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ALL THAT GLITTERS: GOLD IN THE ROYAL IDEOLOGY
OF THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIREShana Zaia¹**Introduction**

Gold is a material that was consistently precious in Mesopotamia regardless of time period and geography.² Gold's value and luxury status was already attested in the 3rd millennium,³ with perhaps the most demonstrative case for gold's esteemed nature during this time, particularly within a royal context, being the Royal Tombs of Ur. These tombs represent one of only two major ancient gold finds thus far discovered in Mesopotamia and contain numerous gold items, including jewelry, vessels, ornamentation, and weapons.⁴ But gold is not native to Mesopotamia, necessitating considerable effort by kings and traders to acquire it, especially in large quantities. Nor was gold used as currency, with the exception of the Kassite period; indeed, the essential characterization of gold was one of prestige and luxury. Gold was certainly not unique in this case: other luxury materials such as precious stones, aromatics, and foreign goods are known to have circulated throughout Mesopotamia. But gold appears with a consistency and frequency essentially unparalleled amongst precious materials, which prompts the question: what was it about gold in particular that motivated its acquisition, despite the considerable effort required? To address this query, this paper takes as its case study the Neo-Assyrian period, which provides a wealth of textual

1. This paper was presented at the Venice Advanced Seminar for the Humanities in 2019 and was conducted within the Horizon 2020 project "The King's City: A Comparative Study of Royal Patronage in Assur, Nineveh, and Babylon in the First Millennium BCE", undertaken at the University of Vienna. My gratitude goes to Yoram Cohen and Rocío Da Riva for their guidance, as well as to Lucio Milano, Peter Machinist, and Piotr Steinkeller for their feedback. Translations follow RIMA, RINAP, and SAA unless otherwise noted.
2. See Winter 2012 on the fascination with gold throughout history.
3. See Steinkeller 2014 and 2016.
4. For discussions of these finds, see Zettler – Horne 1998; Hauptmann *et al.* 2018; and Jansen *et al.* 2016.

material about gold, its acquisition, and its role in state ideology. In this corpus, one can see a clear ideological meaning behind gold; namely, its intrinsic connection to the divine realm as a symbol of divine favor and as a royal gift to the gods in exchange for this favor.

Gold in the Neo-Assyrian period

The deportations of people and goods are well-known features of the Neo-Assyrian kings' imperial program, described within the numerous reports of conquests and annexations.⁵ Seized goods regularly included precious and prestige items, including silver, expensive stones, aromatics, and other costly or difficult-to-procure commodities. One of the most consistently-mentioned items in these deportation lists was gold, which appeared more frequently and in more contexts than any other precious materials.⁶ Furthermore, gold tended to be listed first, occasionally superseded only by silver. While silver was often used in a similar manner by the kings in tandem with gold (for instance, in temple gilding), its use as currency meant it was not exclusively tied to an ideological agenda or usage in the same way, and gold seems to have been consistently considered more precious than silver in ideological as well as in economic settings.⁷

As mentioned, there are no known native sources of gold within Mesopotamia and this precious metal thus entered the region through trade or by force.⁸ While the Old Assyrian period traders

5. On deportation generally, see Oded 1979 and Liverani 2017.
6. Jankowska 1969. Silver is a close second to gold in terms of frequency of attestations and was generally taken in larger quantities.
7. One may look to the Sumerian literary text *Enki and the World Order*, in which the god's blessing includes "may all your silver be gold", and the curse from *The Cursing of Agade* "may your gold be bought for the price of silver" (see Römer 1993 and Cooper 1983). For a Neo-Babylonian example of gold's primacy over silver, see Neriglissar's Royal Palace Inscription from Babylon: Neriglissar writes regarding the Shrine of Destinies in the Ezida temple that "[a former king] had made it in silver, I overlaid (it) with bright gold] and ornaments of divine splendor" (Da Riva 2013, 133). Assyrian and Babylonian kings alike often portrayed themselves as surpassing the deeds of their predecessors, and Neriglissar thereby demonstrates that gold is a more impressive form of gilding. Similarly, Ashurbanipal wrote a letter to the elders of Nippur (SAA 21 18) beseeching them to capture a wanted person, promising that the captor would receive his weight's worth of gold, citing an earlier example in which Sennacherib allegedly rewarded someone with his weight in silver, thus increasing the stakes and outdoing his grandfather.
8. On possible native sources of gold around Mesopotamia, including Turkey, Iran, western and southern Arabia, and Egypt and Nubia, see Moorey 1994, 217-220. The gold trade in the third millennium BCE is discussed by Steinkeller 2016, 128-129, 132, and 2014, 693, who writes that northern Mesopotamia acquired gold largely from Anatolia and Egypt. Southern Mesopotamia, he (*ibid.*) suggests, accessed gold from eastern origins instead, including the Iranian Plateau, Azerbaijan, and as far away as Turkish, which he argues was in the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex and had access to trading routes into Afghanistan. Turkish is mentioned in texts as the location of a mountain called Ḫarali/Arallu that was a source of gold, discussed further below. During the Amarna Age, large quantities of gold came from Egypt, where it was "as plentiful as dust" (Westbrook 2000, 378-379). Egypt remained a source of gold during the Neo-Assyrian period but its status as such gradually waned over the first millennium; for instance, Kleber (2017, 19-20) shows that gold in Babylonia largely did not come from Egypt during the Neo-Babylonian period. See also possible gold sources in northern Afghanistan and Iran, Hauptmann *et al.* 2018 and Jansen *et al.* 2016.

exchanged textiles for relatively large quantities of gold,⁹ the Neo-Assyrian kings clearly preferred the latter method, giving the impression that they regularly cleared out the treasuries of enemy kings' palaces (and, to some extent, temples) or required regions from around the Assyrian periphery with access to gold to contribute it as taxes and tribute.¹⁰ This was something the kings pursued aggressively, claiming to take gold in considerable amounts, with targeted conquests that would have meant control over the trading routes through which gold traveled.¹¹ At first glance, this is unsurprising: gold was the most valuable metal in ancient Mesopotamia, with a value up to 15 times that of silver.¹² Gold was consequently a symbol of wealth and power and the kings acquired it as a visible marker of their successes in conquest and territorial control. The Empire's overall prosperity was itself a barometer of the king's ability to lead his people and several inscriptions, including the "Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal", referred to the market prices of certain commodities, such as low prices for barley, wool, and oils and other staples or imported goods, to demonstrate the resultant high quality of life for citizens.¹³

Gold was one of a variety of prestige items that Assyrian kings hoarded or displayed; indeed, they took great pride in their collection of trophies, from luxury furniture to exotic plants and animals to curiosities like foreign weights.¹⁴ Based on the Neo-Assyrian administrative and economic documents, gold was carefully controlled by the crown and restricted to royal and elite contexts.¹⁵ The Royal Tombs in Calah, a rare example of extant ancient gold, are a demonstration of gold's use in a restricted royal and elite space. These tombs, found under the Northwest Palace

