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## **Assur und sein Umland** Im Andenken an die ersten Ausgräber von Assur

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(Hgrs)



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## THE TRIALS OF ESARHADDON: THE CONSPIRACY OF 670 BC

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents an attempt to use the scarce available sources, both textual and archaeological, in order to reconstruct the events leading up to the mass execution of members of the Assyrian governing elite in the year 670 BC.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Ancient Assyria; 7th century BC; Esarhaddon (680-669 BC); conspiracy; prophecy; moon god of Harran.*

In this paper, I will a dark chapter of the reign of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon: a conspiracy that came to a cruel end in the year 670 B. C. In the 7th century BC, the ancient kingdom of Assyria was by far the largest Near Eastern empire of its time, encompassing the area of the modern states of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in their entirety, half of Israel, wide parts of south-eastern Turkey and extensive regions of Western Iran. Assyria was at that time divided into about seventy provinces, each under the control of a governor<sup>2</sup>. The king personally appointed each and every governor, and these in turn answered directly and only to the king. As a rule, governorship was not hereditary: Thus, the office could not be passed on from father to son, and in order to prevent dynastic ideas and schemes from the outset, the king preferred his governors to be eunuchs – castrated men who were physically unable to have children. The king was understood to be chosen by the gods and to rule by their grace; his word was law, and he could directly intervene at all levels of his empire. Nevertheless, the Assyrian administration was largely decentralised and in their provinces, the governors were authorised to act independently on behalf of the king: As far as routine matters were concerned, they operated at their own discretion.

But in order to make sure that all subjects of Assyria were at all times aware of the fact that the one person who was all-powerful in the empire was the king, and only the king, his omnipresence and ubiquity was established and guaranteed on various levels: Hence, the king entertained residences all over the empire which he visited on a regular basis during his continual travels through his kingdom; in each of these palaces lived an entire royal household, complete with an administrative staff, various supply and maintenance units and also entertainment personnel such as musicians and singers. The average inhabitant of the many Assyrian residence cities will not always have known whether the king was present in his local palace or not; but the imposing building itself was always there, visible every day as a monument to the king's claim to

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<sup>2</sup> For the Neo-Assyrian provincial system see Radner 2006a.

power. Moreover, the king was present in the form of his images: In all major sanctuaries of Assyria, his statues and steles took their place next to the divine image; they were also erected at other prominent locations, such as city gates<sup>3</sup>. And maybe most importantly, each and every inhabitant of Assyria was personally tied to the king by the means of a loyalty oath<sup>4</sup>; such oaths were imposed at the time of the new king's ascension to the throne, but were repeated in the context of important state events such as the election of a crown prince. The oath was perceived as a spiritual essence, and the oath-taking ceremony included the ritual drinking of water which was thought to cause the oath itself to enter the body; this was meant to prevent "from within" any breach of the agreement.

The combination of a decentralised administration and the close personal link between the people and their king was the backbone of the Assyrian empire which since the 14th century BC had been a constant in the ever-changing political geography of the Ancient Near East. For seven centuries this way of government succeeded, always headed by a member of the same family; this clan had ruled the ancient city of Assur many centuries prior to its mutation into the centre of a territorial empire, and therefore the dynasty of the Assyrian kings is to be counted among the longest-living in world history.

One of the reasons that kingship could so firmly remain in one family's control for more than a millennium<sup>5</sup> was that it needed not necessarily pass from father to son or even eldest son: Each of the king's male relatives was a possible successor to the throne, and hence the royal bloodline was well protected against its extinction. In principle, all the king's sons, brothers, cousins and nephews, but also more distant relatives could ascend to the Assyrian throne; however, one requirement was an absolute essential: In order to be king, a candidate needed to enjoy perfect physical and mental health. But even under the proviso of this sensible condition, dozens, if not hundreds of possible successors to the throne were usually available. It was, however, the king's exclusive privilege to choose an heir, during his reign and with divine assistance. This heir could use his time as crown prince to gain experience as a ruler in the making and to secure his power base; usually, he could then hope to ascend to the throne after his predecessor's natural death with wide acceptance. Nevertheless, time and again Assyria saw controversies and also battles for the throne; but the protagonists were all members of the royal clan<sup>6</sup>. We know of several instances when the struggle for power did not originate in the old king's death, but already started when his crown prince was chosen: More than once, disappointed hopefuls reacted to the installation of a rival as heir to the throne by killing the ruler, trying to wrestle the power not only from the old king, but also and especially his chosen successor. Esarhaddon (681–669) was confronted with this fate twice during his lifetime, and we will focus on the second and lesser known of these events.

