

Rab-saris and Rab-shakeh in 2 Kings 18

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The titles of two of the three envoys of Sennacherib who appeared before the gates of Jerusalem in 701 (2 Kgs 18: 17ff.) have been a subject of scholarly debate, both Assyriological and biblical, for over a century—a curious case of mistaken lexical equations and circular argumentation.

Whereas the identity of the Tartan with the Assyrian *turtānu*, "Commander-in-Chief" (lit., "the second-in-command"), was apparent even after the first stages of the decipherment of the Assyrian royal inscriptions, the question of the cuneiform counterpart of the other two Assyrian titles in Hebrew guise could not easily be resolved. But even before the decipherment of the cuneiform, when Assyriology was still in its infancy, Semitists and biblical scholars had surmised that "Rab-saris" (KJV Rabsaris) must mean "Chief of the Eunuchs"/"Chief Eunuch." This title was compared to *rāb sārīšim* (Dan 1: 3), "Master of (Nebuchadnezzar's) eunuchs," and was related to *sārī, sārīšim* in Isa 53: 3 and to *sārīsā/sarsā* in Aramaic and Syriac.

Similarly, "Rab-shakeh" (KJV Rabshakeh) was understood to be Sennacherib's "Chief Cupbearer" (RSV: Chief of the Butlers, Luther: *Erzschenke*) and was compared to *šar hammašqim* in Gen 40: 2, 9, etc.¹

A few years later, the early Assyriologists concluded—rather unfortunately—that Rab-shakeh corresponds to LÚ.GAL.SAG, a logogram believed to be pronounced *rab šaq* or *rab šaqu* (from *šaqū*, high), a title of a high ranking dignitary occasionally dispatched by the kings of Assyria on military missions. Hence this title was no longer rendered as "Chief Cupbearer" but as "General," "General Staff-officer," or the like.²

As no cuneiform counterpart could be provided at that time for the "Rab-saris," Schrader stated that it was "probably the translation of a corresponding Assyrian title. But it has not been possible to say anything more definite hitherto. The [Biblical Hebrew] word *sārīs*, 'eunuch,' has not yet been found in the inscriptions" (1883: 319 = 1888: 2: 3). Schrader's disciple Hugo Winckler was much less cautious. He suggested that the "Rab-saris" of 2 Kgs 18: 17 was merely a wrong explanatory gloss to the rab-SAG (1889: 138). A learned glossator, knowing that SAG = *rēšu*, had "retranslated" *rab-šaq* (Rab-shakeh) with the non-existent Assyrian title *rab ša riš* and then hebraized it into *rab-sārīs*! As supporting evidence for this argument, Winckler pointed out that in Isa 36: 2, the parallel to 2 Kgs 18: 17, only one Assyrian envoy appears, the Rabshakeh.³

At about the same time, sounder suggestions were brought forth, mainly from the Leipzig school, headed by Zimmern (1899: 116; 1905: 651). The latter, followed by Klauber's penetrating study (1910: 70–72), adduced ample evidence that the Chief Cupbearer in Assyria was not the GAL.SAG, but the GAL.BI.LUL (or

GAL.KAŠ.LUL), pronounced *rab-šaqē*, another high ranking dignitary also mentioned in the eponym lists and in royal correspondence. Consequently, *rab šaqūšaqē* was taken as the original of the Rab-shakeh of the biblical narrative. As for the LÚ.GAL.SAG, this title was either transcribed, rather cautiously as *amēl-rab-SAG* (Klauber 1910: 73–77; 89) or transliterated as *amēl-rab-rešu*, and translated "General" (Streick 1916: 682). It was further suggested that LÚ.SAG by itself was pronounced *ša-rēši* and, like the *šūt-rēšu* of the Assyrian royal inscriptions, denoted a (royal) eunuch, often employed in various imperial-administrative posts.⁴

Convincing as they might have seemed, these renderings were not universally accepted. The entirely incorrect equation of Rab-shakeh with LÚ.GAL.SAG and the transcription of the latter as *rab-šaq* were not abandoned. Several leading Assyriological publications,⁵ collections of ancient Near Eastern texts in translation,⁶ as well as several recent translations of the Old Testament have followed the old error.⁷

