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THE IMPACT OF ORACULAR MATERIAL  
ON THE POLITICAL UTTERANCES AND  
POLITICAL ACTION IN THE ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS  
OF THE SARGONID DYNASTY

BY

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It is well known that the written materials of the Sargonid period present increasing references to all sorts of predictive signs, deriving from astral phenomena, from dreams and other utterances, or from extispicy. These references may be essentially drawn, on the one hand, from epistolographic texts and from the so called "astrological reports", on the other hand, from technical texts such as the "Queries to the Sun God Šamaš". The Kuyunjik archive has disclosed a large number of letters written to the kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal by various people, commonly defined as "scholars" (1), who were experts in the various fields of Mesopotamian scholarship (astrology, extispicy, magic or exorcism, medicine and lamentations) (2) attached to the court for royal service. In these letters, the scholars duly informed the king (and sometimes discussed it with him) about the interpretation of the meaning of astral phenomena and other events, in order to give him indications as to his decisions in the fields of politics, religion, cult, and about his

(1) These texts have recently received a thorough scientific edition in S. PARPOLA, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (State Archives of Assyria, Vol. X), Helsinki 1993 (henceforth *SAA X*). The Assyrian material was previously edited by the same PARPOLA (*Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 5/1-2), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970-1983 (LAS).

(2) For this distinction, see PARPOLA, *SAA X*, pp. XIII-XV.

own, private behaviour (which had to conform as much as possible to the sanctity of his role as representative of humanity before the gods). The “astrological reports” are a special category of letters, regarding almost exclusively astral omens, and informing the king of the current state of astronomical observation (3). The “Queries to the Sun god” were documents stemming from the current extispicy practice, which gave the king the essential information about the relevant ritual and interpretation of the divine signs. The king sent specific questions on various matters to the haruspex (*barû*): after asking the Sun god Šamaš to give his answer, the diviner slaughtered a sacrificial sheep, observed the shape of its entrails (especially the liver), and wrote down his observations to be sent to the king for evaluation.

As has been shown on more than one occasion, these texts provide us with an almost day-by-day perception of the interest of the Sargonid kings in matters of prediction, particularly as concerns their political and military enterprises. Thus, we find indications not only about the conduct of Assyrian military campaigns, relations with subject and foreign peoples, the behaviour of political enemies or the loyalty of Assyrian officials, but also about the cult of the gods or the health of the members of the royal family. The climax of this interest would seem to correspond with the period of Esarhaddon (681-669 B.C.) (4), although there is ground for suspecting that the element of chance in the discovery of texts may have conditioned our outlook (5). In any case, even if Esarhaddon did represent a case of heightened royal sensitivity to the uses of prediction for political purposes (6), he would seem to have operated along lines which in-

(3) The texts have been edited by H. HUNGER, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings (State Archives of Assyria, Vol. VII)*, Helsinki 1992.

(4) The overwhelming majority of the datable scholars' letters (and “Reports”) is addressed to Esarhaddon; a smaller number comes from the reign of Ashurbanipal (see the tables in *SAA X*, p. xxix, and *SAA VIII*, p. xxii).

(5) The history of the royal archives of Nineveh, dramatically disturbed by the final siege of the Assyrian capital, has not been adequately understood; on the other hand, the excavations in Kuyunjik were made at the turn of the past century, with primitive techniques and with remarkably little attention paid to cuneiform texts. A particularly difficult problem is represented by the almost total absence of epistolographic texts of the reign of Sennacherib.

(6) PARPOLA, *LAS 2*, p. 235, has attributed, at least partially, the special attitude of Esarhaddon towards predictive sciences to the awareness of his own poor health (Esarhaddon was at times very seriously ill). On the other hand, F. M.

volved the whole dynasty (7), and of course within the mainstream of tradition of Mesopotamian rulership since the Old Babylonian Period (8).

A further element of novelty which characterizes the Sargonid Dynasty is the presence of explicit references to predictive facts and their implications in the Royal Inscriptions. In the early Neo-Assyrian historiographical texts indications of political and military actions deriving from positive omens were absent, or given in the most implicit form ; but, beginning with Sargon II, a specific part of the historiographical message is concerned with the explanation of which divine signs were requested and/or obtained. This paper is concerned with the sources pointing to this particular development, and with their implications for the self-representation of the Assyrian kingship.

