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Spatial Cognition, Ritual Spaces, and Self-Assertion in Visual Media of the Ancient Near East

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This paper focusses on concepts of space and ritual in Ancient Near Eastern visual art. Two very different types of visual media are confronted: representations on cylinder seals from the third and second millennium BC and reliefs from the palace of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, from the 7th century BC. Both media are a rewarding source for reconstructing ancient Mesopotamian spatial cognition and its realistic practice which goes beyond the efficacy of textual records. Within the imagery of ritual scenes on cylinder seals, strategies of self-assertion by members of society who are not royals can be observed. Contrary, within the visual narrative of the royal lion hunt on Assyrian palace reliefs, the mythological perception of space is effortfully blended with geopolitical and economic interests.

Ancient Near East; visual media; space; ritual; cylinder seals; lion hunt

Dieser Beitrag konzentriert sich auf Konzepte von Raum und Ritual in der altvorderasiatischen Bildkunst. Dabei werden zwei sehr unterschiedliche Arten von Bildmedien gegenübergestellt: Darstellungen auf Zylindersiegeln aus dem 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr. und Reliefs aus dem Palast des assyrischen Königs Assurbanipal aus dem 7. Jahrhundert v. Chr. Beide Medien sind eine wertvolle Quelle für die Rekonstruktion der altmesopotamischen Raumvorstellung und ihrer realistischen Praxis, die über die Aussagekraft textlicher Aufzeichnungen hinausgeht. Innerhalb der Bildsprache von Ritualszenen auf Zylindersiegeln lassen sich Selbstbehauptungsstrategien von nicht-adeligen Gesellschaftsmitgliedern beobachten. Innerhalb der visuellen Erzählung der königlichen Löwenjagd auf assyrischen Palastreliefs hingegen wird die mythologische Raumwahrnehmung aufwändig mit geopolitischen und wirtschaftlichen Interessen vermengt.

Vorderasien; visuelle Medien; Raum; Ritual; Zylindersiegel; Löwenjagd

I Introduction

Landscapes of ruins in southern Mesopotamia (Fig. 1): The view wanders through the chain of hills harboring rubble from buildings that have been there for millennia, before it joins the endless horizon of the vast plain. The sunrise each morning and sunset each evening enveloped the landscape in a reflective red light, which faded over the course of the day in the haze of the burning sun. Thousands of years ago, city-dwellers in Mesopotamia may have seen the same view from the roofs of their houses and the terraces of their temple towers. Their perception of the natural environment is unlikely to have been much different from that of the people who live there today. But their awareness of the natural phenomena and geographical conditions – the heart of the Mesopotamian world – had not yet been trained by modern maps or high-resolution satellite perspectives. It differed from modern spatial knowledge as a result, but was not overly concerned with

explaining the directly visible: rather, it was continuously driven by the quest to describe the world as a whole. This is what makes it worthwhile to explore the conditions of the culture-specific processes of the spatial cognition of the time, especially the everyday practice by which spatial cognition served as a survival technique for all segments of the population.

While empirical knowledge of the natural space was limited to the vast, flat alluvial plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the site of the oldest cities in human history, the external coordinates of this living space were known from very early on:¹ The mountains in the east and northeast, which had already been interpreted in the most ancient myths as the birthplace of the great rivers; the desert steppe in the west, associated with darkness and death as the site of the setting sun; the Lower Sea in the Persian-Arabian Gulf and the Upper Sea, generally referred to as the Mediterranean and characterized as Lake Van or Lake Urmia beyond Zagros and Taurus beginning late in the second millennium BC; the freshwater springs, which led to the idea of freshwater ocean lying under a flat earth, the cosmic Abzu; and finally the domed heavenly firmament as the abode of the gods, thought to exist in three spheres.

Many of these geographic coordinates remained invisible to most people throughout their lives, especially the mountains and distant seas. Nevertheless, they were part of a worldview that was fixed because of its cosmological nature. In this cosmic geography, people's fates were determined by the gods linked to the natural phenomena, like the astral deities and the god of the freshwater ocean known as Enki/Ea. But the people themselves also managed to achieve stability and security through rituals that garnered them coexistence with the supernatural, divine powers.

Texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, from the second millennium BC, and the "Babylonian Map of the World" and "Sargon Geography" from the early first millennium BC provide relatively precise ideas about the real geographical knowledge that existed and its links to mythology. Image media are another rewarding source for reconstructing ancient Mesopotamian spatial cognition and its realistic practice, and will be looked at more closely below.

