
THE TRIALS OF ESARHADDON: THE CONSPIRACY OF 670 BC

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an attempt to use the scarce available sources, both textual and archaeological, in order to reconstruct the events leading up to the mass execution of members of the Assyrian governing elite in the year 670 BC.

KEYWORDS

Ancient Assyria; 7th century BC; Esarhaddon (680-669 BC); conspiracy; prophecy; moon god of Harran.

In this paper, I will a dark chapter of the reign of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon: a conspiracy that came to a cruel end in the year 670 B. C. In the 7th century BC, the ancient kingdom of Assyria was by far the largest Near Eastern empire of its time, encompassing the area of the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in their entirety, half of Israel, wide parts of south-eastern Turkey and extensive regions of Western Iran. Assyria was at that time divided into about seventy provinces, each under the control of a governor². The king personally appointed each and every governor, and these in turn answered directly and only to the king. As a rule, governorship was not hereditary: Thus, the office could not be passed on from father to son, and in order to prevent dynastic ideas and schemes from the outset, the king preferred his governors to be eunuchs – castrated men who were physically unable to have children. The king was understood to be chosen by the gods and to rule by their grace; his word was law, and he could directly intervene at all levels of his empire. Nevertheless, the Assyrian administration was largely decentralised and in their provinces, the governors were authorised to act independently on behalf of the king: As far as routine matters were concerned, they operated at their own discretion.

But in order to make sure that all subjects of Assyria were at all times aware of the fact that the one person who was all-powerful in the empire was the king, and only the king, his omnipresence and ubiquity was established and guaranteed on various levels: Hence, the king entertained residences all over the empire which he visited on a regular basis during his continual travels through his kingdom; in each of these palaces lived an entire royal household, complete with an administrative staff, various supply and maintenance units and also entertainment personnel such as musicians and singers. The average inhabitant of the many Assyrian residence cities will not always have known whether the king was present in his local palace or not; but the imposing building itself was always there, visible every day as a monument to the king's claim to

¹ This paper is the annotated version of a lecture given in December 2004 on the occasion of my Habilitation at the Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften at the University of Munich. I would like to thank my former colleagues and friends there, especially Walther Sallaberger, Michael Roaf and Andreas Schachner, for the eventful and formative six years which I was privileged to enjoy in their company.

² For the Neo-Assyrian provincial system see Radner 2006a.

power. Moreover, the king was present in the form of his images: In all major sanctuaries of Assyria, his statues and steles took their place next to the divine image; they were also erected at other prominent locations, such as city gates³. And maybe most importantly, each and every inhabitant of Assyria was personally tied to the king by the means of a loyalty oath⁴; such oaths were imposed at the time of the new king's ascension to the throne, but were repeated in the context of important state events such as the election of a crown prince. The oath was perceived as a spiritual essence, and the oath-taking ceremony included the ritual drinking of water which was thought to cause the oath itself to enter the body; this was meant to prevent "from within" any breach of the agreement.

The combination of a decentralised administration and the close personal link between the people and their king was the backbone of the Assyrian empire which since the 14th century BC had been a constant in the ever-changing political geography of the Ancient Near East. For seven centuries this way of government succeeded, always headed by a member of the same family; this clan had ruled the ancient city of Assur many centuries prior to its mutation into the centre of a territorial empire, and therefore the dynasty of the Assyrian kings is to be counted among the longest-living in world history.

One of the reasons that kingship could so firmly remain in one family's control for more than a millennium⁵ was that it needed not necessarily pass from father to son or even eldest son: Each of the king's male relatives was a possible successor to the throne, and hence the royal bloodline was well protected against its extinction. In principle, all the king's sons, brothers, cousins and nephews, but also more distant relatives could ascend to the Assyrian throne; however, one requirement was an absolute essential: In order to be king, a candidate needed to enjoy perfect physical and mental health. But even under the proviso of this sensible condition, dozens, if not hundreds of possible successors to the throne were usually available. It was, however, the king's exclusive privilege to chose an heir, during his reign and with divine assistance. This heir could use his time as crown prince to gain experience as a ruler in the making and to secure his power base; usually, he could then hope to ascend to the throne after his predecessor's natural death with wide acceptance. Nevertheless, time and again Assyria saw controversies and also battles for the throne; but the protagonists were all members of the royal clan⁶. We know of several instances when the struggle for power did not originate in the old king's death, but already started when his crown prince was chosen: More than once, disappointed hopefuls reacted to the installation of a rival as heir to the throne by killing the ruler, trying to wrestle the power not only from the old king, but also and especially his chosen successor. Esarhaddon (681–669) was confronted with this fate twice during his lifetime, and we will focus on the second and lesser known of these events.

Esarhaddon became king of Assyria in the year 681. Despite the fact that his father and predecessor Sennacherib (704–680) had made him crown prince two years earlier and had had the whole country take an oath on behalf of his chosen heir, this happened against all odds: Esarhaddon had not been Sennacherib's first choice and in order to have him installed as crown prince, the old king first needed to dismiss another of his sons from the office⁷. This son, Urdu-Mullissi by name, had been crown prince and heir apparent to the Assyrian empire for well over a dozen years when he suddenly

³ On the images of the Assyrian kings see Winter 1997: 363-369.

⁴ On Assyrian loyalty oaths see Radner 2006b.

⁵ As documented best by the Assyrian King List (Grayson 1980-83: 101-115).

⁶ The known cases of usurpation and succession wars are discussed by Mayer 1998a.

