State-Sponsored Sacrilege: “Godnapping” and Omission in Neo-Assyrian Inscriptions

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Abstract: Because of the symbolic and religious importance of cult statues in ancient Mesopotamia, these images were targeted on numerous occasions by invading forces as part of the conquest of a foreign polity. In the case of the Assyrians, triumphant kings would sometimes list cult statues from a newly-conquered city or group as spoils of war, alongside members of the royal family, their subjects, and their precious goods. Such acts of divine deportation are sometimes called “godnapping” in secondary literature. A conspicuous feature in godnapping reports is the paucity of divine names mentioned. Deported cult images are instead simply called “gods” of a foreign king, people, or city. Because godnapping has thus far been studied purely as a political tactic, the omission of names has been ascribed to the Assyrians’ disinterest in or ignorance of non-Assyrian divinities. This study proposes viewing godnapping not through a political lens but rather a religious one, arguing that the Assyrians would certainly have been aware of which cult statues they were deporting, and that they would have considered the non-Assyrian cult images gods in their own right. Focusing upon the religious and inscriptional traditions of the Assyrians, this paper seeks to demonstrate that omitting divine names in deportation accounts may have been purposeful and meant to prevent these gods from seeking retribution. Instead of using the traditional approach of examining the political ramifications for the conquered polity whose gods have been deported, this paper turns instead to the religious and psychological consequences for those who were deporting the gods and exposes the Assyrian perspective of godnapping as presented in their own inscriptions.

Keywords: Assyria, religion, royal inscriptions, cult images, iconoclasm

Introduction

“Godnapping,” the forcible removal of cult statues by invading forces, is attested in ancient Mesopotamian history from the Isin-Larsa period at the start of the
second millennium BCE until the last centuries BCE. Because cult statues were considered manifestations of the gods, godnapping was a powerful tool for asserting hegemony and for demoralizing subjugated peoples, who were thereby deprived of their gods and divine protection. Several studies have sought to understand this phenomenon within the framework of imperialism and political control. While differing in the subject of inquiry, what the previous studies share is a primarily external locus of approach; in other words, the use of godnapping has been considered almost exclusively from the point of view of the psychological, theological, and socio-political effects upon the groups whose gods had been deported. It is the purpose of this study to reverse this approach, and to analyze the act of godnapping from the perspective of those who deported the gods. Attestations of godnapping are most numerous in Assyrian sources, especially during the Neo-Assyrian period, which will be the focus of this study.

Since Cogan (1974) analyzed the deportation of cult images within the context of divine abandonment and Assyrian imperial policy, several works have attempted to provide further explanations for why Assyrians (and other groups) would include gods as part of the spoils of conquest. In a recent dissertation on the topic, Johnson (2011: 137, 178–79) argued that godnapping was meant to be a statement of the might of the Assyrian empire through the humiliation of conquered peoples, and that it was a calculated political tactic. Holloway (2002) had previously set forth a similar analysis in a study of Assyrian religion and imperialism, in which he argues that godnapping functioned as a fear tactic and a punishment for defying Assyrian rule. Kravitz’s (1999) earlier

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1 “Godnapping” was coined by Alasdair Livingstone (1997). Attestations of godnapping in the cuneiform textual record span from the reigns of Shu-ilishu (184–1757) to Cyrus the Great (559–30). All dates in this article are BCE unless otherwise noted.
2 Johnson (2011: 12, 133) argues that the deportation of cult statues had a psychologically damaging effect on the people whose gods were taken, and that this was a tactic meant to ensure obedience to the Assyrian king. Kravitz (1999) puts forth a similar argument regarding the public display of captured cult statues. For the relationship between god and image, as well as the creation of cult statues, see Walker and Dick (2001), Berlejung (1997, 1998), and Dick (1998), among others.
3 Comprehensive treatments of godnapping can be found in Kravitz (1999) and Johnson (2011). For godnapping and the destruction of divine images during the Neo-Assyrian period specifically, see Holloway (2002: 118–51). Other works that discuss this phenomenon include Cogan (1974), Beaulieu (2001), Berlejung (2002), and Schaudig (2012).
6 According to Holloway (2002: 196), “the capture of divine images was intended as an object lesson against disobedience to Assyria. It was a punitive act meant to devastate the country
work on divine trophies of war, as she calls them, takes a more neutral approach, focusing on the political and theological messages behind the display of captured cult images in Assyria.

The conclusion that godnapping was purely (or even primarily) political in nature misses a critical detail, however; namely, that Assyrians still recognized non-Assyrian deities as gods in their own right and, therefore, godnapping was a form of violence against the divine. Consequently, the perpetrators of godnapping would have been at risk of facing divine wrath and retribution from the gods whose cult statues were deported. Since there is no reason to believe that the Assyrians considered non-native gods to be false idols or less legitimate than their own, how did they reconcile this act of aggression against the gods? What rhetoric did Assyrian scribes use to describe this act and what anxieties, if any, may be encoded in their language? Were the Assyrians cavalier and boastful about godnapping, as has previously been suggested?

It is the aim of this paper to address systematically the act of godnapping, as well as cases in which cult statues were returned or destroyed, from the perspective of the Assyrians themselves, as portrayed in Assyrian royal inscriptions, royal correspondence, and chronicles beginning with the late Middle Assyrian Period.

Data for godnapping, when juxtaposed with attestations of the return of cult statues to their native polities, reveal a more complicated picture of the

afflicted and to strike the terror that culminates in political subservience into the hearts of Assyrian subjects.” Indeed, gods were generally only taken from groups and regions rebellious to Assyria, see Holloway (2002: 144). For the destruction of temples and cult spaces as a political tactic, see Bottéro (1994: 35).

7 Bottéro (1994: 35) argues that this is evidenced by use of the divine determinative, the worship or recognition of foreign cults, and treaty witness lists. See also van der Spek (2014: 12, 21–22). Richardson (2012: 236) enumerates the ways in which Assyrian kings dealt with foreign cults, including homage, accepting gifts, and installing royal or divine images. See also Berlejung (2012) for case studies of Gaza and Ekron under Assyrian rule.

8 Van der Spek (2014: 21) considers religious motivations one of the “factors that are often ignored by modern historians ... the kings themselves clearly believed that there were religious reasons for their policies.” Assyrian kings are attested as providing sacrifices to gods that are identified as non-Assyrian; for example, Shalmaneser III records that he created a statue of himself that he dedicated to Armada of Arwad (RIMA 3 A.0.102.55: 4). For Assyrian involvement with foreign cults under Shalmaneser III and Assurnasirpal II in general, see Karlsson (2013: 131). Non-Assyrian cults were also recognized in the Assyrian heartland, as evidenced by the tākultu lists and the Götteradressbuch, for instance; see Frankena (1954), Menzel (1981: T 146–66), and George (1992: 181). In addition, the power of swearing oaths by the gods of foreign panthea can be seen in the treaty corpus (see SAA II 1988), which includes non-Assyrian gods in invocations, divine witness lists, and curse formulae. A recent survey of foreign gods in Assyria during the Neo-Assyrian period is given by Salo (forthcoming).

9 For a discussion of this argument, see Johnson (2011).
theological and psychological implications of divine deportation than has previously been argued. The Assyrians claim responsibility for these deeds, and the act itself was deemed justified by the behavior of the enemy king or polity,\textsuperscript{10} but there is a pattern in the Assyrian textual record that is consistent from the earliest attestations of the practice of godnapping: specifically, a noticeable reluctance to record the names of the gods deported unless the Assyrians are returning them to their original locations. While several of the studies referenced above have remarked that few instances of godnapping include an explicit listing of the particular god(s) taken, this tendency has been variously dismissed as the Assyrians’ ignorance, willful or otherwise, of the gods they were deporting, or the unimportance of identifying gods that were not the heads of the pantheon in question.\textsuperscript{11} But names are routinely omitted even for deported gods that were surely familiar to the Assyrians, including gods from various Babylonian cities, who were part of Assyria’s own extensive pantheon. Nor are the gods named always the heads of their respective panthea, so there must have been some other reason for the Assyrians to omit the names of the gods involved. Defying, neglecting, or causing harm to a god put one at risk of facing the god’s wrath, which would manifest in curses that would include misfortune, illness, or even death for the offender.\textsuperscript{12} Considering that perpetrators of godnapping would fear divine retribution, this pattern of omission may be read as a deliberate strategy to suppress the sacrilegious implications of forcibly removing gods from their patron cities.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the absence of divine names in the textual record indicates at least deliberate caution, if not outright anxiety, in how the

\textsuperscript{10} For Assyrian justifications for war, see Oded (1992).
\textsuperscript{11} Kravitz (1999: 29) states in passing that “there is remarkably little information beyond the minimal report” of godnapping. Karlsson (2013: 129 fn. 733) observes this phenomenon as well, although his statement that gods in the later Neo-Assyrian period are “often named” is incorrect. Regarding the named gods that Šamši-Adad V deported from Der, Johnson (2011: 135) muses “did the Assyrians know the names of the gods in Der and not the names of the other gods? Were the other gods not as important as the gods taken in Der, so did not deserve mention by name?” While not referring to godnapping in this case, Holloway’s (2002: 120) claim that “silences in the Assyrian royal inscriptions are always worth noting” is certainly applicable here.
\textsuperscript{12} For cursing in general, see Kitz (2014).
\textsuperscript{13} The consequences of a god leaving his or her patron city are described in the lamentation texts. Common themes include the vulnerability of the city to invading forces, chaos, destruction, death, and the inversion of the natural order, i.e. in The Marduk Prophecy (Borger 1971; Neujahr 2012: 27–41). That godnapping was indeed a sacrilegious act is best depicted in inscriptions written by those whose gods were deported, who are able to write freely about godnapping without fear of divine wrath (see the discussion of the stele of Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur below).
Assyrians chose to portray acts of godnapping in their sources. What follows is a discussion of how Assyrian sources describe godnapping and the gods that were deported. Then, to test the hypothesis that the omission of divine names was purposeful, this paper will address the return of cult statues. Finally, the extreme and rare examples of the destruction of cult statues will be considered.

