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PERSPECTIVE, OPINION, AND COMMENTARY

## From Clay Tablets to Cure: Inside an Early Medical Education Establishment in the Ancient City of Aššur

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Clay tablets and cuneiform manuscripts provide a rare window into medical education and training in the Neo-Assyrian period (c. 725–614 BCE). This article reviews recently published in-depth research that reconstructs the life and work of Kišir-Aššur—a magico-medical practitioner, physician, and exorcist—and situates his practice within a scholarly, multigenerational household in the ancient city of Aššur. As a descendant of Bāba-šuma-ibni, the presumed founder of a family of healers, Kišir-Aššur inherited not only texts but also an institutional tradition of apprenticeship and communal mentorship. The House of Bāba-šuma-ibni (House N4) in Aššur is plausibly interpreted as one of the earliest historically identifiable “colleges” for professional training in Mesopotamia, characterized by a structured and integrated ritual-medical curriculum, progressive responsibilities, and early clinical exposure. Together, these findings highlight how scholarly households

shaped Neo-Assyrian medicine and preserved professional standards through teaching, practice, and text-based learning.

### Kišir-Aššur and the Scholarly Family of Bāba-šuma-ibni

Little is known about Kišir-Aššur's birth or death, except that he lived in the mid-seventh century BCE in Aššur—the former political and enduring religious capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire—located approximately 100 km south of Nineveh (modern-day Mosul, Iraq). Kišir-Aššur resided in his family's home, designated “House N4” by archaeologists. Within this house, he practiced the familial craft of healing, exorcism, and magico-medical rituals [1].

The family of Bāba-šuma-ibni was active over five generations during a critical century of Assyrian imperial history, coinciding with the reigns of major kings such as Sargon II, Sen-



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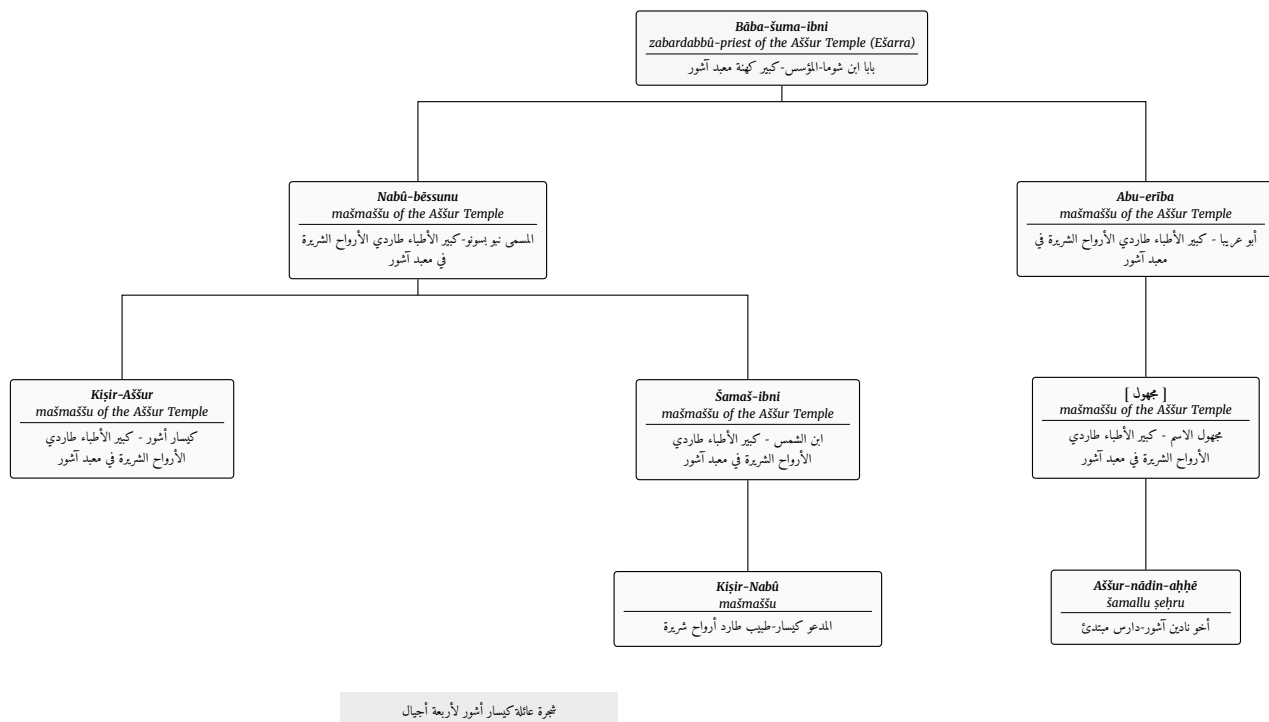


