

Prices and Wages in Mesopotamian Royal Inscriptions

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[Rulers often use favourable economic figures to enhance their public image. Royal inscriptions of the early OB period seem to have adopted a similar device. These texts mention information on prices and wages at the time of their composition. Many commentators read this use of economic information as propaganda. According to them, the economic situation is idealised in the inscriptions. This point is often made by means of a contrast between such ‘utopian’ economic passages and ‘realistic’ information taken from everyday documents of the period, such as contracts and legal texts. The view that economic passages in royal inscriptions are unrealistic raises a number of issues in the study of royal discourse in the ancient Near East. In this article, I examine economic passages in OB inscriptions taking into account the following question as a starting point: do we have robust parallel sources providing reliable information on what the ‘actual’ prices and wages were? Two of the main findings are, first, that we lack grounds for a robust contrast between ‘utopian’ and ‘realistic’ economic information. Second, while royal inscriptions tend portray a ruler’s policies positively, they do not necessarily display the features of propagandistic discourse in their economic passages.]

Keywords: Old Babylonian royal inscriptions; economic propaganda; methodology and economic history.

0. Introduction

Rulers often use economic statistics in official discourse so that the populace may see their administration in a good light. Royal inscriptions from ancient Mesopotamia extol the character and deeds of the ruler. The practice of including economic information that seems ‘too good to be true’ has been identified in some of those inscriptions. I call those passages mentioning prices and wages within a royal inscription ‘economic passages’. Assyriologists have developed a tradition of interpreting such portions of text as royal ‘propaganda’. The main reason for this is that they believe facts and figures mentioned in economic passages betray a utopian view of the economic conditions during a ruler’s reign. They believe ‘realistic’ but comparable economic data must be extracted from more objective economic, administrative and legal texts. After comparison, the

1. In what follows, my use of primary sources translated by somebody else (frequently Frayne 1990 for Sumerian texts), will be clearly indicated. Other translations are my own.

disparity between economic passages and the data from those objective texts leads them to read all economic passages uniformly as unrealistic propaganda.

I have recently begun to re-examine this way of reading economic passages. At first, I tended to agree with this mainstream interpretation, but – particularly in the case of inscriptions from the early Old Babylonian (OB) period – I have come across a series of points that are leading me to challenge the standard view. In this article, I would like to focus on OB Mesopotamian royal inscriptions and present a preliminary report of my findings. I have looked at inscriptions from the reigns of Sîn-kāšid (ca. 1865–1833), Nūr-Adad (1865–1850), Sîn-iddinam (1849–1843), Warad-Sîn (1834–1823) and Šamšī-Adad (1807–1775).² I will share three main findings that should be of interest: (1) the mainstream view of economic passages tends to be reproduced in the contemporary literature without a more critical examination of the initial arguments that established this tradition of interpretation; (2) those initial arguments could be challenged on methodological grounds: comparing data contained in economic passages to ‘realistic’ economic data in more objective texts is more difficult than it seemed at first; (3) on the other hand, if we look closer at economic passages in terms of their cultural and literary features, we may not conclude that they should be uniformly taken as propaganda.

In what follows, I discuss each of these findings. First, I outline the development of the mainstream interpretation as a tradition that developed within the field of Assyriology. I trace the origin of this tradition back to a small number of works published in the 1950s and 1960s. Those, in turn, refer to studies of objective prices and wages undertaken in an earlier era of the discipline. This leads me to address my second finding. A robust comparison, between allegedly propagandistic economic passages and more objective information on prices and wages contained in economic, administrative and legal texts, is not as straightforward as it seems. For this reason, we should not rely too much on this sort of procedure. Thirdly, the view that economic passages reinforce royal propaganda can also be challenged on the grounds of cultural and literary features of the wider inscription in which each passage is included. Those inscriptions are not uniform, even though they share some elements in common.

Notice that I am not attempting here to offer a well-articulated alternative theory to help us make sense of economic passages. Given those three preliminary findings, I suggest the following tentative conclusions: (1) we lack the necessary information to make a robust contrast between economic passages and objective economic data; (2) royal inscriptions do indeed try to portray the king’s character and deeds in a good light, and this portrayal might well include economic performance; (3) but it does not necessarily mean that they are propaganda in the sense in which we understand the term today; (4) some factors have been neglected in the interpretation of economic passages in royal inscriptions; (5) a re-examination of the mainstream view of economic passages will have to reconsider both the basis for this view and the text/context of the passages themselves in the search for a more rigorously established interpretation.

1. *Generalising Interpretations*

I have identified a number of OB economic passages (see Appendix 1), but two good illustrations for the concept are, first, Sîn-kāšid’s text from Uruk (RIME 4.4.1.8) and, second, Šamšī-Adad I’s text from Assur (RIMA 1.0.39):

2. All dates BC. The approximate dates follow the conventional middle chronology. See Van de Mieroop 2016: 17–18, 348–63. See Appendix 1 for the examples of economic passages from each reign.

[*Šîn-kāšid, wall of Uruk*:] In his period of kingship, according to the market value of his land, 3 gur of barley, 12 minas of wool, 10 minas of copper, 3 ban of vegetable oil cost one shekel of silver.³

[*Šamšī-Adad I, Enlil temple in Assur*:] When I built the temple of the god Enlil, my lord, the prices in my city, Aššur, (were): two cor of barley could be purchased for one shekel of silver; fifteen minas of wool for one shekel of silver; and two seahs of oil for one shekel of silver.⁴

Large fragments of these two inscriptions were known already in the early days of Assyriology, when scholars took those economic passages at face value. At a later stage, a new critical view of economic passages as propagandistic emerged and quickly got accepted as the new mainstream interpretation.

