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Kings, Priests, and Power in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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Abstract

Despite a relative dearth of information in the surviving corpus about Assyrian priests' more routine concerns, the Assyrian state correspondence contains some details that can improve our knowledge of priests' daily lives, rights, and responsibilities. Using four case studies, this paper analyzes situations in which priests are accused of misconduct or crimes to better understand the powers and expectations of individual priestly offices as well as the realities of everyday life that might have rendered these boundaries more flexible or surmountable. These cases of irregularities reveal that cultic personnel had distinct economic, legal, and judicial roles and were sometimes able to extend their powers when necessary to manage issues such as crime and shortages in resources, only requesting royal intervention as a last resort.

Keywords

clergy – crime – temples – daily life – administration

1 Introduction*

Studying the lives and roles of priests and cultic officials in Assyria is a challenging task. Unlike in the Neo-Babylonian period, with its rich data set from

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priestly and temple archives,¹ the corpus of administrative and economic documents related to the temple personnel known from the Neo-Assyrian period is quite small, leaving modern scholars largely in the dark about how Neo-Assyrian temples and their staff functioned on a daily basis.² Of the various institutions, the Aššur temple in Assur is the best understood in terms of the cult's inner workings, though most of the information in the state archives relates to the king's role in rituals and not to daily practices.³ Furthermore, most previous studies have focused on the Assyrian king as the *šangû*, the high priest, of the god Aššur.⁴ This is understandable, as it is rare that terms for "priest" in the royal inscriptions refer to persons other than the king.⁵ In his priestly role, the Assyrian king served as the god's political and religious representative on earth. Moreover, the king had a duty to support and patronize the temples in his empire, and temple rebuilding, sacrifices, and royal rituals

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- 1 An overview of the Neo-Babylonian priesthood and the available sources is given in Waerzeggers (2011).
- 2 Van Driel (1969: 185) summarizes the problem as "we do not know very much about the material and economic backgrounds of the cult in Assyria. The number of administrative documents published is not very great ... the great role of the king in the upkeep of the system is the most important fact. But the lack of documents informing us about the administration of the properties and the regular receipts of the temples make the impression of an overpowering royal influence in at least the material aspects of religion too strong. We know hardly anything about the possessions of the temples and their priestly staffs in Assyria."
- 3 See van Driel (1969, especially 51–73 and 139–69) and Menzel (1981), who details different cultic personnel as well as practices from temples outside of Assur, including in Nineveh, Calah, and smaller cities like Arbela and Kurba'il. The king's main duties were to participate in public rituals like the *akītu* and regular private rituals such as the *tākultu* (feeding of the gods). Known ritual and festival days in the Assyrian cultic calendar are discussed in Cohen (2015).
- 4 See Maul (2017: 346–9), Maul (1999), and Pongratz-Leisten (2015, especially 202–5).
- 5 In general, priestly titles mentioned in the royal inscriptions are appellations of the king, including *išippu na'du/rēštû* "attentive/foremost purification priest," *šangû šīru* "exalted priest," *šangû ellu* "holy priest." Moreover, the gods are said to love, establish, and protect the king's *šangûtu* "priesthood." For some examples from the Sargonid kings, see RINAP 3/1 17: vi 47–48 ("Aššur and Ištar, who love my *šangûtu*"), RINAP 4 1: i 74 ("Ištar, the lady of war and battle, who loves my *šangûtu*"), 57: ii 14–17 ("Good signs occurred for me concerning the securing of the foundation of the throne of my *šangûtu* forever"), RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 3: i 14 ("They (the great gods) required my *šangûtu*"). For Assyrian royal titulary before the Sargonid kings, see Cifola (1995) and Sazonov (2016).

are highly visible in the official texts. Ritual texts, which give some insight into cultic practices, also focus mostly on the responsibilities of the king, though at least professional priests are mentioned; however, rituals do not provide information about priestly duties outside of that particular context.⁶

Nevertheless, some glimpses into the daily lives of priests and temple staff in Assur and elsewhere are possible thanks to the state archives of Assyria. Cultic officials are mentioned primarily in the royal epistolary corpus, though there are also relevant legal and administrative documents and ritual texts.⁷ Unfortunately, this means that the bulk of information is restricted to the late Neo-Assyrian period, largely the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal (681-c. 627 BCE), but even then it is not chronologically or geographically representative.⁸ The letters, while providing the most evidence about routine matters, are out of context and lack replies from the king. Nonetheless, one can extract some data about the ordinary lives of cultic officials and their relationships with the king. The king, after all, had significant oversight of temple affairs and macro-level investment—from installing priests in important positions, to controlling when and how royal rituals took place, to undertaking construction work on temples and donating to the cult—and he consequently received many reports and replies from priests. More importantly for understanding priests' daily lives, these texts can provide insight into the priests'

6 In addition to the works mentioned above, see SAA 20 for editions of royal rituals and also the discussions in Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 379–447), with further literature. The Assyrian *akitu*, in particular, has recently been reevaluated by Barcina (2017). In addition, Reade (2005) describes rituals portrayed in Assyrian royal reliefs and sculpture, including depictions of priests.

