

The Murderer of Sennacherib, yet Again: The Case against Esarhaddon

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Who was responsible for the murder of Sennacherib? This question fascinated Assyriologists for most of the twentieth century, until a new interpretation of an obscure, fragmentary letter convinced many that a disenfranchised elder son of Sennacherib, Urad-Mullissu, had hatched the conspiracy. Since the (re)publication of this text in 1980 by Simo Parpola, near consensus has developed about these events. In this paper I reexamine the issue and revive the theory that Esarhaddon, Sennacherib's son and successor, may have been behind the assassination, rather than his elder brother. I do not question the coherence of Parpola's interpretation, but I suggest that the field may place undue confidence in a single broken, decontextualized letter. More importantly, the evidence implicating Esarhaddon is ample. I extend six arguments that point toward Esarhaddon's guilt, most of which are derived from Esarhaddon's own account of events in his famous Nineveh A inscription. I do not propose that we can establish Esarhaddon's guilt conclusively at this remove, but I conclude that the weight of this evidence equals, if not surpasses, that which points to a plot concocted by Urad-Mullissu.

In 1979, at the 26th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Copenhagen, Simo Parpola presented new evidence regarding one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of the ancient world.¹ He identified the murderer of Sennacherib, ruler of the vast Neo-Assyrian empire, who was assassinated on the twentieth day of the month Ṭebētu in the year 681 BCE. In previous decades, uncertainty had ruled. Scholarly opinion vacillated between suspicion that the perpetrator of the regicide was a bitter, disenfranchised older son of Sennacherib, in particular Urad-Mullissu, and suspicion that Babylonian sympathizers committed the crime, presumably with the backing of Sennacherib's younger son Esarhaddon. Consensus was never reached for lack of sufficient data with which to confidently reconstruct what had transpired. Parpola, however, provided a new argument, and the strongest to date: He reinterpreted a previously misunderstood letter (ABL 1091)² as referring to a "treaty of rebellion" (*adê ša sīlī*) involving Esarhaddon's older brother, Urad-Mullissu, who was conspiring to

Author's note: This paper is an expanded version of an argument I made briefly in my book, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, Writings from the Ancient World Supplement 4 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 320–24. I also delivered a version of this at the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Warsaw in July 2014; I thank my many interlocutors there for the extremely lively discussion that followed.

1. The paper was published in the proceedings of that conference and is well known in article form among Assyriologists: Simo Parpola, "The Murderer of Sennacherib," in *Death in Mesopotamia: Papers Read at the XXVIe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. Bendt Alster (Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1980), 171–82.

2. The most recent edition of the letter is that of Frances Reynolds, *The Babylonian Correspondence of Esarhaddon* (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 2003), 82, no. 100. Reynolds (whose edition appears in the venerable State Archives of Assyria, of which Parpola is editor-in-chief) translates more of the broken sections than Parpola did ("Murderer of Sennacherib," 180–81), but the translation is not substantially different from that provided by Parpola in the RAI proceedings volume.

murder his father.³ The conspiracy was discovered by some unnamed loyalist, but when he attempted to approach Sennacherib to reveal the plot, he was instead taken to Urad-Mullissu and executed.

Parpola's interpretation of the letter and his establishment of Urad-Mullissu's guilt proved so convincing that in the decades following the appearance of his paper most scholars have asserted Urad-Mullissu's guilt as a proven fact.⁴ For example, in the encyclopedic *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Eckart Frahm, the leading authority on Sennacherib today, writes simply: "On 20th Tēbetu (x.) 681 Sennacherib, as a consequence of his stubbornness, was killed by Urdu-Mullissu and his accomplices."⁵ I wish to call this conclusion into question. I will begin by discussing the letter, but my primary purpose with this article is not to attack Parpola's interpretation of events. Rather, I intend to present a feasible counternarrative—that is, to marshal all of the evidence suggesting Esarhaddon's own guilt in the matter of Sennacherib's assassination. Surprisingly, I do not know of any previous effort to gather all such evidence into one place. Parpola concluded his paper with legal language: "Surely we are now in a position to acquit the harassed king of the murder charge he does not deserve, and convict the man to whom all the evidence points"—Urad-Mullissu. In this spirit, I offer this response as a summary statement for the prosecution of "the harassed king." After a brief examination of the letter, I offer the case against Esarhaddon, presented in six exhibits.

3. In addition to his interpretation of the letter, Parpola included a second argument in his paper. He pointed out that the theophoric element in Urad-Mullissu's name (^dNIN.LÍL), which had been read "Ninlil" in most previous scholarship (rendering the name "Arad-Ninlil"), should actually be read "Muliššu." The name that Parpola ended up with can be linked without much difficulty both to the Adrammelech mentioned in 2 Kings 19:37 // Isaiah 37:38 as one of the murderers of Sennacherib, and to the Adramelos/Ardumuzan named as the murderer by Berossos. Parpola's discussion of the name here is almost certainly correct, but his conclusion—that the "identification of Arad-Ninlil/Arda-Mulišši as the murderer of Sennacherib can thus be doubly assured" ("Murderer of Sennacherib," 174)—is dubious. The biblical writer, much less Berossos, would not have known what actually transpired on that fateful day in Assyria. These later accounts would not have resulted from investigative journalism but from passing on whatever traditions these writers themselves had received. Although Esarhaddon's scribes appear to have deliberately avoided alluding to the murder of Sennacherib in official inscriptions, the palace probably still circulated a story of Urad-Mullissu's guilt, whatever the truth of the situation. The somewhat garbled appearance of Urad-Mullissu in the non-Assyrian sources might prove nothing more than the efficacy of Esarhaddon's propaganda and, if he was indeed responsible, his suppression of the truth.

4. Most scholars, indeed, but not all. After summarizing the evidence of the case, A. K. Grayson concludes, "It must be confessed that the murder of Sennacherib, the circumstances surrounding it, and the causes leading up to it, are unsolved puzzles" ("Assyria: Sennacherib and Esarhaddon [704–669 B.C.]," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 3, pt. 2: *The Assyrian and Babylonian Empires and Other States of the Near East, from the Eighth to the Sixth Centuries B.C.*, ed. John Boardman et al. [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991], 121). See the similar comments in A. K. Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)*, Part 2, RINAP 3/2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 28–29; also M. J. de Jong, "'Fear Not, O King!' The Assyrian Prophecies as a Case for a Comparative Approach," *JEOL* 38 (2003–2004): 114.

5. E. Frahm, "Šīn-aḫḫē-erība," in *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 3, pt. 1: P–Š, ed. H. D. Baker (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 1121. So also Karen Radner introduces Urad-Mullissu in her entry of the same series: "Son and murderer of Sennacherib" ("Urdu-Mullissu," in *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 3, pt. 2: Š–Z, ed. H. D. Baker [Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2011], 1407). See also E. Frahm, "Family Matters: Psychohistorical Reflections on Sennacherib and His Times," in *Sennacherib at the Gates of Jerusalem: Story, History and Historiography*, ed. I. Kalimi and S. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 219; and E. Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sanherib-Inschriften* (Vienna: Institut für Orientalistik, 1997), 18. I wish to thank Dr. Frahm for his feedback when I presented an earlier form of this paper at the Rencontre, and for graciously suggesting improvements despite being a proponent of the traditional interpretation.

