Two British Museum Fragments, Possibly of a Royal Decree

A. KIRK GRAYSON
University of Toronto

J. NICHOLAS POSTGATE
Cambridge University

The inscription published here is preserved on two fragments of a stone amulet found near the Istar Kadmuiri temple at Nimrud by Hormuzd Rassam and now in the British Museum. Although the text is fragmentary and its content puzzling, it is clearly not a royal inscription, as one would expect on stone. The inscription is published courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. For their generous co-operation the authors wish to thank the museum's staff and in particular Dr Edmond Sollberger and Mr C.B.F. Walker.

Rm. 863 and 864 (copy below) are two non-joining fragments which seem certain to belong to a single limestone slab, inscribed on both faces. Rm. 863 is a piece from the lower part of the obverse and the top of the reverse, measuring ca. 31 × 7 cm; Rm. 864 must therefore come from the top of the obverse and the bottom of the reverse – it measures ca. 14 × 11 cm. Both fragments are about 6.8–7.5 cm in thickness, swelling towards the centre. Unfortunately there is no way of telling how much of the slab is missing between the two pieces, but it is clear from the curvature of the surface and from the text itself that little is missing from the right edge of Rm. 863; the estimated position of the original edge is indicated on the copy.

On the top edge of the slab (i.e. on Rm. 864), there remains a trace of a projection, which must have resembled those familiar from stone amulets designed for suspension (cf. Reiner, JNES 19 [1960], pp. 148–55), as well as from a few other clay items, e.g. the Khorsabad King List (Gelb, JNES 13 [1954], pp. 209–30 and pls. XIV–XV) and the Nimrud hemerology (Hulin, Iraq 21 [1959], pp. 42–53 and pls. XIV–XV). There is no sign of a perforation through the projection, however.

The text is written in lapidary script (e.g. the form of lu, cf. Grayson, Iranica Antiqua 11 [1976], p. 32), as one would expect, and in Assyrian dialect (mugirru, ma-a, ibbatuqu, lu tuhaliliq, and subjunctive in -ni), albeit with the non-colloquial /i/ sometimes replaced by /u/ as in Assur-pa-ta (cf. Reiner, JNES 19 [1960], pp. 148–55). Although it is obviously of Neo-Assyrian date, we cannot define any criteria which would enable us to date it more precisely.

Obverse Rm. 863
1) lu GAL.LU.A. 'zu lu GAL LÜ. NAR lu [x x x x]
2) šă UGULU.UM-ma-ni KUR.aš-šur-a-a LÜ.e-ri[t-be]
3) LÜ.a-lik il-ki tê-ê-mi-šu-ru a-n[a x x x x]
4) u-ta-ra-ni ma-a LÜ.un-ma-nu šă q[n x x x x x x]
5') *MAš ez-zi-iš lik-kil-muššu dîŠKUR[x x x x x]

Reverse Rm. 863
6') [in]a bir-qî-šî liš-ši-šû a-ni-É.GAL kib-s[išu u]
7') ta-lak-tu-šû TA* ŋ(*) GAL lu tu-ḫal-li-iq-[šû' (x x x x)]
8') EME-šû i-lat-tu-qu a-na EGIR UD-me a-na UD ša-a-[tti/e]
9') ina šâ LÜ.un-ma-ni KUR.aš-šur-a-a LÜ.e-rib-te LÜ.a-[ ... ]
10') ši-a-tu x [x x x x x]x-pa-ra pa-nu-šu ni-[x]

Lacuna

Reverse Rm. 864
1') [ ] lu ni [ ]
2') [ ] EN(?)'LU.GAR šû(?)

(remained uninscribed)

1–7) ...... to Nergal-aplu-[ ...... ] ..... whether a ...-man, or a scribe(?) , or sons of [ ... , or] a chariot-carpenter, or [ ... , or] a diviner, or an omen-reader, or a doctor, or [ ... , or] an iron-smith, or a [ ...... ]

Lacuna

1’–10’) or the chief doctor, or the chief temple-singer, or [ ...... ], who makes a report about an Assyrian master-craftsman, a member of the temple personnel(?) , who performs ilku-service, saying: ‘The master-craftsman who .... [ ...... ] – may [Ashur and] Ninurta look angrily upon him, may Adad take away [his sight(?)] from him with his thunderbolt, may Belat-Ekalli destroy his paths and ways from the palace [ ...... ]. They shall cut out his tongue for eternity and forever, and ... that Assyrian master-craftsman, a member of the temple-personnel(?), ...... Lacuna

