1 RELIEFS AND SCULPTURES

The Assyrian sculptures consist mostly of stone panels which originally lined the walls of huge royal palaces. They were carved between about 870 and 620 BC and constitute one of the most impressive and eloquent witnesses of ancient Mesopotamian civilisation, giving us an extraordinary glimpse into the minds and material culture of people whose empire at its greatest extent stretched from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, from the mountains of Iran and Turkey to the deserts of Egypt and Arabia (Reade 1983).

Although most of the sculptures now appear as individual panels, separated from those which once stood beside them, they were once part of elaborate decorative schemes. The palaces were built principally of sun-dried mud-brick (adobe). Bricks glazed with brilliant colours were used at particularly prominent points on the exterior. The interiors of rooms were frequently painted, and there will have been rich textiles on the floors. The carved panels, generally some 2 metres high and themselves painted in part, were set against the bases of the walls, both on exterior façades and in the principal apartments, with painted plaster continuing upwards to the ceiling, which was also painted (see nos 243, 245, 249).

There were also Assyrian sculptures of other kinds, such as free-standing statues, stelae, and commemorative obelisks placed in or outside temples; some sculptures were carved in the living rock to record royal achievements. These other monuments are liable to be made in a range of stones, but the material most favoured for the palace sculptures was a form of gypsum, sometimes known as alabaster or Mosul marble. This fine-grained stone is abundant in the Assyrian heartland; a brilliant grey-white in colour, it can be obtained from quarries or opencast mines, and it is fairly soft and easy to work, though it tends to harden and darken after exposure. It is eminently suitable for the use to which it was put, and its availability was a major reason for the development of stone sculpture in Assyria. The Assyrians used iron picks to reach stone of good quality, and large two-handled iron saws to cut it into rough blocks which were then chiselled into shape (see Fig. 16). The actual carving of the wall-panels could be done with points and chisels after the panels had been mounted on the palace walls; lastly they were polished, fine details were added, and they were at least partly painted.

King Ashurnasirpal (883–859 BC) or one of his advisers seems to have been the first person to observe the special qualities of gypsum and to suggest it should be used on a substantial scale in this way. At the time Ashurnasirpal was creating a new palace, in what was indeed a new
capital city, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu or Calah). He was following an ancient precedent, proclaiming by a new foundation his status as a major monarch, one who expected his fame to last for centuries; several later Assyrian kings were to act in the same way, immensely proud of the cities and palaces which they created. While these Assyrian palaces stand in a long tradition of royal architecture, and wall-paintings were already well known, Ashurnasirpal's extensive use of stone decoration was an innovation in Mesopotamia. The king may have heard stories of the ancient stone monuments of Egypt, but was probably influenced directly by acquaintance with the Hittite buildings of southern Turkey and northern Syria, which frequently incorporated panels of basalt or limestone. A previous Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BC), who also visited Syria, had already erected a few basalt figures in a palace of his own, and Ashurnasirpal was following this example. Assyrian rulers were always ready to experiment with new ideas, especially those associated with opulence and a grand life-style. The palace sculptures were far more than decoration. The architectural tradition in which they belonged, and of which they are the finest surviving relics, was designed to impress, astonish, intimidate, to present an image of the Assyrian capital city as capital of the civilised world, of the royal palace as centre of the universe, and of the Assyrian king as the most powerful man alive, deputy of Ashur, the most powerful god. The sculptures projected these messages both to the people who saw them - Assyrians and others - and to the supernatural world, whose inhabitants included malevolent spirits eager to spread misfortune and disaster. Each palace had its specific characteristics, as each king with his team of designers expressed the spirit of his reign and competed with his predecessors to create a monument of incomparable splendour. For us, the sculptures provide a vivid picture of ancient landscape and architecture, equipment and technology, civil and military organisation, daily life and religious practices; they are historical records in themselves; and they repeatedly offer remarkable insights into Assyrian attitudes and official ideology.

