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THE ASSASSINATION OF SENNACHERIB

By E. B. W. CHAPPELOW, F.R.A.S., F.R.S.A.

THE publication, in 1931, by the late Dr. R. Campbell Thompson of the prism of Esarhaddon, which he discovered at Nineveh in 1927/8, has re-opened the whole question of the author of Sennacherib's assassination and lends colour to the theory that it was really Esarhaddon himself.

When Sargon II ascended the throne of Assyria in 722 B.C., Babylonia was torn in twain by the anti-Assyrian party which supported as a deliverer the Chaldean Merodachbaladan (whose first appearance was in the reign of Tiglathpileser III, 745-727; the Biblical Pul), and the pro-Assyrian party, the priestly class, who were influenced by a community of culture and Sargon's conciliation of them.

Sargon at once had to face Merodachbaladan in alliance with Elam and was defeated at Dûrilu and compelled to leave the Chaldean undisputed King of Babylonia for twelve years.

Then in 710-709 B.C. he renewed the contest, expelled Merodachbaladan, and ruled as governor (*shakkanaku*) of Babylon until his death.

At Sennacherib's accession in 705 B.C., nominees of all parties, Assyria, Chaldea, Elam, and the native Babylonians themselves, had reduced the country to utter confusion, which was made worse confounded by the revolt of Hezekiah of Judah fomented by the Chaldean king.

In 689 B.C., in the face of constant revolt and the loss of a brother and two sons in Babylonian affairs, Sennacherib destroyed Babylon and deported the statue of Bêl-Merodach to Assyria, thus alienating the priesthood. For the rest of his reign he ruled Babylon through governors and appointed his younger son Esarhaddon to the post in 681, the year, be it noted, of his assassination.

Such being the political background, let us examine the extant evidence.

In his 1927 prism (Col. i, 1-18 - Col. ii, 11 1 and 2 and 8-11) Esarhaddon states that he was a younger son and had been appointed to the succession by Sennacherib with divine approval, that king having compelled the Assyrian people, including

Esarhaddon's two brothers, to take the oath of allegiance to him; that his brothers then fomented scandal and instigated rebellion against him behind his back, that Ashur and Merodach caused him to take refuge in a secret place and that his brothers then fought each other for the crown, but were helped neither by the people nor the gods.

Esarhaddon then says that he marched in haste towards Nineveh and met and defeated his brothers in Khanigalbe (the ancient Mitanni). The enemy troops and the Assyrian people acknowledged him as king, whilst the two brothers deserted their troops and fled to an unknown land. Esarhaddon then entered Nineveh and mounted the throne, and later, he says, heavily punished and destroyed the seed of the troops who had supported his brothers.

I.—THE PLACE OF THE ASSASSINATION: BABYLON, NINEVEH OR ASHUR.

(a) *Babylon.*

Dr. Thompson points out that Schmidt (*Asarhaddons Staatshalterschaft*, 109) had already suggested that the temple of Nisroch in II Kings, xix, 36 & 37, should be read as the temple of Merodach, *i.e.*, Êsagila in Babylon, quoting in support Ashurbanipal's statement in the Rassam Cylinder, Col. iv 11, 70 *et seq.*, that he gave the dismembered limbs of the rest of the people (of Babylon) who had cast down his grandfather, Sennacherib, among the colossi, as food for dogs, etc. A. Jeremias (*The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East*, 1911) agrees with this and also suggests that there is a definite break in the sense between vv. 36 & 37 of II Kings xix, so that it is not implied that the temple of Nisroch was in Nineveh.

The Rassam Cylinder is the only native inscription which mentions a definite scene for the murder, *i.e.*, Babylon.

(b) *Nineveh.*

In an epigraph of Ashurbanipal in *Cuneiform Texts (British Museum)*, xxxv, 15, a deity, Ishtar of Arbela or Ashur, says "By my great help thou did'st defeat their warriors, the rest alone in my hand . . . in Nineveh, the city of thy rule, with the sword thou did'st destroy them", and Ungnad (*Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, xxxv, 50, 1923) claims this as referring to the murderers and as proving that Nineveh was the scene of the

crime, and that, as Esarhaddon's brothers were in Nineveh, the guilt was theirs.

The inscription, however, is, it may be submitted, very indefinite and inconclusive.

Dr. Thompson points out that if Nisroch be Merodach, then the Temple must be Êsagila in Babylon and not the small Temple of Nebo and Merodach in Nineveh where he found no colossi, and that the murderers must have been Babylonians or have come from Babylon as otherwise Ashurbanipal would not have devoted Babylonians to Sennacherib's shade, but adds that the people mentioned by Ashurbanipal in *Cuneiform Texts*, xxxv were possibly not the same as those mentioned by him in the Rassam Cylinder.

