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## **Context first: a study on the purpose of the Nimrud wall reliefs, combining their spatial context and imagery**

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Innovative approaches by Junior Archaeological Researchers

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE LOWER LIMB SKELETAL  
EVIDENCE FOR THE ENDURANCE RUNNING  
HYPOTHESIS

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# CONTEXT FIRST

## A STUDY ON THE PURPOSE OF THE NIMRUD WALL RELIEFS, COMBINING THEIR SPATIAL CONTEXT AND IMAGERY

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### *Abstract*

*During the last decades, a large amount of research has been carried out concerning Neo-Assyrian palaces. The most well-known features of these palaces are the wall reliefs that adorned the palace walls, which have been extensively studied as well. These wall reliefs are mainly studied in isolation, often focussing on the iconography of the images and their meaning, without looking at their spatial context. The aim of this study is to investigate the purpose of the wall reliefs in the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, combining both the images depicted on the wall reliefs and their spatial context. Since the wall reliefs are often associated with ideologies and propaganda, this study will investigate other possible functions of the wall reliefs as well. First, the wall reliefs and the suites in which they are located will be considered, in order to see if a connection can be detected between them. Second, the wall reliefs will be examined in connection to the rooms that had the same function.*

### *Keywords*

*Archaeology of the Near East, Mesopotamia, Assyrian Empire, Northwest Palace, Ashurnasirpall II*

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### **I**ntrouction

Assyrian palaces have been extensively studied over the past decades, with a main focus on the royal palaces at Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh (Barjamovic 2011; Kertai 2015; Oates and Oates 2001). Many of these studies have concerned themselves with the wall reliefs that adorned the palace walls. These reliefs have mainly been investigated in isolation, concerning the images themselves, their possible meaning, and their iconography (Albenda 1994; Ataç 2010; Watanabe 2014; Winter 2010). The reliefs are often associated with ideologies and propaganda, specifically hunting scenes and scenes of warfare (Liverani 1979; Reade 1979; Watanabe 2002). It is however problematic to make claims about these matters without studying the reliefs in their spatial contexts. Few visitors were allowed to enter the palace, yet

in order for the wall reliefs to be designated as a medium for propaganda, the reliefs needed to be seen by an audience.

In this article, Ashurnasirpall II's (r. 883 – 859) Northwest Palace at Nimrud will be investigated as a case study (see fig. 1). The Northwest Palace is particularly well suited for this research, since a great range of themes can be recognised within the depictions on the wall reliefs and the locations of the wall reliefs in the palace have been reconstructed by Meuszynski (1981), and Paley and Sobolewski (1987; 1992; 1997).<sup>1</sup> These reconstructions make it possible to study the reliefs in their original context. This article provides an examination of the spatial context of the wall reliefs in association with their imagery.

