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"The City of the Kipkip-Speech"?
Kipkipi in Ashurbanipal's Inscriptions

Introductory remarks

In the inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, there is a word that long has puzzled scholars. In Ashurbanipal's narration of his second campaign to Egypt 663 BCE, his enemy Tanutamon, king of Kush, is said to flee from Thebes, away from the approaching Assyrian army, to ⁿᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi*. Because of the textual context (where a toponym is expected) and because of the city sign 'uru', scholars then and now have generally seen *Kipkipi* as a toponym, situated south of Thebes (i.e. along Tanutamon's natural escape route). Recently, the idea that *Kipkipi* is not really a toponym has been given. The aim of this brief paper is to discuss the meaning of the form ⁿᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi*. After having given the attestations, I will discuss earlier interpretations and present an interpretation of my own.

The attestations

The word *Kipkipi* is mentioned in five different inscriptions, and in the same textual passage. The text passage in question is well preserved in four of the texts and partly preserved in a fifth text.[1] It is best preserved in the inscription presented below (RINAP 5/1, 11: ii 34-38).[2]

EGIR ᴵUR-*da-ma-né-e ḫar-ra-nu aṣ-bat* / *arki Tandamanê ḫarrānu aṣbat*
I took the road in pursuit of Tanutamani,

al-lik a-di ⁿᵘ*Ni-i'* URU *dan-nu-ti-šú* / *allik adi Nī' āl dannūtīšu*
(and) I marched as far as the city Thebes, his fortified city.

ti-ib MÈ-*ia dan-ni e-mur-ma* ⁿᵘ*Ni-i' ú-maš-šir* / *tīb tāḫāzīya danni ēmurma Nī' umaššir*
He saw the assault of my mighty battle array and abandoned the city Thebes;

in-na-bit a-na ⁿᵘ*Ki-ip-ki-pi* URU *šu-a-tú a-na si-ḫir-ti-šú* / *innabit ana Kipkipi ālu šuātu ana siḫirtīšu*
he fled to the city Kipkipi. That city (Thebes), in its entirety,

ina tukul-ti AN.ŠÁR *u* ᵈ15 *ik-šu-da* ŠU.II-*a-a* / *ina tukulti Aššur u Ištar ikšudā qātāya*
with the support of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Ištar, I conquered.

A narration of the sack of Thebes follows. Ashurbanipal says that he returned to his capital Nineveh "with full hands", and Tanutamon is never heard of again (RINAP 5/1, 11: ii 39-48).

Previous interpretations

As already noted, the dominant theory on the interpreting of *Kipkipi* claims that it is a toponym and that it should be equated with the toponym *Gbgb*, attested in an inscription from Kom Ombo[3] (c. 200 km south of Thebes but north of the first cataract) and Ptolemaic times (c. 330-30 BCE).[4] This equating is justified by pointing to the writing of the toponym and to the location of *Gbgb*, fitting with the escape route of Tanutamon. The weaknesses of this theory are that *Gbgb* is referred to firstly in Ptolemaic times and that it does not at all seem to be a special place,[5] as one would expect if Assyrian royal inscriptions would talk of it.

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1 There are three main points of difference as for the text passage in the five texts. Two texts (RINAP 5/1, 9: i 45; 11: ii 36) add the adjective "mighty" to "battle array", while two others (RINAP 5/1, 3: ii 22; 6: iii 39') skip it. The fifth (RINAP 5/1, 4: ii 1'-3') has a lacuna here. One text (RINAP 5/1: 9: i 47-48) talks of no less than ten (instead of two) deities as supporting Ashurbanipal in conquering. This text (RINAP 5/1: 9: i 49) also stands out by saying that also Heliopolis was conquered. The word *Kipkipi* is written in the same way in all five texts.

2 Transliteration and translation from Novotny and Jeffers 2018 (RINAP 5/1): 235.

3 de Morgan et al. 1895-1909: 52, no. 596, col. 10.

4 A theory proposed or accepted in e.g. Aynard 1957: 33, note a; Parpola 1970: 207; Röllig 1980: 604; Bagg 2017: 343. The location of *Kipkipi* is stated as unknown in Kahn 2006: 265, note 87; Onasch 1994: 157.

