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# My Brother's Keeper: Assurbanipal versus Šamaš-šuma-ukīn

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**Abstract:** When Esarhaddon named his successors, he split the empire between two of his sons, with Assurbanipal as king of Assyria and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as king of Babylonia. This arrangement functioned until 652 BCE, at which point a civil war began between the brothers. The war ended with Assurbanipal's victory and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death in 648 BCE. While Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death is mentioned in several of Assurbanipal's inscriptions, it is still unclear how the king of Babylon met his end, and scholars have suggested theories ranging from suicide, assassination, execution, and accidental death. By offering a reexamination of the evidence for royal death in general and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's demise in particular, this article explores how possibly taboo topics such as fratricide, regicide, and suicide were depicted in Neo-Assyrian state texts and how Assurbanipal appears to have coped with his brother's rebellion and death, especially as compared to Assyrian treatments of belligerent and rebellious foreign kings. This article argues that the relative silence around Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death is due to the fact that, while he was an enemy combatant, he was nonetheless a member of the Assyrian royal family and a legitimately-installed king. Overall, this article concludes that Assurbanipal uses several rhetorical strategies to distance himself from Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, especially invoking *deus ex machina* as a way to avoid even the potential accusation of fratricide and ultimately erasing his brother from the written record and Assyrian history.

**Keywords:** Assyria, Assurbanipal, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, suicide, fratricide, regicide, brotherhood, death

*Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field."  
While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.  
Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"  
"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"  
The Lord said, "What have you done?  
Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me  
from the ground."  
Gen. 4: 8–10 (NIV)*

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# 1 Prologue

This is a tragedy of identities, and, like many such stories, it contains strife and betrayal and ultimately ends in the dramatic death of one of its main characters. At its center are two brothers, but they could as easily be described as two rulers, two Assyrians, two Sargonid sons. The protagonists are Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, co-regents eventually turned rivals. Their father, Esarhaddon, had set up provisions splitting the Assyro-Babylonian territory he ruled over between his two successors. This unexpected move was likely due to Esarhaddon's own traumatic and chaotic rise to the Assyrian throne after the murder of his father, Sennacherib, who had been killed by Esarhaddon's brothers. By Esarhaddon's own account, this slaying was motivated by jealousy after Sennacherib had named Esarhaddon as his heir. Esarhaddon claims to have escaped certain death at his brothers' hands only by fleeing to safety until he could rightfully take the Assyrian throne. Presumably seeking to avoid the same deadly fraternal rivalry between his potential heirs, Esarhaddon named Assurbanipal as the successor to the Assyrian throne and designated Šamaš-šuma-ukīn for sovereignty over Babylonia in 672 BCE, about four years before he died.<sup>1</sup> Scarcely could he have anticipated that, by 652 BCE, tensions between his heirs would far surpass the strife that he had experienced with his own brothers—indeed, that a full-scale civil war would break out between Assyria and Babylonia, culminating in the fall of Babylon and death of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn in 648 BCE.<sup>2</sup>

Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was a unique case in the Assyrian Empire: he was the only member of the Assyrian ruling family to accede to the Babylonian throne and never to the Assyrian one, by intention.<sup>3</sup> Though he was an ethnic and cultural Assyrian, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's royal inscriptions depict a quintessential Babylonian king, one who adopts the Babylonian image and idiom to an extent unprecedented in the Babylonian inscriptions commissioned by other Assyrian kings.<sup>4</sup> This dual identity was largely innocuous until the civil war brought it into focus, causing an identity crisis to play out on the international stage. This identity crisis went beyond the tension of brothers in control of different polities facing off, as it complicated the traditional Assyrian inscriptional conventions not only about foreigners and enemies, but also those that applied to Assyrian

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1 RIMB 2: 248, Frame (2007): 95.

2 RIMB 2: 248.

3 Sennacherib's first crown prince, Aššur-nādin-šumi, acted as king of Babylon during his father's reign but, had he not been deposed, would eventually have become king of Assyria as well. This was not the case for Šamaš-šuma-ukīn.

4 For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Zaia (Forthcoming).

royal family members. This paper addresses the complex identity of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as simultaneously Assyrian royalty and Babylonian adversary by exploring how his familial, political, and cultural affiliations affected the way that his death, a persistent controversy in modern scholarship, was reported in the Assyrian royal inscriptions and how such potentially taboo topics as royal death, regicide, suicide, and fratricide were conceptualized in Assyrian texts. In doing so, this paper addresses how Assurbanipal and his scribes balanced the usual conventions for traitorous enemy kings against the traditional reluctance to discuss the death of Assyrian royalty to ultimately explain away and erase Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's betrayal and death.

## 2 Act I: The silence of Assyrian royal death

How Šamaš-šuma-ukīn met his end remains a source of scholarly debate. His death is recorded in Assurbanipal's Assyrian inscriptions, but there is ambiguity as to whether he was executed, committed suicide, died accidentally, or was killed in some other way; the texts say only that it was a *mūtu lemnu* "cruel death" and that the gods *ina miqit* <sup>d</sup>*gīri iddūšuma uḥalliqa napšātsu* "consigned him to a fire and destroyed his life" with one inscription stating that the gods <sup>d</sup>*gīri qātūšu ušāhizū ušaḳmū paḡaršu* "made the fire-god grasp his hands (and) had his body burned."<sup>5</sup> Assurbanipal's Babylonian inscriptions are silent regarding the end of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's reign and life and subsequent Assyrian kings likewise do not mention him, as if he had never existed.<sup>6</sup> The Šamaš-šuma-ukīn Chronicle and *akītu* Chronicle mention Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's rebellion but both talk around his defeat, omitting his demise and even his name in these records, calling him simply "the king."<sup>7</sup> In terms of iconography, a relief from Assurbanipal's North Palace in Nineveh depicts the king's soldiers handing him the Babylonian crown and the royal insignia, symbols of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's downfall, but the Babylonian king himself is absent.<sup>8</sup>

5 RINAP 5 Asbpl 6: ix 21' -ix 24'; 7: viii 55'-viii 61'; 8: viii 16''''-viii 20''''; 23: 108–111. Van de Mieroop (2016: 32) speculates that it may have been suicide but refrains from making definitive claims. On the role of the fire god's name to designate this particular type of fire, see below.

6 In fact, it does not appear that anyone dies in Assurbanipal's Babylonian inscriptions, but that is likely due to the range of genres attested, which does not include Assyrian-style military reports or annals.

7 Grayson (1975): 32–36, 128–32.

8 The relief was found in Room M ("the Babylonian Room"), see Barnett (1976): 46 (Pl. XXXV) and Da Riva and Frahm (1999/2000): 167.

Von Soden has argued that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's *simmagir* official, Nabû-qātī-šabat, cast him into the fire, though he remarks that it is unclear whether this was a case of assisted suicide or assassination.<sup>9</sup> A later Aramaic manuscript in Demotic script (Papyrus Amherst 63) includes a fire element as well in retelling the story of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's rebellion, with cursed Babylonian king Sarmuge (Šamaš-šuma-ukīn) receiving the advice of his frustrated sister that, if he does not return to Nineveh and make amends with his brother Sarbanabal (Assurbanipal), he should build a room full of incense, perfumes, tar, and pitch so that he can set himself, his family, and his palace on fire when Babylon inevitably falls to Assyria.<sup>10</sup> A general (*turtānu*) travels to Babylon but likewise fails to convince Sarmuge to seek an audience with Sarbanabal.<sup>11</sup> The general's warning that Sarbanabal would retaliate against Babylon prompts Sarmuge, according to Steiner's interpretation, to follow his sister's suggestion, turning away from the temple of Marduk to build his own dwelling of boughs, tar, pitch, and perfumes before bringing in his children and doctors and setting it all alight.<sup>12</sup> Despite attempts to spare Sarmuge, the king dies<sup>13</sup>—the text ends with the grief of Sarbanabal and his anger towards the general who catalyzed his brother's death, which van der Toorn interprets as due to Sarmuge's own army rather than earlier interpretations of suicide: the general says “the enemy is very much terminated, remember you his end: for his own army burned him.

<sup>9</sup> Von Soden (1972: 85) writes that “es ist nicht ganz undenkbar, daß dieser damit einem Wunsch des verzweifelten Königs entsprach; wahrscheinlich ist das angesichts des qualvollen Feuertodes allerdings nicht. Assurbanipal sagt in Prisma A IV 51, die Götter hätten seinen feindlichen Bruder in den Feuerschlund geworfen (*ana mi-qit* <sup>d</sup>*Gira a-ri-ri id-du-šū*), nennt aber den Vollstrecker des Willens der Götter nicht. Nach ABL 972 war Nabû-qātē-šabat vielleicht nach seiner grausigen Tat vor Assurbanipal erschienen in der Hoffnung, dafür belohnt zu werden. Die entehrende Behandlung, der der König ihn später unterwerfen ließ (s.o.), zeigt, daß diese Rechnung nicht aufgegangen war. Wir dürfen vermuten, daß auch er später getötet wurde.” This conclusion is followed by Ito (2015: 139–40) with especial attention to the evidence from the epistolary corpus. Another recent discussion can be found in Dietrich (2016): 130–31.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner (1997): 322–27 (replacing the earlier translation in Steiner and Nims (1985): 63–65), Dietrich (2016: 132–34). The Aramaic version was “probably recorded in writing, after some time of oral transmission, in the sixth century BCE in southern Syria and known from a later papyrus in Demotic script found at Elephantine,” according to Frahm (2003): 38–39. The most recent translation of Papyrus Amherst 63 can be found in Van der Toorn (2018): 217–37.

<sup>11</sup> Steiner (1997): 326.

<sup>12</sup> Steiner (1997): 326. Van der Toorn's (2018: 233) edition credits the general with starting the fire and attacking the city.

<sup>13</sup> Steiner (1997: 326–27) reads the text as recording Sarmuge's death, attempts at revival, and the mourning of the daughters of Assyria, but an alternate translation and interpretation has recently been presented in Van der Toorn (2018: 234–35).