⁷ On Sennacherib's changing succession arrangements and the resulting conflict see Frahm 1997: 18-19 (with references and earlier literature).

had to resign from the prominent position; the reasons for his forced resignation are unknown, but were obviously not grave enough to have him pay with his life. Despite the fact that Urdu-Mullissi had to swear loyalty to his younger brother, he opposed his elevation to the office of crown prince, conspired against Esarhaddon and tried to cause Sennacherib to take back the appointment; the king did not comply, but the situation was clearly very precarious, and the new heir was sent into exile for his own protection. Sennacherib does not seem to have realised just how dangerous his decision to back Esarhaddon's promotion was for his own life; otherwise it is a mystery how the former crown prince Urdu-Mullissi could be allowed to stay in his father's closest proximity where, right under his nose, he plotted to become king⁸. Sennacherib seems to have been caught completely off-guard when Urdu-Mullissi and another son of his attacked him with drawn swords in a temple of Nineveh: On the 20th day of the tenth month of 681⁹, Sennacherib was killed by the hands of his own sons whose deed caused a stir all over the Near East, best witnessed by the report found in the Old Testament¹⁰. Yet the kingship that Urdu-Mullissi craved for was not to be his. The aftermath of the murder saw friction between him and his conspirators; his accession to the throne was delayed and ultimately never took place at all. Assyria was in chaos when Esarhaddon, leading a small army, entered the country from his western exile and marched towards the heartland of the empire. He managed to drive out the murderers of Sennacherib¹¹ and, two months after the assassination, he became king of Assyria¹².

These bloody events shaped the new king profoundly. It comes as no great surprise that after his accession to the throne Esarhaddon ordered all conspirators and political enemies within reach to be killed; yet he could not touch the leader of the conspiracy as Urdu-Mullissi had found asylum in Urartu¹³. That Assyria's northern neighbour would harbour the murderer of Sennacherib is not at all unexpected: The two countries had been in an almost constant state of war for the past two centuries. At that time, chances were that Urdu-Mullissi still might become king and in that event, the Urartian king could reasonably expect to gain substantial influence over Assyria. In the meantime, Esarhaddon made an effort to ensure that his brother would not have any powerful allies at home, should he ever try to stage a coup d'état from his exile: Many officials throughout the country who were suspected of entertaining sympathy for the enemy fraction were replaced. To give but one example, the complete security staff at the royal palaces of Nineveh and Kalḫu was dismissed¹⁴; it is of course understood that these men were not sent into retirement: They will have been executed.

Henceforth, Esarhaddon met his environs as a ruler with overwhelming distrust. Routinely, he sought to establish by means of oracular queries whether certain courtiers, officials and even members of the royal family wished him ill or actively tried to harm him¹⁵. If he seems to have been wary of his male relatives, he appears to have

⁸ Details about Urdu-Mullissi's conspiracy are mentioned in a letter from the reign of Esarhaddon, SAA 18 100.

⁹ Grayson 1975: 81: Chronicle 1 iii 34-35: „On the twentieth day of the month Tebet (x.) Sennacherib, king of Assyria, was killed by his son in a rebellion.“

¹⁰ 2 Kg. 19,37; Jes. 37,38.

¹¹ The only known account of Esarhaddon's exile and his victorious return is found in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon (Borger 1956: 40-45: Nin. A i 8- ii 11); we should be aware of the subjectivity of the available information.

¹² Borger 1956: 45: Nin. A i 87-ii 2: “Im Monat Adar (xii.), einem günstigen Monat, am 8. Tage, einem *eššēšu*-Festtage des Nabu, zog ich freudig in Ninive, meine Residenz, ein und setzte mich froh auf den Thron meines Vaters.”

¹³ According to the report in 2 Kg. 19,37 and Jes. 37,38.

¹⁴ Radner in press (c).

¹⁵ SAA 4 139-148 (“insurrection queries”).

entertained less suspicions about the women of his family. This is certainly one of reason why Esarhaddon's mother Naqi'a, his wife Ešarra-ḥammāt and his eldest daughter Šerua-eṭirat were able to wield an amount of influence that has few parallels in Ancient Near Eastern history¹⁶. The power of his wife was much noticed even outside palace circles; it is quite extraordinary that her death in the year 673 is mentioned prominently in two contemporary chronicle texts¹⁷. The devoted widower had a mausoleum erected and special rites for his wife's funerary care installed¹⁸. Even more remarkable, he did not get married again; the vacant position of the Assyrian queen was hitherto occupied by his mother Naqi'a¹⁹ who had already played an important role in Esarhaddon's appointment as crown prince and in his eventual taking of power: This is most obvious from a prophecy which records the encouraging words of Ištar of Arbela to Naqi'a during the time of Esarhaddon's exile²⁰. That also the daughter Šerua-eṭirat occupied a prominent position at her father's court is known from some letters that speaks of her self-confidence²¹. Her far-reaching influence is apparent from the fact that in later years she acted as a mediator in the conflict between her brothers, the kings of Assyria and Babylon²²; this is without parallel for any Near Eastern woman of that time.

Esarhaddon's general distrust against his environment is also mirrored by his choice of residence. He had a palace in the city of Kalḫu (Fig. 1) adapted which his forefather Shalmaneser III (858–824) had constructed as an armoury some two centuries earlier. This building was situated far from the administrative and cultic centre of the city, on top of a separate mound that protected it well from its surroundings. In the years between 676 and 672, Esarhaddon had the old building renovated and enhanced, turning it into a veritable stronghold: The gateways especially were turned into strongly fortified and impregnable towers that, if needed, could be used to seal off the palace against the rest of the city. The only access to the building was through a narrow entrance, leading into a long and steep hallway inside the enclosing wall which was protected by a sequence of several heavy doors and which steeply ascended towards the palace²³. Esarhaddon had a similar palace erected in Nineveh, also far removed from the acropolis proper at Kuyunjik on the separate mound of Nebi Yunus (Fig. 2); however, as this is today the site of one of Mossul's most important mosques, the building is only insufficiently explored²⁴.

In the first years of his rule, Esarhaddon proved himself a successful regent who, after a chaotic start, was able to consolidate his kingship and efficiently prevented segregation and territorial losses. Treacherous vassals, who had thought Assyria weakened and had tried to benefit from this, had to come to the painful realisation that Esarhaddon fully controlled his governors and his army and was able to take revenge for treason in the same way as his predecessors had done: As a consequence, the vassal kingdoms of Sidon and of Šubria were conquered and

¹⁶ For a survey of the status of the women of the Assyrian royal family see Melville 2004.

