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# Women and Palaces in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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# Women and Palaces in the Neo-Assyrian Period

Francis JOANNÈS\*

The status of women in Neo-Assyrian palaces is well documented, and has been for a long time, through texts and archaeological finds. It reveals that what we could term the Queen's Household as an institution was a powerful element of the Neo-Assyrian palatial system. Women who operate in the Queen's Household possess an economic power that can be considerable. Every place where the Queen is present, and even every place where she owns large domains, generates a Queen's Household with female staff used for service, production, and administration. On the royal administration's model, these Queens' Households are placed under the authority of an administrator-in-chief, the *šakintu*. This person manages and controls the finances of the House placed under her authority, as the Queen would herself do it, as in fact the lady of the house would in general. These *šakintus* rely both on the power that their function affords them, and on belonging to family or ethnic networks that are a useful complement to their economic role. This economic role is indeed not ordered along a male/female distinction only. The marriage of Šubētu, the daughter of the *šakintu* Amat-Astarti is a good example of the status and economic power of such a woman.

**Keywords:** administration, household, palace, queen, *šakintu*

## I. Introduction

I would like to present here elements of analysis on the status of women in the first millennium B.C. within the great political and economic institution that was the royal palace. Such a study is unfortunately limited by the scarcity of available sources for the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid period in Babylonia. I have therefore turned to Neo-Assyrian documents, especially those for the eighth and seventh centuries, which provide us with a great amount of data related to life in royal palaces.

The status of women in palaces is indeed well documented, and has been for a long time, through texts but also through spectacular archaeological finds such as women's graves in the North-West palace of Kalḫu<sup>1</sup> and through several iconographic sources.<sup>2</sup> It reveals that what we could term the Queen's Household as an institution was a powerful element of the Neo-Assyrian palatial system. Far from the only place where the reigning queen resided—the one who bore the title of MÍ.É.GAL or MÍ.KUR (Sumerian) = *issi ekalli/segallu* (Akkadian) (Parpola 1988)—, the Queen's Household had multiple locations, in large capitals but also in cities linked to the centres of exploitations of agricultural resources.

To study the Queen's Household does not in fact mean we are only interested in individuals

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Abbreviations follow the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative ([http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/abbreviations\\_for\\_assyriology](http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/abbreviations_for_assyriology)), with the following exception: TB = Dalley 1997.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Damerji 1999; Fadhil 1990a-b; Kamil 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Albenda 1987; Ornan 2002.

from the royal family. Determining the respective powers of the Queen-Mother (the mother of the reigning king) and the Queen who is the main spouse is both a political and economic problem that we will not treat here. The advantage of using Neo-Assyrian sources lies in helping us document the women who exercised functions within various Palaces and who present a particular economic situation: they do not only constitute a workforce for production or service: some of them had a set of powers of decision-making, control and autonomous implementation which gave them a real economic power.

This aspect of things has been the subject of several recent studies on which I have based myself, and whose main analyses and conclusions I have used. Other than N. Postgate's major article published in *Iraq* 41 (= Postgate 1979) and the elements gathered in Radner 1997, this research field has mostly been explored by Saana Teppo (2005) now Saana Svärd (2015) and by Sherry Lou MacGregor (2012) who provide an updated current bibliography.

We will thus see here in the first instance a brief summary of what are Neo-Assyrian queens and their Household, then the role played by the female administrator-in-chief of the Queen's Household called the *šakintu*. Finally, a case study centred on a marriage contract from Kalḫu will enable us to contextualise certain questions that emerge concerning the economic role played by these women in Neo-Assyrian palaces.

## II. The Queens and Their Households

What was the female hierarchy of the palace? The role of the king's mother seems to have been a powerful one, at the very least according to Šammu-ramat and Naqia's careers.<sup>3</sup> The king's daughters also enjoyed a high status: they participate in certain rituals and serve in political marriages. They are present during temple visits, in particular to address themselves to female divinities like Šerua or Mullissu. In the diplomatic field, we know the case of Sargon II's daughter, Aḫat-abiša, who was married to the king of Tabal. Similarly, Esarhaddon married his daughter to the king of Scythes. Šerua-eṭerat's letter to her sister-in-law Libbali-šarrat, wife of Aššurbanipal, shows that royal princesses participated in the written culture.

### 1. The Residences of Assyrian Queens

The Queen and the Queen-Mother had several residences, lands, and managed their assets, with their own staff, including military. In the capital's palace, the residential part (*bētānu*) was used as the royal family's residence: it was not simply destined to "enclose" women. However, in several palaces, we know of palace quarters reserved for royal women and their staff: it is the case at Kalḫu in the North-West palace and in the *ekal māšarti* (= Fortress of Shalmaneser). In the first, finds have shown that it contained well-built and spacious apartments with reception rooms and bathrooms. The queen's apartment in particular had a very large reception room (Oates and Oates 2001, 65). We have found women's objects in all these apartments and, underneath, women's graves. Rooms 74 and 75 had subterranean rooms underneath them that contained precious objects. Similarly with the *ekal māšarti* renovated by Esarhaddon: the south-west angle contained the residential part, separated from the rest by corridors; it comprised

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Melville 1999; Svärd 2015; MacGregor 2012.

vast apartments and contained several women's objects. In room S10 ("storeroom") tablets were found that constituted the archives of the *šakintu*, the female administrator of the Queen's Household, which proved that the queen had several residences at Kalḫu, and probably also in other capitals. In Nineveh, the South-West palace also contained a residential wing, allocated to Tašmetum-šarrat, Sennacherib's wife. Other sparse mentions attest to a Queen's Palace at Ekallātum, and Queen's Household at Arbail, Kilizi, Adaian and Kasappa. In total, attestations of Assyrian queens' residences cite at least twenty-six establishments in twenty different locations (see Tables 2-3 below). Also, some queens could even have had autonomous building activities: thus, Naqia may have had a palace built at Nineveh (Borger 1956, 116), next to Sîn and Šamaš's temple.