They set fire to the house of the one who controls heaven and earth” while the king responds “let the [army] come (back) to me. And if you [still have] some compassion, turn your face to me. Come to me, to the palace]. I said [to you]: ‘Let them slay Babylon, but spare my brother!’”<sup>14</sup> While the historicity of this story is debatable, it captures well the complicated feelings of Sarbanabal as he grapples with his brother’s rebellion and death. Sarbanabal’s last statement is particularly powerful, separating the traitorous Babylon from the fallen king, concluding the narrative by reaffirming Sarmuge’s identity as his brother.<sup>15</sup>

Greek retellings seem to be based on Ctesias’ *Persica*, preserved in citations in the works of other authors.<sup>16</sup> The *Persica* appears to have given an alternative account, as Steiner and Nims write that Ctesias

reports in his *Persica* 17 (written 250 years after the event) that the fatal fire was ignited at the king’s request and that his death was a suicide. According to this account, King Sardanapallos (= Assurbanipal!) died with his queen and concubines (but not his three sons and two daughters) in a wooden chamber which he had constructed for the occasion atop a huge pyre in his palace and which he had filled with all of his fabulous wealth.<sup>17</sup>

The later traditions are historically problematic, however, and cannot clarify contemporary sources. Essentially, all that can be said conclusively is that the contemporary sources claim that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn died because of a fire, and that this detail captured the imagination enough to be incorporated (and embellished) within later conceptions of this event.<sup>18</sup>

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**14** The translation of Steiner (1997: 326–27) reads “remember how he perished (and) you shall bea[r] your yo[ke], refraining from [go]ing up to the hou[se] of the one who holds h[eav]en and earth. The king spo[ke] up) and said ad[dress]ing the gener[al] ‘[Leave] the [pa]lace, get out. Your sentence I [pronounce] on behalf of my god ... your [fa]ce he will not let [me] see, [for] I said [to you]: ‘Let them smite Babylon (but) let them keep my brother alive.’”

**15** As Van der Toorn (2018: 239) rightly notes, “the last part of the story exculpates Assurbanipal from fratricide.”

**16** Including Diodorus Siculus, see Waters (2017), Dietrich (2016: 135–36), and Frahm (2003: 40).

**17** Steiner and Nims (1985: 62) and Frahm (2003: 38–39), who notes that Ctesias’ account is “more fiction than history,” that Sardanapallos was probably a composite character, “and that the king deliberately burnt himself to death, together with wives and eunuchs, would be in strict opposition to the cultural reality of ancient Mesopotamia.” The figure of Sardanapallos as the last king of Assyria is quite dominant in the Greco-Roman sources as synonymous with decadence while Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (called Saosduchinos in Greek sources) is a minor figure. Berossus instead names Sīn-šarru-iškun (Sarakos in the Greek sources) as the last king of Assyria but maintains the theme of royal self-immolation as cause of death. For the Greek legends and further reception history, see Dietrich (2016: 134–36) and Frahm (2003: 41–45).

**18** According to Dietrich (2016: 130–31), “die mesopotamischen Texte, die über diesen Tod des Šamaššumukin berichten, berichten zwar allesamt von einem Tod in den Flammen, doch die

But it is not only in later reinterpretations that the conflict between Assurbanipal and his brother was portrayed as an incredibly high-stakes encounter; the civil war lasted from 652 BCE until 648 BCE and required a significant investment of Assyrian resources.<sup>19</sup> So the questions remain: why is it that we do not know for certain how Šamaš-šuma-ukīn died? Why does Assurbanipal state his brother's death only briefly? After all, Assyrian kings do not shy away from the grisly and (from their perspective) justified executions of enemy rulers; on the contrary, one can find a number of examples in which the execution is described as public and particularly horrific.<sup>20</sup> As a general rule, kings who die in the Assyrian royal inscriptions are not innocent; these are foreign rulers who have broken treaties or cast off the yoke of Assyria or betrayed the Assyrian king and the gods in some other way, earning their grim fate.<sup>21</sup> Royal death is significant not only politically but also ideologically, as the demise of the ruler commonly signaled the conclusion of a war or the conquest of a polity, and publicizing a brutal execution could act as a deterrent against further insurgency by other rulers. For example, King Teumman of Elam fled into the forest with his son Tammarītu but to no avail, since Assurbanipal claims that “through the support of (the god) Aššur and goddess Ištar, I killed them. I cut off their heads in front of one another.”<sup>22</sup> Regarding how

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Legende von der Selbstverbrennung scheint vielleicht nicht von Beginn an festgestanden zu haben.”

**19** Waerzeggers (2015: 223) suggests that the war was so costly that “no other major Assyrian offensive was recorded in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, even though the empire was to last for another thirty years,” though the toll the war took on Assyrian resources may have been only one of several factors that affected Assyrian military endeavors.

**20** For instance, Ashurnasirpal II flays a foreign ruler and hangs his skin over the city wall of Arbela (RIMA 2 A.O.101.1: i 67–68), and Sennacherib binds Nergal-ušēzib to a bear (RINAP 3/1 34: 33–36). On public impalement in Assyrian inscriptions, see Radner (2015).

**21** Exceptions do exist; for example, Assurbanipal writes: “(as for) Yakīn-Lû, the king of the land Arwad, Mugallu, the king of the land Tabal, Sanda-šarme of the land Hīlakku (Cilicia), who had not bowed down to the kings, my ancestors, they bowed down to my yoke. They brought (their) daughters, their own offspring, to Nineveh to serve as housekeepers, together with a [sub]stantial dowry and a large marriage gift, and they kissed my feet. I imposed upon Mugallu an annual payment of large horses. After Yakīn-Lû, the king of the land Arwad, had gone to (his) fate, Azi-Ba'al, Abi-Ba'al, (and) Adūni-Ba'al, the sons of Yakīn-Lû who reside in the middle of the sea, came up from the middle of the sea, came with their substantial audience gift(s), and kissed my feet” (RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: ii 66–ii 81). One can also suggest that Kudur-Nahhunte of Elam who “did not last three months and suddenly died a premature death” might also have been innocent (RINAP 3/1 22: v 11–v 13). Assurbanipal also records the deaths of other rulers that were seemingly accidental, such as the case of “Bēl-iqīša, a Gambulian who had cast off the yoke of my lordship, [who] gave up (his) life through the bite of a mouse” (RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: iv 54–55).

**22** RINAP 5 Asbpl 26: 1–6.

Assurbanipal himself heralded his captured opponents to their ultimate ends, Frahm has remarked that a particular gate to the Kuyunjik citadel in Nineveh

was the location where Aššurbanipal, a man of sometimes rather gruesome taste, used to humiliate and torture his enemies, with a large crowd witnessing the action. Rebel kings were forced to grind the bones of their fathers, or were put into fetters together with pigs, dogs, and bears.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Assyrian kings did sometimes record more straightforward statements of the opponent's death as well.<sup>24</sup> Public executions were not restricted to Assurbanipal's reign but it is particularly notable that Assurbanipal, as the contemporary of Šamaš-šuma-ukin, did not suppress his treatment of captured enemy rulers in his royal inscriptions.

While rare, suicide was also not a completely taboo topic,<sup>25</sup> as indicated in the tragic tale of Nabû-bêl-šumāti, a Babylonian who had violated his treaty with Assurbanipal and was faced with the prospect of being extradited from Elam and given over to Assyria, where presumably he would have been cruelly executed:

Nabû-bêl-šumāti, the grandson of Marduk-apla-iddina (II), heard about the advance of my messenger who had entered into the land Elam; his heart became anxious (and) distressed. His life was not precious to him and he wanted to die. He spoke to his own personal attendant, saying: 'Cut me down with the sword.' He (and) his personal attendant ran each other through with their iron belt-dagger(s).<sup>26</sup>

In this case, not only is the suicide-by-proxy described in detail, but Assurbanipal also openly writes that he desecrated the corpse when it was delivered to him, an unusual inclusion: "I did not hand over his corpse for

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<sup>23</sup> Frahm (2008: 18).

<sup>24</sup> See above footnote.

<sup>25</sup> See RIA XII: 366 for a list of attestations and the note that suicides are not mentioned in the law codes. Dietrich (2016) has recently written about suicide in the ancient Near East and the Bible, including the present case of Šamaš-šuma-ukin.

<sup>26</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: vii 28–vii 37, with a slightly different account in 23: 104–107 that cites the "terror (*hātu*) of the god Aššur" as the catalyst for the suicide. Similarly, a servant of Teumman stabs himself upon seeing his master's head, though it is not explicit that he died from the event (one may perhaps assume it): "(As for) Umbadarâ (and) Nabû-damiq, the envoys of Teumman — [the k]ing of the land Elam — by whose hands Teumman sent insolent message(s), whom I had detained before me by making (them) wait for the issuing of my decision, they saw the decapitated head of Teumman, their lord, in Nineveh and madness took hold of them. Umbadarâ pulled out his (own) beard (and) Nabû-damiq stabbed himself in the stomach with his iron belt-dagger" (RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vi 48–vi 56, 4: vi 50–vi 59, 6: vii 1', 7: vi 13'–vi 23'). Postgate (1992: 255) suggests that the "symbol of Assur" was also a dagger of iron but see also the discussion in Holloway (2002: 160–77).



burial. I made him more dead than before: I cut off his head (and) hung (it) around the neck of Nabû-qāti-šabat.”<sup>27</sup> Unhappy with the traitorous ruler’s escape from justice, Assurbanipal takes symbolic agency in Nabû-bēl-šumāti’s death even though technically the deed is done, giving the deceased ruler the ultimate insult of being denied a proper burial and simultaneously creating a secondary punishment for the late Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s *simmagir* official.<sup>28</sup> One can compare this episode to the numerous versions in Sargon II’s inscriptions of the suicide of Rusa I of Urartu, several of which claim specifically that he took an iron dagger to his own heart.<sup>29</sup> Van de Mieroop has identified two other certain instances of suicide in Assurbanipal’s inscriptions, including a wounded Urtaku, king of Elam, defiantly calling out to the Assyrian soldier to cut off his head in an epigraph on a relief in Assurbanipal’s palace in Nineveh that depicts this moment.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the primary difference between these rivals and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is that the latter was Assyrian royalty and, thus, his identity may be a reason for the relative silence in the Assyrian inscriptions. Apparently, no matter the level of betrayal, Assyrian royal family members were destined to die ambiguously, at least when it came to the official record in the royal inscriptions. Furthermore, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was not a usurper but rather the legitimately-installed king, designated as such by the same Assyrian king who had declared Assurbanipal crown prince of Assyria, which prevented the possibility of Assurbanipal casting Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as an illegitimate ruler.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately,

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**27** RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: vii 45–47. The narrative in RINAP 5 Asbpl 23: 104–107 states that Assurbanipal did not bury the body. Assurbanipal additionally disturbs the resting place of former Elamite kings, taking their bones out into the sun and then carrying them back to Assyria, which meant that he “prevented their ghosts from sleeping (and) deprived them of funerary-offerings (and) libations” (RINAP 5 Asbpl 9: v 49–54).

