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Neo-Assyrian Temple Sacrifices: 1. *rēšēti*

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 sacrifices¹. In the present study we will concentrate on only one of the several types of sacrifice, namely *rēšēti*.

H. W i n c k l e r suggested for SAG.MEŠ a reading of *rēšēti* with the meaning of "Erstlinge" and "die erste (beste) Qualität"². According to M. Streck, *rēšēti* meant "die besten Stücke", "die Erstlinge oder Prima-Qualität"³. W. von Soden places SAG.MEŠ under the entry *reštu* meaning "Bestes", "1. Qualität"⁴ or under *reštū* meaning "erstklassig"⁵. Thus, according to W. v o n S o d e n, SAG.MEŠ would not denote a sacrifice as such but only the quality of particular goods. J. N. P o s t - g a t e, however, is decidedly for the SAG.MEŠ sacrifice = *rēšēti*⁶. 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 II⁷. 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. W i n c k l e r, *Altorientalische Forschungen I*, Leipzig 1897, p. 248.

³ M. S t r e c k, *Assurbanipal und die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Niniveh'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, l. 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 *bīt ilāni*^{meš} ⁹*ta-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 ⁴*an-nu-rig* SAG.MEŠ ⁵*ša* KUR-ka ⁶*mu-su* ⁶*ša* URU Bar-*hal-zi* *mi-mi-ni* ⁷*la na-ša*, "now no one has brought the SAG.MEŠ of your land, the «fifth» of Barhalzi"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 *ša* UGU KUR URIKI LUGAL *ú-ki-nu-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 ilāni*^{meš}-*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-bīt-tu* ³⁵SAG.MEŠ *kašpu hurašu 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

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.

¹² Streck, Assurb., Annalen, Col. VII 1.

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 *šibtu*¹⁵. Forty head of SAG.MEŠ cattle and a hundred head of dariu cattle, under the common term of *šibtu*, were given to the house of the chief of cooks — É 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 É 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 LÚŠID¹⁶ É LUMU, “the scribe

¹⁴ W. von Soden reads *mad-ni-ni* instead of *KURĪ-sal* (AHw 573 a: *mad-nanu*, “ein Ständer oder Halter, 1. für Weinkrüge?”). The text editor, O. Schroeder, proposed the reading *mat i-li* (KAV, p. XXVII); thus, he was close to the correct reading *KURĪ-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 DUGŠAB *KURĪ-sal-li*, arousing no doubt as to the correctness of the reading. Thus the *rab karāni* (wine master) mentioned in the text delivered 10 imeru 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. DUGŠAB *KURUl-pu-nu*, i.e. dishes characteristic of the Ulpunu country, are mentioned in the document ADD 999:2.

¹⁵ ADD 754 — TCAE, pp. 305–306.

¹⁶ K. Deller, “Orientalia” 35, 1966, p. 206, is of the opinion that LÚŠID Rs 1–4 and 12–13 cannot mean LÚSANGA. Cf. now R. Borger, *Akkadische Zeichenliste*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1971, who shows that for the sign No 314 (SANGA = *šangu*) the reading *um bis ag x* (ŠID) = *tuššarru* 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 $\text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{ŠID } \text{ša } \text{É } \text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{MU } \text{še-eh-ri}$ (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 $\text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{ŠID}$ of Nineveh, and imprisoned. Since the investigation proved, however, that the crime was not so serious as the $\text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{ŠID}$ of Nineveh claimed, the man was restored to his post. The quoted text shows that $\text{É } \text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{MU}$, "the cook's house", constituted a part of the temple complex, which could be run only by a person in appropriate holy orders¹⁷. In the light of these considerations it is possible that also $\text{É } \text{L}^{\text{U}}\text{GAL MU.MEŠ}$, "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 Nineveh¹⁸. 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 silver¹⁹. 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 = *rē-šēti*.

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 $\text{L}^{\text{U}} \text{narē} (?)^{\text{meš}}$, "the SAG.MEŠ musicians".

¹⁷ As to the holy orders, see M. San Nicolo, *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 Barḫalzi area is defined as *hamussu*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 provinces²¹.

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 ilāni^{meš} kur Aššur^{ki} bēl^{meš}-ja ú-kin dà-ri-šam*.

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