9. Larsen (2015, 117-118) writes that, in the Old Assyrian period, "gold played a special, not entirely understood role, and it seems that it was hoarded in Assur. We also know that certain central procedures, such as the joint-stock partnership, were always formulated using the gold standard". See also Dercksen 2004, 81-90.
10. Luxury goods also had an important role in diplomacy, see Feldman 2006 for cases from the late Bronze Age. Neo-Assyrian traders are discussed in Radner 1999b.
11. See Jankowska 1969.
12. Powell 1996, 229-231, Larsen 2015, 220 (Old Assyrian), Kleber 2016, 123-124, Kleber 2017, 15 (Neo-Babylonian).
13. The "Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal" states "may [the people] of Aššur buy 30 kor of grain for one shekel of silver! May [the people] of Aššur buy 3 seah of oil for one shekel of silver! May [the people] of Aššur buy 30 minas of wool for one shekel of silver!" (Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 214). From the royal inscriptions come "When I built the temple of the god Enlil, my lord, the prices in my city, Aššur, (were): two kor of barley could be purchased for one shekel of silver; fifteen minas of wool for one shekel of silver; and two seahs of oil for one shekel of silver, according to the exchange rate (*maḫīru*) of my city Aššur" (RIMA 1 Šamšī-Adad I 1, 59-72) and "They carried off without number oxen, sheep and goats, donkeys, camels, (and) people. They filled (with them) the whole extent of the land, in its entirety, to all of its border(s). I apportioned camels like sheep and goats (and) divided (them) among the people of Assyria (so that) within my country they (the Assyrians) could purchase a camel for one shekel (or even) a half shekel of silver at the market gate. The tavern-woman (i.e., prostitute), for the worth of (her) wages, the beer brewer for the worth of his beer-jug, (and) the gardener for the worth of his baskets of greens will always receive camels and slaves". (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 3, viii 5-15, with the translation of the final line following Cohen 2015, 47-48). On the term *maḫīru* "exchange rate", see Fales 1996, 20-25.
14. Feldman 2015; Reade 2004, 256-257. Reade (*ibid.*) highlights the importance of royal collections in the public performance of the king's success in taking and maintaining control over territory and politics, not only in texts but also in reliefs that depicted the goods being taken and the king receiving them. See Liverani 2017, 66-99 on collection and display and Peyronel 2016 for weights.
15. This may, however, be a product of the available text corpora, which are largely state archives.

in Calah and dating to the 9th-8th centuries, contained the remains of several queens and a few men (who were presumably of elite status) along with numerous gold items including extravagant jewelry, gilded textiles, and objects associated with the cult.¹⁶ Though the kings' tombs have not been found, one would expect a similarly high or even higher investment of gold in these spaces.¹⁷ There was, of course, an aesthetic appeal to gold, and its malleability and resistance to corrosion made it ideal for jewelry and gilding. But burials, trophy collecting, and wealth display are not enough to justify the fixation on gold depicted in texts and its prominence in war spoils, taxes, and tribute, especially considering evidence of kings abandoning royal hoards and melting down objects made of or gilded with precious metals (including gold) to refashion them.¹⁸ Moreover, the collection and storage of gold in the palaces is not visible in the texts that depict royal ideology; this feature is known rather from economic and administrative documents. Nonetheless, the Neo-Assyrians neither used gold as currency, nor is there evidence that they considered it a trade item.¹⁹ While all of these features are not mutually exclusive factors, they are not enough to explain the frequent appearance of gold in state texts. Thus, the question remains: what was the symbolic value of gold that merited such a concerted and consistent effort on the part of the Neo-Assyrian kings to acquire it?

While gold was mentioned in almost every attested text genre in the Neo-Assyrian period, the solution is perhaps found in the texts that depict royal ideology, state religion, and kingship ideals – that is, royal inscriptions, literary works, and religious or ritual texts – as opposed to economic, administrative, or private texts. Looking at the royal inscriptions, it quickly becomes apparent that gold was not merely a prestige commodity but that it was also increasingly and intrinsically tied to the divine world. Specifically, receiving or procuring gold was a tangible symbol of divine favor and approval, designating those kings who were selected and supported by the gods. In turn, the fortunate kings returned the gold unto the gods, the royal inscriptions in particular giving the impression that most of the royal gold holdings were reinvested into the temple cult and offered up to the gods in gratitude for imperial successes. This was not necessarily unique to gold, which was almost always mentioned in tandem with other luxury materials, frequently in the order of gold, silver, and precious stones (such as lapis lazuli and carnelian), many of which also had roles in ritual

16. Hussein *et al.* 2016 and Winter 2012, 158-159.

17. While the royal tombs found in Calah and Ur already suggest that gold was a feature in the funerary traditions for high-status individuals, Gilgamesh also inters a large quantity of gold and other precious materials with his deceased companion, Enkidu, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003, 487-488, Tablet VIII 92-206).

18. For examples, see Moorey 1994, 217-232; Reade 2004, 257-258; Thomason 2005, 167; Radner 1999a, 134-137. There were treasuries in both palaces and temples that could have stored gold for generations, used and reused by several kings.

19. Assyrians primarily used silver, especially after the reign of Sargon II, and less frequently bronze and copper, see Radner 1999a, 129-131; Radner 2017, 215; Gaspa 2012. In southern Mesopotamia, silver's use as both a luxury item and in economic exchanges began with the Sargonic dynasty, increasing in popularity until the Old Babylonian period, likely related to trading routes in the north and west, and these trading routes may have informed the Old Assyrian trade in silver as well (Steinkeller 2016, 130-132).

and mythology.²⁰ But this paper suggests that gold's place at the nexus of state power and state religion was particularly strong and consistent across texts relating to royal ideology. These qualities were not new (or unique) to the Neo-Assyrian period, but, within the state ideology of this time, gold's primary value was its symbolic link to the divine world, which can be seen in three main ways: it was connected to kingship as a sign of divine endorsement or as a symbol of divine kingship; it was a material that was strongly associated with and controlled by the gods; and the kings portrayed themselves as using gold primarily in veneration of the gods through ritual offerings and investment in temples, especially through (re)construction works, to show their gratitude with a gift worthy of the divine.²¹ These characteristics motivated and justified the royal preoccupation with collecting gold beyond, but not mutually exclusive to, its socio-economic value.

Gold and kingship

The role of the divine in Assyrian kingship is well known: the gods selected and supported the king, who acted as their mortal representative on earth and whose deeds were accomplished at the command of the gods. Indeed, the acquisition of gold through deportation was itself a sign of the gods' favor, allowing the king to triumph over his enemies and rewarding him with the spoils of war. In this way, the acquisition of gold was part of this divinely-sanctioned triumph, while the fallen enemies' loss of gold was a feature of divine anger, usually at the enemies' betrayal of a treaty or an oath of loyalty to the Assyrian king, an agreement consecrated by the divine.²²

20. For example, in Sennacherib's raid of Marduk-apla-iddina II's palace treasury in Babylon (RINAP 3 1, 30-33). As for other precious items used in rituals and mythology, lapis lazuli was sometimes associated with goddesses in sexual contexts such as with Tašmētu (SAA 3 14 "Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmētu") and Ištar, for whom a lapis lazuli vulva was often used as a symbol of the goddess in rituals (Foster 2005, 677; Nissinen 2003, 176-177). Lapis lazuli and other stones were moreover associated with kingship and the divine world in similar ways as gold, such as with scepters and daises, as stones were often set into the gold objects. On the importance of lapis lazuli in particular, see Winter 1999. For more on the use of stones in ritual and their protective powers, see Schuster-Brandis 2008. On luxury and luxury arts in Mesopotamia, see Feldman 2015.
21. A similar thesis was set forth earlier by Winter (2012, 157-158), who wrote that "scarcity, cost, and material properties are not sufficient to account for the vested value", but that "the 'meaning' of gold, whether used in palatial or temple contexts, was not restricted to its market value, or even to its physical property of not tarnishing, but rather was closely associated with divine properties of light and lustre". Moreover, many of the observations made in this paper may be applicable to other periods of Mesopotamian history as well, but this requires further study.
22. A salient example is that of Sargon II's "Letter to Aššur" detailing his eighth campaign, which was conducted against Urartu in 718 BCE. The victory against this powerful foe was described in the framework of a royal inscription but with the style of a literary epic as a letter to the god Aššur. Of note here is the account of looting the treasuries in the religious and political center at Mušašir; instead of the efficient lists found in other royal inscriptions, Sargon II dedicates more than 50 lines to a highly descriptive enumeration of what he removed from the palace and temple treasuries, including a total of over 50 talents of gold, almost 300 talents of silver, and many priceless golden or gilded items. The list of spoils is preceded by the statement that the Urartian king Urzana had earned this fate because he "did not fear the name of Aššur, had cast off his allegiance to me (Sargon II) and forgotten his duty", mirroring the curses from the treaties that manifest the gods' displeasure as the tangible loss of gold (Foster 2005, 808-811; Mayer 2013, 130-141). Thus, the extended list of precious booty, with its plentiful