More recently, the equation of LÚ.SAG with *ša ri-šū* in a lexical text published by Landsberger and Gurney (1957: 83: 232) has finally settled the century-old dispute. Yet, the question of how the title LÚ.GAL.SAG in the royal inscriptions should be read still remains a matter of debate. Some continue to normalize it as *rab-rēši*,⁸ while others prefer *rab-ša-rēši*, which thus corresponds to *rab-sārīs* of 2 Kgs 18: 17.⁹ The issue is not merely one of lexicographical conventions; it relates to the question whether the *ša-rēši* and consequently the *rab ša-rēši* were or were not eunuchs—a cardinal problem of the Assyrian imperial administration.¹⁰

Curiously enough, the proof that LÚ.GAL.SAG was indeed pronounced *rab ša-rēši* in Assyria has been close at hand all these years. A bilingual "heart-shaped" docket from the Kuyunjik collection at the British Museum (81–2–4, 147), bearing an Aramaic superscription with the title *rbsrs*, was published almost a century ago.¹¹ The editors of that text in CIS recognized that *rbsrs* corresponds to Rab-saris in 2 Kgs 18: 17 and hence rendered the date *šm Nbsr r rbsrs* as "Anno eunochorum principis Nabosarušur" (CIS 2/I: 145). It was rather unfortunate that in the cuneiform text the date-formula had been shortened to *limmu Nabu-šar-ušur* and his title omitted. Subsequently, this eponym was identified with Nabu-šar-ušur the governor of Marqasi and the eponym for 682,¹² and not with one of his two name-sakes,¹³ both post-canonical eponyms (i.e., after 648).¹³ That identification has never been questioned, nor has the resulting strange situation that a provincial governor would at the same time have held the high rank of Chief Eunuch.

The long awaited clue to the correct identity of the Nabu-šar-ušur of the bilingual docket and to his title has been provided by three economic documents, one—unpublished—from Assur (Weidner 1941: 316) and two from Nimrud, ND 3423 (Wiseman 1953: 140; Deller 1966: 193) and ND 5465 (Parker 1957: 134. pl. 21). In all three texts Nabu-šar-ušur carries the title of GAL.SAG. Weidner, when referring to the date in the Assur document (*lim-mu Nabu-šar-ušur rab-SAG*), noted its relation to that of the *rbsrs* of the Aramaic superscription (CIS no. 38) but did not draw the prosopographic and chronological inference. This was performed, very convincingly, by Margarete Falkner, who has shown that Nabu-šar-ušur, the LÚ.GAL.SAG of the Nimrud and Assur tablets, should be placed in the early post-canonical period, i.e., in the fifth decade of the seventh century (1956: 114). Our bilingual docket was also assigned by her to the same post-canonical eponym and not to that for 682. She made no reference, however, to the Aramaic superscription.¹⁴

More recent prosopographic examination of our docket and of another bilingual docket, K. 3784, closely related to it,¹⁵ has revealed that both must belong to the mid-seventh century or somewhat later and not to 682.¹⁶ Thus, the identification of the Nabu-šar-ušur of the bilingual docket with the early post-canonical Nabu-šar-ušur the LÚ.GAL.SAG has once and for all been established.¹⁷ It eliminates any possible doubt that the logographically written title LÚ.GAL.SAG (or, occasionally, LÚ.GAL.LÚ.SAG¹⁸) was indeed rendered in Aramaic *rsrs*, i.e., *rab ša-rēši* in Akkadian or *Rab-sāris* in Biblical Hebrew. Thus oddly enough, proper analysis of the Assyriological evidence has returned us to the answers offered in the pre-cuneiform stage of inquiry.