Early Assyriologists were charitable towards the claims made in royal inscriptions. One study, for example, assumed that Šamšī-Adad's economic passage was merely "fixing" or regulating "the monetary standard".⁵ This was deemed comparable with the "inscription of Sin-gashid (*sic*) of Uruk". A couple of years later, Walter Schwenzner published a monograph on Babylonian economic life. That seminal study included an attempt to establish the prices of certain commodities, including cereal, oil and wool. A table listed 'the prices' of such commodities with an indication of their sources.⁶ Some of the primary material was economic and administrative, but the sources for the early OB period were precisely the economic passages of Šîn-kāšid and Šamšī-Adad.⁷ In the early days of Assyriology, then, the conventional interpretation was to regard economic passages in royal inscriptions as trustworthy sources of information about daily economic life in ancient Mesopotamia.

However, with the publication of a large amount of ancient Near Eastern economic, administrative and legal texts in the following decades, new studies emerged, which dealt with several aspects of economic history. Bruno Meissner published a monograph on commodity prices in the mid-1930s. He used a larger number of sources than Schwenzner to list the prices in Babylon, but it was only in the late 1950s that a more detailed and critical inclusion of the newly published sources was taken into account.⁸ From the 1950s onwards, prices and wages contained in economic passages of royal inscriptions were no longer held as reliable sources of information.

As far as I can tell, Albrecht Goetze first suggested this line of thought to an English-speaking audience as part of his commentary on the Laws of Eshnunna (LE). LE starts with a list of tariffs for several commodities and services – 1 cor of barley, 3 seahs of fine oil, 12 of normal oil, 6 minas of wool, etc. for 1 shekel of silver.⁹ Goetze suggests contrasting this with the prices in the economic passages of Šîn-kāšid and Šamšī-Adad, with the warning: "They are likely to be fictitious (...), as these kings boast how great prosperity is, and how inexpensive life, during their reigns". Next, he asserts that the "actual prices" must be obtained from "contemporaneous contracts", adding a footnote listing Schwenzner's and Meissner's studies as authoritative analyses of the data containing the "actual prices".¹⁰ Goetze's remarks in his LE commentary, in turn, was

3. RIME 4.4.1.8:15–22, trans. Frayne 1990: 454.

4. RIMA 1.0.39.1:59–69, trans. Grayson 1987: 49.

5. Luckenbill 1912: 158.

6. Schwenzner 1915: 19–24, 27–8; see also tables in the end.

7. Schwenzner consulted the hand-drawings of Thureau-Dangin 1907 and Messerschmidt 1911.

8. Meissner 1936; Sweet 1958 (unpublished). See Farber 1978: 2.

9. LE 1, I have maintained the measurements in the original, but see Roth 1997: 59 for a conversion.

10. Goetze 1951/2: 29–30.

picked up by Adam Falkenstein, when he wrote that the economic data in *Sîn-kāšid*'s inscription "did not reflect reality". A year later, he edited an inscription of Warad-*Sîn* from Larsa that contained an economic passage. Noting the parallels with other inscriptions, he insisted in contrasting Warad-*Sîn*'s facts and figures with the tariffs proposed in LE.¹¹

Edmond Sollberger's commentary in a mid-1960s edition of texts excavated in Ur had a great impact in perpetuating the reading of economic passages as propaganda. Referring to an inscription of *Sîn-iddinam* and also to a major fragment of a royal inscription of '*Sîn-iqīšam*', he states that the wages, "though high, are fairly consistent", unlike the prices, which, differently from those on LE, are "artificial" and, "as it were, official propaganda".¹² We are, then, given a table listing what quantities of certain products 1 shekel of silver could buy in the reigns of *Sîn-iddinam*, '*Sîn-iqīšam*', *Sîn-kāšid*, *Eshnunna* and *Šamšī-Adad*. The table allegedly allows us to compare the "cost of living" across each reign.¹³ From this point onwards, the mainstream view of economic passages as propaganda had been consolidated.

Few years later, Giovanni Pettinato edited *Sîn-kāšid*'s inscription and commented on the economic passage as unrealistic. What he used to substantiate his position was Sollberger's table, another secondary source and a direct quote from Falkenstein.¹⁴ Kirk Grayson, in his important edition of Assyrian inscriptions, argued that the prices listed in *Šamšī-Adad*'s economic passage from Assur are "very low as a comparison with actual prices reveals". Without explaining what he meant by "comparison", he points the reader to Meissner's already out-dated list of commodity prices in Babylon (not Assyria!). He echoes Sollberger, further describing the inscription's prices as "utopian", and the text as "propaganda", suggesting that we check Sollberger's "convenient chart comparing the 'official' prices" and affirming that "more realistic prices" could be found in LE and the Laws of Hammurabi (LH).¹⁵

Fast-forward to more recent times, and the same points are made with reference to the same secondary studies. Daniel Snell, known for his work on ancient Mesopotamian economies, writes that "the royal inscriptions exaggerated the well-being of the subjects", suggesting a comparison with data from contracts of the time, compiled in Sollberger's table.¹⁶ Péter Vargyas, writing about prices in an important reference collection, notes that "favorable prices in the royal inscriptions exaggerate the prosperity of a given reign for propagandistic reasons".¹⁷ A well-known compilation of primary sources in translation contains OB inscriptions commented by Frans van Koppen. On the *Šamšī-Adad* inscription, he writes: "The list of ideal, cheap prices for the basic staples is an element that is known from other royal inscriptions as well and conveys the idea that the king brought about economic prosperity for the people".¹⁸ In a textbook, Mario Liverani refers mainly to *Sîn-kāšid*'s inscription, but draws the following generalisation from it: "The propagandistic tone

11. Falkenstein 1963: 33; 1964: 38.

12. Sollberger 1965: 15.

13. Sollberger 1965: 15–6. The attribution of a major fragment (BM 132226) to '*Sîn-iqīšam*' was, later on, corrected, and it is now seen as part of an inscription of *Nūr-Adad*. See Sollberger 1982: 342; Frayne 1990: 147.

