

# COMPETITION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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## FAME AND PRIZES: COMPETITION AND WAR IN THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

*Karen Radner*

'You have come from the ends of the earth with a gold-bound ivory sword-hilt... As an ally of the Babylonians you performed a great feat and you rescued them from trouble by killing a warrior who was only one palm short of five royal cubits' (fr. 350 L–P). With this poem, the poet Alcaeus of Mytilene welcomed his brother back home to Lesbos after serving in the army of Nebuchadnezzar II, including at the battle of Ashkelon in 604 BC where the Babylonian and the Egyptian army clashed in the tumultuous period after the disintegration of the Assyrian Empire from 614 BC onwards.<sup>1</sup>

Fame and riches were the mercenary Antimenidas' prize for his courage in battle, and the main focus of this article will be on the motivation and rewards of his near-contemporaries, the soldiers serving in the Neo-Assyrian army. As we shall see, with fame, the king's favour and public awards to win, the competitive element that is often overlooked when discussing Near Eastern warfare, or indeed society, is very visible and the intention of this contribution is to draw attention to this prominent manifestation of the agonal aspects embedded in Mesopotamian civilization.

### **Competitiveness in Assyria**

In light of the fact that this approach is not at all prominent in Ancient Near Eastern studies, it will be useful briefly to sketch forms of competition in Assyrian culture and to provide a rough outline of the wider context of forms of competition before we turn to its role in war.

A glance at the Assyrian calendar shows at once that competition is part of the fabric of daily life: a variety of public contests were held throughout the year. Foot races took place in the second month (Ayyaru, corresponding to April/May) and the ninth month (Kislimu, corresponding to November/October) and were held in honour of Nabû, god of knowledge but also youthful vigour, and the warrior god Ninurta respectively (Cohen

1993, 313, 333–4). The modalities of these races are not at all clear and as it is obvious from Mesopotamian sources that speed and endurance were equally valued in a runner's performance (Rollinger 1994, 46–53; Lamont 1995), either element may have played a role in deciding the winner. Assyriologists have tended to stress that these races were the ritual re-enactments of divine contests, such as between Ninurta and the lion-eagle Anzu who stole the Tablets of Destinies, but this of course does not prevent the races from being competitive sporting events with contestants and spectators. The same is true for the wrestling matches taking place in the fifth month (Abu, corresponding to July/August) which were dedicated to Gilgamesh, mythical hero and judge of the netherworld, commemorating and emulating his famous wrestling match with Enkidu which stood at the beginning of their friendship (Rollinger 2006, 10–11). The matches lasted for nine days, taking place throughout the annual festival honouring the dead (Cohen 1993, 319–20, 462–3; Rollinger 1994, 38–40; George 2003, 126–7). The sources identify the wrestlers as *eflu*, an Akkadian term used to designate young healthy men, and the lengthy period of this contest indicates wide participation in these wrestling matches.<sup>2</sup>

These sporting events aside, the eighth month (Arahsamna, corresponding to October/November) saw a contest of another nature: public debating. The calendar prescribes a performance of the dispute between the hoe and the plough, a version of which survives also in written form (Cohen 1993, 331–2); but as Bendt Alster (1990, 3) has underlined when discussing this composition and other such disputations which always aim to establish precedence of one of two contestants over the other, 'the written tradition handed down to us in the shape of cuneiform tablets represents only one side of the living tradition, because no direct information is available about the oral tradition which undoubtedly lies behind this particular genre' and public debate is likely to have provided a showcase for the quick-minded and rhetorically accomplished.

That Assyrian society fostered competition and competitiveness is not part of the widespread perception that sees Assyria as a rigidly hierarchical society which would assign each person a predestined inflexible position within the unyielding ranks of its all-encompassing bureaucracy – but this is a misconception which should be abandoned. As J. N. Postgate (2007, 358) recently stressed, 'the Neo-Assyrian administration was not bureaucratic, and depended on a sense of institutional loyalty and personal interaction up and down the system' – a system that, moreover, relied on competition.

### **Competition within the army**

From the ninth century onwards, professional warriors from defeated neighbouring kingdoms were incorporated into the Assyrian army (Fuchs 2005, 53) which was thus slowly but steadily transformed into a professional standing army. Specialized soldiers largely replaced the conscripts who provided military service only during the summer months when the agricultural calendar permitted the absence of farm workers. This transformation was concluded by the mid-eighth century BC at the latest (Kaplan 2008), with mercenaries from all adjoining regions supplementing the professional soldiers from within the boundaries of Assyria (Postgate 2000, 100–4). Andreas Fuchs (2005, 51–5) has emphasized the heterogeneity of the Assyrian army and analysed it as the intentional product of a royal strategy aiming to neutralise the army's otherwise unbridled power vis-à-vis the king in order to protect his sovereignty; a useful and successful approach which significantly contributed to Assyria's internal stability and the longevity of its royal dynasty. The different contingents constituting the Assyrian army were allowed and encouraged to preserve and develop their own customs and idiosyncrasies;<sup>3</sup> rather than being forged into a unified army, its individual components found themselves in intense competition with each other for royal recognition and favour.

In the following, we will mainly focus on the individual soldier but provide a wider cultural context where necessary; this will necessitate discussions of the Assyrian concept of 'fame', of the heroic dimension of Assyrian kingship and the employment of eunuchs in high army offices. But at the heart of our examination lies the exploration of the benefits expected by soldiers. For those who lost their lives in battle, there was the hope of fame and the guarantee of 'eternal life'. For those who lived to tell the tale, there was a share in the booty of war, but again also the chance of fame and of public recognition, best witnessed by the presentation of prizes in acknowledgment of the deeds of battle.

