

The Seal of Tašmetum-šarrat, Sennacherib's Queen, and Its Impressions

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One of the many achievements of Mario Fales, and certainly one of his most visible ones, is his key role in the renaissance of Neo-Assyrian studies from the 1970s onwards, both by contributing to virtually all aspects of the political, cultural, social, legal and economic history of the Assyrian Empire and as a major figure in the on-going publication of the primary sources. It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this paper to him: it deals with a seal of a member of the Assyrian royal family and its ancient impressions, two of which are attested on a tablet edited by Mario in his book *Imperial Administrative Records, Part I: Palace and Temple Administration* (= *State Archives of Assyria* 7), Helsinki 1992; with J. N. Postgate).

The seal in question was acquired in 2002 by the British Museum¹ and can be identified with reasonable certainty as that of the Assyrian queen Tašmetum-šarrat, the “beloved wife” of Sennacherib (704–681 BC). Three impressions of this very seal are also housed in the BM collections. After discussing all four, I will briefly address the significance of scorpion imagery as a symbol of the Assyrian queen, comparing its presence on this seal with other uses of the same image on items owned by various Neo-Assyrian queens. I will conclude with a consideration of the seal's owner, discussing the issue of how many queens Sennacherib may have had and who would have been the queen at the time of his murder in 681 BC. The term “queen” will be used in this article to refer to the king's primary wife and the mother of the crown prince. The Assyrians reserved the word *šarrutu* (Bab. *šarratu*), the feminine form of *šarru*, “king”, exclusively for goddesses and referred to the wife of the king as “palace woman” (*issi ekalli* > *sēgallu* = Mi.É.GAL) (Parpola 1988).

The seal and its ancient impressions

On 15 May 2002 at Christie's South Kensington auction (sale 9382 [lot 288]), the British Museum acquired a white chalcedony stamp seal, now kept in the Middle East Department under the inventory number 2002-05-15, 1 (Fig. 1). The dome-shaped seal has a convex base, a diameter of 1.7 cm and a height of 1.85 cm; it is horizon-

¹ I am grateful to the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to work with the materials held in the Middle East Department and owe my thanks to Dominique Collon, Diana Edelman and Frans van Koppen for their suggestions. My thanks go also to Richard Hodges, who prepared the illustrations.

tally perforated and today fixed to a gold wire hoop, but as will be seen, it can be demonstrated that the seal was originally mounted into a setting. Inside a guilloche and dot border, the seal motif shows the Assyrian king and queen approaching a goddess seated on a straight-backed throne with stars at its back and supported by a lion; the king is shown in the typical praying gesture while the queen raises both arms to the deity. Above the scene hovers an eight-legged scorpion (Fig. 2; for a drawing see now Niederreiter 2008: 61 fig. 10).



Fig. 1: The stamp seal BM 2002-05-15: 1. Fig. 2: Modern impression of the seal.

As it happens, the British Museum also houses three objects excavated at the South-West Palace in Nineveh onto which this seal was impressed in antiquity: two clay sealings and a so-called “docket”, a tongue-shaped clay tablet that was formed around a knotted string originally fixed to another object. This is one of the very rare instances where the original seal and its antique impression are known to us; in a recent survey, W. W. Hallo mentions only one confirmed case each for the Old Babylonian and the Kassite periods (Hallo 2001: 252, 25 n. 43 respectively), and there is a possible case each for the Ur III period and the Old Assyrian period (Hallo 2001: 246–267). Our case seems to be the first known example from the Neo-Assyrian period. Moreover, the “docket” provides a date, the ninth month of the eponymy of Nabû-ahhe-ereš (IX/681 BC), which indicates that the seal was used shortly before the murder of Sennacherib in 20/X/681 BC (*Bab. Chr.* 1: iii 34–35 in Grayson 1975: 81; Frahm 1997: 18–19).

