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Heads and Beds: On the Origin of the Akkadian Term for Eunuch or Courtier

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Abstract: Alongside the ongoing debate over whether the primary meaning of the Akkadian term *ša rēši* (lit. “he of the head”) is “eunuch” or “courtier,” various explanations for the origin of the term have been proposed. After reviewing the seven explanations encountered in the secondary literature, and assessing their respective strengths and weaknesses, this article makes a new proposal for the origin of the term, namely that it refers to the “head” of the king’s bed. It is observed that this hypothesis is consistent: (i) with Akkadian terminology relating to parts of beds, which uses *rēšu(m)* to designate either a bed’s top end generally or its “headboard” specifically; (ii) with the perception, visible in Babylonian ritual texts, of the bed as a place of potential danger to its occupant; and (iii) with the Akkadian literary expression *mukil rēši* (“lit. keeper of the head”) which, by analogy with well-attested expressions like *mukil bābi* (“keeper of the gate”) and *mukil appāti* (lit. “keeper of the bridle”), is more likely to refer to an inanimate “head” than part of the human body. The possibility that the term *ša rēš* (*šarrī*) is equivalent to the Greek term εὐνοῦχος, as argued for example by (Briant, P. 1996. *Histoire de l’empire Perse. De Cyrus à Alexandre*. Paris: Fayard. = Briant, Pierre. 2000. *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire*. Translated from the French by Peter T. Daniels. Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns), has been questioned by (Lenfant, D. 2012. “Ctesias and his Eunuchs a Challenge for Modern Historians.” *Histos* 6: 257–97), but if the newly proposed origin of *ša rēši* is correct, it indirectly supports the case for an equivalency of the two terms: like εὐνοῦχος (lit. “bed-keeper”), *ša rēši* would literally refer to guardianship of the king’s bed. The new proposal nevertheless has no bearing on the debate over whether *ša rēši* primarily designates “eunuch” or “courtier.”

Keywords: eunuch, courtier, head, bed, furniture

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... men are nowhere an easier prey to violence than when at meals or at wine, in the bath, or in bed and asleep.¹

1 Introduction

The Akkadian term *ša* (often *šūt* in the plural) *rēši*, literally “he of the head,”² is first attested³ as a designation of royal personnel in administrative texts from the city of Mari, on the Middle Euphrates, in the 18th century BCE, where it denotes several hundred armed men in the palace administration who could perform manual tasks such as removing wool from sheep.⁴ The term resurfaces in Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian documentation of the 13th and 12th centuries: in Babylonia, *ša rēšis* are associated with particular governors and provinces,⁵ while in Assyria, a handful of *ša rēšis* hold the high offices of governor, steward and *qēpu*, and also serve as eponyms.⁶ The term is particularly well attested in Assyria during the Neo-Assyrian empire (ca. 911–609 BCE), where it designates royal officials active both inside and outside the palace, as well as men in a variety of occupations including

1 Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* (7.5.59), translation by Miller (1914: 287).

2 For an overview of the attested spellings see CAD R 292a, Hawkins (2002: 217–18) and, for the Neo-Assyrian period specifically, Groß (2020: 239).

3 The following overview concerns *ša rēšis* in Babylonian and Assyrian administrative centres. On *ša rēšis* in the Hittite empire see Hawkins (2002) and Peled (2013); on *ša rēšis* in Urartu see Çifçi (2017: 200, 295) and Gökce (2020); and on *sārīsim* in the Hebrew Bible see Tadmor (1995). For the related titles of *rab ša rēši* and *ša rēš šarri* see, on the former: CAD R 289b–90, Tadmor (1983; 2002) and Mattila (2000: 61–76, 153–54); and on the latter: CAD R 290a–92a, Brinkman 1968 (310–11), and Bongenaar (1997: 99–102). On the possibly related titles *ša rēš āli*, attested at Achaemenid Nippur and Larsa, and *rab ša rēš āli*, attested at Seleucid Uruk, see CAD R 290b with references to further literature.

4 CAD R 292 consistently translates *šūt rēši* in Mari contexts as “soldier.” In Babylonia in the Old Babylonian period, the term is only attested in two omens, YOS 10 25: 61 and YOS 10 46: ii 23 [CAD R 292], both of which predict that *šūt rēši* will kill the king. A. Goetze thought that the script of YOS 10 46 resembled the script used in the chancellery of Ḫammu-rāpi (YOS 10: pp. 1, 14). Although the omens themselves could well be older than Ḫammu-rāpi’s reign, or indeed than the First Dynasty of Babylon, the picture of *šūt rēši* they present is not necessarily different from that which is visible in the Mari documents (cf. Oppenheim 1973: 327).

