Chapter 2
Approaching the early Neo-Assyrian period

2.1 "Problems of a unique character"

Until the decipherment of cuneiform, the history of Assyria had been written not by the victors—as runs the timeworn adage—but by the losers; however, finally obtaining the winning side's account presents a bevy of new issues with which the historian must contend: "The study of Assyrian history", as Lambert (1974, 103) once put it, "involves problems of a unique character within the ancient Near East. The quantity of relevant material is greater than that for any other kingdom of comparable duration and influence, yet it is so one-sided in content and purpose that it creates as many problems as it solves." This situation is even more pronounced for the early Neo-Assyrian period, in which the textual record is heavily skewed towards the Assyrian royal inscriptions. Overcoming these limitations to create a plausible historical reconstruction balancing the statements of the surviving sources with etic considerations—writing thereby what Reade (2024b) has recently dubbed "invisible Assyrian history"—requires creativity and patience.

In turn, the growing corpus of historical sources for this period in languages other than Akkadian demands recognition (see already Ch. 1.2). Assyriology's 'conceptual autonomy' must now be weighed against more sources than those of Classical historiography and the Bible. As the corpus of Aramaic inscriptions within Assyria grows, and the pervasiveness of its use within the state is better articulated, it will become difficult to separate 'Aramean' from 'Assyrian' history (see Ch. 2.4.2).[90] Wherever possible, it is sought herein to harmonise Aramaic and Akkadian-language accounts. Much the same is attempted for Luwian and Urarṭian-language sources, although the interpretative gulf is necessarily wider, the findings often less certain.[91] These textual sources must also be compared wherever pertinent with the extant archaeological record. While the resultant history is still recognisably 'traditional' and 'Assyrian', this is—at least presently—unavoidable in answering the work's central question.

Furthermore, there are various distinctive or unique features of the early Neo-Assyrian state and its textual and material record which are important to note when assailing an historical reconstruction of the era. These include the institution of the campaign, which was central to Assyrian society (Ch. 2.2), the very specific terminology used to describe the annexation of territory and the intellectual paradigms underpinning this (Ch. 2.3), the ambiguous processes constituting provincialisation during this period (Ch. 2.4), the particularities of being an Assyrian king which set him apart from his contemporaries (2.5), the world of the elites who constituted Assyria's gubernatorial class (Ch. 2.6), and, finally, the almost voiceless masses at the bottom of the Assyrian hierarchy (Ch. 2.7). Interwoven with these explanations are discussions of the sources used to identify these different aspects within the Neo-Assyrian material and textual record, and their very particular demands upon the historian. All of this is conceptualised as a prolegomenon to the following two chapters (3 and 4) presenting the history itself in two different perspectives, one diachronic, the other geographical.

2.2 *akšud!* The world of the early Neo-Assyrian campaign

2.2.1 The anatomy of an Assyrian campaign

In earlier research, Assyria was frequently described as a bellicose society, this having prompted its territorial expansion (see Ch. 1.2). The reality is somewhat different; Saggs (1982, 85) already pointed to Assyria's poor reputation within the Old Testament as has having spread this notion, and Bagg (2016, 57–58) has con-

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90 That Aramaic inscriptions assume an ancillary role in this present study is a mere consequence the present textual record.
91 See Payne 2019 for methodological discussion on the use of Luwian sources in writing Assyrian history, and Salvini 2012 on the Urarṭian textual corpus.

versely emphasised the general brutality of the era.[92] What the present author would rather argue is that the practice of annual campaigning occupied a central position within the early Neo-Assyrian political, social, and cultural spheres (Grayson 1976b, 134–138) unique among the polities of the time, and that it is this which has lent Assyria its fearsome aspect. While campaigning was a facet of kingship common to practically every ancient Near Eastern state, no other civilisation sought to undertake campaigning with such remarkable regularity—or to document it so painstakingly—as early Neo-Assyria.

Although this could be taken as evidence of a very warlike culture, this fails to understand that the campaign was not necessarily conceptualised as violent.[93] *gerru*—the Assyrian word for a campaign (corresponding to Standard Babylonian *ḫarrānu*)—primarily denotes a route, path, way, or journey (see Zehnder 1999, 124–134). This terminology marks an important distinction from European conceptions of the 'campaign',[94] which are territorially and spatially connoted, centring upon the venturing of a military force into 'the field', i.e. into an arena in which combat between armies might occur.[95] Insofar, the meaning of *gerru* is more neutral than might be thought, and focuses on the journey itself—hence, its semantic range is probably closer to the word 'expedition' in English.[96] Indeed, some military campaigns were actually peaceful, fulfilling symbolic, religious, or diplomatic goals, or simply gathering tribute. Some contained little to no violence, and are described rather in adventurous terms within the textual record, emphasising the logistical feat of travelling through difficult territory rather over the martial prowess of the king and his army.[97]

This Assyrian ambiguity between martial and peaceful endeavour is crucial, as it reflects the broader interchangeability between the military and the civil in Assyrian society. Not only does distinguishing between civil and military administration within Assyria remain fraught (Postgate 2007a),[98] but it is also now clear that whether an Assyrian king elected to expand the *Māt-Aššur* through military conquest or peaceful, infrastructural means such as agricultural intensification was his own prerogative (see Ch. 2.3.5). While warlike things generally happened on campaigns, this was not a given.

As will be further argued, the notion of the campaign as a journey is important in understanding its important symbolic and political aspects—akin to a traditional Mesopotamian hero such as Gilgāmeš,[99] the king

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[92] Indeed, a very recent empirical study examining violence in the Near East in the longue durée actually points to the Chalcolithic as having been the most violent era in Mesopotamian history (Baten et al. 2023).

[93] While the historian of Assyria conventionally refers to 'war' with some frequency, the Assyrian royal inscriptions do not conceptualise events in such a manner. Akkadian *nukurtu* 'hostilities, strife, war'—is practically unattested within this corpus, although it does appear prominently within other genres of text, particularly omen literature and astrological reports, albeit even then it is used most frequently to describe conflict within a kingdom, rather than between two nations.

[94] Derived from Late Latin *campania* 'open country', 'campaign' connotes the act of leaving the urban sphere and entering the countryside on a (military) expedition (compare with French *campagne*, Italian *campagna*, Spanish *campana*, and—very literally —German *Feldzug*).

[95] The Mesopotamian focus rather upon the journey itself has something of a parallel in Arabic *ḥamla* 'campaign', derived from the root *ḥamala*, which is primarily associated with the act of carrying or bearing something, also in the abstract sense of enduring (Wehr 1994, 240–241); interestingly, another meaning of *ḥamala* is to be pregnant, the connection being the effort of carrying an unborn child, which must have been considerable for a woman in a pre-modern nomadic society.

[96] In a similar vein, Bernbeck (2010, 153) translates *gerru* as 'intervention' or 'incursion'. The semantic connection in *ḫarrānu* has also recently been observed by Earley-Spadoni (2022, 150–152), although she interprets it conversely as roads being associated with war, rather than the notion of a journey having semantic priority over that of a martial campaign.

[97] Indeed, there is evidence that some Assyrian kings gave their armies 'slack' with campaigns focusing on peaceful achievements such as marching to a sea, creating monuments, or felling timber from symbolically-charged forests and mountains as 'breathers' between larger, much bloodier affairs (see especially the campaigns of Salmānu-ašarēd III to the west, Ch. 4.6.5). This would have permitted an Assyrian army to regain its strength and confidence after multiple years of heavier-going, much more violent warfare.

[98] Consider, for example, the ambiguity evident in the word *ṣābu* 'people, troops', used interchangeably in military and non-military contexts.

[99] This notion of the king on campaign harkens back to the heroic literary journeys of Mesopotamian kings into mountains attested as early as the Early Dynastic period (see Zand 2020). Conflation between literary and actual campaigning is already attested by Šarru(m)-kīn of Akkad at the latest, whose expeditions to the cedar forests of the Mediterranean coast are difficult to disentangle from the shift of the cedar forest in the Gilgāmeš story to the Levant by the Old Babylonian period at the latest (Klein/Abraham 2000; George 2001).

ventured beyond Assyria's pale at least once a year with the 'hosts of Aššur' and the standards of his gods in a projection of Assyrian might. For this endeavour, he brought with him a large number of men from throughout his realm who would at least notionally share in the adventure, adversity, or atrocities which awaited, and return to share stories of the campaign's events with their families and neighbours. As such, campaigns contained elements of ritual and stagecraft which were far more effective propaganda than any written or visual medium (see below, Ch. 2.2.4).

The importance of the annual campaign is demonstrated by it occupying the vast majority of the annalistic narratives within the Assyrian royal inscriptions (see below Ch. 2.2.5), which is also how so much is known of Assyria's campaigning activities. For centuries, Assyrian kings commissioned scribes to compose very detailed accounts of campaigns to be inscribed onto commemorative tablets and prisms usually buried as foundation deposits during the construction or refurbishment of palaces, or to be carved onto relief orthostats (alongside visual depictions), stele, or even rock faces. While not primarily meant for a human audience, they were still often highly detailed accounts providing not only the king's place of departure and subsequent itinerary, but sometimes even the date on which this occurred and further temporal information over the course of the narrative.[100] Sometimes, the events of the king's return at the campaign's close and the commemoration of the campaign itself are described. Small preambles are also occasionally presented, offering additional context to the campaign's motivations or even a 'cause for war' (or *casus belli*, see Oded 1992). As such, this textual genre, which is essentially confined to the Assyrian corpus,[101] is an excellent source for reconstructing Assyrian history, albeit through a very particular and one-sided lens. The reworking of these narratives and their extensive inscription on a variety of media point to their significance to the king's self-conception, even in an entirely solipsistic medium.

The significance of the campaign is further underlined by the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle (SAAS 2, B1–12), which assiduously records the main target of each year's campaigning in curt remarks for more than a century and a half (between 857 and 700). Frequently recopied by scribes, this chronicle's layout embodies the regular, annual conception of campaigns.[102] A year without a campaign for whatever reason received the remark *ina māti* 'in the land'. As such, these lists provide a reliable chronological framework with which to reconstruct the history of the early Neo-Assyrian period, and are particularly useful for reigns possessing only a few royal inscriptions (see Fuchs 2008a).

The campaign or *gerru* conceptually consisted of a series of stages, which, although a simplification of reality,[103] must still broadly reflect the actual progress of such an undertaking:

1. The assembly of the army
2. The king's departure with the army from a home city
3. The march to the intended destination, often including hardship and/or the collection of tribute from vassals
4. A military encounter with a foe and taking of spoil, or a non-violent climax to the campaign such as the collection of further tribute, the visiting of a sacred space, or the creation of an outpost
5. The march back to the home city and a triumph
6. The dispersal of the army

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100 Some Assyrian kings' inscriptions do not present campaign narratives in order of *palû*—i.e. regnal year—but rather by *gerru*, the campaign itself (i.e. "in my first campaign, . . . in my second campaign, . . ." etc.). As recently noted by Yamada (2019a, 170–171), this trend begins with an inscription of the *turtānu* Dayyān-Aššur which was illegally excavated at Tall ʿAǧāǧa and subsequently destroyed (Frahm 2015).

101 The last governors of Sūḫu imitated this genre with their own 'annalistic' accounts (see Ch. 4.4.5). For the brevity and imprecision with which campaigning is described within the Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions, see now Weiershäuser 2023.

102 "This practice, which we may trace back as far as Tiglath-pileser I. was well established by the ninth century and a tangible reflection of it is found in the royal annals and the eponym chronicles which presuppose yearly expeditions." (Grayson 1976b, 135).

103 Indeed, Badalì et al. (1982) were able to apply a Proppian narratological analysis to the campaigns of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II with some success. Nonetheless, there are only so many ways of writing the narrative of a campaign, as Melville's (2019a, 351, tab. 1) juxtaposition of Šarru-ukīn's 'Letter to the God Aššur' (RINAP 2, 65) and Plutach's *Vita Alexandri* suggests.

In the first stage, the king collected his troops into the 'hosts of Aššur' for the campaign. As discussed in the following section, this would have been a mixed force including both Assyrian and non-Assyrian professional soldiers and Assyrian provincial levies completing their military service. Little is known about this procedure for the early Neo-Assyrian period (see further discussion below in Chs. 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). The king would have simultaneously finalised the rough plans for the campaign with his advisors including his commander-in-chief, the *turtānu*. The Assyrian strategy consisted of amassing a single, unstoppable army annually for a campaign, but this also meant that only a single region could be attacked each year (unless multiple campaigns in a single year were undertaken, which some kings did do), and Assyria was vulnerable while the army was abroad. This required an elaborate calculus of the risks and benefits of campaigning in one region over another, and a 'grand strategy' of sorts. This has been interpreted by some authors as meaning that a systematic Assyrian long-term strategy held sway,[104] with the campaigns of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II being used as a test-case (e.g. Baudains et al. 2015); unfortunately, much of this is pareidolia,[105] particularly considering how many of this king's campaigns were dispatched in order to quell revolts or abruptly experienced a change of course to put down insurrection. As will be seen in Chapters 3 and 4, there is a broad strategic logic evident for the greater part of the early Neo-Assyrian period, and kings did reserve themselves certain conquests for opportune moments, as with Adad-nārārī II and Ḫanigalbat (see Chs. 3.4.1; 4.1.4), but the reconstruction of a concerted 'grand strategy' seems excessive. Nonetheless, a Babylonian *tamītu* (oracle query) written for a king of Bābili (Bābil, Iraq) surviving in a late Assyrian copy[106] does attest to the importance of a notional target before the campaign commenced (MesCiv 13, 5: 1–3):

> ^dUTU EN *di-nim* ^dIŠKUR EN *bi-ri* NENNI [EN SÍ]G ᵗᵘᵍSÍG-ᵉ NE-*i* LUGAL ᵏᵘʳ*šu-me-ri u* [*ak*ˀ*-ka*ˀ*-di*ˀ*-i*ˀ LUGAL[?] *dan*]-*nu* ŠAKKANA TIN.TIRᵏⁱ *ša* MU NE-*ti ana* DU KUR KÚR-*šú* NENNI *ana* GAZ Ṣ[AR *u* IR IG]Iᵐᵉˢ-*šú* GARᵐᵉˢ-*šú lìb-ba-šú na-šú-šú k*[*a-bat-ta-šú u*]*b-lam-ma ti-iṣ-mu-ru-ma* DINGIR-*ut-ku-nu* GAL-*ti* ZU-*ú* GIM KA DIN[GIR-*ti-ku-n*]*u-ti ina* ŠÀ MU NE-*ti li-i*[*ṣ-rim lik-pi*]*d-ma tap-ḫur-ti de-kut* KUR-*šú* DAGAL-*tì*

> Šamaš, lord of judgment, Adad, lord of inspection, so-and-so, owner of this woollen fringe, king of Sumer and [Akkad, gr]eat king, ruler of Bābili, who—your great godhead knows—has determined, planned, resolved, and intended—in accordance with your great divinity—within this year to march to the land of his foe so-and-so for the purpose of its defeat, pillaging, and plundering

The second stage was the departure itself. Assyrian royal inscriptions frequently give the precise place and date of departure, perhaps to allude to its auspiciousness; this departure—perhaps even with an announcement as to the general direction—could be used to a king's strategic advantage or disadvantage. For example, as noted, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's campaigns were often interrupted by news of an uprising elsewhere—perhaps as the Assyrian army was already on the move in another direction—which compelled him to alter his planned campaign. As Assyrian military strength would be concentrated into a single army and regional gar-

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104 Grayson's (1976b, 137) argument is characteristic: "It cannot be denied that this proposal of a broad policy consciously thought out and applied is based upon an argument that is dangerously circular. Ashur-nasir-apli II campaigned on all fronts, therefore his policy was to campaign on all fronts and vice versa. Nor can it ever be proven, barring the discovery of a totally unexpected type of document, that such grand plans ever existed. But the only alternative is to conclude that year after year this gigantic force was sent out in any direction that happened to catch the king's fancy."—naturally, his distinction between thoughtful and thoughtless campaigning is exaggerated.

105 Consider the following remark by Liverani (2011c, 476): "Mapping the itineraries of his campaigns, it is possible to note how they were perfectly connected to each other, covering the entire circumference of the empire, as if they were the result of a specific project." Compare also Mayer's (1995, 45) assessment: "Bereits in den mittelassyrischen Königsinschriften ist deutlich der Fortschritt in der Entwicklung des assyrischen Militärwesens erkennbar. Strategische Planung zeichnet sich in Umrissen klar ab, Prioritäten und Zusammenhänge in der Abfolge der Feldzüge sind festzustellen."

106 This query is entitled *tamīt alāk ḫarrāni ana māt nakri ana dâki ḫabāti u šalāli ana šulum šarri alāku u târa* "an oracle query about marching on a campaign to an enemy land for the purpose of its defeat, pillaging, and plundering, for the king's safety, and his departure and return" (MesCiv 13, 5: 48). It was composed in Babylonia during the late Kassite period, and enquires in a systematic manner after the potential success of a campaign to the mountains by a Babylonian king. That the famous scribe Nabû-zuqup-kēnu—who enjoyed royal patronage (Frahm 1999)—had copied it may well point to the preparation of a similar mountain campaign by his royal patron, perhaps Sîn-aḫḫē-erība on his campaign against the Yasubigallians (Edmonds 2019a, 42). In enquiring about every possible aspect of a campaign, this query presents an 'anatomy' of such an undertaking from an emic, Mesopotamian perspective.

risons depleted, the king marching on a campaign of multiple months in a completely different direction would give a local polity the chance to rebel and fortify its position, knowing that the Assyrian king would not be able to respond until much later in the year, or even the following spring.[107] However, this same factor could also be used for misdirection, with the king marching one way with his forces before abruptly changing course and attacking an unsuspecting polity, sometimes even an Assyrian ally.[108]

From here, in the third stage, the Assyrian army would march through its own and allied territory until it reached its goal, frequently collecting tribute on its way. Generally, marches would involve the crossing of rivers (the Assyrians preferred boats or pontoons to permanent bridges; see Bagg 2017a) and the traversing of rough and inhospitable terrain, which added to the 'adventurous' aspect of campaigning.[109] This part of the march is well illustrated in the aforementioned *tamītu* (MesCiv 13, 5: 8–11):

> ni-i[r-šú li]-ꜥišꜥ-bat-ꜥmaꜥ ꜥṣiꜥ-mit-ta-šú liš-te-ši-ir [KI ERIMᵐ]eš an-na-a-na-ti ABUL TIN.TIRᵏⁱ U[D.DU . . .] du ꜥxꜥ [. . .] KURᵐᵉš-šú DIB. DIB-iq ꜥÍDꜥᵐᵉš ꜥuꜥ ꜥsuꜥ-ra-a-nu ꜥmaꜥ-ꜥlaꜥ iš-ši-ra-niš-šú li-te-bir rik-si u ḫal-[ṣi . . .] x e-lu-ti u KI.TAᵐᵉš lit-tab-ꜥbalꜥ-ꜥkátꜥ ḫar-ri na-at -ba-ku u sa-ḫi-ma-a-ti šá KUR-i [. . .] ꜥxꜥ NENNI ana GAZ SAR u IR li-ir-[di] UGU DINGIR-ti-ku-nu GAL-ti

> Should he seize his yoke and direct his team, and depart from the gate of Bābili with this host [. . . journey through] his lands, and cross rivers and brooks before him and should he penetrate divisions, border marche[s . . .] above and below, should he traverse the hollows, gullies, and ravines of the mountain [. . .] should he proceed to the [land of] so-and-so for the purpose of its defeat, pillaging, and plundering?

A common trope throughout the inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian period is of journeying through difficult landscapes previously unexplored by Assyrian kings (Liverani 2017b, 41–54). This was a display of the king's 'heroic priority' (Tadmor 1999; Gaspa 2007), and more generally of his mobility; for example, Adad-nārārī II's titulary notes the many regions to which he had marched, and describes him as (*ša*) *šadâni dannūtu ittatabal-kitu* "he who has constantly traversed the formidable mountains" (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 31). In turn, it notes that the very moment that he sets out on a campaign (*ana ṣabāt gerrīya*), his enemies' weapons already melt as if in a furnace (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 22).[110] One particularly evocative passage from the annals of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II reads as follows:

> ERIMᵐᵉš ig-du-ru KUR-ú mar-ṣu iṣ-ṣab-tu KUR GIG dan-niš EGIR-šú-nu la a-lik 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-ʾi-ru ki-ma qin-ni ú-di-niᵐᵘšᵉⁿ ina qé-reb KUR-e dan-na-su-nu iš-ku-nu šá ina MANᵐᵉš-ni ADᵐᵉš-ia ma-am-ma ina qé-reb-šú-nu la TE-ú ina 3 UDᵐᵉ UR.SAG KUR-ú i-ḫi-ṭa gap-šú lìb-ba-šú GIŠ.LAL ub-la e-li ina GÌRᴵᴵ.ᵐᵉš-šú KUR-ú ú-sa-ḫi-ip iḫ-pi qi-na-šú-nu UKKIN-šú-nu ú-pa-ri-ir

> The troops were afeared, and took to harsh mountains. As the peaks were very harsh, I did not pursue them. The mountain was keen as the edge of iron dagger's blade and sky's winged birds did not venture therein. Their fortresses were ensconced in mountain's midst like the *udīnu*-bird's nest, so that none among the kings, my forefathers, had approached them. For three days, the hero scoured the mountain. His valiant heart longed for battle. He ascended on foot and overwhelmed the mountain. He smashed their nest, and scattered their flock.

Sometimes, this adventuring assumes the greater part of an account. Regardless of how long it lasts within the narrative, the early Neo-Assyrian campaign almost always culminates in one or more events which serve

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107 Espionage both by Assyria and its adversaries is well attested for the late Neo-Assyrian period (e.g. Oppenheim 1968; Dubovský 2006; 2014; Dezső 2014), and there is no reason why this would not have been the case for earlier periods.

108 The most famous example of this is the conduct of Šarru-ukīn at the close of his famous eighth campaign (RINAP 2, 65: 309–342), who decided while his army was encamped by Ḫubuškia (probably Pasve, Iran) to raid the holy city of Muṣāṣir/Muṣru (Muǧīsir, Iraq). Sending the body of his force back to Assyria by way of the Pišdār plain, the king instead made his way through the mountains (by way of either the pass at Ḫāǧǧī ʿUmrān, Iraq, or one of the routes running from Selve, Iran, to Ṭawbzāwa, Iraq), to catch Muṣāṣir/Muṣru unawares (Fuchs 2011a, 392–393). Similar tricks can be noted for other kings, such as Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* dispatching a force to quell a revolt at Ḫalzi-atbāri while marching himself to the unsuspecting mountainous region of Ulluba in his campaign of 739 (RINAP 1, TP 37: 16–34).

109 For studies of the heroic aspect of the Assyrian king's journeys through the mountains, see e.g. Favaro 2007, 103–133; Zamazalová 2018.

110 A striking later example from Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV's reign of this 'motion-motif' is a passage wherein the king boasts of his capacity to march through Urarṭu unmolested (RINAP 1, TP 39: 24–25).

as the fulfilment of the campaign's purpose, or the end of the campaign's 'story', in what might be termed the fourth stage.

This stage is sometimes peaceful, such as the reception of a particularly large tribute, the ritual washing of the king's weapons in a sea, the establishment of an outpost (see Ch. 2.3.4), or the creation of a monument such as a rock inscription or relief. More often than not, however, it is martial (albeit sometimes quite unimportant). This probably reflected reality, as there would have been an expectation among the assembled army of some manner of battle. Combat promised both advancement through the ranks and the collection of spoils (see below Chs. 2.2.2; 2.2.3), no matter how trifling, and it would have made sense to put the Assyrian army to use while it was already assembled. After an enumeration of the many mountain maladies with which the king could be afflicted on the march, the *tamītu*-query imagines the military scenario as follows (MesCiv 13, 5: 16–18):

> GIM *ana* KUR KÚR UR₅-*tú ik-tal-du šum₄-ma ina* DÙ-*eš* ᵍⁱˢTUKULᵐᵉˢ *gi*[*g . . . n*]*u-šú* DIB.DIB-*ti im-taḫ-ḫa-ru-šú šum₄-ma ina* NIGIN-*e*
> URUᵐᵉˢ *dan-nu-ti* [BÀ]Dᵐᵉˢ-*e-ma* KI-*šú im-taḫ-ḫa-ṣu* ᵈ⁺*en-líl* EN ᵍⁱˢTUKULᵐᵉˢ *ku* ⸢x⸣ [. . . ᵈ1]5 *be-let* MURUB₄ *e-pi-šat a-na-an-ti* [ᵍⁱˢTUK]
> ULᵐᵉˢ-*šú-nu dan-nu-ti* SUMᵐᵉˢ-*šum-ma pat-niš dun-nu-*[*nu*?]

> When he has arrived safely in the land of the foe, whether they engage him in the fray [. . .], close with him in combat, or whether they attack him as he lays siege to fortified cities and fortresses, will Enlil, lord of weapons, [. . . and Iš]tar, lady of strife, the warrioress grant him their powerful weapons and firmly brac[e him?]

In times of war, the campaign was intended to 'knock out' an opposing polity—destroying its army, infrastructure, or agricultural basis, and hence its offensive capacity, and granting Assyria the strategic initiative in a particular theatre—rather than to conquer a region. This 'defence through offence' was particularly common for Urarṭu, which early Neo-Assyrian kings periodically attacked in order to neutralise it as a threat. It is sometimes clear that there was no appropriate adversary for the Assyrian army to confront. If a polity immediately rendered an appropriate tribute, then the Assyrian king was unable to attack it. This explains the curious excursions sometimes taken by the Assyrian army on the return march to the Assyrian heartland to attack apparently unsuspecting, usually highland polities.[111]

Campaigns did not intrinsically result in any territorial expansion—there were not 'shifting fronts' like a modern warzone.[112] Territory was extended and borders were fixed in the Assyrian textual record with a discrete terminology (see Ch. 2.3) with conceptual autonomy from the sphere of campaigning. This is important inasmuch as it demonstrates that the Assyrian state was not intrinsically *expansionist* as has been proposed by some researchers (see Chs. 1.3; 2.3.5), but rather *expeditionary*—it sought to dispatch armies regularly outside of its own realm for a host of different reasons.

In a fifth stage, the army marched back to Assyria with its oft-considerable spoils, this concluding with a triumph, the political aspects of which will be discussed below. Sometimes this march would be interrupted by another event such as a subsidiary conquest (for example, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's attack on the city of S/Šūru of Ḫanigalbat on his march back from Naʾiri, RIMA 2, 0.101.19: 102–103). With the king's return to his city, the campaign was conceptually ended, and jubilation in the form of a triumph could begin, as the *tamītu* relates (MesCiv 13, 5: 28–31):

> *na-a-ru ina tak-na-a-ti ma-ḫar-šú ur-ta-aṣ-ṣa-nu* [. . .] x ⸢DÙG-*ub*⸣ ŠÀ-*bi uš-šá-bu* TA *ul-li-i* [. . .] ⸢x⸣-⸢*su*⸣ TIN.[T]IRᵏⁱ *šá* È-*šú ina šul-*
> *me* IGI-*ru* [. . .] ⸢x⸣ *ú-na-áš-šá-qu*

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111 Thus, for example, Adad-nārārī II attacked his own vassal of Katmuḫi quite without warning immediately following a rather middling campaign to the Upper Tigris in a calculated act of betrayal (KAL 3, 47: 10′–15′, see Edmonds 2023b, 257–259), Tukultī-Ninurta II attacked the city of Kibaki without any provocation on his march back from a campaign in 887 (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 1–3), and, in 866, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II attacked the unsuspecting polity of Udu on his homeward march after failing to take the city of Amēdu (RIMA 2, 0.101.1 iii 110–113).
112 While, in certain circumstances, detachments of the Assyrian army must have fanned out in a 'capillary' fashion analogous to modern warfare to occupy territory and have engaged in skirmishes (Fales 2010a, 171), the conception of the army as a single body undertaking a journey together with the king must nonetheless have been central to the understanding of a *gerru*.

> Will singers croon to him tenderly? [. . .] and will they dwell in peace there? As from time immemorial [. . .] and will they see him back safely to Bābili whence he departed? [. . .] and will they kiss [him]?

Evidently, the return from an arduous campaign warranted at least a kiss, although the reality was a huge spectacle, the details of which are considered in Chapter 2.2.3. Finally, the army was either kept mustered at the capital for another campaign, or dispatched homewards to the provinces in a final stage.

On his return, regardless of his actual success, the king could propagandistically claim a victory and a triumph provided that the campaign had not been an unmitigated disaster. This was aided by the looseness of the terminology associated with campaigning—the Akkadian verb *kašādu*, which is conventionally translated as 'to conquer' and appears constantly within accounts of campaigns, has the primary meaning of 'to reach, arrive', and, unlike modern notions of conquest, did not include any intrinsic transfer of permanent ownership—its meaning is closer to 'seize or grasp', and, indeed, it often appears in metaphors involving hands (e.g. *ina qāti akšud, kišit qātīya*).[113] Any enemy land through which the king had marched and the settlements of which he had temporarily occupied was a 'conquest' by this loose terminology, and worthy of celebration, regardless of how minor its strategic value had been. As will be seen, many Assyrian kings began their reigns with 'easy' mountainous targets adjacent to the heartland with scarce military worth or riches simply in order to have campaigned and to receive the legitimating accolades of a returning triumph, and to proclaim in a curtness rivalling Caesar's *veni vidi vici* a single word—*akšud!* 'I conquered!'

2.2.2 The unexceptional early Neo-Assyrian army

Like Byron's "wolf on the fold", the Assyrian army has often been imagined as an invincible, technologically superior foe descending upon its helpless opponents, as one particularly striking quotation from a popular work demonstrates (Anglim et al. 2013, 12):

> While historians tend to shy away from analogies, it is tempting to see the Assyrian Empire, which dominated the Middle East from 900–612 BC, as a historical forebear of Nazi Germany: an aggressive, murderously vindictive regime supported by a magnificent and successful war machine. As with the German army of World War II, the Assyrian army was the most technologically and doctrinally advanced of its day and was a model for others for generations afterwards.

Yet, as with many other factors in the Assyrian expansion, the suspicion remains that the well-attested army of the successful, late Neo-Assyrian Empire is being imposed upon the early Neo-Assyrian period, for which evidence is much scanter. In assessing the actual effectiveness of the early Neo-Assyrian army, it is worth considering what is known of its composition in this earlier period, and how it stood up to its foes.

The early Neo-Assyrian army is generally understood as having been of a seasonal, agrarian nature, with the majority of the army composed of men performing their *ilku*-obligations, as in the Middle Assyrian period, restricting campaigning to periods in which agricultural obligations did not take priority (e.g. Radner 2015b, 96). However, this is not borne out by the early Neo-Assyrian data, as Adad-nārārī II can be demonstrated to have campaigned very energetically and frequently for much of the year (see Edmonds 2023b), and Dornauer (2016, 77) has noted that the dates of campaigns between 866 and 853 do not correlate with the demands of the agricultural year.[114] The notion that a standing Assyrian army emerged in the mid-9th century (e.g. Radner 2015b, 96) is hence conjecture, as non-seasonal behaviour might be evidenced from the beginning

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113 There is an argument for understanding *kašādu* as 'to conquer' as an abbreviation of longer expressions such as *ina qāti kašādu* which are sometimes used in its place. By this same logic, *kišittu* 'spoil' would stand metonymically for *kišit qāti* 'the grasping of the hand'—naturally, however, this must remain speculation.

114 Note also the examples provided by Saggs (1963, 146–147). As suggested by Fuchs (2011a, 387), it seems more likely that some manner of rota existed, so that a portion of Assyria's soldiers were on active campaign-duty, while the remainder remained in their respective provinces; by this logic those men would remain free for harvesting crops, giving Assyria a huge strategic advantage.

of the early Neo-Assyrian period;[115] indeed, the very aim of much of the Assyrian army's non-seasonal campaigning during this period was to seize grain about to be harvested from hostile polities and transport it to proto-provincial strongholds—a tactic particularly common during the reign of Adad-nārārī II (Edmonds 2023b, 260–261. 283). Moreover, Postgate (2007a, 350–351) has pointed to the difficulties throughout the Neo-Assyrian era in identifying such a standing army, the ambiguities associated with such a term, and that the *ilku*-service continued unabated throughout the entire period. In turn, as will be seen below, foreign contingents were absorbed into the Assyrian army throughout its history. Hence, the early Neo-Assyrian army was probably a mixture of both professional and levied Assyrian soldiers and foreign contingents from the very outset.

Little can be more closely deduced of the composition and outfitting of the early Neo-Assyrian army (e.g. Dezső 2012, 53–60).[116] From the visual sources of the period, a clear distinction can only be made between lightly-armoured footsoldiers, on the one hand, and a class of well-armoured soldiers, on the other—the former must have vastly outnumbered the latter. Both classes could serve in contingents of bowmen or spearmen, with the vast majority acting as bowmen (Scurlock 1997, 496). It might be suggested that the 'professional' soldiers are represented by those wearing armour (Dezső 2006b, 89), but this cannot be proven.

The mounted arm of the early Neo-Assyrian army consisted of chariotry, and cavalry from the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta II at the latest onwards. These Assyrian chariots were light, two-man models, and must have primarily functioned as mobile bow platforms able to exploit quickly changes in an enemy's disposition so as to pepper enemy units from unprotected angles, and flee before they could be engaged at close quarters. From the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II onwards, a more heavily armoured three-man variant is also attested (Dezső 2006b, 119). While chariots could carry a great deal of ammunition, their horses were vulnerable to arrows—hence the troika configuration of horses (Littauer/Crouwel 1991)—and they could be overrun by enemy cavalry. Moreover, they could only be employed on suitable ground. Nonetheless, their prominent use until the very end of the empire demonstrates that they were worth their considerable expense despite any vulnerabilities (Fuchs 2011a, 394–395; Radner 2015b, 99–100).

The actual size of the early Neo-Assyrian army remains a difficult topic on account of a paucity of data; certainly, the impression is often given that Assyria outnumbered its opponents. From the early Neo-Assyrian period, the best intimation as to numbers comes from the mention of 50,000 men sent by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II to undertake logging within the land of Meḫru (RIMA 2, 0.101.40: 28–30); however, Liverani (2004, 215) has pointed out that the unusual citation of a number implies that this was a special undertaking, noting also that this enterprise's non-martial nature means that civilians were likely also involved.[117] Liverani's (1992c, 135) estimation of an Assyrian expeditionary army of 20,000 men for this early period remains reasonable, although this could have been larger. The claim within Salmānu-ašarēd III's annals that he marshalled a force of 120,000 men for a campaign in his 14th regnal year (RIMA 2, 0.102.6 iii 24–26; 8: 44′–45′; 10 iii 14–17) is probably hyperbole (Odorico 1995, 107–112; Yamada 2000, 181–182). Fales (2010a, 101) has rather argued that this round number should rather be taken as an Assyrian straw poll of the imagined total manpower of Salmānu-ašarēd III-era Assyria.[118] What does seem clear is that Assyria sought to have an advantage in manpower, and would take whatever opportunity presented itself to incorporate defeated armies—from what scarce documentary evidence survives, it is possible that Assyria suffered from manpower shortages by the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (see Ch. 3.4.3), although the evidence also permits alternate interpretations.

Before assessing the capabilities of Assyria's military opponents, it is worth noting that many of their troops would ultimately be incorporated into the Assyrian army themselves. While it is often stated that

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115 As is discussed below, the notion that a standing Assyrian army was distributed between four marcher provinces of the Assyrian realm at this time is based on a series of inferences which do not hold up to close scrutiny (*pace* Radner 2015b, 97).

116 Note the recent study on the early 8th-century provincial army stationed at Gūzāna by Kerekes (2017), although the use of the reliefs from the Palace of Kapara as a visual source seems anachronistic.

117 A striking, if oft-forgotten, point is that the Akkadian term *ṣābu* can describe both a martial or civilian formation of men. While a difference naturally existed in whether a group were genuinely to be employed for a military purpose or not in practical terms, it must be kept in mind that this was a pragmatic rather than terminological distinction.

118 Note, however, that the dire situation of the 'western front' during his reign may actually have led to a mass mobilisation of Assyrian reservists for the campaign of 845 (see Ch. 4.6.3)—while the figure of 120,000 still seems much inflated, the Assyrian army fielded by Salmānu-ašarēd III would still have been unusually large.

large-scale incorporation of foreign soldiers into the Assyrian military only occurred from the reign of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* onwards (e.g. Kaplan 2008), this is not borne out by the sources. Firstly, large foreign contingents are already attested for the Middle Assyrian period (Postgate 2008, 86–89). Secondly, early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions abound with mention of the incorporation of defeated enemy contingents into the Assyrian army (see Tab 1.), albeit often without numbers. While these incorporated foreign troops are not recognisable in visual sources of the era (Schachner 2007, 154), this could well be because they received Assyrian uniforms, be the result of artistic convention, or merely represent an accident of preservation. Both Fuchs (2005, 39. 51–53) and Radner (2011b, 39) have suggested that the multi-ethnic makeup of the late Neo-Assyrian army fostered competitiveness between units and prevented the military from becoming overly powerful in the political sphere; the same may well hold for the early Neo-Assyrian military. In actively recruiting the troops of its defeated foes, Assyria set a precedent for the later multinational Achaemenid army, the panoplies of the individual regiments of which would fascinate Classical authors. If the 'inclusiveness' of the early Neo-Assyrian army was evident, then this may well also have served as an enticement for polities to submit and participate in Assyrian campaigning with its potential benefits rather than serve as a target for this sizeable army. Certainly, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's march to the Mediterranean—which included the levying of chariots and soldiers from the northern Syrian states through which he marched (presumably being returned to their respective polities following the campaign)—may also have been conceived as a 'dress rehearsal' for the incorporation of the militaries of these polities into the Assyrian army; however, as is argued elsewhere in this work (see Ch. 4.6.5), this may rather have fostered a local solidarity in the peer polities of the northern Levant, and enabled the larger coalitions which would rally to oppose incursions by Salmānu-ašarēd III.

Table 1: Early Neo-Assyrian incorporation of foreign troops into its army.

Date	Event	Source
ca. 931* (3rd Campaign)	Aššur-dān II defeats the Yaḫānu and settles them within Assyria's borders.	RIMA 2, 0.98.1: 31–32
Ca. 912*	Adad-nārārī II defeats Qumānû and settles its soldiers (in Assyria?).	RIMA 2, 0.99.1 o. 19
ca. 905–901 (AN unknown year f., 2nd Campaign)	AN II defeats Aḫlamians and resettles them in Arrapḫa.	KAL 3, 53: 7'–8'; cf. RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 33
896	AN II brings Nūr-Adad and his extensive troops back to Ninūa and grants them cities.	RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 78–81
879	Aššur-nāṣir-apli II brings 1,500 *aḫlamû* Aramean troops back with him to Assyria.	RIMA 2, 0.101.19: 95–96
855	Salmānu-ašarēd III defeats Aḫūnu and brings 17,500 or 22,000 of his soldiers back to Aššur and counts them as Assyrians.	RIMA 3, 0.102.2 ii 74–45, 5 iii 5–6; 6 ii 7–9, 8: 8'; 10 ii 3–6; 14: 48–50; 16: 22–24; 20: 18–19; 28: 26–28; 40: 10–13
843	SMN III absorbs Marduk-mudammiq of Namri's cavalry into his own army.	RIMA 3, 0.102.6 iv 9–12
830	Dayyān-Aššur incorporates Sarduri I's cavalry into his army after a victory.	RIMA 3, 0.102.16: 236'
833, 824, or 821 (ep. Aya-ḫālu)	Ituʾians are mentioned as soldiers in the Assyrian army in an administrative text.	Tall Baqqāq 2, 1 & 2 (Ismail 1989)
818	Šamšī-Adad V incorporates 140 riders from the defeated army of Ḫarnaṣiruka the Mede.	RIMA 3, 0.103.1 iii 33–34

Table 1 (continued)

Date	Event	Source
815	SA V incorporates 3,000 captured Babylonian soldiers into his army "like locusts" (*kīma erbî*) after taking Dūr-Papsukkal.	RIMA 3, 0.103.1 iv 31; iv 34–36

Regardless, these mass incorporations of foreign combatants into the early Assyrian army suggest that the quality of the forces opposing Assyria was not poor, but rather that they were of roughly equivalent ability and training to Assyrian troops.[119]

The notion that Assyria's success was down to fielding chariots (Radner 2015b, 4), is contradicted by its adversaries' extensive use of precisely the same (e.g. Naṣībīna: RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 41; Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni: RIMA 2, 0.101.1 ii 120). Indeed, mounted cavalry—probably the most important military innovation of the era—was adopted relatively late by Assyria.[120] As noted by Fuchs (2005, 40), the first mention of cavalry is in reference to a campaign of 886 in the annals of Tukultī-Ninurta II (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 37), while an armed rider is already evident on a 10th-century orthostat from the palace of Kapara at Tall Ḥalaf.[121] Indeed, Assyria seems to have been a latecomer to other technical innovations, having also been slow to adopt iron wholesale (Fuchs 2005, 39–40), leading Fales (2010a, 103) to suggest that the early Neo-Assyrian army had made mixed use of different metals.[122] While certainly comparatively well documented (see Backer 2013), Assyrian siege engines also do not seem to have been a decisive factor in Assyria's expansion, and their technology was no different from Bronze-age examples (Fuchs 2005, 40);[123] most sieges rather were protracted affairs involving a city's starving out or intimidation into submission (Fuchs 2008b).[124]

Considering that its opponents possessed comparable equipment and training, the question remains as to how Assyria was able to defeat its opponents. The present author would suggest that this was a result of the remarkable versatility of the Neo-Assyrian army, its capacity to concentrate in overwhelming numbers (Fuchs 2005, 40–42; 2011a, 386–388), and its ability to campaign year in, year out—the Assyrian army simply 'did not quit'. This force was even successful in operating within a variety of different and often difficult biomes (Fuchs 2005, 39), despite the advantage which defending forces possessed within their own territory.[125]

This hardiness and success seem in the present author's mind to have been the result of two factors, namely the Assyrian 'art of war' (i.e. the organisational-logistical ability of the Assyrian military and the mode of warfare which they practiced), on the one hand (Ch. 2.2.3), and the support for and expectation of annual campaigning among Assyria's population, on the other (Ch. 2.2.4). The present author would argue

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119 Very little is known at all of the training of Assyrian soldiers during this period, although the presence of various footraces and sporting events within the Assyrian calendar (Radner 2011b, 37–38) must have played a role.

120 The image of a rider on the 12th-century seal of the grand vizier Ilī-padâ is the sole visual evidence for horseback riding during the Middle Assyrian period (Wiggermann 2006, 96). It is noteworthy that the centaur is frequently attested on Middle Assyrian seals (Bonatz 2015) and on Middle Babylonian *kudurru*-carvings (Seidl 1989, 176–178) but afterwards largely disappears—this could hint at a disenchantment of the mythical centaur within Mesopotamian culture following protracted contact with horseback riding.

121 These orthostats had been re-used from a previous structure, and thus a date to the early 10th century for this carving seems appropriate (see Ch. 4.1.2).

122 While Kühne (2017a, 330) has recently argued for an early adoption of iron by Assyria as a factor in its military success, he concedes that this process must have been gradual—it is difficult to see as to how this would have differed from the behaviour of Assyria's neighbours.

123 See, for example, the Bronze-age visual evidence collected by Nadali (2009) or the Hittite textual evidence collected by Singer (2008). Siege engines are already mentioned in the annals of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I (RIMA 2, 0.87.2: 34).

124 Explicitly in Hebrew, the *rab šāqê*'s speech before the walls of Ursallimmu as recorded in the Bible (2 Kings 18:27–37; Isaiah 36:12–20) implies that speeches to besieged populations were the norm, as otherwise reflected in the parley of the *turtānu* before the walls of Bābili in the Aramaic tale of *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī* (see below Ch. 2.1.8), and a depiction of a soldier within a siege engine by the wall of a Mannean city reading aloud from a scroll (Tadmor 1991, 421–422; albeit recently challenged by Boyd 2022).

125 One reason for this may be the actual geographical position of Assyria, which, placed as it was in the plains between mountains and desert, presented three distinct environments, within which the Assyrian army would have had experience.

that these were the product of what he terms 'campaign-culture'—the central place of the campaign within early Neo-Assyrian society which enabled the energetic and enduring practice of one or more campaigns each year. While the elevation of expeditions into an annual institution gave Assyria a decisive edge over its rivals, it also fostered a culture in which kings could become politically dependent upon the legitimacy lent by the triumph. That the king could focus his attentions so consummately on the political dimensions of his expeditions was down to the keenly honed Assyrian art of war, which largely spared him the onus of tactical and strategic planning.

2.2.3 The repeatable, sustainable Assyrian art of war

As noted, the early Neo-Assyrian army was in and of itself relatively unremarkable for the period. Where it differed from its competitors was in its size and its capacity to campaign very regularly. Undergirding this must be various martial and logistical innovations which permitted it to perform so dependably. Despite their over-bearingly martial tone, early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions contain comparatively little in the way of descriptions of battles (Fuchs 2005, 40).[126] This is frequently because the enemy refused to fight in a pitched battle and would either flee to fortifications or difficult terrain (Liverani 1992c, 155–156), but probably also because these battles were generally quite unremarkable, following more or less the same pattern—and intentionally so.

At the beginning of the Neo-Assyrian period, warfare was not dissimilar to that of the later War of the Roses; large bodies of men fired bows at one another until one side began to falter, at which point the winning side would charge (Fuchs 2011a, 395).[127] By the end of the period, i.e. the 7th century which witnessed the development of heavy infantry and more effective cavalry, the experience would have been more or less that of the era of 'pike and shot' without artillery: Large bodies of ranged infantry firing at one another only to retreat behind walls of essentially immobile spearmen whenever cavalry charged them. In considering the warfare of the period under examination, one should assume a slow transition from the one style of warfare to the other. What is very important about this manner of warfare (particularly in its early stages) is that it was inexpensive, psychologically tolerable, and eminently repeatable.

Modern psychological studies have demonstrated that when distance is put between participants in a battle, their capacity to commit homicide increases, as they become incapable of emotionally connecting with their respective foe (Grossman 1996, 97–137). Moreover, it is far easier to kill opponents when they are in flight, as it is more difficult to establish an emotional connection with a figure whose back is turned, especially when one is pursuing on horseback, for which reason the vast majority of the casualties of a pre-modern battle generally occurred during a retreat. These observations map very well onto what has been discussed hitherto for the Assyrian art of war.

