



# Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context





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Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students

*Edited by*

Jack Cheng

Marian H. Feldman



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Irene J. Winter





## THE LEAD INLAYS OF TUKULTI-NINURTA I: PORNOGRAPHY AS IMPERIAL STRATEGY

Julia Assante

In tribute to Irene Winter, I offer a study on decorative arts. Every phase of this contribution is in some way indebted to her, not least because she has done so much to elevate the “minor arts” to a solid standing in the discourse of ancient Near Eastern art history. The objects in question are twenty small-scale lead reliefs with erotic content.<sup>1</sup> Twelve pieces feature men and women in uncommon sexual acts, sometimes in *ménages à trois* (figures 1-4 and 6-8). Eight, including one mold, portray single females, usually nude, in various poses (figures 9-14).<sup>2</sup> The erotica appeared in the reign of one king, Tukulti-Ninurta I (1240-1207 BCE), and at only two sites: Assur, the ancient capital of Assyria, and the adjacent royal city of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. As most former scholarship has distorted the nature and function of these objects in order to make (erroneous) sensational claims about ancient Near Eastern society, this study’s main aim is to set the record straight.

The archaeological and textual evidence suggests that the reliefs were made as decorative insets for the furniture of Assyrian elite. Formal and contextual analyses in light of contemporary visual and social traditions indicate that they are private pornography. I consider the Middle Assyrian erotic reliefs as pornographic because they formed a discrete, exclusive repertoire that acutely conflicted with their moral environment, quite in contrast to Old Babylonian erotica that was mass-produced and celebrated certain long-standing cultural motifs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Not all reliefs are shown here. Nearly all are badly damaged from a disease caused by storage in oak boxes. Most are kept in an argon vacuum at the Vorderasiatisches Museum to prevent the disease from advancing. The drawings offered here are my own, taken from sketches in excavation day books. The sketches were made before storage and the onset of the disease.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Klengel-Brandt remembers at least one more at the Assur site museum.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on Old Babylonian erotica, see Assante 2000, 2002. For comparison between Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian erotica, see Assante 2000.





As such, the lead inlays represent the only provenienced pornography known from Mesopotamia.

The inlays are also politicized. So a further aim is exploring their ideological aspect. Politicization is introduced by the soft-pointed caps worn by all males in scenes where their heads survive. The caps unambiguously identify them as foreigners, specifically westerners from the modern region of Syria, who were deported to Assyria as captives by the thousands during Tukulti-Ninurta's reign.<sup>4</sup> Until the end of the Assyrian empire, the cap was the chief visual means by which westerners, especially captives, were distinguished from Assyrians. Men fornicating in sex scenes are the first Assyrian depictions of foreigners so far known. Overall, the lead inlays were part of a massive state production of decorative arts that I argue helped form and maintain an imperialist ideology at the time when Assyria was fast rising as a dominant war state.

The sexual lead pieces are stylistically and, probably, functionally most closely related to contemporary non-figural lead work, of which there may have been thousands of examples.<sup>5</sup> Yet they are considerably isolated in style and content.<sup>6</sup> Their singular use of human figural forms, their themes, and their superior technology set them in a class of their own, while pointing to a precisely targeted elite audience. Despite their diminutive sizes (averaging 5.46 centimeters in height), they are astonishingly detailed, variable in motif, and naturalistic. The small numbers found suggest that they were produced as exclusive editions, even though mold casting normally leads to duplication. Restricted manufacture would have enhanced the status of the reliefs as well as their psychological impact. The openwork's detail and intricacy demonstrate an unusually high degree of craftsmanship and technological expertise. Since there is not the slightest evidence, formal or otherwise, that Middle Assyrian artisans were aware of sexual representation

<sup>4</sup> Specifically northwest Syria (Hattina), Bit-Adini on the middle Euphrates and the Levant. See Wäfler 1975. This foreign element was first noted by Jerrold Cooper (1972-1975, 264). Soft-pointed caps occur again in Assur-bel-kala's "broken obelisk" (1074-1057 BCE).

<sup>5</sup> Of the excavated lead objects, the Vorderasiatisches Museum houses about 280, not all identifiable; others were left in Iraq, sent to museums in Turkey, or lost or discarded.

<sup>6</sup> The extreme majority of Assur lead, mostly disks, shows highly stylized floral patterns. Although many lead objects from Anatolia and north Syria share the openwork style, they tend to take certain forms: trinkets, jewelry elements, or schematic human figurines. See Assante 2000, 262 n. 15.





from other periods and places, the lead smiths apparently invented it. It was an extremely short-lived experiment.

There is a certain consistency of sexual attitudes in coitus scenes that works partly by the omission of familiar positions. Surprisingly, sex in which both partners are recumbent—so common in erotica from other times and places in the ancient Near East—does not occur. Instead, all intercourse involves at least one partner standing. The sometimes difficult postures prevent construing such scenes as representing “normal,” that is, Assyrian, behavior. There are, furthermore, no hints of the domestic or community sphere—no beds or local tavern settings as in Old Babylonian erotica, which contemporary viewers could misread as Assyrian. Assyrians simply did not show Assyrians having sex. The specific milieu is staged and theatrical rather than orgiastic or ritual. Whether or not artisans modeled these scenes on actual live sexual performances or simply imagined them may never be answered. The iconography, discussed below, of theatrical postures, sexual props, musical instruments, and dancers’ costumes further distances these scenes from everyday Assyrian reality. By these visual prompts, Assyria effectively disowned its own erotic production.

Because I have already discussed in a number of studies modern scholarship’s consistent misinterpretations when it comes to sex and nudity, only a few most pertinent to the lead reliefs are mentioned here.<sup>7</sup> First, seemingly blinded by their content, scholars missed or ignored the careful insignia of foreignness in the reliefs<sup>8</sup> as well as the iconography of sexual theater. Furthermore, the artifact class to which they belong was not investigated, precluding the discovery of their true function. Finally, their archaeological contexts have been overlooked or distorted, beginning with the excavator himself. Although Walter Andrae was quite aware that only one female nude was found in the Ishtar Temple (and that in later fill), he published all lead erotica in his Ishtar Temple report (Andrae 1935). His decision was based on his conviction that the reliefs *must* depict cult prostitution.<sup>9</sup> Many have followed Andrae in deploying the reliefs to make claims about “orgiastic cults,” fertility rites, and the pervasiveness of

<sup>7</sup> See Assante 1998; 2000, 19-73; 2003; 2006. Fortunately, Cooper’s careful *RIA* analysis of the reliefs (1972-1975) eliminated a Sacred Marriage misinterpretation early on.

<sup>8</sup> With the exception of Cooper. See n. 4.

