

# THE *mukarrib* AND HIS BEADS: KARIB'IL WATAR'S ASSYRIAN DIPLOMACY IN THE EARLY 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY B.C.

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses some of the less well-known evidence attesting to the existence of diplomatic links between South Arabia and Assyria in the 7th century B.C. Karib'il Watar's relationship with Assyria is analysed. The evidence of gift exchange between the two states is examined. The implications of this pattern of ties is also studied in light of evidence for caravan traffic between the two regions.*

## KEYWORDS

*Assyria, Sennacherib, Saba, Yemen, mukarrib, Karib'il Watar.*

Around 683 B.C. Sennacherib deposited an alabaster tablet (VA 8248 = KAH 2, no. 122) as a foundation inscription beneath the *bīt akīti* at Assur. In it, he reported (ll. 48-51) that he had included in the deposit *pappardilū* [onyx? banded agate? Galter 1987: 16; white-banded black agate or onyx, Frahm 1997: 147-148], valuable stones and aromatic resins from the *nāmurtu*-gift of Karibili, king of Saba' (Frahm 1999: 85). The text, written in the first person as if spoken by Sennacherib, refers to the gift which Karibili 'had ordered to be brought to me'. In Frahm's translation we read,

'Als ich das Fundament des Akītu-Festhauses legte, habe ich, das *nāmurtu*-Geschenk (betreffend), das Karibili, der König von Saba, mir zu bringen befohlen hatte, (und das) aus *pappardilū*, wertvollen Steinen und wohlriechenden Essenzen (bestand), Steine und Essenzen aus diesem *nāmurtu*-Geschenk in sein Fundament gelegt' (Frahm 1999: 85).

The identification of Karibili in the South Arabian sources has exercised numerous scholars for over a century. The name *Krb'l*, which means 'god has blessed' (Gratzl 1906: 6, 'es segnete Gott'; 'Gott hat gesegnet', Tairan 1992: 185), is not uncommon in the royal onomasticon of South Arabia (Tairan 1992: 184-185). Far and away the most illustrious leader to have borne this name, however, was *Krb'l Wtr bn Dmr'ly mkrb s'ib*, or Karib'il Watār b. Dhamar'alī *mukarrib* of Saba' and the century-long controversy which has raged over the short and long chronologies in South Arabian history turns on whether or not Karib'il Watar = Karibili (Garbini 1996, Avanzini 1996, for useful summaries of the debate). While some scholars harbour lingering doubts about the identification of Karib'il Watar with Karibili (e.g. de Maigret and Robin 1989: 263; Robin 1996: 1120 notes, 'Malgré cette incertitude persistante, nous retenons l'identification comme hypothèse de travail'), many are now quite prepared to accept the identity of the two as virtually assured (e.g. Galter 1993: 36; Nebes 1997: 95).

The family of Karib'il Watar has been reconstructed by Robin (Robin 1997: 157). In Saba' he bore the title *mukarrib*, a term, the vocalization of which is uncertain (Robin 1996: col. 1048) but which the *Sabaic Dictionary* translates as 'head of federation in archaic period' (Beeston, Ghul, Müller and Ryckmans 1982: 78, s.v. KRB

I). Beeston suggested that the title *mukarrib* may have been similar to Arabic *mudjammi'*, i.e. 'unifier', in the sense 'that he was head both of Sabaeans proper and of non-Sabaeen elements in the federation' (Beeston 1995: 664). In this sense, the title certainly befitted the deeds of Karib'il Watar, for according to the text (RES 3945= Gl. 1000) of his great *res gestae* at Širwāh (Fig. 1), discovered by Eduard Glaser, the Sabaeen *mukarrib* expanded Saba' from a fairly small area around Ma'rib and Širwāh-Khawlān and the southern end of the Jawf, to a state which, through conquest, included the formerly independent kingdoms of Kaminahu, Haram, Qataban and Hadramawt, as far north as Najran in what is today southern Saudi Arabia (Robin 1996: col. 1089; Nebes 1997). A late reflex of the *mukarrib* institution, which was not hereditary, may also be preserved by Eratosthenes. Strabo (*Geog.* 16.4.3), drawing on Eratosthenes, wrote about kingship in South Arabia as follows: 'no son of a king succeeds to the throne of his father, but the son of some notable man who is born first after the appointment of the king; for at the same time that some one is appointed to the throne, they register the pregnant wives of their notable men and place guards over them; and by law the wife's son who is born first is adopted and reared in a royal manner as future successor to the throne' (for the possibility of this pattern being reflected in the inscriptions from Yala, see Garbini 1996: 18).