If a foe chose to stand and fight, then the Assyrian army must have approached it and assumed a battle formation. Wielding composite bows,[128] the Assyrian archers would have formed a large, usually numerically superior mass, which would have been psychologically reassuring for the individual soldiers, and then fired their bows into an enemy mass in the distance. Frequently, particularly in sieges, armoured archers with shield-bearers seem to have populated the front ranks, which must have given the more lightly armoured troops behind a sense of safety. Such a massed but inaccurate archery duel would have resembled early gunpowder warfare inasmuch as it would have been discipline, morale, and mass psychology which gave one side an advantage over the other. With superior numbers and effective training, it is likely that an early Neo-

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126 Note, however, some attempts to reconstruct the dispositions and events of some individual late Neo-Assyrian battles (e.g. Blanchard Smith 1994; Córdoba 1997; Scurlock 1997, 498–515; Fales 2010a, 197–207).

127 The bow was the central weapon within Near Eastern warfare and of the king himself (Findling/Muhle 2012; Mander 2023), and also connoted virility in various ancient cultures of the region (Cifarelli 1998, 224, fn. 84). In the *Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta I*, the climactic battle begins with the Assyrian king firing an arrow from his bow at the enemy (Liverani 2017c, 308), perhaps reflecting a genuine war ritual. Note also that Assyrian victory celebrations centred upon a ritual archery display featuring the king (see Ch. 2.2.4).

128 Frahm (2002, 75–80) has published a missive from Aššur detailing the creation of composite bows–some of these are described explicitly as being for *ilku*-duty, implying that such weapons were 'standard issue' for conscripts.

Assyrian army could swiftly cause an opponent to waver despite the lack of any technological advantage over him.[129] When the adversary seemed weakened or demoralised, the second phase of combat—the charge— would begin. It is here that the more lightly armed soldiers would have played a role, and particularly the armies recruited wholesale from conquered polities (see the previous section); these men must have charged the enemy, presumably supported on the flanks by cavalry and chariotry. These light soldiers were a 'forlorn hope' of sorts who needed to close the gap with the enemy before they could be whittled down by opposing archers; these troops—perhaps including the hardy Itu'ians—were both very fearsome and the most expendable. The actual close combat portion of a battle would have been swift, as the individual stamina required for any protracted mêlée is considerable (Melville 2014, 529), and here, once again, their lightness may well have been an advantage over their opponents.[130] As images from Salmānu-ašarēd III's Balāwāt Gates demonstrate, Assyrian soldiers 'fought dirty' in close combat—they are often depicted as grabbing their foes while stabbing them or slitting their throats with their short swords, often as the enemy seems about to flee, or even throws up his hands imploringly.[131] With the enemy broken, the pursuit would have begun; this is a common trope within Assyrian royal inscriptions, in which the landscape is garnished with the dead, and slaughtered soldiers are likened to animals; a passage from an inscription of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I describing the defeat of a Qumānian army (RIMA 2, 0.87.1 v 90–96) is characteristic:

> ki-ṣir-šu-nu gap-ša lu-pe-ri-ir a-di ᵏᵘʳḫa-ru-sa ša pa-an ᵏᵘʳmu-uṣ-ri ab-ku-su-nu lu ar-du-ud šal-ma-at qu-ra-di-šu-nu i-na gi-sal-lat KUR-i ki-ma šu-ú-be uš-na-il úšᵐᵉˢ-šu-nu ḫur-ri ù ba-ma-a-te ša KUR-i lu-šèr-di

> I broke their mighty force and pursued them in their retreat as far as Mt. Ḫarusa before (the land of) Muṣru. I spread out their warriors' corpses on mountain ledges like sheep,[132] and made their blood run into the hollows and plateaux of the mountains.

With the pursuit came the (in)famous Assyrian headhunt (e.g. Bonatz 2004; Dolce 2004);[133] the parallel long drawn between warfare and hunting in Assyrian culture (e.g. Schumpeter 1919, 25–26) would have come to the fore here. Individual soldiers could win glory and prestige for themselves by pursuing and capturing or—even better—killing and beheading enemies, especially those of high status. This hunt after dehumanised, now animal-like foes displays a sporting and competitive character; the laurels included decoration and an audience with the king (Radner 2011b, 45–50). Those involved in the bloodthirsty headhunt (which must have been an encouraged but ultimately voluntary phase at the close of a battle) would have been ambitious, hardened men involved in gamified slaughter—the bleak truth is that they may well have relished it; one Assyrian relief even shows Assyrian soldiers tossing decapitated heads at one another in obvious jest.[134] The positive connotations of this practice are obvious, and one Assyrian official seal attested in various sealings depicts multiple lions *passant* (to use the heraldic term) with decapitated heads before them (Curtis/Reade 2008, 189); here, the Assyrian king and his army are personified as a lion, much akin to the lion-similes applied to Assyria in the prophetic books of the Bible.[135]

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129 There was quite evidently no dishonour in the notion of having won a victory primarily at range. For example, Šarru-ukīn's inscriptions proudly describe the cornering of an enemy leader and pelting of him with arrows until he slunk miserably away (RINAP 2, 1: 409–412; 2: 388–391; 6: 1'–3'; 65: 139–140).

130 Interesting in this regard is that the Assyrian warriors charge the Kassites unarmoured in the so-called *Tukultī-Ninurta I Epic* (iv 39–40) during a surprise attack, implying that this tactic of trading protection for speed had some real-world precedent. Consider also the "sons of Aḫlamian women" who fight unarmoured (*lā taḫluptu*) in the Late Babylonian *Na'id-Šīḫu*-composition (SpTU 4, 121 iv 7).

131 Cifarelli (1998, 224–225) identifies this raising of the hands with the expression *upnī petû*, suggesting that this was the gesture signifying surrender. Certainly, in this visual world (*Bilderwelt*), there is no 'worthy opponent' against whom the Assyrian soldier gallantly spars, and it seems unnecessary to infer anything approaching duelling or chivalrous combat.

132 The image is that of mountain sheep being pastured on steep terrain (*šunūlu* has the sense both of spreading something out, or of laying out a corpse, but also of bedding down animals), and is thus an inversion of the peaceful trope of the king as a 'good shepherd' (see also Psalm 23).

133 The headhunt was hardly confined to Assyrian culture, and is also attested in earlier periods (Dolce 2017), and contemporarily to Assyria in the northern Levant (Dolce 2004; Radner 2011b, 49; Cornelius 2023).

134 See Radner (2011b, 52, fn. 23) who suggests that this might even reflect dancing.

135 See Cogan 2008. This may well have been inspired by the lion-skin mummery of Assyrian priests following a victory (Reade 2005, 20).

While still in the field after the battle, individual enemies were punished with gruesome, public torture, in which the theatrical or ritual dimensions must not be underestimated. In turn, the anonymous dead were piled into great mounds as a warning for locals. As hideous and gruesome as these spectacles were, they also formed group rituals which would have fostered solidarity among soldiers and may have possessed a purificatory element to remove any sense of guilt (Melville 2016, 223–224). Further rituals and feasting would have occurred at the Assyrian camp after a victory (May 2012b, 461–467), presumably depending on strategic exigencies.

From this brief overview, it is clear that the design of Assyrian warfare was excellent considering the affordances of the time.[136] The psychological toll on the average Assyrian soldier within the mass of archers firing on a distant enemy would have been minimal. The extreme act of charging the enemy need only have been performed by a dedicated portion of the army including lightly armoured 'shock-troops' and mounted elements. This type of warfare was low in casualties among the core of the army and carried comparatively little psychological strain, and was hence very repeatable.[137]

An analogy might be found in the army of Alexander the Great which campaigned with him unabatedly throughout his career. The core of this was formed by the Macedonian pikemen (or phalangites), whose origins in the landscape of Macedonia parallel that of early Neo-Assyrian soldiers in the foothills of the Transtigris; well-drilled and employed in a large mass within a protective formation, the casualties of these soldiers were comparatively low. Considering Alexander's mass marriages of his soldiers with local women and settlement of them within newly founded colonies, and the occasional threat of the Macedonian army engaging in mutiny, one wonders if there were not, in fact, too many of these troops surviving battles for Alexander's taste. Indeed, many of these veteran rankers continued to fight in the wars of the successors (diadochi) well into advanced old age.[138] Within this Macedonian system, the very hazardous aspects of combat were performed by contingents of very well-drilled elite light and heavy cavalry and infantrymen and disposable local levies.

Returning to Assyria, Fuchs (2011a, 390) has noted the caution displayed by the Assyrian army; the massed archery duels of the early Neo-Assyrian period must have required a 'cool head', particularly in determining the optimal moment to initiate the charge. It is hence interesting to note the presence within the Assyrian army—and particularly among its leadership—of eunuchs; an early Neo-Assyrian battle with its calculated aspects may have been a situation in which a commander with less testosterone was a benefit.[139] Certainly, Šamšī-Adad V's chief eunuch Mutaqqin-Aššur—described as *eršu mūdê tuqumti amēl ṭēmi* "intelligent and versed in the fray, a man of reason" (RIMA 3, 0.103.1 ii 18)—undertook an important and wide-ranging campaign in his king's stead soon after the succession war.[140] It is unclear as to whether eunuchs were useful in the combat roles (generally as archers) in which they sometimes appear within the Assyrian visual record (Assante 2016, 72–73)—it might be noted in this respect that eunuchs were commonly functionaries within the Assyrian palace, and hence palatial reliefs of eunuchs in combat may well have served a

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136 It should be noted in passing that the battle sequence of the *Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta I* presents exactly the same sequence of archery duel, lightly armoured charge, and pursuit reconstructed here (see Liverani 2017c, 308).

137 Note, however, some evidence collected by Scurlock and Andersen (2005, 351) of trauma among Assyrian veterans; see also Abdul-Hamid/Hughes 2014.

138 Alexander's corps of silver shield pikemen are described as having continued active service past their 60's (with many being over 70) at the battle of Gabiene (Winter 316–315) according to Diodorus (*Bibliotheca historiae* 19.41.2), a point further recounted by Plutarch (*Demetrius* 16).

139 Late Antique eunuch commanders may serve as an interesting comparison. On the one hand, Claudian could rail with acerbic invective against a eunuch serving as consul in his work *In Eutropium* (1.271–273), emphasising his target's effeminacy and avarice and memorably intoning on the topic of a eunuch serving as a general: "Quid te, turpissime, bellis / inseris aut saevi pertemptas Pallada campi? / tu potes alterius studiis haerere Minervae". On the other hand, Narses, the eunuch general and contemporary of Belisarius, is described approvingly by Procopius (*de Bellis* 6.13.16) as sharp and more energetic than might be expected from a eunuch (ἄλλως δὲ ὀξὺς καὶ μᾶλλον ἢ κατ᾽ εὐνοῦχον δραστήριος).

140 Besides their administrative competencies, eunuchs' loyalty to the hierarchy—and by extension the king himself—would have been useful for the Assyrian king within the military sphere, with them potentially serving as informants.

heroic 'wish fulfilment'-purpose for the eunuchs who would have walked past them on a daily basis.[141] Regardless, shrewdness was evidently valued in generals.

This Assyrian repeatability did also contain a dangerous flaw—predictability. It is interesting to note that one battle scene on Salmānu-ašarēd III's Balāwāt Gates (Schachner 2007, pls. 2. 22a–24b) depicts the Assyrian army being swarmed by Urarṭian troops streaming down from the mountains, with hand-to-hand combat occurring between the ranks of firing Assyrian archers as the chariotry gallop to the rescue—it might be presumed that the Urarṭians had launched an early, pre-emptive charge in this battle to attempt to negate Assyria's archer superiority by overrunning the Assyrian lines. This implies that the Urarṭians were well acquainted with the Assyrian art of war and were seeking to innovate tactically against their southern neighbour.[142] This may well be one of the reasons why Assyrian assaults of dangerous opponents such as Urarṭu employed overwhelming force and were envisaged as 'knock-out-campaigns'—the imperative was to remove the enemy's further offensive capabilities for at least a decade at a time, as protracted exposure to the Assyrian art of war would permit a foe to develop countermeasures.[143] Indeed, this may explain in part Salmānu-ašarēd III's repeated bloody setbacks in the west fighting coalition after coalition with little success (see Ch. 4.6.5)—his Levantine opponents were wise to Assyrian tactics.[144]

Besides its repeatability, the second important aspect of the Assyrian manner of conducting war was its logistical efficiency, or, indeed, sustainability. Not only could Assyrian armies march forth each year effectively, but they did so in a manner in which they were well-supplied without exhausting Assyria's resources in the long-run.[145] This was particularly important, as Assyrian tactics frequently relied on greater numbers than the army's opponents (Fuchs 2005, 41). The logistical competencies of the Assyrian army were an obvious source of pride; much emphasis is placed upon the ability of this force to brave difficult biomes, hacking through mountains or enduring thirst.[146] A well-known late Neo-Assyrian period tablet detailing the constitution of a military detachment (SAA 5, 215) presents a significant number of non-combatant support troops, 101 men within a detachment of 1,430 (Postgate 2000, 93), and such a proportion could well have also prevailed within the early Neo-Assyrian army. The construction of orderly camps is a popular theme among Assyrian relief art (Reade 2005, 15–19);[147] the design and erection of such camps seems to have been roughly standardised, complete with a Roman-style *cardo-et-decumanus*-layout.[148] Moreover, they could be swiftly assembled and disassembled (Fales/Rigo 2014, 415–419).[149] This standard encampment format could also be very quickly fortified to create a more permanent fortress—this would have permitted the Assyrian army

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141 Certainly, in Ming Dynasty-era China, a eunuch-only battalion was raised in 1508 to much scandal, and grew in size over the remainder of the century, but its eunuchs were said to be poor soldiers and disorderly (Tsai 1996, 66–69).

142 The emulation of Assyrian culture in Urarṭu suggests a steady stream of Assyrians (whether as fugitives, mercenaries, or craftsmen) to this kingdom (see Reade 2019b).

143 Parker (2015, 286) notes the strategic and propagandistic benefits of such targeted campaigns: "This strategy generated Assyrian power since it limited the vulnerability of the Assyrian military and made the outcome of most battles conducted as part of Assyria's well-orchestrated royal campaigns relatively predictable."

144 Indeed, the setback of the battle of Qarqaru (849) may have inspired a shift to cavalry over chariots among the Assyrians; see Miglus 2008, 235, with further references.

145 Naturally, such a reconstruction runs counter to the 'predatory army' model (described by Bagg 2011, 4) in which the Assyrian army was compelled to conquer in order to sustain itself. At its largest size under the late Neo-Assyrian kings, it spent far too much time putting down rebellions for this to be plausible.

146 Interestingly, heavy snowfall was considered a reasonable ground to abort a campaign (van Buylaere 2009).

147 A relief in crude style in the Mawṣil Museum prior to its capture by the Islamic State documented by Brusasco (2016, 221, fig. 12) may well hail from Sūḫu, as he suggests, but is an example of a Syro-Hittite funerary relief (compare Bonatz 2000), rather than a depiction of scenes of 'camp-life' emulating Assyrian examples.

148 Recently, Dezső (2021, 14–15) has identified what could well be the survival of the earthworks of such an Assyrian fort in the CORONA-imagery of the site today known as *Pukay Ḫwaru* (36°14′14.40″N, 44°44′52.17″E) in the plain of Rānya, Iraq (incorrectly called by him *Pukay Sāru*—i.e. 'Puka Upper'—which is, in fact, the neighbouring village half a kilometre to the south-southeast). The size of the area enclosed by the earthworks is some 2 ha—time will tell as to whether this was the average size for an Assyrian fortress or not.

149 Indeed, Fales and Rigo (2014, 417) even note an example in which the earthworks of a campsite from the preceding year were reused in the following year, suggesting that the Assyrian army would 'recycle' earlier encampments to save time and energy.

(like that of the Roman Empire) to 'drop' semi-permanent fortresses to control an area with remarkable alacrity if necessary.

Marriott and Radner (2015, 139) have suggested that an Assyrian army was carefully configured for the biome in which it was to campaign that year, but this seems unlikely for the early Neo-Assyrian period—for example, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's annals frequently describe the king abruptly changing course in order to put down a rebellious vassal (e.g. RIMA 2, 0.101.1 i 74–77). The early Neo-Assyrian army was evidently built for versatility, rather than specialised applications. Far-reaching in this regard were the consequences of a small innovation noted by Scurlock (1997, 497): the widespread adoption by the Assyrian army of marching boots.

The notion that a professional Assyrian army was distributed between four marcher provinces of the Assyrian realm from the reign of Salmānu-ašarēd III onwards (Radner 2014b, 106–107; 2015b, 97; 2017c, 390) is speculation based upon Liverani's (2004, 218) anachronistic contention that Salmānu-ašarēd III introduced a concerted policy of fixed marcher provinces for certain high officials, each with its own army.[150] Rather, each Assyrian province had its own military detachment raised from local levies, professional soldiers, and foreign contingents (Postgate 2007a, 20–23), essentially giving governors private armies, which they were compelled to maintain, as attested by a few surviving administrative letters of the era, particularly those from Tall Baqqāq (Ismail 1989), and Tall Ḥalaf (see Dornauer 2014, 26–30; Kerekes 2017).[151] Prior to the annual campaign, these individual governors would march their own detachments to a rallying point chosen by the king,[152] as exemplified in a passage of a letter from a military officer of the reign of Šarru-ukīn (SAA 5, 152 o. 21–b.e. 27) already noted by Radner (2011c, 372):

> *ú-ma-a an-nu-ra* LUGAL *be-lí i-sa-ap-ra* ERIM^meš-LUGAL-*ia* ^giš GIGIR^meš BAD-ḪAL-*lum* [*ki-i*] *ša* LUGAL *iš-pur-an-ni ú-sa-ak* [*e*]-*da-nu ša* LUGAL *be-lí iš-kun-an-ni* [*a*]-*na-ku a-du* ERIM^meš MAN-*ia* [*a*]-*du e-mu-qi ina* IGI-*at* LUGAL *be-lí-ia ina* ^uru *arba-ìl a-na-ku*

> As the king, milord, has now written to me, I shall assign my royal troops, chariots, and cavalry as the king wrote to me, and I shall be in the presence of the king, milord, at Arba'il with my royal troops and forces come the deadline the king, milord, has set me.

Once gathered, the army constituting the 'hosts of Aššur' would march through Assyrian and allied territory out into neighbouring territories on campaign.[153] This was actually a boon for the Assyrian economy, as it meant that a significant proportion of the male population was living off the land beyond Assyria's borders while grain was being harvested inside of Assyria itself, maximising Assyrian stockpiles.

By the reign of Adad-nārārī II at the very latest, the campaign had become an annual event, part of the yearly political, cultural, and economic cycle, a finely tuned mechanism which became so efficient that it was able to function even under uninspired or poor leadership, and only extraordinary circumstances were required to halt it. Not even plagues (which the army likely spread) or heavy losses could impede campaigning for more than a couple of years. The presence of the king on this enterprise was symbolically important, but he would usually have ceded actual control of the army to his *turtānu* or to the chief eunuch. Indeed, one letter (SAA 16, 77) remarkably advises the king Aššur-aḫa-iddina as follows (Fuchs 2011a, 382):

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150 In reality, only the fief of the *abarakku*/*masennu* Aya-ḫālu (RIMA 3, 0.102.2003) and perhaps indirectly the province of the *turtānu* (SAA 3, 17/RIMA 3, 0.102.17) are attested from this era. Even then, it is unclear as to whether these were fixed territorial entities. Far more likely, marcher provinces were created *ad hoc*, and would grow, shrink, or be moved according to the performance and influence of an individual high official, or strategic necessity. Certainly, much of the territory encompassing Aya-ḫālu's holdings was conquered by the Urarṭian king Minua scarcely more than a generation later, and what survived seems to have been guarded by the *sartinnu* (see Ch. 4.2.6). The actual extent of the province of (the house of) the *turtānu* also seems to have been subject to change during the early Neo-Assyrian period (see Ch. 4.6.4).

151 Matney et al. (2022, 62–66) have also recently collected textual and archaeological information pointing to provincial garrisons living with their families in settlements in the vicinity of Assyrian provincial capitals.

152 Aššur-nāṣir-apli II may have constructed the city of Imgur-Enlil (Balāwāt, Iraq) with this purpose in mind (Oates 1974, 175); another example is the Šahrazūr plain, Iraq, used by the late Neo-Assyrian kings to form up armies prior to campaigns into the Zagros (Altaweel et al. 2012, 14).

153 Jones (2023a, 323) rightly observes that the Assyrian princes Arad-Mullissu and Šarra-uṣur waited to kill their father Sîn-aḫḫē -erība until midwinter—20th Ṭebētu (X) 681—when the Assyrian army would be dispersed about the realm in its winter quarters with the exception of the king's household division which they were evidently able to win over to their cause.

[*ṭé-mu a-na*] ˡᵘGALᵐᵉˢ-*ka šu-˹kun˺* [x x x-*šú*]-*nu šá-zi-iz* LUGAL *be-lí* [*a-na*] ˹*qa˺-ra-bi lu la i-qar-ri-ib* [*ki-i*] ˹*ša*˺ LUGALᵐᵉˢ-*ni* ADᵐᵉˢ-*ka e-pa-áš-u-ni* [*at*]-˹*ta*˺ *ina* UGU *mu-le-e i-˹ti˺-*[*iz* ˡᵘ]˹GAL˺ᵐᵉˢ-*ka qa-˹ra˺-*[*bu lu-pi-šu*]

Send [commands to] your magnates, have them array the[ir forces (?)]. The king, milord, should not approach the fray! Stay on the hill [as] the kings, your fathers, did! Your magnates [will do b]attle.

This safe but visible placement might be compared with the that of the later Persian monarch in the centre of his army in Greek accounts (e.g. Arrian *Anabasis* 2.8.11).[154] Indeed, Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's situation on a hill watching the siege of Lakisu (Tēl Lāḵīš, Israel; Arabic: *Tall al-Duwayr*) is explicitly luxurious (Thomason 2016b, 254). What it intimates is that the Assyrian king's presence on the campaign was ultimately *political*.

2.2.4 'Campaign-culture'. Spectacle, loyalty, and belonging on the march

While there has been a good deal of scrutiny of the nature of Assyrian campaigns (e.g. Grayson 1976b, 134–138; Marriott/Radner 2015), the broader social implications of this institution have not been fully explored hitherto. As already noted, the propagandistic effect of a correctly stage-managed Assyrian campaign would have been immense. Compounding this was that regularity with which these ideally occurred. While the external projection of power which a campaign represented has long been discussed (e.g. Parker 2011, 371–372; 2015, 287), its utility for the king within his own political arena, and the propagandistic effect on the individual level for its participants has been less well explored. An exploration of these phenomena goes some way towards elucidating a persistent literary trope in Mesopotamian literature identified by George (2013)—that of warfare and battle as a festival, or even a dance.[155]

Elaborate rituals, festivities, and other spectacles would have preceded a campaign. The first clear intimation of this is in Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's foundation late in his reign of the city of Imgur-Enlil (Balāwāt, Iraq) as both a staging site for the Assyrian army and a sacred location at which he could gain insight into the coming campaign through dream divination at its temple of Mamû (see Ch. 3.4.3). Thereafter, his son Salmānu-ašarēd III constructed a 'military-palace' at Kalḫu in a precinct separate from the citadel at which even more impressive military spectacles could be hosted. A window into these is presented by the so-called Nimrūd 'Wine Lists', dating to the late reign of Adad-nārārī III and the early reign of Salmānu-ašarēd IV. These were found in the military palace at Nimrūd[156]—popularly dubbed "Fort Shalmaneser"—and detail the disbursement of vast quantities of wine for long lists of both officials and foreign dignitaries. Fales (1994) has astutely noted that the dates of the wine dispensations in the Nimrūd Wine Lists fall within Addaru (XII) or Nisannu (I), and that the quantities and personages recorded hence point to a single yearly banquet at the military palace at Kalḫu for around 6,000 people. The timing, location, and guests demonstrate that this must have been a pre-campaign event hosted by the king while his magnates were already assembled in the Assyrian heartland for the new year's celebration and perhaps the ritual re-granting of their titles.[157] This is further supported by the these texts having been found in the same context as the Nimrūd Horse lists, leading

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154 There are a few Assyrian kings who may have assumed a more active leadership role—in particular Adad-nārārī II, Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, and Šarru-ukīn (all usurpers), but even the latter is implied to have been killed in his camp (SAAS 2, B6 r. 8–11). This is particularly interesting considering Nadali's (2013, 78) observation that usually Assyrian kings are depicted in reliefs as already waiting in camp for the army to return after a battle.

155 For example, Verderame (2024) has very recently noted the close lexico-semantic link between the Mesopotamian hero (Sumerian ur-saĝ, Akkadian *qarrādu*) and jumping (*šaḫāṭu*), dancing (*raqādu*), and shouting (*ragāmu*), all of which point to the celebratory aspect of warriorhood and the notion of combat as Ištar's dance.

156 Dubbed the *ēkal māšarti* 'review palace' in late Neo-Assyrian sources. On this palace type and its nomenclature, see recently Šašková 2023 with previous literature.

157 Note that there may also have been a military-themed *akītu* of Ištar of Arbaʾil in Addaru (XII) during this period which would have furnished yet another spectacle for foreign visitors; see Weissert 1997b, 347, and discussion below.

Postgate and Dalley (1984, 24) to surmise that these disbursements of wine and the mustering of horses were connected.[158]

Thus, once a year, around the new year's celebrations, the Assyrian king invited both his magnates and nobles, and foreign emissaries to a splendid banquet in his military palace. As an occasion for conviviality and commensality involving vast quantities of wine, this would have enabled Assyria's elite to bond among themselves and with the foreign dignitaries, all under the king's watchful eye on his dais.[159] In the midst of this feasting and military pomp, there must also have been a marked tension as each party of foreign delegates wondered which region would endure an Assyrian campaign later that year—the diplomatic dimensions must have been immense. The Assyrian campaign would usually leave two to three months after the festivities, which would have left a comfortable space for foreign polities to negotiate not to be on the receiving end of Aššur's host that year.

A couple of months later, governors from around the realm would return with their military contingents for the assembling of the army and the beginning of the campaign. The opinion of the general population towards Assyria's wars and performance of *ilku*-duty is unclear, although some certainly dodged the draft (see Ch. 2.7). Nonetheless, as discussed below, fulfilment of military service, even as a common footsoldier, seems to have brought esteem within Mesopotamian society. It is likely that a young man's first spell of military service—no matter how tedious—would have been considered a rite of passage, as is the case in many societies today.[160] The congregation of all of these different contingents would have emphasised the diversity of those under Assyrian standard, but also their common purpose. Inasmuch as a great deal of the early Neo-Assyrian army was composed of levies from throughout the kingdom (see above, Ch. 2.2.2), this would have had a very important propagandistic aspect. Many Assyrian *ilku*-levies from more distant provinces may never previously have seen the Assyrian heartland, which may well be one of the reasons why Assyrian kings put so much effort into massive hydraulic projects in the plain of Naynawā from the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II onwards (e.g. Ur/Reade 2015; Ur/Osborne 2016; Ur 2017; 2018; Morandi Bonacossi 2018),[161] namely as a means of impressing the armies mustering on their plains.

A curious cultural memory of what must have been the incredible spectacle of the collection of the 'hosts of Aššur' in one place appears in Ctesias' narrative, where he very unusually describes Ninyas' assembly of his army and the annual rotation of its troops in order to maintain order (BNJ 688 f1b 21.3–7, trans. Roller):

πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἀσφάλειαν τῆς ἀρχῆς καὶ τὸν κατὰ τῶν ἀρχομένων γινόμενον φόβον κατ᾽ ἐνιαυτὸν μετεπέμπετο στρατιωτῶν ἀριθμὸν ὡρισμένον καὶ στρατηγὸν ἀπὸ ἔθνους ἑκάστου.καὶ τὸ μὲν ἐκ πάντων ἀθροισθὲν στράτευμα ἐκτὸς τῆς πόλεως συνεῖχεν, ἑκάστῳ τῶν ἐθνῶν τὸν εὐνούστατον τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν ἀποδεικνύων ἡγεμόνα, τοῦ δ᾽ ἐνιαυτοῦ διελθόντος μετεπέμπετο πάλιν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐθνῶν τοὺς ἴσους στρατιώτας, καὶ τοὺς προτέρους ἀπέλυεν εἰς τὰς πατρίδας· οὗ συν τελουμένου συνέβαινε τοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν βασιλείαν τεταγμένους ἅπαντας καταπεπλῆχθαι, θεωροῦντας ἀεὶ μεγάλας δυνάμεις ἐν ὑπαίθρῳ στρατοπεδευομένας, καὶ τοῖς ἀφισταμένοις ἢ μὴ πειθαρχοῦσιν ἑτοίμην οὖσαν τιμωρίαν. τὰς δὲ κατ᾽ ἐνιαυτὸν ἀλλαγὰς τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐπενόησεν, ἵνα πρὶν ἢ καλῶς γνωσθῆναι τοὺς στρατηγοὺς καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἅπαντας ὑπ᾽ ἀλλήλων, ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν διαχωρίζηται πατρίδα· ὁ γὰρ πολὺς χρόνος τῆς στρατείας ἐμπειρίαν τε τῶν κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον καὶ φρόνημα τοῖς ἡγεμόσι περι-

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158 The list of high officials KAV 135, 160, and 167 found in the Aššur Temple and dating to the early reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II could well relate to horse disbursals and thus be connected to the same general event, still held in Aššur at the time. That horses were distributed centrally may well have been on account of their huge importance in the Assyrian war effort.

159 However, as Mattila (2000, 157) has noted, however, only the *rab ša rēši* is frequently attested among the very highest officials constituting the 'cabinet'—either these men were wined and dined at a separate, more intimate event, or their presence was not required. They could well already or still have been in Aššur on account of the new year's festival.

160 The present author is particularly reminded of the rituals associated with the beginning of national service among young men in south-eastern Turkey in which drums, pipes, and ululating women accompany a community's young conscripts headed for muster. For the social and psychological dimensions of military service in Turkey, see particularly Altınay 2006, 61–86.

161 One might consider the long, monumental canal adorned periodically with rock reliefs running horizontally across the hillside at the pass of Fayḍa, Iraq, through which Assyrian armies headed north-westwards would have marched (Morandi Bonacossi/Qasim 2022); the flash of the white limestone bedrock into which it was cut is visible from the plains below even today, and reminds of the beautiful white and pink striations of the Iraqi Kurdish mountains farther east in the Dašt-e Ḥarīr or Kūysanǧaq (Sōrānī: *Kōye*). Its visual effect in Antiquity must have been marked; one might note the wonderment with which this 'imperial landscape' was still viewed by Alexander's army marching to Gaugamēla (Marciak et al. 2020); Alexander and his successors would add to this with monuments of their own (Reade/Anderson 2013; Wójcikowski et al. 2023).

τίθησι, καὶ τὸ πλεῖστον ἀφορμὰς παρέχεται μεγάλας πρὸς ἀπόστασιν καὶ συνωμοσίαν κατὰ τῶν ἡγουμένων. τὸ δὲ μηδ᾽ ὑφ᾽ ἑνὸς τῶν ἔξωθεν θεωρεῖσθαι τῆς μὲν [ἀληθοῦς] περὶ αὐτὸν τρυφῆς ἄγνοιαν παρείχετο πᾶσι, καθάπερ δὲ θεὸν ἀόρατον διὰ τὸν φόβον ἕκαστος οὐδὲ λόγωι βλασφημεῖν ἐτόλμα· στρατηγοὺς δὲ καὶ σατράπας καὶ διοικητάς, ἔτι δὲ δικαστὰς καθ᾽ ἕκαστον ἔθνος ἀποδείξας, καὶ τἆλλα πάντα διατάξας ὥς ποτ᾽ ἔδοξεν αὐτῶι συμφέρειν, τὸν τοῦ ζῆν χρόνον κατέμεινεν ἐν τῆι Νίνωι.

> To secure his rule and to instil fear in his subjects, he sent each year for a specified number of soldiers and a commander from each of the nations. He kept the army—collected from everywhere—together outside the city and appointed as leader of each of the nations the one who was best disposed to him. At the end of each year, he would again send for the same number of soldiers from each nation and return the former to their homeland. While this was happening, all those gathered around the palace were amazed at seeing such a great force always encamped in the open air, and how punishment was ready for those who revolted or were disobedient. He conceived of this annual exchange of the soldiers so that each one would depart to his own homeland before the leaders and everyone else came to know each other too well since a long time on campaign would give the commanders experience in both warfare and arrogance, especially providing a particular occasion for revolt and conspiracies against the leaders. Since he was not seen by anyone outside, everyone was ignorant of his [true] luxuriousness, and each person, as if fearing an unseen god, did not dare to speak badly of him. After appointing the commanders, satraps, administrators, and even the judges for each nation and also arranging everything that seemed beneficial, he remained in Ninos for the rest of his life.

The details of this curious narrative furnished by Ctesias are quite striking,[162] and the generals are described as 'on campaign'—it seems likely that this is a garbled cultural memory of the institution of the Assyrian annual campaign which Ctesias is relaying, in which he has it stationed permanently in front of the city of Ninos in order to demonstrate further Ninyas' indolence.

The precise date on which the king departed was often recorded in inscriptions, and hence may well have been publicly announced as the army left the city at which it had collected. Some dates in particular seem to have been very popular, such as the 1ˢᵗ Simānu (III) or 13ᵗʰ Ayyāru (II). Among the expressions used to describe this were *ina qibīt Aššur* 'at (the god) Aššur's command' (Oded 1991) and *ina tukulti Aššur* 'trusting Aššur'—it may well be that these reflected slightly different oracular methods or outcomes. On occasion, the omens were probably less than ideal but strategic factors outweighed dallying, as in the case of Šarru-ukīn's famous eighth campaign, where only an auspicious month is given in his *Königsbericht* (RINAP 2, 65: 6–9).

That the early Neo-Assyrian king usually participated personally in the campaign is evident, as Assyrian sources are not shy to state when the king was not present and had delegated this responsibility to another official. Nonetheless, it is unclear how often the king actually went on campaign personally by the era of the *turtānu* Šamšī-ilu (786–745), as this official's own inscriptions describe himself as the victor over Assyria's foes rather than the king. Considering that the king on campaign was far more visible to commoners than otherwise, his absence would have been noted.[163] Certainly, the participation of Sammu-rāmat in Assyrian campaigning alongside her son (RIMA 3, 0.104.3: 7–10) must have been remarkable enough to those who saw her stood beside him on the chariot that an entire tradition which would make its way into Classical tradition was born.[164]

The beginning of the march must have been a moment of expectation.[165] Ritually prepared by various prophylactic procedures, the king would have appeared to lead on his army in a martial spectacle. In the fragmentary so-called 'Epic of Salmānu-ašarēd III' (SAA 3, 17/RIMA 3, 0.102.17), the people of Aššur cheer the

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162 Lenfant (2004, 52) notes that there is no obvious source or parallels for this account.

163 This may well have provoked the formation of the aforementioned cultural memory of Ninyas the Ninevite shut-in, or of his curious by-name *Zamēs/Zamesea*—probably a memory of Šamšī-ilu (see Ch. 3.5.5).

164 Pinnock (2014, 512–513) has aptly noted that Assyrian queens seem to have fascinated Classical sources far more than Assyrian kings, and this may well be born of the wonder of Assyria's inhabitants themselves upon seeing queens in such public roles.

165 One might compare Doughty's (1936, vol. 1, 44–45) account of the emotions surrounding the annual departure of the caravan of the *ḥaǧǧāǧ* from Dimašq, Syria, to Makka, Saudi Arabia, in the 1870's: "There was a great stillness in all the camp; these were the last hours of repose. As it was night there came the waits, of young camp-followers with links; who saluting every pavilion were last at the Persians' lodgings . . . The new dawn appearing, we removed not yet. The day risen the tents were dismantled, the camels led in ready to their companies, and halted beside their loads. We waited to hear the cannon shot which should open that year's pilgrimage. It was near ten o'clock when we heard the signal gun fired, and then, without any disorder, litters were braced upon the bearing beasts, their charges laid upon the kneeling camels, and the thousands of riders, all born in the caravan countries, mounted in silence. . . . At the second gun, fired a few moments after, the Pasha's litter advances and after him goes

king on as he marches off on campaign, calling *deʾiqtu ṭābtu adanniš ana bēlum* [. . .] *alik bēlum šarrāni daʾaš* [. . .] "Good-speed verily the lourde! [. . .] March forth, lourde of kings! Crush [. . .]"[166] As the march was underway, an atmosphere of excitement may have prevailed, and an incredible 'soundscape' developed: above the rhythmic tread of thousands of feet would have hung the strains of marching songs[167] and the music of a military band accompanying the king on his chariot.[168] In embarking on a campaign, a king had gathered together most, if not all, of his magnates—as such, he could keep his friends close and his enemies closer, preventing governors and high officials from scheming behind his back in the provinces and undermining his authority.[169] Indeed, a high official who had become a threat but also too powerful to dismiss could be neatly organised to fall to a stray arrow in the hurly-burly.[170] Just as governors displayed their loyalty by joining the congregation of the 'hosts of Aššur' (see below for examples in which this did not occur), so too did the king count on their loyalty during the trying and chaotic events of a campaign. The extended period spent by the king and his magnates together 'on the road' would have given them an excellent opportunity to more generally discuss policy (Radner 2011c, 372) and to end the campaign with a clear vision of how their own provinces were to be governed in the period until they saw the king again.[171] In turn, while the external projection of Assyrian power which an advancing army on campaign heralded would have been immense, the progress of the 'hosts of Aššur' would also have reinforced Assyrian authority in the provinces and permitted the king to inspect his land for himself. As terrible as the approach of an Assyrian army must have been to its foes—one need only consider the descriptions in the Hebrew Bible (Aster 2007a)—its progress through the landscape may well have been reassuring for those Assyrians not immediately in its path or prey to its foraging soldiers. Many may have had relatives marching in this seemingly unstoppable mass, or remembered their own military service, or spied the distant glint of the standards of the gods.

As noted in Chapter 2.2.3, keeping discipline was vital to the Assyrian art of war, and morale must often have preoccupied the Assyrian king.[172] The 'Epic of Salmānu-ašarēd III' (SAA 3, 17: 17/RIMA 3, 0.102.17: 17) puts great emphasis on this point, noting: *ītanammar ana rabûtīšu šipṭu ana ṣābīšu iddunu* "He consulted time and again his magnates that his troops be disciplined". That campaigns could potentially go terribly awry in a manner which publicly embarrassed the king is amply demonstrated by various scenes within the subversive and humorous narrative of the Naʾid-Šīḫu composition known in Neo-Assyrian and Late Babylonian recensions (Edmonds 2019b). Set in late Kassite-period Babylonia, the fragmentary narrative centres upon an unnamed king's attempt to campaign in the Zagros and constant trumping by one of his own warriors, one Naʾid-Šīḫu. Everything that could go wrong does, with local rulers refusing to hand over foodstuffs, troops becoming drunken and disorderly, and Naʾid-Šīḫu even initiating a battle before the king has completed a heroic speech. Much of this humour rests in a familiarity with the functioning of the campaign, and the literate elites reading such works must have embarked on such marches themselves, once more underlining the

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the head of the caravan column: other fifteen or twenty minutes we, who have places in the rear, must halt, that is until the long train is unfolded before us; then we strike our camels and the great pilgrimage is moving."

166 The present author understands the awkward and ungrammatical use of *be-lum* as an intentional archaism by the poet.

167 KAR 158 vi 6′–11′; viii 28′ preserves evidence of *kerrētu*-songs (perhaps from the word *gerru*). The first lines (i.e. titles) of these songs range from those seeming to praise Ištar, goddess of war (*rašubtu ina ilāni anāku* "I am the most terrifying of the gods") to the obviously bawdy (*sūqa abāʾma šittā sekrēti ūta* "Walking down the street, I met two ladies").

168 Cheng (2012) notes the frequency with which the Assyrian king is accompanied by a pair of harpists in visual sources.

169 This may be one of the reasons why newly-crowned Assyrian kings were so eager to begin campaigning.

170 The most likely case of this occurring presently known is the fate of Salmānu-ašarēd III's successful *turtānu* Aššur-bēlu-kaʾʾin, who was abruptly replaced in the wake of the Battle of Šītamrat (855) by Dayyān-Aššur, a situation which suggests that he fell in the fighting at this battle, despite its possibly anticlimactic nature (see Chs. 3.5.1; 4.6.3). However, this dynamic might well have gone two ways—note the suspicious, sudden death of Šamšī-Adad V on yet another (perhaps unpopular) campaign to Babylonia (Ch. 3.5.2), and also that Sammu-rāmat accompanied her own son on campaign, perhaps as she was wary of leaving him alone with the *turtānu* Nergal-ilāya (Andreas Fuchs made the latter point to the present author). As Šarru-ukīn's body could not even be recovered (Frahm 1999, 74–75), it is unlikely that he was 'fragged' by his own army.

171 One might note in this respect the border official Aššur-ālik-pāni bringing his reports on a writing board with him to the mustering of the army at Arbaʾil in the aforementioned letter SAA 5, 152 (r. 1–4).

172 Heeßel (2014b, 385–386) remarks on the many apodoses relating to the breakdown of discipline within the Mesopotamian omen tradition. Note also Rollinger's (2016b) extensive survey of the trope of panic (*ḫattu*) in cuneiform historiography.

importance of the campaign to Mesopotamian culture.[173] The darker side of order and its (sometimes wilful) lack thereof on campaign is demonstrated in the aforementioned psychology of Assyrian warfare, the head-hunt, and the atrocities committed, which have been discussed in the previous section.[174] It suffices only to add that such experiences would have further fostered a competitive *esprit de corps*. If the climax of the campaign could be correctly timed, and the army was in good spirits, then the political function of the campaign had been perfectly achieved. This explains the occasional abrupt plunder or conquest of allies on the march home (see Ch. 2.2.1), or the march onwards to a symbolic site such as a mountain or a sea to create a monument or receive tribute following a military setback, as evidenced, for example, by Salmānu-ašarēd III's strategically inutile march to the Phoenician coast to carve rock reliefs and receive tribute following his failure to take Dimašqa in 841 (see Ch. 4.6.5); after yet another failure to defeat Dimašqa/Ša-imērīšu in front of an army which had suffered year after year of indecisive and probably costly battle in the west, Salmānu-ašarēd III could only 'put a brave face on things' and play the conqueror—in 839, he would conclude an underwhelming campaign against Que (see RIMA 3, 0.102.10 iv 22–34; 11 r. 3′–16′; 12: 31–36; 13 r. 1′–4′; 14: 100–102; 16: 143′–151′) with two rock reliefs, further resorting to spectacle and commemoration where feats of arms failed. Whatever the outcome, the march home would have served as a 'decompression period' for Assyrian soldiers, wherein men could confront their experiences as a group, and at the end of which awaited the great triumph.

The Assyrian triumph (*erēb āli*, see Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 82) must have been an incredible spectacle (Reade 2005, 19–22; Villard 2008; May 2012b; Nadali 2013; Fink 2022; Ristvet 2024, 331–333). As early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions were focused upon the king's concrete achievements rather than the celebratory acts surrounding them, it is only come the last Assyrian kings' royal inscriptions—which had been freed almost entirely from the traditional conventions surrounding this genre—that the details and precise configuration of these events become tangible, although this information can be supplemented the surviving early Neo-Assyrian 'lays of the king' and some visual sources.

The propagandistic value of such a spectacle should hardly be underestimated, indeed, in some cases it may have been the point for the entire campaign, particularly for new kings on their first campaign who sometimes marched against unimportant mountain polities not far from the Assyrian heartland to score an easy victory (Edmonds 2023b, 256). The symbolic centrepiece of this festival was the return to the city from the steppe (hence the term for triumph, *erēb āli* 'entering of the city'). As identified by May (2012b, 468–477), this is depicted in some visual sources in scenes of the Assyrian king and his army before a walled city, on the ramparts and parapets of which musicians play music and inhabitants applaud. The king's march into the city with his army further demonstrated the city's esteem for him, in permitting him to enter the civic space armed (see Ch. 2.3.4). In returning to the city victoriously, the king embodied that most ancient of archetypes, the hero vanquishing chaos, akin to Ninurta (Maul 2003). In turn, many late Neo-Assyrian kings had their defeated enemies paraded about the city before being chained with animals such as bears or dogs by the city gates to be mocked by passers-by in an unambiguous example of dehumanisation (Liverani 2014, 378).[175] Trophies would also be displayed at the gates of a city; for example, Schaudig (2022, 261) notes that a

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173 Indeed, the composition uniquely contains long lists of both warriors and high officials with realistic names participating in the campaigning (Edmonds 2019b, 334–335).

174 As has been discussed in the preceding section, the Assyrian campaign was also accompanied by atrocities, in which Assyrian soldiers actively participated; while those involving torture were likely ritualised into mass spectacles, other, apparently taboo transgressions—the obvious example being rape—remain unmentioned (Fuchs 2009, 71–72; Bagg 2016, 60). The sad truth is that such behaviour is known to foster a strong group identity among the perpetrators.

175 While an act of humiliation, this also recalls the ancient archetype of the hero mastering dangerous animals and monsters and displaying them within civilisation at the end of his adventures, as in the case of Saint George taming the dragon with the princess' girdle and having it waddle back with him to the city of Silene in the *Legenda Aurea*. Within Mesopotamian culture, this begins with imagery of the king with lions in cages attested as early as the Late Chalcolithic period (McMahon 2009), and continues with the Gilgāmeš tradition (should it be the case that the monster Ḫuwawa is spared and brought back to Uruk in some versions of the story; see references noted by George 2003, vol. 1, 11), and Šarru(m)-kīn of Akkad's triumphant leading of Lugalzagesi in a neck-stock to Nippur (e.g. Schrakamp 2020, 620), which presumably served as the archetypical punishment emulated thereafter.

collection of ceremonial mace-heads from foreign rulers was found at the Tabira Gate at Qalʿa Širqāṭ including one from Marduk-mudammiq, king of Namri, plundered by Salmānu-ašarēd III (RIMA 2, 0.102.94). In turn, monuments referring to these victories could be deposited there later (e.g. May 2014, 86–88).

