

ART, MYTH AND POWER (I)

ART OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

(4000 BCE to c. 500 CE)

What is the Ancient Near East?

- ▶ Refers to the regions currently comprised of Egypt, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, the Gulf states and Turkey
- ▶ Known as the “cradle of civilisation”: region where the first urban centers were developed
- ▶ Approx 4000BCE to 500CE
- ▶ Why is it named this way?:
 - ▶ Its proximity to the countries in the West (Europe) led to its name during 19th century archaeological excavations undertaken by the French and British



Map showing the regions of the ANE and its current nation-states



Early archaeological excavations in the ANE

Key Concepts

- ▶ The power of images of devotion
- ▶ Royalty and the patronage of art
- ▶ Developing of the written language



CREATION OF THE FIRST CITIES

The roots of contemporary urban civilisation can be traced back to the developments of ANE in 4000 BCE.

- ▶ Empires emerged across vast regions
- ▶ Creation of maritime and land routes: led to trading
- ▶ Invention of writing (Cuneiform)
- ▶ Artistic expression: new forms of art that showed devotion to gods and kings
- ▶ Growth of powerful ruling families, led to demand of luxury items

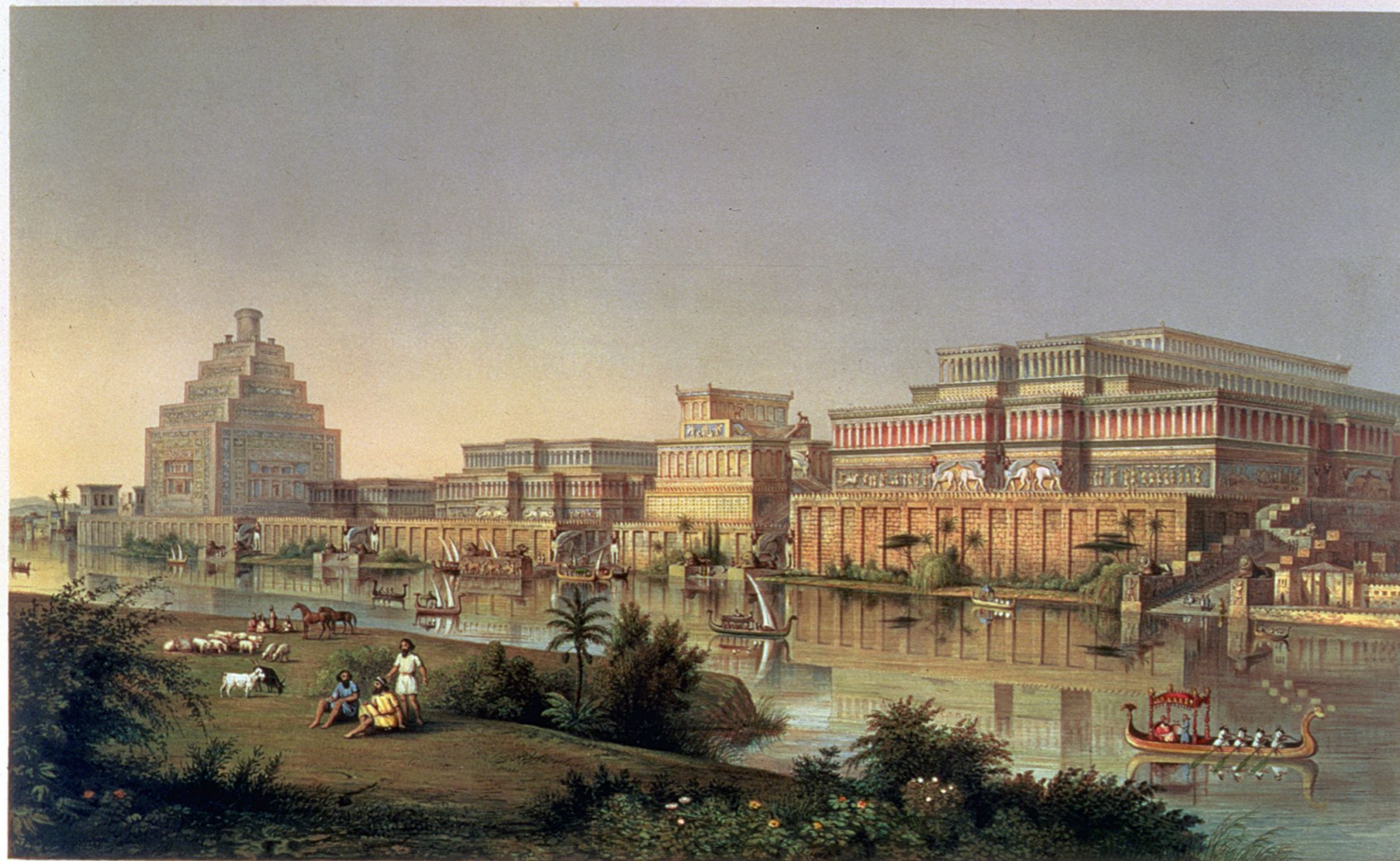


Plate 1. — The Palaces of Nimrod, Assur, &c.
From a Sketch by James Ferguson Esq.

