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The Man Without a Scribe and the Question of Literacy in the Assyrian Empire*

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K 652 (ABL 151) is a short but difficult Neo-Assyrian letter hitherto believed to refer to the making of a royal image and relief figures for Assyrian government officials. This interpretation derives from E. Klauber, who in his study *Assyrisches Beamtentum* (Leipzig, 1910), p. 103 f, rendered the words *la-a-ni* and *a-su-mu* occurring in the text as „Bild“ and „Relief“ respectively and compared them with the inscribed stelae of Assyrian kings and governors actually found at Assur and other Assyrian sites. At first glance, this interpretation makes sense and has, in fact, been generally accepted. Later translations of the letter (L. Waterman, *RCAE* [1930], no. 151; R. Pfeiffer, *SLA* [1935], no. 143; *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, B [1965] 273, A/2 [1968] 348 f, and L [1973] 79) differ from Klauber only in minor points:

[**Waterman**] „To the king my lord, your servant Sinna'id. May it be well with the king my lord.

„In regard to that which the king my lord has written me, he should summon (*i-še-si-a*) a scribe. Let him design an image (*la-a-ni*) of the king, a relief figure (*a-su-mu*) for the governor of the city of Arrapha, a relief figure for ...“

[**Pfeiffer**] „To the king, my lord, your servant Sin-naid. Greetings to the king my lord.

„The secretary is giving orders (*i-še-si-a*) concerning what the king my lord has written me, that they should make an image of the king, a bas-relief for the prefect of Arrapkha, a bas-relief for ...“

[**CAD**] „As to what the king my lord has written me, (...) let them draw an image of the king. let them ... a relief figure for the governor of Arrapha, let them ... a relief figure for PN.“

See also AHW. p. 77, s.v. *lānu* „Bild, Figur,“ and p. 534, s.v. *asūmu* „Bildstele(?)“

* It gives me great pleasure to dedicate this article to Wolfgang Röllig, a long-time member of the advisory committee of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, whose work has always been a source of inspiration to me. Abbreviations are those of the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* and *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, with the following additions: KAI = H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (2nd ed., Wiesbaden, 1966); NL = H.W.F. Saggs, „The Nimrud Letters,“ *Iraq* 17 (1955) 21 ff, etc., cited by text numbers.

This consensus does not mean, however, that the letter has necessarily been correctly understood. Quite the contrary. All the published translations suffer from numerous flaws making them totally obsolete today.¹ In particular, the idea that the letter would refer to the making of a royal image and relief figures has to be abandoned. The word *lānu* did not mean „image“ in Neo-Assyrian,² nor has the word *a-su-mu* (a hapax legomenon) any connection to „relief figures“ except its assonance to Babylonian *asumittu* „stela.“³ Overall, the text contains many unusual and problematic features, some of which (like the form *i-še-si-a* in line 7) are anomalous enough to raise the suspicion that something is wrong with the cuneiform copy on which the translations have been based.

Collation of the original confirms this suspicion. Instead of *i-še-si-a*, the tablet actually reads *i-še-e¹-a*. This word also occurs in rev. 3, and in general the reverse of the tablet, indicated as largely damaged in the copy, turns out to be completely readable.⁴ The alleged *la-a-ni* in obv. 7 actually reads *la-a-si¹*.

¹ *ana bēt* (obv. 5) does not mean „in regard to“ (Waterman), „concerning“ (Pfeiffer) or „as to“ (CAD), but „where(to)“, rarely „when“ (see the examples cited in n. 11 below); *išpurannini* (obv. 6) does not mean „wrote me“ but „sent me“ (see n. 11, and note also SAA 10 316 s.2 and 318 s.1, „I have gone where the king, my lord, sent me“); *i-še-si-a* (obv. 7) can under no circumstances be taken as a form of *sasū* „to call, summon,“ cf. simply CAD Š/2 (1992) under *šasū*: *li-is-pu-ru* (obv. 9) cannot be read *liširu* „let them draw“ (CAD) since the sign BU did not have the value /šir/ (see von Soden, *Akk. Syll.*, no. 213); reading *li-is-sir-ru* (Klauber, Waterman, Pfeiffer) is out of the question since neither *esēru* A „to collect“ nor *esēru* B „to shut in“ makes sense in the context and since neither verb is attested in Neo-Assyrian (cf. already S. Ylvisaker, LSS 5/6 [1912], p. 31). For *la-a-ni* and *a-su-mu* see presently.