In a review of South Arabian chronology Garbini, basing himself largely on the testimony of RES 3945, questioned whether Karib'il Watar the Great could have been the Karibilu referred to in Sennacherib's inscriptions. He wrote, 'Quant à la possibilité que le Karib'il de Sennachérib puisse être identifié au Karib'il Watar auteur de RES 3945, elle paraît assez faible: dans l'inscription citée, Karib'il fait un compte rendu long et détaillé de ses entreprises, mais la plus septentrionale des cités rejointes fut Najran; il est peu vraisemblable qu'il ait eu une entreprise mémorable comme celle d'une guerre contre l'Assyrie (et qu'il aurait présenté bien sûr comme une victoire); le fait-même d'avoir conduit une armée à des milliers de kilomètres de distance, à travers le désert, aurait été souligné (comme le fut, malgré le résultat négatif, l'entreprise d'Aelius Gallus, certainement plus facile que celle qu'aurait exécutée Karib'il)' (Garbini 1996: 18).

Garbini is surely correct in suggesting that *if* Karib'il Watar had campaigned against Assyria, this surely would have been mentioned in an inscription. Yet nothing suggests that the South Arabian magnate *ever* campaigned north of Najran, let alone in Assyria. However, this observation in no way casts doubt on the identification of Karib'il Watar and Karibilu. Rather, it can be suggested that RES 3945 pre-dates both the establishment of Sabaeen diplomatic ties with Assyria and Sennacherib's *bīt akīti* inscription. Although the Sirwah text is undated, the construction of the *bīt akīti* must have occurred *after* Sennacherib's conquest of Babylon in 689 B.C. which is mentioned in the foundation document (Galter 1993: 34). Sennacherib died in 681 B.C. and Frahm suggests that the *bīt akīti* text dates to c. 683 B.C. (Frahm 1999: 85). It is thus plausible to suggest that RES 3945 dates to sometime before 689 B.C., perhaps to the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (cf. Nebes 1997: 95).

As an aside, it is interesting to consider Frahm's suggestion that the tradition of monumental inscriptions describing the deeds of a king - as exemplified by RES 3945 - had no prior tradition in South Arabia and may, therefore, have been influenced by Assyria (Frahm 1997: 145-146; 1999: 86). In other words, South Arabian scribes who had seen Assyrian royal inscriptions may have returned to South Arabia and subsequently carved Karib'il Watar's *res gestae*. While this is certainly logical, it strikes me that Garbini is surely correct in suggesting that if Karib'il had sent a delegation to Assyria, this would surely have rated a mention in his Sirwah inscription. Therefore, it still seems more likely to conclude that RES 3945 pre-dates the contact with Assyria.

Karib'il's *nāmurtu*-gift is, however, open to further scrutiny. Taking 'gift' (don) as the simple translation of Akk. *nāmurtu*, Robin argues, 'sa contribution est un don (*nāmurtu*) et non un tribut. Ces deux indices suggèrent que l'Assyrie reconnaît à Karib'il un statut plus élevé que celui de Yāthi'ī'amar [Ita'amara, attested in the reign of Sargon II] et que des relations de nature politique se nouent, après plusieurs décennies de contacts commerciaux' (Robin 1996: col. 1118). Further, Robin suggests, 'Karibilu n'est pas un simple tributaire: de sa propre initiative, il fait un don dans lequel son titre de roi est enregistré et donc reconnu. Cette situation pourrait refléter la prééminence que Karib'il le Grand s'est assurée par les armes sur l'ensemble du Yémen' (Robin 1996: col. 1120). This, however, is perhaps a too generous view of the term *nāmurtu*. The *nāmurtu*-gift is described by Galter as 'Geschenke, die bei Audienzen dem König überbracht wurden' (Galter 1993: 34). Similarly, Postgate translates the term in English as 'audience-gift' (Postgate 1997: 211). Frahm, however, has noted, 'Ursprünglich ein Audienzgeschenk für den König, bezeichnet *nāmurtu* in neuassyrischer Zeit sowohl freiwillige Gaben, die zusätzlich zum regulären Tribut geliefert werden, als auch zwingend vorgeschriebene. Neben Vasallenkönigen waren auch Provinzgouverneure angehalten, *nāmurtu*-Gaben an den assyrischen Hof zu bringen. Bevorzugt wurden Produkte höherer Qualität, für die der König Verwendung hatte' (Frahm 1999: 83, n. 29).

