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## ON THE ROLE OF ARAMAIC IN THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Contemporary research has thrown increasing light on a highly significant facet of culture in the Assyrian Empire: the symbiosis of Aramaic and Akkadian[1]. A surprising breakthrough in this respect was the publication of the bilingual inscription, cuneiform and alphabetic, from Tell Fekheriye in Syria, incised on the statue of a ruler from Gozan, which is written in archaic style in Akkadian and Aramaic [2]. We can now state fairly confidently that bilingualism was current on the Western periphery of Assyria, the bulk of whose population consisted of Arameans, at the very least from the mid ninth century B.C.E. onward [3].

However, it was only some 120 years later, when the territories west of the Euphrates were conquered that this symbiosis was officially recognized and Aramaic became the second language of the empire, alongside Akkadian.[4]

1. See: A. L. Oppenheim. *Letters from Mesopotamia*. Chicago 1967. pp. 42-48; J. Muffs. *Studies in the Aramaic Legal Papyri from Elephantine*, Leiden 1969. pp. 189-190; H. Tadmor, *The Aramaization of Assyria*, in: J. Nissen & J. Renger, *Mesopotamien und Seine Nachbarn* (XXV. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale 1978). Berlin. 1982. pp. 449-469; A. R. Millard. *Iraq* XLV (1983) [XXIX Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale. 1982]. pp. 101-107; F.M. Fales, *Aramaic Epigraphs on Clay Tablets of the New Assyrian period* (Studi Semitici. nuova serie 2). Rome. 1986. pp. 36-47 (henceforth. Hales. *Epigraphs*).
2. See: A. Abu-Assaf. P. Bourdieu & A. R. Millard. *La Statue de Tell Fekheriye*, Paris. 1982; J.A. Kautman. *Maarav* III (1982) pp. 137-175; R. Zadok. *Tell Aviv* IX (1982). pp. 117-129; J.C. Greenfield & A. Shaffer. *Iraq* XLV (1983). pp. 109-116; idem. *Anatolian Studies* XXXIII (1983), pp. 123-129; idem. *RB* XLII (1985). pp. 45-59; F.M. Fales. *Syria* XL. (1984). pp. 233-250; idem, *Epigraphs*, pp. 40-43.
3. For an early interchange between Akkadian and Aramaic verbs "to kill" (*daku* > *qatalu*) in the Assyrian scribal practice of the tenth century, see my note: Towards the Early History of *qatalu*, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXVI (1985), pp. 51-54.
4. This may be seen as a reversal of the practice current in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E in the lands west of the Euphrates. Then it was a Western Akkadian that was served as the language of literacy and lingua franca throughout the whole area, including Egypt. The cuneiform archives of the royal chancelleries at el-Amarna, Ugarit, and Hattusha document this practice. The literary centers of Canaan (e.g. Hazor, Aphek), where the alphabetic script was already incipient use, yielded evidence of extensive use of Akkadian. For cuneiform texts from Hazor see: B. Landsberger & H. Tadmor *IEJ* XIV (1954), pp. 201-218; W.W. Hallo & H. Tadmor, *IEJ* XXVII (1977), pp. 1-11, H. Tadmor, *ibid*, pp. 98-102: For those from Aphek see: A.F. Rainey, *Tel Aviv* II (1975), pp. 125-129; III (1976), pp. 137-140; D.I. Owen *Tel Aviv* VIII (1981), pp. 1-17;

Assyrian reliefs beginning from the time of Tiglath-pileser III [5] provide numerous portrayals of a scribe writing on a tablet or a board,[6] side by side with another scribe writing on papyrus or a parchment scroll.[7] Such scribes would record the loot taken in battle or count the number of enemy casualties.[8]

This pictorial rendition undoubtedly corresponds to the phrases "Assyrian scribe" (*tupsharru Ashuraya*) and "Aramaic scribe" (*tupsharru Aramaya*) that occur together in the various documents, referring to officials in the imperial service.[9] The "Aramaic scribe" was of particular importance in the western part of the empire, where the royal correspondence was conducted also, or according to some authorities primarily, in Aramaic.[10] As the Aramean elements in Assyria

W. Hallo, *ibid.*, pp. 18-24. For the early alphabetic ostrakon from 'Izbet Sartah, see M. Kochavi, *Tel Aviv IV* (1977). pp. 1-13. A. Demsky, *ibid.* pp. 14-27.