But the connection between Assyrian kingship and gold started at the very beginning of a king's reign, during his coronation in the Aššur temple.²³ The royal coronation ritual employed gold objects in several stages, perhaps unsurprisingly since it was a major state rite for an extraordinary situation and merited using the most precious commodities available. In addition, gold may have had a connotation of purity and divine-like eternity since it did not corrode, hence its appearance in the form of bowls, plates, and other utensils for ritual use.²⁴ This is a trait that was lauded in literary and religious texts as well, such as in a hymn to Ištar against impotence, which contains a wish for a blessing: *kīma kašpi ebbi kīma ħurāši ruššē adirta ay aršī* “like pure silver, red gold, may I never tarnish”.²⁵ As part of the incoming king's prostration before the god Aššur, he made an offering of gold, bringing oil in a golden bowl from the palace and placing it, along with a mina of silver and of gold, at the god's feet.²⁶ This offering of precious goods happened first, before the god's table was set and the crown prince made the standard offerings, primarily of sheep, to each god and gave (presumably precious) stones as presents. When the priest subsequently crowned the prince as king, he gave him a golden ring or torque (*sabirru*).²⁷ This was not a true ring, i.e. one worn on the hand, but instead either a bracelet or armband.²⁸ The palace reliefs and monumental iconography depict kings wearing bands on the wrist and arms, and these would have included the royal *sabirru*, while they tend not to show rings worn on kings' hands.²⁹ This golden band identified the king as the favored official of the gods and would, in turn, become the king's own method of designating his most important and celebrated officials, one of the few ways in which gold was given out to non-royal persons and a visible marker of the king's personal endorsement.³⁰

A true golden ring associated with kingship is referenced in a letter from Nabû-šumu-līšir, an official in Babylonia, to Ashurbanipal about the destruction of the city Birati by the army of the

gold, is depicted simultaneously as the divine retribution against Urzana for betraying his oath of loyalty to Sargon II (and, consequently, Sargon II's gods) and as the tangible reward for the Assyrian king in return for his obedience to the gods.

23. See Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 435-441 and Da Riva 2017, particularly for comparisons between Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian coronations. Another text, the “Myth of the Creation of Man and God”, depicts the king as formed perfectly from birth by the gods for his future office. Pongratz-Leisten (2015, 37, 208-216) has suggested intertextual links between this myth, “Ashurbanipal's Coronation Hymn” (SAA 3 11), and Esarhaddon's account of his own succession in RINAP 4 1. An MA thesis on the topic of Assyrian coronation rituals was prepared by Saki Kikuchi (2015), and I am grateful to Saki for translating and sharing some of the portions relevant to this paper.
24. Winter 2012, 157-158. See also RINAP 5 *Sin-šarru-iškun* 15: 7 in which *Sin-šarru-iškun* “had a *kallu*-bowl (and) a *šulpu*-bowl of reddish gold made for washing his pure hands and had (it) firmly placed before [him (Nabû)]”.
25. Biggs 1967, 28; Foster 2005, 676 (translation). See Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 446 for the importance of non-tarnishing materials and the crown.
26. SAA 20 7, i 32'-i 37'. This is a Neo-Assyrian copy of a Middle Assyrian ritual; a Neo-Assyrian version is not extant. Only one example of the hymns that may have been part of the ritual survive (SAA 3 11, “Ashurbanipal's Coronation Hymn”), but it is not clear to what extent this text would have represented Neo-Assyrian coronation rituals in general. A mina by the heavy standard would be about 1 kg.
27. SAA 20 7, ii 24-29.
28. See Postgate 1994.
29. Reliefs often show the kings wearing bracelets or armbands with rosettes but it is difficult to correlate the known terminology with the iconographic representations.
30. See Postgate 1994; Radner 2008; and state texts such as SAA 7 73.

king of Babylon, in which he describes how he despaired after the city was ruined and its gods were removed by enemies, but that he was greatly heartened by seeing the *unqu burāšu ša šarri* “golden ring of the king” afterwards. Unfortunately, as he writes, he has since sent a messenger to the king but no longer saw this ring, which caused him to lose hope anew.³¹ This golden *unqu* was a signet ring that acted as the royal stamp seal and was often used metonymically to mean a sealed royal order; i.e. Nabû-šumu-līšir was pleased to receive a letter from the king after the destruction of Birati but now worries because he has not received a royal missive stamped with that seal in response to his message, which he fears means he was abandoned by the king or had fallen out of favor.³² The royal signet ring is also mentioned in a letter about the treasury of the temple of Ḥumḥumiya in Dūr-Šarrukku, which had been sealed using the *unqu* of Esarhaddon, and there was a golden seal found in Tomb III of the queens’ tombs in Calah.³³ Officials are also known to have had their own stamp seals but it is likely that only royalty would have had the honor of a golden *unqu* and officials’ signet rings were probably made of other materials.³⁴

The *sabirru* was not the only golden item the king wore to demonstrate his status: the king also occasionally wore a golden tiara or crown (*agū*), which was mentioned, for instance, in a ritual for purifying the royal regalia in the presence of the gods.³⁵ The royal crown was closely associated with divine endorsement: gods were regularly credited with bestowing the scepter and crown (the trappings of kingship) upon the rising king or were mentioned as the true owners of the regalia. The royal coronation ritual specifically mentions the highest Assyrian gods, Aššur and Mullissu, in the latter context: *agā ša Aššur u kakki ša Mullissu inaššia ina šēp parakki ina muḥḥi kussē ušeššab 1 nīqa ana pān eppaš* “He [the king] lifts up the tiara of Aššur and the weapons of Mullissu, seats them upon the throne at the foot of the dais, and performs a sheep offering before it”.³⁶ One depiction of the coronation survives on an Assyrian helmet, which shows Aššur and Mullissu giving the king the royal scepter and crown, respectively, in a parallel to the ritual.³⁷ But the Assyrian king’s headwear, crown or otherwise, is not a straightforward matter: the golden *agū* is not the headdress that the king received in the Middle Assyrian coronation, which is a *keilīlu* (or *kulūlu*), perhaps better

31. SAA 18 146, r. 1-10.

32. For the *unqu*, see Postgate 1994.

33. SAA 18 152 and Radner 2008, 494-496, respectively.

34. See for example SAA 18 163, which mentions the king’s golden seals and a seal of Šuma-iddin, prelate of Dēr. Radner 2008, 487-488, Da Riva 2017, 87.

35. Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 444-446. See also the ritual commentary SAA 3 39, r. 20.

36. SAA 20 7, ii 15-16, though one should note that the crown’s material is not specified. Other gods were occasionally associated with the crown; for instance, “Ashurbanipal’s Coronation Hymn” claims that “Anu gave his crown (*agū*), Enlil gave his throne; Ninurta gave his weapon; Nergal gave his luminous splendor” (Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 215; SAA 3 11). This seems to be true of divine visions and prophecy as well: SAA 9 2, a prophecy from Ištar of Arbela to Esarhaddon, shows the goddess promising “I will [reconcile] Assyria with you. I will protect [you] by day and by dawn and [consolidate] your crown (*agū*)”, while a diviner writes to the king that he saw a vision in which “When the father of the king, my lord, went to Egypt, a temple of cedar was bu[ilt] outside of the city of Harran. Sin was seated upon a staff, with two crowns (*agū*) on (his) head, and the god Nusku stood before him. The father of the king, my lord, entered; he (the god) placed [the crown(s)] on (his) head, saying: ‘You will go and conquer the world with it’” (SAA 10 174).

37. Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 216, including a reproduction of the image.

translated as “wreath” or “mural crown”.³⁸ In that case, the *kililu* is said explicitly to be the king’s, though Aššur and Mullissu have power over it. That the *kililu* existed in gold versions is known from a letter from Sennacherib detailing a list of tributes and audience gifts, which included two golden *kililu* (GILIM) for the palace.³⁹ It is unclear, however, from what material the coronation *kililu* was made, as it is not specified. Other depictions of the Assyrian king’s headgear come from the reliefs, which show a variety of headwear in different contexts and across time, but these are not conclusive for determining their material composition, despite some traces of glazes.⁴⁰

Rather, the *agû*, especially in a golden form, was more clearly and consistently a feature of kingship in the divine world: Esarhaddon created a crown for Aššur as king of the gods that was made with red gold and precious stones, his description emphasizing its radiant qualities.⁴¹ Aššur is also given the epithet *agû* “(Lord) Crown” in Esarhaddon’s treaty inscription.⁴² The *agû*’s material composition is rarely qualified but an omen claims that if Ištar is seen with a silver crown, there will be a flood of dragonflies, suggesting that her crown is not usually silver.⁴³ An *agû ruššû ša šamê simat šarrūti* “golden tiara of the heavens fittest for kingship” was also associated with Šamaš in a hymn to the god in which Ashurbanipal calls himself a son and servant of Šamaš.⁴⁴ Moreover, several letters discuss the creation of *agû* for cult images, including a golden *agû* for Ušur-amassa.⁴⁵ The shining gold of the crown was especially strongly connected to the luminous properties of celestial gods, representing the divine light of the sun, the stars, and the moon, but one might suggest that all cult images wore an *agû* of precious metals and stones.⁴⁶

A commentary to the Assyrian cultic calendar may indicate that the Assyrian king wore an *agû* only during special ceremonies, as it identifies Šabātu 26 as a day *ša šarri agû inaššû* “on which the king wears an *agû*” and another entry reads that the 8th day of another month is *ša šarri agû inaššû*

38. The verb *kullulu* “to crown” is a cognate as well (CAD K s.v. *kullulu*).

39. SAA 1 34.

40. An overview of courtly headwear in the Assyrian reliefs is given by Reade 2009, who describes the Assyrian royal hat starting in the mid-9th century as a “fez with a conical top” (*ibid.* 248), sometimes decorated with a band of rosettes that may have been embroidery (*ibid.* 254). Some traces of color are preserved on the reliefs; for instance, Sargon II had different types of fezes, including “white, with three red bands decorated with white rosettes. Glazed bricks show the opposite design, in which the fez is red, having three white bands decorated with yellow rosettes . . . other Sargon glazed bricks, made for temple platforms, show an overall yellow fez with blue circles decorating the upper two bands only” (*ibid.* 256 with additional examples on 249-250). One could conjecture that yellow might have been meant to signify gold, but whether it was the metal or a fabric is entirely speculative.

41. RINAP 4 48, 82-86. This is mentioned by Winter 2012, 161, who also notes the parallels to a crown of Marduk from the Kassite period.

42. SAA 2 14, ii 16’.

43. SAA 8 461, 3-5. In this case, the ‘crown’ is the meteorological corona of the star.

44. Ebeling 1953, 52-53; Foster 2005, 734 (translation). Šamaš has a strong association with kingship ideals, not only as one of the gods who provides guidance to the king via oracular decisions but also because of the royal title ^d*šamšu* “sun(god)” that several Assyrian kings took on starting with Tukultī-Ninurta I, as well as the prevalence of the winged sun disc in iconography, a trend towards solarization of kingship and gods (Aššur in particular) that Pongratz-Leisten (2013, 304-308) attributes to Babylonian, Mitannian, and Hittite influences.

45. SAA 10 349, 12-18.

46. The association of gold with gods who have astral aspects is not new in the Neo-Assyrian period; one can compare to a limestone mold from the reign of Naram-Suen, which Steinkeller (2014, 695-696) has interpreted as a mold for creating gold stars or rosettes as the symbol of Ištar/Inanna.

šarrūtu ilqī šū ina kussī šarrūti ūšīb “when the king wears the crown, is (when) he took kingship and sat on the royal throne”.⁴⁷ One could imagine that, after the private coronation ritual, the king had a more public ceremony in which he sat on the throne for the first time, during which he would don the divine crown; i.e. a golden *agū*. Indeed, the *agū* is mentioned in the royal inscriptions almost exclusively in the context of Šin granting the king his crown or halo (*agū*), which may suggest that this type of crown was at least made from shining materials to create an association with a lunar corona, gold or otherwise.⁴⁸ Exceptional cases are when Esarhaddon and Šin-šarru-iškun make reference to the *agē belūti* “crown of my lordship”, but only within the context of taking on the office of kingship, further suggesting that the *agū* had a restricted usage.⁴⁹ In this sense, the cultic commentary SAA 3 39, in which the king wears a golden *agū*, can be explained in that he is equated explicitly with Ninurta in it, whereas, during the coronation ritual, the king acts primarily in his capacity as the *šangū* (high priest) of Aššur, the true king.⁵⁰

Other than the depictions in reliefs, exemplars of royal accouterments are only preserved from the queens’ tombs in Calah, essentially the only collection of ancient Assyrian gold still extant since gold was routinely reused, even in antiquity, and tombs were often looted of precious items.⁵¹ As mentioned, these tombs contained an impressive amount of gold in a variety of forms. Perhaps most relevant, however, are the elaborate golden crowns, which were clearly masterful works with intricate details and embedded precious stones. Winter has suggested that these crowns signified “abundance, fruitfulness, and divine blessing” and that “the ensuing physical shine would have then been used to convey both life-force and contact with the divine, toward positive ends”, connecting

47. SAA 3 40, 13-14, r. 16.

48. See for example RINAP 1 Tiglath-pileser III 35, i 8, in which Šin grants the king his scepter and crown and RINAP 4 1, ii 32 in which Šin is *bēl agī* “lord of the crown”. Omens also relied on the connection between Šin/the moon, the *agū*, and kingship; for instance, “If the moon at its appearance wears a crown (i.e. halo): the king will reach the highest rank” (SAA 8 256, 4-6). See also RINAP 3 17, below.

49. RINAP 4 116: 22’, RINAP 5 Šin-šarru-iškun 1, 10. The phrase *agū belūti* also occurs in Sennacherib’s royal inscriptions within the name of one of Nineveh’s gates, “Nannāru is the one who protects my lordly crown” (see RINAP 3 17, vii 91) and as *agū šarrūti* in a broken context in RINAP 4 1015 i 2’.

50. Kryszat (2008, 113) has remarked “in II 15 bringt der *šangū* die Krone Aššurs und die Waffe Ninlils herbei, diese stehen stellvertretend für die Anwesenheit der beiden Götter bei der folgenden Zeremonie, in welcher der *šangū*-stellvertretend für den Gott Aššur-dem König die *kulūlu*-Binden aufsetzt (und ihm so die *šangū*-Würde verleiht?). Sind die stets als ‘Kronbinden’ übersetzten *kulūlu* vielleicht die Insignien der königlichen *šangūtu*?”, which would account for the difference in terminology. Compare to the *agū burāsi* that the Babylonian king wears in the Ekur in VAT 9817 (Livingstone 1986, 125); unlike the Babylonian king, the Assyrian king was not the “true” king but rather subject to Aššur, so this may have had implications for the headwear in the coronation ritual, especially as the ritual itself contains the line “Aššur is king!” (SAA 20 7). Kikuchi (2015), however, cautions against too restrictive a definition of the *kulūlu* as exclusive to the king as *šangū* or to the god Aššur, noting that queens and other important figures may have worn a *kulūlu* and that the evidence relating to the *šangū* office is difficult to interpret conclusively. On the queens’ crowns, see Pinnock 2018.

