

Nebo-Sarsekim (Jeremiah 39:3) mentioned in a recently noticed Babylonian text

Terence C Mitchell

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Abstract: A recently published cuneiform tablet (BM 114789) dating from the 6th century BC mentions a man who can be identified with the Nebo-Sarsekim known in the account given by Jeremiah (39:3) of the last days of Jerusalem. The tablet also includes a number of titles mentioned in Jeremiah the meaning of which has hitherto been uncertain. The new evidence illuminates the history of the Babylonian administration established in Jerusalem after 597 BC.

Introduction

Reports appeared in many newspapers recently giving an account of a cuneiform text dating from the 6th century BC which mentions a man who can be identified with the Nebo-Sarsekim known in the account given by Jeremiah (39:3) of the last days of Jerusalem. This cuneiform tablet, BM 114789 (Figure 1), which is dated to 595 BC, was acquired by the British Museum in 1920, and is one of a group of economic texts being prepared for publication by Professor Joseph Jursa of the University of Vienna. It is part of the collections of the Department of the Middle East (formerly Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities) in the British Museum, which holds over 100,000 cuneiform tablets and fragments. The text concerns a Babylonian official named Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn *rab-ša-reši*, who is clearly to be identified with biblical Nebo-Sarsekim who has the title *rab-sāris*. This paper first appeared in *Faith and Thought* 46 (April 2009) and is republished here with permission of the Editor.

The tablet

The tablet was included in the recent British Museum exhibition *Babylon: Myth and Reality* held during the winter of 2008-2009, and was illustrated in the exhibition catalogue (Finkel & Seymour 2008: 145 fig. 128)

The text was published by Jursa (2008) and reads:

1½ manu of gold, the property of Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn, *rab ša-reši*, which he sent to Esangila in the care of Arad-Bānītu *ša-rēši*; Arad-Bānītu has handed [it] over in Esangila. In the presence of Bēl-usāti son of Alpaia the royal *tābiḫū* [and of] Nādin son of Marduk-zēr-ibni.

Month šabaṭu, day 18, year 10, Nebuchadnezzar.



Figure 1: The administrative text referring to Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn BM 114789 35mm high 54mm wide
Photo: C.J. Davey, Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

In this, 1½ manu was the equivalent of about 1.65 lbs (756 grammes), a quantity of gold appropriate for a senior man such as Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn (*rab ša-reši*) to present to Esangila (perhaps better known as Esagila), the temple of Marduk the principal god of Babylon. The title *rab ša-reši*, ‘chief of the head’, indicates that he held an office near to the ruler, superior to that of Arad- Bānītu, *ša-rēši* ‘(he) of the head’, who conveyed the gift to the temple. *Tābiḫū*, literally ‘butcher’, the title of Alpaia, the father of one of the witnesses, perhaps indicates in this context some such office as ‘bodyguard’, since the man in charge of the king’s food was in a position which virtually amounted to that.

All three of the Akkadian titles in this text, *rab ša-reši*, *ša-reši*, and *tābiḫū*, are found also in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew transcriptions *rab-sārīs*, *sārīs* and *ṭabbāḥ*.

Akkadian *rēšu*, the common word for ‘head’ (Reiner and Roth 1999: 277-89), is found in the phrase *ša-rēši*, literally ‘of the head’, in contexts which show that this usually has the meaning ‘attendant, soldier, officer, official’ (Reiner and Roth 1999: 292-6; Brinkman 1968: 309f). There is evidence, however, that in some contexts in Middle Assyrian (c 1500-1000 BC) and Neo-Assyrian (c 1000-600 BC), and possibly in Old Babylonian (c 2000-1500 BC), as well as in the literary dialect known as Standard Babylonian (late second to late first millennium BC) it had the meaning ‘eunuch’ (Brinkman 1968: 309f; Reiner and Roth 1999: 296). The longer phrase *rab ša rēši*, mentioned in Middle Babylonian (c 1500-1000 BC) and Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian (c 1000-600 BC) texts, referred to a more senior official (Akkadian *rab* meaning ‘chief’ or the like) who can be described as ‘commander of the court attendants or officers’ (Reiner and Roth 1999: 289f).

The Akkadian phrases *ša rēši* and *rab ša rēši*, were borrowed in Hebrew in the forms *sārīs* and *rab-sārīs*, very possibly early in the first millennium BC before the rise of the Assyrian Empire (Tadmor 1995: 324), in which case they could have had the specific meanings ‘eunuch’ and ‘chief eunuch’, and it has indeed been argued by Tadmor that Hebrew *sārīs* always had the meaning ‘eunuch’ in the Old Testament (1995: 319-21). In some contexts this was clearly the case (Is. 56:3-4; Est. 2:3; and probably 2 Ki. 20:18), and even Potiphar the Egyptian official whose wife tried to seduce Joseph (Gen. 37:36; 39:1), could have been a eunuch, his wife possibly having sought solace with the young Hebrew because of what Potiphar was. In other passages, however, this translation could be debated (1 Sam. 8:14-15; 1 Ki. 22:9; 2 Ki. 8:6; 9:31-33; 23:1; 24:15; 25:19; Jer. 29:2; 34:19; 38:7; 41:16).

