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REVENGE, ASSYRIAN STYLE

On the first day of the month Kislimu (November–December) in 689 BC, the Assyrian king Sennacherib sacked the famed city of Babylon after a siege of up to fifteen months. This act was the culmination of a long process: we see Sennacherib throughout his reign change from a young king highly respectful of the gods of Babylonia and Assyria into one who destroyed the principal sanctuary and the city of Babylonia's main deity, Marduk. Although Assyrian rulers stated habitually that they razed cities, the description of Babylon's destruction has no parallel in earlier accounts, and stands out by its detail. Sennacherib's report was carved on the cliffs of the Bavian gorge, at the mouth of an irrigation canal he constructed in the mountains to the north of his capital, Nineveh:¹

On another campaign, I marched quickly against Babylon as I had decided to conquer it. Like an oncoming storm I broke loose, like a fog I overwhelmed it. I surrounded the city with siege engines and ramps, and [I seized it] single-handedly. Plunder []. Its people — commoners and nobles — I did not spare. With their corpses I filled the city squares. I carried off alive Shuzubu,² king of Babylon, together with his family and [officials] into my land. The wealth of that city — silver, gold, precious stones, goods and valuables — I distributed among my people and they made it their own. The hands of my people took hold of the gods who dwelled there and smashed them. They took their goods and valuables. Adad and Shala, the gods of Ekallate, whom Marduk-nadin-ahhe, king of Babylon, in the reign of Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, had taken and carried off to Babylon, after 418 years I took from Babylon and returned to Ekallate. I destroyed the city and its houses, from foundation to parapet, I devastated and burned them. I tore out the bricks and earth of the inner and outer walls (of the city), of the temples and of the ziggurat, as much as there was, and I dumped these into the Arahtu canal. I dug canals through the midst of that city, I flooded it with water. I made its very foundations disappear, and I destroyed it more completely than a devastating flood. So that in future

¹ See Jutta Börker-Klähn, *Alt Vorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs* (Baghdader Forschungen, iv, Mainz, 1982), 206–8, for a description of the reliefs that accompany the inscription and the location of the text.

² The Assyrians always used the shortened form 'Shuzubu' to refer to the Babylonian king, Mushezib-Marduk. For a list of selected kings of Babylon and Assyria, see Appendix.

days the site of that city and (its) temples would not be recognized, I totally dissolved it with water and made it like inundated land.³

With this act, Sennacherib set in motion a chain of events that we can follow for some 150 years through a series of royal accounts that repeatedly referred to this moment. It is as if he started the scripting of a revenge tragedy⁴ composed over several generations. Sennacherib could not have known what was to follow, but it is clear that he did realize the magnitude of his acts, and we can see that he was careful to distance himself from some aspects of the events.

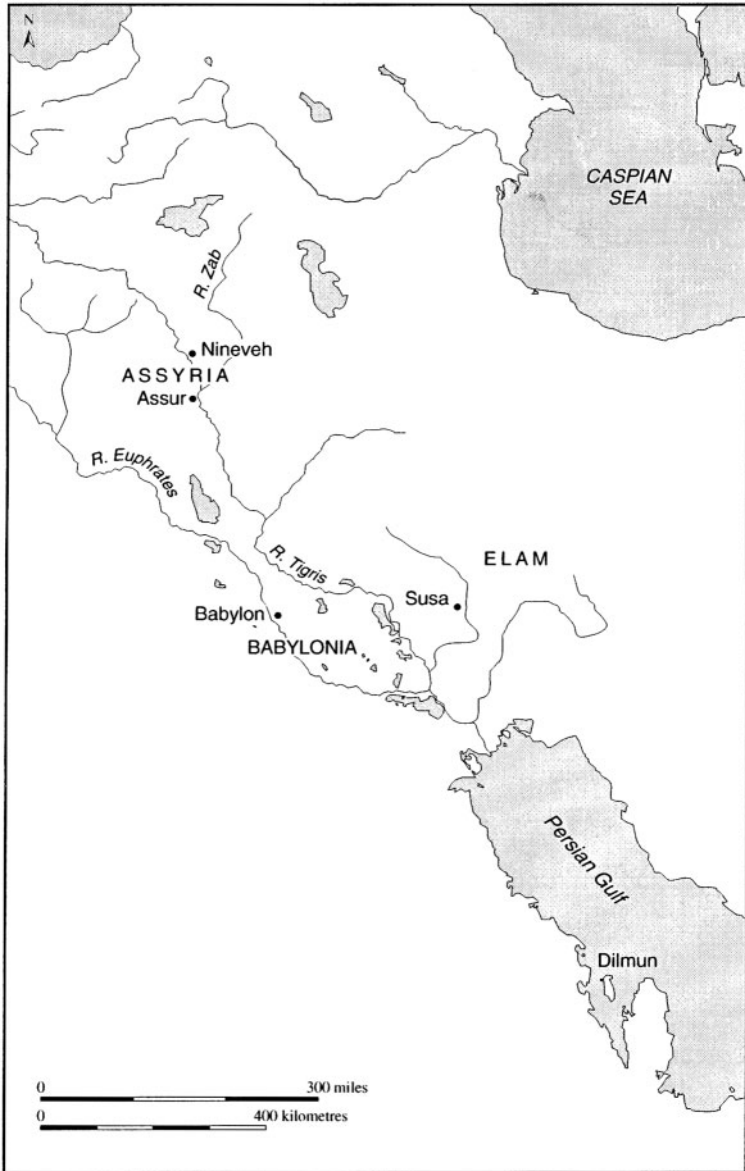
Royal inscriptions of this type are our main source for the reconstruction of the history of the Assyrian empire, which dominated the Middle East from the ninth through to the seventh century BC. Especially in the last century of that empire, the kings left what were often lengthy accounts of their military engagements, systematically arranged in a year-by-year sequence. These accounts were embedded in inscriptions that commemorated the construction of a palace, temple, aqueduct, and so on, and provided the temporal framework for the building project. After the king had conducted the said campaigns, he commissioned a particular building. Because of the association with construction projects, the inscriptions appear on a variety of architectural features. Often they were written on clay tablets or prisms buried in the foundations to guarantee that future generations would know who had constructed the building. Decorative relief panels lining the walls of Assyrian palaces, their thresholds, and the colossal bull or lion statues guarding their gates, for example, were also inscribed.⁵ More rare were inscriptions in the countryside, like the one found at Bavian, connected to development projects such as the construction of an irrigation canal.

