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Mar-Issar and the Restoration of Babylonian Sanctuaries

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Abstract

This study is based on the letters of Mar-Issar, an Assyrian official working at the end of Esarhaddon's reign, as the supervisor of the reconstruction and restoration of sanctuaries in the main Babylonian cities, and the reorganization of their cult. His letters constitute a correspondence with the Assyrian king, mainly about the completion of reconstruction works in the southern kingdom of Mesopotamia. The detailed study of the letters, concerning their content as well as their structure, is a real key to understanding the materiality of the embellishment of the sanctuaries and statues. Furthermore, this study helps to understand the specific role of Mar-Issar, demonstrative of the involvement of the Assyrian king in this building project and emblematic of the complexity of the relation between Assyria and Babylonia.

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Introduction

Assyria and Babylonia, the northern and southern kingdoms of Mesopotamia, cultural sisters, maintained a very complex relation during their entire existence. The Neo-Assyrian period is the best documented concerning the complexity of the Assyro-Babylonian relations. Babylonia represented the most important problem for the vast empire that the Sargonid dynasty built, in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. If subduing the southern kingdom was their main concern, Assyrians also strongly respected Babylonian culture and scholarship, and regularly adopted Babylonian manners and customs. The Babylonian culture was really influent in Mesopotamia, with prestigious cities and ancient and highly revered temples. Thus, Assyrian kings were proud and honoured to rule Babylon and bestow upon Babylonian gods and temples.¹ The importance of the southern kingdom for the Neo-Assyrian kings is also symbolized in the use of specific foreign title in their royal tutelary. The kings of the Sargonid dynasty tried various methods to rule Babylonia, but none of them were really effective. However, the reign of Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) appears to have been one of the most quiet and peaceful in Babylonia. It was significantly marked by his will to appease Babylonia and improve the relations between the empire and the kingdom. The present study will explore an exceptional administrative mission in this pursuit.

History of scholarship

An important knowledge is linked to Babylonia during the reign of Esarhaddon, due to the amount of royal inscriptions, chronicles, official correspondences, economic texts, and other types of inscriptions. Letters constitute the most numerous corpora and the most important documents offering contemporary evidence for the reign, with the royal inscriptions. Concerning the period from 750 to 610 BC, no less than 3300 letters are known, two-third of which are written in Neo-Assyrian, and one-third in Neo-Babylonian. Most of them are part of the collection of archives discovered in the royal palace of the Neo-Assyrian capital Nineveh, the first source of information concerning the Sargonid dynasty. The excavations performed in the site of Niniveh between 1850 and 1905 allowed the discovery of about 6000 cuneiforms texts, half of which are letters belonging to the royal Assyrian correspondence. These letters fall mainly in two groups, 300 letters dating from the beginning or the last decade of Sargon II's reign (721-705 BC), and 750 from the last years of Esarhaddon and the first years of Assurbanipal (669-627 BC). The correspondence between the Neo-Assyrian kings and their officials dealt with political, administrative, religious and military matters.²

Among this important amount of letters, many were written to king Esarhaddon by officials, various

¹. Frame 1992, p. 257.

². A great part of this correspondence was published with their translation, in the collection of the States Archives of Assyria, from Helsinki University, composed of 18 volumes.

advisers and professional consultants. However, only a few were written by the king himself.³ The main subjects of the letters are problems pertaining to the court or the royal family, the temple administration, as well as the Babylonian affairs. The letters are not dated and simply addressed to the king without any further specifications, but for Simo Parpola, to the scholarship of whom we owe the modern edition and basic study of these letters, roughly 80% of the letters found in Nineveh can be assigned to the reign of Esarhaddon.⁴ One of the main interests of these letters is their private character, providing a new approach, different than the official royal Neo-Assyrian documents. The letters of Mar-Issar, on which our study is mainly based, come from this collection.

The first publication of the letters of Nineveh, preserved as the Kouyunjik Collection in the British Museum, was realized by Robert Francis Harper in 1892. This book presents nearly 1500 exact copies of the cuneiform texts. In 1979, Simo Parpola proposed a new publication of the Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts of the Kouyunjik Collections. The same year, Manfred Dietrich completed the publication of the collection with the Neo-Babylonian letters. However, the most interesting publications concerning the Mar-Issar letters are the transcriptions and comments made by Simo Parpola of 345 letters sent to Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. His work is divided in two volumes, the first one concerning the transliterations⁵ and translations into English, published in 1971, and the second one presenting the comments and appendices in 1983. His work is really comprehensive and brings a lot of elements to the comprehension of the letters. However, thanks to the program of State Archives of Assyria of the University of Helsinki, Simo Parpola could publish a new version of his translations accompanied with a study of the letters. The volume X of the SAA collection, published in 1993, is a review of the two previous volumes, supplemented by letters from Babylonian scholars and some additions referring to the Assyrian corpus discovered since. This book realized by Simo Parpola constitutes my best source and first working tool. The letters are gathered in different dossiers, ordered in chapters according to the profession of the writers. A chronological order inside the chapters has been implemented as far as possible. Miscellaneous letters from individuals, for whom the assignment to a professional group could not be established, are presented at the end of the book. All the Mar-Issar letters are gathered in this part, both in standard transliterations and in English translations. The numbering of the letters, from 347 to 370 comes from their classification in this book.

Barbara Nevling Porter interested in the study of the reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries under Esarhaddon, studies the letters of Mar-Issar, alongside the archaeological evidence. Her research, gathered in the book published in 1993, offers a very complete framework to the study of Esarhaddon's building program. Nonetheless, she mainly focused on the material found in excavation and the various inscriptions confirming the

³. Some of the letters were also written to the mother of Esarhaddon. Nevling Porter 1993, p. 165.

⁴. Nevling Porter 1993, p. 165; Parpola 1983, p. XII.

⁵. The transliterations are addressed to the specialist of Akkadian and Sumerian languages, and consist to render the text of the original cuneiforms in Roman characters according to standard Assyriological conventions

involvement of the Assyrian king in the restoration of the sacred buildings. Thus, to her, the study of Mar-Issar's letters is secondary, but she made a lot of comparisons proving the importance and relevance of these letters to the history of the monuments.

The reign of Esarhaddon is rich of documentary sources and the archives from Nineveh can be completed by numerous others. The royal inscriptions of Esarhaddon mention regularly the reconstruction of the Babylonian sanctuaries, which may conclude that they were produced to promote the king's works in the southern kingdom. As these inscriptions are official and produced in order to promote the Assyrian empire and its king, they give less direct information on the building process than the letters written by officials. They were found on various objects and materials; upon a lapis-lazuli cylinder seal, clay cylinders, bricks, and clay tablets. They were translated and published a first time by Riekle Borger in 1967, then revised by Erle Leichty in 2011. Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles also present a problem concerning their objectivity, but constitute a rich documentary source for Esarhaddon's reign. Albert K. Grayson compiled them in a really complete publication in 2000.

Most of the archaeological evidence comes from German archaeological campaigns. Robert Johann Koldewey was responsible of the first and most important excavations in Babylon for the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (DOG), from 1899 to 1917, which supplied numerous materials to the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.⁶ The research was resumed in the Sixties and Seventies, by a German team, then an Italian one, and finally an Iraqi one. Owing to the Gulf War in 1990, excavations were stopped. A program of restoration of the buildings of Babylon was programmed next, but was also interrupted in 2003 by the Iraq War. The Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut were involved in the excavations in Uruk from 1912 to 1989. The city of Borsippa was also partly excavated by the DOG, followed by an Austrian team of the University of Innsbruck from 1980.

Archaeological evidence concerning the reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries during the reign of Esarhaddon are not very rich. In Babylon, as well as in the other Babylonian cities, the buildings have been repeatedly reconstructed after the Neo-Assyrian period, and the ruins corresponding to Esarhaddon's reign are really damaged and hardly recognizable. Archaeological finds consist mainly in bricks bearing inscriptions of Esarhaddon, found *in situ* or near the sacred-buildings. They corroborate Esarhaddon's claim that he sponsored substantial restoration work on various sanctuaries, in the main Babylonian cities. Thus, building inscriptions⁷ constitute the best archaeological evidence to confirm the work of Esarhaddon on the Babylonian sanctuaries. In Babylon, twenty-four building inscriptions have been found, all inscribed on bricks, except for one on a seal.⁸ Although the archaeological evidence confirms the involvement of Esarhaddon in the reconstruction and restoration of Esagil and Etemenanki, we do not learn anything about the architecture of these buildings, and which parts exactly were concerned. The extensive disturbance of the site in modern times and unrecorded

⁶. Koldewey 1914.

⁷. Building inscriptions are often placed in the foundations or walls of the buildings whose construction they describe.

⁸. Nevlng Porter 1993, p. 53-54.

diggings are certainly some of the main reasons that further remains of Esarhaddon's work in the city have not been discovered, since they have been lost or destroyed.

The historical context of the correspondence⁹

In the first part of his reign, the Assyrian king Sennacherib wanted to conclude an agreement with the Babylonian cities and obtain a pretence of peace. However, the Elamites and the Chaldean tribes allies to the Babylonians, instigated disorder in the relations between Assyrians and Babylonians, which provoked the death of one of the sons of Sennacherib. The Assyrian king confronted them in one of the most important battles of the century; the one in the Diyala valley, which weakened his strength. As he failed in his attempt to rule Babylonia, he radically changed his policy toward the South, now anti-Babylonian. As no agreement could be established between Assyria and Babylonia, Sennacherib decided rashly to besiege Babylon in 690 BC. The siege lasted fifteen months, during which the city knew a severe famine. Five years after the death of his son, Sennacherib took his revenge, entirely destroying the city of Babylon and robbing all its wealth. All the cult statues were destroyed or taken to Assyria, including the statue of Marduk, depriving Babylon of its divine protection. The Babylonian people were scattered, and the city burnt and flooded. Sennacherib wished to transform it to a swamp, so that that nobody could recognize it afterwards.

The destruction of Babylon marked a turning point in the reign of Sennacherib and in the relations between Assyria and Babylonia. This event terrified the Babylonian citizens, as well as the Assyrians who were also divided on the new royal policy. Sennacherib boasted to have found a solution to the Babylonian problem, by removing its cultural and religious prestige from Babylonia. After the destruction, for eight years, Babylonia remained quiet and peaceful without any riots. However, the resentment towards Assyria and its rulers was even stronger; Babylonian scribes did not recognize Sennacherib. In the official Babylonian Chronicles, these eight years are considered as a time without any king on the throne of Babylon.¹⁰ Thus, re-establishing recognition of Assyrian supremacy was not easy for Esarhaddon in Babylonia, when he succeeded to his father. In addition, Esarhaddon was quite traumatized by the brutal death of Sennacherib in 681 BC. His murder, which the circumstances remain a mystery, was perceived by Babylonians as the consequence of his violent action towards their country and their gods.

The succession of Esarhaddon was really troubled, engaged in a conflict with his brothers for the throne of Assyria. At his ascension to the thrones of Assyria and Babylonia, the Babylonian resistance was still deeply

⁹. Many handbooks bring information concerning the Sargonid dynasty, and more specifically the reign of Esarhaddon, but the most complete and detailed remain *The Cambridge Ancient History*, from 1991. In addition, the book of Frame about the political history of Babylonia published in 1992, is also a really good tool for the period.

¹⁰. Grayson 2000, Chronicle 1, p. 81, iii 35.

rooted and represented a real problem. Assyria, in order to rule, had to establish the peace in Babylonia, now becoming a vital issue for the empire. The endless conflict with Babylonia and its allies substantially weakened the Assyrian empire.

From the beginning of his reign, Esarhaddon initiated the reconstruction of Babylon and many different sanctuaries and temples throughout Babylonia. This action was called for to remedy the destruction caused by Sennacherib in 689 BC. Through the rebuilding, repopulation, honour and gifts accorded to the Babylonians, Esarhaddon tried to rule as a true Babylonian king. He wanted to remove the anti-Assyrian feelings and demonstrate the benefits that could come with Assyrian rule. However, before action, his decision had to obtain a divine consent, in order to justify it, as well as the violent act of retaliation that Sennacherib had claimed as inspired by the gods and endorsed by Marduk himself.¹¹ In this, Esarhaddon reinforced the idea that Babylonians were responsible of their troubles, assimilating it to a punishment from the gods.¹² According to Assyrian view, the Babylonian gods themselves would have destroyed and deserted the city of Babylon. The Assyrian king was confronted to a decree established by Sennacherib, claiming confirmation by the gods, sentencing Babylon to remain into ruins for seventy years. Esarhaddon declared that, in an act of grace, Marduk agreed to release Babylon of its fate, transforming the seventy years of punishment in eleven years. Thus, the curse ended at the beginning of Esarhaddon's reign on the throne of Babylon. The reconstruction of the Babylonian sanctuaries occurred during the reigns of Esarhaddon and of his son Assurbanipal. The building program of Esarhaddon was a large-scale project, which couldn't be achieved during his rule only.

Method and aim of the study

My study will focus on the restoration and reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries, including both rebuildings and consecrations of new cult statues, as told by Mar-Issar in his letters. The main purpose will be to observe and analyse how Mar-Issar deals with this topic in his letters, the characteristics that emerge and how they contribute to our understanding of how to visualize a Babylonian sanctuary. Furthermore, this study will allow us to understand better the complex role of Mar-Issar, which remains quite mysterious. To complement this study, I will also approach other sources, written documents and archaeological finds. The study will also give an interpretation of the role of Mar-Issar.

