THE NEO-ASSYRIAN WORD FOR “QUEEN”

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The problem of how to read the Neo-Assyrian logogram for “queen”, MIE.GAL (abbreviated in MfKUR), has so far remained without a convincing solution. The reading ša ekalli proposed by B. Landsberger in the Festschrift Baumgartner (VT Suppl. 16, 1967), p. 187, is attractive in view of Biblical šēgāl, “queen”, but involves a serious phonetic difficulty. While the middle /g/ would well fit a loan from Neo-Assyrian, the initial /s/ requires Neo-Assyrian <s>, not <š>; and this is a rule without an exception1.

On the other hand, the reading ekallitu suggested by W. von Soden in ZA 45 (1939), p. 51 (cf. also LAS II [1984], p. 206 referring to MfÉ.GAL-tu in ABL 1291 r. 5), is clearly unacceptable because the nominative construct form of MfÉ.GAL with a third person suffix is MfÉ.GAL-šū, not -su as required by a word ending in the feminine morpheme -(a)f2. This indicates that the logogram is a genitival compound, as actually proved by a MA text recently published by S. Franke and G. Wilhelm in Jahrbuch des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, 4 (1985), p. 21, 2, reading “PNF, the queen (Mf É.GAL-li) of PN”. The reading sinnišat ekalli “woman of the palace” proposed by E. Weidner in AFO 17 (1954-56), p. 261, and R. Borger in BiOr 18 (1961), pp. 151-152, would fit a genitive compound and has the right kind of initial sibilant. But of course it is otherwise difficult to reconcile with the Biblical word, which, after all, clearly is a loan from MfÉ.GAL.

This looks like a dilemma, but there is an extremely simple way out of it. All the difficulties disappear once the Biblical word is accepted as a loan from Assyrian but its proposed ‘etymology’ ša ekalli is abandoned, and the logogram is read with the Neo-

Assyrian values of its components as “the woman (MĪ) of the palace (Ē.GAL)”. This simple way out was already suggested in 1979 by J.N. Postgate, unfortunately only in a footnote\(^3\), where it escaped the attention of the present writer (and presumably many others as well) until it recently occurred to me independently. Since the incorrect reading /ekallitu/ has recently found its way even to the glossary of SAA 2, it seems appropriate to set the matter straight with a fully developed discussion.

As pointed out by Postgate in the footnote just referred to, “the parallelism in ADD 960 and 961 of KUR(.)MĪ.MEŠ and KUR(.)i-sa-(a)-te” indicates that the word for “woman” in Neo-Assyrian was not sinništū or sinnissu but issu. By coincidence, I had myself come to the same conclusion in a note published simultaneously with the Postgate article in OLZ 74 (1979), p. 34 (submitted in 1976). In this note I quoted another attestation of i-sa-a-te in ABL 203, r. 4\(^4\), and suggested that the Neo-Assyrian word, pronounced [iššu], may be related to the rare OB word iššu “woman” (CAD I1J, p. 267b) occurring in poetry and equated with marhītu “spouse”, aššatu “wife” and sinništū “woman” in synonym lists. Postgate, loco cit., suggested that the original form of the word may have been *ištū, but this seems unlikely since the nominative construct form of the word with 3rd person masc. suffix is regularly Mī-su lissusul\(^5\) not Mī-su, as expected in feminine and segolate nouns of the pattern (C)VCC (cf. UZU)GABA-su /irassu/, ABRT 2, 19, 15', from irtu “breast”; GĒME-su /amassul/, ND 2325, 4 [Iraq 17 pI. 24, 1], from amtu “female servant”; GISIG-sa /dalassu/, TIM 9, 54, rev.10, and GISIG-su /dalassu/ KAV 215, r. 9, from *daltu/dassu “door”\(^6\).

The construct form of issu before a genitive can be posited as issi (cf., e.g., qa-ba-si

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\(^4\) The context reads: “Today it is a month since I have been ill and since this piercing pain (sihlu) has been stinging me. They have asked (? is-sa-ah-lu) ... a woman (? i-su), who says: ‘You are ill with the Hand-of-Venus; it is due to intercourse with women (ina UGU si-ih-ir ša i-sa-a-te)’. I am afraid and shall not do (anything) without (an order from) the king” (Obv. 7ff.; modify the rendering in OLZ 74, col. 34).

