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The Decline and Fall of the Assyrian Court Scholar: A Social Network-Based Examination

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Abstract

Modern scholars have long been divided over whether the correspondence of ancient scholars with the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal represents an anomaly or a typical relationship between scholars and kings in the ancient Near East. This article uses social network analysis to examine the changing status of scholars in Assyria. It argues that the reign of Esarhaddon saw the emergence of an ‘inner circle’ of scholars who maintained power and influence through controlling access to the king, and an out-group with little influence who hoped to move into the inner circle. By contrast, under Ashurbanipal all scholars experienced an immediate decline in centrality scores, suggesting a sudden loss of status as the scholars were marginalized and slowly phased out even as Ashurbanipal collected his own archive of cuneiform scholarship. The decline of court scholars in Assyria should therefore be understood primarily as a political phenomenon, that is, an attempt by Ashurbanipal to reduce the influence of a group which he perceived as having become too powerful within the Assyrian imperial administration.

Keywords: Neo-Assyrian Empire; Social Network Analysis; Esarhaddon; Ashurbanipal; Cuneiform Scholars

Introduction

The letters and reports sent to the Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (r. 681-669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (r. 669-631 BCE) by practitioners of the scribal arts of celestial divination, exorcism (*āšipūtu*), pharmacology (*asūtu*), extispicy (*bārūtu*) and lamentation (*kalātu*) represent our earliest evidence of the application of divination as well as our only

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direct evidence attesting to a close relationship between kings and scholars.² While the corpus has attracted significant attention from modern scholars thanks to its literary qualities, evidence for Mesopotamian divination and medical practices, and the close personal relationships which certain scholars appeared to have enjoyed with the royal family, essential questions about the role of scholars in the royal court remain unresolved.³ Does this correspondence represent a typical relationship between scholars and the Assyrian king, or did Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal have a unique interest in cuneiform scholarship? Did Assyrian kings usually follow the recommendations of their scholars, or did scholars fulfill a propagandistic function to confirm decisions which had already been made?

Previous scholarship has been sharply divided on these issues. A. Leo Oppenheim considered the correspondence to be typical not only of Assyrian kings but for Neo-Babylonian kings as well (1969, pp. 114-22).⁴

² Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76. The five fields of scholarship were defined by Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, vol. 2 (Kevlaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1983), p. xiv. Collectively, scholars were sometimes known as *ummānu*, but this term could also be used for anyone possessing specialized expertise (CAD U-W: 108-15). Similarly, no specific term was consistently used for the practice of celestial divination. The term *ṭupšarrūtu* can refer to a wide range of scribal learning and practices (CAD T: 162-63), while the term *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*, “scribe of [the celestial omen series] Enūma Anu Enlil” was only rarely used in the Neo-Assyrian period (SAA 8 499: r. 5; SAA 7 1: col. 1 ln. 18); see Francesca Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 237-56; Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing*, 219-21. For the specialization of the *asū*, see JoAnn Scurlock, “Physician, Exorcist, Conjurer, Magician: A Tale of Two Healing Professionals,” in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karel van der Toorn (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1999), 69-79. For the role of the *kalū* see Uri Gabbay, “The *kalū* Priest and *kalātu* Literature in Assyria,” *Orient* 49 (2014): 115-44.

³ The letters have most recently published in SAA 10, along with astronomical reports in SAA 8, and extispicy reports in SAA 4. Additional letters from scholars can be found in SAA 13 131-132, 173-177; SAA 16 80, 157-177; SAA 18 124-142; CTN 6 1; ABL 1088; CT 53 612; CT 35 37-38. The latter was translated in Theo Bauer, *Das Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1933), 85-87, but was first recognized as a letter by Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 374-75. Also included is the unpublished tablet 1881-7-27, 20 (British Museum).

⁴ A. Leo Oppenheim, “Divination and Celestial Observation in the Last Assyrian Empire,” *Centaurus* 14 (1969): 97-135, here 114-22.



Simo Parpola, whose two-volume study *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* forms the foundation of all research into these letters, argued that similar letters from scholars to Sargon II (r. 722-705 BCE) and Sennacherib (r. 705-681) had either been deliberately destroyed in antiquity or “may simply not yet have hit the spade of the archaeologist.”⁵ Scholars who have used these letters as comparative material for biblical studies have likewise assumed that they represent a typical first millennium monarch’s relationship with his scholars.⁶

Others have argued that the sheer volume of extant correspondence in comparison with earlier periods suggests a new kind of relationship between the king and his scholars.⁷ The search for possible causes for this abrupt change has led many scholars to propose that Babylonian divination practices were first adopted in Assyria following the Assyrian conquest of Babylonia during the reign of Sargon II.⁸ However, scholars from Babylon found employment in Assyria as early

⁵ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. xii.

⁶ Karel Van Der Toorn, “Scholars at the Oriental Court: The Figure of Daniel Against its Mesopotamian Background,” in *The Book of Daniel: Composition & Reception*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 37-54; Matthijs J. De Jong, *Isaiah Among the Near Eastern Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 316-18, 469; Justus Ghormley, *Scribes Writing Scripture: Doublets, Textual Divination, and the Formation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 16-23.

⁷ Jeanette C. Fincke, “Assyrian Scholarship and Scribal Culture in Kalḫu and Nineveh,” in *A Companion to Assyria*, ed. Eckart Frahm (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 378-97, here 381; Karen Radner, “Royal Decision-Making: Kings, Magnates, and Scholars,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 358-79, here 366-68.

⁸ Jeanette C. Fincke, “The Babylonian Texts of Nineveh: Report on the British Museum’s Ashurbanipal Library Project,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003/2004): 111-149, here 116-17; Fincke, “Babylonische Gelehrte am neuassyrischen Hof: zwischen Anpassung und Individualität,” in *Krieg und Frieden im Alten Vorderasien: 52e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale International Congress of Assyriology and Near Eastern Archaeology, Münster, 17.21. Juli 2006*, ed. Hans Neumann, Reinhard Dittmann, Susanne Paulus, Georg Neumann and Anais Schuster-Brandis (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 269-292, here 269-70; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “All the King’s Men: Authority, Kingship, and the Rise of the Elites in Assyria,” in *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority: Cosmos, Politics, and the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, ed. Jane A. Hill, Philip Jones and Antonio J. Morales (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 285-309, here 298; Natalie Naomi May, “Administrative and Other Reforms of Sargon II and Tiglath-Pileser III,” *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 21 (2015): 79-116, here 91-94.

as the Middle Assyrian period, and scholarly texts copied from Babylon and Nippur are widely attested in temple archives and private collections from Aššur and Kalhu for centuries before Sargon's conquest of Babylonia from 710-707 BCE.⁹ Others have suggested that political instability led to an increased demand for supernatural protection on the part of Assyrian kings during the seventh century BCE.¹⁰ Recently, Eleanor Robson has linked official support for scholars to official veneration of the scribal god Nabû, which received extensive state support from the reign of Sargon II onwards. Robson argues that Ashurbanipal was the last Assyrian king to maintain an extensive scholarly retinue, and that state support for scholars declined steadily as a result of a general economic decline in the aftermath of the war between Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin from 652-646.¹¹

Entangled with this question is the extent to which Assyrian kings followed the recommendations of their scholars when making practical decisions about how to run the empire. It is difficult for modern minds to imagine that Neo-Assyrian rulers maintained a functional empire for the better part of three centuries while regularly making important political decisions on the alignment of planets or protrusions from the liver of a sacrificial sheep, and many scholars have argued that scholars served a propagandistic purpose by reassuring the populace that the king enjoyed the favor of the gods.¹²

⁹ David Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000), 37; Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks: A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 50-55, 65-68; Eleanor Robson, "Tracing Networks of Cuneiform Scholarship with Oracc, GKAB, and Google Earth," in *Archaeologies of Text: Archaeology, Technology, and Ethics*, ed. Matthew T. Rutz and Morag M. Kersel (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 142-63, here 148-49.

¹⁰ Jana Pečírková, "Divination and Politics in the Late Assyrian Empire," *Archiv Orientalní* 53 (1985): 155-68, here 158-59; Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy*, 42-47, 242-43.

¹¹ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 50-86.

¹² Frederick Mario Fales and Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, "The Impact of Oracular Material on the Political Utterances and Political Action in the Royal Inscriptions of the Sargonid Dynasty," in *Oracles et prophéties dans l'antiquité: actes du Collège de Strasbourg 15-17 juin 1995*, ed. Jean-George Heintz (Paris: De Boccard, 1997), 99-114; Karen Radner, "The Trials of Esarhaddon: The Conspiracy of 670 BC," *Isimu: Revista sobre Oriente Próximo y Egipto en la antigüedad* 6 (2003): 165-84.



Similarly, Eckart Frahm has argued that by presenting the king with many possible interpretations, scholars ensured that whatever decision he made was arguably ‘correct’ according to the omens.¹³ Others have suggested that scholars under Esarhaddon crossed over to become policy-makers with significant influence on political decisions.¹⁴ The view that Esarhaddon was a uniquely paranoid and superstitious individual who was manipulated by his scholars has a long history, although others have noted that he took measures to avoid being overtly manipulated or have emphasized the dependence of scholars on the king.¹⁵

This study will apply new methodologies to answer these questions. By employing social network analysis to analyze Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal’s correspondence with their scholars, it will argue that an inner circle of nine prominent scholars gained significant power during the final years of Esarhaddon’s reign through controlling access

¹³ Eckart Frahm, “Royal Hermeneutics: Observations on the Commentaries from Ashurbanipal’s Libraries at Nineveh,” *Iraq* 66 (2004): 45-50; see also Jeffrey L. Cooley, “Celestial Divination in Esarhaddon’s Aššur A Inscription,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135 (2015): 131-47.

¹⁴ Radner, “Royal Decision-Making,” 272-74; Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, “Scholars and Scholarly Tradition in Neo-Assyrian Times: A Case Study,” *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 3 (1989): 99-114; Cynthia Jean, “Divination and Oracles at the Neo-Assyrian Palace: The Importance of Signs in Royal Ideology,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2010), 267-75.

¹⁵ For those scholars who entertained the idea that Esarhaddon was a uniquely paranoid monarch, see A.T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 347; Wolfram Von Soden, *Herrscher im alten Orient* (Berlin: Springer, 1954), 125-26; Oppenheim, “Divination and Celestial Observation,” 120-21; Simo Parpola, “Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian Letters,” in *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis*, ed. Frederick Mario Fales (Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente, 1981), 117-42, here 123. Lorenzo Verderame has noted steps Esarhaddon took to avoid being manipulated, such as asking multiple scholars to separately give their interpretations of the same event. See Verderame, “A Glimpse into the Activities of Experts (*ummānu*) at the Assyrian Royal Court,” in *From Source to History: Studies on Ancient Near Eastern Worlds and Beyond Dedicated to Giovanni Battista Lanfranchi on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday on June 23, 2014*, ed. Salvatore Gaspa, Alessandro Greco, Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, Simonetta Ponchia and Robert Rollinger (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 713-28; Verderame, “Astronomy, Divination, and Politics in the Neo-Assyrian Empire,” in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, ed. C. L. N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015), 1847-53. Erle Leichty, “Esarhaddon, King of Assyria,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Macmillan, 1995), vol. 2, 949-58, here 957, suggested that Esarhaddon was no more paranoid than any other Assyrian king. More recently Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy*, 44-47 and Josette Elayi, *Esarhaddon, King of Assyria* (Columbus, GA: Lockwood Press, 2023), 43-44 have emphasized scholars’ dependence on the king rather than the reverse.

to the king through frequent substitute king rituals and warnings about auspicious days. After Esarhaddon's death in 669 BCE, the scholars of the inner circle were quickly excluded from positions of power by Ashurbanipal. This strongly suggests that the decline of court scholars in the latter half of the seventh century should be understood primarily as a political phenomenon, through which scholars who wielded power through their claim to exclusive access to an esoteric body of knowledge came to be viewed as a political threat which must be curtailed.

Methodology

Previous studies of the role played by scholars in the Assyrian court have rightly emphasized the personal relationships between the king and scholars over attempting to identify their formal position within the imperial administration.¹⁶ This framework can be rightly extended to understanding the entire Neo-Assyrian administration: letters sent to the king by provincial governors and palace and temple officials are just as concerned with royal favor, rewards, and punishments as those of their scholarly counterparts.¹⁷

Studies of modern organizations have shown that organizations rarely operate according to their formal hierarchy. Orders given by leaders

¹⁶ Radner, "Royal Decision-Making," 363-65; Verderame, "A Glimpse into the Activities of Experts," 724-27; Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy*, 42-48; Pečirková, "Divination and Politics in the Late Assyrian Empire," 158-68; Eleanor Robson, "Empirical Scholarship in the Neo-Assyrian Court," in *The Empirical Dimension of Ancient Near Eastern Studies/Die empirische Dimension altorientalischer Forschungen*, ed. Gebhard J. Selz (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2011), 603-29, here 607-08; Melanie M. Groß, *At the Heart of an Empire: The Royal Household in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 300-02. The major exception is Parpola, "The Assyrian Cabinet," in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 379-401; who situated scholars within a proposed 'cabinet' of eight officials which reflected a divine council of gods. Parpola's model is too rigid and includes offices which were prominent at different points in Neo-Assyrian history. For a critique, see chapter 3 of Christopher W. Jones, *The Structure of the Late Assyrian State, 722-612 B.C.* (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ For a discussion of competition and royal favor in Assyrian officialdom, see Christopher W. Jones, "Power and Elite Competition in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, 745-612 B.C.," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2021), 319-420.



are often ignored by subordinates, few members read their organization's formal regulations, and most employees find out about policy changes through their peers rather than through formal channels. Understanding power within an organization therefore requires studying informal ties rather than formal organizational structure.¹⁸ This applies to the ancient world as well as modern corporations – the correspondence of Assyrian kings reveals many cases where officials who held formally important titles wielded little actual influence, and conversely where persons who held less prestigious offices were in fact extremely influential due to having a high trust relationship with the king.¹⁹

Social network analysis is an especially useful tool for quantifying informal relationships within organizations. Social networks simplify relationships into a system of nodes and connecting edges, which can then be mathematically analyzed. In a communications network, nodes represent either individuals or other actors within the network. Edges represent communications sent between the nodes. Edges can connect nodes in one direction or in both directions. A path is a connection between three or more nodes which does not include any node or edge more than once. Edges can also be weighted. For this

¹⁸ Chester I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 114-26, 161-69; Philip Tompkins, "Organizational Communication: A State of the Art Review," in *Conference on Organizational Communication*, ed. G. Richetto (Huntsville, AL: NASA, 1967), 4-26, here 5-11; Tompkins, *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia: The Decline of the Space Program. A Study in Organizational Communication* (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2005), 74-75; David Andrews, *The IRG Solution: Hierarchical Incompetence and How to Overcome It* (London: Souvenir Press, 1984), 52-127; T.J. Watson, "Organizations: Negotiated Orders," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015): 10965-10968; Anselm Strauss, *Negotiations: Varieties, Contexts, Processes, and Social Order* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), 235-43. For specific case studies, see Anselm Strauss et al, "The Hospital and its Negotiated Order," in *The Hospital in Modern Society*, ed. E. Friedson (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 147-69; Jim Thomas, "Some Aspects of Negotiated Order, Loose Coupling and Mesostructure in Maximum Security Prisons," *Symbolic Interaction* 7 (1984): 213-31.

