The Deviant Villain:

The Construction of Villainy as Deviant Otherness in Mesopotamian Royal Rhetoric

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Abstract

This article combines theoretical and historical approaches for studying notions of heroism and villainy in ancient Mesopotamia, as reflected in royal propaganda and rhetoric. It focuses on the different manners in which Mesopotamian kings of the second and first millennia BCE constructed the image of their rivals as villains who deviate from the standard characteristics of the heroic ruler. The theoretical framework of the article is based on heroism studies, a recently-established field within the social sciences, which studies the role of heroes and villains in human society. The article utilizes these theoretical considerations for analyzing Mesopotamian royal inscriptions where the ruler's rivals were portrayed as villains. Seven villain-archetypes are identified and discussed, each of which contrasting one or more of the typical heroic traits of the Mesopotamian ruler. By combining sociological, psychological and philological methodologies, this article offers a new perspective on ancient Mesopotamian society and culture.

Keywords: *Heroism; villainy; heroes, villains; Mesopotamian royal inscriptions; propaganda*

Introduction[2]

"It is the invariable lesson to humanity that distance in time, and in space as well, lends focus. It is not recorded, incidentally, that the

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[2] The following abbreviation are used in this article: <u>RIMA 1</u>: Kirk A. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennium BC (to 1115 BC)* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1987); <u>RIME</u>

lesson has ever been permanently learned." (Isaac Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*)

"One man's hero is another man's villain", as the cliché goes. But how do we distinguish between heroes and villains? And why do we have them at all? At the basis of this essay lie several assumptions, the most basic of which is that the image of the villain is frequently formed as a construct of social deviance. For varying reasons, and under varying circumstances, certain members of society might attempt to vilify rivals by portraying them as villains who deviate from customary social norms and conventions. In accordance with the scope of this journal, this essay surveys Mesopotamian sources of royal propaganda and rhetoric from the second and first millennia BCE, combining theoretical perspectives with historical ones in order to demonstrate how Mesopotamian rulers constructed the image of their rivals as deviant villains, contrasting their own heroic image.

This essay consists of three parts: it opens with the theoretical aspects of heroism and villainy, continues with an overview of Mesopotamian royal propaganda and notions of heroism, and concludes with a survey of villainous archetypes in Mesopotamian royal rhetoric. The latter part forms the core of the essay. In this third section, several characteristic textual examples are provided in order to exemplify the theoretical considerations with which this article begins. Numerous other examples exist, but those discussed will

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4: Douglas S. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003–1595 BC)* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1990); RINAP 1: Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria.* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); RINAP 2: Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721–705 BC)* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2020); RINAP 3.2: Kirk A. Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC), Part 2* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014); RINAP 4: Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); RINAP 5.1: Jamie Novotny and Joshua Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC), Aššur-etel-ilāni (630–627 BC), and Sîn-šarra-iškun (626–612 BC), Kings of Assyria, Part 1* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018); RINBE 2: Frauke Weiershäuser and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Amēl-Marduk (561–560 BC), Neriglissar (559–556 BC), and Nabonidus (555–539 BC), Kings of Babylon* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2020).

have to suffice. Although few, they are nonetheless indicative of the arguments made in this article.

In order to define "deviance," we must first delineate the outline of that which is considered standard, normal, or socially-accepted. After supplying definitions for what counts as standard, we can illustrate its boundaries and limitations, and from there, proceed to deviance. Hence, before explaining the villain, we must begin with an outline of the hero. The opening section clarifies several theoretical considerations about heroes as social conformists and villains as social deviants, the nature of heroes and why we need them, and about social perspectives concerning heroic ingroups and villainous outgroups.

Heroes and Villains: Theoretical Perspectives

"You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain." (Harvey Dent, *Batman: The Dark Knight*)

What makes a person a hero? What makes a person a villain? Who decides who is a hero and who is a villain? Why? How? In contemporary sociological and psychological discourse, heroism is frequently viewed as the ideal reflection, embodiment or enactment of socio-cultural values. Accordingly, villainy is regarded as its negative mirror-image: the oppositional reflection of non-conformism with the socio-cultural values that the dominant element in society tries to enforce and perpetuate. In this sense, villainy can be viewed as a deviant social construct; this approach stands at the basis of the theoretical framework of this essay.

The individual perspective: conformist heroes, deviant villains

Assuming that the concepts of heroism and villainy can be analyzed as social constructs, the hero can be understood as the socially-ideal person, and the villain as a socially-flawed person. A hero embodies social values in a complete and extreme manner, while a villain exhibits one or several social values in a negative manner: either the value itself bears a strong social importance—so mere breaching it is

enough to portray the transgressor as a villain—or the very breaching of the values is extreme, and hence portrays the transgressor as a villain. Either way, the villain is a person who deviates from the social standard. The image of the villain is constructed against the background of an oppositional hero-image. Not all heroes necessarily have oppositional villains, but most villains are constructed as oppositional concepts to heroes.

It must be remembered that the majority of the research of heroes and villains is done by Westerners, who usually examine Western cultural settings; as such, its application for the ancient Near East might be limited at times. However, it is assumed that a certain degree of universality can still be found.[3] In order not to deviate (pun intended!) too much from the historical settings this essay focuses on the second and first millennia BCE Mesopotamia. The theoretical considerations outlined below are mostly limited to elements that can be applied to ancient Mesopotamia. The reader should be aware, however, that the field of heroism studies covers much more ground.[4]

Why do we need heroes (and villains)?

If assuming the basic perspective that heroes and villains are essentially social constructs, the most obvious question we should ask ourselves concerns their social functionality. What functionality do heroes and villains fulfill? Put simply, why do we need them? Phrasing this question in sociological terminology, what are the

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[3] George R. Goethals and Scott T. Allison, "Making Heroes: The Construction of Courage, Competence, and Virtue," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. James M. Olsen and Mark P. Zanna (San Diego: Elsevier, 2012), 197.

[4] The pertinent literature is too vast to be specified here in any detail. Some of the most notable and recent works in this regard, which also contain numerous references to previous literature, are: Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, *Heroes: What They Do and Why We Need Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 183–235; Ari Kohen, *Untangling Heroism: Classical Philosophy and the Concept of the Hero* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Zeno E. Franco, Scott T. Allison, Elaine L. Kinsella, Ari Kohen, Matt Langdon and Philip G. Zimbardo, "Heroism Research: A Review of Theories, Methods, Challenges, and Trends," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 58, no. 4 (2016): 382–396; Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals and Roderick M. Kramer, eds., *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

reasons that lead social groups to create heroes, admire them, and sometimes even venerate or worship them? Viewing villains as the antonymic image of heroes leads to similar albeit opposing questions: what are the reasons that lead social groups to create villains, loath them, and sometimes even ostracize and persecute them?

The key for these questions lies in the first concept—the heroes—since our basic assumption is that conceptual villains do not usually exist in their own right but are socially-constructed in order to contrast conceptual heroes. Understanding the social circumstances that produce heroes, therefore, will also entail understanding the creation of villains. We will therefore focus now on the social construction of heroes.

Our first consideration should be cautionary: varying circumstances. Different social groups frequently produce different types of heroes, and a particular social group may change its preferences for creating heroes when life circumstances change. Any generalization in this regard will be futile, and our assessments must always take into account that each place and time might exhibit different heroic constructs. That being said, we must also assume that humans frequently behave according to similar and recurring patterns, and certain common denominators are shared by different social groups and historical settings.

Research demonstrates that heroes fulfill three main functionalities. They supply encouragement for others, they establish social norms and values, and they supply physical and psychological protection for individuals.[5] Indeed, one of the basic reasons we need heroes is similar to the reason we need leaders: they provide their social group with security, direction, inclusion, identity and pride. Social groups rely on heroes/leaders in order to survive and prosper.[6]

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[5] Elaine L. Kinsella, Timothy D. Ritchie and Eric R. Igou, "Lay Perspectives on the Social and Psychological Functions of Heroes," *Frontiers in psychology* 6 (2015): 130–142; Franco, Allison, Kinsella, Kohen, Langdon and Zimbardo, "Heroism Research," 389–390.

[6] Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 9–12; Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 190, 193, 209.

Another significant point is that we identify with people that serve as role-models or guides for action, especially moral action. As children grow, they go through a socialization process and learn how to become integrated in their society. Through imitation, identification, and other learning processes, children learn from role-models— "significant others," in sociological terminology—how to act and behave. These role-model are strongly associated with notions of heroism: parents, close family members, TV actors, politicians, even fictional characters. The "significant other" frequently possesses a heroic image. In this sense, we need heroes because they are a key-factor in our socialization process.[7]

Another reason involves two of the characteristics of the typical hero: being an underdog and going through struggles (see below). We sometimes identify with the struggling hero because we are engaged with struggles in our own lives. Viewing our role-model as a person who faces similar complications can ease our own tension and stress.[8]

When it comes to the psychological perspective, one of the theories that attempts to explain our need to create heroes was developed by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, who viewed this process as transference. In psychoanalysis, "transference" is regarded as one of the ego's defense mechanisms: an unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. As Becker explained, humans are the only living species who is aware of its own mortality. This awareness causes a great fear of death, and this fear leads us to seek meaning for our lives, in the form of heroic traits. Becker claimed that in this way individuals achieve symbolic immortality by venerating heroic figures that exemplify the highest social standards. Thus, hero-admiration reflects positive transference while villain-hatred reflects negative transference.[9]

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[7] Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization," in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, ed. David A. Goslin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 347–380; Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 101–102.

[8] Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 119; Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 200, 210, 212.

[9] These ideas are expressed most comprehensively in Becker's seminal work *The Denial of Death* (1973).

