The Expression “Non-Lord of a Throne” in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions  
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1. Introductory remarks

The phenomenon of creating enemy images is timeless and universal.¹ In this activity, an abnormal “Other” is negatively juxtaposed in relation to a normal “Self”, not the least in political discourse. In various situations - notably ones that involve the topic of colonialism - a “subaltern” is constructed, that is an agent who is both inferior (thus “sub”) and different in an essence-based, negative way (thus “altern”). Through the developing of images of “alterity”, various oppressive systems can be justified. In this way, a colonial power can legitimate its possession of foreign lands and resources.²

Enemy images are expressed not the least in Assyrian royal inscriptions in which Assyrian kings seek to legitimate their coercion and imperialist wars and ambitions. As a doctoral student, focusing on this text corpus, I became highly aware of this. One enemy image that I encountered, and which I decided to come back to when I had more time, was the curious term or epithet “non-royal person” (or literally “non-lord of a throne”)³ (lā bēl kussî), applied to some foreign rulers in Early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions.⁴ As far as I know, the relevant epithet has not been the object of a special study before. I went on to explore the meanings of this presumably negatively-laden term,⁵ and in this paper I present the results of the ensuing investigation. The contexts of the relevant expression, more precisely the textual passages in which the expression occurs, was highlighted in my analysis and search for meanings.⁶

In my investigation process, I searched for further attestations by surveying the preserved Assyrian royal inscriptions (as defined in Grayson 1987: 4), as these are conveyed in up-to-date publications.⁷ I did this both through reading the relevant books and through using the developed, digitalized search tools in the field.⁸ As for the books, I naturally refer to the RIMA-volumes (RIMA 1-3) concerning the Old, Middle, and Early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and to the RINAP-volumes (RINAP 1, 3-4) regarding the Late Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. Regarding the inscriptions of Sargon II (RINAP 2 is not yet published), I looked at the publications of his inscriptions from Dur-Sharrukin (Fuchs 1994) as well as at those (prism fragments) from Assur and Nineveh (SAAS 8). I also examined Sargon II’s “letter to a god” which contains this ruler’s famous narration of his eighth campaign (Mayer 1983), and the highly rhetorical, so-called “Assur Charter” (Saggs 1975). As for

¹ This article is a part of my research program “The Enemy in Assyrian Propaganda”.
² These observations are naturally a part of post-colonial theory, as exemplified in Said 1978.
³ As translated in Grayson 1996: 69, 81. Yamada (2000: 222 n. 502) gives “one not of the royal throne” or “one who is not suitable to the throne”, while Saggs (1975: 15) in his turn translates the term “not the (rightful) throne-holder”. A German translation is dem der Thron nicht zustand (Fuchs 1994: 326).
⁴ The cuneiform writing of the term is la EN⁴GU.ZA (e.g. RIMA 3:A.0.102.14:148).
⁵ This is e.g. argued by Yamada (2000: 222 n. 502) who claims that the relevant term “expresses a value judgment with a negative connotation”, not the least in its occurrences in omen texts in the meaning “one who is not suitable to the throne will seize the throne” (lā bēl kussî kussā iṣabbat).
⁶ Rather than the semantics and etymology of the words that build up the expression, namely the negative particle lā, the noun bēlu (lord), and the noun kussî (throne).
⁷ I also checked whether there is a “positive” version of the expression (i.e. a bēl kussî) attested as a divine or royal epithet (Tallqvist 1938: 47-48, Seux 1967: 55-57) - with negative results.
⁸ The primary search tool that I used was Oracc, available on http://orac.museum.upenn.edu/.
Ashurbanipal and his texts (RINAP 5 is not yet published), I naturally consulted the publication by Borger (1996). I also looked at some important, recent works which present new Assyrian royal inscriptions (CUSAS 17, KAL 3). Although their not being royal inscriptions proper, I also paid attention to the less rhetorical texts of the state archives of Nineveh (SAA 1-19), since their being accessible and relevant.  