The language of godnapping

A key to understanding the native psychology behind godnapping is the terminology used in Assyrian texts and how it differs from other Mesopotamian traditions. The customary motif, particularly in literature, is that of divine abandonment: the god or goddess becomes angry with his or her patron city and leaves to dwell elsewhere until he or she chooses to return. The stages of this trope are essentially threefold: 1. initial departure, which the god carries out in rage; 2. divine reconciliation, during which the god is appeased and has mercy; and 3. voluntary return, when the god reenters his patron city with joy and fanfare. Divine abandonment is attested in both Sumerian and Akkadian literature, found in Sumerian city laments (such as the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur) and the Erra Epic, and is often used as an explanation for why misfortune befalls an individual or city. Drawing a connection between the divine abandonment motif and the Assyrian deportation of cult statues, Cogan (1974: 21) argues that divine abandonment was a scribal convention that intended to avoid “depicting foreign gods as taking the field in defense of their adherents, thus sparing these gods humiliating defeat at the hands of the superior Assyrian gods.” But what happens in Assyrian sources does not conform to this model – the divine abandonment motif is not used to depict godnapping.

Some explanation may be found in generic differences between the literary texts referenced above and royal inscriptions. However, Babylonian royal inscriptions do occasionally utilize the divine abandonment motif, as well as other literary descriptions similar to those used to portray the departure of gods.

14 Not every text includes all three stages and variation is especially common in literature, but the inscriptions discussed in this study that utilize the divine abandonment motif generally rely upon this pattern.
15 For the Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur, see Michalowski (1989). For the Erra Epic, see Foster (2005: 880–911). Divine abandonment on an individual level is also found in such works as The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer (Foster 2005: 392–409).
17 The exceptional case of Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscriptions is discussed below.
in lamentation texts, to depict the conquest or destruction of Babylonian cities. For instance, an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125–04) that records the destruction of Babylon at the hands of the Elamites reads: “the lord (Marduk) became angry and full of wrath. He commanded and the land was abandoned by its gods ...; the guardians of peace became angry and went up to the dome of heaven; the protective spirit of justice stood aside. The god ..., who guards living creatures, abandoned the people; they all became like those who have no god.” The text continues with demons filling the cult centers and with the conquest of Babylon by the Elamite king, who is said to have deported the gods and destroyed the temples. Within the corpus of Babylonian royal inscriptions, the trope is not limited to the Second Isin Dynasty but rather has a continuous tradition, found as late as the Cyrus Cylinder from the Achaemenid period. The differences in genre thus do not fully explain why the Assyrians did not use the divine abandonment motif for godnapping in their royal inscriptions.

That is not to say that the motif is entirely absent from the Assyrian royal inscription corpus. There are references to the voluntary departure of gods, but this phrasing is not used to describe gods that the Assyrians are deporting; rather, these attestations are stereotyped descriptions of the misfortune of the

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18 RIMB 2 B.2.4.8: 17–20. This particular inscription, a bilingual historical-literary text, is preserved in several exemplars, one of which contains a colophon indicating that it was copied as part of Assurbanipal’s collection. The later portion of the inscription (edited as RIMB 2 B.2.4.9) describes Marduk’s appeasement and voluntary return to Babylon after hearing the supplications of Nebuchadnezzar I. A Neo-Assyrian copy of another historical-literary royal inscription of Nebuchadnezzar I (RIMB 2 B.2.4.5) preserves an account of the king beseeching Marduk to return to Babylon from Elam. Like the former inscription, the language used is typical for the departing god motif, giving the god himself agency in leaving Babylon. That these texts exist in Neo-Assyrian copies suggests that Assyrians were familiar with this trope in Babylonian sources, even if they did not use it in their own texts.

19 Schaudig (2001: 552–56). The Cyrus Cylinder features the familiar pattern of divine wrath and subsequent departure, when Marduk becomes angry and he and the other Babylonian gods abandon their sanctuaries, returning when Marduk proclaims Cyrus the king of Babylon. As will be discussed below regarding Esarhaddon’s attempt to appeal to Babylonian audiences by using the divine abandonment motif, Cyrus too appears to be self-consciously adopting Babylonian language to describe Babylon’s hardships and his own rise to power, despite being a non-Babylonian king. In addition, although they are not considered royal inscriptions, Neo-Babylonian chronicles also rely upon the departing god motif, and the few attestations of mortal hands deporting gods are framed in gentler language than in Assyrian texts, such as “the king of Akkad and his troops went up toward Manê, Saḫiri, and Bāliḫu, sacked them, took a large amount of booty, and deported (abāku) their gods. In the month of Elul, the king of Akkad made his way back with his troops, and on the way he took (leqû) Ḫîndanu and its gods to Babylon” (reign of Nabopolassar, Glassner 2004: 218–19). See also Glassner (2004: 216–17) for the Assyrian deportation (abāku) of the gods of Susa to Uruk.
soon-to-be-defeated enemy king. Two deported gods are portrayed in Assyrian royal inscriptions as having left their cities voluntarily – Nanāia and Marduk – but, notably, only in the accounts of their returns with the help of the Assyrian king. Nanāia’s abandonment of Uruk is recorded in Assurbanipal’s Rassam Cylinder, in which she is depicted as leaving in anger for Elam, where she would remain for almost 2,000 years. In the Assyrian accounts of Marduk’s return to Babylon, his earlier departure is likewise framed within the terminology of voluntary withdrawal. It seems that the convention is found with regards to deported deities only in accounts in which Assyrian kings are returning gods to their patron cities. That both Nanāia and Marduk are traditional Babylonian gods is perhaps also a significant factor in the use of this motif. In general, Assyrian depictions of divine abandonment are limited to non-Assyrian gods, as opposed to the Babylonian sources that describe the departure of their own gods. Assyria’s gods apparently do not leave their cities in anger, and so divine abandonment is never used to describe the actions of Assyrian gods. The absence of this convention is likely part of a greater ideological program in Assyrian royal inscriptions to avoid depictions of Assyrian military defeats, especially within the Assyrian heartland. Because cities in the Assyrian core are normally not described as falling to enemy forces, there is no need to phrase the event as abandonment by their own gods.

Instead of divine abandonment, Assyrian inscriptions make it clear that mortal hands (namely, theirs) are the agents of the god’s deportation. Both Johnson (2011: 217–18) and Cogan (1974: 23) provide an analysis of verbs used in deportation, which are variations of the act of taking, removing, or despoiling. These terms are never descriptions of actions taken by the gods themselves, the subjects of the verbs being rather the Assyrian king or, in rare cases, his troops. But while Assyrian kings take direct responsibility for the removal of

20 Examples from Cogan (1974: 11–13) include the following: the seven cities of Qummuḫ, in which “their gods abandoned them, rendering them helpless,” Kirua of Illubru, “a faithful vassal of mine, whom his gods had abandoned,” and Sanduarri of Kundu and Sissu, who “(was one) whom the gods had forsaken.” Gods are sometimes described as returning in the chronicles or eponyms as well with no reference to deportation. Cogan (1974) also notes that the use of the divine abandonment by the conqueror, rather than the conquered, as justification for warfare is a Neo-Assyrian innovation.

21 BIWA: 57–58 and 242. The exemplars claim different periods of time for Nanāia’s absence: 1535, 1630, or 1635 years. This suggests that the exact number was less important than the impression that a long period of time had passed.

22 Discussed in detail below.

23 Cogan (1974: 23), and Johnson (2011: 217–18) for the Neo-Assyrian period in particular. The most common constructions rely upon the verb šalālu “to deport” (including the adverbial usage in šallatiš manû “to count as booty”).

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gods from their patron cities and the act itself is not omitted from the written record, the manner in which the removal of a deity from his or her patron city is portrayed nonetheless suggests a deliberate caution and an awareness of the potentially sacrilegious nature of godnapping.

The theological importance of divine names

Speaking or invoking divine names is an essential component for a wide range of text genres during all periods of Mesopotamian history. Prayers and hymns in praise of the gods showcase the importance of the act of naming, since they often begin with an invocation of one or several gods by name. Divine names carry a power beyond that of the god to which they refer, as can be seen with the fifty names bestowed upon Marduk at the end of Enuma eliš, for example, or the use of Enlil’s name in divine epithets to illustrate the supremacy (ellilātu) of other gods. Ritual use of divine names is also significant, as many rituals required the liturgists to speak the gods’ names as part of the cultic act, including in the Assyrian tâkultu ritual. In particular, Assyrian royal inscriptions often include long dedications to single gods and extended lists of gods who accompany the king on campaign and are credited for his subsequent successes, not to mention the gods responsible for the king’s accession to the Assyrian throne in the first place. Essentially, all of the king’s actions were for

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24 Radner’s (2005) survey of how mortal names are significant to ideas of self-preservation and immortality provides an exploration of the concept of naming. Her remarks concerning the importance of the “written name” are relevant to written divine names as well; for instance, when she writes that the example of Lugal-e demonstrates how “der Name und das Bild der Person waren solchermaßen aneinander gebunden und ergänzten und verstärkten einander wechselseitig in ihrer Funktion der Existenzsicherung der dargestellten und genannten Individuums” (2005: 118). Similarly, the image (šalmu) and the name of the god are bound together.

25 See CAD Š šumu 1c b’: 287.


27 See Frankena (1954: 129) for liturgists speaking the gods’ names during the ritual. Compare also Van der Toorn’s (1996: 52) description of the Old Babylonian ancestor cult, wherein the food offerings (kispum) would be accompanied by the speaking of the deceased’s name (šumam zakārum).