The letters of Mar-Issar have already been studied numerous times since their translation, but only superficially. Thus, for the first time the letters will be used in their own right, as a base to study the reconstruction of sanctuaries of Babylonian cities, rather than as complementary sources as it has been done in earlier scholarly study. A main inquiry concerns the expression of the materiality in the letters of Mar-Issar and its paramount importance. It will also come to observe what the letters add to our knowledge, amply derived

¹¹. Babylonian citizens were accused to have paid Elamites during the war, with the treasure from Marduk's temple, and to be responsible of their fate.

¹². Lackenbacher 1990, p. 63.

from other sources, about the king's involvement in the restoration of Babylonian sanctuaries and some aspects of Neo-Assyrian scholarship.

With the letters of Mar-Issar being the basis of my study, the methodology that I will develop will consist in a hermeneutic study. I will explain and interpret the letters,¹³ from a general study to a detailed study, in purpose to answer to the problematics that I exposed. First of all, the study will consist of a general presentation of the letters, involving an establishment of the topics and a structural analysis of the texts. In addition, the composition of the letters and the place of each topic within the text will be introduced. Afterwards, a more detailed analysis of the letters will be presented, concerning the content and the interrelation of the texts. Then, the development will focus on the main topic of my subject, the restoration of Babylonian sanctuaries and the way how Mar-Issar depicts it, connected to the question about materiality. This study will be completed with a philological study of the content of the letters, as well as a comparative study with other official's letters. Finally, the research will conclude on the three main questions developed along the study to open on the policy of the king Esarhaddon.

¹³. Mainly from the translation that Simo Parpola made of the texts.

Mar-Issar: an Assyrian agent in Babylonia

Firstly, we have to introduce Mar-Issar, in order to understand his role and the relevance and importance of his letters in the context of the Babylonian sanctuaries reconstruction. Simo Parpola characterizes him as an Assyrian scholar, a concept that needs to be defined and commented upon before initiating the main study.

The Neo-Assyrian scholarship

The Scholarship disciplines were apparently divided in five, which consisted in astrologer/scribe, haruspex/diviner, exorcist/magician, physician and lamentation chanter. However, if each scholar was wearing one of these titles, they would rarely be limited to one discipline but categorised on their ability based on the study and mastery of an extensive technical lore.¹⁴ The appellation of scholar, which is *ummānu* in Akkadian, did not apply to every scribe, diviner, exorcist, physician or chanter; only those who excelled in their discipline or in more. Thus, the scholars were those responsible for the cultivation and development of Mesopotamian philosophy and science, and the transmission of this knowledge to later generations. They defined themselves by the role “to keep the king's watch”, and so protect, guide and advise the king. These officials were serving the king by interpreting omens, conducting extispicy, protecting the kingdom from evil, and maintaining the king's ritual purity.¹⁵ The interesting aspect is the relation between the individual work of the scholars and the scientific tradition which was conveyed to them by written tradition. In Mesopotamia, scientific knowledge was progressively accumulated and fixed in a series of texts, known as “Scriptures”.¹⁶ The foundation of scholarly knowledge was based on these texts. Thus, the personal duty and competence of the scholars was to study and interpret them.¹⁷

Mesopotamian Wisdom was determined by a strong religious and metaphysical orientation. Astrology, magic, divination and mystical philosophy were predominant. The foundations of their belief were based on the fact that the gods themselves were the source of everything. Mesopotamian Wisdom offered a comprehensive and systematic explanation of the world beginning from the basic proposition that God had created the universe as a mirror of his existence and man as his image. Thereby the king was defined as God's representative on earth. This complex metaphysical theory directly influenced the policy and the ideology of the country.

The divination was present and pretty significant in every field of the Assyrian and Babylonian

¹⁴. Parpola 1993, p. XIII.

¹⁵. Parpola 1993, p. XXII; Parker 2011, p. 370.

¹⁶. Parpola gave this appellation, considering these texts as the professional literature containing observations of natural phenomena that accumulated over hundred of years. Parpola 1993.

¹⁷. Lafranchi 1989, p. 99.

administration. The king himself gave lot of credit to astronomical and magical matters, making a consequent place for this in his policy, notably in his Babylonian policy. Divination was considered as a kind of scientific discipline and the most important of them; it was not conceived as a primitive magical or occult activity but one of the most basic features of Babylonian life. The senior diviners were men of influence, deeply respected in society. Both private individuals and officers of state consulted them on any important occasion. Babylonian divination was regarded as a major intellectual achievement throughout the ancient world.

Divination represented a kind of communication technique with the gods, the destinies of all mankind being already shaped by them, individually as well as collectively. The purpose of this discipline was to ascertain the will of the gods and the prediction of future events. All perceived phenomena were presupposed having supernatural cause and effect. Furthermore, it was believed that the gods were cooperating and ready to reveal their future intentions. Various purification rituals could be used to avert any bad portents. Divination used numerous techniques, such as the observation of animals' entrails, oil in water, smoke from incense, the behaviour of animals, and celestial and other natural phenomena.¹⁸ The distinction was made between provoked omens and unprovoked or natural omens. Concerning the interpretation of dreams, Mesopotamian philosophy was quite reluctant to the idea that gods could directly use man to express divine will, considering also that a dream was significant only when an expert had interpreted it.

During the First Millennium BC, celestial portents were the heart of divination, in connection with the scientific advances in astronomy. Astrology was the most famous divination method in Babylonia, emblematic of the country, its practitioners were considered as the most distinguished scholars. Celestial and meteorological phenomena had an especial prophetic validity concerning matters relating to the king and state. Hundreds of reports on such matters from scholars are preserved in the Nineveh archives, reflecting a network of observatories throughout the country. Some reports were only celestial observations, while some others presented ominous interpretations. The latter were mostly dispatched from Babylonia. The development of divination was due to Babylonian contribution. The Nineveh reports reveal that astronomical experts may have had considerable influence on the royal policy. It sometimes happened that some unfavourable predictions were not accepted by the king. Even Esarhaddon, considered as the most superstitious by many modern scholars, did not always trust the work of his diviners.¹⁹

The Neo-Assyrian period is particular, because it is chronologically almost at the end of the stream of tradition. The development of the activity of scholars during this period is illustrated by the correspondences with the king that were maintained, which represents a really rare feature of Mesopotamian history. If these scholars were the most trusted men of the king, who could have been called for personal tasks, their responses were still carefully controlled at the court. From the corpus of letters from Assyrian scholars spread over an

¹⁸. Preference for the different techniques were differing from one period and area to another; Oates 1979, p. 178.

¹⁹. Oates 1979, p. 179-180.

approximately 35-year period, Simo Parpola had identified seventeen men who maintained direct contact with the king. As with the high administrative officials, their names were mainly Assyrian. These men were certainly extremely versed in Mesopotamian traditional knowledge.

The person of Mar-Issar

Mar-Issar was a scholar, whose first role was certainly that of a scribe, working for Esarhaddon in Babylonia.²⁰ His letters reveal that his work consisted of supervising the Babylonian temples and their cults, together with the reorganization and reconstruction of these temples. He never appears with an official title in his letters, but he is principally identified as a scribe and astrologist by the contents of his reports. However, it remains uncertain if he was a professional scribe or astrologist, or if he was any other type of scholar. The exact Akkadian designation of his office is thus still unknown. Twenty-four letters are related to Mar-Issar, recognizable for their exceptional consistency in shape, physical appearance, script, orthography and style. The name of Mar-Issar is preserved on nine letters, and it was restored by Simo Parpola on the fifteen others.²¹ All letters of Mar-Issar were apparently written during the period from 671 to 669 BC, the last years of Esarhaddon's reign.²² Six letters were identified as replies to the king, fourteen as spontaneous, and the rest is unclassified.²³ The letters contain lots of information concerning temples and cultic matters, as well as astronomical and magical issues. There is also information of an administrative nature, about the actions of local officials, the relations with Elam and the events in the Babylonian cities. Mar-Issar was in charge of a wide area, probably too large to be under his own authority. Thus, numerous cities are mentioned: Babylon, Borsippa, Uruk, Akkad, Cutha, Dēr, Dilbat, Dūr-Šarrukku, Ḫursagkalama, Laḫiru, Sippar and Nippur. However, most of these cities are only mentioned once or twice. Most letters of Mar-Issar focus on Babylon and Borsippa, dealing regularly with their sanctuaries, Esagil and Ezida. The city of Akkad is also often mentioned, but only little attention is given to it. While, Uruk, Cutha and Dēr are quoted only three or four times, but information concerning them is richer.

The life of Mar-Issar remains a mystery; he was one of the scholars serving Esarhaddon around 670 BC. He was not residing in the court, but in Babylon. His exact political authority is uncertain, he was apparently communicating and executing king's orders, responsible only to the king himself. Direct orders to these officials were usually coming from the king himself, or at least under his direction. Even if Mar-Issar might have influenced the king through his letters and is sometimes seen interfering into local affairs, he certainly seems have to respected his place as an observer.²⁴ The wide range of topics of his reports, directly transmitted to the

²⁰. Parpola 1993, p. XXV-XXVI.

²¹. Parpola 1983, p. 435.

²². Simo Parpola considers that the identification of even tiny fragments is possible due to really conspicuous features of the letters. The dating is based on his work, with only one exception, the no. 358, dated from 667 BC. Parpola 1971, p. 35.

²³. Parpola 1983, p. 478.

²⁴. Grant Frame thinks that Mar-Issar applied sometimes his own orders and not the ones of the king, Frame 1992, p. 91 and 240.

king, would be the proof of the particular importance of his position and the value of his reports.²⁵ The formulas which he uses in his letters, “I have heard” and “the king, my lord, should know this”,²⁶ indicate that his main duty was to inform the king in person. Consequently, he seems to have been an important scholar. Even if the Assyrian court housed many scholarly experts, and many more were scattered all around the empire, only a few of them engaged in regular correspondence with the king. An exchange of letters with the king remained highly restricted and rare. The main part of the exchanges were realized between the king and his provincial governors and other officials of similar or superior rank, and only some of them were coming from deputy governors or other lower level officials.

Mar-Issar was apparently a trusted agent sent by the king himself, in order to report on conditions in Babylonia. He might have been a member of the “Inner Circle”, seventeen Assyrians involved in more or less regular correspondence with the king.²⁷ This circle was composed of high-ranking men, eight of whom bear titles which prove that they were the supreme scholars in their special disciplines. Two of them are even present in the Assyrian king list.

The official scholars in Babylonia

The Babylonian scholars were the actors of an extensive Assyrian involvement in the internal administration of Babylonia. The structure of the Babylonian administration was not yet modified. The cities were the natural and traditional administrative centres for their districts, and were consequently of the same importance. Esarhaddon followed his predecessors by choosing to adopt the traditional city-based pattern of administration, considering the cities as central. Babylon was at the heart of an administrative district, as well as Nippur, Uruk, Ur and Borsippa. These administrative centres for provinces were under the supervision of Assyrian-appointed administrators, most often native Babylonian residents of these cities.²⁸

Many middle-and lower-level officials must have been Babylonians, which was a practical necessity. The most important Babylonian officials were appointed or confirmed by the Assyrian king, who expected them to report all the elements and activities occurring in Babylonia and for them to enforce all royal instructions. Some Assyrian scholars were also sent to the South in order to carry out duties and supervise the activities of the Babylonian officials, on which they would send reports to the king. The Assyrian government was involved in various activities in Babylonia, such as the administration of the temples, which required specialized knowledge.

Thus, Mar-Issar was a part of these trusted Assyrian scholars sent as supervisors to Babylonia. He was a

²⁵. Frame 1992, p. 90-91.

²⁶. *Asseme mā; šarru bēlīlū ūdi*.

²⁷. All these men were Assyrians, excepted one, see Table I. The “Inner Circle was opposed to the “Outer Circle”. Parpola 1993, p. XXV.

²⁸. Nevling Porter 1993, p. 37-38.

kind of representative of the king in his supervision of the Babylonian temples and in the progress of the royal building program. Assyrian kings might not have trusted Babylonian scholars considering that they may send unreliable reports to hide the true nature of the Babylonian situation and events. Thus, the dispatch of special trusted agents would have been a way to check up on matters, to carry out special tasks and maybe to establish the coordination of various jurisdictions. These agents had official functions and acted openly, considered as the eyes and the ears of the king.²⁹ Thus, Mar-Issar is specifically qualified by Simo Parpola as the royal “ear and eye” in Babylonia.³⁰ This expression was used later for some officials in the Persian Empire, and it seems that the function of Mar-Issar might have been a kind of prototype of this office.³¹

Such responsibility and power could have tempted these men to overstep the limits and attempt to manipulate the king through their occupation. However, there is no real evidence of such facts, and the validity of the letters as historical sources had never been really questioned. The scholars seem to have executed their office with seriousness and rigor. They might have been seen as opportunistic charlatans, using the king's inexperience for their own benefit. However it appears that the advisors of the king truly believed in the significance of their craft, in a context of strong traditional religious beliefs with high dictates, linked to the state ideology.³²

²⁹. Frame 1992, p. 240.

³⁰. Parpola 1993, p. XXVI.

³¹. Parpola 1971, p. 35.

³². Parpola 1993, p. XVII.