What heroes are

The next question to address is, what heroes (and villains) actually are? What are we talking about when we are talking about heroes (and villains)? In order to answer this question, we should assess how society defines heroes, and what are the attributes ascribed to heroes by their surrounding community.

Again, we should begin with a cautionary consideration about relativism: "heroism is in the eye of the beholder."[10] Circumstances vary not only for the reasons we need heroes, but also for the ways in which heroes are created.

Two of the fundamental aspects of heroism are **achievement** and **morality**. Heroes are usually regarded as highly competent, and as achievers. They are also regarded as acting in a moral manner.[11] Morality, of course, is socially- and culturally-dependent: each group defines its own norms and morals, and therefore the achieving and moral aspects of the hero vary between different groups.

As is mentioned above, heroism entails many times the ideas of struggle and victory. People who face difficulties, and manage to overcome them against all odds, may gain heroic imagery. The tougher the challenge, the more this imagery will intensify. Therefore, if the hero is regarded as an underdog, his triumph will be viewed as more significant. This is why underdog-heroes are usually more esteemed than top-dog-heroes of a similar scale. For these reasons, many leaders or other types of heroes aspire to relate themselves to narratives of struggle, redemption and triumph. They portray themselves as underdogs who went through struggle, prevailed it, and turned out victorious. The image of the underdog can be emphasized, or even falsely fabricated, in order to intensify a heroic image. We should remember, however, that the underdog

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[10] Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 186.

[11] Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 44–48; Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 186–187; Lawrence J. Walker, "The Moral Character of Heroes," in *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, ed. Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals and Roderick M. Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99–119.

image is only effective when combined with successful achievements; nobody views a loser as a hero![12]

Finally, we should also consider the concept of "the hero's helper". As part of the hero narrative, we sometimes see a figure of a wise guide or a companion who supports the hero. This helper assists the hero during his struggle, and helps him triumph and achieve his goals.[13]

What heroes do

We have discussed why social groups need heroes and villains, and what heroes actually are. We shall now give a quick answer to another question: what do heroes do? What are the actions and behaviors exhibited by people who are defined as heroes by their society?

As previously stated, heroes act morally. In this sense, they enact in an ideal manner what is considered moral in their society. As has also been discussed, heroes achieve goals in a highly competent manner. These goals may be related to moral social concepts, or to the hero's own ambitions.[14]

The hero may take risks—whether physical or mental—on behalf of others, despite the probability of self-suffering. Martyrdom and acts for the greater good are part of this aspect of what heroes do.[15] Risks and self-sacrifice are related to a significant point that was made before: heroes overcome obstacles by engaging in struggle. The fact that they achieve redemption and victory not only defines them, but is also part of what they do.

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[12] Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 126–132; Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 210–215; Joseph A. Vandello, Nadav Goldschmied and Kenneth Michniewicz, "Underdogs as Heroes," in *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, ed. Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals and Roderick M. Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 339–355.

[13] Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 189–190; Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals and Roderick M. Kramer, "Introduction: Setting the Scene: The Rise and Coalescence of Heroism Science," in *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, ed. Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals and Roderick M. Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

[14] Goethals and Allison, "Making Heroes," 187, 205–207; Walker, "The Moral Character," 99–119.

[15] Selwyn W. Becker and Alice H. Eagly, "The Heroism of Women and Men," *American Psychologist* 59, no. 3 (2004): 163–178; Allison and Goethals, *Heroes*, 13–14.

The collective perspective: heroic ingroups, villainous outgroups

We now shift from the individual perspective to the collective one. Previously we have viewed the role of heroes and villains as individual members of society. Now we will look at society at large and consider the essence of heroism and villainy as socially-constructed dichotomous concepts of sameness and otherness, which generate the notions of ingroups and outgroups; in simple terms: "us" and "them."

Important foundations for our understanding of collective notions of sameness and otherness were laid by sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt, who postulated three basic assumptions concerning the construction of collective identities:[16]

1. Collective identity is an analytically autonomous element in the construction of social life. Collective identity is part of social life, and forms one of its basic components.

2. The process of constructing collective identity has always existed throughout human history. It is global and historical, and therefore specific case-studies can explain other instances of identity formation. We can use the past to learn about the present, and also relay findings from the present to the past, with due caution not to anachronistically project our own notions and force them on past societies.

3. Collective identity is constructed from basic and continually-changing social/cultural elements. Eisenstadt called these elements "codes" or "schemata," and claimed that they are used to build and maintain boundaries between an ingroup and its outgroups. He distinguished between three major codes: **primordiality**, **civility**, and **sacredness (sacrality) / transcendence**. The **primordial code** includes elements that are socially-constructed, but perceived as natural: gender, kinship, territory, language and race. The **civic**

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code is the core of the collective social identity. It is based on norms, traditions and rules of conduct that define society, and teach members how to be part of the collective. The **sacral/transcendent code** connects the boundaries between the ingroup and its outgroups with the sphere of sacredness: God, Reason, Progress and Rationality. This code relates society to the metaphysical world and is common in pre-literate or archaic societies.

How does all this relate to heroism and villainy? The construction of a collective social identity involves two opposing social processes: ingroup identification and outgroup discrimination. The former process forms identification between members of the ingroup, while the latter forms discrimination against members of outgroups. These processes create intergroup differentiation. Notions of heroism and villainy can be used during both processes. Social consolidation is established either around heroic features which are the core attributes of the ingroup, or against villainous features, which are the perceived attributes of an outgroup.

Mesopotamian Royal Propaganda: The Heroic Ruler and His Villainous Rivals

> "Nothing has to be true, but everything has to sound true."
> (Isaac Asimov, *Second Foundation*)

Now that the theoretical framework of this essay has been clarified, we move on to the ancient Near East. Our knowledge of notions of heroism and villainy in Mesopotamia is not easily obtained, because such themes are rarely explicitly addressed in the extant written records. This study is therefore limited to a specific type of sources: royal inscriptions composed on behalf of rulers who boasted of their feats and military triumphs. Naturally, these records abound with propaganda and self-praise, which includes similes and metaphorical imagery of heroism and villainy. As before, we will begin by briefly illustrating the heroic traits of rulers, and consequently move on in the next section to the manner in which these rulers constructed the villainous images of their rivals. It should be noted that the following

discussion is rather general, and illustrates a simplified outline of the self-constructed heroic image of the Mesopotamian king.

A lot has been written on Mesopotamian royal rhetoric and propaganda.[17] For example, in an essay dedicated to Assyrian kingship, Karen Radner specified what in her view were the three main prerequisites of the Assyrian king: descent from the royal family, divine legitimation and, demonstrated ability.[18] This view seems to hold true to Mesopotamian rulers at large, and additional elements can be added, forming a list of seven heroic archetypes of the Mesopotamian ruler, which are discussed below:

1. Ideal representative of the socio-cultural collective, of the urban and civilized world.
2. Moral.
3. Underdog.
4. Legitimate ruler.
5. Strong, vigorous, courageous.
6. Protects his people.
7. Rules by the grace and consent of the gods.

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[17] In addition to the literature mentioned in this essay, the reader may also consult works primarily focused on first-millennium Assyria: Frederick M. Fales, "The Enemy in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: 'The Moral Judgement'," in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn: Politische und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im Alten Vorderasien vom 4. bis 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, ed. Hans Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1982), 425–435; Carlo Zaccagnini, "The Enemy in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: The 'Ethnographic' Description," in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn: Politische und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im Alten Vorderasien vom 4. bis 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, ed. Hans Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1982), 409–424; Hayim Tadmor, "Propaganda, literature, historiography: Cracking the Code of the Assyrian royal inscriptions," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 325–338; Mario Liverani, "Literary-Political Motifs in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: Measuring Continuity versus Change," in *Literature as Politics, Politics as Literature: Studies in Honor of Peter Machinist*, ed. David S. Vanderhooft and Abraham Winitzer (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 269–284.

[18] Karen Radner, "Assyrian and Non-Assyrian Kingship in the First Millennium BC," in *Concepts of Kingship in Antiquity*, ed. Giovanni B. Lanfranchi and Robert Rollinger (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria, 2010), 27.

Ideal representative of the socio-cultural collective, of the urban and civilized world

The interrelated concepts of order, peace, civilization, and urbanization stood at the core of Mesopotamian perception of the world. The different societies that inhabited Mesopotamia viewed the ruler as the prime responsible for keeping order and fighting chaos, both on the cosmic level and on the practical one. The ruler, as the person who stood at the highest position in society represented these ideas in their extreme. He reflected the embodiment of culture and civilization, contrasting elements such as foreign peoples or nomads, anything that existed outside of the society ruled by the king.[19] For example, when the Assyrian kings made non-Assyrian populations "become Assyrian," what actually happened was that these populations were conquered, destroyed, tortured and deported. Such an attitude was perceived by the Assyrians as legitimate because of the alleged cultural inferiority of these foreign populations.[20] All this can be seen as the hero leading his ingroup of civilized people against any outgroup of perceived foreigners, outsiders, or uncivilized populations.

Moral

Being civilized also meant acting morally. Morality, of course, is subjective, and depends on social norms and definitions. When Mesopotamian kings claimed to be or act morally they usually related it to their obedience of the gods and their implementation of divine will. Reverence of the divine, however, is a different issue, which is discussed below. The Mesopotamian king occasionally aspired to portray himself as a moral ruler even regardless of the gods. One such aspect was the motif of the "just king": the ruler's image as fulfilling the capacity of judge and securing law and order in the land. This was made explicit in various instructions, decrees, and official

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[19] Mario Liverani, "The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (vol. 4), ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), 2362–2363.
[20] Mario Liverani, "Thoughts on the Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Kingship," in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 537–541.

law collections.[21] All these characteristics of the Mesopotamian king can be understood against the background of the "moral hero" motif. As was previously discussed, being moral and acting morally are basic attributes of the hero.