5 See CAD R 293b for references and Brinkman (1968: 310–11) for discussion of attestations of *ša rēši* and *ša rēš šarri*.

6 See Jakob (2003: 82–92, esp. 84–90), who points out that oft-cited passages of the Middle Assyrian Laws and “Harem Edicts” do not unequivocally prove that *ša rēši* were castrated (see also Pirngruber 2011: 288–97), but thinks that the term nevertheless means eunuch in Middle Assyrian contexts because of the evidence of a cylinder seal depicting a beardless *ša rēši*, Uşur-namkūr-šarri. On Uşur-namkūr-šarri’s career see now Llop (2021), who thinks his promotion under Tukulti-Ninurta I “bears witness to the king’s policy of promoting eunuchs in key places of administration during a crucial period of Assyrian history” (Llop 2021: 277).

several of low-status,⁷ and in Babylonia during the Neo-Babylonian empire (ca. 626–539 BCE), where *ša rēši*-officials appear in palace, local and military administration.⁸ The term was still in use after the Persian conquest of Babylonia, at least until the reign of Xerxes I (486–465 BCE), when it may have been replaced by a loanword from Old Persian, *ustabaru*.⁹

Since the 1960s, discussion of the term has focused on whether its primary meaning is “attendant” or “eunuch.”¹⁰ Early contributors to the debate allowed that some people designated *ša rēši* may have been eunuchs, but cautioned against assuming castration on the basis of the term alone.¹¹ The Akkadian dictionaries are representative of this approach with the *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* suggesting the translation “Leibwächter” for *šūt rēši* at Mari and “etwa (Hoch-)Kommissare” or “etwa Haushofmeister, Vorsteher” in later contexts (AHw 974),¹² and the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary translating the term as “eunuch” in only two attestations of the term (CAD R 296).¹³ Specialists in Neo- and Late Babylonian economic and social history have agreed with the dictionaries, long preferring to translate the term in Babylonian contexts as “royal official” or “courtier.”¹⁴ However, specialists in

7 For a detailed discussion of the various roles in which *ša rēšis* are attested in the Neo-Assyrian empire see now Groß (2020: 239–57), with references to earlier literature.

8 Jursa (2011: 159–66) gives an overview of the titles and functions of *ša rēši* in the Neo-Babylonian and early Achaemenid periods.

9 Jursa (2011: 166–71). Attestations of the term in Babylonian technical and literary texts not mentioned in CAD R 292b–93a include: a commentary on *Šumma izbu* preserved on a tablet of Hellenistic date (De Zorzi and Jursa 2011; Kraus 2015); a medical incantation preserved on a tablet of 7th century date (CT 23 10: 14 [CAD R 296]); the Epic of Nabopolassar, preserved on a tablet of Achaemenid or Hellenistic date (Grayson 1975: 82, ii(?) 12); the Kurigalzu Letter (Wiseman 1967: 496 iii 16’); and the Dynastic Prophecy, preserved on a tablet of Hellenistic date (Grayson 1975: 34, iii 5).

10 See in particular Brinkman (1968: 309–11), Oppenheim (1973), Garelli (1974: 133–36), Parpola (1983: 20–21), Brinkman and Dalley (1988: 85–86 n. 27), Grayson (1995), Tadmor (1995), Briant (1996: 285–88 = 2002: 274–77), Deller (1999), Watanabe (1999), Mattila (2000: 131–33), Dalley (2001), Hawkins (2002: 217–21), Pirngruber (2011), Lenfant (2012). For more recent discussions of the term *ša rēši* in Neo-Assyrian contexts see Groß and Pirngruber (2015), Radner (2017: 97–98), and Groß (2020: 239–57).

11 E.g., Brinkman (1968: 309–11), Oppenheim (1973), Garelli (1974: 133–36), and Brinkman and Dalley (1988: 85–86 n. 27).

12 Indeed, with respect to the *ša/šūt rēšāni* attested as governors of provinces in the Neo-Assyrian empire, AHw famously states “keine Eunuchen!”

13 Deller (1999: 304) poses the reasonable question: “The position taken up by both dictionaries inevitably leads to the question: if *ša rēši* does not mean eunuch *per se*, what should be the Assyrian or Babylonian word for it?” Hawkins (2002: 218 n. 17) notes that the CAD “extraordinarily” excludes “the contexts where the term is paired with *ša ziqni*.”

