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ASHURBANIPAL'S HEADHUNT: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By DOMINIK BONATZ

The severed head is a topic that has always attracted popular attention. In Christian art, for example, it was an image of martyrdom and fearless resistance against suppression.¹ In contrast, popular accounts of headhunting have been used to convey an image of the primitive for Western audiences since the nineteenth century (e.g. Panel 1992). In anthropology headhunting has long been discussed in terms of materialist and evolutionary models. Only recently attempts have been made to place the phenomenon of headhunting in a wider historical and regional context (Hoskins 1987; idem 1996b; George 1991). The headhunter has become a professional recruiter in the search for executives to fill high-level positions. However, most scholars would not look to urban societies when researching the topic of the practice of headhunting, namely the taking of a head. We still habitually perceive it as an expression of violence and primitive warfare that occurs in stateless societies. In opposition to that view, this article will focus on an urban society in which a headhunt was, in at least one case, carried out in a strict anthropological sense: that is the headhunt of Ashurbanipal, described in the annals as the overthrow of the Elamite king Te-Umman and portrayed on the reliefs at Nineveh.

The severed heads of enemies were an indispensable element in Assyrian warfare. In the aftermath of a battle they were displayed as trophies and counted as the most prestigious testimony to the warlike qualities of the victorious army. The taking and counting of heads are vividly described twice in the Assyrian annals and on the reliefs depicting the military campaigns of the Assyrian kings. For example, Ashurnasirpal II in his capture of the city of Dirru reports: "I felled 800 of their combat troops with the sword (and) cut off their heads. . . . I built a pile of live men and of heads before their gate" (Grayson 1991: A.O.101.1, ii 107–9). The counting of head trophies is frequently represented on the wall slabs in the palaces of Tiglath-pileser III (e.g. Barnett and Falkner 1962: Pls. 37, 49, 59), Sargon II (Albenda 1986: Pl. 111), Sennacherib (e.g. Barnett *et al.* 1998: Pls. 173–7), and Ashurbanipal (e.g. Barnett *et al.* 1998: Pl. 213).

Since the accumulation of heads was the main aim of the display of military power, the single head normally remained an anonymous object. The individual who had been beheaded was only named in rare cases with the first evidence, early in the second millennium BC, when several minor-ranking Amorite kings were decapitated and their heads were presented to more powerful kings, such as Zimri-Lim or Shamshi-Adad (Charpin 1994: 51–2). In Neo-Assyrian times, the earliest evidence for individually named heads is given by Esarhaddon (*infra*), but nowhere did the symbolic connection between the head as human trophy and image of power become more evident than in the reign of Ashurbanipal. Of all his triumphs, the one best documented both in texts and reliefs is that in 653 BC over Te-Umman, king of Elam, and over Dunanu, his Gambulean ally.² Our visual sources for this event are slabs 1–6 from room XXXIII of the Southwest Palace and slabs 5–9 from room I of the North Palace, both at Nineveh.³ They are accompanied by epigraphs written on the slabs, and mentioned in greater detail on tablets with captions for reliefs, published by Weidner in *Archiv für Orientforschung* 8 (1932–3) as "Assyrische Beschreibungen der Kriegsreliefs Aššurbānāplis".⁴ The tablets were probably written while the reliefs were being

¹ For instance, the head of John the Baptist presented to Salome, the decapitation of St Alban, David taking the head of Goliath, and Judith beheading Holofernes are themes vividly portrayed by book illustrators, painters and sculptors from medieval to modern times.

² For the historical background of this conflict see Gerardi 1987: 138–57; Frame 1992: 121–5; Mayer 1995: 405.

³ See Barnett *et al.* 1998: 94–100, Pls. 286–320 for the slabs in room XXXIII of the Southwest Palace and the art-

critical study on these reliefs by Kaelin 1999. For the slabs from the North Palace see Barnett 1976: Pls. 25–6). A comprehensive overview of both versions of the Te-Umman-Dunanu relief cycle in the Southwest Palace and the North Palace is given by Reade 1979: 96–109. Attempts to reconstruct the relief cycle with the help of the captions are also made by Wäfler 1975: 288–9 and Gerardi 1987: 138–44.