5. See, eg., R.D. Barnett & M. Falkner *The scriptures of Tiglath-Pileser III*, London, 1962, Pls. V-VI; G. R. Driver. *Semitic Writing*. London, 1948. Pls. 23B 24C; D.J. Wiseman, *Iraq XVII* (1955), Pl. III, 2.
6. D.J. Wiseman (above. n. 5, pp. 8-13) has argued convincingly that the rectangular object the scribe is holding is not a clay tablet, but rather an ivory or a wooden board (in fact. a hinged diptych). covered with wax.
7. For textual evidence of writing on papyrus (*niyaru* and *urbanu*). see *CAD*, N, II, p. 201; W. von Soden. *AHW* p. 1428. Writing on parchment is attested mainly from Neo-Babylonian documents; see *CAD*. M. I. p. 31 S.V. *magallatu* (an Aramaic loanword). In Neo-Assyrian documents, parchment (KUSH *nayaru*. *CAD*. N, II. p. 201) is rarely mentioned.
8. I. Madhloom has suggested that the person holding a scroll was not a scribe but an artist, whose task was to sketch battle scenes that would later be carved on stone reliefs. (*Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae XXII* (1974). p. 385).  
I believe however that conclusive evidence against this thesis may be furnished by a fresco from Til Barsip, a major Assyrian administrative center in the western part of the Empire (F. Thureau-Dangin-M.Dunand. *Til Barsib*, Paris. 1936. Pl. pp. 54-55). It portrays two scribes (Fig. 1), one writing on a tablet and the other on a sheet of papyrus. standing behind three courtiers who are facing the king (only the lower part of his figure survives, with part of a crouching lion). Since this fresco is concerned not with a military campaign in a foreign land, but with a ceremony at the royal court, it stands to reason that the person holding the sheet of papyrus, standing beside the scribe with the tablet, is, not an artist but likewise a scribe, recording the royal instructions in Aramaic.
9. See the evidence collected by J. Lewy, in *Hebrew Union College Annual XXV* (1954), pp. 185-190. For the list of dignitaries. K. 4395. in which the *tupsharru Ashuraya* is followed by the *tupsharru Ar(a)maya* (p. 188 rr. 74), see now *MSL*, XIII p. 239 V: 5-6.
10. See: S Parpola, 'Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian Letters', in F. M. Fales (ed.), *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons*, Rome, 1981, pp. 122-123. It is not surprising that the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the west needed Aramaic as a kind of *lingua franca* for its official dealings. After all, Assyria had inherited what had been the kingdom of Darnascus, with its existing administrative system; see B. Mazar. "The Aramean empire and its relations with Israel", *BA XXV* (1962). pp. 111-112 (now in his " *The Early Biblical Period: Historical Studies*, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 163-165).

gained ascendancy particularly as a result of mass deportations.[11] scribes in the capitals of the empire were obliged to acquire proficiency in both scripts, cuneiform and alphabetic. Indeed, there are economic documents dating from the seventh century written on clay tablets in Akkadian with annotations [o.....] even summaries in Aramaic.[12] To my mind, such documents were most likely written by a single scribe, fluent in both languages.[13] The same pertains also to the oracular queries on certain state matters, put before the Sun-God Shamash and the patron of extispicy. It is stated there that very often the tablet of query was accompanied by a slip of papyrus (*niyaru, urbanu*) which carried the name of the person concerned - the subject of the query- inscribed, no doubt, in Aramaic.[14] Through such bilingual scribes Akkadian absorbed not only Aramaic terms in many areas such as administration, literacy, and even warfare,[15] but also spelling conventions characteristic of alphabetic script.[16] In Babylonia, during the period of the Assyrian Empire and particularly under the Neo-Babylonian kings, there was even a special term, *sepiru*, borrowed from Aramaic, to denote the bilingual scribe.[17] This term was written sometimes phonetically (se-pi-ru) and sometime ideographically: (A. BAL, literally "one who converts, transposes." i.e. a person who reads a text in one language and translates it into another) [18] A related term is *targummanu* . "interpreter." already known in Old Assyrian and Western Akkadian of the second millennium B.C.E.; the corresponding ideogram is EME. BAL "one who converts speech." [19] This term apparently signifies a person who translates oral communications, in contrast to the *sepiru*, who is concerned with writing.[20] Of special significance in this connection is the relief of Sargon II from his palace at Khorsabad which portrays the siege of a city in a hilly country (Fig. 2)."

