

УДК: 7.032(355)

ББК: 87.8

A43

DOI:

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## The Border between War and Peace. Power and Propaganda in Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid Art

### Introduction

The Neo-Assyrian and the Achaemenid empires were the first supranational political entities which emerged in Western Asia. As typical imperial structures, their art, being one of the most tangible means of propaganda, strongly reflected their imperialist policies. Propaganda in ancient empires has been a popular topic for study [15; 26] and a wide range of specific analyses of both Assyrian and Achaemenid kingships have also been conducted [2; 5; 8; 10; 12; 16; 18; 19; 20; 24; 28; 29].

The features of propaganda vary according to the historical, cultural and political context in which it was created. However, it is generally possible to identify two main subspecies: action propaganda — aimed at changing attitudes — and integration propaganda — aimed at reinforcement.

Propaganda is of course not objective, and is used primarily to influence an audience and bolster a specific political agenda, often based on expansion policies and the submission of others. It uses specific codes and languages in order to produce emotional responses in the audience.

Who was the audience of the propaganda of ancient Near Eastern kingdoms and empires? Firstly, it was aimed at the gods in order to show them the strength of the king and his achievements in ruling the state [17, pp. 2354–2355; 23, p. 259]. Next, it was directed at the political and social structures surrounding the king, i.e. the court, the nobility, the army, foreign visitors, and — last of all — at the common people.

The society in such imperial entities was strongly hierarchical, with wealth, status, and power concentrated in the hands of the king, his court, and his officials [7]. Propaganda, however, despite being focused on strengthening ties with the audience, expressed merely the ideology of the ruling elite, for the purpose of justifying inequalities between societies and any particular actions carried out by the king [16, p. 300]. It followed two main directions: first it had to emphasize the legitimacy of the actions of the ruling elites; second, it also made defamatory remarks about adversaries. These actions were based on the concept of “centre versus periphery”, which is a typical *topos* of imperial societies. Assyrian ideology was strongly influenced by this concept whereas Achaemenid dogma was less affected. The centre was seen as prosperous and civilized due to the position and actions of the king; it produced the resources necessary for existence; the periphery, on the other hand, was seen as uncivilized, chaotic, dark and unknown [16, p. 306; 17, pp. 2362–2363].

The goal of Assyrian ideology was to incorporate the periphery into the centre. Once included within the “inner” world, the “outer” world became politically, culturally and economically developed: building an irrigation system allowed the exploitation of unproductive lands, the enlargement of settlements provided houses for new settlers (often forcefully relocated) and the construction of palaces and administrative buildings underlined the political rule. In order to strengthen internal cohesion a policy of elimination of diversity through unification and assimilation among the different peoples was pursued. Overall, Assyrian ideology bolstered the idea of the civilizing mission of their elite and that any part of the periphery might be integrated into the centre; it was therefore the prevailing of cosmos over the surrounding chaos that brought order and civilization [16, p. 307].

By following this double standard imperial art essentially expressed images based on the relationship between an empire — or rather its ruling elite — and the outside world. It served to reiterate their legitimacy to rule a multicultural empire. It also expressed their wishes of how the outside world — as well as a possible future viewer — would see them.

Art and politics strongly interact with each other. Both are expressions of ideologies, created and bolstered by the specific historical moment during which they emerged. Both address an audience. Thus imperial art was essentially a politically committed art, inspired by political ideology.

Both the Neo-Assyrian and the Achaemenid empires were international powers. The Assyrian state was fully centralized and made use of complex combinations of domination, exploitation and enslavement, as well as violence and organization [22, p. 164]. Achaemenid administrative control was more oriented toward collaboration with the local authorities, granting them some sort of autonomy, also because of the much larger extension of the empire.

The Neo-Assyrian empires lasted from the 10<sup>th</sup> until the very end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, during which a strong expansionist policy was followed. Both the historical events and the ideological content were recorded in paintings, obelisks and low-relief stone slabs, which mainly decorated the walls of the royal palaces [6]. The Achaemenid Empire had a shorter life and most of its works of art refer to a period in which the maximum extent of the empire had been reached and expansionist military campaigns had mostly ended.

