

Research article

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On the word *timmu* in Ashurbanipal's account of the sacking of Thebes by his army

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Abstract: The Akkadian (but originally Sumerian) word *timmu* features prominently in the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's (668–631) account of his army's sacking of the south-Egyptian city of Thebes. Two tall, heavy, and adorned *timmu* are said to have been seized from a temple gate in Thebes and transported to Assyria. The question is whether *timmu* in this context should be translated according to its basic meaning of “column” or if the translation “obelisk” (not mentioned in standard Akkadian dictionaries) is a viable alternative. This article argues that “obelisk” is a fully plausible translation, and discusses what the use of the word *timmu* for obelisk could tell about Assyrian perceptions of Egyptian culture.

Keywords: Akkadian, Assyria, column, Egypt, obelisk, Sumerian

Introduction

In the narrative of his army's second military campaign to Egypt in 664/663 BCE, the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–631) claims that his forces took “two tall *timmu* with shiny *zaḫalû*-metal, whose weight was 2,500 talents (and which) stood at a temple gate” back to Assyria in connection with the sacking of the south-Egyptian city of Thebes.

The meaning of the Akkadian (but originally Sumerian)¹ word *timmu*, which is pivotal in the above quote, is disputed, at least in this particular context. This is reflected in the differing interpretations given in the translations of Ashurbanipal's royal inscriptions and in the entries in the standard Akkadian dictionaries.

Regarding the translations of the inscriptions, some translators of the passage in question have preferred “obelisk”, while others have opted for “column/pillar”. Translations from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century use “obelisk” without exception, as far as I can see (Smith 1871: 54; Smith 1887: 15; Jensen 1890: 169; Streck 1916: 17; Luckenbill 1927: 296; Piepkorn 1933: 41). In modern times, translations are divided between the alternatives “obelisk” and “column/pillar”. Oppenheim (1969: 295), Cogan (2008: 152), and Novotny and Jeffers (2018: 236) all use “obelisk”, while Onasch (1994: 123, 125), Borger (1996: 215), Talon (2011: 151), and Hurowitz (2017: 185) use “column/pillar” for *timmu*.

The relevant entries in the standard Akkadian dictionaries (AHw, CAD, CDA) show two different meanings for the word *timmu*. On the one hand, *timmu* means “pole, rod, stake”. On the other hand, it means “column”. Clearly, it is the latter meaning, which refers to an architectural element, that is relevant here. None of the mentioned dictionaries include “obelisk” as a possible meaning in the context of their textual attestations of *timmu* as an architectural element.² Similarly, neither of the up-to-

1 According to the Electronic Pennsylvanian Sumerian Dictionary (ePSD), the Sumerian word *dim* (Akkadian *timmu*) means “post, pillar, pole” (psd.museum.upenn.edu/nepsd-frame.html, accessed 2024-05-29).

2 Notably, the entry in the CAD (Chicago Assyrian Dictionary) also uses the term “column” in relation to Ashurbanipal's account of his army's actions in Thebes, when giving “two tall columns cast of pure *zaḫalû*-silver”. It

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date English-Akkadian dictionaries (AEAD, EACAD) includes an entry for “obelisk”, and the translation “column, pillar” is given in the AEAD's entry on *timmu* (p. 125).

The questions posed in this article are the following: Can *timmu* really mean obelisk (of the Egyptian type)? As noted above, the “obelisk” interpretation largely belongs to an earlier scholarly era, and the standard Akkadian dictionaries do not include it as an alternative. If the translation “obelisk” can be justified, what does the use of this terminology and the act of seizing obelisks reveal about how Egypt and Egyptian obelisks were perceived in Assyria? As far as I know, there has never been a full discussion of the translation of *timmu* in the context of Ashurbanipal's narrative of his army's second campaign in Egypt.³

In what follows, a comprehensive quotation of the passage in question will be provided, followed by a discussion based on the research questions presented above.

