

WHO WERE THE “LADIES OF THE HOUSE” IN THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE?¹

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ABSTRACT

The rather euphemistic “lady of the house”,² *bēlat bēti*,³ appears twelve⁴ times in the extant Neo-Assyrian sources. The overall interpretation of the compound must, however, be more complex than its straightforward translation. In this article, we will aim at clarifying the identity of the ladies who carried this title in the Neo-Assyrian period as well as briefly discussing the possible problems and/or prospects resulting from the proposed identifications. We will argue that more than half of the occurrences clearly use the term “lady of the house” to indicate the wife of the crown prince.

1. “LADIES OF THE HOUSE” BEFORE THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

The compound *bēlat bēti*, “lady of the house”, is not only attested in the Neo-Assyrian period, but also in the third and second millennia BC, in southern Mesopotamia. The oldest known occurrences of this title appear in a handful of administrative texts from the third millennium BC. These sources include two texts from southern Babylonia, one from Nippur⁵ and one from Umma,⁶ and three texts

¹ The preparation of this paper was facilitated by the access to the database of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. We would like to thank J. Novotny, G. Van Buylaere and R. M. Whiting for offering their invaluable comments on a draft of this article.

² Or “Lady of the household/estate”.

³ *bēlet bīti* in Babylonian. Note that the logographic spelling GAŠAN-É for the title is almost exclusively used in Neo-Assyrian sources (see below).

⁴ One of the attestations, however, appears in a duplicate of one of the texts. Thus, there are only eleven unique occurrences in this text corpus.

⁵ Westenholz 1975: no. 67 iv 2, which is a text belonging to a group of texts from Nippur that is dated earlier than Naram-Sîn of Akkad(e) (Westenholz 1975: 9–10).

⁶ For the text (Nik II 53), see Foster 1982: 31; lines i 5 and iii 2 of this text mention *nin é* “the lady of the household”. The document concerns sheep for consumption and offerings in the temples of Inanna and Šara. The wool may have been used by the local textile industry and one of the sheep is specifically said to be allocated to a *šu-i* “a barber”. On the dating of this document, which belongs to “Group A”, see Foster 1982: 2–7, 9, 50. Wilcke (1974/77: 89a) interprets the *nin é* in this text as “queen”.

from northern Babylonia, two texts from the town of Tutub in the region of the Diyala River⁷ and one text from an unspecified site in the Diyala region.⁸ From these laconic administrative texts, it becomes clear that the “lady of the house” was a prominent figure already in the third millennium BC, but her exact role and status are still not fully understood.

In the latter part of the second millennium, more precisely in the 14th century BC, the “lady of the house” is attested twice in the El-Amarna Letters.⁹ These two passages may refer to a sister (EA 1; topically, see also EA 2–5) and a daughter (EA 11) of two successive Babylonian kings, Kadašman-Enlil I and Burna-Buriaš II; these two women were given as concubines to the Egyptian Pharaohs Amenhotep III and Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV). On the other hand, especially in the later EA 11, it is more likely that the woman in question is an Egyptian princess and not her Babylonian counterpart. The precise nuance of the title in the El-Amarna correspondence is thus not certain, but it may either reflect the status of the Pharaoh’s Babylonian concubine or that of his daughter Mayati (Meritaten) who later became the queen of Egypt.¹⁰ Furthermore, these passages may tell about the wish of the Babylonian king(s) to see a Babylonian princess achieving a high rank among the wives of the Pharaoh at the Egyptian court or about his/their desire to marry an Egyptian princess.¹¹

A Sumerian mythical composition now known as Enlil and Sud provides us with an interesting reference to the title, “From now on, let a woman be the ..., let a foreign woman be the lady of the house.”¹² Depending on the date of this literary text – perhaps originally composed in the Old Babylonian period, or even earlier, but being then possibly canonised during the subsequent Middle Babylonian period – could this text in part be interpreted as a literary comment on the political marriages of the third or second millennium BC?¹³

⁷ For NIN.É in nos. 32:17 and 63:8’, see Sommerfeld 1999 and Weiershäuser 2008: 196–197. These documents date to the reign of Naram-Sîn in the twenty-third century BC; see Sommerfeld (1999: 32 and 120 on l. 8’), who briefly, but effectively, sums up the sources and discussion on these prominent ladies in the third millennium BC.

⁸ Gelb 1955: 272–273 (No. 33:48, to be read NIN É¹; see Sommerfeld 1999: 120). The collection to which this text belongs can also be dated to the Old Akkadian period, possibly to the reign of Naram-Sîn or his successor Šar-kali-šarri (Gelb 1955: 170).

⁹ *be-el-ti* É-<*tī*> appears in a broken context in EA 1:48 (see the suggested restoration in Moran 1992: 4 n. 17, for which, of course, the correctness cannot be guaranteed). Greeting-gifts of lapis lazuli to *be-el-ti* É-*ka* are mentioned in EA 11 r.25.

¹⁰ On Mayati (Meritaten) and the identity of the “lady of the house” see the discussion in Moran 1992: 23 n. 22. The letters EA 10–11 record that Burna-Buriaš II sent lavish greeting-gifts to Mayati. It is likely that the Mayati in EA 10 is the same Mayati in EA 11 (see also Hess 1993: 106–107).

¹¹ The latter possibility is plausible in the case of EA 4, because the Babylonian king (Kadašman-Enlil?), see Moran 1992: 9 n. 1) had asked the Pharaoh to provide him with an Egyptian wife already before sending this letter.

¹² Line 156 in Civil 1983: 61; see also ETCSL 1.2.2 for an edition of the text.

