

An Assyrian Camelot

Visualising the literary world of Aššur-bāni-apli's court

Alexander Johannes Edmonds (University of Münster)

1. The reign of Aššur-bāni-apli, a curious literary golden age

There is an art to kingship.¹ This is expressed in the relative adeptness of a particular monarch's self-presentation, the grace and imperiousness of their bearing, and capacity to maintain the "political illusion" (Ellul 1965), but also in the artistic production (architectural, artifactual, theatrical, musical, textual) of his or her reign, the *part maudite* (Bataille 1949) of which only a ruler or sizeable institution could dispose in the premodern world, but the trappings of which nonetheless sundry society aped. It is all the more frustrating that Assyria's long historical trajectory only seldom offers evidence sufficient to examine historically its artistic production akin to Pound's (1952, 7–8) charming riverine simile:

"Art or an art is not unlike a river, in that it is perturbed at times by the quality of the river bed, but is in a way independent of that bed. The colour of the water depends upon the substance of the bed and banks immediate and preceding. Stationary objects are reflected, but the quality of motion is of the river. The scientist is concerned with all these things, the artist with that which flows."

A splendid exception, the reign of Aššur-bāni-apli (669–631 BC) permits just such a meaningful plumbing of waters.² Not only does a surfeit of literature survive from his rule both in contemporary and later textual witnesses, but much of it alludes to events within his own reign, and involves not only his historically attested adversaries, but remarkably even his family and what must be personal acquaintances (Edmonds 2025a; 2025b, 95–100), and in dramatic, humorous, or even bizarre settings to wit—these can only have been royal commissions. As such these provide new biographical glimpses into the personal life of one of the most enigmatic Assyrian kings, and a court about him as colourful as any Camelot. Their effective visualisation necessitates a novel technical approach.

¹ This study adopts the present author's (Edmonds, 2025c: xiii–xiv) conventions for numbering Assyrian kings, normalising names, and abbreviation (after the *RIA*). Reigns are given from enthronement, rather than first regnal year, and all dates are BC. This article was written within the framework of the project "Governance in Babylon – Negotiating the Rule of Three Empires" (2021–2026, University of Münster) funded by the European Research Council within the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement no. 101001619) under principal investigator Kristin Kleber.

² For his reign, see Novotny, Jeffers 2018, 1–36; Frahm 2023, 273–300; Jeffers, Novotny 2023, 1–26; Novotny, Jeffers, Frame 2023, 1–46; Elayi 2026; Fuchs, Edmonds in press.