THE LETTER (ABL 1091)

Parpola's interpretation of ABL 1091 provides a formidable challenge to those who wish to keep the case open. His brief paper is impressive, even brilliant, and at first blush it does appear to exonerate Esarhaddon definitively. But closer scrutiny allows for some doubt about Parpola's reconstruction. Most saliently, the letter is quite broken. The beginning and end of the text are both missing, as is the end of every line. The name of Urad-Mullissu, the villain here condemned, is not once fully preserved, although the five partially preserved attestations do support the reconstruction.⁶ The recent history of the text illustrates this: Parpola notes that after its initial publication, the letter "escaped attention because it was completely misunderstood and mistranslated by its editor."⁷ Grayson concurs, "There is much to be said for [Parpola's] theory, but, given the broken state of the letter, it cannot be definitively proven."⁸

In addition to the ambiguity inherent in any fragmentary text, one can question some aspects of Parpola's reconstruction. As he restores the text, the letter describes an unfortunate supporter of Sennacherib who uncovered a plot to assassinate the king. When the man asked for an audience with the king to inform him of the treason, he was instead brought to Urad-Mullissu, the very conspirator he meant to expose. Urad-Mullissu executed the would-be informant along with his brothers. Parpola contends that the only conceivable context for the letter is that it was written to Esarhaddon, during his reign, and therefore after the assassination was a *fait accompli*. The purpose was to denounce two of Urad-Mullissu's henchmen named in the letter, Nabû-šumu-iškun and Šillāia/Šillā.⁹ It was this pair who had brought the unnamed, ill-fated protagonist of the letter to Urad-Mullissu rather than to the king, maintaining the secrecy of the plot and sealing the fate of both Sennacherib and the informant.

But a problem arises with viewing these two henchmen as the target of the letter in question. Both of these men seem to have maintained their positions into Esarhaddon's reign.¹⁰ This is difficult to explain if the two were indeed co-conspirators with Urad-Mullissu, which is crucial to Parpola's interpretation.¹¹ Šillāia is attested as late as the year 675, which means that either the writer of this letter waited six years after the assassination to denounce him, or Esarhaddon forgave him—two equally unlikely scenarios.¹²

6. According to Reynolds's edition, the name appears as ^mARAD-rd[NIN.LÍL] (obv. 10'), ^mARAD-^dNIN.[LÍL-ma] (rev. 1), ^mARAD-rd[NIN.LÍL] (rev. 4), ^mARAD-^dNI[N.LÍL] (rev. 6), and ^mAR[AD-^dNIN.LÍL] (rev. 11).

7. Parpola, "Murderer of Sennacherib," 172.

8. Grayson, "Sennacherib and Esarhaddon," 121.

9. The name of the latter is preserved only as ^mŠi[-] (obv. 7').

10. This was noted by Parpola ("Murderer of Sennacherib," 177 n. 17). For the textual record of Šillāia, see F. S. Reynolds, "Šillāia," in *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 3, pt. 1, 1173–74, nos. 4–5. The Šillāia active in Esarhaddon's reign is not conclusively linked to the Šil[...] of the letter about the murder plot, but the identification of the two seems likely—although Šillāia no. 5 in *PNA* is an anti-Assyrian, pro-Babylonian activist, which seems odd, as I note below. That the Nabû-šumu-iškun of the letter is the same official of this name from Esarhaddon's reign is yet more questionable owing to the commonness of this name. Heather Baker records no fewer than thirty-three individuals of this name in the Sargonid period ("Nabû-šumu-iškun," in *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. 2, pt. 2: *L–N*, ed. H. D. Baker [Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001], 888–90).

11. Mario Liverani recognized this issue as well: "Nabu-shum-ishkun and Sillaya, the only two witnesses of the alleged denunciation and elimination of the accusers, i.e. the only two witnesses of the fact that Urad-Mullissu was the chief conspirator, remained in the service of Esarhaddon, a rather strange fact if they had been part of the conspiracy" ("The Age of Sennacherib," in *The Sennacherib Wall Reliefs at Nineveh*, ed. C. Lippolis [Florence: Case Editrice La Lettere, 2011], 17).

12. One subplot that deserves further investigation is whether there is any connection between Šillāia and Bēl-ušēzib, the Babylonian scholar (see Exhibit 5 below). Both were pro-Babylonian, but they were clearly in different factions. Bēl-ušēzib, Esarhaddon's firm supporter from the time he was crown prince, denounces Šillāia in various letters to Esarhaddon (see S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* [Helsinki: Helsinki Univ.

Another concern that arises with Parpola's interpretation is that it fails to explain the Babylonian dynamic. Peter Machinist, an advocate of Parpola's interpretation who praised his *Rencontre* paper as a "stunning performance," nevertheless cautions, "If there is a question to be raised here, it is that in reconstructing the background and motives of the murder, on the basis of ABL 1091 and other evidence, Parpola perhaps too narrowly focuses on court jealousies and personal ambitions. Larger factors are not considered, one of which seems crucial: Sennacherib's attitude toward and violent treatment of Babylonia, especially Babylon."¹³ As outlined in Exhibit 5 below, it seems likely that a pro-Babylonian group was involved in some way, especially in light of Ashurbanipal's overt accusation of the Babylonians in his Prism A inscription.¹⁴ It is, of course, possible that Esarhaddon and Urad-Mullissu were part of rival factions that were both pro-Babylonian—and this might explain why Šillāia, a pro-Babylonian activist, was loyal to Urad-Mullissu—but the one candidate for the throne whom we know had Babylonian backing was Esarhaddon. By virtue of the principle of *lex parsimoniae*, the Babylonian question points toward Esarhaddon's involvement.

There is a reason that Parpola's interpretation has gained such a following: His reasoning is cogent and the letter cannot be ignored. One other piece of evidence not mentioned by Parpola also supports his theory, namely, the inclusion of the title "avenger of (his) father, who engendered him" on an Esarhaddon stele from Zincirli.¹⁵ This strikes me as a major exhibit for the prosecution against Urad-Mullissu, or at least the defense of Esarhaddon. Yet the epithet is unique among Esarhaddon's numerous inscriptions with voluminous titularies. If it represented so significant an accomplishment as killing the party truly responsible for Sennacherib's death, one would expect it to appear more saliently and the event to be celebrated in some inscription. So while this does not look good for those wishing to prosecute Esarhaddon, it is far from definitive. I do not suggest that we should dismiss the evidence of the letter and the Monument A epithet, but we should recognize their ambiguity. At the end of the day I remain unconvinced of Urad-Mullissu's guilt principally because Parpola's argument rests primarily on one incomplete text. Moreover, I think Parpola errs by placing too much weight on Esarhaddon's own account of events, which is prejudiced to the point of lacking any credibility in defending him.¹⁶ Unwilling to convict Urad-Mullissu on the evi-

Press, 1993], 92, no. 112 rev. 3–6; cf. also the very broken mention of Šillāia in another letter by Bēl-ušēzib edited by Parpola in the same volume, p. 98, no. 117 rev. 13').

13. P. Machinist, review of *Death in Mesopotamia*, *JAOS* 104 (1984): 570. Compare the remark of Hayim Tadmor, who writes (prior to Parpola's paper), "The entire question of the succession at the close of Sennacherib's reign (directly connected with his murder) is part and parcel of the struggle between supporters and opponents of the Babylonian line, which is still obscure" (Hayim Tadmor, Benno Landsberger, and Simo Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will," *SAAB* 3 [1989]: 32. Tadmor's section of this contribution is a translation of an article originally published in 1958.)

14. This point was recently raised by Mario Liverani. Liverani admits that overall, "[t]he opinion of Simo Parpola (and other scholars) is probably the correct one" ("Age of Sennacherib," 16). But he appears to lack conviction as he follows this with a series of points suggesting Esarhaddon's involvement, concluding with, "One last consideration: [Ashurbanipal's inscription] clearly implies that the murder of Sennacherib was thought at the time to have been carried out by a pro-Babylonian party ... and Esarhaddon's behaviour proved to be openly pro-Babylonian when he reconstructed the city and restored the cult of Marduk" (17).

15. *mutēr gimil abi ālidišu*. See Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)*, RINAP 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 184, Esarhaddon 98 i 25.

16. Parpola writes, "The weakness of this theory [of Esarhaddon's having engineered the assassination] is that it is in disagreement not only with Esarhaddon's own account of the course of events, which puts the blame on his brothers, but also with the traditions of the Bible and Berossus; it also involves a lot of reading between the lines" ("Murderer of Sennacherib," 172). None of what Parpola describes here actually weakens the claim. Esarhaddon's own account is propaganda; the traditions of the Bible and Berossos are later and presumably derive from Esarhad-

dence at our disposal, I believe it is time to reexamine Esarhaddon's potential involvement in the reprehensible affair.

