

SOME THOUGHTS ON SYMBOLISM IN ARCHITECTURE

Diederik J.W. Meijer, Leiden University
{from Fs Margueron, 2010}

Throughout his career professor Jean Margueron has increased our knowledge of Ancient Near Eastern architecture with numerous essays, both on the grand design, and on how buildings could be reconstructed. He has thus greatly contributed to the fount of knowledge with which we can try to understand that architecture, and through his work we are made all the more aware that there are important differences between our own western architecture and that of the Ancient Near East.

One of these differences would seem to be the amount of philosophical background that we can recognize in our own architecture, and which is extremely difficult to gauge from the archaeological remains from the Ancient Near East. With philosophical background I do not mean the kind of simple symbolism that governs a king's palace to be large and opulent, nor that a temple should be a "high place." Rather my concern is with the western preoccupation with what one could call the human dimension in buildings: the modeling of buildings after an ideal plan based on human dimensions. Although the first comprehensive theoretical treatise on architecture known to us is the one by Vitruvius, he mentions Greek examples for his work¹. It is especially with the human body that the Greeks were infatuated, so we may indeed let the anthropomorphic precept begin there. The harmony of numbers and the play of proportions were favourite subjects for the Pythagoreans.² Protagoras' dictum that *Man is the Measure of All Things* was translated into building practice in Greece, and that is what Vitruvius incorporated in his theoretical writings. His remarks (III: I,2-3), as is well known, gave rise to the famous Renaissance drawings of Francesco di Giorgio, Leonardo da Vinci and others, in which a square and a circle confine the outstretched extremities of man and represent the basis of ideal proportions for buildings.

This "humanist" symbolic approach to building therefore derives from classical antiquity, that is, long before Humanism as a coined term existed. When we read that churches should be built "*in modum crucis*", i.e. >after the shape of the Cross= we immediately think of the symbolism of the Cross on which Jesus died, but in fact this Medieval canon is unthinkable without the tradition of building after a philosophical idea, and this was instituted by Vitruvius and his unidentifiable predecessors.³

It is dangerous to reason from the unknown, and thousands of texts will still be excavated, but it seems that the Ancient Near East has produced no comparable ideas of philosophically based ideal forms or dimensions, let alone any that would be based specifically on the human form. Although we know countless building inscriptions by rulers, their explicit concern is always with the good deed they are performing in erecting a building for the deity, for the city and for their own status and pleasure. And although certain standardized systems of measurements were utilized, it is difficult to find any mention of something like ideal proportions.⁴ This probably means that Humanism in architecture, based on Greek and Roman precursors, is indeed a relatively recent development in the history of human culture.

Why did such a development not take place in the Ancient Near East? In other words, what prevented the ancient Syrians and Mesopotamians from conceiving such an idea? Asking this question may be useful if it can be shown that in other cultural areas, apart from architecture, a slumbering form of humanism did occur.

Humanism, described as the position that man is a special being with an individual will and capabilities not entirely subject to his natural surroundings, is easiest to observe in writings, and in pictorial art after that. In art, realism as such is not necessarily a hallmark of Humanism, but a central place for individuality certainly is.

In sculpture in the round, Old-Babylonian sculpted clay heads, ἈYarim-Lim' s head from Alalakh, as well as the glazed terracotta animals from Nuzi and Dur Kurigalzu show such an awareness of human and animal form that the impression one gleans from wisdom and proverb literature is fully confirmed: they, like us, could see themselves realistically and naturally.⁵ Cylinder seals from the Akkadian period show realistic scenes without prototypical canonized symbolism.⁶ In other words, realism and naturalistic depiction were not alien to the ancient Mesopotamians and Syrians, albeit that their pictorial art strikes us, who are "formed" by Greek art, as perhaps rather static.

On a more philosophical level the Gilgamesh epic, especially the futile quest for immortality, and Enkidu' s dramatic attempts at adaptation to the human world, can be said to represent an awareness of *la condition humaine*, that is, to show that Mesopotamians were self-conscious human beings.