We have neither drawn an opposite distinction between provoked and unprovoked omens of any sort, nor among the techniques involved in obtaining such omens. The Assyrian horizon does not present oracles in the Delphian sense, nor prophécy in the Biblical sense : the small collection of so-called "Assyrian prophecies" (9) are at present understood to represent the utterances of

FALES (*Esarhaddon e il potere della divinazione*, in F. M. FALES - C. GROTTANELLI [Eds.], *Soprannaturale e potere nel mondo antico e nelle società tradizionali*, pp. 95-118) has stressed the interaction between the irresolute and suspicious temper of that king and the political difficulties of his reign, which started after a civil war and experienced strong internal opposition and open revolt.

(7) One of the "Reports" is datable with precision to the reign of Sargon (SAA VII, no. 501) ; this clearly shows that the practice was already in use at his time. In a letter written by Sargon to an Assyrian general (S. PARPOLA, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part 1. Letters from Assyria and the West* [State Archives of Assyria, Vol. 1], Helsinki 1987, no. 14), mention seems to be made of scholars accompanying the royal army (Obv. 4'-5', 8' : but the text is partially damaged at the relevant point).

(8) In the correspondence of Mari a good number of texts deal with extispicy and with oracular utterances of various gods. See J.-M. DURAND, *Archives Épistolaires de Mari*, Vol. 1/1 (*Archives royales de Mari*, Vol. XXVI, Paris 1988). Hammurabi states many times in the introduction to his "Code" to have fulfilled divine oracular orders ; mention of extispicy is made some centuries later in an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar I (G. FRAME, *Rulers of Babylonia from the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)* (*The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods*, Vol. 2), Toronto 1995, No. B.2.4.1, iv, 4).

(9) In this schematic presentation, we follow M. WEIPPERT, *Assyrische Propheten der Zeit Esarhaddons und Assurbanipal*, in F. M. FALES (Ed.), *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions : New Horizons in Literary, Ideological and Historical Analysis*

specific gods (but in the main of Ištar in her various local manifestations) to the Assyrian king or to members of his royal family <sup>(10)</sup>, probably upon official visits to their shrines. Such prophecies were totally independent from other kinds of technical “oracles” (like astrology or extispicy), and referred invariably to the current political, social or even religious situation. The gods’ and goddesses’ utterances were materially spoken by human intermediaries, men but often also women, who were sometimes labelled as *raggimu/raggimtu*, “ecstatic”. Only one case is attested in which a commoner’s speech, given on an ordinary occasion, was considered meaningful for the king’s (religious) decisions <sup>(11)</sup>.

Let us begin by an overview of the traditional procedures which involved the king as far as oracular and other predictive utterances are concerned. The need to obtain oracles, in view of the vagaries of destiny, and to comply with the response, is clear from the Old Babylonian version of the epic of Naram-Sîn, the king of Akkad who experienced personal and political disaster through his contempt for omens <sup>(12)</sup>. Already from the Mari letters we may deduce the regular practice of observing astronomical events, deducing *omina* from them, and performing extispicies in order to obtain a more precise response or oracle (*têrtum*) <sup>(13)</sup>. These practices may be shown to continue, on and off, all during the second and early part of the first millennium; so that we might term them the normal state of affairs as far as the relation between political or military action and its presupposition or justification in the sphere of the divine are concerned.

(*Oriens Antiqui Collectio*, Vol. XVII), Roma 1981, pp. 71-116. A thorough edition of all “prophetic” texts is in preparation by S. PARPOLA, in the *State Archives of Assyria* series.

(10) Other than Ištar, we have the gods Aššur, Marduk, Nabû, *bêl tarbaše*; the addressees of the prophecies were the king, the queen mother, and in one case the aristocracy of the sacred capital Assur.

(11) It is represented by an apparently meaningless speech given by an attendant to the chariot which was transporting the statue of the Babylonian god Marduk to Babylon after its long exile in Assyria at the end of Esarhaddon’s reign. The speech was reported to the king and his scribes, and was considered as an utterance unfavourable to the completion of the transport: thus, the statue was brought back to Assyria.

(12) M. LIVERANI, *Naram-Sin e i presagi difficili*, in F. M. FALES - C. GROTTANELLI (Eds.), *Soprannaturale e potere nel mondo antico e nelle società tradizionali*, pp. 31-45, esp. pp. 37-41.

