

CHAPTER 17

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ROYAL DECISION-MAKING: KINGS, MAGNATES, AND SCHOLARS

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Good advice is to be heeded....In this matter the king should listen to his servant.

(Letter of the scholar Adad-šumu-ušur to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria; Parpola 1993: no. 196)

WHEN Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (r. 680–669 BC), imagined how his enemies made decisions he thought of them as acting on the basis of advice received from their counsellors. This is made explicit by the phrasing of some extispicy queries (see Koch in this volume) put forward to the sun-god:

In case Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, sent a messenger of his choice to go to Kaštaritu, city lord of Kar-Kašši (a fortress in the Zagros mountains), would Kaštaritu, on the advice of his counsellors, seize, question, and kill that messenger? (Starr 1990: no. 57, 4'–7')

Will he (i.e. the king of Urartu) ..., on the advice of his counsellors, ...take the road from where they are to wage war, kill, plunder, and loot, and come to Šubria (a buffer state between Assyria and Urartu)? (Starr 1990: no. 18, 6–9)

While this image may not be too far removed from the reality of the royal decision-making process in Urartu and Kar-Kašši, it is more than anything a projection of how the Assyrian kings made their choices, seeking and receiving guidance from their advisors as a matter of course.

Ruling as the earthly representatives of Aššur, Assyria's supreme god, the Assyrian rulers presented themselves in their official inscriptions as the sole creators and maintainers of the Assyrian Empire, and in this they followed the conventions of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions since the third millennium BC (Radner 2005: 153–155).

But contemporary archival texts—letters, reports, and administrative records—speak another language, which shows them supported by administrative, military, and cultural elites, in Assyria and beyond (Lanfranchi 1997). Those men participated on all levels in building and running an empire which, from the mid-8th to the late 7th century BC, stretched far beyond the Assyrian homeland to include all of Iraq and most of Syria, wide sweeps of eastern Turkey and western Iran, and almost the entire eastern Mediterranean coast.

This chapter focuses on the role of two distinct groups of advisors to the Assyrian king and their impact on royal decision-making: the highest state officials, or magnates, and scholarly experts in the royal entourage.

THE MAGNATES

All regions formally incorporated into the ‘land of Aššur’, to use the contemporary designation for Assyria, were organized as provinces and administered by governors (*pāhutu* or *bēl pāhete*, ‘proxy’) who were appointed at the king’s discretion (Radner 2006). While they had no other claim to their office, they were, as the king’s chosen representatives, all-powerful on a local level. It was of paramount importance to Assyria’s cohesion that the king could rely on their loyalty and trust them absolutely.

By the late 8th century, most neighbouring states were allied with Assyria, which meant that, although nominally independent, they had to take Assyrian policy into account as a matter of course. After the invasion of 671 BC even Egypt, which had formerly been in the influence sphere of the kings of Kush (modern Sudan), belonged to the Assyrian block. Delegates (*qēpu*, ‘trusted one’) of the king of Assyria advised the rulers of allied states and reported directly to their master.

Together with a small group of high officials with traditional titles such as ‘palace herald’ (*nāgir ekalli*; Figure 17.1) and ‘chief cupbearer’ (*rab šāqē*) (Mattila 2000), who in actuality were the most senior Assyrian state officials, these governors and delegates constituted the ‘magnates’ (LÚ.GAL.MEŠ = *rab(b)ûte*, literally ‘the great ones’; cf. Parpola 1995: 379 n. 1 on the Neo-Assyrian realization of the logogram). The magnates comprised a set of about 100–120 men who formed the backbone of the Assyrian Empire, instrumental in its creation and indispensable to its maintenance.

At least from the early 9th century onwards, these magnates were preferably drafted from a class of professional administrators rather than the members of the ancient noble families who in previous periods had occupied hereditary positions of power within the Assyrian state (e.g. Cancik-Kirschbaum 1999). This innovative policy was designed to secure the king’s position and at the same time ensure that posts were awarded on merit rather than through family ties—a key strategy for stabilizing the expanding state. Many of the magnates were eunuchs (*ša rēši*, ‘he of the head’; an ancient term for personal servant) whose physical inability to father children was designed to ensure their loyalty to the king. Moreover, men who became eunuchs gave up their family connections in



FIGURE 17.1 Stela of Bel-Harran-bel-ušur, palace herald under Shalmaneser IV and Tiglath-pileser III, and eponym of the year 741 BC: from Dur-Bel-Harran-bel-ušur, modern Tell Abta, Iraq (Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri, inv. no. 1326). (Photo reproduced from Unger 1917: pl. 1)

order to serve the king, often taking a new name in the process (Deller 1999: 306). The original backgrounds of the Assyrian eunuchs therefore remain entirely obscure. This is not just the accidental result of the chance survival of the available sources, but part and parcel of the eunuch identity. Having no family of their own, their allegiance belonged first and foremost to the king, who seems to have regarded them almost like adopted children. Most significantly it was the king, and his royal successors, who were responsible for the eunuchs' care after death (Deller 1999: 307).

Not all high state officials were eunuchs, however. The crown prince, who was part of this select group, is an obvious exception, while those 8th-century kings who came to the throne without having been appointed crown prince by their predecessor—Tiglath-pileser

III (r. 744–727 BC) and Sargon II (r. 721–705 BC)—are very likely to have held high state offices before they usurped royal power. Did they not need to be eunuchs because they were members of the royal family? In the absence of information about the personal backgrounds of known eunuchs the argument easily becomes circular.

