Women in Neo-Assyrian Iconography: Social Roles and Representations

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WOMEN IN NEO-ASSYRIAN ICONOGRAPHY: SOCIAL ROLES AND REPRESENTATIONS

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research

Analysing the existing literature on the iconography of Neo-Assyrian women reveals that certain areas have been extensively studied, while others remain underexplored. While some research has addressed the general artistic representation of Neo-Assyrian women, there is still a lack of focused analysis on the specific styles and techniques used to distinguish female from male figures in visual art. This gap highlights the need to more closely examine how gender was constructed, communicated and reinforced through iconography. Gender is not simply a biological category in this context, but a cultural and ideological construct expressed through visual language. This thesis takes the opportunity to explore how artists conveyed gender distinctions through visual elements. By doing so, it aims to contribute to broader discussions on gender roles and representation in Neo-Assyrian society and understand how power, status and identity were visually encoded through gendered imagery.

Moreover, the literature is limited in terms of comprehensive studies on symbols specifically associated with women. Studying this aspect could show insight into societal views on women's roles and femininity.

When looking at political roles of women, we see the existing research extensively mentioning the political influence of elite women. Melville studied the dynamics between royal female and male Assyrians and argues that even elite women, while their influence was undeniable, were not 100% independent and were always supporting a male figure (2004, p. 57).

Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of how artistic depictions reflect the social status of Neo-Assyrian women remains underdeveloped. While much of the existing academic literature focuses on queens and elite women, there is less attention on how lower-status women are represented in iconography. Thus, there is a potential for original research here. It presents an opportunity to contribute new insights. By analysing how different social classes of women are depicted and omitted in Neo-Assyrian art, light can be shed on aspects of gender and class dynamics that scholars have overlooked and a more nuanced understanding of the everyday lives and statuses of Neo-Assyrian women could be provided.

In conclusion, certain aspects of iconography on Neo-Assyrian women have been studied. However, there are notable gaps, especially concerning gender distinctions in art, symbolic associations and representations of non-elite women. I will compare and contrast depictions of royal women versus common women and analyse iconographic details (clothing, jewellery, posture, activities) that may

indicate status. I will also at underrepresented groups, like enslaved women or lower-status labourers, to see if they appear at all in visual records. I will also discuss eunuchs in comparison with females. By focusing my thesis on these underexplored areas, I could add valuable insights.

My main research question is: *''How does Neo-Assyrian iconography, as seen in palace orthostats and a bronze relief, depict women across different social roles, and what can this reveal about their status and gender in Neo-Assyrian society?''*

First, I will discuss five case studies presenting artworks depicting females and eunuchs and share iconographic analyses of academics. Subsequently, to answer the main question, I will answer the following sub questions:

- *How are women differentiated from other marginalized gender categories, particularly eunuchs, in terms of visual markers and spatial positioning?*
- *To what extent do Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs reflect, reinforce, or construct contemporary gender ideologies?*
- *In what ways do symbols in Neo-Assyrian iconography reflect the roles and status of women, and how do examples of women depicted with masculine features inform our understanding of gender fluidity and power in elite Assyrian contexts?*
- *How do depictions of women across social contexts (royal, elite, foreign, enslaved) reflect their status and challenge Assyrian gender norms?*

1.2. Methodology

This thesis employs iconographic analysis to qualitatively examine the representation of women in Neo-Assyrian art. That is the close examination and interpretation of visual imagery, symbols and stylistic elements in order to explore how women were portrayed. The focus on iconography provides insights that textual sources alone may not reveal, particularly regarding societal perceptions and artistic conventions.

The data collection process involved consulting a variety of sources, including academic journals, scholarly books and online museum collections. These sources provided both contextual information and access to visual materials essential for the analysis.

Furthermore, the selection of visual artworks was conducted with the aim of representing a comprehensive cross-section of Neo-Assyrian society. The primary materials analysed include palace orthostats but I included one bronze relief to add value to the major lines of discussion. To ensure a balanced examination, artworks depicting women from various social roles were sought. These roles encompass depictions of queens, wives, mothers, slaves, and servants.

Additionally, analysing artworks that depict foreign captives could be relevant because these captives became part of Neo-Assyrian society as slaves or servants. Many female captives were assimilated into the empire as slaves, servants or concubines. These women were forced into Neo-Assyrian households or labour systems. Moreover, Assyrian inscriptions suggest that foreign women were taken into Assyrian household, sometimes even serving in palaces – which will be analysed more in chapter 2: Case studies.

Furthermore, I looked at how these female captives were represented in the artworks. If the artwork explicitly shows them as captives (e.g. in chains, being led away), then their representation might be more about conquest rather than their role within Neo-Assyrian society. By contrast, if I find depictions of these women working (e.g. weaving, carrying goods, serving food), then it is stronger evidence for their presence in Neo-Assyrian daily life.

Moreover, the analysis focused on identifying recurring motifs, symbols and stylistic elements associated with each social role. Interpretations were made within the broader historical and cultural context of the Neo-Assyrian period, ensuring that conclusions drawn are grounded in established scholarly discourse. This approach facilitates an understanding of how women's roles and statuses were visually communicated and perceived in ancient Assyrian art.

However, certain limitations of this methodology must be acknowledged. One significant limitation is the potential scarcity of visual depictions of women, particularly those from lower and middle social classes. The available artworks often exhibit an overrepresentation of elite women, such as queens, which may skew the overall interpretation of women's roles in Neo-Assyrian society. Additionally, the interpretive nature of iconographic analysis carries the risk of subjective bias, especially when dealing with ambiguous or symbolically complex imagery. These limitations were considered throughout the research process to ensure a cautious and reflective approach to interpretation.

The chapter outline will be as follows. After this introduction follows chapter 2 on case studies, where I will present five case studies with different representations of women in the Neo-Assyrian visual landscape. Eunuchs will also be discussed.

Next is chapter 3: Iconographic analysis, where I will start with discussing how women are differentiated from eunuchs in Neo-Assyrian art in subchapter 3.2.1. Then, in subchapter 3.2.2., gender ideologies are discussed. After that, social roles, representation, and examples of women depicted with masculine features will be reviewed in subchapter 3.2.3. Finally, in subchapter 3.3.1., I will reflect on how imagery of women across different social contexts suggest their status and challenge Assyrian gender norms.

In chapter 4 there will be a conclusion where I will evaluate what my results are in relation to my literature review, following the abstract of this paper in chapter 5.

1.3. Background

1.3.1. The Neo-Assyrian period

The Assyrian time period is one of the most well-documented era's in archaeology. Especially the Neo-Assyrian time period, which is known for its great empire and influential kings, art and iconography, architecture, material culture and inscriptions.

Assyria lies in the middle Tigris valley in northern Iraq (Macgregor, 2012, p. 2). The Neo-Assyrian Empire arose in the 10th century BC, building upon the foundations of the earlier Middle Assyrian Kingdom (Sinha et al. 2019, p. 1). Lasting roughly from 1353 to 609 BCE, Assyria relocated its capital four times within the same cultural and administrative framework. This repetition, unusual in ancient empires, allows for meaningful comparison of capital development over time, making Assyria a rare and informative subject for examining the dynamics of capital creation. The Assyrian capitals offer some of the most comprehensive archaeological records for examining the development of ancient capital cities. The Middle and Neo Assyrian periods mark the two principal imperial phases in Assyrian history, when the empire grew substantially in power and territory. The city of Aššur served as the traditional and original capital at the core of the Assyrian state (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 30).

The emergence of Assyria as an imperial power is generally understood in two distinct stages. The first stage includes the initial fifty years of territorial expansion, beginning with the reign of Aššur-dan II from 934 to 912 BCE and continuing through the rule of Tukulti-Ninurta II, who reigned from 890 to 884 BCE. The second stage involves the founding of Kalḫu and the formal rise of Assyria as an empire under the leadership of Ashurnasirpal II, who ruled from 883 to 859 BCE, and his successor Shalmaneser III, whose reign lasted from 858 to 824 BCE (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 67).

Following a period of decline often referred to as the dark ages, Assyria began its second major phase of imperial expansion, which continued for over three centuries, from 934 to 609 BCE (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 58). Driven by an ideology centred on universal domination, the empire expanded swiftly through sustained military campaigns and a system of enforced tribute. By the early seventh century BC, Assyria had established itself as the dominant power in the Near East, with territorial control extending from central Anatolia in the north, westward to the Mediterranean and Egypt, and eastward to the Persian Gulf and the western Iranian plateau (see Fig. 1) (Sinha et al. 2019, p. 1). This era, known as the Neo Assyrian period, marked the transformation of Assyria into the most extensive empire the world had known up to that time (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 58).

