Egypt and the Origin of Assyrian Wall Reliefs
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Introductory remarks

The sudden rise of monumental palace art in the shape of wall relief programs in Assyria in the ninth century BCE under Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) in his North-West Palace of Kalhu (modern Nimrud) has long interested scholars.¹ It has been common practice to speak of the Syrian and Anatolian cultural spheres as the source of inspiration for these relief programs (e.g. Winter 1982, Gilibert 2004). The issue has rather revolved around to what extent the Assyrians copied or transformed these Syrian-Anatolian influences (e.g. Gerlach 2000, Orlamünde 2011). The perspective that these influences may be indirect, then having Egypt as their ultimate source, has less often been brought up (but see Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951: 172). Monumental relief programs in Egyptian palaces and temples were well developed in the New Kingdom (1550-1069), and because of this fact and Egypt’s proximity, it is natural to take a closer look on this art when discussing the origins of Assyrian relief programs.

This paper contributes, in all modesty, to the debate by making a comparison out of an iconographic motif that is attested both from ancient Egypt and Assyria, namely “the siege scene” (Figs. 1-2). The comparative case is a most-likely-to-be-similar one. Thus, if it can be proved that there are substantial divergences between the two scenes, then the idea of Egypt as the ultimate source of inspiration for Assyrian art will be somewhat undermined. In case of the alternative outcome, the idea in question will appear as a credible explanatory force. The Egyptian scene given below (Fig. 1) is taken from the art of the famous ruler Ramesses II (1279-1213) who is known for his ample monumental art and whose art in its grandeur can be seen as a good representative of Egyptian palace art, conveying a high point. The Assyrian scene (Fig. 2) is, for evident reasons, taken from the palace art of Ashurnasirpal II. It is my hope that this paper will bring more light on the issue of the latter art’s origins.

A scene from Egyptian royal iconography

The scene below (Westrin 1907: pl. Till art. VI Egypten²) represents the Egyptian king Ramesses II and his army besiege the city of Dapur, situated in Syria but controlled by the rivalling Hittite empire (Kitchen 1998: 56). It is part of a tableau showing the gradual defeat of the polity in question, and it was laid out in relief on several of Ramesses II’s monuments, such as his mortuary temple Ramesseum, and is accompanied by captions and text narratives. As for the aftermath of the siege, Ramesses II narrates that he raised a statue of himself and established a garrison in the conquered city of Dapur (Meyer 1965: 454-71). The siege of Dapur was part of a larger military campaign of the said king around 1270 BCE which took him and his army past Palestine and well into Syria, to the cities of Dapur and Tunip, capturing the city of Kadesh where Ramesses II nearly had suffered a decisive defeat against the Hittite state and its Anatolian and Syrian allies a few years earlier (Grimal 1994: 256-

² Originally illustrated in Erman 1894 after a drawing made by Lepsius.
57). However, the king’s military gains were shortlived, and the Hittites managed to regain their lost Syrian territory, followed by a stalemate that was eventually resolved by a peace treaty between the two parties in 1259 BCE (Meyer 1965: 454-71).

Describing the scene above, Ramesses II is depicted in his chariot while shooting an arrow at the besieged city of Dapur. Meanwhile, enemy soldiers are driven over by his chariot while others flee at his approach. Two of the king’s sons, depicted with the sidelock of youth, are portrayed slaying enemies. Enemy soldiers are illustrated as killed, lying all over the place. Regular Egyptian soldiers, depicted with darker skin and white loincloths, attack the city with various weapons. Two of these soldiers are about to storm the enemy city through a ladder. Defenders of the city are seen falling headlong from the walls, as fleeing, or as sending arrows, spears, and stones. Others, among them women, give away gestures of seeking for mercy. At the foot of the city, a short row of tribute and tributaries are illustrated, pointing to the eventual outcome of the siege. The city is situated on a mountain and is topped by its city emblem. Captions (on the left half) and text narratives (on the right half) accompany the scene.