¹³ The dating of this composition is uncertain but it is noteworthy that “The independent cult of

The “lady of the house” also appears in texts from Ugarit, where it may have even denoted a goddess;¹⁴ the known Neo-Assyrian attestations, however, clearly refer to humans. The interpretation of the compound in Ugarit, although it diverges from Mesopotamian sources, might result from different syncretistic motifs or their emphasis.

It should be noted that *bēlat bēti* can also be understood more prosaically to allude to any lady of a house, i.e., owner of a house or “housewife”, as it is in the case of the Middle Assyrian Laws¹⁵ and in omen collections such as *Šumma ālu* and *Šumma izbu*.¹⁶ In fact, it is surprising that not a single *bēlat bēti* “owner of a house” is presently attested as a seller of a house in Neo-Assyrian conveyance documents.

To what extent the “lady of the house” is ideologically connected to the divine *bēlet / bēlat ēkalli* “lady of the palace” falls outside the scope of this paper.¹⁷ Therefore, we avoid speculating whether or not there is more than just a structural similarity between the two near-identical compounds. In any case, late Neo-Assyrian sources, which are our main concern here, would not necessarily help us resolve or clarify this issue.

2. “LADY OF THE HOUSE” IN NEO-ASSYRIAN SOURCES¹⁸

In Neo-Assyrian sources, only twelve texts mention the title “lady of the house”. The dates and other pertinent details of these texts, including the relevant prosopographical evidence, are discussed in this section. Except for the last example, which deviates from the rest, we have attempted to give the known attestations chronologically.

(1) A document (CTN 2 223) from the Governor’s Palace archives lists wool distributed to different individuals and households. In line two, “the eunuch of the

Sud seems to have died down after the Early Dynastic period” Black *et al.* 2004: 106. According to the editor of the text, “The tale had a wide diffusion attested not only by the relatively high number of sources preserved and their geographical distribution, but also by its long survival through Middle-Babylonian times and into the Assyrian libraries” (Civil 1983: 43). On political marriages of the third millennium BC, see e.g. Weiershäuser 2008: 260–269; for the second millennium, see the Amarna Letters in particular and for the Neo-Assyrian period, e.g., see Dalley 1998, especially pp. 83–84, 90, 93–98.

¹⁴ However, this interpretation is disputed; see the discussion in De Clercq 2003: 21, 154–156.

¹⁵ Despite the high number of “laws” dealing with women in Middle Assyrian Laws, there is only one reference to *bēlat bēti* (NIN É) in this compilation; for a translation and transcription of this passage, see, e.g., Roth 1995: 161, A § 24 (KAV 1 iii 47).

¹⁶ For this usage, see the references in CAD B: 191; this might be called general, neutral or non-marked usage of the compound and it occurs, amongst others, in Neo- and Late Babylonian. All the extant Neo-Assyrian attestations, however, seem to be “marked” and refer to a specific lady.

¹⁷ On *bēlet ēkalli*, see De Clercq 2003.

¹⁸ For post-canonical dates, we use the conventions of PNA (see PNA 1/I: XVIII–XX).

‘mistress of the house’¹⁹ is said to have received [X] talents of wool. Although the line is broken²⁰, the reading “lady of the house” is supported by Postgate’s comment about line 6. He translates the line as “the eunuch of the palace-[overseer(?)])” but makes the following comment: “Perhaps rather *ša m*ji É.GAL – ‘of the queen’; if so, the identity of the ‘mistress of the house’ becomes problematical.” On the contrary, this makes things much clearer. In fact, “queen” and “lady of the house” are different titles, as will be posited below (no. 8). One should also take into account the commodity in question here. Wool and textile production has clear links to women’s households in the Neo-Assyrian empire.²¹ It makes sense that both the queen and the crown prince’s wife would receive wool.

CTN 2 223 comes from area B 50, room vii. This is the so-called “1950 building”, which Postgate describes as “the home of some branch of the administration”.²² Slightly contrary to that, Joan and David Oates (2001: 134–135) state that it was decorated with “geometric wall paintings” like the Governor’s Palace, which they consider to have been only “the office and/or residence of a series of individuals important in the administration of Kalhu”.

However, the prosopographical evidence in the texts found in the “1950 building” helps us here. Namely, one of the documents unearthed there is a letter to the governor written by the official Nabû-de’iq (CTN 2 230 = SAA 1 228). If Baker is correct in assigning texts to this individual, this Nabû-de’iq was active in the west during the reign of Sargon II (721–705).²³ He is known to have authored (or dictated) five letters to the king and two letters to other officials.²⁴ In the letter found in the “1950 building”, he reports to the governor something that the chief confectioner (*rab karkadinni*) had said; due to the tablet’s poor state of preservation, the rest of the letter is lost. With the dating in the reign of Sargon and the assumption that this lady was most likely the crown prince’s spouse (see below), we have at least two candidates for the “lady of the house” mentioned in this text: Sennacherib’s wives Tašmetu-šarrat or the famous Naqi’a.

(2) In the sale of a house, SAA 6 200 (ADD 337 and AR 178), a servant of the “lady of the house” appears as the first witness: “[Witness NN], chariot fighter of the lady of the house of the crown prince” (r.7’). The text itself records that Šamaš-abu’a, son of Kaki from Maganuba, sold a house and a plot of land in Maganuba.

Robert Whiting suggests that, since the penalty clauses of this contract refer to Aššur and Mullissu, SAA 6 200 may have been written somewhere near Assur.²⁵ This is possible, but since Sargon’s capital Dur-Šarrukin was built on the land

¹⁹ This is the only case in which the spelling NIN-É is used instead of GAŠAN-É (cf. n. 3, above).

²⁰ Postgate (1973: 217) reads the line [() L]Ú?.[S]AG *ša* [N]IN?–É.