¹⁷ Grayson 1975: 85; Chronicle 1: iv 22: „On the fifth day of the month Adar (xii.) the king's wife died.“ Note the difference in the day date in the second text, Grayson 1975: 127; Chronicle 14: 23: „The eighth year: On the sixth day of the month Adar (xii.) the king's wife died.“

¹⁸ For references see Radner 1999b: 406.

¹⁹ See Melville 1999 for a monograph devoted to Naqi'a.

²⁰ SAA 9 1 v 12-25. For the dating of the prophecy to the period of Esarhaddon's exile see also Parpola 1980: 175.

²¹ SAA 16 28; SAA 18 55.

²² As detailed in a literary composition in Aramaic language preserved on *Papyros Amherst* 63 xvii 5–xxii 9, see Vleeming/Wesselius 1985 und Steiner 1997: 322-327.

²³ On this building, the so-called Fort Shalmaneser, see Oates/Oates 2001: 144-155 (with earlier literature).

²⁴ On this building, the so-called Review Palace or Arsenal, see Scott/MacGinnis 1990: 64-67 and Reade 1998-2001: 419-420.

turned into Assyrian provinces²⁵. The completion of a peace treaty with Elam, Assyria's long-standing rival in Iran, in the year 674²⁶ must be seen as a skilful political manoeuvre, and the securing of the Eastern border provided Assyria for the first time ever with the chance to attempt and exploit the power vacuum in Egypt to its own advantages – Assyria's first invasion into Egypt, however, ended with a defeat against Taharqa the Nubian, and a hasty retreat²⁷.

At that time it had become increasingly clear that Esarhaddon's physical condition was poorly: He was constantly struck with illness, mostly of a rather severe nature. For days, he withdrew to his sleeping quarters and refused food, drink and, most disturbingly, any human company²⁸; the death of his beloved wife in the year 673 may well have further damaged his already fragile health. For the all-powerful king of Assyria, this situation was bizarre. Esarhaddon's counsellors witnessed his deterioration first with apprehension and then with increasing objection, but were of course not in a position to actually change the state of affairs. It is a testament to Assyria's sound administrative structure that the country could take the king's continuing inability to act his part. Modern day man may well be able to muster considerable sympathy for Esarhaddon whose symptoms were indeed rather alarming: As we know from the correspondence left by the royal physicians and exorcists,²⁹ his days were governed by spells of fever and dizziness, violent fits of vomiting, diarrhoea and painful earaches. Depressions and fear of impending death were a constant in his life. In addition, his physical appearance was affected by the marks of a permanent skin rash that covered large parts of his body and especially his face. In one letter, the king's personal physician – certainly a medical professional at the very top of his league – was forced to confess his ultimate inability to help the king: „My lord, the king, keeps telling me: ‘Why do you not identify the nature of my disease and find a cure?’ As I told the king already in person, his symptoms cannot be classified³⁰.“ While Esarhaddon's experts pronounced themselves incapable of identifying the king's illness, modern day specialists have tried to use the reported symptoms in order to come up with a diagnosis in retrospect³¹. However, it is not entirely clear whether the sickly Esarhaddon contracted one illness after the other or, as would seem more likely, suffered from the afflictions of a chronic disease that never left for good. Be that as it may, in a society that saw illness as a divine punishment, a king who was constantly confined to the sick bay could not expect to meet with sympathy and understanding. He could, however, reasonably presume that his subjects saw his affliction at the very least as an indication that the gods lacked goodwill towards their ruler, if not as the fruit of divine wrath, incurred by committing some heinous crime. Therefore, the king's condition needed to be hidden from the public by all

²⁵ See Radner 2006a: 63-64 s.v. Šidunu, Kullimeri and Uppumu.

²⁶ The most explicit source for this is the letter SAA 18 7. For the historical context see Waters 2000: 42-44.

²⁷ The campaign is mentioned in two chronicle texts: Grayson 1975: 84: Chronicle 1: iv 16: „The seventh year: On the fifth day of the month Adar (xii.) the army of Assyria was defeated in Egypt.“ Grayson 1975: 126: Chronicle 14: 20: „The seventh year: On the eighth day of the month Adar (xii.) the army of Assyria [marched] to Sha-amile.“ For the historical context see Morkot 2000: 264.

²⁸ Most explicitly described in the letter SAA 10 43, with which his physicians tried to coax the king out of his isolation.

²⁹ For these letters see the discussion of Parpola 1983: 230-236.

³⁰ SAA 10 315: 7-12: *ka-a-a-ma-nu LUGAL be-lí i-qab-bi-ia ma-a a-ta-a ši-ki-in GIG-ia an-ni-iu-u la ta-mar bul-še-e-šú la te-pa-áš ina pa-ni-ti ina pa-an LUGAL aq-ṭi-bi sa-kik-ke-e-šú la ú-šá-ah-ki-me.*

³¹ Parpola 1984: 231-233 suggested *Lupus erythematoses*, and this hypothesis was accepted and further developed by Kaiser 1995. For a critical review of this identification and a critique of the general idea of retrospective diagnosis see Leven 2004: 380-382.

means, and that this was at all feasible was very much facilitated by the ancient tradition that whoever came before the king had to be veiled and on their knees³².

Because of his failing health, Esarhaddon saw himself permanently in death's clutches; this alone made it necessary to provide for his succession: Who would be king after him? There were a great many possible candidates: Esarhaddon himself had fathered at least 18 children³³, but some of them suffered, like their father, from a frail condition and needed permanent medical attention³⁴. It would appear that sickly sons were, just like all the daughters, deemed unfit from the start: After all, only a man without fault could be king of Assyria. At one point, a son called Šîn-nadin-apli was deemed a fit candidate, as is demonstrated by an oracular query addressed to the sun god³⁵. However, it was Assurbanipal who was elevated to the rank of crown prince of Assyria in the year 672, on the 18th day of the month Iyyar (ii.), and at the same time, his elder brother Šamaš-šumu-ukin was declared crown prince of Babylon. Installing one son as the next king of Assyria and another son as the future ruler of Babylon was a novel approach, as for the past decades the Assyrian kings had simultaneously held the crown of Babylon. Following the tradition established for Esarhaddon's own proclamation as crown prince, the whole country had to swear an oath to respect and honour the king's decision³⁶; simultaneously the king's mother, Naqi'a, saw to it that all those who could at one point have entertained hopes to succeed Esarhaddon as king of Assyria took an additional loyalty oath in favour of her grandson Assurbanipal³⁷. And even his dead mother Ešarra-ḫammat was thought to have risen from her grave to secure Assurbanipal's claim: According to a contemporary letter, her ghost appeared to the new crown prince in a dream, blessing him and pronouncing him and his heirs the rightful rulers of Assyria³⁸.

