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THE BRITISH MUSEUM'S ASHURBANIPAL LIBRARY PROJECT*

By JEANETTE C. FINCKE

The purpose of the British Museum's Ashurbanipal Library Project is to investigate the content of the significant tablet collection that this Assyrian king assembled for his royal library. The initial project is focused on the Babylonian texts in order to establish the compositions involved and their relation to the rest of the Kouyunjik Collection and to the collecting activities of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC).

The examination of the Babylonian texts of Ashurbanipal's library is a difficult task. Whoever is familiar with the Nineveh texts knows that the tablets were originally stored in four different buildings (see Fig. 1): in the South-West Palace, in the North Palace, and in the vicinity of the temples of Ištar and Nabû, with some additional find spots on and off the mound Kouyunjik. It is the tablet collection of the South-West Palace that formed the library of Ashurbanipal, but the excavation reports of Nineveh very seldom refer to the places where the tablets were found. To reconstruct the different libraries and archives is a very time-consuming task and beyond the possibilities of the six-month timetable for this project. Therefore, for the time being, I decided to consider the Babylonian literary tablets and all legal documents written during the reign of Ashurbanipal and his predecessors as coming from one place, namely Ashurbanipal's library or libraries at Nineveh.

While surveying the approximate figure of 26,000 tablets and fragments that the British excavators unearthed in Nineveh I entered the genre and content of the Babylonian texts in a database, together with a short description of the fragments, e.g. shape, colour, number of columns, lines and dividing lines. This database includes information on about 4290 tablets and fragments, of which 610 have already been rejoined to other fragments. Therefore, until now, the total number of Babylonian texts and fragments excavated in Nineveh is about 3680 — or in other words about one-seventh of all of the British Museum's Nineveh collection. The database I created also serves as a basis for collecting all texts of the same kind in order to identify joining fragments.

First, I would like to give a brief description of the information obtained from the written sources on Babylonian tablets and scribes during the Neo-Assyrian period prior to the creation of the Ashurbanipal libraries, and then to compare this information with the preliminary results of my content analysis of the excavated Babylonian Nineveh texts.

A fragmentary letter to the king tells us “[when] our writing boards had been [tak]en out they were [brou]ght to Marduk-apla-iddina”.¹ This letter was written in Nippur, most probably by the governor, the *šandabakku*-official, and reflects an event of Sargon II's reign. We do not know how many writing-boards were taken away or who owned them — they might have belonged to private scholars or even to the temple library of Dur-anki — but this reference might indicate that Marduk-apla-iddina anticipated the Assyrian effort to obtain the written knowledge of Babylonia. He might have tried to prevent this by collecting the writing-boards himself and storing them in a safe place.

After Marduk-apla-iddina II went into exile to Elam in 710 BC Sargon II ascended the Babylonian throne. It was Sargon II (721–705 BC)² or his successor Sennacherib (704–681 BC)³ who gave an order to a Babylonian scholar in his service concerning *lē'u ša ekurri* “a writing-

* This is a slightly revised version of the paper I gave at the 49e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in London as an interim report on the project. I would like to thank the staff of the Department of the Ancient Near East of the British Museum for their support, especially Christopher Walker, who initiated this part of the “Ashurbanipal Library Project”, and St John Simpson, who corrected my English in the original version of the paper. I am very much indebted to the Townley Group of the Friends of the British Museum for funding the project.

¹ CT 54, 451 (79-7-8, 257) rev. 1–3: *ù GIŠ.DA.MEŠ-n[i ki-i]*

(2) [*ù-še-š*]u-nu a-na ^{md}AMAR.UTU-IBILA-SUM-[n]a (3) [*ul-te-b*]i-lu; see Manfred Dietrich, *WdO* 4 (1967–8) 86–7 (A VI 1b), and id., *The Babylonian Correspondence of Sargon and Sennacherib*, *SAA* XVII, 2003, 165 (No. 201).

² Leroy Waterman, *Royal Correspondence of the Assyrian Empire* 1, 1930, 360–1 (No. 516); Karen Radner (ed.), *PNAE* 1.II: B–G, 1999, 312; Dietrich, *SAA* XVII 43, see p. xxxv.

