

Review

Zainab BAHRANI:

Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia

New York, Zone Books, 2008

280 pp. ISBN: 9781 8909 51849

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War is a human activity that was early made object, by the first civilizations, of a self-justification. Because of violence that war generates, it carries by definition a great deal of uncertainty and also a great potential for endangering the fundamentals of society: stability in political and economical institutions, social and cultural life, undisturbed possession of property and human existence itself.

That's how one understands why the violence unleashed by war has been the target of "domestication" by Power, which has always tried to channel the violent energies of warfare to purposes considered to be useful. Hence its search for maximum control and monopoly of all forms of violence. Because of this, warfare as a factor that endangers the maintenance of social order was able to become also a factor of cohesion for communities, when galvanized and mobilized against fictional or real threats to their own survival. Therefore, similarly to the Romanized world or the European Middle Ages, Ancient Mesopotamia also distinguished an impious and ruleless military practice from another oriented to dignified purposes, demonstrative of the skill and art of people who dwell in cities, sustained by agriculture, and fearful of the Gods that created the tranquillity of an ordered and balanced world. Civilized warfare as an art is even included among the ME, the principles that sustain world order, and whose mastery allows one to

maintain and expand it¹. It's not surprising thus, that warfare could also be seen in the Ancient Near East as an instrument for peace and expansion of what was considered to be Civilization.

Zainab Bahrani, in *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia*, assumed as an objective not to study military practice itself but, as the author herself affirms, “what underlies war and violence”, e. g., the conceptions and “philosophical beliefs” (p. 15) about war in Mesopotamia. Her purpose depends more specifically on connecting this level of understanding of warfare with conceptions about *the body*, especially the human body. To achieve it, Bahrani analyses several examples of artistic representations produced by political Power, where the human body emerges as an essential and meaningful element. To make this analysis, the author moves between the broader cultural parameters of Mesopotamian thought, such as divination practices or the function of writing and visual art.

The author begins by guiding us on the description of a relief in one of Ashurbanipal's palaces in Nineveh, depicting the Assyrian king banqueting in a garden with his wife (ch.1). This specific image is only the highest point of a bloody visual narrative in several panels, about the Assyrian victory over the Elamites in the battle of Til-Tuba (653 BC). Teumman, the king of Elam, is beheaded in the midst of battle, his severed head appearing various times along the composition. The head emerges, finally, hanging in one of the garden's trees, before the Assyrian king and his consort. The main theme of this composition is obvious: the decapitation of Teumman represents the decapitation of Elam itself; a fact highlighted by the contrast between the chaos of fighting and the tranquillity of the king's garden, which comes up to symbolize the restoration of order² against the

¹ The *Inanna and Enki Myth*. About the myth and the ME, see Farber-Flügge, G., *Der Mythos Inanna und Enki unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Liste der ME*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1973; cf. also Alster, Bendt, “On the Interpretation of the Sumerian Myth ‘Inanna and Enki’” *ZA* 64 (1974), pp. 20-34.

² It's noteworthy the significance of gardens in the Ancient Near East: order, quietness and peace besides control over a diversified and turbulent world and over its microcosmic representation. See Oppenheim,

turbulent foreigners. This is the author's point of departure towards an introduction to the theme of this work. Bahrani assumes as the ultimate expression of Power the sovereign's rule over life and death, that is, over the *bodies* of its subjects and enemies³. In fact, the visual and written narratives that reached us from throughout the Ancient Near East are filled with examples of the way by which the human body becomes the radiant reflex of sovereign power, in its positive version as much as in its opposite. That is to say, the sovereign power represented not only in the virile and strengthful attributes of the victorious king or god, but also in its contrast with the mutilated and undifferentiated bodies of the vanquished enemies. However, this book is not specifically centred in characterising the ideology of power and political culture in Mesopotamia. Much has been well written about this subject⁴. Bahrani privileges a descriptive approach much indebted to Art History, complementary to her analysis on the visual examples chosen (e. g. *Stele of the Vultures*, *Victory Stele of Daduša*, etc.), including the Til-Tuba relief panels, to show the ways by which the combination of those two *media*, images and written words, could reflect aspects of the justification of Power and legitimating strategies of its violence. That justification certainly suffered an evolution whilst the paradigm of the city-state stretched over to broader horizons.

