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CHAPTER 18

Assyrian Religion

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What is actually Assyrian about "Assyrian religion?"[1] This question immediately arises in any study of the Assyrians' religious beliefs, their divine cults, their piety, their prayers, and their rituals. After all, most of the great gods venerated in Assyria bear the names of the very same deities that were venerated in the ancient civilization of southern Mesopotamia, and in Assyria too were these gods bound to the mythological narratives that had taken their literary form in the south. Many hymns to the gods, prayers, and descriptions of rituals that circulated in Assyria were inspired by Babylonian and Sumerian models, or were copies of texts that originated in Babylonia. Assyrian temple architecture and art are likewise indebted to Babylonian traditions in a fundamental way. To what degree the south influenced Assyrian culture and religion is clear from the fact that, both in the divine cult and in the official proclamations of Middle and Neo-Assyrian kings, the prevailing idiom used was not the native Assyrian language, but rather the languages of the south – primarily Babylonian, which was closely related to Assyrian, but also Sumerian, which was already extinct by the early second millennium BCE.

During the late Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian periods, these Babylonianizing tendencies were strengthened considerably as Assyrian rulers consciously attempted to give, at least outwardly, a Babylonian appearance to their systems of government, their institutions, their ceremonies, and their piousness, whether it was in order to make Assyria appear more familiar to the kingdoms and principalities of the Near East that were strongly influenced by Babylonian culture or meant to dissociate from Babylon the symbols of Babylonian culture that were connected to its claim to power and to transfer them to Assyria. What is genuinely Assyrian is therefore not always easy to recognize beneath an exterior that appears initially to be quintessentially Babylonian. To complicate matters, some phenomena of Babylonian origin are far better known from Assyrian sources than from Babylonian ones and may only misleadingly appear to us as typically Assyrian. For this reason, the time is not yet ripe to present here a substantial comparison between Assyrian and Babylonian religion. Thus, in this chapter, the discussion will often be rather about the religion and cult in Assyria than about the typically Assyrian traits of Assyrian religion.

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The City of Ashur and its Temples in the Third Millennium BCE

The traveler who journeys from the flat, fertile Babylonian alluvial plain to the north rapidly learns to recognize that Babylonia and Assyria may indeed have shared cultural roots but always remained two entirely different countries in terms of their natural settings. Beyond Samarra, vegetation becomes increasingly meager. Some 150 kilometers further north comes the Babylonian plain to an unexpected, abrupt end. Like a locking bolt, a 300 meter high, jagged mountain range stretches before the traveler, through which only the Tigris breaches its course, via the el-Fatḫa strait. Behind this natural boundary, the Jebel Ḫamrin, lies Assyria, a land in which – unlike in Babylonia – there are no more palm groves, but rain-fed agriculture is possible. The mountains continue into the Jebel Khanukah, which then tapers off in low chains towards the north. On one of these elevations, which stands a proudly soaring 25 meters high towards the northeast over the Tigris only to plummet almost vertically down to the river, lies Ashur, the starting point of Assyrian culture.

The god who carries the name of the city of Ashur and its dominion, which steadily grew over the course of centuries, is without doubt unmistakably Assyrian and intrinsic to the Assyrian religion (Tallqvist 1932; Lambert 1983). The god Assur is the heart of Assyrian religion even though he likely played no prominent role in the early history of Northern Mesopotamia.

In Nineveh and Arbela, the ancient cities that developed into the most important centers of the Assyrian heartland during the second and first millennia BCE, it was from the earliest periods not a male deity that stood at the center of religious veneration but rather the great goddess that would later – under the influence of southern Mesopotamia – be equated with Ištar, the goddess of war and unstoppable lust. There are some indications that this was no different in the early history of Ashur.

Already in the mid-third millennium BCE, a probably not insignificant city blossomed on this privileged site, from which one could control the trade routes to Babylonia, Syria, Anatolia, and into the Iranian highlands and thereby obtain great wealth, while enjoying the security provided by the sparse no-man's-land separating Assyria from Babylonia in the south.

The construction of monumental buildings in Ashur in later periods, and the digging of foundations and the leveling that went along with it, almost completely destroyed the remains from this time, but a glimpse into the early period of Ashur was granted to the excavators of the city in at least one place. The unique but, unfortunately, largely isolated evidence conveys to us a surprisingly detailed impression of the religious life of the city. In northern Ashur, deep below the foundations of several subsequent buildings, were discovered the remains of a temple that was most likely dedicated to the great goddess of Assyria, as were the later sanctuaries that lay above it (Andrae 1922 and 1935; Bär 2003; Schmitt 2012). In a blaze of fire, possibly set by hostile conquerors, the roof and walls of the sanctuary caved in at some point, burying the interior of the cult room under them. In this room of about 16 × 6 meters, which one entered from the long side, there was a niche located on the narrow side. There, on a pedestal, once stood the cult image of the probably nude goddess, vaulted by a narrow, deep compartment. She appeared to confront the worshipper as if she were coming from another, transcendental world. This oldest temple layout, which the excavators called "archaic," already shows the basic design of the later Assyrian temple and testifies to the appreciation for tradition that is so characteristic of Assyrian culture. As in later times, the goddess was even then already

provided with daily meals and smoke offerings. A small blood basin for animal sacrifices, clay incense-holders and stepped altars, sacrificial bowls and libation vessels bear witness thereof. Fragments of almost ninety alabaster statuettes depicting men and women, some sitting and others standing, with folded hands and large eyes that were directed contemplatively into the distance, were found in the debris. Many of these sculptures, which were generally less than 50 centimeters high, could be reassembled. The findspots suggest that they were positioned on low mud-brick benches on the long sides of the cult room. The men are shaved bald and wear a "tressed skirt," probably made from sheepskin, which leaves the upper body uncovered. The women, adorned with ornate, wide plaits of hair, are likewise wrapped in a tressed robe, which, however, mostly leaves only the right shoulder free. Such statues were probably meant to represent their donors permanently before the deity and to secure divine favor with uninterrupted prayer.

The parallels to conventions from the "high period" of Assyria in the second and first millennia BCE should not be overlooked here. In the Neo-Assyrian period the Assyrian kings still took care to set up their statues in the most important cult centers of the land, where they remained steadfastly in their place listening in prayer for the divine command, while the gods "gazed benevolently" upon them and thus blessed their endeavors. One could therefore assume that the votive statues from the "archaic Ištar temple" portray several generations of early city leaders of Ashur, as well as their wives, sons, and high officials, asking for blessings for themselves and for their city. Perhaps already the early city leaders expressed their gratitude to the goddess by dedicating booty to her, such as is documented first for the Old Akkadian period in an inscription of the ruler Ititi (Grayson 1987: A.0.1001) and then increasingly in the second and first millennia BCE during the heyday of the Assyrian kingdom.

The telling, albeit singular finds from the Early Dynastic Ištar temple in Ashur leave no doubt that, in the third millennium BCE, the people in northern Mesopotamia – just as in the south – imagined that the divine forces they called upon to attain benevolence were anthropomorphic. Like princes, deities resided in monumental houses and, through their presence, provided protection to the community. The furnishings of the temples – implements for sacrifices, various types of offerings, and votive statues – demonstrate that the Assyrians attempted to secure divine protection through consistent devotion and through the diligent care and nurturing of the deity.

We do not know if, in that early time, the rulers of the city also sought to obtain the grace of the god Assur; indeed, we cannot even say if the cult of Assur was already propagated in the third millennium BCE. The archeologists were unable to detect any building remains that could be interpreted with any likelihood as the remnants of an early preexisting structure under the foundations of the later, monumental Assur temple. It is therefore possible that the cult of Assur was much younger than that of the "great goddess" who was later referred to as Ištar, and that it was only in the late third millennium BCE that a male deity of the name Assur increasingly surpassed the female deity.

If the excavators are correct (Haller and Andrae 1955: 9ff., 12ff.), the nucleus of the settlement of Ashur (Bär 1999: 10f.), the cliff rising precipitously over the Tigris in the extreme northeast of the city, which was later crowned by the Assur temple, may have remained without a widely visible cult center for a long time.[2] This would be in line with later Assyrian historical tradition, which ascribed the construction of the temple not to the gods themselves or the very first ruler of Ashur, but rather to Ušpia, the otherwise obscure sixteenth monarch of the Assyrian King List, who is counted as the penultimate of the early kings who "lived in tents" (see Grayson 1980–3: 103 and Grayson 1987: A.0.77.2: 5–7; Borger 1956: 3 iii 16ff.).

