

Ashurbanipal: literate or not?

by Alasdair Livingstone – Birmingham

Although many rulers and monarchs in the Ancient Near East lay claim to various kinds of wisdom, relatively few claim literacy, and of these Shulgi and Ashurbanipal were by far the most vociferous. While it may never be possible to actually test the veracity of Shulgi's assertions, the purpose of this article is to present and discuss for the first time some evidence that has direct bearing on the question of Ashurbanipal's literacy.¹ Serious commentary on this issue commenced almost twenty-five years ago with some observations by S. Parpola, who wrote that the literacy claims "can well have more truth in them than a critical modern reader would *a priori* be inclined to think".² More recently S. J. Lieberman returned to the matter and pointed out the proliferation of phrases in colophons of tablets in the king's libraries that insist that the tablets were for his own use, such as *ana tāmarti šitassiya*, "for my review in reading", *ana tāmarti šarrūtiya*, "for my royal review", *ana taḥsisti tāmartišu*, "for study in his reviewing", *ana taḥsisti šitassišu*, "for study in his reading", and *ana tamrirtiya*, "for my examining".³ Lieberman considered that this and other evidence demonstrated clearly that the king was making intelligent use of individual tablets that were "gathered in his palace for *his own* (Lieberman's italics) study". The matter was returned to by Beate Pongratz-Leisten in her study entitled "Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien".⁴ In the context of a broadly based study of Mesopotamian royal *Selbstbehaup-*

¹ Thanks are due to the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to publish cuneiform tablets in their keeping. I would also like to thank Prof. W. G. Lambert for looking through the final manuscript and making some suggestions, Dr I. L. Finkel and Dr J. J. Taylor for discussing with me my research on the Ashurbanipal literacy question at various stages of its progress and The Leverhulme Trust for financial support. Bibliographical abbreviations are given according to the system followed by the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary.

² S. Parpola, Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. Part 2: Commentary and Appendices. AOAT 5/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1983) 347.

³ S. J. Lieberman, Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Ashurbanipal's Personal Tablet Collection, in: Linger Over Words. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran (Atlanta 1990) 305–336, esp. 318–319.

⁴ B. Pongratz-Leisten, Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien. SAAS 10 (Helsinki 1999).

tung she takes a sceptical view of the possibility of royal literacy at the Neo-Assyrian court, dismissing the well known letter in which Balasî, one of the most prominent scholars attached to Esarhaddon's court thanks the king for having appointed him as Ashurbanipal's tutor⁵ as simply belonging to a phase when Ashurbanipal was to have been trained as a priest before it became clear that he would become crown prince.⁶ This view does not accord with commonly accepted dates for the relevant parts of the royal correspondence discussed below. Pongratz-Leisten regards the literacy claims and the very formation of the royal libraries in Nineveh as belonging to a "Wissensverwaltung" which should be seen "als eigener Komplex neben Bürokratie und politischer Verwaltung [...], der unabhängig von einer angenommenen zunehmenden Kenntnis der Schrift existierte".⁷ Most recently Jeanette Fincke has had the opportunity of giving consideration to the Ashurbanipal literacy question in her report on the British Museum's Ashurbanipal Library Project.⁸ Under the subheading 'Ashurbanipal's interest in the scribal art' she emphasises the king's concern with that art, including an actual preoccupation with old tablets as claimed in his inscriptions and she cautiously allows the possibility that he could read cuneiform tablets, albeit perhaps not with the much flaunted expertise.⁹ She refers to simple writings and explanations in some scholarly letters, suggesting that this was to make them easier for the king to understand. These writings, and especially the glosses in the correspondence of the astrologer Nabû-aḫḫē-erība, are part of the subject matter of a discussion by P. Villard of Ashurbanipal's education.¹⁰ The purpose of the present contribution is to bring the debate on the literacy question further by presenting and discussing some new evidence.

⁵ S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*. SAA 10 (Helsinki 1993) 30 n. 39.

⁶ The view that Ashurbanipal was originally destined to be trained as a priest is supported by a reference to an unpublished lecture by E. Weissert (SAAS 10, 312); more recently Weissert has given a review of Esarhaddon's arrangements for the royal succession in: K. Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire I/1* (Helsinki 1998) 159–163, esp. 162–163.

⁷ SAAS 10, 315.

⁸ J. Fincke, *The Babylonian Texts of Nineveh. Report on the British Museum's Ashurbanipal Library Project*, AfO 50 (2003/2004) 111–149.

⁹ See Fincke, AfO 50, 120–122. A seemingly incontrovertible example of an interest in old tablets is SAA 10, 118 f. n. 155 from Ašarēdu the Younger referring to an unsatisfactory tablet that the king had been using which was to be replaced by a better one from the time of Hammurabi that had been recently obtained from Babylon. Note that at this point Ashurbanipal was already king.

¹⁰ P. Villard, *L'éducation d'Assurbanipal*, Ktma 22 (1997) 135–149.

The clearest claim to literacy is made in the inscription known to modern scholarship as L⁴. Parts of this are quoted by Pongratz-Leisten, Villard and Fincke.¹¹ Their translations differ not only from each other in certain details, but also from the present writer's rendering of the relevant passage, which, supported by a transliteration from the actual tablet, K 2694 + 3050, is given here:

- 10 [d^dAMAR.UT]U ABGAL DINGIR.MEŠ *uz-nu ra-pa-áš-tu ḥa-si-su pal-ku-u iš-ru-ka ši-rik-te*
 11 ^rd^dAG *ṭup-šar gim-ri iḥ-zi né-me-qi-šú i-qi-šá-an-ni a-na qiš-ti*
 12 ^rd^dNin-urta ^dU.GUR *dun-zi zik-ru-te e-mu-qi la šá-na-an ú-šar-šu-u gat-ti*
 13 [š]i-pir *ap-kal-li a-da-pà a-ḥu-uz ni-šir-tú ka-tim-tú kul-lat ṭup-šar-ru-tú*
 14 [GIS]KIM.MEŠ AN-e u KI-tim *am-ra-ku šu-ta-du-na-ku ina UKKIN um-ma-a-ni*
 15 *šu-ta-bu-la-ku* DIŠ BÀ-ut *ma-aṭ-lat AN-e it-ti* ABGAL Ì.MEŠ *le-ḥu-u-ti*
 16 *ú-pa-tàr* I.GI.A.RÁ-e *it-gu-ru-ti šá la i-šu-u pi-it pa-ni*
 17 *áš-ta-si kam-mu nak-lu šá* EME.GI₇ *šu-ul-lu-lu ak-ka-du-u ana šu-te-šu-ri áš-tu*
 18 *ḥi-ṭa-a-ku* GÙ.SUM *ab-ni šá la-am a-bu-bi {DIŠ?} šá kak-ku sa-ak-ku bal-lu*