If we look at what we know of landholdings, two queens owned lands in the city of Šabbu (site unknown): Sennacherib transferred land belonging to the queen-mother, after the latter's death, to the mother of the crown prince. According to S. Melville (1999), the person would be Naqia. At Laḫiru, in the upper Diyala valley, we find an Idu'a, "an intendant to the city of Laḫiru from the queen mother's domain" in 678. Other members of the royal family (Šamaš-šum-ukin and Libbali-šarrat) also owned lands at Laḫiru. We know, finally, that the queen owned vast domains in the region of Harran: maybe we should link this to the mention of a statue of Naqia placed in the street of the city of Gadisê, near Harran (SAA 13 188: see Melville 1999, 105).

A king's daughter is said to have owned a city (SAA 11 221), while Sennacherib's daughter, Šadditu bought an entire property (garden, house, fields, and operation personnel) (SAA 6 251), and the daughter of Naqia, Abi-rāmi, rented land at Baruri in 674 (SAA 6 252).

Aside the revenues coming from their properties, royal women received gifts: in the Nimrud Wine Lists, the queen receives 300 portions of wine; in a list of Nineveh, she received 250 portions. When tributes are sent to the king, he allocates a share to the queen who is a beneficiary on the same level as the highest dignitaries of the empire. Thus, the text SAA 7 48 documents money received by the queen and by king's daughter. We note, finally, a large allocation of linen (SAA 7 115) to the Queen's Household, apparently for her own needs.

In return, the queen made sumptuous offerings to temples: animals (SAA 7 175, 181), oil, honey, and perfumes. Naqia offered 1 mina of gold to a temple of Babylonia for the tiara of Nabû. Finally, the queen (eight Kuššite horses) and the queen-mother (twenty Kuššite horses) provided horses to the army by the intermediary of the temple of Nabû at Kalḫu and they were the only ones to do so from the royal family.

## 2. Staff Attached to the Queen's Household

The staff of the Queen's *Household* is mixed: masculine and feminine. We find within it (one or several) butlers, cooks, and food preparers in large cities, as well as textile and precious metal craftsmen. The queen even had a dock-chief and merchants. The Queen's Household counted eunuchs who took advantage of their status to acquire land and staff, like Milki-nûri, eunuch to the queen in 668.

The women who are cited as coming from palatial staff fall within a number of categories quite well identified (see Table 1 below):

- administrative support: *šakintu*, *lahḫīnutu*, *masennutu*, *tuṣšarrutu*
- leisure: musicians: *nuartu*, *nargallutu*, *kurgarrutu*(?)
- service staff: GÉME.É.GAL (“palace maid”), *šaḳītu*, *gallābtu*
- technicians for jewellery (*nappaḫtu*, *pallissu*), perfumes (*muraqqītu*), food (*āpītu*, *karkaddinutu*), and clothing (MÍ.UŠ.BAR.MEŠ)

**Table 1: Women Professionals in Imperial Administrative Records (Teppo 2005, 70)**

Profession	Translation	Translation	Listed in SAA 7
<i>Šakintu</i>	Administrator	SAA 7 23	13
<i>Nargallutu</i>	Chief musician	SAA 7 24	8
<i>Lahḫīnutu</i>	Stewardess	SAA 7 24	6
<i>Tuṣšarrutu</i>	Scribe	SAA 7 24; CTN 3 39, 40	6
<i>Masennutu</i>	Treasurer	SAA 7 26	many (MEŠ)
<i>Nuārtu</i>	Musician	SAA 7 26, 24	many (MEŠ)+53
<i>Nappāḫtu</i>	Smith	SAA 7 24	altogether 15
<i>Pallissu</i>	Stone-borer	SAA 7 24	
<i>Gallābtu</i>	Barber	SAA 7 24	1
<i>Kurgarrutu</i>	Performer of some kind	SAA 7 24	x+13
<i>Muraqqītu</i>	Perfume maker	SAA 7 24	1
<i>Šāḳītu</i>	Cup bearer	SAA 7 26	many (MEŠ)
<i>Āpītu</i>	Baker	SAA 7 26	many (MEŠ)

A Kalḫu female scribe from the Queen’s Household lends money. Finally, as S. Dalley and N. Postgate (1984, 93-94) remark, the Queen’s Household, by the intermediary of one of her scribes, lent money to private individuals coming from the Mullissu temple.

What doesn’t yet appear clearly is a possible distribution of women only found in the king’s household, others only found in the *Queen’s Household*, and those common to both. Though what should be ascertained is that the two Houses were really differentiated inside the Palace. What leads us to think they are marks found impressed on prestigious objects that are either the emblem of the king (a lion), the queen (a scorpion),<sup>4</sup> or of other houses to avoid confusions when precious dishes are used together.

