

Solving the starry symbols of Sargon II

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Abstract

The city of Khorsabad (ancient Dūr-Šarrukīn), the newly built capital of Sargon II of Assyria, contained multiple instances of a sequence of five images or symbols (lion, bird, bull, tree, plough) which also appeared shortened to three (lion, tree, plough). What did they mean? There is currently no consensus. This paper proposes a new explanation, suggesting that the images **a**) symbolise specific constellations and **b**) represent Babylonian/Assyrian words whose sounds ‘spell out’ Sargon’s name (this works for both the long and the short version). Combining these two traits, the effect of the symbols was to assert that Sargon’s name was written in the heavens, for all eternity, and also to associate him with the gods Anu and Enlil, who the constellations in question were linked to. It is further suggested that Sargon’s name was elsewhere symbolised by a *lion passant* (pacing lion), through a bilingual pun.

Introduction

Groups of decorations in glazed brick found at Khorsabad (Dūr-Šarrukīn), the capital city newly built by Sargon II (721-704 B.C.), have long been suspected to have some sort of symbolic meaning. The present paper puts forward a theory about what this meaning was, and how it worked.

Specifically, we will argue that the images both represent specific constellations and write out the name ‘Sargon’, thereby placing it in the everlasting heavens. If accepted, this result confirms the widespread suspicion that Sargon’s symbols were the inspiration behind a much-discussed statement by his grandson Esarhaddon that he wrote his own name in ‘constellations’ (*lumāšī*).¹ For Esarhaddon’s starry writing, Julian Reade (1979a: 45) introduced the term “astrographic”, which was developed into “astroglyphs” by Michael Roaf and Annette Zgoll (2001: esp. 266).²

After analysing the ‘mystery symbols’, we will consider a case where similar principles apply on a smaller scale, with images of pacing lions (*lions passant*). This will reinforce a point of method which we use in our treatment of the mystery symbols.

Our two subjects of enquiry will by no means exhaust the topic of ‘name play’ under Sargon. We will not here delve into the name’s representation by the ‘number-riddle’ involving the circumference of Khorsabad (see refs in Frame (2020: 18)). Nor will we consider inscriptions which may work like those examined here, but are (usually owing to the smaller number of symbols) even harder to make sense of – some of which are mentioned at the end of the paper.

Sargon’s Name

The English name ‘Sargon’ is taken from the Biblical Book of Isaiah 20:1 (סַרְגֹּן, *sargōn*). Since *ō* and *ī* are represented in Hebrew by visually similar letters, the extant Biblical form *sargōn* is probably a corruption, through scribal error, of an original form with *ī*: *sargīn* or *sarrugīn* (Delitzsch 1920: 48-51, 60-61, 103-104). Mesopotamian evidence for the name is to some extent contradictory,³ so that determining which elements the name was composed of, and exactly what it meant, is more complex than one might suppose, and cannot be pursued in full here. For present purposes, it suffices to make three key points:

a) The name comprised two elements: *šarru* ‘king’, and a form or derivative of *kānu* ‘to be firm, legitimate’.

b) In Assyrian, *š* and *s* were ‘swapped’ with respect to Babylonian: where Babylonians said /š/, Assyrians said /s/ (and vice-versa).⁴ Hence Assyrians would have pronounced the first part of the name, ‘king’, as /sarru/ rather than /šarru/.

c) It is likely that, in vernacular Neo-Assyrian pronunciation, the *k* of *kānu* (or whatever derivative the name included) changed to, or was interchangeable with, *g*. As pointed out by Kaufman (1974: 137-140), followed e.g. by Fales (1986: 60), Neo-Assyrian changes from *k* to *g* are suggested by Aramaic transcriptions of Assyrian words (esp. names). For example, already in 1872, when Eberhard Schrader (1872: 161) pointed out that the Neo-Assyrian name *mannu-kī-ārba’il* ‘Who is like Arbela?’ appears in Aramaic script as מנגארבל (*mng’rbl*), with *g* rather than *k*. This is especially interesting, because the Aramaic spelling with *g* appears on a clay envelope, whereas both the envelope and the tablet inside it also have a cuneiform spelling with *k*: *man-nu-ki-i-ārba-il*, suggesting that the cuneiform spellings are traditional, and that the Aramaic more closely captures the sound (Fales 1986: 197-200). Hämeen-Anttila (2000: 15-16) takes Neo-Assyrian *k* and *g* as “two allophones of a phoneme indifferent to voicedness”. A feature which would have lent cultural stature to the vernacular *g* in Sargon’s case is that it likens the second part of the name to its sumerograms (*gin, gi.na*).

The differences between the Babylonian and Assyrian pronunciations of the name find reflection in two spellings of it in the Aramaic alphabet. The first, from a seal-impression of Sargon’s own Eunuch Pan–Aššur–lāmur,⁵ found at Khorsabad, has *s* and *g* (*srgn*, סרגן). The other is from the ‘Ashur ostrakon’, an Aramaic letter found in Assyria but probably sent from Babylonia, and probably dating to the reign of Sargon’s great-grandson Ashurbanipal: it has *š* (or *s*) and *k* (*šrkn*, שרכן).⁶ The differences were first highlighted by Sprengling (1932: 55), and (Millard 1976: 8) observes that *s* and *g* on the seal, from Assyria, follow Assyrian vernacular, whereas *š* and *k* on the ostrakon, from Babylonia, follow Babylonian vernacular.⁷

In sum, I suppose that the vernacular Assyrian pronunciation of Sargon’s name was /sarrugīn/ or /sarrugēn/ (crasis of *šarru-ukīn*) and/or /sarrugīnu/ or /sarrugēnu/ (*šarru kīnu*).⁸ For the argument presented here, the presence of *g* rather than *k* is significant, while *š* vs *s*, *ī* vs *ē* and the presence or absence of the final *u* are inconsequential. The presence or absence of the final *u* only makes a difference for the interpretation of Sargon’s bird-symbol.

The ‘Mystery Symbols’ from Khorsabad

Sargon’s ‘mystery symbols’, to whose elucidation we now turn, appear on the façades of temples overlooking the Khorsabad palace courtyards XXVI, XXX and XXXI (Nunn 1988: 175). The symbols are made of glazed brick, their chief colours being yellow/gold and blue (see overleaf). Loud and Altman (1938: 59a) commented that “In their original brilliance they must have been dazzling”. As Nunn (1988: 178) points out, this is currently the only known case in Assyria in which glazed bricks are used to decorate temple façades (“in Assyrien einmalig”).

There are a total of seven images, consisting in a ‘main group’ of five plus an extra one on either side. The ‘main five’ are: a lion, a bird (variously taken as an eagle, raven, crow, or hawk),⁹ a bull, a fig tree,¹⁰ and a plough. The ‘extra two’ are a king and a man holding what seems to be a spear.¹¹

There is further a ‘short’ version of the symbol sequence which, while leaving the two humans unvaried, shortens the ‘main group’ from five images to three: lion, fig-tree and plough. We will thus refer to the main group of five as the ‘long’ version, and the group of three as the ‘short’ version.

In each case (long and short), the main images appear in twin sets on either side of the gateway, constituting mirror images of each other (see Figure 5).

The long version appears on the façade to the temples of Sîn and Šamaš, and in the main courtyard of the Nabû temple. The short version features on the façade of the temple of Ningal, which was 1.80m shorter than the other façades (Nunn 1988: 176), and in the entrance leading from the ‘Vorhof’ to the main courtyard inside the Nabû temple (Nunn 1988: 176).

The best-preserved set was, at the time of excavation, that on the façade of the Sîn temple. The equivalent decorations on the Šamaš, Ninurta and Nabû temples can, though badly broken, be reconstructed as being like those on the Sîn temple (Nunn 1988: 176).

The images from the Sîn temple

The best-preserved example of Sargon’s ‘mystery images’ comes from the Sîn temple. They appeared on a projecting basement with “tableaus” of glazed bricks that “extend their entire width of 7 meters each, and rise from the floor to a height of 1.50” (Loud 1936: 92):

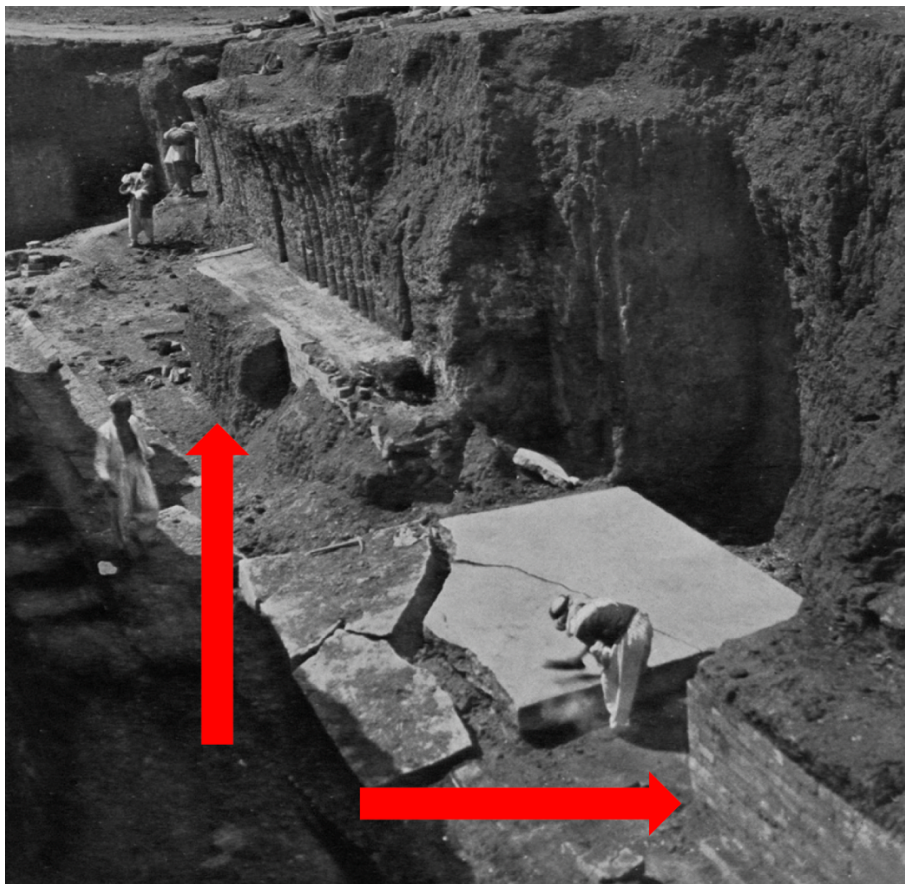


Figure 1 - the entrance to the Sîn temple as excavated by the Chicago team. The projecting basement upon which Sargon's symbols appeared is highlighted in red. From Loud (1936: p. 91 Fig. 100). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.

