

A THEOCRATIC APPROACH TO GOVERNANCE IN ANCIENT TIMES: ASSYRIANS

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Abstract

The organized belief systems, temple structures, and religion-state relations that emerged with the Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia began to undergo Semitization with the dominance of Semitic societies in the region. Sumerian cultural elements, which underwent Semiticization during the Old Babylonian period, assumed an Assyrian character with the rise of the Assyrian State in the Ancient

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Near East and its evolution into an imperial structure. The Assyrian society, known for its religious orientation, operated on a religion-based understanding of state organization and the formulation of state policies. It was believed that divine requests and orders influenced various situations, such as kings' legitimacy, heirs' determination, and decisions regarding wars and peace. The land was perceived as belonging to the gods, and the kings were seen as representatives of the gods on earth. This study aims to uncover the theocratic aspects of Assyrian state administration based on information gleaned from cuneiform sources and modern literature.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Gods, Kings, Mesopotamia.

Eski Çağ'da Teokratik Bir Yönetim Yaklaşımı: Asurlular

Genişletilmiş Özet

Tarihteki pek çok ilkin ortaya çıktığı Mezopotamya toprakları, ilk devlet yapılanmalarının ve siyasal örgütlenmelerin de görüldüğü coğrafyadır. Sumerlilerle birlikte organize bir yaşama ilk adımlarını atan Mezopotamya toplumlarının inanç sisteminde varlık gösteren Sumer tanrıları söz konusu coğrafyada görülen Sami egemenliği ile birlikte Samileşmeye başlamış ve bölgenin büyük tanrıları Sami menşeli adlar almaya başlamıştır. Çok tanrılı bir görünüm arz eden Babil ve Asur inanç sisteminin ilk dönemlerinde hürmet gösterilen 600'ün üzerinde büyüklü küçüklü tanrı bulunmaktadır. Bu tanrılar zamanla birbirleriyle karışarak hâkimi oldukları kentlerin koruyucu tanrıları olarak kabul görmeye başlamışlardır.

Asurluların dinî inanç ve adetlerinin genel açıdan yapılanması incelendiğinde Babil etkisi açık bir biçimde görülmektedir. Bunun en önemli sebebi ise Mezopotamya'da Sumerlilerle şekillenen inanç sistemlerinin Babil Kralı Hammurabi ile Samileşmesidir. Asur Devleti'nin bölgenin hâkim gücü hâline gelmesi ile birlikte bölgenin kültür taşıyıcısı rolüne bürünen Asurluların teokratik bir devlet sistemine sahip olduğu görülmektedir. Hanedan üyelerinin veliahtlık ve krallık makamlarına yükselmesinin tanrısal gerekçelere dayandırılması dinsel bir gelenektir. Krallın oğullarından hangisinin veliaht olması gerektiği kehanet uygulamaları ile tanrılara sorulmaktaydı. Bu yöntemle veliahtlığına dini bir meşruiyet kazandırılan prenslerin devlet bürokrasisi ve toplumun her kesimi tarafından sorgusuz bir şekilde kabul görmesi amaçlanmaktaydı. Veliahtların yanı sıra kralların kullandıkları unvanlar da dinî içerikli olup tanrılarca seçildiklerini gösterse de bu unvanlar krallara herhangi bir tanrılık payesi vermemekteydi. Devletin en tepesindeki kralların taşıdığı bu dinî hüviyet devletin işleyişine dair her hususta dinsel etkinin kendisini göstermesinde tetikleyici unsur olmuştur. Zira devletin ve ülkenin gerçek sahibi ve kralı olarak kent tanrısı görülmekte, krallar ise tanrının vekili olarak kabul edilmekteydi. Dolayısıyla krala karşı olası bir saygısızlık tanrıya saygısızlıktı ve saygısızlık yapan kişiler en ağır biçimde cezalandırılmalıydı.

Tanrı Aşşur, Asur Devleti'nin eski Ön Asya coğrafyasında politik açıdan rakipsiz bir hâle gelmesi ve Asur kentinin öneminin artmasıyla birlikte din adamları tarafından her şeyin sahibi ve yaratıcısı olarak nitelendirilmeye başlanmış ve bu tanrıya tüm tanrısal alametler sunulmuştur. Asur Devleti'nin siyasal desteğiyle her geçen gün daha da geniş kitlelere ulaşan tanrı Aşşur, devletin emperyal politikaları açısından da halk üzerinde bütünleştirici bir role sahipti. MÖ 8. yüzyılda

Asur Devleti'nin Babil kentini ele geçirerek tüm Mezopotamya'da hakimiyet sağlamasıyla Eski Ön Asya coğrafyasının en büyük tanrısı pozisyonuna yükselen Aşşur, katipler tarafından yazılmış edebi anlatıların da ana karakteri haline gelmiştir. Tanrısal desteği arkalarına aldıkları düşünülen kralların savaşçı ve kahraman kişilikler oldukları vurgulanmaktaydı. Tanrılara hizmette kusur etmeyen ve büyük ordulara komuta ederek tanrının hâkimiyetini daha geniş topraklara yaydığını vurgulayan Asur kralları, ister doğal yollarla isterse de darbe yolu ile tahta çıksın Aşşur, Enlil, Ninurta ve Iştar gibi tanrılar tarafından seçilmiş olduklarını vurgulamakta ve tanrı Aşşur'un tapınağında taç giymekteydi.

Edebi anlatıların yanı sıra devlet işleyişinin de ana karakteri haline gelen tanrı Aşşur siyasal meşrulaştırmanın en büyük dayanak noktası haline gelmiştir. Ancak Asur devletinin sınırlarının genişlemesine paralel olarak panteonda da bir genişleme görülmüştür. Bu bağlamda Asurlular Şamaş, Marduk, Adad, Iştar, Enlil, Súen (Sîn), Nergal, Ereşkigal ve Ninurta gibi tanrılara büyük bir saygı duymaya başlamışlardır. Devletin işleyişine yönelik alınan tüm kararlar tanrısal bir gerekçeyle dayandırılarak meşruiyetlerinin sağlanması amaçlanmıştır. Bu hususta dikkat çeken en önemli faaliyetler savaşlardır. Asur inanç sistemine göre savaşlar tanrıların istek ve emirleriyle gerçekleştirilmekteydi. Günahkârlar olarak nitelenen düşmanlar mutlak suretle cezalandırılmalıydı. Bu durum Asur dış politikasının dine dayandırılmasına ve kralların emperyal heveslerine dinî bir meşruiyet kazandırılmasına imkân sağlamaktaydı.