EXHIBIT 1. ESARHADDON'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SENNACHERIB

The most compelling evidence against Esarhaddon comes from a careful reading of his apology.¹⁷ As is well known, the apology appears after the titulary in Esarhaddon's Nineveh A inscription. This inscription was prepared and circulated about seven or eight years after Esarhaddon's enthronement, during a period when Esarhaddon's approval ratings must have been low. The vaunted Assyrian army had recently been defeated in Egypt, an embarrassing setback in Esarhaddon's plans to expand the empire. I have argued elsewhere that the apology was composed in response to this—faced with questions about his fitness for office after leading the army to a debacle, Esarhaddon's scribes departed from the typical formulary of royal inscriptions to include a long section narrating his rise to the throne, emphasizing his divine election and military prowess.¹⁸ But despite its propagandistic nature, the apology includes some remarks that should surprise readers of Assyrian royal inscriptions. Esarhaddon is not candid—he maintains that the gods were on his side and the outcome of the contested succession was never in doubt—but when describing the obstacles he overcame with divine assistance, he reveals a situation in which he was slandered and alienated. The passage in question (i 23–31) reads:

Proper conduct departed my brothers¹⁹ and they forsook (the will) of the gods. They trusted in their arrogant deeds, and they were plotting evil. They started evil rumors, calumnies, (and) slander about me against the will of the gods, and they were constantly telling insincere lies, hostile things, behind my back. They alienated the well-meaning heart of my father from me, against the will of the gods, (but) deep down he was compassionate and his eyes were permanently fixed on my exercising kingship.²⁰

This passage is revealing about the situation in Nineveh during the period preceding Sennacherib's death. The apology informs us that "evil rumors," "calumnies," "slander," "lies," and "hostile things" were circulating with regard to Esarhaddon. This emphasis on the defamation of Esarhaddon, and the fact that it appears at all in an inscription composed to glorify him and legitimize his rule, suggests that this was a major issue in late-680s Nineveh. Further evidence of this appears in Esarhaddon's shocking admission that the brothers "alienated

don's propaganda; and as I attempt to show here, one suspects Esarhaddon not so much because of reading between the lines of his account but because of taking it at face value.

17. I am continually surprised by how trusting most modern scholars are of Esarhaddon's version of events. One excellent exception to this is de Jong, "Fear Not, O King!," esp. 113–15. On the apology, see Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 301–35.

18. On the context of Esarhaddon's apology, see my "The *Sitz im Leben* of Esarhaddon's Apology," *JCS* 68 (2016): 181–95.

19. On l. 23, see E. Frahm, "Warum die Brüder Böses planten: Überlegungen zu einer alten *Crux* Asarhaddons 'Ninive-A' Inschrift," in *Philologisches und Historisches zwischen Anatolien und Sokotra: Analecta Semitica in Memoriam Alexander Sima*, ed. W. Arnold, M. Jursa, W. W. Müller, and S. Procházka (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 27–49. I tentatively translate following Rykle Borger's earlier understanding of the phrase (*Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* [Graz, 1956], 41). For my justification of this translation, see *Royal Apologetic*, 310–11 n. 28.

20. (23) *riddu kēnu eli aḥḫēya itabikma* (24) *ša ilāni umašširūma ana epšētišunu šurruḫāti* (25) *ittaklūma ikappudū lemuttu* (26) *lišāni lemutti karši tašgerti ki lā libbi ilāni* (27) *eliya ušabšūma surrāti lā šalmāti* (28) *arkiya iddanabbubū zērāti* (29) *pašru libbi abiya ša lā ilāni uzennū ištiya* (30) *šaplānu libbašu rēmu rašišuma* (31) *ana epēš šarrūtiya šitkunā ināšu*. The translation here follows Leichty, *Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon*, 22, Esarhaddon 1, with the exception of l. 23, for which see the previous note.

[*uzennû*, literally, caused to hate] the well-meaning heart of my father from me.” Approaching these lines with the most basic hermeneutic of suspicion sets off an alarm for the careful reader. We know that Sennacherib had previously designated Esarhaddon crown prince. But here Esarhaddon himself states that with this arrangement in place, such terrible things were said about him that Sennacherib was alienated from him. What follows is even more startling: It was only “deep down” (*šaplānu libbašu*) that Sennacherib continued to have compassion for Esarhaddon. The conclusion that inevitably follows is that on the surface, in public, Sennacherib did *not* have compassion for his young son. Unfortunately, we can only guess at how this lack of compassion manifested itself.

The final line of this section raises more doubts about Esarhaddon’s good standing at the time of Sennacherib’s murder. Esarhaddon remarks that Sennacherib’s “eyes were permanently fixed on my exercising kingship.” Why is Esarhaddon compelled to state this? The entire previous section of the inscription (i 8–22) describes the nomination of Esarhaddon and his entering the House of Succession, the *bīt ridûti*, as the legitimate heir. It is possible that Esarhaddon pronounced Sennacherib’s unfailing dedication to the succession plan because there were those who alleged that Sennacherib switched his support to another son prior to his untimely demise. Even with the most generous reading, Esarhaddon may be telling the truth, but he still notes this only because it was surprising that Sennacherib did not change his support.

Esarhaddon would not have broached the subject of his falling out with his father unless it were a publicly known fact. The admission that his reputation was thoroughly besmirched at the court at Nineveh and that Sennacherib was alienated from him provides a motive for Esarhaddon. Perhaps Sennacherib began to back another son. Even if Sennacherib had not publicly revised the succession, perhaps Esarhaddon suspected that, in light of the new rift in their relationship, Sennacherib intended to designate a different son as heir. If this were the case, dispatching Sennacherib prior to an official change of support could have been Esarhaddon’s safest alternative. Along these lines, Grayson and Novotny comment, “Esarhaddon (and his mother Naqī’a) may have been complicit in the murder, especially if his elder brothers had managed to turn Sennacherib against him. Esarhaddon and Naqī’a had the most to lose if that were the case and they would have needed to act quickly to ensure that the succession arrangement remained in their favor.”²¹

In any event, we should take this passage from Esarhaddon’s own inscription into consideration as we ponder who was the most likely murderer of Sennacherib. But there is much more evidence to examine.

EXHIBIT 2. ESARHADDON’S BANISHMENT FROM NINEVEH

Our next exhibit involves Esarhaddon’s departure from Nineveh shortly before the murder.²² Again we know of this from the apology, which reads, “At the counsel of the great

21. Grayson and Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, Part 2*, 28–29. Despite the suspicion of Esarhaddon apparent in this comment, it still seems to me unduly influenced by the presumption of Esarhaddon’s innocence. They write “if his elder brothers had managed to turn Sennacherib against him” (emphasis added) when Esarhaddon has just openly admitted that they had!

22. This assumes, of course, that Esarhaddon was in Nineveh to begin with. There is no evidence that demands this conclusion, but it seems likely. There was a *bīt ridûti* (“House of Succession”) in Tarbišu as well, but we have no reason to believe that Esarhaddon resided there. Moreover, wherever he was, he states that he was “caused to leave” and removed to “a secret place,” so the following points stand. Most, if not all, scholars who have heretofore tried to solve the murder of Sennacherib have assumed that Esarhaddon lived in Nineveh, and there is no good reason to challenge this.

gods, my lords, away from [my brothers'] evil deed(s), they caused me to reside in a secret place and their good aegis they stretched forth over me" (i 38–40). Many scholars accept this at face value, and those who do so go a step further and attribute Esarhaddon's departure to Sennacherib's concern for his safety. Parpola exemplifies this view, writing, "Foreseeing trouble, Sennacherib sends Esarhaddon away from the capital to the western provinces, yet he does not revise the order of succession."²³ But Esarhaddon never claims this himself. In fact, Sennacherib never appears in this passage of the apology, so it is fair to question this assumption. *Why* did Esarhaddon leave Nineveh? On the one hand, as numerous scholars have inferred, it may have been a royally sponsored precautionary measure. Unable to ensure the crown prince's safety, Sennacherib may have sent him away with his blessing. On the other hand, Esarhaddon may have fled the scene of his own volition, or he may have even been banished by his father. A few points make the latter explanations more feasible.