\(^5\) E.g., Mī-šū ADD 269, 3; 270, 5; 275, 2; 618, r. 1; Mī-šū ADD 473, 5; and 125 further examples in NA legal and administrative documents. Note the spelling Mī-su-šū /issusu/ in ADD 430, 6, and cf. a-na Mī-su-ti /ištāti/ “for wifehood” in ADD 308, 8 and CTN 3, 47, 7. While the former spelling (Mī-su-šū) could also stand for /sinnissušu/ (cf. šu-ru-up-tū-ka LAS 4, 17; na-mur-ta-ka ABL 1360, 3'; ma-šar-tu-šu LAS 62, 10; 63, 7), reading /sinnissušu/ is excluded in the latter case, since the abstract of sinništū/sinnissu is sinnisšu not *sinnissušu by analogy to aššatu : aššatu and amtu : amātu.

\(^6\) Note, however, GISIG-BAN-šu-nu /gassašunu/ ABL 1400, 12, and GĒME-šu /amtušu/ ADD 207, 4; 209; 4, 213, 3, and passim, indicating that the place of the auxiliary vowel was somewhat variable. The same phenomenon also occurs in masculine segolates, where we have /urušu/ (written ARAD-šū, passim) beside /urassu/ (ARAD-su, ABL 916, 11, the only attested example), but regularly šu-la-an-šu (ABL 1149, 9', and LAS 250, rev. 12), šu-lam-ka (TI, pl. 2-3, II, 27'), šu-bar-šu (GPA 109, s. 2), šu-bar-šu (ADD 75, 1; GPA 14, 1; 19, 2, and passim), pa-gar-šu (ABL 92, rev. 13), ri-ga-an-šu (BA 2, 634, 13), lu-um-an-šu (LAS 278, rev. 13'), etc.
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/qabassil mu-da-bi-ri NL 70, r. 13, from *qabaltu/qabassu; and lu ma-za-si /mazzassil pa-ni LAS 153, r. 8', from mazzaltu/mazzassu). Hence the basic phonemic shape of “palace woman” is to be reconstructed as *issi ekalli in Neo-Assyrian. However, this basic form was subjected to various phonological pressures in practice transforming it into *segallu (pronounced [se:gallu]), as shown by the variants of the following syllabically spelled compounds also having issulissi as their first component:

1. *issi ahâiš “together” (lit. “with each other”); variants indicate that the components of this compound tended to be fused together, whereby the final vowel of *issi was regularly elided with a concomitant lengthening of the first vowel of the following word: *issi ahâiš > issâhâiš (etc.)7. Analogously, *issi ekalli > *issëkalli.

2. *issu annaka “from here”, *issu ammaka “from there”, and *issu pâni “from before”: here the components likewise tended to be fused together, but this time the first vowel of annaka/ammaka was elided with a concomitant loss of first the gemination and then the first syllable of *issu:

Accordingly, *issu annaka > issunnaka > sunnaka8;
*issu ammaka > summaka9;
*issu pâni > supâni10.

7) The attested variants include:

i-si a-ha-IŞ CT 53, 257;
is-sa-a-he-e-IŞ LAS 70, r. 15;
is-sa-a-he-IŞ LAS 284, r. 11;
is-sa-a-hi-şi CT 53, 888, 8;
[s]a-a-hi-şi NL 19, 13;
is-sa-he-‘i-IŞ ABL 1388, r. 5; LAS 172, r. 14; 182, r. 5; 195, r. 2;
is-sa-he-IŞ ABL 185, 9; 419, 15; 1115, 12; 1203, 7; 1389, r. 9; ADD 1252, 6; CT 53, 205, r. 7; 935, r. 6; LAS 145, 10;

i-sa-ha-ii-şi ABL 645+, 13;
i-sa-he-IŞ ABL 910, r. 8; CT 53, r. 12;
i-s[a-h]i-şi NL 2, 91;
TA a-ha-a-a-イス ABL 168, r. 8, 18;
TA a-ha-イス ABL 121+, r. 11;
TA a-he-イス ABL 823, 12; 1026+, 27; 1292, 10; CT 53, 17+, 3; 266, 4.