(13) See, in general, J.-M. DURAND (quoted above).

The oldest and most traditional technique was *extispicy*, whose methods were already canonized in the second millennium in the largest scientific treatise in the Mesopotamian corpus<sup>(14)</sup>. The treatise listed a long series of possible conformations of various parts of the liver (and other exta) of the sheep, each of which was associated with a prediction of a very unspecified formulation, which could be considered favourable or unfavourable. The interpreter had to verify whether the favourable or unfavourable *omina* were more numerous, and this balance caused the answer to the question which the king had asked the Sun god Šamaš.

A second technique was *astrology*, which was canonized in the large treatise *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and which slowly progressed to pre-eminence during the first millennium<sup>(15)</sup>. Astral phenomena, like the movements of planets in the constellations, lunar and solar eclipses, special appearances of the Sun and the Moon, meteors, etc., were intensively observed by schools of astronomers. Just as in the extispicy treatise, each astral phenomenon was associated with a prediction with an unspecific formulation. Through appropriate analysis conducted by the scholars, and duly described to the king in the letters and in the "Reports", this prediction could be made precise and transferred to contemporary political, social, and cultic events.

(14) The so-called *bārītu*, which however has not yet received a thorough edition. See recently I. STARR, *Chapters 1 and 2 of the bārītu*, «State Archives of Assyria Bulletin» 6 (1992), pp. 45-53. For the ritual of extispicy, see I. STARR, *The Ritual of the Diviner (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 12)*, Malibu 1983. For the Old-Babylonian period, see especially U. JEVES, *Old Babylonian Extispicy: Omen Texts in the British Museum (Uitgaven van het Nederlands historisch-archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, Vol. LXIV)*, Leiden 1989.

(15) The treatise has been published only partially with modern standards. See recently: W. H. VAN SOLDT, *Solar Omens of Enūma Anu Enlil: Tablets 23 (24) - 29 (30) (Uitgaven van het Nederlands historisch-archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, Vol. LXXIII)*, Leiden 1995; F. AL-RAWI - R. GEORGE, *Enūma Anu Enlil XIV and Other Astronomical Tablets*, «Archiv für Orientforschung» 38-39 (1991-1992), pp. 52-73; F. ROCHBERG-HALTON, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enūma Anu Enlil* («Archiv für Orientforschung» Beiheft 22), Graz 1988; E. REINER - D. PINGREE, *Babylonian Planetary Omens Part Two: Enūma Anu Enlil, Tablets 50-51 (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 2.2)*, Malibu 1981. The basic edition is still that by Ch. VIROLLEAUD, *L'astrologie chaldéenne. Le livre intitulé "enuma (Anu)" Bel"*, Paris 1908-1912. The reconstruction of the various parts of the treatise was attempted by E. F. WEIDNER, *Die astrologische Serie Enūma Anu Enlil*, «Archiv für Orientforschung» 14 (1941), pp. 172-195, 308-318; 17 (1954), pp. 71-89; 22 (1968), 65-75.

But the gods could communicate with man in other ways. Some privileged individuals, at times including the king himself, but generally represented by professionals (*šabrû*), were visited by the gods in *dreams*. Here too treatises of various length explained the ways to interpret such dreams (16), which however in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions seem very much to the point and contain the direct indications of the divine will.

Last but not least, the king might receive the words of the god directly, both in the form of explicit commands or through a cryptic utterance which needed to be solved by the king himself and his scholars. This is the well-known and already mentioned case of Ištar of Arbela, whose temple was visited by the Assyrian king on some specific occasions (before starting an important campaign, for example) and preferably during her annual festival. The goddess spoke reassuring words to the king, reinforcing his faith in herself and in the solidity of the Assyrian rule, acting like a solicitous mother with her most beloved son (17).

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Bearing this background of procedures for the questioning and response of the gods in mind, we may now cast a glance at the main passages to be found in the Royal Inscriptions of the Sargonid dynasty.

The most skeletal and implicit formulation of divine utterance is provided by the formula *ina qībit*, "by the order of ...", followed by the names of the gods to whom the action is attributed and then by the description of the action itself :

"At the order of Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Adad, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, Šarrat kidmûri, Ištar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, Nusku, (...) I covered Elam, in all its extension, like the destructive force of a terrible storm" (18).