2 Spatial cognition and ritual in images on seals

The daily sunrise over the mountains in the eastern Mesopotamian plain generated a mythical experience of space that is very specific to this region. While these mountains were usually not visible to those living in the lowlands, as has already been stated, people could conceive of them nonetheless. Images on cylinder seals beginning in the second half of the third millennium BC give us a very precise idea about this: a seal from the Akkadian period, for example, shows the sun god Shamash in the middle of other principal Mesopotamian deities, rising from the depths between two scaled mountain peaks with a saw in his raised hand (Fig. 2). Texts of incantations from the later Assyrian era rewrite this visual imagination with the words "[Shamash], when you emerge from the great mountain, when you emerge from the great mountain, the mountain of springs."² The complex frame of reference for this conception of space had already been expressed several centuries before, in the image of the seal. The everyday experience of the sunrise is connected first to a spatial association – the highlands – in the texts where it is called "place of the sunrise" (*ki^dutu-è-kam*), then second to a moment in time – the break of day – and third to a religious experience, the appearance of the sun god. But where do human beings figure into this frame of reference? They act within it: space and time

1 See Horowitz 1998, 318–362.

2 Translated after Borger 1967, 13, l.1-4.



Fig. 1 | Uruk, southern Iraq.

form a cosmic unity at the moment of sunrise, into which humanity enters by means of the ritual itself. At the morning hour – sunrise – the worshipper directs a prayer to the sun god. This prayer determines the further – hopefully positive – course of the day, guaranteed by the all-seeing divine sun, which resumes its path across the firmament of the heavens until the evening hour, keeping watch over law and order on earth.

The characteristic thing about the analogous images from the seals is that the worshipper inscribes himself into the place where the sun rises, as the person praying (Fig. 3). He appears on the right edge of the picture, with a raised hand and a sacrificial goat in his arms, to direct his prayer to the ascending sun god. In the prayer ritual pictured here, then, the person plunges into the cosmic unity of space and time, and this unity leads him to an encounter with the divine and to the mythical limits of the perceptible world.

Because of this, the encounter remains an indirect one, even in the image, because liminal zones exist that cannot be transcended. In the seal's representation, these are the gates and the gatekeepers of the rising sun, which close off the site of its ascension. The real distance to the mountains, which normally was not to be conquered, remained unreachable and unimaginable to most, as did the unknown space behind them. Few chosen ones in the heroic historiography of Mesopotamia were permitted to cross this zone.

The Epic of Gilgamesh tells how the royal hero actually manages to pass through the gate of the mountains to the place of the sun: “The scorpion-man opened his mouth to speak to King Gilgamesh: ‘Go, Gilgamesh! May the mountains of Mashu allow you to pass!’ [...] When Gilgamesh heard these words, what the scorpion-man told him, he took to heart, he took the path of the Sun God [...]”³

Gilgamesh was a role model for Mesopotamian rulers in many ways. They followed the mythical paths of Gilgamesh on their expeditions and achieved heroic fame by doing so, enjoying the privilege of closer proximity to the sites of supernatural powers than most of their subjects ever would. Nevertheless, even normal mortals succeeded in establishing contact with the divine powers through rituals and the spaces of action created within those rituals, giving them a tool for self-assertion that was fundamental to their peace of mind. Not only do the images referring to this process illustrate it in what is sometimes a very graphic way, but they can also be interpreted as an essential element of ritual self-assertion.

3 Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet IX.132-138, George 1999, 73.

