Neo-Assyrian Women Revisited

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In her recent book, Svärd uses theories of hierarchical and heterarchical power to reveal how women wielded power within the highest echelons of the Assyrian Empire. Svärd determines that the queen occupied a distinct position in the state hierarchy, separate from the king, and that only one woman at a time could be queen. The queen could retain her post even after the king died, though the new king could replace her if he deemed it necessary. The king decided the queen mother's role, depending on political circumstances. Both queens and queen mothers ran large, lucrative estates and participated in religious ceremonies. During the Sargonid period, military units were attached to their households. In some official spheres of action, their power could be qualitatively similar to that of the king, and in a crisis, they could even act for him. Other women associated with the palace, such as royal daughters, female administrators, and workers, were more apt to develop power heterarchically, through petitions, negotiation, or communication networks.

Wishing to expand upon her theoretical approach, Svärd has studied diachronic changes in Assyrian queenship, concluding that the office developed to meet the needs of family and dynasty. In addition, I argue here that the demands of an expanding empire required the king to delegate authority to trusted relatives. Thus, as the empire reached its peak under the Sargonid kings, royal women naturally gained power and prominence, and kings benefited. For example, the queen's prosperous estates and business ventures allowed her to help fund the military as well as some temples and building projects, and so defray the costs to the throne. All of this shows that Assyrian women had individual agency and authority, and could influence the king's decisions. Despite the value of theory, it is also necessary to consider women individually, in the context of their times, and as they responded to unique circumstances.

The discovery of graves in the NW palace at Nimrud in 1989 nearly doubled the number of Neo-Assyrian queens known by name.[1] Magnificent grave goods, including exquisitely fashioned jewelry and vessels made of gold, glass, and crystal, along with skeletal remains and funerary inscriptions, have complicated our previous understanding of royal women and raised a host of questions. What did the office of queen (MÍ.É.GAL, *segallu*) actually entail? Did she hold the title for life or just while her husband reigned? Could more than one woman use the title simultaneously? Could the king replace his queen at will? How did the king's mother fit into the picture? What was the status of other women who lived and worked in the palace? Among recent publications addressing these questions, Saana Svärd's *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces* stands out as the first to approach the subject through

This is a review article of *Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces.* By Saana Svärd. State Archives of Assyria Studies, vol. 23. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2015. Pp. xiv + 286, illus. $79.50 (paper).

1. For the graves, see most recently Muzahim Mahmoud Hussein, Mark Altaweel (trans.), and McGuire Gibson (ed.), *Nimrud: The Queens' Tombs.* Oriental Institute Miscellaneous Publications. Baghdad: Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2016.

a modern theoretical lens.[2] The volume under review represents her revised dissertation. Ambitious in scope and thoroughly researched, this stimulating book not only forces us to reconsider the roles of Assyrian women, but also our assumptions about power relationships in Assyria.

In the introduction, after carefully locating her investigation within women's studies and gender studies, Svärd notes that most publications treating Neo-Assyrian women have considered them separately from men and only within a hierarchical power structure. In order to broaden this view, she proposes "to test the hypothesis that by examining the evidence from two interrelated perspectives—reading the evidence for finding hierarchical power relations (Part I) and heterarchical power relations (Part II)—I will gain a better understanding of power in the Neo-Assyrian palaces and specifically women's role in the exercise of power" (p. 18). A second goal is to demonstrate that modern theories of power can provide insight into ancient societies. Accordingly, the book is divided into two parts, one devoted to hierarchy and the other to heterarchy (a system of unranked relations). Each section begins with a chapter that delves into the respective theory involved.

The theory chapters document every step of the author's personal intellectual journey and reveal how she formulated her views about different kinds of power. They include valuable information and useful terminology, yet one questions whether the book (as opposed to the dissertation) needed such lengthy exposition. Svärd's conclusions about hierarchy and heterarchy do indeed shed light on her subject. However, she would have served her core argument better had she summarized her theoretical methodology in the book's introduction and reiterated specific points when pertinent to her discussion of Assyrian women. A succinct theoretical précis would have highlighted her key ideas. As it is, the theory chapters threaten to overwhelm the Assyrian material that she covers in three separate chapters. In the following, I review the key points of her argument, and then offer some suggestions of my own.

Part I, chapter 2 investigates hierarchical power, of which Svärd identifies two interrelated types, structural and individual. In the process, she rehearses the ideas of a wide range of intellectuals and scholars, including Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, Michael Mann, Bruce Lincoln, Steven Lukes, and Anthony Giddens, to name only a few. Eventually, she settles on Giddens' approach on the grounds that he sees power not only in terms of societal structure but also as a product of individual agency. Thus, Svärd observes, "social institutions exert constraints, but they do not determine a person's actions. The institutions rather enable an individual to achieve goals and by attaining these goals, the individuals at the same time remake the structures" (p. 36). This understanding of hierarchical power proves useful later, because it leaves room for heterarchical action.

