

SARGON'S LETTER TO AŠŠUR-ŠARRU-UŠUR: AN INTERPRETATION

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In volume I of the series *State Archives of Assyria*¹, S. Parpola offered a new, revised text edition and translation of ND 2759, the unfinished letter which was to be sent by Sargon to Aššur-šarru-ušur, his governor in the western province of Que (usually located in coastal Cilicia). The letter had previously been edited and commented upon by J.N. Postgate in 1974², while the first edition was that of H.W.F. Saggs in 1958³. The new edition by Parpola offers improvements in some damaged points of the tablet, thanks to the collations on the originals. One of these points deserves a deeper inquiry, because it may shed more light on some unsolved historical problems which lay on the background of this important text.

The point in question is the sentence in Obv. 7-9, which now attains a great historical value when read with Parpola's new interpretation of Obv. 8: ⁷*an-nu-rig Aš-šur* ^d*Šá'-maš'* EN ^dAG DINGIR^{MES}-*ia e-tap-š[ú l]a ina ŠÀ qa-ra-bi'* [*la ina ŠÀ m]e-me-ni* ⁹ ^{KUR}*Mus-ka-a-a pi-i-šú it-ta-an-na-na-ši* ¹⁰*a-na sa-al-mi-ni it-tu-ar* "My gods Aššur, Šamaš, Bēl and Nabû have now taken action, and without a battle [or any]thing, the Phrygian gave us his word and became our friend⁴".

Following the new presentation of the small broken passage in Obv. 8, it is now clear that Sargon intended to send his letter to his governor *before* hostilities of some moment between the Assyrian and the Phrygian kingdoms had broken out, as it is clearly stated by the sentence [*l]a ina ŠÀ qa-ra-bi'* [*la ina ŠÀ m]e-me-ni*.

Now, this statement has specific consequences on the chronological problems of the text. In his study of the letter, Postgate argued for a low dating in Sargon's reign, and

¹ *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I: Letters from Assyria and the West*, Helsinki 1987, no. 1.

² *Iraq* 35 (1973), pp. 21-34.

³ *Iraq* 20 (1958), pp. 182-187 and 202-208 (commentary).

⁴ Parpola translates "(has) become our ally", which is a little too optimistic.

assigned it to his thirteenth *palû*, on the basis of the account of his Annals for that year⁵. In the Annals, which are however fragmentary, we are told that Midas, after hearing about the conquests of Sargon's governor against his own territory and the submission of many foreign rulers to the Assyrian king, sent a request of peace to Sargon in Babylon, where he was acting against his south-eastern foes⁶. It seems now that the context described in the Annals cannot fit well with the newly established text of the letter of Sargon. The letter explicitly states that no battle has been necessary to the Assyrians to obtain Midas's friendly attitude. On the contrary, in the Annals a series of battles is described as the reason which induced Midas to peace: the Assyrian governor attacked Phrygian territory three times, deporting warriors and inhabitants and destroying fortresses and towns⁷. More precisely, Midas is said to have turned to peaceful relations "[as he saw (?)] the destruction of his country and the deportation of his people" (*hi-pe-e KUR-šû šá-[lal] UN^{MES}-šû*)⁸.

Such a deep contrast between the Annals and Sargon's utterance cannot be solved by assigning to the latter a mere rhetorical value, that is by supposing that Sargon was diminishing the value of Assyrian efforts against the Phrygians in order to exalt the general political result (to show, i.e., that the Phrygian kingdom was so inferior to Assyria that even less than battles sufficed to win it). In the Annals, indeed, a special place is given to the Assyrian governor of Que and to his military efforts. He is given the role of protagonist instead of the king (a rather rare, though not unique feature in Royal Inscriptions). Moreover, he is specifically mentioned (^{LÚ}*šū-ut-SAG-ia* ^{LÚ}*šá-kin KUR* *Qu-e* "My eunuch, prefect of Que"⁹) in contrast with the vague dictions "my eunuchs (and) my governors", "my eunuchs", which were reserved for the other three occasions in which Sargon himself was not presented as the winner on the field¹⁰.

All this means, I think, that the victory over Midas in 709 was considered of high political importance, and this naturally implies that the problem of the western boundaries had been of deep concern throughout the whole reign of Sargon. This is confirmed by Sargon's Annals. In Sargon's fourth *palû* (718 B.C.), Kiakki of Šinuhtu

⁵) *Loc. cit.*, pp. 32-34.

⁶) Lie, *Sargon Annals*, pp. 66-68, ll. 444-467. The extent of Midas's episode is uncertain, owing to the fragmentary character of ll. 455-467; in l. 458 the "seven kings of Ia'u, district of Adnana" are mentioned; it is not possible to understand definitely whether Midas's episode ends before that line.

⁷) *Ibid.*, ll. 445-451.

⁸) *Ibid.*, p. 68, l. 454.