14. Pettinato 1970: 103.

15. Grayson 1972: 20–21 (see n. 64). The author later edited a chronicle containing a broken list of commodity prices and urged caution in taking the source too literally, because of the propagandistic character of prices in royal texts. See Grayson 1975: 60–2. As for LH, some key passages listing wages or tariffs for specific services are uncertain. See LH §257–277, Roth 1997: 129–32.

16. Snell 1997: 59, 180.

17. Vargyas, in: Powell, Vargyas and van den Hout, 2003/5: 612.

18. van Koppen 2006: 103. The collection is Chavalas 2006.

(abundance of goods, thus low prices!) becomes particularly evident when comparing these celebratory statements with more normative, but realistic, price lists (such as the one found in the laws of Ešnunna) and the current prices recorded in the administrative texts of the time”.¹⁹

I could carry on, but my first preliminary finding is clear: from an initial acceptance of economic passages as trustworthy, assyriologists moved on to adopt a more critical reading of those texts as propaganda. Moreover, they have assumed an analogy between economic passages without taking into account their broader context. The mainstream interpretation now reads such passages uniformly as utopian portrayals of idealised economic conditions. To sum up how this came about: initially, there was an attempt to substantiate such view with reference to primary sources and recent studies of economic data. At a later stage, two or three secondary sources were used as the main basis for such claims, and the claims themselves reflected the language of those works (one text is ‘propaganda’ and is analogous to other texts; the ‘price table’; the comparison with normative, but ‘realistic’ prices in legal texts LE or LH; the ‘realistic’ prices in ‘contracts of that time’). Currently, those claims are part of the common knowledge in the field, being further transmitted (as any tradition eventually is) at one’s initial stages of academic life (reference works, textbooks, sourcebooks). It is this reproduction of the mainstream view in the literature without a more critical examination of the arguments supporting it that is open for a challenge: how solid is this procedure of contrasting data in economic passages with objective economic data from economic, administrative and legal texts? Should we assume that all economic passages function in the same way (that is, should we read them uniformly as propagandistic)?

2. *Obtaining Objective Economic Data*

Let me present the second preliminary finding by tackling the first of the two questions above, leaving the other one for the next section. The view that comparable prices and wages can be obtained from other sources so that we may know ‘*the price of X*’ or ‘*the wages for Y*’ in order to play them against economic passages is problematic. For this to be a theoretically and methodologically acceptable exercise, we would need to find texts with a decent combination of pieces of information that is very hard to obtain.

To begin with, there is a well-known theoretical debate in the study of economic history about whether we know how economic dynamics yielded prices, wages or tariffs in the ancient world. One position seems to reject the use of modern economic theory to interpret data from the distant past. It claims that each economy is embedded in a social system that shapes and shoves it. Our current theories may fare better in the contemporary world, but it would be anachronistic and counterproductive to use them to interpret price and wages determination in light of data from, say, the OB period.²⁰ On the other side, there are those who have obtained considerable success, as far as the empirical information allows, in showing that prices and wages behaved more or less as one would expect them to behave today.²¹ “Unanimity of opinion exists almost nowhere, but a majority of cuneiformists hold now and have always held that prices in cuneiform sources mean, more or

19. Liverani 2014: 201.

20. Renger 2007: 187–95. See, on this side of the debate, the much-criticized Polanyi 1977 and Finley 1985, who did not actually deal with ancient Near Eastern economies. For a critical summary and discussion, see Monroe 2007: 171–4.

21. Farber 1978; Powell 1990: 98–9. According to Monroe 2007: 174–84, the point not only applies to economic processes but also to structures such as, for example, the institution of money.

less, what prices mean today”.²² If we adopt the minority position, then, there is very little we can say about how ‘*the price of X*’ or ‘*the wages for Y*’ behaved and, therefore, not a whole lot to do about the contrast between realistic and propagandistic prices. If, on the other hand, we adopt the majority view, then we open a Pandora box of variables that need to be determined in combination for a robust study of ‘*the price of X*’ or ‘*the wages for Y*’.

We are now talking about a second, methodological, type of problem with this procedure. Normally, in their discussion of how unrealistic, utopian or propagandistic economic passages are, assyriologists think it sufficient to select a number of Mesopotamian economic texts (especially contracts and administrative records) from the OB period in order to tell what ‘*the price of X*’ realistically was.²³ The problem with this is well summarised by Marvin Powell, who sought to establish a methodologically sound series of commodity prices in the later OB period: “price data rarely occur in simple $x = y$ form but are usually embedded in a documentary context that can be extremely difficult to interpret, with the result that the literature on the subject contains numerous minor errors and not a few serious ones”.²⁴

In Economics, it is important to differentiate between short-term and long-term trends. When assyriologists speak of ‘*the price of X*’ they probably have in mind the latter. However, the use of individual economic texts (e.g. sales contracts) is more likely to yield the short-term price of the specific commodity or service under discussion. This is because too often those texts have been taken in isolation or in a relatively small number, too disperse to count as a temporal series. Schwenzner’s study of prices, for example, suffered from this problem. He assumed that merely taking the mean price or wage (the average over a certain period of time) would be enough. However, as Ronald Sweet puts it in his study of money in the OB period, “the general trend that these equivalencies (commodities) took will be discernible only if: (1) the data are sufficiently numerous for the exceptional to be distinguished from the normal variation, and (2) the data occur regularly and fairly frequently over the period of time being studied”.²⁵

For long-term trends, though, what we need is a large number of *controlled* samples. This means that they should be more or less uniform in terms of place and quality of the product, amongst other factors, to make sure we are not comparing apples and oranges. This was another problem Schwenzner’s study, as “one cannot assume (...) that prices throughout lower Mesopotamia (...) were unaffected by local conditions”.²⁶ In fact, cities at that time were more or less isolated, and now economic historians dealing with the early OB period generally treat southern and northern Babylonia as separate economic regions.²⁷ In short: the price of the same item can differ from place to place. Moreover, OB economic texts may mention a certain commodity by name without specifying its quality, which leads to another problem pertaining to the lack of control of the data. This is “a basic and pervasive problem for study of Babylonian prices in any era”. The issue is often deliberately ignored, because there is no way around it.²⁸ Needless to say, this is a less than ideal situation.

