

# The Interconnectedness of Neo-Assyrian Kingship & Prophecy



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#### KELLOGG HONORS COLLEGE C&PSTONE PROJECT

#### Abstract

Ancient Neo-Assyria was a large Mesopotamian empire that existed in modern-day Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, and other countries in the Levant. The Neo-Assyrian empire existed from around 2600 B.C. until its eventual demise in 609 B.C. The Neo-Assyrians, like most Mesopotamian civilizations, had a strong relationship with their gods. The kings of the Neo-Assyrian empire were both servants and messengers of the gods. To communicate with the gods and hear their demands, prophecy and ritual were primarily used. Prophecy was not only central to Neo-Assyrian lives but also to kingship, as well, much more than previously thought. The daily lives of the Neo-Assyrians were saturated with rituals and sacrifice. These rituals, as well as other information, were written down on cuneiform clay tablets. Through the use of clay tablets and inscriptions found at Nineveh, as well as royal reliefs stored in various museums, I have examined the heavy extent to which prophecy plays in the rule of Esarhaddon, Ashurbanipal, and future kings of the Neo-Assyrian empire. These sources required close reading of fragmentary translations from the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC). The entirety of Neo-Assyrian kingship was determined by prophecy and the gods. Prophecies served to validate, legitimate, and direct the kings' rule, as well as connect their empire with the gods.

### Methodology

One of the most popular methods of communication in Neo-Assyria was the exchange of clay tablets. These tablets were written in Cuneiform and distributed all over Mesopotamia. These tablets were usually broken after their purpose was served; however, important tablets such as receipts, ritual instructions, royal inscriptions, scholarly texts, deeds, etc. were kept and preserved. For my thesis, I have identified fifteen tablets that illustrate the relationship between Neo-Assyrian prophecy and kingship. These tablets were collected from the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC), which is an international database of Cuneiform texts and translations that is open to the public for educational and research purposes. Not every tablet on ORACC is translated, but it is the largest database for Mesopotamia Cuneiform tablets. As the tablets are very old, most of them are fragmented and some information is lost. However, the translators have either put in their best educated guess or interpretation for a word or phrase. These are included in the translations in between brackets. I can reasonably expect my sources and evidence to tell me how a king feels about a prophecy or ritual during his reign. However, it is important to remember not to take everything king says for face value. What he intends and what he writes down may be two very different things depending on the situation at the time. If the king has sponsored any if the writing, then it's possible that the information can distort the events. To address this, I have taken one main approach- close reading. This means dissecting the primary source to the best of my ability in order to get the most information from it. I have also noted the difference in prescriptive texts and descriptive texts. These tablets were kept in kings' archives or libraries (especially Ashurbanipal's Library) for future omens and oracles. The Neo-Assyrians believed that spiritual phenomena happened again and again, so that similar outcomes could be predicted. For my purposes, I choose to believe that the Neo-Assyrians followed the "stream of tradition" in that information was kept in archives for priests, prophets, and kings to consult later. However, it is also crucial to point out that not everything was written down as it would have been assumed that the participants should have known the information well enough to remember it without guidance. To organize my primary sources, I created an excel sheet which will serve as an appendix.

#### Results

Ritual and prophecy played a huge part in Neo-Assyrian kingship. The king, himself, had to wear many hats and take on different roles in order to succeed in his reign. His relationship with his empire, his legacy, and the gods were all dependent on religious ritual and prophecy. For example, the king would pray to the gods and use sacrifices for victory in battle or vengeance against enemies. The king had to be a strong leader and a strong supporter of the gods. Neo-Assyria was strong primarily for their brutality in battle, but also their firm belief in the divine. Because they believed so strongly, it was also crucial that they maintain their gods through acts of service and purification rituals. Rituals like the Mis-Pi ritual served he gods by bringing them to life in the most respectful and dignified way. Ritual tablets were a stable for many Neo-Assyrian kings .The fact that thousands of ritual tablets were written down and kept, illustrates the significance of ritual within the Neo-Assyrian society- so much so, that instructions and royal inscriptions were kept for future uses. Ritual and prophecy was a way the king could manage and understand his relationship with the gods. Maintaining this relationship was crucial to the development of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Scholars have studied Neo-Assyrian kingship for decades, and my contribution adds to the scholarship of the interconnectedness between Neo-Assyrian kings, ritual, and the divine.

## Neo-Assyrian Clay Cone



**Pictured above** is a votive clay cone. These cones were used by Neo-Assyrian kings both for spiritual and legitimacy reasons. These cones were passed down from king to king, acting as a form of legacy and good faith. They were involved in purification, fertilization, and good faith rituals as well as other rituals around the empire. When kings are depicted, they are typically pictured with a cone in their right hand. This object connects kingship with Neo-Assyrian ritual.

