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Building Walls, Social Groups and Empires: A Study of Political Power and Compliance in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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Abstract. This contribution aims to use social history and social theory to investigate political power and compliance with authority in ancient Western Asia, through the case study of Neo-Assyrian imperial building projects. Our first aim is to discuss the realities of construction work in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, focusing on the building process both through literary sources and archaeological data. Our second goal is to understand the role played by these building sites in the strengthening of local and supra-local political orders, in the consolidation of social group boundaries, and in the construction of political subjectivities of the ancient social actors involved. Our reflection sheds light on the new interpretative possibilities – and challenges – that integrating social theories, archaeological work, and language technology may create.

Keywords. Political philosophy, archaeology, *ilku*, social history and theory, social contract, political economy, anthropology, mudbricks, social structures, network analysis.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main critiques of Rousseau's idea of the social contract – since the very moment it was published in 1762 – has always been that it never actually occurred in real life. It is an artificial and imagined contract that nobody ever signs or enters into consciously. The 19th-century intellectuals condemned this fictive contract by glorifying organic communities' ties, theorizing about the *Volksgeist*, putting forward customary and family law, and sometimes romanticizing Christianity. They argued that there is no such thing as the social contract, but there are, however, strong ties between individuals and the groups that they belong to by birth and tradition. Social theorists have tools to conceptualize both swings of the pendulum when they insist that societies are always grasped

in *status nascendi*. Then there is not a 't$_0$' moment where a society is created and remains crystallized for a time before transforming. There are sudden ruptures, but societies are *always* in a process of construction with forces that lean towards preserving the *status quo* and others that lean towards change, forces that work for integration and others for disintegration. These processes are constant, not always unidirectional, and create a kaleidoscope of possible social and political configurations. Societies are founded again and again, day after day, year after year, in a variety of ways. In this perspective, the social contract is not a 't$_0$' moment but an uninterrupted succession of them.

There is nothing simple and obvious in the fact that the Neo-Assyrian imperial administration could extract labour and taxes from a population, and that the population works within these boundaries. Likewise, there is no universal theory, no universal model that could explain what exactly people are ready to comply with in terms of resource extraction. Scholars have insisted that there is always a symbolic dimension to political domination: there is in people's minds a set of principles and social representations, a specific view of the world that naturalizes the arbitrary and renders antagonisms and social inequalities – or at least a certain level of inequality – acceptable (Weber 1964 [1920]; Cassirer 1946; Bourdieu 1979a, 1979b, 2014:162-176). This scaffolding is different from one society to the next. This means that there is no universal threshold, no universal red line that an administration could cross that would trigger opposition. As there exists no universal notion of justice through which people perceive their interaction with state authorities (Sen 2009), the level of taxes and resource extraction that people are ready to accept varies in time and space and across social groups, and it depends on what the state says it is giving back, what it does give back, and on a set of ideas on what it is fair to be asked to do/to hand over in exchange (Thompson 1971; Scott 1985, 1990; Richardson 2020).

Scholarship on the relationship between the imperial administration and members of the ruling elite is prolific. The same cannot yet be said about its relationship with the members of the lower strata of Neo-Assyrian society. The quantitative argument for including social history in the analysis of ancient Western Asian empires is straightforward: why concentrate all the attention on the smallest fraction of the population? The more qualitative argument speaks to a wide panel of academic enterprises beyond history itself: if we want to grasp societies holistically, we need to look at the entire social fabric (Hobsbawm 1971). While the power of elites is sourced from below, the ideology they produce is always in a dynamic relationship with the wider social structures and existing symbolic arrangements (Geertz 1973; Bourdieu 1994). Moreover, social structures and symbolic productions both include social actors that are no longer human or that never were – such as spirits of ancestors, deities and other meta-persons (Sahlins 2017). The political society is a cosmic polity anchored in its specific ecological and material environment, and the study of the social contract and of political ontologies should include the social ties woven with non-human contractors.

Why do we consider building activities as a locus of social contract? Building sites brought together multiple members of society: the gods, the king, his high-ranking officials, hired laborers such as architects and master builders, deportees and corvée labourers. Participation in a building site is therefore a social, political and cultural activity. The aim of this contribution is to analyse the role of Neo-Assyrian monumental building activities in the constant construction of the political society and in the strengthening or rearranging of local hierarchies.

Monumental building projects are of course not the only place where the construction of the political society took place, but these are likely the most representative (Knapp 2009; Richardson 2015; DeMarrais, Castillo, Earle 1996: 17–19; Pauketat 2000; for other places in which the social contract is generated, see Wilkinson 2003: 11-14; Ur 2005; Rosenzweig 2016, 2018).

To address our research goal, we study the social topography of monumental building sites and reflect on the social change brought about by these enterprises in local societies. We pay attention to the practical transformations of local societies with the emergence of labour ties between the administration and the local individual social actors (elite and non-elite social groups) but also reflect upon the discursive framework within which they take place.

THINKING AND RETHINKING ANCIENT POWER: A HISTORICAL SETTING

The grip of the early Mesopotamian states was long thought of as absolute and based on violence. The majority of the non-elite population was imagined as slaves and passive, exploited subjects with little wriggle room to exercise political agency. This dogmatic way of imagining ancient social actors does not easily lead to the exploration of political subjectivities and to the investigation of the terms of the social contract or to the symbolic dimensions of political domination. These long-lasting paradigms of orientalism in Assyriology were progressively disproved in the second half of the 20th century and in more recent studies on the nature of political power in ancient Western Asian polities (Darling 2013: 15-32; Svärd 2016; Richardson 2012, 2017). Important developments in the study of the economy in general – and labour in particular, specifically in Mesopotamian societies – have attested a wide variety of work contracts (Postgate 1974; Jursa 2015; Radner 2007), and that private property was widespread (Démare-Lafont 2016; Radner 1997, 2007). Working outside your own household was common and individuals now appear to have been able to anchor themselves to different types of institutions and to move rather freely between them. Also, rather than an all-powerful despotic state, we see a more complex and multi-layered political reality, which faces mistakes, hesitations, power conflicts and straightforward failures. Richardson has made a strong case for the 'weakness' of Mesopotamian states in the 2nd millennium BC (Richardson 2012, 2017). Although the Neo-Assyrian Empire is usually portrayed as the zenith of Mesopotamian imperial power and the highest achievement of administrative centralization, it still struggles to make things work. The State Archives of Assyria highlight the daily difficulties of running an empire: far from being a smooth-running, self-regulating and easy endeavour, we see imperial agents struggling to carry out their work (i.e., how to look after royal demesnes and collect taxes in SAA 01 176, SAA 01 182, SAA 05 003),[1] dispatching agents to oversee fluvial shipments of timber (see SAA 01 004, SAA 05 003), organizing road stations (see SAA 01 177), dealing with greedy or incompetent administrators and accusations of all sorts (see SAA 15 189, SAA 05 121), reporting on conspiring sheikhs (see SAA 10 354) (Luukko 2018; Deller, Parpola 1966; Parpola 1995). Another relevant factor in the lack of clarity on state authority and compliance is the cloud of mystery surrounding the political role of intermediate social groups such as *nasiku*/sheikhs, which are still relatively understudied by textual scholars.

The Neo-Assyrian political system went through significant changes during its long 300-years span (911 BC– 609 BC), and one has to be careful not to extrapolate 'phenomena unique to the reign of a certain king or even to a certain period within this reign onto the entire Neo-Assyrian period' (Svärd, May 2015: 6). The early Neo-Assyrian state also changed as a result of its expansion and integration of new territories outside the Mesopotamian heartland and there are variations in the content and style of royal inscriptions and reliefs throughout this period (Liverani 2012; Harmanşah 2013: 93-101; Tudeau 2019). Its early administrative technology was to some extent inherited from the 2nd millennium BC Middle Assyrian state (see Düring 2015 for a review of the discussions on this point) but as the empire conquered new territories, it had to fine tune its administrative techniques to be able to penetrate distant territories and integrate their populations. This integration happened both on a practical and discursive level, through a network of provincial administrations extracting taxation and corvée labour but also through physical construction of Neo-Assyrian architecture and reliefs, which translate into a discursive and symbolic fabrication that legitimized political domination and extraction. Building programmes beautifully inserted themselves into this propaganda narrative. We would like to focus on the very process of building these places as a *locus* where these practical and discursive policies were being constructed and implemented. With tools from social history and social theory we try to grasp the role that building sites played in the structuring of social relations between individuals, groups, and the state.

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[1] All State Archive of Assyria (SAA) texts can be accessed at http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/corpus.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: NETWORK ANALYSIS OF BUILDING SITES

We use textual analysis to study the social relations formed at the building sites, and to this data we apply qualitative social network analysis (SNA). Our approach is invested in describing all the actors involved, determining their place in the social topography of the empire and trying to grasp their lived experience. We look at the symbolic dimensions of construction projects by analysing the discourse on earthen building activities in royal inscriptions and administrative letters. We reflect on the potential and pitfalls of computer-assisted SNA for analysing ancient building sites.