The God Assur

Even the name of the most Assyrian of all gods escapes our understanding. We cannot etymologize it, and we do not know whether Assur (Aššur) bears the name of his city or the city the name of its god.[3] Already in the Old Assyrian period the concepts "god Assur" and "city Ashur" were inextricably interwoven, even in the writings of the divine name and the name of the city: not infrequently, the divine determinative was added to the name of the city and the determinative for localities to the name of the god (Galter 1996). The clarity that should actually be established with the help of a determinative is thus deliberately obfuscated. City and god, such is the message, are inseparable from each other.

Unlike all of the other great gods of the ancient Near East, Assur was originally an independent and solitary god who was conceived as entirely without family and without involvement in divine communities and hierarchies. For him, neither father nor mother is envisioned, nor does he have a wife and children. The city gods of Babylonia, in contrast, all have a place in the complex Mesopotamian pantheon – just as their cities are integrated into a political system, they are related to one another through family ties. Furthermore, even if they were worshipped as the lords of their city, they always also represent a cosmic force or an aspect of culture. Thus is Enlil, the god of Nippur, in equal measure the father and king of the gods and the divine representative of the unpredictable natural force of the earth that brings forth flood and earthquakes. Nanna-Sîn, the god of Ur, is the moon with all of the celestial body's associated properties, and Utu-Šamaš, the god of Larsa and Sippar, is the sun god, who is also the patron deity of order and justice and the god of the homeless and disconsolate. Finally, Enki-Ea, venerated as the god of the city Eridu and as lord of the fresh water, embodies the power of intellect that produces civilization and clever solutions for any problem.

Assur is completely free of such qualities. His character is difficult to capture. He is the city and its power; no further attributes can be identified. While numerous myths feature the gods of Babylonia, depicting in great detail their respective characteristic traits, Assur remains strangely without face or fable. Even in a late hymn to the god from the reign of Assurbanipal (668–631 BCE), descriptions of heroic exploits of any kind that would allow any conclusions about Assur's character or his history are lacking. Only Assur's splendor and strength and his power and omnipotence are praised, while his character is described as being incomprehensible even for the gods (Livingstone 1989: 4–6; Foster 2005: 817–19 IV.4b). Assur is called "the maker of (all) the creatures of heaven and earth, fashioner of the mountains" (Livingstone, loc. cit., 4: 15), but aside from this reference to his role as a primeval god of creation, allusions to more specific deeds are missing. Assur appears without attributes, he is simply god. So it is not surprising that, particularly in the Old Assyrian period, he is often mentioned not with his name but rather is just called *ilum* "god."

Somewhat ironically, it was exactly this absence of any particular character traits that permitted the unprecedented rise of Assur, for it allowed the recognition of an all-encompassing divinity in him, which could easily absorb deities venerated in other regions. Over the course of centuries, as the city and the state of Ashur became more and more prominent and influential, Assur too grew from a largely inconsequential local deity into a global god. Assur's transformation into a great god is quite interesting from the point of view of the history of religion, as there are few other cases of deities rising to prominence that are equally well documented.

The god Assur was probably not only connected to his city but also very closely associated with the steep rock projection towering over the Tigris upon which his temple was

constructed. An inscription of the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233–1197 [1243–1207] BCE) states specifically that Assur, "the lord of the mountain Abiḫ, loved his mountain," and commanded the king "to build a lofty residence in its center" (Schroeder 1922: Text Nr. 54; Weidner 1959: 36). The cliff in Ashur called Abiḫ was inextricably linked with the god and his cult site. Even when, in the early Neo-Assyrian period, the city of Ashur no longer satisfied the geopolitical and logistical demands that the capital of a large empire had to contend with and Aššurnaṣirpal II (883–859 BCE) left the old capital in order to establish a new residence further in the north in Kalḫu (Nimrud), Ashur remained the uncontested sole seat of the god Assur and with that the religious and cultic center of Assyria. Aššurnaṣirpal II did not consider a relocation of the cult to the new royal residence, nor did his successors in the later Neo-Assyrian period, who relocated the court first to Dur-Šarrukin and then to Nineveh. To implement additional cult centers for Assur in the respective royal residences, duplicating the god's cult, also did not come into consideration – too closely was he connected with the location of his cult in Ashur.[4]

The only exception to this rule occurred during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, the first king of Ashur to leave the time-honored but space-constricted capital city to establish a new royal residence. Only three kilometers upstream from Ashur, on the opposite bank of the Tigris, he produced out of thin air an entire city with temples and palaces, proudly gave it the name Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, and attempted to relocate the cult of Assur to the new residence. Not only was a new royal palace constructed there but also a cult building with a stepped tower that was consecrated to Assur (Andrae 1977: 174–6; Heinrich 1982: 215–217; Eickhoff 1985: 27–35). Yet the magnificent temple building was probably thought of only as a temporary residence of the god, to be used in the context of festive ceremonies associated with processions (Miglus 1993: 199–204) – due to its comparatively small size, it seems unlikely that it was meant to completely replace the old Assur temple. In any case, Tukulti-Ninurta's newly established building was given up after only a few years of use, and was made unusable (Eickhoff 1985: 34f.). Tukulti-Ninurta's attempt to move Assur to another location, close to his new residence, was apparently considered an act of severe hubris that contributed to the king's poor reputation. Assur was not to be removed from his cliff.

An ancient representation of the deified cliff of Assur, partly human-shaped, adorned with "scales" representing a mountain, and accompanied by two gods associated with wellsprings, has been preserved on a stone relief that most likely originated from the Old Assyrian period. It seems to have been housed in the Assur temple for centuries, until it was thrown into the well of the main court of the temple by the conquerors of Ashur in 614 BCE (Andrae 1931; Kryszat 1995).

All in all, then, it seems likely that the original cult place associated with Assur was the cliff towering over the Tigris. For a long time, there seem to have been no major architectural structures on the cliff. It was possibly the Assyrian ruler Ušpia, who remains a largely obscure figure to us, who first gave Assur – as well as other gods – a fixed dwelling.

When, at the end of the third millennium BCE, merchants from Ashur established trade colonies in Anatolia and brought their city to great wealth, soon too did the house of Assur receive a new, more splendid form. Yet even though several inscriptions of the ruler Erišum are known that deal with the new temple and its dimensions (Grayson 1987: A.0.33), we can form no proper conception of it. What we do know is that it housed the god – just as in later periods – in the form of a probably life-sized image in the round. A letter found in the Assyrian trading colony Kaniš speaks specifically about the fact that thieves had penetrated the temple and "had stolen the sun (wrought) from gold from the chest of Assur, as well as

the sword of Assur" (Hirsch 1961: 14; Larsen 1976: 261f., n. 37). This is, incidentally, the only passage suggesting that Assur was associated with the sun already in the early period, perhaps even as the god who gave the sun its space (?).

The temple of Assur bore the curious name – probably referring to the god's overwhelming power – "House, Wild Bull" (Grayson 1987: A.0.33.1:16). On an Old Assyrian seal, which is explicitly labeled as the seal "of (the god) Assur," a remarkable image has been preserved, which, in the style of many Ur III period seals, shows an interceding deity before a peculiar symbol that may depict in equal measure the temple of the god and his craggy cult site as well as the might of Assur. It shows a mound armored with "mountain scales" standing on four legs and furnished with a bull protome (Veenhof 1993: 652 with n. 27 and Pl. 124), thus representing the name of the temple almost pictographically.

Although it was, as a rule, not tolerated to give Assur a home elsewhere, Assur's might was also present in the trading colonies. Kaniš and other places where Assyrian merchants lived received ceremonial weapons that were regarded as the weapons of the god. In legal cases, following old Mesopotamian traditions, oaths had to be sworn before these weapons (Hirsch 1961: 64–7). This amounted to self-imprecation in the case of perjury, which was expected to result in a deadly strike by the god with just those weapons. In addition, the "sword of Assur" received in regions far from the homeland the deference that otherwise was given to Assur in his home city. Even in Neo-Assyrian times, ceremonial weapons were used in the temples of captured territories in order to demonstrate the presence and the might of Assyria's gods (see, for example, Fuchs 1998: 25 and 55: 6-8, as well as Holloway 2002: 151–77).