14 E.g., Brinkman (1968: 309–11; 1987: 321), Frame (1991: 42), Bongenaar (1997: 100), Jursa (2011), De Zorzi and Jursa (2011).

Assyrian history have usually disagreed with the dictionaries' stance, tending to translate *ša rēši* in every context as “eunuch,” and citing various pieces of suggestive evidence in support.¹⁵ A review of previous literature on the term's meaning was conducted by Pirngruber (2011), who concludes that the theory that *ša rēši* can be consistently translated as “eunuch” stands “auf tönernen Füßen,” and emphasizes that the term could well have had multiple meanings at any one time, in the same manner as the Greek term *εὐνοῦχος* as it appears in narratives about the Achaemenid court by Herodotus and Ctesias.¹⁶ The debate about if and when *ša rēši* means “eunuch” seems far from over, and this contribution to *ša rēši*-studies offers no new evidence that could resolve the problem.¹⁷ Its aim is more limited, namely to make a new proposal for how the term itself came into being.

2 Previous Proposals for the Origin of the Term *ša rēši*

Multiple proposals have been made concerning the origin of the designation “he of the head.” Brinkman (1968: 310 n. 2068) thinks that the term refers “to the position of the attendant, standing at the head of or near an individual,” and Oppenheim (1973: 333–34) agrees, writing that a *ša rēši* “was constantly at the side of his master

¹⁵ E.g., Parpola (1983: 20–21), Grayson (1995), Postgate (1995: 5), Tadmor (1995; 2002), Radner (1997: 155–57), Deller (1999), Watanabe (1999), Mattila (2000), Cancik-Kirschbaum (2003: 109), Fuchs (2008), Ambos (2009), Barjamovic (2011: 57–59), Niederreiter (2015), Frahm (2017: 170), Radner (2017: 97–98). Exceptions in this respect are Garelli (1974: 133–36), Dalley (2001), and Siddall (2007).

¹⁶ Pirngruber (2011: 308). Note, however, that Pirngruber's point that “alle” sources used to support the case for a consistent translation of the term as “eunuch” stem from the Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods, is not completely accurate. Of clear Neo-Assyrian date is the prophecy for Assurbanipal as crown prince, which draws a distinction between the “sons” (DUMU^{mes}) of those “of the beard” and the “successors (?)” (*ḫalpēte*) of those “of the head” (SAA 9: p. 38, l. 4 with references to further literature in the notes). Note too that the commentary on *Šumma izbu* 14 – which, according to one plausible interpretation (Kraus 2015), equates the term *ša rēši* with a state of childlessness – is preserved on a tablet of Hellenistic date (De Zorzi and Jursa 2011); the commentary may well predate the Hellenistic period but it does not necessarily date as early as the second millennium BCE.

¹⁷ Brinkman and Dalley (1988: 86 n. 27) and Pirngruber (2011: 309) advocate prosopographical study of those designated *ša rēši* and related terms with a view to establishing whether or not they had biological children. However, unless evidence of adoption has survived, it is difficult to see how one could establish that a *ša rēši*'s children were not biologically related to him. Pirngruber (2011: 309) points out various other questions relating to the understanding of the term *ša rēši* which have not yet been satisfactorily answered.

for personal services.” However, Parpola (1979: 33), working on the basis that the term was *ša rēšēn*, “he of the two heads,” cites the suggestion of his student Merja Immonen that the term referred to a female head “behind” the male head in order to convey the ambiguous gender of the individual (“nicht Mann, nicht Frau”). Deller (1999: 304–305), following Parpola’s views that *ša rēši* signifies a castrated male and that the term was originally *ša rēšēn*, proposes that “head” in this context means “testicle,” and suggests that “he with testicles” euphemistically implied “he without testicles.” Also assuming that the term was *ša rēšēn*, Dalley (2002: 117–18) prefers to interpret the “heads” in question literally, proposing that they refer to two-headed primeval bisexual beings described by Berossus. In a second step, Dalley argues that men designated by this term were often members of the royal family (Dalley 2001: 203–206, see also Dalley 2002: 121–22), and accordingly suggests that the allusion to primeval beings in the name of their office was intended to distinguish them by endowing their office with an aura of deep antiquity (Dalley 2002: 121–22). Only later, Dalley suggests, did the title develop into a term with the primary meaning “eunuch” (Dalley 2001: 203).