²¹ Teppo 2007b: 266–268.

²² Postgate 1973: 7.

²³ PNA 2/II: 820.

²⁴ SAA 1 226–232.

²⁵ PNA 1/I: 70a-b.

of Maganuba²⁶, the only place name appearing in the document, there may well be other reasons behind the choice of deities in the penalty clauses. The archival context of this text is unclear, as it is with most of the texts “excavated” at Nineveh and, therefore, it gives us no further clues pertaining to the location where the document was drawn up.²⁷

The identity of this “lady of the house” depends entirely on the dating of the document. If it dates to the reign of Sennacherib, as Kwasman and Parpola suggest,²⁸ there are at least three potential wives of crown princes that this text might refer to.

The most probable candidate for the lady in question is the wife of Esarhaddon (680–669), Ešarra-ḫammat, the next queen of Assyria. However, since Esarhaddon was named crown prince in 683,²⁹ only two years before the death of his father Sennacherib (704–681), one of the wives of the earlier, previous crown princes is an equally strong candidate. During the reign of Sennacherib, the earliest attested crown prince of Assyria may have been Urdu-Mullissi³⁰, whom Sennacherib demoted in favour of his younger brother Esarhaddon, and who eventually murdered his father.³¹ Around the same time, Aššur-nadin-šumi, the eldest son of Sennacherib was installed as king in Babylon in 699, and in 694 or 693, Nergal-šumu-ibni,³² another son of Sennacherib, may have been appointed as the king of Babylon, after the Babylonians forcibly removed Aššur-nadin-šumi from the throne.³³ It is

²⁶ See Radner 2006c: 54 and especially SAA 12 19:7'–18', and also Fuchs 1994: 38 (l. 44), 293, 431, 447. The distance between Maganuba and Assur is more than 100 km, but Nineveh is much closer to Maganuba than Assur.

²⁷ Regarding the archives of Nineveh, see Parpola 1986 and Reade 1986.

²⁸ The dating is tentative. If the Daniati-ilu mentioned in the text is the same person mentioned in SAA 6 194, as Beate Pongratz-Leisten suspects (PNA 1/II: 376), the dating of the text would be near 681, which is the reconstructed date for SAA 6 194 (Millard 1994: 102–103). The other names mentioned in this text (Šamaš-abu'a, Kaki, Baḫianu, Daniati-ilu, Mari', and Aḫu'a-eriba) are not helpful as far as the dating of the text is concerned. In addition, there is no clue as to the social milieu of this text, because the only profession mentioned is a chariot fighter.

²⁹ Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XXXIV.

³⁰ The name is often written Arda-Mullissi in scholarly literature.

³¹ See, however, Melville 1999: 22.

³² His full name is readable only in SAA 6 186:9'; see the discussion in Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XLI n. 59. The transaction (SAA 6 186) is given the title “An Officer of the Crown Prince Acquires a Vineyard (683)” in the SAA series. Although the title “crown prince” does not appear in this fragmentary document, these personal information officers (ll. 7'–8') are not associated with people other than members of the royal family (e.g., the crown prince in SAA 14 169 r.7; and probably also the crown prince in SAA 6 37 r.8) or provincial governors (see e.g., SAA 6 36:8–9, SAA 15 82 r.5'–6': Marduk-šarru-ušur, governor of Šingibutu/Sangibutu, CTN 2 18:19–20, and probably also SAA 6 57 r.4'–5', 9'). However, on the basis of the date of the document (683), one option is to consider Nergal-šumu-ibni a “prince”. The implications of this problematic date are not discussed by Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XXVII–XXIX, possibly because the text does not mention the *mār šarri* “crown prince, prince”; cf. the dossier of Se'-madi (SAA 6 109–112) and the discussion of it (pp. XXXIII–XXXIV). Regrettably, the name of the month is broken away both in SAA 6 109 r.8' (also dated to 683) and SAA 6 186 r.13.

³³ Even if such an appointment really took place, it is quite unlikely that Nergal-šumu-ibni ever

probably Nergal-šumu-ibni who is referred to by the title “crown prince” in three documents since he is mentioned in a similar context in another document by his name, but without a title (all these texts are dated between 694-I and 693-I).³⁴ Then, at least theoretically, the servant of the “lady of the house” in SAA 6 200 may be a subordinate of his wife.

(3) This attestation comes from the Nineveh archives as well. Lines 3–4 of the legal transaction SAA 6 257 (previous editions: ADD 1194 and NALK 111) contain a reference to “2 gentlemen, servants of the lady of the house of the crown prince”, who sell their slave to Ilu-iššur, “a servant of the crown prince” in 680-I-10. The text is dated 12 or 22 days after Esarhaddon ascended to the throne of Assyria and thus Kwasman and Parpola (1991: XXVII–XXIX) argue convincingly that the title “crown prince” here must refer to Esarhaddon. The scribe seems to have been uncertain whether he should refer to him (Esarhaddon) as the king or the crown prince. To make it clear that he was aware of that a new king had ascended the throne, the scribe (unconventionally) added the following comment after the date: “Purchased in the reign of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria.” Therefore, in this case the lady in question was in all probability Ešarra-ḥammat.³⁵

The buyer Ilu-iššur is identified as being from the town of Illat (location unknown), but the transaction may have been concluded in Nineveh. Although the individuals present in this document are not mentioned in any other known documents, one can gather some hints from their occupations. Both sellers and the buyer are associated with Esarhaddon. This suggests the scene of transaction as the court of Nineveh. One might also guess that in this case the two sellers are the principal heirs of the estate of one Ḥazail, since they are identified as his widow and brother. The female seller might have been an aristocratic woman of means, because women act as sellers quite rarely in the Neo-Assyrian period. With the exception of the scribe and two fowlers, the witnesses of this transaction are military officials (two horse trainers and three outriders). This may indicate that the buyer was likewise a military official or a fowler.

acted as king of Babylon in Babylonia because the most reliable sources are silent about him (see esp. Grayson 1975: 78–81). Nergal-šumu-ibni could as well have been crown prince of Assyria from ca. 694 until 683, i.e., between Urdu-Mullissi and Esarhaddon. If Sennacherib demoted or overlooked his eldest sons in favour of Esarhaddon, including two elder sons who had both previously held the position of crown prince, then psychologically it may not appear so surprising that these two former crown princes turned against their father and killed him. It is well known that Urdu-Mullissi did not act alone when killing Sennacherib but had an accomplice in the plot, who could have been Nergal-šumu-ibni; see Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XLI n. 59.