7 Löhnert (2007) discusses the term “priest” in the Neo-Assyrian period, giving the criteria of whether officials are temple staff, perform cultic actions, have access to the restricted portions of the temple, or are ritually purified, and notes that “not all persons who worked in the temple can be considered to be priests, because only a few were allowed to perform religious actions, that is to directly ‘talk’ to the gods by means of prayers or by means of offerings” (Löhnert 2007: 274). She (*ibid.* 275) sees as priests primarily the *bārû* “diviners,” *kalû* “lamentation priests,” *āšipû*, “exorcists,” and the *šangû* “high priests.” Some other priestly offices are attested as well, such as *šangû šanû* “deputy priest,” *išippu* “purification priest,” *ērib bīti* “clergy/temple enterers,” and *šešgallu* “high priest.” Other cultic personnel that do not necessarily fit Löhnert’s criteria are also known, see Menzel (1981) and Van Driel (1969: 170–191). Delineations between “priests” and other cultic officials exceed the scope of this study; as this paper focuses on the *šangû* and *kalû*, it will use the term “priest” but these letters also mention other cultic personnel who may not be considered “priests.” On the installation of *kalû*, see Gabbay (2014: 135–36).

8 The relevant material is published largely in the *State Archives of Assyria* volumes. See also Radner (2015b) for an overview of the corpus and the nature of communication between the king and his officials.

relationships with each other and their respective communities in a way that is overlooked when the king is the central focus of the priesthood.

This study explores expressions of priestly power in the Assyrian letter corpus, in which “power” includes legal power, expert authority, jurisdictions, and permissions or privileges. In particular, this paper addresses occasions when power is misused. Even though royal oversight was important for major cultic concerns, priests conducted their daily and routine affairs largely without the direct involvement of the king. Unless the priests had performed certain rituals such as sacrifices or divination that needed to be reported to the king, the letters do not record what goes *right* on a daily basis, but rather only exceptional and problematic events. Consequently, many extant letters are complaints directed to the king from priests, about priests, and between priests regarding the incorrect use or outright abuse of priestly power. These complaints provide information about how priests exercised power and authority themselves (especially in the king’s absence), crossed the established boundaries of their power (through power abuses or other means), and conceptualized their powers in relation to those of the king and other priests.

What follows are four representative case studies: a property dispute between priests, priests dealing with criminals, priests who were criminals, and one priest who seemingly went rogue. The letters describing these events were sent from cult centers around the Assyrian empire and found in the Nineveh and Calah palace archives, and concern the positions of the *šangû* “high priests” and *kalû* “lamentation priests.”⁹ These cases start to expose structures of authority among priests and the boundaries of their positions as revealed through their transgressions.

2 Case 1: Priests and Property

The state archives allow for some micro-level observations about the priests’ local authority and daily lives. The priests’ most obvious powers were associated with their roles in rituals—the performance and meaning of attested Neo-Assyrian rituals is beyond the scope of this paper, but this space is one in which priests clearly had agency. Moreover, priests were duty-bound to pray on behalf of the king and to perform rituals with a proxy if the king was unable

9 For these two offices and their rights and responsibilities, see Menzel (1981: 130–208), van Driel (1969: 175–78), and Pongratz-Leisten (2015: 202–205) for the *šangû* and Gabbay (2014, especially 116–19) for the *kalû* in Assyria and (2014b: 63–80) in general.

to attend personally.¹⁰ There are also indications that the priests were able to make decisions about the performance of non-royal rituals.¹¹ Other than their overtly religious duties, however, the priests had significant authorities and roles in several other sectors, such as economic, administrative, and even judicial ones. Some of these are showcased in a letter from Iddin-Ea, a *šangû* of Ninurta in his patron city of Calah, to the king, likely Esarhaddon. Iddin-Ea describes an altercation he had with Urdu-Nabû, the *šangû* of the city's temple to Nabû, another high-status institution in the city of Calah:

[Tomorrow or the d]ay after, the king, my lord, will hear. I will certainly die because of this if (the king) says: "Why didn't you inform me?" Urdu-Nabû, the priest, has written a field, a house and people, sons of temple votaries, in a sealed document and has thus made them his own. Therefore, I am left with no control over them. I have now written to the king, my lord, that the king, my lord, may know (about it).¹²