The empire's core territory formed a triangular zone in northern Iraq, bounded by the city of Aššur (modern Qalʿat Šerqāṭ) to the south, Nineveh (modern Mosul) to the north, and Arbela (modern Erbil) to the east (Sinha et al. 2019, p. 1).

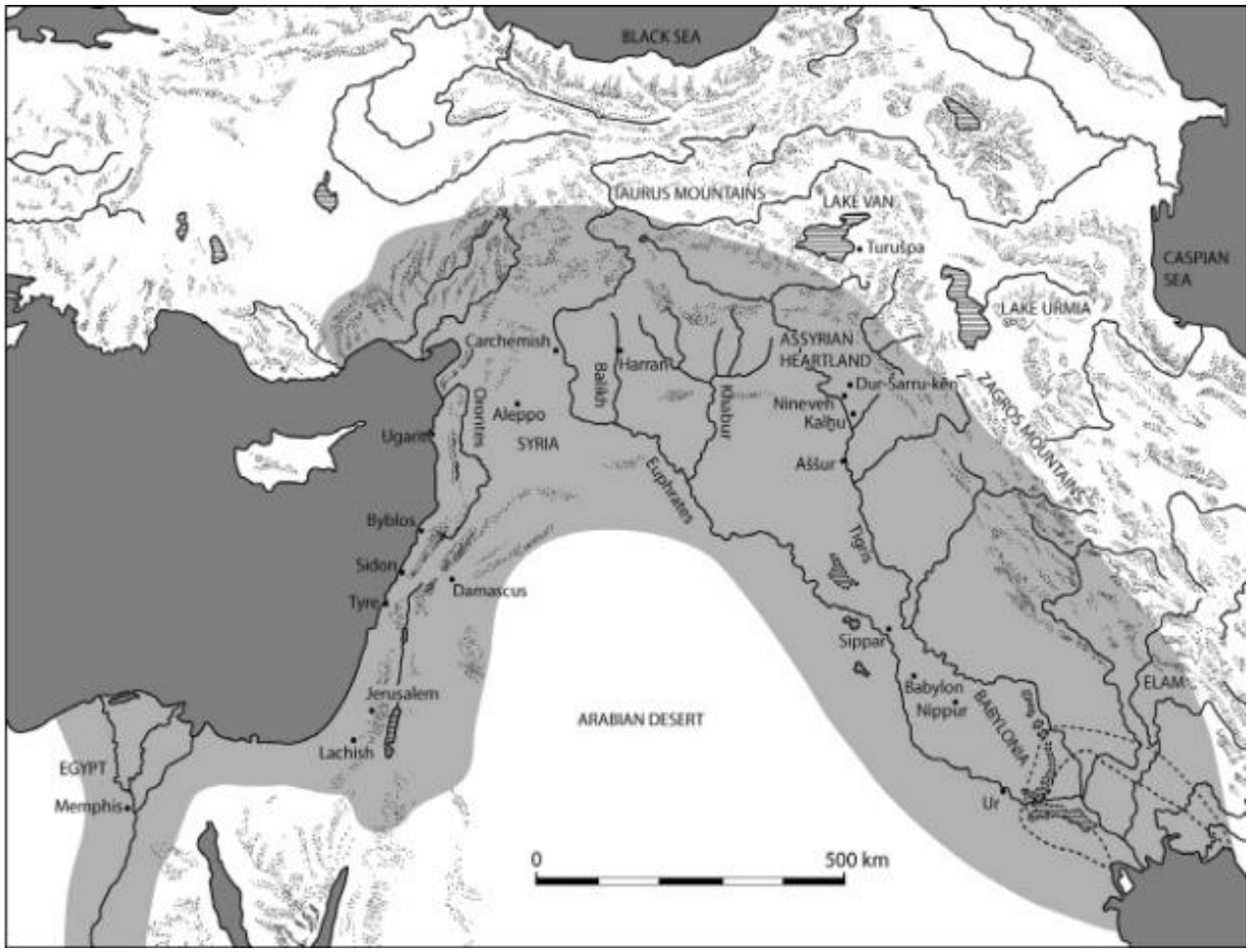

Figure 1: The Neo-Assyrian Empire at the peak of its power (7th century BC). The empire dominated most of the Near East (Yoffee, 2015, p. 471, Figure 23.1).

The Assyrian Empire established four successive capitals over time, founding new urban centers at Kār Tukultī Ninurta, Kalḫu, Dur Šarrukēn and Nineveh (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 184). Excavated primarily for architectural layout, Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta reveals key features of Late Bronze Age capital planning, including a walled citadel, monumental and religious buildings, and canals, elements later seen in Neo-Assyrian cities (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 38).

Kalhu (Nimrud), excavated since the 1840s, was a major 9th–8th century BCE capital. Its citadel housed the North-West Palace (royal residence), the Central Palace (Ashurnasirpal II), and Fort Shalmaneser. It was larger than Assur and the first to include a secondary military palace (Politopoulos, 2020, pp. 60, 82). Dur-Sharruken (Khorsabad), Sargon II's short-lived capital, lacked full excavation. Its centralized citadel reflects administrative planning, but the city was abandoned after

Sargon's death, and the capital moved to Nineveh (Politopoulos, 2020, p. 103). However, between 614 and 612 BC, the core cities of the empire were attacked. The fall of Nineveh and the destruction of the Temple of Ashur signalled the collapse of the Assyrian Empire (Yoffee, 2015, p. 470). Centralized rule, succession struggles, and the burden of maintaining large cities and armies weakened the empire. Nearby capitals strained agriculture and required complex food distribution systems (Yoffee, 2015, p. 471).

In this context, a key feature of Assyrian imperial policy was the large-scale deportation and resettlement to control conquered people (Macgregor, 2012, p. 2). During this period, the women of the Assyrian palaces lived in a wealthy society connected to regions across the empire and abroad, exposing them to foreign artists, entertainers, goods and materials (Macgregor, 2012, p. 3).

1.3.2. The women of Assyria

Assyrian women had active social, economic and religious roles. However, historical- and iconographic data on Assyrian women is scarce. Assyrian archaeology is predominantly associated with male figures and the elite. The existing archaeological record on Assyrian women mainly shows royalty and higher entities but priestesses, mothers, wives, servants and slaves are often less represented. This is because the elite was more visible in artistic- and iconographic works (Lion et al., 2016, p. 5).

Women were legally categorized as daughters, wives, or widows, with the rights and restrictions they faced depending largely on their social status. As mothers, they held greater status and property rights, while childless women remained more vulnerable and transferable within family structures (Démare-Lafont, 2003, p. 11).

The Middle Assyrian Laws include a rule, that only free women were allowed to cover themselves with a veil in public spaces. This right did not extend to slave women or unmarried temple attendants. If a slave woman wore a veil, she could be punished with severe penalties such as having her face disfigured or her clothing forcibly removed. Men who failed to report such cases could also be punished. In palace reliefs, women shown as captives or fugitives who were about to become enslaved appear frequently, while women from Assyrian society are largely absent. The act of showing a woman's face, whether in person or in images, was seen as exposing her to shame or dishonour. The ability to remain unseen and maintain privacy was a privilege given mainly to free women, especially those of higher rank (Svärd, 2018, p. 280).

Moreover, femininity is often viewed as passive and obedient, but the palace evidence presents a different picture. The material suggests that social status had a greater impact on an individual's role

and duties than their gender. This indicates that elite women were subject to a different set of expectations and norms (Svärd, 2015, p. 455).

What we also see in the Neo-Assyrian time period is that the male gender is so dominant that it went as far as male-gendering the Neo-Assyrian queens (May, 2024, p. 378). In the case study of Ellie Bennett we can see the male-gendering of foreign queens. The “Queens of the Arabs” were portrayed by Neo-Assyrian scribes and artists not as typical royal women, but in ways usually reserved for foreign male rulers. Although they were recognized as women, their roles and depictions followed masculine conventions because they were seen as foreign kings. This blend of gender and foreign identity made their authority more acceptable to the Assyrians. Their portrayal supported Assyrian ideas of power, where even women who ruled had to fit into a masculine framework. As a result, these queens were represented as women performing masculine roles and should be understood as gendered masculine within the Assyrian imperial worldview (2022, p. 96).

