Let Praise of Aššur Not Be Forgotten: Temple Heterarchies and the Limits of Royal Patronage in the Neo-Assyrian Empire

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Abstract

Understanding how the numerous temples in the Neo-Assyrian Empire situated themselves within the imperial network is challenging, largely because of a bias in the official sources towards a few temples, especially that of Aššur. Revealing the relationships between the less-attested temples necessitates not only moving beyond the top of the hierarchy but also doing away with hierarchies almost entirely, as they both limit the possible connections and are impossible to build for the majority of known temples. Because there are myriad ways of organizing temples relative to one another, this paper proposes heterarchies as a more effective framework for understanding the changing dynamics of cultic landscapes. This study uses royal patronage (or its absence) as its barometer, establishing a typology that ranges from temples operating entirely independently of imperial support to those that actively seek it, and demonstrating how heterarchies can expose different perspectives of power, status, and affinities amongst institutions. Ultimately, a heterarchical approach shows that the relationships established by royal patronage were not straightforward, homogenous, or stable, and that the ways in which temple and state interacted with one another affected both “vertical” and “horizontal” positioning of temples within the cultic landscape of the empire.

Keywords

kingship – priests – royal ideology – administration – Mesopotamia – religion

1 A Heterarchical Approach to Neo-Assyrian Temples¹

The cultic network of the Neo-Assyrian Empire was vast and complex, causing numerous challenges when modern scholars seek to understand the relationships between temples, kings, and local communities. It is not only that every city had at least one temple, which belonged to the patron deity of that city, but also that several other gods typically had temples in the same city, many within the temple complex of the patron. Moreover, many deities had temples in several cities and could even be the patrons of multiple urban centers.² Lacking in the Assyrian corpora are philosophical or theological treatises that reflect upon urban religion. However, a few texts give some indications for how the Assyrians may have perceived their cult centers. These texts, often called “temple lists,” have organizational schemes ranging from geographical, theological, thematic, and acrographic; while at least one was apparently hierarchical,³ these texts are essentially a form of lexical lists, which are scholarly and theoretical and are therefore less representative of active cult practices.⁴

For Assyrian temples, the relevant sources are known as the Divine Directory (*Götteradressbuch*), including a better-attested section called the Assyrian Temple List, both of which were geographically-minded and largely centered on the city of Assur, though some versions of the Assyrian Temple List include temples in other Assyrian cities, such as those of Adad of Kurba'il, Ištar of Arbela, Ištar of Nineveh, and Adad of Zabban.⁵ There does seem to be

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2 For instance, Ištar of Nineveh and Ištar of Arbela. In Neo-Babylonian Borsippa, one deity (Nanāya) appeared as two different manifestations within the same city: as Nanāya of the Ezida temple to Nabû and as Nanāya of the Eḫuršaba temple (Waerzeggers 2010: 26–8). An overview of Assyrian temples can be found in Menzel 1981.

3 George 1993: 38–9; this list is concerned exclusively with Babylonian temples.

4 George 1993: 1–6; for instance, the “Canonical Temple List” was apparently modeled on the lexical god-list AN = *Anum*.

5 SAA 20, no. 49, Menzel 1981: T 146–66, George 1992: 167–92. The Assyrian Temple list also includes the temples of Marduk and Zarpanitu in Babylon. It should be noted, however, that not all recensions contain all of the extant sections and that the earliest datable exemplar

a loose hierarchical system that was applied to the temples within the city of Assur, and, with regard to the temples of other cities, George argues that “these cult-centres were evidently considered by some recensions of the temple list of sufficient religious importance in Assyria to warrant their inclusion with the temples of the national religious capital.”⁶ Nonetheless, this sheds little light on a possible larger hierarchy. The same is true for the embedded lists of temples in the royal inscriptions, which are rare.⁷ Moreover, the Akkadian terms for “temple” or “shrine” in general do not indicate special rankings or status, though one could argue broadly that *bītu* is usually the full-sized temple and terms like *šubtu* “shrine/seal” designate smaller cultic spaces, generally located within other temples.⁸ Overall, the texts suggest that there was a very limited hierarchy of only the highest tier, dominated by the temple of the highest god – the Ešarra temple of Aššur in Assur – and the other shrines in Assur, often followed by the temple of the patron god of the political capital, with little effort to organize the empire’s numerous other temples by rank.⁹

Indeed, there are too many (ever-shifting) factors that must be taken into account when evaluating the standing of a temple within the imperial landscape for one to employ a hierarchical approach. Ultimately, cult centers and

dates to the reign of Sennacherib; see George 1992: 167–72. These texts have parallels with the *tākultu* texts as well.

- 6 George 1992: 171. One section lists Aššur’s, Nineveh’s, Arbela’s, and Kalzu’s ceremonial names but not their temples.
- 7 For instance, in Ashurnasirpal II’s reports of building the temples in Calah (e.g. RIMA 2 A.O.101.30: 53–60). Sequences like this but with divine names have often been considered hierarchically ordered; see the discussion of “embedded god-lists” in Allen 2015: 95–140. Lexical god-lists were also arranged in a hierarchy, but these are not typically representative of active cult practices. It should be noted, however, that the deity sequences also do not represent simple hierarchies, as there were many factors behind the selection and ordering of certain deities and arrangements were subject to change over time or geography and were even dependent on the contents of the text (Zaia 2017).
- 8 See discussion in George 1993: 62. Terms for temples and shrines include *ēkurru*, *gegunnū*, *šaḫūru*, *a/ešertu*, *ešmāḫu*, *kiššu*, *simakku*, *sukku*, *šubtu*, *papāḫu*, among others. Some cities are called *māḫāzu*, which has been translated as “cult center,” suggesting at first that the resident temples would be more important or that the city is known primarily for its religious character, but the qualifier is applied either generically or to only a few cities: specifically, Kār-Tukulti-Ninurta, Nineveh, and Assur within Assyria, as well as a selection of Babylonian cities such as Babylon, Sippar, and Borsippa. While these cities certainly housed important temples, they also had political importance to the kings referring to them as *māḫāzu*. See also the “List of Shrines in E-Šarra” (probably meaning the Ešarra in Assur) in George 1992: 185–91.
- 9 See for instance the argument of Nissinen (2001: 175) that “not every urban settlement was glorified as a city of God. Cities that were economic and political centers of states or districts usually housed central temples, enjoying higher religious status than the more peripheral settlements.”

temples in the Neo-Assyrian Empire cannot (and should not) be arranged hierarchically; i.e., in fixed, vertically-ranked relationships. This leaves us with the problem of how best to understand the diversity of status, prestige, and power relationships between temples and within the cultic network of the empire. To this end, the approach of heterarchies is better suited for understanding the myriad interrelationships and modes of ranking between temples and urban centers. Heterarchy is “the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked, or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements,” and so “priorities are reranked relative to conditions and can result in major structural adjustment.”¹⁰ A particularly useful feature of heterarchies is that they offer an alternative to hierarchical thinking, while still accommodating a hierarchy’s existence, and better represent the complexities of power relations and changes.¹¹

As the majority of temples did not occupy the small, topmost echelon, they can be considered in numerous ways, with high variability across time and space. Importantly, the status of a temple could change dramatically depending on factors including: the status of the city in which it was based; the temple’s age, wherein older was generally portrayed as more prestigious; the size of the temple;¹² the importance of the resident god(s), especially the patron god; the larger imperial geography, especially in an expanding empire whose peripheries were ever-evolving; kings’ personal ideologies, particularly regarding the gods they perceived as their primary patrons and the city they chose as their seat of kingship; socio-economics and how resources were moved around the empire, especially as part of royal patronage; and the realities of political and administrative relationships in the changing imperial landscape. The diversity of characteristics means that these temples resist typological categorization and, depending on which of these factors are selected as sorting criteria, the resulting image of the cultic landscape may be quite different.

10 Crumley (2015: 2). See Crumley 1979 for the application of this term, which was developed for neurological sciences, to ancient societies. Since then, Svärd (2012 and 2015) has applied this term to understand royal women and power dynamics in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Heterarchies are not the only possible framework; future studies may also benefit from “gray space,” i.e., the “pseudo-permanent margins” that exist between legality/safety and illegality/death (Yiftachel 2009), which may better relay the persistent precariousness of certain categories of temples. I thank Nimrod Luz for directing me to this latter concept.