According to the letter, Urdu-Nabû has taken over property and people that had either belonged to Iddin-Ea or were at least under his control, conducting an official legal process to seal these assets as his own (*ina libbi unqi issaṭar ana ramanīšu uttēre*). It is clear from other letters that Assyrian priests had numerous legal and economic powers, acting as witnesses for texts about sales of land or people, especially if their own god (that is, their temple) was involved as guarantor. For instance, Iddin-Ea and the priests of Ninurta's temple in Calah were able to witness the donation of Dūr-mākī-Issār, a child born to a *ḥarimtu*,¹³ as a "gift" (*širiktu*) to Ninurta, to be "considered part of the temple of

10 For instance, the *kalamāḫu* (chief lamentation priest) Urad-Ea reports to Esarhaddon that the *akītu* of the gods of Kurba'il has taken place with the king's *kuzippu* garments standing in as a proxy for the king (SAA 10 339) and, in another letter, requests the same garments for the *akītu* of Šin of Ḥarrān (SAA 10 338). On Urad-Ea, see Gabbay (2014: 119–21). Statements that certain gods should bless the king are ubiquitous in epistolary greeting formulae and prayers to gods on behalf of the king are frequently mentioned, see SAA 10 214, 240, 307, 343, and 174, among many other examples.

11 In particular, exorcists and astrologers wrote to the king about rites and rituals they have decided to perform, often in response to certain circumstances or complications; see, for instance, SAA 10 10, 212, 233, 253, 257, 273, and 276. On occasion, the priests wrote to the king for advice when there were complications with a ritual, see e.g. SAA 13 46.

12 SAA 13 126: r. 2'–13'.

13 The term *ḥarimtu* is controversial, often translated as "prostitute." However, Assante (1998) has argued that it is rather the legal status of a single woman who is not under her father's responsibility.

Ninurta” for the purpose of completing labor (*ilku*) or corvée (*tupšikku*) work.¹⁴ Another text shows priests of various temples witnessing a sale of people in Nineveh who were not related to any temple cult.¹⁵ The clergy (*ēreb bītāti*) of Assur even acted as scribes in entering a treaty during Esarhaddon’s reign, whereas other cities sent regular scribes (*tupšarrī*).¹⁶ Priests, moreover, owned or purchased their own property as well as entered transactions as part of their cultic office; for instance, priests could buy slaves¹⁷ and there was a town owned by clergymen (*āl ērib bīti*) in Maganubba, near Nineveh, with associated fields that Sargon II had to purchase in order to convert the area into his new capital, Dūr-Šarrukīn.¹⁸ That even the king could not simply seize the fields that belonged to the clergymen suggests that Urdu-Nabû committed a severe breach of property law. It is apparent that Iddin-Ea’s complaint concerns Urdu-Nabû overextending his official powers of writing and concluding legal documents and of controlling certain property and people for his own personal use, thereby infringing upon Iddin-Ea’s own rights over these assets.

3 Case 2: Priests versus Criminals

In several instances, priests sought the intervention of the king after failing to maintain order in their temples because of criminals. One letter is a combined plea from Mutakkil-Aššur, the deputy priest (*šangû šanû*, i.e., the “second” *šangû*) of Aššur, and, secondarily, Issār-na’di, the mayor (*ḥazannu*) of Assur:

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- 14 SAA 12 92. The witnesses not only include several *šangû* of Ninurta and Nabû but also a *šangû* of Adad and other cultic officials of Ninurta or Nabû such as a *ša-endišu* “incenser,” *rab nuāri* “chief musician,” *nuḥatimmu* “cook,” and *lahḥinnu* “temple steward,” as well as scribes and officials outside of the temple personnel like the *rab ēkalli* “palace manager.”
- 15 SAA 6 59. The witness list names several *šangû* (and one *lahḥinnu*), including those of Tašmētu, Šarrat-nipḥa, and Gula.
- 16 SAA 10 6.
- 17 As an example, see SAA 14 472, in which a *šangû* of Bēl purchases a slave from Sîn-bēlu-ušur, who does not seem to belong to the temple’s personnel.
- 18 “That city I built anew [.....] and I placed [.....] in it, and [I called its name] Dūr-Šarruk[īn]. The fields surrounding it, in accordance with tablets [of purchase] I [.....]ed to its owners, and [their] herds [I], and so that no injustice should b[e caused I ...] ... I cleared ninety-five hectares of land for Aššur in the irrigated fields of the town of the clergymen in the district of Nineveh, field for field ... , I received ninety-five hectares of l[and of the town of the] bakers, in return for the land of the town of the clergymen, as an exchange [...] from [their h]ands” (SAA 12 19).