Galter has suggested that the reference in Sennacherib's *bīt akīti* text to the exotica of Karibili's *nāmurtu*-gift fulfilled a particular propagandistic function. 'Die Schreiber Sanheribs nahmen die Begrüßungsgeschenke aus Dilmun (Bahrain) und Saba' als Beispiele dafür, wie nach der endgültigen Zerstörung Babylons durch die Assyrer 689 v. Chr. sogar weit entfernte Völker der absoluten Macht des Gottes Assur und seines Königs huldigten. Damit sollten vermutlich Erinnerungen an Aussagen in den Königsinschriften Sargons II. – seines Vaters – geweckt werden. Sargon ließ berichten, daß er anlässlich seines Sieges über den Chaldäerfürsten Marduk-apla-iddina II. und der Eroberung Babyloniens aus Furcht vor der Macht des Gottes Assur bzw. seines Königs zur freiwilligen Unterwerfung und Tributeistung zweier entfernter Inselstaaten, Dilmun (Bahrain) und Jadrana (Zypern, dessen Name, wie die Texte ausführen, keinem früheren assyrischen Herrscher bekannt war), kam. Dieser Aussage stellt der Text Sanheribs die Geschenke Dilmuns und Saba's anlässlich der Zerstörung Babylons gegenüber und provoziert dadurch einen Vergleich der Macht beider Herrscher' (Galter 1993: 34-35).

Galter's suggestion that Sennacherib's receipt of *nāmurtu*-gifts from Saba' following the destruction of Babylon symmetrically mirrored his father Sargon II's receipt of gifts from Dilmun and Cyprus following Sargon's defeat of the Chaldaean chieftain Merodach-Baladan is interesting, particularly in light of the fact that in both cases the gift-giving appears to have been voluntary. There is, however, a geographical factor in the case of Karibili which must not be forgotten. Whereas Dilmun, from at least the Kassite period onwards, was under some form of Babylonian and later Assyrian control or vassaldom, Saba' was well beyond the potential grasp of any Assyrian army. While it is true that Sennacherib campaigned against Adummatu (Fig. 1), i.e. Dumat al-Ġandal in what is today the Jawf oasis of northern Saudi Arabia, at the southern end of the Wadi Sirhan, in 690 B.C. (Eph'al 1982: 118ff; the inscribed beads from Nineveh marked 'booty from Dumetu', most probably came from Adummatu [Frahm 1999: 87, contra Galter 1987: 29, who identified Dumetu with Dummetu in Bīt-Adini]), there is no suggestion that he ever travelled as far south as Saba'. It is unlikely, therefore, that Karib'il Watar ever felt threatened by the might of Assyria.

On the other hand, the conquest of Adummatu may well have had potentially negative consequences for Sabaeen caravan traders, and Karib'il Watar may have sought to minimise any such consequences by establishing friendly relations with



Sennacherib. That Sabaeen caravans were active by the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century has been shown conclusively by the cuneiform texts from Sur Jar'a (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990) in the Anah district of western Iraq (Fig. 1). These include one tablet with four columns of text in which an attack on a caravan from Tayma and Saba' is reported by the governor of Suhu and Mari, one Ninurta-kudurri-ušur. Although the text has been known for 15 years it is worth quoting the relevant passage in full:

'Ich, Ninurta-kudurri-ušur, <sup>(27)</sup> Statthalter des Lands Suhu und Mari - Leute aus Tema und Saba, <sup>(28)</sup> deren Wohnsitz ferne liegt, deren Boten zu mir nicht gekommen waren <sup>(29)</sup> und die bis zu mir nicht gereist waren, eine ihrer Karawanen kam an...<sup>(30)</sup> des Brunnens Martu und des Brunnens Halatu, ging aber weiter <sup>(31)</sup> und trat in die Stadt Hindanu ein. In der Stadt Kar-Apladad zu <sup>(32)</sup> Mittag vernahm ich die Nachricht; ich spannte meinen Wagen, in der Nacht <sup>(33)</sup> überquerte ich den Fluss und am nächsten Tag vor Mittagszeit <sup>(34)</sup> erreichte ich die Ortschaft Azlajanu. Drei Tage blieb ich in Azlajanu im Hinterhalt. Am dritten Tage <sup>(35)</sup> kamen sie an. Hundert von ihnen nahm ich lebendig; zweihundert Kamele <sup>(36)</sup> samt ihrer Ladung, blaue Purpurwolle,...Wolle, Eisen (?), Alabastersteine (?), alles was man sich wünschen kann, <sup>(37)</sup> eroberte ich. Ich führte von ihnen eine grosse Beute fort <sup>(38)</sup> und brachte sie ins Land Suhu hinein. Im siebten Jahre <sup>(39)</sup> des Ninurta-kudurri-ušur, Statthalters des Lands Suhu und Mari, wurde dieser Bericht gemacht' (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 351).

As the editors of this text noted, this represents the oldest textual reference to Saba' outside of the Bible (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 357). However, a potentially even older physical manifestation of South Arabian caravan trade with Syria via the Middle Euphrates (i.e. the region of Mari and Suhu) comes from a somewhat unlikely quarter. In a period III grave in the cemetery at Hama, dated by the excavators to the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C., was found a unique ivory beaker (Fig. 2) with a typically South Arabian, standing ibex attached to one side (Riis and Buhl 1990: Fig. 105). Originally considered Syrian by Harald Ingholt, the piece was re-attributed to South Arabia but incorrectly dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. by Barnett (Barnett 1964). Subsequently, it was argued by Riis and Buhl that the piece was indeed Syrian, as originally suggested by Ingholt (Riis and Buhl 1990: 224). Very recently, however, in the course of a discussion of the ibex in South Arabian iconography, Avanzini has shown that the piece without doubt fits well into the context of comparable artworks decorated with ibex which were produced in the archaic period of the first South Arabian states (Avanzini 2005). Interestingly, a cuneiform letter discovered at Hama (Fig. 1) in 1936, which was sent by Marduk-apla-ušur, the ruler of Suhu mentioned in Shalmaneser III's (858-824 B.C.) Black Obelisk, to Rudamu/Urtamis, king of Hamath, concerns 'infringement upon common trade interests by a third party' (Parpola 1990: 261). Quite clearly, Suhu and Hamath were in close contact at this time, and that contact provides the perfect context in which to view the appearance of a South Arabian ivory vessel at Hama. The caravan trade described in the Sur Jar'a text is likely to have brought goods from Saba' to the area of Suhu and Mari, and the traffic discussed in the Hama letter provides the perfect explanation for how such a South Arabian item may have been moved westward from the Suhu-Mari area around Anah to the kingdom of Hamath.

One might suggest, therefore, that the establishment of diplomatic ties with Assyria by Karib'il Watar was viewed as a strategy of appeasing a potential enemy who had already shown, by his capture of Adummatu, that Assyria was prepared to maintain a presence in northern Arabia if it seemed strategically sound. Clearly it was in Karib'il's own interests to see South Arabian caravan trade proceed unimpeded. Galter has suggested that Sennacherib's attack on Adummatu was undertaken preemptively to prevent the Arabs of north Arabia from proffering aid to the Babylonians during the

Assyrian campaign against Babylonia (Galter 1993: 35). But Karib'il's diplomatic initiative may have been prompted less by a perceived military threat against his domains, so distant from even Adummatu, than by a commercial imperative. While he probably had no historical knowledge of actions like Ninurta-kudurri-ušur's (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 324 date the attack on the caravan to the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. on the basis of eponyms), he may have known that in the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 B.C.) the Middle Euphrates had come under Assyrian control, and that Sūhu was no longer independent (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 326). A prudent 'trade' mission to Assur, bearing gifts, may therefore have suggested itself. Cuboid incense burners, of the sort well-known in South Arabia and at northern sites such as Thaj and Qalat al-Bahrain, have been found at Assur (Ziegler 1942: Abb. 52), and these may well have been used to burn the sort of South Arabian aromatics which Sennacherib's *bīt akīti* inscription suggest were brought to Assur during his reign.