A scene from Assyrian royal iconography

The scene below (Layard 1853: pl. 13) represents the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II and his army besiege a city somewhere in north-west Mesopotamia. It is part of a visual program, focusing on royal warfare and hunting, which decorated the throne room of the North-West Palace in Kalhu (Meuszyński 1981). This program is made up of reliefs on stone slabs laid out in two registers and separated by a (regularly repeated) text narrative. The (north-)western milieu can be inferred from the looks of the enemy (Wäfler 1975). There are not any captions, and the text narrative, i.e. the so-called Standard Inscription, conveys a general description of the king’s person and deeds and is not a comment on the iconography, making a definite localization of the city under siege unattainable (Grayson 1991: 268-76). The reign of Ashurnasirpal II

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1 It is believed that the warfare scenes depict events from regnal years 6-9 (Russell 1998-2001: 245), and the annals of Ashurnasirpal II can therefore be consulted. The annals on the one hand talk of a campaign towards the city Suru of the land Suhu, situated along the Euphrates and to the south-east of the mouth of the river Habur (Grayson 1991: 212-13, iii 16-26). They also speak of a confronting of a rebellion from the land Luq, the city Hindanu, and the land Suhu, the two firstly mentioned polities situated at or near the mouth of the Habur (Grayson 1991: 213-15, iii 26-48). The relevant passages
was part of a period in which Assyria gradually regained its old borders from the Middle Assyrian period (c. 1500-1000 BCE), consisting roughly speaking of the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris in northern Mesopotamia (Liverani 1982, 1992). The military gains in the west which Ashurnasirpal II claims through his words and images turned out to be temporary, and it was his successor and son, Shalmaneser III, who managed to establish a firm control on north-western Mesopotamia, paving way for the greater Assyrian empire of the seventh century BCE (Liverani 2004: 213).

Describing the scene above, Ashurnasirpal II in his chariot shoots an arrow at a besieged enemy city. The gesture is mirrored by the emblem above the king’s head, hovering in mid-air and representing a god, probably the state god Ashur (Reade 1998: 37). The king shares his chariot with a shield-bearer and the charioteer. No less than four horses pull the royal chariot. An enemy soldier is driven over by the chariot. Regular Assyrian soldiers, characterized by their pointed monochromed helmets, kill a few enemies in close combat. A number of enemy soldiers defend their city by shooting arrows from the city’s crenellations. One enemy seems to fall headlong from the crenellations, while another makes some gesture with his raised right arm.

Similarities and differences

In the following comparison between the two siege scenes in question, I will distinguish between primary parallels (where there are direct similarities), secondary parallels (where similarities exist outside these specific case studies), and no parallels (where there are clear differences). Iconographic elements that have correspondences, but that are given in other ways, are continuously brought up in the evaluating. At the end, I will pay special attention to the differences and their possible backgrounds.

Turning firstly to primary parallels and the royal image, a chariot-bound king assaults a besieged enemy city in both examples. He also drives over enemy soldiers under his chariot and uses his bow weapon in both cases. These iconographic elements are of course of crucial importance. Also common to both scenes are the depictions of princely or regular soldiers stabbing down people of the enemy side. These attack the enemy city relatively lightly armed, and they even use their bare

also refer to enemies who flee by swimming, to boat building, to river crossing, and to royal hunting (Grayson 1991: 212-16, iii 18-19, 29, 33-34, 48-50 resp.), i.e. themes which are actual motifs in the visual program in question (Meuszyński 1981: B17 upper, B11 lower, B9-11 lower, B19-20 resp.).
hands in combat, when seizing the hair of their opponents before stabbing them to death. A most important similarity is that the Egyptians and Assyrians are not represented dead, wounded, or at a disadvantage in combat. Lastly, the fact that both kings are accompanied (and obviously guided and supported) by a divine emblem underscores similarities. While a sun disk with two uraeii hovers above the Egyptian ruler, a winged disk with a horned god inside hovers above the Assyrian one.

Moving on to primary parallels and images of the enemy side, representatives of enemies to the Egyptian and Assyrian kings are illustrated shooting arrows, throwing spears (and seemingly also stones) at the attackers from the crenellations of their besieged city walls. In both scenes, other men make gestures of submission and mercy seeking from these crenellations. Other similarities focus on the circumstance that people from the enemy side are seen falling headlong from the crenellations and on the fact that enemies are depicted “all over the place” in a highly unorganized manner. There is a chaos prevalent where the enemy is and an order where the “rightful” side is. It even looks like city defenders are shooting at each other occasionally, indicative of their chaotic state. The enemies’ horses are illustrated galloping along in panic, with their accompanying cavallerists portrayed as desperately clinging on to them.