No colour photographs of the images were ever taken. The Chicago team who re-excavated Khorsabad in the 1930s took black-and-white ones, but these are not hugely informative:



FIG. 105.—PORTION, SHOWING EAGLE, OF TABLEAU AT LEFT OF ENTRANCE TO THE SÎN TEMPLE, AS FOUND BY THE IRAQ EXPEDITION

Figure 2 - The Eagle on the left side of the Sîn temple. After Loud (1936: 96). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.

The chief excavator himself commented that the glazing on the bricks was almost completely lost,¹² but nonetheless had “much more of the design and color appears than the camera succeeded in registering” (Loud 1936: 97).

For what the images looked like, therefore, we must turn to the beautiful plates drawn in the 19th Century by Eugène Flandin, for the multi-volume work *Ninive et l’Assyrie* by Victor Place. (This work referred to the building now know to be the Sîn temple as the “Harem”).

How far Flandin can be trusted on points of detail is uncertain.¹³ On the plus side, he is likely to have used a *camera lucida*,¹⁴ which would have ensured correct proportions. On the minus side, the Chicago team found that there were fifteen courses of glazed brick, not – as in Flandin’s illustrations (see e.g. Figure 6 below) – twelve.¹⁵ Thankfully, for the present argument to work, the details of the figures do not matter: it is enough to know what they are pictures of, what sequence they stood in, and what their main colours were. These points were confirmed by the Chicago team,¹⁶ and are not in dispute.

Place’s publication first provides a general view of the Sîn temple facade, suggesting in the upper register how it might have looked originally, and showing in the lower register how it actually looked in its *état actuel*:

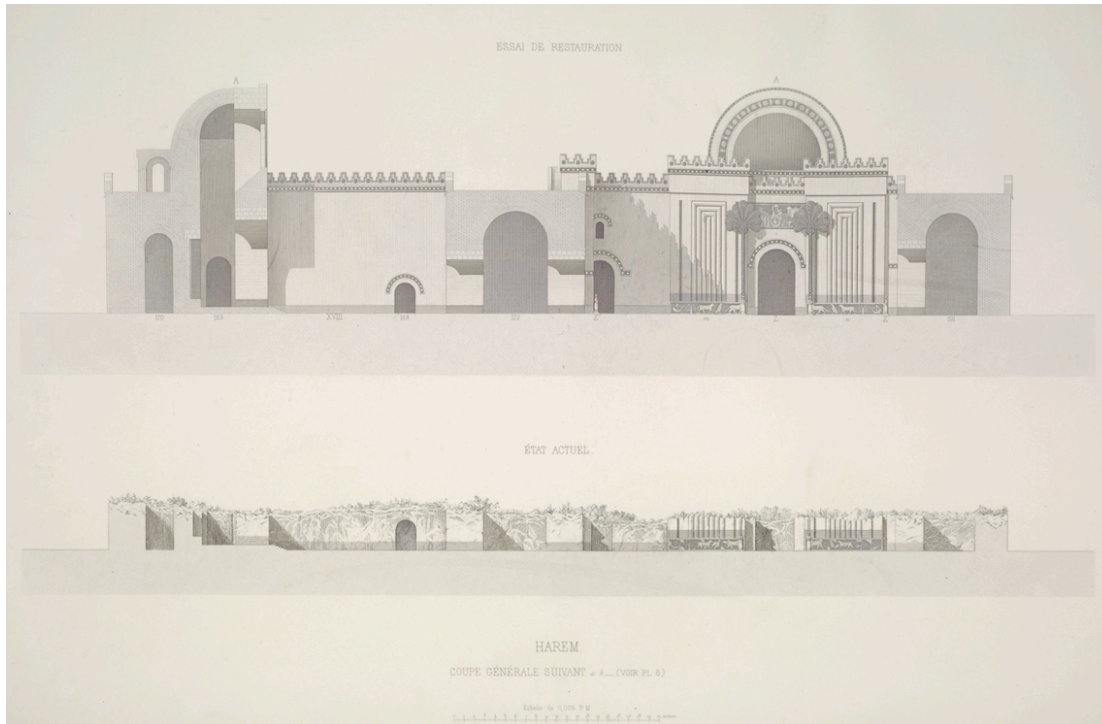


Figure 3 - the Sin temple at Khorsabad, as reconstructed by Victor Place (upper) and as preserved (lower). After Place (1867a: pl.23), courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f681-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020)

Zooming in, we get the following detail of the images' *état actuel*:

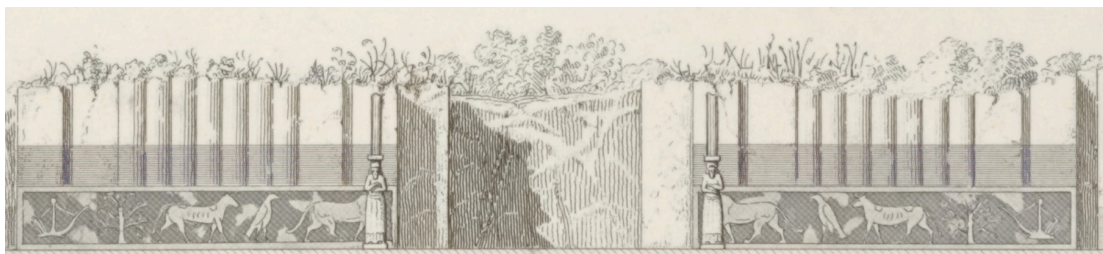


Figure 4 - Detail of Figure 3, by the author

Place then provides his reconstruction of the same gateway, in colour:



Figure 5 – “Essai de restauration” of gateway ‘Z’ to the temple of Sin at Khorsabad. From Place III pl. 24, courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f682-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020).

The high-up image of the king in his chariot is a guess, about which Place himself expressed doubts.¹⁷

Place then provides a detail of the images on the right-hand side of the doorway, making it clear that they wrap round the sides of the buttress-like plinth, so that the first and last of them (king and man with spear) were not visible from the frontal view:

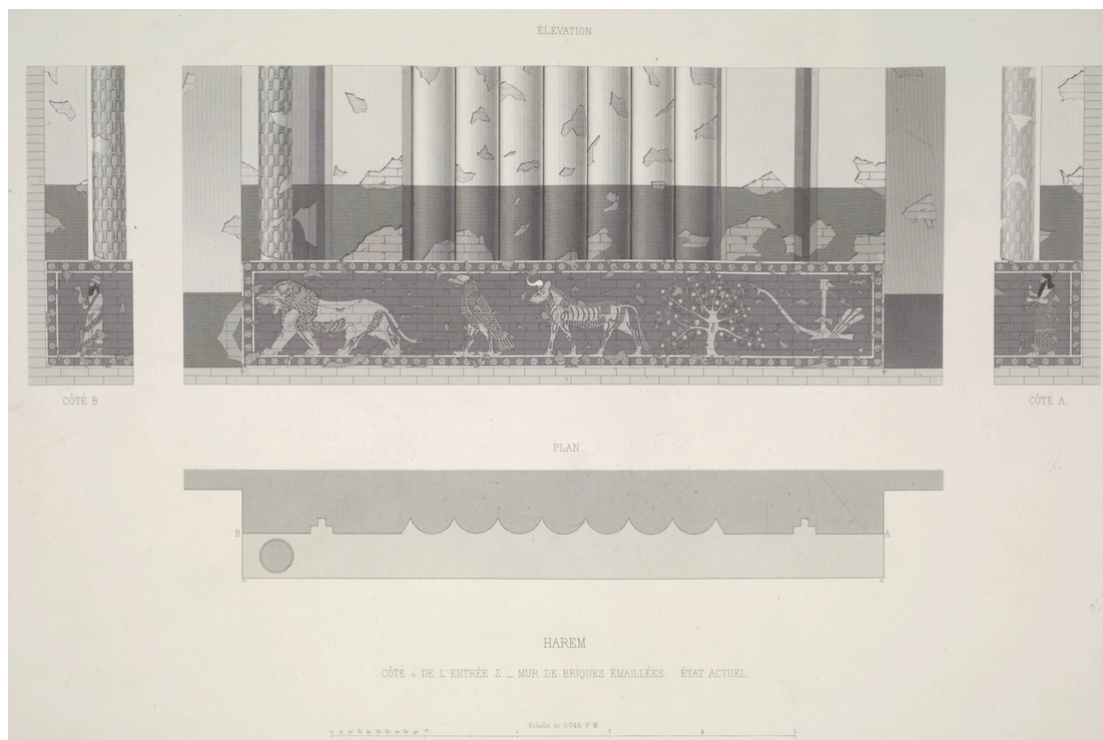


Figure 6 - from Place III pl. 26, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f684-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020).