22. Powell, in: Powell, Vargyas and van den Hout, 2003/5: 610.

23. A combination of this procedure with legal quotes from LE and LH is what generated Sollberger’s oft-cited table, for example.

24. Powell 1990: 77.

25. Sweet 1958: 30.

26. Farber 1978: 3.

27. Goddeeris 2007: 198–205.

28. Powell 1990: 79.

Another methodological issue has to do with the standards of measurement. Lists of commodities, whether in sale contracts or in administrative texts where they figure as parts of the wages generally employ measurements, such as the shekel (síg), the mina (ma-na) or the kor (gur). Do they always mean the same thing? “In order to be precise in analysing prices,” says Powell, “one really needs to know the absolute values of each metrological unit involved in any price equivalence. This, however, is impossible, because Mesopotamian units of weight and measure with identical names have variants across time and space and even variants within a very limited time and space”.²⁹ A related and important issue is the quality of metals, since equivalencies in both economic texts and economic passages within inscriptions are given in terms of silver.³⁰ This is not to say that a robust study of long-term prices would not be possible, but such study would require establishing a statistically sound margin of error, and the procedure has been left out of comparisons between objective and so-called propagandistic prices or wages.

Let me now bring these issues even closer to the critical reading of economic passages in OB royal inscriptions. It is true that those passages speak mostly of barley (še), wool (síg), bread (ninda) and oil (ì, ì-giš) and that they adopt more or less the same style as far as the economic portion of the texts is concerned. There is, in short, some similarity between them, but their context also matters. Those are inscriptions from Larsa, Ur, Uruk and Assur. They are distributed more or less over a century in the early 2nd millennium. Are they comparable with a generic economic text from ‘the OB period’? To a certain extent, if we are charitable, yes. However, a more robust and methodologically sound comparison would have to answer positively to at least each of the following questions: (1) is the text not only from the OB period, but also more specifically from the same place, reign (and preferably same year) as the given economic passage of a certain king? (2) Ignoring the problem of product quality, can we at least establish the equivalence of silver and the commodity of the economic text being compared to the same commodity in the economic passage? A positive answer to both of these questions, in all their details, and in the use of the same economic text would be very hard to obtain. For one thing, some documents omit the required information. For another, many of them are broken at crucial points.

Moreover, as I have already mentioned, this would only give us the ‘price of X’ in the short-term, for that specific transaction at that specific time, rather than ‘*the* price of X’. To find the latter, we would need to find a statistically significant amount of material that allows positive answers to both questions above. In principle, with hundreds of thousands of administrative and economic texts, this could be done (say, as a PhD thesis), but the procedure is certainly much more complex than merely relying on information obtained from Schwenzner’s or Meissner’s early studies or Sollberger’s simplified table.³¹ Yet, it is the latter procedure that has been grounding the reading of economic passages as propaganda, besides considerations of textual genre, to which I now turn.

3. Cultural and Literary Features

My third preliminary finding is that the interpretation of economic passages as propaganda assumes too quickly the uniformity of texts in which they occur. It is true that they share some

29. For a discussion of these problems and possible ways around them, see Powell 1987; 1990: 78–88.

30. Powell, in: Powell, Vargyas and van den Hout 2003/5: 610–1.

31. The efforts of Farber 1978, Snell 1982 and Powel 1990 are laudable, but unfortunately they do not cover data directly relevant to the study of early OB royal inscriptions containing economic passages.

elements in common (which, by the way, justifies studying them together), but if we look closer at economic passages in terms of their cultural and literary features, it becomes clear that not all function in the same way. It also becomes clear that our understanding of what propaganda is and how it operates does not quite describe what we observe in OB economic passages.

A comparison and contrast of economic passages is revealing. As already noted, one element they share in common is that some products recur. In passages about wages, they tend to be the staples of food (barley, bread, oil) and drink (beer = *kaš*). The food staples, together with wool, are mentioned in the passages about commodities as well. Dates (*zú-lum*) are mentioned occasionally on both sides.³² Both kinds of economic passages seem to be emphasising access to important commodities, whether from the point of view of what a day's wages can afford or from the point of view of what one can get for a shekel of silver (see Appendix 2). On the other hand, OB royal inscriptions are diverse in the kind of economic information they include in their economic passages, with some listing both prices and wages (Nūr-Adad's and one by Sîn-iddinam), others only prices (Sîn-kāšid's and Šamšī-Adad's), and others only wages (Warad-Sîn's and one by Sîn-iddinam).