When Europeans began archaeological exploration of the ancient Middle East in the mid nineteenth century AD, they were naturally drawn to the massive ruins of the major cities of

³ *The Annals of Sennacherib*, ed. Daniel David Luckenbill (Chicago, 1924), 83–4, ll. 43–54. Except when explicitly stated, all translations from the Akkadian in this article are my own, based on editions by other scholars. Passages surrounded by square brackets, [], are restored in the broken text. Italics are used when the restoration is uncertain, and the space is left empty when no likely restoration can be suggested. Parentheses contain my own comments.

⁴ See John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford, 1996).

⁵ See John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall: Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions* (Winona Lake, 1999), for a complete survey of the locations of Assyrian royal inscriptions.



THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST c.700 BC

Assyria in what is now northern Iraq. Royal inscriptions were thus the first cuneiform texts to be found and translated, and their contents fundamentally influenced the writing of Assyrian history. Lacking an ancient continuous narrative spanning the empire, this history had to be pieced together by modern scholars. The chronological order of Assyrian royal inscriptions and their detail on military actions seemed ideal for the creation of an *histoire événementielle*. The first histories of Assyria were often mere paraphrases of the ancient annals. While in more recent years scholars have become more sceptical of the annals, especially remarking on the Assyrian predilection for hyperbole, they still see them as a primary source of factual information. But these are not straightforward accounts that need nothing more than the elimination of their exaggerations; they are statements regarding royal actions that reflect the official opinion about an event embedded in the particular circumstances of the moment at which they were written. When various ancient versions of the same event are preserved, we can see how these were rewritten to fit the conditions of the time of composition, and that the 'facts' in them were often changed.⁶

Accounts such as the passage describing the sack of Babylon become much more meaningful when we see them as a source for more than factual information. They were literary constructs, whose content and structure were determined by the context in which they appeared. Moreover, once formulated and written down, they became the official account of an event. The question of the intended audience for Assyrian inscriptions is a tricky one:⁷ few people knew how to read, and scholars are often puzzled as to why so much effort was expended on carving inscriptions. It is irrelevant for my purpose, however. The people who composed inscriptions could — and, I shall argue, did — read earlier accounts that were relevant. Even if they were a small literate minority, it is their thoughts that I shall study.

The Bavian account shows very clearly how the context of a 'historical' description was crucial for its formulation and how the account became a point of reference that could not be ignored. It was carefully crafted in terms of both literary structure and the actions that it depicted. It was phrased in a specific way because

⁶ See Marc Van De Mieroop, *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* (London, 1999), 40–59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56–7.

the narrative provided a justification for the sack of Babylon, although this justification was not explicitly spelled out. Implicitly it referred to the causes of Sennacherib's actions, which can only be understood when seen in the context of the principle that underlay them: revenge. The creation of the account itself, rather than its subject matter, was the most important event here, and as such it became the point of reference for future generations. The actions described in it may not even have taken place; but once recorded, they became exactly what had happened to Babylon, and the trigger of reactions. The question as to whether or not the actions described occurred in reality — something which we have failed to substantiate through independent evidence⁸ — is in this respect immaterial. The narrative became the central reality, and determined how the event was remembered.

Sennacherib — or rather his courtier or courtiers who composed official inscriptions — was faced with a challenge: a narrative of the destruction of Babylon had to be different from that of other cities. Babylon was the capital of Assyria's southern neighbour, Babylonia, and although they were two separate states, Babylonia and Assyria had a long history of cultural and religious contact; many traditions, ideas and practices borrowed from the south were adopted in the north. Babylon's city god was Marduk, who was not only the main deity of Babylonia but was also very prominent in the Assyrian pantheon. When foreign cities and cult centres were sacked — and numerous ones had suffered that fate — their gods had been of little or no importance in the Assyrian pantheon, and the destruction could be recorded using a set of standard phrases and expressions. Babylon was different, as its god was also a very important Assyrian god, and many of the city's religious practices had been introduced into Assyria. Babylon had been attacked and looted by Assyrians in the past, but the accounts describing this were vague on the details and focused on the Babylonians' own guilt which had caused the displeasure of the god Marduk.⁹ So the author(s) had to create a new phraseology, and did so by manipulating the wording of other available texts.

⁸ See J. A. Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire: Babylonian Society and Politics, 747–626 BC* (Philadelphia, 1984), 68.

⁹ See, for example, the 'Epic of King Tukulti-Ninurta I', who sacked Babylon in the thirteenth century BC: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), 209–29.

