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Andrzej Reiche (1951–2022)

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A Cuneiform Forgery. A Miniature Obelisk with Assyrian Inscription in the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw

Foreword

Museum curators and collectors alike approach archaeological artefacts coming from the antiquities market with distrust. The lack of reliable information about the places and circumstances of their discovery, not to mention the specific archaeological contexts, raises questions about the authenticity of objects put up for sale by antiquities dealers and collectors. In principle, such artefacts require not only meticulous comparative analysis but also thorough investigation into the circumstances under which they could have been created as well as into their recent history.[1] In this paper, we subject to such scrutiny a miniature terracotta obelisk inscribed with cuneiform script. In the 1980s, the obelisk was acquired by the National Museum in Warsaw for the Collection of Ancient Art from a private collection; it was given the inventory number 200995 MNW (**fig. 1**).[2]

A Description of the Object

The form of this miniature artefact resembles the monumental stone obelisks that developed in Ancient Egyptian art. It was fashioned by hand from well purified fine-grain clay without visible inclusions and then fired. Its rectangular base measures 3.7 × 4.2 cm and its current

[1] On the forgery of Ancient Near Eastern artefacts, see, e.g., Oscar White Muscarella, *The Lie Became Great. The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures* (Groningen, 2000), p. 176. Studies in the Art and Archaeology of Antiquity, vol. 1; Cecile Michel, "Cuneiform Fakes: A Long History from Antiquity to Present Day," in *Fakes and Forgeries of Written Artefacts from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern China*, Cecile Michel, Michael Friedrich, eds (Berlin–Boston, 2000), pp. 25–60. Studies in Manuscript Cultures, vol. 20.

[2] *Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej. Egipt, Bliski Wschód. Przewodnik*, Witold Dobrowolski, ed., The National Museum in Warsaw (Warsaw, 2007), p. 141, cat. no. II.22 (Antoni Mierzejewski); Andrzej Reiche, "Die altvorderasiatischen Denkmäler in den Museen in Polen. Die Geschichte und der Bestand," in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident*, Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Margarete van Ess, Joachim Marzahn, eds (Berlin, 2011), p. 337, fig. 31. Topoi. Berlin Studies of the Ancient World, vol. 1.

height is 13.2 cm. It was originally crowned with a low pyramidion. Although fragments of only three sides of the pyramidion remain today, their angle allows us to ascertain that the pyramidion was about 1.1 cm in height and, thus, that the obelisk's original total height was approximately 13.8 cm. Located centrally in the base is a borehole 1 cm in diameter and 12 cm deep, which had a technological function.

Two of the obelisk's sides (I and II) are inscribed with 15 lines of cuneiform characters each, while the remaining two sides (III and IV) have 16 lines each. The number of characters per line varies from two to five. Incised in the upper section of side I, and faintly visible also on side III, are two fine parallel lines separating the first line of script from the base of the pyramidion capping the obelisk. No traces of such lines are visible on sides II and III.

The obelisk is poorly preserved. The top is partly chipped and visible on each of the sides are cracks and material losses of various size, which have been partially filled in with light-pinkish putty. A large cavity in the upper section of side IV, not filled with putty, likely appeared later than the smaller losses. Also visible, especially on side I, are numerous dark-brown and black spots, including fragments of black slag from melted clay. On the other three sides, such signs of overfiring are less prominent. We can also observe a pronounced deformation in the form of a curve in the obelisk's vertical axis. The majority of these imperfections are likely the result of excessive temperature in the firing of the obelisk.

The Object's Acquisition

The National Museum purchased the obelisk in 1987 from Wiktor Otton Kościałkowski (1901–87).[3] According to oral information provided by Mr. Kościałkowski, the artefact had previously belonged to Prof. Stanisław Kościałkowski, who reportedly had it with him during his wartime peregrinations through the Soviet Union and later in the Middle East (**fig. 2 a–b**).

Professor Stanisław Kościałkowski (1881–1960) was a historian and the head of the Polish History Department in the History Faculty of Stefan Batory University in Vilnius. His area of expertise was the period of King Stanisław August's reign.[4] In June 1941, he was arrested by the NKVD in the building of the Society of Friends of Science in Vilnius, where he worked as a curator from October 1939. Sent to a labour camp in central Ural, he was released in January 1942. In the same year he joined Anders' Army and, as its member, was evacuated to Teheran. There, he was involved in the founding of the Iranian Studies Society (ISS) and the Polish-Iranian Folk University, which he also headed.[5] Among the Society's activities was the organisation of research trips, during which participants collected cultural objects for

[3] Wiktor O. Kościałkowski hailed from the Zyndram-Kościałkowski family and was not closely related to Professor Stanisław Kościałkowski. The name and his degree of relation to the object's previous owner are incorrect in Andrzej Reiche, "Die altvorderasiatischen...," op. cit., p. 337.

[4] Leonid Żytkowicz, "Kościałkowski Stanisław," in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 14, book 62, Emanuel Roztworowski, ed. (Wrocław–Warsaw–Krakow, 1969), pp. 394–96.