### III. *Šakintu* Women

The clearest case of economic power exercised by a woman within this type of structure is the one linked to the function of *šakintu*: the *Queen’s Household* is indeed managed and directed by a *šakintu* (“female chief-administrator”), who commands staff composed of men and women. Her title is the feminine form of *šaknu*, however she only intervenes in the Palace’s management and legal sphere: there is no female *šaknu*-governor for example. The title *šakintu* appears at the beginning of the eighth century (788), and is attested until the post-canonical *limmu* period, that is at the extreme end of the Assyrian empire, with one attestation in 622.

In more recent studies, *šakintu* women are no longer considered as “harem manageress(es)”, but as female administrators of the Queen’s or the Queen-Mother’s Household(s); the most

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Niederreiter 2008.

important point being that these women are always linked to a structure whose principal authority is a woman (Teppo 2005, 54).

A *šakintu* is generally attached to a specific place: large capitals (Nineveh, Kalḫu, Aššur), cities in “old Assyria” (Kasappa, Kilizi, Arbail, Adian, Šibaniba), finally several non-Assyrian urban centres (Kaḫat, Našibina, Tušpan [= Tušhan?], Til Barsip, Ḫaurīna:<sup>5</sup> all are located in the west). But there can be several *šakintus* in a single capital: at Nineveh four *šakintus* are attested. They are thus attached to palatial structures more or less well identified: at Kalḫu, the old palace (= North-West Palace), the *ekal māšarti*, and the new palace (= ?); at Nineveh, the South-West palace and the *ekal māšarti*; at Aššur, the palace of the internal city.

The other locations, which are essentially cited in SAA 7 23, are to be understood rather as countryside manors, production centres on the Zab borders’ area between Kalḫu and Arbail on the one hand, and in upper Djezireh, in the region of the Ḫurmaš valley between Nisibe and Kaḫat on the second hand. Two extensions are more original: the valley of the upper Tigris around the Tušp/ḫan, and Anti-Lebanon’s western counterfort around Ḫaurīna, on the road towards Tadmor/Palmyra.

**Tables for the *šakintus* (Teppo 2005, 56–62)**

**Table 2: Identified and Dated *šakintus***

Name	Date	Location	Text
Addatī	reign of Sennacherib	Nineveh	SAA 6 81, 82
Aḫi-tallī	reign of Sennacherib	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 6 88–90, 92–93
Amat-Ba’al	7th century	Old Palace of Kalḫu	ND 2309
Iliā	7th century	Kalḫu	ND 2313
Zarpī	668-V-27	Nineveh	SAA 14 8
Šiti-ilat	Ca. 642–615	Kalḫu Review Palace	CTN 3 35
Amat-Astarti	after Assurbanipal’s reign	New palace of Kalḫu	ND 2307

**Table 3: Undated *šakintus***

Year (if known)	Location	Text
FROM TIGLATH-PILESER III (744–727) TO SARGON II (721–705)		
721–612	Arbail	ND 2803
	Kilizu	ND 2803
	Adian	ND 2803
	Kasappa	ND 2803
	Ḫaurīna	SAA 7 134
SENNACHERIB (704–681)		
694-xii-10	Nineveh	SAA 6 83
694-xii-10	Nineveh	SAA 6 84
692-x-6	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 6 85
	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 6 86
	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 6 87
	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 6 94
	Nineveh	SAA 6 95

<sup>5</sup> = Hawārīn (Parpola and Porter 2001, 8), near ancient Qaryatāin.

ESARHADDON (680–669)		
	Kilizi	SAA 6 247
	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 7 23
	Review Palace of Nineveh	SAA 7 23
	Review Palace of the New Contigent	SAA 7 23
	Našibina	SAA 7 23
	Šibaniba	SAA 7 23
	Bit-Adad-le'i	SAA 7 23
	Šudu	SAA 7 23
	Te'di	SAA 7 23
	Kaḥat	SAA 7 23
	2 in Sunê	SAA 7 23
	Tupḥan	SAA 7 23
	The household of the Lady of the House	SAA 7 23
		SAA 16 183
	Inner City of Aššur	SAA 13 18
ASSURBANIPAL (668–631?)		
668-i-22	Central city of Nineveh	SAA 14 9
654	Nineveh	SAA 14 11
668–650	Nineveh	SAA 14 12
650	Assur	SAA 14 13
668–650	Assur	SAA 14 14
645*	Til Barsip?	TB 13
AŠŠUR-ETEL-ILANI (630?–623?) OR SIN-ŠARRU-IŠKUN (622?–612)		
	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 14 175
	Nineveh	SAA 14 176
625*-ix-26	Central City of Nineveh	SAA 14 159

According to S. MacGregor (2012, 61–65), *šakintu* women would mostly have been production workshop managers at the service of the *Queen's Household*. These women were tightly linked to textile production.<sup>6</sup> But their circle of intervention appears much larger: *šakintus* enjoyed lucrative personal financial activities: they could lend up to 2 minas of silver, and they bought properties and staff for their own selves. *Šakintus* employed “the scribes of the queen,” men and women (LÚ.A.BA, MÍ.A.BA-*tú*; cf. SAA 7 24).

