



ORIENT - OCCIDENT

THE LION METAPHOR IN THE MESOPOTAMIAN ROYAL CONTEXT

The aim of this paper is to discuss the way in which the lion metaphors are used in the royal context in Mesopotamia and how they function in relation to the king. The association of royalty with the lion is common even at the beginning of a new millenium. It featured typically in the Disney film « The Lion King » which is the story of a young lion who struggles to establish his rightful kingship which was forcefully deprived him by his uncle. Another example is found in the context of English royalty: the crusader Richard I was called « Richard, the Lion-Heart ». He was also the first English king to adopt the coat of arms showing the three gold lions or leopards of England, and this emblem has been used by every dynasty since. The earliest evidence for using lions as a heraldic device, however, comes from Geoffrey, count of Anjou, who, in the mid-twelfth century, depicted rampant golden lions on his shield, for the first time in European history. In ancient Mesopotamia, the royal association of the lion is well attested in numerous lion metaphors applied to the king in both Sumerian and Akkadian texts as well as in artistic evidence, a typical example of which is the royal lion-hunt scene depicted on the so-called « Assyrian royal seal ».

In 1981, Elena Cassin published her article « Le roi et le lion » in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 198.4. She examined the relationship between the king and the lion in Mesopotamian textual evidence, and successfully established their associative link. Her work should be regarded as pioneering and is the first serious study to examine the royal association of the animal. It is, however, not sufficiently dealt with in Cassin's study what particular traits of royalty can be articulated by the expression of lion metaphors according to the specific contexts, and how the metaphoric expressions can effectively evoke ideas appropriate for royalty by referring to the animal. An explanation for the symbolic association of the king with the lion is sometimes provided in terms of

the lion being the prime predator in the animal kingdom, *i.e.*, the « king of animals » or the « king of the wild (*eršetu* [sic]) », the latter suggested by Cassin. This idea is easy for modern readers to understand, but care is required when an interpretation derived externally is imposed upon the system of meanings in an ancient culture. In fact, no examples can be found in Mesopotamia which describe the lion as the « king » in either Sumerian or Akkadian literature. It is only the king who is described in terms of the « lion ». I believe that an appropriate understanding of the symbolic role of animals can only be reconstructed by examining their internal relationships in relation to their contexts and, without a careful reading of each context, interpretations of animals occurring in metaphoric expressions run the risk of being « subjective ».

The royal hymns of the Ur III king, Šulgi, are full of animal metaphors. The lion metaphors describe the king as follows : « lion, never failing in his vigour, standing firm in his strength » (**pirig nam.šul.bi.ta nu.kúš.ù nè.ba gub.ba.me.en**)¹, « lion with wide-open mouth » (**pirig ka.duḥ.ḡa**)², « vigour of a raging lion » (**á pirig.ug**)³, « lion with awe-inspiring eyes » (**pirig.igi.ḡuš**)⁴, and « lion with the raised paw » (**pirig šu.zi.ga**)⁵. Elsewhere, the Isin king Lipit-Ištar is described as the « supreme lion who has no rival » (**pirig.zà.dib gaba.ri nu.tuku**)⁶, and the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi as a « fierce lion » (**pirig.bànda**)⁷. In Akkadian, the metaphoric statement « I am a lion » occurs in the royal annals of Adad-nirari II (*la-ab-ba-ku*)⁸ and Aššurnasirpal II (*lab-ba-ku*)⁹, and Esarhaddon is described as the « fierce lion » (*lab-bu na-ad-ru*)¹⁰.

In order to elucidate the underlying function of Mesopotamian metaphoric expressions, it is important to refer to a theory of metaphor demonstrated in the field of « philosophy of language » by Max Black. His major work on metaphor was published in 1962 in his book *Models and Metaphors*. Black analysed metaphor in terms of semantic « tension » and « interaction ». A principal

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1. Šulgi A 42.
 2. Šulgi C 1-2.
 3. Šulgi C 10.
 4. Šulgi A 3.
 5. Šulgi C 11.
 6. SEUX 1967, 437.
 7. ZA 54 (1961), 51, 9.
 8. KAH, II 84, 15
 9. AKA 265, I 33.
 10. VS I 78, recto 24 ; cf. SEUX 1967, 147-148.

concept in his theory is that « something new » emerges by understanding a metaphoric statement, which is to be regarded as a verbal action essentially demanding « uptake », a creative response from a knowledgeable reader. It is the reader who is led to engage in selecting, organising, and projecting ideas. It is a characteristic feature of Mesopotamian animal metaphors that the reference to an animal frequently occurs with other ideas or images which are normally not associated. When the king says, for example, « I am a lion, a wild bull, a hero, a warrior », new interpretations may emerge from combinations of various semantic elements through their coactivity. Black's theory is indispensable to an understanding of the underlying intention of such statements.