[5] Studies on Professor Stanisław Kościałkowski's organisational and scholarly activity in the Middle East include: Oskar S. Czarnik, "Stanisław Kościałkowski jako współorganizator polskiej działalności naukowej na Wschodzie w latach 1941–1949," *Przegląd Polsko-Polonijny*, no. 5–6 (2013), pp. 427–38; Mirosław A. Supruniuk, "Nauka polska na Bliskim i Środkowym Wschodzie w latach 1942–1949. Część I. Persja," *Opuscula Musealia*, 22 (2014), pp. 45–71; id., "Naukowa i polityczna działalność Stanisława Kościałkowskiego na Środkowym i Bliskim Wschodzie w latach 1942–1949," in *Stanisław Kościałkowski pamięci przywrócony*, Małgorzata Dąbrowska, ed. (Warsaw–Łódź, 2016), pp. 193–214.

future museums in Poland.[6] Professor Kościałkowski's passion were Eastern rugs and carpets, though he also collected Persian faience and old metallurgic wares.[7] For political reasons, in 1945 the ISS was relocated to Beirut, where it continued its operations as the Polish Institute of Near East Studies, with Prof. Kościałkowski co-heading its Oriental Section. Further political turbulence forced him to move to central England in 1950, where he would remain for the rest of his life, teaching Polish language, literature and history to students of higher classes in the middle school run by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Pitsford outside of Northampton.

Given Professor Kościałkowski's wartime history, it seems unlikely that he was in possession of the obelisk prior to his arrest in Vilnius. The fact that such an artefact was outside of his area of interest at the time notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine how he could have kept his hands on the object throughout his detainment by the Soviets and his later exile to the labour camp. Only in the course of the activities in which he engaged at the time of his stay in Teheran, and then in Beirut, could he have developed an interest in an object like this miniature obelisk with a cuneiform inscription.

Unfortunately, nowhere in Prof. Kościałkowski's published memoirs, biographical studies of his life or his surviving correspondence do we find any mention of the artefact.[8] Thus, we may only rely on guesswork. With a fair dose of confidence, we may presume that Prof. Kościałkowski bought the obelisk or received it as a gift in either Teheran or Beirut, which could also explain the obelisk's purported connection to the Professor's wartime life. We also know nothing about when or under what circumstances the artefact came into the possession of Wiktor O. Kościałkowski.

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The Inscription

Covering the obelisk's sides is a cuneiform inscription in Neo-Assyrian script (10^{th} – 7^{th} c. BC). The text is known: it appears on royal lion hunt reliefs discovered at the ruins of the North Palace unearthed at Nineveh. Epigraphs on some of these reliefs identify the hunting monarch as Ashurbanipal, the ruler under whom the Assyrian Empire rose to its greatest heights. Assyria, which during the reign of this great monarch stretched from Egypt in the west to Elam in the east, fell less than two decades after Ashurbanipal's death, its capital of Nineveh captured and razed to the ground in 612 BC. The ruins of the North Palace remained buried until 1853 excavations led by Hormuzd Rassam and William Kennett Loftus, agents of the British Museum.[9] Most of the royal lion hunt reliefs were taken to the British Museum in 1856, where today they are a highlight of the Assyrian gallery. One of the reliefs made its way to the Louvre.[10]

[6] Supruniuk, "Nauka polska...," op. cit., p. 66, n. 133.

[7] "Most of the acquired artefacts later made their way to the Polish Military Museum in Teheran, from where they were taken to Jerusalem in May 1945, and incorporated into Field Archive and Museum No. 2," Jerzy Hauziński, "Orientalne pasje Stanisława Kościałkowskiego," in *Stanisław Kościałkowski...*, op. cit., p. 219.

[8] I thank Dr. Hab. Mirosław A. Supruniuk for his consultation on this matter.

[9] Richard David Barnett, *Sculptures from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (668–627 B.C.)* (London, 1976), pp. 9–20.

[10] Ariane Thomas, "The Material Culture of Nineveh in France," in *Nineveh the Great City, Symbol of Beauty and Power*, Lucas P. Petit, Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, eds (Leiden, 2017), pp. 287–92. See also Barnett, *Sculptures...*, op. cit., p. 19.

Like many of Ashurbanipal's inscriptions, the epigraphs on the royal lion hunt reliefs begin with the words *anāku Aššur-bāni-apli* – "I [am] Ashurbanipal." On the obelisk bearing the inventory number 200995 MNW, we find three of the five known epigraphs belonging to this group (fig. 3 a–d).