The city of Nineveh, as re-imagined for the Victorian book *Nineveh And Its Remains*, by AH Layard.

DEITIES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST



- ▶ **Theocracy:** A form of government in which a priest rules in the name of God; a deity of some type is recognized as the ruling authority

Burney Relief
c. 1800-1750 BCE
Mesopotamia



Akkadian cylinder seal dating to c. 2300 BC, depicting the deities Inanna, Utu, Enki, and Isimud

What is Melammu?



Amulet with a Lamaštu Demon

Mesopotamia or Iran

ca. early 1st millennium BCE

Obsidian

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

What is Melammu?

- ▶ The deities typically wore *melam*, an ambiguous substance which "covered them in terrifying splendor"
- ▶ The effect that seeing a deity's *melam* has on a human is described as *ni*, a word for the "physical creeping of the flesh"



Amulet with a Lamaštu Demon

Mesopotamia or Iran

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ṢALMU: THE POWER OF IMAGES



- ▶ **ṣalmu**: a concept in which a representation of someone could stand in for the figure itself
- ▶ Could be used for all kinds of images: paintings, statues, reliefs etc.
- ▶ Used for anthropomorphic figures- could be humans or gods
- ▶ An image of a king is therefore not a mimetic portrait of him, but rather a stand-in for the king himself
- ▶ Could be iconic or aniconic

Stela: an upright stone slab or column typically bearing a commemorative inscription or relief design

Limestone stela of Ashurnasirpal II

865BCE - 860BCE

Assyria

SPACES OF ROYALTY



Digital recreation of the Ishtar Gate created by the king, Nebuchadnezzar II leading to the city of Babylon around 575 BCE



(above) Panel with striding lion
ca. 604-562 B.C., Babylonian
Metropolitan Museum, NYC



(below) Processional Way of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon
Pergamon Museum, Berlin



Contemporary recreation of the Ishtar Gate, Pergamon Museum, Berlin



Photo of the *in situ* remains from the 1930s of the excavation site in Babylon



Drawing recreating the Assyrian Sculpture Court of the king Ashurnasirpal II

Relief: A sculpture that projects from a background.

Lamassu: A celestial being from Mesopotamia, with a human head, wings and the body of a bull or lion



Human-headed winged lion (lamassu)
ca. 883-859 B.C.
Assyria
(Met Museum)



Relief panel
ca. 883-859 B.C.
Assyria
(Met Museum)

ROYALTY AND THE PATRONAGE OF ART



Assurnasirpal II Killing Lions

c. 875 BCE

Assyrian palace relief

THE INVENTION OF WRITING

Goes back to 3000BCE, probably invented by Sumerians (currently Southern Iraq)

Used for administrative documents, letters, trade receipts (also found literature- Ashurbanipal from the 6th century BCE had the oldest library)

Began as pictographs; scribes realised it was faster to make representations of objects rather than actual drawings

<https://youtu.be/eFGLaFR7le4>










Cuneiform: One of the earliest known forms of written expression- a logo-syllabic script used for several languages in the ANE. Involved wedge shaped characters impressed on clay tablets

Stylus: A writing implement that incises lines into surfaces, such as clay.

Clay tablets showing the process of Cuneiform writing

Source: British Library



	pictograph c. 3100 BCE	early cuneiform sign c. 2400 BCE	later cuneiform sign c. 700 BCE	
bull's head				bull
bowl				bread, food
head bowl				to eat

Pictograph: An ideogram that conveys its meaning through its pictorial resemblance to a physical object

- ▶ Written language developed from pictographs, evolving into more abstracted wedges to create cuneiform script

The progression of cuneiform writing symbols



Cuneiform tablet with a small second tablet: private letter
ca. 20th-19th century B.C.
Old Assyrian Trading Colony

GLOSSARY

- ▶ **Melammu:** radiance or aura that the god embodied. It could be fearsome or awe-inspiring.
- ▶ **Theocracy:** A form of government in which a deity is officially recognized as the civil ruler; the rule of the king is guided by the name of god
- ▶ **šalmu:** a concept in which a representation of someone could stand in for the figure itself
- ▶ **Stela:** an upright stone slab or column typically bearing a commemorative inscription or relief design
- ▶ **Relief:** A sculpture that projects from a background.
- ▶ **Lamassu:** A celestial being from Mesopotamia, with a human head, wings and the body of a bull or lion
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