### **A warrior's death as a ticket to eternal life**

Ancient Near Eastern tradition judged a warrior's death reputable and praiseworthy, and those who bravely sacrificed their lives in battle could achieve eternal fame. This paradoxical belief, found in so many cultures, is well attested also for Assyria where respect and esteem in general were all-important. As in many other languages, in Akkadian<sup>4</sup> the word for 'name', *šumu*, could also denote in particular the famous, distinguished, celebrated name and was then used in the sense of 'fame, renown' (Radner 2005, 90). A good name was imperative when dealing with the royal court, reflecting

the fact that while access was generally restricted a fine reputation could open doors: ‘I worked meticulously, thinking: “May my name be good in front of my lord!”’<sup>5</sup> argued a seventh-century Assyrian bureaucrat when asking the crown prince Ashurbanipal to promote him into royal service. Scholars, too, were eager to enhance their reputation and the Assyrian royal library of Nineveh contained a specific ‘ritual to see the fame of divination and acquire a great name’.<sup>6</sup> And indeed it is the wise men of Mesopotamia whose names, like those of the kings, were recorded and passed on to later generations, sometimes surviving for millennia (Wilcke 1991, 265–7; Radner 2005, 94, 276).

Such eternal fame corresponded in the Mesopotamian mind to eternal life, for the physical body – destined to die – was thought to be but one component of a human being. An individual was deemed to consist also of two other elements, capable of surviving physical death: the individual’s name and spirit (Akkadian *etemmu*) were thought to be intimately linked to each other while being tied to two very different spheres, the netherworld and the world of the living. After the mortal body had died, the spirit’s well-being in the netherworld was dependent on the survival of the name among the living. If a name was forgotten the spirit was thought to turn into a phantom without identity (Akkadian *utukku*), prone to leave the netherworld to haunt the living (Radner 2005, 19–21) – the survival of a dead person’s name was therefore paramount to the specific individual but also to human society.

First and foremost, the name’s continued existence was guaranteed by its invocation in the death rites by which a family provided for their dead ancestors (Radner 2005, 74–88). Those who accomplished great deeds, however, could hope that their names would be remembered by many also outside their own family circle, thereby improving the chances of their survival. To have one’s name committed to popular memory was an efficient way to secure one’s existence after death and those who had the means to anchor their names in the people’s mind certainly did so.

Mesopotamian rulers harnessed the powers of art and architecture, poetry and the written word in order to ensure the perpetuation of their name (Radner 2005, 90–161, 177–8), and the Assyrian kings were no exception. There is a decidedly competitive element to this but, as each was conceived as a ‘king without equal’ among his contemporaries, this competition is intergenerational: ‘I did what none of my forefathers had done before me’ is a common catchphrase in their inscriptions, and intergenerational competitiveness can be seen as the rationale for projects as diverse as the exploration and conquest of the world and the construction of temples, palaces, fortifications and entire new cities.



Clear-sighted strategy but also personal courage in the face of battle were crucial in acquiring everlasting fame, and long passages in the royal inscriptions celebrate the king as a mighty warrior and fearless commander of his troops; a letter of the Hittite king to the adviser of Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria (r. 1240–1205 BC) mocks the young and inexperienced king's desire to march into battle straight away in order to make a name for himself (Radner 2005, 95–6).<sup>7</sup> In particular Tiglathpileser III (r. 744–727 BC) and Sargon II (r. 721–705 BC), under whose rule Assyria's territory was doubled, portrayed themselves as operational fighters who personally led their men into the fray, as an episode from the account of Sargon's eighth campaign may illustrate: 'With only my own chariot and the horses which are (always) with me, never leaving my side in enemy and friendly territory, (and) the contingent of (my brother) Sin-ahu-ušur, I hit (the enemy army) like a terrible arrow in its heart.'<sup>8</sup> As Sargon died in battle, there is no reason to cast doubt on his active participation in combat; the fact that his corpse was never recovered from the battleground so that no proper funeral could be conducted caused an ideological crisis for Assyrian kingship that overshadowed the rule of his successors (Frahm 1999) and changed their attitude to the front line. But that in the eighth century BC the king was expected to be a valiant warrior and compelled to pursue acts of heroism by virtue of being the king of Assyria is obvious also from the words of one of Tiglathpileser's officials who fully expects his king to rise to the challenge of attacking the mountain fortress Turušpa (also known as Tušpa), the capital of the kingdom of Urartu, Assyria's main rival at the time: 'When the king, my lord, went up to Urartu for the first time, the gods Aššur and Šamaš delivered the city of Turušpa into the hands of the king, my lord. Hence, may the king, my lord, advance against Urartu so that they may conquer Turušpa and that the king, my lord, may immortalise his name!'<sup>9</sup>

A key objective of the Assyrian royal inscriptions is to stress 'heroic priority', to use Hayim Tadmor's (1999, 57) phrase, with special attention being given to those achievements that were innovative, preferably technologically or militarily (Radner 2005, 98–9), or eclipsed comparable deeds of their predecessors. In a recent study on the changing and evolving descriptions of their dominion as found in the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings, Robert Rollinger (2008, 684) has described the often explicitly-stated intent to surpass the royal ancestors as 'behaviour which one might almost call agonal'.<sup>10</sup> But instead of focusing on the Assyrian kings' competition with their forefathers we will now again turn our attention to a group of people who vied with their contemporaries for fame and recognition: the soldiers.

