A Stranger in the House: Situating Deviance in an 'Alterity' Research Approach[1]

Melanie Wasmuth[2]

Abstract

The paper exemplifies how the modern semantic field of 'alterity' can be turned into a fruitful research approach for ancient Near Eastern Studies and where 'deviance' would be situated in such an approach. I ask how modern terms and concepts that intentionally or unconsciously enter our modern interpretation of ancient sources can be instrumentalised for countering historiographical 'othering.' The key idea is to turn the modern terms and underlying concepts and connotations into a research tool that facilitates a systematic search for additional direct or circumstantial evidence on the chosen topic, in this case that of 'a stranger in the house.' The paper has the format of a double note. The first part highlights some general methodological questions and sketches out the research tool via sets of characteristic key questions. The second part provides an application example for illustrating how the different questions change the scope of interpretation of ancient sources. The sample case study is a characteristically underdetermined private legal document from 7th c. Assur concerning a group of Egyptian merchants who are attacked in the house of their host.

Keywords: *Research tool; Othering; Deviance; Alterity; Assur; Egyptian merchants; Case study*

[2] Melanie Wasmuth; University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: m.wasmuth@gmx.net.

1. Introduction

This paper draws its inspiration from a conference on "A Stranger in the House […] in Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern Societies […]" (Prague, 2018). Though the subtitle elucidated that 'stranger' was to be understood as synonymous for 'foreigner,' the main title invited the fundamental question of what 'a stranger in the house' may mean. What defines a 'stranger' in ancient (southwest Asian) societies, who puts them into the house, and which impact does their presence have on the strangers themselves, on the household, and on the wider community? The following remarks demonstrate how strongly academic research on any of these questions is shaped by our modern preconceived ideas, even – or especially – in cases of source-based approaches to ancient history. They also highlight how much the standard alternative approach, i.e., the application of modern terms and concepts as explanatory models or specific research angles, limits our outlook on antiquity. Instead, I suggest a paradigm shift concerning the integration of source- and theory-based approaches: to develop the modern terms and underlying concepts, which we inadvertently (have to) use when communicating about the ancient sources under consideration, into research approaches, i.e., into tools for opening up new research questions and perspectives, instead of narrowing them down. The core strategy employed here for developing such tools is to contextualise a term or concept in its modern semantic field (or domain) for showcasing the scope of their interpretation potential.[3]

For the topic at hand, two basic assumptions tend to dominate the research outlook. Based on the prevalence of imperial narratives in Assyriology, especially for the Neo-Assyrian period, the "stranger" is primarily perceived as an enemy, or at least a newcomer to be looked

---

[3] For a similar approach for interpreting material sources see, e.g., Melanie Wasmuth, "Petrification as a Research Approach: Its Terminological Potential for Material Culture Studies," in *Petrification Processes in Matter and Society*, ed. Sophie Hüglin, Alexander Gramsch and Liisa Seppänen (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021), 35–42. For a similar research outlook for recontextualising the concepts of honour and shame see Michael Herzfeld, "'As in your own house:' Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 75–89.

at askance for coming from former enemy territory.[4] The alternative underlying assumption is to see the "stranger," especially the "stranger in the house," as pertaining to a prevailing law of hospitality. This is strongly embedded in ethnographic and anthropological studies on (Near Eastern and Mediterranean) hospitality.[5] I will showcase, both in the conceptual introduction and in the application example, that the field of "strange/stranger," even reduced to the special setting of "in the house," can have a much wider scope of interpretations. The case study discussed below exemplifies this extended scope as it is situated – at least to some extent – in the wider context of "hospitality," but embedded into the socio-historical context of a highly culturally-diverse urban centre, where people from up to 4000 km away lived next to each other.[6]

Ancient identity constructions: challenges

Before explicating how such a research approach might be developed out of the different connotations underlying the term 'strange/r,' some general comments are due regarding the issue of researching

[4] See even the alterity-oriented study Mathias Karlsson, *Alterity in Ancient Assyrian Propaganda* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns / Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2017).

[5] For introductory literature see, e.g., Andrew Shyrock, "Breaking Hospitality Apart: Bad Hosts, Bad Guests, and the Problem of Sovereignty," in *The Return to Hospitality. Strangers, Guests, and Ambiguous Encounters*, ed. Matei Candea and Giovanni da Col, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012): S20–S33; or Matei Candea and Giovanni da Col, "The Return to Hospitality," in *The Return to Hospitality. Strangers, Guests, and Ambiguous Encounters*, ed. Matei Candea and Giovanni da Col, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012): S1–S19; Eveline van der Steen, "Honor, Shame and Hospitality: The Distribution of Power in the Premodern Levant," in *Levantine Entanglements – Cultural Productions, Long-Term Changes and Globalizations in the Eastern Mediterranean,* eds. Terje Stordalen and Øystein S. LaBianca (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox eBooks Publishing, 2021), 583–615; but prominently already Julian Pitt-Rivers, "The Law of Hospitality (reprint; original: 1977)" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2012): 501–517; and Herzfeld, "Hospitality," 75–89, who adopts a similar approach by addressing the topic via a "group of glosses" (p. 75) with the double-aim of assessing emic and etic elements (pp. 75–76).

[6] On the scope of cultural diversity in the urban centres of ancient southwest Asia and northeast Africa in the 8th–6th c. BCE, and especially Assur in the 7th c. BCE, see Melanie Wasmuth, *Migration and Non-Elite Agency in the Urban Community of Assur: A Case Study* (working title), in preparation; see also, e.g., Günter Vittmann, *Ägypten und die Fremden im ersten vorchristlichen Jahrtausend* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2003); Jan Krzysztof Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbours (Journal of Juristic Papyrology* Supplement 12; Warszawa: Warsaw University Faculty of Law and Administration, Institute of Archaeology, and Fundacja im. Rafała Taubenschlaga, 2009); Ran Zadok, "Onomastics as a Historical Source," in *Writing Neo-Assyrian History. Sources, Problems, and Approaches*, ed. Giovanni Battista Lanfranchi, Raija Mattila and Robert Rollinger (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project and the Foundation for Finnish Assyriological Research, 2019), 399–488.

ancient identity constructions. The first concerns the complexity and variability of constructions of personhood and identity. It is often easier to define (aspects or facets of) identity by exclusion, referred to by the concept 'identity/alterity' (or also identity/otherness). Conceptually, this functions without (de)valuation of the 'other.' For example, a picture within a group of different colourful images may be identified by being the only one in a set not showing a specific colour, without this being understood as something lacking or laudable. In practice, and especially if the identification concerns people, this tends to change. Identity perceptions and displays happen in a social context. Thus, they carry social ramifications. Though the perception or display of being different ('otherness') does not necessarily imply negative or positive valuation, in practice it often does – either consciously or unconsciously. This is the point where 'otherness' shifts to 'othering,' even if this term and concept is supposed to refer only to actions and attitudes of intentional devaluation of the 'other.'[7] Similarly, 'deviance' – the breaking of social norms – has originally been defined within sociology as an inherent characteristic of social systems: as "a basis for change and innovation, and […] a way of defining and clarifying social norms."[8] However, in actual fact, it rarely – if ever – has a neutral connotation, but is either applauded or stigmatized (see below).

Another important issue to be highlighted here is the complication of having to deal with two layers of impact. In addition to the ancient contemporary complexity of the matter, modern historiographers are bound to their own cultural *zeitgeist*. This leads to unconscious or

---

[7] See, e.g., Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: a Structural Approach* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Genoni, Mia Reinoso, "Otherness, History of," in *Encyclopedia of Identity*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson II (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 526–530; Doris Bachmann-Medick, "Alterity – A Category of Practice and Analysis. Preliminary Remarks," *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 4 (2017): 1–12. http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2017/13387/. For the analogous conceptualisation of difference/différence see, e.g., Vincent Lloyd, "Difference/Différence," in *Encyclopedia of Identity*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson II (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 227–228.

[8] Dominic Abrams, "Deviance," in *Encyclopedia of Identity*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson II (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 213–219, especially 213.

deliberate preconceived assumptions, and hence historiographical 'othering.'

A further challenge is rooted in the nature and scope of the available ancient sources. As perception is a mental phenomenon, it defies direct preservation. We cannot even draw on the level of direct oral comment.[9] The best we can hope for are reflections of it in circumstantial evidence and secondary sources, which display the mental processes through media that are bound to culture-specific means of expression.[10]

Alterity / deviance / othering as a research approach: methodological challenges

A major challenge of integrating modern research on conceptual issues into ancient world studies is the general lack of systematic presentations of the relevant terms and underlying concepts in relation or contrast to each other in modern fields of research, including misunderstandings caused by definitional imprecision. This strongly hampers transferability of the conceptual issues and their contextualisation. For the semantic field of 'alterity / deviance / othering,' this is a major issue. Many key terms are not discussed at all in the specialised lexica (see, e.g., the limited range of pertinent terms in the *Lexikon der Globalisierung* or the *Encyclopedia of Identity*[11]). Much less are they presented as a consistent reflection on how the various concepts and terms are supposed to relate to each other.

A second major challenge is rooted in the diversity of modern languages used to describe the relevant phenomena. They feature

---

[9] As stressed by Herzfeld, "Hospitality," 84, there is already "a clear demarcation between attitudes that can be simply *entertained* toward certain categories of stranger, and attitudes that can and are directly *expressed* to them." This distinction is however beyond the scope of sources preserved from ancient times.

[10] For one case study on how such circumstantial evidence might be systematically searched for see, e.g., the study by Melanie Wasmuth and Céline Debourse, "The Perception of the Foreign Other in the Neo-Assyrian Period: the Potential of Digital Approaches," in preparation, on how the current major digital tools in Assyriology facilitate and defy access into the social ramifications of being perceived as a foreigner in Assyria during the Neo-Assyrian period.

[11] Ferdinand Kreff, Eva-Maria Knoll, and Andre Gingrich (eds), *Lexikon der Globalisierung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011); Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Identity*.

different sets of connotations in every-day use, partially different ones for general and specific academic terminology, but also substantial variety within specific academic terminology across modern national and/or language borders and subject areas. This is a widespread challenge in academia, but is exceptionally prominent with regard to terminological and conceptual discussions on [(cross-) cultural] identity constructions and perceptions.[12]

While these discrepancies constitute a major difficulty for specific research on ancient perceptions of alterity and deviance in any form, it is of minor relevance for this contribution. One might even argue that it is a blessing that key terms and concepts regarding cross-regional migration – "foreigner," "stranger," "visitor," "newcomer," etc. – tend not to be deemed worth a lexical entry (see once more, e.g., *Lexikon der Globalisierung*, *Encyclopedia of Identity*). Hence, it is possible to present the key idea behind this contribution without over-burdening it with an extensive analysis of the state-of-the-art.