¹⁰Marduk, the sage of the gods, gave me wide understanding and broad perceptions as a gift. ¹¹Nabû, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition of all his wisdom as a present.¹² Nin-urta and Nergal gave me physical fitness, manhood and unparalleled strength. ¹³I learnt the lore of the wise sage Adapa, the hidden secret, the whole of the scribal craft. ¹⁴I can discern celestial and terrestrial portents and deliberate in the assembly of the experts. ¹⁵I am able to discuss the series “If the liver is a mirror image of the sky” with capable scholars. ¹⁶I can solve convoluted reciprocals and calculations that do not come out evenly. ¹⁷I have read cunningly written text in Sumerian, dark Akkadian, the interpretation of which is difficult. ¹⁸I have examined stone inscriptions from before the flood, which are sealed, stopped up, mixed up.

For the first part of l. 13 Pongratz-Leisten offers the normalised text [šⁿ]nat apkalli adapa aḥuz and translates “gleich dem weisen Adapa lernte ich”, thinking quite plausibly of the not uncommon phrase *šinnat*

¹¹ Fincke, AFO 50, 111; Pongratz-Leisten, SAAS 10, 311f; Villard, Ktema 22, 136–137.

apkalli, “equal to the sage” (CAD *s. v. šinnatu* Š/3, 48a) and this phrase does in fact occur in a parallel passage in the E-Prisms.¹² With regard to the verb in the phrase *ḥi-ṭa-a-ku* GÜ.SUM *ab-ni šá la-am a-bu-bi*, which is certainly to be understood as *ḥiṭāku*, 1st pers. sing. stative of *ḥātu*, “to examine, explore”, Fincke in her previously quoted article translates “I am enjoying the cuneiform wedges (sc. writing) on stone(s) from before the flood”, as if the word were to be derived from *ḥadû*, “to enjoy”, which is indeed how it was understood ninety years ago by Streck.¹³ This is an unfortunate glitch in what is otherwise an extremely useful piece of work. For the final part of l. 18 Pongratz-Leisten translates “ich studierte Steinschriften aus der Zeit vor der Sintflut ebenso wie (Texte) des komplexen *kakku sakku*” and Villard understands the phrase similarly. The *crux* lies in the last three words, *kak-ku sa-ak-ku bal-lu*. Despite the probable existence of a medicinal plant and a magical stone called *kakku-sakku*¹⁴ and regardless of its etymology,¹⁵ although the phrase *kakku sakku* occurs on Assyrian library catalogue writing boards, as Villard points out the fact remains that no text with this name or *incipit* has been identified. This notwithstanding, Villard translates “qui sont un mélange de *Kakku sakku*”. In the present writer’s opinion the phrase is most likely in the context here to be understood as translated above, the three words being the verbal adjective of the verbs *kanāku*, “seal”, *sakāku*, “stop up”, *balālu*, “mix up”.¹⁶ The meaning that is required by the context is that of obtuse and to Ashurbanipal seemingly antediluvian inscriptions, perhaps in reality Early Dynastic or from the Jemdat Nasr Period, that only but grudgingly yielded their meaning. Finally it should be mentioned that, as seen by Villard, the Composition “If the liver is a mirror image of the sky” is quite possibly Tablet XVI of the series *bārûtu*.¹⁷ This would then be a reference to a particular text in the context of other royal assertions that are generalities.

The relevant passage in the letter from Balasî to Esarhaddon concerning Ashurbanipal’s education and referred to above reads as follows “To whom indeed has the king done such a favour as to me whom you

¹² R. Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (Wiesbaden 1996) 176.

¹³ Fincke, *AfO* 50, 111 and 121 with fn. 88. See Streck, *Asb.* II 256–257.

¹⁴ CAD K 60a, 1. and 2. and AHw. 423a.

¹⁵ AHw. suggests its *lemma* *kakkūšu*, “1) etwa (Erbsen-)Gestrüpp and 2) ein Stein”.

¹⁶ These are the interpretations given in CAD B 41b, 1. f) and CAD K 137b, 1. c). CAD S 78a refers to the occurrences in ZA 6, 242:12 and BM 37055:5; these texts have since been edited in A. Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford 1986) 61–69.

¹⁷ See CT 20, 1 obv. 31 and Villard, *Ktama* 22, 138.

have appointed to the service of the crown prince, to be his master and that I read with him his exercise?" (rev. 5–9). The latter part of this in Assyrian is *ummānšu anākuni liginnu* (written *li-gi-in-nu*) *aqabbāššuni*, and this phrase will be referred to again below. A number of relevant dates relating to these matters were put forward by S. Parpola. First it is worth looking at the proposed dating of the letter just quoted. Parpola's commentary on the letter dates it to Du`ūz, or late June, 671 BC¹⁸ and refers to a second letter, this time addressed to Esarhaddon by Nabû-ahḫē-eriba, where a detailed excursus on dating is given.¹⁹ With the exception of the tutelage clauses the two letters are responding in a similar vein to the same message from the king. Parpola's suggestion is that this was sent out at the same time to both scholars and that they may even have collaborated in their response. The second letter, however, mentions a four month long absence of the king. The only event that fits this is the Egyptian campaign, which Esarhaddon is known to have lead personally. The dates of this four month campaign are given by the Babylonian Chronicle and supply the Du`ūz, 671 date for the king's return to Assyria and the letter.²⁰ One year earlier, as shown by the date given in Esarhaddon's succession treaty, Ashurbanipal and his brother Šamaš-šum-ukin had respectively been appointed as heirs to the thrones of Assyria and Babylonia.²¹ According to a letter from another scholar this event apparently coincided with their marriages, in Ashurbanipal's case to the lady Libbi-āli-šarrat, no doubt a scion of an Assyrian noble family.²²

These events need to be placed in perspective. Ashurbanipal became crown prince in 672, and probably married Libbi-āli-šarrat in that year. The following year, in 671, after Esarhaddon's triumphant return from Egypt, Balasî was appointed as his tutor. Just two years later he was to become king, and to reign for thirty-nine years. We do not know how old he was when he became king, but we may suspect that he was at least in his later teens. If one is to take the letter at face value, then at this age, and also already with the mighty status of crown prince, Ashurbanipal was being passed into the tutelage of a scribe, yet one of the most senior masters of the scribal art and cuneiform literature of the time. It might be

¹⁸ Parpola, LAS 2, 38.