It could be argued that the quest for fame was essential especially for those in danger of dying without children who would guarantee the upkeep of their death rites; the young men serving in the Assyrian army, often still unmarried (Roth 1987), certainly ran this risk. The canonical version of the Epic of Gilgamesh, attributed to the sage *Sîn-leqe-unninni* and found in several copies in the royal library at Nineveh, contains several explicit comments on the fate of the slain warrior. When Gilgamesh, the legendary hero and king of Uruk, summons his dead companion Enkidu from the netherworld and inquires about the fortunes of various groups of people, Enkidu describes the fate of the fallen soldier in positive terms: Enkidu's answer to Gilgamesh's question: 'Did you see the one who was killed in battle,' is: 'His father and mother honour his memory (lit. hold up his head) and his wife [weeps] over [him].' (*Gilgamesh* XII 148–9).<sup>11</sup> His family mourn and honour the slain warrior but the absence of children who would continue this practice is noticeable. Enkidu himself was the victim of an ultimately fatal wound acquired in the fight against *Huwawa*, the demonic guardian of the cedar forest, and died without having fathered children; that his fame was commemorated by the songs of the people of Uruk was therefore vital to the dead hero's continued existence: 'May the ploughman on [...] mourn you [who] will extol your name with his sweet work-song! May the [...] of the spacious city of Uruk-the-Sheepfold mourn you, who will extol your name with the first [...]' (*Gilgamesh* VIII 23–6).<sup>12</sup> And according to another Neo-Assyrian version of the Gilgamesh story that is distinct from the canonical version, Gilgamesh himself anticipated the possibility of losing his life to *Huwawa* but thought it worth the resulting fame: 'If I fall, I should [have made] a name: (men will say) "[Gilgamesh] did battle [with] ferocious *Huwawa*!"'.<sup>13</sup> Potential death was part of Gilgamesh's self-chosen mission and it is exactly its dangerous nature that makes it attractive to him for it gives him the chance to attain fame, regardless of eventual failure or success.

This same sentiment was attributed to the soldiers in the service of Ashurbanipal (r. 668–c. 630 BC) by their commanding officer *Bel-ibni* who quoted the words of his men in a letter to his king: in the course of a military operation in the marsh regions of the extreme south of Babylonia, a contingent of 150 soldiers suddenly found themselves ambushed just outside the enemy's territory. Outnumbered by the four hundred men of the hostile forces, they prepared for the perilous confrontation by executing the 130 enemy soldiers taken captive in a previous encounter (to prevent their liberation or uprising) and proclaimed in the face of this precarious situation: 'Should we die, we will die with a supreme name!'<sup>14</sup> And the Assyrian contingent was indeed victorious, killing 17 and

wounding sixty or seventy men before putting the enemy troops to flight; yet twenty of the Assyrian soldiers suffered injuries and although some may have survived their battle wounds, some will certainly have died.

It is difficult to gauge to what extent brave acts such as these, which certainly were meant to attract the attention and gratitude of the king, also enhanced the soldiers' reputation in society at large. But it is clear that at least within the administrative and military cadres of the Empire, certain army contingents<sup>15</sup> enjoyed a special appreciation which was undoubtedly based on an outstanding performance in the past, both of the survivors and the dead. That individuals, too, were held in high esteem for their accomplishments is most obvious when they are considered for future missions; our evidence originates from the state archives and naturally favours the high officers, such as the Chief Eunuch Ša-Nabû-šû (Starr 1990, no. 9, 63, 78–80, 88, 96), the most senior military officer under kings Esarhaddon (r. 680–669 BC) and Ashurbanipal, and his successor Nabû-šarru-ušur (Starr 1990, no. 267, 270–2, 292). Both were routinely considered to lead the army in particularly difficult assignments, a clear indication of their excellent reputation.

Courage in battle, and the desire to die a heroic death, is not claimed by the Assyrian sources for their own warriors alone; they also attribute these qualities to the enemy. The best example is that of an Elamite aristocrat who was injured during the battle between the Assyrian and the Elamite forces at Til-Tuba in 647 BC. His fate is described in image and word on Ashurbanipal's wall decoration in the Southwest Palace of Nineveh. In the midst of the fierce battle, a scene that is conspicuous because of the accompanying inscription shows Urtakku, identified as an Elamite by his dress, arms and hairstyle, in conversation with an Assyrian soldier. The inscription reads: 'Urtakku, in-law of Teumman, who was wounded by an arrow, but did not die, called to an Assyrian to behead him, saying: "Come, cut off my head! Take it before the king, your lord, and make a good name for yourself"'.<sup>16</sup> The Elamite prince is here portrayed as a valiant warrior who does not seek to escape wounded but prefers to die an honourable death on the battlefield; in this, he is contrasted with his spineless in-laws, the Elamite king Teumman and his son Tammaritu who try to escape after their chariot has been wrecked in battle – an attempt that proves to be unsuccessful as they are hunted down and killed.<sup>17</sup>

To die in a heroic way may indeed have offered the chance to be immortalised by undying fame and, like Gilgamesh, Assyrian soldiers may have been mentally prepared themselves to sacrifice their lives in the hope of achieving this goal, but they also had a rather more tangible assurance for their names' survival. The king was held responsible for the memorial

