

REMEMBRANCE AT ASSUR: THE CASE OF THE DATED ARAMAIC MEMORIALS

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*And women still prayed to Juno
For sons as brave and bold
As he who held the bridge
In the brave days of old.¹*

In a paper presented at The Assyrian National Convention in Los Angeles in 1999 Simo Parpola stated:

Distinctively Assyrian names are also found in later Aramaic and Greek texts from Assur, Hatra, Dura-Europus and Palmyra, and continue to be attested until the beginning of the Sassanian Period. These names are recognizable from the Assyrian divine names invoked in them; but whereas earlier the other name elements were predominantly Akkadian, they are now exclusively Aramaic. This coupled with the Aramaic script and language of the texts shows that the Assyrians of these later times no longer spoke Akkadian as their mother tongue. In all other respects, however, they continued the traditions of the imperial period; the temple of Ashur was restored in the second century AD; and the stelae of the local rulers resemble those of Assyrian kings in the imperial period. It is also worth pointing out that many of the Aramaic names occurring in the post-empire inscriptions and graffiti from Assur are already attested in imperial texts from the same site that are 800 years older.²

The purpose of this contribution is to examine a collection of the graffiti referred to by Parpola from the point of view of the Assyrian cultic calendar. The relevant texts are edited in fully vocalised form and translated into German by K. Beyer (1998: 11–25) correcting and bringing up to date the previous editions of B. Aggoula (1985) and P. Jensen (Andrae & Jensen 1920). An English rendering is given here that is intended to follow Beyer as closely as possible except that a simplified version of the names is given.³ The original texts are dated according to the Seleucid era and cluster between the years 189 and 222 AD. Since for the purpose of this article it is the monthly calendar and not the year dates that are significant the

¹ After Babington, Lord MacAulay, Horatius, *Lays of Ancient Rome*.

² <http://nineveh.com/Assyrians%20after%20Assyria.html>

³ Beyer mainly translated the personal names rather than giving a rendering without special diacritics.

texts are given here in the order of the days and months of the Assyrian calendar. The *sigla* on the left for each text are those that were employed by Andrae and Jensen (1920: 8) to identify the inscriptions according to the archaeological context of their *Schriftträger*, as will be explained below. The Aramaic form of the god *Assor* has been replaced by the Akkadian form Aššur for the sake of clarity and minor differences in the vocalisation of what are certainly the same Aramaic names have been standardised.

- A 27j March/April 222 AD
On the 1st(?) of Nisan in the year 533 Aššur-beddayan the son of Aza was remembered favourably.
- A 17a/b March/April 221 AD
On the 8th day of Nisan in the year 532 Ellay the son of Ebadebuh the son of Mlabel and Hanna the son of Ahhiy-Aššur and Aššur'aqab the son of Ahhiy-Aššur were remembered before the god Aššur and the goddess Šerua favourably and for benefit forever.
- A 29k March/April 215 AD
On the 8th day of Nisan in the year 526 Basru was remembered favourably. And Hanna the son of Ahhiy-Aššur favourably before the goddess Šerua.
- A 25b No date by year
On the 9th day of Nisan Aš[šur ...] the son of Ahhiy-Aššur was remembered [before Aššur] and Šerua favourably.
- A 29i No date by year
On the 9th day of Nisan Aššur-dayyan the son of Aššur-ares was mentioned favourably.
- A 27b March/April 208 AD
On the 10th of Nisan in the year 519 Basru the son of Qassma was remembered favourably – and his brother Qib-Aššur.
- A 29b After 189 AD
On the 10th day of Nisan in the year 500 [+...] Hayyana the son of Ahhiy-Aššur was mentioned favourably. And Mlabel and Basru and Ahhiy-Aššur the son of Hannana.
- A 29h March/April 200 AD
On the 10th day of Nisan in the year 511 Aza the son of Aššur-dayyan was mentioned favourably before the Lady.
- A 20 March/April 206 AD
On the 11th day of Nisan in the year 517 Matlay and Aza were ... every day.

- A 23c After 193 AD
On the 11th day of Nisan in the year 504 [+ ?] Mlabel the son of Ebadebuh was remembered before Aššur and the goddess Šerua favourably and for benefit.
- A 25e After 192 AD
On the 11th day of Nisan in the year 503 [+ ?] ... the son of Belebi was remembered before Šerua favourably.
- A 28h After 189 AD
On the 12th of day in Nisan in the year 500 [+ ...] Qib-Aššur the son of Qassma was remembered before Aššur forever.
- A 27e March/April 214 AD
From the 12th day of Nisan. In the year 525 the rainy season lasted from the 26th of Shebat to the 12th of Nisan and that was of abundance.
- A 28c January/February 204 AD
On the 20th of Shebat in the year 515 [...] before Aššur forever.
- A 27i January/February 204 AD
On the 22nd of Shebat in the year 515 remembrance and blessing were given to Basru the son of Qabshma before Aššur and Šerua, favourably.
- A 26a January/February 220 AD
On the 24th of Shebat in the year 531 Hayyana the son of Ahhiy-Aššur and Qib-Aššur the son of Qassma were remembered before Aššur and Šerua favourably and for benefit ... and one *as* per group of artisans.
- A 27c After 89 AD
On the 24th day of Shebat in the year 400 [+ ? ...].
- A 28b January/February 216 AD
On the day of the 25th of Shebat in the year 527 Qib-Aššur was mentioned before Aššur and Šerua favourably. And compassion.
- A 22 No date by year
On the 26th day of Shebat Aššur-dayyan the son of Aššur-tares and Aššur-hel the son of Aššur-heden and Blati the son of Aššur-heden and Aza the son of Aššur-dayyan and the treasurer Ebada the son of Obdat were remembered.