⁹) *Ibid.*, p. 66, l. 445.

¹⁰) In the episodes of the repression of pillaging activity in Babylonia, 12th *palû* (*ibid.*, p. 56, l. 382), of the expulsion of Muttallu of Kummuhu, 13th *palû* (*ibid.*, p. 70, l. 4), and of the reduction to loyalty of Išpabara of Ellipi (*ibid.*, p. 74, l. 2) in the 14th *palû* (for this dating, see H. Tadmor, JCS 12 [1958], p. 96).

was expelled from his reign for intrigues with Midas¹¹; in the fifth, Karkemiš was conquered, as its ruler Pisisiris had sent messages to Midas against Assyria¹²; in the seventh, Sargon had to reconquer two forts previously taken by Midas¹³; in the ninth, Ambaris of Tabal was expelled from his reign since he had sent envoys to Midas and to the Urartian king¹⁴. In sum, the texts show us that Midas's activity was a thorn in the flesh of Assyria until Sargon's thirteenth *palû*, when the Phrygian king sent his embassy for peace; and this indicates that in no way the governor of Que's victory of that same year could be underestimated in a letter written to him — as in fact it was not underestimated in the Royal Inscriptions. It therefore follows that the dating of ND 2759 to a period following the Assyrian victory of 709 must be abandoned, to avoid such a contrast between the letter and Royal Inscriptions. Thus, a higher date must be searched for.

The *terminus post quem* is obviously represented by Sargon's accession; and we may trust Sargon's inscriptions, where the first year of Assyro-Phrygian hostility is pinpointed to Sargon's fourth *palû*, when Kiakki's expulsion took place¹⁵. From that point onward, the hostility increased: the year after, as seen, Sargon conquered Karkemiš, whose king had previously sent messages to Midas. The situation grew worse until 715 (seventh *palû*), when Assyria directly attacked Phrygia. All this suggests that in the years following 718 Phrygia represented a growing danger for Assyrian politics in the West, even if a direct confrontation was not felt necessary until 715. In this situation, some oscillations in the foreign politics of both powers may have taken place; and an attempt of Midas to establish peaceful relations with Assyria is well conceivable. This would also explain the enthusiasm for Midas's peaceful message shown by Sargon in our letter.

As for the *terminus ante quem*, following what has been said above, it must confidently be detected in the first military clash between Assyria and Phrygia (715, seventh *palû*). The period 718-715 is thus a rough date which does not give rise to a contrast between ND 2759 and Sargon's Royal Inscriptions; but we may proceed in searching a more exact time span. Since the *pahatûtu* "governorship" (of Que) is attributed to Aššur-šarru-ušur in ND 2759¹⁶, it is obvious that Que had already been incorporated in the Assyrian provincial system when ND 2759 was written¹⁷. This leads us directly to the well-worn problem about the dating of the provincialization of Que. As

¹¹) Lie, *Sargon Annals*, p. 10, ll. 68-71.

¹²) *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12, ll. 72-75.

¹³) *Ibid.*, p. 20, ll. 119-120; p. 22, ll. 125-126.

¹⁴) *Ibid.*, pp. 32-34, ll. 194-204.

¹⁵) See fn. 11, above.

¹⁶) Line 35.

¹⁷) Postgate, *loc. cit.*, p. 27.

this annexation is not mentioned in the Royal Inscriptions — perhaps because of the fragmentary character of the texts — it was attributed for a long time to the predecessor of Sargon, Shalmaneser V¹⁸. Recently, however, the date of 715 (seventh *palû*) has been suggested for the annexation; in this view, the clash with Phrygia is considered as a part of the campaign that brought to the annexation of Que, which had been previously occupied partly by Phrygia and partly by Greek (Ionian) colonists¹⁹.

All this would imply that Aššur-šarru-ušur was installed as governor of Que *after* or *during* that campaign; and this would further imply that our letter was written *after* the campaign itself (*during* would be too quaint a coincidence). In this way, however, the contrast between our text and the Royal Inscriptions would emerge again, since the Annals describe a military effort of some moment against Phrygia.