**28** Dietrich (2016: 59, 88) calls this “escapist self-killing” and Assurbanipal’s response is “soziale Tod” since he cannot kill the deceased himself. Similarly, see Van de Mieroop (2016: 33).

**29** See, for example, Fuchs (1994): *Prunk*. lines 76–77, *Zyl. 27*, *Stier. 15*, *Ann. 164–65*. Sargon II’s Letter to the God does not make this claim, however, and Kravitz (2003: 94) writes, “although the Letter’s graphic actualization of Rusa’s anguish and impotence strongly implies Rusa’s death, his death is reported unambiguously only in Sargon’s later inscriptions. These more explicit accounts state that at the close of the eighth campaign, Rusa stabbed himself with his own dagger.” Van de Mieroop (2016: 19–22, 34) notes that “Rusa’s act of desperation was all the more remarkable because suicide was extremely rare in ancient Mesopotamian sources.” On this topic, see also Roaf (2012).

**30** Van de Mieroop (2016: 33–34), RINAP 5 Asbpl 28: 1–5. The other instance concerns soldiers killing themselves as they lose to the Assyrian army, see Van de Mieroop (2016: 34).

**31** Especially considering the public nature of Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty (discussed more below).

Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was an Assyrian and Assyrian rulers do not die in the royal inscriptions, much less are they murdered or commit suicide.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Aššur-nādin-šumi's death is completely off-screen; it is not mentioned in his father Sennacherib's inscriptions, though it was alluded to in a letter and is likely the primary catalyst for Sennacherib's devastating attack on Babylon.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, there is evidence that some inscriptions written after 694 BCE, when Aššur-nādin-šumi was deposed and likely executed, omit Aššur-nādin-šumi's accession to the Babylonian throne entirely.<sup>34</sup> This erasure parallels too how the puppet ruler Bēl-ibni was no longer mentioned in inscriptions, as if his rule had never occurred, after Sennacherib replaced him with Aššur-nādin-šumi, though there is no evidence that he was killed.<sup>35</sup>

The unwillingness to talk openly about the demise of an Assyrian ruler is consistent with the deaths of kings reigning in Assyria as well, such as Sargon II's death on campaign and Sennacherib's murder.<sup>36</sup> Some scholars have suggested that Sargon II's demise is lauded in Isaiah 14:3–20 and Richardson has argued that it was “the first ‘world news, shared in all lands ... the Assyrians themselves saw Sargon's death (and the failure to rescue his body) as a major rupture in the world order.”<sup>37</sup> Assyrian kings' longevity was supposed to be guaranteed by the gods, if blessing formulae are any indication, and the suddenly cut-short life of kings like Sargon II would have far-reaching religious and ideological implications about the king's relationship with the gods. For instance, the literary text “The Sin of Sargon” expresses the anxiety around royal death and is one of only two Assyrian sources that mention Sargon II's demise explicitly; it appears moreover to be from the reign of

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**32** RIA VIII: 380.

**33** The letter was actually sent to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn from Babylonian citizens, who write that “moreover, [Aplaya the haruspex] has assembled the people who captured Aššur-nādin-šumi (and) delivered him to Elam, and has concluded a treaty with them, adjuring them by Jupiter (and) Sirius. We have now heard (about it) and informed the crown prince of Babylon” (SAA XVI 21: r. 3–r. 8).

**34** See Dewar (2017: 33–34).

**35** Dewar (2017: 34–35), Van de Mierop (1999: 46–47). Bēl-ibni is also an unusual case in that he was ethnically Babylonian but raised in the Assyrian court; for further discussion, see Zaia (Forthcoming).

**36** Aššur-etel-ilānī references Assurbanipal's death in his inscriptions: “after my father and begetter had departed, no father brought me up or taught me to spread my wings, no mother cared for me or saw to my education” (SAA XII 36: 4, 35: 4), which uses a different euphemism, *alāku nammušišu*, rather than the usual idiom *alāku šimtišu* (NAM(MEŠ-šu) “to go to his fate” (see CAD N s.v. *nammušišu*). Nonetheless, Assurbanipal's name is not mentioned nor is his death discussed explicitly.

**37** Richardson (2014: 458), see also Frahm (2014: 206), especially fn. 197.

Esarhaddon, not that of Sennacherib himself, who almost never mentions his father in his royal inscriptions.<sup>38</sup> The second reference to the tragedy is in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle B, which gives the most information, although even then Sargon II's name is not mentioned and his death is laconically expressed as LUGAL GAZ (*dâku*).<sup>39</sup> A chronicle states that Sennacherib led a revenge campaign against Sargon II's killer, but this campaign is noticeably absent from Sennacherib's royal inscriptions, which is quite unusual in a genre that puts so much emphasis on military campaigns.<sup>40</sup> With regard to the assassination of Sennacherib, a Babylonian letter to Esarhaddon mentions Sennacherib's death, albeit only euphemistically and in an abbreviated form that omits the verb, which would have perhaps been too close to stating the fact of the king's death: *Sîn-ahḫē-eriba šīmāti* "Sennacherib <has gone to > (his) fate."<sup>41</sup> As will be seen below, Esarhaddon does not discuss his father's murder in his royal inscriptions even though his description of how he reacts to the news is an integral part of his succession narrative. Otherwise, little is known about the murder of earlier kings: Tukultī-Ninurta I's death, also at the hands of his son, is recorded only in the Babylonian Chronicles, and Aššur-nērārī V was probably killed during an internal uprising as well.<sup>42</sup> Omens and divination reports were often concerned with the Assyrian king's possible death, but only as a possible future to avoid.

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**38** For the text, see Tadmor et al. (1989), SAA III: 77–79, see also Weaver (2004: 64) and Frahm (1999: 75–76). For the attestations of Sargon II's name see RINAP 3/2 135: 2 (reconstructed) and RINAP 3/2 163: 5'. Frahm (2014: 202) has suggested a psychological response to this event, writing that "Sennacherib's reaction to his father's death was one of almost complete denial. He apparently felt unable to acknowledge and mentally deal with what happened to Sargon."

**39** Frahm (1999: 74).

**40** Frahm (2014: 203).

**41** Frame (2007: 67). There is a highly contested passage in RINAP 5 Asbl 11: vi 70–76, in which Assurbanipal executes the allies of his brother after Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death and some have read that he did so "at the bull colossus where they had laid flat Sennacherib," i. e. where Sennacherib had been murdered, while others have read "where ... Sennacherib laid them flat," i. e. where Sennacherib too had executed rebellious Babylonians. The unlikelihood of referring to a king's death so openly and crassly (and the likelihood of instead demonstrating a continuity of tradition) suggests the latter is correct, but see Frahm (1997: 19) and RINAP 3/2: 29.

**42** See references in RIA VIII: 381, and Grayson (1975: 176) for Chronicle 22 (Chronicle P): "the officers of Assyria rebelled against him (Tukulti-Ninurta I), removed him [from] his throne, shut him up in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta in a room and killed him." It has been suggested that Shalmaneser V's death was fratricide, but like other cases the reality is obscured in euphemism; see Younger (1999: 486), especially fn. 28 for further reading. Regicide in Assyria has also been discussed by Wiseman (1974: 251–53).

### 3 Act II: My favorite brother, my hostile brother

Especially pertinent to the case of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, there is a lack of clarity in the accounts of what ultimately happened to Esarhaddon's traitorous, patricidal, and regicidal brothers as well. When it comes to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, the inscriptions record at least that his life came to an end, while there is almost complete silence with regard to Esarhaddon's brothers.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, in both cases, the eventual fates of the brothers are ambiguous and intentionally so. Both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal cope with their brothers' betrayal and fates by leaving the ultimate punishment to the gods, who are displeased with the brothers' behaviors, which are portrayed as an affront to the deities themselves. Perhaps because of the circumstances of the dual kingship, Assurbanipal must go one step further, first undermining his brotherly relationship to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn before the gods impose their final punishment. These strategies of ambiguity serve to distance the Assyrian kings from the fates of their brothers and from, worse still, the suggestion of royal fratricide.

The shift from Assurbanipal referring to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn favorably to speaking of him unfavorably is stark and definitive. Initially, both Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Assurbanipal describe each other positively. The term they use, *talimu*, is one that has been widely debated regarding whether it actually means "brother" or not.<sup>44</sup> The term was originally used only between gods or the king and a deity but, during the Neo-Assyrian period, was invoked between two royal humans as well.<sup>45</sup> The word is used quite rarely in this way, however, and most attestations come from Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's references to one another.<sup>46</sup> May has concluded that "it seems that *talimu* is applied as a *title*, and not just as a designation of kinship."<sup>47</sup> Bartelmus further argues that "we may

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<sup>43</sup> Na'aman (2006) suggests that the silence is due to the brothers' escape, arguing that Esarhaddon's brothers had fled to Urartu and that a hostage exchange failed, resulting in their survival, though Esarhaddon would not admit to that reality in his inscriptions.

<sup>44</sup> See examples from Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's inscriptions in RIMB 2 B.6.33.2: 9–14, B.6.33.4: 24–27. Bartelmus (2007: 287–88) suggests the possibilities "*biological* brother, *twin* brother, *equal* (brother), *favourite* (brother), 'brother (= friend).'"

<sup>45</sup> See May (2011–2012: 156–61) for examples.

<sup>46</sup> May (2011–2012: 161–63), including the observation that "in three almost identical inscriptions from the lavish residence (Palace L) of Sīn-ahu-ušur, Sargon II's brother, at Dūr-Šarrukīn ... it is noteworthy that in these inscriptions *talīm Šarrukīn* might be taken as standing in apposition to *sukkalmahhu*, 'Grand Vizier.'" This royal figure may also have suffered erasure, as Guralnick (2012), evaluating a recut figure from one of Sargon II's reliefs at Dūr-Šarrukīn, suggests that Sīn-ahu-ušur was originally depicted next to Sennacherib and facing Sargon II but that, for some reason, his representation was recut into that of a courtier.