Transliteration

I	II	III	IV
1. *a-na-* 2. *ku* ^{m}AN. 3. ŠÁR-DÙ-A 4. MAN ŠÚ MAN KUR 5. ˹AN˺.ŠÁR^{ki} 6. [*šá*] AN.ŠÁR ^{d} 7. [N]IN.LÍL *e-* 8. *mu-qú ṣi-* 9. *r*[*a*]*-a-ti* 10. *ú-š*[*at-l*]*i-* 11. *mu-uš* UR. 12. MAH.MEŠ *šá* 13. *ad-du-ku* ^{giš} 14. *til-pa-a-nu ez-* 15. *ze-tú šá* ^{d}	1. XV *be-* 2. *let* MÈ 3. UGU-*šú-* 4. *un az-* 5. *qu-up* 6. *muh-hu-ru* 7. *e-li-šú-* 8. *nu ú-ma-* 9. *hir* GEŠTIN 10. *aq-*˹*qa*˺*-a* 11. *e-*˹*li*˺*-šú-* 12. *un* 13. *a-na-*˹*ku*˺ 14. ^{m}AN.ŠÁR-DÙ- 15. A MAN ŠÚ MAN KUR AN.	1. ŠÁR^{ki} *ina* 2. *mul-ta-* 3. *'u-ti-* 4. *ia ina* GÌR^{ii}- 5. *ia* UR. 6. MAH *ez-zu* 7. *šá* EDIN-˹*šú*˺ 8. *ina* GEŠTU^{ii}-*šú* 9. *aṣ-bat-*<*ma*> *ina* TUKUL- 10. *ti* AN.ŠÁR 11. *ù* ^{d}*iš-* 12. *tar be-let ta*^{l}(t:ga)*-ha-* 13. *zi ina* ^{giš}*az-* 14. *mar-e ša* 15. ŠU^{ii}-*ia* 16. *as-hul zu*^{l}*-mur-šú*	1. *a-na-* 2. *ku* ^{m}[AN]. 3. ŠÁR-[DÙ-A] 4. LU[GAL ŠÚ LUGAL] 5. KUR AN.ŠÁR 6. ^{ki} *ina me-lul*^{l} (t:gal)- 7. ˹*ti* NUN˺- 8. *ti-*[*ia*] UR. 9. MAH *šá* EDIN-*šú* 10. *ina* KUN-*šú* 11. *aṣ-*˹*bat*˺*-ma* 12. *ina qí-bit* ^{d} 13. NIN.URTA ^{d} 14. ˹U˺.GUR DINGIR.MEŠ 15. *ti-ik-li-* 16. *ia*^{l}(t:ṣe) *ina* ^{giš}*hu-*

Transcription and Translation

The transcription and translation below divide the inscription into three parts corresponding to the epigraphs of the North Palace reliefs. The last passage breaks off in mid-word; we restore the missing fragment in angle brackets.

A. Obelisk inscription (inv. no. 200995 MNW), I.1–II.12 = epigraph on slab D at the British Museum (inv. no. BM 124886), lower panel, the scene "Ashurbanipal pours a libation after the lion hunt"[11]

anāku Aššur-bāni-apli šar kiššati šar māt Aššur [*ša*] *Aššur Mulissu emūqū ṣirâti uš*[*at*]*limūš nēšē ša adduku tilpānu ezzetu ša Ištar bēlet tāhāzi elišun azqup muhhuru elišunu umahhir karāna aqqâ elišun*

[11] Barnett, *Sculptures...*, op. cit., pl. 57 and 59; Jamie Novotny, Joshua Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC), Aššur-etel-ilāni (630–627 BC), and Sîn-šarra-iškun (626–612 BC), Kings of Assyria*, part 1 (University Park: Pennsylvania, 2018), pp. 348–49. The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, 5/1. See also <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-51>, [retrieved: 2 June 2021].

"I, Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, to whom (the god) Aššur (and) the goddess Mullissu have granted outstanding strength, set up the fierce bow of the goddess Ištar – the lady of battle – over the lions that I had killed. I made an offering over them (and) poured (a libation of) wine over them."[12]

B. Obelisk inscription (inv. no. 200995 MNW), II.13–III.16 = epigraph on slab C at the Louvre (inv. no. AO 19903), centre panel, the scene "Ashurbanipal spears a lion"[13]

anāku Aššur-bāni-apli šar kiššati šar māt Aššur ina multa'ûtiya ina šēpēya nēšu ezzu ša ṣērišu ina uznīšu aṣbat<ma> ina tukulti Aššur u Ištar bēlet tāhāzi ina azmarê ša qātīya ashul zumuršu

"I, Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, while enjoying myself on foot, seized a fierce lion that was born in the steppe (lit. "of its plain") by its ear and, with the support of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Ištar – the lady of battle – pierced its body with the lance that was in my hand."[14]

C. Obelisk inscription (inv. no. 200995 MNW), IV.1–16 = epigraph on slab D at the British Museum (inv. no. BM 124886), centre panel, the scene "Ashurbanipal seizes a lion by the tail"[15]

anāku [Aš]šur-[bāni-apli] ša[r kiššati šar] māt Aššur ina mēlulti rubûti[ya] nēšu ša ṣērišu ina zibbatišu aṣbatma ina qibīt Ninurta Nergal ilāni tikliya ina hu<utpalê ša qātīya muhhašu inatti[16]>

"I, Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, while (carrying out) my princely sport, seized a lion that was born in the steppe (lit. "of its plain") by its tail, and through the command of the gods Ninurta (and) Nergal, the gods who support me, <shattered its skull> with the ma<ce that was in my hand>."[17]

Commentary

Assyrian scribes often placed inscriptions of the same or very similar content on several text vehicles.[18] The text of some of the epigraphs from Ashurbanipal's reliefs, albeit from other series than the one depicting the lion hunt, has been found on tablets as well.[19] Moreover,

[12] Translation by Novotny, Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., p. 349.

[13] Barnett, *Sculptures...*, op. cit., pl. 57 and 58; Novotny, Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., pp. 346–47. See also <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010123113>, [retrieved: 2 June 2021].

[14] Translation by J. Novotny, J. Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., p. 347.