¹⁹ See chapters 3 and 4 of Christopher W. Jones, *The Structure of the Late Assyrian State, 722-612 B.C.* (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming).

study, the weight of the edges corresponds with the number of communications sent between two nodes.²⁰

This study uses two measures to analyze the networks: Betweenness centrality and Bonacich centrality. Betweenness centrality (also known as Freeman Betweenness) attempts to identify which nodes serve as bridges between different parts of a network by calculating how often each node sits on a possible path between two other nodes. Nodes with a higher number of possible paths which run through them will have higher scores.²¹ Betweenness centrality therefore measures which nodes have the most control over the movement of information within the network.

However, betweenness centrality does not consider the weight of ties, so a node which communicates once with two separate nodes will have the same betweenness centrality as one which regularly serves as a conduit between two other nodes. Research by Karen Cook et al. has shown that betweenness centrality often failed to predict influence in networks where centrality was a zero-sum game in which gains made by one actor came at the expense of another (called a negatively connected network).²² In order to address these weaknesses, Philip Bonacich developed a measure called Beta-centrality (or Bonacich centrality). This measure calculates centrality by taking into account the centrality scores of other nodes when computing each node's centrality score. Every node's centrality affects the score of other actors within a certain radius. The formula for Bonacich centrality contains an attenuation factor β which can be set to any number between 1 and -1 by the analyst. The absolute value of β determines

²⁰ Christina Prell, *Social Network Analysis: History, Theory & Methodology* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications), 8-25; John Scott, *Social Network Analysis*, 4th ed (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017): 74-80.

²¹ Linton C. Freeman, "Centrality in Social Networks: Conceptual Clarification," *Social Networks* 1 (1978/79): 215-39; Prell, *Social Network Analysis*, 103-07; Scott, *Social Network Analysis*, 99-100.

²² Karen S. Cook, Richard M. Emerson, Mary R. Gillmore, and Toshio Yamagishi, "The Distribution of Power in Exchange Networks: Theory and Experimental Results," *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (1983): 275-305.



the radius within which the centrality scores of other nodes affect a certain node's score. Setting β as a positive number analyzes a network as positively connected, so that nodes gain power from being connected to influential nodes. Setting β as a negative number analyzes the network as negatively connected.²³ Absolute values of β which are closer to zero heavily weigh the immediate connections of each actor, while an absolute value of 1 takes into account scores across the entire network.²⁴

Because different values of β can produce extremely variable results in low density, negatively connected networks, Bonacich suggests either selecting a value for β based on an estimate of the degree of separation which affects an individual's status, or setting an extreme absolute value for β .²⁵ As the goal of this paper is to identify shifting power relationships between the king, scholars, and other officials, this analysis treats power and influence as a finite resource. Superiors can only give a finite amount of attention to subordinates, and so they distribute this attention unequally. Increased attention given by the king to one subordinate takes attention away from other subordinates. While studies of communications networks typically analyze their subjects as positively connected networks, in this study communications are not being analyzed in order to gauge their efficiency but as a proxy for power and influence.²⁶ This study therefore treats the Neo-Assyrian empire as a negatively connected

²³ Phillip Bonacich, "Power and Centrality: A Family of Measures," *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (1987): 1170-82; Prell, *Social Network Analysis*, 109-113; Scott, *Social Network Analysis*, 100-01.

²⁴ Bonacich, "Power and Centrality," 1174-75.

²⁵ Phillip Bonacich and Simon Rodan, "Comment and Response on 'Choosing the ' β ' Parameter when Using the Bonacich Power Measure'," *Journal of Social Structure* 12 (2011). Accessed April 18, 2020. [https://www.cmu.edu/joss/content/articles/volume12//BonacichRodanOctober 2011.pdf](https://www.cmu.edu/joss/content/articles/volume12//BonacichRodanOctober%202011.pdf); cf. Simon Rodan "Choosing the ' β ' Parameter When Using the Bonacich Power Measure," *Journal of Social Structure* 12 (2011). Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.cmu.edu/joss/content/articles/volume12//Rodan.pdf>.

²⁶ Prell, *Social Network Analysis*, 111; Daniel P. Modaff and Sue DeWine, *Organizational Communication: Foundations, Challenges, and Misunderstandings* (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2002), 181-83.

network. I have therefore set the value of β to -1, weighting the entire network when calculating the scores of each node. Any change in the king's favor towards one official can therefore elevate or demote others.

The Data

I constructed the data sets²⁷ for this study manually, compiling networks of all extant communications which can be dated to the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. To better understand changes in the networks over time, I also constructed four smaller networks consisting of letters which can be dated to the years 680-675 and 674-669 during Esarhaddon's reign and the years 669-664 and 652-646 under Ashurbanipal.

Only a handful of letters from the Neo-Assyrian period contain dates, and even fewer mention the king by name. Letters must therefore be dated through a combination of prosopography, stylistic considerations, orthography, paleography, archaeological context, and historical events mentioned in the texts.²⁸ Letters from scholars which contain detailed reports of astronomical phenomena and can often be dated to the precise day the letter was written.²⁹ This data set makes use of the extensive work on dating letters which has been carried out as part of the State Archives of Assyria Project. This allows us to assign 848 letters to the reign of Esarhaddon, from his coronation on 18 or 28 Adar (XII) 681 BCE to his death on 10 Marchesvan (VIII) 669 BCE.³⁰ As the precise dates for the end of Ashurbanipal's reign are not known, all letters from his accession in 669 until the fall of the empire

²⁷ The data can be accessed through <https://zenodo.org/records/10041178>.

²⁸ Parpola, "Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian Letters," 126-28.

²⁹ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 381-427.

³⁰ The cautious scholar should note when dating texts that SAA 10 uses Julian calendar years for astronomical calculations, while SAA 8 uses astronomical years. As astronomical years contain a year '0' for mathematical purposes, astronomical years BC are numbered one year lower than the equivalent Julian years.



have been analyzed as a single network containing 630 letters (Appendix C). An additional 530 letters, largely very brief or fragmentary examples, could date from the reigns of either Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal and have therefore been excluded from this study. Because one of the goals of this study is to analyze the status of scholars relative to other officials in the empire, all letters dating from the relevant time frame were included in the relevant networks, not only those sent to or from scholars.

I was able to considerably expand the initial data set through including what I call “developed messages.” Two forms of developed messages can be recognized: the first are written or verbal communications which have been lost but are mentioned in surviving correspondence. This could include cases where a letter-writer mentions that they are replying to a previous message, where a letter summarizes other messages sent and received by the writer, or other references to previous letters and communications. Communications the writer promised to send at a later date, and unsubstantiated allegations about communications sent or received by third parties were not included as developed messages.

The second form of developed message comes from co-authored letters, which are especially common among the letters from scholars and posed a special challenge for compiling this data set. Letters from co-authors were counted as a separate communication from each co-author to the recipient(s). As the senders of the letter presumably communicated with each other about its contents, a bi-directional connection was added between each co-author. Messages sent to multiple recipients were counted as separate messages from the sender to each recipient, but no connections were made between the recipients as they may have read the message individually without consulting one another. The inclusion of developed messages expanded Esarhaddon’s network to include 289 nodes which sent a

total of 1,231 messages. The network of Ashurbanipal and later kings consists of 259 nodes which sent a total of 843 messages (**Table 1**).

Network:	Number of Tablets:	Total Messages (Letters + Developed Messages):	Number of Nodes:
Esarhaddon:	848	1,231	289
Ashurbanipal/Later:	630	843	259
Esh 680-675:	59	109	45
Esh 674-669:	256	514	94
Asb 669-664:	57	75	21
Asb 652-646:	142	265	88

Table 1. Size of the networks built for this study

Disambiguating persons with identical names posed another challenge for building the data set, as Assyrian scribes did not usually record patronymics when writing personal names. In many cases persons with the same name provide other clues to their identity such as references to their background, title, or geographic region. The *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* project has already carried out extensive work on disambiguating names in Neo-Assyrian sources, with preference given towards splitting instances where it is not clear that two documents refer to the same person. I have followed this practice for this data set, as splitting minor figures into multiple nodes is less likely to distort the data set than lumping multiple low-centrality actors together into one node. An especially difficult problem occurs in the final years of Esarhaddon's reign when Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin held the office of crown prince simultaneously. Many letters are addressed only to "the crown prince" (*mār šarri*) without elaboration. Here I have examined the letters for geographic clues as to their origins: letters sent from the Assyrian heartland were considered as letters to Ashurbanipal while letters from Babylonia or discussing Babylonian affairs were considered as letters to Šamaš-šumu-ukin. Five letters, mostly fragmentary, could



not be assigned to either crown prince and have been provisionally treated as their own node.³¹

As the ends of a tablet are the most likely places for breaks to occur, many letters are missing their introductory formulae. Many can nevertheless be assigned to an individual sender or recipient based on language, style, orthography, or handwriting, and in this I have followed the decisions made by the *State Archives of Assyria* and *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* projects. In several other cases several letters or developed messages were clearly sent or received by the same individual whose name has been lost. These individuals have been assigned to separate nodes.³²

The sender or recipient of many other letters cannot be determined. Grouping these lost names together into a single node would have a distorting effect on measurements of centrality by creating a large and well-connected node where none exists, while dropping them from the network entirely could lead to underestimating the centrality of widely connected figures if some of their letters happen to have been damaged. Letters with no sender or recipient have been disambiguated into separate nodes according to the sender or recipient whose name is still extant. For example, all unknown persons who received letters from or sent letters to Esarhaddon are grouped into a single node, which connects only to Esarhaddon; while all unknown persons who sent letters to another individual are grouped into another node which connects only to that individual. While it is possible that these aggregate nodes include persons who sent messages to multiple other actors in the network, disambiguating the letters in this way follows

³¹ These are SAA 16 37-38, 69-70, and 116. Note that while the payment alleged in SAA 16 69 came from the governor of Ur, the alleged conspirator Sasī is reported to have acted at many locations in the empire and so this letter was not assigned conclusively to either crown prince.

³² These include the three “anonymous informers” who authored anonymous reports to Esarhaddon in SAA 16 62-72. For a discussion of these informants and how they can be distinguished, see Luukko and Van Buylaere in SAA 16, p. xxix-xxxviii.

the same principle of disambiguating personal names discussed above: namely, that splitting individuals is less likely to distort the final conclusions than merging them. Fragmentary letters for which the sender and recipient are both unknown were not considered for the analysis; 136 letters dated from the reign of Esarhaddon and 134 from the reign of Ashurbanipal were therefore not included in the networks.

Six letters from the reign of Ashurbanipal and two letters from the reign of Esarhaddon identify themselves as being written either by all the people of a city or (perhaps more accurately) by the ruling class of that city.³³ There are also ten letters sent by kings which are addressed to an entire city or cities (eight from Ashurbanipal and two from Esarhaddon).³⁴ These letters have been accounted for by adding a single node for each city which sent or received them. Letters where governors identify themselves by name but append a demonym or city name to their greeting formulae have been counted only as messages to or from that individual governor, as this is likely a rhetorical strategy rather than indication that the letter had a larger number of authors.³⁵

³³ For letters to Esarhaddon, see SAA 16 153 (from the women of Borsippa); SAA 18 86 (from the Sealand). For letters to Ashurbanipal, see SAA 22 84-85 (from Kissik); SAA 22 78 (from Ur and Šat-iddina); SAA 22 80-81 (from Ur); SAA 22 79 (from Ur, Kissik, or Šat-iddina). An additional two letters to Ashurbanipal (SAA 18 147; from the Bit-Amukani, and SAA 21 112; from the Gambulu) were sent by tribal groups, these have been treated in the same manner as the letters from cities.

³⁴ For letters from Esarhaddon to cities, see SAA 16 96 (to Aššur) and SAA 18 1 (to Babylon). For letters from Ashurbanipal, see SAA 21 1-5 (to Babylon); SAA 21 17 (to Nippur); SAA 21 42 (to Kissik); SAA 21 65 (to Elam).

³⁵ SAA 22 28, 132; SAA 21 110; CT 54 445. Ashurbanipal sometimes addressed letters to provincial governors similarly, possibly to indicate the letter should be read as a public proclamation by the recipient. For examples, see SAA 21 18, 29, 32-33. For the suggestion that locally recruited governors needed to demonstrate to the Assyrian king that they governed with the support of their people, see Seth Richardson, "Getting Confident: The Assyrian Development of Elite Recognition Ethics," in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, & John Weisweiler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29-64, here 59-61.



Has the Scholarly Correspondence of Earlier Assyrian Kings Not Yet Been Found?

Any modern scholar considering whether the scholarly correspondence of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal is typical or exceptional is immediately confronted with the massive disparity in the number of letters from scholars which can be dated to their reigns versus the reigns of their predecessors. Out of 848 letters dating from the reign of Esarhaddon, 436 are to or from scholars (51.4%). Among the 630 letters from Ashurbanipal or later kings, 106 are to or from scholars (16.8%). Compare this to the 1,151 letters dating from the reign of Sargon II, of which only two were written by scholars. Only one letter from a scholar is present among the 69 which can be dated to the reign of Sennacherib, while no letters from scholars are to be found among the 188 that date from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (r. 745-727 BCE).³⁶

The subset of letters which can be dated more precisely than to the reign of a king tend to cluster around certain date ranges. The majority of Esarhaddon's datable correspondence comes from 674 BCE or later (266 letters) while only sixty letters can be dated to 675 or earlier. Thirty-one letters from scholars can be dated to 675 or earlier, compared to 213 which can be dated to 674 or later.³⁷ Fifty-seven letters from the reign of Ashurbanipal can be dated to before 664, of which fifty were sent to or from scholars. Only twenty-three letters

³⁶ The two letters from scholars dating from the reign of Sargon II are SAA 8 501 and SAA 17 43; and the letter from the reign of Sennacherib is SAA 8 472. For other letters from the reign of Sennacherib see SAA 5 150-151; SAA 15 226; SAA 17 4, 6, 32-38, 52-57, 81, 92-100, 102-128, 136, 140-141, 143-144, 164, 170, 177, 182, 188, 190, 192-193; STAT 2 163. For letters from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III see SAA 19 1-151; CTN 2 166-167, 180-211, 265, CTN 5 nos. ND 2087 & ND 2353, p. 237-239.

