THE ASSYRIAN PALACE AND RELIEF CARVING
CHAPTER ONE

ROYAL RHETORIC AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IN NEO-ASSYRIAN RELIEFS

Definitions

While “story” is a major component in narrative, the terms are not synonymous. Story evokes content. Narrative, however, demands that one address oneself at the same time to both content and structure—what Culler (1975:244) would call the means by which “the end is made present throughout the work”; and what Chatman (1979:176) has called discourse: “the expressional means of presenting content.” Narrative, then, is structured content, ordered by the “telling” which is a necessary condition of the form.

The genre seems inextricably tied to words: oral or written, fiction or nonfiction. Even when narrative is pursued into the visual realm, the notions of word and story remain, as does the frequent assumption of a text behind the images (Weitzmann 1957, 1970; Schapiro 1973:9). Stimulated by analyses of contemporary visual media and their impact, however, I should like to re-examine an ancient situation in which, although “event” may be interchangeable with “story,” similar principles of sequence and flow appropriate to narrative (i.e., content plus telling) pertain; yet the text exists parallel to rather than behind the image, and the totality of images itself creates a “narrative space.”

I speak of a particular segment of the ancient Mesopotamian world: the Neo-Assyrian period, for which monuments have been preserved roughly from the ninth through the seventh century B.C., and during which time there was an extraordinary flowering of “historical narrative” in the representational art associated with royal palaces. To better understand this phenomenon, it is essential to deal not only with the givens of the narratives themselves but also with the “storyteller” behind