<sup>47</sup> May (2011–2012: 165).

assume that *talīmu* was the official designation of the highest possible rank among the king's relatives, but obviously of lower position than the king himself," although she notes that there is still much that is unknown about the practical functions of the status.<sup>48</sup> That Sargon II's brother, Sîn-aḫu-ušur, calls himself the king's *talīmu* is similarly unclear in that it may indeed indicate their fraternal relationship or a political title, as in a ruler of equal standing but elsewhere, since he has his own palace and the political title *sukkalmahḫu*.<sup>49</sup> It might be that *talīmu* was used similarly to how kings would call themselves the *tukultu* of a god, except meant to describe a relationship between mortal rulers, specifically one that includes a mutual recognition of political authority. This interpretation would favor Bartelmus' suggestion that it "should literally be translated as 'entrusted (with)' ... or "endowed (with)" ... In the wider sense it could thus mean 'proxy; deputy; representative' (= "the one who is entrusted with the same tasks/endowed with the same rights") which fits most of the contexts it is used in."<sup>50</sup> There is some speculation that *talīmu* was used to shroud the fact that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was the elder brother.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, three letters from Šamaš-šuma-ukīn to Assurbanipal show the former greeting the latter with the simple *ana šari aḫiya* "to the king, my brother," using the standard term for "brother" instead of *talīmu*.<sup>52</sup> Whatever the meaning, the *talīmu* (and its indication of a close relationship) is dropped when the civil war breaks out.

When things turn sour between the siblings is ironically when the terminology becomes much more clearly familial as Assurbanipal describes the degradation of their brotherly relationship. Assurbanipal refers to his brother as *aḫu* (ŠEŠ) *lā kēnu*, which recent editions translate variously as "hostile brother" and "unfaithful brother."<sup>53</sup> The moniker *lā kēnu* may be a play on Šamaš-šuma-

48 Bartelmus (2007: 299).

49 On the title *sukkallu*, its variants, and the responsibilities of holders of the title, see May (2017). Sîn-aḫu-ušur is also referred to with the common word for brother, *aḫu*

50 See Bartelmus (2007: 298). The brothers mostly use the term in blessings.

51 According to Novotny and Singletary (2009: 168–69), "Šamaš-šumu-ukin, at least by Iyyar (II) 672, was Esarhaddon's eldest living son. His seniority of age, as many scholars have already pointed out, was intentionally downplayed by the heir designate of Assyria once he became king; Assurbanipal conveniently referred to him as his "favourite brother" (*aḫu talīmu*) and he does not refer to himself as being younger than his brother in his inscriptions; the adjective *rabūtu* ("older") had been erased on K 2694+ (see above), which, as Weissert suggests, is hardly an accident since Assurbanipal does not refer to himself as being younger than his brothers in his inscriptions. The exact age difference between Šamaš-šuma-ukin and Assurbanipal is not yet known."

52 SAA XXI nos. 102–104 (one greeting formula is reconstructed).

53 RINAP 5 Ašbpl 3 vii 1, vii 35, 4: vii 40, 6: viii 10" (reconstructed), 7: vii 25', 11: iii 70, iii 96.

ukīn's own name, as the element *-ukīn* is based on the verb *kēnu* as well, subtly undermining to some extent the personal name's translation—"Šamaš has established the name"<sup>54</sup>—and, consequently, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's divine endorsement and status as recognized king. Quite frequently, Assurbanipal calls his brother *aḫu nakru* "enemy brother"<sup>55</sup> or, once, *nakrī* "my enemy."<sup>56</sup>

Early in the conflict, Assurbanipal wrote several letters to Babylonian groups that were either loyal to him or that he thought would be sympathetic to preventing the civil war from escalating.<sup>57</sup> In these letters, Assurbanipal never refers to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn by name, but rather by *lā aḫu* "no-brother," suppressing Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's identity through this characterization.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Assurbanipal uses synecdoche to describe his brother as "enemy hands," further depersonalizing his rival.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, as Assurbanipal negates his brotherly relationship with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, he simultaneously uses fraternal language to appeal to his Babylonian allies. For example, one letter features Assurbanipal writing to the Babylonians that "your brotherhood with the Assyrians and your privileged status which I have established remain valid until the present day."<sup>60</sup> This underscores the contrast between Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and the faithful Babylonians, whose loyalty means to Assurbanipal that they act in a more fraternal way than his own blood relation.

To properly characterize Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as an enemy force, Assurbanipal qualified his brother's betrayal in the same way that he would describe rebellious vassals; namely, that he was "(my) unfaithful brother who did not honor my treaty."<sup>61</sup> As the punishment for treaty-breaking was death by divine wrath, generally in the form of curses, this addition served to set up the fatal eventuality. In addition, Assurbanipal spoke of how his brother

<sup>54</sup> PNA 3/2: 1214.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vii 18, 6: viii 16'-viii 17', 8: viii 55', 11: iv 6, iv 50, iv 53-54, vii 48-49, vii 99-100.

<sup>56</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vii 1, in combination with "unfaithful brother," and one should note that other exemplars have *bēl nakrīya* "lord of my enemies." Assurbanipal's treaty with his Babylonian allies uses the latter term as the Babylonians are made to swear "the enemy (*bēl nakrīya*) of Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, [ ... ] shall not be our ally" (SAA II 9: 20). On Mesopotamian conceptualizations of enemies, see Pongratz-Leisten (2001).

<sup>57</sup> These include ABL no. 301, K 2931 and 83-1-18,511, see Parpola (2004: 229). It appears that Uruk and Ur were sympathetic to the Assyrians, while the north aligned itself with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (RIA XI: 620).

<sup>58</sup> Parpola (2004: 231-32).

<sup>59</sup> Parpola (2004: 229).

<sup>60</sup> Parpola (2004: 227). "Brotherhood" is well-established as a term of political alliance, see below.

<sup>61</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iii 93-100.

turned against him, even though he was the “brother for whom I performed (many acts of) kindness (and) whom I had installed as king of Babylon — I made and gave him anything that is *distinctive*, appurtenances of kingship,” including “more cities, fields, orchards, (and) people to live inside them than the father who had engendered me had commanded.”<sup>62</sup> Taking complete agency over Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s kingship mirrors the Assyrian king-vassal relationship as well as heightens the level of pathos for Assurbanipal, who portrays himself as exceedingly generous and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as ungrateful, deserving of his punishment.

One of Assurbanipal’s inscriptions uses the theme of “brotherly relations” not only to criticize Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s failure to respect their brotherhood but also to frame Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s betrayal as having religious implications:

He (Šamaš-šuma-ukīn) locked the (city) gates of Sippar, Babylon, (and) Borsippa and (then) put a stop to (our) brotherly relations. On the wall(s) of those cities, he posted his fighting men and they were constantly prepared to do battle with me. He withheld the performing of my offerings before the gods Bēl, Son-of-Bēl (Nabū), the light of the gods — Šamaš — and the warrior — Erra — and he discontinued my giving (them) food offerings. He plotted evil (ways) to deprive (me) of the cult centers, the dwelling place(s) of the great gods whose sanctuaries I had renovated (and) decorated with gold (and) silver, (and) in whose midst I constantly established appropriate procedures.<sup>63</sup>

The word for “brotherly relations,” *aḥḥūtu*, means literally “brotherhood” but is also a diplomatic term, indicating here a breach of both familial and political loyalties.<sup>64</sup> Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is presented as the aggressor, the one who had disrupted their relationship and prepared for war, apparently unprovoked. Moreover, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s actions mean that Assurbanipal was denied the ability to venerate the Babylonian gods, for whom he had been dutifully providing sacrifices and regular offerings, and he was even unable to visit the gods’ temples despite the fact that he claims to have rebuilt them at great cost. In order to give offerings, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn had acted as a proxy for the Assyrian king, much like how priests performed rituals on behalf of Assyrian kings who

<sup>62</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iii 70–iii 77. A similar account in the Ištar Temple Inscription reads “(as for) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, (my) unfaithful brother for whom I performed (many acts of) kindness (and) whom I had installed as king of Babylon, he forgot (the acts of) k[indness] that I had done for him, ma[de] the land Akkad, Chaldea, (and) Aram, servants who belonged to me, become hostile towards me and put a stop to (our) brotherly relatio[ns],” including the rebellious brother in a list of other adversaries (RINAP 5 Asbpl 23: 108–111).

<sup>63</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iii 107–117.

<sup>64</sup> CAD A s.v. *aḥḥūtu*. Another example can be found in the same inscription mentioned above, RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: x 40–50, in which Assurbanipal writes of the Urartian king Sarduri III and how he “used to regularly send (messages of) brotherly relations (*aḥḥūtu*) to my ancestors.”



wanted to participate in cults in absentia.<sup>65</sup> This transforms Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's betrayal from simple treason into blasphemy, which Assurbanipal will portray as inciting the wrath of the gods and condemning his brother to execution at their hands. A letter written by Assurbanipal during the conflict even calls Šamaš-šuma-ukīn "this man whom Marduk hates," a strong condemnation of his brother who, as king of Babylon, should be beloved by Marduk in particular.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, Assurbanipal calls his own army "the troop which I have put together for Bēl" in the same statement, clearly aligning himself with Marduk but using the name for the god that is more common in Assyrian inscriptions.<sup>67</sup>

## 4 Act III: Divine fire and *deus ex machina*

That the gods turn their backs on Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is a critical component of Assurbanipal's depiction of his brother's fate. As mentioned above, Assurbanipal's royal inscriptions contain a few largely similar accounts of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's demise, which conceal the realities of the king's death through the use of *deus ex machina*. Prisms from Nineveh, Assur, and Nimrud have essentially the same description of the king of Babylonia's dramatic end:

(As for) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, (my) hostile brother (*aḫu nakru*) who had planned murder against Assyria and uttered grievous blasphemies (*šillatū rabūtu*) against (the god) Aššur, the god who created me, he (the god Aššur) determined for him a cruel death (*mūtu lemnu*); he consigned him to a fire and destroyed his life.<sup>68</sup>

It is important that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is portrayed as not only treasonous towards the political entity of Assyria, which is expressed in synecdoche since the murder is planned against Assurbanipal himself, but also that he blasphemed against the highest god of Assyria. That his death is "cruel" or "evil" (*lemnu*) is in response to his act of treason, generally characterized as *epšētu lemnetu*, "evil deeds," a mirror curse that appears in other records discussed below. The outrage of Aššur brings about Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's punishment at the god's hands, which is unique to this episode. Other instances in which Assurbanipal accuses enemies of speaking *šillatū rabūtu* against his gods

<sup>65</sup> For example, the priests could use the king's royal garments in place of the king himself, as a priest of Kurba'il did for the *akītu*-festival when Esarhaddon could not attend personally (Holloway 2002: 275).

<sup>66</sup> Parpola (2004: 228).