First, if Esarhaddon was removed for his own safety, the situation would be unparalleled in contemporary texts—why would he leave the presence of the king, his father, who had all the available resources to protect him? In the ancient Near East, people fled the presence of the king when they considered themselves in danger from that king, not when that king supported them and wanted to ensure their safety.²⁴ Moreover, if Esarhaddon were still the crown prince, as he claims, he doubtless would have had a royal guard tasked with safeguarding him. Second, we have just covered the conspicuous point that Esarhaddon and Sennacherib were on the outs when this happened. It strains the imagination to envision a situation in which Sennacherib was publicly displeased with Esarhaddon yet so insistent on his position as successor that he developed an elaborate scheme to hide him away until ... one knows not what the long-term plan may have been. That Esarhaddon's fall from grace resulted in both a geographical and a positional displacement makes more sense.

Third, although Esarhaddon attributes his exile to fleeing for fear of his brothers' yet-unrealized "evil deed(s)," there is reason to connect it to the aforementioned negative reports about Esarhaddon circulating at that time. An extant text from Esarhaddon's reign suggests this. The text in question seems to include several oracles solicited by Esarhaddon during the turbulent period when he was displaced by his brothers.²⁵ One oracle reads in part: "Now these criminals caused speech against you, caused you to leave, (and) surrounded you. You opened your mouth (and cried out), 'O Aššur!'"²⁶ The wording here merits discussion. The

23. Parpola, "Murderer of Sennacherib," 175. See also Karen Radner, "The Trials of Esarhaddon: The Conspiracy of 670 BC," in *Assur und sein Umland: Im Andenken an die ersten Ausgräber von Assur*, ed. Peter A. Miglus and Joaquín Ma Córdoba (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma), 166–67; Martti Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources* (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press), 20; Erle V. Leichty, "Esarhaddon, King of Assyria," *CANE* 2, 951.

24. See Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 321–22, esp. n. 53.

25. The text is undated, but several parts of it apparently refer to the civil war that accompanied Esarhaddon's accession, leading Parpola reasonably to conclude that the text dates from "the very last days of 681 or early 680" (*Assyrian Prophecies* [Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1997], lxx). It is possible that this oracle collection belongs to a later period in Esarhaddon's reign, but this is unlikely. Although there were a few particularly unstable periods during Esarhaddon's reign, including in the late 670s, the mention of being forced to leave due to others' slander links this closely with the apology's narration of the events of 681. But without a firm date one should not place too much weight on the evidence of this oracle. Collection 1 of this corpus also concerns the instability surrounding Esarhaddon's accession, but Parpola dates it to around 673 BCE, the same time as the composition of Esarhaddon's apology in Nineveh A. Moreover, Collection 3, which includes the passage quoted above, may also contain a reference to the conspiracy against Esarhaddon near the end of his reign, in 670 BCE (iv 25–30)—but that section is very broken, and it might also refer to the events of his accession.

26. *annūrig šaršarrāni annūti / ussadbibūka ussešūnikka / iltibūka atta pika / taptitūma mā anīna Aššur* (ii 10–13). For alternative translations of the beginning of this phrase, see Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, 23–24, no.

group introduced at the outset, “these criminals” (*šaršarrāni annûti*), causes ambiguity in two ways. First, it is not clear who “these criminals” actually are, and it may be that this is a deliberately vague designation intended to cover all of Esarhaddon’s enemies within Nineveh. The second bit of ambiguity stems from the fact that “these criminals” are in some way the subject of the following two verbs, but because both verbs use the causative stem, it is impossible to determine either from grammar or from context whether the criminals are the primary or secondary subject—that is, one does not know whether “these criminals,” whoever they may be, were caused by some other malevolent party (omitted from the text) to do the dastardly things described, or whether the criminals in question were themselves the prime movers. That is, it is unclear whether the aforementioned criminals caused the slander or whether they were caused to slander. Translated literally, the first verb is “they caused them to slander you”—are the criminals “they” or “them”? In light of the vagueness of who the criminals are, it affects the interpretation little, but the (deliberate?) ambiguity could be cited as evidence that Esarhaddon’s supporters are not comfortable addressing matters directly—as if there is something to hide.²⁷

More importantly, the oracle directly links the accusations against Esarhaddon to his exile.²⁸ The apology is beautifully crafted to separate these events for the audience: Esarhaddon describes the accusations and the rift with his father, then pronounces his father’s continued approval of the existing succession arrangement, then focuses again on the brothers’ perfidious evil deeds (without naming any tangible crimes), then narrates his going into hiding. The oracle, however, allows us to see through the rhetoric here and realize that the falling out with Sennacherib and the removal from Nineveh were closely related.

The collocation of Esarhaddon being slandered and being removed from Nineveh provides strong evidence against the prevailing opinion that Sennacherib, hoping to ensure Esarhaddon’s safety and future succession, sent him away from Nineveh as a precaution. It is more plausible that he left in disgrace, either fleeing of his own volition or banished by royal fiat, forcibly removed after his detractors’ allegations of some major indiscretion. His removal from Nineveh seems secure enough to afford him a personal alibi—Esarhaddon certainly did not commit the heinous deed himself—but it provides him with a motive.

EXHIBIT 3. THE STATUS OF ESARHADDON’S BROTHERS

One might object that if Sennacherib were indeed aware of trouble brewing, he would want to keep his disgruntled, passed-over sons nearby so that their actions could be monitored. The phenomenon of taking “guests”—that is, hostages—into the palace for the purpose

3.3; Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003), 120–21, no. 86; CAD A/2: 143 sub *annûrig* b, 381 sub *ašû* 7.n; CAD D: 13 sub *dabābu* 9.e; and CAD Š/2: 124 sub *šaršarrānu*.

27. The specific terminology used does not shed light on matters. The first verb, *ussadbibūka* “they caused speech against you,” is a Š stem from *dabābu* ‘to speak’. Although *šudbubu* at its core appears to be a neutral term meaning ‘cause to speak’, the context here suggests slander. Prior translations include “[they] conspired against you” (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 120, no. 86; “you” refers to Esarhaddon in all these instances), “[they] provoked you” (Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, 23, no. 3.3), and “they have incited [these rebels] to plot against you” (CAD D: 13 sub *dabābu* 9.e). The following verb, *ussešūnikka* “[they] caused you to leave,” is an equally obvious Š stem from *wašû* ‘to go out’. Like *šudbubu*, *šūšû* is inherently neutral, meaning only ‘to cause to go out’, but here we see renderings such as they “expelled you” (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 120, no. 86), “had you banished” (Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, 23, no. 3.3).

28. Liverani also appears to endorse the idea that Esarhaddon’s brothers’ slander precipitated his exile: “It seems that Sennacherib sent Esarhaddon abroad for a while, perhaps to Kharran. Esarhaddon reports the measure in positive terms, as devised for his own protection, but a different interpretation is also possible: that he was exiled after the reaction of the elder brothers” (“Age of Sennacherib,” 16).

of observation is well attested in the ancient Near East; rulers understood the advantages of keeping one's enemies close.²⁹ And, building on this speculation, one could then argue that Sennacherib did want Esarhaddon far from his less noble-minded kin, so he encouraged him to find safe haven. But another piece of evidence from Esarhaddon's oracle collections militates against this.

One brief prophecy is delivered not to Esarhaddon himself but to the "mother of the king" (*ummi šarri*), by Aḫāt-abiša of Arbela.³⁰ It reads: "I am the Lady of Arbela. To the mother of the king: Because you appealed to me saying, 'You set the one on the right and the one on the left in your lap—but my own offspring you forced to roam the steppe'—Now fear not, O king! The kingdom is yours; the power is yours!"³¹ A few factors suggest that those "at the right and the left" must refer to Esarhaddon's brothers. They are contrasted with "my own offspring," namely, Esarhaddon; Parpola also notes that the expression of children placed at the right and left elsewhere indicates a pair of children nominated as a king's successors.³² In this oracle, then, we have strong evidence that other sons of Sennacherib enjoyed his favor. Esarhaddon, meanwhile, was forced to "roam the steppe," a common expression used to indicate the aimless meanderings of wild animals outside civilization.³³ To the urbane Assyrians, "roaming the steppe" was a condition so undesirable that it appears as a curse in various Neo-Assyrian treaties, alongside being clothed with leprosy.³⁴ Although we cannot be certain what sort of literary embellishments the prophetess made here—and we should also bear in mind that she is allegedly quoting Esarhaddon's own mother when describing his state—it is difficult to reconcile the mention of Esarhaddon's "roaming the steppe" with the traditional idea that Sennacherib ushered him to a safe haven for his own protection. On the contrary, this oracle coheres well with the alternative—that Esarhaddon was exiled, and his estrangement directly benefitted his rival siblings.