5 Breyer 2014: 22.

In a recent article, the toponym status of *Kipkipi* is called into question.[6] To begin with, the above-mentioned weaknesses are pointed out in this article. The author then looks at pejorative passages in Assyrian royal inscriptions and conducts a linguistic analysis of the form *Kipkipi*. By seeing a duplication of the Akkadian word *kippu*, which would give "Gedärm",[7] and by pointing to the said pejorative passages (such as *šadâ emēdu*),[8] the author concludes that *Kipkipi* is in fact a "rude idiomatic expression". In its context, it means "er ging zugrunde im Gedärm", or more figuratively, "er verreckte am Arsch der Welt". Some weaknesses of this theory are that the word in question is rare, of restricted use, and its duplication seems to be hypothetical.[9] Also, and perhaps more importantly, it ignores (outside the rendering of it in the transliterations) the presence of the city sign ′uru′. The seeing of the verb *abātu* I (referring to destroying) instead of *abātu* II (referring to fleeing)[10] is also questionable, not the least in view of the context in which the act of fleeing is expected.

KIPKIPI AS A KUSHITE TOPONYM?

The interpretation of *Kipkipi* as a toponym has two major strengths. Firstly, the textual context makes the mentioning of a toponym expected. Tanutamon flees *from* Thebes *to* some place. Secondly, the forms *Gbgb* and *Kipkipi* are fairly similar in appearance. The equating of *Gbgb* with *Kipkipi* is however problematic, because of the time period aspect and because of the above-mentioned insignificance aspect. It would be more logical for *Kipkipi* to refer to an important (or *the* most important) city in Kush, such as Napata.[11] I would therefore

suggest that *Kipkipi* is the Assyrian nickname of an important city in Tanutamon's Kush. It would make perfect sense for the Assyrian scribes to write that Tanutamon "went back to where he came from". The logic of placing *Kipkipi* within Egypt is, on the other hand, obscure.[12]

KIPKIPI AS UNINTELLIGIBLE SPEECH?

The viewing of *Kipkipi* as a toponym as well as a linguistic phenomenon are not mutually exclusive. Thus, *Kipkipi* may stand for a toponym that has a linguistic base. This linguistic base does not have to be a word, though. It can also be unintelligible speech. A classical analogy would be the Greek term *barbar*, which in its original meaning referred to people whose language appeared unintelligible, sounding like *bar-bar*.[13] To the Assyrians, the Kushites then appeared to speak like *kip-kip(i)*. If taking the city sign ′uru′ as a logogram (instead of a determinative), the writing URU *Ki-ip-ki-pi* would then mean (figuratively), "the city of the *kipkip*-speech", supposedly pointing to Napata, the capital of Kush. It can be transcribed as *āl kipkipi*, viewing the *i*-ending as expressing the genitive case.[14] Assyrian royal inscriptions sometimes refer to people whose languages are unintelligible. Moreover, derogative views on the Kushites are frequently expressed. In the absence of attestations of *Kipkipi* in Kushite sources, I will focus on these themes from Assyrian inscriptions in the following sections.

OTHERNESS OF NON-AKKADIAN LANGUAGES IN ASSYRIAN GOVERNMENT SOURCES

The Akkadian language was the norm in the Neo-Assyrian empire, and all other languages represented otherness in some way.[15] A prime example of the primacy of Akkadian (at least) in official discourse is given in a letter from Sargon II to an official from the city of Ur.

6 Breyer 2014.

7 Breyer 2014: 22-23. Actually, the AHw (I, pp. 482-83) does not talk of any duplication and gives only "Darmschlingen (des Opferschafes)". According to the CAD (K, pp. 399-400), the word *kippu* means "snare, loop, loop-like formation on the exta" and (secondarily) "calamity(?)". The form *kipkippu* is also attested. It refers to some kind of bird and is written with the bird determinative ′mušen′ (AHw I, p. 482; CAD K, p. 397).

8 For this idiom, see the AHw (I, p. 211) and CAD (E, p. 140).

9 Judging by the entries in the AHw (I, pp. 482-83) and CAD (K, pp. 399-400).

10 For these verbs, see the AHw (I, p. 5) and CAD (A I, pp. 41-47).

11 Napata, written *Npt* in Kushite sources (see e.g. FHN I, text 29, line 7), situated at Gebel Barkal and near the fourth cataract, was the dynastic home of Egypt's Kushite 25th dynasty (Morkot 2000: 129-44).

12 Why would Tanutamon go to an obscure, barely known, south-Egyptian city rather than to Kush? Also, there is no contemporary textual evidence that says that Tanutamon ever returned to Egypt after the sack of Thebes.

13 For this Greek term, see e.g. Hall 1991.

14 Breyer (2014: 22) also sees a genitive-ending but due to the preposition *ana* (the city sign is dismissed as a determinative). In my interpretation, the genitive-ending rather relates to *ālu*, standing in status constructus.