A large number of phrases are standard for this type of account; for example: 'Its people — commoners and nobles — I did not spare. With their corpses I filled the city squares'. The only remarkable aspect perhaps is the sheer number of these phrases. But, by themselves, they were insufficient to render the importance of the event. The destruction of Babylon was supposed to have been complete; the account states that Sennacherib had torn down the city and 'dissolved' it with water, turning it into a wasteland. Such acts are the opposite of what a good king does; he constructs buildings and digs irrigation canals for the benefit of the people. The phraseology used to describe the destruction was thus taken from regular building accounts, but rendered in the negative.¹⁰

Sennacherib was the proud builder of the new capital city of Assyria, Nineveh — an old city which he greatly expanded and completely rebuilt — and a great number of his inscriptions boast about this undertaking. In the Bavian inscription the destruction of Babylon was portrayed as the negative parallel to Nineveh's construction, and the narrative of the sack was purposefully embedded in a building account that described the positive work done for Nineveh. There were two parts to that work: the enlargement of the city wall and the building of an irrigation canal. These are paralleled by two aspects of Babylon's destruction: the tearing down of its buildings and walls; and the removal of its earth through the force of water. Whereas for Nineveh Sennacherib states: 'the inner and outer walls, which did not exist before, I constructed',¹¹ for Babylon he says: 'I tore out . . . the inner and outer walls (of the city) . . . as much as there was'.¹² As the main purpose of the Bavian inscription was the celebration of the building of an irrigation canal, the destruction of Babylon by water received special attention. For Nineveh Sennacherib could say: 'to the midst of Nineveh I dug a canal and I let the waters run in it'.¹³ In the case of Babylon this led to: 'I dug canals through the midst of that city,

¹⁰ An analysis of the phraseology of this passage and its relationship to other accounts was undertaken by Hannes D. Galter, 'Die Zerstörung Babylons durch Sanherib', *Studia Orientalia*, lv (1984).

¹¹ In Akkadian, *dūrušu u šalhūšu ša ina mahṛê lā ibšū eššiš ušēpiš* (*Annals of Sennacherib*, ed. Luckenbill, 79, ll. 5–6).

¹² In Akkadian, *dūru u šalhū . . . mala bašū assuḥma* (*ibid.*, 84, ll. 51–2).

¹³ In Akkadian, *adi [libbi] Nimua ḥiritu ušahra mē šumūti ušarda qerebša* (*ibid.*, 79, ll. 11–12).

I flooded it with water. I made its very foundations disappear, and I destroyed it more completely than a devastating flood'.¹⁴ The negative elements in the description of Babylon's devastation can thus only be fully understood when seen in contrast with Sennacherib's work for the benefit of Nineveh.

The rubble of the destroyed city was dumped into the Arahtu canal, a branch of the Euphrates river that ran through Babylon. The fleeting reference to this act in the Bavian inscription seemingly has little importance, but it is at the centre of the only other Sennacherib account of Babylon's destruction, embedded within the building inscription of the *akītu* (New Year's) temple in the Assyrian city of Assur:

After I had destroyed Babylon, had smashed its gods, and had annihilated its people, so that the location of that city would not be recognizable, I removed its earth and had it carried by the Euphrates river to the sea. The earth reached Dilmun, and when the Dilmunites saw it, the fear of Assur fell upon them and they brought their treasures to me.¹⁵

The message conveyed is clear: the rubble of Babylon carried off by the Euphrates river discoloured the Persian Gulf to such an extent that the Dilmunites, living on the island of Bahrain some six hundred kilometres down the Gulf, saw it and voluntarily submitted to Assyria in fear. The focus on the earth of Babylon is explained by the rest of the inscription: within the *akītu* temple some of the earth was preserved as a symbol of Assur's power to be observed by future generations. Because the storing of earth in the temple was a crucial part of the building account, its earlier washing-away into the Persian Gulf was mentioned in detail. The building of the *akītu* temple itself was of great importance, as it indicated clearly the subjection of Marduk's cult to that of Assur in Assyria. The *akītu* temple was central to the New Year's festival at Babylon, and it was now moved into the sacred area of another deity in another city. Marduk had lost his independence. The detail of the earth was of little importance in the Bavian inscription, but became central to the one regarding the *akītu* temple.

The core of the Bavian account is concerned with the description of what happened to the rulers of Babylon, both human and divine. The removal of king Shuzubu was nothing

¹⁴ In Akkadian, *ina qereb āli šuātu hirāti ahrēma eršessunu ina mē aspun šikin uššēšu uḫalliḡma eli ša abūbu naspantašu ušātir* (*ibid.*, 84, ll. 52–3).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137, ll. 36–41.

unusual, since rebellious opponents and their families were regularly deported to Assyria. The treatment of the gods and their temples was special, however, and the tone of the text changed at this point in the description. Instead of using the first person narrative, as is standard throughout the account, there was a shift to the third person: 'The hands of my people took hold of the gods who dwelled there and smashed them. They took their goods and valuables'. This reluctance to implicate Sennacherib directly was certainly inspired by a fear of Marduk's power. The Assyrian king had started out his reign with the usual reverence for that god. Marduk's cult had been introduced by Sennacherib's father, Sargon II, into the temple of Nabu at Nineveh, and there are indications that Sargon had placed the Babylonian god on the same level as Assyria's main deity, Assur. Sennacherib himself had referred to Marduk as one of the patron deities of his kingship, and he had even restored some of the processional road in Babylon, which was important in the Marduk cult.¹⁶ His actions towards Babylon were thus a full reversal of policy, one which he was disinclined to acknowledge fully. Hence, he cautiously distanced himself somewhat from these actions and placed the blame on unnamed people.

Yet we know that Marduk's statue was taken to Assyria's religious capital, Assur.¹⁷ While Sennacherib did not explicitly refer to Marduk in the Bavian account, he did report the fact that divine statues were taken home by the Assyrians, and he named specifically those of Adad and Shala. This act is often seen by scholars as an irrelevant detail in the sack of Babylon, and the lines describing it are regularly omitted from the interpretations of Sennacherib's account.¹⁸ It seems, however, that this detail provides the key to the understanding of the entire account. Sennacherib claims to have *recovered* the statues of the gods Adad and Shala, which had been taken from the Assyrian city of Ekallate 418 years earlier. His theft of Marduk's statue was the repetition of something that had been done to Assyria

¹⁶ See Eckart Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sennacherib-Inschriften* (Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft xxvi, Vienna, 1997), 283–4.