29. Of course, if one follows this line of reasoning one must accept that Sennacherib's methods of surveillance were terrible. This would require assuming that he considered the elder sons a sufficient threat to spy on them, yet he allowed them the freedom of movement to assassinate him.

30. Liverani asserts that the very fact that Esarhaddon's mother, Naqī'a, had to consult the gods on Esarhaddon's behalf suggests Sennacherib's change of heart regarding the succession: "Naqī'a obtained some oracular sentences in favour of his [sic] son, something that would have been unnecessary if the decision and favour of the old king had remained unchanged" ("Age of Sennacherib," 16).

31. *anāku Bēlet-Arbail / ana ummi šarri / kī taḫḫurīninni / mā ša imitti / ša šumēli / ina sūniki tassakni / mā yā'u / šit libbiya / šēra tusarpidi / umā šarru tapallaḫ / šarrātu ikkū / danānu ikkūma* (v 14–23; for the text see Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, 9, no. 1.8). Note also the translation of this text in CAD R, which emphasizes Esarhaddon's plight in contrast to his brothers' good position even more (though, I think, by taking some liberties with the text): "You, Istar of Arbela, hold on your lap the oldest and second oldest sons (lit. the one on the right and the one on the left), but my own offspring ... you made run around (unprotected) in the open country" (CAD R: 149 sub *rapādu* 5).

32. In fact, this occurs within Esarhaddon's reign, in reference to his own sons. A certain Adad-šumu-ušur wrote to him, "You have girded a son of yours with *headband* and entrusted him with the kingship of Assyria; your eldest son you have put (up) to the kingship in Babylon. You have placed the first on your right, the second on your left side (*1 ina imittika 2-u ina šumēlika tusaze'iz*)!" See Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, 9, commentary to v 15f. For the latter text, see Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, pt. 1: *Texts* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 102–3, no. 129 obv. 6–13.

33. See CAD R: 147–49 sub *rapādu*. The expression is best known from the Gilgamesh epic, in which it appears several times. Enkidu "roams the steppe" with the (other) wild animals before he is civilized. Later, after Enkidu's demise, Gilgamesh "roams the steppe" mourning him, and he suggests that he will do so again if he cannot cross the sea and achieve immortality.

34. See Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ. Press, 1988; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 11, no. 2 iv 6; 45, no. 6 l. 421; see also Jacob Lauinger, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty at Tell Tayinat: Text and Commentary," *JCS* 64 (2012): 99, v 89.

EXHIBIT 4. THE RAPIDITY OF ESARHADDON'S ACCESSION

Consider closely the chronology of what transpired. Sennacherib was murdered on the 20th of ʿĪbētu, the tenth month of the Mesopotamian year.³⁵ Esarhaddon reports that about six weeks later, on the 8th of Addaru, the twelfth month, “I joyfully entered [Nineveh] and on the throne of my father I happily sat.”³⁶ This is a remarkable turnaround for the recently spurned prince. Sennacherib’s assassination was among the most momentous events of the seventh century BCE, but no matter how significant, in the ancient world news could only travel as fast as people. Yet in six weeks Esarhaddon had managed to learn of Sennacherib’s death, muster an army,³⁷ march on Nineveh, and assume the throne.

It is worth reading an excerpt of Esarhaddon’s apology in this light. After hearing of his brothers’ ambiguous “evil deeds” (*epšētišunu lemnēti*, i 55), Esarhaddon declaims:

I did not wait one or two days. I did not pause for my army. I did not look for my rear guard. I did not muster a contingent of horses, the binding of the yoke, or the tools of my warfare. The provisions of my campaign I did not stockpile. Snow and the coldness of the month Šabaṭu, the depth of winter, I did not fear. Like a flying eagle, to overthrow my enemies I spread my wings. The road to Nineveh, with severity and urgency, I took, and before me, in the land of Ḫanigalbat, all of their elite warriors impeded my advance and they sharpened their weapons. The fear of the great gods, my lords, overwhelmed them and the arousal of my mighty warfare they feared. They became like raving women.³⁸

To be sure, the idea of not waiting for one’s army can be found elsewhere in Assyrian royal inscriptions and is part of a self-aggrandizing trope.³⁹ But Esarhaddon stresses this far beyond what is ordinary; it does not seem like perfunctory royal propaganda here. It is conceivable that Esarhaddon’s emphasis on moving rapidly could be intended to address the fact that his response to the assassination appeared to be tremendously quick—as if it had all been calculated beforehand.⁴⁰

35. This is recorded in the Babylonian Chronicle of Nabû-naṣir to Šamaš-šumu-ukīn; see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 81, chronicle 1 iii 34–37 = Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 198–99, chronicle 16 iii 34–37.

36. *ḫadīš ʿrumma / ina kussī abiya ṭābiš ušib* (Nineveh A ii 1–2). The Babylonian Chronicle records this as happening on either the 18th or 28th of Addaru (Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 82, chronicle 1 iii 38 = Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, 198–201, chronicle 16 iii 38; see the commentary to iii 38 in Grayson’s volume). This places the actual accession a bit later, and it could be that Esarhaddon fudges the date slightly so that his triumphal entry occurs on the day of the *eššēšu* festival of Nabu, something he mentions in the inscription (i 87). But the chronicle also reports that the rebellion ended on the 2nd of Addaru (iii 37), so if it is in fact more accurate than the apology, then Esarhaddon’s quelling of the revolt would have taken almost a week *less* than he reports.

37. Unless, of course, one accepts at face value Esarhaddon’s claim, “I did not pause for my army. I did not look for my rear guard. I did not muster a contingent of horses” (Nineveh A i 63–64). I do not.

38. Nineveh A i 63–73.

39. For example, Sennacherib reports that when Marduk-apla-iddina II revolted at the beginning of his reign, “like a powerful wild ox, I took the lead of my troops from Baltil (Aššur), but I did not wait for the main force of my army, nor did I wait for the rear guard” (A. K. Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria [704–681 BC], Part 1*, RINAP 3/1 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012], 33, Sennacherib 1 l. 19). The motif also appears in Sargon’s eighth campaign report (see Walter Mayer, “Sargons Feldzug gegen Urtu—714 v. Chr.: Text und Übersetzung,” *MDOG* 115 [1983]: 80–81 l. 130) as well as the annals of Ashurnasirpal II (A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I [1114–859 BC]*, RIMA 2 [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991], 205, A.O.101.1).

