kept in temples. The text “The Description of the Town”¹⁶ tells us that, e.g., there has been a *šalam Tukulti-apil-Esarra* in Ashur's temple (l. 12). The same text describes the kings' *šalmāni* in other temples of the town (^dALAM.LUGAL l. 57, 60, 80, 105). In the so-called King's Ritual,¹⁷ ‘stones’ are mentioned as gifts for the *š. š[a šarrī]* (ii 8) and *š.^(més) ša ekalli* (ii 7, iii 29). KAR 214 (VAT 10126)¹⁸ mentions *š.^{més} ša Ekur š.^{més} ša bit Aššur* (i 30), *š.^{més} ša malkē u rubē š.^{més} ša hupšē* (i 19f).¹⁹ The stelae may have performed a function similar to the one of adorants and statues set up in temples. With the number of the stelae constantly growing from time to time some of them were removed from the temple. Since it would have been improper to destroy them or to use them as building material they were put near the walls, where the town area did not reach.

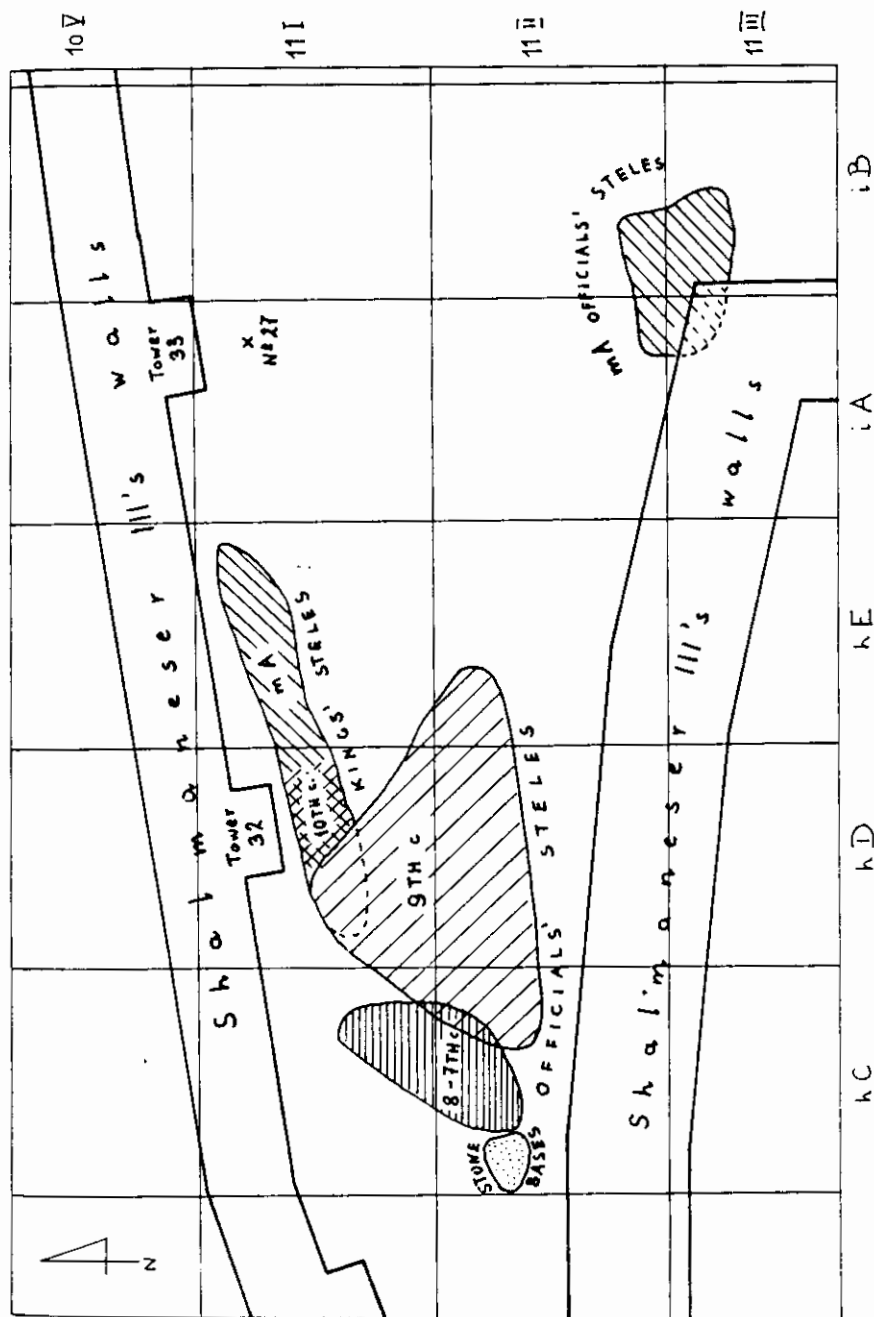
¹⁵ AHW. 1078 *šalmu(m)* II.