¹⁹ Parpola, LAS 2, 64.

²⁰ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*. TCS 5 (Locust Valley, NY 1975) 85 and R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*. AfO Beiheft 9 (Graz 1956) 124.

²¹ S. Parpola/K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*. SAA 2 (Helsinki 1988) 28ff. n. 6.

²² SAA 10, 152–153 n. 185.

thought likely, and evidence in favour of this will be given below, that Ashurbanipal had at this stage already received some education and was moving on to a higher phase.

Following this theme of indications of literacy a further missive needs to be brought into the discussion. This is not, however, a letter from a scholar, but an *abat šarri*, a royal memo, though not from the king, but from his eldest daughter, Šērū³a-ēṭirat. It is necessary to look closely at the text since the memo has been wrongly translated in the past. The most recent edition is that of Mikko Luukko and Greta Van Buylaere,²³ and the text can be transliterated as follows:

- 1 *a-bat* DUMU.MUNUS.LUGAL *a-na*
- 2 ^fURU.ŠÀ-URU-*šar-rat*
- 3 *a-ta-a tuṣ-pi-ki la ta-šaṭ-ti-ri*
- 4 IM.GID-*ki la ta-qab-bi-i*
- 5 *ú-la-a i-qab-bi-ú*
- 6 *ma-a an-ni-tu-u NIN-sa*
- 7 *ša* ^{fd}EDIN-*e-ṭè-rat*
- 8 DUMU.MUNUS GAL-*tú ša É ÚS.MEŠ-te*
- 9 *ša* ^m*aš-šur-NIR.GÁL-DINGIR.MEŠ-GIN-in-ni*
- 10 MAN GAL MAN *dan-nu* MAN ŠÚ MAN KUR *aš-šur*
- 11 *ú at-ti ma-rat kal-lat GAŠAN É ša* ^m*aš-šur-DÙ-A*
- 12 DUMU MAN GAL *ša É ÚS.MEŠ-te*
- 13 *ša* ^m*aš-šur-PAB-AŠ* MAN KUR AŠ

The letter has obvious implications for the question of literacy at the Neo-Assyrian court and the reason for its neglect is that it was mistranslated by Oppenheim, a mistranslation perpetuated by later writers.²⁴ Oppenheim's rendering of the letter (bringing the reading of one of the names up to date) was as follows:

‘Why do you not write me any letters, why do you not send me any oral message? Isn't it in reality because people might say: “Perhaps that one (i. e. the writer of this letter) is higher in rank than she.” After all: I Šērū³a-ēṭirat, am the eldest daughter born in the official residence to Aššur-etel-ilāni-mukinnī (= Esarhaddon), the great and legit-

²³ M. Luukko/G. Van Buylaere, *The Political Correspondence of Esarhaddon*. SAA 16 (Helsinki 2002) 23 n. 28.

²⁴ A. L. Oppenheim, *Letters from Mesopotamia. Official, Business and Private Letters from Two Millennia* (Chicago/London 1967) 158 and most recently F. M. Fales, *Lettere dalla corte assira* (Venezia 1992) 72 and A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (London/New York 1995) 529.

imate king, king of the world, king of Assyria, while you are only a daughter-in-law, the lady of the house of Assurbanipal, the eldest son of the king born in the official residence of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria.’

The memo can be divided into two sections, ll. 1–4 and ll. 5–13. In the first section the key phrases are *a-ta-a tuṣ-pi-ki la ta-šaṭ-ṭi-ri* and IM.GÍD-*ki la ta-qab-bi-i*. In the case of the first the plain meaning is “Why are you not writing your tablets?” As every undergraduate student of Akkadian knows, in Assyrian and Babylonian the usual expression corresponding to the English phrases “writing to” or “writing a letter to” is a form of *tuṣ-pam šapārum* and countless examples could be cited. To get the sense of sending a communication out of what is actually in the memo is contrived and unnecessary. In the case of the second phrase the clear meaning is, following on from *a-ta-a*, “Why are you not reciting your exercise tablet?” Since IM.GÍD can be read *liginnu* this is in fact exactly the expression used by Balasī in reference to his prospective lessons with Ashurbanipal, *anākuni liginnu aqabbāššuni* “that I read with him his exercise.” CAD cites these passages from the memo several times, usually without translation. In one case, however, in the L volume s. v. b) *liginnu*, the translation is “why can you (fem.) not (even) write your tablet, do you not even know how to recite your lesson?” Apart from the fact that the interpolation ‘even’ is unnecessary, and the meaning ‘not know how to’ absent from the text, this is in principle correct. One has the feeling, though, that Oppenheim and other later translators intentionally ignored the plain meaning and tried to twist it because they balked at the idea of a woman – and that a princess – having personally anything to do with writing at all. Although the sense of the first section of the memo has been understood correctly by Luukko and Van Buylaere their translation of the second section, which reads as follows, can be questioned: “Yet you are (only) a daughter-in-law – the lady of the house of Assurbanipal, the great crown prince designate of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.” It is suggested here that the memo gives perfect sense simply translated according to grammar and lexicon, and without interpolation of the word “only”:

‘Why don’t you write your tablets and recite your exercise, or people will say “Is this the sister of Šērū’a-ēṭirat, the eldest daughter of the succession palace of Aššur-etel-ilāni-mukinni, the great king, the legitimate king, king of the world, king of Assyria?” And you are a daughter-in-law, the lady of the house of Ashurbanipal, the great crown prince of the house of succession of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.’