The first of these objects, BM 84671 (Fig. 3), is an uninscribed clay sealing with a string hole on both sides, bearing an impression of the chalcedony seal. The piece was published in 1987 by J. Reade, who described it as follows: “Two beardless figures, perhaps the queen followed by an attendant to whom the seal belonged, are worshipping a goddess enthroned on an animal that may be a lion. There is no clear indication of headdress. The seal had a guilloche border.” (Reade 1987: 145 with photo as Fig. 7; reproduced in Herbordt 1992: pl. 32: 3). But when placed next to a modern impression of the chalcedony seal, it becomes clear that this is the impression of the very same seal. The standing figure on the right is recognizable as the queen herself, rather than an attendant: her distinctive mural crown can be made out clearly. The shallow impression of the top third of the figure in front of her obscures the head of the king, which explains why Reade thought of a beardless figure, but the bent arm raised in prayer is plainly visible. The modern impression confirms Reade’s description of the goddess on her lion. In addition, the hovering shape of the scorpion can be made out faintly. The ancient impression demonstrates that the chalcedony seal was

originally mounted into a setting, presumably a ring fashioned of precious metal, most likely gold.

The second object bearing the impression of the chalcedony seal, BM 84553 (Fig. 4), is another uninscribed clay sealing, this time without visible string holes but instead, with impressions of a coarse textile. Due to secondary burning, the sealing is very dark in colour, which makes it difficult to see the details of the impression that, in addition, is shallower than that of BM 85671. But the king and the queen are clearly visible, as is the scorpion. The shape of the lion can be made out, albeit only vaguely, and although most of the seated goddess's body is obscured, her head is well preserved.



Fig. 3: Clay sealing BM 84671, with an ancient impression of the seal BM 2002-05-15, 1.



Fig. 4: Clay sealing BM 84553, with an ancient impression of the seal BM 2002-05-15, 1.

The third object bearing the impression of the chalcedony seal is an inscribed “docket”, K. 348+Ki. 1904-10-9, 246 (edition: SAA 7 94), with an impression each on the obverse and the reverse (Fig. 5). The impression on the reverse is very poorly preserved since the surface became blistered when the object was exposed to the fire that destroyed the citadel of Nineveh. The impression on the obverse, however, is good enough to allow the identification. S. Herboldt described the seal as follows: “Two



Obverse



Reverse

Fig. 5: Clay docket K. 348+Ki. 1904-10-9, 246 (edition: SAA 7 94), with an ancient impression of the seal BM 2002-05-15, 1.

human figures (praying?) stand in front of a lion (?) which carries symbol(s) on his back. Only a pillar with a sphere is discernible” (author’s translation of Herbordt 1992: 252 Ninive 203). This description and Herbordt’s drawing (1992: pl. 14: 13) can now be expanded and modified: her pillar with a sphere is, in reality, the lower legs of the seated goddess whose body can be made out clearly in the impression. Also, the scorpion is visible. The seal has been impressed only faintly on both sides of the docket and neither traces of the guilloche border nor of the setting are visible.

The docket is inscribed with six lines in cuneiform, listing twelve items of clothing and giving a date: (1) 7 TÚG.KI.TA.MEŠ BABBAR.MEŠ (2) 2 TÚG.gal-IGI.2 (3) 1 TÚG.qir-mu (4) 1 TÚG.ma-qa-ti bé-te ZAG SA₅ (5) 1 TÚG.ur-nat ZAG G[I₆[?]] (rev. 1) ITU.GAN *lim-me* ^{md}PA-PAP-KAM-eš, “Seven white undergarments, two cloaks, one overcoat, one house gown (with a) red front, one tunic (with a) dark[?] front. Ninth Month, eponymy of Nabû-ahhe-ereš (681 BC)”. In contrast to what is stated in the edition, this date does not fall in the “reign of Esahaddon”: the text is dated a few weeks before the murder of Sennacherib, which took place on day 20 of the tenth month (20/X/681 BC).

The Assyrian queen and the scorpion

J. Reade was the first to recognize the close connection between the queen and our seal, not on the basis of the original seal, which was not known then, but on the basis of the sealing BM 84671 and two impressions of a very similar seal (BM 84789 and BM 84802; Reade 1987: 144f.). He based his identification on the fact that the seals show a woman wearing the mural crown, the headdress reserved for the queen (and in certain circumstances, also the king’s mother²). That he did not comment on the presence of the scorpion was due, no doubt, to the impressions being too faint to recognize the shape without prior knowledge of the original seal.