³ Dietrich, *WdO* 4 (1967–8) 90; Vera Chamaza, *Die Omnipotenz Aššurs. Entwicklungen in der Aššur-Theologie unter den Sargoniden Sargon II., Sanherib und Asarhaddon*, *AOAT* 295, 2002, 308–9 (No. 65).

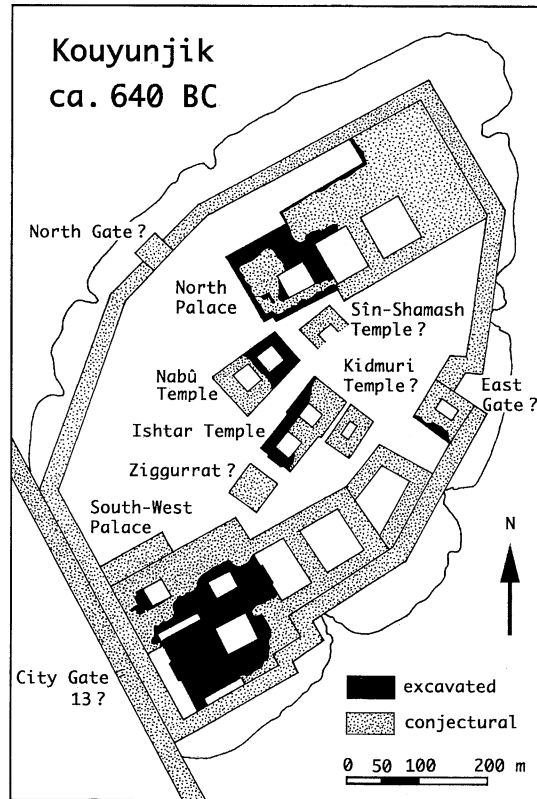


Fig. 1. Kouyunjik. Sketch with restorations after J. E. Reade, *RIA* 9 5./6. Lieferung, 2000, article “Ninive (Nineveh)”, drawn by J. C. Fincke

board of the temples”,⁴ commanding him to make a list of all temples. Bēl-iddina, the scholar in charge, wrote an interim report to the king describing the regions of Babylonia he had already checked and the lists he had made and sent to the king. He also indicated that he was afraid to continue his inspection further to the south of Babylonia, to the villages of Dēr and Nippur, because it was much too dangerous for him to go there as an official in the Assyrian king’s service without further proof of authorization.⁵ The order to make a list of the Babylonian temples might have been given for administrative reasons,⁶ but it could also have been given with respect to auditing the tablets of the Babylonian temple libraries.

During the reign of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), the son and successor of Sennacherib, several Babylonian scholars were in the king’s service. In those days the Assyrian palace was the only institution that was able to guarantee a position for a scribe or scholar on a fairly long-term basis. Esarhaddon also kept at least eighteen young Babylonians in one of his Ninevite palaces in order to teach them the scribal art, if necessary under compulsion like Ninurta-gimilli, the son of the *šandabakku* of Nippur, who “has been put in irons”.⁷ Some of these students were sons of high officials or even sheikhs of Babylonia. They had obviously been taken as hostages to be educated in Assyria. Later they might have entered the king’s service as loyal officials, some of whom might even have later returned to their native country, as is known to have happened from the royal inscriptions. However, the fact that Esarhaddon not only educated them in the Assyrian ideology but also let them learn the scribal art is remarkable. These hostages were privileged. A goldsmith of the queen’s household, who wanted his son to enjoy the same privilege and therefore bought

⁴ *ABL* 516 (81-7-27, 31) = *SAA* XVII 43, 6: *āš-šu GIŠ.le-u₅-um šá É.KUR.MEŠ.*

⁵ *Ibid.* rev. 6–9: *GIŠ.le-u₅-um (7) liš-šá-tar šá la LUGAL pal-ḫa-ku-ma (8) a-na BĀD-AN.KI ù NIBRU.KI (9) ul al-lak it-ti dul-li-ia* “Let a writing-board be written, because without the king I am in fear and I will not proceed to Dēr and

Nippur with my work.”