⁴ In this paper the captions are cited following Weidner's numbering from 1 to 37.

designed, and can thus be regarded as proposals for captions later to be written on the walls.⁵ Furthermore there are the annalistic reports on Prism texts B and C, which also concern the Elamite and Gambulean campaign.⁶

Texts and reliefs both point out a very particular detail of this historical event, namely the severed head of Te-Umman which emerged as the most precious trophy from the battle and thereafter figured prominently in a series of triumphal ceremonies. The story starts with the battle at the river Ulai, depicted on three slabs in room XXXIII of the Southwest Palace in Nineveh. Slabs 2 and 3 (Fig. 1) picture the flight and subsequent death of Te-Umman — easily recognizable by his feathered cap — and his son, Tammaritu. The epigraph on the relief and caption 9 of the tablets both report:

Te-Umman, king of Elam, who in fierce battle was wounded, Tammaritu, his eldest son, took him by the hand, (and) to save (their) lives, they fled. They hid in the midst of the forest. With the help of Ashur and Ishtar, I killed them. Their heads I cut off in front of each other. (Barnett *et al.* 1998: 95; cf. Weidner 1932–3: 9.24–8)

Ashurbanipal, who did not participate in the campaign against Elam, paradoxically put himself in the position of the headhunter. In other societies practising headhunting, this would not be unusual; often headhunters are paid without those employing them losing prestige (e.g. Scarduelli 1990: 457–61). For Ashurbanipal, moreover, the decapitation of Te-Umman functions as an index of the active role which he, as Assyrian king, had to play in a military campaign. The indexical qualities of the severed head become even more evident when one considers the sequence of events in which it was involved thereafter. First, the head of Te-Umman was taken away by a soldier (Fig. 1). After that, it appears twice in the upper register of slab 1 (Fig. 2). It is identified from among others that are piled up in a tent and then carried off by an Assyrian soldier in an Elamite cart. The inscription on the relief says:

Head of Te-Umman, king of Elam, which in the thick battle a common soldier in my army cut off. To (give me) the good news they hastily dispatched (it) to Assyria. (Barnett *et al.* 1998: 95)

Here, interestingly, the role of the headhunter is transmitted to a common soldier. With that, a clear statement was made that the death of the Elamite king was in no way a heroic fate.

For the events which followed when the head arrived in Nineveh, we only have the textual evidence. No reliefs of this scene have survived, and it may be that the corresponding reliefs were never executed. The description given in captions 10 and 11 of the tablets, however, elucidates one of the most ambiguous performances from which the symbolism of headhunting ritual emerges:

The head of Te-Umman, king of Elam, which by the power of Assur, Sin, Shamash, Bel, Nabu, Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, the soldiers of my army cut off and brought quickly, and in front of the gate “May Assur’s Priestly Ruler Grow Old” cast down before my chariot-wheels. The head of Te-Umman, I cut the sinews off his face and I spat on it. (after Weidner 1932–3: 10.29–34, 11.35–6; cf. Luckenbill 1927: 402, No. 1099)

It is very hard to imagine how this scene would have been represented on the reliefs. Even without the visual evidence, however, we can understand how the mutilation substantially changed the meaning of Te-Umman’s head. Until then, as trophy, it was proof that a person, the Elamite king, had been killed. From that moment on, however, it became the focus of ritual and political attention. The story then continues in two directions. One is the procession from Nineveh via Arbela (Erbil) to Ashur, and the other is the entry into Nineveh. It is not clear how these two events fit into one chronological and logical order and whether the severed head was in reality displayed separately as an attraction in two ceremonies, or whether it was added to at least one of them symbolically. In any case, the head must have been prepared, for example smoked, to be conserved for subsequent intended uses.

The procession to Arbela is described in caption 34, in another tablet K 2652: 45–5, and in Prism texts B and C as part of Ashurbanipal’s eighth campaign against the Gambuleans. The entry into Arbela is also depicted on the upper registers of slabs 5–7 from room I in the North

⁵Weidner 1932–3: 175–6; Kaelin 1999: 40, n. 94. A compilation of the texts with proposals for captions is given in Borger 1996: 299–307.

⁶The historical records in both texts are identical; transliteration and translation in Piepkorn 1933: 60–77; re-edited by Borger 1996: 97–108, 224–6.