<sup>67</sup> Parpola (2004: 228).

<sup>68</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 6: ix 21'-ix 24', 7: viii 55'-viii 61', 8: viii 16''''- viii 20''''.



showcase the Assyrian king taking matters into his own hands in vivid detail: he rips out their tongues, flays them alive, slits open their mouths.<sup>69</sup>

Aššur's epithet here as the *ilu bānīya* "god who created me," i. e. Assurbanipal, implies that he did not do the same for Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, who consequently does not have the divine endorsement necessary to be a legitimate Assyrian ruler. One prism shows a later modification that adds numerous gods to the episode, extending the range of deities implicated in the Babylonian king's death:

the deities Aššur, Sīn, Šamaš, Adad, Bēl, Nabū, Ištar of Nineveh, Šarrat-Kidmuri, Ištar of Arbela, Ninurta, Nergal, Nusku, who march before me (and) kill my foes, consigned Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, (my) hostile brother who had started a fight against me, to a raging fire and destroyed his life.<sup>70</sup>

This particular deity sequence is common in Assurbanipal's prism inscriptions, notably in campaign narratives, with the group epithet that they "kill [Assurbanipal's] foes" subtly suggesting that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn had become a member of that category, especially when combined with Assurbanipal's insistence here of his own innocence in the civil war. Otherwise, the vague language surrounding Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death is the same as in the shorter account.

Only one narrative, which is preserved on a slab from the Ištar Temple in Nineveh, is slightly different, claiming that the gods "[En]lil, [Mullissu], and Marduk, the gods who support me, looked upon his evil deeds (*epšētušu lemnētu*) and came to my aid. [...] their mighty battle array. They made the fire-god grasp his hands (and) had his body burned."<sup>71</sup> The mention of "his hands" and the causal form of the verb "to ignite" (here, *ušāhizū*) had prompted the earlier suggestions that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn set the fire himself in an act of suicide or some other desperate attempt that backfired either accidentally or through the intervention of his *simmagir* official.<sup>72</sup> Another passage may suggest

<sup>69</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vi 71–vi 74, 4: vi 77–vi 81, 6: vii 29'–vii 33', 7: vii 21–24, 11: iv 64–iv 69, 36: 1–3 (epigraph).

<sup>70</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iv 46–52. On the variation between Prism A and Prism C (RINAP 5 Asbpl 11 and 6, respectively), Cogan (2014: 76) writes that "Prism A's author went beyond invoking all the gods by name; he presented them as active on behalf of the king. Thus, e. g., he reworked the description of the demise of Shamash-shumu-ukin given in the earlier Prism C, which told of the king's hostile brother planning murderous acts against Assyria and speaking slanderously against the god Ashur, who threw him into the fire (C ix 24–28). Prism A credited all twelve gods as being responsible in bringing about this "blazing" punishment (A iv 46–52), which befell Shamash-shumu-ukin because he had broken with Assurbanipal, behaving disloyally and repaying good with wrongdoing (A iv ii 70–113; cf. C vii 120–129)."

<sup>71</sup> RINAP 5 Asbpl 23: 110–111.

<sup>72</sup> Dietrich (2016: 132) suggests that he jumped of his own volition, but presents the possibilities that he might have been pushed or died accidentally. The term *aḥāzu* "to seize" is also

suicide as well, since it refers to the survival and subsequent execution of “the people who had incited Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, (my) hostile brother (*aḫu nakru*), (so that) he performed this evil deed, who feared death, whose lives were precious to them, and who did not fall into the fire with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn.”<sup>73</sup> Notable is that the people here did not die in the fire because they “feared death” and their “lives were precious to them,” in contrast to Nabû-bēl-šumāti, who was described in a passage mentioned above as a man whose “life was not precious to him and he wanted to die” before his suicide-by-proxy.<sup>74</sup> It is worth considering that, if this were an act of suicide, there is the significant difference from other suicide narratives in that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is not said to have gone mad or become distressed; indeed, there is no description of the king’s emotional or mental state before his death.<sup>75</sup> Regardless of the ambiguity, that the gods had the ultimate agency over this act is clear.

Fire is often used as a divine weapon and even the kings’ accounts of burning cities and territories down on campaign tend to use the divinized fire, <sup>d</sup>Gīru (<sup>d</sup>GIŠ.BAR), instead of *išātu* as metonymy for the destructive flames that result in total devastation, which is true also for accounts of death by fire.<sup>76</sup> The gods sometimes rained down fire from the sky onto Assurbanipal’s enemies<sup>77</sup>

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associated with *qātu* “hand” in a meaning of “to assist” or “to absolve his sin” (CAD A s.v. *aḫāzu* s. 6) and with *išātu* “fire” in the meanings “to be set aflame” or “to flare up” (CAD A s.v. *aḫāzu* s. 10b and 11b, respectively) and since *qamû* “to burn” is often associated with sacrifice, this version of the episode may be purposefully drawing upon the language of sacrifice and absolution to characterize Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s death. I thank Seth Richardson for bringing these semantic connections to my attention.

**73** RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iv 55–iv 63.

**74** Perhaps this passage might also support the suggestion that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s official threw him into the fire in a similar suicide-by-proxy situation; however, it is odd that the official himself did not then jump into the fire with his master but instead apparently fled for survival, emerging alive later in the sources.

**75** On the connection between insanity and suicide (and examples such as the death of Rusa), see Schaudig (2014: 406–10). Schaudig (2014: 417–18) also discusses the frenzy Esarhaddon’s brothers enter as they plan and then execute the murder of Sennacherib. In addition Frahm (2009: 27–46) discusses the brothers’ behavior as described in the Nineveh A inscription. One can also compare with the case of Nabû-bēl-šumāti mentioned above, as “his heart became anxious and distressed” before he commits suicide-by-proxy (see citations above).

**76** Earlier references to execution did not use the divine name, see for instance Shalmaneser III claiming that he captured the city Aridu and “erected a tower of heads in front of the city (and) burned (*ana maqlūte qilūti*) their adolescent boys (and) girls” (RIMA 3 A.0.102.2: 15–17).

**77** RINAP 5 11: ix 79–ix 81. This motif is already in use in the Middle Assyrian period: see, for example “I conquered the great cult centre of the land Purulimzu. I burnt them (the inhabitants) alive” (Tukulti-Ninurta I A.0.78.1: iii 42–44). Nonetheless, it is quite unusual that fire is used to execute individuals rather than groups. This is true of other forms of execution; for instance,

and another enemy king, Mussi of Tabal, met a similar fate as that of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn when “(the god) Aššur, the great mountain whose boundaries cannot be transgressed, conquered him and had his body burned with a blazing fire.”<sup>78</sup> The Arab peoples, too, faced the deadly fire.<sup>79</sup> One should note that not all of these were terminal episodes and execution by fire is relatively rare in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions overall.<sup>80</sup> In general, though, the use of the god’s name for fire instead of the common word *išātu* may have been a subtle way of indicating the divine hands behind the flames.

The gods are the active agents in ending the civil war and, in most accounts, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s crime against Aššur is rectified by Aššur himself. This is a convenient solution to the alternative: if Assurbanipal successfully captured his brother, he may have had no choice but to execute him as a foreign enemy and treaty-breaker, committing the taboo act of fratricide. Fratricide, which Bremmer has termed “the first crime” since it is the first crime committed after the expulsion of humans from the Garden of Eden in Genesis, is an indication of chaos in Mesopotamian literature—*Erra and Išum* describes brother killing brother as part of the pandemonium—and in omen reports.<sup>81</sup> Even if it were not Assurbanipal himself who killed Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, which would have been probable since Assurbanipal did not personally go on campaign, a soldier would have been faced with the prospect of killing Assyrian royalty and the brother of his king, and the scribes writing the royal inscriptions might have struggled with applying the usual motif by which Assyrian kings were given credit for their

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impalement was applied to groups rather than identified individuals, with the exceptions of Nabû-ušabši, a Chaldean leader (Radner 2015: 113), and three Babylonians executed by the priest of Borsippa’s Nabû temple (Radner 2015: 119–20).

**78** RINAP 5 Asbpl 23: 143–144.

**79** RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vii 88–viii 4, 4: viii 2–viii 7, 7: x 10–16.

**80** Dietrich (2016: 118–119) discusses suicide through self-immolation, arguing that, during war in the ancient world, suicide happens either by the sword or through self-immolation; the former is more of an act in the heat of the moment, whereas suicide by fire is associated more with imminent conquest and siege conditions, so that one is not captured alive nor is one’s corpse at risk of desecration.

**81** Bremmer (2008: 57, 65). For *Erra and Išum* see Tablet IV ll 134–35, Erra says “House house, man man, brother brother must not spare (one another), let them kill each other!” (translation following Foster 1996: 785). For examples from oracles and omens, see the astrological report of Nergal-eṭir that “If Venus stands opposite Orion: land will become hostile to land, brother to brother; there will be fall of man and cattle” (SAA VIII 255: r. 2–5) and the letter from the astrologer Akkullanu, which reads “[if] Mars approaches Perseus, there will be a rebellion in the Westland; brother will slay his brother; the palace of the ruler will be plundered; the treasure of the country will go over to another country; the emblem of the country will be cast down; the king of the world will be delivered by his gods to his enemy” (SAA X 100: 9–12).

army's accomplishments on campaign. It is possible that a soldier would have been signing his own death warrant by killing Šamaš-šuma-ukīn or any members of the Assyrian royal family; one might compare this to the story of the soldier who kills Saul in 2 Samuel 1: 1–16, about which Porter writes that, “although Saul had been his deadly enemy, David's first reaction was to reject forcibly the idea that it was acceptable to kill an anointed king, however helpful that death might prove to David himself.”<sup>82</sup> One imagines that killing an Assyrian king would earn the offender the death penalty on the grounds of treason, which was in general a capital offense whether committed by a foreigner or an Assyrian.<sup>83</sup> By far the most elegant and least taboo-prone solution is the *deus ex machina*, especially since the gods have the authority to grant and strip away kingship.<sup>84</sup>

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**82** Porter (1993: 109). While this particular situation is not discussed in Assyrian judicial documents, one such text indicates how protected the king was: a certain Šumma-ilāni, identified as the ruler of the otherwise unknown city Arkuḫi, was denounced for wanting to name his son Assurbanipal and was punished with the river ordeal, though it appears that he pleaded guilty and did not undergo it (Kataja 1987: 66–67). As Kataja (1987: 66) notes, “it is clearly implied that giving the name of the ruling king (or crown prince) to a commoner, or even planning to do so, was a strict taboo, a sacrilege to the extent that an ordeal was possible.” I thank Johannes Bach for this suggestion and for bringing this text to my attention.