Eski Mezopotamya toplumlarında kralların üç temel görevi bulunmaktaydı. Bu görevler tanrıların isteğinin yorumlanması, ülkenin yönetilmesi ve tanrıların önünde Asur halkının temsil edilmesiydi. Eski Asur Dönemi'nde kendine *şangu* diyen ve rahip ya da idareci olarak algılanabilecek olan yöneticiler ortaya çıkmıştır. Zira bu dönemde krallar başrahip olarak tüm ruhban sınıfının başında bulunmaktaydı. Dinsel hayatın merkezinde bulunan tapınakların Asur Devleti'nin din eksenli politik anlayışının en büyük destekçisi olması tapınakların inşa ve bakım faaliyetlerine büyük bir önem verilmesi sonucunu doğurmuştur. Asur devlet geleneğinde başkomutan, başyargıç ve başrahip vasıflarına sahip olan kral yeni tapınakların inşa edilmesinden, tapınakların geçiminden, restorasyonundan, tapınaklara atanan görevlilerden ve dinî faaliyetlerin yerine getirilmesinden birinci derecede sorumlu olarak görülmekteydi. Asur krallarının tüm vasıflarının en belirgin olduğu yer yine tapınaklardı. Zira önemli kralların başarıları ve kahramanlıkları tapınaklarda belirgin hâle getiriliyordu. Kireçtaşı ile kaplanan tapınak duvarlarına askerî zaferler, kralların av faaliyetleri ve ibadetleri tasvir edilmekte, böylelikle de hem tanrılara bir çeşit hesap verildiği düşünülmekte hem de uyrukların gözünde büyük bir propaganda faaliyeti yürütülmekteydi.

Bayram, şölen ve ritüeller de Asur siyasal yaşamında din etkisinin en belirgin olduğu ve din ile desteklenmiş politik propagandanın zirveye çıktığı en önemli süreçler olarak dikkat çekmektedir. Asur toplumunun dindarlığının somutlaştırılmış olduğu bayramlar ve ritüeller siyasal yaşamın da önemli birer unsuruydu. Başrahip sıfatıyla kralların koordinasyonunda halka açık bir şekilde icra edilmiş olan bu şölenler toplumun her ferdini dinsel açıdan diri tutmakla beraber siyasal otoritenin meşruluğunun tekrar tasdik edildiği ve siyasal propagandanın etkili bir biçimde gerçekleştirildiği süreçlerdi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din, Siyaset, Tanrılar, Krallar, Mezopotamya.

Introduction

Mesopotamia, the birthplace of many historical milestones, witnessed the emergence of the first religious state structures and political organizations. Within the belief system of Mesopotamian societies, the Sumerian gods, initially integral to the organized life initiated by the Sumerians, underwent a process of Semiticization during the Semitic dominance in the region. Consequently, the prominent gods of the area started adopting Semitic names. In the earlier phases of Babylonian and Assyrian religious beliefs, which displayed a polytheistic nature, over 600 primary and minor gods were revered. These gods eventually amalgamated and associated with the protective gods of the cities they governed.¹

The Sumerian pantheon's primary god, An, transitioned to Anu with the onset of Semitic dominance in the region. Similarly, Utu, revered as the sun god and guardian of justice, assumed the name Šamaš, while the moon god Nanna became known as Suen (Sîn). Inanna, worshipped as the goddess of love and fertility, adopted the name Ištar. In the Sumerian belief system, the names of Enlil, known as the "god of wind or storm" and revered as the "lord of the storm," as well as Nergal and Ereškigal, acknowledged as gods and goddesses of the realm of the dead, were adopted into Semitic societies without alteration.²

The god Šamaš held great reverence in Sippar and Larsa, while Suen (Sîn) was highly venerated in Ur and Harran. The goddess Ištar was prominently worshipped in Uruk, and Enlil was a focal god in Nippur.³ During the era of Semitic dominance in ancient Mesopotamia, not only did the names of gods change, but their characteristics also amalgamated, consolidating multiple gods into singular entities. This led to a reduction in the number of gods while introducing new ones. Notably, Marduk and Aššur emerged as pivotal gods. Marduk, in particular, ascended to prominence as the

¹ Ekrem Sankçioğlu, *Başlangıçtan Günümüze Dinler Tarihi* (Isparta: Fakülte Kitabevi Yayınları, 2011), 19.

² Okay Pekşen, 'İnanç ve Tanrılar', *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Kültür Tarihi*, ed. L. Gürkan Gökçek et al. (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2022), 261–273.

³ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 195.

chief god of Babylon. He assimilated the characteristics of Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag, and Ninurta, consolidating their attributes within himself. As a result, Marduk was revered as the creator of the entire universe and mankind.⁴ The emergence of these new gods during the Semitic dominance in the region coincided with their regional influence aligning with the imperial political powers of the cities they dominated. Consequently, belief systems and gods lacking political patronage gradually lost their influence over time.⁵

The Assyrian religious beliefs and customs bear a distinct Babylonian influence upon analysis. This influence largely stems from the Semiticization of Sumerian-influenced belief systems in Mesopotamia under the reign of Babylonian King Hammurabi. With Akkadian becoming the dominant language, Sumerian flood and creation narratives underwent Semiticization, ceasing Sumerian usage.⁶ During the early first millennium BC, as the Assyrian State expanded into a political empire, the god Marduk was supplanted by Aššur, the primary god of the city of Assyria.⁷ This marked a shift in the region's cultural center towards Assyria, with the Asharra Temple, erected around 1300 BC serving as the earthly residence of the god Aššur. As the Assyrian Empire rose as the dominant power in the region, the Assyrians assumed the role of cultural torchbearers. This mission was reflected in the titles adopted by the kings, such as “*King of the Country, King of the Four Quarters*”, and “*šar kiššati - King of the Universe*”, harking back to the Akkadian era. These titles, despite carrying religious connotations signifying the kings' approval and chosen status by the gods, did not imbue the kings with god status as seen in Akkadian King Naram-Sin's case.⁸ Nevertheless, the religious identity embraced by the ruling kings at the apex of the state became a catalyst for religious influence permeating every facet of the state's operations.

⁴ Gürkan Gökçek, *Asurlular* (Ankara: Bilgin Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2015), 241-242.

⁵ Donald A. Mackenzie, *Myths of Babilonia and Assyria* (London: The Gresham Publishing Company, 1915), 338.

⁶ Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 242.

⁷ Pekşen, ‘İnanç ve Tanrılar’, 271; Tuğçe Horunlu, ‘Yeni Asur Dönemi Devlet Politikalarında Din Faktörü’, *Mezopotamya'nın Eski Çağlarından İnanç Olgusu ve Yönetim Anlayışı*, ed. L. Gürkan Gökçek et al. (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2019), 384.

⁸ Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 228.

1. Theocratic Approaches in Assyrian Political Life

1.1. The Real King: God

The residence of Aššur, the chief god of the Assyrian pantheon and the most widely worshipped god in the country, was the city of Assyria, which was also the capital of the state. Examining the origin of Aššur, the belief suggests that he departed from the land of Nimrod to establish the city of Nineveh. In later periods, he was considered the son of Sam, believed to be of Semitic origin, and underwent deification.⁹ Aššur, held in higher esteem than Marduk, commanded profound respect among Assyrian kings, who believed their military endeavors were under the oversight and protection of this god. In reciprocation, the kings presented sacrifices and offerings to their gods on various occasions. This practice propelled the Assyrian state to expand the sphere of influence of Aššur by erecting temples dedicated to the god in conquered lands through imperial policies. As the Assyrian state grew politically dominant in the ancient Near East and the significance of the city of Assyria escalated, the clergy began describing Aššur as “the father of the gods”, “the ruler/creator of the World”, and “the king of the universe”. All divine signs and attributions were directed toward this god, solidifying his preeminent position.¹⁰ Backed by an imperialistic political structure like the Assyrian State, the god Aššur and the religion associated with him spread across vast territories, emerging as the dominant belief system in the region. Crucially, Aššur, supported by the Assyrian State’s political influence, played a unifying role among the populace, aligning with the imperial policies of the state.