<sup>9</sup> See Assante 2000, 46-49; Scurlock 1993, 15; Westenholz 1995, 61.





prostitution, sacred or secular, in ancient Mesopotamia. I have argued elsewhere that such claims for Mesopotamia are fictions. They began appearing after the popularizing abridged edition of Sir James Frazer's monumental work, *The Golden Bough*, was released in 1922 (Assante 2003, 23-24). Frazer almost single-handedly invented fertility cults and religious prostitution for the ancient Near East, with some help from other sources, notably Herodotus. Until recently, these pornographic inlays wrongly stood as proof for the existence of such rites in ancient Mesopotamia. I see no evidence for fertility cults, sacred prostitution, or orgiastic cults in Mesopotamia's primary sources, visual or textual. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that Assyrians perceived Ishtar as the goddess of sex during the Middle Assyrian period. Royal inscriptions from Tukulti-Ninurta I envision her in strictly martial terms. It was probably this Ishtar that the king had in mind when he built her temple in Assur.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Hurrian Ninevite Ishtar was associated with healing, not sex.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The Case for Elite Furniture Inlays*

The true archaeological contexts of the reliefs present their complete life cycle: their creation, consumption, and finally, reuse in fill. The findspots taken together strongly suggest that they were furniture inlays made for the royal house.<sup>12</sup> Eleven out of twenty were found on the New Palace Terrace of Assur, which, as I have shown, was a workshop site that manufactured luxury decorative items of many types.<sup>13</sup> All exhibited technological failures consistent with the debris of an industrial zone. Mixed in were kiln testers, the occasional

<sup>10</sup> She may also have been the custodian of secrets, perhaps having to do with oath-taking (Westenholz 1998, 77). See also *KAR* 139. Most Assyrian versions of Ishtar are associated with motherhood or healing in addition to war. Both Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Assur had strong connections to kings and state cult (Menzel 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Neo-Assyrian records also refer to her as wet nurse and mother (Livingstone 1989, 99).

<sup>12</sup> This discussion is drawn from the extensive coverage in Assante 2000, 179-209. I compiled data from Andrae's excavation day books in Berlin, with supplements from Miglus 1996 and Eickhoff 1985. Reinhard Dittmann, who excavated at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta with Kartrin Bastert, C. Schmidt and S. Thürwächter in 1986 and 1989, generously shared unpublished material from his excavations.

<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, Tukulti-Ninurta named the main gate to the terrace, "The Metal Workers' Gate" (Miglus 1982, 274).





tool, and pieces of gold and copper sheeting often used for plating, all signs of industrial output. The great amount of raw material and scrap metal in the form of sheeting, lumps, strips, wire, and so forth, also points to production rather than consumption. This is the first archaeological context—where they were made.

There are two examples for the second archaeological context—where they were used: Tukulti-Ninurta I's South Palace in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and an opulent town house in Assur, whose owner was almost certainly related to the royal house (Assante 2000, 200-201). Both date the artifacts to Tukulti-Ninurta's reign and establish the elite and secular status of the users.

The third archaeological context is secondary use. One object was found in later fill of the Ishtar Temple in Assur and two in the vicinity. As I have demonstrated, this fill was probably taken from the adjacent New Palace Terrace to stabilize and pack the temple mount (*ibid.*, 184-199). Another piece occurred in the fill of the Assur Temple at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, which was packed and sealed just after the king's death. Other objects in the same fill indicate the nearby palace court as the source.

A great many finds from the New Palace Terrace, whether in lead, shell, ivory, alabaster, frit, gold, or bone, share similar characteristics with the erotic reliefs—they are flat, thin, shiny, or lustrous, and have one figural or decorative surface that may be raised or incised. These are characteristics ideal for decorative inlays, for furniture and chests, stone vessels and accessories. As erotica was found together with ivory inlays and other materials that are textually attested to decorate Tukulti-Ninurta's furniture,<sup>14</sup> the archaeological contexts alone point rather strongly toward the reliefs as inlays.

Significantly, the image that is formally closest to erotic reliefs also decorated furniture. It comes from a bronze openwork panel found in the North-West Palace at Nimrud (figure 5), believed to have overlaid the upper legs of a wooden throne (Layard 1853, 198-199; Finkel 1995, 124-125). Three figures, one facing right and two facing left with the female form taking center, present a compositional arrangement that bears a striking resemblance to figure 4. Although not inlays,

<sup>14</sup> See the inventory text (VAT 16462; T232/IX) found in the palace at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta that itemizes the adornments of the king's throne room furniture. For a new transliteration and translation by Walter Mayer and myself, see Assante 2000, appendix 4; also Köcher 1957-1958.





the figures are nevertheless further comparable to the erotica in size (approximately 4.3 centimeters high) and detailing. The minute dimensions, intricacy, and lack of standardization of the erotica would require study at close range, ideally in small viewing fields set in chests, bed frames, or chairs.<sup>15</sup>

The considerable differences between erotic art and contemporary public decorative arts suggest that lead erotica was made for private, rather than public, viewing. Public design relied on vegetal, animal, and supernatural motifs, usually stylized, as in Tukulti-Ninurta's South Palace walls. His throne-room furniture adhered mostly to animal and vegetal forms, with a few instances of otherworldly human figures.<sup>16</sup> Here and in other public art, when nude human forms were used, they were mythological. The naturalistic postures in sex scenes and the elaboration and flow of clothing further contradict the ideals of contemporary official art, such as the iconographical postures and stiff formality of contemporary cylinder seals. Since erotic scenes are not traceable to any literature or myth so far discovered, viewers were not permitted a comfortable, distancing frame from previous art or mythology but were put into a voyeuristic position of watching the unexpected, the surprising, and the spontaneous.

Depictions of sex may have been more than contrary to formal tastes, they may have been prohibited. Beyond a few allusions to Old Babylonian love poetry, sexual encounters appear in texts only later in the Neo-Assyrian period, and then very seldom.<sup>17</sup> Even if Assyria had produced oral or written erotica, it is unlikely that it would have described the kind of sex shown in these reliefs. In the Middle Assyrian period, sexual imagery seems to have been suppressed. In official representation of all periods, images of mortal women—even clothed—were of the utmost rarity, and Assyrian women were almost never depicted. Non-Assyrian women, who appear sparingly in later palatial reliefs on walls or gates as publicly debased prisoners of war, are fully clothed; only the exposure of legs or possibly heads metonymically suggests nakedness and sexual availability (Cifarelli 1998, 223). Thus the official arts of Assyria protected Assyrian ideals of female modesty, even for non-Assyrian women. At the least, such

<sup>15</sup> Because such detailed edges are difficult to fit, the receiving surface was probably soft, either wood, plaster, or mudbrick.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 14.

<sup>17</sup> See the incipits in Black 1983, 28.





well-observed ethics render the likelihood that erotica was intended for public view all the more slim.

### *The Lead Inlays*

#### *The Intercourse Scenes*

Among the intercourse scenes, three portray coitus in profile in which a standing male penetrates a female who lies in front of him, raised on a platform (figures 1-3). The platform is a squared, probably mud-brick structure up to ten courses high and five wide. Many scholars, following Andrae (1935, 103), have interpreted it as a temple altar; the female figure is then a temple prostitute. More recently, Frances Pinnock (1995) sees it as a city wall, transferring prostitution from the temple to the street. Rather than altars or walls, the platforms are more likely to represent stage props for live sex shows. They are quite realistically sized, as though to facilitate specific sexual acts and to maximize visual access to points of sexual exchange. In figures 1 and 2, the female lies on a platform tailored to support her torso and raise her recumbent body to the exact height of the male's groin. In the disk, figure 2, a separate step of four courses at the base of the platform brings the male's genitals in contact with the female's. The block step, incidentally, eliminates the city wall interpretation. In all cases, the woman lifts her legs to allow an unobstructed view of the outsized and highly articulated penis penetrating her. In figure 1, the slant of the platform's surface enables her to raise her upper body sufficiently to see her partner's face. But the platform in the *ménage à trois* scene, figure 3, in which a woman is vaginally penetrated on one end and masturbates a man on the other, is not as deep nor as slanted. The results are twofold. First, the woman cannot lift her head and make visual contact with her partners. More importantly, the shallowness of the structure emphasizes the two points of sexual contact; sexual activity takes place visually clear of the prop and is symmetrically arranged on either side of it. Whether modeled on the real or purely imaginary, the platforms are customized for the maximum exhibition of sexual feats.