The text passage

(39) KU.BABBAR KÙ.GI *ni-siq-ti* NA₄.MEŠ NÍG.ŠU É.GAL-šú *ma-la ba-šú-u* (40) *lu-bul-ti bir-me* GADA.MEŠ ANŠE.KUR.RA.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ UN.MEŠ *zik-ru u sin-niš* (41) 2 *tim-me* MAḤ.MEŠ *pi-tiq za-ḥa-le-e eb-bi* (42) *ša 2 LIM 5 ME GUN KI-LÁ-šú-nu man-za-az KÁ É.KUR* (43) *ul-tu man-za-al-ti-šú-nu as-suḥ-ma al-qa-a a-na* KUR AN.ŠÁR.KI (44) *šal-la-tú ka-bit-tú ina la mī-ni áš-lu-la ul-tú qé-reb* URU.ni-i' (45) *e-li* KUR.mu-šur ù KUR.ku-ú-si (46) GÍŠ.TUKUL.MEŠ-ia *ú-šam-ri-ir-ma áš-ta-kan li-i-tu* (47) *it-ti qa-ti ma-li-ti šal-meš a-tu-ra* (48) *a-na* NINA.KI URU EN-ti-ia

(39) Silver, gold, precious stones, as much property of his palace as there was, (40) garment(s) with multi-colored trim, linen garments, large horses, people – male and female – (41) two tall obelisks cast with shiny *zaḥalû* metal, (42) whose weight was 2,500 talents (and which) stood at a temple gate, (43) I ripped (them) from where they were erected and took (them) to Assyria. (44) I carried off substantial booty, (which was) without number, from inside the city Thebes. (45–46) I made my weapons prevail over Egypt and Kush and (thus) achieved victory. (47) With full hand(s), I returned safely (48) to Nineveh, my capital city.⁴

The semantic range of *timmu*

Regarding the Akkadian-Sumerian word *timmu*, the CAD (T, pp. 418–419) offers the meanings “pole, stake” (1) and “column” (2).⁵ Similarly, the AHw (III, p. 1360) suggests the meanings “Stange” (1), “Pfahl” (2), and “Pfeiler, Säule” (3). Finally, the CDA (p. 407) provides the meanings “post, pillar” (in texts from Nuzi), “pole, rod”, “stake for impalements”, and “archit. ‘column’.” As already noted, it is the meaning of *timmu* as an architectural element that is of interest for the present discussion.

The word *timmu* is usually attested in its meaning of an architectural element. Also, and as can be seen in the attestation section of the CAD, the majority of the examples of *timmu* as an architectural element derive from Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions.⁶ In an inscription (RINAP 2, no. 2) of Sargon II (721–705), “four [ma]tching cedar columns (^{gis}*tim-me*), [whose diameter(s) are one *nindanu* ea]ch” are

should be noted, however, that the CAD entries *manzazu* and *manzaltu* (M I, pp. 228, 233) speak of “obelisks” when referring to Streck's aforementioned translation.

3 As far as I can see, only Streck (1916: 17, nn. 2–3) comments on *timmu* (in two footnotes), but he merely discusses the weight and material of the two monuments, not the term itself.

4 RINAP 5/1, no. 11 (the most recent text edition). Transliteration and translation by Novotny and Jeffers (2018: 236). The passage also occurs in RINAP 5/1, nos. 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12; RINAP 5/2, nos. 93, 197, 233. These versions are almost identical, but the texts RINAP 5/1, nos. 9, 12 and RINAP 5/2, nos. 93, 197, 233 are somewhat abbreviated. The latter three texts also stand out through the writing ^{gis}*tim-me* (more on this below).

5 The former translation is subdivided into two sub-meanings, with 1.a) being general and appearing in genitive constructions and 1.b) referring to poles, stakes used when impaling enemies.