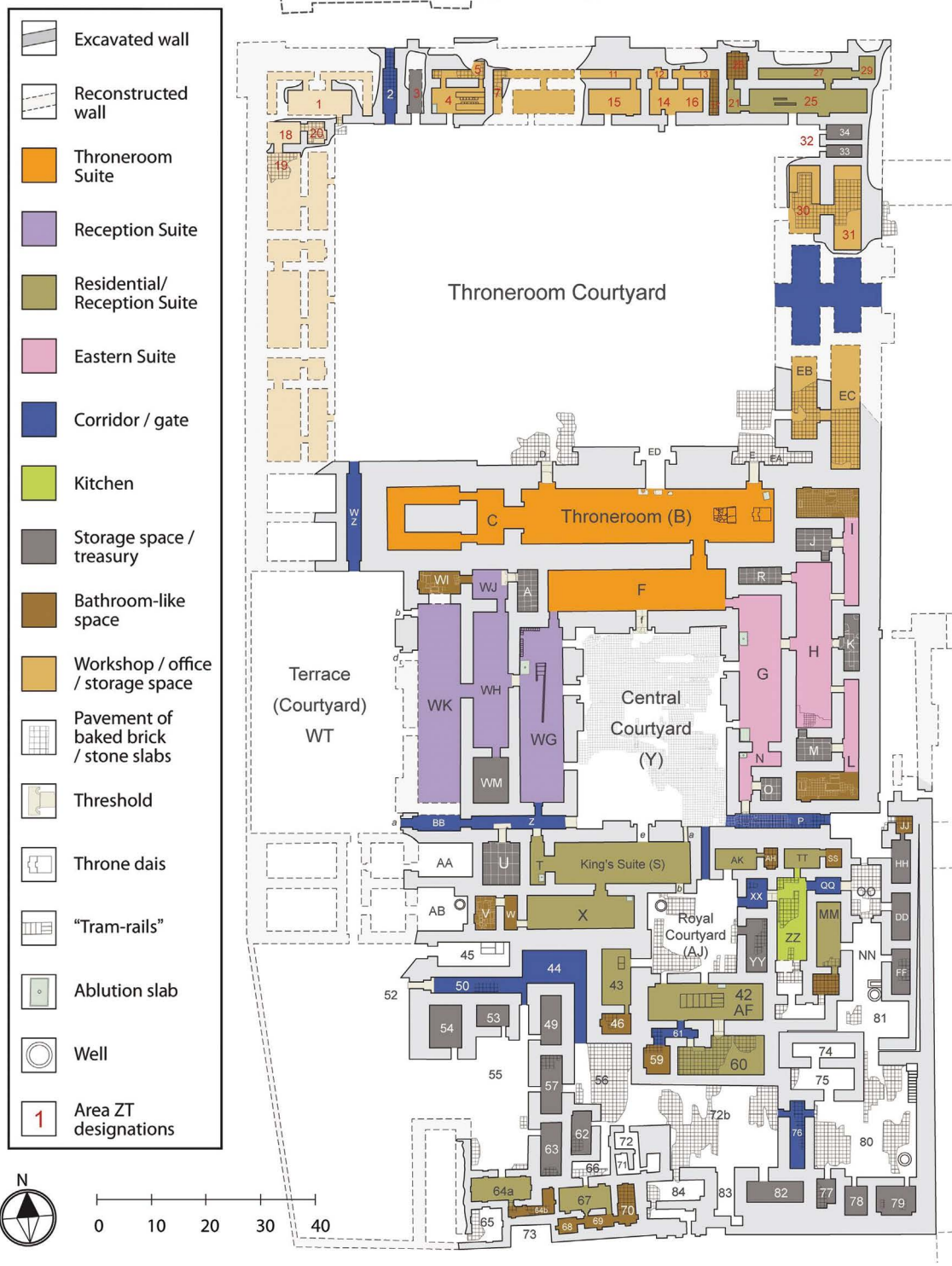


Figure 1. Floorplan of the Northwest Palace (Kertai 2014, 339; Courtesy of Dr. D. Kertai).

Wall reliefs that are associated with propaganda are expected to be located in the most accessible wings of the palace, where more visitors would be able to see the reliefs. Moreover, Russell (1998, 662) states that specific themes are present in individual rooms. This implies that the reliefs complemented the function of a room.

### **The Northwest Palace**

The Northwest Palace was situated in Nimrud and was built during the ninth century BCE by Ashurnasirpall II as the royal residence in his newly established capital (Oates and Oates 2001, 36). The palace can be divided into three areas, each having a distinct function: the administrative area, the official area and the private area. No wall reliefs were situated in the administrative area or the private area.<sup>2</sup> The official area housed four suites, which all had a distinct function, that were built around the Central Courtyard. Each suite could be reached through a courtyard or corridor, and the suites were also connected through an internal route that originated from the throneroom (Kertai 2014, 340, 344). The rooms situated in the official area were adorned with wall reliefs, but the corridors and courtyards were mainly undecorated.

The Throneroom Suite and the actual throneroom were accessible through the Throneroom Courtyard. The throneroom was the main reception area of the palace and the largest room in the palace. Its façade was decorated with narrative scenes depicting tributaries, guiding the visitors to the west entrance.

The Double-sided Reception Suite was located west of the Central Courtyard and was probably used as a secondary throneroom (Oates and Oates 2001, 55). It was both connected to the Throneroom Courtyard through corridor WZ and the Central Courtyard. Therefore, Kertai (2015, 35) states that visitors who were allowed to enter this secondary throneroom were privileged to go past the throneroom, but were not necessarily allowed to enter the rest of the palace.