14 | db

After the Assyrian Empire conquered the city of Babylon in the 8th century BC, the god Aššur ascended to the status of the greatest god in the Ancient Near East region. His dominance extended throughout Mesopotamia, securing a notable presence for him in the Babylonian Epic of Creation, *Enūma Eliš*.¹¹ The Assyrian dominance

⁹ Mackenzie, *Myths of Babilonia and Assyria*, 277.

¹⁰ Theophilus G. Pinches, *The Religion of Babilonia and Assyria* (London: A. Constable & Company Limited, 1906), 69.

¹¹ Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur Is King! Aššur Is King!: Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 65.

in the region triggered a transformation where Semitic cultural elements assumed an Assyrian identity. In this shift, significant changes occurred within the epic, notably replacing Marduk with Aššur as the protagonist. In the Babylonian version, the god Marduk defeated Tiamat, while in the Assyrian version, Marduk was replaced by the god Aššur. Aššur, embodying attributes from various gods, was subsequently revered as the “*father of the gods*.” Additionally, the depiction of kings in front of the tree of life, symbolizing Aššur, on cylinder seals served as a deliberate practice to embed the notion of the kings’ authority possessing religious significance within society’s subconscious. This representation on cylinder seals was a strategic effort to intertwine religious authority with the figure of the kings, consolidating the perception of their rule as having divine sanction.¹²

The elevation of Aššur is unmistakably evident in cuneiform texts through expressions used to describe him. For instance, the usage of “*Anšar (all the heavens)*” in Assyrian texts to refer to Aššur indicates a potential shift toward a monotheistic structure for this god. However, what truly sets this god apart from other primary gods is prominently his warrior aspect.¹³ The defining trait of the Assyrian State lay in its emphasis on warrior culture. This characteristic became deeply intertwined with the god Aššur, attributing sanctity to military endeavors. Fighting in the name of god Aššur was perceived as an act of worship, with military campaigns regarded as “*God’s command*”. This divine mandate demanded unwavering obedience to expand and fortify the authority of god Aššur and his earthly representative, the king. Rebellion or defiance against the kings equated to disobedience against the god Aššur, inviting severe repercussions. Refusal to pledge allegiance resulted in harsh punishments. This alignment facilitated the foundation of Assyrian foreign policy on the principles of the god Aššur, providing religious legitimacy to the imperial ambitions of the kings. The intertwining of religious authority with the monarch’s rule allowed the Assyrian

¹² Kürşat Demirci, *Eski Mezopotamya Dinlerine Giriş Tanrılar, Ritüel, Tapınak* (İstanbul: Ayışığı Kitapları, 2013), 34.

¹³ Louis Joseph Delaporte, *Mesopotamia: The Babylonian and Assyrian Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 310.

state to bolster its imperial aspirations and foreign policy under the divine sanction of god Aššur.¹⁴

The ascension of Aššur as the “*king of the universe*” and the attributed roles of the creator of both heaven and hell indeed exemplify the Assyrian reverence for this god. Interestingly, despite this elevation of Aššur, the Assyrians demonstrated respect for the gods of other societies. Alongside their devotion to Aššur, they worshipped the gods inherited from the Babylonians and continued to venerate the gods in regions they conquered.¹⁵ The divine authority of Aššur was notably more extensive than the power attributed to other gods. Cuneiform texts referred to god Aššur as “*lugal (shar-rum) – lord*” and “*true king*”, emphasizing his supreme status. Additionally, the human king was designated as “*išši ak Aššur (governor - steward of Assyria)*”, signifying the king’s role as the representative of Aššur on earth.¹⁶ It is seen that the concept of a ruthless and warrior king is revealed with the understanding of “*the world ruler king*” who is believed to rule the country on behalf of the god Aššur.¹⁷ The Assyrian kings strategically emphasized their ascent to the throne as bestowed by the authority of the god Aššur, thereby endowing their reigns with significant sanctity under this religious guise.¹⁸ To solidify this sanctity, they cooperated closely with the clergy, a mutually beneficial alliance. The Assyrian rulers sought validation of their power through religious endorsement provided by the clergy. This partnership between the kings and the clergy was pivotal. The clergy validated and upheld the legitimacy of the kings’ rule through religious means. In return, they enjoyed a prosperous existence, benefiting from various privileges. These privileges encompassed safeguarding and preserving temples, exemption from taxes and labor, and even extending legal immunity to temple

16| db

¹⁴ Demirci, *Eski Mezopotamya Dinlerine Giriş*, 34; Amélie Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ’da Yakınođu* 2, trans. Dilek Şendil (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2013), 2/174–175; Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 243; Okay Pekşen, ‘Eski Mezopotamya’daki Savaşlarda Tanrıların Rolü’, *History Studies* 8/2 (2016), 62.

¹⁵ Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 242.

¹⁶ Charles Keith Maisels, *Uygarlığın Doğuşu*, trans. Alaeddin Şenel (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları, 1999), 278.

¹⁷ Gary V. Smith, ‘The Concept of God/The Gods as King in The Ancient Near East and The Bible’, *Trinity Journal* 3 NS (1982), 22; Bülent İplikçiođlu, *Eskiçağ Tarihinin Ana Hatları* (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, 1990), 60.

¹⁸ Hakan Temir, ‘Kutsalın Tezahürü ve Mekânın Etkisi Bakımından İslam Öncesi Arap Yarımadasındaki Kâbe/Beytler?’, *Şırnak Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 26 (2021), 125.

members. This symbiotic relationship bolstered the kings' religious authority and the clergy's prosperity.¹⁹ The Assyrian kings cultivated a distinct religious identity intertwined with their authority. They frequently appeared depicted in religious garb, portraying themselves in ceremonial attire that emphasized their connection to religious practices. This portrayal helped shape a perception of the kings as religious figures within society's eyes. Moreover, their religious identity was further affirmed through ceremonial practices. The kings often took oaths within the temple precincts of the god Aššur, signifying their commitment and allegiance to the divine authority. Additionally, their coronation ceremonies frequently occurred within these sacred spaces, reinforcing their divine mandate and religious legitimacy in the eyes of the people. These rituals served to strengthen the connection between kingship and religious authority, solidifying the kings' religious identity within Assyrian society.²⁰ Indeed, within Assyrian society, the king was regarded as not just a political leader but also as the high priest of the god Aššur. This dual role entailed specific obligations and responsibilities linked to religious practices. The king was duty-bound to oversee the construction of temples, ensure the upkeep of existing sacred sites, support and favor the temple officials, present significant offerings and valuable gifts to the temples, and participate in sacrificial rituals. Fulfilling these obligations bestowed social prestige upon the kings, reinforcing their religious and societal standing. However, any negligence or failure to fulfill these duties was considered a grave offense. It could lead to divine disfavor and evoke curses upon the king and the kingdom, potentially inviting wrathful consequences from the gods. Thus, adherence to these religious duties was paramount for maintaining the king's authority and societal acceptance in Assyrian culture.²¹ The cuneiform texts concerning temple construction activities dictated by the Assyrian kings often aimed to provide an account of the gods while concurrently serving as a form of propaganda within society. These inscriptions served as a means of legitimizing the king's actions and emphasi-

¹⁹ V. Diakov - S. Kovalev, *İlkçağ Tarihi*, trans. Özdemir İnce (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2014), 1/182.

