

AN ASSYRIAN KING IN TURIN¹

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ABSTRACT

At the Museum of Antiquity in Turin (Italy) is now again exhibited the famous portrait of Sargon II (donated by P.E. Botta to his hometown, along with another portrait of a courtier) together with a few small fragments of other lesser-known Assyrian wall reliefs, from Khorsabad and Nineveh. In this paper we present some considerations on the two Botta's reliefs, considering in particular the representational codes used by artists in the composition of the Assyrian royal portraits.

RESUMEN

En el museo de Antigüedades de Turin (Italia), actualmente se exhibe de nuevo el famoso retrato de Sargón II (donado por P.E. Botta a su ciudad natal a la par que otro retrato de un cortesano) junto con unos cuantos fragmentos pequeños de otros relieves murales asirios menos conocidos de Jorsabad y Ninive. En el presente artículo exponemos algunas consideraciones sobre los dos relieves de Botta, valorando en particular los códigos de representación utilizados por los artistas en la composición de los retratos asirios reales.

KEYWORDS

Assyrian reliefs - visual representation codes - Khorsabad - Sargon II's head

PALABRAS CLAVE

Relieves asirios - códigos de representación visual - Khorsabad - cabeza de Sargón II

It gives me great pleasure as well as some emotion to take part in this volume in honour of Donny George Youkhanna. His support has proved of paramount importance for many of the interventions aimed at preserving the Iraqi cultural heritage that have been undertaken by the Turin Centre of Excavations and Italian authorities over the past years of embargo and war². To such preservation of the cultural heritage of his country –a delicate

¹ I would thank dr. Egle Micheletto (Soprintendente Archeologo del Piemonte) and dr. Gabriella Pantò (Director of the Museum of Antiquity of Turin) for allowing me to use some photographic reproductions of the museum's archive (figs. 1 and 2: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali - © Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici del Piemonte e del Museo di Antichità Egizie) and take some photos of the details (figs. 4-6 are shots of the author); the drawing (fig. 8) is by Marco Benetti.

² Ever since 1964, the year that saw the beginning of activities in Iraq, the Turin Centre of Archaeological Research and Studies has committed itself, first under the guidance of its founder, Giorgio Gullini, and later of Antonio Invernizzi, to the safeguard of the Iraqi cultural heritage, both in the domain of archaeology and of architecture. Among the projects promoted or coordinated by the Turin Centre of Excavations in order to preserve the Iraqi heritage we may quote, as concerns the past ten years, the BRILA, a database of the objects stolen during the First Gulf War and the following years of embargo. The year 2003 saw the recovery of about 800 items from the Baghdad market – mostly from the plundered museum – thanks to the concerted efforts of the Centre, of Italian Embassy and of the Carabinieri (website: www.centroscavitorino.it). In 2004 a batch of over 1300 objects, first stolen and later recovered by the Jordanian Customs Police was filed and subsequently published in the form of a catalogue (Menegazzi R., 2005, *An Endangered Cultural Heritage* –

as well as dramatic matter— Donny George decided to devote, with tenacity and dedication, the last years of his work.

I am grateful to him for his useful advice and for the unbounded helpfulness I never failed to appreciate about him since I, then a young PhD student, first met him in the Baghdad Museum (a few years before the last war); I am grateful to him for the friendship and courtesy that he never ceased to show in spite of geographical distance.

This contribution deals with the fine head of Sargon II from Khorsabad, by all means the most significant of the fragments that variously reached Turin in the 19th century, and that have found only recently a new and appropriate place of exhibition³. This brief contribution, at any rate, has no other aim than that of providing an overview – corroborated by some reflections— of a work he would most certainly have liked to admire directly.

1. THE TURIN HEAD OF SARGON II

The portrait of Sargon II (TO 10407; Fig. 1) arrived in Italy on 17th February 1847, together with another head, also from Khorsabad⁴, in all likelihood of another dignitary (TO 10408); the item was given to the Turin Egyptian Museum by Paolo Emilio Botta, who might be correctly regarded the discoverer of the Assyrian civilization. He left Turin, his birthplace, when he decided to move over to France along with his father, a Piedmontese in exile, and to “become” *Paul Émile Botta*⁵.

