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VISUAL ANALYSIS OF MATERIALS FROM NEO-ASSYRIAN TEMPLES AND ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT CONSULTATION

Stahl Field Report 2013

Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley
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During the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters, with the aid of the Stahl Endowment Fund, I had the opportunity to carry out research of archaeological and archival materials pertaining to my dissertation project on the Neo-Assyrian temple at a number of museums and institutions in the United States and abroad.

The Neo-Assyrian temples that are the focus of my research are aesthetically dynamic monuments that were built atop citadels of Assyrian capital cities of northern Mesopotamia, present day northern Iraq, during the height of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, dated to the first half of the first millennium BCE (c. 1000-612 BCE). The temples of this period were constructed, renovated, and rebuilt as part of larger state-sponsored building programs initiated and overseen by the most powerful and successful rulers of the period. The temple monument consisted of a dynamic mix of materials and spaces; its imposing facade was embellished with raised podiums, glazed brick panels, columns overlaid with bronze, monumental entranceways fitted with guardian colossal stone animals, and thresholds articulated with carved stone reliefs of mythological sages. The temple interior contained a complex array of rooms and courtyards, filled with an abundance of architectural and free-standing materials, including podiums, niches, paved floors, statues, altars, and pedestals. Elaborate decorative elements further articulated the built environment with an abundance of color and texture, for example wall paintings, glazed brick panels, and carved stone wall reliefs. Set within the foundations themselves were additional materials, such as building inscriptions and foundation deposits. In sum, the Neo-Assyrian temple presented a strong statement of conspicuous consumption made possible through the strategic combination of culturally meaningful and aesthetically powerful materials, which now play a leading role in museum collections around the world.

My dissertation analyzes the Neo-Assyrian state-sponsored temple as an influential built environment imbued with social meaning that interacted with the spatial and social environment within which it was constructed and thereafter used. The central question concerns the ways in which the built environment- including its valued contents- ritualized the practices that took place within, how it set these practices apart and inflected them as unique and meaningful within the Neo-Assyrian milieu. My dissertation thus places the Neo-Assyrian temple within a new framework that sees ritual as a strategic mode of acting that ritualizes and inflects the practice itself and the associated materials. This approach will generate previously unrecognized attestations of patterns, meanings, and social relations of the Neo-Assyrian imperial society. In order to reconstruct ritualized performance and material interaction in the temples, based on the sightlines,

communicative potential, visibility, and spatial syntax of their built environment, the physical, aesthetic, and sensory features of the architectural and free-standing material stand at the forefront of my research.

My project focuses on temples from the sites of Kalhu, alternatively called Nimrud or Calah, situated approximately 30 kilometers southwest of the modern-day city of Mosul on the banks of the Tigris River; and Dur-Sharrukin, present day Khorsabad, situated 15 kilometers northeast of Mosul. Excavations were carried out at these sites during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under a variety of directors associated with British, French, and American expeditions, which has resulted in the archaeological finds being distributed throughout a number of countries and museums. The original excavation reports, drawings, and photographs are housed alongside these materials in archives and libraries associated with these institutions.

During the 2012-13 academic year I was able to conduct personal analysis of these materials, now housed in the British Museum, Musée du Louvre, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In working with the objects, I took multiple high-quality photographs with a digital SLR camera, being sure to capture unique visual qualities of the objects, such as color, texture, and shine, by playing with various angles of light and viewpoints, and to accurately record any colored glaze or paint by using a ColorChecker Passport. I took measurements of the objects when possible, noting their absolute dimensions and weight, and created sketches in order to capture unique qualities not picked up by the camera (Fig. 1). In compiling such a thorough dataset, I began to note exceptional qualities of many of the objects. For example, color has been preserved on the surface of certain carved ivories from Khorsabad (Fig. 2); the decorative patterns on some architectural elements, such as glazed clay wall plaques, have the exact same measurements, an indication of the attention to detail and precision that must have gone into their production (Fig. 3); the facial features of certain monumental stone carvings were accentuated with great detail and precision, as seen on the statues from the Sin Temple at Khorsabad (Fig. 4); and that there are striking similarities in design and scale of three stone pedestals (altars?) found at Nimrud and Khorsabad. In addition, a number of the objects with which I was able to work have not previously been published, making these research trips most necessary and informative for my project. All of these datasets were recorded in a FileMaker database.

In addition to the material objects, I closely analyzed and recorded information from the original excavation reports, drawings, photographs, correspondence, and expedition diaries of various expeditions. The written reports provided very useful information on findspots and the original visual characteristics of certain objects, which may not have been preserved or are now completely lost; for example, the brilliant colors of the glazed brick podiums at Khorsabad that have faded over time. A number of site plans were also included in these written reports, some of which noted findspots for objects and labels for various rooms that have not been included in previous publications. These types of contextualizing resources are indispensable for my project. In addition, photographs and drawings from the excavations revealed the quality of preservation of various materials when originally uncovered, as well as the conditions of excavation during these periods (Fig. 5). The expedition diaries also provided a unique insight into the management of materials during excavation, for example how they were removed, stored, and then distributed between various institutions and countries.