² *lānu* is well attested in Neo-Assyrian, but only in the meanings „body, stature, figure, height“; see SAA 2 5 iv 16, 6:610; SAA 3 13:12.15, 23 r. 5, 38 r. 10, 39:10; SAA 5 156 r. 3; SAA 9 9:14.15; SAA 10 349:14; ABL 1078 r. 1; ADD 310:5 and 312:4; CTN 3 95 r. 11.17.22.26; ND 2082:4 (Iraq 16 34); Ass. 8476h r. 2 and 9687:4. The Neo-Assyrian term for „image“ was *šalmu*, cf. e.g. [*sal-m*]u ša AMA-[LUGA]L „image of the queen mother,“ CT 53 921 r. 17, *šal-mu*-LUGAL „royal image,“ CT 53 41:14.16 and r. 2, and 2 *sal¹-[mu-LUGA]L.MEŠ-ni* „two royal images,“ *ibid.* 12; also, written NU-MAN.MEŠ-ni, CT 53 18:6; NU-MAN.MEŠ, ABL 1194:13, CT 53 516:2; [NU]-LUGAL.MEŠ-ni, ABL 1098:11; [NJU]-LUGAL-ni, ABL 951:19; NU-MAN, SAA 7 62 i 14, ii 12, iii 10, r. i 10. The reading *la-a-ni* involves two particular difficulties rendering it suspect: the „overhanging“ *-i*, which is incongruous with the rules of Neo-Assyrian phonology and morphology, and the separation from LUGAL in the next line, which would be inexplicable had „royal image“ been meant by the writer.

³ See below. The attested Neo-Assyrian forms of the word are NA₄.*uš-mit-tu*, SAA 3 29 r. 4; NA₄.*uš-me-ta*, Scheil Tn II 60; *uš-me-te*, ND 2774:5 (Iraq 23 pl. 26); and *ú-su-mit-tu*, SAA 10 227 r. 25.

⁴ I collated the reverse of the tablet in November, 1966, the obverse (from photo) in the early eighties. All the new readings indicated with exclamation marks in the

On the other hand, the hapax legomenon *a-su-mu* in obv. 10 and 12 as well as the difficult *li-is-pu-ru* in obv. 9 and rev. 4 turn out to be correctly copied, and on the whole the copy proves reasonably accurate. Thus, collation does not eliminate the unusual character of the text but rather emphasizes it. Like the deleted *i-še-si-a* and *la-a-ni* (and the obscure *a-su-mu* and *li-is-pu-ru*), the new word forms *i-še-e-a* and *la-a-si* are not attested anywhere else.

The difficulties posed by these words quickly disappear, however, when it is realized that in spelling them the writer did not follow the standard Neo-Assyrian orthography, where graphic <s> stands for spoken [š] and vice versa,⁵ but rather the Neo-Babylonian system, where <s> = [s] and <š> = [š]. Thus *i-še-e-a* corresponds to normal Neo-Assyrian <i-se-e-a> = [išše:a] „with me,”⁶ *la-a-si* to <la-a-šu> = [la:si] „there is not,”⁷ and *li-is-pu-ru* to <liš-pu-ru> = [lišpu:ru] „let him send and.”⁸ The alleged „relief

transliteration were checked against the original in July, 1992. I wish to thank the Trustees of the British Museum for the photographs reproduced and for the permission to publish them.