#### Assyrian Kingship

The role of king in Neo-Assyria was a heavy one. He was not only the leader of the land, but his responsibilities expanded to the wellbeing of the gods, his successors, his military, and all of Assyria. The role of king in Neo-Assyria was both a great privilege and a great honor. In Eckart Frahm's A Companion to Assyria (2017), "the idea that the king was the representative or the human agent of the god was quite widespread in the ancient Near East...used by the rulers of the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium." Though later Neo-Assyrian kings did not view themselves as divine, but merely attached to the gods- especially Assur. Neo-Assyrian kings had a duty to protect their temples and promote prosperity amongst their citizens. However, there was another duty that involved the "task of *māta ruppušu*, 'to enlarge the country (of Assyria)," or in other words imperialize and conquer the cities and nations around them. The king also had to emphasize his strength in violent and military matters. Listening to diviners and prophets was a large responsibility for the kings, as well, because their advice was the way that the gods were speaking to him. After securing his legitimacy, the king also had to insure of his legacy, that his name and accomplishments outlive him. He does this through monuments, battles, and inscriptions. Above all else, he has a duty to the gods, in maintaining them and keeping them happy. All of these responsibilities and duties are executed through prophecy and ritual (they cannot be done without them). Prophecy and ritual are so intertwined with Neo-Assyrian kingship, that you cannot have one without the other. Ritual and prophecy ruled over the Neo-Assyrian lives, and the kings' used prophecy and rituals to communicate with the gods about their own lives as well as the lives of everyone within the empire.

**Pictured right** is the 3D scanned image of tablet SAA 20 006 (RIAA 315). This tablet is one mention of the Mîs-pî & Pit-pî ritual. It was found in 1925 and it dates around 911-612 B.C.

**Pictured below** is the translation of tablet SAA 20 006 (RIAA 315), that mentions the *Mîs-pî & Pit-pî* ritual. Notice that the ritual is actually called the 'washing of the mouth' in line one. Lines 3-13 offer instructions as well as a description of the ritual, as well as the king's role with in it. Though there are portions of the tablet that are fragmented or not translated, from what scholars do have, we can understand that libation of wine and sacrifice of sheep are also part of this ritual. The 'face' in question would be that of the god's.

- (1) [On the 23rd day the king performs] the 'washing of the mouth' [in the main room].
- (2) [... they] p[ut a portable censer] of juniper in the king's hand.
- (3) [The king] enters the house of Dagan [with a rikshaw]. He brings f[orth a portable censer and a torch], lights the censer, [illuminates the face].
  (5) [... in] the courtyard an eating-bowl
- (6) [.....] he offers [...] and returns the eating-bowl
- (7) [.....] he puts [...] on the censer
- (8) [.....] pours wine [...]
- (9) [.....] He 'arouses' the house,
- (10) [.....] performs sheep offerings.
  (11) He seats [the chanters].
- (12) He collects [...],
- (13) sacrifices [... spi]cy grains,





The Mis-Pi ritual was a common ritual used in both Neo-Assyria, Babylon, and other parts of Mesopotamia. The Opening of the Mouth and the Washing of the Mouth rituals were two different rituals that worked hand-in-hand with one another. These rituals are about purifying and allowing statues of deities and gods to be able to speak, hear, taste, and smell. In a sense, these rituals bring the god 'to life' within it's statue base. According to Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, professor of archaeology and Ancient Near East studies at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, "Mouth-Opening" was achieved by applying various fragrant substances such as ghee, honey, cypress on the mouth of the statue in order to bring the god's senses to the surface. The "Mouth-Washing" ritual was completed subsequent to the "Mouth-Opening" ritual, and it compromised of cleaning the statue with water in order to purify the god. The purpose of the second ritual is to allow the god to become the statue, itself. These rituals hold significance, not only for their role in Neo-Assyrian society, but because anything containing these rituals was written down. Mentions of the *Mis-Pi* ritual are seen in royal inscriptions and instructional texts. The ritual itself took place over two days and was led by a priest, who paraded the statue then completed the ritual in a reed hut, according to Kim Benzel, curator of Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The priest would perform the act of vivification to the god. Though the human actors are assisting the god, it is the god himself who is bringing himself to life. This ritual is just one of the many examples that illustrate the relationship between religious ritual and Assyrian kings. Every king preformed this ritual in order to serve his gods and 'bring them to life." It was his duty to keep the gods clean, safe and purified. This ritual also illustrates the close connection that the king has with the divine, as not any average person could perform this ritual. The king alone, along with a special priest had this important duty to open and wash the mouth of the gods. The ritual established and cemented his power as a Neo-Assyrian leader as the gods put their trust into him. The Mis-Pi ritual was a crucial aspect of Neo-Assyrian kingship and Neo-Assyrian religion.



The Neo-Assyrian empire comprises of large portions of Mesopotamia in modern day countries of Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and other countries along the Levant. Esarhaddon, one of the most prominent kings from the 600 B.C.s was also able to conquer parts of Egypt as well. Imperial expansion was seen as one of the kings' most important duties in order to appease

his gods.

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