

Stories of long ago.

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After Eltekeh: Royal Hostages from Egypt at the Assyrian Court

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Michael Roaf has spent much of his professional life far away from his native Britain, holding appointments in countries as far-flung and diverse as Iraq, the United States and Germany. On the occasion of his 65th birthday I would like to offer him this paper on Egyptian expatriates at Nineveh. As Michael enjoys good puzzles, I would like to bring to his attention the so far unresolved mystery of why they were living in the heart of Assyria more than two decades before the conquests of Esarhaddon (r. 681–669 BC) brought a great many Egyptians into cities such as Nineveh and Assur.

The source

My starting point is a well-known sale document from Nineveh (K. 294) that has been edited several times since it was first published by Johns (1898, no. 324). The most recent full edition is that of Kwasman and Parpola (1991, no. 142).¹ Unlike most attestations of Egyptians in the Assyrian heartland, this text does not date to the period after 671 BC when Esarhaddon of Assyria invaded and subjugated the lands on the Nile. Especially the conquest of Thebes and Memphis resulted in the relocation of a great many Egyptians to the cities of the Assyrian heartland (Radner 2009, 223–226). Our text, however, dates to the year 692 BC and therefore raises the question, why were there Egyptians at Nineveh in the first place at this time? Apart from some remarks by Struve (1927, 66), the only discussion to address this key issue is that of Onasch (1994, 15–16) but his short comments, in the historical introduction to his edition of the inscriptions of Assurbanipal (r. 668 – c. 627 BC) regarding his Egyptian campaigns, do not explore the subject and its further implications in any depth.

¹ K. 294 is a complete tablet without any damage but its text features several scribal mistakes. However, Kwasman and Parpola's edition is not without inaccuracies, either. I was able to collate the tablet in July 2011 in the British Museum and take the opportunity to communicate corrections: Obv. 8: URU.ni-nu-u (instead of expected URU.ni-nu-u-a as given in edition). Rev. 2: ^ma-tar-su-ru (as expected; not the edition's MÍ.a-tar-su-ru). Rev. 3: ^ma-mat-su-u'-la (scribal mistake for expected MÍ.a-tar-su-u'-la, as given in edition). Rev. 4: ga-mur (not the edition's gam-mur). Rev. 14: LÚ*.<GAL>-MÁ.DU.DU (scribal mistake for expected LÚ*.GAL-MÁ.DU.DU, as in rev. 16; not indicated in edition). The signs in lines 7, rev. 4 and 17 marked in the edition as damaged are in fact fully preserved.

Unlike other legal texts found at the ruin mound of Kuyunjik, which may concern legal affairs conducted far from the capital, there can be no doubt that the business transaction recorded in our text took place in Nineveh itself because its subject is a house in that city and is described as such: “A built house with its beams, doors and a yard in Nineveh, adjoining the house of Mannu-ki-ahhe, the house of Ilu-issiya, and the street” (obv. 6–10). The text continues: “Šilli-Aššur, the Egyptian scribe (LÚ*.A.BA LÚ*.mu-ṣu-ra-a-a), has contracted and bought it for one mina of silver (by the mina) of the king from Šarru-lu-dari, Atar-suru and Amat-Su’la, the wife of Bel-duri” (obv. 10 – rev. 4). Bel-duri is identified as a “shield-bearing Third Man (of a chariot-team)” earlier in the document (obv. 3) and it is very likely that he was no longer alive when the house was sold; his death may be the reason why the house changed ownership in the first place. This would explain why his wife is named as one of the legal parties, an unusual occurrence in Neo-Assyrian contractual practice. The other two men who owned the house jointly with Bel-duri’s wife are likely to have been her or rather her husband’s relatives, most probably his brothers (Radner 2004, 73–74).

