

The Representation of the Bow in the Art of Egypt and the Ancient Near East

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The bow was known as a weapon of hunting and warfare from very early times in Egypt and throughout the ancient Near East.¹ It also functioned as an extremely important symbol of monarchial power. It is with this factor, as well as with a number of aspects of the representation of the bow which seem to have gone unnoticed, that the present article is concerned.

1. *Symbolic Use of the Bow*

In Egypt, the bow (Eg., *pdt*; *iwnt*; *šmrt*; Amarna: *pidātu*) was used as a symbol of royal strength² and as representative of the might of whole nations. Egypt's enemies were traditionally referred to as the "Nine Bows" and often depicted as actual bows or as nine ethnically differentiated captives beneath the feet of the king.³ The bow was also used in Egypt to symbolize the extent of the monarch's power; thus, arrows were fired toward the four cardinal points during the coronation and jubilee festivities.⁴ Likewise, in Mesopotamia the bow (Sum. *giš.BAN*, Akk. *qaštu*) was used as an attribute of immediate and potential power fit for gods and kings. Not only do we find representations showing monarchs and deities posing with bow in hand, but literary evidence also suggests a close symbolic connection between the bow and the institution of kingship among gods and men.⁵

Doubtless under Mesopotamian influence, the bow also figures prominently in early representations from Iran and in other areas. Important monuments of chieftains of the Lullubi such as the Stele of Tar Luni and the rock-relief of Annu-banini⁶ show these kings triumphing over enemies in compositions in which

1. For a description of the development and use of the bow in the ancient Orient, see G. Rausing, *The Bow: Some Notes on its Origin and Development*, Acta Archaeologica Ludensia (Lund, 1967); and Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study*, 2 vols. (London, 1963). For the bow in Egypt, see also W. Wolf, *Die Bewaffnung des altägyptischen Heeres* (Leipzig, 1926); and, in Mesopotamia, E. Salonen, "Die Waffen der alten Mesopotamier," *Studia Orientalia* 33 (1966).

2. Cf. *Sinuhe* 62–63, etc.

3. E. Uphill, "The Nine Bows," *Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap "Ex Oriente Lux,"* 19 (1966), 393–420.

4. See W. Helck and E. Otto, eds., "Bogen" in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (Wiesbaden, 1975), 1:843.

5. Cf. *Enuma elish* VI:82–93, etc.

6. See R. Ghirshman, *Iran: From the Earliest Times to the Islamic Conquest* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 54–55, figs. 21, 22.

the king's bow is central and extremely dominant. For the Persians the bow was a particularly important royal symbol and the earliest representations of their bows are found on the Achaemenid imperial coinage which depicts the figure of a royal archer.⁷ The representational evidence from Hittite Anatolia and Syria, as well as from other peripheral areas of the ancient Near East, likewise suggests a clear connection between the bow as a symbol of power and the person of the king.

2. *The Turned Bow*

In all these artistic traditions the bow is accordingly shown carried, ready for use, by various monarchs, and as such it is represented grasped naturally with the body of the bow held outward, the bowstring toward the king. In Mesopotamian and Mesopotamian-influenced art, however, important exceptions to this stance are found, beginning with the Stele of Naram-Sin, where the king and his troops hold their bows in crooked arms, the bowstring held toward the enemy. This pose may merely reflect artistic convention, but the fact that all the bows are held in this position might indicate that some meaning was inherent in the stance. I would like to suggest that even in this early period such a pose could reflect a real or at least an artistic device indicating the supremacy of the person holding the bow. In Naram-Sin's case the victory had already been won and the turned bow may signify the fact that there is no further threat of resistance. This motif might then represent an artistic tradition which provided the origins of the similar pose which occasionally appears in later Mesopotamian works and is commonly found in the Neo-Assyrian period.