Bibīa, the prefect of the Itu'eans, and Tardītu-Aššur, the prefect of the Itu'eans, his deputy, sit outside the Inner City, in front of the gate, eating [bread] together, drinking wine, and squandering the exit-dues of the Inner City. When I opened negotiations with them, they grabbed the *best things* (*rēšātu*), mistreated me, and let my garments go back to me. I am not strong enough to fall upon them. They have seized the Sinneans who transport wood to the Aššur temple and received [1]8 minas of silver from them. The postmaster released their fetters, and they ran away. (Now) no one is serving under the express messengers.¹⁹

The named officials were behaving inappropriately in public spaces and, when the priest tried to discuss the matter with them, they attacked him and subsequently robbed a group of wood-transporters.²⁰ That Mutakkil-Aššur tried to stop them himself and wrote for help in cooperation with the mayor suggests that priests had some judicial authority to act against criminals and worked in coordination with the local government.²¹ With the priests unable to resolve the matter themselves, the king was the next highest authority in the city both as chief priest of Aššur and highest political leader.

Another priest, Dādī, the *šangû* from the Bīt-Kidmuri temple in Nineveh, reported trouble with the chief victualler, who infringed upon Dādī's rights as the inheritor of his father's priestly office:

The chief victualler arrested and interrogated me without (the authorization of) the king or the crown prince. He plundered my patrimony (*bīt abīya*). All that my father had acquired under the king's aegis he plundered and carried off. At the same time, he took away one talent of refined silver and 20 minas of silver in the form of household utensils—gifts of the king and queen mother. I received/inherited my father's *office*, (but now) I am (even) chased away from the temple. Let the crown prince take care of (this) lest I die without (the help of) the king or the crown prince.²²

The letter suggests that arresting and interrogating Dādī without the king or crown prince's approval violated a sort of due process that he expected or was perhaps entitled to due to his special status as priest. It also shows some rights

19 SAA 13 33, probably from Assurbanipal's reign.

20 The phrase *kuzippīya ina muḥḥīya ussāllik*, which Cole and Machinist translated as "let my garments go back to me," might be better understood as the hooligans pulling the unfortunate priest's garments over his head, presumably to ridicule him.

21 On the *ḥazannu* in Assyria, see Van Buylaere (2010).

22 SAA 13 154. Dādī served primarily under Assurbanipal, but this letter is undated.

of inheriting a priestly office: Dādî has right of access to the temple as well as over his father's property, including expensive gifts from royalty.²³ Before listing his grievances, Dādî identifies himself as Bêl-rēmāni's son since, theoretically, the king had personally installed and confirmed Bêl-rēmāni as priest. Dādî's inherited wealth made him vulnerable to what he posits are false accusations and theft. He apparently had no local advocates to whom he could turn, prompting him to write to the king. It is possible that he was stripped of these rights for some other reason, though the unlawful arrest suggests that normally only the king or crown prince could remove a priest from office, just as they installed them in the first place.²⁴

But there must have been many criminal cases that the priests took care of themselves, which thus went unreported. One such situation may appear in a letter to Esarhaddon. Mār-Issār, a royal agent in Babylonia, wrote that Aḥḥēšāya, the *šangû* of Nabû in Borsippa, impaled three Babylonian men:

[In Bor]sippa ...[...]; the priest of Na[bû], [Aḥḥēšāy]a, has [...]ed him, and they have taken everything that [...] and brought it into Borsippa. Sa'īlu, a native of Gam[bulu], Nabû-zēra-ibni from Bīt-Ibâ, and [NN] from Dūr-Šarrukku: [these], altogether three, [men] have been [...] and impaled by the priest Aḥḥēšāya. [...].²⁵

The context is unclear, but impalement was an established method of public execution in Assyrian legal practice, and so this may be a rare reported case of a priest punishing temple theft as normal, without needing to appeal to the king.²⁶ Thus, one can see that the priests had several judicial and punitive powers and appealed directly to the king if the local processes failed.

23 For patrilineal inheritance of priestly offices, see Löhnert (2007, especially 278).

24 While many priestly offices were inherited, these and others nonetheless required royal installation and confirmation; on this topic, see Löhnert (2007: 275).

25 SAA 10 350 r. 3–11.

26 See Radner (2015, especially 119–20), who also tentatively restores a reference to ritual shaving in this case and speculates that the men's crime was theft from the temple, but both of these suggestions are uncertain. While Aḥḥēšāya is a Babylonian priest, and Babylonia was controlled by Assyria at this time, whether Aḥḥēšāya specifically adopted the Assyrian method of capital punishment or the Babylonians had the same sentence for this crime is less clear.