Other explanations for the term have been offered by Grayson (1995: 90), who assumes that the term means “chief” or “some such term for an important functionary,” and more recently by Steinert (2012: 137–38 n. 3), who proposes that *rēšu* in this phrase is simply a designation for the king. In her words:

„Da der Kopf der zuoberst befindliche Körperteil ist, bedeutet *rēšu* übertragen „alles das, was hoch, oben ist“ (z.B. die Spitze von Bergen, Gebäuden, des Himmels, Objekten) und „alles, was herausragend, erstrangig ist“ (z.B. hohe Funktionäre und Oberhäupter). Der König ist der „Kopf“ des Landes schlechthin; seine Leibbediensteten und Eunuchen, die ihn unmittelbar umgeben und in Prozessionen des Hofes direkt hinter dem König gehen, heißen *šūt rēši* „die des Kopfes.“

Finally, Hawkins’ explanation (2002: 218 with n. 15) resembles that of Brinkman’s in that he also understands *rēši* as referring to the head of the king. Hawkins however goes further, proposing that the term is derived from an unattested expression, *ina rēsi izuzzu*, “to stand at the head, attend upon,” and that the *ša rēši* differed from another type of royal attendant, the *manzaz pāni*, in that the “one who stood at the head” attended the king when he was recumbent, i.e., in the bed chamber, while the *manzaz pāni* (literally, “standing (before) the face/ (in) the presence”) waited on the king in other areas of the palace.

3 Strengths and Weaknesses of Previous Proposals

Each of these seven proposals has its merits, but also its weaknesses. Brinkman’s theory, namely that “of the head” refers to a servant’s personal proximity to his

owner, is plausible but fails to explain why the owner's "head" is the focus of attention, rather than, e.g., his "face" (*ša pāni*: unattested) or "side" (*ša idi*: also unattested). Parpola's and Deller's proposals account for the one occasion where *rēšu* appears in the dual in this phrase, in the Middle Assyrian Laws,¹⁸ but one attestation seems an inadequate basis on which to develop a theory about the term's origin. As Hawkins (2002: 218 with n. 13) notes, *rēšu* in the dual is occasionally encountered in contexts where it definitely should not be understood literally as "two heads," and if the dual form were significant, one would expect – as Deller (1999: 305) himself acknowledges – to find dual forms in the Old Babylonian syllabic spellings of the term. Dalley's proposal can be challenged on the same grounds as Deller's: it is based on the probably faulty assumption that the dual form in the Middle Assyrian Laws is meaningful. Moreover, the development in the meaning of the term which she posits, from "eunuch" to a court title, is uncertain: Pirngruber (2011: 296, 308) has argued for the opposite development in the term's meaning, i.e., from a court title to a designation for a castrated male.¹⁹

Grayson's idea cannot be dismissed entirely but *rēšu* is attested nowhere else with the meaning "chief": to express this idea, Akkadian normally uses the term *rab* (lit. "great").²⁰ Steinert's theory that *rēšu* in this expression refers to the king as the metaphorical "head" of the land seems possible, but when *rēšu* designates a king in other contexts it clearly means "servant (of the gods)" (CAD R 281a–82b), and so, if *rēšu* is used metaphorically here, this would seem the likelier explanation: "he of the (gods') servant," i.e., "he of the king." Hawkins' idea, namely that the term alludes to the king's head when the king is in recumbent in his bedchamber, seems the strongest of the proposals yet made.²¹ The idea was already considered but rejected by Deller (1999: 305), on the grounds that the phrase supposed to lie behind the term, *ina/ana rēsi šarri izuzzu*, "stand at the head, attend upon," is never attested, but following Hawkins, the absence of the term in the Akkadian text corpus is not necessarily grounds to dismiss the idea. In its favour, one can note both the fact that the Greek word *εὐνοῦχος*, which is used in similar contexts to *ša rēši*,²² clearly

¹⁸ *aṭyala ana ša re-še-en utār*, "he may turn him (the adulterer) into a eunuch" (KAV 1 ii 54, cf. *ibid.* ii 97). On the Middle Assyrian laws generally with references to editions and studies see Stol (2012: 405–20) = Stol (2016: 662–82).

¹⁹ Similarly AHW 974 and Grayson (1995: 90), without supporting arguments.

²⁰ For a list of titles that begin with the element *rab* see CAD R 31b-32a (s.v. *rabū* mng. 2c 2' and 4').

²¹ Groß (2020: 239–40 n. 458), for instance, follows Hawkins' proposal.