death rites of soldiers who had died in his employ, guaranteeing and ensuring in this way their continued existence. The best indication of this practice is provided by a ritual text dated to the reign of Ammi-šaduqa of Babylon (c. 1550–1530 BC), enumerating all those receiving the king's death care. The list of the names of this king's ancestors, both real and fictional, is followed by the summary invocation of those representing the rule of the dynasties of Amurru, Ḫana, Gutium and 'of those not recorded on this tablet' before the focus is shifted to '(each) soldier who died serving his lord, sons of the king, daughters of the king, all mankind from east to west, (all those) without provider and carer (for the death rites) – come and eat und drink this! Bless Ammi-šaduqa son of Ammi-ditana, king of Babylon'<sup>18</sup> According to this, the king of Babylon provided death rites for all his royal predecessors and their children but also all those who would have otherwise remained ignored. Yet special attention is given to those who died as soldiers in royal service and the guarantee to provide for their death rites will have gone a long way to ensure the troops' full commitment and loyalty. A close parallel for this relationship is attested for the Assyrian king and his eunuchs (*ša rēšī*, literally 'He of the head'). From the ninth century onwards, the Assyrian kings increasingly relied on castrated men to act as their governors in the provinces and fulfil other high military and administrative state offices; we have already mentioned that in the seventh century the Chief Eunuch can often be seen as the acting commander-in-chief of the Assyrian troops. A eunuch's inability to father children held an obvious advantage for his master in a society where the individual's primary concern was normally for their own family, an inclination which could impede or dilute one's devotion to the king. The eunuchs in royal service, on the other hand, were entirely focused on their master and could almost be described as the adopted sons of the king. That the royal family took responsibility for the death care of the eunuchs<sup>19</sup> was essential in this relationship and provided, beyond high social status and a place in the royal household for life, a key incentive for the eunuchs' loyalty to the king.

### **Rewards for the living**

But the Assyrian concern with reputation after death was balanced against a desire for reputation during life. The loyal servants of the king did not have to wait to die to reap the rewards for their faithfulness: those who survived a war stood to gain much for their loyalty to the king and their bravery in battle. Whether it was the desire for immortal fame or rather for earthly prizes that motivated the individual warrior is impossible to know; but it is clear that contemporary society saw both as the deserved returns of a valiant fighter.

The best sources for the material rewards that a war hero might come to enjoy are a series of royal decrees issued by Aššur-etel-ilani (r. 630–627 BC), one of the last Assyrian kings. To those military commanders who had aided him in securing the Assyrian throne in a bloody war of succession, he awarded not only honours and property but also tax privileges; the preamble to the documents commemorating these decrees reads: 'I planned to do them good: I clothed them with multi-coloured robes and bound their wrists with golden bracelets ... Fields, orchards, buildings and people I exempted from tax and gave to them'.<sup>20</sup> Prosopographical studies of individuals such as Ashurbanipal's charioteer Remanni-Adad (Fales 1987) or his contemporary Šulmu-šarri (Radner 2002a, 70–2), one of the king's 'friends' (*ša qurbūti*, literally 'he who is close'), have shown that they amassed property and distinctions over the course of their careers, undoubtedly as much through personal initiative as through their close links with the king. A letter to an eighth-century governor of Kalhu makes the link between performance in battle, material rewards and social status especially clear. A military officer commanding the governor's troops during a campaign to Babylonia informs his master about the yields of his recent engagement at the city of Rapiqu and elsewhere: 'Out of (all) the captives who came out (of some enemy city) I have looked for and chosen 30 people; I applied to the commander-in-chief and he gave (them) to me. Out of (all) the captives who came out of the city of Rapiqu I have chosen ten people but as the commander-in-chief was not in a good mood I did not apply to him. May my lord speak to him when he comes to the palace' (Postgate 1973, no. 194 lines 7–23).

To kill a prominent enemy was a conspicuous way for a soldier to distinguish himself and prove his loyalty to the king and in the Urtakku episode of the battle of Til-Tuba, which we have already discussed, it is explicitly highlighted as a method of raising a warrior's profile. The Elamite prince Urtakku's request to have his head cut off refers to the fact that Assyrian soldiers routinely cut off the heads of certain fallen enemies. In the royal inscriptions the act of heaping up the severed heads of the enemy soldiers in front of the defeated city serves as a metaphor for the absolute victory of the Assyrian army and the total destruction of the enemy troops,<sup>21</sup> and in the palace reliefs from Kalhu (Nimrud), Dur-Šarrukin (Khorsabad) and Nineveh, from the reigns of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 884–859 BC) to Ashurbanipal, Assyrian soldiers with head trophies are commonly portrayed amidst the activities following the victorious battle.<sup>22</sup> The soldiers are shown collecting, carrying and even dancing<sup>23</sup> with the trophies. The dancing suggests the ritual potency of the slain enemies' heads,<sup>24</sup> as do some scenes found on the bronze bands decorating a temple

gate commissioned by Ashurnasirpal's son Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 BC). In addition to the frequent depiction of soldiers beheading their enemies in man-to-man combat<sup>25</sup> (in order to stress these warriors' enormous strength and skill, required to strike off a head with a single blow),<sup>26</sup> head trophies are shown set up on, or in front of, the fortification walls of defeated and abandoned enemy cities<sup>27</sup> while riders and charioteers are depicted transporting individual head trophies, fixed either to the harness of the horses<sup>28</sup> or the chariot.<sup>29</sup> these are clearly the heads of very specific enemies.

Trophies such as these had an important role to play in administration, as a number of scenes in the palace reliefs illustrates. A detail from the wall decoration of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BC) in his Southwest Palace at Nineveh (fig. 1),<sup>30</sup> for example, shows in the setting of a Babylonian landscape Assyrian soldiers delivering the trophies to the typical team of two scribes, one working with the cuneiform script, the other with Aramaic alphabet, who record the relevant data, presumably the numbers of