28 Indeed, the power and authority of the Assyrian king was seen as granted by the gods, who elected him to kingship and then tasked him with the divine imperative to extend the borders of
the exaltation of, and supported by, the gods of Assyria. Moreover, the Assyrian treaty corpus in SAA II is a prime example of the importance of divine names for the Assyrians, even when the gods invoked belonged to non-Assyrian parties. These treaties enumerate the gods by name in (often quite long) lists and it was either understood or explicitly laid out in curse formulae that those who did not respect the conditions of the document would be at the mercy of the gods whose names were written in the inscription. In the case of international treaties, the divine witness lists included both the gods of Assyria and the gods of the contracting party, indicating that the Assyrians saw the participation of both sets of gods as necessary to conclude the agreement and protect the oaths.\textsuperscript{29} Previous studies have demonstrated that there was an intentionality behind the selection and ordering of the divine names in these various Assyrian sources.\textsuperscript{30} In general, the invocation of divine names seeks to focus the gods’ attention on the speaker, whether he is calling upon the gods to underscore his piety, to praise them for his successes, or to signal their protection of an inscription. With this in mind, the omission of divine names in godnapping accounts is an unexpected and striking phenomenon, but one that is explicable considering the nature of the deed. After all, divine deportation is far from an act of piety or worship for the gods that are taken, and the absence of names may be read as an acknowledgment of the irreverent nature of godnapping. If invocation is the standard practice in exaltation, the opposite – omission – may then be the customary portrayal of sacrilege, at least within the perpetrators’ inscriptions. Indeed, if the inclusion of divine names is meant to attract the attention of the gods, those who commit godnapping might seek to avoid invoking the gods for this very reason.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} The power of divine names is also apparent in the conclusion of other formal documents and agreements. This includes contracts, \textit{kudurrus}, and other legal documentation, in which gods are invoked as part of curse formulae or witnesses.

\textsuperscript{30} See, for instance, Barré (1983) for Neo-Assyrian treaties and Karlsson (2013) for deity sequences in Middle Assyrian royal inscriptions.

\textsuperscript{31} Much has been written about who the audience for royal inscriptions would have been, especially those that are in locations that are difficult to reach or inaccessible to the general population. One prevailing opinion (Tadmor 1997: 330–32) is that the gods were intended as the primary audience, which would further underscore the importance of caution when recording sacrilegious acts.
Godnapping in Assyrian sources

There are 56 attestations of godnapping by Assyrians, found primarily in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, with a few cases recorded in chronicles, royal correspondence, and palace reliefs.\textsuperscript{32} The practice is attested in the Assyrian royal inscriptions beginning with Tiglath-pileser I in the late Middle Assyrian period and continues through the reign of Assurbanipal.\textsuperscript{33} Of these 56 attestations, only seven include the names of the gods taken.\textsuperscript{34} This is a percentage of about 13\%, which is almost exactly the inverse of the percentage of returned cult statues that are named, discussed below.\textsuperscript{35} Instead of listing divine names, deported gods are identified only obliquely: in 38 cases, by far the majority, gods that have been deported are referred to simply as \textit{ilānī} (DINGIR.MEŠ) plus a pronoun that refers either to the foreign ruler or to the conquered people. Of this subgroup, 18 deportations involve the gods of a specific ruler (or rulers), while 20 deportations target the gods of the people in particular cities or regions.

\textsuperscript{32} Attested instances of godnapping by king, following Holloway (2002: 123–44 for a detailed chart of divine images deported by Assyrians) are: seven under Tiglath-pileser I, one under Assur-dan II, three under Adad-nerari II, one under Tukulti-Ninurta II, two under Assurnasirpal II, three under Shalmaneser III, eight under Shamshi-Adad V, one attributed to an unknown Assyrian ruler or official (ninth–eighth century), seven under Tiglath-pileser III, four under Sargon II, ten under Sennacherib, then four each under Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. One additional occurrence under Esarhaddon, in which he depornts gods from a group of unidentified kings (RINAP 4 1: iv 78–v 9), is not included in Holloway’s study. More recently, Berlejung (2012: 156–60) has called into question one attestation from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III.

\textsuperscript{33} The first Assyrian attestation of godnapping, however, is in a literary work, the \textit{Tukulti-Ninurta Epic}, which records the deportation of Marduk from Babylon, see Machinist (1978). That the use of godnapping in royal inscriptions began with Tiglath-pileser I may be related to the creation of the genre of royal annals under this king.

\textsuperscript{34} These are the deportations of the gods of Der (RIMA 3 A.0.103.2: iii 42–48’ and Chronicle 21 Synchronistic History iv 3–6 in Grayson 1975: 168, although the latter source does not list any gods by name for Der) and Dur-Sharruku (Chronicle 21 Synchronistic History iv 7–8 in Grayson 1975: 168) under Shamshi-Adad V, the gods of Uraṭu (Sargon II), the gods of Uruk (Sennacherib), and the gods of Elam (Assurbanipal). Two cases come from non-contemporary or non-Assyrian sources: the stele of Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur (the governor of Suhu and Mari) that reports a late ninth–early eighth century Assyrian king’s “hiding” of Anat of ‘Anat (RIMB 2 S.0.1002.10: 22–23) and a letter to Assurbanipal concerning the earlier deportation of gods from Babylonian cities (SAA XIII: 190).

\textsuperscript{35} Disregarding the non-Assyrian sources and non-contemporary sources cited above, this percentage drops to only about 9\% (5 attestations). Non-Assyrian sources can be excluded on the grounds that they were not written by the perpetrators of the act and are not subject to anxiety about divine retribution.
that have been conquered. The remaining attestations are more varied: in three cases, the gods are identified by geographical location; four further cases include three attestations of the “gods, their helpers” and one attestation of “gods of his father’s house;” the remaining four cases are from reliefs and cannot be identified conclusively. In addition, the cult statues are frequently nested in lists of prisoners and spoils that include the king, royal family, citizens, and precious goods, minimizing the cult image’s prominence and status as divine manifestation. Shalmaneser III’s Black Obelisk provides a typical example: “Aḥunu, together with his gods (ilānūšu), his chariots, his horses, his sons, his daughters, (and) his troops I uprooted (nasāḫu) (and) brought to my city Assur.” This is consistent with the other examples in that, while the act of godnapping is described in an otherwise straightforward manner, the gods taken are not recorded by name.

Affiliating the gods with rulers or conquered peoples may also hint at something other than a way to identify gods without using their names. Many gods listed as deported are minor or poorly attested deities, and it is possible

36 Of the gods affiliated with rulers, almost all are written as ilānūšu or ilāšu (the phonetic complement –ni is not always present). The other cases are the gods of Kili-Teshub and his family and the gods of the rulers of the Bazu region, which are both written ilānūšumù, and the gods and goddesses of Taḥarqa, written ilānūšu ʾištarāṭuṭt(ʾINANNA.MEŠ)-šu. The gods affiliated with cities or regions are written almost exclusively as ilānūšunu or ilāšunu, with the plural pronoun generally referring to the inhabitants of these areas unless more than one city is listed. The exception is the gods of Dur-Papsukkal, who are designated as ilānūšu, where the pronoun clearly refers to the city.

37 The gods of Shapazza (ilānū ša ṣapazza), the gods of Til-Garimmu (ilānū āšib libbišu), and the gods of Adumutu (ilānūšu, with the pronoun referring to the city).

38 The gods of Israel (Samaria, specifically), the gods that Merodach-baladan II took to Dur-Iakin during the reign of Sargon II, and the gods Esarhaddon deported from unidentified rebellious kings. This phrase, ilānū tiklišunu, was earlier translated as “the gods of their trust” (Johnson 2011).

39 The dynastic gods of king Ṣidqa of Ashkelon (ilānū bit abīšu).

40 The positions of the deported gods in these lists appear to be random, although the gods sometimes directly follow a statement about the conquest of the city and are often themselves followed by “their possessions” and “their property.” Human deportations seem also to be subject to variation. Generally, if the ruler of the polity has been deported, he is listed before any mortal, divine, or property deportations, although this too has exceptions. Both divine and human deportations use the same verbs, including šalālu and its cognate šallatu “captive,” the latter of which is not used to describe gods, only humans and objects (CAD Š I: 196–202; for a brief discussion of šallatu, see Zawadski, 1995). For additional reading about the Assyrian practice of deportation, see Oded (1979). See also Berlejung 2012 for parallels between foreign king and god in Assyrian policy.

41 RIMA 3 A.0.102.14: ll. 46–50.
that the Assyrian practice of godnapping was more concerned with dynastic and local gods, rather than the tutelary gods of a polity. This may have had the strategic effect of focusing Assyrian aggression on the ruler or population facing punishment and conquest, rather than on the greater cults. After all, even the heads of panthea that are taken are generally qualified in some way. For instance, Sargon’s deportation of Ḫaldi and Bagbartu, the chief gods of Urartu, is unusual in that he reports only taking the highest gods of the Urartian pantheon, but even then the deities are said to be specifically Urzana of Mušašir’s gods (ilânušu).\(^\text{42}\) In fact, after Sargon II deported the gods, which he “counted as spoils” (šallatiš amnû) along with the royal family, palace property, and a large number of deportees, the text claims that the king of Mušašir committed suicide upon hearing about the destruction of his city and the deportation of Ḫaldi, “his god” (šalâl Ḫaldia ilišu), which may serve to underscore Ḫaldi’s role as protector of Urzana and Mušašir, rather than his status as the head of the Urartian pantheon.\(^\text{43}\) Shamshi-Adad V deports the patron gods from Der (Anu-rabû/Ishtaran and Sharrat-Deri) and Dur-Sharruku (Ḫûmḫûmya and Shimaliya), but the high gods are listed among a number of other deities who are poorly attested or otherwise unattested. The same gods are sometimes deported from more than one city, as with Anu-rabû and Sharrat-Deri, who Shamshi-Adad V reportedly took from Dur-Sharruku as well, which weakens the geographic affiliation of these gods. In the passage quoted below, Sennacherib deports the Lady of Uruk (Ishtar of Uruk) from her patron city, as well as other goddesses such as the Lady of the Rēš-Temple, Nanâia, and Ušur-amâssa, who are considered important to the Uruk local pantheon but are not necessarily high-ranking outside of Uruk. These deities are taken alongside minor goddesses such as Bēlet-balāti, Kurunam, and Kaššitu.\(^\text{44}\) A later correspondence to Assurbanipal concerning Sennacherib’s deportation of Babylonian...


