

# Some reflections on a hymn to the city of Arbela

Mattias Karlsson

## Introduction

This paper will focus on a text (LKA 32<sup>1</sup> / SAA III 8) which has been preserved from the state archives of Assyria and the seventh century BCE, and which is commonly referred to as the “Hymn to the City of Arbela”. The tablet (K 173/4b) on which the text was written was actually found in Huzirina (modern Sultantepe), i.e. in the Assyrian-controlled Balih-region. The text consists of 58 preserved lines, with 33 on the obverse and 25 on the reverse of the tablet. The tablet is partly damaged, and since it has been lost, unclear readings must be evaluated based on the preserved excavation photograph (Ass. Ph. 6553). The beginning, i.e. the best preserved part, contains praises of the city, its temples and goddesses. The following part of the text seemingly centres on the cult of the patron deity Ishtar of Arbela and on the celebrations in connection with this. As suggested by Livingstone (1989: xxv), who edited the text in SAA III,<sup>2</sup> the literary genre which this text forms a part of may be understood as an especially Assyrian variant of the literary genres of “hymn to a deity/temple” which are amply attested from southern Mesopotamia. According to Livingstone (1989: xxvi), the hymns to Assyrian cities have as their main points: “the appointment and genealogical position of Assurbanipal in relation to Aššur or the Ištar, the prosperity of Assyria and its cities, the contentedness of the citizens, and the need to educate mankind in the praise of the gods of Assyria”. Assyrian “hymns” praising the cities of Assur (SAA III 10), Nineveh (SAA III 7), and Uruk (SAA III 9) have also been preserved.

The aim of this paper is to transcribe, translate, and make some notes on the hymn to the city of Arbela. In my paper, I will firstly provide a transcription and translation of the relevant hymn. The transcription may be seen as complementing the text’s edition in SAA III. Secondly, in a following comment section, I will focus on the ideological content of the hymn and, in all modesty, make some notes on various idea patterns which I believe can be identified.

## Transcription and translation

Below is a transcription and translation of the hymn presented. These are based on the publication in SAA III 8. I have on the whole followed Livingstone’s translation, but in the not-so-few cases of divergences I have indicated these by and in footnotes. I have retained Livingstone’s structuring of the text, i.e. with regards to sentence dividing and the like. As for dialect, in light of the generally Neo-Assyrian character of this text (Livingstone 1989: xxi), Assyrianisms have been preferred in cases where both Assyrian and Babylonian forms are possible. In line with SAA-procedures, three dots within brackets signify a short textual break, while five dots indicate a longer one. Only words which need to be reconstructed in full have been placed within brackets.

1 <i>Arba’il Arba’il</i>	Arbela, O Arbela,
2 <i>šamê ša lā šanāni Arba’il</i>	Heaven without equal, Arbela!
3 <i>āl niġūti Arba’il</i>	City of merry-making, Arbela,
4 <i>āl isinnāti Arba’il</i>	City of festivals, Arbela!

<sup>1</sup> LKA = Ebeling 1953.

<sup>2</sup> The hymn was first edited in Ebeling 1952-53.