The fact that *šakintu* women were not harem concubines and that they were not enclosed was much insisted upon.<sup>7</sup> But we should follow this reasoning through its end, and show the extent of the autonomy they had. Because this autonomy is high and shows makes them appear as independent parties to contracts concerning purchases or family law, lending for their own account or for an institution. In addition we have noted that they owned staff that could be numerous, and if we base ourselves on the data of the *Nimrud Wine Lists* (Wilson 1972), numbers can reach several dozen, even hundreds of individuals, admitting that all the staff of the *Queen's Household* is placed under their authority. In any event, they dispose of a veritable administration

<sup>6</sup> See SAA 7 115.

<sup>7</sup> Although we do have the case of a *sekretu* (royal concubine or royal woman) who accedes to this position (SAA 6 88–89).



(female-scribe, “stewardess” [*lahhinutu*]) and they manage an entire palatial structure for which they are responsible even in the absence of the Queen. They thus are appointed and attached to a location rather than to a person, while of course being accountable to the Queen for their activities.

This supposes that *šakintu* women had a certain number of socio-cultural rights:

- 1) Knowledge and practice of writing. Even if they had scribes (sometimes women) at their service, their capacity to manage the *Queen’s Household* is founded on their mastery of reading and writing. As they are capable of drawing up and using accounting reports or property acts.
- 2) The appointment of supervisory support staff, especially when it closely touches the royal family, lies on social networks: it is thus probable that a number of *šakintus* were close to the Queen and/or belonged to the Assyrian nobility — in the same way that the ladies of the *Queen’s Household* in modern Europe were chosen and designated according to the degrees of their “good nobility” —. But Assyrian *šakintus* are not at Court to make up numbers: they have real responsibilities and real powers. They figure among the women who have a veritable economic role, and in S. Svärd’s words, they had real *agency* (= power of autonomous decision). This does not prevent them from being inserted in family structures or networks that can be complex.
- 3) We can thus propose to consider *šakintus* as a “duplication” of the Queen or the Queen-Mother: in the various attested palaces, they have the same management authority as the queen of the royal palace (at a time when it was unique ...) and which equates to transposing in the palatial environment a “domestic” authority recognised as belonging to the wife, for the organisation and functioning of the house. Simply, during the Neo-Assyrian period, while the royal administration had captured everything that relates to the palace’s functioning, for its masculine part, the Queen and her Household (particularly wealthy moreover ...) managed for themselves and in part (for the military and religious aspect) the resources they owned.
- 4) Therefore, the predominant element to analyse their social and economic status is as much their administrative capacity, their social status, and the possibility of their belonging to the Assyrian nobility. We thus arrive to the conclusion that in Assyria in the eighth and seventh centuries, nothing prevented a woman from exercising important powers through which she had a strong part of autonomy, from the moment that she was socially able to integrate networks that gave access to such powers.

#### IV. A Case Study: The Marriage of Šubētu

A text (ND 2307) that belongs to the archives of *šakintu* women at Kalḫu has often been treated and merits our attention: it is a contract made between Amat-Astarti, the *šakintu* of the New Palace at Kalḫu and Milki-rāmu, son of Abdi-Azūzi, to whom she gives her daughter, Šubētu, in marriage. It should first be noted that by their onomastic, the parties of this contract are of West-Semitic origin and more precisely Phoenician (particularly in view of the divine names they contain: Astarte and Azoz/Azūzu). The text was first edited by B. Parker (1954, 37–39), then taken up again by N. Postgate (1976, 103–107) as FNALD 14 and commented on by S. Svärd

(2015). According to K. Radner,<sup>8</sup> it deals with Phoenician families who become united. There is a consensus on the possibility of identifying the husband Milki-rāmu with a Milki-rāmu eponym in 656.<sup>9</sup> But the text from Kalḫu is dated with a post-canonical eponym, now placed precisely in 622. It seems to me then very dubious that a high dignitary already well-established in 656 (thus not in post-adolescence...) could have concluded a marriage thirty-four years later, unless he enjoyed exceptional longevity and health.

The marriage contract ND 2307 was found in a room (ZT 16) located in the north wing of the outer room of the North-West Palace at Kalḫu. The internal composition of the small archive to which it belonged showed it to be the archive of a *šakintu*. N. Postgate (1976, 98) drew attention to the contents of these texts:

- ND 2307 marriage of the daughter of a *šakintu*
- ND 2308 redemption of a pledged slave-woman
- ND 2309 purchase of a girl to be a votary
- ND 2310 report on expenses
- ND 2311 report on expenses (list of objects)
- ND 2312 report on expenses
- ND 2313 purchase of a slave by the *šakintu*
- ND 2314 sale of a slave-woman to another woman
- ND 2315 sale of a slave-woman to another woman
- ND 2316 a young girl is dedicated by the queen as a votary to the goddess Mullissu, but at the same time she is given in marriage to a weaver.

The dossier is composed of a contract, ND 2307 (Fig. 1), and three reports on expenses, ND 2310, 2311 and 2312 (Fig. 2):

**The Marriage Contract:** ND 2307 = FNALD 14

Amat-Astarti, the *šakintu* of the New Palace of Kalḫu gives her daughter Šubētu in marriage to Milki-rāmu, son of Abdi-Azūzi. This is the dowry she has given them:

— three seal impressions,<sup>10</sup> one cylinder impression —

A beautiful gold nugget (*būn abnu*) (weighing) 1 shekel  $\frac{1}{3}$ , (and) a gold cumin grain (weighing)  $\frac{1}{2}$  shekel (were given) for a total of half-mina of silver (of equivalent value).<sup>11</sup> Silver jewelry, (namely) four silver, two silver *dašannu*-jewels, a large silver band (*qūlu*), two silver torc (*gāgu*), twenty silver earrings (*qudassu*), (and) sixteen silver rings (*unqu*) (were given) for a total of 2 minas 4 shekels of purified silver (*bašlu*) (of equivalent value).