11 Crumley 2015: 2.

12 For archaeological data on temples, including information about dimensions and layouts (though information for the Aššur temple after Sennacherib’s reign is scarce), see for instance Miglus 2013: 530–76, Schmitt 2012, Reade 2005, Bär 2003, Haller 1955, Werner 2009, and Heinrich 1982.

2 Heterarchy Case Study: Royal Patronage

As a first step of applying the concept of heterarchies to the Neo-Assyrian religious landscape, this study uses as its barometer royal patronage, which was necessary for the proper functioning of a temple. This did not come automatically, even though supporting and maintaining temples of his domain were some of the most important duties of the Assyrian king. The royal inscriptions boast of extravagant gifts and offerings as well as lavish and expensive renovation projects that the king conducted in exchange for divine favor and the gods' guarantees for a successful reign and a prosperous empire.¹³ The impression from the state texts is that the wealth and labor from around the empire, especially from campaign spoils, tribute, and taxes, were overwhelmingly directed into Ešarra's coffers, particularly as provinces were required to supply it with offerings.¹⁴ Moreover, the Assyrian king himself acted as the *šangû* ("high priest") of Aššur's temple, to which he would travel regularly for rituals and to visit his deceased ancestors, and the fact of his physical presence in the city ensured the temple's regular upkeep.¹⁵ The temple of the patron deity of the political capital at the time, where the king kept his main residence, would have been the second-most prominent temple in this respect; for instance,

- 13 Temple patronage – including (re)building, providing cultic images and accouterments, and (re)establishing offerings – was even commonly part of royal titulary, emphasizing how critical this act was to the performance of kingship. For royal patronage through temple building and renovation, see Novotny 2010 and Schaudig 2010. Requests for divine blessings in exchange for completed building projects are commonplace in the royal inscriptions.
- 14 The Aššur temple was portrayed as the center to which all resources flowed, and Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 19) cites "the establishment of a system of regular deliveries to the Aššur temple providing for the daily offerings to the god Aššur. These deliveries were contributed 'in a fixed rota' by the various provinces of Assyria." For the Assur temple receiving taxes, deportees, and war spoils, see also van Driel 1969: 170–91. The Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions otherwise do not typically qualify where this income goes but the juxtaposition of successful campaigns with temple-building projects in the royal inscriptions implies the destinations for this incoming wealth. See also Holloway 2002: 100–8. For the Middle Assyrian period *ginā'u* payment system, in which provinces were obligated to provide certain goods and supplies, mostly foodstuffs, to the Assyrian core (in particular, to the Aššur temple), see Gauthier 2016. Some individuals were obligated as well, see for instance SAA 12, no. 80, which lists out the wine offerings for the Aššur temple from the high officials by day and month. For details about the Aššur temple and how it functioned, see van Driel 1969 and Menzel 1981.
- 15 Interestingly, the royal inscriptions only rarely (and mostly in quite late sources) mention renovations on the Aššur temple, perhaps because there was an expectation that this temple in particular should never be allowed to fall into disrepair.

that of Ištar in Nineveh under Sargon II's successors.¹⁶ When other temples are mentioned individually, this is largely in the form of building projects, some of which were strategically selected to highlight the king's good works in a certain area, while others may have been driven by the king's personal preferences. Because the rebuilding accounts were described in the royal inscriptions, which had an agenda in portraying the king in a specific and favorable way, they may not have reflected all of the actual projects accurately.¹⁷

In principle, however, the state was responsible for supporting all of its temples equally and the king had direct responsibility for every temple, including installing their cultic personnel.¹⁸ State texts largely reinforce the ideological fiction that the king was uniformly fulfilling his obligations, not only in the royal inscriptions but also in letters to the king that praised his role in the wellbeing of all of his temples.¹⁹ Cultic personnel working in a temple that received active and adequate royal patronage could be sure that their temple would have certain features: financial stability; regular maintenance; adequate staff and cultic resources including ritual equipment, regular offerings, and the gods' accessories; land grants; and even exemptions from taxes or labor obligations.²⁰ But the reality is that resources and royal attention were finite

- 16 Decrees setting the royal offerings and expenditures of festival ceremonies for the Aššur temple can be found, e.g., in SAA 12, nos. 1, 19, 69, and 71. Similar decrees for other temples are lost, except for later copies of decrees for the Šarrat-nip̄a temple from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I (i.e., SAA 12, no. 68). The patron gods of the other political capitals, Kār-Tukulti-Ninurta and Dūr-Šarrukīn, are not explicitly identified but are likely Aššur and Nabū, respectively. Ḥarrān, the home of Sīn of Ḥarrān, may also have been a capital under Aššur-uballit II during the last years of the Assyrian Empire; see Radner 2018.
- 17 The majority of the (re)building projects were focused on the main cities of the Assyrian core – Assur, Nineveh, Calah – and, under certain kings, strategically selected cities in Babylonia. Other cities appear depending on the king, such as Ashurbanipal's especial patronage of Ḥarrān's temples (see Novotny 2003).
- 18 On the installation of priests and the king's role in the process, see Löhnert 2007. For an example, see SAA 1, no. 75, in which Sargon II must decide on the successor to the *ša-muḫhi-biti* position in the Aššur temple.
- 19 For instance, Esarhaddon writes that he “completed the sanctuaries of all of the cult centers, (and) constantly established appropriate procedures in them,” a statement repeated in several inscriptions and with parallels from other Neo-Assyrian kings (RINAP 4 136: 5–7). Letters to Sargon II from his crown prince Sennacherib regularly include addresses such as “all your/the temples are well” (SAA 1, no. 31, for instance). See also SAA 1, no. 133, which praises Sargon II for the workmanship of the temples, while SAA 1, no. 134: 10–11 declares “O king, my lord, may you be the temple of kings!”
- 20 Exemptions and privileges were generally given to the cities in general, including Assur, Nippur, Babylon, Borsippa, and Sippar; see Frame and Grayson 1994. The temple could even receive land holdings from the king, as in the case of a 4000 hectare estate that Sargon II gave to the Nabū temple in his new capital at Dūr-Šarrukīn (SAA 1, no. 106).

commodities, even in the powerful Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the lion's share of imperial patronage consequently went to only a few temples. Of course, these were not the only active temples in Assyria; as mentioned, there were temples scattered all across the empire, essentially wherever there was an urban settlement. These temples were not necessarily peripheral or unimportant to the official pantheon; in fact, many of the temples in this category were dedicated to important deities, usually in their regional forms. That these temples were locally important is without question, but unfortunately the overabundance of temples comes with an underabundance of sources: the majority of temples were not visible in empire-wide royal ideology at all and were not the main recipients of direct royal patronage. This category includes smaller temples, temples that were geographically peripheral, temples in conquered foreign territories, and even some temples in the same city as a "major" temple.

However, by viewing these temples through the lens of royal patronage – perhaps, better, a lack thereof – one begins to see the dynamics of the cultic network at work, including how individual temples positioned themselves within it, especially while attempting to survive state neglect. After all, there is little information about how temples related directly with each other, so one must largely rely on evidence for how individual temples and the state interacted with one another. Nonetheless, even the traditionally "vertical" relationships between patron king and patronized temple were neither homogenous nor static. A heterarchical approach reveals these different relationships and how they could significantly affect a temple's positioning within the imperial landscape, both "vertically" with regard to the state and "horizontally" with other temples. In essence, those temples that did not occupy the limited hierarchy at the top were more sensitive to changing fortunes and thus

Known staff members in Assyrian temples are outlined in Menzel 1981 and van Driel 1969. Sennacherib dedicated staff to the Zababa temple when he reinvigorated the cult (SAA 12, no. 87) and to the *akītu* house he built (SAA 12, no. 86). Similarly, Esarhaddon, upon resettling Akkad, returned the Ištar of Akkad image from Elam in 674 and reestablished her cult there (SAA 10, no. 359). While Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions do not mention the reconstruction of her temple, Eulmaš, Nabonidus left several inscriptions claiming that Esarhaddon was not only a previous builder but that the temple had deteriorated so much by his reign that he could not find the original foundations (Frame 1993); while Frame (*ibid.* 35–36, 44) doubts the veracity of this account, he does suggest that Akkad was largely abandoned after Kurigalzu's reign until Esarhaddon's reconstruction. The king also sometimes provided land for the temples or to individuals who would then use the land to provide for the temples; see van Driel 1969: 186–7, though evidence is limited largely to the Aššur temple. Decrees of exemptions from taxes for certain celebrated individuals show that the taxes could include such products as corn, straw, herds, flocks, and personnel (for *corvée* labor), see for instance SAA 12, no. 26.

were more likely to engage in power-based struggles and negotiations against one another or even against the king.

