

The theme of leaving Assur in the royal inscriptions of Tukulti-Ninurta I and Ashurnasirpal II by Mattias Karlsson

Introductory remarks

The city of Assur (modern *Qal'at Šerqāt*) functioned as the capital of Assyria in all Assyrian historical periods. At times though, Assyrian rulers decided to move and/or reside elsewhere. It is the phenomenon of leaving Assur which is focused on in this brief article. More precisely, I will discuss the literary theme of leaving (as capital city)¹ Assur in the royal inscriptions of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243-1207) and Ashurnasirpal II (883-859),² i.e. the two Assyrian rulers who were the ones who made this drastic move away from the age-old, traditional centre which was Assur.

The early Assyrian state consisted only of Assur with its hinterland, functioning as a city-state both in the third millennium BCE and in the Old Assyrian period (c. 2000-1500), except of course from the reign of Shamshi-Adad I (1813-1781) when Assur was a part of a larger, international polity.³ It was only in the Middle Assyrian period (c. 1500-1000) that the texts tell of a “land of Assur” (*māt Aššur*) rather than of solely the city of Assur. The new extended polity now included cities such as Nineveh, Kilizi, and Arbela.⁴ Tukulti-Ninurta I, who is generally known for his ideological innovations,⁵ decided to leave Assur and build a new capital city named Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (modern *Tulūl al-'Aqar*) on virgin soil three kilometers to the north-east of Assur, on the eastern bank of the Tigris. After his violent death, Assur regained its status as the political centre. In the early Neo-Assyrian period (c. 1000-750), the likewise innovating⁶ Ashurnasirpal II decided to move from Assur to Kalhu (modern *Nimrūd*), a city which had functioned as a provincial centre in the Middle Assyrian period.⁷ This time the change became more lasting, since Kalhu remained the Assyrian capital city until Sargon II's (722-705) move to Dur-Sharrukin (modern *Horsabad*) in the late eighth century BCE, followed by a move to Nineveh. Assur never regained its position as the political centre of the Assyrian state.

In scholarly literature, the main focal point regarding the historical act of leaving Assur has arguably been to explain this political measure in underlying, strategic, and geopolitical terms, i.e. as an expression of *Realpolitik*. Many scholars argue that the kings in question aimed at getting away from the old establishment (the “nobility” or “aristocracy”) in Assur to form a power base of their own.⁸ A conflict with the

¹ The term “capital city” may of course be problematized. Our way of defining such a centre was probably not the same as in ancient Assyria. The Assyrian king e.g. had local palaces (such as that in Balawat) in most of his important cities. In this article, I define capital city simply as being the city which had the primary administrative function. Another point to make here is that the term “leaving” (Assur) of course is relative, since neither of the two kings hardly rejected this city completely, but they did surely leave in the sense of them moving their main administration elsewhere.

² All precise dates follow the (middle) chronology of Brinkman (1977: 335-348).

³ Cancik-Kirschbaum 2008: 28-40 (overview). The exact status of this city-state in the 3rd millennium BCE is hard to pinpoint, but it seems to have been (at least partly) under the authority of the rulers of Akkad and Ur III (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2008: 30-31).

⁴ Ashur-uballit I (1363-1328) seems to have been the first ruler to describe himself as “king of Assyria” (*šar māt Aššur*). See Grayson 1987: A.0.73.6: 3.

⁵ Machinist 1983: 519 (on Babylonian influences), 2011: 409-413 (listing four ideological features).

⁶ Winter 1981, 1983 (on the decoration of the North-West Palace).

⁷ Postgate and Reade 1976-80: 320-321.

⁸ See e.g. Larsen 1976: 293, Reade 1981: 156-160, and Radner 2011: 324-325.

priesthood of Ashur in Assur has also been suggested.⁹ Others refer to geopolitical concerns focusing on the central position of Kalhu in Assyria (thus being strategically important).¹⁰ The relevant move is here placed in the context of an ongoing power struggle between the elites of the cities of Assur and Nineveh,¹¹ or in the context of the regional dominance of Nineveh and Arbela.¹² The free, open spaces for royal building projects which Kalhu (by contrast to the crowded Assur) must have offered, has also been noted and identified as a motivational ground.¹³ Less often, scholars have centred on the narrations of the kings themselves on this matter. Supposedly, the covert reasoning has been more attractive than the overt (i.e. the propaganda) one in this case. It may be of interest to complement the more down-to-earth discussion with the ideological one, thus obtaining a picture both of what the kings wanted us to think as well as what the real reasons (behind all propaganda) to the drastic moves from Assur were. This brief article aims at contributing to achieve this balance.