⁵ See S. Parpola, „The alleged Middle Neo-Assyrian irregular verb **nass* and the Assyrian sound change š > s, *Assur* 11 (1974), 1-5, especially n. 13 on p. 4.

⁶ Cf. *i-se-e-a*, SAA 1 124 17, *is-se-e-a*, ibid. 205:14 and SAA 10 354 5 10 27; *i-si-ia* and *is-si-ia* passim; *i-se-e-ka* „with you,” NL 27:10 (Iraq 18 pl. 9); *is-se-e-ka*, CT 53 908 r. 2; *i-se-ka* and *is-se-ka* passim; *i-[se-e]-šu* „with him,” NL 19 (Iraq 17 pl. 4); *i-se-e-šu*, SAA 1 29:31, 35 r. 3, 124:22 and r. 12, SAA 10 369 12, ABL 557 r. 8; *is-se-e-šu*, SAA 1 4:13 and 13 r. 9, SAA 10 97 r. 8 and 353 r. 7, ABL 951 r. 4.6.8; *i-se-šu* and *is-se-šu* passim; *i-se-e-ni* „with us”, ABL 621+ r. 14; *i-se-ni* and *is-se-ni* passim; etc. The frequent spellings with *i-* imply that the geminate <ss> of *issi* (< *ište*) was reduced to [š] in suffixed forms, where the stress was shifted from the first to the second syllable.

⁷ E.g., SAA 1 233:18.20.r. 11.16, SAA 6 152:3; ADD 280:9, 386:2; CTN 3 66:11; *la-a-šu* SAA 6 2:8, 3:7, 96:10, and passim; *la-áš-šu*, *la-šu*, etc. passim; note exceptionally *la-a-ši*, SAA 6 52 r. 1, and *la-áš-ši*, ADD 476:2, both = „there is not.” These spellings suggest that the pronunciation [la:si], implied by the present letter, actually was much more common than the standard spellings (*la-áš-šu* etc.) would seem to indicate.

⁸ Cf., e.g., *gab-ru-ú ša e-gir-te LUGAL be-lí liš-pu-ru* „let the king my lord send a reply to (this) letter and (give orders to the ‘third men’),“ ABL 683 r. 9 ff; *e-gir-ti liš-pu-ru ... a-na LÚ*.šá-UGU-URU šum-mu a-na LÚ.šak-nu liš-pu-ru ma-a* „let him send a letter to the city overseer or to the prefect, saying (...),“ SAA 5 213:9 ff; on the anaptyctic *-u* (corresponding to the Babylonian enclitic particle *-ma* „and”) see the commentary on LAS 18 r. 8 in LAS 2 (1983), p. 26.

As indicated by the above examples, precative forms of *šapāru* were usually spelled with the sign *liš* in Neo-Assyrian and spellings with *li-iš-* are rare; the only examples known to me are *li-iš-pur*, SAA 5 81 r. 5; *li-iš-pur-ra*, SAA 5 244 r. 8, and *li-iš-pur-u-ni*, GPA 197 r. 5. The present spelling (*li-is-pu-ru*) is to be considered in the light of the writer’s reduced syllabary discussed in n. 17. CVC-signs were practical from the viewpoint of writing economy (*liš* has two wedges only vs. 15 of *li-iš* and 13 of

figure,“ *a-su-mu*, is in reality just a variant of <šum-mu> = [summu] „if.“⁹ Similar spellings occur in other NA letters as well, though much more sporadically.¹⁰

With this basic point established, we can now present a revised transliteration and translation of K 652:

	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Translation</i>
1	<i>a-na</i> LUGAL BE- <i>i</i> ^f <i>a</i> ¹	¹ To the king, my lord: your servant
2	ARAD- <i>ka</i> ^{md} 30- ^f 1	Sin-na ² di. Good health to the king, my
3	(<i>lu</i>) DI- <i>mu a-na</i> LUGAL	lord!
4	<i>be-lí-ia</i>	

li-is) and therefore much used by professional scribes, but using a CV-VC sign combination instead did the same trick and helped reduce the number of cuneiform graphemes to be mastered drastically.