The content of the letters

For a better understanding of the purposes of Mar-Issar's letters, and the complexity of Mar-Issar's role as the supervisor of Babylonian sanctuaries and their cults, we need to realize both general and close study of his whole corpus. Thus, this part will present all the topics discussed in these letters.

General presentation of the letters and their structure

The correspondence consisted of giving the king information on the progress of the reconstruction work on Babylonian sanctuaries, about which the king is really concerned, asking regularly Mar-Issar for news. In addition, the scholar reports omens from Babylonia and various events happening under his oversight, and advises the king. Thus, Mar-Issar often deals with different topics in each letter. However, all his topics appear to be really connected to the policy of Esarhaddon and to be of great importance to him. Only part of the letters are really focused on the sanctuaries. Thus, three main topics were identified: the letters about divination, the ones about the reconstruction of the sanctuaries, and the ones dealing with the different events occurring in Babylonia. The events that Mar-Issar reports to the king are mainly linked to the reconstruction works or to omens.

Although the letters bring a lot of information, many of them are largely destroyed and illegible for some parts.³³ Only four letters are really complete,³⁴ the others have a beginning and/or an end destroyed, as well as breaks in the middle or some small parts missing. Another four letters are very incomplete, they present enough elements to be ascribed to Mar-Issar, but not enough information to define their topic.³⁵ Among the corpus, letter 356 deals with an identifiable topic, which is divination, but not enough to really understand it. However, the letters that Mar-Issar wrote, even generally incomplete, present enough information to be clearly understood and be interesting. Among all the letters, only two letters, no. 350 and 364, appear to deal with all the three different topics. From the overall study of the letters, the general scheme of a typical letter may be gained. All the letters concerning sanctuary reconstruction are dealing with this topic in the first part of the text, immediately after the opening formula, enforcing the main function of Mar-Issar. The only exception is letter 350, revealing another ordering of hierarchy, that of the city concerned. Thus, Babylon is always discussed first, even if the topic is not about reconstruction matters, but only events occurring.

Thus, if the topic concerning the building and statues works is not the most represented, it appears always at the beginning of the letters, while the other elements are being mentioned afterwards. That underlines

³³. See *Appendice 1*.

³⁴. The letters n. 348, 349, 357, 363.

³⁵. The letters n. 356, 260, 366, 370.

which one of his multiple functions was the main one and shows the importance of this topic for Mar-Issar and the king. In the letters of Mar-Issar, it mainly comes to the sanctuaries of Babylon, Borsippa and Uruk, which makes sense, since these sanctuaries were the most important of Babylonia. There are no letters concerning only this topic, while we can observe two letters completely preserved that do not deal with buildings or statues. Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw too wide a conclusion from such an analysis when most part of the letters are incomplete. We have to take into consideration that some elements concerning another topic could have been originally present. Four letters give evidence on only omens, one of them is completely preserved and another one is really incomplete.³⁶ Even so, divination is obviously present in the letters of Mar-Issar, and thus omens were certainly very important for the king. The link between sanctuaries reconstruction and omens was surely quite strong. In the most complete letters, omens appear regularly at the end, which suggests that omens could have also been present at the end of the broken letters.

Through this general study, a layout of the topics appears with an hierarchy. This aspect illustrates the seriousness of the work of Mar-Issar and reinforces his position as a scholar.

Analysis of the content ³⁷

Concerning astronomy and omens

The letters related to omens and astronomical matters are the most recurrent; thirteen letters are concerned with this topic.³⁸ Except a few which one personal to Mar-Issar, all the omens appear to be connected to events occurring in Babylonia. The most common is the realization of an astronomical observation in order to know when the best moment is to organize a specific event, mainly concerning official ceremonies. The number of letters approaching the topic of divination are quite substantial, however the significance of the information varies.

Letter 347 deals with a lunar eclipse, which Mar-Issar explains to the king was observed in Akkad, Borsippa and Nippur. The scholar mentions an interpretation written on a tablet, certainly part of the “Scriptures”, which helped him in the interpretation of the phenomenon. He specifies to the king that he will keep watching for the solar eclipse, following the king's direct order. Everything seems to be driven by this lunar eclipse, seen all over Mesopotamia, and the evil side of which will befall on the “Westland”. In this letter, Mar-Issar insists on the importance of his work and we can observe a little how he was working, and how the interpretation could be really complex. Interpretations can be numerous and various. The fact that final order

³⁶. The letters n. 356, 362, 363 and 365. The complete one is the 363, while the incomplete is the 356.

³⁷. See *Appendice 2*.

³⁸. Letters n. 347, 349, 350, 351, 352, 356, 357, 358, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365.

always came from the king shows the significance of the role of Mar-Issar and the place of divination in Assyrian administration. Letter 351 is linked to the previous letter, mentioning again the “Westland”, which the tradition interprets as the Hittite country and the nomad land or Chaldea. Mar-Issar details the possible events which will take place owing to this eclipse. At the end, he advises the king to be prudent even if he doesn't really have to be worried by this astronomical phenomenon, and that some protective rituals should be performed.

Letter 352 concerns the burial of the Assyrian substitute king in Babylonia. Mar-Issar describes what is organized for this event, and mentions that all portents were cancelled, but omen litanies were performed to perfection. He also mentions what a prophetess said to the substitute king before his death. Prophecies seem to have importance, even when they are not coming from an expert. An eclipse is supposed to affect Babylonia and is indicated when the next substitute king reaches his function. In the letter 357, the Elul Festival of Babylon is interrupted by Mar-Issar following up the king's order, because the month Elul was intercalary. There are also mentions of dreams and their interpretation in the letters of Mar-Issar. Letter 361 concerns this topic. Mar-Issar had a dream in which the god Bel appeared, but he says to the king that the meaning is different from the events of his dream. If in his dream Bel supports him, the real issue is that he feels forsaken by the king and complains about the inefficiency of administration. Mar-Issar does not seem to be an expert in dream interpretation, but uses his dream to underline the problems of his situation. Another letter, no. 365, also deals with a dream; this time concerning the Epic of Creation. The king is present in the dream of the scholar, but unfortunately the letter is not complete, and does not allow one to conclude that Mar-Issar speaks about more than the dream itself.

In letter 362, Mar-Issar discusses astronomical interpretations, predicting the future and the destiny of a land. Then different interpretations are exposed, depending on the subsequent path that the planet Jupiter will take. This letter is one of the most detailed concerning divination, making it really interesting and useful for the comprehension of this discipline. The following letter, no. 363, is thematically connected to the previous one since it contains a rectification. There was a change in the prediction of which the scholar must inform the king. This occurrence proves the importance of being precise in this work and how much it was a complex art. Letter 364 is of the same nature, the scholar is giving the interpretation of a constellation approaching the moon. The consequences are negative for the king of Elam, but positive for the king of Akkad; and they are quite serious as they concern death and defeat. Divination seems to have been largely connected to the context of war and conquest, enabling the results to be known. Finally, letters 356 and 358, both mention eclipses and dates, but are not really complete and do not bring much information. Similarly, omens are mentioned briefly in one sentence, at the end of letters 349 and 350.

The importance of this topic in the letters show that Mar-Issar was certainly a very competent scholar, although helped by subordinated officials, such as the staff of the temples. The skills he displays through his letters correspond to a high level scholar.

Concerning buildings and statues

Nine of the twenty-four letters are really dealing with the reconstruction of the sanctuaries and the statues of the gods.³⁹ The discussions about ornaments of statues prevail and they mention various precious materials. The luxurious decoration of statues appear obviously very important.

The first letter dealing with reconstruction of buildings and/or statues is letter 348, and concerns Borsippa.⁴⁰ It refers to jewellery and gemstones which were to be used to make the tiara of the god Nabû, some of which were even part of the personal belongings of the king and his mother. Mar-Issar keeps the king informed of the arrival of the jewellery, which was dispatched by one of the king's messengers, and that he had received them with the seal intact. This letter follows another, where Mar-Issar tells the king about the problem of the transmission of the jewellery. He thanks the “genie of the king”, for his generosity, and confirms that all the jewellery were used for the creating the tiara of Nabû, as the king had ordered. The king is also kept aware of the progress of the works on the statues in general through this letter. Through the gift that he made, the king is realizing an offering to Nabû and proving that he is taking a lot of care of the god. It is probably because the god Nabû was one of the most important Babylonian gods, that Esarhaddon gave his own jewellery. Mar-Issar prays that Nabû and Bêl bring dignity, fortune, fullness of life and old age to the king and his family, as well as victory against his enemies. The significance of serving the god Nabû for Esarhaddon is underlined in this letter, as well as the richness associated with religious buildings.

Letter 349 concerns the city of Uruk and the work in progress on the cult statues, especially the statues of the goddesses Nanaya and Uşur-amatsa. Mar-Issar describes the ornamentation work on the statues. He mentions also three statues of gods for the temple of Mummu, explaining that the work is finished, except the overlay with gold, but the overlay with silver is done. The significance of the ornamentation and its richness is obvious. The statues appear to be one of the biggest concerns for Mar-Issar in his function as supervisor of the temple reconstruction. Even the minor gods require attentive work and precious materials. Mar-Issar also informs the king of how much gold is available, but his power concerning it appears to be limited; he can't check the amount of gold without the presence of “the prelate, the delegate and the temple scribe of Uruk”. He says that he shall go to Uruk to supervise the gold and the work himself. At the end, the scholar talks about the difficulties encountered with the reconstruction of the temple of Dêr, due to disagreements between the “prelate” and the officials of the city, and of the city's proximity to Elam. He advises the king to send a bodyguard and an Assyrian master-builder to the city to progress the work. This is the only time that the temple of Dêr is mentioned, questioning why it does not appear to be one of the main building works to which Mar-Issar was attached. In addition, Mar-Issar advises the king that he should not neglect the guard of the temple, which means that the temple is vulnerable. Obviously, temples constituted the first target of an enemy who would attack a city,

³⁹. Letters n. 348, 349, 350, 353, 354, 355, 358, 364, 368.

⁴⁰. Untitled “Riots in Babylon”, Parpola 1993, p. 283-284. The number of the letters correspond to the ones attributed in SAA X by Simo Parpola.

in order to weaken morale in its population, and because of the richness that it housed.

Letter 353 is about the tiara of Nabû of the temple of Borsippa, which is completed with names inscribed on it and a dedicatory ritual. The *ašgikû*-jewellery, a term that will be discussed later on, was obtained as booty from Egypt, which underlines the importance of warfare to finance the Assyrian projects. The next letter, no. 354, concerns Ezida and the overlay with silver of its sanctuaries. This is the first time that the overlay is mentioned for the building itself and not only for the statues. The construction of Esagil is discussed, the builders are apparently in need of limestone, and the shares that Mar-Issar had with him had been already distributed. Mar-Issar seems to move a lot in Babylonia for the building program, to supervise work as well as to acquire materials. He keeps the king informed on the progress and the needs for the construction. The work on Ezida appears to be more advanced than the one on Esagil.

Letter 355 talks about the reconstruction in Uruk at this time, including a problem with the glazed bricks. The works for the temples reconstruction faced some difficulties, alike many other building constructions. However, it is interesting to observe that the progress, as well as the difficulties concerning the building program, is discussed by Mar-Issar with the king. Letter 364 deals also with the difficulties, but coming from natural events this time. In Borsippa, the river had swollen, weakening the bridge and causing water to rise up the wall Ezida. Mar-Issar asks the king, if he can make “the oblates of Išum glazing” kiln-fired bricks and whether they can brick up the quay-wall of the sanctuary. Every decision has to be approved by the king. The scholar talks again about the king's inscription, as well as his statue, the mark of the king's presence and the proof of the work he has done in honour of the Babylonian gods. Then, he talks about the wall of the Nergal temple in Cutha, a city which is not discussed a lot in the letters and which does not have a significant role in the building program of Esarhaddon. In addition, the way how Mar-Issar seems as though he is trying to convince the king, gives the feeling that this project was not a real concern of Assyria. It is like if Mar-Issar was asking for the permission from Esarhaddon rather than he was to carry out his orders. The construction of the temple is not clearly discussed, since it is still a project; nothing has been approved yet.

Letter 358 deals with the inscription of the Pedestal of the statue of the goddess Tašmetu, the consort of the city god of Borsippa Nabû, that the king ordered. The statue was certainly meant to be placed in Ezida. In addition, two statues of the king are placed next to the statue of the goddess, one on each side. The king has to be in connection with every god and to conciliate with them, but it is also a way to mark his presence in Babylonia. Letter 368 focuses on the work on the divine statues for Esagil in Babylon, including a statue of the king. The statue of the king is mentioned along with the statues of the minor gods. Mar-Issar is talking about the work in progress on seven statues for Esagil, which implies already an extensive project. Then, he informs the king of the reconstruction works in Akkad and the involvement of the inhabitants, glazing and gilding kiln-fired bricks. In the same register, the letter 350 concerns statues of Sargon placed in the sanctuaries and in the streets, Processional Street probably, in Borsippa. The link with the Babylonian gods and the country had to be made not

only with the current king, but with all the dynasty of Sargonids, especially its founder.

The only element really connected to the reconstruction of the temples concerns the bricks, or more specifically, the glazed-bricks. The bricks are obviously the foundation of any kind of building, so the fact that they have to be glazed seems to be really significant. Generally, there is more information on the work in progress on the statues than the temples themselves. The statues were in a way the masterpieces of the temples. There are numerous divine statues mentioned in the letters, main gods as well as minor deities, showing the importance of the statues in the temples, all of them with ornaments of precious materials.