Hebrew *ṭabbāḥ* had the meaning ‘butcher, cook’ (1 Sam. 9:23-24), from *tābaḥ*, ‘to slaughter’, but it could also designate an official in a senior position not directly connected with food, ‘provost’ or something of the kind.

The passage in the Hebrew text at Jeremiah 39:3 which contains the name of Nebo-sarsekim runs *nērgal šar-’eser samgar-nēbū šar-sēkīm rab-sārīs nērgal šar-’eser rab-*

mag. The Rabbinic scholars (Masoretes) who preserved the Hebrew text were evidently not themselves familiar with some of the details of this passage. The hyphen (called *maqṣep* in Hebrew) was only introduced by them early in the Christian era, and it is not found, for instance, in any of the Biblical manuscripts from Qumran. In this passage it is used correctly in most of the forms, but the link in *samgar-nēbū* is incorrect, and this error was carried over into the Authorised Version, which renders the passage as though it gives a list of six personal names, including one repeated twice: ‘Nergal-Sharezer, Samgar-nebo, Sarsechim, Rab-saris, Nergal-Sharezer, Rab-mag’.

After the decipherment of cuneiform it became clear that three of these forms, *samgar*; *rab-sārīs* and *rab-mag* were Babylonian-Assyrian official titles: *samgar*, Babylonian *simmagir*, ‘royal commissioner’ or something of the kind; *rab-sārīs*, Babylonian and Assyrian *rab ša reši*, mentioned above; and *rab-māg*, Babylonian *rab mugī*, another official whose role has not been precisely identified. This means that *nērgal šar-’eser*, found twice, and *nēbū šar-sēkīm* were personal names, and that the passage in Jeremiah 39:3 should be rendered in English as ‘Nergal-sharezer, *samgar*, Nebo-sarsekim, *rab-sārīs*, and Nergal-sharezer, *rab-mag*’.

The New International Version (1979) does better than the Authorised Version, though it takes *Samgar* as a place name, with the translation ‘Nergal-Sharezer of *Samgar*, Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official’, and the English Standard Version (2001), though it recognizes that *rab-saris* and *rab-mag* were titles of officials, wrongly retains the *samgar-nēbū* of the Hebrew text, with ‘Nergal-sar-ezer, *Samgar-nebu*, Sarsekim and Rab-saris, Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag’.

The history of the time

The main historical events of this time have been summarized in the table on page 10. In this the Babylonian kings are placed on the right, and the kings of Judah on the left, with the headings Jerusalem and Mizpah, indicating that after the final Babylonian conquest, the capital was moved to the latter site.

When Nebuchadnezzar succeeded Nabopolassar as king of Babylon in 604 BC, Jehoiakim (strictly Jehoiakim) was the Judaeen king in Jerusalem. He had been placed there by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho, with his name changed from Eliakim (2 Ki. 23:34). When he died in 598 BC he was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin (strictly Jehoiakin) who surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar on 16 March 597 BC after a short siege, and was deported with his family to Babylon where he was relatively well treated (2 Ki. 24:10-15). At that time Nebuchadnezzar placed Mattaniah, Jehoiakin’s uncle, on the throne in Jerusalem with a change of name to Zedekiah (2 Ki. 24:17 = Jer. 37:1).

After some years Zedekiah rebelled against Babylonian rule and Nebuchadnezzar made a final destruction of



Figure 2: The Babylonian Chronicle that refers to the first capture of Jerusalem in 597BC, BM 21946. Photo: C.J. Davey Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Jerusalem (2 Ki. 25:1-3; Jer. 39:1-2; 52:3-7) in 586 BC Zedekiah escaped from the city before its fall, but was captured, blinded, and taken captive to Babylon (2 Ki. 25:4-7; Jer. 39:4-7). With the principal figures of Judah in Exile in Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, a member of a distinguished Judaeon family, as governor of Palestine (2 Ki. 25:22). Since Jerusalem had suffered destruction, he made his capital at Mizpah (2 Ki. 25:23), about eight miles to the north. Gedaliah was subsequently murdered by dissidents (2 Ki. 25:25; Jer. 40:13-41:2)

While the date of the first fall of Jerusalem is known to have been 597 BC, that of the final fall, given above as 586 BC, is uncertain. This is because the series of tablets known as Babylonian Chronicles which give brief annual summaries of the events of Babylonian history between 747 and 539 BC have gaps in the sequence. One of the tablets BM 21946 (Figure 2), covers the years 605-595 BC and therefore includes 597, the year of the first Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, but there is a gap of thirty-seven years in the series, and the next surviving tablet BM 25124, covers only the year 557 BC, and the following one BM 35382, the so-called Nabonidus Chronicle, covers the years 556-539 BC. Though there is thus this gap in the evidence, it is generally agreed that the final destruction of Jerusalem took place either in 587 or 586, most probably 586 BC.