Although they were both imperial polities, the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid empires had different ideologies that are strongly reflected in their works of art. Assyrian political propaganda employed the wide-ranging and deliberate broadcasting of violence displayed by a combination of visual art and royal inscriptions. Persian state propaganda, on the contrary, reflected the idea of a large multi-cultural empire based on voluntary submission and integration. Achaemenid imperial art focused on the empire’s international nature and internal cohesion.

Another big difference concerns the surviving material, since we have a much bigger corpus of Assyrian works of art. Assyrian art is more complex, since it covered a longer period. There were several stylistic developments within it over the centuries and overall, Assyrian art and ideology were the final result of a long-term development of Mesopotamian features.

The most detailed and varied narrative reliefs are those dated to Ashurnasirpal II’s rule (883–859 BCE), which show him engaged in a number of activities, as well as his court, people, soldiers involved in various actions.

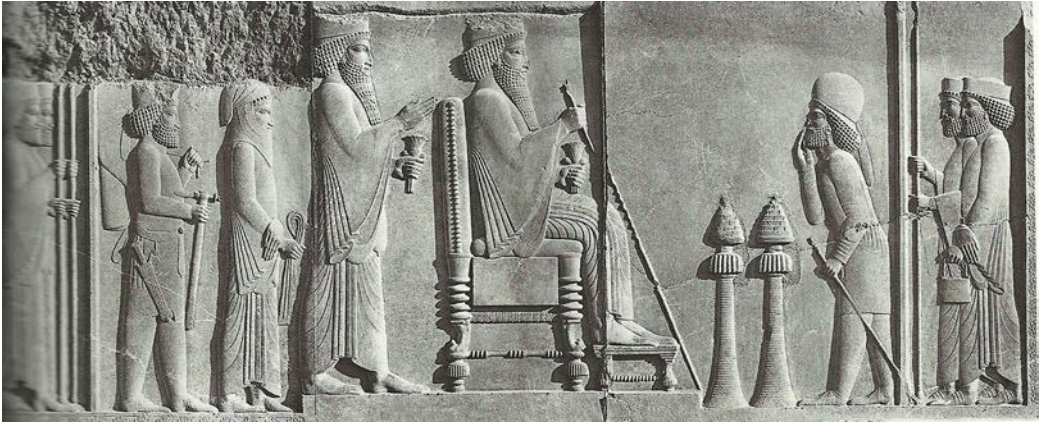


Fig. 1. Darius I and Xerxes I giving audience. Stone relief from Persepolis. National Museum of Iran, Teheran

Achaemenid art was mainly a creation of the times of Darius I and Xerxes I and presents less variation and internal development. Persians could not count on a previous and solid artistic tradition, therefore they adopted and successfully mixed several features coming from their predecessors, such as Mesopotamian, Elamite, Urartian, Lydian and Egyptian leading to the “Achaemenid eclecticism” [19, p. 347]. However, Achaemenid visual art especially made use of Assyrian and Babylonian artistic features [4, p. 136].

In this paper I will summarize the general aspects of the imperial ideologies of both the Assyrian and Achaemenid empires and how these were reflected in their art. Considering the enormous fields linked with this theme I will describe general and repetitive rules rather than absolute ones. Moreover, I will focus mainly on stone reliefs, notwithstanding the fact that several other artistic media show important features, such as the ample corpus of glyptics, for example. Neither will written evidence be taken into account, despite the strong connections between visual art and inscriptions.

### The king

At the vertex of this imperial ideology stood the king: art represents him as the creator and guardian of a civilized and peaceful territory, where chaos is kept at bay.

The king was the centre of all propaganda. It focussed on two main aspects: exalting the king, and justifying and sustaining the righteousness of the king’s cause and actions.

Each Neo-Assyrian king was anxious to prove his own superiority and continuously claimed that those who preceded him had not accomplished as much as he had done. The same pattern is clearly expressed by Darius I as well, but subsequent Achaemenid kings abandoned this *topos*.