²⁰ Pierre Bordreuil et al., *Tarihin Başlangıçları, Eski Yakındoğu Kültür ve Uygarlıkları*, trans. Levent Başaran (İstanbul: Alfa Basım Yayın Dağıtım, 2015), 483.

²¹ Kemalettin Köroğlu, *Eski Mezopotamya Tarihi Başlangıcından Perslere Kadar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), 189.

zing their devotion to the gods. In a temple construction text attributed to Ilu-šumma, an Old Assyrian king reigning at the onset of the 2nd millennium BC, the following statements might be presented:

“1-15) Ilu-šumma, vice-regent of Aššur, beloved of the God Aššur and the Goddess Ištar, son of Šalim-aḫum, vice-regent of Aššur: Šalim-aḫum, vice-regent of Aššur, (was) the son of Puzur-Aššur (I), vice-regent of Aššur:

16-48) Ilu-šumma, vice-regent of Aššur, built the temple for the Goddess Ištar, his lover, for his life. A façade (and) new wall I constructed and subdivided house-plots for my city. The god Aššur opened for me two springs in Mount Abiḫ and I made bricks for the wall by these two springs. The water of one spring flowed down to the Aušum Gate (while) the water of the other spring flowed down to the Wertum Gate,²²

1.2. Divine Titles of the Assyrian Kings

18| db

The titles employed by Assyrian kings played a significant role in underscoring their religious standing. Expressions like “*God Aššur is the king, ... is his vicegerent*” in official correspondence highlighted the king’s role as the vicegerent of god, ruling on behalf of the divine. However, it’s noteworthy that this specific terminology was confined to formal documents. In other texts, kings were referred to as “*lord (rubā’um, bēlum)*”, indicating that the deputyship of god was primarily a cultic designation. Nonetheless, Assyrian kings maintained a close relationship with the gods concerning state affairs. They believed that through prayers for the welfare of their countries, they could gain the gods’ support and consent. It was also a prevalent belief that Assyrian kings were servants of the god Aššur, continually receiving divine orders guiding state policies. This interconnectedness between the kings and the divine sphere underscored the religious legitimacy of the rulers’ authority. The perception of the king as a divinely appointed figure responsible for implementing state policies in accordance with the will of the gods was

²² A. Kirk Grayson, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia - Assyrian Periods - Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (To 1115 BC) 1* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 1/A.0.32.2.

integral to Assyrian ideology and governance.²³ Absolutely, during the reign of Assyrian king Šamši-Adad I in the 18th century BC, there were shifts in the titles used by rulers. Notably, the title “*King of the Universe*” (*šar kiššati*) replaced the previous title “*King of the Four Quarters*”. It’s important to note that this change in title doesn’t inherently imply a god-king. Šamši-Adad I himself stated in cuneiform texts that his appointment was by the god Enlil, indicating a distinction between divine appointment and actual god status. Considering these aspects, it’s plausible to interpret Šamši-Adad I’s rule as one fueled by religious authority, leaning toward a theocratic framework. His assertion of being appointed by a god accentuates the intertwining of religious endorsement and political authority, suggesting a governance style where religious legitimacy played a pivotal role in consolidating power. This theocratic aspect likely allowed Šamši-Adad I to wield significant influence, both politically and religiously, during his reign.²⁴

The evolution of the Assyrian State from a local kingdom to an expansive empire did not drastically alter the societal perception of the ruler. However, as the borders expanded and the Assyrian State transformed into an imperial structure, the legitimizing influence of religion extended to state policies and permeated all administrative aspects. This shift marked a significant change in the ruler’s role and perception within society. In the Old Assyrian Period, the king was often viewed as “*primus inter pares (first among equals)*”. Yet, during the Imperial Period (Sargonid Period), characterized by a military-theocratic monarchy, the king’s identity transformed into an unrivaled and potent figure. Emphasizing their divine selection, protection, support, and directives received from gods like Aššur, Enlil, Ninurta, Ištar, Sin, and Nergal—among the most revered in Ancient Mesopotamia—Assyrian kings completely reshaped the concept of governance to encompass a deeply religious character. The rulers’ portrayal as chosen and guided by multiple significant gods reflected a profound transformation, wherein governance took on a distinctly religious dimension. This transformation marked the apex of the Assyrian monarchy, firmly embedding divine authority as a cornerstone of their rule. The Assyrian policies, especially wit-

²³ Amélie Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ’da Yakınođu 1*, trans. Dilek Şendil (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2013), 1/114, 478.

²⁴ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 229.

hin the military realm, were notably shaped by religious beliefs. Campaigns were viewed as divine mandates against peoples considered in rebellion against the Assyrian gods, warranting punishment as decreed by divine will. Every Assyrian soldier, perceiving their military actions as sanctioned by divine orders, regarded themselves as holy warriors. However, for the inhabitants of conquered lands, the situation was starkly different. Considered rebellious against the gods, these people faced severe punishment, often being enslaved under the notion of being the property of the gods. This religious justification provided a legitimate ground for slavery. Consequently, these individuals were exploited as unpaid labor in various reconstruction and construction activities across Assyria. During the Imperial Period (Sargonid Period), all state policies came to be viewed as forms of worship to the gods, elevating the kings to the status of servants and highest priests of the gods. This synthesis of roles, blending high priest and king as the deputy of god, birthed an absolute ruler type dominating every facet of life. This fusion consolidated an absolute authority within the king, who wielded power across societal, religious, and administrative spheres.²⁵ Absolutely, during the Neo-Assyrian Period, there was a prevailing belief that all administrative actions were executed under divine directives. This conviction bolstered the perception of the king as an absolute ruler whose authority was unquestionable. The notion that the kings received direct orders from the divine, particularly from god, served as a foundation for the unquestionable nature of this absolute monarchy. The belief in divine mandates for administrative activities not only reinforced the king's authority but also contributed significantly to the absolute and unquestionable power vested in the ruler. This conviction in the divine origin of the king's directives consolidated their control over every aspect of governance and societal life.²⁶

20 | db

1.3. The King as the Vicegerent of God

In ancient Mesopotamian societies, kings held three primary duties. They were responsible for interpreting the will of the gods, governing the country, and representing the Assyrian people before the gods. During the Old Assyrian Period, rulers referred to them-

²⁵ Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 225–226.

²⁶ Köroğlu, *Eski Mezopotamya Tarihi*, 182.

selves as *šangu* and were perceived as either priests or administrators. During this era, kings held the highest position within the clergy, functioning as the high priest.²⁷ Based on the perception of god Aššur as the true sovereign within the state structure, kings adopted the title “*šangu of Aššur*”, meaning *Priest of Aššur*. During coronation ceremonies in the Middle Assyrian Period, emphasis was placed on the god Aššur as the ultimate ruler of the land, with the kings acting as proxies for Aššur. This practice persisted into the coronation ceremonies of the Neo-Assyrian Period. In fact, the coronation hymn of Ashurbanipal explicitly underscores the status of kings as representatives of the god, stating, “*Aššur is king - the true king is Aššur! Ashurbanipal is Aššur’s [representative], created by his own hand*”.²⁸ It was emphasized that the kings, believed to have divine support, embodied the qualities of warriors and heroic figures. Assyrian kings, unwavering in their service to the gods, highlighted their extension of divine sovereignty over vast territories by commanding formidable armies. Whether ascending to the throne through inheritance or by coup d’état, these kings asserted that their selection was ordained by gods like Aššur, Enlil, Ninurta, and Ištar. They were crowned in the temple of the god Aššur, signifying their divine sanction.²⁹

Within the Assyrian belief system, the divine protection of kings was prominently depicted in the artistic symbolism of the Middle Assyrian Period. The “*melammu*”, representing the radiant circle surrounding the king in the works of Tukulti-Ninurta I, was interpreted as a shield or armor bestowed by the gods, safeguarding the ruler.³⁰ Assyrian kings had the privilege of not only being protected by the gods but also communicating directly with them. So much so that it was believed that the commands perceived as the word of gods were given directly to the kings by the gods through revelation and communicated to the whole people through the kings. The words revealed to the kings by the gods were written on tablets and kept in the royal archives. A tablet containing divine revelations dated to the Esarhaddon Period contains the following statements:

²⁷ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 252.