¹⁷ The evidence is presented by Benno Landsberger, *Brief des Bischofs von Esagila an König Asarhaddon* (Amsterdam, 1965), 20–7.

¹⁸ For instance, J. A. Brinkman, 'Sennacherib's Babylonian Problem: An Interpretation', *Jl Cuneiform Studies*, xxv (1973), 94; Galter, 'Die Zerstörung Babylons', 164.

hundreds of years before; although not explicitly spelled out here, this would certainly have been known to all who read the account as revenge for that earlier Babylonian act.

In the same vein, the other actions of Sennacherib and his people towards Babylon were also acts of revenge for earlier crimes which were not explicitly stated. Sennacherib described the looting of the temple treasury, for instance. This was a direct reply to the fact that the last Babylonian rebellion under Mushezib-Marduk had been financed by Marduk's temple, a fact reported in several other of Sennacherib's inscriptions. For example, in the final edition of his annals, Sennacherib stated:

(Mushezib-Marduk) hurried back from Elam and entered Shuanna (= the sacred quarter of Babylon). The Babylonians placed him on the throne — something for which he was not suited — and entrusted to him the rule over Sumer and Akkad. The treasury of the temple Esagila they opened, and the gold and silver of Marduk and Zarpanitum (Marduk's wife), the goods of their temples, they took out and to Umman-menanu, king of Elam, who had neither wisdom nor good advice, they sent it as a bribe. (They said): 'Gather your army, prepare your camp, and come quickly to Babylon to help us, for you are our protection'.¹⁹

The abduction of the Babylonian king was also an act of specific revenge. While by itself it was not unusual, its importance becomes clearer when we look at the history of Sennacherib's interactions with Babylon. In political terms, Babylonia had been one of Sennacherib's main headaches.²⁰ In the eighteen years since he had come to the throne of Assyria, seven men had been king in Babylon. Sennacherib had tried to control the region in numerous ways: personal rule, the appointment of his son as Babylonian king, and rule by a Babylonian man who was educated in Assyria. None of these worked, and the throne was seized repeatedly by opponents, often with the support of the king of the west-Iranian state of Elam. The worst blow to Sennacherib must have been the fate of his eldest son, Assur-nadin-shumi, whom he had placed on the throne of Babylon in 700 BC. In 694, Babylonian opposition took advantage of Elamite military action in the region to capture this son and hand him over to the Elamite king: he disappeared for ever. So when five years later the Assyrians faced the independent ruler of Babylon,

¹⁹ *Annals of Sennacherib*, ed. Luckenbill, 42, ll. 28–37. See also A. K. Grayson, 'The Walters Art Gallery Sennacherib Inscription', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, xx (1963), 88–9, ll. 11–15.

²⁰ The events have been described several times: see, for example, Louis Levine, 'Sennacherib's Southern Frontier, 704–689 BC', *Jl Cuneiform Studies*, xxxiv (1982).

Mushezib-Marduk, Sennacherib had a personal score to settle. The removal of Assur-nadin-shumi to Elam was paralleled by that of Mushezib-Marduk to Assyria.

The description of Babylon's destruction is thus fully informed by parallelism, both in form and in content. To describe the events, the author(s) used parallels to other texts: usual acts were repeated from earlier campaign accounts; unusual ones were expressed by taking the creative works of the ruler with regard to Nineveh and turning them into destructive ones for Babylon. The actions themselves were similarly informed by earlier parallels, but one of the elements of the comparison was left unstated:

UNSTATED

Assyrian prince taken to
Elam (in 694 BC)

Temple treasury emptied by
Babylonians to finance
anti-Assyrian rebellion
(in 692 BC)

Divine statue stolen by
Assyrian king (in 689 BC)

STATED

Babylonian king taken to
Assyria (in 689 BC)

Temple treasury emptied by Assyria
(in 689 BC)

Divine statues stolen by Babylonian
king 418 years earlier (c. 1090 BC)²¹

The principle at work here is that of revenge: what had been done unto Assyria was now being done unto Babylon. The unstated legal principle behind Sennacherib's action was that of an eye for an eye. Famous from the eighteenth-century BC law code of Hammurabi, this principle is referred to by Mesopotamian scholars as the *lex talionis* or talion, borrowing a term from Roman Law. Despite the prominence of the practice, the Akkadian language did not have special words for the noun 'revenge' or the verb 'to avenge'. The latter was expressed as 'to return the favour' (Akkadian *gimilla turru*), which could be both an act of kindness and a harmful one. Thus the gods in the Babylonian creation myth implored Marduk to return the favours they had given him (Tablet IV, l. 13), while earlier they had urged Tiamat to avenge her husband Mummu (Tablet I, l. 122) using the same wording.²² The reciprocal character was emphasized in the Akkadian term; the qualitative aspect of the original act was unimportant.

²¹ The few indications in Assyrian inscriptions of long distances in time between several events are usually inaccurate.

²² Both lines are quoted in *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, v (G), ed. A. Leo Oppenheim (Chicago, 1956), 74–5.

