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GENDERING THE CONQUERED SPACE: THE MEANING OF SPATIAL METAPHORS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXTS

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Рассматриваются функции пространственных метафор в контексте завоевания земель. Различные метафоры использовались для описания процесса завоевания, в особенности посредством феминизации территории противника. Если в ассирийских источниках эти метафоры использовались в риторике военного времени, то в Ветхом Завете они служили для преодоления разрушения и потери пространства. В обеих культурах пространственные метафоры отражают существовавшие в то время нормы пола, класса, расы и этнической принадлежности и вместе с тем замещают реальную географию.

Ключевые слова: воображаемая география, феминизация пространства, гендер и пространство, пространственные метафоры, гендерный ландшафт, риторика военного времени, Ассирия, Ветхий Завет.

The so-called spatial turn and its theoretical framework have arrived in Ancient History and Biblical Studies since more than two decades. In Assyriology, surprisingly less attention has been paid to this scholarly trend. Although there are voices, that question the heuristic value of the concept outside human geography and social sciences [1, p. 400–419], «space» is a useful category for ancient Near Eastern history as well.

Based on the assumptions by H. Lefebvre [2], E. Soja [3] and others [e.g. the summary in 4, p. 14–29] that space is socially constructed, that means made by men/women, this paper deals with the ideological implications of imagined geographies. According to Lefebvre's terminology, this corresponds to his category of «conceived space» [2, p. 39, 45], produced by language, metaphor and ideology.

In the following, I will concentrate on the relationship between gender and military conquest in ancient sources about occupation or conquest of land. The process of conquering could be described as penetrating a body or more drastic as rape. Metaphors of exploring the female body were frequently used when referring to besieging cities. The focus will lie on Assyrian royal inscriptions and on some passages of the Old Testament, where we can distinguish different kinds of metaphors¹: a more neutral metaphor is the one of «nation/landscape-as-(female)body». Clearly sexually connoted is the «raping-the-city» metaphor. I argue that this embodiment of space had an actual meaning in royal ideology and especially in wartime rhetoric.

The Assyrian empires of the late second and especially the first millennium BCE were monarchies

based on territorial expansion. They were characterized by a mentality that fostered thinking in dichotomies like native–foreign/alien, male–female or in- and out-group. Some of the most important prerequisites of the successful king were his ability to protect his people as their shepherd and to be the farmer, gardener or cultivator of land. Assyrian kings acted as the deities' representative on earth and were portrayed as having transcendent and immanent dominions over the foreign lands and people. Especially in times of war this led to a humiliating or even mocking view on the enemy [5, p. 41–63].

In Assyrian sources, there is also a correlation between royal ideology and spatialized wartime rhetoric. Although in its exact details debatable, the cuneiform texts reveal an equation of imperialism with hegemonic manliness expressed in terms of spatial metaphors. It is no need to overemphasize the sexual aspect [as in 6 and 7], but there are clear indications of a gendering of land as one of many other facets in wartime rhetoric. As similar metaphors are still part of our modern daily lives [8; 9; 10], we sometimes easily overlook them, especially in ancient sources². This holds true for the «landscape/nation-as-body» metaphor, when land is personified as a female body.

Official Assyrian statements on conquered lands not only complement existing perceptions of real space but also mostly replace them. Remarkably, examples of «realistic» descriptions of conquered lands are rare in cuneiform sources and always quite laconic: For instance, king Assurnasirpal II (883–850 BCE) simply states in the account of the approach to the city of Carchemish during his ninth campaign:

ÍD.A.RAD *ina* <A>.KAL.-šá *ina* GIŠ.MÁ.MEŠ
KUŠ.DUĤ.ŠI-*e lu-ú e-bir*

«I crossed the Euphrates, which was in flood, in rafts (made of inflated) goatskins...» (RIMA II A.O. 101.1, iii 64–5)³.

The majority of texts, however, have lengthy narratives about besieging a city or invading a land. These passages use a highly literary, often metaphorical language known from poetical or mythological texts. Over the centuries, various kings applied the same metaphors on different historical campaigns or regions. By that, these metaphors became stereotypes.