In the Old Assyrian period, Assur was by no means the only god venerated in his city. Besides him are named, above all, Adad, the weather god, and his father, the sky-god Anum, the moon- and the sun-god, as well as Ištar of Ashur, now, in most cases, called *Aššurītum* ("the Assyrian"). In lists of multiple deities, Assur, however, always stands in the first position. For a long time he was regarded specifically as the "king":[5] not only as the king of the gods but also as the true king of his city.

The political power of the ruler, who stood at the helm of the city in the Old Assyrian period and called himself "overseer" (*waklum*) or "great one," (*rubā'um*), was restricted. The "overseer" was apparently simply the head of the influential assembly of the powerful citizens of Ashur, much rather than a king equipped with far-reaching power (Larsen 1976: 109–91). Yet he was also – following a concept that we encounter in southern Mesopotamia already in the early third millennium BCE – the earthly representative of the god Assur, who served as intermediary between the god and his land and guaranteed as a trustee that the property of the god was enlarged and tended to. The Assyrian word that designates this function, *iššiakkum*, goes back to the Sumerian title ensi(ak), "vice-regent (of the god NN)."

The office of High Priest remained a central one for Assyrian rulers from the Old Assyrian period onwards. The rulers cared for the well-being of their god, by means of which they also guaranteed the well-being of their subjects, whom the god had entrusted to them. Until the downfall of the Assyrian empire at the end of the seventh century BCE, little of this changed in principle, even though, with the growth of their power in the course of the Middle Assyrian period, the rulers of Ashur began to assume the title "king" (*šarrum*), following the Babylonian example (Seux 1967: 295ff.). One of the most important duties of the rulers of Ashur was to watch over the main task issued to mankind according to the ancient Near Eastern creation myths: to care for the gods and particularly for the god who embodied one's own land (Maul 2008).

It almost appears as if only the "vice-regent" was able to maintain the connection between "King Assur" and his mortal subjects. Virtually all remaining hymns and prayers to Assur are

formulated in the name of the ruler, while prayers to Assur designated for other people are entirely absent – very much in contrast to extant prayers directed to other great gods of the ancient Near East. Moreover, as we know from later period texts, the major rituals and festivities revolving around Assur, especially the New Year's festival, could not be carried out in the absence of his "vice-regent," because it was incumbent upon him alone "to grasp the hand of the god" and with this to bring the ritual into motion.

The Theology of Assur and His Elevation to Universal Dominion

In the late 19th century BCE, the city and the temple of Assur received a completely new design, and it appears that, during that time, the god Assur also became associated with an entirely new theology, which was to shape the image of the god until the downfall of Ashur. Šamši-Adad (ca. 1808–1776 BCE), a ruler of Amorite origin, had conquered Ekallatum, a city that lay in Assyrian territory, and from there also brought under his sway Ashur and an entire Upper Mesopotamian kingdom that ranged westward until the Euphrates. As Sargon of Akkad had formerly done, he now called himself "king of the universe" (*šar kiššatim*), thus expressing his far-reaching claims to sovereignty to the rival kingdoms of Mesopotamia that were struggling for hegemony. Although later times saw in him a king who was "not of the flesh of the city Ashur," he was the one who gave the house of Assur the monumental form that was retained largely unchanged for more than one thousand years, until the downfall of the city (Haller and Andrae 1955; van Driel 1969; Miglus 2001). The new building, with which, "at the command of Assur," the self-proclaimed "*pacifier* of the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates" (Grayson 1987: A.0.309.1:5–10) replaced the decayed Assur Temple of Erišum, was, however – as the building inscriptions reveal – not dedicated to Assur but rather to the god Enlil. Yet in no way had Šamši-Adad abolished the cult of Assur with this. His new Assur theology, strongly influenced by southern Mesopotamian ideas, implied that Assur was none other than Enlil, the king of the gods of the Sumerian-Babylonian pantheon, who was worshipped in Nippur.

This was both a bold and a politically clever maneuver. During the third millennium BCE, Nippur had become the undisputed cultic-religious center of the federation of southern Mesopotamian cities and had maintained, as the most important seat of the gods, this paramount position under the mighty kingdom of the Third Dynasty of Ur. In the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium, supremacy came to the ruler who had command over Nippur, the city of Enlil, "the king of the gods" and "king of all lands," and who provided for the god. Nippur was considered the heart of a large united territory for which the provider of the king of the gods bore a special responsibility – wherever his royal court was located. When the political fragmentation that followed the collapse of the Ur III dynasty put this role of Nippur into question, Šamši-Adad found himself in the position to do what would have previously been unthinkable: to construct in another location, namely in Ashur, a "new Nippur" and with that, as "the appointee of Enlil (*šakin Enlil*)," to raise a claim not only over a city but also over an, in principle, endlessly expandable large-scale territory.

The figure of the god of Assur lent itself to equation with Enlil. Like Enlil, Assur had been regarded for quite some time as the king of the gods; and Enlil's epithets "great mountain" and "wild bull" were very much in line with corresponding qualities of Assur. So it was quite

reasonable that Šamši-Adad endeavored to reproduce in Ashur the cultic topography of Nippur, which was aligned to Enlil, and that he gave his new temple the ceremonial Sumerian name É-am-kur-kur-ra, "House, Wild Bull of All Lands," after the southern Mesopotamian archetype. Based on the evidence from later periods (see George 1992: 186–91 and Menzel 1981: T 146–9), the Enlil-Assur temple of Šamši-Adad was probably furnished with shrines for many other great gods, in order to show that the cult place of the god, as was taught about Nippur, was the origin of all divinity and the true home of all gods. We come to know of the abundance of the gods worshipped in Ashur from a letter of Šamši-Adad in which he chides his son Yasmaḫ-Addu for housing far too many gods in Mari: "But now you fill the city (i.e. Mari) with (statues of) gods, while the sheep for the sacrifice do not suffice. What is this, what do you do there? Do you have no advisor who advises you? The city Mari is full of gods. No other city is as full of gods as Mari. Only Mari and Ashur are so full of gods!" (Charpin 2004: 379 with n. 40).

Following the example of the Enlil temple in Nippur, an enormous stepped tower with a base of about 60 × 60 meters and a height that was probably likewise 60 meters (Haller and Andrae 1955: 2–5; Miglus 1985), crowned with a small temple, arose in Ashur, in the immediate vicinity of the Assur temple. The rites and festivities associated with such a building in Nippur were probably introduced in Ashur as well. The time-honored cultic institutions of Nippur, which were considered to be closely linked to creation and believed to be primeval, were now accessible in Ashur too. Later, the belief that not only was Ashur a mirror image of Nippur, but that Nippur was also a mirror image of Ashur, was reinforced in historical-mythological narratives. Enlil himself speaks in one of them of his "two cultic sites," Nippur and Ashur, and takes the form of a white raven to reveal, after a destruction of both his seats, the location for reconstruction in both places (Frahm 2009: 145–51, text no. 76).

Šamši-Adad was possibly not the first who attempted to raise the influence of the god Assur by equating him with a king of the gods. Long before Šamši-Adad was Dagan, the "Enlil" of the middle Euphrates region, worshipped in the house of Assur (Grayson 1987: A.0.31) – probably, just like Enlil later, as an emanation of Assur himself. So it may be that Šamši-Adad took up again an already old idea, this time to make Ashur into a cultic center whose prestige would reach far beyond northern Mesopotamia and into the south. As the "appointee of Enlil," he probably had in mind to extend his reach of power far into that region. This would admittedly not come to pass. But the idea of establishing a supraregional center by creating a "new Nippur," erected at another location, that adopted the city's old traditions continued to persist over several centuries. Indeed, the doctrine of Ashur as the seat of the "Assyrian Enlil, the lord of all lands" constituted the ideological core of the expansive power politics of Assyria in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods.