A number of the palace reliefs and monuments of Ashurbanipal II, Shalmaneser III, Tiglath Pileser III, Sargon II and Sennacherib show these kings in battle, holding audience, receiving tribute from subject peoples, or before servants while holding a bow with the bowstring turned outward in the same manner (plate 1). In static scenes the end of the bow is usually allowed to rest on the ground, while in active scenes the bow is simply held in the outstretched arm.⁸ This seemingly conventionalized pose with the bow has been described by M. C. Root, who noted that "When the bow is held vertically by Assyrian kings it is almost invariably held so that the string is turned away from the king's body."⁹ Such a manner of holding the bow seems somewhat unnatural, however, since the arc of the bow must interfere with the forward leg of the person holding the weapon in this way.¹⁰ As Root points out, this suggests "... the possibility that

7. M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*, *Acta Iranica* 19 (Leiden, 1979), 164–69.

8. Contrast, e.g., plates 1 and 2. Several varieties of the pose are found. Sometimes the king holds two arrows with the bow (as in plate 2), sometimes the bow is held alone. In other representations the king may hold a cup with the bow, and sometimes the cup is held alone in what may be a parallel gesture. A clear example may be seen on the British Museum's "black obelisk" of Shalmaneser III, where the king is shown before suppliants with turned bow and two arrows in the topmost front register, and with cup alone in the second or "Jehu" register.

9. Root, *King*, 168.

10. The unnatural nature of this pose is perhaps even more evident when the king is shown seated, as in the British Museum relief of Sennacherib receiving the capitulation of Lachish (see, e.g., *ANEP*, 129, ill. 371).



Plate 1. Ashurnasirpal II with bow turned before servants (from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud)

for the Assyrians this pose with the bow reflected an actual usage which may even have had some significance within court protocol."¹¹

This pose, in fact, has usually been interpreted as symbolizing the accomplishment of military or hunting victories.¹² Yet, at least for the Neo-Assyrian period, such an interpretation seems unsatisfactory on several grounds. It does not explain, for example, those representations that show the god Ashur holding the turned bow over enemies in the course of raging battle,¹³ nor does it fit the evidence of certain representations which do not utilize the motif where it would be fully expected if its primary significance were one of accomplished victory. In all the extant examples, however, the bow is positioned with the string held away from the dominant subject—whether deity, king, or man. It might seem preferable, therefore, to view the turned bow as a specific gesture of *dominance* in keeping with the complex system of Mesopotamian gesture symbolism utilized in many of the formal aspects of life.¹⁴ An important illustration of this may be seen in the Nimrud relief of Ashurbanipal

11. Root, *King*, 168.

12. *Ibid.*, 166–67.

13. As in the orthostat relief of Ashurnasirpal from the North West Palace at Nimrud (British Museum 124551) which shows both the king and the god Ashur extending turned bows.

14. See Root, *King*, 168 and *passim*, and A. D. Kilmer, "Symbolic Gestures in Akkadian Contracts from Alalakh and Ugarit," *JAOS* 94 (1974), 177–83.



Plate 2. Ashurbanipal II offering libation to Ashur (from the North Palace, Kuyunjik)

holding a bow while pouring a libation over lions killed in the hunt (plate 2). This relief has been used as an example of a “victory pose,” but it is important to notice that the king holds the bow with the string toward himself as he stands before the altar of Ashur.¹⁵ On the other hand, for example, when Shamash-resh-usur appears before the deities Adad and Ishtar (plate 3), the goddess—as the dominant figure—holds the bow with the string toward the monarch. The deities Ashur and Ishtar are also represented holding the bow turned in this way toward worshippers in a number of examples of Assyrian glyptic.¹⁶ Here again, while a gesture signifying victory would be out of place on such seals, the symbolism of the deity’s dominance would be perfectly natural. This same convention of the turned bow also occurs in Egyptian art in exactly the same contexts—and with the same apparent meaning—as I have shown elsewhere.¹⁷

15. Root (*King*, 168, n. 24) cites this relief as a seemingly anomalous exception to the general rule of the outward turned bow in the monarch’s hand. If, however, the direction of the turned bow indicates not victory but dominance, then the representation is not at all anomalous.

16. See, e.g., the 8th–7th c. Assyrian cylinder seal of green chalcedony in the British Museum which shows a beardless person worshipping the goddess Ishtar who holds the turned bow with two arrows toward her devotee; H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1939), plate 35a.

