

SENNACHERIB'S DESCRIPTION OF LACHISH AND OF ITS CONQUEST

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When Sennacherib's conquest of Lachish is considered, the vivid reliefs depicting that event which were found in the ruins of his palace at Nineveh immediately come to mind.¹ These are, however, simply pictorial representations; they do not include any verbal description of any significant length of the events depicted. For instance, the cuneiform label which accompanies one of the scenes says little beyond the fact that Sennacherib conquered Lachish.

Thus, the search for a text which provides a parallel literary description of this conquest takes one beyond the confines of the room of palace reliefs and into the Neo-Assyrian archives. Until now, this search has not been very rewarding. The entry in the annals for Sennacherib's western campaign of 701 B.C. does not mention the city of Lachish,² nor has it been thought that any other extant text mentions that city's conquest by Sennacherib.

The suggestion of the present study is that just such a text has indeed been found. However, because of difficulties with the text, it has not been recognized for what it is. In fact, because of the document's fragmentary nature its two main pieces were previously looked upon as two different texts, both of which were attributed to Assyrian kings other than Sennacherib—one to Tiglath-pileser III,³ and the other to Sargon II.⁴ N. Na³aman has brought these

¹For an earlier presentation of these reliefs, see J. B. Pritchard, *ANET*, Plates 371-374 on pp. 129-132. For the most recent and extensive presentation of these materials, see D. Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Tel Aviv, 1982).

²*ANET*, p. 288.

³Tablet No. K6505 in the British Museum, first published by G. Smith in *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, vol. 3 (London, 1870), Pl. 9, no. 2, and subsequently published by P. Rost, *Die Keilschrifttexte Tiglat-Pileasers III* (Leipzig, 1893), pp. 18-20, lines 103-119.

⁴H. Winckler, *Altorientalische Forschungen*, 2 (Leipzig, 1898): 570-574; H. Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur," *JCS* 12 (1958): 80-84.

two fragments together and demonstrated convincingly that the text they comprise was written during the reign of Sennacherib.⁵

This text continued to pose a problem, however, because of the name of the god whom Sennacherib identifies in it as the one who directed him to attack the cities of Hezekiah of Judah. The name of that god is Anshar, not Ashur. H. Tadmor has noted that Sennacherib did not employ the name of this god in this way until after his conquest of Babylon in 689 B.C.⁶ Following up on that observation, I suggested in a previous study that this text should thus be connected with a second western campaign conducted by Sennacherib some time after 689.⁷

In this present study, that earlier proposal is now made more specific in terms of its description of the events which took place during that second western campaign. The more specific application to which that earlier interpretation is extended here is the addition of the proposal that the second half of the surviving text of the tablet describes the city of Lachish and Sennacherib's conquest of it.

1. *Overview of the Contents of the Text*

Although the text is damaged, the gist of its first half is relatively straightforward (lines 1-10). It describes Sennacherib's conquest of the Judahite city of Azekah. Since the name of Azekah has survived in the fifth line of the text, there is no doubt about the identity of the city that Sennacherib attacked in this instance. Its description as "located on a mountain ridge" (line 6) is particularly appropriate for the site of Tell Zakariyeh, with which the ancient site of Azekah has been identified.⁸ The mountain ridge upon which this site rests belongs to a forested park along the present-day Highway 38 south of Beth Shemesh, and because the tell is barren it stands out in contrast to the forest which surrounds it. Sennacherib's concern with the border between his dependencies in Philistia and Hezekiah's territory should be noted here also, for in

⁵N. Na'aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR*, no. 214 (1974), pp. 25-39.

⁶Tadmor, p. 82.

⁷W. H. Shea, "Sennacherib's Second Palestinian Campaign," *JBL* 104 (1985): 401-418.

⁸Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 431.

this case he emphasized the fact that Azekah was located on that dividing line (line 5).

The next section of the text, lines 11-20, presents more difficulties in historical and geographical interpretation. The reason for this is that the name of the city conquered by Sennacherib's forces in this case is missing, due to the damage to the text at the beginning of line 11. The rest of the line, however, goes on to identify the site as a "royal [city] of the Philistines, which H[ezek]jah had captured and strengthened for himself." Further details concerning the site are given in subsequent lines, and various of these are noted below.

Because of the identification of this site as a royal city of the Philistines, it has been natural to view this unnamed city as one or the other of the two inland cities of the Philistine pentapolis. Gath has been a more popular choice than Ekron. The suggestion of the present study is that this royal city of the Philistines which Hezekiah took over and fortified for himself was neither Gath nor Ekron, but rather that it was Lachish.