(16) See A. L. OPPENHEIM, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society N.S., Vol. 46/111)*, Philadelphia 1956.

(17) See WEIPPERT, *cit.*, above.

(18) Ashurbanipal, Prism A, col. iii, ll. 29-35 (M. STRECK, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrische Könige*, Leipzig 1916, p. 26).

A partial parallel for this expression is to be found very often in the statement *ina tukulti*, "with the help of ...", again followed by divine names and description of royal actions :

"(Esarhaddon) The king who, with the help of Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Nabû, Marduk, Ištar of Nineveh, Ištar of Arbela, has marched safely from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, and submitted to his feet all his enemies and the unsubmitive princes" (19).

As has been aptly shown, the main connotation of these two expressions (20) lies in the stress given to obtaining the gods' positive oracular responses before any political, military or religious royal enterprise, a stress which has been generally undervalued because of its repetitive and almost fixed formulaic expression. The Assyrian king is presumed not to take action without a specific command from the gods ; in this way, all his actions appear as to have been guided by the hands of the gods, whereas all his enemies, as is clearly stated in another kind of topical sentence, are guided by their own advice and will, a fact which invariably leads to their final destruction (21). However, expressions like *ina qîbit* (with their variants) and *ina tukulti* are of a relative, if not total, indeterminacy, without any reference to the specific means by which divine support for the king's action was obtained (22).

More precise references to the ways and means by which the god made his favour clear to the king before an action was undertaken by the latter are provided by technical clauses inserted in the historiographical account. The verb *qabû* in the precise meaning of "predict" is at times to be found, for example in a passage of Ashurbanipal's Prism A :

"Ummanaldaš, who since remote times Aššur and Ištar, my lords, had predicted would be my servant" (23) ;

(19) R. BORGER, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* («Archiv für Orientforschung» Beiheft 9), Graz 1956, p. 33, Klch. A, ll. 12-14.

(20) In the Royal Inscriptions, other rhetorical formulae are used to express the same concept : e.g., *ina amat*, "by the word/order"

(21) LIVERANI, *Naram-Sin, cit.*, pp. 31-33.

(22) No relation between these expressions and any specific kind of impetrative or prognostic ritual or technique has been recognized at the moment. It would seem that the expressions are voluntarily left unspecified, but further analysis may disclose new horizons in this field.

(23) STRECK, *Assurbanipal, cit.*, p. 82, Prism A, col. x, ll. 7-8. The clause might refer to some kind of "prophecy" rendered by the two gods.



or the noun *purussû*, “decision”, at times specified as “unalterable”, *ša lā enê* : for example,

“The god Sîn, who, with his unalterable decision, [told me to march against Elam]” (24) ;

or further the expression *ina ēpeš pî*, “in the enactment of the speech of ...”, for example in Ashurbanipal’s Prism A :

“In the enactment of the noble speech of the gods Aššur, Mullissu, Sîn, Šamaš, Adad, Bêl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, Šarrat kidmuri, Ištar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, Nusku, my father Esarhaddon caused the loyalty oath (towards me) to be pronounced” (25).

All these expressions, however, while certainly reflecting *per se* interest in specifying the determination of royal actions by divine decisions, are vague and topical, essentially because the specific means of prediction are not described. It is thus more fruitful to turn at this point to a passage such as the following by Sargon, in which a chain of provoked and unprovoked signs is fully described :

“At the exalted command of Nabû and Marduk, who had moved on a path in a stellar station, (which meant) the advancement of my weapons ; and further, as a favorable sign for the obtaining of total power, the god Magur, lord of the tiara, made an eclipse that lasted one watch, to announce the destruction of Gutium. Upon the precious approval of the warrior Šamaš, who wrote encouraging omens on the exta that he would walk at my side, ... I mustered my army” (26).

(24) STRECK, *Assurbanipal, cit.*, p. 180, K. 2631 + (Dedicatory Inscription to Nergal), l. 21. In all probability, this clause might refer to Sîn’s role in rendering a verdict to mankind under his astral personification, i.e. the Moon, a duty which Marduk assigned to him when the Babylonian god established the cosmic order after destroying Chaos (personified by the female goddess Tiamat), as stated in the *Enûma eliš* “poem” ; see U. KOCH-WESTENHOLZ, *Mesopotamian Astrology. An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination (The Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies Publications, Vol. 19)*, Copenhagen 1995, pp. 99-101.