Then, we employ computer-assisted Network Analysis (NA) as an effective tool to explore the symbolic attributes of specific materials used in the building process and some of the social actors engaged on site. An emic perspective is fundamental to understanding a society's perception of itself: how it portrays itself to its own members and to outsiders. Language technology can assist traditional textual criticism by using big data to show syntagmatic and paradigmatic semantic connections of words in a much wider textual corpus.

The lexical portal recently launched by CoE ANEE makes it possible to perform network analysis on the Akkadian texts present in the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (Oracc).[2] In the portal there are two networks built by ANEE on the basis of 7346 Akkadian texts, primarily dated to the Neo-Assyrian period (c. 930–612 BC). A total of 4930 Akkadian words in their dictionary forms have been inserted in the portal to be explored through network analysis. The basis of the selection is to include words that appear five times or more in the texts (Jauhiainen *et al.* 2021; Svärd *et al.* 2020; For portal information see Jauhiainen *et al.*; Sahala *et al.*). The two networks were created with different methods: first, the Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI) routine, which creates connections of a syntagmatic semantic nature, highlighting words that appear together in multiple texts and scoring that connection. Second, the network based on word vectors built with fastText elaborates connections based on the paradigmatic semantic connections of words, thus connecting words that belong to the same conceptual category (Svärd *et al.* 2020). The results were then visualized in Gephi, and the interactive portal provides the user with the possibility of extracting a sub-network in the form of an ego graph, that is, a word and all the words that are directly connected to it (Bastian, Heymann, Jacomy 2009).

A SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS OF NEO-ASSYRIAN BUILDING SITES

Neo-Assyrian building sites must be seen as a form of collective and organized action that requires the coordination of multiple social actors. The individuals involved in these projects are not all human beings, and when they are, they come from different places in the social topography belonging to different institutions. Although written texts and archaeological materials from public buildings tend to focus on the ruling elite, administrative letters provide us with concrete information about the organization of labour during the building process. Mythological and ritual texts allow us to understand the role played by the gods in these enterprises and the fundamental mediation of the religious personnel.

In the *Enuma Elish*, the Mesopotamian creation myth particularly influential in the 1st millennium BC, the first description of the construction of a monumental building is that of the Esagil (Tablet VI, 57-67). It was built by the gods after Marduk was elected as their king in the midst of an episode of social unrest. After creating human beings, they thought it necessary to establish the institution of kingship to wisely guide and shepherd the people. Building was also amongst his duties. But the gods did not entirely delegate their prerogatives and they still controlled the *modus operandi*. In the Neo-Assyrian period, the gods are the initiators of imperial construction projects, or at least the projects need to be submitted to them for approval. The gods communicated with the king through visions and sometimes gave him precise instructions on how to carry out the work, for instance by

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[2] The extraction date for the data used: February 2019.

Figure 1. Votive relief of Ur-Nanshe, king of Lagash, Early Dynastic III (2550–2500 BC). The king is portrayed with a basket of earth used to manufacture mudbricks on his head. (Source: Ernest de Sarzec, *Découvertes en Chaldée* 1896. Public domain).

specifying a desired location (RINAP[3] 5, Ashurbanipal 006 http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003705/). If no direct command had been passed and the king wanted to launch a project, he had to consult the gods by resorting to the usual communication channels, which meant he heavily relied on his religious specialists to ask the question and interpret the given answer according the correct procedures (RINAP 3, Sennacherib 160, http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003965/).

The Neo-Assyrian king is described as the 'deities' builder', i.e., builder of temples (Dalley 2010; Lackenbacher 1982; Karlsson 2013: 97), which is a fundamental pillar of royal ideology. This portrayal also underlines the king's humility in front of the gods (Karlsson 2016; Lackenbacher 1982; Oppenheim 1949; Russell 2017) (Fig. 1).

The re-elaboration of previous iconographic Mesopotamian motifs used by Gudea, Ur-Nanshe and Ur-Nammu is adopted by the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, who is portrayed carrying a basket of earth on top of his head (Fig. 2) (Lackenbacher 1982; Karlsson 2016: 103-104).

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[3] RINAP = *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period.*

Figure 2. Stela of Ashurbanipal in which the king is shown with a ritual basket of earth on his head © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions provide us with numerous examples of the king as master builder, who raised a basket onto his head (e.g., RINAP 4 104, Esarhaddon 105, http://oracc.org/ribo/Q003334/), rebuilt the city from top to bottom, mixed the clay for bricks with precious materials (e.g., RIMAP 3 A.O.102 10, Shalmaneser III 010, http://oracc.org/riao/Q004615/; RIMAP 2 A.O.100 3, Tukulti-Ninurta II 03, http://oracc.org/riao/Q006033/) and completed the building by plastering (e.g., RINAP 5/1 11, Ashurbanipal 011, http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003710/). When the king mentions his predecessors, it is often a matter of legitimation by showing that he is acting in the tradition of previous kings. Looking at the practical organization of building sites, it is obvious though that the king is not the actual physical builder: archaeological and textual data indicate the effort needed to coordinate the construction labour (Sinopoli 1994: 170; Parker 2011: 374-375; Parpola 1995: 50).

During the Neo-Assyrian Empire, numerous palaces were built in the different capitals and in the provinces. These palaces were important administrative centres run by a multitude of officials (Groß , Kertai 2019; Groß 2020; Politopoulos 2020: 141). The royal household played a fundamental role. Many of the high-ranking officials, designated in the sources as 'the big ones', usually translated as 'magnates', took an active role during construction: the palace manager, the palace supervisor, the treasurer, the granary supervisor and the provincial governors all had a part to play (Groß 2020). All these officials were assisted by their scribes and deputies. Sheikhs also appear to be involved in human resource management as in the case of Dur-Šarruken (SAA 15 280, http://oracc.org/saao/P334710/). Gathering the necessary bricks for the building sites was also a logistical challenge that required coordination and created tensions. The bricks were produced at different sites, centralized and then shipped out to the provincial governors (SAA 19 052, http://oracc.org/saao/P224427, SAA 05 291, http://oracc.org/saao/P313453/). A very interesting aspect of the construction sites is that portions of walls were assigned to the different provincial

governors. This is evidenced in a letter in which a treasurer explains to King Sargon II how he has settled a misunderstanding between two governors regarding the exact portions of the walls that they had to build (SAA 01 164, http://oracc.org/saao/P334333/). Not all collaborations led to tensions though, as other reports are mostly positive (SAA 15 094, http://oracc.org/saao/P334074). We can now turn to those officials who were part of the actual workforce, amongst which we find the chief master builders, master builders, chief architects, and architects. Master builders and their junior apprentices were fundamental to Neo-Assyrian construction enterprises and were a disputed resource amongst the magnates of the empire (SAA 05 056 http://oracc.org/saao/P313448/ „ SAA 01 165 http://oracc.org/saao/P334644/). Magnates wrote letters to the king to request them on specific building sites (SAA 16 111 http://oracc.org/saao/P334265/), but the king's wishes could be disputed by the treasurer who kept a close count of the workforce (SAA 05 056 http://oracc.org/saao/P313448/) , SAA 15 151, http://oracc.org/saao/P313476/). Two of these letters also mention runaway master builders, which must have put further strain on their management. Recent studies describe the numerous social actors involved such as *ummânu*/skilled craftsmen, *šelappiāiu*/architects, metalworkers and stoneworkers (Harmanşah 2013: 162–167; Baker 2017; Groß 2020). Religious specialists intervened at specific moments of the building process, with detailed procedures in the case of the construction of temples (Ambos 2010). They communicate for instance, with the god Kulla, the lord of foundations and brickwork (RINAP 2, Sargon II 043, http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap2/Q006524). Thus, in every building project taken on, the king stands interlaced within a network of social relations that stretches from the realm of the gods to a wide variety of officials working in his palace. Let us now leave the high spheres and look at the lay citizens partaking in the constructions. This workforce was composed of multiple actors, working under different contractual obligations.

First forced labour, which was made up by prisoners of war, deportees and slaves.

> (But) as for me, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, the performing of this work came to my attention by the will of the gods and I put my mind to it. I forcibly removed the people of Chaldea, Aramean (tribes), the land of the Manneans, (and) the lands Que and Ḫilakku, who had not submitted to my yoke, then I made them carry baskets (of earth) and they made bricks. I cut down canebrakes in Chaldea and I had their splendid reeds hauled (to Nineveh) for its (the palace's) construction by enemy soldiers whom I had defeated.
> RINAP 3/1 3 41-43, Sennacherib 003
> http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003477/

Building projects had a way of integrating newly conquered populations as never before in the political economy, societal fabric and cosmic narrative of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Oded 1979, Parker 1997; Groß 2018). They became a platform for the imperial administration to create new ties with the ever-increasing population under its control (see RINAP 5/1 11 x85, Ashurbanipal 011, http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003710/; RINAP 3/2 43 6b, Ashurbanipal 011, http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003517/). These people were often uprooted from their original social and community settings, and became unwillingly active social actors by contributing to the empire socially, politically and culturally.

