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Slavery and Personhood in the Neo-Assyrian Empire[1]

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Introduction

In a brief letter that may be dated c. 672–69 BCE, the chief exorcist Adad-šumu-uṣur wrote to the Assyrian king (Esarhaddon) concerning an untested drug, "Let us make those slaves drink first, and let the crown prince drink only afterwards" (SAA 10 191: 11–r. 1). The scenario is one that might plausibly be envisaged for any pre-modern court society. The letter sheds little light on the actual conditions of palace slaves during the Neo-Assyrian period, and yet the basic idea of the slave as a person inferior even to the point of being entirely dispensable is one that will be familiar to students of slavery in all periods of history. Yet, the topic of Neo-Assyrian slavery has received relatively little attention from scholars in comparison with other periods of the region's history, especially the (admittedly better documented) Ur III and Neo-Babylonian eras. The present article examines the nature and function of slavery in Neo-Assyrian society in the light of Orlando Patterson's characterization of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons," put forward in his seminal book, *Slavery and Social Death* (Patterson 1982: 13).

In recent studies of slavery in the Ancient Near East, Orlando Patterson's work has often been cited, and the breadth and vision of his scholarship have been rightly acknowledged, but only rarely have his ideas been engaged with in any depth.[2] The reasons for this lie, I think, mainly in the nature of our sources. We are dealing primarily with cuneiform legal and administrative documents, therefore studies of

slavery have tended to be dominated by discussion of slaves' legal status and the extent to which this can be distinguished from that of other low-status dependent groups, and with their role in the society and economy. The legal-historical approach has played a central role in the discussion, and cross-cultural comparison is problematic. Recent studies of Near Eastern slavery have noted the difficulty of approaching the subject from a more theoretical standpoint (Culbertson 2011: 3), or from a perspective aligned with current interests in issues such as the realities of the slave experience (Seri 2011: 50). Personal stories as such are difficult – in fact, usually impossible – to recover. We lack the narrative accounts of the classical authors: narrative, such as it is, is largely restricted to the royal inscriptions but these are hardly ever concerned with slavery (except in a metaphorical sense, in relation to royal power). Literary compositions such as "The Dialogue of Pessimism," which involves a slave and his master, are interesting but can hardly be taken as a reflection of actual conditions of slavery.[3] The only time we come close to hearing the voice of a Mesopotamian slave is in the relatively few Neo-Babylonian records of court proceedings that deal with legal actions brought by slaves (or ex-slaves) who wished to challenge their conditions of servitude or those of their offspring.[4] These factors have made it difficult for scholars of Mesopotamian slavery to engage in cross-cultural comparison.

Despite the link that has often been made between the Orient and slavery, in particular by the influential ancient historian Moses Finley, it has long been accepted among scholars of the Ancient Near East that slavery played a restricted part in Mesopotamian society at all periods, and that the state did not rely on slavery to any significant extent to fulfil its needs for labor.[5] Having said that, there were at all times various categories of dependent peoples who, while not necessarily slaves, were certainly not free either.[6] These groups could be quite large, though they still made up only a small sector of the overall population: accurate quantification is problematic, if not impossible. The native terminology concerning these different groups is notoriously difficult to elucidate with precision: a single word can be used to refer to many different conditions of servitude and dependency, including – but not limited to – slavery. Thus, it is not for nothing that the words of the late Govert van Driel are often cited in studies of Near Eastern slavery. According to him, the term *urdu* is "a word which may designate everybody from the lowest slave to the most exalted servant of the king, and even the king himself in relation to the gods" (van Driel 1970: 174). The Mesopotamian world-view, then, held that everyone, including the king himself, was subject to a higher authority and this relationship of subordination was expressed using the term for a common slave, *urdu*. Yet cutting across these nested hierarchical relationships implicit in the use of the word *urdu*, in practice a clear distinction was appreciated between free men, who (in theory at least) enjoyed autonomy based on economic self-sufficiency and who were liable to render military or labor service and other obligations to the state, and those in a condition of servitude, who depended on their master for food and other necessities and who were not liable for state conscription or labor service (Von Dassow 2011: 212).

The notion of the "chattel slave" has played a central role in discussions of Ancient Near Eastern slavery, because at various periods slave-sale documents feature prominently among the relevant sources. In spite of Patterson's argument against defining slavery in terms of property, this approach has persisted (and is likely to continue to do so) because it presents us with a neatly circumscribed group of people whom we can confidently judge to have really been slaves, in contrast to others of contested status who occupied the grey areas near the bottom end of the social scale in various conditions of dependency. These issues will be discussed below in relation to the Neo-Assyrian material.