²² E.g., Briant (1996: 288, 794) = Briant (2002: 277, 774). See also the brief remarks below, Section V.

refers to the king's bed,²³ and the existence of a similar term *ša rēš šarri*, lit. "he of the king's head," of which *ša rēši* may be an abbreviation.²⁴

4 A New Proposal: "He of the Head (of the Bed)"

Hawkins' proposal that the term *ša rēši* reflects an original role as king's guard in the royal bedchamber seems the most plausible of the explanations for the term offered so far. However, an alternative one is possible: instead of *ša rēši* referring to the head of the king as he lies in a prostrate position, as Hawkins proposes, it could refer to the head of the royal bed. This modified understanding of the term would not change the original duty of the *ša rēši* – he would still be an attendant who waited on and guarded the king in a location where he was at his most vulnerable, his bedchamber. It would, however, add weight to the case for seeing a close connection between the Akkadian term and the Greek term *ἐὺνοῦχος*, since both terms would, on this interpretation, refer explicitly to the bed.

In many modern languages including English, the term "head" can denote the top end of a bed, where the head of its inhabitant lies. The case for understanding *ša rēši* as "he of the head (of the bed)" depends, first, on the bed of the Babylonian or Assyrian king also having a "head" in Akkadian terminology, and second, on "he of the head (of the bed)" making better sense as the origin of the term than "he of the (king's) head." Both these issues are discussed in the following section, as well as evidence for the Mesopotamian perception of the bed as a place of potential danger for its occupant.

4.1 Beds with Head(s)?

The dictionaries' entries for *rēšu(m)*, and the relevant entries in Salonen's *Die Möbel des alten Mesopotamien nach sumerisch-akkadischen Quellen* (Salonen 1963: 151–53), all suggest that a bed could indeed have a head in Akkadian terminology. In ritual texts attestations of the logographic writing $\text{SAG}^{\text{giš}}\text{NA}_2$ abound, and this writing has consistently been rendered by Salonen, the dictionaries and the editors of the ritual texts, as *rēš erši*, lit. "head of the bed." Furthermore, an entry in the word list *Ura = ħubullu IV* (henceforth: *Ura IV*) refers to (*eršu*) *ša re-ša-a ša-qa-a*, "(bed) whose two heads are raised" (*Ura IV*: 149 = *MSL* 5, 164). Salonen (1963: 151)

²³ The term means literally "keeper of the bed" (from *εὺνή*, "bed," and *ἔχειν*, "to have, hold, keep"); see Lenfant (2021: 457–59) for a detailed discussion of the etymology, and for arguments against earlier assumptions that it refers to the beds of royal women.

²⁴ Bongenaar (1997: 97).

suggests that the entry refers to the head- and footboard of the bed (“die beide Wände: Kopf- und Fusswand des Bettes”), and his idea finds some support in the prominent “headboard” – for want of a better term – found in depictions of beds in Neo-Assyrian relief sculpture.²⁵ The beds depicted can be divided into: pieces of booty removed by Assyrian soldiers from conquered cities (e.g., Figure 1); beds among deportees’ possessions (Figure 2); beds for use in Assyrian military camps (e.g., Figure 3); and, in two notable cases, beds “in use” by a king of Hamath and by Assurbanipal (Figures 4 and 5).

In several of the 29 depictions of beds catalogued by H. Kyrieleis (1969: 15–16), the head of the bed swings away from and then back towards the bedframe, thus creating a concave cavity or “curve”²⁶ which, on the evidence of the bed depicted in Assurbanipal’s “Garden Scene” relief, among others, was filled with a cushion on which the occupant could lean.²⁷



Figure 1: A relief (BM 124953) depicting deportees on the move with their possessions, including in the second register a bed being transported upside down on an ox-drawn cart. Southwest Palace, Nineveh. The British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). For a line drawing see Layard (1853: Pl. 35).

²⁵ The depictions are found on the bronzes of the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III and in wall reliefs from the palaces of Tiglath-Pileser III, Sennacherib and Assurbanipal; see Kyrieleis (1969: 15–16) for a full inventory, including of depictions of beds in Babylonian and Assyrian “Beschwörungsreliefs” (not discussed here). For evidence of high-backed beds in earlier periods of Mesopotamian history see al Gailani Werr (1996: 31).

²⁶ Curtis (1996: 175) observes that the curve seems to be more pronounced in reliefs from the seventh century BCE.

²⁷ This cushion could well be the *bīt rēšētu* attested in a Neo-Babylonian list of household objects which Jursa (2003: 23) suggests means “Kopfpolster” (“headrest”).



Figure 2: A lost relief depicting Assyrian soldiers carrying away a bed among other pieces of furniture from a city. Southwest Palace, Nineveh (Layard 1853: Pl. 40).