For lack of systematic academic definitions, I will exemplify the suggested approach by one of the major open-access dictionaries, www.dictionary.com. Though not aiming at a comprehensive systemization, it comes quite close. Each term is defined by its underlying range of connotations, which are complemented by representative exemplary sentences and by a set of synonyms and antonyms, which circumscribe the most common denotations from a different perspective.[13]

---

[12] See, e.g., difference/différence (Lloyd, "Difference/différence," 227–228).

[13] In addition to these functional aspects, it features two further advantageous characteristics. As a widely used editable open-access dictionary, it is likely to reflect as well as shape every-day language and by-connotations much better than print dictionaries. Hence, provided intermediate stages are preserved, it allows to study the process of shifting usage in much more detail than can be done via updated print editions. In addition, it could easily be complemented by sections on specific academic usages as well as by corresponding pages in different languages, hence explicating the overlap and differences and aligning academic usage throughout the world's languages and subject areas in the long run.

2. A 'stranger' in the house: terminological implications

Dictionary.com lists six denotations each for the terms "strange" and "stranger":[14]

strange

> 1. unusual, extraordinary, or curious; odd; queer: a strange remark to make.
>
> 2. estranged, alienated, etc., as a result of being out of one's natural environment: In Bombay I felt strange.
>
> 3. situated, belonging, or coming from outside of one's own locality; foreign: to move to a strange place; strange religions.
>
> 4. outside of one's previous experience; hitherto unknown; unfamiliar: strange faces; strange customs.
>
> 5. unaccustomed to or inexperienced in; unacquainted (usually followed by to): I'm strange to this part of the job.
>
> 6. distant or reserved; shy.

stranger

> 1. a person with whom one has had no personal acquaintance: He is a perfect stranger to me.
>
> 2. a newcomer in a place or locality: a stranger in town.
>
> 3. an outsider: They want no strangers in on the club meetings.
>
> 4. a person who is unacquainted with or unaccustomed to something (usually followed by to): He is no stranger to poverty.

---

[14] Dictionary.com, s.v., "Strange," Accessed December 28, 2021, www.dictionary.com/browse/strange; Dictionary.com, s.v., "Stranger," Accessed December 28, 2021, www.dictionary.com/browse/stranger.

5. a person who is not a member of the family, group, community, or the like, as a visitor or guest: Our town shows hospitality to strangers.

6. Law: one not privy or party to an act, proceeding, etc.

Though there is much overlap, it is to be noted that the adjective and the substantive have also distinct connotations. Thus, being a "stranger" does not necessarily make you "strange," nor does being "strange" signify that one is a "stranger." This tension lies at the core of the research approach (or tool) outlined here.

As provided by the quoted dictionary entries, the most common meanings for 'stranger' cover a range from 'inconnu/unknown' via 'foreigner,' 'newcomer,' and 'outsider' to 'oddball' with a context-specific additional connotation of being 'underprivileged.' The perception as 'stranger' may thus signify spatial, temporal, or emotional distance (which leads to valuating the 'strangeness'). As a consequence, highly divergent aspects of ancient society will be addressed based on the historiographer's preconceived assumption of what "a stranger in the house" refers to.[15] The following remarks indicate, how even more aspects and potential ancient evidence can be opened up with the simple expedient of turning basic terminology into research approaches with multiple investigation lines.

'Stranger:' spatial dimension

In the context of cross-regional mobility and connectivity, the most straightforward connotation of 'a stranger in the house' is that of a 'foreigner,' i.e., someone originating in spatially and subsequently culturally distant lands. However, this is not the only and not necessarily the most prominent connotation. Even regarding spatial distance, a look at the key definitions provided by dictionary.com shows that the perception of 'stranger' occurs on local, regional, and

---

[15] In this contribution the focus on the house is explicitly used as a limiter (i.e., evidence for 'strangers' within the architectural unit of the house, whatever this might imply in practice. Thus, a metaphorical usage like in the Rhodian euphemistic paraphrasing for rape or the extension of the 'house' to include the whole island or political unit of Cyprus, see Herzfeld, "Hospitality," 76.

cross-regional levels. A 'stranger in the house' might equally refer to someone, who comes from the same town, the neighbouring district, somewhere else in the region, or from far away. What is characteristic is that they are unknown and/or not fitting in. Hence, the scope of 'stranger' with regard to spatial distance is best reflected in the semantic field *unknown – outsider – foreigner.*

Thus, on a spatial level, an 'alterity' research approach developed out of the connotations underlying the term 'strange/r' opens up two key questions. Where is the 'stranger' from, e.g., from the same dwelling, the same neighbourhood, the same settlement, the same area, or a distant region?[16] And what denotes the boundaries of these spatial categories, also considering split household constructions for seasonal or more permanent (e.g., commercial, military) professional reasons? Thus, is the relevant person perceived as a 'stranger' because or in spite of the spatial distance to the observer or other concerned visitors? Today, depending on the context, a royal messenger or other professional from a thousand or more kilometres away may have been perceived as less 'strange' to someone from a similar professional context than an inhabitant of the same town who lives in a very different social circle. Similarly, a regular or long-staying long-distance visitor may be seen as less 'strange' than an unknown neighbour or short-distance newcomer who relocated to the community from the neighbouring town, for example, for marriage.[17]

'Stranger:' Temporal dimension

Another scope of meanings comes to the fore when complementing the focus with a temporal dimension, i.e., rooted in the observation

---

[16] See also here the similar aspect mentioned by Herzfeld, "Hospitality," 76: "The Greeks' conventional distrust of *kseni* (outsiders) from other villages translates easily into a comparable stance toward *kseni* in the sense of 'foreigners.'"

[17] In contrast to traditional perceptions of the spatial dimension of "strangeness," the here presented scope of potential socio-spatial distance from the person perceiving someone else as "strange(r)" does not lend itself to a linear mapping, or one in concentric circles, but requires mapping a more complex interrelation of space and social perception. More suitable would be a network presentation, but also there it is not easy to display the complexity of partially spatially conflicting relations.

of whether the 'stranger' is either only temporarily encountered, only from a certain point in time onwards, or continuously. As exemplified by the semantic field *visitor – newcomer – oddball*, 'a stranger in the house' might equally refer to someone who is usually not in the house, who lives there only temporarily, who is a recent addition to the household, or who lives in the house permanently but is perceived as 'strange' for whatever reason. Depending on the preconceived assumption of the historiographer as well as on the perception of the 'strangers' themselves and by others, different sets of research questions become prominent.

Someone who is usually not in the house

A definition of a 'stranger' being *someone who is usually not in the house* immediately evokes the question of why such persons are in the house. Are they known or unknown, wanted in the house or unwanted? Hence, depending on the context, 'stranger' might refer to the invited grandmother or neighbour, a traveller requesting right-of-hospitality, an expected though not necessarily wished for visit from the tax collector, or a thief sneaking into the house.

On a more in-depth level, such a primary outlook on the meaning of 'stranger' opens up investigation lines of typical distances covered for short-term visits and of prominent reasons and practicalities for such visits. In case of 'visits' by unknown and/or unwanted persons they include also measures for getting overlooked or for protecting oneself and one's household, means of getting access against the wishes of the inhabitants, statistical information of their occurrence, etc.

Someone (only) temporarily living in the house

By shifting the connotation to *someone only temporarily living in the house* the question of why the 'stranger' is temporarily in the house remains prominent, as do the immediate questions of where the 'stranger' is from, how long is the stay, and whereto the 'stranger' goes afterwards. When developing the definition into an explicit line of investigation, further questions might become even more important.

Was the stay in the house voluntary or forced – either from the perspective of the stranger or the usual inhabitants? Who decides why, e.g., a mercenary or an official visitor is assigned to a specific household for lodging? Is there leeway in case of personal connections or previous knowledge of the other person? Are assignments made randomly or based on a roster within a specific group, e.g., due to their status or profession? Are such temporary stays single instances or do they mark house(hold)s designed for temporary lodging? Is there evidence for commercial hospitality or (only) for top-down assignments? Which rights and obligations derive from the respective roles?

On a more abstract level, such an investigation line is thus concerned with the interaction of private and official or individual and social dimensions of social interaction, especially in the context of spatial mobility of people.

Someone (permanently) living in the house, but perceived as 'strange'

Once more a largely complementary set of key questions is opened up when underlying the meaning of *someone (permanently) living in the house, but perceived as 'strange.'* Though 'foreignness,' and therefore migration or more short-term mobility of people, can be a key factor of why someone is perceived as 'strange' by themselves or others, this is not the only, and perhaps not even the key, characteristic why someone might have been perceived as a 'stranger.' Someone belonging to a household can be seen as strange or odd for various reasons, like gender, age, physical features, behaviour, 'foreignness,' etc.

Hence, an investigation line based on such a definition immediately questions typical or unusual household compositions. In addition, it strongly induces one to question emic versus etic perspectives, both historically and historiographically. Do the outside-, inside-, and self-perceptions differ? Would the relevant person be perceived as 'strange' only in the very specific context, e.g., being the only female/male or child/adult in an otherwise uniform social environment or would their behaviour and other characteristics have

been more widely perceived as deviant from the norm (see below: valuation dimension)?

'Stranger:' valuation dimension

With the valuation dimension, we enter a realm that has excited substantial discussion throughout various academic subject areas and marks the core focus of this thematic issue. Within the sketched-out investigation tool, this concerns the scope of perceptions as 'strange' ranging from 'difference/otherness/alterity' via 'deviance' to 'différence/othering.'

Alterity

As already indicated above, one (at least theoretical) possibility is to perceive someone as differing from oneself or the other household members without attaching a valuation to it – whether positive or negative. From a historiographical point of view, this aspect can be implemented by focussing on comparative analysis. Thus, one potential investigation line of 'alterity' concerns the (basically descriptive) compilation of evidence, e.g., for identity ascriptions and an analysis of what may have prompted them. Two key questions are how a behaviour or characteristic is identified as 'strange,' and which social, legal, and administrative actions are standard or exceptional with regard to gender, age, profession, origin, religious beliefs, visual appearance, etc.

Furthermore, a typical alterity question within this toolkit asks whether the identification and its ancient connotations are addressed directly in the source (or source corpus), or whether it stems from the modern historiographers (via preconceived assumptions drawn from modern times including their specific training). The former scenario can provide direct glimpses into ancient etic perspectives (as indicated in the introduction, no sources are preserved for accessing the emic perspective of the identified individual). A critical analysis of the latter, on the other hand, promotes the disambiguation of different ancient and modern etic levels of interpretation.

Deviance

The second level in this systematics is the ascription of value judgement to the perceived alterity. Someone is perceived as 'strange(r)' when or because they transgress conventions, either intentionally or because they do not know better or cannot help it. One of the academic key terms describing this phenomenon is 'deviance.'[18] Accordingly, an investigation line concerning 'deviance' within a connotative alterity approach asks how unconventional behaviour is perceived. Is it taken for granted, admired or frowned upon? What motivated the unconventional behaviour and the reactions to it? Does the acceptance/rejection root in the personality or in specific circumstances of the 'stranger,' of the household, or the observer? Is there, e.g., ancient evidence that digressions from the norm are more easily accepted if someone does not know better, e.g., because of being a 'foreigner,' still being a child, or due to known or immediately observable mental or physical conditions? Furthermore, does the observed deviance induce a change in the observer's behaviour and attitudes towards what is perceived as 'strange'? And do the reactions experienced by the 'stranger' change their future behaviour, and why or why not?

