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Art of Power in the Ancient World

Both the relief of Assurnasirpal II killing lions (875 - 860 BCE) and the Arch of Constantine (315 AD) were commissioned during a consolidation of the power of a ruler. In the early 9th century, Assurnasirpal II marked his reign by establishing a new capital city, Kalhu. The relief was created to put in his new palace in Kalhu. The arch was commissioned by the senate to mark Constantine's victory in the recent civil war. The two pieces are very different in the manner that they convey the power of the rulers, however. Assurnasirpal shows himself, in low relief, flanked by soldiers as he positions to slay a lion. The arch, on the other hand, showcases panels of high relief from works from different periods that depict victories of past rulers as well as scenes of Roman mythology. The panels created in Constantine's time for the arch, also in high relief, illustrate parts of Constantine's campaign against Maxentius, though not his final victory in Rome. Despite the differences in how the arch and the relief convey power, they are similar in that they reference the ruler's power over the empire somewhat indirectly.

The relief's narrative and composition both relate Assurnasirpal's militaristic strength. One knows that Assurnasirpal II is the subject from his central location and elevation over his soldiers. Assurnasirpal's form completely obscures the chariot driver, the only figure at his level. The low relief helps to make this hierarchy rigid—no background confuses the order in which the figures are displayed. This scene captures the moment right before Assurnasirpal II releases the arrow. This pose shows both his physical strength in drawing the bow and his collectedness in the

face of a powerful opponent. The fact that his soldiers are present references his controll as a commander though he faces the lion without need of their assistance. The piece manages to relay these qualities of Assurnasipal as a general even though it is actually shows a ceremonial lion hunt.

The Arch of Constantine is unique among triumphal arches as it celebrates a victory of Romans against Romans. The designers of the arch thus had the task of stressing Constantine's victory and current hold on the empire without emphasizing fighting between Romans. By using spolia, the designers used Rome's rich cultural, artistic, and military history to help convey Constantine's controll. In scenes created for historic Roman triumphs, the past emperors' head were rechisled to resemble Constantine. This sends the aggressive message that Constantine rules as absolutely as all past rulers. The subject matter of these taken panels- which mixes real historical events and interactions between emperors and Roman gods- both avoids focusing on recent violent battle scences and shows Constantine as a figurehead of Roman traditional religion.

The panels created after Constantine's victory show a slightly more abstract style than the reused ones. In the frieze of Constantine addressing the Roman people, the positioning of figures follows a more rigid order than the scenes in tondi above. The people of Rome lack any distinguishing features, and the senate sits raised slightly above them flanking Constantine. The relief contains only enough depth to convey the size of the crowd rather than attempting to realistically portray the event. The freize depicting the Siege of Verona displays the same style. In front of the city walls, three soldiers are shown with shields raised in identical poses. The walls of Verona rise in front of them to a comically small height, a top which the opponents stand with arms raised in a throwing position. The poses of all soldiers are not dynamic- all those fighting look like static forms placed in on a

stage. Again, the artists did not make an effort to realistically portray events. Like the spolia, this symbolic artwork shows some events from Constantine's campaign without conveying the gory details of the war.

In their different ways, Constantine's arch and the relief of Assurnasirpal II portray power in a nuanced way. Of course, the arch is much more clear example of propaganda, but this is partly because these pieces were intended for very different audiences. The relief was a part of the Kalhu palace, so it would have been seen by privileged citizens of the empire or important visiting foreigners. It was intended to adorn and decorate. The arch, on the other hand, was created to be displayed publicly at a time when the political atmosphere had recently been unstable. It was overtly a tool for sending the message to the people of Rome that Rome was under the rule of a strong leader.

Works Consulted:

Art History, Stockstad & Cothren

"Arch of Constantine", Oxford Art Online