⁶ Dietrich, *SAA* XVII 43, describes the letter as “Inspection of Work on Temples all over Babylonia”.

⁷ *ABL* 447 (K. 821) = *SAA* XI 156 obv. 10: *si-par-ri AN.BAR šá-kin*; see also Simo Parpola, *Iraq* 34 (1972) 33–4.

a Babylonian to teach divination texts to his son, was reported to the king by an agent.⁸ The agent pointed out that in doing this the goldsmith wanted to have the same rights as the king and the crown prince.

The most instructive information about Ashurbanipal's way of assembling tablets for his royal libraries is given by the king himself. Two copies of his letter order to one of his agents in Borsippa are preserved:⁹ Ashurbanipal demands that his agent (Šadūni) seize all scholars from Borsippa whom he knows in order to "collect all the tablets as many as are in their houses and stored in the temple Ezida".¹⁰ Ashurbanipal not only asked for tablets of various rituals and incantations that were vital to maintain his royal power but also for "rare tablets . . . that are not in Assyria".¹¹ At the end of his letter the king summarizes his instructions as follows: "No one is allowed to hold back a tablet from you; and as for any tablet or instruction that I did not write to you about but you discover to be good for the palace, you must take it as well and send it to me".¹²

Fortunately, we know the answer of the scholars of Borsippa to this or a similar request of Ashurbanipal.¹³ The scholars describe themselves as the "obedient people of Borsippa" who are not negligent of the king's instruction that reads as follows: "Copy the complete scribal corpus that is in the possession of Nabū, my lord, and send it to me".¹⁴ They answer: "We will carry out the instruction on the writing-boards made of *musukkannu* wood. Everything, that you wrote about, apart from what is in the Esaggil, is here".¹⁵

In his letter order Ashurbanipal asked for the original clay tablets but the scholars of Borsippa intended to copy the requested texts on writing-boards. Obviously, the Borsippaean scholars misinterpreted the instruction with the intention of keeping the original tablets in their own temple library. Could the reason for their misinterpretation be the memory of Tukultī-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BC), who ransacked the Babylonian libraries in the late thirteenth century and carried away all the tablets to Aššur?

The Library Records of early 647 BC,¹⁶ even though none of them is complete, give significant information about Ashurbanipal's acquisitions of tablets and writing-boards for the palace libraries of Nineveh (see Table 1): approximately two thousand tablets and three hundred writing-boards were taken from Assyrian and Babylonian private scholars, who gave away compositions they did not need for their professional work. With few exceptions the acquisitions consist of the professional literature of experts in Mesopotamian scientific and religious lore, mainly divination texts, such as extispicy, astrological, terrestrial, physiognomic, dream and birth omens, as well as exorcists' lore, medical texts and lamentations, and also seventeen independent compositions that occur only once in the records. Keeping in mind that the compositions of 74.7% of the tablets are unknown to us, the divination corpus is still the largest one — 20.8% of all tablets mentioned in

⁸ ABL 1245 (83-1-18, 121) = SAA XVI 65.

⁹ CT 22, 1 (BM 25676 and 25678). This letter has been studied by various scholars, see e.g. R. Campbell Thompson, *Late Babylonian Letters*, London 1906, 2–5; François Martin, *Lettres néo-babyloniennes*, Paris 1909, 19–22; Robert H. Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria*, AOS 6, 1935, 179–80 (No. 256); Erich Ebeling, *Neubabylonische Briefe*, München 1949, 1–3; Stephen J. Lieberman in: T. Abusch et al. (eds.), *Lingering over Words. Studies . . . Moran*, HSS 37, Atlanta 1990, 3.

¹⁰ CT 22, 1 obv. 8–10: DUB.MEŠ *ma-la ina É.MEŠ-šū-nu i-ba-āš-šū-ú* (9) ù DUB.MEŠ *ma-la ina é-zi-da šak-nu* (10) *hi-pi-ir-ma*.