4 Case 3: Priest versus Priest

Temple staff members are known to have committed crimes as well.²⁷ Temples were economically powerful and wealthy institutions, receiving the king's investments and war spoils as well as taxes and forced labor. Within the temples were also precious items used for cultic objects, decorations, and cult statues, which were adorned with or made from gold, silver, and gems. A letter from Rāšil, a statue maker in Babylon, reported to Esarhaddon that he made good progress on a crown for the cult statue of the sky god Anu and on sun discs:

I have made the statues which the king, my lord, ordered. I have made the crown of Anu which the king, my lord, ordered. (Both) the sun disks about which I spoke to the king and the ...-emblems have been made. About what I said to the king, my lord: "The 12 minas of gold which came in to me as gifts for Bēl I have made into rosettes and ...-ornaments for Zarpanītu." I will now fashion the seals which the king, my lord, gave me. The gems going on the crown of Anu and those gems of yours going on the sun disks are stored in the treasury of the temple of Aššur. No one can open (it) without the authority of the priest and Nabû-ētir-naṣṣāti. I have now written to the king, my lord, that the king send me anyone whom the king, my lord, pleases to open (the treasury), so that I can finish (the work) and give it to the king, my lord.²⁸

The only problem, he writes, is that the gems needed to complete the crown and the discs are stored in the treasury of the Aššur temple, controlled by the *šangû* and another temple official. Therefore, Rāšil requests that the king send someone with the authority to open the treasury to give him the gems.

But once precious materials adorned the cult images or other parts of the temple, they were not as well protected as items in the treasury, at least not while on display.²⁹ In theory, divine images were in restricted areas, but that did not prevent crime when the offenders were priests who had access to those spaces. This particular abuse of power was apparently a common problem. For example, the *šangû* of Ninurta, Aššur-rēšūwa, wrote from Calah that his temple was plagued by thievery:

27 Criminality and poor behavior among cultic personnel is also discussed in Ambos (2007).

28 SAA 13 174.

29 On the architectural layout of temples, see Holloway (2002: 200–201, especially fn. 420, and 258).

In the time of the father of the king, my lord, the clergy of the temple of Ninurta cut off 3 fingers (worth) of golden *appendages* from the beams of gold at the head of Ninurta. I turned in a report to the father of the king, my lord. All the men [went] to meet [...]. [fragmentary] They cut off a [... x] spans wide and 11 cubits (= 5.5 m) long, and they removed 8 silver *bands* from the walls. The eunuch (*ša-rēši*) of the king, my lord, should come and investigate. Nabû-erība, the lamentation priest, and Gallul, the temple guard, were in charge of the cutting. They should be interrogated, and their accomplices should be brought out. Now then I and the mayor of Calah had the overseer of the city-gates go down to Urdu-Marduk and Sangî-Issār, and he had a look. The king, my lord, should ask him how much was cut off. How many have they become now? They have been taught (a lesson), but (still) they don't keep their hands off the temple. (When in the time of) your father they didn't keep their hands off the temple, some of the men were killed. The king, my lord, should do as he d[eems best]. I am alone; there is no *one to take care* of the case."³⁰

Aššur-rēšūwa complains that the clergy has a history of misconduct, and had earlier defiled the cult image of Ninurta in order to steal gold. When Aššur-rēšūwa reported this to the previous king, some men were executed, possibly by the priests themselves, as in the aforementioned case with Aḥḥēšāya. This was not enough of a deterrent, though, and the *kalû*, Nabû-erība, in cahoots with the temple guard, stripped a considerable amount of silver from the walls of the temple. The judicial process began from there, with Aššur-rēšūwa and the major of Calah trying to resolve the case together, but to no avail—the offenders reportedly had many accomplices, while Aššur-rēšūwa claims to be on his own, needing assistance from the state to continue. Nonetheless, this letter showcases a *kalû* taking advantage of temple access for his own profit, while the *šangû* uses his power to try and prosecute (and perhaps even execute) the offenders.