The fragment measures 89 cm in height and 52 in width; it reproduces the head profile of Sargon II, moving left and wearing the typical truncated conical tiara with the pointed top. Both the king’s tiara and garment at shoulder/breast level were carved with geometrical motifs and rosettes, mostly no longer extant. The tiara, the breast and the shoulders actually appear to have been smoothed out in modern times (perhaps when the block was sawn off, or on reaching the museum?), likely in order to eliminate abrasions and scratches of the stone and enhance the concept of integrity (and therefore value, in 19th century eyes) of the item. Such interventions of subsequent smoothing are particularly obvious if we consider the occipital area of the tiara, which is now barely visible. On top of

Iraqi Antiquities Recovered in Jordan, Monografie di Mesopotamia VII, Firenze). Thanks to the Italian Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (MiBAC), and in the presence of specialists from what in those days was the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro (ICR), the Centro Scavi Torino has coordinated courses of restoration and history of art, first in Baghdad, and later in Amman, while new laboratories were set up at the Iraq Museum with ministerial contributions. A restoration project for the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh – strongly backed by G. Gullini and supervised by Giuseppe Proietti (former director for archaeology in the Italian Ministry of Culture) – has unfortunately been interrupted by the outbreak of the more recent Gulf War; however, it has succeeded in producing significant photographic evidence – now published (see: Lippolis 2011) – of the state of the royal suite. All these interventions have always met with strong interest and support from Donny George. In the past few years the Turin Centre has played an active role in the setting up of the Assyrian gallery and of the Islamic halls of the Iraq Museum (thanks to the funds from Italian Ministero Affari Esteri, MiBAC and Fondazione Banca Nazionale delle Comunicazioni).

³ After lying for over a century in the depots of the Turin Egyptian Museum, with only few temporary exhibitions, the reliefs are now exhibited in one of the halls in the Turin Museum of Antiquity.

⁴ It was part of the reliefs loaded by Botta on the Cormoran on 1st June 1846 and reaching Paris on 22nd January 1847. In the Turin Museum of Antiquity 5 fragments from Khorsabad are currently preserved (head of Sargon, head of dignitary, head of pair of horses, head of an officer of the guard, sculptural fragment of the royal sword scabbard), as well as two from Nineveh (royal cortege, victims in the river): Bergamini 2010, Lippolis 2010. As concerns the filing of the single items in Turin see also: Invernizzi 1965, Dolce-Nota Santi 1995 (with a history of the acquisitions).

⁵ P.E. Botta has suffered in Italy an undeserved fate of neglect, and even ‘his’ Turin has perhaps never adequately commemorated him as one of the outstanding figures in the city history. A recent biographic study on his research and exploration work, however, has partly done justice: Bergamini 1987.

the tiara all that remains visible is part of two of the rosettes originally forming a frieze (Fig. 2). As for the decoration of the garment, some motifs carved near the right shoulder on the border of the left sleeve are still visible.



*Fig. 1. The Sargon II's head at Turin
(© Soprintendenza per i Beni
Archeologici del Piemonte e del Museo di
Antichità Egizie. Museo di Antichità:
TO 10407)*



Fig. 2. Detail of the tiara of the king

Furthermore, such smoothing-out processes are likely to have unfortunately impaired the interpretation of possible colour traces, which –as Botta himself states in his reports– were still evident on some of the Khorsabad reliefs. Nowadays even a careful direct examination is incapable of detecting any trace of pigment.

The Turin relief is cut at the king’s shoulders and blocked out on the sides following a particular sectioning technique widely implemented by the first excavators at Khorsabad⁶. Unlike other slabs, whose lunette shape resulted from the adaptation of the cut of the item to the curve of the head, the fragment with Sargon II’s face shows a tapering upper edge that follows the outline of the tiara. At the top of the item a fragment of the upper edge of the slab is preserved: it cannot be removed, as it is matched by the pointed top of the king’s headwear.