5	<i>āl bēt ḥidāte Arba'il</i>	City of the temple of jubilation, Arbela!
6	<i>eyyak Arba'il aštammu šīru</i>	Shrine of Arbela, lofty brothel <sup>3</sup> ,
7	<i>ēkurru šundulu parak šīḥāti</i>	extensive <sup>4</sup> temple, sanctuary of love plays <sup>5</sup> !
8	<i>bāb Arba'il šaqū māḥāzu</i>	Gate of Arbela, the elevated <sup>6</sup> cult centre <sup>7</sup> !
9	<i>āl tamšīlāti Arba'il</i>	City of likenesses, Arbela!
10	<i>mūšab ḥidāti Arba'il</i>	Abode of jubilation, Arbela!
11	<i>Arba'il bēt tēme u milki</i>	Arbela, temple of reason and counsel!
12	<i>rikis mātāte Arba'il</i>	Bond of all lands <sup>8</sup> , Arbela!
13	<i>mukīn paršē rūqūti Arba'il</i>	Establisher of profound rites, Arbela!
14	<i>kī šamē šaqī Arba'il</i>	Arbela is as elevated as heaven.
15	<i>išdāšu kunnā kī šamāmi</i>	Its foundations are as firm as the heavens.
16	<i>ša Arba'il šaqā rēšēšu išanannan [...]</i>	The peaks <sup>9</sup> of Arbela are elevated, it competes with <sup>10</sup> [...].
17	<i>tamšīlšu Bābili šinnassu Aššur</i>	Its likeness is Babylon, its rival <sup>11</sup> is Assur.
18	<i>māḥāzu šīru parak šīmāte abul šamē</i>	O lofty cult centre, sanctuary of the fates, gate of heaven!
19	<i>ana libbīšu errabū maddanāt [mātāti]</i>	Tribute from [all lands] enters into it.
20	<i>Ištār ina libbi ušbat Nanaya mar'at Sīn [...]</i>	Ishtar dwells there, Nanaya, the [...] daughter of Sin,
21	<i>Irnina ašaretti ilāni ištārtu bukurtu [...]</i>	Irnina, the foremost of the deities <sup>12</sup> , the goddess, and the daughter of [...]. <sup>13</sup>
22	<i>āl anni ālu ša (anni) ša Nanaya šubtu annītu</i>	City of consent, city of ditto of Nanaya, this dwelling <sup>14</sup> !
23	<i>[...] Arba'il ina kal [...]</i>	[...] Arbela in all [...]!
24	<i>[ina mātāti] kalīšina [...] ul imaššal [...]</i>	[Among] all [lands] [...] does not rival [...]
25	<i>[...] bēt ḥidāti</i>	[...] temple of jubilation.
26	<i>[...] ullalūma? ana [...]</i>	[...] purify and [...]
27	<i>[.....] Egašankalamma [.....]</i>	[.....] Egashankalamma [.....]
28	<i>[.....] u? [...] kī [.....]</i>	[.....] and [...] like [.....]
29	<i>[.....]</i>	[.....]
30	<i>[.....]</i>	[.....]
31	<i>[.....] šaqū [.....]</i>	[.....] elevated [.....]
32	<i>[.....] bētu? u ālu? āl? [...]</i>	[.....] temple and city, city of [...]
33	<i>[.....] mēlula [.....]</i>	[.....] cultic <sup>15</sup> play [.....]
1'	<i>[.....] [kīma] [.....]</i>	[.....] [like] [.....]
2'	<i>mātāti kalīšina iriššā [.....]</i>	All lands rejoice [.....]
3'	<i>ālikūti ša Arba'il u iribūtīšu</i>	Those who leave Arbela and those who enter it

<sup>3</sup> Livingstone translates “hostel” but in light of this goddess’ link to sexuality and temple prostitution (Bahrani 2001), “brothel” seems more appropriate in this context.

<sup>4</sup> The word “extensive” may capture the aspect of the size of the temple better than “broad” does.

<sup>5</sup> In line with the reasoning in note 2, the word “love plays” suits better than “delights”.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, I consistently translate *šaqū* as “elevated” and *šīru* as “lofty”.

<sup>7</sup> I prefer the translation “cult centre” instead of “holy town”, the latter falsely implying an adjective.

<sup>8</sup> I consistently translate *mātāte* as “all lands”, thus clearly rendering the idea of the whole world.

<sup>9</sup> The translation “peaks” seems less figurative than “pinnacles”. It is unclear whether the term here refers to the elevations of the city wall (i.e. the crenellations) and/or to those of the Ishtar temple (i.e. the gates).

<sup>10</sup> The wording “compete with” seems to be the standard translation of *šanānu* Gtn.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase *šinnassu* is nominal and does not carry a finite verb, as Livingstone’s translation imply.

<sup>12</sup> I prefer the less gender-biased word “deities” in place of “gods”.

<sup>13</sup> Livingstone tries to make *bukurtu* into an adjective, but the relevant word is clearly a noun.

<sup>14</sup> Out of consistency, I use the wording “dwell(ing)” in all attestations of *wašābu*.

<sup>15</sup> I have added “cultic” to the word “play” to emphasize the clearly ritual connotation of this word.