A letter from Arbela shows a similar epidemic of thefts in a local temple. The cultic official Aššur-ḥamātū'a of the Ištar of Arbela temple informed Assurbanipal that Nabû-ēpuš, the *kalû* of the nearby Ea shrine, stole gold from Ištar's offering table:

Nabû-ēpuš, the priest of Ea, has stolen property from the temple. He peeled off and removed the golden ... from the *massive* (offering) table which is in front of Ištar. Nabû-nādin-apli, the temple guard, caught him

30 SAA 13 128.

red-handed. Even before my time, the [pries]t of Ea committed a [thef]t, but they (the temple authorities) retrieved it and covered it up. The king should question him about both (cases). When the king, my lord, had not yet stationed me in my post, they used to commit thefts and cover them up. (Left) on their own, they (can) cover (everything) up without any effort, (thus) causing great *whispering* in the temple. Now they are all of one accord, saying: "Let's do it this way." I speak to them, but they don't listen. (What) I have heard I have written to the king, my lord. The king, my lord, should do as he deems best. (One other note): Nabû-ēpuš, who committed the robberies, is a lamentation priest. No one beside him (is allowed) in the *parakku*!³¹

At least in this case the guard caught the criminal and the cult image itself was not desecrated. As a *kalû*, Nabû-ēpuš could use his official access to the *parakku*, the inner shrine or dais of the god, to his advantage, violating the trust inherent in his sacred responsibilities for his own personal gain.³² Nabû-erība, the *kalû* from the previous case, only stripped silver from the walls, not from the statue or its accouterments, so Nabû-ēpuš' offense may have been even more serious. Moreover, the letter claims that the Ea priest is a repeat offender but that the other priests conceal his crimes. Clearly, priests are meant to report and punish criminals and Aššur-ḥamātū'a is frustrated with the other priests' noncompliance, claiming that he spoke to the temple staff but that they ignored him. It is noteworthy that Aššur-ḥamātū'a's jurisdiction seems to be limited to his own temple, and he is powerless against the consensus of the Ea temple officials; nor can he keep priests of other temples out of his own. Perhaps this shows that a united temple personnel could override even the law, though presumably not the king, and so Aššur-ḥamātū'a resorted to writing directly to Assurbanipal to accuse the entire staff of corruption.

31 SAA 13 138, adopting Gabbay's (2014: 121) translation for line r.e. 18, which Machinist and Cole translated as "he is not to ascend the dais," suggesting that Nabû-ēpuš transgressed the limitations of his office even before his crime.

32 Gabbay (2014: 121) notes that the accusation may be false for just this reason, that "the *kalû*'s status allows him to enter the *parakku*, the inner cella of the god, but this also turns him, especially in an environment which does not easily accept him, into a likely suspect in any theft of its contents." It is notable that, while the Ea priest apparently had access to the *parakku* of other temples, he did not steal from the temple in which he was *kalû* but instead targeted the Ištar of Arbela temple, the Egašankalama. As the citadel of Arbela (Erbil, Iraq) has not been excavated, the proximity of these temples is unknown, but the Ea shrine may even have been within the Egašankalama's temple complex since the latter, the primary temple of the city, may have been quite large. This would have allowed the Ea priests convenient access to the cultic objects.

5 Case 4: Pūlu, the Lamentation Priest

Finally, there is the case of Pūlu, a master class in transgressing the acceptable authority of a position. Like the other offending priests, Pūlu is a lamentation priest. One might wonder at this point why the *kalû* are apparently so susceptible to turning to a life of crime. Gabbay, reflecting on this matter, has argued that the office of *kalû* was Babylonian in origin, poorly attested in Assyria, and only integrated into the temple cult in the late Neo-Assyrian period, remaining lower status than other cultic officials such as the *āšipu*.³³ He suggests that, because of these foreign roots, the *kalû* never quite shed their status as “outsiders” in the Assyrian temple, making them likely suspects in cases of theft.³⁴ The troublemaker in this case, Pūlu, was a *kalû* in the Nabû temple in Calah but, based on his own letters to the king, no one would ever imagine that anything was amiss: he wrote to the king three times, reporting on results of divination via sheep offerings.³⁵ However, another letter tells a very different story: though his identity is lost, the letter’s author clearly has intimate knowledge of the temple’s inner workings, and he furthermore identifies his father as having supervised eunuchs and beer rations in the temple.³⁶

The writer’s complaints are many, describing what he sees as shocking blasphemies and transgressions. The first accusation shows the gravity of the situation: Pūlu “has been acting arbitrarily in the temple of Nabû”—that is, that he “acts in accordance (only) with himself” (*kī ramanīšu uppaš*). Trusting in oneself, rather than in the gods or the king, is a familiar trope used to describe betrayal in Assyrian texts. This is emphasized with the claim that Pūlu’s actions are “without the permission of the king” and with repeated statements about