The new translation has various implications. For one thing, Šērū'a-ēfirat is treating her sister-in-law with respect, addressing her with her royal titles and emphasising her high position and reminding her of it. There is no evidence for the rivalry and court intrigue that was introduced into previous translations by interpolation of extra wording. This is particularly unfortunate since these ideas have found their way into the introduction to SAA 16²⁵ and indeed also Amélie Kuhrt's much used history of the Ancient Near East.²⁶

The second and more important point regards literacy. Libbi-āli-šarrat is letting her sister-in-law and her husband down by not studying, by not writing her tablets and reciting her lesson. This is of course negative evidence of literacy. The princess was not writing her tablets or reciting her lesson. But the memo demonstrates extremely clearly that there was an expectation that she should be doing lessons. And if this was the case, it would be surprising if other young people at the royal court were not similarly expected to learn to read and write.

If in fact literacy among the young royals was promoted at Esarhad-don's court, then in view of the very large numbers of surviving cuneiform tablets from the palace complex and the fact that a significant number concern intimate details of royal family life, one might wonder whether relevant material can be found in the actual tablet collections. The letter 80-7-19, 68, published as CT 53, 140, begins: "To Ashurbanipal [...], your brother ^mla'-[...]". In the context of the correspondence to which this letter belongs the word "brother" is to be understood literally here, not figuratively or diplomatically as it might be elsewhere. A number of brothers of Ashurbanipal are of course known by name and there is indeed a possible candidate, a *lakû*, "baby, weak one", referred to three times in LAS²⁷ and possibly occurring as a hypocorism in the present context. The first time he is, as a young child or baby, extremely poorly, and so magical and other means are being put in place to bring about his recovery. The second two references report his recovery: "He will get well, the king my lord may be glad!" So we have a possible and plausible candidate as to the sender of the letter. The correctness of this restoration is however immaterial to the present argument. The letter has various characteristics that show it was not the work of a professional scribe. As can be seen from *Fig. 1* although the signs are correct and well written they are very big and the lateral and horizontal spacing is wide.

²⁵ SAA 16, XXVIII.

²⁶ Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 529.

²⁷ See Parpola, LAS n. 219, 250 and 254 with commentary.



Fig. 1: Letter 80-7-19, 68, obverse (CT 53, 140)

Most striking of all however is the unusual shape of the tablet, certainly very different from professional Neo-Assyrian letters and more like a juvenile Do-It-Yourself exercise tablet. So was *lakû*, if it indeed be he, expected to write, as it would seem Libbi-āli-šarrat was, and is this tablet one of the products of that expectation, a letter to his elder brother?²⁸

Another comparable but even more intriguing letter is 83-1-18, 22, published as CT 53, 147, and edited as SAA 16, n. 19. The text starts as follows:

- 1 *ana* MAN EN-*ía*
- 2 ARAD-*ka* ^m*aš-šur-DÛ-A*
- 3 *lu* ^rSILIM-*mu* ^r*ana* MAN U-*ía*
- 4 ^dPA *u* ^d[AMAR.U]TU *ana* MAN U-*ía*
- 5 *li*[*k-ru-b*]*u*

As can be seen from Fig. 2 the letter is very clumsily written and exhibits unusual orthography for a professional letter to the king. The letter

²⁸ For the suggestion that another of Ashurbanipal's brothers might have been literate see Villard, *Ktama* 22, 139.



Fig. 2: Letter 83-1-18, 22, obverse (CT 53, 147)

declaims “To the king, my lord, your servant Ashurbanipal. Good health to the king, my lord. May Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord!” A lacuna destroys all but the end of the next three lines and the reverse is extant but blank. Simple writings include *MAN* for king, *U* for lord, the numerical *ía* sign and the simplest possible writing for the name Ashurbanipal, all in a very small compass. The letter is not rich in content: the SAA project, normally a wizard at dreaming up captions for letters, draws a complete blank here. Could this be a letter from Ashurbanipal to his father that was actually written by himself? The coincidence of large and beginner’s ungainly and uneven script, the simple writings as well as the brevity and general lack of content suggest strongly that this was the case. This of course involves the supposition that there was a fast track royal curriculum designed to prepare Ashurbanipal to write a letter to his father at an early stage in his education. If accepted that Ashurbanipal wrote this tablet at a young age, some time before he became Balasî’s student, then it could be noted in passing that since he already bore the name Ashurbanipal, this would have obvious implications for the question of whether the name was adopted when he became crown prince.

One might wonder whether any of the actual materials relating to the process of education were kept within Ashurbanipal's collections, and in this connection some tablets will be brought forward for discussion that, like the letters, have previously not been linked to the literacy question. There are a number of prayers that have Ashurbanipal's name in them as supplicant that are unusual in their style of writing. One example is K 8005+, published here as *Fig. 3* with a transliteration and translation in the Appendix. The prayer is of *šu.il.lá* type²⁹ and in l. 26' one can read and restore [*a-na-ku* *ir-ka* ^mAN].ŠÁR-DÛ-A DUMU DINGIR-ŠÚ ŠÁ DINGIR-ŠÚ *aš-šur* ^dU.[DAR-ŠÚ ^d*aš-šur-ri-tu*], "[I am your servant], Ashurbanipal, the son of his god, whose god is Aššur and whose goddess is [Aššuritu]!". The script is very clear, the wedges of the individual signs do not overlap or overrun laterally and there is clear space between the lines. Also, the script is large, well over half a centimetre in height. It is instructive to compare a different copy of the same prayer, K 6692, *Fig. 4*, also previously unpublished, now transliterated and translated in the Appendix. The corresponding line here is [*a-na-ku* *ir-k*]a NENNI A NENNI ŠÁ DINGIR-ŠÚ NENNI ^dU.DAR-ŠÚ NENNI-[*tu*], "[I am your servant] so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, whose god is so-and-so, whose goddess is so-and-so". The idea of course was that an individual might pay a professional scribe to prepare for him a copy of the prayer with his own name inserted. In this case one has a typical clearly and well written Ashurbanipal library hand, with script 3 mm in height. The fact that it has been possible here to compare the writing on two tablets that are duplicates apart from the supplicant line is not the main point. The script of the tablet on *fig. 4* is exceptionally well written, but in its size and general execution resembles the script of thousands of other tablets in the Ashurbanipal libraries. The script on the *fig. 3* tablet on the other hand is almost unique, distinguished by the large size and clearness of the signs. It was not of course unusual for the names of kings to be inserted in *šu.il.lá* or other types of prayers but in this case the uniqueness of the tablet, coupled with the fact that Ashurbanipal's name is mentioned as the supplicant, and seen in the context of the evidence for literacy that has already been advanced, make it seem likely that this was a tablet that he was intended to copy as an exercise. Of course, it could not be ruled out that he wrote it himself, but the other explanation seems more likely.