Connected to these festivities, the king would have performed various war rituals (e.g. Elat 1982; Pongratz-Leisten et al. 1992). Representative of these, is a ritual involving mummers' dances, sacred archery, and a lyre recital by the king before the chariots bearing the standards of the gods (MacGinnis 2019, 84),[176] which probably occurred immediately after a victory in the field (May 2012b), but may well have been performed analogously in Assyria as a part of a triumph, which concludes as follows (SAA 20, 18: 48–56):

> *ki-ma* LUGAL ^lúKÚR-*šú ik-ta-šad du-ma-qi i-na-áš-ši* ^gišBALAG *ina nag-la-bi-šú e-lal ina* IGI DINGIR^meš *il-lak* UDU.SISKUR^meš *e-pu-šú qaq-qu-ru i-na-šiq e-rab-*URU *a-na ma-dak-te up-pa-áš* [*a*]-*na qir-si er-rab nap-tu-nu* GAR-*an* LUGAL *i-ḫad-du*

> Once the king has vanquished his foe, he dons the jewellery. He hangs the lyre from his shoulder and approaches the gods. Sacrifices of sheep are made. He kisses the ground, he performs a triumph back to the camp, he enters the *qirsu*-pavillion, and begins the banquet. The king rejoices.

Whether part of the triumph or not, this neatly preserves the tenor of such rituals.[177] The evidence of a musical recital is particularly interesting considering a curious genre of royal paeans—some of these written in a peculiar register with bizarre syntax for metrical effect—of which only a few examples survive (LKA 62–64, RIMA 3, 0.102.17/SAA 3, 17), suggested by Bach (2018, 18) to belong to the genre known as *zamar šarri* 'lays of the king' (see KAR 158 viii 24'). In LKA 62/SAA 24, 234 and LKA 64/SAA 24, 233, and in RIMA 3, 0.102.17/SAA 3, 17, the compositions begin and end in the third person, presumably marking a singer or bard's narration, but contain a middle portion in the first person representing the words of the king himself.[178] It is possible that in this or another celebratory musical context (such as the ensuing banquet), a court singer would perform this in a duet with the king, and that particularly interesting or notable lays were later collected out of historical or lyrical interest.

The ensuing feast would also have played an important role in the triumph, and it is key to note its conceptual connection with dining after hunting (Winter 2016). Either as a part of this spectacle or following it in a discrete event, the king would have had prominent captives brutally punished (Fuchs 2009, 97–109). Whenever possible, prominent enemies such as kings (e.g. Kundibḫalê of Katmuḫi or Marduk-balāssu-iqbi of Babylonia) were brought back alive to Assyria and flayed at either Ninūa or Arbaʾil; it is scarcely coincidence that both cities had hypostases of Ištar, goddess of war, as their tutelary deity, and this must have been a ritually charged event. The aforementioned so-called Epic of Salmānu-ašarēd III mentions a ceremony at the

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176 Whether these events are to be connected to the *akītu*-festival (e.g. Pongratz-Leisten 1997a) or not depends upon the difficult question as to whether the *akītu*-festival was ubiquitous in Assyrian culture prior to the reign of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība or not. The broken cone RIMA 3, 0.104.1002 is particularly interesting in this regard, as it mentions a king, son of a *šam-ši*-^d[*Adad*, an *akītu*, and one *Tukultī-Ninurta* (see Frahm 2000a, 78, fn. 22). While Adad-nārārī III would seem the most logical candidate as commissioner of this inscription, Aššur-nāṣir-apli I also cannot be ruled out, particularly considering his known connection to Ištar and Ninūa. Frahm (2000a, 77) further notes a curt reference in a text of Tukultī-Ninurta I to *tašrīt Ninūa* (RIMA 1, 0.78.33: 4)—it is possible that this might refer to a post-campaign *akītu*-festival at Ninūa in Tašrītu (VII); this would resonate with Ambos' (2013, 35–72; 2014, 331–332; 2017, 74) reconstruction of an Assyrian autumn festival during this same period—analogous to a spring/autumn mirroring within the Babylonian cultic calendar (Ambos 2010)—but the latter would have occurred at Aššur, not Ninūa. As Assyrian kings are also attested as having departed on campaign during Tašrītu (VII) (e.g. Tukultī-Ninurta II and Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*), it seems at least to the present author that there must have been a diachronic change in the location and actual timing of the Assyrian autumn festival(s). In much the same way, it is also possible that various *akītu*- or *akītu*-esque festivals were introduced to Assyria (and subsequently abandoned) at different times prior to the late Neo-Assyrian period, in which this solidified into the Babylonianised spectacles known from Sîn-aḫḫē-erība onwards.

177 The ritual archery (SAA 20, 18: 22–47) is particularly interesting, as it mirrors the stages of a classic early Neo-Assyrian battle (Ch. 2.2.3). After the king blesses an arrow, he gives it to a nobleman, who fires it from a chariot into a symbolic effigy accompanied by with other noblemen on chariots in a martial display reminiscent of a battle's initial archery duel. After this, the king approaches the 'enemy' to symbolically dispatch it, like the charge and pursuit stage of the battle.

178 While Bach (2018) reconstructs a succession of different voices within this composition, closer scrutiny of LKA 64/SAA 23, 233 presents a much simpler structure of narrator—king—narrator (see Fuchs/Edmonds 2024, 488–493).

shrine at Milqia near Arbaʾil,[179] and lion hunting thereafter in the vicinity of Aššur (RIMA 3, 0.102.17/SAA 3, 17 r. 27–29). It may well be that lion hunts more generally attended a triumph (Weissert 1997b, 349), but there is presently insufficient evidence to demonstrate this.[180]

It has sometimes been argued that the curious textual genre known as the "letters to the God Aššur" known from the Neo-Assyrian textual corpus played a role in the celebrations surrounding the returning Assyrian king's triumph.[181] Oppenheim (1960, 143–145; 1979, 124–126) memorably argued that these reports were "written not to be deposited in silence in the sanctuary, but to be actually read to a public that was to react directly to their contents" (1960, 143). Perhaps the strongest evidence for this is that the people of the city of Aššur appear among the addressees of Šarru-ukīn's famous report of his eighth campaign (RINAP 2, 65: 4). While this idea of a 'public' engagement with the stuff of royal inscriptions is interesting and chimes well with the triumphs occurring following a return from a campaign, leading to Assyriological support for this idea (e.g. Marriott/Radner 2015), this does not fit well with the contents of these letters themselves.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that the king is explicitly stated to be in his camp on campaign—this being, after all, the very premise behind the use of a letter; here, Oppenheim (1960, 143) suggests that "they replace in content and most probably in form the customary oral report of the king or his representative on the annual campaign to the city and the priesthood of the capital". Hence, these *Königsberichte* ('royal reports') would be missives from the king unable to perform a triumph at Aššur. However, it seems difficult to imagine as long, complex, and repetitive a composition as Šarru-ukīn's aforementioned report being performed (and in Standard Babylonian to wit).[182] In particular, the bizarrely small Assyrian casualties presented in these 'Letters to the God Aššur' have remained a sticking point for Liverani (2010, 230; 382–383; 2017c, 308; 2017d, 540) who struggles to explain as to how an audience of Assyrian elites would react to these, concluding that they were symbolic. In response, one need only think of the words of a later self-styled Assyrian, Lucian (*Quomodo historia conscribanda sit*, 20, trans. after Kilburn 1959, 31):

ἐπὶ γὰρ Εὐρώπῳ τῶν μὲν πολεμίων ἀποθανεῖν μυριάδας ἑπτὰ καὶ τριάκοντα καὶ ἓξ πρὸς τοῖς διακοσίοις, Ῥωμαίων δὲ μόνους δύο, καὶ τραυματίας γενέσθαι ἐννέα. Ταῦτα οὐκ οἶδα εἴ τις ἂν εὖ φρονῶν ἀνάσχοιτο.

And in the number slain he even contradicted the officers' dispatches with his false figures: at Europus, he said, the enemy lost 70,236 killed, while the Romans lost just two and had nine wounded. I do not think anyone in his senses would accept that.

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179 Milqia is attested as an important pagan shrine as late as the Syriac martyrdom-narrative of Mār Qardāǧ (Walker 2006, 249–257; 2007).

180 Weissert (1997b, 347) suggests that there were annually two triumphal *akītu*-celebrations for Ištar of Arbaʾil, in Ulūlu (VI) and Addaru (XII), which would have preceded the corresponding new year's (I) and autumn (VII) festivals at Aššur. It is difficult to say as to whether such a system existed during the early Neo-Assyrian period. Certainly, in the so-called *Epic of Salmānu-ašarēd III*, the sacking of the Uraṛtian king's city was only accomplished by the 10th Ulūlu (VI); the king would have had to hurry to have visited the Sea of Naʾiri and receive tribute before returning to Assyria through the mountains in time to complete an *akītu*-festival at Arbaʾil by the close of Ulūlu (VI). Like the obstructive autumn festival in Tašrītu (VII), this reduplicated celebration of the *akītu* of Ištar of Arbaʾil may well have been an invention of the late Neo-Assyrian period (see above and further discussion in Ch. 2.5.1). A pre-campaign early Neo-Assyrian 'triumphal *akītu*' in Addaru (XII) would need to be compatible with the complicated events of the new year, but would certainly have provided a splendid martial show to the foreign emissaries who had come for the Addaru (XII) banquet.

181 These unusual texts are literary letters to the god from the king—so-called *Königsberichte*—for which replies from the god to the king—i.e. *Gottesbriefe*—are even preserved (see the overview by Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 210–265).

182 Šarru-ukīn's aforementioned report of his eighth campaign (RINAP 2, 65) is exactly 430 lines in length and a reading of its contents in English translation apparently takes 46 minutes and "manages to hold the attention of a neutral audience without prior knowledge" (Marriott/Radner 2015, 127–128, fn. 4). Yet, written in Standard Babylonian (with occasional Assyrianisms) of remarkable literary value with intricate syntax interspersed with bland, annalistic descriptions of conquests (Hurowitz 2008, 105, fn. 8) and even a list of loot from Mušaṣīr some 52 lines long, it seems very difficult to imagine Aššur's political elites standing to attention before the god Aššur—chairs would have been a royal privilege in state events—for three quarters of an hour without even the king present as a scribe read out long abstruse passages.

It seems very difficult to believe that the Assyrian nobleman would keep a straight face where Lucian could not.[183] It seems rather that these texts had a cultic and/or commemorative function.[184] This hardly means that a successful campaign would not be celebrated with dedicated literary compositions—indeed, the aforementioned paeans, perhaps to be described as *zamar šarri*, would have served such a role handsomely.

Following this great spectacle, the remaining governors and their troops would march back to their respective provinces, bringing with them stories of the campaign, its hardships, triumphs, and spoils, and also the sorry tidings of those who had fallen.[185] It was hence vital that the campaign was properly stage managed to encourage trust in the regime among the general population in city and countryside alike.[186] The consequences of a disastrous campaign on the general population's morale would have been decisive. In 754, Aššur-nārārī V's army was probably trounced by an Urarṭian force led by Sarduri II at Arpadda (SAAS 2, B1: 65′–66′; B2: 60′–61′; CTU A 9–1 l.e. 1–10, 9–2 l.e. 1–10); there was no campaign (*ina māti*) for the following four years, and thereafter only two campaigns to Namri before the army stayed once more at home (SAAS 2, B1: 65′–75′; B2: 60′–68′). As Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* was able to win a decisive victory against Urarṭu in 743 soon after a civil war, and begin a new phase of territorial expansion (see Ch. 3.6), the army itself was probably not understrength. Rather, the governors and their troops in the provinces refused the call to assemble for the campaign in sufficient numbers that a viable army for campaigning could not be formed. With the arrival of a new leader in which the magnates of the land had confidence and the end of the Šamšī-ilu-regime, Assyria's full forces could be brought to bear.

As already noted, some soldiers who had distinguished themselves in battle (or the subsequent slaughter) would receive decoration and promotion from the king (Radner 2011b, 45–50).[187] Some manner of mess dinner without the king's presence must have ensued after this ceremony which was quite liable to get out of hand, as one remarkable missive recounts (SAA 16, 115 o. 5–r. 9):

ARAD^meš É-EN^meš-*ia ša* LUGAL *be-lí* UD-*mu an-ni-ú ú-par-ri-su-u-ni* ^m*tab*-URU-*a-a* DUMU ^mEN-KASKAL-PAP-PAP *ša a-na* ^lúGAL-*ki-ṣir-u-tú* LUGAL *be-lí ú-še-lu-u-ni* ^md PA-*sa-kib ša a-na* ^lú3.U₅^meš *ka-a-<a>-ma-nu-te* LUGAL *be-lí ú-še-lu-u-ni* ^mIGI.LAL-^dŠÚ *ša a-na* ^lú*qur*-ZAG

183 For the tradition of skewed numbers in Roman historiography and the background to Lucian's comment, see Reinard 2021.

184 As the opening address already makes clear, the king was reporting primarily to the god Aššur, and a cultic context should be assumed. The very fine quality of the large tablet of RINAP 2, 65 further suggests a commemorative function—certainly, its find context in House N4 (the "Haus des Beschwörungspriesters") at Qalʿa Šarqāṭ suggests that it was part of this family's collection of unusual historical texts (see Pedersén 1986, 41–59). Pongratz-Leisten (2013, 301) has interestingly suggested that all surviving *Königsberichte* recount the completion of campaigns in which some manner of sacrilege had occurred, and hence that this served as a cleansing ritual for the king prior to his entry into Aššur. Certainly, Šarru-ukīn had plundered the sacred city of Muṣā-ṣir (RINAP 2, 65), Aššur-aḫa-iddina had conquered the 'sanctuary state' of Šubria (RINAP 4, 33), Šamšī-Adad V's *Gottesbrief* (RIMA 3, 0.103.4) justifies his conquest of the shrine-city of Dēru (Tall al-ʿAqar, Iraq, see Ch. 4.6.2), and whether KAL 3, 29 is assigned to Adad-nārārī II or III (Edmonds 2023b, 275, fn. 68), it must also concern a campaign to Dēru. By this same logic, the fragmentary *Königsbericht* RIMA 3, 0.105.3 compiled in one of the many eponymates of Šamšī-ilu must date to 770, when Aššur-dān III's forces marched to the Babylonian city of Marad, traditional shrine of the deity Lugal-Marada (Stol 1990); this is cogent, as the other eponymates of Šamšī-ilu are unsuitable—one falls in the midst of a war with Urarṭu (780), the other was a year in which the Assyrian army did not campaign (752). However, as suggested to the present author by Andreas Fuchs, these texts might also simply have been created to commemorate campaigns of which the king was particularly proud. Certainly, it seems unlikely that the king's triumph was held up until a literary response from the Aššur Temple reached him—rather, this was probably a literary fiction, and this correspondence was created post-factum (perhaps parallel to the composition of conventional annalistic accounts) by a scribe as a commemorative item—note that the scribe's name and pedigree is given in RINAP 2, 65: 428–429.

185 Note, for example, the Bible's triumphant allusion to the disastrous death of Šarru-ukīn (Isaiah 14:16–19, see Frahm 2017b, 561), or its description of the death of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība and the flight of his patricides (Isaiah 37:36–38; Tobit 1:21), both of which point to a vast 'rumour mill' about the Assyrian realm.

186 Finkel (2014, 291) notes this in his discussion of whether Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's campaign to Nibur involved a search for the *apobaterion*: "After all, if Sennacherib had really gone up Mount Nipur looking for the Ark, all his army would have known about it, and on their return everybody in the palace, the capital, the surrounding countryside and, before long, probably the entire empire would have known about it too."

187 MacGinnis et al. (2020, 100–101) provide interesting possible evidence of the king rewarding crown land to state personnel in the wake of campaigns, albeit in newly conquered, often less than desirable regions, meaning that it was probably immediately sold on.

^{meš} LUGAL BE *ú-še-lu-u-ni* 3 *an-nu-te* ERIM^{meš} *šá-ak-ra-nu-tú šú-nu ki-ma i-šak-ki-ru* LÚ GÍR AN.BAR TA *pa-an mì-ḥi-ri-šu la ú-sa-aḥ -<ḥa>-ra*

The servants of milord's household whom the king, milord, decided (to promote) today—Tabālāya, son of Bēl-Ḥarrān-aḥu-uṣur, whom the king, milord, promoted to rank of cohort commander, Nabû-sagībi, whom the king, milord, promoted to rank of permanent third-man, and Ātamar-Marduk whom the king, milord, promoted to rank of lifeguardsman—these three soldiers are drunkards! When inebriated they can scarce keep their iron swords from their fellows!

The soldier who "can raise a thirst" must have been as common a trope then as now; a scene of the so-called Naʾid-Šīḥu Epic (Edmonds 2019b) ends with precisely such a scene of soldiers becoming drunk and unruly on campaign despite the king's best efforts to prevent them (SAA 3, 50 r. 21–29).

At the end of a soldier's *ilku*-duty, he would be demobbed and return to his family. As a veteran of another campaign, he could be expected to be fêted by his community, as demonstrated by a remarkable paean to the soldiering life in the literary composition conventionally called the 'Epic of Erra', one of the most popular literary compositions of the period.[188] Therein, the war-gods of the Sebitti extol battle in a rousing speech (*Erra* 1, 51–59),[189] stating:

alāk ṣēri ša eṭlūti kī ša isinnimma
āšib āli lū rubû ul išebbi akla
šumsuk ina pī nišīšūma qalil qaqqassu
ana ālik ṣēri akî itarraṣ qāssu
ša āšib āli lū puggulat kubukkuš
ana ālik ṣēri akî idannin mīna
akal āli lullû ul ubbala kamān tumri
šikar našpi duššupi ul ubbala mê nādi
ēkal tamlî ul ubbala maṣallu ša rēʾî
qurādu Erra ṣīma ana ṣēri turuk kakkīka

Parting for the field is to manhood a fest!
For the burgher, if a prince, bread still shall not sate—
Reviled among his folk, shrunken, crestfallen,
To the common footsoldier he'll cast out his hand!
But e'en from the burgher, fort yet in his power
To the common footsoldier, still what would it vaunt?
Town's plump loaf holds naught to the ember's bread
Nor fine honeyed beer to waterskein's draught
Nor citadel's palace the herder's hovel—
Hero Erra to the field! Let your arms be smote!

"And gentlemen in England now a-bed / Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here, / And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks / That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day"—that Assyrian society and culture oriented itself around the campaign cycle and the mixture of emotions, adventures, and possibly rewards which the campaign season might bring is hardly impossible to envisage, indeed, field archaeologists do much the same thing today.[190] Yet, while generations of Assyrian men would have bandied about war

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188 See George's (2013) study of warfare in *Erra*, also quoting the same passage as here. On praise of heroic war in Akkadian literature more generally, see recently Ponchia 2021.

189 The normalisation follows that of the *electronic Babylonian Library* (https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/5/SB/I). The translation is the author's own.

190 By means of contrast, Ristvet (2024, 335–336) has very recently concluded that "there is little evidence that either elite or ordinary Assyrians celebrated their role as soldiers in the Assyrian army"; however, her observation is built upon a curious series of criteria: She notes that there are no violent wall-paintings known from elite residences, that seals representing violence are only found in official contexts, that weaponry was not stored in homes, and that Assyrians were not frequently buried with weapons. In fact, none of this demonstrates her point. As has been seen, weaponry was generally state-issued, and presumably returned at the end of military service, and there is no reason why militaristic commemorative art identifiable in state or royal contexts should also be found in the domestic sphere.

stories of one campaign or another, leaving them to drift into oral history, the king immortalised his exploits quite permanently.

2.2.5 Leaving one's mark. Commemoration and the veracity of Assyrian royal inscriptions

The completion of a successful campaign brought with it the opportunity for commemoration by the king for posterity. Already during his campaign, the king had scribes accompanying his army to document its progress (Reade 2012). Visually, this most prominently took the form of narratives of campaigns on stone orthostats within the Assyrian palaces (or as wall-paintings). For the most part, this was for the internal consumption of the king, his court, and foreign dignitaries (e.g. Nadali 2022); a particularly interesting example is that Šarru-ukīn seems even to have devoted the decoration of individual rooms within his palace at Ḫūrsābād to individual campaigns (Reade 1976). Other visual displays included glazed brick façades such as that famously known from the Temple of Aššur, the registers upon obelisks installed at gates or in temple courtyards, and on bronze bands holding together timber temple and palace gates, as most famously known from the aforementioned site of Balāwāt, and various smaller vignettes on more portable objects. Textually, this took the shape of the previously discussed 'lays of the king', and of royal inscriptions on a variety of media, which now must finally be concertedly broached.

While the contents of the Assyrian royal inscriptions are immediately recognisable to the modern Assyriologist, the actual parameters of this genre remain vague; despite the incredible homogeneity in content and style of this corpus of texts, exceptions can be found to almost every definition. Perhaps most simply, these encompass official historical narratives with the king is the protagonist with a commemorative function; their audience are primarily the gods and future rulers (see recently Bagg 2016, 60–62; Frahm 2019, 142; Galter 2022). As such, they have been likened to the *res gestae* of Roman Antiquity.

Evolving out of relatively modest commemorative inscriptions in the Old Assyrian period, the Assyrian royal inscriptions had become fully formed historical narratives by the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I, and continued to develop during the Neo-Assyrian period, acquiring an ever more literary or even confessional character by empire's end.[191] These inscriptions usually recount a particular king's *Heldentaten*, often sequentially, which has given rise to their frequent appellation as 'annals', or, indeed, in chronological or geographical summaries. A king would usually commission such inscriptions at various junctures throughout his reign —they operate as 'time capsules' after a fashion.[192] Where they can be reconstructed, the redactional histories of such texts hence present a fascinating insight into which achievements were considered at a given moment to exemplify a certain monarch's reign; the shifting emphases could be guided by an alteration in the king's self-presentation, a political development, or even the context in which the inscription was to be left (see, for example, van de Mieroop 1999, 41–52). Assyrian royal inscriptions were written in Standard Babylonian—the literary dialect—although Assyrianisms are commonplace within their texts. Late Neo-Assyrian texts display an elaborate literary language replete with shades of epic compositions such as the Babylonian national epic *enūma eliš* (Weissert 1997a) or *ša nagba imūru*, the late version of the Gilgāmeš epic (Bach 2020), but this is much less so the case for early Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, which are more direct in their sense.[193]

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191 Within this developmental trajectory, the early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions present an intermediate stage, displaying both very conservative features and some innovations. Their redactional histories remain unclear on account of the scantness of evidence, but it is clear that some texts had undergone multiple reworkings before reaching their final annalistic form (Edmonds 2023b, 286–288).

192 Indeed, precisely such an idea is stated outright in a unique but unfortunately very damaged preamble to an inscription of Adad-nārārī II (KAL 3, 48: 1′–5′) asking the reader to study the inscription and read out the king's deeds. Andreas Fuchs has wryly noted to the present author that speaking to anyone other than the gods or a future ruler would have been *below* an Assyrian king.

193 Indeed, the use of florid language appears to be an innovation of the magnates who added their own inscriptions to those of kings (see Ch. 2.6). Note, however, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's literary pretentions (Ch. 3.4.3), and Foster's (2022) recent defence of the literary merit of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's 'Standard Inscription'.

Their actual authors were a staff of scribes, about whom scarce little is known, particularly in the case of the early Neo-Assyrian period. The very conservative and repetitive formulations found in narratives—the *aṣbat*'s, *akšuḍ*'s, and *amḫur*'s—point to an unbroken compositional tradition from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, or at the very least access to earlier inscriptions; the occasional references to very specific events centuries before—such as the loss of Ana-Aššur-utēr-aṣbat/Pitru and Mutkīnu during the reign of Aššur-rabi II (RIMA 3, 0.102.2 ii 37–38) or the failure of Sikkūr and Sappānu to render tribute since the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta I (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 84–86)—imply a library of earlier annalistic texts or chronicles or even some kind of historical database from which scribes could draw when composing these texts. The extent to which Assyrian kings were involved in the actual composition of royal inscriptions remains difficult to gauge. While their oft-repetitive elements point to purely scribal composition and the frequent confusions between first and third person indicate multiple layers of redaction or repurposing of texts, there are also differences and idiosyncrasies between the royal inscriptions of different kings which do point towards some measure of royal input—perhaps most strikingly the peculiar scatology of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's inscriptions (Frahm 1998, 159) which must have come 'from the top', as it were.

Unsurprisingly, the archaeological context of these inscriptions was almost always the temple, palace, or some other building work. It is important to emphasise the materiality of these royal inscriptions, along with the contexts in which they were carved or deposited, something which has received relatively little concerted investigation hitherto.[194] Inscriptions on materials which have not survived today must be inferred—in particular on metal statues, for which CUSAS 17, 75 is the only surviving example. Many texts (such as those on rock reliefs) demonstrate some degree of interplay with the images on which they were carved (Morello 2016). Some examples are puzzlingly unfinished, were completed sloppily, have suffered partial or complete erasure, or have been truncated to fit into a certain space.[195] The abstraction of these inscriptions to texts by means of modern editions has aided in the compiling of history and rendered their contents accessible, but has removed their important visual and material element, and even a sensory aspect, if one will. The reading of cuneiform requires a suitable light source (one reads the shadows left by the impressions), making many inscriptions legible only under certain circumstances or even times of day. The degree of cuneiform literacy during this period is debated (see below), but it is likely that the use of cuneiform writing and the commissioning of inscriptions was highly respected—indeed, the destruction of one ruler's inscription by another is a rarity (see Ch. 4.3.5 for an exception)—even the *turtānu* Šamšī-ilu's inscriptions were not destroyed in his *damnatio memoriae*; rather, his name was carefully removed from them (Ch. 3.6). Some stele inscriptions ask not to be placed in a 'taboo house' (*bīt asakki*), implying that there was a sort of 'hall of shame' or 'sin bin' whither inscriptions of the disgraced might be sent. Antiquarian interest in the inscriptions of earlier kings and the aping of their script or other features is evident throughout the Neo-Assyrian era, ranging from an amulet shaped ancient forgery or replica of an inscription of Aššur-uballiṭ I (RIMA 1, 0.73.1, see Soden 1952) all the way to the use of archaic sign forms on the inscription of the stele of Šamšī-Adad V found in the Nabû Temple at Nimrūd (RIMA 3, 0.103.1).

A great deal of research has been devoted to the Assyrian royal inscriptions as heavily biased, propagandistic works abounding with 'ideological' content—even as 'codes' requiring 'cracking' (Tadmor 1997). Certainly, the Assyrian royal inscriptions are rousing or even bombastic, but they can also contain long tedious sections which do not produce such an effect, and the issue of their inaccessibility remains. In understanding the logic behind the laborious creation of these inscriptions and their subsequent rendering inaccessible, it is important to note the fundamental connection between the king, his 'name' (*šumu*), and writing (Radner 2005), and the notion that his *ṣalmu*, his image or likeness, contained something of his essence, as the well-known ritualised mutilation of the Assyrian king's image in the palace reliefs of Naynawā and Nimrūd amply demonstrate (e.g. Nylander 1980; Porter 2009; Simpson 2020). Radner (2005) understands all of these activities as *Selbsterhaltung* ('self-preservation') which is appropriately Mesopotamian—one need only think of Rilke's

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194 Note, however, Assyriological research on earlier periods in the collected volume edited by Balke/Tsouparopoulou 2016.
195 On the final phenomenon, see recently Howard (2023) in respect to the relief inscriptions of the palace of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II at Nimrūd.

famous assessment of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgāmeš as an "Epos der Todesfurcht"—but it cannot be the entire story. More recently, Pongratz-Leisten (2021) has theorised an "aura of the illegible" for inscribed objects which comes somewhat closer to encapsulating the phenomenon. What seems to the present author the central theme (or *roter Faden*) is the presumption of a much deeper, legible nature of the cosmos in literate, scribal Mesopotamian thought. Much as the stars in the sky or the creases of a liver alike were cuneiform signs waiting to be read, it might be wondered if a king commissioning these inscriptions was not quite literally inscribing himself into the surrounding universe.[196]

Something of the same idea is present in the sacrifices made before stele and rock reliefs depicting the king, which has sometimes been understood as evidence of a royal cult (May 2020) or more loosely veneration of the royal image (MacGinnis 2023a).[197] In light of the long timespan and contradictory evidence and terminology, it seems difficult to establish a single hard and fast rule for this issue of veneration, nor is it entirely clear whether it is the king or the king's numinous aspect—the *body politic*, as it were—which is being worshipped here.

Finally, one might note the eponym stelae, upon which often a niche shaped like a tablet with handles with the king's short titulary was carved—in a sense, the Assyrian king became a 'textual medium' (*Schriftträger*) with his death, an upright stele upon which his name was inscribed, as if hanging from a tablet around his neck.[198] This is most striking in the example of the eponym stele of Adad-nārārī II (see below, Ch. 3.3.2) where the new king had uniquely taken a statue of his brother Aššur-uballiṭ II* and decapitated it, wearing down the statue to shape it into the crude semblance of an eponym stele and then roughly carving a tablet-shaped recess into its chest into which he incised his own name. The statue was still distinctly king-shaped (*basileomorphic*), and yet also now a stele bearing another king's name. Thus, the evidence does point broadly to the presence of the king's essence in some manner or another within these inscriptions and images, and that this could be cultically activated in at least some cases.

It is this which perhaps explains as to why rulers would devote so much time and resources to the seemingly pointless activity of creating inscriptions bereft of any contemporary audience, addressed to gods and future rulers, which could only be competently understood by the same class of specialists composing them, and were found on such impractical locations as orthostats where they could only be read by torchlight's flames, on distant rockfaces where "eagles dare", under the earth where only an earthquake or palatial renovation would reveal their contents, or in temple precincts accessible to an illustrious few.[199] The production of these texts was their very purpose, both in a cosmic dimension in which the king's very being was written into the universe, and in a more concrete political sense, in which the creation of these inscriptions was a demonstration of the king's aptitude and accomplishment, despite the inaccessibility of their content—in the famous words of McLuhan (1964), the present author should like to suggest that "the medium is the message". What, then, might be made of the contents of these texts? Do they bear any veracity?

As essentially solipsistic texts for gods and future rulers to find, the Assyrian royal inscriptions might be expected to be laden with incredible hyperbole. While this does hold for many inscriptions of the late Neo-Assyrian period, those of the early era are comparatively modest. From the reign of Adad-nārārī II onwards,

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196 This thesis would explain the very unusual phenomenon of some notable monumental inscriptions being unfinished despite also having clearly been on public display, most notably the White Obelisk of Aššur-nāṣir-apli I which must have stood in the courtyard of the Temple of Ištar at Ninūa, and the stele of Šamšī-Adad V found in the Nabû Temple at Nimrūd but clearly originally intended for its Ninurta Temple. In both cases, the king in question might be presumed to have died while it was still being completed—Aššur-nāṣir-apli I suffered from a ghastly illness (Edmonds 2023b, 252–253, fn. 22) and Šamšī-Adad V died very suddenly, probably in Babylonia (see Chs. 3.5.2; 4.5.4). At once, the spell was broken, the essence of the commissioner to be imbued in the text was gone, and the work immediately abandoned. Conversely, inscriptions on such monuments are sometimes rushed to the point of near illegibility (as is the case at Milla Mīrkī, Iraq), or contain unsightly corrections of the text (Kenk Boğazı, Turkey) simply so that the entire inscription be realised—a royal inscription could not function as the king's text until it was complete.

197 One might note by the same token the odd practice of praying before the lion pit mentioned in the famous letter of Urad-Gula (SAA 10, 294 o. 39).

198 There has been some suggestion that these stelae were themselves the source of reverence (Canby 1976).

199 Even stelae, which are often considered to be public monuments, were placed in cultic settings by Assyrian kings, limiting potential access to them (Yamada 2000, 295–297).

a martial introit announces the king's incredible power and position within the cosmos in the format of an extended titulary before the events of the annalistic narrative commence. This bombast notwithstanding, the actual campaign accounts are terse and employ a standardised vocabulary. Deviations from this are obvious, and seem to represent particular episodes or content which the king or the author composing his account specifically included for one reason or another. Insofar as the present author knows, the early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions do not directly contradict the other information available for the period, and thus do not 'lie' *per se*. Indeed, it is difficult to see what would be gained by lying in a document which no contemporaries would read addressed to the omniscient gods.[200] However, this does not mean that they are at all objective accounts, as they also omit any details which would be embarrassing to the present king or his immediate predecessors—failures such as defeats, rebellions, or territorial losses are only mentioned when they justify a later event in the narrative. Like the composing of a modern *curriculum vitae*, a king wished to retain whatever 'feathers in caps' he could, and downplay if not entirely omit any 'black eyes'.

This state of affairs demands that the historian consider these inscriptions with a keen eye for what they might be omitting, particularly military defeats or political setbacks. As is still the case in modern politics, 'weasel words', ellipsis, and statistics were acceptable ways of twisting an historical narrative to suit one's aims,[201] but there are no direct falsehoods, at least in this era—stripped of its ebullient language, everything in a royal inscription would 'hold up in court'. Very tellingly, there is only one Assyrian king whose inscriptions straight-facedly lie, and it is little coincidence that he also created the most inscriptions and spent the least time interacting with the real world of any Neo-Assyrian king: Aššur-bāni-apli. A small example suffices here:

> *ina* ḪÚL^meš *ri-šá-a-ti e-ru-ub ina* É *ri-du-ti áš-ru nak-lu mar-kás* LUGAL-*ú-ti ša* ^md30-PAP^meš-SU AD AD *a-lid-di-ia* DUMU LUGAL-*tú u* LUGAL-*tú e-pu-šú ina lìb-bi-šú a-šar* ^mAN.ŠÁR-PAP-AŠ AD *ba-nu-u-a qé-reb-šú ib-bi-šu-u ir-bu-u e-pu-šú be-lut* KUR-AN.ŠÁR^ki *gi-mir mal-ki ir-du-u kim-tu ú-rap-pi-šú ik-ṣu-ru ni-šu-tú sa-la-tu*

> In jubilation, I entered into the House of Succession, a refined place, the knot of kingship, (in) which Sîn-aḫḫē-erība, the father of the father my begetter, served as crown prince and king, and within which Aššur-aḫa-iddina, my father and begetter, was born and raised, and exercised rule over Assyria, and led all rulers, and expanded his family, and bonded with kith and kin.

As noted by Kertai (2013a, 21–22), none of this is true or makes any sense. Even if the 'house of succession' is understood metaphorically—which makes no sense, as it is made clear that the North Palace at Naynawā is meant—Sîn-aḫḫē-erība did not spend his crown-princeship and kingship in the same building, nor did Aššur-aḫa-iddina bond with his relatives (rather they sought to kill each other over the Assyrian throne), nor did he rule from the 'house of succession'—most bizarrely, this is history within Aššur-bāni-apli's own lifetime, some of which he himself experienced. That Aššur-bāni-apli was at all wedded to this palace—intended for the crown prince, and not for a king—and commissioned inscriptions describing in detail a royal education (something which should have been a given), displays a troubling inability to "put away childish things". The peculiarities and pretentions of Aššur-bāni-apli's reign are so pronounced, and his reign so obviously deplored by posterity (see Chs. 2.5.1. 4), that it seems his delusions had invaded even his own royal inscriptions.

2.2.6 Having the last word. Reconsidering the reception and transmission of Assyrian royal inscriptions

The wealth of royal inscriptions and their contents has given rise to a line of reasoning in which these are understood as propaganda which would have been read by or to a significant part of Assyrian society (Oppen-

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[200] It does seem clear that their focus changes over the course of a reign to justify particular issues preoccupying the king, e.g. the justification of Adad-nārārī II's usurpation in his late inscription RIMA 2, 0.99.2, responding to succession problems related to his own son (compare Aššur-aḫa-iddina's commissioning of his apology RINAP 4, 59 ca. 673, as Aššur-bāni-apli became crown prince; see Wang 2024, 192).

[201] In the curious and improbable figures sometimes appearing in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, see, for example, Millard 1991; Fouts 1994; Odorico 1995; Yamada 1998; Nadali 2021.

heim 1960; 1979). An extended refutation is unnecessary here, as it is increasingly recognised that access to these inscriptions would have been very limited (e.g. Bagg 2016; Siddall 2017), but two models ('diffusionist' and 'discursivist') for the appearance of the content of the Assyrian royal inscriptions outside of the inscriptions themselves warrant a review and qualification with more plausible routes of transmission than those presented.

The 'diffusionist' argument argues that the contents of the Assyrian royal inscriptions were consumed by a small but important literate elite, and propagated beyond this context through primarily oral channels which nonetheless retained the essence of their contents in meaningful enough a manner to warrant study within the framework of 'propaganda', a model described by Liverani (2014, 374–375) as a series of "concentric belts":

> Shifting from the innermost to outermost belt, the degree of detail decreases, while to [*sic!*] amount of people involved increases—so that in a theoretical product between the two factors, the amount of information remains the same.

It is perhaps simplest to begin at the end, the non-literate belts which Liverani articulates beyond the first, literate belt (the royal court). In the Assyrian cities constituting the second belt, the Assyrian king gives speeches and parades, and constructs monuments, while in the third belt essentially ignorant peasants learn of events by hearsay and believe the now simplified contents of the royal inscriptions unwaveringly.[202] The central problem with this argument is that it imagines a situation in which semantically highly complex 'propaganda' is 'emitted' from the royal inscriptions and reaches the 'Assyrian on the street' in a manner in which it has been reduced and simplified to its basest form but is still conceptually the same propagandistic content (otherwise it would be pointless to mine the Assyrian royal inscriptions for propaganda, after all). Aside from its disdain for peasants, this is an unrealistic assessment of how news travelled orally in the ancient world, particularly considering the centrality of the campaign and its staging to Assyrian society, and the very efficient Assyrian communication network (e.g. Radner 2014a; Earley-Spadoni 2022), which must frequently have 'leaked' despite the contents of the tablets transported being illegible to most of Assyria's inhabitants.[203] As will be concluded in Chapter 2.7, the Assyrian peasant (like the members of all agrarian populations throughout history) was actually quite sensitive to political changes, and hardly an uncritical believer.

In turn, the diffusionist model suggests that the Assyrian court consumed the content of royal inscriptions (e.g. Parpola 2007). Firstly, it must be noted that this presupposes the appropriate scribal competencies among elites; as argued elsewhere in this work (Ch. 2.6), this also downplays the very specialised usages of cuneiform writing within Neo-Assyrian society.[204] Moreover, it is difficult to understand why the Assyrian king needed to 'preach to the choir' by furnishing them with royal inscriptions as reading material—Liverani (2014, 374) writes here of the "self-indoctrination of the scribal elite", the "only ones able to understand the subtleness of the message and its implications".[205]

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202 Liverani's (2014, 375) writing here is typically subjunctive, leaving it unclear whether he believes that this was actually the case, or this is what the king 'imagined' as his audience. Fortunately, he addresses this elsewhere (2010, 229), in an argument already quoted in Ch. 1.3, concluding that the Assyrian peasant must be ascribed 'false consciousness'.

203 The most obvious example of this is the abrupt and embarrassing death of Šarru-ukīn, which was mocked in the Bible (Frahm 2017b, 561) and was clearly common knowledge immediately after it occurred. Logically a functioning Assyrian 'ideology' would portray this as a heroic noble death, and 'propagandistic' Assyrian royal inscriptions would wax lyrical about Šarru-ukīn's immortality now that he had achieved a bellicose apotheosis, and yet the silence is resounding.

204 Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions were a highly *specialised* textual category, and could only be competently engaged with by appropriately trained scribes. Indeed, their level of specialisation is still only at the tip of the iceberg in terms of understanding the decision-making and even cognitive processes behind the composition and physical creation of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. For example, there is a curious phenomenon of 'para-texts' surrounding the creation and carving of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, as demonstrated by a manner of linear cuneiform 'shorthand' attested in two texts found by Layard carved discretely onto stones, only one of which has ever been deciphered (Reade/Finkel 2002). This shorthand was evidently a quick way of writing out portions of royal inscriptions on non-clay media. While the sign-inventory of this shorthand must have been much simplified compared to cuneiform written with a stylus, it evidently sufficed to transport excerpts of text from one location to another without need for a tablet or writing board; the consequences of the existence of this 'shorthand' for the creation of royal inscriptions cannot be further explored here.

205 As a disciple of the *maîtres du soupçon*—as Ricœur (1965, 42) so memorably termed them—Liverani must constantly wrestle with his self-imposed problem of 'false consciousness'.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the consumption of royal inscriptions by an elite is presented by the contents of the library of the "Haus des Beschwörungspriesters" (House N4) at Qalʕa Širqāṭ, which contains the famous manuscript of Šarru-ukīn's 'Letter to the God Aššur' (RINAP 2, 65), which Dewar (2023, 329, fn. 22) has taken as evidence of such a practice. However, it might rather be suspected that this beautifully formed ceremonial tablet was simply obtained as a curio by the family who kept this library—by rights, this (perhaps unique) tablet should have been displayed in the Temple of Aššur.[206] Indeed, only one other 'royal inscription' is attested in the library, an amulet-shaped copy of an inscription of Aššur-uballiṭ I (RIMA 1, 0.73.1) which any scribe literate enough to consume an account of Šarru-ukīn's eighth campaign would have immediately understood as a blatant forgery; it must be concluded that RIMA 1, 0.73.1 either possessed some manner of apotropaic function lent by its *Henkeltafel*-format (see Heeßel 2014a; Schaudig 2020), or had been collected as yet another curiosity.[207] This is not to claim that royal literature was not present in the various private libraries of Aššur—indeed, quite the contrary—but this was an entirely different genre with a different purpose, and many of the hymnic compositions attested would have been preserved in a professional context by cult singers, as evident, for example, for House N3 at Qalʕa Širqāṭ (see Pedersén 1986, 34–41).

Hence, it is very difficult to accept the reception of royal inscriptions among a literary elite or the proliferation of their contents. This is hardly unsurprising considering the placement of the larger part of royal inscriptions in inaccessible locations such as building foundations, mountain cliff-sides, or sacred precincts of temples, and their own stated audience of the gods and future kings (e.g. Bagg 2016, 60–62). It is probably for this reason that a second strand of reasoning which might be termed 'discursivist' has emerged, which understands the royal inscriptions as part of a larger 'discourse', employing postmodernist literary theory to erode or circumvent the limits of transmission which the intended audience and find-contexts of the royal inscriptions necessarily impose.

During the late 1960's, there was a general disillusionment with traditional authorial theories within literary studies; these were seen as overemphasising the biographical aspect over broader societal contexts and the subjectivity innate to the interpretation of art. In iconoclastic fashion, two influential postmodern authors, Barthes (1968) and subsequently Foucault (1969), set out a loose paradigm diametrically opposed to that hitherto which sought to negate the influence of the author within literary criticism—the so-called "death of the author". In particular, the latter of these developed the notion of "author-function" (*fonction-auteur*), namely that the author is a function of discourse (i.e. that texts are an expression of discourse, which thus has epistemological priority). By turning the notion of authorship on its head, this model has the benefit of 'levelling the playing-field' for texts without clear authors, which may well explain its popularity within some quarters of Assyriology.[208] It also permits inaccessible texts to play a leading role in the reconstruction of 'ideology' and 'propaganda' despite having never been read by anyone beyond the scribes who composed them.

This model's central weakness is in its abandonment of authorial intent—if texts are products or expressions of a discourse (based for Foucault upon an epistemologically-rooted power dynamic), then this discourse must first be reconstructed and charted to a remarkable degree of exactitude in order for this stance to be valid, otherwise it is simply placing the cart before the horse.[209] For the Assyrian royal inscriptions, the dimensions, quality, and content of such an underlying discourse can only be reconstructed from these same

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206 Interestingly, the library contains one other tablet dating to the same period (Maul 2010, 206, fn. 58), an incantation tablet written by one Nabû-šallim in 713 (KAR 252), but this does not shed any real light on why RINAP 2, 65 written the year before was present in the archive, as these are of entirely different genres.

207 The only other 'historical text' found in the same context, a list of kings and their scholars (see Pedersén 1986, 57) bespeaks an interest in intellectual history, which is supported by a broader fascination with antiquated scholarly and ritual texts within this corpus, with student scribes even being required to copy texts in archaic ductus (Maul 2013c).

208 See, e.g. Gabriel's (2024) recent, generally approving discussion of this theory and its application to Mesopotamian literature.

209 As in the rest of his oeuvre, Foucault leaves the epistemological legwork and serious historical reconstruction required to justify so radical a stance to the reader. Consider in this regard Scruton's (2015, 101) remarks: "There are certainly many insights in Foucault's early writings. But the relativist method – which identifies reality with a way of apprehending it – must lead us to doubt that they are hard-won. For this method allows him to jump across to the finishing line of historical enquiry, without running the hard track of empirical enquiry."

inscriptions themselves—there are not enough pertinent texts of other genres to accomplish the legwork required for such a postmodern literary theory to work in this instance (if at all). Applying this methodology seriously to the Assyrian royal inscriptions necessarily plunges the practitioner into a sterile hermeneutic circle. This epistemological chasm has been bridged by some authors by mapping the same discourse onto an imagined Assyrian 'ideology' (e.g. Pongratz-Leisten 2015; Karlsson 2016), thus rendering the contents of the royal inscriptions synonymous *pars pro toto* with the reconstructed intellective framework of more or less an entire state. From this, in turn, judgements can be extrapolated (*totum pro parte*) for the 'ideological' import of any given text. The central problem with this methodology is that there is no reason to justify it, and that it merely 'kicks' the aforementioned epistemological 'can' a little farther 'down the street'; by enlarging the discursive sphere, the meaning of the resultant communication is correspondingly diminished. Put another way, it essentially eliminates the notion of transmission by presupposing the ubiquity of the content which would otherwise constitute the 'message'. Without meaningful author or recipient, the result is Liverani's "self-indoctrination" of the Assyrian elites expanded to an entire society, a solipsistic 'discourse' engaging solely with itself. Whether, for example, an Assyrian believed the content of the royal inscriptions is impossible to assess in such a model—its epistemology is entirely circular. It is impossible for the researcher to engage seriously with premises built on such unfalsifiable foundations. This is all the more unfortunate, as there are, in fact, some viable routes by which the contents of the royal inscriptions enjoyed further reception—even if the texts did not—which can here be briefly explored.

The first of these was in the royal land grants, schedules, and decrees, which often contained language and even content in the shape of *historiolae* very similar to that of royal inscriptions (Kataja/Whiting 1995 xiv–xvi). This seems to be born of the simultaneous presentation by the king of a *kudurru*-stele to high officials receiving high profile land grants, which demanded the use of an appropriate linguistic register for the text.[210] While royal decrees seem to have been occasionally collected on *Sammeltafeln* for historical interest or perhaps legal reasons (e.g. SAA 12, 76), it is unlikely that they would have been read by a wide audience. Their declarative aspect could reflect actual Assyrian proclamations—of which only a few in Babylonian Akkadian are known from the late Assyrian period—but this is speculation.