Another type of labour used on the building sites was *ilku* workers, as Assyrians performed corvée labour, *ilku*, as part of their duty to the king (Burke 2008: 141-143; Bernbeck 2019: 143-145; Yokoyama 1994). *Ilku* obligations were mainly linked to land tenure and could also be carried out on royal demesnes, in irrigation projects, temples, or through enrolment in the army (men only in this case). Evidence indicates that individuals could send dependents to perform *ilku* duty in their place (Postgate 2013: 22; Düring 2020: 104). *Ilku* was imposed on the lay population, including recently displaced populations, but also on lower ranking state officials, however these seem to have been able to produce some kind of substitute payment, a commuted equivalent of the service (Groß 2020: 63; Postgate 1971: 499; Postgate 1974: 400). The mentions of *ilku* in the State Archive of Assyria corpus show that sourcing and coordinating this workforce was not an easy task, with most challenges stemming from discussions on who exactly can be subjected to what. The sources reveal that people from all echelons tried to escape their duties: state officials reminded the king of forgotten exemptions (SAA 08 296, http://oracc.org/saao/P236978/, SAA 01 099 http://oracc.org/saao/P334048/), or argued that a specific task could not be considered part of their

ilku service (SAA 19 033, r12 http://oracc.org/saao/P393615/). The correspondence shows discussions between the kings and their officials about which category specific groups of people fall into and if they could be asked to perform *ilku* (SAA 01 223, 4 http://oracc.org/saao/P313502/; SAA 01 183, 12 http://oracc.org/saao/P334830/). These letters also show the difficulties faced by the officials in the mobilization of the workforce, as people plainly refused to participate in what they defined as a 'burden' (SAA 16 040, http://oracc.org/saao/P313428/), whilst others simply escaped and resettled elsewhere to avoid being persecuted by *ilku* duties 'month after month' (SAA 01 183, 12 http://oracc.org/saao/P334830/). Even when the officials and the performers seem willing to comply with their duty, more challenges arise regarding the chain of command (SAA 10 324 http://oracc.org/saao/P334320/, SAA 13 182 http://oracc.org/saao/P238742/). One edict appointing an official lists the severe punishments of wrongful appropriation of *ilku* workers, punishments that include tongue cutting and supernatural sanctions, which indicates that such fraud could not have been unusual (SAA 12 082 http://oracc.org/saao/P336125/).

To our knowledge, there is no evidence of women or men being hired for wages to work on building sites, but it is not implausible that these transactions happened. There is evidence of craftsmen such as blacksmiths hiring themselves out (Radner 2015), and we also know that the state sometimes hired personnel on a short-term basis to cover punctual needs. But again, the evidence here concerns bodyguards and scouts, not builders (Radner 2015). The absence of sources related to hired labour on building sites could mean that the Neo-Assyrian state was able to supply the necessary workforce by dispatching craftsmen remunerated through the land-grant system and the workers serving their *ilku*.

We now focus our attention on the actors and institutions financing the construction works. Textual sources reveal the underpinnings of financing schemes as the larger the building project, the bigger the financing scheme. Most of the king's officials, high-ranking and low-ranking got their income from the land grants assigned to them when they took up office and so did not receive specific remuneration because the work simply fell under their general responsibility (and when they believed it did not they made a point of it: 'The king, my lord, surely knows that it is not (part of) our *ilku*-duty' SAA 19 033, r12 http://oracc.org/saao/P393615/). We have mentioned previously how the king and his treasurer were careful to distribute the workload equally amongst governors to avoid tensions. The rations that the workers received were seemingly taken from the royal granaries (Postgate 1974; Faist, Llop 2012), which were plenished by the grain harvested from royal demesnes, sometimes by other *ilku* workers, or levied through the agricultural tax (Groß 2020: 337–348). However, evidence suggests that the construction costs were not sustained solely by the imperial treasury but that 'portions' of the construction could be supported by loans granted by individuals (Parpola 1995). King Sargon II seems to have borrowed silver from different individuals (SAA 01 159 http://oracc.org/saao/P334910/) to finance the construction of Dur-Šarruken (Bedford 2009; Parpola 1995). Exactly how this silver was used is unclear. One should also mention here that the only reason we know about this private-public financing scheme is that the creditor is complaining that some merchants have been refunded while he is still waiting for the refund of his 570 minas of silver.

ANALYSING THE NETWORK: A SOCIAL SCIENCE APPROACH

This review of the sources shows that building projects gather a wide scope of social actors that hold different positions in the social topography: the gods, the king, his high-ranking officials, craftsmen, architects, master builders, *ilku* labourers, deportees, and enslaved populations. Two things to remember here is that all these social groups were seldom in contact – at least to that extent– and that lay people would not have had access to these places outside of the specific building experience (Dewar 2022: 135; also, Dewar's personal communication). These interactions are not just interpersonal, but fundamentally inter-institutional: they involve different imperial offices, different socio-political organizations such as families, lineages, clans, and occupation groups such as guilds. They also speak about asymmetrical dependencies when owners can send their enslaved dependents to perform *ilku* in their place. Through the activation of these different interpersonal and inter-institutional ties, building sites connect different localities, villages, towns and cities. The networks that they create stretch through the urban and

rural landscapes, integrating distant lands with the imperial core (Wilkinson *et al.* 2005; Parker 2011; Liverani 2012; Harmanşah 2013: 127-130; Neumann 2020).

The sources also reveal that building sites required a substantive coordination of the Neo-Assyrian magnates. We see instances of both cooperation and competition taking place between different types of offices (i.e., conflicts between the office of the treasurer and the offices of the provincial governors) and between similar offices (i.e., competition between the offices of the governors). Sociology of organization applied to bureaucratic systems shows that these are not as efficient and rational as sometimes portrayed (Crozier, Friedberg 1977). Organizations are social systems based on interactions of their members, and as such they are dynamic entities and not static as their organizational charts suggest. The constant changes of their environment create uncertainty, which requires actors to improvise. There might be precise codes, rules of procedures, but not all events can be precisely predicted. This is when individual social actors and groups can develop strategies, but their aims do not always match up with those of the wider organization (Crozier, Friedberg 1977). In our case study, the individuals in the office of governor x implement individual strategies, but they also take part in office-level collective strategies against the office of governor y. Likewise, all the offices of governors x, y and z can implement strategies against another office or against the king himself. Ultimately, the empire can only function if the multi-scalar individual and collective strategies favour the bureaucratic system as a whole more than they favour its sub-units. Endeavours like wide-scale public building constructions show us how fragile these equilibriums actually were. The choice of the state to share the workload equally between governors can be seen as a solution selected to neutralize the endemic competition raging between their offices. With every new building site, the king must have made sure to keep dangerous entropic dynamics at bay. He should guarantee that these structural conflicts are regulated, and that everyone is moving to achieve the wider organization's goal and not just advancing personal interests. In this optic, the process of planning and building guarantees the power balance between the different institutions of the highest spheres of society, thus continuously reaffirming the structure of power. This is crucial for the continuity of the king's rule.

Furthermore, some of the phenomena that we have encountered so far, such as individuals benefiting from exemptions, sending dependents to perform duties in their place, or handing over *ilku* payments, could have functioned as status signalling, which sociological research has shown to be fundamental to the construction of social group boundaries (Veblen 1961 [1899]; Bourdieu 1972, 1979). Taxation and corvée duty then, should not be interpreted solely as a means by which the Neo-Assyrian state gathers resources but as suggested by Richardson for the Old Babylonian period as a powerful tool to create political subjectivity (Richardson 2020). Being exempt from *ilku* also meant having more time to work for a wage, as Radner mentions for the inhabitants of Assur engaging in caravan trade (Radner, 2015: 336). *Ilku* exemptions were a means of increasing one's prestige or symbolic capital, but also one's economic capital. Another point raised by the exploration of the logistics and energetics of Neo-Assyrian construction sites is that of social and geographic mobility. It is conceivable that the existence of a mobile workforce did impact local social, economic and political orders (Zaccagnini 1983; Radner 2007; Postgate 1987). We need to wonder if the wide-scale mobilization of *ilku* workers impacted the structuring of social relations at any level by affecting the local political economies and household modes of production.