In spite of the naturalistic poses taken by the figures in these scenes, the action is characterized by a kind of cold practicality typical





of pornography. Sex acts stand as the chief points of focus, stripped of narrative content and, to a great degree, warmth and familiarity. Touching or mutual gazing is de-emphasized, especially in group-activity scenes. There are other formal signs of a pornographic nature that lie in the objectification of the female partner in these images and consequent emotional detachment. The very fact that the females are nude, for example, while the males are richly clothed sets the sexes in opposition and focuses the viewer's attention on the feminine body. That the male partners hold her nakedness in full view, whereas her view is limited, objectifies her within the scene.

The way the bodies are represented also sharply delineates gender differences. In figure 1, the male's full beard, large protruding nose, and pointed cap all resonate with his noteworthy ithyphallicism. Male legs are also quite muscular with highly articulated kneecaps and bulging calves, signifying hard masculine tautness, like the ready penis. The man in figure 2 is the only male figure of this typology that ignores the timeless masculine ideal of erect posture. The female by contrast is soft and rounded. The display of buttocks, a penetrable part of human anatomy, is also gendered. The buttocks of male figures in all lead inlays are covered. Formally this helps to frame and therefore emphasize the penis and its point of penetration. Yet Assyrian viewers might have perceived uncovered buttocks as feminine, a reading that would disturb the picture of naturalized male dominance over women or introduce a homosexual coloration that could compromise a male viewer's response. By contrast, female buttocks are exposed, and even outlined in figure 6. A detailed succession of anklets, bracelets, and necklaces works to accentuate female nakedness and comprises the sparse adornments allowed to a body prepared exclusively for sex.

Gender hierarchy is further played out in the configuration of standing males versus supine females. This configuration has a military signature and illustrates the ideological equation of imperialism with sexual dominance. In Mesopotamian battle art from all periods and places, the victor stands upright looking down on his enemy whose passive, supine position announces his utter defeat.<sup>18</sup> Occasionally, the victor grasps the upraised hand of his defeated enemy, a gesture remarkably similar to the one in figure 1 (and in Andrae 1935, pl. 45n).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Examples are numerous and consistent; one of the earliest is in the Royal Standard of Ur.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Opificius 1961, pl. 13, fig. 489.





It is in fact a gratuitous gesture in sexual scenes, suggestive of manhandling, and used to convey control over the woman's movements. The scene creates an atmosphere of dominance and submission, a dualism favored in battle art. Another visual quotation from imperial art is the woman's upraised palm. This gesture has appeared ubiquitously in Mesopotamia as a sign of formal supplication (Cifarelli 1998). In later Assyrian reliefs, the raised open palms of conquered peoples signified pleas for clemency. In battle art, the sexual implications of the standing and recumbent configuration become clearer when the victor holds the bow, arrow, or lance. Such weapons are long-standing similes for an erect penis in ancient Near Eastern arts and texts, demonstrating a correlation of sexual dominance of penetrator over penetrated with physical or political dominance.<sup>20</sup> Assyrians are never depicted subjected to this emasculating imagery.

Oddly, *coitus a tergo* appears in only one motif, the *ménage à trois* of figure 4. A nude woman stands in the middle penetrated from behind by her partner at the right. The woman's second partner faces her at left, although only his legs have survived. This scene mimics live entertainment most obviously because the male at right plays a lute while engaged in coitus. He also turns up alone in a fragment that probably came from the same mold (Andrae 1935, pl. 45d). The woman again wears anklets, bracelets, necklaces and has distinctively tightly waved hair. She is in a dance step, raising her outside thigh high above her waist to allow a good view of the man's penis at her buttocks. At the same time, she twists her upper body to the front, displaying her breasts. As her outstretched hand is nearly identical to the woman's masturbating hand in figure 3, she is most probably masturbating her facing partner.

Scenes that feature a couple in standing intercourse present a more joyful, equitable picture (figures 6-8 and Andrae 1935, pl. 45f). In two, both partners are clothed. The scenes are also stylistically different; bodies are generally fuller, longer, and less knobby, for instance. There is more physical contact as well. Figure 6, in which the heads survived, shows close face-to-face gazing. Each touches the other's chest—perhaps the sole example of

<sup>20</sup> For examples see Paul 2002 and potency incantations 2, 3, 4, 14, and 15 in Biggs 1967. See also Foster 1993, 141. For discussion of such homoerotic symbolism in Assyrian royal art, see Assante forthcoming.





breast stroking in Mesopotamian erotica. At the same time, he embraces her while she holds his penis between her legs. The citation to staged performance is embedded in the type of garments worn. This is hardly street wear. The man's skirt is composed of a short, bordered cloth that envelops his buttocks and a cloth panel underneath, which reaches to his feet. Long dangling tassels emerge between his legs. The woman is bare chested and her buttocks are uncovered, even outlined with a decorated girdle that wraps between her thighs. A long panel of cloth falls between her legs like that worn by a female dancer-entertainer copulating in an Old Babylonian plaque scene (Barrelet 1968, no. 591). Armbands and a head circlet or cap complete her attire. The outfits highlight key points of sexual anatomy, such as the woman's bust and buttocks and the man's penis, as they should for clear sexual representation. Yet they go further and imitate reality by depicting garments made to maximize freedom of movement, which the loose cascading panels worn by both and the man's tassels would only accentuate.

Other positions of standing intercourse are more acrobatic, as in the best preserved of this type, figure 7. The performers stand more or less side by side. The woman balances on one foot, while lifting her other leg to the level of her partner's waist. The man penetrates her from under her raised thigh. His anklet may identify him as an entertainer. The woman again grasps her partner's penis to guide it in. The masturbation theme in many lead scenes privileges masculine pleasure and suggests a male viewing audience.

The de-emphasis of male dominance in these scenes leaves room for the expression of a more lighthearted sexual showmanship. Unlike the anonymous female nudes of other lead reliefs, these women can be identified as dancers or entertainers by their clothing. In those images in which the heads remain, the male wears a soft-pointed cap. The implications are first, that the male partners are not only foreigners but also entertainers, and second, that the females are not just entertainers but also foreigners. Contemporary viewers probably did not read the semblance of equality in these scenes as elevating the female to male status but as reducing the male to hers. The focus seems to shift away from the internal hierarchy between sex partners in previous scenes, in which male viewers could in part identify with the more dominant male alien performers, to the hierarchical relationship of the beholder's visual possession of sexualized bodies, both male and female.