The new succession set-up was also expressed by visual means, most prominently on the royal stelae set up at Sam'al and Til Barsip which depict the king and both crown princes (Fig. 3)³⁹. Also the image displayed on the royal seal was adapted to fit the new situation: The traditional depiction of the king killing a lion was replaced by an updated design that showed this subject not just once, but three times; this was meant to convey that not king Esarhaddon alone, but also his two crown princes Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin were the country's legitimate rulers⁴⁰; that this was indeed reality is clear from a number of references in letters which show both crown princes deeply involved in matters of political and cultic importance⁴¹. Such a division of power must have appealed to all those who wished to see the sick king's burden lightened: It seems that a socially acceptable way of coping with an unpleasant and dangerous situation had been found.

Yet making public who would be the next king could endanger the present ruler's life, as Esarhaddon had learned the hard way from the example of his father Sennacherib's grim fate. It is at that time that Esarhaddon became for the second

³² Parpola 1980: 172 with n. 12.

³³ For Esarhaddon's children see Parpola 1983: 117-119 and Weissert 1998: 161-163.

³⁴ For the sickly condition of e.g. Šamaš-metu-uballit and Aššur-taqiša-libluṭ see Weissert 1998: 162 s.v. h and i.

³⁵ SAA 4 149.

³⁶ As documented by the surviving copies of the succession treaty (SAA 2 6) and references in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon (SAA 2 14; Borger 1956: 72; Tarbišu A: 40 (date formula) and Assurbanipal (Borger 1996: 15-16, 208; Prism A i 8-22 // Prism F i 7-17).

³⁷ SAA 2 8.

³⁸ SAA 10 188.

³⁹ Börker-Klähn 1982: 212-213 no. 217-219; Miglus 2000; Porter 2002.

⁴⁰ On the implications of the new royal seal see Maul 1995.

⁴¹ e.g., SAA 16 17-27, 34-35, SAA 18 6-7.

time in his life the victim of a conspiracy that was meant to wrestle Assyrian kingship from his hands.

In the beginning of the year 671, Esarhaddon set out on a second campaign against Egypt⁴². On his way to the river Nile he visited the city of Ḥarran where a prophecy was revealed to him. In a letter that was sent to Esarhaddon's successor some years after the event, the following is related: „When Esarhaddon marched to Egypt, a temple of cedar wood was erected at Ḥarran. There, the god Sîn was enthroned on a wooden column, two crowns on his head, and standing in front of him was the god Nusku. Esarhaddon entered and placed the crowns onto his head, and the following was proclaimed: ‘You shall go forth and conquer the world!’ And he went and conquered Egypt⁴³.“ The two deities mentioned are part of the divine triad that had been worshipped in the city of Ḥarran since old, the moon god Sîn, his consort Nikkal and their son, the god of light Nusku. The moon god's two crowns are only attested in this text and have found various interpretations. One popular reading takes it to be a reference to the Egyptian double crown and thus a sign announcing the victory over Egypt⁴⁴. It seems more likely, however, that the description simply refers to the combination of crown and moon sickle which the moon god is wearing on his head (e.g. on the depiction on a stela from Til Barsip –Fig. 4)⁴⁵, especially as the moon sickle is often called the “crown” of Sîn in the written sources⁴⁶.

Undoubtedly encouraged and heartened by the divine words, Esarhaddon and his army continued their march towards Egypt and indeed, three months later, on the third day of the month Tammuz (iv.), the Assyrian troops were victorious in a first battle⁴⁷. However, Esarhaddon seems to have not trusted his good fortune after all: Only eleven days after the victorious battle, he had the substitute king ritual (*šar pūḫi*) performed⁴⁸. This was an ancient ritual meant to protect the king from impending death that had been announced by an omen, usually an eclipse⁴⁹. It was not the first time that the rite was performed during Esarhaddon's reign⁵⁰, but the ceremony of 671 is especially important as it was to be the first of a series of three that incapacitated the king for a substantial portion of the following two years: For each time the ritual was undertaken the king went into hiding for the next one-hundred days.

The ceremony required the installation of a substitute who took over the king's place for a period of one-hundred days, acting as his replacement in every way: He wore the king's clothes, he ate the king's meals and he slept in the king's bed while the true monarch remained hidden from the public and was to be known

⁴² An account of this campaign is given in two chronicle texts: Grayson 1975: 85; Chronicle 1: iv 23-27; Grayson 1975: 127; Chronicle 14: 25-26.

⁴³ SAA 10 174: 10-15.

⁴⁴ First suggested by Spalinger 1976 and accepted e.g. by Redford 1992: 360 and Holloway 2002: 408. Cf. Nissinen 1998: 123 with note 465.

⁴⁵ M. 4526 (Aleppo Museum), see Kohlmeyer 1992: 99-100, pl. 40-41.

⁴⁶ For references see CAD A/II 156 s.v. 2.

⁴⁷ Grayson 1975: 85; Chronicle 1: iv 24-25: „On the third, sixteenth (and) eighteenth days of the month Tammuz (iv.) – three times - there was a massacre in Egypt.“

⁴⁸ The ritual was performed on the 14th day of the month Tammuz (iv.) of 671; see the discussion of Parpola 1984: xxviii s.v. 9.

⁴⁹ On the *šar pūḫi* ritual see Parpola 1971: 54-65, Parpola 1983: xxii-xxxii and also Ambos 2005a: 51-58.

