

# Imperium and Officium Working Papers (IOWP)



## Imperium & Officium

Research Network

### On Courtiers in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: *ša rēsi* and *mazzāz pāni*

Version 02

September 2014

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Abstract: This paper discusses the range of competences of *ša-rēsis* and *mazzāz pānis*, two terms translated as ‘courtier’, in the Neo-Assyrian period. Taking a micro-historical approach, we focus on the life of a certain Bēl-ibni, a particularly well-documented courtier who is attested bearing both titles. After comparing his career with the evidence for *ša-rēsis* and *mazzāz pānis* at large, the article concludes with a hypothesis regarding a possible semantic nuance between the two expressions for courtier.

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## On Courtiers in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: *ša rēši* and *mazzāz pāni*

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, royal courts have been a very popular subject of research.<sup>1</sup> However, in spite of the wealth of literature dedicated to this topic, the term “courtier” has remained somewhat elusive. According to one leading researcher of the phenomenon of courts, one main reason for this deficiency is the fact that the word is often “used as a generic term for all people at court—including menial servants as well as the ruler’s higher-ranking intimates; domestics as well as state servants.”<sup>2</sup> As regards the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it has already been observed by E. Klauber in 1968 that this problem is not to the smallest part due to the fact that the main designation for courtier in the cuneiform documentation, *ša-rēši*, seems to apply to a rather heterogeneous group of persons. In order to remedy this state of affairs, we suggest adopting a micro-historical approach pioneered by works such as Carlo Ginzburg’s description of the life of the miller-turned-heretic Domenico Scandella in 16<sup>th</sup> century CE Friuli (Ginzburg 1976). We will therefore focus on Bēl-ibni, a courtier whose life and career are exceptionally well documented. By means of (re-)examining aspects of his career and competences and comparing them to the contemporary documentation at large, we hope to shed light on the role of courtiers more broadly (and conversely establish in how far Bēl-ibni can be considered as a typical courtier). In lieu of a conclusion, this article will close with some thoughts on the relation between the two titles *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni*, which are the most common terms for “courtier” and were both borne by Bēl-ibni. Before delving deeper into the matter, it is necessary to briefly discuss the linguistic background of these expressions.<sup>3</sup>

The title *ša-rēši* is attested from the Old Babylonian period onwards. It is particularly common in the Middle- and Neo-Assyrian as well as the Neo-Babylonian periods. The

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<sup>1</sup> See especially the texts assembled in Duindam *et al.* (eds.) 2011 (with Barjamović 2011 on the Neo-Assyrian court) as well as the literature mentioned *ibid.* in the introduction. For the ancient world, note in particular Spawforth (ed.) 2007, Llewellyn-Jones 2013, Strootman 2014 and Groß 2014; for the Abbasid Near East also van Berkel *et al.* 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Duindam 2011: 2, similarly van Berkel *et al.* 2013: 2 noting a “vagueness of terminology”. See also Groß 2014: 5: ““courtier” in the proper sense of the word means a member of the king’s entourage but also denotes the palace household members in general, comprising officials, professionals, servants, and others.”

<sup>3</sup> For an exhaustive discussion that also includes less frequent designations (such as *mār ekalli* and *zāriqu*) see Groß 2014: 245–316.

expression literally means “(he) of the head”; its etymology is still unresolved.<sup>4</sup> Among the various proposed translations of the title *ša-rēši*, “courtier”, “attendant” on the one hand, and “eunuch” on the other, are encountered most frequently. Whereas the former interpretations are fairly unproblematic, save for the broad range in status and range of the people designated as *ša-rēšis* alluded to above, the latter one has elicited a vast amount of literature revolving around the question of whether the title does indeed always imply the castration of its bearer (summarized in Pirngruber 2011). The source material discussed here does not allow for a definite solution in either direction, however, it has a bearing on some of the underlying assumptions.

The compound *mazzāz pāni*, or *manzāz pāni* (in the Babylonian dialect), consists of the two nominal elements *mazzazu* (or *manzazu*) and *pānu*. The latter noun, meaning „front“, or (in the plural) “face”, is fairly clear and does not need further explanation here, but it is worth it to reflect upon the participle form *mazzazu* and the associated verb *uzuzzu* in more detail. In addition to the term *mazzazu* (or *manzazu*, CAD M/I 233–4), CAD separately lists the lemmata *manzaltu* (CAD M/I 228–30) and *manzāzu* (CAD M/I 234–9).<sup>5</sup> The two terms are already attested since the Old Akkadian period, and can mean “stand” as well as “position” or “location” in general and in more specific contexts (such as extispicy, CAD M/I 235–6 s.v. *manzāzu* 2). Both occasionally denote a post, an office or a rank, including (especially in the case of *manzāzu*) posts or ranks of deities and of persons (at court).<sup>6</sup> As regards meaning and morphology, we may identify the two words as forerunners of *mazzazu* (or *manzazu*) which is only attested from the second half of the second millennium onwards. According to the CAD, it refers to “courtiers” or “personal attendants” and appears in compound with nouns such as *ekallu*, *maḥru* and, particularly, *panu*.<sup>7</sup> The composite *mazzāz pāni* basically means “the one

<sup>4</sup> The various attempts at explanation are discussed in Pirngruber 2011: 287–288.

<sup>5</sup> The variants given under *manzaltu* are *manzaltu* / \**mazzaltu* / *manzaltu* / *mazzaltu* / *mazzassu* and under *manzāzu* *manzāzu* / *mazzazu* / *manzanzu* / *muzzāzu*. Cf. AHW 638–9 distinguishing between *mazzaz/štu(m)* / *manzaz/štum* (Middle and Late Babylonian *manzaltu*, Middle Assyrian *mazzaltu* and Neo-Assyrian *mazz/nzassu*) = “Stellung, Posten”, *mazzāzu(m)* / *manzāzu(m)* = “Standort” and *mazzizu* / *manzazu* (< *muzzal/izum*) = “stehend”, with the latter building the compound *mazzaz pāni*. The term is afflicted by two consonantal changes, namely the change of /lt/ into /ss/ in the Neo-Assyrian dialect (Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 21–2, cf. GAG § 34.d) and the dissimilation of /zz/ to /ñz/ in the Babylonian dialect (GAG § 32.b).

<sup>6</sup> Note also the compound *bēl manzalti* attested in Late Babylonian texts, translated as “officeholder” in CAD M/I 230.

<sup>7</sup> Several references in the administrative letters of the Neo-Assyrian kings are listed within the entry *manzazu* f) “with *panū*”. Cf. CAD M/I 440–1 s.v. *mazziz pani* (“court attendant, eunuch”) and *mazziz panuttu* (“being a

who stands before” where the addressed vis-à-vis usually (though not exclusively) is the king. The *mazzāz ekalli* can literally be understood as “the one who serves the palace”.<sup>8</sup> From among the various different connotations of the related verb *uzuzzu* (also building *figurae etymologicae* with its nominal counterparts) established by CAD (see CAD U/W 373–92), there are two which are especially relevant in connection with our compound: to be “in the presence of a god, king” (CAD U/W 379 4b), and “to serve, to be at the service of”, both in phrases amongst other built with *ina maḥar* (7a) and *ina pani* (7b). *Ina pāni uzuzzu* (and similar phrases) expresses both, literally, the physical standing before gods and humans and, in a wider sense, the steady availability for and devotion to gods and humans. The same is true for courtiers or, in our case, the *mazzāz pāni*. Although they might not have been physically present before the king around the clock, they were entitled to maintain personal contact with the king (either in writing or orally) on a regular basis and were expected to constantly serve and support the king in their words and deeds. Whereas the title *mazzāz pāni* clearly refers to courtiers, the phrase *ina pāni uzuzzu* does not always refer to courtiership but, for instance, simply to audiences with the king (and others) or the provision of services for the king (and others) instead.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Bēl-ibni – an archetypical courtier?