The second is in a hitherto overlooked 'missing link', namely visible Assyrian official inscriptions in Aramaic. Only a single example of this genre survives, namely an unfinished, partly incised commemorative plaque in Aramaic discovered at Tall ʾAwšarīya, Syria, which remains unpublished (see Fales 2007, 105–106).[211] That there were more such inscriptions (at least in the west) could be intimated by the curious appearance of 'Assyrianising' language in a few notable passages of the Bible.[212] This phenomenon was first noted by Machinist (1983), and since expanded upon (e.g. Aster 2007a; 2007b; 2017). While there are marked phraseological similarities evident between these passages and the Assyrian royal inscriptions which cannot be ascribed to happenstance, there is also no 'smoking gun' which demonstrates a direct transmission from cuneiform—rather, an alphabetic intermediary must be assumed. While most likely Aramaic official inscriptions served this role,[213] scrolls containing Aramaic proclamations—as suggested by an Assyrian relief depiction with an Assyrian soldier within a siege engine by the wall of a Mannean city reading aloud from a scroll (Tadmor 1991, 421–422)—can also hardly be excluded. Regardless, the contents of the Assyrian royal inscriptions would have been accessible in some instances in translation in a probably highly abridged manner.[214] The

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210 This can be inferred from the carving of a snake found on the side of the land grant stele RIMA 3, 0.107.1 (Dalley 1976, 110–111) which resembles one on the side of the stone land grant tablet RIMA 3, 0.104.9 (Grayson 1996, 246), both of which are immediately reminiscent of the imagery known from Babylonian *kudurru*-stele.

211 The bilingual and trilingual inscriptions of Ninurta-bēlu-uṣur at Ḫadattu (ʾArslān Ṭāš, Syria) do not count as these were concealed from view (Radner 2021b, 169) and hence had the same 'time-capsule'-logic as a conventional royal inscription.

212 Fortunately, the issue of the possible transmission of an Assyrian vassal treaty into the Book of Deuteronomy—perhaps the most exhausting issue in ancient Near Eastern studies—need not be considered here.

213 While the reading of inscriptions of alphabetic inscriptions by Syro-Anatolian rulers brings with it its own challenges and necessary contextual knowledge (then as well as now), these inscriptions were not only more accessible through their use of an alphabet, but also in terms of their placement.

214 The 5th-century Aramaic translation of Darius I's Bīsotūn-proclamation found at Elephantinē (modern Ǧazīrat al-Fantīn), Egypt, could lend credence to this notion, but it is important to note that this later Achaemenid inscription was explicitly envis-

issue then becomes the degree to which these new texts at all reflect the cuneiform originals (*Vorlagen*) on which they would have been based, and what their purposes at all were.[215]

The last of these is in the aforementioned sphere of literature; royal hymns frequently employ language and phrases otherwise known from the Assyrian royal inscriptions, and would seem to have been composed by reworking annalistic material into poetry. Unlike royal inscriptions, these were clearly intended to be spread by oral channels; as rightly noted by Tadmor (1997, 327), the hymnic composition dubbed the 'Hunter and the Asses' concludes *lišme maḫ(i)rû ana arkî lušanni* "may the first hear, and relate it to the last" (LKA 62 r. 9). Nonetheless, the surviving 'royal lays' are invariably very short compositions, and the information about a campaign which they conveyed was brief—they cannot be considered textual intermediaries for any substantial annalistic content. Nonetheless, it is very likely that this process is behind the appearance of some very specific tropes found within the Assyrian royal inscriptions within Classical historiography, such as Darius escaping Gaugamēla on a mare in Plutarch's *Vita Alexandri* (Melville 2019a).[216]

What these examples demonstrate is that there is a great deal of exciting work on the cultural dynamics of the Assyrian period to be done, but that the approach must be fundamentally altered to obtain meaningful results. The focus must first be on the establishment of plausible (if not durable) lines of transmission between different textual genres and languages, and the reconstruction of the contexts in which this occurred, so as to better understand both authorial intentionality and the nature of the recipient (intended or unintended). This process does not exclude the reconstruction of an Assyrian 'ideology'—as averse as the present author himself is to this clunky heuristic—but it demands one which is far more rigorous with its sources, and builds its theories 'from the ground up', demonstrating very solidly the situations in which Assyrian texts influence one another or where textual intermediaries must have existed. This would require much more patient work and far less fashionable theory, but the results would be of enduring utility. These points will be expanded upon in the present work's conclusion.

What such an analysis would probably demonstrate is that royal inscriptions must be removed from their privileged position as sources as more evidence comes to light, and that for 'ideological' research they are a dead-end—but therein lies the very point. These texts were never supposed to interact with other texts, or engage in a 'discourse', but rather to bear an account of a king—and with that a part of himself—into the future within the context of a commemorative act.[217] They were meant for him to have 'the last word'.

It is a happy if strange circumstance that these texts chose to record with such meticulousness the events of campaigns and the vast wealth of toponyms with which the territorial expansion of the Assyrian state can be closely charted, even if less can be garnered as to the state of the conquered territory thereafter. It is this which will now be considered.

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aged as a proclamation, and hence belongs to a genre from distinct from that of the Assyrian royal inscriptions with a different audience (and of course also to a different culture). In turn, the Elephantinē papyrus collected various additions such as a translation of Darius I's epitaph from Naqš-e Rostam, Iran, and various other 'memoranda', and may well have been recopied time and again in Egypt as part of the scribal curriculum (Mitchell 2017), rather than for any commemorative or documentary purpose.

215 The complications which these Aramaic-texts present to models of 'discourse' and 'ideology' in Assyria would necessarily need to be resolved before such a methodology could be assailed once more.

216 The composition of a 'royal lay' or other victory hymn in which an Urarṭian king memorably and amusingly escapes on a mare may well have made its way into Aramaic literature (akin to the cuneiform composition which must underlie the Aramaic story of *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī*, see Ch. 2.5.4), or into oral folklore, fable, or nursery rhyme (like the 'Grand Old Duke of York').

217 That this simple and widespread explanation for the creation of Assyrian royal inscriptions among previous generations of Assyriologists (e.g. Saggs 1984, 55) was at all junked is the result of various authorial theories external to Assyriology having been applied to the Assyrian royal inscriptions (see Galter 2022, 87–99 for a *Forschungsgeschichte*), which the present author has argued to have been intellectually unproductive. There is presently a gradual return to more traditional assessments, albeit in modern garb; for example, Fink (2022, 118–119) has recently argued for the Assyrian royal inscriptions functioning "as the conclusion of a celebration of the great deeds of the king" as if this is a novel stance.

2.3 Drawing a line. Assyria's expansion re-articulated

2.3.1 Networks, oil-stains, and everything in-between

One of the most central tasks in the writing of a history of the early Neo-Assyrian state is the tracing of its territorial expansion. As accounts of campaigning, the aforementioned royal inscriptions naturally contain a wealth of toponyms which can be used to chart very precisely the movements of the Assyrian army on campaign, often down to the precise progress of the force on a particular day, and must serve as the central source.[218]

Such a reconstruction begins with the establishment of a solid historical geographical basis, i.e. the localisation of the regions and settlements mentioned in these accounts. The creation of a comprehensive historical geography of Assyria and its conquests has been an important project since the inception of Assyriology as a discipline, and, after more than a century and a half, it might be said that much has been accomplished (see Röllig 1995). This has been aided by the unparalleled toponymic coverage of the period, which even survives in multiple languages, and the ever-improving archaeological coverage of the regions which Assyria would come to control. Nonetheless, a number of uncertainties remain, and false assumptions occasionally continue to exist within academic literature;[219] often, a single new attestation or the identification of a new fix-point can bring an entire reconstruction down like a house of cards, and demand appraisal of an entire region anew. This can sometimes have direct consequences for the extent of Assyrian territory.[220]

There is naturally the danger in such an historical-geographical reconstruction of imposing an overly rational or modern conceptualisation on the sources, and of envisaging a homogenous Assyrian state on a map with its opponents arrayed about it, and then to reconstruct from this a grand strategy from a modern cartographic perspective.[221] While maps could plausibly have long been used on perishable material, the present evidence tends towards a generally restricted use of maps during the Neo-Assyrian period (Düring 2017); certainly, small details in the annals such as some settlements being 'behind' mountains (e.g. RIMA 2, 0.98.1: 23) point to a much more three-dimensional imagination of space, as if stood on top of a mountain or ziggurat looking out on a landscape, which was—at least given the present state of knowledge—the closest to a bird's eye view that a Mesopotamian could obtain.[222] As further discussed below in Chapter 2.5.1, the Assyrian king was more mobile than has often been imagined, as were his magnates. Through their duties, and particularly the long marches through the landscapes of the Near East on campaigns, the king and his advisors developed elaborate spatial memories of the Assyrian realm and that of its neighbours through long years of service (as any traveller does today). It is more on the basis of this spatial reasoning than anything else that they would have strategically acted. This reconstruction is somewhat at odds with the popular topic

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218 As of yet, there are no surviving early Neo-Assyrian chronicles akin to those known for the Middle Assyrian period—the latest known dates to the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli I (KAL 3, 61). Noteworthy, however, is the Synchronistic Chronicle (ABC 21), an historical-justificatory text in the garb of a chronicle, and the aforementioned Eponym Chronicle.

219 As noted by Bagg (2006, 184): "when a proposal, even a cautiously formulated one, is quoted by many generations of scholars, in some cases from a second or third hand, at some point it becomes an undisputed identification. Furthermore, this procedure particularly affects historical maps, where doubts about an identification are not always adequately indicated. It seems to me that it was easier for the Assyrians to make a city vanish from the face of the earth than it is for modern scholars to delete a widespread incorrect or highly doubtfully identification from a map."

220 One well-known example is the identification of a second Idu at Sātū Qalˁa, Iraq, which meant that a Middle Assyrian province of the same name no longer needed to be placed (quite unrealistically) on the Middle Euphrates at Hīt, Iraq (van Soldt 2008).

221 For example, Bernbeck (2010, 150) has remarked that "if the Assyrian king reached a specific geographic place and set up a monument, scholars imagine not only that the surrounding region became part of the imperial periphery, but that regions between this point and the core were included in the empire."

222 Rollinger (2016a, 139, fn. 51) has noted that the late version of the 'Etana epic' found at Naynawā contains a sequence wherein the eponymous figure looks down at the sea from an eagle's back and sees that it has become a cattle pen, and thereafter a mere trough, which Rollinger argues implies Assyrian cognisance of the enclosed nature of the Mediterranean. Were this to be true, then it would have considerable repercussions for the history of cartography, implying that the Phoenicians had mapped this region, and parchment maps of their findings were available in the late Neo-Assyrian court.

of an Assyrian 'mental map' in which barbarians lurk at the fringes of the mythically connoted world which it is the Assyrian king's task to conquer. This is because such a model—if valid and not simply a construct fashioned from various literary tropes—would be of little use in strategic decision-making or the running of an empire.[223]

Returning to the matter at hand, the reconstruction of a durable historical-geographical framework which might be harmonised with the ancient landscape and archaeological record permits the next step, namely the establishment of a chronological framework by means of which expansions can be tracked within the textual and archaeological sources. The Assyrian royal annals contain very standardised expressions changing little over the centuries such as the verb *kašādu* for a temporary capture of a toponym, *b/pêlu* for the imposition of informal dominance over a region, or *ana mișir māt-Aššur manû/turru* for the annexation of a region through the extension of the border. As a result, territorial expansion can be tracked without great difficulty. Interestingly, though, the actual provincialisation of a region was a process separate to the extension of a border, as will be seen. Hence, the present author separates these two processes into 'expansion-history' (so-called *histoire bataille*) and 'province-biography' (what might be described as *Provinzportrait*, see Ch. 2.4.1).

In reconstructing the expansion of Assyria, it is necessary to discuss the territorial models which have been suggested for this. In an influential article, Liverani (1988, 84) criticised the traditional—or, in his own words, "old"—model of the Neo-Assyrian expansion, which he likened to the spreading of an "oil-stain", noting:

> The old paradigm for the making of the Assyrian empire is a paradigm based on the concept of territorial empire, i.e. on the control (or lack of it) by Assyria of outlying lands that are conquered, in time lost and reconquered, one after another, in progression from the nearer to the most distant in relation to the central country. Access to distant regions is subordinate to control of intermediary zones; a sharp distinction is made between zones under Assyrian control and zones that are hostile; there is a correspondence between the political/military situation and the statements contained in royal inscriptions. A region is considered to have been conquered by the king who claims to have made a victorious expedition; then it is considered lost under his successors whose inscriptions are lacking; then it is reconquered from scratch by a succeeding king who claims to have made a further victorious expedition.
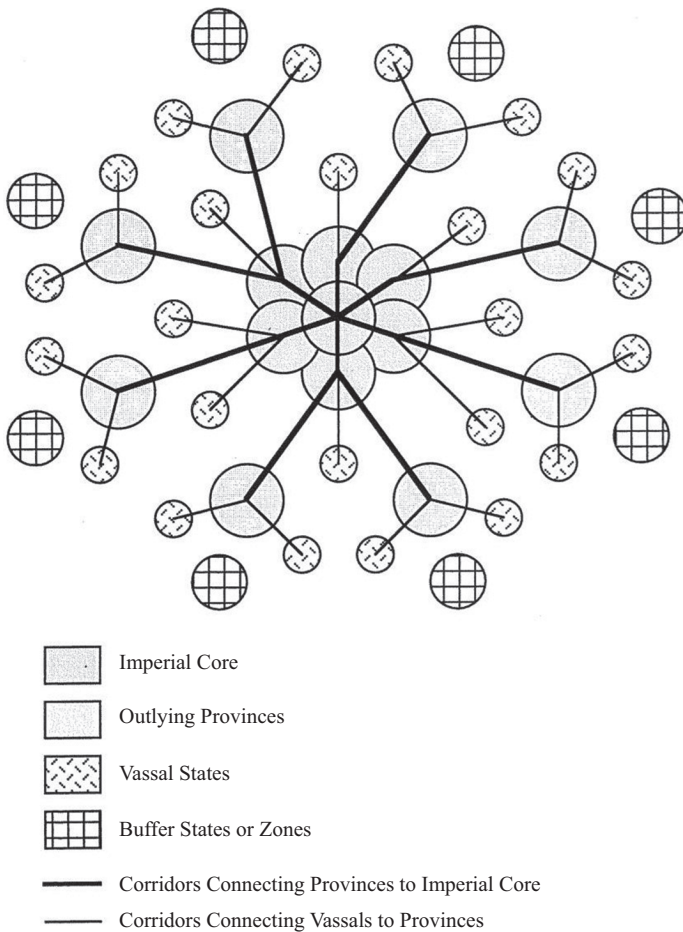
While pointed in its formulation, Liverani did identify a number of implicit assumptions made by Assyrianists in conceptualising the expansion which previously had gone unaddressed. Perhaps most important is that territorial contiguity is frequently assumed where evidence is lacking. To combat these shortcomings, Liverani (1988, 86), then submitted his own, novel paradigm envisaging the Assyrian *reconquista* rather as a network:

> Assyrian control is extended and becomes consolidated differently than the "oil-stain" metaphor suggests; by a thickening of pre-existing networks or by setting up other networks even at great distance. In this phase the Assyrian empire exists to the extent that the Assyrians are capable of shifting between one Assyrian center and another, and of transporting material goods from non-Assyrian centers. The empire is not a spread of land but a network of communications over which material goods are carried.

That this paradigm has proven influential among Near Eastern archaeologists is unsurprising—the network metaphor lends itself to envisaging the interconnections between sites evident in a 'tell-centric' conception of the landscape; in turn, the conception of power within networks has been a popular approach in the past decades (e.g. Schortman/Urban 2012; Schortman 2014). Within the study of Neo-Assyria, this metaphor was adopted by Lamprichs (1995b), who envisaged the expansion as occurring by means of initially isolated 'bridgeheads' (*Brückenköpfe*) developing into networks, and further expanded upon by Parker (2001), who
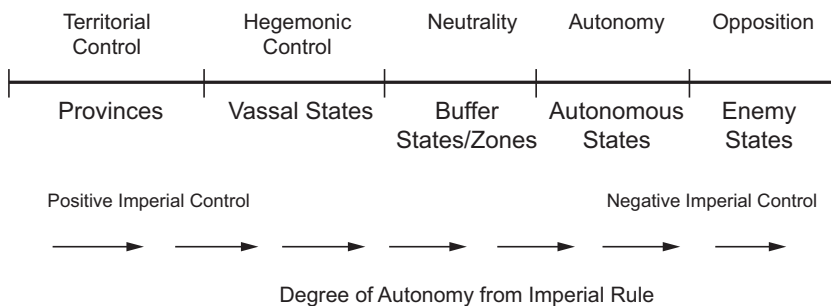
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223 The reduction of the varied and fascinating geographical materials extant in the Mesopotamian textual record to a conceptualisation of 'world domination' spanning multiple empires (e.g. Rollinger 2016a), or a 'global *imaginaire*' (Ziemann 2023) imposes a metropolitan (or even palatial), primarily textual Mesopotamian geographical conception onto a far more diverse world composed of a great variety of interwoven societies and cultures with very different relationships to their own landscape and edges than these 'conceptual worlds'—there are regrettably too many exceptions in such an approach to prove any useful point. This does not detract from the usefulness of such studies in exploring conceptions of space within narrower, more sober frameworks (e.g. Liverani 1999–2001; Rollinger 2020).

imagined the empire as dendritic and discontinuous, with lines of communication connecting core regions to outlying provinces in a visual model reminiscent of the work of Christaller (Fig. 2).

Imperial Core

Outlying Provinces

Vassal States

Buffer States or Zones

Corridors Connecting Provinces to Imperial Core

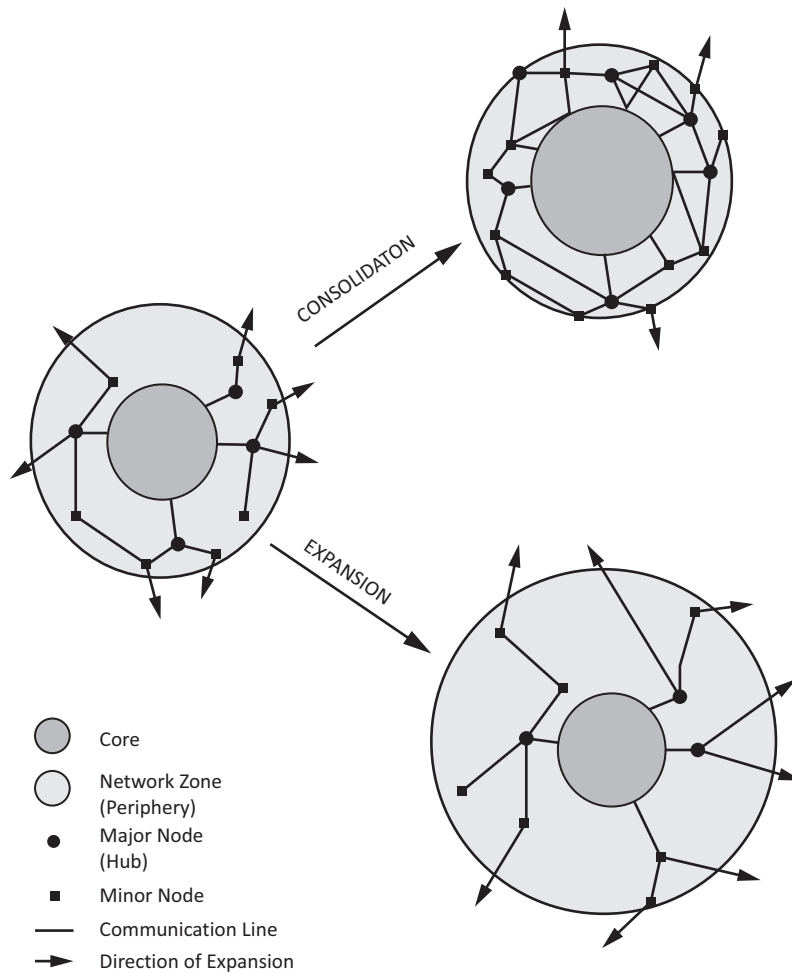Corridors Connecting Vassals to Provinces

Figure 2: Parker's network model (Parker 2001, 257, fig. 6.2).

Accompanying this was a supplementary model which depicted control upon a spectrum, termed by Parker (2001, 254; 2015, 284) the 'territorial-hegemonic continuum' (Fig. 3).

Territorial Control	Hegemonic Control	Neutrality	Autonomy	Opposition
Provinces	Vassal States	Buffer States/Zones	Autonomous States	Enemy States

Positive Imperial Control   Negative Imperial Control

Degree of Autonomy from Imperial Rule

Figure 3: Parker's territorial-hegemonic continuum (Parker 2015, fig. 16.1).

This model was even further elaborated upon by Bernbeck (2010) who presented an even more 'nodal' model in which multiple imperial cores could exist (Fig. 4).

Core

Network Zone
(Periphery)

Major Node
(Hub)

Minor Node

Communication Line

Direction of Expansion

Figure 4: Bernbeck's nodal model (Bernbeck 2010, 159, fig. 7).

These various 'network empire' models of Assyria remain influential (e.g. Düring 2020a, 147–150), but were already notably criticised by Postgate (1992a, 256) who remarked that the 'traditional' and 'network' models were hardly mutually exclusive, and made the following observation:

> The image of a network should not be taken to imply a diminution of control in these areas, however: in an agricultural environment land is carefully monitored. Each farmer knows his fields, each village knows its boundaries, and the administration's rural network works through the village mayors

This notwithstanding, as is often the case with such theories, the originator is the ultimate refuter.[224] While Liverani's network paradigm describes early Neo-Assyrian expansion as a "thickening of pre-existing networks" (1988, 86), Liverani (2004, 217) describes the (frequently unsuccessful) imposition of tributary obligations upon polities west of the Euphrates by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II and Salmānu-ašarēd III as a doubling of Assyria's "area of control" so that

> the extent of the areas controlled by the two great kings of the 9th century is impressive indeed. In the course of a single reign, the area under Assyrian control became twice the size of the previous and traditional one.

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224 It should be noted in passing that the network model has been rejected for the Middle Assyrian expansion westwards; see the *Forschungsgeschichte* presented by Reculeau 2016. Düring (2020a, 147–150) is something of an exception for vaguely endorsing this model for the Middle Assyrian period.

The network has become an ink-blot. By such logic, the Assyrian 'network' never properly existed—much of the Upper and all of the Lower Ḫābūr and Middle Euphrates stood in a tributary relationship to Assyria by roughly 905 at the very latest (see Chs. 3.4.1; 4.4.3). Liverani argues for a minimalist interpretation of Assyria's control in 1988, and a maximalist interpretation in 2004—implying that he had abandoned his original 'network'-premise; instead, he writes of Assyria campaigning within and then without its traditional border (2004, 215).

Yet, Liverani's shift towards a maximalist concept of control in his later article brings with it its own problems. For Liverani, this is an expansion—indeed, he (2011a, 674; 2011c, 481) characterises the period between 858 and 745 as the "first expansion and its crisis" (more pointedly in Italian: "la prima espansione e le crisi di crescita"), which seems something of a misnomer (see Ch. 4.6.5) considering that territorial expansion halted in 856 with the taking of Masuwari/Til-Barsip, and Assyria sought only with mixed success to extract tribute from the west until Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*.[225] Salmānu-ašarēd III fought coalition after coalition, and his successor Šamšī-Adad V entirely neglected the west.[226] Adad-nārārī III undertook a series of campaigns to the region early in his reign and thereafter Šamšī-ilu continued these interventions, but it would be difficult to describe even the zenith of Salmānu-ašarēd III's achievements in the west as "expansion"—Assyrian power in the region fluctuated far too wildly. Nonetheless, this interpretation of vassalage as territorial expansion has some followers; for example, Parpola (2003, 99) describes the late Neo-Assyrian Empire as including Lydia and Elam. Most recently, the map accompanying Düring's (2020a) chapter on the "Assyrian threshold" has Assyria's "territorial expansion" in 830 stretching from the coast as far west as modern Adana, Turkey, to Baġdād, Iraq.

It seems clear from this that neither the minimalist nor the maximalist interpretation of control seems to be suitable for charting Assyria's expansion meaningfully. If control is reduced to a network by means of a minimalist view, then a remarkably anaemic state emerges which bears little resemblance to the provincialised state; it is for this reason that Liverani restricted this model to the *reconquista* and then ultimately abandoned it. If the divide between territorial possession and vassal is eliminated as the maximalist reading would propose, then two very different manners of control are combined, producing an inflated state which fluctuates too frequently and violently to be of use to researchers.

Part of the problem is that there has been scarce little systematic philological study of the expressions used to describe the early Neo-Assyrian expansion (see most usefully Yamada 2000, 300–308). The Assyrianist is generally intuitive when working with the language of the royal inscriptions in a manner which must be confusing to the uninitiated—for example, the verb *kašādu* is invariably translated with 'conquer', although the Assyrian historian does not ascribe any territorial expansion to this act as this word would imply in English. In fact, as might be demonstrated, the early Neo-Assyrian texts contain a detailed *instrumentarium* of terms describing conquest, expansion, and incorporation which do present a coherent internal logic, but do not map directly onto the modern Western notions of annexation and expansion, or indeed of network. These will be explored in the following sections, and an appropriate apparatus for historical investigation outlined.

2.3.2 Hard, moveable borders and tributary hinterlands

An important notion in early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions is that of the border, *miṣru*;[227] time and again, the precise location of borders is carefully presented in both royal inscriptions and other historiographical

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225 It is possible that Liverani's argument is based upon the very strange claim of territorial expansion as far as the Mediterranean in RIMA 2, 0.101.67 which must represent either an error in the composition of the *Vorlage*, or failed pretentions to expansion on the part of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II; see Chs. 3.4.3; 4.6.5. Liverani's incoherent division between the activities of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II and Salmānu-ašarēd III has already been thoroughly critiqued by Sano (2017).

226 As will be argued in Ch. 3.5.2, it is possible that Aššur-daʾʾin-apla would have annexed territory west of the Euphrates if he had won the succession war of 826–820.

227 The possibly West Semitic word *taḫūmu* 'border, boundary' (Fales 1990, 136) is used in other textual genres, but not in royal inscriptions; it is already attested in the Middle Assyrian period in respect to property (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2000, 6).

texts. One of the most remarkable examples is the Synchronistic Chronicle (ABC 21) which outlines chronologically the shifts back and forth in the border between Assyria and Babylonia over centuries. This importance of borders ties into fundamental Mesopotamian concepts of the boundedness of civilised space and the importance of ritual demarcation; these range from the small scale such as the magic circle created by the exorcist (see, e.g. Ambos 2016) all the way to the borders of countries, as an Assyrian war ritual wherein an impure figurine is deposited at the border of an enemy's land demonstrates (Schwemer 2007). The Assyrian king was ritually and cosmically the protector of the Assyrian kingdom (Maul 1999), which hence lent the maintenance of borders a deeper significance.[228]

Tied to this notion of borders was the significance of transgression, which is also found time and again in letters and treaties, and seems to have been commonly accepted by Assyria and its foes alike, as the following quotation from an inscription of Aššur-aḫa-iddina demonstrates (RINAP 4, 1 v 26–33):

> ^{kur}*e-la-mu-ú* ^{kur}*qu-tu-u ma-al-ki šip-ṣu-u-ti ša a-na* LUGAL^{meš} AD^{meš}*-ia e-tap-pa-lu ze-ra-a-ti da-na-an* ^{d}*aš-šur* EN*-ia šá ina kul-lat na-ki-ri e-tep-pu-šú iš-mu-u-ma ḫat-tum u pu-luḫ-tum* UGU*-šú-nu it-ta-bik-ma áš-šú a-na mi-ṣir* KUR^{meš}*-šú-nu la ḫa-ṭe-e* ^{lú}KIN.GI$_4$. A^{meš}*-šú-nu šá ṭu-bi u su-lum-me-e a-na* NINA^{ki} *a-di maḫ-ri-ia iš-pu-ru-nim-ma* MU DINGIR^{meš} GAL^{meš} *iz-ku-ru*

> The Elamites and Gutians—obstinate rulers, who erst answered the kings, my ancestors, with hostility—heard tell of the might wreaked by my lord Aššur among all (mine) enemies, and fear and terror poured over them. That there might not be trespassing on the borders of their lands, they dispatched their messengers (with tidings) of amity and peace to Ninūa, before me, and swore an oath by the great gods.

This demonstrates that 'hard' borders—even in rough terrain—were mutually recognised. Indeed, although Assyria is envisaged as possessing 'frontier zones' (e.g. Parker 2002; Morello 2015), this term is something of a misnomer; a 'frontier' in English implies a last bastion of some civilisation before the beginning of more or less 'wild', thinly populated and frequently inhospitable regions, such as the 'Wild West' for the United States of America or Siberia for the Russian Empire. No such situation is perceptible for Assyria's borders—both in the Zagros and Upper Tigris, Assyrian correspondence demonstrates that borders between Assyria, the semi- or entirely independent mountain polities, and Urarṭu were keenly understood; from complaints about smugglers (SAA 5, 100) to expeditions into Šubrian and Urarṭian territory for logs (e.g. SAA 5, 33–34), the territorial status of these regions is evident to the authors of these letters. Considering the encompassed nature of land within mountainscapes and the scarcity of passes, this is hardly surprising. At best, one might use the term 'borderland' to describe the edge of Assyrian control in an area, but the end of Assyrian control would have been known even in such a circumstance. Something akin to Parker's 'territorial-hegemonic continuum' seems unlikely in practice.

The extension of these borders is an important topic in Assyrian inscriptions. As has already been discussed in Chapter 2.1.1, the verb *kašādu*—conventionally translated as 'to conquer'—does not entail any change in territorial ownership in and of itself, and is not connected to territorial expansion. This is demonstrated most clearly in the summary of Tukultī-Ninurta II's conquests (RIMA 2, 0.100.6; Qaḍīya 1–3), wherein the 'conquests' (*qāssu ikšud*) include the twin cities of Sippar in Babylonia and a "land of Aramu". In reality, he simply passed by these toponyms on the way to Sūḫu on his campaign of 885 (Edmonds 2023b, 248–249).

Rather, expansion is primarily described with variations on the expression *miṣrī ruppušu* 'to broaden, extend the borders', and incorporation was usually concretely expressed within inscriptions with *ana miṣir Māt-Aššur manû/turru* "to incorporate into the borders of Assyria" (CAD T, 277). While moveable (preferably outwards), it is false to imagine these borders as having been 'ever-expanding' in the Assyrian mindset—this frequently voiced notion of perpetually expanding borders popular in 'ideological' studies (Liverani 1990, 79) is a misnomer (see below, Ch. 2.3.5). Indeed, considering the bounded nature of actual expansions, a common trope employed in the Assyrian royal inscriptions is to emphasise rather the very vague 'fear' or 'renown' which an Assyrian king projected beyond these borders (e.g. RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 128–131; 101.1 iii 23–25).

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228 Also notable in the Assyrian textual record are the various surviving rituals to prevent an enemy from approaching or crossing the border; see the references collected by Meinhold (2017, 26).

As 'hard' as such borders could be, this did not mean that the territory behind such borders needed to be formally annexed or provincialised; domination (*b/pêlu*) sufficed.[229] This can be seen most clearly in the description of the conquest of Ḫanigalbat; here, in the narrative of the final, seventh campaign, the following is stated (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 99–101):

> *ana* ᵏᵘʳ*ḫa-ni-gal-bat lu a-lik ma-da-tu šá* ᵏᵘʳ*ḫa-ni-gal-bat* ⌈*e*⌉-*liš* ⌈*ù šap*⌉-*liš lu am-ḫur* ᵏᵘʳ*ḫa-ni-gal-bat* DAGAL-*tu a-na paṭ gim-ri-šá lu a-pél a-na mi-ṣir* KUR-*ia* ⌈*lu-te-er*⌉ 1-*en pa-a ú-še-eš₁₅-*⌈*ki*⌉-*šu-nu-ti*

> Verily I went to (the land of) Ḫanigalbat. I received the tribute of Ḫanigalbat above and below. Thus I lorded over Ḫanigalbat to all of its extent. I returned it to the border of my land. I caused one voice to be imposed over them.

Here, a shifting of Assyria's borders to encompass Ḫanigalbat occurs despite the fact that Naṣībīna, the most important state in this region, was only a vassal (noted also by Shibata 2023a, 207). The prerequisite for this seems to be that the Assyrian king had overlordship over the region (described with the aforementioned verb *b/pêlu*). The actual provincialisation of Ḫanigalbat would take another generation to complete (see Ch. 4.1.5), and kings of Ḫanigalbat are attested as late as the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II. The same phraseology is attested as early as the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I (RIMA 2, 0.87.1 i 46–61):

> ᵈ*a-šur* DINGIRᵐᵉˢ GALᵐᵉˢ . . . *mi-ṣir* KUR-*ti-šu-nu ru-up-pu-ša iq-bu-ni* . . . KUR.KURᵐᵉˢ KURᵐᵉˢ *ma-ḫa-zi ù mal-ki*ᵐᵉˢ KÚRᵐᵉˢ-*ut* ᵈ*a-šur a-pél-ma mi-iṣ-ri-te-šu-nu ú-ke-ni-iš* . . . UGU KUR ᵈ*a-šur ma-a-ta* UGU UNᵐᵉˢ-*ša* UNᵐᵉˢ *lu-rad-di mi-ṣir* KUR-*ti-ia ú-re-piš-ma gi-mir* KUR.KUR-*šu-nu a-pél*

> Aššur and the great gods . . . commanded me to extend the border of their land. . . . I dominated the lands, mountains, shrines, and rulers to Aššur and I compelled their marches to submit. . . . To the land of Aššur I added land, to its people people.[230] I lorded over the entirety of their lands.

Indeed, as is demonstrated by the Great Bend of the Euphrates during this king's era (see Ch. 4.7.2), Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I had set a 'hard' border here, even though its hinterland was only dubiously controlled at best. Yet another example of this can be seen in the conquests of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II. While this king extended Assyria's borders to encompass the land of Zamūa (roughly the modern Governorate of as-Sulaymānīya, Iraq), and an Assyrian governor was installed at the provincial centre of Arrakdi/Tukulti-Aššur-aṣbat (see Chs. 4.2.4–6), one of his inscriptions (RIMA 2, 0.101.53: 6) concedes that the actual control of this region was that of tributary states:

> *ina* KUR.KURᵐᵉˢ *ù ḫur-šá-ni šá a-pe-lu-šu-nu-ni* ˡᵘGARᵐᵉˢ-*a al-ták-ka-an ma-da-ta-šú-nu am-ḫur* ˡᵘARAD-*tú up-*⌈*pu*⌉-*šú*

> In the lands and mountains over which I lorded, I constantly installed my governors. I received their tribute. They did servitude.

To describe this situation as a 'network state' would be a misnomer—the 'oil-stain' has spread, but rule is local, albeit with rulers chosen by the Assyrian king, a situation termed a 'transitional case' (see Ch. 2.4.2).

From these examples, it can be seen that the setting of the border was an important royal activity. Only the Assyrian monarch seems to have been able to extend the Assyrian borders, as no such act is mentioned in the inscriptions of any governors, nor can it presently be evidenced.[231] This must have been a politically and cultically charged act, although no sources survive to describe the rituals associated with the extension of the border.[232]

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229 As will be seen in the following sections *b/pêlu* serves as a catch-all verb to describe lordship over an area whether inside or outside of Assyria.

230 Note the mention here of 'land added to land', which is an agrarian idiom relating to the expansion of inhabitable land, rather than a metaphor for expansion through conquest (see below Ch. 2.3.5).

231 Something of an exception is presented by Pālil-ēreš' occupation of Anat, but Sūḫu was already a 'transitional case' (see Chs. 2.4.2; 4.4.4–5) so this leaves it unclear whether this would have been perceived as an expansion from an Assyrian perspective, rather than one governor's appropriation of territory from another.

232 The ritual act of depositing a 'weapon of Aššur' (*kakku ša Aššur*) in a local temple following annexation is attested for the late Neo-Assyrian period (see Ch. 2.4.1), but no correlate is described in the early Neo-Assyrian annals.

There is a persistent misconception that rock reliefs and inscriptions functioned as imperial border markers or a means of 'Assyrianising' a periphery into imperial space (e.g. Shafer 2007; Menis 2020). While there is a good argument in the present author's mind for some Urarṭian examples fulfilling a role in demarcation, and probably also the Bronze-age rock reliefs of the Lullubian kings (see Ch. 4.2.3), this does not apply to Assyrian rock reliefs and inscriptions, which obey a very different logic. Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs and inscriptions were created in a variety of settings and locations within and without Assyria with little discernible relationship to Assyria's actual borders.[233] With the exception of those created as part of hydraulic programmes, they were generally placed either in relatively inaccessible sites off the beaten track (Kreppner 2002), or at sites with a pre-existing cultic significance, or already possessing a rock reliefs and inscriptions (Harmanşah 2007a). As is already made clear by Assyrian royal inscriptions, rock reliefs were created within the aterritorial conceptual world of the campaign, often marking particular moments on a campaign or the march home, and would have been associated with ritual and even feasting. Insofar, Assyrian rock reliefs and inscriptions did not punctuate *space* but rather *time*.[234]

This 'gap' between extension of borders and provincialisation generally closed during the late Neo-Assyrian era; the 'genius' of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* was to undertake an immediate provincialisation of any newly annexed territory (see Ch. 3.6), engendering 'expansion' in the modern sense, as demonstrated by the following exemplary passage (RINAP 1, TP 39: 25–29)

> ᵏᵘʳ*ul-lu-ba a-na gi-mir-ti-šu . . . ana mi-ṣir* KUR-*aš-šur ú-ter-ra ina qé-reb* ᵏᵘʳ*ul-lu-ba* URU DÙ-*uš aš-šur*-BA-*šá* MU-*šú ab-bi* ˡᵘ*šu-ut* SAGᵐᵉˢ-*ia* ˡᵘEN.NAM *ina muḫ-ḫi áš-kun*
>
> I (re)turned (the land of) Ulluba in its entirety . . . to the border of Assyria. I created a city in the midst of (the land of) Ulluba. I named it Aššur-iqīša and I installed a eunuch of mine as governor over them.

It is possible that this kind of prompt integration been an aim of earlier rulers, but that administrative and material shortcomings demanded a more gradual process of provincialisation. Nonetheless, the wide territorial sweep of late Neo-Assyrian expansions sometimes provoked exactly the same dynamic as before, in which the Assyrian administration was compelled to play 'catch up', for example in Babylonia, where various solutions to the problem of integration were attempted (see Ch. 4.5.5).

Hence, it is clear that the border was an important part of the emic notion of Assyrian expansion (which demands the modification at the very least of existing network models), and that the border expanded independently from the subsequent process of provincialisation during the early Neo-Assyrian period, although these were combined into a single 'package' by the late Neo-Assyrian period. That border and provincialisation have gone hand-in-hand in studies of Assyrian expansion hitherto is a transposition of the late Neo-Assyrian system of 'integrated' expansion innovated by Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* onto the early Neo-Assyrian period. So effective was this new process in sweeping through and provincialising the Levant that the Book of Isaiah (10:13) has the Assyrian king state *wĕʾāsîr gĕḇûlōṯ ʿammîm* "and I have removed the bounds of the people" (see Machinist 1983, 725), as if engendering a borderless world within a single, constantly expanding Assyrian *oikoumēnē*, an idea so striking that it continues to haunt the discipline of Assyrian history today (see Ch. 1.3 and below 2.3.5); it hardly helps that the goddess Ištar sought in a prophecy to convince the Assyrian king Aššur-aḫa-iddina himself of this unrealistic notion (SAA 9, 2: 15′–16′):

> *taḫūmāni ša mātāti ugammar addanakka*
>
> I will abolish the borders of all lands and render them unto thee!

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233 The earliest example of this conflation of commemoration and conquered space known to the present author is by Badalì et al. (1982, 40) who state: "The places where the images of the kings are erected are primarily those places which have witnessed the end of the campaign (as has already been seen), and therefore they mark the most distant point reached by the Assyrian king and, implicitly, the area which he conquered."

234 The Assyrian rock reliefs which most demonstrably were not deposited on borders are Milla Mīrkī (see Ch. 4.2.6 and Fig. 10) and Elin (see Ch. 4.3.3 and Figs. 7 and 11).

This must be the earliest known reference to the sublimation of the world into a single political system and the creation of a borderless world—now as then, the final imperial pretention. The expansive drive to become a 'world emperor' with which Assyria is so often identified was a product of its terminal stages; for the early Assyrian king, a strong border and ample tribute evidently sufficed.

2.3.3 "Aššur's yoke". Vassal territory beyond the Assyrian border

While tributary polities within the Assyrian borders were tolerated as 'transitional cases' (see below Ch. 2.4.2), and depicted as provinces or 'proto-provinces', those beyond the Assyrian pale—the *mişir ša māt-Aššur*—were understood as foreign polities. These could either be considered Assyria's peers—a relatively rare occurrence best known for Babylonia—or as subordinate states to be subjugated in order to establish a tributary relationship.

In describing the distinction between Assyrian provinces and Assyrian vassals, Postgate (1992a) famously distinguished between the "Land of Aššur and the Yoke of Aššur". While this metaphor is very amply attested from the inscriptions of Šarru-ukīn onwards (see Dewar 2016, 27–28), it is only used very sparingly prior to this (see Table 2):

Table 2: Early use of the 'yoke'-metaphor in Assyrian inscriptions.

King	Source
Tukultī-Ninurta I	RIMA 1, 0.78.1 iii 4
Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I	RIMA 2, 0.87.1 ii 54; ii 93; iii 85; 12: 23'
Adad-nārārī III	RIMA 3, 0.104.4: 2'
Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*	RINAP 1, TP 5: 11'; 37: 17(?); 42: 37'–38'

It is notable that the yoke-metaphor does not appear in the inscriptions of any of the early Neo-Assyrian kings before Adad-nārārī III. However, the programmatic name *Aššur-nīrka-da''in* 'O Aššur, strengthen your yoke!' borne by a prominent high official late in the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (Mattila 1998, see Ch. 3.4.3) implies that this metaphor was current during this period, albeit unused in royal inscriptions.[235]

The rulers of the vassal states which comprised this notional territory were bound by treaty to the Assyrian king, but this was conventionally conceived of as an agreement between kings rather than states. Beyond fulfilling their tribute obligations and pursuing a foreign policy in accordance with Assyrian interests, these polities were permitted their own internal autonomy.[236] Interestingly, this tribute could sometimes involve corvée-labour, although this would seem to contradict the internal autonomy of a vassal state (Postgate 1992a, 257). While the delivery of this tribute is a recurrent theme within Assyrian visual sources (Bär 1996), the extant early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions do not provide sufficient information on the imposition of regular tributes for statistical assessment to be worthwhile;[237] it would require the discovery of a dedicated administrative archive to reconstruct this information. Rather, the historian is only able to garner a general sense of what this tribute might have been from 'spot-tributes', and from the pains which Assyria was willing to take to acquire such resources—nonetheless, this permits the assessment of the general importance of a particular tributary to Assyria's foreign policy.

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235 This may well be because the difference between the many 'transitional cases' within the Assyrian kingdom and those polities outside of it was slight in actuality during this period, rendering the term somewhat meaningless.

236 "The local ruler (even if a puppet installed by the Assyrians) was king within his own country, which was not considered part of Assyria. All economic and administrative relations with the Assyrian state would have taken place at a high level, from apex to apex. The Assyrian administration would have had nothing to do with the internal affairs of the client state" (Postgate 1992a, 255).

237 Assyrian campaign narratives generally describe the demands of irregular 'spot-tribute' by the Assyrian king as his army passes through an area, which cannot have been characteristic of the usual amounts.

The vocabulary used to describe the subjugation of polities and the creation of a vassal relationship during this period is primarily *šuknušu* 'to cause to submit' (for which reasons insubmissive groups are described as 'insubmissive' *lā kanšū/kanšūte*), and the more general verb *b/pêlu* 'to rule, lord, dominate'. In order to maintain the clear distinction presented in the sources between incorporation into Assyria's territory and a mere client relationship, the imposition of vassalage is not treated as 'expansion' in this work.

This point is particularly important as the sources presently available for the early Neo-Assyrian period are not sufficient to establish the duration for which many client states actually rendered tribute before disobeying, or whether these annual demands of tribute increased over time. Certainly, many tributary states in the Zagros seem to have immediately ceased the delivery of their vital tribute of horses upon the death of an Assyrian king, obliging his successor to swiftly march into the mountains to intimidate the polities of the ʾOrūmīye to resume their tribute.[238]

During the late Neo-Assyrian period, a type of official called a *qēpu*, occupying a role similar to a modern political officer or attaché, is attested as supervising Assyria's vassal states to ensure their compliance (Dubovský 2012)—the present dearth of administrative sources precludes the identification of similar individuals for the early Neo-Assyrian period for the time being, although their presence might be supposed. No correspondence between Assyria and its vassals is preserved (beyond RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 5–8, a letter quoted in an annalistic account of the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta II—probably translated from Aramaic into Akkadian for the purposes of the narrative), although much of this may have been in Aramaic anyway (Edmonds 2023a).

2.3.4 Early Neo-Assyrian 'spot-expansions' and the logic of urban conquest

The city also played an important part in the Assyrian conceptualisation of expansion, although this was distinct from that of the border. The Assyrian royal inscriptions use the same word *ālu* 'city' to describe any form of settlement (Fuchs 2010, 75–76),[239] although these could be further qualified within a three-tiered system (Ikeda 1979; Liverani 1992c, 125–126) as *āl šarrūti* 'royal city' (implying use as the capital of either an Assyrian province or a foreign polity) or *āl dannūti* 'fortified city'.