(25) STRECK, *Assurbanipal, cit.*, pp. 2-4, Prism A, col. i, l. 13. This clause might refer again to some “prophecy” rendered by the gods (a “prophecy” of Nabû is attested in the Neo-Assyrian corpus, see above).

(26) F. THUREAU-DANGIN, *Une relation de la huitième campagne de Sargon (Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Textes Cunéiformes, Vol. 3)*, Paris 1912.

As may be seen, we have here the record of two full astrological observations. The first is relevant to the course of the planets Mercury and Jupiter; the second concerns a lunar eclipse, with Magur standing as a synonym of the divine name Sîn. Both cite relevant omens, which proceed from the general to the specific (seizing power in the first case, and destruction of a foreign land in the second); finally, we have the confirmation of these astrological observations by means of an extispicy to the Sun god. This interest on Sargon's part in specifying the sources of divine favour is particularly striking, because it is set within the context of a letter addressed to the god Aššur recounting the king's prowess and success in war. Now, it is well known that such letters to the god Aššur were followed by an answer from the god himself, apparently in the form of a written message, in which approval of every single action of the king was duly expressed (27). In this *scenario*, the detailed indication of signs requested and obtained which we have just quoted presumably had the aim of soliciting a positive judgement in the expected reply from the god. So, minimally, we may say that Sargon here wanted all recipients of this text to know that he had kept precisely to the standard rules of predictive procedure. This extreme care depended on the fact that the military action involved had been the sacking of the temple of the Urukian chief-god Haldi (28). We shall see further on that the question of the existence and necessary annihilation of the gods of vanquished peoples has in many cases to do with these explicit Assyrian quotes of omens.

(27) The relevant texts have been edited by A. LIVINGSTONE, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea (State Archives of Assyria, Vol. III)*, Helsinki 1989, nos. 41-47. A theoretical analysis of these texts is in preparation by Dr. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Tübingen.

(28) A. L. OPPENHEIM, *The City of Assur in 714 B.C.*, «Journal of Near Eastern Studies» 19 (1960), p. 137, has suggested that Sargon's action had an extremely sacrilegious character ("Sargon committed a crime against the *ius gentium*"), so that he felt it necessary to declare "an overruling divine command that made it his 'manifest destiny' to destroy" the Haldi temple. In a text from Esarhaddon's times, the so-called "Sin of Sargon", a sin of Sargon is invoked as the cause of his unexpected and unprecedented death on the battlefield: such a sin must be quite probably identified with his breaking the treaty with the Babylonian king Merodach-Baladan II (S. PARPOLA, in H. TADMOR - B. LANDSBERGER - S. PARPOLA, *The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will*, «State Archives of Assyria Bulletin» 3 (1989), pp. 48-49.

Let us move to Esarhaddon's reign. It is still open to question whether or not the succession of this king was ultimately legitimate, in the wake of the murder of his father Sennacherib by a conspiracy led by his brother Arad-Mulissi<sup>(29)</sup>. In any case, it may be noted that the enthronement of this king is described in a well-known passage, in which a myriad of auspicious omens of various nature is quoted :

“Šin and Šamaš, the twin gods, took month after month the truthful and rightful path ; and in order to give the land and people a reliable and correct judgement, they appeared regularly on the first and fourteenth day of the month. Venus, the brightest of the stars, appeared in the West, in the path of Ea, to stabilize the land and appease the gods ; it reached its culmination and disappeared. Mars, who makes decisions for the West, was bright in the path of Ea, and showed its alignment as its omen, which gave strength to the king and his land. Messages from the ecstasies (*mahhû*) were constantly available, they were established for the solidity of the base of my priestly throne for all time. Favourable signs in dreams and ominous utterances (*egirrê*) in order to secure the foundation of my throne and the length of my reign were portended on me. I gazed upon these favourable signs, and my heart rejoiced and my soul was happy.”<sup>(30)</sup>

The sequence is clear : as in Sargon's text, astrological omens are the first to be evaluated, thus possibly confirming the top rank of astrology among predictive sciences at this period, and then other omens are called on to confirm the result. Thus we see the ecstatic (*mahhû*) together with those in charge of dream-interpretation and of the *egirrûs*, which were perhaps involuntary sounds emitted asleep or in ecstasy<sup>(31)</sup>. It may be noticed, however, that the non-astrological techniques are here only sketched in, for reasons which are

(29) For the conspiracy, see S. PARPOLA, *The Murderer of Sennacherib*, in B. ALSTER (Ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia (Mesopotamia, Vol. 8)*, Copenhagen 1980, pp. 171-182. For the problem of Esarhaddon's legitimate succession, see recently B. PORTER, *Images, Power, and Politics. Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy (Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 208)*, Philadelphia 1993, pp. 13-26, with an exhaustive bibliography.