Unquestionably the most imposing of all Assyrian sculptures are the gateway figures in the shape of human-headed winged lions and bulls, standing up to 5 metres tall. Usually they were monoliths, weighing up to 30 tons. Moving them at all was such an achievement that Sennacherib (704–681 BC) devoted an entire series of sculptured panels to showing how it was done, with hundreds of men dragging them on sledges. These giant figures, however, were only the most prominent of a host of guardian spirits which the Assyrians called into service to protect their palaces. Smaller figures were very common in the palace of Ashurnasirpal, and some rooms were panelled with little else, but both here and in later palaces they were regularly positioned at doorways. Many
of them resemble winged men, like angels, but other varieties come to the fore in the seventh century, probably as a result of closer contact with the magical traditions of Assyria’s southern neighbour, Babylon. There are documents describing rituals which involved the burial of magical figurines under floors, and as the descriptions of the figurines correspond broadly with the figures carved on the walls, we can often identify them by name. One of the most striking, for example, is a winged human figure with an eagle’s head; this is a variety of *apkallu* (see nos 67–72), once mistakenly identified with the god Nisroch, mentioned in the Bible.

Narrative reliefs show the achievements of the various kings in war, in the hunt and in public works. These had been standard themes of Mesopotamian art since about 3500–3000 BC, glorifying royal power and responsibility, since it was a king’s duty to honour the gods, to protect the state from enemies of every kind, and to promote national prosperity and prestige. The sculptures were executed by workmen of variable standard, some more closely controlled and supervised than others, with the finest work in the most important rooms. The location of particular kinds of subject-matter reflected the architectural context;
for example, sporting scenes showing the king's personal achievements tended to be in the more private areas. Exterior façades sometimes displayed large-scale processions of people bringing tribute to the king, surrounded by his courtiers. Formal scenes showing the king as high-priest were prominent, both in sculpture and in glazed brick.

The stylistic evolution of Assyrian sculpture tends to reflect contemporary developments in the writing of history. Earlier narrative scenes had tended to summarise or symbolise royal achievements, so that a long story was compressed into a single brief composition. There were many examples of this convention in small works of art and probably in textiles, and so there are in the earliest Assyrian sculptures. Each wall-panel is liable to be treated as a self-sufficient unit, with few figures overrunning from one panel to the next. By the end of the seventh century, however, physical divisions between wall-panels were virtually ignored, and compositions sometimes occupied entire rooms. This gave limitless opportunities to fill out the broad background against which the principal events were happening, to include minor incidents and occasionally to utilise the dramatic potential of empty space. Because the purpose of the narrative sculptures was to tell stories, the artistic conventions are correspondingly straightforward. The scale of a person or a place depends on its importance in the story. Successive scenes produce a cinematic effect: the spectator could begin at one point, looking at the advance of the Assyrian army, for instance, and follow its progress through battle and siege to ultimate victory, with the defeated population marched off into captivity under the eyes of the Assyrian king. There are many variations on this basic theme. Trouble was often taken to represent dress, architecture and landscape accurately, and the carvings were manifestly derived from drawings made in the field. The one subject not represented was Assyrian defeat: there are no Assyrian dead. One is reminded of the formula with which the king would close his official report to the god Ashur: after describing some long and bloody campaign, he would admit that there had been just six Assyrian casualties—one charioteer, two horsemen and three foot-soldiers. JER

Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), or people working for him, created Assyrian sculpture as we know it. At his new capital of Nimrud they combined existing artistic traditions, variously expressed, in what was essentially a new medium, the sculptured palace. Most of the wall-panels in Ashurnasirpal's palace had magical subjects, which repeated themselves along the walls in much the same way as the design of a Mesopotamian cylinder-seal, rolled across clay, could be repeated almost indefinitely. Other walls had narrative subjects, representing in stone the achievements that Assyrian kings had long been accustomed to record in written annals. Working as they were in a new medium, Ashurnasirpal's artists were influenced by tradition and sometimes treated the physical divisions between panels as frames beyond which a narrative composition, or one element in a composition, could not be extended. They were also aware, however, of the way in which long stretches of wall could be exploited to construct long and complex compositions. Wall-paintings probably provided a precedent for this, and it is exemplified in the overall scheme of Ashurnasirpal's throne-room.

