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Texts in Movement
The Networks of Near Eastern Royal Narratives

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Abstract This article examines royal narratives as part of broader literary, political, and cultural networks of the ancient Near East, through a comparative study of the Middle Bronze Age Epic of Zimrī-Lîm and the Late Bronze Age Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta. It presents an exploratory comparison of the two narratives in order to test the heuristic value of an approach inspired by the Actor-Network Theory. By situating the narratives within the Near Eastern cultural milieu from which they emerged and tracing the social contexts in which they circulated, it reveals the contrasting trajectories of the two texts: one likely only short-lived, tied to the immediate political setting of its hero; the other preserved and transmitted in later scholarly traditions. Through this comparison, the article asks how such texts participated in the co-creation of social realities within which they operated.

Keywords Royal narratives. Royal ideology. Scribal education and tradition. Epic of Zimrī-Lîm. Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta. Actor-Network theory.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Archaeology of the Texts. – 3 Constructing Royal Discourse. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The topic of royal ideology and propaganda in the ancient Near East is broad. Throughout the millennia and vast region,[1] the kings and their courts produced many objects to promote themselves. Palaces could have been filled with statues or reliefs depicting the royal figures performing heroic deeds, participating in rituals, or boasting of their wealth. Public spaces could have been occupied by stelae, sometimes bearing royal inscriptions. Scribes in schools were educated by copying royal inscriptions, hymns, and narratives. When reconstructing temples and palaces, the foundations often yielded royal inscriptions of the past kings, addressing their successors. Through visual, textual, and oral media, the kings communicated their promotion to varied audiences from farmers to officials to merchants or diplomats.

The aim of this article is to address one of these media, namely royal narratives. More specifically, the article outlines their dynamical networks – in what contexts they were composed, how they were influenced by previous royal narratives and other literary texts, how they circulated over the ancient Near East, and how they might have shaped the social realities, especially the political discourses.

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1 During the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence tools (namely ChatGPT-5 and Grammarly) were employed in a limited capacity to provide language feedback and to comment on the clarity and coherence of the argumentation. No AI system contributed to the scholarly interpretations, analyses, or conclusions presented here, which remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

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The journal *Kaskal*, whose name also means 'the journey', seems to be almost an eponymous venue to host an article about such a topic.

To address this issue, we will centre our discussion around two historical royal narratives, the Epic of Zimrī-Lîm[2] (furthermore EpZL) extolling the king of the Middle Bronze Age Mari and the Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta[3] (furthermore EpTN), praising the Late Bronze Age Assyrian king. This study is theoretically based on some assumptions of the Actor-Network Theory[4] (ANT), hand in hand with the theory of social construction of reality.[5] Importantly for us, from the ANT perspective, the texts themselves are actors, too. They are set within the network of interconnected actors, and all of them together continuously create the social reality, whether they are human or not. From this perspective, interpreting the sources means tracking the networks by which they are entangled in the complicated web of the "social".

In an ideal case, we would track these networks as closely as possible. Observing the actual situation, for example, someone holding a tablet, interacting with the signs that make sense to them because they, at some other time, were taught their meanings. The meaning of the situation was also shaped by the places where this happened, such as a palace court in contrast to education in *edubba*. Should the words have been read aloud, each of the present people would have understood them slightly differently – an educated scribe, a priest, a soldier, a foreign emissary, a peasant, or the king. The networks in which the tablet was and is entangled are virtually limitless.

Unfortunately, an issue well-known to all of us makes such a detailed approach impossible. The sources at our disposal are extremely limited and discontinuous. There is seldom any immediate context in which we may follow the networks to such detail that the emergence of the social meaning is clear to us. We must follow many indirect networks, sometimes centuries or millennia apart. The broad timespan itself is not necessarily a problem for this approach. After all, we are now also entangled in networks with actors thousands of years old, and they shape our present social realities. The problem, however, is to demonstrate the existence and relevance of the networks for particular historical situations. Therefore, rather than reconstructing the complete and complex networks in a strict Latourian sense, this article uses ANT heuristically to ground the interactions among texts, tablets, archives, scribal training, kings, courts, audiences, etc. I believe this approach may help us focus on some aspects that may otherwise be overlooked or ignored. It also guides us to be cautious when we are reconstructing the meaning in the past. Admittedly, there are great limits to what we can reasonably say.