Bēl-ibni was a courtier under Assurbanipal (669–631/627) about whose life we are extraordinarily well informed. This is true in particular for the years when he was active in the service of the Assyrian king in Southern Babylonia during the revolt of Šamaš-šum-ukīn (652–648) and afterwards in the campaigns against the neighbouring kingdom of Elam. A frequently recurring antagonist in his correspondence is Nabû-bēl-šumāte, possibly the governor of the Sealand, who defected from the crown to side with Šamaš-šum-ukīn and who later fled to Elam, whence Bēl-ibni tried to obtain his extradition, resulting in Nabû-bēl-

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eunuch”) according to the Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees. However, it is unclear whether these terms denote eunuchs or not.

<sup>8</sup> On the basis of *uzuzzu* and its meaning “to serve, to be at the service of” (CAD U/W 382–3 s.v. *uzuzzu* 7).

<sup>9</sup> Note, for instance, SAA 1 65:6–7: *ina pa-ni-ia i-ti-ti-zi* (the master-builder Paqaḥa had an audience with the letter’s writer) and SAA 13 33 b.e. 3: *ina IGI ka-li-’i me-me-ni la i-z[a’]-za’* (no one is serving under the express messenger).

šumāte's suicide.<sup>10</sup> In addition to a substantial dossier of letters written by Bēl-ibni to the king, he appears also as the recipient of royal letters and is occasionally mentioned in the correspondence of other officials.<sup>11</sup>

As regards his titles, Bēl-ibni does not once identify himself as a *ša-rēši*, but he is designated as such in a letter to king Assurbanipal by Nabû-ušabši of Uruk, the city's governor during the 650s (ABL 267 r. 11–12):<sup>12</sup> <sup>ld</sup>en-ib-ni <sup>lu</sup>sag šá [lugal] is said to have returned with the archers under his command from Elam and now staying in the region of Puqūdu. The context of this text is in line with what we know about Bēl-ibni's tasks competences from other texts and which are primarily military. A royal letter (ABL 289) sent by Assurbanipal to the Sealander in April 650 BC – thus the second year of the Šamaš-šumu-ukīn revolt – announces in lines 10–12 the arrival of Bēl-ibni, “my slave and courtier (*mazzāz pāni*)” in a military capacity, as a troop commander (*ana ālik pānūti*): <sup>ld</sup>en-dū urdā u mazzāz pānia ana ālik pānūte ana muhhikunu altapra. This letter thus records the appointment of Bēl-ibni as commander of the Sealand and is consequently the earliest of the dossier (with the likely exception of ABL 1106, see De Vaan 1995: 54). He is explicitly said to have been sent (*altapra* in line 12) by the king to the Sealand, his earlier whereabouts – the court in Nineveh? or some other province of the empire? – are unknown. He is designated as *mazzāz pāni* in at least one other instance: In ABL 291, Assurbanipal scolds Bēl-ibni for having acted without royal authorization, a behaviour described as especially inappropriate for a *mazzāz pāni* in lines 13–17: *attā ša* <sup>lu</sup>mazzāz pānā *attā u puluhta tīdū libbū agā tētepuš*, “you, who are *mazzāz pāni* and who knows my fearsomeness – why did you act like this?”. Additionally, in ABL 1222, a letter to the king by Bēl-ibni, the abstract *mazzāz pānūte* occurs but due to the fragmentary state of the letter it is unclear who it refers to. Considering that the passage is part of an extended *captatio benevolentiae*, Bēl-ibni himself is certainly the most likely option. His precise military rank was likely that of a *turtānu*: according to ABL 795:5–6 (cf. De Vaan 1995: 33), the king personally ordered Bēl-ibni to lead the army as *turtānu* into the Sealand, *ša šarru bēlā išpuranni umma alikma* <sup>lu</sup>turtānu emūqa [*ša* <sup>kur</sup>Aššur<sup>ki</sup>] *ana māṭ tāmṭim*

<sup>10</sup> His title and defection from Assyria are briefly discussed in Frame 1992: 127–129; in Baker, PNA 2/II 811–814 s.v. Nabû-bēl-šumāte 10. he is accepted as governor. For the political history of the years in question see Frame 1992: 131–190, for the activities of Bēl-ibni see in particular 175–187.

<sup>11</sup> The pertinent material is gathered in Baker, PNA 1/II, 306–310 s.v. Bēl-ibni 18, providing a detailed account of his career. The letters written by Bēl-ibni himself were analysed from a philological viewpoint by De Vaan 1995: 39–52 for a survey of the epistolographic material, some 75 letters.

<sup>12</sup> De Vaan 1995: 33 erroneously adduces ABL 291 as evidence for Bēl-ibni being a *ša rēš šarri*, but in this letter he bears the title of *mazzāz pāni*.

*ridi*, “as to what the king wrote to me: go and lead as a *turtānu* the forces of Assyria into the Sealand”. A final title mentioned in connection with Bēl-ibni is that of a *šākin tēmi* (CT 54 545:6). This letter is very fragmentary, but the mention of the town of [Sip]par in line 7 seems then to point to an origin of this letter in northern Babylonia and it is thus possible that we are dealing with a homonymous but different individual.<sup>13</sup> As regards terminology, the available evidence does not contain indications of any kind of distinction between the titles of *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni*; both seem to be generic expressions “courtiers”, and neither is associated with specific tasks: they are thus less offices than aulic titles. The military nature of Bēl-ibni’s mission was specified by the king in both passages discussed above, the letter to the Sealander (ABL 289:10–12) and the letter to Bēl-ibni himself referred to in ABL 795:5–6. Conceptually, then, *ša-rēšis* can be defined in Weberian terms as household officials with extra-patrimonial competences, the latter assigned to them in an ad hoc manner (but which with the passing of time may have become stereotyped) at their master’s discretion.<sup>14</sup>

A final letter that needs to be mentioned here is ABL 1311, lines 35–36. The passage was translated by De Vaan (1995: 315): “More than human beings [...] I love as a *ša-ziqni* (bearded one) the king, my lord” which of course does not fit the mutual exclusiveness of the groups of *ša-rēšis* and *ša-ziqnis*.<sup>15</sup> The passage thus needs to be translated differently, accepting De Vaan’s rather plausible completion of line r. 35, *al-la un<sup>m[es]</sup> [šal-mat sag. du] ša ziq-nu* (paralleled in ABL 1222), one would arrive at something like “More than the blackhead-people, the bearded ones, I love (as *ša-rēši*) the king of Assur, my lord”. This

<sup>13</sup> Frame 1992: 180<sup>+242</sup> points out that the mentioning of Nabû-bēl-šumâte in the same letter seems to favour identification. However, there was another individual Nabû-bēl-šumâte occupying the post of *šākin tēmi* of Borsippa between 662 and 653/2, cf. Frame 1992: 272. Identification with this Nabû-bēl-šumâte would better suit the northern provenance of this letter. An elegant but utterly speculative solution would be to interpret the governorship of Bēl-ibni as a reward for his successful campaigning and victory over Nabû-bēl-šumâte, especially in the light of his Babylonian family background (see below). Another problem is the place of Bēl-ibni’s presumed governorship: the governors of the Sealand bore the title of *šaknu*, as did the governors of the city of Ur. The only city in the south with a *šākin tēmi* was Uruk, where Nabû-ušabši is attested until 649 (year 20 of Assurbanipal) and who was succeeded already in 647 (year 22 of Assurbanipal) by Kudurru; see Frame 1992: 271–283. Did Bēl-ibni serve as a kind of interim governor of Uruk in Assurbanipal’s 21<sup>st</sup> year?

<sup>14</sup> See the remarks on the administrative staff in a society ruled by traditional authority in Weber 1978: 226–231 and in particular 229–230.