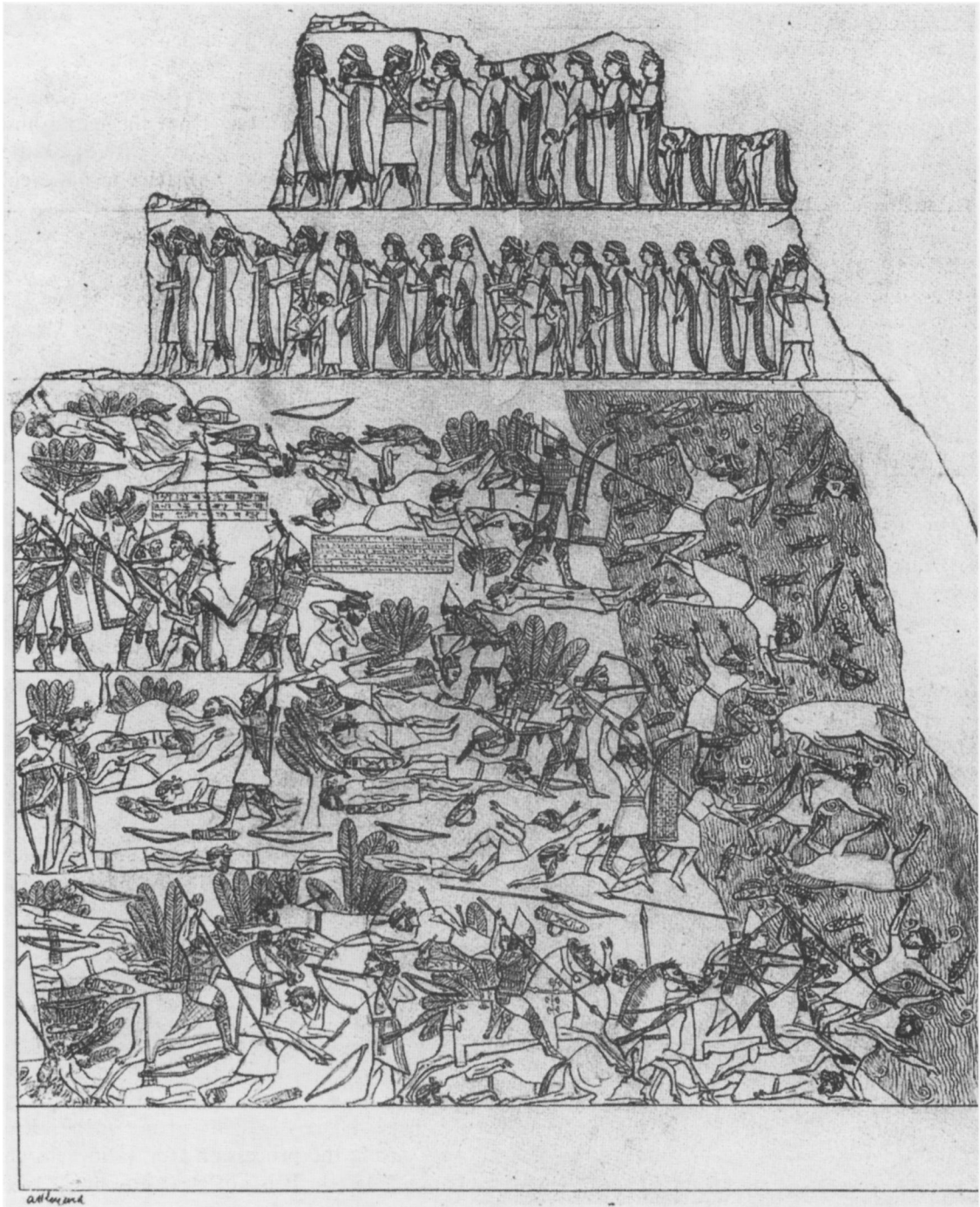


Fig. 1. The capture of Te-Umman's head, slab 3, room XXXIII, Southwest Palace at Nineveh (Barnett *et al.* 1998: Pl. 296).

Palace (Barnett 1976: Pl. 25; Reade 1979: Pls. 21–2). The king proceeds in his chariot from left to right, surrounded by a triumphal procession and preceded by an Elamite cart which doubtless held Te-Umman's head. The scene is described in caption 34: "With the severed head of Te-Umman, the Elamite king, whom Ishtar, my mistress had handed over to my hands, I joyfully entered the city of Arbela" (after Weidner 1932–3: 34.45–7; cf. Luckenbill 1927: 395, No. 1043). Thereafter, the king reappears on the battlements of the city of Arbela, pouring a libation over the head of Te-Umman (Fig. 4). The relief is very worn, but the following details may still be recognized on

