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“The Revolt of Babylon” Revisited

The Value of Pap. Amherst 63’s Literary Tale within its Contemporary Context

Uzume Z. Wijnsma

Papyrus Amherst 63 is a fourth-century BCE Demotic-Aramaic papyrus from Egypt containing an amalgam of mostly religious texts. The last columns of the papyrus contain a literary tale, “The Revolt of Babylon”, which narrates the historical seventh-century BCE war between the Assyrian king Assurbanipal and his Babylon-based brother Shamash-shum-ukin. Previous scholars have connected the tale’s function or “value” to the possible role played in this war by the ancestors of the fourth-century BCE Arameans who eventually produced the papyrus, and have interpreted the tale as pro-Assurbanipal and/or pro-Assyrian (propaganda). The present paper attempts to identify some of the pitfalls involved in these previous hypotheses, partly by moving beyond the Arameans’ possible ancestral history and by grounding the tale more thoroughly in the papyrus’ contemporary context. Although the presently widely differing translations of the narrative do not allow for any certainties, this paper will argue against a simplistic yet widespread pro-Assyrian interpretation of “The Revolt of Babylon” and suggest a more ambivalently king-critical reading instead.

In the nineteenth century “Papyrus Amherst 63” was found “in an earthen jar near Thebes”, Egypt, together with several other Greek and Demotic papyri. Based on palaeography, the papyrus could be dated roughly to the fourth century BCE. Nothing else was recorded about its archaeological context.¹ However, upon examination in the early twentieth century and subsequent decades, this particular papyrus was found to be quite special: although it had been written in the Egyptian script of Demotic, its actual language was discovered to be Aramaic, a combination unique in ancient Egypt.² As the translation of the papyrus progressed, two other particular elements caught the interest of scholars: first, the majority of its contents concerned religious texts about an amalgam of (mostly Aramaic) gods, parts of which bore a striking resemblance to biblical hymns; secondly, the very last columns of the papyrus were found to be taken up by a literary tale, recording a story about events that had happened over three centuries prior to the papyrus’ creation. This story, dubbed “A Tale of Two Brothers” or “The Revolt of Babylon”,³ told of the rebellion of the Babylon-based Shamash-shum-ukin against his brother Assurbanipal, king of the Neo-Assyrian empire – a rebellion which is historically known to have happened during 652-648 BCE. It was the first attestation of such an Assurbanipal-centred tale in non-Greek sources, forming one witness to a wider spread of such stories in the ancient Near East.

Despite the position of “The Revolt of Babylon” as an important element in understanding first-millennium literary traditions (what kind of stories circulated about (past) (Assyrian) kings in the first millennium BCE? How were they portrayed and why? Etc.), interest in the papyrus has mainly been

¹ Nims and Steiner, “A Paganized Version”, 261, referencing Newberry, *The Amherst Papyri*. For the date see Vleeming and Wesselius, “An Aramaic Hymn”, 501, and Bowman, “Aramaic Religious Text”, 219, 223. Nims and Steiner wanted to date the papyrus to the late second century BCE on the basis of a peculiarity in the script and the fact that the jar contained other papyri which had second century BCE dates written on them. It should be noted, though, that the jar apparently contained nineteen different papyri while Nims and Steiner only mention the date of four of them (Nims and Steiner, “A Paganized Version”, 261-262); the dates or contents of the rest are unknown to me. Furthermore, Steiner had apparently changed his view in 1997, writing that the papyrus’ texts seemed to have been dictated “possibly at the beginning of the third century BCE, to an Egyptian scribe trained in the fourth century BCE” (Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 310).

² Although the combination of an Egyptian script or language with a foreign one has been attested multiple times, those instances mainly concerned words or phrases embedded in an otherwise Egyptian-language context; Pap. Amherst 63 is unique in Egypt in its lack of such a context as well as the sheer length of the combination (Quack, “Egyptian Writing”, 321).

³ Steiner and Nims, “A Tale”, and Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, respectively.

focussed on the parallels to biblical hymns and their significance to the history of the formation of the Bible. The attention given to the tale at the papyrus' end has been relatively peripheral, possibly enhanced by the tedious process of translating this Demotic-Aramaic narrative. Three (pairs of) scholars – Kottsieper, Sven Vleeming and Jan-Wim Wesselius, as well as Charles Nims and Richard Steiner – did make significant attempts to both translate and interpret the tale (as well as other parts of the papyrus), but much remains to be questioned. Among other things, one of the most pressing questions is one of intent, goal, function: exactly *what* was a tale relating a mid-seventh century BCE Mesopotamian war doing on a late fourth century BCE Aramaic “religious” papyrus from Egypt?

Previous hypotheses regarding the tale's function have been expressed, but they have focussed mainly on the distant history of the Arameans who eventually composed it; the analyses lack a wider historical and literary context in which the tale could be placed. Other than that, the extant translations differ and its interpretations vary. The present paper will attempt to address these problems: it will contrast and compare the available translations, comment upon the troubles of interpretation that arise from these, and, finally, it will attempt to place the tale in the historical and literary context in which it belongs. Ultimately, it will attempt to identify some of the pitfalls inherent in previously proposed hypotheses regarding the tale's “function”, and suggest a different approach of analysis to the tale's contents. Of course, as long as agreement upon the tale's translation remains absent, no absolute conclusions can be drawn from it;⁴ what is possible, though, is to provide a new framework of interpretation and to argue against a simplistic yet wide-spread interpretation of the tale as being pro-Assyrian (propaganda).

The Tale: Outline

Before reviewing previous hypotheses about the tale's function, let us first have a look at the contents of the tale itself. Presently, the only full translations of the tale have been published in Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 33-37, and Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 322-327.⁵ However, due to the difficulties of the script-language combination mentioned above, these translations can differ widely. Quoting the very first lines of the tale in both its translations will suffice to illustrate the extent of the differences:

That (in) the year (in) which was born our lord, king (6) Assurbanipal the earth was (in) peace, likewise the shapes (or: shadows) of the clouds. (7) A man whose pains he will find: When life is peaceful, the brother. A woman (8) whom he caused to be pregnant: *The child for you was torn from our house, your son is a saviour (9) and ... Because of (this) a firm name has arisen for you.*⁶

The year in which was born our lord, King Sar[ba]nabal, the land was prosperous the thin, *the split* grew thick. A man would find its gatekeepers in good health (and be told): “You, my brother, enter this gate. From our house let us fetch (lit. take) for you a morsel (of bread) and *let me roast* a goat on ... onions.”⁷

If one wishes to interpret a tale with such differing translations, one must tread very carefully. Fortunately, though, a lot of key elements *are* agreed upon and can be used for a reconstruction of the narrative's basic skeleton. Taking only these elements, the following outline can be given:

After a lament of some sort, the tale starts with an introduction of the brothers in an “omen-like” style: Assurbanipal was born in a good year/with good omens, while Shamash-shum-ukin was born in a bad year/with bad omens.

⁴ Unfortunately, I am not currently in a position to analyse the tale's semantics linguistically; I am therefore bound to (a comparison of) the translations published.

⁵ See also the translation in Steiner and Nims, “A Tale”, 69-81, published with photographs of the papyrus. Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, is an updated version.

⁶ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 33.

⁷ Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 322-323.

