
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AT PARTHIAN ASSUR: THE COMMEMORATIVE STELE OF RIḤUT-ASSUR



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When the Assyrian Empire fell in 612 BC, the city of Assur, like most important Assyrian cities, lost its status. This once flourishing trade centre devolved into a mere village, with houses scattered inside and outside the city walls. Assur continued in this condition during the succeeding Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid, and Seleucid empires. Later, in the 1st century BC when Parthia dominated, Assur was re-established as a city. Over the next three centuries, indigenous traditions flourished and evolved alongside Parthian practices. Although a complete rendition of the change and continuity witnessed at Parthian Assur as reflected in art, architecture, and epigraphs¹ is beyond the scope of the present study, a brief glimpse into this state of affairs can be gleaned from the stele dedicated to a certain Riḥut-Assur.

ART ANALYSIS: CLOTHES & SYMBOLS

The 1.57 m tall limestone stele (fig. 1) was found west of the south forecourt gate of the Temple of Assur,² suggesting that the individual who erected the stele and/or the individual to whom the stele is dedicated was a worshipper of the god Assur. The stele shows a male figure, identified in the opening lines of an Aramaic inscription as Riḥut-Assur. The figure is in profile and faces right. This is reminiscent of a stele dating to the time of Tiglathpileser III that shows three figures positioned in the same manner and direction, while participating in a religious ceremony.³ Like his Assyrian counterparts, Riḥut-Assur's right hand is raised in line with his waist and aligned with his shoulder in prayer gesture. This motif typically indicates a greeting or benediction. His left hand, raised in line with his waist, holds what appears to be a palm frond or barley wreath angled upward; in funerary depictions, this motif is associated with the deceased. This confirms the figure as Riḥut-Assur and not 'ŠTṬ since the inscription notes the latter as restoring the stele. Immediately above his right hand are a star and an upward-facing crescent.

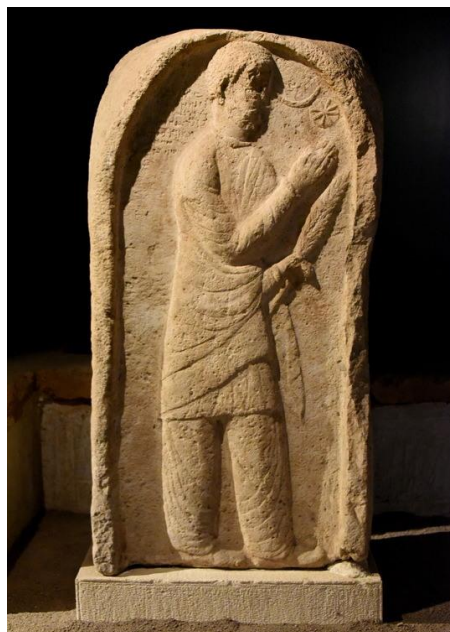


Fig. 1: An inscribed stele from Assur
(Credit: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, FRCP [Glasg.])

These symbols are also found on steles depicting Assyrian kings in the position of offering prayer. The star motif was traditionally associated with the goddess Ištar (Sumerian Inanna). Although never invoked or appealed to in any of the inscriptions from the Parthian-Assur corpus, her name occurs as the epithet 'ŠTR', taking the common noun meaning of "the goddess." This title is assigned to Seru'a, consort of Assur.⁴ Thus, it is possible that Ištar was equated with the goddess Seru'a at this time. Further, when considering that the name SRY/W when transcribed is similar to the Akkadian form *šēru* which translates to "morning star,"⁵ it can be hypothesized that she may have been derived from one of three aspects of Ištar, namely, that of the planet Venus, the morning and evening star.⁶ If this correlation is correct, then the cult of Ištar, first attested to at Assur in the Early Dynastic Period, persisted for more than three thousand years in the city. As for the up-turned crescent, it is commonly associated with the moon god Sîn (Sumerian Nanna). This deity was worshipped at Assur from the 15th century BC, when Puzur Ashur III erected a temple to Sîn. However, other than the occurrence of the crescent motif, there is no other evidence to indicate that Sîn was still worshipped at Parthian Assur. Therefore, its meaning here is not clear.

Rihut-Assur's short hair has its origins in the Roman East during the 1st century AD, a trend that continued afterwards as seen at Palmyra.⁷ His beard and attire, on the other hand, conform to the Parthian style. He wears a long-sleeved pleated tunic reaching just above his knees. The tunic overlays a wide elliptical pleated trouser whose hem is loosely gathered over his ankles above his shoes. The trousers are reminiscent of those donned on a bronze statue from Šāmī dating to the Early to Late Parthian Period. A torque with what appears to be a centrally placed medallion hangs around his neck. Unfortunately, the details of the medallion cannot be established, therefore, nothing more can be said about it in

this context. Its presence does, however, recall the Persian *hamyanaka*, Aramaic *hmnyk'*, or “necklace” worn by the Achaemenids as a sign of nobility. While Riḫut-Assur’s dress and short hair may be similar to that of the priests at Palmyra in the 1st century AD,⁸ the symbolic *polos* worn by the Palmyra priests⁹ and the distinctive, long narrow bundle of fabric worn over the left shoulder of Khuzestan priests¹⁰ are absent from our figure. For this reason, it is unlikely that Riḫut-Assur was a priest. The evidence indicating his social standing is also conflicting. While his dedicatory stele was restored and placed at a gate, and his medallion necklace was a marker of the nobility of the 2nd century BC, the lack of an adorned belt on his tunic, a marker of nobility in the Parthian period is absent.¹¹