As a Third Man, Bel-duri was a member of the army, more specifically the chariotry. He shared this profession with the second witness to the transaction, a man with the Egyptian name Hur-waši “Horus is sound” (Mattila 2000, 481, with previous literature), and we can assume that they were professionally acquainted with each other. The fifth witness is also called Hur-waši and holds the title of LÚ*.GAL–MÁ.DU.DU “head of boatmen, captain”. So does the third witness Rasu’, whose name is of Egyptian origin if not as easy to etymologise (Mattila 2002, 1033). The title of these Egyptian men has nothing to do with commercial shipping but is a military title referring to the Assyrian fleet that Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BC) had established at Nineveh (see below). The list of witnesses is headed by “Šusanqu, the king’s in-law” (^mš^u-sa-an-qu ha-at-na MAN, rev. 12). The fact that he is named first in the list of witnesses signals that this is an important man. This is clear also from his title *hatan šarri* which identifies him as related to the king by marriage.

Who was Shoshenq, the king’s in-law?

In a legal document from Assyria’s capital, it is impossible to assume that the king in question would be any other ruler than the Assyrian king.² Šusanqu is the Assyrian rendering of the extremely well attested name Shoshenq which was popular among the various royal houses of Libyan descent claiming regions in the Nile Delta and, on occasion, all of Egypt in the first centuries of the first millennium BC. The name is not exclusive to the heads of these ruling houses but is attested also for other members of these families (Kitchen 1986, 520–521, 606–607).

2 Pace Onasch (1994, 15), who considers the possibility that the king in question could be the king of Kush or an Egyptian ruler. Compare the use of *mar šarri* “crown prince”, *ummi šarri* “mother of the king” and *marat šarri* “daughter of the king” in Neo-Assyrian legal texts, always referring to relatives of the Assyrian king.

Our Shoshenq was therefore not only related by marriage to Sennacherib, king of Assyria, but was also a member of one of the Delta dynasties. His title is proof of a dynastic marriage between the Assyrian royal family and one of the ruling houses of northern Egypt. That his presence in Nineveh was a long-term arrangement is clear from the fact that he acted as a witness to a house sale: should there ever be a disagreement, the testimony of the witnesses was considered far more important than the document itself (Radner 2003, 891), and he and the other Egyptian witnesses must therefore have been permanent residents rather than occasional visitors passing through Nineveh. That the Egyptian scribe Šilli-Aššur bought a house in the city makes this point of course glaringly obvious in his specific case, but it is no less certain for the other Egyptians named in our document.

Although it is the most likely scenario, Shoshenq was not necessarily married to a daughter of Sennacherib as the term *hatannu* designates more generally a man linked by marriage to a certain family. Therefore, he could have been married to one of Sennacherib's sisters or even a more distant female relative of the king. Only very few Assyrian princesses are known by name for the period in question. Sennacherib's sister Ahat-abiša was married to Ambaris, king of Tabal in Anatolia, by their father Sargon II (r. 721–705 BC) and is therefore an extremely unlikely candidate for Shoshenq's bride, even if she may have been sent back to Assyria after Ambaris rebelled against Sargon in 713 BC (Aro-Valjus / Nissinen 1998, 59). A more plausible candidate may be Šadditu who is attested buying land in a legal document from Nineveh during her brother Esarhaddon's reign (Kwasman & Parpola 1991, no. 251). But it is of course pure chance that her name happens to survive in our fragmentary sources, and it is very unlikely that she was the only daughter of Sennacherib.

Unlike Ahat-abiša, however, who was sent to Tabal with her royal bridegroom, Shoshenq and his unknown princess bride remained at the Assyrian court. This alone makes it clear that at the time that our sale text was recorded Shoshenq was a royal hostage.

The Assyrian practice of taking of high-born hostages (*lītu*) is very well attested (see the brief survey by Zawadzki 1995). Subject rulers who had been made to accept Assyrian sovereignty by force had to secure their treaties with Assyria, in addition to swearing the usual oaths, by handing over members of their family and sometimes also other high-born individuals who were then sent to live at the Assyrian court. Their presence there served a two-fold purpose. While at Assyria, they were to guarantee their family's, and country's, loyalty to the Assyrian king with their life. Moreover, were they to return to their native lands, ideally as its ruler or in another influential position, then the time spent at the Assyrian court was meant to have attuned them to Assyrian sensibilities and hence ensure their dependable conduct at home.