Computer-assisted Network Analysis (NA) could be an effective tool to explore these ties in both the interpersonal and inter-institutional dimensions. Sourcing the data from Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, researchers from the CoE ANEE have built a social network that is visible through Gephi (Jauhiainen, Alstola 2022). The first obvious obstacle we face is that the fragmentary nature of the textual sources and archaeological materials at our disposal does not yet enable us to picture the full socio-demographics of one specific Neo-Assyrian building site and to produce a holistic graph that would picture all the social actors involved. We could, however, generate graphs of different building sites and then combine them to produce an ideal type. But, here, we face the second challenge that needs addressing: many people evidenced in the sources still remain invisible in the networks generated. At the moment, the software is programmed only to place as nodes individuals that are mentioned by name. This means that the labour force listed in the texts do not always appear in the networks, which impedes a comprehensive social network analysis of monumental building sites. Generally, we still cannot visualize the individual social actors from the lower strata, their relations of dependency, and the everchanging structuring

of the social contract. This is very problematic if we want to take a more holistic approach to social history. Like-wise, social network analysis has been criticized by generations of sociologists, who have argued, for instance, that focusing on interaction makes the structures disappear (Bourdieu 2014: 111-114; Borgatti, Brass, Halgin 2014). The danger then is de-politicizing the social world by turning conflict-ridden social stratifications into friendly networks. Taking these warnings into account, SNA can be programmed to show inter-institutional relations and not just inter-personal ones. Acting on this need, the team of researchers working on the software has integrated the information of people's offices when stated in PNA (Jauhiainen, Alstola 2022). This means that we could theoretically analyse the interactions of institutions in a specific time period but also over the *longue durée*.

SEMANTIC DOMAINS ANALYSIS

In the analysis we carried out for this contribution we were interested in visualizing through network analysis the link between people and building materials, specifically builders and mudbricks, as a concrete example to further our knowledge of labour organization.

When we look for the Akkadian word for mudbrick, *libittu*, in the PMI network we see a clear connection with words that indicate standardized building practices and mathematical arguments (e.g., *nalbanu*/brick mould; *nazbalu*/standardized load; *igigubbû*/constant or coefficient), but also to šitimgallu, the Akkadian word for master builder, indicating the presence of a skilled/specialized workforce at the construction site (Fig. 3).

On the other hand, the fastText graph highlights a direct connection of *libittu* with *labānu*/to make bricks or to spread, *nalbanu*/brick mould, *tupšikku*/brick carrying (basket), *naburru*/battlements or crenellations, *eperu*/earth, *kupû*/canebrake, *igāru*/wall, and *dūru*/city wall, thus stressing more the typology of work, raw sources and final location of mudbricks than the quality of labour (Fig. 4).

In the portal's sidebar, the degree highlights the number of connections the searched word, for example in fig. 3 and 4 *libittu*, has with different words based on the algorithm. The number to the right of each word indicates
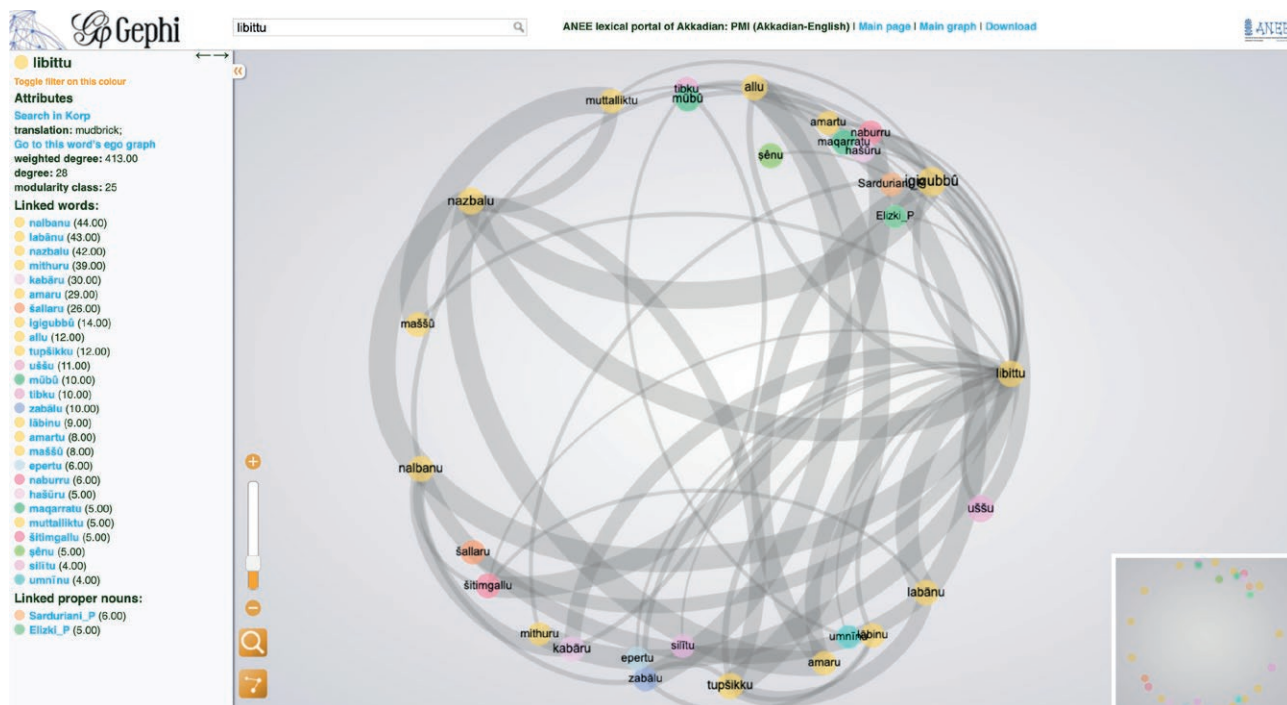

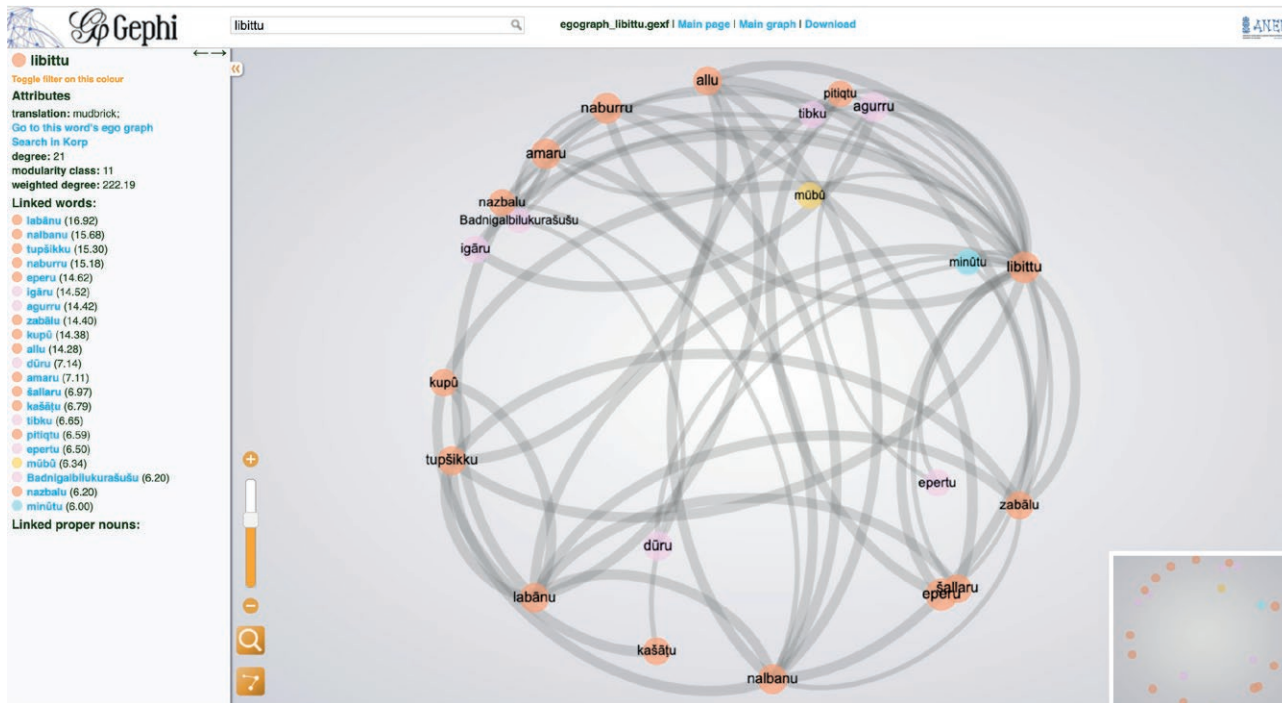**Figure 3.** PMI graph of *libittu*.

Figure 4. FastText graph of *libittu*.

the strength of the link between the word and the original search word. The PMI network (Fig. 3) highlights the relationship between mudbrick and the nature of labour, while the fastText provides information about raw sources, location and tools of labour.

When we search for the Akkadian word for builder, *itinnu*, the resulting PMI ego graph provides interesting connecting words in which we can detect a strong link to the builder's work and city wall construction (*itinnu-pilku*). The graph also provides the connection between builder and apprentice/junior assistant, *qallu* (Fig. 5).