A. L., "On Royal Gardens in Mesopotamia", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24/4 (1965), pp. 328-333; Dalley, S., "Ancient Mesopotamian Gardens and the Identification of the Hanging Gardens Resolved", *Garden History* 21/1 (1993), pp. 1-13; Lincoln, Bruce, "À la recherche du paradis perdu", *History of Religions* 43/2 (2003), pp. 139-154

³ The author uses the concepts of *biopolitics* and *biopower*, formulated by Michel Foucault and G. Agamben. About the subject, cf. Patton, P., "Agamben and Foucault on Biopower and Biopolitics" in Calarco, M., DeCaroli, S. (eds.), *Giorgio Agamben: sovereignty and life*, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 203-218.

⁴ Among others, see Frankfort, H.; *Kingship and the Gods: a study of ancient Near Eastern religion as the integration of society & nature*, University of Chicago Press, 1978; Liverani, M., "The deeds of ancient Mesopotamian kings" in Sasson, J. M. (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, volumes I-IV, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995, pp. 2353-2366. For the Assyrian case, cf. Liverani, M., "The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire" in Larsen, M. T. (ed.) *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires*, Akademisk Forlag Kobenhavn; Parpola, S., "Sons of God. The Ideology of Assyrian Kingship" consulted in: <http://www.gatewaystobabylon.com/introduction/sonsofgod.htm>, in 14th May 2009.

Nevertheless, some of its essential features were kept, showing a remarkable survival in the *longue durée*.

In order to relate different conceptions of Power, Bahrani establishes a contrast between Naram Sin's *Stele of Victory* and the Stele of Hammurabi's 'Code' of Laws, symbols of different functions of royalty. The author describes the figure of Naram-Sin: he is represented with divine attributes, manly and warlike in his victory over the Lullubi, smashing corpses with his feet, standing before a vanquished enemy that begs for mercy. The king has power, thus, "not only to end life but also to prolong it" (p. 113). The difference is striking between the figure of Naram-Sin in his monument and the one of Hammurabi, fearful and respectful before Šamaš: the Babylonian king is depicted as a righteous king receiving from the hands of Šamaš the responsibility of maintaining justice and rightfulness in his land. Hammurabi protects the widow, the orphan and the foreigner. His power grants to his subjects, as Bahrani says, "a horizon of juridical certainty" (p. 118), even when it is the capital punishment that is at stake, ultimate expression of the power of the sovereign. The *king of battle* and the *legislator king*, shepherd of his people, when put together side by side, depict two of the most important ways by which royalty in the Ancient Near East projected itself and became effective.

We say "effective" not by chance. Being a common practice of scholarship to analyse the iconography of Power as a way to understand its ideology, Bahrani highlights, though, a less visible function of that iconography: the magical-religious and performative function of images and writing that surpasses their primary role of registering and imitating reality. The author approaches the theme of monumentality of art produced by Power in Mesopotamia as a way, not only to communicate with the divine sphere, but also to *inscribe* in a perennial canvas the history of the deeds accomplished and, especially, the *effects* of that History, which was lived and would be resurrected when narrated. Bahrani says properly that "Instead of imitating the natural world, representation (writing, visual images, and other forms) was thought to participate in the world and to produce effects in the

world in magical or supernatural ways” (p. 17). One could say that the ontological meaning of representation possessed a more profound dimension than the one assumed nowadays⁵. Bahrani tries to establish a bridge between these visual and written productions and other common activities in ancient Mesopotamian culture, like divination⁶.

Divination was, for people of those times and places, an instrument to understand reality and a guide for their decisions. The presupposed indistinction that Mesopotamians assumed between the physical and “supernatural” worlds required the use of those means. In fact, the religious and mythological thought of the Mesopotamians assumed that the world was composed as fabric tissue by the gods. World made sense and had a meaning, even though it was largely uncognoscible to common mortals. Observing animal entrails and body signs and diseases; reporting abnormal, strange or unusual occurrences; interpreting dreams considered to hold a message, all these would be considered visible expressions of an occult dimension of reality (past, present or future)⁷. Their interpretation, laid on the hands of specialists, would allow one to accede to that dimension in order to understand the will of the gods and also the “sins” of men, conscious or unconsciously committed, which would help them in their conduct. In the political and military level this assertion could not be otherwise. Not only divinatory practices, but also monuments of victory that assumed a performative dimension became what Bahrani calls “magical technologies of war”

⁵ To *represent* could be considered, in the Ancient Near East, as an act of creation. Indeed, to Mesopotamians something was considered to exist as long it possessed an identity, *a name*, a representation that synthesized the being. To give a name or to speak a word is to represent and to give a visible form to something immaterial. It is also the word – written and oral – that establishes and creates a social, economical or political relationship, like marriage, contracts or political alliances. On this subject, maybe the best explanation would be that of Bottéro, J., *Mesopotamia: writing, reasoning and the gods* (translated by Z. Bahrani and M. Van de Mieroop), University of Chicago Press, 1995, especially chapters 5 and 6.