Without royal support, day-to-day operations were in danger of experiencing disruptions, especially under the added stress of festival periods. Arguably the most important task of the temple was the daily feeding ritual, which relied upon livestock (primarily sheep and calves, but also oxen and sometimes birds), and the number of animals needed increased for festivals and cultic ceremonies.²¹ The king was meant to provide state support to temples in the form of taxes, tithes, conscriptions, and agricultural land, all of which would ensure an adequate supply of livestock, other foodstuffs, and laborers.²² When the local supply chain of provisions for the rituals was discontinued or disrupted for some reason, the daily offerings were put in jeopardy, and often the temple needed the king to intervene and fix the problem. This affected even the most important temples; for instance, Dadî, a priest of Aššur in Assur, wrote several letters to Esarhaddon about lapsed livestock deliveries. One letter complains about shepherds not delivering their required tax of sheep for the *naptanu* cultic meals, obliging Dadî to take an active role: “I myself am buying sheep from the market (lit., *abullu* ‘the city gate’) and fattening them.”²³ While he claims he is purchasing them himself, he was presumably using the capital from the temple’s treasury and not his own personal funds. Several of his other letters ask for royal intervention after years of non-delivery of sheep and oxen from various cities, noting that the shortages were already problematic enough to prompt a number of earlier letters to the king.²⁴ As the main temple of the empire, the Aššur temple needed a great deal of livestock, especially for the large festivals, but received it from numerous sources, hence its

21 See van Driel 1969: 159–62, and Gaspa 2012 for these data. The records are better from the Neo-Babylonian period, in which one can see more clearly the sheep expenditures needed for daily cult versus festival days and how the Eanna temple managed its livestock (Kozuh 2014, Robbins 1996). Smaller temples may have instituted lighter demands than Ešarra but the offering requirements may still have been a challenge for the temple’s shepherds to meet without purchasing or being provided with additional livestock.

22 According to van Driel 1969: 189, the extant materials “give the impression that unless a temple received directly the ground that had to support it, the royal administration kept an important share in the arrangements for its provisioning. The influence of the state, or the king, in these matters also becomes clear from some royal inscriptions where regular offerings are said to be instituted.” See for instance, SAA 12, nos. 19, 24, 48, 68, 69, 71.

23 SAA 13, no. 19.

24 SAA 13, no. 18, SAA 13, no. 21. See also Groß 2015: 33 n. 38. A similar text is SAA 13, no. 166, a memorandum listing several problems with temples in Babylonia, including the need for materials for renovation projects and the deficits or non-delivery of wine and sheep.

continued functioning after years of non-delivery by some cities.²⁵ Moreover, it is clear that this temple had enough financial stability and liquid capital to purchase its own livestock when necessary, but smaller temples may not have been able to weather a disruption of this nature as easily, especially if the king's intervention was slow or nonexistent. Foodstuffs were not the only items necessary for the temple operations, and texts also relate shortages in clothing and textiles (many of which were for clothing the divine images) or staff.²⁶

The stakes were high, as a lack of resources and persistent issues with daily operations increased the risk of shutting down entirely.²⁷ Many shrines and temples are attested only for brief time periods and, while the reasons for their disappearance are not usually known, some of these cult spaces would have faded into obscurity due to royal inattention.²⁸ For instance, the temples in Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, established when Tukultī-Ninurta I transformed the city into his seat of kingship, were closed down at some point after the city was no longer the political capital, with evidence that the temple doors were blocked with stone slabs and the resident gods were relocated to Assur.²⁹ Similarly, by the reign of Arik-dīn-ili, the Šamaš temple in Assur had been abandoned for long enough to become *tubkī u karmī*, “heaps (of dirt) and ruins,” and was being used as a makeshift residence for squatters.³⁰ A letter to Esarhaddon suggests that Ištar of Akkad's Eulmaš temple had become defunct, possibly liquidated

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- 25 According to Gaspa (2012: 250), “the management of large amounts of meat, especially ovine and bovine meat, for religious ceremonies celebrated in the Temple of Aššur in Assur ... was one of the main tasks of the central administration of the Assyrian State in its dealings with cultic affairs.” See SAA 13, nos. 18 and 22 about whether the meat should be pickled or sent to the *šakintu* of Assur; see also Groß 2015: 35. Lists of offerings for the temple can be found in SAA 7. SAA 10, no. 96 deals with officials who did not give their sheep offerings to Aššur.
- 26 SAA 10, no. 289 mentions a shortage of garments intended as wages for the priests and exorcists. The king was also responsible for providing precious materials, such as gold and jewelry for the cult image, which temples would not be able to acquire for themselves. See further cases below.
- 27 See Ambos (2007: 190–1) for examples in which the temple's treasures were depleted because the king needed to finance military action.
- 28 Known temples are collected in George 1993. Several kings describe “re-founding” temples as well as demolishing and rebuilding deteriorated shrines, suggesting that the temples had fallen into disrepair or out of use; see Novotny 2010.
- 29 Schaudig 2010b: 156, Hagens 2005: 37–39 and Eickhoff 1985: 34–5, 45, 51. When the temples closed is unknown and Millard (1994: 79, 95) lists eponyms for Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta in 804 and 748 BCE.
- 30 Novotny (2010: 115), RIMA 1 A.O.75.1: 14–48.

when the cult image and many of the temple's possessions were taken to Elam, subsequently affecting the temple's land holdings and personnel.³¹

Considering these challenges, how did cultic personnel in minor or peripheral temples survive on the margins of the imperial cultic network? Unfortunately, there is limited textual evidence and what information is available comes primarily from letters to and from the king, which are restricted in scope and chronology to the late Neo-Assyrian period.³² Nonetheless, these texts contain enough details to observe several strategies that minor and peripheral temples employed to stay functioning or to attempt to change their fortunes. Essentially, these temples faced two basic outcomes – 1. surviving largely independently with minimal royal involvement or 2. attracting direct royal patronage. For those temples without direct royal patronage, their options were either to simply make do with fewer resources or to cooperate with other temples and officials. The alternative was to attract enough royal patronage to shift the temple to a more prominent status, a change that hinged on the importance of the resident deity or city in imperial ideology. This transformation was rare but did occur and could happen both passively (e.g., the king taking interest in the local god or city) or actively, through the efforts of the cultic personnel. What follows are a few illustrative examples for each category and, while not an exhaustive treatment, demonstrates how temples navigated or changed their relative statuses through the lens of royal patronage (or neglect), both to demonstrate the ramifications for the temple's status and ability to function with respect to other temples and to reveal one layer of the heterarchical relationships between temples in the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

3 Independence and Adaptation

Temples that made do without the king's attentions are the least visible in the textual record but also likely comprised the largest category.³³ These temples

31 SAA 10, no. 359, though it is not clear when the statue had been taken. An inventory list of objects moved from the temple to Elam may have been composed in conjunction with this reestablishment project (see SAA 7, no. 60 and SAA 7: xxiv) but may also be linked instead to Ashurbanipal's repatriation of Babylonian temple objects after his victory over Elam. See Frame 1993: 44–50 for other sources about this episode.

32 The relevant material is largely published in the State Archives of Assyria series.

33 According to van Driel (1969: 185–6), because we lack the economic and administrative records of temples, there is little evidence for temple staff, property holdings, possessions, and financing, and he writes that “no case seems to be known in which we are informed about the way in which the rebuilding was financed, whether the costs were borne by the state, i.e. the king, whether the temple as an institution had to contribute a share, or

simply conducted their daily business as usual, not needing to involve the king in their affairs.³⁴ Cultic personnel of smaller temples had, in principle, the same rights and responsibilities as their colleagues in major temples, and the main duties of any temple were largely standardized: personnel had to conduct daily rituals for the resident gods (including feeding, clothing, and bathing the god) and celebrate festivals.³⁵ To accomplish these tasks, temples were staffed with cultic personnel that included different types of clergy, specialists, craftspeople, and professionals including bakers, cooks, and weavers.³⁶ These personnel would have been under the aegis of the *šangû*, who was the temple administrator and highest-ranking priest.³⁷ One document recorded that Iddin-Ea, a *šangû* of Ninurta in Calah, purchased a weaver of multicolored

whether the population of the place where the temple stood had to bear extra burdens" (van Driel 1969: 185–6).