\(^{43}\) Fuchs (1994: 215), Ḫursa šat māt Urartti Ḫepē Mušašir šalâl Ḫaldia ilišu išmema. There is some ambiguity in the text as to the referent of -šu; that is to say, whether Ḫaldia is characterized as Urzana’s god or the patron god of Mušašir. See also Holloway (2002: 135 fn. 192), with secondary literature about Sargon II’s eighth campaign, his letter to the god Aššur, and the role of Ḫaldi in Urartian religion. For Mušašir’s relationship to Urartu, see Radner 2011.

\(^{44}\) Indeed, these three deities do not have particularly visible cults in Uruk itself. Bēlet-balāti is fairly well attested in Uruk but also has strong cults in Nippur, Borsippa, and Babylon (Beaulieu 2003: 312–13). Kaššitu, in contrast, is associated with Uruk only in this deportation record (Beaulieu 2003: 319). Kurunam, also rendered Kurunnitu, is likewise rarely attested (Beaulieu 2003: 320). The other two deities that Sennacherib deports from Uruk are the gods Šamaš of Larsa and Palil, who were both considered to have intermediate importance in Uruk (Beaulieu 2003: 267, 282, 307).
gods is similarly concerned with lesser-known gods or those who have no strong affiliation with a particular city: the list comprises Marat-Sîn of Eridu, Marat-Sîn of Nemed-Laguda, Marat-Eridu, Nergal, Amurru, and Lugalbanda. Assurbanipal does claim to have taken a main Elamite deity, (In)Shushinak, who was particularly important to Susa and represents one of only two instances in which a deported god is given an epithet. Several of the other Elamite gods deported, however, are so poorly known (five are *hapax legomena*) that even the readings of their names are still uncertain.

Even in the exceptional examples wherein the gods are named, there is sometimes a deliberate distancing of the king from the act itself. An episode from Sennacherib’s reign records that,

> I ordered archers, chariots, (and) horses of my royal contingent to confront the king of the land Elam ... they marched to Uruk (and) carried off the deities Shamash of Larsa, the Lady of the *Rēš*-Temple, the Lady of Uruk, Nanāia, Uṣur-amâssa, Bēlet-balâti, Kurunam, Kaššitu, (and) Palil, the gods who live in Uruk.

Because Assyrian kings normally attribute the actions of their troops to themselves in their royal inscriptions, Sennacherib’s reluctance to claim that he was the agent of this particular deed is remarkable. Instead, the deportation is attributed to nameless Assyrian soldiers, who would be held responsible instead of the king. A further – albeit more tentative – case is Shamshi-Adad V’s deportation of the gods of Der. Conducted during his fifth campaign, Shamshi-Adad reports that he carried off eleven deities, each listed by name in a stele carved around 812. The fifth campaign is recorded in one other extant royal inscription from Shamshi-Adad’s reign, the highly fragmentary “letter from a

45 SAA XIII no. 190: 6-rev. 8. Where these gods came from is unknown; the letter says only that they were stored in Issete and were meant to be returned to Babylon, although Cole and Machinist argue that Babylon was likely the statues’ point of origin as well (SAA 13: xii).
46 BIWA: 53–54 and 241, *il pirištšunu ša ašbu ina puzrāti ša mamman là immaru epšēt ilūtišu* “the god of their protected knowledge, who dwells in hidden places, whom no one had seen the nature of his divinity.” The other epithet is found a few lines later in the same account and describes the six gods immediately following (In)Shushinak as those *ša šarri mút Elamiri iptanallaḫū ilūssunu* “whose divinity the kings of Elam constantly worshipped,” although the epithet is not found in all exemplars.
47 BIWA: 53–54 and 241, these total 18 gods of Elam other than (In)Shushinak. The Nergal-Laš Inscription only preserves the name (In)Shushinak before a break in the text, which resumes with “the gods of the land of Elam and its goddesses,” apparently omitting the lines of divine names found in the other exemplars (BIWA: 84).
48 RINAP 3/1 34: 29b-33a.
49 RIMA 3 A.0.103.2.
god” (presumably Assur), also composed around 812. The text includes two partially preserved recapitulations of the fifth campaign that are close parallels to the report found on the stele but with one important exception: the breaks in the “letter from a god” are not large enough to reconstruct the seven lines of divine names listed in the stele. For this reason, Livingstone reconstructs “the gods dwelling in Der” (ilānū ašibūt ūrdı̄ Dēri) in both gaps. While the genre of letters from gods is not well attested and the poor state of preservation for this text is not conducive for drawing greater conclusions, it is notable that the divine names seem to be omitted, despite having been included in another source. What this may say about the limits of divine speech and the possible taboo against depicting a god acknowledging violence against other gods will be the subject of further research, but would be consistent with discomfort about committing these acts to writing.

The return of cult statues

Although the trend found with godnapping is a compelling one on its own, when the data is juxtaposed with attestations of returned cult statues, one can more clearly see a deliberateness behind the omission of names in the godnapping records in that the absence of divine names is characteristic only when the Assyrians are deporting cult statues, not when they are returning them. In fact, the situation with returned cult statues is almost a complete inversion: 22 attestations of returned cult statues yield 18 instances of named gods for a percentage of about 82%. Such a disparity between the naming of gods deported versus gods returned is significant, and further suggests the use of

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50 RIMA 3 A.0.103.4, SAA III: 108–09.
51 SAA III: 108; Grayson does not reconstruct anything in the gaps.
52 The possibility of generic differences at play between the “divine letters” and royal inscriptions is weakened by the fact that Sargon II’s letter to Assur does include divine names. The latter letter is the report of the king to the god, not the god’s response, and that may account for the discrepancy between it and the letter from Assur to Shamshi-Adad V.
53 Violence between gods is generally restricted to literary works, although the Esagil Chronicle appears to show Marduk commanding the destruction of cult statues (see Schaudig 2012: 130–34 for this episode and a discussion of Marduk’s power to kill other gods).
54 Recording the return of cult statues appears to be an exclusively Sargonid phenomenon, aside from one attestation under Tiglath-pileser III: three instances under Sargon, two under Sennacherib, eleven under Esarhaddon, four under Assurbanipal, one under Shamash-shumu-ukin (Holloway 2002: 277–83).
deliberate suppression in godnapping accounts that could be attributed to anxiety about violence towards the divine.

The return or reinstallation of cult statues, along with the refurbishment of cult centers, was a pious act, one that the Assyrians termed as happening \textit{ina rišāti} “amidst rejoicing” or mercifully, as opposed to the descriptions of conquest, plunder, and destruction that normally precede the event of godnapping.\footnote{For returning deported gods to their cult places in conjunction with reestablishing their regular offerings, see for instance Fuchs (1994: 169 and 229–30), referring to the gods of various Babylonian cities. For an example of the common motif of destruction, slaughter, and conquest before the deportation of gods, see RIMA 2 A.0.99.1: obv. 10–19.} Esarhaddon, in particular, uses the trope of having mercy on a foreign ruler when returning divine images. For instance, Laialê of Iadi’ is said to have begged Esarhaddon to return his gods, and Esarhaddon acquiesces to his request, claiming “I had pity on him and said to him ‘Ahulap!’”\footnote{RINAP 4 2: col. iii ll. 24–30. This also occurs with the gods of Hazael the Arab, discussed below (RINAP 4 1: col. iv ll. 1–16). The term “ahulap” is an interjection related to seeking or showing compassion, with the implication that the person requesting mercy is suffering greatly (CAD A I: 214).} Many of the examples of a god’s voluntary return “amidst rejoicing” are found as part of the Assyrian repatriation of Marduk to Babylon.\footnote{These are found largely in Assyrian inscriptions from Babylonia. Esarhaddon famously claims that Marduk had changed his mind about how long Babylon should be abandoned, resulting in Esarhaddon becoming the king chosen to rebuild the city: “the merciful god Marduk wrote that the calculated time of its abandonment (should last) 70 years, (but) his heart was quickly soothed, and he reversed the numbers and (thus) ordered its (re)occupation to be (after) 11 years.” (RINAP 4 104: ii 2–ii 9, among others) This account also relies upon mercy and reconciliation, although it is Marduk who is the primary actor rather than Esarhaddon. Indeed, with Marduk the kings generally do not claim that his return is due to their mercy, as opposed to statues of other gods that were returned. For Marduk’s return “amidst rejoicing” under Assurbanipal, see RIMB 2 B.6.32.1: 10, RIMB 2 B.6.32.2: 37–42, and RIMB 2 B.6.32.6: 7–10, for example. See also an example from the reign of Shamash-shumu-ukin, in which “Marduk gladly (tābiš) took up his holy residence in Esagil” (RIMB 2 B.6.33.1: ll. 9–22). For epithets of Shamash-shumu-ukin that record Marduk’s return, see below.} Given that a god’s appeasement and subsequent joyous and willing return are the latter stages of the divine abandonment motif, and the audience for these inscriptions are Babylonians, these cases lend further support to the hypothesis that divine abandonment, reconciliation, and voluntary return are used by Assyrians primarily to appeal to Babylonian sensibilities. A few accounts stress the amount of time that has passed since the god or goddess was removed from his or her proper place: Assurbanipal reports returning Nanāia to Uruk after almost 2,000 years in Elam, and Sennacherib claims to return Adad and Shala to Ekalātum after 418 years.
had passed since the gods had left the city. Boasting about completing a task after it had been neglected for an exaggerated length of time is an idiom similar to that which is found with building renovation and construction projects in Assyrian royal inscriptions and is meant to emphasize the king’s superior abilities and piety. Overall, it comes as no surprise that the Assyrians would exalt such deeds, proud of the goodwill they foster through them in both the mortal and divine worlds. Because there is no fear of divine retribution when returning cult statues, there is consequently no need to omit the names of the gods involved. Rather, invoking the names of the gods whose cult statues were returned further emphasized the positive nature of the action.