Mentioning of the richness and the brightness of the buildings and the statues is very frequent when the reconstruction is discussed. Whether it is about the jewellery ornamenting the statues, or the gold and the silver which are used to decorate both. Only the glazing of the bricks appears also to be a functional practice, in addition to being related to decoration.

Concerning events in Babylonia

Mar-Issar reports many events occurring in Babylonia in his letters, thus we can observe fourteen letters mentioning different occurrences.⁴¹ The character of the events differ. In Babylonia they mainly concern Babylon and Borsippa. The topic of events also deals with the reorganization of cults and the performance of rituals, since they are discussed only when their proper conduct encounters a problem.

To begin, in letter 348, Mar-Issar informs the king of a riot, which took place in Babylon. In addition, the scholar gives his point of view on the events, defending the inhabitants of Babylon and criticizing the “commandant of Babylon”. This letter underlines the importance of the position of Mar-Issar, who appears really close to the king, advising him. This gives also the feeling that Mar-Issar was a honest scholar, worried to denounce the corruption among the other officials, which makes sense in the perspective of his role as supervisor. The letter 369 also concerns a problem of corruption, on behalf of the governor of Dur-Šarruku, the Prefect of the Land and the governors of Nineveh and Arbela. The first took silver and animals from the treasury of the gods Šimalu'a and Humbum, while the others took silver from the temples. Mar-Issar considers that these treasures belong to the gods and the king, and they are dissipated. However, none of the officials offers a good example to follow, so a trusted bodyguard should be sent by the king to investigate, and the responsible should be punished. The bodyguard would certainly be someone close to the king, perhaps from the king's guard. The problem has to be solved before it is too late. Mar-Issar denounces again the corruption inside the assyro-Babylonian administration, preoccupied by not upsetting the gods and the welfare of the empire.

Letters 350, 351 and 352 are linked, all concerning the substitute king, who was appointed by the Assyrian king to rule in Babylonia. The first deals with the end of his reign, which lasted 100 days. The letter

⁴¹. Letters n. 348, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 357, 359, 361, 364, 367, 368, 369, 370.

also mentions events in Borsippa. A priest of Nabû apparently sentenced three men to death. This event is probably mentioned, because a priest of Nabû is involved, and thus the case concerns Mar-Issar, who had to have authority on the staff of the temples in Babylonia. At the end of the letter, he is certainly making an inventory of ritual offerings for a specific god. The second letter concerns the entry of the substitute king in Nineveh, then Akkad, and what he will have to do when he will be in the city of Akkad. The topic of the last letter is the death of the substitute king Damqî and his wife. Mar-Issar informs the king about the organization of the ceremony for their burial. The inhabitants of Akkad were frightened, but the problem was solved. Then, the scholar mentions the succession of the substitute king, the proceeding and gives some advice to the king concerning it.

Letter 353 mentions “a bodyguard sent by the king to the commandant and the prelate of Borsippa” and an account of the bulls and sheep belonging to Nabû, constituting the ritual offerings for the god. This is one recurrent element in the letters, one of the functions of Mar-Issar certainly, as the supervisor of the reorganization of the cult; he has to take care of the ritual offerings. In this case, offerings with ritual sacrifices have not been practiced, not even the account of animals, since the shepherds refused to do their work. This problem with the shepherds is the reason for the coming of the bodyguard. We can consider that it was a quite common problem, which could have been deeper, impregnated maybe from the hatred against Assyrian rule. There was also a problem with a sacrifice to the goddess Nanaya, the number of kidneys in the ritual was not enough, and the population was accordingly worried, afraid that the gods would not be satisfied. Mar-Issar is waiting for the king's decision about this problem. He ends the letter with the coming of the lady of Akkad, and with a good omen concerning Babylon.

Letter 354 also deals with a lot of different events; although it is quite complete, the narrative of events is difficult to understand. First of all, after having discussed of the construction of Ezida and Esagil, Mar-Issar talks about the adjuration of officials. These officials could be the delegates of Babylonia and “the cohort commander” Idri-aha'u, whom he talked about previously in the letter, but are more probably other men. They seem to have escaped and the words that Mar-Issar is using to talk about them are quite strong and violent. He tries to solve this problem, as the king had ordered, but the result is unknown. Finally, the scholar mentions Cutha and animal offerings, and delegates of Ezida in Borsippa.

Letter 357 is about the interruption of the Elul Festival in Babylon which was interrupted by order of the king, because of indication of astronomical data linked to the month Elul. This event shows the importance of divination and its impact on the king and on the society in general. Mar-Issar confirms that when he saw the king's sealed order, he applied it without any interrogation. He informs the king that the festival was interrupted as he had ordered and that it will be performed in the coming month instead. In another register, letter 359 concerns Akkad and the ritual offerings, which have not been delivered to the gods since Mar-Issar became the supervisor. However, the offerings were practiced for years after the resettlement of the city that the king had organized. He asks the king to make some reconciliations with the inhabitants of Akkad, and he repeats his

fidelity to the king. Letter 361 is also linked to divination, since Mar-Issar had a dream with the god Nabû, which is connected to some problems with the administration. Some post stations in some towns are not transmitting his letters to the king and he has not received one from the king either, so he is complaining that he can't really do his work and that he feels isolated. Again, the manners with which he is talking to the king are displaying his position and his proximity with the king.

One of the subjects of letter 364 is set in the city Borsippa, where the bridge became too weak because of the water of the river rising up too much. Mar-Issar presents the situation to the king and states that the bridge should be strengthened before the arrival of the king. Then, he mentions that some scholars have been dismissed and replaced. Letter 366 is only partially preserved; Mar-Issar writes about people who have not brought the meat, probably it is about a ritual offering, and a “former man” who should be sent to Sippar. Letter 367 is also really short, the official informs the king on the coming of Elam's king in Babylon, a piece of the news that he had received from a Babylonian citizen.

Letter 368 concerns the governor of Itu'u and Gabbaru, where the actions are probably related to some reconstructions, but it is uncertain that they were linked to a temple reconstruction. Letter 370 is really incomplete; except the mention of Borsippa, nothing else can be said.

The role of Mar-Issar appears to be quite complex. His functions are multiple, but his role as supervisor is apparent in all. In every letter, the information varies. They all concern Babylonia, and relate to events of various characters. Mar-Issar's concern with corruption caused by governors and other officials, as well as of the simple shepherds seems to be significant, due to its recurrence in the letters. This problem of corruption was probably something quite common, like in any other empire, especially of this size. Thus, this confirms the role of the scholar, whose mission consisted also to keep control of Babylonian officials, and his position as trusted man close to the king.

Interest and relevance of the letters

First of all, the letters of Mar-Issar offer a different point of view from the royal inscriptions, answering and reporting events to the king. The information brought by the letters are not distorted by either an Assyrian point of view nor a Babylonian. In addition, this information is transmitted by a concerned man who attended many of the said events. Although, we can never have any certitude concerning the objectivity of sources, Mar-Issar's letters appear to be more objective than many others.

His letters allow one to observe and understand the work of scholars, especially because its number is quite consequent and offers a certain continuity to his work, a continuity which offers much interest and sense. The formal and academic aspects of the letters of Mar-Issar support the fact that this man was certainly an

official scholar, with the rigor expected from a man like him. The reports that he makes concerning officials and the administration in Babylonia, show that he was preoccupied by a good ethic within administration. Thus, the letters also present a lot of interest, because they bring information concerning Assyrian administration in the southern kingdom, how it was established and its dysfunctions, in a context of relative peace.

The letters of Mar-Issar offer a good idea of the progress of Esarhaddon's building program at the end of the Assyrian king's reign. Mar-Issar always mentions what has occurred, and what remains to be done in the sanctuaries. The rich detail of the reconstruction descriptions indicates that works on Esagila and Etemenanki, as well as for the sanctuaries in Borsippa and Uruk, were nearly completed by the end of Esarhaddon's reign. This idea corresponds to the fact that Mar-Issar wrote his letters during the three last years of Esarhaddon's reign. The oldest one is from July 6th 671 BC, and the most recent from July 6th 669 BC.⁴² The repair and replacement of the damaged gods' statues and the embellishment of the buildings were supposed to be the last steps of the restoration, just before equipping the temple with cultic vessels and restitution of regular offerings and the appointment of temple personnel. Since the Assyrian building program started in 680 BC, at the beginning of Esarhaddon's reign, it makes sense that eleven years later, some sanctuaries appear to be nearing completion. The fact that we can follow the evolution of reconstruction works over a few years constitutes a very interesting approach. A few letters appear connected by one topic in particular, thus we can follow the work on the tiara of Nabû or on the statue of Tašmetu through some different letters. His letters are really essential to observe the progress on the work concerning the Babylonian sanctuaries, but also all the elements attached to it. For example, problems which can occur during the reconstruction works, like disagreements with officials or with workers. Mar-Issar had to take care of the process of the building program and deal with all the subsequent events.

The relevance of the letters is mainly based on the fact that Mar-Issar was in direct connection to the king and he had to supervise a wide territory in Babylonia. The way he is talking to the king proves that he was certainly a trusted man of the king, whose point of view held an importance. This proximity is sufficient to attest of the significance of the remarks contained in these letters. Mar-Issar appears as a true man of importance, with a key role in Babylonia. The fact that he had to take care of such a wide area is quite rare and so significant of his importance. This point offers a really interesting view of Babylonia, both overall and diverse. Moreover, he was the supervisor of the progress of the building program of Esarhaddon in Babylonia and of the reorganization of the cult, a great project of Esarhaddon's reign. The supervision of Mar-Issar of the works on Babylonian sanctuaries is also an indication that the temples and statues were refurbished under the sponsorship of Esarhaddon. In addition, Mar-Issar sometimes specifies that his letter is a direct answer to a question asked by the king concerning the progress on the projects. In the letter dealing with the work on the divine statues of Uruk,⁴³ Esarhaddon asked his official about what has still to be done on the statues. This proves the active

⁴². Parpola 1971, p. 35.

⁴³. Parpola 1993, letter n. 349.

interest that the Assyrian king had concerning the work being done in Uruk, and in the other Babylonian cities, in his name. No other group of letters present so much information about the Babylonian sanctuaries under the reign of Esarhaddon. Omens and reports of Babylonian events also participate to show what the main concerns of the king in Babylonia were. Omens are recurrent in the letters, which it corresponds to the importance of Babylonian divination in the Assyrian culture.

The restoration of Babylonian sanctuaries in Mar-Issar's letters and other sources

After an overall analysis of the letters, we will focus on the heart of our study. The reign of Esarhaddon is characterized by his impressive building project. From the conjoint evidence of the sources, it results that it mainly concerned the construction and restoration of eight Babylonian temples. It is obvious that Mar-Issar had a really important role in this project, and it is on this topic that we will extend a more detailed study. First, we will clearly present the project of Esarhaddon, in parallel with a short description of the buildings in question, then we will observe how Mar-Issar treats the project, especially the character of richness and the materiality in the letters of Mar-Issar.

Esarhaddon's building program⁴⁴

Esarhaddon was really proud of the reconstruction of Babylon that he instigated, and which was regularly mentioned and depicted in his texts.⁴⁵ Through his building program, his purpose was to recreate the image that Babylonia had of itself as a real nation, and to become consequently the city's new patron. The Assyrian king really wanted to reunite the south under the attraction of Babylonia, in order to easily dominate them⁴⁶. The restoration and revitalization of Babylon was a kind of gift to the south as a whole. Esarhaddon extended the tangible benefits of Assyrian rule to other Babylonian cities. One of his main gestures was to return the statues of Babylonian gods captured during wars and carried to Assyria.

In parallel to his southern building program, Esarhaddon initiated an Assyrian one. Esarhaddon's building project concerned eight temples in Babylonia, while seven temples are involved in the project in Assyria. Esarhaddon tried to give equal attention to both territories. This colossal building program was far more than any Assyrian king had done before him. In addition, he offered gifts and royal favours to the Babylonian cities. The project building that Esarhaddon led together in Assyria and Babylonia defined his public image as king and his role as ruler of Assyria and Babylonia as well. However, the character of the building project in Assyria differed from the Babylonian project. In Babylonia, the construction and restoration works were mainly focused on temples and sanctuaries, while the Assyrian building program included extensive work on palace and arsenal complexes in addition to the temple constructions. The two massive arsenals in Nineveh and Calah underlined his will to remain fundamentally a northern and Assyrian king. The real political and military base of the Assyrian Empire remained naturally in Assyria and its main cities. This meaning is clearly carried in the

⁴⁴. The books dedicated to the reign of Esarhaddon deal with this topic; see Grayson 1991 and Frame 1992.

⁴⁵. Leichty 2011, n. 104-126, p. 193-257; n. 104, p. 193-201, offers a description of the reconstruction of Babylon.

⁴⁶. Nevlings Porter 1993, p. 41.

project that the king undertook in Assyria, proving where his priorities lay.