The fact that reciprocity was at the basis of revenge had two important repercussions: the act of revenge had to be of the same order as the original crime, and there had to be equality between the two parties involved. The talion we find expressed with great consistency in the law codes of Mesopotamia made the punishment equal to the crime, but only when the two parties were also equal. For instance, Hammurabi states: 'If an *awīlu* should blind the eye of another *awīlu*, they shall blind his eye',²³ and he goes on to list bone for bone, tooth for tooth, and so on. There is a full parallelism. Retaliation was based on the same principle in non-legal contexts as well. Almost every Mesopotamian inscription ends with a curse formula to warn the possible despoiler, and a basic principle in them is that the punishment predicted is of the same nature as the damage inflicted by the despoiler.²⁴ For example, an inscription from the ninth century BC, found in the tomb of the Assyrian queen Jabâ in the royal palace at Kalhu, reads:

By the life of Shamash, Ereshkigal, and the Anunnaki, the great gods of the netherworld: Jabâ, the queen, reached (the end of her) life through natural death, and followed in the path of her forefathers. Whoever later on, be it a queen who sits on the throne or a palace woman, beloved by the king, removes me from my tomb, places someone else with me, with evil intentions reaches out her hand to my jewellery, or breaks the seal of my tomb, above (on earth) may her spirit roam around thirsty in the heat of the sun, below in the netherworld may she not receive as libation good beer, wine, and flour as an offering with the Anunnaki. May Ningizzida and Pituh-idugallu, the great gods of the netherworld, impose restlessness upon her corpse and ghost for ever and ever.²⁵

If Jabâ's body were to be removed from her tomb, she would not receive funerary offerings and her spirit would roam in eternity. So the punishment invoked is that the same should happen to the perpetrator of the crime. There is full equality, rather than an intensified punishment as in the biblical passage: 'I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

²³ Trans. Martha Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd edn (Atlanta, 1997), 121, §196. While the meaning of the term *awīlu* varies according to context, here it has to be regarded as a 'free man' and a member of the upper level of the Babylonian social structure.

²⁴ See Zainab Bahrani, 'Assault and Abduction: The Fate of the Royal Image in the Ancient Near East', *Art History*, xviii (1995), 372–5.

²⁵ Abdulilah Fadhil, 'Die in Nimrud/Kalhu aufgefundene Grabinschrift der Jabâ', *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, xxi (1990). For the reading Pituh-idugallu, see Jeremy Black's remark quoted in Joan and David Oates, *Nimrud: An Assyrian Imperial City Revealed* (London, 2001), 82.

If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold' (Genesis 4:23–4).

In Mesopotamia, the punishment is equal to the crime only when the perpetrator and the victim are also equal, however. The curse in Jabâ's tomb mentions not just anyone as the possible perpetrator, but another queen or palace woman.²⁶ In the code of Hammurabi punishments vary according to the social status of the people involved. When they are equal, the punishment is the same, as in the example quoted above. When the victim is of a lower social rank, however, there is a monetary fine rather than a reciprocation of the crime. For example: 'If he (an *awîlu*) should blind the eye of a commoner or break the bone of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver sixty shekels of silver'.²⁷ Should someone inflict harm on a man of a higher social rank, the punishment would be greater: 'If an *awîlu* should strike the cheek of an *awîlu* who is of a status higher than his own, he shall be flogged in the public assembly with sixty stripes of an ox whip'.²⁸ Thus, when the Assyrian king took revenge on an enemy, he tacitly admitted that the latter was equal to him. By treating the city of Babylon the way he did, Sennacherib implicitly acknowledged its equal status to his own capital, Nineveh.

The king of Assyria without a doubt considered himself to be superior to his enemies, but he could compare himself to them. In Assyrian royal inscriptions 'the enemy' is a trope, whose characteristics are more important than the individual aspects of the actual opponents.²⁹ The enemy was the negative counterpart of the Assyrian king: he was treacherous, selfish and cowardly, in contrast to the Assyrian's honesty, generosity and courage. Such a binary opposition could only function if there

²⁶ Admittedly, there is some uncertainty here. What I translate as 'her hand' and 'her spirit' appears in the Akkadian text with the masculine possessive suffix. The grammar in texts of this period is often imprecise with respect to gender, but the text specifically refers to women earlier on.

²⁷ Trans. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 121, §198. The word translated as 'commoner' is intended to indicate a lower social rank than *awîlu*: the middle level in a three-tiered system of free man, 'commoner' and slave.

²⁸ Trans. Roth, *ibid.*, 121, §202.

²⁹ Mario Fales, 'The Enemy in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: "The Moral Judgement"', in Hans Jörg Nissen and Johannes Renger (eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn: Politische und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im alten Vorderasien vom 4. bis 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Berlin, 1987).

was comparability between the two. That comparability made revenge possible.

There was an actual lack of comparability in Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon, however, and this would haunt him and his successors. Sennacherib had not only dealt with an equal, the king of Babylon, but also with one superior to him, the god Marduk. It is clear from his own description that he was worried about this: he blamed the hands of his people for the destruction and looting of Marduk's temple, and also did not acknowledge the fact that he took the god's statue with him to Assyria. Yet he was responsible for these acts, and his successor, Esarhaddon, had to deal with the consequences. This is where the cycle of revenge continues.

When Esarhaddon came to the throne of Assyria in 680, he realized that Babylonia could not be left in ruin. The region was too important to be ignored by an emperor who sought to control the entire Middle East, and the long-lasting influences of Babylonia on Assyria had led to a special respect for it. Assyrian culture and religion were permeated with ideas and traditions that had their origin in Babylonia. The rebuilding of Babylon, therefore, became one of Esarhaddon's main projects, but he needed to provide an explanation for this reversal of his father's policy. He did so by ascribing the crimes against Marduk to others: his father had not acted of his own will and had suffered from the crime. Several accounts provide alternative descriptions of the events.