We know of several rulers who had spent time at Sennacherib's court before they returned to rule their native country in line with Assyria's wishes: Bel-ibni whom Sennacherib appointed as king of Babylon "had grown up like a puppy in my palace" (Frahm 1997, T 3 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 3: 14 and parallels) and

Tabua whom Esarhaddon appointed as queen of the Arabs “was raised in the palace of my father (Sennacherib)” (Leichty 2011, 19 Esarhaddon 1 iv 15 and parallels). From these statements in the royal inscriptions, we learn that at least these royal hostages were children when they were sent to the Assyrian court – an obvious advantage as regards the objective of pro-Assyrian indoctrination.

How, and when, did Shoshenq come to Nineveh?

But was Shoshenq a child when he first came to Nineveh? By 692 BC he was old enough to be married, but the group of Egyptians attested in our sale document may well have arrived much earlier in Nineveh. The fact that one of them, the scribe Šilli-Aššur, had replaced his native Egyptian name with an Assyrian one (“Protection of Aššur”), indicates a significant degree of assimilation but there is no way of knowing how this relates, if at all, to the length of his stay. If his scribal expertise was indeed used, as Morkot (2000, 230) suggests, to draw up diplomatic correspondence with Egypt and Kush, this name may have been chosen to signal his unwavering loyalty to his Assyrian employers.

A closer look at the political interaction between Assyria and the lands on the Nile³ should prove more instructive for addressing this question. Since the final decade of the 8th century BC (the exact moment is fiercely debated, see e.g. Fuchs 1998, 130–131 for an overview of some key dates), the king of Kush in present-day Sudan controlled all of Upper Egypt up to Hermopolis and was acknowledged as overlord by the local rulers of Middle Egypt and in the Nile Delta (Morkot 2000, 128). Onasch (1994, 15; accepted by Huber 2006, 306) can only conceive of the period prior to the Kushite conquest of the north of Egypt as a meaningful scenario for a marriage alliance between Assyria and a Delta dynasty. Then, Shoshenq’s presence in Assyria could perhaps be connected with the diplomatic overtures to Sargon in 716 BC by the Delta ruler Osorkon IV (c. 730 – c. 715 BC, “Šilkanni, king of Egypt” in the Assyrian inscriptions) who controlled Ro-nefer, Tanis and Bubastis in the north-eastern Delta until his reign was ended by the Kushite conquest (Kitchen 1986, 372–376). According to Sargon’s inscriptions,

Šilkanni, king of the remote country of Egypt, whom the fear of the splendour of the god Aššur, my lord, had overwhelmed, brought as his audience gift twelve large Egyptian horses, their likes not to be found in this country (Fuchs 1998, 28, 57: III.e Ass. 8–11).

Sending an audience gift (*tāmartu*, see Radner 2007, 216), however, would not necessarily have obliged Osorkon IV to enter a treaty with Sargon II. However, even if a treaty were concluded, and this is certainly possible, then this would have been a voluntary agreement. It would not have required Osorkon to secure his future obedience to Assyria by placing hostages, as this was normally enforced only after a previous betrayal.

³ Zamazalová 2011 provides a good survey of the relations between Assyria, Egypt and Kush before the Assyrian invasion of 671 BC.