Our best sources for the relationship between the king and this second level of political power is the royal correspondence unearthed in the state archives of Kalhu and Nineveh. Comprising about 1200 surviving tablets, the letters exchanged between Sargon II and his magnates constitute the most voluminous sub-corpus (edited by Parpola 1987; Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990; Fuchs and Parpola 2001; and Dietrich 2003; Figure 17.2). The letter-writers habitually refer to themselves only by name, not by office, but many of Sargon's correspondents acted as 'year eponym' (*limmu* or perhaps better *līmu*). Although still little understood today, this key position within the Assyrian state was assigned annually and its holder consequently lent his name to the year in which he held the office; this had been the traditional Assyrian way of designating individual years since the early second millennium (Dercksen 2004: 52–62). As a consequence, the names and titles of many of Sargon's correspondents can be found in the Assyrian Eponym List (Millard 1994), which gives us an understanding of their respective official roles within the empire. Many of the correspondents of Tiglath-pileser III, attested in the so-called Nimrud Letters (Saggs 2001), can also be identified in this manner. In the 7th century BC, the professional nature of the men holding the position of year eponym changed (cf. Mattila 2009). The identification of the letter-writers of the political correspondence of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal (r. 668–c. 630 BC) is therefore less straightforward (edited by Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002; Reynolds 2002; and in forthcoming volumes in the series *State Archives of Assyria*). If the unsolicited petitions and denunciations addressed to these kings are disregarded, then the content of the remaining letters would seem to imply that they, too, represent a similar range of officials to those attested in the 8th-century royal correspondence.

THE SCHOLARS

Chosen for his royal office by the gods, the king of Assyria was expected to rule according to their design. The gods were thought to communicate their wishes through ominous signs encountered everywhere in the natural world (Rochberg in this volume). The king relied on scholarly advisors to monitor and interpret these divine messages and to perform the rituals necessary to keep the precious relationship with the divine powers in balance. As the Babylonian literary composition *Advice to a Prince*, a copy of which is also known from Assurbanipal's library, has it: 'If [the king] has no regard for his scholarly advisors, his land will rebel against him' (Foster 2005: 867). While a number of contributions in this volume, by Barbara Böck, Ulla Koch, Anne Löhnert, and Daniel Schwemer, discuss the scholarship of these experts, the present chapter is concerned with their participation in the royal decision-making process.

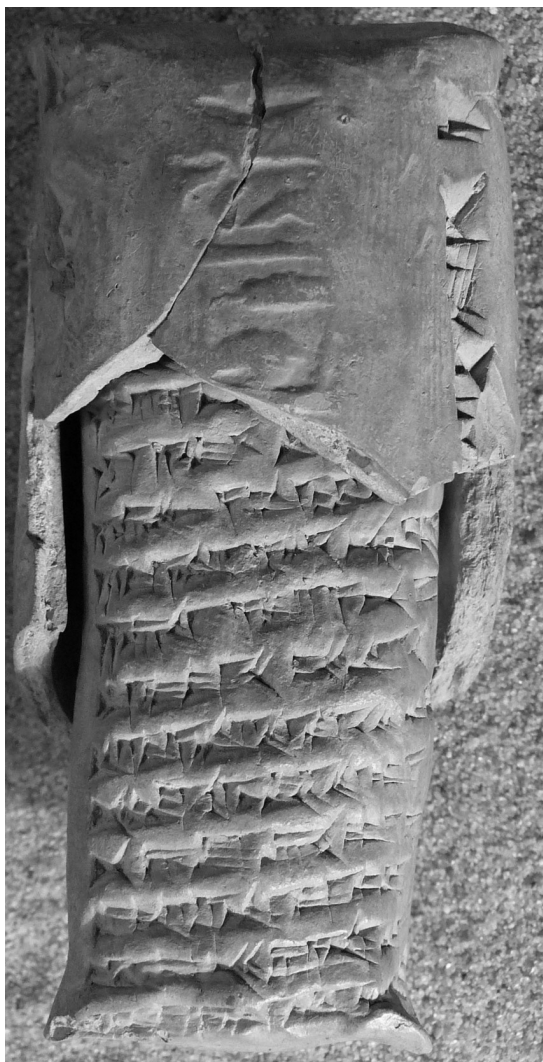


FIGURE 17.2 Letter from the correspondence of Sargon II, found with its envelope intact; it was opened only in the British Museum (BM, 81-7-27, 199 and 81-7-27, 199A; Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: nos. 288, 289). The letter reveals why it was never read. A man who had lost his job sent it to his superior as the fourth of a series of missives, without ever receiving a reply to his pleas: 'Why is my lord silent (while) I wag my tail and run about like a dog? I have sent three letters to my lord. Why does my lord not consent to send an answer to (my) letter?'. (Photo by Greta Van Buylaere. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

Our best sources for the relationship between the king and his scholars are the c. 1300 documents of the correspondence between Esarhaddon and his son and successor, Assurbanipal (r. 669–c. 630 BC), and some of their astrologers, extispicy experts, exorcists, physicians, and lamenters (edited by Hunger 1992; Parpola 1993 (with additions in Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002 and Reynolds 2002); and Starr 1990). Correspondence between earlier Assyrian kings and their scholars, as far as it may have existed, has not been recovered by modern excavations, yet there is ample evidence for scholars in the employ of the kings from royal inscriptions (Fales and Lanfranchi 1997), various archival texts (e.g. Radner 2009: 231–238), and even the wall decorations of the royal palaces (Reade 2005; and see Frahm in this volume). These sources indicate that the Assyrian

kings of the 9th and 8th centuries, too, employed scholarly advisors of various disciplines. This is not surprising, as in doing so they simply followed a well-established convention that is also attested for the Assyrian kings of the second millennium BC (Jakob 2003: 518–537) and earlier Mesopotamian rulers such as Zimri-Lim of Mari (Charpin in this volume).