Black distinguishes between the « focus » and the « frame » of a metaphorical expression. For example, in the statement « The chairman ploughed through the discussion », the contrast is between the word « ploughed » and the words surrounding it. The word « ploughed » has here a metaphorical sense, while the other words have literal sense. « Ploughed », therefore, is the « focus » of the metaphor, and the remainder of the sentence in which that word occurs is the « frame ». The presence of a particular frame can result in metaphorical use of the complementary word, whereas the presence of a different frame for the same word may fail to result in metaphor.

Black develops his interaction view into a set of claims ¹¹ :

1. A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, to be identified as the « primary » subject and the « secondary » one. Thus, if one says « The poor are the negroes of Europe », « the poor » is the primary subject and « negroes » the secondary one.

2. The secondary subject is to be regarded as a « system » rather than an individual element. Thus, in the above example, the presence of the word « negroes » signals a system of relationships or « implicative complex » thereby calling to mind numerous ideas, images, sentiments, values and stereotypes.

3. The metaphorical utterance works by applying to the primary subject a system of « associated implications », comprised in the implicative complex, that are characteristic of the secondary subject. In the example cited, for instance, « the poor » of Europe might be viewed not merely as an oppressed class, but also as sharing the inherited and indelible qualities of « natural » poverty attributed to black Americans by white racists ¹².

4. These « implications » usually consist of « commonplaces » about the secondary subject, but may, in suitable cases, consist of deviant implications established *ad hoc* by the writer.

5. The metaphor selects, emphasises, suppresses, and organises features of the primary subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the secondary subject.

11. BLACK 1962, 44-45.

12. Cf. TURNER 1974, 30.

The basic concept explained above is that a metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects : the « primary » subject and the « secondary » one. For example, in the statement « The king is a lion », the primary subject is the « king » and the secondary subject the « lion ». The primary subject serves as the central theme of the expression, and it remains the fundamental purpose of the statement. The secondary subject functions as the focus of the metaphor, which cannot be understood literally. The role of the secondary subject should be regarded as a « system », and it signals a system of relationships, thereby evoking various ideas, images, and so on. Thus the secondary subject acts as a system of implicative association for selecting and emphasising particular features which are projected onto the primary subject. The last claim explains the way in which the two subjects « interact » in the context of a particular metaphorical statement. For example, in the sentence « Man is a wolf », the primary subject « man » encourages the hearer to select some of the properties of the secondary subject, « wolf ». The effect of calling a man a « wolf » is to evoke the « wolf-system of related commonplaces », in which associated notions, such as fierce, hungry, engaged in constant struggle, preying upon other animals, scavenging, etc., are implied. The hearer is then led by this system to construct a corresponding system of implications to fit the primary subject, « man ». Any human traits that can be talked about in « wolf-language » will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details and emphasises others : *i.e.* it organises our view of man. The primary subject is thus « seen through » the metaphorical expression, in which the metaphor acts as a « filter ». It is important for the metaphor's effectiveness that the system of commonplaces associated with the word « wolf » in the above example is known by the hearer and such commonplaces should be readily evoked. A metaphor that works in one society may not work or may seem preposterous in another. For instance, the interpretation of the statement « Man is a wolf » would differ in a society where the wolf is worshipped as a god, or where the animal is taken to be the reincarnation of a dead human.

In Mesopotamia, a metaphoric use of the animal tends to occur in complex statements. Lion metaphors used in Sumerian royal contexts may be interpreted on three levels, according to the degree of specification of particular animal characteristics. On the first level, metaphors comprise statements that evoke associated implications based on the naturalistic and concrete gestures or behaviour of the animal. The ideas intended to be evoked are those expected to occur immediately after such gestures, which present a threat and imply potential damage to the onlooker. In Šulgi hymn C, the lion metaphor occurs in the first sentence as follows :

I am the king, I am the wild bull of extraordinary vigour,

I am the lion with wide-open mouth (*pirig ka.duḫ.ḫa*)¹³.