There are also similarities and differences in the wider inscriptions where these economic passages occur (see Appendix 3). A very important common element is that they show a strong tendency to be preceded by some kind of temporal clause. Some of them are more specific (*u₄ ... -a* or *u₄ ... -bi-a*): “When I dug the Tigris, the great river” (*u₄ I₇.idigna i₇-gu-la mu-ba-al-la-a*);³³ “on that day” (*u₄¹-bi-a*);³⁴ “When I built the w[all of U]r” (*u₄ b[ād ú]ri.KI-ma mu-dù-a*);³⁵ “When I made the temple of Enlil, my lord” (*inūma bīt^dEnlil belīya epušu*).³⁶ Others mark time in a more general sense, referring to the king's administration: “In his reign” (*bala nam-lugal-ka-né*);³⁷ “In my beautiful reign” (*u₄ bala sa₆-ga-mu*).³⁸ Despite those common points, the inscriptions have distinct literary features, ordering their main elements differently and selectively including or excluding them, with some containing a kind of long-term or short-term wish-statement in the end and some containing detailed epithets and titles of the king. Those inscriptions share some motifs and phrases, but are not uniform in their literary features.

Moving on to focus on what the inscriptions imply as the cause of the economic conditions that they portray, we may look at the vicinities of each economic passage, asking to what extent the king is held responsible for favourable economic conditions. In a propagandistic text, we would expect the king and his policies to be unambiguously portrayed as the main factor behind economic prosperity. However, this is far from being the case. Table 1 (below) lists what I suggest as possible immediate and general causes of the economic conditions in each passage from Appendix 1.

32. Other items are mentioned sporadically. For the use and importance of those commodities in ancient Near Eastern economies, see Bertman 2005: 293; Ellison 1978: 204–8; Farber 1978: 10–11, 22–23; Katz and Voigt 1986: 27–34; Renger 2007: 192.

33. RIME 4.2.9.2: 51–2, trans. Frayne 1990: 160.

34. RIME 4.2.9.6: 25.

35. RIME 4.2.13.20: 40, trans. Frayne 1990: 240.

36. RIMA 1.0.39.1: 59–61.

37. RIME 4.4.1.8: 15.

38. RIME 4.2.8.7: 57.

Table 1 - Possible causes of prosperity (trans. Frayne 1990 for RIME and Grayson 1987 for RIMA)

Sîn-kāšid (RIME 4.4.1.8)	<i>General: king's policies (?)</i> “... his period of kingship” (line 15) preceding economic passage	
Nūr-Adad (RIME 4.2.8.7)		<i>Immediate 1: king's policies</i> “I made oil and butter abundant. I had my people eat food of all kinds, (and) drink abundant water. I destroyed the brigand, the wicked, and the evil-doer in their midst. I made the weak, widow and orphan content” (lines 46–56) preceding economic passage 1 <i>Immediate 2: construction (?)</i> “At that time I built the great wall of Larsa...” (lines 64–5) preceding economic passage 2
Sîn-iddinam (1) (RIME 4.2.9.2)	<i>General 1: divine help 1</i> “when (...) An, Enlil, Nanna, and Utu granted to me a good reign of justice” (lines 10–3) <i>General 2: king's skill</i> “by means of my broad wisdom” etc. (lines 14–6), preceding construction report <i>General 3: divine help 2 combined with king's skill</i> “by the decree of the gods (...), by the favour of the gods (...), by means of my triumph” etc. (lines 33–42), preceding another construction report	<i>Immediate 1: construction</i> “to establish good water for my city” etc. (lines 17–22) “I grandly dug (...) the Tigris (...) providing perpetual water, unceasing abundance for Larsa” (lines 42–50) “When I dug the Tigris...” (lines 51–2) preceding economic passage <i>Immediate 2: king's policies</i> “I let nobody take less or more” (lines 60–2), after economic passage
Sîn-iddinam (2) (RIME 4.2.9.6)	<i>General 1: king's piety and policies</i> “for the god Utu (...), with my ardent prayer, I removed (...) complaint from my city” (lines 25–8) <i>General 2: king's policies (?) and divine help</i> “In the days of my gracious [r]eign, which the god Utu gave to me” (lines 58–60), preceding economic passage 2	<i>Immediate 1: king's policies (?)</i> “I assembled the host of Larsa and gave to them, as its (...) workers, wages – food, anointing oil – (...) to please them” (lines 29–34), preceding construction report <i>Immediate 2: construction (?)</i> Possible temporal clause, followed by gap in text (see lines 42–8), preceding economic passage 1
Warad-Sîn (RIME 4.2.13.20)	<i>General 1: king's piety and divine blessing (?)</i> Nanna hear the king's prayer and allowed him to build the wall (lines 14–25), preceding ode to the city and construction report	<i>Immediate 1: construction (?)</i> “When I built the w[all of U]r...” (line 40), preceding economic passage <i>Immediate 2: king's policies</i> “I removed (...) complaint from my

	<i>General 2: wish for divine blessing sending prosperity (?)</i> “May you, god Nanna (...), grant me (...) a reign of abundance (...), years of plenty...” (lines 51–6)	land” (line 45), preceding construction report
Šamši-Adad (RIMA 1.0.39)	<i>General: king’s policies (?)</i> “At that time I received the tribute of the kings...” (lines 73–80), after economic passage, possibly cross-referencing royal epithet of “pacifier” of Mesopotamia (lines 5–8), preceding construction report	<i>Immediate: construction (?)</i> “When I built the temple...” (lines 59–61), preceding economic passage

At first sight, it would appear that the king plays an immediate role in causing prosperity. This would be consistent with what we may expect from political propaganda. However, as I indicate with interrogation marks (?), I am making several allowances here by framing those elements as possible causes of prosperity, because textually it is not clear at all whether that is the case.³⁹ Even by this generous reading, though, I can make the case that the king’s actions are not portrayed, overall, as directly connected to the prosperity of the land. Clear exceptions are the texts of Nūr-Adad and the first of Sîn-iddinam. In both cases, the king provides a framework or structure in the country that is conducive to prosperity. Nūr-Adad highlights his role in fighting crime and oppression, whereas Sîn-iddinam highlights the importance of the infrastructure brought about by the construction work as such, culminating in an effective irrigation system. This king also states that he let nobody take less or more than a certain level of wages, possibly hinting at a stipulation of ‘just wages’. The link between those policies and the economic passages is relatively clear, both in textual proximity and in implied causation.⁴⁰

Even in those cases, however, the effects of royal agency in causing prosperity tend to be enhanced by a general cause. Nūr-Adad is more ‘unilateral’ in the causation scheme, but Sîn-iddinam and Warad-Sîn both combine divine action with the king’s skill on a more general level. Divine favour in response to royal piety seems to be a recurring general cause of a good reign. In Warad-Sîn’s case, the inscription even ends with a prayer for a reign of prosperity.