**83** One can point, for instance, to Esarhaddon's mass execution of his own officials after the conspiracy of Saši, see Radner (2003). Parpola (SAA XXI: 16) has recently interpreted a letter of Assurbanipal to the Nippureans (ABL 292, undated) as the king placing a bounty on Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's head, but it is more likely that this letter has to do with Nabû-šuma-ēreš, who was governor of Nippur, rebelled against Assurbanipal, and was succeeded by Enlil-bāni, an Assyrian loyalist to whom the letter is addressed, see Frame (2007: 121). The letter does not identify the wanted man, which would be unusual with respect to Šamaš-šuma-ukīn since Assurbanipal calls him at least “no-brother” or the other terms mentioned above even when he does not mention him by name. Nippur was perennially rebellious against Assyrian rule, with evidence that Esarhaddon removed and executed several of the city's governors (Frame 2007: 66). Assurbanipal had control of the city from 664–660 so, if Enlil-bāni was made governor in 661, ABL 292 could coincide with this period and refer to an attempt to remove a rebellious governor who would then be replaced with a local ally. We know from other texts that Nabû-šuma-ēreš died of illness before Assurbanipal could capture and execute him, but that his sons were captured instead and forced to crush their deceased father's bones as a post-mortem execution at the Nineveh Citadel Gate (see, for instance, RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vi 79–85). On Nippur in the Neo-Assyrian period, see SAAS IV.

**84** This is also put forth by Dietrich (2016: 131), who writes “die Überhöhung des Sieges ins Religiöse rechtfertigt den Sieg des einen Bruders über den anderen und entlastet Assurbanipal von dem Vorwurf, selbst den Tod seines Bruders verschuldet zu tun haben” and sees the hands of the gods as being there so that the suicide is “nicht als freiwillige Tat heroisiert, sondern als endgültiges und von den Göttern bestimmtes Schicksal interpretiert” and thus legitimated.

Death is, in general, controlled by the larger cosmos—the standard euphemism is that someone “went to their fate,” and fate was something determined by the gods.<sup>85</sup> Descriptions in which the gods inflict death are found most prominently in cursing formulae, which are themselves often explicitly tied to fate. The divine fate of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is not an *ex post facto* phenomenon, however; curses are a central ideological feature in the enforcement of treaties and alliances so, when Šamaš-šuma-ukīn turned against his brother, divine ramifications were already on the table. In particular, it is the aforementioned Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn violated. Esarhaddon designed protections for both of his heirs in his Succession Treaty, which was sworn before the gods and enforced with the curses that the gods would inflict upon treaty violators.<sup>86</sup> For instance, the Succession Treaty included the curse “may Aššur, king of the gods, who decrees the fates, decree an evil and unpleasant fate for you,” the “evil fate” (*šimtu lemnu*) in parallel with the evil death (*mūtu lemnu*) with which Aššur would smite Šamaš-šuma-ukīn in the royal inscriptions.<sup>87</sup> Of particular interest as well is that the treaty contains curses that decree death by fire: one curse comes from the fire god <sup>d</sup>Gīru, that he will “burn up your name and your seed” and another curse condemns the violator’s body to death by divine fire (<sup>d</sup>Gīru) just as a wax figure would be destroyed by fire (*išātu*).<sup>88</sup> It is presumably no accident that the scribes, when describing Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s death, write “fire” as <sup>d</sup>Gīru, subtly invoking the treaty curse and reinterpreting the fire acting upon Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s body as the completion of an act of sympathetic magic that had been conducted on a wax figure with ordinary fire as part the oath ceremony.<sup>89</sup> After all, in rebelling against his brother, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn

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**85** A survey of the uses of *šimtu* “fate” in first millennium sources can be found in Lawson (1994).

**86** The treaty is quite extensive but includes specific provisions such as “you shall not oust him from the kingship of Assyria by helping one of his brothers, elder or younger, to seize the throne of Assyria in his stead” (SAA II 6: 69–70, similarly in 214–25), that any words uttered against Assurbanipal by his brothers or family members must be reported (SAA II 6: 73–82, 108–122), and that rebellions must be defeated (SAA II 6: 162–164). The curse section is more extensive than in other treaties, with a standard curse section (lines 414–493) and ceremonial curses (518–663), ensuring the unfortunate demise of the treaty violator. Ironically, the treaties were also meant to protect the Babylonian king and Assurbanipal’s brothers (SAA II 6: 266–282, 336–352, 360–373) but not, of course, at the expense of Assurbanipal.

**87** SAA II 6: 414–416, including the Tell Tayinat version, lines 78–79 (see Lauinger 2012).

**88** SAA II 6: 524, 608.

**89** On this topic, see Faraone (1993).

transgressed the treaty stipulations that protected Assurbanipal's succession and brought a divinely-inflicted fate upon himself.

Considering the treaty curses, Assurbanipal could confidently foreshadow the wrath of the god as a consequence of the altercation in his letters to the Babylonians, in which he warns the recipients “do not listen to his vain words, do not taint your name which is in good repute before me and the whole world, do not make yourself culpable before god” and that “violating a treaty is a matter (to be settled) before god.”<sup>90</sup> However the matter was resolved, Assurbanipal knew that he could come away from the conflict with clean hands, especially since he directed a number of queries to the Sungod concerning the war and thus acted under divine advisement.<sup>91</sup>

Further absolving Assurbanipal of any guilt, Aššur's own thoughts on the matter are preserved in a literary text edited as “Aššur's Response to Assurbanipal's Report on the Šamaš-šuma-ukīn War.”<sup>92</sup> Letters from gods to kings are rare and tend to be written in response to particularly controversial or major conflicts.<sup>93</sup> This precise tablet refers a number of times to the “evil deeds” (*epšētu lemnētu*) of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, who is nowhere described as Assurbanipal's brother nor as the regent of Babylonia, with only a brief reference to his royal office that is mentioned in phrasing typical for cursing formulae: “I pulled out the foundations of his royal throne, over[threw] his reign and [comma] ended the destruction of the entire land of Akkad.”<sup>94</sup> As with the royal inscriptions, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is accused of committing blasphemy against the gods and one line references not only curses but a prophecy that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn callously ignored, bringing destruction upon himself and his kingdom:

ruining his own life and destroying the land of Akkad, (as prophesied by) the words of gods which [...], Šamaš-šuma-ukīn [*overlooked*] my lordly curse with which I had cursed him, and did not take seriously good [couns]el regarding his own life [ ... ..]. [ ... ..] he aroused [the anger of] all the gods and [ ... ..] performed evil deeds which were to cost him his life.<sup>95</sup>

This passage is perhaps meant to be in conversation with Prism A, which features a man reporting a dream oracle in which Sīn condemns any rebels against Assurbanipal to death, including a curse that promises death by burning

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**90** Parpola (2004: 227–28).

**91** SAA 4 nos. 279–291.

**92** SAA III 44.

**93** Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 331).

**94** SAA III 44: 3–4.

**95** SAA III 44: 13–15.

(through divine fire as <sup>d</sup>Gīru).<sup>96</sup> Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's demise is then simply the fulfillment of the prophecy.<sup>97</sup>

Even in the letter from Aššur, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's punishment is conceptualized as his own fault and he is elsewhere in the text called the one “who carried off the property of the gods.”<sup>98</sup> It is not clear what this means, perhaps it is a critique of the king of Babylon's involvement in cults or his return of the Marduk statue to Babylon, an event that undermined Assurbanipal's own claims that he had accomplished this act himself; nonetheless, the “evil deeds” bring about a mirror curse as Aššur “decreed his fate as evil.”<sup>99</sup> The exact punishment is not stated. Many have interpreted the following lines as the closest explanation of what the god commanded to be Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's cause of death:

I decreed for him [the fate] of his predecessor Išdu-kin, king of B[abyl]on, and in his time his people were seized by famine; they chewed leather straps. I made [ ... ..] to seize the people of Akkad, and I made them eat each other's flesh [ ... ..].<sup>100</sup>

The issue is that there is no known Babylonian king called Išdu-kin.<sup>101</sup> Historically, there was an Elamite of this name who was son of Hupan-timpi, a *sukkal*, and to whom Išbi-Erra gave his daughter as a wife.<sup>102</sup> The name means “the foundation is established,” and one wonders if there is again some sort of wordplay because of the shared element GIN (*kānu*).<sup>103</sup>

**96** RINAP 5 Asbpl 11: iii 118–iii 127.

**97** Another dream vision is described in the literary text, “The Netherworld Vision,” in which a man sees his father and is warned against *hītu* “error” or “sin” (contra SAA III: 79). Some scholars have interpreted the father as Sennacherib, while others have suggested that it is Assurbanipal's perspective on Esarhaddon's designation of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as king of Babylon and the resulting civil war as his *hītu*; Finn 2017: 107, with additional bibliography) outlines this latter hypothesis, which originated with Kvanvig and Sanders. One can turn to Frame (2007: 96) for why these scholars might interpret Esarhaddon's decision in this text, as Frame writes that “the king's plans for the succession caused some astonishment. Adad-šuma-ušur, the king's exorcist, praised the decision but commented that ‘the king, my lord, has done upon earth what has not been done in heaven’; while he had appointed one son to succeed him in Assyria, his eldest son (*apilka rabū*) was to be king of Babylonia. It is thus clear that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was older than Assurbanipal though they may not have had the same mother.”

**98** SAA III 44: 18.

**99** SAA III 44: 19.

**100** SAA III 44: r. 7–r. 10. Famine is a feature in cursing formulae; see, for instance, a similar situation in the Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (SAA II 15: 449–450 and Tell Tayinat version vi 27,028). On cannibalism in the ancient Near East, see Pongratz-Leisten (2007: 11–12).