As most cities were walled, they served as symbolic microcosms of a land in their own right (e.g. Pongratz-Leisten 1994, 18; Ataç 2013, 53);[240] indeed, unlike modern conurbations, they would also contain unbuilt land set aside for various non-urban activities (Baker 2009). These walls ensured the integrity or even inviolability of the city, and much emphasis was laid upon control of access to a city, and its ritual protection from any ill which might enter it there. As a liminal space, the gate sheltered various activities such as legal disputes, public assemblies, or commerce both respectable and salacious (May 2014). The focal point of the Assyrian triumph, i.e. *erēb āli* 'entering the city' (see Ch. 2.2.4) was that it involved the applauding of the king and his army outside an Assyrian city, and then him entering it armed as a demonstration of the city's trust of his intentions[241]—akin to individual regiments of the British Army being granted the 'freedom' to parade in certain cities today.[242]

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238 This phenomenon is notably attested for the first campaigns of Aššur-nāṣir-apli I (RIMA 2, 0.101.18: 1′–15′), Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (RIMA 2, 0.101.1 i 45–69; 17 i 61–90), Salmānu-ašarēd III (RIMA 3, 0.102.1: 14′–40′; 2 i 14–29; 6 i 28–41; 10 i 19–23; 14: 22–26; 16: 6–8), and Šamšī-Adad V (RIMA 3, 0.103.1 i 53–ii 6).

239 The term *kapru*, used to designate a village in administrative texts, is never found in the annals, although *ālu ṣeḫru* 'small city' can appear.

240 An interesting parallel complex of metaphors which cannot be further explored here is that of circumvallated cities as powerful females, as best demonstrated by the *Mauerkrone* (mural crown) worn by the Assyrian queen (see recently Pinnock 2018), and the later iconography of goddesses such as Tyche of Antiocheia or Aphrodite of Aphrodisias (particularly as the latter city had a tradition of having been founded by Ninos and Semiramis).

241 One might note, by means of comparison, that weapons were not permitted within the *pomerium*, Rome's sacral encapsulation of land.

242 It is noteworthy that the Aramaic story of *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī* (see Ch. 2.5.4) begins with a description of the birth of the two brothers Sarbānabal and Sarmugī in which the relative auspiciousness of their respective births is expressed through the reactions of gatekeepers at Ninūa, with the gatekeepers welcoming in the traveller with victuals in the year of Sarbānabal's birth, and barring the gate in that of Sarmugī (P. Amherst 63 xviii 4–13).

It is clear, by means of contrast, that vassal cities retained their internal civic autonomy, and hence that any business with the Assyrian king was conducted outside of the city's walls; for example, visual sources display tribute being presented to Assyrian kings outside of a city's walls, and—by the same token—a city's population would deliver their own ruler to the Assyrians along with his property outside of their gate to avoid the king's wrath and maintain this 'urban inviolability'. Thus, for example, Adad-nārārī II accepted the tribute of Bīt-Baḫiāni/Gūzāna outside of this city, and only entered the adjacent shrine of Sikāni (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 100–102). In turn, during the marches of Assyrian kings up and down the Euphrates, they and their armies invariably camped outside of cities, unless they were Assyrian possessions (see Ch. 4.4.3).

Indeed, it is intimated in the annals that entry by the Assyrian king into an enemy or even allied city rendered it *de facto* his own to do with as he pleased (although he did not automatically own it—this required a further step, described below). Thus, for example, when Salmānu-ašarēd III marched westwards in 853 (see Chs. 4.6.4–5), the people of Til-ša-Turāḫi and Saḫlala feared Assyrian reprisal and killed their own king Gē-ammu (RIMA 3, 0.102.2: 78–81; 6 ii 19–23; 8: 12′–14′; 10 ii 13–15; 14: 54–56; 16: 28–30). Salmānu-ašarēd III took advantage of this to enter these cities—thus claiming them for Assyria—and installed his gods in their temples. In the surviving account of Adad-nārārī II's Ḫanigalbat Campaigns, this king mentions entering cities multiple times—for example, in 898, he enters Raqamātu by "vehemence and force" (*ina šipṣi danāni erēbu*) before despoiling it (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 57).

This phenomenon demonstrates why some early Neo-Assyrian annexations could be quite 'silent'—all that was needed was for the king to decide to enter an allied city, and it was all but his. This concept of access to a city equating to control of it is interesting in respect to the verb *kašādu*, which primarily means 'to arrive at' or 'to reach', and only secondarily 'to conquer' (see Ch. 2.2.1)—it might be asked as to whether *āla kašādu* notionally meant 'to take a city' in the sense of entering or being able to enter it, and was a form of control rooted in access rather than possession as conquest is envisaged in European languages. Interesting in this regard is the practice of presenting models of circumvallated cities to the Assyrian king during tribute deliveries (Radner 2007, 217–218; see Foster 2024 for Old Babylonian parallels)—might these represent the submission of distant cities, their denizens providing such a model in lieu of a king actually entering the city?[243] In a more brutal example in the same vein, Frahm (2017c, 172, fig. 8.1) has recently noted a metal brazier shaped like a city wall discovered at Nimrūd which would have permitted the king to warm himself against what would look like a burning city.

While entering a city was tantamount to its annexation, this was actually expressed with different terminology indicating possession, namely the set expression *ana ramānīya amnu/aṣbat* 'I counted/took as my own' (see Tab. 3); this is most neatly demonstrated by an episode during Adad-nārārī II's second campaign to Ḫanigalbat (900), wherein he enters the city (Y)aridu and harvests its grain before claiming Saraku for himself (see below) and storing it therein (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 43–44):

a-ʿnaʾ ᵘʳᵘia-ri-di ʿluʾ e-ru-ub ŠE.KIN.TARᵐᵉˢ KUR-šú e-ṣi-di ᵘʳᵘsa-ʿraʾ-ku a-na ra-ma-ni-ʿia luʾ am-nu ŠE.AMᵐᵉˢ ʿùʾ ŠE.INʾ.NUᵐᵉˢ ina ŠÀ lu at-bu-ku

Verily I entered (Y)aridu. I harvested the grain of his land. Verily I took Saraku for myself. Verily I heaped up the grain and straw inside it.

Here, it is clear that the act of entering a city lent the Assyrian king the right to dispose of it as he likes, but the choice of long-term or indefinite occupation or use required the claiming of it as his property. This process during a campaign, which functioned independently of the extension of Assyria's borders, and could occur inside or outside of its pale, is dubbed by the present author 'spot-expansion'.

This expression ceases to be used after the reign of Salmānu-ašarēd III. Yamada (2000, 301–302) has understood this terminology as reflecting provincialisation during a period in which the terminology of the late Neo-

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243 Schaudig (2022, 260) has interestingly suggested that these were made out of the earth collected from defeated cities by Assyrian kings, but this is contradicted by some archaeological evidence of city-models being made out of bronze (Barnett 1950, 5–6); it would also be impractical for delegations to travel long distances with such earthen models. Rather, the present author would suggest that these brazen models were containers for such earth. Beckman (2023) has suggested that the famous Persian demand for earth and water as a sign of submission is derived from this Assyrian practice. The notion of collecting sacred earth as keepsakes survives in the Middle East until today, for example at the Meryemana Kilise at Anıtlı, Turkey (Ṭūrōyō: *Ḥāḥ*).

Table 3: Attestations for 'spot-expansions'.

Date	Appropriation	Source
900	Adad-nārārī II takes Saraku (territory of Naṣībīna) for himself (*ana r. amnu*)	RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 44
899	AN II takes the palaces of Mamlī at the foot of the Kāšiāru for himself (*ana r. amnu*)	RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 46–47
894	AN II takes the city of Dūr-Katlimmu for himself (*ana r. amnu*)	RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 112–113
882	Aššur-nāṣir-apli II takes the city of Tušḫan for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 2, 0.101.1 ii 8–9
875–868	ASN II takes the city of Aribua belonging to Lubarna of Patina/Unqi for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 2, 0.101.1 iii 81–82
866	ASN II takes the land of Mallānu for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 2, 0.101.1 iii 101
866	ASN II (re)takes the city of Damdammusa for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 2, 0.101.1 iii 107
855	Salmānu-ašarēd III takes the cities of Til-Barsip and Pitru for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 3, 0.102.6 i 59–61; 10 i 43–44; 14: 40–41; 16: 17
852	SMN III takes the city of Til-(ša-)Turāḫi for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 3, 0.102.8: 13'–14'; 16: 30
833	SMN III takes the city of Mūru of Abi-rāmu of Bīt-Agūsi for himself (*ana r. aṣbat*)	RIMA 3, 0.102.14: 130–131; 16: 215'

Assyrian period had not yet been developed. In Lamprichs' (1995b, 28–29) scheme, these seizures are seen as the creation of bridgeheads (*Brückenköpfe*). Neither of these interpretations seems entirely fitting: Some of these occur within territory either already within Assyria's borders or simultaneously annexed to them (e.g. Dūr-Katlimmu, Tušḫan, Damdammusa, Til-Barsip and Pitru, Til-(ša-)Turāḫi), while others outside of the Assyrian border were either adjacent and very quickly absorbed (Saraku, palaces of Mamlī, Mallānu) or swiftly abandoned (Aribua, Mūru).

Rather, the present author would argue that these were *ad hoc* creations designed either to establish 'proto-provincial' (see below) improvised control of an area until a provincial structure could be established, or outposts created far beyond the Assyrian pale which seem to have been short-lived attempts at partnership between the Assyrian king and local rulers (see Ch. 4.6.5). Hence, the term 'bridgehead' does not seem descriptive of these attested examples of 'spot-expansion' (a 'bridge' was either unnecessary or swiftly abandoned), nor can these be taken as provincialisation, as Aribua and Mūru were too distant. What these seem rather to demonstrate is the logic behind the very initial stage of provincialisation—direct appropriation by the crown, what might be termed the 'proto-provincial' phase (see below Ch. 2.4.1).

2.3.5 A down-to-earth explanation of Assyrian 'expansionism'

The Assyrian king's role possessed a profound cosmic dimension as the protector of the world order and the vanquisher of chaos (Maul 1999). The martial and protective roles are combined in the oft-repeated example of the king being commanded to expand the borders of Assyria (e.g. Tadmor 1999, 55; Frame 2008, 23; Fales 2010a, 78; Parker 2011, 363; Galter 2014, 329–330), a point central to the 'ideological' structuralist reconstruction of Assyrian motivations, which emphasises an image of constantly expanding borders (Liverani 1990, 79). Under the provocative heading "The king and his god, or: the Assyrian caliphate", Liverani (2016, 377) has recently summarised this notion (see already Ch. 1.3) as follows:

> The mandate is twofold. On the one hand, the king has to ensure justice and order to the inner country—in other terms he has to fully accomplish the nature of Assyria as a perfectly ordered cosmos. On the other hand, he has to expand the cosmos at the expense of the peripheral chaos, up to a complete coincidence of the Assyrian state with the entire world, or at least the human *oikoumene.* Conversely, if the king is correctly accomplishing his task of enlarging the country *(māta ruppušu),* by conquering the periphery, the god will reward him with full control and prosperity in the inner country.

This command to expand is often considered as intrinsic to the conception and functioning of the Assyrian state; indeed, Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 120) calls this "the central premise of Assyrian kingship, namely the expansion of

the borders of Assyria commanded in the Assyrian coronation ritual." Building upon this idea, Ristvet (2024, 327) even writes most recently of "divinely ordained conquest". Considering the alleged centrality of the expansion of borders and even conquest to Assyrian kingship, a more detailed investigation of this trope is necessary here.

The theme of expansion centres upon the complex of the god Aššur, the sceptre (*ḫaṭṭu*), the land, and its people. For example, one inscription of Aššur-bāni-apli (RINAP 5, Asb 159 r. 9) describes him being bestowed with the "just sceptre which extends the lands and people" (*ḫaṭṭu iširtu murappišat mātāti u nišī*). This is quite evidently the same sceptre granted to him by the god Aššur during his coronation, invoked at the beginning of the hymn (SAA 3, 11 o. 2–3):

> o. 2. UD^meš-*ka* ^d*aš-šur na-*ʿdinʾ* ^giš GIDRU-ʿkaʾ *lu-ur-rik*
> o. 3. *ina* GÌR^II-*ka* KUR-*ka* [0] *ru-up-piš*
>
> o. 2. May Aššur, bestower of your sceptre, lengthen your days and years!
> o. 3. Extend your land at your feet!

This same sceptre appears once again later in the hymn (SAA 3, 11 o. 16–17):

> o. 16. DINGIR^meš GAL^meš *lu-kín-nu* BALA-*šú li-ṣu-ru* [*ša* ^m*aš-šur*]-DÙ-A MAN KUR-*aš-šur* ʿZI^meš-*šúʾ*
> o. 17. ^giš GIDRU *i-šir-tu a-na ru-up-pu-uš* KUR *u* UN^meš-*šú lid-di-nu-niš-šú*
>
> o. 16. May the great gods make firm his reign! May they protect the life [of Aššur]-bāni-apli!
> o. 17. May they give him the just sceptre to extend the land and his people!

In these cases, the sceptre, which refers to the king's judicial role rather than his martial aspect,[244] is connected to the extension of both land and people, a sentiment echoed in a Middle Assyrian royal ritual which seems to be connected to the (probably annual) renewal of kingship (KAL 12, 1 o. ii 11′–13′):

> ʿiʾ+*na e-šar-te* ^giš GIDRU-*ka* KUR-*ka ra-pi*[*š q*]*a-ba-a še-ma-a ma-ga-ra ki-it-ta ù sa-*[*lì*]-*ma Aš-šur lid-di-na-ku*
>
> Extend your land with the justness of your sceptre! May Aššur grant you command, attention, assent, truth, and peace!

It seems quite clear in these examples that the judicial aspects of kingship are here being emphasised, and that this concerns both land and population, much as is stated—*sans* sceptre—in an inscription of Aššur-aḫa-iddina (RINAP 4, 1 ii 30–31):

> ^d*aš-šur* AD DINGIR^meš *šu-ud-du-ú ù šu-šu-bu mi-ṣir* KUR-*aš-šur*^ki *ru-up-pu-šú ú-ma-al-la-a* ŠU^II-*u-a*
>
> Aššur, father of the gods, granted me the forsaking and settling (of cities) and the extension of the borders of Assyria

As has been seen in the preceding sections (Chs. 2.3.), the extension of the border was conceived as a royal prerogative—only the king was able to alter the extension of Assyria's borders, as demonstrated by the lack of territorial expansion by individual governors or high officials even in circumstances where it might have been possible. The passages from the Middle and Neo-Assyrian texts cited (KAL 12, 1 and SAA 3, 11) are central to the argument that Assyria possessed an expansionist 'ideology', and yet they seem for the most part to shy from territorial expansion through the shifting of borders—rather, the extension is of the land and peoples, of settlement and just rule, and peacefully connoted.[245] It is further useful to consider this evidence against that of actual mention of expansion of Assyria within the extant Assyrian royal inscriptions (Tab. 4).

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244 For the symbolism of the sceptre in Mesopotamian culture, see esp. Wiggermann 1985–1986, 7–16; Ambos 2013, 108–112; Bramanti 2017. The entirely peaceful connotations of the sceptre (*ḫaṭṭu*) in the Assyrian coronation hymn were already noted by Capomacchia and Riveroli (2014, 175) who juxtapose it with the *kakku* (weapon) bestowed for war. Note the Assyrian substitute king (*šar pūḫi*) ritual involves the burning of the substitute king's sceptre (*ḫaṭṭu*), weapon (*kakku*), throne, and table and depositing the ashes at the heads of the substitute king and queen in their grave (Verderame 2020, 198), implying that these four objects were the central items of royal regalia.

245 Dietrich (2003, 135. 143) already doubted that this expression was connected to military expansion.

Table 4: Assyrian kings described as or mentioning having expanded Assyria's territory.

King	Quotation	Source
Aššur-uballiṭ I	*murappiš miṣrī u kudurrî* Who extends borders and boundaries	RIMA 1, 0.76.1: 32
Enlil-nārārī	*murappiš miṣrī u kudurrî* Who extends borders and boundaries	RIMA 1, 0.76.1: 27
Arik-dīn-ili	*murappiš miṣrī u kudurrî* Who extends borders and boundaries	RIMA 1, 0.76.1: 24
Adad-nārārī I	*murappiš miṣrī u kudurrî* Who extends borders and boundaries	RIMA 1, 0.76.1: 15
Tukultī-Ninurta I	*mureppiš miṣrī* Who extends borders	RIMA 1, 0. 2: 9–10; 8: 4′–9′
Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I	*miṣir mātīšunu ruppuša iqbûni* They (i.e. the gods) commanded me to expand their land	RIMA 1, 0.87.1 i 49
	miṣir mātīya ureppišma I expanded the border of my land	RIMA 1, 0.87.1 i 61
	miṣir mātīšu ana ruppuši iqbâ He (i.e. Aššur) commanded me to expand his land	RIMA 1, 0.87.1 ii 99–100
Adad-nārārī II	*ša . . . urappišu māssu* Who extended his land	RIMA 3, 0.104.1: 18
Aššur-nāṣir-apli II	*murappišu miṣir mātīšu* Who extends the borders of his land	RIMA 2, 0.101.40: 8
	murappiš dadmī Who extends the inhabited world	RIMA 3, 0.104.1: 18
Adad-nārārī III	*urappišū māssu* They (i.e. the gods) extended his land	RIMA 3, 0.104.6: 9
Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*	*murappiš miṣir Māt-Aššur* Who extends the borders of Assyria	RINAP 1, TP 35 i 29
	ana rupp]uš Māt-Aššur To exte]nd Assyria	RINAP 1, TP 46: 4
Šarru-ukīn	*murappiš miṣir Māt-Aššur* Who extends the border of Assyria	RINAP 2, 73: 9
	(*urappiša māssu*) (I expanded his (i.e. Ambaris') land)	RINAP 2, 1: 198; 2: 230; 7: 30
	ša Aššur šar ilāni urappiša kisurruš I expanded the border of Aššur, king of the gods	RINAP 2, 8: 13
	miṣir Māt-Aššur(?)] *urappiš* I expanded [the border of Assyria(?)	RINAP 2, 63: 13
Sîn-aḫḫē-erība	*urappiš mātī* I expanded my land (creation of Kār-Sîn-aḫḫē-erība)	RINAP 3, 4: 30; 15 ii 31″; 16 ii 68; 17 ii 50; 22 ii 32; 23 ii 30; 24 ii 5′; 32 i′ 8′; 140 o. 13′

Even accounting for the lacunae in the Assyrian textual record (for example, that Tukultī-Ninurta II's own titulary is only fragmentarily preserved), it is still quite surprising how little this trope appears, particularly for the reigns of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and Šarru-ukīn considering the large expansions which these witnessed.[246] Also

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246 Naturally, Aššur-bāni-apli does not seem to have concretely expanded Assyria's borders.

curious is that Adad-nārārī III claims to have expanded his land, even though no expansions are attested in his reign (indeed, he conceded land to Babylonia; see Ch. 4.5.4), and that although he describes his ancestor Adad-nārārī II as having expanded Assyria, he describes his great-grandfather Aššur-nāṣir-apli II rather as a *murappiš dadmī* "expander of the inhabited world" (RIMA 3, 0.104.1: 18). Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, in turn, is termed a *murappišu miṣir mātišu* "expander of the borders of his land", albeit only in the so-called 'Ninūa Standard Inscription'—it is perhaps significant that this inscription was created for the temple of Ištar at Ninūa. While Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's inscriptions repeatedly describe himself as expanding his land, a close reading demonstrates that all of these instances are related to the apparently peaceful founding of Kār-Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (e.g. RINAP 3, 4: 29–30):

> uru*el-en-za-áš a-na* URU LUGAL-*ti ù dan-na-at na-ge-e šu-a-tu aṣ-bat-ma* MU-*šú maḫ-ra-a ú-nak-kir-ma* uru*kar-*md EN.ZU-ŠEŠ meš-*e-ri-ba at-ta-bi ni-bit-su* UN meš KUR.KUR *ki-šit-ti* ŠU II-*ia i-na lìb-bi ú-še-šib i-na* ŠU II lú*šu-ut-*SAG-*ia* lú EN.NAM uru*ḫar-ḫar am-nu-ma ú-rap-piš ma-a-ti*

> I took Elenzaš for a royal city and district fortress, I altered its old name and called it by the name Kār-Sîn-aḫḫē-erība I settled within it the peoples of the lands I had vanquished, I counted it among the possessions of my eunuch, the governor of Ḫarḫar, and thus I expanded my land.

As the use of the verb *ṣabātu* demonstrates (see Yamada 2018b, 28–29), the city was abandoned at the time that Sîn-aḫḫē-erība took it, and the expansion was into now-unclaimed land. The focus is upon the erection of a provincial administration, rather than conquest or expansion of borders. More generally, it might be noted that the variance between *miṣru* and *mātu* is significant. While *miṣra ruppušu* attends conventional annexations, *māta ruppušu* seems semantically vaguer, which is fitting for its use in more peaceful circumstances. Indeed, the full sentence of the attestation from an inscription of Adad-nārārī III (RIMA 3, 0.104.6: 8–9) reads *ilānu rabûtu rēʾûssu kīma šamme balāṭi eli nišī māt-Aššur uṭibbuma urappišū māssu* "The great gods rendered his shepherdship fine like a healing plant for the people of Assyria and they (i.e. the gods) expanded his land". Particularly in light of the close of this inscription (the Sabaʿa Stele) which discusses Pālil-ēreš' building works, and the lack of territorial expansion during this reign, it might be suspected that here the expansion of land is meant in the sense of the extension of arable, inhabitable land—something approximating the description of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II as *murappiš dadmī* "expander of the inhabited world" (RIMA 3, 0.104.1: 18).[247]

These references tie into a completely different complex of ideas (which nonetheless fits well with the *ḫaṭṭu*-sceptre as the implement with which not only borders are moved, but cities emptied or settled), namely that of infrastructural and agricultural improvement, and the king's pastoral role, as best exemplified in the curt descriptions of the economic improvement of the Assyrian realm found in royal inscriptions from the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I to Salmānu-ašarēd III such as the following from the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta II which provides the most unambiguous connection (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 132–133, see also the parallel passage RIMA 2, 0.100.3 r. 3′–4′):

> É.GAL meš *ina ši-di* KUR-*ia ar-ṣip* giš APIN meš *ina ši-di* KUR-*a ar-⌈ku⌉-ús* ŠE.AM meš *tab-ka-a-ni a-na e-riš-ti* KUR-*ia* UGU *ša pa-an* ⌈*ú*⌉-*šá-ter at-bu-⌈uk⌉* UGU KUR *aš-šur ma-a-ta* UGU UN meš-*šá* UN meš *ú-rad-di*

> I built palaces in the districts of my land. I hitched up ploughs in the districts of my land and heaped up more grain for the needs of my land than ever before. I added land to Assyria and added people to its people.

This passage has served as something of a puzzle hitherto; noting that Tukultī-Ninurta II is not reported as expanding Assyria's borders, Sano (2015) has argued that this must refer to the imposition of vassal relation-

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247 The word *dadmū*, a *plurale tantum* which seems to originate in Amorite (Streck 2000, 87) denotes both the people and settlements constituting an inhabited region, or, more generally, the inhabited world (see the references in CAD D, 18–20), and thus somewhat mirroring the Greek term *oikoumenē* (οἰκουμένη). While it is tempting to jump to the latter sense, it should be noted that Assyrian royal inscriptions frequently present examples in which it is clear that there is more than one *dadmū* within the known world, i.e. *kullat nišī kal dadmī* (e.g. RINAP 5, Asb 159: 15). Often it is meant in the sense of a kingdom and its people, so that Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV's annals (RINAP 1, TP 47 o. 22), for example, describe him sweeping over the land of Bīt-Saʾalli "like the Deluge" and "laying waste to its settlement" (*abūbiš aspumma ušaḫriba dadmēšu*).

ships and that *ma-a-ta* must be understood as a mistake for a plural form *mātāti*. However, this writing appears in the parallel and is unambiguous. Rather, the agrarian context makes it clear that an expansion of cultivated land and people to work it is meant here, rather than any territorial expansion.

By this explicit, bucolic logic, it becomes clear that the relentless territorial expansion which has been inferred from the coronation hymns is something of a misnomer—while some kings could expand Assyria by expanding its borders, others could fulfil this commandment by extending the natural border along "the strip of herbage strown / that just divides the desert from the sown". The expression was vague and perhaps deliberately so, in order to permit kings to find different ways to fulfil its commandment depending on their situation.[248] Understanding the expression *māta ruppušu* in a vaguer sense, as encompassing not only territorial expansion, but also the expansion of useable, irrigated, arable land, also goes a long way to explaining a particular dynamic between the king and his governors evident during periods of royal weakness; while magnates could not expand Assyria's borders due to a royal prerogative, they could undertake infrastructural work to make the 'desert bloom' and expand the settled area afforded Assyria, rendering themselves (informally) not only a *murappiš dadmī*, but indeed a *murappiš māti*. In particular, one might think of the various hydraulic works and settlement foundations undertaken during the early 8th century Pālil-ēreš (see Ch. 4.4.4), Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-uṣur (RIMA 3, 0.105.2), or presumably Šamšī-ilu (RIMA 3, 0.104.2012). Moreover, this same impulse is already evident in the description of canal digging in the cylinder of Bēl-ēreš (RIMA 2, 0.96.2001), semi-independent Assyrian ruler of (Ša)dikanni (Tall ʿAǧāǧa, Syria) during the mid-11th century when centralised Assyrian control was at a nadir (see Ch. 3.2). This agrarian drive must have been a major factor in the remarkable war-preparedness in which Assyria found itself come the reign of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*— despite civil war and plague, the competition between magnates to improve and expand their own fiefdoms into the steppe as a proxy for the kingly activities beyond their grasp ultimately paid dividends. Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and his successors, in turn, outdid all of these efforts through the mass deportations, systematic agricultural colonisation, and creation of an imperial landscape marking the late Neo-Assyrian period (e.g. Wilkinson et al. 2005).

Hence, to conclude, an Assyrian king was commanded to expand his land; while this could take the form of territorial expansion with the wave of the Assyrian king's sceptre, it could just as easily comprise of the 'internal expansion' of agricultural improvement and the increase of population "like a healing plant" as Adad-nārārī III's inscription memorably put it.[249] How the polyvalent command to 'expand the land' was taken was up to an individual king, his advisors, and the prevailing mood of the era—it is modern bias which has made the Assyrian king a relentless outward expansionist, rather than a ruler with a variety of options, some brutal and some not. In fact, the Assyrian king was standing on the simple, down-to-earth answer the entire time, as the coronation hymn (SAA 3, 11 o. 3) makes quite clear:

> *ina šēpīka mātka ruppiš*
>
> Extend your land at your feet!

2.4 Early Neo-Assyrian provincialisation

2.4.1 Everything counts. Writing the biography of a province

A very useful means of understanding the aims of the Assyrian state in different conquered regions is to chart the process of its administrative incorporation of territory and population into its realm, a process which can be termed 'provincialisation'. There is no native term for this in the Assyrian textual corpus, but it

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248 It is once more to be reminded that the first part of the coronation hymn (KAL 12, 2; SAA 3, 11 o. 1–22) constituting the blessing of the king is entirely peaceful in content, and focuses upon social harmony and advantageous prices for agricultural products.
249 As such, Richardson's (2016, 33) slightly flippant observation of Assyria's "nearly obsessive pronouncements about *Lebensraum*" is not entirely off the mark.

is expressed through the trope of building palaces and imposing governors (Liverani 2012b). The manner in which this occurred during the early Neo-Assyrian period can be reconstructed through a careful process of inference in which the evidence of expansion found in the Assyrian royal inscriptions is compared to the dates at which the territory in question first appears as an Assyrian province within other textual sources, primarily the earliest mentions of such provinces within and their governors within the Eponym Lists and Chronicles.[250] Often, archaeological evidence such as the appearance of Assyrian material culture, the construction of new official buildings, and monuments and texts created by local governors can be integrated into this reconstruction.

In this work, the present author seeks wherever possible to trace the individual histories of different provinces during the early Neo-Assyrian period and their transformations through what he terms 'province-biography'—an attempt to present a portrait of the provincialised territory and the interactions (and misunderstandings) between local and state actors, tracing over time the either swift or gradual political, administrative, social, and cultural integration of the province into the Assyrian state.

The Akkadian word for province is *pīḫatu* (Assyrian *pāḫutu*), meaning literally 'responsibility' and thus the word for a provincial governor a *bēl pīḫati* (or *bēl pāḫiti*) 'responsibility-bearer'. A slightly semantically vaguer term also used for governor is *šaknu*, literally 'the installed (one)' or *šakin māti* 'the installed (one) of the land'. This ties into the central notion that governors were acting in place of the king, to whom the province nominally belonged. Predictably enough, the Neo-Assyrian province has its origins in the Middle Assyrian provincial system, which itself seems to have built upon the previous Mitannian system (e.g. Llop 2011), as demonstrated by the survival of earlier terminology such as *ḫalzu* 'district, fort' into the Middle Assyrian period (Postgate 1995, 1–2).[251] Each province had a capital, referred to in royal inscriptions (from the perspective of the king) as the *āl šarrūtīya* 'city of my kingship' with a palace at least nominally belonging to the king from which the provincial governor administered to the province. At least notionally, a governor was an Assyrian from the heartland, and often a eunuch by the late 9th century. Unlike a Roman governor, once he received his province, he would continue to govern there for the remainder of his career (a little like 'getting tenure' at a university), unless he either distinguished or manoeuvred himself into a still higher position (such as a position on the 'royal cabinet'), fell from grace,[252] chose the wrong side in a royal power-struggle, or died. As has already been discussed, he possessed his own provincial army, which it was his duty to maintain and march with as a part of the king's great army on the annual campaign. The governor also bore the fiscal responsibilities for the province; as the distinction between state and private in such bureacracies was blurred at the very best of times,[253] this offered the opportunity for immense personal enrichment, given a lucrative province. The reverse of this coin was that governors could be expected to 'chip in' themselves in the event of a crisis. Ultimately, an early Neo-Assyrian governor was not unlike a vassal king in his power and responsibility, and many behaved not dissimilarly.

The Assyrian royal inscriptions only rarely provide information on territories already incorporated into the realm, and then usually by way of building inscriptions. Local official inscriptions by high officials tend to provide more details, but only a relatively small number of these have yet been discovered. In considering provincial history, it is worth briefly lingering over the issue of administrative and epistolary sources; while a large corpus of such texts exists for the late Neo-Assyrian period, only a scarce few are presently known for

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250 For a prominent example of this approach, see Radner 2006c, and discussion of this methodology by Edmonds (2021, 75).

251 The subdivision of the Middle Assyrian provincial system does seem broadly to reflect pre-existing territorial units (e.g. Cancik-Kirschbaum 2023, 274–275). For example, the 'Upper' and 'Lower Provinces' of the Middle Assyrian period seem to correspond to the previous subdivision of Ḫāna into upper and lower regions (see Ch. 4.4.2).

252 Grayson (1993, 25) calculates the average term of a provincial governor as having been 22 years. See Postgate (2007a, 6) for examples of and terminology for 'sacking' within the Assyrian hierarchy.

253 "It is very difficult for a modern westerner to understand an ancient eastern civilization, be it in the area of the arts, religion, or our present concern power politics. Whether we like it or not, we bring basic assumptions into our research which have no meaning in the culture we are studying. . . . In modern western democracies, we assume that a man or woman in public office—such as the mayor of a city—will maintain a scrupulous division between the public purse and his or her private funds. . . . An ancient official, be he Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or Assyrian, would be mystified by the whole business" (Grayson 1999, 255–256).

the early Neo-Assyrian period.[254] Three main corpora of letters and administrative documents are known from the early Neo-Assyrian period: one from a capital, and two from the provinces. The first of these is from Nimrūd, and comprises a variety of texts from different palatial contexts dating generally from the late 9th to mid-8th centuries unearthed during the British excavations. Of particular importance to the present study is the collection of texts dubbed Nimrūd 'Wine Lists' (Wilson 1972) which provide a valuable insight into the organisation of the Assyrian court during the reign of Adad-nārārī III. Another important document for the era is the royal appointment of Nergal-apīl-kūmūʾa as the first governor of Kalḫu by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, which gives the best insights at present into the internal operation of the early Neo-Assyrian state (SAA 12, 82–84). The next group of texts originate from Tall Billā, Iraq (ancient Šibaniba), published by Finkelstein (1953). This comprises some 22 administrative documents from the reign of Salmānu-ašarēd III (JCS 7, 68–90) discovered in a sounding by what might have been the city's temple of Ištar (Finkelstein 1953, 114). Last to be mentioned is the sizable corpus consists of the Neo-Assyrian tablets from Tall Ḥalaf, Syria (ancient Gūzāna), first published first by Friedrich, Ungnad, Meyer, and Weidner (1940) and again in modern editions by Dornauer (2014). They comprise of deposit of tablets associated with the governor Mannu-kī-Aššur and dating to the reign of Adad-nārārī III. Beyond these, a few other 'stray' tablets from the early Neo-Assyrian period are to be mentioned, including a brace of tablets from Tall Baqqāq (Ismail 1989), three important but overlooked administrative texts from the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II discovered at Qalʿa Širqāṭ (KAV 135; 160; 167), a few land grants from Ninūa (SAA 2, 1–2; 12, 1–13), and a few lonely cuneiform tablets from Assyria's eastern marches (see the recent enumeration in MacGinnis et al. 2021, 95). To these might be added some letters found in Building III at Ḥamā (Arbøll 2020; 2023), including a letter from Marduk-apla-uṣur of Sūḫu to Rudamu (i.e. Urtamis) of Ḥamat (Ḥama 1, see Parpola 1990; Arbøll 2023, 105–107).

This corpus is hardly sizeable or representative of the era; that more tablets from the early Neo-Assyrian period have not been discovered over the years is surprising, but may well reflect the 'luck of the draw'—however, there are some indications that Aramaic was already being used as an administrative language in the western half of the Neo-Assyrian realm from the very beginning of the period (see below Ch. 2.4.2), and that 'clayless offices' may already have been common during the 9th century. Another factor which is only now becoming clear is the likely prevalence of wax writing-boards.[255] In turn, there is increasing evidence of illiterate or paraliterate bookkeeping by means of clay tokens within the Middle and Neo-Assyrian administration (MacGinnis et al. 2014; Monroe 2016; Nilhamn 2019; MacGinnis 2023c). Hence, the actual proportion of administration and correspondence conducted in cuneiform on clay tablets may be much less than previously thought, and practically non-existent in large parts of the Ǧazīra.

There is a commonplace assumption that the epistolary and administrative corpus is more reliable than Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, as neatly illustrated by the following quotation from Berlejung (2012, 21–22):

> Referring to the Assyrian sources, the major focus will be on the Assyrian letters since they reflect the everyday life, political pragmatism and practice (more or less the facts) and not royal programmatic ideology (quite often fiction). Assyrian royal inscriptions will also be included, but their reader must be aware of the fact that they cannot be taken at face value since they are written as royal propaganda with the idea to construct and to promote a program, that is, the ideal of Assur (god, king, and land), master of history and order. However, from the letters and administrative records, we know that Assyrian kings were also political pragmatists and realized very pragmatic interests

This assessment of epistolary sources is common, but regrettably naïve. A letter is intrinsically rhetorical, particularly a missive to a king; it seeks to convince the addressee of any number of things, from the impor-

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254 It is perhaps disconcerting that Olmstead's (1918c, 254) remark made over a century ago still generally holds for today: "We are still far from the conditions of the later Assyrian empire when the mass of letters and of other documents give insight into the inner life of the court or of less exalted folk as well. For us, the only recourse is the long list of officials who year by year gave their name to be used to date events."

255 For Assyrian writing-boards, see foundationally Wiseman 1955. More generally, see the extensive exploration by Cammarosano et al. (2019), and Zimmermann's (2023a; 2023b) studies demonstrating the widespread use of writing boards in Kassite Babylonia. A writing board might already have been depicted with a stylus on the famous *Symbolsockel* of Tukultī-Ninurta I (Ass 19869 = RIMA 1, 0.78.27) most recently discussed by Schmitt (2019, 388–392). Interestingly, similar wax writing-boards for Sabaic have recently been found in Yemen (Stein 2021).

tance of a request to the earnestness of the greetings contained therein—even the most objective reports must convey the notion of the reporting official's veracity.[256] Radner's (2016b, 67) contrast of the cool, professional Assyrian official dispatching curt reports written by scribes versus the wheedling scholar's long-winded petitions is charming, but does not seem to reflect the oft-chaotic contents of the late Neo-Assyrian state correspondence, these even though the letters had passed through the 'filter' of the language employed by an administratively-trained scribe (see Ch. 2.6). A very crucial point identified by Postgate (2007a, 338–339), in turn, is that oral communication was heavily prioritised within the Assyrian administration; letters were considered inferior to personally speaking to the king or a superior, and a governor would report to the king in person in the event of an emergency, this explaining the deputy-heavy design of the Neo-Assyrian administration. What survives for the historian are often issues of secondary importance.

While administrative documents seem entirely objective, it is important to note that they only describe what is relevant to the administration—they allow us to "see like a state" in Scott's (1998) notable idiom, but it is impossible to remove the glasses. Very frequently, the immediate context of an administrative text cannot be usefully reconstructed; for example, only an educated guess can be made as to what the high officials listed in the tablets KAV 135, 160, and 167 were at all receiving. While the methodology employed in this work seeks to avoid teleology wherever possible, the reader will already have noted the use in the work hitherto of late Neo-Assyrian state correspondence and other contemporary archival texts in a limited fashion to illustrate certain examples. It is only to be hoped that the find of a sizeable early Neo-Assyrian state archive will fill in the many blanks of the period. The process of provincialisation itself might now be considered.

The life of an early Neo-Assyrian province began in one of three ways: It was carved from a larger pre-existing province, it was created *ex nihilo* from a 'proto-provincial' formation, or it was fashioned from an annexed vassal polity. The first of these cases is presently somewhat seldom, but this may well be on grounds of the limited sources for this period. Certainly, the large 'transitional case' (see below, Ch. 2.4.2) province of Katmuḫi experienced various problems in controlling its own holdings which prompted Tukultī-Ninurta II and Aššur-nāṣir-apli II to establish a new Assyrian province in its southern half at Tillê while leaving the northern half in control of the local ruler serving as governor of Katmuḫi (see Ch. 4.1.3).[257] The second of these strategies was the creation of a 'proto-province', usually by means of a 'spot-expansion' (see Ch. 2.3.4). By directly taking ownership of a city, the king kept it under his authority until it could be rationalised into a province. This tactic was particularly employed by Adad-nārārī II, compelling his successor Tukultī-Ninurta II to undertake the provincialising himself during the 880's. In the matter of a decade or so, this proto-provincial settlement would either become a provincial centre or be discarded by the king for any number of reasons as unusable. The third method was through the unseating of a local ruler who was already a vassal and his replacement with an Assyrian governor. In some cases, scarce little may have actually changed under the new Assyrian regime, but others would have seen the imposition of a recognisable Assyrian state apparatus, particularly during the late Neo-Assyrian period.

Perhaps logically, the act of incorporation was generally expressed with expressions relating to the verb *manû* 'to count', as has already been seen in respect to the phrase *ana miṣir Māt-Aššur manû* and in the 'spot-expansion'-expression *ana ramānīya amnu.* The administrative connotation of this expression is evident, and it is this integration which seems so central—indeed, while the fixation of researchers has been on territorial expansion (as has been seen in Ch. 2.3.5), the majority of early Neo-Assyrian references are to the counting of people as Assyrians.

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256 Indeed, various rhetorical strategies are commonly employed within the letters which hint at officials (and their scribes) trying to cover their backs—such as anticipating a possible query and supplying an answer to it—and a reticence to broach dire news to the king is evident (Bernbeck 2010, 149). As in bureaucracies the world over from time immemorial until today, corruption is silent—it would be fascinating to identify what is *not* stated in Assyrian correspondence.

257 From what is presently known, the practice of subdividing conquered territories into two or more provinces seems thus to have been an invention of the early Neo-Assyrian period. Radner (2010a, 29) furnishes the subdivision of Katmuḫi into Katmuḫi/Šaḫuppâ and Tillê in 879 as the earliest example, but it is noteworthy that the same year (and indeed campaign by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II) also witnessed the creation of a set of two provinces in the Upper Tigris basin at Sinā-bu and Tušḫan respectively.

It was generally sought to create provinces of a manageable size, and oversized 'super-provinces' such as Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu (see Ch. 4.3.3–4) were a rarity born of political circumstances. This process frequently involved the subdivision of kingdoms into two individual provinces as noted by Radner (2010a, 29). Provincialisation would have been accompanied by the inauguration of a royal residence and presumably various symbolic acts, perhaps with the king present. In the inscriptions of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, Šarru-ukīn, and Sîn-aḫḫē-erība, the ritual act of depositing a 'weapon of Aššur' (*kakku ša Aššur*) in a local temple was described as part of the symbolic annexation of a province (see Holloway 2002, 198–200); no mention of this is extant for the early Neo-Assyrian period, although it may originate in Middle Assyrian practice.[258] Alternately, the swift expansions of the late Neo-Assyrian period may have necessitated an 'invented tradition' to justify culturally such unprecedented conquests.[259]

With the transformation of a region into an Assyrian province would have come various shifts beyond the imposition of an Assyrian governor. For example, renamings of settlements with programmatic or propagandistic names could occur (Pongratz-Leisten 1997b).[260] This may well have developed out of the earlier custom of naming new settlements after their founders, in the Middle Assyrian period most famously Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta (Tulūl al-ʿAqar, Iraq), or the many *dunnu* settlements of the Assyrian countryside. Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I's christening of a settlement at modern Tall ʾAwšarīya, Syria, on the Upper Euphrates *Ana-Aššur-utēr-aṣbat* "I returned this (city) to Aššur and took it" (see Ch. 4.6.2) marks an early example of this process, which seems truly to have taken off during the consolidatory efforts of Tukultī-Ninurta II who created an eponymous residence Nēmed-Tukultī-Ninurta and probably also the Assyrian Zagrine fort Tukulti-Aššur-aṣbat (Edmonds 2023b, 283). This practice continued throughout the Neo-Assyrian period, and, indeed, names became more elaborate, with an extremely striking example being the renaming of a series of settlements with extremely programmatic names in Šubria after Aššur-aḫa-iddina conquered the border state in 673 (RINAP 4, 33 iv 6′–7′; iv 14′–22′), although it seems unlikely that these were actually used in practice. Indeed, many programmatic names seem to have swiftly fallen by the wayside, with the local toponyms being pragmatically used by the Assyrian administration—indeed, sometimes even the names of long-conquered polities continued to resurface in curious quarters (see Demsky 2008).[261]

There were no official disparities in standing between provinces within the *Māt-Aššur* (Postgate 1992a, 252),[262] although, in practice, high officials were able to sometimes lord over multiple provinces and use one as their 'capital', as evident from the 'westen bloc' which emerged in the Great Bend of the Euphrates during the Šamšī-ilu-era (Ch. 4.6.4), or the expansive holdings of Pālil-ēreš on the Lower Ḫābūr and Middle Euphrates (Ch. 4.4.4). From the mid- to late 9th century onwards, eunuchs increasingly came to be installed as provincial governors, presumably as an attempt to centralise control over the provinces and curtail hereditary governorship. The inscriptions of Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and his successors are striking for consistently mentioning that the unnamed governors set over a newly annexed territory were eunuchs.[263]

Over time, there would have been a gradual cultural assimilation or hybridisation of the local population which would have been spurred by deportations.[264] These are already attested for the reign of Adad-nārārī II

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258 Postgate (1992a, 255) has noted that the weapon of Aššur was an iron dagger, harking back to a time when iron was a valuable quantity.

259 The placement of the dagger is highly reminiscent of (albeit unrelated to) the concept of "spear-won land" within Hellenic culture, as first described in Homer (see recent discussion in Degen 2019). The most famous example of this was the casting by Alexander the Great of a spear onto Asia's shore upon the crossing of the Hellespont, claiming thereby the entirety of Asia as "spear-won land" (Diodorus, *Bibliotheca historiae* 17.17.2).

260 For an overview of the Neo-Assyrian method of naming places, see Luukko 2018.

261 Conversely, Fales (2023, 441) argues that these programmatic toponyms functioned as effective propaganda considering their curt, slogan-like quality.

262 By the same token, there is no terminology for or concept of 'sub-provinces' within a given province, although secondary towns with a subsidiary administrative function must obviously have existed (Postgate 1995, 3).

263 Nonetheless, the notion that subsequent governors of such territories were necessarily eunuchs is speculation.

264 Radner (2015b, 108–109) prefers the term 'resettlement' for these 'permanent vacations', noting: "'Deportation', as the strategy of mass resettlement in the Assyrian Empire is usually called (a misnomer, given various inapplicable associations such as marginalization and extermination), could indeed be regarded as a privilege rather than a punishment. . . . On the other hand, dis-

in a limited manner, but would be carried out on a huge scale by the late Neo-Assyrian period (Oded 1979; Sano 2020). Tied to these late deportations would have been the remarkable landscape tranformations which have already been mentioned (Wilkinson et al. 2005); while it is clear that agricultural expansion was a very important aspect of early Neo-Assyrian policy (see Ch. 2.3.5), the present author would separate this from the truly monumental creation of a vast landscape of settlements of standardised size infilling unexploited agricultural areas, which seems to be a late Neo-Assyrian acceleration of this earlier tendency. The selection of a city as a provincial capital and the expansion of cultivable land and creation of new settlements seems to have yielded a reduction in 'second order' settlements (Postgate 1979, 216–217), although the 'dicephalous' province of Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu presents at least one exception to this rule, and others are also likely to exist—certainly, Dūr-Katlimmu cannot be presently distinguished as having been a provincial capital, despite it having served as a vital Assyrian centre in the west (see Ch. 4.4.4).

This phenomenon of reorganisation has prompted some to envisage a considerable increase in wealth disparity under Assyrian rule, most recently and comprehensively Ristvet (2024, 346–347), who draws upon a variety of data to argue this point; however, her argument relies upon a programmatic structuralist core-periphery model, and a number of conflicting observations. For example, she notes the proliferation of elite homes within provincial capitals as evidence of this; while such a state of affairs bespeaks the growth of a new urban, provincial elite and the 'rustication' of the lower classes, but not necessarily any real growth in wealth disparity, which would only be observable with a much more representative sample.[265] More compelling is her example of the increasing impoverishment of graves at Qalʿa Širqāṭ and Tall Billā during the Neo-Assyrian period (Creamer 2021a; 2024), although this presupposes the representativeness of the available data, and its applicability to Assyria as a whole, neither of which can yet be effectively established. Finally, she argues that resentment against the Assyrian state led to its collapse; as is demonstrated in this work, it was rather the poor leadership of its last few kings, rather than the system itself (see Ch. 2.5.1). Moreover, the provincial system was perpetuated more or less wholesale by the succeeding Neo-Babylonian Empire, and Assyrian bureaucracy retained following the fall of Assyria both at Dūr-Katlimmu (e.g. Kreppner 2021; Kühne 2021a, 381–383) and in the province of the *rab šāqê* (Toptaş/Akyüz 2021; Roaf 2021), suggesting that this had been a successful system.