*Single Females*

Six erotic reliefs and one mold are of single nude women in various postures. An eighth, a corroded piece from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, figure 14, shows what might be fringed cuffs above the woman's ankles, suggestive of dancers' pantaloons.<sup>21</sup> This group could be put into three categories: frontal spread-legged nude female (figure 9), sitting female in profile (figures 10, 11, and 13), and standing nude female bending over (figures 12 and 14). However, as there are no indications of baselines to orient the sitting and standing females, some figures that seem to be seated or standing when the relief is held one way, could just as well be standing or recumbent when the relief is rotated. Lone females might have been put in sets meant to parade a variety of sensuous forms. And as lead is a remarkably pliable metal, they may have been joined into more complex scenes.

In the spread-legged motif (figure 9 and Andrae 1935, pl. 45m), the woman grabs her thighs above the knees from underneath and pulls them apart, flush with the sides of her body. The artist has depicted her vulva as a large deltoid in abruptly high relief resembling appliqué. Her wide-open legs and prominent vulva invite the viewer's visual penetration. Six out of eight females are in profile. As they do not face the viewer and hence seem to be unaware of his (or her) attention, he is free to peruse their bodies without interaction, a voyeuristic act. Such visual strategies give more weight to the claim that the primary viewing audience was male.

*The Ideology of Sex, Dominance and Conquest of the Other*

The non-Assyrian insignia of the soft-pointed caps locates sexual deviancy outside the Assyrian moral realm. It also alerts us to embedded political-ideological messages. The reliefs play predominantly on the concept of the other, a concept that here as elsewhere is usually grounded in gender, ethnicity, and social status. Alterity, a chief tool of the imperialistic state, creates and maintains dualisms that position the ruling power at the top and the conquered or subjugated

<sup>21</sup> See the drawing in Eickhoff 1985, pl. 13, no. 2.





at the bottom. The more extreme the degradation of the other, the more superior the dominant force appears. The dominant group or regime typically employs a number of “izing” devices applied to the other—marginalizing, barbarizing, criminalizing, exoticizing, feminizing, and so on—to give shape to the discourse of alterity. The most effective way the Assyrian male citizen class, the *awīlu*, could maintain social borders and its superior position was by using these devices to manipulate laws, economics, public signs of difference, and art. Lead erotica is a good example from art, for it deploys all these devices, feminization in particular. In so doing it works to assert and even naturalize the inferiority and subordination of foreign men.

Middle Assyrian lawmakers designed a legal system that forced foreign men into social structures of women and lower class men that kept them relatively helpless. They subordinated non-*awīlu* men largely by making them invisible to state recognition. There are no legal provisions for non-*awīlu* men as there were in the earlier laws of Babylonia. There is no terminology even for Assyrian males of the commoner class known from other legal codes. Non-*awīlu* men were effectively erased. This is surprising in view of the heterogeneity of Assyria at this time. I understand this legal denial as a tactic to assert *awīlu* supremacy. The laws were written exclusively for the protection of *awīlu* men and their property. Hence, women of no matter what class, Assyrian and non-Assyrian alike, as well as all non-*awīlu* men were defined against the *awīlu* male as the other. Grouping non-*awīlu* men, such as those depicted in the reliefs, with women as the other is one way the state feminized certain classes of men.

The psychology of alterity in which the superior “naturally” dominates the inferior other was obviously at the root of Assyria’s military mentality. It is apparent in those sex scenes that re-imagine battle imagery of conqueror and conquered along gendered lines. More generally, since the male figures most probably represent foreign captives, the inlays refer to a wider, unseen configuration involving territorial conquest and the military, those who captured and deported them. From all that we know, Assyria during this period was profoundly androcentric, “nationalistic” in promoting attitudes of Assyro-centrism and supremacy, and, finally, hierarchical, three salient traits of a military society. The reliefs were cut from the same cloth.

Assyria’s martial mindset seems to have pervaded even the social fabric and was projected on the chief deities, Ishtar and Assur, who





took on powerfully warlike natures at this time.<sup>22</sup> The military may have been entirely Assyrian as foreign personnel do not appear in the record for another two hundred years (Mayer 1995, 167-225). Many Assyrians participated directly in the military at one time or another and were thus exposed to its disciplines and biases about conquest.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, the owners and audiences of pornographic art were likely to have come from the ruling class, the king as well as elite, if not royal, men. The primary viewers of pornography then were also the primary ideology makers whose involvement with the ever-escalating imperialistic program would have been unavoidable. Because most high army officials were presumably related to the king, as they were in later periods (Mayer 1995, 123, 434-435), some of the audience no doubt belonged to the military elite. Certainly, it would have been the military elite who could best appreciate the messages of conquest and the other in lead erotica.

The ideology behind physical exposure in the reliefs can partly be deduced from law and official art, in which the display of physical exposure was long used as a sign for the conquered or criminalized.<sup>24</sup> Full nudity for both men and women in a secular context signified loss of identity, the abject, submitted, and obedient. Even the Akkadian word for nudity, *erû*, connotes emptiness and destitution (*CAD* s.v. “*erû*”). At this time, nudity effectively implemented submission to state punishment for both sexes.<sup>25</sup> The correlation between defeated

<sup>22</sup> In Tukulti-Ninurta's royal inscriptions, he calls on Ishtar, “mistress of strife and battle” to slay his enemies and inflict defeat (TN I A 0.78.1 vi 2-22; Grayson 1987, 238). In his account of his battle with the Kassite king Kashtiliashu, he refers to Ishtar as she “(who) marches at the fore of my army” (TN I A. 0. 78. 23; Grayson 1987, 271). The militarization of Assur is amply reflected in Middle Assyrian royal inscriptions that call on him to destroy the enemy and in personal names that appear for the first time in this period, such as Aššur-dā'issunu, “Assur is trampling them down,” (KAJ 124 r. 6 and 156, 10) or Aššur-mukannis, “Assur is subjecting” (KAJ 162, 26).

<sup>23</sup> Anyone who owned real estate was obligated to perform service duty, called (*ḫ*)*ilku*, which included war service, see *RIA* 5, 52-59. The remarkably convoluted Middle Assyrian Laws A §§ 36 and 45, which sought to preserve the army wife's patriarchal status in the absence of her husband, further indicate the average *awīlu*'s high degree of participation in the militia.

<sup>24</sup> This discussion draws heavily from Cifarelli 1998. Nudity in other place and times of the ancient Near East conveyed a wide range of meaning, and female nudes did not always carry messages about sexuality (Assante 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Legal texts from Nuzi and Hana describe stripping and public display of women who violated marital regulations. In one instance, the naked wife is set for public display on the roof of the palace (Malul 1988, 122-138).





enemies with punished criminals is played out through nudity in later battle accounts (Cifarelli 1998, 213, 226). Exposure as a mark of social inferiority or criminality was imposed by Assyria's dominant social group, *awīlu*-class males. It distances marked men from the dominant class and turns them into feminized, visually possessible objects. Given these connotations, one can better understand why the exposed males in the inlays were carefully labeled as non-Assyrian. Full male nudity in the reliefs, however, would have compromised the picture of male-female hierarchy inherent in Assyrian ideology.