¹¹ Ibid. rev. 25, 27–31: *ša a-na LUGAL-ú-ti ta-a-bi* (26) . . . (27) . . . *u mim-ma hi-ših-ti* (28) *i-na É.GAL ma-la ba-šū-ú* ù DUB.MEŠ *aq-ru-tu ša mé-dak-ku-nu-šim-ma* (30) *i-na KUR.aš-šur.ki ia-nu bu-'a-nim-ma* (31) *šu-bi-la-a-ni* "whatever is good for the kingship . . . and whatever is needed in the palace, as much as there is, and rare tablets that are known to you and do not exist in Assyria, search for them and send them to me!"

¹² CT 22, 1 rev. 33–9: *man-ma* (34) *tu-pi ul i-kil-lak-ka u ki-i* (35) *mim-ma tu-pi u ni-pi-šū ša a-na-ku* (36) *la āš-pu-rak-ku-nu-šū-u ta-tam-ra-ma* (37) *a-na É.GAL-ia ta-a-bu* (38) *it-ti-'im-ma i-šā-nim-ma* (39) *šu-bi-la-a-ni*.

¹³ BM 45642 (81-7-6, 35). I learned about this text from an unpublished manuscript kindly sent to me by Eckart Frahm (Eckart Frahm, Headhunter, Bücherdiebe und wandernde Gelehrte: Anmerkungen zum altorientalischen Wissenstransfer im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr., to appear in CDOG 4 "Wissenskultur im Alten Orient. Weltanschauung, Wissenschaften, Techniken, Technologien; 4. Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 20.–22. Februar in Münster"). The text itself will be published in *Iraq 67/1* by Andrew George, who gave a paper on this subject at the 49e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, 2003, in London. In S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria 1995*, Helsinki 1997, 71–2, n. 9, George gave the first information about this text and transliterated and translated some lines.

¹⁴ BM 45642 (81-7-6, 35) obv. 9: *um-ma kul-lat LÚ.DUB.SAR-tú š[á]š[á] NÍG.GA^dAG EN-ia šu-tu-ra-a' šu-bil-la-ni*.
¹⁵ Ibid. obv. 12–13: *n[a-aš-pa]r-tum* (12) *'ina UGU' GIŠ.DA ša GIŠ.MES.KAN.NU nu-pal<-lu>* . . . UL DÙ.A.[B]i (13) *[š]á taš-pu-ru al-la ša ina É.SAG.GÍL ia-a-nu*.

¹⁶ S. Parpola, *JNES* 42 (1983) 1–29; SAA VII 49–56. The following statistical study uses only the records published as SAA VII 49–52, because the others are much too fragmentary to give significant information.

TABLE 1. Four Library Records from Nineveh (SAA VII 49, 50, 51, 52)

Compositions and series	Number of tablets	Number of writing-boards	Percentage of the total number of	
			tablets	wr.-boards
Terrestrial omens (<i>šumma ālu</i>)	161	1	10.9	0.7
Astrological omens (<i>enūma anu enlil</i>)	73	3	5.0	2.2
Extispicy (<i>bārūtu</i>)	0	69	–	50.4
Physiognomic omens (<i>alandimmū</i>)	39	1	2.7	0.7
Dream omens (<i>iškār zaqīqu</i>)	16	0	1.1	–
Birth omens (<i>šumma izbu</i>)	7	10	0.4	6.8
Omen series <i>iqqur ipuš</i>	4	0	0.3	–
Hemerologies (<i>ūmē tābūti</i>)	3	0	0.2	–
(Total: divination texts)	305	81	20.8	59.1)
Exorcists' lore (<i>āšipūtu</i>)	18	4	1.2	2.9
Medical texts (<i>bulṭē</i>)	7	27	0.5	19.7
Lamentations (<i>kalūtu</i>)	2	12	0.1	8.8
Various compositions	40	13	2.7	9.5
Unknown compositions and series	1097	0	74.7	–
(Total of the known compositions)	372	137	25.3	100.0)
Total:	1469	137	100.0	100.0
	(+ 188 tablets and wr.-boards)			

TABLE 2. Babylonian texts of Ashurbanipal's libraries

Type	Number
Legal documents	1128
Literary texts	1331
Divination: 759 library texts — 636 archival texts	
Not yet clearly identified as well as cylinders, cones, and the like	1221
Total	3680

the records but 82.0% of those ones of which we can identify the compositions — followed by the exorcists' lore, which is 1.2% of all tablets but 4.8% of the known compositions.