2. *Two Major Questions in the Lachish Identification*

At first glance it may seem quite strange to identify Lachish as "a royal city of the Philistines." The paradox of this proposal raises two main questions: (1) How did Lachish come to be a possession of the Philistines?, and (2) why would it be identified as a "royal" city?

Lachish in Possession of the Philistines

If this text describes events that took place during the course of Sennacherib's 701 campaign, then no reasonable answer can be given to the first of these two questions. If, on the other hand, it refers to events that occurred during a later western campaign of his, then there is a good historical explanation available. As a result of his success in campaigning through Judah in 701, Sennacherib imposed a heavy payment of tribute upon Hezekiah. He did more than that, however, for he also cut off some of Hezekiah's territory and gave it to the Philistine cities on Hezekiah's western border. As the Assyrian king states in his annals, "His [Hezekiah's] towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi,

king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country. . . .”⁹

Located as it was in southwestern Judah, Lachish was a prime candidate to be among the cities and towns of Judah that were taken away from Hezekiah and given to the Philistine cities. The extensive fortifications of Lachish provided all the more reason for Sennacherib to have been interested in removing it from Hezekiah’s control. D. Ussishkin, the current excavator of Lachish, has come to the same conclusion: “Sennacherib tells in his inscription that the towns which he had plundered were given to the Philistine cities along the Mediterranean coast. That is, to Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza. The desolate city of Lachish was probably one of those towns.”¹⁰

The only difference in my proposal here is that Lachish had not yet been destroyed and was still a viable city when it was turned over to one of the Philistine kings, probably Padi of Ekron. As a part of his capitulation, Hezekiah was forced to turn over the still-fortified stronghold of Lachish in order to diminish his capacity for further rebellion against the Assyrian king.

As a former Judahite city, Lachish would have been a prime target for Hezekiah to take back from the Philistines in the interval between Sennacherib’s two campaigns. Its location was strategic, its fortifications were impressive, and it probably was the second most important city of Judah at the time. If it was to Padi of Ekron that Lachish was given by Sennacherib, then that city would have been all the more attractive as a target for repossession, for Padi was an Assyrian puppet who at one time had been in Hezekiah’s custody when Ekron was in revolt against Assyria.¹¹ Thus, the events in the interval could explain how, in taking Lachish back from the Philistines, Hezekiah would have been “taking over a royal city of the Philistines and fortifying it for himself.”

Lachish as a “Royal City”

While the aforementioned course of events could explain how Hezekiah could have taken Lachish over from the Philistines, it does not necessarily explain how Lachish could have been classified

⁹ANET, p. 288.

¹⁰D. Ussishkin, “Answers at Lachish,” *BAR* 5 (1979): 34.

¹¹ANET, p. 287.

as a royal city. When I first proposed that this text should be connected with Sennacherib's second western campaign in a paper presented to the American Oriental Society meeting in Toronto, Canada, a few years ago, M. C. Astour noted in the discussion of the paper that the Neo-Assyrian use of the phrase "royal city" was quite general and need not be connected with one of the cities of the Philistine pentapolis.

Now the ongoing excavations at Lachish have provided archaeological data which explain how Lachish could have been referred to as a "royal city." Ancient Judahite Lachish was not a cosmopolitan residential city in the ordinary sense of the term. It was rather a royal quarter or royal citadel, very much like Megiddo and Samaria in northern Israel. The excavations at Lachish have uncovered many structures within the city walls. These include the governor's palace, Late-Bronze and Persian-period temples, the gate complex, and store houses or stables (or both!). But they have not uncovered ordinary residential houses of the common people. The reason for this absence has to do with the nature of the city. It was not an ordinary residential city; it was rather a "royal" citadel. Therefore, it would have been quite appropriate for Sennacherib to have referred to it as such when he attacked it during his second western campaign.

Thus, we may summarize the historical situation as follows: The events of 701 explain how Lachish could have fallen into Philistine hands, the interval between Sennacherib's two western campaigns explains how Hezekiah could have taken it over again and fortified it for himself, and the archaeology of the site explains how it could have been referred to as a "royal" city. Beyond these points, however, the city whose name is missing from the Assyrian text still needs to be identified by comparing its characteristics with those of the city described in the text.