Šamši-Adad's attempt to appropriate the status of Nippur for his own political interests was also highly consequential in another respect. For it appears as though, only a short time after Šamši-Adad, Hammurabi, the powerful king of Babylon, took up Šamši-Adad's idea. He considered Babylon the "new Nippur" and himself the appointee of Enlil. Hammurabi believed that his aggressive politics were crowned with such great success because he fulfilled a divine plan of salvation. In the introduction to his collection of exemplary "legal decisions," the so-called Hammurabi Code, Hammurabi explains, retrospectively, the vast success of his expansionist politics with the fact that in a "prelude in heaven," Anum, the sky-god, and Enlil, the king of gods, effectively transferred to Marduk, the city god of Babylon, the "Enlilship" – that is, the divine king's authority over all mankind, to be held in perpetuity. Simultaneously, Hammurabi himself, the "appointee" of Enlil, was entrusted

with the leadership of the people. Marduk, the previously rather unimportant god of Babylon, was little by little transformed into a new divine king, modeled after Enlil (Sommerfeld 1982), and Babylon and Esagil, the sanctuary of Marduk, were likewise redeveloped following the example of Nippur (George 1992: 4–7 and *passim*). This new Marduk–Enlil theology may well have been inspired by the model of Šamši-Adad's attempt to identify Assur with Enlil. Once instituted in Babylon, it enjoyed enduring success. Even in periods in which the political influence of Babylon was limited, the city's claim, originally associated with Nippur, to be the center of the world inspired its rulers and citizens in their fight for independence and greater power.

How enormously significant the equation of Assur with the old Sumerian king of gods Enlil was to become in Assyria is first apparent in the Middle Assyrian period, when a territorial state with more than two dozen provinces came into being. We know from archives of the Assur temple's administration of offerings (Freydank 1997; Maul 2013) that each individual province had to deliver, year by year, a (fairly modest) amount of grain, sesame, fruits, and honey for sacrifices offered up daily to Assur. That this obligation was considered highly relevant politically can be seen from the fact that it was regulated as a contractually bound agreement concluded between the highest administrator of offerings of the temple and the particular governors of the individual provinces. Both incoming and missing deliveries were recorded with great diligence in the temple. Had only practical concerns mattered, the daily provisions of Assur and the other gods residing in his temple could probably have been covered easily by royal domains or temple estates or could have been defrayed completely by the hinterland of the capital city. But the scrupulous documentation left by the Assur temple's administrator of offerings clearly shows that exactly this was not intended. What really mattered was that the basic care of the god was carried out by *all* parts of the Assyrian state *jointly*. Far more important than the need to amass the natural produce required for the regular offerings appears to have been that commodities from the entire country ended up on the table of the gods. God and country thus bear the same name with a very good reason: the land Ashur (*māt Aššur*) with all of its individual parts feeds the god, who himself embodies the land.

This notion, characterizing the Middle Assyrian offering practice, is apparently very old and has a long prehistory, which can be traced back within the cult of Enlil to the third millennium BCE. Already in the 21st century BCE, in the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the governors and rulers of the individual provinces belonging to the empire were required, exactly as in the later period, to deliver goods to the Ekur, Enlil's temple in Nippur. From a corpus of several hundred documents from Puzriš-Dagan (modern Drehem), we learn where exactly the meat came from that was placed before Enlil for his daily meals (Sallaberger 2003/2004). The animals for slaughter required for this purpose stemmed not only from the great herds of the state and the temple, but were delivered regularly by all regions of the state. Year after year, governors and rulers of individual provinces sent a fatted sheep or a small billy goat as a gift for the supraregional god Enlil, without shying away from the somewhat disproportionate effort of sending a messenger with a single animal over distances of several hundred kilometers to Nippur.

We find the ancient idea that all parts of the land should nourish their god also in sources from the Neo-Assyrian period, now from the perspective of an all-encompassing worldwide claim to power and with an added cosmological dimension. A royal inscription of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), in which he describes the festivals that took place on the occasion of the

roofing ceremony for the renovated temple of the imperial god Assur, states: "I slaughtered fattened bulls and butchered sheep; I killed birds of the heavens and fish from the *apsû*, without number; I piled up before them (the gods of the Assur temple) the harvest of the sea and the abundance of the mountains. … I presented them with gifts from (all) the inhabited settlements, (their) heavy audience gifts" (Borger 1956: 5; Leichty 2011: 127–8). The animals delivered here were not only the sustenance for the god; they represented in addition and above all the three cosmic layers of the world as conceived in the ancient Near East: sheep and bulls stand for the earth, for the man-made and natural swaths of land, the birds for the heavens, and the fish for the sweet-water ocean (*apsû*), over which the earth arches. The highest god is thus sustained by the life force of the entire cosmos in its vertical order, comprising heaven, earth, and sweet-water ocean (*apsû*). And if, as our text claims, "gifts from (all) the inhabited settlements" arrived in Ashur, the idea suggests itself that the entire community of (civilized) mankind and thus, effectively, the whole "universe" brought its tribute to the god in order to sustain him in a collective effort.

The Assyrian offering practice described here is to a significant extent motivated by the desire to comply with a divine mandate to mankind articulated over and over again in the creation myths. The ancient Sumerian myth *Enki and Ninmaḫ* as well as the Old Babylonian *Atraḫasis* story and the Babylonian world creation epic *Enūma eliš*, composed in the late second millennium BCE, unanimously relate that man was solely created in order to provide the gods with food and drink. The care and feeding of the gods is, according to these myths, the real, the true task of man, who, in order to show them his gratitude for his existence, had to apply a considerable portion of his labor so that the gods, released from any burden of work, would be cared for.

The demand on man formulated in the creation myths, that the work of *all* should nourish the gods, was implemented in Assyria with the utmost literalness. For Middle Assyrian documents show that, for the preparation of the dishes placed before the god, at least occasionally workers from *all* provinces of the kingdom were enlisted, even though men living in Ashur could have been readily employed for this purpose (Maul 2013). And both in the Middle Assyrian and the Neo-Assyrian period, even the king and the high dignitaries residing in the capital city of the empire provided natural produce for the preparation of the regular offering called the *ginā'u*. In other words: kings, governors, officials and high dignitaries, craftsmen, farmers, and probably also herdsmen and cattle-breeders together supplied the daily meals for the god, which could, hence, be considered as gifts that had been provided by a community that comprised all strata of society and the entire territory of the Assyrian state.

Such a conception of sacrifice can create a powerful sense of identity among those involved. Through the act of collective offering, rulers and subjects together become a people of god. In the case of Assyria, in which the name of the god Assur also designates the land and its inhabitants, this is particularly clear. The message delivered by Esarhaddon is in line with this. On the one hand, individuals of "foreign seed" are forbidden from participating in the sacrifice for Assur (Borger 1956: 5; Leichty 2011: 128, vii 13–15), while, on the other hand, in the ritual of the ceremonial laying of the foundation for the new Assur temple, both "noble and lower class people" of the city of Ashur were involved alongside the king's sons (Leichty 2011: 153, lines 16–17[6]).

We observe here how the "commensal community" of Assur is situated on the way to developing a kind of state identity: among the willing, an Assyrian is he who, whatever his

social or geographic background, participates in the care of the deity that carries the name of the land of Ashur and whose sustenance the Assyrian king has to guarantee. The path that leads from an "offering community" to a supranational political community of the Assyrian people is laid out here.

Significantly, provinces that were newly integrated into the aggressively expanding Neo-Assyrian empire were forced to take part in the regular feeding of the imperial god. King Esarhaddon not only placed a governor over the conquered Egypt, he also imposed upon it, as we learn from his inscriptions, the obligation to provide "in perpetuity regular offerings for Assur and the great gods" (Borger 1956: 99; Leichty 2011: 186, lines 48–9). The regular offerings imposed on the conquered forced them, in addition to everything else, to show their respect to the almost transcendent power of a foreign deity, and to ask for divine benevolence from those who had disempowered them. The correspondence of the later Neo-Assyrian kings shows us that resistance regarding the delivery of the expected gifts was not tolerated and was severely punished. A breakaway from the community of the "subjects of Enlil," which had to feed the god and thereby sustain the world order, was understood as the gravest transgression.