The two compositions, EpZL and EpTN, were selected as the focus points for illustrating the topic for several reasons. First, they are among the best-preserved royal narratives that could have been used as narrative political discourses during the life of the rulers they praised.

Second, they are set apart from each other by a significant time gap and are, in many ways, distinct. At the same time, they also share many similarities. Because of that, we may try to track their networks in a somewhat more nuanced way and follow transformations of the genre. They also exhibit many features that are shared with other literary texts and are, therefore, ideal for tracking broader literary connections.

Third, they are rather straightforward in their political message. EpZL narrates Zimrī-Lîm's military expeditions north of Mari, praising him for his deeds, demonstrating the divine support he had, as well as highlighting his personal involvement and relation with his army. EpTN focuses on the conflict between Assyria and Babylonia, and it puts a lot of energy into justifying this war by proclaiming the treacherous and impious behaviour of the Babylonian king Kaštiliaš. Both seem to be quite clear in their praise, and it is less likely that they were intended as a political satire or as mock-epics.[6]

2 For *editio princeps* and French translation, see Guichard 2014. Transcription and English translation are available at ORACC `https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/nere/Q009326`; see also Miglio 2017 and Válek 2022.

3 See Machinist 1978 for a composite edition of EpTN with English translation and Jakob 2024, texts nos. 5-10, for an edition of several new fragments and their translation in German.

4 See Latour 2007.

5 See Berger, Luckmann 1966.

6 We may contrast this, e.g., with the Ugaritic narratives about Kirtu and ʾAqhatu, where the scholarly consensus is far from clear, and some argue for satire. See, e.g., Margalit 1999, 206, 208-9 and 1989, 477-82.

e-ISSN 2036-5845

2 Archaeology of the Texts

Following the ANT approach, we should start the discussion with the immediate contexts of the compositions. For us, the starting points are archaeological settings. In both cases, unfortunately, the records are rather fuzzy.

2.1 The Epic of Zimrī-Lîm

EpZL has been preserved only in a single manuscript, a four-column tablet.[7] Its fragments have surely been unearthed in the Great Royal Palace, but further details are not clear. The discovery was probably made during the first years of the archaeological mission at Mari. The most probable locus of the discovery is room 115 of the palace, but there is a possibility of a mix-up with objects from room 108. In any case, it seems more than likely that the tablet ended up at the same place as some royal correspondence, administrative and legal documents, and a few literary texts. However, the findspot was probably not the place where this text was stored when it was used by someone at the palace, and the co-finds are not necessary part of the same original archival context. The collection of texts among which EpZL was discovered was probably a temporary storage created by the Babylonians after the conquest of Mari, serving to sort out texts to be transported to Babylon.[8] Should this interpretation be correct, we may further speculate whether this means EpZL was of no interest to the Babylonian scholars, whether they actually transported another copy of the composition, or whether something prevented them from transporting this particular collection that was ultimately left behind. We will later revisit this form of movements of texts – through military conquests – as it is also relevant to the EpTN, where it is even narrated about. While the immediate archaeological context of EpZL is not detailed in regard to its use in narrative politics, it firmly places it in the timeframe of active rule of Zimrī-Lîm and within the centre of political activities at his city, the Great Royal Palace.

2.2 The Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta

The case of EpTN is even more complicated. This composition has been preserved in more manuscripts, from two sites, and from different periods. None of them can be readily connected directly to the period of the rule of Tukultī-Ninurta. Together, the preserved fragments seem to belong to eight different manuscripts.[9]

Two manuscripts were discovered in the tablet collections ('libraries') of Nineveh, a notoriously mixed-up assemblage where individual findspots are difficult to ascertain. The first manuscript[10] was found in the Kuyunjik mound, in the area between the temples of Ištar and Nabû.[11] This manuscript was discovered together with Neo-Assyrian tablets, but its palaeography is Middle Assyrian.[12] Therefore, we may argue that it could have been archived (there?) for a long time. The second manuscript[13] from Nineveh was also discovered in the Kuyunjik mound and is usually attributed to the Neo-Assyrian collections of Aššurbanipal, and its palaeography is Neo-Assyrian.[14] This clearly indicates that this composition was of interest to the future generations of scholars who copied it.