One attempt to exonerate Sennacherib is found in a text called 'The Sin of Sargon' by modern scholars. The fragmentary composition ostensibly deals with Sennacherib's father, Sargon II, who had died on the battlefield somewhere in Anatolia, and whose body had not been recovered for burial.³⁰ It describes how Sennacherib charged haruspices with the task of finding out why the gods had been angry with Sargon, and that they declared that the cause had been the breaking of a treaty guarded by the gods of Assyria and Babylonia. As a means of atonement, Sennacherib promised to build two divine statues, one for Assur, another for Marduk. But although the first was made, 'Assyrian scribes wrongfully prevented me from working [on the statue of Marduk] and did not let me make [the statue

³⁰ For these events, see Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sanherib-Inschriften*, 8.

of Marduk, the great lord], and (thus) [*shortened* my li]fe'.³¹ So the text suggests that Sennacherib already had intended to resurrect Marduk's cult and restore his statue. He had been prevented from doing so by 'scribes', and had paid for it with his life.³²

The reference to Sennacherib's shortened life is clearly one to his murder, an event that would lead to its own cycle of revenge years later, and that was also then seen in the context of Sennacherib's relationship with Babylon. The historical facts are clear: in 681, Sennacherib was assassinated by his own son, Arda-Mulissi, who was probably angry that he had not been selected as crown prince.³³ A war of succession ensued, which was won by Esarhaddon, who later claimed in his own inscriptions that this was the result of his father's selection rather than a power struggle.³⁴ Contemporary Assyrian sources, however, were virtually silent on the topic of Sennacherib's murder. Esarhaddon obliquely referred to it in the account of his rise to power. Only later sources were more explicit and made a connection with the king's Babylonian policy. When in 648 the Assyrian king Assurbanipal put down a Babylonian rebellion under the leadership of his own brother Shamash-shuma-ukin, he was merciless in his revenge. Those who had slandered the god Assur had their tongues cut out, while others were 'cut down between the bull colossi as a burial sacrifice for my grandfather Sennacherib'.³⁵ The fact that these Babylonian people were a sacrificial offering for the dead Sennacherib

³¹ Trans. Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (State Archives of Assyria, iii, Helsinki, 1989), 79.

³² For an analysis of this difficult text, see Hayim Tadmor, Benno Landsberger and Simo Parpola, 'The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will', *State Archives of Assyria Bull.*, iii (1989).

³³ The murderer was identified by Simo Parpola, 'The Murderer of Sennacherib', in Bendt Alster (ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia* (Copenhagen, 1980).

³⁴ Barbara N. Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy* (Philadelphia, 1993), 14–26.

³⁵ This passage is very difficult and has been translated in many different ways: see Akio Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im alten Mesopotamien* (Kevelaer, 1985), 112–13. Oppenheim's translation depicts the Assyrian idea of revenge the best: 'The others, I smashed alive with the very same statues of protective deities with which they had smashed my own grandfather Sennacherib — now (finally) as a (belated) burial sacrifice for his soul': A. L. Oppenheim, 'Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts', in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd edn (Princeton, 1969), 288. The Akkadian text, however, more likely identified the place of this sacrifice than the fact that the statues were used to crush the people.

strongly suggests that the Assyrians in Assurbanipal's time held them responsible for Sennacherib's murder.

Later Babylonian sources did not deny that, but naturally saw things from the opposite point of view. They were candid in portraying Sennacherib's murder as revenge by the god Marduk for earlier iniquities by the king. King Nabonidus, who ruled Babylonia from 555 to 539 BC, was very explicit on the matter:

[Against Akkad] he (Sennacherib) had evil intentions, he thought out crimes against the country, [he had] no mercy for the inhabitants of the country. With evil intentions against Babylon he let its sanctuaries fall into disrepair, disturbed their foundation outlines and let the cultic rites fall into oblivion. He (even) led the princely Marduk away and brought him into Assur. (But) he acted (thus against the country only) according to the wrath(ful will) of the gods. The princely Marduk did not appease his anger, for twenty-one years he established his seat in Assur. (But eventually) the time became full, the (predetermined) moment arrived, and the wrath of the king of the gods, the lord of lords calmed down; he remembered (again) Esagila and Babylon, his princely residence. (Therefore) he made his own son murder the king of Subartu (Assyria), he who (once) upon the wrath(ful command) of Marduk (himself) had brought about the downfall of the country.³⁶

Sennacherib's crime towards Marduk had thus been avenged by the god: the king had been murdered by his own son. The proper rules of revenge had been followed. The punishment was much harsher than the crime — the destruction of a temple had led to a death penalty — and this was justified by the fact that the perpetrator (Sennacherib) and the victim (Marduk) were not on the same level. Sennacherib had transgressed against a higher power, therefore his punishment was much more severe.

Esarhaddon was unhappy that his father was considered a criminal, and tried to indicate that Sennacherib had a change of heart in his attitude towards Marduk, which helped him justify his own reversal of policy and allowed the rebuilding of Babylon. But Sennacherib's guilt in the destruction of the city was still a blemish on his record. Esarhaddon tried to remove this by shifting the responsibility from his father to Marduk himself. According to him, the god had taken revenge on his own people for the use of his treasures to bribe the Elamites. Esarhaddon left a set of building inscriptions regarding the reconstruction of Babylon that addressed the earlier destruction of the city. In one of them he stated:

In the reign of an earlier king, there were evil omens in Sumer and Akkad. The people who lived there constantly answered each other with 'yes' (when they meant) 'no', and lied all the time. [They forsook] their

³⁶ Trans. Oppenheim, 'Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts', 309.

gods, they abandoned the worship of the goddesses . . . Even to the treasury of the Esagila, the palace of the gods, an unassailable shrine, they stretched their hands. The silver, gold and precious stones they squandered on Elam as payment for support. Anger seized the lord of the gods, Marduk. He made evil plans to overthrow the land and to destroy its people. The Arahtu canal, the river of abundance, a mighty river, a raging torrent, whose high water is like a flood, rose up. It poured its water into the city of his abode and made it like a ruin heap. The gods who resided there flew off like birds, and went up to heaven.³⁷

He thus employed the same elements as his father, in the latter's accusations against Babylon, but changed the roles of Marduk and Sennacherib. Whereas Sennacherib had held Marduk responsible for the misuse of his treasury and had punished the god, Esarhaddon made the people of Babylon the perpetrators who were punished by Marduk using Sennacherib as his agent.