⁵⁰ The letters SAA 10 1-3 would seem to refer to an earlier performing of the ritual which, however, cannot be attributed to a certain date; both the solar eclipse of 679 and the lunar eclipse of 674 may have given cause for the performing of the ritual, cf. the discussion of Parpola 1984: xxviii s.v. 7, 35, 516. The alleged *šar pūḫi* ritual of 672 (Parpola 1971: 55: entry 4 in the table) should be reassigned to the year 657 (thus Parpola 1984: xxix s.v. 13).

only under the pseudonym “The farmer”⁵¹. The goal of the ritual was to trick fate and redirect the bad omens and the evil they predicted onto the replacement king; in order to make absolutely certain that it was he whom death would strike, nothing was left to chance and the man was killed at the end of his hundred day reign; small wonder that retards – who could not grasp the meaning behind their sudden rise to the throne – were deemed to be ideal candidates for the doomed role of substitute king. This ritual had a long-standing tradition in Mesopotamia and was performed for the last time in the year 323 when the priests of Babylon tried to save the dying Alexander – in vain⁵².

For Esarhaddon, the 671 ceremony proved to be altogether more successful: He survived, and in the following two years, he had the ritual performed at another two occasions⁵³: This meant, however, that he did not act as king of Assyria for close to a year, making continuing use of a practice that was only fit to be employed as a last-resort escape route in a dead end situation. In practice, this could only work as the crown princes Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin were in a position to step up to take on their father’s tasks.

It was not under their leadership, however, that the Assyrian army continued to wage war in Egypt: Although we do not know the identity of the army’s leader for certain, it is most likely to have been Esarhaddon’s chief eunuch Aššur-našir⁵⁴. The Assyrian army continued its victorious campaign, winning two more battles and even conquering the royal city of Memphis⁵⁵. Its temples and palaces were plundered, and among many other spoils, 55 royal statues were carried away by the Assyrian troops⁵⁶, some of which have been excavated in Esarhaddon’s Nebi Yunus palace at Nineveh⁵⁷.

It was at that time that the news of a second prophecy spread from Ḫarran where a local woman had fallen into ecstasy, uttering a sensational divine message: „This is the word of the god Nusku: Kingship belongs to Sasî. I shall destroy the name and the seed of Sennacherib!”⁵⁸ “As the successful conquest of Egypt had just proven the oracle of Ḫarran to be most trustworthy, the importance of this second prophecy was paramount: It brand-marked Esarhaddon and his heirs as impostors and unworthy to rule over Assyria and thus provided an ideological foundation for a possible revolt.

At this point, we need to discuss the relationship between Esarhaddon and the shrine of the moon god at Ḫarran. The king’s initiative to visit this sanctuary seems to coincide with the beginning of a building project that was to transform this shrine – which was very ancient⁵⁹ and had enjoyed the patronage of various Assyrian kings after Ḫarran’s reconquest in the 9th century⁶⁰, but certainly did not hold a supreme position among the temples of Assyria – into one of the most prominent Near Eastern sanctuaries

⁵¹ This title is always written with the logogram LÚ.ENGAR. Whether this was actually realised as *ikkāru* in Neo-Assyrian is not at all certain as there are no syllabic spellings for this term; I have therefore suggested *qatinnu*, a term which also means “farmer”, as the Neo-Assyrian equivalent of LÚ.ENGAR (Radner 1999a: 115-116).

⁵² On the *šar pūḫi* ritual performed for Alexander see Ambos 2005b: 96-101 and Huber 2005.

⁵³ 15th day of the month Tebet (x.) of 671 and 14th day of the month Sivan (iii.) of 669, cf. the discussion of Parpola 1984: xxix s.v. 10 and 11.

⁵⁴ Aššur-našir’s successor as chief eunuch, Ša-Nabû-šû, directed a great many military campaigns and his chances for military success in Egypt were the subject of an oracular query to the sungod: SAA 4 88.

⁵⁵ Grayson 1975: 85: Chronicle 1: iv 26-27: „On the twenty-second day Memphis, the royal city, was captured (and) abandoned by its king.”

⁵⁶ Onasch 1994: I 35-36.

⁵⁷ For the recovery of statues of Taharqa and Anuket see Scott/MacGinnis 1990: 67.

⁵⁸ SAA 16 59 r. 4’-5’: *ma-a a-bat*^dPA.TÚG *ši-i ma-a* LUGAL-*u-tu a-na*¹ *Sa-si-i ma-a* MU NUMUN *šá*^{id}30-PAP.MEŠ-SU *ú-ḫal-la-qa*.

⁵⁹ The moon god’s temple at Ḫarran is attested since the early second millennium BC, see George 1993: 99 no. 470.

⁶⁰ Radner 2003: 228.

of the 7th and 6th century. The newly found status of Sîn's temple at Ḥarran is witnessed by the building inscriptions of the kings Assurbanipal and Nabonidus⁶¹ and also supported by the growing popularity of a legal clause that stipulates a gift to Sîn of Ḥarran in case of breach of contract⁶². The temple and the sanctuaries that succeeded the shrine – eventually the Great Mosque of Ḥarran which was destroyed by the Mongols in 1260 – were all holy places of wide-ranging and far-reaching importance⁶³. The first Ḥarran prophecy in Esarhaddon's favour was already a result of the interest that the king had developed for the temple and that had led to his visit.

But what had attracted Esarhaddon to the moon god in the first place? As we have discussed before, the most visible symptom of the long-suffering king's disease was a skin condition for which his various medical experts were unable to find a cure and which they were hesitant to name. According to the Mesopotamian belief system, every deity was the patron of a special curse that was closely linked to the god's character. The curse of the moon god caused the victim to be afflicted by an incurable skin disease that made him a social outcast. One text states: „Sîn, the lamp of heaven and earth, shall dress you in the *saḥaršubbû* disease and ban you from showing yourselves in the presence of the gods and the king. Like wild donkeys and gazelles you shall roam the steppe!⁶⁴ “ It is not a far stretch to see a connection between the newly found interest of a king, who is plagued by a nasty skin disease, for the temple of a deity, who was capable to cause an illness of that sort. It would seem possible to me that Esarhaddon sought to battle his affliction at its root when he decided to build a new shrine for the moon god: What better way to win a deity's favour?