It is not certain if this is a true representation of Riḫut-Assur or simply a standardized figure. This possibility is suggested by the fact that another contemporary dedicatory stele depicts a similar figure with the same details; only the inscription differs. The absence of individual character traits recalls the works of earlier Assyrian sculptors who made no attempt to show individuality in the portrayal of their subjects; instead they were more concerned about the details of attire.¹²

TEXT ANALYSIS: FORMULAS & PERSONAL NAMES

1. ŠNT CC[C]
2. XX +III ŠL[M]' DY
3. RḫT'SR BR
4. BNBW'ḫDYT
5. DY ḫDT LH 'ŠṬT,
6. 'L ḫYYHY WḫY'
7. 'YNY BRH

1. The year 200 +
2. 20 + 3, the stat[ue] of
3. Riḫut-Assur son of
4. B-Nabû-'eḫdet
5. that was restored by 'ŠṬT,
6. for his life and the life of
7. 'Aynī his son

The Late Parthian elements displayed on the statue are corroborated by the date provided in the opening lines of the inscription.¹³ Only the year is inscribed; no day or month is given as seen with other dedicatory inscriptions of the collection. The first two lines provide the character representing the year. Although B. Aggoula translates the year 324 and notes that the third centennial marker is uncertain, K. Beyer reads year [4]24. Since Beyer does not provide a reason for the restored date, Aggoula’s date will be accepted.

Continuity is further seen with the presence of the formulaic construction “šl[m]' dy” / “statue of”; this is also seen in many earlier Assyrian and Aramaic inscriptions. Listed immediately is the name of the person to whom the stele is being dedicated, namely Riḫut-Assur. The god Assur’s name forms part of the personal name, which Aggoula translates “*le soulagement d’Assur*”; RḫT being a noun of the Aramaic root RWḫ “to relieve.” It is

unclear why he opted for this particular interpretation since he also offers possible Arabic, Greek, and Akkadian word forms.¹⁴ As for Beyer, he translates: “*Wohlgefallen-des-(Gottes)-Assur*”. Both fail to consult the Akkadian onomastica which offers several personal names bearing the Akkadian noun *riḫû* / “offspring, creation.”¹⁵ These include the 10th century BCE Assyrian name, Ri-ḫu-ša-īlāni / “The seed of the gods,”¹⁶ and also the 6th century BCE hypocorism Ri-ḫa-te.¹⁷ With this in mind, Riḫut-Assur translates to “The seed of Assur”.

That several other personal names of our collection are also comprised of the deity’s name speak to the fact that Assur was still revered by some of the locals. However, these theophorics differ significantly from those used during Assyrian hegemony. To explicate, the once ferocious warrior deity conveyed in the names, Assur-da’issuna / “Assur treads them down” and Assur-mukanniš / “Assur subjugates”, was replaced with the image of a sympathetic deity in the Parthian period in the forms of Assur-natan / “Assur gives” and Assur-šamē, / “Assur listens.” In the same way that epithets show an evolution of his character, so did the temple in which he was worshipped. Though the building was resurrected in the northern plateau on the same spot where it had stood during the Assyrian Periods, the overall architecture lacks continuity from the older sanctuary. The new structure consisted of a Parthian tripartite *iwān* and Greek columns; however, its layout implies a connection to its Assyrian past such as having his image posited in the sanctuary of the sanctuaries. In this way, we see the subdued god Assur restored to his house, which in overall form was foreign, but at the same time also familiar in architectural nuances.

Following with the tradition of outlining the patrilineal line of the person being commemorated or remembered, the scribe provides Riḫut-Assur’s father’s name, b-Nabû-’eḫdet. In this case, the god Nabû forms part of the personal name. It also forms part of personal names mentioned in other inscriptions from the collection. For this name, Aggoula suggests the Aramaic root ’HD with the (preposition) B prefixed to the god name Nabû which he translates as “*avoir recours à, s’attacher*.” It is worth pointing out that the onomastic structure made of a preposition + divine name is well-known in Akkadian, as in the names Ana-Bēl (or: Nabû)-taklāk / “In Bēl (or: Nabû) I trust,” and itti-Marduk-balātu / “With Marduk is life.”¹⁸ Thus, the structure b-Nabû-’eḫdet / “I hold onto (i.e. I am most devotee of) Nabû,” rare in Aramaic onomastica, betrays an Akkadian origin.

The theophoric names that contain Nabû or Assur cannot confirm that these gods were the deities specifically honoured by the respective person bearing either name, but it does indicate that the god in question was important to the parents of the individual who had chosen the name. While the god Assur’s importance is confirmed in the city’s pantheon of gods, evidenced by the monumental character of his sanctuary, the same cannot be said about the god Nabû. Thus, it can be assumed that Nabû did not carry the same level of importance as Assur since the former’s original temple dating to the Assyrian Period had not been restored in the central part of the city. In fact, it is not clear where he dwelled in the city during the Parthian period.