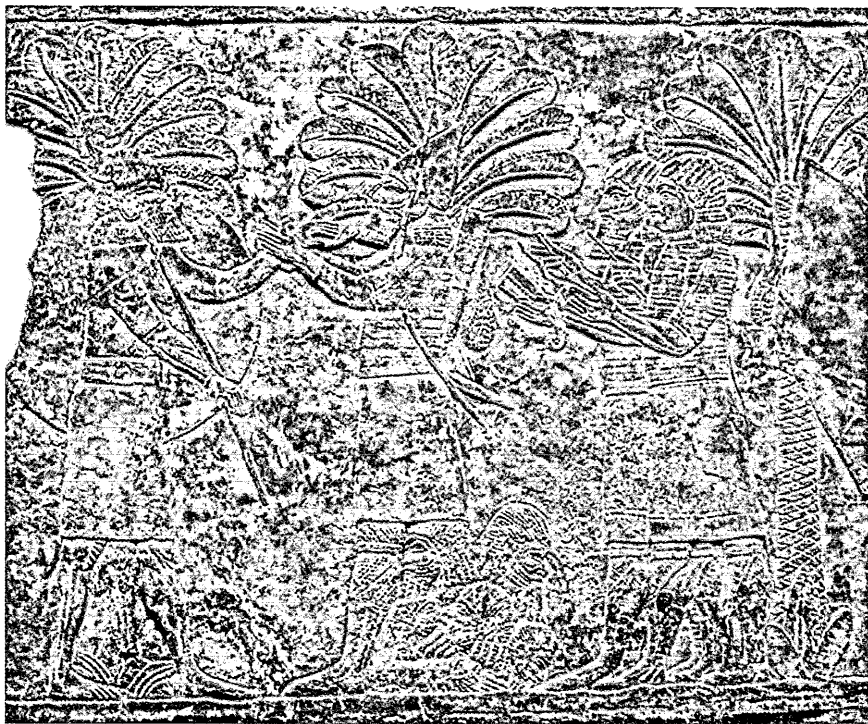


Fig. 1. British Museum, WA 124955, detail. Sennacherib's wall decoration of the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, slab 9 of room XXVIII (FF).

Photo by Eleanor Robson.



Fig. 2. British Museum, WA 124801a, detail. Ashurbanipal's wall decoration of the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, slab 1 of room XXIII.

Photo by Chikako Watanabe.

trophies but also the names of the soldiers. That only the heads of specific enemies were of interest, that the gathering of these trophies was highly selective is clear from the fact that the Assyrian 'head-hunt' as depicted in art is clearly focused on particular individuals, most obviously so in the already mentioned Til-Tuba cycle (fig. 2)<sup>31</sup> where Assyrian soldiers bring the captured heads, including those of the Elamite king Teumman and his eldest son Tamarritu, into a tent where three Elamites, captives or allies of the Assyrians, inspect and identify them (Watanabe 2004, 111). That the cowardly Teumman's head was worth collecting indicates that it is the victim's status rather than specifically his valour in battle that decides whether the body should be decapitated; the battle scenes depicted in Assyrian art feature many dead whose heads were not severed. And while the heads clearly were the most important trophies, it is worth stressing that the slain enemies' weapons were also collected. In the lower register of the stone slab from Sennacherib's wall decoration in the Southwest Palace, already discussed, a number of soldiers are shown bringing booty, captives and trophies before two scribes, adding to the big pile of furniture, vessels, arms and other objects heaped in front of them. Three of the soldiers deliver the head trophies and quivers of fallen enemies, the first holding up a head and a quiver while the next has a head in each hand and the last bears the two quivers that would seem to match the two heads carried by the second soldier.<sup>32</sup> The link between heads and weapons collected in battle is made explicit in a scene in Ashurbanipal's Battle of Til-Tuba sequence: as one soldier is about to decapitate the Elamite king Teumman, another is shown gathering the royal headdress, bow and quiver from the battle-field (Watanabe 2004, 112 fig. 13).

Decapitation as practised by the Assyrian soldiers is always a culturally symbolic event. While the display of the severed heads of the enemy troops

in front of a defeated city, as attested in royal inscriptions and depictions such as Shalmaneser III's gate decorations, uses them to threaten and shame the enemy, the individual heads collected and processed through the state system served as trophies signifying victory in combat. It is important to stress that the Assyrian army did not practice a general 'head-hunt' with soldiers rewarded for the number of enemies killed (reckoned by number of heads brought in); instead, there was very selective rewarding of those who brought in the heads of high-ranking enemy leaders. Our scene from Sennacherib's palace decoration shows an Assyrian officer fastening a bracelet around the wrist of a soldier (fig. 1), quite clearly indicating a reward ceremony to honour the warrior for his success in battle. A heap of heads is shown right next to the two men, and we can assume that this warrior managed to kill somebody who ranked prominently among Sennacherib's southern enemies.

That precious jewellery, as in evidence in the Sennacherib scene, purple robes and 'golden' swords (most likely to be swords with lavishly decorated hilts and scabbards, as worn by the king and his courtiers) were used to honour those who had distinguished themselves is well attested also in the textual record. From the time of Ashurnasirpal II onwards, the Assyrian king can be shown to have awarded swords and bracelets of gold to those he wished to reward for their service (Postgate 1994, 236–9),<sup>33</sup> and the practice recalls also the 'gold-bound sword' which Antimenidas brought back to Lesbos as a very noticeable reminder of his years as a soldier and of his one especially heroic battle encounter. The precious swords and bracelets with which Assyrian soldiers were rewarded for their service were all standardized to a high degree, which shows the longevity and widespread recognition of their symbolism.<sup>34</sup> These rewards constituted highly visible and readable indications of the bearer's achievements in battle and royal service, as did the multi-coloured robes mentioned in the Aššur-etel-ilani grants. Administrative texts from the eighth and seventh century BC further indicate that distinguished soldiers were 'clothed' in a formal procedure, marking the acquisition of a special status which elevated them beyond other troops; the ensuing change in their dress (its exact nature not yet identified) indicated and reinforced this new status (Postgate 1994, 237; 2000, 374).