51. Moorey 1994, 221-225. On the Calah tomb finds, see Hussein *et al.* 2016. The inscribed gold bowls of Yabā and Bānītu are edited as RINAP 1 Shalmaneser V 2001, Tiglath-pileser III 2003-2005. Šamšī-ilu, the field marshal, also had an engraved golden bowl in his tomb in the Calah palace, see RIMA 3 Adad-nērārī III 2014. Analyses of extant gold have been found to be largely electrum, see Moorey 1994, 217; Hauptmann *et al.* 2018.

the lustrous golden headwear with the *melammu*, the radiance of the gods.⁵² Presumably these observations would hold true for the kings' ceremonial and funerary crowns as well.

Finally, gold would have been linked with kingship within the palaces themselves, as the palaces would have contained a large amount of gold, not only decorative elements and gilded furniture, including the king's throne, but also the possessions of individual royal family members and items given as audience gifts and tribute or taken as spoils, luxury itself functioning as a signifier of imperial power. Some small gold finds were discovered in non-funerary contexts in the palace at Calah, though these were only remnants of what must have been a larger assemblage.⁵³ These palatial collections and uses of gold are better known from administrative texts but are largely invisible in the royal ideology apart from the lists of luxury items and gilded furniture taken from enemy kings' palaces as war spoils.

Gold and the gods

Gold was, above all, a gift from the gods, and its possession was a sure sign of the gods' endorsement. The converse was also true, in that the loss of gold was indicative of the gods' displeasure and their abandonment of the one whose gold has subsequently been taken away. In some literary texts, gold was portrayed as a personal favor from the gods on an individual level. A first-millennium exorcistic text to prevent illness contains a series of prayers, several of which invoke precious materials in simile constructions: *kīma* ^{na4}*parūti nūrī limmir idirtu ay arši kīma* ^{na4}*uqū* *napištī ina pānika liqir liššakna rēmu kīma hurāši ilī u* ^d*ištari lislimū ittīya* "May my light shine like alabaster, may I have no gloom. May my life be as precious as lapis in your sight, let there be mercy for me. May my (personal) god and goddess be reconciled with me, as with gold".⁵⁴ The Babylonian Theodicy, in contrast, turns this motif of gold as divine approval on its head to express injustice as *umallū pašallu ša ḥabbilu ni[sirta] uraqqā išpikkū ša pišnuqu ti'ūs[su]* "they (the gods) fill the oppressor's st[rongroom] with refined gold (and) empty the powerless man's larder of [his] provisions".⁵⁵ These worldviews remained the same, albeit on a greater scale, when it came to the Assyrian king and his inscriptions. For instance, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, which was sent around the Empire's territories and sworn by Assyrians and allies alike, contained a number of curses meant to punish treaty violators with the worst fates possible. One such curse promised that, for those who did not remain loyal to Ashurbanipal as crown prince and eventual king, the gods would *akālī ina pittī hurāši ina mātikuunū lušālikū* "make bread be worth gold in your land", that is, that bread would become prohibitively expensive and as rare as gold, an inversion of the aforementioned tropes of

52. Winter 2012, 159.

53. See Mallowan 1966 for a description of the finds and their locations.

54. Ebeling 1953, 76-83; Foster 2005, 685 (translation). Compare to *adirta ay arši* in the hymn to Ištar, above.

55. Lambert 1996, 63-89; Foster 2005, 921 (translation). An incantation against demons depicts the evil spirits as attempting to seduce a woman with enticing promises such as "I will fill your lap with silver and gold" in a perversion of the supernatural control of gold, the luxury good used here for ruin rather than for favor (Foster 2005, 987).

successful kingship through low prices and an abundance of staples.⁵⁶ The Tell Tayinat version of the treaty replaced the line with the similar *akali ina pittu ḫurāši ina mātikuunu lilqū* “may they take [b]read away from your land in the same manner as gold”, invoking the ubiquitous deportation of gold when a land was conquered to curse the territory in question with the denial of even basic essentials needed to survive, forcing it into famine conditions.⁵⁷ Treaties and loyalty oaths were concluded before and protected by the gods and the betrayal of a political agreement with the Assyrian king was thus a sin against them.⁵⁸ These curses consequently fit into a pattern in which gold was granted by the divine and was then revoked in cases of disloyalty to the Assyrian king and his gods via breaking treaty agreements and alliances. This also fits within a well-known literary motif known as divine abandonment, in which the gods’ departure from a city left it vulnerable to capture and destruction. The resulting lack of divine protection suggests that the plundering of gold and other items from a city’s treasuries after conquest was one result of divine displeasure and the absence of one’s own gods, as well as of the wrath of the Assyrian gods.⁵⁹

Gold was moreover linked directly to several areas of the Assyrian state religion and cultic practices. For one, gold and goldsmiths had their own patron deity, Kusibanda. In the royal inscriptions, Kusibanda appeared in narratives about building projects and the creation of royal and divine statues. Cultic images were made with a wooden or bitumen core that was coated in a red gold for the skin, finished with precious metals and stones, and clothed with jewelry and expensive textiles, which also had gold ornamentation sewed into them.⁶⁰ The creation and animation of the image was highly ritualized, necessitating the presence of the gods, hence Kusibanda’s appearance to ensure that the gold was properly rendered.⁶¹ Many royal statues were made in a similar fashion, and these were also regularly installed in temples as continuous petitioners before the cult images.⁶² Other gods were occasionally associated with gold as well, including Ninagal, who was called the goldsmith of Anu in an incantation for purifying the royal insignia, and the fire god Girru, who was addressed as *ša erī u annakī muballil unu attā ša ṣarpi ḫurāši mudammīqšunu attā* “you are the one who mixes copper and tin, you are the one who refines gold (and) silver” in an incantation, presumably playing on the role of fire in smelting and purifying gold.⁶³ The Aššur temple’s Golden Doors (^dGIŠ.IG.MEŠ *ḫurāšu*) were themselves divinized, receiving offerings in the *tākultu* rituals, a daily feeding rite for the gods.⁶⁴ The Golden Chariot of Aššur was also counted as a god in a royal ritual

56. SAA 2 6, 567.

57. SAA 2 15 567/vii 59. An astrological report partially preserves a similar curse on the Cimmerians and Mannaeans (SAA 8 418, r. 3-6.).

58. The extant Assyrian treaties and loyalty oaths are edited in SAA 2.

59. On this topic see recently Johandi 2016 (for texts relating to Marduk in particular).

60. See Oppenheim 1949 as well as RINAP 4 48, 38 and SAA 7 60.

61. For the animation rituals *mis pi* and *pit pi* and the various smith gods’ roles in them, see Walker – Dick 2001.

62. There is evidence, however, that at least some royal statues were cast: for instance, Sennacherib mentions how his predecessors used the lost wax technique to cast copper statues of themselves (RINAP 3 17, vi 80-vi 88).

63. Reiner 1958, 53; Foster 2005, 663 (translation, attributed to the period 1500-1000 BCE). The royal insignia were considered divine in origin, see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 441-444.