All of the points presented here describe an ideal early Neo-Assyrian provincialisation 'package'. In reality, ever more examples are emerging of situations in which an intermediary formation blending vassal state and province occurred, conventionally termed 'transitional cases', the phenomenon of which will now be investigated. In presenting these only semi-integrated political entities as full Neo-Assyrian provinces, and even bestowing Assyrian names upon local rulers, Assyrian sources sought to make everything possible 'count' as a province, a maximalist bureaucratic stance which only partially conceals the local discontinuities and misunderstandings in the governing of Assyrian 'transitional cases.'

2.4.2 Reading between the lines. Language and 'transitional cases' in the early Neo-Assyrian state

While the notion of a monolithic Assyrian demography and linguistic situation was current for the first half of the 20th century, the recognition of ever more Aramaic inscriptions and linguistic content in Assyrian contexts (see the *Forschungsgeschichte* running though Fales 2000) provoked a model of the 'Aramaicisation' of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (e.g. Tadmor 1982), the premise being that the mass deportations of the late Neo-Assyrian state had fostered Aramaic as a spoken *koinē*.

With the discovery of a 9th-century Akkadian-Aramaic bilingual inscription on a statue from Tall Faḫḫār-īya, Syria (Abou Assaf 1981; Abou Assaf et al. 1982), this model was revised (Millard 1983), with the under-

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graced Assyrians, rather than being killed, were sent away from their home in order to redeem themselves as colonists in the state's service."

265 Squitieri and Altaweel (2022) conversely deduce a reduction in house size come the Neo-Assyrian period, which they take as evidence of a growing wealth disparity. Their own study is somewhat handicapped by its analysis of the Neo-Assyrian period as a single unit, and its inability to encompass the massive agrarian settlement expansion of this period.

standing now that "bilingualism was current on the western periphery of Assyria, the bulk of whose population consisted of Arameans, at the very least from the mid ninth century B.C.E. onward" (Tadmor 1991, 419). Since then, the Assyrian Aramaic textual record has grown immensely, and the question has now shifted to identifying the degree to which Aramaic was adopted institutionally by the Assyrian administration (e.g. Radner 2014a, 84–86; 2021b, 166–177).

Yet, the discovery of the Tall Faḫḫārīya Statue also had important repercussions for the reconstruction early Neo-Assyrian provincial governance. Within the inscription, its commissioner, the governor of the local Assyrian province of Gūzāna, was termed *šaknu* 'governor' in the Akkadian text, but *malk* 'king' in the Aramaic version. From his name, *Adad-itʾi* in the cuneiform text and *Hadad-yisʾî* in the alphabetic version, and that of his father who had also been governor of Gūzāna, rendered as *Šamaš-nūrī* in Akkadian, and as *Sās-nûrî* in Aramaic, it became clear that the governors of Gūzāna during this period were actually local rulers who had retained their jobs as Assyrian governors following annexation.

Information on this curious phenomenon was further expanded with the discovery and publication of a range of official commemorative inscriptions from the Medioeuphratine polity of Sūḫu (ʿĀna and Ḥadīṯa Districts, Iraq) which called the nominal governors of this Assyrian province 'governors of (the land of) Sūḫu and (the land of) Māri' and presented genealogies and deeds in annalistic style as if they were kings (Cavigneaux/Ismail 1990).

This evidence was sufficient for Postgate (1992a, 256–257) to suggest a model to explain these ambiguous situations within the early Neo-Assyrian administration, which he termed 'transitional cases'—states both within and without Assyria straddling the otherwise clear-cut distinction between province and vassal. Grouping these into the broad categories of "'internal' and 'external' anomalies", Postgate suggested for the former category that their ruling dynasties were retained for efficiency:

> Within Assyrian territory it need not surprise us if pockets of local autonomy persist until quite late, interrupting its continuity, as Liverani has stressed. There would have been no need to antagonize the local population and waste Assyrian resources in reducing polities which were clearly going to co-operate. Hence the survival of local dynasties in places like the Habur basin—firmly within Assyria by Assyrian reckoning—did create discontinuities in the oil-stain of direct Assyrian control

For the latter category, 'transitional cases' beyond Assyria, he noted the following:

> This was not the same as the later practice of attaching an Assyrian agent to a local court, best attested in the Phoenician ports. Rather, it entailed replacing the local ruler by, or converting him into, a 'governor' answerable to the king, but probably not the incorporation of his territory or local administration into the Assyrian system proper, as they do not appear to have been provincial governors of the regular variety.

At the time, Postgate identified the regions of Bīt-Baḫiāni/Gūzāna (Tall Ḥalaf, Syria), Dēru (Tall al-ʿAqar, Iraq), (Ša)dikanni (Tall ʿAǧāǧa, Syria), and Sūḫu as examples of this phenomenon to varying degrees, and suggested that none of the 'transitional cases' was all that long-lived.[266]

Building upon these findings, the present author (Edmonds 2021) investigated the strange case of the Assyrian province of of Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu in the Upper Tigris, which seems to have been established around the mid-9th century without any attested conquest of its capital Amēdu (see Chs. 4.3.3–4). From patient study, he found that the first-attested local governor's name was attested in two puzzling variants as the eponym for 846, namely as *Ḫadi-libbušu* 'his heart is joyful' and *Iḫtadi-libbušu* 'his heart rejoiced'. Inasmuch as these variants were widespread and simultaneous (having been used to date the year in royal inscriptions and documents, as well as appearing in the Eponym List and Chronicle), the only conclusion could be that a confusion had emerged as to the writing of his name. However, the variation in the name element *Ḫadi-* 'he/it is joyful' and *Iḫtadi-* 'he/she/it rejoiced' which represented the same verb in Akkadian, but in two forms, one the predicative verbal adjective (i.e. stative) and the other a finite form in the perfect tense, could

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266 "This can only have been a transitory solution, and is hardly attested after the ninth century. There must have been strong pressure, both practical and ideological, to drop one side or the other of the divide. Practically, there was simply the convenience of conformity to a well-established pattern, creating comparability with other states in the same position." (Postgate 1992a, 257).

not have come about through a visual or auditory error in Akkadian. Rather, its only plausible explanation was an error in the translation of this name from Aramaic into Akkadian, as the written form of the corresponding Aramaic verb *ḥdy* in the comparable forms in Aramaic is written identically in alphabetic script as *ḥdh* and can only be distinguished aurally, i.e. *ḥādᵉ* 'he/it is joyful' (m.s. active participle) versus *ḥᵉdā* 'he/it rejoiced' (3.s.m. perfect), meaning that the name had been translated from Aramaic, and that the confusion must have arisen from the ambiguity in its written form, as summarised below in Table 5:

Table 5: Ambiguity in the names of Ḫadi-/Iḫtadi-libbušu (after Edmonds 2023a, 150, Tab. 1).

Aramaic name	Name written in Aramaic script	Rendering of name in Akkadian in inscriptions
Ḫādᵉ-libbeh 'his heart is joyful'	*ḥdhlbbh*	Ḫadi-libbušu 'his heart is joyful'
Ḫᵉdā-libbeh 'his heart rejoiced'	*ḥdhlbbh*	Iḫtadi-libbušu 'his heart rejoiced'

This finding brought with it a further realisation, namely that this first governor was actually a local ruler who had been permitted to continue ruling as a provincial governor, with his name having simply been translated into Akkadian for use as the eponym of the year 849, which would explain the lack of any attested conquest of the city of Amēdu, the formidable capital of the polity of Bīt-Zamāni. This situation perfectly paralleled that known for the previously mentioned province of Gūzāna, which was not conquered, but rather quietly absorbed into Assyria with its rulers remaining in charge as governors. Indeed, as correctly reconstructed by Lipiński (2000, 129) and Dornauer (2010, 57), the two aforementioned governors of Gūzāna both appeared in the Assyrian Eponym List and Chronic, Sās-nûrî/Šamaš-nūrī as *Šamaš-nūrī* (ep. 866) and his son Hadad-yisʾî/Adad-itʾi as one *Adad-rēmanni* (ep. 841), firmly attested as governor of Gūzāna during this period.[267] The name *Adad-itʾi* is only a phonetic rendering of the Aramaic name *Hadad-yisʾî* 'Hadad is my aid' in cuneiform; the Assyrian scribes translating his name for his eponymate chose the commonplace Akkadian name *Adad-rēmanni* 'O Adad, help me!' so as to observe the royal naming taboo: the precise translation of *Hadad-yisʾî is Adad-nārārī*. These findings are summarised in the following table (Tab. 6):

Table 6: Renderings in Akkadian of the names of the governors Sās-nûrî and Hadad-yiʿsî (after Edmonds 2023a, 151, Tab. 2).

Aramaic name	Name written in Aramaic script	Akkadian name in the Tall Faḫḫārīya Inscription	Akkadian name in Assyrian documentation
Sās-nûrî "Sās is my light"	*ssnwry*	*Šamaš-nūrī* "Šamaš is my light"	*Šamaš-nūrī* "Šamaš is my light"
Hadad-yiʿsî "Hadad is my aid"	*hdysʿy*	*Adad-itʾi* (phonetic rendering, no meaning)	*Adad-rēmanni* "O Adad, help me!"

Hence, a phenomenon could now be identified of local dynasties with Aramaic names ruling as Assyrian governors during the 9th century in cases in which no violent conquest had occurred, and Postgate's list of 'transitional cases' now numbers a total of five definite examples. In turn, the present author (Edmonds 2023a) was very recently also able to identify yet another example of faulty translation, this time of the name of an early governor of the land of Sūḫu. A recently published duck-shaped weight (Finkel/Reade 2019) provided an inscription of this ruler in Akkadian on one of his own weights, and, unlike its rendering in the annals of Tukultī-Ninurta II as *Ilu-ibni*, this governor's name on the weight read *Ilu-bāni* (DINGIR-*ba-ni*). Even more remarkably, this governor described himself as follows:

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267 See Edmonds' (2021, 85) refutation Younger, Jr.'s (2016, 265) objection.

DINGIR-*ba-ni* NAM ZAG ^m*tukul*-MAŠ ŠID AŠ ŠÚ MAN KUR-AŠ ^ki

Ilu-bāni the marcher governor (*pīḫat pāṭi*) of Tukultī-Ninurta (II), viceregent of Aššur, king of the universe, king of Assyria

As is further discussed in Chapter 4.4.5, Sūḫu was in a formal sense actually only a vassal at this time, and is depicted as a distant tributary in the inscriptions of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (RIMA 2, 0.101.1 i 99–101); Ilu-bāni seems here to have invented the otherwise unattested title of *pīḫat pāṭi* for himself, and curiously does not mention his governorship of Sūḫu but rather his subordination to Tukultī-Ninurta II. The attestations of his name can be summarised below (Tab. 7):

Table 7: A chronological overview of the writings of Ilu-bāni/-ibni's name (after Edmonds 2023a, 156, Tab. 4).

Date	Writing	Source
891–884 (Reign of Tukultī-Ninurta II)	DINGIR-*ba-ni*	Finkel and Reade 2019
885 (Reign of Reign of Tukultī-Ninurta II)	^mDINGIR-*ib-ni*	RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 70[268]
882 (Reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II)	^mDINGIR-DÙ	RIMA 2, 0.101.1 i 99–101

As the reader might have suspected, his name displays the same ambiguity in realisation attested for *Ḫadi-/Iḫtadi-libbušu*, namely the ambiguity in translating a third-weak Aramaic verb, here *bry* 'to create', the Aramaic cognate of Akkadian *banû* 'to create' on account of its identical appearance as *brh* when written as a m.s. active participle (*bār^e*) or a 3.m.s. perfect (*b^e rā*), as might be seen in the following table (Tab. 8):

Table 8: The Akkadian names of Ilu-bāni/-ibni and their proposed Aramaic origins (after Edmonds 2023a, 157, Tab. 5).

Akkadian name in inscriptions	Reconstructed Aramaic name	Name written in Aramaic script
^mDINGIR-*ba-ni* *Ilu-bāni* 'the god is the creator'	**Il-bār^e* 'the god is the creator'	**ʔlbrh*
DINGIR-*ib-ni* *Ilu-ibni* 'the god created'	**Il-b^e rā* 'the god created'	**ʔlbrh*

In this case, as Ilu-bāni/ibni's duck-weight was locally commissioned, it is clear that this was his own translation of his name into Akkadian, meaning that his actual Aramaic name was *Il-bār^e* 'the god is the creator'. As the very similar Akkadian name Ilu-ibni was very common, Assyrian scribes must have translated his name from its Aramaic writing **ʔlbrh* into this conventional name independently of his own local translation efforts.[269] In the latest attestation of his name following his diplomatic visit to Kalḫu, the Assyrian scribe has 'hedged his bets' by writing the logographic form ^mDINGIR-DÙ which could be conceivably be read either way. Hence, the examples identified of Aramaic-speaking local rulers serving as Assyrian governors with Akkadian names might be collected together accordingly (Tab. 9).

There is an interesting political aspect which might be ascertained from this pattern. The governor of Sūḫu Il-bār^e had probably been imposed by Adad-nārārī II following his defeat of Sūḫu during the last years of his reign (see Chs. 3.4.1; 4.4.5); hence, he sought to strengthen his ties to the next Assyrian king Tukultī-Ninurta II by having himself described with a unique title emphasising his personal relationship with the

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268 The parallel text KAL 3, 20 is unfortunately broken at this juncture, so the writing of the governor's name here is unknown.
269 As the name *Ilu-bāni* is still entirely correct and attested in the Neo-Assyrian prosopographical corpus, albeit less often (Baker 2000a), this must have been a mistranslation, rather than a 'renaming' as attested for Adad-rēmanni/Hadad-yisʿî.

Table 9: Governors of early Neo-Assyrian 'Transitional Cases' known to possess multiple Names (after Edmonds 2023a).

Aramaic name	Biography	Name written in Aramaic script	Rendering of name in Akkadian in local inscriptions	Rendering of name in Akkadian in inscriptions from the Assyrian heartland
Il-bār^e 'the god is the creator'	Governor of the land of Sūḫu (ruled ca. 892–878), self-styled 'marcher governor'	* *ʾlbrh*	DINGIR-*ba-ni* *Ilu-bāni* 'the god is the creator'	DINGIR-*ib-ni* *Ilu-ibni* 'the god created' (note also the ambiguous writing DINGIR-DÙ)
Ḥād^e-/Ḥ^{e}dā-libbeh 'his heart is joyful' / 'his heart rejoiced'	Governor of the province of Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu (ep. 849)	* *ḥdhlbbh*	–	*ḫa-di-/iḫ-ta-di-li-bu-šu/šú* *Ḥadi-/Iḫtadi-libbušu* 'his heart is joyful' / 'his heart rejoiced'
Sās-nûrî 'Sās is my light'	Governor of the province of Gūzāna (ep. 866)	*ssnwry*	^{md}UTU-ZALAG$_2$ *Šamaš-nūrī* 'Šamaš is my light'	^{md}UTU-*nu-ri* *Šamaš-nūrī* 'Šamaš is my light'
Hadad-yisʿî 'Hadad is my aid'	Governor of the province of Gūzāna (ep. 841)	*hdysʿy*	^{m}10-*it-ʾi* *Adad-itʾi* (phonetic rendering, no meaning)	^{d}IŠKUR-*rém-(a-)ni* *Adad-rēmanni* 'O Adad, help me!'

Assyrian monarch. To this end, he even indulged in 'imperial emulation' by creating his own duck-weight with a cuneiform inscription imitating the Assyrian examples in his possession,[270] and had his name translated into the Akkadian Ilu-bāni. The Assyrian administration, by means of contrast, had mistranslated his name from its form written in alphabetic Aramaic into the common name *Ilu-ibni*;[271] the confusion when Ilu-bāni arrived at Kalḫu for a diplomatic visit in 882 can only be imagined! By means of contrast, the governors of seem to have had a more distant relationship with the Assyrian state bureaucracy. As the devotional statue from Tall Faḫḫārīya was produced quite late in Adad-rēmanni/Hadad-yisʿî's tenure,[272] his eponymate as *Adad-rēmanni* must have been and gone. Either he never found out that the Assyrian administration had renamed him as such or he chose to ignore it and have his name rendered phonetically in the Akkadian-language part of his inscription. While the statue itself is in Assyrian style, and the Akkadian inscription competently executed, no mention is made of the Assyrian king. Gūzāna would rebel in 808 from Assyria, and it may well be that its governors were champing at the bit for independence (see Ch. 4.1.6).

More generally, this finding bears considerable import for the reconstruction of the administration in the Ğazīra during this period. In all of the cases cited, there is a clear disconnect evident between the 'central' Assyrian bureaucracy and the administration of the provinces as early as the 890's, one which could only have occurred through mistranslation between two languages: Akkadian and Aramaic. In turn, these mistakes are literate and would not have occurred aurally. This means that these governors corresponded exclusively in Aramaic letters with their Assyrian overlords. Indeed, precisely such a letter sent from the Aramaic

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270 The weight corresponds to Assyrian standards, and was probably based upon an example given to him by Tukultī-Ninurta II, who seems to have sought to introduce metric standardisation within his kingdom and its dependencies (see Ch. 3.4.2).
271 The alternate scenario would be that the compiler of the detailed itinerary-style royal inscription of Tukultī-Ninurta II (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 41–127) was working from an Aramaic *Vorlage* made by a bematist (presumably an Assyrian scribe accompanying the king on campaign), and *Il-bār^e* (*ʾlbrh*) had only become *Ilu-ibni* once the text had been handed over to another scribe to compile into a cuneiform Akkadian inscription. However, this second explanation would imply that the textual documentation of an Assyrian campaign in the field could be accomplished in *Aramaic*—a potentially practical notion, but one running entirely counter to the expectations of Assyrianists. Considering analogies to the case of Ḫadi-/Iḫtadi-libbušu, the first scenario is presently to be preferred.
272 This inscription displays a complex internal redactional structure displaying three distinct stages of composition and the recopying of the inscription from one statue to another, implying that considerable time had elapsed (see Ch. 4.1.6).

polity of Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni to the Assyrian king in late 887/early 886 is quoted in an unfortunately fragmentary passage of Tukultī-Ninurta II's annals (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 4–6):[273]

> ᵐbi-x-[x . . .]-šú šá ᵐam-me-ba-['a-li] a-na UGU-ia lu iš-pu-ra ma-aˀ ᵐbi-a-la-si ˡúe-mu-qi-a a-na [UGU]-šú a-sa-pa-ra EGIR [-šu . . .] iš-tu ᵘʳúú-di a-na ᵘʳúšá-úˀ-[ra] a-na si-li-ḫi šu-a-te ir-te-di-ma

> Verily, Bi-x, the of Ammi-baˀal wrote to me, stating: "I sent my forces in pursuit of Bialasi [. . .], he fled from Udu to Šawra in a single javelin's throw!"

Besides the obvious fact that the sender was a native speaker of Aramaic, this passage seems to contain two Aramaicisms. Firstly, as noted by Lipiński (2000, 139–140), the phrase *ana siliḫi redû* is a hapax in Akkadian but does have a good cognate in a Hebrew expression found repeatedly in the Book of Job. Secondly, as he also intimates, the toponym ᵘʳúšá-úˀ-[ra] seems closer to *Ṣawrā*, the modern Ṭūrōyō name of this toponym (Savur, Turkey), than the Akkadian name *S/Šuru*.[274] This would again suggest an Aramaic *Vorlage* (i.e. text upon which it was based). While it cannot be excluded that the sender had an Assyrian scribe with him, it seems more likely that this letter was sent in Aramaic and translated for the purposes of the royal inscription. Regardless, combined with the other evidence, this points to the widespread use of Aramaic by the Neo-Assyrian in dealing with the governors of 'transitional cases'. Local cuneiform inscriptions from the Ǧazīra during this period are invariably commemorative, and must hence be understood as expressions of status, and deviations from the norm rather than evidence of the general use of cuneiform within the chancelleries of these 'transitional cases'.[275] Indeed, part of the scribal curriculum used in the Ǧazīra survives in the shape of the proverbs of ʾAḥîqar, long recognised to be older in date than the remainder of the ʾAḥîqar-composition, which Niehr (2007, 13–14) has reasonably suggested as having been collected within the context of scribal training and the more general education of elites. He locates their compilation in the chancelleries of one of the independent Aramean states near the Euphrates in the 9th century on grounds of a proverb's reference to a Tēmannite woman. Here, his theory might be slightly tweaked, locating them rather in the context of a Ǧazīran scribal centre just prior to or *already* under Assyrian domination, perhaps as a 'transitional case'. This would explain their subsequent couching within a novellic framing story which must have been composed within Assyria during the final decades of the Assyrian Empire (see Ch. 2.5.4)—these proverbs continued to be used to train generations of scribes (whether of Assyrian or Aramean background) in Aramaic *within* Assyria, although it is unclear as to whether this would have been within a state or private context (see discussion in Ch. 2.6), and may have become quite a beloved part of the curriculum considering their varied and interesting content, much like Catullus for generations of British public schoolboys. Cherishing his traditional scribal education in Aramaic, an unknown author had composed a dramatic romance of intrigue and betrayal of a scholar in the Assyrian court around these venerable proverbs as a tribute to the wisdom they contained. Aramaic would continue only to gain in popularity over the course of the Neo-Assyrian period, and come increasingly to be used in tandem with cuneiform in commemorative inscriptions, most famously at ʾArslān Ṭāš, Syria (see Ch. 4.6.4), or even alone at Tall ʾAwšarīya, Syria (see Ch. 2.2.6).[276] By the mid-8th century, Aramaic received increasing institutional use such as the use of alphabetic script alongside cuneiform on weights or Aramaic epigraphs upon cuneiform documents (Röllig 2005), and must be imag-

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273 This transliteration and translation takes into account the suggestions by Kessler (1980b, 62) and Lipiński (2000, 139–140). That this passage is a letter quotation is rendered plausible by another such example in the same text (RIMA 2, 0.100.5: 11–12), although Grayson (1991, 171) is correct in noting the difficulty in identifying the quotation's close.

274 See discussion of the historical geography of this region including this toponym in Ch. 4.3.

275 It is no coincidence that cache of administrative clay tablets from Tall Ḥalaf postdates the defeat of this city in 808 and the imposition of a new Assyrian administration complete with an Assyrian palace.

276 Fales (2007, 108) notes, the scant early visual evidence is of little help—scribes could probably just as easily write Aramaic on a writing board as cuneiform. The earliest depiction of scribes within the Neo-Assyrian visual corpus hails from the Salmānu-ašarēd III's bronze gates found at Balāwāt and consists of a scribe creating a rock inscription with artisans (Schachner 2007, 173); Reade (2012, 701–705) argues convincingly that the scribe carries a writing board—it seems unlikely that clay would make sense in the field. Radner (2014a, 84. 225, fn. 95) further identifies a pair of scribes, one with a scroll, on the bronzes. As Reade notes (2012, 706), the cuneiform scribe always takes pride of place among 8th-century depictions of pairs of scribes using both media in tandem.

ined as ubiquitous by the end of the Empire, the Aramaic writing system even later being referred to as 'Assyrian writing' in Demotic Egyptian, Greek and Mishnaic Hebrew sources (Steiner 1993).

What these findings demonstrate once more is the decentralisation of the early Neo-Assyrian realm, and the pragmatism of the Assyrian state in dealing with local polities, with Aššur-nāṣir-apli II incorporating both Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni and Bīt-Baḫiāni/Gūzāna peacefully into Assyria near the end of his reign. It also demonstrates the differing manners in which local rulers sought to position themselves between the Assyrian king and their own people within transitional cases. As will be seen in the regional studies, a local ruler actually had a great deal to gain from 'joining' the Assyrian realm. Not only was he freed from potentially arbitrarily ever-increasing tribute obligations, but he now had a 'place at the table'—he could actively influence Assyrian politics rather than being the passive recipient of them. In turn, if the incorporation were timed properly, then he stood to squeeze various concessions out of the Assyrian king. For example, Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni ended up being fused with the pre-existing province of Sinābu to create a 'super-province' called alternately Amēdu, Bīt-Zamāni, Naʾiri, or Sināibu run *de facto* by the ruler of Amēdu. As such, he had greatly increased the size of his own realm by becoming an Assyrian governor.

Indeed, as demonstrated by the case of Bīt-Baḫiāni/Gūzāna, the local dynasty had joined the Assyrian fold at an opportune moment, but continued to view their own kingdom as semi-independent, and themselves as kings. At the right juncture in 808, a rebellion broke out here—perhaps on account of the shakiness of the Sammu-rāmat-regime—but was crushed. Gūzāna's rulers may well have realised that it was only a matter of time before their own dynasty was replaced by an Assyrian governor from the heartland, perhaps a eunuch. Certainly, a similar case is known to have happened at Sūḫu around 797–796 when its governor Tabnēa was called to Assyria on business and treacherously killed on the orders of the governor Pālil-ēreš, in the wake of which he seized Anat and gave the governorship of the now reduced land of Sūḫu to an unscrupulous relative of his, one Iqīša-Marduk (see Chs. 4.4.4–5). In much the same manner, Mušēzib-Ninurta, vice-regent of (Ša)dikanni, was unceremoniously dispatched by Dayyān-Aššur, the increasingly overbearing *turtānu* of Salmānu-ašarēd III, at some point in the 830's or early 820's so that he could add this old Assyrian city in the Ḫābūr to his own fief (see Ch. 4.4.4). Whichever way it was worded or however a local king presented himself to his people, a deal with the Assyrian state was 'eating cherries with the devil'. Whether going out in a dramatic rebellion, or getting 'whacked by the don' at an unexpected moment, a local king who became an Assyrian governor had condemned either himself or his children to a brutal end.[277]

2.5 "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown". The early Neo-Assyrian world of the king

2.5.1 The man at the centre of the world

"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown"—Prince Hal's journey to the throne of England in Shakespeare's *Henriad* presents an archetypical transformation of the youthful adventures of a prince into the grim realities of kingship; certainly, the life of an Assyrian prince or king contained just as much splendour, intrigue, and brutality as any of the Shakespearian histories, if not more. The Mesopotamian conception of the cosmos was profoundly monarchical, and that of Assyrian culture even more concentratedly so. Unlike his Babylonian colleague, the Assyrian king had retained his ancient functions within not only the profane but also sacred sphere—as both king of Assyria and vicar of the god Aššur, he was king and pope alike (see Machinist 2006, 153–159).[278] The Assyrian king stood at the zenith of his world, the ultimate authority within his realm. Indeed, the king could even be conceptualised as a being distinct and separately created from the remainder

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277 It is admittedly possible that some transitional cases were quietly absorbed following the death of a local ruler in a system not dissimilar from the 'doctrine of lapsation' known from the Indian Raj, but little evidence of this survives for Assyria.
278 It is probably on account of these sacral functions that Assyria's kingship seems to have remained the preserve of a single family all the way until empire's end; no obvious breaks in the line can be detected, and accusations of illegitimacy within the Assyrian royal family are remarkably rare (consider CM 55 A7 r.7 as an important possible exception).

of mankind (Mayer 1987).[279] As such, he was at least notionally only beholden to the god Aššur, his own people, and the opinion of future kings. For example, a commandment from a 9th-century text describing the investiture of the eunuch Nergal-āpil-kūmūʾa as the first governor of Kalḫu states as follows (SAA 12, 83 o. 21′):

[*šum-ma* LUGAL] ⸢*iq*⸣-*ṭi-bi ma-a* GAZ *bal-liṭ ki-i* ⸢*pi*⸣-*i* [LUGAL . . .]

[Should the king] command "kill!" or "spare!", then (he will do) as [the king commands . . .]

In reality, this absolutism would have been constantly encumbered by different officials, factions, and organisations beneath him, and demands on him placed by the political and cultic calendar, not to mention the annual campaign. In turn, the institution of kingship contained a vast body of religious and cultural norms and traditions designed to police the king's own behaviour. For example, the case of the governor of Aššur celebrating after retrieving his wife from the harem of a recently deceased Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (SAA 12, 95) demonstrates that the Assyrian monarch could notionally possess any woman in his kingdom,[280] but that the social pressure against this Gilgāmeš-like *droit de seigneur* may well have been considerable.[281]

The official presentation of Assyrian kings sought to homogenise the present incumbent with his royal forefathers, so that a striking conservatism is evident in royal self-depiction. For example, the royal titulary displays only gradual shifts until the late Neo-Assyrian period (Cifola 1995). In turn, the use of traditional throne names blended the achievements of the king with his forefathers (see below Ch. 2.5.3).[282] Moreover, early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and chronographic documents such as the Assyrian King List sought to present kingship as an unbroken and peaceful succession from father to son, with dramatic conflicts over the Assyrian kingship between brothers and uncles relegated to the more distant past, although one wonders whether 'Assyrian on the street' would ever have believed this. Finally, the idealised official art of Assyrian kings on reliefs and wall paintings depicts them as virile and mature warriors or priests (in the 'James Bond'-age of optimal experience and physical strength) completely indistinguishable from one another—there is no 'portraiture' in Assyrian royal art (Winter 2009; Dittmann 2018).[283] This situation of an omnipotent but homogenised king has led to a somewhat paradoxical situation within some quarters of the discipline of Assyrian history, wherein scholars have focused on reconstructing an 'ideology' of the king as the most potent being of the universe while considering the actual operation of the Assyrian realm and its expansion within structuralist frameworks minimising the king's impact upon policy. This is presumably born of a somewhat justifiable reaction to the 'great men' narrative of history, in which the ancients themselves seemed to have believed (see Chs. 1.1–2), but it lacks nuance.

This is aptly illustrated by the popular image of the Assyrian king as static and palace-bound, which is an imposition of the unusual reigns of the final kings of Assyria upon a much more dynamic era. This is best exemplified by Liverani's (2009, 82) portrayal of the 'king in his palace' and his decision-making:

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279 It is for this reason that the inscriptions of some Assyrian kings who had not originally been intended for kingship mention them having already been chosen in the womb for kingship (meaning that their later unexpected designation as crown prince was actually 'the right choice all along'), and as to why the usurper Adad-nārārī II's late inscriptions describe the transformation of his stature "to that of lordship".

280 See Frahm (2014, 192; 2023a, 237); Radner (2012b, 695) reconstructs this rather as Sîn-aḫḫē-erība taking the governor's wife hostage for political leverage. The two views are not mutually exclusive.

281 Note that this trope survives later in Iamblichus' *Babyloniaca*, in which Garmos, king of Babylon, serves as the antagonist, relentlessly pursuing the heroine Sinone. On Gilgāmeš' *ius primae noctis*, see Rubio 2014.

282 One might consider in this respect the short 'pedigree remarks' contained in the titularies of early Neo-Assyrian kings, for which there is not yet any comprehensive survey.

283 Various visual tricks existed within the Assyrian palaces to homogenise the king with the idealised royal depictions around him. For example, Reade (2023a, 473) has recently noted the following in respect to the throne room of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II's North-West Palace: "The effect on B-23 would have been that the king, if seated on his royal stool in front of the panel, would have concealed the Sacred Tree, appearing himself as the central individual in a group of three kings, flanked by the two carved on the panel. In his absence the Sacred Tree would have seemed to be resting on the same stool."

> Information gathering was not an easy task, since the king lived rather secluded in the Palace and needed news from outside. Information—as already said—came through two separate channels: human and divine. The entire course of Mesopotamian kingship, as far as decision-making is concerned, is dominated by this double channel of information.

In this reconstruction based primarily upon the surviving letters from scholars of the Assyrian state archives, the king spends his entire day reading and answering correspondence from officials and diviners, completely cut off from the world around him, rather like a modern academic constantly refreshing his emails.[284] It is perhaps on account of the ample information available that scholarly treatments of royal decision-making are so dominated by discussion of the role of scholars (e.g. Radner 2011c; Pongratz-Leisten 2013)—this image can be demonstrated to be something of an exaggeration (see below Ch. 2.6). While a king could probably get caught in 'cultic red tape' if he was not careful, and a wily adviser with augurs and haruspices in his pocket could control the king's movements through inventive use of the hemerologies and various other means, a determined king could overcome such barriers. One of the methods by which a king would have maintained his control of events would have been to retain his mobility, setting his own programme of where he need be. Through campaigning and building projects and other tasks at various locations, he could keep his own magnates busy and 'on their toes', and stop them from scheming.

Indeed, while probably not as 'nomadic' as later Achaemenid kings, the Assyrian king was probably on the move a great deal,[285] a point which has only recently been recognised (Groß 2020, 501–502).[286] By the same token, the commonplace narrative of the relocation of the king's 'capital' from one city to another over the course of the Neo-Assyrian period (e.g. Kertai 2013a; 2015; 2021) is also a gross simplification of this period's reality.[287] Reade (2011, 109) is something of a lone voice in pointing out that there is no word for 'capital' in the Assyrian vocabulary, only of a royal city (*āl šarrūti*), of which there were examples throughout the realm. While Aššur remained *de facto* the religious centre of the Assyrian kingdom (Machinist 2015), and thus the closest approximation to a capital,[288] wherever the king was *was* essentially the centre of the state (Reade

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284 As the occasional use of the verb *šušmû* within the Assyrian state correspondence intimates (e.g. SAA 5, 152 r. 4), reports were actually read out loud to the king (the mediating role of the scribe in this process as a 'communications specialist' was evidently important, but remains difficult to define precisely; see Ch. 2.6).

285 Barjamovic (2011, 52) downplays this notion: "When the entire royal court journeyed to another city, the palace staff presumably had an opportunity to experience the world outside the walls. There is nothing to indicate that such travels were as common as in the later Persian Empire, but clearly the court did occasionally move from one palace to another."

286 One of the clearest examples of this is the attestation of palaces containing royal harems all over the Assyrian kingdom—Parpola (2012, 617) lists some 16 examples, and Frahm (2014, 178) counts 22—as it would be unnecessary to create such a private wing were the king not to visit at least occasionally (as the lack of such a women's quarters in the Šamšī-ilu-era Assyrian palace at Tall Ḫalaf which he was never intended to visit demonstrates). It seems little coincidence to the present author that some of these harems are in cities on Assyria's main overland communication route (e.g. Adian, Kasappa, Naṣībīna), and must have served as luxurious waystations for the king while he was in transit. Favaro's (2007) study of travel during the Neo-Assyrian period only discusses royal journeys in the context of campaigns.

287 It should be noted that while Kertai continues to retain his terminology of 'primary palace' (2013a) in more recent publications, he has come slowly to concede that other important but unexcavated palaces existed parallel to those he considers primary for different periods, acknowledging, for example, that Ninūa's unexcavated early Neo-Assyrian palace must have rivalled that of Aššur (2015, 13–16). While he uses size and monumentality as the criterion for a 'primary palace', he also claims that the Assyrian administration would have stayed in the 'primary palace', thus dismissing Aššur-aḫa-iddina residing the late years of his reign in Kalḫu and even constructing a new palace there (all of which would call for his administration being moved there) as it was not as monumental as the palace in Ninūa (2013a, 18). He also does not mention the important administrative role which Imgur-Enlil played during the late reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II which could well be enough to qualify it for the status of 'primary palace' from an emic point of view. Considering that Šamšī-ilu held the reins of power for the early to mid-8th century, the 'primary palace' for this period could be argued to have been that of Til-Barsip. Indeed, the Assyrian palace at Ḫarrānu remains tantalisingly unexplored, and other unfinished infrastructural transformations in the area (i.e. the *qanā* at Başbük, Turkey) could all point towards a (possibly abandoned) plan to create a new 'heartland' in Asyria's west to rival that in the east (see Ch. 4.6.4). Hence, Kertai's conclusions seem premature given the present state of research; as the Assyrian heartland is better archaeologically explored and the precise movements of the Assyrian kings are better-known, a much more mobile image of the king and further important Assyrian palaces is likely to emerge.

288 See Marti's (2023, 171–173) recent discussion of Aššur as the *āl palê* 'dynastic city' or *āl kiššūte* 'city of rule' throughout Assyrian history, implying that it was always Assyria's 'capital'.

2011, 109).[289] As an *āl šarrūti*, a 'royal city', every Assyrian provincial capital contained a palace which was at least notionally the king's own, even if the king never set foot in it. Already during the reign of Adad-nārārī II, the king elected to spend much of his time in Ninūa rather than Aššur and undertake building projects there, something shared by his son.[290] This was not only a strategic decision, as Ninūa was closer to most of the theatres of campaigning than Aššur, but also political—Adad-nārārī II was a usurper and sought to distance himself from his deposed brother Aššur-uballiṭ II*'s patronage of the city of Aššur. The foundation of Kalḫu by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II by no means meant that it was the notional 'capital' at the time, merely the new administrative centre (*ēkal kiššūtīya*, see Marti 2023, 174), and, even then, he seems to have been distracted from the creation of this new city by the construction of Imgur-Enlil during his final years.[291] Even in the same residential city, the king did not stay put—ideally, he would construct a new palace for himself, and move into it.[292] The late Neo-Assyrian kings also undertook large, palatial building projects in residence-cities throughout their realm (not only the heartland), and also stayed mobile.[293] Indeed, Thomason (2016a, 136–137) has noted the explicit portability of the king's ritual equipment—including the all-important portable sanctuary known as the *qirsu* (May 2010; 2015b)—which would have allowed him to deal with pressing cultic issues while on the move. That Assyrian kings are imagined as so static is the product of the extant royal correspondence (consisting only of letters received while the king was at that respective palace) and the monumental architecture of Assyrian palaces, onto which it is all too easy to project an image of modern sedentary life.[294]

The reality is that static kings were received very poorly by posterity. The Assyrian king Ninyas of Ctesias and other Classical authors is depicted as both scheming and indolent, doing away with his mother Semiramis only to spend his days among his eunuchs and harem in the city of Ninos. Considering the illness which seems to have plagued the last years of Adad-nārārī III's reign (see Ch. 3.5.4), the weakness of his successors under the Šamšī-ilu-regime, and the increasing influence of eunuchs within the kingdom, something of this story's gist does seem to hold. In much the same manner, the Classical tradition of Sardanapalus and his bizarre, slovenly behaviour does resonate with Aššur-bāni-apli,[295] who did not partake personally in campaigning, was fixated with his tenure as crown prince and the palace in which he spent his childhood, and does not even leave his own palace as a fictional character in the *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī*-story found within

289 Grasping 'at the other end of the stick', Thomason (2016b, 254) notes that "the sensorium of the Assyrian heartland flowed outward from the capital cities and accompanied the king wherever he travelled."—this is unsurprising were the king himself the 'heart' of his land.

290 Note in this regard that Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's inscriptions (RINAP 3, 1: 66–67; 2: 37–38; 3: 37–38; 4: 64–65; 15 v 28–39; 16 v 51–61; 17 v 34–47) describe Ninūa as having been the site at which his ancestors since time immemorial exercised dominion, ruled their subjects, and received annual tribute. Proceeding from the notion that there was only one Assyrian 'capital' at a time and it had never before been Ninūa, Lanfranchi (2017, 174) is unable to explain this, and concludes that this must reflect a literary fiction. In fact, this may well refer to Adad-nārārī II and Tukultī-Ninurta II, if not even earlier Assyrian kings.

291 Maul (2000a, 389) has also correctly noted that Aššur-nāṣir-apli II chose to be buried in Aššur, as indeed were kings as late as Sîn-aḫḫē-erība and Aššur-bāni-apli.

292 McMahon (2013) also emphasises the enhanced visual and auditory sense of motion lent by the gates and sculptures of Assyrian palace complexes. The abrupt sensory transformations in moving between contrasting palatial spaces would certainly have conveyed such a feeling of motion, and remind the present author of the literary effect of Gilgāmeš' epic race against the sun down a tunnel suddenly ending in a jewelled garden in Tablet IX of the Standard Babylonian epic.

293 While Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* chose to construct his new palace in Kalḫu rather than another city, this may well be because of the role the city had played in his own rise to kingship. Šarru-ukīn famously a new eponymous city; although his palace was abandoned with his death, the city survived as a provincial capital (Radner 2006c, 54). Sîn-aḫḫē-erība chose Ninūa to remodel into a new, massive city, while Aššur-aḫa-iddina chose to spend much of his time in Kalḫu rather than Ninūa, which he likely associated with his father and his own succession issues.

294 Consider Barjamovic's (2011, 27) assessment: "The court as a social institution was set in the spatial framework of the royal palace. This was the setting in which the king and the imperial elite would interact, and a focal point of the imperial bureaucracy. It was a venue for the advertisement and manifestation of royal power and ideology, and a conspicuous backdrop for military reviews, political negotiations and the reception of foreign dignitaries. Finally, it was the home of the royal family."

295 See the arguments for this advanced by Frahm (2023a, 403) and now Degen and Fink (2024). Consider also Aššur-bāni-apli's curious assignment of eponymates to atypical officials such as the chief musician Bulluṭu (Reade 1998, 263); see further discussion below in Ch. 2.6.

the famous Papyrus Amherst 63, the *Vorlage* of which must have been a text commissioned by himself (see Ch. 2.5.4)![296] His only sporadically public persona may well have been the product of infirmity or melancholy, as remarkably attested by a passage from an inscription in which the king is depicted as bewailing a variety of misfortunes (RINAP 5, Asb 185 r. 3–13), including his own weakness and strife and discord within both his house and land. To say that Aššur-bāni-apli's own father Aššur-aḫa-iddina had avoided the limelight is an understatement; besides suffering from a chronic illness, he also seems to have imposed ever more elaborate security measures around his person which left him more or less invisible to the general population (e.g. Radner 2003c; 2010b)—it is hardly surprising that what seems to have been multiple loosely connected conspiracies against him by royal pretenders sprung up in 670 (see Radner 2003c; Frahm 2010). A consonant focus upon religious themes and the intimate relationship between the king and one or more gods is perceptible in the inscriptions of both Aššur-aḫa-iddina and Aššur-bāni-apli (e.g. Liverani 2016, 384), emphasising the interior, contemplative aspects to their own reigns.[297]

This lack of 'ruler visibility' was a serious threat to the institution of Assyrian kingship.[298] Tied to the king's status as the centre of events and the state corporeal was also the presumption that whatever he was doing was evidently the most important thing on earth at that particular moment, hence his ritual obligations as a part of his priestly office. The central event in the king's cultic calendar was the new year's festival, which had become a protracted two-month-spectacle by the late Neo-Assyrian period (Maul 2000a; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 407–416; Heeßel 2020, 59–64). It is unclear whether the early Neo-Assyrian new year was as elaborate as that of the late period—Heeßel (2020, 63) has recently noted the remarkable tautology and redundancy of the much of the festivities—and more generally questioned whether the king needed to be present for all of this, but it was conveniently at a time of year which was usually too cold for campaigning or agriculture without much for the king or his people to do otherwise.[299] An analogous autumn-festival in Tašrītu (VII) may or may not have occurred (see above Ch. 2.2.4)—certainly, it would have been less convenient. The spring festival involved various junctures in which the king would be ritually empowered by Aššur's divine crown in an event considered theologically to render him more or less superhuman, and which he must have attended.[300] Obviously, the more ritual and public engagements throughout his realm which he could attend, the better his visibility would be and more than likely the higher his esteem. News of the 'fluffing' by the king of these important ceremonies or any dire omens occurring during them would have spread through the kingdom like wildfire, and a king infirm in body or mind (*non compos mentis*) would have to be carefully guided through such ceremonies through elaborate stagecraft.

Thus, while some kings were able to overcome the strictures imposed by their advisors, officials, and elites, and decide policy for themselves, living up to the standards of their more renowned forebears, or even transcending them entirely, even the most successful early Neo-Assyrian rulers could live to see their own power ebb with age; unable to retire from the politics and kingship which their now-aging frames were supposed still to embody as perfect vessels, and increasingly reliant upon advisors, many saw their own succes-

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296 Indeed, as hinted by Weissert (1997b, 356), the focus upon the spectacle of the triumph and royal lion hunt in Aššur-bāni-apli's relief programme and inscriptions may well hint at the *exceptionalness* of such a staged public event, rather than its regularity. Building upon observations by Reade (2022, 19), Portuese (2023, 477–482) has noted the secluded, shrine-like layout of Aššur-bāni-apli's throne room in the North Palace, and that this points to a radical shift in the king's accessibility and self-presentation analogous to that found in Classical sources.

297 Liverani (2016, 384) further adds that "[t]he weak character of both kings was no doubt a major factor in increasing their dependence on the divine help."

298 While 'ruler visibility' has not been studied in detail hitherto for Assyria (the focus hitherto has rather been upon the staging of state rituals, which serve as only part of a ruler's overall visibility), there is a wealth of literature on this phenomenon for the Roman Empire (e.g. Millar 1998; Hekster 2005; Icks 2019) and it has also been applied to Ottoman history (e.g. Eldem 2008; Stephanov 2018).

299 Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 407–409) has suggested that the Šabāṭu (XI)-festivities which she connects to Ninurta were introduced by Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, which would imply that the spring festivities were briefer prior to this period. Maul (2000a, 390) notes that at least one later element, the *puḫur ilāni* 'divine assembly' on 22nd–26th Šabāṭu (XI) was already present in the time of Adad-nārārī III.

300 By means of contrast, the king seems to have been able to skip other cultic events such as the *tākultu*-rituals with relative impunity (Heeßel 2020, 67).

sion arrangements concluded in better days go horribly awry, princes openly rivalling against one another, the court splitting into factions, governors flaunting their decrees, and, finally, the flash of their own sons' daggers—many a triumphant Assyrian king's reign ended bitterly in betrayal.