²⁹ See in general W. Mayer, *Untersuchungen zur Formensprache der babylonischen „Gebetsbeschwörungen“*. *Studia Pohl, Series Maior 5* (Rome 1976).

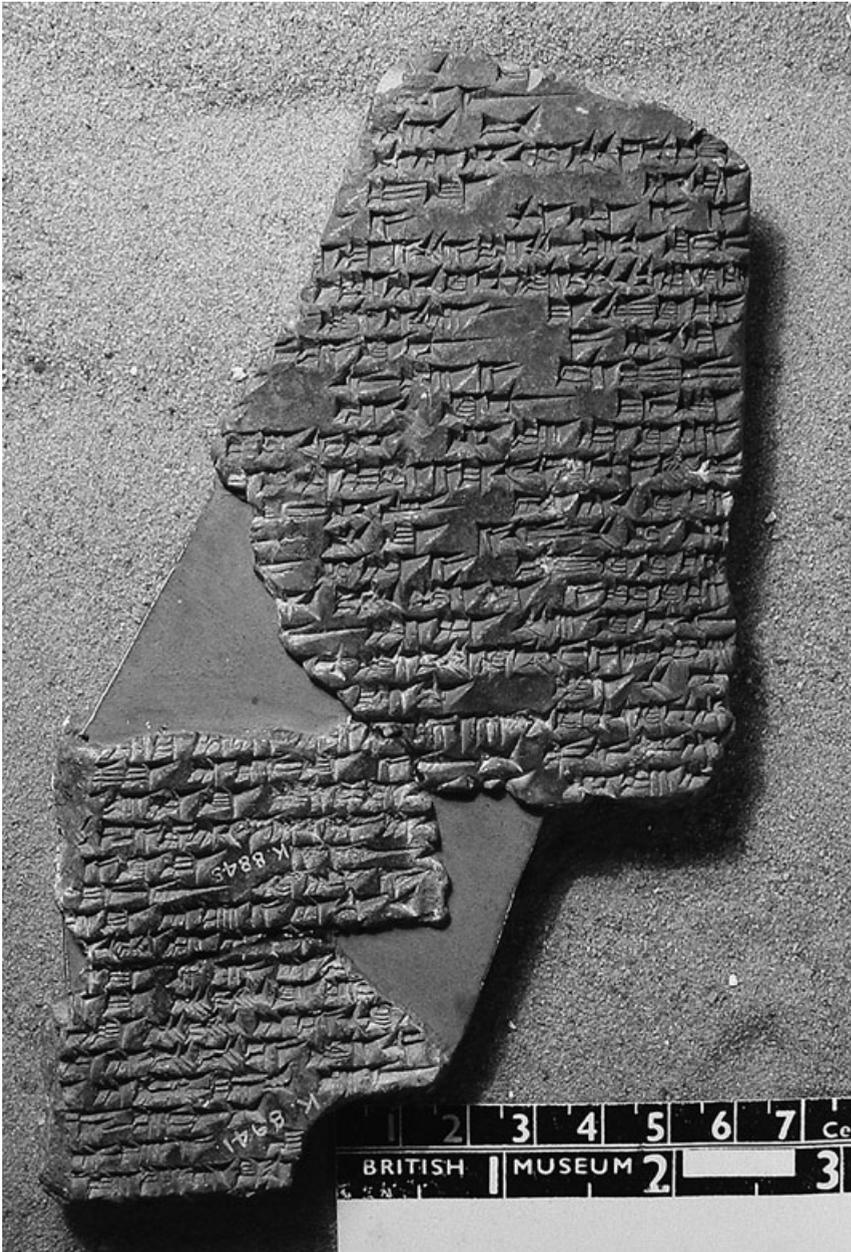


Fig. 3: Šu-il-la-prayer K 8005+8845+8941

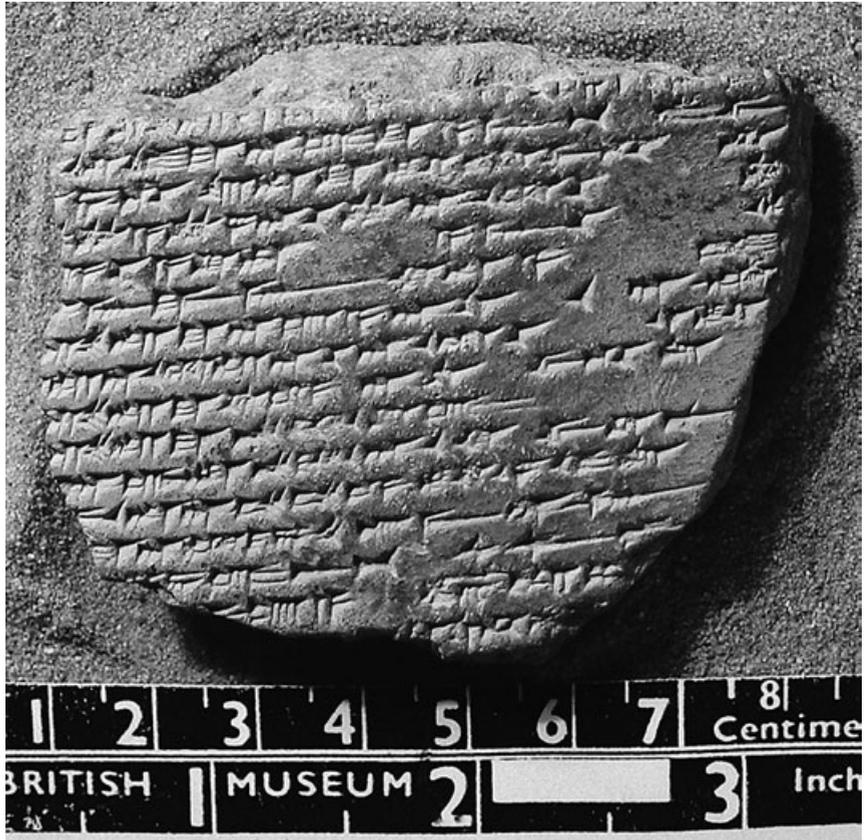


Fig. 4: Šu-il-la-prayer K 6692

The tablet K 143, figs. 5 and 6, a manuscript of the *dingir.ša.dib.ba* composition published by W. G. Lambert,³⁰ stands out as a unique item in his libraries because of the comparably enormous size of its cuneiform signs, almost a centimeter high, and its unusual ductus. The wedges hardly connect, perhaps in order to illustrate to a learner how the signs are constructed and their dynamic, and in these regards this tablet goes further than K 8005+. It is an illustration of what in an English primary school would be called non-joined-up handwriting. Although it does not bear Ashurbanipal's name, these characteristics indicate its potential