⁹ Cf., e.g., SAA 1 99 r. 17, *šum-mu* LÚ.*qur-bu-te šum-mu* LÚ.*ša-EN.NUN* [*li-l*]i-*ka* „Let either a bodyguard or a guard come“; similarly ABL 556 r. 17. For further examples of disjunctive *šummu* ... *šummu* „either ... or“ see SAA 1 41 r. 5 f, 48:13 f, 139:4 ff, 220:5f and r. 8 ff, SAA 5 213:9 ff (quoted in n. 8), SAA 10 152:7, 194 r. 14, 362:6, ABL 1056 r. 4 ff, etc. The prothetic *a-* attached to *su-mu* is certainly due to analogy with *kīma* „when, if,“ which is often found with this prothetic *a-* especially in letters from Der and Babylonia (e.g., ABL 800:9, 861 s. 1, 1063 r. 11, ABL 1296 r. 6, CT 53 77 s. 4, 716:5; note, in the meaning „if,“ ABL 211 r. 15 ff, *a-ki-ma ina šà a-bi-te an-ni-te qur-ba-ku* „if I am involved in this matter (let the king punish me)“; also ADD 102 r. 5). Note also *a-ki-i* beside *ki-i* „as, if, whether“ (passim); *a(m)-mar* beside *mar* „as much as“ (passim), etc. Occasional spellings of *šummu* with the MU sign in Assur (TCL 9 62B r. 1, FWA 107q r. 2, Ass. 9571t r. 2, 9634:7, 9644d :6, 9644e:7, 9661d:7, 9661k:7, 13846ad r. 2) imply a merger with *šumu* „name“ and thus a variant pronunciation [su:mu] beside the normal [summu].

¹⁰ Cf. *a-ra-si* and *uš-še-si-i[b]* for normal <a-ra-ši> = [ara:si] and <us-se-šib>, in letters from Babylonia (ABL 685:14 and 760:8); *e-pa-sa-an-ni*, *ep-sa-at*, *ú-na-mesa* for normal <e-pa-ša-an-ni>, <ep-šat>, etc., in letters from Der (ABL 800 r. 6, CT 53 904:4.7, ABL 1348:10); and *sa-pal*, *e[p]-sa-tu-ni*, *e-pu-su-(su-)nu*, *ep-pa-su-nu*, *ni-is-pur-an-ni*, *as-pur-^fan¹-[ni]* for <šá-pal>, <ep-šá-tu-ni> (etc.), <ni-iš-pur-an-ni> and <áš-pur-an-ni>, in letters from Phoenicia (ABL 992:12.14, CT 53 148:18.r. 18.21.23, and CT 53 289:16.r. 16), all written by the same man with a Babylonian name and writing Assyrian with a heavy „Babylonian accent.“ Correspondingly, in letters from Babylonia, *la-áš-hur*, *iš-hu-ra-an-ni*, *pa-ri-iš-tu*, *ú-še-bi-la-áš-šú* for <la-as-hur>, <is-hu-ra-an-ni>, <pa-ri-is-tu> and <ú-se-bi-la-áš-šú> (ABL 1063:21, 1453+:11, 1436:5, CT 53 68 r. 12 and 364:1). Note also *ma-ši-i* for normal <ma-se-e> „to wash“ in BM 103389:22 (AfO 32 38 f), a text from Assur. These parallels imply that the writer of our letter originated from the southern parts of Assyria subjected to Babylonian linguistic or orthographic influence. The spelling BE for *bēlu* „lord“ in obv. 1 points in the same direction, for it is otherwise attested only in letters from Assur (ABL 419:6, SAA 8 140 r. 2), Der (ABL 537:1.3.6.14, 798:1.3.r. 7, CT 53 904:3.5.8), and Babylonia (CT 53 490:6, Iraq 34 22:20, ABL 85 r. 3?), and well as in two letters from the vassal rulers of Mušasir and Šurda (ABL 768:3 f and 1081:2.4.r. 8).