Full nudity for women in the reliefs works to inscribe the hierarchy of male over female. The laws of exposure for women are more finely shaded than for men and more closely structured along class lines, while leaning hard on the notion of the male gaze. According to Middle Assyrian laws, women of the *awīlu* class, that is the daughters and wives of the *awīlu*, were expected to wear veils in public and were thus visually available only in private, presumably *awīlu* settings. Conversely, women of lower socio-legal rank, the unmarried *qadištu*'s and single women not living with their fathers or *ḥarimtu*'s, as well as female slaves, were not allowed to veil when out and were therefore visually available in public.<sup>26</sup> Assyrian law seems to have linked visual availability with sexual availability because mandated exposure applied only to marginalized unmarried women and slaves, with whom a man could sexually engage without legal restraints. The penalty for non-*awīlu* women wearing a veil was severe. It was also severe for *awīlu* men who failed to bring the offender to the palace for punishment. Both were beaten and marked and then stripped of their clothing—the state's way of publicly debasing the miscreant man to the woman's criminal status.

The law was meant to be enforced by *awīlu*-class men, not women. Only males of the *awīlu*-class were responsible for looking and for policing public space to maintain a system of social ranking based on visual/sexual accessibility. Male looking was therefore empowered by the state. Men also dictated visible status by performing the symbolic veiling of women in marital rituals and by stripping unsubmitive women for public humiliation. In short, it was *awīlu* men who looked

<sup>26</sup> Middle Assyrian Laws A § 40 (v. 42-106) and § 41. For discussion, especially concerning the definition of the *ḥarimtu* as a woman without patriarchal status (and *not* a prostitute), see Assante 1998, 32-35 and *passim*.





and *awīlu* men who imposed on women of all classes the figurative and literal degree of their physical exposure.

Although most women in erotic insets appear anonymous to the modern eye, their complete nakedness in some is compelling reason to identify them as non-*awīlu* class females, either *ḥarimtu*'s, slaves, criminals, such as adulteresses who have lost their patriarchal status, or foreign captives. Those who are clothed most probably depict entertainers from the same social groups. Of course, the pairing of these women with westerners greatly favors an interpretation of their identity as captives. A captive woman separated from her husband might have been considered as part of the *ḥarimtu*-class, as marital status may have had little relevance in exile. The dispossessed positions of most foreign females would have made them fitting subjects for physical exposure.

The harsh codes of behavior from Middle Assyrian laws and Palace Decrees leave little doubt that what women do in lead scenes defied accepted conduct. The impact of images in which women engage sexually with two men at once on a society where the death penalty could be enforced for adultery is difficult to appreciate at our remove. The most policed women in Middle Assyrian society seemed to have been the *sinnišātu ša ekalli*, the women of the king's palace, ironically the same place that must have housed such examples of pornography. Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees, edicts concerned primarily with regulating conduct between the sexes, portray a life for palace women under vigilant surveillance; the merest proximity to unauthorized men, including eunuchs, could warrant death.<sup>27</sup> The contrast between the excessive propriety expected of palace women and the behavior of women in the reliefs underscores the pornographic character of the images. It is doubtful that palace women were allowed to own or even ogle erotic pictures of men unless royals expressly wished it. The intended audience was more likely to have been men, especially in view of the content: the open, penetrable vaginas, the masturbation motifs, the objectified female body, as well as the viewer's voyeuristic stance, which all tend to pleasure the male eye.

<sup>27</sup> The edicts are an incomplete compilation from nine kings, including Tukulti-Ninurta I, his father, and his grandfather. For a recent editing see Roth 1995; also see Freydank 1991, 68.





The visual and written record on looking maintains a hierarchy of dominant subject/viewer over exposed object, in which the viewer visually consumes or possesses the object. The audience's visual possession of sexualized foreign bodies in the reliefs parallels its possession of, and dominance over, foreign territory. Michelle Marcus (1995a, 201-202) sees Assyrian sexual and imperial discourses as inseparable and equates the "gaze of the voyeur" to the "imperialistic gaze" in Neo-Assyrian art. Marcus's equation is particularly fitting for images that present foreigners as prostituted spectacles and, hence, as sexually conquerable bodies. They also implicate live spectators who were privileged enough to witness such events. It is far from unthinkable that some captives entertained Tukulti-Ninurta and his court this way, especially considering the common practice to take captives as dancers for the palace (Kilmer 1995, 2611). The more sexual exhibitions defied moral order, the deeper the humiliation would have been for the performers and the social group they represented. Looking at their images meant effectively that the viewer participated in the denigration of the social group represented.

Assyria's imperialistic ideology banked on the nuanced interplay of sex, gender, and power to do its work. The masculinized dominant class and the feminized other was an important dualism. Such gendered dualisms are perhaps more powerful than dualisms based on class or ethnicity, for they underlay all other hierarchical structures. The enemy or foreigner could be conceptualized as a woman and therefore inferior and conquerable, but a woman's low status would not be adequately conveyed by referring to her simply as the enemy. The concept of *nakru*, the word for both "enemy" and "foreigner" (and sometimes "demon"), acquires its greatest dimensions of humiliation when imbricated with women's sexuality. Feminization of the enemy is not just a modern inference; it was a way of thinking perpetuated from the court. In a number of royal inscriptions, Tukulti-Ninurta calls on Ishtar to change his enemy from a man to a woman and to cause his manhood to dwindle away.<sup>28</sup> This explicit feminization of the enemy is the first of its kind recorded. It was to be used again and again in curses of later ages, particularly for soldiers, revealing a great deal about ancient gendered dualisms of the strong versus the

<sup>28</sup> TN I A. 0.78.1 vi 2-22 (Grayson 1987, 238). The inscription survives in 18 examples.





weak operating in military milieus. In one, the warrior is turned into a *ḥarimtu*, a woman with the least power in a homosocial society.<sup>29</sup> The curses add poverty, homelessness, anonymity, dependency on strangers, and sexual vulnerability to emasculation, conditions potentially not unlike those of foreign captives. Conquering itself had gender and sexual undertones. In Neo-Assyrian palatial reliefs and royal inscriptions, conquering is described as something the super masculine does to something comparatively feminine.<sup>30</sup> For Middle Assyrian times, the situation seems to have been much the same. We can see this most clearly in Tukulti-Ninurta's royal inscriptions in which conquered territory is imagined much like the female body, and conquering much like penetration.<sup>31</sup>

Several generations after Tukulti-Ninurta I, Assur-bel-kala (1074-1057 BCE) openly used the female body to stimulate a masculine taste for conquest. In provinces, cities, and "garrisons," which were probably mercenary camps (Mayer 2003, 184), Assur-bel-kala erected nearly life-sized stone statues of nude females. The inscription on the shoulder of the one extant (BM 124963) says the king made them *ina muḥ-ḥi ṣi-a-ḥi*, "for titillation" or "for pleasure." As "*ṣāḥu*," however, can also mean "to be alluring," and the prepositional construction *ina muḥ-ḥi* refers to an object (here, the statues) or place, another possible interpretation arises: "I made these statues. . .to be alluring."<sup>32</sup> Whichever the case, the nudes would have manipulated military men to feel sexual desire. Through the common experience of arousal, Assur-bel-kala could unify his army, foreign and Assyrian, and prepare it for action—simply by getting the blood up. The nudes are not politicized, no doubt to avoid offending non-Assyrian mercenaries. Assur-bel-kala's deliberate conflation of sexual arousal with the warrior spirit is direct and simplistic. As the Middle Assyrian inlays

<sup>29</sup> E.g., the treaty curse of Assur-nirari V (Parpola and Watanabe 1988, 12 v 9-11). Similar curses surface in Jeremiah 50.35 and Nahum 3.13.