11. See: B Obed, . Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Wiesbaden. 1978.
12. See: S.J. Lieberman. *BASOR* 192 (1968), pp. 25-31; J. Naveh, 'The Development of the Aramaic Scripts', *The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings*, V/1 (1970), pp. 16-17, and now in detail, Fales, *Epigraphs*.
13. See: 'Aramaization of Assyria' (above. n 1); p. 453.
14. See. J.A. Knudtzon. *Assyrische Gebete an den Sonnengott*. Leipzig, 1983, Nos 50:4. 124:4, 131 r.2.
15. See. 'Aramaization of Assyria' (above. n. 1), pp. 454-455.
16. See: A. Poebel. *Studies in Akkadian Grammar* (*Assyriological Studies*, IX),(Chicago 1939. pp. 60-64.
17. Cf. J. Lewy (above, n. 9). pp. 191-199.
18. *Ibid*, p 196, n. 108.
19. See: I.J. Gelb 'The Word for Dragoman in the Ancient Near East', *Glossa* II (1968) pp. 93-104.
20. See: J. Lewy (above, n. 9), pp. 196, n. 108.
21. See: P. E. Botta & E. Flandin, *Monuments de Nineve*, Paris 1849, II, Pl. 145; IV, Pl. 180: 1-2 M EI-Amin, *Sumer* IX (1953), p. 219-225.

As the late Y. Yadin observed, an officer, leaning out of the turret of a siege Rnachine, holds a scroll in his hands, apparently appealing to the besieged inhabitants to surrender (Fig. 3),[22] Yadin suggested that this scene recalls the biblical description of Rab-shakeh, the royal chieftain, who called upon the people of Jerusalem to surrender before Sennacherib, his master. (II Kings 18: 17-35). According to the cuneiform epigraph inscribed across the relief, the city besieged by Sargon was "Pa(?))-za-shi, the fortified city of Mannea." [23] Hence, the language used by the officer, who is holding the scroll and addressing the people of the city, must have been Mannean. As, to the best of our knowledge, the Manneans did not possess any script for their language, it stands to reason that the scroll in the officer's hands was inscribed in Aramaic, like any other scroll in the hands of scribes on Assyrian reliefs. Such an officer might have been an "Interpreter of Mannean, targummanu sha Mannaya, a term attested in a Neo-Assyrian document. [24] Naturally, a person holding a text in Aramaic and translating it aloud, would be an Assyrianized Mannean raised in Assyria as a hostage or a deportee. By analogy, can one surmise here that Rab-shakeh too was reading from an Aramaic scroll when delivering his message to the besieged population of Jerusalem? The appeal of the Judean nobles to Rah-shakeh. "Please, speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah in the hearing of the people (standing) on the wall" (II Kings 18:26) indicates that they expected the envoy of the Assyrian king to address them in Aramaic, the customary language of diplomatic negotiations in the West. Rab-Shakeh, however, had a surprise in store for them: he harangued the people on the ramparts of Jerusalem directly, speaking in the vernacular. The remarkable features of the Rab-Shakeh narrative in the Bible are not only the ability of an Assyrian envoy to deliver an eloquent speech in the Judean tongue, but also the very appearance of the king's chief cupbearer as the royal spokesman in time of war. I know of no other case of the chief cupbearer participating in a military delegation, together with the Tartan (Tartanu, the Viceroy) and the Rab-saris (*rab-sha-reshi*, originally the chief eunuch, later the commander in chief). [25] In addition, at that period both these courtiers outranked Rab-shakeh.

22. *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* Jerusalem-Ramat-Gan, 1963, , pp. 320 and 425.

23. See: C.B.F. Walker, 'The Epigraphs' in P. Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon*, King of Assyria, Paris, 1986, p. 112.

24. See: C.H.W. Johns, *Assyrian Deeds and Documents*, II, Cambridge, 1901, No. 865: 6-8.;

25. It is regrettable that in the past many scholars failed to identify properly the titles 'Rab-Shakeh' and 'Rab-saris' in II Kings 18, both Akkadian loanwords. A common error was that the title written ideographically LU GALSAG stands for 'Rab-shakeh'. Examples of this misconception may still be found in the standard collections of Near Eastern texts in translation. Nowadays

Why then. of the three members of the Assyrian delegation was the chiefcup bearer chosen to conduct the negotiations with King Hezekiah's representatives. As a possible explanation of this choice, I would suggest that Rab-shakeh, a [...] alone of the Assyrian entourage, was fluent in Judean and capable of delivering a convincing propaganda speech in that language. It is inconceivable that the cupbearer of Sennacherib, who was certainly not an expert in Semitics. have acquired this fluency. if he were not a Westerner in origin: an Israelite, Moabite or Ammonite.[27] Highly-placed officials at the Assyrian court, v[...] names betray an origin west of the Euphrates. are mentioned in numerous monuments from the eighth century onward.[28] In a late Babylonian tradition. Ahikar the hero of an Aramaic narrative, was *ummanu* (i.e. the counselor and scribe of King Esarhaddon,[29] and Nehemiah, another Westerner, attained the position "the king's cupbearer" in the court of Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1:11). Such ap[...] ments were surely no exception in the history of royal courts. Indeed, they were typical of Assyria. the only one among the empires of the ancient Near East which the language of the conquered. forcefully acculturated, ultimately vailed over the language of their imperial masters.\*

there can be no doubt that this title was pronounced *rab-sha-reshi*, whereas the usual ideographical writing for the chief cupbearer (*rab-sha-qe-e*), was LU GAL BI.LUL. More in my discussion about these two titles in C.L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (eds.), *Essays in Honor of David Noel [...]* man. Philadelphia. 1983. pp. 279-295.