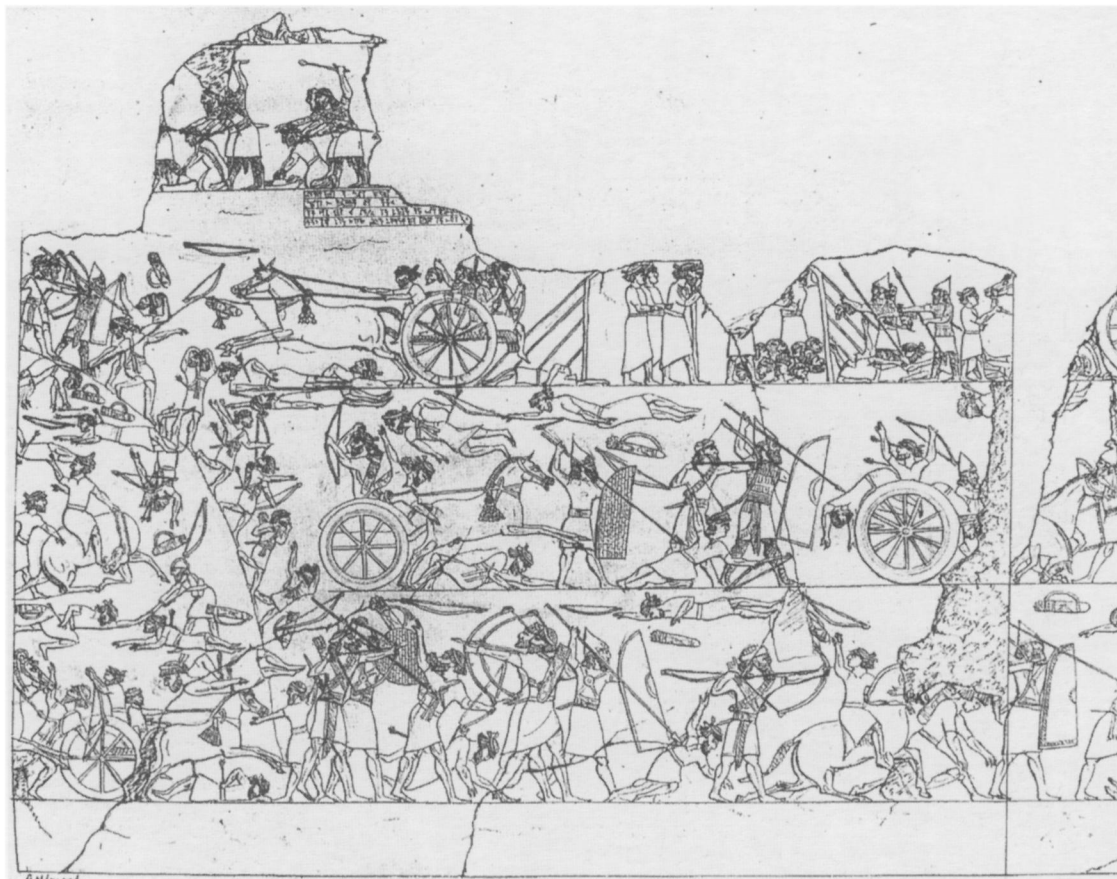


Fig. 2. Te-Umman's head identified in a tent and taken away to Nineveh, slab 1, room XXXIII, Southwest Palace at Nineveh (Barnett *et al.* 1998: Pl. 288).

it: the attendant standing behind the king, the figure of Ashurbanipal, his bow, the streaming libation, the incense burner, the head of Te-Umman,⁷ the offering table, and an attendant facing the king. The description of this scene is given on tablet K 2652: 44–5: “At that time I grabbed in my hands that bow, I set it up over the head of Te-Umman, king of Elam” (after Luckenbill 1927: 360, No. 930). The corresponding text in caption 14 can also be cited: “I cut off the heads of my enemies (= Te-Umman and his allies), I poured out wine over them” (after Weidner 1932–3: 14.3; cf. Luckenbill 1927: 397, No. 1056).

The analogy that emerges from this scene is very clear. We recognize the repetition of the same scene in the libation ritual at the end of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt (Barnett 1976: Pl. 57). Thus, the public image of the triumphant king as headhunter and as lion hunter merged into a single figure — that of Ashurbanipal (cf. Weissert 1997: 349–50). However, this is not the last stage in the story of Te-Umman's head, in which the severed head served as an index for the coherence of the royal triumph.