<sup>30</sup> In Assante forthcoming, I discuss public art, where gender hierarchy is almost exclusively described by degrees of masculinities, from the supermasculine, impenetrable at the top to the feminized, penetrable, and conquerable at the bottom. And see Marcus 1995a; Cifarelli 1998.

<sup>31</sup> See TN I A. 0.78. 23 (Grayson 1987, 271) for images of penetrated virgin territory.

<sup>32</sup> That *muḥḥu* can also refer to the upper part of an object (here breasts) suggests an intentional wordplay. See *CAD* s.v. "*muḥḥu*"; also the Assur-bel-kala inscription A.0.89.10 (Grayson 1987, 108).





were made for sophisticated Assyrian elites, more complex messages could be communicated.

Although it is not absolutely clear if the images portray captives or westerners as they are envisioned to behave at home, the objects themselves were made and used in the capital cities and thus capture foreigners for Assyrian consumption. Underpinning the visual possession of pornography is, of course, Tukulti-Ninurta's tangible ownership of captives. The booty, animate or inanimate, streaming into the metropolis during triumphal processions stood for subdued territories metonymically brought to the Assyrian heartland. For Assyrians and non-Assyrians alike, the influx of captives—the flow of wealth drained from the periphery—established Assur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta as the center of power. The more living booty the king could corral, the more his royal epithet, King of the Universe, seems to be confirmed. Through sheer statistics, this third-generation ruler took care to substantiate his ascendancy over his father, in particular his military ascendancy, by claiming to have taken exactly twice the number of hostages his father took, an astounding 28,800 prisoners captured from a single campaign.<sup>33</sup> Included in these were the western peoples shown in the reliefs.

This later wave of hostages was made to labor on the royal building projects at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, after the building of the New Palace Terrace.<sup>34</sup> Their representations were probably made at this time and intended for the new residence. Tablets excavated at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, mostly from the South Palace, afford a glimpse of their exile conditions.<sup>35</sup> One tablet alone records 1000 households of foreign laborers living at the worksite. Although we do not know exactly what conditions deportees endured, the hostages who built Sargon's new city, Dur-Sharrukin, were managed by officials with military backup (Mayer 1995, 340). The armor found in the main court of the South Palace suggests that Middle Assyrian policy was much the same, with labor teams kept under close military supervision.

Lead production itself may have implicitly carried the imprints of captive labor. From ration lists we know that some laborers were

<sup>33</sup> TN I A. 0.78.23, line 28 (Grayson 1987, 272) and Shalmaneser I A.0.77.1, line 74 (Grayson 1987, 184).

<sup>34</sup> Earlier hostages from northern Syria (Shubaru) and southern Anatolia built the New Palace Terrace (TN I A. 0.78.1 iv 40-61; Grayson 1987, 237).

<sup>35</sup> See the texts in Freydank 1974 and 1980.





specialized craftsmen, probably transferred to the capital specifically for their expertise, as in later periods (Matthews 1995, 465). In spite of poor records, the sheer amount of wrought lead found in Assur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta indicates a very large community of metalworkers. Some were likely to have been foreigners, for the peoples of the western and northern territories already had a long and established knowledge of metallurgy relative to Assyria, a knowledge that the Assyrian state would have wanted to exploit. From the time of Tukulti-Ninurta's grandfather, there was a rapid expansion of improved metal technologies and new decorative forms in Assyria that reached its maximum during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta. That this profile is coincident with the acceleration of deportation cannot be an accident.

The concentration of foreign wealth, labor, and expertise at the core was part of an on-going program of Assyro-centrism, in which the very medium of lead played a significant role. The presence of lead in the Assyrian heartland denotes Assyria's control over the vassal states where the metal was extracted. By this time, Assyrians collected lead ores or metal alloys not only from Syria but also from southern Anatolia.<sup>36</sup> The movement deeper into Hatti territories for lead parallels military advances against Hatti, one of Assyria's greatest enemies during Tukulti-Ninurta's reign. Since the fall of the Mitanni Kingdom, Assyria widened and tightened the peripheral border between it and central Anatolia. In successive stages of increasing power and might, Tukulti-Ninurta's grandfather Adad-nirari I (1305-1274 BCE), his father Shalmaneser I (1273-1244 BCE), and Tukulti-Ninurta himself made Assyria the military equal to Hatti, while developing a feeling of nationalistic superiority and an ideology of conquest (Mayer 1995, 191). Lead as the material evidence of territorial penetration and conquest was employed as an ideological tool only during the period when Middle Assyrian kings, in particular Tukulti-Ninurta, developed their imperialistic ambitions. As the extent of land under Assyrian control increased, so did the importation and use of lead, reaching its peak during his reign.<sup>37</sup> In the years of rapid economic decline

<sup>36</sup> See Lucas 1962, 244; Jankowska 1969; Müller 1982; de Jesus 1980.

<sup>37</sup> The belt of tribute-paying vassals included Rapiqu, Hana and Mari in the southwest, in the north, certain mountain areas, and in the east, Arraphe and the Zagros mountains (Mayer 1995, 209). Babylonia was another area of strategic concern during the Middle Assyrian period.





and territorial shrinkage after Tukulti-Ninurta's death, lead and lead artifacts are rarely attested (Moorey 1985, 125).

The economic use of lead also promoted Assyria's nationalizing drives. Lead was the medium of economic exchange only during the Middle Assyrian period and was used exclusively in the heartland of Assyria for domestic exchange. Bronze, tin, gold, and silver were used for external exchange. The internal circulation of lead as a monetary medium incompatible outside this domain effectively integrated Assyria and enforced an economically based Assyro-centrism consonant with nationalizing ideologies and imperialistic aims. This internal system of exchange based on lead effectively cordoned Assyria off from neighboring countries or, at least, limited economic permeability between them. Economic flow was instead turned inward.<sup>38</sup>

Similar patterns hold for faience, frit work, and wall paintings, which look westward for their origins but were brought to the core. Clearly foreigners transmitted their motifs, their styles, and their technological know-how. The explosion of prestige technologies during this time must have been due in part to the cheap and abundant labor provided by foreigners as well as their expertise. This, combined with seemingly limitless royal resources, would have led to the perfection of individual technologies and an upgrade in artistry in general. Tukulti-Ninurta seemed to have had a craze for the new, the brilliant, and the artificial. His emphatic adornment of palaces, temples, and their contents, glittering with artificial gemstones, glazed floral forms, and shining metals, works to announce his dominance over captured territories. His superiority was also apparent in the labor he was able to extract from them. The lead reliefs, like buildings and other adornments, showcased his ownership of humans, technology, and foreign territories. They were the material testaments of his supremacy as ruler and conqueror.