64. SAA 20 38, i 42; 40, i 35; 47, 4'. As doorways were vulnerable to threats both mortal and supernatural, there were rituals and offerings to the gods that were undertaken when doorways in temples were

from Assur that listed all of the deities that went before and after Aššur to the *akītu* house, though it is less clear if it would have received cult in the same way.⁶⁵ Finally, goldsmiths themselves tended to be distinguished from other types of smiths due to the level of training required for their projects and the high prestige inherent in working on this luxury material and the divine images.⁶⁶

Moreover, the gold used for divine images was sometimes described specifically as high-quality or difficult to acquire.⁶⁷ A clear example of this is Esarhaddon's claim to have imported gold from Mt. Arallu, also called Ḫarali or the Gold Mountain, a mountain located in Tukrish that was known in the Ur III and Old and Middle Babylonian texts as the source of high-quality gold.⁶⁸ Already in the third millennium, however, this mountain was seen as an incredibly distant and semi-fantastical place that was associated with the underworld (or, as in the Sumerian literary epic *Enki and Ninbursag*, the place where the gods lived before humans were created), implying that any king who returned with its especially precious gold had accomplished an epic, almost superhuman act.⁶⁹ Esarhaddon describes the refurbishment of the deported Babylonian cult images in the Aššur temple as follows: *ina šāriri ruššē nabūt Aralli eper šaddišu ušarriḫa nabūtsun* "I sumptuously adorned their features with red *šāriri*-gold, the creation of Mt. Arallu (and) an ore from its mountain", which made the statues shine like sunlight, a trope also found with temple renovations.⁷⁰ The restoration of the Babylonian cult images was critical to Esarhaddon's Babylonian policies, so he portrayed himself as using only the finest and most difficult to access materials in this endeavor, demonstrating simultaneously his incredible prowess in traversing such a long distance to do so. While it is possible that Esarhaddon or his agents actually travelled to Tukrish, the gold may have

constructed and outfitted with their doors, see most recently Neumann 2019, 263 as well as Ambos 2004, 196-198.

65. SAA 20 54: ii 11'. For more information, see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 420-421.

66. Groß 2018, 377.

67. Ashurnasirpal II, for instance, writes that he made an image of Ištar for the Šarrat-nipḫi temple in Calah from *šāriri*, an alloy sometimes translated as "fine gold", and *ḫurāšu ḫuššū* "ruddy/reddish gold", which was more expensive and likely purer, giving it its ruddy qualities. Powell 1996, 230-231, for instance, mentions that for the Kassite period, "gold that is 'red' (if that is really what the term means) is twice as expensive as gold that is 'bright.'" See also Thavapalan 2018, 18.

68. See Steinkeller (2016, 129) for the association of Ḫarali and Tukrish with gold and lapis lazuli in third millennium texts, as well as his suggestion that these locations were in the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex. Steinkeller (2014, 702) also notes Mari and Qatna texts from the 18th and 15th centuries, respectively, that mention precious goods, including gold ornaments, from Turkish or of "Tukrish manufacture", adding (*ibid.* fn. 34) a list of attestations in which Ḫarali was associated with gold, and that "the gold of Harali was thought to be of the highest quality, since lexical sources identify it as 'choice gold' (*ḫurāšu liqtu*)".

69. For parallels with the Cedar Mountain and Lapis Lazuli Mountain, see Oppenheim 1978, 637. The mythologization of gold sources was quite ancient even by this time, see for instance the Sumerian literary work *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* and Steinkeller's (2014, 704) comment that, "as its name is used in the poems about Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, Aratta is but an allegory for an exotic and fabulously rich eastern land", but that "it is highly likely that the intended audience of these compositions were the Iranian rulers whose good will and cooperation Šulgi and his successors sought to win through treaties and diplomatic marriages", and that the Ur III rulers were interested in acquiring gold and lapis lazuli from these Iranian rulers. On the tendency of far-flung geographical locations to be described in fantastical ways, see Konstantopoulos 2017. For more on Ḫarali, including its conceptualization in *Enki and Ninbursag*, see Komoróczy 1972, especially 115-116.

70. RINAP 4 48, r. 87-90; 51, iv 1-iv 8.

originated from elsewhere and Mt. Arallu may have been used here allegorically to heighten the epic drama of the king's achievement. One may also compare to the so-called "Gilgamesh Letter", a composition that draws upon features of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* within the form of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. In the letter, Gilgamesh imposes an obligation of comically large amounts of precious and expensive metals, including 30 minas of gold, upon a foreign king for the purpose of fashioning a statue of his companion Enkidu.⁷¹ Gilgamesh sends this foreign ruler to Eriš, which may have acted similarly as an allegory to designate a far-away location rather than a true source of gold and luxury goods.⁷²

Finally, perhaps less explicit but just as important are the divine-like characteristics of gold itself. As a relatively soft metal, gold had a transformative power, able to be manipulated into objects and gilding and then smelted down to its natural form with minimal loss.⁷³ These transformative properties could have a magical or ritual connotation.⁷⁴ Gold's resistance to corrosion moreover gave it the impression of being pure and everlasting, while its shine and lustrous appeal associated it implicitly with astral gods in particular, such as Šamaš, Šin, and Ištar, and with divine luminosity in general.⁷⁵ Because of gold's precious nature, however, it was not restricted to one god or even to gods with strong celestial characterizations, and many gods had accoutrements made from gold.⁷⁶

71. Foster 2005, 1017. 30 minas by the heavy standard would be around 30 kg. On historical letters, see Frazer 2015. For Gilgamesh's role in Mesopotamian literary traditions and political thought, see Steinkeller 2018.
72. It is not clear if Eriš is meant to be understood as historical, fictional, or an archaic location used to suggest extreme long distances; according to Kraus (1980, 119), the reading is not certain and there is only one other attestation of the geographical name Eriš, which was in or near the Kāšiyari mountains, located on the southern border of Turkey with Syria. This attestation comes from a Middle Assyrian inscription attributed to Aššur-bēl-kala (RIMA 2 Aššur-bēl-kala 7, iii 16).
73. During the smelting process, small amounts of gold were lost, which is well-documented in Neo-Babylonian archival texts relating to goldsmiths (Payne 2007). Gold was rarely pure, which would have been its softest form, but was alloyed with silver (as electrum) or other metals (Moorey 1994, 217-218). For recent analyses of the Royal Tombs of Ur, see Hauptmann *et al.* 2018, in which they conclude that most gold items were made from gold-silver alloys and likely originated in northern Afghanistan.
74. One could compare to the Sumerian *Hymn to Ninkasi*, in which the beer goddess is portrayed as what Civil (1964, 67) describes as "the mysterious power which produces the fermentation and changes plain grain and water into the liquid which 'makes the liver happy, fills the heart with joy'".
75. An explicit association between Šamaš and gold occurs in funerary contexts, likely because of the association of Šamaš with the netherworld; for instance, George (2003, 487-489) notes that Gilgamesh prepared gold for Enkidu's tomb in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and that there is a Neo-Assyrian text (perhaps from the reign of Ashurbanipal) detailing provisions for a king's funeral that included displaying the grave goods outside, that is, before Šamaš: "Items of gold and silver, every requisite for the tomb, the trappings of his lordly estate that the father who sired me loves, I displayed before Šamaš and placed in the tomb with him". The display of grave contents before Šamaš can also be observed in Ashurbanipal's exposure of the Elamite kings' remains from their tombs in Susa before the sun, though he does this in reverse, as a disinterment (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 11, vi 70-76). On the associations of luminosity and radiance with the divine world, see Winter 1994.
76. For instance, Neo-Assyrian texts mention Marduk's gold chariot (RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 6, i 33'-i 37'); Marduk's gold scepter (RINAP 5 Aššur-etel-ilāni 3/Babylonian 2); ornaments of Babylonian goddesses (SAA 7 60); and a sun-disk of gold (SAA 18 179). Literature provides examples as well, including a Sumerian composition, *Nanše A*, which portrays the scribal goddess Nisaba writing with a golden stylus (see Jacobsen 1987, 133).