5	<i>a-na bé-et</i>	⁵ I have no scribe where the king sent me to.
6	LUGAL <i>iš-pu-ra-ni-ni</i>	
7	LÚ*.A.BA <i>i-še-e¹-a</i>	
8	<i>la-a-si¹</i>	
9	LUGAL <i>li-is-pu-ru</i>	⁹ Let the king order either the governor of Arrapha or Aššur-belu-taqqin to send me one.
10	<i>a-su-mu a-na LÚ*.EN.NAM</i>	
11	<i>ša URU arrap-ra-ap-ha</i>	
e.12	<i>†a¹-su-mu</i>	
r. 1	<i>†a¹-na maš-šur¹-U-LAL¹</i>	
2	<i>†i¹-en¹ LÚ*.A.BA</i>	
3	<i>†i¹-še¹-e¹-a</i>	
4	<i>[li]-i¹-pu-ru</i>	

Thus the message of the letter actually turns out to be very simple: the sender simply informs the king that he didn't have a scribe and that he needed one. What is interesting is that this circumstance did not prevent him from putting his message into writing and drafting the present letter. Lines 5 f and 9 ff imply that the sender was on a mission in the Zagros mountains,¹¹ where people knowing Assyrian cuneiform certainly did not grow on trees.¹² Hence he must have either written the letter himself or had someone

¹¹ For lines 5 f cf. SAA 5 226:5 f, *ina É LUGAL be-lí ina UGU LÚ.GAL.MEŠ iš-pur-an-ni-ni* „when the king sent me to the magnates (in Media)“; CT 53 141:6 ff *bé-et LUGAL [bé¹]-a-na KUR GAL-KAŠ.LUL iš-pur-an-ni-ni* „when the king my lord, sent me to the land of the chief cupbearer“; ABL 992:13, KUR *bé-et LUGAL be-lí iš-ku-ni-ni* „(the king, my lord, knows) the land where the king, my lord, stationed me“ (referring to Phoenicia). Note further, referring to missions in the Zagros area: NL 41 r. 1 f (Iraq 20 pl. 38), *a-ki LUGAL be-lí ina UGU LÚ.LUL.MEŠ iš-pur-[an]-ni-ni* „when the king, my lord, sent me to (catch) the criminals, (I went there)“; SAA 5 227:21 f. *ka-i ú-ma-a i-li-kan-a-ni É LUGAL be-lí iš-pur-šu-u-ni* „as he now came, (going) to where the king, my lord, sent him“; and SAA 5 198 r. 3 ff, *[bé-et] LUGAL be-lí [i]š-pur-ra-ni-ni †ú¹-ta-me-š[i]* „I have set out [to where] the king, my lord, sent me.“

The lack of a blessing formula in our letter dates it to the reign of Sargon II. Aššur-belu-taqqin (rev. 1) is known to have served at this time as a governor in or in the vicinity of the Transtigridian city of Meturna (Tell Haddad on the Diyala), 160 km SE of Arrapha (Kirkuk); see ABL 455 r. 5 and the other letters from or mentioning Aššur-belu-taqqin (ABL 212, 887, 1057, CT 53 64; ABL 438, 638, 1296, CT 53 6 and 244). The fact that the desired scribe was to be supplied either by the governor of Arrapha or by Aššur-belu-taqqin but not, e.g., the governor of Der (Tell Aqar), implies that the sender was located somewhere in the upper reaches of the Diyala river.