³⁴ Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XXIX, XXXII–XXXIV. See also PNA 2/II: 956b.

³⁵ Another possible candidate might be queen Ana-Tašmetum-taklak(?) (Finkel 2000: 12), but if there were only one queen or “main wife” at a time, the lady in question must have been Ešarra-ḥammat, because she was alive up to 672 (see Teppo 2007a: 388 and Svärd 2008: 33–34).

(4) In a well-known letter from Nineveh (SAA 16 28 = ABL 308), King Esarhaddon’s eldest daughter Šerua-eṭerat writes to Libbali-šarrat, the wife of the crown prince Assurbanipal. She stresses to Libbali-šarrat the importance of doing her homework. At the end of the letter, Šerua-eṭerat also reminds Libbali-šarrat of her station: “Yet, you are a daughter-in-law – the lady of the house of Assurbanipal, the great crown prince designate of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (ù at-ti ma-rat kal-lat GAŠAN-É ša ṁaš-šur-DÜ-A).”³⁶ The letter was recently discussed by Livingstone (2007a: 103–105), whose main aim was to connect this piece of evidence to the promotion of literacy at the royal court.³⁷ Nevertheless, the letter can also be seen as something more unusual, i.e., as proof of education preparing Libbali-šarrat for her imminent role as queen of Assyria. It may also be feasible to consider her literacy as a means for her to perform cultic duties, first as the “lady of the house” and then later as the queen of Assyria. The question concerning Libbali-šarrat’s cultic role is left undecided for the time being, but clearly this letter provides compelling evidence by equating the title “lady of the house” with that of the spouse of the crown prince.

(5) The administrative document SAA 7 4 (ADD 854) lists governors and high officials. Parts of it are missing, but a relevant passage on the reverse is fairly clear. After stating that 49 high-ranking officers are under the authority of the crown prince, the text lists Marduk-šarru-ušur, “[eunuch] of the crown prince”, Nabû-rešu’a, “chief fuller”, Man-ki-Ḫarran, “major-domo” and Tutī, “village manager”, and it adds a summary note stating that they all belong to the household of the “lady of the [house]” ([PAB] a-na É GAŠAN-[É]).

Fales and Postgate (1992: XVII–XIX) suggest that this text, as well as some other documents (SAA 7 1–7 form a coherent group), might be part of a larger group of texts which assign lodgings to high officials (nos. 1–12). Thus, the four persons mentioned above do not belong to the household of the “lady of the house”, but

³⁶ Livingstone (2007a: 104) may be right here when arguing that interpolating the word “only” between “are” and “a” appears erroneous.

³⁷ ABL 308 is an *abat mar’at šarri* “letter/word of the king’s daughter”, and not an *abat šarri* “a royal memo” as Livingstone (2007a: 103) designates the document; this is a significant point and defines the relationship between the two high ladies at the Assyrian court in Nineveh during the late reign of Esarhaddon. The word *abutu* at the beginning of any Neo-Assyrian letter clearly marks the letter as sent from superior to inferior, at least from the writer/sender’s point of view. Had this been a letter between equals, *ṭuppi/īm* followed by the sender’s name would have been expected (private communication, Greta Van Buylaere, who will discuss the matter in her forthcoming dissertation). The nature of the word *abutu* in this context may be further exemplified by quoting a letter sent to Sargon II by the treasurer Aššur-dur-paniya, *mīnu abatūni šarru bēlī iqabbūni šarru bēlī lišpura* “Let the king, my lord, write me what his orders are.” SAA 5 52 r.19–20. In general, it is not bad to translate *abat šarri* as “the king’s word” at the beginning of a letter, but at the same time this translation is weak since it does not reflect the relationship between the sender and the recipient of a letter.

rather were lodged in her household temporarily, perhaps for some major festival in Nineveh.³⁸

Mattila dates the document to the late reign of Esarhaddon, when his succession treaty ceremony took place in Nineveh in 672.³⁹ Some details suggest that SAA 7 4 is closely connected to SAA 7 3; many of the same people are mentioned there, but not in the same order. The provinces of Upumu and Kulimmi (mentioned in no. 3) were not annexed by Assyria before 673, narrowing down the date of this text considerably. A further clue is that SAA 7 3 may date to the same year as SAA 7 1, although only the month and the day (one day earlier than no. 1) were written down.⁴⁰ Parpola, however, has suggested that the date for SAA 7 1 is 650.⁴¹ Fales and Postgate conclude that these proposed datings and other prosopographical evidence indicate that SAA 7 3 was written in the late reign of Esarhaddon or in the early reign of Assurbanipal, between the years 673–650.⁴²

In any case, it seems certain that the title “lady of the house” here refers to the spouse of the crown prince, especially as the household of the “lady of the house” is mentioned right after the crown prince’s. Therefore, we assume that this passage likewise concerns Assurbanipal’s wife, Libbali-šarrat. Parpola reads the sign GAŠAN (interpreted as “(to the house of the) Lady”) on SAA 7 1, which would mean that this same lady housed other guests as well.⁴³

(6) The partially preserved administrative list SAA 7 21 (ADD 835) and its likewise partially preserved duplicate SAA 7 22 (ADD 836 = 83-1-18,399) are regarded as surveys of palace officials. The latter is one of the few texts from the Nineveh archives for which a well-founded guess can be made regarding its provenance since most of the 900 tablets forming the 83-1-18-group were excavated in Room LIV of the South-West Palace.⁴⁴ The majority of these are datable to the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.⁴⁵ Assuming that the title once again signifies the spouse of the crown prince, we suggest Libbali-šarrat as the “lady of the house” here, on the presumption that the text was composed in the late reign of Esarhaddon.