Othering

Depending on the degree of digression of what is perceived as the norm, such observed deviance can lead to the judgement of requiring or at least inviting – often repressive – action, i.e., earmarking the other as too different to be part of the respective in-group, thereby provoking or even forcing change in the 'other.'[19] Thus, the analysis of what characterises standard versus exceptional behaviour is a

---

[18] See, e.g., Abrams, "Deviance," 213–219.

[19] Though in theory othering practices can happen due to positive and negative value judgements, the practices tend to be punitive; see, e.g., Céline Cantat and Prem Kumar Rajaram, "The politics of the Refugee Crisis in Hungary: Bordering and Ordering the Nation and Its Others," in *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, ed. Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz and Immanuel Ness (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 181–192.

concern of an alterity focus, the analysis of the ancient perception and potential discourse of what is seen as 'strange' a major issue of a deviance investigation line, while any measures rectifying or endorsing 'strangeness' on a personal and institutional level can be suitably subsumed under 'othering' within the here sketched-out classification system. This concerns, e.g., the study of correlations between identity ascriptions and the granting or denying of rights of residence, property, travel, or salary level.

The second major line of investigation within the scope of 'othering' concerns potential evidence for active, deliberate 'othering' aiming at adverse effects for the other. Only this latter question would be traditionally focussed upon if applying the modern concept of 'othering' as a model for ancient contexts, instead of as a tool for opening up contextualising evidence and further research questions.

Preliminary conclusions

To resume, the three different dimensions of "strangeness" (socio-spatial, temporal, and valuating) and the social implications of their semantic fields provide a toolkit in the form of key questions opened up by the core terms in each category. The aim of the toolkit is to overcome – or at least become more aware of – the often unconscious historiographical impact on the interpretation of ancient data sets.

As will be seen from the case study below, a further major outcome of applying the toolkit is that it focuses on the specific source or context in its wider social setting. This approach significantly facilitates the interlinking of micro- and macro-levels regarding both, ancient life and socio-historical research. It furthermore highlights a number of major areas of ancient lived society that are not yet studied at all in detail.

3. Sample case study: introduction

The potential of the presented terminology-based research approach shall be exemplified by a random case study from the corpus of texts

reflecting the presence of an Egyptian community in 7th c. BCE Assur: a legal document concerning Egyptian merchants violated against in the house of their host, who was summoned to court for this. The following discussion does not aim at 'solving' the mysteries of the text, i.e., to assess as accurately as possible its most likely setting and interpretation, though a lot of contextualising information is given and discussed. The issue here is to showcase the impact of the investigation lines sketched out in the toolkit above on its interpretation, thus essentially to keep the discussion on the level of an intellectual game. For an in-depth socio-historical research, such an application of the toolkit would be only the starting point for assessing the potential scope of the source's and its protagonists' setting in ancient lived realities.

Editorial comment

According to the primary and currently only (independent) edition, the document reads:

> LÚ.DAM.GÀR.MEŠ LÚ*.*mu-ṣur-ra-a-a a-na ú-ba-ra-tu* inâ É ᵐ*ḫa-ku-*ˈba*ˈ*-a-a e-ta-ra-bu* ᵐᵈ*šá-maš*–SAG–*i-ši*ˈ LÚ*.SANGA ᵐ*a-a*–PAB ᵐDUMU–*nu-ri* ᵐDINGIR–*sàˀ-qàˀ-a' mú-mu-ba-di* ᵐ*nàˀ-bu-u-te* PAB 5 LÚ.*sa-ˈru-uˈ-(te) ša ina* UGU-*ḫi* ˈLÚ-DAM.GÀRˈ LÚ*.*mu-ṣur-ra ina* É ᵐ*ḫa-ku-ba-a-a ši-a-x ir-qa-pu-u-ni* ᵐ*ḫa-ku-ba-a-a ana* IGI LÚ*.GAL.MEŠ *ú-ka-a-*[*na*] (date and twelve witnesses).

> The Egyptian merchants have entered the house of Hakubaya as foreign guests. Šamaš-reši-išši, priest, Aya-naṣir, Mar-nuri, Il-saqa', Umubadi, Nabute – in all five *criminals* who *attacked* the Egyptian merchants in the house of Hakubaya. Hakubaya shall test[ify] before the magnates. (Date and twelve witnesses.)[20]

---

[20] Quotation from the first edition: Veysel Donbaz and Simo Parpola, *Neo-Assyrian Legal Texts in Istanbul* (Saarbrücken: SDV, 2001), 123–124; publication no. StAT 2 173; essentially like this also included in the online edition platform Oracc (http://oracc.org/atae/P336981/; last accessed: 14 Oct. 2021).

The primary edition does not contain an editorial comment, and so far the digital edition in Oracc is not yet lemmatized.[21] As far as I am aware, there does not exist any detailed philological or socio-historical comment on the source, though it is referenced in several publications.[22]

The clay tablet including its badly preserved clay envelope was found in Assur as find no. Ass. 14671r; it is now inventoried in the Archaeological Museum Istanbul as IstM A 1894 + A 1896. It belongs to an archive (N31B) comprising at least 44 tablets that were found, probably lumped together, in a private house in the southern central area of the town.[23] It was written in Month 12, day 22, of the eponym year of Sîn-šarru-uṣur (ITE.ŠE UD-22-KÁM *lim-mu* [md]30–MAN-PAB), thus either in 636 or in 625 BCE.

The * in LÚ* denotes a graphic variant to LÚ noted consistently in the primary edition.[24] By now, most names are rendered (slightly) differently:[25] the host Hakubaya as Ḫakkubāia, Šamaš-reši-išši as Šamaš-rēši-išši, Aya-naṣir as Aia-aḫī, Mar-nuri as Mār-nūri or as son of Nūrî (see below), Il-saqa' as Il-saqâ, Umubadi as Ummu-baddi,

---

[21] Donbaz and Parpola, *StAT 2*, 123–124; http://oracc.org/atae/P336981/ (last accessed: 14 Oct. 2021).

[22] See, e.g., Irene Huber, "Von Affenwärtern, Schlangenbeschwörern und Palastmanagern: Ägypter im Mesopotamien des ersten vorchristlichen Jahrtausends," in *Altertum und Mittelmeerraum. Die antike Welt diesseits und jenseits der Levante*, ed. Robert Rollinger and Brigitte Truschnegg (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006), 303–329, especially 313; Betina Faist, "Zum Gerichtsverfahren in der Neuassyrischen Zeit," in *Assur – Gott, Stadt und Land. 5. Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 18.-21. Februar 2004 in Berlin*, ed. Johannes Renger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 251–266, especially 256; Melanie Wasmuth, "Cross-Regional Mobility in ca. 700 BCE: The Case of Ass. 8642a / IstM A 1924" *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 12 (2016): 89–112, especially 96–97, 104; Betina Faist, *Assyrische Rechtsprechung im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Münster: Zaphon, 2020), 87, 99, 145.

[23] See Olof Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the City of Assur. A Survey of the Material from the German Excavations* II (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), 126–129, for the archival ascription; for the archaeological context of the archive see Peter A. Miglus, *Das Wohngebiet von Assur. Stratigraphie und Architektur* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1996), 270, Plan 53; Melanie Wasmuth, "Das sogenannte Ägypter-Archiv von Assur (N31): archäologische Bemerkungen zum Komplex N31A+D," *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 1 (2021): 31–79, especially 36–37, 70, 76.

[24] Donbaz and Parpola, *StAT 2*, XXI.

[25] In this paper, the personal names are consistently spelled as the main entry in PNA, i.e., the main reference work on Neo-Assyrian personal names: Karen Radner, Heather D. Baker, and Simo Parpola (eds), *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* I–III (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998–2011). For references to the relevant PNA entries see below: Section 5. In accordance with Assyriological standard practice, the name of the deity is rendered as Aššūr, the place name as Assur.

and Nabute as Nabūtu. The witnesses (translation rendering adapted to PNA) are: IGI ᵐ*ab-di–sa-lu-u-mu* – Abdi-Salūmu, IGI ᵐ*ru-ma–qa-ar-te* – Rūma-qarti, IGI ᵐ*pu-ṭu-ba-a-áš-te* – Puṭu-bāšti (i.e. the Egyptian name Petubastis / *P3-dj-B3stt*), IGI ᵐ*ki-ṣir–aš-šur* – Kiṣir-Aššūr (i.e., possibly, but not necessarily, one of the key persons of the archive[26]), IGI ᵐ˹*ḫu*˺*-ru* Ḫūru (i.e., the Egyptian name Hor / *Ḥr*, an abbreviated name containing the god Horus), ˹IGI˺ ᵐ*mu-*˹*ṣur*²˺*-ra*²*-a.(a) u* ᵐ*qi-ši-ṣi-im* – Muṣurāiu[?] (i.e., if read correctly, reflecting the relatively common naming practice of an 'ethnonymic,' "the Egyptian") and Qišiṣim, ˹IGI˺ ᵐ*pa-ši-i u* ᵐ*za-na-it-ḫu* – Pašî (who may bear an Egyptian name) and Zanaithu, IGI ᵐ*mu-ki-ni–aš-šur* URU.ŠÁ–URU-˹*a-a*˺ – Mukīn-Aššūr from the Inner City, IGI ᵐ*ab-di–se-e'* – Abdi-Sē,' and IGI ᵐ*ṣil*–[*xx*] – Ṣil-[*xx*].

The basic reading of the text poses some challenges: A) the number of "criminals," b) the actual meaning of the term used for "criminals," and c) the verb specifying the offence. Regarding a): In the existing text edition, the second sentence is ambiguous: six persons are listed, but the sum is given as "five criminals." Thus, either there is a scribal mistake, or one of the persons listed does not count towards the sum. The most obvious person in either case is Šamaš-rēši-išši, the priest. His (for the document) exceptional identification via his name and profession may have caused the miscount (starting from the first person identified only by name) or may be an indicator that he falls into a category of his own. He may be a (chance) witness of the case, or the "textual mistake" reflects a deliberate choice of the writer to keep the implications for the priest Šamaš-rēši-išši ambivalent, thus inviting a reading as "in all: for certain at least five criminals." Another option is a small scribal (or maybe edition?) mistake regarding Mār-nūri, who is possibly to be understood as *mār Nūrî* ("son of Nūrî"), and thus as filiation to Aia-aḫī.[27] This would, however, require emendation. According to the

---

[26] See Stefan R. Hauser, *Status, Tod und Ritual. Stadt- und Sozialstruktur Assurs in neuassyrischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 81–82 n. 276; see also below.