In the narrative sculptures effective description takes precedence over visual reality, and there is little concern with relative scales and perspective. The style of the sculptures is largely linear, in low relief embellished with incised detail, but considerable care is taken with the contours of flesh and musculature.
1 Statue of the king
This statue was placed in the Temple of Ishtar, where it was found, to remind the
goddess of the king's devotion. It is made
of magnesite, and the original pedestal on
which it stands is of reddish stone. Both
are unusual materials, probably brought
back from a campaign abroad, though the
actual workmanship of the statue is clearly
Assyrian. Kings often boasted of the
exotic things they acquired from abroad,
ot only raw materials and finished goods
but also plants and animals.
The king stands bare-headed, without
the royal crown. His hair is long, which
was the fashion at the Assyrian court of
this time, but his long and magnificent
curled beard is more imposing than that
which a courtier would have worn. It has
been suggested that the Assyrians used
false hair and beards, as the Egyptians
sometimes did, but there is no evidence
for this. The king's dress consists of a
short-sleeved tunic on top of which a long
fringed shawl has been fastened, covering
most of his body below the waist; the
shawl is drawn over the left arm, round
the back, and then forwards over the right
shoulder, to be secured to the belt in front.
In his right hand he carries a ceremonial
sickle of a kind which gods sometimes use
in fighting monsters; the mace in his left
hand symbolises the authority vested in
him as vice-regent of the supreme god.
The inscription carved on his chest pro-
claims his titles and genealogy, and men-
tions his expedition westward to the
Mediterranean Sea.

About 875–860 BC
From Nimrud, Temple of Ishtar Sharrat-naphi
WA 118871
Statue: H 113 cm, W 32 cm, D 35 cm. Base:
H 78 cm, W 35 cm, D 35 cm
Layard 1853: 361; 1853a: pl.52. Grayson 1976:
190. Strommenger 1970: 13–14, pl. 1
The king on campaign
Ashurnasirpal is travelling in a chariot through a hilly landscape with attendants. This is probably a campaign in the mountains of Kurdistan, which adjoined Assyria to the north and east. A river at the bottom is represented schematically by lines and spirals, and the rough ground by a pattern of scales.

The king can be identified by his flat hat with a pointed top, and his is the grandest beard. The two arrows held upright in his right hand, with the bow lowered in his left, symbolise victory. He wears a sword on his wide belt, and the end of the sheath is decorated with a pair of lions back to back. He has two wristlets; both incorporate rosettes, worn in the position of a modern wrist-watch. A spare bow and arrows, an axe and a spear are carried in quivers on the side of the cab; decoration including a prancing bull is incised on the quivers, which would probably have been made of embossed bronze. The back of the chariot, from which a spear-shaft projects diagonally backwards, is closed by a studded shield with a central boss in the shape of a lion's head.

An attendant holds a sunshade over the king's head; in battle this man would draw his own sword, from its simpler sheath, while using a shield to protect the king from arrows.

The charioteer holds three or four reins in each hand, together with a whip. This is a typical light chariot of its period, holding a maximum of three people, with six-spoked wheels. A thick yoke pole is visible, rising from the base of the cab, and a patterned cloth hangs between the top of the cab and the elaborate yoke itself, which is visible above the horses' shoulders. The horses themselves, led by a groom in front, are richly caparisoned, with crests and tassels in addition to their harness. Three horses are shown, as in many chariot teams of this date, and there has been much debate over the various chariot fittings and methods of harnessing that may have been employed for teams of two, three and four horses.

An armed groom in front is helping to lead the horses. His raised arm wears a wristlet similar to the king's; this is an anomaly of a kind not uncommon in Assyrian art. It seems, from the great majority of sculptures, that there were strict rules governing what individuals of a particular status could be seen to wear; probably rosette wristlets were only meant to be worn by royalty and gods, but the men doing the carving were not particularly familiar with such rules and applied them inconsistently.

This is one of two pieces that originally formed the lower section of a single right-angled panel in the corner of a room; they were sawn apart for ease of transport in the nineteenth century. At the top of the panel can be seen a few signs of the so-called 'standard inscription', summarising the achievements of the king, which was written across the middle of virtually every panel in the North-West Palace. Another version of this text was written on the reverse side of the panels, invisible against the mud-brick wall.