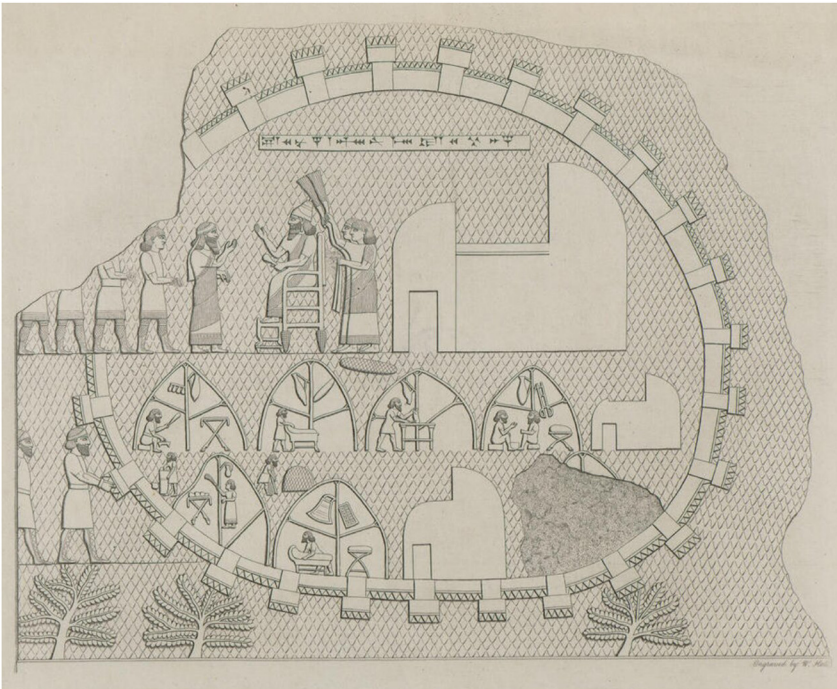


Figure 3: A lost relief depicting an Assyrian military camp of Sennacherib with men setting up beds inside tents. Southwest Palace, Nineveh (Layard 1849: Pl. 77).



Figure 4: Detail from the Balawat Gates (BM 124657) depicting the king of Hamath watching the course of a siege from his bed on the wall. Balawat, reign of Shalmaneser III (King 1915: Pl. 77).



Figure 5: Detail from the "Garden Scene" relief (BM 124920) depicting Assurbanipal reclining on a bed with a curved "head" with a necklace of possible apotropaic function looped around the top left corner. North Palace, Nineveh. ©The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

First, however, it should be noted that the full entry of Ura IV: 149, cited in part above, gives pause for thought: (*eršu*) *ša rēšā šaqâ*, “(bed) whose two heads are raised,” is equated not with $\text{GIŠ.NA}_2.\text{SAG.ZI.GA}$, as one might expect, but with $\text{GIŠ.NA}_2.\text{GU}_2.\text{ZI.GA}$, i.e., “bed with raised necks.” To be sure, the equation of *rēšu* with GU_2 is attested elsewhere in the lexical tradition, but the equation raises the question of whether $\text{SAG}^{\text{GIS}}_{\text{NA}_2}$ was, in fact, understood as *rēš erši*. Nearby entries in Ura IV compound the problem: GIŠ.SAG.NA_2 is equated both with *kittim erši*, lit. “support of the bed” (Ura IV: 166 = MSL 5, 165), and with *pūt erši*, lit. “forehead of the bed” (Ura IV: 169 = MSL 5, 166), but not with *rēš erši*. Additionally, *pūtu* is very likely to mean “headboard” or similar, since Marduk’s bed is described in an inscription of Assurbanipal²⁸ as having a forehead, “*pūtu*” (RINAP 3/2 No. 162, r iii 18’), which is specified to be half the length of its *amāru*, “sideboard,” the proportional relationship one would expect a bed’s ends to have with its sides. And finally, a different lexeme entirely, *rēšētu*, attested several times in ritual literature, seems to have meant “head” of the bed in the general sense of “top end” (AHw. 972b s.v. *rēštu*).²⁹

