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Marduk, the Scribes, and the Problem of the Neo-Assyrian King

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All kings depict their rule as right and just; they are the defenders of widows and orphans, and the creator of great cities and other works. Historical study also shows kings to be the primary makers of widows and orphans, and the despoilers of the land. We know this in part because historical traditions frequently incorporated the narratives of their rivals and underlings.

But for scholars of the Ancient World, Mesopotamia presents a particular challenge when it comes to identifying the expression of discontent. This absence is largely due to the monarchical character of Mesopotamian government, but also because the surviving literary material originates, by and large, from the elite. Naturally, those in the upper echelons of society depended on the crown for their identity and livelihood, and were less likely to participate openly in subversive activities aimed at their employers. However, the special circumstances associated with the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (911-612 BCE) provided an opportunity for some implicit statements of this type to seep into the Mesopotamian historical record.

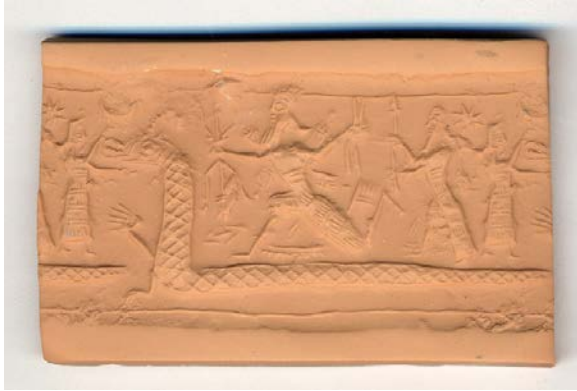
Scribes had existed in Mesopotamia for millennia; they were the tiny, literate minority responsible for recording prosaic business transactions and the deeds of kings, alike. But during the Neo-Assyrian period the king and the court scholar became more intimately intertwined than they had ever been. While they still worked closely with the king to produce royal inscriptions and other literary manifestations of royal power, scholars now also became more independent and creative. They expressed this through additions to and re-narrations of canonical texts. This newfound sense of identity caused a scholarly “critical community” to develop. This community would use the same rhetorical techniques used in the royal inscriptions (which they helped to write!) to reverse the narrative and create a “counterdiscourse” about Neo-Assyrian kings.



The dragon symbol of Marduk (Detroit Institute of Art)

Although evidence for these counterdiscourses are rare, they almost always center on a Neo-Assyrian king's relationship with the Babylonian god Marduk. The interest in Marduk is representative of another important aspect of the Neo-Assyrian period: their interactions with Babylon. It has long been recognized that Babylon was “Assyria's problem and Assyria's prize;” the Assyrians struggled to subjugate Babylonia, and their sour relationships culminated in the destruction of Babylon by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 689 BCE. After this monumental event, Sennacherib's successors struggled to negotiate their relationship with Babylon through repeated attempts to return Marduk's cult statue, which had been removed from Babylon during this destruction. This act of ‘godnapping’ symbolized the subjugation of Babylonia – the center of Mesopotamian history and tradition – to Assyria.

But this was not the first time that the cult statue of Marduk was center stage in a military and political struggle: it had been stolen from the Babylonians many times, with the most significant capture by the Elamites in the twelfth century BCE. In this particular incident, the statue was returned to Babylon by the Second Isin dynasty king Nebuchadnezzar I. This repatriation prompted a major theological shift in Babylonia that precipitated the production of important texts such as *Enūma Eliš* (also known as *The Babylonian Creation Epic*), which features Marduk as its main protagonist. After this, Marduk would play a great role—especially in literary texts—in defining kingship in Babylonian thought, and would thus become important for Assyrians who sought to subjugate Babylonia.



Scene from the Epic of Creation, cylinder seal (British Museum)



Boundary stone from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (British Museum)

This Assyro-Babylonian cultural tension revealed itself directly within the royal circle, since Babylonian scholars—as keepers of the oldest Mesopotamian literary traditions—were often brought to Assyria to aid in the expansion of the royal library at Nineveh. Thus, Assyrian and Babylonian scholars, all with different opinions about Assyria’s status with relation to Babylon and her gods (and not always ones that you would expect!), created a very real discourse that reflected contemporary cultural and political events.

We find this dialogue primarily in texts discovered at Nineveh or in private scholarly libraries; many exist in only one copy, an indication that their contents was not meant to be disseminated widely. One

example of this type of text is “The Sin of Sargon,” where Sargon (who stands in here for Sennacherib) is criticized for having mistreated Marduk:

“[Let me investigate] by means of extispicy the sin of Sargon, my father, let me then find out [the circumstances], le[arn the]; [let me make] the sin he committed against the god an abom[ination to myself], and with God’s help let me save myself.” (SAA 3: 33, 10-12)



Sennacherib watches the capture of Lachish (and whose face was later deliberately mutilated as a condemnation of his memory) (British Museum)

Such a pronouncement—in only one copy—may be a vestige of a pro-Babylonian contingent within the Assyrian scribal elite during this period.

