



# STATE ARCHIVES OF ASSYRIA

Published by the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project  
of the Academy of Finland  
in co-operation with  
Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft

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VOLUME X  
Simo Parpola  
LETTERS FROM ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN SCHOLARS

HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS



# LETTERS FROM ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN SCHOLARS

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HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

1993

## FOREWORD

The manuscript of this volume is based on the transliterations, translations and notes of Simo Parpola, both previously published and newly undertaken for this volume. The Project staff in Helsinki contributed heavily to the development of the manuscript. More details will be found in the editor's preface.

Our thanks are due to the Trustees of the British Museum, London; for permission to publish illustrative material in their keeping and to their photographic department for their prompt and professional service. We thank I. L. Finkel of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities of the British Museum and M. J. Geller, University College, London, for timely collations.

We thank the Olivetti (Finland) Corporation for continuing technical support and the Finnish Ministry of Education for subsidies to help offset the costs of publication, and we express our gratitude to the Academy of Finland and the University of Helsinki for continuing financial support for the Project.

Helsinki, July 1993

Robert M. Whiting

## PREFACE

Most of the Assyrian letters included in this volume have been available in modern critical edition since 1970, when the first volume of my *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (LAS I) was published. An extensive commentary to these texts (LAS II) has been available since 1983. The prolonged work on the commentary produced many corrections, improvements and additions to the texts edited in LAS I, though by and large this edition still retains its value.

The decision to produce a revised and enlarged edition of LAS in the SAA series was prompted primarily by two factors. In the first place, LAS I has long been out of print and it was felt that the publication of an updated version of the corpus, especially in the format of the SAA series with complete glossary and indices, would be a real service. More importantly, the Babylonian letters belonging to the corpus, which were omitted from LAS I for reasons explained there, p. VIII, still remained unedited; making this important material finally available for study had become a real desideratum in view of recent advances in the study of Assyrian royal ideology and religion.

The present edition is based on a computerized version of LAS I prepared, proofread and updated with LAS II by Laura Kataja and Raija Mattila. The English of the translations was revised by Robert M. Whiting. This preliminary manuscript was supplemented with transliterations and translations of the Babylonian letters and the new Assyrian material provided by myself, a preliminary new order of the texts was established by Raija Mattila, and preliminary proofs, including indices compiled by Mattila, were produced.

The final manuscript represents a thoroughly revised version of this preliminary manuscript. I have personally scrutinized all the transliterations, translations, indices and the glossary, modified the order of texts and the critical apparatus, provided the headings and written the introduction. Thus the responsibility for the final product rests with me. However, the preparation and production of the volume incorporates a tremendous investment of time and effort by Raija Mattila, Laura Kataja and Robert M. Whiting, and it would never have appeared without them. I am deeply indebted to them for their valuable assistance.

Thanks are due to the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to publish previously unpublished texts in their custody in this volume, and to the staff of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities of the British Museum for continued collaboration received in the publication of the SAA series.

The edition of the Babylonian letters has greatly profited from transliterations and collations made by Prof. Manfred Dietrich of the University of

Münster and kindly placed at the disposal of the Project. Dr. I. L. Finkel of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities and Prof. M. J. Geller of University College, London, collated a number difficult passages at my request. Dr. Julian Reade of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities once again provided excellent illustrations. I wish to extend my thanks to all these colleagues for their invaluable collaboration.

Helsinki, July 1993

Simo Parpola

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## INTRODUCTION

The unique correspondence edited in this volume originates from a group of ancient scholars (*ummâni*, literally, “masters”) attached to the service of the Assyrian king as his spiritual guardians and advisers. Although their scholarship, as we shall see presently, encompassed fields and activities that for the most part would not seem scientific or worthy of pursuing today, that was certainly not the way it was seen at the time. In order to understand the special role played by the scholars at court, the reasons for their interaction with the king, and the significance of the present correspondence in general, one has to consider the nature and orientation of Mesopotamian scholarship and the fundamentals of Assyrian royal ideology.

### Mesopotamian Scholarship and Royal Ideology

#### *The Five Scholarly Disciplines*

In no. 160 the author introduces to the king twenty “able scholars” (*ummâni lēûti*) whom he considered fit for royal service. Each of them is identified by a professional title as expert in a particular scholarly discipline; the titles include *tupšarru* “astrologer/scribe,” *bârû* “haruspex/diviner,” *âšipu* “exorcist/magician,” *asû* “physician,” and *kalû* “lamentation chanter.”<sup>1</sup> The author is careful to point out that many of the scholars, including himself, were proficient in more than one discipline, and that their ability was based on the study and mastery of an extensive technical lore.