mentioned. The text states that these were positioned between lion colossi (*urmahhu*) and crossbeams (*adappu*).⁷ In a letter (SAA 1, no. 66) to Sargon II about “casting column-bases and lions of bronze”, the author refers to “four column(*tim-me*)-bases of bronze for two *hilānu* palaces”, with (*bīt*) *hilānu* being Syrian in origin (Frankfort 1952). Sennacherib (704–681) regularly mentions his making and/or placing of adorned columns of metal or exotic wood. These were positioned on top of various types of colossi (*urmahhu*, *piriggallu*, ^(munus)ĀB.ZA.ZA-*a-ti/te*) or stone pedestals (*kigallu*) and as supporting crossbeams or architraves (*hittu*).⁸ For example, in RINAP 3/1, no. 15, Sennacherib claims to have placed “two mag[nificent] ebony columns (^{gis}*tim-me*), [whose inlays are *pišallu*-gold,] and columns (^{gis}*tim-me*) of [cedar, cypress, (and) *dapṛānu*-juniper] with *eš*[*marû*-silver and bronze] inlays” between “sphinxes” (ĀB.ZA.ZA-*a-ti*) and architraves.⁹ In two of his inscriptions (RINAP 3/2, nos. 75–76), Sennacherib speaks of “[tall] cedar columns (^{gis}*tim-me*)” being brought from Lebanon to Assyria, using the Tigris River for transportation. His successor, Esarhaddon (680–669), also mentions columns being imported to Assyria, with his vassal kings sending him “large beams, tall columns (*tim-me*), (and) very long planks of cedar (and) cypress” from Lebanon (RINAP 4, no. 1). He also refers to “large copper columns” (*tim-me*) and “tall cedar columns (^{gis}*tim-me*)” supporting crossbeams (RINAP 4, nos. 1, 3). Various types of colossi are mentioned in this context, although not explicitly as column bases.

Turning finally to the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, the word *timmu* also appears as an architectural element in passages other than the one describing the looting of Thebes. Ashurbanipal claims to have “had long-haired heroes, lion-headed eagles, (and) tall columns (*tim-me*) erected at [the gates of the sanctuaries of ‘the great gods’]” (RINAP 5/1, no. 3). He also claims to have “[fastened band(s) of silver on tall] col[umns] (^{gis}*tim-me*)” and to have “[erected them] at [the Gate of the Abundance of the Lands]”, meaning at the entrance to the Ashur temple (RINAP 5/1, no. 5). Furthermore, he claims to have “covered tall columns (^{gis}*tim-me*) with shiny copper and to have positioned the architrave(s) of the gate(s) of its *bīt-hilāni* (on them)”, the building in question being a palace of the crown prince (RINAP 5/1, no. 9). It can be noted that the connection between columns and colossi/pedestals-crossbeams/architraves is not as strong as in the inscriptions of Sennacherib, suggesting that *timmu* could have been free-standing.

In conclusion, there is little in these attestations of the word *timmu* as an architectural element to suggest that “obelisk” lay within the semantic range of *timmu*. On the contrary, the Akkadian-Sumerian term *timmu* seems to be firmly tied to Mesopotamian (and Syrian) palace and temple architecture. Only some of the inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal allow for the possibility that *timmu* could have been free-standing (detached from various types of bases and superstructures), although the evidence for this is unclear. Also, the architectural element in question appears to have been made of metal or wood, not of stone (like obelisks). The only link to Egypt is the fact that some *timmu* were made of ebony (*ušû*), a type of wood that was certainly imported from Africa. Nevertheless, they had bases and superstructures.

6 One Middle-Assyrian text (*AfO* 17, p. 146) mentions a column of cedar, and another speaks of wooden figurines on top of columns (*AfO* 18, p. 306). Additionally, an inscription (in Akkadian and from Susa) by a Persian ruler named Darius mentions a “house of columns” (MDP 21, p. 40, no. 5).

7 See also RINAP 2, nos. 7–9, 11, 13–14.

8 See RINAP 3/1, nos. 1–2, 15–17, 34, and RINAP 3/2, nos. 39–44, 46, 75–76.

9 The term “sphinx” in a Mesopotamian context should be understood as referring to a hybrid creature like the “male and female human-headed lions” (Black and Green 1992: 51), not to the Egyptian sphinx (such as the Great Sphinx at Giza, which wears the royal *nemes* headcloth).