³⁷ For letters from scholars to Esarhaddon from before 674 BC, see SAA 8 39, 245-246, 289, 301-302, 316-317, 324-325, 336, 339, 347, 356, 369-370, 380, 438, 456, 469, 500, 502, 512; SAA 10 84, 109, 111-113, 149; SAA 18 134. For the redating of SAA 10 149, originally dated to 14-III-621 by Parpola, see Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 95-96 n. 168).

from scholars can be dated to Ashurbanipal's reign after 664.³⁸ There is also a substantial cluster of 151 letters from the years 652-646, but only fifteen of these letters were sent to or from scholars (9.9%).³⁹

One must proceed cautiously with such statistics. Letters from scholars can be more precisely dated than letters from other officials, which means that they are over-represented in subsets of letters which can be dated to within a six-year period. If we divide the 412 letters from non-scholars to Esarhaddon by the twelve years of his reign, we return an average of 34.3 letters per year, or 206 letters for the period 674-669. This suggests the true figure for the proportion of letters to and from scholars in the final six years of Esarhaddon's reign is around 50%, the same as the earlier half of his reign and for his reign as a whole. Likewise, scholars seem have consistently written to the king in Akkadian. The dearth of letters from officials outside of Babylonia or the Assyrian heartland during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal suggests that much of this correspondence must have been carried out in Aramaic written on perishable materials rather than on durable clay tablets.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, it is clear that letters from scholars cluster most frequently in the 674-664 date range, with fewer examples dating from earlier in Esarhaddon's reign or later in Ashurbanipal's. Letters from

³⁸ For letters from scholars to Ashurbanipal dating later than 664 BC, see SAA 8 8, 104, 186, 487; SAA 10 100-102, 104-105, 131-135, 138-142, 160, 345-346; CT 35 37-38.

³⁹ These are SAA 10 138 (651 BC); SAA 10 104-105, 131-133, 135, 139, 142, 345-346 (650); SAA 8 487; SAA 10 134, 140 (649); SAA 10 141 (648).

⁴⁰ Only a few letters from officials outside of Babylonian or the heartland are known from the reign of Esarhaddon, see SAA 16 59-76 (the upper Khabur); SAA 16 126-135 (the Levant); SAA 13 188 (Harran); SAA 16 146-151; SAA 13 190 (north and east provinces). No letters from these regions are known from the reign of Ashurbanipal. For the possibility of official correspondence being written in Aramaic see Parpola, "Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian Letters," 123; Edward Lipiński, "Araméen d'Empire," in *Le Langage dans l'Antiquité*, ed. Pierre Swiggers and Alfons Wouters (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 94-133; Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 124-34. A single letter written in Aramaic has been found in Aššur, for a recent edition see James M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, 2nd ed (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2003), 20-23.



scholars are almost nonexistent prior to Esarhaddon's reign, even though scholars are attested in other sources as being present in Assyria since the Middle Assyrian period.⁴¹ If scholars frequently corresponded with Neo-Assyrian kings from before the reign of Esarhaddon, their correspondence must have not yet been found.

It is here that a close study of the archaeological context of the Nineveh letters would be of great assistance. Yet here we face the difficulties caused by half a century of destructive excavations by the British Museum at Kuyunjik. Excavators usually did not record any find spots for any of the tablets recovered, which means that the only way to recover any information about find locations is by matching museum registration numbers which indicate a year of accession with rooms of the Southwest Palace or other areas known to have been excavated during a specific season.⁴² While each expedition collected surface finds all over the tell and catalogued texts found by the watchmen hired to guard the site between dig seasons, the majority of the texts which were added to the museum's collection in a certain year can be assumed to have come from the areas which were excavated that previous season.⁴³

⁴¹ The best summary of evidence for scholars in Assyria before the reign of Esarhaddon can be found in Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 149-173.

⁴² Julian Reade, "Ninive (Nineveh)," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, vol. 9 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998-2001), 390-433, here 422.

⁴³ Budge's account of the excavations mentions that the watchmen hired to guard the site would gather tablets which were exposed by erosion during the off-season and would turn them over to the British Museum during the next dig season. See E.A. Wallis Budge, *By Nile and Tigris: A Narrative of Journeys in Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum Between the Years 1886 and 1913* (London: John Murray, 1920), 67.

Find Area:	Total Letters:									
		SgII	Snh	Esh	Esh/Asb	Asb	Sši	Pre-681	Post-681	% Scholars
SW Palace, Room 1	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	--	100%	0%
SW Palace, Rooms 40-41	52	7	1	14	11	19	0	15%	85%	66%
Court 6/Rooms 7-8	52	4	0	21	12	14	0	8%	90%	56%
SW Palace, Smith's Oval	188	79	9	31	18	16	0	47%	35%	43%
SW Palace, Room 54 area	457	15	3	172	105	138	0	4%	91%	52%
North Palace	82	8	4	26	17	21	2	15%	80%	45%

SgII = Sargon II; Snh = Sennacherib; Esh = Esarhaddon; Esh/Asb = Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal; Asb = Ashurbanipal; Sši = Šin-šarru-iškun. % Scholars = percentage of post-681 letters which were sent to or from scholars. Undatable letters are included in the totals but not in the totals for individual kings.

Table 2. Find spot clusters of letters excavated at Kuyunjik.

Collating this data shows there were five major locations where large numbers of letters were found (**Table 2**). Three areas of the Southwest Palace primarily contained letters from the reign of Esarhaddon or later: (Rooms 40-41; Court 6 and Rooms 7-8; and Room 54 and the surrounding terraced area); as did the North Palace. By contrast, the large oval excavated by George Smith on the east side of the palace in 1873 and 1874 (encompassing courts 19 and 49 as well as rooms 29, 34, and 38-42) primarily contained letters from the reigns of Sargon II and Sennacherib. Letters from scholars consistently make up about half of the post-681 BCE correspondence in every location except for Layard's excavations of Rooms 40-41 (the 'Library of Ashurbanipal'), where the percentage of letters from scholars is slightly elevated. However, as the total number of letters recovered from this area is small and includes many letters unrelated to scholars, one cannot conclude that letters from scholars were stored in this area.



Because letters from scholars can often be precisely dated, we can determine that letters sent by the chief exorcist Adad-šumu-ušur to Esarhaddon between 671 and 669 BCE were found scattered across Kuyunjik in Court 6/Rooms 7-8, the Room 54 terraced area, Smith's Oval, and Rooms 40-41 as well as in the North Palace (**Figure 1**).⁴⁴ Furthermore, two letters sent to Esarhaddon by the exorcist Marduk-šakin-šumi in the month of Iyyar (II) in 670 BCE, along with three letters sent successively in Tammuz (IV), Ab (V), and Elul (VI) of the same year, were found in the Room 54 terrace. Yet, another letter which he sent in Tammuz 670 was found in the North Palace, and a letter sent in Ab or Elul of the same year was found in Court 6/Rooms 7-8.⁴⁵ It makes little sense that two letters sent from the same person, to the same recipient, in the same month, would be stored not only in two different rooms of the same palace but in two different palaces located half a kilometer apart, the latter of which (the North Palace) was not even built until 646-643 BCE.⁴⁶ Furthermore, a letter sent to Esarhaddon from the scholar, Kudurru, as well as another sent by Akkullanu to Ashurbanipal are made up of multiple fragments which were later joined together at the museum, some of which were found in the Room 54 terrace of the Southwest Palace and others in the North Palace.⁴⁷

The only way these deposition patterns make sense is if the letters were not recovered from an archival context but were instead deposited in fill layers during renovation or construction work on the

⁴⁴ SAA 10 207, 220 (Court 6/Rooms 7-8); SAA 10 211, 222 (Rooms 40-41); SAA 10 190, 200, 203, 213, 217, 259 (Room 54 area); SAA 10 202 (Smith's oval); SAA 10 206 (North Palace). All assignments of locations follow Reade, "Ninive (Nineveh), p. 422.

⁴⁵ SAA 10 243, 265 (Iyyar 670 letters from Room 54 area); SAA 10 246-248 (Tammuz/Ab/Elul 670 letters from Room 54 area); SAA 10 244 (Tammuz 670, North Palace); SAA 10 252 (Ab/Elul 670, Court 6/Rooms 7-8). All assignments of locations follow Reade, "Ninive (Nineveh)," 422.

⁴⁶ David Kertai, *The Architecture of Late Assyrian Royal Palaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167-84.

⁴⁷ SAA 10 179 (Kudurru to Esarhaddon; accession numbers 1883-1-18, 122 + 1904-10-9, 169) and SAA 10 100 (Akkullanu to Ashurbanipal; 1883-1-18, 61 + 1904-10-9, 59).

palace, similar to how the letters found in the Northwest Palace and the Governor's Palace in Kalhu were discovered buried in fill layers used to raise the level of the floor.⁴⁸ The letters would therefore have been discarded either when Ashurbanipal built the North Palace from 646-643 BCE, or when Šîn-šarru-iškun renovated the southwest terrace of the Southwest Palace some time during the 610s.⁴⁹ The Sargon II correspondence was likely deposited during the original construction of the Southwest Palace by Sennacherib. Letters likely cluster around certain date ranges because they were organized chronologically and these periods happen to have been taken off the shelf and discarded *en masse* as a part of periodically freeing up storage space in the archives.

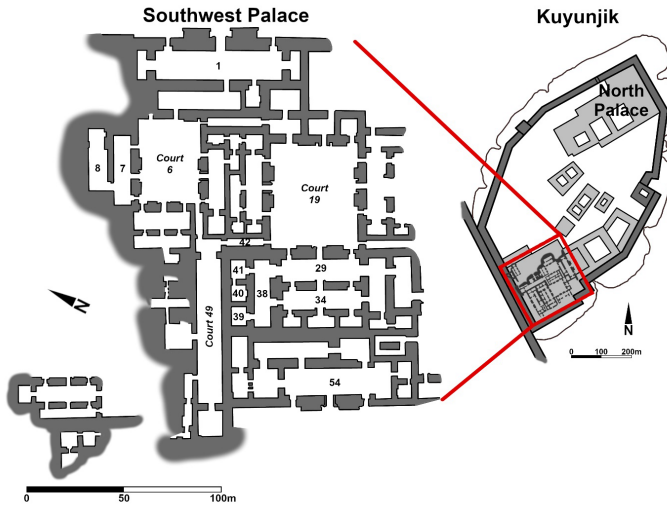


Figure 1. Map of Kuyunjik and the Southwest Palace showing rooms where major deposits of tablets were found. After maps in R. Campbell Thompson and R.W. Hutchinson, *A Century of Exploration at Nineveh* (London: Luzac, 1929), pl. 3 and Reade, “Ninive (Nineveh),” 391.

⁴⁸ Max E.L. Mallowan, “The Excavations at Nimrud,” *Iraq* 15 (1953): 1-42, here 32-33; Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* (London: Collins, 1966), vol 1, 43-51, 172-73; J.N. Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1973), 4-7.

⁴⁹ RINAP 5/2 Šîn-šarru-iškun 1; Margarete Falkner, “Neue Inschriften aus der Zeit Sin-šarru-iškuns,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 16 (1952-1953): 305-10.



If we accept that the letters were recovered from secondary depositions into which the surplus royal archives were discarded, the fact that Esarhaddon/Ashurbanipal letters show that scholarly correspondence made up a fairly consistent 45-55% of letters across all find spots while hardly any scholars' letters appear among the recovered correspondence of Sargon II strongly suggests that the earlier king did not correspond regularly with scholars in the same manner as Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. This is not to say that scholars were not present in Assyria during Sargon II's reign, only that they did not enjoy the same access to the king as they did during the the reign of these later kings. The temple appears to have been the primary employer of scholars throughout the Middle and early Neo-Assyrian periods, as it was in all periods in Babylonia.⁵⁰ Even as scholars took on an important role in crafting Sargon II's royal propaganda, Sargon appears to have kept them at arms length and did not allow them access to the inner circles of power.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 50-53, 128-40; Troels Pank Arbøll, "Magical and Medical Knowledge on the Fringe of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: The Cuneiform Tablets from the Danish Excavations of Ḥamā in Syria (1931-1938)," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 26 (2020): 1-22, here 9-15; Arbøll, *Medicine in Ancient Assur* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 253-268; Philippe Clancier, "Qurdi-Nergal's house in Huzirina," *The Geography of Knowledge*, 2019 <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cams/gkab/contexts/huzirina/> (accessed November 21, 2023); Natalie Naomi May, "The Connection of Neo-Assyrian Scholars to the Temple Officialdom: Some Evidence, Mostly from Colophons," *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2017-2: 96-101; May, "Exorcists and Physicians at Assur: More on their Education and Interfamily and Court Connections," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 108 (2018): 63-80. For scholars in Babylonia, see Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 149-173. For Babylonian city governors patronizing scholars in the period prior to Assyrian rule, see Steven W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1996), 51.

⁵¹ The scholars Nabû-zuqup-kenu and Nabû-šallimšunu, both linked to the temple of Nabû in Kalhu, played a key role in composing Sargon II's royal inscriptions and harnessing scribal knowledge to support royal propaganda. Nabû-zuqup-kenu was a descendant of Gabbu-ilani-ereš, who had served as a scribe under Tukulti-Ninurta II (r. 890-884) and Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859). Nevertheless, no letters from either scholar survive. Nabû-šallimšunu is mentioned in a single letter from Sargon's reign, see SAA 1 71: r. 7'-r.e. 11. Nabû-zuqup-kenu does not appear in any letters. For their roles under Sargon II, see Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 75-76, 93 n. 119; Natalie Naomi May, "The Scholar and Politics: Nabû-zuqup-kēnu, his Colophons, and the Ideology of Sargon II," in *Proceedings of the International Conference Dedicated to the Centenary of Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff (1915-1999)*, ed. Natalya V. Koslova (St. Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2018), 110-164; Eckart Frahm, "Nabû-zuqup-kēnu, das Gilgameš-Epos und der Tod Sargons II," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 51 (1999): 73-90. Gabbu-ilani-ereš is attested in the Synchronistic King List, see Fei Chen, *Study on the Synchronistic King List from Ashur* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 31-38, A. 117 col. iii ln. 17, 19.