Esarhaddon became king of Assyria in the year 681. Despite the fact that his father and predecessor Sennacherib (704–680) had made him crown prince two years earlier and had had the whole country take an oath on behalf of his chosen heir, this happened against all odds: Esarhaddon had not been Sennacherib's first choice and in order to have him installed as crown prince, the old king first needed to dismiss another of his sons from the office<sup>7</sup>. This son, Urdu-Mullissi by name, had been crown prince and heir apparent to the Assyrian empire for well over a dozen years when he suddenly

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<sup>3</sup> On the images of the Assyrian kings see Winter 1997: 363-369.

<sup>4</sup> On Assyrian loyalty oaths see Radner 2006b.

<sup>5</sup> As documented best by the Assyrian King List (Grayson 1980-83: 101-115).

<sup>6</sup> The known cases of usurption and succession wars are discussed by Mayer 1998a.

<sup>7</sup> On Sennacherib's changing succession arrangements and the resulting conflict see Frahm 1997: 18-19 (with references and earlier literature).

had to resign from the prominent position; the reasons for his forced resignation are unknown, but were obviously not grave enough to have him pay with his life. Despite the fact that Urdu-Mullissi had to swear loyalty to his younger brother, he opposed his elevation to the office of crown prince, conspired against Esarhaddon and tried to cause Sennacherib to take back the appointment; the king did not comply, but the situation was clearly very precarious, and the new heir was sent into exile for his own protection. Sennacherib does not seem to have realised just how dangerous his decision to back Esarhaddon's promotion was for his own life; otherwise it is a mystery how the former crown prince Urdu-Mullissi could be allowed to stay in his father's closest proximity where, right under his nose, he plotted to become king<sup>8</sup>. Sennacherib seems to have been caught completely off-guard when Urdu-Mullissi and another son of his attacked him with drawn swords in a temple of Nineveh: On the 20th day of the tenth month of 681<sup>9</sup>, Sennacherib was killed by the hands of his own sons whose deed caused a stir all over the Near East, best witnessed by the report found in the Old Testament<sup>10</sup>. Yet the kingship that Urdu-Mullissi craved for was not to be his. The aftermath of the murder saw friction between him and his conspirators; his accession to the throne was delayed and ultimately never took place at all. Assyria was in chaos when Esarhaddon, leading a small army, entered the country from his western exile and marched towards the heartland of the empire. He managed to drive out the murderers of Sennacherib<sup>11</sup> and, two months after the assassination, he became king of Assyria<sup>12</sup>.

These bloody events shaped the new king profoundly. It comes as no great surprise that after his accession to the throne Esarhaddon ordered all conspirators and political enemies within reach to be killed; yet he could not touch the leader of the conspiracy as Urdu-Mullissi had found asylum in Urartu<sup>13</sup>. That Assyria's northern neighbour would harbour the murderer of Sennacherib is not at all unexpected: The two countries had been in an almost constant state of war for the past two centuries. At that time, chances were that Urdu-Mullissi still might become king and in that event, the Urartian king could reasonably expect to gain substantial influence over Assyria. In the meantime, Esarhaddon made an effort to ensure that his brother would not have any powerful allies at home, should he ever try to stage a coup d'état from his exile: Many officials throughout the country who were suspected of entertaining sympathy for the enemy fraction were replaced. To give but one example, the complete security staff at the royal palaces of Nineveh and Kalḫu was dismissed<sup>14</sup>; it is of course understood that these men were not sent into retirement: They will have been executed.

Henceforth, Esarhaddon met his environs as a rule with overwhelming distrust. Routinely, he sought to establish by means of oracular queries whether certain courtiers, officials and even members of the royal family wished him ill or actively tried to harm him<sup>15</sup>. If he seems to have been wary of his male relatives, he appears to have

<sup>8</sup> Details about Urdu-Mullissi's conspiracy are mentioned in a letter from the reign of Esarhaddon, SAA 18 100.