What do these scattered pieces of data mean for our understanding of Akkadian bed terminology? One possibility is to regard the Akkadian equivalent of all logographic spellings $\text{SAG}^{\text{GIS}}_{\text{NA}_2}$ as not *rēš erši* but *pūt erši*, lit. “forehead of the bed,” following Ura IV: 169. Since *rēšētu*, by analogy with *šēpi/ētu* (“foot” of the bed), seems to designate the top end of the bed in general, the phrase *pūt erši* would logically refer to the curved part of the top end of the bed so distinctively depicted in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian relief sculpture. There is, however, one flaw in this theory: a spelling *re-eš* GIS_{NA_2} is indeed attested – in two Nineveh manuscripts of the ritual tablet of the canonical Lamaštu series.³⁰ Although these are the only syllabic realizations of SAG in the phrase $\text{SAG}^{\text{GIS}}_{\text{NA}_2}$ known to me outside of the lexical tradition, the context mirrors the attestations of $\text{SAG}^{\text{GIS}}_{\text{NA}_2}$ in other ritual texts discussed above. Accordingly these two syllabic spellings are sufficient evidence to make the interpretation of $\text{SAG}^{\text{GIS}}_{\text{NA}_2}$ as *rēš erši* very likely. With the term *pūtu* in the Assurbanipal inscription, Ura IV: 169 and elsewhere, we are then probably dealing with a synonym of *rēšu(m)* in this specialized sense of “raised part of the top end of the bed.”

What should one make of the “two raised heads” in Ura IV: 149? It is tempting to evoke this entry, with its clear dual form of *rēšu*, to explain the otherwise anomalous attestation of a dual form of *rēšu* in *ša rēši* in the Middle Assyrian Laws (discussed above, Section III). However, temptation should probably be resisted

²⁸ Although RINAP 3/2 No. 162 largely consists of a copy of an inscription of Sennacherib, the lines cited here were written during the reign of Assurbanipal. On the political and religious significance of gods’ beds in the Sargonid period see Nevling Porter (2002 and 2006).

²⁹ Salonen (1963: 151–52 s.v. *rēš erši*). It neatly parallels the better attested term *šēpitu*, “foot (of the bed)” (CAD Š/2 293).

³⁰ *ina* 150 KA_2 *ina re-eš* GIS_{NA_2} *u še-pi-ti* GIS_{NA_2} *GAR-an* (*pirsu* III 102 = Farber 2014: 139).

since the obvious explanation of the entry, namely that they are the head- and footboards of the bed (Salonen 1963: 151), is difficult to reconcile with the visual evidence: none of the depictions in Assyrian or Babylonian relief sculpture represent a bed with a discernable footboard.³¹ Could it possibly refer to the two corners of the raised upper section of the bedframe?

4.2 Beds as Places of Danger

Indirect support for the proposed interpretation of *ša rēši* can be found in the fact that beds were perceived as places where the occupants were vulnerable to supernatural attack. This idea emerges most clearly from ritual instructions that accompany various Babylonian incantations designed to protect the client from attack by evil demons.³² Thus, in *Maqlû* (“Burning”), the series of anti-witchcraft rituals, several actions take place at the head of the bed: asafoetida, a lump of salt and “twelve *ša’irrus*” are separately placed on a censer located there, and a figurine of the deity Lugaledina stands there.³³ In the ritual *Bit mēseri* (“House of Enclosure”), the practitioner is said to address “seven kneeling figurines of *apkallu*-sages made out of consecrated tamarisk wood that stand at the foot of the bed.”³⁴ In the canonical series of incantations against the demon Lamaštu, both the head and the foot of the bed are protected: the practitioner is instructed to recite a particular incantation and then to place three fumigations “to the left of the door, at the head of the bed, (and) at the foot of the bed.”³⁵ Similarly, the Šadūnu Letter refers to amulets intended for the head and foot of the king’s bed,³⁶ and a list of necklaces includes several intended for the “right end of the foot of the bed” and, by extension, also for the left end of the foot of the bed.³⁷ Although the Egyptian-style necklace looped around the top left corner of the head of Assurbanipal’s bed in the “Garden Scene” relief (Figure 5) was probably intended to remind the viewer

31 Admittedly, the bottom end of Assurbanipal’s bed is obscured by the depiction of Libbali-šarrat sitting on a high-backed chair in the foreground (see Figure 5), but I would argue that the artist’s decision to position the queen there was influenced by the fact that the foot of the bed was visually unremarkable.

32 On the deaths of several kings in their bed chambers in Herodotus and Ctesias, see Lenfant (2021: 460–61).

33 *Maqlû* VI 133, VII 157, IX 113’–114’, 116’, 118’ (Abusch 2015: 344, 357, 372, 373).

34 *Bit mēseri* III, “Stück I,” l. 55 ff. (Borger 1974: 192), cited with different line numbering by Borger (1994: 231).