The five scholarly professions occurring in no. 160 recur several times as a group in the present correspondence and elsewhere, occasionally together with other similar professions. Thus letter no. 7 refers to “scribes, diviners,



exorcists, physicians and augurs (*dāgil iššūri*) serving in the palace and living in the city” as a group. A memorandum from the reign of Assurbanipal (ADD 851 = SAA 7 1) enumerates by name seven astrologers, nine exorcists, five diviners, nine physicians, six lamentation chanters, three augurs, three Egyptian magicians (*hartibi*), and three Egyptian ‘scribes’; the 45 individuals listed evidently represented the totality of scholarly experts employed at the royal palace at the time.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a Neo-Assyrian vocabulary combines “wise man (LÚ.NUN.ME.NÍG.TAG.GA = *hassu*), diviner, exorcist, physician, chanter” into a group, while a contemporary list of professions presents “scribe, exorcist, diviner, physician” as consecutive entries.<sup>3</sup>

It is thus clear that the scholarly experts of no. 160 formed a close-knit professional group intimately associated with the concept “wise man.” And while comparable foreign experts (Syrian and Anatolian augurs, Egyptian magicians and scribes) evidently could also qualify as “wise men,”<sup>4</sup> basically only representatives of the said five scholarly disciplines were included in this category. The designation “wise men” accorded to them derives from the fact that they represented mutually complementary branches of Mesopotamian Wisdom, an extensive body of traditional (largely esoteric) knowledge comparable to Jewish Kabbalah. This body of knowledge is known to us primarily through its written component, which beside philosophical texts (largely authored by scholars identifiable as exorcists, diviners or chanters) almost exclusively consists of the technical literature of the Five Disciplines.<sup>5</sup>

Not every scribe, diviner, exorcist, physician or chanter, of course, deserved the designation “scholar.” As indicated by no. 160, this designation was reserved to only those individuals who excelled in their trade to the extent that they were in command of more than one branch, if not the entire extent of the Wisdom. Such individuals were responsible for the cultivation and development of Mesopotamian philosophy and science, and it is from such individuals that the present correspondence originates.

### *The Nature of Mesopotamian Wisdom*

The technical lore of the Five Disciplines underlines the strong religious and metaphysical orientation of Mesopotamian scholarship: astrology, magic, divination and mystical philosophy, matters rejected today as pseudo-scientific, played a prominent part in it.<sup>6</sup> True enough, mathematics, astronomy and linguistics also played an important role in Mesopotamian scholarship; but these “exact sciences” too were harnessed to the service of the predominantly religiously and philosophically oriented Wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Isaiah, in predicting the fall of Babylon, writes as follows (47:10): “Your wisdom (*hākmatek*) and your knowledge (*daʿtek*) perverted you, and you said in your heart, I am, and none else beside me.” What the prophet meant by wisdom and knowledge appears in the following verses (47:12-13): “Stand now with your enchantments, and with the multitude of your sorceries, wherein you have laboured from your youth: perhaps you will profit, perhaps you will prevail! You are wearied in the multitude of your counsels; let now the viewers of the heavens, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand

up and save you from what will come upon you!" The same idea recurs in the prophecy of Nahum on the fall of Nineveh (3:17): "You have diviners like locusts, and astrologers like grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun arises they flee away."

These two passages, scornful as they are, reveal the great respect which the Mesopotamians had for the experts in divination, magic and astrology, and one may get an idea of why the study of these pseudo-sciences was appreciated above everything else. Insight into the supernatural or numinous was considered the greatest wisdom of all, the foundations of which were believed to have been laid by the gods themselves. This view was also shared by the author of the book of Daniel, who writes, addressing Belshazzar, king of Babylon:

There is a man in your kingdom who has in him the spirit of the holy gods, a man who was known in your father's time to have a clear understanding and *godlike wisdom*. King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, appointed him chief of the *magicians, exorcists, astrologers, and diviners*. This same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, is known to have a notable spirit, with knowledge and understanding, and the gift of *interpreting dreams, explaining riddles and unbinding spells*. (Dan. 5:11)

### *The King as God's Earthly Representative*

Mesopotamian Wisdom provided a comprehensive and systematic explanation of the world starting from the basic proposition that God had created the universe as a mirror of his existence and man as his image.<sup>8</sup> The complex metaphysical theory derived from this basic proposition had direct political and ideological significance, since it defined the position of the king as that of God's representative on the earth.

The central dogmas of Mesopotamian Wisdom were epitomized in an esoteric diagram called the *Tree of Life*, circulated among initiates only.<sup>9</sup> A stylized version of the diagram, depicted as an elaborate palmette-crowned tree trunk surrounded by a garland of palmettes, pine-cones or pomegranates (Fig. 1), served in Assyrian imperial art as an ideological symbol providing the legitimization for Assyria's claim to world dominion. This symbol involved two basic interpretations.

On the one hand, it represented the divine world order maintained by the Assyrian king as God's representative on the earth; the garland around the Tree symbolized the underlying unity of the cosmic powers operative in the universe, "gods," conceived as aspects of a single, all-encompassing transcendental God, Aššur. By implication, this symbolism called for the political unity of the entire world under the hegemony of Assyria.

At the same time, the symbolism of the Tree was projected upon the Assyrian king to portray him as the perfect image of God. The symmetry, harmony, and axial balance of the Tree symbolized the absolute perfection and mental balance of this ideal man. The relevance of such symbolism for