Notes on the primary sources

Before discussing the literary theme in question, a few notes on the relevant primary sources should be given. Tukulti-Ninurta I does not discuss his “abandonment” of Assur directly, although indirectly so by narrating his construction projects in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. Two different versions (see quotations below) of this narration are expressed in his “commemorative” (i.e. annals or “summary inscriptions”) texts. One of them is found inscribed on a stone tablet from (probably) the new capital, and now in London.¹⁴ The other version is attested in three texts (all on stone tablets) from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, and now in London or Berlin.¹⁵ All attested narrations are found at the end of each text, followed only by the sections of blessings and curses. The circumstance that these narrations address the issue of creating the new capital city “as a whole” makes them especially rewarding to highlight in this discussion. Some tags and labels on bricks mentioning the new capital city in the relevant museums in London, Berlin, and Istanbul,¹⁶ may also be useful for this study.

Ashurnasirpal II does not discuss his abandonment of Assur in a direct way either. His narration of his embarking upon building projects in Kalhu (see quotation below) is however attested in many of his commemorative texts from his new capital city. The named narration is part of the beginning of the “building inscription-sections” of these texts.¹⁷ Often a reference to a specific building project in Kalhu follows, such as references to the North-West Palace in the text (the so-called Standard Inscription)¹⁸ on the walls of the named building, and to the Sharrat-niphi temple on the inscribed pair of monumental stone lions stationed at the gateway of this sanctuary.¹⁹ The text on the so-called Banquet Stele provides another version of the relevant narration (see

⁹ See e.g. Cancik-Kirschbaum 2008: 53.

¹⁰ Postgate and Reade 1976-80: 320.

¹¹ Postgate and Reade 1976-80: 320.

¹² Radner 2011: 324-325.

¹³ Postgate and Reade 1976-80: 320, Cancik-Kirschbaum 2008: 53.

¹⁴ BM 98494 and Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22.

¹⁵ VA 8253, T 350, Ass ph S 6900-6902 and Grayson 1987: A.0.78.23; BM 115692, T 94 and Grayson 1987: A.0.78.24; and lastly VA 8834, Ass 5208, Ass ph 589, 595 and Grayson 1987: A.0.78.25.

¹⁶ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.35-38. For the numerous exemplars, see the notes in Grayson 1987: 285-289.

¹⁷ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1: iii 132-136 (inscription in the Ninurta temple), and A.0.101.17: v 1-24 (inscription on the stele of the Ninurta temple).

¹⁸ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.23: 14-22.

¹⁹ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.28: v 1-16, A.0.101.32: 7-21.

quotation below), and is by contrast not at the end of the inscription.²⁰ This text also conveys grand claims regarding the inauguration of the palace, the building of the city (by speaking of palace and temple building), deportations to Kalhu of forced labour, and the creation of a canal and gardens/orchards of various kinds.²¹ The text on the Banquet Stele together with the narration (and its two main versions) in question are arguably the most important sources to focus on in this article.

The theme of leaving Assur in the propaganda of the two kings

In the following three “subsections”, the literary theme of leaving Assur (as a political centre) is discussed. The version of Tukulti-Ninurta I is brought up firstly, while that of Ashurnasirpal II is centered on after that. The two versions are then briefly compared. The first two subsections are two-tiered in that each of them first presents the relevant narrations (through quotations), and then analyse these.

Tukulti-Ninurta I and the theme of leaving Assur

In the text on the BM 98494 (A.0.78.22), Tukulti-Ninurta I says the following regarding his move to Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (in Grayson’s translation):

At that time the god Ashur-Enlil, my lord, requested of me a cult centre on the bank opposite my city, and he commanded me to build his sanctuary. Beside the desired object of the gods (i.e. the city Assur) I built the great cult centre, my royal dwelling, (and) called it Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta. I completed within it the temple of the gods Ashur, Adad, Šamaš, Ninurta, Nusku, Nergal, Sibitti, and the goddess Ishtar, the great gods, my lords. I made the Pattu-mēšari (‘Canal of Justice’) flow as a wide (stream) to its sanctuaries (and) arranged for regular offerings to the great gods, my lords, in perpetuity from the fish (lit. ‘produce’) of the water of that canal. Within that cult centre I took possession of much terrain beside the Tigris, I erected (a terrace which was) 120 layers of brick, (and) on top of those layers of brick I constructed Egalmešarra, ‘House of the Universe’, my royal dwelling.²²