The gods invoked in these inscriptions are consistently Aššur and his consort Šerua and the onomasticon has a sprinkling of names that sound or could be thought to sound Neo-Assyrian and as if they could have been heard on the streets of Nineveh in the 7th century BC. The following comments on the attestation or non-attestation

of personal names in Assyria could not have been made without the invaluable Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the University of Helsinki, one of the many fundamentally important projects initiated and masterminded by the jubilarian.

Firstly there is the once royal name Aššur-aḫu-iddina (i.e. Aššur-heden in A 22), “Aššur has given a brother!” Another name, Qib-Aššur, “command of Aššur” (A 27b, A 28h, A 26a, A 28b) is almost identical in form and meaning to an attested Neo-Assyrian name, Qibit-Aššur. A further name, Aššur-tares, “Aššur judges” might be plausible as a Neo-Assyrian moniker although, like Aššur-dayyan, “Aššur is judge” (A 27j, A 29i, A 22) it does not seem to actually occur in Neo-Assyrian. These names need to be examined in the wider context of the Assyrian Aramaic onomasticon of the period, a study that is outside the scope of the present paper, but an important point needs to be made. The individual bearing the name Aššur-aḫu-iddina, that is, the name of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria from 680–669 BC, may well have been wealthy – he was important enough to be remembered in the inscription – but was not royalty. In the Neo-Assyrian period there is evidence that certain names at least in some circumstances could be regarded as the prerogative of the royal family. A Neo-Assyrian document records an historical event in the provinces as follows (Kataja 1987). The local governor of the town of Arkuḫi in the province of Kašiyari, a certain Šumma-ilani, had proclaimed “After my son is born I will call him Assurbanipal!” This resulted not only in his arrest but even in his being forced to undergo the river-ordeal. The borderline between royal and non-royal names seems to be complicated. In the Helsinki Prosopography the name Esarhaddon is attested for six individuals apart from the king himself of whom two were a bodyguard and an oil-presser but all these attestations are from the earlier reigns of Sargon II and Sennacherib. Perhaps in Neo-Assyrian times a personal name became taboo for the populace after it became a royal name.

From a cultic and religious point of view the name Ahhiy-Aššur, which seems to mean “my brother is Aššur” is interesting.⁴ Unsurprisingly, this does not occur in Neo-Assyrian times and it may indicate a later diminishment in the once unapproachable splendence of this deity. In his study of these inscriptions Aggoula points out that the names of the individuals of this corpus as a whole cluster into three families (1985: 24). He creates a family tree for one of these families in which the name Ahhiy-Aššur appears in the first and third generations. However, following the readings of the names used by Beyer and in view of the closeness of the dates, which make three generations unlikely, it appears that there may have been only one individual of this name. One might wonder whether this family had a cultic function. However, it would then seem surprising that no cultic

⁴ Beyer provides an alternative rendering “Aššur has given life”, evidently understanding the letters *’hy* as representing the causative stem of the root *hyy*. He does not give any commentary but seems to prefer the translation “Aššur is my brother” since he places it first.

office is mentioned, although elsewhere in these texts one individual is referred to as a *gazzabra*, “treasurer” (A 22) and another as a heavy drinker, *šrb* (A 33).

The archaeological evidence sheds some interesting light on the popular nature of the cult of Aššur in Parthian times. All the Aramaic inscriptions discussed above were excavated *in situ* in the building in a stratum above what had once been the Aššur temple in Neo-Assyrian and earlier times. This *iwān*-type building was evidently still a centre for the cult of Aššur and Šerua. The inscriptions were engraved on the pavement slabs of the floor adjacent to a step on which Andrae thought that the worshippers sat as they wrote them (Andrae & Lenzen 1933: 77). These circumstances, with private individuals being able to personally worship within the temple precinct, contrasts strongly with the august nature of the cult of Aššur in Neo-Assyrian times but indicates an aura of familiarity between worshipper and deity that could make a name such as “my brother is Aššur” more understandable. In earlier times there would not have been any question of such individuals entering the temple, let alone defacing it. In fact there were only certain times of the year when the king would enter the temple of Aššur and entry was restricted to a certain cadre of priests, some of whom bore the title *ērib bēti*, “temple enterer”.