It would, however, appear that it was exactly the king's pilgrimage to Ḥarran that publicised his disease to a degree that had successfully been avoided so far. Knowledge about the king suffering from such a serious and also repulsive illness cannot have failed to thoroughly disqualify Esarhaddon in his subjects' eyes as ruler of Assyria – an office that could only be held by a man of perfect physical and mental health. We have to see the second prophecy in this context.

Who was Sasi whom that prophecy proclaimed to be Assyria's true king? We do not know his identity, but one thing is certain: This man, who bore a rather common name that may well have been an abbreviation and who entertained a household at Ḥarran at the time, is extremely likely to have been part of the royal family as he could not even have been considered as king of Assyria otherwise. Yet it is implausible that he was a son of Esarhaddon or indeed any descendant of Sennacherib, as the prophecy speaks of annihilating the name and offspring of that very king. It is more probable to trace Sasi's ancestry back to the heroic Sargon (621–605), Sennacherib's father and predecessor who had led Assyria to its greatest military triumphs. However that may be, fact is that in a very short period of time Sasi's cause managed to win many followers all over the empire, some of them in extremely high positions: One supporter was Esarhaddon's chief eunuch Aššur-našir⁶⁵ whose role in the planned usurpation was prominent and the subject of an oracular query performed at the moon god's temple in Ḥarran⁶⁶. In the meantime, the prophetess who had proclaimed the divine verdict in

⁶¹ For references see George 1993: 99 no. 470.

⁶² For references to the clauses stipulating the donation of horses see the table in Radner 1997: 308–309.

⁶³ For a treatment of the religious traditions of Ḥarran see Green 1992.

⁶⁴ SAA 2 6: 419–421.

⁶⁵ SAA 10 377; for a discussion and additional references see Mattila 1998: 204 s.v. 11.

⁶⁶ According to a diviner's letter to Esarhaddon, conspirators brought him to Sîn's temple at Ḥarran and made him perform an oracle query for them. The question put forward, „Will the chief eunuch take the kingship?“ (SAA 10 179 r. 5': GAL-LÚ.SAG LUGAL-ú-tú i-na-áš-šī), was confirmed (r. 9'-10': LUGAL-u-tú i-na-áš-šī). I do not understand this to mean that Aššur-našir is supposed to become king, but that he will contest Esarhaddon's claim to the rule and act as kingmaker for another contender. Note,

Sasî's favour had placed herself under Sasî's protection; we cannot underestimate the value of this undoubtedly highly charismatic individual for the spread of the movement and the recruitment of new followers. It seems that loyalty oaths were at that time sworn to Sasî, as if he already were king⁶⁷, just like in the case of Urdu-Mullissi whose supporters had taken an „oath of rebellion“ (*adê ša sîhi*) against Sennacherib⁶⁸.

The goal of Sasî's followers was obviously to make the prophecy come true: This meant getting rid of Esarhaddon and his crown princes and installing Sasî as king of Assyria. The conspiracy did not remain a secret operation for long. We have already mentioned that Esarhaddon had learned a lesson from his father's death and from the beginning of his reign had entertained little faith in the trustworthiness of his minions; now it paid off that he had made his subjects swear as part of his loyalty oath to report whenever they heard or saw anything that might be interpreted as an action against the king. Indeed, soon after the Sasî movement started to take shape, various letters reached Esarhaddon informing him about the pretender's followers who were not only active in the Ḫarran region, but also in central Assyria and even in Babylonia⁶⁹. In marked difference to the conspirators against Sennacherib, who a decade before had plotted as a small group and in utmost secrecy directly under the king's eyes, the new rebels were far less concerned about the concealment of their plans; their belief that Sasî was chosen and protected by the gods as the true king of Assyria will of course have made all the difference.

At first, Esarhaddon did not take action against Sasî and his followers but waited and gathered more information about the conspiracy. Never were more letters containing denunciations and accusations addressed to the king than in these months, laced with fervent proclamations of loyalty and love for the ruler⁷⁰. Understandably, Esarhaddon was extremely concerned for his safety and his life, and he had the substitute king ritual performed again, on the 15th day of the month Tebet (x.) of 671⁷¹, less than three months after concluding a period of hundred days as “the farmer” – this measure effectively removed him from the public eye and thus offered better protection against any attempt on his life. As soon as this second time-out was over, Esarhaddon took immediate action against the conspirators. Using maximum force and brutal violence, he was successful: In contrast to his father he did not have to pay with his life.

The available chronicle texts offer but a brief remark for the year 670: „The king killed many of his magnates in Assyria with the sword.⁷²“ This stoic statement is brutal enough in itself, but it can only insufficiently convey what this massacre, the second that Esarhaddon had ordered among his own people within a decade, really must have meant for the country: If one considers the well-oiled machinery of Assyria's administration as the backbone of the empire, it becomes apparent that killing off a large part of the top officials would cause far more and also more permanent harm to the state than the murder of a king. Just how much the empire's structure was damaged is also shown by the highly unusual fact that in the first months of the new year no official

however, that in the final years of the Assyrian empire, the chief eunuch Sîn-šumu-lešir who had earlier helped Assurbanipal's successor Aššur-etel-ilani to power, managed to ascend to the Assyrian throne; for this case see Tadmor 2002: 610 (with references and earlier literature).

⁶⁷ SAA 16 243 (fragmentarily preserved).

⁶⁸ SAA 18 77: 4'; cf. also SAA 10 113.

⁶⁹ The most important sources for the conspiracy are the letters SAA 10 179, SAA 10 377 and SAA 16 59-62; a number of other letters, including various texts from Babylonia, seem to belong to the same historical context, see Nissinen 1998: 109-153 for references and a detailed discussion (whose theorizing about Sasî's role within the conspiracy I find, however, unnecessarily convoluted).

⁷⁰ e.g. SAA 10 240, SAA 16 59-76, etc.

⁷¹ For the date see the discussion of Parpola 1984: xxix s.v. 10.