33 Gabbay (2014: 116–19).

34 Gabbay (2014: 121) writes: “there may be some indications that the *kalû* was regarded as an ‘outsider’ in Assyrian temples, although this is somewhat speculative. In two instances, a *kalû* is suspected by other temple clergy to have stolen precious materials from the temple (SAA 13 128 and 138). In other instances in which persons are suspected of theft from temples, these are not high-ranking clergy, and usually not even cultic functionaries, but rather other professionals who were involved with the temple institution, such as shepherds or guards ... this may indicate the *kalû*’s status as something of an alien among the temple staff, despite his high rank. If the charges against him were correct, this may indicate his own perception of himself as an outsider in the temple, despite his important cultic status. If the charges were false, this may indicate that because he was perceived as an outsider by colleagues, he was easy to blame for internal problems in the temple.” This is possibly circular reasoning, however, if the *kalû* were outsiders because they were seen as thieves, and they were seen as thieves because they were outsiders.

35 SAA 13 131, 132, and 133.

36 SAA 13 134. The following quotations are from this letter unless otherwise specified.

how Pūlu upsets tradition and takes on prerogatives meant for the ruler. The priest's crimes include changing the interior of the *akītu* houses of Nabû and Tašmētu,³⁷ assigning a goldsmith to work on Marduk's table (given to the temple by Sargon II),³⁸ and appointing cult officials himself.³⁹ The strange accusation that Pūlu sketched cultic objects—a socle and dragons that Nabû's cult statue stands on—must be related to this redecorating and restaffing program.⁴⁰ Indeed, Pūlu's crimes are summed up in that he “removed the old work and replaced it with new,” actions reserved for the king or, at the very least, the *šangû*, certainly not for a relatively low-ranking priest.

Similarly, Pūlu flouted appropriate procedures by taking on tasks meant for other cultic officials and changing the rituals. A prior king donated golden bottles to measure out the palace's allotment of wine for the temple, but now Pūlu uses his own measuring system and distributes it himself.⁴¹ He also inspects the beer, which had been a duty of the writer's father.⁴² Pūlu even performs the responsibilities of women; what happened to the woman who does the lighting ceremony for Nabû's consort Tašmētu is unknown, but Pūlu performs her duties without the knowledge of the higher-ranking priests or the king's official.⁴³ He also outsourced a ritual related to Bēl and Nabû to hired laborers, meanwhile accessing highly restricted cult spaces, emphasized by his entry into the ritual bathhouse of Bēl and Nabû and a hint at some role in clothing the cult image.⁴⁴ The implication is that Pūlu oversteps his permissions and authorities by entering these restricted spaces and bringing in outsiders to help him with rituals he should not be performing. But even Pūlu's own

37 “Without the permission of the king, he tore out *doorposts*, fastened others, and cut down the ... in the *akītu* house of N[abû] and the *akītu* house of Tašmētu” (lines 7'–9').

38 Lines 9'–11'.

39 “He has appointed officials of his own choosing in the temple” (lines 16'–17').

40 “Furthermore, the dragons upon which Nabû stands, and the socle between them—he has made a sketch out of them” (lines 12'–14').

41 “Moreover, the king's father set up golden bottles of ...-liter capacity (with) royal images on them. They would fill with wine the one in front of Bēl and the one in front of Nabû. They would be decanted. The wine was the palace *allotment*. Now this has been stopped. He himself measures out the wine and carries it in.” (lines 18'–22').

42 “And formerly, when my father supervised the house of eunuchs ordinary beer from goats was decanted, and he used to inspect [new] and old (beer) at the same time. [.....] regular offerings” (lines 22'–b.e. 27').

43 “He also does the work of the woman who carries out the lighting ceremony for Tašmētu. Nobody with him sees (her), neither the deputy priest, nor the temple steward, nor the king's official know” (lines r. 4–8).

44 “He enters the ritual bath house of Bēl and Nabû. (There) twice a year the loins of Marduk are ungirded ... The ... has been left at his disposal and is being placed in [front of Bēl] and in front of Nabû with the help of hired laborers” (lines r. 1–2, r. 9).

tasks are objectionable for the writer, who insists that the sheep offerings must be discontinued for a while due to irregularities.⁴⁵ Finally, there is the complaint that Pūlu took over the temple's finances, supervising the treasuries with the power to open and seal them again.⁴⁶ He writes "all the precious stones and jewelry are under his custody; he does not show them to anybody with him."⁴⁷ As seen above, only the highest priests or those commissioned by the king could authorize opening the treasuries or grant access to the gems, cultic decorations, and precious metals.