His project in the south helped him to be seen by the Babylonians as a ruler attentive of their traditions of kingship. Although his project obviously proved that the north was remaining his real base of operations, and the administrative and military centre of the empire, the Assyrian king also showed that he respected the culture and religion of Babylonia as much as his own. The purpose of his building program was certainly to demonstrate that his primary commitment would still remain Assyria, while suggesting his willingness to be a truly Babylonian king, fulfilling the traditional responsibilities, so that the Babylonians would accept him.⁴⁷

This project was also a way for Esarhaddon to honour the gods of Babylonia, the sanctuaries constituted their houses on earth. The importance that he gave to religion in his reign was associated with his great respect for Babylonian culture, but undoubtedly also with his belief in the powers of the Babylonian gods. The reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries was a way to be forgiven, but also to honour the Babylonian gods, as well as the Assyrian gods. The purpose was to have the protection and the blessing of the gods concerning Assyria and his reign. The consent and approval of the population of Babylonia would come after. During the second millennium BC, the gods began to be increasingly identified with political ambition, in particular after the rise of Marduk.⁴⁸ The idea was that a good relation with the gods was required before having a good one with the people.

Esarhaddon began the works in Babylonia and Assyria approximately at the same time, just one year later for the first Assyrian construction work. In 680 BC, the Assyrian king announced the Esagila project, then in spring 679 BC, he instigated the building program of the northern temple Ešarra.⁴⁹ The reconstruction of Ešarra was thus the second one of his projects, after the one of Esagila in Babylon. This realization was the first step in his delicate project to win the favour of Babylonians without resentment in Assyria. Assyrians made efforts to recover the original plans of the sanctuaries and follow these plans in the reconstruction work.⁵⁰ Esarhaddon had to maintain the balance between the two building projects, thus as he included more cities in his southern program, he also expanded the one in the north, giving equivalent attention. The works in Ešarra were followed by those in Nineveh and Calah, joined by those of Babylon by Borsippa, Uruk, Nippur and Akkad.

The Babylonian sanctuaries

Many Babylonian cities were concerned by the extensive building program of Esarhaddon, some representing a bigger part of the project than others. We will briefly introduce the buildings restored in each city.

⁴⁷. Nevling Porter 1993, p. 75.

⁴⁸. Schneider 2013, p. 73.

⁴⁹. Nevling Porter 1993, p. 67.

⁵⁰. Babylonian inscriptions A + C, Ep. 25.

The main building project: Babylon

The religious centre in the city of Babylon had been the traditional religious and political centre of Babylonia for many generations, and was at the heart of the building program. Esarhaddon wanted a reversal of Sennacherib's punitive treatment of Babylon, item by item. The most important temple in Babylonia was known as Esagila, the dwelling-place of Marduk, patron god of the city.⁵¹ Babylon was the city where Marduk, the ruler of the other gods, worshipped. The building, situated on the east bank of the Euphrates, almost one kilometre south of the royal palaces, was formed in an important quadrangular enclosure surrounded by high walls. It was considered the largest and most splendid temple, “the house that lifts up its head”. The temple of Marduk was associated with 55 side-chapels.

The ziggurat Etemenanki, “the house that is the foundation of heaven and earth”, was situated in the large court to the north of Esagila. Etemenanki is not referred to in Babylonian texts, until the 7th century, after the destruction of the sanctuary by Sennacherib. Originally seven stories high, the monument disappeared at the end of Antiquity. Only its foundations remain and have been excavated. Although, Esagil is one of the main subjects of Mar-Issar's letters, Etemenanki is never mentioned.

The building program also concerned the city walls of Babylon, the only part of the reconstruction works not dedicated to religious buildings. However, Mar-Issar never mentions the city walls and their reconstruction, which could be linked to his role. Mar-Issar is supposed to have been responsible for only the sanctuaries and their cult.⁵² However, his responsibilities seem quite wide. The rebuilding of the city walls of Babylon is also rarely discussed in Esarhaddon's inscriptions. The rebuilding of the city walls seems to have been delayed until late in Esarhaddon's reign, or perhaps not ever begun, but at least the laying of foundations had been realized. Assurbanipal is largely responsible for their reconstruction, in what his inscriptions confirm. Assyrians probably intended to keep the Babylonian city relatively defenceless until Assyrian and Babylonian relations improved.⁵³ Mar-Issar's letters could perhaps confirm that the reconstruction of the city walls had not even started under Esarhaddon.

The sanctuaries of Borsippa and Uruk

If the project concerning the temples in Babylon was its centrepiece, they only constituted a part of this Babylonian building program, which included also the cities of Uruk, Nippur, Borsippa and Akkad⁵⁴. As the

⁵¹. A brief description of the Esagila may be found in many modern handbooks on Babylonian culture. The one used in this presentation has been made of Oates 1979, p. 156-159.

⁵². Parpola, 1993, p. XXV.

⁵³. Nevlng Porter 1993, p. 58.

⁵⁴. The city of Cutha is also mentionned in the Mar-Issar letters, SAA X n. 364. But, nothing is certain about religious building project in this city.

dating of the building projects in the other cities is uncertain, they must have started after the one in Babylon. Esarhaddon had developed really large public works in Babylonia, which he couldn't accomplish during his one reign.

The building project in Borsippa concerned the Ezida, the main temple of the city dedicated to the god Nabû, and the Eureminanki, its ziggurat. The temple Ezida was one of the main religious centres in Babylonia, competing with Esagila of Babylon. Esarhaddon also rebuilt the temple of Gula, and strengthened it after it had been weakened by flood. He also made generous donations, such as the realization of a tiara for the god Nabû, which is discussed in Mar-Issar's letters. In addition, Esarhaddon may have sponsored the construction of a quay for the Ezida temple and the strengthening of its embankment to protect the building from flooding. This construction was strongly recommended by Mar-Issar after a flood. However, the work may not have begun under the reign of Esarhaddon, who died four months after this letter was written.

In Uruk, the Eanna sanctuary was reconstructed, including the ziggurat of Anu, the city god. The sanctuary was also dedicated to the goddesses Ištar and Nanaya. The conjoint evidence of ancient sources and modern excavations shows that the debris was cleared away and the structure was rebuilt, recovering the original foundation. Inside the sanctuary, the chapels Ernigalanna devoted to the goddess Ištar, and Eḫilianna to the goddess Nanâ, were also rebuilt. A new ziggurat dedicated to Anu was built, however no foundation documents, such as buildings inscriptions, are available in this case.

The specific cases of Nippur and Akkad

The temple of Inanna in Nippur, known as Ebaradurgarra, was also restored as a part of the building program. However, the sanctuaries reconstruction in the city of Nippur are not mentioned in Mar-Issar's letters. The explanations are numerous and remain hypothetical. The city was perhaps not under the jurisdiction of Mar-Issar, but of other unknown officials. The letters related to Nippur may have existed but gone missing. Or, again, the reconstruction works may have been completed at the end of Esarhaddon's reign, when Mar-Issar's mission took place. At least, archaeological evidence attests the reconstruction in Nippur during his reign. The work of Esarhaddon was mainly destroyed during later restorations of the building, but a lot of materials connected to the king were found. In the surviving northern front section and gate, one brick bearing Esarhaddon's inscription was discovered. In the area of the Inanna temple itself, fragments were found of some fourteen clay cylinders with Esarhaddon's dedicatory inscription for Ebaradurgarra⁵⁵. This archaeological evidence proves the interest and the work of Esarhaddon in the sanctuaries of Nippur, despite the lack of mentions concerning the Babylonian city in Mar-Issar's letters.

The old traditional religious centre of Akkad⁵⁶ was also concerned by the building program. The Assyrian king would have restored the temple of Ištar, known as Eulmaš, the statue of the goddess who was

⁵⁵. Goetze 1963, p. 119.

⁵⁶. Its identity and location are still debated by all the scholars.

carried off to Elam in Sennacherib's reign. Esarhaddon probably took care of its return in Akkad. This project is quite emblematic of the meaning of the building program in general, which is to symbolize the Assyrian respect for the traditional culture of Babylonia and to reconcile its inhabitants. However, the city of Akkad constitutes a specific case, since it had not yet been localised. Then, if Mar-Issar mentions the city of Akkad and some of its building works, there is no archaeological evidence to confirm the facts.

Each of these Babylonian cities were considered cultural and religious centres, some of which had been very important in the past. All knew a renewal in this period and everything was being run well by Esarhaddon. If we can consider that Babylon was a way to be forgiven by the Babylonians, the rest of the building program was more to conciliate them and to show the Assyrian involvement in the Babylonian life. Esarhaddon acted as patron of the temples in every main Babylonian city.

The military capital of some of the Babylonian cities presupposed the support of their patron gods, and the promotion of their cults.⁵⁷ When the city was rebuilt into a military garrison, the cult of the city god also experienced a special financial and theological promotion. These strategically important cities exposed on the Assyrian borders, close to Elam for some, such as Dēr, required special financial investment and administration. This promotion appears to make sense, since the Assyrian king certainly wanted to benefit the assistance and protection of the patron-god of a border city in close proximity to his enemies.

The reconstruction as depicted by Mar-Issar

The description of the sacred-buildings

In Mar-Issar's letters, the reconstruction of the buildings themselves is not described much. Most of his texts dedicated to the building program concern the reconstruction and the ornamentation of the deities' statues. Notwithstanding, the information concerning the reconstruction of the buildings are very interesting. The accent is obviously put on the glazed bricks constituting the walls of temples.

The main character of the architectural decoration of temples is the eye-catching richness of the overlay. If the statues deserve a specific treatment with precious materials to be the most luxurious as possible to symbolize the gods, their house may also have a similar treatment. All of the buildings of the sanctuary are certainly not mentioned; mainly just the central sacred building, the house of the god. Due to its function, it stands to reason that this building had to be apart, more visible than the rest of the complex buildings. These buildings had to reflect the wealth of the god, as well as the richness of the Assyrian empire.

⁵⁷. Pongratz-Leisten 1997, p. 251.

The letters concerning the reconstruction of the buildings are not many, only four.⁵⁸ The other letters are dedicated to the work on the statues, with mentions of a lot of different precious materials. In the letters 355, 364 and 368, the most important mentioned term is the glazed bricks, or the action to glaze the bricks. The glazed bricks seem to be always linked to sacred building. In the letters, the bricks are never merely mentioned as simple bricks, but always as glazed bricks, and sometimes as glazed kiln-fired bricks. Twice in the letters 364 and 368, bricks are specified as kiln-fired, but in the letter 355, it is not mentioned which kind of bricks it is about, some parts being illegible. However, bricks need always to be fired before being glazed, so we can suggest that these terms were always associated.

Other materials are also quoted, such as the *elallu* limestone in letter 354, which seems to be a specific limestone. This stone had to be acquired for the king and Mar-Issar had some pieces that he gave to the delegates of Babylonia and the cohort commander Idri-aha'u, who probably brought them to Babylon, where they had to go. This limestone was certainly used for the statue representing the king Esarhaddon and/or its pedestal, as Mar-Issar speaks of “my lord's stand in Esaggil”. A statue of the king was surely present in every sanctuary for which he had sponsored the reconstruction. This type of limestone may have been quite particular, so it may have only been used for the statue of the king in the most important sanctuary of Babylonia. In letter 368, Mar-Issar talks about asphalt transported from the country of Itu'u to Akkad. They certainly also used asphalt for other constructions, as it was required for the foundations of the temples. The city of Akkad constituted a specific case where the sanctuaries reconstruction probably needed more foundation works than the others. It is interesting to know where the material came from, and to observe all operations which took place in parallel to the construction work itself.

Concerning the identity of the workers that built the Babylonian sanctuaries, the letters bring some information, but nothing really precise. In letter 364, Mar-Issar tells that the “oblates of Išum” are available to brick up the quay-wall of Ezida. The oblates⁵⁹ were probably a cheap workforce, perhaps free, and the ones of Išum may have been the closest, in order to execute this work in a short period of time. Nevertheless, the oblates are only mentioned once, so we can't know if they were involved in a lot in the reconstruction of sanctuaries or not. In letter 368, it is the inhabitants of Akkad that are described as glazing and gilding the bricks themselves. Yet, this is not specified if they were only doing this task or if they were entirely rebuilding the sanctuary. Some specific skills were certainly required to build sanctuaries. In letter 354, where Mar-Issar talks about masters accompanying him in order to overlay the sanctuaries of Ezida with silver. Experts were probably required to execute this work. However, no experts are mentioned in the letters concerning the glaze of the bricks, which was also a delicate work. The experts were not from Borsippa, so they certainly came specifically to perform this work. Mar-Issar may have accompanied them to supervise their work and their use of silver, which would

⁵⁸. Letters n. 354, 355, 364 and 368.

⁵⁹. This term constitutes an anachronism, since it comes from the Middle Age and is associated to Christianity. They dedicated their life to serve a god.

correspond with his role. Another letter, no. 355, concerns the workmen, but this time because they do not want to realize their labour in Uruk. This letter is not complete, and we do not know who was in charge of the work, including glazing bricks. It is the only time that this kind of problem is reported. This disagreement seems to have been quite important since Mar-Issar had to move to Uruk to meet the workers. The scholar had to confront them, but unfortunately their discussion is not complete. It appears quite normal that Assyrian officials sometimes met problems involving the reconstruction works. In letter 349, Mar-Issar mentions problems between “the prelate and the officials of Dēr” concerning the construction of the temple of this city. Accordingly the work does not seem to progress as fast as expected, and Mar-Issar talks about sending a “bodyguard” with an “Assyrian master-builder” to the Babylonian city to solve the problem.