As for the remaining inscriptions (marked with a question mark), several immediate or general ‘causes’ which I have included are only implicit, and conveyed by a temporal clause. The two forms are: (1) During the king’s (good) reign, such and such economic conditions obtained; and (2) During the king’s construction work, such and such economic conditions obtained. The first type is a broad statement that good prices or wages coincided with that king’s period of rule, but strictly speaking, this is a correlation claim, not a causation claim, let alone a propagandistic one. The second type is closer to a causation claim, even though it comes in the temporal form, but it could be interpreted as a temporary economic policy, and not a long-term trend: ‘during the time of the construction work, I offered good wages or stipulated good prices’. In Sîn-iddinam’s second

39. Closeness to the economic passage or to keywords related to prosperity are the main criteria for including those dubious elements as possible general or immediate causes, but lack of clarity is nevertheless indicated with the interrogation marks.

40. A possible third inscription that could also be stressing the king’s agency in immediate connection to economic prosperity is Warad-Sîn’s, but only in the somewhat vague one-line statement that he “removed (...) complaint” from the land.

passage, this connection is made clear by the passage about assembling workers and paying them enough for that construction work. In Šamši-Adad's case, a portion of text mentioning tribute from other kings blurs the connection after the economic passage. Are the goods brought from outside into the land a factor in reducing commodity prices? The inscription merely mentions the fact, without drawing any clear connections.

Elements of the building inscription textual genre, often ignored in the literature discussing economic passages, help us approach a discussion of royal propaganda in an alternative light. William Hallo defines royal inscriptions as a genre, noting that they form “part of cuneiform literature which was intended for permanent preservation” because they were “either inscribed on durable materials, or duplicated in great numbers, or provided with blessings on those who would preserve the monuments and curses on those who would destroy them or erase or alter the name inscribed on them”.⁴¹ Therefore, as *messages* intended to be around for a long time, royal inscriptions on a building (such as the ones studied here) were not necessarily meant for a contemporary audience. “Most probably they were conceived in the first place to be restricted from viewing and handling”.⁴² This goes against the widely accepted view of how propaganda operates.

What, then, was the audience for those building inscriptions? What was their purpose? According to one view, “they were to be read by future kings and other potential rebuilders of the structure”.⁴³ The basis for this claim is the formulaic curse formula against those who may in the future dilapidate the monument. However, this type of passage does not always occur – in fact, curses are included in only one of the inscriptions studied here (Šamši-Adad's). For others, such inscriptions were “to be read by the deity to which they were addressed”.⁴⁴ This makes sense of passages using the dative case /-r(a)/ to dedicate something (perhaps the whole construction) to a deity. Regardless, except for the group of scribes commissioned to write the inscriptions and, perhaps the priests who might have read them in their dedication of the monument, the texts were not normally in sight.⁴⁵ “It was a matter of indifference to their royal author whether his contemporary subjects could read them” and “even their decorative value was incidental”.⁴⁶ The normal role of a royal building inscription, therefore, was connected somehow to a future audience, or to a divine audience. It is far from clear what purpose it would serve as propaganda directed towards a contemporary audience.

At this point I am not offering a systematic interpretation of economic passages – this will require further investigation. There are, for example, much later economic passages in inscriptions that seem to imitate the earlier style. However, at least on the general purpose of OB inscriptions, I side with Govert van Driel, for whom building inscriptions are intended for the dedication of the whole structure to a deity, with the purpose of ensuring “the prolongation of reign, well-being and life”, occasionally also expressing “a wish that the memory of the good deed should be preserved”.⁴⁷ This accounts for the divine audience, on the one hand. On the other, especially temple inscriptions (of which we have some containing economic passages) were also copied in foundation deposits stone tablets (e.g. Šamši-Adad's) with a message implying a future human

41. Hallo 1962: 1. For a typology of OB royal inscriptions as a genre, see Hallo 1961.

42. Tsouparopoulou 2014: 27; see Oppenheim 1977: 146–7.

43. Hallo 1962: 10.

44. Oppenheim 1977: 147.

45. Tsouparopoulou 2014: 28.

46. Hallo 1962: 10.

47. Van Driel 1973: 68.

audience. The construction of temples according to divine revelation should follow a number of strict rules in order not to affect cosmic balance and bring negative consequences upon the land.⁴⁸ Inscriptions in foundation deposits often contained curses against those who would find them and not properly restore the building. Foundation deposits provided a model for current and future construction work on the temple, and apparently later kings made a point of digging them out to look for guidance in their own building work on top of the older temple.⁴⁹ This, to me, accounts for the future intended human audience. Regardless of how we answer the question of what role economic passages played in that discourse, we will have to treat the issue in light of those cultural aspects as well.