Six manuscripts of EpTN were discovered in Aššur. The first manuscript[15] probably comes from the

7 A.3152+M.5665+unnumbered fragment; see Guichard 2014 for *editio princeps*. See also Válek 2022, 15-18 and Guichard 2014, 1-4 for more details about the excavation contexts. The current location of EpZL fragments is unknown.

8 See Charpin 1995.

9 An additional manuscript was suggested by Arnaud, who claimed that EpTN found its way to Ugarit, contemporary to the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta (RS.25.435 = Arnaud 2007, no. 36). While this would have been a very interesting piece of evidence to our discussion, I now believe it is clear that this tablet does not belong to EpTN at all; see Válek 2024.

10 BM.121033+BM.98730+BM.98731 = fragments A+B+C in Machinist 1978. These fragments do not join directly; the reasons to consider them one tablet are discussed by Machinist (1978, 9-11).

11 See Reade 1986, 217, who provides a correction to the discussion of Machinist 1978, 9.

12 Machinist 1978, 10.

13 Rm.142+Rm.957 = fragment F in Machinist 1978.

14 See Machinist 1978, 16.

15 VAT.9596+VAT.12960 = fragment D in Machinist 1978 and no. 5 in Jakob 2024.

collection N1 in the Aššur Temple.[16] This is a Neo-Assyrian collection, but just as it was the case with the first manuscript from Nineveh, the palaeography is Middle Assyrian, indicating its long-term archiving. The rest of the Aššur manuscripts[17] lack more precise information about their findspots. All of these manuscripts can also be dated to the Middle Assyrian period based on the palaeography. Unfortunately, due to the lack of an excavation context, we cannot securely state if they were also archived until the Neo-Assyrian period, but it is likely.

In sum, the preserved fragments of EpTN manuscripts clearly indicate a persistent interest in this narrative within the Assyrian scholar communities that has led to its transmission and preservation. In contrast with the EpZL, none of these manuscripts can be readily connected to the life of the hero of the poem, i.e., to the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta. While the Middle Assyrian origin of many tablets makes it possible, they remain archaeologically detached from the contexts of their supposed active use for the politics of this king.

2.3 Literary Networks

Moving further from the excavation contexts of the compositions under discussion, we may now attempt to fit them within further networks of the literary milieu of the ancient Near East. Tracking these networks may allow us to better grasp their emergence as well as their impact on the construction of social realities, especially royal discourses.

The physical form of these epics as cuneiform tablets, as well as their incorporation in scholarly collections, necessarily leads us to connect their emergence with scribal education. Although the authors of the texts remain anonymous to us,[18] those who inscribed them in the clay must have been educated in scribal skills.

Starting with the Middle Bronze Age Mari, we may note that the scribal education in Old Babylonian times was not only a process of learning how to write and read cuneiform signs but also included cultural education. Among other things, the scribes-to-be encountered numerous literary texts, including narratives. By copying these texts, they not only learned to write but also acquired a repertoire of models, including literary tropes, to be reused in their later scribal practice. Hand in hand with this, it formed the worldview of the scribes – indoctrinating them.[19]

The process of scribal education in Mari during the time of Zimrī-Lîm has been discussed only relatively recently.[20] A house in the vicinity of the Great Royal Palace, labelled by the archaeologist *Chantier K*, has been identified as a scribal school. The findings from this structure reveal that the education in Mari during this period was very similar to the Mesopotamian practice. Importantly for us, the finds indicate that scribes of Mari could have encountered the literary corpus of advanced works, such as Sumerian wisdom literature, letters, hymns on the Ur III kings, religious liturgies, narratives such as Lugalbanda and Enmerkar or Lugal-e, or royal inscriptions.[21] These texts served as literary inspiration for the scribes, allowing them to transpose and adapt learned knowledge to praise their own kings.