Finally, one other significant element in the reconstruction is the inscription of the king. This kind of inscription had to be put on every public building that Esarhaddon sponsored. Mar-Issar does not always mention this action, probably because it goes without saying. However, in letter 364, he states that the inscription of the king has to be made twice. Probably in this case, the scholar asks the king about the inscription, because the bricking up of the quay-wall of Ezida does not seem to have been planned. The same goes for the construction of the temple of Nergal in Cutha. The inscription was a way to remind which buildings Esarhaddon sponsored during his reign, and thus leave a positive image of him and his reign in history, as well as in Babylonia, to show how much he has done for the country.

Thus, through the letters, it appears really obvious that the sanctuaries had to be the most luxurious possible. The phase of the decorative enrichment of the temples construction is one of the most dealt within Mar-Issar's letters, and seems to be the most important in the whole process of the sacred-buildings construction.

The description of the completion of cult statues

The realization and repair of Babylonian cult statues representing the deities and holds a significant part in the reconstruction of the sanctuaries. Six letters are concerned with work on the statues of various temples, also including the statues of kings, Esarhaddon and the founder of the dynasty, Sargon II. Letter 358 is really interesting, it concerns the jewellery which was used to make the tiara for the statue of the god Nabû of Ezida, in Borsippa. Mar-Issar talks about the *gusīgu*-jewellery, which consist of 30 jewels that he received in a sealed dispatch, brought to him from Assyria by his own messenger. Nothing more is specified about the exact nature of this jewellery is offered. The scholar mentions also that on the same day, the bodyguard, Nabû-le'i, brought him twenty-six 'eye-stones' of serpentine and one mina of gold. This time, we get a more specific idea of what kind of jewels the tiara was made of. In addition, the serpentine was of the king's own property and the gold had belonged to the queen's mother. This richness represents a true offering from the king and his mother to the god Nabû, emphasizing the symbolism of this offering. As to strengthen the action of the king, Mar-Issar formulates

greetings for Esarhaddon and his family, wishing that Bel and Nabû may bring dignity, fortune, fullness of life and old age to him, as well as victory against his enemies. Afterwards, letter 353 deals with the completion of the work on Nabû's tiara. An inscription of the names of the king and the crown prince is made on the tiara and a ritual has to be performed, as the last phase of the realization. Mar-Issar mentions again the *gusiġu*-jewellery, specifying that they come from Egypt, obtained as booty.⁶⁰ The war in Egypt provided funding for Esarhaddon's building program, like in the Assyrian tradition in which warfare is the first system of state funding, thanks to booty.

Next letter, no. 349, concerns work in progress on statues of the temples in Uruk, mainly their dressing up and their overlay with gold and silver. The work on the goddess Nanaya progress, the statue is being decorated. The face and hands of the statue of Ušur-amatsa have been overlaid with gold, but the figure and the feet have not been yet. This means certainly that this work was not done in Assyria before returning the statues, but on site, in Uruk, probably in the Eanna sanctuary. The work may not have been well realized or not finished, gold might have been missing, but Mar-Issar does not seem preoccupied by this. In fact, the function of Mar-Issar may simply have been to deliver precious materials for securing the refurbishing of the statue. Furthermore, the statue of the goddess is dressed and adorned with a golden tiara. Two golden dragon statues are added on each side of the goddess as her attributes. Through the case of the goddess Ušur-amatsa, we have a good illustration of the process of ornamentation of a statue, from its overlay to her display in the temple. However, such rich ornamentation was maybe not given to all statues, but may have depended on the importance of the deity. Certainly, some minors deities had to do with a somewhat less luxurious decoration. Only three gods statues from the Mummu's temple were overlaid with silver, not with gold, that appears to be the responsibility of Mar-Issar. Thus, statues are receiving both silver and gold, but it is not specified which parts are overlaid with which kind of material. The statues of the gods Arkayitu, Anunitu and Palil perhaps did not receive other ornamentation. To finish, the scholar talks about the work to do after the statue of Ušur-amatsa and the temple of Mummu are complete, which consists of the decoration of the statue of Nanaya. Along the letter, we can follow the progress of the work in Uruk and a part of its organization. In letter 368, Mar-Issar also informs the king of the work on the statues, of Esagil this time. He mentions various gods, as well as the king, showing that the number of statues were certainly substantial. The different statues are processed at the same time, which surely represented an important amount of work, requiring lots of men. As the sentence is not complete, Mar-Issar seems to tell at the end that all is being done in Esagil, accordingly to the previous mentions. However, if the scholar talks about the work that is being done, he does not give details of the process.

In contrary to the previous, letter 350 does not deal with the work on statues, but instead quotes statues of Sargon displayed in the streets in Borsippa, including surely the processional street, and the statue of Tašmetu. The scholar mentions the neck of the Tašmetu's statue, and the one of another which we don't know the name.

⁶⁰. The term "booty" is enclosed within parentheses in the translation, which means that it is an interpretative addition.

The letter is not complete and brings only information concerning the position of the statues outside the temples. In letter 358, Tašmetu is mentioned again, the inscription on the pedestal of her statue is realized, which means that the statue is probably completed. The inscription is an important part of the statue, usually added at the end. Two statues or more of the king are disposed on each side of the pedestals of the deities statues, including Tašmetu. Thus, Esarhaddon surrounded the statues of the gods, proving his status as representative of the gods on earth, and it was also a way to symbolize his connection with the Babylonian gods and his presence in Babylonia, and what he has done for the country and its gods, as a true Babylonian king.

The letters 355 and 359 concern the lady of Akkad, but only the statue's return. Nothing is said concerning its reconstruction. Nonetheless, its return involves certainly its reconstruction or repair, probably in Assyria, in connection to the reconstruction of the sacred buildings in the city of Akkad. In letter 349, Mar-Issar informs the king after the description of the work on Ušur-amatsa's statue, that he sent the statue from Assyria to Uruk, and includes that most part of the work on the statue has been done in Assyria. The reasons for this are numerous; however it might be mainly because all the statues were carried off in Assyria after the Sennachrib's revenge, and so the work on the statues was principally realized in Assyria. For the experts working on the statues, perhaps were they better in Assyria or the best ones were brought in Assyria. However, any remaining hypothesis, and we can not possibly make of a simple case in general. Then, Mar-Issar mentions the work of carpenter and metalworker, showing that various skills were required to carry out the statues.

Through these letters, we can notice the significance of the statue of Nabû and its adornment. In comparison, the statue of Marduk is never mentioned, although the progress on the work of Esagil is discussed, as well as the work on some statues for the temple. This situation corresponds to the mystery in all the sources concerning the repair of the Marduk's statue and its return. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that the work concerning the sanctuaries in Borsippa is more the focus of attention than the work on Esagil and in Babylon in general, especially since Mar-Issar is supposed to have resided in Babylon.

Mar-Issar's vocabulary on materials

In order to understand more precisely the character of richness of the sanctuaries and their statues, some terms used by Mar-Issar to denote the materials used, deserve some study in their own right. As most concern the finishing of the cult statues and buildings, this study may furnish some new and precise observations concerning the importance of appearance and the kind of visual impact desired.

Philological analysis

In order to propose a detailed study of the materiality and the richness present in the letters of Mar-Issar, we will realize a brief philological study, focused on the most striking terms of the letters.

The case of the bricks

In the set of the letters of Mar-Issar, three letters present the term “bricks”, the 355, 364 and 368. The question of the absence of the term “kiln-fired” associated to “bricks” in the letter 355 was raised, but it appears that a part of the tablet was damaged just before the term *išāhhuṭu*. This term is the conjugation of the verb *šahāṭu*, which means “to glaze”. Thus, the term *ebirtū*, meaning “fired bricks”, has certainly not been easily identifiable, and the translation was realized only with the term “bricks”. Further in the same letter, the part of the tablet preceding the term *išāhhuṭu* is illegible, and the translation proposes only “are glazing”. In both cases, we can interpret that the letter was dealing with glazing the bricks. If we can't issue any certainty, the same kind of bricks was certainly used in all cases. As we have seen earlier, bricks need to be fired to receive the glaze, so bricks were certainly always kiln-fired. We can observe in the letters 364 and 368, that the same akkadian terms are used, *ebirtū išāhhuṭu*, to talk about the work of glazing the bricks. This reinforces the fact that this practice is not uncommon.

The frequency of silver and gold

Among the terms expressing the richness of the decoration of the statues and the buildings, we have the silver and the gold. The term “silver” appears all the time in the same form of sumerian KUG.UD, which corresponds to the akkadian *kaspu*. It is present six times, in the letters 248, 349, 354, and 369. The term “gold” always appears in the same form of sumerian KUG.GI, which corresponds to the akkadian *ḥurāṣu*. We can observe this term in letter 348 once, and in letter 349, thirteen times.

The term *uhhuzu* is regularly associated to the mentioning of gold or silver, since it is translated by “have been overlaid”. This term appears three times in letters 349 and 354, always linked to one of the metals.

The cases of *elallum*, *gusīgu* and *ašgikû*

The three terms *elallum*, *gusīgu* and *ašgikû* are really interesting because they are the only ones which have not been translated by Simo Parpola. They all deal with materials used for the buildings or the statues. Each of them appearing only once in the letters and is associated to the sumerian term NA4, of which the correspondence in akkadian is *abnu*, which means stone, rock or gem. For the term NA4.*e-lal-lum* used in letter 354, the author Simo Parpola gave the translation “a kind of limestone” and “*elallu* limestone”. The akkadian term *elallu* means cloud, which does not really make sense in this particular case. The term NA4.*gu-si-gu* in letter 348, is interpreted as “a piece of jewellery”. The term *ašgikû* appears in Sumerian in letter 353 under the form

ÁŠ.GÌ.GÌ.MEŠ, and linked to NA4, it is interpreted as “a precious stone”. Simo Parpola translates these two terms as *gusīgu*-jewellery and *ašgikû*-jewels respectively. Thus, if the translation of *elallum*, *gusīgu* and *ašgikû* appears to be really complicated, the author proposed a different interpretation of *abnu* according to which other word it is associated. When *abnu* is linked to *elallum*, it is interpreted as a limestone. When *abnu* is connected to *gusīgu* or *ašgikû*, it is interpreted as a gem, or a precious stone. In letter 348, the context confirms the translation since it is about the tiara of Nabû and its components, but in letters 353 and 354, it is more about hypothesis. In the letter 353, Simo Parpola even adds that the jewellery was obtained as a booty to help the comprehension.

The term *abnu* also appears in other occasions. In letter 348, NA4.MEŠ is translated into “jewels”, to describe what is supposed to be the *gusīgu*-jewellery. Then, further along in the same letter, NA4.IGI.2.MEŠ is, with precaution, translated as “eye-stones” and NA4.MUŠ.GÌR as serpentine. Finally, the term *abnu* appears for the last time in the letter under the Sumerian form NA4.KIŠIB, which refers to the jewellery previously mentioned. It is interesting to see that the term *abnu* is regularly associated to other terms but always varying. Only once, this term refers to the meaning of stone not as a jewel. However, *abnu* associated to *elallum* appears as a specific stone, which according to the context of the carrying out of a royal sculpture, definitely implies that this kind of stone was considered precious. Perhaps it was about alabaster or marble, but their Akkadian terms *ašnugallu* or *parūtu* have not been used instead of *abnu elallum*. As previously mentioned, the term *elallu* means cloud, so associated to *abnu*, it could have a precise sense for Assyrians, perhaps symbolic, that we do not perceive for now.

This study gives an idea of the many different kinds of materials needed to realize the desired finish for the Babylonian sanctuaries. The difficulty in finding their translations could indicate that some of these materials were really rare and specific, hence their importance and precious character.

Main focus of Mar-Issar

The materiality in the letters of Mar-Issar is expressed through the words. The words used by Mar-Issar for the embellishment of the buildings and the statues are sometimes generic and often really rare. Thus, concerning the action of glazing the kiln-fired bricks, the words used are always the same along the letters and correspond certainly to the usual way to express this action. The same when Mar-Issar talks about the overlay of the statues and the sanctuaries, regularly linked to gold and silver. All these terms appear always under the same form, and correspond to the generic word used to define them. However, Mar-Issar mentions various materials in his letters which are really specific. Each of them appears only once and its translations were not found, which reinforces the aspect of rareness.

The scholar is reporting the progress of the work, which is coming to an end, and the work now consists only of the embellishment. This step of the reconstruction that Mar-Issar describes is certainly the most

important, since it represents the return of the gods statues and thus, the return of the gods themselves in the different cities. This step was important for both Assyrians and Babylonians, and certainly highly anticipated. The significance of this last step of reconstruction is obvious in the letters of Mar-Issar, since the description of the work on statues is described in detail. The materiality within the letters reflects constantly the precious aspect of sacred buildings and its statues. The letters put the accent on the brightness of the buildings and the statues as its main characteristics, and emphasize the sacred aspect of these reconstructions. This underlines the meaning of the temples and statues as gifts for the gods and as the representation of their houses and themselves.