[15] Barnett, *Sculptures...*, op. cit., pl. 57 and 59; Novotny, Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., pp. 347–48. See also <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-51>, [retrieved: 2 June 2021].

[16] Or *ulatti*, after: Novotny, Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., p. 348.

[17] Translation by Novotny, Jeffers, ibid.

[18] See Novotny, Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal...*, op. cit., passim.

[19] Ernst Friedrich Weidner, "Assyrische Beschreibungen der Kriegs-Reliefs Aššurbânaplis," *Archiv für Orientforschung*, no. 8 (1932–1933), pp. 175–203; Pamela Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs: The

apprentice scribes copied royal inscriptions in schools. Hence, the fact that passages known from epigraphs in the North Palace appear on the NMW obelisk does not in and of itself undermine its authenticity.

What is surprising, however, is the layout of the inscriptions. First, the last passage breaks off in mid-word. Second, the scribe split many words between two lines, a practice that is extremely rarely seen in cuneiform texts. He furthermore separated the divine predeterminative DINGIR (^{d}) from several divine names and the geographic postdeterminative KI (^{ki}) from the toponyms. Even if we allow that it was difficult for the copyist to fit entire words on the obelisk's narrow sides, it is unclear why he did not employ solutions that other experienced Assyrian scribes relied on in similar circumstances. For example, he could have used more compact signs (e.g., U [𒌑] instead of Ù [𒌑𒆠] or ŠÁ [𒋗] instead of ŠA [𒊭]), or the shorter forms of divine names (e.g. ^{d}XV in place of ^{d}*Iš-tar*).

Paleographic analysis raises further questions and doubts. Several wedges (e.g., the last horizontal wedges in MAR in III.14 and ME in IV.6) are devoid of the "heads" that typically occurred when scribes pressed the stylus into the clay. Such simplified shapes are occasionally found in inscriptions on stone surfaces, in which the engravers recreated the "heads" artificially, but they should not appear on a clay text vehicle. Additionally, the shape of certain signs is incorrect. The sign TAR (III.12) is so slanted that it resembles the sign KUR. In TA (III.12), the scribe left out the last vertical wedge, and in LUL (IV.6) – the horizontal wedge at the end. A correct sign IA ends in two vertical wedges, one on top of the other, and not in a single vertical one as we see in IV.16. Strikingly awkward are also EDIN in IV.9 and QÍ in IV.12.

The irregularities described above breed a suspicion that the text on the obelisk is a copy and that the source of the copyist's inspiration was an inscription carved in stone. If the copy had been made in antiquity, the copyist, a person using Assyrian script signs on a day-to-day basis, would not have made this many paleographic errors. Thus, the text was likely copied in modern times. The forgery could not have been done before 1853, when the first royal hunt reliefs were unearthed in Nineveh, nor later than 1960, when the obelisk's first known owner, Stanisław Kościałkowski, passed away. It seems doubtful that the inscription was copied directly from the reliefs during the excavation work or immediately afterwards. In the 1850s, knowledge of cuneiform writing was highly uncommon, with few people being capable of creating a copy of such high quality.[20] Moreover, to produce such a fake in the vicinity of Nineveh in the mid-19th century would likely have been more challenging than finding an original artefact. We also ought to rule out the possibility that the copyist reproduced the text directly from the reliefs at a later point in time, as by the year 1854, the reliefs had been removed from Mosul and shipped off to the two museums, in London and Paris.[21] Thus, the author of the inscription on the obelisk must have relied on a hand copy.

Development of Epigraphic Text," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, no. 40 (1988), pp. 18–21; John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall. Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1999), pp. 157–66, 191–99. Mesopotamian Civilizations, 9.

[20] The forgery of cuneiform texts had become a lucrative business in the Middle East and Europe by the 1880s, see Erle Leichty, "A Remarkable Forger," *Expedition Magazine*, no. 13 (1970), pp. 17–21; Cécile Michel, "Cuneiform Fakes..."; though many of the earlier forgeries were casts. See also Ignacio Márquez-Rowe, Manuel Molina, "Cuneiform Forgeries in the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat (Barcelona)," in *tibnim mû illakū. Studies Presented to Jaquín Sanmartín on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Gregorio del Olmo Lete, Lluís Feliu, Adelina Millet Albà, eds (Barcelona, 2006), pp. 289–90. Aula Orientalis-Supplementa, 22.

[21] Barnett, *Sculptures...*, op. cit., p. 10, pl. 57–59. After many years, Richard David Barnett reconstructed the original sequence of the hunting scenes by putting together photographs of the relief from the British Museum

There is much to indicate that the copyist's source of inspiration was a plate from Sir Henry Creswick Rawlinson's monumental work *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, or more precisely, its first volume published in London in 1861, titled *A Selection of Historical Inscriptions of Chaldea, Assyria & Babylonia*. Rawlinson, an agent of the East India Company, British diplomat and politician, spent almost thirty years in the Middle East, during which he collected and copied ancient inscriptions. He made a tremendous contribution to the deciphering of cuneiform script and the Akkadian language. In the 1850s and 1860s, he was one of the few people in the world who could read and understand cuneiform. Rawlinson had the opportunity to see the North Palace reliefs in situ, having visited Rassam's excavation site as early as February 1854 to personally oversee the selection and dispatch of the findings to the British Museum.[22]