Unlike the magnates, scholars were only very rarely eunuchs; among all known learned specialists, only two extispicy experts are thus designated (Starr 1990: nos. 300, 337). The main reason for the relative rarity of eunuch scholars was probably the fact that for learned men, temple offices offered the main alternative to a career in the king's entourage, and as those required the holder to be physically intact (Löhnert 2007), castration would have made this career path impossible.

In stark contrast to the magnates' obscure origins, we are rather well informed about some of the scholars' family backgrounds, as they took great pride in their ancestry and family ties and frequently mentioned their family connections when corresponding with the king; additional information can often be found in the colophons of library texts (Hunger 1968). The scholars saw themselves very much as part of a wider kinship group, often working alongside their brothers, fathers, uncles, sons, nephews, or cousins. Some Assyrian and Babylonian scholarly families maintained close relationships with the Assyrian kings over generations. Several scholars in the entourage of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, for example, belonged to a family whose members can be shown to have continually occupied prominent positions in the royal retinue from the late 10th century onwards (Parpola 1983: XVII–XIX; Frahm 1999: 78–79; Luukko 2007: 229). Clearly, descent from a long line of scholars and/or kinship with other scholars in the king's entourage was thought to enhance the authority an expert could claim on the basis of his own talent and qualifications.

The scholars received their basic training in the paternal household and, as they tended to work in teams (Robson 2011: 608), continued to learn from their colleagues throughout their lives. There was a rudimentary hierarchy in place, with the younger scholars being seen as the 'apprentices' of their more senior colleagues: 'The apprentices should imitate and assist them' (Parpola 1993: no. 385), as one letter has it in regard to astrologers (cf. also Parpola 1993: nos. 160, 167, 171, 221, 294). The emphasis on teamwork, however, was combined with a very healthy dose of competition (cf. Kuhrt 1995: 525; Robson 2011: 608), judging from the surviving correspondence, scholars—the astrologers especially—tended to disagree with each other in matters of interpretation as often as they were of one opinion.

DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE KING

The link between the king and the scholars in his entourage has been aptly described as patronage: a personal voluntary long-term relationship between a socially dominant patron, namely the king, and his socially inferior clients, namely the scholars, based on

the mutual exchange of goods and services, patronage is a flexible relationship shaped by privileges and obligations, favours and expectations, quite separate from the rights and duties of office (Westbrook 2005: 211, 222/2009: 218, 232). While the occasional scholar entertained a sense of entitlement that is quite at odds with the language of affect used by the majority in their communications with the king (Westbrook 2005: 222–223/2009: 232–233), it is clear that the scholars depended on their royal patron's goodwill, with no formal claims to their position. As the king is quoted saying in one 7th-century letter:

My servant has looked after me; let me do my servant a favour. The first token of my favour is: I will assign to him the leadership of scholars. My second favour is: As long as he is in Assyria, let him be near me. (Parpola 1993: no. 182)

However, there were two official scholarly posts, namely the position of royal tutor (*ummānu*; also a general term for expert) and that of chief scribe (*rab tupšarri*) which sometimes were held by the same person—for instance, Nabu-šallimšunu during the reign of Sargon II (Thureau-Dangin 1912: l. 428). The role of the royal tutor was to educate the crown prince, who as king also retained the services of his old teacher. While there was a first-millennium tradition of compiling lists which matched kings, including those of Assyria, with their respective *ummānū* (Kuhrt 1995: 524; Frahm 2003: 158; Zamazalová in this volume) and thus celebrated the role of the royal tutors, the office does not seem to have had great visibility beyond scholarly circles. It did, however, provide a guaranteed income and a clearly defined, protected role for its holder, moreover one that he could expect to hold for his lifetime. The other scholarly office was that of chief scribe, not to be confused with the palace scribe (*tupšar ekalli*), who was a high administrative official in charge of the state accounts, also doubling as the king's personal secretary. The chief scribe, on the other hand, was responsible for organizing the king's cultic diary and making sure that all associated needs and requirements regarding personnel, venues, and literature were met (Luukko 2007: 251–252). To this end, he frequently coordinated the activities of other scholars in the royal retinue without, however, being formally in charge of them: their allegiance was directly to their patron the king. The composition of royal inscriptions was another responsibility of the chief scribe, and possibly also of the royal tutor (as argues Frahm 2003: 157–158), although in this case their roles are difficult to disentangle.

Even the most valued scholars in the king's entourage did not belong to the highest echelons of the court (e.g. Parpola 1993: no. 226; cf. Westbrook 2005: 228/2009: 239–240), let alone of Assyrian society. The magnates, on the other hand, certainly were part of that elite group, formally appointed to a high office that was indispensable for the existence of the state. Their link with the king was a bureaucratic one, an impersonal relationship based on rules meant to ensure fair treatment. A letter from Kišir-Aššur, the governor of Dur-Šarrukin under Sargon II, provides a good example:

As to the houses of the recruitment officers, about which the king, my lord, wrote to me: 'The houses are already built, you are deceiving me in order to give them to your servants!'—as if I did not tell the truth to the king, my lord! Let a royal eunuch who

will tell the king, my lord, the truth come and have a look at these houses of the recruitment officers! If they are already built, let him go and tell it to the king, my lord, and let the king, my lord, hold his report to my discredit and say: 'Why do you not tell me the truth?' (Parpola 1987: no. 124)

Kiṣir-Aššur, who had only recently succeeded Šep-Aššur as the governor of the royal residence city of Dur-Šarrukin, stood accused of embezzlement and dishonesty, very serious accusations which for others would have carried the risk of death (Radner 2003: 905–906). Refuting these accusations, he demanded an official inquiry—clearly, he knew himself and his interests to be well protected by the rules governing his appointment.