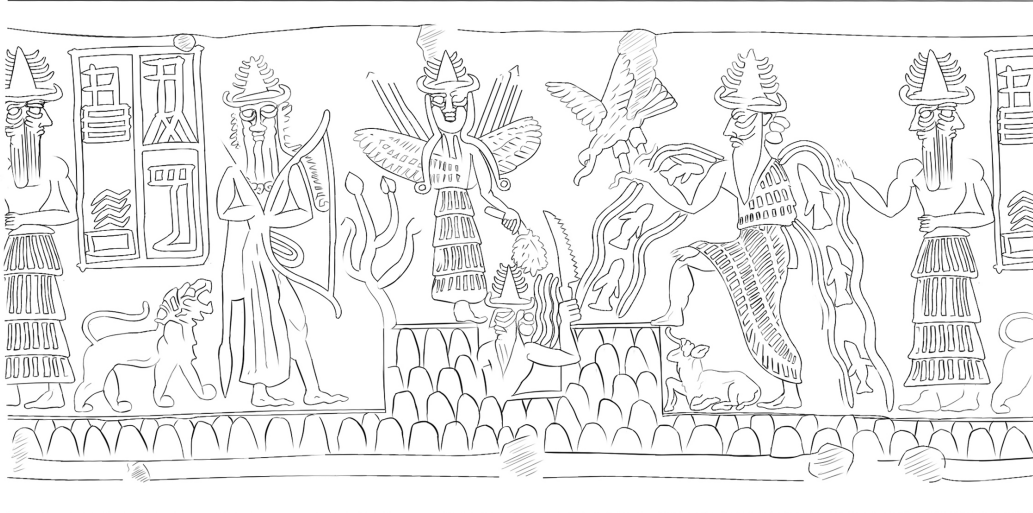


Fig. 2 | Cylinder seal (modern impression) with Mesopotamian deities (Trustees of The British Museum, BM 89115).



Fig. 3 | Cylinder seal (modern impression) with Shamash, divine doorkeepers and worshipper (Louvre A 139).

The seals in particular would perpetuate the substantive meaning of the image each time they were unrolled for quotidian uses in the various spheres of business, administration, certification, and other correspondence. In iconic practice, they were instruments of a potentially infinite reproduction of their ritual reference. It is even likely that the ritual space was expanded with every act of sealing, specifically into those spheres where there was not necessarily any religious connotation (such as economy, administration, and certification), but where the action of the transcendental powers was essential for both the functioning of institutionalized procedures and for people's daily routines.

One such example is a receipt from the city of Aššur from the thirteenth century BC, archived in Kar Tukulti-Ninurta, that documents the rations for guardsmen (Fig. 4). The official commissioned by the king, named Aššur-reši-iši, signed the document several times with his seal, which shows a bearded man facing left, with his hand raised in prayer, in front of a ram. An omega-shaped symbol over the ram emphasizes the religious

character of this scene, in which the representation of the ram can be interpreted as an attribute of either a deity or a sacrificial animal. The solitary figure of the person praying likely represents the seal owner.

The seal image vouches for the identity of its owner, binding the seal holder to the contractual document and protecting the contents with its religious, ritualistic iconography, just as it protects its owner. We may assume that at the moment of sealing, the proximity to the divine imagined in the picture was projected onto the receipt, consequently marking out an object-action space that was divinely sanctioned.

Of course, not every seal bore depictions of ritual acts in which a person and/or the seal owner was included in the image. Nevertheless, there are numerous images from beyond this era that take up this subject matter, and it frequently seems to have been the individual decision of the seal owner to choose this theme.

In this context, it is striking that a relatively large stock of ritual scenes has survived among the seals from the Middle Assyrian period associated with the example of the sealed receipt from Kar Tukulti-Ninurta, since this era is actually characterized by a wholly different stylistic and iconographic repertoire. There must have been a consistently strong and individual demand for these scenes to explain their conservative continuity in the visual communication system of the Assyrian state apparatus, which otherwise generally aspired to new motif standards.

The images on this seal contrast two different concepts of spatial cognition. One situates the action in the physical space of the city (Fig. 5): the praying man in the guise of a high Assyrian official, depicted with his hand raised, is standing in front of a temple building whose interior is visible. Inside, the statue of a dog positioned on a pedestal as a symbol of the goddess Gula refers to the divine presence in this place. But the encounter with the divine illustrated by the prayer gesture remains an indirect one, since the person praying and the cult image are separated by the walls of the temple. The meaning of this visual concept perhaps lies in the fact that the person praying is not only submitting to the goddess, but also to the virtually powerful institution of the temple that is present in the urban space. It is telling that the seal owner, who in turn should be identified with the image of the praying man in the seal, does not represent a priest of this temple institution, but rather is the governor of Amasakku, a high-level political official, for whom this image serves to confirm his authority and divine support.