1.3.3. Iconography in archaeology

In order to understand how ancient societies used images to express their traditions, beliefs and social systems, archaeologists can use iconographic analysis to recognize and organize visual symbols. Also, scholars can gain deeper insights into the common ideas, patterns and ways of life and values of past societies (Hartwig, 2015, p. 78).

Understanding an artwork’s broader artistic and historical context is key to decoding its significance. Iconography also explores representation through examining what figures and symbols convey and their cultural meanings. It seeks to answer questions such as: What does a particular depiction or written symbol on an object represent? What cultural meanings are communicated through these representations?

Human figures and religious imagery are especially significant in archaeological iconography, providing a window into the symbolic language of past cultures.

Iconographic analysis involves the interpretation of visual elements such as figures, motifs, spatial arrangements, and their placement within an architectural setting in order to understand their symbolic or ideological meaning. Irene Winter emphasizes that both the images on the wall reliefs and their specific spatial context must be examined together to fully grasp their function within Assyrian palace architecture (1983, p. 15).

In her analysis of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Winter demonstrates that the throne room was not simply decorated with isolated scenes, but carefully organized into a structured visual program. Each visual unit contributed to a larger ideological message. The style, composition, and

repetition of images function as iconography, where meaning emerges from the entire arrangement rather than from individual depictions alone. Visual focus is placed on the figure of the king, but the overall program communicates authority and divine sanction on behalf of the state itself (Winter, 1983, p. 28).

Winter ultimately argues that the throne room serves as a visual and architectural microcosm of the Assyrian empire. Its imagery, spatial logic, and symbolic content present a unified message of royal power, divine legitimacy, and political order. The iconographic program does not merely illustrate history but constructs a visual rhetoric that elevates the king as the central agent of both divine will and imperial success.

In conclusion, iconographic analysis offers archaeologists and historians an important method for understanding how visual culture conveyed the values, beliefs, and structures of ancient societies. As Irene Winter's study of the Northwest Palace illustrates, examining both imagery and spatial context reveals how art served a purposeful role in expressing political authority and divine legitimacy. Through this approach, artworks are seen not merely as decoration, but as integral to communicating and shaping the identity and ideology of a society.

2. Case studies

2.1. Introduction

Neo-Assyrian art offers a glimpse into the empire its social, religious and political structures, providing insight into the roles and representations of women. This chapter presents one relief and three palace orthostates depicting women in different capacities: queens, captives and ordinary figures. Also, a discussion on eunuchs and how they can be differentiated from women is being presented, since there is a similarity in their appearances. These case studies highlight how women were portrayed, briefly discuss gender representation and the meanings embedded within these depictions. First, I will discuss the iconographic features of the art and briefly link visual elements to meaning in each case study. Then, I will discuss the different interpretations of several scholars. I will focus more on symbolic interpretation in chapter 3.
By discussing these case studies, we can better understand the research of scholars and the archaeological record on gender and the status, identity, and symbolism of women in Neo-Assyrian society.

2.2. Ashurbanipal and his wife

2.2.1. Iconographic features

Assyrian palace orthostates seldom portray women, but there exists a rare amount that falls under the reign of King Ashurbanipal that only displays elites in royal surroundings (Miller, 2021, p. 88).

The renowned relief of King Ashurbanipal and his queen offers a rare glimpse into royal life during the Neo-Assyrian period (see Fig. 2) (645–635 BC). Set in a lavish garden, this scene captures a moment of triumph and leisure. Unearthed in the North Palace of Nineveh, Iraq, the carved gypsum relief now resides in the British Museum (The Banquet Scene, 645BC-635BC).

We see as central figures King Ashurbanipal reclining on a couch with a footstool under his feet and raising a cup. Opposite to him, we see the queen also holding a cup, sitting upright in a high-backed chair. She is adorned with elaborate dress and headdress. It seems that the king is shirtless. The couple is surrounded by hanging grapevines, trees (likely date palms) and vine-covered arches, suggesting they are in a garden. A table appears near the queen, piled with items. To the left there are several attendants or servants standing, holding fans and possibly instruments. Both the king and queen have two attendants behind them fanning them. And on the very left, in front of the attendant with the harp, a severed head is hanging from the tree.
The king reclining on the couch conveys a sense of peace, power, and royal privilege, while the seated queen's rare visibility underscores her elite status. The garden setting symbolizes divine favour and order, creating a serene backdrop. Meanwhile, the hanging head serves as a reminder of military conquest, and the presence of servants and attendants highlights the established social hierarchy.

Figure 2: The Banquet Scene (645BC-635BC). Ashurbanipal and his queen celebrate victory over the Elamites (British Museum, museum number: 124920, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-53).

While the relief suffered from damage and weathering and does not contain extensive inscriptions, we can still see remarkable details on the artwork. King Ashurbanipal is sitting on a couch in an uplifted and relaxed pose. He is holding a cup in one hand, symbolizing wealth and triumph. The figure opposite to Ashurbanipal sits upright but low down on a chair holding a goblet while looking at the king. Ponchia et al. (2024, p. 10) refer to the figure sitting opposite the king as his spouse and denote this scene as a special occasion. Macgregror (2012, p. 33), Stol (2016, p. 535) and Gansell (2014, p. 402) also refer to the figure opposite to Ashurbanipal as his queen, Libbali-sharrat.

Moreover, in his work ''Assurbanipal's feast'', Barnett (1985, p. 5) discusses the sitting position of the queen who is sitting aside the king. Throughout time and regions, different opinions exist on what is considered appropriate for a queen or priestess to show on an artwork, in contrast to the husband. Never has a queen been portrayed beside a king before this artwork in Assyria. Stol (2016, p. 535) argues that the Assyrians could have seen this way of portrayal in Egypt and have implemented it back home. Gansell (2014, p. 409) argues for a potential erotic scene in the Banquet Scene because of the bed on which the king lounges. A bed is a remarkable element in Assyrian iconography and one of the few examples available, which is why this argument has been made. Svärd (2015, p. 77) also discusses that the scene has been interpreted as a ''private setting'' and emphasizes the queen's prominent role and the ensuing prosperity that resulted from a triumphant military campaign. Another interpretation is from Collins (2006, p. 99), who argues that the scene reflects femininity and fertility, suggested by the presence of date palm trees. This connects to broader views outside Assyria, where a woman sitting beside her husband or occupying his chair was interpreted in various ways. Some considered it inappropriate or unacceptable, while others viewed it as suggestive of a sexual context.

The scene is also attended by entertainers playing music and servants waving fans and serving food. Macgregor (2012, p. 33) interprets the relief as depicting an ensemble of female musicians approaching the king and queen from the left, identifying all attendants as women. She argues that at least seven female instrumentalists performed for the royal couple in the garden, with the musicians shown playing their instruments while processing calmly toward them.
Macgregor debates further that they are dressed in imitation of the queen. The attendants and queen share similar hairstyles, with wavy hair covering the neck and resting on the shoulders. The musicians wear plain headbands, unlike the queen's mural crown. Their clothing features roll collars,

decorative cuffs, and ankle-length hems, with plain fabrics contrasting the queen's ornate patterns. Their status is marked by jewellery, foot coverings and fringed shawls.

The relief shows all figures on the same ground line, facing the royal couple in profile at equal scale. Those closest to the king and queen overlap, partially obscuring one another (2012, p. 35). The remaining attendants appear fully visible, with greater individuality shown in figures farther from the royals. This scene is exceptional as the only known depiction set in the queen's gardens and one of just two surviving reliefs showing Assyrian (rather than foreign) female musicians (Macgregor, 2012, p. 36).

In terms of academic interpretations, I can conclude that there are contradictory opinions regarding the Banquet Scene. Many scholars discussed this artwork as it is one of the most popular works under Ashurbanipal, the last great ruler of Assyria. Not many scholars have dived deep into analysing the queen in this Banquet Scene, but some academics acknowledged the queen's presence and the scene being organized around her rather than the king.

2.3. Relief plaque of Queen Mother Naqia

2.3.1. Iconographic features

Among the few exceptional artworks depicting women in elite settings during Ashurbanipal's reign, there exists a unique piece that predates his rule: the bronze relief plaque of Esarhaddon's mother, Naqia (Miller, 2021, p. 89). This object stands out not only for its subject matter but also for its medium and function, offering a rare example of a woman of royal status represented in Neo-Assyrian bronze.

The plaque presents two figures in profile. On the right is a male figure, likely King Esarhaddon, identifiable by his tall conical crown or headdress, a staff held in his left hand, and his bearded face. On the left stands a female figure, most likely Queen Naqia, who raises her right hand and holds an object, possibly a mirror, in her left. She too wears a headdress, and both figures are dressed in long robes. The entire background is inscribed with cuneiform script, though the edges of the plaque are broken, leaving the piece incomplete.