This represents the “état actuel” of the images as seen in Place’s day, which seems to have been very good – indications of damage are visible, but few. There is no corresponding close-up of the left-hand side, but the detail in Figure 4 above suggests they were also in good shape.

Place then goes on to provide details of the images, in colour. It is clear from the absence of damage that these have been restored, but we saw in Figure 6 that the originals were in not too bad a shape, and Flandin’s drawings are likely to have been reasonably accurate – not least because he could have used the left-hand and right-hand sets to restore each other. Here they are:

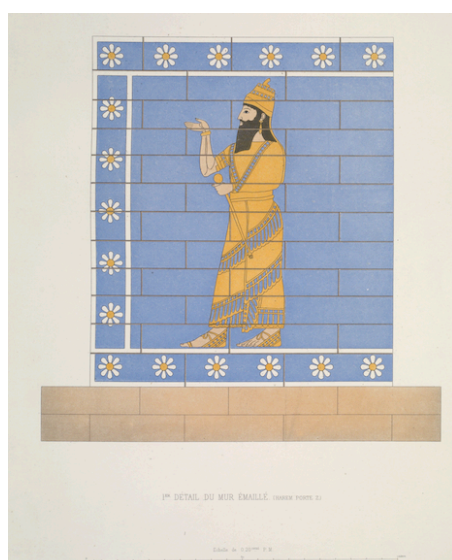


Figure 7 from Place III pl. 27, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f685-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020)

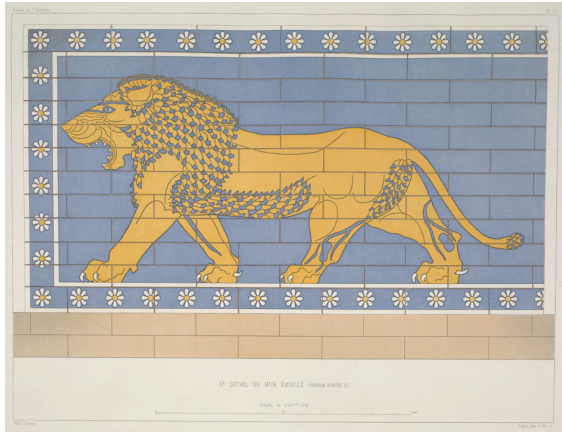


Figure 8 - after Place pl. 29, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f687-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020)



Figure 9 - after Place pl. 29, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f688-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020)

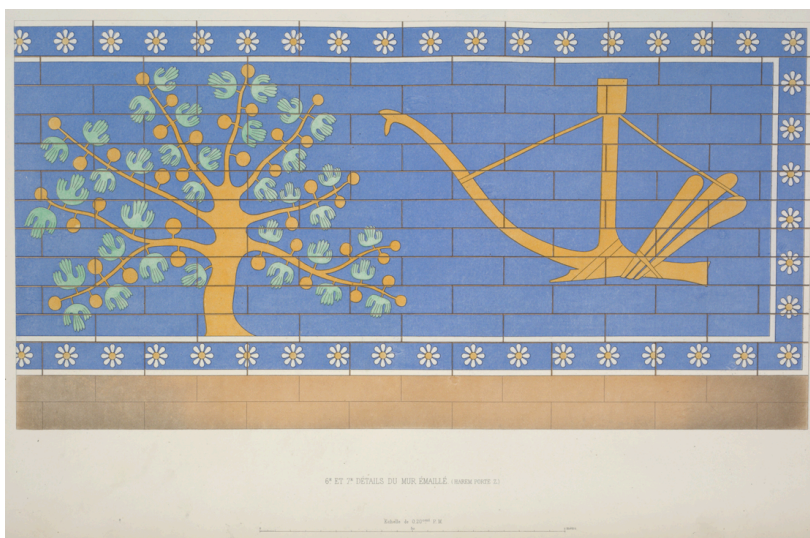


Figure 10 - after Place pl. 31, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f689-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020)

The plough's vertical shaft was used to drop seed into the soil, making it a 'seeder plough' (*epinnu*). An illustration of such seeding in action occurs on Middle Babylonian seal impressions:

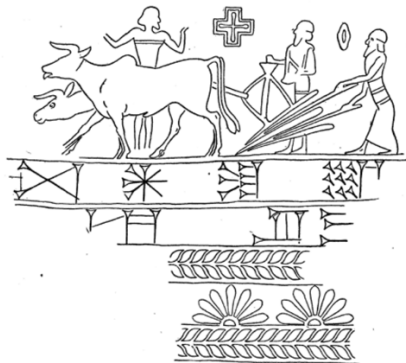


Figure 11 – composite drawing by Clay (1912: 66) of a ploughing scene, compiled from multiple seal impressions on a Middle Babylonian tablet dated to Nazi-Maruttaš. Public domain.

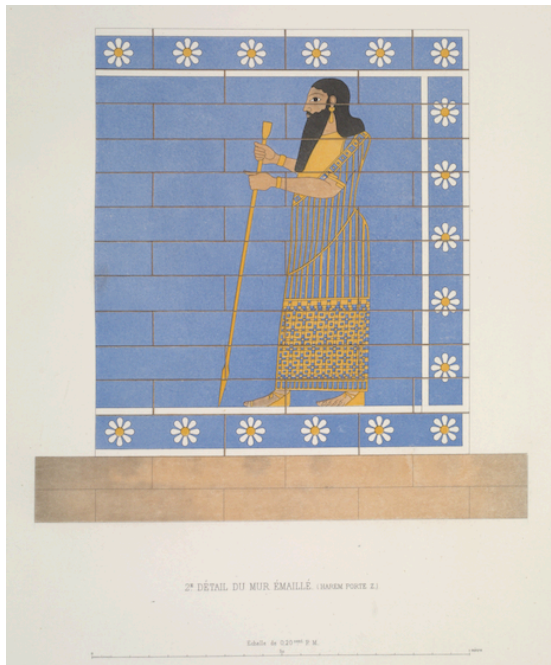


Figure 12 - Place pl. 28, Courtesy of the General Research Division of the New York Public Library (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-f686-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, accessed 29.iii.2020).

So much for what Sargon's images ('long version') look like. But what do they *mean*? Various answers have been given. We will review them before assembling our own.

History of interpretation

It has been suspected for almost a hundred years that there is more to Sargon's 'mystery symbols' than meets the eye.

In 1844, Georges Perrot took a dim view of the yellow-and-blue pictures, deeming that their author "makes no attempt to imitate the real colours of nature; all he cares about is to please the eye and to vary the monotony of the wide surfaces left unbroken by the

architect” (Perrot and Chipiez 1884: 296). This early denigration shows how much there was still to perceive about these remarkable images.

The first scholar to have suspected that the symbols were more than just decorative seems to have been Eckhard Unger. Writing in **1925**, he put forward an interpretation which he was to stand by for decades: that each image symbolised a god, with the bird (which he took to be an eagle) representing Ninurta, and the bull representing Adad (1925: 475). He came back to the other animals in subsequent years.

In **1936**, Gordon Loud took the five animals to represent Sargon’s power as a sovereign, so that the lion, “sovereign of the earth”, symbolised “the power of the Assyrian empire”, the eagle, “sovereign of the air”, likewise symbolised “the might of Sargon’s empire”, etc. (1936: 94-96). (Loud had no suggestion for the bull, which failed to impress him: it “lacks power, gives forth no sense of life, and in the proportions of the body suggests a horse rather than a bull”).

In **1938**, Unger took his previous interpretation further, with new matches between symbols and gods. He recognised he had no interpretation of the plough (1938: 252a).

In **1944**, while discussing the symbols at the bottom of two Sargon prisms, and proposing to connect these with Esarhaddon’s astroglyphs and Sargon’s number-riddle, Ernst Weidner did *not* bring in the mystery symbols at Khorsabad (1941-1944: 49). This shows that, when the connection between Sargon’s and Esarhaddon’s symbols was made (four years later), it was by no means as obvious an idea as it might seem in hindsight.

It was only in **1948**, in an ‘additional note’ at the end of his book *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East*, that Cyril Gadd made a connection between Sargon’s mystery symbols and Esarhaddon’s. Moreover, Gadd had a new idea about colour: pointing out that the colours of Sargon’s images (yellow on blue) agreed very neatly with the idea of constellations in the sky,¹⁸ Gadd wrote that

There need be little hesitation in believing that these Khorsabad figures display to us the *šitir burummê* [Gadd understood this as ‘writing of the constellations’, MW] as the Assyrians represented it, the writing of the motley-constellations upon the blue background of the heavens. It would hardly be too bold to go a step further—if the figures on the Black Stone in some way spelt ‘Esarhaddon’ (as we are told they did), the figures at the entrances to the Khorsabad temples perhaps spelt ‘Sargon’ in the same system (Gadd 1948: 93-94).

Noting that they had symbols in common,¹⁹ Gadd thus proposed that Sargon’s and Esarhaddon’s mystery symbols were part of the same “system”, and that, like Esarhaddon’s, Sargon’s symbols somehow spelled his name. The latter point anticipates the line of analysis proposed here.

In **1957**, Eckhard Unger returned to the mystery symbols in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* entries ‘Fayence’, which refined his interpretation of the images as symbolising gods (1957a: 30), and ‘Feigenbaum(zweig)’, where he suggested that the fig tree was a specifically Assyrian symbol (1957b: 33).

In **1979**, Julian Reade treated Sargon’s mystery symbols in light of Luckenbill’s idea (1925: 166) that Esarhaddon’s symbols were to be read in terms of their visual similarity to cuneiform signs. Using this system, Reade suggested that the five signs wrote Sargon’s name: “the face of Sargon’s panels would represent Sargon’s name, with the lion here as *šarru* and the symbols in between the lion and the plough as variant spellings of the second two syllables. On the side-panels, the king would have to be *amelu* and the figure with the spear a pleonastic *a*” (Reade 1979b: 46). The plough would, as in Luckenbill’s discussion of Esarhaddon, represent *na*.