A further reason for the relative silence within Ancient Near Eastern studies with regard to *Slavery and Social Death* is the fact that in the three decades since the book was published only rather few studies have attempted to address wider-ranging issues surrounding slavery in Mesopotamia. This dearth of attention has changed quite recently, with the appearance of two significant publications. The first is an innovative demographic study of servile laborers in the central Babylonian city of Nippur during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE, as documented in administrative rosters kept by the city administration (Tenney 2011a). The second major recent publication comprises the proceedings of a symposium held at the Oriental Institute in Chicago in March 2010 with the theme "Slaves and Households in the Near East" (Culbertson 2011). A few words about these two volumes are warranted.

In his study Tenney uses the term "servile" to describe the large public workforce of Kassite-period Nippur, thus avoiding the label "slave" since the civil status of these workers remains quite uncertain. In fact, very occasionally individuals are described in his text corpus by the conventional Babylonian terms for slave (*ardu* and *andu*, for male and female, respectively), but this restricted usage suggests that other members of the workforce were *not* considered to be slaves by those who wrote the documents, and it is unclear why only a few workers should be singled out in this way.[7] Nevertheless, all of the workers appear to have been subject to common conditions, in particular, abnormal population stress, relative poverty, and working under duress (Tenney 2011a: 135). In his study Tenney rejects Patterson's defining characteristic of a slave as a socially dead person deprived of all natal ties, on the grounds that the Nippur servile laborers were allowed to marry and have families, and also they sometimes identified themselves by patronyms (Tenney 2011a: 130–131, n. 219). However, this may be imposing too literal an interpretation on Patterson's characterization, since Patterson himself stresses that slaves in both ancient and modern societies "had strong social ties among themselves. The important point, however, is that these relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding" (Patterson 1982: 6). There is no doubt that in ancient Mesopotamia slaves, like other members of society, typically formed families, and that in the case of slaves these families always formed part of the larger household (whether private or institutional) to which they were attached (see below). When we encounter cuneiform texts dealing with slave-holding on any scale, the slaves are frequently enumerated in family groups. As to the application

of Patterson's idea of "natal alienation," then, the crux lies in the nature of the relationship of domination between master and slave; that is, did the master have the absolute right to dissolve the familial ties that bound his slave? This, in turn, raises the question of whether the slave had any possibility of defending the integrity of his own household against his master's attempts to subvert it. The extant sources are, predictably, rather silent on these matters, but it seems likely that the master's domination was complete and that he could dispose of his slaves as he wished, regardless of their family ties.[8]

In her introduction to the Oriental Institute Symposium volume, Culbertson considers slaves to be "one social group that was always, and by definition, attached to a household or institution" (Culbertson 2011: 13). This household attachment is not taken to be a defining characteristic of Ancient Near Eastern slavery, but rather it is used as a means of focusing on "the dynamics of enslaved peoples in their immediate contexts" (Culbertson 2011: 2).

Culbertson stresses, as others have done, that the concept of complete individual freedom is anachronistic; rather, "The construction of societies into households and institutions suggests that most persons, not only slaves, were woven into hierarchies and subject to other entities, ranking vertically up to the king or emperor, who themselves were subject to divine authority" (Culbertson 2011: 13). In concluding her introduction to the volume, Culbertson remarks:

> However, one advantage of the household approach to slaves is clear: by situating slavery within the context of household – whether household is understood as a domestic estate, state institution, or temple – we view slaves more directly in history. As members of households, slaves were not at the margins of history and society, but belong to historical and social processes. Even though slavery was never the dominant source of labor in the Near East, it was always a complex of social apparatuses that managed relationships of economic or social obligation and debt, integrated outsiders into social establishments such as households, and shifted trajectories of upward and downward mobility for those who endured the predicament of enslavement. (Culbertson 2011: 14)

This approach is potentially productive because we are dealing with a society whose institutions, both private and public, tended to be organized along household lines. And yet there remains the intractable problem of distinguishing slaves from other servile, dependent classes.