The scribal education from the Middle Assyrian period is, unfortunately, much less explored and more difficult to reconstruct.[22] Nonetheless, it seems that it was, to some extent, built upon the Babylonian practices, adapting them to fit the local Assyrian needs.[23] Indeed, it appears that the Babylonian literary tradition was valued in the Middle Assyrian period. EpTN itself contains an example of this – when Tukultī-Ninurta conquered Babylon, local texts were collected and transported to Assyria to enrich

16 See Pedersén 1986, 12-28, for the description of N1.

17 VAT.10358 = fragment E in Machinist 1978 and no. 7 in Jakob 2024; VAT.10339+VAT.10343 = no. 6 in Jakob 2024; VAT.10655 = no. 8 in Jakob 2024; VAT.10722+VAT.12178 = no. 9 in Jakob 2024; VAT.10904 = no. 10 in Jakob 2024. To these, we could add another text, VAT.10447 = no. 11 in Jakob 2024, which does not belong to the EpTN composition, but is also a Middle Assyrian narrative about Tukultī-Ninurta.

18 It has been suggested that EpZL was composed by a certain Ašmad, a persona named in the narrative; see, e.g., Wasserman 2015 or Sasson 2015, 33, fn. 7. However, this remains a speculative suggestion.

19 See Delnero 2016 for broader discussion on the construction of scribal identity through education.

20 See extensive discussion of Nicolet 2015a; 2015b.

21 The corpus is extensively described (and some of it edited) in Nicolet 2015b.

22 See, e.g., Postgate 2013, 47-85.

23 See Veldhuis 2012.

e-ISSN 2036-5845

the scholarly collections.[24] Similarly, we have already mentioned that Ḫammurabi, when he conquered Mari, transported documents from there.

Military conquests were only one mode of how the literary works circulated. The ancient Near East was, both in the Old Babylonian and in the Middle Assyrian periods, richly interconnected – by international communications from diplomacy to long-distance trade to movements of all kinds of scholars and professionals.[25] Together with people, texts moved, too. These texts then influenced scholarly practices over a broader area, providing them with inspiration on literary motifs and devices.

Among the texts that travelled, those with royal themes are those that are of special interest to us. We have already mentioned that the *Chantier K* in Mari yielded hymns, epics, or royal inscriptions. In the Old Babylonian period, scribal education was still largely centred on Sumerian, and the corpus of Akkadian texts in the curriculum was very limited.[26] Nevertheless, Akkadian was the language that was used in everyday practices. Akkadian compositions about royalty circulated throughout the Near East, and scholars at Mari were aware of them, too. For example, the Great Royal Palace yielded a copy of The Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn.[27] The same composition was also discovered in Ešnunna,[28] a city that had a significant influence on the scribal traditions of Mari.[29]

The narratives about the kings of Agade were widespread. The Old Assyrian merchants even got them to Anatolia – a poem praising Sargon for his military conquests in Anatolia was discovered in *kārum* Kāneš.[30] Later, in the Late Bronze Age, these compositions resurfaced in Anatolia and, through international communications, reached as far as Egypt.[31] In Anatolia, we may observe the transformation of such works to better fit local traditions. For example, the composition Narām-Sîn and the Enemy Hoards was discovered there not only in Akkadian but also in Hittite edition.[32] The transformation of Mesopotamian literature in Anatolia during the Late Bronze Age is extremely clear in another widespread royal composition, the Epic of Gilgameš, which has been attested there in Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian, sometimes heavily transformed to fit the local geographical and cultural realities.[33] Although the evidence remains very discontinuous, these examples illustrate that royal narratives travelled great distances, spanning over centuries, influencing scribes and scholars who contributed to the creation of royal discourses on their royal courts or in international diplomacy.

In Mesopotamia, the most widespread texts presenting royal discourse are certainly royal inscriptions.[34] Many of them are attested not as *actual* royal inscriptions in situ, e.g., inscribed on stelae or foundation prisms, but as tablet copies used in scribal education. Thus, they had a significant impact on scribal practices and consequently on any ideological production. Importantly for us, the royal narratives resemble royal inscriptions in many ways. Similarly, they resemble chronologies.[35] We may note that numerous royal inscriptions are indeed narrative in form, and some are even longer than EpZL.[36] However, there often seems to be a difference in perspective throughout the royal documents. Chronologies list events by short entries, royal inscriptions usually give a bit more elaborate descriptions of them, and finally, royal narratives focus on one or a few selected episodes and narrate them in greater detail, with repetitive passages, including features like direct speech, etc. This can be illustrated with EpTN. The Assyrian-Babylonian conflict is mentioned in chronologies,[37] elaborated in royal inscriptions,[38] and fully described in the epic. Such a change of perspectives could then possibly be connected with

24 This episode is narrated in manuscript B 2'-11'; see Machinist 1978, 128-9.

25 For the ancient Near East as a broad framework for cultural transmission, exchange, etc., see, e.g., proceedings of the Crossroads conferences (the last one being Mynářová et al. 2024).