The first phrase, « I am the king », establishes the identification of « I » as the « king », and the following phrases can be seen as rendering properties of Šulgi as the king. The notion evoked by the lion « with wide-open mouth » may be associated with the terrifying sight of fangs, which can bite and deprive others of life. This sight may also evoke notions related to the animal's « roar », which inspires awe and fear with its extraordinary noise. In each case, the awe-inspiring properties engender fear of death. Another metaphor for Šulgi, « lion with the raised paw » (*pirig šu.zi.ga*)¹⁴, belongs to the same category. They both emphasise the poised moment which may be followed immediately by aggressive actions. Namely, a « wide-open mouth » may bite and pierce the flesh of its prey, and a « raised paw » may strike, scratch and smash its prey violently. Therefore, these metaphors emphasise the animal's potentially fatal attack on its prey.

The second level of metaphor comprises a statement that is observed naturally but implies ideas that are abstract. For example, the metaphor « lion with awe-inspiring eyes » (*pirig.igi.ḫuš*)¹⁵ evokes notions by a conceptual means in which the ideas are processed and constructed upon basic knowledge shared within the community. The expression « awe-inspiring eyes » is abstract, so the reader is required to construct a concrete image of this expression based on the « norm » in society. If the reader is totally ignorant of these commonplaces, the metaphorical expression may not convey its intended meaning. Bearing this risk in mind, an interpretation of the phrase can be undertaken by careful examination of the use of the original word occurring in this statement. The Sumerian word for « awe-inspiring » is *ḫuš*, an adjective that attributes to the subject a property inducing the feeling of « awe ». When this word occurs in conjunction with that for « aura », *me.lám.ḫuš* is translated as « awe-inspiring aura ». The word *ḫuš* originally denotes the reddish colour of bricks¹⁶. Heimpel has suggested that *ḫuš* is associated with a luminous phenomenon, especially that of « fire » which is red-yellow in colour¹⁷. This recalls the phenomenon of « cat's eyes », commonly observed in feline animals : their eyes glow brilliantly in the reflection of light in darkness. Feline animals are nocturnal and hunt at night, using their nocturnal vision. Encountering their flashing eyes at night engenders instant fear in the human mind. This may be explained on two levels.

13. Šulgi hymn C 1-2 : CASTELLINO 1972, 248 : 1-2.

14. Šulgi C 11 : CASTELLINO 1972, 248 : 11.

15. Šulgi A 3 : FALKENSTEIN, ZA 16, 64 ; KLEIN 1981, 192 : 3.

16. I am grateful to Prof. Selz for his suggestions.

17. HEIMPEL 1968, 309-310.

In the first place, it is indeed dangerous because the animal is looking for its prey, and the viewer of these flashing eyes exposes himself to the danger of attack. In the second place, it is even more frightening to encounter the animal at night, because the human is in the more vulnerable situation, being unable to see in the dark, whereas his attacker can see him. Thus the feeling of fear is greater. The metaphor « lion with awe-inspiring eyes » may be interpreted as the king possessing properties that induce fear and awe as great as those perceived when the lion is encountered at night. A similar notion is expressed in the royal epithet for Lipit-Ištar, in which the king is described as « hero with bright eyes » (**ur.sag igi.zalag.ga**)¹⁸. This can also be understood as an expression of the flashing eyes of felines. The concrete manner in which the feeling of « awe » and « fear » is experienced in the presence of the lion under particular circumstances is thus projected onto the primary subject through which our view of the « awe » perceived in respect of Šulgi is specified and organised.

The third level of metaphor comprises statements that focus on properties perceived in the animal. It refers to a concept that itself is deduced from a particular aspect of the animal, and this concept is regarded as the essential factor which induces actions admired by the onlooker. For example, the metaphor « vigour of a raging lion » (**á pirig.ug**)¹⁹, describing Šulgi, focuses on the underlying power of the enraged animal, and what is implied here is an abstract idea that is projected onto the properties of kingship. Another metaphor, « lion, never failing in his vigour, standing firm in his strength » (**pirig nam.šul.bi.ta nu.kúš.ù nè.ba gub.ba.me.en**)²⁰, similarly emphasises inexhaustible energy, observed in the animal. Such notions are systematically processed, resulting in the formation of abstract concepts. Thus the focus of these metaphors is not « specification » but « generalisation » of ideas.