Underdog

At times, Mesopotamian rulers tried to portray themselves as underdogs, to enhance their eventual triumph over enemies. This put the emphasis on individual attributes since the king shares his glory with no-one. One of the most common motifs used for this purpose was the portrayal of the king as fighting alone against multiple enemies, often under difficult conditions.[22] This can be assessed against the background of the typical underdog hero who goes through struggle and eventually triumphs.

Legitimate ruler

Mesopotamia was usually ruled by hereditary dynasties. Kings based their legitimacy on their relation to the ruling family, often as sons of the previous king. By portraying himself as a legitimate heir to his predecessor, a new king achieved an inherent right to demand obedience from his subjects. Customarily, the oldest son of the reigning king would hold an official role of crown-prince, which made him the next in line for kingship. Deviations from this custom sometimes led to succession disputes, intrafamilial struggles and rebellions.[23] Two pertinent examples occurred in the latter stages of

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[21] Liverani, "The Deeds," 2360; Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (second edition) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 2, 4–5; Raymond Westbrook, "Introduction: The Character of Ancient Near Eastern Law," in *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, ed. Raymond Westbrook (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 25–27.

[22] Andreas Fuchs, "Assyria at War: Strategy and Conduct," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 381; Gojko Barjamovic, "Propaganda and Practice in Assyrian and Persian Imperial Culture," in *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History*, ed. Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46.

[23] Liverani, "The Deeds," 2359–2360; Radner, "Assyrian and Non-Assyrian Kingship," 26–27. Specifically for the first millennium, see Walter Mayer, "Der Weg auf den Thron Assurs: Sukzession

the Neo-Assyrian empire, when Esarhaddon's older brothers challenged his legitimacy, and when Ashurbanipal's older brother did the same. Both cases led to civil wars within the royal family for the right of succession.

Strong, vigorous, courageous

Assyrian kings made much effort to portray themselves as military heroes, even though the reality was probably quite different.[24] Throughout Mesopotamian history, the king frequently portrayed himself as "ruler of the universe," surpassing any other contemporaneous ruler, but sometimes also surpassing previous kings of his own kingdom.[25] This basic trait of Mesopotamian kingship is related to the concept of the hero as achiever; as discussed above, being highly competent and achiever are fundamental aspects of the image of the hero.

Protects his people

Mesopotamian rulers were always seen as the protectors of their people and state, and as responsible for their prosperity.[26] The very survival of the kingdom was perceived as deriving from the ruler's ability to administer it, and to protect it against chaos and external dangers. One of the most vivid exemplifications of this notion was the concept of the shepherd, traditionally assumed by Mesopotamian kings as a metaphor and a title.[27] This can be seen, yet again, as a characteristic marker of the heroic king as leading his ingroup, against any possible outgroup, be it real or imagined.

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und Usurpation im assyrischen Königshaus," in *"Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf": Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient. Festschrift für Oswald Loretz*, ed. Manfried Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 533–555 (concerning Assyria) and Walter Mayer, "Nabonids Herkunft," in *dubsar anta-men: Studien zur Altorientalistik. Festschrift für Willem H. Ph. Römer*, ed. Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 245–261 (concerning Babylonia).

[24] Fuchs, "Assyria at War," 381.

[25] Liverani, "The Deeds," 2361; Hayim Tadmor, "World Dominion: The Expanding Horizon of the Assyrian Empire," in *Landscapes: Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East, Part 1*, ed. Lucio Milano (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria, 1999), 57.

[26] Liverani, "Thoughts on the Assyrian Empire," 537.

[27] Roth, *Law Collections*, 10 n. 2.

Rules by the grace and consent of the gods

One of the most significant foundations of Mesopotamian kingship was the assumption that kings functioned as mediators between humans and gods, and their earthly rule was perceived as existing under divine auspices.[28] For this reason, kings frequently ascribed their military success to the grace of the gods.[29] In addition to viewing this as a fundamental attribute of the heroic Mesopotamian king, we may also assess this feature against the background of another theoretical aspect of the hero: "the hero's helper." The gods acted as helpers and supporters of Mesopotamian kings, and as such they fulfilled the role of the wise guide who offers the hero assistance in his struggle and leads him to victory. As said, it was the kings themselves who frequently related their success to divine help and advice.

Villain Archetypes in Mesopotamian Royal Propaganda

"You see, in this world there is two kinds of people, my friend: those with loaded guns, and those who dig. You dig." (Blondy to Tuco, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*)

We now reach the archetypical concepts that define villains in Mesopotamian royal propaganda. A survey of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions from the second and first millennia reveals reoccurring patterns of several characteristic villainous archetypes, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The foreign / uncivilized villain.
2. The evil / immoral / insolent villain.
3. The many villains against the inferior hero.
4. The rebellious / disobedient / treacherous villain.
5. The weak / cowardly villain.
6. The non-conformist villain.

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[28] Liverani, "The Deeds," 2359; Liverani, "Thoughts on the Assyrian Empire," 536; Radner, "Assyrian and Non-Assyrian Kingship," 25.

[29] Fuchs, "Assyria at War," 380.

7. The godless villain.

It can be argued that each of these archetypes was formed as the inverse of one or more of the characteristics of the ideal Mesopotamian ruler, as specified in the previous section. Thus, "The foreign / uncivilized villain" contrasted the heroic king who was "Ideal representative of the socio-cultural collective, of the urban and civilized world"; "The evil / immoral / insolent villain" contrasted the "Moral" heroic king, and so on. Seven archetypical villains, mirroring seven archetypical heroes. We will now present the pertinent textual evidence and discuss it against the background of the assumption that these archetypes were constructed as dichotomous concepts to the heroic traits of Mesopotamian kings.

Archetype 1: The foreign / uncivilized villain

The first archetypical villain we consider is the "foreign / uncivilized." Every human society is established and consolidated around shared norms, traditions, and customs, which eventually define who belongs to that particular society and who is regarded as an outsider or a foreigner. As mentioned above, Mesopotamian societies were centered around the concepts of urbanism and learned civilization in which "to be civilized" meant to belong to the sedentary, agricultural, and urban system, while to be a nomad, or to live outside of the core of urban society was regarded as barbaric and uncivilized.[30] Mesopotamian rulers, therefore, sometimes labeled their rivals as foreign or uncivilized, two concepts that in essence formed similar notions which contrasted the proper people of Mesopotamia. The "foreign / uncivilized villain" was thus marked as part of an outgroup.

Our first example is taken from an Old Assyrian stone tablet found in the city of Ashur, in which an otherwise unknown Puzur-Sîn scorns Šamšī-Adad for being a foreigner who seized Assyria from its

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30 Echoes of these social notions are found, for example, in the tension between Gilgameš and Enkidu at the beginning of the epic of Gilgameš. Once the uncivilized Enkidu is indoctrinated into Mesopotamian urban society, he leaves behind his former "beastly" way of life in the steppe.

native inhabitants. The passage is not easily understood, because it is partially broken, and contains several phrases which meaning is vague or conjectural. However, the negative characterization of the Amorite enemies of Puzur-Sîn is obvious:[31]

[1] [*i*]-˹*nu*˺-*me* [2] [*P*]*uzur-Sîn*([*p*]*ù-zur*₈-ᵈZUEN) [3] [*iš*]*ší’ak*([É]NSI) ᵈ*a-šur* [4] [*mā*]*r*˺([DUM]Uˀ) *Aššur-bēl-šamê*(ᵈ*a-šur-be-el*-AN-*e*) [5] ˹*le-mu-tu*˺ *a-sí-nim* [6] [*pa-r*]*a-á’ Šamši*-[*Adad*](ᵈUTU-*ši*-˹ᵈ˺[*adad*]) [7] ˹*ša* x *pu*˺ [x ˹*š*]*a ā*[*l*(UR[U] *aš*]-˹*šur*˺ [8] ˹*ú-na*˺-*ap*-[*pi*]-*lu* x [9] [x x] x [x] *re-di-˹am*˺ [10] [*a*]-˹*na āl*˺(URUˀ) *aš-šur* [(*lu*)] *ú-*˹*up*ˀ˺-*pí-šu* [11] x x *ù a-hi šumšu*(MU-*šu*) [12] [*ší-bi-i*]*t*˺ ˹*a-hi-tim*ˀ˺ *la ší-ir* [13] [*āl*]([URU]) ˹ᵈ˺*a-šur* [14] […]

[1] [W]hen [2] [P]uzur-Sîn, [3] [go]vernor of god Aššur, [4] [so]nˀ of Aššur-bēl-šamê, [8] gouged-out[32] [5] the evil of Asīnum, [6] [offs]pring of Šamši-[Adad] [7] who was […] of the cit[y of Aš]šur, [10] I [(indeed)] established [9] appropriate [ruleˀ] [10] for the city of Aššur. [14] [I removedˀ] [11] [the…] and the foreignness of his name,[33] [12] a foreign [epidemi]cˀ, not of the flesh of [13] [the city of] Aššur.

Another example is found in Ni 2760, an Old Babylonian tablet that copies a caption from a stele that commemorated the victory of Kudur-mabuk, father of Warad-Sîn king of Larsa (reigned ca. 1890–1878 BCE), over Ṣillī-Ištar of Maškan-šāpir. The victorious Kudur-mabuk referred to his foe as follows:[34]

[3] ˡúérim larsaᵏⁱ-ma [4] hul-gál *e-mu-ut-ba-lum*ᵏⁱ-šè

[3] Enemy of Larsa, [4] evil-doer against Emutbala.