The Neo-Assyrian Period: Introductory Remarks

The Neo-Assyrian Empire spanned the period from around 911 BCE down to the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. For its time, it was the greatest territorial state the world had known, encompassing much of the Near East and including Egypt for a time in the seventh century BCE. One of the well-known characteristics of the Neo-Assyrian empire is its reliance on mass deportation, that is, the forced resettlement

of conquered peoples in other parts of the empire, often far away from their land of origin.[9] These deportees were a vital source of labor, both in the heart of the empire and in the provinces, in city and in countryside. They formed an important component of the workforce employed on large-scale public building projects, and were instrumental in the intensification and expansion of cultivation that was needed for the supply of the rapidly growing cities. The successful integration of vast numbers of these people into the Assyrian state is no doubt a major reason why the system had no need to rely on slave labor to any significant degree.

The Neo-Assyrian written documentation includes legal contracts from private family archives as well as from the so-called "State Archives" found in the palaces of Nineveh, which served as the imperial capital from the late eighth century down to the final collapse of Assyria. It also includes administrative documents and letters, many of which were actually found in various palaces in the major cities at the heart of the empire. These archives from the royal palaces deal, to varying degrees, with affairs at the imperial center – especially concerning the royal court – as well as with provincial administration. We also have royal inscriptions that provide information especially about military campaigns and royal building projects. Before discussing some of the dynamics of slavery in greater detail, I shall first consider aspects of the ideology relating to slavery in the Neo-Assyrian period as reflected in the written sources.

The Ideological Dimension of Assyrian Slavery

To gain any kind of insight into contemporary ideology surrounding slavery, we have to turn to the royal inscriptions, which, of course, were composed with a view to legitimizing and celebrating the Assyrian king's power. Nevertheless, it is worth having a look at some relevant material from this text genre. One passage of particular interest is found in a so-called "Letter to (the god) Aššur," a text that describes the campaign by king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) to the land of Šubria in the Upper Tigris region in the year 673. The passage runs as follows:

> He [the Šubrian ruler] heard my royal message, which burns my enemy like a flame, and he doubled over at the hips; he tore off his royal garment and clothed his body with sackcloth, the garment of a sinner. His appearance became miserable and he became like a slave and counted himself among his servants. With entreaty, prayer, expressions of humility, kneeling against the wall of his city, he was bitterly crying "woe," beseeching my lordship with open hands, (and) saying "Aḫulap!" again and again to the heroic Aššur, my lord, and the praise of my heroism. (RINAP 4 81, no. 33 i 1–7)

Here the enemy ruler's debasement is explicitly associated with the condition of slavery. There is a dual aspect to this: he adopts the position of a slave vis-à-vis the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, to whom he appeals, but by his behavior and appearance

he also reduces himself to the level of his own slaves, thereby negating his status as ruler and relinquishing his claim to kingship. Thus the slave and the (legitimate) ruler (Esarhaddon) – representing the extreme ends of the social scale – are juxtaposed, and the enemy ruler is seen as manifestly unsuited to the exercise of kingship. His behavior is intended to invoke mercy, but in fact all he succeeds in attracting is contempt.

The same text contains a further, extraordinary (but unfortunately quite damaged) passage later on. It reports how the Šubrian ruler fashioned a statue, clothed it in sackcloth (explicitly called "the garment of a sinner" in the passage cited above), placed it in fetters "as befitted slavery" (*simat urdūti*), made it hold a grindstone for milling, and applied to it a skin of red gold as a replica of (real) skin. He then gave it to his two sons to present to Esarhaddon in order to induce pity and save his life (RINAP 4 83, no. 33 ii 18–23).[10] The Šubrian ruler's sons are quoted as enjoining Esarhaddon to put the crimes and disobedience (of their father) on the *asakku*-demon, that is, a demon that symbolized cosmic disorder (Wiggerman 1992: 162).[11] Since in mythology the *asakku* was vanquished by the god Ninurta, this passage belongs with others that depict Esarhaddon in terms of Ninurta battling victoriously with his enemies.[12] If I understand the text correctly at this point, the statue was intended to take upon itself the crimes and disobedience of the Šubrian ruler, leaving him free to submit to Esarhaddon and be spared, or so he hoped. The ploy did not work: Esarhaddon poured scorn on the Šubrian king and accused him of shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted (his actual words were "you are putting in drainpipes after the rain!").