The text does not provide exact titles, but groups them on a rather descriptive level, e.g., “520, the high officials”, “[x hundred, the b]odyguards”, and “1,200, the household of the Lady of the House”. Fales and Postgate suggest that the numbers are so high that they are likely to refer to “the entire body of military, administrative

³⁸ The lodging-theory may be supported by the fact that the 49 persons that “belong” to the crown prince also included a *turtānu* (l. 2’), whose appearance may be difficult to explain as being part of the staff of the crown prince.

³⁹ Mattila 1990: 15.

⁴⁰ Fales & Postgate 1992: XVIII–XIX.

⁴¹ Parpola 1983: 456.

⁴² Fales & Postgate 1992: XIX.

⁴³ Fales & Postgate 1992: XVII and the comments to SAA 7 1.

⁴⁴ Reade 1986: 213–214.

⁴⁵ Parpola 1986: 228–229.

or domestic personnel at Nineveh at the time”, rather than some commodity.⁴⁶ We find this statement slightly problematic and think that a commodity of some kind seems a more probable answer to these high numbers.⁴⁷

(7) The obverse of SAA 7 23 (ADD 950) enumerates 145 weavers, whereas the reverse lists 13 *šakintus* (female administrative chiefs in charge of the women of the palace⁴⁸). Since the two faces of the tablet were written at different times and possibly even by different scribes, the connection between these two lists is not entirely certain.⁴⁹ Moreover, the place names associated with the weavers are different from those of the *šakintus*. In any case, one of the *šakintus* is stationed in “the household of the lady of the house”.

The date of composition is uncertain, but Fales and Postgate suggest that this text might have been composed for the same event as for SAA 7 1–12 (see attestation no. 5 above), which gives us some clues as to the provenance and the dating of the document.⁵⁰ Although it is not certain, it is plausible that the title again refers to the spouse of the crown prince. The queen and her entourage were most probably located in the palace of Nineveh Central City (mentioned in many texts) and the crown prince’s wife would have had a separate household, É GAŠAN–É. Thus, the woman in question could again be Libbali-šarrat.

(8) The partially broken administrative document SAA 7 130 (ADD 1104) from Nineveh lists various high officials who sent food supplies to the “lady of the house”. Fales and Postgate (1992: XXX) argue that the food was an audience gift (*nāmurtu*) to highly placed persons. The identifiable officials of high rank include the governors of Barḫalzi, Calah, and Arzuḫina, a eunuch of the king, a mayor, and the chief shepherd. These individuals do not appear in other texts – although some of the titles do – and are therefore of little help with dating this text. However, the last mentioned official, Milki-nuri, appears in many texts written during the reigns

⁴⁶ Fales & Postgate 1992: XIX.

⁴⁷ First of all, there are also two personal names in this list listed with “X hundred”. It is possible that several hundred individuals were under the authority of these persons, especially if the person in question was chief victualler or the cohort commander of the crown prince (for this possibility, see PNA 1/I: 73b s.v. Aḫu-duri nos. 23–28). Nonetheless, the personal names break the pattern of listing large professional groups. A more grave concern is that the numbers seem too large to be numbers of personnel, even for the whole of Nineveh. For “the household of the lady of the house”, the number 1,200 is quoted. Another 800 are listed for the chief eunuch. Altogether, the numbers on this fragmentarily preserved tablet amount to at least 5,240 persons. Assuming that the “lady of the house” here refers to the wife of the crown prince, as before, it is hard to imagine her having a staff of 1,200 persons. This becomes particularly difficult when we remember that the probable number of women living in the palace of Nineveh Central City would have been between 150–300 women (see Teppo 2007b: 267).

⁴⁸ Teppo 2007b.

⁴⁹ Fales & Postgate 1992: XIX.

⁵⁰ Fales & Postgate 1992: XIX.

of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal as “the eunuch of the queen”; the texts mentioning him date to the years 672–669.⁵¹

It is significant that in a related text, SAA 7 132, the food audience gifts go to the queen. This implies that the titles “queen” and “lady of the house” were indeed separate. This, connected with the certainty of the text’s date of composition, would again identify Libbali-šarrat as the most likely candidate as the “lady of the house”.