<sup>15</sup> See for example SAA 16 200:7–8: *lú sag<sup>mes</sup> lú ša-ziq-[ni<sup>mes</sup> ina giš.mi lugal] ninda<sup>hi.a</sup> e-ku-lu*. Similarly, in SAA 5 90, a hundred conspirators against the king of Urartu, *adi ša-rēši adi ša-ziqni* (line 11), were sentenced to death.

passage may thus contain as reference of class consciousness: by explicitly separating himself from the group of the *ša-ziqnis*, Bēl-ibni claims a higher degree of proximity to the king. Due to the paucity of references, the exact meaning of *ša-ziqni* is difficult to establish.<sup>16</sup> Note that in SAA 5 294 (lines r. 8–9), the *ša-ziqnis* are put in opposition not with *ša-rēšis* but with the *arad ekalli*, and one can speculate whether this can be taken as an indication that these people did not have too close an affiliation with the palace, especially in the light of Bēl-ibni's statement. In that case, the standard translation of “bearded courtier” would thus be misleading, as the term would rather designate those officials (and palace employees) that were recruited from the “free citizenry” rather than constituting a class of persons integrated on a permanent basis into the ambience of the palace.<sup>17</sup>

A final aspect of Bēl-ibni's competences that deserves mention here is the role in the chain of communication, in particular when considering that he had the privilege of direct contact to the king. This aspect becomes particularly evident in his role as intermediary between Assurbanipal and the Elamite king Tammaritu II. In ABL 1130, Bēl-ibni offers the king to obtain a writ (*šapāru*) from Tammaritu; unfortunately, the supposed purpose of this document is in a lacuna at the beginning of the tablet and cannot be reconstructed.<sup>18</sup> Later, after Tammaritu had been ousted from the throne by Indabibi in 649 BC, Bēl-ibni receives him in his role as royal delegate and, having checked with the king, sends the former Elamite king and his family and nobles further on to Nineveh (ABL 284). Several more letters of the dossier ascribed to him mention the sending on of people to the king in different contexts, and sometimes simply as witnesses to confirm Bēl-ibni's own written accounts (e.g. ABL 280). More often, however, there is no reason stated as to why an individual was sent before – or granted access to – the king, as was the case for example with a tributary from Dilmun (ABL 458), a certain Šumāya, who was a relative of Tammaritu (ABL 282), or Bēlšunu, Bēl-ibni's brother after his rescue from the hands of Nabû-bēl-šumāte (ABL 460). The rather large number of instances seems to indicate that the regulation of direct communication of people

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion in Groß 2014: 262–265, who notes that the term only occurs as antipode to *ša-rēši*.

<sup>17</sup> This interpretation is reconcilable with the standard distinction “castrated: uncastrated”, but relegates the aspect of potential castration of officials (which maybe plays a bigger role in the mind of contemporary scholarship than in ancient practice) to a secondary level. Also, neither does this distinction exclude that *ša-ziqnis* could occasionally be summoned (or hired?) to serve in the palace, as emerges from ND 2498 (see Parker 1961: 17, 35–36 and Groß 2014: 189), a list of personnel serving domestic functions, with a group of six taylor (*kāširu*) being constituted by three *arad ekallis* and three *ša ziqnis*.

<sup>18</sup> Also, in another letter, ABL 281, Bēl-ibni offers to forward a royal missive concerning the arrest of Nabû-bēl-šumāte to the Elamite king Ummanaldašu in secrecy.

in his operational area with the royal court – at his own discretion, at royal order and possibly also upon request of individuals – was indeed an important aspect of Bēl-ibni's day-to-day business.

His brother's case then leads us to another observation: somewhat unexpectedly for a courtier, Bēl-ibni's family background is very well-documented. His father was Nabû-mukīn-ahi according to ABL 1106 (r. 14).<sup>19</sup> The precise content of this letter is difficult to establish, but what is clear is that the writer, maybe again Nabû-ušabši, communicates to the king that Bēl-ibni showed discontent about the royal decision to appoint Nabû-kudurrī-ušur, the writer's brother, over the Sealand. In one of his own letters to the king, Bēl-ibni refers to his older brother Bēlšunu, whom he characterizes as a loyal servant of the king (ABL 460 r. 3: *šeš-ú-a ra-bu-ú ir ša lugal en-ia*), and who had been detained (*ina bīt maššarti*) for four years in shackles in the hands of Nabû-bēl-šumāte. The third known relative of Bēl-ibni is a nephew from his sister's side, who is known to have served in the army under his uncle who had installed him as commander of an outpost according to ABL 280 r. 1–3: <sup>1</sup>*Mu-še-zib-damar.utu mār ahatia urdu ša [šari] bēlia šá ina muhhi kād[u] apqidu*, “Mušēzib-Marduk, my nephew from my sister's side, a servant of the king, my lord, whom I placed over an outpost”. In this function, Mušēzib-Marduk received the oaths of loyalty to Assyria from a conquered people. He even was entrusted by Bēl-ibni with the task of acting as messenger on his behalf to the king, as emerges from ABL 277 (r. 3–7): “Bēl-ibni appointed for this task Mušēzib-Marduk, son of Bēl-ibni's sister, who two or three times at the order of Bēl-ibni had come before the king; they will call him gate commander (*ša muhhi bābi*).”<sup>20</sup> Such a role is confirmed by ABL 399, a letter of the king to Bēl-ibni confirming the arrival of Mušēzib-Marduk in Nineveh and his immediate departure from there. A particularly interesting introductory formula is encountered in ABL 1138, in which the sender identifies himself as [<sup>1</sup>*Mu-še-zib-damar.utu*] *dumu šeš-šú ša* <sup>ld</sup>*en-[ib-ni]*. Regardless of whether this letter is indeed to be attributed to our Mušēzib-Marduk – who appears erroneously as the son of Bēl-ibni's brother rather than of his

<sup>19</sup> The letter was collated and briefly discussed in Jursa 2007: 130<sup>+26</sup> who confirmed the reading Nabû-mukīn-ahi (cf. also De Vaan 1995: 50<sup>+21</sup>). Based on R: Harper's emendation <sup>ld</sup>*ag-[nig].du-uru* in ABL IX, the name of Bēl-ibni's father was sometimes given as Nabû-kudurrī-ušur, see e.g. Frame 1992: 159<sup>+122</sup> and Baker, PNA II/2 842 s.v. Nabû-kudurrī-ušur 5.

<sup>20</sup> It is possible but cannot be proven that the second part of this quote refers to the same appointment described in ABL 280.

sister<sup>21</sup> – this identification of the sender by means of a reference to a relative is remarkable in two regards. First, it provides evidence for the important role of family affiliations: in what we may describe as a case of ancient nepotism, Bēl-ibni provided his sister's son with a position in the provincial army and a career as his personal delegate. Second, this case shows that the argument according to which *ša-rēšis*, supposed eunuchs, were employed by kings because of their particular trustworthiness arising from the absence of any family relations is inadequate to shed light on the rather complex realities of Ancient Near Eastern courts.<sup>22</sup> This may find confirmation in CT 54 62, another interesting letter as regards Bēl-ibni's (?) family background.<sup>23</sup> The sender of this letter assures the king of his loyalty and reliability in an extensive *captatio benevolentiae*, and narrates afterwards harassments inflicted on a group of the king's subjects – a caravan? – by Nabû-bēl-šumāte. Towards the end of this letter, the writer refers to his family (r. 18–20): “The king may lord shall know that my family (<sup>lu</sup>*qinnaya*), they are all with me [...] Assyria, [the house of?] my [lord? ...]”. De Vaan translated this passage as “they are Assyrians from the house of my lord” and put forward the interesting proposition that Bēl-ibni and his family were deported to Assyria in the time of Sanherib's destruction of Babylon, where they were then raised as loyal subjects, which is why they considered themselves as Assyrians (De Vaan 1995: 31, 328–333). This interpretation certainly stretches the evidence to some extent, but on the other hand explains why Bēl-ibni, although he was clearly a Babylonian native as evidenced by his name (and other names in his family) as well as by his language was put in charge of a high military command in the war between Assyrian and Babylonia under Šamaš-šum-ukīn. De Vaan's hypothesis of a previous deportation would thus be an elegant solution to these incongruences.

<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, the letter may have been sent by a son of Bēl-ibni's brother Bēlšunu, who, it has been said, spent long years in captivity in the hands of Nabû-bēl-šumāte. In that case, Bēl-ibni took care of the sons of two of his siblings, rather than only his sister's son. Note that also in ABL 277 quoted above, Mušēzib-Marduk was identified by his relationship to Bēl-ibni.