Sennacherib's name was not explicitly mentioned by Esarhaddon, but it must have been well known to many in Babylon, where this inscription was written, that he had been involved in these events. The narrative nevertheless shifted the focus to the god Marduk, whose anger at the use of his temple treasure led to the city's destruction. That the authors were aware of Sennacherib's original account in the Bavian inscription is clear from the reference to the Arahtu canal. Both accounts see the destruction of Babylon as the work of a flood which erased the city from the face of the earth. Consequently, the gods had to abandon the city which could no longer house them: the statue of Marduk had not been stolen, but the god had left voluntarily.

Now that Marduk had become responsible for Babylon's destruction, he could also be used to justify its rebuilding. Esarhaddon went on to say: 'Although he had written down seventy years as the period of its desolation, the merciful Marduk let his anger dwindle soon. He turned the numeral upside down and ordered the restoration in the eleventh year'.³⁸ The reversal of the cuneiform numeral for 70, 𒍪𒍪, indeed leads to the number 11, 𒍪. The revenge that Sennacherib had exacted on Babylon was a justified revenge, as it was done for the sake

³⁷ For the cuneiform text, see Th. G. Pinches, *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, 44 (London, 1963), no. 3, col. 1, ll. 18–46. The edition *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*, ed. Riekele Borger (Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft ix, Graz, 1956), 12–15, merges together a number of different texts, which need to be distinguished and analysed separately: see J. A. Brinkman, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Esarhaddon's Retrospect on the Downfall of Babylon', *Jl Amer. Oriental Soc.*, ciii (1983), 39.

³⁸ Pinches, *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets*, 44, no. 3, col. 2, ll. 2–9.

of Marduk, and Marduk's mercy permitted Esarhaddon to rebuild the city. The decisions were all made on the level of the gods, who communicated their original displeasure and subsequent reconciliation through omens to the people. The rebuilding of Babylon was thus the positive analogue of the original destruction.³⁹

Esarhaddon may have thought that he had ended the cycle of revenge: Marduk had been angry, but had calmed down and forgiven the crimes against him. But, as Klytimestra also learned too late, the cycle of revenge does not end easily. The Babylonians did not forgive and forget the destruction of their city. When Assyria lost its grip over Babylonia after Assurbanipal's death in 627, a local dynasty established itself under King Nabopolassar. By 614, he felt that Assyria had weakened sufficiently to be a target of his own military campaigns and turned against his northern neighbour. He justified his actions in a declaration of war, a very unusual type of document for Mesopotamia, which by itself lends greater importance to its contents.⁴⁰ According to Nabopolassar, the god Marduk had selected him to avenge⁴¹ Babylon: 'From the land at the lower sea the great lord Marduk looked upon me to avenge the land of Akkad (Babylonia)'.⁴² Retaliation was against the city of Sennacherib, Nineveh, which he would treat exactly as Babylon had been treated some seventy-five years earlier. Since Sennacherib's men had taken the goods and valuables of the gods of Babylon, Nabopolassar would return the property of the Esagila and Babylon. Because Sennacherib 'tore out the bricks and earth of the inner and outer walls (of Babylon)', Nabopolassar would 'tear out the foundations of the city of Sennacherib'. While the Assyrian king 'carried off alive Shuzubu, king of Babylon', Nabopolassar 'would exile the []⁴³ of his (Sennacherib's) family from Assyria forever'.

Nabopolassar was successful; together with his Median allies from the west of Iran he conquered Assyria's capital, Nineveh, in 612. The city was destroyed, but, once again, this was not a

³⁹ See Brinkman, 'Through a Glass Darkly'.

⁴⁰ The text was published by Pamela Gerardi, 'Declaring War in Mesopotamia', *Archiv für Orientforschung*, xxxiii (1986). The name of Nabopolassar does not appear explicitly in the preserved parts, but his authorship seems certain.

⁴¹ Akkadian *turru gimil*.

⁴² Gerardi, 'Declaring War in Mesopotamia', 35.

⁴³ The word is unfortunately broken, but it is a term in the plural.

thoughtless act of violence. It was carefully planned and executed, as we can observe in the archaeological record. Persons who knew how to read cuneiform went through the palaces and identified the representations of the people most despicable for their earlier deeds against the victors, and they defaced only those representations, cutting out eyes and ears.⁴⁴ Most likely the Medes focused on King Assurbanipal, who had destroyed Susa, the capital city of Elam, while the Babylonians focused their anger on King Sennacherib. Finally, Nineveh was burned down, as can be seen from the charred palace remains.

The Babylonians themselves have left us no description of what happened, so we cannot compare their narrative with those quoted above. But we do have a later Greek account from the fourth-century BC historian Ktesias of Knidos, who worked at the Persian court at Susa, and must have been informed by Babylonian sources. His work, the *Persika*, is only known to us from later excerpts, and the passages of relevance to the fall of Nineveh are preserved only in the work of the first-century BC historian Diodorus. Both Ktesias and Diodorus have a poor reputation as historians; the former is usually seen as more interested in gossip than in history, the latter as 'a third rate compiler only as good as his source'.⁴⁵ Although we do not know how much reworking the later author undertook on Ktesias' text, I shall refer to Ktesias as our source. In the narrative on the fall of Nineveh, the description of the death of Sardanapalos, made famous through its depiction by Eugène Delacroix, is often singled out to demonstrate Ktesias' taste for drama. But rereading his account in the light of the earlier sources I have mentioned may mean that a reassessment is needed. The siege of Nineveh did not go well for the Babylonians and Medes for two years, according to Ktesias, 'but in the third year great storms of rain fell without cease, with the result that the Euphrates became swollen, inundated part of the city, and overturned the wall for twenty stades'.⁴⁶ Modern historians have argued over the historicity of this statement, suggesting

⁴⁴ For a description and explanation of the practices involved, see Bahrani, 'Assault and Abduction'.