40. De Jong does not note the rapidity of Esarhaddon’s accession, but he does draw attention to the fact that he clearly had supporters in various places who were poised to move on his behalf: “[Esarhaddon’s] heroic description

We should also consider the response of the rebellious armies in this context. On his way to Nineveh, Esarhaddon first encounters adversarial “elite warriors,” but after positioning themselves for battle, they “became like raving women.” It appears that battle was avoided (i 74–79). Meanwhile, the people allegedly embrace him while “they, the usurpers, doer(s) of rebellion and revolt, when they heard of the coming of my campaign they abandoned their troops, their support, and to an unknown land they fled.”⁴¹ We can take this claim at face value and accept that the brothers failed to put up a fight, but even if we do not, the alternative is that the battle was short. If Esarhaddon’s brothers were indeed behind the assassination, and their ultimate goal was to take the kingship as Esarhaddon claims,⁴² this is incongruous. It leaves us with a situation in which the brothers conspire to murder their father, catching Esarhaddon off guard and isolated. It is Esarhaddon, however, who swoops in and takes charge of the situation before anyone is prepared. The brothers, who had hatched the whole plot, *preemptively* flee. The conspirators should have had a major tactical advantage with the element of surprise on their side—but according to this version of events, it was they who were unprepared for the ensuing skirmish. We are left to choose between, on the one hand, an astonishingly misconceived conspiracy combined with an equally astonishing response to the crime and, on the other hand, a well-crafted coup carefully executed.⁴³

A few caveats accompany this line of reasoning. First, given his designs on the throne and his (one-time, if not current) position as crown prince, Esarhaddon undoubtedly would have had supporters in Nineveh ready to rally in an event such as an assassination, and some parties in the palace, such as Naqi’a, were obviously operating on his behalf. Even if this were a surprise to Esarhaddon’s faction, his supporters would not have been slow to respond. Second, in an episode filled with unknowns, this aspect of the contested succession is particularly full of open questions. We do not know, for example, the size of the various factions or the extent of the battle—was this a clash of armies or only a small group of supporters of the rival candidates? Was Esarhaddon truly in hiding, more or less alone, or was he accompanied by an army? (The rhetoric of the apology suggests the former, but the fact that he allegedly turned away some other force *en route* suggests the latter.) Neither do we know

[in his apology] is silent on the preparations his faction—Naqia, Bel-ušēzib and others—made when they mobilised support for Esarhaddon in various cities and from various deities” (“Fear Not, O King!,” 119).

41. *u šunu ḥammā’ē ēpiš sīḥi u bārīti / ša alāk gerriya išmūma šābē tuklātešunu ēzibūma / ana māti lā idū innabūtū* (i 82–84).

42. Nineveh A i 41–44; cf. also ii 8–9.

43. The only other scholar who has addressed this inconcinnity, to my knowledge, is Barbara Nevling Porter. She writes, “If we discount the effects of Ištar’s intervention, how had Esarhaddon, whose troops were outnumbered, managed to win? First of all, Esarhaddon’s sudden appearance had probably caught his brothers’ armies before full preparations for confronting him could be completed. In addition, Esarhaddon’s troops had a special incentive. They had not, he tells us, taken time to gather provisions; they had no chance of winning a sustained war. Their success, and their lives, depended on winning in this single thrust. Some were, moreover, Esarhaddon’s personal troops, bound to him and his fortunes. They had every reason to attack with a fervor that unmanned their opponents. Faced with this determination and perhaps touched by the charisma of Esarhaddon himself, his brothers’ troops surrendered to Esarhaddon in groups, pledging to support him. Perhaps, as the text claims, the oath of fealty to Esarhaddon imposed earlier on the Assyrians among them had also added to their misgivings and made them fight less well. However we explain it, the gamble paid off” (*Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian Policy* [Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993], 25). I am not persuaded that Esarhaddon’s army would have had more motivation than its opponents, even if moved by loyalty and a charismatic leader. Everyone’s lives were on the line. Also, Porter’s explanation takes the apology at face value when convenient (e.g., that Esarhaddon moved without supplies) but not at other times (e.g., Esarhaddon arrived with an army even though he claims otherwise). Porter seems to accept uncritically Esarhaddon’s propaganda, specifically his claim that even though he had no foreknowledge of the assassination and his brothers were the schemers, he somehow managed to surprise them.

whether the assassination was orchestrated long in advance or whether it was the product of an opportunistic malcontent. And most importantly, the “secret place” (*ašar niširti*, i 39) to which Esarhaddon fled has regrettably remained a secret from modern scholars. Our only clue is the mention that Esarhaddon crossed the land of Ḫanigalbat on his homeward journey. Leichty speculated that Esarhaddon stayed in Harran during his exile, but he based this on admittedly “inconclusive evidence”—essentially just the fact that the Sargonid rulers had connections with this city and it was west of Ḫanigalbat.⁴⁴ Harran is a possibility, but there are any number of other possibilities.

Let us assume that Esarhaddon was indeed in Harran, as this is one of the places closest to Nineveh, yet still west of Ḫanigalbat, where he might have stayed. Harran is about 250 miles from Nineveh as the crow flies, but Esarhaddon would probably have taken the royal road through Guzan and Našibina, making the journey closer to 300 miles (over fairly level, easily traversed terrain). Thus our scenario requires a 600-mile round trip for the message to reach him and for him then to return to Nineveh. In a span of about six weeks, this necessitates fifteen miles a day, without taking into account mobilizing the army, possible conflicts along the way or at home, weather delays, or anything else.⁴⁵ This is not outside the realm of feasibility, but there is certainly little margin for error. And if Esarhaddon were anywhere beyond Harran, or in a mountainous region (where political fugitives often hid), the logistics become much more difficult to explain.

On top of this, not only did Esarhaddon manage to pull off this brisk coup, but he did it in the dead of winter—during Šabātu, the eleventh month, equivalent to our January–February.⁴⁶ This was the time of year when the armies were usually home and the rulers were planning the next spring’s campaign, because the hazards of winter rendered mobilizing an army too perilous.⁴⁷ The season and Esarhaddon’s whereabouts only add to the improbability of the news, if unexpected, reaching him in time for him to journey home and claim the throne so expediently.

EXHIBIT 5. ESARHADDON AND BABYLON

Thus far we have focused solely on Esarhaddon and his brothers at the expense of the wider political scene. A broader view furnishes another point that casts doubt on Esarhaddon’s version of events, and it derives from Esarhaddon’s relationship with Babylon. A few points can be made about this:

First, as is well known, after multiple failed attempts to keep Babylonia under control through installing a governor—culminating with the capture of his eldest son, Aššur-nādin-

44. Erle V. Leichty, “Esarhaddon’s Exile: Some Speculative History,” in *Studies Presented to Robert D. Biggs, June 4, 2004*, ed. Martha T. Roth et al. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2007), 190.

45. I do not know of any studies of how fast Assyrian forces could travel on campaigns. Such studies have been done on Roman and medieval armies, but estimates range from anywhere between eight and over twenty miles a day, depending on the terrain, the baggage train and other logistics, the type of force, the weather, and other variables.

46. That Esarhaddon drew attention to the weather in his inscription is interesting, though I suspect, following Greta Van Buylaere, that Esarhaddon’s lack of fear of “snow and the coldness of the month” was primarily to contrast him with Sennacherib, who admitted to turning home during one campaign on account of the snow (“I Feared the Snow and Turned Back,” in *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, and Scholars: Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola*, ed. M. Luukko, S. Svard, and R. Mattila [Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society], 300–303).

47. Van Buylaere writes, “Even today, roads and mountain passes in eastern Turkey can be closed due to too much snow. So, in Shebat (January–February), in the dead of winter, Esarhaddon’s journey back from the mountains may have been difficult—even apart from his encounter with an opposing army” (“I Feared the Snow,” 303). See also Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics*, 23.

šumi—Sennacherib responded with violence, razing Babylon.⁴⁸ Afterward, Sennacherib was despised by the Babylonians.

Second, it appears that Esarhaddon had Babylonian support while he was still only a prince, that is, while Sennacherib remained alive. In a letter to Esarhaddon, the Babylonian astrologer Bēl-ušēzib recalls having overheard “words” in Nineveh, but he obstructed them out of concern for “the well-being of the prince, m[y] lord” (*šulmu ša mār šarri bēliya*).⁴⁹ More importantly, Bēl-ušēzib suggests that as a prince, Esarhaddon had been ordained to rebuild Babylon: “I spoke the sign of kingship of Esarhaddon, the prince, my lord, to Dadā the exorcist and the mother of the king, saying ‘Esarhaddon will rebuild Babylon and will restore Esagila.’” As de Jong points out, this letter was written after Esarhaddon had assumed the throne but it refers to events that occurred while he was still crown prince,⁵⁰ thus confirming Esarhaddon’s Babylonian backing from an early stage.

Third, after becoming king, Esarhaddon reversed Sennacherib’s anti-Babylonia policy. In his inscriptions from Babylon he portrays himself with all the trappings of a good Babylonian ruler; for example, he adopts the epithet *narām Zarpanītu* “beloved of Zarpanītu” and claims to have been appointed by Marduk.⁵¹ While this might not be surprising in ordinary circumstances—scribes would naturally play up such elements in inscriptions written specifically for Esagil and Babylon—given Sennacherib’s stance toward Babylon, this is a dramatic about-face.