4. *Final Remarks*

In this paper, I have raised questions about the mainstream reading of economic passages within OB royal inscriptions as propagandistic. I have shared three main preliminary findings of my on-going research. First, this mainstream view of economic passages has been uncritically transmitted and is now a common-sense view in the literature. Second, the mainstream view is based on two pillars: a small number of secondary studies and broad comparisons between alleged propagandistic passages and more objective economic administrative texts, but both pillars can be challenged on methodological grounds. In principle, the challenge is not insurmountable, but the simplistic procedures adopted so far by the mainstream view need to be amended, and judgment on the points obtained from such procedures, suspended. Third, a closer examination of cultural and literary features of the OB royal inscriptions where economic passages occur indicates that they should not all be taken uniformly, and that they do not seem to be instances of ‘propaganda’, strictly speaking.

Given my three findings so far, it is safe to tentatively conclude, first, that we lack the necessary information to make a robust contrast between economic passages and objective economic data. Second, royal inscriptions do indeed try to portray the king’s character and deeds in a good light, and this portrayal might well include economic performance. However, third, this fact should not necessarily lead us to read such passages as propaganda – at least not in the scholarly use of the term. Fourth, a number of important factors have been neglected in the interpretation of economic passages in royal inscriptions, such as, for example the interaction between royal and divine agency in causing economic prosperity. Fifth, a re-examination of the mainstream view of economic passages will have to reconsider both the basis for this view and the literary and cultural background of the passages themselves in the search for a more rigorously established interpretation.

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48. Kapelrud 1963; Leick 2003: 106; Lundquist 1983: 212–5; Palmer 2012: 300–301; Roux 1992: 211; Tsouparopoulou 2014; Van Buren 1952: 293.

49. See Winter 2000.

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7. Appendix 1: Early OB Economic Passages

I have so far identified the following inscriptions of the OB period containing economic passages: RIME 4.2.8.7, 4.2.9.2, 4.2.9.6, 4.2.13.20, 4.4.1.8 and RIMA 1.0.39.1 (all six quoted below), and RIME 4.2.13.21, 4.4.1.10–15, which contain economic passages that overlap significantly with the inscriptions of the same kings already quoted below.

Economic passage 1: Sîn-kāšid (RIME 4.4.1.8)

15 bala-nam-lugal-la-ka-né	(Lines 15–23) In his period of
16 3 še gur-ta	kingship, according to the market
17 12 ma-na síg-ta	value of his land, 3 gur of barley, 12
18 10 ma-na urudu-ta	minas of wool, 10 minas of copper, 3
19 3 bán ì-giš-ta	ban of vegetable oil cost one shekel of
20 ganba-ma-da-na-ka	silver. May his years be years of
21 kù-babbar 1 gín-e	abundance (trans. Frayne 1990:454).
22 h́é-éb-da-sa ₁₀	
23 mu-a-ni mu-h́é-gál-la h́é-a	

Economic passage 2: Nūr-Adad (RIME 4.2.8.7)

57 u ₄ -bala-sa ₆ -ga-mu	(ii:57–63) During my good reign,
58 2 še gur-ta 2 (bán) ì-ta	according to the market value which
59 10 ma-na síg-ta	was in my land, thus one shekel of
60 10 gur zú-lum-ta-àm	silver purchased 2 gur of barley, 2 ban
61 ganba-šà-ma-da-gá-ka	of oil, 10 minas of wool, 10 gur of
62 kù 1-gín-e	dates.
63 ur ₅ -gin ₇ ba-ra-sa ₁₀	
64 u ₄ -bi-a bàd-gal-larsa.KI-ma	(ii:64–70) At that time I built the great
65 h́ur-sag-gin ₇ ki-sikil-la mu-dù	wall of Larsa like a mountain in a pure
66 á lú-1-e	place. The wages of each worker were
67 3 (bán) še-ta 2 síla ninda-ta	3 ban of barley, 2 síla of bread, 2 síla
68 2 síla kaš-ta	of beer, 2 shekels of oil; thus they
69 2 gín ì-ta-àm	received this in one day (trans. Frayne
70 u ₄ -1-e ur ₅ -gin ₇ šu ba-an-ti	1990:148–9).

Economic passage 3: Sîn-iddinam (1) (RIME 4.2.9.2)

51 u ₄ I ₇ .idigna i ₇ -gu-la	(Lines 51–3) When I dug the Tigris,
52 mu-ba-al-la-a	the great river, the wages of each
53 á lú-1-e	worker were:
54 še 1 gur-ta	(Lines 54–9) 1 gur of barley, 2 síla of
55 ninda 2 síla-ta	bread, 4 síla of beer, 2 shekels of oil, in
56 kaš 4 síla-ta	one day so they received this.
57 ì 2 gín-ta-àm	
58 u ₄ -aš-a	

59 ur₅-gin₇ šu ḥa-ba-an-ti

60 lú á-lá

61 lú á-daḥ

62 ba-ra-bí-tuk

Economic passage 4 - Sîn-iddinam (2)⁵⁰ (RIME 4.2.9.6)

49 [á lú-1-e]

50 [x še-gur-ta]

51 zú-lum 2 síla-ta

52 ga-àra 2 síla-ta

53 duḥ-še-giš-ì 2 síla-ta

54 ì 2 gín-ta-àm

55 amaš ni-kú-e šub-ba

56 u₄-aš-a

57 ur₅-gin₇ šu ḥa-ba-ra-an-ti

58 u₄-[b]ala-sa₆-ga-gá

59 ^dutu lugal-mu

60 gá-ar ma-an-sum-ma-a

61 še 4 gur-ta

62 zú-lum 12 gur-ta

63 síg 15 ma-na-ta

64 ì-giš 3 bán-ta

65 ì-šaḥ 5 bán-ta-àm

66 ganba sa-uri₅.KI

67 larsa.KI ù ma-da-g[á-ka]

68 kù 1 gín-e

69 ur₅-gin₇ ḥa-ba-ra-[sa₁₀]

(Lines 60–2) I let nobody take less or more (trans. Frayne 1990:160).