Scholars and Social Networks under Esarhaddon

A social network of correspondents during the reign of Esarhaddon reveals a very different picture than the limited status accorded to scholars during the reign of Sargon II. Esarhaddon's network consists of 288 nodes and 488 edges containing 1,231 total communications. Eighteen actors in the network can be identified as temple personnel, fourteen as palace personnel, eight as members of the royal family, and twenty-nine as provincial governors or their subordinates. By comparison, Esarhaddon's network contains fifty scholars, who together sent or received 650 communications in the network – 53% of the total amount of communications. Esarhaddon's correspondence can also be divided into two sub-networks: An early network made up of letters which can be dated to between 680-675 BCE and contains 45 nodes, 53 edges, and 109 total communications; and a late network covering the years 674-669 which contains 94 nodes, 164 edges, and 514 total communications.

Simo Parpola identified seventeen scholars as being part of Esarhaddon's 'inner circle' based on family ties and the volume of their correspondence.⁵² David Brown argued for expanding the inner circle further to accommodate nearly every scholar who authored a significant number of letters to the king or who co-authored letters with other scholars.⁵³ However, volume of correspondence alone is not an indicator of influence: a scholar who sent a large number of messages to the king but received few replies had much less influence than a scholar who wrote less often but whose advice was eagerly sought out by both the king and others. Scholars such as Bel-ušeziḫ and Akkullanu which Parpola included in his inner circle have low scores

⁵² Parpola first proposed sixteen members in *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. xv-xvi; he later added Mar-Issar to increase this number to seventeen in SAA 10 p. xxv-xxvi.

⁵³ Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy*, 47-48.



in both centrality measures because they either only wrote to the king or rarely or never received replies.

Social network analysis allows us to refine Parpola's list. To define the inner circle more rigorously, Z-scores were computed for each node in the network. First, the mean score and standard deviation were calculated for each centrality measure. Esarhaddon and the nodes representing unidentified correspondents were excluded from these calculations. Z-scores were calculated by subtracting the mean score from each node's score and dividing the result by the standard deviation. The resulting Z-score for each node gives their centrality score in terms of number of standard deviations from the mean. Scholars whose score lies greater than one standard deviation above the mean were included in the inner circle.

This allows us to define the inner circle down to ten prominent scholars, nine of whom have a Z-score greater than one in Bonacich centrality and six of whom have a Z-score greater than one in betweenness centrality (**Table 3**). The chief scribe (*rab tuṣṣarri*) Issar-šumu-ereš, the exorcists Adad-šumu-uṣur and Marduk-šakin-šumi, and the scholar and envoy Mar-Issar rank highly in both categories. The astrologers Balasî and Nabû-ahhe-eriba, the exorcists Nabû-našir and Urad-Gula, and the physician Urad-Nanaya score highly in Bonacich centrality only, while the chief scribe Nabû-zeru-lišir has a high score in betweenness centrality alone. Nabû-zeru-lišir's low Bonacich score may be due to an early death, as he does not appear in any sources after 673 (when the majority of Esarhaddon's surviving scholarly correspondence was written) and likely died that year. His son Issar-šumu-ereš took his place as chief scribe.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Issar-šumu-ereš is first attested as *rab tuṣṣarri* only in texts after 673. See PNAE 2-1 p. 577-579; 2-2 p. 911. For Issar-šumu-ereš as the son of Nabû-zeru-lišir, see BAK 344:2-4.

<i>Name:</i>	<i>Bonacich Centrality:</i>	<i>Bonacich Z-score:</i>	<i>Betweenness Centrality:</i>	<i>Betweenness Z-score:</i>
Marduk-šakin-šumi	727.964	8.526025	339.5	1.297676
Balašî	616.437	7.171374	3	-0.2937
Adad-šumu-ušur	581.353	6.74523	1198.833	5.361625
Issar-šumu-ereš	555.394	6.429921	1450.583	6.552198
Nabû-ahhe-eriba	281.374	3.101565	0	-0.30788
Mar-Issar	260.642	2.849746	672	2.870131
Urad-Nanaya	174.447	1.802787	118	0.25016
Nabû-našir	140.321	1.388279	111	0.217056
Urad-Gula	130.321	1.266815	223	0.746725
Nabû-zeru-lišir	50.52	0.29752	334	1.271665

Table 3. The 'Inner Circle' of scholars under Esarhaddon.

Only a handful of other officials have centrality scores comparable to the members of the inner circle. Those other officials with Z-scores at least a standard deviation above the mean in either centrality measure include the crown princes Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin, Esarhaddon's mother Naqia, his son Šamaš-metu-uballit, and a handful of palace, temple, and provincial officials.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ These are the provincial officials Nabû-ra'im-nišešu and Salamanu (situated somewhere in the eastern Zagros); Ninurta-aha-[...] (Babylonia); and Raḥiṣ-Dadi (northern Zagros); the temple officials Suma-iddin, Urdu-Nabû, Nabû-našir, and Urdu-ahhešu; and the palace officials Bel-iqiša, Nabû-šarru-ušur, and Babilayu.



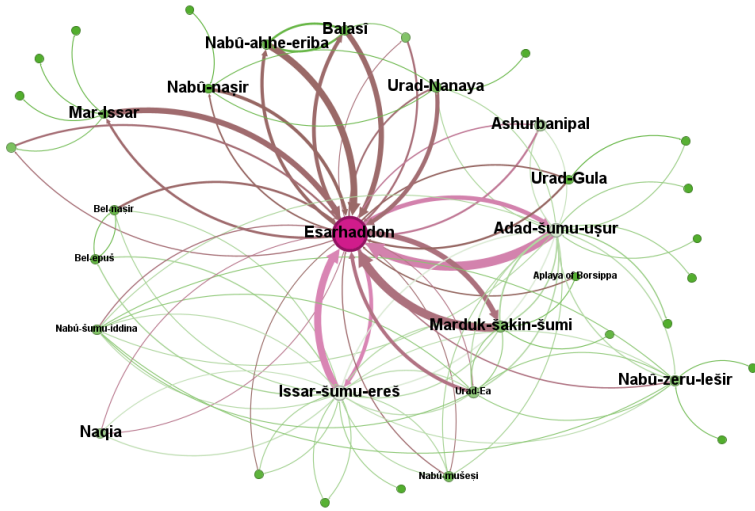


Figure 2. The ‘inner circle’ of Esarhaddon’s scholars. Large labels are members of the inner circle or the royal family, small labels are scholars outside the inner circle who connect to members of the inner circle. Generated using Gephi.

With only a handful of exceptions, scholars in the inner circle are the only ones who recommend the enthronement of a substitute king, the only ones who write letters addressing the king as ‘the farmer’ (*ikkāru*) during a substitute king ritual, and the only ones who advise the king on auspicious and inauspicious days for receiving visitors or performing activities.⁵⁶ Many of them were blood relatives: Nabû-zeru-

⁵⁶ For letters concerning the enthronement of a substitute king, see SAA 10 1, 3, 189, 209, 219-221, 314, 377, (Adad-šumu-ušur); SAA 10 25, 221, 240 (Marduk-šakin-šumi); SAA 10 1, 12, 25 (Issar-šumu-ereš); SAA 10 350-352 (Mar-Išsar); SAA 10 25 (Urad-Ea); SAA 10 1-3 (Nabû-zeru-lišir). The only persons outside the inner circle to recommend enthronement are Urad-Ea and Nabû-šumu-iddina in SAA 10 1:3-4, where they appear as two of five co-authors alongside three members of the inner circle, and Munnabitu in SAA 8 316: r. 1-3, but note that this letter was sent in 677 BC, early in Esarhaddon’s reign, and this scholar is not attested after 674 (SAA 8 317). It is possible that Munnabitu was an important scholar earlier in Esarhaddon’s reign when there are fewer surviving letters.

For letters sent to ‘the farmer,’ see SAA 10 2 (Nabû-zeru-lišir); SAA 10 26 (Issar-šumu-ereš); SAA 10 209-212, 221 (Adad-šumu-ušur); SAA 10 1 (Nabû-zeru-lišir, Adad-šumu-ušur, Nabû-šumu-iddina, Urad-Ea, and Issar-šumu-ereš); SAA 10 212 (Adad-šumu-ušur and Urad-Ea); SAA 10 325 (Urad-Nanaya). In addition to the co-authored

lišir and Adad-šumu-ušur were sons of Nabû-zuqup-kenu, a prominent scribe under Sargon II and a descendant of the scribe Gabbu-ilani-ereš. Issar-šumu-ereš was the son of Nabû-zeru-lišir, while Urad-Gula was the son of Adad-šumu-ušur.⁵⁷ Nabû-zeru-lišir and Issar-šumu-ereš also appear as Esarhaddon's scholars in the *Synchronistic King List*, a late seventh century list of Assyrian and Babylonian kings which also records their most prominent scholars.⁵⁸

However, scholars from the inner circle only make up one-fifth of the fifty scholars attested in Esarhaddon's correspondence. The rest form a long-tail distribution of scholars with low centrality scores (**Figure 3**). Nearly three-fourths of the scholars in the 'out-group' did not correspond with anyone other than the king, and the median number of letters this group sent was two. While all the members of the inner circle except for Mar-Issar appear to have been based in Nineveh, scholars in the outer circle identify themselves as hailing from Aššur, Arbela, Harran, Borsippa, Dilbat, Cutha, and Uruk.⁵⁹ It is not known if these scholars were writing from their hometowns or if they relocated to Nineveh to seek royal employment. In either case, scholars from the out-group were on the outside looking in, sending

SAA 10 1, two additional letters to 'the farmer' from outside the inner circle are known: SAA 10 128 (Nabû-šumu-iddina) and SAA 13 75 (Nergal-šarrani, priest of the Nabû temple in Kalhu).

For letters advising Esarhaddon on auspicious days, see SAA 10 190:11-r. 4, 192: r. 1-9, 203:12-r. 11, 207:5-17, 221: r. 5-12, 314:3'-11' (Adad-šumu-ušur); SAA 10 233: r. 6-12, 253:15-r. 12, 254: r. 2-13, 260:10-r. 6 (Marduk-šakin-šumi); SAA 10 5:8-r. 6, 6: r. 11-19, 7:6-14, 13:6-15, 14:8-r. 10, 18:5-r. 9, 19:4'-r. 8 (Issar-šumu-ereš); SAA 10 70:6-14, 73:7-r. 17, 74:6-r. 3 (Nabû-ahhe-eriba); SAA 10 52:6-r. 12 (Balasî); 44:7-14; 53:10-r. 7 (Balasî and Nabû-ahhe-eriba); SAA 10 325: r. 3'-7' (Urad-Nanaya). The lone exception, SAA 16 62:5-9, was sent by the so-called "anonymous informer."

⁵⁷ For Issar-šumu-ereš as the son of Nabû-zeru-lišir see BAK 344:2-4. For Nabû-zeru-lišir as the brother of Adad-šumu-ušur see SAA 10 294: r. 21. For Adad-šumu-ušur as the son of Nabû-zuqup-kenu see colophon in CTN 4 45: r. 4'. For Urad-Gula as Adad-šumu-ušur's son, see SAA 10 226: r. 9-10. For Nabû-zuqup-kenu's role under Sargon II, see May, "The Scholar and Politics"; Frahm, "Nabû-zuqup-kēnu, das Gilgameš-Epos und der Tod Sargons II."

⁵⁸ Chen, *Study on the Synchronistic King List*, 34-37, col. iv ln. 13.

⁵⁹ SAA 8 100-102; SAA 10 84, 148 (Akkullanu, from Aššur); SAA 10 136 (from Arbela); SAA 8 181-183; SAA 10 338-344 (Urad-Ea, from Harran); SAA 8 288-299, 356-357, 374 (Nabû-iqīša, and Aplaya, from Borsippa); SAA 8 477-483 (Nabû-ahhe-iddin, from Dilbat); SAA 8 416; SAA 18 131, 133 (Nabû-iqbi, from Cutha); SAA 8 449-453 (Ahheša, from Uruk).



their observations to the king while receiving infrequent replies and occasional acknowledgment of their services.

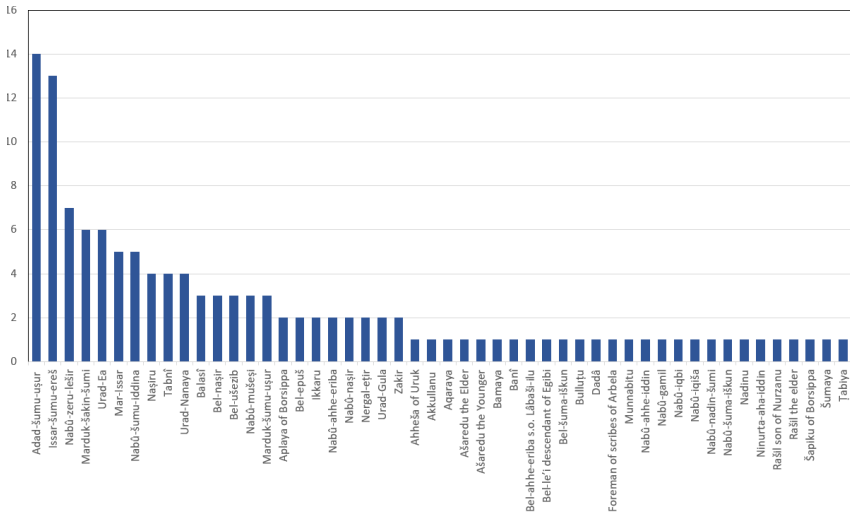


Figure 3. Chart of Esarhaddon's scholars showing the number of other actors to which they connect in the network. All scholars with one connection only connect to Esarhaddon, except for the exorcist Dadā, who connects to the scholar Bel-ušēzib.

What did scholars in the out-group write to the king about? A survey of astronomical omen reports shows that scholars in the out-group were much more likely to report positive omens and less likely to report negative ones (**Table 4**). Omens were classified as positive if they decreed something good for “the land” or for Subartu or Akkad. The latter two terms were equated with Assyria and Babylon by scholars, and as Esarhaddon held both crowns simultaneously omens concerning both regions were of equal relevance.⁶⁰ Omens were also classified as positive if the scholar explicitly stated they should be interpreted as positive. Scholars of the inner circle reported close to equal numbers of positive and negative omens. Scholars in the out-

⁶⁰ Lanfranchi, “Scholars and Scholarly Tradition,” 112-13.

group, however, reported almost three times as many positive omens as negative omens.