Lion metaphors occurring in Assyrian royal inscriptions, on the other hand, seem to be closely connected with their contexts. A metaphoric expression describing Aššurnāširpal II as a « lion » occurs in the middle of a catalogue of other attributes of the king :

At that time my sovereignty, my dominion, (and) my power came forth at the command of the great gods. I am king, I am lord, I am praise-worthy, I am exalted (var. powerful), I am important, I am magnificent, I am foremost, I am a hero, I am a warrior, I am a lion (*labbaku*), and I am virile²¹.

18. RÖMER 1965, 35 : 78.

19. Šulgi C 10 : CASTELLINO 1972, 248 : 10.

20. Šulgi A 42 : KLEIN 1981, 192 ; FALKENSTEIN, ZA 16, 66.

21. AKA 264-265, I 31-33 ; GRAYSON, ARI 2, 121, 540.

This statement can be understood as rendering properties of kingship attributed to Aššurnāṣirpal II. Phrases such as « I am king », « I am important », and « I am a hero » are taken literally. On the other hand, the statement « I am a lion » is a false statement in fact, unless it is uttered by the lion itself. Thus the expression « I am a lion » stands out as the focus of metaphor, and it contrasts with the remaining phrases that function as the frame. The role of the frame is to select animal properties that are suitable for the ideas related to the « lord », « praise-worthy », « powerful », « magnificent », « foremost », « virile », « hero », and « warrior ».

An example of precisely the same metaphor, which, however, signifies something slightly different according to the context, is found in a royal inscription of Esarhaddon, in which the king is described as a « fierce lion ». The first example reads as follows :

Merciless, who has subdued the stiff-necked people, clothed in splendour, fearless in battle, excellent warrior, merciless in battle, great mighty prince, who holds the [foreign] rulers by their reins, a **fierce lion** (*labbu nadru*), the avenger of his own father ²².

Each title expresses qualities related to the notions of being merciless and brave in battle. The lion metaphor occurs after the statement of the king's dominant status vis-à-vis other rulers, and immediately before he calls himself the « avenger of his own father ». The latter is to be understood from the historical fact that Esarhaddon avenged the murder of his father, Sennacherib, who was assassinated in a conspiracy by a group of people including one of his sons. The fact that the « fierce » aspect of the lion emphasised in this metaphor gives prominence to the « mercilessness » attributed to the king and, as the avenger of his father, his anger and cruel treatment of the murderers are effectively evoked and emphasised. It is « fierceness with hatred » that is focused on in this statement. The second example reads as follows :

Who conquers his enemy, who vanquishes his foe. The king whose walking is a Deluge and his acts a **fierce lion** (*labbu nadru*). Before he comes, it is a city, after he leaves, a hill of ruins ²³.

What is emphasised in this passage is the destructive aspect of the king in the context of a military campaign. The lion metaphor is juxtaposed with the « Deluge » describing the king's advance. This is followed by the statement that the city will be left in ruins by the king's army. The « Deluge » emphasises the devastating effect that corresponds to the advance of the king's troops. At the same time, this effect is metaphorically expressed in terms of the « acts of a

22. BORGER, Esarh. 96 § 65 : 20-25.

23. BORGER, Esarh. 97 § 65 : rev. 11-13.

fierce lion » which are uncontrollable. It is, therefore, the « devastating » aspect that is focused on in this expression, which can also be brought about by the Deluge or by the fierce nature of the animal. Aspects emphasised by exactly the same metaphoric expression, « a fierce lion », are thus variable according to the context, in which the notions expressed before and after the metaphoric focus select the corresponding properties and thereby organise our view of the primary subject, the king.