A solution to the problem may be given by considering attentively the position reserved in ND 2759 to Urik, the well-known king of Que, already mentioned in Tiglath-pileser III's inscriptions. It is generally accepted that he was allowed to reign in Que even after its annexation as a province, and that Aššur-šarru-ušur ruled Que as a governor in a sort of co-regency or superintendence. This hypothesis rests upon the consideration that Urik was left with a certain freedom of action, which allowed him to send envoys to Urartu²⁰; but it does not provide any temporal duration to this mixed government, nor is it concerned about how long before ND 2759 Urik sent his envoys. We may, however, notice that sending emissaries to a country hostile to Assyria was considered a treachery against the Assyrians, and that it was heavily punished, as is clearly shown by the fate of Muttallu of Kummuhu, who was readily expelled from his reign for a similar attempt²¹. And we may also notice that in ND 2759 no word is dedicated to any measure against Urik for his perfidy, neither in the governor's letter to the king nor by the king himself in his reply. Thus, we get the impression that the discovery of Urik's anti-Assyrian activity was already a matter well-known both to the king and to his governor when the latter wrote to Sargon. Following this impression, I suggest that, when Aššur-šarru-ušur wrote to Sargon, Urik had been already punished for his treachery, and, consequently, that Aššur-šarru-ušur had been created governor of Que exactly as a reaction to Urik's attempt to develop an independent policy. No mixed rule, thus, but a replacement of the local dynasty with Assyrian governorship — as is well attested by Royal Inscriptions for other regions.

¹⁸) Since E. Forrer, *Die Provinzeinteilung des Assyrischen Reiches*, Leipzig 1921, pp. 70ff.

¹⁹) J.D. Hawkins, *CAH III/1*², Cambridge 1982, pp. 418-419; A. Lemaire, *RSF* 11 (1983), pp. 16-18; A. Lemaire, *N.A.B.U.* 1 (mars 1987), p. 5; for the Ionians, see P. Elayi - A. Cavigneaux, *OrAnt* 18 (1979), pp. 68-75.

²⁰) Cf. Saggs, *loc. cit.*, p. 206; Postgate, *loc. cit.*, p. 28.

²¹) Cf. fn. 10, above.

This reconstruction could fit well with the dating of Assyrian annexation of Que in 715. As seen above, Urik's attempt consisted in contacts with the Urartian king. But this may be only a part of the story. In 715, the military activities against Phrygia consisted in the recapture of three towns of Que which Midas had previously taken²². This means that Urik had been subjected to Phrygian pressure before 715. This probably caused a forced good disposition of his towards Phrygia; like his companion in ill-fate Urzana of Muşaşir, he was pressed between two major powers, and tried to balance their influence²³. Perhaps his mission to Urartu was initially sent under Phrygian pressure, because a kind of alliance between Phrygia and Urartu was operating, as the later episode of Ambaris of Tabal shows. Such a situation would well explain why a group of people of Que were in Phrygian hands, and why — on the contrary — Aššur-šarru-ušur calls them "subjects of the king, my lord"²⁴. If this is the background of the Assyrian attack to Phrygia, it seems to me that Midas's attempt to establish peaceful relations mentioned in ND 2759 may be rigidly related to the Assyrian reaction against Urik, i.e. to the discovery of Urik's plot and to the subsequent appointment of Aššur-šarru-ušur to governorship in Que. By forwarding the emissaries of Urik, Midas evidently tried to stop any future Assyrian reaction by recognizing the Assyrian dominion in Que. This was evidently done *before* Assyrian military intervention against Phrygia, but *after* the reduction of Que to Assyrian province. The later Assyrian attack to Phrygia may testify a dramatic change of scene; and this may be reflected in the fact that Sargon's letter was not finished, and, as Postgate argued, never sent²⁵.

To sum up the discussion above, I suggest the following reconstruction of the events which preceded and originated ND 2759:

- 1) In a date between 718 and 715, Midas of Phrygia attacks Que and takes some of its towns;
- 2) Urik is forced to pass over to Phrygian side; the forwarding of envoys to the Urartian king takes place, as a consequence of good relations between Phrygia and Urartu;
- 3) In 715, Assyria takes action; Urik is punished, Aššur-šarru-ušur is made governor of Que;
- 4) Midas tries to stop further Assyrian involvement, and sends Urik's envoys to Aššur-šarru-ušur;
- 5) Letter of Aššur-šarru-ušur to Sargon;

²²⁾ Cf. fn. 13, above.

²³⁾ See *ABL* 409 and the commentary by M. Salvini, *Tra lo Zagros e l'Urmia*, Rome 1983, pp. 36-38.

²⁴⁾ ARAD^{MES} ša LUGAL be-lí-ia, ND 2759, l. 16.

²⁵⁾ Postgate, *loc. cit.*, p. 29.

6) Redaction of ND 2759, which was not sent perhaps due to a change in the political situation;

7) Assyrians attack Phrygia, as described in Royal Inscriptions.

If this reconstruction and dating is accepted, it appears clearly that 715 was a crucial year for Assyrian foreign policy. Assyria found itself pressed both by Urartu and Phrygia, probably operating in cooperation. The campaigns of that year show that Sargon's effort was directed in these two directions (Que, as seen above; Mannea and Media, in order to subtract them to Urartian influence²⁶); and this would explain why Sargon showed himself so happy of Midas's attempt, and so well-disposed towards him in this letter. A breach seemed to open in the enemy ranks; and this occasion was not to be lost.

²⁶) Lie, *Sargon Annals*, pp. 16-18, ll. 101-116.