Although I work in a field geographically more than three thousand miles away and more than a millennium and a half earlier than the events of the Icelandic sagas, my connection to the work of William Ian Miller is foundational: Miller is my father and therefore my earliest academic mentor. His influence might explain how I have ended up, despite my temporal and geographical distance from his own field, with a shared interest in the bloodier side of history. This article will deal with topics that Miller has touched on in his own work, including the meaning and value of severed body parts, the ambiguity of messengers and their messages, and the intentions and worldview behind pre-modern texts.

In this article I look at the royal narratives of the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian empire (c. 911–605 BCE), Ashurbanipal (668–c. 627 BCE). With a heartland in what is now northern Iraq, the Neo-Assyrian empire under Ashurbanipal reached from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, the Zagros Mountains through the Levant down into Egypt. Starting in the 1840s, successive Neo-Assyrian capitals began to be uncovered by French, British, and German excavators, revealing a material past for a civilisation that had previously been known mostly through garbled (and unfavourable) Biblical and Greek sources. Royal inscriptions of Assyrian kings in stone or on clay formed the basis of the decipherment of cuneiform, the world’s first writing system, and the language Akkadian, an East Semitic language related to West Semitic Ugaritic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.1 The earliest excavations also uncovered Assyrian palace reliefs, limestone slabs with shallow carvings that adorned the walls of Assyrian palaces. These were highly coveted by European powers, although they were generally considered to be of little artistic merit.2

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1 Cuneiform texts written in Sumerian, a linguistic isolate which was long dead as a spoken tongue by the Neo-Assyrian period, would not be deciphered until much later and are still much more poorly understood than Akkadian texts.
This initial assessment saw the texts and art of Assyrian palaces as simplistic and highly stereotyped propaganda. However, a century and a half of scholarship has shown that reliefs, annals, and epigraphs were in fact dynamic forms of communication which evolved in style, content, and purpose over the period of the empire. Innovation is particularly apparent in the works of Ashurbanipal's reign. His reliefs exhibit previously undeveloped narrative techniques and subject matter, while his royal inscriptions show notable literary influences and a strong interest in Assyria's ancient past.

The culmination of Ashurbanipal's artistic and narrative innovation is generally agreed within the discipline to be represented by the palace wall reliefs and accompanying texts that deal with the Battle of Til-Tuba (c. 653) and the beheading on the field of Teumman, king of Elam (a traditionally hostile nation based east of the Zagros Mountains in modern-day Iran) as well as subsequent campaigns against Elamite allies in southeast Babylonia, the region to the south of the Assyrian heartland and part of its sphere of imperial control. This narrative, particularly in its visual form, is structured around Teumman's severed head, the image of which appears repeatedly across the reliefs of two palaces, sometimes attached to his body, more often not. Although Teumman's head is notable for its prominence in these visuals and in written narratives that discuss its treatment, it is not the only severed head to play a role in the account of the campaigns against Elam and its allies. Across a handful of royal sources about these events composed during Ashurbanipal's reign, severed heads appear in a variety of contexts and evidently serve a variety of purposes, although there are certain common features of how they are presumed to function.

The sources which feature the story of Teumman's and other enemies' heads are of several types, with different editions within these types. As outlined in Table 1, there are both visual and textual narratives of several forms. These include the shallow reliefs carved on palace walls (in this case, the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, built by Ashurbanipal's grandfather Sennacherib, r. 705–681, but renovated during his reign and, to a lesser extent, the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh). Some of these wall reliefs contain so-called

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