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Neo-Assyrian Temple Sacrifices: rēṣēti

The economy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (935–609 BC) was determined by the activity of three institutions: the palace, the community and the temple. In the research on the economy of the empire carried out thus far the least attention has been devoted to the temple economy.

When researching the temple economy, it is particularly important and pressing to undertake work on the very complicated problem of sacrifices. In the present study we will concentrate on only one of the several types of sacrifice, namely rēṣēti.

H. Winckler suggested for SAG.MEŠ a reading of rēṣēti with the meaning of “Erstlinge” and “die erste (beste) Qualität”\(^1\). According to M. Streck, rēṣēti meant “die besten Stücke”, “die Erstlinge oder Prima-Qualität”\(^2\). W. von Soden places SAG.MEŠ under the entry reštu meaning “Bestes”, “1. Qualität”\(^3\) or under reštu meaning “erstklassig”\(^4\). Thus, according to W. von Soden, SAG.MEŠ would not denote a sacrifice as such but only the quality of particular goods. J. N. Postgate, however, is decidedly for the SAG.MEŠ sacrifice = rēṣēti\(^5\). This opinion, I think, is fully justified.

If we have a complete source material at our disposal, then the oldest mention of SAG.MEŠ comes from the time of Ashurnasirapli II\(^7\). After the grounds around

\(^1\) The necessity and urgency of this type of research has been lately stressed by J. N. Postgate, Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire, Rome 1974, p. 213 (henceforth TCAE).
\(^2\) H. Winckler, Altorientalische Forschungen I, Leipzig 1897, p. 248.
\(^3\) M. Streck, Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergang Nimirih’s, III, Teil, p. 567.
\(^4\) AHw 972 b.
\(^5\) AHw 973 a.
\(^6\) TCAE, pp. 213, 306 ff. Postgate also accepts the translation “first-fruits”.
\(^7\) AKA, p. 245, 1. 9.
Kalhu had been watered and brought into cultivation, the ruler established a supply of various goods and wine for the gods of the local temples, calling it SAG.MEŠ. In this context SAG.MEŠ could be treated as a supply of firstfruits, i.e. first crops from the newly cultivated area.

Other mentions, which must be dated back to the Sargonid period, come from correspondence, royal annals, administrative documents as well as those of private legal practice (purchase-sale). A letter of a certain Shullumu, sent from Babylonia to the king (Ashurbanipal) and dealing only with temple matters, closes with the statement: ... SAG.MEŠ bit ilâmi₇₈ ṣa-a-bi, “as to the SAG.MEŠ of the temples, everything is in order”⁸. Judging from the contents of other letters dealing with sacrifices, it can be assumed that Shullumu wants thus to assure the king that the temples have no difficulty with receiving products due to them as the SAG.MEŠ sacrifice.

Also to Babylonia refers a notice contained in Ashurbanipal’s annals of introducing sattukkê ginê SAG.MEŠ for the Assyrian temples after putting down the rebellion of Shamash-shum-ukin⁹. M. Streck’s translation, treating SAG.MEŠ as an adjective describing the quality of ginû, seems to us not convincing. First, the text suggests that the quoted fragment enumerates various sacrifices, and secondly, in spite of a relatively large number of texts referring to ginû, nowhere do we find an adjective defining the quality of the sacrifice.

SAG.MEŠ as a term denoting a sacrifice appears also in a letter of Iddin-Ashur, which says that 4an-nu-riq SAG.MEŠ ṣa KUR-ka ḫo-mu-su ṣa URU Bar-ḫal-zi mi-mi-ni 7la na-ṣa, “now no one has brought the SAG.MEŠ of your land, the «fifth» of Barḫalzi”¹⁰.

The duty to deliver SAG.MEŠ to the Assyrian temples follows also from the information contained in an administrative document from Nineveh. It enumerates various products such as beef, poultry, bread, beer and flour, coming ištu libbi SAG.MEŠ ṣa UGU KURURIKI LUGAL ḫo-ki-μu-u-ni, “out of the SAG.MEŠ which the king imposed on Akkad (Babylonia)”¹¹.

Let us come back to two other bits of information from Ashurbanipal’s annals. After defeating Elam, the ruler sacrificed ri-še-e-ti a-na ilâmi₇₈-ja, “the rēšēti sacrifice to my gods”¹².