The other concept is the encounter between the person praying and the deity in an imaginary space, which is still atmospherically charged through the astral symbols in the upper part of the seal image (Fig. 6). The representation of the enthroned deity on the right side of the image may be seen as her cult image, but it could also be pure imagination, since the presence of the deity is evoked in the prayer ritual in any case: her closeness is felt even without a specific visual substitute. The decisive factor is the fire or incense altar between the man who is praying and the deity. The altar and the burned incense are the medium to divinity, the instrument of its evocation: in principle, the possibility to create a ritual space through the use of specific paraphernalia such as incense was open to all individuals. Ritual descriptions like the “Prayer of the Raised Hand,” Ištar 2, offer a detailed guide:

In a space where no one comes, sweep the roof, disperse clean water and lay four bricks corner to corner. Pile up small twigs of Euphrates Poplar and light a fire. Sprinkle on scented plants, roasted flour and juniper, pour out *mihhu* beer but do not [yet] prostrate yourself. Recite this passage three times before Ištar. [Then] prostrate yourself and do not look back behind you.⁴

4 Ištar 2: 107–110, in Zgoll 2003, 53–54.



Fig. 4 | Middle Assyrian seal impression from Kar Tukulti-Ninurta (Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, VAT 18012).



Fig. 5 | Middle Assyrian seal impression from Aššur (Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, VAT 09662a).

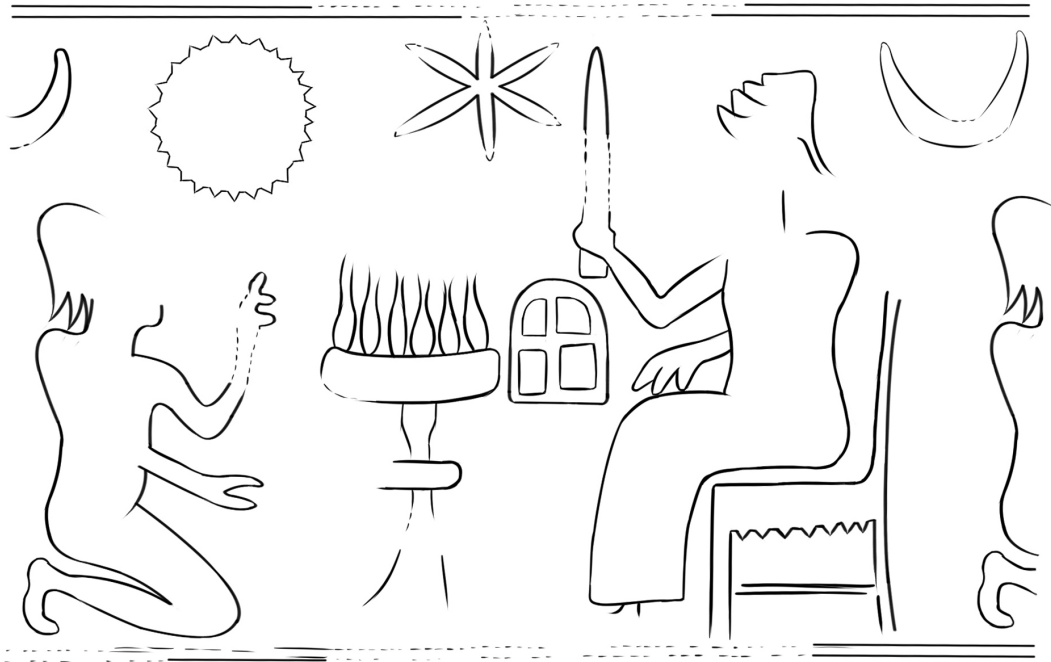


Fig. 6 | Middle Assyrian seal impression from Aššur (Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin, VAT 08801).

In this context, the encounter between supplicant and deity, comparable to the seal image with the temple architecture, is likewise an indirect one. Here, however, it works without a specific spatial reference and is therefore theoretically imaginable anywhere a fire altar can be set up and ritual action can be performed. What gives this image its own magic is the simulation of a ritual space in which the person praying inscribes himself as a representative of the seal holder.

From a sociohistorical perspective, these images are an important source that let us observe strategies of self-assertion by members of society who are not royals. Self-assertion, to define this term more precisely, functions in this case largely via the mechanism of self-representation through presentation. The seal holder presents the deity or temple institution to whom he or she is submitting in order to draw maximal attention to the positive effect being exerted by its powers. This process clearly and (for this period) uniquely happens as part of the personal inscription into the ritual space, and thus the safest space for stability and order.

3 Spatial cognition and ritual in reliefs of the Assyrian lion hunt

What helps individuals in the collective of society is also confirmed in the actions of the ruler. As I close this article, however, I would like to point not to the comparable ritual actions of the king and their illustration in media other than cylinder seals, but to briefly address another issue that is very revealing of royal self-assertion and the models of spatial cognition in the ancient Near East: the ritual of the royal lion hunt and its depiction in Assyrian reliefs.