Distinctive jewellery, weaponry and garments are the most visible rewards in kind which could include material goods, slaves and land as well as tax breaks, and definitely signalled to the world the bearer's high standing at court and within the military hierarchy. Yet the existence of such visible, and commonly identifiable, indicators of military success<sup>35</sup> provided a way of signalling achievement and recognition beyond the customs of the individual army division and doubtless served to foster and



encourage a competitive spirit among all members of the Assyrian army. It created a climate where individual success was noticed and honoured and where personal achievements were openly advertised to the observer – a key incentive for each soldier to achieve his personal best.

Both the earliest available evidence for the public rewarding of honorific marks of status and for the collection and ritual use of head trophies dates to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II; but is this at all meaningful? Ashurnasirpal who moved the royal residence from Assur to Kalhu, a city where he built extensively, left far more textual and material sources behind than his predecessors, including his father and grandfather who set the Assyrian conquest in the West in motion and the gains of whose military successes provided the core financing for his building activities. While the collection of head trophies is seemingly novel in the Assyrian sources, we should perhaps hesitate to present this as a innovation in the military tactics of the ninth century BC, as the practice of severing a defeated enemy's head is attested at various times in various parts of the Ancient Near East,<sup>36</sup> including eleventh-century Assyria (Grayson 1991, 14: i 81–2; 24: vi 5–6). But it is notable that stone reliefs from Carchemish and Til-Barsip, Assyria's immediate neighbours and rivals in the west, dating to the early first millennium BC (Dolce 2004, 127–8 fig. 8–9), provide close parallels for the Assyrian depictions of the eighth and seventh centuries of warriors carrying head trophies. After Ashurnasirpal II, the Assyrian preoccupation with the decapitation of enemies continues under Shalmaneser III, as we have seen, yet it is only in the mid-eighth century BC that the motif of the formal presentation of the severed heads by the soldiers to their superiors or the king is found in Assyrian art; the earliest known depictions date to the reign of Tiglathpileser III.<sup>37</sup>

Regina Janes (2005, 16–8), in her stimulating study of beheading as human cultural practice, stresses the difference between the trophy head – 'a social sign of individual martial prowess' (Janes 2005, 15) – and a 'presentation head' which is passed on by its taker and marks the power of the person to whom it is presented, rather than that of its taker. While she does not take Assyrian practice into account,<sup>38</sup> her analysis 'that the head fulfills the sovereign's responsibility for order and peace to the people, and it belongs to them as much as to him' (Janes 2005, 18), fits the Assyrian cultural context very well. We can certainly assume that the ceremony in which the soldiers presented the heads encompassed also the official award of honours to the warriors in question, along the lines discussed earlier. The chance of a personal encounter with the king<sup>39</sup> in itself as a consequence of distinguishing oneself in battle was surely a key motivation fuelling the competitiveness of Assyrian soldiers. It is only in the reliefs of

Sennacherib and later Ashurbanipal that we find the presentation of head trophies portrayed as a bureaucratic act, with scribes taking notes and processing both the soldiers and their severed heads rather than the king or high officers accepting them from the warriors in a formalised ceremonial setting. The decoration of distinguished warriors with awards directly after battle, without the king's presence, indicates the ongoing process of professionalisation of the Assyrian army and warfare; the soldiers in question come in all sorts of military dress, representing the many different constituent parts of the Assyrian army.

Yet this new format of the recording and recognition of the soldiers' achievements also suggests that there is a shift in distance between the king and his soldiers: while Tiglathpileser III and Sargon II were proud to lead the troops personally into battle, this behaviour is increasingly rare for Sennacherib and his successors. Ashurbanipal in particular was never active on the battlefield and usually stayed behind in his palace at Nineveh. It is probably not a coincidence that during this king's rule members of his personal entourage stood a better chance of being selected for the role of *limmu*, the person whose name designated the new year, than did the top cadre of military officers, men who ran provinces and the troops that went with them and for whom (along with the king) this prestigious role had hitherto been reserved exclusively. But under Ashurbanipal and his successors, those closest to the king, the Palace Overseer, the Palace Scribe, the Music Master and the Chief Cook, found themselves elevated to what was for one year the most conspicuous role in Assyrian society<sup>40</sup> – a clear indication, in my view, that towards the end of the Assyrian Empire the army commanders saw themselves eclipsed by the king's courtiers in the competition for royal favour.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the dating, on the basis of fr. 48.10–11 *L-P*, see Quinn 1961 and Niemeier 2001, 18.

<sup>2</sup> For the popular appeal of wrestling in the Ancient Near East see Sjöberg 1985; for combat sports in Hittite Anatolia see Gilan 2001.

<sup>3</sup> A sense of group identity is promoted prominently by the distinct styles of dress identifying different army contingents, see Postgate 2001, 373, and Deszö 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Akkadian is the modern umbrella term for the Assyrian and Babylonian languages/ dialects.

<sup>5</sup> Luukko & Van Buylaere 2002, no. 34: 5–7: *at-ta-ab-[rid] e-ta-pa-áš mu-uk šu-mi ina pa-an [EN]-ia lu-u de-e-iq.*

<sup>6</sup> Zimmern 1901, 112: no. 11 rev. iii 15–16: NAM.BÚR.BI *ta-na-at-ti ba-ru-ti a-ma-ru u šu-ma ra-ba-a le-qu-u.*

<sup>7</sup> Beckman 1999, 149–50 for a translation of the letter KUB 23 103.