²⁸ Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ'da Yakınođu*, 2013, 2/163.

²⁹ Körođlu, *Eski Mezopotamya Tarihi*, 182.

³⁰ Yusuf Kılıç - Şeyma Ay, ‘Eski Mezopotamya’da Siyasi Örgütlenmede Din Olgusu’, *Turkish Studies* 8/5 (2013), 400.

“...The great Lady am I. I am Istar of Arbela, who has destroyed thy foes before thee (lit., thy feet). What words of mine which I spoke to thee couldst thou not rely upon? I a Istar of Arbela, thy foes I will flay and give them to thee. I, Istar of Arbela, before thee, behind thee, will I go: fear not. Thou art in the midst of I, in the midst of distress will come and sit down. By the mouth of Istar-la-tashiat, of Arbela.”³¹

Another significant practice highlighting the legitimacy and divine deputyship of the Assyrian kings emerged with the sanctification ritual, which began in the 13th century BC. This ceremonial act, occurring between the temple of the god Aššur and the palace, underscored Aššur as the true sovereign while portraying the Assyrian king as the earthly warrior representing the god. Within this framework, the primary responsibilities of the Assyrian kings included safeguarding existing borders and expanding the territorial holdings of the god Aššur through the conquest of new lands. As a result, Assyrian kings are depicted as tireless conquerors.³² When a rebel within Assyria challenged the king, it was viewed as an act of defiance against the god’s appointed representative, thus seen as a transgression against the god. Similarly, if a king from another state displayed hostility or declared war against Assyria, it was interpreted as a form of disrespect towards the god Aššur. In both scenarios, the rebel or enemy king was considered to have committed a grievous offense and was subjected to punishment. This understanding, embedded within the Assyrian state structure, underscored the kind of monarchy deeply rooted in religious authority and absolute power.³³ The wars fought by the Assyrians were conducted in the name of the god Aššur. As depicted in the narratives within the Assyrian king annals, god Aššur explicitly demanded retribution against enemy kings perpetually engaged in rebellion.³⁴ The primary places for recording achievements were the temples. While initially aimed at holding kings accountable to the gods, upon content analysis, these texts also revealed their function as tools for

³¹ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia 2* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1927), 2/618–619; Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ’da Yakındoğu*, 2013, 2/163.

³² Bordreuil et al., *Tarihin Başlangıçları*, 159.

³³ Egon Friedell, *Mısır ve Antik Yakındoğu’nun Kültür Tarihi*, trans. Ersel Kayaoğlu (Ankara: Dost Kitabevi Yayınları, 2006), 231.

³⁴ Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 267.

kings' propaganda among their subjects. The following statements inscribed on the wall of a temple built during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1115 - 1076 BC) constitute one of the examples of this situation:

“... Tiglath-Pileser, valiant man, armed with the unrivaled bow, expert in the hunt: The Gods Ninurta and Nergal gave me their fierce weapons and their exalted bow for my lordly arms. By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, with my strong bow, iron arrowheads, and sharp arrows, I slew four extraordinarily strong wild virile bulls in the desert, in the land Mittani, and at the city Araziqu, which is before the land Ḫatti. I brought their hides and horns to my city, Aššur. I killed ten strong bull elephants in the land Ḫarrān and the region of the River Ḫabur (and) four live elephants I captured. I brought the hides and tusks (of the dead elephants) with the live elephants to my city, Aššur. By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, I killed on foot 120 lions with my wildly outstanding assault. In addition, 800 lions I fell from my light chariot. I have brought down every kind of wild beast and winged bird of the heavens whenever I have shot an arrow. After I had gained complete dominion over the enemies of the god Aššur, I rebuilt (and) completed the dilapidated (portions of) the temple of the Assyrian Ištar, my mistress, the temple of the god Amurru, the temple of the god Bel-labira, the temple of the Ten Gods, the temples of the gods of my city Aššur. I put in place the entrances to their temples (and) brought the great gods, my lords, inside. (Thus) did I please their divinity...”³⁵

This belief in Assyrian kings' alignment with divine will and support in military endeavors persisted into the Neo-Assyrian Period. An eminent example of this is observed in the military practices under the reign of Sargon II. Historically noted in the Babylonian chronicles, Sargon II's ascension to the Assyrian throne through a coup d'état during the fifth year of Shalmaneser V's reign solidified his position as one of the pivotal figures in Assyrian his-

³⁵ A. Kirk Grayson, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia - Assyrian Periods - Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114-859 BC) 2* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 2/A.0.87.1: vi 55-vi 94.

tory.³⁶ Although the cuneiform texts detailing the ascension of the king suggest that he rose to power by divine request and order, the military activities undertaken by this king were also motivated by religious considerations. However, in reality, these military expeditions were primarily driven by economic and political objectives. This is evident in the historical records of Sargon II's famous eighth expedition. The Zagros Mountains and Lake Urmia held considerable wealth in sheep and cattle due to their expansive pastures. Moreover, the horses bred in this region held significant strategic value for the armies of that era. The area, rich in mineral resources, became a contested territory between Assyria and Urartu for these reasons.³⁷ We acquire knowledge about Sargon II's eighth campaign in 714 BC through the records of Nabu-shallum-shunu, the son of the king's chief clerk, Harmakki.³⁸ The cuneiform texts suggest that the Assyrian king was supported by divine intervention during the mentioned expedition.

24 | db

“...I had never crossed the border of Ursâ (Rusâ), the Urartian. (nor) the boundary of his wide land, (and because) I had never spilled the blood of his warriors on the (battle) field, I raised my hand (in prayer to the god Aššur) to bring about his (Rusâ's) overthrow in battle, to turn his insolent utterances against him, and to make (him) bear his punishment. The god Aššur, my lord, listened to my just words, and they were pleasing to him. He was inclined (lit.: turned) to my righteous entreaty and was amenable to my petition. He dispatched at my side his fierce weapons which, whenever they go forth, crush the uncompliant from the east to the west.”³⁹

1.4. Religious Destruction: The Transfer of Statues of God

Beyond the claim of divine support during their military campaigns, Assyrian kings implemented a significant state policy by taking the statue of the defeated city's god with them post-

³⁶ Faruk Akyüz - Koray Toptaş, 'Yeni Asur İmparatorluğu: Savaşın Kralları', *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Siyasi Tarihi*, ed. L. Gürkan Gökçek et al. (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2020), 214.