<sup>22</sup> This argument was most extensively formulated by Xenophon in his *Cyropaedia* and quite uncritically accepted by modern scholarship; see the discussion in Pirngruber 2011: 298–300. A recent discussion of the topic shows some awareness of the problem, speaking of “eunuchs who *at least nominally* had their ties to family and outside loyalties severed by castration” (Barjamović 2011: 42; *our italics*) but overall clings to a very traditional notion of eunuchs, without further consideration of the matter in more depth (see especially *ibid.* 57–59).

<sup>23</sup> The author of this letter is broken off but the text was tentatively attributed to Bēl-ibni by De Vaan (1995: 44, see 328–333 for a commented edition) because of its content; his interpretation was accepted in PNA 1/II.

### 3. Comparanda

The question that arises from the paragraphs above is in how far Bēl-ibni's career and personal circumstances can be considered representative for a *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pani*. To that purpose, we shall have a look at the attestations of these titles, in the substantial Neo-Assyrian documentation. In general, the title of *ša-rēši* is more amply attested and will thus primarily receive our attention. As it constitutes the most fruitful field for the purpose of the present investigation, we shall first stay with the royal correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian kings and scour this corpus for parallels and similarities that may provide clues as to how (and whether) the actualities known about Bēl-ibni lend themselves to generalisation.<sup>24</sup> Afterwards, a synopsis of the occurrence of the titles of *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni* in a wide variety of different sources from royal inscriptions to deeds recording land grants shall be provided.

#### 3.1 *Ša-rēšis* in the letter corpus

Particularly well attested in the epistolographic sources is the practice of a *ša-rēši* being dispatched by the central administration on a specific mission, which was usually either judicial, administrative, or – as was the case with Bēl-ibni's nomination as troop commander in southern Babylonia during the war against Šamas-šum-ukīn – military in nature, and often upon request of the local administrators. For example, in SAA 1 82 dating to the reign of Sargon II, Ṭāb-ṣil-Esarra appeals to the central authority for an appointment of a *ša-rēši* in order to keep in check a group of pastoral Arabs prone not only to leave the territory assigned to them and their livestock, but even to loot Assyrian subjects in a year of drought.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in a letter to Esarhaddon (SAA 18 103), an official from Babylonia suggests to put a royal *ša-rēši* in charge of a trading colony (*kārum*), obviously also to relieve himself of this task: “As soon as a royal *ša-rēši* is placed over the *kārum*, the king's heart will be happy and I will believe in my own well-being”. Sometimes, such missions of *ša-rēšis* could be more limited in time or scope: in SAA 18 100, a *ša-rēši* was called for the inspection of the damages caused by an earthquake in the city of Assur, and in SAA 13 128 the priest Aššur-

<sup>24</sup> The pertinent material has been published over the last two decades in several volumes of the State Archives of Assyria (SAA) series, relevant here are SAA 1, 5, 13 and 16–19.

<sup>25</sup> The role of Arab tribes within the borders of the Neo-Assyrian Empire was discussed by Fales 2002.

rēšūwa asks for the sending of a royal *ša-rēši* to verify (and try?) a case of theft of temple property. To adduce also one example of a letter concerned with military matters one could mention SAA 15 54, in which letter an unknown official asks for a reinforcement of 2,000 men to be led by either a *ša-rēši* or a bodyguard (*ša qurbūti*). There are also instances when a *ša-rēši* was dispatched upon royal discretion rather than by request, as evidenced for example by SAA 1 11, a letter written by Sargon II to a governor Mannu-kî-Adad. In this letter, the king announces to have sent a *ša-rēši* in order to carry out a review (*asirtu*) of the troops under the governor's command. In such occasions, conflict between royal emissaries and the local officials could arise, as is shown by SAA 17 62 from Bīt-Dakkūri, documenting a disagreement between the governor Nabû-taklak and a *ša-rēši* concerning the stationing of a garrison (*šūlūtu*). Hence, what at first glance seems to have been a peculiarity of Bēl-ibni's range of competences, namely his role as intermediary in the direct communication between individuals under his command and the king that has emerged from his dossier, is actually paralleled by the fact that *ša-rēšis* were regularly employed by the court to settle diverse affairs in the provinces and to regulate matters beyond the palace's immediate sphere of influence.<sup>26</sup>

Also those *ša-rēšis* who were not sent from the king but who permanently stood in the service of provincial governors and other officials and magnates carried out such military tasks on a regular basis. In SAA 19 22, Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, the governor of Šimirra, informs Tiglath-pileser III that he just had installed a *ša-rēši* as garrison commander (*rab bīrte*) over a group of troops from a local petty king. Also from Šimirra is a fragmentary letter mentioning a *ša-rēši* in connection with archers and a battle (SAA 19 43). Another official, Ša-Aššur-dubbu writes to the king that he sent out two of his *ša-rēšis* with six soldiers (*šābu*) under the command of two cohort commanders (*rāb kišri*) with the task of bringing back a group of deserters: On their way back, the whole convoy with the exception of the two cohort commanders were taken captive by a band of insurgent Šubrians, illustrating the dangers potentially involved in the missions of *ša-rēšis*.

Whereas such military affairs loom particularly large in Bēl-ibni's dossier,<sup>27</sup> administrative matters surface only occasionally in his correspondence and are visible for example in his

<sup>26</sup> Direct requests at intercession were usually directed at higher-ranking magnates such as the vizier (*sukkallu*) according to the extant documentation. Among them, there are also two letters addressed to the *rab ša-rēši* (SAA 17 53 and 18 99), the former asking for intervention in favour of the writer who had fallen from royal grace.

<sup>27</sup> Suffice it here to refer to the overview of the corpus in De Vaan 1995: 53–65 with succinct synopses of the contents of all the letters.

independent decision to appoint his nephew as commander over a military outpost (cf. ABL 277 and 280 discussed above in section 2), and also in the task of provisioning the troops under his command that is sometimes alluded to. An instructive example is provided by the letters ABL 792 and ABL 794. In the latter, Bēl-ibni complains “The king, my lord knows that there are little supplies in my hands” (ABL 794 r. 15–16) and asks for the dispatch of a *ša qurbūte*. That the latter official is supposed to carry additional provisions for prisoners of war under Bēl-ibni’s command is specified in ABL 792 which speaks of the same affair, providing more details. Of particular interest are lines r. 8–10 which contain Bēl-ibni’s report on how he intends to proceed in a time of hardship, implicitly requesting royal approval of his course of action: “The king my lord knows that supplies are scarce in the land. I will buy barley for dates and silver from the Puqudeans, and then distribute it among them”. Additionally, if we accept De Vaan’s attribution of ABL 1102 to Bēl-ibni, there is one instance which shows him adjudicating a conflict (*šaltu*) between two individuals, possibly concerning work or service obligations towards crown (*dullu ša šarri*). A letter from the reign of Sargon II, SAA 17 173, does indeed confirm that arbitration in cases of dispute was another task that *ša-rēšis* were occasionally charged with.

Finally, the aspect of family ties needs consideration. The principal difficulty here is the fact that the large majority of *ša-rēšis* in the royal correspondence is not mentioned by name. However, upon closer investigation there are indeed some instances that indicate that Bēl-ibni and his attempts to further the career of the members of his extended family may not have been exceptional for palace personnel. SAA 13 178, a letter of the Babylonian *šatammu* Šuma-iddin to king Esarhaddon contains a passage that is highly informative regarding the overall importance of having personal networks based on family ties or else at court. Šuma-iddin complains that those who have a brother or someone else in the palace can rely on him, *mannu ša ahušu u qereb ekallišu ibašši ana muhhišu rahuš*, whereas he has no-one in the palace except for the king, *anāku manmanu’a ina ekalli ša šarri bēlija iānu ana lā šarru bēlija*. There is at least one letter that confirms that also *ša-rēšis* maintained strong ties with the world beyond the palace viz. their family of origin, and that their families relied on them when it came to possible careers in the service of the crown. In SAA 16 34, Šumāya writes to the crown prince Assurbanipal:

“The crown prince, my lord, shall enquire: “Was my grandfather not assisted by the *ša-rēši* Aššur-bēlu-ka’in?”, and afterwards, when your grandfather ascended to the throne, did he not appoint him as scribe? Now, the crown prince may not forsake me! The name of his grandfather and the service of my father shall not disappear from your house!” (r. 6–12).