Although it is difficult to determine which cult statues Assyrian kings deported and later returned precisely because the inscriptions do not identify the gods taken, one case study from Esarhaddon’s royal inscriptions is particularly telling; namely, Esarhaddon’s return of Atar-samayin and the other Arabian gods to Hazael. Esarhaddon records that his father Sennacherib had conquered the Arabian fortress Adumutu and taken “its gods” back to Assyria as spoils of war. The gods are not initially listed by name, consistent with the pattern of omission regarding deported deities. Esarhaddon then claims that:

(As for) the city Adumutu, the fortress of the Arabs, which Sennacherib, king of Assyria, (my) father, who engendered me, conquered and whose goods, possessions, (and) gods, together with Apkallatu, the queen of the Arabs, he plundered and brought to Assyria – Hazael, the king of the Arabs, came to Nineveh, my capital city, with his heavy audience gift and kissed my feet. He implored me to give (back) his gods, and I had pity on him. I refurbished the gods Atar-samayin, Dāya, Nuḫaya, Ruldāwu, Abirillu, (and) Atar-qurumā, the gods of the Arabs, and I inscribed the might of the god Assur, my lord, and (an inscription) written in my name on them and gave (them) back to him.

58 BIWA: 57–58 and RINAP 3/2 223: ll. 48–49, respectively. Note that the latter episode occurs directly after the smashing of Babylon’s gods, and includes both the names of Adad and Shala as well as the Babylonian king who had deported them, Marduk-nadin-āḫē.  
59 For the topos of renewing or reconstructing a building after an allegedly extensive period of decay, see Novotny (2010).  
60 RINAP 4 1: col. iv ll. 1–14. Explicitly claiming to return gods that the king’s predecessor had deported is not standard but rather a phenomenon that begins with Esarhaddon, possibly as part of the king’s greater policies aimed towards undoing the deeds of his father. There is also significant overlap between gods that Esarhaddon returns and named gods deported by Shamshi-Adad V (from Der and Dur-Sharruku) and Sennacherib (from Larsa and Uruk). Whether Esarhaddon was aware of the accounts of the previous kings and purposefully returned these gods or whether it is happenstance relating to his Babylonian policies is open to speculation.  
61 RINAP 4 1: col. iv ll. 1–14.
Even within the same passage, it is only when detailing the return of these gods that Esarhaddon identifies the deities by name. Invoking these gods by name only at this point emphasizes Esarhaddon’s compassion and piety, and Esarhaddon thus simultaneously suppresses the original act of godnapping while promoting his own return of the Arabian cult statues. That Esarhaddon inscribes the gods themselves with his name as well as the “might” of Assur also indicates the king’s recognition of the significance of names in this event.62

Returning to the argument that Assyrian kings omitted divine names because of their ignorance of foreign gods, Esarhaddon is attested as deporting Arabian gods on three occasions during his reign but, unlike in the passage above, does not give back the cult images in these cases. Because these gods are not identified by name, it is tempting to claim that Esarhaddon was simply not aware of which gods he was taking since they are not part of the Assyrian pantheon. However, when Assurbanipal later returns an Arabian cult statue that he claims Esarhaddon had originally deported, that god is revealed to be, once again, Atar-samayin.63 Assurbanipal returns this god to Iauta’, king of Qedar and Hazael’s son and successor.64 If Assurbanipal’s account is accurate, it would be quite strange for Esarhaddon to know the name Atar-samayin in one case, but not in others, especially considering the fact that Iauta’ most likely recognized the same gods as his father. Following the same pattern as the example above, Assurbanipal’s inscription reads that “his [i.e. Iauta’]s] gods (ilānušu) had been deported (šalāhu), conforming to the indirect terminology of godnapping. The deported deity is mentioned by name a few lines later, when Assurbanipal claims that he returned Atar-samayin after Iauta’ swore an oath of allegiance to Assyria.65 One

62 Kravitz (1999: 26) argues that the inscription was meant to humiliate the Arabian gods and effectively negates the act of repair, contra Cogan (1974: 36–37), who sees Esarhaddon’s repair of the cult statues as representing his respect for the gods. See also Schaudig (2012: 126) for the inscription as marking the gods as subordinate to Assur. Berlejung (2012: 152) views the inscription as a form of “Assyrianization,” and claims that “this re-modeling of foreign images is not purely destructive, but also contains the constructive tendency of indoctrination and re-education.”

63 BIWA: 113 and 243. One exemplar modifies “his gods” with “which my father, my creator, had deported (šalāhu),” while the main exemplars omit even that admission, resulting in a translation that claims Iauta’ “approached me concerning his gods” (aššu ilānušu imḫurannima). Even without the reference to previous deportation, the implication is that Atar-samayin had been taken by the Assyrians at some point, hence the ruler’s appeal to Assurbanipal.

64 One source claims that Esarhaddon himself installed Iauta’ as king of the Arabs after Hazael’s death and supported him against rebels (PNA 2/1: 497–98, RINAP 4 97: 13b-19).

65 BIWA: 113 and 243. Names may also play a central role in this return, much like with Esarhaddon and the gods of Hazael. The line describing the oath-swearing – “I made him swear by the great gods and I returned Atar-samayin to him” – describes the oath using the common
can speculate that the other Arabian gods Esarhaddon deported on other occasions may also have been the same gods as the ones that he lists as having returned to Hazael.\textsuperscript{66} This suggests that Esarhaddon’s familiarity with the Arabian gods was not the deciding factor for whether he recorded divine names or not and these data are consistent with the pattern that gods that are deported are not identified, but gods returned are listed by name.

**Returning gods in royal epithets**

Accounts of returning gods are not limited to the chronicling of historical events; rather, Esarhaddon goes so far as to include restoration of gods’ cult statues in his main royal epithets, styling himself as a pious rebuild king through these acts. He claims in one epithet to have returned the “captive gods” from Assur to the Esagil of Babylon, carefully highlighting his restoration of the temples and cult while glossing over the earlier deportation of these gods: “the one who ... (re) built Esagil and Babylon, (and) restored the gods and goddess(es) who (live) in it; the one who returned the plundered gods of the lands from the city Assur to their (proper) place and let (them) dwell in security.”\textsuperscript{67} The epithet does not identify a phrasing $nīš$ $ilāmi$ $rubōtī$ $zakāru$. Because $nīšu$ is rendered with the logogram MU, however, one could argue for an intentional double meaning that suggests actually speaking the names of the gods as part of the oath, since MU can be rendered $šumu$ “name,” which is often found with the verb $zakāru$, including in the sense of invoking gods (CAD Z: 17–18).

\textsuperscript{66} This is not to suggest that the cult statues themselves were identical to the ones taken from other Arabian leaders; it is probable that there were several cult statues of the same gods among the various Arabian tribes. As mentioned above, Shamshi-Adad V, for example, deported gods from the Babylonian cities of Der and Dur-Sharruku during his fifth campaign. Because these two cases are exceptional in that the gods deported are listed by name, one can see that there is some overlap of cult images between the two cities (namely, images of Anu-rabū and Sharrat-Der are deported from each city). The multiplicity of cult images goes without comment, and so one must imagine that it was not problematic for the Assyrians. That the Arabian territories would have a similar situation with multiple cult images of the same gods would not be surprising. In addition, there is no evidence that local cults were suspended after Assyrian conquest or the removal of the cult statues, nor is there evidence that repatriated statues were returned to leaders of the same tribe from which the images were originally taken. For multiple images of Marduk, see Dalley (1997). The idea of multiple cult statues also has implications for the continuation of the cult during the period of the god’s exile, following van der Spek (2014: 8): “destruction or deportation of the statues of the gods did not mean that the cult could not be restored with a different statue, or with the original if it were allowed to return from exile.” See also Berlejung (2002: 212–19). For multiplicity and polytheism in the ancient Near East, see Porter (2000).

\textsuperscript{67} RINAP 4 1: col. ii ll. 21–24.
king who had taken these gods originally, and the language īlānū mātāti šallūtī “plundered gods of the lands” is equally vague, although Esarhaddon admits that these gods began their journeys home from Assur. In another, related royal epithet, Esarhaddon records not only returning deported deities but also reinstating their cultic offerings, which he claims to have taken part in himself.⁶⁸ He also subtly weaves the divine abandonment motif into his royal titles, calling himself “the king during whose reign the great gods became reconciled towards the shrines of their cult centers (and) returned.”⁶⁹ Comparably to the previous epithet, Esarhaddon does not qualify from which regions the gods were taken, by whom, or under what conditions; instead, Esarhaddon focuses the narrative on his role as restorer. A third epithet is similar but notable in that there is a named returned god, Ishtaran, who is reinstalled in his temple at Der: “(the one) who made Ishtaran return to his city Der and his temple Edimgalkalama and made him sit upon his eternal dais; the one who renewed the adornments of the captive gods of the lands; he returned them from the heart of Assyria to their places and re-established their share of income.”⁷⁰ The more specific reference to Ishtaran is followed by the ambiguous statement found in the other examples, namely that Esarhaddon returned “plundered gods of the lands” from Assyria to their places, without providing further detail. The inclusion of returning cult statues, particularly Marduk, in royal titulary is not restricted to Esarhaddon, but is also taken up by his successors.⁷¹ Conversely, no Assyrian king is ever attested as having epithets referring to godnapping or the destruction of cult statues. If the Assyrians were indeed boastful regarding the act of godnapping, surely at least one king would have taken on an epithet to that effect. Instead, the historical fact of godnapping is suppressed through the emphasis upon restoration of cult statues to their proper places.