Ṣillī-Ištar is portrayed as an enemy of Larsa, thus a foreigner and an evil person. He is not merely the foe of Kudur-mabuk individually, but the enemy of Larsa as a whole. Eventually, he is also portrayed

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[31] RIMA 1.0.40.1001 ll. 1–14; edition: RIMA 1, 77–78.

[32] In the D stem, the verb *napalu*, "dig out," "hack down," "demolish," may have more nuanced meaning, and can imply gouging out or uprooting an object. In the present context, it is the "gouging out" of the hated Amorites from Assyria.

[33] Uncertain; this is my understanding of the phrase *a-hi* MU-*šu* (=*ahî šumšu*).

[34] RIME 4.2.13a.1 ll. 3–4; edition: RIME 4, 266.

as a subdued weak enemy, as Kudur-mabuk places his foot over Ṣillī-Ištar's head.

In one of the descriptions of the military campaigns of the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (reigned ca. 1243–1207 BCE), the Assyrian king relates to one of his rivals, Ehli-Tešub king of Alzu, as follows:[35]

iv 6 m*eh-li-te-šub šar*(MAN) *māt*(KUR) *al-zi* iv 7 *ana i-˹diˀ pu-luh-ti-ia iš-hu-ut-ma* iv 8 *ummānāt*(ÉRINᵐᵉˢ) *ēkallišu*(É.GAL-*šú*) *ù ma*[*rì*]*.šu*(DU[MUᵐᵉˢ]-*šú*) *il-qe* iv 9 *si-hír-ti mātišu*(KUR-*šú*) *ú-me-ṣ̌ir* iv 10 *ana pa-aṭ na-i-ri ana māt*(KUR) *la i-du-ú* iv 11 *šá-la-liš lu i-ba-ʾa ši-ta-at* iv 12 *um-ma-na-˹teˀ-šú-nu šá i-na ˹libbiˀ*(˹ŠÀˀ) *tam-ha-ri* iv 13 *i-pár-ši-du šu-mur ta-ha-zi-ia* iv 14 *e-du-ru-ma ana šadê*(KURᵐᵉˢ) *be-ru-ti* iv 15 *ana e-ṭé-er nap-šá-ti-šú-nu lu i-nu-qu*

iv 6 Ehli-Tešub, king of the land of Alzu, iv 7 feared for the might of my awe, so iv 8 he took his courtiers and his so[ns]. iv 9 He abandoned his entire land. iv 11 He indeed went stealthily iv 10 to the border of Nairi, to an unknown land. iv 11 The remainder of iv 12 their army, which iv 13 had fled iv 12 in the midst of battle, iv 14 fearing iv 13 the fury of my warfare, iv 15 indeed ran iv 14 to remote mountains iv 15 to save their lives.

Other than being portrayed as a coward (see "Archetype 5"), Ehli-Tešub is also described as having sought asylum in "an unknown land" (*māt lā idû*, l. 10), a possible allusion to the fact that he could only feel safe outside of the civilized world of the dominant Assyria.

In another inscription that refers to the same campaigns, Tukulti-Ninurta draws our attention to the topographical circumstances of his fight:[36]

33 *hur-šá-ni be-ru-ti* 34 *a-šar la me-te-qi šá šar*(LUGAL) 35 *ia-um-ma ar-ha-te-šu-nu* 36 *la i-du-ú i-na li-it* 37 *kiš-šu-ti-ia šu-túr-ti* 38 *e-te-ti-iq-ma erbâ*(40-*a*) *šarrāni*(MANᵐᵉˢ) 39 *mātāt*(KUR.KUR) *na-i-ri a-na qabli*(MURUB₄) *ù*

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[35] RIMA 1.0.78.1 col. iv ll. 6–15; edition: RIMA 1, 236.

[36] RIMA 1.0.78.5 ll. 33–42; edition: RIMA 1, 244.

tāhāzi(MÈ) ⁴⁰ *dáp-ni-iš iz-zi-zu-ú-ni* ⁴¹ *it-ti-šu-nu am-da-ha-as* ⁴² *a-bi-ik-ta-šu-nu áš-ku-un*

³⁶ With the power of ³⁷ my supreme authority ³⁸ I frequently crossed ³³ remote mountains, ³⁴ impassable places ³⁴ which ³⁵ any other ³⁴ king ³⁶ did not know ³⁵ their paths. ³⁸ Forty kings ³⁹ of the lands of Nairi ⁴⁰ fiercely stood against me ³⁹ for battle and conflict. ⁴¹ I fought with them, ⁴² I inflicted their defeat.

The mention of the difficult mountainous terrain in this passage might allude to the "uncivilized" nature of these remote areas which stand in contrast to the Mesopotamian agricultural plains, the abode of urbanization and civilization.

Archetype 2: The evil / immoral / insolent villain

The second villain-archetype is that of villains who were portrayed as evil, immoral, or insolent. Their very morality is defamed, not necessarily because of a specific incident, but because they are characterized as inherently morally flawed.

We have already discussed in the previous section several relevant examples. The first of these is Puzur-Sîn's peculiar inscription RIMA 1.0.40.1001, in which he blamed the Amorite ruler he expelled from Assyria as "the evil of Asīnum" (⌈*lemūtu*⌉ *Asīnim*, l. 5). Another example is found in the Old Babylonian inscription Ni 2760 (RIME 4.2.13a.1), in which Kudur-mabuk of Larsa described his foe, Ṣillī-Ištar of Maškan-šāpir, as an "evil-doer against Emutbala" (hul-gál *Emutbalum*-šè, l. 4).

Yet another example to consider in this respect comes from a different time and place. The last king of the Neo-Babylonian empire, Nabonidus (reigned 555–539 BCE), has left several accounts that reflect on his predecessors. Given the fact that Nabonidus was not a legitimate ruler but became king of Babylonia as the result of a coup, he had obvious motivations to portray his predecessors in positive or negative light, depending on the case. Thus, Neriglissar (reigned 560–556 BCE) was portrayed in Nabonidus' inscriptions in

a positive light, while his son, Lâbâši-Marduk (reigned 556 BCE), was portrayed negatively. Neriglissar was a usurper who seized the throne by murdering the reigning king Amēl-Marduk (reigned 562–560 BCE). As a usurper himself, Nabonidus might have sought to legitimize his rule by exalting Neriglissar, a previous usurper. But since Nabonidus came to power as the result of deposing and murdering the previous king, Lâbâši-Marduk, it was necessary for him to vilify his predecessor, and by that, justify his seizure of the throne:[37]

iv 34' *iš-tu u₄-um* iv 35' *im-lu-ú iṣ-ba-˹tú˺* iv 36' *ú-ru-uh ši-im-ti* iv 37' *Lâbâši-Mar*[*duk*](ᵐ*la-a-ba-ši-*ᵈAMAR[UTU]) iv 38' *māršu*(DUMU-*šu*) *ṣa-ah-˹ri˺* iv 39' *la a-hi-iz ri-id-di* iv 40' *kīma*(GIM) *la libbi*(ŠÀ) *ilima*(DINGIR-*ma*) iv 41' *ina kussi*(GIŠ.GU.ZA) *šarrūti*(LUGAL-˹*ti*˺) iv 42' *ú-ši-im-ma* […]

iv 34' After (Neriglissar's) days iv 35' were fulfilled, (and) he took iv 36' the path of fate, iv 37' Lâbâši-Mar[duk], iv 38' his you[ng] son, iv 39' not properly-behaved,[38] iv 42' sat iv 41' on the throne of royalty iv 40' against the will of the gods, and […]

Nabonidus uses two different techniques in this passage to construct Lâbâši-Marduk's villainous image: accusing him for being "not properly-behaved" (*lā āhiz riddi*, l. 39') and for ruling against the will of the gods (see "Archetype 7"). The passage does not explain the actual nature of Lâbâši-Marduk's "improper behavior," but simply portrays him as such, as if it was an integral part of his nature.

Archetype 3: The many villains against the inferior hero

The next archetype reflects a classical "David versus Goliath" motif. One of the possible traits of a hero is being an underdog. Once the underdog-hero manages to overcome his difficulties, his heroic image is enhanced. Mesopotamian kings, therefore, occasionally depicted themselves as underdogs who faced numerous enemies at

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[37] "Nabonidus 3"/RINBE 2.III.3 col. iv ll. 34'–42'; edition: RINBE 2, 64–65.

[38] Literally, "not possessing (good) conduct" (*lā āhiz riddi*).

once, but nonetheless managed to prevail and overcome their superior foes.

Our first example of this one-against-many motif is taken from a building inscription commemorating the construction of the temple of Šamaš in Mari, issued by King Yahdun-Lim (reigned ca. 1820–1795 BCE). In this passage, the king of Mari presents himself as fighting against several different kings, and triumphing:[39]

[67] *i-na ša-at-tim-ma ša-a-ti* [68] m*la-ú-um šar*(LUGAL) *sa-ma-nim*ki [69] *ù ma-at ub-ra-bi-im* [70] m*ba-ah-lu-ku-li-im šar*(LUGAL) *tu-tu-ul*ki [71] *ù ma-at am-na-ni-im* [72] m*a-ia-lum šar*(LUGAL) *a-ba-at-tim*ki [73] *ù ma-at ra-ab-bi-im* [74] *šarrū*(LUGALmeš) *an-nu-tu-un* [75] *i-ki-ru-šu-ma* [76] *a-na ti-lu-ti-šu-nu* [77] *ṣa-ab su-mu-e-pu-uh* [78] *ša ma-at ia-am-ha-ad*ki [79] *il-li-ka-am-ma* [80] *i-na a-li-im sa-ma-nim*ki [81] *um-ma-at tur-mi-im* [82] *iš-ti-ni-iš ip-hu-ru-šum-ma* [83] *i-na ka-ak-ki-im da-an-nim* [84] 3 *šarrī*(LUGALmeš) *an-nu-ti-in* [85] *ša tur-mi-im ik-mi* [86] *ṣa-ba-šu-nu ù ṣa-bi ti-la-ti-šu-nu i-du-uk* [87] *da-aw-da-šu-nu im-ha-aṣ* [88] *gu-ru-un ša-al-ma-ti-šu-nu iš-ku-un* [89] *du-ra-ni-šu-nu iq-qú-ur-ma* [90] *a-na ti-li ù ka-ar-mi* [91] *iš-ku-un-šu-nu-ti*

[67] In that same year, [68] La'um, king of Samānum [69] and the Ubrabium land, [70] Bahlu-kullim, king of Tuttul [71] and the Amnānum land, [72] Aiālum, king of Abattum [73] and the Rabbum land, [74] these kings [75] rebelled against him. [77] The army of Sūmû-Epuh [78] of the land of Yamhad [79] came [76] to their aid, [79] and [80] in the city of Samānum [81] the tribes of treachery [82] assembled as one against him, but [83] by mighty weapon [85] he defeated [84] these three kings [85] of treachery. [86] He smote their armies and their aiding-armies, [87] he inflicted their defeat. [88] He put their corpses in piles. [89] He tore down their walls and [91] set them [90] into mounds and ruins.