As both these inscriptions refer to Ashurbanipal's own conquest of Babylon in 648 during the civil war with his brother Shamash-shumûkin, the persons mentioned were of a generation subsequent to that of the murderers of 681 B.C.

Dr. Thompson further claims that the Assyrian tradition, according to these two texts, was that the crime had been committed by Babylonians in Babylon or from Babylon, and that as Esarhaddon was Crown Prince in Babylon in 681 B.C., this strengthens the evidence against him.

The civil war between the two brothers must have been *after* the assassination, and is confirmed by the *Babylonian Chronicle*, Col. iii, 11, 36-37, which merely states that his *son* killed Sennacherib in a revolt which continued in Assyria from the 2nd to the 18th Adar, when Esarhaddon succeeded, but it is not clear whether this refers to the strife between Esarhaddon's two brothers or to that between them and Esarhaddon.

(c) *Ashur.*

This is a possible site according to the letter K.82-2-4, 65, published by Leroy Waterman in his *Assyrian Royal Letters*, from an unknown writer to an unknown addressee. Waterman describes it as a report on the confusion in Ashur incident to the murder of Sennacherib, perhaps with the hope of assisting Esarhaddon's accession.*

It states that the wife of the king's prefect had been made to enter the palace, but when they heard that the king (un-

* It must be stated that Olmstead ("Western Asia in the Days of Sargon," 1908, p. 158) puts forward the suggestion, but only the suggestion, that this refers to the body of Sargon who fell in battle against the Cimmerians.

named) was dead, the prefect made her leave it. A dirge was then chanted before the prefect and his chief officers who wore red robes and golden rings. A broken passage follows with a reference among others to a certain Danai, who is said to have loosened the fastening of the great gate and to have brought forward something (according to Waterman, the dead, *i.e.*, Sennacherib) and it is then stated that they went forth to the dead to weep. The prefect and his men were wrapped in mantles(?) and stood with iron daggers drawn. The people (?) were afraid and appealed to Hâmbî the courier, and someone, apparently Hâmbî, entered the palace and went unto the fastening, saying "Open the door", and they laid hold of the prefect, and he (Hâmbî?) slew the sons of Zazaki.

If, as Waterman suggests, the king mentioned in this letter is Sennacherib, the dead body referred to was presumably his. If so, was he killed there or did his body merely rest in Ashur on its way from Babylon to Nineveh, or were the kings of Assyria buried in Ashur?*

Was the prefect acting as official guardian of the body or had he himself committed the murder at the instigation of Adramelech and Sharezer or Esarhaddon? If the latter, were his accomplices the sons of Zazaki, whom Hâmbî (?) slew?

That he should have overawed the people of a purely Assyrian city is strange unless he was the guilty party in the employ of non-Assyrians, perhaps Babylonians, or the feeling against him, if he had acted on the instructions of the Assyrian party at Nineveh, might have been one of natural indignation at the assassination of the national king. On the other hand the slanders of which Esarhaddon complains and the fact, which he himself admits, that he had to go into hiding, make it possible that the prefect, if guilty, had acted for him and the Babylonian party. And who was Hâmbî? Was he an emissary of Esarhaddon who had come to encompass the downfall of a hostile pro-Assyrian official, merely an ordinary State courier who happened to be on the spot, or had he been sent from Nineveh to stir up feeling against the tool of the Babylonizing Esarhaddon? If Waterman's suggestion is correct, these queries are legitimate.

The question of locality is bound up with the identification of Nisroch, but no god of this name is known from cuneiform

* We know, from the *Babylonian Chronicle*, on pp. 272-275 of Band II of Schrader's *Keilinschriftliche Bibliothek*, 1890, that Kings of Babylon were buried in the palace of Sargon of Agade and others.

sources. He cannot be the Assyrian Nusku whose chief seat was at Kharran. The name has, however, been regarded as composite (Schrader: *Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament*, 1883, and Pinches: *Old Testament in the Light*, p. 129), Pinches' suggestion being that it is a form of *Ashuraku*, just as Nimrod is probably for *Amaruduk* or *Amarudu* in the original Akkadian, *i.e.*, Marduk (Merodach), the initial N being an assimilation to the Hebrew Niphal.

Schrader also pointed out that the Septuagint reads for Nisroch 'Assarach, if this, with Wellhausen, is to be regarded as the proper emendation for the traditional Nasarach or Meserech (*cf.* the Arasche of Josephus), which would support the *Ashuraku* of Pinches.