- 34 It is possible that some temples in this category may have even preferred a lack of oversight, which would have allowed them to make decisions related to logistics, staffing, and cultic activities without needing to wait for royal approval, but this is speculative. Moreover, besides some administrative freedom, there are few obvious incentives for a temple to actively seek this level of independence, as it would have placed the full burden of supporting the temple on its local community. As mentioned above and discussed further below, local communities certainly supported their temple but were unlikely to have been able to provide the amount of funds and livestock necessary for long-term and consistent sustainability.
- 35 Waerzeggers (2011: 61–2) has remarked on this phenomenon for the Neo-Babylonian period, writing that, while modern scholars tend to focus on public festivals, “in the Babylonian mindset the daily sacrificial cult was the most essential manner of worship” and it was carefully performed and perfected, with plentiful offerings indicating a successful reign while interrupted rites or abandoned altars were indicators of a failed or antagonistic king. This was not only expressed in royal inscriptions, but also in administrative records, as she (*ibid.*) comments that: “constancy and regularity of worship were not just the concern of kingship. Archival texts show that great care was taken to safeguard the continuity of the sacrificial cult in practice. Human, technical, or accidental errors occasionally prevented the achievement of perfection, and in such cases, records were made of missing or imperfect food portions and of the priests responsible.” For Babylonian evidence for administrative failures that caused an interruption in the ritual feeding of the gods, see Levavi 2018: 196–202 and Kozuh 2013.
- 36 See Menzel 1981 and van Driel 1969 for the staff of the Aššur temple. Löhnert (2007: 274–5) has discussed the category of “priest” in the Neo-Assyrian period. Data for staff composition are more robust in the Neo-Babylonian period, when essentially only the primary god in a temple complex had a full, dedicated priesthood, while the others had a smaller set of staff members or no dedicated staff at all (Waerzeggers 2010: 41–2).
- 37 According to Löhnert (2007: 275), “the *šangû*-office in the Neo-Assyrian period formed the essential office of a temple. A small temple consisted of at least one *šangû* who combined the administrative and cultic management. Within a large temple household, the *šangû* of a deity or a temple held the highest position. Together with other priestly offices, several *šangûs* were assigned under his authority to different functions in order

cloth trim (*ušpār birmi*) specifically to work in the temple. The weaver was bought from the “weaver of the queen” (i.e., a weaver from the queen’s household in Nineveh) during the eponym of Zababa-eriba (likely 637 BCE, certainly during the reign of Ashurbanipal) for the relatively low price of ½ mina of silver, presumably paid from the temple treasury.³⁸ Thus, the temple was able to acquire its own staff with its own money, which may have happened routinely but the records were lost or destroyed. This purchase survived ostensibly because it was related to the palace, the text finding its way into the royal archives in Nineveh, where it was found. Nonetheless, however independently they operated, the temples were still subject to royal oversight and the king was meant to ensure that there were enough supplies and resources for daily operation as well as funds for the regular maintenance of ritual equipment and of the temple itself. For instance, one temple decree shows how the king relocated a *šangû* from the temple of Adad in Assur to the temple of Zababa and Baba in Sultantepe and assigned craftsmen to him in order to counteract a lack of appropriate personnel in the latter area.³⁹

However, some letters reveal royal neglect and absence, particularly in terms of shortages in staff and resources for renovations. For example, a letter from Arbela complains that Ištar of Arbela processed out of the temple for a ritual or festival but that the men carrying the goddess’s cult image were *saklûte* (“boors” or “simpletons”), and not from elite, established families, who often made up the priesthoods in the more prestigious temples.⁴⁰ The earlier staff had moved to Calah, leaving less qualified men in charge of the important task of handling the cult image. A letter from Akkullanu, an astronomer and priest, informs the king that the priest of the Uraš temple has not been shaved (i.e., consecrated); the king’s approval was needed first.⁴¹ Because Akkullanu was involved with the Aššur temple, the Uraš temple mentioned here may be

to manage the daily provision of the deities according to the complex administrative and cultic divisional sections.”

38 SAA 12, no. 94, Gaspa 2018: 83–5, 141, including the argument that the price indicates that the weaver, Šumma-Nabû, was a young man rather than an established expert. Indeed, he was probably an apprentice (he is called the *urdu* of the weavers selling him) and therefore less expensive than someone with more experience. Textiles were important for clothing the gods, among other uses; see Gaspa 2018 and Neumann 2017.

39 SAA 12, no. 48 (undated); see discussion in Löhnert 2007: 276–7.

40 SAA 13, no. 152. The former staff came from *qinnâte ša Ninua labîrûte* “the old families of Nineveh.”

41 SAA 10, no. 97. This letter also mentions another staff member (a stone-borer who was also put in charge of the cult images) who had died and whose son needs to be confirmed. Akkullanu writes that there needs to be some haste on the part of the king in resolving this issue because it is a festival period.

the one known in Assur, though this minor god also had shrines elsewhere.⁴² In a similar letter, Akkullanu writes that several other cultic officials in the Assur temple need to be installed by the king. The letter reveals that considerable time could pass without royal intervention, as the chief baker's son was waiting for eight years to be consecrated: "concerning the chief baker, Sennacherib ap[ointed] him to supervise their 'bread.' Indeed, he was shaved and received his headgear in his reign. It is now the eighth year since he died, and his son is at present 'standing with his hair' (expecting to be shaved)."⁴³ There is no reason to believe, however, that the son did not take on his father's duties in the meantime on the technicality of not being officially installed by the king, as the temple would have needed his labor for the regular cult. In principle, only the king could install a priest into his office, but some personnel presumably went ahead with their duties even when the king had not formally approved them, something that must have happened often in the minor temples.⁴⁴ The king could also cause the shortage himself, as in a letter from the scholar Rāši-ilu in Babylon that gently reminds the king that they are meant to perform the clothing ceremony of Bēl on a certain day. Unfortunately, Rāši-ilu writes, the king has called away the *ērib bīti* "temple enterers/clergymen" who Rāši-ilu needs to assist him with the ceremony, and there is no available staff for the ritual otherwise.⁴⁵

The local temple and city community may have rallied together to help a struggling temple remain functioning independently as long as possible. For instance, a letter from Ina-šar-Bēl-allak, the treasurer in Dūr-Šarrukīn, mentions that the king set up regular sheep offerings for the Nabû temple there but that it is actually the *kišru* ("cohort") in the city that organize them, not the

42 George 1993: nos. 172, 493, 1431, 1432. Akkullanu also followed up on a query the king had about priests in Calah, but it is not clear what the matter was or if he traveled to Calah for these answers (SAA 10, no. 99).

43 SAA 10, no. 96: r. 18–26. This case is also discussed in Löhnert 2007: 281–2. There is evidence that some priestly offices needed approval through divine consent via extispicy (Löhnert 2007: 280), which would have added significant delays to the appointment of a priest in some cases. As an example, see SAA 4, no. 150.

44 As pointed out by Löhnert (2007: 278–80), candidates for a priestly office in particular needed to have the appropriate education, lineage, and even physiognomy, which considerably narrowed the pool of potential priests. It may be that the minor and peripheral temples did not always have the luxury of choice and had more flexible prerequisites out of necessity. Royal neglect could cause similar irregularities in priestly appointments in major temples as well; in an example from 8th century Babylonia, the governor of Borsippa appointed priests himself (along with taking on other royal prerogatives) since the king at the time, Nabû-šuma-iškun, was a relatively weak ruler (Waerzeggers 2010: 41).

45 SAA 13, no. 176. SAA 13, no. 177 mentions the original order.

king.⁴⁶ In Cutha in northern Babylonia, an *alahḫinu* (“temple steward” or “grain official”) took the initiative to repair the temple of the city’s patron, Nergal, himself, leaving behind a rare private royal-type inscription.⁴⁷ The Cutha temple is seldom mentioned and none of the Neo-Assyrian kings before Ashurbanipal mention rebuilding the temple there.⁴⁸ The inscription is Neo-Assyrian but undated (so ostensibly before Ashurbanipal’s renovations), and the *alahḫinu*, Sebettū-rēmāni, was well established in this temple (his father had held the same position), so he may be an example of a cultic personnel member who was financially stable enough to provide necessary repairs for the temple during a time when it was completely forgotten by the state apparatus. Because most of the extant material primarily has to do with the state and communication with the king, the involvement of the local community in directly supporting its temples is absent, but one could presume that the wealthier citizens may have contributed to repairs, as Sebettū-rēmāni did, and that locals of all socio-economic strata would provide livestock, foodstuffs, silver, or labor, either as tax or free-will offerings and gifts.⁴⁹ There are a few records of private donations of people (usually family members), fields, and estates to individual temples that would support this hypothesis.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, this would likely not work as a long-term solution for many temples, especially considering the cost of festival days and major structural renovations or repairs to the cult image or accouterments, which often required gold and precious stones.⁵¹

The best example of how a temple’s personnel may have dealt with a staff and resource shortage is the case of Pūlu, the *kalū* (“lamentation priest”) of the Nabû temple in Calah under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.⁵² The Nabû temple, while important, had always been secondary to the temple of Ninurta,

46 SAA 1, no. 129.

47 See edition in Radner 2005: 139–40.

48 For Ashurbanipal’s rebuilding project, see RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 12: i 13’–25’, 21: 10’, 22: i 14’–17’, 23: 61–63.