⁶ Among divinatory practices we consider, for example, astrology, extispicy, hepatoscopy and other oracular phenomena.

⁷ For the Assyrian practice, Starr, I., *Queries to the Sun god. Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*, State Archives of Assyria IV, University of Helsinki Press, 1990.

(p. 15), as important to warfare as weaponry, logistics, intelligence and the tactics employed.

In this context, the author reminds us of the practice of posing questions to the gods concerning strategies to follow or the army's eventual success or failure, right before the campaigns are launched (ch. 7) and also the custom of specialists in divination to accompany the troops' march. The author also reflects about the common use of "kidnapping" divine images or other monuments from the vanquished countries: famous examples are the "exile" of Marduk's statue carried by Sennacherib after Babylon's downfall, or the Naram-Sin and Hammurabi's stelae that the Elamites took, in different occasions, as trophies back to Susa, their homeland⁸. To recover the statues of the gods exiled in enemy land becomes naturally a cause to engage war, because their absence or presence reflects the country's own prosperity or misery.

We believe it is necessary to make an observation about the close connection that the author makes between divination and the magical-performative role of the representations fabricated by Power. In fact, the function exercised by the monumental projection of the sovereign's power can be inscribed in the same grounds of divination, for it was a way to promote communication with an immanent plan. However, divination is characterised by a passive role of humankind in reality: men identified the signals in the natural world that, in their opinion, could be manifestations on the visible sphere of divine plans. Humankind could even receive divine communications through dreams and oracles, but its role is an interpretative one, because interpretation was the bridge between reception of a message and further action concerning it. Hence, man is not assumed as responsible for producing

⁸ Bahrani considers the kidnapping of the monuments of the vanquished "akin to the reconfiguration of space by territorial and architectural destruction and by means of the mass deportation and relocation of civilian populations" (p. 159). Monuments are references of time and space: to reconfigure space by means of their appropriation is not only a significant symbol or a method of psychological warfare, but also a religious justification of warfare itself. It is also a performative way of turning effective the domination over others.

those signals: he does not intervene in a reality that is immanent and pre-established by the gods⁹. Through divination, Man *reacts*, whether as a receptor/vehicle of a godly speech or as a mere interpreter of the signs observed in the natural sphere.

Thus, divination can lead to a reaction to the phenomena presented to him. However, when Man produces texts or images, whatever the canvas in which these media could be inscribed (stelae, royal inscriptions, foundation deposits, architecture, *etc.*), he *acts*: he does not limit himself to read the signs that occur in the world, yet he tries to *write* signs in the world, creating, himself, *reality*. The word *inscribe* is suitable when one realizes that clay tablets were the most common and expanded canvas for written communication. In this sense, Bahrani touches an essential point, when associating divination with the symbolic representations of Power, flowing though in different directions and serving opposite objectives. Human body (and the animal body, because animals are also vehicles of communication with the divine sphere, especially through extispicy) is one of the privileged instruments by which the symbols and ideology of the sovereign power could be projected towards society or foreign countries because the body, being a part of the physical world is, nevertheless, filled with meanings. Humankind and its body is the principal object of the exercise of power. The body, like a clay tablet in which the gods deposited signs ready to be deciphered, could also be an instrument to project reality through its various representations. I believe this is one of the general principles that can be found in this book, which is nevertheless broader than what this simple review could embrace.

Maybe we risk committing an abusive or anachronistic comparison with other historical and cultural contexts, if we consider the body as a political metaphor for royalty and for the organization of society in the Ancient Near East, just as it was in Medieval and Modern Europe: could the king be considered in Mesopotamia as a *caput regni* that

⁹ The active role of man in divination is his interpretation of its meaning and purification and deviation of a potential evil: a perfect example of it was the ritual of the substitute-king in Assyria.

coordinated, by its divine legitimacy to rule and by its “superior knowledge”, the rest of the society, just like the head and the brain controls the rest of the body?

Even though the Mesopotamians didn't formulate conceptions like this in such way, maybe the organic harmony of the body could be assumed as a possible metaphor for the social and political ideals in the Ancient Near East, where humankind was created to serve and to obey the gods, while taking care of the order in the world. Among Men, the king, as vice-regent that ruled in the land by the name of the deities, was the ultimate responsible to protect the relationship between the gods and the Earth, always under threat of submersion by chaos and Deluge.