Since Assyrian reliefs feature an abundant corpus of royal images and actions, we can delve deeper into its royal ideology. The king is constantly represented on sculptures and painting which focus on his achievements. He is represented fulfilling all royal duties: as supreme priest and emissary of the gods he is shown worshipping (Ill. I. 1); as head of state he receives officers, ambassadors and tributes (Ill. I. 2); as supreme judge he administers justice. How-

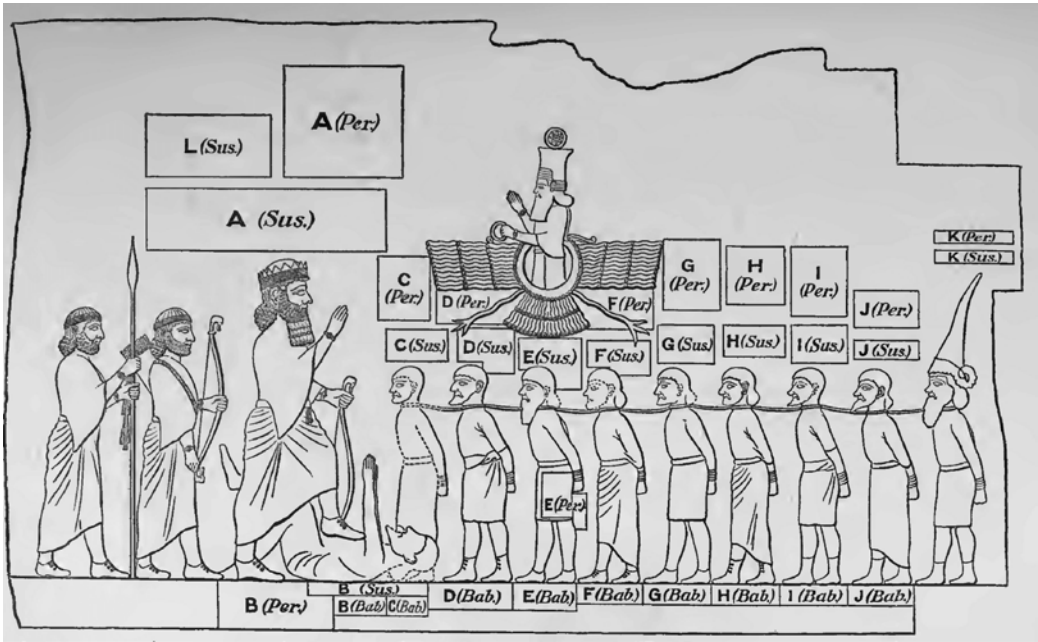


Fig. 2. The Behistun relief. Darius I and the position of his inscriptions. Rock-relief. In situ. Drawing by Jill Curry Robbins, after L. W. King and R. C. Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscription of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistûn in Persia* (London, 1907)

ever, apart from these ordinary duties, his royal character — and virility — are exalted by his victories, which may be over men, wild animals, or natural obstacles (Ill. I. 3). The message that many kings broadcast emphasized their military capacity. The king was thus exalted as a superhuman, who had no equal and thus rightfully exercised his power. He was the most important figure, generally larger in size than the other figures in the same composition, so he can be easily recognized by the viewer. He was associated with typical symbols, garments and objects which had the dual function of both highlighting his kingship and defending him with apotropaic powers. Apart from royal duties, private moments can be shown, as the king enjoying a banquet together with his wife (Ill. I. 4).

Achaemenid kings, on the contrary, are much more static, being characterized by a lack of movement. The royal image is not enclosed in a narrative framework, therefore there is little variation in the royal images. The king is usually represented sitting on the throne or standing up, accompanied by a few figures who may be servants, bodyguards or members of the court. He wears royal garments and holds royal objects such as a bow, which is a typical sign of Achaemenid royalty. He is represented performing few actions: he might receive an official (Fig. 1), fight an animal, or be together with Ahura Mazda, represented by a *fara-vahar* or winged solar disc. Only in the well-known relief of Behistun in Western Iran is he shown stepping on a defeated enemy in front of nine other figures, representing the leaders of peoples who rebelled against him (Fig. 2). They are shown with hands tied and ropes around their necks.

### **The king and the gods**

One of the most important features of Assyrian ideology — if not the most important — is the special relationship between the king and the gods [3; 21].