(9) In SAA 6 339 r.9 (ADD 408), Remanni-Adad, the chief chariot driver of king Assurbanipal (668–630), buys land. Among the witnesses appears “[NN], chariot driver of the house of the lady [of the palace]”. We would, however, prefer to render the end of r.9 as “the house(hold) of the lady [of the *house*]”.⁵²

The date of this text is broken away, but if the restoration in l. 4’ is correct, Assurbanipal was already king. However, it is not impossible that the text could be earlier. The text is part of the Remanni-Adad dossier found at Nineveh and his earliest transactions are to be dated to the period of 671–668 BC, although his transactions do continue down to 660 (see SAA 6 296–350). If we assume that the text is from the reign of Assurbanipal and that the title regularly refers to the spouse of the crown prince or of a prince, then the identity of this “lady of the house” is unclear. The wife of Assurbanipal’s heir Aššur-etel-ilani (629*–626*?) is not a likely candidate, because he most probably ascended the throne while still a minor. Thus, he was not even born in the years under discussion (668–660).⁵³

There are a total of fourteen witnesses for this land sale. The majority of them hold military titles, including five chariot drivers, two “third men”, and a deputy team commander. Other witnesses of high rank in the court are the chief diviner and the deputy of the chief physician. Most of these witnesses appear in other documents of the Remanni-Adad dossier as well. The known dates regarding their activities support the date proposed above.⁵⁴

(10) In the year 619*, a smith called Tuqunu-ereš lent a large sum (8 1/3 minas) of silver to Girittu, a chariot maker (SAA 14 169 = ADD 50). The witnesses of this document have interesting professions, some of them being servants of the most important dignitaries, and they came from numerous cities. One of them is “Bel-Ḫarran-isše’a, “a chariot fighter of the lady of the house”, while other witnesses are a “third man” from the Inner City, a merchant from Kilizi, three gatekeepers (New Palace, temple of Ninurta and the gatekeeper of the commander-in-chief), a royal bodyguard from Ḫarran, a recruit, an Assyrian singer, an architect(?), a baker from Kilizi, a stone driller from Kurba’il, an information officer of the crown prince,

⁵¹ PNA 2/II: 752 and Luukko & Van Buylaere 2002: XVIII–XIX.

⁵² The SAA edition reads *ša é GAŠAN^l–[é^l]* and not e.g. *ša é GAŠAN^l–[é^l.GAL]*.

⁵³ PNA 1/I: 183a.

⁵⁴ According to PNA, dates for other texts with these witnesses are 670–663 and 660.

and two scribes. Unfortunately, none of these individuals appear in other known documents and therefore the prosopographical evidence is of no help here.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, most of the witnesses in the document are probably from Nineveh. The names of the provincial cities are apparently marked to highlight the presence of less familiar witnesses from outside the capital in this context. The majority of the witnesses from the capital relate to the palace, with the exception of the gatekeeper of the temple of Ninurta. There are also quite a few military witnesses (5 out of 15).

The document is from the reign of Sîn-šarru-iškun (626*–612*),⁵⁶ which makes the identity of this “lady of the house” completely uncertain, since even the name of Sîn-šarru-iškun’s designated successor is not known. Nevertheless, the fact that one of the witnesses comes from the crown prince’s household supports the hypothesis that the “lady of the house” here refers to the wife of the crown prince. In addition, most of the evidence so far available suggests that the title would usually have been used in connection with the spouse of the crown prince.

(11) Almost all the above attestations of the “lady of the house” can relatively safely be taken to represent the wife of the crown prince. This would make things look unexpectedly simple. The last occurrence of the compound under study, however, differs from the others since it does not refer to the spouse of the crown prince, but to the wife of another high official, the *turtānu*. Although the passage in question (see below) has been interpreted in different ways, there is no doubt as to the reading of the signs in the relevant line.⁵⁷

This document from Calah (ND 2605) is apparently a memorandum of business transactions of a certain Ḫašdaya⁵⁸. One of the transactions involves a gardener, possibly [*Nerga*]-*l-na’di*, who is said to be a servant of Duri-Issar, the ... of the village manager Šumma-Aššur of “the lady of the house of the commander-in-chief” (MÍ. GAŠAN-É ša LÚ.tar-tan).⁵⁹ This lady evidently owns her own estates, since a village manager is her subordinate.⁶⁰ By way of comparison, the preceding transaction on the tablet relates the sale of two dependent farmers by Ilu-šumu-iddina, village manager of the queen, to Ḫašdaya.

⁵⁵ The scribe Bel-lamur, the keeper of the tablet in 619*, cannot be the man with the same name in SAA 6 140 (contra Gentili in PNA 1/II: 319), since the purchaser in that document (Sîn-šarru-ušur) was active during 693–682 (PNA 3/I: 1145).

⁵⁶ PNA 1/I: XIX.

⁵⁷ Collated by ML in August 2008.

⁵⁸ According to Saggs (2001: 274) Kuddaya, but see PNA 2/I: 464b.

⁵⁹ Note the erroneous reading by Saggs (2001: 274): ša MUNUS š[a]? É ša amēl tar-tan, although he drew the third sign of the line, which is a variant sign-form of GAŠAN consisting of 7 tilted wedges, correctly (Pl. 54). The document was also edited earlier in Parker 1961: 36–37, who thought that although the sign resembles GAŠAN, the context would suggest GÊME. However, she translates the relevant passage as “wife”.

⁶⁰ Briefly discussed in Teppo 2007a: 407. See also Mattila 2000: 118, 132–133.

The text was found in the administrative wing of the North-West Palace, more precisely in area ZT 4, the so-called Ziggurat Terrace. This area presumably consisted mainly of offices and storage facilities. The fill in room ZT 4 produced about 350 documents that were the remains of the royal archives, mostly from the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727) and Sargon II (721–705). Many of these documents are letters,⁶¹ but some are administrative documents; the latter texts were published by Parker and her editions are now hopelessly outdated.⁶² Apparently, the “imperial” office that was associated with the room ZT 4 texts ceased to be in use by the end of Sargon’s reign, when the capital was moved to Dur-Šarrukin (706).⁶³

ND 2605 was composed either in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, or Sargon II.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the prosopographical evidence does not help us date this document more precisely.