[27] I would like to thank anonymous reviewer #1 for the suggestion.

transliteration (no photo or handcopy available), the male human determinative is written in front of DUMU, not in front of *nu-ri*, thus the actual writing is (currently?) Mār-nūri.

B): The second concern is the actual meaning in the text of the term *sarru*, translated as "criminal." According to Korp, the basic meaning of the term is "criminal, false one;" CAD S (= vol. 15, 1984): 180, gives a wider range of "criminal, fraudulent, thief, liar."[28] The term is not studied in detail, especially not regarding its disambiguation from *parriṣu* – "criminal, thief" and *šarrāqu* – "thief." It is interesting to note that the Old Assyrian abstract noun *sarrūtu* is translated in the AHw (AHw 1031) as "dishonesty," while CAD, Oracc, and Korp translate "meanness, falseness, treachery" and "thievery" (CAD S [= vol.15] 185).[29] As will be discussed at least to some extent below, the choice of translation has substantial impact on the setting of the offence.

C): Another important caveat, which is beyond the scope and aim of this paper to solve, concerns the actual phrasing of the offence. The preposition *ina* UGU-*ḫi* (normalized: *muḫḫi*) ranges in the Neo-Assyrian archival texts from "against" to "concerning" to "in charge of" (see Oracc: ATAE[30]), thus depending in meaning on the predicate of the clause, which is unclear (*ši-a*-x *ir-qa-pu-u-ni*). There are several interesting options for *ši-a*-x: e.g., *šiāmātu* "bought merchandise," *šiāmu* A "to buy," *šiāmu* B "to allot power or fate," *šiāṭu* "be(come) negligent," or simply *šiāti* "this [f.]" (see AHw 1225–1226). However, with no information on the remaining signs constituting the end of the word, their plausibility cannot be assessed. For *irqapūni*, neither CAD, nor AHw have any good solution to offer.

28 Korp: Language Bank of Finland, Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, Korp Version [https://www.kielipankki.fi/corpora/oracc/]. CAD: Ignace J. Gelb et al. (eds), The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 21 vols (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010).

29 AHw: Wolfram von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch, unter Benutzung des lexikalischen Nachlasses von Bruno Meissner bearb. von Wolfram von Soden, 3 vols (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–1985).

30 See oracc.museum.upenn.edu/atae/sig? Ⓧ%40atae%2Fimgurenlil%25akk-x-neoass%3AUGU-hi%3Dmuhhu[skull%2F%2Fskull]NˊN%24muhhi (last accessed: 25 Oct. 2021).

There is no entry *raqāpu* or similar; closest come *irkabūni* "they travelled (hither)" (CAD R [= vol. 14, 1999] 83–91, AHw 944–945) or *irgabūni* "they were seized by fear" (CAD R [= vol. 14, 1999] 62; AHw 941).

Thus, a more judicious translation of the text (using current standards of name renderings) would be:

> The Egyptian merchants have entered the house of Ḫakkubāia under *ubārātu* status. Šamaš-rēši-išši, priest, Aia-aḫī, Mār-nūri (or Aia-aḫī, son of Nūrî), Il-saqâ, Ummu-baddi, Nabūtu – in all five ˹law-violators˺ who ˹… (offended against?)˺ the Egyptian merchants in the house of Ḫakkubāia. Ḫakkubāia shall test[ify] before the magnates. (Date and twelve witnesses.).

Rationale of choice

The text is a characteristically underdetermined source typical for the administrative and juridical sources in the 'private' archives of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. No identification information is given beyond the names for nearly all persons mentioned, and the description of the legal issue is kept very brief with no contextualisation. The document has been chosen, because it is immediately relevant for the topic at hand, i.e., of being (perceived as) "a stranger in the house" in ancient southwest Asia and surroundings. The phrasing explicitly places the Egyptian merchants, as well as the criminals, and probably the priest and Ḫakkubāia, its owner, in a/the house. Though seemingly obvious at first glance, applying the sketched-out 'alterity' research approach / toolkit exemplifies a much wider interpretation potential.

When approaching the source from a general socio-historical approach aimed at reconstructing potential ancient realities, the text immediately triggers a number of questions. What is known about the mentioned persons, the locality, and the (court) procedure from other sources? Why do the Egyptians remain anonymous? Why is

only the priest identified with name and profession? Why were the Egyptian merchants in the house of Ḫakkubāia? Why were they attacked there? Did that action make the five attackers criminals or were they already (known) criminals before they attacked? What is the priest's role in all of this? And what made this incident a case for the magistrates?

The first question, which is typical for a traditional philological approach, falls under the basic unemotional *alterity* strand in our toolkit, i.e., a rather descriptive comparative compilation of direct basic evidence from similar sources. The result is rather bleak, as most of the persons involved in the original incident and the actual court case documented in the source are only known from the case study discussed here.[31] Thus, the source is likely to be dismissed as unproductive or at least undervalued within a traditional philological approach.[32] Though the consistent application of a complex "alterity approach" cannot solve the lack of direct data, it opens up a large set of additional or at least more nuanced questions for analysing who is to be considered as a 'stranger' in the case study, and what this implies for the self-perception of the 'strangers,' their perception by others, and the social implications of either viewpoint. As will be developed below, each individual involved in the mentioned offence might be considered as a 'stranger,' as are the witnesses of the documents, though for different reasons.

4. Sample application: the Egyptian merchants in the house of Ḫakkubāia

The most obvious persons to whom the (modern and ancient) perception as "strangers in the house" refer are the "Egyptian merchants (who) have entered the house of Ḫakkubāia under *ubārātu* status." Thus, they will provide the focus of this sample study (see

---

[31] See PNA and PNA Online Addenda (Heather D. Baker, "Updates to The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire [2019]." http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/pnao/updatestopna/); for details see section 5 below.

[32] See typically Faist ("Rechtsprechung," 256), Huber ("Ägypter," 311), Wasmuth ("Mobility," 96–97), or Zadok ("Onomastics," 311) who mention the source without discussing its implications in detail.

section 5 for a reduced discussion of the other protagonists). For clarity and as a reminder, I provide a concise 'quote' of the research questions set out above.

Spatial dimension

> Where is the 'stranger' from? Is the person perceived as a 'stranger' because of or despite spatial concerns?

The spatial dimension of the sketched-out research tool brings the ambiguity of the identification as "Egyptian merchants" to the fore.[33] They may be Egyptian in the sense of being 1) merchants from Egypt, 2) Egyptian-speaking merchants or otherwise culturally-affiliated to Egypt, or 3) merchants dealing with Egyptian merchandise. Thus, are these "Egyptian merchants" long-distance travellers, or are they living and travelling more regionally within the Assyrian empire or only the Assyrian heartland, or are they local inhabitants not travelling at all, though in contact with long-distance travellers?

Depending on the researcher's preconceived assumption of the connotation of "Egyptian merchant," the focus of the question of

---

[33] For a discussion of the potential connotations and implications of the identification as "Egyptian" (*miṣiraya / muṣuraya / muṣurra*) see already Melanie Wasmuth, "Egyptians outside Egypt – Reassessing the Sources," in *Intercultural Contacts in the Ancient Mediterranean. Proceedings of the International Conference at the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo, 25th to 29th October 2008*, ed. Kim Duistermaat and Ilona Regulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 105–114; Wasmuth, "Mobility," passim, especially, 91–95. For the available Neo-Assyrian evidence on LÚ.DAM.GÀR – *tam/nkāru* ("merchant") as a 'royal trade agent for long-distant trade with quasi diplomatic status' see Moshe Elat, "Der tamkāru im neuassyrischen Reich" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 30 (1987): 233–254, especially 253–254; Karen Radner, "Traders in the Neo-Assyrian Period," in *Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. Jan Gerrit Dercksen (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1999), 101–126, especially 101. Though there is certainly good evidence for such an interpretation, a more detailed study is needed on whether this is the only usage of the term, or whether – depending on place and time – also a wider scope of interpretation is possible (on the interpretation of *tamkāru* as a general term for trader, at least in the Old Assyrian period, see Jan Gerrit Dercksen, "The Old Assyrian Trade and its Participants," in *Documentary Sources in Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman Economic History: Methodology and Practice*, ed. Heather D. Baker and Michael Jursa (Oxford and Havertown, PA: Oxbow Books, 2014), 59–112, especially 65). For the argumentation at hand, the specific issue is of minor concern, as also a narrower scope as "royal trade agents" includes the sketched-out additional levels of interpretational leeway when considering whether the violation was directed against the private individuals, the business men acting in their private capacities (see Elat, "Tamākru," 254), or the royal agents; and also for considering the actual travelling scope of these long-distant traders.

"where the stranger is from" shifts. In the case of 1) 'Egyptian merchant equals merchant from Egypt,' the question concerns their ethnic and cultural background given that Egypt, and especially lower Egypt at the time, is characterized by a culturally diverse society.[34] Intertwined with the dimension of *deviance* and *othering*, this prompts questions concerning the norm for cross-regionally active merchants from Egypt. Are they 'Egyptian' in the sense of being reared in traditional Egyptian culture, or do they tend to be (descendants of) newcomers to Egypt who make use of their double (and/or triple) cultural expertise to make their ventures effective and profitable? Unfortunately, this is currently impossible to study for 8th and 7th c. Egypt as we are lacking major archival sources for such (and most other) ventures from that period. Nonetheless, it is a research question important to address.

In the case of 2) 'Egyptian merchant equals Egyptian-speaking merchant or merchant otherwise culturally affiliated to Egypt,' the most prominent question is where the 'strangers' are from —Egypt or someplace else— where they live and have their headquarters, and whether Egyptian is their mother tongue or a foreign language. If the latter, this is followed by the question of whether the language was learned to facilitate the profession or whether it is just a characteristic competence of the individual merchant, thus triggering the ascription, which is not necessarily related to the trade. In any individual instance, this latter scenario is a realistic option; in our case study it is not likely. As a whole group of 'Egyptian merchants' is mentioned, a more obvious trade-related connection to Egypt or

---

[34] For introductory literature on the socio-cultural cultural diversity of 7th c. Lower Egypt see especially Vittmann, *Ägypten und die Fremden*; Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbours*. For insights into the political complexity see, e.g., Melanie Wasmuth, "Obliterating Historical Complexity as Academic Practice: Historiographical Maps of 7th c. BCE Egypt," in *Dissemination of Cartographic Knowledge, 6th International Symposium of the ICA Commission on the History of Cartography, 2016*, ed. Mirela Altić, Imre J. Demhardt and Soetkin Vervust (Springer International Publishing, 2018), 281–298; Jan Moje, *Herrschaftsräume und Herrschaftswissen ägyptischer Lokalregenten. Soziokulturelle Interaktionen zur Machtkonsolidierung vom 8. bis zum 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014); Dan'el Kahn, "The Assyrian Invasions of Egypt (673–663 B.C.) and the Final Expulsion of the Kushites," *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 34 (2006): 251–267.