³⁰ W. G. Lambert, *dingir.ša.dib.ba* Incantations, *JNES* 33 (1974) 267–322. The tablet with the large script is text witness A.

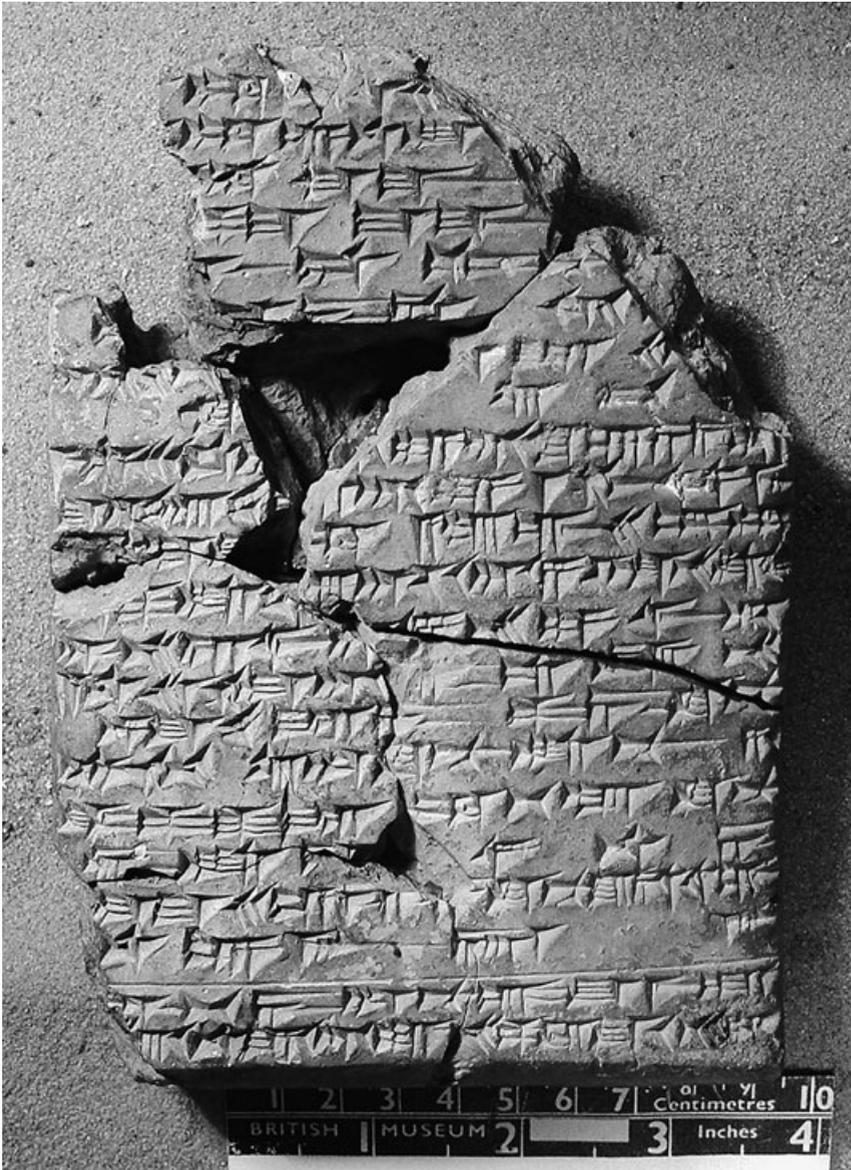


Fig. 5: K 143 obverse (JNES 33, 306)