The narrative then goes on with referring to the building project (the city walls) commemorated by the text,²³ and lastly gives blessings and curses directed at a “later prince” (*rubû arkû*), i.e. a future ruler of Assyria.²⁴

In the second version of the event (given in A.0.78.23-25), the following is stated by Tukulti-Ninurta I (again in Grayson’s translation):

At that time the god Ashur, my lord, requested of me a cult centre on the bank opposite my city, the desired object of the gods, and he commanded me to build his sanctuary. At the command of the god

²⁰ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 20-25.

²¹ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 25-154.

²² Grayson 1987: 270, A.0.78.22: 39-51. Note that in order to avoid confusion, I have skipped Grayson’s use of the form Aššur and the cursive bits of his translations.

²³ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 52-54.

²⁴ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 55-67.

Ashur, the god who loves me, I built before my city, Assur, a city for the god Ashur on the opposite bank, beside the Tigris, in uncultivated plains (and) meadows where there was neither house nor dwelling, where no ruin hills or rubble had accumulated, and no bricks had been laid. I called it Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta. I cut straight as a string through rocky terrain, I cleared a way through high difficult mountains with stone chisels, I cut a wide path for a stream which supports life in the land (and) which provides abundance, and I transformed the plains of my city into irrigated fields. I arranged for regular offerings to the god Ashur and the great gods, my lords, in perpetuity from the fish (lit. ‘produce’) of the water of that canal.²⁵

Also this narrative passage goes on with providing references to the building project to be commemorated, namely the temple and ziggurat of Ashur,²⁶ followed by sections of blessings and curses, at least in the cases of A.O.78.23-24.²⁷

Firstly, it should be noticed that Ashur or Ashur-Enlil is presented as the one who ordered the king to found the city and build its sanctuaries.²⁸ The “religious” nature of the new capital city is also conveyed by the names given to it. Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta is “Ashur’s city” (*āl Aššur*), it is referred to as “(great) cult centre” (*māḥāzu (rabû)*) or “cult centre” (*māḥāz*) connected to “my (i.e. his) lordship” (*bēlūtija*), and as a “sanctuary” (*atmānu*).²⁹ More profanely, the city is also called “seat of my kingship” (*šubat šarrūtija*).³⁰ Likewise telling of the sacred status of the new capital is the marked presence of the Ashur temple (Ekurmesharra) referred to as the “seat of Ashur” (*šubat Aššur*), “holy house” (*bītu ellu*), and “radiant sanctuary” (*atmānu rašubbu*).³¹ The ruler in question sees to the creation of new land beside the Tigris, and erects buildings on it, most importantly the Ashur temple.³² As already noted, in addition to this temple or “house” (*bītu*), Tukulti-Ninurta I also commissions a ziggurat which he calls the “base of Ashur” (*nēmed Aššur*) and whose function was as the “repose of Ashur” (*rimīt Aššur*).³³ Also telling of the emphasis on the god Ashur is the circumstance that this god is solely responsible for implementing blessings and curses in 78.22,³⁴ and active (along with other deities) in the sections of blessings and curses in texts 78.23-24.³⁵ Additionally, Ashur is put forward as the deity who loves Tukulti-Ninurta I in the inscriptions of 78.23-25.³⁶

As indicated already in the blessings and curses sections of 78.23-24, not only Ashur was referred to in the context of creating Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. The ruler in question also claims to have provided Adad, Shamash, Ninurta, Nusku, Nergal, the Sibitti, and Ishtar (along with Ashur all termed “my lords”, *bēlīja*) with sanctuaries in

²⁵ Grayson 1987: 273-278, A.O.78.23: 88-108, A.O.78.24: 41-52, A.O.78.25: rev. 9-24.

²⁶ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 109-118.

²⁷ Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 119-146, A.O.78.24: 56-57.

²⁸ Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 88-92 (e.g.) and A.O.78.22: 39-40 respectively.

²⁹ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 97, A.O.78.22: 52, A.O.78.22: 52-53, A.O.78.22: 40 respectively.