About 875-860 BC
From Nimrud, North-West Palace, West Wing
WA 124557
H 101 cm, W 86 cm, extant TH 20 cm
Paley and Sobolewski 1987: 77, pl. 5; Reade 1985: 210, pl. X11a
3 Episode from a siege

This piece is from a series of wall-panels which showed the Assyrian army attacking an enemy fortress, and illustrates an incident of technological interest. The fortress stands on a rise, perhaps an ancient mound. Inside the walls is a pulley with two ropes hanging from it. Though there is no visible link between the pulley and the bucket below, it is clear that the Assyrian soldier in the foreground has cut the rope with which someone inside the fortress has been trying to collect water from a source outside the walls. This soldier must be the same as the one on the left of the panel, who holds the bucket in his left hand and lifts his right arm in a gesture of triumphant greeting towards someone, presumably an officer or the king himself, who appeared with the main Assyrian force on panels further to the left. The central figure, with both arms raised, is holding a shield over his head as a protection against enemy shots. Meanwhile an enemy soldier on a tower is shooting an arrow at the Assyrians to the left; he is wearing a headband, but this item of dress is not sufficient to identify the location of the scene; it may have been somewhere in Syria. The architecture of the fortress, with lines of rosettes below the crenellations and pairs of windows in the towers, suggests a place of some distinction; in Assyria such rosettes would have been made of glazed bricks.

The scale of the defender, unnaturally large in relation to the tower on which he is stationed, is typical of ninth-century art. So is the general composition to which this panel must have belonged, with the attacking Assyrians on one side and the people attacked on the other. Within a single composition, however, it is unusual at this date to show a single person more than once in consecutive moments, as in a strip-cartoon.

There are traces of the standard inscription at the top of the panel.

JER

About 875–860 BC
From Nimrud, South-West Palace, but probably originating in the North-West Palace
WA 118606
H 104 cm, W 93 cm, extant TH 19 cm
4 Escape across a river
This panel, which is a complete composition, probably shows an incident described in Ashurnasirpal’s annals. In 878 BC the king was campaigning down the Euphrates river, and reached the enemy capital a little south-east of the modern town of Ana. Then, ‘in the face of my mighty weapons, Kudurru with seventy of his soldiers fell back into the Euphrates to save his life’ (Grayson 1976: 138).

Two Assyrian archers are shooting at the enemy; they are dressed and armed as typical Assyrian soldiers, with pointed helmets, short kilts, swords and bows, and with quivers on their backs. Two of the trees growing on the bank are crudely drawn and hardly identifiable, but the third is unmistakably a date-palm. There are three enemies in the water: their long robes indicate that they are all people of high status rather than ordinary soldiers. One is swimming, and has been hit by
arrows. The other two are using inflated animal-skins to help support themselves in the water, blowing into them as they struggle towards the fort on the right. The one without a beard is probably a eunuch: eunuchs were employed extensively at the courts of the ancient Orient – not only to guard women – and many of them reached positions of high responsibility.

The foundations of the fort, which may be on an island, appear to be of stone, whereas the walls themselves would probably have been mud-brick. The arched shape of the doors is typical of the period.

There are traces of the standard inscription at the bottom of the panel.

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About 875–860 BC
From Nimrud, North-West Palace, Room B, panel 17 (top)

WA 124318
h 88 cm, w 225 cm, extant TH 9.5 cm

5 Royal lion hunt

The lion hunt has special significance in ancient Mesopotamia. Even before 3000 BC, 'royal' figures are shown killing lions, and the Assyrian royal seal itself (see no. 194) represented this theme, with the king on foot confronting a lion face to face. The Mesopotamian lion, now extinct, was somewhat smaller than the more familiar African lion (one was compared in the nineteenth century to a 'large St Bernard dog'), but it was still a formidable opponent. Lions represented the wild forces of nature which it was a king's duty to control, and it seems that at some stage there developed a rule that the killing of lions was reserved for royalty alone.