Prism text B (VI: 17–99, VII: 1) relates the details of the capture of Dunanu, the Gambulean king, who was the ally of Te-Umman. During the procession to Arbela, Dunanu was kept alive. He was executed only upon the king's return to Nineveh. On the way back to Nineveh he was forced to carry the head of Te-Umman hanging round his neck, while his brother Samgunus had to carry another head. This scene, near which the Gambuleans are tortured, is depicted on slab 5 in room 33 (Fig. 3). A description of this is given in Prism B (VI: 50–6):⁸

⁷In contrast to the drawing in V. Place's *Ninive et l'Assyrie*, which is reproduced here as Fig. 4, the head of Te-Umman does not appear on the drawing made by W. Boucher and published in Barnett 1976: Pl. 26. The

head, however, is clearly visible on the photograph placed next to the drawing on Pl. 26.

⁸Probably also in caption 25, but the text is very fragmentary (see Weidner 1932–3: 25.47–9).

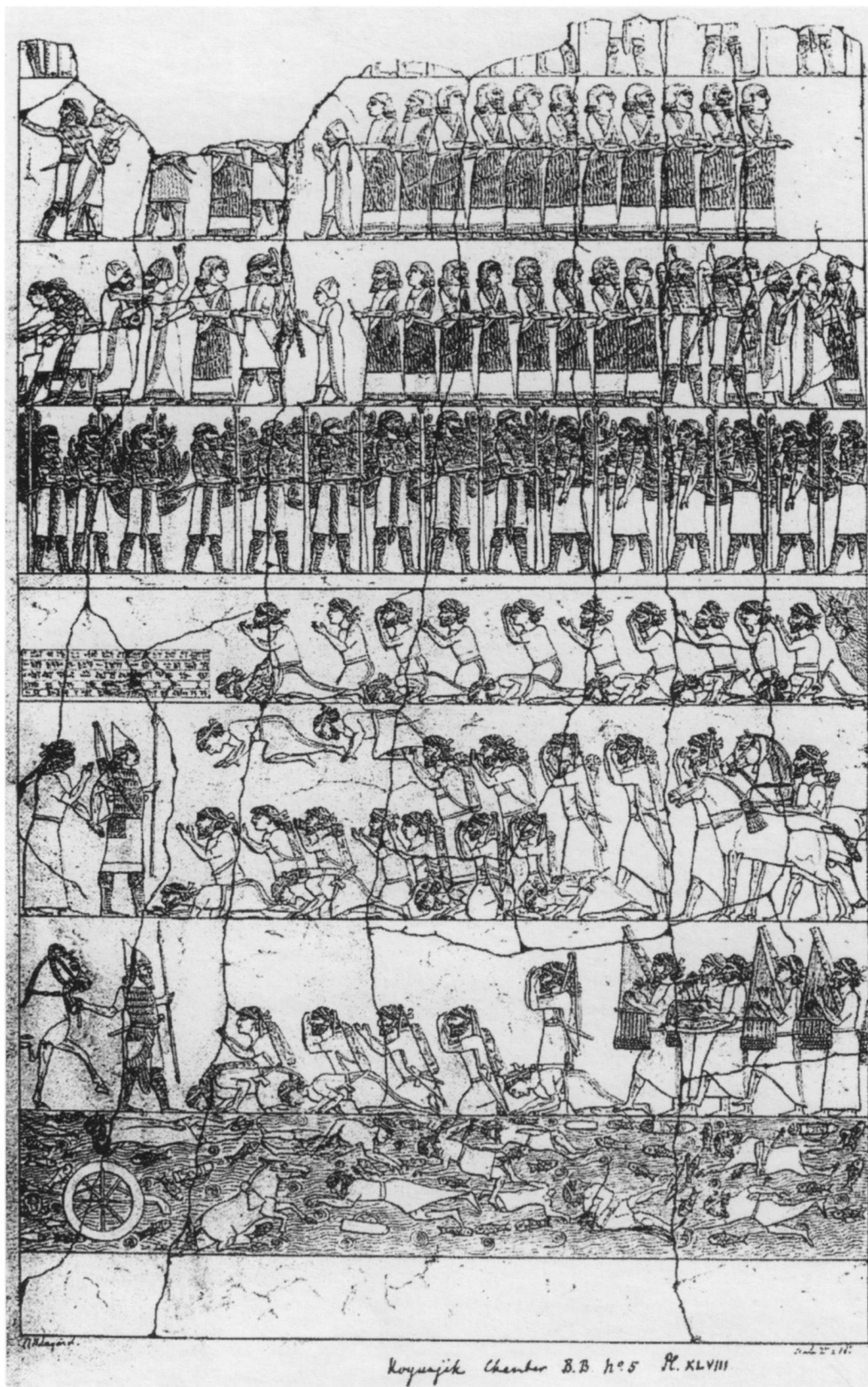


Fig. 3. Dunanu carrying the head of Te-Umman, slab 5, room XXXIII, Southwest Palace at Nineveh (Barnett *et al.* 1998: Pl. 304).

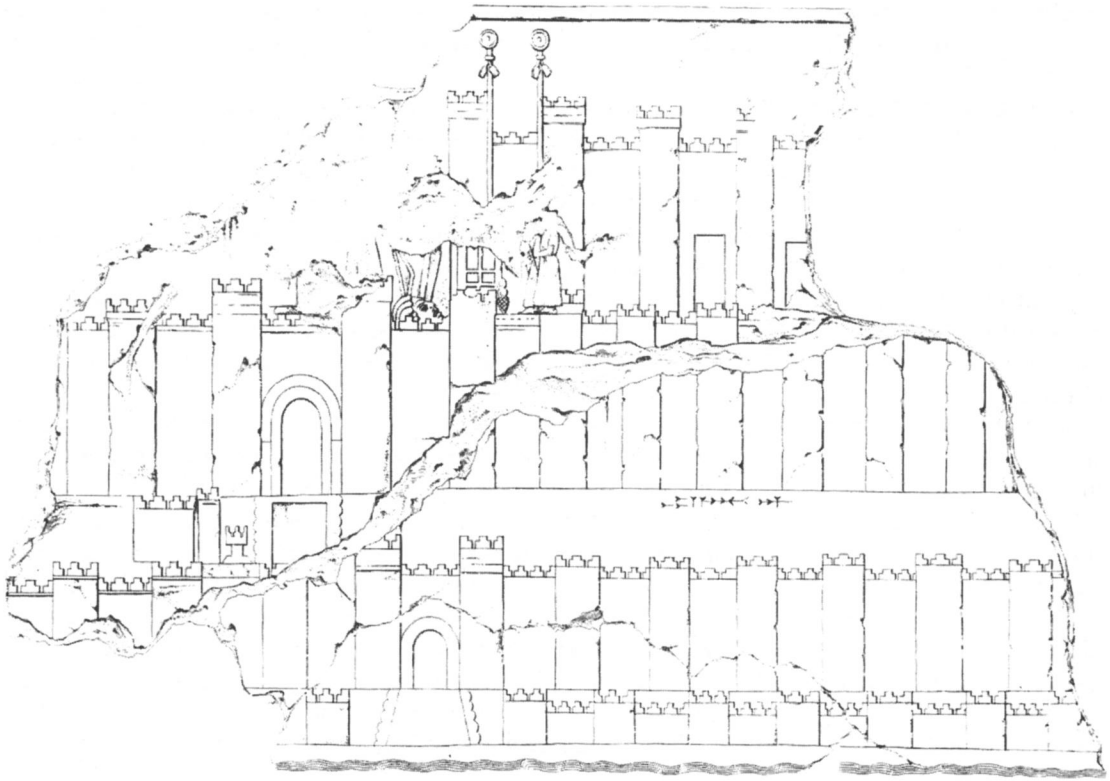


Fig. 4. Ashurbanipal pouring a libation over the head of Te-Umman, slab 9, room I, North Palace at Nineveh (Place 1867: Pl. 41).

The head of Te-Umman, the Elamite king, I hung on the neck of Dunanu. . . . With booty from Elam and booty from Gambulu, which I had conquered with the help of the god Ashur, and accompanied by singers and music, I entered joyfully into Nineveh. (after Piepkorn 1933: 73; cf. Borger 1996: B §36, VI: 50–6)

In this case, the head hanging round Dunanu’s neck was the most effective visual sign of the humiliation of the defeated king short of execution in Nineveh.