We can distinguish different kinds of metaphors in the texts: more neutral are the ones of «landscape/nation-as-body» or «conquering-virginland». J. Assante, for example, observed that in inscriptions of king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1240–1205 BCE) conquered territory is imagined much like the female body, and conquering much like penetration of virgin territory [7, p. 358; RIMA I A. 0.78. 23]. About four centuries later, Assurnasirpal II claims to have penetrated impassible territory that was so remote that it was unknown to the kings who preceded him. He calls himself:

*mu-pat-ti*⁴ [tu]-*da-at* KUR.MEŠ-*e šá* GIM *še-lu-ut pat-ri a-na* AN-*e zi-qip-ta šá-ak-nu*.

„...opener of paths in mountains which rise perpendicularly to the sky like the edge of a dagger.” (RIMA II A.O. 101.40, i 15).

The king had to explore regions,

KUR-*ú* GIM *zi-qip* GÍR AN.BAR *še-su na-a-di*
u MUŠEN AN-*e mut-tap-ri-šú qé-reb-šú la i-'i-ru*.

«...wherein the mountain was as jagged as the point of a dagger and therein no winged birds of the sky flew...» (RIMA II A.O. 101.1, i 49)⁵.

This motive of the «difficult path» that had to be cut through the mountains with iron axes and copper picks (RIMA II A.O. 101.1 ii 95–96) is frequently used to metaphorically describe alien landscape. The Assyrian king actively transforms the untouched, virgin land into cultivated space.

An intensification of the «landscape/nation-as-body» metaphor appears in some books of the Old Testament, when cities are equated with endangered or violated women. Hebrew and Akkadian⁶ terms for «city», *‘ir* (עיר) or *ālum*, as well as Greek *polis* and Latin *urbs* are of female grammatical gender. The same applies to the nouns for «land», in Akkadian *mātum* / *eršetum*, Greek *chōra* or Latin *terra*. Grammatical gender only does not tell much. Things become more significant, when grammatically male terms like Judah, Israel or Egypt are treated female, combining them with female personal or possessive pronouns («she», «her») in the text, but also with epithets like «virgin», «wife», «whore», «mother», «bride», or

«daughter». Cities and nations are not inherently female but have to be made feminine by scribes or authors. This means, they are constructed imaginatively. Famous Biblical examples of such feminized cities devastated by gods are Nineveh and Babylon. In Second Isaiah, the consequences of Babylon’s military destruction are equated with the fate of women in war:

«Come down and sit in the dust, virgin daughter Babylon ... strip off your robe, uncover your legs ... your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your shame shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one» (Isa. 47: 1–3).

The prophetic book Nahum, dating to the Persian period (6th–5th centuries BCE) [13, p. 540–542], presents one of the most thoroughly gendered presentations of the Assyrian encounter in the Bible. Historical background is the retrospective view on the fall of the Assyrian capital Nineveh in 612 BCE by a coalition of Babylonians and Medes. Woman Nineveh is an object of scorn, she is the guilty one, the deceptive whore, who is attacked with «flaming swords and flashing spears», who has brought the punishment (i.e. the city’s destruction) upon herself:

«On account of the countless whorings of the whore, the graceful beauty, mistress of sorceries, one who sells nations through her whoredom, and families through her sorceries» (Nahum 3: 4).

Nahum 2: 14 and especially 3: 5 contain oracles directed against a feminized Nineveh, accusing her of harlotry and threatening her with rape:

«Behold, I am against you, says Yahweh of Hosts (Sabaoth), I will lift up your skirts over your face and I will display your nakedness to the nations and your shame to the kingdoms» (Nah 3: 5).

The historical military conquest of Nineveh by a human army becomes an act of a masculine divinity shaming a feminized city through sexual assault⁷. Yahweh, through Nahum, has labeled the capital of Assyria a prostitute. This implies that the Assyrian king was portrayed as somebody, who was not capable to protect her. Now, the gates of the town (this is her vagina) are opened to her enemies. In contrast to Nineveh, on the also feminized (grammatically masculine) Judah no language of whoredom is attached, when she is told to celebrate the downfall of her rival. Yahweh, the vengeful storm god, carries out the shaming and military conquest of Nineveh, while the Assyrian king is totally incapacitated, cursed to his grave. This is intended to belittle Assyrian invaders and to preserve the masculine power and honor of Yahweh. Indeed, during the lifetime of Nahum the Assyrians were no military threat anymore, because the Achaemenid dynasty dominated the land. So Nahum can be read as «subversive anti-imperial scrip-

ture [13, p. 542]» directed against any empire. He not only gives reasons for the downfall (bloodshed, deceit, harlotry) of an imperial power, but also «condemns all oppressive or offensive acts, imperial as well as intra-societal [13, p. 555]». Through the image of the Assyrian empire, the book of Nahum shows how Yahweh acts against and liberates his people from such imperial power. Readers could interpret this as a symbol of hope that the Persian domination will also come to an end like the former Assyrian.