2. The attestations

In the following, I will present and discuss all the attestations of the relevant term “non-lord of a throne”. It turned out that the term is only attested for two Assyrian rulers - both of the Neo-Assyrian period - namely Shalmaneser III and Sargon II.

There are four attestations of the epithet in question in the royal inscriptions of Shalmaneser III. They occur in two texts, expressed twice in one certain passage on the Black Obelisk and on one of the king’s statues. The texts embody the final edition of the king’s annals, and the passage narrates events from the king’s twenty-eighth regnal year (RIMA 3:A.0.102.14:146-56, RIMA 3:A.0.102.16:268-86). The said passage is given below in Grayson’s translation (Grayson 1996: 69, 81-82).

In my twenty-eighth regnal year, while I was residing in Calah, a report was sent back to me that the people of the land Patinu had killed Lubarna, their lord, (and) appointed Surri, a non-royal person (lit. “a non-lord of a throne”), as sovereign over them. I issued orders and sent out Dāiān-Āššūr, the field marshal, chief of my extensive army, at the head of my army (and) camp. He crossed the Euphrates in flood and pitched camp at Kinalua, his royal city. Overwhelmed by fear of the radiance of Āššūr, my lord, Surri, a non-royal person, departed this life. The people of the land Patinu took fright in face of the flash of my strong weapons, and laying hold of the sons of Surri, together with the guilty soldiers, they handed (them) over to him. He hung these soldiers on stakes. Sāsi, a man of the land Kurūṣṣā, submitted to him (and) he appointed (him) to sovereignty over them. He received from them silver, gold, tin, bronze, iron, (and) elephant ivory without measure. He created my colossal royal statue (and) erected (it) in Kinalua, his royal city, in the temple of his gods.

In sum, the people of Patina (a Syrian polity), kill their leader Lubarna (who was sanctioned by the Assyrian king), and put another person (not sanctioned by the Assyrian king) named Surri as their leader. Shalmaneser III sends out his field marshal Dajjan-Ashur (this man took care of the king’s last campaigns). The usurper is overwhelmed by “fear of the radiance of Aššūr” (pulḫī melammē ša Aššūr) and dies before (?) the field marshal arrives with his troops. The people of Patina get afraid and try to avoid punishment by extraditing the persons directly responsible for the insurrection. Dajjan-Ashur puts these persons to death, and installs a man named Sasi from a neighbouring (?) polity on the throne of Patina. Dajjan-Ashur receives this man’s tribute, and sees to the erecting of a royal statue in the local temple.

Regarding this man Surri, who is referred to as a “non-lord of a throne” twice in the passage, we do not get much information about him. He obviously had some support,

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9 Conveniently accessible at http://orac.museum.upenn.edu/saa/.
10 As stated by Grayson, the cuneiform, rendering this passage, often gives “I / me” instead of “he / him” (as in the translation), thus alternating between the king and the field marshal as the subject.
not the least from “the guilty soldiers” (šābī bēl ḫūṭi), in Patina, thus his ascent to the throne. It is obvious that one of his shortcomings was that he was not sanctioned by the Assyrian king, and that another of his shortcomings was that he was not of royal descent, being not of a lordly essence, just as indicated by the term “non-lord”. By contrast, the Assyrian king is “being lordly” (bēlāku) (RIMA 2:A.0.99.2:14). Perhaps the telling of the pitiful (?) death of Surri also served to underline the latter idea on lack of royal descent. The passage, literally translated, informs the reader that “he went to the death of his destiny” (mūt šīmtū illīk), presenting him as doomed. Still, his non-support from the Assyrian king is clearly Surri’s primary shortcoming.

There are five attestations of the epithet in the royal inscriptions of Sargon II. It is expressed in two different contexts. One of these contexts is conveyed in a passage of the (displayed) annals and summary inscription from Dur-Sharrukin regarding the king’s eleventh regnal year (Fuchs 1994: 2.3 Ann 241-54, Fuchs 1994: 2.4 Prunk 90-109). The said passage is given below in the translation of Fuchs (1994: 326).