Ashurbanipal’s triumphal entry into Nineveh ensued, and there he displayed the head of Te-Umman and poured wine over it (captions 13–14):

I Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, displayed publicly the head of Te-Umman, king of Elam, in front of the gate inside the city, where from old it had been said by the oracle: the head of your enemies you shall cut off, you should pour wine over them. (after Weidner 1932–3: 14.47–50, 1; cf. Luckenbill 1927: 396, No. 1047)

Thus, Ashurbanipal set his actions within a tradition that, according to his own words, had always existed.

In a final scene, for which we have no textual evidence, Ashurbanipal displays the head of Te-Umman once again, now in a more private sphere. This is the famous “garden scene” from Room S¹ of the North Palace (Barnett 1976: Pl. 65). Ashurbanipal reclines opposite his seated wife, with a laden table between them. His eyes focus on the head of Te-Umman which hangs in a tree.⁹ This shows that the royal repast is also consecrated to the triumph over an enemy. We may notice how the head of Te-Umman had become a lasting trophy signifying that Ashurbanipal had actively and permanently gained control over his enemies.

When viewing Ashurbanipal’s behaviour with the severed head of Te-Umman from an anthropological perspective, two main questions arise. The first concerns the nature of Ashurbanipal’s

⁹Note Abraham Winitzer’s paper “Assurbanipal’s ‘Garden Scene’” at RAI 49, which offered a different interpretation of the head as that of Nabū-bel-shumati who

was another rebel beheaded by order of Ashurbanipal (see also *infra*, n. 13).

headhunting. Was Te-Umman's head just a trophy of combat and proof that the Elamite king had been killed or did it hold significance beyond this single meaning? Certainly, the latter was the case.

In contemporary anthropology, headhunting is defined as an organized, coherent form of violence in which the severed head is given a specific ritual meaning and the act of head-taking is consecrated and commemorated in some form (Hoskins 1996: 2). Following this definition, we must admit that Ashurbanipal had indeed carried out a headhunting ritual in the strict anthropological sense. Its significance was essentially different from that of the customary Assyrian practice in warfare of cutting off the heads of enemies for "statistical" purposes. Te-Umman's head, in contrast, was the focus of ritual attention, and, even if we do not know what finally happened to the head, its taking and consecration were also commemorated in both textual and visual form. Thus, the second question which arises is that regarding the factors that made the taking of Te-Umman's head a potent ritual act.

The first factor is political. As in many other societies practising headhunting, the severed head emerges as a political symbol which helps to commemorate an important historical event — in this case the defeat of Elam — and to maintain ideological control over the past.¹⁰

The second factor is religion. Ashurbanipal's war against Elam was, like other Assyrian military campaigns, regarded as a divine mission.¹¹ By defeating and decapitating the king of Elam who, according to Assyrian royal rhetoric: *lā mušāqir ilāni*, "did not honor the gods" and *ana Aššur šar ilāni . . . ihtū*, "sinned against Ashur the king of the gods" (Prism B V: 35, 41–2), Ashurbanipal fulfils the divine command of Ishtar of Arbela. In Prism B he confirms that "The head of Te-Umman, king of Elam, at the command of Ashur and Marduk, the great gods my lords, I cut off before his assembled troops" (Prism B VI: 1–3). As a result, Ashurbanipal was later able to celebrate the taking of Te-Umman's head in inscriptions dedicated to the god Nabû: "To Nabû, the exalted lord, who lives in Nineveh in the E-zida, my lord: (I am) Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, . . . who as a result of his duty and his weighty order cut off in battle the head of Te-Umman, king of Elam" (after Luckenbill 1927: 383, No. 992). This shows that the head was not only a constant object of visual propaganda, but that it had also become a consecrated medium of communication with the gods. Here again, we touch on the phenomenon of headhunting from a very anthropological point of view.

The third factor is tradition. As already stated, Ashurbanipal set the ritual of headhunting within an age-old tradition by citing the oracle: "the head of your enemies you shall cut off, you should pour wine over them". The question is, however, did Ashurbanipal follow an existing tradition or had he himself invented the tradition? I assume that the latter was the case. We know that Ashurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon, had cut off the heads of Abdi-milkuti, king of Sidon, and Sanduarri, king of Kundu. Esarhaddon says that he hung the heads of both kings around the necks of their high officials "in order to display to the people the might of my lord Ashur" (Borger 1956: 50, A, III 20–38). However, for other parallels we have to go back to a prophecy of the time of Zimri-Lim affirming his victory over an enemy with the words: "one will cut off the head of Ishme-Dagan and will place it at the feet of my lord" (*ARM X 4: 25–7*; see Charpin 1994: 52). In contrast to these rare examples of a royal headhunt, Ashurbanipal not only took the head of Te-Umman but later, with the help of Tammaritu, he also decapitated king Ummanigash, who had been installed by him on the throne of Elam (Prism B VII: 30–5).¹² Furthermore, the corpse of Nabû-bel-shumati, grandson of Merodach-Baladan, who had incited