Two cloaks in wool of *kāru*-red colour, two *urnatu*-garments in wool of *kāru*-red colour, two *urnatu*-garments in linen, two garments of lower quality(?), two shawls, (and) two white cloaks(?) {two *urnatu*-garments, two *urnatu*-garments in linen, two garments of lower quality(?),

<sup>8</sup> Radner 1997, 163, with further reference to B. Oded.

<sup>9</sup> Aside the editors' bibliography for this text, see also Lipiński 1991.

<sup>10</sup> See Herbordt 1992 (= SAA Studies 1), Nimrud 27, Taf. 13, 7. We consider that it is the seal of the *šakintu* Amat-Astarti and of the husband Milki-rāmu.

<sup>11</sup> That is, a rate of around 1 for 16.

two shawls<sup>12</sup> (were given) for a total of 9 ½ minas and 4 shekels of silver (equivalent in value).

Aside (the equivalent in value) in silver, there is: one bed (adorned with) bronze, one *kit-turru*-chair (adorned with) bronze, one roll of *qarāru*-cloth, two *tappaštu*-carpets, one *qermu*-garment, one *gulēnu*-garment, two *gammidatu*-garment, one linen *saddinnu*-tunic, ten é-sag garments, a pair of *magarūtu*-coats, two *urnatu*-garments, one linen *urnutu*-garment, two(?) garments of secondary quality, two shawls, one dining table (adorned with) bronze, two chairs (adorned with) bronze, [.....] (adorned with) bronze, one bronze(!) mirror, one bronze(!) seal, one bronze cauldron, one bronze tube, an iron poker, (and) iron *magazutu*-scissors(?).<sup>13</sup>

And as smaller objects: two eating bowls, one GIŠ.ŠÁ.KAR, two GIŠ.ŠU.UN.MEŠ, one *mušakilu*-spoon in *ḥaštu*-stone, one *burallu* in stone, two *dannānu* spice-jars, two *pursītu* salt-bowls, (and) two shallow plates (*makaltu*?) [.....] in stone.

If Šubētu is childless, she will buy a female slave, will put her in her own place, and will make her conceive children. These children will be her (= Šubētu) children. If she comes to love her (the slave), she will keep her; if she comes to hate her, she can sell her.

If Šubētu no longer loves Milki-rāmu, she will give (the dowry) back. If Milki-rāmu no longer loves his wife, he will pay her double (her dowry).

Before Arbāiu, the *ḥazannu*-mayor (of Kalḥu); before Nabû-šumu-ušur, the priest; before Iddināia, the priest; before Indabī, the religious man; before Aššur-mudammīq, the *rabī sikkāti*; before Nabû-bēla-ušur, the *rabī (sikkāti)* of the house of the palace maids; before Abi-laia; before Izbu; before Nabû-šarra-ušur.

On the eighth day of the month of Addaru, *limmu* of Daddī, the great intendant.

### Reports on Expenses:

ND 2310 = Postgate 1979, 100

- [.....]  
 2 [.....]  
 [.....]  
 4 one ring of half shekel, one [.....]  
 7 shekels 5/6 mina: bread, ten d[ays]  
 6 5/6 mina: meat, four *qû* wine  
 twenty-four *qû* wine, twelve days [.....]  
 8 four... *masanāte*-vessels from the [.....] house  
 two meat, one third of [...]  
 10 the day I [went] to Aššur;  
 1 ½ shekels silver for the oil I [.....]ed;  
 12 ½ shekel for wine, the day I [came] to Aššur;  
 on the next day: 1 shekel, wine, ½ shekel, meat;  
 14 4 shekels for grapes;

<sup>12</sup> It is possible that lines 18–19 are the duplicates of lines 15–17. But we find the same sequence at lines 28–29, as if the series *urnutu* of linen + TUG.ÚS + *ḥušannu* formed a coherent vestimentary whole.

<sup>13</sup> A variant for *magzazu*?

- 3 shekels for butchering (butchers' animals)
- 16 2 *imēru* 3 *sūtu* of barley, (of which?) 2 *sūtu* of barley  
borrowed from the son of Ubru-Nabû;
- 18 1 *imēru*, from Bēl-ZI-erēš,  
borrowed
- 20 20 <*imēru*> of wheat  
10 *qû* of flower: 5/6 mina
- 22 four *kapilu* in leather  
5/6 mina: the *šazipīnu*,
- 24 her fee;  
1 shekel: goldsmith wages
- 
- 26 general total: 1 mina 7 shekels of silver:  
wedding gifts (*zubullā'u*)
- 
- 28 total: {erasure}

ND 2311 = Postgate 1979, 101

- TÚG.GU.LÁ.MEŠ garments
- 2 one *maqlalu* garment  
one *siprītu* garment
- 4 two *qarrāru* garments  
white *maqātu*-dresses
- 6 *urnatu*-garments in purple-red wool  
one *huzūnu*-shawl, one *dappastu*-cover
- 8 for the lid of one *tahlīpu* piece of furniture  
one linen veil
- 10 five *sagu*-skirts  
6 *sūtu* of wheat, from the House
- 12 five *šappu*-bowls of flour  
twenty sheep with (long) fleece
- 14 two *qusāyu* sheep  
equivalent of 7 shekels of silver
- 16 for KASKAL-wool and (simple) wool  
one bronze basin
- 18 two bronze cauldrons  
one [.....] in wood
- 20 one [.....] in wood  
[.....] of wine  
Unpreserved traces on reverse (7 lines?)