It is relevant to note the difference that emerged from the search for master builder, *šitimgallu*, in the PMI and fastText graphs (Figs. 6-7). While both graphs highlight a link to *gišhurru/*plans or planning, *naburru/*battlements, and *emqu/*wise one, the PMI graph also provides a clearer connection with *ummiānu/*craftsmanship and mudbrick work (e.g., *nalbanu/ labānu/ libittu*), highlighting how the word šitimgallu/master builder is directly connected with earthen constructions. On the other hand, the fastText ego graph is focused on the behavioural and qualitative characterization of the master builder as an integral part of the construction mechanisms of the empire (e.g., *lēʾû/*skilled; *emqu/*wise, šūturu/very great).

In the NA fastText analysis we noticed the strongest links between master builder and *lēʾû* (powerful one/competent) and master builder and *emqu* (wise one), both connections stressed the necessity of empowering the craftsman as part of the state machine and imbued him with adjectives related to power and control. Likewise, in the SNA PMI network there is a strong correlation between master builder and *kakugallūtu* (activity/body of knowledge of the exorcist) that emphasized the religious dimension of earthen construction, specifically when done for the king and the gods. When we explored the link between *libittu* and *tupšikku* in the SNA, we noticed a strong link between this latter and *ilku*, stressing how *ilku* was an integral part of the earthen construction work (Fig. 8).

The fastText *ilku* graph shows all the different domains in which forced labour was used; among those, building sites were one of the most important social spaces (Fig.9).

Likewise, conducting a fastText NA of the world *dullu,* another Akkadian work used for corvée labour, we noticed the direct link between *dullu* and builder; and *dullu* and powerful highlighting not only how the builder's work was linked with hardship, but how central it was to the concept of power itself (Fig.10).
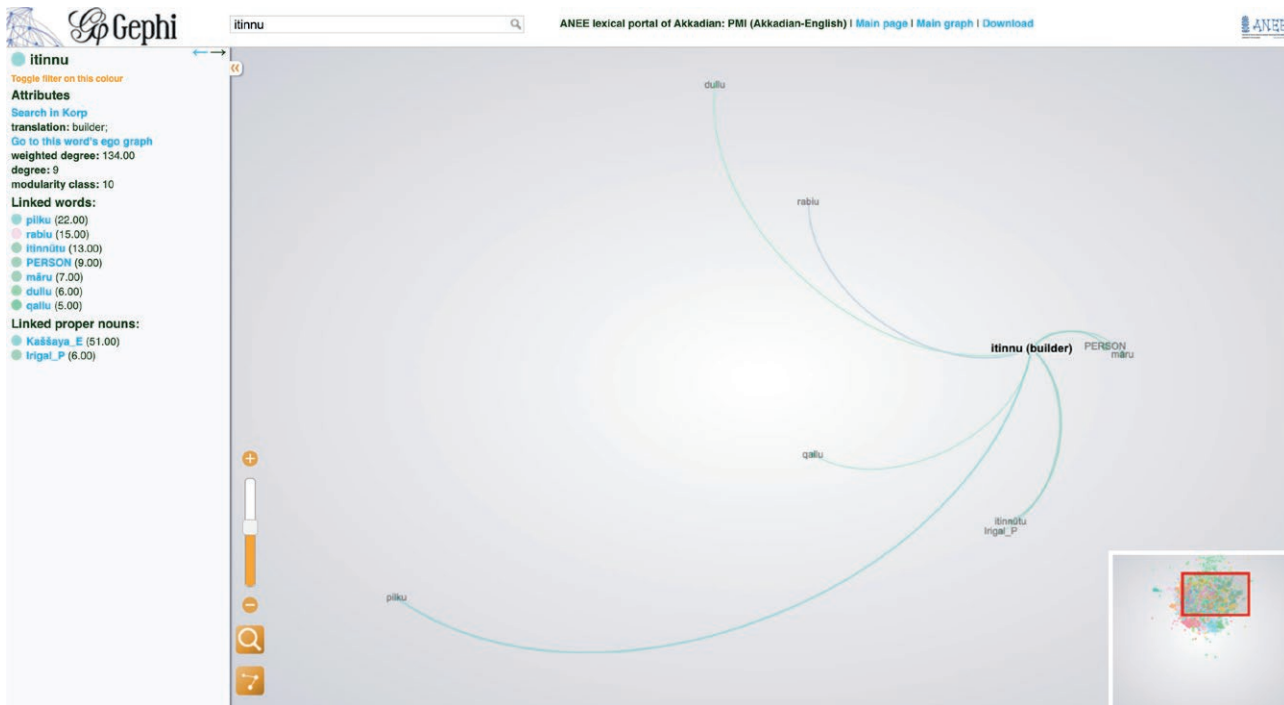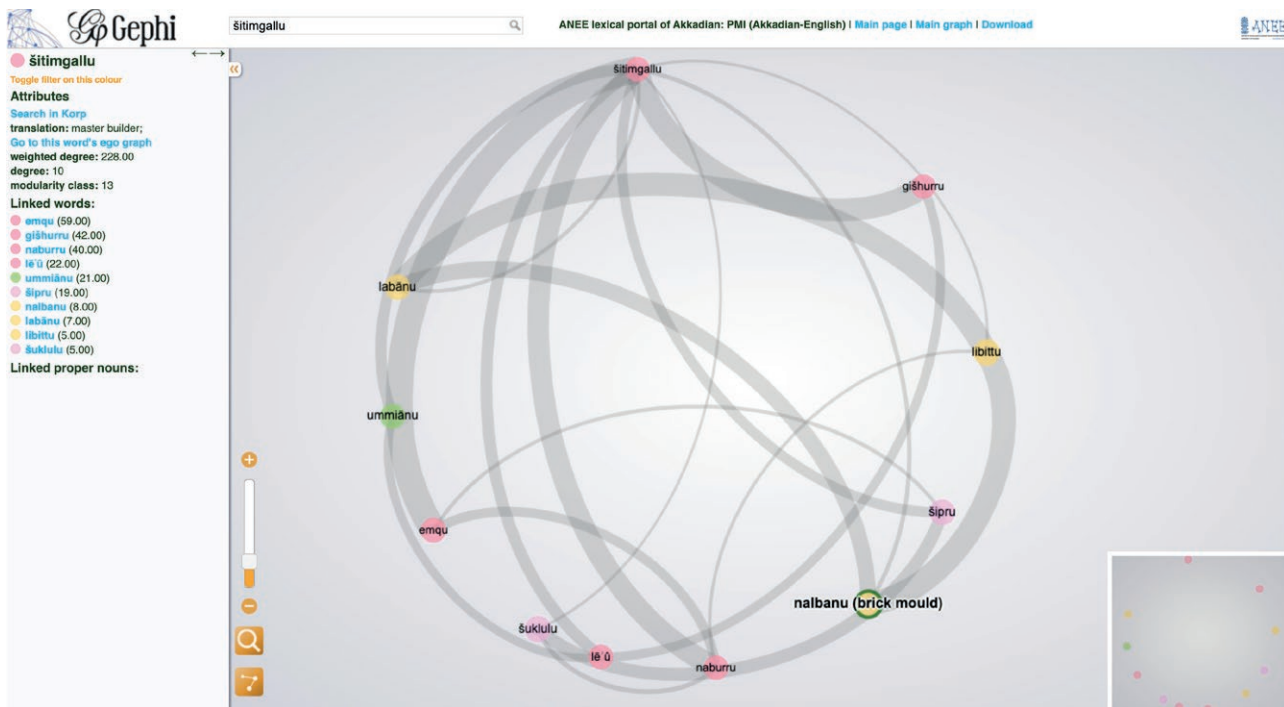
Figure 5. PMI Graph of *itinnu*.
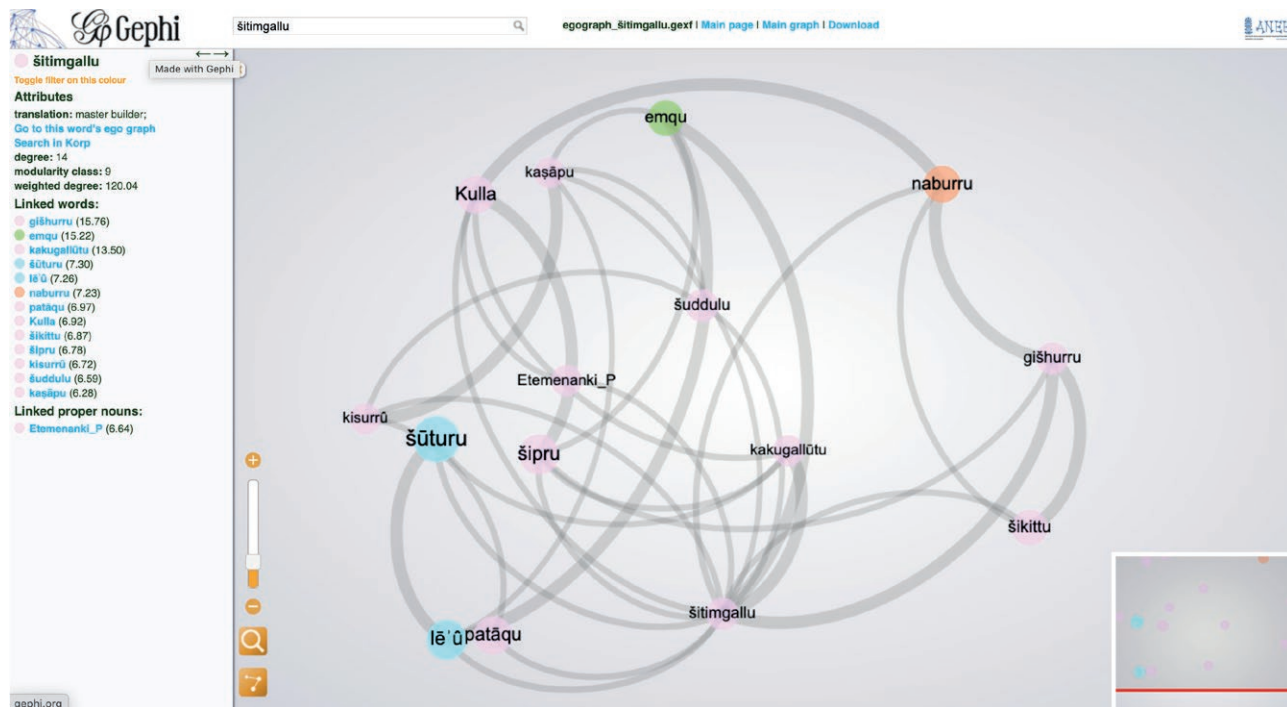