(Was) Azuri (anlagt), den König der Stadt Asdüdu, so plante sein …, den Tribut nich mehr zu bringen, und er sandte den Königen in seiner Umgebung ( Briefe voller) Gehässigkeiten gegen Assyrien. Wegen der Bosheit, die er (damit) begangen hat, hob ich seine Herrschaft über die Bewohner seines Landes auf und setzte Aḫimiti, seine Lieblingsbruder über sie ein. Diese verlogen Hethiter haßen jedoch seine Herrschaft und machten Jadna über sich groß, dem der Thron nicht zustand, (und) der wie sie keine Ehrfurcht vor der Herrschaft kannte.


The second part of this passage is somewhat different in the summary inscription, and is conveyed below through the translation of Fuchs (1994: 348).

In der Wut meines Herzens sammelte ich nicht erst die Masse meines Heeres und brachte auch nicht mein Heerlager zusammen, sondern zog gegen Asdüdu (allein) mit (denjenigen von) meinen Krieger, die mir in Freundes- (wie in Feindes) land nicht von der Seite weichen. Und kaum hörte jener Jamani 11 in der Ferne von meinem Heerzug, da floh er zu Grenze Ägyptens im Bereich des Landes Meluhха, und sein Aufenthaltsort war nicht zu finden. Asdüdu, Gimtu (und) Asdudimmu umzingelte und eroberte ich, seine Götter, seine Frau, seine Söhne,

11 As noted also by Fuchs (1994: 326 n. 307), Jadna and Jamani must be the same person. There is not any room for two “rebels” with very similar names, in the same role and in the same regnal year.

A similar version of this passage is given in the fragmentarily preserved annals from Assur and Nineveh and the reign of Sargon II (SAAS 8: VII.b K.1668+ IV´ 1-48). The passage in question is here given in the translation of Fuchs (1998: 73-74).


In sum, the ruler Azuri of the Philistine city state Ashdod turns and conspires against the Assyrian king and is (somehow) deposed by the latter. Sargon II places Azuri’s brother, Ahimeti, on the throne instead. However, this man gets dethroned by the inhabitants who instead elevate Jamani, the “non-lord of a throne” in question. Sargon II turns hastily (heroically without waiting for reinforcements) against Ashdod and two related cities. He captures them, seizes their booty, install a governor, effectuates cross-deportations, and declares that this reorganized polity now bear the yoke of Ashur and that its population now are counted as Assyrians. In the prism fragments from Assur and Nineveh, it is also narrated that Jamani dug a moat (?) around his city in order to defend his stronghold from the coming Assyrian army. He sought support from the neighbouring powers in the region, first and foremost Egypt. This notwithstanding, Ashdod and its related cities were conquered. After perceiving the already mentioned, fatal “fear of the radiance of Aššur”, Jamani himself is said to have fled by going to Egypt (?), like a fish who hides at the bottom of the sea (!).

Focusing on Jamani, “the non-lord of a throne”, also this ruler seem to fail in the two areas: sanctioning from the Assyrian king and royal descent. As for the former area, his seizing of the throne is not at all described as backed by Sargon II. The people of Ashdod, referred to as “Hittites” (!), replaced Sargon II’s protégé with Jamani. As for the latter area, there are several factors that, beside the focused epithet, testify of the shortcoming in question. He did not “know” (edû) a “respect for” (palḫu) the relevant “lordship” (bēlūtu), quite naturally since he was a “non-lord”. It is also said of Jamani that he cowardly fled when he heard of the coming of the Assyrian army, that “he fled and disappeared” (innabitma lā innamer) on his way to Egypt. He is also described as coming from the lower classes, in the epithet “commoner” (sāb ḫupši), attested alongside the term “non-lord of a throne”. The noun ḫupšu generally means “member of lower class” and specifically “rabble” of soldiers (CAD H: ḫupšu). The class dimension comes across clearly here. Jamani is also described as foolish in his futile projects of digging a moat and seeking alliances. It is e.g. stated that he looked for support from Egypt - a power that (according to Sargon II) was not able to lend this support. Jamani is also portrayed as trusting in his own strength and as unwilling to accept any superior, thus being haughty and godless - a common characterization of Assyrian enemies (Karlsson 2016: 225-26). Lastly, Jamani and his flight is ridiculed by pointing to his panic and likening him to a fish that seeks refuge at the bottom of the sea. He clearly does not behave lordly here. In the case of Jamani, it seems that the dimension of class belonging is stressed.