ND 2312 = Postgate 1979, 102

	4 ½ shekels of silver	for one <i>kuzīpu</i> -cloak
2	2 ⅓ shekels	for one wrapping-fabric ( <i>halluptu</i> )
	1 shekel	for one leather <i>kapilu</i> -strap
4	6 shekels of silver:	6 litters of wine
	when I went to Kalḫu	
6	1 ¼ shekels	in Nineveh
	1 shekel	in the city of the people of Aššur
8	2 shekels	in Kalḫu
	1 shekel	for grain
10	1 shekel	for your (needs)
	½ shekel	the day the woman got well(?)
12	1 shekel	for wine
	1 ½ shekels	for Šamaš-nādin-aḫi
14	½ shekel	for also Šamaš-nādin-aḫi
	.....	for 13 shekels of silver
16		loaned from Zizî
	½ shekel	(loaned from) Baiā

According to N. Postgate (1979, 102), we are dealing with the preparations for a wedding that involve festive travels (wine, meat) to Aššur, Kalḫu and Nineveh and mentions *zubullā'u*, the food gifts usually offered during marriages. The resemblance between the names of garments in ND 2311 and FNALD 14 could indicate that we are indeed dealing with Šubētu and Milki-rāmu's marriage, under the reign of Sîn-šar-iškun (622), and at a time when it seems the situation in Assyria is still calm enough to permit this kind of procedure.

S. Svärd (2015) has interpreted this dossier in the following manner:

“This unusual text illuminates how high-ranking women were able to exercise power that was not bound by the usual gender limitations and hierarchies. Normally, the father arranged marriages for his daughters, but we know of no man who was married to a *šakintu*. It can be suggested that she had similar authority over her family as she had over her property. Whatever the case may be, she could certainly assume the male role and carry it out successfully, especially if the groom really was the high official Milki-ramu. In any case, the existence of heterarchical power relations is implied in the document; it seems clear that Amat-Astarti is here not simply taking advantage of her high position but rather negotiating on behalf of her daughter with another influential family and thus engaging in lateral power relations.”

But we note a certain number of particular facts: thus, the dowry that the *šakintu* gives to her daughter doesn't contain any land, nor staff, but solely furniture and jewellery. The part evaluated in silver for the dowry is estimated at a total of 11 minas and 38 shekels of silver. The sum is important but not colossal, even when we count the remainder of the objects as having an equivalent value. Šubētu would thus have received a dowry of around twenty minas of silver

from her mother. This *šakintu* has an “average” wealth, but it is a wealth composed of resources that she partially controls in the palace: jewellery, clothes, furniture, and luxury dishes.

We have of course noticed the fact that the marriage contract is established in an autonomous manner by Amat-Astarti, and that no male authority appears. Similarly, the marriage clauses are not that common, as even if this union is destined to produce offsprings, it falls to the sole choice of the wife who could decide to not conceive.<sup>14</sup> She would thus have recourse to a form of “gestation by proxy,” and the female-slave she will use will not be able to claim the status of mother, nor the status of secondary spouse: Šubētu will keep the possibility of selling her later, not taking into account the fact that she is the biological mother of her children.

Similarly, Šubētu can take the initiative of a separation from her husband: even if she then has to leave him the dowry’s value, considered as a contribution to current household maintenance. The reverse clause is more common: Milki-rāmu must compensate her double the value of the dowry if he decides to repudiate her.

These very particular dispositions must, it seems to me, make us view this contract as not representative of what the matrimonial norm was in Assyria in the seventh century. Two important factors are at play here: first, the ethnic origin (Phoenician) of participants, which could explain the introduction of the possibility of a divorce at the initiative of the women if it is a West-Semitic legal practice; in all cases, we are in a social community which is not necessarily that of the Assyrian high-nobility; we then must take into account the “professional” situation of Šubētu and her mother’s, the *šakintu* Amat-Astarti. We can hypothesise that they both belong to the royal palace’s world, that it is there that the essential of their lives occurs, and that certain residence requirements ensue (like the non-maternity of Šubētu?) that have their extension in the contract’s clauses.

If we come back to the purely economic aspects of this dossier, it seems that the *šakintu* belongs to another category than that of the Ladies of the Assyrian nobility: she is of western origin, disposes of property resources essentially, and moves in geographical circles part of central capitals (Aššur, Kalḫu, Nineveh). Aside *šakintu* women issued from the Assyrian nobility and who link their family relationships to their power within the *Queen’s Household*, there may have been *šakintus* issued from foreign environments, whose socio-economic powers rested on the favours their queen granted them who herself could also have been of western origin.<sup>15</sup>

## V. Conclusions

The rich Neo-Assyrian palatial documentation shows that the *Queen’s Household*, as a financial institution, is multiple and powerful. If female staff exists and directly serves the king, women who operate in the *Queen’s Household* possess an economic power that can be considerable, first of them the Queen herself (and/or the Queen-Mother). Every place where the Queen is present, and even every place where she owns large domains, generates a *Queen’s Household* with female

<sup>14</sup> The clause was interpreted along the usual parallels as being linked to Šubētu’s (physical) incapacity to have children. But it may be a decision prompted by the situation in the *Queen’s Household*. In any case, she keeps full control on the choice of the substitute mother.