If one counts reports which contain a mixture of good and bad omens as a half negative and half positive, then scholars in the out-group reported positive omens in 69% of their reports (not counting those reports which are too damaged to read), compared to 36% for reports from scholars in the inner circle. This is all the more surprising given that the probability of a lunar eclipse omen portending negatively for Assyria was somewhere between 50-60%, depending on the interpretive method used.⁶¹ In short, it appears that only scholars from the inner circle had the standing to deliver bad news to the king. Scholars of lesser status sought to move into the inner circle by sending good news of the gods' continued approval of the king.

<i>Scholars from the inner circle:</i>	<i>Total:</i>	<i>Positive:</i>	<i>Negative:</i>	<i>Neutral:</i>	<i>Mixed:</i>	<i>No Event:</i>	<i>Text Damaged:</i>
Adad-šumu- ušur	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Balašî	11	3	4	1	0	2	1
Issar-šumu- ereš	5	0	2	0	2	1	0
Marduk- šakin-šumi	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
Mar-Issar	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
Nabû-ahhe- eriba	14	6	3	0	2	2	1
Balašî/N-a-e:	2	0	0	1	0	1	0
<i>Scholars from outside the inner circle:</i>	<i>Total:</i>	<i>Positive:</i>	<i>Negative:</i>	<i>Neutral:</i>	<i>Mixed:</i>	<i>No Event:</i>	<i>Text Damaged:</i>
Ahheša	5	4	0	0	1	0	0

⁶¹ Lanfranchi, "Scholars and Scholarly Tradition," 112-13.



Akullanu	4	0	3	0	1	0	0
Ašaredu the elder	4	2	1	0	1	0	0
Ašaredu the younger	5	2	3	0	0	0	0
Bel-le'i	6	3	3	0	0	0	0
Bel-našir	7	4	0	0	0	1	2
Bel-ušeziḅ	10	8	0	0	1	0	1
Nabû-ahhe-iddina	7	3	3	0	1	0	0
Nabû-iqīša	12	10	2	0	0	0	0
Nabû-šumu-iškun	11	5	1	1	3	0	1
Nergal-eṭir	44	22	8	1	6	1	6
Rašil the elder	5	3	1	0	1	0	0
Zakir	17	9	5	0	0	1	2
<i>All others:</i>	23	17	5	2	5	0	0
<i>Total, inner circle:</i>	38	11	12	2	4	6	2
<i>Total, others:</i>	160	92	35	4	20	3	12

Table 4. Omen reports sent by scholars to Esarhaddon, ordered by whether these reports were positive or negative.⁶²

While scholars from the outer circle attempted to curry favor by reporting a statistically unlikely number of positive omens, scholars from the inner circle came to use negative omens to control access to the king. Between June of 679 and June of 669 BCE, eight lunar eclipses were visible in Assyria which would have occasioned the enthronement of a substitute king.⁶³ However, there is no extant evidence confirming that the eclipses of June 1 or July 17, 679 or of

⁶² Compiled from reports in SAA 8 and SAA 10.

⁶³ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. xxiii.

November 3, 677 actually triggered an enthronement.⁶⁴ Although at least sixteen scholars are attested as writing to Esarhaddon during this period, not a single response of the king is recorded, nor do the scholars ever co-author letters. While one report sent by the scholar Munnabitu recommended enthroning a substitute king, his advice is contradicted by a report from another scholar, and there is no evidence that an enthronement actually took place.⁶⁵ Our first firm evidence of a substitute king being enthroned comes from letters sent by scholars from the inner circle in response to an eclipse on September 3, 674 which discuss the unfortunate substitute's time on the throne and his burial.⁶⁶ The presence of a substitute for each of the four eclipses which occurred thereafter is attested by numerous letters which discuss Esarhaddon in hiding as well as the execution and burial of the substitutes.⁶⁷

If each instance (with the exception of the two eclipses which occurred fourteen days apart in 669) required the king to remain secluded for the full one hundred days normally required, this would mean that Esarhaddon spent more than one-fifth of his final five years as king in hiding while a substitute sat on the throne in either Assyria or Babylon.⁶⁸ Scholars appear to have controlled access to the king during these periods. Letters attest to Adad-šumu-ušur approving visitors to

⁶⁴ While Parpola suggests in *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. xxiii that SAA 10 219 (=LAS 136; the letter refers to a substitute king) dates to the eclipse of November 3, 677 BC, he reversed himself later in the volume and identified this letter as referring to the eclipses of May 27 or June 10, 669 BC based on astronomical data. See *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. 123.

⁶⁵ SAA 8 316:18-r. 6 (May 22, 678 BC); cf. the report on the same eclipse from the scholar Ašaredu the Elder in SAA 8 336 which does not recommend enthronement.

⁶⁶ SAA 10 1-3. For the dating of these letters see Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. 35-38.

⁶⁷ SAA 10 12, 314, 347, 350 (eclipse of July 2, 671); SAA 10 240, 377, 351 (December 27, 671); SAA 10 25 (May 27, 669); SAA 10 26, 128, 325 (June 10, 669).

⁶⁸ Calculated based on a full one hundred days for each eclipse plus fourteen days for the eclipse of May 27, 669, divided by the 1,886 days separating the September 3, 674 eclipse and Esarhaddon's death on November 1, 669. Dates have been converted to the Julian calendar using the tables in Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. 382-83.



the king and Urad-Nanaya forbidding the crown princes from going outside during the ritual.⁶⁹

Attestations of the substitute king ritual are rare outside of Esarhaddon's reign. The ritual is attested as being performed twice late in the reign of Adad-nirari III sometime between 786 and 783 BCE, but is not explicitly attested anywhere else in Assyria prior to the reign of Esarhaddon.⁷⁰ The rhetorical phrase "I would go as a substitute for the king" in letter greeting formulae from Babylonia was common from the Old Babylonian period onwards, so its continued use in letters from the reign of Sargon II does not imply that the ritual was currently being practiced.⁷¹ It seems likely that the inner circle of scholars revived a ritual which had long since fallen out of use in order to control access to the king. Likewise, auspicious days are first referenced in the royal inscriptions of Sargon II describing the founding of Dur-Šarrukin, but there is no evidence for kings prior to Esarhaddon's reign following a regimen of auspicious days which determined their movements and when they would receive visitors.⁷²

Both practices gave the scholars of the inner circle control over Esarhaddon's movements and allowed them to dictate which officials could have access to him. The frequent use of co-authored letters among scholars of the inner circle represents an extra effort at persuasion by presenting a certain course of action as the consensus of

⁶⁹ SAA 10 209-211 (Adad-šumu-ušur approves visitors); SAA 10 314 (Urad-Nanaya forbids the crown princes from going outside).

⁷⁰ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. xxvii-xxviii. The attestations under Adad-nirari III are known from administrative texts only, see D.J. Wiseman, "The Nimrud Tablets, 1953," *Iraq* 15 (1953): 135-160, here 148 & pl. XV, ND 3483 and 3484; CTN 1 33; CTN 3 141.

⁷¹ Erkki Salonen, *Die Gruss- und Höflichkeitsformeln in Babylonisch-Assyrischen Briefen* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Kirjapaino Oy Helsinki, 1967), 103-05. For its use in the Neo-Assyrian period see SAA 17 10:2-3. For other instances see SAA 17 *passim*, SAA 19 99, 122, 131, 134-142, 149, 201. Of special note is SAA 17 20:2-3, where the author substitutes the *sukkallu* for the king. After the reign of Sargon II only two letters use this phrase, see SAA 10 160:4 (Esarhaddon); SAA 21 113:3 (Ashurbanipal).

⁷² RINAP 2 2:483.

multiple experts.⁷³ The picture of scholars during Esarhaddon's reign is therefore one in which a small group of scholars occupied positions of great power and influence, while a much larger group attempted to curry favor in hopes of someday being invited to join this inner circle.

When did this situation come into being? While letters from scholars make up about half of the letters which can be dated from earlier in Esarhaddon's reign, Nabû-ahhe-eriba is the only scholar from the inner circle who appears in the earlier correspondence.⁷⁴ There are no letters describing the reign of a substitute king, nor are there any letters informing the king about auspicious days. All of these appear in the correspondence from 674 BCE onwards. We can only speculate as to what internal or external pressures caused Esarhaddon to turn towards scholars during the latter half of his reign.

Esarhaddon's attitude towards scholars combined utter confidence in their methods with a measured trust of the persons employing them. Early in his reign, the scholar Bel-ušeziḫ warned him in a letter that during the reign of his father the interpreters of astronomical omens and extispicy experts had conspired together to conceal negative omens from the king.⁷⁵ Esarhaddon's own scholars sometimes pleaded that they had not hidden any omens from the king, defending themselves against a concern Esarhaddon must have sometimes expressed.⁷⁶ His suspicions were not unfounded: as has been shown above, his more junior scholars showed a clear preference for

⁷³ For co-authored letters from the inner circle see SAA 10 3 (Adad-šumu-ušur and Nabû-zeru-lišir); SAA 10 209, 256, 259 (Adad-šumu-ušur and Marduk-šakin-šumi); SAA 10 24 (Adad-šumu-ušur, Issar-šumu-ereš, and Marduk-šakin-šumi); SAA 10 205 (Adad-šumu-ušur, Issar-šumu-ereš, plus Nabû-mušeši); SAA 10 1 (Adad-šumu-ušur, Nabû-zeru-lišir, Nabû-šumu-iddina, Urad-Ea, and Issar-šumu-ereš); SAA 10 212 (Adad-šumu-ušur plus Urad-Ea); SAA 10 40-41, 43-44, 47, 50, 53 (Balasî and Nabû-ahhe-eriba); SAA 10 25 (Issar-šumu-ereš, Marduk-šakin-šumi, plus Urad-Ea); SAA 10 297 (Nabû-našir and Urad-Nanaya).

⁷⁴ SAA 8 39.

⁷⁵ SAA 10 109: r. 1-10; dated by the discussion of the events surrounding Sennacherib's assassination in ln. 7'-21' and r. 14-15.

⁷⁶ SAA 10 265: r. 7-14, 286: r. 2'-11'.



reporting positive omens over negative ones. While Esarhaddon was probably literate, he was unlikely to have mastered the obscure signs and knowledge of the Sumerian language needed to read scholarly texts, as evidenced by the glosses which his scholars sometimes added to their reports for the king's benefit.⁷⁷ Although Esarhaddon sometimes attempted to obtain independent interpretations from his scholars and prevent them from conspiring together to agree on an interpretation, he was ultimately at his scholars' mercy when it came to understanding the complex astronomical texts from which they drew their interpretations.⁷⁸ As Balasî wrote in one letter to the king after Esarhaddon attempted to read the standard birth omen series for himself, "Šumma izbu is difficult to interpret...truly, [one] who has [not] had the meaning pointed out to him cannot hope to understand it!"⁷⁹

Scholars and Social Networks under Ashurbanipal

The network of Ashurbanipal and later kings contains 259 nodes and 412 edges containing 843 separate communications. Eleven actors in the network can be identified as temple personnel, eleven as palace personnel, six as members of the royal family, eight as tribal leaders,

⁷⁷ Simo Parpola, "The Man Without a Scribe and the Question of Literacy in the Assyrian Empire," in *Ana šadī Labnāni lū allik: Beiträge zu altorientalischen und mittelmeerischen Kulturen*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Hartmut Kühne, and Paolo Xella (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 315-324, here 321 n. 17, estimates that basic literacy in Neo-Assyrian would require knowing only 79 syllabograms and 33 of the most common logograms. Others have come up with similar estimates for other periods of Akkadian literature, see Dominique Charpin, "Lire et écrire en Mésopotamie: une affaire de spécialistes?," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 148 (2004): 481-508; Eleanor Robson, "Do Not Disperse the Collection! Motivations and Strategies for Protecting Cuneiform Scholarship in the First Millennium BCE," in *Sharing and Hiding Religious Knowledge in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Mladen Popović, Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, and Care Wilde (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 8-45. For evidence of Esarhaddon's basic literacy, see SAA 10 235: r. 4-9; RINAP 4 13:3. For glosses made by scholars in their reports, see SAA 8 65:2. See also Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology*, 60; Giovanni B. Lanfranchi, "The Library at Nineveh," in *Capital Cities: Urban Planning and Spiritual Dimensions: Proceedings of the Symposium held on May 27-29, 1996, Jerusalem, Israel*, ed. Joan Goodnick Westenholz (Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 1998), 147-56, here 152-53.

⁷⁸ For a case where Esarhaddon attempted to gain a second opinion about an observation of Mars and Saturn with regards to an auspicious day, see Verderame, "A Glimpse into the Activities of Experts"; Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology*, 64-65.

⁷⁹ SAA 10 60: r. 1-2, r. 10-14.

six as foreign kings, twenty-nine as provincial governors or their subordinates, and thirteen as bodies of assembled elders representing the people of Babylonian cities. Twenty-two scholars are present in the network, who together sent or received 126 communications, representing only 15% of the total communications in contrast to 53% in Esarhaddon's network. Two smaller networks were also constructed, one from 669-664 BCE which contains 21 nodes, 31 edges, and 75 messages; and another from 652-646 containing 88 nodes, 138 edges, and 265 total messages.

The network includes twenty-nine communications from the reign of Sîn-šarru-iškun, two from the reign of Aššur-uballiṭ II, thirty-six which could date from late in Ashurbanipal's reign or in the reign of a later king, and five dating to one of the kings following Ashurbanipal but which could not be dated more precisely. The network includes many private archives dating from the final fifty years of the empire, which form their own networks distinct from the main network and cause some of their members to score very highly in the Bonacich centrality measure. Letters from the western half of the empire are completely absent from Ashurbanipal's correspondence. Except for correspondence with foreign kings in Urartu, Elam, and Dilmun, all letters originate either from the Assyrian heartland or from Babylonia.