Moreover, Reade implied that Sargon's symbols could be interpreted as "recognized (or even improvised) constellations" (1979a: 45) – a suggestion previously made by Luckenbill (1925: 166) for Esarhaddon's symbols: "The symbols are pictures of constellations, and represent the name of Esarhaddon". Reade's extension of Luckenbill's idea comes close to the solution argued for in the present paper, where specific constellations are suggested.

In **1995**, Reade found that the symbols were "comparable" to those on the bronzes and on a "prism illustrated by Weidner" (i.e. Ass. 16587 = VA 8424). Moreover, he proposed a decipherment of Sargon's symbols, achieved jointly with Irving Finkel: the long version ran "Sargon, great king, king of Assyria" and the short version "Sargon, king of Assyria" (1995: 235).

One year later, in **1996**, Reade and Finkel presented their idea in greater detail: they interpreted the symbols (long version) as a writing of *šarrukīn šarru rabû šar māt aššur*^{ki} 'Sargon, Great King, King of the Land of Assyria', with the following reasoning:

The image of the **king** is a "direct pictogram, representing Sargon in person", and thus stands for the name 'Sargon' (Finkel and Reade 1996: 248).

The **lion** is an "indirect pictogram, standing for LUGAL = *šarru* 'king'", on the basis that "the lion was a familiar symbol of strength and royalty" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 249). They also note that the lion is "found engraved in front of Sargon's name on vessels of stone and glass" excavated at Nimrud (see discussion above), and suggest that this reflects experimentation with esoteric writings of the name before Sargon moved to Khorsabad (Finkel and Reade 1996: 249) – an idea which we will develop in the *lion passant* section of the paper.

They interpret the **bird** as a raven (*āribu*) or a water-bird (*arabû*), and suggest this is a "direct pun" (i.e. play on sounds) "to represent *rabû* 'great'" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 249).

They interpret the **bull** as an "indirect pictogram standing for LUGAL₂ = *šarru* 'king'", on the basis that "the bull, like the lion, was a symbol of virile strength and royalty" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 249).

They interpret the **fig-tree** as an "indirect pun" for 'land': fig is *tittu*, whose sumerogram is MA; lexical lists indicate that MA can stand for *mātu* 'land' (Finkel and Reade 1996: 249).

They understand the **seeder-plough** as representing Aššur via the similar-sounding word *šurû* (an agricultural implement), or symbolically as "an indirect pictogram symbolising the ploughed fields typical of the Assyrian landscape" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 250).

Finally, they understand the **human figure** as standing for the place-determinative KI, on the basis that its spear-tip is pointing at the earth – *eršetum*, whose sumerogram is KI (Finkel and Reade 1996: 250).

The wider context of their suggestions is an argument that Sargon's symbols were "a deliberate attempt by the Assyrian authorities to produce a home-grown equivalent to exotic foreign hieroglyphs" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 244). This is reflected in the title of their paper – "Assyrian Hieroglyphs".

With an Egyptian dimension in mind, they commented that "that the glazed brick panels were arranged in pairs, each facing in a different direction. This emulates a well-known quality of Egyptian writing: it can proceed from left to right or vice versa, the reading being dictated by diagnostic signs such as birds or human figures" (Finkel and Reade 1996: 250). And indeed one could add that Sargon's use of *five* symbols matches the *five* names which Egyptian kings used by this period.²⁰

Egyptian issues aside, Finkel and Reade commented "it seems possible that a deliberate parallel was being drawn, through these paired groups of symbols, between the natural and supernatural worlds. Gods could have *lumāšī*: so could Sargon" (1996: 262). This cohered with the circumstance that the glazed-brick panels with Sargon's symbols were

placed “exclusively so far as we know, on approaches to shrines, at the base of facades, the points where natural and supernatural worlds were juxtaposed” (Finkel and Reade 1996: 262).

In **2003**, Ludwig Morenz (2003a: 21-22) suggested that the two human figures in the ‘long’ version represented the name ‘Sargon’ (which Morenz took to be *šarru-kīn*): the first figure would represent *šarru* ‘king’, while the staff held by the latter could either be interpreted as “^{gi}*mukanu*” or as *qanû* ‘reed’, each of which would have a sound similar to the element ‘*kīn*’ in Sargon’s name. Morenz (2003a: 23) further proposes that the two human figures portray Sargon as an Assyrian and a Babylonian king.

In a separate publication of the same year, Morenz dubbed the Finkel/Reade interpretation attractive (“anziehend”) (2003b: 198), and accepted their suggestion of Egyptian influence on the *idea* of ‘encoding’ the king’s name symbolically.

Morenz’s own solution in his second 2003 paper was that the lion symbolised kingship, the bull (which he took as *šūru*) alluded to *šarru* ‘king’; the fig tree (typical of non-irrigated land) represented Assyria; the two human figures alluded to ‘šarru-kēn’ on the basis that the first is a king (*šarru*), and the second carries a reed (*qanû*) which sounds similar to *kēn* (as in the first paper). Morenz also deemed it possible to view the final figure as a calque of the Egyptian hieroglyphic determinative ‘A21’ (i.e. man-holding-stick). He also thought that, in an extra layer of meaning, each symbol alluded to a god (Morenz 2003b: 217).

In **2004**, Michael Roaf and Annette Zgoll studied Sargon’s mystery symbols together with Esarhaddon’s, viewing both as specimens of the same ‘astroglyphic’ mode of writing (2001: 290). They accepted the Finkel/Reade understanding of the lion and bull as representing the king, and of the tree and plough as representing Assyria (2001: 267). Since their main concern was with Esarhaddon’s symbols, and he did not include a bird, they did not discuss the bird. They did, however, observe that Sargon’s five-symbol group follows a progression “from wild beasts (lion, bird and bull) to arboriculture (fig tree) and agriculture (plough)”, commenting on “an obvious symbolism of the Assyrian king mediating between the divine and human spheres and exerting control over the whole range of nature” (2001: 209).

In **2005**, Eckart Frahm (2005) combined existing proposals plus new ideas into a new solution: the lion would symbolize *šarru*; the bird would symbolize *ukīn* because its outline shape was similar to the cuneiform sign GI (Sumerogram for *ukīn*); the bull would symbolize the king; the fig tree would represent *māt* “land” (on the basis of a “not completely clear” association); the seeder-plough would represent Aššur on the basis that its outline is similar to the cuneiform signs an-šár and *aš-šur*. The five symbols would, therefore, represent *šarru-ukīn šar māt aššur* ‘Sargon, king of Assyria’.

In **2008**, Zoltán Niederreiter (2008a: 58-59) observed that two of Sargon’s symbols, the lion and the bull, are well attested as emblems of royalty in Assyria, and also associated with constellations. He inferred that, by “un choix conscient”, “les emblèmes divins et royaux, exécutés de manière identique, ont été employés à la fois pour représenter les sphères céleste et aulique” (Niederreiter 2008a: 59). On this basis, Niederreiter thought it probable that the mystery symbols represented Sargon’s titles. In the same year, in his PhD dissertation (2008b: 80) he followed the Finkel/Reade interpretation as “*Šarru-kīn šarru rabû šar māt aššur^{ki}*” (long version) and “*Šarru-kīn šarru māt aššur^{ki}*” (short version).

In **2020** Grant Frame offered a thorough survey of previous opinions in the introduction and commentary to his ‘text 58’ (which consists in the long and short versions of Sargon’s symbols). While listing existing proposals to read the symbols as Sargon’s name and titles, he reserved judgment on whether the proposals are correct: he cited previous ‘translations’ of the symbols, but refrained from offering one in his own voice.

The time is ripe, therefore, for a new solution to be proposed. The first step in unfolding mine will be to explain why I do not include the two human figures.

Discounting the two humans

For two reasons, I suppose, like other scholars,²¹ that the two human figures accompany and enclose the ‘main group’ of five, but are not actually part of it.²² The first reason is that since the two human figures wrap around the buttress-like plinths (one round to the right and one round to the left), the viewer-from-afar does not see them, only the ‘main group’ of five. The second reason is that, as pointed out by Peter Miglus, the ‘main group’ of five is separated from the two humans by vertical lines of rosettes, which mark it out as self-contained. This happens in the Šin temple,²³ and also in the main courtyard of the Nabû temple, though there the rosettes have a different shape.²⁴ Hence the two human figures do not form part of the present solution.²⁵

The images as constellations

A property of Sargon’s ‘mystery symbols’ which seems not yet to have been recognised is that *all five* symbols which the viewer sees from afar can be interpreted as representing specific constellations, known from Babylonian/Assyrian astronomy.²⁶ Three are the same as those modern Europeans know today (because we inherited them from Mesopotamia, via the Greeks), while two are unfamiliar.

The three familiar ones are: the lion = **Leo** (^{mul}ur.mah); the eagle = **Aquila** (^{mul}ti₈^{mušen}, *erû/arû*); the bull = **Taurus** (^{mul}gu₄.an.na, *alû*).

