

The Nebu⁽¹⁾sarsekim Tablet,
BM 114789 (1920-12-13, 81)
Some Provisional Remarks*

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Transcription

1. 1½ MA.NA GUŠKIN šá^{p.d+} AG-LUGAL-su-GIN
= 1½ mana hurāšu ša Nabû-šarrussu-ukīn
2. LÚ.GAL.SAG šá ina °ŠU^{II} P^{ARAD}-DÛ-tú
= rab ša-rēši ša ina qāt Arad-Banītu
3. LÚ.SAG šá a-na É-sag-gíl
= ša-rēši ša ana Esaggil
4. ú-še-bi-la P^{ARAD}-DÛ-tú
= ušēbila Arad-Banītu
5. a-na É-sag-gíl it-ta-din
= ana Esaggil ittadin
6. ina GUB-zu šá^{p.d+} EN-ú-sat
= ina ušuzzu ša Bēl-usāt
7. A-šú šá^PA-a LÚ-qur-ZAG[?]
= māršu ša Aplâ ša-qurbūti[?]
8. P^{na}-dīn A-šú šá^{p.d} marduk-NUMUN-DÛ
= Nādin māršu ša Marduk-zēr-ibni

Blank space

9. ITI.ZÍZ U₄.18.KAM MU.10.KAM
10. ^dPA-NÍG.°GUB-ú-šu[r]
11. LUGAL TIN.TIR^{ki°}

Translation

1.5 lb of gold belonging to Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn, Chief of courtiers, which he forwarded to the Esaggil through the agency of Arad-Banītu, Courtier, Arad-Banītu has delivered at the Esaggil.
In the presence of Bēl-usāt son of Aplâ, member of the royal guards, and Nādin son of Marduk-zēr-ibni.
Shebat 18th, 10th year of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon.

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Some observations

The transcription of BM 114789 (1920-12-13, 81) here presented is based on photographs kindly provided by the British Museum A.N.E. Dept. Staff. Also, Michael Jursa's translation the way he had it divulged over the Internet¹ has proved instrumental in coaxing from the cuneiform its full message, particularly from the lines on the right-hand and bottom edges. A single question-mark had to remain, however. Definite answers must be left to Jursa himself, whose edition will become the scholarly *textus receptus* as a matter of course.

Our man was launched into cyberspace under the name of Nebo-Sarsekim² and has so been designated on the world-wide web ever since. Whereas the single instance³ of the god Nabû being mentioned by the Masoretic Bible in his own right has the god's name vocalized נְבוּ, theophoric reference to the god unexceptionally takes on the form of נְבוּ, though⁴, and so does the onomastic item under discussion.

l. 1: ^{p.d+}AG-LUGAL-su-GIN... Although a logogram in a name's final position seems to usually reflect the name ending in the preterite tense, while imperative mood endings would seem to prefer syllabic writing, it is not uncommon for the latter to be found written logographically too. A random case in point is the type of name ending in *-uṣur*, which can be put in writing either syllabographically or using either of the logograms for *naṣāru*.⁵ Consequently, *Nabû-šarrussu-kīn*, 'Nabû, maintain his rule!' might be the proper reading of this name's two known occurrences ending in -GIN.⁶ If it is, a third man joins in⁷: ^d*Nabû-LUGAL-ut-su-ki-i-ni* = *Nabû-šarrussu-kīn(i)*, whose name unequivocally has its verb in the imperative mood, the final *-i-* merely being an *überhängender Vokal*.⁸

l. 2: LÚ.GAL.SAG... Not only the question of whether our *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn*, the *rab ša-rēši* is likely to be identical with the biblical figure of נְבוּ שַׂר־רֵשִׁים, the *רב־רֵשִׁים* deserves scholarly debate; also worth considering is the possibility that he and his namesake who held the office of *ša rēš šarri* under Amel-Marduk are one and the same individual.⁹

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/07/11/ntablet111.xml#comments>

² *ibid.*

³ Jes. 46:1.

⁴ *HAL*³, 623b.