The second context in question is found in the already quoted summary inscription from Dur-Sharrukin (Fuchs 1994: 2.4 Prunk 33-36). The event that is narrated dates to the king’s second regnal year, as indicated in the annals (Fuchs 1994: 2.3 Ann 23-25). It is here conveyed below, once again in Fuch’s translation (Fuchs 1994: 345).

(Was) Jaubi’di von Amattu (angeht), einen aus dem niederer Volk, dem der Thron nicht zustand, einen böser Hethiter, so sann sein Herz auf die Königsherrschaft über das Land Amattu. Er brachte die Städte Arpadda, Ṣimirra, Damaskus (und) Sameðina gegen mich zum Aufstand, stellte Einmütigkeit (unter ihnen) her und rüstete zur Schlacht. Ich bot die Heeresmassen Assurs auf, umzingelte ihn mitsamt seinen Kämpfern in seiner Lieblingsstadt Qarqaru und nahm

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12 Paradoxically, he is referred to as “king” (šarru) in the prism fragments, implying a respected status. However, the term does not automatically convey this recognition (CAD Š II: šarru).

This event also appears in the so-called Assur Charter, a text in which Sargon II concisely discusses his right to the throne and his reconfirming of the special status of the city of Assur (and Harran) in the Assyrian empire (Saggs 1975: ll. 16-27). The relevant passage is conveyed below in the translation of Saggs (1975: 15).

Ilu-bi’idi, the Hamathite, not the (rightful) throne-holder, unfitted for a palace, who in the shepherding of (his) people did not consider their destiny but for the god Aššur, his land (and) his people sought evil, not good, and treated (them) with insolence, gathered together Arpad (and) Samaria and turned (them) to his side… … he then killed, and did not leave a single person… … I raised my hands to Aššur and in order to conquer Hamath (and) the rebel peoples of the widespread Westland I came before (Him in prayer). Aššur the great god … heard my prayer and received my supplication. I caused my widespread forces to take the way to the Westland. Hamath … … from days of old who had learned the fame … I made the peoples of the Westland bow to my feet, and the spoil therefrom I brought to my city Aššur.

In sum, Sargon II is confronted by a widespread rebellion in the west, instigated by Ilu-bi’idi/Jaubi’idi, the ruler of Hamath in Syria. This ruler had managed to bring together a number of important polities (Arpad, Damascus, Simyra, and Samaria) in a rebellion against their common Assyrian overlord. Sargon II hears of this, receives reconfirmation from the god Ashur on his support, and marches to Qarqar in Syria for a battle with the enemy coalition. Sargon II and his army captures, plunders and burns Qarqar. Chariots and charioteers are seized and incorporated into the Assyrian army. The guilty people are killed, and Ilu-bi’idi himself gets punished by having his skin carved off. The remaining inhabitants subordinate themselves under Sargon II.

