

Rituals of War: the Body and Violence in Mesopotamia

Book Review by Magnus Widell, School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology, University of Liverpool, and author of *The Administrative and Economic Ur III Texts from the City of Ur* (2003).

In this collection of eight essays, art historian Zainab Bahrani sets out to analyse and describe the acts of warfare and violence in ancient Mesopotamia. Rather than simply offering a chronological survey of wars or the technicalities of warfare, the author has provided a study of the underlying philosophy of martial actions, thereby attempting to elucidate the concepts, rituals and ideologies of war and violence in the Mesopotamian tradition. Bahrani is concerned with the ritualistic and ideological representations of warfare as well as the supernatural aspects of war, which she refers to as the "magical technologies of war".

The first chapter of the book, "The king's head", is a detailed analysis of the Neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs from Ashurbanipal's North Palace in Nineveh depicting Ashurbanipal's second campaign against Elam. While Bahrani recognises that the motif is embedded into the ideology of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, her analysis is concerned first and foremost with the reliefs as work of visual art. Only in an "indirect and non-mimetic manner", she says, are the reliefs historical documents with ideological value.

After a long and detailed description of the reliefs and the methods used in the composition to effectively transmit a narrative, Bahrani concludes that the scenes lack a linear narrative progression. She completes the chapter by successfully demonstrating the central role of king Teumman's severed head in the account of the battle. This central role of the head, concluded from the composition itself, its inscriptions, as well as other Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, is emphasised through its repetitive display in the reliefs and underscores the importance of the defeat of the Elamite king.

The second chapter, "Babylonian semiotics", serves as a highly theoretical overview of how the author understands and interprets ideological images in ancient Mesopotamia, and it might be useful to read this chapter before one reads anything else in the book. According to Bahrani, reality and representation were not clearly distinguished in ancient Mesopotamian scholarly thought, nor did representation and the supernatural represent separate domains. While ideological representations are obviously manipulated, they may still be factually true and can therefore help us to understand historical events.

The role of the body and body parts in Babylonian divination forms the subject of the third chapter, with Bahrani returning to the idea presented in the preceding chapter that everything in ancient Mesopotamia, including the physical bodies of humans and animals, was seen as a text that could be understood by those who knew how to read the signs, which in the case of Mesopotamian hepatoscopy and extispicy were the Babylonian baru priests. Bahrani then goes on to demonstrate that omens were frequently consulted in connection to military decisions.

"Death and the ruler" (chapter four) deals with the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin dated to the second half of the 23rd century BC. According to Bahrani, the reliefs on the stele communicate a completely new concept of kingship, with one divine king ruling over a vast empire, as opposed to local rulers of separate city-states. The absolute sovereignty of Naram-Sin is demonstrated by his power over life and death, as he is stepping on his enemies, who are either dead

or in different stages of dying. While Naram-Sin is a fully fledged god, Hammurabi is depicted as a human king with the power to directly interact with the gods on his famous law stele.

In chapter five, "Image of my valor", Bahrani continues to discuss the representation of sovereign power and violence in public monuments. In the stele of Dadusha (1790-1780 BC), describing the military victory of Dadusha over Bunu-Ishtar of Arbil, the upper three registers of the stele display dying enemies of the king while the lower register is filled with the severed heads of previously defeated foes.

Unlike Naram-Sin, Dadusha is not a god, but like Hammurabi, he is depicted together with gods. Based on both textual and iconographic evidence, Bahrani argues that it is Dadusha himself who is killing the enemy king on the stele's top register, and that his sovereign power is expressed by the act of stepping on the body of the defeated king.

"The art of war" (chapter six) examines the assault on and removal of public monuments of the enemy. According to Bahrani, "war was fought at the level of monuments as much as land and natural and economic resources", and she claims that some Mesopotamian wars were fought specifically for images and the procurement of public monuments, two rather provocative statements that seem somewhat tenuous. She also associates the removal of public monuments with the deportation and relocation of populations, a regular practice of the Neo-Assyrian kings. However, mass deportations to punish, uproot and marginalise specific groups is a common strategy in imperial management, and it is questionable if this strategy should be connected to the practice among Mesopotamian kings of abducting and assaulting public monuments of their enemies. In the seventh chapter, "Omens of war", Bahrani continues the discussions of chapter three and reiterates the important function of divination in military decisions and the divine and ritual character of Mesopotamian warfare in general. Finally, in the eighth and concluding chapter, "The essence of war", she returns to the ultimate definition of war as both a productive and destructive force.

Overall, *Rituals of War* is a thought-provoking but somewhat disjointed collection of essays, full of analytical and philosophical excursions. Art historians will find much in this volume interesting and controversial. Students will find helpful introductions and overviews but may require the instruction of a specialist to sort through the more complicated issues.