Other aspects of this passage are discussed in the next section. In the frame of the current discussion, we may notice that Yahdun-Lim did not merely state that he faced several enemies, but also specified their

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[39] RIME 4.6.8.2 ll. 67–91; edition: RIME 4, 606–607.

names, tribes, and countries, probably to lend credibility to his claims of facing multiple enemies at once.

In his twenty-fourth regnal year, Samsu-iluna (reigned ca. 1750–1710 BCE) constructed the city-wall of Kiš. The event was commemorated in several cylinders that were found in the city, some written in Akkadian, others in Sumerian. These inscriptions also mentioned the defeat he inflicted on his opponents, among which Rīm-Sîn II of Larsa. In the passage under discussion, Samsu-iluna describes his victory over a coalition of rivals:[40]

[101] 26 *šarrī*(LUGAL) *ha-am-ma-i* [102] *za-i-ri-šu i-na-ar* [103] *gi-me-er-šu-nu iš-ki-iš* [104] *Iluni*(DINGIR-*ni*) *šar*(LUGAL) *iš-nun-na*^ki [105] *la ꞌše-muꞌ a-wa-ti-šu* [106] *i-ik-mi* [107] [*i*]*n šigari*(^giš SI.GAR) [108] *ú-ra-aš-šu-ma* [109] [*n*]*a-pí-iš-ta-šu* [110] *ú-ša-ri-iḫ*

[102] He killed [101] twenty-six rebellious kings, [102] his foes. [103] He slaughtered all of them. [106] He bound [104] Iluni, king of Ešnunna, [105] who did not listen to his commands. [108] He led him off [107] [i]n a neck-stock, [108] and [110] had [109] his [l]ife [110] destroyed.

According to this passage, Samsu-iluna defeated no less than twenty-six enemy kings. In another text—RIMA 1.0.78.5, discussed above—Tukulti-Ninurta I claims to have faced an even larger number of rivals: no less than "forty kings of the lands of Nairi," who "fiercely stood against me for battle and conflict" (*erbâ šarrāni mātāt Nairi ana qabli u tāḫāzi dapniš izizzūni*, ll. 38–40).

A highly vivid example of this motif is found in the famous "Bavian Inscription" of King Sennacherib (reigned 704–681 BCE). The text tells of Sennacherib's rather infamous destruction of the city of Babylon, but also of his earlier clashes with the kings of Elam and Babylon, who joined forces in an unsuccessful attempt to drive the Assyrians out of southern Mesopotamia:[41]

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[40] RIME 4.3.7.7 ll. 101–110; edition: RIME 4, 387.
[41] "Bavian Inscription"/RINAP 3.2.223 ll. 34–37; edition: RINAP 3.2, 315.

[34] *ina šatti*(MU.AN.NA) *annîmma*(Ú-*ma*) *it-ti ar nāri*(ÍD) *šu-a-tu ša aḥ-ru-ú it-ti* ᵐ*um-ma-an-me-na-nu* [35] ⸢*šar*⸣(⸢LUGAL⸣) *māt*(KUR) *Elamti*(ELAM.MAᵏⁱ) *ù šar*(LUGAL) Babili(KÁ.DINGIR.RAᵏⁱ) *a-di šarrāni*(LUGALᵐᵉˢ-*ni*) *ma-aʾ-du-ti ša šadî*(KUR-*i*) *ù māt*(KUR) *tam-tim ša re-ṣu-ti-šú-nu i-na ta-mir-ti* ᵘʳᵘ*ḫa-lu-le-e* [36] *áš-ta-kan si-dir-ta ina qí-bit* ᵈ*aš-šur bēlu*(EN) *rabê*(GAL-*e*) *bēliya*(EN-*ia*) *ki-i* ᵍⁱˢ*šil-ta-ḫi šam-ri i-na lìb-bi-šú-nu al-lik-ma si-kip-ti ummānātišunu*(ERIMʰⁱ·ᵃ·ᵐᵉˢ-*šú-nu*) [37] *áš-kun pu-ḫur-šú-nu ú-sap-pi-iḫ-ma ú-par-ri-ir el-lat-su-un*

[34] In this year, with the flowing of this canal which I dug, [36] I had drawn up a battleline [34] with Umman-menanu,[42] [35] the king of the land of Elam, and the king of Babylon, together with the many kings of the mountains and the Sea-land who were their supporters, in the meadows of the city of Halulê. [36] By the command of Aššur, the great lord, my lord, I charged into their midst like a furious arrow, and [36–37] I repelled[43] [36] their troops. [37] I dispersed their assembly and scattered their bands.

Sennacherib informs us that he fought not only against the kings of Elam and Babylon, but against a whole coalition they formed "together with the many kings of the mountains and the Sea-land who were their supporters" (*adi šarrāni maʾdūti ša šadî u māt tâmtim ša reticulum*, l. 35). Needless to say, he was victorious.

Archetype 4: The rebellious / disobedient / treacherous villain

The fourth archetype in our survey is one that depicts the villain as rebellious, disobedient, or treacherous. The concept of monarchy was deeply immersed in the collective thought of the people in ancient Mesopotamia since these societies were hierarchical. Any deviation from this pattern would not have been tolerated; the proper civilian was expected to be obedient of his superiors, and thus disobedience was constructed as a highly negative quality.

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[42] Humban-menanu.
[43] Literally, "placed… a repulse" (*sikipti… aškun*).

Mesopotamian rulers sometimes portrayed their rivals in such negative light.

We have previously discussed in different contexts several relevant texts. For example, in the inscription RIME 4.6.8.2, Yahdun-Lim king of Mari claimed to have fought against multiple enemies (see "Archetype 3") because they rebelled against him (*ikkirūšu*, l. 75). In order to emphasize this, the text uses phrases such as "tribes of treachery" (*ummat turmim*, l. 81), and "these three kings of treachery" (*šalāš šarrāni annutin ša turmim*, ll. 84–85).[44] Similarly, we saw how in the inscription RIME 4.3.7.7 Samsu-iluna king of Babylon defined one of his twenty-six rivals—Iluni of Ešnunna—as a king "who did not listen to his (=Samsu-iluna's) commands" (*lā ⌈šemû⌉ awātišu*, l. 105).

Another relevant example is taken from a prism of Esarhaddon (reigned 680–669 BCE), so-called "Nineveh A." This king faced a problem immediately upon his accession; he was the youngest of his father's sons, and hence his appointment as heir by Sennacherib was not met with consent. As soon as Sennacherib died, Esarhaddon's older brothers revolted, and a civil war broke out. Esarhaddon emerged victorious and consolidated his rule over the empire, but he did not conceal his dissatisfaction of the disloyalty his brothers have shown:[45]

i 41 *ar-ka-a-nu ahhūya*(ŠEŠ^meš-*ia*) *im-ma-hu-ma mim-ma ša eli*(UGU) *ilāni*(DINGIR^meš) i 42 *ù a-me-lu-ti la ṭābu*(DÙG.GA) *e-pu-šu-ma ik-pu-du le-mut-tú* i 43 *is-se-hu-ma kakkī*(GIŠ.TUKUL^meš) *ina qé-reb Ninua*(NINA^ki) *ba-lu ilāni*(DINGIR^meš) i 44 *a-na e-peš šarrūti*(LUGAL-*u-ti*) *it-ti a-ha-meš it-tak-ki-pu la-la-'i-iš* i 45 ^d*aš-šur Sîn*(^d30) *Šamaš*(^dUTU) *Bēl*(^dEN) *Nabû*(^dAG) *Ištar*(^d15) *šá Ninua*(NINA^ki) *Ištar*(^d15) *šá Arba-ili*(URU.LÍMMU-DINGIR) i 46 *ep-šet* ^lú*ha-am-ma-ʾe-e šá ki-i la lìb-bi ilāni*(DINGIR^meš) *in-né-ep-šú* i 47 *lem-niš it-ta-aṭ-lu-ma i-da-šu-un ul i-zi-zu* i

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[44] The term *turmu* we encounter in this context is not translated in any of the standard Akkadian dictionaries. I assume that in this inscription it means "treachery" because of the context, and because of its similarity to the term *tūrum* (<*târum*), which has a semantic range of meanings related to returning or changing – basically, doing something in an opposite manner than expected.

[45] "Nineveh A"/RINAP 4.1 col. i ll. 41–52; edition: RINAP 4, 12–13.