17. See the present writer’s “The Turned Bow in Egyptian Iconography,” *Varia Aegyptiaca* 4 (1988), 181–87; and “The Turned Bow as a Gesture of Surrender in Egyptian Art,” *JSEEA* (forthcoming).

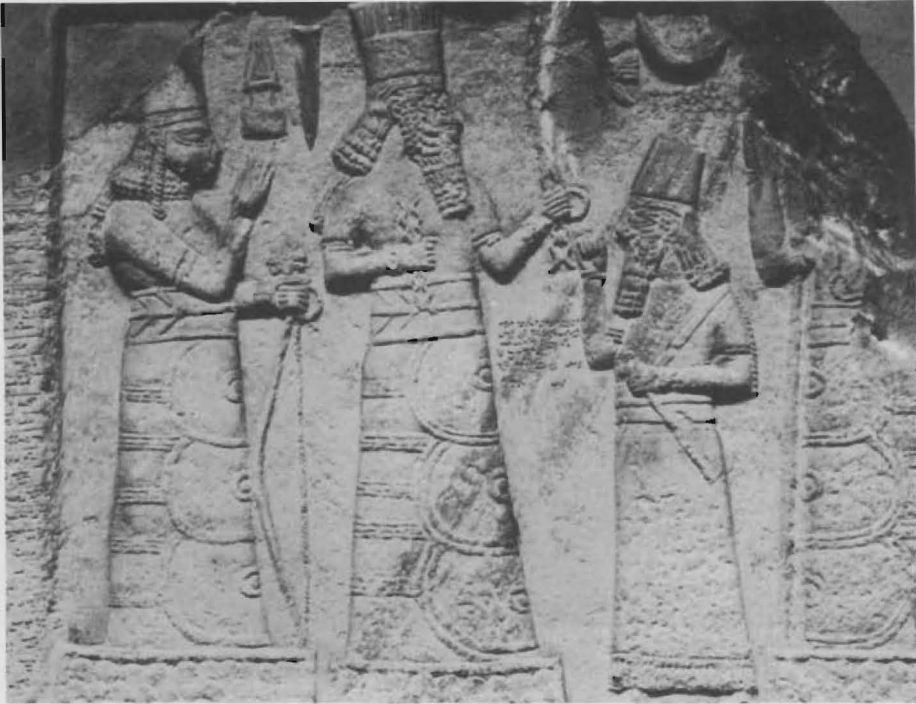


Plate 3. Adad and Ishtar with bow turned before Shamash-resu-usur (from Babylon)

3. *Representational Conventions*

While the bow itself was frequently and accurately represented in the art of Egypt and the ancient Near East, certain artistic traditions regularly show characteristic peculiarities which may represent conventions in their portrayal of the bow in use. In Assyrian works, archers shown shooting from the left of the target are usually drawn realistically, but when firing from the observer's right (and thus in rear view) the Assyrian archer is often portrayed with his right hand on the side of the body closest to the onlooker and not obscured behind the head (plate 4). Occasionally, part or even all of the bowstring is also shown on the archer's near side as if his body were totally transparent (plate 4). It is possible in such cases that the drawing hand and bowstring were viewed as such important elements of the representation that they were consciously shown as the symbolic directors of the release of the arrow, and thus as indispensable aspects of the composition. On the other hand, a preferable explanation might be that the visual paradox is the result of a convention by which the Mesopotamian artist produced a mirror image of an archer firing from the left of the target. That these representations are not simply of left-handed archers may be seen in the fact that they are found depicted only to the right of the target, and that the archer's back is frequently clearly turned toward the viewer, as is the palm of the hand pulling the string. A left-handed person drawing a bow in such a stance would present the front of the torso and not



Plate 4. Siege scene of Tiglath Pileser III (from the Central Palace, Nimrud)

the palm but the back of the hand to the viewer. A close examination of the archer's hands, feet, and beard (as with the central archer in plate 4), however, often reveals a mirror-image of an archer firing from the left. Such a convention may also be found in the portrayal of attendants and other figures in Assyrian orthostatic reliefs and is in keeping with the general Assyrian artistic tendency to portray a visual progression from left to right—subjects on the left side of the composition being in many cases dominant models for the rest of the composition.

