

THE ASSYRIAN TRIBUTE AND ITS DEPICTION

Research in the ideology of the Neo-Assyrian empire

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In Mesopotamian art the depiction of tribute scenes did not develop as a well-defined and easily recognizable topic before the Neo-Assyrian empire, more specifically, it appeared between the 9th and 8th century B.C. During this period the Assyrians became the most powerful political force in the Ancient Near East through their vast military expansion.

The tribute scenes in Assyrian art show the exact moment when the vassal delivers the tribute before the Assyrian king. By offering the tribute-items in connection with the vassal's obligatory posture of submission (e.g. kissing the king's feet) the pictorial representation of this act was utilizable extensively for the political ideology of the Assyrian empire. Moreover, the topic of delivering tribute propagandized the superiority of the Assyrian kingship as well as the religious worldview and the Assyrian claim of power.

From the point of view of contemporary foreign policy, tribute was an elementary component of a bilateral treaty between two disproportionately political entities which defined the *modus vivendi* between them. The delivery of tribute was the material fulfillment of the treaty which the inferior party of the treaty - the vassal - had to perform to the superior party of the treaty - the Assyrian king as the first representative of the empire. For this the vassal received a range of services and benefits, above all the guarantee of a certain sovereignty which allowed a certain freedom of action. This sovereignty is the decisive difference to conquered lands which the Assyrians transformed into the status of a province without any independence. Consequently, provinces were considered to be Assyrian property and their naturalized inhabitants had to pay taxes to the Assyrian administration.

The basis for the validity of the treaty was an oath (*adê*) solemnly declared by the vassal. A correctly delivered tribute renewed the vassal's relationship to the Assyrian king. But every breach of this oath (e.g. the refusal of tribute) subsequently annulled the agreed *status quo* between the treaty parties.

The composition of tribute scenes in Neo-Assyrian art consists of several parts: on one side is the receiving part consisting of the Assyrian king and his bodyguards, on the other side is the delivering part consisting of the vassal and the tribute-bearers. Between the king and his vassal appears a group of Assyrian officials who introduce the vassal and his delegation to the king. The leading person of this group might be the crown prince or the commander-in-chief (*turtān*). Another significant person is a beardless official, presumably a eunuch, who signals the tribute delegation to step forward by waving his left arm.

The members of the tribute delegation are clearly recognizable as foreigners by their clothing, and their hair- and beardstyles. They appear in long lines according to a strict hierarchy. The wide variety of the tribute products range from precious items (e.g. jewelry, metal in the form of ingots), exotic animals (e.g. all kinds of apes, elephants), weapons (e.g. spears, bows, helmets) to raw materials (e.g. ivory tusks, timber) as well as livestock (e.g. sheep, cattle, horses, camels). According to the written sources, the so-called tribute-lists, people as well were transferred, such as the children of the vassal as hostages for the Assyrian king or specialized soldiers and prisoners of war.

There are two different ways that the delivery of tribute is displayed in Assyrian art: one way was to deliver the items to the Assyrians during one of their numerous military campaigns, the other was the annual tribute which was offered in the Assyrian capital or the current residence of the Assyrian king. This is indicated by an architectural structure in the background of the scene. It is obvious from the images (e.g. palace reliefs) and the records of war that the appearance of the Assyrian army was a sufficient reason for the threatened cities or countries to offer tribute voluntarily for their own sake, since the refusal of tribute or military resistance would have caused fierce assaults and sieges by the powerful Assyrian army.

At first glance, the tribute scenes seem to be very similar to the booty scenes in Assyrian art. However, the difference between these two topics is given by the representations themselves: taking booty needs a narrative context of warfare with the Assyrians troops marching up and the siege, battle, and conquest. The booty-items are always carried away by Assyrian soldiers and the defeated enemies are shown in shackles. Contrary to this, tribute scenes represent an independent topic without any need for embedding in a specific context. The tribute deliverers always carry their items by themselves, they are never tied up and sometimes they even carry weapons.

During the 8th century B.C., tribute scenes slowly disappeared as a topic in Assyrian art. According to the increasing territorial expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire, a cordon of tribute-delivering vassal states around the heartland of Assyria was no longer necessary. The Assyrians transformed the conquered land immediately into provinces as an integral part of their empire. Any kind of resistance was met with severe violence. Only at the far ends of the realm were there some loyal allies left who kept up their friendly relationships to Assyria with gifts and audiences with the Assyrian king. Consequently the main emphasis in the official Assyrian art was put on other topics such as the cruel punishment of rebels, the submission of defeated enemies, more elaborated scenes of siege, looting, and triumph. In this very respect, the topic of tribute scenes reflects the development of Assyrian foreign policy in the 1st millennium B.C.

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