The seeder plough corresponds to the Babylonian constellation ^{mul}apin = *epinnu*, these being the Sumerian and Babylonian/Assyrian words for ‘seeder plough’.²⁷

What about the fig-tree? In the absence of a Mesopotamian constellation with this name (none is known), I take Sargon’s fig-tree as representing the Mesopotamian constellation **Jaw** (*isu/issu*; no modern equivalent), via (near-)homophony between *isu* ‘tree’ and *isu* ‘jaw’.²⁸ Since the Jaw was sometimes specifically understood to belong to the Bull of Heaven,²⁹ it makes sense for the bull and fig-tree to appear next to each other in Sargon’s sequence. As to how *isu* ‘jaw’ was represented, the use of a near-homophone would have remedied the unseemliness of a picture of a disembodied jaw. Indeed, the Tree was an important and widespread symbol in Assyria (Parpola 1993: esp. 163), so Sargon’s scholars might have been glad to be able to squeeze it in.³⁰

The identification of the ‘mystery symbols’ as constellations is supported by their colour. As already pointed out by Gadd, yellow or gold on blue (as opposed, say, to naturalistic colours) is very much suggestive of stars in the sky.³¹ Furthermore, yellow/gold does not seem to have been a colour typical of Neo-Assyrian palace decoration: Julian Reade remarks that “the main colours found” on orthostats (reliefs) are “black, white, red, and blue”, and that these same four “predominate” in what survives of Neo-Assyrian wall-paintings”.³² It would seem that the decorators at Khorsabad were instructed to use an unusual colour, to reflect the astral character of the images. Blue-and-gold was also used for an arc of genies surmounting a Khorsabad city gate (Place 1867b: pl. 14). They could have had an astral character too.

As for the blue background, Reade (1979a: 19) points out that there are parallels to it at Khorsabad and Nimrud.

Why these particular constellations?

Why did Sargon choose these particular constellations for his temple wall? To this, there are at least two answers.

The first answer is that the constellations in question all have associations which would have befitted an Assyrian king. Information about their associations in the eyes of Neo-Assyrians can be derived from the star list *Mul.Apin*. A manuscript of this composition's Tablet II (VAT 9412+) has a colophon dating it to the eponymy of Sargon's son and successor Sennacherib,³³ making it plausible that what it has to say would have already been recognised under Sargon himself.

Babylonians and Assyrians divided the starry sky into three bands, or 'paths', which they associated with the gods Anu, Enlil and Ea. *Mul.Apin* tells us which of these 'paths' each star or constellation sat in. Moreover, *Mul.Apin* associates each constellation with a particular deity:

Table 1 - Sargon's 'mystery symbols' and their astral connections according to *Mul.Apin*

SYMBOL	CONSTELLATION	IN <i>MUL.APIN</i>	DEITY	PATH OF
lion	Leo	I i.8	Enlil	Enlil
eagle	Aquila	I ii.12	(Zababa)	Anu
bull	Taurus	I ii.1	(bull of heaven)	Anu
fig-tree	Jaw	I ii.1	crown of Anu	Anu
plough	Plough	I i.1	Enlil	Enlil

All five sit in the paths of Anu and Enlil (not Ea). This focus on Anu and Enlil coheres with the circumstance that, in his 'juniper-garden inscription' from Nimrud, Sargon calls himself the 'chosen one of Anu and Enlil' (*nišīt Anu u Enlil*) – again omitting Ea.

Since Sargon is happy to honour Ea in other contexts (e.g. Frame (2020: p. 208)), the reason for focussing on Anu and Enlil to the detriment of Ea here is probably that they both had kingly attributes. Enlil was the traditional head of the pantheon, and the Jaw is associated with the *crown* of Anu, the god of the sky, pointing to the role of 'chief god' which Anu sometimes has in Mesopotamian narratives. It is obvious enough why a ruler would have particularly sought association with these two deities and their constellations.

Following the associations in *Mul.Apin* (and beyond),³⁴ we further see that the Eagle links Sargon to the god Zababa:

mul^dza-ba₄-ba₄ mul^{ti}₈mušen u mul^{ad}₆

The star of Zababa, the Eagle and the Dead Man.

Ex. 1. (*Mul.apin* I ii.12, edited by Hunger and Pingree (1989: 33))

The same association is found on 'Astrolabe B', preserved on a tablet from the 12th Century B.C. (i.e. several centuries earlier than Sargon):

itu^ziz mul^{ti}₈dza-b[a₄-ba₄]

The month of Šebāt, the Eagle-constellation, Zababa.

Ex. 2. (VAT 9416 = KAV 218 = 'Astrolabe B', iii.25, edited by Horowitz (2014: 36))

There are various reasons for supposing that the connection to Zababa is one which Sargon would have appreciated. First, Zababa was a warrior god, and therefore well suited to Sargon, who conquered widely. Second, Sargon of Akkad may have identified Zababa with Ilaba, his personal god.³⁵ If, as already suspected by George Smith in 1872,³⁶ Sargon of Assyria was consciously emulating Sargon of Akkad,³⁷ and if he knew of the connection between Zababa

and his illustrious predecessor, he would have no doubt been delighted at a connection between Zababa and himself, as it would have reinforced the connection between himself and his earlier namesake – whom he might even have thought to be a king of Assyria,³⁸ and so his direct predecessor. Third, a tablet from Neo-Assyrian Assur (KAR 142 i.22-25) edited by Pongratz-Leisten (1994: 221) syncretises Zababa with Enlil’s son Ninurta, the ‘hero god’ – a connection Sargon would again have welcomed.

In sum, all five constellations have associations befitting Assyrian royalty. But there is a feature of them as a group which intrigues: they appear in a different sequence from that in *Mul.Apin*. Indeed, from *Mul.Apin*’s point of view it is jarring to have the plough last, when *Mul.Apin* specifically states it is the *first* star in Enlil’s ‘path’:

epinnu enlil ālik panī kakkabī šūt enlil

The Plough is Enlil, who goes at the front of Enlil’s stars.

Ex. 3. (*Mul.Apin* I i.1)³⁹

If *Mul.Apin* enshrines a sequence which was already traditional in Sargon’s date (which seems likely), one is left wondering: why was the order changed?

This brings us to the second reason for why Sargon used these particular constellations, as opposed to others: they wrote out his name.

The images and Sargon’s name

If one takes Sargon’s ‘mystery symbols’ and considers the Babylonian/Assyrian words which they represent, we end up with a sequence of words that include sounds spelling out ‘sar(ru)gin(u)’:

nēšu (Assyrian /nēsu/), *arû* or *aribu*, *gumāhu*, *išu*, *epinnu*

If one wants /sargīn/, the bird can equally be a crow (*aribu*) or eagle (*erû/arû*). If one wants /sarrugīn/, then it has to be an eagle. For the bull, one has to use *gumāhu* ‘large/prime bull’, which is a rarer word than *alpu* ‘bull’. But this is not a big obstacle: *gumāhu* is a word Sargon uses in his inscriptions, and the specimen in his picture looks like a prime one, so that *gumāhu* is reasonable. Moreover, we will see below that this bull should probably be understood more specifically as the Bull of Heaven, whose Sumerian name (*gu₄-an-na* ‘bull of heaven’) likewise began with a *g*. For the tree, one has to suppose that the fig-tree stands generally for *išu* ‘tree’ rather than *tittu* ‘fig tree’ specifically, but this again seems unproblematic.

The idea of dealing in single consonants (such as the *š* of *nēšu* or the *g* of *gumāhu*) is largely alien to Mesopotamian cuneiform, but would have been familiar to First-Millennium Assyrians from Aramaic. Indeed, alphabetic writing may have been around in the Ancient Near East earlier than traditionally thought.⁴⁰

Also worth observing is that the five symbols each contribute a letter as per a putative Aramaic spelling of Sargon’s name as סררגין: *nēšu arû gumāhu išu epinnu*. This would involve a *plene* ʾ, which, though unattested for Sargon’s name in Mesopotamia,⁴¹ is likely to have underlain the Biblical form of the name (see above).

Sargon’s name and the ‘short version’

The ‘short’ version of the inscription reduces the five symbols to three. The equivalences employed above for the ‘long version’ would give

nēšu iṣu epinnu

which does not spell Sargon's name. But if we read the same symbols slightly differently (something which literate Assyrians were well used to doing in cuneiform), we obtain

šar(ru) giš epinnu

This once again gives us 'šar(ru)gin' (or, with Assyrian /s/ for Babylonian š, /sar(ru)gin/).

The logic of the three readings is that the lion stands for the word *šar(ru)* 'king' (as also in the *lions passant*, see below); and that the picture of the fig tree represents the Sumerian word for 'tree' (giš) rather than the Babylonian/Assyrian word (*iṣu*). (We will meet a similar mixture of Babylonian/Assyrian and Sumerian in connection with the *lions passant*).

Why not always use the *first* letters?

To modern eyes, it might look more intuitive to use only words whose *first* sounds made up 'Sargon', and some will view this as a weakness in the above proposals. To this there are four replies.

The first is that the authors of the symbol-spelling were working under multiple constraints, which severely limited their room for manoeuvre: not only did the symbols need to represent the sounds of 'Sargon'; they needed to work in both the long and short version; they needed to double as constellations with appropriate cultural associations; *and* they needed to be visually suitable for public display in a royal capital – where a lion and an eagle are more seemly than, say, a sandal and a mouse's tail! With these constraints, one can easily envisage the royal scribes resorting to letters other than the first.

Secondly, Michael Jursa observes that Neo-Babylonian onomastics (c. two centuries after Sargon) sometimes produced nicknames which used only *part* of the full name, omitting the beginning: he gives the examples of Šulāya from Bēl-ušallim and Bammāya from Erība-Marduk (Jursa 2005: 7 n. 33 and 100 n. 730. I owe this reference to Heather Baker). While the like has yet to be demonstrated for Assyria, Sargon's scholars would very likely have been aware of the phenomenon.

The third consideration is that when writers of cuneiform abbreviated their spellings, they did not always keep the beginning of the word. Though keeping the beginning was the dominant habit, there are occasional cases where the abbreviation started with a non-initial component (Worthington 2020: 205). When the 'mystery symbols' use letters/sounds other than the first, this may have been less jarring than it is to us.