Is it possible that Karib'il himself undertook such a mission? On the face of it, this does not seem very likely. The *bīt akīti* text refers to the *nāmurtu*-gifts as gifts which Karibili 'mir zu bringen befohlen hatte' (Frahm 1999: 85). Yet a series of six inscribed beads (Fig. 3) from Nineveh (Frahm 1999: 84, has reconstructed the inscription in question on the following beads, BM 89291 = Galter 1987: no. 47; BM 89908 = Galter 1987: no. 49; BM 89910 = Galter 1987: no. 51; BM 89912 = Galter 1987: no. 53; BM 89918 = Galter 1987: no. 59; BM 89926 = Galter 1987: no. 66; all are from Nineveh except possibly BM 89926, the provenance of which is listed as unknown) suggests he may have made the trip himself, for in the text inscribed on these cylindrical beads Sennacherib describes them as *nāmurtu*-gifts that Karibili, 'king of Saba', 'brought me' (Frahm 1999: 84; Galter 1987: nos. 47, 49, 51, 53, 59 and 66). Frahm has reconstructed the full text of the beads as follows:

1. [Palast] Sanheribs, des Königs von
2. [Assyrien - *nāmurtu*-Geschenk,
3. das] Karibili, [der König] von Saba',
4. [mir] dargebracht hat. [Wer (die
5. Perle) *in den*] *Dienst* eines [Gottes
6. oder von Menschen *stellt*] oder
7. [meinen (darauf) geschriebenen
8. Namen austilgt, dessen Namen und Samen mögen Aššur, DN, DN, (DN, DN und DN) vernichten].

Galter has suggested that these beads may have formed 'part of the Assyrian regalia' (Galter 1987: 17), while Deller believed they came from jewellery which was reserved 'für den persönlichen Gebrauch des Königs' (Deller 1987), pointing to the six-strand necklace slung over the back of Assurbanipal's couch in his well-known garden scene (Fig. 4) where he appears reclining and drinking wine, accompanied by his wife, with the head of Teumman suspended from a tree (Barnett 1970: Pl. 16).

Notwithstanding the great distance separating the kingdoms of South Arabia from the royal cities of Assyria, it is interesting to note that roughly a thousand years later another great South Arabian ruler, Shammār Yuhar'ish, king of Saba', dhu-Raydan, Hadramawt and Yamnat, sent a delegation to the Sasanian court in Ctesiphon (Müller 1976), possibly upon hearing of the birth of Shapur II (Potts in press). It is perhaps testimony to the ever-shrinking world of the Near East during the Iron Age and, even more so, during the Sasanian period, that links between such distant monarchs were seen to be important expressions of political good will abroad, and of exalted status at home.