(30) BORGER, *Inscripfien ... Asarhaddons, cit.*, p. 2, Ass. A, col. i, ll. 31-41.

(31) The meaning of this term has not yet been fully understood. See provisionally A. L. OPPENHEIM - E. REINER (Eds.), *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, Vol. E, Chicago 1957, pp. 44-45, s.v. *egirrû*.

hard to determine, while great technical attention is paid to the astrological aspect of the prediction.

On the other hand, we do have cases in which a fully non-astrological oracular utterance is described in its entirety. This is the case of the direct request for help which Ashurbanipal addressed to Ištar of Arbela, upon being challenged by the Elamite ruler Teumman. The king seeks the goddess in the city of Arbela itself, during her festival, by means of a direct invocation: he asks that, in the name of his perpetual faithfulness, she should punish the *hybris* and the lack of belief of the Elamite king<sup>(32)</sup>. It may be noted that this invocation has the connotation of a lament, and conversely the answer of the goddess is — rather curiously for us — formulated in the tone of an adult reassuring a forlorn child:

“Ištar heard the sighs I emitted, and she said: ‘Fear not!’; and comforted me in my heart: ‘Due to the raising of your hands in prayer, due to your eyes filled with tears, I had mercy upon you’”.

There is little doubt that the wording and the general atmosphere of the reply of the goddess are the same as what we find in a peculiar collection of pronouncements, allegedly issuing from Ištar again, which were copied one after the other on some resumptive tablets of this period. Let us quote at least one of these speeches:

“Esarhaddon, king of all lands, do not fear! What evil wind attacked you, whose wing I did not break? Your enemies bend at your feet like branches of the apple-tree in the spring. I am the great lady, I am Ištar of Arbela, who casts your enemies at your feet. What words of mine did I utter, which you could not trust? ...”<sup>(33)</sup>.

But the account of the campaign against Teumman contains yet another appearance of the goddess, in the form of a dream which comes to a professional interpreter (*šabrû*) attached to the entourage of the king<sup>(34)</sup>. The dream as related has a complex structure. In the first movement, Ištar appears in full battle array (quivers at her

(32) A. PIEPKORN, *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal I: Editions E, B<sub>1-5</sub>, D, and K (Assyriological Studies, Vol. 5)*, Chicago 1933, pp. 64-66, Cylinder B. Col. v, ll. 15 - 49.

(33) K. 4310 (T. G. PINCHES, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, Vol. 4<sup>2</sup>, no. 61), Obv., Col. i, 4<sup>2</sup>-17<sup>2</sup>.

(34) PIEPKORN, *Historical Prisms, cit.*, p. 66, ll. 49-76.

side, bow in one hand, sword in the other) : the king stands before her and she addresses him "like the mother of a child", saying that she will go to battle in the king's stead. The king then puts forth an objection, "wherever you go, I will go with you, o Queen of Goddesses !". But the motherly attitude of Ištar continues in the next answer : "Eat food, drink wine, make music, and revere my divinity, until I go, and perform this action, so as to fulfil the wish of your heart". Finally, the goddess embraces the king, covering his whole body, and with a flaming countenance she goes forth against Ashurbanipal's enemies. This is the end of the dream, and it is taken as an unequivocal sign that the king may prepare his armies and march against the enemy at the end of the festival.

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The examples quoted above do not exhaust the available material, but are certainly the most representative cases. All considered, and even not taking into account all parallel material (from letters to hymns), it is undisputable that the Sargonid kings not only took into account oracular utterances when planning their military and political enterprises, but felt obliged to provide a variety of public testimonials as to their observance of divine signs (35). Now, it may be asked whether these increasing references to oracular and predictive requests and replies are merely a stylistic device of the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, or if they reflect rather a deliberate inclusion of this part of the narrative. And if this were so, what would be the reasons behind the inclusion ?