Figure 3: Relief plaque of Queen Mother Naqia and her son King Esarhaddon (680BC-669BC). A decorative covering fragment with Esarhaddon and Naqia (Louvre Museum, museum number: AO 20185, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010120474).

This remarkable artifact was produced during Esarhaddon's reign (680–669 BCE). Though often described as a relief, it is in fact a bronze cultic object, not a palace orthostat. The Louvre Museum, which acquired the *Relief plaque of Queen Mother Naqia and her son King Esarhaddon* (680BC-669BC) in 1955, records that it was discovered in Assyria and likely originated in a sacred setting, possibly associated with the sanctuary of the Assyrian national god. The relief depicts a solemn scene of prayer between the king and his mother, a moment of devotion enriched by ritual symbolism. In this case, the identity of the queen is not in doubt: her name, Naqia, is inscribed on the gown of the female figure (Svärd, 2015, p. 77). The king is shown with a traditional Assyrian tiara and a short-

sleeved tunic, while holding a mace, a clear symbol of royal authority. Queen Naqia wears a regal diadem and a flowing tunic, holding a mirror, an object that may have carried both ritual and symbolic meaning. The *Relief plaque of Queen Mother Naqia and her son King Esarhaddon* (680BC-669BC) itself is made of cast bronze, weighs 14 kilograms, and measures 33 cm in height and 31 cm in width, with a plate thickness of 4 cm and an overall depth of 6.5 cm.

Bronze representations of women from the Neo-Assyrian period are exceptionally rare. In fact, only two such bronzes are currently known: the royal plaque of Naqia and the protective plaque of the demoness Lamashtu (Louvre AO 22205). By contrast, stone reliefs and ivory carvings more frequently depict women such as priestesses or goddesses. The rarity of female imagery in bronze, especially elite women, makes the Naqia plaque particularly significant. Typical Neo-Assyrian bronzes usually depict kings, deities, animals, or demons, and were primarily intended for devotional or protective use, rather than for decoration or commemoration. Their visual style conforms to established royal and ritual conventions, with figures presented frontally or in profile, modestly dressed, and holding symbolic objects.

Unlike the palace orthostats that lined the walls of Assyrian residences and administrative buildings, the *Relief plaque of Queen Mother Naqia and her son King Esarhaddon* (680BC-669BC) functioned as a separate cult object. It was acquired by Louvre agents in Syria in the late 19th century, and museum records confirm that it is not a palace relief but a ceremonial panel. Its likely function was sacred, possibly as a temple offering or altar decoration, suggesting a deliberate association between the queen-mother and divine favour.

Gender representation plays a central role in this piece. According to Gansell, facial features were key in distinguishing gender in Neo-Assyrian art. A soft, rounded face with full cheeks, a defined jawline, and a pronounced chin were all indicators of feminine beauty. These traits are visibly emphasized in the bronze plaque of Naqia (Gansell, 2014, p. 402), wife of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE) and mother of Esarhaddon.

The mirror held by Naqia adds further symbolic depth. In the ancient Near East, mirrors were associated with both mortal and divine women. While they had practical uses, they also carried religious significance and were often dedicated as temple offerings or used as attributes of goddesses (Albenda, 1985, as cited in Gansell, 2014, p. 405). The presence of a mirror in Naqia's hand may thus signify her royal status or underline the ritual nature of the scene (Macgregor, 2012; Melville, 1999, as cited in Gansell, 2014, p. 405).

Gansell also notices a mural crown on the relief of Naqia (2014, p. 411). The depiction of a mural

crown, resembling the walls of a fortified city, may have conveyed the strength and sacredness of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It could also have signified the safeguarding of the royal city, the palace, and the queen's living area, while additionally serving as a representation of her own integrity (Börker-Klähn, 1997; Ornan, 2002, as cited in Gansell, 2014, p. 411).

Altogether, scholars interpret this bronze plaque as a rare depiction of Assyrian royal femininity. Naqia's soft facial features, her ritual mirror and mural crown collectively mark her as an elite woman linked to divine favour and imperial power (Gansell, 2014). The piece highlights the crossing of art, power and gender in Neo-Assyrian representation.

2.4. Female prisoners

2.4.1. Palace orthostat with a parade of prisoners

2.4.2. Iconographic features

This scene features three women on the left, one child and one armed man. The figures are in profile, a typical convention in Assyrian art. All the women are shown in long dresses. The women on the most left and right show breasts. All women have long hair. Their simplified, repetitive depiction suggests depersonalization, they are not individuals but representations of the defeated enemy's population. The women and child hold one hand to their heads, a gesture of mourning or despair. This is a standard visual convention in Assyrian art used to depict captives or people in mourning. The child only has underwear on. He is smaller in scale, emphasising his vulnerability, and holds up one hand while being touched on the head by the woman in front of him (likely his mother). On the far right, an Assyrian soldier stands in military attire with a pointed helmet, a beard, and weapons (a sword and a bow over his shoulder). He holds a rod or mace, possibly a symbol of control or authority. He appears to be guiding or guarding the captives.

Figure 4: Siege and capture of a city; deportation of prisoners with women and children in carts (865BC-860BC). Women, a child and cattle join a parade of prisoners during Ashurnasirpal II's siege (British Museum, museum number: 124552, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1849-0502-6?selectedImageId=354564001).

This gypsum wall panel (865–860 BCE), excavated from the North-West Palace of Nimrud, shows the story of Ashurnasirpal II's military campaigns (see Fig. 4). Measuring 304.8 centimetres in width, the relief captures two simultaneous narratives of Assyrian domination: the systematic humiliation of captives and the brutal assault on a fortified town. While the right side of the relief depicts the violent assault on an enemy town, the left side reveals a quieter but equally charged scene: the systematic procession of prisoners, among whom were women and a child (*Siege and capture of a city,* 865BC-860BC). The image of this controlled march, accompanied by livestock and supervised by armed soldiers, visually asserts the empire's capacity not only to conquer but also to displace and manage subject populations.

2.4.3. Babylonian captives

2.4.4. Iconographic features

At the centre of the scene is a two-wheeled cart drawn by a pair of oxen, likely used for transporting human captives. Seated inside are two women, depicted in profile, wearing long garments and head coverings. The middle woman is bigger in profile than the other two figures. Their raised hands, possibly clutching their clothing, may suggest fear or distress. Behind them stands a child or young servant, shown upright and apparently nude, which emphasizes his vulnerability. The child or young servant appears to wear a cap, different from the long head coverings of the two women, and the grouping may represent a mother with her son and daughter. The little girl holds a water-skin in her left hand. Ahead of the cart, a herd of cattle is shown moving forward, with a date palm tree in the background adding a sense of landscape. Above the main group, flocks of goats or sheep are being herded forward, indicating that livestock, along with people, were taken during military campaigns. Although not visible in this cropped view, scenes of this kind typically include armed Assyrian soldiers, asserting control.

Figure 5: Babylonian captives and battering rams during the aftermath of a siege (728BC). A Neo-Assyrian relief panel of Babylonian captives and battering rams under Tiglath-Pileser III (British

Museum, museum number: 118882, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1849-0502-6?selectedImageId=354564001).

This gypsum relief, measuring 99 centimetres in height and 290 centimetres in length, dates to the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (728 BCE) during the Neo-Assyrian period (see Fig. 5). Excavated from the Central Palace in Nimrud, the relief depicts the capture and relocation of people and animals. The Although this scene forms only the left section of a larger composition, the full relief illustrates a moment of deportation from the military campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III in southern Mesopotamia (*Babylonian captives and battering rams during the aftermath of a siege,* 728BC).

These visual representations (see Figures 8 and 9) are part of a larger composition that shows the result of conquest through the regular deportation of populations during the Neo-Assyrian period. According to Oded, mass deportations became a consistent strategy within Assyrian imperial policy, serving as a primary tool for maintaining control over conquered populations and leading to significant political, demographic and cultural impacts. The Assyrians' deportation methods included moving men together with their families, grouping them by origin and cultural identity, a practice that is vividly represented in reliefs where women and children appear in orderly lines (1979, p. 2).

As Miller notes, these scenes consistently emphasize the vulnerability of foreign subjects, especially women and children, who appear more frequently in deportation imagery than male fighters or elites. They are often shown under the control of the Assyrian military as captives in passage or civilians caught in siege settings. While these images underscore a clear power imbalance, it is notable that explicit acts of violence against these women and children are seldom depicted (2021, p. 88). This absence may suggest a deliberate artistic strategy, designed to contrast Assyrian control with subdued foreign submission, rather than reflect the full reality of imperial encounters.