The notions expressed in lion metaphors in relation to kingship are also represented symbolically on the « Assyrian royal seal ». Seal impressions of this type have been found on various bullae from Neo-Assyrian sites : they show a circular stamp impression with a motif of the king killing a lion. The seal was used to mark and authenticate the property of the king's palace. Stylistically, they are divided into two types. The first type shows the king fighting a rampant lion (*fig. 1*), and the second type only the figure of a lion (*fig. 2*). These motifs are often encircled by an inscription or by a guilloche border, and some of them are further encircled by texts inscribed on bullae. Although it is not clear who could hold and use these « royal » seals, the motif represented on them was undoubtedly recognised as the mark of royal authority. The motif represented on the first type shows the king stretching out his left arm to grasp the head of a lion which faces him. The king's right hand holds a dagger that has been plunged into the lion's chest. The lion is shown rampant, raising its right front paw, ready to strike, and its mouth is wide open. The representation of the second type is slightly different. The lion stands horizontally with three legs firmly set on the ground, its right front leg stretches forward, and its mouth is wide open.

It is noteworthy that the lion in both types is shown with its right front paw raised and its mouth wide open. The aspects presented here by the lion « with the raised paw » (**pirig šu.zi.ga**) and « with wide-open mouth » (**pirig ka.duḥ.ḫa**) have already been discussed as one of the animal metaphors attributed to Šulgi. The posture of the lion on the Assyrian royal seals can be seen as the visual representation of these metaphors, which functions in the same way as metaphorical statements by evoking notions related to the damage that the animal has the potential to cause. The presence of the king in the scene indicates that this « metaphoric text » is to be read in the context of kingship. The king himself is as fierce as the lion that represents maximum danger. The king's fierce aspect as a « warrior » is explained and embodied by the lion, whom he faces and kills. The king's action and quality are thus « seen through » the posture of the lion, which functions as a « filter » or a symbolic medium to evoke appropriate ideas from associated commonplaces.

In the second type of royal seal, on the other hand, the lion depicted in the scene may have been intended to act as a metaphorical substitute for the king, in

which the nature of the king is projected onto the characteristics emphasised by the lion. The lion represents the king in order to organise our view of the king, who is to be seen as being as aggressive as the lion that is about to strike with a right front paw, in the same manner as the king attacking his enemy with a weapon held by his right hand, and to bite and pierce its enemy with sharp fangs. The pictorial representations of the animal thus achieve their effect by presenting symbolic agents in a concrete form, and these properties, explained in terms of the metaphoric representation, are intended to interact with the absent primary subject, *i.e.* the king. The viewer would recognise the context as « royal » from the particular circular shape of the seal impression as well from the motif represented in the scene, even though the figure of the king is not present.

To conclude, the role of the lion in the royal combat scene is to embody the aggressive characteristics attributed to the king. In other words, the figure of the lion, as the secondary subject of the metaphoric representation, organises our view of the king, and the king cannot be identified as possessing this quality of aggressiveness or fierceness without the animal, which is the concrete image of such properties. The presence of the animal in the scene is, therefore, essential. I was deeply impressed when I first saw the lion-hunt reliefs of Aššurbanipal, and what moved me so much was the way in which the lions are represented with great respect. There is no single example in which the animal is depicted with the intention of humiliation, despite the fact that the lions are ruthlessly pursued and killed. This characteristic representation of lions presents a clear contrast with that of enemies : captured enemies are tortured and humiliated, their heads are detached from their bodies, they are trampled on by the victors, and the bodies deliberately exposed to humiliation by being impaled on stakes. If the lions were merely perceived as representing enemy forces to be conquered, similar representations could be expected. However, the fact that the lions were depicted with dignity suggests that the animals embodied aspects of the king. For example, a lioness represented in the palace reliefs of Aššurbanipal (*fig. 3*) demonstrates unceasing bravery in combat despite the serious wounds that paralyse her physical functioning. The lions in the hunting scenes thus represent the essence of heroism and the virtue of warriorship. The artists as well as ordinary Assyrians must have shared the view that « the king is a lion », so the animals had to be represented with great care and respect.

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Fig. 1 — Assyrian royal seal (type 1)
(after Sachs, *Iraq* 15, p. 169, pl. XVIII-4)



Fig. 2 — Assyrian royal seal (type 2)
(after Parker, *Iraq* 24, p. 39, fig. 9)



Fig. 3 — Lion hunt relief of Assurbanipal, from Room C,
North Palace, Nineveh, ca 654 BC (after Barnett 1976, pl. XIII)