³⁰ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.22: 41.

³¹ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 112-113, A.O.78.23: 111, A.O.78.23: 112 respectively.

³² Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 88-108, A.O.78.24: 41-52, A.O.78.25: rev. 9-24.

³³ Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 116 (e.g.) and A.O.78.24: 54 respectively.

³⁴ Grayson 1987: A.O.78.22: 55-67.

³⁵ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 119-146.

³⁶ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.O.78.23: 92.

the new capital city.³⁷ A canal was created in order to provide all these “sanctuaries” (*išrētu*) with “offerings” (*ginû*) in the shape of (supposedly) fish, with Ashur and the “great gods” (*ilāni rabûti*), or just the great gods, as the intended recipients.³⁸ The image of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta as a “temple city” (in the sense that it contained sanctuaries for many deities) is arguably presented in the references above.³⁹

The “religious” nature of the new capital city is also conveyed in the descriptions of the site (of what would become the new city) as a pristine land, not inhabited or built upon before.⁴⁰ In a certain sense, the new city could then be regarded as culturally pure, suited for holy buildings.⁴¹ The use of the literary theme of “difficult path” in describing the construction of the metropolis likewise serves to emphasize the ritually clean land on which the new royal seat was to be laid out.⁴²

Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta naturally also contained more “secular” buildings and areas, the palace being foremost among these. On bricks of clay, the building and institution of the “palace of Tukulti-Ninurta (I)” (*ekal Tukultī-Ninurta*) is referred to.⁴³ The palace is described as being built on reclaimed land, and is called Egalmesharra with the epithets of “house of the universe” (*bīt kiššati*) and “seat of my kingship”.⁴⁴ The city wall is also stated as being erected, here with the explicit purpose of imposing “awe of my lordship” (*rišibti bēlūtija*) on the outside world.⁴⁵ The frequent notes on the depositing of the ruler’s “monumental inscriptions” (*narû*) accompany this statement.⁴⁶ In texts 78.23-25, the creation of canals and the reclaiming of lands are spoken of as parts of agricultural reforms in the relevant city area.⁴⁷

In the context of narrating the creation of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, Assur is barely mentioned. In these few cases, the latter city is termed “my city” (*ālīja*) as well as “desired object of the deities” (*ba’it ilāni*).⁴⁸ The former epithet is not restricted to Assur however, since Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta is also referred to in this way.⁴⁹ In light of the mentioned city epithets, Assur does not seem to have been taboo in the texts. This impression is strengthened further by a text from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta in which Tukulti-Ninurta I calls himself “receiver in Assur of heavy tribute from the four quarters” (*māḥir bilti kabitti ša kibrāt erbetti ina Aššur*).⁵⁰ Building activities in Assur are of course spoken of in other, earlier inscriptions.⁵¹

Summing up, the leaving of Assur is spoken of only in terms of the move to Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. The latter capital city is described almost as a temple city, first and

³⁷ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 43-45. Furthermore, administrative texts indicate the existence of a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Sharrat-niphi (Freydank 1976-80: 456).

³⁸ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 45-48.

³⁹ Whether it can be labelled a temple city in the Babylonian notion is however doubtful. Tadmor (2011 [1968]: 125-134) argues that only Assur, and then only sporadically, ever had this status in Assyria. For the idea of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta as a cosmic centre, see Dolce 1997.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.23: 94-97.

⁴¹ Descriptions of temple building in Mesopotamia (both in the north and south) often focus on the purity and purification of the building site (Ellis 1968: 8-17).

⁴² See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.23: 100-102.

⁴³ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.36: 1. Actually, this palace seems to have contained two units, namely a northern (more public) and a southern (more private) one (Eickhoff 1976-80: 458).

⁴⁴ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 51. Distinguished from the Ashur temple, named *ekur kiššati*.

⁴⁵ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 52-53.

⁴⁶ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.22: 54. Such foundation deposits are also stated as being placed in/under the New Palace in Assur. See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.2: 45-46.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.23: 103-106.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.23: 93 and A.0.78.23: 89 respectively.

⁴⁹ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.25: rev. 25.

⁵⁰ Grayson 1987: A.0.78.24: 19-20.

⁵¹ See e.g. Grayson 1987: A.0.78.1-21.

foremost containing the new temple to Ashur. Ashur is described as having commanded the move from Assur to Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. The special status of Assur is however still recognized, at least judging by the discussed epithets.