The editors of SAA 16 identify the writer of the letter with Šumāya, son of Nabû-zēru-lēšir, an astrologer and exorcist from Nineveh (cf. Luukko, PNA 3/II 1280–1281 s.v. Šumāia 6), and assume that it was Šumāya’s grandfather who was assisted by the *ša-rēši* Aššur-bēlu-ka’’in. However, this is unconvincing for several reasons: first and foremost, it introduces in addition the crown prince Assurbanipal’s grandfather (Sennacherib) another, unnamed grandfather – the writer’s grandfather – whereas line 12 explicitly refers to the service rendered by the writer’s father. Additionally, the interpretation given in SAA 16 34 leaves the mentioning of the otherwise unknown *ša-rēši* Aššur-bēlu-ka’’in completely unexplained.<sup>28</sup> We are thus rather inclined to assume that the writer changes between direct and indirect speech (as evidenced by the quotation marks in the translation provided above), and that there is only one grandfather (the crown prince’s) spoken about in the letter, and that the writer of SAA 16 34 is a Šumāya, son of the *ša-rēši* Aššur-bēlu-ka’’in. There can in any case be no doubt that Šumāya is clearly appealing to the crown prince’s sense of duty towards his loyal servants and their families. As a member of a courtier’s (and scribe’s) family, he expects royal patronage also for himself. This is most explicitly stated in the subsequent lines of the letter which continues:

“My father (and) my grandfather stayed in your house. The king, your father, loves the one who worked for him, feels concern for the son of one who worked for him!” (r. 13–16).

Whereas pride in one’s ancestry is quite frequently encountered in the correspondence of scholars,<sup>29</sup> a careful reading of the epistolographic documentation shows thus that also on another level family ties play an important role in the bureaucracy. Having “a brother or someone else in the palace” provided individuals not only with an advocate of their interests before the king, but also with an opportunity for a career in the service of the king, who was expected to take care of the relatives of his direct servants. The cases of Bēl-ibni’s nephew and Aššur-bēlu-ka’’in’s nephew confirm that *ša-rēši*s were no exception to this rule.

<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, if the writer of this letter were indeed to be identified with Šumāya/Nabû-zēru-lēšir, then the grandfather is Nabû-zuqup-kēnu which raises the problem that the latter was not appointed as scribe by Sennacherib: he was already active during the reign of Sargon II (Baker/Pearce, PNA 2/II 912–913 s.v. Nabû-zuqup-kēnu). Finally, the Assyrian spelling of the writer’s name with an ending *-a-a* given in SAA 16 34 (<sup>1</sup>Šu-ma<sup>1</sup>-[a]<sup>1</sup>-[a]) is questionable given that there is no trace of a second *-a* due to the fact that the right edge of the tablet is broken off in the upper corner.

<sup>29</sup> As noted by Radner 2011: 363. A good example is SAA 10 160, the writer of which claims (lines 36–37): “I fully master my father’s profession, the discipline of lamentation!”

### 3.2 *Ša-rēši* in other textual sources

The remaining textual sources which provide information about the title *ša-rēši* include legal records, administrative documents, queries to Šamaš, royal inscriptions as well as other royal decrees and treaties. They basically support the impression gained about *ša-rēšis* from the case of Bēl-ibni and from the letter corpus. The basic connotation “courtier” is confirmed by the preserved affiliations of *ša-rēšis*, who stood in the service of the king (*ša-rēš-šarri*), other royal family members (crown prince, queen and king’s mother) and high-ranking state officials (magnates and provincial governors) who had their own extended households.<sup>30</sup> As members of the royal court, *ša-rēšis* are frequently mentioned together with other court members in palace records, such as the wine lists from 8th-century Fort Shalmaneser (NWL 1–33, CTN 3 119–149) and a list of court personnel from 7<sup>th</sup>-century Nineveh (SAA 7 5). From the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (RINAP 1 47:19) on and then especially in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC they are also listed among the booty taken or the tribute received from foreign palaces (e.g. from the palace of the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina defeated by Sennacherib, RINAP 3/1 1:32). In the queries they appear together with their counterparts, the *ša-ziqni*, listed before the king’s relatives, military functionaries and household personnel as possible insurgents against the king Esarhaddon or the crown prince Assurbanipal (SAA 4 139:4; 142:4). The close association between the king and the *ša-rēšis* is underlined by the standardized formula of the grants of tax-exemption of Assurbanipal. In the list of epithets the king describes himself as the one “who always behaves kindly towards the *ša-rēšis* who serve him (*mazzāz pānīšu*)” (SAA 12 25:7–8).

Evidence for family ties of *ša-rēšis* is rather scanty in the sources under discussion here (which should not come as a surprise as they centred on the palace and the king rather than on the private life of the servants), but there are some hints. One example is provided by the *ša-rēši* Bēl-tarṣi-ilumma, who was a scribe in the early stage of his career and later became governor of Kalḫu in the reign of Adad-nērāri III. According to the broken seal impression on the tablet GPA 64, the scribe and *ša-rēši*(?) Sīn-ēṭir possibly was his brother.<sup>31</sup> It is also worth mentioning here the issue of the litigation clauses of legal documents, which in addition to the contracting parties also list their sons and grandsons. In a few cases this also pertains to *ša-*

<sup>30</sup> Especially the queen’s establishment is striking in that also her staff, including the *šakintu* (i.e. the female manageress of the queen’s household) and her treasurer, had their own *ša-rēšis* in their service (Svärd 2012: 131).

<sup>31</sup> The titles are given in GPA 47:7–8.

*rēšis*, including the *ša-rēši* Šamaš-šarru-ušur whose archive was found in Kalḫu.<sup>32</sup> Although these stereotype clauses might not in each case reflect the actual circumstances (due to the inattentiveness of the scribes), their variations do not seem to be arbitrary and one cannot deny the possibility that at least some *ša-rēšis* had their own family and children (even if only adopted children).<sup>33</sup> In any case, one should also take into account a unique reference in a collection of prophecies according to which the crown prince Assurbanipal will once rule over the “sons (*mar’u*) of the *ša-ziqni*” and the “‘successors’ (*ḫalputu*) of the *ša-rēši*”.<sup>34</sup> A clear distinction is made here between the *ša-ziqni* as biological fathers of their offspring, and the *ša-rēši* who were succeeded by unrelated individuals, likely at the king’s discretion. This clause at least implies that the (adopted) sons of the *ša-rēšis* did not automatically follow them in their footsteps, as was customary in Assyrian society, but can also be (and indeed was) read as referring to a lack of offspring and eunuchship.

Another interesting issue is the association of *ša-rēšis* with one another in the context of employment relationships, apparently independent from family relations. This is the case also with our Bēl-tarši-ilumma who had the *ša-rēšis* Bēl-issē’a, a village manager, and Rēmanni-ilu in his service.<sup>35</sup> Although tangible examples are rare, it is quite clear that this was a common phenomenon since the highest-ranking state officials (magnates and provincial governors), who used to employ *ša-rēšis*, were *ša-rēšis* (or *ša-rēš-šarris*) themselves (Groß 2014: 245–248). In addition to a superior/subordinate relationship, *ša-rēšis* with an equal status and standing may have (occasionally) had friendly connections to each other. A close relationship between two eunuchs is indicated by the seal A 3877 which according to its inscription had been donated by Bīrtāiu, *ša-rēši* of Adad-nērāri (III), to his protector (EN-*kit-*

<sup>32</sup> Šamaš-šarru-ušur’s sons and grandsons are mentioned in ND 3426:14 (649) = FNALD 9; 3422 r. 5–6 (642\*); 3427 r. 1–2 (622\*). Note, however, that in a legal record of unknown date he is only mentioned together with his brothers and nephews (ND 3429 r. 3–4), whereas his contracting partner is listed along with his sons, grandsons, brothers and nephews (ND 3429 r. 1–3); cf. ND 3463 r. 4 (641\*).