After the lengthy discussion of theories of power, in chapter 3 Svärd analyzes all the evidence for queens and queen mothers in order to define the type of hierarchical power that they wielded. First, the author concentrates on the office of MÍ.É.GAL (*segallu*, 'queen'), which she considers a largely autonomous institution that operated independently from the king. Svärd posits that only one woman at a time fulfilled the queen's duties. Since the

2. Although Zainab Bahrani's book, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (Routledge, 2001), also calls upon modern theory, it covers a much wider chronological and geographical range. Other recent works are not so theoretically oriented. See, e.g., Sarah C. Melville, "Neo-Assyrian Royal Women and Male Identity: Status as a Social Tool," *JAOS* 124 (2004): 37–57; Sherry Lou Macgregor, *Beyond Hearth and Home: Women in the Public Sphere in Neo-Assyrian Society*, State Archives of Assyria Studies, vol. 21 (Helsinki, 2012); Simo Parpola, "The Neo-Assyrian Royal Harem," in *Leggo! Studies Presented to Frederick Mario Fales on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. G. Lanfranchi, D. M. Bonacossi, C. Pappi, and S. Ponchia (Wiesbaden, 2012), 613–26; David Kertai, "The Queens of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 40 (2013): 108–24.

queen occupied her own position in the hierarchy, she could remain in office even after the king died. When circumstances made it expedient, however, the new king could replace the old queen with his wife or mother. Put another way, the king chose his queen based on the political situation and the qualities of the individuals involved. This view goes a long way in explaining the otherwise puzzling funerary inscriptions from the Nimrud graves. Accordingly, the texts that identify Mulissu-mukanišat-Ninua as the MÍ.É.GAL of both Ashurnasirpal II and his son, Shalmaneser III, could indicate that Ashurnasirpal's queen retained her position during Shalmaneser's reign. The same explanation would apply to Iabâ, MÍ.É.GAL of Tiglath-pileser III, and Banitu, MÍ.É.GAL of Shalmaneser V, assuming that these names represented a single person (Banitu being the Akkadian translation of Iabâ).[3]

Likewise, it appears that Naqi'a, Esarhaddon's mother, assumed (or resumed) queenly duties after her daughter-in-law, Ešarra-hamat, died. Such an arrangement would have avoided complications at a time when Esarhaddon wanted to secure the succession. Svärd's suggestion that only one queen ruled at a time and that a change in king did not necessarily end her tenure in office makes good sense. Forming such generalizations about the queen mother's position has proved more difficult, yet Svärd concludes similarly, "Her visibility appears to be strongly related to the current political situation" (p. 46). It seems that the status and power of both queens and queen mothers depended largely on contemporary political demands and individual motivations and interactions. The hierarchical flexibility seen here reminds us that tradition and precedent guided but did not entirely dictate the decisions of those in power.

In the rest of the chapter, Svärd attempts to identify qualitatively the type of hierarchical power that royal consorts and mothers wielded. Here the author runs into a problem inherent in the study of chronologically scattered ancient sources; namely, whether to consider them as a representative body or individually as evidence of unique circumstances. Since it better suits her theoretical framework, she chooses the former approach, although she acknowledges the drawbacks involved and periodically refers to temporal developments (p. 84). Over the course of the chapter, she demonstrates that the highest-ranking women (sometimes) had military units at their disposal, performed religious rituals, appeared on monumental art, ran complex administrative operations, and had authority over a wide variety of high-ranking men and women. Svärd concludes, "The power of the queens and the kings' mothers was very much equated with authority and qualitatively similar to the power of the king" (p. 81). Given the wide chronological distribution (roughly 300 years) of our correspondingly meager evidence, as well as the situational variability noted above, Svärd's assertion may give a false impression of formalized queenly power, and thus require some qualification.

The queen certainly commanded authority by virtue of her office and her position as the wife, former wife, or mother of a king. In running complex business enterprises and fulfilling religious or court duties, she wielded power similar to his. However, in some important spheres of activity she did not normally participate at all. As far as we know, queens did not appoint magnates or provincial governors, lead armies into combat, conclude political treaties with foreign states, found cities, or condemn anyone to death. In those spheres, she played no discernable role, except (perhaps) under extraordinary circumstances. Naqi'a's standing in for the recently deceased king to impose a loyalty oath on behalf of her grandson, Ashurbanipal, represents such a case. Therefore, I would amend Svärd's statement slightly

3. S. Dalley first proposed this identification, which is now widely accepted. See "The Identity of the Princesses in Tomb II and a New Analysis of Events of 701 BC," in *New Light on Nimrud: Proceedings of the Nimrud Conference 11–13th March 2002*, ed. John E. Curtis et al. (London, 2008), 171–75.

to read that the power of the king and queen was qualitatively similar in many areas, and in the sense that they commanded the obedience and respect of subjects. The king had authority over every facet of imperial administration, whereas the queen *normally* limited her actions to certain areas. This is not to diminish the queen's or queen mother's accomplishments or to suggest that they did not enjoy real authority and could not take on the king's duties in an emergency. In any case, royal women did exert authority over a large number of both men and women.