The Babylonian texts of the Ashurbanipal libraries can be separated into two different groups (see Table 2): the literary compositions such as divination, religious, lexical, medical, mathematical and historical texts as well as epics and myths, on the one hand, and the legal documents on the other hand. The group of the legal documents covers letters, contracts and administrative texts and consists of 1128 Babylonian tablets and fragments. Within the group of the literary compositions, of which 1331 tablets and fragments are classified so far, the divination texts can further be differentiated between 759 so-called library texts, such as tablets of the various omen series and their commentaries, and 636 so-called archival texts such as omen reports, oracle enquiries and the like. Although I believe this differentiation is a modern one and the Assyrian libraries stored both kinds of texts in the same library for future reference,¹⁷ I will ignore the so-called archival texts in order to be able to compare the data with those of the library records and other royal libraries (see Table 3).

Within the divination corpus, which is the largest group of the Babylonian Nineveh texts, including more than 57% of all identified literary tablets and fragments, the astrological omen series *enūma anu enlil* has the largest number — one-quarter of all omen texts — followed by the liver omens (*bārūtu*) with 7.7%, and the terrestrial omens of *šumma ālu ina mēlē šakin* with 5.6%. Even in the Library Records these three compositions have the largest number: here the divination corpus makes 82.0% of all known compositions, of which the terrestrial omens form the largest

¹⁷ See e.g. Ernst Weidner, *A/O* 16 (1952–3) 198, and S. Parpola in: K. R. Veenhof (ed.), *Cuneiform Archives and Libraries* (CRRAI 30), PIHANS 57, Leiden 1986, 224.

TABLE 3.

<i>Compositions and series</i>	<i>4 Library Records from Nineveh: tablets (W = writing-boards)</i>			<i>Ashurbanipal's libraries: Babylonian library texts</i>	
Astrological omens (<i>enūma anu enlil</i>)	73	(6 W)	19.6%	336	25.2%
Extispicy (<i>bārūtu</i>)	0	(76 W)	–	103	7.7%
Terrestrial omens (<i>šumma ālu</i>)	161	(1 W)	43.3%	74	5.6%
Physiognomic omens (<i>alandimmū</i>)	39	(1 W)	10.5%	2	0.2%
Dream omens (<i>iškār zaqīqu</i>)	16	(0 W)	4.3%	0	0.0%
Birth omens (<i>šumma izbu</i>)	9	(10 W)	2.4%	5	0.4%
Omen series <i>iqqur ipuš</i>	4	(0 W)	1.1%	5	0.4%
Hemerologies (<i>ūmē ṭābūti</i>)	3	(0 W)	0.8%	5	0.4%
(Total: divination texts)	305	(81 W)	82.0%	759	57.0%
Akkadian prayers				52	3.9%
Akkadian incantations/rituals (<i>āšipūtu</i>)				145	10.9%
Various Akkadian religious texts				18	1.3%
(Total: Akkadian religious texts)				215	16.1%
Sum. prayers (<i>balag, eršahunga, šuila</i> etc.)				9	0.7%
(Total: Sumerian religious texts)				28	2.1%
Bilingual prayers/cult songs				25	1.9%
Bil. incantations/rituals (<i>āšipūtu</i>)				67	5.0%
(Total bilingual religious texts)				186	14.0%
Religious texts in “archaic characters”				4	0.3%
(Total religious texts)				429	32.2%
of which exorcists' lore (<i>āšipūtu</i>)	18	(4 W)	4.8%	212	15.9%
of which lamentations (<i>kalūtu</i>)	2	(12 W)	0.5%	105	7.9%
Medical texts (<i>bultē</i>)	7	(27 W)	1.9%	81	6.1%
Lexical series	6	(0 W)	1.6%	15	1.1%
Syllabaries in archaic characters				21	1.6%
Epics and myths				19	1.4%
Historical texts (royal inscriptions, treaties)				19	1.4%
Mathematical texts				1	0.1%
17 independent compositions	34	(13 W)	9.1%		
Total:	372	(137 W)	100%	1331	100%