⁴⁵ Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), p. xix.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Diodorus, *Library of History*, II. 27. Trans. Edwin Murphy, *The Antiquities of Asia: A Translation with Notes of Book II of the 'Library of History' of Diodorus Siculus* (New Brunswick, 1989), 35.

flooding, flash floods and manipulation of the irrigation system as explanations,⁴⁷ but this seems to me a misunderstanding of the passage by taking it as an accurate historical account. It is not important whether or not the inundation of Nineveh took place in reality. It was an exact repetition of what had happened to Babylon seventy-five years earlier, and the Babylonian narrative of the event used by Ktesias included it because it demonstrated proper revenge. It was not a mistake by Ktesias to involve the Euphrates river instead of the Tigris, the river which runs by Nineveh. After all, it had been the waters of the Euphrates that had washed away Babylon, and they may similarly have destroyed Nineveh in the Babylonian account. That the river played an important part in that account is also clear from the biblical narrative, where the prophet Nahum states: 'The gates of the "rivers" were opened, and the palace melted away' (Nahum 2:6).⁴⁸

Ktesias goes on to narrate an act by the Babylonian king, regularly seen as purely fictional:⁴⁹

He (Belesus) also declared that, in the midst of their dangers, he had vowed to (the god) Belos that if Sardanapallos was vanquished and the palace were burnt he would transport their ashes to Babylon, where he would deposit them along the river near the precinct sacred to the god, and throw up a mound that would stand out for those navigating the river as a lasting memorial to the man who had overthrown Assyrian supremacy.⁵⁰

This act only makes sense if we remember that Sennacherib had taken some of the earth of Babylon to deposit it in the Assur temple,⁵¹ and we can easily imagine that Ktesias' Babylonian source included this report. The story continues to explain that this was a ruse by Belesus, that is Nabopolassar, who knew that the gold and silver of Nineveh had been melted down by the

⁴⁷ For example, J. A. Scurlock, 'The Euphrates Flood and the Ashes of Nineveh (Diod. II 27.1–28.7)', *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, xxxix (1990).

⁴⁸ See Peter Machinist, 'The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective', in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria, 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* (Helsinki, 1997), 189.

⁴⁹ For example, by John McGinnis, 'Ctesias and the Fall of Nineveh', *Sumer*, xlv (1987–8).

⁵⁰ Diodorus, *Library of History*, II. 28. Trans. Murphy, *Antiquities of Asia*, 36.

⁵¹ This connection was mentioned in passing in König's reconstruction of Ktesias' text, *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm König (Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft xviii, Graz, 1972), 42. See also Machinist, 'Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective', 194.

fire of the city and were mixed with its ashes. This sounds like pure fantasy, but we can surmise that the theft of the city's treasures by the victorious Babylonian army inspired the idea.

The last act of this tragedy, therefore, focused on the same two elements that had been introduced by Sennacherib three centuries earlier: the destructive power of water and the removal of earth. When Ktesias found his Babylonian source, he may have thought that it gave him an accurate account of the sack of Nineveh (a city that was almost fully abandoned in his day). He may not have known that it followed a set pattern of revenge and that it had to depict the city's end as the parallel of what Nineveh's builder had done to Babylon. We can trace the entire revenge tragedy and see how its successive acts relate to one another. That parallels and reversals of earlier statements were more important than facts can be brought out only by an intertextual analysis. The authors of the various accounts were aware of those that preceded and responded to them. This took place across cultural boundaries: Assyrian/Babylonian, and possibly Mesopotamian/Greek. It is beside the point for the historian to seek factual truth in them. While the story of the sack of Babylon stands out as a prime example of how the ancient authors worked, I am certain that it is not a unique case of their responding to earlier texts. Modern historians need to remain aware of this in their work.

Nabopolassar's feat was the final act of the cycle of revenge. To the Babylonians, Assyria did not have a special cultural or religious value; it had simply been a borrower of their traditions, and there was no reason for them to admire Assyrian culture. Assyrian gods were of little or no importance to them, so they did not fear them. The Assyrians themselves could no longer reply. Once the empire was defeated its urban centres, which had been artificially supported by booty and tribute, vanished. Its army, which had relied on contingents of foreign troops, was disbanded. Assyria was completely wiped out. Sennacherib had probably never realized how dire the consequences of his actions would be, and the god Marduk, in the end, had the upper hand.

APPENDIX

LIST OF SELECTED KINGS OF BABYLONIA AND ASSYRIA
WITH DATES OF RULE*Babylonia*

Sargon II (709–705)

Sennacherib (704–703)

Marduk-zakir-shumi II (703)

Marduk-apla-iddina II (703)

Bel-ibni (702–700)

Assur-nadin-shumi (699–694)

Nergal-Mushezib (693)

Mushezib-Marduk (692–689)

Sennacherib (688–681)

Esarhaddon (680–669)

Assurbanipal (668)

Shamash-shuma-ukin
(667–648)

Nabopolassar (626–605)

Nabonidus (555–539)

Assyria

Sargon II (721–705)

Sennacherib (704–681)

Esarhaddon (680–669)

Assurbanipal (668–627)