¹² Occasional letters from vassal rulers (see SAA 5 164-168) show that Assyrian cuneiform was used at least in some Zagros principalities under direct Assyrian influence. The level of scribal competence evidenced by these letters is low, indicating that the use of the script was limited to the vassal court only.

in his retinue write it.¹³ Whichever the case, the writer evidently was an ordinary Assyrian administrator not generally thought to have been able to read or write.¹⁴

This explains the many unusual spellings, word forms and phrases occurring in the text. Not being a professional scribe, the writer simply was not able to adequately follow the standard spelling and phrasing conventions of the Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence. At the same time it is clear, however, that he was by no means a mere dilettante either but must have had considerable previous writing experience. The tablet, expertly moulded, has the typically Neo-Assyrian letter format,¹⁵ the introductory formula agrees with contemporary conventions, and the signs are drawn and distributed over the lines with a skill that can be acquired only through long and repeated practice.

If an ordinary Assyrian government official possessed such writing skills, there is every reason to believe that literacy in the Assyrian empire was far more widespread than hitherto assumed.¹⁶ After all, mastering the elements of cuneiform script (the basic syllabograms and the most important logograms) does not take longer than a semester today. This level of competence is sufficient for writing and reading simple texts, and it is the level

¹³ The forms of the signs and several orthographic details agreeing with standard Assyrian conventions (in the first place the spelling of the city name Arrapha with the LIMMU sign) betray the Assyrian origin of the writer. It could be objected that he might as well have been a local scribe trained in Assyria; but in that case the sender would (contrary to the wording of the letter) have had a scribe at his disposal!

¹⁴ See, e.g., A.K. Grayson, *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., III/2 (1991), p. 202: „There seems to have been no training programme for potential bureaucrats nor were the officials literate, since an army of scribes bolstered up the entire system.“

¹⁵ The tablet measures 1.7 x 3.1 x 6.2 cm and thus displays the standard 1:2:4 *egirtu* ratio between its thickness, width and length. See S. Parpola, JNES 42 (1983) 2 n. 5 and LAS 1 (1970) 331-341, and K. Radner, „The Relation Between Format and Content of Neo-Assyrian Texts,“ in R. Mattila, ed., *Nineveh 612 BC. The Glory and Fall of the Assyrian Empire* (Helsinki, 1995), 63-77, especially 71f.

¹⁶ The current scholarly consensus seems to be that after relatively wide-spread literacy in the early second millennium BC (see n. 19) there was a „reversal“ in the development of the cuneiform script, which eventually „led to literacy becoming the prerogative of a restricted class of highly trained specialists [in] the late second and early first millennia“ (M.T. Larsen, „The Mesopotamian Lukewarm Mind: Reflections on Science, Divination and Literacy,“ in F. Rochberg-Halton, ed., *Language, Literature, and History: Philological Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* [New Haven, 1987], p. 220, with reference to earlier opinions); see also J.S. Cooper, *International Encyclopaedia of Communications* 1 (Oxford, 1989), 442, and J. Oates, *Babylon* (rev. ed., London, 1986), 163.

evidenced in our letter.¹⁷ Naturally, full mastery of the cuneiform writing system takes a lifetime and can be attained only by a small number of professionals. But such a mastery was not necessary in everyday life. The level of literacy evidenced by the present letter was within the reach of every affluent Assyrian family, and there certainly was no prohibition against it.¹⁸ The extent to which this potential was actually realized of course remains a matter of conjecture, but it would stand to reason that elementary literacy was mandatory at least for public and state offices, as later in Greece and Rome.¹⁹ I submit that the alleged „drastic“ second-millennium change in