Having carried out this research and having gained first-hand experience with these dynamic materials and informative archival documents, I am confident that I will now be able to complete my dissertation project. The information gathered during these museum research visits will also contribute to a number of upcoming conference papers, as well as a forthcoming article on visibility and the gaze in Neo-Assyrian palatial wall reliefs. I am therefore very grateful to the Stahl Endowment Fund for their generosity and support.

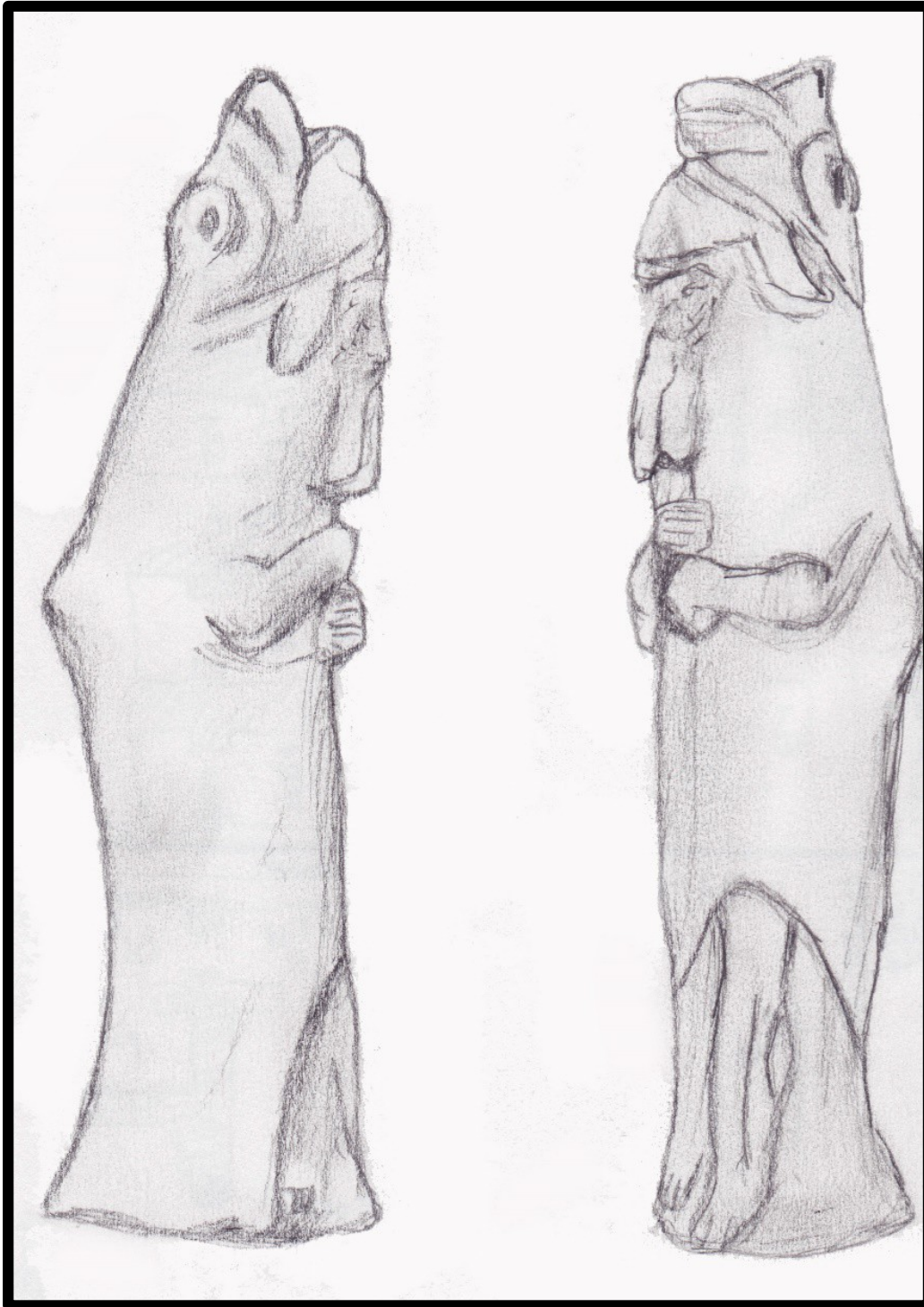


Figure 1: Sketch of an unbaked clay fish-cloaked Apkallu figurine, height 12.7 cm, from Nineveh. Department of the Middle East, British Museum. Such figurine were buried in groups of six in foundation deposit boxes in order to ward off evil and diseases from a building and its inhabitants.