4' <i>ḥadiū iriššū u</i> [.....]	are glad, they rejoice and [.....].
5' <i>bēltu ina muḥḥi urmāḥi ušbat ina muḥḥi</i> [...]	The Lady is seated on a lion, on a [...];
6' <i>urmāḥāni dannūti šapalša kansū</i>	strong <sup>16</sup> lions crouch beneath her.
7' <i>šarrānī māti pāniša</i> [katmū]	The kings of the land <sup>17</sup> are [overwhelmed] before her,
8' [...] <i>ša etallūt umāmē</i> [...]	[...] domination over beasts [...].
9' <i>kal niqē ina tūb libbi</i> [...]	All kinds of sacrifices [...] in a good state <sup>18</sup> ,
10' <i>kal maṣḥāti ina tūb libbi</i> [...]	all kinds of offering flour [...] in a good state.
11' [šumu] [...] [kisal] [...] <i>nabē Arba'il nadi</i> [...]	[name] [...] [courtyard] [...] of called <sup>19</sup> Arbela is put in place [...].
12' <i>arim pigū ša</i> [.....]	The <i>pigū</i> instrument of [.....] is tuned <sup>20</sup> !
13' <i>arim pilaggī ša</i> [.....]	The lyre of the [.....] <sup>21</sup> is tuned!
14' <i>arim</i> [.....] <i>ša kurgarrī</i>	The [.....] of the <i>kurgarrū</i> is tuned to? [...]
15' <i>arim ana?</i> [...] <i>inḥī ša kulmašāti</i>	the laments <sup>22</sup> of the <i>kulmašitu</i> <sup>23</sup> .
16' <i>arim dubdubbī</i> [...] <i>ša lilissāti</i>	The <i>dubdubbu</i> is tuned, the [...] of the kettledrums!
17' <i>ḥadi libbu</i> [...] <i>šapal</i> [...]	The heart is glad [...] under the [...].
18' <i>Arba'il rīšā</i> [...] <i>nišē iriššū</i>	Arbela are rejoicing, <sup>24</sup> the people rejoice [...]!
19' <i>bēltu rīšat</i> [.....]	The lady is rejoicing [.....];
20' <i>iriššā? bēt</i> [ <i>ḥadūti</i> ] [...]	the house <sup>25</sup> of [jubilation] <sup>26</sup> [...] rejoice!
21' <i>ēkurru kuzbu za'un?</i> [.....]	The temple is bedecked <sup>27</sup> with allure <sup>28</sup> [.....],
22' <i>bēltu ša bētu ša Arba'il irišša? libbaša</i> [...]	the Lady of the House of Arbela rejoices, her heart [...].
23' <i>ina nigūtīša urrukū</i> [...]	By her merry-making, are lengthened the [...]
24' <i>ša</i> [...] <i>kī</i> [...] <i>Arba'il</i> [.....]	of [...] like [...] Arbela [.....].
25' [.....] <i>ālki libēl kī</i> [...]	[.....] your city, may it rule like [...]!

## Comments

A first point to focus on is the intertwining of city and temple which is expressed in the hymn. In the descriptions of Arbela as “the city of merry-making/festivals/temple of jubilation” (3-5), the city and the temple are closely connected. The same is also true for the descriptions of the temple as “the shrine/gate of Arbela” (6, 8), and of Arbela as “the elevated cult centre” (8), “abode of jubilation” (10), “temple (!) of reason and counsel” (11), and “establisher of profound rites” (13). It is thus clear that the city and the temple were one and the same. This of course is in line with the traditional Mesopotamian notion of city-states dominated by their own omnipotent tutelary deity.

<sup>16</sup> It makes more sense to perceive lions as “strong” rather than as “mighty”. Also, the former is not figurative.

<sup>17</sup> KUR is clearly written in the singular, not necessarily implying a scribal error. The word *mātu* would then signify the land under the Assyrian king’s direct control.

<sup>18</sup> This translation of the adverbial phrase *ina tūb libbi* seems less figurative than “in elation”.

<sup>19</sup> Livingstone here translates “bright”, but the likely combination of MU and *nabū* indicates “being called”.

<sup>20</sup> The verb *arāmu* rather talks of “to cover”, but I must admit that Livingstone’s translation “tuned” fits well.

<sup>21</sup> Livingstone presumes the word *assinnu*, supposedly from attestations in parallel texts.

<sup>22</sup> Literally, “sighs”. The translation “song” fails to express the lamenting aspect of this group’s performance.

<sup>23</sup> An understanding of the *kulmašitu* as cultic prostitutes would fit well with the reasoning in notes 2 and 4.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast, I distinguish stative and present tense-forms in my translations of the forms with *riāšu*.

<sup>25</sup> To differentiate the two words, I have consistently translated *bētu* as “house” and *ēkurru* as “temple”.

<sup>26</sup> In light of the preceding word and the preserved first syllable, it seems plausible to reconstruct *ḥadūti* here.

<sup>27</sup> The word “bedecked” arguably conveys the aura dimension of *kuzbu* (see note 27) better than “adorned”, the latter description implying *kuzbu* as an architectural feature, i.e. a notion probably right off the mark.

<sup>28</sup> The word “allure” may express the clearly sexual aspect of *kuzbu* better than “attractiveness” (Winter 1996). It seems to me that Livingstone has consistently avoided any connotations to sexuality in his translation.

Another striking ideological feature of this text is that Arbela (and the temple) is described as an actual subject, as an animated entity, acting in its own right. Some of the city/temple epithets given above incorporate this dimension, such as “establisher of profound rites” and “temple of reason and counsel”. Moreover, “Arbela” is said “to rejoice” (18’), and in the last line of the hymn, “the city” is asked “to rule” (25’). The fusion of the city and its main temple noted above thus carries with it a notion of an actual subject who can think, feel, act, and so on.