¹⁷ The letter contains a total of 40 different graphemes, of which 26 (= 65%) are phonetic and 14 ideographic. The phonetic signs (*a e i u; ba ha ia ka la na ra ša; bé še; li ni si; mu pu ru su; ap et is iš*) account for 70.5% of all sign occurrences. The ideograms include numbers, determinatives and logograms for common nouns, names, and name elements (A.BA „scribe,“ ARAD „servant,“ BE(-li) „lord,“ DI „well-being,“ EN.NAM „governor,“ LUGAL „king“; 30, *aš-šur, arrap*, EN, LAL). Even though the sample is very limited, the total absence of CVC-type syllabograms on the one hand, and the presence of CV-VC type spellings (*bé-et, li-is, ra-ap*) on the other, indicates that it is representative (cf. n. 8 above). Supposing that the writer's complete syllabary included all the commonly used Neo-Assyrian CV and VC graphemes and a proportional number of additional logograms, it would have consisted of a total of 112 signs, 79 of them syllabograms and 33 ideograms. (In actual fact, the syllabary may well have been more reduced and still perfectly functional). This compares well with such syllabic systems as Japanese hiragana and Linear B. To put the matter in perspective, it may be noted that even the syllabary of such an expert scribe as Mar-Issar, attested in an extensive correspondence (SAA 10 347-370), does not include more than 225 graphemes (170 syllabograms + 55 ideograms).

¹⁸ An anonymous letter to Esarhaddon (ABL 1245) denounces a goldsmith who „like the king and the crown prince has bought a Babylonian, settled him in his own house, and taught (*liginnu iqtibi*) his son in exorcism; they have even explained to him extispicy omens, and he has even studied gleanings from Enuma Anu Enlil, and this right before the king, my lord!“ (obv. 4-12). However, it is clear that the man was not accused for teaching his son to read and write but for acquiring knowledge in magic, extispicy and astrology – subjects potentially highly dangerous to the monarchy (see SAA 10 179 and my remarks in Iraq 34 [1972] 32) – without the king's permission. To judge from a contemporary letter, learning to read and write cuneiform was not considered a difficult task in this period – not at least by the writer, the princess Šerua-ētirat, who degrades her sister-in-law by hinting she was involved in such childish exercises (ABL 308). A letter written by the above-mentioned goldsmith's son (ABL 847) has actually been preserved, and it displays very good writing competence.

¹⁹ In his book *The Old Assyrian City State and Its Colonies* (Copenhagen, 1976), p. 305, M.T. Larsen writes: „There are indications that a great many Assyrians knew how to read and write so the need for privately employed scribes may not have been so great. The system of writing was highly simplified with only a limited number of syllabic signs and quite few logograms, and many of the outrageously hideous private documents constitute clear proof of the amateurishness of their writers. We know for certain that some of the sons of important merchants were taught the

Mesopotamian literacy (see n. 16) actually never took place, and that the level of literacy in first millennium Mesopotamia was at least as high (if not higher) as in earlier times.²⁰

APPENDIX: Additional Philological Notes on K 652

2. The reading of the sender's name is based on the syllabic spellings ^m*aš-šur-na-a²-di* (ABL 941:9), ^m_{A.10}*na-a²-di* (ADD 22:3), ^m_{EN}*na-a²-di* (SAA 6 325 r. 23) and ^m*na-a²-di*-DINGIR (CT 53 38 r. 3 and CTN 3 102 ii 9).

3. The supplied *lu* is (with the exception of CTN 3 1:4) otherwise missing from the salutation only in letters from the Balih and Habur area (see SAA 1 214:3, 222:3, 223:3 and 224:3), where its omission is surely intentional and due to Aramaic influence (see KAI no. 233:1).

5. *a-na bé-et* is elsewhere regularly spelled with the *ina* sign. For *a-na* = <ina> see LAS 2 (1983), r. 47 f.

6. Note the standard spelling *iš-pu-ra-ni-ni* beside the non-standard *li-is-pu-ru* (obv. 9, rev. 4). Similar vacillation between standard and non-standard orthography also occurs in the other letters surveyed in n. 10 above, e.g. *iš-pur-an-ni* and *e-pu-uš* beside *e-pa-sa-an-ni* in ABL 800 r. 6.9.13; *ep-pu-šú* beside *e-pu-su-nu*, in CT 53 148:16 and r. 18; *iš-ku-ni-ni* and *e-pu-¹uš-ma¹* beside *e[p]-sa-tu-ni*, ABL 992:13 f and 23; *iš-kun-u-nu* and *le-pu-šú* beside *ni-is-pur-an-ni*, CT 53 289:13 and r. 5 f. Note also *iš-se-e-a*, NL 96:37 (Iraq 39 pl. 34, a letter from Arrapha), and *iš-sap-ra-a-ni*, SAA 10 273:7 and r. 11.