Regarding the structure of the scenes and primary parallels, it is worth pointing out that the persons involved in the scenes are depicted in profile,\(^4\) that details of the action are “hanging in the air” and “piled up” rather than portrayed realistically with broad and depth in perspective, and that individual components are not depicted realistically in terms of proportions either. As for the latest feature, the enemy cities are for example illustrated as relatively tiny. It is obvious that the artisans were driven by functional goals rather than by the aim of giving a reflection of reality.\(^5\)

Turning to secondary parallels and the Egyptian and Assyrian sides in their respective conflicts, the circumstance that princes form part of the siege force in the Egyptian scene differentiates it from the Assyrian one with the latter’s seemingly regular soldiers, but there are indeed depictions of (what probably is) crown princes attested from Assyrian art associated with warfare. The “aftermath scene” with the Assyrian king standing face-to-face with the crown prince (alternatively the field marshal) naturally comes to mind (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B7 lower). In any case, the focusing on the king’s sons is in certain respects unique to the monumental art of Ramesses II in the Egyptian sphere (Murnane 1995: 203). The Egyptian scene also includes the portrayal of siege instruments, in this case a ladder upon whom two Egyptian soldiers climb in order to storm the enemy city. However, siege instruments are frequently illustrated elsewhere in Assyrian state art (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B4 lower), and it is simply a coincidence that this particular scene lacks this feature.

Moving on to the enemy side and secondary parallels, the Egyptian scene contains a depiction of an enemy aiming with his spear at an Egyptian from the crenellations. Another iconographic component to mention is the portrayals of enemy heads that protrude from the crenellations. Both these features are however also attested in Assyrian art focusing on warfare (cf. e.g. Schachner 2007: 1 lower). The body gestures of the Egyptian enemies, such as the mercy seeking gesture by fleeing soldiers and the arrow-inflicted and crouching (in their being wounded or killed) enemy soldiers, are also often attested in Assyrian art depicting warfare (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B8 upper). Also the less standard, Dapur-located images of the enemy fleeing by means of a rope down from the crenellations and killed enemies

\(^4\) Note however the exceptions from this general rule, as attested from the Dapur crenellations.

\(^5\) The idea that the ancient artisans were not skilled enough to produce accurate and realistic representations is certainly misguided. Instead, the function of the art was highlighted.
hanging double-folded from the crenellations also have their correspondences in other Assyrian war scenes (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B4 lower). The Egyptian military force is quite heterogenous (by its mixture of princely and regular soldiers) in comparison, but later Assyrian art was to diversify the representation of the Assyrian army, for example by depicting foreign auxiliary troops with their characteristic feather-decorated helmets (cf. e.g. Barnett et al. 1998: room XXXVI). Finally, Dapur is by contrast located on a hill of some sort, but topographically elevated enemy cities are frequent in other Assyrian art (cf. e.g. Schachner 2007: 1 lower).

A special feature is the portraying of women, attested only in the Egyptian scene. Men and women are differentiated by what they are wearing, and some women are illustrated making gestures of submission from the crenellations. However, women are depicted also in Assyrian art on warfare, and both of the said phenomena are characteristic of the Mesopotamian art in question (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B8 lower). One of the Dapur women seems to hold a ritual vessel (a sistrum?) in her hands, and this iconographic component may be in line with the act of mercy seeking accompanied by ritual action. Having said that, Assyrian ivories that depict women who make musical performances from city crenellations are known (cf. e.g. Mallowan and Davies 1970: V:6). Also the depiction of men (?) among the women at the crenellations, jointly making the mercy seeking gesture, has correspondence in other Assyrian art on warfare (cf. e.g. Schachner 2007: 13 upper). Lastly, Egyptian soldiers seem to discipline three tribute bearing Dapur women. Other Assyrian art conveys such motifs (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B5 lower), and the circumstance that women are not represented as direct targets of the warfare is common to Egyptian and Assyrian relief art. The attacking of the enemies’ women was taboo in both cultures.

Regarding structure and secondary parallels, the three-fold partition of the Dapur scene into motifs focusing on fighting outside the besieged city, on actions directly associated with the storming of the city, and on the delivering of tribute (naturally related to the aftermath of the siege) has correspondences also in Assyrian relief art (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B3-5 lower). This spatial or temporal partition of the siege scene is thus not evidence of a fundamental difference in art. Lastly, the Egyptian scene is accompanied by textual captions, presenting the actors and explaining the action, in contrast to the Assyrian one which only has its Standard Inscription. However, other Assyrian art also employs textual captions (cf. e.g. Gerardi 1988).

Turning to real differences and the “good” side, the use of “social perspective” (the relative size of the actors) is striking in the Egyptian scene but absent in the Assyrian one. Relatedly, Ramesses II conducts warfare single-handedly from his chariot, while Ashurnasirpal II shares his chariot with the charioteer and a shield-bearer. Another interesting difference is that the Egyptian ruler wears a crown (the so-called “blue crown”) that is often tied to military occasions, although it can not be considered as a genuine “war crown” (Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 74-75). The Assyrian ruler often wears his crown in question in cultic contexts (cf. e.g. Meuszyński 1981: B13).