The very different nature of the relationships between king and scholars and king and magnates, respectively, resulted in fundamental differences in how advice to the king was presented. We must, of course, primarily rely on the written sources for this judgement but we can certainly assume that the letters mirror the conventions which also governed personal encounters. The magnates, it would appear, were able to approach the king on an almost equal footing, at least as far as this was possible while observing the necessary notions of appropriateness and politeness. Their letters are introduced with a bare minimum of greetings formulae, usually only: 'To the king, my lord: your servant PN. Good health to the king, my lord.' The scholars' letters, on the other hand, would at the very least add a blessing such as 'May (the gods) Nabu and Marduk bless the king, my lord!', with optional additions, such as 'May Aššur, Bel and Nabu give happiness and joy to the king, my lord!' (Parpola 1993: no. 61), or, in more elaborate versions, 'May Nabu, Marduk, Ištar of Nineveh and Ištar of Arbela give long lasting days, everlasting years, happiness and joy to the king, my lord!' (Parpola 1993: no. 83) or 'May Aššur, Šamaš, Bel and Nabu bless the king, my lord, and let the king, my lord, attain his desire!' (Parpola 1993: no. 123). The blessings formula was omitted on inauspicious days, probably in order not to curse the king inadvertently: '(Since) this is a gloomy day, I did not send the (introductory) blessing' (Parpola 1993: no. 76). The deep social chasm dividing king and scholars is clearly apparent from the very beginning of their letters.

The language of the magnates' letters, however, is factual, even, as we have seen, when faced with royal accusations and suspicions. There is no place for the wheedling, coaxing, and pleading which are commonplace in those parts of the scholars' letters that do not concern their professional assessment. Compare only the succinct 'Whatever the king, my lord, commands' (Parpola 1987: no. 227) from a typical magnate's letter to the rather more adulatory 'You are able, wise and circumspect: may the king do as he sees best' (Parpola 1993: no. 112) in a typical scholar's letter. This difference in language reflects the differing relationship with the king—patronage versus formal appointment—but also the fact that while the scholars wrote their letters themselves the magnates, although literate (Parpola 1997), had theirs written by centrally trained, professional scribes employed as their secretaries. As is evident from the quotes given throughout this chapter, the scholars' letters are much more immediate, personal, and emotive in tone—the missives of private individuals rather than office holders.

PASSING ON DIVINE MESSAGES

In a scholar's own words, it was his moral duty to advise his king:

If I had not addressed the king today, wouldn't the king say to his servant (i.e., the letter-writer) tomorrow: 'You were a servant of my father; why didn't you advise and instruct me?' (Akkullanu to Assurbanipal; Parpola 1993: no. 90)

Ever since A. T. Olmstead, in his still influential *History of Assyria* (1923: 347), saw the Assyrian king under the 'ghastly control' of his scholars, popular views of Assyria have included visions of superstitious kings at the mercy of sinister svengalis and their corroding, self-serving machinations, construing the scholars' role in royal decision-making as essentially negative. However, in his commentary on the scholars' letters, Simo Parpola (1983: XVIII–XIX) stressed 'the overwhelmingly passive and "academic" nature of their advisory role', highlighting how their advice was usually offered in response to a particular question or as a reaction to specific circumstances which, given that they worked on the basis of established scholarship and in competition with other experts, left little room for any alleged Machiavellianism.

The king used the scholars as expert advisors, soliciting their recommendations on specific matters within their particular range of expertise:

[The king, my lord], is made like a sage; he has understood her (i.e., the goddess Ištar's) counsels...[As to what the king], my lord, said: 'He who knows this matter should speak out—is it true?'—[who could possibly give] any kind of counsel to the sun (i.e., the king)? (Issar-šumu-ereš to Assurbanipal, attributed on the basis of the handwriting; Parpola 1993: no. 29)

While the insurmountable social gap between the ruler and his scholars frequently led the latter to profess that they were not fit to counsel the king whose learnedness (cf. Frahm and Zamazalová in this volume) they liked to praise and sometimes, as in the present case, overstate, there can be little doubt that the scholars in the royal entourage represented the elite of their respective disciplines. Competition was fierce and only the best could hope to attract and maintain the king's patronage (see, e.g., Parpola 1993: no. 160 for a catalogue of qualifications and achievements of twenty hopefuls from Babylonia).

However, the Assyrian kings extended their patronage to a comparatively large number of scholars. In one year, most probably 670 BC, Esarhaddon's (r. 680–669 BC) scholarly entourage at the royal court of Nineveh alone consisted of forty-five experts. An administrative record (Fales and Postgate 1992: no. 1; cf. Radner 2009: 222; Figure 17.3) lists thirty-six experts representing the five main branches of Mesopotamian prognostic and remedial scholarship, followed by three augurs working in the Anatolian tradition (*dāgil iššūri*, literally 'bird watchers'), three ritual experts in the Egyptian scholarly tradition (*harṭibu*) and three 'Egyptian scribes' (*tupšarru Mušurāyu*). The thirty-six Mesopotamian scholars break down into twelve prognostic and twenty-four remedial experts: seven astrologers



FIGURE 17.3 Administrative record from the royal archives of Nineveh listing forty-five scholars at court (British Museum, K 1276; Fales and Postgate 1992: no. 1). (Photo by Mikko Luukko. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)

(*tupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*, literally ‘scribe of the celestial omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil*’) and five extispicy experts (*bārû*) on the one hand and nine exorcists (*āšipu*), nine physicians (*asû*), and six lamenters (*kalû*) on the other: twice as many therapeutic specialists as diviners. The Mesopotamian scholars outnumber the nine experts in Anatolian and Egyptian scholarship fourfold, a discrepancy which probably reflects the Mesopotamian disciplines’ greater importance to the king. Yet the very presence of experts trained in the Anatolian and Egyptian scholarly tradition in Esarhaddon’s Ninevite retinue is highly significant. Not only does it illustrate an interest in ‘foreign’ scholarship beyond cuneiform culture; but as the ‘foreign’ scholars used methodologies that differed fundamentally from their Mesopotamian colleagues but were applied to the same prognostic and therapeutic ends, they can be seen as their royal patron’s ‘control group’ of scholars, useful in order to falsify or verify the Mesopotamian scholars’ results.