**101** Ito (2015): 141, Frame (2007: 154).

**102** Zadok (1987: 5).

**103** According to the TDOT in the entry on *šōreš* (TDOT: 489), this term means “(2) figuratively the foundations of mountains, buildings, and cities, especially in the destructive image of



Two lines are particularly striking for the question of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's identity: "because of these evil deeds [which] he kept on perpetrating, on my account (even) his (own) gods became angry, abandoned him, and took to foreign parts."<sup>104</sup> While this continues the theme of blasphemy and Aššur's agency in Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's punishment, these lines most clearly cast Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as a foreign king. Divine abandonment is not an unusual motif in the Assyrian royal inscriptions; however, it is never applied to Assyrian kings, only to foreign rulers. Moreover, the phrasing *ilānūšu* "his gods" is common in divine abandonment and "godnapping" accounts—again, only for foreign rulers.<sup>105</sup> Aššur referring to the gods of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as "his" and, more importantly, not identifying himself as one of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's gods is perhaps the strongest distancing of the king of Babylon from his Assyrian heritage. In further support of this reading is the god's condemnation of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as the one "who did not keep my treaty but sinned against the charity of Assurbanipal, my beloved king."<sup>106</sup> Again, the trope of treaty-breaking is common with foreign rulers. Notable too is that Assurbanipal is Aššur's "beloved king" and representative in the mortal world, while his brother has neither a connection to the high god of Assyria nor royal titulature. Just as Assurbanipal has undermined his brotherly ties, so too does Aššur disown the Assyrian ruler of Babylonia. The dissociation between Assyria and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn can also be found in letters to the king from mortals: an official from Kutha, for example, writes to the king that the chief tailor had addressed Nergal, the city's patron god, concerning the destruction of the city wall, and had said to the god "you should not bla[me] Assyria for this crime. Blame Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, [who] committed this [crime]!"<sup>107</sup> This suggests a fluidity to ethnicity and cultural identity, as Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's "Assyrian-ness" is stripped from him in several ways.

As stated above, fratricide is never mentioned by Assyrian kings, but Pongratz-Leisten believes that Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal both killed their brothers and that this very letter from Aššur is an example of how the kings

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tearing out (*nasāhu*) the roots of an enemy land; also of individuals, such as someone who breaks an oath; (3) in personal names, the paternal line, as in the alternative name *šuruš-kīn*, 'The root is sturdy,' i. e., the continuation of the paternal line (e. g., after the death of a son) is assured (cf. also *išdu-kīnu*). These meanings are also associated with the partial synonym *išdu* (*m*), 'foundation, root.' For this name in Ur III Akkadian texts, including the definition "the foundation is firm," see Hilgert (2002: 392), especially footnote 213.

**104** SAA III 44: 20–21.

**105** Zaia (2015).

**106** SAA III 44: 7–10.

**107** SAA XVIII 157: 9'–11'.



avoided direct engagement with this reality<sup>108</sup>: in contrast to the royal inscriptions,

the royal reports to the gods and letter of the gods to the king served to sanctify royal deeds, which involved sacrileges such as fratricide, parricide, and the destruction of the main sanctuary of the enemy. Despite their intertextual links with the royal inscriptions, then, royal reports to the gods and letter of the gods to the king must be seen in light of their particular function of sanctifying the king's deeds.<sup>109</sup>

The defeat of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and his army ends much like other Assyrian conquests in that the army plunders the Babylonian king's palace, "parading" in front of Assurbanipal all of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's regalia and symbols of kingship, including his "palace women, eunuchs, his battle troops ... (and) people—male and female, young (and) old."<sup>110</sup> Notably absent is Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, who is deceased at this point, a fact that is only alluded to indirectly in the preface to the list of spoils, which reads that "Assurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, who by the command of the great gods, achieved his heart's desires."<sup>111</sup> This inscription accompanies a relief in the North Palace, mentioned above, in which Assurbanipal receives the Babylonian crown, the royal staff, and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's cylinder seal.<sup>112</sup> As Novotny and Watanabe observe, "each item displays the concept of kingship symbolically, and together they demonstrate the significance of the loss of Babylonian royal power" and the repossession of

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**108** Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 347). As noted above, the same principle may apply to the death of Shalmaneser V, which is expressed through euphemism.

**109** Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 37–38). With regard to Assurbanipal, Pongratz-Leisten points not only to the "Letter from Aššur" but also the "Dialogue between Assurbanipal and Nabû," in which the king prays to Nabû to spare him from his adversaries and the god reassures the king that "your ill-wishers, Assurbanipal, will fly away like *pollen* on the surface of the water. They will be squashed before your feet like *burbillātu* insects in spring," see SAA III 13 r. 9–10 and Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 331, 347), with further qualification that "divine legitimization is cited in Aššur's letter to Assurbanipal regarding the rebellion of Ashurbanipal's brother Šamaš-šum-ukīn, who was governor of Babylonia and was killed by Ashurbanipal during the civil war."

**110** The entire text reads: "I, Assurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, who by the command of the great gods, achieved his heart's desires: They paraded before [m]e clothing (and) jewelry, royal appurtenances of Šamaš-šu[ma-u]kīn — (my) hostile brother — his palace women, his [eun]uchs, his battle troops, a chariot, a processional carriage, [the ve]hicle of his lordly majesty, every necessity of his palace, as much as there was, (and) people — male and female, young (and) old" (RINAP 5 Asbpl 38: 1–9). Novotny and Watanabe (2008: 120–25) contains editions of all of the inscriptions that mention spoils from Babylon, including Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's royal paraphernalia.

**111** See note above.

**112** Barnett (1976: 46–47) (Pl. XXXV). On this relief and the items presented in it, see Novotny and Watanabe (2008). For Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's royal seal, see Da Riva and Frahm (1999/2000).

Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's seal, so closely associated with his royal identity, is especially significant.<sup>113</sup> That these items serve as the markers of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death is all the more interesting when put in contrast with King Teumman of Elam, whose severed head and hand, which was still holding a royal scepter, are depicted in several reliefs in the same North Palace, most famously in the relief in which the Assyrian king and his queen banquet in the gardens of Arbela, in which the Elamite king's head hangs from a tree.<sup>114</sup> Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's actual body is missing, perhaps burnt beyond recognition in the fire, but it is difficult to imagine that Assurbanipal would have portrayed his brother's corpse or charred remains on a relief in a similar way. That the accompanying inscription also makes no mention of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's demise supports the hypothesis that Assurbanipal modified how he would portray a conquered enemy in the case of his brother: Assurbanipal represents his own hands as unsoiled, with the suggestion that the gods concluded the conflict themselves but skipping past the actual death of the Babylonian king while preserving the conventional account of plundering a fallen enemy's palace. Markedly different from other accounts of city conquest and plunder, however, is that the fall of Babylon and allied cities is not mentioned, not even in the chronicles.<sup>115</sup>

One can compare with the episodes contained in these same inscriptions that record the deaths of Tammarītu and Urtaku, since both are also killed in some way by divine hands.<sup>116</sup> Both kings of Elam, Tammarītu was Teumman's son and Urtaku was placed on the throne by Assurbanipal before diplomatic relations between them degraded. Assurbanipal credits Aššur and Ištar as the executors of the king's prayers that, presumably, a grim fate befall Tammarītu, since he writes that

as a result of the supplications that I had addressed to (the god) Aššur and the goddess Ištar, they accepted my appeals (and) listened to the utterance(s) of my lip(s). His servants rebelled against him and *together* cut down my adversary.<sup>117</sup>

**113** Novotny and Watanabe (2008: 115).

**114** Barnett (1976: 42–43), 56, including that “the gruesome exhibition of Te-umman's cut-off head at the city centre gate was in execution of a prophecy: ‘Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, put the head of Te-umman king of Elam before the gate of the city centre in public. As from ancient times by prophecy was proclaimed ‘the heads of thine enemies shalt thou cut off, wine shalt thou libate over them ...’ Shamash and Adad have accomplished in my time.”

**115** Ito (2015: 141).

**116** Relevant to the following discussion is Richardson (2017: 123–25), in which he explores the motif of “messages from afar” and the long reach of the Assyrian gods against enemies in even the most distant lands.

**117** RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: vii 37–vii 40, with several other parallel passages in other inscriptions.

In this case, the cause of death is clearly stated—while it is implicit that the gods had incited the rebellion, the assassination of Tammarītu at the hands of his own servants is not hidden in euphemism.

Urtaku, king of Elam, is a particularly troubling case for Assurbanipal, who writes that the gods themselves “judged my case with Urtaku ... with whom I was not hostile towards (but) who started a fight with me.”<sup>118</sup> The gods dispatch him themselves in one inscription, which emphasizes in a number of ways that the king has died:

in that year, they destroyed his life through a bad death. They assigned him to Kurnugia, the place of no return. The heart(s) of the great gods, my lords, were not appeased, (and) the angry mood of their lordly majesties were not pacified. They overthrew his kingship (and) took away his dynasty. They made somebody else assume dominion over the land Elam.<sup>119</sup>

Urtaku’s cause of death, like Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s, is simply divine wrath but the stress on his entrance into Kurnugia, the netherworld, and the undoing of his dynasty are stronger and more detailed statements than what Šamaš-šuma-ukīn receives. Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is moreover never subjected to other motifs used for enemy kings, such as being compared to an animal, being described as fearful or cowardly or “trusting only in himself,” or being subject to post-mortem violence in which his body would have been dismembered or displayed.

The reluctance to admit to the death of a native king in the royal inscriptions creates an odd problem for Esarhaddon, who is invested in demonstrating his brothers’ treachery in murdering their father and his own innocence as the rightful heir. The likeliest suspect is Urdu-Mullissu, but more brothers may have been involved—including Esarhaddon himself. While later sources, including biblical, Neo-Babylonian, and Classical ones, describe the murder and sometimes name a murderer, Esarhaddon’s inscriptions do neither.<sup>120</sup> The result is that Esarhaddon is forced to essentially talk around his father’s death:

I, Esarhaddon, who with the help of the great gods, his lords, does not turn back in the heat of battle, quickly heard of their evil deeds. I said ‘Woe!’ and rent my princely garment. I cried out in mourning, I raged like a lion, and my mood became furious. In order to

**118** RINAP 5 Asbpl 75/Tablet 4: 15–16.

**119** RINAP 5 Asbpl 75/Assyrian Tablet 4: 17–19. Another passage is a little less direct as to the gods’ role but is also interesting in that death comes for Urtaku unexpectedly: “(As for) Urtaku, the king of the land Elam who had not honored my friendship, whom death called on a day (that was) not his fate, who came to an end (and) withered away while wailing — he no (longer) set foot upon the land of the living. In that year, his life came to an end (and) he passed away” (RINAP 5 Asbpl 3: iv 49–iv 54, among other parallel passages).