Nahum illustrates the versatility of gendered language in the ideological representation of history: the more common metaphor «Jerusalem-as-woman» is recasted or even transformed into a «Nineveh-as-woman» metaphor⁸. An example of the former metaphor comes from the book of Ezekiel. It applies the picture of the violated woman on Jerusalem, who is brutally attacked by her husband Yahweh, because of her alleged adultery with foreign nations (Assyria, Egypt)⁹. For this perceived wrong, Jerusalem is attacked by the god verbally and physically: she is exposed, raped, stoned, and stabbed. In verses 39–41, God punishes his wife for her lewd behavior, commanding the woman's lovers (Egypt, Assyria) to break down her platforms and high places and to destroy her property. When viewed through the historical lens [14, p. 116–120], the actions of Jerusalem can be seen as an attempt of a city to protect itself from the pillaging and total annexation by much greater nations by trying to actively get in contact with them. Yahweh prevents and punishes such autonomous behavior that is against the male norms of society. With this, we approach to the ideological implications of gendered spatial metaphors.

Above mentioned examples of gendered spatial metaphors reveal that they were part of a dichotomized, gendered ideology, which is reflected not only in inscriptions but also in myths and literary texts. The «kernel of truth» behind such metaphors were historical military encounters all over the Ancient Near East and the real experience of siege, warfare, or social insecurity. The metaphors express the loss of space or destruction of cities like Nineveh or Jerusalem. B. E. Kelle states that, «certainly the violation of women as a metaphor fits the destruction of capital cities, for the stripping, penetration, exposure and humiliation of the women are analogous to siege warfare, with its breaching of the wall, entrance through the gate, and so forth» [15, p. 104]. He sees the Biblical metaphors as crafted for times of warfare. The capital cities serve as metonyms for the ruling houses and the political elite. According to him, the metaphors offer «a war-time critique of political rulers and their actions» [15, p. 107].

G. Yee argues that Ezekiel, the spokesman of the male elite of his time, used spatial metaphors to «avoid blame for the nation's fall by concealing themselves behind the bodies of women [14, p. 134]». Woman as a symbol or trope for a sinful targeted group or nation helped him articulate issues of power and asymmetry. These metaphors pressure the male elite to avoid being identified as women but instead to identify with the dominating violent masculinity of Yahweh.

Contemporary research on metaphor has revealed its cognitive dimension: namely, that metaphor is part of human conceptualization and not just a linguistic expression that occurs in literary works. Philosopher Tim Rohrer [8, p. 115–137] has observed already in 1995, that the reality of our modern political life is constituted by metaphors. They are fundamental to our political discourse¹⁰. Metaphors of rape or the metaphor «nation-is-a-person» were consciously used by President George Bush in the propaganda before the First Gulf War in 1991 to persuade the U.S. and her allies «to share his (i.e. Bush's) understanding of the crisis» [10, p. 116] and to attack Iraq. This time it was the alleged «rape of Kuwait», that had to be retaliated. The modern example shows that gendered metaphors of space have a meaning in daily politics. They serve as a justification to go to war.

The underlying gendered symbolism in political discourse helps make it feel natural and legitimate to fight wars and spend money on military programs that would otherwise be difficult to justify on rational security grounds. It is a face-saving strategy that covers up the real intentions of the producer of the metaphor. Certainly, the kings and elites in antiquity had no problems to legitimate the financing of wars, but they also had to justify wars before their gods and their subjects. By using metaphors, the kings and rulers strengthened a sense of community, a feeling of sharing a common goal, – a goal that had to be realized.

Metaphorical descriptions of conquering land recur in Assyrian war reports and Old Testament texts but had different meanings. In cuneiform sources, gendered space was used as a tool in political propaganda, to belittle the enemy and legitimize territorial expansion. Books of the Old Testament reflect elements of Assyrian and Babylonian war rhetoric but adapt and enlarge spatial metaphors for their own purpose: to criticize Judean elite or even their own people. Thus, gendered space is not so much seen as factual means of propaganda but serves as means of criticizing hubristic behavior. Within both contexts, the «landscape/nation-as-(female)body» metaphor is different from the rape metaphor. The former stresses the typical stereotypes between the genders, like male

is strong, female is weak and reflects hegemonic manliness of the victor. The rape metaphor is a subcategory of the «nation as woman» metaphor, but emphasizes the severity of the crisis, the extreme hardship and consequences of war for its victims.