Our answer to this set of problems is twofold. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to suggest that the Sargonid kings had to various degrees an intellectual interest in the complex arts of diviners and interpreters, and towards arts and techniques in general ; and that they considered this aspect to be an integral part of the royal image. In corresponding with Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, courtiers refer to them as being "the very image of Adapa", that is the mythical

(35) For a recent survey of the much debated problem of the existence, and extent, of the "public" to which the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions were directed, see M. LIVERANI, *Antico Oriente. Storia società economia*, Bari 1988, pp. 834-840.

forerunner of all wise men and scientists of Mesopotamia<sup>(36)</sup>. And this reputation was presumably based on fact, at least to a certain extent. Even Sargon, the most belligerent of his dynasty, personally possessed a luxury edition of the astrological omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil* which has been found in the Nineveh excavations<sup>(37)</sup>. His son Sennacherib proudly related his mastery of the art of casting bronze, and how he fashioned colossal pillars and cultic statues following a new technique he himself had devised<sup>(38)</sup>. Esarhaddon could understand written omens to the extent of quarrelling with his own scholarly counsellors about their interpretation<sup>(39)</sup>. And finally, Ashurbanipal claimed to have learned to read and write cuneiform even in its archaic and most difficult forms, and to have been initiated into the most secret level of scribal lore<sup>(40)</sup>.

Thus, we may affirm that in the Sargonid period a new dimension to the royal figure is added: that of technical expertise and of overall knowledge, which substantiates the image of the “king who is knowledgeable and wise”. This element seems an innovative modification of the traditional profile of the Assyrian king<sup>(41)</sup>. As we well know from periods before Sargon, self-reflection had been concentrated for the most part in the sphere of military prowess, disregarding the few past examples of mastery of the arts and sciences such as Šulgi, the Neo-Sumerian king<sup>(42)</sup>, or Hammurabi<sup>(43)</sup> and other Babylonian rulers<sup>(44)</sup>.

(36) S. PARPOLA, *LAS* 2, p. 100.

(37) D. J. WISEMAN, *Assyrian Writing-Boards*, «Iraq» 17 (1955), pp. 3-13; PARPOLA, *LAS* 2, p. 333.

(38) D. D. LUCKENBILL, *The Annals of Sennacherib (Oriental Institute Publications, Vol. 2)*, Chicago 1924, pp. 108-109. Col. vi, l. 80- Col. vii, l. 19

(39) PARPOLA, *LAS* 2, pp. 70-72.

(40) STRECK, *Assurbanipal, cit.*, pp. 254-256, “Tontafelinschrift L<sup>4</sup>”, Col. i, ll. 11-19.

(41) Obviously, some Assyrian kings before the Sargonids bore some titles relating to wisdom, such as Aššur-reša-iši I (*eršu*, “wise”); Aššurnasirpal II (*hāyisu*, “intelligent”; *pēt uzni nēmeqi*, “with open intelligence and wisdom”). But these examples represent only an insignificant part in the whole of their titulary.

(42) See G. R. CASTELLINO, *Two Šulgi Hymns (BC) (Studi Semitici, Vol. 42)*, Roma 1972, pp. 11-13 and 14-16.

(43) In the introductory section of his Code, Hammurabi stresses his knowledge and wisdom (G. R. DRIVER - J. C. MILES, *The Babylonian Laws*, Vol. 2, Oxford 1955, p. 8, Col. iii<sub>a</sub>, ll. 17-19; Col. iv<sub>a</sub>, ll. 7-8). Obviously, the skill of Hammurabi in administering justice is celebrated by his famous Code itself.

(44) Samsu-iluna, Hammurabi's son, affirms to have received wisdom from the god Ea (D. FRAYNE, *Old Babylonian Period (2003-1595 BC) (The Royal*

On the other hand, this new dimension may be seen in relation to the political and social framework surrounding the sudden and dramatic expansion of the Assyrian empire during the reign of Sargon and of his successors. Political and social upheaval accompanied and followed the annexation of the countries which were included in the Assyrian provincial system : it involved wars, the deportation, and the submission of large numbers of people, and on many occasions the abduction of local gods to the Assyrian capitals, a fact which implied obviously an appalling religious uprooting for the remaining inhabitants.