Figure 6. PMI graph of *šitimgallu*.

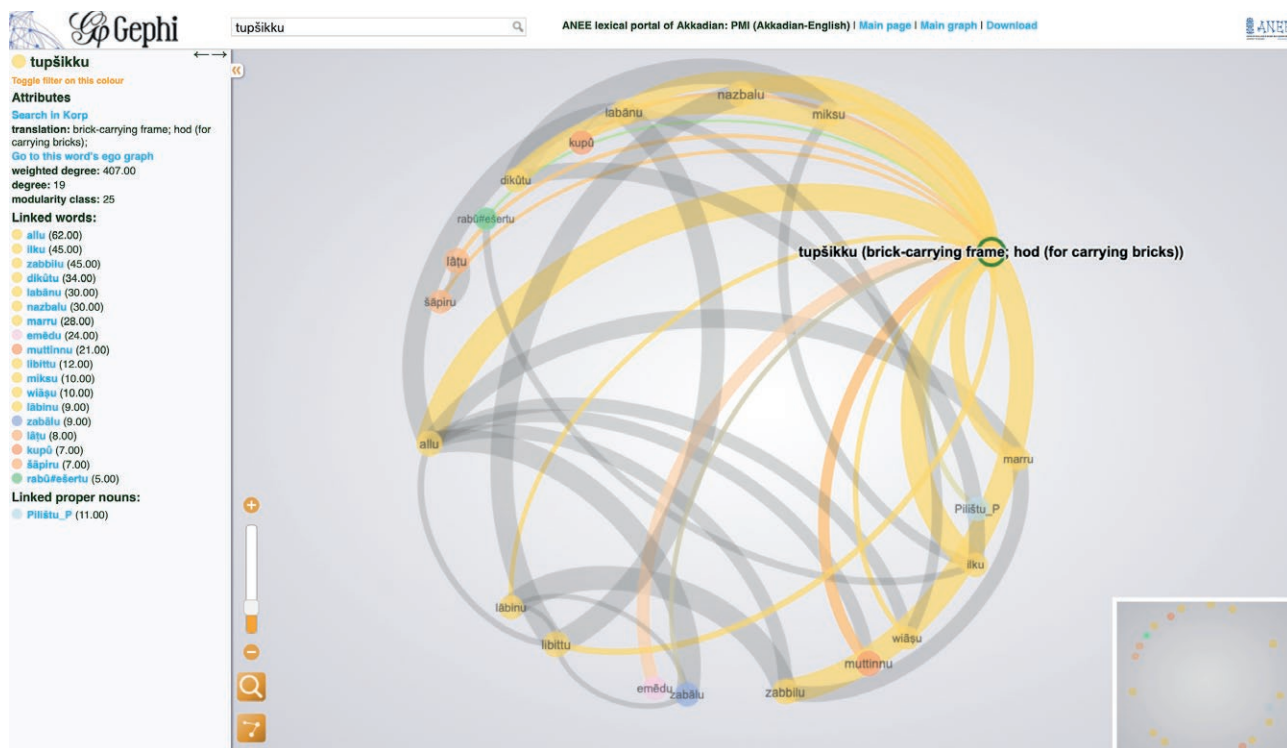**Figure 7.** FastText graph of *šitimgallu*.
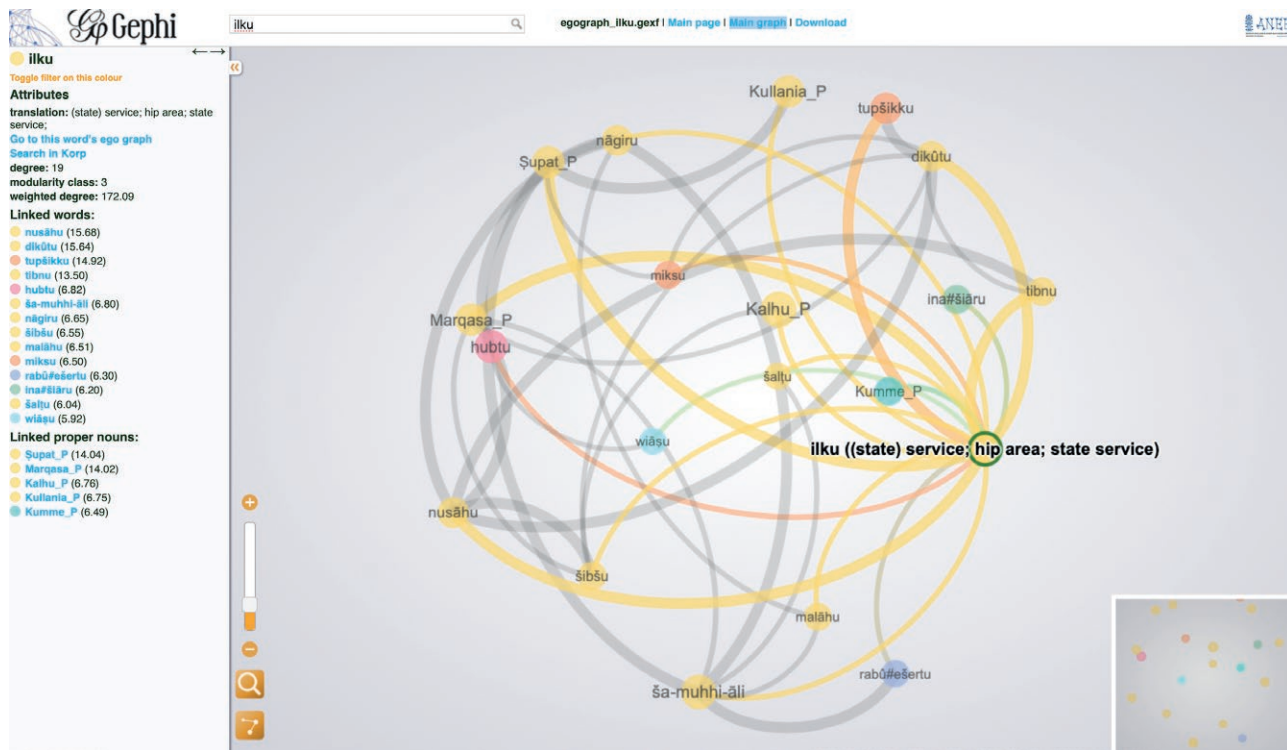

Figure 8. PMI graph of *tupšikku*.