Notes

1. Thus, e.g., Thenius 1849: 383; Eddrup 1875: 2858; Berger 1886: 201. But already Jerome did not doubt that "Rabsaris" was "princeps eunuchus sive magister aut major eunuchus" and "Rabsace" was "princeps deosculans sive multus osculo" (*Liber de Nominibus Hebraicis*, ad loc.).
2. Delitzsch 1883: 13; 1896: 685; Schrader 1888: 319–20; Knudtzon 1893: 317; Muss-Arnolt 1905: 1099; Winckler 1903: 273; Manitius 1910: 199–209.
3. Before Winckler's ingenious speculation Klosterman (1887: 459) had suggested that the shorter version in Isa 36: 2 should be preferred. Influenced by these opinions, Stade and Schwally (1904: 271) excised the "Tarran" and the "Rab-saris" from 2 Kgs 18: 17, considering them marginal glosses. (In modern scholarship, this hyper-critical approach has been followed by Gray 1970: 675 and by the JB.) Several years after his short note of 1899 Winckler offered yet another, but no less far-fetched, speculation. He suggested that the original text in 2 Kgs 18: 17 read "and he sent the Tarran" etc., but the "Tarran" was later supplanted by "Rab-shakeh" (1903: 273, n. 5). Haupt's recit objection (*apud* Stade and Schwally 1904: 271) must have salvaged the "Rab-shakeh" but not the other two titles in the English edition of the *Polychrome Bible*.
4. Ungnad 1917/18: 56; Zimmern 1923: 31; Weidner 1956: 264. By that time it had been widely recognized that Hebrew *sāris*, Aramaic *rsrs*, *רַסְרַס*, and Syriac *sārisā*, "eunuch," were loan words from Assyro-Babylonian *ša rēši* (lit., "he who is at head"). Thus already, Delitzsch 1896: 694; Zimmern 1899: 116; 1903: 649; and BDB: 710.
5. Cf., e.g., Smith 1921: 60; 20; Waterman 1930–31: no. 283: 1 and vol. 3, p. 111; Piepkorn 1933: 12: 9. This error, reiterated recently by Henshaw, 1969: 15, goes back to the parallel passage in Streck 1916: 160: 25.
6. See, e.g., Luckenbill 1926: ¶171; ¶802; ¶803; Oppenheim 1950: 282^b; Wiseman 1958: 56. Cf. also Wiseman 1962: 1072.
7. "Rab-shakeh" was translated as "field-marshal" in Waterman (1947), as "the commander" in NAB, and as "chief officer" in NEB. NJPS left this and the other two Assyrian titles untranslated, as in KJV and RSV.
8. So, e.g., AHW: 938^b; Kinnier Wilson 1972: 35; Garelli 1974: 135; Borger (1978: 91) renders LÚ.SAG as *šar-rēši*. As for LÚ.GAL.SAG, he cautiously noted: "Lesung unsicher, etwa *rab-rēši*." Only in those few cases when it is written as LÚ.GAL.LÚ.SAG does he read it as *lū-rab-šar-rēši*. Cf. below, note 18.
9. So Oppenheim 1963: 3; Fenton 1968: 1127; Henshaw 1969: 14; Parpola 1976: 171; Tadmor 1976: 323.
10. For the Neo-Assyrian material see most recently Brinkman 1968: 309; Reade 1972: 91; Oppenheim 1973: 330–34 (with survey of previous literature); Garelli 1974: 133–36; Parpola 1979: 33; Henshaw 1980: 293. In a paper presented at the 27th *Rencontre Assyriologique internationale* in Paris (July 1980), I adduced some evidence for the political role of the influential *ša-rēši*'s in the Assyrian Empire of the late 9th and the early 8th centuries. It is not our purpose here to discuss the controversial question whether all these high royal courtiers were castrates or whether the appellation *šar-rēši-ša-rēši-sāris* could also denote non-castrated personnel. In all brevity, I would like to draw attention to two crucial but generally overlooked passages: (a) CT 23 10: 14 (quoted—as far as I know—for the first time by Jensen *apud* Manitius 1910: 109): *kima šar-rēši la ālidi nilka libal*, "May your semen dry up like that of a eunuch

who cannot beget" (CAD N 234^a); (b) Isa 56: 3–5: *wē'al yāmar bassāris hēn 'āni'ēs yābēs*, "And let not the eunuch say 'I am a withered tree'" (NJPS). The eunuchs are consoled that they will have "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" (v 5). Both passages, I believe, speak for themselves and require no further comment.