Ashurnasirpal II and the theme of leaving Assur

The narration which describes the creating of the whole of the new capital city, and which starts many building inscription-sections from Kalhu, is the most complete in the long inscription in the Ninurta temple of Kalhu. Other texts abbreviate, or select parts of, the narration which is conveyed below in the translation of Grayson:

The ancient city Calah which Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, a prince who preceded me, had built – this city had become dilapidated; it lay dormant (and) had turned into ruin hills. I rebuilt this city. I took people which I had conquered from the lands over which I had gained dominion, from the land Suḥu, (from) the entire land Laqû, (from) the city Sirqu which is at the crossing of the Euphrates, (from) the entire land of Zamua, from Bīt-Adini and the Ḫatti, and from Lubarna, the Patinu. I settled (them) therein. I dug out a canal from the Upper Zab (and) called it Patti-ḫegalli. I planted orchards in its environs. I offered fruit (and) wine to Ashur, my lord, and the temples of my land. I cleared away the old ruin hill (and) dug down to water level; I sank (the foundation pit) down to a depth of 120 layers of brick. I built its wall...⁵²

The cited text ends with this narrative passage. The Banquet Stele has another version, just after the royal titulary, and given below in Grayson's translation:

Ashur, the great lord, cast his eyes upon me and my authority (and) my power came forth by his holy command. Ashurnasirpal, the king whose strength is praiseworthy, with my cunning which the god Ea, king of the apsû, extensively wise, gave to me, the city Calah I took in hand for renovation. I cleared away the old ruin hill (and) dug down to water level. From water level to the top, (a depth of) 120 layers of brick, I filled in the terrace. I founded therein a palace...⁵³

A description of the grandeur of the North-West Palace follows.⁵⁴ Deportations (see the first quotation) of peoples from the periphery to the core, the creation of botanical/zoological gardens, orchards, temples, and provincial palaces are the following themes,⁵⁵ placed before the narration of the “menu” and palace inauguration.⁵⁶

In the case of Ashurnasirpal II, the cause behind the move from Assur to Kalhu is not really stated. Ashur (but also Ea) are associated with the decision to create a new capital in the second quotation,⁵⁷ although not explicitly. It seems that the good

⁵² Grayson 1991: 222-223, A.O.101.1: iii 132-136.

⁵³ Grayson 1991: 289, A.O.101.30: 20-25.

⁵⁴ Grayson 1991: A.O.101.30: 25-32.

⁵⁵ Grayson 1991: A.O.101.30: 33-84.

⁵⁶ Grayson 1991: A.O.101.30: 102-154.

⁵⁷ Grayson 1991: A.O.101.30: 20-23.

example set by his predecessor, Shalmaneser I, was motivation enough.⁵⁸ Also, there is not any Kalhu-based Ashur temple referred to in the king's royal inscriptions, although it has been noted that this god resided in various guises also in Kalhu, without him having a temple of his own (as in the times of Tukulti-Ninurta I).⁵⁹ Picking up on the latter note, Ashur is clearly present also in Kalhu. Ashurnasirpal II e.g. states that "I (i.e. he) dedicated this city (i.e. Kalhu) to Ashur, my lord" (*ālu šū ana Aššur bēlīja aqīssu*).⁶⁰ Additionally, Ashur is mentioned first in the narration of the palace inauguration.⁶¹ There was not any abandoning of the cult of Ashur.

Instead of highlighting Ashur, i.e. to the extent of what Tukulti-Ninurta I did in this regard, and the commissioning of a new Ashur temple in Kalhu, Ashurnasirpal II focuses on the creating of his North-West Palace. As is the case for temples, this palace is even given a name: "joyful palace, palace full of wisdom" (*ekal hūd libbi ekal kullat nēmeqi*).⁶² Another indication of the palace being regarded as a sacred building is the mentioning of Ashur and all the deities of the king's land being brought into the palace before anything and anyone else after the completion of the building project in question.⁶³ The highlighting of the North-West Palace is first and foremost made on the Ninurta temple stele and on the Banquet Stele but also (of course) on the Standard Inscription which lined the walls of the said building.⁶⁴

