Revolts in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A Preliminary Discourse Analysis

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The following remarks are based on my oral response to the papers delivered by Karen Radner and Peter Bedford at the 2014 Yale “Revolts” conference. Both speakers analyzed revolts that concerned the Neo-Assyrian state, a political entity that grew, during the final phase of its existence, in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, into the first true empire in world history. Radner provided a typological assessment of revolts throughout the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 1000–609 BCE), while Bedford discussed in some detail the last revolt against the Assyrians, that of Babylonia under Nabopolassar, which led to the downfall of the Assyrian state. This short essay will look at revolts in the Neo-Assyrian era from yet another angle, that of “discourse analysis.”

My point of departure is Radner’s distinction among three types of revolts, or rebellions, that periodically rent the fabric of the Neo-Assyrian state: a) attempts by formally independent vassal rulers to regain their political agency; b) independence movements in recently annexed territories; and c) attempts to gain power by factions operating within the empire’s core area. I find this typological analysis convincing and helpful. Another of Radner’s statements—that “there is no attempt in the official records of the Assyrian Empire to disguise the fact that rebellions happened”—may, however, need some qualification. To be sure, many texts from the Neo-Assyrian period deal with revolts quite openly, sometimes even for the express edification of later generations. But there are also attempts to conceal the existence of revolts or to provide massively distorted accounts of the events behind them.

The objective of this essay is to analyze how specific Neo-Assyrian source types depict various types of revolts, in order to reach a better understanding of the discourses about revolts that took place within the Assyrian empire. Given that discourses, as proposed by Foucault, not only represent political, social, and cultural realities, but also shape them, it is hoped that the analysis will also illuminate something about the power dynamics within the Neo-Assyrian state. I will begin with an examination of scholarly, literary, and

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1 These ideas are outlined in detail in Foucault, 1969.
historical-literary compositions, texts that were well known among the educated classes of ancient Assyria and formed part of the Assyrian “stream of tradition.” Royal inscriptions and chronographic texts will be considered next. The source types discussed in the remainder of the article, treaties and loyalty oaths, queries to the sun-god, and letters, can be classified as archival texts—they were addressed to contemporary audiences. While the letters—a particularly informative source on revolts—had a fairly restricted number of readers, the loyalty oaths had to be sworn by virtually everyone, at least in theory.2

Except for a few observations at the end, non-Assyrian viewpoints will not be explored in this paper, but it should be stressed that those who fought against Assyria’s imperial expansion obviously considered their efforts not as unlawful acts of rebellion, but as legitimate attempts to regain their independence.

It goes without saying that the following discussion is not meant to be comprehensive—it’s goal is to provide a representative picture of the evidence, which is abundant, by focusing on a few specific examples.

1 Scholarly Texts

One of the most important text genres produced by Mesopotamian scholars were omen treatises, some of them more than 100 tablets long. These treatises systematically collect observations of natural and other phenomena (movements of celestial bodies, abnormal markings on the liver of the sacrificial lamb, the behavior of animals, etc.) and associate them, in the so-called apodoses, with predictions about the future. Many Mesopotamian apodoses regard the king and the state. This applies, in particular, to omen texts related to forms of divination that were routinely practiced at royal courts, such as extispicy, astrology, and (to a lesser degree) observations of malformed births.

Quite a few of the apodoses found in omen texts studied during Neo-Assyrian times deal in one way or another with revolts. A typical example is the prediction: “A son of the king who dwells in a town of my territory (or: a border town) will revolt against his father (ana abišu bārta ippušma) but will not seize the throne” (ACh Ištar 20:47, see Heeßel, 2014:385, n. 29). Other subversive activities mentioned in omen apodoses include a confederate (bēl salīmi) of the king becoming his opponent; a grandee (kabtu), a diviner, or a royal servant defecting ((*w)ašū) to the enemy; the auxiliary troops of the king rebelling against him (tišṭāṭšu ibbalakkatāšuma); and city elders (šībū tāli) writing to

2 For an overview of the various types of Mesopotamian sources that deal in one way or another with historical events, see Renger, 1996.