Moving on, the chariot horses of Ramesses II are behaving somewhat wildly and unorderly, in contrast to the calm and forceful appearance of the Assyrian horses. Perhaps the intent behind the Egyptian horse motif was to convey the message that Ramesses II accomplished his military feat in spite of this external obstacle.

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6 This emasculation of the male enemy is common in Assyrian propaganda (Karlsson 2013: 270-71, 2016: 228-42). It naturally served to belittle the opponents of the Assyrian king.

7 Whether this taboo was kept in real life, outside the propaganda sphere, is of course another question. It is easy to suspect that also ancient warfare was accompanied by the atrocity of rape.
As for actual differences and the enemy side, the Egyptian scene differentiates the combatants not the least by means of varying skin colour, not only when it comes to ethnicity but also with regards to sex (Robins 1997: 180). This differentiation is evidently not found in Assyrian art (cf. Wäfler 1975). In the Dapur scene the Egyptians have a darker skin than the Syrians, and in Egyptian iconography generally men have darker skin (red-brown) than women (yellow). Another interesting difference is that the meticulous delineating of muscles is very marked in the Assyrian scene but largely absent in the Egyptian one. The attacking of the enemies’ horses with arrows is also something which differentiates the Egyptian scene from the Assyrian one. Finally, the great city emblem which adorns the besieged city in the Egyptian scene is, to my knowledge, unattested as a motif in Assyrian art.

How should we understand these (what I suspect to be meaningful) differences? It has often been concluded that the position of the king in Egypt was markedly stronger than that in Assyria (cf. e.g. Frankfort 1948). The above noted social perspective and the motif of the sole king in chariot can be explained by these varying ideological positions. It should be said though that there are some pictures of a few Assyrian kings (notably Esarhaddon) in moderately given social perspective (Reade 1979: 331-32), and that the themes or motifs of the Assyrian king achieving “heroic priority” and overcoming the “difficult path” pervade Assyrian state ideology, especially its royal inscriptions (Karlsson 2013: 114-20, 192, 2016: 126-33, 218). Furthermore, the juxtapositioning by Frankfort of kingship in Egypt and Mesopotamia in terms of status has long been seen as exaggerated (Hill et al. 2013). Nevertheless, I believe that the identified difference can be considered as a meaningful one.

It has also been noted that Egyptian culture, in particular with respect to its views on its kingship, had a strong sense of dualism and belief in dichotomies, notably between Order and Chaos (cf. e.g. Assmann 1990). The more marked differentiation between war and peace inherent in this worldview can then explain things such as the special helmet for royal warfare (the so-called blue crown) in Ramesside Egypt. However, also Assyrian kings are depicted wearing clothing that is especially connected to royal acts of violence, notably the military robe of warfare and the headband or diadem associated with hunting (Magen 1986: 92-96, Reade 2009: 249-52). Additionally, the contrasting of Order and Chaos was an inherent part also of the Assyrian belief system (Karlsson 2013: 189, 2016: 214). It is then difficult to establish that the identified difference is indeed a meaningful one.

Turning to a third possibly meaningful difference, it is difficult to explain the role skin colour differentiation had in Egyptian art and identity formation. One should definitively be cautious in applying modern notions of nationalism and racism upon the ancient material. Fact remains that Egyptian art, for whatever reason, stands out in their use of skin colour, in their differentiating of sexes and ethnicity groups (Robins 1997: 180). It should be noted here that colour in Egyptian art could have a symbolic function. The black face of the famous, seated statue of Montuhotep II needs not express a marker of ethnicity but a religious statement, connecting the king to fertility (associated with the black soil of Egypt) and Osiris, god of the dead (depicted with a black face). Also, the absence of skin colour as a marker of difference in Assyrian art may be explained by Mesopotamia’s distance from subsaharan Africa and the Far East. Still, the use of skin colour in Egyptian art is a meaningful difference.

Another often repeated conclusion focuses on the idea that Assyria was a profoundly militaristic and imperialistic state (cf. e.g. Fuchs 2005). The above noted

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8 The theme of heroic priority focuses on the king’s extraordinary and unprecedent feat in some area.
emphasis on muscles can perhaps be explained this way. However, the dichotomy in question is quite exaggerated. Military might was an important component of Egyptian state ideology from the earliest times, and warfare was a self-evident motif in the monumental art of New Kingdom Egypt (Redford 1995: 164-69). Also, Assyrian kings does not come across solely as brute warlords. They are also often portrayed making offerings to deities (Magen 1986: 65-69), and the state archive from the capital Nineveh presents an image of a court culture not solely concentrated on military ambitions (e.g. Hunger 1992). Having said that, there may still be a difference in terms of relative focus on warfare in the two cultures, so it is fully possible that emphasis on muscles in Assyrian art tells of a meaningful difference.