Miller argues that the frequent inclusion of women and children in such reliefs contributes to a gendered ideological framing: foreigners are feminized and infantilized, while Assyrians are almost exclusively portrayed as elite, armed men (2021, p. 89). However, this feminization should not be taken at face value as a literal statement about women's passivity or insignificance. Rather, it may reflect how Neo-Assyrian art strategically employed gendered imagery to symbolize broader ideas of conquest, vulnerability, and imperial order. While the figures of women and children are undoubtedly framed as suppressed, their presence also communicates the comprehensive nature of Assyrian domination, one that extends beyond the battlefield into the realm of civilian life and cultural identity. In this sense, their depiction can be read not only as passive, but also as essential to the imperial narrative.

2.5. Eunuchs and gender differentiation

2.5.1. Iconographic features

The scene presents a carefully composed courtly procession, centred on a high-ranking official, possibly the king, who is positioned prominently on the left. He is shown drinking from a bowl, a gesture that suggests ceremonial or ritual significance. Around him are attendants identified as eunuchs, based on their beardless faces, rounded features, elaborate hairstyles, muscular underarms and richly detailed long garments. Their close proximity to the central figure and their calm, dignified bearing signal their elevated status within the palace hierarchy. Also, all figures wear earrings.

Among these figures, one eunuch holds a parasol above the central figure. Another carries a fan or fly-whisk. One attendant wears a quiver slung over his shoulder, while another has a towel draped across his chest, possibly indicating ritual duties or a role in maintaining the comfort of the king (*The aftermath of the bull hunt of Ashurnasirpal II,* 875BC-860BC). The central figure holds a cup in one hand and a bow in the other, a combination that may symbolize both ceremonial authority and military achievement. Below him lies a dead bull, a likely reference to a successful hunt or conquest.

To the right, two bearded figures with a more serious and frowned look, are adding a musical element that enhances the ritual tone of the scene. One figure in front of them walks with folded hands, a gesture that conveys composure and deference, perhaps identifying this person as another eunuch or a female court member. All eunuchs (except the one folding his hands) are carrying weapons, either a crossbow or a sword.

The combination of music, ceremonial posture, and formal dress contributes to the visual impression of a structured and hierarchically ordered palace environment. The eunuchs in this relief are portrayed as integral participants in the projection of royal authority.

Figure 6: The aftermath of the bull hunt of Ashurnasirpal II (875BC-860BC). Ashurnasirpal II celebrating after a bull hunt in relief (The British Museum, museum number: 124533, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1849-1222-18?selectedImageId=372294002).

In ancient Nimrud, this relief was unearthed within the grand North-West Palace. It was carved during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II between 875 and 860 BC. Measuring 93 centimetres in height, 225 centimetres in width and 9 centimetres in thickness, it is intricately incised and accompanied by cuneiform inscriptions that announce the king's military conquests and divine favour (*The aftermath of the bull hunt of Ashurnasirpal II,* 875BC-860BC).

In Neo-Assyrian court, eunuchs occupied a distinct and powerful role. Although male, their status was marked by both physical and social differentiation from other men. Castration was often performed before puberty and resulted in physiognomic traits that included smooth, rounded faces, plump cheeks and a lack of facial hair. These attributes closely resembled those of elite women in Assyrian art, occasionally leading to confusion in identifying certain figures (Ziffer, 2023, p. 77). Compared to the king's idealized masculinity, which was communicated through a full beard, muscular form, and commanding gaze, eunuchs stood out as deliberately stylized embodiments of an alternative male identity (N'Shea, 2016, p. 215).

Importantly, Neo-Assyrian sources make a clear distinction between elite court eunuchs, such as those depicted in the relief, and individuals castrated as punishment for sexual transgressions, the latter of whom held no status in courtly representation or political life (Ziffer, 2023, p. 77). The eunuchs featured in palace art were not marginal figures; rather, they were central to the execution of administrative, ceremonial and military affairs. Their privileged roles are emphasized by their

placement immediately behind the king in visual compositions, what N'Shea (2016, p. 217) interprets as a sign of high social rank.

Their attire further affirms their elite standing. Despite their physiological differences, eunuchs dressed in garments almost identical to those of the king and other hypermasculine figures. They wore clothes with tasselled fringes, jewellery such as bracelets and earrings, and carried daggers, the latter being signifiers of authority and masculinity. Additionally, eunuchs are often depicted with folded hands in presentation scenes, a pose associated with respect and courtly respectability (N'Shea, 2016, p. 216).

The soft, feminized features of eunuchs should not be read as markers of weakness. Rather, they were the result of hormonal restructuring from prepubescent castration, which altered body fat distribution and skeletal development. These characteristics, including their shorter stature and rounded figures, were deliberately employed by artists to distinguish eunuchs from the masculine, fully-bearded men in the palace environment (N'Shea, 2016, p. 215).

This visual ambiguity has at times led to interpretive challenges. In one notable example, Schmidt Colinet (1997), as cited by Ziffer (2023, p. 77), proposed that the figure shown banqueting with Ashurbanipal (see Fig. 2), who was previously identified as a queen, may in fact have been a trusted eunuch. Likewise, servants in similar scenes have been variously interpreted as eunuchs or women, further illustrating the complexity of gender representation in Neo-Assyrian art. In chapter 3.2.1. I will explain further how you can differentiate eunuchs from females.

The depiction of eunuchs in these palace reliefs offers more than a record of courtly ritual. It reveals a carefully structured ideology of service, control, and political intimacy. Eunuchs embodied an in-between identity that made them ideal instruments of royal authority. As figures who were biologically male yet visibly distinct from normative masculinity, they were uniquely positioned to serve as loyal agents of the king's will.

Their visual presentation, marked by elegance, order, and discipline, helped to construct a broader narrative of imperial control. Within the strict hierarchies of the Neo-Assyrian state, eunuchs represented the inner machinery of power, visible reminders that the strength of empire was not only built on conquest but also maintained through carefully managed relationships and visually codified loyalty (N'Shea, 2016, p. 217).

3. Iconographic analysis

3.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the visual representation of women in Neo-Assyrian art through an iconographic lens. Focusing on four key research questions, it analyses how artistic depictions reflect, reinforce, or challenge gender norms across different social contexts. The study investigates recurring symbols associated with women, potential masculine attributes in female depictions, the ways in which these images communicate social status and a discussion on eunuchs. This chapter establishes a foundation for understanding how gender ideologies were visually constructed in Assyrian art.

3.2. Gender distinctions in Neo-Assyrian art

3.2.1. How are women differentiated from other marginalized gender categories, particularly eunuchs, in terms of visual markers and spatial positioning?

Neo-Assyrian palace orthostats systematically represent women and eunuchs as existing beyond the core masculine power structure and political elite. However, their visual depictions construct different social identities. Traditionally, figures with beards are described as men. Beardless figures, except priests, women and children who can usually be recognized without difficulty, are described as eunuch (Reade, 1972, p. 91). However, visual evidence shows that beardless figures and female figures often look similar.

Beardless figures, primarily eunuchs, feature prominently in Neo-Assyrian royal iconography where they perform various court functions (Reade, 1972, p. 91). Ninth and eighth century reliefs consistently show eunuchs positioned near crown princes and thrones, demonstrating their privileged access to royalty (Reade, 1972, p. 95). Under rulers like Sargon and Ashurbanipal, eunuchs appear with greater frequency in depictions of both palace life and royal hunts, signalling their institutionalized role in elite circles (Reade, 1972, p. 97).

Reade also observes that some eunuchs wore decorative headbands (1972, p. 94). Iconography shows eunuchs dominating the king's inner circle, identifiable by their formal court dress. This attire differs from the mail armour worn by eunuchs in military roles alongside regular soldiers. During

Ashurbanipal's reign, reliefs depict female attendants in long robes and wide headbands near the queen (Fig. 2), suggesting they belonged to her royal household (Reade, 1972, p. 100).

When comparing the female attendants of Ashurbanipal's Banquet Scene (figure 2) and the eunuchs in Figure 6, I see both groups shown with short, curly hair and similar headbands and no facial hair. I do notice a difference in body type within the two groups. Both groups wear long dresses and have the same body form, but the female attendants in figure 2 have less muscular arms than the eunuchs in Figure 6 and do not show breast contours. Also, the female figures have more rounder, fuller faces and the eunuchs have more masculine jawlines. Both groups seem to wear earrings as well but no necklaces. The female figures all wear bracelets for certain but for the eunuchs I cannot say this for sure.