Turning to the actual dates of the texts there are two clear clusters, one involving the first twelve days of the first month of the year, Nisan, and one between the 20th and 26th of the eleventh month, Shebat. These fall directly within what were the most important dates in the cultic calendar of Assur in the Neo-Assyrian period, the period of the New Year’s festival at the beginning of Nisan and a time span right at the beginning of the period of rituals between the 16th of Shebat and the 19th of Adar (van Driel 1969, Menzel 1981 T 30–68) when there were a complicated series of rituals involving the temple of Aššur as well as other temples and frequently requiring the presence of the king. Although the data in the inscriptions comes from only nineteen texts the pattern is extremely striking and cannot be a coincidence. Whatever other changes in the cult and worship of Aššur and Šerua might have taken place it is clear that the tradition of observing these two sacred periods had survived.

This still leaves open the question of what exactly is being described in the texts, why these particular time periods have been chosen and what other cultic nuances that involve possible continuations of earlier Mesopotamian practices are being perpetuated. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that the persons mentioned in the inscriptions quoted above were ordinary people and the rituals of Nisan and Shebat referred to above were ceremonies that belonged to the royal and state cult. On this point valuable information is provided by the hemerologies⁵ that were of course widely used in the Neo-Assyrian period as can be seen from the

⁵ The present writer is preparing a new edition of all the Assyro-Babylonian hemerologies. An overview of the main genres can be found in Livingstone 2007b.

many examples of their citation in Neo-Assyrian scholarly letters (Parpola 1970b and 1983).

The most basic and widespread hemerology, the Babylonian Almanac, proves in this connection to be a useful source of information. In this text there are many references to people in positions of power made from the perspective of the individual whose well-being is dependent on their favourable disposition, the common man. The Almanac is almost entirely concerned with the lucky or unlucky character of each day of an ideal calendar of twelve thirty day months as well as acts that one is either to carry out or avoid on a particular day. However, thinly interspersed within this material are references to events that coincide with the yearly cycle of the cultic calendar as known from royal and official rituals. The New Year festival is recognised by a series of acts at the beginning of the month leading to the comment “A strong day, your month!” and at the beginning of the month of Tammuz there is mention of weeping, probably a reference to the cult of Dumuzi or a similar deity. A lament for Tammuz in Neo-Assyrian dialect shows that the cult of Tammuz was practised in the Neo-Assyrian period (Livingstone 1989, no. 16). Taken as a whole, this evidence must suggest awareness among the common people of elements of the national cult. If this was accepted it could explain why in the late texts from Assur discussed here there is a cluster of cultic remembrances corresponding to the dates of the high points of the Neo-Assyrian cultic calendar, a case of ancient cultic memory. To this textual attestation for continuity can be added some solid archaeological evidence relating to the New Year’s festival. As Andrae and Lenzen (1933: 89–90) describe in some detail there was a Parthian building outside the city of Assur following closely what had once been the contours of the completely destroyed remains of Sennacherib’s *akītu* house on the plain that was used to celebrate the New Year’s festival. This without doubt attests to the resurgence and survival of this cult.

An additional text that should perhaps be seen as involving cultural memory can be brought into consideration:

A 28a

January/February 216 AD

On the [...] day of Tishri in the year 528 remembrance and blessing were given to Hanna the son of Ahhiy-Aššur and Mlabel the son of Ebadebuh before (all the) gods favourably and for benefit for ever by these personnel.

Unfortunately the lacuna falls precisely in the place where the date once stood. However, although the first seven days of Tishri, the 7th month in the Assyrian calendar had a particularly strong nuance, this nuance is shared by the month as a whole. This numinous aura of the beginning of the month of Tishri involved a whole series of dietary and behavioural prohibitions. In his forthcoming edition of

the hemerologies the present writer argues that this character of the month resulted from the seventh month having once been the first month of the year, and hence the time of the New Year's festival. This would explain the name of the month, which means "beginning", and there is other evidence. The abandonment of the month as the New Year gave it the negative numinous quality, like an abandoned, haunted, house. Be this as it may, the character of the month may explain the remembrance and blessings in the Aramaic text.

A final matter that must be at least brought into consideration is the question of whether offerings to the shades of the deceased were made at the time that the memorial inscriptions were written. If so this would perpetuate the rituals of *kispu*, "offerings to the dead" of earlier Mesopotamia (Radner 2005a: 74). Various complications would however have to be taken into account including changes in burial practices. In the Parthian period burials were no longer made in private houses, the scene of the previous *kispu* offerings, sometimes with a tube by means of which liquid offerings could enter the earth. Presumably, if in Parthian times similar offerings to ancestral shades were made, they would be made at or near the grave, not in a temple. There is however a connection. As demonstrated by Radner, the *kispu* ritual did not only involve the offering of food and drink, but also had a spoken element. The names of the deceased needed to be spoken out and in this respect, like the Aramaic memorials, ensured a remembrance.