The king's lion hunt has been a ritualized event since the third millennium BC, one parallelized with the workings of the gods in myths. It symbolizes conquest of the hostile forces of nature and is often equated to the military duties of the monarch as a

symbol of overcoming chaos and establishing order.⁵ In this context, the lion hunt is an action assigned by the gods, just as any act of war is a divinely commissioned work. One peculiarity of the Assyrian lion hunt in the first millennium BC is that it increasingly shifted the action away from far-flung natural settings and toward specially designed landscape gardens in the urban centers of the kingdom, in order to celebrate the most important religious holidays such as the festival of the New Year.

A relief from King Aššurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh (668–627 BC) provides a clear vision of a royal park in the center of the capital (Fig. 7). The grounds extend along a slope, upon which various tree species are planted in diagonal rows. They are watered by a main channel that runs across the picture horizontally and by secondary channels that branch off of it sideways. The water for this channel system is supplied from an aqueduct in the upper right area of the park. In addition to the channels, a central path leads through the middle of the park. It contains an altar with a crenellated tower and opens onto a terrace with more trees, which surround a columned pavilion with an annex to the side. In front of or inside this annex is a stela with the image of an Assyrian ruler who is likely the builder, King Sennacherib (704–681 BC).

In one of his longest inscriptions, known as the “Palace Without Rival,” Sennacherib provides a brief description of the garden that he had constructed for him in Nineveh beside his palace and which appears to have been depicted on the relief from the North Palace of his grandson, Aššurbanipal.⁶ The report is also an eloquent testimony about the concept of the garden, namely that it is a faithful reproduction of the Amanus mountain range, with all of its trees, plants, and fruits, but that it also contains botanical stocks from southern Babylonia (Chaldea). From the Assyrian ruling perspective, then, the garden constitutes a transfer of the cornerstones of the empire – the Amanus in the far west and Chaldea to the far south – to the center of power, and is thus an almost colonial-seeming symbol of appropriation and dominance. This ideologized spatial construct is also where the lion hunt takes place: not necessarily in the garden next to the king's Southwest Palace at Nineveh that is described and illustrated, but clearly in a similar park near the area of the palace. Sennacherib's aforementioned inscription refers to the existence of several such parks, which he had laid out for him “above the city and below the city.”⁷

One example of a publicly staged and ritualized lion hunt in one of these parks that is unique in its dramaturgy and visual intensity is documented the relief cycle from the North Palace of Aššurbanipal in Nineveh. Some of the reliefs that are at least indirectly related to this event were placed along the walls of a long corridor, which led from this monarch's North Palace down to the foot of the citadel hill and was presumably the shortest route to the nearby park. One side of this relief shows the procession by the royal entourage from the palace to the hunt, while the other side shows their return with the slain lions.⁸

In the actual representations of the lion hunt, which were located in rooms C and S of the North Palace, the lions are released from cages; the ruler then hunts them down one by one with a bow, spear, or dagger, either on horseback, in a carriage (Fig. 8), or on foot. At the end, the hunting kills are consecrated to the gods in a ritual that includes offerings of libations and incense.⁹ The action takes place in an open field, bounded by fences, behind and in front of which guards with spears and dogs prevent the lions from breaking out of the hunting terrain. A wooded hill rises alongside this field, upon which a royal stela has been erected under a fixed canopy (Fig. 9).