2. ORIGINAL LOCATION OF THE SARGON II’S PORTRAIT

It is not possible to establish with full certainty what place the fragment originally found within the illustrated cycles of the Khorsabad palace. Their complexity, the fragmented condition of the slabs (often found after having collapsed to the ground), and some mistakes in E. Flandin’s otherwise splendid drawings have prompted to suggest various –more or less likely– interpretations. At first P. Albenda⁷ suggested that the busts of Sargon and of the courtier, both preserved in Turin, came from rooms 6 or 11. Such suggestions are difficult to accept since –as has been recently remarked⁸– the relief of room 6 –re-excavated by V. Place in 1854, and with all the reliefs still *in situ*, although lying on the ground– shows antiquarian characteristics that do not correspond to those of the Turin relief. On the other hand, as far as the sequence from room 11 is concerned, it is long since known that it is displayed in its entirety at the Iraqi Museum⁹, in the recently renewed Assyrian gallery (Fig. 3): the Turin relief must therefore necessarily have another provenance¹⁰.



Fig. 3. Reliefs from room 11 at Khorsabad, (Baghdad, Iraq Museum)

⁶ Portrait “blocking-out” was mostly implemented by the first French mission at Khorsabad, whereas the practice of selectioning and “lightening” of reliefs employed by the British at Nimrud and Nineveh was different, and carried on even beyond the end of Botta’s work. For a study on the selection strategies of Assyrian reliefs and their distribution in Western museum collections see Di Paolo 2009.

⁷ Albenda 1986, p. 183.

⁸ Bergamini 1995, p. 110.

⁹ Albenda 1986, 178-179 (IM 60975/2-1 and 60979/3-1).

¹⁰ See also Di Paolo 2009, pp. 234-235 (notes 15 and 16).

It has been more recently suggested that the royal portrait from Turin may have been cut away, together with the dignitary's head, from one of the wall slabs of the *bitanu*, namely from façade M, slab 19¹¹; or that the two fragments may come from façade N, slabs 32-33, that Flandin, the drawer, appears to have reproduced erroneously (that is with king and dignitary moving from left to right, which is the opposite of the actual image) in the final publication of his drawings.

The king-and-dignitary pattern appears also in another table by Flandin, depicting façade M, slab 19, immediately right of entrance doorway K¹². The relief with the left-looking king (and the dignitary with flabellum behind him) on slab 19 does not appear to have reached any museum. Should it not be one of those lost at sea, it might be regarded as a plausible source for the Turin relief(s).

As for the relationship between the Turin heads of Sargon and of the dignitary (the latter interpreted as flabellum-bearer, Fig. 4), whilst Albenda seems to indicate both fragments as coming from different areas of the palace¹³, it has been recently suggested that they might belong to the same ensemble¹⁴. Such suggestion might find –admittedly partial– confirmation in the fact that both fragments reached the Turin museum on the same occasion.