After years have passed, Assurbanipal assigns his brother to Babylonia, where the latter indeed goes to and resides. However, some period of time goes by, and emissaries from Babylon enter Nineveh to deliver a message to the king: “From Shamash-shum-ukin to Assurbanipal: I am king in Babylon, and you are governor in Nineveh”. Since the message angers Assurbanipal, he orders the emissaries to be imprisoned. Yet, at dawn, the turtan sends servants to the king, delivering his advice – while referencing the customs of the royal forefathers – to release the emissaries. On top of that, he advises the king to bring them to the bathhouse and to dress them in embroidered garments. As the advice pleases Assurbanipal, he orders the emissaries to be released – and indeed sends them to the bathhouse, and dresses them in embroidered garments.

Subsequently, Assurbanipal summons his sister Sherua-eterat and describes the situation to her: Shamash-shum-ukin had been appointed governor of Babylon, while Assurbanipal was king of Nineveh, and the latter had bestowed all kinds of gifts on his brother, from all kinds of countries. Sherua-eterat is to go to Shamash-shum-ukin – “the Immoderate One”/“the rotten fellow” – and speak to him. So she journeys to Babylon. There, guards going up on the city’s wall spot the coming force: “The troop which is coming is larger than messengers, smaller than warriors!” So she reveals herself as Sherua-eterat, the sister. Shamash-shum-ukin then starts to speak; in response, Sherua-eterat beckons her brother to listen to her, and advises him to go to the king. Shamash-shum-ukin replies, after which Sherua-eterat again beckons him to listen to her and to go to Assurbanipal. Finally, Shamash-shum-ukin refrains from speaking/listening, and his sister tells him that, if he does not listen to her words, something bad will/should happen. She then leaves Babylon.

When in Nineveh Assurbanipal asks his sister what “the Immoderate One”/“the rotten fellow” had said to her, Sherua-eterat answers negatively. The king then summons his turtan and orders him to go to Babylon: he is to smite the city, but spare the king’s brother. So the turtan journeys to Babylon, where the guard-episode repeats itself: “The troop which is coming is larger than messengers, smaller than the army of the king!” The turtan then directly addresses Shamash-shum-ukin, his “lord”, and advises him to go to the king. Shamash-shum-ukin answers, apparently again refusing to listen, and the bad thing Sherua-eterat had already spoken of is either verbally repeated by Shamash-shum-ukin to the turtan or does indeed happen.

The story then becomes fragmentary and unclear: the turtan is named, and he seems to be returning to Nineveh; Shamash-shum-ukin is named; something with a hand/hands in blood; Sherua-eterat appears again. Luckily, the last lines of the papyrus are slightly more readable:

the king speaks and tells the turtan to leave the palace, [for] he had said [to him] to smite Babylon, (but) to keep his brother alive.

Function and Composition: Previous Hypotheses

Previous hypotheses regarding the tale’s function have mainly rested on two assumptions: 1) the tale is pro-Assyrian, and 2) the function of the tale is dependent upon the history of the (ancestors of the) Arameans who produced it. As will be analysed below, neither of these statements can simply be upheld. Moreover, the relationship of the tale to the rest of the texts on the papyrus might reveal whether the tale should be interpreted as “religious” or should rather be seen as an independent composition written next to religious texts.

Pro-Assyrian

Especially the assumption that the tale would have been pro-Assyrian (or pro-Assurbanipal) has been pervasive; ever since it was put forward by Steiner and Kottsieper, subsequent literature has been adopting this view.⁸ However, the idea does not find direct support within the tale. The only elements

⁸ See Kottsieper, “aramäischen Texten”, 284, and “Anmerkungen”, 397-398, as well as Steiner, “A New Source”, 204, and “The Aramaic Text”, 310, followed in this by Holloway, *Religion*, 2; Frahm, “Images of Ashurbanipal”, 38; Holm, “Sheikh Fadl Inscription”, 222, 224, and “Memories of Sennacherib”, 307; Scurlock, “Whose Truth”, 466; etc.

that are used to argue for a pro-Assyrian view are elements *external* to the tale, whether elements within the rest of the papyrus (on which more below) or actual seventh-century BCE annals of Assurbanipal, episodes of which narrate the war against his brother. Similarities of the tale to the latter would supposedly point to the tale's roots in Assyrian propaganda. However, even if (elements of) the tale might have roots in cuneiform sources, this does not, on its own, prove the tale's supposed pro-Assyrian perspective. What the tale's view on Assurbanipal really was should be taken first and foremost from the narrative itself. Yet, no arguments are presented for why the tale itself would have been pro-Assyrian. Perhaps the fact that the tale introduces Assurbanipal with a good omen and ends with a dead Shamash-shum-ukin has led to this idea. These elements alone, though, are hardly enough to interpret the tale as pro-Assyrian: the introduction of a king with traditional royal and/or laudatory terminology did not mean that the king would be good or without criticism - and a "happy ending" for the continuation of empire was not the equivalent of having a respectful monarch on the throne. One has only to think of the dialectic expressed in "Westcar"'s Khufu personage, or the portrayal of "Ahiqar"'s Assyrian kings - who, in the end, remain firmly throned - to be warned against any such simplistic interpretation. Yet, "The Revolt of Babylon" is predominantly interpreted as pro-king.

The History of the Arameans

A major interest of Steiner, Kottsieper and Vleeming and Wesselius has been the specific origins of the Arameans who produced Pap. Amherst 63. While Vleeming and Wesselius have not connected these ideas to their idea of the function of the tale, Steiner and Kottsieper have.

The origin-hypotheses all revolve around the mention of a land called "Rash" in the papyrus' religious hymns, assumed to be the original homeland of the papyrus' Arameans. While Vleeming and Wesselius place this land in Syria-Palestine,⁹ Steiner and Kottsieper both locate it in or nearby Mesopotamia. For Steiner it is a land between Babylonia and Elam,¹⁰ while Kottsieper believes it to be Southern Babylonia.¹¹ Both argue that the (ancestors of the) papyrus' Arameans will have been deported from this land by Assurbanipal in the aftermath of the war (652-648 BCE) the tale recounts. This idea of the war being the cause of the destruction of these Arameans' original homeland and the deportation of their people has informed hypotheses about the origin and function of the fourth-century BCE tale: the tale is believed to stem from cuneiform propaganda supposedly spread out by Assurbanipal after the war to promote a positive view of him,¹² while the tale's eventual function in Pap. Amherst 63 is thought to have been religious. As Steiner puts it, if destruction and deportation really were the consequences of the war against Shamash-shum-ukin then "it is easy to understand why they [=the Arameans] preserved a story about that revolt for half a millennium and incorporated it into a *religious* document like our papyrus" (*italics* his).¹³ He does not further elaborate this view. Kottsieper, however, goes a step further. He specifically believes that the tale was an elegy, lamenting the historical events that caused the Arameans' deportation from Southern Babylonia. The latter theory rests for a great part on a lament preceding the tale: in Kottsieper's translation,¹⁴ it concerns the people of the "Sumpflandes" (the marshlands, i.e. Southern Babylonia), who lament the destruction of their land, after which the tale, "the object of the lament", follows. This tale will then have been a sort of elaboration on the destruction of the Arameans' homeland. Kottsieper further relates that by adopting a pro-Assyrian perspective in the tale, they attributed the *alleinschuld* for these events to Shamash-shum-ukin, the supposed instigator of the war. By taking a pro-Assyrian view and moulding Shamash-shum-ukin into the bad guy, the community could have represented itself as a victim of Shamash-shum-ukin's political crimes.¹⁵

⁹ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 9.