This fascinating text gives us some idea about the prevailing ideological values attached to slavery: it was a debased condition, associated with sin and humility, and with a certain manner of dress ("sackcloth," Akkadian *bašāmu*) and items of bondage. The grindstone placed in the statue's hand symbolizes hard, repetitive labor: milling was a task that we know was often carried out by prisoners. This composition presents us with a vivid image of how the king Esarhaddon supposedly conceived of the state of slavery, bringing us as close to the concept of "social death" as the contemporary Mesopotamian sources permit. However, we are dealing here with royal rhetoric, heavily interlaced with mythology relating to the god Ninurta. The problem, then, lies in determining the extent to which this picture can be reconciled with the reality of slavery as experienced in daily life, or indeed if the two can be reconciled at all. The contemporary legal and administrative documents and letters shed little light on this issue, although there is one extant court record that offers a rare, albeit terse, insight into social attitudes towards slavery. According to this tablet two men bring a lawsuit on behalf of their brother (or colleague); their complaint is (unusually) presented verbatim: "Why do you tread down our brother in slavery?"[13] They are then recorded as paying a sum of silver to redeem the man from his fetters, in return for which he has to serve them for three years and [x] months (a common occurrence when a debt was paid off by a third party).

The Sources of Slaves

At this period slaves could be acquired or could enter the state of slavery by four principal routes: (1) purchase or other means of transfer between individuals or institutions; (2) being born into slavery; (3) through debt bondage; and (4) being captured as a prisoner-of-war. These routes to enslavement correspond quite closely to the sources of servile laborers that Tenney (2011a: 122–129) identified for Kassite-period Nippur.

Purchase of slaves

Slaves could be bought, either from another slave-owner or from a merchant. The merchants typically specialized in supplying slaves from abroad, especially Anatolia (Radner 1997: 227–230), and merchants in general tended to be associated with the palace (Radner 1999: 101–103). We also have cases of people selling members of their own family;[14] this is presumably an indicator of economic hardship, although background information on the circumstances is typically absent.[15] Transfer of slaves within the family is also attested, for example, through inheritance or dowry.[16] When known officials feature as the buyer of slaves, it raises the question of whether they are acting in a private or an official capacity (or indeed whether such a distinction is meaningful).[17]

House-born slaves

References to slave marriages and to slave families make it clear that slaves could be born within the household to which their parents were attached. Two Assyrian terms, *unzarḫu* and *ša šīme*, have been understood as "house-born slave" and "bought slave," respectively. Although Radner (1997: 205) considered *unzarḫu* to be the counterpart of *ša šīmi*, it should be stressed that *ša šīmi* is attested in a private context but *unzarḫu* is not; rather, all attestations of *unzarḫu* have the royal court as their background. This raises a number of possibilities: (1) that house-born slaves tended not to be sold outside of the household; (2) that if they were sold, then a different term was used (e.g. *urdu*, *amtu*); (3) that the term *unzarḫu* refers to a restricted group of slaves associated with the royal court, and that is why it does not feature in the sale contracts. Otherwise, we find quite frequent references to family groups of slaves, which makes it clear that slaves were not normally detached from their immediate kin, although this certainly could happen.[18] In fact, slave-owners could actively foster the creation of slave families: in a number of documents (e.g. SAA 14 nos. 34, 37 and 38) an Assyrian official is attested to be buying a female slave as a wife for one of his male slaves (Radner 1997: 169–171). The slave-owner was presumably acting in his own interests, to maintain or increase his stock of slaves by facilitating the production of slave offspring and to encourage

social harmony within his own household. With respect to this latter point, it is worth noting Tenney's finding that very nearly all of the servile laborers in Kassite-period Nippur who managed to escape were males without family ties (Tenney 2011b: 141–142); he concludes from this that family responsibilities were a strong deterrent to flight.

Enslavement via debt bondage

A debtor or a dependent of his could become the slave of his creditor if the debt was not repaid on time. In theory this state of slavery was temporary, that is, it would be terminated by repayment of the debt, but this must often have proved impossible. Sometimes the debt was paid off by a third party, whom the debtor then had to serve, normally for the rest of his life (Radner 2001: 280–284). Security for debt is a related issue: in this case the debtor placed one or more people at the disposal of the creditor until the debt was repaid. These pledged people were normally dependents of the debtor – typically women and children – but occasionally slaves were handed over. It is not always easy to determine whether a person given as debt security was originally free or a slave. In the case of non-slaves given as security, there remained the possibility of permanent enslavement if the debt were not paid off.