I have argued that lead erotic inlays were intended explicitly for a type of viewer who could best infer their imperialistic content, the highest-ranked men of Assyria. These would include the king, his palace officials, as well as military officers who had access to his private apartments or who were recipients of gifts. Some of them, according to Assyrian custom and the archaeological record, were his relatives. The primary audience, the king and his court, would unfailingly iden-

<sup>38</sup> For more on lead in the Middle Assyrian period, see Assante 2000, 256-260.





tify with the dominant viewer position. What might have been of the utmost importance to Tukulti-Ninurta, beyond the pleasure these images afforded, may not have been a brute, despotic ownership of eroticized bodies; these images might have worked to conscript court members as allies. Certainly the king met with intrigue and, potentially, conspiracy, if the story of his assassination is true.<sup>39</sup>

A more complex function of the erotica than arousing desire, pleasuring the eye, or conveying messages of royal/imperial might have been power brokering in much the same vein as call girls are used today to conscript potential business clients. Assyrians privy to pornographic scenes participated in an act characterized by its exclusivity, its social illicitness, and the sheer intimacy of sexual response. Thus, the mutuality of authorized viewers is drawn tighter and their solidarity confirmed. As the reliefs carry a subtext that feminizes the west, should they activate sexual aggression in these viewers, arousal would align them emotionally and physically with the king's imperialistic ambitions. If this speculation should be the case, we might imagine that at least for that moment of sustained viewing pleasure while the king's elect perused these rare, intricate reliefs and assimilated their multivalent meaning, his plans and his person remained safeguarded.

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<sup>39</sup> Opposition may have formed for a number of reasons. Assyria suffered financial collapse after his death, which suggests that he bankrupted the state with his ceaseless war and building campaigns. The drain of power away from the prominent citizens of Assur with the building of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta might also have been an antagonizing factor. The removal of the god Assur from his ancient home is perhaps the most extraordinary demonstration of the king's tendency to flout the traditions of his own people. Given the guarded rules all other Assyrian kings maintained for image making, the singular creation of pornography would be consistent with his defiant personality.





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Note: All photos with VA numbers by courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin. Drawings are by the author, following sketches in the original field inventory journals.



Figure 1. Lead inlay (VA 4244)



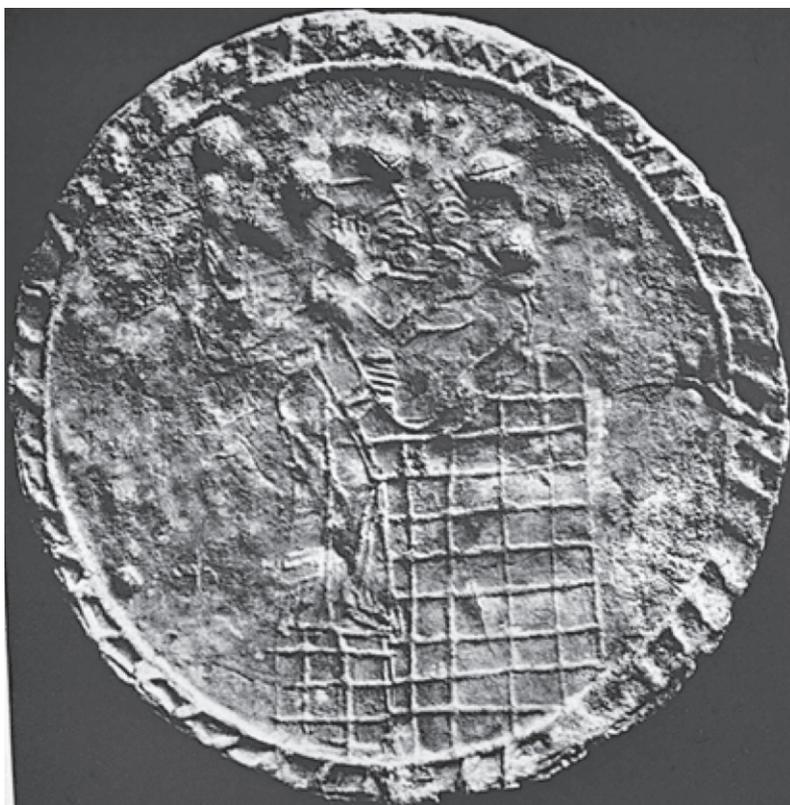


Figure 2. Lead disk (VA 5441)





Figure 3. Lead inlay (VA 4245)



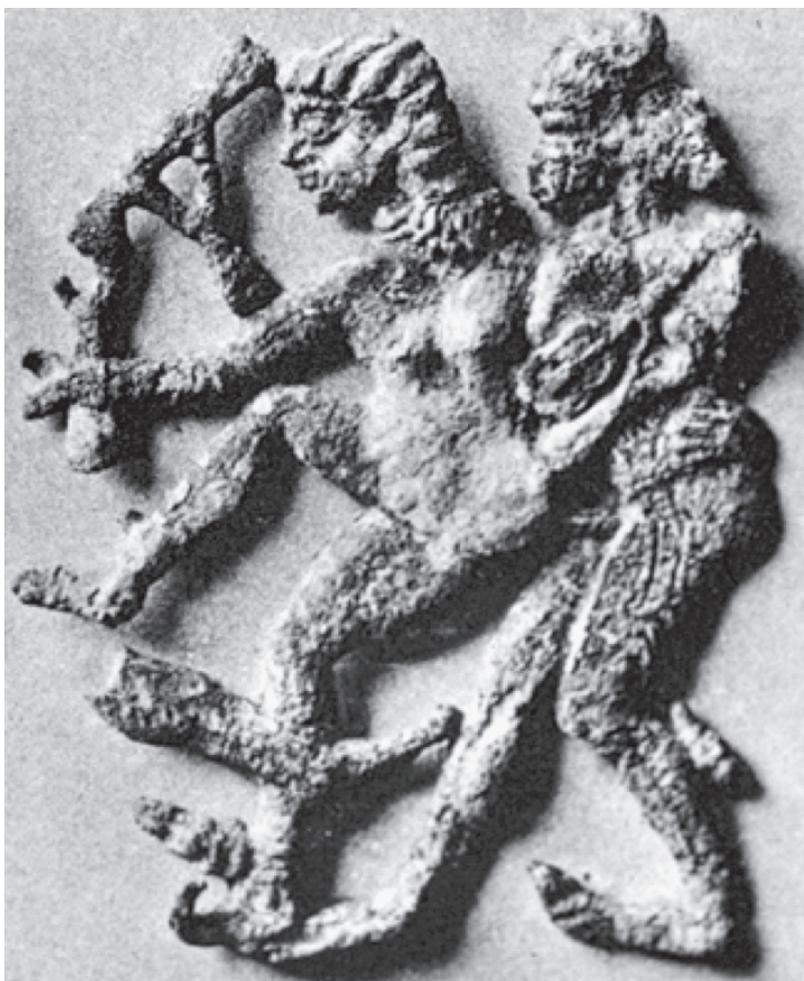


Figure 4. Lead inlay (VA 5428)