Back to the gods: gold and the temple cult

From the perspective of the royal inscriptions, gold was portrayed as disproportionately invested into the temples (rather than allocated for other purposes known from administrative texts), from large-scale construction projects to the creation of individual cultic implements, and many precious items from successful campaigns were dedicated to the gods in this way in return for their support of the king.⁷⁷ Because gold was both rare and closely connected with the divine, it was presumably one of a few offerings deemed worthy of the gods. Some royal gifts had a specifically cultic context, as the king often provided golden implements for the performance of rituals as well as for furnishing the cult, such as when Ashurbanipal claims that, when he rebuilt the temples in Assyria and Babylonia, *mimma simat ekurri mala bāšū ša kašpi burāši ēpuš* “I made every type of temple appurtenance there is from silver (and) gold”.⁷⁸ The best sources for the use of gold for cultic implements are the state archives, namely letters and administrative or economic documents, which detail how gold was processed and allotted to the goldsmiths to become cultic paraphernalia for various temples across Assyria, but this information is largely invisible in the royal inscriptions.⁷⁹ In contrast, the latter focus on the kings’ deeds and express the investment of gold in the temple cult in generalizing statements about furnishing and outfitting the temples.⁸⁰ This gold was identified as coming from conquests, taxes, or tributes, and these statements draw a clear connection between military and political successes and the king’s patronage of the cult using the accompanying loot.

One of the most visible methods of channeling gold into the temple cult, according to the royal inscriptions, was for building features like paneling and other structural gilding projects. Already mentioned were the golden doors of the Aššur temple in Assur, which may have been a prerogative of Assyria’s supreme god and primary cult center. More generally, the kings would have gold hammered thin and attached to the walls of the temples to give the temple itself a shining appearance, especially within the cellas, as well as to some structural features like wooden poles, doorframes, and the daises upon which the divine statues stood.⁸¹ For instance, Esarhaddon gilded the walls of Aššur’s chapel *burāšu kīma siri* “(with) gold as if (it were) plaster”, and both he and Ashurbanipal inlaid the walls of the Ištar of Arbela temple with silver, gold, and (in Ashurbanipal’s case) copper to make it *unammir kīma umē* “shine like daylight”.⁸² Taken at face value, these were massive expenditures: Ashurbanipal mentions a canopy (*ermu*) for the Esagil in Babylon that was made of over 34 talents of red-gold (over 2000 kg by the heavy standard).⁸³ While accounts in the royal inscriptions were often exaggerated, the intended effect was one of awe-inspiring luster that

77. An overview can be found in Novotny 2010, 131-135.

78. He makes the same claim in several inscriptions, see for instance RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 6, i 94'-i 98'.

79. For Assyrian craftsmen, see Groß 2018.

80. See for instance RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 6: i 94'-i 98', also mentioned above.

81. SAA 13 128 reports thieves that cut off gold from the “beams” (*gišūn*) by the head of Ninurta’s cult image and stripped silver from the walls. See also RINAP 4 48, r. 91, in which Esarhaddon claims “I made anew a seat of everlasting *musukkannu*-wood together with a footstool, covered with red gold, for the goddess Tašmētu” in Babylon. For bronze and gold fragments found in temples in Dūr-Šarrukīn and Imgur-Enlil, which were gilding for wooden door poles and leaves, see Neumann 2019, 272.

82. RINAP 4 60, 22'-25'; RINAP 4 54, r. 16-17, RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 23, 40; Assyrian Tablet 1, 4-6.

83. RINAP 5 Ashurbanipal 6, i 27'-i 32'; 10, i 31-i 38; 15, ii 14-18; 23, 46.

was fit for the divine as well as for showing off the impressive wealth of the king and his limitless piety for the gods.⁸⁴ Temples in particular were meant to be bright and luminous, the decorative program employing colorful elements including not only metals but also stones, fabrics, and paints, the inside generally whitewashed for a shining effect.⁸⁵ A prophecy in which the goddess Ištar of Arbela directly addresses Esarhaddon to assure him of her protection and support claims that *ina massiki ša ħurāši ina qabli šamē aḥarrīdi* “I (Ištar) watch over you in a golden chamber in the midst of heaven”, suggesting that the royal interest in gilding the gods’ earthly temples was in imitation of how their heavenly homes were conceptualized, and Esarhaddon did indeed claim to gild this goddess’ temple during his renovations of it.⁸⁶

Gold that was not intended for decorating the temples may have found itself in the foundations of these same buildings. Laying foundations was ritually significant, conducted on certain days with the implicit consent of the gods,⁸⁷ and kings often depicted themselves as sparing no expense in the quality of materials used as the basis of their temples and (to a lesser extent) palaces in (re)construction accounts. Foundations were made with bricks in expensive molds from clay that was mixed with crushed aromatics, while oils (perfumed and high quality), silver, gold, various precious and imported stones, and resins were laid within them with accompanying rituals.⁸⁸ The royal inscriptions attest to the use of gold in the foundations of several important temples in Assyria and Babylonia, for instance in Sennacherib’s *akītu* house, the account of which explicitly mentions some of the deposited items as coming from the spoils of his Arabian campaigns, and in

84. It should be noted that using silver for temple decorations was also a significant expenditure as it took currency out of circulation.
85. Thavapalan 2018, 15-16. On the association of luster with the divine, see Winter 2012, 158. Many materials were equated with the divine in lexical lists in which the first column contains plants, animals, metals, and so forth and the second names the corresponding gods. For instance, compendium CBS 6060 equates gold with Enmešara and red gold with the Anunnaki, while *An* equates precious metals with a triad of the highest-status gods of the Old Babylonian period: Anu with silver, Enlil with gold, and Ea with copper (Livingstone 1986, 175-182). In the latter example, the metals are themselves given divine determinatives, as if they are conceptualized as deities.
86. SAA 9 1, iii 23’- iii 24’. The term *massiku* refers to “living quarters” or “abodes” (CAD, M I *s.v. maštaku*). A later, Babylonian hymn to Nabû’s temple in his patron city of Borsippa describes the building as “its brickwork is of soapstone(?), its parapet is of finest, choicest gold, its retaining wall is of alabaster, the apparel of Ezida is blue (glazed) pegs” (Foster 2005, 875). Ambos (2004, 50-51) draws comparisons with how gods build temples themselves in Akkadian literature (such as the gods building the Esagil in *Enūma ēliš*) and with Hittite building rituals, noting especially in the latter case that the gods used only the finest materials – silver, gold, lapis, and so forth. He concludes that the act of placing these same materials in the foundation of man-made temples was an imitation or reconstruction “*en miniature*” of the original, divinely-created temples. For the connection between temple foundations and the *apsû*, as well as the acts of digging foundations and presenting foundation deposits as entering into “divine unquantifiable time”, see Neumann 2019, 264-265.
87. Divine consent could be obtained through divination but the king’s specialists could also consult hemerologies and omen collections in order to determine the appropriate months and days in which to undertake the building project (Neumann 2019, 258-260). Building rituals and the role of foundation deposits is discussed in Ellis 1968.
88. For a recent discussion, including the use of clay foundation figurines in the shape of mystical figures such as *apkalu* and *ugallu*, see Neumann 2019, 261-263. For rituals related to construction in general, see Ambos 2004.