**Destruction of cult statues**

Purposeful omission is seen in its most extreme form in the records of cult statue destruction, of which there are only two attestations.⁷² Deported cult statues

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⁶⁸ RINAP 4 48: ll. 36–40.
⁶⁹ RINAP 4 48: l. 33.
⁷⁰ Johnson 317–19, RIMB 2 B.6.31.11: 176. Ishtaran, also called Anu-rabû, is one of the gods that had been deported by previous kings.
⁷¹ Discussed below.
⁷² Some scholars have suggested that Tiglath-pileser III destroyed the gods of Gaza and that a relief from Sargon II’s palace depicts the destruction of a divine statue (see, for instance, Cogan 1974: 23–24). There is no evidence for the former (see Berlejung 2012: 156–60) and Richardson
were largely treated with respect, depicted in the reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III as being carried away intact by the Assyrian soldiers and even placed in temples or given to Assur.\footnote{For a relief from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III that depicts Assyrian soldiers carrying off cult statues, see most recently Berlejung (2012: 157) and Schaudig (2012: 125–27). Schaudig (2012: 125–26) argues that the statues in the relief represent two groups of gods, one Syrian and one Mesopotamian, contra Uehlinger, who argues that they are the gods of Ḫanīnu of Gaza. Berlejung (2012: 156–58) argues for a Syrian identification. An example of a relief depicting the deportation of divine symbols, rather than cult statues, can be found in Berlejung (2002: 230), and shows the cult images of Shapazza being carried away by Assyrian soldiers. Instances of captured gods given to Assyrian gods as gifts or placed in temples are only five in number, all stemming from the Middle Assyrian and early Neo-Assyrian phases. Two attestations come from Tiglath-pileser I, who presents the gods of Sugu and the gods of Lullume to the temples of Ninlil, Anu-Adad, and Ishtar in Assur. Assur-dan II gives the gods of Kirurri/Habruri to Assur as gifts, which Adad-nerari II later does with the gods of Qumanu. Adad-nerari II is also attested as bringing gods to Assur, but the city of origin for these deities is unknown. The practice was apparently discontinued or no longer recorded after the reign of Adad-nerari II (see Cogan 1974: 28; Kravitz 1999: 23). Tiglath-pileser III’s claim that he “donated the 25 gods of those lands, my own booty which I had taken, to be door-keepers of the temple of the goddess Ninlil … (the temple of) the gods Anu (and) Adad, (the temple of) the Assyrian Ištār, the temples of my city, Aššur, and the goddesses of my land” is otherwise unique (RIMA 2 A.0.87.1: iv 32–39). It is not known if the later kings who give captured gods as gifts to the Assyrian gods set them up as doorkeepers in temples as well. Karlsson (2013: 258) concluded that deported gods used as doorkeepers in Assyrian temples were symbolic of the Assyrians’ recognition of the gods’ power. Based solely on the textual evidence, however, it is unclear whether the status granted to these gods or the gods given as gifts was one of respect or one that underlined their subservience to the main Assyrian gods. Johnson (2011: 112), for instance, has argued that the display aspect of captured gods was meant to be humiliating and demoralizing to the people whose gods were presented in such a way. Kravitz (1999: 28) regards this exhibition as integral to the status of deported cult statues as trophies of war, focusing on the benefit to the cultural and political image of Assyria rather than the effects upon the conquered population, and argues that all exported images were displayed, even when the textual record does not reflect this. Although Kravitz does not directly relate the exhibition of captured rulers with that of deported gods, trophy-captives provide an interesting point of comparison. Several deported enemy leaders were placed at city gates, which situates both the leaders and the gods at separate thresholds, one political and one religious. This must have been intentional, as captive kings were never placed in front of temples, and divine images were not displayed outside of the city gates. Whether the practice continued in the later periods and was simply not chronicled is speculative. It is possible that all deported images in the later periods were placed in temples for safekeeping, as suggested in SAA XIII 190: ll. 6–15, but perhaps this was considered so routine that it did not require further comment. The rise in attestations in the later periods of deities that were specifically doorkeeper gods may, however, suggest that foreign gods were no longer...}
unequivocal act of violence against the divine, even more so than deportation.74

The rarity of attestations for destruction of cult images is in itself indicative of the severity of such an act.75 The circumstances in which a polity’s gods are used in this capacity. Because descriptions of gods placed as doorkeepers or given as gifts to Assyrian gods drop out of the textual record after the reign of Adad-nerari II, it is tempting to suggest that a shift in practice occurred when Assurnasirpal II moved the Assyrian capital to Calah.

74 Following Richardson (2012: 237), “the practice of abduction and the reluctance to destroy gods implicitly acknowledged the bounded power of kings: killing gods was an inversion of the hierarchies of cosmic power and thus unacceptable ... in general, the destruction of gods and temples was a trope used to vilify enemy or usurper kings – mostly in Babylonian sources – not to bolster any king’s claims of his own military success.”

75 Richardson (2012: 238) argues that, “if these few cases of icon-breaking add up to anything, it is that the act was thinkable, but rarely performed – and deeply problematic. Indeed, the entire subject of image destruction is deeply subordinated by Assyrian curses, which rarely presupposed its possibility, compared to the ubiquity of protections against altering inscriptions.” See also Holloway (2002: 119) for the intentionality behind destruction and speculation about how common destruction of divine images might actually have been. For a contrasting depiction of Assyrian iconoclasm, see 2 Kings 19:17–18 (New Revised Standard Version): “of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone; therefore they have destroyed them.” Similarly, see Isaiah 44: 9, 11. While the Hebrew Bible is not accurate in its portrayal of Assyrians as burning cult images as a general policy (Bagg 2013: 126), the discourse around the destruction of divine statues in the Bible is a significant point of comparison for the Assyrian sources. Even in the above quotation, an iconoclastic statement that is clearly not Assyrian is appended to the destruction of the gods; namely, that man-made images created from wood and stone are not gods. It is known from accounts of the miš pi and piš pi rituals that Assyria’s own cult statues were created from wood and stone, and ritual elements were incorporated to remove the craftsmen’s agency in the fashioning of images. Thus, it would be surprising for Assyrians to destroy the divine images of other gods based on this reasoning and the sentiment must rather be interference from the composers of the Hebrew Bible. An example of how the Bible underscores the man-made nature of Mesopotamian cult statues appears in the apocryphal story Bel and the Dragon, which narrates how Daniel demonstrated to Cyrus the Great that Bel’s cult statue was merely brass and clay, unable to eat the food sacrifices the priests claimed the god consumed, and destroying the statue during the course of events. Iconoclastic episodes are found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, including in 2 Kings 23, in which King Josiah burns the vessels of Baal, Asherah, and “all the host of heaven” (2 Kings 23: 4) and personally removes Asherah (presumably, her cult statue) from the temple, “burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the common people” (2 Kings 23: 6). There is no hesitance either to name the gods affected or to ascribe the act of destruction to the king himself, as the idolatry itself is considered blasphemous, not the destruction of cult statues. Similarly, 1 Samuel 5: 4 records the mutilation of the image of Dagon, apparently by God, after the Philistines placed the ark of God into Dagon’s temple: “and when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon
destroyed are likewise extreme in nature – only as a result of what Richardson (2012: 235) terms “total wars” were such measures taken, namely as part of Sennacherib’s war against Babylonia and Assurbanipal’s war with Elam. Neither account identifies the gods involved by name, although gods from these polities were the subjects of deportation previously and Marduk is identified in later sources. Sennacherib’s claim to have destroyed the Babylonian cult images, including the Marduk statue, is recorded in two sources from his reign: the Bavian Inscription and the bit akīti Inscription. The former records that, “my people seized and smashed (qāt nīšēya iḵussunūtimu ušabbiru̱m) the gods living inside Babylon.”76 The bit akīti Inscription provides a similar description: “after I destroyed Babylon, smashed its gods, (and) put its people to the sword, I removed its earth in order to make the site of that city unrecognizable and I had (it) carried to the sea by the Euphrates River.”77 While Sennacherib does not conceal the destruction of Babylon’s cult statues, he takes care not to identify the gods involved. The deities are further qualified as “its,” i.e. Babylon’s, gods, emphasizing their affiliations as polity gods rather than as members of the greater Assyro-Babylonian pantheon.

Although he takes direct credit in the bit akīti Inscription, Sennacherib’s initial claim that the gods were destroyed by his troops is again a deliberate framing that distances the king from the act.78 As discussed above, Sennacherib

and both the palms of his hands lay cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.” I thank Na’ama Pat-El for bringing these episodes to my attention. For further reading about idols and idolatry, see Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft (2011) and May 2012.

76 RINAP 3/2 223: ll. 47–48. Luckenbill’s (1924) earlier translation of lines 50b-52 has an additional account of divine destruction and reads: “I demolished, razed and burned with fire the city and houses, from its foundations to its parapets. I tore out the city wall and outer city wall, temples, gods, ziggurats of brick and earth, all that existed. I cast them into the Araḫtu canal.” This translation created a problem, since the gods had already been smashed and, presumably, could not subsequently be thrown into the water. A more recent translation by Grayson and Novotny (RINAP 3/2 223: 50b–52) resolves this inconsistency: “I destroyed, devastated, (and) burned with fire the city, and (its) buildings, from its foundations to its crenellations. I removed the brick(s) and earth, as much as there was, from the (inner) wall and outer wall, the temples, (and) the ziggurat, (and) I threw (it) into the Araḫtu river.” Which translation is more correct depends upon whether bitāt ilāni (Ē.MEŠ DINGIR.MEŠ) is interpreted as “temples (and) gods” or “houses of the gods” (i.e. temples). Because the gods have already been dispatched by this point in the text, and since this passage seems to be concerned with the destruction of buildings and walls, Grayson and Novotny’s translation appears more likely.


78 Richardson (2012: 237) writes that the king is “distancing himself from the act with a rare extension of ‘credit’ to his troops,” similarly to Holloway (2002: 121), who notes that “the annals
uses the same language regarding his deportation of the gods of Uruk. That Sennacherib uses this motif exclusively for the deportation and destruction of Babylonian gods suggests that he was particularly anxious about violence against Babylonian gods, deities that were not only longstanding members of the Assyrian pantheon but also whose patron cities had been part of the Assyrian Empire until late in his reign. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising that Sennacherib would feel particular unease about aggressive acts against the gods of this polity.