The writer's outrage stems from the fact that he saw all of these infractions as Pūlu transgressing the regular duties of lamentation priests, taking powers and privileges that rightfully belonged to other cultic officials, namely the *šangû*, or to the king himself.⁴⁸ The writer's frustration with the inaction of the other cultic officials is palpable: he writes that "one of the clergymen saw him, but he turned him back and let him go" and "no one has authority, and no one says (anything) to him" and "no one can do (anything); there is an order to remain silent. But they have changed the old rites!" One may speculate that the other cultic officials actually supported Pūlu's leadership.⁴⁹ Indeed, the mention of how the writer's father supervised eunuchs and the beer rations may be a subtle hint that perhaps these complaints stem from a personal grudge, from someone who expected to take on his father's duties, especially since the writer later adds, "why does [NN] serve [in] my father's [o]ffice while I am dying of hunger? ... Let the king try him, and let him write me in detail about the work of the house of eunuch[s]."⁵⁰ A possible alternative reading is that the Nabû temple was suffering from a staffing shortage and a dire need for renovations. Pūlu may have simply taken charge for practical

45 "Moreover [they ...] as they please, and [they ...] the regular sheep offering in the afternoon as they please. The regular sheep offering which is car[ried] out in the temple of Marduk should be stopped—for at least one month if not two. The regular sheep offering of the pilgrims (lit. 'the blesser'), which is performed before Nabû, is [incom]plete. They carry out the regular sheep offering in full before Marduk—but having performed its ritual in the temple of [...]mar" (lines r. 9–15).

46 "[Pūlu is the one who i]s to blame [for ...] [...] which he/th]ey [...] [...] (and)] all the [tr]easuries are under his supervision: he is the one to open and seal them" (lines b.e. 28'–31').

47 Lines r. 3–4.

48 On the acceptable duties of the *kalû* in Assyria, see Gabbay (2014: 116).

49 Lines 14'–15', r. 16–17. Gabbay (2014: 121–2) has suggested that the change in rites is "perhaps referring to an attempt to change the Assyrian rites to Babylonian ones. Indeed, Pūlu himself is portrayed in two other letters as an active, meticulous scholar and priest, showing great interest in cultic matters."

50 Lines r. 25–e. 4.

and logistical reasons instead of waiting for the king to install new staff or send experts and support for renovation work. The *šangû* is notably absent, since the letter mentions only the deputy (*šangû šanû*). If the letter writer did not feel personally slighted by Pūlu, perhaps this would be the story of a heroic *kalû* who saved his temple from dilapidation and lapsed rites in the absence of the high priest. Of course, that story would certainly not have been reported to the king, here either Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal, whose duty it was to personally maintain all temples and install high priests. It may support this interpretation that Esarhaddon did not renovate Nabû's temple in Calah, while Assurbanipal reported significant work on this temple, from top to bottom:

[At] that time, the temple of the god Nabû that is inside Calah, [wh]ich Adad-nārārī (III, r. 811–783 BCE), son of Šamši-Adad (v), king of Assyria, a king of the past who came before me, had built, had become old. I removed its dilapidated section(s) and (then) I mixed (its) *kalakku*-mortar with beer and wine. Basket carriers made bricks while playing. While there was singing (and) joyous celebration, I built (and) completed (it) from its foundation(s) to its crenellations. I roofed it with long beams of cedar. [I] decorated all its copings [...].⁵¹

While it is an Assyrian motif to call a temple neglected and dilapidated before renovations,⁵² there may be some truth to a gap in temple maintenance that might coincide with Pūlu's tenure, so this letter may reveal one method by which temple staff coped with a lapse in maintenance and the loss of the high priest. The only possible indication that Pūlu acknowledged that his actions transgressed his station is that he did not himself report these issues to the king; perhaps he and the other temple personnel found it more convenient to maintain the fiction that the temple was operating normally rather than to suggest royal neglect.

6 Conclusion

Letters about how power was abused and misappropriated provide a useful perspective into the daily lives of priests in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, preserving stories that speak to local priestly authority in absence of or opposed to royal oversight. While these letters report on irregularities and are not

51 RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 7: x 53'–64', dated to 646 BCE.

52 Novotny (2010: 111).

representative of a typical day in a priest's life, they can nonetheless allow us to deduce the expected or standard powers and responsibilities of several cultic offices through their descriptions of transgressive behavior. The *šangû* in particular had distinct economic, legal, and judicial roles, not only in their temples but also alongside the local government. They likely resolved most cases of misconduct in their temples and cities on their own, only contacting the king as a last resort when their own processes failed. Cultic offices also had different levels of temple access and fixed duties and expectations, but boundaries may have been more fluid in special circumstances, such as during shortages of staff and resources. Despite the relative scarcity of information about Neo-Assyrian priests, these cases of power abuse contain valuable if fragmentary views into the daily concerns of this significant professional class.

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