Captives taken as prisoner-of-war or booty

Some captives were certainly enslaved, but the extent of this seems to have been rather limited. In his comprehensive study of mass deportation, Oded considered three likely routes via which captives became enslaved (Oded 1979: 110–115). In the first place, they could be incorporated into the permanent (and sometimes mobile) labor forces in order to provide manpower for public works around the empire. For example, an inscription of Esarhaddon records, "At that time, by means of the prisoners from the lands that I had conquered with the help of the god Aššur, my lord, I repaired (and) renovated the dilapidated parts of the ruined wall, city gates, (and) palaces, which are in Kalhu" (RINAP 4 159, no. 78: 37–38). In the second place, captives could be distributed among the personnel, both civilian and military. In these cases the royal inscriptions often state that the captives were distributed "like locusts" or "like sheep." This imagery, no doubt intended to reinforce the impression of great numbers, has a dehumanizing effect (though such comparisons are found in relation to non-human booty, so they are also a more general feature of royal rhetoric). In the third place, captives could be allocated to the temple in order to boost the workforce that supported it. Despite Oded's characterization of these scenarios as enslavement, it is difficult if not impossible to trace what happened to the captives once they had taken up the place allocated to them in Neo-Assyrian society, and it's questionable whether all or even many of them were actually considered to be slaves, even though many no doubt ended up working

under servile conditions.[19] It remains difficult to determine what – if anything – distinguished these people from the majority of deportees, who simply became Assyrian subjects and were effectively assimilated into the Neo-Assyrian state.

There is likely to have been some differentiation among captives according to their level of skills and/or their former status: these factors would have influenced their subsequent position, both in terms of the household or institution to which they were allocated, and in terms of their standing within that household thereafter.[20] It is clear that skilled foreign captives, who might include the palace personnel of defeated kings, were highly valued by the Assyrians. For example, an inscription of Sennacherib records how he plundered the palace personnel of the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina:

> I rushed to Babylon and entered the palace of Marduk-apla-iddina (II) (Merodach-baladan) to take charge of the possessions and property therein. I opened his treasury and brought out gold, silver, gold (and) silver utensils, precious stones, beds, armchairs, a processional carriage, royal paraphernalia of his with gold (and) silver mountings, all kinds of possessions (and) property without number, a substantial treasure, (together with) his wife, his palace women, female stewards, eunuchs, courtiers, attendants, male singers, female singers, palace servants who cheered up his princely mind, all of the craftsmen, as many as there were, (and) his palace attendants, and I counted (them) as booty. (RINAP 3/1 34, no. 1: 30–33)

Such people would most likely have been deployed in Sennacherib's own palace or in the households of high-ranking members of his entourage,[21] as is clear from a similar passage in the inscription of Esarhaddon that I discussed above:

> With regard to … […], a group of charioteers, a group of cavalry, commanders of …, officials, [engin]eers, troops, light troops, shield bearers, scouts, farmers, shepherds, (and) orchard keepers – [I add]ed (them) in great numbers to the massive fo[rc]es of the god Aššur and to the guard of the former kings, my ancestors, and I filled Assyria in its entirety like a quiver. I distributed the re[st of them] like sheep and goats among my palaces, my nobles, the entourage of my palace, and [the citizens of Ninev]eh, Calah, Kalzu [and] Arbela" (RINAP 4 84, no. 33 iii 16´–22´).

These people had no say in their fate, but again it remains completely open as to whether any of them actually became enslaved. Personally I doubt that many of them were. Above all else, the Assyrian king wanted a labor force that was both loyal and productive because he was interested in generating revenue. Thus, we have a number of letters from the royal correspondence in which the king berates officials for failing to supply deportees with what they needed. His concern for the welfare of these displaced persons reflects a desire that they should be settled and become self-supporting as quickly as possible. However, there is also an element of the king representing himself as shepherd of his people, a well-known strand of the prevailing imperial culture and ideology that united all Assyrian subjects, regardless of their origins (Parpola 2007: 264).