15 For Assyria and the foreign lands forming a dichotomy in terms of culture, see Zaccagnini 1982.

"[As to what you wrote]: 'There are informers [... to the king] and coming to his presence; if it is acceptable to the king, let me write and send my messages to the king on Aram[aic] parchment sheets' — why would you not write and send me messages in Akkadian? Really, the message which you write in it must be drawn up in this very manner — this is a fixed regulation!" (SAA 17, 2: 13-22)[16]

This passage shows that even Aramaic – the language that was spoken in much of the Neo-Assyrian empire – represented otherness.[17] Writing in Akkadian was decreed by the king.

The primacy of the Akkadian language is also shown in the tradition of turning foreign city names into *Akkadian* city names. There are countless examples of this practice. For the present purpose, Egypt-related examples can be given. In a fragmentary royal inscription of Esarhaddon, the father and predecessor of Ashurbanipal, the following is said of Sais.

"I imposed on the city Kār-Esarhaddon. [...] three barley-homers of honey, [...] which I imposed [...] groats, [...] homers of chufa from the city Kār-Aššur; of [...] sheep, twenty-four homers of groats [from the city] Kār-bēl-mātāti, which is called [Sais] in Egypt." (RINAP 4, 54: 20-25).[18]

In the above passage, the north-western delta city Sais, home to the dynasty which ruled over Egypt after the Kushites and Assyrians, is given the Akkadian name *Kār-bēl-mātāti*.[19] Even personal names of foreigners were sometimes changed. Psammetichus I, a prominent member of the mentioned Saite dynasty, is called *Nabû-šēzibanni* in Ashurbanipal's inscriptions.[20]

Also, occasional and unexpected ethnographic remarks with regard to languages are made in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions. The following example comes from an Esarhaddon-text.

"In my tenth campaign, the god Aš[šur ...] had me take [... (and) made me set out] to [Magan and Meluḫḫa, which are called] Kush and Egypt in (their) native tongue." (RINAP 4, 34: 7'-9')[21]

The otherness of the Egyptian and Kushite languages are here pointed out, by speaking of Kush and Egypt being called (*nabû* N) this in their native tongue, or literally, "in the mouth of the people of the land of Kush and land of Egypt" (*ina pî nišē māt Kūsi u māt Muṣur*).

Finally, unintelligible speech (having the Akkadian language as the norm) is attested in Neo-Assyrian government texts. The following passage comes from an Ashurbanipal-text.

"[...] his [mes]senger [...] to inquire about my well-being a[pp]roached the border of my land. The people of my land saw him and said to him: 'Who are you, stranger? A mounted messenger of yours has never taken the road to our territory.' They brought him to Nineveh, my capital city, [...], before me. (Among all) the languages (from) sunrise (to) sunset, which (the god) Aššur had placed at my disposal, there was not a master of his language. [H]is language was different and his speech could not be understood." (RINAP 5/1, 1: vi 1'-13')[22]

Unfortunately, the ethnic background of this messenger can not be reconstructed from this very fragmentary text. Nevertheless, the image of otherness in foreign languages is present. The terms *aḫû* and *nakru*, indicative of alterity in Assyrian inscriptions, are both attested.[23]

Derogative views on Kush in Assyrian government sources

If my theory on *kipkipi* as unintelligible speech is correct, the question is whether the reference to *kipkip*-speech displays a degrading attitude on the part of the Assyrians or not. Considering the highly rhetorical and much polarizing nature of Assyrian royal inscriptions, it is reasonable to interpret the Assyrian references to Kushite *kipkip*-speech as derogatory.[24]

There was a "ready-made garb" for enemy kings in Assyrian royal inscriptions. In describing the Kushite rulers as weak, cowardly, haughty, godless, and mad, this pattern is followed.[25] There are, however, some indications that the negative imagery targeting Kush and Kushites went beyond the said ready-made garb, and that Kushites were especially stigmatized.

Turning to the texts, the following statement is made in an inscription of Esarhaddon. Esarhaddon

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16 Translation from Dietrich 2003 (SAA 17): 5.
17 For the prominent role of Aramaic in the Neo-Assyrian empire, see e.g. Tadmor 1982.
18 Translation from Leichty 2011 (RINAP 4): 116.
19 Meaning "The harbor of the lord of all lands".
20 Meaning "Nabu, save me!". See RINAP 5/1, 6: iii 12'; 11: ii 17.
21 Translation from Leichty 2011 (RINAP 4): 87.