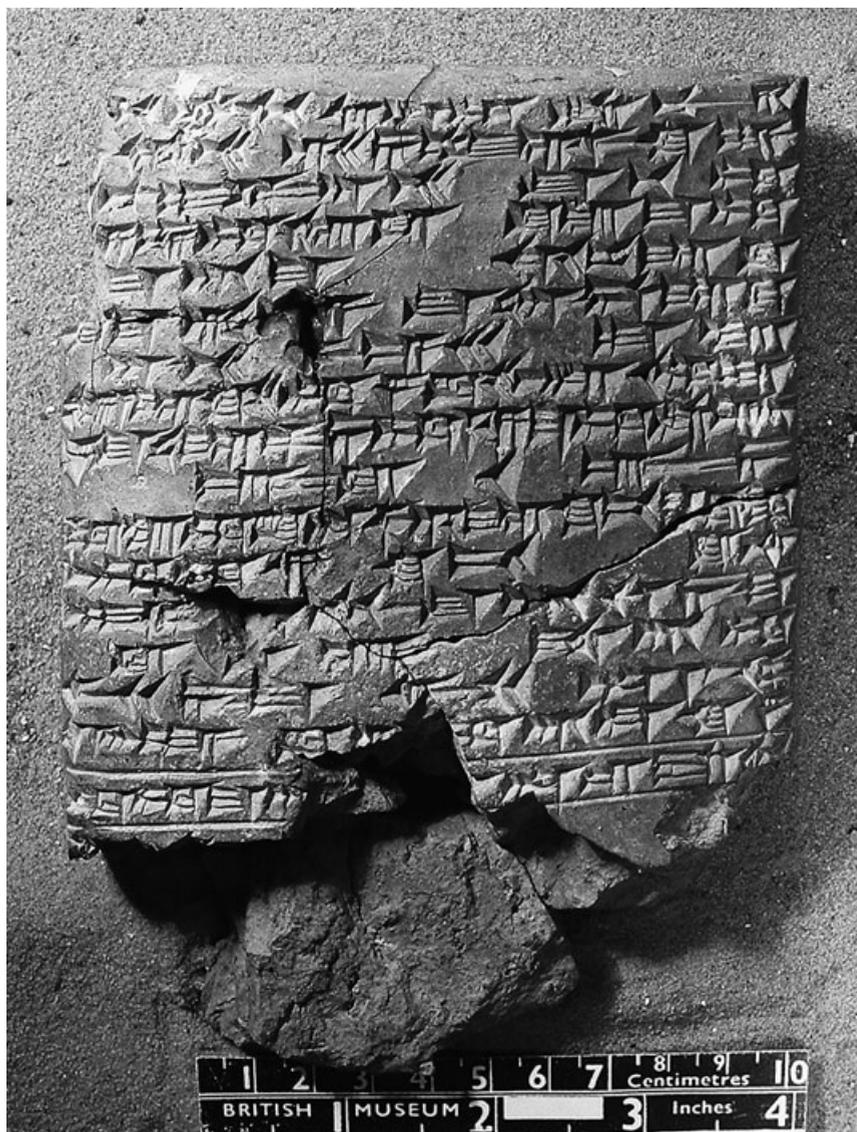


Fig. 6: K 143 reverse (JNES 33, 307)

suitability for use in scribal training. Compared to other areas and periods little is known of Neo-Assyrian scribal training, but elsewhere such props did not play a part in the known curriculum. It points rather toward private tuition in a context of elites. For Alexander there was no royal road to mathematics, but the situation for learning cuneiform seems to have been different for the young royals at the court in Nineveh.

A further twist in the Ashurbanipal literacy question that has hitherto not been highlighted is the fact that there are some tablets in the Ashurbanipal libraries that have in their colophons the line “I am Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria”. These include three tablets listed by H. Hunger,³¹ of which two are a chemical and technical recipe³² and a lexical text,³³ while the third is a fragment bearing only a short section of the colophon.³⁴ These three pieces have a remarkably similar ductus and are written in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner in script roughly half a centimetre high. What is perhaps most remarkable is the extremely long twenty-five line colophon, mainly consisting of supplication and prayer to Nabû and Tašmētu, especially unexpected on tablets of such mundane subject matter and reminiscent of Ashurbanipal’s claim in the court poetry to enjoying a special relationship with these deities.³⁵ In ll. 9–20 one reads “For my life, the protection of my vitality, prevention of illness, the confirmation of the foundation of my royal throne, I placed (it) in the library of the temple of Nabû in Nineveh of the great lord, my lord, for all time. In future, O Nabû, look on this work with joy, and constantly bless my kingship. Whenever I call out to you, take my hand! As I repeatedly go into your temple, constantly protect my step. As this work is placed in your temple and stands firm before you, look constantly with favour and ever consider my wellbeing!” Like a student, the king is to place his tablet in the temple of Nabû.³⁶

³¹ H. Hunger, *Babylonische und assyrische Kolophone*. AOAT 2 (Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1968) 105–106 n. 338.

³² H. Zimmern, *Assyrische chemisch-technische Rezepte, insbesondere für Herstellung farbiger glasierter Ziegel*, in *Umschrift und Übersetzung*, ZA 36 (1925) 177–208.

³³ T. J. Meek, *Some Explanatory Lists and Grammatical Texts*, RA 17 (1920) 138–139 (K 4199).

³⁴ K 10600.

³⁵ A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*. SAA 3 (Helsinki 1989), esp. text 6 and 13. The special relationship between Ashurbanipal and Nabû as can be observed in colophons has already been remarked on by Lieberman, *Fs. Moran*, 317–318.

³⁶ The practice of students writing a prayer to Nabû as god of the scribal art is best documented in Babylon; cf. A. Cavigneaux, *Textes scolaires du temple de Nabû ša ħarê* (Baghdad 1981).

There are of course very many library tablets that purport in their colophons to be the work of Ashurbanipal that quite clearly were not, but quite apart from the uniquely long and poetic colophon, would an ordinary scribe dare to proclaim “I am Ashurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria” as part of a tablet colophon’s content? An historical event that makes this seem unlikely is recorded in a document relating to provincial affairs.³⁷ The governor of the city of Arkuḫi in Kašīari, one Šumma-ilāni had said “After my son is born I will call him Ashurbanipal!” As a result of this gross act of insubordination he was immediately apprehended by the higher provincial authorities and sent to the river ordeal. One did not play lightly with the name of the king.

The very existence of the chemical and technical recipe with the poetic colophon epitomises the content of L⁴, where claims to the acquisition of extremely specialized knowledge run parallel to the mythopoetic conception of having been granted wisdom and understanding by the gods. But whereas L⁴ is a formal royal inscription, the chemical and technical recipe with its colophon is part of a private relationship between Ashurbanipal and his god. The tablets with the “I am Ashurbanipal” colophons show that he maintained his commitment to the scribal craft even while king and that he reached a certain level where he did in fact have knowledge of the tradition, as proclaimed in L⁴ and as argued on various grounds by Lieberman, as mentioned above. This of course has important implications for how the formation and content of the Ashurbanipal libraries should be understood: they represent his personal interests.

In this connection reference can be made to two recently published texts relating to the acquisition of certain tablets from Borsippa.³⁸ The first of these two newly published texts is a Late Babylonian copy of a letter from an unnamed scribe, certainly a member of the scholarly elite of that city. He commences by addressing Ashurbanipal with the usual deference but includes the phrase “on whom Nabû, who dwells [in Ezida], bestowed broad understanding and who like me (*kīma iāti*), is bowed to the scribal craft (*kunnušu ana ṭupšarrūti*)”.³⁹ Even apart from the fact that the use of the word *kunnušu*, “to bow down”, with the Assyrian king as subject is striking would he have dared to include such a line in his letter

³⁷ L. Kataja, A Neo-Assyrian Document on Two Cases of River Ordeal, SAA Bulletin 1/2 (1987) 65–68.

³⁸ G. Frame/A. R. George, The Royal Libraries of Nineveh: New Evidence for King Ashurbanipal’s Tablet Collecting, Iraq 67 (2005) 265–284.

³⁹ Both expressions are in BM 45642, obv. l. 4.

if there was the slightest chance of it being interpreted sarcastically? It was an acknowledgement from one scholar to another of a reality: the king of Assyria was literate.