Exit from slavery

Manumission does not feature in the Neo-Assyrian documentation, raising the question of whether this is because manumission did not happen, or because it is simply not reflected in the surviving sources. It may be significant that there is no Neo-Assyrian equivalent to the Neo-Babylonian term for a "tablet of free status" (i.e. a manumission document) (*ṭuppi mār-bānûti*), nor is there any counterpart to the Neo-Babylonian words for a "freedman" (*zakû*) or "freedwoman" (*zakītu*) (see Kleber 2011: 101–102). It was possible to redeem a person (whether slave or free) who had been taken into debt bondage by repaying the sum owed, but in cases of permanent slavery death or escape appear to have been the only means of exit. In fact, these two outcomes are envisaged in the slave sale documents, some of which contain a clause indemnifying the buyer against the flight or death of the slave.[22]

Terminology and Definitions

The various Neo-Assyrian terms for "slave" and the text types in which they occur have recently been treated in detail by Karen Radner;[23] for reasons of space, I shall confine my discussion here to the most common term, *urdu*. In spite of Radner's nuanced exposition and close contextual analysis of the terminology, there is one significant respect in which her interpretation of the term *urdu* differs markedly from the alternative interpretation put forward by other scholars in recent years. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the word *urdu* can denote relationships of subordination, including, but not limited to, slavery. This potentially poses a problem of interpretation when it comes to an individual who is not the object of a sale but who is nevertheless designated as an *urdu* of another party, typically in the format "*urdu* of so-and-so" or "*urdu* of x-official" (where the official is often high-ranking). It is also quite common for people in this category to be designated by a specific office or profession in addition to *urdu*. Many such individuals feature as witnesses to legal documents, and some also occur as principal parties to transactions. The question of whether these people should be interpreted as "genuine" slaves, or simply as subordinates or employees of the other individual or official, is critical to understanding the conditions of Neo-Assyrian slavery, in particular, the slave's agency. Radner (1997: 220–222, 225) assumes that such people *were* slaves and that therefore slaves could conclude legal transactions and serve as witnesses. Ahmad and Postgate (2007), on the other hand, adopt a considerably more minimalist position in their discussion of some men who sell their sisters, according to two of the texts that they edit. These men are designated "slave of" the Palace Herald or of a certain Marduk-šaduni (no. 7), and "slave of the Queen" (no. 20), respectively. They remark, "These sellers can hardly be chattel slaves or they would not have held the rights of legal ownership of their relative, and it seems likely that the use of ÌR [= logographic writing of *urdu*]

here expresses only the relationship of members of staff to their 'boss'…" (Ahmad and Postgate 2007: ix). In support of their interpretation, some of the *urdu*s attested in this role as another individual's employee also bear offices or professions themselves. While (chattel) slaves could practice a profession, such as "baker," there are other instances of *urdu*s bearing offices that are most unlikely to have been held by true slaves, in particular, military positions such as "chariot driver."[24] It seems only reasonable to conclude that these *urdu*s were indeed employees or subordinates, rather than true slaves, and for this reason the minimalist position of Ahmad and Postgate seems to me preferable to that of Radner. This brings us back to the observation made above, that we are on much firmer ground when dealing with those slaves whom we know to have been bought and sold in the "regular" sale contracts.

The Social Order

The metaphorical use of *urdu*, operating at multiple levels to denote an individual's relationship to his superior (and the king's relationship to his god), can be considered to reflect the social hierarchy, with the king at the top of the earthly order and the slave at the very bottom. As noted above, this nuanced usage of *urdu* was not confined to Assyria, but had a long history within Mesopotamia. In terms of how society and the administration worked, the implications are that the higher one moved up the social hierarchy, the more subordinates (*urdu*s) accrued to an official, reflecting his status and power. In concrete terms, then, we might expect a rough correlation with the size of the official's household, measured by the number of personnel attached to it. All this aligns nicely with Nicholas Postgate's argument that the Neo-Assyrian term *bēt bēlē* ("masters' house") signified the bureau or department for which an individual worked, from the point of view of that employee (Postgate 2007: 353–358). The term *bēlu* ("master," "lord") is the counterpart to *urdu* in that it could denote a slave-owner on the one hand, or an employer or superior on the other. This brings us back to the importance of the household, since the *bēlu* would typically have been the head of a household, whether domestic or institutional (or a combination of the two, as is likely in the case of officials' bureaux). Thus the terminology relating to slavery – and to subordination in general – is intimately bound up with the ways in which the administrative apparatus and its workings were represented in writing by Assyrian officials, reflecting what Postgate (2007) has called the "invisible hierarchy." In his view, the Assyrian administration was not bureaucratic but rather "depended on a sense of institutional loyalty and personal interaction up and down the system" (Postgate 2007: 358). In this context the social relationships embodied in the term *urdu* were a cornerstone of the system. Similarly, in the political sphere *urdu* was used to denote someone who was loyal (or disloyal) to the king, including not only Assyrian subjects but also allies and vassal rulers.