I would like to propose an altogether different scenario which I find far more persuasive. In 701 BC the Assyrian army met Egyptian troops on the battle field, for the first time since the battle of Qarqar in western Syria in 853 BC. Now, these troops were part of the Kushite forces. The confrontation took place in Eltekeh, a site in southern Palestine⁴ not far from the city of Ekron (Tel Mique) which had rebelled against the previously accepted Assyrian sovereignty with the support of Kush. According to Sennacherib's inscriptions, the people of Ekron

formed a confederation with the kings of Egypt (and) the archers, chariots, (and) horses of the king of the land Meluhha (= Kush), forces without number, and they came to their aid. In the plain of the city Eltekeh, they sharpened their weapons while drawing up in battle-line before me. With the support of the god Aššur, my lord, I fought with them and defeated them. I captured alive in the heat of battle the charioteers and sons of the Egyptian kings (DUMU.MEŠ LUGAL.MEŠ KUR.mu-uš-ra-a-a), together with the charioteers of the king of the land Meluhha (= Kush).

This passage is first used in an edition of Sennacherib's *res gestae* from 700 BC, shortly after the recorded events (Rassam Cylinder: 43–45, see Frahm 1997, T 4), and is then recycled verbatim in subsequent editions compiled in 697, 696, 694 and 691.⁵ When our sale text was recorded in 692 this account of the battle of Eltekeh was still widely promulgated in Sennacherib's official inscriptions.

Sennacherib's account makes it clear that from the Assyrian point of view, despite the recently established supremacy of Kush, there were still Egyptian rulers considered powerful enough in their own right to be described as kings. This being the case, the Assyrian foreign policy would have taken these rulers into account as a matter of course. Onasch's argument (1994, 15) that any dynastic alliance must have been arranged prior to the Kushite conquest is therefore invalid.

The capture of Egyptian princes at Eltekeh in 701 provides therefore the most likely scenario for Shoshenq's arrival at Nineveh, as one of the nobles taken captive during the battle. It also serves to explain why we encounter him in the company of Egyptian military officers: a member of a chariot crew and two ship captains. While Sennacherib's account does not mention any ships from Egypt, much of the campaign of 701 took place along the coast and it is entirely possible that also the two Egyptian ship captains featured in our text as witnesses were taken captive at that time. Whatever the circumstances of their arrival at Nineveh, their role there should

4 Eltekeh's exact identification with Tell esh-Shalaf is possible but not universally accepted, see Gallagher 1999, 123–124.

5 Rassam Cylinder = Frahm 1997, T 4 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 4, 43–45 (composed 700) // Frahm 1997, T 10 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 15, iii 14'–25' (composed 697) // Frahm 1997, T 11 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 16, iii 46–58 (composed 696) // Heidel Prism = Frahm 1997, T 12 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 17, iii 11–21 (composed 694) // Frahm 1997, T 13 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 18, ii 1'''–3''' (very fragmentary, composed 691) // Chicago Prism = Frahm 1997, T 16 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 22, ii 78–iii 6 (composed 691) // Jerusalem Prism = Frahm 1997, T 17 = Grayson / Novotny 2012, Sennacherib 23, ii 74–iii 5 (composed 691).

be connected with Sennacherib's construction of a fleet in preparation for the invasion of Elam in 694. Built by Syrian craftsmen at Nineveh and manned with Levantine crews, the ships eventually sailed down the Tigris to Opis, from where they were transported overland to the Arahtu river and there successfully deployed in battle. Sennacherib's inscriptions make specific mention only of sailors from Tyre, Sidon, and Ionia (or Cyprus; the reading of the place name remains unclear in all available sources, see Frahm 1997, 24, 117) but our text indicates that also Egyptians served as naval officers in Sennacherib's fleet⁶ and it is most likely that they were taken prisoner during the campaign of 701, as were the aforementioned ship-builders and crews who are identified explicitly as war captives in Sennacherib's inscriptions. In any case, their mention is an important reminder not to dismiss the native Egyptian seafaring traditions (for which see Jones 1988) when discussing the Greek and / or Phoenician contribution to the later Saite navy (e.g. Lloyd 1972) which is well attested from the reign of Necho II (r. 610–595 BC) onwards.