An Assyrian king was essentially the high priest of the god Aššur [14], the main deity of the Assyrian pantheon, whereas an Achaemenid king was the emissary on earth of Ahura Mazda. In Achaemenid art this special relationship is often marked by the presence of the winged solar disc, the representation of Ahura Mazda in accordance with a design of Assyrian origin.

For Assyrian ideology and cosmology, both the god Aššur and the king formed the centre of the universe and realm, the first ruling over the other gods, and the second as his emissary on earth, looking after the realm on behalf of the gods [9; 27].

Despite being the most powerful and righteous man on earth, the king himself was never considered divine or immortal. The king was invincible, but still human. However, he had a special affinity with the gods, who chose him to be their vice regent on earth (*iššakku*) and to rule the state under the supervision of the gods [8, p. 227; 1].

The king's duty was to protect his realm from human, animal and other negative forces. The image of the king killing a lion is a clear metaphor in which wild animals threaten the safety of the realm (Ill. I. 3).

The actions of the king are the continuation of a long-term ideology in Near Eastern art: the justice of his cause and the unquestioning loyalty of his people.

### **The king and the court**

The court is formed by a large number of courtiers and others who composed the king's entourage. These included the monarch's or noble's favourites and retinue, eunuchs, household, aristocracy, court appointees, bodyguards, and perhaps also emissaries from other kingdoms or visitors to the court. Foreign princes and nobles in exile might also seek refuge at a court. The support of the court was essential for the king's rule. Hence, beside the prominent figure of the king, members of the court are always shown, surrounding, helping or addressing the monarch. Representing the members of the court was clearly intended to please them and emphasize their positive role in the correct ruling of the realm.

This pattern, with some artistic and narrative differences, is found in both Assyrian and Achaemenid art (Ill. II. 1; Fig. 1).

### **The king, the army, and war**

Even if, ideologically speaking, the king had the right to rule over lands and men, he was perfectly aware that the support of his army and officers was essential for his rule, especially if some other family member was a rival candidate for the throne. Military campaigns also served as an instrument to strengthen army morale and the king's prestige with the soldiers — since his subjects would also have been well aware of the military machine at the king's disposal. Bellicose activities thus also provided opportunities to praise and please the troops. In addition, successful expeditions yielded plenty of booty, which was partially distributed between the soldiers in order to strengthen loyalty.





Fig. 3. Persian and Median guards depicted on a door's jamb, Persepolis. Photo by M. Castelluccia

War was also portrayed as the result of a divine commandment to the Assyrian king to eliminate any threat to stability — but was never the result of an Assyrian king's personal aggression towards others [13, p. 511].

Representation of war generally followed a common narrative. At first the army gathered under the supervision of the king. Then it marched to face the enemy on the open field. All corps of the army were represented in detail: cavalry, chariots, archers, infantry, spearmen, sappers and siege machines (Ill. II. 2). Assyrian superiority over the enemies is continuously stressed — with the king, repeatedly on show, as the uniting factor of the Assyrian army. These soldiers were physically strong and courageous, homogeneous and they acted in unison [16, pp. 309–310]. Battles were undisputed victories, and the defeated enemies are crushed by the charge of the cavalry or lie on the battlefield or are carried away by the flowing river next to which the battle took place (Ill. II. 3, 4). The sculptures avoid undesirable subjects, such as Assyrian casualties. In other scenes, the army besieges enemy strongholds, which are well defended by strong walls with high towers (Ill. II. 5). Notwithstanding the resistance of the enemy, the Assyrian army is victorious and the enemy city or fortress is conquered. Prisoners are either tortured and killed or brought away as slaves (Ill. III. 1–4). Finally, the soldiers carry away the booty (Ill. III. 5).

This detailed narrative composition has no parallel in Achaemenid art. War and warfare are voluntarily avoided. There is no reference to battle and violence in Achaemenid art. However, representation of the army is not totally absent. In the Persepolis reliefs and on the glazed bricks from Susa processions of Persian, Median and Susian guards are extensively portrayed (Fig. 3). However, these are just the royal bodyguards, elite troops, which probably comprised the backbone of the king's support. They were, though, just a fraction of the entire army — the rest of which is not shown at all.