⁵ *AHw.* 756a-13aβ; 14a.

⁶ The other one is on record in Sack 1972, no. 23:4, written ^{p.d+}AG-LUGAL-ut-su-GIN, bearing the title of *ša rēš šarri*, 'royal courtier'; the shorter form in BM 114789 is due to the scribe running out of space as he continued writing on the right-hand edge.

⁷ *CAD*, K, 167a, sub k).

⁸ *GAG*³, § 18e.

⁹ Cf. foot-note 6 above; the document naming this high official is dated to the year 561. Vanderhooff 1999, 151 & n. 115 suggested that this *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn* might be the same individual as

l. 3: LÚ.SAG... In translating the hotly debated title of *ša-rēši* and its compounds Bongenaar has been followed here in his neutral rendering ‘courtier.’¹⁰ In essence *ša-rēši*’s (*šūt-rēši*) are palace employees, who may or may not have been eunuchs proper.¹¹

l. 3: *šá*... Probably this *šá* awkwardly repeats the *šá* of the preceding line, so it has been left untranslated, as it has by Jursa. Otherwise, one would have to interpret ll. 1-4: ‘... gold, which is in the custody of A., (and) which he (sc. N.) forwarded ...’

ll. 3-5: *a-na É-sag-gíl ú-še-bi-la* ^{PA}. ... *it-ta-din*... In the absence of further evidence detailing *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn*’s official duties, business interests or devotional inclinations we can only speculate for what purpose he did allocate an amount of gold this size to Babylon’s main temple. On no account did he owe it as a debt, for in that case a receipt with a quite different phraseology would have been made out, which would not have failed to use the *maḥir*¹² and/or *eṭir*¹³ formula.¹⁴ The gold would not have been called his¹⁵ in the first place. A deposit can be ruled out for similar reasons.¹⁶ Our record can best be placed in Jursa’s class of

Jeremiah’s שֶׁר־סָבִים, but he considered it an impossible thing to prove. The 34 years time span between the name’s two occurrences would seem to make the persons involved less likely to be the same individual, but allows for their identity still. Assyrian magnates have been shown to hold office for even longer periods of time, with tenures of up to 49 years: Mattila 2000, 135, sub f). Distinct titles could be readily accounted for as a result of promotion, demotion, rotation or, in this case, retirement; cf. Mattila 2000, 133-136 for a succinct overview of how careers would have developed at the Assyrian court. If it would turn out that *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn* the *rab ša-rēši* and *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn* the *ša rēš šarri* are indeed one and the same person, and that, at this rate, the lower ranking of his latter title in the hierarchy of courtiers could be due to retirement status, we would nicely have a Neo-Babylonian parallel to the career of *Ša-Nabû-šū*: after his resignation from the high office of *rab ša-rēši*, in which he had served Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal for many years, this magnate is eponym of year 658 as a mere *ša-rēši*, and later on in the latter king’s reign he pops up again, this time without any title at all but obviously still a man of importance, with his name being mentioned between the *rab ša-rēši* and the *masennu*: Mattila 2000, 62-63; 136, sub g). The Neo-Babylonian vernacular tends to use *ša-rēši šarri* and *ša-rēši* as near synonyms, so it seems: Bongenaar, 1997, 99-100.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ The issue ‘eunuch or not’ is briefly surveyed by Bongenaar 1997, 99-100 and Mattila 2000, 131-132. The evidence from Assyria strongly points to a *ša-rēši* typically having been incapacitated from begetting children. Things need in no way have been the same for Babylonia, though.

[Postscriptorial note: a heavily documented assessment of the topic has recently been delivered by L.R. Siddall, “A Re-examination of the Title *ša-rēši* in the Neo-Assyrian Period,” in: *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria. Proceedings of the Conference Held at the Mandelbaum House, The University of Sydney, 21-23 July 2004* [Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement Series, 21], Leuven: Peeters, 2007, p. 225ff.]