As a matter of fact, a fragmentary letter (ND 2361⁶⁵) from the eighth century BC belonging to the Nimrud corpus confirms that the *turtānu* was the deputy of the king at that time. Hence, we may consider the *turtānu* second in rank after the king in the Assyrian empire. Nevertheless, this may only concern the ninth century and most of the eighth century BC as it is plausible that the position of the *turtānu* was considerably weakened after Sargon II split the office of *turtānu* into two, thus introducing the left *turtānu* in 708 BC.⁶⁶ It should not be ruled out that several *turtānus* were relatives of the king.⁶⁷

3. “LADY OF THE HOUSE” IN CULT?

On the basis of the seven administrative and four legal documents we have briefly mentioned above, together with one letter, not much can be said about the cultic duties of the “lady of the house”. The arguments or premises for such activities of hers therefore have to be established using indirect evidence or speculative reasoning. As already outlined at the beginning of this paper, *bēlat bēti*, “lady of the

⁶¹ Published in Saggs 2001.

⁶² Parker 1961. See pp. 36–37 (Pl. XIX) for ND 2605.

⁶³ Oates & Oates 2001: 45–47, 68.

⁶⁴ It is probably more correct to read the personal name in l. 2’ as Tiglath-pileser (^m*tukul-ti-’A-É’*. [ŠA]R.[R]A than ^m*ku-ti-a* (for the latter reading, cf. Parker 1961: 36 and Saggs 2001: 273), but this does not automatically mean that the tablet was written during his reign since the purpose of mentioning him almost at the beginning of the tablet may be to refer to his deeds in the past.

⁶⁵ The credit for determining the exact nature of this document belongs entirely to our teacher Simo Parpola. The most recent, but unsatisfactory, edition of this letter can be found in Saggs 2001: 240–241.

⁶⁶ For the establishment of the office of the left *turtānu*, see, e.g., Mattila 2000: 111.

⁶⁷ On this question, though usually only the well-known *turtānu* Šamši-ilu is taken into account, see, e.g., Mattila 2000: 110, 129. It is possible that the family of the *turtānu* is mentioned together with the royal family, though this necessitates restoring [LUGAL] in line 5 of the letter ND 2682, a text from the same Nimrud corpus. For an edition of the letter, see at present Saggs 2001: 289–290.

house” in all Neo-Assyrian attestations signifies mortal women, and not goddesses. Since we now know that the title refers to the wife of the crown prince, a cultic (*bēltu*⁶⁸) and/or institutional (*bētu*) role may be assumed for the “lady of the house”. However, the specific nature of her or their role(s) may only be guessed at with the present textual evidence. Our guess, for which arguments can be presented, is that she was involved with the cult of Ištar. For example, Weiershäuser has recently (2008) published a monograph on the royal women of the Ur III dynasty in which she describes in detail their participation in the cult of Inanna.⁶⁹ In the first millennium BC, comparatively speaking, the cult of Ištar was as strong as ever, and even if almost 1500 years separate these two groups of royal women, why should their activities be essentially very different from one another?

If resorting once more to SAA 16 28 (ABL 308), one cannot escape from the idea that a young girl, Libbali-šarrat, wife of the crown prince, may in a way have been prepared to assume the role as an earthly counterpart of Ištar (or Mullissu), the Mesopotamian lady *par excellence*, in a ritual context.⁷⁰ The goddess Ištar’s roles included, amongst others, that of acting “between the heavenly and earthly domains” and being “mediatrix of divine knowledge” (see Nissinen in this volume). The mortal “lady of the house” may well have acted as mediatrix of divine love and wisdom through literacy, at least on a symbolical level. In practice, this could have happened through her, possibly together with other royal women, taking part in rituals, for example, by performing offerings to the goddess and ritual ceremonies, either next to her husband or independently, by saying her prayers or praising the goddess(es) Ištar/Mullissu. Even if not much relevant evidence can be adduced for it, these speculative notes can hardly be considered groundless.

The systematic, if not even programmatic, use of GAŠAN in the Neo-Assyrian documents of the seventh century may insinuate that *bēlat bēti* could have been read or understood with specific connotations. For example, one could interpret the reading GAŠAN as *ištarītu*,⁷¹ thus even *ištarīt bēti* could at least theoretically be

⁶⁸ Keeping in mind that the word *bēltu* mostly occurs in Neo-Assyrian texts in connection with goddesses, Ištar and her numerous manifestations in particular. But, of course, *bēltu* represents the feminine equivalent of the masculine *bēlu* “lord”; the latter is not only often used in religious contexts but also on mundane occasions, for instance, in addressing superiors in general, and it also appears as an essential element in many professional titles. Although *bēltu* “lady” is used when addressing a superior woman (see, e.g., SAA 10 154:1, 4, r.1, 3, and SAA 10 348:13, both of which are either purely NB or at least NB influenced letters), it is so far not attested in the Neo-Assyrian period in any compounds that would designate professions.

⁶⁹ See especially Weiershäuser 2008: 26, 52–58, 60–68, 120, 135–142, 167–168, 177–181, 205–207, 241. On the possible attempts of En-ḫedu-ana, daughter of Sargon of Akkad(e), to establish Inanna/Ištar as the goddess of the Sargonic dynasty through syncretism, see also Weiershäuser 2008: 252–253 (with previous bibliography).

⁷⁰ Ištar and Mullissu may appear interchangeable in some contexts, see Parpola 1997: XVIII.

⁷¹ AHw: 399b, CAD I/J: 270b; in Old Babylonian *ištarītu* was a woman of special but unclear status (see CAD I/J: 271a).

considered, but, on the other hand, NIN, which commonly corresponds to Akkadian *bēltu* “lady, mistress”, does not seem to carry this semantic nuance.