Because Egyptian art very rarely portrays the rear view of the human figure in two-dimensional representations—and then only for specific purposes¹⁸—a mirror image of archers firing from the left of the target is almost exclusively utilized for archers on the target's right. In Egyptian works the bowstring may regularly be seen to be placed accurately to the end of the drawn arrow from both ends of the bow. In Mesopotamian works, however, while the bowstring may be accurately shown from the lower arm of the bow to the arrow notch, the string often leaves the top of the bow at an improbable angle which does not intersect with the arrow (plate 4). In some instances the bowstring does not intersect with the drawing hand from either end of the bow, and again it is possible that some artistic convention is present in such cases.

18. See S. A. Goudsmit, "The Backview of Human Figures in Ancient Egyptian Art," *JNES* 40 (1981), 42–43.



Plate 5. Tutankhamen hunting with Queen Ankhesenamun (golden shrine from the tomb of Tutankhamen)



Plate 6. Ashurbanipal II hunting (from the North Palace, Kuyunjik)



Plate 7. Ramses II shooting from chariot (after Y. Yadin, *Art of Warfare*)

4. *Heroic Overdraw*

In one particular situation the bow is intentionally depicted inaccurately for purposes of propaganda. Egyptian artists almost always represent the drawn bow pulled—heroically—to a point back behind the archer’s head (plates 5, 7, and 8). That such drawing of the bow is unrealistic is seen in the accurate representation of an Egyptian archery school where the instructor places the student’s hands in position with a draw which is anchored at the ear.¹⁹ The accompanying inscription reads, “Draw your bows to your ears.”²⁰ Interestingly, this pose is favored in

19. This 18th Dynasty wall painting from the tomb of Min at Sheikh Abd el-Gurnah is illustrated in Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 1:201.

20. For this inscription, see J. A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, 1951), 196.



Plate 8. Battle scene of Ramses II (from the Great Temple, Abu Simbel)

many Neo-Hittite works, even though these are more usually influenced by Mesopotamian conventions for the representation of the bow.

In Mesopotamian works, the arrow is usually anchored more naturally at a forward point which keeps the bowstring in front of the ear (a point of practice which the archer must observe to avoid being struck by the released bowstring). In the Neo-Assyrian period, however, we detect a change toward the Egyptian style in some representations and especially those which depict the king. Here, like the Egyptian pharaoh, the Assyrian king is shown drawing the bow back to a distance that would be almost impossible with any powerful hunting or combat bow.²¹ If the arrows which also appear in such compositions—whether Egyptian (plate 5: in the queen's hand; plate 7: in the chariot quiver) or Mesopotamian (plates 6, 11: held by the king's retainers) are carefully measured against those drawn on the bow, they will be seen to be much shorter and to reach only to a point beneath the archer's ear or chin. This would be a realistic span. Hence, the artists in both cultures depicted the length of arrows realistically—except when drawn on the bow for the propagandist purpose of what I would call the “heroic overdraw.” That this elongated span is not merely the result of a representational convention designed

21. Representational evidence is extant to clearly show that the powerful Assyrian composite bow required two men to string it. See for example Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 2:295.



Plate 9. Lion hunt of Ashurnasirpal II (from the Central Palace, Nimrud)