On plate VII of Rawlinson's magnum opus, drawings of our three epigraphs occur side by side (**fig. 4**). Moreover, they are in the same order as they appear on the obelisk (A–B–C, while the order of the reliefs in room S_1 of the North Palace is B–C–A).[23] Here too some of the wedges are without "heads," which unlike in the obelisk is unsurprising, since Rawlinson's autography was to convey the shape of wedges carved in stone. The form of several signs on the obelisk is distinctly closer to Rawlinson's copy than to the originals in the reliefs. Rawlinson copied the TAR in the name ^{d}*Iš-tar* (epigraph B) imprecisely but the copyist of the obelisk inscription went a step further, altering the wedges to such a degree that the sign looks more like a KUR than a TAR (III.12). In the ZU of the word *zu-mur* (epigraph B), Rawlinson copied the lower horizontal wedge at a sharper angle than in the original, which the copyist interpreted as a *Winkelhaken* (III.16) (**fig. 5**).

Rawlinson made an error in reproducing the inscription accompanying the scene of Ashurbanipal killing a lion with a spear: he left out the last sign in the word *aṣ-bat-ma*, clearly visible on slab AO 19903. This sign is likewise absent on the obelisk (III.9) (**fig. 6**). It cannot be ruled out that the copyist made the same mistake as Rawlinson or used a yet-undiscovered copy of the epigraph in which the sign MA is also missing.[24] Taking into consideration the other irregularities in the text on the obelisk, this, however, seems highly improbable.

It is not hard to guess why the copyist chose precisely the three epigraphs from Rawlinson's publication for the obelisk's inscription. Their length was appropriate – neither too long nor too short – and their text was complete (the copyist judiciously passed on the text of the fourth and fifth inscriptions, which are longer and partially damaged).

The fact that the cuneiform text was taken from a hand copy published in print says something about the obelisk's creator himself. He was no ordinary forger looking for inspiration in popular albums or even in museums. He must have had access to a library or academic institution that had Rawlinson's monumental publication among its holdings. The high quality of the inscription on the obelisk and the few paleographic errors suggest that he may have even known the basics of cuneiform himself.

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and the Louvre. His study was published after the death of Prof. Kościałkowski, when the obelisk was already in existence, and thus could not have been a source of inspiration for the copyist.

[22] Barnett, *Sculptures*..., op. cit., p. 10.

[23] Ibid., pl. 57.

[24] See the discrepancies between the text in the relief epigraphs and their respective passages on the plates. Weidner, *Assyrische Beschreibungen*..., op. cit., passim.

Assyrian Obelisks – Ancient Historical Monuments

The presentation of such a highly specific object from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, currently on display in the newly rearranged Ancient East section of the Gallery of Ancient Art, requires some archaeological commentary. Since the obelisk comes across as Assyrian, it would be fitting to invoke similar artefacts (rarely mentioned in Polish literature on the subject) and, on account of our obelisk's "dubious" nature – to show them as potential sources of inspiration.

Besides numerous small fragments, we know of only (or as many as) four such artefacts. These were made between the 11th and 9th centuries BC, and their imagery and inscriptions document the accomplishments of Assyrian kings. They were erected in public places, in front of palaces and temples (as attested to by the context in which some of the discoveries were made – though none has ever been found standing upright). They were found in Assyrian capitals – Assur (here only fragments), Nimrud (Kalhu) and Nineveh, and, when taking into account the relative abundance of other Assyrian relief works (palatial orthostates, rock reliefs, steles), can be thought of as exclusive objects. All of these artefacts are today on display in the British Museum.

They include the *Broken Obelisk* made of limestone, found in Nineveh in 1853 during excavation work by Hormuzd Rassam.[25] What remains of it today, measuring 63 cm in height, is only the upper part of the original artefact. It is attributed to King Ashur-bel-kala (1073–1056 BC). Its cap is in the form of a two-tiered ziggurat, below which is a rectangular field with a relief showing the ruler receiving tribute from conquered enemies. Visible above this scene are divine emblems (**fig. 7**).

The *White Obelisk* – an artefact much studied and written about with regard to its attribution, dating and interpretation of its content.[26] Proposed have been its attributions to Ashurnasirpal I (1049–1031 BC), Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), and several other rulers.[27] It was discovered in Nineveh in 1853 by Rassam. Also made of limestone, it is the tallest Assyrian obelisk, measuring 2.9 metres. It is also the richest iconographically, containing eight

[25] British Museum, London, inv. no. BM 118897 (limestone, h. 63 cm, base – 64 × 41 cm). I limit my citations to the publication of the discovery and to pointing out the discussion in the still indispensable and today-collective study of Jutta Börker-Klähn, and inscriptions according to A.K. Grayson in the series Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. For the latest discussion on this group of artefacts, with bibliography, see John Malcolm Russell, "Obelisk," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie, Zehnter Band* (Berlin–New York, 2003), pp. 4–6; id., "Assyrian Art," *A Companion to Assyria*, Eckart Frahm, ed. (New York, 2017), pp. 469–71, 475–79; Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, Leonard William King, *Annals of the Kings of Assyria*, vol. 1 (London, 1902), pp. 128–49, pl. LI; Jutta Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs* (Mainz am Rhein, 1982), pp. 179–80, no. 131. Baghdader Forschungen, vol. 4; inscription (in upper section, below ziggurat) – Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium. I (1114–859 BC)*, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian Periods vol. 2* (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 1991), pp. 99–105 (A.0.89.7). On the reconstruction of the scenes, see also John Curtis, "The Broken Obelisk," *Iraq*, 69 (2007), pp. 53–57 [further literature therein].