7 f. Literally, „there is no scribe with me.“

9. When used in hendiadys with another verb, *šapāru* (without the ventive suffix) often had the meaning „to send (word), order, direct“ in Neo-Assyrian, e.g., *liš-pu-ru lu-bi-lu-niš-šú*, ABL 464 r. 6; *šu-up-ru bé-et šu-tú-u-ni li-is-[b]u-tu lu-bi-lu-ni-[šú]*, SAA 1 246:10 ff; *a-sa-par ú-ba-lu-ni-šú*, SAA 5 263:5; *šu-pur liš-u-lu a-na ^msa-si-i*, ABL 1257:8; *a-šap-par i-ša-²u-ú-[lu-u]š*, ABL 464 r. 11; *a-šap-par i-ša-ú-lu*, SAA 1 91 r. 8.

9 ff. The word order can be compared with ABL 896 r. 2 (*la-áš-pur a-na é-a-muk-a-ni* „let me send word to Bit-Amukani“) and ABL 1385:8 f (*ša áš-*

scribal art in Assur... In spite of these observations it must be assumed that the big firms did have their own scribes.“ See also his remarks on literacy in the Old Akkadian and Old Babylonian periods in *Festschrift Reiner* (above, n. 16), p. 219f. The evidence available to me indicates that this picture applies to the Assyrian Empire as well. Most private letters of this period are written with a limited syllabary and in this respect do not differ from their Old Assyrian predecessors. They also include a fair number of „outrageously hideous“ documents (e.g., CTN 3 no. 3), which under no circumstances can qualify as the handiwork of expert scribes.

²⁰ For a similar view see H. Vanstiphout, „Memory and Literacy in Ancient Western Asia,“ in J. Sasson et al., eds., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York, 1995), 2181-2196, esp. 2188 f.

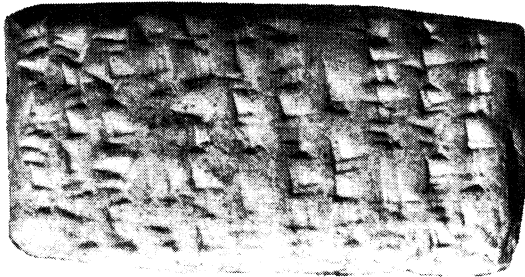
pur-an-ni a-na šeš-ia mu-uk, „as to what I wrote to my brother, saying (...)“.

11. The spelling URU.*arrap-ra-ap-ha* is attested only here and is a compromise between the standard spelling URU.*arrap-ha* and a fully syllabic spelling (e.g., *ár-rap-ha*, ABL 1244:10).

r. 1. There is an accidental vertical wedge above the second horizontal of *aš-šur*.

r. 3 f. *šapāru + issi* „to send to“ is also attested in SAA 10 353:14 ff („[the king, my lord], sent a bodyguard to the commandant“) and ABL 916:7 ([LÚ].A-KIN DUMU-LUGAL *is-si-ia is-sap-ra* „the crown prince sent a messenger to me“).

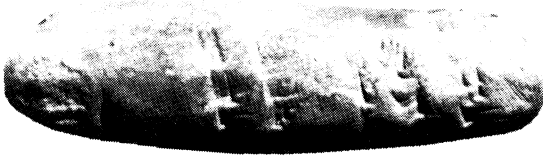
K 652. Photograph courtesy Trustees of the British Museum



Obverse



Reverse



Right edge