49 Neo-Babylonian temple archives record *erbu* “income” not only from the king but from high officials and other people, as well as tithe-farming and taxes; see Jursa 2010: 255, 485–90.

50 These cases concern the Nabû and Ninurta temples in Calah: SAA 12, nos. 92–93, 95–98.

51 According to van Driel (1969: 186), “There is no reason to suppose that an Assyrian temple could not buy the ground it needed for the support of its staff. The buying of slaves by temples seems attested. But the usual way to provide for the needs of the temple seems to have been through gifts by the king and by private persons, seemingly at his instigations.” Moreover, while it is unknown how many animals the Neo-Assyrian temples needed for daily and festival sacrifices, later data from the Eanna temple in Babylonia show that the numbers of sacrificial animals needed could be rather high (see e.g. Kozuh 2014, Robbins 1996).

52 This case is also discussed in Zaia 2019.

the city's patron, and Calah had moreover lost its status as imperial capital, which was now based in Nineveh, generations earlier. Pūlu's letters to the king, which simply report the results of divination via sheep offerings, give no indications of issues in the temple.⁵³ Luckily, another letter provides a perspective behind the scenes.⁵⁴ The letter itself is not complimentary of Pūlu; its author, whose name is missing, wrote to the king in order to complain that he has been denied his rightful temple office of supervising the eunuchs and beer rations, a position he expected to inherit after his father's passing.⁵⁵ The author appears to blame Pūlu personally for his denied patrimony and he takes the opportunity to launch a smear campaign against the *kalû*, providing an extensive list of Pūlu's apparent crimes against the established procedures of the temple.⁵⁶ While most of the writer's complaints are phrased to seem theological in nature, they also indicate Pūlu's breach of the acceptable temple hierarchy, which would put the king and the *šangû*, respectively, at the top. Despite their important roles in the cult, the *kalû* were not very high-ranking among the temple staff, though they were authorized to enter restricted spaces and thus had superiority over staff who were not.⁵⁷ A close reading of the complaints, however, reveals a temple in crisis and Pūlu's attempts to maintain functionality, which comprised taking on the duties of several absent staff members, stretching diminished resources, and making much-needed renovations that he has been forced to undertake due to royal neglect.

A priest who did not belong to the highest temple ranks becoming the acting authority in the temple is already a cause for concern regarding the state of the temple, but there are several indications of a staffing shortage that would explain it. First and foremost, there is apparently no *šangû*; the temple is functioning under the aegis of a *šanû* ("deputy," lit., "second one"). As a result, Pūlu took executive decision-making powers and appointed new officials himself, normally a prerogative reserved for the king.⁵⁸ The letter betrays the fact that Pūlu has had to perform rituals outside of his *kalû* duties, especially a lighting ceremony for Nabû's consort Tašmētu (a ritual that had been performed earlier by a woman, though it is unclear if it must always be a woman)⁵⁹ and the

53 SAA 13, nos. 131, 132, and 133.

54 The following line references for the letter's contents are from SAA 13, no. 134.

55 On inheritance and prestige of the priesthood, see Löhnert 2007.

56 Lines r. 25-e. 4.

57 Waerzeggers 2010: 46–7. See Gabbay (2014: 116–9, 121) for the Babylonian origins of the *kalû* priesthood and the *kalû*'s resulting outsider status in Assyria.

58 Lines 5', 16'–17'.

59 Lines r. 4–8. Comparative data from the Neo-Babylonian period suggests that women were permitted into the temple cult on a very limited basis, and often for female deities (Waerzeggers 2010: 50).

rituals in the bath house of Bēl and Nabû, as well as having to hire external laborers (*agrûtu*) to assist in restricted cult spaces.⁶⁰ Moreover, the temple treasury, which contained the precious jewels and cultic jewelry, were typically secured with the king's seal and could only be accessed by a *šangû* or someone deputized by the king, but now this has fallen under Pūlu's aegis as well.⁶¹ The problem clearly extends beyond the absence of the *šangû*, as many members of staff must be missing in order to prompt the *kalû* to take on so many responsibilities and to outsource some of the labor to hired workers. Similarly, the letter shows that the temple's resources were becoming strained as well: in particular, the temple received wine from the palace (i.e., the state), which was traditionally measured out for sacrifices to the gods in golden bottles of a certain capacity that had been issued by an earlier king. Pūlu, on the other hand, implemented his own measuring system, suggesting an effort to ration out the wine provisions more strictly so that the offerings could continue even as the wine stores were running out.⁶²

There are also signs that the temple itself suffered damage or routine decay and that Pūlu took steps to make necessary renovations. The *kalû* removed and replaced old wooden structures, did some restoration work in the *akîtu* houses of Nabû and Tašmētu, and tasked a goldsmith with refurbishing a golden table of Marduk that had been donated to the temple by Sargon II.⁶³ Even assuming the smallest window of time (i.e., from the very end of Sargon II's reign to the earliest possible date for this letter, the beginning of Esarhaddon's reign), Marduk's table would be at least 25 years old, though it was likely much older, and probably in need of some repairs. At the time of this letter, it seems that Pūlu also had similar plans to refurbish the socle and dragons that Nabû's cult image stood upon, as he made a sketch of them.⁶⁴

Though Pūlu's efforts are laudatory, the upkeep and provisioning of the temple were the responsibility of the king, and needed the king's orders or at least his consent. Some letters attest to local staff requesting that the king intervene in similar matters, but for some reason Pūlu and the other priests opted not to write to the king.⁶⁵ As a result, Pūlu was an easy target for the

60 Lines 1–2, r. 8–9.

61 Line r. 3. For instance, see SAA 13, no. 127 and SAA 13, no. 174, in which the king must send a person authorized with a sealed order to open the treasuries.

62 Lines 18'–23'.

63 Lines 6'–11'.

64 Lines 12'–14'.

65 For instance, SAA 1, no. 264, in which someone reports about construction on the *akîtu* temple in Išāna but complains that there is no storehouse or grain stores, and SAA 1, no. 143, which reports a lack of labor and resources. SAA 1, no. 114, from the governor of Calah to Sargon II, asks the king to order the governor of Dūr-Šarrukīn to provide Calah with straw for brickmaking purposes.

irate letter writer, who warns that his report “will not please the king” as Pūlu’s actions were undertaken “without the king’s permission.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the letter also implicates the other cultic officials, who were clearly aware of Pūlu’s actions and yet did not intervene. Despite the letter writer’s efforts to make it sound as though Pūlu started a reign of terror in the temple, it would seem that the other cultic officials who were still there acted as collaborators, opting for the practical solution as the necessary resources and staff were apparently not forthcoming from the crown. This is corroborated by other sources: for one, neither Sargon II nor Sennacherib report renovations on the Calah temples in their royal inscriptions, preferring to focus their efforts on their respective capital cities. Letters to Sargon II and Esarhaddon reveal issues with the state of the temple as well. One letter in particular, contemporaneous to Pūlu’s tenure, reports that the Nabû temple was beset by fungus in the courtyard and the storage room.⁶⁷ As the temple’s most important function was the uninterrupted daily cult, it appears that the staff (minus the one disinherited detractor), facing a dire reality of labor and resource shortages, came to an agreement that it would be more expeditious to quietly adapt to their circumstances until such time as royal patronage resumed. Indeed, it is only Ashurbanipal who next claims to undertake major renovations of the Nabû temple in Calah, so Pūlu seems to have served as *kalû* at a time in which the temple was suffering from extended royal inattention.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, he appears to have successfully maintained both the local cultic operations as well as the ideological fiction of the king’s ability to have oversight over all of his empire’s temples; had the disgruntled letter writer not had a personal grudge to report, it is likely that none would have been the wiser.