However, one crucial step was *not* taken in the lands of the Twin Rivers: that of the abstraction of man from his environment. The Dutch archaeologist Henri Frankfort made a beautiful distinction⁷ when he emphasized the mythopoeic character of Mesopotamian thought: the relation of man to his surroundings was one of I-Thou, not I-it; the culture-nature divide did not exist to the extent it is known in our culture (where it is one of the basic tenets).⁸ Yet it looks as if such an abstraction is needed if the human form is to be taken as a measure in more than metric ways: one needs to cut loose from the bond between man and his natural and social surroundings in order to deal freely in human metaphors. And here a side-effect of the Near Eastern world plays a role: when we said above that humanism involves a certain abstraction of man from his surroundings, it must be borne in mind that these surroundings include the gods. These were, after all, personifications of natural powers rather than the intellectual individuals we know from some other religions.

Another step that was not taken in the Ancient Near East is the professionalization of builders and the recognition and acceptance of their handiwork as a *prestation* that can be personalized. Those who, in the Ancient Near East, were seen to be active in architecture were the *Bauherren* (patrons, the ones giving out the commission), not the *Baumeister* (the architects). The Palazzo Rucellai in Florence is named after its *Bauherr*, but its fame was associated with the name of its *Baumeister*, Leon Battista Alberti, then as now.⁹ Such phenomena were not known in ancient Mesopotamia or Syria. There, the ruler as *Bauherr* positioned himself as the mediator between gods and mortals, in a traditional legitimization of his function. One gets the impression that this legitimization, however, only regarded his immediate surroundings - the elite (and perhaps indeed the gods) - rather than the populace at large: the temples that kings prided themselves on building for the greater glory of the god(s) may not have been the sites of the kind of massive congregations that the three leading religions of today want to command. Indeed, the temples were mostly relatively small, and often well-enclosed and guarded,¹⁰

not designed to accommodate large congregations. It is as if the ruling class who were responsible for the construction and upkeep of these major temples did not feel obliged to take the opinion of the populace into account - or their religious feelings, if these differed from the state religion. There is room to suggest that the bridge between the official, canonical religion and day-to-day household veneration became more and more difficult to cross. If one may judge by the increasing occurrence of relatively simple clay figurines and plaques of lesser deities and genies between ca. 2600 and 1800 BC, a popular idea of cult was emerging parallel to the state or canonical one. Those objects are not easy to relate to gods of the official pantheon, and may thus represent a substratum of popular religion - which perhaps involved more of an ancestor cult than is usually admitted to have existed. Oppenheim's question "how truthfully do they reveal what is commonly meant by religion?" is still to a large extent unanswerable (1977:175).¹¹ In any case, such smaller -and accessible- street chapels as did exist were mostly consecrated to lesser deities like Hendursanga.¹²

In terms of the importance of builders, the telling difference is that in the European West from the later Middle Ages onward, a certain amount of status could be derived from employing this-or-that craftsman. Such employment was emphasized accordingly. It speaks for a kind of individualization of craftsmanship unknown in the Ancient Near East.¹³ When Hiram of Tyrus sends craftsmen to Solomon, they are treated in the text (1 Kings 5) as wares of exchange, not as specialists. Yet they commanded skills that apparently were not available in Solomon's country, and which hence deserved attention. But it is their usefulness or "value" in the exchange, rather than their individual quality, that plays the main role in the story.¹⁴

It may well be that the very distance between the ruler who commissioned important buildings on the one hand, and the architectural product on the other, also prevented a more intimate intellectual bond with that product: it is especially the one actually working closely on something with his hands, who will feel connected and who will reflect more readily on aims, possibilities, significance and meaning of the work he is undertaking. But his environment must be willing accept those reflections.

If we are simply reduced to the recognition that European Humanism with its Classical origins offered something genuinely new in this respect, it might still be useful to enquire after further causes of the difference, besides the ones mentioned.