Figure 1. Genealogy of the Bāba-šuma-ibni family (725–614 BCE).

nacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. Excavated tablets from House N4 reveal an extensive private library dedicated to the family's professional activities. These texts—especially those attributed to Kišir-Aššur—allow researchers to trace phases of his education, early career, and advanced practice, making him the earliest historically identifiable figure whose medical training can be studied in such detail (Figure 1).

### Aššur as a Center of Religious and Medical Learning

Although Nineveh served as the political and intellectual capital of the empire, Aššur remained its spiritual heart due to the presence of the national deity's temple and the royal tombs. Founded as early as 2600 BCE, Aššur retained its status and maintained scholarly institutions well into the Neo-Assyrian period. It was here that the House of Bāba-šuma-ibni evolved into a medical-scholarly training center, combining private instruction with structured apprenticeship, and possibly functioning as a medical education establishment—or a “Kollegium” for training specialist healers [1–3]. The term *Kollegium* is derived from the Latin *collegium* (“college”), meaning an organized society of individuals performing common functions and possessing special rights and privileges. It can also refer to a body of colleagues, a guild, a fellowship, or an association [4].

### Medical Education in Mesopotamia: Integrated and Practice-Based

How Kišir-Aššur was trained—and how he produced and transmitted medical knowledge—suggests that his education followed a practical, example-based approach rather than abstract theoretical study [1]. Through copying tablets, composing and expanding texts, and participating in real-life healing rituals, Kišir-Aššur acquired expertise in *āšipūtu*, the scholarly discipline of healing and exorcism.

This integrated training blurred the lines between medicine and what modern scholars categorize as “magic.” Diagnoses, incantations, treatments, and rituals were unified within a single holistic system. This synthesis reflects the cultural reality of Mesopotamian healing, where illness was perceived to arise from both natural and supernatural causes, requiring ritual, medicinal, and spiritual responses [1].

### Healers and Their Roles: A Holistic Approach

Traditional distinctions between physicians (*āšû*) and exorcists (*āšipu*) have increasingly been challenged. Both roles overlapped substantially, with the *āšipu* often acting as both diagnostician and ritual practitioner.

Five main scholarly professions are attested throughout the Neo-Assyrian period: the *āšipu* (exorcist), also transcribed as *mašmaššu* (possibly “chief exorcist”); the *āšû* (physician); the *ṭupšarru* (scribe), including the *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*

**Table 1.** Role titles used by healers in Neo-Assyria and how they possibly link to modern Arabic terms in use nowadays. Arabic renderings are interpretive phonetic parallels and not confirmed etymologies.

Akkadian	English translation	Possible phonetic transcription from Akkadian to Arabic	Possible role description based on modern Arabic
āšû	physician	الغزو	الطبيب المعظم
āšipu	exorcist	العصيبو	طارد الأرواح الشريرة
mašmaššu	possibly chief exorcist	المسمسو	معالج المس (الجنون)
ṭupšarru / ṭupšar	Scribe (incl. astrologer-scribe when specialized)	التبصارو	متبصر أو قارئ الطالع
kalû	lamentation priest	القوال	قارئ التعويد / قوال
bārû	diviner	البارو	الباري / الشافي / المعافي

(“astrologer”); the *kalû* (lamentation priest); and the *bārû* (diviner). In the literature, *āšipu* and *mašmaššu* are sometimes used interchangeably [1, 5, 6].

Arabic and Akkadian are both Semitic languages and therefore share linguistic roots. Some modern Arabic terms may plausibly preserve echoes of Akkadian terminology. In this article, we propose potential links between selected professional titles and commonly used terms in modern spoken Arabic. Table 1 lists the professions attested in House N4 and presents our proposed correspondences with modern Arabic usage.

### The Training Environment at House N4

The House N4 compound, also referred to as the *Haus des Beschwörungspriesters* (“House of the Conjuring–Summoning Priest”), served as both a residence and a scholarly institution [3]. It was excavated near the south-eastern sector of Old Aššur by German and Iraqi teams (1903–1914; 1970s–1980s) [7, 8]. The house featured (Figure 2):

- a central, red-painted room (Room 3);
- a stone-paved courtyard (Room 7);
- a library room (Room 10);
- Room 11, which functioned as a burial site and also contained administrative tablets and a writing board, possibly representing an archive; and
- apotropaic figurines and protective plaques buried under floors and thresholds.