4 Interdependence and Cooperation

Some minor temples coped with shortages through cooperation with other temples and officials who could provide assistance or indirect access to royal

66 Lines 4’ and 7’.

67 See SAA 1, no. 114 (mentioned above); see also SAA 1, no. 26, in which Calah had to provide a large amount of straw and reeds for the construction project in Dūr-Šarrukīn, likely hindering the city’s abilities to conduct its own renovation projects. The fungus is reported in SAA 13, no. 71.

68 RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 7: x 53’–64’, dated to 646 BCE and naming Adad-nērārī III (r. 811–783 BCE) as the last previous builder. See Novotny 2010: 111 on dilapidation as the reason to rebuild a temple.

resources. For instance, one letter shows that the weavers of the Ištār of Arbela temple supplied the textiles for the temple of Adad of Kurba'il.⁶⁹ Another letter provides more information about this exchange, specifically that the Ištār of Arbela temple needed red wool from the palace so that they could send their weavers to Kurba'il to make these garments, some of which would be used in Adad's cult there.⁷⁰ There are a few letters between cultic personnel as well. One letter, for example, was sent from the *alahhinu* of one temple to another; neither temple is specified, but one was presumably from Ešarra.⁷¹ The letter writer informs us that he was sending a group of *ḥundurāyus* (who may have been artisan craftsmen involved in carpet-making or textile traders) so that they could complete the work (*dullu*) that the king ordered at the recipient's temple. In exchange, the other *alahhinus* would need to provide the workers with *massuku* textiles (possibly a type of canvas), which were necessary for the work.⁷² It seems safe to assume that the recipient temple did not have the essential resources available locally, hence the other temple (which, if it were indeed the Aššur temple, was more powerful) providing assistance.

When the temples in Dēr, a city of the god Ištāran (Anu-rabû) in Babylonia, needed renovation work, the cultic personnel in the city coordinated with officials in other cities. In one case, a priest from Dēr communicated with the Assyrian governor in Arrapha, who then acted as a liaison between Dēr and Sargon II to resolve an issue about inscriptions for the temple wall.⁷³ Another letter, sent by Mār-Issār, Esarhaddon's agent in Babylonia, shows that the local officials in Dēr were unable to effectively rebuild the temples themselves and the crown prince of Elam had sent corvée workers to help them; Mār-Issār, loyal to the Assyrians, requested that the king send an Assyrian foreman and bodyguard to supervise the local building efforts and protect the border city from Elamite influence.⁷⁴ Several temples could also fall under the aegis of the same cultic administrators; for instance, a *šangû* named Qurdi-Nergal served in this capacity for temples in Arbela, Sultantepe, and Ḥarrān, though he seems

69 SAA 13, no. 186.

70 SAA 16, no. 84.

71 SAA 13, no. 41.

72 Both the *massuku* and the *ḥundurāyu* are disputed terms, however; see Gaspa 2018: 74, 326.

73 SAA 15, no. 4.

74 SAA 10, no. 349: l. 11–r.e. 29.

to have been based in Sultantepe.⁷⁵ A *qīpu* (“royal representative”) is attested as serving both the Nabû and Ninurta temples in Calah.⁷⁶

Minor temples in the same city as major temples and even those in Assur could find themselves without direct royal attention, underscoring that the status of the city in the imperial hierarchy was not the only factor in a temple's standing. Neglect was so extreme in the case of the Amurru temple in Assur that the entire building collapsed, but the divine residents of the Amurru temple were simply moved into the nearby, larger Anu temple complex during construction.⁷⁷ The Amurru temple's staff would also have been integrated into the Anu temple temporarily so that the gods' daily care and rituals would not have been abandoned. The same situation seems to have occurred with the Nabû temple in Assur, which was apparently deserted at some point (after the reign of Šamši-Adad v, the inscription claims) until it became *qaqqariš* (“like the ground”), forcing Nabû and Tašmētu and their staff to move into the local temple of Ištar until Sîn-šarru-iškun magnanimously rebuilt the temple.⁷⁸ The king – either Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal in the case with Amurru and Sîn-šarru-iškun in the case with Nabû – had to approve the movement of any relocated gods back to their proper places, as was also true for a number of Babylonian gods left in an unnamed temple in the Land of the Chief Cupbearer on the northwestern edge of the empire. In this situation, however, these gods were originally deported from their respective homes by Sennacherib and then brought to this temple by Esarhaddon, who had intended to return them to Babylonia with Marduk, whereupon they were apparently forgotten. Meanwhile, these gods were maintained by the personnel of the local temple in which they were staying until the letter writer, the official Šamaš-šuma-lešir, was sent to the area by Ashurbanipal, where he

75 Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 452) writes “whether the cache of 400 tablets found in Sultantepe was intended to be kept safe from invaders around 610 BCE is not clear, but their scribes are all known to have been members of a family of *šangûs* in the service of the gods Zababa and Bau [i.e., Baba] of Arbail, including Qurdi-Nergal and his sons Mušallim-Bau and Nabû-zēr-kitti-lēšir.” Holloway (2002: 328 n. 59) writes that “unless he [Qurdi-Nergal] was hardened to a prodigious commute, the daily duties of one or more of these positions had to have been executed by a local priest.” See also the decree SAA 12, no. 48, above.

76 SAA 12, no. 96: r. 14.

77 SAA 10, no. 21.

78 It should be noted, however, that these renovation claims come only from Sîn-šarru-iškun's own inscriptions (see his inscription 7 in RINAP 5, for instance) and a temple or shrine of Nabû in Assur is not otherwise attested in the Assyrian royal inscriptions (for its appearance in topographical texts, see George 1993 nos. 397, 1069, 1194), so it is not clear how much of this history, if any, is true.

discovered the overlooked deities and informed the king.⁷⁹ For minor temples, it was not unusual that royal delegates, who often had oversight of multiple small temples, were dispatched to oversee them instead of the king providing his own personal supervision.

5 Attracting Royal Patronage (Passively)

The most effective way to guarantee a temple's well-being was if the temple could attract the king's attentions and reap the benefits of direct royal patronage. Ideally, the temple would become important enough that it would move entirely out of the margins and into the central ideology of the empire. The success stories are limited but suggest that at least one of two things took place: either the city became important to the king, or the resident deity did. Sometimes these happened in tandem; since city and city god were intrinsically bound, if a city's god rose in prominence in royal ideology, the city too benefited from royal favor, and vice versa.

For some cities, this happened through no or minimal direct agency of the city's inhabitants. This is true of the political capitals Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, Dūr-Šarrukīn, Calah, and Nineveh, whose temples and resident gods enjoyed direct royal patronage because of the city's elevated status, though these benefits declined when the capital (and, concurrently, the king's attentions) moved to a new city.⁸⁰ Since not every city could become a political capital, many cities became prominent because their resident deity became important in imperial ideology for other reasons. This was certainly the case with temples in Babylonia under the Assyrian kings, who invested in renovation projects as they sought to maintain or strengthen their hold over the southern territory, since endorsement from these gods, particularly Marduk, was critical to the successful performance of Babylonian kingship.⁸¹

Within Assyria proper, one can observe this phenomenon with Arbela (modern-day Erbil, Iraq), a city on the northeastern edge of the Assyrian core. Arbela was long recognized as a cult center, but it and its patron goddess

79 SAA 13, no. 190. The gods were Mārat-Sîn of Eridu, Mārat-Sîn of Nemed-Lagudu, Mārat-Eridu, Nergal, Amurru, and Lugalbanda.

80 Harrān and its patron god Sîn of Harrān may also have benefited from the increasing importance of the city during the late Neo-Assyrian period, but extant evidence for Sîn of Harrān is not plentiful enough to be conclusive. See discussion in Nissinen 2001: 203–6 and Novotny 2003.