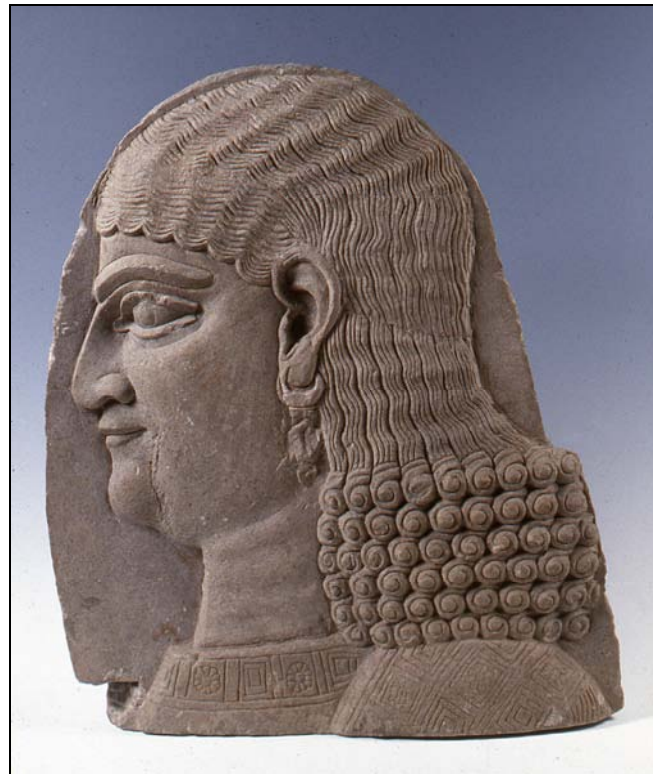


Fig. 4. Portrait of a dignitary
(© Soprintendenza per i Beni
Archeologici del Piemonte e del
Museo di Antichità Egizie.
Museo di Antichità, Torino:
TO 10408)

¹¹ The layout of king and dignitary with flabellum reconstructed here does not appear to be currently preserved in any museum: Bergamini 1995, pp. 110 and 112.

¹² On the original drawing it is indicated as SE side of the courtyard (Albenda 1986: pl. 56, p. 131); however, according to the excavation plan it would rather appear to be the NW side (Albenda 1986, plan on p. 194).

¹³ Albenda, describing as 'large head' the one of the dignitary in order to stress its size, suggested its provenance from façade N (whilst for Sargon's face he suggested, as has been said, rooms 6 or 11): Albenda 1986, p. 183 (10408).

¹⁴ Bergamini 1995, p. 112 (façade N, northern end of the NW wall – slab 33). Such reconstruction is confirmed as plausible by Di Paolo 2009, p. 234, who goes on to suggest that the dignitary's head might actually come from slab 15 on façade N (corresponding to the NW side of courtyard VIII), currently preserved in a fragmentary condition at the Oriental Institute Museum (Di Paolo 2009, p. 235). However, the fracture above the slab shoulder A 7359, currently in Chicago, clearly shows that the Turin dignitary bust – preserved well below the point of fracture of the piece in the American museum– can in no way belong to such slab.

As far as the execution of the item, the preservation of pieces and the stone characteristics are concerned, the two heads appear closely related, although some stylistic differences are to be noticed. By way of example, the rendering of the eyebrows is much elongated on Sargon's head, while the courtier's eye appears foreshortened and indeed almost in profile. Further differences concern the treatment of nose (with particular reference to the nostrils), ears, hairstyle (*i.e.* the parting between straight hair and locks on the back of the neck), and various facial features¹⁵. Such differences, even among juxtaposed figures on Assyrian reliefs, are in no way rare and can be ascribed to the intervention of different hands, particularly if the figures lay near the juncture of contiguous slabs.

The photographic comparison of the two pieces (Fig. 5), however, points out the different proportions of the two heads: the one of the dignitary is larger than that of the king. Such aspect might cause some perplexity; however, it is not in itself sufficient to suggest that the two portraits belong to two separate compositions. Similar cases, although not so widespread, are not unknown to us, *e.g.* the relief displayed in Baghdad (Fig. 3). In such cases the variation in size between portraits can be explained only through the need to uniform as much as possible the stature of all the characters in the procession. The tiara worn by the king, however, allowed him to stand out amidst the cortege, reaching –or even exceeding, as is the case with the Turin relief– the visual field of the slab.



Fig. 5. Sargon II and his courtier (Torino, Museo di Antichità)

Doubts remain as to the reconstruction of the Turin dignitary as flabellum-bearer, provided we want to assign him to the same scene as Sargon's portrait: considering the size of the two heads and the pointed top of the royal tiara 'piercing' the upper margin of the

¹⁵ It may be hoped that such –merely approximate and personal– remarks might be taken up again in future and developed within a project aiming at the analysis of the Turin reliefs through a high-resolution three-dimensional scanning.

slab, one might wonder whether there remained any room for a flabellum¹⁶, for such object was always carried at the same height as the tip of the tiara. Now, it is difficult to think that the flabellum was made to exceed the slab as is the exceptional –as well as legitimate, given the subject– case with the royal headwear. Any attempt at reconstructing a scene on the basis of the too partial elements at our disposal is entirely speculative: we have to confine ourselves to remarking that such a compositional pattern would have entailed some problems of execution. Even conceding that such difficulties could be brilliantly overcome by a skilled craftsman, it would appear opportune at least to retain some reservations on the interpretation of the Turin dignitary's head as a flabellum-bearer standing behind the king.