Despite even narrower geographic limitations on the corpus, letters to and from scholars make up a much lower percentage of Ashurbanipal's correspondence than they did under Esarhaddon. Nearly all the scholarly correspondence from Ashurbanipal's reign dates from the 674-664 BCE cluster of letters which represents continuity from Esarhaddon's correspondence. There are only twenty-three letters from scholars which date from later than 664, and none which can be



dated to the reigns of the kings who came after Ashurbanipal.⁸⁰ The latest known letter sent by a scholar was sent sometime shortly after 648 BCE.⁸¹

Whereas Esarhaddon's network features a clear 'inner circle' of scholars who have centrality scores much higher than the majority of scholars as well as other officials, there are only three scholars in Ashurbanipal's network who have a betweenness centrality score higher than zero. Only one scholar – Akkullanu – has a Z-score more than one standard deviation above the mean in betweenness centrality, and no scholar has a Bonacich centrality score above this mark. Four scholars – Akkullanu, Babu-šumu-iddina, and former inner circle members Nabû-ahhe-eriba and Issar-šumu-ereš – achieve a Bonacich score more than one standard deviation *below* the average,

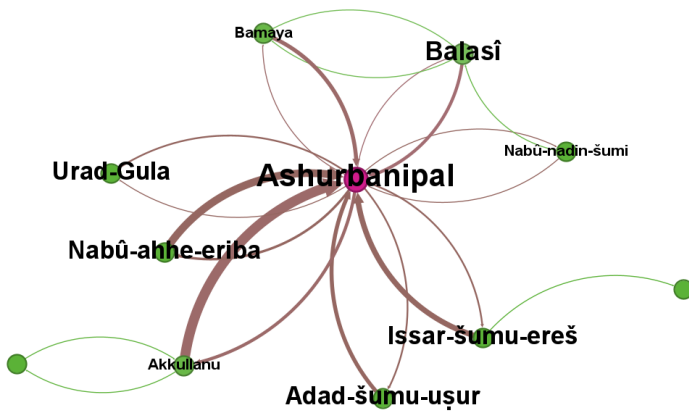


Figure 4. Social networks of scholars formerly part of Esarhaddon's 'inner circle' during the reign of Ashurbanipal. Scholars from outside the inner circle are shown in a smaller font. Compared to **Figure 2**, this graph shows decreased connections between scholars and between scholars and non-scholars. Generated using Gephi.

⁸⁰ SAA 10 160 (660 BC); SAA 8 8, 104, 186; SAA 10 100, 104 (657); SAA 10 102 (c. 657-655); SAA 10 138 (651); SAA 10 105, 131-133, 135, 139, 142 (650); SAA 10 101, 345-346 (650s); SAA 8 487; SAA 10 134, 140 (649); SAA 10 141 (648); CT 35 37-38 (sometime after 648). Note that SAA 10 149, originally dated by Parpola to 621 BC, has been re-dated to 678 during the reign of Esarhaddon. See Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 95-96 n. 168.

⁸¹ CT 35 37-38; translated in Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria*, 374-75.

Only sixteen of the fifty scholars who appears by name in Esarhaddon's correspondence also appear in Ashurbanipal's letters. This is not merely a product of normal turnover: those sixteen scholars make up the majority of scholars attested by name from the reign of Ashurbanipal. The missing scholars from Esarhaddon's correspondence were mostly not replaced. Only five scholars appear by name in Ashurbanipal's letters who were not also attested in Esarhaddon's correspondence, and all of them have very low centrality scores. Of the ten scholars in Esarhaddon's inner circle, Nabû-zero-lišir was probably deceased by the time Ashurbanipal took the throne in 669 BCE as he is not attested in any documents after 673.⁸² The physician Urad-Ea, the exorcists Nabû-našir and Marduk-šakin-šumi, and the scholar Mar-Issar also do not appear in Ashurbanipal's correspondence.

To compare centrality scores in networks of different sizes, scores must first be normalized by dividing each score by the maximum possible score for that network. Comparing normalized scores from the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal shows that nearly every scholar with a Bonacich or betweenness score higher than zero experienced a decline in centrality scores of 75% or more (**Table 5**; **Table 6**). The one exception is Akkullanu, a scholar of little importance during Esarhaddon's reign who rose to become the only scholar of any appreciable centrality during the reign of Ashurbanipal. This decline is especially striking among the five remaining members of the inner circle, who all exhibit sharp declines in centrality measures relative to both to the positions which they held under Esarhaddon and to other persons in Ashurbanipal's network (**Figure 5**).

For reasons outlined above, comparisons across the 6-year subset networks must be done with caution, due to both the small sample size

⁸² PNAE 2/1, pp. 577-79.



and the fact that letters from scholars are more likely to be dated with precision. The smaller sample sizes and the removal of most of the non-scholarly correspondence from the networks spanning 674-664 combine to have a major distorting effect on complex centrality measures such as the Bonacich measure. Nevertheless, while scholars account for the vast majority of the letters which can be dated to Ashurbanipal's early years from 669-664, few of them connect to anyone besides the king. In sharp contrast to the final years of Esarhaddon, only one co-authored letter is evident, and of the thirteen scholars in this network only Akkullanu connects with anyone other than the king or a co-author.⁸³ With the exception of Balasî, who co-authored a letter to Ashurbanipal with the astrologer Bamaya, none of the scholars of the inner circle communicate with anyone other than the king.

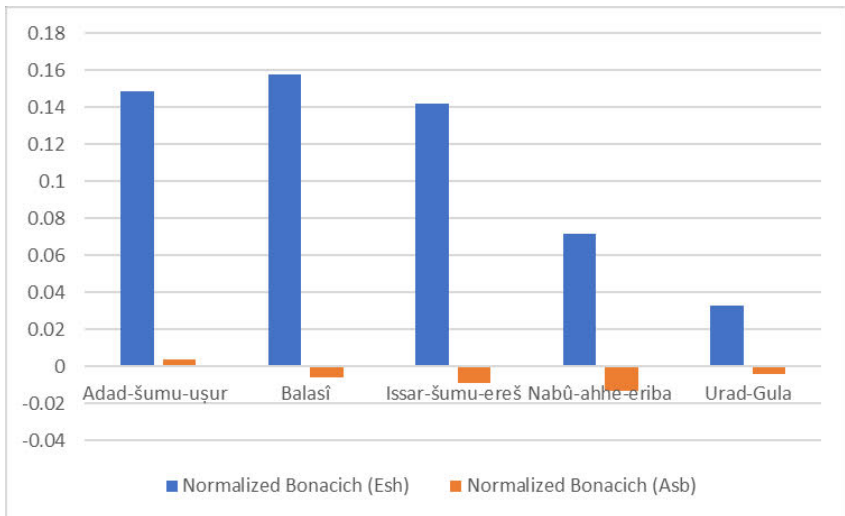


Figure 5. Chart of changes in normalized Bonacich centrality scores among members of the inner circle between Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.

⁸³ SAA 10 63 (co-authored letter from Balasî and Bamaya); SAA 10 95 (Akkullanu communicates with Ashurbanipal and a temple official).

<i>Inner Circle:</i>	<i>n-betweenness (Esarhaddon):</i>	<i>n-betweenness (Ashurbanipal):</i>	<i>Percent Change:</i>
Adad-šumu-ušur	1.509	0	-100%
Balašî	0.004	0.001	-75%
Issar-šumu-ereš	1.777	0.175	-90%
Nabû-ahhe-eriba	0	0	N/A
Urad-Gula	0.272	0	-100%
<i>Scholars outside the inner circle:</i>	<i>n-betweenness (Esarhaddon):</i>	<i>n-betweenness (Ashurbanipal):</i>	<i>Percent Change:</i>
Akkullanu	0	0.314	N/A
Ašaredu the elder	0	0	N/A
Bamaya	0	0	N/A
Marduk-šumu-ušur	0	0	N/A
Nabû-iqbi of Cutha	0	0	N/A
Nabû-mušeši	0	0	N/A
Nabû-nadin-šumi	0	0	N/A
Nadinu	0	0	N/A
Rašîl the elder	0	0	N/A
Šumaya	0	0	N/A
Ṭabiya	0	0	N/A

Table 5. Comparison of normalized betweenness centrality scores of scholars who appear in both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal's networks.

<i>Inner Circle:</i>	<i>n-Bonacich ($\beta=-1$) (Esarhaddon):</i>	<i>n-Bonacich ($\beta=-1$) (Ashurbanipal):</i>	<i>Percent Change:</i>
Adad-šumu-ušur	0.149	0.004	-97%
Balašî	0.158	-0.006	-104%
Issar-šumu-ereš	0.142	-0.009	-106%
Nabû-ahhe-eriba	0.072	-0.013	-118%
Urad-Gula	0.033	-0.004	-112%
<i>Scholars outside the inner circle:</i>	<i>n-Bonacich ($\beta=-1$) (Esarhaddon):</i>	<i>n-Bonacich ($\beta=-1$) (Ashurbanipal):</i>	<i>Percent Change:</i>
Akkullanu	0.008	-0.02	-350%
Ašaredu the elder	0	0	N/A
Bamaya	0	0	N/A
Marduk-šumu-ušur	0.001	0	-100%



Nabû-iqbi of Cutha	0	-0.004	N/A
Nabû-mušeši	0.014	0	-100%
Nabû-nadin-šumi	0.008	0.001	-87.5%
Nadinu	0	0	N/A
Rašil the elder	0	0	N/A
Šumaya	0	0	N/A
Ṭabiya	0	0	N/A

Table 6. Comparison of normalized Bonacich centrality scores of scholars who appear in both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal's networks.

Ashurbanipal's much larger 652-646 network also shows clear signs of a decline in scholarly influence. Scholars only account for fifteen of the 142 letters assigned to this network. None of the members of Esarhaddon's inner circle appear in this network, but no scholars seem to have risen to take their place. None of the five scholars who do appear in this network have centrality scores which rise at least one standard deviation above the mean, not even Nadinu, who had also served under Esarhaddon and by now had two decades or more of scholarly experience. Three of the five scholars in this network do not appear in either Ashurbanipal's 669-664 network or in Esarhaddon's network, and may represent a small amount of generational replacement. Three of these five scholars originated from outside of Nineveh and it is not clear that they were employed in the royal court.⁸⁴

What caused the scores of scholars to decline so sharply? A closer examination shows that the ways that scholars of the inner circle

⁸⁴ Babu-šumu-iddina describes himself as being "of Kalhu" in SAA 10 134:3, while the lamentation priest Nabû-zeru-iddina (author of SAA 10 345-346) is described in a colophon from Nineveh as the son of Urad-Ea, lamentation priest of Sin in Harran (BAK 500:2-3); however, it should be noted that he also appears on a list of scholars found at Nineveh (SAA 7 1: r. col. i ln. 1). Issar-nadin-apli (author of SAA 10 136-142) describes himself as *rab ešrāti ša* ¹⁰*ṣupšarri ša* ^{URU}*Arbail*, "chief of the ten scribes of Arbela" (SAA 10 138:3-5), although one of his letters (SAA 10 137) can be dated by astronomical observations to either December 17, 670 or June 11, 667 BC. See Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, p. 86. Nergal-šumu-iddina (SAA 10 131-133) and Nadinu (SAA 8 487; dating to May 1, 649) have no clear connection to another city. Nadinu also authored a report to Esarhaddon (SAA 8 486) which can be dated to April 10, 670, meaning that his two surviving datable reports were written twenty-one years apart.

connected to other actors changes from Esarhaddon to Ashurbanipal. Under Esarhaddon, Adad-šumu-ušur sent messages to twelve other actors while receiving messages from eleven. His nephew Issar-šumu-ereš sent messages to twelve and received messages from thirteen. Under Ashurbanipal, Issar-šumu-ereš sent messages to two actors and received messages only from the king, while Adad-šumu-ušur corresponded with the king only. Other persons no longer saw these scholars as persons of influence through whom they could connect to the king. Scholars from the inner circle also no longer co-authored letters in the same way they did under Esarhaddon.

Only one scholar managed to increase his centrality score under Ashurbanipal: the scholar Akkullanu, who had been of little consequence under Esarhaddon, managed to maintain an unusually long career under Ashurbanipal, corresponding with the king into the 650s.⁸⁵ However, Akkullanu scores very low in the Bonacich centrality measure, suggesting his status was highly dependent on the king.

Overall, the picture which social network analysis reveals is that under Ashurbanipal the status of scholars in the inner circle declined to a level similar to that of scholars in the out-group under Esarhaddon, while scholars from the out-group largely ceased to write to the king altogether. Presumably, after hearing of the decline in status of the inner circle many of them lost hope that the new king would reward them, and so returned to the temples to continue their work there. A few new scholars appear in Ashurbanipal's later letters, but most scholars ceased to write to the king and were not replaced.

⁸⁵ SAA 8 104; SAA 10 100 (both 657); SAA 10 101 (mid 650s). Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 94-96 also assigns SAA 10 104-105 (both from 650 BC) to Akkullanu based on unenumerated stylistic comparisons, but I regarded them as from an unknown sender for the purpose of network analysis. Akkullanu is also mentioned in two letters from 650 BC, see SAA 21 28: r. 12-19; SAA 22 17: r. 15'.



Explaining the Decline of Court Scholars under Ashurbanipal

While social network data can reveal changes in centrality over time, it cannot by itself reveal the causes of this decline. This requires a close examination of written sources from the early reign of Ashurbanipal. Signs of friction between Ashurbanipal and the scholars are visible even when he was crown prince: letters attest that Ashurbanipal declined to hire Šumaya son of Nabû-zeru-lišir and Tabnî, most likely the son of the chief haruspex Marduk-šumu-ušur, despite their fathers' service to Esarhaddon.⁸⁶ When Nabû-ahhe-eriba, a former member of the inner circle, wrote to inform the king of the first lunar eclipse of his reign on April 21, 667 BCE (16-I-667 in the Assyrian calendar),⁸⁷ he received a reply which caused him to draft another letter in response:

Concerning the report of the lunar eclipse about which the king my lord wrote to me: they gathered and brought in all the reports of the scribes specializing in (the astronomical omen series) *Enūma Anu Enlil* into the presence of the father of the king my lord. Afterwards, a scholar whom the father of the king my lord chose would read them in a *qirsu* by the river. Nowadays it can be done in whatever way is suitable to the king my lord.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ SAA 10 182 (Tabnî); SAA 16 34 (Šumaya). For Šumaya's status as the son of Issar-šumu-ereš, see SAA 10 257: r. 7, 291: r. 1-2. Tabnî is nowhere explicitly named as Marduk-šumu-ušur's son, but this can be inferred through his description of his father as *rab bārûti* in SAA 10 182:13, r. 27. Marduk-šumu-ušur is identified as *rab bārûti* in SAA 6 339: r. 7; SAA 7 7: r. col. ii ln. 7. Tabnî and Marduk-šarru-ušur also co-authored a number of letters and omen queries dating from the reign of Esarhaddon, see SAA 10 177; SAA 4 18, 139, 155, 185. For the expectation that a crown prince should hire the sons of his father's officials, see Jones, "Power and Elite Competition in the Neo-Assyrian Empire," 363-68.