Egyptian seems indicated. However, they might equally be based in Egypt, in the Levant, in the Assyrian heartland, or locally in Assur.

In the case of 3) 'Egyptian merchant equals seller of Egyptian merchandise,' the two aforementioned scenarios remain likely possibilities. However, the personal connection of the merchant(s) to Egypt, whether as the place of origin, a temporary home, or as one's individual cultural affiliation via language, beliefs, or mode of appearance is not necessary. The business might focus on Egyptian merchandise or only include it in a wider selection of commodities, with 'Egyptian merchant' either referring to staff members of the one local place/enterprise providing (also) Egyptian merchandise or to the actual persons specialising in selling Egyptian merchandise.[35]

Temporal dimension

Someone who is usually not in the house

> Why is the 'stranger' in the house? Is the 'stranger' known or unknown? Is the 'stranger' wanted in the house or unwanted?

If a temporal dimension is added, the question concerning the 'Egyptian merchants' shifts away from who they are and where they are from, to what they do and how they come to be in Ḫakkubāia's house. The question of 'who is usually not in the house' also strongly includes the further protagonists of the court case in the discussion.

For the Egyptian merchants, the question of why they are in the house is strongly connected to whether they are regularly or occasionally in the house and for how long. Are they temporarily in the house on business during the day or are they staying with Ḫakkubāia as visitors (see also below: temporarily living in the

---

[35] As far as I am aware, these additional ramifications of 'foreign' merchants have not been studied. The focus tends to remain on the question of whether the Neo-Assyrian *tamkāru* are (potentially) independent business people or 'royal trade agents' (see above).

house)? Are they in his house based on personal knowledge and/or invitation, or because it is Ḫakkubāia's job (officially or unofficially) to house 'strangers' or at least specific 'strangers' generally or at certain times? The latter, i.e., a somewhat institutionalised role of host which has been violated (attack in the house), would easily explain the requirement to "testify before the magnates." However, this is not the only possible scenario. Ḫakkubāia's role as an official host might also be only for an official business transaction, either with him as the representative of the second party, or between the "merchants" and the "criminals." As explicated in the editorial comment above, the term used here (LÚ.*sa-˹ru-u˺-(te)*) is rather generic and might potentially refer equally to known/convicted criminals/thieves or more metaphorically to actors in a business transaction that do not play by the rules ("fraudulent, liar"; see also below, section 5). In the latter case, Ḫakkubāia's summons to testify before the magnates may, e.g., be because of the "Egyptian merchants'" discontent with the conclusion of the transaction due to dishonest behaviour of the other side or because Ḫakkubāia failed to ensure a correct procedure. The identifying phrase of the Egyptian merchants as *ana ubārātu* ("as foreign guests") does not help clarify whether Ḫakkubāia was the host for accommodation or for a business transaction. The phrase is too rare to be certain of what it implies, though the phrasing and the earlier Old Assyrian usage of *wa/ubrūtu* make a connotation of "with (official) visitor status" more likely.[36] However, for lack of sufficient contextualising or analogous evidence, this "visitor status" may equally imply their status within the house of Ḫakkubāia (accommodation) or within the town of Assur (accommodation or business transaction).

An interesting aspect is raised by the question of whether the "Egyptian merchants" have been wanted or unwanted in the house. Again, this is most productive regarding Ḫakkubāia's role in the drama. Did he object to the Egyptian 'strangers' and/or their

---

[36] AHw 1399: s.v. "ubaru(m) – Schutzbürger;" see also Wasmuth, "Mobility," 96–97; Wasmuth and Debourse, "Perception of the Foreign Other."

merchandise in the house? Did he even want to harm the merchants and therefore turned a blind eye to the law-violation, thus causing his summons before the magnates? Or did he want them in his house, but for whatever reasons could not prevent the attack against them? Did he perhaps bring the case before the magnates himself in order to rectify what he saw as his shortcomings as a host? Based on the current stage of research either scenario is possible, as neither has been studied in detail yet for the context in question, i.e., 7th c. BCE Assur (and Assyria).

Given the textual uncertainty regarding the "attack," it is even possible to construe a context in which the "Egyptian merchants" were not violated against at all, but were only instrumental to a by now not sufficiently preserved/understood circumstance which brought home an unrelated offence. For example, their testimony may have led to the conviction of "law-breakers" housed and/or otherwise protected by Ḫakkubāia. However, the repeated focus on the host function of Ḫakkubāia, despite the shortness of the text, make such a circumstantial scenario less likely.

Someone only temporarily living in the house

> Why is the 'stranger' temporarily in the house? How long is the stay? Whereto does the 'stranger' go afterwards? Are the temporary stays exceptions or regular instances? Is the stay in the house voluntary or forced (perspective of 'stranger' / usual inhabitants)? Who decides why which 'stranger' lives temporarily in a specific house(hold)? Are the decisions made randomly or based on pre-set criteria like rosters or acquaintance? Who bears the cost of the stay: the 'stranger,' the 'host,' or an 'institution'? Which rights and obligations derive from the respective roles?

The main questions thus opened up by the tool especially concern the status, social, and professional role of the host or landlord and the practicalities of overnight stays for long-distance travellers and certain professional groups. As already indicated above, one possible

option is that the "Egyptian merchants" were overnight guests in the house of Ḫakkubāia, thus temporarily living in his house. In this scenario, the reason why the "Egyptian merchants" lodged only temporarily in his house is probably the obvious one to be gained from their identification. As they are not identified as individuals but by their profession, this is what likely mattered. Their anonymity may indicate a local perspective seeing them as generic "foreigners" who do not need to be named, unlike the local criminals who are being brought to the magnates. Alternatively, they remained anonymous because the visitor status was not granted to them as individuals but via their profession, and because the concern for the magnates was not the damage done to the individual visitor but the (direct or indirect) violation of a visitor status by a local host, in our case Ḫakkubāia.

As Akkadian has a term explicitly denoting "staying overnight" (*bâtu / biātu / biādu*; AHw 124, CAD B [= vol. 2, 1965] 169–173), the phrasing of the tablet seems to preclude such an interpretation. However, this may be explained by the context in combination with the characteristic conciseness of the document. If the legal issue is not primarily the lodging but the violation of the visitor status, it may have been more important to refer to the starting point of the stay, i.e., the entering of the house under *ubārātu* status, not their being his lodgers. This would especially be the case if the housing by Ḫakkubāia is implicit in the status, i.e., assuming him to be officially appointed to house these specific or such visitors to Assur.

The key question thus opened up by the alterity toolkit is how merchants were housed in Assur (and elsewhere in the Neo-Assyrian period). Did they typically stay at commercial guesthouses as well documented, e.g., for the Assur–Kaneš trade in the Old Assyrian period?[37] Were they granted (and/or required to make use of) accommodation provided by the court, central administration, or

---

[37] See, e.g., Jan Gerrit Dercksen, *The Old Assyrian Copper Trade in Anatolia* (Istanbul: Nederlands historisch-archaeologisch instituut te Istanbul, 1996), 70–71, 94; CAD U/W (= vol. 20, 2010) 398–399 *s.v., "wabru"* in *bīt* wabrī – guest house, caravanserei;" AHw 1454: s.v. "*wabru/ubru: bīt w.*/u. – Gasthaus, Karawanserai."

trading enterprises,[38] and, if yes, what were the criteria behind the choice of host? Or did they draw on their personal or professional networks or status to claim lodgings independently?

Someone permanently living in the house, but perceived as 'strange'

> Is the inclusion of the 'stranger' typical or unusual for contemporary household compositions? Do the outside, inside, and self-perceptions differ? Is the perception as 'strange' context-specific or more widely perceived as deviant from the norm?

Though it may be more likely that the "Egyptian merchants" stayed in Ḥakkubāia's house only temporarily, a long-term stay is also consistent with the current (meagre) scope of available evidence. This is one of the options regarding the term *ana ubārātu*, which is translated also as "resident alien,"[39] and may thus indicate a legal status of residence. What this (potential) legal status implies is currently unknown, as the phrase is relatively rare in the known corpus. There is so far no detailed study on the community composition of Assur and on the social implication of different local perceptions and official status from a socio-historical perspective.[40] Thus, on the current state of research such a residency might be implemented by access to own lodgings, via centrally provided accommodation, or via individually or professionally organised stays in private or commercial residences. For the current investigation line the assumption would be a long-term or permanent residence of

[38] This certainly has been a practice in the ancient southwest Asia; see, e.g., the evidence of Carian army members hosted by 'citizens' in Late Babylonian Borsippa (Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Carians of Borsippa" *Iraq* 68 (2006): 1–22), or the "gardeners in charge of the royal orchards," i.e., high administrative officials, who are assigned to host a group of 'strangers,' either deportees or soldiers, in Old Babylonian Dilbat (see Dominique Charpin, "Immigrés, réfugiés et déportés en Babylonie sous Hammu-rabi et ses successeurs," *in La circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien* (RAI 38), ed. Dominique Charpin and Francis Joannès (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1992), 207–218, especially 213–215. To which degree this has been a general Mesopotamian policy or specifically, a Babylonian one, or whether these are only rare, situation-specific parallels needs further study.

[39] AHw 1399: s.v. "*ubāru*" – Ortsfremder, Beisasse; Schutzbürger; CAD U/W (= vol. 20, 2010) 10–12: *s.v., "ubāru"* – stranger, foreign guest, resident alien, guest-friend.

[40] In preparation by the author based on a research scholarship of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (July 2021 – June 2023; Wasmuth, "*Migration.*"

the "Egyptian merchants" in the house of Ḫakkubāia and their perception as 'strange' within the household, either by themselves, by other members of the household, or by outsiders/others. However, we have no information at all concerning whether they felt at home or as 'strangers,' how they were seen and how they behaved in comparison to other members of the household, or how the household was composed in comparison to other houses. Thus, further discussion requires additional assumptions (see below).

Valuation dimension

Alterity

> How is a behaviour or characteristic identified as 'strange?' Is the identification based on ancient connotations borne out directly by the source? Or are the "strangers" identified as such by the modern historiographers via contextualising the source within their ancient setting and/or via preconceived assumptions drawn from modern times?

The lack of direct contextualising evidence for the specific situation and persons in combination with the current state of socio-historical research on 7th c. Assur and on the implications of being perceived as an "Egyptian merchant" at the time requires a scope of contextualisation that is far beyond the aim and framework of this contribution. As showcased above and below, there is a lot of scope for modern misconception and over-interpretation of the source as well as some measures to ensure some degree of open-mindedness and caution to counter these. For providing insights into the ancient practical and socio-psychological implications of being perceived as 'strange,' a detailed analysis is needed into which social, legal, and administrative actions are standard / exceptional with regard to gender, age, profession, origin, religious beliefs, visual appearance, etc. in 7th c. Assur.[41] Only then will it be partially possible to judge whether "Egyptian merchants" are likely to have been seen as

---

[41] See forthcoming monograph by the author (Wasmuth, *Community of Assur*); see note above.