In recent times, when the Turin reliefs were newly exhibited at the Museum of Antiquity, a small fragment from the scabbard of the royal sword (Fig. 6), worn out but still clearly recognizable, has emerged from the museum depots. At present it is not possible to state whether it belonged to the same scene described above.



Fig. 6. Fragment of the royal sword (Torino, Museo di Antichità)

3. REPRESENTATIONAL CODES IN THE PORTRAIT OF SARGON II¹⁷

It is widely known that artists of Ancient Near East did not consider important the mimetic representation of reality or feelings: they aimed at expressing in their works the essence of things rather than their appearance. They consequently accorded greater relevance to geometric and schematic forms rather than to organic ones in the surrounding

¹⁶ See Flandin's drawings by way of example: Albenda 1986, pls. 45, 70, or the previously mentioned reliefs at the Iraq Museum (Fig. 3).

¹⁷ This paragraph is drawn and developed from the reflections expounded in a recent article concerning representational codes in Assyrian reliefs: Benetti-Lippolis 2011.

world. In human subjects no representation of personality is found, as well as no attempt to define their peculiar traits: the form is ever rendered in its general lines. Furthermore, every subject is often matched with a given ‘universal’ image of reference –*e.g.* king, horseman, soldier, prisoner– employed by artists in appropriate contexts without varying the specific features. In representing the various body parts, and particularly the most significant ones, there exist accurately defined representational codes for single instances. The artistic representation of the head in the Assyrian relief is largely eloquent as far as Ancient Eastern art –including Egypt– is concerned. Starting from the Khorsabad relief preserved in Turin and depicting Sargon II (Fig. 7) we may set forth some remarks regarding the representational criteria used by the Assyrians in order to render some subjects, and more specifically in royal ‘portraits’. We may try and examine, through a reconstruction of Sargon II’s face, the various development stages of a canon dating back to the infancy of Mesopotamian art.



*Fig. 7. Sargon II's profile, detail
(Torino, Museo di Antichità)*

Considering the ‘Assyrian canon’ with regard to the head (Fig. 8), we may notice that the face, which at first sight appears in profile, is actually the outcome of the merging of two different points of view. Generally the profile representation, particularly as far as the head is concerned, is doubtless the most characteristic way of easily and effectively defining the features or the attributes of a person, owing to its inherent irregularity and lack of symmetry¹⁸. The Assyrian and, more generally, Mesopotamian ‘canon’ states that two different –we might say ‘complementary’– standpoints should merge into one. Let us for instance consider both the front and side perspectives (Fig. 8: A): in switching from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional view they intersect (Fig. 8: B) and overlap,

¹⁸ Police identification photos or the majority of caricatures can be an example of this.

resulting in a profile face with frontally viewed eye and eye-brow (Fig. 8: C). The side view –the clearest and most effective one– retains almost all the details, whereas the front