The notion of honor, as elucidated by Patterson (1982: 77–101), is no doubt integral to this conceptualization of the social order, though this aspect is – somewhat predictably – elusive, given the nature of the sources and the dearth of narrative. Again, the Esarhaddon inscription discussed above is illustrative: the Šubrian ruler put on the "garment of a sinner" as part of his self-imposed descent into slavery, all the while praising the king's heroism. Among the more mundane sources, however, it is difficult to isolate a concept of honor. It certainly played a part in the rhetorical strategies employed by officials when writing to their colleagues and superiors, in line with the modes of personal interaction discussed above. As far as slaves are concerned, though, the everyday sources shed no direct light on their dishonored state.

Conclusions

In the foregoing paragraphs I have discussed some key issues relating to the study of slavery in the Neo-Assyrian period. Cross-cultural comparison remains a challenge, thanks to the problem of definition that is exacerbated by the use of partially overlapping and (to us) ill-defined and even obscure terms, and by the multiplicity of categories of low-status personnel with varying conditions of dependency, whose status remains uncertain. Orlando Patterson's conceptualization of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" is one that resonates with the characterization of slavery presented in the royal inscription of king Esarhaddon that I drew on above. I suspect that this particular passage reflects an ideologically extreme attitude toward slavery in the sense that it tells us more about how the ruler wished to portray the plight of his defeated enemy than about the actual conditions of Assyrian slaves.[25] This is not to imply that the reality of slavery was necessarily more benign, but simply to point out that it served the king's purpose to highlight the extreme: unfortunately, we lack the voice of the slave that might serve as a corrective. As for the question of natal alienation, the written evidence is sparse but it does seem likely that slaves (and perhaps other groups, such as low-status deportees) could be deprived of their social and family ties if that is what their master wished. It may well be that their lack of rights in this respect marked them out from other sectors of society, though there were compelling social and practical reasons for slave-owners to support and maintain slave families, and perhaps also social constraints operated to protect them.

Notes

1   The research presented here was conducted within the framework of the project "Royal Institutional Households in First Millennium BCE Mesopotamia," led by the author at the University of Vienna and funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF grant S 10802-G18) as part of the National Research Network "Imperium and Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom." For the abbreviations used in citing documents, see the list at the beginning of the References.

2   A similar observation has been made for ancient history (Lewis, Chapter 2 in this volume).

3   Edition: Lambert 1960: 139–49. The slave responds approvingly to each successive plan put forward by his master, even when the latest plan runs completely counter to the preceding one. In the end, the slave breaks with this pattern to propose that only death is the desired outcome, and when his master threatens to kill him first, the slave responds that his master would not outlive him even by three days. The poem has been read as underlining the master's dependency on the slave; see, e.g. Nemet-Nejat 2013: 78–79.

4   A number of the Neo-Babylonian judicial records discussed by Wunsch involve slaves. Her first dossier (1997/98: 62–67) centers around the status of children born to a woman who was formerly a slave; the court determined that the children born before her manumission document was drawn up remained slaves, while the son who was born later was not a slave and could not therefore be sold. Note also the case of Barīk-il, discussed by David Lewis (this volume, Chapter 2: 40) based on the tablet *Nbn.* 1113, according to which the slave claimed that he had been manumitted but could not prove it.

5   See already Oppenheim 1964: 74–75, who wrote that the Mesopotamian slave population "was at all times rather small and in private hands." For an important exploration of the Ancient Near Eastern concept of freedom, debunking the view that all subjects were by definition unfree, see Von Dassow 2011.

6   For example, the Neo-Babylonian *širku*s ("temple oblates") recently studied by Kleber 2011.

7   Though given that one of the means of entrance into this servile workforce was through the purchase of slaves by the city governor (Tenney 2011a: 123), perhaps the terms *urdu* and *andu* were used to distinguish those acquired in this way, just as the Assyrians later used the term *ša šīme* "bought (slave)" (see below).

8   There are some hints as to the forced break-up of slave families in the Neo-Assyrian documentation (see below).

9   The classic study of mass deportation remains that of Oded 1979. On the assimilation of foreigners into the Assyrian state and the effects of this process on the composition of society, especially the elite, see Parpola 2007.

10 There are clear parallels here with the fashioning of prophylactic figurines during the performance of apotropaic rituals; see Wiggerman 1992 on the combined textual and archaeological evidence.

