CHAPTER TWO

ART IV EMPIRE: THE ROYAL IMAGE AND THE VISUAL DIMENSIONS OF ASSYRIAN IDEOLOGY

As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, it is important to note that studies in the visual arts of Assyria have also come a long way in the past ten years. The primary publications of the Assyrian marbles over the past century and a half have set the stage for the current crop of work, bringing the texts to bear directly on the visual record. Indeed, it may be observed that the texts are no longer the exclusive domain of historians and philologists, while the images are equally no longer the exclusive domain of archaeologists and art historians. What has been amply demonstrated over the past 25 years, and especially in the past ten, is, on the one hand, that one simply cannot look at the verbal domains of information and not include the visual in the larger universe of cultural communication; and, on the other hand, that one cannot restrict study of the visual to merely


establishing chronology and articulating formal properties. Rather, the visual domain contains within it primary information, as well as unique structures of knowledge—oftentimes in parallel or complementary with, occasionally even quite distinct from, the textual record. Consequently, the visual needs to be studied with the full analytical arsenal available to us—art historical, archaeological, anthropological, and textual—and on its own terms.2

The signs for the future are good. There is a new crop of students at work on dissertations in both the visual and the textual/historical field, whose studies depend both on language and visual analysis, such that we may be optimistic about progress in probing the role of and the meaning contained in the Assyrian visual record. And that, of course, is the message: that, in order to progress, students of art history and archaeology must be adequately trained in language, just as students of history and philology must equally be adequately trained in archaeology and analysis of the visual, so as not to use materials

2 In the productive methodological cross-overs these last ten years have witnessed, I cite but a few of the more recent scholars working in the field: first, John Russell has made use of the textual record in his initial study of the palace reliefs of Sennacherib—particularly the combination of domestic internal building projects and foreign policy contained in the decorative program of the major courtyard VI (see J. M. Russell, “Bulls for the Palace and Order in the Empire: The Sculptural Program of Sennacherib’s Court VI at Nineveh,” *Art Bulletin* 49 (1987), 519–37 and *Sennacherib’s Palace without a Rival at Nineveh* (Chicago, 1991), and he will soon publish a study of all of the places, e.g., thresholds and doorway sculptures, where inscriptions were placed in the Assyrian palace, suggesting that the texts participated as much as the imagery in the powerful visual display of the royal buildings—cf. *The Writing on the Wall*…. (Eisenbrauns, in press); second, Michelle Marcus in her work on Neo-Assyrian geography, investigates the role played by representations of terrain in articulating a Neo-Assyrian rhetoric of rule through metaphors of topographical mastery and possession (M. I. Marcus, “Geography as an Organizing Principle in the Imperial Art of Shalmaneser III,” *Iraq* 49 (1987), 77–90, and more recently, “Geography as Visual Ideology: Landscape, Knowledge, and Power in Neo-Assyrian Art,” in M. Liverani, ed., *Assyrian Geography* (Rome, in press); third, Barbara N. Porter has made use of the visual record in elucidating the reign and times of Esarhaddon and other Assyrian rulers—particularly as Assyrian rulers consciously used imagery along with texts to address their audiences (see B. N. Porter, unpublished paper, “Ceremony and Power: Royal Basket-bearing in the Reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal;” and “Sacred Trees, Date Palms and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II,” *JNES* 52 (1993), 129–39); fourth, Pamela Gerardi has worked on how the small captions known as epigraphic texts function when they are included as part of the narrative scenes on reliefs (P. Gerardi, “Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs: The Development of the Epigraphic Text,” *JCS* 40 (1988), 1–35).