81 Waerzeggers 2015.

were almost absent in the Assyrian state records until the first millennium.⁸² The city also had consistent strategic value as an Assyrian stronghold on the northeastern periphery, where it was well situated for access into the Zagros Mountain routes, though it suffered in prominence and resources when the capital moved to Calah and when the kings' attentions turned increasingly towards western conquests.⁸³ Ironically, however, it is only when the Assyrian Empire expanded basically as westward as it would get that Arbela in the east was suddenly visible in imperial texts, resulting from the increased importance of Ištar of Arbela in royal ideology. This local form of Ištar was a principal supporter of the Sargonid kings, especially Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, and she was central to prophecy at this time, as the words of this goddess and her prophetesses and prophets informed the kings' political decision making.⁸⁴ During the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Ištar of Arbela became one of the best-attested deities in state texts, often paired with her counterpart from the Assyrian imperial capital at the time, Ištar of Nineveh. Both kings credit the goddess as one of their main patrons and had a close connection with her, particularly as she was a martial goddess and was said to go on campaign with the army and vanquish foes herself.⁸⁵ With this prominence in royal ideology, Ištar of Arbela's temple, the Egašankalama, enjoyed tangible benefits from direct royal patronage. Not long before, during Sargon II's reign, the temple was in a state of relative disrepair, as a letter reports that the entire wall behind the cult image collapsed and needed to be completely rebuilt, and Sargon II made only minor decorative additions to the temple.⁸⁶ But under Esarhaddon

82 See Nissinen forthcoming and MacGinnis 2014.

83 Radner 2011: 324–6.

84 Nissinen 2003 and 2001.

85 See RINAP 4 1: i 5–7 “Esarhaddon, great king ... whom from his childhood Aššur, Šamaš, Bēl, and Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, (and) Ištar of Arbela named for the kingship of Assyria” and RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 11: i 41–44 “After Aššur, Sin, Šamaš, Adad, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, Šarrat-Kidmuri, Ištar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, (and) Nuska gladly made me sit on the throne of the father who had engendered me (Ashurbanipal).” See also direct addresses from the goddess: “[No]w rejoice, Esarhaddon! [I have be]nt [the four door-jamb]s of Assyria and given them to you; I have vanquished yo[ur enemy. The mood of the people] who stand with you has been turned upside down. [From thi]s you shall see [that] I am [Ištar of] Arbela” (SAA 9, no. 3: iv 14–21) and “During the night, Ištar who resides in the city Arbela showed a dream to my troops and said the following to them, saying: ‘I myself will go before Ashurbanipal, the king that my (own two) hands created.’ My troops trusted this dream (and) they safely crossed the Idide River” (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 11: v 97–103).

86 SAA 1, no. 138. The palace wall, city wall, and granary also collapsed around this time, suggesting systemic problems in the city (SAA 1, no. 137).

and Ashurbanipal, Ištar of Arbela's temple was lavishly refurbished, the kings sparing no expense in its rebuilding, decoration with several precious metals, and protection with apotropaic figures, locks, and walls. Esarhaddon incorporates his extravagant works in both his building narratives and his titulary,⁸⁷ and Ashurbanipal's inscriptions suggest not only a similarly extensive investment in the temple but also a directive straight from the goddess to maintain her cult.⁸⁸

These kings also participated in the public rituals in the city, including the *akītu* festival. Ashurbanipal, in particular, wrote about residing in the city and celebrating the festivals for the goddess in person during at least two months of the year, Abu (v) and Addaru (xii).⁸⁹ The ritual practices in the temple and the city's status as a major religious center were celebrated in cultic and hymnic texts such as "The Rites of Egašankalama" and the "Hymn to Arbela," which equated Arbela's temple cult with those of the traditional cult centers at Nippur, Babylon, and Assur.⁹⁰ By Esarhaddon's reign, Arbela was depicted with Nineveh, Calah, and Aššur as the four "doorjambes" of the Assyrian heartland.⁹¹ This was all achieved with no indication that the cultic personnel of the Egašankalama had an active role in attracting royal attention, but demonstrates the power of royal patronage to substantially change a temple's fortunes and increase its prominence in imperial ideology despite geography or tradition.

87 For example: "[(As for) Egašankalama, the temple of Ištar], which is in Arbela, I overlaid (it) with silver (and) gold and made (it) shine like daylight ... After Ištar, my lady, made my kingship greater than that of the kings, my ancestors, [... I] expanded its features." (RINAP 4 54: r. 16–20) and "(the king) who plated Egašankalama, the temple of Ištar of Arbela, his lady, with silver and made (it) shine like daylight" (RINAP 4 77: 8–9, 78: 8, 79: 8, 93: 4).

88 "I made the house of Ištar, my lady, bright as day with silver, gold, and copper" (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 185: 4) and "O Divine Lady of [the city Arbela!] I, Ashurbanipal, ki[ng of Assyria], the creation of your hands whom Aš[šur] – the father [who had engendered you] – requires, whose [na]me [he has called] to restore san[ctuaries], to successfully complete their rituals, [to protect] their [secret(s)], (and) to please [their] hearts: I am assiduous towards your places (of worship). I have come to revere [your] divinit[y] and successfully complete your rituals" (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 7: v 98–106).

89 RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 14: i' 11'–16' (the *akītu* festival in Addāru) and RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 3: v 16–24 and 7: v 83–86 (the festival when the Bow Star rises in Abu).

90 SAA 3, no. 38, SAA 3, no. 8. SAA 3, no. 9 lists Arbela with numerous cities in Babylonia and Assyria in a praise poem to Uruk. See also discussion in Nissinen 2001: 177–8.

91 Nissinen 2001: 187–8.

6 Attracting Royal Patronage (Actively)

Passive promotion did not occur often and minor temples seeking direct patronage could not necessarily afford to wait until a king took an interest in their resident deity. Some temples tried to fabricate this phenomenon by actively elevating their resident gods in order to attract the king's attentions. To do so, cultic personnel could utilize the tactic of "strategic antiquarianism," an appeal to a glorious past when the god of that particular temple was central to imperial ideology. A telling example is that of Nippur and the Ekur temple: long before the Neo-Assyrian period, Nippur was the main religious center of Babylonia, as its resident god, Enlil, was one of the highest-ranking deities before Babylon rose to prominence and Marduk became the head of the regional pantheon.⁹² By the first millennium, Nippur had become something of a backwater but retained a traditional importance, especially for the Assyrian kings, who had a long history of Enlil veneration, calling themselves the *šakin Enlil* ("governor of Enlil") well after the cult of the god had declined in importance.⁹³ Politically, Nippur shifted alliance several times under the Neo-Assyrian kings, but there is evidence of active cooperation between the cultic personnel of Enlil's temple, Ekur, and the Assyrian government.⁹⁴ For instance, the clergy and officials in Nippur wrote to Ashurbanipal beseeching him to keep the Assyrian troops currently stationed in the city in place to protect Nippur from its enemies.⁹⁵ However, the cult of Enlil seems not to have been considered a royal priority for quite some time, as kings did not claim to renovate his temple and the last king to even make sacrifices there was Tiglath-pileser III.⁹⁶ It was not until Esarhaddon's reign that the temple's fate seems to have changed, possibly due to a letter sent to Esarhaddon attributed to the astronomer Bēl-ušēzib. In the letter, the astronomer highlights Ekur's historical importance in a plea to the king to renovate the temple. Bēl-ušēzib

92 There are hints that Marduk's promotion resulted in tensions and anger on the part of the priesthoods in Uruk and Nippur, which may have been expressed in later commentaries as Marduk killing Anu and Enlil, and in an ancient counterfeit letter claiming attribution to Samsu-iluna in which priesthoods from everywhere but Babylon are portrayed as acting villainously, see Al-Rawi and George 1994: 135–9.

93 Enlil was particularly important to Šamši-Adad I, who seems to have introduced Enlil veneration alongside Aššur into Assyria at an early stage; see Larsen 1976: 59; Cifola 1995: 13, RIMA I A.0.39.1.

94 On Nippur during the Neo-Assyrian period, see Cole 1996.

95 SAA 18, no. 199.

96 RINAP I TP III 47: 11–12, for example.

writes that, despite his primary loyalty to Babylon,⁹⁷ he must inform the king that it is divine will that Esarhaddon renovate Nippur and Ekur and restore the ancient privileges owed to a major cult center, a *bīt abbī* (“dynastic house,” lit. “house of fathers”), a *bīt ilānī rabūti ša šamê u eršeti* (“temple of the great gods of heaven and earth”), *ālu šātu ša Enlil* (“the eternal city of Enlil”) – one that has now become a *ayyaku šulputu* (“destroyed sanctuary”) for which the king has not yet ordered renovations to be done.⁹⁸ He advises the king that, because of Ekur’s historical importance, Nippur should be exempt from taxes, tribute, corvée labor, state service – the privilege of a major religious center – and that it should be treated like Babylon, which enjoys Esarhaddon’s patronage as the political capital of Babylonia.⁹⁹ As part of this argument, he quotes the “Advice to a Prince,” a literary text that instructs kings not to mistreat their subjects on pain of divine punishment, and specifically mentions Nippur’s special status.¹⁰⁰ This would likely have been an effective strategy as kings paid careful attention to ancient tradition, especially when it came to construction projects and granting privileges, often with the express aim of outdoing their predecessors’ deeds and receiving divine favor.¹⁰¹ This appeal indeed seems to have worked for Nippur; at least, Esarhaddon incorporates how he restored the aforementioned privileges to Nippur into his royal titulary and rebuilds not only Enlil’s Ekur temple but also the temple of his consort, the

97 While his background is not explicitly stated, it is clear that he was closely connected with Nippur and had an interest in this city, suggesting that he was Nippurean in origin and moved to Nineveh to serve the Assyrian king (PNA B-G: 338). As a Babylonian, however, his political and religious loyalty would have been to Babylon as the home of Marduk and the seat of Babylonian kingship.