The Eastern Suite housed a reception room, a retiring room, two bathrooms, and five storage rooms or treasuries. Russell (1998, 671-674) has argued that the function of the two bathrooms was to perform libation and purification rituals, which was supported by various architectural features. In room L, and possibly also in room I, there was a drain in the floor, and large slabs that could be interpreted as libation slabs and U-shaped basins were situated in both rooms. Furthermore, rooms L and I were paved with stone slabs and paved bricks, which could be

indicative of exposure to flowing liquids. The large amount of storage rooms is remarkable. These were the most centrally located storage facilities of the palace, and could be related to the rituals that were carried out in this suite.<sup>3</sup> Since this suite stood in direct connection to the Throneroom Suite, it is associated with royal activity (Kertai 2015, 38). The Eastern Suite was less accessible than the Double-sided Reception Suite, as it is not connected to the Throneroom Courtyard. However, both the Eastern Suite and the King's Suite were accessible through a back entrance connected to corridor P. It seems that this entrance would have been mainly used by the palace staff, and should not be considered as a main entrance.

The King's Suite was connected to the Central Courtyard and the Terrace Courtyard. This suite housed a reception room, a retiring room and a bathroom, and functioned both as a residential and reception suite. Architecturally, it is regarded as the most monumental Residential/Reception suite in the palace. The suite was oriented to the north, which is exhibited in the Throneroom Suite as well. This placement made the king architecturally more visible (Kertai 2015, 210). Because it is directly connected to the private area of the palace, it seems plausible that this suite was exclusively used by the king himself.

### **The wall reliefs**

Several themes can be recognised looking at the wall reliefs, which can be assigned to distinct categories, namely: hunting scenes, scenes of warfare, bringing of tribute, religious scenes, Standard-Inscription<sup>4</sup>, undecorated and undetermined (Schubert 2016, 24). Most of the reliefs consist of religious scenes which depict *genii*<sup>5</sup> and the so-called Sacred Tree<sup>6</sup>. With exception of the Double Sided Reception Suite, hunting scenes, scenes of warfare and tributary scenes are only present in the Throneroom Suite, and can also be regarded as narrative scenes. Reliefs were placed next to each other to depict a story, and could have been read like a comic book (Barnett 1970, 14).

The king is often portrayed as the central figure in these scenes, depicting hunts, warfare and the performance of rituals. Some scenes could be interpreted as historic events, whereas others had a symbolic meaning (Paley 1976, 1). Hence, Ashurnasirpal II had himself displayed in several ways. Russell (1998, 663) therefore argues that the wall reliefs are an expression of his ideologies. Even though each relief bears the Standard-Inscription, many plates are only inscribed with this text.

The doorways in the official area were mainly decorated with wall reliefs with apotropaic figures and the Standard-Inscription. Additionally, *lamassu* statues<sup>7</sup> were placed on both sides of several doorways. For the sake of the length of this article the doorways and, therefore, the colossi will not be taken into account<sup>8</sup>.

### Methodology

The available dataset is based on the earlier mentioned reconstructions of the original location of the wall reliefs by Meuszynski (1981), and Paley and Sobolewki (1987; 1992). The rooms will be discussed using the designated names that were also used in these volumes. Each relief has been assigned to one of the seven earlier mentioned categories, based on the images depicted on the reliefs. Unfortunately, at several locations it cannot be determined which reliefs and how many were originally placed there, and therefore an estimation will be made of the number of these missing reliefs. This is especially the case in The Double-sided Reception Suite, since almost no reliefs have been found *in situ*. These reliefs have largely been removed by a later king, to adorn the Southwest Palace<sup>9</sup>. The Double-sided Reception Suite will, therefore, not be incorporated in this research, because the context of the few identified reliefs cannot be determined.

There are four types of reliefs present in the Northwest Palace: (1) reliefs on which the image is depicted on the entire plate, (2) reliefs which bear two images that are separated by the Standard-Inscription, (3) reliefs of which the image partly covers the plate, and (4) reliefs that bear three images, and do not bear the Standard-Inscription. Reliefs of the last type only bear religious scenes (Schubert 2016, 24). Reliefs of type two can contain images from different categories. Therefore, the reliefs will be assigned to both categories and receive a value of 0,5, in order to make it possible to assign reliefs to two categories. In all the other cases, the reliefs will receive a value of 1,0. These values will be used in order to generate several graphs. The number of depictions of the king will also be taken into account.