2.5.2 The making of an Assyrian king

Very few Assyrian kings were born 'in the purple' during their own father's reign; rather, they were born as princes of princes. Most genealogies in early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions go back two generations, and this is probably in part because a young princeling would usually have experienced his grandfather as king.[301] The king possessed a harem and engaged in a form of polygamy involving a single 'queen' and subordinate wives and concubines in an manner similar to that of the Abbasid court, and it is likely that the crown prince did the same (Radner 1997, 125–126; Frahm 2014, 191, fn. 128). The prince would have been surrounded by other siblings during childhood[302]—for example, Aššur-aḫa-iddina ultimately had at least 19 children (see Parpola 1983, 117–119).[303] Some of his brothers or half-brothers would very have been castrated at some point during their childhood (Reade 2024a). As is still the case today in traditional Middle Eastern cultures, the prince's childhood would have been spent in an overwhelmingly female, maternal environment, as Assyrian society seems to have enforced a relatively strict sexual segregation.[304] Frahm (2014, 194–196) has suggested that the mothers of Assyrian princes would frequently have been foreign and have raised their children bilingually with an appreciation of their maternal culture; while the evidence for this remains circumstantial, such a phenomenon is commonplace among the monarchies of other cultures and periods.[305] Psychological studies of polygamous families demonstrate almost universally detrimental effects to all involved (e.g. Al-Krenawi 2013; 2014; Shaiful Bahari et al. 2021; Barut/Mohamud 2023), most prominently a heightened sense of insecurity.

By adolescence, the prince would have been removed from this maternal environment—perhaps involving an initiatory event of some kind[306]—and would have entered a new, masculine sphere. Unlike the maternal coddling which the princeling had received hitherto, the new world he had entered would have been harsh and competitive. This abrupt transition to masculine adulthood characteristic of many traditional societies the world over until today would have had a profound psychological effect upon the prince, threatening the development of what is termed the 'Madonna-whore'-complex within Freudian circles.[307] Certainly, there are a number of powerful queen mothers attested during Assyrian history such as Sammu-rāmat and Naqī'a/

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301 Indeed, considering the amount of usurpation of the throne by brothers or uncles and rivalry between branches of the Assyrian family now evident for the period, the grandfather as an ostensibly impartial, unifying patriarch may well have served as the central male role model for most Assyrian princes.

302 The numbers of children fathered by early Neo-Assyrian kings remains unclear, but was probably high. If the bodies of Aššur-dān III's family are to be associated with those in Coffin 1 of Tomb III at Nimrūd (see Ch. 3.5.5), then his wife bore him five children before her early death in the plague of 765. For a general study of the childhood of Mesopotamian rulers, see Bock 2012.

303 Presumably more, as an odd number of boys or girls was inauspicious (Heeßel 2017)!

304 Consider, for example, the evidence for female veiling in Assyria presented by Fales (2021), although he remains uncertain as to its broader applicability to Assyrian society, and the fundamental role played by the household within Assyrian society (Radner 1997, 200–202). As in most traditional Western Asian cultures until today, the mark of a woman's respectability would have been the limitation of her social world to her extended family, although this would not have precluded her from interacting with a broader societal field within certain legal or economic settings. Naturally, etiquette must often yield to reality, and one need only think of the remarkable number of jokes about marital infidelity with neighbours mentioned within Bar Hebraeus' 13th-century AD *Book of Laughable Stories* (*Kṯāḇā ḏ^e-Ṯunnāyē M^egaḥkānē*, edition: Budge 1897) to see how easily social intercourse between the opposing sexes could depart from accepted mores in practice.

305 One might note the name of a son of Tukultī-apli-Ešarra I who was killed in Babylonia, Nirāya (see Llop 2003); should this not be taken as a hypochoristicon of a -*nārārī*-name or a name containing the Akkadian word *nīru* 'yoke', then a formation from the Hurrian name element *nir*- is not implausible.

306 Perhaps akin to the modern Jewish bar mitzvah, the Turkish *sünnet* circumcision ceremony, or the transition from 'short' to 'long trousers' experienced by English schoolboys.

307 This psychological shift is discussed, for example, by Lang (2002, 133–134) in his study of Hebrew conceptions of divinity, referring to further sociological literature.

Zakūtu who were able to wield immense power through their respective sons on the strength of little more than force of character.[308]

Within the courtly sphere one, senior son would be crown prince, and the remainder would presumably have been occupied with other responsibilities of state, with some posted to other regions of the kingdom.[309] As the early Neo-Assyrian king was wont to move from one city to another, some of his family may have followed him. The Neo-Assyrian system of succession permitted the naming of another successor and the demotion of the crown prince at any time (e.g. Radner 2010a, 27). In an ideal scenario, this world would have created an atmosphere of intense, meritocratic competition encouraging princes to distinguish themselves in service to the state; the reality was much more likely a pall of intense suspicion and intrigue.[310] Becoming crown prince must have brought with it great privileges, but also considerable pressure.

In what must have been an important ceremony, the new crown prince would have received a new name which would serve as his future throne-name and have his election to this position broadcast to both the court and to the wider Assyrian population, presenting a sort of 'mission statement' for the future king's reign (see below). This transformation in status had a cosmic counterpart in the imagined transfiguration of his body into one fit for kingship, a *nabnīt bēlūti* or 'lordly stature' with perfect features (RIMA 2, 0.99.2: 6; 0.100.2 o. 19; 4 o. 10′; 13′), a metamorphosis which a usurper could also experience.[311] That many far less than perfect specimens of manhood ended up crown prince and later king is demonstrated by the curious statements in some king's inscriptions that they were 'chosen in the womb', apparently an attempt to explain how an unsuitable candidate ended up holding the reins of power.[312] As crown prince, a royal staff was put under his charge,[313] and he could possibly have received a 'trainer-palace' called the *bīt redûti* 'house of succession' as known from the late Neo-Assyrian period, but this remains presently unattested. If his education was incomplete, then it was fast-tracked,[314] and if not already married, then the prince would take a bride so that the production of the next generation might begin in earnest.[315] The crown prince would be expected to un-

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[308] For example, Radner (2003c, 167–168) has suggested that the remarkable status of some royal women during the reign of Aššur-aḫa-iddina was as a result of his emotional connections to them and mistrust of his male relatives. For Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's own complicated—if apparently good-natured—relationship to the women in his life, see in particular Reade 1987 and Frahm 2014, 178–192. Considering the pronounced age hypergamy in Assyrian marriage, fathers may well have seemed aged and inapproachable figures to princes, while young mothers may have had the opportunity to serve as friends and confidantes to their sons even once the latter had left the maternal sphere and entered the hyper-masculine competitive sphere of princedom. Regardless, this 'age-staggering' would have made women the 'intergenerational glue' within the extended Assyrian royal family.

[309] It is unclear whether the residence of the crown prince, the *bīt redûti*, was already a part of this institution during the early Neo-Assyrian period.

[310] For example, Andreas Fuchs has noted to the present author that full brothers tended to side with each other against their half-brothers, as is best known for Sîn-aḫa-uṣur, grand vizier and brother of Šarru-ukīn (May 2012a; 2017).

[311] On royal perfection as an (imagined) precondition for kingship, see e.g. Ambos 2009, 3–4. This notion of royal bodily perfection may have underlain the curious funerary practice of the Assyrian king, whereby he was picked in oil, which would have left his body preserved for posterity (MacGinnis 1987). This may well explain Herodotus' (*Historiae* 1, 198) curious statement that the Babylonian kings were embalmed with honey, the historian having misunderstood second-hand information on royal burial practice in Assyria.

[312] This metaphor is presently attested for Aššur-rēša-išši I (RIMA 1, 0.86.1: 2), Tukultī-Ninurta II (RIMA 2, 0.100.2 o. 18–19; 4 o. 9′), Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (RINAP 3, 43: 3; 49: 3; 50: 3), Aššur-aḫa-iddina (RINAP 4, 37 o. 8′–9′; 43 o. 12′–14′), and Aššur-bāni-apli (RINAP 5, Asb 9 i 3–4; 11 i 5; 13 i 23; 220 i 5′; 1030: 8–10); their individual circumstances of succession wildly vary and there is no obvious factor in their respective tenures as crown princes (which all of them were, if only briefly) which would provoke such a metaphor. In the present author's mind, the only thing which these rulers have in common is the disappointing course of their respective reigns, which may suggest that they were not all that well suited to the role they would fulfil.

[313] This must already have been the case during the early Neo-Assyrian period, as the crown prince and his entourage are mentioned in KAV 135 and 167.

[314] In the famous, so-called 'School Days' inscription (RINAP 5, Asb 220), Aššur-bāni-apli's education as crown prince is recounted in detail (Villard 1997; Zamazalová 2011), although it is presently impossible to say whether such a curriculum was standard, particularly for earlier periods.

[315] While the average age at marriage for men seems to have been quite late among the general Assyrian population (Roth 1987), it is likely that an Assyrian prince would have been paired off with a suitable bride much earlier. This would have also functioned as another liminal moment—until today, traditional cultures throughout the world continue to view childless couples as not having attained maturity, regardless of age.

dertake various administrative and symbolic duties, and was now a visible political figure. The programmatic aspect of his name (see below) and his own conduct would give the Assyrian gubernatorial class a sense of what the next reign would bring.

While treated with deference in public, the crown prince would now need to navigate the 'lion's den' of the Assyrian political landscape. This was a complicated affair, demanding both careful political calculus, sheer luck, or both.[316] Initially, the newly minted crown prince needed his father's support to ensure his legitimacy as he began to amass a power-base of his own. He would also require the broad support of the gubernatorial class, and of at least some of the 'cabinet members', and—most crucially—no viable rivals. In this, time was not on his side; the longer his father ruled as king, the greater was the chance that his own position as crown prince would be undermined,[317] and a competing prince would be elected to the position.[318] That crown-princeship was more often than not a poisoned chalice is demonstrated by the remarkable number of Neo-Assyrian monarchs who came to power without having served as crown prince at all (e.g. Adad-nārārī II, Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, and Šarru-ukīn), and the many more who had been crown princes but experienced irregular circumstances in their accession, as demonstrated by Table 10. Princes free of the pressure of crown-princeship had the opportunity to scheme at their leisure and canvass their own supporters. Some must have served as military officers on active duty and have gained laurels and practical experience which the more important crown prince could not—it seems little coincidence that the three men who territorially expanded Assyria the most (Adad-nārārī II, Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, and Šarru-ukīn) were all usurpers.[319]

The weakening of the present king's position or his abrupt death was the moment where a crown prince would rush to rally his own support, and any contenders would present themselves. Sometimes, this was artificially induced, through a prince inciting a rebellion against the reigning king (Aššur-daʾʾin-apla, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*, Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, Šarru-ukīn) or patricide (Arad-Mullissu and Šarra-uṣur). There would be a rush to occupy the city of Aššur: A candidate's kingship could only be confirmed there, so that the last ruler of Assyria, Aššur-uballiṭ ("III") was never a king in the eyes of his own people as the city had been taken in 614 (Radner 2018), and the rebel king Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III* conversely began his rebellion there to garner legitimacy for his cause (see Ch. 3.5.6).

Even once he had taken power and warded off any competitors, danger was still looming for the new king. Unless he was under the protection of a power high official who could make all of the necessary arrangements, he needed to display his competencies quickly to convince the elites and the realm more generally that he was the correct choice. As has been seen in Chapter 2.2.4, this could easily be accomplished with a swift, strategically meaningless campaign which granted the king a triumph and the population of at least one chosen city 'bread and circuses' (*panem et circenses*). With a critical mass of support, the new king would appoint his 'own people' to influential positions, and squeeze out those officials who had stood in his way—probably 'liquidating' them in an ideal scenario, although more likely than not he was compelled to retain less serious offenders within his administration, or to broker power-deals with very high officials and bide his time before replacing them.

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316 Consider in this respect Fuchs' (2019, 64–65) assessment of the felictous timing of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's accession: "Anders als so viele andere Könige sowohl vor wie auch nach ihm hat er sich nicht mit rivalisierenden Brüdern herumschlagen müssen, und sollte er als Kronprinz tatsächlich befürchtet haben, am Ende doch noch von Söhnen seiner Stiefmutter Atalyā verdrängt zu werden, so müssen derlei Ängste nun endgültiger, beruhigender Gewissheit gewichen sein. Schon aus diesem Grund darf der gewaltsame Tod seines Vaters Sargon im fernen Tabāl zu den glücklicheren Wendepunkten im Leben gezählt werden. Für ein am Ende ausgesprochen schwieriges, wenn nicht gar zerrüttetes Vater-Sohn-Verhältnis spricht die von ihm verfolgte Politik, die in wesentlichen Bereichen der Sargons genau entgegengesetzt war, und der ungewöhnlich radikale Schlussstrich, den Sanherib unter das Kapitel seines Vaters und Vorgängers setzte."

317 An example of this is Aššur-daʾʾin-apla, son of Salmānu-ašarēd III, who would seem to have rebelled against his father in reaction to the *turtānu* Dayyān-Aššur's increasing hold over the Assyrian state (see Ch. 3.5.1).

318 This is most celebratedly known from Aššur-aḫa-iddina's election to crown prince, which was sponsored by his mother Naqīʾa/Zakūtu, and was to the detriment of his elder half-brothers.

319 Most likely, more 'expendable' younger sons were given more hazardous or demanding military commands—consider, for example, the two younger sons of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I killed during his occupation of Babylonia (Llop 2003)—while crown princes were given safer postings, leading to an imbalance in military ability between legitimate successors and their brothers waiting in the wings.

Table 10: The successions and deaths of the kings of Assyria (935*–610).

King	Paternity	Crown-princeship	Succession	Death
Aššur-dān II (935*–ca. 913*)	Tukultī-apil-Ešarra II	Probably crown prince	Probably peaceful	Probably natural
Aššur-uballiṭ II* (ca. 913*–912)	Aššur-dān II	Probably crown prince	Probably peaceful	Probably killed in coup
Adad-nārārī II (ca. 912*–891)	Aššur-dān II	Not crown prince	Violent	Probably natural
Tukultī-Ninurta II (891–884)	Adad-nārārī II	Replacement crown prince	Probably peaceful	Natural?
Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (883–859)	Tukultī-Ninurta II	Crown prince	Peaceful	Natural
Salmānu-ašarēd III (859–824)	Aššur-nāṣir-apli II	Crown prince, replaced	Probably violent	Probably natural while deposed
Aššur-daʾʾin-apla (826–820)	Salmānu-ašarēd III	Crown prince	Violent	Death in battle/exile
Šamšī-Adad V (824–811)	Salmānu-ašarēd III	Probably not crown prince	Violent	Sudden death (in battle?)
Adad-nārārī III (811–783)	Šamšī-Adad V	Probably crown prince (if old enough)	Probably peaceful	Natural death after prolonged illness
Salmānu-ašarēd IV (783–773)	Adad-nārārī III	Crown prince	Peaceful	Death from illness?
Aššur-dān III (773–755)	Adad-nārārī III	Crown prince	Peaceful	Death from illness?
Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III* (763–762)	Šamšī-Adad V	Not crown prince	Violent	Death in battle/exile
Aššur-nārārī V (755–747)	Adad-nārārī III	Crown prince	Peaceful	Natural? Death in battle?
Salmānu-ašarēd V* (747–745)	Aššur-nārārī V	Crown prince	Peaceful	Killed in coup
Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* (745–727)	Adad-nārārī III	Not crown prince	Violent	Natural death
Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI* (727–722)	Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*	Crown prince	Peaceful	Killed in coup
Šarru-ukīn (722–705)	Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*	Not crown prince	Violent	Sudden death in battle
Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (705–681)	Šarru-ukīn	Crown prince	Peaceful	Killed in coup
Arda-Mullissu (never crowned)	Sîn-aḫḫē-erība	Crown prince, replaced	Violent	Death in exile
Aššur-aḫa-iddina (681–669)	Sîn-aḫḫē-erība	Replacement crown prince, replaced	Violent	Death from illness?
Aššur-bāni-apli (669–ca. 630)	Aššur-aḫa-iddina	Replacement crown prince	Peaceful	Natural death
Aššur-etel-ilāni (ca. 630–ca. 627)	Aššur-bāni-apli	Perhaps crown prince	Peaceful	Sudden death (from illness?)
Sîn-šuma-līšir (ca. 627)	Unknown but probably royal	Not crown prince (chief eunuch)	Violent	Killed in coup
Sîn-šarra-uṣur (627–612)	Aššur-bāni-apli	Perhaps crown prince	Violent	Death in battle
(Aššur-uballiṭ "III" – never crowned)	Unknown (Aššur-bāni-apli?)	*De facto* crown prince	(Violent)	Death in battle/exile

Even then, this might not have been enough; multiple times in history, an uncle took the throne from a newly minted king—for example, Šamšī-Adad IV took the throne from Erība-Adad II in such a manner, as did Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* from Salmānu-ašarēd V*. Vassals and 'transitional cases' could also lose faith in a new monarch, and seek independence, for which the rebellion of Gūzāna from Adad-nārārī III in 808 is a good example (see Ch. 4.1.6). Lasting the first years as Assyrian king took 'grit'.

2.5.3 Making a difference. The king's personal programme

Once a king had survived the first crucial few years of his reign, staving off both internal and external threats to his rule in a 'consolidation phase', he could now begin realising his more long-term aspirations for his own reign.[320] Understanding and reconstructing these aims remains fraught, as the evidence is generally post-factum in nature, but some broad patterns can be identified.

For example, the onomastics of early Neo-Assyrian kings provide a useful source of information. The choice of throne names among Assyrian kings—"often as carefully chosen as the name of a pope" as Oppenheim (1979, 116) put it—still lacks a systematic study, although some preliminary investigations have been undertaken (Frahm 2005; Radner 2005, 33–35; Galter 2018, 132–134). As demonstrated by Radner (2005, 35), throne names were chosen together with the reigning king when a son became crown prince. Hence, these must have served as something of a 'mission statement' for the coming reign. With the exception of the name *Aššur-nārārī*, every early Neo-Assyrian king to take a throne name had an immediately identifiable namesake in the Middle Assyrian period.[321] In turn, many kings took a name which also referenced a predecessor more or less in living memory, as most obvious for the usurper Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* who had taken the name of the rebel king Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III* who had risen up against the Šamšī-ilu-regime while Pūlu would have been in his 20's. Some names seem to have borne a special function, with *Šamšī-Adad* being the traditional name for a prince who took the Assyrian throne by marching north from southern Mesopotamia with Babylonian support (see Chs. 3.5.2; 4.5.4), and *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra* being a 'crisis-name' assumed by a king wishing to portray himself as Assyria's saviour. *Aššur-uballiṭ*, by means of comparison, was an 'Alexander'-name—that of a conqueror and empire-builder—which explains its use by Aššur-dān II's eldest son and heir, who must have had ambitions of restoring Assyria to its former glory. When his brother usurped him, he adopted the name *Adad-nārārī*, the next great conquering king of Middle Assyria.

That these kings subsequently sought to live up to their names—something explicitly thematised in the inscriptions of Adad-nārārī II who mentions his *šumu kabtu* or "heavy name" (Galter 2018)—is clear from their emulation wherever possible of their namesakes. Thus, Adad-nārārī II undertook a series of programmatic campaigns to Ḫanigalbat which clearly evoked his namesake's own conquest of this kingdom (see Ch. 4.1.4). In his first campaign, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II marched to the otherwise obscure polity of Ništun in the Zagros, raiding it and leaving a devotional statue of himself (*ṣalam bunnannîya*) at the *ēqu*-mountain of city of 'Aššur-nāṣir-apli of the spring', which probably represented the imagined birthplace of Aššur-nāṣir-apli I *ina qereb šadî ša lā īdûšunu mamma* "in mountains' midst, beyond all ken" (see Ch. 4.2.2), and he would later resume the Middle Assyrian practice of marching to the Mediterranean Sea last undertaken by Aššur-nāṣir-apli I (see Ch. 4.6.2).

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320 For example, Adad-nārārī II carefully eliminated every threat to Assyria before devoting the second half of his reign to the defeat of the northern Mesopotamian kingdom of Naṣībīna, and anyone else who got in his way (Chs. 3.4.1; 4.1.4).

321 Indeed, multi-generational emulation is sometimes evident: Just as Aššur-rēša-išši I begat Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I and Aššur-nāṣir-apli I begat Salmānu-ašarēd II, so too did Aššur-rēša-išši II beget Tukultī-apil-Ešarra II and Aššur-nāṣir-apli II Salmānu-ašarēd III. In the latter case, it seems likely that Salmānu-ašarēd III took this throne name emphasising his connection to his own father to enhance his own legitimacy considering his rough succession (see Ch. 3.4.3). The use of throne names seems to have begun with Šamšī-Adad IV, who usurped the throne and hence needed a programmatic name (see Ch. 3.5.2). His adult son Aššur-nāṣir-apli I evidently elected to retain his own name upon taking power, but his sons thereafter assumed throne names. While a case could be made for Erība-Adad II having borne a throne name emulating the first of that name, the father of Aššur-uballiṭ I, it seems more likely that this was his birth name, and the repetition of a royal name unintentional, particularly as a prince Erība-Adad is attested from the intervening reign of Aššur-dān I (Llop 2023, 393).

Striking in this regard are the kings who chose not to take a throne name and break with tradition (i.e. a Francis versus a Benedict XVI). It seems little coincidence that the first known to do so was Aššur-da''in-apla, the son who rebelled from his father Salmānu-ašarēd III and the *turtānu* Dayyān-Aššur. As his name demonstrates, he was firstborn, but this seems also to have been his intended throne name.[322] This marked a radical break in tradition, and it is interesting to note that Assyria stood at a threshold during this period in which it could have expanded territorially west of the Euphrates under the right leadership; as would be the case with the late Assyrian kings, might Aššur-da''in-apla have wished to make 'a name for himself' rather than continue a conservative naming tradition which had outlived its purpose now that Assyria was resurgent?

Naturally, his brother's assumption of the 'traditional usurper-name' *Šamšī-Adad* as a form of legitimation put paid to this change in naming practice. Šamšī-Adad V's own son may well have been too young to formally become crown prince; whether Šamšī-Adad V or Sammu-rāmat chose the name *Adad-nārārī*, it bore an important ambiguity: while this was a 'strong' name and Adad-nārārī I and II had won victories against Babylonia, the latter had also ended his reign by making concessions to Babylonia (see Ch. 3.4.1)—something which immediately happened at the beginning of Adad-nārārī III's reign (see Chs. 3.5.3–4). Finally, it is interesting to note that *Salmānu-ašarēd* was—at least according to present knowledge—the most popular Neo-Assyrian throne name. Just as Salmānu-ašarēd I was in many respects the quintessential Middle Assyrian king, so too did Salmānu-ašarēd III's reign exemplify the pinnacle of early Neo-Assyria; the relative success of these two kings may well have inspired the repeated use of this name.[323]

The prince named *Pūlu*—whose name may even have been Gurgumite in origin (Na'aman 2019)—took on the throne name *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra* as a reference to his uncle's rebellion and the dire straits in which Assyria found itself politically (albeit not economically).[324] Interestingly, despite his very Assyrian self-presentation (see Ch. 3.6), his birth name did appear once parallel to his throne name during his own lifetime in the Phoenician inscription on the stele found at İncirli, Turkey (Kaufman 2007; Na'aman 2019), although it is unclear as to whether he had sanctioned this himself considering that the inscription's text is narrated from the perspective of the local ruler Warikkus, and all other references to *Pūlu* are posthumous (e.g. Brinkman 1968, 61–62).[325] It may well be that this was a common name for the king which would nonetheless never have been spoken to his face (see also Ch. 3.6). His own son Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI*, is referred to as *Ulūlāya* in various later sources (Brinkman 1968, 62) and during his stint as crown prince (Radner 2003b), but only as *Salmānu-ašarēd* in contemporary cuneiform sources (see Yamada/Yamada 2017, 429–431). It is interesting to note in this regard that the Aramaic-language Aššur Ostracon refers to Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* as *tkltplsr* but Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI* as *'lly* (Fales 2010b, 197, fn. 41).[326]

Regardless, Šarru-ukīn did away with this allonymic practice, retaining his birth name (Fuchs 2020). Certainly, the past three kings named *Salmānu-ašarēd* had had less than stellar reigns, and the continued use of

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322 This is implied by Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI* calling his own son and heir Aššur-da''in-apla. Bach (2023, 86) correctly concludes that this meant that Aššur-da''in-apla had received a positive evaluation in posterity, but the phenomenon of two Salmānu-ašarēds having Aššur-da''in-aplas as sons also strongly implies that this was intended as a throne name, so that Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI*'s son would have been Aššur-da''in-apla "II", had he ever come to power. Ultimately, the latter must have been found to be harmless by Šarru-ukīn, and was left to live out his days in Babylonia, albeit under surveillance as the missal SAA 16, 99 demonstrates. It is conceivable that this latter-day Aššur-da''in-apla had been pressured to betray his own father and to aid Šarru-ukīn in his coup in exchange for his life.

323 Indeed, the 'over-saturation' of this name may well have been one of the reasons why Šarru-ukīn chose to keep his birth name upon taking power.

324 Compare Saggs (1984, 83–84): "His personal name was Pul, as recorded both in the Bible and in some cuneiform inscriptions, but he took Tiglath-Pileser as a throne name and an indication of the kind of expansionist policy which, following the first royal bearer of the name, he proposed to pursue."

325 Radner (2017c, 395) claims that Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* ascended the Babylonian throne as *Pūlu*, presumably on the basis of the later King List A.

326 Two explanations of this phenomenon come to the present author's mind. The first is that a *Salmānu-ašarēd* (V*) having very briefly ruled prior to Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* would have caused confusion, meaning that *Ulūlāya* was popularly used as a means of distinguishing Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI* from his ill-fated cousin. Another is that Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI*'s comparatively brief reign might have led to his name as crown prince sticking in a derisory fashion; one might somewhat analogously recall Richard Cromwell surviving for posterity in the British historical consciousness as 'Tumbledown Dick'.

such throne names may have risked descending into farce. It also seems clear that Šarru-ukīn wished to draw a line under his predecessors. This practice of employing one's birth name as throne name continued with his successors Sîn-aḫḫē-erība and Aššur-aḫa-iddina, the latter of whom rejected his unwieldy throne name *Aššur-etel-ilāni-mukīn-apli*. Most strikingly, Aššur-bāni-apli's name—which would imply he was the eldest were it actually his birth name—must actually have been assumed by him as he was not the eldest son, a fiction which was even included in the *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī*-story preserved in Aramaic on Papyrus Amherst 63.

Without a namesake to emulate, or former kings to surpass, the late Neo-Assyrian kings demonstrate rather a fascination with the deeper past and heroic literary figures (perhaps conceptually the same category to them). It may well be that Šarru-ukīn's name was originally theophoric, i.e. DN-*šarra-ukīn* '[The god DN] has established the king' but he chose to shorten it to *Šarru-ukīn* 'The king established'.[327] As his reign progressed, he seems to have become interested in the reign of Šarru(m)-kīn of Akkad, as is demonstrated by the ambiguous logographic writing of the royal name as LUGAL-GI.NA (which can be normalised as *Šarru-ukīn* or *Šarru(m)-kīn*), something encouraged by the addition of an epithet *arkû*—'the later', thus **Šarru-(u)kīn arkû*, 'the later "Šarru(m)-kīn"'—by his influential scholar Nabû-zuqup-kēnu and an associate of the latter, Ninurta-ubalissu (May 2015a, 103–105; 2018b, 116–117; Fuchs 2020, 75–81). The ancient, fabled king Šarru(m)-kīn of Akkad's exploits were already confused with those of the Mesopotamian culture-hero Gilgāmeš by the Old Babylonian period, and Šarru-ukīn seems also to have drawn upon this character; certainly, his royal inscriptions employ Gilgāmeš-like language (Bach 2020),[328] and the enduring puzzle of the creation of the walls of his city according to dimensions corresponding to the "rendering of his name" (*nibīt šumi*) has overtones of Gilgāmeš (Roaf 2023). This fascination with Gilgāmeš was passed on to his son Sîn-aḫḫē-erība, for whom the trusty scribe Nabû-zuqup-kēnu excerpted a passage of Tablet XII soon after his father's fateful passing (Frahm 1999).[329] Sîn-aḫḫē-erība later seems to have commissioned a mural or relief of himself and his many sons alongside characters from the Gilgāmeš-story (Borger 1988, 8; Frahm 1997, 212–213).[330] It could be argued that many of the excesses and strategic blunders of the late Neo-Assyrian period were born of the very lack of concrete precedent for kings to follow.

Living up to one's name certainly set a series of self-imposed goals for a king's reign to accomplish. Naturally, there were also the commandments of the coronation hymn to fulfil, which generally centred upon the commonweal of the realm and its expansion—whether through warfare or agricultural projects (see Ch. 2.3.5). The yearly rhythm of the campaign and the challenge to outdo one's predecessors was an impetus, particularly as certain royal titles such as 'king of the four corners' seem to have been necessary to 'earn' through sufficient campaigning. The creation of obelisks also seems to have been privilege of a small club of kings who made it to the Mediterranean Sea (see Ch. 4.6.2). Another opportunity at royal individuation was the undertaking of monumental building projects, whether of a palace, temple, or city. Building work presented a means for the king to differentiate himself productively in a non-martial capacity. For example, Aššur-nāṣir-apli II seems to have tired of the frequent campaigning of his early reign and to have turned to his building projects at Kalḫu instead, only campaigning where necessary, and using diplomatic means to add new provinces to his realm (Edmonds 2023b, 252), as might be demonstrated for the peaceful incorporation of Bīt-Baḫiāni/Gūzāna and Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni into his reign (see Ch. 3.4.3). Tied to building was temple renovation—here, it can be supposed that a range of different temples and priesthoods clamoured for royal patronage (see Zaia 2021) and sought to convince him of his connection to one deity or the other, which, in

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327 He would have been born in the tumultuous years surrounding or immediately following the rebellion of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*, and it may well be that his father Pūlu (later Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*) sought to demonstrate his loyalty to the ongoing Šamšī-ilu-regime (and to protect his family) by giving his son this 'royalist' name. As the accusative was no longer phonologically distinguished within Neo-Assyrian dialect, the shortening of his name, rendering its meaning ambiguous, would not have been noticeable.

328 However, even Bach's (2020, 325–332) best examples require multiple transformations of the respective passages of the royal inscriptions to reach something approximating a line from *ša nagba īmuru*—this points to a use of Gilgāmeš-like language, but hardly an elaborate 'ideological' message; see also discussion in Ch. 2.2.5.

329 In Frahm's (2014, 203–204) reconstruction of events, Sîn-aḫḫē-erība was in a state of denial over the death of his father. Considering his poor relationship with his father (Fuchs 2019, 64–65), the Gilgāmeš-text's description of inauspicious death in the steppes may rather reflect jubilation akin to that preserved in the Bible.

330 This may be the earliest surviving expression of the adult whimsy encompassed by 'nerd-culture' today.

turn, must have had an effect upon his own self-understanding and further aims in his career.[331] The completion in Kalḫu of a temple to Ninurta so striking that it would become its modern name of *Nimrūd* (Novák/Younansardaroud 2002, 184–185), the sudden mania for the god Nabû during the late 9th century (see Ch. 4.5.4), the steady decline in the importance of Adad (Zaia 2018a), and the rise of Sîn of Ḫarrānu to a status rivalling that of Aššur all point to cultural shifts connected to the shifting patronage of the king of different deities, all of which had real-world consequences for Assyrian politics.

The most obvious part of the king's personal programme was his policy towards two regions: Babylonia and the Levant. The abrupt shifts in Assyrian strategy towards these two regions evident over Neo-Assyrian history can only point to differing doctrines, or even different 'lobbies' among the court and elite which are only sometimes evident; for example, Šamšī-Adad V ignored the west completely and was fixated upon Babylonia. His brother Aššur-daʾʾin-apla (whom he defeated with Babylonian support to win the throne) had the widespread support of the Assyrian gubernatorial class, and it is hardly a stretch that the latter represented politically the complete inverse of Šamšī-Adad V's own stances. During most of the Assyrian Entr'acte, one can only really discuss the policies of Šamšī-ilu, which seem to have been popular enough during the reign of Salmānu-ašarēd IV—during which time his colleague Pālil-ēreš was still in office—but took a nose-dive thereafter, provoking rebellion and non-compliance in the realm for two decades. That Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* could swiftly harness Assyria's might and begin a new phase of territorial expansion implies that the programme suggested by his name (and very soon his deeds) was wildly popular.

Nonetheless, it is only with difficulty that many such aspects can be teased out of the cuneiform sources, as royal inscriptions were designed to present the king in a good light and to homogenise him with his predecessors, as already outlined above and in Chapter 2.5.1. That Assyrian kings could fail spectacularly can only be inferred from omissions in the textual sources and subsequent events; royal disaster could only openly be discussed (at least by those writing under royal patronage) in respect to long-dead rulers known to have been ill-omened, although it could be provocatively updated (Schaudig 2019). That Assyrian kings were sometimes very strange individuals can only be hinted at from the surviving record. For example, Tukultī-Ninurta I had a taste for erotically-themed furniture (Assante 2007), Aššur-nāṣir-apli II was a lover of animals and poetry when not engaged in torture (see Ch. 3.4.3), Sîn-aḫḫē-erība's royal inscriptions display a curious scatology which could only have come from the king himself (Frahm 1998, 159), and the oddness of Aššur-bāni-apli's flaunting of royal convention was enough to inspire the figure of Sardanapalus.

2.5.4 Why stories matter. Cuneiform royal literature and its survival in later sources

As the last point and the discussion in this work hitherto of Ninyas demonstrate (e.g. Chs. 2.2.3; 2.5.1), the Classical sources (see e.g. Drews 1965; Rollinger 2011; 2017b; Fink/Droß-Krüpe 2019) could be of much greater use in assessing the actual standing of the Assyrian king among both Assyrian elites and the lower orders than is commonly held. After the rejection of Classical accounts of Assyrian kings as reliable historical sources in the early 20th century,[332] they have been derided as 'Orientalist' fantasies of louche easterners intended to glorify Greek virtues *ex negativo*. It is only with the gradual recovery of some Aramaic literature composed either in the latter stages of the Neo-Assyrian period or soon thereafter that the inspiration for the Classical anecdotes about Assyrian kings can be identified.

Indeed, there has been a movement among some scholars of the Classics and Ancient History towards a reassessment of Classical authors writing about Mesopotamia which has found consonance with a general re-evaluation of the place of Greece within the Iron-age culture of the eastern Mediterranean, but also of the 'post-colonial' movement within the broader humanities (e.g. Haubold 2013). While some authors have sought to seat

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331 This would have been much the same process as today for adherents of polytheistic religions gravitating towards particular gods, or Orthodox and Catholic Christians towards particular saints. Through the relationship between a deity or saint which this engenders, a behavioural feedback loop can plausibly develop.
332 As best exemplified by Weissbach's (1920) extensive study of Sardanapalus concluding that the figure had no basis in any real Assyrian king.

themselves upon the 'Siege Perilous' of 'Gilgāmeš and Homer' with generally unconvincing results (e.g. West 1997),[333] others have sought more productively to identify genuine traditions within Greek accounts of Near Eastern culture (e.g. Rollinger 2017a). In the present author's mind, the latter work has been hampered by its prevalent methodology, in which the vast cuneiform corpus is combed for motifs resembling tropes within the writings of Classical authors in order to prove their veracity—what might be termed a 'top-down' approach—rather than beginning 'from the bottom up' by establishing plausible routes of transmission from Mesopotamian to Classical literature and historiography through intermediary languages and demonstrating smaller, plausible transmissions first before building towards larger ones.[334] The present author should like somewhat programmatically to present some examples here of the latter methodology, which combines historical and philological insight.

The most obvious starting point is the Babylonian author Berossus, whose writings have been hailed by some as a genuine, revisionist historical account compiled by a Babylonian priest (e.g. Beaulieu 2021), and roundly doubted in their veracity by others (e.g. Stevens 2019). The similarity of many of his statements to sources known from cuneiform—particularly Babylonian chronicles—has encouraged researchers to assume cuneiform literacy on his part. However, many of his remarks, particularly those on the Babylonian creation, do not line up at all with cuneiform documentation, and there is presently no 'smoking gun' for his direct use of cuneiform sources. A philological examination assists in this regard. Firstly, the peculiar manglings of Mesopotamian mythological names he provides, which do not follow the transcription rules of the Graeco-Babyloniaca (see Lang 2021)—they had passed through another language or script between the cuneiform and Greek documentation.[335] In turn, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, king of Bābili, curiously appears as one *Sammougēs* (սամմուգէս) and later as *Samogei* (սամոգէյ),[336] rather than as something resembling the form *Saosdouchinos* from the Ptolemaic Canon.

This is very telling, as Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's name resembles *Sammougēs* within the Aramaic-language composition *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī* preserved within the famous Papyrus Amherst 63 written in Demotic script perhaps hailing from the milieu of an Achaemenid-era Jewish community on the island of Elephantinē (modern Ǧazīrat al-Fantīn) in Egypt (see recently van der Toorn 2018). This composition presents a fascinating fictionalised portrait of the war between Aššur-bāni-apli (*Sarbānabal*) and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (*Sarmugī*) which does largely adhere to what is presently known of the conflict (see discussion in Zaia 2019b; Fales 2020), although it is spun to favour Aššur-bāni-apli. The glowing depiction of Sarbānabal has led some to suggest that this composition was inspired by or translated from an Akkadian composition (Kottsieper 1992), for which there is good evidence.[337] Besides its strange exculpation of Aššur-bāni-apli's part in his brother's death, introduction with his auspicious birth (incorrectly prior to that of his brother, as in his inscriptions where he claimed to be the elder brother), and prominent appearance of his sister Šerū'a-ēṭirat (*Sārēṭara*),

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333 Such comparison is invariably between prestigious works such as the Iliad and the Epic of Gilgāmeš and infers a causal relationship between them from basic archetypical similarities and narratological tropes rather than close philological and historical study.

334 Perhaps as a result of disciplinary boundaries, few if any authors investigate the role of the almost entirely lost corpus of early Iron-age Aramaic and Phoenician literature which might actually have informed Greek authors (see López-Ruiz 2016). Conscious of the problems with the 'top-down' approach, some authors have begun to write of 'hybridity' and to support their arguments with models adopted from the social sciences (e.g. Ziemann 2023).

335 This proposal would be supported by Berossus' *Chōmasbēlos*, whom Hallo (1963, 52–53) already associated with the 'king' ku/kúl-lá-sí-na-(i)-be-el of the Sumerian King List, the name of which is to be rendered in Akkadian as *kullassina* (*i*)*bēl* "they all were lord". Wilcke (1989, 567–568) correctly restored Berossus' original name as *ΧΩΛΛΑΣΒΗΛΟΣ (<ΧΩΜΑΣΒΗΛΟΣ), *Chōllasbēlos*, but this reading is still problematic as it would render an Akkadian name *kullas-bēl*. The solution is presented in the writing of the name Berossus itself *Bēl-rē'ûšunu*, along with the comparandum *Belesys* (the well-known Babylonian satrap Bēlšunu). In both cases, the 3.m.pl possessive suffix -*šunu* has been reduced which must reflect its actual pronunciation by this period, as the form *Belesys* appears in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, an eye-witness account. Following this same logic, the form *kullassina*'s 3.f.pl possessive suffix could plausibly be reduced to something pronounced *kullas*, thus rendering *kullas(sina)-bēl*. Berossus' failure to reproduce a form orthographically correct in cuneiform would thus suggest that he did not use a cuneiform source to obtain this name.

336 See the Armenian text and translation in BNJ 680 f7c.

337 For example, as a *sīn*/*šīn*-opposition is evident in rendering the character's names (e.g. Aššur-bāni-apli = *srb'n'bl*), it would seem that the author of the Aramaic version sought to reproduce the names with their original Assyrian pronunciation.

the most telling point is that Sārēṭara calls herself the 'sister of the twins'(ʾḥt tymy, see Holm 2020). Considering that the composition begins with an explanation of the differing years in which the two princes were born, this is an impossibility, and must be a confusion by the translator, who was unable to understand the rare Akkadian word *talīmu* 'close/bosom brother' (see May 2011–2012). The difficulty of this text means that it cannot be further dwelt upon here,[338] but this is enough to show that Akkadian literary works commissioned by kings could enter the Aramaic literary corpus, if perhaps at a later date.[339] This is important, as it suggests that this curious Aramaic name for Šamaš-šuma-ukīn informed Berossus' account, and would suggest that he had consulted an Aramaic source.[340]

That such chronographic and historical texts existed in Aramaic would hardly be surprising, but this opens an entirely new door on later historiography of Assyria, as it would suggest that some of the extant Classical sources could well be informed by Aramaic historical or literary texts which had their basis in cuneiform literature alongside folk tradition. A few examples suffice.

The first is the similarity of the trope of burning with all one's goods in *Sarbānabal and Sarmugī* to the fiery death of Sardanapalus in some Classical accounts,[341] for which Ctesias' very detailed account in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (BNJ 688 f1q) is descriptive. While the two descriptions are not close enough for one to have influenced the other, they do point to the circulation of similar stories about the end of an Assyrian king (in Babylonia?) on a pyre,[342] and that these could enter Greek historiography.

The second example is that of the *ʾAḥîqar*-romance (the latter also hailing from the Jewish community on the island of Elephantinē). This Aramaic romance was framed around a collection of proverbs hailing from a west Ǧazīran, Aramaic-language, presumably 10th–9th century chancellery context which would have been used in the education of bureaucrats (see Ch. 2.4.2). In the romance itself, which is set during the late Neo-Assyrian period, the scholar ʾAḥîqar, advisor to the Assyrian king, seeks to pass on his position to his nephew Nādin who betrays him in a palace intrigue. ʾAḥîqar is ultimately rescued by a high official called Nabû-šuma-iškun (nbsmskn) and Nadin gets his just desserts—while the end of the story is broken, some versions have Nādin quite literally explode from the knowledge which ʾAḥîqar imparts to him as a comeuppance. Strikingly, the romance can be demonstrated to have been composed in an Assyrian context,[343] and presents a relatively accurate image of late Neo-Assyrian courtly culture,[344] indeed Nabû-šuma-iškun can be identified with an actual official, the charioteer of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (Parpola 2005, 106–107). It seems that the original Aramaic proverb collection survived within Assyrian alphabetic scribal culture, and ultimately collected this

338 Note Kottsieper's (1992, 288) suggestion that the name of the character Sarmugī (srmn₄g₂y), i.e. Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, originates from a misreading of the cuneiform writing of his name GIŠ.NU₁₀-MU-GI(.NA) as *is-sir₄-mu-gi*, although a misreading GIŠ-*šir-mu-gi* is probably more likely. It may well be that the author thought that this was a learned writing for Aššur (*sr* in Amherst 63's Demotic script-Aramaic) akin to the Bronze-age writing A.ŠIR = *a-šùr* = Aššur.
339 At a much later date, this Akkadian composition translated from a cuneiform source into Aramaic, most likely in Babylonia, as some other compositions within Papyrus Amherst 63 have a Babylonian theme. Indeed, an ideal location for this to have occurred is in Uruk where an Assyrian diaspora continued to live during the second half of the first millennium (Radner 2017b, 83–84). Remarkably, Assyrian scholarly texts and literature continued to be consumed and reworked in Uruk during this era as demonstrated by the Late Babylonian recension of the Na'id-Šīḫu 'epic' found here which contains elements demonstrating that it had passed through an Assyrian version before reaching Uruk (Beaulieu 1997, 66; Edmonds 2019b, 340–342), and even the find in an archive there of a tablet originating from the 'library' of Aššur-bāni-apli in Ninūa (Beaulieu 1997, 65–66). Such a milieu would have been the logical place for a forgotten Assyrian royal poem about a feud between two kings to be translated into Aramaic.
340 While it is possible that this is an interpolation by Alexander Polyhistor, editors have taken it as a genuine transmission of Berossus and suggested that he included this 'folk name' intentionally (Breucker 2011, 646).
341 The present author is preparing a comprehensive study of the figure of Sardanapalus which will also demonstrate a new methodological approach.
342 Note that in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (BNJ 688 f1q), Sardanapalus' children flee to Ninos (i.e. Ninūa), demonstrating that the events must be occurring in Babylōn.
343 The spellings of the names within the surviving framing composition are almost entirely Assyrian, reflecting the well-known swap in phonetic values between the consonants *sīn* and *šīn* in first-millennium Assyrian which did not occur in Babylonia.
344 Particularly picturesque is that ʾAḥîqar owns a vineyard in the story, much as many Assyrian high officials are known to have, implying that he retires to an estate on the foothills of the Kāšiāru (Assyria's finest *terroir*) before Nādin betrays him.

story around it, which, in turn, is well-known as having had a very wide reception in Antiquity (see Contini/Grottanelli 2005), including the appearance of one Achiacharos (Ἀχιαχαρος) in the Book of Tobit (1:21). While this story has no cuneiform counterpart—and can hardly be expected to ever have had one—it does provide a window into non-cuneiform historical literature in late Neo-Assyria and demonstrate that this could easily be transmitted into other cultures.

Thirdly, Frahm (2023b) has recently convincingly demonstrated that yet another curious text found in the library of Aššur-bāni-apli, the so-called *Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Crown Prince* (SAA 3, 32) refers to Arad-Mullissu, the murderer of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība who fled with his brother Šarra-uṣur to the land of Urarṭu. In this story, an Assyrian crown prince called *Kummâ* 'the Kummean' has a mystical vision of the underworld which leaves him humiliated. The tradition of the sons fleeing to Urarṭu is well-known from the Bible, but two other traditions add considerably to this story. Firstly, Moses of Choren recounts a longer version of the story (Պատմութիւն Հայոց / *History of the Armenians* 1.24, trans. Thompson 2006, 108–109):

Քանզի ութսուն, աւելի կամ պակաս, ամօ յառաջ քան զթագաւորութիւնն Նաբուգոդոնոսորայ էր Սենեքերիմն կացեալ արքայ Ասորեստանի. որ երուսաղեմ պաշարեաց առ Եզեկիայիւ Հրէից առաջնորդաւ. զոր սպանեալ որդւոց նորա Ադրամելեքայ եւ Սանասարայ՝ եկին փախստական առ մեզ: Յորոց զմինն յւրեմնից հարաւոյ աշխարհիւմերոյ, մերձ ի սահման նորին Ասորեստանի, բնակեցուցանէ Սկայորդին մեր քաջ նախնին, այս ինչն է զՍանասարն. եւ ի սմանէ անուն եւ բազմանալորութիւն լեալ՝ լցից զՍիմն ասացեալ լեառն: Իսկ պերէնն եւ գլխաւորն ի նոցանէ յետոյ ուրեմն մեր մատերմութիւն վաստակոց առ բազատուրան մեր ցուցեալ՝ գրքեխ թութիւն կոմանցն արքանատորեցան առնուլ: Իսկ Արդամոզանն յարեւելից հարաւոյ նորին կոմանցն բնակեալ. ի սմանէ ասէ պատմագիրն լինել զԱրծրունիս եւ զԳնունիս:

Eighty years, more or less, before the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Assyria was Senek'erim, who besieged Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah, the leader of the Jews. But his sons Adramelek' and Sanasar killed him and fled to us. One of these, that is, Sanasar, our valiant ancestor Skayordi settled in the southwest of our land, near the borders of the same Assyria; his descendants multiplied and propagated and filled the mountain called Sim. The most illustrious and foremost among them, showing thereafter friendly services to our kings, were honoured with the vitaxate of those regions. Now Ardamozan dwelt to the southeast of the same area, and from him, says the historian, descend the Artsruni and Gnuni.