Figure 2: Ivory plaque with palmette blossoms and intertwining stems with preserved yellow and black paint, from Khorsabad. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. This type of plaque was likely used as a decorative element on furniture.



Figure 3: Close up image of a three-quarter life-size stone statue that is one of a pair that once flanked the entrance to the Temple of Nabu at Khorsabad. Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



Figure 4: Fragment of a glazed wall plaque from the Temple of Ishtar Kidmuri at Nimrud. Département des Antiquités Orientales, Musée du Louvre.

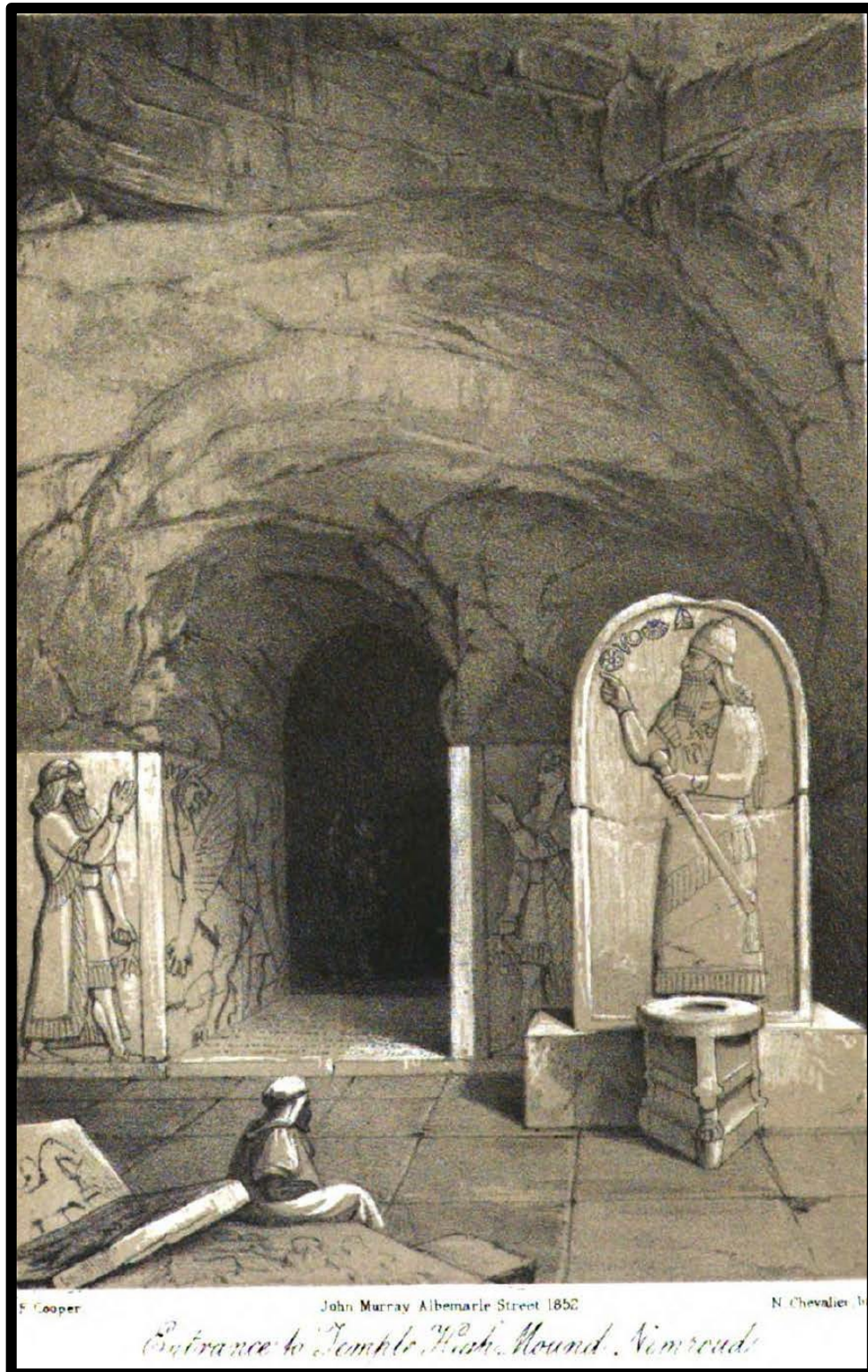


Fig. 5: Water color of an Entrance to the Temple of Ninurta at Nimrud, completed on the spot by J. Cooper, the artist selected by the Trustees of the British Museum to accompany the Nimrud expedition. From A. H. Layard, *Discoverie in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, 1853.