⁷² Grayson 1975: 86: Chronicle 1 iv 29; 127: Chronicle 14: 27.

was chosen to provide the year's name⁷³ – a situation which is extremely rarely attested in the long course of Assyrian history and usually marks a time of inner turbulences⁷⁴.

For centuries, the Assyrian Empire and especially its centre had not been invaded by foreign troops; yet the people of Assyria were not sheltered from the horrors of war: The crisis of the year 670 can be shown to have spread far beyond the royal court. During the recent excavations at the small town of Burmarina (Tell Shiukh Fawqani), situated on the Middle Euphrates close to Til Barsip, a private house was unearthed that contained the remains of an archive of dated legal documents⁷⁵. The dating of these texts suggests that the building was destroyed in the year 670, and a connection with Esarhaddon's extinction of the Sasi conspiracy is therefore likely. The same is true for the situation encountered at the city of Sam'al (Zincirli) in the region of modern Antakia: Here, too, two business documents with fitting dates were found in the remains of a building, the destruction of which I would again place during the events of 670⁷⁶. Both cities are situated in the general area of Ḫarran; this could be more than pure chance and may well indicate that Sasi's cause had met with particular sympathy in his home region which in turn was struck especially hard by Esarhaddon's vengeance.

It is certainly not pure chance that it is at Sam'al and at Til Barsip, the capital of the province in which Burmarina is situated, that royal stelae have been discovered that show king Esarhaddon and his crown princes and glorify the triumph over Egypt in word and image⁷⁷; the purpose of these stelae is described in the inscription incised on one of them as follows: „I erected (this stela) forever so that all my enemies may gaze (at it) in admiration.⁷⁸“ This remark certainly does not only refer to the king's enemies abroad, but also his enemies inside Assyria – whose sheer existence could not even be hinted at in a royal inscriptions that celebrated the monarch's achievements: Not one of these texts contains any allusion to the plot against Esarhaddon, and hence, in the reconstruction of this episode, we are solely dependent on the references in chronicle texts and in letters as well as indirect hints such as found in the dating of archival documents. Thus, the case of the conspiracy of the year 670 is symptomatic for the problems that arise from a historical reconstruction that depends too heavily and uncritically on the testament of royal inscriptions. Against the background of the events just described, I would consider it unfortunate to define Esarhaddon's reign as a period marked by internal peace or even style this ruler as a kind of *Friedensfürst*; this propagates an image of Esarhaddon and his times according to his very own world view and as it was therefore conveyed in his inscriptions⁷⁹. But this reflection of the historical

⁷³ As shown by the date formula in SAA 6 286, dated to the first month of the year “after Kanūnāyu”, cf. Millard 1995: 68, 97 s.v. Kanūnāyu 671.

⁷⁴ Larsen 1972; Millard 1994: 67-68.

⁷⁵ The available dates of the archive allow a firm dating to the reign of Esarhaddon: Issi-Adad-anīnu was the eponym of the year 679 (Burmarina no. 26), Banbâ of the year 676 (Burmarina no. 37) and Atâr-ilī of the year 673 (Burmarina nos. 1, 4, 27, 38). For the publication of these texts see Radner et al. 2005: 625-649.

⁷⁶ The two texts are dated to the eponym year of Banbâ (676): von Luschan 1943: 136-137, pl. 73; cf. Radner 1997: 17.

⁷⁷ Börker-Klähn 1982: 212-213 no. 217-219; Miglus 2000; Porter 2002.

⁷⁸ Borger 1956: 99; Mnm. A.: 52-53: *ana tab-rat kiš-šat na-ki-ri ana ša-at u₄-me ul-ziz*. This evaluation relies all too strongly on the testament of the official inscriptions of Esarhaddon and his successors, and it perpetuates exactly those views that these sources were meant to preserve or even create.

⁷⁹ An example would be the historical reconstruction of Porter 1993, focussing on Esarhaddon's policy in Babylonia. The conspiracy discussed here is mentioned only briefly as a possible consequence of Esarhaddon's succession arrangements of 672 (p. 135), and the book concludes with this statement: „Under Esarhaddon's administration, and in the years that followed it, the costly cycle of Babylonian revolts and Assyrian punitive campaigns for a time came to an end, and the image of a united Assyria and Babylonia that Esarhaddon was striving to promote became briefly a reality. The period of peace that Esarhaddon created between these two states stands as a monument to the power of images and to Esarhaddon's effective use of the peaceful arts of government.“ (p. 153).

situation is certainly even more distorted than the fragmentary picture that we may develop if we also make use of the more objective sources such as chronicles, letters and economic texts

After the conspiracy against Esarhaddon had been quelled, the security measures at court were substantially strengthened: To meet the king had never been easy; now it became even more difficult as two additional ranks were introduced to the hierarchy of those officials who supervised the control of access to the palace⁸⁰. The atmosphere of fear and suspicion must have been overwhelming.

The shrine of the moon god of Ḫarran, however, emerged from the crisis of 670 unharmed and apparently even strengthened: Esarhaddon's successors continued to greatly favour the sanctuary⁸¹. One of his sons was even made a priest of the temple⁸², and the tradition of the king's relatives serving as cult personnel at Ḫarran can subsequently be traced well into the 6th century⁸³. The woman who had proclaimed the prophecy of the god Nusku could easily be defamed as one of those „false prophets“ that the Assyrians knew and loathed just like the Old Testament⁸⁴. We know from a letter to Esarhaddon of the plan to wait for a suitable moment to snatch her from the house of Sašī⁸⁵, and it is probable that this plan or a similar scheme was realised when the conspiracy was crushed. We do not know anything about the woman's further fate, and the same goes for the enigmatic Sašī. To assume that the two key figures of the conspiracy survived is only feasible if they had managed to flee abroad, just like the murderers of Sennacherib; it seems more likely, however, that they were executed together with their fellow conspirators.