Fig. 4. Darius I hunting lions. Cylinder seal from Persepolis. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seal\\_of\\_Darius\\_the\\_Great.jpg#/media/File:Darius\\_seal\\_drawing.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seal_of_Darius_the_Great.jpg#/media/File:Darius_seal_drawing.jpg)

### The king and animals

The depiction of wild animals and hunting scenes also had a precise propagandistic purpose. Firstly, the hunter-king was again a manifestation of royal strength. Then, ideologically, wild animals can be considered as a metaphor for all the negative forces threatening the security of the realm. Hunting scenes are most strikingly and vividly portrayed in the reliefs from the North Palace at Nineveh, which show King Ashurbanipal and his attendants hunting lions on horseback, with chariots and on foot with bows and spears (Ill. III. 6). Other representations focus on an image of the king, standing up, piercing a lion that jumps toward him with open jaws. This image was central to Assyrian ideology as an example of the king's physical power, as well as a metaphor for cosmic order subduing chaos.

This image is also attested on door jambs from Persepolis, and scattered images of the hunter-king appear on Achaemenid seals (Fig. 4). Apart from these references, hunting does not feature in Persian monumental art.

### The king and buildings

The king was above all a builder. He stressed his activities that served to develop economic resources for the people: thus he organized the landscape, created new arable lands, exploited natural resources and built canals. Then in order to celebrate his royalty he erected his own palace, which served as architectural example for the following buildings, and overshadowed the previous one [11]. In fact each king took it upon himself to try to surpass his predecessor in the appropriateness, auspiciously perfect design, and grandeur of his residences [25, p. 347]. Within his rooms, protected by magical figures such as colossal human-headed winged bulls, his achievements are shown (Ill. III. 7). Assyrian reliefs decorated courtyards, corridors, antechambers and halls of audience, where those who waited to be received had

every opportunity to follow the stories represented in all their details. Achaemenid reliefs, on the other hand, adorned balustrades of stairways and door jambs, or served to give more importance to an entrance stairway.

### **Representation of the outside world and people**

A second level of expression of the reliefs is the influence that imperial policies had on the outside world. This is much more clear in Assyrian art, which strongly reflected their expansion policy, whereas Achaemenid art, on the other hand, emphasized the multicultural aspect of their empire.

People and kingdoms situated beyond the border of the Assyrian empire (and thus the realm of Aššur) were grouped into ideologically different categories [24, pp. 333–335].

The first was of well-established kingdoms, such as Urartu, Babylonia and Elam, with which normal diplomatic actions were maintained and which were treated as equals with independent policies. However, were they to break a pact, they might become instead the target of a military expedition.

The following category was of foreign states which did not owe allegiance to the Assyrian king. They were the targets of several military expeditions and thus a favoured subject of the war relief compositions.

The third group comprised client kingdoms, also called the “Yoke of Aššur”, a structure firmly installed by Tiglath-Pileser in the first millennium BCE, referring to client kingdoms that fell outside the “Land of Aššur” [23, pp. 252–255]. They were usually not incorporated under the direct control of an Assyrian governor but were supposed to pay tribute and recognize Assyrian sovereignty. The local ruler was bound to the Assyrian king by loyalty oaths and formalized religious endorsements which were witnessed by Aššur as well as the local deities [23, pp. 252–255]. Disobedience or rebellion by a tributary state led to punishment; it was perceived as a crime against Aššur himself if such an agreement was broken and resulted in the Assyrian king taking retaliatory action against the ruler.

Reliefs show the king receiving their ambassadors and their tribute — and, when a pact was broken, on campaign against the traitor. In the seventh century, after the final expansion, this theme disappeared from Assyrian art.

The last group included peoples who were not organized as recognizable state polities. These inhabited the deserts and mountains surrounding the empire and rejected the ideals of urban civilization. They deserved to be fought and exterminated.

Great care was usually taken in representing foreign peoples, be they enemies or tributaries. Cultural and physical characteristics and the landscape in which they lived were also represented with details.

### **Conclusions**

As has been highlighted, the imperial ideologies of the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid empires exhibited rather marked differences, which are clearly reflected in their different art.