Assur, His Earthly Representative, and the Community of Gods

The Assyrian kings' functions as High Priest and "vice-regent" of the highest god had a significant impact, at least since the time of Šamši-Adad, on the topography of the city Ashur, which remained fundamentally unchanged until the late period. The monumental royal palace, constructed in the early second millennium BCE in the north of the city (Preusser 1955; Pedde 2008), lay in the midst of the great temples of Ashur, in a location that bore the name "Courtyard of the (divine) Emblems." The streets and alleys of the city led to this "forum of the gods." The deities worshipped here, the personified powers of the cosmic order, thus appeared to turn directly towards the city and its people.

The sanctuary of Assur, in contrast, was not only isolated from the inhabited metropolitan area by an elongated five-cornered forecourt that lay below the temple, but also by the royal palace, which closed the "Courtyard of the Emblems" towards the east. Like a locking bolt, it pushed itself in front of the sanctuary of the chief god. A direct and ground-level entrance to the sanctum of the Assur temple, reserved for the ruler alone, existed only on the side of the palace facing away from the city, alongside the northern cliff face, which was fortified with a massive brick construction that is still impressive today (see Figures 18.1 and 23.1). Only here, a direct entrance by way of a stairwell led from the lateral branch of the Tigris to the temple and palace. From the building inscriptions of the Middle Assyrian period we know that the god Assur attended upon the ruler yearly in his palace, where a sanctified place with a pedestal designed specifically for him was made available for this purpose (Grayson 1987: A.0.76.16; Weidner 1956: 276, statue 8; Grayson 1991: A.0.87.4:77–89). The other great gods of Ashur were also regularly "invited" into the palace. The highly meaningful proximity of temple and palace that becomes apparent here is also reflected, incidentally, in the ceremonial names that Tukulti-Ninurta I gave to his palace and to the Assur temple in his newly constructed residence Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. While the palace bore the name É-gal-me-šár-ra, "Palace of the Totality of Divine Powers," he gave to the temple the name É-kur-me-šár-ra,

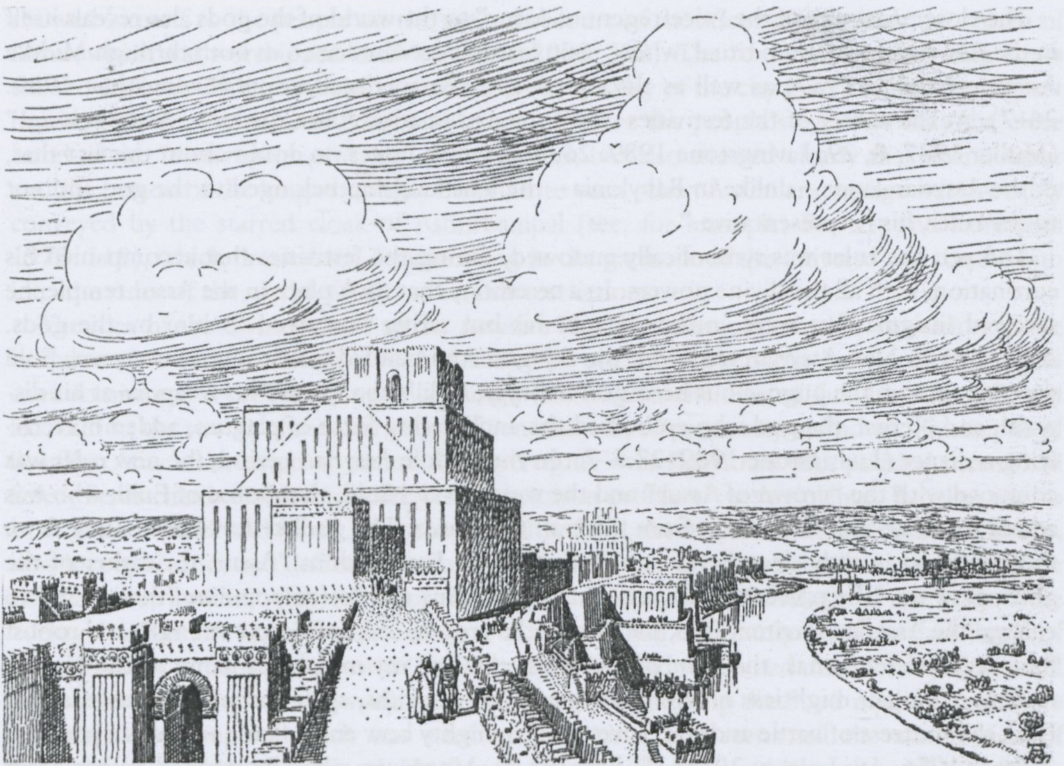

Figure 18.1 View from the roof of the temple of Assur westwards towards the ziggurat and the northern part of the city of Ashur; reconstruction. Drawing by Walter Andrae. From W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs 1938, 33.

"House, Mountain of the Totality of Divine Powers" (George 1993: 171, no. 1444, and 117, no. 687), thus indicating that temple and palace were two inseparable counterparts that mirrored each other.

The "Old Palace" in Ashur constituted, on the one hand, the bridge to the holiest place of divine power, the temple of Assur; on the other hand, it was part of the "Forum of the Gods" that opened up to the city. Here the gods were worshipped who served as protectors and helpers of the "vice-regent of Assur" and determined the fates, but were also subordinated to their divine king Assur. A twin temple connected with the "Old Palace" through a gate and furnished with two small stepped towers, between which were located the actual temple rooms, was dedicated to the sky-god Anu and his "first son," the weather-god Adad (Andrae 1909). The weather-god owed his position, surprisingly prominent in comparison to southern Babylonia, to the fact that, unlike in the south of Mesopotamia, the rain-fed agriculture practiced in the north depended to a fundamental degree on the weather. On the opposite side of the plaza were venerated, likewise in twin sanctuaries, the moon-god Sîn and his son Šamaš, the sun (Haller and Andrae 1955; Werner 2009). The moon, with its ever renewing phases, and the sun, with its regularity, were considered by the Assyrians and Babylonians alike as guarantors of an eternal order. They gave the world its structure through time and the calendar and – within limits – made it appear predictable. The third and final great temple complex, which bordered the "Courtyard of the Emblems" to the southwest, was the ancient sanctuary dedicated to Ištar, which was regularly renewed throughout the centuries (Meinhold 2009).

The close proximity of the "vice-regent of Assur" to the world of the gods also reveals itself in the Assyrian coronation ritual, whose main features are familiar to us both through Middle Assyrian (Müller 1937) as well as through Neo-Assyrian ritual scripts (Livingstone 1989: 26–7). At the center of the festivities stood the exclamation "Assur is king, Assur is king!" (Müller 1937: 8, 29; Livingstone 1989: 26, 15), which leaves no doubt about the fact that, in the Assyrian lands – unlike in Babylonia – the true kingship belonged to the god and not to the ruler, his "representative."

And yet, the ruler was symbolically endowed, during the festivities that accompanied his coronation, with all the divine powers. In a ceremony that took place in the Assur temple, he received insignia that were considered not his but rather borrowed to him by the gods. According to Neo-Assyrian tradition, the sky-god Anu handed over to him his crown, Enlil gave his throne, the pugnacious hero-god Ninurta, Enlil's son, placed his weapons at his disposal, and Nergal, the god who embodied the annihilating force of plagues, added his terrifying radiance (Livingstone 1989: 27:5–7). In the Middle Assyrian period, the new ruler was equipped with the "crown of Assur" and the weapons of Ninlil, the spouse of Enlil, who was added to Assur-Enlil as consort from this point onwards. The godlike force emanating from these insignia is aptly described in an inscription of Esarhaddon: "Assur, the father of the gods, gave me (the power) to let (cities) fall into ruins and to (re)populate (them), and to enlarge the Assyrian territory; Sîn, the lord of the crown, decreed heroic strength and robust force as my fate; Šamaš, the light of the gods, elevated my important name to the highest rank; …. Nergal, mightiest of the gods, gave me fierceness, splendor, and terror as a gift; Ištar, the mistress of battle and war, gave to me a mighty bow and a fierce arrow as a present" (Borger 1956: 46; Leichty 2011: 15, lines 30–8). Moreover, when he stepped before Assur and in other instances (Menzel 1981: T 43, 4; T 52, 4; T 76, 3'), the Assyrian ruler carried, at least during the Neo-Assyrian period, a chain with the symbols of the deities who had equipped him with their power.