It has long been thought that the symbol of the scorpion stands for the Assyrian queen. B. Parker (1955: 111f.) first advocated this idea, based on seals and other objects from Nimrud and Assur bearing the symbol of the scorpion, and M. Mallowan (1966: 114) and S. Herbordt (1992: 136–138; 1997: 282) embraced this suggestion in later studies.

In addition to the evidence provided by the seal and four impressions just discussed, two alabaster vessels found in the Old Palace of Assur are decorated with the image of the scorpion and identified as the property of Tašmetum-šarrat, queen of Sennacherib (Ass. 218 [in Istanbul: EŞ 4622] and Ass. 185 [in Berlin: VA Ass. 2255]; for photographs, see Orlamünde 2003: 141 figs. 2–3; Frahm 1997: 184, with previous literature).

2 When Ešarra-hammāt, Esarhaddon’s queen, died in XII/673 BC, rather than promoting another of his consorts to the role of queen, his mother Naqia took over the public functions of her deceased daughter-in-law. The fragmentary bronze vessel (?) kept in the Louvre shows her, identified by name and title (“king’s mother”) with the mural crown (AO 20.185; for a photograph, see Reade 1987: 143 fig. 4 or Melville 1999: 26 fig. 1).

The grave goods from the recently discovered queens' tombs in the North-West Palace of Nimrud have yielded further evidence for the intimate association of the scorpion with the Assyrian queen. From Tomb II, a gold bowl (IM 105695) with a scorpion embossed on its inner rim (see photograph in Damerji 1999: pl. 32) and an electron mirror (IM 115468) with a scorpion embossed on its handle (see photograph in Hussein, Suleiman 1999–2000: 246) are identified as the property of Atalia, queen of Sargon II (721–705 BC) (for the inscriptions, see Damerji 1999: 18 nos. 5 and 7). A bracelet of gold (IM 105699) with nine cornelian stone inlays, the central one of which is engraved with a scorpion, was also found in Tomb II (see photograph in Hussein & Suleiman 1999–2000: 280). Finally, the finds from Tomb III include a golden stamp seal (IM 115644) in the shape of a finger ring worn as a pendant (for a photograph, see Hussein & Suleiman 1999–2000: 399). Around its convex base runs a cuneiform inscription (Al-Rawi 2008: 136 no. 16) identifying the seal as the property of Hamâ, queen of Shalmaneser IV (784–773 BC) and daughter-in-law of Adad-nerari III (810–783 BC). The seal motif shows, inside a guilloche and dot border, a bare-headed woman whom we, nevertheless, should confidently identify as the queen herself. She is standing in prayer in front of the goddess Gula, who is seated on a straight-backed throne supported by a dog; behind the deity is a scorpion. (For the iconography of this goddess in Neo-Assyrian seals, see Collon 2001: 122). Hamâ's seal is very similar to the chalcedony seal under investigation and it is logical to suggest that it also belonged to a queen; I will try to establish her identity below.

Another comparable seal is known from its impressions only; it shows the king and the queen approaching a god and a goddess, standing on a bull and a lion respectively, with the scorpion hovering above the scene. Its impressions survive on four inscribed box sealings from the North-West Palace at Nimrud, and the preserved dates prove that the seal was used during the reign of Sargon II in the years 719 and 716 BC.³ Due to its similarity to Hamâ's seal, it would seem highly likely that this was the seal of Sargon's queen Atalia.