'strange/rs' in the house of Ḫakkubāia and/or in Assur, and by whom.

Deviance

> Is the 'strange' behaviour intentional or unintentional? Is it taken for granted, admired, or frowned upon? What motivated the unconventional behaviour and the reactions of others to it? Does the 'strangeness' root in the personality or in specific circumstances of the 'stranger,' the household, or the observer? Does the observed deviance induce a change in the observer's behaviour and attitudes towards what is perceived as 'strange?' Does the reaction of others to the 'strange' behaviour induce change in the 'stranger?'

What is clearly brought to the fore by this catalogue of questions is that the focus of the deviance investigation line is on the 'strangers' themselves: what makes them 'strange' and what motivates their behaviour. For lack of further information on the "Egyptian merchants," we once more cannot judge whether the "attack" was induced by their behaviour (*deviance*), by their role (*alterity*), by their sheer existence (*othering*), or by being in the wrong place at the wrong time (*spatial and temporal dimension*). That is, the "attack" might have been motivated by their violating local social norms (behaviour), by a perception of unfair play in a business transaction or by possessing too tempting merchandise (role), as a discriminatory act against foreigners or merchants in general or against Egyptians, Egyptian merchants, or merchants in league with Ḫakkubāia in particular, or because they witnessed, e.g., a break-in into the house of Ḫakkubāia. Thus, the "attack" might have been primarily aimed at the "Egyptian merchants" or at Ḫakkubāia, either as an individual or in his role of host: by violating his property or his social and/or professional standing.

Othering

> What motivates the othering / rejection of the 'stranger?' Does the othering happen on a personal or on a systemic (or

nstitutional) level? Which forms of aggression against the 'stranger' does the othering take? Does the 'stranger' have means for redress against hostile actions? Does the othering induce change in the 'stranger?'

The investigation line *othering* shifts the focus to the attackers, in our case study possibly quite literally, and their motivation for rejecting the "Egyptian merchants" and/or for actively working against them. The legal instance under discussion may, but does not have to be, a case of *othering* in the sense of individual or systemic rejection of and aggression against 'strangers.' However, the recriminations against the "Egyptian merchants" leading to the case being handled by the magnates may have been due to their being Egyptians, or merchants, or inmates of the house of Ḫakkubāia, or for reasons not mentioned in the document. The form of aggression, whether in the form of othering against 'strangers' or otherwise, is once more beyond assessment (see above and below), as is the question of whether the othering (or otherwise motivated hostile actions) induced changes of behaviour in the "Egyptian merchants," as we do not know who these people were. As also the form of attack is uncertain (see above: editorial comment), speculation over potential or likely changes, e.g., not frequenting Ḫakkubāia's house again, changing negotiation tactics, becoming more adamant or cautious, seems futile at the current stage. Concerning redress, one means is actually testified by the document. Someone, either Ḫakkubāia, or the merchants, or the "criminals," (and/or the priest,) or an outsider brought the case to the magistrates. However, whether in 7th c. Assur hostile actions were redressed differently, when occurring on a personal or on a systemic (or institutional) level, and whether individual attacks for business or other reasons were perceived as different offences than recriminations based on group affiliation of whatever kind, is once more currently not researched and probably not discernible due to the underdetermined nature of the sources.[42]

---

[42] For important spadework in this direction see Raija Mattila, *The King's Magnates: A Study of the Highest Officials of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2000); Faist, *Rechtsprechung.*

5. Outlook: the other players in the case study

The sketched-out research tool invites us to consider also the less obvious protagonists of the case study as potential 'strangers.' A detailed application of the catalogue of questions for each of these goes beyond the formal scope of an *Avar* paper. Thus, only a reduced presentation of the persons and their interpretation potential for the presented case study is given.

The host and owner of the house

For Ḫakkubāia, the host and owner of the house, and thus perhaps the least likely person to be discussed as a 'stranger' within traditional philological and socio-historical approaches, at least four relevant aspects are brought to the fore by the toolkit: the question of him being a potential newcomer to Assur, his being in league with 'strangers,' his potentially *deviant* or *othering* behaviour as a host, and his lack of contextualising sources that make him an essentially unknown person to the modern historiographer.

Currently, the name Ḫakkubāia (PNA 440[43]) is only known from two sources in the Neo-Assyrian text corpus: from our case study and from a property and slave sale in Kalhu/Nimrud in 687 BCE (ND 2306), thus from a time, when either town was still of major importance, but not the capital of the empire anymore. In the Nimrud text, the gate guard Ḫakkubāia was one of the witnesses in the sale.

Notably, several of the names mentioned in our case study occur only one more time and that in Nimrud or in the contemporary capital of Nineveh. In each case, it is worth discussing whether both documents from different towns might actually refer to the same person. The most problematic, but nonetheless possible, case concerns Ḫakkubāia. Despite the lapse of 51 (or even 62) years between the two documents (687 vs. 636/625 BCE), he may have started out his career in Nimrud, if the position of gate guard could

---

[43] Prominently also Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 87, 99, 145.

be filled already at a very young (adult) age. The position of trust in the metropolis of Assur would mark his very old age and be given, e.g., in honour of long-term service.

Whatever the case of identification, our Ḫakkubāia may have been assigned the task of housing foreign merchants or hosting important 'international' business transactions,[44] and he may have drawn on his former and current networks for the legal case that arose out of this role. He would be no exception in this within the archive from which our case study stems. Also, the key person in the archive, Urdu-Aššūr, draws on his cross-regional network for his business transactions. Urdu-Aššūr is also a good example for a 'naturalized' newcomer to Assur with high individual and professional agency.[45] He arguably is a second (or third or fourth?) generation immigrant from "Egypt": thus, with roots outside central Assyria, but not necessarily from geographic Egypt, i.e., the Nile valley and delta region up to the first Nile cataract (see above).

As showcased in section 3, Ḫakkubāia may or may not have fulfilled his duty towards the "Egyptian merchants." The fact that he has to testify before the magnates indicates the inclusion of an official role in some way. This might be due either to his official position, the explicit *ana ubārātu* status of the Egyptian merchants, their potential official standing as royal trade agents,[46] or even a personal or official interest of one of the magnates.[47] The unanswerable question in this context is whether Ḫakkubāia inadvertently or deliberately failed in his duties of protecting the visitors from harm. In the case of the former, one might discuss potentially deviant behaviour (= lack of

---

[44] See, e.g., Waerzeggers, "Borsippa," 1–22 for a similar practice, though from a different time and social context, i.e., 5th c. Babylonia. The dossier studied by her concerns the Caro-Memphite contingent in the Achaemenid army including male and female adults plus children. It testifies both, a fluid perception of their identities – they are referred to sometimes as Carians, sometimes as Egyptians – and the practice of their being housed locally, probably by appointment (Waerzeggers, "Borsippa," 1, 7, 9, 20).

[45] See PNA 1399–1400, nos. 5 and 7; see also Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 142 n. 542.

[46] On the potentially additional argument of a special LÚ.DAM.GÀR – *tam/nkāru* ("merchant," possibly "royal trade agent with quasi diplomatic status") status see above, note 33.

[47] On the legal practices involving "magnates," and the scope of their standing and official position in local societies, see, most recently, Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 99; Mattila, *King's Magnates*.

keeping up his role at all relevant times), while in the case of the latter his failure might be classified as systemically persecuted othering (if siding with the criminals) or individually implemented othering (if punished or put into the position of defence before the magnates for siding with the Egyptian strangers).

The priest

Even less is known about the next person named in the document, Šamaš-rēši-išši, the priest. He is only attested in this document, and no namesake[48] of his is currently known in the Neo-Assyrian corpus (PNA 1209). Accordingly, he certainly matches the category of historiographical 'stranger' in the sense of 'unknown.' In addition, his syntactical embedding in the document is uncertain, thus shedding no light on his position in the offence. In the primary (and currently only) edition of the text, he starts the line of names summed up as "in all five *criminals* who *attacked* the Egyptian merchants in the house of Ḫakkubāia," though including him six persons are mentioned (see above: editorial comment). Thus, either the scribe made a mistake in counting, i.e., starting only from the first person identified only by name, or the primary edition did not identify the individuals correctly ("Aia-aḫī, Mār-nūri, …" instead of "Aia-aḫī, son of Nūri"), or the priest Šamaš-rēši-išši is not one of the mentioned group of criminals.

When looking at Šamaš-rēši-išši through the lens of the alterity toolkit, several options are possible which are worth considering, though a detailed study of potential analogous cases and concerns is once more beyond the scope and aim of this contribution. With regard to the spatial and temporal dimension, the question arises whether he is a local priest who by chance or design witnessed the incident or whether he is a traveller who was hosted by Ḫakkubāia in a private (as a friend), professional (as a commercial landlord), or official (as local representative of an institution or association)

---

[48] Namesake is used in this contribution solely as shorthand for "another person bearing the same name," not implying any relationship between the two persons or that one person is named after the other.

capacity. Thus, was Šamaš-rēši-išši temporarily or more long-term a member of the household, and was he seen by himself and/or the household as a 'stranger?' If yes, was this due to his not being a member of the family, due to not being known for long, or due to potentially deviant or even explicitly othering behaviour?

Was he wanted in the house or not – and by whom? As indicated, Šamaš-rēši-išši might have belonged to the household, the visitors/lodgers, the "criminals," an entity of his own, or a combination of any of these. The only starting point for discussion is his explicit identification by profession. Given the unusualness of his name (at least according to the current state of research), it is likely that the identification as a priest was signalled, because it had a bearing on the case. If he was a household member or otherwise in a position to back up Ḫakkubāia's or the merchants' position, his profession might have granted him special standing in the hearing (*alterity: historiography*). If he belonged to or explicitly supported "the criminals" his professional standing might have been mentioned, because it aggravated the offence. If this were the case, his behaviour would thus be documented as *deviant* regarding his profession. In case of his behaviour being explicitly aimed at the merchants or Ḫakkubāia as 'strangers,' it would have to be classified as *othering*. However, Šamaš-rēši-išši might also have been a chance witness of the incidence, either because he was coming by or as an occasional 'commercial' lodger. In this case his professional title may have had no bearing on the incident at all, but might simply be the main information known about him; in this case, the scribe may have included the title to ensure that Šamaš-rēši-išši is not counted amongst the "criminals" (*alterity: identification*).

The five criminals

An interesting study can be made of the otherwise unidentified "criminals." As showcased above, considering whether they were

known or unknown to the host,[49] and wanted or unwanted in the house, prompts the question of their social standing and the specific connotation of *sarru* – "criminal; fraudulent, liar, thief" in the document. Given the fact that several witnesses have obviously some higher social standing and that the case was brought before the magnates, it is worthwhile considering whether the "criminals" were (common) thieves or thugs or rather persons of high social standing who proved to be "criminal" because of dishonest business behaviour towards the "Egyptian merchants in the house of Ḫakkubāia." Strictly speaking, they may even not be "criminals" at all, but only accused of this by Ḫakkubāia or the "Egyptian merchants" for potential dishonest purposes of their own.[50] Though none of the five (or six?) "criminals" are known with certainty from other sources, many of them might be if they are to be identified with namesakes from other documents. If so, they held rather elevated positions, thus making an influential business meeting a likely context.