³⁷ Edwin M. Wright, 'The Eighth Campaign of Sargon II of Assyria (714 B.C.)', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2/3 (1943), 173.

³⁸ Altan Çilingiroğlu, 'Tanrı Assur'a Bir Mektup', *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* II (1984), 1.

³⁹ Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721-705 BC)*, (*The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 2*), ed. Grant Frame et al. (University Park, USA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), no 65: 123-126.

conquest. This practice aimed to psychologically demoralize the conquered territories and solidify Assyrian dominance in those regions. In ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, it was commonly believed that when a city's god's statue was taken away, the god abandoned the city, leaving it defenseless until the statue's return.⁴⁰ This practice served to underscore the supremacy of the god Aššur, elevating him to a singular position within the Mesopotamian pantheon and facilitating effective propaganda among the Assyrian people. An illustrative instance is seen in the victory of Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I over Babylonian king Kashtiliashu. Following this triumph, Tukulti-Ninurta I installed an Assyrian governor in Babylon and relocated the statue of the god Marduk to Assyria.⁴¹ Yet, it's plausible that the Babylonian account regarding the transfer of the god Marduk's statue to Assyria might be an assumption. In the cuneiform texts from the era of Tukulti-Ninurta I's reign do not provide any information supporting this event.⁴² During the Neo-Assyrian Period, it is documented that Assyrian King Sennacherib, aiming to counter threats from the southern regions while confronting Elam, seized Babylon in 689 BC. He razed and devastated the city, then transported the statue of the god Marduk from Babylon to Assyria.⁴³ The reconstruction of Babylon and the Temple of Esagila, destroyed during Sennacherib's reign, occurred under the rule of Sennacherib's son, Esarhaddon. Ascending to the throne after Sennacherib's assassination by one of his sons in 681 BC, Esarhaddon diverged from his father's policy of destructive measures. Esteeming divine cults, Esarhaddon fervently devoted himself to the restoration of Babylon and the temple of Esagila. Under his reign,

⁴⁰ Pekşen, 'Eski Mezopotamya'daki Savaşlarda', 57.

⁴¹ Köroğlu, *Eski Mezopotamya Tarihi*, 111.

⁴² Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ'da Yakınođu*, 2013, 1/467.

⁴³ Jennifer A. Brinkman, 'Foreign Relations of Babylonia from 1600 to 625 B.C.: The Documentary Evidence', *American Journal of Archaeology* 76 (1972), 279; Jennifer A. Brinkman, 'Babylonia in the Shadow of Assyria (747-626 B.C.)', *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. J. Bordman et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3/38; Joan Oates, *Babil*, trans. Fatma Çizmeli (Ankara: Arkadaş Yayınları, 2015), 126; Okay Pekşen, 'Southern Policy Of The Neo-Assyrian State And The Elamite-Babylonian Alliance', *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi* 36/2 (2021), 630-631. Süleyman Çiğdem - Murat Kılıç, 'Hititlerde Bir Psikolojik Savaş Uygulaması: Mağlup Toplumların Tanrı/ Tanrıça Heykellerinin Hattuşa'ya Taşınması', *Anadolu'nun Eski Çağlarında İnanç Olgusu ve Yönetim Anlayışı*. ed. L. Gürkan Gökçek et al. (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2021), 325 vd.

the god Marduk received profound reverence.⁴⁴ The king in question claimed that the reconstruction of the temple of Esagila was commanded by divine.

“...At the beginning of [my] kingship, in my first year, when I sat in greatness on (my) royal throne, [go]d signs [were] established for me; [in] heaven and on ear[th, he (the God Marduk) constantly sent me his] omen(s). The angry [Gods] were recon[ciled] (and) they repeatedly discl[os]ed favorable signs concerning the (re)buil[di]ng of Bab[yl]on (and) the renovation of E[sag]il...”

“...He (the God Marduk) ordered me to complete the cult centers, to renovate the shrines, (and) to organize well the rites of Esagil, the palace of the gods. (ii 45) Every month, the gods Sîn and Šamaš together, at their appearance, answered me with a firm ‘yes’ concerning the avenging of Akkad.”⁴⁵

26| db Under the reign of Ashurbanipal, Esarhaddon’s son, there occurred a grand ceremony marking the return of the god Marduk’s statue to Babylon and the restoration of the Marduk cult.⁴⁶ The primary motive for Assyrian kings prioritizing the reverence of gods and temples was political. This approach aimed to solidify the legitimacy of their rule and foster loyalty among diverse ethnic and religious factions within the expanding Assyrian Empire.

1.5. A Political Place: Temple

The pivotal role of temples, central to religious life, became a cornerstone in supporting the Assyrian State’s religion-centered political ideology, elevating the significance of temple construction and maintenance. Within Assyrian state traditions, the king, holding the titles of commander-in-chief, chief judge, and high priest⁴⁷, bore primary responsibility for temple maintenance, overseeing temple officials, and ensuring religious activities were conducted.

⁴⁴ Oates, *Babil*, 126; Koray Toptaş, *Asarhaddon Asur Kralı, Babil Yöneticisi, Mısır Fatih* (Ankara: Berikan Yayınevi, 2021), 82.

⁴⁵ Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Asarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)*. (*The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 4*), ed. Grant Frame et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), no 104, ii 23b–41b.

⁴⁶ Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ’da Yakındoğu*, 2013, 2/178; Oates, *Babil*, 128.

⁴⁷ Ercüment Yıldırım, ‘Concept of Leadership in the Ancient History and Its Effects on the Middle East’, *Sociology and Anthropology* 4/8 (2016), 713.

Temples were a prominent stage showcasing the quintessence of Assyrian kingship. They served as a canvas illustrating the achievements and valor of notable kings. Depictions of military triumphs, hunting expeditions, and the kings' religious devotion adorned the temple walls, presenting a kind of homage to the gods and functioning as a powerful propaganda tool for the subjects.⁴⁸

According to information gleaned from cuneiform texts, Assyrian kings considered temple building activities as a form of worship. Nearly every Assyrian king was noted for constructing new temples or restoring and upkeeping existing ones. A notable example of this practice is seen in Šamši-Adad I. As the most significant king of the Old Assyrian Period, Šamši-Adad I decreed that the city of Assyria should be the capital upon ascending the throne, commissioning the construction of a grand temple in this city. Šamši-Adad I placed immense importance on the construction of this temple, even pouring oil and honey onto its foundations as offerings to the gods. Additionally, he adorned the cedar trees used in construction with gold and silver, aiming to gain favor and strength from his god.⁴⁹

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The cuneiform texts contain the following statements about the temple built by Šamši-Adad I for the god Enlil:

“The temple of the god Enlil, which Erišum (I), son of Ilu-šumma, had built, had become dilapidated, and I abandoned it. I constructed the temple of the God Enlil, my lord, the fearful dais, the large chapel, and the seat of the god Enlil, my lord, which were methodically made by the skilled work of the building trade within my city, Aššur. I roofed the temple with cedar (beams). I erected cedar doors with silver and gold stars in the rooms. (Under) the walls of the temple (I placed) silver, gold, lapis lazuli, (and) carnelian; cedar resin, best oil, honey, and ghee I mixed in the mortar. I methodically made the temple of the god Enlil, my lord, and called it Eamkurkurra, ‘The Temple – The Wild Bull of the

⁴⁸ Sibel Özbudun, *Ayından Törene Siyasal İktidarın Kurulma ve Kurumsallaşma Sürecinde Törenlerin İşlevleri* (İstanbul: Anahtar Kitaplar Yayınevi, 1997), 97; Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 246–247.