<sup>9</sup> Grayson 1975: 81: Chronicle 1 iii 34-35: „On the twentieth day of the month Tebet (x.) Sennacherib, king of Assyria, was killed by his son in a rebellion.“

<sup>10</sup> 2 Kg. 19,37; Jes. 37,38.

<sup>11</sup> The only known account of Esarhaddon's exile and his victorious return is found in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon (Borger 1956: 40-45: Nin. A i 8- ii 11); we should be aware of the subjectivity of the available information.

<sup>12</sup> Borger 1956: 45: Nin. A i 87-ii 2: „Im Monat Adar (xii.), einem günstigen Monat, am 8. Tage, einem *eššēšu*-Festtage des Nabu, zog ich freudig in Ninive, meine Residenz, ein und setzte mich froh auf den Thron meines Vaters.“

<sup>13</sup> According to the report in 2 Kg. 19,37 and Jes. 37,38.

<sup>14</sup> Radner in press (c).

<sup>15</sup> SAA 4 139-148 (“insurrection queries”).

entertained less suspicions about the women of his family. This is certainly one of the reasons why Esarhaddon's mother Naqi'a, his wife Ešarra-ḫammāt and his eldest daughter Šerua-eṭirat were able to wield an amount of influence that has few parallels in Ancient Near Eastern history<sup>16</sup>. The power of his wife was much noticed even outside palace circles; it is quite extraordinary that her death in the year 673 is mentioned prominently in two contemporary chronicle texts<sup>17</sup>. The devoted widower had a mausoleum erected and special rites for his wife's funerary care installed<sup>18</sup>. Even more remarkable, he did not get married again; the vacant position of the Assyrian queen was hitherto occupied by his mother Naqi'a<sup>19</sup> who had already played an important role in Esarhaddon's appointment as crown prince and in his eventual taking of power: This is most obvious from a prophecy which records the encouraging words of Ištar of Arbela to Naqi'a during the time of Esarhaddon's exile<sup>20</sup>. That also the daughter Šerua-eṭirat occupied a prominent position at her father's court is known from some letters that speak of her self-confidence<sup>21</sup>. Her far-reaching influence is apparent from the fact that in later years she acted as a mediator in the conflict between her brothers, the kings of Assyria and Babylon<sup>22</sup>; this is without parallel for any Near Eastern woman of that time.

Esarhaddon's general distrust against his environment is also mirrored by his choice of residence. He had a palace in the city of Kalḫu (Fig. 1) adapted which his forefather Shalmaneser III (858–824) had constructed as an armoury some two centuries earlier. This building was situated far from the administrative and cultic centre of the city, on top of a separate mound that protected it well from its surroundings. In the years between 676 and 672, Esarhaddon had the old building renovated and enhanced, turning it into a veritable stronghold: The gateways especially were turned into strongly fortified and impregnable towers that, if needed, could be used to seal off the palace against the rest of the city. The only access to the building was through a narrow entrance, leading into a long and steep hallway inside the enclosing wall which was protected by a sequence of several heavy doors and which steeply ascended towards the palace<sup>23</sup>. Esarhaddon had a similar palace erected in Nineveh, also far removed from the acropolis proper at Kuyunjik on the separate mound of Nebi Yunus (Fig. 2); however, as this is today the site of one of Mosul's most important mosques, the building is only insufficiently explored<sup>24</sup>.

In the first years of his rule, Esarhaddon proved himself a successful regent who, after a chaotic start, was able to consolidate his kingship and efficiently prevented segregation and territorial losses. Treacherous vassals, who had thought Assyria weakened and had tried to benefit from this, had to come to the painful realisation that Esarhaddon fully controlled his governors and his army and was able to take revenge for treason in the same way as his predecessors had done: As a consequence, the vassal kingdoms of Sidon and of Šubria were conquered and

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of the status of the women of the Assyrian royal family see Melville 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Grayson 1975: 85: Chronicle 1: iv 22: „On the fifth day of the month Adar (xii.) the king's wife died.“ Note the difference in the day date in the second text, Grayson 1975: 127: Chronicle 14: 23: „The eighth year: On the sixth day of the month Adar (xii.) the king's wife died.“

<sup>18</sup> For references see Radner 1999b: 406.

<sup>19</sup> See Melville 1999 for a monograph devoted to Naqi'a.

<sup>20</sup> SAA 9 1 v 12-25. For the dating of the prophecy to the period of Esarhaddon's exile see also Parpola 1980: 175.