Commentary

Rm. 864
1) It would be tempting to read UGULU-llu[um], but the traces do not entirely support the idea.
2) LU.X.DU: The x is a problem. It lacks an upper horizontal needed for LAGAB. Postgate believes there may have been horizontals before it, now eroded, in which case one might read LÜ.SAR.DU (i.e. KEŠDA.DU),
Rm. 863
Obverse

Rm. 863
Reverse

Rm. 864
Obverse

Rm. 864
Reverse

Remainder uninscribed
conceivably a writing for rakāsu, e.g. raksu. But Grayson believes there is little evidence of anything missing.

4) There may be traces of a sign missing at the end of the line ("ni" or "LUGAL").

Rm. 863
2') ummānu in Neo-Assyrian generally means a scribe, but it could still keep the meaning of craftsman; it is not clear which is right here. We translate as a singular, despite -šunu in l. 3' and ina libbi in l. 9' because the plural should be ummānāte. Until we known the precise meaning of ummānu, we cannot translate Aššurāyu precisely, since 'an Assyrian scribe' can mean a scribe who writes in cuneiform rather than Aramaic. lu.e-rib-te (restored after l. 9') is apparently unknown. Our translation assumes a contraction of ērib-hte 'enterer of the temple,' but this cannot be considered certain. It is equally uncertain whether the three designations (ummānu, ēribte, and ālik-ilki) are meant to apply to a single individual or not: we assume they are, because of the simple mention of ummānu in l. 4'.

3') Although the person making the report should certainly be singular, as appears clearly from l. 5'-8', we prefer to take the -šunu here as referring to those officials or professionals listed above as possibly making the report. Otherwise the plural must be the recipient of the report, presumably named in the break at the end of l. 3'.

4') The complete content of the report which is envisaged, and against which the entire inscription seems to have been composed, has to have been compressed into the end of l. 4', and it is unfortunate that we cannot convincingly restore the end of the line. A sole, very tentative, suggestion: ummānu ša qanni ēkalli šī 'He is a craftsman from the palace quarter,' or ša qa-[at] ... .

5') likkilmāšu is plural and therefore a DN must be restored at the end of 4'.

7') Ė(*) GAL: the scribe has mistakenly LĪL.GAL.

9') Without the verb in this sentence, it is hard to suggest the precise meaning of ina libbi. The easiest translation is 'from among,' but this is difficult because it seems to be a singular which follows; otherwise ina libbi tends to mean 'by means of' – which is conceivable, but slightly odd. At the end one expects ṱq-[ālik-ilki] but there is not enough room unless it was written on the edge.

Conclusion

The text is now so mutilated that it is impossible to reconstruct its function with any confidence. However, we suggest the following. A high authority, quite likely the king, guarantees to Nergal-aplu- ... (l. 2) that officials and employees of the palace (l. 7') will not be allowed to interfere in his establishment by claiming that his employees are in fact due to work for the palace. These employees are Assyrians, craftsmen, performing īlkū services, and, if we are right, classed as persons entitled to 'enter the temple.' It is therefore likely that Nergal-aplu-... was a temple official, probably šangū, and dare we suggest that he was priest of the Ištar Kadmuu Temple? As for the presence of craftsmen performing īlkū services for a temple, the only clear instance seems to be Johns, ADD 1, no. 640 (cf. Postgate, Taxation p. 78, l. 32 and p. 89 for comment). Nevertheless, it is entirely plausible that a king could make out a document of this kind protecting a temple from possible claims on it by the secular authorities, and this seems the most probable reconstruction at present. Thus it appears to be a kind of royal decree. Two other Assyrian royal decrees on stone are known: one of Adad-narari III published by Thompson, AAA 20 (1933), pp. 113–15 and pls. XCVIII–C, and Reade and Walker, AfO 28 (1981–2), pp. 117f. (cf. Postgate, Royal Grants pp. 115–17, and Orientalia n.s. 42, p. 444); the other known only from a fragment published by Dalley, Iraq 28 (1976), pp. 107–11.