In chapter 4, Svärd takes an in-depth look at other women associated with the palace, including royal daughters and daughters-in-law, *šakintu*s (female administrators), *sekretu*s (general female personnel), musicians, and palace employees such as scribes, weavers, and cooks. This chapter also grapples with the complex issue of "women's quarters" and the possibility that women were sequestered. Svärd finds no clear evidence to support either suggestion. Rather, high-ranking women could move about relatively freely, at least when accompanied by a security detail befitting their rank.

After identifying the various categories of women involved with the court, Svärd turns to those mentioned in royal inscriptions (e.g., prisoners and deportees) and administrative texts such as the Nimrud Wine Lists. Overall, she finds that while royal daughters and daughters-in-law derived power from their position in the hierarchy, non-royal women usually gained power through personal reputation or a practical skill such as weaving or cooking. Finally, Svärd reiterates her claim that the king's power and the queen's power were qualitatively comparable, asserting that all types of women mentioned in Assyrian texts operated "in male spheres of action" (p. 143). This view seems at odds with the criticism levied in the introduction against taking a gender binary approach to power. Would it not be preferable to state that in certain sectors men, eunuchs, and women sometimes performed the same jobs and even enjoyed the same official powers?

Moving to heterarchy in chapter 5, Svärd outlines Foucauldian ideas about power as well as theories that relate heterarchy to gender and archaeology. Again, she considers the ideas of an impressive number of scholar-theorists before observing, "All power relations can be seen to depend wholly on the context and on the shared ideological conditions of the communicators. This view sees overlying social structures as less important than the interactions and ambitions of individuals" (p. 159). In other words, social hierarchy and individual agency form a three-dimensional matrix of power relationships. Although gender certainly plays a role, men (including eunuchs) and women participate in both hierarchical and heterarchical power relationships. Neither type of power is ever static because circumstances, individuals, and societies change over time.

Chapter 6 explores the heterarchical power of palace women in detail. Since heterarchical relationships are interpersonal, flexible, and occur outside official channels, they are difficult to identify in the sources. Nevertheless, Svärd shows that Assyrian women used petitions, negotiations, and communication networks to form such power relationships. Letters, as well as judicial and administrative documents, reveal that women "were not bound by the usual gender limitations and hierarchies" when acting heterarchically (p. 165). Interestingly, most of the evidence for female heterarchical power concerns non-royal women, while queens and queen mothers usually operated within hierarchical power structures.

Svärd's theoretical approach to Assyrian women has produced many important observations about how the Assyrians negotiated power. Yet, even though theory may provide a useful framework (as this book ably demonstrates), it tends "to create its own 'specific' or immanent field in which history, with its huge volume of heterogeneous matter, cannot

be contained. Theory traditionally aspires to be synchronic."[4] Fully aware of this limitation, Svärd continues to explore new methodologies. In a recent article, for example, she undertakes a diachronic study of changes in Assyrian queenship. Here she concludes that women became prominent in imperial administration in order to meet the needs of family and dynasty.[5]

While I agree with that conclusion, I think that we can take it further by relating changes in royal women's power to the development of the empire, and more specifically as solutions to the problems that expansion created. In order to rule a vast empire, kings needed to increase economic capacity, develop administrative organization, empower provincial governors without diminishing royal authority, maintain military superiority without bankrupting the state, and manage unanticipated threats. The more territory Assyria encompassed, the greater the stress put on the king and, indeed, the entire imperial system. In addition to recognizing the administrative changes that occurred in response, it is useful to tie them to specific problems they attempted to solve. In other words, we need to ask what motivated particular changes in women's status and power.