The word *timmu* in the account of the sack of Thebes

Before turning to the account of the sack of Thebes, some words about Egyptian obelisks are necessary. The Egyptian obelisk was a “tapering, needle-like stone monument, the tip of which was carved in the form of a pyramidion” (Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 208). The forms of both the obelisk and the pyramidion had their origins in the *benben* stone, a cult object in the temple of the sun god Ra in the city of Heliopolis (Habachi 1978: 5–14; Quirke 1992: 27).¹⁰ Although Egyptian obelisks are closely linked with the sun god, the city of Heliopolis and temple structures, they also appear (in a smaller form) in front of private tombs of the Old Kingdom (2686–2181) (Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 208). During the great building era of the New Kingdom (1550–1069), massive obelisks were made and erected at temple pylons/gates, often in pairs. Inscriptions, commissioned by the Egyptian kings to tell of their supposedly brave and pious deeds and characters, adorn the sides of these obelisks (Habachi 1978: 51–108; Quirke 1992: 77–78). As observed by Shaw and Nicholson (1995: 208), “no such pairs remain *in situ* today, the last two having been separated when Muhammed Ali presented one of the Luxor obelisks to the French government in 1819, leaving only one in front of the temple.”¹¹

Moving on to the textual passage that highlights the term *timmu* in relation to Ashurbanipal's second campaign in Egypt, there are a few clues to focus on, namely quantity (two), height (“tall”), material (*zaḥalû* metal), weight (2,500 GUN), and placement (at a temple gate). The question is whether these clues point to a “column” or an “obelisk”. A final aspect to consider, and one that is closely related to the factors of height, material, and weight, is how these two *timmu* were brought to Assyria.

Starting with the clue of quantity, the obelisk is a plausible choice of interpretation in this context. While it is true that obelisks do not always appear in pairs, the notion of twin obelisks at an Egyptian temple gate is expected. By contrast, finding two columns at the temple gate is less obvious, although this possibility cannot be excluded. Still, Egyptian columns are associated with plurality (not duality) and with the courtyards, hypostyle halls, and pronai beyond the main gate of Egyptian temples (Spencer 1984; Quirke 1992: 77–78).

Regarding the clue of height, the passage merely states that the two *timmu* are “tall” (*šīru*). This measure is of course relative, and all one can venture to suggest in this context is that the monuments in question must have been taller than a human being in order to be referred to as “tall”. Based on this information alone, it is impossible to decide between “obelisk” and “column”.

Turning to the clue of material, it is not stated what the core of the two *timmu* was made of, but the surfaces are said to have consisted (partly or fully) of “*zaḥalû* metal”.¹² According to the CAD (Z, pp. 12–13), *zaḥalû* was “a silver alloy” used for casting objects and for plating metal, wood, and brickwork. To this observation is added the comment that “since it is often called *ebbu*,¹³ *zaḥalû* may refer to a silver alloy of a specific shade or luster”.¹⁴ This metal, *zaḥalû*, was probably electrum, a gold-silver alloy used to plate the tops of pyramids and obelisks (Habachi 1978; Onasch 1994: 123, 125;

¹⁰ The *benben* was believed to symbolize the primeval mound that receives the first rays of the rising sun. The gilded capstone of obelisks and pyramids was known as a *benbenet* (Habachi 1978: 5, 10).

¹¹ For the uprooting of Egyptian obelisks in ancient and modern times, see Iversen 1968 (specifically about the Roman period) and Habachi 1978: 109–182 (generally).

¹² Ashurbanipal seems to claim that the two *timmu* were made (*pitqu*) entirely of *zaḥalû*-metal, but this is most likely an exaggeration. It can be noted here that the writing of *timmu* (as in the context of the sack of Thebes) sometimes includes the determinative *g i š* (RINAP 5/2, nos. 93, 197, 233). This sign determines “Baum-, Holz- und Gerätenamen” (MZL, no. 469). Supposedly, *g i š* in this case classifies *timmu* as a piece of craftsmanship (regardless of the material).

¹³ The word *ebbu* means “polished, shining, lustrous, clean, pure (in a cultic sense), holy” (CAD E, p. 1).

¹⁴ The word *zaḥalû*, which has been identified as having a cognate in Ge'ez (Leslau 1944: 58), is indeed described as *ebbu* (*eb-bi*) in the text passage being discussed in this article.