⁴⁹ Susan Wise Bauer, *Dünya Tarihi*, trans. Mihriban Doğan (İstanbul: Say Yayınları, 2015), 1/50.

Lands', the temple of the god Enlil, my lord, within my city, Aššur."⁵⁰

1.6. Festivals, Feasts, and Rituals in Political Contexts

Festivals, feasts, and rituals prominently feature as integral processes within Assyrian political life, showcasing the pervasive influence of religion and reaching the pinnacle of political propaganda supported by religious tenets. Surrounded by religious practices and concepts permeating every aspect of life, the Assyrians are notably religiously oriented. The festivals and rituals embodying this piety within the society serve as crucial components of political life as well. These public feasts, orchestrated by the kings in their roles as high priests, serve as processes for reaffirming the legitimacy of political authority and effectively disseminating political propaganda. Simultaneously, they sustain the religious fervor of every member of the society.⁵¹ Religious rituals, which held significant importance across various periods of Assyrian history, assumed even greater significance during the Neo-Assyrian Period. Alongside the rituals conducted in the capital, the kings of this era actively engaged in numerous rituals held in various cities within the empire. Of particular note was the city of Babylon. Cuneiform texts detailing the festivities organized in Babylon offer noteworthy insights into the substantial involvement of Neo-Assyrian kings in these rituals. This was mainly due to the belief that all gods, notably Marduk, actively participated in the ceremonies conducted within this city. In a cuneiform text detailing Sargon II's participation in the New Year's Festival (Akitu) within Babylon, the paramount city of the Neo-Assyrian Period, the Assyrian king recounts: "*Into Babylon, the city of the lord of the gods, joyfully I entered, in gladness of heart, and with a radiant countenance. I grasped the hand(s) of the great lord Marduk, and made the pilgrimage to the 'House of the New Year's Feast' (Bit Akitu). The gods, too, came to Babylon 'to take the hands of Bel...'*" This text serves as a crucial example illustrating such interactions.⁵² By actively engaging in this ritual, perceived as a gathering of all gods, the king in question ascended to a revered

28 | db

⁵⁰ Grayson, *RIMA*, 2002, 1/A.0.39.1, 18-58.

⁵¹ Samuel Henry Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion* (Watford: William Brendon and Son, Ltd., 1953), 77.

⁵² Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 326.

position in the eyes of his subjects. Furthermore, this act bestowed great sanctity upon the Assyrian king and offered a significant advantage in garnering acceptance across all the territories under his rule. Following the passing of Sargon II, the veneration of the god Aššur proliferated across the nation under the reign of his successor, Sennacherib. This transformation elevated god Aššur to the forefront of the New Year Festival, as depicted in the Assyrian creation mythos.⁵³

According to the Mesopotamian calendar, the New Year Festivals, traditionally observed during the first eleven days of the month of Nisannu since Sumerian times, retained their rituals despite the shift brought by Assyrian dominance in the region. These festivities involved numerous religious ceremonies performed before the gods' statues, with the kings assuming significant roles in these rituals. Acting as the earthly representatives of the gods and as high priests, the kings held primary responsibility for overseeing the entire festival. Notably, the Sacred Marriage (*Hieros Gamos*), believed to symbolize unions among gods during these festivals, was mirrored in the earthly realm through the union between the king and the priestess or queen, often the leader of the religious women.⁵⁴ This practice, essentially a form of assuming the roles traditionally attributed to the gods by the kings, likely endowed the kings with distinct sanctity and greatly emphasized their status as divine deputies in the eyes of society. Given their pivotal role in religious activities, kings were frequently depicted in ceremonial attire during rituals depicting these events. This is strongly indicative of the kings' dual roles as both political leaders and clergy, which probably explains their portrayal in religious garb during these ceremonies.⁵⁵

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1.7. Oath and Prophecy in Political Contexts

Another significant administrative practice within the Assyrian state, supported by religious beliefs, involved swearing oaths. Evidence indicates that oaths were pledged to numerous gods, particularly the state god Aššur, with these gods regarded as witnesses to

⁵³ Sarıkçıođlu, *Başlangıçtan Günümüze*, 19.

⁵⁴ Gökçek, *Asurlular*, 248–249.

⁵⁵ Bordreuil et al., *Tarihin Başlangıçları*, 483.

the sworn oaths.⁵⁶ Oath-taking, a tradition dating back to the Old Assyrian Period, was a commitment to honesty involving the invocation of gods as witnesses to this truthfulness. It also entailed accepting in advance the consequences that would follow if the oath was breached.⁵⁷ Oath-taking, prevalent across various domains from commerce to everyday affairs, held a significant position in political life as well. Among the pivotal oaths in political spheres were those the kings swore upon ascending the throne. Assyrian kings were required to visit the temple and pledge their oath before the god Aššur just before assuming the throne.⁵⁸ During the Middle Assyrian Period, oath-taking, having evolved into a significant practice within political spheres, established religious commitments within treaties between Assyrian kings and their vassal counterparts.⁵⁹

Cuneiform texts mention that Adad-nārārī I, a king of the Middle Assyrian Period, compelled Šattuara, the rebellious king of Hanigalbat, to swear oaths after quelling a rebellion against his rule.

30| db

“When Šattuara, king of the land Hanigalbat, rebelled against me and committed hostilities; by the command of Aššur, my lord, and ally, and (by the command) of the great gods who decide in my favor, I seized him and brought him to my city Aššur. I made him take an oath and then allowed him to return to his land. Annually, as long as (he) lived, I regularly received his tribute within my city, Aššur.”⁶⁰

During the Neo-Assyrian Period, oath-making activities assumed greater prominence in political affairs. Assyrian kings, driven by an imperial state policy deeply intertwined with religion, compelled conquered kings to swear various oaths following military

⁵⁶ Hildegard Lewy, ‘Assyria, c.2600-1816 BC’, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. Ioworth E. S. Edwards et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1(2)/764.

⁵⁷ Hasan Ali Şahin, ‘Kültepe Metinlerine Göre Eski Anadolu Ve Asur’da Yemin’in Anlamı’, *History Studies* 4/Prof. Dr. Enver Konukçu Armağanı (2012), 413–422; Koray Toptaş - Ömer Kahya, ‘Asurca ve Babilce Metinlerde Yemin’, *Türkiye Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 23/2 (2019), 316.

⁵⁸ Bordreuil et al., *Tarihin Başlangıçları*, 483.

⁵⁹ Okay Pekşen, ‘Çivi Yazılı Kaynaklara Göre Eski Mezopotamya Toplumlarında Siyasal Erdem ve Yemin’, *İnsan, Din ve Erdemlilik*, ed. Mustafa Çakmak - Hüseyin Algur (İstanbul: DEM Yayınları, 2022), 500.