Aia-aḫī[51] has a namesake acting as a witness in Nineveh in 626 BCE for one of the courtiers there, Inurta-šarru-uṣur (TIM 11 5 r.3; PNA 556 [2.]). He might be the same person as the one in Assur and have witnessed the Nineveh case when temporarily in Nineveh or possibly after moving there once Assur became too dangerous for him after the court case referred to in our document. However, the person in Nineveh can equally be unrelated to the one in Assur; nothing is known about them to verify or deny the identification.

As indicated above, the case of *Mār-nūri* is more complicated, as he may be either the second (or third) criminal mentioned, or the signs are to be read (after slight emendation; see above) as *mār Nūrî* – son

---

[49] Though in the latter case they likely knew, or at least knew of, Ḫakkubāia, other inmates of his household, or the "Egyptian merchants," a case of simple chance burglary would probably not have been dealt with by the magnates.

[50] Maybe this potential outcome was the reason, why no specific official is mentioned and why the question of who is actually going to be in charge of judging the case is kept vague (Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 99). My thanks to anonymous reviewer #1 for this reference).

[51] ᵐ*A-a*–PAB; StaT 2 173: Aya-naṣir, PNA 89.2: Aia-aḫī or Aia-aḫḫe.

of Nūrî, i.e., as filiation information for Aia-aḫī. In addition to our case study, the name Mār-nūri (PNA 741) is only attested in one document as first witness (and deputy of the settlement) in an estate sale by a Šumma-ilāni (PNA 1286–1288) in the town of Maganuba in the environs of the former capital Dur-Šarrukin. Whether it is possible that these two namesakes are in fact the same person is difficult to judge. At first glance it seems rather unlikely, as the second text (SAA 6 50/51) is dated on prosopographic grounds to the time of Sennacherib or immediately after (PNA 741; see Mār-nūri 1). However, this is uncertain. The date of SAA 6 50/51 is lost, Šumma-ilāni is not identified further in the document, and all other persons involved in the sale provide no certain date beyond the time-span Sennacherib to post-Assurbanibal.[52] The Sennacherib dating is based on the assumption that the Šumma-ilāni of the document is to be identified with the chariot driver of the royal corps PNA 1286–1287.1 from the reign of Sennacherib (705–681). Thus, for Mār-nūri there are three potential options: 1) he is not to be identified with his namesake from SAA 6 50/51, 2) he is to be identified with the deputy of Maganuba from that document which however dates (substantially) later than the reign of Sennacherib, and 3) he is to be identified with his namesake and was deputy of Maganuba late in the reign of Sennacherib. The latter seems age-wise unlikely, unless the office in that settlement belonging to the former short-lived capital could be attained already at a rather young age.

---

[52] The other persons mentioned in SAA [= *State Archives of Assyria*] 6 50 are: 1) Bar-hatê/Bar-ahāti, the owner/seller of the estate, who is mentioned further only in the duplicate text SAA 6 51 (PNA 269); 2) his servants Hašana/u and family, who are said to date either to the reign of Sargon II, Sennacherib or early Esarhaddon (PNA 464); 3) "the woman Danqî" (and children), who are only known from this text (PNA 379) and thus provide no dating information; 4) three partially preserved witness names including Mār-nūri of thus also uncertain date; and 5) the witness Rapaya/Rapâ-Iāu, a name once more only known from the document discussed here (SAA 6 50) and from two further witness lists, one from Dur-Katlimmu/Magdalu from the reign of Assurbanipal and one from Nimrud/Kalhu from after the reign of Assurbanipal (PNA 1032–1033). Thus, on prosopographical grounds the date is uncertain, Sennacherib and any later date in the 7th c. are possible. If on archival grounds Šumma-ilāni of SAA 6 50/51 is to be identified with more certainty to no. 1, i.e., the chariot driver of the royal corps, chamberlain, and Crown Prince (see PNA 1286–1287; PNA 269 under Bar-ahāti), rather than any of the other individuals of that name (PNA 1286–1288), is currently not studied.

For Nūrî, father of Aia-aḫī, a case can be made for identification with any of his four known namesakes (PNA 969), thus placing him (and his son) either as an official in the reign of Esarhaddon (1), or as a dependent shepherd in the context of the royal chief eunuch Nabû-šarru-uṣur around 650 (2), or as a slave owner in the vicinity of Guzana in the late 7th c. (3), who is explicitly denoted as coming from another (not preserved) city (thus maybe from Assur?), or as an individual from Assur writing a letter regarding corn-tax sometime in the 7th c. BCE (4).

Nothing can be said about *Il-saqâ* (PNA 524) and *Ummu-baddi* (PNA 1386), as they and their names are currently only known from the document under discussion.

The last of the "criminals" is *Nabūtu.* He has a name borne in 7th c. heartland Assyria by up to eight individuals (PNA 897). They include a palace slave, a goldsmith, and a person mentioned in an extremely fragmentary document, possibly a house sale, in Assur, the father of an individual testifying in Dur-Katlimmu/Magdalu, a slave purchased in Nineveh by a scribe, and a person selling five slaves in Nineveh. Thus, he might be of any social context and standing. If he is a person of higher standing or special expertise in Assur, he might, e.g., represent the palace (no. 3; SAAB 9 77) or the goldsmiths' guild (no. 4; StAT 1 22), or function as an expert on the commodities traded by the "Egyptian merchants" (goldsmith; no. 4; StAT 1 22) or be a person of unknown but high standing in Nineveh (no. 1; SAA 14 4) who represented an unknown party in the business under discussion, or he might even be an escaped slave from Nineveh (no. 8; SAA 14 326) who became a "criminal" in Assur.[53] However, the latter seems rather unlikely, as this would constitute an important and

---

[53] Radner (PNA 897) has already indicated the potential identification of some of the individuals in Assur. However, it has to be noted that actually seven out of the eight separated individuals might be the same person, though at different stages of his life, as well as none or only some of them. Only individuals 1 and 8 are difficult to reconcile, though even they might be, if one considers that the former well-to-do person who bought five slaves in the reign of Esarhaddon experienced hardship at some point and fell into debt slavery.

relevant identification with further legal ramifications likely to be referred to in the case at hand.

In consequence, for lack of certain biographical identification, the "criminals" neither confirm nor obviate either contextualisation. If they are to be identified with some of their known namesakes or still unknown others with similar social standing, the standing of the "criminals" may have caused the case to go before the magnates. In this case, the context has probably been either a major business transaction between the "Egyptian merchants" and the "criminals" with Ḫakkubāia as host, which lead to a claim of explicitly fraudulent or dishonourable behaviour. Or the context may have been some kind of political imbroglio, in which the presence of the "Egyptian merchants" had a bearing, but in which they were not necessarily implicated as victims (see textual uncertainty; e.g., bringing to light that the "criminals" were hidden or otherwise protected by Ḫakkubāia). As none of the namesake identifications are certain, and thus nothing is known about the "criminals" beyond the case study text, any other violation remains equally plausible, as long as there is a good reason for the case to be brought to the magnates. Given the strong emphasis on the *ubārātu* status of the "Egyptian merchants" and the host role of Ḫakkubāia, the interpretation of *sarru* "criminal" as "thief, thug" may reflect violation of the merchandise, in the form of theft or damage, or – as above – an attack. On the other hand, an assault of Ḫakkubāia's own property seems less likely, as it is difficult to see how the profession and *ubārātu* status of the "Egyptian merchants" may have played a key role in such a case.

The witnesses

The twelve witnesses recorded in the document are to be discussed on a different level, as they are not, or at least not necessarily, witnesses of the original law-violation, but witnesses of the legal case (or even only of its recording in writing). Thus, they may have been completely unrelated and unknown to the persons involved in the original incident, or they may have witnessed it, or they may have joined the legal case in support of one or several of the persons

involved.[54] Roughly half of the witnesses defy further contextualisation. For the other half, one or several identifications with other namesakes can be discussed, which provide diverging interpretations of their involvement in the case. Whether the different scope of potential identification is accidental or indicative is difficult to judge. However, it is noteworthy that it might be reflective of the case. As discussed above, the Egyptian merchants (*tamkāru*), Ḫakkubāia, "the criminals" (ˁ*sarrūte*ˀ), and the magnates can have drawn on their local and regional networks for providing witnesses in their support (whether of the case or the person in question). These could include persons who are either otherwise not reflected in the written record of the time or who lived in a hitherto unexcavated part of Assur (e.g., the south city or in the un-touched areas of the southern central city). Or they may not have lived in Assur at all, but e.g., in the current or former capitals where many of their namesakes are attested. Four of the twelve witnesses are only known by name and only from our document: *Abdi-Salūmu* (PNA 7), *Rūma-qarti* (PNA 1054), *Qišišim* (PNA 1015–1016), and *Zanaithu* (not in PNA or PNA online addenda). The name of one witness, *Ṣil-*[…] (PNA 1176.6), is not sufficiently preserved to venture identification with other individuals. Thus, they defy further contextualisation of the source and of the event recorded in the text. *Abdi-Sē'* (PNA 7), if to be identified with his only other known namesake, comes from the wider court circle of Nineveh (PNA 7.1) where he is a witness for a eunuch of the king named Nīnuāiu (ADD 254). If not, nothing else is known about him.

Six witnesses may belong to and represent the Egyptian community of Assur: Puṭu-bāšti, Kiṣir-Aššūr, Ḫūru, Muṣurāiu, Pašî and Mukīn-Aššūr, but in each case this is not certain.[55] In the case of *Puṭu-bāšti*

---

[54] See Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 139–148, on the different roles of witnesses.