¹⁰ Steiner and Nims, "A Polemical Poem", 106-107.

¹¹ Kottsieper, "aramäischen Texten", 284.

¹² Steiner, "The Aramaic Text", 310, and Kottsieper, "aramäischen Texten", 289.

¹³ Steiner and Nims, "A Polemical Poem", 106-107.

¹⁴ Kottsieper, "Anmerkungen", 388.

¹⁵ Kottsieper, "Anmerkungen", 396-398.

These ideas, then, rest upon the uncertain location of the land called “Rash”, located from Syria-Palestine to Mesopotamia, and whether or not the ancestors of the papyrus’ Arameans had any direct connection to the war the tale recounts, as well as the above mentioned assumption that the tale is pro-Assyrian, upon which rest the further claims of it stemming from Assyrian propaganda. Additionally, the nature of the tale’s preceding lament and its supposed connection to the tale is essential for Kottsieper’s idea of the tale’s function. Elaborating all arguments for the location of “Rash” and the further geographical journey these Arameans may have gone through (before eventually ending up in Egypt) is beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to say that if Steiner and Kottsieper’s idea of the origin of the tale and it being specifically *religious* in Pap. Amherst 63 were true, it would give an (at least partial) “answer” to the tale’s significance in the fourth century BCE. However, this idea is quite problematic. For one thing, Kottsieper’s idea of it being an elegy greatly rests on the assumption that the tale was the object of the lament preceding it, but, as will be pointed out in the commentary below, this “lament” is interpreted in greatly differing ways; consequently, nothing can presently be said about its supposed value in relation to our tale. Even if one would take Kottsieper’s translation of the lament at face value, its supposed connection to the subsequent tale is hardly a given: nothing in the lament refers to the tale, nothing in the tale to the lament. Although both Kottsieper and Steiner claim the tale to be religious in a sense that it will have recounted a war with traumatic consequences for the papyrus’ Arameans, there is no group, whether ethnic, religious or otherwise, lamenting its fate in the tale. Nothing explicit is said about Shamash-shum-ukin being especially vicious and the cause of people’s hardships in the land. Rather, the sole object of the tale seems to be what happens between a handful of court figures, and not whatever its consequences were for whoever else. Of course, missing the ending of the tale, one cannot say with absolute certainty that such references might not have been written there – and, indeed, even if a reference was not explicitly written down, an implicit link could still have been there – but since the tale as we have it does not present us with any reason to think that its object was not the courtiers but a group who fell victim to them, it would be wrong to assume so. To go a step further, whether the tale was part of the rest of the religious content of the papyrus *at all* could be seriously questioned, on which more below.

A Babylon-Focused History

Quite a different idea regarding the tale’s “value” is related by Vleeming and Wesselius; they note that the tale’s interest must have been with “the history of the city of Babylon, an interest the background of which is not yet clear to us, but which is also evinced in Egypt by the worship of the typically Babylonian goddess Banit in Syene”.¹⁶ They further cite Assurbanipal’s saying in the tale that “afterwards (my army) will smite Babylon, but spare my brother” and a line external to the tale, at the end of column fourteen of the papyrus, reading “on account of a composition the king appointed RSPL as governor of all those who guard the book(s) of Babylon”. They further emphasise that “the fate of the city of Babylon really was the subject which interested these people, much more than the rest of this text, which deals only with the internal relations of the Assyrian royal house in the time of Shamash-shum-ukin’s revolt”.¹⁷

Their argumentation, then, relies on the occurrence of “Babylon” in the tale, the external occurrence of “Babylon” in a religious hymn in the papyrus, and the assumption that a deity worshipped at Syene will have had some bearing on the object of a literary tale found at Thebes. However, this line of argumentation presents some problems. To start with, the city of Nineveh occurs just as much in the tale as the city of Babylon does; they were important as the imperial city and the rebelling city respectively. The assumption that either one would have been the specific focus of the tale, and not the characters and their actions, cannot be upheld. Additionally, the occurrence of “Babylon” in the papyrus’ hymns is interesting in its own right, but it is questionable to what extent this can be used to say anything about the focus of the tale. It should be noted that the translation of the line at the end of column fourteen differs greatly in Steiner; although Babylon is still named, it is there a firm part of the reli-

¹⁶ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 8.

¹⁷ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 8-9.

gious hymns connected to the gods mentioned and has lost a coherent meaning.¹⁸ Furthermore, “Babylonian” gods may indeed have been an object of interest to (Egyptian) Arameans;¹⁹ in the end, though, what gods were worshipped where cannot properly be used to illuminate a literary tale about kings. Vleeming and Wesselius’ claim, then, that the tale’s focus was the history of Babylon cannot simply be upheld.

An Integral or Independent Composition

In trying to determine the “function” of the tale, its relationship to the rest of the texts on the papyrus is as important to explore as the contents of the tale itself: what was a literary tale about Assyrian kings doing on an Egyptian Aramaic papyrus filled with a variety of religious texts? Vleeming and Wesselius’ idea about this relationship interestingly differs from that of Steiner and Kottsieper’s: while the latter have interpreted the tale religiously, in keeping with the rest of the papyrus’ texts, Vleeming and Wesselius have noted their belief that the tale was not a part of these Arameans’ religious literature but an *independent* composition, included in the papyrus “on secondary grounds”.²⁰ Both the script and language of the papyrus’ tale as well as the differing contents of the texts involved may be used to argue for this.

Both Vleeming and Wesselius, and Kottsieper have noted differences of language and script between the various texts on the papyrus. According to the former the majority of the Aramaic used seems to be Official Aramaic, while the Hebrew hymns in columns twelve to thirteen were written in Aramaicized Hebrew, and the literary tale in an at least different dialect of Aramaic.²¹ As for the script, Kottsieper has noted differences in the use of Demotic signs between columns one to seventeen and eighteen to twenty-three; the script of the tale seems to have been used differently and more “freely” than in the first part,²² a phenomenon Kottsieper uses to argue that either the papyrus was “eine Sammelhandschrift aus verschiedenen schriftlich vorliegenden Quellen unterschiedlicher Herkunft” or that the scribe used a decent source for one to seventeen but “sich dann selbst an Kol. 18-23 versuchte und dabei kein so gutes Ergebnis erzielte”.²³

The idea of the different nature of the tale at the end, likely coming from a different source than the rest of the papyrus, is further emphasized by the different contents of the texts involved. The papyrus contained “a collection of cultic, pagan texts of various genres whose relationship to each other is not clear: col. vi: 1-18, is a religious poem; col. VII, a series of blessings and a prescription for sacrifices; columns xii-xiii, a number of hymns in some Canaanite dialect; and columns xvii-xxii” contain the literary tale we are discussing.²⁴ Tawny Holm has called the papyrus a “miscellany”.²⁵ Even Kottsieper agrees on the different literary nature of the tale; although he still views the “lament” starting column eighteen as an incentive to read the tale “im Kontext einer kultischen Feier”, he does state that the text “ist inhaltlich kein Kulttext”.²⁶ Finally, Vleeming and Wesselius have ended with the suggestion that

¹⁸ Part of “A Prayer to Nanai” at the end of Steiner’s column thirteen: “Over the king’s seat, Cow-head – appoint lookouts over the throne; over the throne, Cow of Babylon(ia), guards” (Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 319). Note that “after column iv in the papyrus, the numbers of the Dutch scholars are one higher than those of the Americans who number two columns iva and ivb” (Zevit, “Aramaicized Prayer”, 221).