If this be the case and II Kings be correct, the choice of site rests between Ashur, the chief seat of this god's worship (supporting K.82-2-4, 65 already referred to) and Nineveh, supporting II Kings.

But Thompson and Hutchinson (*A Century of Excavation at Nineveh*, 1929) make no mention of temples of Ashur or Nusku ever having been discovered at Nineveh, which Sennacherib calls (Bellino Cylinder, 1-34) "the city beloved of Ishtar", who was peculiarly associated with it, and whom indeed, coupled with Ashur, he always invokes, whilst the small temple of Nebo and Merodach at Nineveh had no colossi to square with Ashurbanipal's statement, unless there was a private oratory to Ashur in the great "Palace without a Rival", which Sennacherib built there.

Thus of the three possible sites Babylon remains the only one specifically connected with Sennacherib's assassination in the inscriptions.

(2) *The Identity of the Assassin or Assassins.*

According to the cuneiform evidence Sennacherib had six sons, of whom Ashurnâdînhûm, carried captive to Elam in 694 B.C., and Aradbêlit, killed in a Babylonian revolt in 691 B.C., predeceased him.

The names of the other four were Ashurilumuballîṣu, Ashurmunik, Ashursharetir, and Esarhaddon.

Pinches says that ²Ashûrmunik would be better read as Ashurmulik and suggests that he may be Adrammelech, in which Goodspeed, in his *History of the Babylonians and Assyrians*, 1903 supports him, but according to Schrader the Assyrian form of Adrammelech would be *Adarmalik*. Johns (*Ancient*

Assyria, 1912) suggests Ashurshareṭir for Sharezer, but the ending *ezer* would in Assyrian be *utsur* rather than *etir*.

The native sources attribute the assassination to *one* son only and none of Esarhaddon's inscriptions give any names or mention it at all.

Thus the inscription of Nabonidus (556-539), in confirmation of the *Babylonian Chronicle*, merely states that the *son* born of his body slew the king of Mesopotamia (Subartu, *i.e.*, Assyria plus Syria—Pinches) with the sword.

Berosus (3rd century B.C.), who used cuneiform sources, names two sons, but this is not confirmed by any surviving texts. Abydenus and Polyhistor mention only one (according to Abydenus Adramelus, *i.e.*, Adrammelech, who was succeeded by Nergilus (Neriglissor) who was in turn put down by Axerdis (Esarhaddon)). Schrader points out that whereas II Kings xxxv has preserved in Sharezer one part, Abydenus has preserved the other part of the full name *Nergalsharutsur* (Neriglissor), who is, however, not found among Sennacherib's known sons.

V. Floigl (*Cyrus and Herodotus*, Leipzig, 1881, as quoted by Schrader) suggested that Neriglissor might be the eldest son of Ashurnâdinshûm and so the legitimitist heir by descent to the Assyrian crown.

The choice is, therefore, apart from Esarhaddon himself, narrowed down to Ashurmuballitsu, Ashurshareṭir and Ashurmunik, plus perhaps a grandson.

Of the two names given by later writers Adrammelech is consistent throughout, but that of the second varies between the two parts of the composite *Nergalsharutsur*.

It is possible that both Esarhaddon's mother and wife were Babylonian princesses, so that he himself might well be half a Babylonian. Like Sargon, he too favoured the priesthood whom Sennacherib had offended by deporting the statue of Bêl-Merodach, whilst his stay in Babylon had perhaps endeared that immemorial city to him.

If it was his mother, Queen Naqia, through whose influence he supplanted his brothers, his sympathies would naturally induce him to reverse his father's policy towards Babylon and build up for himself a party there as a basis for his struggle for the Assyrian throne. His immediate recognition as King in Babylonia after his father's assassination supports this probability.

It is, therefore, possible that Esarhaddon was, if not the author of the assassination, at least its instigator.

With regard to events in Assyria, although II Kings and later Assyrian sources make no mention of the civil war, except that Adramelus was succeeded by Nergilus, who was put down by Axerdis, the *Babylonian Chronicle* does, although without details. Esarhaddon himself is the only native authority who states that the brothers fought each other, but here again his account, as already summarized, is confused.

In Col. i, 11, 77-79 of the 1927 prism he says the rebel soldiery acknowledged him as king and returned to their allegiance to him, but in l., 82 that his brothers deserted the troops who were helping them, and in Col. ii, 11, 8-11, that he grievously punished the rebel troops who had been helping his brothers, and destroyed their seed. If the troops who, Esarhaddon says, deserted to him, were those he subsequently punished, then he convicts himself of perfidious savagery.