First, the reliefs will be analysed per suite (thus, the Throneroom Suite, the Eastern Suite and the King's Suite). Since the Central Courtyard and several associated hallways are also decorated with wall reliefs, these will be assigned to the Central Courtyard and will also be taken account in this analysis. Second, the wall reliefs will be examined in connection to the rooms that had the same function.

### Results

Hunting scenes, tributary scenes and scenes of warfare were only located in the Throneroom Suite (see fig. 2). Both the Eastern Suite and the King's Suite were only adorned with religious scenes and the Standard-Inscription. This is also the case for the Central Courtyard, with the exception of one undecorated plate. The king was most often depicted in the Eastern Suite (n=23), followed by the Throneroom Suite (n=22) and lastly the King's suite, in which the king is only depicted once (see table 1).

Remarkably, the storage rooms are all decorated in the same manner. The bathrooms, corridors, hallways and retiring rooms are all adorned with either the Standard-Inscription, religious scenes, or both. With exception of the throneroom, the reception rooms are also decorated in a similar fashion (see fig. 3). As for the depictions of the king, these were mainly placed in the reception rooms, the adjacent hallways (rooms C and N), and the retiring rooms. Also, two images of the king were placed in the Throneroom Courtyard.

### Discussion

There are several patterns observable in the location of the wall reliefs of the Northwest Palace, which are related to the suite and the type of room in which they were located. Reliefs depicting narrative scenes were only found in the Throneroom suite. The tributary scenes are mainly located on the façade of the throneroom (D/ED/E), and were placed there in order to direct the visitors to the west-entrance of the throneroom. Paley and Sobolewski (1997, 334) therefore stated that tribute bearers were automatically informed about the royal protocol when appearing before the king. This is further emphasized by the two tributary reliefs that were positioned in the throneroom opposite of this entrance, which would make the route "complete". Hence, the wall reliefs were used to inform and direct its tributary visitors. The throne itself was situated on the eastside of the room and the visitors were directed throughout its entire length, passing several scenes of warfare and hunting scenes. (Kertai 2015, 30). Thus, a second function of the reliefs was to impress its viewers, and to make certain that the king was present through these depictions, even if he himself was not physically present at the moment.

The Eastern Suite has been identified as the location in the palace where rituals were performed by the king (Russell 1998, 671-674). Regarding the wall reliefs this seems very plausible, as the king is often depicted performing rituals, frequently assisted by

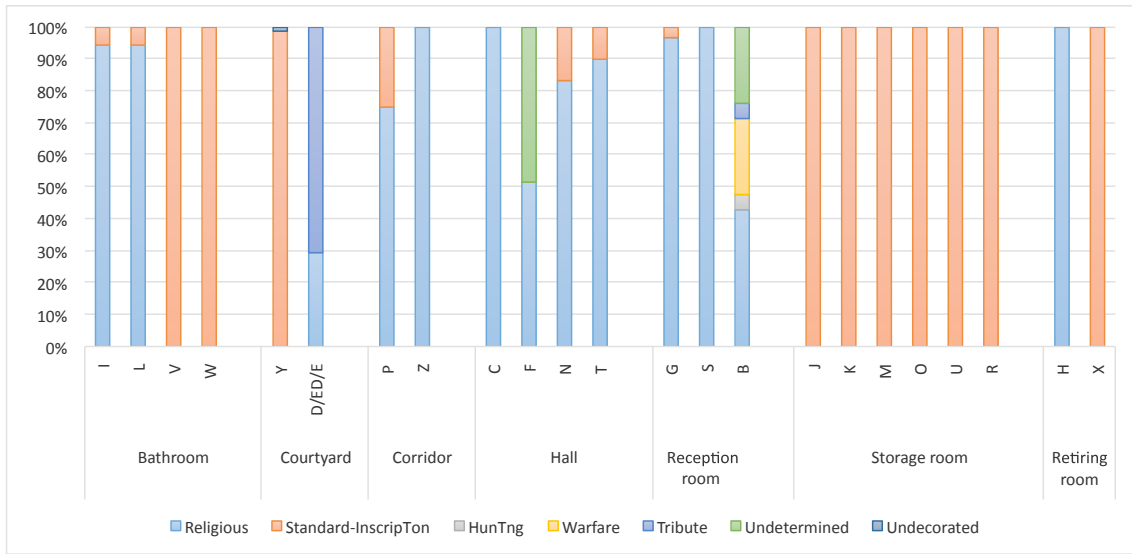


Figure 2. Percentage of wall reliefs in the corresponding suites.

