53) **New Light on the Assassination of Sennacherib** — Tablet 1880-7-19, 28 in the Kuyunjik Collection of the British Museum (most recently published by Frances Reynolds as SAA 18, 100) has long been known to contain invaluable information about the conspiracy to assassinate Sennacherib in 681 BC (Parpola 1980). In 2005 an additional fragment (K. 21923) was joined to the tablet by Jeanette C. Fincke but has until now remained unpublished.1) While the beginning and the end of the tablet remain missing, this restoration provides new information about the plot against Sennacherib and the identities of the persons involved. After examining and collating the tablet at the British Museum in September 2018, I offer a hand copy (fig. 1) and transliteration of the newly joined sections as well as a translation and commentary:

**Obverse**

1’ 

2’ 

3’ 

4’ 

5’ 

6’ 

7’ 

8’ 

9’ 

**Reverse**

8. 

9. 

10. 

11. 

12. 

13. 

14. 

15. 

16. 

These lines are included here from SAA 18, 100: 5’-6’ for clarity.

**Commentary**

4’. This line numbered as line 1’ in SAA 18, 100.

5’. (Line 2’ of SAA 18, 100). The join confirms the reconstruction of the second sign of this line as ŠEŠ, and adds the number “3” before it.

6’. (Line 3’ of SAA 18, 100). The signs LÚ.KUG are clearly visible in the joined fragment. SAA 18, 100 reconstructed the first word of this line as the personal name “[DH]-mu—PAB-MEŠ or Sulmu-ahhe, which can now be shown to be incorrect. The next sign in the line is actually DIM, forming the logogram LÚ.KUG.DIM or Kutimmu, “silversmith.” This logogram is attested in Neo-Babylonian texts (CAD, K p. 608-609) but also appears in a list of Babylonian deportees from Nineveh (SAA 11, 155: 5).

7’. Here the join confirms Reynolds’ reconstruction.

8’-9’. The join ends on line 7. These lines are included here from SAA 18, 100: 5’-6’ for clarity.
r. 8. The conjunction ša is partially visible and can be clearly reconstructed here. The numbering of lines on the reverse matches those from SAA 18, 100.

r. 9. The first personal name on this line was read TUR by Reynolds, although marked as an uncertain reading. TUR, normalized as suhru, “youth”, is only otherwise attested as a woman’s name while here it bears the determinative for a man’s name (SAA 10, 194 r. 10; PNAE 3-1 p. 1178). I suggest the name should be read ŠE.BAR, or izzatu, “barley,” although this name is otherwise unattested.

r. 9-10. These lines list the names of several persons. Reynolds’ reconstruction interprets the names on line 9 as the subject of a reconstructed verb qabû at the end of line 10, and Nabû-aha-erēš as the object. The join gives a conjunction ša at the beginning of line 10, suggesting that Nabû-aha-erēš was part of the same list of names which began on line 9, and that all of them are the subject of the verb which originally appeared after kt on line 10. Here I have reconstructed the verb as šemâ.

r. 14. nimharu = mahâru G-preterite 1cp.

Translation

1-4…whom [PN lost]… 4 sîtu of…
5-6…three brothers, Babylonians… silversmiths in the house of […] when they heard of the treaty of rebellion which […], one of them appealed to the king prior to the murder.

(For a translation of lines 10′(=7)-r. 2, see SAA 18, 100)

r. 3-8. When they uncovered his face, Arda-Mullissi questioned him. They killed [him] and his brothers.

r. 9-10. These are the people: Utṣatu, Tabbūya, [PN lost] and Nabu-āhu-erēš, when [they heard it] they did not believe it. The king should question the men of the house of Arda-Mullissi. Now, when we confronted (them) [they] talk excellent nonsense about […]. Then they wrote to the king [our lord]. The king [our lord]…

As Parpola (1980: 173) has pointed out, this letter must post-date Sennacherib’s assassination. It was most likely written in the time immediately following Esarhaddon’s seizure of the throne, and was the product of an investigation ordered by Esarhaddon into the circumstances of his father’s death with the intent of uncovering any accomplices or co-conspirators who were still at large. The use of the first-person plural verb nimharu in r. 14 shows that the letter had at least two authors who were carrying out the investigation.

The beginning of lines 5‘-6‘ reveal that the plot against Sennacherib by his son Arda-Mullissi was discovered by three Babylonian silversmiths, all brothers, who worked in a royal or temple household whose name has unfortunately been lost. It is possible, based on r. 11, that they worked in the household of Arda-Mullissi himself, although this cannot be considered certain.

One of the three brothers sought to appeal to Sennacherib personally and disclose the conspiracy to him. He was met by Nabû-šumu-īškun and Sīllaya, members of Sennacherib’s household who, unknown to the silversmith, were part of the plot and betrayed him to Arda-Mullissi (Parpola 1980: 172; PNAE 2:2 p. 888). This join reveals that not only did Arda-Mullissi and his co-conspirators kill the would-be informant, but tracked down and killed his brothers as well.

The four men listed in r. 9-10 appear to be persons in the household of Arda-Mullissi. Given this, Nabû-āhu-erēš in r. 10 is almost certainly not to be identified with the Nabû-ahhe-erēš who served as governor of Sam‘al and as eponym in 681 BC (Millard 1994: 61). It is unclear what the four men did not believe. Did they also hear rumors of the plot against Sennacherib but discount them? Or did they disbelieve rumors of the murder of the three Babylonian silversmiths? In any case, given that three people were murdered and disposed of prior to the assassination, the authors of the letter were skeptical towards the claims of innocence being made by members of Arda-Mullissi’s household after the fact. They recommend further investigation be made of the former members of Arda-Mullissi’s household.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to publish, and especially thank Mr. Imran Javed for making a special effort to locate this tablet in the museum’s collection.
References


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