Moving on to the horse issue, the above noted attack on horses may be explained by the idea that Egyptians had less attachment to horses as species, their being introduced to horses in the warfare sphere relatively late, namely in the Hyksos period directly preceding the New Kingdom period (Grimal 1994: 186-87). This may explain the fact that the hurting of the enemies’ horses is not a taboo act in Egyptian iconography. The special cherishing of horses attested in Nubian sources from the Kushite dynasty is certainly not expressed in Egypt (Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 132-33). In Assyrian texts, horses are greatly valued and respected (Postgate 1974: 16-18), and an obvious maltreatment of horses in the visual sources is hardly attested. In other words, I believe that the relevant difference is a meaningful one.

The final observation of possibly meaningful differences focuses on the phenomenon of a great city emblem in the Dapur scene. It is hard to make something out of this, but perhaps depictions of foreign city emblems served to mark the enemy side’s genuine Otherness in the illustrating of the Self-side’s predetermined victory.

To conclude, although I have now focused on differences, the general impression from the above analysis must be that the similarities (primary and secondary parallels) far outweighs the differences (no parallels) in terms of iconographic elements and the two compared scenes. Only a few differences were found to be meaningful and then not in a black or white-fashion but in terms of degrees. All in all, the similarities are so striking that a connection between Egyptian and Assyrian art must be recognized.

Concluding remarks

This case study clearly shows that Egyptian art must be reckoned with in the identifying of the origin of Assyrian wall reliefs. As already noted, Syrian-Anatolian art is often highlighted in this context, but the results of this greatly delimited study point to that also Egyptian art should be identified as a strong influence. This most-likely-to-be-similar case then does not dismiss the Egyptian connection, but it rather points to Egyptian influence as a clearly credible explanatory force. Thus, the role of Syrian-Anatolian relief art as the source of inspiration may be exaggerated.

When did this Egyptian influence come about? It is much conceivable that this occurred in the Amarna period when there was a great contact and interaction between the great states of the day, including Egypt and Assyria. The Amarna letters shows that the growing state Assyria was in direct contact with the established state Egypt (Liverani 1990: 41-42). The expanding state of Assyria naturally sought for ways of proclaiming their great power, and monumental wall reliefs would fulfill this propagandistic need. There are not any monumental wall reliefs preserved from Assyria of the Middle Assyrian period, but it has been suggested that the reliefs of

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9 Wild donkeys are chased by Ashurbanipal in his North Palace of Nineveh (Barnett 1976: room S).
obelisks mirror the decoration of palace walls not preserved (Pittman 1997). The Assyrian obelisk itself has been suggested as borrowed (in form, not in function) from Egypt (Frahm 2011: 73-75). It is consequently quite plausible that this adoption of Egyptian motifs came about already in the Middle Assyrian period. Anyway, Egypt’s great role in the origin of Assyrian wall relief art should be plain to see.

One should of course not forget the influence that southern Mesopotamia undoubtedly had in the shaping of Assyrian propaganda. The obelisk of Manishtushu of the Old Akkadian period and the Standard of Ur from an early dynasty of Ur naturally come to mind, even though the said obelisk is not decorated with art (but with cuneiform) and the said standard does not represent warfare in quite the same way. Still, this caution is perhaps somewhat superfluous, since the cultural dependence of Assyria upon southern Mesopotamia has long been emphasized.

What this article shows is that Egypt and its art has not been enough linked to the question on the origin of Assyrian wall reliefs of the ninth century BCE. At the same time, it is vital to point out that Assyrian court artisans did not embrace Egyptian art wholesale, but that they adapted it to fit their specific culture and needs, as evidenced for example in the above discussion on social perspective, use of colour, and so on. At the end of the day, we can easily distinguish a typically Assyrian form of relief art.

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10 For this idea of Assyrian forerunners in art development, notably in the reign of Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076), to the palace art of Kalhu, see Pittman 1997 and Orlamünde 2011: 463-66.

11 Also, the emergence of Assyrian annals can be linked to the (earlier) development of Egyptian annalistic texts, although a Hittite influence is more often presumed here (e.g. Goetze 1957). Shared features are narration in first person of military deeds, chronologically arranged.
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