¹⁹ E.g. Bel, Nabu, Shamash and Nergal, who were already worshipped by Arameans in Syria (Botta, “Aramaicans”, 373-374).

²⁰ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 32; they do not further specify what “grounds” these would be.

²¹ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 2, 20-22.

²² Kottsieper names several examples of such differences in consistency; e.g. whereas the sign “r2” is only used in relation to “brk” in columns one to seventeen, in columns eighteen to twenty-three it is found in different words as well and can, additionally, be replaced by the sign “L” (Kottsieper, “Hintergrund des Schriftsystems”, 103, 108-109).

²³ Kottsieper, “Hintergrund des Schriftsystems”, 109.

²⁴ Zevit, “Aramaicized Prayer”, 213.

²⁵ Holm, *Courtiers and Kings*, 77.

²⁶ Kottsieper, “Hintergrund des Schriftsystems”, 109.

“the texts in the papyrus proceed from holy and strictly religious material belonging to this Aramean group to less holy, sometimes extraneous and historical texts”.²⁷

As the practice of incorporating widely differing narratives on one and the same manuscript was not uncommon in Egypt, it may well have been the case that our tale had no inherent connection to the rest of the papyrus. The closest examples to Pap. Amherst 63 known to me would be the “Late Egyptian Miscellanies” of the Egyptian New Kingdom, manuscripts of which could contain texts ranging from didactic classical works and historical narratives to hymns, prayers, praises, magical texts and even administrative texts, with all texts on one papyrus mostly written by one single individual.²⁸ Why these texts were written down on one manuscript is not directly obvious;²⁹ however, it should in any case be clear that our tale does not have to have been an integral part of the rest of the (religious) texts on the papyrus. If the tale is indeed to be interpreted independently, there would be no direct need to interpret it as or relate it to a religious lament about destruction and deportation.

To sum up, the hypotheses mentioned above have mainly revolved around pro-Assyrianism and discussions about historical events centuries before “The Revolt of Babylon” as we have it was actually written down. The context contemporary to the time of writing, i.e. the fourth century BCE, has been neglected. Before moving on to this, though, I would like to take some time to analyse the tale itself more thoroughly. Much of the tale’s “message” has been assumed too easily. To get pro-Assyrian assumptions out of the way and to get to a fuller understanding of the narrative in general, it might be stimulating to look more closely at several episodes within the tale.

I will not attempt to provide an exhaustive commentary; instead, I will focus on those episodes which have either been used to argue for a pro-Assyrian/pro-Assurbanipal stance, or which are essential for an understanding of the tale’s “message” in general. The tale’s interpretation is, of course, intimately bound up with its translation, and - as will be shown below - it may change considerably depending on the translation followed.

The Tale: Commentary

1. The Tale’s Preceding Lament

The five lines that start columns eighteen to twenty-three and precede the birth-omens of the brothers are object of much discussion; they form perhaps the least agreed upon passage of the entire narrative. Yet, each different translation could be used to argue for one of the hypotheses mentioned above: Vleeming and Wesselius’ translation of the lines that they have titled “The poet addresses the city of Babylon”³⁰ could be used for their idea of a specific focus on Babylon, Steiner’s translation “A Lament for Nineveh After the Wedding”³¹ could be used to argue for a pro-Assyrian perspective, while Kottsieper’s “Anrede an den göttlichen König [=El]”³² features as a prominent argument in his elegy-hypothesis as he translates the lines as a lamentation of the people of Southern Babylonia. I will not further quote the differently translated lines. Suffice it to say that the contents of all three translations differ no less than their titles suggest. The only thing they seem to agree upon is the fact that it constitutes a lament of some sort. Consequently, then, this lament can presently not be used for an overall interpretation of the tale; before it might shed any light on the tale’s function, its translation and possible connection to the tale should be further researched.

²⁷ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 2, 72-74.

²⁸ Hagen, “Literature”, 84, 86-87. For examples more contemporary to our tale see Caminos, “Reuse of Papyrus”, 46-47, 49-50, and Depauw, *Demotic Studies*, 97-98, 103.

²⁹ The “Late Egyptian Miscellanies” have mostly been interpreted as scribal exercises. Hagen, however, believes this approach to be too simplistic and references Medieval manuscript tradition “where most manuscripts from middle-class contexts (*i.e.* not church or nobility) contain ‘proverbs, recipes, memoranda, and treatises on courtesy and on dreams...and romances in French and English’” used “for literate recreation, but also as works of reference” (Hagen, “Literature”, 93-97).

³⁰ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 33.

³¹ Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 322.

³² Kottsieper, “Anmerkungen”, 188.

2. The Treatment of the Babylonian Emissaries

As mentioned, similarities of the tale to its cuneiform equivalent in Assurbanipal's annals have been pointed out to further advance the argument that it may have been rooted in Assyrian propaganda; however, even if (elements of) the tale had roots in cuneiform sources, this does not, on its own, prove the tale's supposed pro-Assyrian perspective. The *differences* between the tale and the annals may be much more informative than their supposed similarities. A good example of this is the episode of the arrival and well-treatment of emissaries; this element occurs both in the tale and in the annals. The tale's specific elaboration of the episode, however, is at variance with the annals, and may provide quite a different view of Assurbanipal.

To begin with, the annals paint a fine, Assurbanipal-positive picture of the event:

The Babylonians, who had been loyal to Assyria, and (faithful) vassals of mine [=Assurbanipal], he [=Shamash-shum-ukin] deceived, speaking lies to them. He sent them to me, to Nineveh, according to (his) deceitful plan, to pay me their respects (lit., ask my peace, to greet me) (and) I, Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, for whom the great gods decreed a favorable destiny, whom they fashioned (created) in truth and uprightness, invited (lit., caused to stand) those Babylonians to a sumptuous banquet, clothed them in linen (and) brightly colored garments, put rings of gold upon their fingers, - as long as those Babylonians were staying in Assyria, they were mindful of my command.³³

This portrayal of the Babylonians as seemingly innocent men – having been deceived by Shamash-shum-ukin and merely paying their respects to Assurbanipal – who are luxuriously welcomed at the Assyrian court, stands in stark contrast with the contents of our tale: there, the emissaries have come to present Shamash-shum-ukin's devious message of rebellion, after which Assurbanipal imprisons them on a whim of anger. To take Steiner's translation (quite close, in this case, to Vleeming and Wesselius' version):

The emissaries went out from <Ba>bylon until they were ushered into Nineveh. (...) "From Sarmuge [=Shamash-shum-ukin] to Sarbanabal [=Assurbanipal]. I am the king of (!) / in (!) Babylon, and you are the/a governor of/in Ni<ne>veh. Pay tribute to me! Why should I show you respect?"

The king became angry at the emissaries. "Let them be brought down from the dining hall, / to (!) the dungeon, allotted bread and water."³⁴

This imprisonment of the emissaries, absent from the annals, may be an important element in the tale's interpretation. Is it to be interpreted neutrally/positively (i.e. Assurbanipal's anger and orders for imprisonment are understandable/justified because of Babylonia's treachery) or negatively (i.e. no matter the message, one should not imprison the messenger)? The lines following the episode might clarify how it was to be received: after Assurbanipal's orders, the turtan sends the palace a message to comment upon the king's actions. Whether the imprisonment functioned as a customary, "good" element in the king's portrayal or a deviating, "bad" one greatly depends on the specific nature – the translation – of those lines.