The archer shooting a bow wears a diadem with two bands hanging down behind. This kind of diadem encircled the royal hat, but the later king Ashurbanipal is sometimes shown wearing it on its own; otherwise it was worn by the crown prince, so this figure may be either Ashurnasirpal himself or his son and heir, Shalmaneser. A double sheath in the archer's belt holds a dagger and whetstone. There is a spare arrow in his hand, and axes in addition to arrows in the quivers on the side of the chariot. His bow-string is not fully represented: it would have run inelegantly across his face. The chariot itself is broadly similar to that in no. 2, but there are no crests on the horses' heads.

It was a familiar convention in Assyrian art to show a fallen enemy or victim beneath the horses drawing the victor's chariot. Here a lion has been hit by three arrows. The composition is incomplete, and we may envisage another lion further to the right.

There are traces of the standard inscription at the top of the panel.

About 875–860 BC

From Nimrud, North-West Palace, West Wing
WA 124579
H 98 cm, W 119.5 cm, TH 23 cm
Budge 1914: pl. XLIII
Paley and Sobolewski 1987: 76, pl. 5. Reade 1985: 211, pl. XLIVb
6 Royal bull hunt

Wild cattle still lived in the Assyrian steppe at this time, though they were probably rare. The basic composition of this scene is similar to that of no. 5, with the royal chariot rushing to the right across a fallen bull. The warrior in the chariot is King Ashurnasirpal himself, wearing the distinctive royal hat. Here, instead of shooting forwards, he has turned to deal with another bull that has charged the chariot from behind. The king grasps it by the horn, while driving his sword into its neck.

Behind the king rides an armed horseman, leading a mount for the king. At this stage the Assyrians had not mastered the art of fighting individually from horseback. Instead they treated horses as platforms much like chariots, and rode in pairs, with one man fighting with bow or spear while the other controlled both horses. This horseman has a round shield on his back, and one of his duties would have been to use it to protect the king. The royal horse has a saddlecloth woven with a kind of geometric pattern which is still widely seen in the Middle East today. Traces of such incised details, sometimes much more elaborate, can often be seen on clothes and other textiles in the Assyrian sculptures.

This slab is the upper part of a panel that stood on the wall close to the royal throne, and perhaps represented an exploit of which the king was particularly proud. No. 7 was the lower part of the same panel. There are traces of the standard inscription at the bottom of the slab. See nos 246–7 for Layard’s original drawing of this panel and an early engraving of it.

About 875–860 BC
From Nimrud, North-West Palace, Room B, panel 20 (top)
WA 124352
H 93 cm, W 225 cm, extant TH 9 cm
Layard 1849: i, 120; 1849a: pl. 11. Meissner 1981: 23
7 Celebration after a bull hunt
This is the aftermath of the hunt shown in no. 6. The bull lies on the ground, and the king rests his bow while pouring a triumphant libation of wine, a scene comparable with no. 29, which shows a similar libation over two centuries later.

On the left are two royal bodyguards, both carrying maces as symbols of authority in addition to their arms. The figure carrying a sunshade, who also has a quiver, would be the bearer of the king’s bow. Another figure is waving a fan or fly-whisk in front of the king; he has a towel over his left shoulder. All these four are beardless, and may therefore be identified as eunuchs. Documents refer to Assyrian courtiers as being either bearded men or eunuchs: some beardless figures in the Assyrian sculptures are of course women, but they are not frequent; others are children, or priests whose hair was completely shaved off on consecration, but these can usually be recognised without difficulty.

The king, like his attendants, wears what is basically a simple short-sleeved tasselled robe, with traces of incised embroidery. An apron hanging down his back from his wide belt was to help prevent chafing against the edge of the chariot cab. He wears the standard royal crown with diadem; on his arms are rosette wristlets and plain armlets like those of his attendants, though royal armlets more usually ended in animal-heads; his bead necklace is balanced by a tassel at the back of the neck. His sword-sheath is attached to a strap over his right shoulder; the purpose of the double tassels which hang down in front of him and behind remains unclear. He is pouring his libation from a gadooned bowl of a kind which continued in fashion even after the Assyrian period.