This upheaval needed to be given a reassuring answer on the part of the king. Such an answer might well be realized in material measures for incorporated and deported peoples, measures which we have only of late begun to appreciate <sup>(45)</sup>, in spite of the solidly negative image offered by Biblical sources ; but it needed to be also given on an ideological level. The portrayal of the king as the wisest of men, insofar as he was personally expert in all arts and in scientific knowledge, could well balance the fierce and terrible aspect which he showed to the conquered peoples, at least in his self-description. To put it differently : all of the pain and tragedy of being submitted might be acceptable to foreign peoples, if they felt that a superior intelligence were moving the wheels of history ; and a new faith in the new lord might be created and strengthened in this way. This sentiment, obviously, does not find adequate and immediate expression in the Royal Inscriptions, which were devoted to the celebration of the power of the Assyrian king against the external, hostile world. But some traces of the attempt to create and develop it may be detected in the Neo-Assyrian correspondence, e.g. in a letter written to Sargon by a deputy governor, in which the governor stresses

*Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Early periods*, Vol. 4), Toronto 1990, p. 373, No. 2, ll. 16-19, followed in this by his grandson Ammī-ditāna (FRAYNE, *ibid.*, p. 412, No. 1, Col. ii, ll. 5-10 and by his great-grandson Ammī-šaduqa (FRAYNE, *ibid.*, p. 427, No. 2, Col. ii, ll. 3-5). Curiously, this theme is not given space in Hammurabi's royal inscriptions. This title, however, stems directly from the Sumerian tradition (see, e.g. the Sumerian titles celebrating the sovereign's intelligence listed in M.-J. SEUX, *Épithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes*, Paris 1967, pp. 402-403 s.v. *gešitū*).

(45) See B. ODED, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Wiesbaden 1979.

having encouraged the inhabitants of a Median province which evidently had been annexed recently<sup>(46)</sup>; or in a letter of Sargon in which the king shows mercy to a leader of a group of people who were probably deportees<sup>(47)</sup>.

Conversely, to a certain extent it may have been necessary to project such a reassuring image to the Assyrian ruling *élite* as well. We are informed that the expansion of the Assyrian empire provoked troubles also in its very core, due to the intense and continuous redistribution of powers, which generated new rivalries between social groups in sharing new and extended competences and honours. Tiglat-pileser III ascended to the throne after a long civil war; Sargon became king in almost inexplicable manner; Sennacherib was killed by his son; Esarhaddon fought a civil war against his brothers before attaining the kingship, and had to quell a revolt, executing many of his nobles; Ashurbanipal, finally, fought a long, terrible civil war against his brother Šamaš-šumu-ukīn. Thus, the image of an expert king, who was able *per se* to keep the rapidly evolving situation under control, was needed to fix and stabilize the center of decision-making, and to root the political choices of the monarchy in undisputable interpretations of preordained divine decisions. At the ideological level, any confrontation against both the king's legitimate power and the king's political or social measures was deprived of any fruitful value; and, in any case, the king's personal responsibility in case of failure or lack of success would not be taken into account, since his behaviour appeared (even if *a posteriori*) totally conditioned by the previous order and the subsequent approval of the gods<sup>(48)</sup>. In this way, the legitimacy of his rule was guaranteed against any pretension of his internal opponents.

(46) G. B. LANFRANCHI - S. PARPOLA, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part II. Letters from the Northern and Northeastern Provinces (State Archives of Assyria, Vol. V)*, Helsinki 1990, no. 210: "I have spoken kindly with the countrymen of the son of Bel-iddina (a Median ruler), and encouraged them (...) I said: 'Do your work, each in [his house and] field, and be glad; you are now subjects of the king'".

(47) PARPOLA, *SAA I cit.*, no. 1, 57-65. We follow the interpretation of J. N. POSTGATE, *Assyrian Texts and Fragments*, «Iraq» 35 (1973), p. 29 (the letter deals with Aramean deportees in the Cilician mountains).

(48) The theme of the king's personal responsibility has been treated by G. B. LANFRANCHI in a communication given at the XLIII *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* held in Prague in 1996, in preparation for print.



To sum up, we may conclude that the Sargonid kings tried to project throughout their royal inscriptions the image of a sovereign who follows the will of the gods attentively, and not least by means of exact quotes of their favourable omens. The construction of the empire would thus have been — if our view is accepted — an immense ideological task, as well as a complex political and administrative one.