A main point of contention among scholars is whether Sennacherib actually destroyed the Babylonian cult statues or if he instead deported them to Assyria. Esarhaddon’s retelling of the event, discussed in further detail below, carefully sidesteps the issue, claiming in several inscriptions that the gods of Babylon left for one of two reasons. The first is that they were afraid of Marduk’s rage: “its (Babylon’s) gods and goddesses became frightened, abandoned their cellas, and went up to the heavens.”\(^79\) The second is the flooding of the Araḫtu Canal, also attributed to Marduk’s anger, which destroyed their temples: “the river Araḫtu, (normally) a river of abundance, turned into an angry wave, a raging tide, a huge flood like the deluge. It swept (its) waters destructively across the city (and) its dwellings and turned (them) into ruins. The gods dwelling in it flew up to the heavens like birds.”\(^80\) Similarly to godnapping accounts, the gods are not named but are instead affiliated geographically as the gods of Babylon. That the gods flee to the heavens is more unusual, but perhaps indicates that the statues were, indeed, destroyed and did not “flee” to Assur, i.e. leave as deportees.\(^81\) In both cases, the gods choose to leave as a result of Marduk’s anger, not by mortal hands, and the flooding of the Araḫtu canal, which is more directly reminiscent of Sennacherib’s record of the event, also omits the king’s involvement. Marduk’s own abandonment of Babylon has been interpreted as evidence of at

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79 RINAP 4 106: i 27. A similar claim is found in RINAP 4 113: 12–13: “its gods and goddesses took fright and went up to the heavens.”
80 RINAP 4 104 i 34–45. A similar account is found in RINAP 4 105: i 37b–ii 10, 116: 13′–15′, and 114: i 19 (the latter omits the bird simile). See also RINAP 4 104: iv 9 “I repaired the woeful desecrated state (šalputtašunu lummuntu) of the gods and goddesses who lived in it, who had been displaced by floods and storm.”
81 Schaudig (2012: 125) points to a prophecy from the reign of Esarhaddon in which Ishtar of Arbela claims that “the gods of Esagil languish in the steppe of mixed evil,” rather than heaven, and he notes that “the ‘steppe’ is the place that evil spirits and the souls of those not properly buried are doomed to roam. Here it is a kind of limbo where the ghosts of the Babylonian gods languish, with their statues smashed.”
least the deportation of his cult statue, but it is worth noting that these inscriptions never actually disclose where the god goes after he levels his patron city or even claim that Marduk left the city in the first place, only that the city would be abandoned for a certain period of time. It is only in later accounts that the gods return from Assur. That the intended audience is Babylonian suggests the reason why Esarhaddon reframes the events surrounding the destruction of Babylon as divine abandonment, while the Assyrian reluctance to name gods who are affected by acts of sacrilege results in an ambiguous narrative that does not list the gods involved explicitly nor discloses their true fates.

So too could Esarhaddon’s inscriptions regarding the mis pî ritual refer either to the restoration or to the recreation of these divine images, and scholars have argued for both sides. Richardson (2012: 239–40) has suggested that the creation of cult statues was often as problematic as their destruction, and that a “Neo-Assyrian reluctance to claim creative power over icons correlates to a much older Mesopotamian hesitancy to boast about the act,” which may explain the ambiguity. In one text, for example, Esarhaddon writes:

> With whom, O great gods, will you continually send me to create (banû) gods and goddesses, difficult work (ṣipru marṣu) (performed) in an inaccessible place? (Can I undertake) the renovation work (šipir tēdišti) with people who are deaf (and) blind, who do not know themselves (and) whose future is (still) undecided? The creation (banû) of gods and goddesses is in your hands, so build yourselves a cella for your majestic divinity!84

Later in the same text, Esarhaddon claims that, “the gods Bēl, Bēltiya, Bēlet-Bābili, Ea, (and) Mandānu, the great gods, were truly born (immaldû) in Ešarra, the temple of their progenitor.” Indeed, the cult statues, called “gods” rather

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82 For discussions of this matter, see Berlejung (1998: 158–171), and Frahm (1997: 225, 284–88), among others.

83 Regarding Esarhaddon in particular, Richardson (2012: 240) writes that the king “implied the cleaning, embellishment, and repair of divine statues rather than emphasizing their newness, focused largely on describing the rebuilding of temples, ornaments, and cult objects, and when discussing newly constructed statues, mentioned mythological creatures ... and not gods.” Note, however, Sennacherib’s royal epithet, ēpiš šalam Aššûr u ilāni rabûti “who fashioned the images of Aššur and the great gods,” which is found in several texts (for example, RINAP 3/1 10: 21) and variations such as that found in RINAP 3/2 158 15'-16', which names Assur, Anu, Šin, Shamash, Adad, Bēlet-ilî, and Ishtar of Bit-Kidmuri.

84 RINAP 4 48: 66–69. See also Walker and Dick (2001: 25), who translate the line as “whose right is it, O great gods, to create gods and goddesses in a place where man dare not trespass? The task of refurbishing (the statues), which you have constantly been allotting to me (by oracle) is difficult.”

85 The most recent translation (RINAP 4 48: 87) is given here except that “created” has been changed to “born” to better reflect the meaning of (w)alādu in opposition to banû as used
than šalmu in the beginning, are not listed by name until after they have been created, an act that could be accomplished only after Esarhaddon had received the express consent of the gods. By calling the not-yet-created deities simply ilânu and ištarâtu rather than by name, the narrative employs a pattern similar to godnapping accounts. Whether the texts are interpreted as describing refurbishment or recreation, the Assyrians’ reluctance to discuss violence towards the gods renders Esarhaddon an unreliable narrator with regards to what actually happened to the Babylonian cult statues. His claims cannot definitively prove whether Sennacherib had destroyed the images or not, since vague language is consistent with anxieties surrounding both the destruction and creation of divine statues. Instead, it is proposed here that the explicit reference to destruction in Sennacherib’s inscriptions is probably more reliable.

earlier in the inscription, following the translation by Walker and Dick (2001: 26 and fn. 88). See also Dick (1998: 115–17) for the use of (w)alâdu in the creation of cult images.

86 Written DINGIR.MEŠ u 4.ININ, but one can presume that multiple goddesses are meant despite the singular form. A reference to šalmu is found later in the text, but referring to “divinity” rather than “gods:” “they fashioned (bašâmu) images (šalmû) of their great divinity (ilîtišunu) more artfully than before (and) greatly adorned them” (RINAP 4 48: Rev. 90). Although craftsmen are referred to, the king takes credit for the majority of the work in a reversal of the language Sennacherib used when describing cult statue destruction. The term têdištu is normally translated “renovation,” and its related verb edēšu is found elsewhere in Esarhaddon’s inscriptions regarding the gods of Babylon (as unnamed gods), as is banû (with named gods, the same as those in the previous quotation), but they are not normally said to be born using (w)alâdu except in the context of the temple (RINAP 4 106: ii 29 udduš ilâni and 114: iv 25 šalâm ilâni uddušu). The temple setting for the birth of the gods seems to refer to the ritual acts like mis pî rather than the physical construction of the statues. An exception to naming the gods when they are being built may be found in a text that reads “the god Bêl and the goddess Bêlitiya, the divine lovers, were created (banû) in the city Aššur by their own command and were truly born (walâdu) in Eḫursaggalkurkura” (RINAP 4 60: 36’–37’), although the gods are still given full agency over their own creation. Nevertheless, the correlation between unnamed gods or šalmu with edēšu is consistent. The trope of creating something that is more beautiful or better made than before is a common theme in the reconstruction of buildings, see Novotny 2010.

87 Esarhaddon’s efforts to explain rather than deny what happened may be due to his awareness that the destruction of Babylon and its gods was still part of living memory for the Babylonians, and outright denial would have proved ineffective as a strategy to win their approval. This would be consistent with Esarhaddon’s other political strategies of appealing to Babylonians during his reconstruction of Babylonia, discussed below. For Esarhaddon’s Babylonian policies and his emendation of the events surrounding Sennacherib’s destruction of Babylon, see Frame (2007), Porter (1993), Machinist (1984–5), Richardson (2012), among others. See also Schaudig (forthcoming) for the argument that the events were adapted for a Babylonian audience through a connection to the inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar I.
In other words, because Sennacherib diverges from the established conventions, the first Assyrian king to openly claim to have destroyed cult statues, this suggests that his account is the more historically accurate one, although this cannot be established for certain.

It is only in the later depictions of this event that the god Marduk is named in Assyrian sources. Most pertinent to this study is Esarhaddon’s attempt to return the Marduk statue to Babylon as part of his rebuilding program and the later, successful return of the statue under the aegis of his successors, Assurbanipal and Shamash-shumu-ukin. Accounts of the cult statue’s return to Babylon not only identify Marduk by name, but also utilize the divine abandonment motif, as with Esarhaddon’s descriptions of Babylon’s destruction. As discussed above, in the context of returning gods, the divine abandonment motif is used in Assyrian sources only with Marduk’s return to Babylon and with Nanâia’s return from Elam under Assurbanipal. In both cases, the gods are Babylonian and thus the use of the motif itself may be an attempt to appeal to a Babylonian audience. A representative Esarhaddon epithet regarding the event reads, “the king during the days of whose reign the great lord, the god Marduk, became reconciled to Babylon (and again) took up his residence in Esagil.” Inscriptions under Assurbanipal and Shamash-shumu-ukin likewise name Marduk as well as rely upon divine reconciliation. This motif, combined with Esarhaddon’s very public attempt to return the Marduk statue, was an effort to reshape the collective memory of both the Assyrians and the Babylonians by

88 On this theme, see Porter (1993a), and Nielsen (2012).
89 In contrast, Sennacherib does not use the divine abandonment motif when returning Adad and Shala to Ekalâtum after Marduk-nadin-ahhe had deported them to Babylon. By not mentioning the divine abandonment motif, Sennacherib makes the removal of the gods by the Babylonian king more heinous and his own actions more righteous and pious.
90 RIMB 2 B.6.31.11: 9.
91 Assurbanipal rarely refers to the initial divine abandonment, such as when he addresses Marduk with the plea “remember Babylon, which you yourself destroyed in your anger. Relent and turn your attention back to Esagil, the place of your lordship. You have abandoned your city for too long and have taken up residence in a place not befitting you” (SAACT X: 97–98). It is more common in the inscriptions of both Assurbanipal and Shamash-shumu-ukin to focus on the joyful return of the god rather than his earlier, angry departure. The continued focus on Marduk in their royal titles is due to the fact that it was only after Esarhaddon’s reign that the cult statue was actually returned; see, for instance, the epithet of Shamash-shumu-ukin that reads “the one during whose reign ... Marduk had pity, entered Babylon amidst rejoicing” (B.6.33.3: 5–7 and B.6.33.4: 15–16, using the constructions rēmu rašû and salimu rašû for “to take pity” or “to become reconciled,” respectively). Note the usage of ina rīšāti “amidst rejoicing” in these attestations, like in those of Assurbanipal above.
striking Sennacherib’s involvement from the record and returning full agency to the god Marduk himself.92