For a second time, Esarhaddon had been able to escape unharmed from a conspiracy directed against him, and again, the goddess Ištar of Arbela revealed herself through the words of a prophetess, this time to comfort the king: „I will banish trepidation from my palace! You shall eat and drink safely! Your son and your grandson shall rule as kings, (protected) in the lap of the god Ninurta!⁸⁶“ The situation seemed to be well under control, but still, the old fears had not left Esarhaddon completely, and neither had the disease; already in the next year he had to fall back on the substitute king ritual⁸⁷. Shortly after the end of this period of concealment and apparently in good shape, the king set out for a third campaign against Egypt which, clearly encouraged by Assyria's internal problems, had tried to escape Assyria's control; but on the way to the Nile, Esarhaddon died. It happened on the 10th day of the month Marchesvan (viii.) in the year 669⁸⁸, and as far as we know, his death was natural and unexpected. Thus ended Esarhaddon's reign.

Shortly after, Assurbanipal ascended to the Assyrian throne, and his brother Šamaš-šumu-ukin became king of Babylon, proving Esarhaddon's succession plans a success. For the time being, the impact of blood shed of the past year seemed to be alleviated by the absence of further unrest. But if we leave behind ancient Assyria at this

⁸⁰ Radner in press.

⁸¹ George 1993: 99 no. 470; cf. Holloway 2002: 420-425.

⁸² Assurbanipal installed his brother Aššur-etel-šamê-eršeti-muballissu as *urigallu* of Šin of Ḫarran: Streck 1916: 250: K. 891: 17-18.

⁸³ For Nabonidus' mother Adad-guppi who held a cultic position at the moon god's temple at Ḫarran see Mayer 1998b.

⁸⁴ On the subject see Nissinen 1996.

⁸⁵ SAA 16 59 r. 6'-7'.

⁸⁶ SAA 9 1 vi 19-30.

⁸⁷ Performed on the 14th day of the month Sivan (iii.) of 669, cf. the discussion of Parpola 1984: xxix s.v. 11.

⁸⁸ Grayson 1975: 86: Chronicle 1: iv 30-31 // 127: Chronicle 14: 28-29: „The twelfth year: The king of Assyria marched to Egypt (but) became ill on the way and died on the tenth day of the month Marchesvan (viii).“

point, we do so with the hindsight knowledge that the period of peace was only short-lived: One of the bloodiest and ultimately the final chapter of Assyrian history was about to begin.

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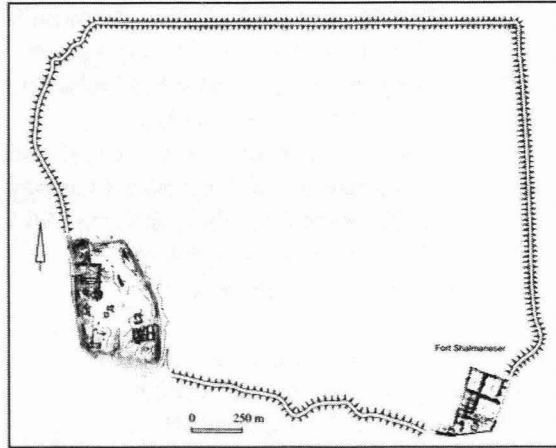


Fig. 1. Map of Kalhu, indicating the position of Esarhaddon's palace ("Fort Shalmaneser") in regard to the main citadel mound. Adapted from O. Pedersen, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East* (1998) 144 plan 66

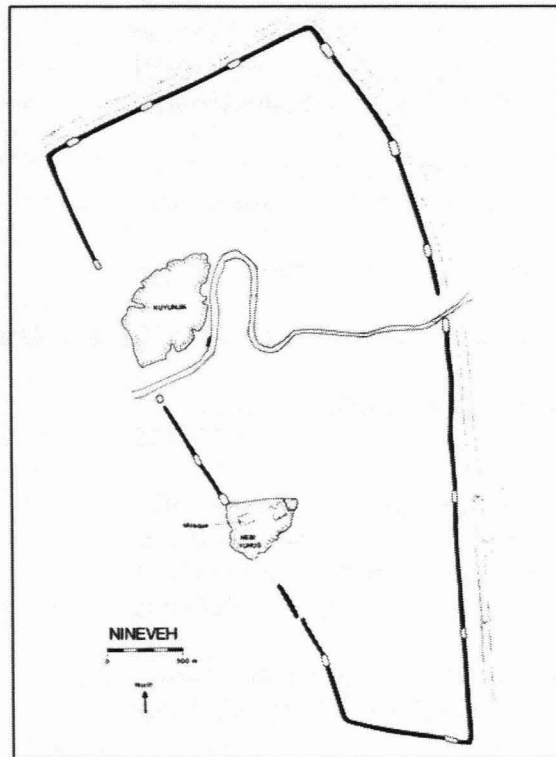


Fig. 2. Map of Nineveh, indicating the position of Esarhaddon's palace at Nebi Yunus in regard to the main citadel mound at Kuyunjik. Adapted from M.L. Scott and J. Macginnis, *Iraq* 52 (1990) 73 fig. 4



Fig. 3. Esarhaddon's royal stela from Sam'al, showing Assurbanipal as crown prince of Assyria (on the panel on the right side of the stela) and Šamaš-šumu-ukin as the crown prince of Babylon (on the panel on the left side of the stela). Reproduced from Börker-Klähn 1982: no. 219

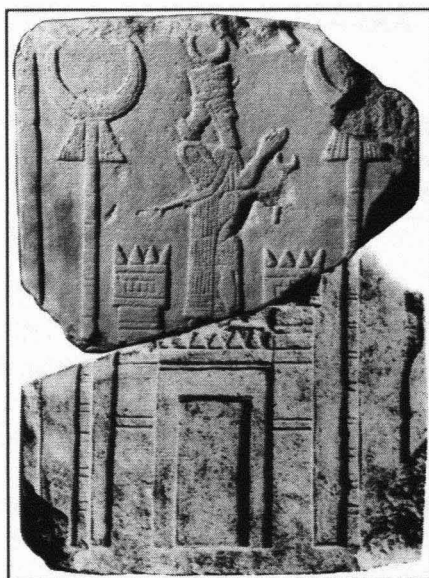


Fig. 4. A stela showing the god Sin, from Til-Barsip. Reproduced from Kohlmeyer 1992: pl. 40