The collocation of these three points—Sennacherib brutalized Babylon; the Babylonians looked to the future king Esarhaddon for support; Esarhaddon became king and restored Babylon—is at best circumstantial evidence for anything untoward directed at Sennacherib.⁵² Yet almost a century ago, Landsberger and Bauer already suspected Babylonian complicity in the assassination in light of this. They wrote, “Danach können wir uns vorstellen, wie sehnlich die Babylonier den Tod Sanheribs erwarteten und es nimmt uns nicht wunder, wenn dieser schließlich vorzeitig herbeigeführt wurde.”⁵³ More recently, de Jong has pro-

48. I take Sennacherib’s claims about destroying Babylon as basically accurate, even if exaggerated. For more, see my *Royal Apologetic*, 303 n. 5.

49. For an edition of the letter, see Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, 86–88, no. 109. For further discussion of the letter in the context of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian support, see de Jong, “Fear Not, O King!,” 116–17.

50. “This passage is part of a report that deals with the period right before Esarhaddon’s accession, but the letter [was] written afterwards. Thus, the letter describes a situation in which Esarhaddon was referred to as crown prince (lines 13 and 17), but at the moment of writing, Esarhaddon had become king (lines 16 and 18)” (de Jong, “Fear Not, O King!,” 116).

51. See especially his Babylon A inscription in Leichty, *Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon*, 193–201, Esarhaddon 104. For discussion of his self-presentation in Babylonia, see Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics*, 94–105.

52. See Frame’s caution against this point (*Babylonia 689–627 B.C.: A Political History* [Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1992], 70). Although Frame is correct to point out that there is no clear evidence linking Sennacherib’s Babylonian policy to his assassination, I do wonder if he is too quick to discount the idea. For example, he writes, “If Esarhaddon belonged to a pro-Babylonian party which opposed Sennacherib’s policy with regard to Babylonia, why had Sennacherib chosen him as his heir?” (70). This is a legitimate question, but there are multiple potential answers. Perhaps Esarhaddon’s pro-Babylonian stance developed only after he became crown prince, and this was the reason for their falling out. Or perhaps modern scholars all read the story of Esarhaddon’s nomination (Nineveh A i 8–22) too cynically, and Sennacherib genuinely consulted the gods without rigging the answer before elevating Esarhaddon.

53. B. Landsberger and T. Bauer, “Zu neuveröffentlichten Geschichtsquellen der Zeit von Asarhaddon bis Nabonid,” *ZA* 37 (1927): 72–73. It should be noted, though, that Landsberger and Bauer attribute Esarhaddon’s pro-Babylonian stance to the fact that his mother, Naqī’a, was a “babylonische[n] Aramäerin und Freund Babylons” (65), but this has been called into question. Sarah Melville points out that there is no evidence for Naqī’a’s nationality despite the speculation on the subject: “It is certainly possible that she came from outside Assyria proper, but

vided arguments on several grounds, most notably that of the oracle collections, that the Babylonians actively sought to place Esarhaddon on the Assyrian throne: “The Babylonian cities had suffered much during Sennacherib’s reign, with as climax the sack of Babylon in 689. ... The choice for Esarhaddon indicates political realism: he was the likeliest candidate to turn their fate. This proved to be a right calculation.”⁵⁴

Thus we know that the pro-Babylonian faction near the end of Sennacherib’s reign was campaigning for Esarhaddon and apparently acting on his behalf. Is it too much to suggest that—especially after Esarhaddon had been banished and his prospects, if events were left to run their course, seemed bleak—someone of this party, either on his own or on the disenfranchised prince’s orders, decided to take drastic measures against the oppressive ruler? If nothing else, we must admit that the clearest motive for the regicide lay with those who had suffered during Sennacherib’s brutal regime and hoped for benevolence from a pro-Babylonian successor.⁵⁵

Complementing all this is a cryptic passage from Ashurbanipal’s annals concerning Sennacherib’s murder. The passage, from Ashurbanipal’s Prism A, reads: “As for the rest of the (still) living people,⁵⁶ in the midst of the bull-colossi among which they destroyed Sennacherib, the father of (my) father, my progenitor—at that time I myself, as a funerary offering for him, destroyed those people in (their) midst.”⁵⁷ The reading here is not perfectly straightforward. The “they” who destroyed Sennacherib could be read “he,”⁵⁸ and in any event “they” are not explicitly linked to the Babylonians. But bringing the Babylonians to the murder site to be executed is difficult to explain unless Ashurbanipal held them at least indirectly responsible, and this interpretation is strengthened by Ashurbanipal claiming to execute them as a *kispu* “funerary offering” for his grandfather.⁵⁹ This admittedly poses problems for any reconstruction of events—if Esarhaddon was behind the murder and scapegoated his brother (leading to the traditions witnessed in the Bible and Berossos), then it is odd that Ashurbanipal lays the blame on a Babylonian group. But the blatant Babylonian connection attested in this inscription of Ashurbanipal does eventually lead one back to the possible involvement of Esarhaddon, friend and benefactor of the Babylonians.

lacking further evidence, it is not safe simply to assume that she did so” (*The Role of Naqia/Zakutu in Sargonid Politics* [Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999], 16). See also Frame, *Babylonia 689-627 B.C.*, 70–71, esp. n. 34.

54. De Jong, “Fear Not, O King!,” 119. De Jong’s reasoning is generally strong, but occasionally I think he goes slightly too far. For example, he cites as evidence of Babylonian support for Esarhaddon oracle 2.2 as published by Parpola (*Assyrian Prophecies*, 14–15, no. 2.2), where “Bel/Marduk promises Esarhaddon to protect him, and announces his *šulmu*.” But Bēl/Marduk is never mentioned in this oracle and he is almost certainly not the deity who was sought out here—Ištar of Arbela is a far likelier candidate.

55. Of course, it seems that many people in Sennacherib’s realm had sufficient motive to dispatch the ruler. On top of disenfranchised princes and vengeful Babylonians, Jamie Novotny recently drew attention to the fact that Sennacherib’s apparently unwelcome renovations of the Ashur temple “may have ruffled more than a few feathers, especially within the Aššur priesthood” (“‘I Did Not Alter the Site Where That Temple Stood’: Thoughts on Esarhaddon’s Rebuilding of the Aššur Temple,” *JCS* 66 [2014]: 106). The perturbation of the Ashur priests probably paled in comparison to the rage of Babylonian supporters, though, and Novotny notes that the ruffled feathers in Ashur probably did not in any way precipitate Sennacherib’s murder; it is more likely that the murder was attributed to Sennacherib’s impiety here after the fact (cf. Novotny, “I Did Not Alter the Site,” 108 n. 61).

56. The context of the inscription indicates that “the rest of the (still) living people” in question are Babylonians.

57. *sitti niše balūssun ina aladlammē / ša Sîn-aḥḥē-erība abi abi bānīya ina libbi ispunū / enenna anāku ina kispišu / niše šātunu ina libbi aspun* (Prism A iv 70–73; for the text, see R. Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals: Die Prismenklassen A, B, C = K, D, E, F, G, H, J und T sowie anderen Inschriften* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996], 44, 235).

58. Reading *ispunu* as a subjunctive third-person masculine singular preterite verb.

59. Cf. Liverani, “Age of Sennacherib,” 17.

EXHIBIT 6. THE ABSENCE OF MENTION OF THE REGICIDE

Over a half century ago, von Soden remarked, “Wenn wirklich die Brüder die Mörder waren, wie wir es zwischen den Zeilen wohl lesen sollen und wie es auch biblische Überlieferung annimmt, warum verschweigt Assarhaddon dann diese Tat, wo er die Brüder sonst doch so schwer beschimpft?”⁶⁰ Von Soden was neither the first nor the last to pose this question, yet I have never come across a satisfactory answer to it. One reason often stated is that mentioning an untimely death of a king in a royal inscription was in some way inappropriate (as an admission of the volatility of kingship, as a bad omen, etc.), but this explanation seems ad hoc, without much evidence to support it.