The fourth consideration is that two prayers on a tablet from Khorsabad, edited by Sweet (1969: 459-460), have a double acrostic: they operate with both the first sign in each line and the last. This shows that Sargon's scribes were not only interested in (line and word) beginnings.⁴²

Sargon and the *lions passant*

The above discussion by no means exhausts Sargon's manipulations of his name. We will suggest here that his name should also be read into depictions of pacing lions (*lions passant*).

Sargon was symbolised by a *lion passant*, and his favourite brother Sîn-ahu-ušur by a symbol resembling a capital Greek *omega* (Ω), often accompanied by a kneeling dromedary (Niederreiter 2005). These symbols appear in various contexts, including bricks and cylinder

seals. Moreover, Niederreiter (2008a: 65) points out that several of them have astral allusions, which coheres with the starry symbols discussed above.

The idea of representing people by symbols was not new to Sargon. A characteristic of Neo-Assyrian administration is that important members of it were associated (especially, but not only, on stamp seals) with symbols. Thus the queen and her sphere of the palace were symbolized by a scorpion (Herbordt 1992: 137-138; Galter 2007: 648-652; Radner 2008: 494-501; Arbøll 2023: 266-267), while in the 6th Century the Crown Prince was symbolised by a Y-shaped cross (Radner 2008: 510, 502-505). Nonetheless, coupled with the ‘number-riddle’ and the symbols studied above, one has the impression that there was a particular interest in names and symbols in Sargon’s reign.

How were the symbols chosen? For Sîn-ahu-ušur, Niederreiter suggests that the omega-like symbol, which represents a uterus (Frankfort 1944: 198-200), alludes to the goddess Ninsikil, further alluding (via similarity in sound) to Sîn-ahu-ušur’s title *sukkallu*.⁴³ As for the scorpion symbolising the queen, the scorpion’s habit of carrying its young on its back makes it a powerful symbol of devoted motherhood (Galter 2007: 656; Radner 2012: 691-692) – a connection reinforced by scorpions’ association to the goddess Išhara, who was connected to marriage (Galter 2007: 656-569). In Mesopotamia there was also a long tradition of associating the scorpion with sexual arousal.⁴⁴ Since, in the workings of the Assyrian palace system, the likely function of the queen’s sphere was precisely to arouse the king, produce his offspring and raise them when young, the scorpion-symbol is a good fit. Whether it also alluded to the queen’s name is unclear.⁴⁵

Let us now turn to Sargon and the *lion passant*. As long realized, and shown in detail by Chicako Watanabe (2002: 46-54), lions abound in discourse surrounding Mesopotamian royalty.⁴⁶ Moreover, they feature heavily in Neo-Assyrian royal iconography,⁴⁷ where Dominique Collon (1995: 72) sees them as marking “the property of the Assyrian palace”. More specifically, *lions passant* can be found in various royal contexts, including stone duck weights from the tombs of Assyrian queens at Nimrud (see Al-Rawi (2008), with refs), a royal stamp seal (BM 99218, cf. King (1914: 38) no. 277), and perhaps the scabbard in a stone relief of Assurnasirpal II (BM 124563, cf. the drawing in Niederreiter (2008a: 57)).⁴⁸

Nonetheless, as observed by Niederreiter (2008a: 52), the highest known concentration of *lions passant* appears under Sargon. They appear on vases found in Nimrud but probably looted from Palestine (Reade in Searight, Reade and Finkel (2008: 16b)) which also bear a cuneiform inscription that says ‘Palace of Sargon, king of Assyria’: BM 91639, 91595, 91460, 118443, and probably 104894, VA 970 (or 790) (all stone), and BM 90952 (glass) (Reade in (Searight, Reade and Finkel 2008: 22b; Niederreiter 2008a: 76-79) and 85-86). Here are two specimens in the British Museum:



Figure 13 - BM 91639. Detail of alabaster jar inscribed with a lion and (not visible in photo) Sargon's name and title. Found at North-West Palace, Nimrud. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



Figure 15 - BM 90952. Detail of the 'Sargon jar'. Green glass vase inscribed with Sargon's name and title and a lion. Found at North-West Palace, Nimrud. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



Figure 14 - drawing of the image and inscription on the jar above, after Niederreiter (2008a: 53). © Zoltán Niederreiter.

The reason for Sargon's greater use of this symbol is probably that the *lion passant* had a significance for him that it lacked for his predecessors: it writes his name. The first element of the name, *šarru* ('king'), is symbolised by the lion,⁴⁹ which in Mesopotamia was often connected to royalty.⁵⁰ The second element, which (as argued above) Assyrians pronounced /gin/ or /gen/, is represented by the lion's action of walking, which alludes to the Sumerian verb 'to walk', *gin* (also *gen?*).

The symbol representing the name probably does not work for the queen and *Sîn-ahu-ušur*, but this asymmetry vis-à-vis Sargon does not undermine the suggested interpretation. First, there is a very small data-set, and there is no *a priori* reason why all elements in it should work the same way. Second, as king, and the most important member of the group, it would make sense for Sargon to have a symbol that behaved differently from the others. Thirdly, though (as suggested here) the symbol represented his name, this does not mean that it *only* did this: elsewhere, Sargon plays on the meaning of his name,⁵¹ so that the *lion passant* could also describe him as a 'true king', bringing him into line with the other two symbols. Plus it would have retained its traditional association with royalty.

There are also *lions passant* carved onto four stone bowls and vases with inscriptions of kings other than Sargon.⁵² But in each of these cases, Reade in (Searight, Reade and Finkel 2008: 22b, 25b, 55a-b) observes that the lion and the cuneiform inscription are not aligned, suggesting they were carved at different times. The suspicion arises, therefore, that these were originally inscribed with Sargon's *lion passant* and that, since his name had not been inscribed too (the *lion passant* doing service for this), a successor saw it fit to have his own name added – helped, no doubt, by the fact that though (it is suggested here) the *lion passant* was specific to Sargon, the lion in general was a generic symbol of royalty.

Balancing probabilities

Is all the above simply coincidence? Are we artificially manipulating Sargon’s symbols (and lions) into meanings they were never intended to have?

A point where these questions are hard to resolve is the match between the five symbols and a putative Aramaic spelling of Sargon’s name as סרגין. Is this match happenstance or deliberate? Though Sargon is known to have discouraged a correspondent from writing to him in Aramaic (SAA XVII 2), a different attitude might have been taken towards images visible to all the city’s population, which would have included many Aramaic speakers. It is hard to be certain.

By contrast, as regards the wider suggestion that the symbols were chosen to spell out Sargon’s name, the odds against coincidence are massive: if one takes strings of Babylonian/Assyrian words at random, they are very unlikely to produce the desired effect. Consider e.g. the first lines of *Gilgameš*, *Ištar’s Descent*, and Hammurapi’s *Laws*:

ša naqba īmuru išdī māti
ana kurnugī qaqqar(i) lâ târi ištar mārāt sîn uzunša iškun
šumma awīlum eli awīlim nērta iddi-ma lā uktīnšu

The first string gets us as far as *šar-* (*ša naqba īmuru*). The second is a non-starter. The third gets us only as far as *ša-* (*šumma awīlum*). So it is for countless other cases: it is far from easy to find a string of words in extant sources which replicates the effect produced by Sargon’s symbols – let alone a string where the effect even works in a shortened version, and brings in constellations. For the effect to obtain precisely with these symbols, with Sargon’s name in his capital city, with suitable constellations, would be such a big coincidence that the effect is extremely likely to have been intentional.

This is not to say that the interpretation of the symbols proposed here is the only one possible. Michael Roaf and Annette Zgoll (2001: 291-292) comment of both Sargon’s symbols and Esarhaddon’s astroglyphs that “they can be ‘read’ in different ways and at different levels”,⁵³ and that “These different layers of meaning demonstrate the remarkably sophisticated intellectual abilities of the scholars active at the court of the Assyrian king”.⁵⁴ One can only applaud this nuanced model of interpretation.

We have already seen that Sargon’s symbols could be understood in at least two ways that interlink (as constellations, and hence as sounds). This does not exclude further layers of meaning. One such possibility is that Sargon’s lion, which seems to be walking,⁵⁵ alludes to the pun mobilised elsewhere by the *lion passant* (see below). Another possibility, already seen by Roaf and Zgoll (2001: 280), is that the bull (also in its astral aspect: the Bull of Heaven) connects Sargon to Gilgamesh. This would fit the argument by Johannes Bach that Sargon is the first Assyrian king whose inscriptions connect him to “the archetypal hero king Gilgameš of Uruk” (2020: 322). In Sumerian tradition, the Bull of Heaven had an extra royal link through its marriage to Ereškigal, queen of the Underworld.⁵⁶

It is further possible that previous solutions proposed by modern scholars to the puzzle of the ‘mystery images’, chronicled above in *History of interpretation*, were apprehended also by Assyrians. However, since Sargon in several contexts puts great emphasis on, or plays with, his name (as opposed to his name and titles),⁵⁷ I would be inclined to privilege solutions which read the five figures as the name alone (without titles).

For the *lion passant*, I cannot prove that Sargon’s scholars interpreted it as I have done. But in a courtly climate where much attention was given to Sargon’s name and how to represent it, it seems virtually certain to me that someone would have realised that the old symbol of the pacing lion conveniently represented the name of the reigning king. And this would account for its increased use under Sargon.

Other cases

Beyond the images studied above, there were comparable images which the present paper does *not* attempt to ‘read’.⁵⁸

Victor Place (1867a: 128-129) reported that the ‘long version’ of the symbols appeared with an extra (hard-to-identify) animal on a room wall inside the temples of Adad, Ninurta and Ea. However, it is far from clear how reliable this information is. His illustration (Place 1867b: plate 25) was labelled “essai de restauration”, without indication of how much was guesswork. Niederreiter (p. 76 n. 181) notes that the Chicago team were unable to confirm “ni la position ni le reste des décorations peintes” in the Adad temple: there is no mention of them in the discussion of the Adad temple by Frankfort (1933: 101-102), and Loud (1936: 125) reports he could find no trace of wall decorations beyond “black paint surfaces”. Some scholars have even thought that the symbols reported from the Adad temple were bronze bands rather than wall decorations, though Niederreiter (2008b: 74-75) opposes this view.