<sup>21</sup> SAA 16 28; SAA 18 55.

<sup>22</sup> As detailed in a literary composition in Aramaic language preserved on *Papyros Amherst* 63 xvii 5–xxii 9, see Vleeming/Wesseliuss 1985 und Steiner 1997: 322-327.

<sup>23</sup> On this building, the so-called Fort Shalmaneser, see Oates/Oates 2001: 144-155 (with earlier literature).

<sup>24</sup> On this building, the so-called Review Palace or Arsenal, see Scott/MacGinnis 1990: 64-67 and Reade 1998-2001: 419-420.

turned into Assyrian provinces<sup>25</sup>. The completion of a peace treaty with Elam, Assyria's long-standing rival in Iran, in the year 674<sup>26</sup> must be seen as a skilful political manoeuvre, and the securing of the Eastern border provided Assyria for the first time ever with the chance to attempt and exploit the power vacuum in Egypt to its own advantages – Assyria's first invasion into Egypt, however, ended with a defeat against Taharqa the Nubian, and a hasty retreat<sup>27</sup>.

At that time it had become increasingly clear that Esarhaddon's physical condition was poorly: He was constantly struck with illness, mostly of a rather severe nature. For days, he withdrew to his sleeping quarters and refused food, drink and, most disturbingly, any human company<sup>28</sup>; the death of his beloved wife in the year 673 may well have further damaged his already fragile health. For the all-powerful king of Assyria, this situation was bizarre. Esarhaddon's counsellors witnessed his deterioration first with apprehension and then with increasing objection, but were of course not in a position to actually change the state of affairs. It is a testament to Assyria's sound administrative structure that the country could take the king's continuing inability to act his part. Modern day man may well be able to muster considerable sympathy for Esarhaddon whose symptoms were indeed rather alarming: As we know from the correspondence left by the royal physicians and exorcists,<sup>29</sup> his days were governed by spells of fever and dizziness, violent fits of vomiting, diarrhoea and painful earaches. Depressions and fear of impending death were a constant in his life. In addition, his physical appearance was affected by the marks of a permanent skin rash that covered large parts of his body and especially his face. In one letter, the king's personal physician – certainly a medical professional at the very top of his league – was forced to confess his ultimate inability to help the king: „My lord, the king, keeps telling me: ‘Why do you not identify the nature of my disease and find a cure?’ As I told the king already in person, his symptoms cannot be classified<sup>30</sup>.“ While Esarhaddon's experts pronounced themselves incapable of identifying the king's illness, modern day specialists have tried to use the reported symptoms in order to come up with a diagnosis in retrospect<sup>31</sup>. However, it is not entirely clear whether the sickly Esarhaddon contracted one illness after the other or, as would seem more likely, suffered from the afflictions of a chronic disease that never left for good. Be that as it may, in a society that saw illness as a divine punishment, a king who was constantly confined to the sick bay could not expect to meet with sympathy and understanding. He could, however, reasonably presume that his subjects saw his affliction at the very least as an indication that the gods lacked goodwill towards their ruler, if not as the fruit of divine wrath, incurred by committing some heinous crime. Therefore, the king's condition needed to be hidden from the public by all

<sup>25</sup> See Radner 2006a: 63-64 s.v. Šidunu, Kullimeri and Uppumu.

<sup>26</sup> The most explicit source for this is the letter SAA 18 7. For the historical context see Waters 2000: 42-44.

<sup>27</sup> The campaign is mentioned in two chronicle texts: Grayson 1975: 84: Chronicle 1: iv 16: „The seventh year: On the fifth day of the month Adar (xii.) the army of Assyria was defeated in Egypt.“ Grayson 1975: 126: Chronicle 14: 20: „The seventh year: On the eighth day of the month Adar (xii.) the army of Assyria [marched] to Sha-amile.“ For the historical context see Morkot 2000: 264.

<sup>28</sup> Most explicitly described in the letter SAA 10 43, with which his physicians tried to coax the king out of his isolation.

<sup>29</sup> For these letters see the discussion of Parpola 1983: 230-236.