[55] Within the private archives of Assur this density of Egyptian names is not at all unusual, certainly not in the so-called archives of the Egyptians, i.e., N31A, N31B, N31D, and N52B. However, their occurrence is much more wide-spread throughout the town. On the textual evidence see especially Donbaz and Parpola, *StAT 2*, 117–154; Betina Faist, *Alltagstexte aus neuassyrischen Archiven und*

(PNA 1002) the argument for his being a member of the Egyptian community is the Egyptian etymology of his name. How indicative this is for his Egyptian origin or his belonging to the local Egyptian community is uncertain.[56] Even if it is, this does not necessarily mean that he is a member of the closely interconnected community reflected in archive Assur N31B, the private archive in south central Assur (test trench gE9I) from which our document derives. He or a namesake is also known as a witness in a slave sale in Assur in 640 (ZA 73 11; PNA 1002.2). For *Ḫūru* (also an Egyptian name), there is again nothing to prove his identification. He might be the cohort commander active in the circle of Kiṣir-Aššūr and Urdu-Aššūr recorded in 'archive' N31 (= PNA 481.2),[57] or the (former) Egyptian scribe at the court of Nineveh (= PNA 481.1), or some other person, e.g., the Ḫūru witnessing a pledge in Assur (= PNA 481.3). Whether it is possible that all of these known Ḫūru are the same person is uncertain. At least at first glance, it seems rather unlikely that a scholar employed at the court for his specific expertise[58] later in life becomes a cohort commander. However, these concerns need first to be studied more widely for making a substantiated guess. The next witness with potential Egyptian community connections is *Pašî*, who bears a possibly Egyptian name. PNA 992 lists five individuals from Assur (2–3 and 7–9) and identifies our witness with the cohort commander from the circle of Urdu-Aššūr from the so-called archive of the Egyptians N31 (PNA 992.3). As our Pašî is not identified beyond his name, this is possible but inconclusive. We simply cannot know whose witness he is, and thus why no further identification was

---

Bibliotheken der Stadt Assur (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 125–149, 172; Karen Radner, "V. Die beiden neuassyrischen Privatarchive," in *Ausgrabungen in Assur: Wohnquartiere in der Weststadt* I, ed. Peter A. Miglus, Karen Radner and Franciszek M. Stępniowski (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 79–133, especially 121–126; on a discussion of their provenience and its socio-historical implications especially Wasmuth, "Ägypter-Archiv" and Wasmuth, *Community of Assur.*

[56] See Wasmuth, "Egyptians outside Egypt", and "Mobility" on the need for questioning this as a general assumption and for discussing it on a case-by-case basis.

[57] See already Hauser, *Status, Tod und Ritual*, 89–90 n. 276 on the need to question the archival nature of N31, and especially Wasmuth, "Ägypter-Archiv."

[58] See Karen Radner, "The Assyrian King and His Scholars: The Syro-Anatolian and the Egyptian Schools," in *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, And Scholars. Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola*, ed. Mikko Luukko, Saana Svärd and Raija Mattila (Studia Orientalia 106; Helsinki: The Finnish Oriental Society, 2009), 221–238.

needed. Another likely Egyptian connection is indicated in case of identification with no. 9, son of Apî and nephew of Ṭāb-bēl, who might be identical to the Egyptian seller of a female slave in Assur (PNA 1339). Another interesting case can be made for identification with no. 5, a judge from Nineveh, an eminently suitable witness for a court case of high importance and possibly even diplomatic ramifications.[59]

The last three witnesses potentially belonging to the closer or wider circle of the Egyptian community in Assur have Akkadian names. The name *Muṣurāiu*, the Akkadian word for 'Egyptian,' is attested in at least five documents from four different places: Nineveh (nos 1–2), Nimrud/Kalhu (no. 3), Assur (no. 5, maybe no. 4), and Dur-katlimmu/Magdalu (no. 6; PNA 772).[60] Once more they can neither be disambiguated for certain nor identified with each other, as the different identifications do not exclude each other. In two cases a son is mentioned, Ḫuddāia and Sīn-na'di respectively, who might be brothers, or half-brothers, or not related to each other. One document mentions Šarru-lū-dāri as Muṣurāiu's father, again without further information neither verifying nor falsifying any of the other identifications. At least three documents situate a Muṣurāiu in the wider palace context: 1) as a member of the palace personnel from Nineveh under Esarhaddon, 2) as a seller of slaves to the royal eunuch Nīnuāiu (see also Abdi-Sē' above) in Nineveh under Assurbanipal, and 3) as a witness for a palace manager in Kalhu after the reign of Assurbanipal. The certain (son of Šarru-lū-dāri; 5.) and the uncertain (Šukkāia, son of an Egyptian or son of Muṣurāiu; no. 4) evidence from Assur locate a Muṣurāiu in the wider context of the Egyptian community reflected in archives N52a (4) and N17 (5).

---

[59] See in this context also Faist, *Rechtsprechung*, 99.

[60] According to PNA 772.4, there is also a sixth mentioning of a Muṣurāiu. The document has finally been published in 2016 (Radner, "Die beiden neuassyrischen Privatarchive," 105; document I.37). According to the text edition, the document has the find number Ass. 1990-20, not Ass. 1990-19 as indicated in PNA (Mass 19). While Michael Jursa (in PNA) translates "Sukku-aia, son of Muṣurayu," Radner in her primary edition of the text translates "Šukkāia, son of an Egyptian," probably because there is no male person determinative in front of mu-ṣur-a-a.

Much more common are the names of *Kiṣir-Aššūr* (PNA 621–626; 65 entries) and *Mukīn-Aššūr* (PNA 763–764; 19 entries). As Stefan Hauser already argued in 2012, even within 'archive' N31 from Assur at least three Kiṣir-Aššūrs are to be distinguished.[61] Thus, *Kiṣir-Aššūr* might be identified with one of the key persons of archive N31A (= "archive of the Egyptians" from the living quarters west of the Nabû temple) or archive N31B, i.e., the archival context of the document at hand.[62] However, many of the other 50 7th c. entries are also possible identifications. They include, e.g., a royal bodyguard from Dur-Katlimmu/Magdalu (63), a guardian of the (royal) tomb (49), a goldsmith (54), a head-priest (16), the father of Erība-Aššūr, Mukīn-Aššūr, and Qurdi-Aššūr from the New Town of Assur (39) in Assur, or a cohort-commander and bodyguard of the crown prince (24), a chariot driver in the circle of royal chariot drivers (15), and a mayor (20) from Nineveh.

In contrast, the name *Mukīn-Aššūr* is mainly known from Assur. In the 7th c. under Esarhaddon also a servant of a palace supervisor on Nineveh is attested (3) and one individual among a list of personnel including sick persons and messengers from Nimrud/Kalhu (16). Given their profession, which might have a bearing on their being chosen as witnesses, a chief of guards (7) and a craftsman (18) from Assur are interesting potential identification options. A noteworthy instance is a Mukīn-Aššūr (PNA no. 8), son of (a) Kiṣir-Aššūr. Kiṣir-Aššūr is not identified further, while Mukīn-Aššūr (as only witness) is identified as "from the Inner City." At first glance, it seems rather unlikely that he is the son of the Kiṣir-Aššūr of our document, as one would expect their kinship to provide the most obvious identification. However, arguments can be made for either identification: they may be father and son or not, and either, both, or none of them may belong to the closer circle of persons reflected in archive N31B from which our document stems. The key question here is the motivation for the special identification of Mukīn-Aššūr

[61] Hauser, *Status, Tod und Ritual*, 81–82 n. 276.
[62] See Wasmuth, "Ägypter-Archiv"; Wasmuth, *Community of Assur*; Faist, *StAT 3*, 125–129; see especially StAT 2 164–233, 273, 286, 289–290; StAT 3 78–101, 114.

as "from the Inner City." This argues either for a need for disambiguation or for an outsider ('stranger') who does not belong to the close circle of persons habitually interacting with and acting for each other in legal documents. As he is the only Mukīn-Aššūr attested in N31B (or N31 for that matter), the issue of disambiguation is likely not for himself. However, depending on the identity of both Kiṣir-Aššūr and Mukīn-Aššūr, the latter might have been specified to disambiguate Kiṣir-Aššūr, i.e., as the Kiṣir-Aššūr, father of Mukīn-Aššūr, from the New Town (i.e., Assur South?; = individual no. 39), but not of this Mukīn-Aššūr who is from the Inner City (i.e., from the area of N31B or further north in the old city?). Alternatively, the identification "from the Inner City" has a bearing on the case and identifies Mukīn-Aššūr explicitly as a representative of a specific group concerned in the case, which is not easily discerned any more.

6. Summary and conclusions

The contribution at hand provides first (sections 1–2) a range of investigation lines including sample sets of key questions based on different terms and concepts characterising the modern semantic field of "strange/r." These draw on the various spatial, temporal, and valuation ranges underlaying the perception of others or oneself as 'strange.' The systematic reflection of these different dimensions and perspectives helps to question one's own preconceived assumptions when dealing with the evidence under discussion. Thus, e.g., it becomes immediately obvious that a visitor, a thief, a family member, or the landlord can equally fall under the category of 'stranger.' In the second part (sections 3–5), I illustrate the application potential of the sketched-out research tool for one sample case study, a legal text from 7th c. Assur that concerns a law-violation involving Egyptian merchants in the house of their host Ḫakkubāia, by a group of "criminals." Though relatively well-known as a document, the text tends to be mentioned only in passing, as little is known for certain about any of its *dramatis personae*. The document nonetheless provides a wide scope of potential contextualisations that open up important

future research questions, especially at the juncture of micro and macro perspectives.

The approach is based on the conviction that the full complexity of ancient social realities is beyond the scope of the preserved sources and beyond the cultural distance of modern historiographers. At best, we can hope for partially revealing some aspects of it if we manage to overcome these challenges. One traditionally pursued approach for doing so is to look at potential modern parallels and concepts and to apply them as (potential) explicatory models to the ancient data. This, however, is fraught with a major problem. While challenging preconceived assumptions on a certain level, applying new / underutilized models to known data contexts also cements reduced, modern-context-inspired interpretations. In consequence, instead of opening up as many options as possible, it tends to narrow these down to fit the model. This is enhanced by the extreme likelihood that the model never did reflect the ancient realities in the first place.

This contribution, in contrast, suggests using modern concepts and terms not as explicatory models or to narrow down the most likely interpretation, but to enhance the scope of envisioned ancient realities. The key idea behind the sketched-out approach or research tool is to test how different assumptions transform the reading of evidence, and thus to help in collecting a much wider scope of circumstantial evidence. Metaphorically speaking, the aim is not to find the next joining piece of blue sky, but to consider where else a blue piece might fit into the mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, e.g., as a reflection of the sky in water, as a floor tile of a house, or as a piece of sky in a picture hanging on the wall; and whether differently coloured pieces, like grey or purple or orange, could also belong to the sky. Though this does not necessarily help enlarging the part of the mosaic or jigsaw already joined together, it significantly enhances the bigger picture of what might have been, how to look for further joints, and how to place the remaining gaps.

For the specific case study discussed here, the research tool highlights *inter alia* the importance for disambiguating namesakes (key strategy focus of PNA), but also for considering their potential identification with each other, and their implications for the fabric of society at the time, even – or perhaps especially – when any certainty of identification is impossible for lack of biographical information (e.g., filiation). Thus, a completely different image of the attack and social standing of the 'criminals' active in Assur arises if they are to be identified with their namesakes from the current (Nineveh) and former (Kalhu/Nimrud, Dur Šarrukin/Maganuba) capitals and major cross-road settlements (Dur-Katlimmu/Magdalu) or not. In the one case, a likely scenario is a physical attack, either because they are strangers or for their merchandise or because they witnessed the breaking into the house of their host, while the other points to a dishonest business deal or maybe even some political imbroglio as the more probable context of the legal case.