In this article various arguments have been adduced in favour of a “yes” verdict on the Ashurbanipal literacy question. A number of inscribed artefacts have been linked with this question for the first time not only from the point of view of their actual content, but also their form and presentation, a field that has often been neglected. The resulting picture, which has been presented here, is more likely to be closer to reality than one based simply on textual analysis. The existence of the libraries has long been known and their study has stretched over almost a century and a half. In fact, the whole library project would be far harder to explain, were the claims to literacy and detailed knowledge mere propaganda: Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, scholar in his library.

Appendix

A *partitur* transliteration and a translation of the previously unpublished prayer referred to above is presented here together with a translation. A detailed commentary on the hymn cannot be offered as it would be out of the scope of the present article.

A = K 8005 + 8845 + 8941 (*Fig. 3*)

B = K 6692 (*Fig. 4*)

1' A	]	x	[
2' A	]	u	x x [
3' A	]	Á.MEŠ	x [
4' A		<i>nam]-búr-bi</i>	x [
5' A	]	<i>na-si-ḥu</i>	ḤUL-ti GAR-nu dum-q[í]
6' A			q]a [?] -i-šu TI.LA!
7' A			ši-m]a-a qa-ba-a-a
8' A		<i>ina mimma m]a-la a-kar-ra-bu kit-tú lib-ši</i>	
9' A		<i>muštē^ḫí] áš-ra-ti-ku-nu le-qu-u par-ši-ku-un</i>	
10' A	]	x	li-kun ma-ḥar-ku-un
11' A	]		me-e-ku-nu šá TI.LA

- 12' A] *ši-ta-a da-áš-pa*
- 13' A] *si-mat-ku-nu GAL-tu*
- 14' A] *i^r šap^r-ši-ḫu kab-ta-at-ku-un*
- 15' A] *kur-ba i-da-a-ma ši-pat-ku-nu šá bul-ṭi*
- 16' A] *lip-ḫu-ru it-ti-ku-un*
- 17' A EN.NU]N *mu-šu a-di šat-ur-ri*
- 18' A] x *liq-ba-a dum-qí-ku-un*
- 19' A] x *lil-li-lu a-šar-ku-un*
- 20' A A.ME]Š ZU.AB *SUD-ku-nu-ši*
- 21' A] x nu *li-bil-ku-nu-ši A.MEŠ ḪÉ.NUN*
- 22' A *ú-š]u-ra-tú li-man-nu*
- 23' A [*li-iz-zi-z]u-ma MUL.MEŠ AN-e x šú un ana A.MEŠ.IDIM-ku-nu*
liš-ku-nu T[I.LA]
- B [*li]-^riz-zi-zu-ma^r [] x x x ^rA.MEŠ IDIM^r [*
- 24' A *li-im-ḫ]ur-ma ^dšam-šu A.MEŠ IDIM pa-ši-ru-ti*
- B *li]-im-ḫur-ma ^dšam-šu A.MEŠ IDIM pa-ši-[ru-ti]*
- 25' A *li-ni-ḫ]u lib-ba-šu li-šap-š[i-ḫ]u kab-ta-s[u]*
- B *]i-ni-ḫu lib-ba-šu li-šap-ši-ḫu kab-[ta-su]*
- 26' A [*ana-ku ÌR-ka ^mAN].ŠÁR.DÙ.A DUMU DINGIR-šú šá DINGIR-šú*
aš-šur ^dU.[DAR-šú aš-šur-ri-tú]
- B] x NENNI A NENNI *šá DINGIR-šú NENNI ^dU.DAR-šú NENNI-[tu₄]*
- 27' A] *a-ku-la A.MEŠ š[i-ta-a*
- B *a-k]al-šú a-ku-la A.MEŠ-šú š[i-ta-a*
- 28' A] GAL.MEŠ *qí-ba-a [*
- B DIN]GIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ *qí-ba-a dum-[qí*
- 29' A *li-zi-z]u-ma ^dé-a ^dUTU u [*
- B *li]-zi-zu-ma ^dé-a ^dUTU u ^dasal-[lú-ḫe*

- 30' A] ʳ^dU.DAR URU DINGIR-šú x [
 B] x URU ^dU.DAR URU DINGIR-šú ^dU.DAR-šú *lis-li*-[*ma*
- 31' A -z] *u-ma suk-kal* ^dUTU [
 B *li*]-*zi-zu-ma suk-kal* ^dUTU *lim-ḥu-ru* [
 32' A *li-zi-z*] *u-ma mu-lil-lu* ú [
 B *li*]-*zi-zu-ma mu-lil-lu* ú [
 33' A ^dMA]R.TU *mu-lil AN-e u KI-t*[*i*
 B] ^dMAR.TU *mu-lil AN u KI IGI-ku-nu* [
 34' A]BA-AN-DU₈-DU₈-*e li-paṭ*-[*tí-ru*
 B] x u BA-AN-DU₈-DU₈-*e li-paṭ-tí-ru* [
 35' A] x ^d*asal-lú-ḥe* NUN.ME [
 B] x x ^d*asal-lú-ḥe* NUN.ME DINGIR.MEŠ [
 36' A GAD.SU]M.IR Ú.DIL.BAT [
 B GAD.SU]M.IR Ú.DIL.BAT *liš-lim pa*² [
 37' A] ^d*é-a* LU[GAL
 B] ^d*é-a* LUGAL ZU.A[B
 38' A] x *ta-ma-a-ti šu-ut* [
 B] ^š*u-ut* ḪU x [
 Translation

- 1' ...] .. [...
 2' ...] ... [...
 3' ...] ominous signs [...
 4' ... a ritual of] expiation [...
 5' ...] the one who roots out evil and establishes wellbeing.
 6' ...] who gives life.
 7' ...] hear my speech!
 8' ...in] everything that I bless, let there be truth!
 9' ... one who seeks out] your shrines, performs your rites.
 10' ...] may it be firm before you!
 11' ...] your life-giving rituals!
 12' ...] drink the sweet (drink)!)
 13' ...] your great appurtenances.
 14' ...] May they calm your emotions!
 15' ...]Recite blessings! Recite your life-giving incantation!
 16' ...] May they assemble with you!