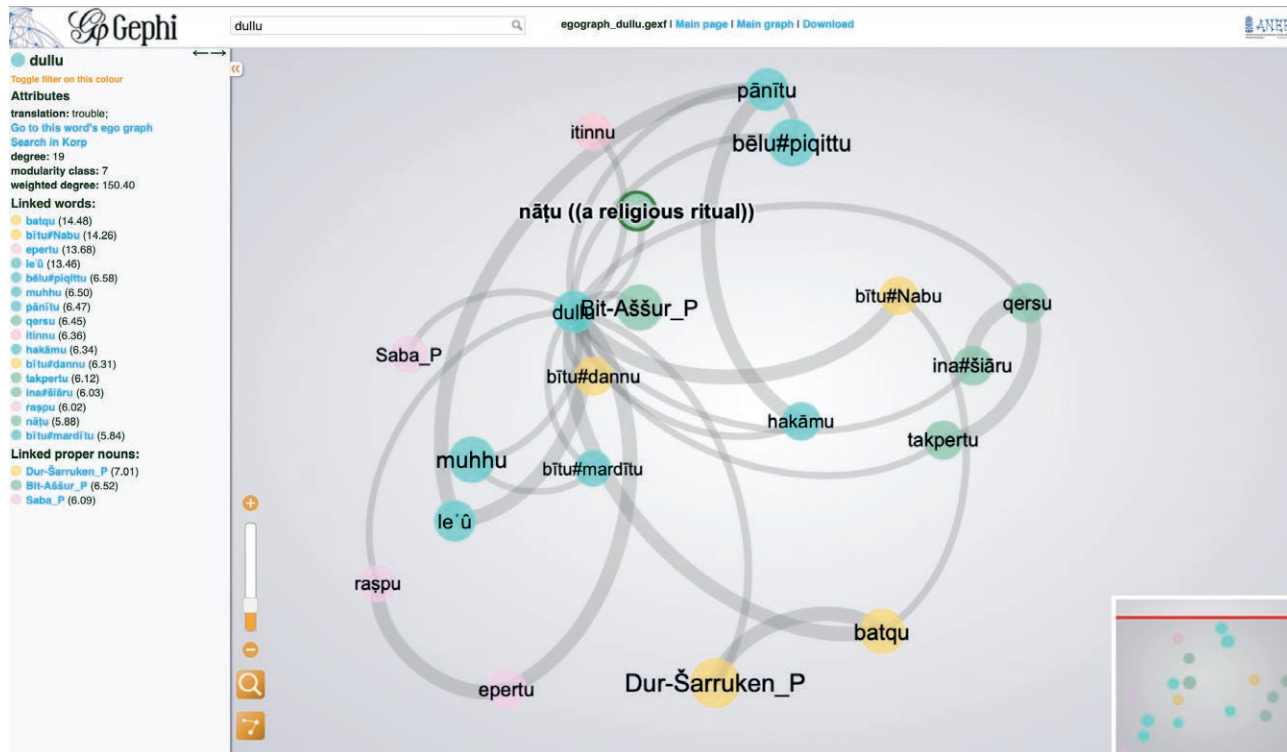**Figure 9.** FastText graph of *ilku*.

Figure 10. FastText graph of *dullu*.

DISCUSSING IMPERIAL DYNAMICS: A SOCIAL HISTORY FRAMEWORK

Studies in the field of the historical sociology of empires attest that the longevity of their political systems depended on their ability to balance the power of the different social groups. Empires constantly had to fight entropy by making sure their resources did not disappear back into civil society (Eisenstadt 1963; Mann 1984, 1986; Cooper, Stoler 1997). Works of comparative historical sociology showed the great variety of configurations and repertoires mobilized by states and empires to pursue this goal (Skocpol 1979; Burbank, Cooper 2010; Monson *et al.* 2015). Scholars working on different time periods and geographical areas studied the endemic competition raging in the high echelons of society and described them as a fundamental factor of large structural transformations, alongside class conflicts involving the lower strata of the population (Lachmann 1987, 2000; Wallerstein 1974, 1991, 2002).

Research, though, did not just focus on the higher echelons of societies. Thompson's concept of 'moral economy' had a deep impact on the reflection on compliance of individual social actors and groups with political authority (Thompson 1963, 1971). He argued that the 18th-century food riots in England took place not just because people were hungry but also because they considered the high prices of grain fundamentally unfair, a breach of what he termed 'a moral economy'. Scholars researched the dynamics of social movements, grasping when popular discontent leads to organized struggle and when it does not, when that discontent turns to physical force and why (Tilly 1964; Wolf 1969; Migdal 1974; Tilly , Wood 2019). They also clearly showed that resistance to political authority does not necessarily take the form of loud protest and revolutionary effervescence but also – and more often – that of discrete and strategic evasion of the grip of the state (Scott 1977, 1985, 1990, 2017; Wolf 1969). The contemporary studies of empires increasingly take all these different aspects into account, focusing on political systems and networks of power, aspects of the political economy but also of the lived experience of the subjects (Bang, Bayly , Scheidel 2020).

Scholars working on historical bureaucratic societies like the empires of Western Asia, or modern nation states, explain that one of the best ways to grasp their political and social architecture is to look at the fiscal technology that they create and implement. Resource extraction is at once the backbone of any large-scale bureaucratic organization – which cannot exist if it cannot afford to – and the fundamental locus of interaction between state agents (ancient and modern) and lay social agents. Within this line of research, Scheidel (2018) investigates corvée systems in different historical and geographical contexts, with an emphasis on the use of workforces in monumental building projects. Scheidel concludes: '*State formation and public construction have long been closely connected in manifold ways, and that makes it all the more important for historians to understand the strategies that states employed for getting things done*' (Scheidel 2018: 262).

Our research shows that organizing and implementing the work at a building site was far from an easy task. Within the royal household, every single step of the process leads to conflicts of varying intensity. Identifying the workers mobilizable for *ilku* was also highly controversial, mainly because it condensed and replayed conflicts that have to do with group boundaries and status signalling. Even when everybody was complying, logistical challenges were still numerous. Quite surprisingly, given this rather unruly backstage, the state did actually manage to get things done.

Our study also indicates that participation in a building site, or in any other imperially led infrastructural project, meant being part of a project that encompassed the entire social and cosmic topography. The construction projects are commanded by the gods, entrusted to the king and finally carried out by multiple social actors belonging to diverse social groups. The dichotomy between royal inscriptions on the one hand, in which the king is the master builder, and the letters and archaeological data on the other, which indicate that monumental public building was a massive collective endeavour, well represent the complex reality of the Neo-Assyrian construction process. The semantic and lexical domains used to describe the Neo-Assyrian kings are often transferred onto the *šitimgallu*, the craftsman who is organizing and guiding the work on site, and under the authority of whom the labour is carried out. This transfer is highlighted in computer-assisted NA by the link between the node 'master builder' and the node 'powerful one/competent'. This relation underlines that the discursive devices used to justify

political power at large are mobilized to strengthen the authority of the agents who are in a face-to-face interaction with the population who is actually implementing the construction. The mobilization of the workforce needed on a construction site and the actual process of building generated social ties, reaffirmed hierarchies, and consolidated local and supra-local orders and their relation to each other. The construction of a palace is a powerful act by which the imperial administration engineered the social fabric, creating or reaffirming synapsis between state and non-state institutions, sometimes almost from scratch in the case of newly created provinces. It was not only walls and gates that were built, but the whole political society that was (re)built along with them.

In the Neo-Assyrian empire, one counted as Assyrian when paying taxes in the form of goods or labour (RINAP 1, Tiglath-pileser III 05, http://oracc.org/rinap/Q003418/). Membership in the community is open: it does not depend on birth in a specific group, be it social, cultic, or ethnic (Postgate 1992; Machinist 1993; Aubet 2013: 126-158; Karlsson 2013: 178-186). This is not to say of course that Neo-Assyrian society was egalitarian, it just means that membership in the ingroup of Assyrians depended on something that people did and not on something that people were. Membership depended on the participation of individuals in the imperial economy or in one of its infrastructure projects. This idea finds a structural analogy in mythological texts, in which human beings were originally created to relieve the gods from hard work (Lambert 2013). Hence, labour – especially *ilku* – is the original purpose of the existence of human beings and the very condition of their membership in the Neo-Assyrian society. In this outlook, there is something fundamentally economic about the Neo-Assyrian, and generally Mesopotamian, social contract in both its supernatural and secular formulations. This statement is not new in itself. Founding arguments about imperial power in ancient Western Asian societies were grounded in an analysis of their political economy: Marx's statement in *das Kapital* about the 'asiatic mode of production', Wittfogel's 'hydraulic hypothesis' that conceptualized irrigation needs in agricultural production as the basis of the state's power over the population (Wittfogel 1957), and Deimel's Temple-State theory (Falkenstein 1954; Foster 1981; Silver 1983; Aubet 2013: 120-126). However, as stressed previously, recent Assyriological research has shown that the grip of the state might not have been so all-encompassing; it has become important to rethink the terms of these wide-scale infrastructural projects (Postgate 1992; Aubet 2013: 126-158).

Political power is fragile because it ultimately relies on the consent of the people. Being that the people are more numerous than the minority that govern them, power and privileges are not shared equally in societies. Why, then, does the majority comply with political domination and, when applicable, with having resources extracted from them in the form of taxes and labour? Is it simply because they are afraid of sanctions and punishment? Scholars have suggested a more complex explanation and insisted that there is always a symbolic dimension to political domination, stressing that 'the most brutal relations of force are always simultaneously symbolic relations' (Bourdieu 1994: 12). We have already mentioned Thompson's 'moral economy,' but more needs to be said here about the ways in which compliance is induced. The sociologist Max Weber, in his efforts to understand the relationship between religious and economic phenomena, insisted that we need to look at how the higher echelons of society justify the social order and their grip on power. They need to explain – to themselves and to those they ruled – why exactly it is that they find themselves at the top of the social scale (Weber 1978 [1922], 1981 [1923]). Picking up Weber's work, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu added that the 'theodicies' are always 'sociodicies' (Bourdieu 1971: 312).