11. Berger 1886: 220; Brünnow 1888: 238–42; CIS no. 38. The Akkadian text was republished in Johns 1889: no. 129 and edited by Kohler and Ungnad 1913: no. 313, where the Aramaic text is also quoted and translated. The Aramaic text is discussed in full by Delaporte 1912: 39–41.
12. Bezold 1896: 1765; Pinches 1902: 181; Kohler and Ungnad 1913: no. 313; Ungnad 1938: 452.
13. Cf. Johns 1901: 3: 223; Ungnad 1938: 452.
14. Falkner (1956: 104 no. 124) rendered LÚ.GAL.SAG as *amēl-rab-rēši*, and translated "General."
15. Johns 1893: no. 130; Kohler and Ungnad 1913: no. 327; Delaporte 1912: no. 22.
16. *ṯaṣṣuni*, *Ḥamaṣuṣu*, and *Ḥandūate* (probably in the West) are mentioned in both dockets but do not occur in other documents from Nineveh. However, *Ḥapladdu-ḥuṣin*, son of one *Ḥa-ma-šū-šūl* *Ḥamadudu* (most likely identical with *Ḥa-ma-tu-tu* of the two dockets), appears in a document from Kanna; see VAT 5399 = Kohler and Ungnad 1913: no. 209, dated to the *limmu* of Nabu-šar-ušur the Palace Scribe (A.BA.KUR). To judge by the prosopography, this eponym, the third of the same name, belongs to the latest group of the post-canonical *limmu*'s: Falkner (1956: 114–15; 119). For the personal names in that document from Kanna, cf. Lipiński 1976: 58; Zadok 1977: 137; for the location of Kanna, see Fales 1973: 105 and Lipiński 1976: 53–63.

17. This Chief Eunuch, like the earlier bearers of that title, was in reality the Commander-in-Chief. He is known to have been dispatched by Ashurbanipal on military missions against the Mannans and the Gambulu; see Knudtzon 1893: nos. 150; 153. If he is identical with Nabu-šar-ušur the LÚ.GAL-*mu-gi* of Knudtzon 1893: nos. 66, 67, texts which derive from the time when Ashurbanipal was still a crown prince, it would seem that he had a long military career, becoming finally the 'Chief Eunuch' no later than 658 (Knudtzon 1893: no. 153). Already as the *rab-ša-rēši* he received a land-grant from Ashurbanipal; see Postgate 1969: no. 10. Falkner (1956: 118) placed his eponymy in 645 but that was the year of Nabu-šar-ahhešu and 646 was that of Nabu-nadin-ahi; see Tadmor 1964: 240–41 and Cogan and Tadmor 1981: 238–39. The earliest dates for his tenure as *limmu* would thus be either 647 or 644.

Nabu-šar-ušur was the first of the three post-canonical eponyms who bore the title of *rab-ša-rēši*: see Falkner 1956: 102, no. 38; 105, nos. 133 and 137 (from the time of Sin-šar-iškun). The last, and perhaps the most famous of these high potentates, was Sin-šum-lišir, who not only placed another son of Ashurbanipal on the throne (Postgate 1969: nos. 13–14) but also seized the throne for a short while during the bleak period which followed Ashurbanipal's death; see Borger 1969: 237–39.

18. This writing is attested for Ša-Nabu-šu, Esarhaddon's Chief Eunuch and Commander-in-Chief: Knudtzon 1893: no. 57; Klauber 1913: no. 37. However, the same person is referred to as LÚ.GAL.SAG in Klauber 1913: no. 36: 2 and in Johns 1901: no. 890: 5. He was the eponym for 658, when Nabu-šar-ušur served as Ashurbanipal's Chief Eunuch: Johns 1898: no. 48 = Kohler and Ungnad 1913: no. 299. Note that his title in this document is no more *rab-ša-rēši* but *ša-rēši*.

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