⁴⁸ *e-mu-qa-šu-un lil-lu-ta ú-šá-lik-ú-ma* ^i 49 *šap-la-nu-ú-a ú-šak-me-su-šu-nu-ti* ^i 50 *niše*(UN^meš) *māt*(KUR) *aš-šur*^ki *šá a-de-e ma-mit ilāni*(DINGIR^meš) *rabûti*(GAL^meš) ^i 51 *a-na na-ṣar šarrūtiya*(LUGAL-*ti-ia*) *ina mê*(A^meš) *ù šamni*(Ì.GIŠ) *it-mu-ú* ^i 52 *ul il-li-ku re-ṣu-us-su-un*

^i 41 Afterwards, my brothers became frenzied. ^i 42 They did ^i 41 anything that ^i 42 is unpleasant ^i 41 for the gods ^i 42 and mankind. They plotted evil. ^i 43 They became rebellious, and with weapons, within Nineveh, without the gods, ^i 44 they were butting each other childishly for the exercise of kingship. ^i 45 Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh (and) Ištar of Arbela ^i 47 have looked malevolently ^i 46 at the deeds of the usurpers, that were done not according to the will of the gods, ^i 47 and they did not stand at their side. ^i 48 They made their strength become idiocy, and ^i 49 made them kneel beneath me. ^i 50 The people of the land of Aššur, that ^i 51 swore in water and oil ^i 50 a loyalty-oath, an oath of the great gods, ^i 51 for the protection of my kingship, ^i 52 did not go to their assistance.

This text is discussed further below (see "Archetypes 6 and 7"). At present, we should pay attention to the manner in which Esarhaddon phrases his brothers' treachery: "They plotted evil" (*ikpudū lemuttu*, l. 42) and "They became rebellious" (*issehû*, l. 43); he even explicitly calls them "usurpers" (*hammāʾē*, l. 46).

We move on to the last of the strong Neo-Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–627 BCE). In his annals, as described on a prism found in Kalhu, he detailed the rivalry between him and his older brother, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, ruler of Babylon who was supported by Humban-nikaš II[46] king of Elam:[47]

^vii 36 *Šamaš-šuma-ukī*[*n*](^mdGIŠ.NU₁₁-MU-GI.ˈNAˈ) [...*ša ana šarrūti*[48]] ^vii 37 *aš-ku-nu-uš* ˈaˈ-[*na*...] ^vii 38 *ú-nak-ki-sa su-ˈlum*ˈ-[*mu*]-ˈúˈ [...] ^vii 39 *abullāti*(KÁ.GAL^meš) *Babil*[*i*...](KÁ.DINGIR.ˈRAˈ[ki]...) TA [...] ^vii 40

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[46] In the text his name is spelled Ummanigaš (*um-man-i-gaš*).

[47] Ashurbanipal's Kalhu Annals/"Prism Kh"/RINAP 5.1.7, col. vii ll. 36–43; edition: RINAP 5.1, 155–156.

[48] The determinative-relative pronoun *ša* must be restored in this line, because of the subjunctive in the following line. The restoration *ana šarrūti* is based on *ša ana šarr*[*ūti*] *aškunu* in col. vii l. 41.

^m*um-man-i-ˈgašˈ* [… *ardu*(ARAD)] *da-gíl pa-*[*ni-ia*] ^{vii 41} *ša a-na šarr*[*ūti*] (LUGAL-[*u-tí*]) ˈ*ášˈ-ku-nu ina māt*(KUR) *e-ˈlamˈ-*[*tí*] ^{vii 42} *it-ti-ia* […] ˈ*ûˈ-šam-kír-šú-ˈmaˈ* ^{vii 43} ˈ*ûˈ-šá-aṣ-*[*li-šúˈ*] *nīr*(ˈGIŠˈ.ŠUDUN) *be-lu-ti-*[*ia*]

^{vii 36} Šamaš-šuma-ukī[n… *that*] ^{vii 37} I installed him ^{vii 36} [*for kingship*ˀ], ^{vii 37} f[*or…*] ^{vii 38} he cut-off the p[eac]e […] ^{vii 39} the gates of Babylo[n…] ^{vii 40} Ummaniga[š… a servant] who obey[s me], ^{vii 41} that [I] installed for king[ship] in the land of Ela[m…] ^{vii 42} he made him hostile with me, a[nd] ^{vii 43} he made [him] ca[st-off] the yoke of [my] lordship.

Both opponents are said to have been previously appointed to their positions as kings of their countries by Ashurbanipal, which obviously strengthens the sense of betrayal once they revolt against him. While Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was actually appointed as king of Babylon by Esarhaddon, his rule still must have received Ashurbanipal's consent once the latter became king of the empire. Therefore, Ashurbanipal's claim to have installed Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as king of Babylon was not entirely fictious.

Archetype 5: The weak / cowardly villain

The next archetype involves not only vilification, but also mockery and ridicule. Here we consider villains who were mocked for their weakness, cowardice, or both.

Tukulti-Ninurta I's inscription RIMA 1.0.78.1 was mentioned earlier (see "Archetype 1"). In one of its passages, the Assyrian king mocks his rival, Ehli-Tešub king of Alzu, as a coward who was so terrified by the might of Tukulti-Ninurta, that he fled and abandoned his country. Ehli-Tešub's army was also described as fleeing in the midst of battle, "fearing the fury of my warfare" (*šumur tāhāziya ēdurū-ma*, col. iv ll. 13–14).

The so-called "Kalhu Annals" of Tiglath-Pileser III (reigned 744–727 BCE) are detailed in a long inscription subdivided into units and inscribed on the walls of Tiglath-Pileser's palace in Kalhu. The

Assyrian king refers in these annals, among other issues, to his opponent Rezin, king of Damascus, in a rather unflattering manner:[49]

⁸′ *šu-ú a-na šu-zu-ub* nāpšātišu(ZI.MEŠ-*šú) e-ˈdeˈ-nu-uš-šu ip-par-ši-id-ma* ⁹′*[ki-ma]* *šikkî*(dNIN.KILIM) *abul*(KÁ.GAL) *ālišu*(URU-*šú) ērub*(KU₄-*ub) ašarēdūtišu*(LÚ.SAG.KAL.MEŠ-*šú) bal-ṭu-us-su-nu* ¹⁰′ [*a-na* GIŠ]*za-qi-pa-a-ni ú-še-li-ma ú-šad-gi-la* mā*ssu*(KUR-su) 40.ÀM 5 ūmē(UD.MEŠ) uš-ma-ni* ¹¹′ *[i-na i-ta]-at ālišu*(URU-šu) *ak-ṣur-ma kīma*(GIM) *iṣ-ṣur qu-up-pi e-sir-šú*

⁸′ He (=Rezin king of Damascus), for the saving of his life, he fled on his own. ⁹′ He entered the gate of his city [like] a mongoose. ¹⁰′ I impaled[50] [on] stakes ⁹′ his foremost men while they were alive, ¹⁰′ and I made his country watch. Forty-five days ¹¹′ I set up ¹⁰′ my camp ¹¹′ [in the surround]ing of his city, and confined him like a cage bird.

Tiglath-Pileser does not spare the use of ridiculing metaphors. He describes how Rezin fled alone in order to save his own life and entered his city "[like] a mongoose" ([*kīma*] *šikkî*, l. 9'). Last but not least, he claims to have confined Rezin inside his city "like a caged bird" (*kīma iṣṣur quppi*, l. 11').

The next Neo-Assyrian king seems to have been even more creative with his use of such insulting descriptions. One of the major military achievements of Sargon II (reigned 721–705 BCE) was his fight against the powerful newly-established kingdom of Urartu, which culminated in his sack of the Urartian holy city Muṣaṣir in 714 BCE. Sargon refers to the Urartian king Rusâ[51] in his annals, that decorated the walls of his palace in Dur-Sharukin:[52]

¹³³ *di-ik-tu ša* ᵐ*ur-sa-a* ᵏᵘʳ*ú-ra-ar-ṭa-a-ˈaˈ* ¹³⁴ *a-na ˈla-aˈ ma-ni a-duk* 2 ME 60 *ẕēr šarrūtišu*(NUMUN LUGAL-*ti-šu*) LÚ.*ša pét-hal-lì-šu i-na qa-a-ti ú-ṣab-bit a-na šu-zu-ˈubˈ* ¹³⁵ *nāpšātišu*(ˈZI.MEŠˈ-*šu) ˈi-naˈ*

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[49] Tiglath-Pileser III's Kalhu Annals, Unit 20, ll. 8'–11'; edition: RINAP 1, 59.
[50] Literally, "caused to be raised" (*ušelî* < *elû* Š).
[51] Rusâ I, king of Urartu (reigned 735–714 BCE). In the text, his name is spelled *ur-sa-a*.
[52] Annals of Sargon II ll. 133–136; edition: RINAP 2, 65.

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urītī(MUNUS.ANŠE.KUR.RA) *ir-kab-ma* *šadâšu*(KUR-*a-šu*) *e-li*
hamšāt(5) *bēri*(KASKAL.GÍD) *qaq-qa-ru ul-tu šad*(KUR) *ú-a-ú-ˈuš*ˈ ¹³⁶
[*a*]-ˈ*di*ˈ *šad*(KUR) *zi-mur ar-du-us-su*

¹³⁴ I killed countlessly ¹³³ with the defeat of Ursâ the Urarṭian. ¹³⁴ I
seized by my hand 260 members of his royal family⁵³ and his
cavalrymen. For the saving of ¹³⁵ his life, he rode his mountains by a
mare. ¹³⁶ I chased him ¹³⁵ over five leagues distance, from mount Uauš
¹³⁶ [unt]il mount Zimur.