<sup>15</sup> The case of Naqia/Zakūtu is well-known; but the hypothesis of the western origin of several queens in the Sargonid period was also put forward (Dalley 1998).

staff used for service, production, and administration. On the royal administration's model, these Queens' Households are placed under the authority of an administrator-in-chief, the *šakintu*. This person manages and controls the finances of the House placed under her authority, as the Queen would herself do it, as in fact the lady of the house would in general. She thus derives from this at the same time significant authority and resources that enable her to function as a leading financial agent in personal operations. These *šakintus* rely both on the power that their function affords them, and on belonging to family or ethnic networks that are a useful complement to their economic role. This economic role is indeed not ordered along a male/female distinction only, far from it. We see, with all due sense of proportions maintained, that certain women of the palace in the Neo-Assyrian period can be *like any other businessman*.

## Appendix

The archaeological context of ND 2307 (Oates and Oates 2001, 46):

“The suites of rooms, to the east were heavily burnt in the fire of 612 BC, yielding evidence at the time of their destruction of domestic activities in the form of carbonised wheat, barley and linseed, with mortars and grindstones, spindle whorls and loom weights, especially in room 15. In rooms 15 and 13 there was a wide variety of pottery types including water jars, plates, tiny oil bottles and lamps. In one amphora of Levantine type (again found in room 15) was a large quantity of Egyptian blue, a material used, *inter alia*, in the decoration of the ivories. In room 12 a group of unusually fine ‘palace ware’ beakers was found stored upside down in a niche, perhaps originally a ventilation shaft, while in the corner was an elephant’s tusk engraved with a guilloche pattern, which had broken into some 50 pieces (ND 2503). Rooms 11 and 13 were clearly storage magazines, with large jars, stacked plates and, in 13, much burnt wood, painted fragments of ostrich egg shell and part of a musical instrument, possibly a harp.

The larger set of rooms produced 61 tablets of which all but 4 come from room 14/16; the fire had not only covered them with a deep deposit of ash but had conveniently baked and thereby preserved them. They are principally legal documents concerned with loans of barley and silver and sales of slaves, with two referring to a court case and a very interesting document detailing the lavish dowry given to the daughter of the *šakintu* of the new palace on the occasion of her marriage to one Milki-ramu, possibly the *limmu* of 656 BC. One text with no year date (ND 2345) is an administrative note concerning the despatch of a letter to officials in charge of the levy. Fifty-two of the room 14/16 documents bore *limmu* dates, two in the reigns of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, the remainder in the time of Assurbanipal and his successors. At least three can be assigned to the reign of Sin-sar-iškun who, at least in the Sardanapalus legend, perished in the flames in the destruction of Nineveh.

Although no one person can be identified as the owner of these archives, of those named as principals or witnesses a number were officials or palace personnel. We believe from their association with the reception suite and the eastern range of offices, and from the character of other rooms in the north wing, that these rooms were originally built as offices, but that the character of the offices had changed by the late 7th century. Certainly at this time the bureaucracy of imperial administration had passed to Nineveh, and in the North-West Palace the

focus of administration is now essentially local. Why some apparently unimportant tablets were kept for so long remains, here as elsewhere, a mystery. One of the interesting features of the later administration is the number of weights that were found here, *inter alia* a 10 mana basalt duck weight of Assurnasirpal II still in use in Room 14 (ND 2505) together with a bronze lion weight bearing an alphabetic inscription (ND 2163). (...)"

The composition of the *šakintu*'s archive in ZT 16 (Svärd 2015):

"I decided to follow Postgate's suggestion regarding the composition of the archive, but I would add two texts because of their contents; ND 2344 from ZT 14 is a sale of a girl to the *šakintu* and ND 2093 relates to the queen's household and the household of the king's mother. As the two spaces had no wall between them, it is conceivable that the tablets' original context was ZT 16. Interestingly, Rooms ZT 11-16 (especially ZT 15) had clear signs of 'domestic activities' at the time of their destruction in 612, for example, loom weights and spindle whorls. This supports the connection to *šakintu*'s as the *šakintu*'s were probably in charge of textile industries in the palaces.

Of these ten documents, four (ND 2307 and possibly ND 2310-2312) deal with the marriage of the *šakintu*'s daughter. The other documents deal with slave transactions. With the exception of ND 2315, all of these texts mention the *šakintu* directly, at least if one accepts the hypothesis of GÉME *ša šarru* being another title for *šakintu*. Mostly these documents refer simply to 'the *šakintu*', but in two documents from Room ZT 16, 'the *šakintu* of the Kalḫu New Palace' (ND 2307, É.GAL GIBIL *ša URU kâl-ḫa*) and 'the *šakintu* of the Kalḫu Old Palace' (ND 2309, É.GAL SUMUN) are mentioned. It seems possible that both the New and the Old Palaces housed a *šakintu* at the same time, as the documents that mention them come from roughly the same period.