(Lines 49–57) [the wages of each (worker) were: x gur of grain] 2 sila of dates, 2 sila of cheese, 2 sila of sesame bran, 2 shekels of oil, not including food from the sheepfolds. In one day so they received this.

(Lines 58–69) In the days of my gracious [r]eign, which the god Utu, my lord gave to me, 4 gur of barley, 12 gur of dates, 15 minas of wool, 3 ban of vegetable oil, 5 ban of lard, according to the market value in Ur, Larsa and m[y] land, so much [was sold] per one shekel of silver (trans. Frayne 1990:166).

Economic passage 5 - Warad-Sîn (RIME 4.2.13.20)

40 u₄ b[àd-ú]ri.KI-ma mu-dù-a

41 'á' lú-1-e 3 bán še-ta

42 '2' [síla] ninda-ta 2 síla kaš-ta

43 '2' gín ì-giš-ta

44 u₄-aš-a ur₅-gin₇ šu ḥa-ba-an-ti

45 šà-ma-da-gá-ka i-^dutu ḥé-éb-ta-zi

(Lines 40–5) When I built the w[all of U]r, the wages of each man were 3 ban of barley, 2 [sila] of bread, 2 sila of beer, 2 shekels of vegetable oil; in one day so each one received this. I removed (any cause for) complaint from my land (trans. Frayne 1990:240).

Economic passage 6 - Šamši-Adad (RIMA 1.0.39.1)

59 inūma bīt(É) ^dEnlil

60 bēliya

61 epušu

(Lines 59–72) When I built the temple of my lord Enlil, the exchange-rate of my city, Assur [was as follows]: for 1

50. Frayne, the editor of RIME 4, reads the first sign of line 57 as UR. This is likely a typo. See Sollberger's (1965, Plate XV, Text 72, line 57) hand copy of the relevant fragment, where the expected UR₅ sign is clearly expressed. I have altered the transliteration of the economic passage above accordingly.

62 *maḥīr*(Kl.LAM) *āliya*

63 *Aššur*^{ki}

64 *ana 1 šiḡil*(GÍN)

kaspim(KÛ.BABBAR)

65 *2 kur*(GUR) *âm*(ŠE)

66 *ana 1 šiḡil*(GÍN)

kaspim(KÛ.BABBAR)

67 *15 manā*(MA.NA) *šīpātīm*(SÍG)

68 *ana 1 šiḡil*(GÍN)

kaspim(KÛ.BABBAR)

69 *2 sāt*[?](BÁN) *šamnam*(Ì)

70 *ina maḥīr*(Kl.LAM) *āliya*

71 *Aššur*^{ki}

72 *lū iššām*

shekel of silver, 2 kors or barley were indeed bought; for 1 shekel of silver, 15 minas of wool; for 1 shekel of silver, 2 seahs of oil, in the exchange-rate of my city, Assur (RIMA 1.0.39.1, own transcription and translation).

8. Appendix 2: Prices and Wages in OB Economic Passages

Table 2 – OB economic passages: what one shekel of silver buys

Sîn-kāšid	Nūr-Adad	Sîn-iddinam (2)	Šamši-Adad I
1 gín kù-babbar =	1 gín kù =	1 gín kù =	1 GÍN KÛ.BABBAR =
3 gur še	2 gur še	4 gur še	2 GUR ŠE
12 ma-na síg	2 (bán) ì	12 gur zú-lum	15 MA.NA SÍG
10 ma-na urudu	10 ma-na síg	15 ma-na síg	2 BÁN Ì
3 bán ì-giš	10 gur zú-lum	3 bán ì-giš	
		5 bán ì.šaḡ	

Table 3 – OB economic passages: what a day's wages buy

Nūr-Adad	Sîn-iddinam (1)	Sîn-iddinam (2)	Warad-Sîn
3 (bán) še	1 gur še	[x gur še]	3 bán še
2 síla ninda	2 síla ninda	2 síla zú-lum	2 [síla] ninda
2 síla kaš	4 síla kaš	2 síla ga-àra	2 síla kaš
2 gín ì	2 gín ì	2 síla duḡ-še-giš-ì	2 gín ì-giš
		2 gín ì	

9. Appendix 3: Broader Context of OB Economic Passages

Table 4 - Inscriptions containing prices, coded

Sîn-kāšid	Nūr-Adad	Sîn-iddinam (2)	Šamši-Adad I
Dedication to a divinity	Temporal clause 1 Divine decree	Temporal clause 1 Divine decree	Royal name / epithets
Royal name / epithets	Divine election Divine help	Divine election 1 Divine help	Divine election Report of building
Report of building	(Gap) Report of policies 1	Divine election 2 Report of piety	Temporal clause 1 <i>Economic passage</i>
Temporal clause	Temporal clause 2 <i>Economic passage 1</i>	Report of policies 1 Report of building 1	Temporal clause 2 Report of policies
<i>Economic passage</i>	Temporal clause 3 Report of building	Temporal clause 2 (Gap)	Temporal clause 3 Wish statement
Wish statement	<i>Economic passage 2</i> Report of building 2 Report of policies 2	<i>Economic passage 1</i> Temporal clause 3 <i>Economic passage 2</i> Temporal clause 4 Report of building 2	Curses

Table 5 - Inscriptions containing only wages, coded

Sîn-iddinam (1)	Warad-Sîn
Royal name / epithets	Royal name / epithets
Temporal clause 1	Report of piety
Divine decree	Divine help
Report of piety	City eulogy
Divine election	Report of policies 1
Divine help 1	Temporal clause
Report of building 1	<i>Economic passage</i>
Temporal clause 2	Report of policies 2
<i>Economic passage</i>	Report of building
Report of policies	Wish statement
Divine help 2	
Report of building 2	