Quirke 2001). Although it cannot be excluded that two plated columns are meant by the term *timmu*, it is clear that the presence of electrum does not argue against seeing the two *timmu* as obelisks, in view of the gilded capstones.¹⁵

Regarding the clue of weight, the *timmu* monuments are described as weighing 2,500 *biltu* (GUN), each or jointly. One *biltu*, generally translated as “talent”, corresponds to about 30 kilos (Caplice 2002: 95). Consequently, 2,500 *biltu* (the weight of the Egyptian monuments) is equivalent to about 75,000 kilos, or 75 tons. Although 75 tons is a considerable weight, it is less than the weight of most Egyptian obelisks that have survived to this day. An unfinished New Kingdom(?) obelisk that still lies in the granite quarries of Aswan, and which would have been the largest obelisk ever cut had it not cracked in the quarrying process, has a length of 41.75 meters and an estimated weight of 1,168 tons (Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 208). The largest obelisk still standing is the Lateran Obelisk of Thotmes III (1479–1425). Its present height is 32.18 meters and it weighs 455 tons (Habachi 1978: 112). In conclusion, if the *timmu* monuments were obelisks, they were comparatively small. There are examples of small Egyptian obelisks that have been preserved (partially or completely) to this day. A pair of obelisks, each 3.13 meters high, were part of a chapel in the Abu-Simbel temple of Ramses II (1279–1213), a pair of small quartzite obelisks (the preserved one is 0.95 meters high) commissioned by Sethos II (1200–1194) were part of the Karnak temple in Thebes, and a single quartzite obelisk of Ramses IV (1153–1147) would have been around 2.5 meters high if complete (Habachi 1978: 98–101). In other words, the weight of 2,500 *biltu* does not exclude obelisks.

Turning to the clue of their placement, the text merely states that the two *timmu* “stood at a temple gate” (*manzaz bāb ekurri*). It does not say whether this was the main gate of the temple, although it is reasonable to assume that it was. Similarly, the text does not say that the front (and not the back) side of the gate is meant, although this is also a reasonable assumption. If they stood on the front side of the main gate, it makes sense to identify a pair of twin obelisks as the two *timmu* in question. If we make less of the expression *manzaz bāb ekurri*,¹⁶ it is possible that two columns are meant. Having said that, a pair of monuments at the back side of a secondary entrance would be unexpected, given the textual context, which paints a picture of Ashurbanipal's army seizing the most important monuments of the temple.

A final aspect to consider, and one that is closely related to the factors of height, material, and weight, is the question of how these two *timmu* monuments were brought back to Assyria. In particular, the fact that they had to be transported overland for some distance is problematic. This can be said for both scenarios: whether they were obelisks or columns. Of course, it is possible that the two monuments were transported as fragments and then reassembled on site in Assyria.¹⁷ The possibility that only the plating of the two *timmu* was brought to Assyria does not find support in the text. The references to the plating (as well as to the weight and placement) of the two *timmu* are clearly attributive in function, with the main clause going on to state that the two monuments were “ripped from where they were erected (*ultu manzaltišunu assuḥ*)” and taken (*leqû*) to Assyria. The word behind the translation “ripped” is *nasāḥu*, typically used in Assyrian royal inscriptions to refer to the deportation of people following an Assyrian conquest (CAD N II, pp. 3–4). The noun in question is

15 The fact that the Assyrian king does not mention any Egyptian royal inscriptions on the sides of the obelisks can be explained by the assumption that he did not want to recognize any other ruler. Besides, temple columns were also inscribed in ancient Egypt (Spencer 1984). In other words, the lack of a reference to inscriptions is not a factor in the debate on whether *timmu* should be translated as “column” or “obelisk”.

16 The word *manzazu* (in the context of *bābu*) is translated as “standing guard at” in the CAD (M I, p. 233).

17 The two *timmu* may have been vandalized and broken into pieces during the sacking. It is also possible that the Assyrian engineers deliberately broke them. Still, it should be noted, however, that the Assyrian engineers were no strangers to hauling monumental sculptures. For example, an Assyrian *lamassu* now at the Oriental Institute in Chicago weighs about 40 tons (<https://isac-idb.uchicago.edu/id/10443a90-e395-4a2f-a81f-75a3b2312c1c>, accessed 2024-06-02).

manzaltu, which carries the meaning of a “stand for an object or image” (CAD M I, p. 228). The suffix-pronoun third person plural *šunu* (added to *manzaltu*) obviously refers to the two monuments as a whole and not to their surfaces.¹⁸ It is also possible, of course, that Ashurbanipal's claim of seizing obelisks or columns was more or less fictional.¹⁹

Having discussed the clues and aspects mentioned in the introduction to this discussion, it should be clear that the meaning “obelisk” is plausible with regard to the narrative of the Assyrian army's looting of two *timmu* from a temple in Thebes.