Vleeming and Wesselius translate as follows (*italics* mine):

In the days of your father, in the days of your father's fathers, (*when*) they had detained messengers, (9) *while* (these were) apportioned bread and water, (*afterwards*) they brought out the messengers from prison³⁵

and then clothed them with embroidered garments etc. This translation would imply that it was not unusual for the king's ancestors to imprison messengers, after which it was apparently customary to release them and treat them to luxuries. Following this translation, the turtan is not criticizing the emissaries' imprisonment, but simply advising Assurbanipal to continue to the next customary phase (i.e.

³³ Luckenbill, *Historical Records*, 301.

³⁴ Steiner, "The Aramaic Text", 323.

³⁵ Vleeming & Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 34.

well-treatment), which, then, the king indeed does. This translation would then allow the king's initial orders for imprisonment to be interpreted positively.

Although this translation may have been supported by the original text, it should be noted that the episode does not seem to be logically coherent if translated this way: although the tale may have presented the imprisonment of ("bad") emissaries as customary, their subsequent release and sudden treatment to luxuries does not seem to fit the same paradigm. Why would people marked as criminals suddenly have been released and treated well? How could this have fitted the royal customs? Why would the tale have presented it that way?

However, the meaning of the episode changes significantly when Steiner's translation is followed (*italics mine*):

From the days of your father, from the days of your father's fathers, emissaries have *not* been imprisoned, allotted bread and water. *Take out* the emissaries from the dungeon³⁶

and treat them well etc. The turtan's "advice" here is an imperative, and for good reason; after all, following this translation, the imprisonment of emissaries is not at all royal custom. Although Assurbanipal may have had a "reason" to imprison them – namely, their unfortunate message of Shamash-shum-ukin's rebellion –, they are but the messengers, and the turtan likewise corrects his king, changing his behaviour to what is royally customary. This translation, as opposed to Vleeming and Wesselius', *is* logically coherent: 1) the king imprisons on a whim of anger, 2) the imprisonment does not stroke with the royal customs, 3) the turtan advises the king to release them.

This obviously contrasts with the annals: there, Assurbanipal is the good, almighty king, spoiling the emissaries; it would have been unthinkable that the king would have been presented as ignorant of royal customs of any sort. In Steiner's version of the tale, he becomes the bad – or, at the very least, the "to-be-guided" – king, unaware of or neglecting such royal customs. If, then, Steiner's translation proves to be correct, the interpretation of Assurbanipal's portrayal in the tale may change considerably.

3. The Wish for Shamash-Shum-Ukin's Life

A similarly striking difference with the annals may be seen in Assurbanipal's wish for Shamash-shum-ukin's life. The tale makes clear that Assurbanipal wants his turtan to "smite Babylon, (but) let them keep my brother alive"³⁷ while the annals contain an entirely different message. As in the emissaries' episode, the Assurbanipal of the annals is good and almighty; behind his every action is the support of the gods. An enemy of Assurbanipal, such as Shamash-shum-ukin, was inevitably doomed to fail.³⁸ In the annals one of the royal seers is even reported to have had a dream with the message that "those who plot evil against Assurbanipal" will be apportioned an "evil death" through "the swift (thrust) of the iron dagger, (through) conflagration of fire, (through) famine (and) the outbreak of the plague".³⁹ And, indeed, the annals report that all rebels came to an end in one of these ways – with Shamash-shum-ukin being cast "into the burning flames of a conflagration" by an array of gods "who march before me [=Assurbanipal], slaying my foes".⁴⁰ The message is clear: Shamash-shum-ukin's death in the annals was inevitable and justified (he plotted evil against his king, and so he had to be – and was – destroyed). The tale seems to share no such sentiments. Whichever translation is followed, the Assurbanipal of the tale does *not* want his brother to die; he does call him "the Immoderate One/the rotten fellow", he sends his sister and then his turtan to convince his brother to surrender, he even sends an army to Babylon – yet, the tale's Assurbanipal apparently dislikes it when his brother does die, and blames his turtan for what has happened (on which more below). Instead of a divinely reigning king,

³⁶ Steiner, "The Aramaic Text", 323.

³⁷ Steiner, "The Aramaic Text", 325.

³⁸ In (Assyrian) royal literature, as Seth Richardson puts it, "a king's action was foreordained, exclusive, central, and unfailingly effective; in historical terms, change was understood to derive from divine right and predestination" (Richardson, "Sennacherib", 473-474).

³⁹ Luckenbill, *Historical Records*, 302.

⁴⁰ Luckenbill, *Historical Records*, 303-304.

then, who will slay his every foe, the king of the tale merely wants his rebel back alive, while having his turtan quell the rebellion for him in the process. This is hardly a king as known from Neo-Assyrian cuneiform sources. Of course the question is how this king of the tale will have been received by its contemporary audience. Will he have been received as good, gentle, merciful, *philadelphos* – or, rather, as bad and weak, unrightfully ordering Babylon’s destruction while sparing the revolt’s true instigator? The tale, as translated presently, does not present an immediate answer to this question – but it in any case does not “enhance” a pro-Assyrian reading.⁴¹

4. The Tale’s Ending

The fragmentary ending poses a serious challenge to our full understanding of the tale. If there ever was a crux to the story, it will now most likely be missed. However, extrapolating from the last lines of the tale, which are fairly preserved, it seems likely that the turtan somehow went into the wrong – as far as Assurbanipal was concerned – since he is ordered to leave the palace. Both Vleeming and Wesselius, and Steiner would like to see the object of the turtan’s wrong-doing in the tale’s very last line: the king orders him to leave the palace

[for] I say/said [to you:] let [my army] smite Babylon, (9) but spare my brother!⁴²

[for] [I] said [to you]: “Let them smite Babylon, (but) let them keep my brother al[ive].⁴³

The reasonable assumption would be that the turtan somehow caused Shamash-shum-ukin’s death – or, at the very least, did not succeed in keeping him alive. He is then blamed for the endeavour and sent away from court – probably living miserably ever after. However, what exactly happened to Shamash-shum-ukin remains unclear and deserves further study; depending on the translation followed, the tale’s meaning changes considerably.

The lines in which Sherua-eterat expresses her death threat/advice to Shamash-shum-ukin are important in knowing what eventually happened to him. She either says that

they will remove you from the house of Bel, indeed from the house of Marduk, (8) they will build for you a house of *the end*, a house *for your skull*: mourning and incense, (9) ... and pleasant spices. Bring in your sons and your daughters and your ancestors, (10) those who loved you. When ointment is seen upon you, ... be lamented together with your sons (11) and your daughters and your ancestors, those who loved you.”⁴⁴

or

go from the house of Bel, away from the house of Marduk. Let there be built for you a bower (lit., a house of boughs); a booth (lit., a house of sticks) do constr<uct>. *Throw down* tar and pitch and sweet-smelling/Arabian perfumes. Bring in your sons and your daughters and your doctors who have made you act brashly. When you see how (low) they have sunk on you (= to your detriment), let fire burn you together with your sons and your daughters and your doctors who have made you act [bra]shly.”⁴⁵

So, she either says that “they” – likely to be identified with Assurbanipal, who later sends out an army, and his courtiers – will build some sort of tomb for Shamash-shum-ukin where he will be mourned (i.e., implying a death threat); or, she advises him to build a booth and burn himself together with those who have made him act brashly.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Pace Kottsieper, “aramäischen Texten”, 287; he writes that the tale does indeed differ from the annals “ohne jedoch die eindeutig proassyrische Ausrichtung auch nur einmal aufzugeben. Vielmehr wird diese durch die Besonderheiten der Darstellung noch verstärkt”.

