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# Eisenzeitliche Paläste in der nördlichen Levante

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Abstract

# Iron Age Palaces in the Northern Levant: the representation of rule by architectural means

## Abstract

The region of the Northern Levant (in the territories of today's states of Syria, Lebanon and Turkey) saw various political developments in the course of the Iron Age (c. 1200 – 330 BCE): first the rise of the small, autonomous Syro-Hittite polities, then their incorporation into the empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. This study is concerned with the question of how the power of the rulers was represented under these different political regimes and, in particular, how this became manifested in the architecture of royal and governors' palaces. Based on sociological theories, it is reasonable to assume that every institutionalised government needs to be legitimated in a way that is communicated by representative means. Owing to its monumentality and durability, the palace as the place where the ruler lived and, at the same time, exercised his power is especially appropriate as a means to communicate messages of power and legitimacy.

The first part of the study introduces the interrelated issues of power, rule, legitimation and representation. This is followed by a discussion of the chosen methodology, which is based on theories of non-verbal communication and the semiotics of architecture. For the analysis of works of art found in architectural contexts, iconographic and semiotic perspectives are also introduced.

The main section of the dissertation analyses the palaces from the era of the Syro-Hittite polities, as well as the Neo-Assyrian and the Persian Empires, that are presently known in the region under study. In each case, the following main issues are considered: the location of the palaces in – usually – urban contexts, the façades of the palaces, the inner configuration of spaces in the build-

ings, the location and furnishings of the rooms supposedly used for representative purposes and the palaces' decorative and iconographic programmes in the form of sculptures, orthostat reliefs and murals. In the concluding chapter, the results of this analysis are discussed against the background of the sociological theories presented at the beginning.

The archaeological – or architectural – record offers insights into the representation strategies of the respective rulers, which seem to have communicated diverging messages to two different sectors of the population. Within the Syro-Hittite polities, a rather homogeneous picture emerges: the palaces were situated in fortified citadels, separated from the rest of the city. In most cases their ground plan followed a common ideal, the so-called *hilani*, which was characterised by a combination of an anteroom with a columned portico and a parallel main room behind it. The façade was in some cases decorated with portal sculptures and orthostat reliefs. The portico suggested openness but, at the same time, was hidden from the view of outsiders by the fortifications and the non-axial arrangement of access routes. Thus, the easy access to the king and inclusion in governmental affairs evoked by this kind of architecture was probably only intended for the select few with access to the palace complexes: the elites of the polities. Despite the appearance of openness, the images installed at conspicuous locations in the palaces and the manipulation of distances and differences in height underlined the special status of the king. In contrast, for the main part of the population the palaces appeared as monumental but distant and inaccessible buildings. That the concepts employed

for the construction of palaces were very similar in various Syro-Hittite states also suggests shared concepts of society, kingship and rule.

During the period of Assyrian rule in the region, the architectural record of governors' palaces is more heterogeneous. It encompasses palaces built and decorated in accordance with common Assyrian concepts as well as those that follow the local traditions completely. However, most buildings display a mixture of Assyrian and local architectural elements. First of all, this leads to the conclusion that no central strategy for representation existed within the Neo-Assyrian empire, at least not as far as the provincial palaces were concerned. Instead, the governors of the various provinces seem to have enjoyed the freedom to design their palaces as they wanted. The presence of at least one reception room with a special set of furnishings seems to have been perhaps the only indispensable element of an Assyrian palace. The adoption of local architectural elements and the resulting hybrid style of many provincial palaces could have served to communicate to the local elites the continuation of traditions or, at least, some degree of accommodation. As before, the palaces remained situated within fortified citadels, in locations that were secluded and inaccessible to most of the population. The presence of a foreign ruling

class was an additional reason for this type of location, in addition to social hierarchy.

From the period of Persian rule only two buildings which may be interpreted as palaces are known so far in the Northern Levant. One is likely to have served representative purposes only, being devoid of domestic spaces; the other might have been the rural seat of a Persian nobleman.

It may be unsurprising that the palaces communicated diverging messages to the elites involved in governing the state and the subordinated population. That the latter experienced the palaces, and thus probably also their inhabitants, as distant, and in all likelihood never saw the splendidly decorated façades of some of the palaces does, however, suggest that a more specific legitimation towards the bulk of the population by the means of palace architecture was not deemed necessary. This could mean that, in these societies, the hierarchisation and the institutionalisation of power was so developed that the population generally did not pose a threat to the rulers. So, it was only the elites who had to be obliged to comply with the rulers by means of a discourse legitimating their rule. Or, the legitimacy of the rulers was communicated to the general population by different means, for example through public ceremonies.