<sup>30</sup> SAA 10 315: 7-12: *ka-a-a-ma-nu LUGAL be-lí i-qab-bi-ia ma-a a-ta-a ši-ki-in GIG-ia an-ni-iu-u la ta-mar bul-še-e-šú la te-pa-áš ina pa-ni-ti ina pa-an LUGAL aq-ti-bi sa-kik-ke-e-šú la ú-sá-aḫ-ki-me.*

<sup>31</sup> Parpola 1984: 231-233 suggested *Lupus erythematoses*, and this hypothesis was accepted and further developed by Kaiser 1995. For a critical review of this identification and a critique of the general idea of retrospective diagnosis see Leven 2004: 380-382.

means, and that this was at all feasible was very much facilitated by the ancient tradition that whoever came before the king had to be veiled and on their knees<sup>32</sup>.

Because of his failing health, Esarhaddon saw himself permanently in death's clutches; this alone made it necessary to provide for his succession: Who would be king after him? There were a great many possible candidates: Esarhaddon himself had fathered at least 18 children<sup>33</sup>, but some of them suffered, like their father, from a frail condition and needed permanent medical attention<sup>34</sup>. It would appear that sickly sons were, just like all the daughters, deemed unfit from the start: After all, only a man without fault could be king of Assyria. At one point, a son called Šîn-nadin-apli was deemed a fit candidate, as is demonstrated by an oracular query addressed to the sun god<sup>35</sup>. However, it was Assurbanipal who was elevated to the rank of crown prince of Assyria in the year 672, on the 18th day of the month Iyyar (ii.), and at the same time, his elder brother Šamaš-šumu-ukin was declared crown prince of Babylon. Installing one son as the next king of Assyria and another son as the future ruler of Babylon was a novel approach, as for the past decades the Assyrian kings had simultaneously held the crown of Babylon. Following the tradition established for Esarhaddon's own proclamation as crown prince, the whole country had to swear an oath to respect and honour the king's decision<sup>36</sup>; simultaneously the king's mother, Naqi'a, saw to it that all those who could at one point have entertained hopes to succeed Esarhaddon as king of Assyria took an additional loyalty oath in favour of her grandson Assurbanipal<sup>37</sup>. And even his dead mother Ešarra-ḥammat was thought to have risen from her grave to secure Assurbanipal's claim: According to a contemporary letter, her ghost appeared to the new crown prince in a dream, blessing him and pronouncing him and his heirs the rightful rulers of Assyria<sup>38</sup>.

The new succession set-up was also expressed by visual means, most prominently on the royal stelae set up at Sam'al and Til Barsip which depict the king and both crown princes (Fig. 3)<sup>39</sup>. Also the image displayed on the royal seal was adapted to fit the new situation: The traditional depiction of the king killing a lion was replaced by an updated design that showed this subject not just once, but three times; this was meant to convey that not king Esarhaddon alone, but also his two crown princes Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin were the country's legitimate rulers<sup>40</sup>; that this was indeed reality is clear from a number of references in letters which show both crown princes deeply involved in matters of political and cultic importance<sup>41</sup>. Such a division of power must have appealed to all those who wished to see the sick king's burden lightened: It seems that a socially acceptable way of coping with an unpleasant and dangerous situation had been found.

Yet making public who would be the next king could endanger the present ruler's life, as Esarhaddon had learned the hard way from the example of his father Sennacherib's grim fate. It is at that time that Esarhaddon became for the second

<sup>32</sup> Parpola 1980: 172 with n. 12.

<sup>33</sup> For Esarhaddon's children see Parpola 1983: 117-119 and Weissert 1998: 161-163.

<sup>34</sup> For the sickly condition of e.g. Šamaš-metu-uballit and Aššur-taqiša-liblut see Weissert 1998: 162 s.v. h and i.

<sup>35</sup> SAA 4 149.

<sup>36</sup> As documented by the surviving copies of the succession treaty (SAA 2 6) and references in the inscriptions of Esarhaddon (SAA 2 14; Borger 1956: 72; Tarbišu A: 40 (date formula) and Assurbanipal (Borger 1996: 15-16, 208; Prism A i 8-22 // Prism F i 7-17).

<sup>37</sup> SAA 2 8.

<sup>38</sup> SAA 10 188.

<sup>39</sup> Börker-Klähn 1982: 212-213 no. 217-219; Miglus 2000; Porter 2002.

<sup>40</sup> On the implications of the new royal seal see Maul 1995.

<sup>41</sup> e.g., SAA 16 17-27, 34-35, SAA 18 6-7.