That the scorpion is the emblem of the Assyrian queen is now widely accepted (see, for example, Collon 1995: 73f.; Stol 2000: 118 n. 48; Melville 2004: 50f.; Radner 2008, 494f.; Niederreiter 2008: 59–62). But why the scorpion? As discussed by Pientka (2004: 395–397), the female scorpion was called *tārūt zuqaqīpi*, “she who picks up the scorpion”, the first element *tārītu* being a nominal form derived from the verb *tarû*, “to raise, to pick up” (also used in the meaning “child-nurse, nanny”). This certainly refers to the fact that the mother scorpion carries her young about on her back. Giving birth to the crown prince is arguably the queen's most important duty, and the very active role in promoting and supporting their sons is well known

3 CTN 2 257 = ND 807 (for a photograph, see Parker 1955: pl. XXII: 5; with the wrong excavation number ND 808); CTN 2 260 = ND 1106a; CTN 2 261 = ND 1106b; CTN 2 262 = ND 1106c. See Herbordt 1992: 200f. Nimrud 114 = Nimrud 116; there can be no doubt that this is the same seal. The scorpion is best visible on the photo of ND 1106b on CTN 2: pl. 97.

for those royal women whose memory has survived even the fall of Assyria (Dalley 2005): Sammu-ramat (“Semiramis”) and Naqia (“Nitokris”). Is the scorpion the emblem of the Assyrian queen because the female scorpion, fiercely guarding and defending her young with her poisonous tail, was seen as the ideal mother?

The Assyrian queen was not only a mother; her role in the state hierarchy had always been important. This is well demonstrated by a letter from the reign of Sargon II (SAA 1 34) concerning the distribution of tribute and audience gifts from abroad. The portion of the queen is listed immediately after the palace’s share and before the crown prince’s part, with the cuts of the high officials following.

By the beginning of the 7th century BC, however, the queen was invested with more and wider-reaching authority than ever before. The textual and archaeological record suggests that, by the time of Sennacherib, the nature and responsibilities of the queen had undergone a deep change. Sennacherib’s unique inscription for his queen Tašmetum-šarrat on lion guardian figures of the doorway leading to a separate wing⁴ in his South-West Palace in Nineveh illustrates this change:

And for the queen (MÍ.É.GAL) Tašmetum-šarrat, my beloved wife, whose features (the goddess of creation) Belet-ili has made more beautiful than all other women, I had a palace of love, joy and pleasure built. ... By the order of Aššur, father of the gods, and (heavenly) queen (*šar-ra-ti*) Ištar may we both live long in health and happiness in this palace and enjoy well-being to the full! (Galter, Levine, Reade 1986: 31f. no. 23; Borger 1988: 5; Frahm 1997: 121).

This singular inscription can at present only be compared to a royal stele of Adad-narari III which portrays him as sharing his achievements with his mother Sammu-ramat (RIMA 3 0.104.2001) who effectively had ruled on behalf of her young son in the early years of his reign. Sennacherib’s inscription gives Tašmetum-šarrat a prominent position by his side and it would be wrong to attribute this to private feelings between lovers: it is a testament of her eminent status as the queen of Assyria. It anticipates the important public roles played by the queens of Sennacherib’s successors Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, Ešarra-hammat and Libbali-šarrat.

Most significantly perhaps, the queen now commanded her own standing army,⁵ as did also the crown prince. This seems to have been a strategy inspired by the king’s

4 Reade 2000: 414 assumes that this partially excavated and poorly known area of the South-West Palace would house the graves of the royal women.

5 Some army personnel of the queen: SAA 6 164 r.4–5, 11–12: LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir ša* MÍ.É.GAL; LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir* KI.MIN; LÚ*.3-*šú ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Sennacherib: 686 BC); SAA 14 7 r.7–8: LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir ša* LÚ*.A-SIG *ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Assurbanipal: ca. 668–666 BC); SAA 6 329 r.13: LÚ.DIB-KUŠ.PA.MEŠ *ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Assurbanipal: 660 BC); O 3691 r.4: LÚ*.3-*šú* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Sîn-šarru-iškun: eponymy of Daddî; unpublished text from Ma’allanāte in the collection of the Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire at Brussels). In contrast to this, the queens of the 8th century do not seem to have had any troops under their command; see the remarks on the texts from the domestic wing of the North-West Palace at Kalhu in Ahmad & Postgate 2007: xv–xvii.

desire to shift power away from the magnates to members of his immediate family. If this change had been engineered by Sennacherib and had been continued by Esarhaddon, which is what the evidence currently suggests, then Sennacherib's murder and the failed conspiracy against Esarhaddon in 672 BC could be directly linked to the displeasure of the high officials at seeing their powers reduced. The mass execution of magnates after both palace intrigues suggests that they had been involved in each and were seeking to regain lost power (Radner 2003).