Known seventh century BC prophecies show that Ištar and Mullissu acted as the tutelary goddesses of the king and his dynasty in the late Neo-Assyrian period.⁷² Provokingly, it may be asked: could *bēlat bēti* also have meant the “lady of the dynasty”? In practice, this connotation could be explained by arguing that it was the *obligation* of the future queen to give birth to an heir of the dynasty and by fulfilling this obligation the succession of the Sargonid dynasty was safeguarded.

4. CONCLUSION

The concept “lady of the house” is not a Neo-Assyrian innovation, but it may have had some specific nuances in this period; it is only used in connection with women of the highest rank in the Assyrian empire, excluding the queen or queen mother (Zakutu/Naqi’a in particular). This absence of any evidence that the “lady of the house” refers to the queen of Assyria, as opposed to the “future queen of Assyria”, is particularly interesting. It is possible that to some extent this could hold true for earlier periods of Mesopotamian history as well. This might at least explain the relatively rare distribution of the compound. Thus, a woman called the “lady of the house” should probably not be interpreted as the “queen” without conclusive evidence. In the Neo-Assyrian period, clearly the concept was mainly used for the crown prince’s wife and the compound is so far only limited to royal women (i.e., to the wives of crown princes and to that of the *turtānu*). This might suggest that the underlying idea behind the concept is nothing less than dynastic continuity, connected to the ideological concern and desire to have a legitimate king from the true seed.

In theory, the term might have referred to wives of other princes as well, but there is no direct evidence to support this. Likewise, the wives of provincial governors may also have been called “ladies of the house”, at least in the literal sense of the compound, but the sources for influential women outside Neo-Assyrian capitals (esp. Nineveh, Calah) are scanty.

A significant number of the texts in which the “lady of the house” appears seem to refer to Libbali-šarrat, Assurbanipal’s wife. Many of these documents involve military officers in some way, especially charioteers of the “lady of the house” (mentioned in 3 out of 11 attestations). This is in accordance with the general tendency of these archives. As Kwasman and Parpola point out, the central people in the legal transactions from Nineveh are either administrative officials relating to

⁷² On their protective role, see Parpola 1997a: XXXI, XXXVI, XLVII, LXIII, LXVI (including goddesses’ constant “fear not!” assurances to the king through prophetesses or prophets), C (n. 180), CVI (n. 259); and the passages in texts SAA 9 2 i 19’, ii 4’–5’, iii 23’; 9 9:1’ (see also the comment to this line).

women’s quarters or charioteers and military officers serving the king and the crown prince. Therefore, this regular appearance of military personnel might be partly coincidental. On the other hand, it may well reflect the substantial representation of military personnel among the Neo-Assyrian elite,⁷³ or the overall number of preventive measures taken to protect the crown prince and his wife.

Chronologically, the attestations are rather concentrated on the late reign of Esarhaddon and early reign of Assurbanipal (nos. 3–4 and 8 are clearly from Esarhaddon’s reign and attestations 5–7 and 9 are either from the reign of Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal), outnumbering those of the reigns of Sargon II (nos. 1 and perhaps 11), Sennacherib (no. 2), and Sîn-šarru-iškun (no. 10). This is no doubt due to the amount and the nature of evidence presently available to us, but may also be influenced by other factors.

The evidence for “ladies of the house” is presented in Table I.

⁷³ Kwasman & Parpola 1991: XX–XXI.

No.	Text ID	Transliteration	Approximate Date	“Lady of the house”	Type of text
1.	CTN 2 223:2	[[() L]ú?.[s]AG ša [N]IN?–É	Reign of Sargon II	Tašmetu- šarrat or Naqi’a	Administrative
2.	SAA 6 200	A–SIG šá ⁷⁴ GAŠAN ¹ –É ¹ šá DUMU–MAN	Reign of Sennacherib?	Ešarra- hammat?	Legal
3.	SAA 6 257	PAB 2 LÚ.MEŠ- <i>e</i> ARAD.MEŠ- <i>ni ša</i> GAŠAN–É ša DUMU– MAN	680-I-10	Ešarra- hammat ⁷⁴	Legal
4.	SAA 16 28	GAŠAN–É ša ^m aš- šur–DÜ–A	672 or 671 ⁷⁵	Libbali- šarrat	Letter
5.	SAA 7 4	É GAŠAN–[É]	673–650	Libbali- šarrat?	Administrative
6.	SAA 7 21 / SAA 7 22	1-[<i>lim 2-me</i>] É ¹ GAŠAN–É / 1- <i>lim 2¹-me</i> É GAŠAN–É	Reign of Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal	Libbali- šarrat?	Administrative
7.	SAA 7 23	É GAŠAN–É	Reign of Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal	Libbali- šarrat?	Administrative
8.	SAA 7 130	<i>a-na</i> GAŠAN–É	672–669	Libbali- šarrat	Administrative
9.	SAA 6 339	LÚ.DIB–PA.MEŠ ša É GAŠAN ¹ –[É ¹]	671–660	Libbali- šarrat?	Legal
10.	SAA 14 169	LÚ*.A–SIG ša ¹ GAŠAN–É	619*-II-20	?	Legal
11.	ND 2605 ⁷⁶	LÚ*.GAL URU.MEŠ- <i>ni</i> ša MÍ. ⁷ GAŠAN ⁷⁷ –É ša LÚ. <i>tur-tan</i>	Reign of Tiglath- pileser III, Shalmaneser V or Sargon II	Unnamed wife of a <i>turtānu</i>	Administrative

Table I. The “Ladies of the House” in the Neo-Assyrian period.

⁷⁴ See n. 35.⁷⁵ Luukko & Van Buylaere 2002: XVII–XIX.⁷⁶ Parker 1961: 36–37.⁷⁷ See n. 59.