¹⁰ In the case of southeast Asian headhunting rituals, for example, Rosaldo (1980) has shown how headhunting works as a central moving force in the shaping of historical consciousness. Hoskins (1987), moreover, argues that "history" has become a new genre of authoritative discourse at local and national level in Indonesia by turning headhunters into heroic figures in the national resistance to the Dutch colonial order. According to Hoskins' approach, headhunting is neither applied cosmology nor a formative episode in the reproduction of social order. It is the proving ground for heroic figures crucial to ideological control over the past.

¹¹ For the religious background of the Assyrian wars see

Oded 1992: 121–35.

¹² Borger 1996: 229. After having been bribed by Shamash-shum-ukin, Ummanigash sent his troops against Ashurbanipal. He was nevertheless defeated by Ashurbanipal's ally Tammaritu. Captions for reliefs report the decapitation of Ummanigash and that afterwards his head was brought to the *šut reši* in Madaktu to give him good news (Kaelin 1999: 95; Borger 1996: 307–19, Nos. 51–83). During Ashurbanipal's fifth campaign, the head of the governor of Armenia was cut off and brought to Nineveh (B IV: 9–16; Piepkorn 1933: 56–7).

another Elamite rebellion, was brought into the presence of Ashurbanipal who cut off his head “in order to increase his death” (Prism A VII: 46–7).¹³ The circumstances of the war against Elam were exceptional because the connection with the “Bruderkrieg” against Shamash-shum-ukin in Babylonia made the conflict emotionally charged (Mayer 1995: 403–8). The taking of Te-Umman’s head might not have been planned and might have happened more or less accidentally in the course of the battle. That it was not common practice to take the head of a foreign king was later confirmed by Tammartu’s rhetorical question addressed to Ashurbanipal “Does one [really] cut off the head of the king of Elam in the midst of his country and before his assembled troops” (Streck 1916: 34–5, IV: 16–17). But, since it was such an exceptional case, Ashurbanipal was forced to create a tradition which assured the severed head a fixed place in the royal symbolic system.

The methods for inventing such a tradition could have been many. One, for example, could have been the parallelism between the royal lion hunt ritual and that of the human trophy. Another would have been of particular interest for Ashurbanipal who took pride in being highly literate and could have been referring to a topos well known from the fifth tablet of the Gilgamesh epic. The transport of the severed head over a long distance, the triumphal return with it to Nineveh and its consecration to the gods recall the epic story in which Gilgamesh returned to Nippur with the head of Humbaba and booty from the cedar mountain.¹⁴ Like Ashurbanipal, who consecrated the head of Te-Umman to his gods in Nineveh, Gilgamesh consecrated the head of Humbaba to Enlil in Nippur. The connotations of the severed head must have made it quite easy for the Assyrian audience to associate the image of victorious king with that of the heroic demon-slayer in the Gilgamesh epic. For Ashurbanipal, therefore, the ritual involving Te-Umman’s head helped him not only to assert a tradition borrowed from epic history, but also to assume the role of keeper of tradition and maintainer of the divine will.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that the individualisation of the severed head, that of Te-Umman, was a new concept in both the visual and in the figurative language of royal triumph developed during the reign of Ashurbanipal. It became a headhunt in the strict anthropological sense only after the head had been taken (perhaps by chance), but it was then given a specific ritual meaning which suggested that the ritual of headhunting as such was a well-established practice. In Ashurbanipal’s reign, we can identify the moment in which an urban society starts to embed the ritual of headhunting in its own cultural system. This seems to be the most intriguing point from an anthropological perspective.

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¹³ See Streck 1916: 62–3; Borger 1996: 59–60, A §62.

¹⁴ “To the house of Enlil the Euphrates shall bear it [the door made of cedar], let the folk of Nippur rejoice over it! Let the god Enlil delight in it!” ... They bound together a

raft, they laid [the cedar on it.] Enkidu was helmsman ... and Gilgamesh [carried] the head of Humbaba.” (George 2000: 47, IM 29, V 300).

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