The presence of ‘foreign’ experts was quite likely an innovation of the reigns of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. Although augurs had been known at the Assyrian court at least since the reign of Adad-nerari III (r. 810–783 BC) (Radner 2009: 231), as

dignitaries from abroad, the first augurs in the royal entourage would seem to date only to the reign of Sennacherib (Radner 2009: 236). Prior to Esarhaddon's conquest of Egypt in 671 BC, when specialists of various disciplines were moved from Memphis to Nineveh in droves (Radner 2009: 223–224), Egyptian scholars would not have been readily available to the Assyrian kings. Indeed, the new policy can easily be seen as a reaction to the discovery that the astrologers and extispicy experts in Sennacherib's entourage had made a pact not to disclose any bad omens to their royal master, as the astrologer Bel-ušeziḫ reminded his patron Esarhaddon:

In the reign of your royal father (Sennacherib), Kalbu the son of Nabu-etir, without the knowledge of your royal father made a pact with the scribes (i.e., astrologers) and extispicy experts, saying: 'If an untoward sign occurs, we shall tell the king that an obscure sign has occurred.' For a period of time he (i.e., Kalbu) censored all [...] if a sign untoward to him (i.e., Sennacherib) occurred, and that was anything but good. Finally, when the *alû* (disease) had come, [he (i.e. Sennacherib) said: 'If a sign] that is untoward to me occurs (again) and you do not report it to me, [...].'] The scribes (i.e., astrologers) and extispicy experts took heed of these words, and by [the gods of the king, they reported] every portent that occurred during the reign of your royal father, and your royal father did stay alive and exercise the kingship. (Parpola 1993: no. 109)

The pact between astrologers and extispicy experts meant that the traditional strategy to verify or falsify the astrologers' reports by means of a pertinent extispicy query to the sun-god could no longer be successful. If the extispicy experts' necessary disciplinary isolation (cf. Robson 2011: 610–611) had been breached the king's faith in his scholars' reliability needed to be restored by other means, and the services of experts using other methodologies must have been highly welcome to that end.

The purpose of Anatolian augury was, after all, identical to that of Mesopotamian extispicy: to receive a confirmation or rejection of a question put forward to the gods. The basic principles governing augury, too, mirror those of extispicy. The augurs interpreted the behaviour of wild birds, observed in their natural habitat and/or the behaviour of captive birds (Figure 17.4), and added up individual observations regarding their movements in the sky, spotted in a certain area and at a certain period of time, to a total result which was either positive ('the birds confirm it') or negative ('the birds reject it') (Ünal 1973: 33–34, 55–56). This matches the way the extispicy experts combined observations gained from a sheep's liver into a positive or negative end result. It is obvious that by soliciting an answer to a specific question to the gods from both augurs and extispicy experts the king exercised quality control over both sets of scholars. The Egyptian ritual experts (Radner 2009: 223–225) may have fulfilled a similar function in regard to the Mesopotamian exorcists. Although the exact function of the 'Egyptian scribes' (Radner 2009: 225) remains unclear it stands to reason that they, too, provided an alternative to a Mesopotamian methodology.

However, not one of the surviving 1500-odd scholarly letters and reports from the royal archives of Nineveh is a communication by any of the experts trained in the remedial and prognostic traditions of Anatolia and Egypt, and only some of the Mesopotamian experts mentioned in the administrative list are also attested as letter-writers. Astrologers are

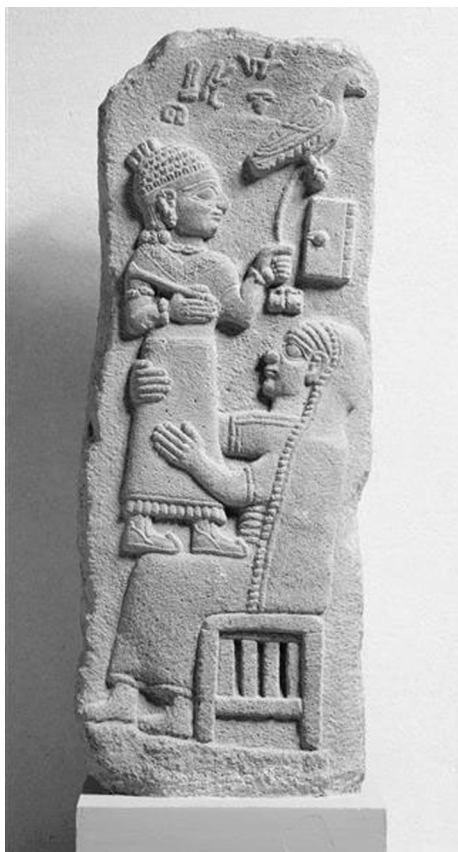


FIGURE 17.4 Funerary stela of Tarhunpiyas, showing him in a state of eternal bliss in his mother's embrace: from Maraş, modern Turkey, late 8th century BC (Louvre, AO 19222). The tame falcon and the writing tablet and stylus identify Tarhunpiyas as an augur. Monuments of this sort are typical of the Neo-Hittite states of Anatolia and northern Syria. (For the hieroglyphic Luwian inscription see Hawkins 2000: 274–275; see also Weeden in this volume.) (Photo from the Louvre's website: www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/)