On occasions that are unfortunately not yet precisely identifiable, the "vice-regent of Assur" had the responsibility to offer up food and drink for each individual god of the Assur temple, for all the gods of the city, even for the gates, for the river and its gravel islands, for the clouds, for the seas, and for the stars, to ensure the divine blessings. This ritual, which was called ***tākultu*** (Frankena 1954; van Driel 1969: 159–62; Menzel 1981: T 113–T 145), was probably performed in the Assur temple and in the city and was – as numerous texts document – practiced from the Middle Assyrian period until the downfall of Ashur in the late seventh century BCE. It appears to have originated in the old Sumerian Enlil rituals (see Sallaberger 1993: 143–5).

Even after they had abandoned Ashur as their royal residence, the Assyrian rulers returned to Ashur and the "Old Palace" on a regular basis in order to observe their cultic responsibilities, especially during the annual spring festivities (Maul 2000). In the house of their fathers, the old royal palace, they also found their last resting places, close to their god (Lundström 2009).

As repentant and modest the "vice-regent" appeared when he faced his god in crisis situations, so godlike he appeared to the people entrusted to him, the "subjects of Enlil." It seems that the idea that the Assyrian ruler possessed certain "divine" qualities gained substantial ground with the proliferation of Assyrian power in the middle of the second millennium BCE (Machinist 2011). In the Neo-Assyrian period, the great Assyrian kings stylized themselves, following the ancient Sumerian example, as the children of the gods, who were reared with the milk of a caring goddess (Foster 2005: 820, IV.4c:13–19 and 39–40; 829–830, IV.4f). After the spring celebrations in Ashur had been rearranged by Ashurbanipal, the king even

showed himself to the people on the great forecourt of the Assur temple with the crown of Assur, which was worshipped as divine (Maul 2000: 398). The "day on which the king wears the crown," the 24th of Šabatu, was considered "the day of the city god," one of the highest holidays of the Assyrian calendar, and brought before the people's eyes not only the close bond of the "vice-regent of Assur" with his god, but also showed clearly that divine Assur and the person of the king essentially flowed into each other. A similar message was probably conveyed by the starred cloak of Ashurbanipal (see, for example, Barnett and Lorenzini 1975: 118), which dressed the Assyrian king in the garment of the universe and turned him into the ruler of the world, far above earthly restrictions.

The idea of the divine nature of the Assyrian king found an abominable expression in the brutal warfare of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE). The old conflict between Babylonia and Assyria over dominance in the Near East, increasingly heated since the time of Tukulti-Ninurta I, had led, during the twenty-three-year reign of Sennacherib, to previously unknown dimensions of hostility. After all attempts to secure the sovereignty over Babylonia with political means had failed, Sennacherib decided to solve his "Babylonian problem" with violence. Babylon was to be obliterated once and for all. By command of the king, the Assyrian armies plundered the city, slew its population, and defiled the temples and divine images. Sennacherib accomplished the Assyrian "retribution" that fell upon Babylon with a mythical "weapon of the gods," the "deluge" (Seidl 1998), with which the god of creation had once vanquished the dark forces of chaos in order to fashion the world (*Enūma eliš* IV: 49) and which had then been used by Enlil in his attempt to destroy the world again. Deliberately imitating the flood myth, Sennacherib dispensed the weapon, which was attributed to Assur, and reenacted the annihilation of Babylonia as an obliterating flood. He dammed the Euphrates, cut ditches through the metropolitan area, and destroyed Babylon so forcefully with the floodwater that debris was allegedly washed up even in the vicinity of the Gulf island of Bahrain (Dilmun). But by stirring up deep anti-Assyrian resentment, these brutal acts also precipitated Assyria's eventual downfall.

Politics as Religion and Religion as Politics

Until the end of the Assyrian state, the religious "orthopraxy" of the Assyrian kings was regarded as the real reason for their political and military successes. The "vice-regent" had to provide for the care and fostering of Assur and all the other gods, reconstruct and sustain their temples (Lackenbacher 1982), and face the gods in festivals and rituals in his capacity as High Priest (van Driel 1969: 139ff.; Maul 2000). Only then could he anticipate stability and success. From the Middle Assyrian period onwards, the territorial expansion of Assyria, along with the prosperity of the "subjects of Enlil," was considered to be a specific sign of divine blessing. Already in the late second millennium BCE, and very much in contrast to the Babylonian south, the Assyrians couched their expansive policy in theological language and explicitly considered it a religious duty. In the coronation ritual of the Assyrian kings, the order the ruler received from the god Assur was: "Expand your land!" (Müller 1937: 12, 35; Livingstone 1989: 26, 3) – even though it was also stipulated that the king should dispense wisdom and exercise law and justice.

The military campaigns of the Middle and Neo-Assyrian kings are accordingly described in their inscriptions as the fulfillment of a divine mandate. Completely in line with this view, the copies of the Neo-Assyrian state treaties concluded with dependent rulers in order to secure loyalty to the Assyrian heir to the throne (Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 28ff.) were sealed not

with the king's seal, but rather with various seals of the god Assur, which – to illustrate the everlasting power of the god – originated from the Old, Middle, and Neo-Assyrian periods. The breaking of such a treaty was accordingly considered in Assyria not only as a betrayal of the ruler of Ashur, but also, first and foremost, as a sinister offense against the god of the world himself.

In the Middle Assyrian period, certain specificities of the Assur-Enlil theology attained great meaning in warfare. Ninurta, the son of Enlil, who was venerated in Nippur as a hero-god who, at the dawn of time, by the command of his father, had defeated the dark forces of chaos and then had established the world order (Annus 2002), was promoted – henceforth as the son of Assur-Enlil – to the position of an important Assyrian god who held the fortunes of war in his hand. The name of the great Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233–1197 [1243–1207] BCE) reflects the significance that Ninurta had acquired in that time: literally translated, he was called "my trust is in Ninurta." Certain expressions in Assyrian royal inscriptions reveal that the king understood his struggle against the enemy as the re-actualization of the mythical struggle of the hero Ninurta and considered himself his earthly image, who had achieved in Ninurta's place the mission of the divine father to rescue the land from the grasp of the "evil forces" (Maul 1999). So it is hardly by chance that Ninurta was worshipped in Kalḫu, the royal residence newly established by Aššurnaṣirpal II (883–859 BCE) 120 kilometers to the north of Ashur, as the main god of the city.

Just as, in the mythical narratives, Ninurta had to provide an account of his various combats to his divine father, the rulers of Ashur presented to their god, the other gods worshipped in the Assur temple, as well as the city of Ashur and its residents, reports about their martial actions. From the Neo-Assyrian period, several "letters" are preserved with campaign reports directed to the god Assur and probably publicly read to him and other deities (Borger 1971; Frahm 2009: 69–70, text no. 29). In addition, replies composed in the names of Assur and Ninurta are known (Livingstone 1987: 108–15). They are reminiscent of prophecies encouraging the king in the name of Ištar of Arbela, which were likewise recorded in writing (Parpola 1997). The reports read to the gods are probably to be connected to royal triumphs, carried out with great pomp, which culminated in the offering of spoils at the temple. In the Neo-Assyrian period, the sanctuary of the warlike Ištar of Arbela held a prominent position on these occasions. "Tribute from all lands enters into it," a hymn to this important Assyrian city claims (Livingstone 1987: 20, line 19). There were also visual statements informing the god about military actions undertaken by the king: representations of campaigns on glazed bricks adorned the podium of the Assur temple as well as the ramp and the gate towers that formed an entrance from the northeast to the "main courtyard" of the temple (Haller and Andrae 1955: 56–62).