Further contrasts emerge when examining other depictions of women. The female figures in Figure 4 display longer hair and visible breast contours, while those in Figure 5 wear long veils and assume passive seated postures, unlike the eunuchs in Figure 6, who are engaged in active roles. Notably, these markers remain consistent even in scenes of deportation, regardless of social rank.

Spatial positioning further distinguishes these groups. The women in the Banquet Scene (Figure 2) appear in a domestic or ritual setting, whereas the eunuchs (Figure 6) are situated within a military context. Although female captives in Figures 8 and 9 are atypically depicted in a martial scene, their portrayal as subdued figures contrasts sharply with the eunuchs' active participation. In terms of interaction with other figures in the scene, we see the women in Figure 2 in a group with other females in servitude but the elite figure opposite king Ashurbanipal is rendered larger than her subordinates. In contrast, the eunuchs in Figure 6 are shown with weaponry, holding a parasol, a fan and one is folding his hands, and they are all in close proximity to soldiers. Eunuchs serving in officer roles appear in artistic representations across multiple periods. During Ashurbanipal's reign, eunuchs appear particularly in hunting scenes where they are frequently shown mounted and equipped with various weapons.

Across all periods, eunuchs are commonly portrayed on foot holding items such as sunshades, fans, or towels. A smaller number are illustrated carrying cups. In the ninth century, these eunuchs often appear armed, sometimes with maces (Reade, 1972, p. 100). Eunuchs occupied elite positions within the Neo-Assyrian empire and were closely connected to military leadership, a sphere deeply associated with Assyrian masculinity. Contrary to later Western interpretations that cast them as diminished or incomplete men, Neo-Assyrian evidence presents eunuchs as a socially respected gender category (Miller, 2021, p. 89).

Neo-Assyrian iconography differentiates women from eunuchs through visual markers in terms of bodily features and in some cases clothing, hairstyles and adornment. Women were often depicted in private, ritual settings and deportation processions while eunuchs were frequently shown in public, military and administrative roles. This visual differentiation served ideological objectives by maintaining strict gendered labour divisions. Women were systematically marginalized, while eunuchs functioned as instruments of imperial administration due to their unwavering loyalty to the king and their perceived non-threatening nature as servants.

3.2.2. To what extent do Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs reflect, reinforce, or construct contemporary gender ideologies?

The palace orthostats mirror, strengthen and create gender hierarchies through calculated visual strategies, as demonstrated by the five case studies. The Banquet Scene in Figure 2 exemplifies this process through its representation of the queen. The woman seated opposite King Ashurbanipal is generally assumed to be queen Libbali-sharrat. If we accept that the figures behind her are also female, we observe one woman playing music while others fan and serve the king and queen, depicting them in servant and musician roles. Macgregor (2012, p. 124) contends that the musicians in this scene are exclusively female. These performers often played in ensembles, which were sometimes all female but frequently mixed gender. The presence of female musicians performing publicly alongside men indicates they were neither segregated nor limited to female audiences. Considering the prestigious contexts in which they performed, such as state and sacred ceremonies attended by royalty and the court, only the most skilled professionals would have been deemed suitable. Therefore, these roles must have been filled by highly trained female musicians.

The palace orthostats in Figures 8 and 9 contrast two gendered paradigms: the passive, orderly procession of captive women and the violent aggression of the Assyrian army. Bahrani (2001, p. 78) notes how Neo-Assyrian artists framed femininity through images of passive captivity, while Winter (1997, p. 365) demonstrates how corresponding representations of oversized, aggressive warriors visually naturalized masculine domination. This gendered contrast was further emphasized through systematic differences in figure scaling, with foreign women's smaller proportions marking their subordinate position.
Yet the art does not merely mirror social norms, but it strengthens them through systematic contrasts.

However, the reliefs also construct ideological exceptions. The near-total absence of Assyrian women from state imagery obscures their documented political influence, as seen in the case of queen Naqia in Figure 3, who managed financial and institutional power (Svärd, 2015, p. 59). The limited

appearance of Queen Naqia in palace reliefs, despite her depiction on at least one relief, demonstrates how Neo-Assyrian art systematically emphasized the king's narrative while marginalizing representations of powerful women (Svärd, 2015, p. 103). This selective visual representation reveals an ideological preference for portraying royal authority as exclusively masculine, even when historical evidence confirms women's political influence. By excluding elite Assyrian women while emphasizing foreign women's suppression, the art crafts a gendered narrative of imperial identity: Assyrian masculinity as invincible and foreign femininity as a symbol of conquered space.

Furthermore, the beardlessness of the eunuchs marked them as trusting because they are non-threatening, enabling their curated portrayal as ideal bureaucrats. They complicated the male/female binary in Assyrian art. In ritual scenes, the domestic depictions of Assyrian women (like the Banquet Scene) show how gender roles were selectively represented, like with Libbali-sharrat's banquet appearance, exposing art's ideological filtering (Macgregor, 2012, p. 47).
The reliefs reflect core ideologies such as male dominance and highlight them through visual exaggeration and construct an imperial fantasy where gender roles serve state interests. As Bahrani claims, *"representation was never neutral, it was the act of conquest itself"* (2001, p. 81).

3.2.3. In what ways do symbols in Neo-Assyrian iconography reflect the roles and status of women, and how do examples of women depicted with masculine features inform our understanding of gender fluidity and power in elite Assyrian contexts?

Neo-Assyrian visual culture systematically divided gender roles along binary masculine and feminine ideals through codified iconography. Male figures, particularly kings, warriors, and officials, were depicted with beards, weapons, and dynamic postures that emphasized their active roles in statecraft and warfare. The sole exception to this masculine paradigm appeared in depictions of eunuchs, whose beardlessness marked their distinct social category. Conversely, feminine representations, whether portraying queens or foreign captives, were characterized by veiled heads, domestic settings, and passive poses that visually emphasized their association with private rather than public spheres.

However, exceptional portrayals of queens Naqia and Libbali-sharrat in Neo-Assyrian art provide compelling evidence for gender-role fluidity among elite women, particularly through their appropriation of traditionally masculine iconography. These rare representations challenge the empire's typical gender binary and reveal nuanced power dynamics.

For example, *The Banquet Scene* (Figure 2) portrays Libbali-sharrat enthroned, which is a composition

normally reserved for kings, while sharing the king's space during a state ritual (Svärd, 2015, p. 80). Her seated posture and scale (larger than attendants) appropriate royal iconography. This selective adoption of masculine-coded power symbols demonstrates how elite women navigated gender expectations.

Similarly, a bronze relief (Figure 3) depicts Naqia mirroring King Esarhaddon's ritual posture: both figures extend their right hands to their noses in identical gestures of worship (Svärd, 2015, p. 77). While their left hands hold gender-coded objects (king's mace vs. queen's mirror), the symmetrical composition elevates Naqia to near-parity with royal masculine power. This visual parallelism is particularly significant given her documented involvement in traditionally male-dominated spheres like divination and temple provisioning (Svärd, 2015, p. 54–55).

These case studies reveal a deliberate artistic strategy. There is *selective masculinization* where queens adopted kingly attributes (crowns, thrones and ritual postures) only in contexts where their roles demanded heightened authority. Finally, there is elite exceptionalism since such fluidity was exclusive to royal women: captive and non-elite women remained strictly feminized. As Svärd notes, their visual parity in ritual scenes implies "negotiated power relationships" (2015, p. 59) that temporarily overrode gender norms.

Also, there is ideological suppression in the relief with Naqia with careful gender repression and her mural crown further blurs gender boundaries. Its battlement design and occasional central cone deliberately echo the king's crown, suggesting a symbolic claim to structural power typically reserved for male rulers (Svärd, 2015, p. 79), while her mirror maintains feminine symbolism. Such iconographic borrowing indicates that elite women could temporarily transcend conventional gender roles when their ritual or political functions required it.

In Ashurbanipal's Banquet Scene (see Fig. 2), there is an example of a woman portrayed with masculine attributes. The queen is wearing a polos crown, which is typically male-associated. Also, she is reclining while feasting, and this is usually a pose reserved for kings. She also hold a lotus which is a symbol of royal power and also seen in male hands. This is a rare case of a queen mirroring kingly iconography, gesturing her elite status. Her authority however derives from her role as consort, not autonomy. This scenery is an exception on the typical segregated gender roles in Neo-Assyrian art and suggests a nuanced power dynamic since the queen is depicted with masculine traits.