The case of the kiln-fired glazed bricks is really interesting, since this is the only mention from Mar-Issar concerning the architectural aspect of buildings. Although asphalt is also mentioned once, in letter 368, it constitutes a specific case. The word appears alone; with no other associated words concerning the rebuilding. Everything else concerns only the embellishment of buildings and statues. Although the Babylonian sanctuaries were reconstructed in kiln-fired bricks, traditionally, sacred buildings were erected in sun-dried bricks. The sacred architecture was conservative and tended to keep antiquated techniques. The brick-walls were covered on both sides with white coatings often decorated with coloured washes or other more precious mural decorations.⁶¹ Thus, the regular mention of kiln-fired bricks and not mere bricks could mean that kiln-fired bricks were specified as such because they were not the traditional bricks used to build sanctuaries. In the case of the quay-wall of Ezida in Borsippa, which has to be reinforced because of the flood, they use also kiln-fired bricks. This decision makes sense, since kiln-fired bricks are certainly more resistant to water than sun-dried bricks. In southern Mesopotamia, good building stones were rare, and sun-dried bricks were more widespread, since the fuel was more scarce. In the North, suitable buildings stones were more easily available, but bricks were also very widespread, and kiln-fired bricks were more common than in the South. They were mainly used in areas requiring more durable bricks; facing the lower courses and paving the floors, while the mass of the building was build in sun-dried bricks.⁶² Thus, kiln-fired bricks were certainly concerning the last parts of building construction, which would explain why Mar-Issar talks only about kiln-fired bricks. In addition, the mention of kiln-fired puts emphasis on the sustainability of reconstructions made by Assyrians, as well as respecting the use of traditional Babylonian materials. The manner which Mar-Issar talks about bricks undoubtedly has valuable meaning.

In the letters, the action of glazing bricks is very often associated to the practices of embellishment, like overlaying with gold and silver. However, due to the important character of sacred building and the climate conditions, glazing bricks could also have been a way to protect the walls of building. The fact that they wanted to brick up the quay-wall of Ezida with glazed kiln-fired bricks is quite curious, since this structure was functional and not a real sacred part of the building. This practice constituted perhaps an additional protection

⁶¹. Oppenheim 1944, p. 58.

⁶². Moorey brings a lot of information concerning the techniques used in the Mesopotamian architecture; Moorey 1994, p. 302.

against water or it might have been a real attention to detail from the Assyrians. The practice of glazing brick was not really widespread in Mesopotamia before, and was developed during the Neo-Assyrian period.⁶³ Perhaps, Mar-Issar insists on this practice because it was quite recent and a more Assyrian practice. In any case, the work of glazing bricks is a part of the last stage of a sanctuary's reconstruction, which pertains to decoration. This practice had certainly both protective and decorative functions. In the letters of Mar-Issar, the glaze of bricks is strongly connected to a decorative practice. As well, Mar-Issar seems to remind regularly that walls are not only made of plain bricks but actually glazed kiln-fired bricks. Thus, the way Mar-Issar mentions and deals with it, accentuates the precious aspect of the walls and the building itself.

Other official's letters

The written sources are really numerous and rich both for the period and for Esarhaddon's project. The reconstruction of the Babylonian capital and the main cities being the one of the most important preoccupation of Esarhaddon, it may be expected that it would be the topic of many official reports. Indeed, the significance of the number of reports concerning the reconstruction project confirms its scope in the Empire. Votive and building accounts are also very rich concerning the reconstruction of Babylon and the other Babylonian cities.

In order to understand the specific role of Mar-Issar, and the particularities of his letters, it is essential to study other officials working in Babylonia during same period, who also had to deal with similar types of work. The rebuilding of Esagil was the subject of several reports from priests in office during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.⁶⁴ Among those, the letters of Urdu-ahhešu presented a lot of interest, since it is also a correspondence with the Assyrian king.⁶⁵

The letters of Urdu-ahhešu

Urdu-ahhešu was a priest or a high temple official working in Babylon for the Assyrian king. Twelve letters sent to the Assyrian king are associated to this scholar, recognizable by the characteristic introductory formula, like in the case of Mar-Issar's. The formula is significantly different, mainly because Urdu-ahhešu quotes more deities than Mar-Issar, and in particular the gods who dwell in Esagil, like to show where he belongs. The letters are principally focused on the works at Esagil, which leads to the conclusion that the official was attached to this religious complex; that he was working there. Among the Urdu-ahhešu's letters, ten concern the Babylonian sanctuaries and their restoration.⁶⁶ Most are incomplete, only three are fully preserved.⁶⁷ Six of the letters

⁶³. Moorey, 1994, p. 312-320.

⁶⁴. Cole and Machinist 1998.

⁶⁵. The letters of Urdu-ahhešu were published in SAA volume 13, by Cole and Machinist, but Parpola continued to collaborate closely on the translations.

⁶⁶. Cole and Machinist 1998, p. 133-142, Letters n. 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170.

⁶⁷. The letters 161, 166 and 168. The beginning of the letter 161 is partly broken but it does not have importance in our case.

concern works of Esagil primarily, while one concerns works in Babylon in a wider way.⁶⁸ The remaining three present various information, some of which refer to the building program.

Letter 161, deals with the restoration work on the temples of Babylon. The scholar mentions the installation of the gates, including the one of the temple of Ea, and those of the perimeter of Esagil which have to be done. Next, he informs the king that the work on the foundations of the ziggurat will begin soon, and that the month Shebat is the most suitable for this. Thus, the significance of celestial phenomena is also evident in this correspondence. This time, it is obvious that they have direct influence on the reconstruction work. Urdu-ahhešu quotes the name of the architect of Esagil, Didî, who appears to act only under the king's orders. At the end of the letter, the scholar deals with the perfumes, sweet-scented oils, red earth paste and precious stones which had to be deposited inside the foundations.

The next letter deals with the numerous cedars used for the reconstruction and coming from Carchemish. Of these, 30 large ones were used to build the outer cella of Bel in Esagil. Works in his account also involves also bricks and burnt bricks. Drainage pipes, walls, and enclosures, are also mentioned, but in an incomplete passage. Then, Urdu-ahhešu talks about the inscription giving the name of the king, made on all the pedestals and all the necks of the statues. Letter 163 concerns also the various materials used for the reconstruction of Esagil, including 64 cedar roof-beams, 360 door-beams, and plaster applied to Esagil. Urdu-ahhešu mentions again Didî, who does not release the cedar roof-beams, which seems to imply a quite complicated relation between the two officials. The expression “the gate of the secret word” is mentioned twice in the letter, but it remains an enigma, what it refers to is unfortunately too corrupt to yield any specific information. The same goes for letter 164, which also concerns the reconstruction of Esagil. Many temples of Esagil are roofed with cypress and fir, but except the temple Eengurra, the others remain unidentified. At the end, the scholar mentions Borsippa and an inspection made apparently by its citizens, but nothing else is known to precise it. In the same topic, the letters 165 and 167, again very incomplete, concern the work at Esagil. One deals with the temple of Marduk and the work of carpenters with brick, who might refer to the building of the terrace of the sanctuary. The other is about beams and the foundation of the cella of Tašmetu and an other unidentified cella.

The letters 169 and 170 are very incomplete and bring very little information. A wooden water ornament for the table of Zarpanitu is mentioned, as just are gold containers, and lapis-lazuli. Once again the importance is shown of the richness in sanctuaries, especially for cult objects. Urdu-ahhešu quotes also arm-bands, rings and plaster concerning Esagil.

Letter 166 is the only one that contains of a memorandum sent to the king on different affairs. Thus, Urdu-ahhešu speaks about the doors of the sanctuary Esagil mounted with precious metals, and the cedar beams which are used to roof the temples in Babylon, Sippar and Cutha. He mentions also the masons of Cutha. Letter 168 deals with the completion of the restoration of Esagil. The upper courtyard in the temple of Bel and Beltia,

⁶⁸. The letters concerning only Esagil: n. 162, 163, 164, 165, 167 and 168. The letter concerning Babylon : n. 161.

with its sanctuaries, and the cella of Tašmetu, the lower courtyard and its sanctuaries, have been rebuilt. The plaster certainly coating the front, the back and the daises of the statues of Marduk and Nabû, as well as burnt bricks for something unknown, have been made. All the drainage pipes are finished, and all the battlements of bitumen and burnt bricks have been put in place. Everything appears to have been made and the sanctuary is finished, only the rites have to be practiced. Only the continuous enclosure of the sanctuaries is not ended and the temple of Belet-Babili, but they were maybe not a part of the program.

The letters of Udru-ahhešu remind those of Mar-Issar, since it is a correspondence with the king, made in order to keep him informed in the progress of the works on the Babylonian sanctuaries. However, Mar-Issar appears as a more important official than Udru-ahhešu, whose supervision seems to be limited to Babylon and more specifically to Esagil only. In addition, Udru-ahhešu does not mention omens in any of his letters, and deals with very few events. His functions were certainly more limited than the ones of Mar-Issar, as well as his skills.

The description that he gives of the works is also different, dealing with different kind of materials, concerning more the building itself and its architecture. Thus, he talks a lot about the roof of temples and the wood used, the cedar. The roof of sacred buildings was usually made of stretched timber, determining their width, since no supporting devices were really used inside. The roof ceiling was generally decorated with metal inlays and incrustations. The opening doors were framed, then coated with sheets of copper or other precious metals, which was engraved or embossed. They were provided with heavy locks and strong ropes to help their manipulation.⁶⁹ The official gives also the names of some of those responsible for the reconstruction work. While Mar-Issar talks about masters and experts, and for the statues, about carpenter and metalworker. Concerning the oblates from Išum or the inhabitants from Akkad, their origin is known but these terms are still very general. Thus, the letters of Mar-Issar mention regularly the workers involved, without never being precise.

The treatment of the materiality varies greatly from the one Mar-Issar gives in his letters. While Mar-Issar deals mainly with the work on the statues and mentions only the glazed bricks when it concerns the building, Udru-ahhešu offers a more detailed description about the work on buildings. He writes less about the statues, or when concerned with them, he does not deal with their richness but with the inscription and the daises. The importance of the inscription of the king on the pedestals and necks of statues constitutes a common point, emphasized in both correspondences. Finally, the significance of the richness is also underlined but not as much as in the letters of Mar-Issar. The characteristics associated to Mar-Issar appear even more specific to him after this comparison. The comparison learns more about the reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries, but also about the letters of Mar-Issar.

⁶⁹. Oppenheim 1944, p. 58.

The letter of Šuma-iddin

Unlike the letters of Udru-ahhešu, the letter written by Šuma-iddin will not be used for a comparative study, but brings interesting information directly concerning Mar-Issar. Šuma-iddin was certainly a priest or a temple administrator, working in Babylon. He wrote some letters to the king, but they were not part of a correspondence. The interest of this letter in particular, written by this official, is due to the fact that Mar-Issar is mentioned three times. It appears that Šuma-iddin was under the orders of Mar-Issar; he writes that he will come back in Assyria as soon as Mar-Issar will be finished with him. It seems that he was on the point of leaving when Mar-Issar decided to inscribe the pedestals, and he had to stay. Šuma-iddin was probably sent by the king to assist the scholar in the reorganization of the cult in Babylonia. He informs the king that he inspected the statues of the king which Mar-Issar brought for the Esagil and the temples of Babylon. He also sent what he calls “the very statue” to the king, the one supposed to be perfect and has to stand, its location remaining uncertain.

That Šuma-iddin also had other responsibilities. He sent to the kings four officials who invoked the right to appeal to the king. These men had information concerning an affair with two eunuchs. Thus, Šuma-iddin seems to have a higher function than these men, who came to him to report these news. However, the official precised that he can not act on his own authority and that the king's messenger should take care of this. Then, he informs again the king of a new development; he had captured one of the eunuchs, but he is busy with work for Mar-Issar at the moment. He promises that he will bring the eunuch with him to Assyria, as soon as the work would be finished. This shows that Šuma-iddin was certainly working in Babylon for a short period, and that his function was quite wide.

This letter offers an example of that numerous men worked for Mar-Issar and followed his orders. This also shows that large portions of men have been certainly mobilized, Assyrians as well as Babylonians,⁷⁰ to work on the building project in Babylonia for a specific period of time. The work appears to have been very intensive, thus forcing Šuma-iddin to stay longer than expected. The authority of Mar-Issar appears quite strong, since he obliged the official to stay in Babylon, his orders do not seem to be discussed.

⁷⁰. They were certainly lots of different populations to work on the reconstructions, but this study does not allow us to say more about this matter.

Characteristics and contributions of Mar-Issar's letters

The visuality of materiality

Archaeological evidence does not give as much information as the letters concerning the embellishment of the sanctuaries, which is the first aspect of the buildings to disappear. They offer an idea of how the statues were supposed to look when they were complete, because even if we can find some in excavations, they are always damaged. Although the letters contain very little information concerning the architecture itself, we learn about the embellishment of buildings and mainly about the embellishment of statues. The depiction of the work on sanctuaries by Mar-Issar also poses an interesting point. In the letters of Mar-Issar, the materiality is very present, through all the various materials, their origin, their specificities, their use, and the buildings and statues themselves. Furthermore, the materiality is almost always associated to a material or a technique bringing a bright aspect or shine. The word “shine” is often used in inscriptions giving the description of the sanctuaries. In an inscription of Nippur from Esarhaddon, concerning the Ekur temple of Enlil, it is written that the processional street was “made to shine like the day”.⁷¹ Another one, from Assurbanipal and concerning Esagila in Babyon, mentions “who makes it look shine like the stars of the firmament”.⁷² Thus, the idea of shine is recurrent concerning the visual of sanctuaries. Although, Mar-Issar never uses this word, the idea of shine is permanent in his description of works on buildings and statues. However, if he talks about jewellery, gold and silver, he never directly refers to colours in the ornamentation, as we could have expected with the glazed bricks.