Ninurta, Nergal, and other gods accompanied the Assyrian king and his army on campaign in the form of standards (Pongratz-Leisten, Deller, and Bleibtreu 1992). Rightly so could a king – as in an inscription of Esarhaddon – claim that he, "with great trust" in his gods, "followed behind their great divinity" into battle (Borger 1956: 65 § 28; Leichty 2011: 54, line 17). Under the last Assyrian kings, martial actions were often scarcely described anymore as achievements of the royal warrior but rather as the work of the gods. In the campaign narratives of Assurbanipal, Assur and Ištar are the ones that attack the enemies of the king (Borger 1996: 234, A § 37:22), and it is the fire-god who, in a manner of speaking, on his own incentive "dropped from heaven and burned (the enemies)" (Borger 1996: 251, Stück 6 16–17). And an Assurbanipal hymn to the warlike Ištars of Nineveh and Arbela claims: "Neither [... by] my [might] nor by the might of my bow, but by the strength and might of my goddesses did I cause the lands disobedient to me to submit to the yoke of Assur" (Foster 2005: 820, 28–30).

The conception of Assur-Enlil as the father of all gods was likewise utilized as an element of Assyria's ideology of war. After the capture of a city, not only its king and his family were often deported to Assyria, but also the gods worshipped there. Their temples were left behind ownerless, their cities without divine protection and without cult. From the time of Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) until that of Assurbanipal, some fifty-five relevant cases are attested in the extant Assyrian royal inscriptions (Holloway 2002: 123–144). Hundreds of gods from the entire Near East arrived in Ashur in this way. They were, in the truest sense of the word, subordinated "to their father" Assur. Often provided with a cult, venerated and, in many cases, housed in the Assur temple itself or in other temples of the gods of the city, they became part of the royal household of the father of the gods and had to effectively listen to his commands. The pantheon of Ashur was thus always also an image of Assyria's imperial power. Only after long negotiations and good conduct on the part of the deprived enemy were some of the kidnapped gods sent back to their original sanctuaries (cf. Holloway 2002: 277–83). To do so, the divine images were sometimes restored in the workshop of the Assur temple – which served as a kind of divine "birthplace" (*bīt mumme*). They were splendidly outfitted and, in a way, newly born. Admittedly, one did not forgo also inscribing "the might of Assur" and of the Assyrian king on the divine images that were sent back (for examples, see Borger 1956: 53, Episode 14; Leichty 2011: 19, lines 6–14; Holloway 2002: 288–91; and more generally Dick 1999) – so that the images could henceforth be recognized at first glance as being the products of Assyrian mercy.

The fate of such an Assyrian captivity befell even Marduk, the god of Babylon, who, like Assur, was modeled after Enlil. The mighty Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I had conquered Babylonia in a war, captured the Babylonian king Kaštiliaš IV, and brought him as hostage to Ashur. Towards the end of the 13th century BCE, he seized Babylon and not only plundered Babylonian libraries, but also brought Marduk from his temple Esagil to the Assyrian capital city. The Babylonian god, who stayed in Ashur for no fewer than 106 years (Weidner 1939–41: 120), was provided with an elaborate cult there. A ritual text shows us (Köcher 1952) that a festival was celebrated in Ashur – probably in imitation of Babylonian customs – that revolved around Marduk and was reminiscent of the Babylonian New Year's festival. It thus appears as though it was first under Tukulti-Ninurta I (and his immediate successors) that an attempt was made to detach the Marduk cult from Babylon and to transfer it to Assyria, so as to fuse two competing "kings of the gods" into one single deity. Centuries later, Sargon II (721–705 BCE) made another attempt to redefine the relationship between Assur-Enlil and Marduk-Enlil. In a letter to Assur in which he informs his divine patron about his campaign to the land of the Urartians, Sargon describes his god as follows: "Assur, father of the gods, lord of all lands, the king of heaven and earth, begetter of all, lord of lords, to whom from of old the Enlil of the gods, Marduk, bestowed the gods of heaven and earth and the four corners of the earth, that they ever, without ceasing, honor him above all others, and that he (Assur) bring them into (his temple), the 'House, high mountain of all lands'[7] with their accumulated treasures" (Foster 2005: 806–7).

Yet Sargon's claim that Ashur would be forever the "exalted cult site that Assur, his lord, had chosen for the world as the center [of kingship]" (Vera Chamaza 1992: 23, lines 30–1) did not remain uncontested in Babylonia – even though the Assyrians tried to enforce it through violent means. In the ever more acrimonious struggle between Ashur and Babylon over the hegemony in the Near East in the course of the first millennium BCE, the Babylonians' unshakable belief in the "Enlilship" of Marduk increasingly became a nuisance to the Assyrians. Similarly to Ashur, so too did Babylon raise the claim, with its powerful divine patron and its

cult facilities patterned after Nippur, to be the center of the cosmos and the true seat of kingship (George 1992: *passim*). To the adversaries of Assyria, this was, without doubt, highly welcome. Completely unlike Assur, who always remained exclusively bound to the city Ashur and closely associated with Assyrian kingship, the Babylonian god was also worshipped far beyond the borders of the regions dominated by Babylon, in the entire Near East. He was considered not only the patron god of his city but also a god of wisdom and healing, who watched over all mankind. Such popularity, not linked to state power, Assur never possessed, and some Assyrians undoubtedly envied the Babylonians because of this.

Against the backdrop of the political wrangling began a conflict driven not least by theologians in which the Assyrian side attempted to prove the primeval nature of Assur and, with that, the superiority of their king of the gods over his Babylonian counterpart. Here, the orthography of the name Assur played a substantial role. From the time of Sargon II onwards, a writing for the name of the god became common that designated the unlimited divine space from which arose all gods and the entire world known to us: *An-šár*, a Sumerian name that literally means "totality of heaven." The writing came very close to the name *Aššur*, given that one pronounced it *Aššar*. Following the rules of scholarly exegesis, one could thus speculate about whether that primeval Anšar and the Assyrian Assur were identical. The Assyrians liked to believe so and used the new writing in order to demonstrate that Assur must have come into being long before Marduk. The latter was thought to have emerged from Assur and was therefore considered to be subordinate to him. But the Babylonians made very similar claims regarding Marduk. Even though not using etymology as an argument, they considered Marduk, whom they called "creator of the gods, his fathers," an avatar of Anšar as well.[8]

At the height of the dispute between Assyria and Babylonia, Sennacherib (see Figure 18.2) wanted to end the conflict conclusively by force of arms and to annihilate Babylon and its sanctuaries once and for all. In the "deluge" staged by Sennacherib, the Marduk temple "sank" too – it was completely destroyed. The Babylonian divine images were smashed and Marduk brought to Ashur. The most significant ritual of Babylonia, a new year's festival in honor of Marduk called *akītu*, to which the creation epic *Enūma eliš* served as cult legend, was reenacted in Ashur (Frahm 1997: 282–8), to legitimize the political sovereignty of the Assyrian king. Marduk and his cult would be completely absorbed in Assur. On the one hand, Assyrian scholars rewrote *Enūma eliš*, replacing the name of Marduk with that of Assur and the name of the city of Babylon with that of Ashur (Lambert 1997). On the other hand, Sennacherib initiated a comprehensive building program, through which the cultic topography obliterated in Babylon would arise again in Ashur. Marduk's destroyed *akītu* house, situated outside the gates of Babylon, was built anew outside the gates of Ashur (Haller and Andrae 1955: 74–80; Miglus 1993), and extensions to and architectural changes within the Assur temple made it possible to resume in that sanctuary the rites associated in Babylon with Marduk (Haller and Andrae 1955: 69–73; Frahm 1997: 282–8).