5 Annus 2002, 102–108; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 244–258.

6 Luckenbill 1924, 111, Col. VII. 53–57; see also Dalley 1994.

7 Luckenbill 1924, 113, Col. VIII. 16.

8 Matthiae 1996, Figs. 10.1–10.5.

9 Matthiae 1996, Figs. 9.20–9.21, 10.1–10.17.

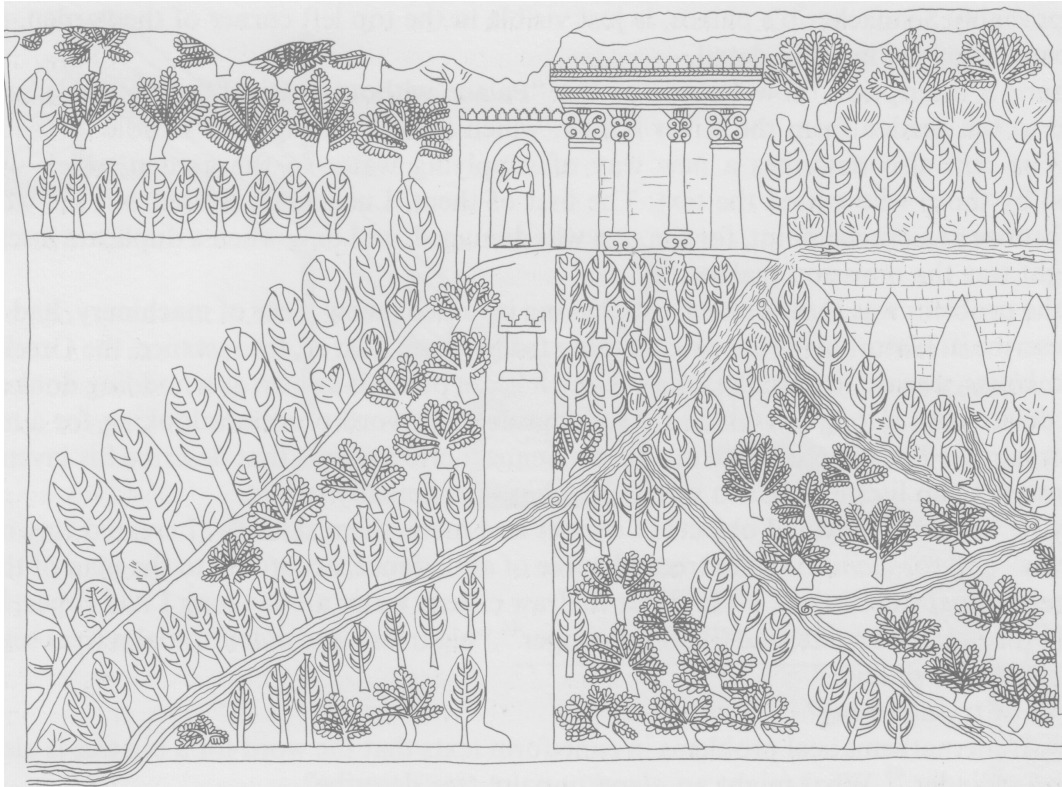


Fig. 7 | Relief of Aššurbanipal showing Sennacherib's garden in Nineveh (British Museum, BM 124939).



Fig. 8 | Relief of Aššurbanipal, lion hunt in Nineveh (Trustees of The British Museum, BM 124853-5).

The concept of this landscape reflects specific characteristics of Assyrian spatial cognition on a twofold level: The first level is mythological, since the field on which the lions are slain is compared to the vast plain or steppe that the ruler is heading into for the purpose of the lion hunt. This equivalence follows clearly from an inscription on a relief of a lion hunt in room S of the North Palace, which states: “In the plain, a wide expanse, raging lions, a fierce mountain breed, attacked me, and surrounded the chariot,



Fig. 9 | Relief of Aššurbanipal, park next to the hunting arena in Nineveh (Trustees of The British Museum, BM 124862).

my royal vehicle.”¹⁰ Although located in reality in the city of Nineveh, the artificially demarcated field of the lion hunt is imagined as a vast plain and steppeland. This idea corresponds to the dualism between city and steppe that was traditional of Mesopotamia. The city (*ālu*) was viewed as a civilizational contrast to the surrounding area, the vast wild steppe (*šēru*) and the mountains (*šadû*). One stood for order and security, the other for anti-order and danger.¹¹ The ruler, as the hunter, transgresses the safe limits of the city, heading directly into the hostile steppe, just as the mythological gods like Marduk, Aššur, Ištar, and Ninurta set out to clear up the chaos of the world in its primal state. In Aššur, the ritual revival of the myth happened at the celebration of the New Year, the *akītu*, but there were annual repetitions in other cultic centers of Mesopotamia as well.¹² The *akītu* house lay outside the city walls, and the processional to it by the ruler, together with images of the gods, is represented in the ritual of the myth as a path beset with danger. In a prism fragment (82-5-22,2) Aššurbanipal is even clearly told, in connection with the *akītu* festival, about the threat of the lions and their ensuing hunt.¹³ This description completely dissolves the boundary between the ritual of the *akītu* festival and the ritual of the royal lion hunt:

[As (if for) the pleasu[re (of my people)]. [I we]nt out. In the pla[n, a wide expanse] – [befo]re my arrival hug[e lions, fier]ce [mountain breed, attacked] (there) the cattle-p[en(s)]. [With] my [single] team, harnessed to [my] l[ordly] vehicle, [fort]y ([10 u]š) minutes after daybre[ak], I pierced the throats of[f] ragi[ng] lions, each (lion) with a single arrow. Thereupon Addar arrived, the month of the festival in the *akītu* temple of the queen of the goddesses, during which time

10 Weissert 1997, 344.

11 Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 18–19.