responsible for the bulk of the surviving written material, with 567 reports and over 170 letters. However, these communications did not all originate from the scholars at the royal court of Nineveh but were written by astrologers active all over the empire, who were all required to inform the king about auspicious sightings (cf. Villard 2008: 181, 184–187 for reports from Assur). Communications from extispicy experts follow in second place, with 354 liver omen reports but just twelve letters, mostly about petitionary matters. The scarcity of letters authored by extispicy experts can be explained by the fact that the final stage of the divinatory process—presentation and discussion of the findings—required face-to-face meetings with the king, which provided regular opportunities for personal communication (Robson 2011: 618) and rendered written approaches unnecessary. Unlike the diviners, the remedial specialists were not required to submit written reports of their findings and their ‘paper trail’ is therefore considerably smaller: there are about 130 letters from exorcists, but only twenty-four from physicians and just nine letters from lamenters. Clearly, the number of surviving texts creates a very different impression as to the relative importance of the different fields of Mesopotamian scholarship to the kings of Assyria than the roster from 670 BC, in which the therapeutic experts outnumber the diviners twofold. The relative dearth of material originating from lamenters and physicians needs to be taken into account

when trying to assess the scholars' role at court. While the 7th-century documents from Nineveh offer by far the best evidence for scholarly patronage known from antiquity, they shed light only on Esarhaddon's and Assurbanipal's dealings with the representatives of Mesopotamian scholarship, and only of select individuals.

IN OPEN DIALOGUE WITH THE KING

A depiction of king Sargon II in conversation with a high official, quite possibly his crown prince Sennacherib, gives us an idea of the personal encounter between the king and his magnates: without his bodyguards and attendants, the king faces the official—who as a sign of distinction and royal trust wears his sword—eye to eye (Figure 17.5).



FIGURE 17.5 Sargon II in conversation with a magnate, probably crown prince Sennacherib: detail of a stone relief from the royal palace at Dur-Šarrukin, modern Khorsabad, Iraq (Louvre, AO 19873–4). (Photo by Karen Radner)

Sargon's magnates frequently mention private discussions with the king. For instance, a letter from Ṭab-šill-Ešarra, governor of Assur, recalls: 'As I said in the presence of the king my lord' (Parpola 1987: no. 75); similarly, Taklak-ana-Bel, governor of Našibina (Parpola 1987: no. 240) and Šamaš-bel-ušur, governor of Der (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 121). The king, too, occasionally referred to advice received in conversation with his counsellors (e.g. Dietrich 2003: no. 3). According to the surviving letters, Sargon's magnates offered their opinions on all matters of governance, state policy, and strategy, as had the officials who had served his father Tiglath-pileser III. This most successful of Assyrian conquerors had been surrounded by advisors who were every bit as hawkish as he, to judge from some of the extant correspondence:

When the king, my lord, ascended to Urartu before (i.e., in 743 BC), the gods Aššur and Šamaš delivered Turušpa (i.e., the Urartian capital, modern Van Kalesi) into the hands of the king, my lord, and (therefore) the king, my lord, may lead his campaign against Urartu! May they capture Turušpa and may the king, my lord, immortalise his name! (Saggs 2001: 136–137, pl. 27; cf. Radner 2005: 95)

In this case, we know for certain that the king chose not to follow the suggestion, despite the fact that the letter-writer was able to call on detailed information of recent Urartian manoeuvres and even the favourable pronouncements of an augur in the entourage of the king of Šubria, an Assyrian ally (Radner 2009: 233–234). Clearly, one counsellor's opinion, however convincingly argued, did not suffice to initiate royal action.

Simo Parpola (1995: 393) suggested that there was a 'comprehensive meeting of all magnates (referred to as "the assembly of all the lands" in contemporary letters)' which was 'a public event serving as a visual demonstration of the royal power and the unity of the empire'. However, the only two available references to this 'assembly of the lands' (quoted Parpola 1995: 393 n. 44) undoubtedly refer to a Babylonian institution rather than an Assyrian one. If the magnates ever did meet regularly *en masse*, then one of the main religious events of the Assyrian calendar, such as the New Year festival celebrated at the city of Assur, would offer a more convincing setting. But it should be remembered that most of the magnates were dispatched to a province of their own or to a foreign court, where they were expected to represent the king on a permanent basis. Assembling them all for a sort of state council would have been a logistical challenge, although not an insurmountable one: after all, they each had a deputy who could handle local affairs in his absence.

There were certainly occasions when all magnates could be expected to come together, most crucially when a new king ascended to the throne and assigned the state offices, either reappointing his predecessors' officials or making new choices (Wiggermann 2006: 94–95). But surely productive meetings would have involved smaller groups. When a governor who found himself confronted with one of his subordinates' accusations replied to Sargon II that 'The king's magnates are assembled; let us settle (the dispute) in the presence of the Treasurer' (Parpola 1987: no. 236), he referred to a decision-making body that included the king and an unknown number of the highest-ranking officials of whom the treasurer was one. The treasurer was singled out here

because his office qualified him best to give a ruling in the disagreement, which concerned the levy of taxes.

This letter provides a rare insight into what happened when the king was petitioned (Radner 2003: 887, with previous literature), as the letter-writer's subordinate had done. The eventual outcome was the 'king's word' (*abat šarri*) but our text indicates that the king was expected to pass judgment in consultation with his counsellors. However, it remains unclear whether they were especially summoned to form a board with specific members or whether the panel consisted of whoever of a certain rank happened to be in the king's presence. Another letter mentioning the magnates taking counsel is unfortunately too fragmentary to offer any additional insight (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 307).