As an example, let us consider the queen and queen mother's association with military units. Svärd has pointed out that the Sargonid period saw a progressive increase in the number and types of troops attached to royal women, and further, that these were active combat units, not just bodyguards. Sargon II probably initiated the first of these developments, but why he did so remains unanswered. Some scholars attribute Sargon's administrative restructuring to his need to reduce the power of the magnates. Indeed, this may have played a role, but it seems to me that other factors motivated his actions.[6] By the late eighth century BCE, the Assyrian Empire had become large and powerful. Most of the empire comprised permanent provinces, although the Assyrians still relied on asserting hegemony over clients in areas where terrain, distance, or geopolitics made annexation undesirable. Over the course of Sargon's reign, the army saw action every year but one (712), often campaigning over terrible terrain distant from the Assyrian homeland. War consumed human and material resources at a rate that proved difficult to sustain. Despite careful management, Sargon could not maintain this vast new empire by force alone, so he had to exert authority through non-violent means, such as diplomacy, espionage, economic sanction, and by creating a credible impression of might. In addition to enemy threats, he also had to manage the diverse personalities and ambitions of his officials. One way to support his efforts was to delegate authority to trusted relatives, though he needed to do so without compromising the public's vision of a single, powerful king. Thus, Sargon made his brother *sukkalmah*, appointed the crown prince to take charge when he was away, married off his daughter to a client king, and increased the role of the queen.

As Sargon's successors sought to address similar problems, royal women earned new duties and greater prominence in state administration. By attaching troops to the households of the queen, queen mother, and other royals, kings benefited in several ways. Most obviously, they won economic advantages, as family members could pay for maintaining state troops out of their own revenues. Through domains located at various points in the Assyrian heartland and contiguous provinces, queens and queen mothers profited from textile

4. Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), 8.

5. S. Svärd, "Changes in Neo-Assyrian Queenship," in *Papers Presented at the Workshop "Change in Neo-Assyrian Imperial Administration: Evolution and Revolution" Held on July 16th, 2013 on the Occasion of the LIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale "Law and (Dis)order in the Ancient Near East," Ghent, July 15th–19th, 2013*, ed. N. N. May and S. Svärd, *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 31 (2015): 157–71.

6. For a different view, see Natalie Naomi May, "Administrative and Other Reforms of Sargon II and Tiglath-pileser III," in the same vol. (see n. 5), 79–116.

production, horse breeding, and agricultural enterprises. As a result, they could contribute to state-funded building projects and the military.

Beyond that, the arrangement provided additional personal security, enhanced the military power of the crown, and boosted royal prestige. In essence, the king used his relatives—wife, mother, siblings, crown prince, and occasionally other children—as his royal representatives. Increased visibility together with royal spectacle helped create a sense of unity and Assyrian identity. Just as important, elites could see that far from simply draining hard-won resources, the royal family played an active, productive part in maintaining the realm. Expanded roles in the administrative sector naturally received concomitant expression in royal ideology and religious performance as well.[7]

In order to meet the demands of imperial rule, Sargonid kings called upon those closest to them. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the involvement of women in affairs of state increased. Svärd's comment (noted earlier) that the power of queens and queen mothers depended to some degree on political circumstances and individual personalities applies equally well to high-ranking males and, indeed, to everyone else at court. Naturally, people did what they could to improve their lot and secure a future for themselves and their families. Why should women be any different from men in this regard? Constrained by strategic and political concerns, the king chose both his wife and his successor. He also determined the role his mother would play, the people his children would marry, and the men who would hold high office. No doubt, these men and women actively pursued their own goals and often influenced the king's decisions.

None of this would suggest that Assyrian women did not have influence, authority, and individual agency (nor have I ever suggested that). It would be difficult to find any time in history when elite women did not participate actively in the business of the state. In the ancient world, power was contingent for everyone, and survival required creative solutions to a perpetual series of problems. We would do well to remember that people usually act in response to immediate concerns and in accord with their own social and cultural norms, not to fulfill abstract models.

The comments I have made here in no way detract from Svärd's achievement. Her volume is essential reading for anyone interested in the women who lived and worked at the Assyrian court. The book far surpasses previous studies in completeness and offers significant new insights into the ways these women fit into the Assyrian hierarchy and won power for themselves. Impressively thorough and always thought-provoking, the author builds a cogent argument. The appendices that chart the evidence for each office and office-holder are a particularly welcome resource. Although scholars will continue to argue specific points and interpretations, such as the length of time Atalia was queen or Naqi'a's status during Sennacherib's reign, Saana Svärd has advanced the discussion considerably. She has shown that the queen was an indispensable part of Assyrian society, that this powerful woman ran a sophisticated administrative concern, and that only one woman at a time held the office—though in my view the problem of title use remains unresolved. Svärd's assessment of the other women in the palace is equally perceptive. Due to their fragmentary nature and chronological distribution, the sources inevitably leave room for further investigation, particularly with regard to the development of women's power over time, or the place of individual women in their contemporary milieu.

7. See, for example, J. E. Reade, "Was Sennacherib a Feminist?" in *La Femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique,* ed. J.-M. Durand, *CRRAI* 33 (Paris: 1987), 139–45; S. Svärd, "Changes in Neo-Assyrian Queenship"; N. N. May, "Administrative and Other Reforms of Sargon II and Tiglath-pileser III."