35 Can. Lam. III 102 (Farber 2014: 192–93).

36 SAA 21 no. 13, see also Frame and George (2005: 280–81).

37 K. 3937+, i, 1’–5’ and 6’–18.’ See Schuster-Brandis (2008: 208–13) for a full edition and discussion.

of Assurbanipal's military successes in Egypt (Albenda 1977: 33–36), one wonders whether, because of its position at the head of the bed, it represents one of these apotropaic necklaces. Another letter, from the exorcist Marduk-šakin-šumi to Esarhaddon, refers to an exorcist walking around a client's bed with a censer and a torch while reciting the incantation “Begone evil *ḫultuppu*” (SAA 10 no. 238, r 5–11).³⁸

4.3 “Bed’s Head” or “King’s Head”?

Having established that, in Akkadian terminology, beds did indeed have a “head” (*rēšu*), and that the bed, including the king's bed, needed protection against evil demons, it remains to be shown that “he of the (bed's) head” is a more plausible interpretation of *ša rēši* than the most plausible of the previous interpretations, namely Brinkman's (“he of the (king's) head”) and Hawkins' (“he of the (king's) head (while recumbent)”). This is a challenging task, not least because it is impossible to dismiss these earlier interpretations out of hand. As already noted above, the strengths of Hawkins' explanation is (a) its location of the original *ša rēši* squarely in the royal bedchamber, like *ἐννοῦχος*, and (b) its ability to account for the similar term *ša rēš šarri*. However, the new explanation not only locates the earliest *ša rēši* in the royal bedchamber, it also brings the term *ša rēši* into closer alignment with *ἐννοῦχος*, the literal meaning of which is “keeper of the bed” (see above, n. 23). Since *ἐννοῦχος* seems to have been the ancient Greek equivalent of *ša rēši* (see above n. 22), a close correspondence between the literal meanings of both terms seems an attractive possibility.

A third point in favour of the new interpretation relates to a little attested Akkadian literary expression, *mukil rēši*, literally “one who holds/keeps the head.” The two contexts in which this expression is attested are identical to two of those in which the *šūt rēši* appear in the Old Babylonian period (see above, n. 4): it appears once in a gall-bladder omen which predicts that the *mukil rēši* will kill the king, preserved on an Old-Babylonian tablet (CAD M/2 184b for references), and once in the *Erra* Epic, where the term stands in apposition to *giršeqqû* (*Erra* IV 109 = Cagni 1969: 116–17). It seems, therefore, not unreasonable to conclude that *mukil rēši* is a literary expression for *ša rēši*. To the best of my knowledge, the element *mukil* occurs elsewhere only with inanimate objects, such as *appāti* (“bridle, reins”) in *mukil appāti*, “chariot driver,” and *bābu* (“gate, door”) in *mukil bābi*, “door/gate keeper.” This in turn suggests that the *mukil rēši* literally refers to the guard of a particular piece of furniture rather than a part of the king's body.

³⁸ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this reference.

5 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is worth highlighting that, should the newly proposed interpretation of *ša rēši* be correct, its literal meaning is closer to that of *εὐνοῦχος* than was previously thought. In a wide-ranging discussion of the problem of the historicity of the *εὐνοῦχοι* in Ctesias' *Persika*, Lenfant warns against assuming a one-to-one correspondence in the semantic ranges of *εὐνοῦχος* and *ša rēši*, and draws attention to the different historical circumstances in which the terms tend to be used, with the Akkadian appearing overwhelmingly in sources from the first half of the first millennium, above all in administrative contexts under the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires, while the Greek term first appears in later sources that are concerned with the Achaemenid empire (Lenfant 2012: 280–81). However, if *ša rēši* refers to the king's bed, Lenfant's cautiousness about using the Akkadian term as a means of understanding *εὐνοῦχος* may be unwarranted. Furthermore, Lenfant convincingly argues – against the prevailing trend – that one *can* understand *εὐνοῦχος* in the narratives of Herodotus and Ctesias as consistently referring to castrated males (Lenfant 2012: 281–87). When viewed together, these two points undermine the confidence with which one can dismiss a consistent translation of *ša rēši* as “eunuch.”

It is also worth noting that the proposed interpretation of the term *ša rēši* offered here cannot comprise an argument *against* the term meaning “eunuch.” When one considers royal courts where the presence of eunuchs is indisputable, such as in ancient and pre-modern China, ancient Rome, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire, it is clear that castration has served symbolic and/or an aesthetic purposes rather than a practical one. In other words, despite *ša rēši* referring to the guard of the king's bed, castration could still have been an essential condition for performing this service.

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