The annual military campaigns regularly brought the king—who normally participated, with the notable exception of Assurbanipal (Fuchs in this volume)—together with at least a selection of magnates and governors, who tended to take personal lead of the troops dispatched from their provinces (e.g. Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: no. 152). Weeks and weeks of being together on the move, and in the temporary confines of the military camp, presented excellent opportunities for frequent and close encounters between ruler and magnates. Diviners, too, were then with the army, as shown by texts (e.g. Parpola 1987: no. 14; Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: no. 215) and scenes on palace reliefs (Reade 2005: 15–19, 42–49 figs. 10–17; cf. also Koch in this volume, Figure 22.2). One such illustration shows Sennacherib's camp in the year 701 BC (Figure 17.6): the king is seated on his throne and attended by his adjutants, while a soldier leads a group of unarmed men into his presence. Around this central scene, unfortunately incomplete, are arranged depictions of various activities taking place in the busy camp, inside and outside the tents, including two men slaughtering a ram on a sacrificial table and inspecting its entrails.

Given that their findings represented messages from the gods, we can expect that the diviners' reports provided a useful starting point for discussions of military strategy and other matters. The relatively vague and often ambiguous nature of the diviners' interpretations based on observing the natural world can be seen as enabling debate by allowing the advancement of a variety of different viewpoints on the basis of this external information.

The available written sources do not contain details of such discussions but there are some hints that may help us in recreating the nature of the discourse. Two letters of Bel-ušeziḫ, a Babylonian astrologer in Esarhaddon's entourage (Parpola 1993: nos. 111–112), contain not just celestial omens and their interpretation but also concrete suggestions as to how to apply the divine messages in the ongoing war against Assyria's eastern neighbour state Mannea. Andreas Fuchs (this volume) has labelled Bel-ušeziḫ—who had little knowledge of Mannea's geography and the conditions on the ground—an 'armchair strategist' but what is of interest to us is that he was willing and even eager to offer concrete strategic advice while allowing for the possibility that others would see the situation differently and suggest a different approach. Rather than assuming that divination would dictate a certain choice, the astrologer saw his own observations and interpretation as a starting point for strategic considerations that would naturally draw also on additional information: 'The lord of kings should ask an expert of the country' (Parpola 1993: no. 111,

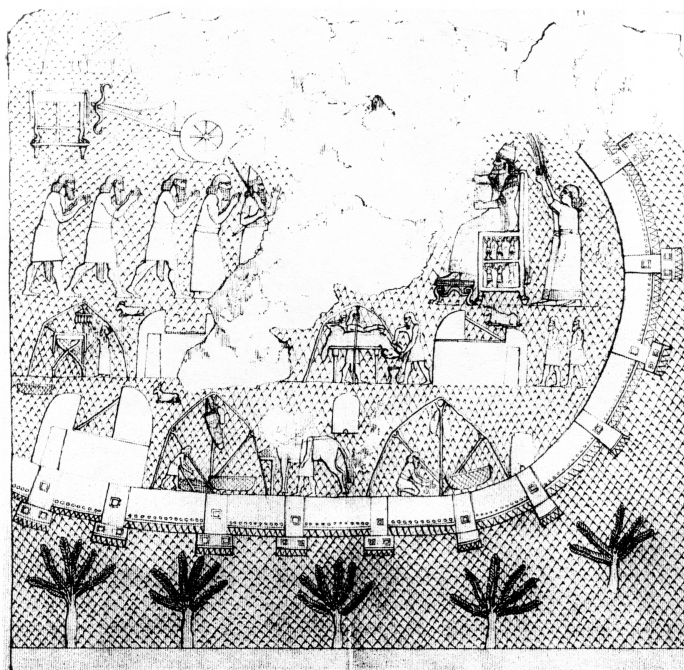


FIGURE 17.6 Sennacherib's military camp in 701 BC, with an extispicy taking place in one of the tents: detail of a stone relief from the Southwest Palace at Nineveh. (Drawing by A.H. Layard (*Or. Dr. IV*, 61), reproduced from Reade 2005: 49, Figure 17, with permission)

rev. 11). Moreover, Bel-ušeziḫ was not afraid to criticize the king's decision: 'If the king has written to his army: "Invade Mannea," the whole army should not invade; (only) the cavalry and the professional troops should invade.' (Parpola 1993: no. 111, 9–12). Bel-ušeziḫ's letters highlight the advantages of using divination to initiate discussions between the king and his counsellors, facilitating open dialogue that was far less restricted by hierarchy and court protocol than a debate predicated on human opinions alone. The joint analysis of existing problems and expected challenges on the basis of divine messages, ambivalent due to the twin filters of imperfect human observation and interpretation, would have provided a powerful tool in the decision-making process.

Royal security was severely tightened by Esarhaddon after Sennacherib, then king of Assyria (r. 704–681 BC), was murdered at the hands of his own sons, and then again after a conspiracy against Esarhaddon himself, involving several of the highest-ranking officials, was uncovered in 670 BC (Radner 2010). But the magnates continued to occupy an elevated position in the empire and their personal meetings with the king continued (e.g. Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002: nos. 45, 134). Despite increased personal distance from the king they were nevertheless expected to 'tell it as it is'. A passage from the loyalty oaths that Esarhaddon imposed in 672 BC when he appointed his son Assurbanipal as crown prince makes this clear:

You shall not do for him what is not good, nor give him an improper counsel or direct him in an unwholesome course, but continually serve him in a true and fitting manner. (Parpola and Watanabe 1988: no. 6, 233–236).