⁶⁰ Grayson, *RIMA*, 2002, 1/A.0.76.3, 4-14.

campaigns aimed at expanding their territories. They invoked gods, particularly Aššur and Adad, as witnesses to these oaths. Anyone who violated their oath and rebelled was considered not only in defiance of the Assyrian king but also against the gods, as the true sovereign of the Assyrian realm was perceived to be divine. Oaths were taken in the presence of the gods themselves.⁶¹

The Assyrian king annals underscored the compelling nature of oaths taken in the presence of Assyrian monarchs and the gods involved in war or diplomatic agreements. According to Assyrian social and political beliefs, individuals who violated their oaths were deemed to have strayed from divine order and were considered irrational. In essence, breaching an oath was considered sinful, and those who committed such transgressions were subject to punishment.⁶² According to this perception, Assyrian kings justified their political objectives with religious reasoning, securing unwavering and boundless support from the devout Assyrian society. In a text dating back to the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, the breach of a vow and the Assyrian king's response to this circumstance are outlined as follows:

“[Tutammû, king of the land Unqi], neglected [the loyalty oath (sworn by) the great gods] (and thereby) disregarded his life. *On my campaign* [...] he did not con]sult me. In my fury, [I ...] of Tutammû, together with [his] nobles, [...] I captured the city Kinalia (Kunalia), his royal city.”⁶³

Religious practices played a significant role in the decision-making processes within Assyrian politics. Assyrian kings frequently turned to methods like fortune-telling or divination when faced with crucial decisions. This method, aimed at receiving definitive “yes” or “no” responses from the gods to specific inquiries, is referred to as “*oracle texts*” in cuneiform records. Particularly in decisions impacting the nation's future, the Sun God Šamaš, often described as the “*guardian of justice*”, was consulted through this met-

⁶¹ Toptaş - Kahya, ‘Asurca ve Babilce Metinlerde Yemin’, 321.

⁶² Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ'da Yakındoğu*, 2013, 2/181.

⁶³ Hayim Tadmor - Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC), and Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC), King of Assyria, (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period 1)*, ed. Grant Frame et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 1/no 12, 3'-6'a.

hod.⁶⁴ Common inquiries regarding the future of Assyria often revolved around the results of wars, the potential outcomes of rebellions within Assyria, the prevalence of diseases, the suitability of royal marriages, and notably, the determination of the crown prince.⁶⁵ Assyrians regarded the responses to inquiries regarding the crown prince as divine decrees. According to Assyrian social and political beliefs, the determination of crown princes was attributed to the god Šamaš. However, in practice, this process essentially validated the choices made by the kings through religious rituals, cementing the unquestionable nature of their selection. This approach not only provided a divine basis for the crown prince's status but also offered absolute justification for the acceptance of the chosen heir by both the dynasty members and the populace.⁶⁶ In a text dated to the Assyrian King Esarhaddon period, the god Šamaš is addressed with the following statements:

“Šamaš, great lord, give me a firm positive answer to what I am asking you! Should Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, strive and plan? Should he enter his son, Sin-nadin-apli, whose name is written in this papyrus and placed before your great divinity, into the Succession Palace? Is it pleasing to your great divinity? Is it acceptable to your great divinity? Does your great divinity know it? Is the entering of Sin-nadin-apli, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, whose name is written in this papyrus, into the Succession Palace, decreed and confirmed in a favorable case, by the command of your great divinity, Šamaš, great lord? Will he who can see, see it? Will he who can hear, hear it?”⁶⁷

The establishment of divine approval in the selection of the crown prince intended to solidify their status on a divine pedestal, aimed to forestall potential power struggles following the king's death. However, while divine endorsement played a significant role

⁶⁴ Kuhrt, *Eski Çağ'da Yakınođu*, 2013, 2/162.

⁶⁵ H. Hande Duymuş Florioti, 'Eski Mezopotamya'da Kehanet Olgusuna Genel Bir Bakış', *Tarih Okulu Dergisi* 6/15 (2013), 23–42.

⁶⁶ Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), XXXIX; Koray Toptaş, 'Yeni Asur Belgelerinde Geçen "İna Qibit (Tanrı Buyruđu) İfadesi', *Mezopotamya'nın Eski Çağlarında İnanç Olgusu ve Yönetim Anlayışı*, ed. L. Gürkan Gökçek et al. (İstanbul: Değişim Yayınları, 2019), 404.

⁶⁷ Ivan Starr, *State Archives of Assyria IV*, ed. Simo Parpola (Helsinki: The Helsinki University Press, 1990), Dilek Şendil/no 149, 1-9.

in the selection process, it wasn't an absolute guarantee for the chosen crown prince to ascend to the throne. The appointed crown prince carried distinct responsibilities, and failure to fulfill these obligations could lead the king to seek approval from the gods to replace the crown prince.

Conclusion

The Assyrians stand apart from other ancient Mesopotamian civilizations due to their imperial policies. In the Sumerian City States Period, Mesopotamian belief systems initially took shape, evolving into religious structures gradually controlled by political authority. The Assyrians, aligning with the religious governance framework prevalent in Mesopotamia, elevated the use of religion in state affairs and its legitimization, particularly in line with their imperial ambitions. Notably, military policies were deeply intertwined with religion, leveraging the gods as a potent argument in endorsing these strategies. Although economic and political motives primarily drove military campaigns, their justification through divine mandates solidified policies rooted in religion, rendering them beyond reproach. This approach likely led Assyrian society to perceive military activities as a form of worship, ingraining the belief that fulfilling the so-called divine command—under the king's leadership, considered the earthly representative of the gods—was a sacred duty. The kings' role as god deputies led to their decrees being regarded as divine mandates. This correlation equated rebellion against the king to rebellion against god, establishing a profound connection between the two. Exploiting this belief, Assyrian kings enhanced their authority by involving the gods as witnesses in state agreements and binding them through oaths. Any breach of these agreements or potential rebellion was interpreted as an act against the gods. Within the Assyrian state's ideology, rebels were considered sinners, and the gods purportedly desired punishment for these transgressors. This perception effectively validated the imperial aspirations of the Assyrian kings.

The Assyrian state tradition embraced the religious authority bestowed upon the kings, who were revered as high priests, granting the dynasty an elevated status driven by religious power. This practice is notably evident in the selection of the heir. Assyrian kings documented in their cuneiform texts that they designated an heir with the blessing and directives received from the gods. This

approach aimed to shield crown princes from societal scrutiny and afford them a religious legitimacy akin to the kings'. However, the kings' ability to replace the crown prince at their discretion, invoking divine orders and approval, distinctly underscores the strategic use of religion in accordance with state policies.

The Assyrian kings, known for their imperial aspirations, undertook strategic measures to unite society and garner widespread support for their policies, including extensive construction initiatives. One primary approach involved erecting new temples, restoring and upkeeping existing ones, and promoting the cult of the god Aššur as a unifying force across the nation. This effort extended to newly acquired regions, where respect for local gods was upheld alongside the veneration of Aššur. Additionally, festivals played a pivotal role in this scheme. The direct involvement of kings in overseeing festivals, wherein they assumed roles traditionally reserved for gods—such as in the “Sacred Marriage” rituals—further solidified the religious authority and privilege attributed to the kings.

34 | db

All these activities were undertaken to enhance the economic potential of the Assyrian state, to unify the Assyrian people of diverse ethnic backgrounds through the unifying influence of religion, and to maintain the perpetuity of religious sentiments within society. These measures aimed to facilitate a smooth administration for the Assyrian kings, ensuring them unlimited powers and unquestionable authority.

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