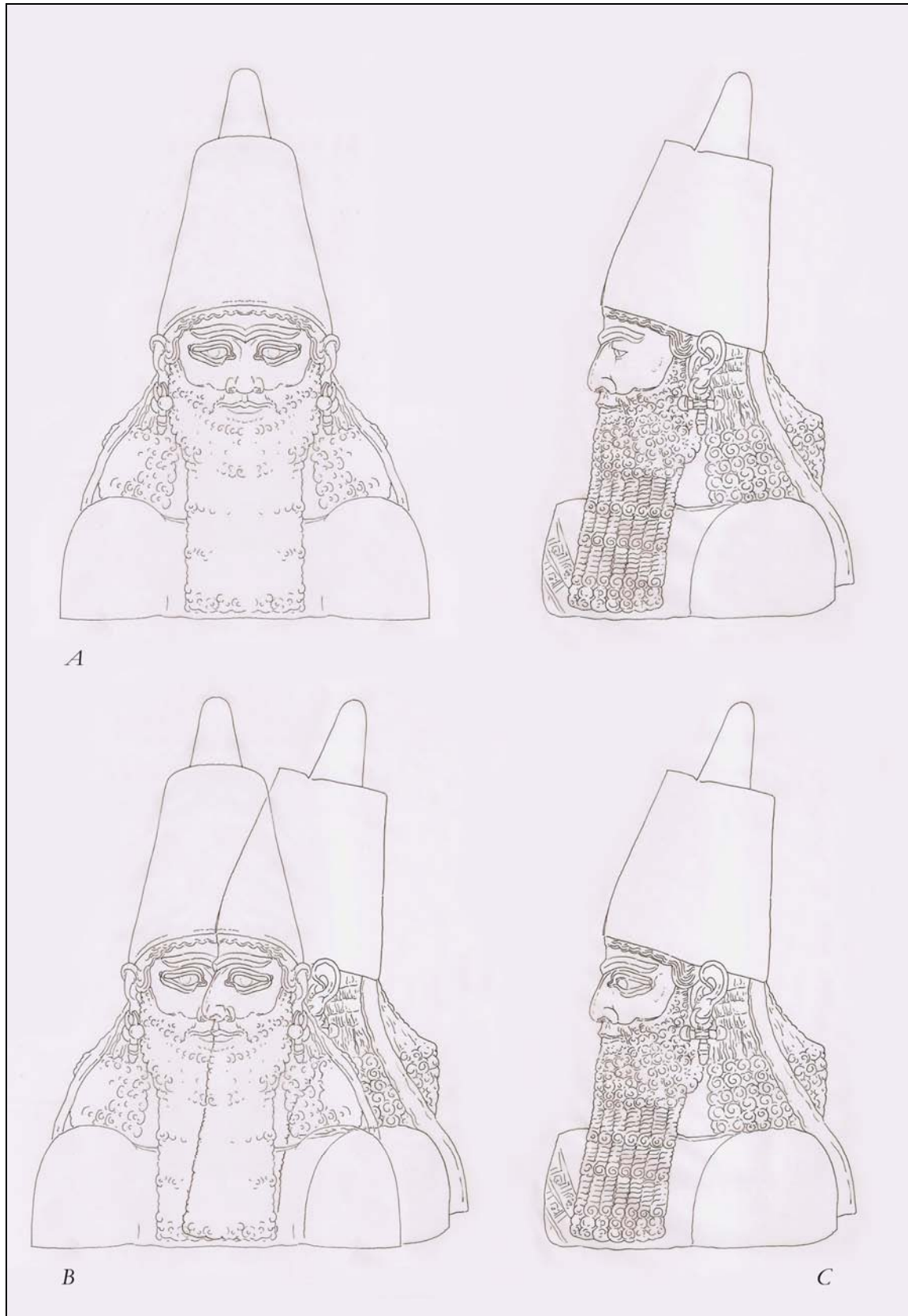


Fig. 8. The “Assyrian canon” in the Sargon II’s head (drawing by Marco Benetti)