The omission of Sennacherib is not limited to the return of Marduk’s cult statue, but instead is part of Esarhaddon’s retelling of the destruction of Babylon.93 Esarhaddon’s claim that Marduk’s anger with Babylon and its inhabitants was the reason for the city’s downfall is found in several inscriptions.94 The result of this reimagining is that Sennacherib and Assyria are entirely absent from the event, placing the actual destruction of the city into Marduk’s own hands. Unlike in accounts in which deported cult statues are returned, the text does not even include a reference to a former king who committed the negative deed that Esarhaddon is charitably undoing, as the severity of the destruction of Babylon and its cult statues necessitates that the text have a stronger corrective response than if it were describing an earlier godnapping act. Specifically, Esarhaddon sets up the description of the event with “before my time, the great lord, the god Marduk, became furious with Esagil and Babylon (and) his heart was full of rage,”95 using the divine abandonment motif to explain the subsequent destruction of the temple and city, respectively, but also remaining strategically vague about when the destruction occurred – it simply happens “before my time,” rather than during the reign of a predecessor, direct or otherwise. Esharhaddon’s reshaping of the narrative is a more subtle and limited version of damnatio memoriae than the physical erasure of a name from an inscription, but the intended effect is essentially the same.96 As far as Esarhaddon’s version of events is concerned, neither he nor any Assyrian king was involved in the destruction of Babylon or its cult statues in any way. Just as Sennacherib’s destruction of the cult statues was the ultimate expression of violence against the divine, Esarhaddon’s use of the divine abandonment motif is the ultimate expression of suppressing historical reality.

The Babylon Stele of Nabonidus provides a retrospective narrative of the destruction of Babylon and uses similar terminology as Esarhaddon’s account.97

92 Nielsen (2012: 7). See also van der Spek (2014: 10) for Esarhaddon’s erasure of Sennacherib’s role via the use of divine abandonment.
93 For more information about how Esarhaddon portrays Babylon’s fall, see Brinkman (1984).
95 RINAP 4 113: 8b-10.
96 This occurs, of course, in a more restricted sense: Esarhaddon does not seek to remove all traces of his father, simply his father’s involvement in the destruction of Babylon. One can compare this with the intentional erasure of names from inscriptions of Nergal-erish, while the inscriptions themselves were not erased (see the discussion in Siddall 2013: 110–12 with secondary literature).
Non-Assyrian sources still rely upon the divine abandonment motif but, in contrast to the later Sargonid kings, these sources are openly critical of Sennacherib’s actions. The retelling in Nabonidus’ stele emphasizes Sennacherib’s sacrilegious behavior, describing the intentionality (and maliciousness) behind the king’s destruction of Babylon, including the ruination of sanctuaries and cults. 98 Regarding Marduk, however, there is no mention of the destruction of the cult statue. Instead, Sennacherib is described as taking the hand of Marduk and leading him into Assyria. 99 Even then, the remainder of the episode is framed as the god having agency over his own deportation: it is only because of the god’s anger that Babylon is destroyed and Marduk remains in Assyria until his wrath is appeased and he returns to his patron city. 100

Because this source was not written by the perpetrators of the act, there is no risk of divine retribution if Marduk is named – and yet even this account is suppressive regarding the possible act of destruction, refiguring the event as deportation and removing to some extent Sennacherib’s agency through the trope of divine abandonment. Sennacherib’s destruction of Babylon is central to this narrative, but his claim to have destroyed the cult statue of Marduk is stricken from the record entirely, and it is only due to Marduk’s anger that his divine image remained in Assyria. Only a reference to the desecration of cultic rites hints at his treatment of Marduk’s cult statue. As argued above, the language of divine abandonment is not conventional for Assyrian sources except in cases in which the cult statue is returned, while this motif is frequently used in Babylonian sources.

Assurbanipal, politically preoccupied with Elam for much of his reign, claims to have destroyed the gods of Elamite cities during his eighth campaign.

98 Schaudig (2001: 515–16 and 523–24). The Babylon Stele of Nabonidus also includes an account of the destruction of Assyria by the Medes, in which the Median king is said to have “ruined their [the Assyrians’] mēṣū” (Schaudig 2001: 516). Schaudig (2012: 122–33) has recently argued that the use of mēṣū in this case is meant to have a double meaning, as mēṣu is also the type of wood used for cult statues: “one may wonder whether the Babylonian scribe deliberately gave a hint for a second reading, indicating that together with the Assyrian cults (mēṣū) the cult statues of the Assyrian gods were destroyed, once personalized ... but now reduced to the mere mēṣu-wood their cores were made of.” While Schaudig does not comment on the possibility that the homophone was used to hint indirectly at the destruction of cult statues while avoiding an explicit reference, it is possible that the scribe’s use of this term was meant to serve this euphemistic purpose.

99 The Assyrian king’s name is not given in this episode, which may be due to breaks in the text or may be purposeful.

in 647/646. In the Rassam Cylinder, Assurbanipal records: “I desecrated (lapātu) the sanctuaries of Elam until they did not exist, its gods and goddesses I counted as zaqīqu-ghosts.”\(^{101}\) While the destruction is framed in no uncertain terms, the fact that he names specific Elamite gods during one of his two deportations from this polity confirms that he deliberately did not name the gods that he has destroyed.\(^{102}\) The use of the verb lapātu in the š-stem is often used to describe sacrilegious acts, but it should be noted that its use in a native Assyrian account of godnapping is unusual.\(^{103}\) This verb is also found in the stele of Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur, the governor of Suḫu and Mari, which, like the Babylon Stele of Nabonidus, provides a non-Assyrian perspective on sacrilege committed by Assyrians. While the stele does not name the Assyrian who perpetrated the “hiding” of the eponymous patron goddess of ‘Anat, the language of the stele indicates the disgraceful nature of the act.\(^{104}\)

That Assurbanipal refers to the gods as zaqīqu may itself be euphemistic, although he makes a separate claim that he smashed the gods of Elam (ilānūšunu), using the same verb that Sennacherib uses for the gods of Babylon (šebēru).\(^{106}\) The term zaqīqu has traditionally been translated in this context as a type of harmless ghost or phantom, suggesting that the gods have been killed.\(^{107}\) Gods can (and do) occasionally die, but it is not typical that they

\(^{101}\) BIWA: 55 and 241.

\(^{102}\) See also Richardson (2012: 236–37).

\(^{103}\) The verb lapātu in the š-stem means “to desecrate, defile” (CAD L: 93).

\(^{104}\) Possibly a king, although some have suggested that it was a magnate. For a recent discussion of the problem and secondary literature, see Siddall (2013: 109–10, 178), and Holloway (2002: 130–31).

\(^{105}\) Although this is technically an account of Assyrian godnapping, the goddess ‘Anat is referred to by name because the stele inscription was not written by Assyrians, as it is primarily an account of ‘Anat’s restoration as completed by a non-Assyrian. ‘Anat’s “hiding” is phrased similarly to the “hidden place” of (In)Shushinak, (w)ašābu ina puṣri/puzrāti, but it is otherwise unclear what the hidden place is. It is possible that the phrase refers to an area of a temple that was only accessible to a limited group of priests, as the Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur stele seems to describe this event as happening before his reign and the stele itself was inscribed not long after the period in which Assyrians still occasionally recorded placing deported gods in temples. As for (In)Shushinak, it is possible that the cult statue was kept in a similarly restricted area of his temple and Assurbanipal’s troops would have had to locate this inner sanctum before destroying the god’s statue.

\(^{106}\) BIWA: 52 and 240. The verb šebēru is also used for the breaking of weapons, see CAD Š II: 246–50. Its use with smashing images is otherwise only attested with Sennacherib’s destruction of the Babylonian gods (CAD Š II: 249 under Subburu).

\(^{107}\) Although the term zaqīqu has generally been translated as “phantom” or “ghost” (CAD Z: 59), it can also mean “nothingness,” which is the preferred translation in the CAD when the
are then referred to as zaqiqlū. Alternatively, Walker and Dick (2001: 8) have suggested that the term is used here to signify that the destruction of the physical cult statue has resulted in the gods becoming “disembodied spirits,” rather than deceased. The type of ghost designated as a zaqiqlū is generally considered to be an entity without a cult, which may explain Assurbanipal’s usage of the term: he has, after all, admitted to destroying the gods’ cult spaces and might now consider their cults eliminated.

Records of the destruction of temples and cult spaces are also extremely rare in Assyrian sources, numbering three attestations, two of which correlate to the destruction of cult images and one with a named deportation of cult images. Holloway (2002: 115) has speculated that Assyrians may have simply declined to include temple destruction in their inscriptions. It is possible that the historical reality of temple destruction is subject to the same omission practices as godnapping.
Conclusion

When Assyrian references to deporting, returning, or destroying cult statues are studied systematically, it becomes evident that the scribes purposefully utilized different techniques when committing these events to writing. There was, apparently, a pronounced desire to suppress the sensitive topic of violence against cult statues. The celebratory language used in accounts of returning cult statues, which also typically include the names of the gods affected, further supports this hypothesis. One can see from curse formulae, especially in international treaties, that the Assyrians did not take the invocation of gods’ names lightly, even those gods that they did not consider as part of their own pantheon. While the act of godnapping was accepted as historical fact, the pattern of omitting the names of the gods involved indicates that the Assyrians felt some anxiety due to the sacrilegious nature of godnapping and destroying cult statues, and may have recorded these acts in such a way to reduce the risk of divine retribution.

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Abbreviations


RINAP 1  Tadmor, Hayim and Shigeo Yamada. 2011. The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-


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