98 SAA 18, no. 124. Enlil’s epithets refer back to a time in which the god had a more active role in the pantheon as a “lord of all lands, the organizer of heaven and earth.” For an alternative reading of this letter, see Scurlock 2012.

99 SAA 18, no. 124: r. 3, 10–11.

100 SAA 18, no. 124: r. 3–6, “The well-known tablet, ‘If a king does not h[ee]d justice’ [... s]ays: ‘Be it a king (*šarru*), a *šandabakku*, an overseer (*aklu*), or an [administrator] (*šāpiru*), [who] puts state service [on Si]ppar, Nippur, and Babylon, and [imposes] corvée on the houses of the gods, [the]se great gods will become angry and not enter their chapels.’” The quotation is not an exact duplication, based on the only extant copy (which is from Ashurbanipal’s library), with the variations affecting the offices mentioned in the beginning in particular: “if either a shepherd (*rē’û*), or a temple overseer (*šatam ēkurri*), or a chief officer of the king (*šūt rēši šarri*) who serves as temple overseer (*šatam ēkurri*) of Sippar, Nippur, or Babylon ...” (lines 55–56, see Lambert 1996: 110–5).

101 For temples in particular, see Novotny 2014 and 2010. See also May 2013 for antiquarianism in Ashurbanipal’s inscriptions. An interest in past kings is naturally not exclusive to the Neo-Assyrian period; see for instance Da Riva 2017 on Nabopolassar in later traditions.

Queen of Nippur.¹⁰² The promotion seems to have endured beyond his reign as well, as Ashurbanipal continued his predecessor's patronage of the city by rebuilding Enlil's ziggurat and calling himself the "governor (*šakkanakku*) of Aššur, Enlil, and Ninurta," despite recurring issues with the local government in Nippur.¹⁰³

7 Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Parallels

Preliminary impressions also suggest that similar categories can be applied for temples in the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Royal patronage was certainly just as important, with temple building narratives comprising the core of Babylonian royal inscriptions.¹⁰⁴ There are some distinct differences: Neo-Babylonian temples operated differently than Neo-Assyrian ones, especially because of the prebendary system,¹⁰⁵ and the political capital of Babylonia essentially did not move from Babylon, starting with the reign of Hammurabi in the 2nd millennium.¹⁰⁶ Babylon also functioned as the traditional religious center, so these factors resulted in the concentration of royal patronage heavily and consistently on the cult of Marduk and, to a slightly lesser extent, on the cult of Nabû in nearby Borsippa, which thereby comprise the most prestigious temples.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, scholars of the Neo-Babylonian period have identified similar trends as those already discussed for the Assyrian temples: first, staff shortages in smaller temples, which manifested as individuals (who were often not originally local to the temple) holding multiple prebends for one temple.¹⁰⁸ Second, there was a system of temple interdependence, which

102 RINAP 4 48: 41 (in which he grants *šubarrû* ["tax exemption"] to Nippur, Babylon, Borsippa and Sippar); 128 (building inscription for the Queen of Nippur); 130 (in which he also mentions reestablishing the daily cult).

103 RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 256 (RIMB 2 B.6.32.15) (building narrative about the Egigunû, the ziggurat in Nippur, including a dedication to Enlil). For problems with the governor Nabû-šuma-ēreš, see for example RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 3. Aššur-etel-ilāni is also known to have rebuilt Ekur in Nippur (RINAP 5 Aššur-etel-ilāni 5).

104 Da Riva 2008 and Waerzeggers 2011b, including the condemnation of kings who are perceived to have committed sacrilege or shown disrespect to the cult.

105 Waerzeggers 2011: 70, 2010: 34–8. The Assyrians knew of the prebend system used in Babylonia though they did not use it themselves, see SAA 18, no. 82 and SAA 17, no. 34 (letters to the kings from Babylonians).

106 The capital may have moved briefly to Dūr-Kurigalzu under the Kassites (see Maul 1997: 119–20).

107 Waerzeggers 2010: 4–6.

108 Waerzeggers 2011: 69.

appears more clearly than in Assyrian sources due to the extant temple archives. For instance, the temples of Šamaš of Larsa and Nergal of Udanu depended on the larger Eanna temple complex in Uruk for necessities related to cult offerings and festivals, including labor and foodstuffs.¹⁰⁹ Third, the priests used strategic antiquarianism that was more developed and intricate than simply writing to the king with an appeal to history; one can point to the case of the Anu temple in Uruk, whose staff and local elites orchestrated a religious reform that promoted the highly traditional but largely defunct Anu cult over the prominent Ištar of Uruk, resulting in the construction of a new temple complex for Anu during the later Achaemenid period; and to the Cruciform Monument, a “pious fraud” orchestrated by the Šamaš of Sippar priesthood to convince the ruler that an Old Akkadian king had given their temple specific privileges.¹¹⁰

8 Conclusion

Although the Assyrian king was theoretically responsible for all of his empire's temples equally, the realities of finite resources meant that some temples benefited from direct royal patronage while others had to operate as essentially

109 Beaulieu 1991a; 1991b; 1993. The crown provided certain gifts and commodities to the temples but the temple was ultimately responsible for its own trade (Kleber 2017: 109 and more generally in Kleber 2008). On the interactions of temples with each other and with the crown in the early Neo-Babylonian period, see Levavi 2018. Larsa itself is an interesting case of royal patronage, as it had largely been abandoned until Nebuchadnezzar II's reign, when “The revival of Larsa was clearly accomplished within the framework of the new Babylonian imperial ideology promoted by the dynasty. The main building inscription of Nebuchadnezzar commemorating the rebuilding of the Ebabbar temple consists literally of a miniature theological and political manifesto ... the traditional Babylonian identity imposed on Larsa and revised to fit the imperial ideology of the dynasty might not have taken root without such decisive state support. Indeed, after the disappearance of the Babylonian empire the cuneiform evidence from Larsa declines sharply and the Ebabbar temple itself is abandoned during the first century of the Hellenistic period” (Beaulieu 2007: 204).

110 For the Anu cult's revival, see Krul 2018. On the Cruciform Monument, see Al-Rawi and George 1994: 139–48, with further bibliography. On this topic, see also Na'aman 2011, though he largely focuses on the use of this strategy by kings to grant legitimacy to cultic reform programs. Some temples were able to finance their own renovations, as Waerzeggers (2010: 28) suggests happened in the case of the Mār-Biti temple in Borsippa. The Borsippa Nabû temple was reinvigorated partly on the basis of ancient local tax traditions already under the Neo-Assyrian kings, see SAA 10, no. 353 (Lines 17–19: “Supply, as [in ol]den times, the regular ram offerings from the estates of the citizens of Borsippa! The fattest rams should be [deliv]ered to Nabû!”).

autonomous, and many fell somewhere in between. The texts relay several options available for cultic personnel in minor and peripheral temples to cope with or overcome a lack of state support so that they could keep the cults of their gods active despite the additional challenges. Evaluating temples based on whether they received royal patronage (and to what extent) exposes one of the many potential heterarchies of Assyrian temples, revealing how varied and changeable the status of a temple could be vis-à-vis the state and other temples; namely, that, except for the Aššur temple and a few others that belonged to a very small class of prominent institutions, temples within the Neo-Assyrian Empire cannot be ranked in a hierarchical or static manner. Ultimately, a heterarchical approach is better suited for understanding these relationships, which were not straightforward, homogenous, or stable, and for demonstrating how the ways in which temple and state interacted with one another affected both “vertical” and “horizontal” positioning of temples within the cultic landscape of the empire. At the same time, royal patronage is but one potential organizing principle, and others would result in different arrangements of relations between temples. In general, heterarchies can reveal different layers of the complex relationships at play between kings, gods, cities, and institutions that are invisible when strict hierarchies are employed, and this case study is simply a first step towards better understanding the nature of urban religion in the Neo-Assyrian empire.

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