The officer facing the king is the crown prince, presumably the next king, Shalmaneser. He is dressed much as the king, but with only the diadem on his head. The man behind him may be the chief eunuch, with a specific headband to mark his office. Both have their hands crossed in a distinctive gesture used by courtiers in the royal presence. To the right a pair of musicians are playing on nine-stringed horizontal harps.

About 875–860 BC
From Nimrud, North-West Palace, Room B, panel 20 (bottom)
WA 124533
H 90 cm, W 225 cm, extant TH 10 cm
Layard 1849: 129; 1849a: pl. 12; Meuszyński 1981: 23
8 Protective spirit

This figure, a man with wings like an angel, is a protective spirit, probably an *apkallu*, one of a pair which guarded an entrance into the private quarters of the king. He carries a goat and a giant ear of corn, possibly symbolic of fertility though their precise significance is uncertain. He wears a kilt with long tassels hanging from it, indicating his semi-divine status, and a fringed and embroidered robe which is drawn round the body and thrown over his shoulder, leaving the right leg exposed. There are sandals on his feet. A bead necklace round his neck is held in position by a tassel at the back. His armlets have animal-head terminals, and there are rosettes on his wristlets and on his diadem. He has the magnificent curled moustache and long curled beard and hair typical of ninth-century figures. The musculature of his leg is exaggeratedly drawn, with a prominent vein encircling his ankle.

Across his body runs the standard inscription. This was incised after the carving of the figure was complete, and cuts through some of the fine details of decoration on the dress.

JER

About 875–860 BC

From Nimrud, North-West Palace, Room Z,
door a, panel i

WA 124591

H 224 cm, W 127 cm, extant TH 12 cm

Layard 1849: 11, 8. Paley and Sobolewski 1987: 60, pl. 4
REIGN OF
TIGLATH-PILESER III

Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC) re-vived the fortunes of Assyria at a critical moment in its history. Towards the end of his reign he was building himself a new palace at Nimrud, which was left unfinished; it was largely robbed of its sculptures by Esarhaddon, a later king who required wall-slabs for a projected palace of his own.

Tiglath-pileser’s sculptors had the work of Ashurnasirpal, over a hundred years earlier, as their obvious model, but they appear to have had fewer technical resources. For instance, the only colossal human-headed bull recorded from the palace was carved in low relief like a conventional wall-panel; many of the carvings are relatively flat, recalling the simple linearity of most ivories cut in the Assyrian style, and they tend to be poorly finished. The compositions, however, are varied, imaginative and well organised, and indicate that the designers had thought seriously about ways of expressing a sequence of historical events in stone. They created decorative schemes which were not merely impressive, like those of Ashurnasirpal, but a visual equivalent of the written annals. They were unquestionably indebted to the kind of systematic narration embodied in small-scale monuments such as the bands of the Balawat Gates (nos 42–3). This tradition may have had wider currency in paintings, textiles and small objects, which have seldom survived.

11 Attack on an enemy town
This is the upper half of a panel once divided into two registers by a central band of inscription. The latter stretched all round the room and was a record of the king’s entire reign; this extract is not directly related to the carvings, but a separate caption at the top gave the name of the town attacked as U[p2], possibly in Turkey.

The Assyrians are attacking from both sides. On the right archers shoot at the town, guarded by swordsmen with high shields. The foremost archer is a senior official, wearing a long court robe under what was probably an armoured jacket. The sculptor has struggled to provide an adequate representation of face, beard, arms, dress, sheath and bow, and reached a visually impossible but effective solution. Both archer and guard have helmets of an unusual design. The high shield of the foremost archer is cut short by the representation of a wheeled siege-engine. It has giant spears projecting from its front, which have been used to lever away at the fortifications of the town. Machines like these, which are known from several Assyrian sculptures, also provided platforms from which archers could shoot at close range. The surface was probably leather, and inside there was a store of water for use if the enemy tried to set the machine on fire with flaming torches. The machines were presumably moved by men, as an animal might panic, and sometimes steep ramps had to be built in order to bring them close enough to the enemy wall. Infantry could advance behind a
siege-engine, under its cover. Its function was comparable with that of the modern tank.

