

55) **Revisiting the Courtier in the Commentary** — In the course of editing a commentary for the newly launched Cuneiform Commentaries Project website (<http://ccp.yale.edu/P417216>) I have found some new evidence regarding the *ša rēši*, courtiers known best from Assyrian sources. The commentary, first published by E. Leichty in 1970 (TCS IV, Commentary O, 232), dates to the third or second century BCE¹ and comprises interpretations of omens from tablet XIV of the series *Šumma Izbu*. Regarding the *ša rēši* the commentary contains the following information:

obv. 6. [x x x x] : DUMU É.GAL : *šá re-eš ina lib-bi šá še-eḫ-ru-ma*
 obv. 7. [x x x x] x-ú a-na a-bi la i-tu-ru :

The two lines are a clarification of what is meant by the term *mār ekalli* (DUMU É.GAL). The explanation is introduced first by giving a synonym, *ša rēši*, followed by a phrase to contextualize the explanation. An article by De Zorzi and Jursa has attempted to restore line 7, and suggests the following translation:

obv. 6. [x x x x] : DUMU É.GAL : *šá re-eš ina lib-bi šá še-eḫ-ru-ma*
 obv. 7. [a-na É.GAL šá-s]u-ú a-na a-bi la i-tu-ru :

“‘Courtier’ (lit.: ‘son of the palace’) (means) *ša rēši* (‘courtier’) because as a child [he was summoned] [to the palace] (and) did not return to (his) father” (De Zorzi and Jursa 2011).

De Zorzi and Jursa suppose that courtiers were recruited “by removing a child from its family context and precluding its return, obviously with the intention of thereby forcing it to attach its primary loyalty to the king and the palace establishment” (DE ZORZI & JURSA 2011).

While the above suggestion is possible, it seems doubtful for two reasons: First, the pronominal suffix *-šu* is not appended to the noun *abu*, a significant element of the translation; and second, *târu* in this construction is better translated as “to become”, given the many examples of such a meaning in combination with the preposition *ana* (cf. CAD T 259a). With these considerations in mind I would instead suggest a translation:

“... ‘Son of the palace’ (means) ‘Courtier’, because²) when he was young and ... did not become a father.”

The consensus among most scholars is that the term *ša rēši* refers to eunuchs in service of the king and palace.³⁾ The legal and administrative texts of these courtiers demonstrate “that they were not married and had no children with all the legal consequences when they ‘go to their fate’, at their death” (DELLER 1999, 303).⁴⁾ Even omens which mention the *ša rēši* clarify that they could not produce offspring: “GIM *šu-ut re-e-ši la a-li-di*... like a eunuch who cannot beget” (GRAYSON 1995, 91). These officials were the most loyal servants of the king and were entrusted with great powers and responsibility (AMBOS 2001, 4; DELLER 1999, 307). In a telling description of the situation at the Achaemenid court, Xenophon (when speaking of Cyrus the king) reports that those “who had children or congenial wives or sweethearts, such he (i.e. Cyrus) believed were by nature constrained to love them best. But as he observed that eunuchs were not susceptible to any such affections, he thought that they would

esteem most highly those who were in the best position to make them rich and stand by them if they were ever wronged, and to place them in offices of honour” (GRAYSON 1995, 96).

In light of this evidence, grammatical and historical, the best understanding of the explanation of *ša reši* given by the commentary is that it demonstrates the defining characteristic of that institution: *ša reši* were not expected to have legitimate offspring.

1 The new restoration of the colophon of the tablet by DE ZORZI & JURSA (2011) has persuasively demonstrated this date.

2 The term *ina libbi ša* is difficult to translate. In Late Babylonian it seems to mean “because” (HACKL 2007, 62). In commentaries it is sometimes used to clarify an explanation, see JIMENEZ 2015, sub *libbū* and *ša*.

3 See the references below for an overview of the evidence referring to *ša reši*.

4 Whether they were allowed to adopt children remains unclear (MATILLA 2000, 132).

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