<sup>33</sup> See Pirngruber 2011: 304–5. Šamaš-šarru-ušur bought a woman and her son (ND 3426, 649\*) and adopted Gallussu, daughter of of the fowler Matī’-il-ilā’ī (ND 3423, 644\*); cf. Groß 2014: 257.

<sup>34</sup> SAA 9 7:4. The hapax legomenon *ḫalputu* seems to be an Aramaic loanword with the meaning “substitute” (Parpola 1997: 38, comment on l. 4).

<sup>35</sup> See Brinkman, PNA 1/II 332–3 s.v. Bēl-tarši-ilumma 1. Note also Aššūr-bēl-ušur who was *ša-rēši*(?) of Pālil-ēreš, governor of Rašappa, according to his seal (RIMA 3 A. 0.104.2008). Pālil-ēreš is also attested with the title *ša-rēši*, see below.

*ri-šú*) Issār-dūrī, *ša-rēši* of the commander-in-chief Nergal-ilā'ī.<sup>36</sup> As one would also expect from brothers, they apparently supported each other.

The functions (and therewith the status) of *ša-rēšis* were manifold. In addition to the letters, this also emerges from the official and professional titles they are attested with. Hence, municipal authorities (like the aforementioned Bēl-issē'a) household administrators, household personnel (kitchen personnel, caretakers of royal tombs), but also a few scribes are known to have been *ša-rēšis* (as is the case with Aššur-bēlu-ka''in, see above). In the inscriptions of the Sargonid kings, *ša-rēšis* are found particularly frequent among those who were active as military leaders and installed as governors in the royal provinces established in newly conquered territories. Also in other sources magnates, provincial governors and military commanders are attested bearing the title *ša-rēši* (Groß 2014: 245–248). These findings are all in accordance with what is known about Bēl-ibni discussed in the preceding section 2, who also was primarily a military commander. On their various different types of errands and missions, described so vividly in the letters corpus, *ša-rēšis* also may have been armed. They certainly were an integral part of the royal bodyguard, as also indicated by the armed *ša-rēšis* who, together with the armed *ša-ziqnis*, stand guard for the king, as stated in the queries to the sungod where they are listed as possible insurgents against the crown (SAA 4 142:12; 144: 12–13: LÚ.SAG.MEŠ *šá til-li Íl-ú-ni lu-ú* LÚ.šá-ziq-ni *šá til-li ÍL-ú-ni a-na* EN.NUN *šá* LUGAL GUB.MEŠ-ú-ni). From this perspective, we can consider Bēl-ibni as quite representative for the class of *ša-rēšis*. Although he did not stand in the company the king on a daily basis, he was charged with the safeguarding of the empire and its king at a distance.

A man of Bēl-ibni's standing certainly enjoyed considerable wealth and may have counted large land holdings under cultivation his own. Especially the *ša-rēšis* of the king but also of other royal family members and other individuals are frequently attested as buyers of land and people in the legal records from Nineveh (Groß 2014: 250–251).

### 3.3 *mazzāz pāni* in the Neo-Assyrian text corpus

The respectable number of references to *mazzāz pāni* in the Neo-Assyrian text corpus is distributed over a relatively broad spectrum of different text types, mainly including royal

<sup>36</sup> RIMA 3 A.0.104.2009. For *kitru* meaning (1) “(military) aid” and (2) “auxiliary force” or “ally” see CAD K 467–468 s.v. *kitru*; cf. CAD K 303–304 s.v. *katāru* A “to band together, to form a confederation”. *bēl-kitri* is not known from other records (CAD K 468 s.v. *bēl kitri*).

inscriptions and letters dating from the late 9<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> down to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, with late Neo-Assyrian references outnumbering the earlier material.<sup>37</sup> In general, it can be stated that only a few individuals are (explicitly or implicitly) designated *mazzāz pāni* in the Neo-Assyrian sources, among which we find provincial and municipal governors as well as high military functionaries, on the one hand, and scholars, on the other.<sup>38</sup>

The first group belongs to most powerful individuals in the empire. To begin with the earliest reference, in an inscription on a stone stele from Tell al-Rimāḥ Adad-nerari III qualifies Pālil-ēreš, governor of the lands of Raṣappa, Lāqê, Ḥindānu and Sūḥu and the cities Ānat and Ana-Aššūr-utēr-ašbat (i.e. Pitūru) – hence, an area stretching over about 500 kilometres along the middle basin of the Euphrates – as his *manzāz pāni* (RIMA 3 A.0.104.7:13–20). This man, who also bore the title *ša-rēši*, was entrusted with the rebuilding of 331 small villages (attached to 10 cities) in the territory under his command after the king's military success in the lands of Ḥatti and Na'iri (at least after the year 797, see Siddall 2013: 43). It has been argued (by Grayson 1993 and Fuchs 2009) that Pālil-ēreš and other state officials active at that time achieved a disproportionate degree of power and, in exceeding their authority, represented potential danger for the growing empire. However, the sources do not indicate that Pālil-ēreš ever defected from the Assyrian crown. He should be rather regarded as one of the most important political actors of his time who played a crucial role in the Assyrian consolidation of the west.<sup>39</sup>

This contrasts to a certain Šillāia who was active in Babylonia at the time of Esarhaddon. Apparently, he acted on behalf of the Assyrian king before he began not only to exceed his authority but to seriously intrigue against Assyria according to letters of the Babylonian scholars Bēl-ušēzib and Zakīru and others (for details see Frame 1992: 84–7). His turning away from Assyria is peculiar since he was counted among the entourage of Esarhaddon, as emerges from a letter written by (the chief scribe) Nabû-zēru-lēšir during the royal substitute

<sup>37</sup> This is likely due to the uneven distribution of the sources, with the bulk of everyday documents dating to the last c. 150 years of the empire's existence.

<sup>38</sup> Also court officials may have been regarded as *mazzāz pāni*. This is indicated by the standardised form of the decrees of Assurbanipal granting tax-exemption according to which this favour was done to *ša-rēšis* (and *mazzāz pānis* (see below). Among the beneficiaries of these grants we find the chamberlain (*ša muḥḥi bētāni*) (name lost) (SAA 12 30), the fodder master (*rab kissiti*) Baḷṭāia (SAA 12 25) and the *rab ša-rēši* Nabû-šarru-ušur (SAA 12 26).

<sup>39</sup> See Siddall (2013: 106–118) for a recent discussion of the role of Pālil-ēreš (alias Nergal-ēreš).

ritual (in the year 679, see Parpola 1983: 516) to “the farmer”.<sup>40</sup> According to this message the substitute king claims that Šillāia should be watched and no longer be in the entourage of “the farmer” (SAA 10 2 r. 10: *ina pa-an LÚ.ENGAR lu-u la i-za-az*).<sup>41</sup> As indicated by a broken letter referring to a Šillāia who used to lead the troops mobilised by the governor of Nippur,<sup>42</sup> our Šillāia may have been a military commander. This possible occupation with military affairs suggests that Šillāia may have had a position similar to Bēl-ibni. Incidentally, the latter also was scolded by the king for having acted contrary to his instructions (ABL 291), but he remained loyal to the king. Judging by the letter communicating this single incident, such a misbehaviour was regarded as especially inappropriate for a *mazzāz pāni*.