Another fragment of the annals, preserved on a clay tablet, states that the gods received šal-lat-su-nu ka-bit-tu 38SAG.MEŠ ḫaspû ẖuraṣu mimma aq-ru, “heavy booty, SAG.MEŠ, silver, gold (and) all kinds of precious things”¹³.

In the two above-mentioned cases the SAG.MEŠ sacrifice formed a certain

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⁸ ABL 994.
⁹ Streck, Assurb., Annalen, Col. IV 196 (p. 40).
¹⁰ ABL 532 — TCAE, pp. 280–281.
¹¹ ADD 1013, Rs. 12–13 — TCAE, p. 128.
¹³ Ibid., Rs. 35 (p. 168).
precisely defined part of war booty. On the basis of the circumstances in which it was given to the temples it can be assumed that it was a single gift.

Other data about SAG.MEŠ are supplied by the Ashur text KAV 79, containing a list of wine and other products for the temple of the god Ashur in Ashur. The SAG.MEŠ sacrifice consisted of 12 šappu dishes (Vs 7), one for each month of the year, and 14 šappu dishes of the pattern characteristic of the Isalla country14 (Vs 10), as well as 74 wine-skins, supplied in the month of Tashritu (Sept.–Oct.) (Vs 11). Only in the case of wine does the document mention the quantity of the supplies from particular provinces. Since no such mention is made concerning SAG.MEŠ, it can be assumed that the products were supplied by each province named by the text.

Interesting data concerning the sources of the income from which the sacrifice was made are given in a Nineveh text dealing with the distribution (zauzu) of the state tax sibtu15. Forty head of SAG.MEŠ cattle and a hundred head of dariu cattle, under the common term of sibtu, were given to the house of the chief of cooks — Ė LUGAL MU.MEŠ.

The question arises whether the part of the text related above (ll. 1–6) is concerned in any way with the temple. However, the remaining part of the text undoubtedly deals with the temple economy. It states that twenty head of cattle were given to the peasants (ikkaru) of the Nineveh deities, supervised by Sin-shar-ibni, while 110 head of cattle to the peasants supervised by Nabu-shar-usur. That the first part of the text is also connected with the temple is shown by the terminology: dariu and SAG.MEŠ, in the light of other texts, denoted temple sacrifices. It is supported also by the fact that Ė LUGAL MU can be localized within the temple complex. We can refer here to the text LAS 309. Demanded by the ruler, the author of the letter, Akullanu, informs the king about the fate of LUSID16 Ė LUMU, “the scribe

14 W. von Soden reads mad-ni-ni instead of KUR()</sal. (AHw 573 a: mad-nunu, “ein Ständer oder Halter, 1. für Weinkrüge?”). The text editor, O. Schr oe der, proposed the reading mat i-li (KAV, p. XXVII); thus, he was close to the correct reading KUR</sal. W. von Soden’s reading is not convincing. When the texts actually say about a pillar, the reading is mad-na-nu. The correctness of this reading is confirmed by three texts ADD 999–1001:1, where there appears DUGSAB KUR</sal-li, arousing no doubt as to the correctness of the reading. Thus the rab karâni (wine master) mentioned in the text delivered 10 imuru of wine of a specific value characteristic of the Isalla country. Apart from the wine there were also “dishes of the Isalla country”, probably used for storing the wine. DUGSAB KUR</sal-ul-pu-nu, i.e. dishes characteristic of the Ulpanu country, are mentioned in the document ADD 999:2.

15 ADD 754 — TCAE, pp. 305–306.

16 K. De l ler, “Orientalia” 35, 1966, p. 206, is of the opinion that LUSID Rs 1–4 and 12–13 cannot mean LUSANGA. Cf. now R. Bor ger, Akkadische Zeichenliste, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1971, who shows that for the sign No 314 (SANGA = šangu) the reading um b i s a g x (SID) = ṭupšarru can also be accepted, entered under another graphic version of the sign No. 317.
of the cook’s house”. We learn that the man, never mentioned by name, was appointed to the post of Lûšid ša É Lûmu še-ēḥ-ri (Rs 6, cf. Rs 1), “the scribe of the cook’s small house” by Senacherib, and he took the required holy orders. Probably soon afterwards he was accused of committing a crime by Ashur-zēr-iddin, the Lûšid of Nineveh, and imprisoned. Since the investigation proved, however, that the crime was not so serious as the Lûšid of Nineveh claimed, the man was restored to his post. The quoted text shows that É Lûmu, “the cook’s house”, constituted a part of the temple complex, which could be run only by a person in appropriate holy orders. In the light of these considerations it is possible that also É Lûgal mu Meš, “the house of the chief of cooks”, of the text ADD 754 formed a part of the temple complex. Thus both dariu and rēšēti mentioned in ADD 754 as a part of šibtu, the state tax, were given to the temples.