In the case of architecture, one might advance the hypothesis that one of the causes lay in the fact that building in the Ancient Near East was rather restricted by the limited kinds of building material available: mud, (bad) timber and very little else. In exceptional cases, limestone in the form of blocks or slabs could be imported (Uruk-period Mesopotamia), or additional materials like basalt could be used. Sometimes cedar wood was imported - but mostly for its rarity value and for its smell (Gudea Cyl. A 8:11), not explicitly because it was better suited for construction purposes. It seems that it is only where a multiplicity of alternative building materials become available that diversification in architectural modes can take off, as it did in Europe. Yet, also the very *will* to import such materials appears to have been relatively rare in the Ancient Near East. Nor can one hold that slow progress of building technology was responsible for the rare use of varying materials. The contemporaneous Egyptians did use different kinds of techniques and materials - which must have been known to the Mesopotamian rulers. The Mesopotamians did import expensive materials like stone, gold and copper to decorate buildings, as for instance the Early Dynastic temple in al-Ubaid shows, and as

we can read from the texts,¹⁵ but these materials were applied as prestations of ostentatious material outlay rather than as symbols of deeper philosophical ideas that had to be expressed through architectural means. Such ideas seem to have been lacking. In short, a meagre measure of 'ostentatious consumption' in architecture and its ornamentation can be said to have existed, but it served to underline not much more than the status of the builder.

For the Mesopotamians, a temple was a building footed in hallowed ground, erected in honor of a deity, in order to pacify that deity and to secure good conditions for the town or country - and its ruler, the builder. But it was the >house of the god=,¹⁶ with the literal emphasis on >house= (Sumerian É): a separate word comparable to our temple or shrine was hardly ever used. One thought of such buildings not as architectural phenomena, but as utilitarian units with a specific, symbolic function. Temples might be experienced as >laden with awe=, and they might have been dark and foreboding inside, but their architectural form was >homely=. For the Mesopotamians their shape and plan were nothing out of the ordinary. In shape, the É or *bitum* (house) of the ordinary man basically differed little from that of the deity.

Ziggurats were different, of course, but they were developed (once their earlier generic evolution from repeatedly refurbished and elevated temples had been recognized as offering such opportunities) to be, perhaps, the relatively simple symbol for a closer proximity to the deity in heaven, or for the lofty position of the community's ruler; there seems to be nothing in their plan that carries any special meaning. Stepped towers are the simplest way to support an elevated shrine (if a shrine there was), since the various podium-levels accessed by staircases facilitate both the access for the builders with their load during construction, as well as that of people on their way to the top for ritual purposes. Note that the Egyptian pyramids - tomb monuments rather than temple-supports, and certainly meant to convey the importance of the ones in them - were not so accessible, and were indeed not meant to be climbed. Discussions still rage about the possible philosophical content of the pyramidal form. If such content existed, this would highlight even more the glaringly special, very prozaic, position of Mesopotamian monumental architecture.

The issue of the utilitarian rather than philosophical building practice is further illuminated by the shape of Syrian and Mesopotamian built tombs. Also they were constructed in the same way as houses or rooms, rather than as places that were designated symbolic as such through a special kind of architecture. These places were hidden from view, mostly under ground, at most indicated or symbolized through stelae or such markers - which were often situated some distance away from the grave itself. As said, tombs (as against ordinary graves and inhumations) had the form of rooms or houses, and this does convey an important message, viz. that life went on after death, where the dead person had to be surrounded by the accoutrements of his earlier live self. Architecturally this was not expressed in a special way, returning us to the realization that architecture as such merely consisted of the erection of a building. The act of building was as it were more important than the physical result.

All this means that we are justified to impart symbolic meaning to the architecture of the Ancient Near East only at a relatively simple level, and that our tendency to read more into it stems from our own more recent cultural heritage.

A discussion like the one above risks being seen as ethnocentric and thus as giving a biased value judgment. It is not meant that way. Rather these remarks mean to point at differences between cultures, and to ask how such differences might arise and what factors cause them. The past of the human race is not comparable to an individual's development from infant to adult; and therefore we may legitimately ask why and how adults in the past came to different solutions than adults now, and we are fully justified in evaluating them. It has been argued here that absolutist rule gave little room to individualism, and that, more basically, a measure of abstraction was lacking, as Frankfort had so eloquently indicated. The work done by professor Margueron will continue to serve as an indispensable underpinning to any analysis of the important part of any culture that architecture is.