References to scholars being *mazzāz pānis* stem from their letters to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, though this pertains not to the title as such but to phrases of the type *ina pāni uzuzzu* (or *ina pūti uzuzzu*). The royal exorcist Adad-šumu-ušur, who was a descendant of a well-known scholarly family and was active under Esarhaddon as well as Assurbanipal, not only stands out by the plenitude of survived letters of his but also by his recurrent references to the membership in the king’s entourage. While he expresses his wish to “stand before the king” (SAA 10 197+198 r. 2–3: *i-na pa-an LUGAL be-lí-ia la-zi-iz-ma*) in a flattering letter to Esarhaddon, he demands the same for his son, the exorcist Urda-Gula who, unlike the offspring of other families in Nineveh, was not favoured with the king’s (now Assurbanipal) offer to stay in his entourage (SAA 10 226 r. 6–11). Adad-šumu-ušur underlines his claim by his perception that there is no one in the palace who serves like him (r. 14–16: *ša ina ŠĀ-bi É.GAL i-za-zu-u-ni gab-bi-šú-nu la i-ra-’u-mu-un-ni*). As if his petition took effect, Adad-šumu-ušur effusively thanks Assurbanipal for his generosity to have incorporated him, his nephews and cousins into the royal entourage in another letter (SAA 10 227 r. 15–16: *ina IGI.MEŠ-ia*).<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, however, Adad-šumu-ušur does not mention his sons or, in particular his son Urda-Gula, which might indicate that Urda-Gula was not favoured by the Assyrian king at that time. This corresponds to a letter written by

<sup>40</sup> Having begun with the enthronement in Nineveh, this royal substitute ritual ended with the re-enthronement of the substitute king in Babylonia, see Parpola 1983: XXVIII.

<sup>41</sup> Šillāia seems to have tried to sustain the picture of a loyal servant of the king according to the letter SAA 10 68 which he sent to the king. Here, he expresses his fear of assassination and complains about the circulation of foul rumours.

<sup>42</sup> SAA 18 3:11’–r. 4. Irritating, however, is the statement that Šillāia used to lead these troops since the days of the king’s grandfather, that is Sargon II (taken that the letter indeed dates to the reign of Esarhaddon). Reynolds (in PNA 3/I 1174 sv. Šillāia 5.) treats this attestation as a reference for our Šillāia.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. SAA 10 228:22–23. See for this affair also already Klauber<sup>2</sup>1968: 41.

Urda-Gula himself to the king (Assurbanipal) where he complains that he has fallen under disgrace although he has formed part of Assurbanipal's entourage when the latter was designated crown prince (SAA 10 194:20–21: *ina* IGI-šú <sup>ṛ</sup>az<sup>ṛ</sup>-zi-zu-u-ni).<sup>44</sup> A similar fate befell the haruspex Tabnî whose position beneath the crown prince (Assurbanipal) was forwarded to someone else. He underlines his indignation about this affront also by referring to his (unnamed) father, chief haruspex and attendant of Esarhaddon (SAA 10 182:7: *ina* IGI-šú *it-ṛ*ti<sup>ṛ</sup>-zi) from his childhood on, who was rewarded by two favours of Esarhaddon: he was appointed as highest scholar and guaranteed closeness to the king (ll. 27: *ṛ*lu<sup>ṛ</sup>? [ṛur]-ba-an-ni *is-ṛ*se<sup>ṛ</sup>-[niš]). The latter favour is particularly consistent with the fact that proximity (physical and mental) is a central aspect of courtiership. The title *mazzāz pāni* is never explicitly applied to a scholar, but it is mentioned in a direct speech of a broken letter of Adad-šumu-ušur to the king Assurbanipal (SAA 10 199 r. 8'). Furthermore, the rare term *mazzāz ekalli* is explicitly applied to scholars, including scribes, haruspices, exorcists, physicians and augurs, in a letter from the chief scribe Issār-šumu-ēreš to the king (Esarhaddon) (SAA 10 7:10). Together with the literal paraphrasing of their close ties to the king and his household in their letters, it is eligible to assume that the scholars were regarded as *mazzāz pāni*.

Adad-šumu-ušur's and his family's appointment to courtiership by Esarhaddon (according to the letters SAA 10 227 and 228), might have been preceded by queries to Šamaš. In fact a few queries from Nineveh survived on the basis of which it was inquired whether the incorporation into the king's entourage (SAA 4 152:7: [LÚ šu-a-tu ]i-bu-kām-ma i-na IGI-sú <sup>ṛ</sup>lu<sup>ṛ</sup>-šá-az-zi-i[z], cf. SAA 4 154 and 155) regarding selected figures was advisable.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the inclusion into the king's entourage did not (only) take place as a smooth transition over time, neither did it (only) depend on random decisions but involved a well-considered process set in motion by the king (and his advisors) and carried out with divine help. Such an appointment was not irrevocable but the king's men constantly had to prove their loyalty and ability, as emerges from the case of Adad-šumu-ušur and offspring. The same affair also suggests that the king not least acted according to his very personal interests and sympathies. On the other hand, the king put great trust in this entourage and was not easily influenced by negative reports on his courtiers, as is indicated by the case of Šillāia and the great number of

<sup>44</sup> Parpola (1983: 1993) established a plausible chronological sequence of these letters.

<sup>45</sup> Each of the three preserved queries is formulated in a slightly different way. The reverse (though not the obverse) of SAA 4 154 gives the impression that the person in question already formed part of the king's entourage and that rather the maintenance of this exclusive membership was the actual concern here.

accusing letters which do not seem to have taken effect immediately.<sup>46</sup> The importance of family ties for the scholars and their self-conception and position at court corresponds well with Bēl-ibni and his known family background. In this respect we shall also mention a unique text which describes the composition and desired effects of a protective charm, a necklace, specifically for courtiers (*manzaz ekalli*) that was designed in order to guarantee his health, provide him with wisdom as well as success and support him with the establishment of a household (*e-peš É?*).<sup>47</sup> If interpreted correctly, this passage would thus constitute a precious reference to possible family ties of courtiers. However, the sources do not allow to postulate that family ties were an important issue of *mazzāz pāni* in general.

The relationship between the king and his courtiers may be characterised by service, obedience and devotion by the latter towards the sovereign who, on his part, rewards this with his accessibility, his trust in his courtier's loyalty and ability, his protection and his generosity. This balance of give and take is reflected in a broken royal letter where the current *šandabakku* is ordered to show obedience towards his lord as it befits a *mazzāz pāni*, since “the favour of the lords of the *mazzāz pāni* obliges them” (SAA 18 3:8'–10': MUN *šá EN.MEŠ-šú-nu ŠÀ-bu-ka a-na UGU-ḥi-šú-nu te-ti-iq*). This balanced concept of courtiership is best underlined by the aforementioned standardised decrees of Assurbanipal where it says that Assurbanipal “always behaves kindly towards the officials who serve him and rewards the reverent who obey his royal command” (SAA 12 25 and 26:7–10: *ša a-na LÚ.šu-ut-SAG.MEŠ man-za-az-pa-ni-šú it-ta-nab-ba-lu i-na dam-qa-a-ti a-na pa-li-ḥi na-šir a-mat LUGAL-ti-šú ú-tir-ru gi-mil-li du-un-qi*). Hence, kindness and rewarding shall be the return for those who serve and obey the king. Thereby also the durability of the devotion is relevant since it is further stressed here that kindness and favour is rewarded for those who served the king already when he was crown prince (SAA 12 25 and 27: 13–16: EN-*ta-ab-ti EN-de-iq-ti ša TA\* re-du-ti a-di e-peš LUGAL-ú-ti i-na UGU LUGAL be-lí-šú am-ru-ú-ma ŠÀ-šú gu-um-mu-ru a-na EN-šu*). Furthermore, it is said about the benefitted courtier that he “served before me [the king] in faithfulness, and walked in safety, who grew with a good repute within my [the king's] palace, and kept guard over my [his] kingship” (SAA 12 25 and 27:15–20: *i-na maḥ-ri-ia i-na ki-na-a-ti i-zi-zu-ma it-tal-la-ku šal-meš qé-reb É.GAL-ia i-na MU dam-qi ir-bu-ú-ma iṣ-ṣu-ru ma-šar-ti LUGAL-ti-ia*). For all this, he was also assured a

<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, the chronological sequence of these letters cannot be established in order to reconstruct the chain of events, but note, for instance, the fragmentary royal letter SAA 18 2 which ends with the conciliatory promise of the king to settle the case of the recipient with Šillāia.