Metaphors were (and still are) tools for integrating affection, enjoyment and thought into different discourses aligned with different ideologies. Their multi-dimensional character made it easy to use them for various purposes. On the one hand, they could be used to offend, humiliate, and degrade one's opponents (dysphemic offensive use) or to legitimize military actions against the enemy and his land by using metaphors that represent women's experiences that call for sympathy, as in the rape metaphor, or hope, as in the birth metaphor¹¹. As has been shown, these metaphors were not only applied on the enemy people, but also on the enemy territory.

Until today, there is a tendency in national defense discourse to personify and sexually characterize the actions of states and armies. This leads to a feminization of cities or even whole countries. The «landscape/nation-as-body» metaphor and its subcategories «landscape/nation/city-as-woman» and «violating/raping-the-city» can be applied on foreign people or lands to stress alterity, i.e. the difference between «them» and «us». They can also refer to own cities, who do not obey to current social or political norms properly.

Such metaphorical descriptions of foreign lands or cities had different meanings. In cuneiform sources, gendered space was used as a tool in political propaganda. In the books of the Old Testament gendered space was used to criticize hubristic behavior on a more literary level. Here, the spatial metaphors produced spatial ideologies that attempted to overcome the deterioration or loss of (real) space. In both analyzed societies, these descriptions became stereotypical, and do not reflect historical realities or real geography, but current norms of gender, race, ethnicity or class within the respective society. Yet, spatial metaphors cover up and replace real geographical descriptions of landscapes or cities.

Примечания

1. Remarkably, Near Eastern and Ancient Greek sources share a similar repertoire of spatial metaphors, as I will show in a future study.

2. K. Radner [11, p. 234] is right that there is no *explicit* «sexual relationship between a dominant male and a passive female» as in the Old Testament, but her further statements that «sexual connotations are entirely missing» in visual arts and texts and that «Assyrians

equated the land with the female and the female body cannot be supported at all,» are too extreme.

3. River crossings are already stated by Tiglat-Pileser I (RIMA II A.O. 87.1, v 57–59). For the underlying royal propaganda see *in extenso* [12].

4. M. Cifarelli [12, p. 123] noted, that the scribe used the more dynamic verb «to open» (*petû* II), rather than «to see» (*amāru*) or «to tread upon» (*kabāsu*). Akkadian *petû* (CAD p 345ff.; 350) can also bear a sexual meaning «to bare, uncover, unveil», referring to the womb or the female genitalia.

5. See also RIMA II A.O. 87.10.

6. The Akkadian word *ālum* («city», see CAD A 1, 379ff.) is in general masculine, but especially under west-Semitic influence feminine, e.g. in the Amarna correspondence, see CAT 126f.

7. The image of Yahweh as perpetrator of gender-biased violence is also obvious in the books of Ezekiel, Hosea, Jeremiah and Lamentations. On Ezekiel see [14; 15; 16; 17; 18] with further literature.

8. Similar personifications include the whore Babylon in Isaiah and the land Samaria in Mica. Remarkably, there are also analogies in Classical authors: In an epigram by Agathias (*AP* 9.152), feminized Troy laments its own fall. Already in the Iliad, Troy is described as having lost her *kredemnon* (marriage veil) as a sign of her forced conquest.

9. I. Zsolnay [17] recently stressed that Erra responds with similar violence like Yahweh on an impertinent Babylon in the late Babylonian epic *Erra and Išum*.

10. For the use of political metaphors in modern Middle East see [10].

11. See e.g. [10] and examples from the Vietnam war [9, p. 308–310].

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GENDERING THE CONQUERED SPACE: THE MEANING OF SPATIAL METAPHORS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXTS

I. Madreiter

The article deals with the functions of spatial metaphors in the context of conquering lands. Different metaphors were used to describe the process of conquest, especially by feminizing enemy territory. Whereas these metaphors were used in Assyrian sources in war time rhetoric, they served in the Old Testament to overcome destruction and loss of space. In both cultures, spatial metaphors echo current norms of gender, class, race and ethnicity but replace real geography.

Keywords: imagined geographies, feminization of space, gender and space, spatial metaphors, gendered landscape, wartime rhetoric, Assyria, Old Testament.

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