Posterity considered Sennacherib's Babylonian politics a most wicked act of hubris. Indeed, after the violent death of Sennacherib, his son and successor Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) strove for a policy of reconciliation and organized with great energy the reconstruction of Babylon (Porter 1993). Under Assurbanipal, the building activities had so far progressed that the "godnapped" Marduk could be repatriated to his newly constructed temple there – even though the deity, "newly born" in the Assur temple, had been furnished with Assyrian royal insignia. The Assyrians of this time acknowledged Marduk's role of divine savior and hero, celebrated in *Enūma eliš*, but the role of primeval king of the gods remained that of Assur. Assur's divinity was considered in the late Neo-Assyrian

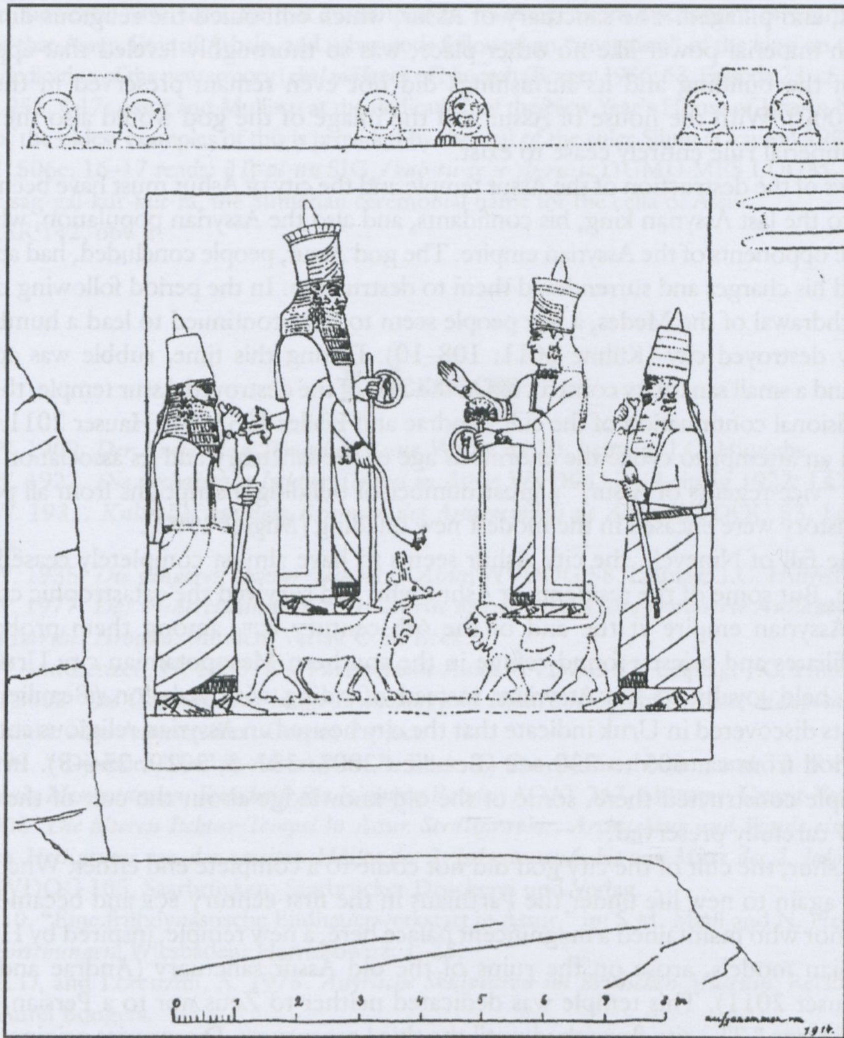

Figure 18.2 King Sennacherib, depicted twice, worshipping the god Assur and his wife Mullissu. Assur is standing on a *mušḫuššu*-dragon, a feature adopted from the cult of Marduk of Babylon. Khinnis, "Großes Relief." *Source*: W. Bachmann, *Felsreliefs in Assyrien*, WVDOG 52, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs 1927, 10, Abb. 8.

period as so comprehensive that all other deities, even the great goddess Ištar, were regarded by some as manifestations of the Assyrian god.

Swan Song

In 614 BCE, troops under the leadership of the Median king Cyaxares besieged the ancient religious center of the Assyrian empire. Its massive fortifications, considered impregnable (and shaping the landscape of Ashur even today) could offer the city no permanent protection: the enemy troops succeeded in entering the city, and Ashur had to pay the bitter price for the centuries-long subjugation of the peoples of the Near East. The city was left destroyed,

plundered, and pillaged. The sanctuary of Assur, which embodied the religious dimensions of Assyrian imperial power like no other place, was so thoroughly leveled that appreciable remains of the building and its furnishings did not even remain preserved in the rubble (Miglus 2000). With the house of Assur and the image of the god would also the spirit of Assyrian imperial rule entirely cease to exist.

The news of the destruction of the Assur temple and the city of Ashur must have been a crushing blow to the last Assyrian king, his confidants, and also the Assyrian population, while spurring on the opponents of the Assyrian empire. The god Assur, people concluded, had apparently abandoned his charges and surrendered them to destruction. In the period following the unexpected withdrawal of the Medes, a few people seem to have continued to lead a humble life in the largely destroyed city (Kühne 2011: 108–10). During this time, rubble was apparently removed and a small sanctuary constructed in the area of the destroyed Assur temple, thus allowing a provisional continuation of the cult (Andrae and Haller 1955: 81; Hauser 2011: 120–7). Perhaps in an attempt to evoke the enormous age of the sanctuary and its association with the numerous "vice-regents of Assur," a great number of building inscriptions from all periods of Assyrian history were encased in the modest new building (Miglus 1992).

With the fall of Nineveh, the city Ashur seems to have almost completely ceased to exist for a while. But some of the residents of Ashur who had survived the catastrophic collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire at the end of the 6th century BCE, among them probably also temple affiliates and priests, found refuge in the southern Mesopotamian city Uruk, which had often held loyalty to the Assyrians instead of siding with Babylon (Beaulieu 1997). Documents discovered in Uruk indicate that the city housed an Assyrian religious community in the period from ca. 605 to 520 BCE (Beaulieu 2003: 331–3, 2010: 254–5). In the new Assur temple constructed there, some of the old knowledge about the cult of the god was apparently carefully preserved.

Yet in Ashur, the cult of the city god did not come to a complete end either. When the city awakened again to new life under the Parthians in the first century BCE and became the seat of a governor who maintained a magnificent palace here, a new temple, inspired by Hellenistic and Parthian models, arose on the ruins of the old Assur sanctuary (Andrae and Lenzen 1933; Hauser 2011). This temple was dedicated neither to Zeus nor to a Persian god, but rather to "Assor." The city flourished until the third century CE. Discoveries originating from this time breathe the spirit of the Hellenized East. Cuneiform was forgotten, the Assyrian language replaced by Aramaic and Greek. But Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions (Beyer 1998), recorded on the same "days of the city god" (Weidner 1941–44) that were considered holy to Assur already well over 1000 years earlier, are evidence that, perhaps thanks to mediation through the Assyrian community in Uruk, the bond between Assur, his city, and his people had survived the destruction of the temple, the downfall of the Assyrian empire, and the demise of an entire era.

Notes

1 This chapter was translated from the German by Shana Zaia, with revisions by the editor of this book.

2 It should be noted, however, that Jürgen Bär has collected arguments for an early structure possibly dedicated to Assur that could have stood at the site of the later Assur temple in the Early Dynastic period (Bär 2010).

3 Note that the name of Nippur's principal god, Enlil, is included in the writing of his city (EN.LÍL[ki]).

4 We do, however, have accounts that Assur took to traveling. From inscriptions of Esarhaddon is it known that Assur, Ištar of Arbela, and other gods followed an "invitation" of the king on the occasion of the dedication of the new armory (*ekal māšarti*) of Nineveh (Borger 1956: 63, Episode 23, cf. also Borger 1996: 255, § 17: Assur and Mullissu at the dedication of the New Year's House of Ištar in Nineveh).

5 One of the oldest examples of this is provided by the seal of the ruler Ṣilulu (Grayson 1987: A.0.27).

6 Ass. 21506e, 16–17 reads: *i*[*l*]-*pi-nu* SIG$_4$/*kab-tu-te ṣe-eḫ-ru-te* DUMU.MEŠ LUGAL (collated).

7 É-ḫur-sag-gal-kur-kur-ra, the Sumerian ceremonial name for the cella of Assur.

8 See KAR 142, obv. 1.

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Further Reading

No comprehensive assessment of Assyrian religion from the beginnings of Assyrian history to the downfall of the Assyrian empire is currently available, but Lambert 1983 provides a valuable, albeit short discussion of the changing images of the god Assur throughout this period. The only monographic treatment of Old Assyrian religion, Hirsch 1961, remains useful but is now very dated. Holloway 2002 provides the most comprehensive treatment of the relationship between religion and politics in the Neo-Assyrian era. Menzel 1981 studies Assyrian temples and Maul 2000 the most important festival cycle in Ashur during Neo-Assyrian times.