Granting that the two monuments were twin obelisks, where were they placed in Assyria? It is tempting to suggest that they were among those building elements referred to as *timmu* that Ashurbanipal's building engineers are said to have erected outside “the sanctuaries of the great gods” (RINAP 5/1, no. 3) or outside the Ashur temple (RINAP 5/1, no. 5), but this idea cannot be proven. In any case, they were most likely placed in a high-profile temple or palace area in an Assyrian city. The precise original location of the twin obelisks in Thebes is also unclear, although it can be narrowed down to Theban sanctuaries associated with the cult of the sun god, including those of the main god Amon(-Ra).²⁰ The term *ekurru* is referred to, which suggests that the *timmu* were looted from a major sanctuary (CAD E, pp. 70–72).

The question is why the Assyrians chose to use the Akkadian-Sumerian word *timmu* to designate Egyptian obelisks rather than adopting the Egyptian term for obelisk (*tehen*) as a loanword in Akkadian. The answer may be that the shape of the obelisk (as well as its location at temple gates) was something the Assyrians could relate to, as it reminded them of the columns, poles, and stakes that were part of their own culture. In particular, the shape of the obelisk may have reminded them of the shape of the stakes they used to impale enemies, which supposedly had needle-like tips to facilitate their use. In contrast, the crocodile was without parallel in Assyria, and the Egyptian word for this animal (*meseḥ*) functioned as an Egyptian loanword (*namsuḥu*) in Akkadian (Lambdin 1953).

Placing the Assyrian looting of Thebes in a wider cultural-political context, the act of taking the twin obelisks (or columns, for that matter) can be regarded as an expression of the phenomenon known as “cultural appropriation”, meaning the adoption or seizing of certain elements (such as ideas, symbols, artifacts, images, and art) of one culture by another (and often dominant) culture.²¹ In this context, it may be noted that some scholars even refer to an “Egyptomania” in Assyria during Neo-Assyrian times (934–612), pointing to ivories, amulets, and statues brought to Assyria from Egypt (Feldman 2004; Karmel Thomason 2004).²² Egyptian cultural phenomena were redefined and

¹⁸ Notably, the translations in the three standard publications of the royal inscriptions of Ashurbanipal made by Streck (1916: 17), Borger (1996: 215), and Novotny and Jeffers (2018: 236) all point in the same direction, with the suffix-pronoun in question referring to the monuments as a whole.

¹⁹ Against this background, it is suspicious that Ashurbanipal does not boast more about this engineering feat in his inscriptions and that he does not illustrate it in the relief art of his palace walls (at least not in the relief art that has been preserved). For the relief art from Ashurbanipal's main palace in Nineveh, see Barnett 1976.

²⁰ For the idea that obelisks were erected only at sanctuaries tied to the sun-cult, see Habachi 1978; Quirke 2001. Still, quite a few Egyptian deities were linked to the sun cult. Besides Amon(-Ra), the Theban god Montu(-Ra) can be mentioned in this context (Quirke 2001).

²¹ It has been proposed that there are four kinds of cultural appropriation, namely cultural exchange (reciprocal exchange), cultural dominance (imposing the dominant culture on a subordinate culture), cultural exploitation (taking from a subordinate culture for the benefit of the dominant culture), and transculturation (the development of cultural hybrids) (Rogers 2006). Obviously, the Assyrian extraction of Egyptian human and material resources is an example of “cultural exploitation”.

²² Still, this Assyrian “Egyptomania” seems insignificant in comparison with the Roman appropriation of Egyptian culture. In fact, 13 of the 21 Egyptian obelisks preserved to this day can be found in Rome, a legacy of ancient Roman times. The Roman authorities even made their own obelisks (Iversen 1968; Habachi 1978: 109). Examples of material resources flowing from Egypt to Assyria include (the fragments of) three statues of the Kushite king Taharqa (690–664) that have been found in the ruins of Nineveh. These appear to have been prominently stationed at the entrance to a palace (Karmel Thomason 2004: 158).

reinterpreted²³ along the lines of cultural appropriation and against the backdrop of Assyria's domination of Egypt.