[26] British Museum, London, inv. no. BM 118807. Hormuzd Rassam, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod* (Cincinnati–New York, 1897), pp. 8–9, illustration on insert between pp. 10 and 11. Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen...*, op. cit., pp. 60–65, 179–180, no. 132. Inscription (on ziggurat and upper section of shaft, one epigraph over sacral scene) – Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium...*, op. cit., pp. 254–56 (A.0.101.18), attributed to Ashurnasirpal II.

[27] Cf., e.g., Julian Edgeworth Reade, "Aššurnaṣirpal I and the White Obelisk," *Iraq*, 37/2 (1975), pp. 129–50; Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen...*, op. cit., p. 179; Eckart Frahm, *Historische und historisch-literarische Texte* (Wiesbaden, 2009), pp. 121–22. Keilschrifttexte aus Assur literarischen Inhalts, 3. Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 121; for further literature, see Russell, "Assyrian Art...," op. cit., p. 471.

friezes – relief bands (16–20 cm in height) with scenes of battles, hunts, life in the royal court and religious ceremonies. It is capped with a replica of a three-tiered ziggurat (**fig. 8**).

The *Rassam Obelisk* (inv. no. BM 118800) – discovered in many fragments in 1853 by Hormuzd Rassam in Kalhu.[28] It was only in the 1970s that its reconstruction was attempted at the British Museum, hence the "late" publication date in 1980; it was also then that Julian Edgeworth Reade gave it the name it commonly goes by today. Attributed to Ashurnasirpal II, it is made of basalt and currently measures 1.6 m in height, and 80 × 60 cm at its base. It contains eight iconographic "fields" measuring 15–15.7 cm on each of their sides, showing imagery radically different from that on the previous artefacts. They depict a procession of gift-bearers ending in a scene showing the Kalhu city wall (the highest panel on the front side), the ruler, and metal ingots given as tribute being weighed. Both the subject and the arrangement of the imagery (the framing on the obelisk's edges) are significantly closer to the later *Black Obelisk*. The proposed reconstruction includes a three-tiered ziggurat on top.

The *Black Obelisk* – discovered in Nimrud (Kalhu) in 1846 by Austen Henry Layard.[29] Made of basalt, it measures 1.98 m in height and 64 × 61 cm at the base. The relief friezes (five on each side) measuring 15 cm in height are enclosed like on the *Rassam Obelisk* and not connected with the reliefs on the adjacent sides. It is attributed to Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC). In addition to one "interjected" landscape and animal scene, it shows the bearing of gifts and a procession of animals presented to the ruler (elephants, camels, monkeys). In the two upper panels on the front (A) side, shown are two kings paying tribute to Shalmaneser III – "Sua from (the kingdom of) Gilzanu" and King Jehu of Israel. The *Black Obelisk*, particularly its relief, is the most frequently cited and reproduced Assyrian obelisk[30] (**fig. 9**).

Obelisk Fragments

In addition to the artefacts described above, the British Museum in London and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin possess numerous obelisk fragments: more than 20 from Nineveh and 256 from Assur.[31] Though they contribute little in terms of iconography, their fragmentary inscriptions are important – indicating the existence of obelisks older than the

[28] Julian Edgeworth Reade, "The Rassam Obelisk," *Iraq*, 42/1 (1980), pp. 1–22, pl. 1–9; Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen...*, op. cit., pp. 183–84, no. 138. Inscription – full publication, with transliteration, in Reade, "The Rassam Obelisk," op. cit., pp. 16–19, Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium. II (858–745 BC)*, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian Periods*, vol. 3 (Toronto–Buffalo–London, 1996), pp. 277–78 (A.0.101.24) [fragment only].

[29] British Museum, London, inv. no. BM 118885. Inscription (in the upper and lower sections of the shaft and on ziggurat – up to the top tier!; and epigraphs on all bands separating the scenes) – Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium...*, op. cit., pp. 62–71 (A.0.102.14), epigraphs – pp. 148–151 (A.0.102.87–91). Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, in two volumes (London, 1849), vol. 1, pp. 345–47; A.H. Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh* (London, 1853), pp. 5–6, pl. 53–56. Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen...*, op. cit., pp. 190–91, no. 152.

[30] It was also used in a context likely not anticipated by the Assyrians – two such obelisks, slightly taller than the original, adorn the courtyard of Priam's palace in the film *Troy* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). This is an obvious anachronism, a dating error, off by at least 300 years. In fact, this is not the only Salmanasar-period work to appear in the film – the monumental gates of Troy, majestically opening on the entrance of Helen and Paris, are a replica of the Balawat Gates.

[31] Julian Edgeworth Reade, "Fragments of Assyrian Monuments," *Iraq*, 43/2 (1981), pp. 145–56; Julia Orlamünde, *Die Obeliskenfragmente aus Assur* (Wiesbaden, 2011). Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 135; see also Russell, "Assyrian Art...," op. cit., pp. 469–71, 475–76.