I freely admit that my reading of the name ‘Sargon’ does not work for the sequence in Place’s illustration of the Adad temple (the extra animal throws a spanner in the works), but I do not view this as an obstacle to my interpretation, because **a**) one can conceive of different symbols being used in different ways in different contexts (e.g. publicly viewable vs not publicly viewable), and **b**) it is not clear how secure the restoration of the symbols in the Adad temple is. It is also not clear to me what colours they used.

Beyond that, at least one of the images (the fig-tree) also appeared in a ‘vestibule’ (Room 15) of the palace ‘Residence K’,⁵⁹ which probably housed Sennacherib while crown prince (Reade 2011: 119), though apparently it was painted rather than glazed (Nunn 1988: 178). It is difficult to know what to make of this singleton.

Equally hard to evaluate are very poorly preserved bronze bands which included some or all of the ‘mystery symbols’.⁶⁰ I also have no theory about painted and glazed ‘high-relief’ bricks from Nineveh published by Davide Nadali (2008), which Julian Reade (2005: 381) suggests might have written “another royal name, from another temple façade”.

Concluding thoughts

We are left wondering who would have been aware that the ‘mystery symbols’ at Khorsabad wrote Sargon’s name and placed it in the heavens: were they a *bravura* piece of cleverness trumpeted by heralds for all to hear? Or restricted lore intended only for a knowing few? Or something in between? It is difficult to say.

Whatever the audience, we can reconstruct the claim. Through the symbols’ astral allusions combined with their sounds, Sargon intimated that his name was written in the skies, and in highly prestigious constellations at that: they linked him to Enlil (no doubt to be syncretised with the Assyrian national god, Assur), Enlil’s son Zababa/Ninurta (both encapsulating the idea of martial might and chiming with the empire’s emphasis on the male line of succession), the Bull of Heaven (of *Gilgamesh* fame) and – through its Jaw – the Crown of Anu.

Sargon’s name thus stands eternal in the heavens, implying that the gods chose him when they first put the stars in place. Moreover, the constellations do not appear in the sky together, but spread out over the year. The name (or part of it) is *always* there above us.⁶¹

Something sobering from the perspective of our understanding of the self-projection of Neo-Assyrian kings is that there is no mention of the mystery symbols in Sargon’s extant inscriptions (and we have a lot of them). This is a powerful reminder that, as per David Kertai’s comment that “the royal inscriptions leave a lot unsaid” (2021: 221b), there is a great

deal we would have liked to hear about that the redactors of the inscriptions were comfortable with leaving out!⁶²

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Julian Reade and BASOR's anonymous referees for helpful comments, which, as well as generally improving the paper, added useful references and saved me from an error of fact. Productive discussion also took place with Jeanette Fincke (to whom I am grateful for help with navigating literature on the identification of ancient constellations), Nils Heeßel, Flash Sheridan (who kindly commented on a draft of the paper), and Annette Zgoll.⁶³

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¹ Various interpretations of the Esarhaddon evidence have been offered, starting with Luckenbill 1925: 166 (whose solution is now discredited). The most important recent contributions are Finkel and Reade 1996: 260, Scurlock 1997: 85-86 and Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 264, 268-288 and 290. There is no space here for detailed discussion.

² I do not apply the term 'astroglyph' to the Sargon symbols here discussed, as I believe them to work differently how Roaf and Zgoll understand the Esarhaddon symbols.

³ For discussion of the complexities see Frahm 2005: 46-50 and Fuchs 2020: 69-86.

⁴ For Neo-Assyrians pronouncing what we transcribe 'š' as /s/ see Ylvisaker 1912: § 5a and Parpola 1974: 2. The point was made already by Oppert 1860: 9: "La prononciation, du reste, semble n'avoir pas toujours été la même à Babylone et à Ninive. Les lettres qui contiennent un ϖ paraissent avoir été prononcées par un s dans le nord, et par un sh (*ch* français) dans le midi; juste le contraire eut lieu pour la lettre ϑ " (I owe this reference to Michael Streck).

⁵ Published by Sprengling 1932: 53-55, with reading improved by Kaufman *apud* Tadmor 1982: 462 n. 23. The seal is no. 123 in Vattioni 1971: 61, who includes parallels for the Aramaic words.

⁶ Lidzbarski 1921 (translation on his pp. 14-15).

⁷ Unlike Millard, I do not suppose that the change from *k* to *g* was motivated by contact with *r*.

⁸ A referee points out to me that earlier Assyrian would have formed the D preterite of *kānu* as *uka'ʾin* rather than *ukīn*. Neo-Assyrian letters include at least two instances of *ukīn* (SAA X 341:11, XIII 134:10), but admittedly they occur in connection with the cult of Marduk, and so are not above suspicions of Babylonian influence. Spellings of Sargon's name with *-ū-kin* in colophons of the Assyrian scholar Nabū-zuqup-kēnu (see Hunger 1968: no. 297) could likewise belong together with the same scholar's colophons' Babylonian sign forms and dating system, identified by May 2018: 120 and 163 n. 136, so they too are not probative for the 'pure Assyrian' form of the name. That said, Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 97 reports that the D infinitive of middle-weak verbs in Neo-Assyrian was moving towards the type *kullu* (as opposed to Middle Assyrian *ka'ʾulu*), which would cohere with preterite *ukīn*. I leave it open whether the form *šarru-ukīn* can be regarded as straightforwardly Neo-Assyrian, or must be regarded as Babylonian in the first instance. In the latter scenario, pronunciations /sargīn/ etc. would reflect how Assyrians pronounced a Babylonian name.

⁹ **Eagle**: Unger 1938: 252, Frankfort 1933: 97, Thomas 2020: 53. **Raven**: Unger 1957b: 33; also Morenz 2003b: 205 n. 52. **Crow**: Olmstead 1923: Fig. 120, after his p. 284 (but cf. his p. 280: "eagles"). **Hawk**: Reade 1979a: 45. Contenau 1931: 1241 was more cautious: "un oiseau du genre rapace". Sim: Fügert and Gries 2020: 6: "a bird of prey". A large part of the reason for modern viewers seeing an eagle in the bird may be the colour gold (often seen today in representations of eagles), but, as the other figures show, this is not to be taken literally and so is not probative.

¹⁰ Watanabe 2002: 123 identifies it more generally as a "tree with fruits".

¹¹ Handcock 1912: 280 took the spear-holding man as a second depiction of the king.

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- ¹² Loud 1936: 93: “There are only a few spots where the fading and flaking of the glaze have not removed all but the faintest suggestion of the original appearance”.
- ¹³ Cf. Nunn 1988: 179 on the colours of images in the main Khorsabad palace: “Die Farben waren etwas ungewöhnlich, wenn man E. Flandins Zeichnungen glauben schenken kann”.
- ¹⁴ Guralnick 2002: 39-40 makes this point for Émile Botta, who first brought Flandin to Khorsabad.
- ¹⁵ Loud 1936: 93 “The baked brick facing, consisting of alternate courses, fifteen in all (though Place shows only twelve) ...”.
- ¹⁶ Loud and Altman 1938: 41b: “Outlined in black, the figures stood out upon an ultramarine blue background. They were of chrome yellow with deep ochre flesh and black hair and bears” (sim. his p. 59a).
- ¹⁷ This is reported by Nunn 1988: 180 (I have been unable to verify the reference to Place).
- ¹⁸ A similar point was made by Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 289-290: “The appearance of the astroglyphs on Sargon’s glazed brick inscriptions – yellow against a dark blue background – is reminiscent of stars in the night sky”.
- ¹⁹ Gadd 1948: 93: “the bull and plough are shared with the Black Stone, which also has trees, though of other kinds”.
- ²⁰ I owe this astute observation to Giuliana Parodi.
- ²¹ E.g. Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 267 n. 10: “We prefer to treat the side panels separately from the signs on the façades”; Frahm 2005: 50: “Leaving the two figures of the king and the crown prince(?) [..., MW] out of consideration”.
- ²² That said, the fact that the figures add up to a total of seven is no doubt significant, not only because of that number’s magical significance in general, but also specifically in light of the fact that (as Gina Konstantopoulos reminds me) Khorsabad included a temple to the Sibitti (the deified ‘Seven’).
- ²³ Miglus 1994: 187: “Die Einheit des Frontbildes betonen dort sowohl die Ausrichtung der Figuren als auch die Umrahmung mit einem Rosettenband”. The same point is made by Morenz 2003a: 21: “Außerdem sind beide [Männerdarstellungen, MW] durch eine Ornamentlinie von den fünf anderen Zeichen getrennt” and Morenz 2003b: 207.
- ²⁴ Loud and Altman 1938: 42a and Nunn 1988: 176: ∩-shapes in the lower part, and in the upper part rosettes sitting inside a circle, enclosed between parallel lines.
- ²⁵ For the king-like figure, it may be relevant that, according to the ‘star’-list *Mul.Apin*, ‘The star which stands in the breast of the Lion’ is ‘the King’ (I i.9) Horowitz and Watson 2011: 64. As noted by Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 280, with reference to Hunger and Pingree 1989: 273, this is because “the king’s star (^{mul}lugal) corresponds to the star Regulus and is part of the Mesopotamian lion constellation”. This coheres with the king-like image standing before the image of the lion. The human who follows the figures recalls the (probably apotropaic) ‘spearholder’ figurines found at Neo-Assyrian Nimrud (see e.g. Oates 1963: 10, and Green 1983: 96, plus the colour photo at <https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/P417474>). The figurines keep the spear close to the body, while the man in Sargon’s picture does not, but this could simply be because figurines with a thin, long, outstretched spear would have been liable to break. The spear-bearer bringing up the rear might, then, have been there to protect the group as a whole.
- ²⁶ Though this was noted as a theoretical possibility by Morenz 2003b: 203: “Immerhin mochte der Bezug auf konkrete Sternbilder bei der Wahl der Einzelzeichen tatsächlich eine Rolle gespielt haben”.
- ²⁷ Opinions on what it corresponded to in terms of modern astronomy vary slightly: “Triangulum Boreale with γ Andromedae” (Reiner and Pingree 1981: 10), “Dreieck aus $41\chi\beta\gamma$ Andromedae” (‘triangle comprising $41\chi\beta\gamma$ Andromedae’, Koch 1989:109), “ α , β Trianguli and γ Andromedae” (Hunger and Pingree 1999: 275), “Triangulum and part of Andromeda” (Horowitz 2014: 245b). Gennadiy Kurtik leaves the matter open: “созвездие в пределах Северного Треугольника и Андромеды (Triangulum Boreale + Andromeda), по другой версии, только Андромеды (Andromeda)” (‘constellation within Triangulum Boreale and Andromeda, [or, MW] according to another version, only Andromeda’; Kurtik 2007: 66-67).
- ²⁸ In addition to the obvious similarity of the two sounds, cf. sporadic interchanges between them, such as Middle Assyrian *kām-šu-tu* for *kamsu* ‘kneeling’ (*AHw* [1963] 433a, *CAD K* [1971] 126b), plus *kapāšu/kabāsu* ‘to bend back’ (*AHw* [1963] 443, *CAD K* 181-182), *rasānu/rašānu* ‘to soak’ (*AHw* [1972] 959a, *CAD R* [1999] 180b-182a), etc.
- ²⁹ Hunger and Steele 2018: 169-170, also observing that “the Bull of Heaven and the Jaw of the Bull seem to be used interchangeably in [various, MW] sections of MUL.APIN” (p. 169).
- ³⁰ Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 275 point out that as a symbol it was “so powerful that it occupied the central positions in the throne room of the Assyrian king in Kalhu and protected the corners of many rooms of the palaces”.
- ³¹ The same scheme of yellow on blue seems to have been used on glazed bricks decorating “die Brücke zwischen dem Nabû-Tempel und der Umfassungsmauer des Palastes” (Nunn 1988: 180, with ref. to illustrations in Place 1867b: pl. 9-17).
- ³² Reade 1979a: 18, remarking further that “Layard notes green and yellow at Dur-Sharrukin, but these seem to be excluded by Botta’s comments”.
- ³³ The colophon is edited in Hunger and Pingree 1989: 123.