26 See Nicolet 2015b, esp. chap. 9 "Littérature sumérienne", where the few Akkadian literary texts are included, despite the title.

27 Westenholz 1997, 231-7 and Charpin 1997.

28 Westenholz 1997, 224.

29 See Charpin 2012; see also Nicolet 2015a, 338-40 for the comparison of the scribal curricula in these cities.

30 Edited in Mieroop 2000.

31 Composition *šar tamḫāri* was discovered in Tell-Amarna; see Westenholz 1997, 104.

32 See text 21A, B in Westenholz 1997.

33 For the edition of Gilgameš texts from Ḫattuša, see Beckman 2019.

34 Collected in the many volumes of RIM (*Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia*) series.

35 See, e.g., Grayson 1975a or Glassner 2004.

36 Although EpZL is lengthier than Old Babylonian inscriptions (compare it, e.g., with lengthy inscriptions of Samsu-ilūna RIME 4.3.7.3 or 4.3.7.5), many of the later inscriptions surpass it by far (e.g., RINAP 5/1 Ashurbanipal 3, 4, 6, 7, etc.).

37 Glassner 2004, 186.

38 E.g., RIMA.0.78.10: 34-40 or 0.78.25: 1-8.

e-ISSN 2036-5845

the intended use of these texts and with the audiences they aimed to target.

EpZL and EpTN are literary works that can (albeit only tentatively, in the case of EpTN) illustrate the transformation of learned scribal knowledge into active political propaganda for a ruling king, similar to the creation of royal inscriptions. Although texts such as these are scarce, compared to inscriptions, they are nevertheless part of the same stream of tradition. The narratives about the kings of Agade are known to us from scribal education, but we may at least tentatively suppose that their origin can be traced back to times when their heroes were living kings. This can be indicated by the only extant Old Akkadian excerpt from the Great Revolt against Narām-Sîn discovered in Ešnunna.[39] While this text cannot be securely dated to the rule of Narām-Sîn, it surely bridges the gap to the Old Babylonian scribal exercises. The Old Akkadian tablet itself was likely a scribal exercise, which may lead us to conjecture that these texts functioned as an ideological device targeting young scribes and became part of the stream of tradition not long after their creation. Other compositions, such as narratives about Adad-Nīrārī, Adad-šuma-uṣur, Nabopolasar, and others,[40] then reveal that the offshoots of this stream were created throughout history. Yet, none of them appears to have become part of the tradition in the same way as the narratives about Sargon and Narām-Sîn.

The relation of the historical royal narratives to the stream of tradition are well illustrated by EpZL and EpTN. It may be argued that some of the scholars might have had an idea to create something that would become part of scribal education for future generations. After all, encountering hymns of Šulgi during education might have encouraged them to do so.

> Because of my extraordinary wisdom and my ancient fame as a master, he should choose my hymns as examples, and himself beget heavenly writings. (ETCSL.2.4.2.02: 305-7)

> For me, the king, the singer has recorded my exploits in songs about the strength of the protective deity of my power; my songs are unforgettable, and my words shall not fall into oblivion. (ETCSL.2.4.2.02: 328-31)

In the case of EpZL, we have only one preserved manuscript. A possible chance for its cultural survival, after the destruction of Mari, was a usurpation of its other copy by the Babylonians when they took away the Mari documents. While intertextualities are later attested in Assyrian and Babylonian traditions, these may be easily explained by relations to the same literary lore that inspired the creation of the Mari text, rather than by the survival of EpZL in Babylonian education. It is more easily conceivable that a short epic extoling a defeated king was of little interest to the Babylonian scholars.