Concerning the final destruction in 586 BC, I will take

the liberty of quoting from a contribution I made to the *Cambridge Ancient History* in 1991:

The Book of Jeremiah reports, in a slightly confused passage, that when the Babylonians had gained possession of Jerusalem a group of senior officers, including Nergal-sharezer, *samgar*, Nebu-sarsekim, *rab-sāris*, and Nergal-Sharezer, *rab-māg*, sat in the Middle Gate, presumably thus establishing themselves as a military government (Jer. 39:3). The three titles are those attaching to senior positions in the Babylonian hierarchy: *simmagir*, something like ‘royal commissioner’, the *rab ša rēši*, and the *rab mugī*, another official of uncertain responsibility. It is not clear, however, whether there were two Nergal-sharezers or whether one man of that name occupied both the offices of *simmagir* and *rab mugī*; and the identity of the *rab ša rēši* is uncertain, because, according to the account in Jeremiah, only a little over a month later, when it is hardly likely that a new man had assumed the office, he is named Nebushazban (Jer. 39:13). There is at present no satisfactory explanation for this. The name *Nērgal šar-’eser* presents no difficulty, since it clearly represents Babylonian *Nergal-šar-usur*, and there is a strong possibility that the man in question was the son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, the Neriglissar of the Greeks, who twenty seven years later became king of Babylon (559-556 BC). The administration established by these officers was only an interim one, set up to deal with immediate issues until further instructions were received from Nebuchadnezzar, who had evidently remained at Riblah. About a month later Nebuchadnezzar sent one of his senior officers, Nebuzaradan (Babylonian Nabu-zer-iddin), to Jerusalem to complete the neutralization of the city. This officer, who is designated *rab tabbāhīm* (‘chief cook’) in the Old Testament (2Ki. 25:8, 11; Jer. 39:9-10.), is known from a passage in a building inscription on a clay prism of Nebuchadnezzar listing court officials, among whom he is named first, with his office, *rab nuḥatimmu* (‘chief cook’), or, perhaps, ‘master of the royal kitchen’, clearly the designation of a man of rank and importance (Mitchell 1991: 407f).

I would add today, concerning the titles in this passage, that, while Akkadian *nuḥatimmu* means ‘cook’, Hebrew *ṭabbāhīm*, plural of *ṭabbāh*, is more precisely ‘butcher’ than ‘cook’ from *ṭabāh* ‘to slaughter’, found also in Akkadian *ṭabīhu*, ‘butcher’ from *ṭabāhu*, ‘to slaughter’.

It is clear that Nabû-šarrūssu-ukīn, *rab ša-reši*, named in the tablet, can be identified with the Nebu-sar-sekim, *rab-sāris*, of the Biblical account. This equivalence can be seen more clearly perhaps by comparing the names with consonants only: Babylonian *nb-šrskn* and Hebrew *nb-šrskm*. Concerning the consonants š and ś, the Biblical Hebrew script has marks introduced in the Christian era

by the Masoretes, which make a distinction between them, whereas the cuneiform writing system represents both š and ś by the same syllabic characters, all conventionally transliterated as š.

Conclusion

In 1991, I wrote ‘the identity of the *rab ša reši* is uncertain’, but the information supplied by this new tablet removes that uncertainty, and since the man in question, Nabû-šarrūssu-ukîn, is shown by the text to have held the office of *rab ša-reši* already in 595 BC, nearly ten years earlier than the reference to him in Jeremiah, there would be no real problem in assuming that in the shifting situation when the Babylonians were setting up an administration in Jerusalem, he was replaced in that office by a different man, Nebushazban. This means that my comments in 1991 that ‘it is hardly likely that a new man had assumed the office’, and that ‘there is at present no satisfactory explanation for this’, can be set aside. This illustrates the process of changing conclusions in the light of new evidence.

Terence C Mitchell
British Museum,
London

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BC	<u>Jerusalem</u>	<u>Babylon</u>
	Jehoahaz	Nabopolassar
609	-----	
	Jehoiakim (<Eliakim)	
	[Appointed by Necho	
		604 -----
598	-----	
	Jehoiachin	
597	-----	
	[Taken to Babylon]	Nebuchadnezzar
	Zedekiah (<Mattaniah)	
	[Appointed by Nebuchadnezzar	
	[Rebelled	
586	-----	
	[Taken to Babylon	
	Exile	
	<u>Mizpah</u>	
	Gedaliah	
	[Appointed by Nebuchadnezzar	
	[Murdered	
		561 -----
		Amel-Marduk
		(Evil Merodach)
		[Jehoiachin released
		559 -----
		Nergal-šar-usur
		(Neriglissar)
		556 -----
		Lābāši-Marduk
		555 -----
		Nabu-na'id
		(Nabonidus)
539	-----	
	[Return of the Jews	Cyrus

Table: A timeline showing events and kings in Jerusalem and Babylon