The assortment of products coming under the term SAG.Meš was varied. The texts mention cattle and sheep, flour, bread, wine and beer, as well as dishes and leather wine-skins.

Besides the above-quoted texts, SAG.Meš appears also in 10 credit documents from Ashur, Nineveh and Guzana, where the credit is copper or silver belonging to the Ishtar of Arbela or Nineveh. A full analysis of these documents is made in our work, now in preparation for printing, in the chapter devoted to credit dealings. Here we would only like to observe that on their basis one might be inclined to assume that instead of naturals the temples received an appropriate equivalent in copper and, from the 7th c. on, in silver. This, however, would be jumping to conclusions. According to all the remaining texts, the SAG.Meš sacrifice consisted of supplies in kind. In Ashurbanipal’s annals SAG.Meš is mentioned beside silver and gold, i.e. as something different from these metals. The only possible conclusion seems to be that the supplies delivered to a temple as the SAG.Meš sacrifice were then sold. It also means that the copper and silver used for credit dealings came partly from the sale of goods arriving at the temples as the SAG.Meš sacrifice = rēšēti.

A part of the SAG.Meš goods was probably consumed by the temple personnel. This is suggested by the seriously damaged text SVAT VIII Rs. 5, mentioning SAG.Meš Lû narē (?)-meš, “the SAG.Meš musicians”.

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17 As to the holy orders, see M. San Nicola, Parerga Babylonica XII, Ar Or 6, 1934, pp. 190 ff. and Parerga Babylonica XVI, Ar Or 7, 1935, pp. 26 ff.
18 ARU 303 (no date); ARU 293 (11 III 676); ARU 294 (24 VIII 671); ARU 295 (x VII 670); ARU 296 (x x 670); ARU 302 (16 x 640); ARU 299 (3 XI 630); ARU 301 (20 II 627); T H 112 (14 V 629); T H 113 (no date, probably the same year as T H 112). SAG.Meš does not appear in ARU 296, but considering the other above-mentioned documents, it seems certain that in this case the capital was SAG.Meš.
19 As has been noted by J. N. Postgate on the basis of newly published source materials, in the 8th century and in the first half of the 7th century the basic equivalent was copper, and silver to a much lesser degree — J. N. Postgate, The Governor’s Palace Archive, London 1973, p. 25.
The document KAV 79 suggests that the quantity of supplies from a given territory was precisely determined. It is confirmed by ABL 532, where the duty of supplying SAG.MEŠ to the temple from the Barhalzi area is defined as ḫamussu\(^{20}\). The term, it seems to us, describes the period of time the supplies were supposed to last, and it is not impossible that in this way also their global amount. In one of the above-quoted fragments of the annals, SAG.MEŠ was a part of war booty, where the quantity of supplies for the temples could not be planned precisely.

Both the assortment of products and the fact that the amount of supplies was planned seem to defy the proposal for translating SAG.MEŠ = rēšēti as “first-fruits”. The other translations cited at the beginning are too general and explain practically nothing. Thus it is necessary to look for another, more precise translation.

The SAG.MEŠ supplies were the responsibility of the governors of provinces. It follows both from ABL 532, where the author of the letter requests the king to ask the scribe and the governor’s deputy directly why the sacrifice has not been delivered to the temple, and from ADD 754, since the supplies of sibitu and dariu, too, were the responsibility of the governors of provinces\(^{21}\).

\(^{20}\) As to the meaning of this term, cf. CAD H, p. 73 b; AHw 319 b and TCAE, pp. 281 and 300.

\(^{21}\) In passing I would like to note that the word rēšēti in the passage quoted by J. N. Postgate (Or. N.S. 42, 1973, p. 444) from Sennacherib’s annals (OIP 2, p. 26, 1.63) is to be translated as “erstklassig“. Cf. the whole context in OIP 2, p. 55, 1.59: suluppa ri-še-te-šu a-na gi-ni-e ilānīmeš kūr Aššur-kī bēlēmeš-ja u-kiš da-ri-šam.