⁴² Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 37.

⁴³ Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 327.

⁴⁴ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 36.

⁴⁵ Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 325.

⁴⁶ If Sherua-eterat indeed tells Shamash-shum-ukin to commit suicide by burning himself, a link is provided between the annals, where Shamash-shum-ukin is thrown into the fire, and the Greek Sardanapalos stories, in which this mythical Neo-Assyrian king is portrayed as having burned himself in the face of defeat. Furthermore,

The translation of Vleeming and Wesselius have the words used in this episode repeated – more or less unchanged – in Shamash-shum-ukin’s conversation with the turtan; in their translation, Shamash-shum-ukin – rejecting the turtan’s attempts to make him surrender – seems to repeat Sherua-eterat’s words to the turtan, apparently telling him that Assurbanipal had sworn to do this to Shamash-shum-ukin. Thereafter, the words become fragmentary, but the turtan seems to leave. Following this translation, the tale’s ending may be summed up as follows:

the turtan fruitlessly attempts to get Shamash-shum-ukin to surrender to Assurbanipal’s kingdom; the turtan then leaves, after which Shamash-shum-ukin dies *somehow*, for which Assurbanipal ultimately blames the turtan and sends him away from court.

Naturally, following this translation, much remains uncertain: how did, eventually, Shamash-shum-ukin die? Why was the turtan blamed for it? Did the turtan actually kill the rebel brother against Assurbanipal’s wishes and was his banishment from court, then, to be expected – deserved, even? Whatever happened in the fragmentary ending, with the “hand with blood” and Sherua-eterat’s second appearance?

Steiner, however, has a different interpretation. In his translation Sherua-eterat’s words are not a prediction but an order/advice to burn himself. Later on, in the conversation with the turtan, the latter threatens to capture Babylon (a passage which is translated differently by Vleeming and Wesselius),⁴⁷ to which Shamash-shum-ukin responds by apparently following his sister’s advice: he goes away from the house of Bel etc. and burns himself together with his sons, daughters and doctors. Again, the words become fragmentary, but the turtan seems to leave after an unreadable gap in the line. For comparison:

[let him be mourned] together with his sons [and his daughters] (11) and his ancestors, those who loved him. The turtan [] ... [] (12) They made him ascend the chariot. He set his face [towards] Sarmanki⁴⁸

[burned h]im ... with hi[s] sons [and his daughters] and his doc[tor]s who had made h[im] act brashly. The g[en][er]al keeps al[ive] ... y[ou]ng <and> old. He [we][nt] [out] [from the palace]. They seated him in the chari[ot]. He (!) [se]t [hi][s] fa[c][e] towards <Ba>[bylon]. (*sic*!) Sarmuge [he took] [with] [him].⁴⁹

The terminology of the ascending of the chariot and the setting of the face towards either one of the cities is the same as every other time one of the tale’s characters journeys between Nineveh and Babylon; probably, then, this line tells of the turtan’s return to Nineveh. If one takes Vleeming and Wesselius’ translation, this would be an odd thing to do: in their version, nothing has happened but Shamash-shum-ukin’s repeating of his sister’s words, and yet the turtan – sent with an entire army to Babylon – leaves it at that. Although the tale then becomes too fragmentary to know what exactly the turtan will have done in the meantime to be expelled from court at the tale’s end, it is unlikely that the turtan will have done whatever it was he did to earn the blame for Shamash-shum-ukin’s death *after* he had already returned to Nineveh. More likely is, then, Steiner’s interpretation that an *action* takes place between the turtan’s conversation with Shamash-shum-ukin and his return: in Steiner’s transla-

it may be interesting to note that the motif of self-immolation in the face of defeat circulated more widely in the ancient Near East (e.g. Sardanapallos (Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, *History of Persia*, 147ff), Bacchylides’ Croesus (Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 65-67), the biblical Zimri (1 Kings 16:18; West, “Croesus’ Second Reprieve”, 419), etc.) and was divergently received: whereas Zimri’s self-immolation seems to have been viewed as righteous retribution for Zimri’s sins, self-immolation in some of the Greek sources seems to have had a flavour of (tragic) heroism. It would be interesting to know how the audience of our tale would have received such a death.

⁴⁷ Steiner translates “Then if so, listen to your words and may you give <heed> to your remarks. Begone, for the wall of Babylon in three days / after a day we shall capture; for the wall *I shall breach* af<ter> a day.” (Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 326), while Vleeming and Wesselius read “While you made me hear your words, and (while) you came to your saying, you scattered the *Arabs* who live in Babylon! (7) He has sworn: we shall fight him/those who live in ... My brother has sworn:” (Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 37).

⁴⁸ Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 37.

⁴⁹ Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 326.

tion, the action involves Shamash-shum-ukin's following of his sister's advice and burning himself to death (instead of seeing this episode as a recap in words of the earlier death threat/advice). The subsequent fragmentary lines – which Vleeming and Wesselius deem too damaged to be translated – would then have the turtan returning to Nineveh, *with* Shamas-shum-ukin, in what is apparently an attempt to save him:

Away they hu[rr]ied, and they [ca]me ... men ... The doctor pounds balm [and] [cas]sia; (with) fran[kinc][ense] and lau[da][num]. He bandages ... He supports ... on ... a be[d]. [He ga]ve ... and [he hurried] ... [up] to the wall ...⁵⁰

If this is indeed what is written, the ending of the tale can be summarized as follows:

the turtan fruitlessly attempts to get Shamash-shum-ukin to surrender to Assurbanipal's kingdom; Shamash-shum-ukin, realizing that he will be defeated by the turtan's army at the gate, then follows his sister's advice and kills himself; the turtan, charged specifically to keep Shamash-shum-ukin alive, immediately brings him to Nineveh in the hopes of saving him; in the end, Shamash-shum-ukin does die, and Assurbanipal blames the turtan and sends him away from court.

Here, then, we would have a story of a well-meaning turtan, correcting his king's behaviour where he must (see "The Treatment of the Babylonian Emissaries" above), loyally following his king's orders to head an army against a rebelling city, trying to save – on his king's wishes – the rebel-brother from his own self-immolation and yet, in the end, being blamed for the endeavour and banished from court. This, then, hardly seems to be an Assurbanipal – or "king" – applauding tale. Taken together with the rest of the commentary, it may in any case be clear that the "pro" meaning has been assumed too easily.

A New Interpretative Framework: Historical and Literary Context

As seen above, the tale has previously been analysed in isolation from its contemporary historical and literary context while focus has been given to possible historical events centuries prior to the papyrus' creation. However, when this tale was written down in the fourth century BCE, a much greater literary tradition concerning past kings and courts – some of which were specifically Assyrian, as in our papyrus – already existed and continued to flow. Unfortunately, an overview of all such stories relevant to our tale is beyond the scope of this paper; some brief remarks will have to suffice.