A third aspect that I would like to raise is the status of Arbela, both on an earthly and on a cosmic level, which emerges from this text. As for the former level, it is e.g. said that “Its likeness is Babylon, its rival is Assur.” (17). Putting Arbela on the same level as these two powerful cities is of course very telling. It is also stated that “Tribute from all lands enters into it.” (19), perhaps as a reflection of Arbela being the destination for booty from eastern campaigns. Nevertheless, also this statement tells of the high earthly status of Arbela. As for the cosmic level, the city in question is “heaven without equal” (2), “bond of all lands” (12), the city is “as elevated as heaven” (14), and “its foundations are as firm as the heavens” (15). The Ishtar of Arbela temple is furthermore “sanctuary of the fates” (18), and “gate of heaven” (18). The city with its temple is clearly imagined as a crucial urban centre, both in an earthly and in a cosmic sphere.

Fourthly, another interesting pattern which is conveyed by this text is the predominance of goddesses, and not of gods. The focus on the tutelary deity Ishtar of Arbela is of course highly natural, but further goddesses (and no god) are praised in the hymn, namely Nanaya (20, 22) and Irnina (21). We are left to speculate on the reasons for this preference. Perhaps it was considered appropriate to highlight goddesses only, when addressing the cult of another goddess. Nanaya and Irnina are both described as the daughters of male (at least in Nanaya’s case) deities (20-21).

Another aspect to mention is the comparative status of Ishtar of Arbela. Arbela is described as “your (i.e. Ishtar of Arbela’s) city” (25’), and the same city is, as already stated, described as the equal to Babylon and Assur (17). Consequently, Ishtar of Arbela is perceived of as a very powerful deity of the Assyrian pantheon. The idea of tribute coming to Arbela (or rather to its main temple) from all lands (19), emphasizes this goddess’ status further. It is also narrated that “The kings of the land are [overwhelmed] before her, [she holds]<sup>29</sup> domination over beasts.” (7’-8’). As for beasts, Ishtar is characteristically also described as in charge of “(strong) lions” (5’-6’). Naturally so, Ishtar of Arbela is much elevated in this hymn to her city.

Two final comments on this hymn deal with the text’s emphasis on merry-making and sexuality. As for the former, Arbela is “the city of merry-making/festivals” (3-4), and it is “the abode of jubilation” (10). All kinds of agents are “glad” and “rejoicing” in connection with the cult of Ishtar of Arbela (2’-3’, 17’-22’). In one passage, various groups of people, such as the *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, and the *kulmašitu*, are described as accompanying the related merry-making by singing and playing instruments (12’-16’). Merry-making is thus much stressed in the hymn.

As for sexuality, this aspect is well known as a vital part of the Ishtar-cult (Bahrani 2001, Bottéro 2001). In this text, my translations “lofty brothel” (6) and “sanctuary of love plays” (7) as well as the bedecking of the temple with “allure” (21’) tell of this aspect.<sup>30</sup> The androgynuous nature of the musicians, the *assinnu* and *kurgarrû*, as well as the alleged promiscuous character of the

---

<sup>29</sup> Livingstone’s reconstruction here seems to be extrapolated and not based on the appearances of signs.

<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, the reasoning here is somewhat circular, because these translations have been made in light of the “established truth” of Ishtar as a deity of sexuality.

singers, the *kulmašitu*, serves to further emphasize the notion of sexuality (Bahrani 2001). Sexuality was vital in the cult of the goddess of Ishtar of Arbela.

## Concluding remarks

In this modest contribution to the discussion on the hymn to the city of Arbela, I have introduced, transcribed, translated, and commented the text in question. Contentwise, I have noted that the city and its main temple are intertwined, that the fusion city/temple emerges as an animated entity, and that the status of Arbela is pictured as high, both on earthly and cosmic levels. The hymn stresses the cult of goddesses, and the status of Ishtar of Arbela within the Assyrian pantheon is imagined as considerable. The cult of the goddess in question focus much on “merry-making” and sexuality.

## Abbreviations and references

Ass. Ph. = prefix of excavation photos from the German excavations at Assur.

K = Kuyunjik collection of the British Museum, London.

LKA = *Literarische Keilschrifttexte aus Assur* (see below).

SAA = State Archives of Assyria.

Bahrani 2001 = Z. Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001.

Bottéro 2001 = J. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2001.

Ebeling 1952-53 = E. Ebeling, in *Jahrbuch für Kleinasiatische Forschung* 2 (1952-53), pp. 274ff.

Ebeling 1953 = E. Ebeling, *Literarische Keilschrifttexte aus Assur*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1953.

Livingstone 1989 = A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA III), Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989.

Winter 1996 = I. Winter, “Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: the Alluring Body of Naram-Sin of Agade”, in N.B. Kampen (ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy* (Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 11-26.