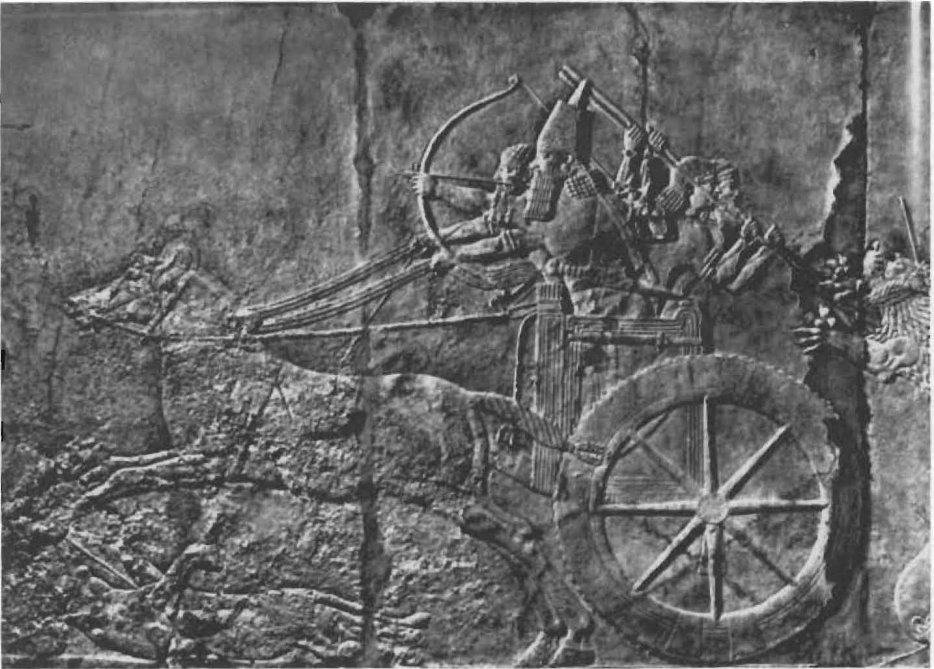


Plate 10. Ashurbanipal II shooting from chariot (from the North Palace, Kuyunjik)



Plate 11. Ashurbanipal II shooting at close range (from the North Palace, Kuyunjik)

to avoid the placement of an object before the king's face may be seen in the fact that the draw is often much longer than would be necessary to simply clear the face (plates 6, 11); moreover, the ancient artists routinely omitted part of the bow-string in situations where the king's face would be obscured (plate 5).

5. *Logical and Line of Sight Aim*

Finally, I would like to draw attention to a fundamental difference which may be discerned in the representation of the bow's use in the two major cultural traditions of the ancient Near East, and one which I believe has gone unnoted. In Egypt, when the bow is shown in use, it is represented with its aim in direct line of sight reference to its target. In Mesopotamia and in the peripheral regions of the ancient Near East until Neo-Assyrian times, the bow is usually represented as independent of any line of sight relationship with its target, in a totally different manner. Thus, a straight line taken along the length of a drawn arrow in Egyptian representations will almost always project directly to the implied target; and, if this target is a living thing—an enemy or game animal—the projected line of aim will invariably intersect with the target at what would be a vital area of the body: the head, neck, or upper torso.

This "line of sight" aim has the corollary that in Egyptian representations showing archers sitting, kneeling, or standing, the bow usually will be held upright with the shaft of the arrow parallel to the horizontal. In representations showing the bow being used from the chariot or any raised position, the bow will invariably be angled forward and the arrow will point downward toward the target (plate 7), the only exceptions to the latter stance being where the king fires from



Plate 12. Lion-hunt stele showing early depiction of raised bow (from Warka)

his chariot into a clustered mass of enemies or game animals (as in the side panel scenes of the funerary chest of Tutankhamen), where the aim is level toward the middle of the target mass. Only rarely in Egyptian artworks is the bow depicted as shooting upward; in such instances Egyptian archers beneath the walls of besieged cities are invariably represented. In all cases, however, whether the bow is held upright or at an angle, the line from the bow to the target is the line of sight. That this is not coincidental is seen in the representation of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, in which the artist redrew the king's bow and arms—while maintaining a direct line of sight aim with the vital area of a new target figure (plate 8).