¹⁶ KAV 42; R. Frankena, *Tākultu* (1954) 122–127; B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel* = *StPohl* 10/II (1981) T 146–166.

¹⁷ K. F. Müller, *Das assyrische Ritual I: Texte zum assyrischen Königsritual* = *MVAG* 41/3 (1937) 4–58.

¹⁸ Frankena, *Tākultu* 25.

¹⁹ Müller suggested: “Vielleicht sind alle diese Bilder als *šalmē ša ekalli* zusammengefaßt worden: ‘Bilder von Personen des Hofes.’” (*MVAG* 41/3, 27).



Location of the "rows of stelae" (after WVDOG 24, pls. I-III).

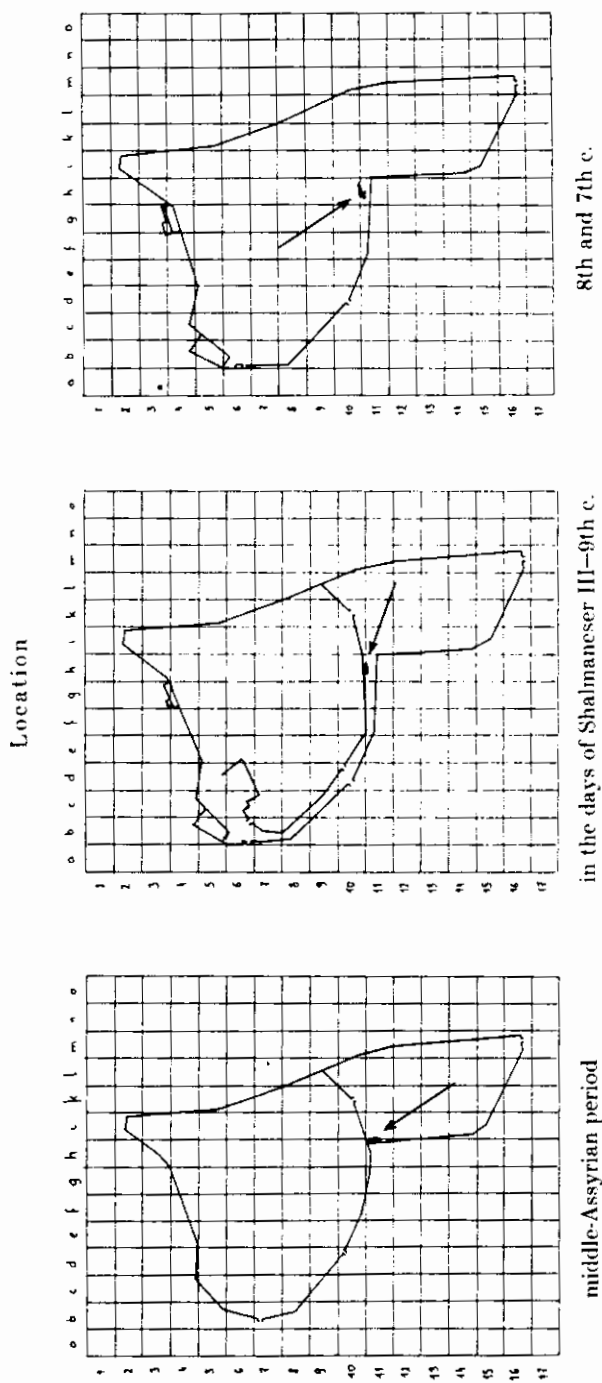


Figure 2