The imagery of the Urartian king, running for his life while riding a
mare all alone, while his family members and soldiers deserted
behind at the mercy of the Assyrian king, was surely a very
humiliating one. Sargon then continued to plunder Muṣaṣir, one of
the holiest cities of Urartu. After describing this event, the text
returns to mock Rusâ, and notifies us of his dire fate:⁵⁴

¹⁶¹ [*i-na māt*(KUR)] *ur*-[*ar-ṭi*] ¹⁶² [*rap-ši*] ˈ*šadê*(KURᵐᵉˢ-*e*) *ka*ˈ-*la-ma* ˈ*si*ˈ-
*pit-tu ú-šab-*ˈ*ši*ˈ-*i-ma* [*a-na* ᵐ*ur-sa-a šarrašunu*(LUGAL-*šú-nu*) *ṣur-ti nag-
la*]-*bi* ˈ*qu-pé-e*ˈ […] ¹⁶³ […x-*ti a-di*] ˈ*bal-ṭú*ˈ *áš-kun na-gu-ú šu-*[*a*]-*tu a-*
[*na mi-ṣir māt*(KUR) *aš-šur*ᵏⁱ *ú*]-ˈ*ter*ˈ-[*ra*]-*am*-[*ma* ¹⁶⁴ [*i*]-ˈ*na qātī*(ŠU)ˈ.[II]
ˡᵘ[*šu-ut rēši*(SAG)]-ˈ*ia*ˈ *nāgir ēkalli*(ˡᵘNÍMGIR É.ˈGAL) *am*ˈ-*nu*-[*šú*
ᵐ]ˈ*ur*ˈ-*sa-a* [ᵏᵘʳ]ˈ*ur-ar*ˈ-[*ṭa-a*]-ˈ*a*ˈ [*na-mur-rat*] ˈ*d*ˈ*aš-šur* ˈ*be-lí-ia*ˈ ¹⁶⁵ [*is-*
hup]-*šu-ma* ˈ*i-na*ˈ [*patar par*]*zilli*([ᵍⁱˢGÍR AN].ˈBAR*ˈ) *ra-ma-ni-šu*
kīma(GIM) *šahî*(ŠAH) *lìb-ba-*ˈ*šu is-hu*ˈ-*ul-*ˈ*ma*ˈ *napšātišu*(ZI-*šu*) [*iq*]-ˈ*ti*ˈ

¹⁶¹ [In] ¹⁶² [the wide] ¹⁶¹ [land of] Ur[arṭu,] ¹⁶² in all the mountains, I
caused lamentation. ¹⁶³ I set ¹⁶² [for Ursâ, their king, flint(-blades),
raz]ors, scalpels⁵⁵ […] ¹⁶³ [… as long as he li]ved. [I] ret[urn]ed that
region t[o the boundary of the land of Assyria, and] ¹⁶⁴ I counted [it
i]n the hand[s] of my [eunuch], the palace herald. Ursâ the Urarṭian,
[the radiance of] Aššur my lord ¹⁶⁵ [overwhelmed] him, so by his own
[ir]on [dagger] he pierced his heart like a pig, and [en]ded his life.

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⁵³ Literally, "seed of his royalty" (*zēr šarrūtišu*).
⁵⁴ Annals of Sargon II ll. 161–165; edition: RINAP 2, 67.
⁵⁵ To slash himself as an act of mourning.

In order to intensify the dramatic effect of his words, Sargon was not satisfied with a mere description of Rusâ's tragic end, but added the humiliating detailed description of his suicide, which Rusâ committed "like a pig" (*kīma šahî*, l. 165).

We have already mentioned the "Bavian Inscription" of Sennacherib, Sargon II's successor (see "Archetype 3"). In a different passage than the one previously discussed, the text continues with unflattering mockery of the cowardice of Sennacherib's opponents, using quite vivid descriptions:[56]

[38]*šar*(LUGAL) *māt*(KUR) *Elamti*(ELAM.MA[ki]) *ù šar*(LUGAL) *Babili*(KÁ.DINGIR.RA[ki]) *hur-ba-šu tāhāziya*(MÈ-*ia*) *dan-ni* [39] *is-hup-šú-nu-ti-ma qé-reb narkabātišunu*([giš]GIGIR[meš]-*šú-nu*) *ú-maš-še-ru-ú-ni zu-ú-šú-un a-na šu-zu-ub nap-šá-te-šú-nu ma-tu-uš-šú-un in-nab-tu-ma* [40] *la i-tu-ru-ni ar-kiš mìn-de-ma* Sîn-ahē-erība([md]30-ŠEŠ.MEŠ-SU) *šar*(LUGAL) *māt*(KUR) *aš-šur*[ki] *ag-giš i-ziz-ma a-na māt*(KUR) *Elamti*(ELAM.MA[ki]) *i-šak-ka-nu ta-a-a-ar-tú*

[38] The king of the land Elam and the king of Babylon, the terror of my strong battle [39] overwhelmed them, and they released their excrement within their chariots. For the saving of their lives, they fled their lands and [40] did not return: "Perhaps Sennacherib, king of the land of Assyria, is furiously angry, so he will return[57] to the land of Elam."

The description of the Elamite and Babylonian kings in their chariots speaks for itself. It is followed by the standard mention that they have fled and deserted their countries, never to return, out of the fear of Sennacherib.

Archetype 6: The non-conformist villain

Our sixth archetype is that of the non-conformist villain. At its essence, this is a type of villain that allegedly acts against his own

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[56] "Bavian Inscription"/RINAP 3.2.223 ll. 38–40; edition: RINAP 3.2, 315–316.
[57] Literally, "will set a return" (*išakkanu tayyartu*).

people or country, thus inevitably deviating from the appropriate socially accepted behavior within the ingroup.

The first example for this archetype we discuss is found in a passage from Esarhaddon's prism "Nineveh A," that was already mentioned (see "Archetype 4"). Stylistically, the structure of this passage is quite interesting. Its opening two sentences inform us that Esarhaddon's brothers "became frenzied" (*immaḫū*, col. i l. 41) and "did anything that is unpleasant for the gods and mankind" (*mimma ša eli ilāni u amēluti la ṭābu ēpušuma*, col. i l. 41–42). The whole passage then continues by specifying these three elements: the brothers' "frenzy", their acts against the gods and their acts against the people. The nature of their "frenzy" is detailed as they "plotted evil" (*ikpudū lemuttu*, col. i l. 42), "became rebellious" (*issehū-ma*, col. i l. 43) and "were butting each other childishly" (*itti aḫāmeš ittakkipū lalā'iš*, col. i l. 44), all in an attempt to achieve kingship. The next part of the passage tells how the gods view the behavior of the rebellious brothers negatively, since these acts were done against the will of the gods who punish and subdue the brothers before Esarhaddon. Finally, the passage notifies us that the people of Assyria themselves remained loyal to Esarhaddon and did not ally with his brothers. The villainous brothers are thus portrayed as evil, crazy, childish, and rebellious, but moreover, as acting against the will of the gods, and against the people of Assyria. This final accusation belongs to the archetype of the "non-conformist villain."

Esarhaddon's son and successor, Ashurbanipal, stands at the focus of our next example. His annals, known from "Prism Kh" found in Kalhu, were used earlier (see "Archetype 4") for demonstrating how he characterized his older brother, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, as a rebellious villain. But portraying his brother as such was perhaps not an accusation strong enough to justify his killing. Ashurbanipal therefore made sure that the villainous image of his estranged brother

was constructed in such a way that no-one will question his evil nature and the legitimacy of his killing:[58]

viii 55' *Šamaš-šuma-ukīn*(md GIŠ.NU11-MU-GI.NA) *ahi*(ŠEŠ) *nak-ri* viii 56' *ša a-na māt*(KUR) *aš-šur*KI *ik-pu-du né-er-tú* viii 57' *ù e-li Aššur*(AN.ŠÁR) *ili*(DINGIR) *ba-ni-ia* viii 58' *iq-bu-ú šil-la-tú rabītu*(GAL-*tú*) viii 59' *mu-u-tú lem-nu i-šim-šu-ma* viii 60' *ina mi-qit gīri*(d GIBIL6) *id-di-šu-ma* viii 61' *ú-hal-li-qa nap-šat-su*

viii 55' Šamaš-šuma-ukīn – (my) hostile brother, viii 56' who plotted murder against the land of Assyria, viii 57' and viii 58' uttered grave blasphemy viii 57' against Aššur, the god my begetter – viii 59' (Aššur) decreed him a dire death: viii 60' he consigned him in an incidence of fire, and viii 61' ruined his life.

The sins of the evil brother were not limited to revolting against Ashurbanipal and questioning the legitimacy of his rule. The above passage also depicts him as a man who acted against the land of Assyria, and against its prime deity, Aššur. Thus, the villainous image is intensified and completed. The evil brother deserved his dire fate. It is also noteworthy that Ashurbanipal portrays his brother's death as a divine punishment, and not as an act that he himself performed. By doing so, Ashurbanipal might have wished to distance himself from the blame of shedding royal blood, and that of his own brother, no less.

Archetype 7: The godless villain

The final archetype is one that puts the villain in a confrontation with the celestial world. As everywhere in the ancient world, the gods were strongly revered in Mesopotamia, and every person required godly blessing. Kings only ruled by the grace of the gods, and blasphemy was considered to be one of the severest sins a person could commit. Accusing one's rival as impious, or somehow acting against the will of the gods, therefore, associated the defamed person with some of

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[58] Ashurbanipal's Kalhu Annals/"Prism Kh"/RINAP 5.1.7, col. viii ll. 55'–61'; edition: RINAP 5.1, 158.

the harshest deviations from the proper conduct – again, distancing him from the ingroup.