22 Translation from Novotny and Jeffers 2018 (RINAP 5/1): 41.
23 CAD A I, p. 210; CAD N I, p. 190.
24 On the ideological nature of Assyrian royal inscriptions, see e.g. Liverani 1979 and Karlsson 2016.
25 See Fales 1982 (with the quoted expression) and Karlsson 2017.

here narrates of his conquering Memphis and of looting the local palace.

"I carried off to Assyria his wife, his court ladies, Ušanaḫuru, his crown prince, and the rest of his sons (and) his daughters, his goods, his possessions, his horses, his oxen, (and) his sheep and goats, without number. I tore out the roots of Kush from Egypt. I did not leave a single person there to praise (me)." (RINAP 4, 98: r. 43-46)[26]

It is the family and possessions of Taharqa, the king of Kush, that are referred to in the above text. The narration has a harsh tone, in saying that Kush was torn out (*nasāḫu*) by the roots (*šuršu*) from Egypt, as if Kushite presence in Egypt was a plague that had to be eradicated.[27]

The above text is written on the Zincirli stele (VA 2708). This stele also has a *scene* sculptured on its front side. This scene represents Esarhaddon with two foreigners at his feet. While the Assyrian king is many times bigger than the other individuals and has a majestic pose, the two foreigners are greatly reduced in size, they are attached to nose-ropes (with Esarhaddon holding the ropes),[28] and they are seemingly begging for mercy. The foreigners have been identified (on the grounds of text content and physical features) as Ba'alu, ruler of Tyre, and Taharqa or his crown prince Ushanahuru (mentioned in the above text).[29] There are interesting differences between the two persons. The Phoenician ruler is *standing* (although raising his two hands in seeking for mercy). The Kushite individual also lifts his hands in begging for mercy, but he is *on his knees*. Moreover, he is considerably *smaller* than the ruler of Tyre. All this tells of an especially negative image of Kush in Assyrian thought.[30]

Concluding remarks

The meaning of the form ᵘʳᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi* in the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal has been centred on in this paper. Earlier interpretations of *Kipikipi* as a city in southern Egypt (based on the attested city *Gbgb*) and on *Kipikipi* as the result of a duplication of the Akkadian word *kippu* were found to be unconvincing. As for the former, *Gbgb* is attested firstly in Ptolemaic times, and it appears to have been an insignificant city, not worthy of mention in a text from Assyria. As for the latter, the city sign 'uru' is completely ignored, and the relevant word is rare, of restricted usage, and with its duplication function seemingly hypothetical. Moreover, the identifying of the accompanying verb as *abātu* I (in the N-stem) does not fit the context.

Taking the city sign seriously and proceeding from the curious, duplicated form *kipkipi*, I have suggested that *kipkipi* is an Assyrian equivalent of the Greek term *bar-bar*, signifying unintelligible speech. The *i*-ending represents a genitive, in relation to the city sign, which functions as a logogram instead as of a determinative. The resulting translation is then, "the city of the *kipkip*(-speech)", to be transcribed as *āl kipkipi*. The city in question should be no other than the capital city of Kush, namely Napata. Apart from the form ᵘʳᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi*, circumstantial and indirect evidence were used in my argumentation, namely the mentioned analogy to the Greek term *bar-bar*, the well-documented role of foreign languages (non-Akkadian) as signifying otherness, and the proofs in Assyrian government sources for especially negative images of Kush(ites) (supposing that *kipkip*-speech is meant derogatory).

Zusammenfassung

Die Form ᵘʳᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi* in den Inschriften des neuassyrischen Königs Ashurbanipal hat lange die Gelehrten verwirrt. Traditionell wird sie mit der Stadt *Gbgb* südlich von Theben gleichgesetzt, während sie in einer neueren Interpretation als idiomatischer Ausdruck betrachtet wird. Dieser Artikel geht einen neuen Weg, indem es vorschlägt, dass ᵘʳᵘ / uru *Ki-ip-ki-pi* sich tatsächlich auf eine prominente Stadt in Kusch bezieht, höchstwahrscheinlich auf Napata.

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26 Translation from Leichty 2011 (RINAP 4): 185-86.

27 CAD Š III, pp. 363-64.

28 For the nose-rope, or lead rope, see Ornan 2007.

29 For a brief discussion on identification aspects, see Leichty 2011 (RINAP 4): 179-80.

30 Especially if Taharqa is the one represented. An equal status (at least) would then be expected.

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