But what can the objects onto which the chalcedony seal was impressed tell us about the role of the queen in the palace administration? While it is difficult to say with any confidence what function the sealing BM 84671 once fulfilled, the inscription on docket SAA 7 94 places it squarely in the context of the palace's textile production and distribution, which was the traditional domain of Mesopotamian queens, as well attested already in the Old Babylonian palaces of Mari and of Tell Rimah (Dalley 1977; Dalley 1984: 51–54; Barber 1994: 175–180). Also, the seal showing the queen and king before a god and a goddess attested during the reign of Sargon II in the North-West Palace at Nimrud (see n. 4) was used in the context of the textile industry. It sealed boxes that contained documents concerning sheep, and at least four more such textile dockets from Nineveh are sealed with stamp seals that can be associated with the queen's household. They can be identified as the queen's equivalent to the royal seal type: the simple scorpion seal is attested in a great many copies and was used by the queen's representatives to act on her behalf (for a detailed discussion, see Radner 2008: 494–502). It is, for now, only attested in the 7th century and the phenomenon should be connected with the increase of the queen's influence, highlighted above, during the reigns of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. The seal used on SAA 7 93, dated to the year 658 BC during the reign of Assurbanipal (668–ca. 630 BC), shows the scorpion with a rosette inside a guilloche and dot border (Herbordt 1992: 252 Ninive 199), while SAA 7 98, 100 and 102 bear impressions of three different seals that all show the scorpion inside a guilloche and dot border or a simple dotted border; their dates are lost (Herbordt 1992: 252 Ninive 201; Ninive 202; Ninive 200). SAA 7 99 may be another example, although so little of the seal impression survives that one cannot be sure (collated 19 September, 2006 in the British Museum).

The owner of the seal

Given that the chalcedony seal can be shown from one of its preserved, dated impressions have been used in the weeks before Sennacherib's murder, the queen who owned and used the seal must be this king's wife. The marital arrangements of Sennacherib have attracted the attention of modern scholars and have led to very different reconstructions, ranging from a simple solution with just one queen (Tašmetum-šarrat) to more complicated scenarios with two queens (T. and the queen mentioned on a stele from Assur) or even a third queen (Esarhaddon's mother Naqia).

A stele from Assur commemorates a queen of Sennacherib, but the inscription is so damaged that it is not possible to reconstruct the name with any confidence (Ass. 16043, kept in Berlin; for a photograph and drawing, see Andrae 1913: 9 pl. 2 fig. 7; for a discussion, see Frahm 1997: 184f.) The fact that the mutilation is obviously the result of evil intent (Andrae 1913: 9) suggests it was the stele of the mother of the patricidal sons of Sennacherib that was defaced in the political turmoil following the king's murder or, perhaps more likely, during the reign of Esarhaddon, who prevailed over his older half-brothers. M. Streck (1916: CCXVI) and R. Borger (1988: 6) have proposed that the queen named on the defaced stele was Sennacherib's "beloved wife" Tašmetum-šarrat, and this remains the most likely possibility: although it is not easy to reconcile the published traces of the signs with her name, the scholar who published the object, W. Andrae, has warned that the mutilation makes it difficult to discern the remains of the signs with any confidence at all (1913: 9–10), so an equation with Tašmetum-šarrat is not as implausible as might initially appear.

Under all circumstances, the famous Naqia can be safely excluded from consideration as the individual referenced on the stele since she never held the title of queen. She played a significant, public role during the reign of her son Esarhaddon – a younger son of Sennacherib both according to his own testament (Borger 1956: 16 episode 11) and the evidence of his name (meaning "Aššur has given a brother", a name typically given to a younger sibling), who came to the Assyrian throne in less than straightforward circumstances – and her grandson Assurbanipal; under her descendants' rule, she was known as "the king's mother". Not a single text, however, mentions Naqia as queen (*sēgallu* = MÍ.É.GAL) during the reign of Sennacherib, and there is simply no evidence at all that she would have held that title at any time during Sennacherib's reign.⁶

But if the stele from Assur indeed referred to a queen of Sennacherib's other than Tašmetum-šarrat, who could she be? Some modern scholars have suggested that the loving praise for the latter in the South-West Palace inscription was composed at the command of an elderly king besotted with a young beauty rather than in honour of his wife of many years (so, for example, Borger 1986: 6–7; Frahm 1997: 4; this view is not shared by Reade 1987: 141f. nor by me). If this were to be the case, then Tašmetum-šarrat would have been Sennacherib's second queen, the successor to the first, who was the owner of the Assur stele and the mother of later patricide Urdu-Mullissi and his brothers.