But it appears that under Esarhaddon the roles of magnates and scholars, previously so clearly kept apart, were no longer strictly separate. Some scholars, no longer simply passive providers of information, became official policy-makers. The Babylonian Mar-Issar, who represented Esarhaddon's interests in Babylonia, is the best example of this trend. He was both a scholar, offering regular astrological advice and organizing the king's Babylonian cultic diary, and a high state official, albeit of unknown title (see above for the difficulty in identifying the offices of 7th-century magnates). His preserved letters (Parpola 1993: nos. 347–370) are a colourful mixture of administrative and scholarly information and recommendations. One such letter may serve as an example (Parpola 1993: no. 364): Mar-Issar first suggests that a bridge across the canal at Borsippa be constructed, moves on to propose building works in temples across Babylonia, then reports on the activities of other Assyrian agents in Babylonia, before presenting a summary of recent celestial sightings and his interpretations of these occurrences. The astrologer Bel-ušeziḫ, a fellow Babylonian, may have aspired to a similar role when he volunteered his services as a strategist to Esarhaddon. This promotion of scholars at the expense of the traditional magnates must be seen in the context of the ongoing and intensifying demotion of the highest state officials during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, a policy whose origins can be traced back to Sennacherib's decision to shift power away from the magnates to the members of his immediate family (Radner 2008: 510; cf. Mattila 2009).

THE BURDEN OF THE FINAL DECISION

A standard formula in the royal grants of Assurbanipal's reign makes it clear that the king was normally expected to heed the advice of others—by stressing the entirely independent nature of his decision-making in the particular cases documented in the grants in question. These documents, which confer landed property and tax privileges to merited officials, stipulate that the king made the decision to reward them 'at the prompting of my own heart, and according to my own counsel' (Kataja and Whiting 1995: nos. 25, 26, 29), a phrase designed to preclude any notion that the king had been manipulated, by the recipient or others, into making the gift.

While the conventions governing the phrasing of royal inscriptions obscure this, the Assyrian kings otherwise openly acknowledged the fact that they made the overwhelming majority of their political decisions with the help of others and on the basis of expert advice. We have tried to analyse the different roles that the magnates and the scholars played in this regard and found that these roles did not remain unchanged throughout the history of the Assyrian Empire but were continually redefined in reaction to events, such as the discovery of a pact between different groups of scholars to withhold negative

information from the king, the murder of Sennacherib, or the conquest of Egypt with the consequent influx of new experts into the Assyrian court.

But though the contribution of various counsellors to royal decision-making was considered vital, the king was still expected to take full public responsibility for the final decision. Assurbanipal's successor, however, the young Aššur-etel-ilani (r. c. 630–627 BC), not only stood in the shadow of his chief eunuch Sin-šumu-lešir but also allowed himself to be portrayed as his pawn in official documents:

After my father and begetter (i.e., Assurbanipal) had departed, no father brought me up or taught me to spread my wings, no mother cared for me or saw to my education. The Chief Eunuch Sin-šumu-lešir, one who had deserved well of my father and begetter, who had led me constantly like a father, installed me safely on the throne of my father and begetter and made the people of Assyria, great and small, keep watch over my kingship during my minority, and respected my royalty. (Kataja and Whiting 1995: nos. 35 and 36)

The last statement does not seem to have convinced the king's contemporaries any more than the modern reader. The resulting disrespect for the king certainly contributed significantly to Aššur-etel-ilani's downfall, with opposition against Sin-šumu-lešir and the boy king quickly rising both in Assyria and Babylonia. The deep hatred for Sin-šumu-lešir exhibited in the Nabopolassar Epic, which celebrates Babylonia's eventual emancipation from Assyria's overlordship (Tadmor 1998), seems to have been rooted not so much in the fact that he was a representative of Assyrian power but that he had assumed authority illegitimately. Instead of contenting himself with an advisory role, he had taken on the executive function customarily reserved for the monarch, to the extent that at some point Babylonian documents were dated according to regnal years in Sin-šumu-lešir's name (da Riva 2001).

The situation of the time of Aššur-etel-ilani and Sin-šumu-lešir has clear parallels in the mid-9th century and again in the early 8th century, when the Assyrian monarchy had also been weak, and magnates such as Dayyan-Aššur, the commander-in-chief from 855 to 826 BC, and in the first half of the 8th century Nergal-ereš, the governor of Rašappa, and the commander-in-chief Šamši-ilu had effectively controlled the affairs of the state (Fuchs 2008). But these consecutive *éminences grises* were atypical of the counsellors of that majority of Assyrian kings who were capable of fulfilling the requirements of their office and prepared to shoulder their key responsibility. To make the final, and correct, decision: this, more than anything, was the foremost duty of the 'wise king' (Frahm, this volume). The reigns of these able kings, amongst whom we can certainly count Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal (at least in the first part of his reign), were marked by an equilibrium of power between multiple advisors whose influence neutralized each other and stabilized the state.¹

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FURTHER READING

The classic work on the Assyrian and Babylonian scholars in the entourage of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal is Parpola (1983), while Radner (2009) focuses on those specialists trained in the Egyptian and Syro-Anatolian scholarly traditions. Despite its occasional recourse to a now outdated Marxist–Leninist vocabulary, Pečírková (1985) remains a valuable analysis of the interplay of divination and politics in the Assyrian Empire. Fales and Lanfranchi (1997) discuss the same topic, with a focus on the relevant references in royal inscription.

Mattila (2000) is a collection of all references for seven of the most senior offices in the Assyrian state. There is no comprehensive study of the Neo-Assyrian administration but Postgate (2007) provides a useful sketch of its general setup.

The letters from the published State Archives of Assyria volumes are now all online at <http://oracc.org/saao/>.

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