⁸⁷ SAA 10 75.

⁸⁸ SAA 10 76:7-r. 10.

A *qirsu* was a portable tent shrine used to perform aspects of various rituals, including the substitute king ritual.⁸⁹ The secrecy surrounding these reports could only have increased the control which the scholars of the inner circle maintained over Esarhaddon. While the eclipse of 667 did not call for the enthronement of a substitute, Ashurbanipal clearly had no intention of continuing his father's practice of receiving reports in secret.

The tensions between Ashurbanipal and his scholars became more apparent a year later, when a partial lunar eclipse occurred in conjunction with Jupiter on April 10, 666 BCE (15-I-666). This portended evil for Subartu and that an important person would die in the place of the king.⁹⁰ Ashurbanipal responded to his scholars' recommendations by doing nothing for several months, even though the *sartinnu* died within a month of the eclipse.⁹¹ Eighty-six days into the one-hundred-day period specified by lunar eclipse omens, Akkullanu finally sent a sharply-worded letter asking "why is nothing being done month after month? [It] is a crime! Something will come of it!"⁹²

Akkullanu recommended that Ashurbanipal confine himself to the palace while the ritual "Giving a Person's Substitute to Ereškigal" was performed.⁹³ Ashurbanipal instead enthroned an inanimate statue as a

⁸⁹ For a discussion of the form and functions of the *qirsu*, see Natalie Naomi May, "The *Qersu* in Neo-Assyrian Cultic Setting: Its Origin, Identification, Depiction and Evolution," in *Language in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 53rd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Vol. 1, Part 1*, ed. Leonid E. Kogan, Natalia Koslova, Sergey Loesov and Serguei Tishchenko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 441-489.

⁹⁰ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 304-05, 406.

⁹¹ SAA 10 90: r. 7'-16'.

⁹² SAA 10 89: r. 9-11.

⁹³ This ritual called for sacrificing and burying a goat in order to absorb the sickness from a person. For the text of the ritual, see Lorenzo Verderame, "Means of Substitution: The Use of Figurines, Animals, and Human Beings as Substitutes in Assyrian Rituals," in *Approaching Rituals in Ancient Cultures: Proceedings of the Conference, November 28-30, 2011*, ed. Claus Ambos and Lorenzo Verderame (Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2013), 301-323. Ashurbanipal would have been familiar with it as it had been performed on his behalf when he was crown prince, see SAA 10 193:14-r. 3.



substitute in Akkad, but did not reply to Akkullanu's letter or inform him of this decision until after the ritual had been completed.⁹⁴ Akkullanu was furious, writing a lengthy letter castigating the king for enthroning a substitute in Akkad where it would protect Šamaš-šumu-ukin rather than himself. He couched his criticism as protecting the king's best interests, saying "if I had not talked to the king my lord today, in the morning would the king not say to his servant: 'You were a servant of my father, why did you not advise and explain to me?'"⁹⁵ He further suggested the king may have been poorly advised by other scholars.⁹⁶ Yet Ashurbanipal had studied the omen corpora himself when crown prince, and may have known that eclipses in the month of Nisan were usually taken to pertain to Akkad, as were eclipses which occurred in the evening. The eclipse of April 10 moved from left to right across the lower part of the moon, exiting in the quadrant which some interpretive schemes associated with Akkad.⁹⁷ It is entirely possible that Ashurbanipal pursued his own interpretation of the omen and chose a course of action at odds with the recommendations of his scholars – one which did not require him to isolate himself.

Ashurbanipal's choice to use an inanimate statue (*šalam pūhi*) rather than a live human (*šar pūhi*) as a substitute king represented a departure from normal practice under Esarhaddon, although it was not unprecedented in Assyrian rituals.⁹⁸ In fact, despite the occurrence

⁹⁴ SAA 10 90: r. 26-s. 3.

⁹⁵ SAA 10 90: r. 17'-21'

⁹⁶ SAA 10 90:14-21.

⁹⁷ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 404, 406-07; Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology: An Introduction to Babylonian and Assyrian Celestial Divination* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1995), 101-04.

⁹⁸ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 305-06 argues that *šalam pūhi* in SAA 10 90:5 refers to a live human substitute, as the same term is used in the Neo-Babylonian *Chronicle of Early Kings* to describe the comical figure Enlil-bani, who allegedly became king of Isin in the early second millennium when the real king died during the course of the ritual. See A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns,

of several solar eclipses as well as a great number of lunar eclipses during his reign, some of which portended evil for Subartu, only two substitutions rituals are attested as being carried out under Ashurbanipal. There is no evidence that Ashurbanipal ever carried out a substitute king ritual using a live human being.⁹⁹ The only other text possibly referencing a substitution ritual from his reign is an anonymous ritual instruction addressed to ‘the farmer’ which describes a helical rising of Mars in Aries that could only have occurred on April 18, 689 or May 4, 657 BCE.¹⁰⁰ Parpola preferred the latter date as a solar eclipse had occurred only nineteen days prior, but another solar eclipse had occurred ninety-eight days prior to the April 689 rising, and it is possible that the rituals were intended to close out the king’s term as a substitute. In any case, the type of substitute is not mentioned, and it is possible that this ritual was also carried out using an inanimate image.

Ashurbanipal also does not seem to have consulted his scholars about evil or auspicious days, as this topic is conspicuously absent from his correspondence compared to the letters between scholars and Esarhaddon. It would be inaccurate to say that Ashurbanipal completely disregarded his scholars’ expertise. He occasionally wrote to them inquiring about observations of expected lunar eclipses,

200), 155, Chron. 22A ln. 32. However, the *āšipu* Nabû-našir mentions rituals conducted with inanimate figurines in a letter to Esarhaddon, including a *šalam pūhi amēli ša tiṭṭi*, “a substitute image of a man made of clay,” a *šalam pūhi amēli ša iškiri*, “a substitute image of a man made of wax,” and a *šalam pūhi amēli ša tiṭṭi paḷaḡ kirie*, “a substitute image of a man made from clay from a garden ditch” (SAA 10 296: r. 5-7). The use of *šalam pūhi* to describe Enlil-bani may be a comical reference to this last type of figurine, as the chronicle describes Enlil-bani as a *nukaribba* (LÚ.NU.SAR; Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 155, Chron. 22 ln. 31), “gardener,” derived from the same word and written with the same logogram as the source of the clay for the figurine in Nabû-našir’s letter (GIŠ.SAR, SAA 10 296: r. 6). See the hand copies in ABL 977: r. 6; L.W. King, *Chronicles Concerning Early Babylonian Kings, including Records of the Early History of the Kassites and the Country of the Sea* (London: Luzac, 1907), vol. 2, 117, ln. r. 8.

⁹⁹ For a list of eclipses during the first twenty-one years of his reign, see Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 402-06.

¹⁰⁰ Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars*, vol. 2, 350.



earthquakes, or purification rituals.¹⁰¹ But by disregarding their advice on substitute kings and auspicious days, he ensured that scholars no longer had the ability to control his movements or dictate who was allowed to be admitted into his presence.

Nowhere was the decline in status of scholars in the inner circle felt more acutely than in the Gabbu-ilani-ereš family. Even before he became king, Ashurbanipal had refused to hire Nabû-zeru-lišir's son Šumaya even as the younger scholar was struggling to pay off his father's accumulated debts.¹⁰² Šumaya's brother Issar-šumu-ereš became chief scribe (*rab tuṣšarri*) late in Esarhaddon's reign and continued in that position under Ashurbanipal. Social network data shows that Issar-šumu-ereš's centrality scores declined by 90 to 106% between Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal's reigns. Some of his letters to Ashurbanipal reveal hints that he struggled to accept his declining status compared to the relationship he once had with Esarhaddon:

Who is not [acceptable] before the king my lord? What should I [...]? What should I [...]? I would like to take on and per[form] the work of the king [my] lord, and even ad[d] interest. (He) said: “who ever [...] before the king and with a bald head [...]. When I was crown prince he did not appe[ar] before me, how could he visit me now?”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ SAA 10 78:1'-8', 132:6-11, 135:7-11 (lunar eclipses); SAA 8 8:1-2 (earthquake); SAA 10 29:1-6 (purification).

¹⁰² SAA 16 34-35.

¹⁰³ SAA 10 27: r. 4-17. For the translation of *garidu* in r. 13 as “bald head,” see the related Akkadian term *gurrudu/qurrudu*, meaning “bald,” see CAD G, p. 141; CAD Q, p. 319. A related verb in Syriac and in Aramaic, meaning to scrape or strip off hair, is also attested, see Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelman's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 257; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac, 1903), 265. The Akkadian word *garidu* otherwise appears only in an Assyrian medical recipe text from Nineveh which requires a ŠIR ša ga-ri-di, “a testicle of a *garidu*,” see R.C. Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Texts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), no. 41: col. iv ln. 29. Thompson later suggested the *garidu* was a beaver,

Issar-šumu-ereš is the only scholar assigned to Ashurbanipal in the *Synchronistic King List* (written during the late reign of Ashurbanipal sometime after 648 BCE) and he continued on in his position until at least 657 BCE.¹⁰⁴ However, he was consulted only occasionally, and his complaints about a lack of access and disparaging remarks allegedly made by Ashurbanipal indicate that he no longer enjoyed a close relationship with the king.¹⁰⁵

Issar-šumu-ereš's downturn in fortune pales by comparison to the free fall suffered by his cousin Urad-Gula. Originally trained as a doctor (*asû*) during the reign of Sennacherib, he had become a rising star during the reign of Esarhaddon as he learned the craft of exorcism under the tutelage of his father Adad-šumu-ušur.¹⁰⁶ He performed work for both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal as well as other scholarly pursuits such as copying a Middle Babylonian Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual inscription from Borsippa.¹⁰⁷ Yet, at some point late in Esarhaddon's reign Urad-Gula's career began to unravel. In one letter

and the passage referred to the substance castoreum, used as medicine in various ancient societies, see Thompson, "Assyrian *garidu* = 'Beaver'," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 4 (1926): 723. The Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) is today not found south of the Caucasus mountains, but skeletal remains have been discovered in Neo-Assyrian levels at Dur-Katlimmu and the species may have survived in the Ceyhan River in Turkey until the early twentieth century. In any case, the application of the term *garidu* to the beaver was almost certainly in reference to its large, hairless tail. For zooarchaeological remains of beavers, see Cornelia Becker, "Die Tierknochenfunde aus Tall Šēḫ Ḥamad/Dūr-Katlimmu – ein zoogeographisch-haustierkundliche Studie," in *Umwelt und Subsistenz der assyrischen Stadt Dūr-Katlimmu am unteren Ḥābūr*, ed. Hartmut Kühne (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), 61-131, here 107-08; A. J. Legge and P. A. Rowley-Conwy, "The Beaver (*Castor fiber* L.) in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 13 (1986): 469-476. For their modern distribution see Duncan J. Halley, Alexander P. Saveljev, and Frank Rosell, "Population and Distribution of Beavers *Castor fiber* and *Castor canadensis* in Eurasia," *Mammal Review* 51 (2021): 1-24.

¹⁰⁴ Chen, *Studies on the Synchronistic King List*, 38, col. iv ln. 15-16. The list ends with Ashurbanipal and Kandalanu as kings of Assyria and Babylon, indicating it was written sometime between 648 and the end of Ashurbanipal's reign. The latest letter attributed to Issar-šumu-ereš is SAA 8 8, dated to 657 BC.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted that unlike other members of the Gabbu-ilani-ereš family, there is no surviving correspondence between Issar-šumu-ereš and Ashurbanipal when the former was crown prince. For others, see SAA 10 186, 188: r. 1-8, 195 (Adad-šumu-ušur); SAA 16 34-35 (Šumaya); SAA 10 257: r. 8, 291: r. 7 (Urad-Gula).

¹⁰⁶ Urad-Gula is named as a deputy of the *rab asû* in a witness list dated to 12-II-681, see SAA 6 193: r. 8'.

¹⁰⁷ SAA 10 257: r. 2-16, 289-91, 294:19 (work for Esarhaddon and crown prince Ashurbanipal); RIMB 2 B.2.8.5; BAK 498 (copying inscriptions).



he admits to Esarhaddon that he misread the text of a ritual, potentially endangering the king or another member of the royal family by failing to protect them from evil.¹⁰⁸ In another fragmentary letter he defends his actions during a difficult childbirth, describing several rituals meant to save a woman in labor and her child.¹⁰⁹

Urad-Gula must have been demoted no later than the first year and a half of Ashurbanipal's reign, as he is next attested in a letter his father Adad-šumu-ušur sent to Ashurbanipal on 30-VII-667 BCE in which he pleaded for Urad-Gula's restoration.¹¹⁰ His pleas fell on deaf ears: when Ashurbanipal issued a call a few months later for leading families of Nineveh to send their sons to be trained as officials, he deliberately excluded Urad-Gula from the invitation.¹¹¹ Adad-šumu-ušur made one final attempt, writing to Ashurbanipal again in I-666. Ashurbanipal responded by stating that Adad-šumu-ušur, his cousins, and his nephews would be retained in royal service, pointedly omitting his sons.¹¹² Adad-šumu-ušur is last attested on a witness list dated to 10-IX-666, so he likely died sometime in the late 660s or 650s.¹¹³ Urad-Gula slid into obscurity, writing several letters to Ashurbanipal in which he describes his declining economic and social fortunes in a plea for some modest financial support.¹¹⁴ He is last attested in a colophon to a commentary on *Enuma Anu Enlil* which dates to 650 BCE, suggesting

¹⁰⁸ SAA 10 291:5'-9'.

¹⁰⁹ SAA 10 293.

¹¹⁰ SAA 10 224:16-r. 8.

¹¹¹ SAA 10 226: r. 4-12.

¹¹² *atta mār ahhēka mār ah abbēka uptahirakkunu ina pāniya tazaza*, "I have gathered you, the sons of your brothers, the sons of the brothers of your father. You stand before me." SAA 10 227: r. 15-16.

¹¹³ SAA 6 314: r. 12.