We can speculate on various justifications for the omission, but to the modern reader at least, Esarhaddon’s failure to accuse his brothers in the apology is striking. The pertinent section of the apology unfolds as follows: Esarhaddon reports being nominated as successor and entering the House of Succession (i 8–22); next, his brothers “abandoned the will of the gods” and “schemed evil”—though the closest the apology comes to specifics is that the brothers slandered Esarhaddon (i 23–31); next, the frightened Esarhaddon absconded and his brothers rebelled (i 32–44); next, Esarhaddon returned and took the kingship (i 45ff.). In the trajectory of events described here, the assassination must have occurred after Esarhaddon’s flight from Nineveh. The apology here reads: “My brothers raved and whatever was not good before gods and humanity, (that) they did. They schemed evil; they rebelled (with) weapons in Nineveh, without the gods; to exercise kingship they constantly butted heads with one another like goats.”⁶¹ Why is Esarhaddon so vague about the nature of the brothers’ evil deeds?

Of course, if Esarhaddon were himself the murderer (or at least behind the murder), one still wonders why he would not have falsely accused his brothers. One possibility is that his brothers’ innocence was known—indeed, if they enjoyed Sennacherib’s favor at the time of the assassination, perhaps no one in Assyria would even have believed that Urad-Mullissu was the culprit. Thus the entire apology may be an exercise in redirection. In an excellent analysis of the apology Philippe Talon concluded, “Le message essentiel qu’il véhicule est, me semble-t-il, assez clair: il souligne de manière répétitive la nécessité absolue pour un souverain de se conformer à la volonté divine.”⁶² The many references to the brothers acting against the will of the gods confirms this, and Esarhaddon may even level a veiled critique against Sennacherib for going against the will of the gods in alienating and banishing him. For this reason Esarhaddon focuses on the brothers’ calumnies and rebellion, juxtaposed with himself having acquiesced to the divine will in becoming heir and absenting himself from Nineveh. This interpretation is speculative, of course, but it remains as plausible as any suggestion for why Esarhaddon ignores the most nefarious aspect of the entire affair—the regi- and patricide.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to assemble here all the evidence that could point to Esarhaddon’s involvement in the murder of Sennacherib. I freely admit that the evidence presented is cir-

60. Wolfram von Soden, *Herrscher im alten Orient* (Berlin: Springer, 1954), 118.

61. *aḥḫūya immaḥūma mimma ša eli ilāni / u amēlēti la ṭābu ēpušūma ikpudū lemuttu / isseḫūma kakkē ina qereb Ninūa balu ilāni / ana epēš šarrūti itti aḫamiš ittakkipū lalā’iš* (i 41–44).

62. P. Talon, “De mes frères anés, j’étais le cadet: Une réinterprétation de l’apologie d’Assarhaddon,” in *Cinquante-deux réflexions sur le Proche-Orient ancien: Offertes en hommage à Léon de Meyer*, ed. H. Gasche et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), 352. See also Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 316–19, esp. Table 9.

cumstantial, and there is nothing close to a smoking gun that unassailably convicts him. One could explain away each of the exhibits above, and if only one or two existed there would be little to level against the man who succeeded Sennacherib. But when viewed in concert, the evidence presented should instill doubt in even the staunchest supporter of Esarhaddon's innocence. Those wishing to prosecute the assassinated king's younger son have a great deal of ammunition. His strained relationship with Sennacherib and his brothers' newfound favor provided a motive. His banishment provided the impetus to act on that motive. The rapidity of his accession suggests a means. His relationship with Babylon may have provided accomplices. And his unwillingness to mention the matter afterward makes the entire affair more suspicious. On top of it all, we have not yet addressed that most famous dictum of criminal law: *Cui bono*? Esarhaddon was undoubtedly the primary beneficiary of the murder; he rose to become king of Assyria while his brothers faded into obscurity.

Parpola concluded his article with something like a closing statement, presenting a plausible narrative of events culminating in Urad-Mullissu's assassination of Sennacherib.⁶³ In the opening sections of this response I stated why I do not consider his case strong enough for conviction despite the beauty of his argumentation and some admittedly damning evidence. Parpola considers Urad-Mullissu's guilt "a matter of virtual certainty,"⁶⁴ which seems to me to go too far. I will not rehash that here. Rather I will conclude with a plausible counternarrative.

At some point near the end of his second decade ruling Assyria,⁶⁵ Sennacherib determined that it was time to designate a successor.⁶⁶ After consulting the gods,⁶⁷ he publicly designated one of his younger sons, Esarhaddon, who then entered the House of Succession and began to prepare to succeed his father. Soon after, though, mudslinging began and malicious talk about Esarhaddon circulated in the palace. This talk could have involved any number of things—some unknown malfeasance on the part of Esarhaddon, a physical ailment that would impede his ability to rule, a sympathy for Babylon not shared by Sennacherib, or something else entirely. Whatever its nature, Sennacherib believed it and lost confidence in the recently promoted crown prince. Having fallen out of favor, Esarhaddon—either of his own volition or at his father's order—removed himself from Nineveh. More rumors began to circulate, this time that Sennacherib was planning to revise the order of succession. A pro-Esarhaddon coalition developed, perhaps including his mother Naqi'a and Babylonian sympathizers who wished to avoid seeing a successor who would continue Sennacherib's vicious

63. Parpola, "Murderer of Sennacherib," 175.

64. Parpola, "Murderer of Sennacherib," 173–74. Parpola in fact appears to cement his conviction of Urad-Mullissu's guilt over the course of the article, as earlier he refers to his conclusion as a "reasonable certainty" (172).

65. We do not know the precise date of Esarhaddon's appointment. Eckart Frahm dates it to "683 or slightly earlier" ("Sīn-ahhē-eriba," 1121), which seems a reasonable estimate in light of the available evidence.

66. Many, including Parpola ("Murderer of Sennacherib," 175), consider primogeniture to have governed Assyrian succession practices (and, correspondingly, that Sennacherib's firstborn, the ill-fated Ashur-nadin-shumi, was the original crown prince). I find this extremely unlikely on the basis of three things: the rest of the history of Sargonid Assyria, comparative data of succession practices elsewhere in the ancient Near East, and anthropological information from several other civilizations from other periods and geographical regions. I deal with this more fully in "The Conflict between Solomon and Adonijah in Light of Succession Practices Near and Far," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, forthcoming. For my purpose here, suffice it to say that I concur with Leichty, who writes, "The Sargonids had no strict laws of succession. Sitting monarchs designated successors, usually from among their sons" (*Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon*, 4).

67. This, of course, involves an uncritical acceptance of Esarhaddon's apology and assumes complete piety on the part of Sennacherib. One could certainly view things more cynically and imagine that other considerations, such as intrapalace politics, special affection for either Esarhaddon or his mother Naqi'a, or something else also played a role.

policies against Assyria's southern neighbor. Acting quickly before an official pronouncement could be made, one of these conspirators murdered Sennacherib, sparking intrapalace fighting as the various princes jockeyed for power in the ensuing vacuum. The conspirators, meanwhile, sent word immediately to Esarhaddon, who rallied his supporters, sped home, and assumed the kingship as his brothers fled.

Is this what happened? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I opened by responding to the legal language that Parpola briefly employed, but legal language ultimately may not be entirely appropriate, because I make no claim to having established Esarhaddon's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Put differently, I think that were I to present this in a prosecution of Esarhaddon, he would probably be acquitted. But I do hope that this summary statement would at least assist Urad-Mullissu in avoiding his own conviction.

I have argued elsewhere that there appears to me to be a general consensus about the reign of Esarhaddon which, when examined closely, is based largely on questionable evidence.⁶⁸ Despite the voluminous royal inscriptions, letters, oracles, and other sources documenting his reign, we must resign ourselves to uncertainty on a number of key issues, including the identity of the perpetrator of the greatest crime of the Sargonid empire. I suggest that, based on the issues described in this paper, Esarhaddon is as likely a suspect as his brothers, although I fear certainty will always elude us.

68. Knapp, *Royal Apologetic*, 304–6.