Bourdieu's earliest work on how state institutions favour the reproduction of social elites in France (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964; Passeron and Bourdieu 1970, Bourdieu 1989), coupled with his theoretical reflection on the concept of 'fields' and 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1972, 1979), ultimately led him to look at the state itself as a sociological object in his *cours au collège de France* given between 1989 and 1992 (collected in Bourdieu 2012). The culmination of this effort can be seen in the article 'Rethinking the State' (Bourdieu 1994), in which Bourdieu gives the following advice:

> In order to understand the power of the state in its full specificity, i.e., the particular symbolic efficacy it wields, one must (...) integrate into one and the same explanatory model intellectual traditions customarily perceived as incompatible. It is necessary first, to overcome the opposition between a physicalist vision of the social world that conceives of social relations as relations of physical force and a 'cybernetic' or semiological vision which portrays them as relations of symbolic force, as relations of mean-

ing or relations of communication. The most brutal relations of force are always simultaneously symbolic relations. And acts of submission and obedience are cognitive acts which as such involve cognitive structures, forms of categories of perception, principles of vision and division. (Bourdieu 1994: 12-13)

Bourdieu's particularity *vis-à-vis* Marxist approaches is that he conceived these cognitive structures not as forms of consciousness that could be 'false' or 'awoken', or as ideologies that consist just of 'representations' but as dispositions of the body, 'deep profound corporeal dispositions' (Bourdieu 1994: 14). He argued that:

Submission to the established order is the product of the agreement between, on the one hand, the cognitive structures inscribed in bodies by both collective history (phylogenesis) and individual history (ontogenesis) and, on the other, the objective structures of the world to which these cognitive structures are applied. (...) The state does not necessarily have to give orders or to exercise physical coercion in order to produce an ordered social world, as long as it is capable of producing embodied cognitive structures that accord with objective structures and thus of ensuring the belief of which Hume spoke – namely, doxic submission to the established order. (Bourdieu 1994: 14-15)

Historians could object that the state that Bourdieu is talking about has nothing to do with ancient Western Asian polities. And this may be true. Bourdieu's original starting point was the French state. He did gradually adopt a more historical approach, reading and commenting on the works of the historical sociologists mentioned above, going back in time and using a variety of materials to build his theories. Bourdieu did not look at Assyriological material, which we consider a shame as a Mesopotamian detour would have greatly enriched his work and hence social theory in general. Ancient Western Asian societies did not have the same political tools and symbolic devices to create embodied cognitive structures: they had no wide-scale public education system that could spread ideas on a shared identity to all corners of the empire. They had multi-layered political structures, different non-state/city-state institutions that exercised coercion and law making (Liverani 1979; Lamberg-Karlovsky 2000: 14-21; Schloen 2001; Barjamovic 2004, Van de Mieroop 2015), and they could not mobilize a pre-defined culture as the basis of an identity that could create a powerful emotional bond between individuals and the public administration. Following this reasoning one can ask: how exactly would the Neo-Assyrian state produce these embodied cognitive structures? By engaging the population in frequent building and renovation work.

The construction sites allowed individual social actors, such as corvée workers, to create an individual history – Bourdieu's 'ontogenesis' – aligned with a collective history – Bourdieu's 'phylogenesis' – in projects that were designed to insure the very reproduction of the objective social and political structures of the empire.

Interestingly enough, even non-compliance with *ilku* duties could ultimately be framed as a normal or logical state of affairs in the theodicy and sociodicy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. We mentioned earlier that the other Akkadian word used in contexts of corvée labour, *dullu*, also means hardship, a word that was also connected to the concept of power. Assyrian subjects were hardly the first ones trying to escape *ilku* duty; long before, as narrated in the Old Babylonian *Atrahasis*, a group of gods known as the Igigi resented the corvée duties imposed on them by higher gods (Lambert , Millard 1969). They cursed, complained, debated, seemingly gathered weapons and took their claims to their Chamberlain, the god Enlil. The decision is taken to relieve the Igigi from their work, and to transfer the *ilku* onto a new player in the game, the human being, created from clay mixed with the blood of one of the rebellious gods. We can agree that that was a surprising choice of ingredients if one was looking for a docile labour force. Elements of *Atrahasis* were integrated into *Enuma Elish*, the creation myth that was central in the Neo-Assyrian period, often copied down but also adapted to the Assyrian pantheon (Lambert 2013). This interesting story gave a powerful framework to make sense of the constant resistance of all human beings – from all social backgrounds – to authority and political domination. Then, even when social agents are rebelling against the *ilku* duties imposed on them by the ruling authority, they are still replaying and conforming to a wider cosmic narrative. One could say here that they are aligning an ontogenesis, a rebellious personal history, with a phylogenesis, a rebellious collective mytho-history.

Building sites were clearly not the only tool mobilized by the state to craft these embodied cognitive structures. Conscription of large strata of the population and their cyclical mobilization in military operations, and wide scale

agrarian policies were part of the same effort. Whilst the present paper focused on construction sites, we believe that only the study of the ways in which these multiple strategies overlapped and intersected in the lives of ordinary social actors can allow a deep understanding of how the state was perceived, viewed from below.

CONCLUSIONS

The Neo-Assyrian state wilfully employed the symbolic and regenerative nature of architecture as one of the *loci* to strengthen the sociodicy of the empire by mixing different social categories in construction and reconstruction activities. This brief exploration through network analysis has shown that the social relations formed at building sites and their symbolic dimensions are a heuristic way to understand not just how walls were constructed, but how – and more importantly – the entire political society was built and periodically renovated. But state policies do not operate in a void.

If we intend to rethink the grip of the Neo-Assyrian state, we must be ready to conceive that some social dynamics are not its creations *per se*. We need to understand the dynamics of the local political economies of the countryside to be able to grasp exactly what the state was leaning on and what it was pushing back against. To pursue this goal, more studies are needed on the lower echelons of Neo-Assyrian society and their relation to the social groups around them. There is enough textual information and archaeological data to sketch the social structures of the Neo-Assyrian countryside and to grasp the sociological aspects of its 'signature landscape' (Wilkinson 2003; Ur 2017). Practically, this means devoting more attention to the *qinni*, to the different levels of the *bētū*, to the *nasiku*, to the small farmed demesnes, to the villages and their managers, and to the place of lower-echelon social actors in the large estates. State-led interventions in the economy had very concrete effects on the different social groups and likewise non-state asymmetrical dynamics between social groups had profound effects on the state: debt cancellations subtracted workforce from higher social groups and high levels of dependency subtracted workforce from the state.

The infrastructural projects that the state was constantly carrying out meant that it needed a large number of *ilku* workers, and this in turn suggests that it had to push against the endemic dynamic of exploitation and rural usury, making sure that the majority of the land did not belong to only a few individuals – including of course its own agents. Building sites can be seen as equilibrating tools: they reinforced the state's relation with individuals and the different groups they belonged to, they reaffirmed the social boundaries between social actors, but they also kept the entire social fabric in balance. Computer-assisted SNA can help visualize and understand how imperial dynamics impact social groups and their identity, but we need to make sure that these different social actors and their groups actually appear in the networks that we are generating. We need to place the *ilku* labourers, the deportees, and the slaves as nodes of the network. And we must be able to visualize and investigate not just interpersonal interactions, but inter-institutional ones. It is only by aligning our sets of tools with our theoretical ambitions that we may be able to translate into concrete practices our humble wishes of giving a voice to the lower strata of the Neo-Assyrian society, those who were, for all practical purposes, the Empire-builders.

This contribution shows that answering questions regarding Neo-Assyrian political governance and compliance requires the collaboration of scholars in multiple fields. Computer-assisted linguistic studies and network analysis are very promising, but they do add a layer of possible incomprehension between scholars because they introduce a new terminology altogether (i.e., 'degree', 'ego graph', 'nodes', 'strong ties and weak ties', 'core', 'periphery') and because the graphic visualizations are generated according to an algorithm, which often works in a way that only few scholars understand. Generating a graph in Gephi is easy, it is a click of a mouse. What is not easy is to comprehend exactly what you are looking at and what its significance is. This is why an interdisciplinary approach in which Assyriologists, archaeologists, computer scientists and social theorists work together to fine tune these tools and shed light on the results is needed. When we have a network that shows us a more representative panel of ancient social actors, linked to the different institutions and social groups they belong to, localized spatially, and with their connection to the material culture established, we will be able to better grasp ancient Western Asian societies in their sociological, economic, religious and political dimensions.

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