The sacred nature of the new capital city is also made clear by the naming of it as the "cult centre of my lordship" (*māhāz bēlūtīja*).⁶⁵ Kalhu can be regarded as a temple city of a kind, since the king describes the creating of several temples or shrines dedicated to deities such as Enlil, Ea(-sharru), Sin, Adad, Nabu, Belat-Kidmuri, Sharrat-niphi, Damkina, Gula, Shala, and the Sibitti.⁶⁶ Most importantly, the ruler commissions a temple to Ninurta, the new patron deity of Kalhu. This god then seized the position of Belat-Kidmuri whose temple also was refurbished.⁶⁷ Several deities are called upon in blessings and curses.⁶⁸ Ashurnasirpal II claims to have been loved by Ninurta, Anu, Adad, Dagan, and Sharrat-niphi in his epithets.⁶⁹ In other words, Ashur is not so much focused on when speaking of the cultic residence of Kalhu.

The city is described as being founded on "mounds and ruin hills" (*tillu u karmu*),⁷⁰ but it could nevertheless be worked into holy ground. The idiom of digging down to water level and applying a certain quantity of layers of brick is strikingly reminiscent of the narrations of temple building.⁷¹ The added component of "difficult path" strengthens this impression in the light of the presence of this ideological theme also in accounts of temple building, emphasizing the relevant building achievement.⁷²

⁵⁸ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1: iii 132.

⁵⁹ Reade 2002: 199.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 40.

⁶¹ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 102-105.

⁶² Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 102-103.

⁶³ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 104-105.

⁶⁴ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.17, A.0.101.30, and A.0.101.23 respectively.

⁶⁵ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 53.

⁶⁶ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 53-59.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1 and A.0.101.38 respectively. Reade 2002: 198-199.

⁶⁸ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.17: v 24-103.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1: i 11, A.0.101.1: i 10-11, A.0.101.1: i 33, A.0.101.1: i 10-11, and A.0.101.28: i 10 respectively.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1: iii 133.

⁷¹ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.40: 30-37.

⁷² See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.40: 36.

As for more “secular” creations, Ashurnasirpal II brags about the orchards and the botanical and zoological gardens which he commissioned in Kalhu.⁷³ These then functioned as “universal gardens”, displaying the might of the Assyrian king over the rest of the world.⁷⁴ The theme of agricultural reform is spoken of indirectly in the king’s account of the creation of a canal (from the Upper Zab) called “Path of Abundance” (*paṭṭi hegalli*) which supposedly was to provide Kalhu with freshwater and water for irrigation.⁷⁵ Direct references to agricultural projects are however restricted to situations in the provincial areas.⁷⁶ The ruler also, although very rarely, refers to the creating of the grand city walls of the new capital.⁷⁷

Turning lastly to the issue of Assur, it can generally be said that the inscriptions from this traditional centre are few.⁷⁸ Building activity in Assur is rarely a topic of discussion.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Assur is seldom referred to as “my city”,⁸⁰ and the relatively common idiom “when I was in GN” (GN *usbāku*) alludes to the king’s residing in Kalhu, not in Assur.⁸¹ Telling of the lowered status of Assur is the circumstance that the city epithet of Tukulti-Ninurta I, “desired object of the deities”, in the reign of Ashurnasirpal II is used as a *royal* and not city epithet.⁸²

Summing up, Ashur and a Ashur temple are not highlighted in the relevant narrations of Ashurnasirpal II. The change of capital city is presented as following a good example set by a predecessor on the throne. The creating of the palace (to some extent sacred) is by contrast much emphasized. The image of Kalhu as a “temple city” is made clear e.g. by the references to the many sanctuaries to various deities. Kalhu is pictured as a “cosmic center”, e.g. by the creation of its “universal gardens”. The city of Assur is rarely spoken of in the texts of Ashurnasirpal II.

Comparison of the two narratives

In comparing the relevant narrations of Tukulti-Ninurta I and Ashurnasirpal II on leaving Assur, both similarities and differences can be noted.

To begin with the former, both new capital cities are described as cult centres, containing a multitude of sanctuaries for various deities. The sites of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Kalhu are also referred to as ritually clean, although the former was pristine land and the latter consisted of ruin hills. Additionally, both rulers present their new capital cities as “cosmic centers”. Common to both kings is also the fact that the movement *to* the new capital city rather than the move *from* the old capital city is highlighted, arguably out of sensitivity for local feelings.⁸³ Possibly, the move from Assur was too disruptive and radical to be an independent literary theme as well.