According to our interpretation, Shoshenq was not placed in the hands of the Assyrian king in a formal exchange of hostages but taken captive in battle and then turned hostage. Once in Nineveh, Shoshenq and certainly also the other princes, who are not attested elsewhere in the available sources, would have been honoured according to their high status, enjoying the king's hospitality at court. Their treatment as royal guests culminated in Shoshenq's case – and very likely in others too – in marriage to an Assyrian princess and formal alliance with the Assyrian royal house. The Egyptian princes' continued presence in Nineveh guaranteed their families' goodwill towards Assyria and kept the relationship of the northern kings with Kush in balance: as long as there were possible pro-Assyrian candidates for the thrones of the Delta and of Middle Egypt, Kushite power over Egypt was not absolute.

This held true once Esarhaddon invaded Egypt in 671 BC. Within a month of the conquest (Kahn 2004, 123 n. 39), he was able to appoint Egyptian kings to rule over the various cities of the region (see the long list of appointees as preserved in the inscriptions of his successor Assurbanipal: Onasch 1994, 36). One of them, the king of Busiris in the central Delta region, is called Shoshenq and while the frequency of the name makes it entirely speculative to assume an identity between him and the Shoshenq attested in Nineveh in 692, we certainly must consider the possibility that this man and some of the other rulers appointed by Esarhaddon had lived for many years as hostages in Nineveh. This provides a context that can explain why it was thought possible to ensure Assyrian sovereignty in the remote lands on the Nile by relying on local rulers: in 671, at the same time as scores of inhabitants of Memphis and Thebes were relocated to the Assyrian heartland, some of the Egyptian nobles and soldiers taken captive at Eltekeh in 701 will have returned to the Nile after spending thirty years at the Assyrian court, having intermarried with the royal family in some cases and having actively served in the Assyrian army in others.

6 There is another mention of a captain in an administrative record from Nineveh listing debts (Fales / Postgate 1992, no. 28: 7), undated but certainly from the 7th century BC. The man in question bears the Assyrian name Mannu-ki[...].

Another Egyptian prince at Nineveh

Our Shoshenq is not the only Egyptian prince that can be demonstrated to have lived at the Assyrian royal court. The far more famous case is of course the son of Nekho of Sais, another of Esarhaddon's appointees, who had spent time in Nineveh under the Assyrian name Nabu-šeziḫanni ("O Nabu, save me!") before he was dispatched back to Egypt to rule in Athribis. He was later known (again?) as Psammetikh and it is under this name that, succeeding to the throne of his father in 664, he managed to establish his control over all of Egypt, initially with Assyria's approval and later without (Frahm 2001, 881 no. 12; Perdu 2003; Kahn 2006, 261–267).

Shoshenq's example raises the distinct possibility that Psammetikh, too, was married to an Assyrian princess during his time at Nineveh. In that case, the family ties with the royal house of Assur may have played a role in motivating his son and successor Nekho II to get involved, after the fall of the Assyrian heartland in 612 BC, in the decade-long succession war for control over Syria and the Levant which Babylon eventually decided in its favour (Radner 2010, 31).

Conclusions

Our analysis of a house sale document of 692 BC which features high-ranking Egyptians as long-term inhabitants of the city of Nineveh has led us to explain their presence in the capital of Assyria as the result of the well-attested capture of Egyptian princes and chariot troops at the battle of Eltekeh in 701 BC rather than as a consequence of diplomatic contacts initiated by Osorkon IV (or another Delta ruler), the scenario favoured by previous commentators. We have highlighted that some of these Egyptians are likely to have served in Sennacherib's fleet, first dispatched in battle in 694. Finally, we have speculated that there was a connection between the presence of a sizeable Egyptian contingent at Nineveh prior to the conquest of Egypt in 671 with Esarhaddon's ability to fill administrative and military posts with Egyptians immediately after taking control of the lands on the Nile.

Our study also emphasises the potential and importance of using private legal documents as historical sources.

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