12 Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 37–84.

13 Weissert 1997, 348.

the gods, [her] parents, assemble in fron[t of her] in order to consult and make d[ecision(s)].¹⁴

A cultural-historical perspective shows us that the perception of the urban outdoor space as a threatening natural environment must have gradually given way over the centuries to the reality of an increasingly domesticated cultural landscape, at least as regards the core region of the kingdom. It is because of this aspect in particular that the staging of a mythological primal state through the ritual of the lion hunt, in the middle of cities like Nineveh, is likely to have acquired an especially strong representative effect. The urban context made the lion hunt of Aššurbanipal a staged performance of unprecedented proportions. Specifically, participants included not only the usual circle who accompanied the king on other hunts, the royal entourage, but also a large crowd of onlookers who followed the goings-on of the hunt from the aforementioned hill (Fig. 9). This hill, with its various stocks of trees, is in turn one of the images of a distant mountain landscape. The king's stela clearly marks it as a conquered and pacified area that, in its representation analogous to the staged hunt, celebrates him as a lion slayer in a carriage. The representation of the audience, evidently emotionally excited by the spectacle being performed, shifts the monarch's prowess and bravery into public view. The ritual thus becomes a clearly propagandistic instrument of legitimizing his rule.

The space where this ritual is constructed is of particular interest for the subject of this paper; it demonstrates the effortful blend of the mythological perception of space with geopolitical and economic interests. The latter illustrate the second level of spatial cognition, at which the conquest of far-off landscapes in the course of political and economic expansion is spatially recreated in the center of the kingdom, symbolizing possession and dominion over all parts of the known world. The king, as the dominant figure, but also his subjects, some of them participating and some of them observing, are immersed into these complementary concepts of space in various ways. As a shared moment of their spatial experience, however, the proximity to the divine would have been at the forefront in the process, just as proximity to the ruler must likely have been an important moment of corporeal experience for the crowd of his subjects.

As I close this image-based reflection, I would like to briefly refer to the variety of textual parallels that summarize the ritualized hunting in very visual metaphors. In addition to the inscriptions by the Assyrian rulers that praise their hunts in the steppe, and the aforementioned prism fragments of Aššurbanipal, there is another text that clearly refers to the reliefs in the North Palace. The text is a copy on a clay tablet (K 6085), but in its original form was likely installed on the very stela that crowned the hill in the park for the urban lion hunt.

I smashed the testicles of the third (lion), I smashed the skull of the fourth, and I sliced through the leg tendon of the fifth [...]. With my lordly vehicle ... when 40 minutes (10 uš) had passed since daybreak, [...] the frightfulness of 18 angry lions [...]. I threw their carcasses side by side in a pile. I let their blood flow, dyeing the green of the field like red wool. There, where I had killed this lion, ... [...]. That field, which the people of my palace called 'He is the lion of the lions,' this field I consecrated to Ishtar of Nineveh¹⁵

Here we have a particularly instructive example of the intermediality of image and text, one that also teaches us that the spatial ideas in the text create mental images. Even though these images may have similarities to the spatial ideas in the physical picture, without their pictorial counterpart they are actually only a distorted picture of the historical reality.

14 L. 2-14, Weissert 1997, 357.

15 Translated after Bauer 1933, 88, pl. 43.

Illustration credits

1 Photo: M. Ossendrijver. 2 Drawing: C. Kabacaoglu after Aruz 2003, No. 139. 3 Drawing: C. Kabacaoglu after Boehmer 1965, Fig. 420. 4 From Fischer 1999, No. 2, Fig. 5. With kind permission of the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin. 5 From Feller 2009, No. 636. With kind permission of the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin. 6 From Feller 2009, No. 267. With kind permission of the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin. 7 From Dalley 1994 Fig. 1. With kind permission of Stephanie Dalley. 8–9 Photo: S. Haack.

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