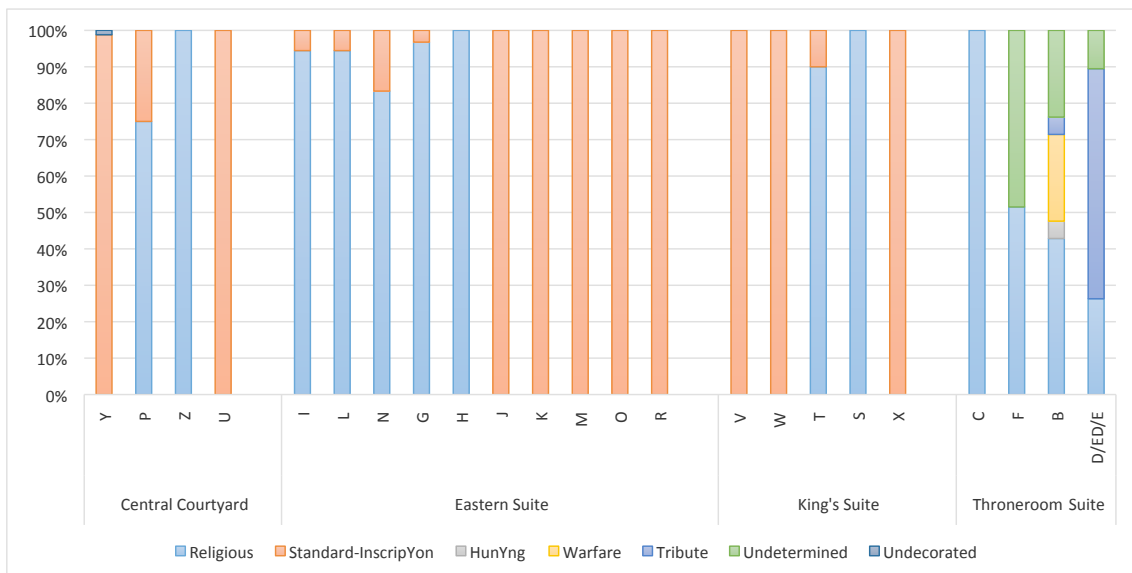


Figure 3. Percentage of wall reliefs in relation to the rooms with the same function.

*genii* and his servants. The depictions of the king are in this context not a medium for propaganda, but rather a way of designating the function of the room. This is also emphasized by the rather secluded location in the palace.

Although the reception room in the King's Suite was very monumental, it was not decorated with narrative scenes and only few depictions of the king were present. One was situated at the east-end of the reception room, where presumably a throne was situated (Kertai 2015, 41). The other depiction was

situated in a hallway, which was visible from the reception room, in the same style as the throneroom suite. The lack of narrative scenes could be related to the audience of this suite, as it probably had a more internal function, and was used only by the king and his officials.

Since the storage rooms were all decorated with the Standard-Inscription, it seems that in these rooms the Standard-Inscription served as a label of property. However, its use in the Central Courtyard and the hallways was probably more decorative, and