26. Cf. my comments in the Hebrew *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol. VII, col. 324, and a more recent [...] Cohen, *Israel Oriental Studies IX* (1979), pp. 32-47.

27. As suggested to me by my colleague. Prof. J. Naveh. The main document in Moabite is st[...] Mesha monument. For Ammonite see now K. P. Jackson, *The Ammonite Language of the [...]* Age (Harvard Semitic Studies, XXVII). Cambridge. Mass., 1983.

28. See; Oded (above. n. II), pp. 105-107.

29 See: J.J A. van Dijk, in *Uruk Vorläufiger Bericht XVIII*, Berlin, 1962, pp. 44-45; J. C. Greenfield in: *Hommages a A. Dupont-Sommer*. Paris. 1971, pp. 50-51.

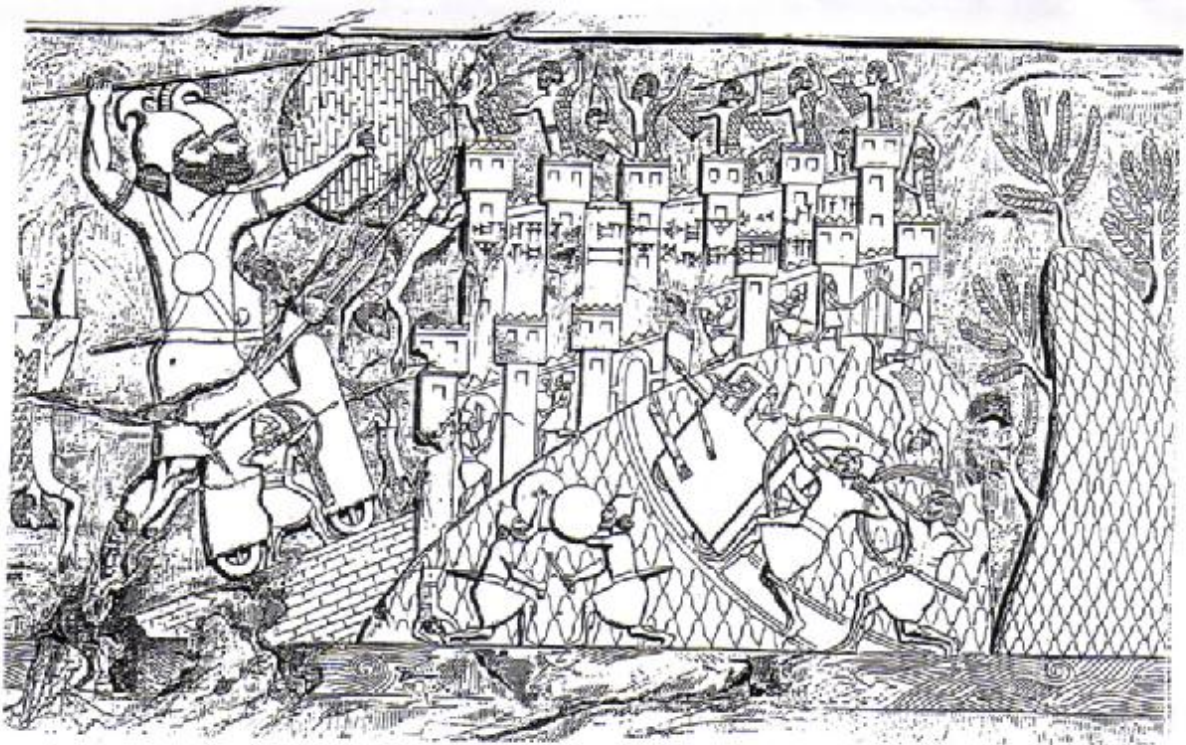
- The same topic is treated in a paper which appears now in Hebrew (*Eretz Israel XX* [1989][...] 249-252). The present English version has been modified and revised. It is a privilege to publish it in the Anniversary Volume for H.I.H. Takahito Mikasa. historian of the Ancient Near East and patron of scholarship.



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Fig. 1: The 'Assyrian scribe' and the 'Aramaic scribe' on a fresco from Til-Barsip (see n. 8) (From: Thureau-Dangon & Dunand, *Til Barsip*, Pl. L).

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Fig. 2: A relief of Sargon from Khorsabad (From: Botta & Flandin, *Monuments de Nineve*, II, Pl. 145).

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