We have already seen in the previous section how the Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal portrayed their estranged brothers who challenged their rule as villains who acted against the people of Assyria. In addition, we have seen that both monarchs claimed that the acts of their rebellious brothers raised divine wrath. In "Nineveh A," Esarhaddon claimed that the gods did not support the revolt of his older brothers: "Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bēl, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh (and) Ištar of Arbela have looked malevolently at the deeds of the usurpers, that were done not according to the will of the gods, and they did not stand at their side" (*Aššur Sîn Šamaš Bēl Nabû Ištar ša Ninua Ištar ša Arba-ili epšēt hammāʾē ša kī lā libbi ilāni innepšu lemniš ittaṭlū-ma idāšun ul izzizzū*, col. i ll. 45–47). Eventually, Esarhaddon claims that it was the gods who subdued his brothers before him.

As is mentioned above (see "Archetypes 6"), Ashurbanipal faced similar situation when his older brother, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, rebelled against him. In "Prism Kh," in addition to vilifying his brother as rebellious and as operating against the land of Assyria, Ashurbanipal further accused him of committing the ultimate sin: "he uttered grave blasphemy against Aššur, the god my begetter" (*eli Aššur ili bānîya iqbû šillatu rabītu*, col. viii ll. 57'–58').

Moving on to the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, we have already seen (see "Archetype 2") how Nabonidus tried to vilify Lâbâši-Marduk, the king who was murdered in order to raise Nabonidus to the throne, by accusing him in "Nabonidus 3" as being "not properly-behaved" (*lā āhiz riddi*, col. iv l. 39). In order to legitimize his assassination, Nabonidus further claimed that Lâbâši-Marduk "sat on the throne of royalty against the will of the gods" (*kīma lā libbi ilī-ma ina kussi šarrūti ušim-ma*, col. iv ll. 40'–42'). The people of Babylonia could have perhaps questioned Nabonidus's legitimacy to rule the empire, but who could argue with the gods?

In our last example, the villifier becomes vilified, as Nabonidus is the one who is portrayed as the villain. Cyrus II ("the Great," reigned 559–530 BCE) put an end to independent Mesopotamian rule. As part of his attempts to legitimize his rule over Babylonia, he commissioned one of the most famous texts of ancient Mesopotamia, the so-called "Cyrus cylinder." In this text, the Persian ruler aspires to vilify Nabonidus, and by that strengthen his own legitimacy for the Babylonian throne – just as Nabonidus did earlier to Lâbâši-Marduk:[59]

¹⁵ *a-na ālišu*(URU-*šu*) *Babili*(KÁ.DINGIR^(meš.ki)) *a-la-ak-šu iq-bi ú-ša-aṣ-bi-it-su-ma ḫar-ra-nu Babili*(TIN.TIR^(ki)) *ki-ma ib-ri ù tap-pe-e it-tal-la-ka i-da-a-šu* ¹⁶ *um-ma-ni-šu rap-ša-a-tim ša ki-ma me-e nāri*(ÍD) *la ú-ta-ad-du-ú ni-ba-šu-un kakkīšunu*(^(giš)TUKUL^(meš)-*šu-nu*) *ṣa-an-du-ma i-ša-ad-di-ḫa i-da-a-šu* ¹⁷ *ba-lu qab-li ù ta-ḫa-zi ú-še-ri-ba-áš qé-reb šu-an-na*^(ki) *ālišu*(URU-*šu*) *Babili*(KÁ.DINGIR^(meš.ki)) *i-ṭi-ir i-na šap-ša-qí Nabium-na'id*(^(md)AG-NÍ.TUKU) *šar*(LUGAL) *la pa-li-ḫi-šu ú-ma-al-la-a qa-tu-uš-šú*

¹⁵ (Marduk) commanded his (=Cyrus's) march against his city, Babylon. He made him take the road to Babylon and was marching by his side like a friend and a comrade. ¹⁶ His widespread troops, which, like the water of the river, their number cannot be recognized, were marching by his side, their weapons girt. ¹⁷ Without struggle or battle, he made him enter the midst of Šuanna.[60] He saved his city, Babylon, from hardship. He handed over to him Nabonidus, the king who did not revere him.

The last sentence in the above passage states that Marduk handed the impious Nabonidus over to Cyrus, accusing Nabonidus explicitly for not revering Marduk. This famous passage obviously resonates with Nabonidus's far-reaching cultic reforms that elevated the Moon-god Sîn to prominence at the expense of Marduk. These acts were considered sacrilege, especially by the powerful clergy of Marduk. Whether the Babylonians indeed welcomed the invading

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[59] Cyrus Cylinder ll. 15–17; edition: Hanspeter Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001), 552.
[60] The name of one of the districts in the inner-city of Babylon, but also a name of the city as a whole.

Persians as their redeemers from the evil Nabonidus is perhaps questionable, but Cyrus certainly used the resentment towards Nabonidus in order to vilify the ousted Babylonian king, and by that strengthened his own legitimacy to rule over Babylon. In a reversal of some of the previous examples, here the foreigner actually uses his foreignness to his advantage and portrays himself as one who comes from the outside to rescue a collective that was betrayed by its own unfit leader – the villain.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Mesopotamian royal propaganda utilized various literary motifs in order to vilify political opponents. The creation of villains went hand-in-hand with labeling them as social or cultural deviant "others." The image of the villain was best produced as an outcast who deviates from the customary norms and rules of the pertinent society. Therefore, vilification was achieved by using social constructs of collective self-identity dichotomized with constructs of otherness, at times of individuals, at times of collectives. This dichotomy can be partly explained against the background of structuralist thought, as it highlights contrasting dichotomous concepts of good versus evil, order versus chaos, civilized versus barbaric and eventually, us versus them. The heroic king exemplified the ideal norms of the collective ingroup, while his villainous opponents represented contrasting concepts, and hence belonged to perceived outgroups.

This essay uses contemporary theoretical approaches to heroism and villainy as the background against which the Mesopotamian evidence was analyzed. Assumptions of universality lie at the basis of all social sciences and at the basis of any hope of conducting meaningful comparative historical research. The theoretical framework presented in the first part if this essay provides several key considerations, the first of which is that heroism and villainy can be understood as social constructs. As such, different social groups may create different types of heroes and villains, depending on the

conditions and circumstances prevailing within a given group at a given time. Several patterns that govern the social creation of heroes and villains recur within many different groups, across space and time. Tracing the common denominators typical of these processes of hero/villain-creation paves the way for formulating questions and answering them: Why do we need heroes and villains? What are heroes and villains actually? What do they do? And how do these considerations highlight social sentiments of collective sameness and otherness?

The first part of the essay presents these questions and tried to answer them. As was explained, social needs for heroism and villainy are multifaceted, but one of the most significant aspects of this human phenomenon is that villainy is mostly constructed as a dichotomic mirror-image of heroism. To understand the villain, we must first understand the hero. And if the hero represents the ideal member of society, then the villain can be understood as a social non-conformist: a deviant. The essay proceeds from this point into a historical discussion of the image of the villain in Mesopotamian royal rhetoric and propaganda, focusing on second- and first-millennium sources. Methodologically, it was necessary to first illustrate the basic outline of the Mesopotamian hero in these texts, the king, in order to subsequently present the constructed image of the villain in these texts, the king's rivals.

Here theory and history meet. Why do social groups need heroes? Because heroes supply leadership and protection for the collective (Heroic trait 1 in the second part of the essay). What are heroes? They are moral (Heroic trait 2), strong (Heroic trait 5), frequently present themselves as underdogs (Heroic trait 3) and have social legitimacy (Heroic trait 4). What do heroes do? They act morally (again, Heroic trait 2) and protect their collective (Heroic trait 6). The seventh heroic trait of Mesopotamian kings, ruling under the grace and consent of the gods, naturally cannot have any basis in modern theories that were formed in a secular world. These seven heroic traits were then contrasted with seven "villain archetypes" that were explained in the third part of the essay. This reflects the reoccurring

claim made in this essay, that the villain forms the negative mirror-image of the hero. Once the heroic traits of Mesopotamian kings were elucidated, their dichotomous villainous archetypes were easily understood. The Mesopotamian societies needed their heroes for similar reasons that all human societies do. The villains we encounter in Mesopotamian royal propaganda reflect antonymic concepts to these heroes.

Even though the examples discussed throughout this essay stem from different times and places and cover a time-span of almost fourteen centuries, several recurring patterns could still be indicated. This is not coincidental, since despite numerous changes the civilizations of the ancient Near East underwent through time, they still maintained a high degree of continuity in customs and traditions. Royal rhetoric is certainly a good example of such continuous literary trends.

This essay still leaves several questions open for future research. One obvious topic that should be investigated further involves the opposite of the alleged homogenous picture this essay portrays. It will be simplistic, indeed naïve, to ignore chronological, regional, and cultural particularities. A more refined resolution, for example, is required in order to assess the many differences between Assyrian and Babylonian sources, traditions and worldviews, and of course between the different phases and sometimes even rulers within each one of these corpora. Such research remains beyond the scope of the present essay.

History, as the cliché goes, is written by the victorious. We therefore usually only have one perspective on a given event, incident or conflict. Our knowledge concerning notions of heroism and villainy in the ancient Near East, therefore, is usually one-dimensional. In order to reliably assess actual events, we are forced to remain partially skeptical about our sources and try to extract the historical essence from them. Reconstructing social notions, therefore, remains quite conjectural. This article sets forth a new methodology in assessing the socio-historical reality that prevailed in some parts of the ancient

Near East. Adopting perspectives from the social sciences can be highly beneficial for improving current philological tools for studying the societies of the ancient Near East. This essay attempts to shed new light on some basic concepts of ancient Mesopotamian societies by analyzing prevalent notions of heroism, villainy, social conformity, and deviance.