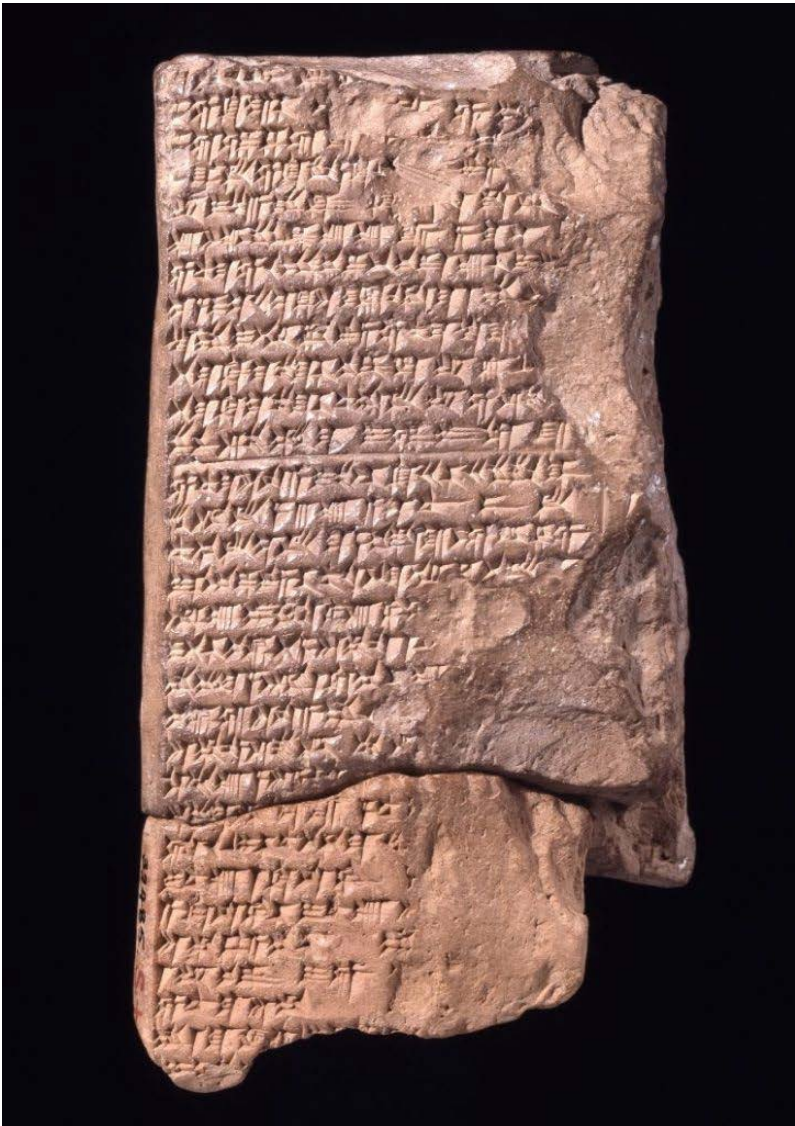
Other times, as a form of criticism, scribes would copy seemingly quotidian letters related to a prior king’s (negative) relationship with Marduk, meaning for them to be applied as a commentary on contemporary events. In other instances, they created texts anew as a response to another scholar’s vision of Assyrian interaction with Marduk. Thus these discontented conversations were mainly occurring in learned literature that was meant to reflect (and reverse) typical royal discourse.

These dialogues can only be found in the interstices of a small segment of society and do not represent an active attempt at rebellion or revolt. They are representative of tensions amongst the *literati*. However, they may be indications of a larger, systemic problem associated with Neo-Assyrian kingship, one that even the common people would have been able to recognize.

We see evidence for this in the increasing performance during the Neo-Assyrian period of rituals that seemingly question the legitimacy of a king. One of these takes place at the semi-annual *akītu* ritual, where the king’s status is in a state of flux. Scholars have long debated whether the ritual – which originated in Babylonia – symbolized the annual renewal of the cosmos or was simply a bit of national-religious propaganda.



Astronomical tablet from the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (British Museum)



Late Babylonian tablet detailing the *akitu* ritual (British Museum)

Perhaps more important is the fact that most of our evidence for another ritual, known as the *bīt rimki* (“the house of washing”), originates from the Neo-Assyrian period. The ritual was performed both before and after the completion of a substitute king ritual, a fascinating exercise necessitated by the presence of evil omens that portended the death of the king. A substitute king was placed on the throne for 100 days, in order to “absorb” the dangers predicted for the real king, who would be returned to his throne at the conclusion of the ritual.

The substitute king ritual was performed at least three times in the years of the last Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. Both the *akītu* and the *bīt rimki* are important, as they served to reaffirm the legitimacy of the king in the presence of the populace, and their reemergence during the Neo-Assyrian period indicates that something larger than a scholarly counter discourse was afoot in this influential time.

These concerns about Marduk and the negative connotations associated with Assyrian treatment of his city and his cult image remained a topic of discussion even into the Neo-Babylonian and Hellenistic periods, where remnants of counter discourses appear even in the last vestiges of cuneiform literature. These later texts can now be seen as part of a continuous dialogue that made ever more explicit attempts to challenge and complicate kingship during the periods of the last great Mesopotamian empires.