**120** RINAP 3/2: 28–29.

exercise kingship (over) the house of my father I beat my hands together. I prayed to the gods Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bēl, Nabû, and Nergal, Ištar of Nineveh, (and) Ištar of Arbela and they accepted my word(s). With their firm 'yes,' they were sending me reliable omen(s), (saying): 'Go! Do not hold back! We will go and kill your enemies.'<sup>121</sup>

The patricide is called only “their evil deeds,” and the focus is turned immediately to Esarhaddon’s grief when he hears the news. That the news is in fact his father’s death is only gestured to by the way that Esarhaddon goes into the typical characteristics of mourning immediately and then prays to the gods “in order to exercise kingship (over) the house of [his] father,” indicating that the former king has gone to his fate and that the time for a new king has come. At no point in his inscriptions does Esarhaddon openly charge his brothers with murder. In the same inscription he uses a number of similar euphemisms: “they trusted in their arrogant deeds, and they were plotting evil,” “their deeds are arrogant and they trust (only) in their (own) counsel. What will they (not) do against the will of the gods?,”

they (the gods) settled me in a secret place away from the evil deeds ... my brothers went out of their minds and did everything that is displeasing to the gods and mankind, and they plotted evil, girt (their) weapons, and in Nineveh, without the gods, they butted each other like kids for (the right to) exercise kingship,

and “the gods Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, (and) Ištar of Arbela saw the deeds of the usurpers which had been done wrongly against the will of the gods and they did not support them.”<sup>122</sup> The language used is clearly emotional and expressive of the ultimate horror that is patricide and the assassination of the Assyrian king but is simultaneously shrouded in ambiguity.

There are several parallels with how Assurbanipal later describes the betrayal of his brother: first, that the brothers commit blasphemy against the gods as well as treason against Assyria; second, that the gods turn against the brother(s); and third, that the gods subsequently dispatch the offenders, whose deaths happen behind the scenes. Like Assurbanipal, Esarhaddon was faced with the prospect of committing fratricide in order to right the injustices committed against his father and it is unknown whether he did, in fact, capture and execute the guilty parties. Knapp, commenting on the theory that the brothers

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<sup>121</sup> RINAP 4 1: i 53–i 62. Johannes Bach (personal communication) notes that the gods' words are a direct quotation from *Lugal-e*, and that this is the only mythological/epic text that is quoted word for word, as the others instances of intertextuality are allusions; this further emphasizes the gods' presence in Esarhaddon's narrative and its mythic quality.

<sup>122</sup> RINAP 4 1: i 24–25, i 32–35, i 38–i 44, i 45–i 47.

were hiding in Šubria, hence Esarhaddon's campaign there to capture Assyrian fugitives whom the king of Šubria had refused to extradite, writes that,

one suspects that if Esarhaddon indeed avenged his father in this way, he would have boasted about it in several inscriptions. But Esarhaddon's inscriptions are silent, with the one intriguing exception of Esarhaddon's Monument A inscription, on a stele discovered at Zinçirli, which includes in his titulary the epithet 'avenger of (his) father, who engendered him' ... At the end of the day, we must accept our ignorance of the fate of the brothers, who disappear from history after the apology.<sup>123</sup>

Considering the reluctance to discuss the death of kings or even Assyrian royalty, much less the murder of one's own family members, it is actually expected that Esarhaddon would not admit openly to executing his brothers and that the offenders would instead be dispatched quietly and the suggestion would be that the gods had taken responsibility for the final punishment. Indeed, one can find similar *deus ex machina* motifs in Esarhaddon's inscriptions, such as in the passage above in which the gods themselves communicate to Esarhaddon that "we will go and kill your enemies." In descriptions of the gods choosing him for kingship, Esarhaddon repeats that the gods "swept away all of [his] enemies like a flood, killed all of [his] foes" and placed him on the throne as king of Assyria.<sup>124</sup> Assurbanipal's description of the death of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn above also utilizes the depiction of the gods as the ones who "killed his foes." Esarhaddon does not go entirely without asserting that he avenged his father and restored order to Assyria, however, and he writes: "I sought out every one of the guilty soldiers, who wrongly incited my brothers to exercise kingship over Assyria, and imposed a grievous punishment on them: I exterminated their offspring."<sup>125</sup> He is able to openly record the execution of soldiers and even their children, but the taboo boundaries stop him just short of commenting on the fate of his brothers.

## 5 Finale: Caught between two worlds

While Šamaš-šuma-ukīn portrayed himself as a proper Babylonian king, his Assyrian cultural identity and royal lineage did have significant implications for his portrayal in Assyrian inscriptions, as they meant that his death was more

<sup>123</sup> Knapp (2016: 187–88). The epithet found here, *mutēr gimil abi* "avenger of (his) father" is also associated with Ninurta, Marduk and Nabû as šu-mar gi<sub>4</sub> a-a-na = *mutēr gimil abišu*, see Maul (1991: 326), especially fn. 31.

<sup>124</sup> RINAP 4 104: ii 9–ii 19, 105: ii 22–ii 34, 114: ii 19–iii 4.

<sup>125</sup> RINAP 4 1: ii 8–ii 11.

complicated to deal with in the official record than that of a foreign opponent, forcing a strategic ambiguity on the part of Assurbanipal's scribes. While Assyrian scribes were no strangers to omitting or amending unpleasant truths and events when creating the royal narrative, that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was an Assyrian royal family member who was legitimately installed in his political position meant that simply ignoring Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's reign and the subsequent civil war were out of the question, as was portraying Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as an illegitimate ruler or depicting him as insane, cowardly, arrogant, or animalistic in the same way as foreign enemies were. Instead, the scribes had to not only erase but to explain away the situation, adapting strategies used for foreign enemies to accommodate the tradition of silence around Assyrian royal death and intrafamily violence. This took the form of characterizing Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's aggressions as a betrayal not only of his loyalty oath to Assurbanipal but also of his family ties, playing with the terms "brother" and "brotherhood" and employing pathos and emotional language when depicting Assurbanipal (and Esarhaddon before him) experiencing said betrayal, emphasizing Assurbanipal's innocence and legitimating his mobilization against his own sibling. Not only was Šamaš-šuma-ukīn distanced from his royal family, but he was also disowned by the Assyrian gods themselves. At the same time, the scribes spared Šamaš-šuma-ukīn from the dehumanization and gruesome deaths so common for treaty-breaking enemy kings in Assyrian royal inscriptions, ultimately consigning Šamaš-šuma-ukīn to the divine fire, the righteous gods-given retribution for his treasonous behavior, simultaneously absolving Assurbanipal from any possible guilt in the death of his brother. Fratricide, suicide, assassination, and even accidental deaths were recorded for enemy kings but would constitute shameful and humiliating fates for Assyrian royalty, which were thus never mentioned in the Assyrian official record. With the divine conflagration, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was solely a victim of his own evil actions, a sacrifice to the gods in retribution for trespassing their commands, the inevitable fulfillment of treaty curses and prophecies. He was completely obliterated—there was no need for Assurbanipal to consider the ramifications of leaving an Assyrian royal family member unburied or having his corpse mutilated, or, conversely, to consider interring a traitor amongst his royal ancestors in Assyria. Unlike with the defeat of other high-profile adversaries, Assurbanipal's scribes did not publicize the victory or employ the usual detailed accounts to highlight the glory of the Assyrian king and his gods, they instead allowed the event to fade into obscurity.<sup>126</sup> After Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death, he disappears from the textual records,

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**126** For the idea of "historical forgetting," see Richardson (2014b: 79–80), to whom I am also grateful for pointing out the complementarity of "erasure of" and "explaining away" historical fact in his review of this paper.

much like Bēl-ibni and Aššur-nādin-šumi did after they were deposed. This *damnatio memoriae* may have been even stronger than removing Šamaš-šuma-ukīn from the Assyrian royal genealogy or official history, as there is evidence that Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's stele at the Ezida in Borsippa, which portrayed him carrying a work-basket in a trope that Esarhaddon had famously adopted when he rebuilt Babylon, was purposefully mutilated, his face erased.<sup>127</sup> With the fall of the Babylonian king, Assurbanipal extended his kingship in southern Mesopotamia, appointing the mysterious Kandalānu as a puppet ruler, who ruled until the end of Assurbanipal's reign in c. 627 BCE, and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn became nothing more than an unpleasant memory preserved in earlier texts.

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## Abbreviations

CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . 1956- Chicago: The Oriental Institute.
PNA	Radner, Karen and Heather D. Baker, eds. 1998–2011. <i>Prosopography of the Neo- Assyrian Period Vols 1–3</i> . Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.
RIMA 2	Grayson, A. Kirk. 1991. <i>Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC)</i> . Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
RIMA 3	Grayson, A. Kirk. 1996. <i>Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858–745 BC)</i> . Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
RIMB 2	Frame, Grant. 1995. <i>Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157–612 BC)</i> . Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
RINAP 3/1	Grayson, A. Kirk and Jamie Novotny. 2012. <i>The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC), Part 1</i> . Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
RINAP 3/2	Grayson, A. Kirk and Jamie Novotny. 2012. <i>The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC), Part 2</i> . Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
RINAP 4	Leichty, Erle. 2011. <i>The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)</i> . Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.

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<sup>127</sup> RIA XII: 620, Porter (1993: 89), BM 90866.



- RINAP 5 Novotny, Jamie. "The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, Aššur-etel-ilāni, and Sîn-šarra-iškun." Online Resource. <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap5/>. Editions as of July 2018.
- RIA Ebeling, Erich, Bruno Meissner, Ernst F. Weidner, Wolfram von Soden, Dietz Otto Edzard, and Peter Calmeyer. 1928. *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*. Berlin: W. De Gruyter
- SAA II Parpola, Simo and Kazuko Watanabe. 1988. *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA III Livingstone, Alasdair. 1989. *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA IV Starr, Ivan. 1990. *Queries to the Sungod: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA VIII Hunger, Hermann. 1992. *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA X Parpola, Simo. 1993. *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA XVI Luukko, Mikko and Greta Van Buylaere. 2002. *The Political Correspondence of Esarhaddon*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA XII Kataja, Laura and Robert Whiting. 1995. *Grants, Decrees and Gifts of the Neo-Assyrian Period*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA XVIII Reynolds, Frances. 2003. *The Babylonian Correspondence of Esarhaddon and Letters to Assurbanipal and Sin-šarru-iškun from Northern and Central Babylonia*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAA XXI Parpola, Simo. 2018. *The Correspondence of Assurbanipal, Part 1: Letters from Assyria, Babylonia, and Vassal States*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- SAAS IV Cole, Steven W. 1996. *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times c. 755–612 BC*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- TDOT Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Volume 15*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

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