In contrast, EpTN is attested only in the context of continuation. While it is not unlikely that some of the manuscripts originated during the rule of Tukultī-Ninurta, it was thanks to the interest of the Assyrian scholars that they were preserved. The fact that it has been preserved both in Aššur and in Nineveh clearly indicates that it was relevant to them. The Neo-Assyrian copy underlines this scholarly interest. We must highlight that apart from praising the living king, texts such as these epics might have also targeted future audiences, making the king unforgettable, just as we have seen in the above-mentioned Šulgi hymns – an intention that was embraced by the Assyrian scholars in the case of EpTN. In addition, the author(s) of EpTN might have, on purpose, targeted the scholarly community via the already mentioned episode of taking the Babylonian archives away to Assyria. In this light, Tukultī-Ninurta was to be praised not only for his military endeavours and great relationship with deities, but also for his contribution to the tablet collections in Assyria. This might have been appealing to the scholars who archived and copied the text.

3 Constructing Royal Discourse

Although we lack the original contexts, it seems more than likely that the narratives were primarily intended to articulate particular aspects of royal ideology, praise the deeds of the kings, and present them as rightful actions. This seems clear from their contents. Therefore, it is essential to work through them to find out what discourse they might have created, as well as to connect this discourse to other social realities, so we may find why the authors might have thought this would work. The authors focused

39 See Westenholz 1997, no. 15.

40 See, e.g., Grayson 1975b.

e-ISSN 2036-5845

on constructing the imagery of the heroes, as well as of their enemies. They used literary figures and numerous intertextualities that might have been known to the audiences, building upon the previously successful compositions. And they also set the story within realia that might have been known to the audiences, be it geographical settings, features of international law, or religious activities from divination to cult. It seems that both epics addressed topics that could have been relevant to different possible audiences, be it high officials, local scholars, foreign diplomats, or those who participated in the narrated military campaigns as soldiers.

We may illustrate the construction of ideological discourse by focusing on the role of the deities and their relationship to the praised rulers. This is an essential feature of both narratives and, at the same time, a vital element of the ancient Near Eastern societies. Both texts go to great lengths to articulate the divine support for the rulers. In the ANT perspective, we may highlight how narratives act in the construction of the social reality by creating or highlighting specific relations between social actors.

They present the kings as those who rule because the deities have chosen them for this purpose. The poet in Mari sang about Zimrī-Lîm that "in the precious heart, the gods have chosen his name",[41] and in Assyria, the scholars could have read about Tukultī-Ninurta that "Enlil raised him like a natural father, after his firstborn son".[42] Essential is that the kings do not act out of their own volition, but follow the instructions of deities.[43] We may read that Zimrī-Lîm performed divination while on his military campaign,[44] or that Kaštiliaš, as the adversary, constantly fails in receiving positive omens.[45] The imagery of divine support on the one hand and divine abandonment on the other is used multiple times in EpTN to articulate the contrast between Tukultī-Ninurta and Kaštiliaš. One was following the divine will, the other acting against it. For Kaštiliaš – who "has not feared your oath, has transgressed your command, has schemed falsehood"[46] – this has severe consequences: "Annunītu no longer approaches Agade […] the lady of Uruk forsaken her city".[47] Tukultī-Ninurta, in this context, provides a just and rightful solution demanded by the deities.

The divine support for the rulers is not articulated as something abstract. Deities in the ancient Near East were conceived as active and physical actors. Gods and goddesses could have accompanied the kings on their campaigns and even into battles. What we perceive as an image of deity was understood as the deity itself.[48] In both narratives, we may see the reflection of this: "Annunītum has walked by his right side, the Storm-God has laid down the loudness of his cry",[49] or "After the gods, his support, the king at the head of the army, begins the battle".[50]

Importantly, the divine characters mentioned in both texts seem to have been intentionally selected to fit the historical-religious settings in which the kings were active. A solid argument can be made for both local and international aims of such literary articulations. For example, EpZL invokes deities closely tied with the religious context of Mari (notably Itūr-Mêr and Dagān) and at the same time names deities broadly recognised in the international religious milieu (e.g., Anu, Enlil, Šamaš, Ištar). Similarly, EpTN presents the deities relevant to the Assyrian-Babylonian conflict, most importantly Aššur and Marduk. Through the narratives, the authority attributed to various deities aptly backed up the authority of the rulers locally and internationally.