8) Cf. TA an-na-ka ABL 473, 3; 775, r. 3; 896, 10; 1164, r. 2; CT 53, 92, 11; NL 2, 15;
TA-un-na-ka CT 53, 598, 3;
TA-un-na-[k] CT 53, 497, 8;
su-na-ka CTN 3, 5, r. 4;
TA-na-ka NL 39, r. 49.
9) [si]-su-um-ma-[ka] CT 53, 947, r. 4’ (cf. ibid., obv. 8);
TA-ma-ka ABL 146, 11; CT 53, 880, r. 6; NL 39, 49.
10) TA pa-ni-ia BM 99055, 6;
Analogously *issēkalli > *sēkalli;
compare *akkēlamšī > kēlamšī;
iṣṣaššūmi > šaššūmi;
ikkilu > killu, etc.

It is of course a well-known fact that in voiced root environment and in the absence of lexical constraints, Neo-Assyrian unvoiced stops tended to be voiced. Since there was no minimal pair ekallu : egallu and since /ll/ is a highly sonorous consonant, a Neo-Assyrian variant *egallu can be unhesitatingly posited for ekallu even though it is not explicitly attested. Hence *(i)sēkalli > *sēgalli/u.

The reconstructed form /*sēgalli/ can thus not only be extensively documented (the phonological evidence cited here is only a fraction of all the evidence that could be musterred), but it also provides a perfect etymon for the Biblical šēgāl. Pending the discovery of a syllabic spelling for 𒐏𒉾.GAL, which hopefully will eventually become available, this virtually amounts to a mathematical proof of the correctness of the suggested reading.

su-pa-ni-ia SAA 1, 29, r. 13.
1) ke-(e-)lam-ši TCL 9, 58, 2, 8, 14, etc.;
1ki-i-la-an-ši K. 241, XI 14 (ADD App.);
1ke-e-la-an-ši ADD 775, 2;
1kil-lam-ši ADD 462, s. 1.
12) iš-sā-sā-me ABL 605, 7;
e-sā-su-u-me BM 116230, 30;
sā-su-me ABL 414, r. 8; 99, r. 3.
13) Cf. TUGgu_zip_pi LAS 224, r. 3', 10'; 272, 13, for /kuzzippil/, Zigi-r-ta-a-a ABL 205, 6, 9, for /Zikirtāj-ul/, gi-da-(a-)ni ABL 126, r. 6 and NL 67, 24, for /kidāni/, etc., as well as the evidence cited by Kaufman, Akkadian Influences, pp. 138-139. See also K. Deller, JEOL 29 (1987), p. 49.
14) Cf. ša-reši “eunuch” → šarēšu (wr. ša-re-sū, Igituh Short Version 232); similarly ša-ziqni “(bearded) courtier” → ša-ziq-nu, ND 2498, 31 (Iraq 23 [1961], pl. 18).
15) When this article was already typeset, K. Deller referred me to ša 𒐏.GAL-lim in NARGD 42-44, 16 (context: 4 qa ZID hi-in-hi-ni 4 BĀN ŠE.GIŠ, ša-du-ti ša IGI-du-ga-ni ša LUGAL-ma ša 𒐏.GAL-limma i-du-n[u]), which according to him provides “the earliest and the only unequivocal attestation” of MI.É.GAL = ša ekalli (see Deller, JEOL 29 [1987], p. 46 with fn. 22). However, as Deller himself admits, taking ša 𒐏.GAL-lim here as “queen” is only possible by assuming a scribal mistake and emending the text into <LUGAL> LUGAL-ma (ibid.), which appears very unlikely in a text as important and carefully written as NARGD 42-44. Even if this emendation were granted, the ambiguity of ša 𒐏.GAL, which in any other context would stand for “that/of the palace”, makes it extremely unlikely that the feminine determinative MI would have been omitted before ša if the intended meaning really had been “queen”. Hence the passage has to be rendered simply “4 liters of hinhuin cereal and 4 seahs of crushed sesame seeds, likewise (-ma) belonging to the king’s panduganu (offering), are provided by the (treasurers) of the palace”. The enclitic -ma appended to 𒐏.GAL-lim indicates contrast to the preceding section, where the treasurer of the Assur temple figures as the person responsible for the panduganu foodstuffs.