"The Revolt of Babylon" is not the only example of Egyptian Aramaic literature concerning Assyrian kings. Two other Aramaic texts may be placed in the same tradition: the famous Elephantine manuscript of "Ahiqar"⁵¹ and the difficult-to-read Sheikh Fadl inscription in Middle Egypt,⁵² both dating to the fifth century BCE, narrated events featuring Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, respectively the grandfather and father of Assurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin. Such stories further existed beside a native Egyptian literary tradition that was similarly concerned with past, and sometimes foreign, monarchy, e.g. the Egyptian tale "Naneferkasokar and the Babylonians" from the third/second century BCE.⁵³ The Assyrians specifically seemed to have been an object of interest in Egypt in Graeco-Roman times; several (fragments of) stories attest to their popularity, including the largest story cycle ancient Egypt ever knew: the Roman story cycle of Inaros, featuring seventh-century BCE Egyptian heroes fighting off the Assyrian enemy forces.⁵⁴ Such stories can be found in many more literary traditions within the ancient Near East. Their continuous and cross-cultural relevance is made particularly clear by

⁵⁰ Steiner, "The Aramaic Text", 326.

⁵¹ For an overview of the history of the traditions concerning the famous rise and fall of Ahiqar, portrayed as advisor to king Esarhaddon, see Holm, "Memories of Sennacherib".

⁵² Although difficult to read, several seventh-century BCE Egyptian kings, among which possibly Inaros, and the Assyrian Esarhaddon seem to feature in the story. For an extensive treatment of this inscription see Holm, "Sheikh Fadl Inscription".

⁵³ For more see Holm, *Courtiers and Kings*, 137-141, 92, 179-180, 141-144.

⁵⁴ For the Inaros cycle and other relevant stories see Ryholt, "Assyrian Invasion", 491-495.

“Ahiqar”, which was not only found in fifth-century BCE Aramaic and first-century CE Demotic,⁵⁵ but also in cuneiform in second-century BCE Mesopotamia⁵⁶ and in the Jewish book of “Tobit”, possibly written down in the first half of the Hellenistic period.⁵⁷ To expand our scope even further: Greek historians were writing about the garbled Assyrian figure of “Sardanapallos”⁵⁸ at the same time that Mesopotamian scribes were copying letters attributed to their ancient king Assurbanipal,⁵⁹ while the traumatic siege of Jerusalem was recorded in biblical tradition connected to the “evil” Sennacherib⁶⁰ – a king who likewise featured in an apparently Egyptian story recorded by Herodotus about an Assyrian invasion of Egypt.⁶¹ The list could go on.

The question is, of course, why such stories were continually written and re-written. The notion of simple “historical interest” does not cover the extent and the nature of all of the stories told; surely a figure such as Inaros did not become so popular in Roman times just because it was an interesting piece of “history”. Other factors must have contributed to such continued interest in the characters and events of the past.

A New Interpretative Framework

Rather than interpreting stories as one-dimensionally “historical” or “religious”, the possibility of a variety of values attached to tales has been explored before, grounding them more thoroughly in their literary and historical contexts and appreciating the possible interests of the audiences involved. For example, if the Sheikh Fadl inscription really is a predecessor of the later Inaros cycle, it does not seem coincidental that this tale concerning a seventh-century BCE Egyptian Inaros battling the Assyrians was written down at a time when a contemporary Inaros led a rebellion against the Achaemenids.⁶² Even “Daniel”’s tales about Nebuchadnezzar, explicitly related to historical deportation and exile - phenomena which, as we have seen above, have also been linked to the Arameans’ interest in our tale - have been interpreted more multi-dimensionally than just “historical” or “religious”. Such tales can be placed in the same tradition as other biblical tales about ancient Judean minorities dealing with the vicissitudes of foreign kings: Egyptians in “Exodus”, Assyrians in “Tobit”, Babylonians and Achaemenids in “Daniel” etc. Such stories have been interpreted as appealing to Hellenistic Judeans precisely because they still lived as minorities under the aegis of foreign, “heathen” courts, providing a “life-style for diaspora”.⁶³ The Elephantine version of “Ahiqar” – especially relevant to our tale as it likewise concerns an Egyptian Aramaic tale about the Assyrian court - might similarly tell us something about contemporary Elephantine views on (Achaemenid) kingship. Interestingly, the story seems to reflect an ambivalently king-critical attitude, as do its proverbs: exhortations to loyalty and obedience and a view of the king as glorious were paired with a portrayal of the monarch as a possible source of danger and whimsical wrath⁶⁴ - something to keep in mind when reading “The Revolt of Babylon”. The point, in any case, is that such stories did not merely concern an ancient past. They could be read as entertainment and as metaphor or example for the present; they could contain “nationalist” sentiments (e.g. the Inaros cycle), religious praise (such as found in biblical books), and didactic lessons (e.g. “Ahiqar”) – all dictating the continuous relevance of such “historical” stories to ancient audiences. With time, such stories could be reduced and added to, transformed and updated. Assyrian kings came to conflate with their Babylonian and Achaemenid successors (e.g. the “Assyri-

⁵⁵ Holm, *Courtiers and Kings*, 88-92.

⁵⁶ Holm, “Memories of Sennacherib”, 302.

⁵⁷ Holm, “Memories of Sennacherib”, 309.

⁵⁸ Breucker, *Babyloniaca*, 481-483; see also Frahm, “Images of Ashurbanipal”, 41-45.

⁵⁹ Goldstein, “Late Babylonian Letters”; see also Lambert, “Historical Literature”.

⁶⁰ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 443-446.

⁶¹ Herodotus, *Histories*, II 141; Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 449.

⁶² Noted by Holm, “Sheikh Fadl Inscription”, 223.

⁶³ Collins, *Daniel*, 51; see also Gnuse, “Prison to Prestige”, 31.

⁶⁴ Bledsoe, “Conflicting Loyalties”. See also Porten and Yardeni, *Aramaic Documents*, 37, and Rajak, “Angry Tyrant”, 116-117.

an” Nebuchadnezzar with his Persian-period general in “Judith”),⁶⁵ but their general value as parables of king and court was maintained, “with the underlying verities all the more emphasized for their transhistorical, even time-traveling, power”.⁶⁶

Besides the specifically individual purposes of narratives, it might likewise be interesting to look at more general literary motifs in Achaemenid and Graeco-Roman times. The way past kings and courts were portrayed may provide us with some interesting insights into the “hopes and fears” of the age and a further question of how our tale would have related to this. Such motifs have been discussed in a recent article by Seth Richardson; in describing a variety of literary traditions (biblical, Egyptian, Greek, etc.) that came to revolve around the figure of Sennacherib, Assurbanipal’s grandfather, Richardson noted some general trends within these stories that lead him to characterize them as “a kind of colonial resistance literature”.⁶⁷ Not only were those stories “openly or implicitly anti-imperial” – i.e. “critical of Assyria’s imperial power, and secondary allusive to later empires (Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome)” – but the trend was also expressed by the fact that the primary roles of such tales became predominantly filled by non-royal actors while miracles, magic and martyrdom became ever more important in “the conception of crucial historical events”. Both phenomena relegated the kings of the empires to the background as more or less passive figures – e.g. as happened in “Daniel” and “Ahiqar”, stories in which these wise men, and not their kings, were the protagonists.⁶⁸ The literary realm was no longer dominated by the almighty kings of old, starring in their own monuments, but more and more by such *ummanu*.⁶⁹ As these stories were written down by and for elites, such a focus expressed, in Richardson’s view, the interests of native elites within the various provinces of empires (Assyrian, Babylonian, Achaemenid, etc.) now ruled not by local kingship but by far-off monarchs instead. The tension that existed between the self-interests of the native elites and the distant monarchs they had to deal with became expressed in a sort of “resistance to empire” within these tales, “safely domesticated by placing it in a deeper past”.⁷⁰ A similar idea is expressed by Michael Chan; he notes that the satirical portrayal of royal rage in Greek and biblical stories (e.g. Nebuchadnezzar’s outbursts in “Daniel”), no matter the stories’ own specific purposes, had the result of “a literary delegitimation of the king and the court”.⁷¹ Not all stories discussed were really *about* social elites or *about* – in Richardson’s case – Sennacherib *per se*, but the fact that these stories reflected such themes did say something about the “anxieties” of the age.⁷²