view merely maintains the eye –admittedly, in this particular case, not fully frontal, but slightly foreshortened– and the eye-brow. After all, the whole of Near Eastern art recognizes the importance of the gaze and of its main instrument, the eye; when seen frontally, its shape is no doubt the most evident and functional (the only one, at any rate, reproducing the eye in its entirety, at least as we commonly perceive it). This might be one of the reasons why Near Eastern artists maintained the front view when reproducing eyes, whereas the rest of the body is shown in profile. The eye, as we know, evokes a complex set of values and symbols: these, however, take their full significance only when the eye itself appears in its entirety, while a visually appropriate side view would have impaired its readability and curtailed its communicative potential. Moreover, the convention is such that the eyes of figures found in reliefs of Assyrian palaces keep, being frontal, a direct visual contact with passers-by, thus enhancing the message conveyed. Studies on perception actually show that the observer is more attracted and impressed by gazing faces rather than by elsewhere-looking ones: ever since our childhood we have first come into contact with, and searched for, the front gaze of the eye in the person watching us. It is not without reason that neophytes of drawing (*e.g.* children), therefore making greater use of verbal symbols (stereotypes) and of the left hemisphere (SX functions), usually draw a frontal eye in a profile head; and even if put before the evidence of facts, they will hardly concede that they have drawn what they know about the eye (tactile values) and not what they see (optical values). In these cases the representation of space and things surrounding us is multi-sensorial, overall, objective, tangible, and devoid of optical predominance. This is exactly the case with Mesopotamian art. In Assyrian reliefs there is a general tendency that prevents significant body elements from remaining concealed. This is ascribable to the fact that Assyrian visual art is to all intents and purposes a form of tangible writing: only what is found in the compositional field, and what is clearly written or described, actually exists. All that was not represented in a figure (*i.e.* an arm or a leg concealed in the sagittal view of a figure) risked being interpreted as *non-existent* rather than *non-visible*¹⁹. The profile representation does not allow, of course, the presence of both eyes and ears: this is the reason why a partial representation of organs is eschewed as much as possible, along with the skewed and ambiguous reading of the figure it entails. Summing up, we may conclude that Assyrian reliefs are based on a conception of ‘pure visibility’: all that exists is represented in its organic entirety.

On the upshot, the two head perspectives combined by the Assyrian artists produce a view which is in many regards more truthful –we might talk of ‘greater simultaneous completeness’– than the broken up early representation. If we observe the result of such breaking-up and re-assembling of front and side views, it shall appear to us far from inconsistent, or even more complete and appropriate.

One last remark concerning style can be made about the Turin royal portrait. In M. Mallowan’s biography we read, as regards the fine bronze head of an Akkadian king from Nineveh (which he identified as portrait of Sargon, but whose actual identity still nowadays offers matter for controversy), that «there is an extraordinary stone head in the Museum at Turin carved in Assyrian times which appears to have been patterned on this one (*i.e.* the Nineveh bronze head – *author’s note*)»²⁰. Such remark is indeed acute and subtle: the comparison of the two profile heads stresses their actual resemblance. Of course we must bear in mind the physical and material difference of the two items: a three-

¹⁹ Our visual system, because of adaptation to the surrounding environment as well as of necessity, and through past experience and mnemonic knowledge, has specialized in the completion of missing parts or in the assumption of their existence; this, however, was not perceived by Ancient Eastern artists (Benetti, Lippolis 2011).

²⁰ M. Mallowan 1977 (reprint 2010), *Mallowan’s Memoirs. Agatha and the Archaeologist*, London, p. 78.

dimensional metal head and a two-dimensional Assyrian relief. The Akkadian head, being a full-relief bronze item, appears more naturalistic; the Assyrian one, with its play on the line and the curve lying at the base of all Assyrian reliefs, is inevitably more decorative and stylized. However, even at a first glance, the morphological structure of facial details (nose, mouth, cheek-bone, eye-brow, orbital cavity) of the bronze head closely resembles that of Sargon II of Assyria. Apart from the elaborate style of hair and beard, on both works we may find a similar interest for planes and volumes (and therefore for light-effects), and a similar basic pattern: the outline of the forehead-nose-mouth profile is virtually identical.

Quite apart from difficulties regarding the identification of the bronze head – whether it should be assigned to the first Sargon (never forgotten in the Annals of Assyria) or to another king of Akkad– it is nevertheless plausible that, on the whole, the overall form of the Akkadian portrait has been borrowed or at least considered by Assyrian artists in order to render the facial features of their kings, and not only at Khorsabad. After all, the 3rd millennium masterpiece must have been well-known in Assyria; it was perhaps still clearly visible even at Nineveh, where it was brought to the light several centuries after the Median invaders had offended and mutilated²¹ that image that epitomized royal power.

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