MESOPOTAMIA
NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

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1. SOURCES OF LAW

1.1 Law Codes

No collection of laws from the Neo-Assyrian period is known to us. If a text of this kind had ever existed, it seems highly likely that it would have been part of Assurbanipal’s famous library in Nineveh. But neither in Nineveh nor in twenty-three excavated sites located in different parts of the empire have archaeologists have succeeded in unearthing so much as a fragment of such a text. In addition, in none of the numerous Neo-Assyrian texts is the existence of a collection of laws hinted at, making it implausible to argue that such a text had existed, written on perishable material such as wooden writing tablets or scrolls of leather or papyrus.

1.1.1 Whatever the reason for the lack of a Neo-Assyrian collection of laws, it is certainly not the result of unfamiliarity with the subject, as the concept of a compilation of laws was well known in the Neo-Assyrian period. Copies of collections of laws from earlier periods of Mesopotamian history have been found in Neo-Assyrian libraries, in particular, tablets with Neo-Assyrian copies of Hammurabi’s Laws. Furthermore, the Middle Assyrian Laws were handed down by tradition, as is shown by a tablet that was found in Neo-Assyrian context in Assur. However, it is not known whether the ancient

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1 The last attempt at a systematic survey of Neo-Assyrian law was J. Kohler’s “Rechtserläuterungen,” in Kohler and Ungnad, Rechtsurkunden . . . , 441–67. Although outdated in many respects, this is still a useful summary.

2 See, e.g., a copy from the Library of Assurbanipal, K 4223+ (photograph in Parpola, Scholars . . . , 116 fig. 17) and note a catalogue of tablets for Assurbanipal’s Nineveh library listing, inter alia, Hammurabi’s Laws (di-na-a-ni ša ḫa-am-n[u-ra-bi]) and the “Advice to a Prince” (see n. 11 below).

3 VAT 10093+10266 = KAV 6+143; see Pedersén, Archives . . . , 22:N 1 (47).
collections of laws were consulted or not—the possibility has certainly to be considered, especially in the case of the Middle Assyrian Laws.

1.2 Private Legal Documents

These are the richest source, both in quantity and in the sort of information they offer. More than two thousand legal documents are known, all of which are sealed, dated, and witnessed in order to be legally valid. The earliest texts date to the late ninth century, but the majority stem from the seventh century.

1.3 Royal Decrees

Recorded are grants of land and tax exemption to individuals (usually high officials) or temples, royal decrees for the maintenance of temples, and appointments of officials. These texts date from the ninth to the late seventh century.

1.4 Letters

Letters, both official and private, can offer important information on legal practice in the Neo-Assyrian period. The texts come mainly from the state archives in Nineveh and Kalhu but also from the archives of the provincial governors in Kalhu and Guzana (Tell Halaf) and the private archives from Assur. They cover the period from the eighth to the late seventh centuries, albeit concentrated in the reigns of certain kings, while virtually no letters from the reigns of some kings, most notably Sennacherib, are known.

1.5 Administrative texts, usually in the form of lists, record data on a wide range of subjects. Since they rarely ever explicitly specify their purpose, their interpretation is often difficult.

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4 Radner, Privatrechtsurkunden . . ., 8–18 on the provenance and editions of the legal documents.
5 Ibid., 20.
6 Recently re-edited in Kataja and Whiting, Grants . . .
7 Parpola, “Royal Inscriptions . . .,” esp. 117–24 on the provenance and dating of the letter corpora.
8 The administrative texts from Nineveh have been recently edited in Fales and Postgate, Administrative Records . . . I, and Administrative Records . . . II. Similar texts have been excavated in many other sites; the most important are Kalhu, Assur and Guzana.