The individual responsible for restoring Riḫut-Assur’s stele was a certain ’ŠṬT. The origin of his name is unexplainable. It could possibly be Parthian; unfortunately, it is not attested elsewhere. ’ŠṬT tells that the reason for restoring the stele is: “ ‘L ḤYYHY WHY’/‘YNY BRH’ / for his life and the life of ‘Aynī, his life’”. While the spelling of ḤYYHY is correct, WHY’ should be ḤYY, which is the first part of the bound phrase. This appeal “for the life of PN” is well attested to in Assyrian documents. It is also evi-

denced in an Old Aramaic inscription dating to 600 BC involving a certain Abaser making an offering to an unknown god “for his life.”¹⁹ The locals of Palmyra in the 2nd century AD also made the same plea to the gods for their lives and those of their family members. Of course, these differ with our inscription which is a commemoration of one person by another, namely ’ŠṬT, to appeal for his life and that of his son. Unfortunately, the connection between ’ŠṬT and Riḥut-Assur is not clear.

Further consideration should be given to ’ŠṬT’s son’s name ‘YNY, to be read ‘Aynī / “My eye.” This is new to Aramaic onomastics and according to Aggoula, it is possibly a short form for ‘YNY‘L’SṬR mentioned in Inscription 14. However, it can also be a shortened form of the Assyrian name Īn-īlu/I / “The eye of the god,”²⁰ which is also attested in Aramaic as Īn-il / “eye of god” in an ostrakon from Nimrud dated to the 7th century BC.²¹

CONCLUSION

The stele dedicated to Riḥut-Assur hints at the continuity of certain practices indigenous to the inhabitants of Parthian Assur. Certain artistic elements were not forgotten and integrated into the depiction of a human form dressed according to Parthian fashion. Like his Assyrian predecessor, the sculptor was not so much concerned with emphasizing the individuality of the person being commemorated. Instead, the act of commemorating was central to the message of the stele. At the same time, the symbols and the honouring of the old deities, Assur and Nabû and the goddess Ištar, continued to be practiced. However, these deities did not escape the influences and conditions of time. No longer was the god Assur invoked to smite enemies and instil fear, instead he was relegated to simply being a provider of offspring and being a sympathetic listener. Nevertheless, he was still allowed to dwell in a sanctuary that befitted his prior glory, and his name continued to be honoured in the personal names of the city inhabitants. In this way, Parthian Assur did not witness a revival of Assyrian culture, instead it saw the continuation of traditions that were honoured and celebrated by its indigenous people, namely the Assyrians.

NOTES

¹ On the epigraphy of Assur see mainly, B. Aggoula, *Inscriptions et graffites araméens d'Assour*, IUO Annali 45 (Napoli, 1985), and K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Inschriften aus Assur, Hatra und dem übrigen Ostmesopotamien*, (Göttingen, 1998).

² W. Andrae, *Aramaische Inscription aus Assur und Hatra aus der Partherzeit*, MDOG 60 (1920), p. 5.

³ H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (New Haven: Yale University Press, (1970), p. 169.

⁴ The evolution of the name of Ištar from a proper noun to a common noun is worthy of further examination and will be the focus of future research.

⁵ *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 17 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 331.

⁶ J. Black and A. Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), p. 109.

⁷ M. A. R. Colledge, *Parthian Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 141-142.

⁸ This connection is implied by V. S. Curtis in his "A Parthian Statuette from Susa and Bronze Statue from Shami," *Iran* 31 (1993), p. 66.

⁹ H. J. W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 22.

¹⁰ W. B. Henning, "The Monuments and Inscriptions of Tang-I Sarvak," *Asia Major* 2:2 (1951), p. 165.

¹¹ According to V. S. Curtis, those of high social rank and royalty were depicted wearing well-adorned belts to indicate their standing in society. See his "Parthian Belts and Belt Appliques," *Iranica Antiqua* (2001), p. 309.

¹² H.R. Hall, *Babylonian and Assyrian Sculptor in the British Museum* (London, 1926), p. 17, 19.

¹³ P. Lensen and W. Andrae date the stele to the 1st century AD, and less likely to the 2nd century AD.

¹⁴ Aggoula, "Inscriptions et graffites araméens d'Assour," p. 27, note 3.

¹⁵ *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, vol. 14 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p. 341, 343.

¹⁶ *Babylonian Boundary Stones and Memorial Tablets in the British Museum*, ed. L. W. King (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), document ix, col. a, line 31.

¹⁷ K. L. Tallqvist, *Assyrian Personal Names* (Leipzig, 1914), p. 187

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 108.

¹⁹ K. Dijkstra, *Life and Loyalty* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), p. 246.

²⁰ Tallqvist, *Assyrian Personal Names*, p. 101.

²¹ J.B. Segal, "An Aramaic Ostrakon from Nimrud," *Iraq* 19 (1957), p. 140.