To identify the owner of the chalcedony seal under investigation, it is only necessary to establish who was queen at the very end of Sennacherib's reign. As R. Borger has argued, the palace inscription in Tašmetum-šarrat's praise cannot have been composed before 694 BC: another of Sennacherib's palace inscriptions, inscribed on bull guardian figures, contains reports of six separate campaigns and therefore implies

⁶ The discussion of Melville suffers from the fact that the author, although aware of the lack of any textual evidence, still insists: "She was certainly a MÍ.É.GAL in the sense that she was part of the 'harem'" (1999: 23) – but this does not at all reflect the Assyrian view on the matter.

this terminus *post quem*; as the Tašmetum-šarrat inscription is a close parallel to this text it is most likely to assume that they were created at the same time (1986: 6). There is, in my opinion, no good reason at present to assume that she was replaced as queen later during Sennacherib's lifetime. The most likely scenario is, therefore, that the chalcedony seal was the seal of Tašmetum-šarrat. What happened to her after Sennacherib's murder is unknown, unless we accept E. Frahm's suggestion concerning a letter denouncing the governor of Assur to Esarhaddon by relating his role in the events taking place in Assur immediately after Sennacherib's death. The fact that the governor and his troops were involved in the war of succession and that he assumed control of the city of Assur is not too surprising, given the mayhem that gripped Assyria after the assassination. Even so, the information with which the unknown author chooses to start his letter is most intriguing: "The king received the [wife] of the governor and had her enter the palace. The day we heard that the king was dead the inhabitants of Assur were weeping but the governor took his wife out of the palace!" (SAA 16 95 1–5). Although it is not hard to accept that the Assyrian king would have been in a position to claim for his household any woman in whom he had developed an interest, for whatever reason, it is impossible to judge what role the governor's wife would have had at court. Frahm has proposed that she had been made queen and that she was no other than Tašmetum-šarrat (1997: 184). This idea lies at one end of the spectrum of possibilities.

Even if the king had wanted the governor's wife at his side, however, she need not necessarily have been made queen: the Assyrian kings had many concubines (*sakrutu* = MÍ.ERIM.É.GAL) as the tomb inscription of Yaba, queen of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC), highlights best perhaps (IM 125000; see Fadhil 1990: 461–463). As a consequence, there is no reason at all to identify her with Tašmetum-šarrat. Although it is perhaps less thrilling a scenario, it could more plausibly be assumed that the governor's wife had been held hostage to keep her husband, one of the highest officials of Assyria, under control. All the letter says is that as soon as he had the opportunity, the governor removed his wife from the palace. Still, judging from this source and the Tašmetum-šarrat inscription, the early 7th century BC would have been a period of remarkable uxoriousness, a quality perhaps hitherto not sufficiently associated with the members of the Assyrian elite.

Although I consider it unlikely that the episode related in the letter to Esarhaddon refers to Tašmetum-šarrat, it highlights how the country was in turmoil after Sennacherib's brutal death. Whether Tašmetum-šarrat met a violent end in the course of the war for succession or whether she lived peacefully as part of Esarhaddon's household and eventually died of old age will have depended on her stance in the events leading up to the assassination. There is, however, no evidence whatsoever that would allow a judgment to be made as to whether she supported Esarhaddon or not. It is clear that, even if she survived the war, she lost her role as the queen of Assyria to her stepson's wife, Ešarra-hammat, as soon as Esarhaddon ascended the throne in the last month of 681 BC, just three months after the chalcedony seal was used to seal the textile docket.

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