Furthermore, it should be appreciated that literature cannot only reflect, but also *generate* hopes, fears, dreams, etc. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on this in detail; suffice it to say that Chan relates such phenomena as “aggressive humour” to a “‘release valve’ for those living in the shadow of an empire” and the social function of such tales as uniting its audience “around community sentiments towards imperial power”,⁷³ while Richardson has explored his stories more generally as a response by ancient Near Eastern communities to the world-imperialization they had been subjected to. In his words, the stories that are sometimes seen as simply “confused” or “bad” history were formed by a “motivated forgetting”; they could be “purposeful re-editions of existing historical knowledge” to re-narrativize “the past experiences of empire’s communities therapeutically: the repetition of reinvented pasts preserved collective identity beyond the traumas of conquest and domination which needed to be ‘forgotten’”.⁷⁴

⁶⁵ Dalley, *Esther’s Revenge*, 217.

⁶⁶ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 502-503.

⁶⁷ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 465.

⁶⁸ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 464-465.

⁶⁹ Richardson’s shorthand (Akkadian) term for “the wider community of administrators and scholars everywhere who made empires work” (Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 464).

⁷⁰ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 467.

⁷¹ Chan, “*Ira Regis*”, 23.

⁷² Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 484.

⁷³ Chan, “*Ira Regis*”, 23-24.

⁷⁴ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 493-494, 497, 500.

“The Revolt of Babylon” Revisited

It is possible that the papyrus’ Arameans really did associate the tale’s war with an expulsion from their original homeland, a view proposed by previous scholars, though quite hypothetical. This would then lie in a similar vein as biblical tales connected to Judean exile. Even then, though, a multiplicity of values must not be forgotten, just as with “Daniel” and other “exilic flavoured” narratives. Keeping in mind the interpretative framework discussed above, “The Revolt of Babylon” may be interpreted in a new way than as simply “religious” or as an alleged copy of “pro-Assyrian propaganda”. Of course, because of the tale’s differing translations and the fragmentary nature of its ending, nothing can be claimed with certainty, but some suggestions may be given.

Other than simply entertaining, “The Revolt of Babylon” might have been read as a story concerning the problem of royal succession generally and fraternal rivalry in particular. The following might just be a shot in the dark, but interest in such a story in the late fourth century BCE might not be surprising since the succession of Achaemenid kings had not been without trouble. In 424/423 BCE Ochus, bastard son of Artaxerxes I, was recognized in Babylonia as the new king, while his half-brother Xerxes was recognized as king elsewhere. In the end, Ochus only triumphed after having killed Xerxes and yet another ambitious half-brother.⁷⁵ In 338-335 BCE the line of succession was likewise garbled.⁷⁶ Finally, the prime example of fraternal rivalry in the period was, of course, the war between Artaxerxes II and his brother Cyrus the Younger, which, after a decisive battle at Cunaxa, ended in the death of the latter in 401 BCE.⁷⁷ When, then, the tale’s Sherua-eterat is made to exclaim “Brother and brother quarrelling!”⁷⁸, might there have been an echo of recognition as to these far more recent Achaemenid brothers fighting amongst themselves?

More importantly, one could keep Richardson’s notes in mind about the complex portrayal of kings in contemporary literature. Although “The Revolt of Babylon” does not fit into “Ahiqar”’s “disgrace and rehabilitation of a minister”⁷⁹ pattern and does not show all characterizations discussed by Richardson – e.g. there is no element of the divine or magical in the story as we have it –, the elements of implicit critique and the passive king may nonetheless be interesting to look at. As noted in the commentary above, we may be seeing such phenomena when, for example, the turtan seems to be correcting Assurbanipal’s misbehaviour regarding the emissaries, in that case possibly changing Assurbanipal’s portrayal from an all-knowing king to a to-be-guided one. The same possible change from almighty and ruthless to a more complex portrayal was, as noted above, found in the wish for Shamash-shum-ukin’s life as well. It is likewise interesting to note that it is not the king but his sister and his turtan who travel to Babylon in hopes of quelling the rebellion; Assurbanipal stays behind in Nineveh. One is reminded of Richardson’s comment that “in every instance in which a non-royal actor effects narrative change, a king is thereby denied the position of agent”.⁸⁰ May we see something of the “passivity” of kings in this as found in other literature of the period? May “The Revolt of Babylon” have been as ambivalently king-critical as our Egyptian Aramaic manuscript of “Ahiqar”?

Conclusion

We have identified some of the pitfalls in previously proposed hypotheses regarding the tale’s function; we have seen that the tale may be interpreted as an independent composition, free from the religiosity of the rest of the papyrus’ texts, and that, additionally, it cannot simply be interpreted as a pro-

⁷⁵ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 310-312.

⁷⁶ Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 419.

⁷⁷ Note that this fraternal rivalry may have been especially significant to Egypt since it was in this period that Egypt successfully revolted and regained independence from the Achaemenids until 343/342 BCE. Egypt may have taken the opportunity to revolt precisely because of the crisis caused by Cyrus the Younger – although the opposite may have been equally true (Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 348-349).

⁷⁸ “Brother and brother quarrelling – who does not rejoice about them?” (Vleeming and Wesselius, *Studies* Vol. 1, 35) or “a man (lit., a brother) and [his] brother are quarrelling *on account of one of (!) them*” (Steiner, “The Aramaic Text”, 325).

⁷⁹ Collins, *Daniel*, 41.

⁸⁰ Richardson, “Sennacherib”, 477.

Assyrian narrative. In the end, what the value of “The Revolt of Babylon” was *exactly* has to remain speculative, pending new research regarding its translation. Such research would benefit from a re-analysis of the tale’s portrayal of the figures involved, Assurbanipal especially, in the light of the commentary above. Either translations need to be altered or the contents of specific passages demand explanation at the least. The contents of the hymn beginning column eighteen and its possible relationship to the tale are likewise important to explore further. When such obstacles of translation and interpretation are reduced, research can hopefully advance to more specific questions, e.g. the surprisingly prominent role of Sherua-eterat, the nature of Shamash-shum-ukin’s death and its possible relation to other ancient Near Eastern motifs of self-immolation, etc. Despite these vagaries, though, we have seen the tale’s embedment in a larger stream of tradition about past (Assyrian) kings. Instead of assuming a one-dimensional “religious” or “historical” value, the possibility of a multiplicity of values attached to the narrative, from entertaining to king-critical, should be kept in mind. Like tales such as “Ahiqar” and “Daniel”, “The Revolt of Babylon” may get us closer to an understanding of first-millennium BCE views on and attitudes towards the complex institution of monarchy in the ancient Near East.

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