"broken" obelisk (Ashur-bel-kala, 1073–1056 BC), dated to the earlier Middle-Assyrian period and the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BC).[32]

The Form and Genesis of Assyrian Obelisks

Remaining open to discussion is the issue of the Assyrians' inspirations or their "innovativeness" in creating obelisks. Some scholars point to a possible influence of Egyptian works (here, the oldest precursory forms date back to the Old Kingdom, 6th dynasty),[33] but Mesopotamian precursors (e.g., the *Manishtushu Obelisk* described below, Babylonian kudurrus, other steles and freestanding stone monuments) cannot be ruled out.

Certainly "Mesopotamian" and unattested elsewhere is the motif that caps the Assyrian obelisks: a replica of a two- or three-tiered ziggurat. This alternative to the classic Egyptian pyramidion (if we treat the shaft as in fact being borrowed from Egypt) very distinctly places Assyrian obelisks in the context of Mesopotamian culture and religion.[34] A miniature or model of a ziggurat, a sacral structure, complements a historical account (text) and iconographic record of the accomplishments of Assyrian kings presented on obelisk sides.

In search of other inspirations behind Assyrian works that could be cited as a basis for examples of imitation like the artefact in the NMW collection, we ought to mention the famous Temple of the Obelisks in Byblos. That complex, dated to the Middle Bronze Age (first half of the 2nd millennium BC), contained more than 26 aniconic and uninscribed obelisks of the classical Egyptian form, in various scales, sometimes interpreted as votive.[35] Whether we are dealing here with the geographic "missing link" between Egypt and Mesopotamia is difficult to answer given the current state of research.

Worthy of brief discussion is one other artefact mentioned in this paper, which takes us back to Mesopotamia. The *Manishtushu Obelisk* commemorating the Akkadian dynasty ruler who reigned in 2269–2255 BC was discovered in Susa in 1898 and published two years later.[36] It is on display in the Louvre (inv. no. S^B 20). Made of basalt or diorite, it had "spent" more

[32] Eckart Frahm, "Die Inschriftenreste auf den Obeliskenfragmenten aus Assur," in Orlamünde, *Die Obeliskenfragmente*..., op. cit., pp. 59–75: 71.

[33] See, e.g., Karl Martin, "Obelisk," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, vol. 4 (Wiesbaden, 1982), pp. 542–45. Interestingly, the rather widespread opinion that the term "obelisk" derives from the Greek word for a "spit," being an ironic commentary by Hellenic newcomers unfamiliar with Egyptian life, is not at all true. See also Karl Lang, "Ägyptologische Berichtigungen," *Anthropos*, 60 (1965), pp. 844–48.

[34] On the connections with Egypt, see Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen*..., op. cit., p. 178; Russell, "Obelisk...," op. cit., p. 4; Frahm, "Die Inschriftenreste...," op. cit., p. 73; Mattias Karlsson, *Egypt and the Origin of Assyrian Wall Reliefs* [online], Uppsala University Publications online, 2016, <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A911519&dswid=-4166>, [retrieved: 12 June 2021], pp. 1, 7–8. These statements focus on the later Middle Assyrian period (from Tiglath-Pileser I), not taking into consideration Assyria's earlier, i.e., Amarna-period, direct contact with Egypt – letters from Assyrian kings did, after all, reach Akhetaten. See also Paolo Matthiae, "On the Origin of the Middle Assyrian Obelisks," in *From the Treasures of Syria. Essays on Art and Archaeology in Honour of Stefania Mazzoni*, Paola Ciafardoni, Deborah Giannersi, eds (Leiden, 2015), pp. 131–52 and id., "The Obelisk of Ishtar from Ebla. Kingship and the Great Goddess in the Old Syrian Artistic Culture," *Eblaitica*, no. 7 (2021), pp. 123–58.

[35] Martha Sharp Joukowsky, "Byblos," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, Eric M. Meyers, ed. (New York–Oxford, 1997), p. 392, fig. 2.

[36] The first proposed name for the artefact was *Obélisque de Manichtou-irba*, see Jacques de Morgan, Gustave Jéquier, Georges Lampre, *Recherches archéologiques* (Paris, 1900), fig. pp. 141–43. Mémoires, vol. 1; Vincent Scheil, *Textes élamites-sémitiques* (Paris, 1900), pp. 1–52, pl. 1–10. Mémoires, vol. 2. Here as *Obélisque de Maništu-irba* [transliteration and text translation].

than a thousand years in Mesopotamia until it was plundered and taken to Susa during the Elamite invasion in the mid-12th century BC. Though it could not have been seen by any of the Assyrian obelisk creators, it marks the existence of obelisk tradition in Mesopotamia already at a very early time. On the other hand, its combination of form and inscription places it in relative proximity to the Warsaw object, with the obvious caveat being that the *Manishtushu Obelisk* is 1.44 metres in height, making it ten times taller. Despite its monumental form, its inscription is neither historical nor religious but rather a kind of "notarial deed" recording the ruler's acquisition of eight parcels of land from a number of owners[37] (**fig. 10**).