¹² ‘He (PN, creditor) has received (the money indebted, or part of it),’ normally preceded by ‘from (*ina qāt*) PN (debtor).’

¹³ ‘He (PN, creditor) has been fully paid (the money indebted),’ normally preceded by ‘from (*ina qāt*) PN (debtor).’

¹⁴ For a succinct description of this type of text see Jursa 2005, 44, sub 4.3.5: ‘Receipts.’ Cf. San Nicolò & Ungnad, 1935, 464-493: ‘H.-Quittungen.’

¹⁵ l.1: *šá*, ‘belonging to.’

¹⁶ Jursa 2005, 44, sub 4.3.4: ‘Records of deposit.’

administrative texts ‘... found predominantly in the temple archives where they constitute the overwhelming majority of our sources,’ and which ‘usually concern the transfer of a commodity (...) from one party to another. The scribes typically took note of the following information:

- a) the type and amount of commodity or object involved;
- b) the type of transaction (object received, given, expected to be given etc.);
- c) the party or parties involved, and finally
- d) the date.’¹⁷

Formally our record of deliverance (*ušēbila ... ana Esaggil ittadin*¹⁸) resembles ‘Sippar texts in which craftsmen “deliver” (*ittadin* or similar forms) their products’¹⁹ to the temple. However, an artisan delivering a finished piece of handicraft to his institutional employer differs widely from a state official allocating raw material of immense value to it. Given their *ad-hoc* character and limited scope generally an overall contextualisation of these innumerable notes and records within the framework of the temple archives will not come into reach soon.²⁰

l. 7: ^PA-a... Along with ^PAp-la-a, ^PA-ya-a and ^PA-a+a, to mention but the commonest forms, this spelling reflects the commonly attested hypocoristicon of names having *apla-*, ‘heir’ as their first or second component. Yet, reading ^PA-ya-a and ^PA-a+a = *Aplāya*, whereas ^PA-a and ^PAp-la-a = *Aplâ* (or *Aplā* for that matter) would seem a cautious thing to do. This man, too, has got his name misspelt from the very onset of his second life on the Internet, being referred to as ‘Alpaya’.

l. 7: LÚ-*qur*-ZAG?... This line is on the lower edge and seems to continue on the right-hand edge. On the photo the last discernable sign could be GUR = *qur-*, which is what Jursa’s translation²¹ suggests; on his authority the present author cannot but assume it is. At that rate the title can be expected to continue either -ZAG or -*bu-tú* on the right-hand edge.

Since the *ša-qur(ru)būti* belongs to the king’s personnel, put at the disposal of his high officials, *Bēl-usāt* son of *Aplâ* is likely to be one of the guards whom *Nabû-šarrussu-(u)kīn* the *rab ša-rēši* would have charged with the task of escorting his envoy *Arad-Banītu* on this risky mission.

¹⁷ Jursa 2005, 44-48: 4.4.

¹⁸ Cf. Jursa 2005, 48, sub *abāku*: ‘ventive forms (and less frequently sentences with *ultu* and *ina qāt* phrases) concern deliveries to the temple.’

¹⁹ Jursa 2005, 47.

²⁰ Jursa 2005, 59: 6.3: ‘The structure of temple archives.’

²¹ ‘royal bodyguard,’ obviously translating *ša-qur(ru)būti/u*.

[**Postscriptual note:** shortly after this paper had been accepted for publication I was kindly informed by Prof. Jursa that *Bēl-usāt*’s title ought to be read LÚ.GÍR.LÁ = *ṭābiḫu*, which is how a royal guard used to be designated in the Neo-Babylonian South; *ša-qur(ru)būti/u* is its strictly Neo-Assyrian counterpart.]

For one thing, this piece of information thus is a welcome addition to our scanty knowledge of the interaction between state and temple in first millennium Mesopotamia.²²

Suffice it for the present to have these most provisional notes. We can only hope for the chief expert in the matter of Neo-Babylonian archives to soon enlighten us on each and every aspect of this humble tablet of rare impact.

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²² Bongenaar 1997, 101⁹⁹.