When exploring how the texts could have worked socially, the audience is of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, it is an issue for which we have only indirect sources, heavily interpreted. There are many possible audiences, all of them non-exclusive.

The audiences also varied over time. As mentioned several times, many royal narratives are attested in the context of scribal education. There, the audience was students, and the encounters with such texts allowed them to acquire writing and reading skills, as well as a repertoire of ideological literary

41 EpZL i: 12.

42 EpTN i: 20' in manuscript A following Machinist 1978.

43 E.g., "The hero does not go on a campaign by himself, the king, by the command of Dagān, the lord…" (EpZL iii: 30-1).

44 "At night, he stepped in front of them, he summoned the diviners" (EpZL iii: 40-1).

45 See fragmentary section of EpTN iii: 39'–49' in manuscript A following Machinist 1978.

46 EpTN ii: 20' in manuscript A following Machinist 1978.

47 EpTN i: 44'–45'in manuscript B following Machinist 1978.

48 On the involvement of deities in battles, see, e.g., Trimm 2017, 553-625; on the conception of divinity, including their physicality, see, e.g., contributions in Porter 2009 or Dick 1999.

49 EpZL i: 27-8. Similarly, Ištar is said to be at the front of the battalion (EpZL iii: 24), and Addu with Erra flank Zimrī-Lîm on both sides (EpZL iii: 37-8).

50 EpTN v: 41' in manuscript A following Machinist 1978. This is a part of a broader description of the battle (starting at line 31') where numerous deities battle, supporting the contingents of Tukultī-Ninurta.

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figures, ready to be reused. It also constructed their worldview. Because we lack proper contexts for the use of EpZL in practice, we cannot rule out the possibility that it was created solely as a school text targeting young scribes. On the other hand, I believe it is reasonable to suppose a broader political intention, possibly with the school itself being only a secondary use. After all, its excavation context places it outside the school curriculum. EpTN is then attested in a scholarly rather than in a school environment. Although education and scholarly activities tend to be interconnected, they do not entirely overlap. The manuscripts of EpTN clearly indicate the interest of scholars in these texts. However, the reason why they archived and copied it remains speculative. As noted before, the continuation of royal narratives both in education and the scholarly milieu might have been among the intentions of the original authors, ensuring the fame of the king for future generations.

The most immediate audiences, during the lives of the rulers, might be inferred by trying to determine to whom the contents were relevant. It might have targeted court officials or military personnel, but also foreign emissaries. Possibly, the king himself wanted to listen to how great he was. We might even have some indications for such practices from Mari, where Zimrī-Lîm was given a recommendation for a musician to appraise him on his court.[51] There is also a possibility that deities were the intended audience. The list could continue, and many reasons and interpretations could be given for all kinds of uses, intentions, and audiences.

We must also ask about the relations of these narratives to the "public", including the issues of how broad this "public" could have been. This may be done through comparison with other works that created the ideological discourse, such as royal inscriptions, monumental architecture, or artistic works presenting it, such as palace reliefs.[52] But here, we must remain cautious that our understanding of it is heavily interpretative and based on many assumptions. My own assumption – an educated guess – is that the primarily intended audience has been more limited and carefully targeted.[53] It consisted of more groups, some of whom were court insiders, while others were foreign emissaries. I base this assumption on the fact that both discussed texts are, on the one hand, quite straightforward and, on the other hand, polyvalent enough to convey meanings to different audiences, both local and international.

It is clear that the poems were not articulated as mere appraisals of kings as the sole most important actors. The poems communicate that the authority of the king must have been recognised within broader social contexts.[54] And the people belonging to these contexts might have been the audience. Both narratives express that while the king is firmly and justly at the apex of the society, he is not despotic and that he cares for and listens to his people. Tukultī-Ninurta, "is the eternal image of Enlil, attentive to the voice of the people, to the counsel of the land".[55] Similarly, Zimrī-Lîm also pursues the advice of his men.[56]