The Assyrians founded their dominion on the ruins of the subjugated peoples; they eliminated pre-existing cultures and imposed their own — save in rare cases such as Babylon.



The Achaemenid sovereigns, likewise, did not destroy but instead assimilated the previous cultures, partly because destroying them by imposing everywhere their own would have led to a cultural impoverishment throughout the empire.

Therefore they undertook a policy of tolerance and respect for pluralism; therefore they did not usually destroy, but tried to assimilate, use or remodel the pre-existing cultures. This was the distinctive and innovative character of the Persian Empire. Perhaps it was a consequence of its rapid conquest of regions that had constituted different poles of economic-cultural development over the centuries (and millennia), such as those in the Nile Valley, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Aegean and the Indus Valley, thus leading to the fall of political, cultural and ethno-linguistic boundaries.

In this way a new type of multipolar “universal empire” was formed, in which ancient and diverse cultures continued to survive, develop and interact with each other under the aegis of the Great Kings of Persepolis.

This diverse approach is thus reflected in all the manifestations of power, from inscriptions to court art, the intrinsic approach of which is never to inspire terror, but to dwell on the order and peace that the dominion of the Great King had imposed and of which he was guarantor.

For this reason the broadcasting of power, violence and war is a constant subject of Assyrian writings and art, whereas it is absent from Persian propaganda.

So, to conclude, it is possible to see how a “propaganda of terror” was replaced by a “propaganda of cohesion”.

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**Title.** The Border between War and Peace. Power and Propaganda in Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid Art.

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**Abstract.** This contribution aims to explore the concept of universal rule in Assyrian and Persian imperial art. The notion of world empire began in the Ancient Near East; the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid empires can be considered as the first real political powers which laid claims to universal hegemony through complex systems of political propaganda, based on writings, and monumental art and architecture.

Assyrian political propaganda was a deliberate broadcast of violence displayed by a combination of visual art and royal inscriptions. The core idea was the invulnerability of the Assyrian king, his army and their will to overcome both natural and human obstacles. Emphasis was on the strong relationship between Assyria and its gods as opposed to the futile resistance of its enemies.

Persian state propaganda, on the contrary, reflects the idea of a large multi-cultural empire based on voluntary submission and integration. Although its artistic perspective was mainly based on a typical Mesopotamian background, Persian royal art mostly did not employ narrative schemes, either in texts or images. Violence was not represented, and wars avoided. Achaemenid art shows a universal peaceful order based on the king’s tutelage.

**Keywords:** Neo-Assyrian empire; Achaemenid empire; Near Eastern art; propaganda.

**Название статьи.** Грань между войной и миром на Древнем Востоке: власть и пропаганда в искусстве Ассирии и Персии.

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**Аннотация.** В статье исследуются проблемы, связанные с концепцией власти в ассирийском и персидском имперском искусстве. Само понятие мировой империи рождается на Древнем Востоке. Новоассирийскую и ахеменидскую державы можно рассматривать как первые реальные полити-

ческие силы, претендующие на универсальную гегемонию, выражающие себя в сложных системах политической пропаганды, в которых ставка делается на тексты, монументальное искусство и архитектуру.

Ассирийская политическая пропаганда через царские надписи и изобразительное искусство намеренно транслировала тему насилия. Ключевой была идея неуязвимости ассирийского царя, его армии, непреклонности воли монарха в преодолении любых препятствий, как природных, так и созданных человеком. Всегда акцентировалась прочная связь Ассирии с ее богами, благодаря которой подавляется бесполезное сопротивление врагов.

Персидская государственная пропаганда, напротив, отражала идею большой мульти-культурной империи, построенной на добровольном подчинении и интеграции. Хотя художественная программа Ахеменидов во многом базировалась на месопотамских традициях, в персидском официальном искусстве практически не использовались нарративные схемы ни в текстах, ни в изображениях. Сцены насилия в нем отсутствуют, тема войны почти не представлена. Ахеменидское официальное искусство демонстрирует универсальный мир и порядок, гарантом которого выступает царь.

**Ключевые слова:** Новоассирийское царство; империя Ахеменидов; ближневосточное искусство; пропаганда.