11 The *asakku*-demon features elsewhere in the text: the account of the Assyrian conquest of Uppumu, capital city of the Šubrian ruler, begins with a date, 21 Ulūlu (month six), which is described as "an evil day, a bad day, the birth(day) of the *asakku*-demon" (RINAP 4 33 ii 3). On that day the Šubrians sprinkled the Assyrian siege ramp with naphtha and set fire to it, but on the instigation of the god Marduk the north wind blew the flames back onto the city and burnt its wall, thus enabling the Assyrians to take the city.

12 See Maul 1998: 74 on this topos in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions; on Esarhaddon as Ninurta, defender of the divine world order, see Parpola 2001: 185–186 and Annus 2002: 99–100.

13 …*a-ta-a* PAB-*u-ni* / *a-na* ÌR-*a-nu-te ta-kab-ba-as-šú* (Jas 1996: 31–33, no. 16: 6–7).

14 For example, in SAA 14 38 a woman is sold by her two brothers and two sons to Kakkullānu as a wife for his slave Urdu-Nabû. The woman is described in l. 8 as the

"slave" of her four sellers who are also her close kin. This raises questions about the status of her sons.

15   On the sale of relations see Postgate 1976: 26.

16   Inheritance: SAAB 9 71; VAT 20363. Dowry: 11 persons including two bakers, a fuller, and a hat-maker are given to Ba'alti-iabati by her father in SAA 14 155 (627* BCE).

17   See, for example, the apposite comments of Ahmad and Postgate (2007: ix–xi) regarding the dossier of the palace scribe Nabû-tuklatū'a (active c. 800–765 BCE) excavated in the North-West Palace at Kalhu.

18   Fales (2009–2010: 174), reviewing Galil's 2007 book *The Lower Stratum Families in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, raises the possibility that children could be separated from their parents in Neo-Assyrian slave sales, and that sometimes slave women and their children could be sold separately from their husbands. He also suggests that there may have been "forced demographic selection" of young girls (Fales 2009–2010: 181). However, other reviews have expressed caution regarding use of the statistics presented in Galil's study; see Radner 2008 and Baker 2009. Further evaluation of the data is advisable, especially in the light of Tenney's (2011a) analysis of the demographic data on the servile population of Kassite-period Nippur.

19   In the case of one slave sale document, a woman and her daughter are described as "booty from Elam which the king gave to (the city) Assur" (VAT 9755, edited by Faist 2009), but such explicit statements are extremely rare.

20   Cf. Toledano 2011: 87–88, who observes that Ottoman slaves of the eighteenth century or later enjoyed more or less favorable conditions, depending on the status of the household to which they were attached and its proximity to the imperial center. His model takes into account the tasks of the enslaved, the stratum of the slavers, the location (core or periphery), type of habitat (urban, village, or nomad), gender (male, female, or eunuch), and ethnicity. Owing to the nature of the sources at our disposal we are far from being able to build up such a detailed picture for the Assyrian empire, yet Toledano's study provides a possible framework for interpretation.

21   The distribution of human booty in this way should be viewed also within the context of gift-giving at court, since it was a means of demonstrating royal favor toward the elite who would in turn have passed on some of the benefits to their own subordinates.

22   A typical clause runs: ÚŠ ZÁḪ *ina* UGU EN.MEŠ-*šú*, "(If) he dies (or) flees, the responsibility is upon his owners" (SAA 14 108 r. 3, dated 637* BCE). An alternative clause protects the buyer against the slave developing epilepsy within 100 days. On the formulation of the sales of persons, see Postgate 1976: 25–28.

23   Radner 1997: 202–248. The various categories of palace slaves and their roles are discussed in the doctoral thesis of Melanie Groß 2014.

24   For example, the witnesses to SAA 6 1, a slave sale document dated in 742, include nine men who are described as *urdānu* (LÚ.ARAD.MEŠ, r. 17) of the chief eunuch. Among them are a chariot driver, Aššur-šallim-ahhe (r. 11–12), and a "third man (on a chariot)," Sin-iddina (r. 12).

25   For example, although the statue allegedly made by the Šubrian king is placed in fetters "as befitted slavery," the textual sources attest to the use of fetters for enemy captives and criminals but not normally for slaves. See, for example, the passages cited in CAD B 254–255 s.v. *birītu* 4. The court record cited above (Jas 1996: 31–33, no. 16) is an exception and it cannot be entirely excluded that its reference to redeeming the man from fetters is a metaphorical rather than a literal representation of his condition.

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SAA 10   see Parpola 1993.
SAA 14   See Mattila 2002.
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