References

Boehmer, R.M. 1965, *Die Entwicklung der Glyptik während der Akkad-Zeit*. Berlin, W. de Gruyter.

Borsi, F. 1989, *Leon Battista Alberti. The Complete Works*. New York, Rizzoli.

Coulton, J.J. 1977, *Greek Architects at Work*. London, Granada.

Edzard, D.O. 1975, Die Einrichtung eines Tempels im älteren Babylonien. Philologische Aspekte, in F.R. Kraus et al., eds., *Le Temple et le Culte*. CRRAI 20, Istanbul, Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut xxxvii, pp. 156-163.

Frankfort, H. 1946, *Before Philosophy*. Chicago, UCP.

Gordon, E.I. 1959, *Sumerian Proverbs*. Philadelphia, University Museum.

Meijer, D.J.W. 2002, The Khafaje Sin Temple Sequence: Social Divisions at Work? in: L. al-Gailani Werr et al., eds., *Of Pots and Plans. Papers on the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia and Syria presented to David Oates in Honour of his 75th Birthday*. London, Nabu, pp. 218-226.

Naredi-Rainer, P. von 1982, *Architektur und Harmonie*. Köln, Dumont.

Oppenheim, A.L. 1977, *Ancient Mesopotamia*. Chicago, UCP.

Sollberger, E. 1975, The Temple in Babylonia, in: F.R. Kraus et al., eds., *Le Temple et le Culte*. CRRAI 20, Istanbul, Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut xxxvii, pp. 31-34.

Vitruvius (M. Vitruvius Pollio), *Ten Books on Architecture*.

Wittkower, R. 1973, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. London, Academy Editions.

Woolley, C.L., & M. Mallowan 1976, *The Old Babylonian Period*, Ur Excavations VII, London, BMP.

1. Relatively little is known about Greek architectural theories, or practices for that matter. See, e.g., Coulton 1977, esp. Ch. 1.

2. See, e.g., Von Naredi-Rainer 1982.

3. The reference is to Wittkower 1973: 30, who cites J. Sauer, *Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes* (Freiburg i.B. 1924) p. 292.

4. That the cubit, which was used in various forms as a favorite dimension in the Ancient Near East, is derived from the length of the human forearm is not an argument in this context.

5. Cf. sayings like *Agō* about like a lord, build like a slave, go about like a slave, build like a lord, to show the superficiality of outward appearances (Gordon 1959 no. 2.137 on p. 270).

6. Cf. the *Expedition* seal Boehmer 1965 Abb. 717. Note the almost Greek stance of the guide on that seal.

7. Frankfort 1946 Chapter VIII (*The Emancipation of Thought from Myth*).

8. This distinction is related to another one: although often clothed in dualistic terms attributed to Descartes (*I think, therefore I am*), the distinction between mind and matter, or body and soul, also that between *animus* and *anima*, is much older, cf. the Roman saying *mens sana in corpore sano*, which clearly centers on the same idea.

9. On Alberti's work for Rucellai, see Borsi 1989 Ch. 4.

10. See Meijer 2002.

11. Cf. Also his remark (1977:181) that "The common man, lastly, remains an unknown, the most important unknown element in Mesopotamian religion."

12. Woolley & Mallowan 1976: 30f; cf. *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* IV-324f.

13. We do know the names of a few *savants* from the Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence, but this is not the same as the fame of Late-Medieval artists, which was spread throughout more layers of the population, and internationally, making them sought-after *commodities*.

14. Apparently, what we call *quality* was perceived as what we would call (monetary) value.

15. Cf. Edzard 1975.

16. See already Sollberger 1975: 32. He adds: *The Babylonian was was no doubt perfectly happy with 'house' and would have probably been baffled by our insistence on using two different terms to express the same concept.*