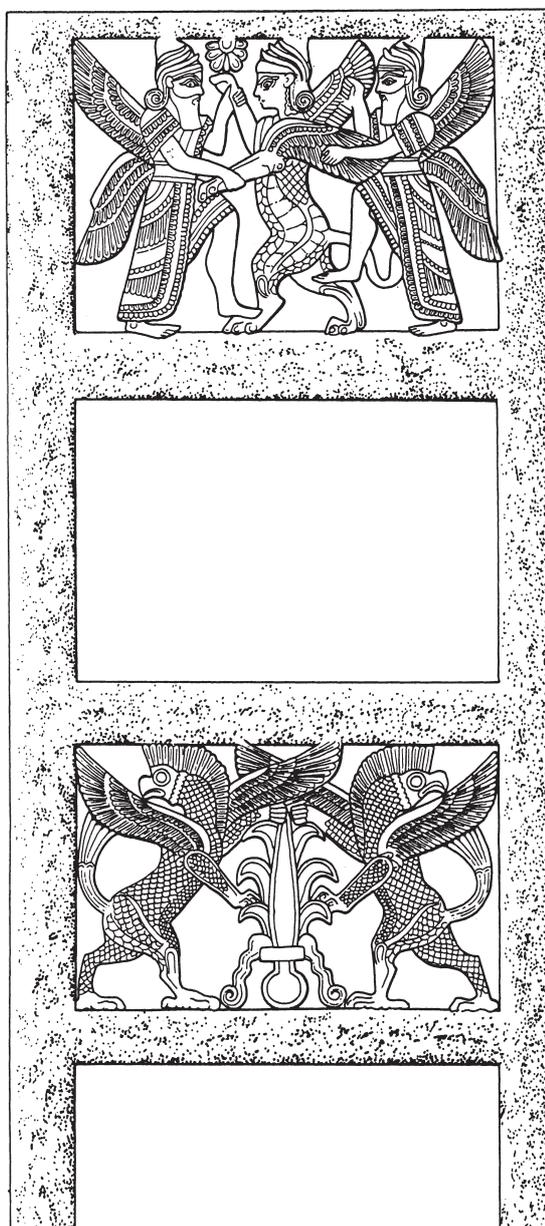


Figure 5a. Neo-Assyrian royal furniture decoration (photo © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)





Figure 5b. Detail of Neo-Assyrian royal furniture decoration (photo © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum)



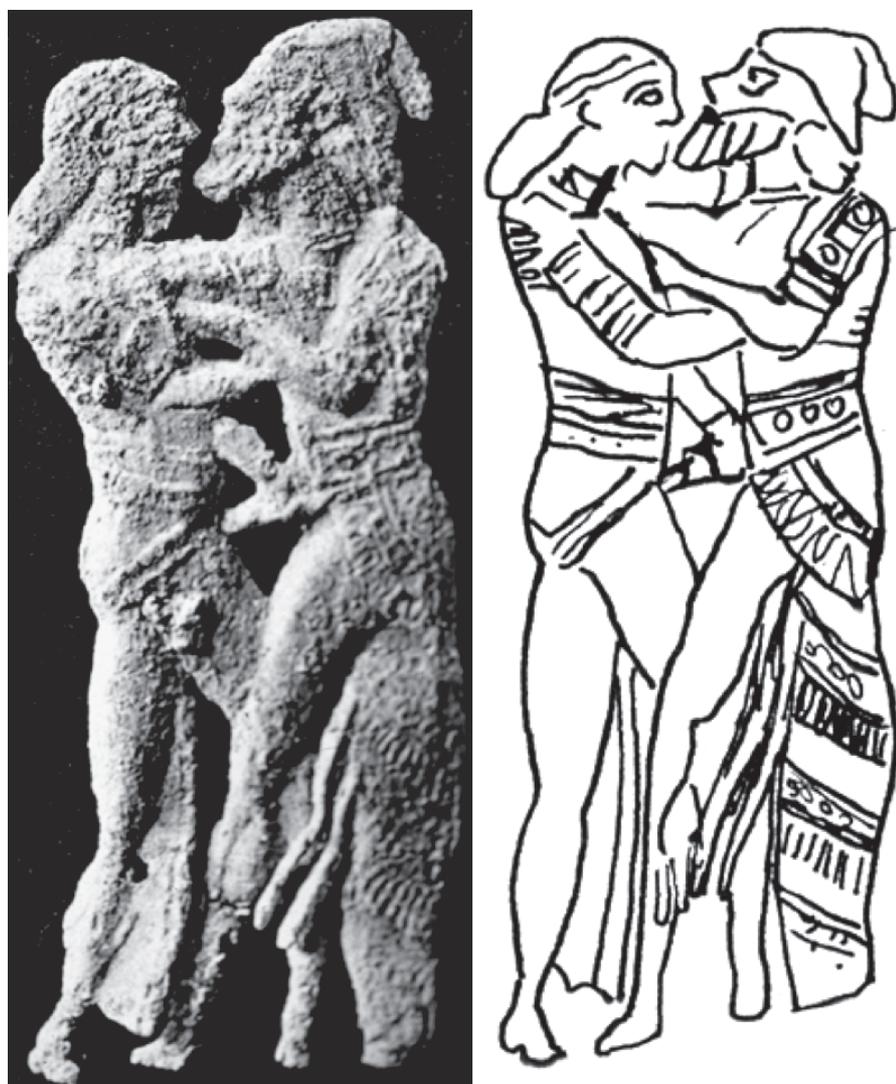


Figure 6. Lead inlay (VA 5426)





Figure 7. Lead inlay (VA 5429)





Figure 8. Drawing of lead inlay (VA 5430)





Figure 9. Lead inlay (VA 5427)



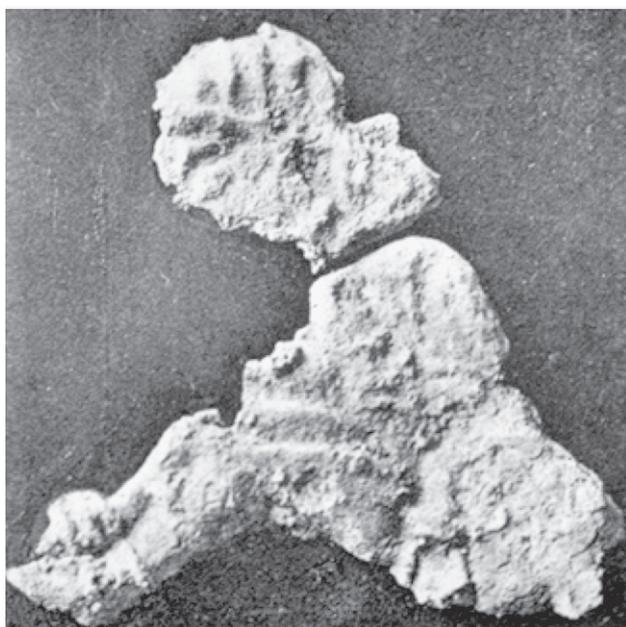


Figure 10. Lead inlay (VA 5433)





Figure 11. Drawing of lead inlay (VA 5160)





Figure 12. Mold for lead inlay (VA 8274)





Figure 13. Drawing of lead inlay (VA 5432)





Figure 14. Lead inlay (BM WA 1922: 8.12.103) (photo courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum with permission from the British Museum.)