group with more than 43%, and the astrological omens amount to 19.6%. The extispicy corpus is not represented by any tablet, but by 50.4% of the writing-boards; all of them were acquired in Babylonia, from Bīt-Ibâ. Certainly, we must expect that a large share of Ashurbanipal's libraries consisted of writing-boards and not clay tablets.

The second largest group of the Babylonian tablet collection is the religious corpus with more than 32%. As in the Library Records, the *āšipūtu*-texts have the largest number of the religious texts with almost 16%, followed by the lamentations with almost 8%. These are the texts Ashurbanipal ordered his agent to assemble in Borsippa and send to him.

The third largest group of the Babylonian tablets consists of medical texts with 6%. This group is just slightly smaller than the group of the lamentations with almost 8%. Contrary to this, the number of lamentations within the Library Records is only one-third of the number of the medical texts. Having said so, I must again indicate that we do not know the compositions of almost 75% of the Library Records, and that tablets and writing-boards were acquired from both Assyrian and Babylonian scholars as well. Therefore the given percentage must be considered as a hint at the ratio of these compositions to each other and not as a real and reliable number of the acquisition.

Another group of literary texts is the lexical texts and sign lists. There are twenty fragments of different tablets with archaic cuneiform signs arranged according to the syllabary A, whereas one

is arranged according to the syllabary B. The Assyrian scribes of the Ashurbanipal Libraries needed sign lists to be able to read the old inscriptions and most of these lists were written by Babylonian scribes! The other groups of Babylonian written texts in Nineveh are the epics and myths and the historical texts with 1.4% each. There is only one mathematical text that is said to be excavated at Nineveh.

The information of the written sources about the tablets from Babylonia and from Babylonian scribes, in combination with the first data of my content analysis of the excavated Babylonian Nineveh texts, leads so far to the following preliminary observations.

First: According to Ashurbanipal's letter order the initial motive for requiring Babylonian tablets to create his libraries must have been to gain possession of rituals and incantations that were vital to maintain his royal power. The large quantity of omen texts within the Babylonian written texts reflects the same idea. Therefore the main share of the Ninevite libraries consists of divination and religious texts. This is also the case within the library dating from around the middle of the twelfth century BC in Aššur, said once to have been the library of Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BC) but later included in the Neo-Assyrian library of the temple of Aššur. In contrast to Ashurbanipal's libraries, within the Middle Assyrian library the group of lexical texts and vocabularies is as large as the group of divination. The Neo-Assyrian Libraries of Aššur also included the Middle-Babylonian tablets Tukultī-Ninurta I carried away in the late thirteenth century BC. One might ask why Ashurbanipal asked for tablets from Babylonia and why he only acquired a few from Aššur, but the likely reason is that he considered the tablets from Babylonia to be original documents, and therefore much more reliable.

Secondly: The intention of the Borsippean scholars to copy the requested tablets on wooden writing-boards instead of clay tablets reflects the situation in the Ashurbanipal Libraries. There are just a few tablets that were certainly written in Babylonia and were therefore imported. All the other tablets written in Babylonian script could just as well have been written by those Babylonian scribes in the service of the king's palace in Assyria.

Thirdly: The Neo-Assyrian Library Records, even though they are not complete, prove together with the answer of the Borsippean scholars that Ashurbanipal's libraries must have contained a large quantity of writing-boards. Some of them were copied by Assyrian scribes, as the colophons of the tablets indicate. Others might not have been copied at all and therefore are lost forever. It is therefore sadly clear that we can only estimate the exact content and full significance of Ashurbanipal's libraries.