Suite	Function of the room	Room	Representations of the King	Religious	Standard Inscription	Hunting	Warfare	Tribute	Un-determined	Un-decorated	Total
Central Court-yard	Corridor	P	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Storage room	U	0	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	16
	Courtyard	Y	0	0	82	0	0	0	0	1	83
Eastern Suite	Corridor	Z	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
	Reception room	G	13	30	1	0	0	0	0	0	31
	Retiring room	H	9	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
	Bathroom	I	0	34	2	0	0	0	0	0	36
	Bathroom	L	0	34	2	0	0	0	0	0	36
	Storage room	J	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	11
	Storage room	K	0	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	14
	Storage room	M	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	12
	Storage room	O	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	10
	Storage room	R	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	12
King's Suite	Hall	N	1	15	3	0	0	0	0	0	18
	Reception room	S	1	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	29
	Hall	T	0	9	1	0	0	0	0	0	10
	Bathroom	V	0	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	11
Throne-room Suite	Bathroom	W	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	9
	Retiring room	X	0	0	24	0	0	0	0	0	24
	Reception room	B	19	18	0	2	10	2	10	0	42
	Hall	C	1	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
	Hall	F	0	17	0	0	0	0	16	0	33
	Courtyard	D/ED/E	1	5	0	0	0	12	2	0	19

Table 1. The amount of wall reliefs and depictions of the king per room.

had no direct relation to the function of these rooms and the surrounding suites.

As for the religious scenes, these are often only used as a way of decoration. In almost all rooms where religious scenes are situated, the corners are decorated with depictions of the sacred tree. Moreover, *genii* are often depicted on both sides of a doorway. However, this has been interpreted by Kertai (2014) as a way of directing people through the palace.

The removal of the reliefs in the Double-Sided Reception suite is however a major drawback to this research. Since it was also used as a reception suite and narrative scenes were also present, it could have given us more information on the use of these types of reliefs. Furthermore, in several rooms located in the Throneroom Suite (D/ED/D, B and F) the number and type of the reliefs could not be reconstructed. Therefore, only an estimation could be made of the original number of the reliefs.

### Conclusions and implications

This study shows that the wall reliefs had a strong relation to their location in the palace. This is reflected in both the suites and the specific rooms.

The images were not only a means of propaganda, but were used in a variety of ways. The reliefs were used to impress the visitors of the palace, to direct people through the palace, to designate the function of a room, to inform its visitors, and lastly to decorate the palace walls.

In future research, more attention should be given to the spatial context of wall reliefs. When studying these reliefs in isolation, a large amount of information is lost, while their contextualization can help us to better understand their role within human built space. Therefore, more research should be carried out with a greater focus on the images of the reliefs and their relationship to architectural geographies.

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1 Many reliefs are now located in different museums all over the world. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scholars were dedicated to trace these reliefs and to reconstruct their original positions (Kertai 2014, 338). These reconstructions were mainly based on the original excavation reports. Furthermore, sawn off reliefs could be connected to the bases that were still *in situ*, and new excavations were carried out that yielded several *in situ* reliefs (Russell 1998, 658). Although some details are still under debate, this extensive work is now considered finished.

2 The administrative area was built around the throneroom Courtyard and housed the offices of the royal secretaries and several storage rooms (Barjamovic 2012, 31; Mallowan 1966, 172). The private area was only accessible for the royal family and their servants. Two rooms were adorned with wall paintings with geometric patterns and a depiction of the king with his servants and prisoners (Kertai 2015, 43).

3 Unfortunately, we do not know what was stored in these rooms, but their primary function seemed to have been protection against humidity (Kertai 2015, 195).

4 The Standard-Inscription mentions the ancestry of the king and his achievements as a king (Paley 1976, 125-133). There is no clear explanation of its function, but several interpretations are given by Russell (1999): 1. The inscription served as a label of property (229); 2. The inscription was a means of decoration (229-300); 3. Since the Standard-Inscription bears a royal message, it was used to give every room and/or monument a royal appearance (300).

5 *Genii* are apotropaic figures, who are often depicted assisting the king while performing rituals (Black and Green 1992, 86). The king can also be assisted by his servants, which were all eunuchs.

6 The Sacred tree is often associated with purification rituals, when seen between two *genii*, or depictions of the king. However, three interpretations of the Sacred Tree exist: 1. It represents the 'tree of life' known from Genesis 2-3; 2. It represents a stylized date palm; 3. It is not a tree at all, but a cult object (Giovino 2007, 2-3).

7 A *lamassu* is an apotropaic figure which has a bull or lion body, and a human head and wings.

8 Suggested further reading: Kertai 2014.

9 Paley and Sobolewski (1987, 76, 78-79) identified thirty reliefs that presumably originated from the west-wing, but were not able to assign these to particular rooms. Some of these reliefs could have also been located on the north-wall of the throneroom.

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