Together, these features support the interpretation of House N4 as a setting for education, healing and treatment, and ritual practice.

### Key Highlights of Training at House N4

- Multigenerational teaching:** Four generations of healers operated from House N4 over nearly 12 decades (c.

725–614 BCE). Trainees included non-family members from cities such as Kalḫu (Nimrud) and students associated with the Gula temple in Aššur [5].

- Apprenticeships and exchanges:** Apprentices often engaged in cross-house training, spending time with scholarly families in other cities [3, 9].

- Career phases:** Kišir-Aššur likely began training in his teens as a *šamallu šeḥru* (young apprentice), progressing through stages broadly comparable to internships and hands-on clinical rotations [5].

- Learning by doing:** Students advanced through practical work—copying tablets and annotating them with new insights—rather than relying solely on memorization of existing texts [1, 10].

- Integrated knowledge:** Texts such as N4-A400 exemplify the integration of diagnosis, ritual, and treatment, consistent with a holistic training model [1].

- Collegial structure:** The family may have functioned as a *kollegium* (college), with several members holding the title *mašmaš bīt Aššur*, the “Exorcist of the House of Aššur” [1–3].

- Clinical exposure:** Kišir-Aššur copied complex texts early in his training, suggesting exposure to real-life healing practice—a pattern that echoes the modern concept of early clinical exposure [11].

- Case-based learning:** Diagnostic teaching appears to have followed a problem-oriented approach resembling contemporary case-based learning [10].

- Early anatomy/physiology instruction:** Although Mesopotamians lacked anatomical knowledge in the modern sense, some texts suggest an effort to systematize symptoms and physiological responses based on observed outcomes [1].

- Use of animal models:** Animal anatomy may have been used to analogize human bodily functions in the absence of direct anatomical knowledge [1].

- Oral instruction:** Beyond written texts, oral mentorship



Figure 2. Map of Old Aššur city showing location of House N4 (arrow). Translations and annotations added by the authors (source [13])

within the scholarly family likely played a pivotal role in developing diagnostic skills [1].

xii. **Contextual learning:** Kišir-Aššur's training was practice-anchored and embedded in the social, spiritual, and physical contexts of healing, rather than in abstract formalism [5, 12].

### Lessons for Modern Medical Education

The case of Kišir-Aššur and House N4 offers themes that are relevant to contemporary medical education, while also requiring careful distinction between evidence-based observations and interpretive analogies. Archaeological and textual sources suggest structured apprenticeship, progressive responsibility, guided mentorship, and early exposure to healing practice—elements that resonate with modern experiential and case-based learning models.

At the same time, although the household exhibits features reminiscent of organized training (e.g., a curated library, multigenerational instruction, and the involvement of non-family trainees), there is no evidence for formal institutional

structures comparable to later historical or modern medical colleges. From a pedagogical perspective, three lessons appear transferable: (1) the value of early, supervised engagement in practice; (2) learning that integrates observation, reflection, and repetition; and (3) stable, longitudinal mentorship within a professional community. Other features—such as the magico-ritual framework or the exclusivity of household-based training—do not align with modern scientific expectations or regulatory standards.

### Conclusion

The House of Bāba-šuma-ibni in Aššur provides evidence suggestive of a structured and enduring setting for medical and magico-religious training. Operating across nearly 12 decades, and involving both family members and non-family trainees, this household maintained an integrated ritual-medical curriculum and appears to have supported early exposure to practical (“clinical”) instruction. On this basis, House N4 may be cautiously regarded as an early training “college” for healer-physician-exorcists.

Kišir-Aššur's life and work offer not only insight into an-

cient Mesopotamian medicine but also a model of education that reflects several features associated with modern professional training, including apprenticeship, hands-on learning, interdisciplinary integration, and communal mentorship. His legacy underscores the intellectual sophistication of Neo-Assyrian medicine and highlights the central role of scholarly families in sustaining and transmitting this tradition.

## ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

### • Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not required for Perspective, opinion, and commentary article.

### • Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

### • Availability of Data and Material

No individual personal data is included.

### • Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

### • Funding

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### • Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that no generative AI tools were used in the preparation, writing, or editing of this manuscript.

### • Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly, directly, and intellectually to the work and consented to its publication.

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