Esarhaddon's renovations of the Aššur temple in Assur.⁸⁹ It was also common for kings to deposit foundation inscriptions that recorded their great deeds for future kings, and these inscriptions were sometimes made of precious materials themselves.⁹⁰ Perhaps best known are Sargon II's foundation inscriptions from his newly-built capital at Dūr-Šarrukīn, which describe his construction projects there. The inscriptions from Dūr-Šarrukīn mention that Sargon II deposited foundation inscriptions of gold, silver, bronze, tin, lead, lapis lazuli, and *gišnugallu*-alabaster and several of these were found in excavations, including the gold tablet.⁹¹ Furthermore, a ritual deposit box from the foundations of the Nabû temple in Calah yielded gold and silver buttons, also presumably an offering to the gods.⁹² The ritual depositing of gold in the very foundations of a temple acted as a gift to encourage the gods to bless the building – which was also protected by the gods in the form of blessings and curses in the inscriptions themselves – thus further utilizing gold and other precious materials as binding agents between the divine and mortal worlds.⁹³

Moreover, gold was used specifically for ritual and cultic purposes within the temples, as can be observed in some ritual texts and cultic commentaries.⁹⁴ For instance, the “Rites of Egašankalama”, describing the death of Ištaran (Dumuzi), and commentaries by Kišir-Nabû and Kišir-Aššur, both exorcists of the Aššur temple, provide lists of items that symbolically represent divine body parts in which gold is consistently identified as the sperm of the god.⁹⁵ This does not give much information about how much or what kind of gold was needed for this ritual, only that gold was an important part of it, and gold's appearance as the sperm of Ištaran/Dumuzi may be related to Sumerian literary traditions linking Dumuzi with Aralli/Ĥarali, as well as associations of the two with the netherworld.⁹⁶ A number of rituals for different gods preserved in texts meant for the cult singers from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I have survived and they refer to the use of one mina of

89. RINAP 3 168, 48-55, RINAP 4 58, iv 5-v 6 (among others).

90. The significance of this act can be compared to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which Gilgamesh claims he buried a stone tablet inscribed with the epic itself in the walls of Uruk after he rebuilt them, see George 2003, 92.

91. The gold tablet is kept in the Louvre Museum (AO 19933) and edited as Fuchs 1994 *Go*. There are other extant examples of Assyrian foundation tablets made of gold, silver, and lead, such as those from Tukulti-Ninurta I in Assur, a gold tablet of Shalmaneser I (Ellis 1968, 97-98), gold and silver tablets that may have originated from Tell Bumariyah from Ashurnasirpal II's reign (Fitzgerald 2010, 40; Ellis 1968, 100), and a small gold tablet from Shalmaneser III's reign (Ellis 1968, 101). Inscriptions from numerous other kings attest to this tradition as well even if the tablets mentioned have not been found (Novotny 2010, 121-124).

92. Mallowan 1966, 265.

93. That the gold was inscribed as a traditional foundation inscription also preserves the king's name and works for later kings. This phenomenon is not restricted to the Neo-Assyrian kings: Hittite evidence is extant (see Beckman 2010, 85-86) and Nabopolassar also deposits gold, silver, precious stones, oils, aromatics, and figurines of himself in the foundations of the Etemenanki of Babylon, additionally using ceremonial *tupšikku*-baskets made of gold and silver for his sons to carry as part of the construction ritual (Da Riva 2013, 9-10, 88-89; for Neo-Babylonian evidence generally see Schaudig 2010, 146-158). Achaemenid-period gold foundation tablets are discussed in Root 2010, 176-177, 200-208.

94. Ritual texts are difficult to understand on their own as most do not faithfully replicate the ritual themselves and the reasons for why they were written down are still obscure. On this problem see Sallaberger 2006/2008 and SAA 20, XV-XVII.

95. SAA 3 37, r. 5'; 38, r. 15; 39, 12.

96. For example, in *Dumuzi's Dream* and *The Death of Dumuzi*, see Alster 1972 and Kramer 1980.

gold along with other precious metals and textiles as part of the table setting for the god (in two cases, the deity is identified as *ama*); similar texts mention an *uskāru* of gold or that the table setting included juniper, silver, and gold.⁹⁷

Ritual usage would have concentrated gold that was not earmarked for building projects into the main temples in the Empire's religious center, as most rites would have taken place in Assur, but important temples and experts in other cities, especially in the royal capitals, would have also required gold provisions to conduct local rituals. There is one letter from the exorcist Nabû-nāšir in Nineveh, for instance, about performing prophylactic rituals against diseases on behalf of the king. As part of the sympathetic magic of these rituals, the letter mentions not only figurines but also silver, gold, copper, and tin, each in the quantity of seven "grains" (šE), as critical to the completion of the rituals.⁹⁸ While this is a small quantity of gold in comparison to more high-profile rituals (such as the coronation), it is nonetheless necessary to activate the ritual. Rituals could also take place on the campaign route, though these are rarely mentioned in the royal inscriptions.⁹⁹ Sennacherib's inscriptions describe a unique episode in which the king and his army needed to cross the Persian Gulf to reach the city Nagītu on the Elamite coast. In order to pass through the waters safely, Sennacherib conducted a ritual offering for the most important god of waterways, Ea, and cast the sacrifices *itti eleppi būrāši nūni būrāši alluttu būrāši ana qereb tām̄tim* "into the sea with a gold boat, a gold fish, (and) a gold crab" to earn the god's favor and secure passage for his army.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and state archives reveal that there were many characteristics and uses of gold that connected it closely to the divine world, even in comparison with other precious and imported goods. Only silver was in higher demand and appeared in more contexts, sometimes listed first, but this can be explained by its use primarily as currency and its availability in larger quantities, at least after the reign of Sargon II. It is clear that gold was considered more valuable than silver, both economically and in state ideology. On the practical, economic level, gold was carefully controlled by the state: the letters, economic texts, and administrative records testify to the fact that gold was weighed at every step, starting with where it was seized or received outside of Assyria until it reached an Assyrian treasury, where it was weighed again and either sealed or assigned to the goldsmiths for a particular task.¹⁰¹ Possession of gold was moreover restricted to

97. SAA 20 24, 13-14; 25, 13-14; 26, 13, 18; 27, 13. These rituals were performed later as well, were more routine or frequently-undertaken rituals than the royal ones, and may have been performed outside of the temple as well, see SAA 20, XXIII.

98. SAA 10 296, r. 3-15.

99. A divination ritual in a fortified camp, for instance, is depicted on one of Ashurnāširpal II's reliefs from the Northwest palace in Calah (BM 124548).

100. RINAP 3 46, 76-81. Maritime rituals are perhaps best known from the Phoenicians, see for instance Christian 2013 and Brody 1998. It is possible that this ritual was inspired by a Phoenician one, as the Assyrians were in close contact with Phoenician traders and employed Phoenicians and their ships for campaigns. This is merely a suggestion, however, and requires more study.

101. Radner 1999a, 134-37.

gods, kings, and select officials, in that order. On a larger scale, gold was naturally a visible symbol of the wealth of the Empire, and it was funneled into the cities, temples, and palaces as a public act of royal consumption. On the ideological level, gold was under the aegis of the gods, whether they were bestowing it upon the kings as a sign of divine endorsement and favor or receiving it as offerings of gratitude from those same kings. The connection to the divine was related not only to gold's rarity and value but to features such as its luster and luminosity, its permanence and resistance to tarnishing, as well as its semi-magical ability to be manipulated and transformed into a finished product and then smelted down again into its original state. In general, royal ideology's perception of gold as closely connected to the divine world and as something worthy of gifting back to the gods essentially set gold apart from other luxury commodities, giving it unique contexts and characteristics when compared to other precious metals and stones and driving the kings' interest in collecting this material in large quantities. Overall, the Neo-Assyrian period provides a useful case study for understanding the symbolic importance of gold and how it was conceptualized as having certain attributes – particularly its connections to the divine realm – that influenced the kings' acquisition and expenditure of gold.

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