<sup>8</sup> Thureau-Dangin 1912, line 132–3: *it-ti GIŠ.GIGIR GÌR.2-ia e-de-ni-ti ù ANŠE.KUR.RA.MEŠ a-li-ku-ti i-di-ia ša a-šar nak-ri ù sa-al-mi la ip-pa-rak-ku-ú ki-tul-lum pe-er-ra* m30–PAB–PAB <sup>133</sup> *ki-i GIŠ.sil-ta-be ex-xi i-na ŠÀ-bi-šu am-quit-ma.*

<sup>9</sup> Saggs 2001: 136–7, pl. 27: ND 2673: lines 4–10: <sup>1</sup>*ki-ma pa<sup>1</sup>-ni-ú LUGAL EN a-na KUR.URI* <sup>5</sup> *e-li Aš-šur* <sup>d</sup>UTU <sup>1</sup>URU <sup>1</sup>.*tu-ru-uš-pa-a* <sup>6</sup> *ina ŠU.2 LUGAL EN-ia* <sup>1</sup>*i<sup>1</sup>-sa<sup>1</sup> ak<sup>1</sup>-nu-ma* <sup>7</sup> LUGAL EN KASKAL-<sup>šú</sup> *a-na KUR.URI liš-kun* <sup>8</sup> URU <sup>1</sup>.*tu-ru-uš-pa-a li-ik-šu-du* <sup>9</sup> LUGAL EN *šun* <sup>10</sup> *liš-k[un]*. For this reading see Radner 2005, 95.

<sup>10</sup> In Rollinger's original German, 'ein geradezu agonal zu bezeichnendes Verhalten'.

<sup>11</sup> *ša ina tāhāzi dēku tāmur ātamar abūšu u ummašu rēssu našū u aššassu ina muhhišu* [iba]kē[ā]š[šū] (George 2003, 734–5).

<sup>12</sup> This fragmentary passage is known from two Neo-Assyrian manuscripts from Nineveh (K 8565+9997) and Sultantepe (S.U. 51/7) which, however, do not allow us to reconstruct the complete text; see George 2003, 652–3 for these lines.

<sup>13</sup> VAT 10585b, lines 4<sup>2</sup>-5<sup>2</sup>: *šum-ma am-da-qu-ut šu-ma* [u uš-xi-iz] <sup>5</sup> [<sup>d</sup>GIŠ.TUK *it-ti*] <sup>11</sup> *tu-be-be da-pi-ni* GIŠ.LÁ *iš-ke[um]* (George 2003, 356–7, for the Old Babylonian parallel of this passage see George 2003, 200–201: YBC 2178 iv 148–9).

<sup>14</sup> de Vaan 1995, 265–9: K 680 rev. 4–5: *ki-i ni-mut-tu i-na* <sup>5</sup> MU *bab-ba-ni-i ni-mut.*

<sup>15</sup> E.g. the Itueans who are used as crack troops during the reign of Tiglathpileser III, see Postgate 2000, 101.

<sup>16</sup> This scene and the inscription are engraved on slab 2 of the decoration of room XXXIII in the Southwest Palace of Nineveh, now in the British Museum, WA 124801b; see Russell 1999, 175 fig. 58 (detail photo), 172 (inscription) and Radner 2005, 92–3.

<sup>17</sup> The fate of Teumman and Tammaritu in the battle of Til-Tuba is charted by Watanabe 2004, 107–14.

<sup>18</sup> BM 80328: 33–43: *ù AGA.UŠ ša i-na da-an-na-at be-li-šu im-qú-tu* <sup>34</sup> DUMU.MEŠ LUGAL <sup>35</sup> DUMU.MÍ.MEŠ LUGAL <sup>36</sup> *a-wi-lu-tum ka-li-š-in* <sup>37</sup> *iš-tu* <sup>d</sup>UTU.È.A *a-du* <sup>d</sup>UTU.ŠÚ.A <sup>38</sup> *ša pa-qi-dam ù sa-ḫi-ra-am la i-šun-ú* <sup>39</sup> *al-ka-nim-ma an-ni-a-am a-ak-la* <sup>40</sup> *an-ni-a-am ši-ti-a* <sup>41</sup> *a-na Am-mi-ša-du-qá* DUMU *Am-mi-dī-ta-na* <sup>42</sup> LUGAL KÁ.DINGIR.RA.KI <sup>43</sup> *ku-ur-ba*; discussed by Finkelstein 1966, 95–7, Tsukimoto 1985, 68–9, and Radner 2005, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Kataja and Whiting 1995, no. 25 rev. 19–31 and no. 26 rev. 19–31; discussed by Ambos 2005, 140–1.

<sup>20</sup> Kataja and Whiting 1995, no. 35 lines 25–rev. 1 and no. 36 lines 17–9.

<sup>21</sup> The earliest attestation is in an inscription of Tiglathpileser I (r. 1114–1076 BC): Grayson 1990, 14: i 81–2. For a collection of references see *CAD A/2* (= vol. 1, part II, 1968), 333 *s.v. as tu 2* (pile of human heads), *CAD D* (vol. 3, 1959), 144 *s.v. dimtu 1a1'* (tower of heads), *CAD N/1* (= vol. 11, part I, 1980), 178 *s.v. nakāsu 6a* (to cut off heads), *CAD N/2* (= vol. 11, part II, 1980), 232 *s.v. niksū 3d* (severed head) and *CAD R* (= vol. 14, 1999), 186 *s.v. rašāpu 1b* (to heap up piles of skulls).

<sup>22</sup> References to some of the relevant material can be found in Bonatz 2004, 93 and Dolce 2004, 121–4 (both unaware of the Shalmaneser III material, see below); there is at present no complete or systematic study.