Regarding Ilu-bi’idi, “the non-lord of a throne”, also he is portrayed with the dual shortcomings of non-sanctioning from Assyria and the lack of proper royal descent. As for the former shortcoming, it is not really stated how he came to power, but the phrasing that “he set his heart on the kingship of Hamath” (ana šarrūt māt Amatti libbašu ikpud) points to a force of ambition and opportunism. In any case, his position of power is not approved by Sargon II, who calls him “commoner” and “unfitted for the palace” (lā šininti ēkallī). Both of these epithets express his non-lordly status, from an Assyrian point of view. The noun šinintu, in combination with the noun ēkallu, signifies “a person not up to/worthy of the palace” (CAD Š III: šinintu). Ilu-bi’idi is also accused, in his shepherding, of working against his own population (not knowing their best) as well as against the Assyrian god, land, and people. In ethnic terms, Ilu-bi’idi is referred to as the “Hamathite” (Amattû) and (anachronistically) as the “evil Hittite” (Ḫattû lemnu). As the stereotypical Assyrian enemy, he cowardly

13 Jaubi’di and Ilu-bi’idi must be the same person. There is not any room for two “rebels” with very similar names, in the same role, from the same place, and in the same regnal year.
bands together against the sole Assyrian king, employing a chaotic form of violence (Karlsson 2016: 226-27, 238-39). The fate of Ilu-bi’idi was not at all glorious. Sargon II tells us that he was seized and then killed by having his skin carved off. In short, Ilu-bi’idi was illegitimate and lowly in the world view of the Assyrian court.

3. Concluding discussion

In this article, I have focused on the expression “non-lord of a throne” in Assyrian royal inscriptions. It is attested solely in the Neo-Assyrian period and only for three Levantine rulers. The former limitation may be meaningful (Neo-Assyrian annals are relatively rich), but the latter one is probably coincidental, since the west was respected in Assyria, and it would be more likely for other regions to be stigmatized (Karlsson 2016: 189-202). Anyway, I have tried to understand the term using a context-based approach, looking at the passages in which the expression is attested.

First of all, I could conclude (unsurprisingly) that the term or epithet in question is perceived of as altogether negative in Assyrian royal inscriptions. In other words, the “non-lord of a throne” is a bad person or character in Assyrian state ideology.

Secondly, the expression refers to an individual who has seized the throne (in an Assyria-dominated area) without the permission from the Assyrian king. In the Assyrian world view, foreign rulers within the orbit of Assyrian imperialism had to have the blessing of the Assyrian king, otherwise they would be illegitimate (Karlsson 2016: 158-73). Many passages in Assyrian royal inscriptions tell of the Assyrian king placing a trusted, local person on a foreign throne to be his vassal (e.g. RINAP 3/2: Sennacherib 46: 26-27). Foreign potentats “who had placed himself for the kingship (of GN)” (ša ramānšu iškumu ana šarrūt GN) (Borger 1996: A VIII 3-4) or “who sat on his throne without my (the Assyrian king’s) permission” (balum ṭemeja ina kussišu ūšibu) (Fuchs 1994: 2.4 Prunk 84) are highly disapproved of. These examples were seen as direct challenges to the world order, established by the Mesopotamian deities and administered by the Assyrian king. The Assyrian king himself could, without the help of any other human being, seize the throne alone (e.g. RIMA 2:A.0.101.1:i44), since he was the only truly (earthly) legitimate ruler (Karlsson 2016: 147-58).

Thirdly, there is a class-based dimension to the epithet “non-lord of a throne”. The Assyrian kings put much stress on royal genealogy, e.g. by king lists and references to previous kings in epithe sections and in narrations of (re)building. Successors are called upon to carry on the ruling Assyrian king’s work. The Assyrian royal line was pivotal and sacrosanct (Karlsson 2016: 211-23). This makes it understandable why the “non-lords of thrones”, in their usurping and self-made ways, were regarded so negatively in the sources (apart from their opposing the Assyrian state). Moreover, these individuals do not belong to the local higher classes, but they are rather “commoners”, “unfitted for the palace”, and part of the “populace”. The connotation of class-based contempt is thus also a component of the negatively-laden epithet.

To sum it all up at the end, the “non-lord of a throne” in Assyrian royal inscriptions was a bad (1), illegitimate (2), and socially misplaced (3) individual. He was an “Other” and “subaltern” in an imagery of alterity that justified inequality.
4. Abbreviations and list of references