It is conceivable that the North-West Palace was the Old Palace mentioned in ND 2309, as it was already built by Assurnasirpal II (883-859) but the location of the New Palace is less clear. Assuming that the New Palace really was relatively new, it might be the South-West Palace. In any case, it is curious that a document belonging to the *šakintu* of the New Palace ended up in the North-West Palace as it seems clear that the North-West Palace could not have been the New Palace of the texts.

To conclude, it seems that there were active *šakintus* in Kalḫu throughout its Neo-Assyrian history and often in several different palaces. An early document from Room 57 (788) and two documents from North-West Palace ZT 4 (probably Sargon II, 721-705) attest to this during the time when Kalḫu was the capital of the realm. From the post-canonical period, there is textual evidence from both the archive in ZT 16 (641\*- 616\*) as well as from the *šakintu*-archive in the Review Palace (638\*-615\*)."'



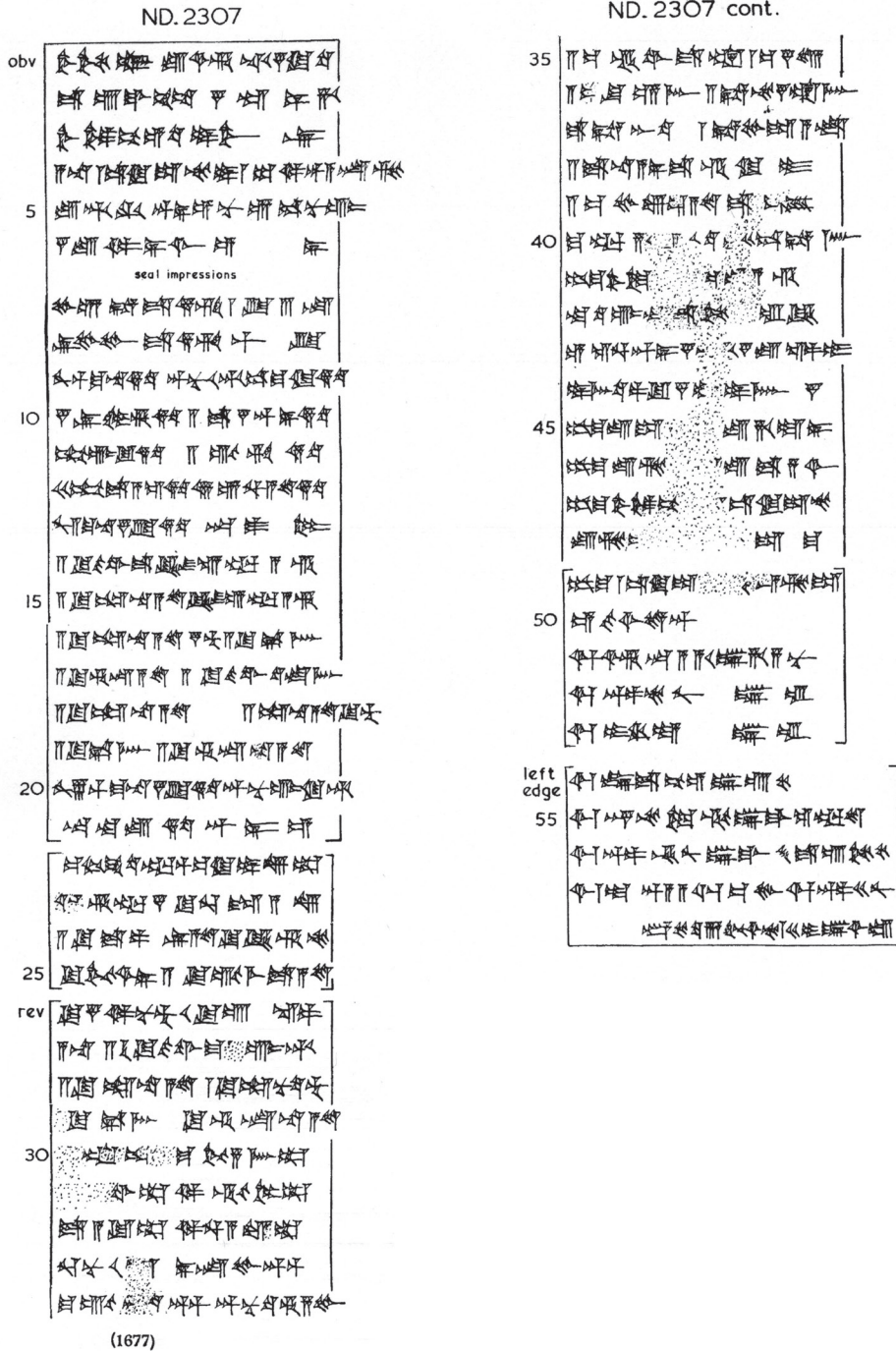


Fig. 1: Copy of ND 2307 (Parker 1954, Pl. VI)  
(Reproduced by the courtesy of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq)

ND2310

obv

5

10

15

rev

20

erasure

rest

uninscribed

ND2311

obv

5

10

15

ND2312

ND2312 cont

15

rest

uninscribed

obv

5

10

Fig. 2: Copy of ND 2310–2312 (Parker 1961, Pl. X)  
 (Reproduced by the courtesy of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq)

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