In this context, I see potential in further exploring the possible impact on military personnel, which in times of war may concern broader population. In the case of EpZL, the king associates himself with his troops in his speech: "A womb has created you, a mother, just like you, has given a birth to me! The same battle is upon me!",[57] and the poem narrates how "until the king has achieved his goal, and Ida-Maraṣ was subjected under his feet, he (only) drank water from water-skins, counted with the soldiers, everything was torture. Great (were) the huntsmen who went with him, like an onager (eating) straw in the steppe, his men ate meat, they gained courage; they gained strength".[58] This literary feature might have been particularly appealing to the military personnel in the Middle Bronze Age Mari. The strategies of EpTN are, in this regard, more focused on presenting the king as someone who actively participates in the battle. However, the preserved passages do not indicate such a close relation to the

51 In A.27 (Ziegler 2007, text no. 8); see also Sasson 2015, 36.

52 An interesting interpretative scheme here may be the theory of concentric belts as discussed by Liverani (2014), addressing how the ideological message reaches the wider populace in a somewhat diluted manner, in contrast with the most immediate audiences. For a discussion on the royal inscriptions (in the Neo-Assyrian period), see, e.g., Frahm 2019, 140-2. For an interesting discussion on royal ideology and its audiences, including a discussion of the accessibility of palace reliefs that may be in some ways parallel to our discussion, see Portuese 2020.

53 The narrower audience could have appreciated more the peculiarities of the narrative. Compare this with the discussion of Portuese on the reliefs: "The degree of comprehension could depend on the knowledge possessed by the viewer, on his/her readiness in appreciating the depicted details, their meanings, their associations in the iconographic context, and the ideological and political reasons lying behind the narrated episode" (2020, 202).

54 See, e.g., summary on how the kings of Mari acquired and communicated their authority and charisma in Sasson 2015, 21-38.

55 EpTN i: 18′ in manuscript A following Machinist 1978.

56 EpZL ii: 33-6.

57 EpZL ii: 22-4.

58 EpZL iii: 7-14. Following this passage, Zimrī-Lîm pronounces an encouraging speech to his soldiers.

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soldiers. While Zimrī-Lîm is appraised as *primus inter pares*, Tukultī-Ninurta seems to be rather *primus* only. The narratives and their poetic devices had the potential to communicate, negotiate, strengthen or even establish ties – i.e., networks – among actors. By this, they contributed to constructing the desired royal ideology into a social fact.

4 Conclusion

Royal narratives of the ancient Near East compose an interesting collection of texts that communicated royal ideological discourse. Yet, their emergence and social impact are still poorly understood. The limited evidence and imprecise excavation contexts limit our possibilities of interpretation. The article argued that despite these limits, examining them as actors in vast social networks offers a promising way in an attempt to reconstruct their relevance in past societies.

In this short article, we have explored some of the networks in which the Epic of Zimrī-Lîm from Middle Bronze Age Mari and the Epic of Tukultī-Ninurta from Late Bronze Age Assyria were set. Some networks are peculiar to each of the compositions, such as those relating to their excavation contexts and specific cultural and social realities. Others are shared and interconnect these works whose creation spans over centuries. Both are offshoots of the literary stream of tradition that was continuously in creation and transformation throughout the history of cuneiform writing.

The two examples reveal contrasting lives of the royal narratives. EpZL was most likely only a short-lived episode in the construction of political discourse. It has been composed for a living king, building upon existing royal discourse that its author(s) could have encountered during scribal education and when working for the palace administration. However, after the defeat of Zimrī-Lîm's state by the Babylonians, the social relevance of this composition probably swiftly faded away. In contrast, several centuries later, EpTN picked up on the descendants of the same literary and political tradition. This time, its existence outlived its hero and author(s). It became part of the same tradition, influencing scholars of future generations. These contrasting trajectories highlight the value of an approach inspired by the Actor-Network Theory for understanding how texts not only reflected but also shaped social and political realities. The future endeavours of exploring royal narratives are still wide open, and most of the networks among actors remain to be reconstructed.

Abbreviations

A	accession no., Mari tablets
BM	museal siglum, British Museum, London
ETCSL	texts in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature; available at `https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/`
K	museal siglum, British Museum, London (Kuyunjik collection)
M	accession no., Mari tablets
ORACC	The Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, available at `https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/`
RIMA	texts in the series Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods
RIME	texts in the series Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Early Periods
RINAP	texts in the series Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
Rm	museal siglum, British Museum, London (Rassam collection)
RS	excavation siglum Ras Šamra (Ugarit)
VAT	museal siglum, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin

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