- ³⁴ Seidl 1968: 163-164 reports that, on Kudurrus, Zababa is symbolized by an “Adlerstab”. See also Sallaberger 2017: 168a, section “Symboltier Adler”.
- ³⁵ Thus the suggestion of Nigro 1998: 93: “In fact, Ilaba was identified with Zababa, the patron deity of Kish, when Sargon assumed the kingship of his home town”. As pointed out by Sallaberger 2017: 167b, the two deities share the (from Sargonic times onwards) unusual sign-value **ba** in the writing of their names.
- ³⁶ Smith 1872: 47: “the Assyrian king Sargon, who named himself after the earlier monarch”.
- ³⁷ The fullest case to this effect remains that of Olmstead 1908: 25-29. Pursuing this matter exceeds the scope of the present paper.
- ³⁸ Cf. Finkel and Reade 1996: 263: ‘Sargon’ “was indeed the name of an Old Assyrian king, as Sargon II or his advisers will have known from king-lists, but it is by no means clear how well they distinguished between that Sargon I of Assyria and the far more celebrated Sargon of Agade.”
- ³⁹ After Hunger and Pingree 1989: 18.
- ⁴⁰ Schwartz 2021: 255-266. (I owe this reference to Mark Weeden).
- ⁴¹ Cf. Weinberg 1975: 457-459 and Millard 1991: 107 and 109, the latter with a spelling of ‘man’ as *yš* on an ostrakon from Arad, c. 700 BC, and a spelling of *šibat* ‘old’ as *šybt* in the Sefire treaties.
- ⁴² I owe this observation to an anonymous referee.
- ⁴³ Niederreiter 2008a: 64-65. I am less persuaded by Niederreiter’s explanation of the dromedary, which seems to me overly complex. One could surmise that the dromedary (Bab/Ass *ibilu*) was chosen for its sound, resembling *ibru* ‘friend’ or even Sumerian **ibila** ‘heir’.
- ⁴⁴ See already several references to “fertility” in Van Buren 1937: 1-28. Also Parker 1955: 111-112 and Galter 2007: 652-653.
- ⁴⁵ Only one name, Atalia/Atalya, is known for a consort of Sargon, and it is of unclear derivation and meaning (Radner 1999: 433). Zadok 2008: 329 thinks that “an Arabian derivation” is “likely”.
- ⁴⁶ Cf. refs in Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 279 and Galter 2007: 647. See also Watanabe 2021: 113-124.
- ⁴⁷ See e.g. Watanabe 2002: 54-55 on the Assyrian royal seal. Other animals linked on seals to Assyrian kings include stags and stallions. Herbordt 1997: 283 suggests they symbolised the king’s virility.
- ⁴⁸ Viewed as such by Niederreiter 2008b: 91.
- ⁴⁹ An interpretation close to this was suggested by Watanabe 2002: 56: “It is noteworthy that the figure of a lion is engraved before the name of Sargon II on vessels of stone and glass, where the animal may also represent the royal title”. (Appositions in Babylonian and Assyrian normally follow names, though it is unclear whether one should also expect the rule to be followed in the case of complex games such as this one). Cf. Finkel and Reade 1996: 49, interpreting the lion among the mystery symbols as “standing for” *šarru* ‘king’.
- ⁵⁰ Watanabe 2002: 46 notes that “Though the lion is never described as the ‘king’ in Mesopotamian texts, the ‘king’ is frequently described in terms of the lion”. Compare also the gloss in ^{pi-ti-i-g}pirig = *šar-rum* (TCS IV p. 228, 552; cf. George 1992: 260) and the *Šumma Izbu* omen *šumma sinništu ūlid-ma qaqquad nēši šakin šarru dannu ina māti ibašši* ‘If a woman gives birth and it has the head of a lion, a mighty king will arise in the land’ (De Zorzi 2014: 393), where ‘lion’ symbolises ‘king’.
- ⁵¹ Seux 1967: 297, citing TCL III and ADD 809, recto, 5, points out that Sargon is the only Sargonid king to assign himself the epithet *šarru kīnu* ‘true king’, and that he is also given this epithet by several letter-writers. (A letter to Esarhaddon, SAA XVI 3, uses it too: [*ana lug*]al *dan-nu u ki-i-nu bēliya likrubū* “May (the gods) bless the strong and righteous [kin]g, my lord”).
- ⁵² 1882-5-22, 1795 = Reade no. 83; 1882-5-22, 606a = Reade no. 66; 1885-12-5, 15 = Reade no. 379; 1885-12-5, 6 = Reade no. 383. The few *lions passant* with no (preserved) cuneiform, such as Reade’s no. 66, are not discussed here.
- ⁵³ Cf. their comment on the lions in the Processional Way at Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon: “The observer would [..., MW] be free to decide whether the message referred to the human king or to Marduk the divine king of Babylon” (p. 282).
- ⁵⁴ Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 291-292.
- ⁵⁵ See e.g. also the description of Contenau 1931: 1241: “un lion rugissant dans l’attitude de la marche” (a roaring lion in the attitude of walking).
- ⁵⁶ See discussion in Zgoll 2020: 136-137.
- ⁵⁷ The evidence is too complex to treat here in detail. See the observation by Frahm 2005: 50 n. 29 on “Sargon’s almost obsessive interest in his own name” and the summary comment by Elayi 2017: 14: “Sargon II seemed to enjoy playing with his name’s meaning”.
- ⁵⁸ E.g. Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 279 n. 40 note the possibility that impressions of a “large (5.8 by 7.4 cm) stamp seal from Nineveh (Curtis/Reade 1995, 189, Herbordt 1992, 136 pl. 19) [which, MW] show a human head, a lion with a hand between its back legs and a smaller lion above its back” constitute a further example of astroglyphs, in the same tradition as the inscriptions of Sargon and Esarhaddon. On their pp. 280-282 they also suggest an astroglyphic interpretation for “the bulls and mušḫussu-dragons on the Ištar Gate and the lions on the Processional Way” at Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. See also their n. 75, p. 291.

⁵⁹ Loud and Altman 1938: 66: “Upon the wall of the vestibule was clearly recognizable the stylized fig tree (Pl. 32 A) so familiar from the temple tableaux, while on the wall of the stairway was an ascending array of the tableau fig tree and bird along with other designs too fragmentary for identification”. The (b/w) photo in their Plate 32A is not very clear, but the trunk and left side of the fig tree can plausibly be made out.

⁶⁰ See e.g Finkel and Reade 1996: 247-248 and 251-253 and Curtis 2008: 79-80.

⁶¹ Indeed, at least parts of the Plow constellation were visible in the sky year-round (Koch 1989: 107-108).

⁶² Admittedly, the ‘number riddle’ *is* mentioned in inscriptions, but only in those which were buried (such as cylinders), not those visible in the palace. This is presumably because Sargon wanted future rulers, who renovated Khorsabad, to be aware of the significance of its perimeter. The symbols would not have warranted equivalent mention, as they would have been likelier to be lost and so unavailable to restorers to see.

⁶³ This study of Sargon’s Starry Symbols is dedicated to Stan, who scintillates.