<sup>47</sup> See Schuster-Brandis 2008: 319–321, text no. 10: 10–12.

burial place of his choice which guaranteed peace in death (SAA 12 25 and 27 r. 19–31). Also future kings are required to treat them well and are further instructed to not to trust in the word of “a hostile informer” (*a-kil kar-ši*) but to investigate whether the accusations towards the beneficiary are true and not to treat them unfairly but punish them adequately in the case they are guilty (SAA 12 25 and 27:9–18). This may remind us of the case of Šillāia who was accused of several misdeeds by a number of different people but who (apparently successfully for a while) pretended to be loyal to the king (see above). Since in the decrees an entire paragraph deals with such a scenario, this may have been a well-known matter (and there are indeed enough letters preserved which indicate that badmouthing of other people was a common strategy to stress one’s own virtues at court).

#### 4. *Ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni*

The close association of the titles *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni* dates back to the Middle Assyrian period. Among the collection of the Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees (MAPD) explicit regulations were issued for the *mazzāz pāni*. These include a decree (§ 8) from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I which deals with the inspection of the *mazzāz pāni* and the subsequent treatment of *mazzāz pāni* and *ša-rēš-šarri* in case they do not prove to be in an appropriate condition.<sup>48</sup> Also § 21 (from the reign of Tiglath-pileser I) enumerates *mazzāz pānis*, *ša-rēš-šarris* and *širkus* (oblates) who shall be struck with 100 bows and cut off one ear in case they eavesdrop on a singing or quarrelling palace woman (Roth 1995: 206–7). Leaving aside an examination of the *širku*, we get the impression that *mazzāz pāni* and *ša-rēš-šarri* constituted an integral part of the Middle Assyrian court and were active there under similar circumstances. Since the decrees tend to list both titles subsequently, they were, however, rather not meant as synonymous terms. Although considerable overlaps might have existed, the enumeration implies that both terms had slightly different connotations, with *mazzāz pāni* apparently also serving as generic term. This feature, but now in reverse order of *ša-rēši* (or *ša-rēš-šarri*) followed by *mazzāz pāni*, can still be found in the Neo-Assyrian sources, including the lists of human booty in the royal inscriptions as well as the lists of court personnel in the queries to the sun god and in a treaty.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Roth 1995: 200–1 (cf. § 20, pp. 205–6). This is the highly debated paragraph about whether *ša-rēšis* were castrates or not (for a recent examination see Pirngruber 2011: 294–7).

<sup>49</sup> Note, for instance, the following references: Human booty: RINAP 3/1 1:32 (from the palace of Marduk-apla-iddina II) and Borger 1996: 105, Prism B vi 31 (from palace of the Gambulean Dunānu). Assyrian court

Peculiar is the wording of the standardised decrees of tax-exemption of the reign of Assurbanipal discussed above. According to the translation provided by Kataja and Whiting, the *ša-rēši*s are further described as the king's *mazzāz pāni*, that is, as those who serve the king. In this case the two terms do not denote two different types of courtiers, but suggest a direct interrelation. Figures such as the military commander Bēl-ibni, but also the governor Pālil-ēreš, who are attested as both *ša-rēši* and *mazzāz pāni*, underline the impression that both terms simply refer to courtiers. A certain degree of interchangeability of the two terms is furthermore indicated by a single instance where one (*issēn*) *mazzāz pāni* is demanded to tell the story of a squandered house before the king (SAA 16 42 r. 10). As discussed above, several similar requests for intervention are attested in connection with the *ša-rēši*s and it is occasionally also the case that it is asked for “one *ša-rēši*”.<sup>50</sup>

In general, however, the discussion in the preceding paragraphs show the use and distribution of the two terms in the Neo-Assyrian text corpus differ and rather point to different connotations. The more common title *ša-rēši* refers to employees of the court who are attested in a broad range of tasks and functions inside the palace as well as abroad, from low menial household services to important military missions. As stated in the introduction, a translation as “eunuchs” is largely a matter of interpretation. Some sources mentioning *ša-rēši*s call to mind the classical images of eunuchs as personal servants at Oriental courts with little dealings with the outside world, like the *khādim* of the Abbasid court.<sup>51</sup> Other instances, like the case Bēl-ibni, depict high-ranking individuals with intact and quite close family ties or else permission to found families of their own and who were deployed as representatives of the state vis-à-vis local and regional dignitaries – a position they held also during the Neo-Babylonian period (Jursa forthcoming) – and often in a military capacity. All of them share the feature, broadly speaking, of being part of the king's personnel, whereas we may define the *mazzāz pāni* as the confidants or friends of the king, as seems especially suitable for the scholars who were the king's advisors. The concept of the *mazzāz pāni* calls to mind the

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personnel in a treaty: SAA 2 8:7. Assyrian court personnel in queries: SAA 4 139:4, 142:4, 144:4 and 148:6 (here, the *ša-rēši* are mentioned together with the *ša-ziqni*). In the royal inscriptions the Sumerian loanword *tīru* seems to occasionally replace *ša-rēši* (Groß 2014: 258).

<sup>50</sup> Groß 2014: 254. Note that in the first place *ša-qurbūti* were in high demand to control and settle the different matters throughout the empire in favour of the central administration (Groß 2014: 617–618).

<sup>51</sup> On the *khādim* see van Berkel *et al.* 2013: 178–182. An interesting figure is Mu'nis al-Muzaffar, the highest military authority during the reign of the caliph al-Muqtadir, who was a castrate himself but recorded to have complained about the money squandered on women and eunuchs of the harem, *ibid.* 120–128 and 181–182.

“friends of the king” (*philoī tou basileōs*) of the Seleucid court who served as court officials, ambassadors and military commanders and functioned as intermediaries, between the royal court and outsiders, who obtained properties and other rewards from the king (Strootman 2011: 69–71). Basically, one could argue that *ša-rēši* refers to the professional (i.e. rational) and *mazzāz pāni* to the emotional (i.e. patronage) relationship between the king and his courtiers. This would also explain why the scholars (who maintained a patronage relationship to the king, see Radner 2011) were an integral part of the *mazzāz pāni*, whereas they usually did not belong to the class of *ša-rēši*, rather to the contrary, stood in opposition to them (Radner 2011). Apart from the scholars, however, being recognised as a *ša-rēši* and as a *mazzāz pāni* at the same time may have been not that uncommon. Bēl-ibni, for instance, was a high official of Assyrian and must have had close personal ties to the king, if we consider the tone of the letters between the two. In connection with Bēl-ibni it may be also significant that the title *ša-rēši* was applied to him by a third person (ABL 267), whereas the king calls him his *mazzāz pāni* (ABL 289).

#### Abbreviations and bibliography

CTN 3 = Dalley, S. / Postgate, J.N. 1984, FNALD = Postgate, J.N. 1976, GPA = Postgate, J.N. 1973, NWL = Kinnier Wilson, J.V. 1972, RIMA 3 = Grayson, A.K. 1996, RINAP 1 = Tadmor, H. / Yamada, S. 2011, RINAP 3/1 = Grayson, A.K. / Novotny, J. 2012, SAA 1 = Parpola, S. 1987, SAA 2 = Parpola, S. / Watanabe, K. 1988, SAA 4 = Starr, I. 1990, SAA 5 = Lanfranchi, G. / Parpola, S. 1990, SAA 7 = Fales, F.M. / Postgate, J.N. 1992, SAA 9 = Parpola 1997, SAA 10 = Parpola 1993, SAA 12 = Kataja, L. / Whiting, R. 1995, SAA 13 = Cole, S. / Machinist, P. 1998, SAA 15 = Fuchs, A. / Parpola, S. 2001, SAA 16 = Luukko, M. / van Buylaere, G. 2002, SAA 17 = Dietrich, M. 2003, SAA 18 = Reynolds, F. 2004, SAA 19 = Luukko, M. 2012

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