¹¹⁴ SAA 10 294; with references to previous correspondence in r. 3-9. For commentary on this letter see Simo Parpola, "The Forlorn Scholar," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed. Francesca Rochberg-Halton (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1987), 257-278; Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "ABL 1285 and the Hebrew Bible: Literary Topoi in Urad-Gula's Letter of Petition to Assurbanipal," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 7 (1993): 9-17; Hurowitz, "An Overlooked Allusion to *Ludlul* in Urad-Gula's Letter to Assurbanipal," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 14 (2002-2005): 129-132.

that he had either died or sold off his personal library, which by this date was incorporated into Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh.¹¹⁵

A lone scholar stands out amidst the declining centrality of scholars in Ashurbanipal's social network. Akkullanu is the only scholar whose betweenness centrality rises one standard deviation above the mean (**Figure 5**). During Esarhaddon's reign he had been a scholar of no particular importance who sent reports of mostly negative omens to the king (**Table 4**). Under Ashurbanipal he became the king's preferred scholar, regularly fielding inquiries about rituals, temple administration, and copying texts for Ashurbanipal's royal library.¹¹⁶ His later omen reports to Ashurbanipal suggest that he changed his approach. During the conflict with the Cimmerians in 657 BCE, Akkullanu authored a long omen interpretation which went to great lengths to spin negative omens into assurances of Assyrian victory, even quoting a now-lost Middle Babylonian literary letter to argue that a recent drought represented a positive omen as it would encourage Assyria's soldiers to fight harder in order to secure food for themselves.¹¹⁷ In another report, he predicted that a solar eclipse would augur poorly for the king of Elam.¹¹⁸

Yet, Akkullanu had a base of support outside of the palace: he was a priest in the temple of Aššur, and many of his connections in Ashurbanipal's network were to priests or other temple personnel with whom he interacted during the course of his duties.¹¹⁹ He was

¹¹⁵ Parpola, "The Forlorn Scholar," 271 n. 8; David Pingree and Erica Reiner "A Neo-Babylonian Report on Seasonal Hours," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 25 (1974/1977): 50-55.

¹¹⁶ SAA 10 95: r. 18'-24; SAA 10 96: r. 1-3; SAA 10 101:2-4.

¹¹⁷ SAA 10 100: r. 1-11.

¹¹⁸ SAA 8 104.

¹¹⁹ For Akkullanu's office of *erib bīti* or "temple-enterer," see SAA 21 28: r. 14-15. He is also described as a priest when witnessing a court decision (657 BC), see Fales and Jakob-Rost, "Neo-Assyrian Texts from Assur: Private Archives in the Vorderasiatisches Museum of Berlin, Part 1," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 5 (1-2): 3-157, here 46-47, no. 16: r. 16.



confident enough of his standing before the king to write several letters accusing numerous provincial governors and other officials of accepting bribes and not paying taxes which were due to support the Aššur temple, and also served as a judge in civil cases within Aššur.¹²⁰ Ashurbanipal trusted Akkullanu enough to send him on a dangerous diplomatic mission to southern Babylonia during the height of the war with Šamaš-šumu-ukin.¹²¹ Other scholars such as the formerly favored Balasî sent him to the king in their stead to explain omens instead of appearing before Ashurbanipal themselves.¹²²

Akkullanu was the last of a dying breed. As discussed above, there are very few letters from scholars in Ashurbanipal's network dating from 652-646 BCE. The latest known astronomical report from an Assyrian scholar was written on 2-IV-648.¹²³ The latest datable extispicy report is from 23-I-650.¹²⁴ Colophons reveal that scholars remained hard at work processing the many scholarly tablets taken to Nineveh in the aftermath of the war with Šamaš-šumu-ukin, and were composing royal inscriptions and new lists of omens related to that conflict. However, this activity also slowed by the late 640s and disappeared entirely by 639 BCE.¹²⁵

While the dearth of letters from after 646 makes an argument from absence difficult, the near total absence of scholars from the legal and

¹²⁰ SAA 10 95: r. 11'-16'; 96: 11-25; 107: r. 1-s. 2; Remko Jas, *Neo-Assyrian Judicial Procedures* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1996), 71-72 no. 46 ln. 8, r. 16; see also Pierre Villard, "Akkullānu, astrologue, prêtre et juge," *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 1998/2 (June 1998): 53-55.

¹²¹ SAA 21 28: r. 12-19. The treaty itself had been negotiated by Nabû-ušabši the governor of Uruk. Akkullanu was sent to conduct the ceremonies which would formalize it. Akkullanu is also mentioned in the fragmentary letter SAA 22 17: r. 15', likely sent by Nabû-ušabši.

¹²² SAA 10 57: r. 3'-7'.

¹²³ SAA 10 141. Note that SAA 10 149, originally dated by Parpola to 621 BC, has been re-dated to 678 during the reign of Esarhaddon. See Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 95-96 n. 168.

¹²⁴ SAA 4 305.

¹²⁵ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 80-83; Ivan Starr, "Historical Omens Concerning Ashurbanipal's War Against Elam," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 32 (1982): 60-67.

administrative texts which are common from the final three and a half decades of the empire is a powerful argument for their decline. Only three scholars appear in legal texts dating from after 648 BCE: Urad-Nabû the doctor appears as a witness to a real estate sale from *630 BCE, while an exorcist named [...]nadin-apli and an extispicy expert named Bel-našir appear as witnesses to a sale document from *621.¹²⁶ Of the three, Bel-našir is described as working for the crown prince, while [...]nadin-apli is in the employ of Aššur-šumu-ibni, a person about whom nothing else is known. None are described as working for the king.

Conclusions: Scholarship as a Political Phenomenon

In her recent book *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, Eleanor Robson argued that the decline of court scholars in Assyria came about as the result of an economic crisis in the aftermath of the 652-646 BCE war with Šamaš-šumu-ukin and Elam, which left the Assyrian kings unable to afford to pay large numbers of scholars.¹²⁷ However, the decline in centrality of scholars from Esarhaddon to Ashurbanipal which is evident in both the aggregate networks and between the 674-669 and 669-664 networks suggests that the decline in their status was immediate and took place as soon as Ashurbanipal took the throne. This is supported by numerous letters which suggest that scholars, especially those from the Gabbu-ilani-ereš family and others who had been part of Esarhaddon's inner circle, were no longer accorded the status they had previously held.

Ashurbanipal did not immediately do away with the scholars, some of whom continued to serve in their positions until at least 650 BCE. But he reduced their numbers, excluded them from the inner circles of power, and did not allow them to control access to his person or

¹²⁶ SAA 14 35: r. 15 (*630 BC); SAA 14 166: r. 4-6 (*621).

¹²⁷ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 82-86.



restrict his movements with substitute king rituals or a regimen of auspicious days. These decisions would have reduced their influence by removing the tools which the inner circle of scholars had used to control the previous king.

It would be wrong to conclude that Ashurbanipal, a king otherwise famous for his scholarly learning who began to assemble a personal library of scholarly texts while still a crown prince, disbelieved in the basic premises of divination and the cuneiform omen tradition. Rather, his problem was one of power and control. The decline and fall of the Assyrian court scholar should be understood as an essentially *political* phenomenon. Under Esarhaddon, a small group of scholars had risen to become some of the most powerful men in the empire, who used their scholarly knowledge to achieve a certain level of control over the king himself. Ashurbanipal found this situation intolerable, and saw the scholars as a political group whose power needed to be curtailed.

Ashurbanipal had been trained in cuneiform scholarship by Balasî, a member of his father's inner circle.¹²⁸ He collected a large number of omen texts himself, including the series *Barûtu* and *Enûma Anu Enlil* commonly cited by scholars.¹²⁹ Some of these texts formerly belonged to members of the Gabbu-ilani-ereš family.¹³⁰ In contrast to his father, whose basic literacy skills were not sufficient for interpreting scholarly

¹²⁸ SAA 10 39: r. 4-13. For more on Ashurbanipal's scribal training, see Alasdair Livingstone, "Ashurbanipal: Literate or Not?" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 97 (2007): 98-118; Pierre Villard, "L'éducation d'Assurbanipal," *Ktéma* 22 (1997): 135-149; Silvie Zamazalová, "The Education of Neo-Assyrian Princes," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 313-330; Ulla Jeyes, "Assurbanipal's *bārûtu*," in *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten: XXXIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Heidelberg 6.-10. Juli 1992*, ed. Hartmut Waetzoldt and Harald Hauptmann (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1997), 61-65.

¹²⁹ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 124; Frahm, "Royal Hermeneutics," 48-50; Fincke, "The Babylonian Texts of Nineveh," 120-24; Eleanor Robson, "Do Not Disperse the Collection!," 21-24.

¹³⁰ Jeanette C. Fincke, "Assyrian Scholarship and Scribal Culture in Kallû and Nineveh," 385-86; Robson, "Do Not Disperse the Collection!," 25-26; W.G. Lambert, "A Late Assyrian Catalogue of Literary and Scholarly Texts," in *Kramer Anniversary Volume: Cuneiform Studies in Honor of Samuel Noah Kramer*, ed. Barry L. Eichler (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 313-18, K. 11922 ln. 2.

texts, Ashurbanipal bragged of his scholarly prowess in royal inscriptions.¹³¹ In doing so, he empowered himself to critically assess his scholars' recommendations and make his own decisions about the proper course of action in response to omens.¹³² In doing so, he undermined the source of their power, that is, their ability to provide exclusive access to an esoteric body of knowledge.

Having been ejected from the inner circles of power, cuneiform scholars retreated into the temple. They would remain there until the end of cuneiform writing. There is little evidence for a close relationship between Neo-Babylonian kings and their scholars. Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BCE) asked the Eanna temple in Uruk to send lamentation priests for a ritual, implying that these scholars were primarily employed by the temple.¹³³ Royal inscriptions from throughout the Neo-Babylonian period also describe scholars being consulted for rituals associated with temple or ziggurat construction.¹³⁴ The royal inscriptions of Nabonidus frequently reference omens and auspicious days for beginning the construction of temples, often claiming to have performed extispicies himself. In one case he simply claims to have dreamed the appropriate astronomical omens into existence.¹³⁵ Yet the later Royal Chronicle depicts Nabonidus interpreting the tablets of *Enūma Anu Enlil* himself

¹³¹ Most famously in inscription L, see Livingstone, "Ashurbanipal: Literate or Not?," 100.

¹³² Frahm, "Royal Hermeneutics," 50; Stephen J. Lieberman, "Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Assurbanipal's Personal Tablet Collection," in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, ed. Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard and Piotr Steinkeller (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1990), 305-336, here 321-30; Verderame, "A Glimpse into the Activities of Experts," 727.

¹³³ Yuval Levavi, *Administrative Epistolography in the Formative Phase of the Neo-Babylonian Empire* (Münster: Zaphon, 2018), 302-303 no. 64.

¹³⁴ RIBo Nabopolassar 6: col. ii ln. 31; Nebuchadnezzar II 27: col. ii ln. 4; 28: col. ii ln. 6; RINBE 2 Nabonidus 28: col. i ln. 41-42; 29: col. i ln. 22'. For the equation of the term *kakugallūtu* with *āšipūtu*, see CAD A2, p. 431; CAD K p. 61.

¹³⁵ RINBE 2 Nabonidus 16: col. ii ln. 41-51, 58; 17: col. i 1-col. ii ln. 3; 24 col. i ln. 28; 25: col. ii ln. 2-38; 27: col. ii ln. 50-56; 28: col. i ln. 42, col. ii ln. 60-61; 34: col. i ln. 4-25, col. ii ln. 9; 47: col. iii ln. 12-13. For the dream of astronomical omens, see RINBE 2 Nabonidus 3: col. vi ln. 1'-col. vii ln. 10'.



when his scholars are stumped, while the more explicitly hostile Verse Account mocks Nabonidus for his pretensions of competence at interpreting astronomical and liver omens.¹³⁶ Both texts may represent disapproving memories among scholars of a king who overrode their expertise and did not allow them to overly influence his decision-making.¹³⁷

Under Achaemenid rule scholars worked exclusively for the temple, where they sometimes performed rituals to avert evil from the king without the king's knowledge. However, there is no evidence that Persian kings took notice of these performances. Scholars turned toward providing private horoscopes rather than advising kings.¹³⁸ In the latter half of the first millennium BCE, the temples of southern Mesopotamia served as arks preserving the traditions of cuneiform knowledge in a world which had moved on, but the court scholars had long since been marginalized from political power from the beginning of the reign of Ashurbanipal.

¹³⁶ Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 312-17, no. 53 col. iii ln. 2'-16' (Chronicle); Sidney Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts Relating to the Capture and Downfall of Babylon* (London: Methuen & Co., 1924), 83-87, col. v ln. 8-15 (Verse Account); for translation see James B. Pritchard, ed, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 312-15.

¹³⁷ Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 171-72.

¹³⁸ For studies of cuneiform scholarship in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods, see Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks*, 204-244; Paul-Alain Beaulieu and John P. Britton, "Rituals for an Eclipse Possibility in the 8th Year of Cyrus," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 46 (1994): 73-86; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Afterlife of Assyrian Scholarship in Hellenistic Babylonia," in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tzvi Abusch*, ed. Jeffrey Stackert, Barbara N. Porter and David P. Wright (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2010), 1-18; Rochberg, *In the Path of the Moon*, 243-55; Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing*, 78; Eleanor Robson, "The Socio-Economics of Cuneiform Scholarship after the 'End of Archives': Views from Borsippa and Uruk," in *At the Dawn of History: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of J.N. Postgate*, ed. Yağmur Heffron, Adam Stone and Martin Worthington (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 459-74; Christine Proust and John Steele, "Introduction: Scholars, Scholarly Archives and the Practice of Scholarship in Late Babylonian Uruk," in *Scholars and Scholarship in Late Babylonian Uruk*. ed. Christine Proust and John Steele (New York: Springer, 2019), 1-52.

Abbreviations used in the article and appendices

- ABL Harper, Robert Francis. 1892-1914. *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kuyunjik Collections of the British Museum*. 14 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- BAK Hunger, Hermann. *Babylonische und assyrische Kolophone*. *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* vol. 2. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1968.
- CAD *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. 21 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956-2010.
- CT 35 Budge, E.A. Wallis. 1920. *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets, &c., in the British Museum, Part XXXV*. London: Harrison & Sons.
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- KAV Schroeder, Otto. *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur, verschiedenen Inhalts*. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1920.
- PNAE Radner, Karen and Heather D. Baker, eds. *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*. 4 vols. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998-2017.
- RIMB 2 Frame, Grant. *Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the end of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)*. Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia – Babylonian Periods vol. 2. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.
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- SAA 17 Dietrich, Manfred. *The Babylonian Correspondence of Sargon and Sennacherib*. State Archives of Assyria vol. 17. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2003.
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