In Mesopotamia we find from the earliest extant evidence that a different approach prevailed. We see the archer aiming his bow high (by Egyptian standards) and above the target. Only in the later Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs and

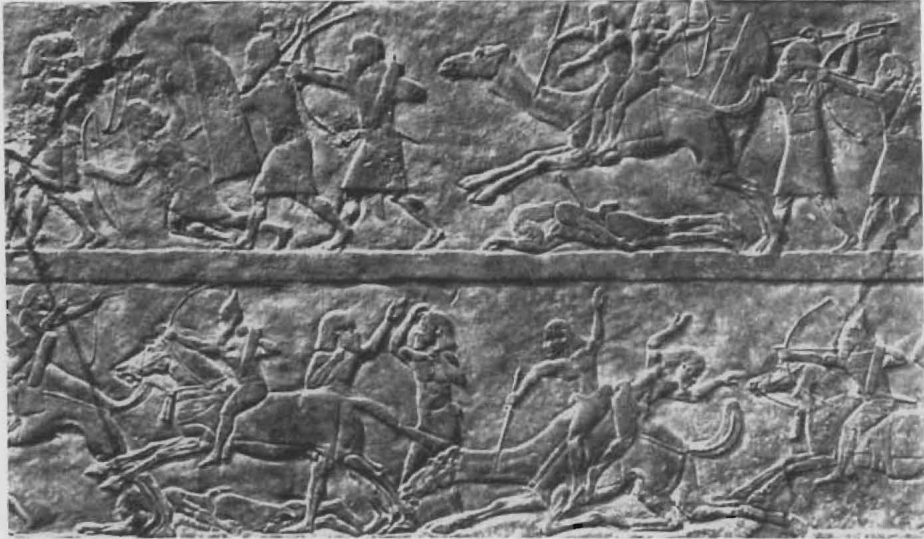


Plate 13. Assyrian troops in battle (from the North Palace, Kuyunjik)



Plate 14. Chariot hunting scene with lowered bow (golden bowl from Ugarit)



Plate 15. Chariot hunting relief with raised bow (from Malatia)

paintings do we find bow and target regularly aligned according to line of sight. Ostensibly, it would appear that the Mesopotamian artist chose to represent the use of the bow realistically, for the bow must of course be aimed above the mark in order to hit the mark on all but the closest targets. The early Mesopotamian artist thus shows the bow in the natural position for almost all shooting—tilted slightly back from the vertical with the arrow tip raised at least four or five degrees from the horizontal—and only later is this rule frequently abrogated. This is well illustrated in the relief of Ashurnasirpal (ca. 883 B.C.E.) slaying a lion leaping at his chariot (plate 9), where the king's aim is well above the lion's head even at the closest range.²² In the later representations of Ashurbanipal (ca. 668 B.C.E.) the king's aim—even from the raised position of his chariot—is high in order to reach a distant target (plate 10). In the representation of the same king dispatching an attacking lion at close range, however, his aim is direct and in line of sight with the vital center of the head of the leaping beast (plate 11). Thus we see an apparent desire for increased accuracy in the portrayal of the bow's use in later Neo-Assyrian works, which definitely represents a departure from earlier Mesopotamian treatment of archer and target in close proximity.

In the case of almost all earlier Mesopotamian works, in fact, the bow is shown aimed above its target whether the target is at a distance or close at hand. The Warka lion hunter's stele (plate 12) is unique in that while the archer's aim is

22. Cf. also the representation of a hunter and stag on the Tribute Panel of the Rassam obelisk of Ashurnasirpal (*ANEP*, 119, ill. 350).



Plate 16. Hunting scene with raised bow at close range (from Alaja Huyuk)

high at the closest range,²³ the arrow actually bends downward as it crosses the body of the bow so that the artist (whether intentionally or not) has achieved both a natural shooting stance—and a line of sight aim with the leaping lion immediately before him!

Interestingly, in the later Neo-Assyrian period, both realistic and line-of-sight methods of representation are sometimes utilized in the same compositions, where Assyrian troops are shown aiming directly at the enemy at close range while the enemy archers are portrayed (conveniently!) aiming high and over the Assyrians in the traditional manner of representation (note the upper right and lower left registers of plate 13). This combination of true and line-of-sight aim was evidently a conscious device by which the artist heightened the sense of Assyrian military superiority and impending victory by indicating that the Assyrian troops would hit their marks while the enemy would miss theirs. It will also be seen that enemy

23. Although it is possible that the hunter and prey are intended to be understood as being distant from one another in this composition; cf. F. Basmachi, "The Lion-Hunt Stela from Warka," *Sumer* 5 (1949), 88. This does not seem likely, for while the lions attacking the archer are smaller than those attacking the spearman in the upper register of the stela, the latter hunter is himself depicted as smaller than the archer. The lions before the archer are also shown as rampant, which would suggest their proximity to him. I would therefore see the difference in the sizes of the hunters and their prey as being quite capricious rather than a matter of design.