Since the *Manishtushu Obelisk* fails to meet our criteria in terms of scale, it makes sense to look for an artefact of a more modest size. We find one in the *Black Stone of Esarhaddon* (*Black Stone of Lord Aberdeen*). Purchased around 1820 by the fourth Earl of Aberdeen, it was donated to the British Museum in 1860, where it was given the acquisition number 60-12-1,1 and later the inventory number BM 91027, and published in 1861 in Rawlinson's *Cuneiform Inscriptions* series.[38] The rectangular cuboid object is made of basalt and has a height of 21.6 cm with 9.5 cm sides. Located on the upper surface is a series of peculiar symbols. The lateral surfaces are covered by an inscription describing the rebuilding of Babylon and the Temple of Marduk during the reign of King Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) (**fig. 11**). The text is known from many copies, whereas the decoration of the upper surface, with imagery including a dais with a symbol of a god, the ruler praying, the Assyrian Sacred Tree, a bull, a mountain and more, is not so obvious. This assortment of images has been interpreted in a number of ways, for example, as an allusion to celestial constellations[39] or peculiar hieroglyphs,[40] or even as a combination of the two.[41] We can surely expect to hear more opinions on the matter. For our considerations, however, more important is the fact that the *Black Stone of Esarhaddon* does not have the pyramidal shape typical of an obelisk.

The last of the artefacts cited above most likely belongs to the category of "foundation deposits,"[42] while the object from the NMW is described as a "votive obelisk." An overview of the numerous and highly diverse objects of this type, ones that are albeit quite strongly related to each other (votive objects were deposited as "foundation sacrifices" attesting to, e.g., a king's funding of a temple), offers no analogue to our artefact.[43]

[37] Ignace Jay Gelb, Piotr Steinkeller, Robert McCray Whiting, Jr., *Oldest Land Tenure Systems in the Ancient Near East: Ancient Kudurrus* (Chicago, 1991), no. 40, pp. 116–40, pl. 67–72. The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications, vol. 104.

[38] Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC), The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period volume 4* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 2011), pp. 231–37, no. Esarhaddon 114, fig. pp. 232–35 [with newer literature, transliteration and translation].

[39] Daniel David Luckenbill, "The Black Stone of Esarhaddon," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 41/3 (1925), pp. 165–73; Peter Andreas Miglus, "'Der Stein des Grafes von Aberdeen': Interpretation eines assyrischen Flachbildes," in *Beiträge zur Altorientalischen Archäologie und Altertumskunde. Festschrift für Barthel Hrouda zum 65. Geburtstag*, Peter Calmeyer et al., eds (Wiesbaden, 1994), pp. 179–91, table 18.

[40] Irving Leonard Finkel, Julian Edgeworth Reade, "Assyrian Hieroglyphs," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 86 (1996), pp. 244–68.

[41] Michael Roaf, Annette Zgoll, "Assyrian Astroglyphs: Lord Aberdeen's Black Stone and the Prisms of Esarhaddon," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 91 (2001), pp. 264–95.

[42] Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New Haven–London, 1968), pp. 121–24, fig. 35.

[43] Ellis, *Foundation Deposits*..., op. cit., Eva Andrea Braun-Holzinger, Walther Sallaberger, "Weihgabe. A. In Mesopotamien," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, vol. 15-1./2. (Berlin–Boston, 2016), pp. 25–32.

To sum up, the obelisk has no equivalents among Assyrian artefacts, or even more broadly, among artefacts from the Ancient Near East. It combines elements taken from Assyrian and Mesopotamian traditions (namely the inscription and arguably the general shape), the considerably older oriental tradition (obelisks from Byblos and Ebla), and finally, Egyptian tradition.

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Conclusion

Detailed analysis of the obelisk leaves little doubt that we are dealing with a forgery dating from the second half of the 19th century or the first half of the 20th century. The artefact combines elements from several cultures. Placed on an obelisk characteristic of Egyptian art is an Assyrian cuneiform inscription. Significantly, the obelisk is not mounted with a cap characteristic of monumental Assyrian obelisks in the form of a ziggurat replica, a fact which can only partially be explained by its diminutive size and the consequent difficulty in forming two or three "terraces" at its peak. Though the forger copied the inscription's signs with considerable care, he reproduced them in a ductus typical of inscriptions carved in stone instead of impressing them as they should appear on clay. He also made a series of other paleographic errors. As demonstrated, the forger relied on Rawlinson's publication from 1861. He selected three epigraphs on account of on their size and the attractive information that the inscriptions accompanied scenes of King Ashurbanipal hunting lions discovered in the North Palace on the Kouyunjik mound in Nineveh.

Additionally puzzling is the artefact's incorrect firing, which led to its deformation and reduced its aesthetic quality, thereby diminishing its appeal on the collector's market. If, however, this was not an accidental mistake, we may venture the hypothesis that the effect was to suggest that the artefact's damage was a result of the blaze in the North Palace at Nineveh's capture in 612 BC.

The errors and contradictions identified above attest to the limited knowledge that the artefact's creator possessed about the culture of ancient Assyria. In turn, the dilettantish ease in the choice of elements in the composition and the fact that the forger relied on Rawlinson's rare publication invite a certain – though somewhat hesitant – admiration for his knowledge and skilfulness. Yet, to gain a fuller understanding of this, it would be necessary to identify his other works.[44]

Translated by Szymon Włoch

[44] The miniature obelisk was likely not made as a one-off piece. According to Christopher Walker, curator of the British Museum's Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, a similar object turned up in London.