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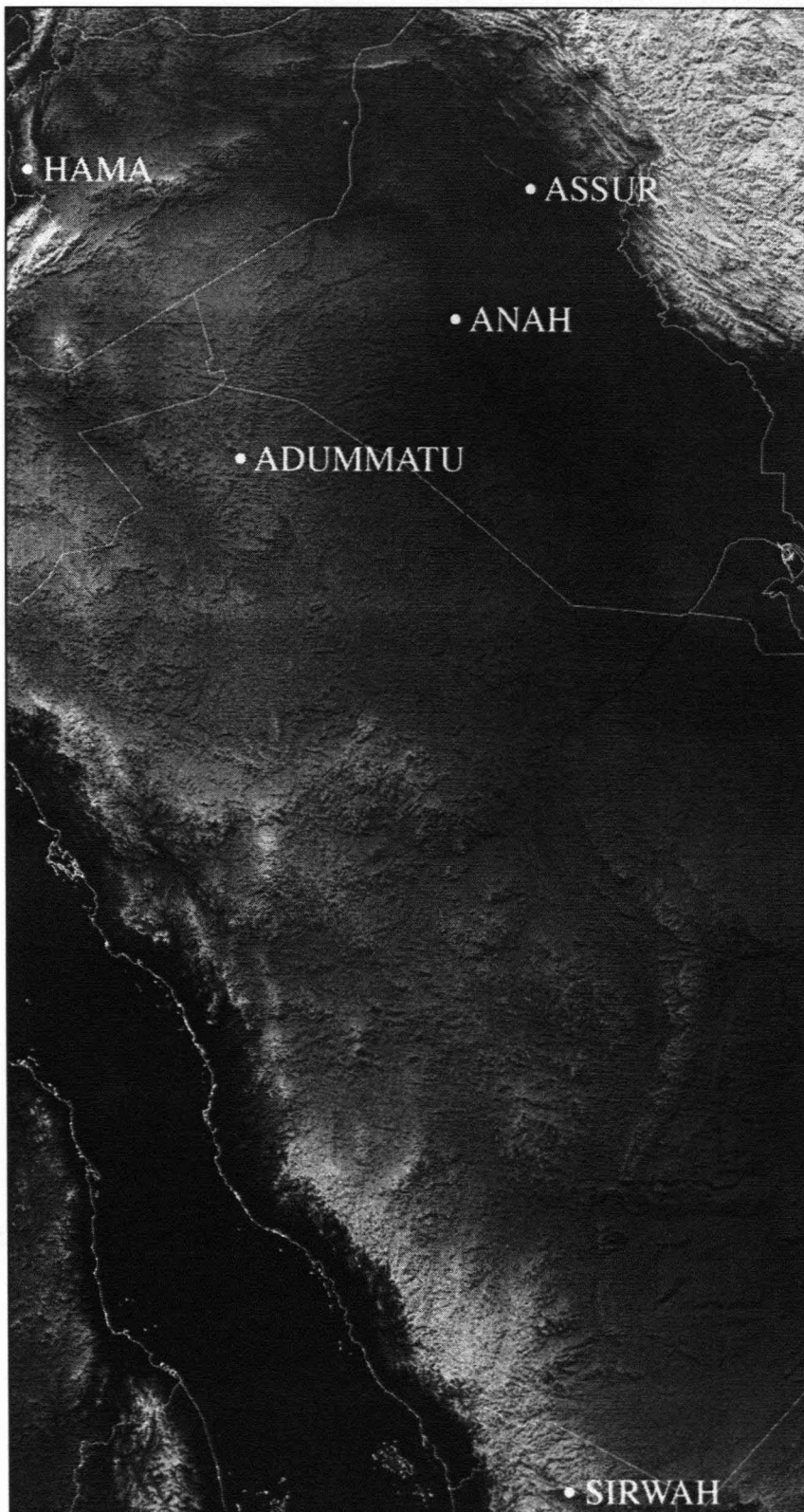


Fig. 1. Map showing principal sites mentioned in the text.



Fig. 2. Ivory cup from Hama (after Riis, P.J. and Buhl, M-L. 1990: Fig. 105).

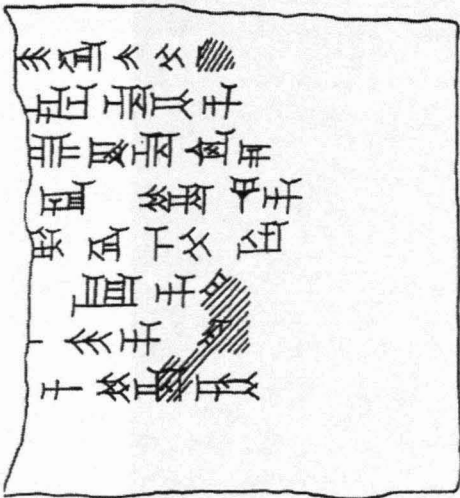


Fig. 3. BM 89910 (after Galter 1987: 23).



Fig. 4. Detail of BM124920 showing the necklace slung over the back of Assurbanipal's couch (after Barnett 1970: Pl. 16).