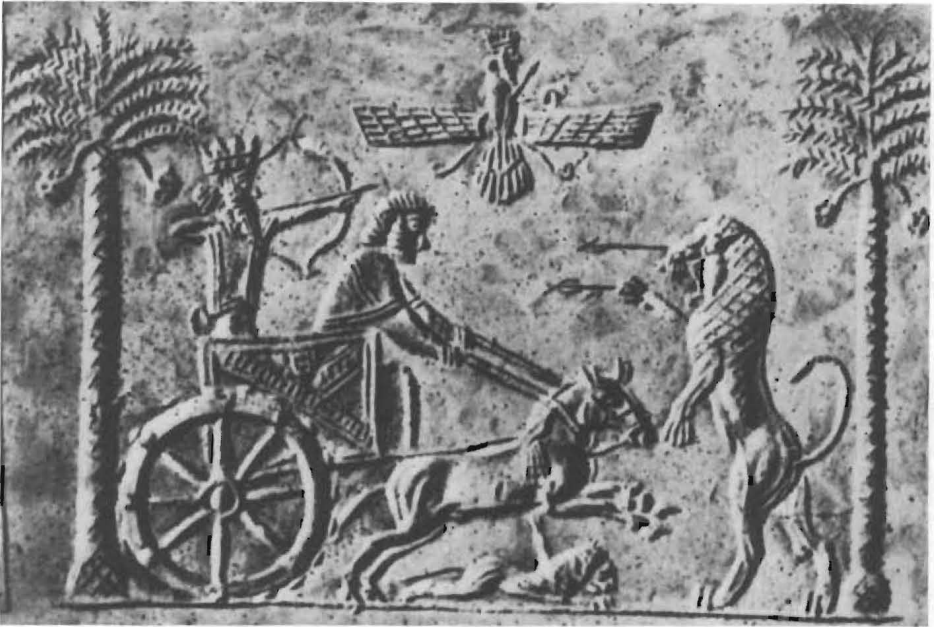


Plate 17. Seal impression showing Darius with raised bow (from Thebes)

bowmen in such compositions are shown as either incapable of drawing their bows as far as the Assyrians or fumbling, still in the process of drawing (plate 13). In either case, the impression of enemy impotence or incompetence is further strengthened.

An archer depicted shooting from his chariot on the great golden bowl found at Ugarit (plate 14) shows the influence of the Egyptian direct line-of-sight aim (compare plates 7 and 8). But most of the art of the minor nations of Syria-Palestine and of Anatolia seems to have followed the Mesopotamian tradition of the representation of the bow—with raised aim both at long and short range, as may be seen in the representations of bow hunters in a number of reliefs from Malatia (plate 15), Alaja Huyuk (plate 16), and elsewhere.²⁴ Not unexpectedly, Iranian art follows this same Mesopotamian pattern as may be seen in the cylinder seal representation of Darius hunting lions (plate 17). In all of these areas it is clear that the bow was represented as independent of its target, the artist choosing to show the archer in a natural stance without regard for the internal coherence of the representation.

Thus Egypt and the other nations of the ancient Near East followed divergent patterns in the representation of the use of the bow. In Mesopotamia and those areas largely influenced by the Mesopotamian tradition, the archer was depicted

24. Cf., e.g., the reliefs from Karatepe, Carchemish, and elsewhere: H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 4th ed. (Harmondsworth, 1970), 309; Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 1:366–67, etc.

accurately, yet viewed quite independently of his target for purposes of visual representation. In Egypt, representations of the use of the bow were usually diverted from what was known to be true in terms of point of aim to an artistically coherent line-of-sight relationship between the bow and its target, a fact which may be seen to be consonant, on the one hand, with the Egyptians' willingness to present the simultaneity of view of different parts of the same object, and on the other hand, to their evident desire to achieve harmony among the several elements of any composition.