Conclusion

The focal point of this article has been a textual passage in which the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal claims that his army seized two monuments, designated by the Akkadian-Sumerian term *timmu*, in connection with the sacking of the south-Egyptian city of Thebes in 664/663 BCE.

The meaning of *timmu* is disputed, at least in this particular context. Translations from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century and some modern translations see *timmu* as “obelisk”, while several other modern translations, and all the standard Akkadian dictionaries, regard *timmu* as meaning “column”. With this in mind, the following questions were posed: Can *timmu* really mean obelisk? If the translation “obelisk” can be justified, what does the use of this terminology and the act of seizing obelisks tell us about Assyrian perceptions of Egypt and Egyptian obelisks? To my knowledge, the translation of *timmu* in the context of the sack of Thebes has not been fully discussed before.

A number of clues and aspects concerning the taking of two *timmu* by the army of Ashurbanipal, namely their quantity, height, material, weight, placement, and means of transportation, have been discussed in order to determine whether the translation “obelisk” can be justified. This article argues that it is fully possible, and perhaps even likely, that *timmu* means “obelisk” in the context of the narrative of Ashurbanipal's second Egyptian campaign. The fact that the Egyptian *timmu* are described as two in number, “tall”, plated with electrum, weighing 75 tons, and placed at a temple gate does not speak against their having been twin obelisks, although it cannot be ruled out that they were columns. The fact that the two monuments were light in weight compared to the most famous examples of Egyptian obelisks, and the circumstance that the transportation of the supposed obelisks must have been a major challenge, do not exclude the possibility that *timmu* can be translated as “obelisk”. There are several examples of small (but still “tall”) New Kingdom obelisks, and the transportation of Egyptian columns would also have been a major obstacle. The possibilities that the two monuments were broken into pieces (and thus made easier to transport) and that Ashurbanipal's words about seizing *timmu* did not correspond to reality, must also be considered. Arguably, the standard Akkadian dictionaries should include “obelisk” as a possible meaning of the word *timmu* in the context of an architectural element, in addition to “column”.

The use of *timmu* instead of an Egyptian loanword in Akkadian to refer to obelisks may be explained by the circumstance that the shape of obelisks was something to which the Assyrians could relate. The phenomenon of cultural appropriation is expressed here, both through the act of seizing the obelisks and in the “Egyptomania” of the Neo-Assyrian state, because of which Egyptian resources flowed into Assyria, and Egyptian culture was redefined through the eyes of the Assyrians.

Abbreviations

AEAD	Parpola <i>et al.</i> 2007
AfO 17	Weidner 1954–56
AfO 18	Köcher 1957–58
AHw	von Soden 1965–1974

23 It has been suggested that Assyrian “obelisks” are evidence of Egyptian influence (Frahm 2011). The Assyrian “obelisks” in question are the Broken Obelisk (BagF 4, no. 131), the White Obelisk (BagF 4, no. 131), the Rassam Obelisk (BagF 4, no. 138), and the Black Obelisk (BagF 4, no. 152). The Assyrian “obelisks” differ from Egyptian obelisks (of the New Kingdom) in several important ways. They are shorter and more compact, they have stepped apexes, and they are decorated with registers containing reliefs and epigraphs. Assyrian “obelisks” are referred to as *narû* in Akkadian texts (CAD N I, pp. 364–367).

BagF 4	Börker-Klähn 1982
CAD	Gelb <i>et al.</i> 1956–2010
CDA	Black, George, and Postgate 2000
EACAD	Cohen 2011
MDP 21	Scheil 1929
MZL	Borger 2003
RINAP 2	Frame 2021
RINAP 3/1	Grayson and Novotny 2012
RINAP 3/2	Grayson and Novotny 2014
RINAP 4	Leichty 2011
RINAP 5/1	Novotny and Jeffers 2018
RINAP 5/2	Novotny and Jeffers 2023
SAA 1	Parpola 1987

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