<sup>23</sup> In one of the reliefs from Ashurnasirpal II's throne room (room B) in the Northwest Palace of Kalhu (slab 6; British Museum, WA 124550): two soldiers rhythmically swing two head trophies each in the company of some musicians while five other soldiers juggle or play catch with head trophies: Budge 1914, pl. XVI, Gadd 1936, 135–6, and in one of Sennacherib's reliefs from room XIII (J) of the Southwest Palace in Nineveh (slab 14; British Museum, WA 124786b): Barnett, Bleibtreu & Turner 1998, vol. II pl. 174–5 no. 244 (s14): four soldiers swing two head trophies each in synchronised movements while the upper register shows two soldiers delivering heads to the pair of scribes.

<sup>24</sup> Best attested in the case of the head of the Elamite king Teumman, see Bonatz 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Schachner 2007, pl. 2: IIa.16–17, 29–30, 34–35; pl. 3: IIIb.6–11; pl. 7: VIIa.6–7, 25–26, 38–39, 40–41, 58–59, 61–62; pl. 9: IXa.1–2; pl. 10: Xb.14–15.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Roman view (Voisin 1984, 259), it takes a hero to deliver a single blow capable of severing head from body.

<sup>27</sup> Schachner 2007, pl. 2: IIa.51; pl. 8: VIIIb.25; pl. 10: Xb.19; pl. 13: XIIIa.55.

<sup>28</sup> Schachner 2007, pl. 16: Pa.9, 25–26.

<sup>29</sup> Schachner 2007, pl. 4: IVb.8. Note that Schachner 2007, 155 does not consider this to be a real human head but interprets it as a decorative element.

<sup>30</sup> British Museum, WA 124955 = slab 9 of room XXVIII (FF) in the Southwest Palace of Nineveh; for photos and the excavators' line drawings of the entire scene see Barnett, Bleibtreu & Turner 1998, vol. II pl. 233, 252–4, 256 no. 346 (s9).

<sup>31</sup> British Museum, WA 124801a = slab 1 of room XXXIII in the Southwest Palace of Nineveh; for a colour photograph of the entire scene see Curtis & Reade 1995, 74–5.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed photo and the excavators' line drawing see Barnett, Bleibtreu & Turner 1998, vol. II pl. 252–4 no. 346 (s9).

<sup>33</sup> Add to the references discussed by Postgate 1994 an attestation from the time of Ashurnasirpal II: Kataja and Whiting 1995, no. 83: line 22': GĪR ḤAR KÛ.GI *i-na-āš-šī* EN.NUN *šū* MAN EN-*šū i-na-sar* 'He shall carry a dagger and a bracelet of gold and keep the watch of the king, his lord.'

<sup>34</sup> The connection of the awarding of such standardized prizes, especially jewellery, with the development of coinage is explored in Radner 2002b, 51–3.

<sup>35</sup> Postgate 1994 and Postgate 2000 provide a well illustrated overview over key jewellery and garments; for decorated swords see Hrouda 1965, pl. 21–2.

<sup>36</sup> For depictions of soldiers carrying head trophies from mid-third-millennium BC Ebla, see Dolce 2004, 125–6 fig. 6–7; for the decapitation of defeated enemies according to the eighteenth-century palace correspondence of Mari see Charpin 1994.

<sup>37</sup> One scene of the stone decoration of Tiglathpileser's Central Palace at Kalhu (which was later dismantled and therefore not found *in situ*) shows two soldiers presenting two head trophies each to a eunuch officer (Barnett & Falkner 1962, pl. XLVIII–XLIX, with Tadmor 1994, fig. 11) while another depicts a soldier, carrying two head trophies and leading a shackled captive by the ear, being led in front of the seated king (Barnett and Falkner 1962, pl. LIX; reproduced by Dolce 2004, 123 fig. 3); whether the soldier presenting head trophies in a third scene is approaching the king or only a senior official must remain unclear due to the fragmentary state of preservation (Barnett and Falkner 1962, pl. LXXVIII). A scene from the multi-coloured wall paintings of the provincial palace at Til-Barsip in Syria shows a soldier presenting to the king several head trophies (exact number unclear due to fragmentary state of preservation) and a captive, whom he drags forward by pulling his beard (Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936, pl. LII; reproduced in black and white by Dolce 2004, 128 fig. 10). A similar scene, albeit badly preserved, is known from the stone decoration of the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, showing head trophies being brought before the king in his chariot (room 2, slab 2–3, lower register: Albenda 1986, pl. 111).

<sup>38</sup> She is aware only of the depictions of severed heads in Ashurbanipal's reliefs, citing earlier evidence only, albeit with an illustration (fig. 1.1), when making the point that 'beheading is among the most ancient, widespread, and enduring of human cultural practices' (Janes 2005, 10), and when contextualising Israelite practice (Janes 2005, 144–5).

<sup>39</sup> The depictions of these encounters in the palace decoration indicate the formal context of an audience with the king, but we should also consider the possible participation of war heroes in a royal banquet, a traditional setting for the king honouring those that have distinguished themselves. The wall reliefs of room 2 of Sargon's palace at Khorsabad emphasise the connection between bravery on the battle-ground and drinking wine with the king, by placing the depiction of the officers at a royal banquet in the register above the representation of the campaign into the Zagros mountains, one of Sargon's toughest military operations (Albenda 1986, pl. 109–30). The material of the drinking kit allotted to the individual participants in such banquets reflected their status and was theirs to keep (Radner 1999–2001, 21–2).

<sup>40</sup> Millard 1994, 87 (Palace Overseer Bel-ahu-uşur), 92 (Music Master Bulluţu), 107–9 (Palace Scribe Nabû-şarru-uşur), 113 (Chief Cook Sailu), 114 (Palace Overseer Sin-alik-pani), 115 (Palace Scribe Sin-şarru-uşur).

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