Esarhaddon says that the Assyrian people did not support his brothers and Berosus that they were driven out by the citizens of Nineveh. But what does Esarhaddon actually mean by the Assyrian people? The hardy peasants and farmers who had formerly formed the backbone of the army and the State, had been bled white by generations of warfare, so that the army at this time included a large number of mercenaries. Apart from these, there would, of course, be the mercantile, priestly and official classes. It would be interesting to know with what troops Esarhaddon drove his brothers out.

Was it with the Assyrian garrisons of Babylonia plus native Babylonian troops? What proportion of the regular army had he? Did the bulk of the regular army support the brothers in Nineveh as representing the legitimist claims of primogeniture and the Assyrian as opposed to the Babylonian party? The army, presumably officered by Assyrians proper of noble birth under the Crown, was at this date the most effective force in the State, whilst the mercantile classes would naturally favour strong government rather than a struggle for the Crown either between the brothers and Esarhaddon or between the brothers themselves.

But the statements of Esarhaddon and Berosus as to the Assyrian people and the citizens of Nineveh have little bearing on the subject under review, because it is obvious that they only took action when the day had already gone in Esarhaddon's

favour and, therefore, turned to the rising sun. The officers of the army or such part of it as was in Assyria would very probably have instinctively opposed the pro-Babylonian Esarhaddon, especially if he were suspected of Sennacherib's assassination, whilst the rank and file, before the issue was decided, would naturally follow whoever paid them. Again, the oath of allegiance to Esarhaddon exacted by Sennacherib, being based on an injustice and no doubt exacted by *force majeure*, would have little binding effect, especially when Sennacherib had been assassinated and if it was suspected that the author of the crime was the man whom he had so conspicuously favoured above the heads of his elder brothers. We are thus again, in the absence of clearer written evidence, faced with an insoluble problem.

Unless it was a case of thieves falling out, Esarhaddon's statement that his brothers fought each other certainly militates against the statement in II Kings that they assassinated their father in concert, which it would surely have been to Esarhaddon's interest to broadcast. But if they did not, then the real assassin, whom Esarhaddon does not deem it advisable to mention, must have been a third party who himself or through his agents acted far from Nineveh, in fact, according to Ashurbanipal, in Babylon.

This would account for the confusion in Nineveh on receipt of the unexpected news, just as the letter K.82-2-4, 65 may mirror a similar confusion in Ashur.

Esarhaddon is guilty of yet another contradiction, for after saying that his brothers were at each other's throats, he represents them as united against himself. On the other hand their supersession in favour of Esarhaddon gave them a very strong motive for assassinating Sennacherib and for conspiracy and violence against Esarhaddon.

Nevertheless the evidence extant is far from exculpating Esarhaddon from at least complicity in the crime and does not allow us to accept II Kings as it stands.

But this faces us with yet another problem. How did the attribution of guilt for Sennacherib's assassination to one or two of Esarhaddon's brothers (both historically unidentifiable with any certainty) and not to himself become so current in the West as to be adopted in II Kings ?

Of course, Esarhaddon's account, being that of the victor and next King of Assyria, would be the official although not necessarily the true one. As the *Babylonian Chronicle* states, the civil war lasted only seventeen days, and as Esarhaddon's version

does not mention the murder at all, accounts received in the West would, unless Esarhaddon left a subsequent version which has not survived, be based on rumour, and in so swift a succession of events, the rumour would be very confused.

No Assyrian official or governor after Esarhaddon's victory would dare to ascribe the guilt to him who now held the power and the glory even if he knew that guilt to be a fact; he would have nothing to gain and all to lose.

In the fashion of all Assyrian kings, Esarhaddon would allow the publication of no official statement containing anything derogatory to himself, just as the native records contain no account of the plague which compelled the Assyrian army of Sennacherib to withdraw from before Jerusalem, and just as we may never know whether Shalmaneser V died from natural causes or violence in the camp before Samaria.

There are, as I hope I have shown, grave suspicions against Esarhaddon, and what more natural, when the princes in Nineveh had failed, than for them to be saddled by the conqueror, not in any State inscription, but by more subtle and probably verbal methods of propaganda, with responsibility for that crime which he may himself have committed and to avenge which they may have taken up arms? Great have been the opportunities and powers of autocratic governments in all ages to subvert the truth.

I have endeavoured to state fairly the pros and cons in this baffling problem, but unless further excavation yields unexpected light, a baffling problem it must remain.

"The above paper is published without discussion, for those whom it may interest. The Council should not be held to endorse the views expressed."