On the left a second group of Assyrian spearmen are attacking across a ditch, and scaling a ladder. Their uniform is distinctive; they wear crested helmets, carry round shields, and have straps across their chests. Appearing first in Tiglath-pileser’s reign, they are probably soldiers drawn from the western half of the empire or from its mountainous fringes. In front a soldier in more traditional Assyrian dress, with a pointed helmet, is cutting off an enemy head. The literal head-count was the standard means of estimating the numbers of enemy dead.

The events of the attack, from beginning to end, are here compressed into a single composition, since the enemy themselves are shown in successive stages of defeat. Three have been impaled on stakes, to intimidate the remainder. Two are tumbling from the walls, one with his hair falling loose. Some of the bodies have been stripped. Those on the battlements raise their arms in surrender or submission; one is being killed by an Assyrian.

About 730–727 BC
From Nimrud, Central Palace
WA: 1155; 1189
H. 109 cm, W. 211 cm, extant TH. 13 cm
12 Victory celebration
This fragment is part of a victory celebration scene, in which the king would have been shown in triumph. The two right-hand figures, clapping their hands, are Assyrian courtiers. The figure on the left, whose garment is visible under his cloak and who carries a whip, is probably a soldier. The cloak is a lion skin, probably with bells attached. A figure of this kind is known from other Assyrian victory scenes, from the reigns of Ashurnasirpal and Esarhaddon, though it is less common than might have been expected; the lion-skin mummery was perhaps a traditional act, immediately after battle, that did not fit comfortably into formal Assyrian art.

It honoured Ishtar, the goddess of fertility and of human passion as expressed both in love and in war. Her animal was the lion, and various documents refer to people wearing lion skins or lion masks at Ishtar festivals in different parts of the ancient Middle East.

About 730-727 BC
From Nimrud, Central Palace
WA 136773
H 82 cm, W 91 cm, extant TH 8 cm
Barnett and Falkner 1962: 9-10, pls i-ii

13 The capture of Astartu
(Above)
The king in procession
(Below)

This panel, once the left end of a composition, was found reused in a later palace.

It belonged to a series in which a central band of inscription, listing the events of the reign in chronological order, divided two independent compositions in separate registers. The text on this panel happens to describe a campaign in the north, but the upper composition represented a campaign in the west, and the name of the town represented, Astartu, is given in a caption at the top.

Astartu was situated in modern Jordan. It is shown as a typical Middle Eastern fortress town, built on top of a mound which probably covered the remains of much older settlements. There are towers at intervals along the walls, and a high town gate; inside, at the top on the left, is a building with an arched entrance, perhaps the citadel. The town has just been captured and its inhabitants are being marched away. An Assyrian soldier waving a mace escorts four prisoners, who carry their possessions in sacks over their shoulders. Their clothes and their turbans, rising to a slight point which flops backwards, are typical of the area; people from the Biblical kingdom of Israel, shown on other sculptures, wear the same dress. Above them a second Assyrian soldier is driving two fat-tailed sheep. Further to
the right they would have met the Assyrian king, reviewing his troops and their booty.

In the lower register, the king himself appears in a chariot under his tasselled state parasol, which is held by a eunuch. He wears the royal hat, somewhat higher than the ninth-century type, and a fringed robe. His right hand is raised, while his left holds a flower. His chariot is larger than the ninth-century type, with a quiver at the front, and the wheels have eight spokes rather than six. The patterns on the cloth hanging between the front of the chariot and the yoke include a winged disc, a solar symbol of great significance throughout the Ancient Near East. The charioteer holds three reins, but two horses are actually shown drawing the chariot, gaily caparisoned and led by a pair of grooms wearing quivers. The one man visible in the poorly preserved chariot to the right once held a pole with a circular ornament on top; this was one of the sacred standards which accompanied the Assyrians into battle.

About 730-727 BC
From Nimrud, South-West Palace, but probably originating in the Central Palace
WA 113908
H 190 cm, W 195 cm, extant TH 16 cm
Barnett and Falkner 1962: 30, pls LXVIII-LXXI