The visual aspect is emphasized in the letters. Thus, when Mar-Issar deals with the reconstruction works, the accent is obviously on the visible aspect of the sanctuaries, and especially through the statues. The specification of which kind of materials are used in the reconstruction, like the kind of bricks or the kind of limestone, aims to inform the king of the work itself, but also of the appearance of the result. Thanks to these details, Esarhaddon can have his own vision of the sanctuaries without being present. Through the letters of Mar-Issar, we can understand the importance of the visibility of the sanctuaries, made to be seen by the humans and by the gods. The embellishment was crucial in sanctuaries construction, helping to make these buildings sacred.

The letters constitute an essential source in the study of sacred buildings in the Neo-Assyrian period, but they are complementary to other written sources, especially to the other scholars' letters. The letters of Urdu-ahhešu bring lots of additional information on the reconstruction of sanctuaries, dealing with roof beams and doors, among other things. His letters do not concern the embellishment, but the architecture itself. Although Urdu-ahhešu only took care of the Esagila reconstruction, the works that were depicted were similar for the other

⁷¹. Nippur C, ll. 14-15 : Goetze 1963.

⁷². Stele S2, ll. 8-10 : Streck 1916.

Babylonian sanctuaries. However, the materiality in his letters are different than in the ones of Mar-Issar, though visual, not associated to a decorative aspect and thus not really concerned by the aspect of shine and richness.

From Mar-Issar's letters, the idea that sanctuaries had to be the most visible and impressive possible is obvious. It translates the idea of sanctuaries as gifts and houses for the gods, and also as a kind of jewellery, in the heart of the city. Temples were significant in the city's conceptualization of its own identity. The power of the Mesopotamian city is linked to its patron deity and the others gods beside him (or her), whose divine powers were in connection with the political status of their city.⁷³ Thus, the city was important, rich and prestigious, and its temples were impressive and luxurious.

The particular position and the authority of Mar-Issar

Simo Parpola considered, when he had to organize his *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, that Mar-Issar could not be categorized in any professional group. Thus, he put the correspondence of Mar-Issar at the end of his book, to show the specificity of this case and its unclassifiable character. These letters really present the work of a particular official of the king, as scholar, scribe, administrator, and a trusted man of the king.

First of all, Mar-Issar was assigned to a mission of a considerable importance, the one of supervising Esarhaddon's building program in the south. This means that he was already a man of importance, or at least a trusted man of the king. This project represented a lot for the king and for the Assyrian empire, and was a really extensive and expensive project. However the Assyrian king could not have been able to supervise this project himself, so he needed a trusted man with the relevant skills. Mar-Issar was not limited to one function in his office, responsible for the progress of reconstructions, for the richness used for the embellishment of the buildings and statues, for all the events which could have occurred during the reconstructions, as well as the events happening in all the cities under his oversight. In addition, he was reporting very often omens realized in Babylon. The fact that he had skills for divination emphasises his role as a scholar. However, he was practicing mainly astrology, which was the most prestigious method of divination, and was even able to interpret dreams.⁷⁴ This reinforces the idea of a scholar with great skills and a high-level position.

Furthermore, he reports a lot of various events happening in Babylonia, some of which are directly connected to the building project, whereas some are not. In three of his letters Mar-Issar is dealing with the substitute king of Babylon,⁷⁵ showing that he was even taking care of the political matters. However, even in his case, his mission concerns religion, the official ceremonies that the substitute king attended or his burial. But,

⁷³. Schneider 2013, p.74.

⁷⁴. Letter n. 361.

⁷⁵. Letters n. 350, 351 and 352.

when addressing about corruption among the officials, he is, anew, showing a political role.⁷⁶ He shows that he is really strict with corruption in the letter 354, where he uses violent terms towards the adjured officials. This proves that he was a rigorous administrator, fighting against the corruption, but also very close to the king, reporting all these events to him. Again, this reinforces his position, since he appears as a real supervisor and even one of the main representatives of the royal Assyrian rule in Babylonia. As such, it seems understandable that he was preoccupied by the functioning of the Babylonian administration. His regular advices and requests to the king, like with the reconstruction of the quay-wall of Ezida,⁷⁷ match such a role. In addition, Mar-Issar had sometimes to take great decisions, in order notably to calm disordered situations.

Mar-Issar seems to have established a correct relation with Babylonian citizens. He is taking their defence in the context of Babylona riots against officials in letter 348, and a Babylonian citizen comes to inform him of this important fact concerning Elam in letter 367. If we can not make any affirmations, the relation between Mar-Issar and the Babylonian citizens seem peaceful. The scholar appears to have more problems with officials and workers concerning the sanctuaries reconstruction, like in Uruk.⁷⁸ Through the letters, no major problems apparently occurred in Babylonia for these three last years of Esarhaddon's reign. Babylonia knew the peace during this period, confirmed by the other written sources from the reign. Assyrian rule and administration seemed to have been accepted, or at least tolerated, by Babylonians.

Through the letters, we can observe that he was regularly moving between the different Babylonian cities, which he was in charge. His presence seemed to have been needed in a lot of situations, but he had also a consequent number of men working for him all over the country. Only once, the power of the scholar appears to have been limited, when he had to wait for the presence of some Babylonian officials to check the gold reserve in Uruk.⁷⁹ Mar-Issar seems to have dealt with a lot of richness, finding them, receiving them and controlling them, like with the jewellery for Nabû's tiara. He also had to ensure the proper conduct of the cult, for which he was also sometimes helped by some officials sent by the Assyrian king. He mentions many problems concerning ritual offerings, which have not been well practiced, often not enough consequent, like in Borsippa with letter 353. However, Mar-Issar could not attend in each city and solve all the problems in person.

All these elements come to confirm that Esarhaddon's choice in the appointment of Mar-Issar to this function was a well-thought one. Since, the building project aimed to please the Babylonian gods, the Assyrian king needed to send an official able to interpret the messages from the gods and to know if they were agree or not. In addition to divination, the official should have numerous skills, concerning mainly the administration of temples. The supervising of sanctuaries reconstruction and cultic services reorganization involved a lot of responsibility, sometimes very extensive. The geographical area of his authority emphasized the complexity of

⁷⁶. Letter 369.

⁷⁷. Letter n. 364.

⁷⁸. Letter 355.

⁷⁹. Letter 349.

his role. Esarhaddon also required a scholar in whom he trusted to accomplish a mission of a such importance, and who could also report the dysfunctions of the Babylonian administration. The reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries was one of the main projects of Esarhaddon's reign, a way to finally conciliate the southern kingdom. From the beginning to the end of his reign, Esarhaddon was permanently concerned by this project. Thus, the function was a heavy responsibility, but certainly also an honour. Only a really important scholar, with various high skills, could perform this function. Finally, since the letters of Mar-Issar almost only mention the completion of the Babylonian sanctuaries, the embellishment of buildings and statues; perhaps the scholar was appointed to the supervising of the completion of Babylonian sanctuaries restoration. The supervising of the previous architectural works would not have required such an important man, as the letters of Urdu-ahhešu proved. However, he seems have taken care of the foundational work in Akkad,⁸⁰ but as we have seen, this city was a separate case. This reconstruction was more symbolic, since it came to rebuilding the old traditional religious city of the southern Mesopotamia, and could have been undertaken later on. Mar-Issar could also have supervised the beginning of the reconstruction, but without regularly informing the king, only the completion of the work would have interested him.

Esarhaddon's involvement in Babylonian sanctuaries reconstruction

The importance of omens in the letters of Mar-Issar is undeniable and is representative of the king's concerns. It shows that Esarhaddon paid much attention to the will of Babylonian gods. The appointment of Mar-Issar matches this idea; otherwise the king could have nominated a qualified official, without skills in divination. Even though the Assyrian king was considered superstitious by many scholars, he was more pious than superstitious. The Assyrian king wanted to reconcile the Babylonian gods and to obtain their protection and their support. His purpose in Babylonia was to be amended by the gods, after the violent actions of his father, and then to have a possible chance to be accepted by the population. The building project was undoubtedly linked to religious concerns and was certainly also for Esarhaddon a way to honour the Babylonian gods, highly respected in Assyria.

The astronomy and the realization of omens are strongly linked to the reconstruction of the Babylonian temples, since it is overriding to know if the gods agree with each project and when are the best moments to begin them. Every element of the reconstruction is connected to the gods, since they are made for them, so they need to be accepted by them and in accordance with them. As we have seen previously, the sanctuaries were the houses of gods on earth, and the public face of the gods' presence in the city, beside the population. As well, the statues were considered as the manifestation of the gods on earth, as the extension of their personality, and served as the gods in the context of the temple's rituals. Thus, without the presence of the gods in the temples,

⁸⁰. Letter 368.

the buildings have no sacred character and the city itself has no protection. That is why the completion of cult statues is the most important part of the sanctuaries reconstruction. The completion of the work was the only step of the reconstruction representing such a religious and political issue.

However, if omens are recurrent in the Mar-Issar's letters, they never appear directly connected to the reconstruction works. An omen interrupts the Elul Festival of Babylon, or some others inform the king about what will happen to his enemies, but none have influenced the reconstructions. The letters of Udru-ahhešu bring more elements concerning omens, like when he mentions which month is the most suitable to build the foundations of the ziggurat of Babylon.⁸¹ It shows how much divination may affect the reconstruction works.

The fact that Esarhaddon regularly asked Mar-Issar about the progress of reconstruction works, and mainly about the statues, shows that he was really concerned by the completion. The fact that the scholar was already supervising the sanctuaries restoration at the beginning of Esarhaddon's reign and only sent letters at the end, or was appointed to this function only at the end of the restoration, proves in both cases that Esarhaddon was mostly concerned by the completion and the last step of restoration of sanctuaries. In addition, the Assyrian king gave his own jewellery, and not some obtained as booty, as well as the gold of his mother, to produce the tiara of Nabû. The letters show that overall, he was truly willing to be involved in the completion of sanctuaries, in order to show as much as possible his belief in Babylonian gods, and that he was acting as a true Babylonian king. All in all, his involvement seemed to have paid off, since his reign is the most peaceful of the Sargonid kings in Babylonia.

⁸¹. Letter 161.

Conclusion

The study of the letters of Mar-Issar is extremely rich, mainly due to the complex role and high ranking position of this official. As we have seen, Mar-Issar was not only a scholar, but he also had skills in various other fields. His role as supervisor of the reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries and reorganization of their cults, as well as his close relation with the king Esarhaddon, he made his letters a truly interesting subject of work. If Mar-Issar was supposed to supervise the reconstruction, he reports to the king almost only on the embellishment of sanctuaries and statues. Thus, I developed two hypothesis: Mar-Issar could have been sent to Babylon only to work on the completion of the sanctuaries, or he could have worked already but reported to the king only on the completion of the reconstruction works. In both cases, it shows that the completion and embellishment of the sanctuaries, including the realization of the statues of gods, was definitely the most important part of the reconstruction. Esarhaddon is asking himself about the works, following rigorously the progress of the works. Mar-Issar puts the accent on the embellishment in such a way that, the visibility of sanctuaries appears clearly. This gives the feeling that it was made on purpose that the king could have his own vision of the completed sanctuaries, without moving to Babylonia. The position of Mar-Issar also shows clearly the significance that the reconstruction of Babylonian sanctuaries had for the Assyrian king. This is also the proof that scholarship was a fundamental tool in the administration of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Both political and religious aspects are a part of the building project of Esarhaddon and are undeniably linked. The decision to start the reconstruction is as much political as religious, whereas the process of reconstruction appears somewhat more religious. The richness of the embellishment seems to have been first of all thought to please the gods, which the sanctuaries are the houses and the statues their representations on earth. Esarhaddon certainly wanted first to be forgiven by the Babylonian gods and secondly that they agree and support his reign in Babylonia. In Mesopotamia, the support of the gods was the most important, and Esarhaddon was particularly aware of that, after the experience of his father.

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Appendices

	<u>Complete</u>	<u>Almost complete</u>	<u>Beginning broken</u>	<u>End broken</u>	<u>Break(s)</u>	<u>Very incomplete</u>
Letter 347					×	
Letter 348	×					
Letter 349	×					
Letter 350			×	×	×	
Letter 351				×		
Letter 352		×				
Letter 353		×			×	
Letter 354					×	
Letter 355					×	
Letter 356						×
Letter 357	×					
Letter 358					×	
Letter 359		×				
Letter 360						×
Letter 361						×
Letter 362			×	×		
Letter 363	×					
Letter 364			×	×	×	
Letter 365			×	×	×	
Letter 366					×	
Letter 367			×	×		
Letter 368					×	
Letter 369					×	
Letter 370						×

Appendice 1: Distribution of the letters by state of conservation

Letters complete; Letters containing all the topics

	<u>Omens</u>	<u>Buildings/Statues</u>	<u>Events</u>	<u>Undefined</u>
Letter 347	×			
Letter 348		×	×	
Letter 349	×	×		
Letter 350	×	×	×	
Letter 351	×		×	
Letter 352	×		×	
Letter 353		×	×	
Letter 354		×		
Letter 355		×		
Letter 356	×			
Letter 357	×		×	
Letter 358	×	×		
Letter 359			×	
Letter 360				×
Letter 361	×		×	
Letter 362	×			
Letter 363	×			
Letter 364	×	×	×	
Letter 365	×			
Letter 366			×	
Letter 367			×	
Letter 368		×	×	
Letter 369			×	
Letter 370				×

Appendice 2: Distribution of the letters by topic

[Letters complete](#); [Letters containing all the topics](#).