Naqia, mother of King Esarhaddon, stands as the most extensively documented queen and royal mother of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The historical record confirms her active involvement in religious

affairs throughout the empire (Svärd, 2015, p. 54). The significant bronze relief (Figure 3) depicts Naqia participating alongside the king in important rituals, demonstrating her religious authority. Her involvement in divination, temple provisioning, and ritual oversight parallel the king's own religious responsibilities (Svärd, 2015, p. 55).

While some scholars argue that the king's mother held no independent authority and that her prominence depended entirely on royal favour or manipulation (Melville; Ben-Barak, as cited in Svärd, 2015, p. 59), the evidence of Naqia's substantial religious and economic activities suggests a more complex dynamic of shared power.

Although the relief depicting Naqia survives only in bronze fragments, its composition likely showed both the king and queen advancing toward a deity. Naqia's posture and presentation appear to closely mirror that of the king, although the use of bronze as a medium may have influenced how she was depicted, both in form and in intended meaning. Both figures hold an object to their nose with their right hands, while their left hands grasp distinct symbolic items: the king wields a mace, whereas Naqia holds a mirror. The juxtaposition of mace and mirror may represent complementary divine principles of masculinity and femininity (Svärd, 2015, p. 77). As this relief constitutes the only known Neo-Assyrian representation of a queen holding a mirror, its exact significance cannot be conclusively determined. However, Naqia's depiction as a figure of central importance, ritually paralleling the king, emphasizes her unique role. Her presence was clearly integral to the relief's ideological purpose.

Only two queens, Naqia and Libbali-sharrat, can be conclusively identified in extant visual sources. Most remarkably, both figures are portrayed utilizing insignia and iconographic elements that were normally exclusive to kings, a conscious artistic decision that emphasizes their exceptional position within the royal power structure (Svärd, 2015, p. 80).

While Neo-Assyrian art overwhelmingly enforced gender binaries, these queenly exceptions demonstrate that elite women could symbolically appropriate masculine power markers when their roles required ideological legitimation. This carefully circumscribed fluidity underscores how gender norms were strategically relaxed for those at the empire's highest classes.
Neo-Assyrian visual culture applied specific symbols to imply femininity, status and ritual roles for women, ranging from standard markers of domesticity to elite symbols. These representations appear in both royal and non-royal contexts, strengthening gendered ideologies while occasionally enabling expressions of power.

First, veils will be discussed as markers of feminine modesty and social status. In the *Prisoners of war* scenes, we see captive women wearing veils. They are often depicted wearing veils, signifying their femininity and suppression. I also noticed a water-skin carried by a young girl in Figure 5. Water-skins sometimes appear with women in Assyrian art, but they do not specifically represent femininity. Their meaning depends on the situation: whether showing work, rituals or daily life, not gender (Bahrani, 2001, p. 112-115).

In the Banquet Scene, we see attendants wearing headdresses, though theirs were often finer and paired with jewellery, marking their elite status (Svärd, 2015, p. 89).

Secondly, the lotus flower is depicted and symbolizes fertility and royalty. In the Banquet Scene, Libbali-sharrat holds a lotus flower, tied to fertility, regeneration and divine favour (Winter, 1983, p. 15). The lotus may also refer to the queen's role in ensuring dynastic continuity, as floral motifs were associated with royal legitimacy (Ornan, 2002, p. 45). Collins (2006, p. 99) interprets the scene through a gendered lens, positing that the date palm trees serve as iconographic markers of feminine fertility. This vegetal symbolism, he argues, transforms the visual story into a celebration of reproductive power within the royal context.

Two notable interpretations of the queen in the Banquet Scene offer contrasting perspectives. Stol asserts that *"the queen has all the attributes of a lady in her position"* (2016, p. 535), while Gansell argues that her full, round, and soft facial features symbolize ideal female beauty, in contrast to the king's face that is mostly covered by his beard (2014, p. 402). However, I find these interpretations unconvincing because the servants in the scene are depicted with nearly identical facial features to the queen. If the queen's appearance was truly intended to signify her elevated status or idealized beauty, one would expect greater visual distinction between her and the attendants. Instead, the lack of differentiation suggests that facial features in Assyrian art may have followed conventional artistic norms.

Thirdly, the mirror is shown and symbolizes ritual power and feminine identity. In Naqia's relief, she is holding a mirror, which is rare but significant. Mirrors were associated with goddesses such as Ishtar and symbolized both beauty and ritual purification and suggesting Naqia's ritual authority (Svärd, 2015, p. 77).

Furthermore, the mural crown is also depicted and suggests queenship and military imagery. It is unique to queens to wear this. The mural crown resembles city battlements and is linked to royal women to the defence of the empire. Typically a masculine symbol, its use by elite women like Naqia transcended gender norms (Svärd, 2015, p. 79).

Finally, jewellery and adornments also appear on elite women in the forms of bracelets, necklaces and broad headbands (like in the Banquet Scene in Figure 2) which shows a clear distinction with the female captives in Figures 8 and 9 who did not wear them (Reade, 1972, p. 100). Some jewellery designs mirrored those worn by goddesses, subtly associating queens with divinity (Winter, 1983, p. 18).

The visual symbols associated with Neo-Assyrian women functioned along a variety of gendered representation. Common markers like veils and mirrors upheld traditional feminine ideals tied to domesticity and beauty. In contrast, elite women strategically employed insignia such as mural crowns and lotus flowers to appropriate symbolic attributes typically reserved for masculine or divine figures, which blurred the gender boundaries. This selective iconography demonstrates how royal women navigated between prescribed gender roles and the exceptional status demanded by their political and ritual positions (Svärd, 2015, p. 81).

3.3. Social status and representation in Neo-Assyrian imagery

3.3.1. How do depictions of women across social contexts (royal, elite, foreign, enslaved) reflect their status and challenge Assyrian gender norms?

Neo-Assyrian iconography provides critical insights into the hierarchical, gendered, and politically instrumentalized status of women in Assyrian society. Through an analysis of elite and foreign women as well as their interactions with eunuchs, we can reconstruct a system where women's visibility and roles were controlled by state ideology.

Libbali-sharrat's prominence in the iconographic record may reflect her elevated status at court. In any case, her role closely parallels that of Naqia (Svärd, 2015, p. 60). Royal women such as Queen Naqia and Libbali-sharrat held significant symbolic value and exercised political influence, although they lacked formal authority. The palace orthostat and bronze relief where they are depicted on, are examples of reliefs showing royal women in religious or dynastic contexts, but never in military or administrative roles (Bahrani, 2001, p. 131-135). Libbali-sharrat raising her hands and holding a cup is linked to fertility and Naqia wearing regalia signifies their elite status, forming status markers. According to Bahrani, the presence of elite women in the art highlights their domestic roles while celebrating victories they did not participate in and argues that Assyrian art constructs a *''gendered division of labour''* (2001, p. 142-143). Royal women held symbolic and maternal authority but were excluded from overt political power. Their portrayal served to legitimize male rule. Elite women were status symbols, valued for their association with wealth and domestic order but denied public agency.

The captive women in Ashurnasirpal II's reliefs did not have individualized features but represented ''foreignness'' rather than personhood (Bahrani, 2001, p. 158). The women in the relief are depicted with careful attention to their gendered roles. Their attire, likely long robes with head coverings, distinguishes them from male captives, while their body language, such as bowed heads and clenched hands, emphasizes their subjugation. The inclusion of a child, possibly clutched by one of the women, adds to their vulnerability. Foreign women were props in imperial propaganda and their depictions justify Assyrian expansion and aggression.

Svärd (2015, p. 60) explains that Naqia and her son helped legitimize each other's power. Their relationship shows a two-way exchange of status, which doesn't fit the usual top-down hierarchy of Assyrian royalty.

4. Conclusion

The depictions of women in Neo-Assyrian art reveal a complex interplay of power, gender and propaganda, where social status influenced visibility and symbolic function. While Neo-Assyrian art consistently portrays women as passive or secondary players, closer analysis uncovers contradictions, such as Naqia's political influence or female musicians' public roles, that challenge gender norms. Royal women (Naqia, Libbali-sharrat) appear as legitimizing agents, while foreign women are dehumanized symbols of conquest. Women are differentiated from eunuchs through visual markers in terms of bodily features and in some cases clothing, hairstyles and adornment. Elite women's roles are decorative, yet female musicians challenge strict gender segregation.