⁷³ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 36-52 and A.0.101.2: 31-38 respectively.

⁷⁴ Stronach 1990, Novák 2002. For the notion of “cosmic centre” and the concepts of core/periphery in Mesopotamian state ideology, see Liverani 1979: 306-307 and 1990: 139.

⁷⁵ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 36-37.

⁷⁶ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.30: 78-84.

⁷⁷ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.26: 57.

⁷⁸ See notably Grayson 1991: A.0.101.53. Texts with Assur as their provenance make up c. 12% of this king’s corpus of royal inscriptions. This number can be compared with the corresponding one based on Shalmaneser III’s corpus of royal inscriptions, namely c. 40% (Karlsson 2013: 290, appendix 5).

⁷⁹ Exceptions are Grayson 1991: A.0.101.52, A.0.101.67-69, A.0.101.138.

⁸⁰ Grayson 1991: A.0.101.67: 10.

⁸¹ See e.g. Grayson 1991: A.0.101.1: iii 26.

⁸² Grayson 1991: A.0.101.40: 9.

⁸³ Reade 2002: 199 (commenting Ashurnasirpal II’s move).

Turning to differences, Ashur plays a greater role in the texts of Tukulti-Ninurta I. This god here commands the move and also gets a new grand temple. These points are not made in the texts of Ashurnasirpal II who instead highlights Ninurta whom he promoted as the patron deity of Kalhu.⁸⁴ The relatively peripheral role of Ashur in Kalhu is accompanied by the rarity of referring to Assur in the inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II. A final, and crucial, difference between the two narratives is the circumstance that the king and the palace is more highlighted (at the expense of Ashur) in the texts of Ashurnasirpal II than in those of Tukulti-Ninurta I.⁸⁵

Concluding remarks

A first point to make is that the literary theme of leaving Assur perhaps rather should be called “moving to Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta/Kalhu”. It may, to some extent, be natural to focus on the move *to* rather than on the move *from*, but it is also possible that this general silence on the leaving part can be understood as reflecting a sensitivity on the part of the king. This can at least be said for Ashurnasirpal II who does not seem to have made an effort to transfer the cult of Ashur from Assur to his new capital city. Leaving the traditional centre of Assur was a huge step, and it required some care and diplomacy on the part of the king. It is here interesting to note that while Tukulti-Ninurta I was murdered, Ashurnasirpal II (as far as we know) lived until old age.⁸⁶

A second point centres on the new capital cities as “temple cities”, questioning the dichotomy between sacred and profane. The shortcomings of this dichotomy is especially apparent when talking of the North-West Palace which was visited by the deities and also functioned as a place for rituals.⁸⁷ The custom of the laying down of foundation deposits and the use of the idiomatic building-narration (see above) also connect temples and palaces with one another. Although deportees and the city’s inhabitants are also spoken of, the emphasis is on creating sanctuaries for the deities. It seems like the new capital cities primarily were created as “religious” centres.

A third and final point I would like to make is one concerning the varying balance (in terms of highlighting) between temples and palaces in the inscriptions of the two rulers.⁸⁸ The palace of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta is mostly mentioned on bricks, while the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II is much stressed. Possibly, this shift of emphasis speaks of a transition to a more patrimonial state⁸⁹ in the Neo-Assyrian period. A gradual movement towards royal autocracy in Assyrian state ideology has been recognized before,⁹⁰ and these narrations may add to this observation.

⁸⁴ Reade 2002: 199.

⁸⁵ Note however Tukulti-Ninurta I’s earlier emphasis on building the “New Palace” (called Elugalumunkurkurra) in Assur. See Grayson 1987: A.O.78.1-10, 30.

⁸⁶ Admittedly, this note is speculative. The loaded issue of Assyria’s relations with Babylonia (Machinist 1983: 519) should e.g. also be added to the equation.

⁸⁷ On the latter, see e.g. Russell 1998.

⁸⁸ Although palaces were to some degree sacred buildings, they nevertheless had more of a worldly character than temples and shrines. It is thus a matter of *degree*, not of a true binary dichotomy.

⁸⁹ A patrimonial state is characterized by a situation in which all political power is in the hands of the king, there being no separate influential power group such as a “nobility” (Weber 1978 [1922]).

⁹⁰ Seux 1980-83: 172-173 (identifying a gradual transition from theocracy to autocracy).

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