The variance between the two versions of the prince's name (Adramelek' and Ardamozan) point to the harmonisation of various sources, and hence of a source containing Sanasar and Ardamozan living on the border of Assyria. Remarkably, as noted by Harrak (2001) and al-Jeloo (2022, 159), there is a Syriac hagiography of Saint Eugenios (*Mār ʾAwgen*) mentioning that the saint arrived at a village called Sargūgā on the side of Mount Qardō (the Assyrian Mount Nibur, the modern Cudi Dağı, Turkey, Arabic: *Ǧabal al-Ǧūdīya*) localised by al-Jeloo at modern Giriçölye/Derebaşı, Turkey, where *Šārāʾṣār* son of *Sanḫērīb* stayed, built a temple, and had children (Syriac: Bedjan 1892, 446). Identifying *Šārāʾṣār* with Sanasar who settled on the border of Assyria would make sense here, and would then put Ardamozan southeast of Cudi Dağı, which would fit nicely to the location of the holy city of Kumme, which must be in the valley of Beytüşşebap, Turkey (see Ch. 4.2.2–3). Insofar, here, a royal literary composition was written mocking an Assyrian prince living in exile in a holy city at which he had claimed sanctuary. That stories of these princes became part of the later foundational myths of Armenian noble houses (Martirosyan 2019) points to both memory in folklore, and probably an Aramaic composition about the murder of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība circulating at the close of the Assyrian Empire.[345]

Fourthly, two bizarre scatological texts from the 'library' of Aššur-bāni-apli curse one Bēl-ēṭir of Bīt-Ibâ for reasons quite unclear (SAA 3, 29–30). One of these (SAA 3, 29) parodies the phraseology of a *narû*-inscription and describes Bēl-ēṭir and a harlot called *Našqat* 'kissy'. The latter seems to erect a blank stele for him and bewails his loss after his apparent death (see discussion by Sansone 2023). The other (SAA 3, 30) curses Bēl-ēṭir and some other figures known to have been intimates of Aššur-bāni-apli at his court with remarkably vile sexual imagery. This same mocked figure seems to be reflected in a very curious tradition related by the Greek historians Bion (BNJ₂ 89 F1a) and Alexander Polyhistor (BNJ 273 f81a), that of a figure called Belētaras (Βελητάρας) or Belētaran (Βελητάραν), a gardener at the Assyrian court, who grafted himself

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345 Note in this regard the survival of the twins Sanasar and Baltasar in the Armenian oral epic conventionally known as the *Daredevils of Sasun* (Սասնա ծռեր) until it was textually documented in the 19th century. Jones' (2023a, 313–316. fn. 88) onomastic reservations that one [DN-]Šarra-uṣur could have been an Assyrian prince are unfounded, as [DN-]Šarra/u-ukīn bore an analogous name (see above, Ch. 2.5.3).

onto the Assyrian royal family, fathering its final kings (already noted by Henkelman 2011, 120–121). A second account (BNJ₂ 89 F1b) calls this gentleman Bēlous, son of Derketadēs (Βελεοῦν τὸν Δερκετάδου).[346] This latter name is quite striking, as the ending -άδης is the Greek patronymic suffix, which would leave *Derket-*, with which one then is reminded immediately of *Derketō*, mother of Semiramis.[347] Two other interpretations present themselves, either that this is a reference to his probable father, one Zēru-kīn (thus *br zrkn* to Derketadēs),[348] or to his erstwhile patron Šamaš-ibni, king of Bīt-Dakkūri (thus *br zkr* to the variants Dekeltad/tēs to Derketadēs). Regardless, like the other examples, an Assyrian literary text seems to have echoed in some manner of Aramaic composition which made its way salaciously into Greek historiography.

Fifthly, a final example might be considered, that of the Hellenistic novel. While Iamblichus' *Babylonaica* contains much fanciful content and is not pertinent to the present considerations, the *Ninos*-novel is. This only fragmentarily preserved story which seems to have enjoyed considerable popularity in Antiquity has been suggested to have been written by a Parthian subject (López Martínez 2019b). Certainly, it contains various interesting details which do not seem to fit a stereotyped 'orientalist' framing. In this story (see Stephens/Winkler 1995, 23–71), the 17-year-old Assyrian prince Ninos is in love with his cousin, the princess Semiramis (their mothers Thambe and Derkeia are sisters). Here, Semiramis is not (yet?) a virago, but rather a virginal girl. His ardour is tempered by his necessity to march repeatedly on campaigns in his father's name, including one to the mountains of Armenia, in which his march with his army (including elephants) is preserved in detail. In another fragment, Ninos is shipwrecked at Colchis with some men on another campaign. Obviously, the story will have a happy ending. Semiramis' demure virtuousness implies an origin quite separate from Ctesias, and it is interesting that Ninos is a teenager in this story, as Sammu-rāmat's actual counterpart Šamšī-Adad V was also probably a young crown prince at the time of the Assyrian succession conflict (see Ch. 3.5.2), and that campaigning to Urarṭu by the *turtānu* Dayyān-Aššur did take place during the last years of the reign of the ailing king Salmānu-ašarēd III, which would fit with Ninos leading an army there in his father's stead. Naturally, more than 700 years lie between the era of Sammu-rāmat and the composition of the *Ninus*-romance, which would seem to render the transmission of an authentic Assyrian tradition unlikely, but there is evidence suggesting an Aramaic influence upon this novel, namely the name of Semiramis's mother Derkeia, which demonstrates traces of having passed through a Semitic-language composition,[349] which may mean that older Assyrian material was incorporated into this romance. Indeed, a recent publication of a new literary fragment (POxy. 5264) points to there having been another Hellenic novel of the period centred upon Semiramis (López Martínez 2018), which may point to even more literary engagement with Assyrian history during this period.

This series of examples does not even touch upon native Egyptian compositions about the Assyrian Empire, as recorded in the ever-growing (see Ryholt 2019) corpus of texts constituting the *Inaros*-cycle in which Egyptian heroes fight invading Assyrian forces (e.g. Quack 2006), or the *Serpot*-composition which seems to refer to Semiramis (Zauzich 2010). Most strikingly, Tomb A2 T1 at the site of aš-Šayḫ Faḍl, Egypt, preserves an Aramaic-language *Inaros*-composition (Holm 2007; Köhler et al. 2018), demonstrating that these Achaemenid-era historical literary romances were being translated back and forth between different languages in a situation of remarkable hybridity. This is without considering other biblical sources (see Frahm 2017b; 2020c) and

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346 Henkelman (2011) links this with a story perhaps from Ctesias, in which one Bēlos or Belitana had a tomb near Babylōn which Xerxes visited only to receive a curse from its occupant (Aelian *Varia historia* 13.3). The solution to this riddle is beyond the scope of this work.

347 Further inspection of textual variants in the critical apparatus also presents the curious variants *Dekeltadēs* (δεκελτάδου) and *Dekeltatēs* (δεκελτάτου).

348 Inasmuch as Bēl-ēṭir is described as the *išpik zê Zēru-kīn* "thunderbox of Zēru-kīn" in the mock titulary of SAA 3, 29 o. 4 but only *išpik zê ṣāriti* "thunderbox of a flatulent" in the parallel titulary in SAA 3, 30 o. 2, and his designation *mār Ibâ* refers to his clan affiliation, it seems plausible that this Zēru-kīn is meant as his father, the crude humour being that he had given him the 'breath of life'. Note the emphasis on wind-breaking, similar to that experienced by Kummâ at the close of the Underworld Vision (SAA 3, 32 r. 30).

349 In the story, her mother's name is *Derkeia* (Δερκεία) which is very similar to her name in the mainstream name *Derketō* (Δερκετώ) in Classical tradition (López Martínez 2019a, 130), generally understood as a rendering of the name of the goddess *Atargatis* (Drijvers 1999, 114). However, the discrepancy between the two names is significant as the name *Derkeia* lacks the final consonant of the usual form. The most logical explanation is that this name had moved between various scripts, so that in an Aramaic recension the final -*t* had been misunderstood as a feminine ending and replaced with -*h*.

the mythical description of Nimrôḏ the hunter, founder of Assyria (see van der Toorn/van der Horst 1990), or the hybridity which has been increasingly recognised within Judean literature (Honigman 2022).

What the present author seeks to demonstrate is that there is an entire world of only partially preserved literature and historiography playing with Assyria and its kings already active before the empire even fell. This literature probably reflected not only royal and elite, but even more general perceptions of a king and his reign, and quite unlike royal inscriptions, this literature had scarce patience for a king who failed to meet the mark; as such, it is particularly useful as a cautious supplement to cuneiform sources.[350] Indeed, the influence of such literature seems to be evident on some cuneiform compositions such as the Late Babylonian Naʾid-Šīḫu-composition (Edmonds 2019b); to what extent it was influenced by or influenced other 'dissenting' literature in cuneiform (see Finn 2017) remains to be seen. Certainly, the Akkadian royal letters copied by later scribes (Frazer 2024) present a far more personal image of kingship than what is found in royal inscriptions. A new 'bottom-up' paradigm of textual hybridity and translation in an interconnected post-Assyrian imperial world must be developed to understand these transformations. As it is, stories and gossip did matter in the perception of a king—then as much as now.

2.6 In the lions' den. Assyria's elites and the political sphere

While the Aramaic portion of the *Book of Daniel*'s (6:17–25) description of the Babylonian king's lion-pit (*gobbā ḏī ʾaryāwāṯā*) seems fanciful, the late Neo-Assyrian king did, in fact, keep a pit of lions, as evidenced by the famous letter of Urad-Gula which describes him praying before such a pit (SAA 10, 294 o. 39). This lion's den seems a fitting metaphor with which to begin discussion of the role of Assyria's elites (see e.g. Tadmor 1986; Parpola 2007; Pongratz-Leisten 2013; Richardson 2016). The reconstruction of this group remains a fraught issue, particularly for the early Neo-Assyrian period;[351] royal inscriptions seldom mention Assyrians beyond the king himself and his anonymous army, and reconstructing this group requires a careful piecing together of the remaining documentary information which includes the onomasticon of the Eponym Lists and Chronicles (SAAS 2), and dedicatory objects and inscriptions on seals. Even then, the results seem far from representative, and there are few emic terms with which even to define elites as a distinct group (Radner 1997, 198–200).

Until more sources by means of which the social history of the early Neo-Assyrian period might be reconstructed are forthcoming, a history of the elites of this period is more or less that of its governors, who are visible in the aforementioned Eponym Lists and Chronicles, which provide a list of the Assyrian officials honoured with the naming of the year after them. The official in question would receive a stele inscribed with their name in analogy to that of the king—thus also being 'inscribed' into history—and his name would be used to date documents throughout the kingdom. While theoretically ascribed by lot, as suggested by the famous die of Aya-ḫālu (RIMA 3, 0.102.2003), the reality was that these were preselected some two years in advance by the early Neo-Assyrian period at the latest.[352] During this period, the order of eponymates was ordered hierarchically, so that the king would celebrate his eponymate two years after his father's death (this permitting the eponym for the coming year to still celebrate his eponymate), then his *turtānu* would celebrate the eponymate, and the other members of the 'royal cabinet' in turn, followed by the governors of prominent provinces, and those from less well-established provinces if the king reigned long enough. If the

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350 Consider, for example, Reade's (2024c) interesting suggestion on the strength of Classical tradition that Aššur-bāni-apli died in exile from old age—something which could have been common knowledge in the Near East without ever being recorded within the cuneiform textual record. Such a fate could better fit Aššur-uballiṭ "III".

351 "Von der weltlichen Elite, d. h. den Funktionären des Königs in Verwaltung und Heer, ist erstaunlich wenig bekannt. Würdenträger erscheinen in ihrer jeweiligen Funktion, in einigen Fällen lässt sich sogar ihre Karriere mitverfolgen, doch ihr sozialer Hintergrund, ihre Familien und gegenseitigen Beziehungen bleiben im Dunkeln." (Fuchs 2005, 47).

352 The date at which the king's eponymate moved from the year after his father's death to the subsequent year (i.e. two years after his father's death) has remained a point of contention; Reade (2004, 469) and Bloch (2012, 10–11, fn. 23) argue that this occurred with the accession of Aššur-dān II, while Yamada (2018a, 83) has contended that this was already in place during the Middle Assyrian period. Regardless, Tadmor (1958, 28, fn. 53) must be correct that the two-year system was already operative by the reign of Adad-nārārī II.

king reigned for 30 years, then he received a second eponymate.[353] Sometimes, the usual order is disrupted, for example by the promotion of an official to a high position, or as an exceptional reward by the king to an individual—this is particularly noteworthy in respect to the usurpers Adad-nārārī II and Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* who both interrupted the usual order of eponyms to reward individuals who had aided them in gaining the throne.[354] By closely studying the variants in names, the sometimes-curious discrepancies in names found in these lists and other sources, and irregularities in the sequences, deeper insights into this period can sometimes be gained, as has already been noted in respect to 'transitional cases' in Chapter 2.4.2.

In terms of their make-up, the early Neo-Assyrian elites are usually understood as a continuation into the Iron age of the old Middle Assyrian aristocracy (e.g. Parpola 2007). Certainly, the old 'knightly' class of charioteers constituting the *mārū damqūti* 'wellborn' seem to have survived into the Neo-Assyrian period (Postgate 2000, 91; Radner 2002, 9–10), albeit with a presumably diminished status. Nonetheless, the Middle Assyrian court was already culturally diverse, and a couple of colourful figures are already evident prior to the Neo-Assyrian period, such as one Kīdītû, an Arrapḫian governor who built a pleasure palace for a Tukultī-apil-Ešarra, very likely the first of his name, as recorded in a curious and unprovenanced brick inscription (RINAP 1, TP 2006).[355] By the same token, one might note one Ubrutu, son of Nazi-Maruttaš, an unplaced eponym during the reign of Aššur-dān II (RIMA 2, 0.98.3: 20–21). While the surviving names of eponyms during the 10th century (SAAS 2, A7 o. iv 1–v 13′) are generally Akkadian, this need not mean that their bearers were of Assyrian origins; indeed, the latter Ubrutu was evidently of Kassite stock. It is possible that in the chaos, decentralisation, and population movements of the era, increased cultural hybridity occurred among Assyria's elites; certainly, it is difficult to identify any manner of ethno-cultural prejudice among the governing classes. What must, nonetheless, have been rife is nepotism, which was more or less a given within the ancient Near East (Grayson 1999, 256), although explicit reference to this practice is comparatively rare within the textual record (Baker 2015, 591–592).

One point in which something about the general background of the Assyrian elites might be stated is their education. Firstly, it seems very likely that elite males at the very least were literate. Radner (2021b, 151–155) has recently reconstructed a 'state education' received by those elites in the service of the Neo-Assyrian bureaucracy, in which there was a basic level of literacy received by all Assyrian officials, and the "full arsenal" which specialised scholars received. In support of this notion, she cites the famous letter SAA 15, 17, sent by an Assyrian official without a scribe asking for a new one to be sent to him. Indeed, on the basis of this reconstruction, she even suggests that secretary-scribes were officials in training. This analysis unfortunately does not accord with to the reality of the letter in question, which Parpola (1997, 320) describes as follows:

> This explains the many unusual spellings, word forms and phrases occurring in the text. Not being a professional scribe, the writer simply was not able to adequately follow the standard spelling and phrasing conventions of the Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence. At the same time it is clear, however, that he was by no means a mere dilettante either but must have had considerable previous writing experience. The tablet, expertly moulded, has the typically Neo-Assyrian letter format, the introductory formula agrees with contemporary conventions, and the signs are drawn and distributed over the lines with a skill that can be acquired only through long and repeated practice.

Indeed, the most obvious point is that the letter would not exist if the governor in question was willing or able to 'make do' until the next time he could reach civilisation. Assyrian officials who could read and write nonetheless wanted someone else to do it in a professional function wherever possible—they wanted a 'communication specialist'. In light of what the present author has argued in Chapter 2.2.6, it is important to un-

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353 Notable examples are the second eponymates of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra II and Salmānu-ašarēd III.
354 A contrasting example is that of Aššur-bāni-apli whose choice of officials for the eponymate was frequently strange, and perhaps intended to snub the high officials traditionally entitled to this honour. Most strikingly, he awarded one eponymate to Bulluṭu, his chief musician, much as Sîn-šarra-iškun would award another to his chief cook Saʾīlu; one might suspect the 'reality disconnect' of late Neo-Assyrian kings discussed in Ch. 2.5. It is possible that this behaviour partly inspired the luxuriousness of the Sardanapalus myth (Reade 1998, 263).
355 One might compare the onomastics of the members of the local ruling dynasty at Idu who served as Assyrian governors during the same period; in this case, they oscillate between Akkadian and Hurrian (Hess 2020).

derline this point regarding the specialisation of cuneiform writing. Just as a Neo-Assyrian royal inscription is full of a mannered jargon with which it describes political events,[356] so too is a letter of the Neo-Assyrian correspondence written in a sociolect which is only semi-comprehensible to the uninitiated.[357] Being a scribe within the state apparatus was a 'technical profession' with its own place within the Assyrian hierarchy, and one in which its practitioners took pride.[358] The messages which these men sent on his majesty's behest could almost be deemed as 'encoded', containing a specialised administrative language, the nuances of which sometimes continue to elude the modern researcher. This made standardised cuneiform letters a safer, encrypted means of communication between the state and its functionaries, particularly considering how much of the early Neo-Assyrian bureaucracy in the Ǧazīra was in Aramaic (see Ch. 2.4.2).[359] Secrecy could be maintained even if a message was intercepted, and reports could not easily be falsified or misinformation spread; much as a modern Assyriologist can almost immediately intuitively tell if a text is a forgery, so too would a scribe have quickly 'sussed' a 'bunk' communication. Hence, the Neo-Assyrian governor and those of his class did not write administrative letters, they had someone to do it for them. By the same token, they did not receive a centralised state education or begin their careers as a scribe (*pace* Radner 2021b, 151–155). Sîn-naʾdi was not able to write the letter SAA 15, 17 in the correct manner, nor would he even have wanted to have learnt—for this man, reading and writing was not used for 'shop'.[360] The question is raised as to what exactly this obvious scribal proficiency was used for, and the answer must be his own private life, housekeeping, and literature; such, at least, is the impression gained from what early Neo-Assyrian scribal exercises have been recovered at Qalʾa Širqāṭ (KAL 15, 2; 3; 6; 7; 13; 14; 34). It is hence a shame that more is not known of the elite's cultural pursuits; while it remains very difficult to contextualise the literary tablets found at Sultantepe, Turkey (Robson 2019, 134–138; Rubin 2023, 74–78) or to establish whether or not they were representative of broader tastes, it is interesting to note that this corpus contained literature both praising the king and royal authority, and conversely mocking it.

Unfortunately, very little is known about elite women and the role which they played in politics (e.g. May 2018a), beyond that of certain queens (e.g. Parpola 2007; Kertai 2013b; Svärd 2015a; 2015b).[361] As has already been discussed, the sexes were generally socially separated, limiting their direct political engagement with one another. Outside of the cultic sphere, women seem ultimately to have been dependent upon their husbands' status within Neo-Assyrian society—even the titles of Assyrian queens within their own inscriptions were invariably connected to their men.[362]

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356 Indeed, this jargon essentially ensured the continued employment of a certain group of scribes—if the skill and know-how required to write a royal inscription were lost entirely, then it would require a long and arduous process for a new generation to re-learn the huge amounts of contextual knowledge accompanying this type of inscription. Even in Assyria's darkest hours, an Assyrian king would have kept on such specialists, as letting them go would mean admitting that nothing worth writing a royal inscription about remained to be written.

357 Consider, for example, the very standardised expressions found in these letters to express wishes or commands (Ponchia 1989).

358 Scribes are frequently visually depicted in scenes of campaigning, but as distinct from their fellow Assyrian troops, and even as wearing impractical court dress (see Reade 2012), much as one would still wear a gown to work as a college don or even a schoolmaster until the latter part of the last century.

359 This incidentally explains the use of a cuneiform letter by Marduk-apla-uṣur of Sūḫu to correspond with Rudamu (Urtamis) of Ḫamat (Ḥamā 1, see Parpola 1990; Arbøll 2023, 105–107) despite both individuals having been Aramaic-speakers—the political contents of this letter were sensitive.

360 Nonetheless, the very fragmentary Middle Assyrian literary letter KAL 16, 53 is here of note, as it appears to be military in theme—might this be an early example of 'military fiction' intended for Assyrian officers? Certainly, as argued in Ch. 2.2.4, the Naʾid-Šīḫu composition was intended for an audience accustomed to campaigning and bureaucracy.

361 From these, only Mullissu-mukannišat-Ninūa and Sammu-rāmat can presently be shown to have exerted any real power during the early Neo-Assyrian period, and will hence be discussed individually in Chs. 3.4.3, 3.5.3, and 4.5.4 respectively.

362 Svärd (2015b, 40–41) argues that queens retained their titles after the death of their husbands (and by extension a manner of institutional power), but the evidence for this is quite slim, as Mullissu-mukannišat-Ninūa was married to Salmānu-ašarēd III rather than his mother (see 3.4.3), and Sammu-rāmat occupied a unique quasi-regent position, which quickly dissolved once her son reached maturity (see Ch. 3.5.3).

By means of contrast, the class comprising Assyria's eunuchry can be better defined.[363] Eunuchs (Akkadian *ša rēši* 'he of the head') were already a part of Assyrian court life in the Middle Assyrian period (Deller 1999),[364] and they endured into the Neo-Assyrian period. Indeed, the court at Sūru of Bīt-Ḫalupê also had eunuchs (RIMA 2, 0.101.1 i 92), implying that this tradition had also continued independently in Upper Mesopotamia. As noted by Deller (1999, 305–306), there seems to have been a strong *esprit de corps* among eunuchs, and Assyrian noble families will have had excess sons castrated in order to enable them to enter the Assyrian administration as eunuchs (see also Grayson 1995, 95). While officially becoming a eunuch meant renouncing one's parentage and taking on the king as a father instead (Deller 1999, 306–307), it seems very probable that they continued to assist their former families once within this institution; like the clergy of Medieval Christendom, having a consecrated individual in the family would have allowed one to pull strings.[365] While it would have been inappropriate for a eunuch to express his status through family or birth, there are some hints that certain eunuchs circumvented this situation by displaying local pride instead; for example, the eunuch Ninurta-bēlu-uṣur's inscriptions found at ʾArslān Ṭāš, Syria, do not provide his parentage, but they do provide a detailed multilingual description of his origins which is presently unique within the textual record (Röllig 2009, B.2–4; A.4–5; a.4′-6′; b.3–5):

> ᵐᵈMAŠ-EN-PAP *šá* ᵘʳᵘ*ṣi-ra-ni šá* ᵘʳᵘ*ḫa-laḫ-ḫi šá pa-an* ᵘʳᵘ*li-pa-pa-an* KUR-*e* URU É AD-*a*
>   ʾ*nrtbl*ʳ*ṣr z*ˑ*y qryt ṣrn zy ḫlḫ zy qdm llbn*ˑ *qryt byt* ʾ*by*

> Ninurta-bēlu-uṣur of the town of Ṣirāni of (Akk. adds: the city of) Ḫalaḫḫu which is opposite the town of Lipapan (Akk. adds: the mountain), my ancestral town

In turn, the powerful eunuch Pālil-ēreš, governor of Raṣappa, seems to have been a native of the eastern Ǧazīra (see Ch. 4.4.4), where he was content to rule his own 'kingdom within a kingdom' during the Entr'acte. Some eunuchs must have been royals who had been 'removed from the running'; the clearest example is Šamšī-ilu, whose pretentions even as *turtānu* exceeded those of most kings, and whose rapid promotion at a young age bespeaks such an origin. Another is Aššur-nāṣir, chief eunuch, who was one of high officials who sought to topple Aššur-aḫa-iddina in 670 (see Radner 2016a, 52–53); that both he and the governor of Aššur independently screwed their "courage to the sticking place" in the same year and sought to become king suggest that they were both collateral princes with a claim to the throne. Eunuchs stand out for the hierarchical relationships which they openly expressed in inscriptions on precious cylinder seals from the era as "PN eunuch of PN".[366] In onomastic terms, eunuchs also bear the most overtly royalist or chauvinist names, such as what might be termed *bēlu*-names were eunuchs. As noted by Galter (2004b, 450), these names display loyalty to a lord, rather than to a king; thus, various lower officials subordinate to high officials possessed names such as GN-*bēlu-uṣur* "O GN, protect the lord!" It is remarkable in this respect as to how few eunuch names reference the king—for all of their apparent loyalty, eunuchs seem to have been wedded more to their own institution than the sovereign in practice.

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363 It seems to have generally been accepted in the past years that eunuchs were castrated men (e.g. May 2023, 261), although the actual etymology of their job title *ša rēši* 'he of the head' is unrelated to this, being related to their position of trust as the king's bedside attendants, and thus a cognate of Greek εὐνοῦχος (Frazer 2022). While there is no conclusive evidence, it is probable that a crushing technique was used to make eunuchs; this would not have rendered eunuchs impotent as is often imagined, but rather simply sterile (Ayalon 1999, 316–325), which Parpola (2012, 616) astutely notes through Assyrian references to eunuch dalliances. Araujo (2023, 3–4, fn. 10) suggests this process of crushing would not have been sufficient punishment for rape in the Middle Assyrian Laws (for which the penalty was to be made into a eunuch), and hence that excision of the penis would have occurred.
364 Note also the appearance of eunuchs upon the visual registers White Obelisk of Aššur-nāṣir-apli I, albeit in lower proportions compared to bearded attendants than in the late Neo-Assyrian relief sculptures (Reade 1975, 145).
365 One good example is Sîn-ēṭir, the brother of the eunuch Bēl-tarṣi-ilumma, governor of Kalḫu, profiting from a land-deal there (CTN 2, 64: 3), implying that families of well-placed eunuchs could reap the benefits of such an investment despite the sacrifice of having less members in the following generation. While the central devotee before the divinity on his seal (see Watanabe 1993, no. 7.1) is without a beard, another, probably bearded figure before a divinity is evident on the same seal in a left-hand group—it may well be that the central devotee is Bēl-tarṣi-ilumma and the subsidiary devotee is Sîn-ēṭir.
366 Some of these were gifts from superiors to underlings (somewhat akin to workplace gifts of luxury watches today).

That eunuchry's star rose over the course of the early Neo-Assyrian period seems to have been a response to the growing power of the Assyrian gubernatorial class, who sided almost entirely with Aššur-daʾʾin-apla over the prince who would become Šamšī-Adad V during the succession war of 826–820. It is in the aftermath of this that eunuchs, particularly the chief eunuch of the time Mutaqqin-Aššur, become prominent in the extant sources—it might be presumed that Šamšī-Adad V and his successors hoped to split competition among the elites (Fuchs 2005, 52) by pitting these two groups against one another. In the ensuing Entr'acte, the eunuch *turtānu* Šamšī-ilu ruled in all but name (see Ch. 3.5.5), and the eunuch Pālil-ēreš, governor of Raṣappa, essentially controlled a state within a state (see Ch. 4.4.4). By the early 740's, eunuchs were openly creating stelae depicting solely themselves as if ruling (*in statu regis*), and it was only through his forceful statecraft that Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* was able to bring them finally to heel.

Surrounding the king were an inner circle of the highest officials which has been termed his 'cabinet' (Parpola 1995). These were high officials whose offices bore often antiquated titles such as the Hurrian post of *turtānu* 'second-in-command' (Wilhelm 1970),[367] or palatial offices such as *nāgir ēkalli* 'palace herald' or *rab šāqê* 'chief cupbearer' (for these offices, see Mattila 2000). These men and the other high officials at their fringes are loosely referred to as *rabûtu* 'magnates' within the Assyrian corpus. One of the difficulties is in understanding their exact functions or spheres of responsibility, which remains quite opaque for the early Neo-Assyrian period, and must be inferred through comparison between the sources known from the Middle Assyrian and late Neo-Assyrian periods (Faist 2010).[368] Some of them were entrusted with marcher provinces intended to stave off particular threats (see already Ch. 2.2.3), the extent of which would seem to have been entrusted in something of an ad hoc manner until the late Neo-Assyrian period.

The logic behind the assignment of different fiefdoms to different governors remains unclear, and sometimes magnates appear as administrators of a variety of non-contiguous territories in what sources survive. For example, During the reign of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, Nergal-apīl-kūmūʾa, the first governor of Kalḫu, also had holdings in the vicinity of Naṣībīna (SAA 12, 82–84). At the end of the 9th century, Šarru-Ḫattu-ibella/ipella governed both Aššur and Naṣībīna, along with some other cities in the Upper Ḫābūr (WVDOG 24, 41). For a period in the 770's, one Aplāya governed both Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu and (Mā)zamūa, along with Aššur (WVDOG 24, 41). By much the same token, Šarru-ēmuranni may also have governed both Amēdu/Bīt-Zamāni/Naʾiri/Sinābu and (Mā)zamūa during the reign of Šarru-ukīn, and even have spent a stint overseeing things in Babylonia (Radner/Schachner 2001, 771).[369] If there was a province of the palace herald prior to 745 (see Ch. 4.2.6), then the *nāgir ēkalli* Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-uṣur was compelled not only to guard it, but also the problem-zone of the Ṭarṭār, where he was tasked with the construction of a new fortified settlement during the reign of Salmānu-ašarēd V* (see Ch. 4.4.4).

All of this demands that a fluidity of power and general competitiveness throughout this era be emphasised (e.g. Richardson 2016, 54–57).[370] In turn, high officials or governors of lucrative provinces could rise to dominate the Assyrian court from the most unexpected of directions, although the precise details remain obscure in most cases (note, however, the well-documented case of Pālil-ēreš). Such dynamicism is demonstrated by the appearance of a *šāqû rabû* ('great cupbearer') parallel to the *rab šāqê* ('chief cupbearer') during the early Neo-Assyrian period (Mattila 2000, 47–48). One *šāqû rabû*, Aššur-nīrka-daʾʾin, successfully married his daughter Mullissu-mukannišat-Ninūa to Aššur-nāṣir-apli II, and engineered the prince who would become Salmānu-ašarēd III's successful bid for the throne (see Ch. 3.4.3). Šamšī-Adad V seems wisely to have had this influential but tautologous post abolished.

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367 While the present author is unconvinced that there was a set number of these individuals or an esotericism connected to them (see criticism by Frahm 2000b), as it seems more likely that in the king's inner circle probably waxed and waned, this is a useful term when applied more loosely.

368 ". . . it is highly unlikely that a term denoting an office remained stable over a period of 300 years. 'Histories of terminology' or *Begriffsgeschichten* have firmly established that even basic terminologies are subject to rapid historical change." (Bernbeck 2010, 151).

369 As a result, Aplāya would logically be the unnamed governor of Naʾiri who donated an inscribed axehead discovered at Tall Ḥaddād, Iraq (RINAP 2, 2008).

370 See also Jones' (2021) recently completed doctoral dissertation on competition among elites during the late Neo-Assyrian period.

A final topic to be discussed under the heading of 'elites' is the scribal class to which has already been alluded. The degree to which its members are imagined to have held sway within royal decision-making, the court, and broader society is difficult to gauge. Certainly, old scribal families seem to have supplied the members of the priesthood, and must have enjoyed considerable standing in such roles (see discussion by Zaia 2019a)—nonetheless, as the Assyrian king was also high priest of Aššur and hence 'pope' of the Assyrian 'state religion' (if such a term is at all appropriate), Assyrian priests would not have been able to censure him as effectively as their colleagues in Babylonia could their own sovereign. The waxing and waning of the fortunes of different gods and temples within Assyria as they competed for royal patronage (see Zaia 2021) suggests at least to the present author a decidedly subordinate role of the Assyrian clergy politically. In turn, some scholars have suggested that as diviners, educators, and the composers of inscriptions, scribes wielded considerable power within the Assyrian court and broader society, a stance best summarised in the following remarks made by Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 35):

> Within the political, bureaucratic, and religious social strata of ancient Near Eastern society, leading scholars can be regarded as the "intellectuals" of their time; they shaped the *weltanschauung* and the perception of the king's *body politic*, compiled the religious, historical, juridical and lexical knowledge, expounded ritual and religious texts, and determined the thought patterns for the ideological education of the bureaucratic elite. As such, scholars acted not only as the ideological custodians of the central institutions of temple and palace. Rather, by reaffirming, transmitting, and modifying inherited social, cultural, and political traditions, scholars also fulfilled authoritative and power exercising functions on the higher levels of state administration. They acted as personal agents, counselors, and tutors to the crown prince and king and their advice was sought perpetually in all state affairs. Hence, beyond formulating the ideological basis for royal authority, scholars were also directly involved in the exercise of authority in ways that reached beyond their particular skills and expertise as astrologer, exorcist, and diviner.

The present author must respectfully beg to differ. As specialists, scribes were employed in very specific roles within the Assyrian court, and it is a simplification to imagine them as a single 'scribal class' or as occupying the role of modern "intellectuals", although they can be demonstrated to have occasionally convened for a manner of 'divinatory board meeting' during the reigns of the last Neo-Assyrian kings (Maul 2013a, 241). The central role of the king's scholars was to detect and avert cosmic danger to the king and his land; for their divinatory competences—and particularly their ability to predict eclipses—certain groups of scholars must have enjoyed much prestige, but the notion that they dictated 'ideological' policy to the king is unrealistic: Whether the armchair tactician Bēl-ušēzib's advice to the king on mountain warfare (Fuchs 2011a, 384–385) or the high priest of Aššur Akkullānu's detailed considerations (Maul 2013a, 302–305), the Assyrian king had little difficulty in entirely ignoring scholarly suggestions. Indeed, scholars seem to have been a considerable irritation to Sîn-aḫḫē-erība—one group of diviners in his court were found to be falsifying signs to avoid his displeasure, and the king ultimately took to isolating teams of diviners from one another and posing them identical questions to get any results (Maul 2013a, 310–311; Fuchs 2019, 111–115)—a remarkable early example of the scientific method! The notion that the king was constantly encumbered by ritual precepts and constantly consulted diviners for every decision of state[371] also seems to the present author an imposition of the atypical reign of Aššur-aḫa-iddina upon the remaining period.[372] In the first place, various factors meant that prognostication was not constantly available—the stars could be obscured, or it could be one of the ten days of the month in which extispicy was inauspicious (Maul 2013a, 33–35), or the king could be on the road and loathe to stop and set up the *qirsu* for such an undertaking. Moreover, a king could essentially 'brute

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371 For example, Liverani (2009, 90) notes: "The Palace was secluded and protected from dangers coming from outside, yet it contained in itself other dangers. Most of the time was spent in checking the reliability of information, the loyalty of courtiers, the favor of the stars. The working day of an Assyrian king in his palace — a 'normal' day, with no special ceremonies and no military engagements — was a full day, a hard day, a stressing day."
372 For example, only a single extispicy report presently survives from the reign of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība (Finkel 1987), meaning that this king's own use of diviners is only known from his own testimony. The discovery of an archive of divinatory queries or reports from an earlier, more conventional king, e.g. Pūlu/Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* or Salmānu-ašarēd III, would do much to contextualise the extant corpus. While the consultation of extispicy and ecstatics is well documented during the Middle Assyrian period (Jakob 2003, 516–517. 522–528), little in the way of actual reports is presently extant (see Shibata 2015).

force' any answer to a question which he wished by asking it repeatedly, or by having the wording slightly altered. In turn, there were multiple methods of divination available, the practitioners of which actively competed with one another, and royal patronage could abruptly shift, as the abandonment of dream divination at Imgur-Enlil demonstrates. Most recently, a network analysis seems to demonstrate that the late Neo-Assyrian kings lost interest in their own scholars (Jones 2023b) at the height of the empire's pomp and glory, precisely when the most scholarly 'ideological' creation might be expected.[373] It seems difficult to imagine an Assyrian *grammateocracy* ('rule of the scribes') in these circumstances. Akin to modern academia, most Assyrian scholars made a precarious living at best, as the famous letter from Urad-Gula with which this section began demonstrates, with many falling by the wayside, left praying at the lion's den.

2.7 'United as one voice'. The silent Assyrian masses

Beyond the king and his high officials, it is difficult to reconstruct the sentiment of Assyria's general population towards its state, and most of the available evidence hails from the late Neo-Assyrian period.[374] As has already been noted with respect to the gubernatorial class, the Assyrian king's power was not untrammelled. The Assyrian king had once been but a first among equals (*primus inter pares*), and some vestiges of this survived. Moreover, in both its pastoral and judicial aspects, Assyrian kingship did entail a manner of social contract between the king and his population, as is most memorably outlined in the so-called Assyrian Coronation Hymn (KAL 12, 2; SAA 3, 11), which focuses upon the king's role as a lawgiver and guarantor of advantageous commodity prices. In particular, it states *qabû šemû kitti mēšaru ana širikti lū šarkūšu* "May they bestow on him as a gift command, attention, truth, and justice!" (SAA 3, 11: 8).[375] Most strikingly, in a trope already crystalised in the prologue of the Code of Ḥammu-rāpi, the hymn wishes the following:

> o. 12. *ṣe-eḫ-ru liq-bi-ma* [*ra-bu-ú*] *liš-me*
> o. 13. *ra-bu-ú liq-bi-ma* [*ṣe-eḫ-ru*] *liš-me*
> o. 14. *mit-gur-tu sa-li-mu* [*ina* KUR-*aš-šur*]^ki *liš-šá-kín*
>
> o. 12. May the lesser speak and the [greater] listen!
> o. 13. May the greater speak and the [lesser] listen!
> o. 14. May concord and peace be established [in Assyria]!

While this sentiment can hardly be termed democratic, it does present a model of a stratified society in which everyone has a voice.[376] An extension of this notion appears in Assyrian royal inscriptions in the expression *pâ ištēn šakānu/turru* 'to impose one mouth, i.e. to unite as one voice', said of regions subjugated by the Assyrian king. Liverani (2017b, 162) understands this as placing a region under a single 'command', but this runs contrary to its very broad usage for areas which would not have been a single administrative unit, some of which never enjoyed any uniform Assyrian control.[377] The present author would argue rather that this is rather connected to the notion of homogenising local interests into a single coherent 'voice' which might engage in dialogue with the Assyrian state—this trope would hence not be as much about domination

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[373] Naturally, such analysis is predicated on the representativeness of the surviving epistolary corpus, which may be doubtful in light of the prominent role of orality within the Neo-Assyrian administration.

[374] Perhaps the most charming mark left by the 'common man' upon Assyrian history is the many examples of gaming boards scratched onto the plinths of colossal sculptures in Assyrian palaces by bored sentries (Reade 2000, 611).

[375] This sentiment is already present in the Middle Assyrian annual ritual renewing the sovereign's kingship, in which the priest crowning the king states *qabâ šemâ magāra kitta u salīma Aššur liddinakku* "May Aššur grant you command, attention, assent, truth, and peace!" (KAL 12, 1 o. ii 11'–13').

[376] For Assyria as an antecedent of democracy, see e.g. Isakhan 2012. Note also Maul's (2013a, 323) comment that "der in unserer eigenen Kultur gepflegte Mythos vom Ursprung der Demokratie in der griechischen Polis verstellt allzuleicht die Einsicht, daß eine Kultur des Aushandelns nicht zwangsläufig an die Agora und an die uns vertrauten formen und schon gar nicht an Aufklärung und Säkularisierung gebunden ist."

[377] This also does not explain the examples given by Liverani of it being applied to enemies.

as rationalising representation akin to the 'harmony of interests' (*Interessenharmonie*) formulated by Lamprichs (1995b, 29–30). The benefits of this for the Assyrian regime were plain.

Certainly, the king could not expect to ride roughshod over local institutions incessantly without encountering resistance, and it was understood that something of a balancing of interests was necessary. Indeed, the issue of *andurāru*, or freedom from taxation and *corvée* labour granted to particular cities came to be a crucial point during the late Neo-Assyrian period (Villard 2007), possibly even contributing to the demise of Ulūlāya/Salmānu-ašarēd VI* and the accession of Šarru-ukīn (Vera Chamaza 1992). Moreover, in governing Babylonia, the late Assyrian king was compelled by circumstances to listen to the demands of various pre-existing civic institutions in a manner far from the absolutism which he enjoyed in Assyria proper (Barjamovic 2004).[378] A few somewhat curious surviving petitions (Radner 2016b, 67–68) imply that commoners had the right to write to the sovereign completely out of the blue, even if these letters would have been roundly ignored.

There were some channels by which the Assyrian population could probably openly express its dissatisfaction,[379] particularly immediately following the death of a king, when the regime was at its weakest (Saggs 1984, 57). In turn, prophet and ecstatics (see Nissinen 1998) were able to serve as the 'people's voice' (*vox populi*), standing up to kings within a sacred framework in which they need not fear reprisal (Maul 2013a, 200–210). Natural events such as earthquakes or eclipses—considered a baleful omen for a king (Maul 1999, 205; 2000b; MacGinnis 2023b)—would have formed exceptional circumstances within which open criticism of a king might well have been cosmically justified and socially acceptable. One of the greatest weapons of the dissatisfied is humour; were the free-wheeling antics of the *aluzinnu*, a type of performing fool, widespread enough in Mesopotamian society and farther afield to have survived into the Greek ἀλαζών (Griffith/Marks 2011; Rumor 2016; 2017), then the mocking of authority may have had various similar conduits within Assyria's oral peasant culture.[380]

While Liverani (2010, 229) has ascribed a simple credulity to the Assyrian peasant (see Ch. 1.3), it seems far more likely that were just as realistic about politics as Assyria's elites. Almost every generation of the early Neo-Assyrian period witnessed some manner of succession problem, which would have done little to encourage blind trust in the king among the populace. However, if a king proved successful, then the population may well have considered him as divinely favoured.

It is difficult to assess whether the civil wars which rocked Assyria were 'popular' in nature. Certainly, those of Aššur-da''in-apla and Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III* lasted six years apiece, which must have required popular support, and it seems little coincidence that Pūlu took the same throne name as the latter when he made it onto the throne. Nonetheless, the remarkably monarchical Assyrian worldview seems to have meant a widescale uprising by the Assyrian population was only palatable if a viable alternative candidate for kingship was available; at least from present knowledge, the same family ruled Assyria unbroken throughout its trajectory (Radner 2010a, 27).

Indeed, it seems that it is only in the 7th century that respect for this large dynasty finally broke down, probably on account of Aššur-aḫa-iddina's inaccessibility and paranoia—including vast oath-swearing ceremonies and the liquidation of a large part of the elite in 670 (see recently Tushingham 2024)—and his son Aššur-bāni-apli's erratic behaviour and further sequestering of himself within his palace.[381] With the quashing of the simultaneous attempted putsches by Aššur-nāṣir, the chief eunuch, Abdâ, governor of Aššur, and the still ambiguous Sasî, who may well have saved his neck by betraying the other two, in 671 it seems that

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378 It is perhaps unsurprising that Aššur-bāni-apli, perhaps the Assyrian king with the least exposure to the realities of his own realm, was the most amenable to this brand of social justice (Ito 2017).

379 See the various studies on criticism of the king by Fink (2013; 2017; 2020a; 2020b), although these concentrate on literary and scholarly contexts, and are of limited applicability to the general Assyrian population.

380 As the ἀλαζών was the ancestor of the *miles gloriosus* of Latin comedy, there is hence a pleasing line of tradition all the way from the Mesopotamian *aluzinnu* to Shakespeare' Falstaff (Edmonds 2019b, 345).

381 Epḥʻal-Jaruzelska (2016, 126–127) has recently noted that Aššur-aḫa-iddina's royal inscriptions repeatedly thematise the consent with which he ruled, a trope otherwise entirely foreign to this genre of text. This would seem to hint at Aššur-aḫa-iddina's insecurity in regard to his own popularity as king.

the viable royal candidates for the throne had now been exhausted, and the Assyrian population's opinion began to harden not only against Aššur-aḫa-iddina, but against the very Assyrian monarchy itself.[382]

It seems little coincidence that a taboo upheld for centuries (evidenced for the early Neo-Assyrian period by the translation of Hadad-yis'î's name as *Adad-rēmanni* rather than *Adad-nārārī*, see Ch. 2.4.2) came to be broken during this same period: the bearing of royal names by commoners. This is demonstrated not only in the appearance of various individuals named *Aššur-uballiṭ* in the onomastics from the reign of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība onwards (Brinkman 1998b), but even a legal text from the 670's (Kataja 1987) describing the prosecution of one or more individuals—one of them a local ruler—in the Kāšiāru (Mardin Eşiği, Turkey, Ṭūrōyō: *Ṭūr ʿAḇdīn*) who wished to name children *Aššur-bāni-apli* and *Sîn-aḫḫē-erība*.[383] This disdain for these last kings must also have extended to the wild rumours circulating about which would solidify themselves into the tales of Sardanapalus and his legendary sottishness and effeminacy, or of the gardener Belētaras (i.e. Bēl-ēṭir of Bīt-Ibâ) having fathered the last kings of Assyria (see above Ch. 2.5.4). Not only did nobody believe that Aššur-bāni-apli made the crops grow (*pace* Liverani 2010, 230), but rather the population thought him a 'weed'.[384] It could well be for this reason that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was ultimately induced to rebel—ironically enough, the king of Babylonia would then have been setting out to rescue the Assyrian monarchy from itself.

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[382] It is probably for this reason that it became conceivable in this period for a royal eunuch such as Sîn-šuma-līšir to become king, where Šamšī-ilu never could (see Reade 2024a).

[383] Note also that Aššur-bāni-apli's *turtānu* Aššur-da''in-[x (usually reconstructed as *Aššur-da''inanni*) could plausibly have been an *Aššur-da''in-aplu*.

[384] Generally overlooked is that rebellion occurred not only in Babylonia but also Assyria during the war between Aššur-bāni-apli and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, as noted in the 'Akītu Chronicle' (ABC 16, 17), suggesting that Aššur-bāni-apli was less than popular in his own land. In turn, RINAP 5, Asb 185 r. 3–13 hints at mass unrest in Aššur-bāni-apli's realm already at the beginning of his tenure.