Moreover, I faced contradictions between the symbolic power of elite women and their visual marginalization. For instance, while Svärd (2015) emphasizes queens' political roles, the palace orthostats depict them passively, suggesting a dissonance between historical reality and propaganda. I also observed how symbols such as veils, children and musical instruments were used to encode status and gender expectations. The Banquet Scene's female musicians (Macgregor, 2012, p. 124) further challenge assumptions about women's exclusion from public life. Their presence alongside men suggests gendered roles may have been more fluid in cultural contexts than in political ones. This aligns with Svärd's (2015, p. 60) argument that power relations could be reciprocal, even if art idealized female passivity.

As Svärd argues, gender is not an inherent trait but a social construct: a perspective especially useful for studying Neo-Assyrian society due to the scarcity of direct archaeological evidence on gender in Mesopotamia. Instead, the available records reflect social behaviours, all of which contributed to the construction of gender. To gain deeper insight into gender dynamics and its formation in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it is essential to analyse representations of both masculinity and femininity (2015, p. 14). This iconographic analysis decoded how art constructed social hierarchies by researching motifs such as veils, posture and instruments. Comparing elite and non-elite depictions (queens vs. captives) helped to uncover Assyria's gendered power dynamics. The methodology uncovered patterns in artistic representation, but these findings must be contextualized within the biases and standards of Neo-Assyrian visual culture.

At the same time, this research encountered several limitations that must be acknowledged. Certainly, there have been significant constraints in the available visual evidence on Neo-Assyrian women, including fragmentary material, scarcity of depictions, and the underrepresentation of non-

elite women. A major challenge was the elite bias in the surviving record.
Most palace orthostats centred around royalty or conquests. Imagery of non-elite Assyrian women are rare and give an incomplete perception of Neo-Assyrian daily life. Even the labour scenes where women are serving portray idealized or foreign women. Furthermore, the fact that most of these artworks were produced by and for elite men introduces an inherent bias into the visual narrative.

The nature of iconography itself also presents interpretive challenges. Inferring meaning from visual elements is not always straightforward, and my interpretations are subject to the limitations of available data and methodological subjectivity. After my analysis, I often found myself questioning whether the art reflected an ideology or propaganda rather than being social reality, which raises a broader question: Do the artworks reflect Assyrian society or its ideological self-portrait? My methodology exposes this tension but cannot fully resolve it.

Because this thesis prioritizes visual evidence, I deliberately limited engagement with textual sources. Nonetheless, I did encounter relevant texts that provided additional layers of interpretation, regarding Naqia for instance, but I tried my best to focus on visual sources for this thesis. However, I do realize textual sources occasionally contradict art or complicate the narrative suggested by the art. Therefore, I recommend further studies that incorporate textual, archaeological, and visual data to form a more comprehensive understanding of women's roles in Neo-Assyrian society. As Macgregor (2012, p. 2) argues, a multidimensional approach is essential, especially when examining underrepresented groups such as non-royal women and priestesses.

Neo-Assyrian iconography presents a thoroughly structured visualisation of gender roles that served the empire's ideology. Through analysis of four palace orthostats and one bronze relief, this thesis has addressed the research question: “How does Neo-Assyrian iconography, as seen in palace orthostats and a bronze relief, depict women across different social roles, and what can this reveal about their status and gender in Neo-Assyrian society?”.

This study reveals how depictions of women and eunuchs supported social hierarchies while enabling limited exceptions for elite women. The artworks consistently associate Assyrian masculinity with warfare and leadership, while femininity is linked to domesticity or vulnerability; a contrast most evident when comparing images of Assyrian soldiers with those of foreign captives.
Royal women occupied a unique position in this visual system. Queen Naqia's bronze plaque (Fig. 3) shows her participating in royal rituals with her son Esarhaddon. Her mirror and mural crown symbolizing both feminine sacred authority and borrowed masculine power symbols. The art associated Assyrian masculinity with warfare and kingship, while femininity was tied to weakness

(Bahrani, 2001). Royal women like Naqia and Libbali-sharrat uniquely appropriated masculine symbols with mural crowns, ritual postures and thrones (Figs. 6-7). This careful use of symbols gave elite women some power, briefly allowing them to cross traditional gender roles (Svärd, 2015).

Similarly, the Banquet Scene (Fig. 2) depicts Libbali-sharrat enthroned beside Ashurbanipal. Her posture and lotus flower suggest ritual importance. While these representations granted royal women visibility, they were carefully limited to dynastic or ceremonial contexts, never showing them in military or administrative roles. These symbols maintained social rankings but allowed royal women some power.

The presence of female musicians in the Banquet Scene provides another notable exception. Their public performance challenges assumptions about strict gender segregation (Macgregor, 2012).

Foreign women received dramatically different treatment in Neo-Assyrian art. Deportation scenes (Figs. 8-9) systematically depict them as anonymous captives, often shown with children to emphasize vulnerability. Unlike royal women, these figures lack individual identity, serving instead as propaganda tools that justified Assyrian expansion (Miller, 2021). Their consistent portrayal as passive and defeated contrasts sharply with images of Assyrian warriors.

Eunuchs complicate this binary system. Though visually similar to women in their beardlessness, they wielded significant authority as palace officials and military officers (N'Shea, 2016). Their iconographic resemblance to women often blurs gender distinctions in artistic representations. Their representations in reliefs like Figure 6 show them occupying spaces between traditional gender categories. These in-between roles show that Assyrian art allowed some exceptions when it benefited the empire.

The case studies collectively demonstrate that palace orthostats were not neutral but ideological tools. While they generally enforced strict gender roles, subtle variations like Naqia's ritual authority or Libbali-sharrat's enthronement, reveal where reality may have diverged from propaganda. These exceptions are particularly significant because they show elite women negotiating power within the system's limits.

Scenes like Ashurbanipal's banquet (Fig. 2) and deportation processions (Figs. 8-9) established binary oppositions: Assyrian hyper-masculinity versus foreign feminized vulnerability (Bahrani, 2001; Miller, 2021). The artwork presented imperial control as natural while downplaying women's actual political role (Svärd, 2015).

Ultimately, this thesis concludes that Neo-Assyrian art used visual representation as an instrument of control. By analysing how different groups (royal women, foreign captives and eunuchs) were

represented, we gain new understanding of how gender functioned in Neo-Assyria. The findings not only illustrate Assyrian society but also demonstrate how art was used to shape perceptions, with implications for studying gender representation in other imperial contexts. Yet the small amount of power given to queens, along with the unclear portrayals of eunuchs, show that this strict system was not perfect. These exceptions suggest there was more to gender roles than just royal propaganda.

6. Abstract

This thesis examines how Neo-Assyrian palace orthostats and one bronze plaque depicted women across different social roles and what these representations reveal about gender and status in Assyrian society. Through iconographic analysis of artworks, including the Banquet Scene of Ashurbanipal, Queen Naqia's bronze plaque and deportation reliefs, the study shows that women's portrayals were wisely created to serve state interests. Royal women like Naqia and Libbali-sharrat were shown in sacred roles to legitimize the empire, often holding ritual objects like mirrors or sitting beside kings. Elite women appeared as models of domestic life, though rare examples like female musicians suggest some public roles. Foreign women were deprived of individuality, depicted only as conquered captives with children, emphasizing Assyria's military dominance. Eunuchs, while visually similar to women in some reliefs, held administrative power, operating between gendered spaces as trusted administrators.

The analysis addresses gaps in existing research by comparing depictions of royal, elite and foreign women, as well as eunuchs. It finds that Neo-Assyrian art imposed strict gender hierarchies: men were linked to warfare and leadership, while women were bound to domestic or ritual roles. However, exceptions like queens wearing mural crowns or sitting on thrones show restricted flexibility for elite women. These cases suggest negotiated power, where royal women appropriate masculine symbols when needed. Foreign women had no such exceptions since their images served only as propaganda.

Methodologically, this study combines analysis of visual signs (posture, clothing, symbols) with critical engagement of scholarly research. It highlights how art both reflected and constructed gender norms, often exaggerating differences to boost imperial ideology. While most reliefs present a fixed view of gender, the small but significant exceptions, like Naqia's ritual authority or the female musicians, reveal cracks in this system. These findings contribute to broader debates about representation and power in ancient empires, showing that Neo-Assyrian art was not a neutral record but a tool of control. Next to focusing on elite women, observations are also done on often-overlooked groups like non-elite women and eunuchs. This way, the thesis offers a more complete understanding of gender dynamics in one of history's most visually advanced dynasties.

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