3. *Lachish and the City Described in the Text*

Although badly broken, line 12 of the text appears to describe the city in question as being "like a tree standing out on a ridge." While this description is quite general, it is appropriate for Lachish, especially when it is viewed along the western, northern, and eastern sides of the hill upon which it is located. In addition, line 13 describes the city as "surrounded with great towers and exceedingly difficult (is) its ascent." The tourist visiting Lachish today

approaches the city up the road toward the city gate from the southwestern corner, the same corner from which the Assyrian troops mounted their main attack. This approach is already fairly steep, as witnessed by the angle of incline of the Assyrian siege ramp; but the ascent to the city walls on the other sides of the city is even more steep.

As for the towers, the Lachish reliefs from Nineveh illustrate the abundance of towers in Lachish's fortifications. Four towers are depicted at the city's southern end, anywhere between seven and ten towers are shown at its northern end, and another tower is connected with the city gate between these two points. If the reliefs were complete, they probably would demonstrate that there were still more towers along the city walls.

Line 14 refers to the "palace like a mountain (which) was barred in front of them and high (was) its [top?]." This description fits very well with the impressive governor's palace of Strata IV and III at Lachish. Given the size and prominence of this palace upon the mound, it probably was visible for a considerable distance from the city.

Line 15, as N. Na³aman has noted, refers to the water shaft of the city.¹² This is described as "dark and the sun never shone on it, the waters were situated in darkness. . . ." The water supply of ancient Lachish has not as yet been located by the excavators. At present there is a small well at the foot of the northeastern corner of the tell, but it could not have been adequate to supply a city of this size in ancient times. Given the size of that ancient city, one may expect that it had a water shaft comparable to those found at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gibeon. Certainly, Sennacherib considered that the water supply of the city referred to in this text was inaccessible to his besieging troops. (As I understand it, one of the goals for the 1989 season of excavations at Lachish is to locate the city's water shaft, and the northern end of the tell seems to be the most likely area in which such an installation would have been situated.)

The point of reference of line 16 is obscure.¹³ It states that "its [mou]th was cut with axes and a moat was dug around it." If this statement refers to the subject of the preceding line, then the water shaft is in view here; but a moat around the water shaft does not

¹²Na³aman, p. 29.

¹³Ibid.

seem to make very good sense. If one thinks in terms of the results of the excavations at Lachish in seeking to ascertain the meaning of this particular specification in the text, one might consider the outer revetment wall. The Ninevite reliefs of Lachish show a double wall around the city. The excavators have noted, however, that the outer lower wall was different from the upper inner wall.¹⁴ They have called the lower wall a revetment, and a glacis ran up from it to the foot of the upper wall. This feature of the city's fortifications might have been what is in view at this point in the text.

Line 17 refers to Hezekiah's marshaling of his troops to defend the city. This statement gives little that is specific for Lachish, for it could have applied to any city defended by Hezekiah against Sennacherib. By way of contrast, however, line 18 has a direct archaeological correspondence at Lachish. The text states here: "I caused the warriors of Amurru, all of them, to carry with" The evident reference is to the construction of a siege ramp. The existence of just such an Assyrian siege ramp has now been clearly demonstrated in the excavations at Lachish. It is the only siege ramp known in Israel that dates to Assyrian times.

There has been some speculation about just how this siege ramp at Lachish was built. Was it by only Assyrian engineers? Was it by Judahite captives? Or was it by some other personnel? This text of Sennacherib tells us where he got the personnel to construct the siege ramp referred to here—namely, the soldiers of Amurru, i.e., from the western countries. Thus, in order to execute this project he requisitioned soldiers from the western towns, cities, and countries under his control, probably from Philistia and Phoenicia and others in the area.

4. *The Assyrian Capture of the City*

Although damaged, line 19 of the text appears to refer to the breakthrough of the Assyrian troops into the city in question. Since line 20 deals with the booty carried out from the city, one may expect a victorious action like this to be referred to here. The language appears to describe the breakthrough in terms like those used for the breaking of a clay pot.

¹⁴D. Ussishkin, "Defensive Judean Counter-ramp Found at Lachish in the 1983 Season," *BAR* 10 (1984): 72.

A time element is mentioned in connection with this victorious breakthrough. The Assyrian phrase for this reference to time reads, *ina 7-šu*,¹⁵ which translates as “in his 7th (time).” The kind of time referred to here has seemed obscure. It does not appear to be a 7th year, for neither Hezekiah nor Sennacherib celebrated their 7th years of reign during either the first or second western campaigns of the latter king. If a month had been involved here, Sennacherib probably would have referred to it with an Assyrian month name, as is customary in the annals.

In addition to these difficulties, neither the year nor the month seems sufficiently immediate to the time of the event described. Like the inscription of the Siloam tunnel, this text appears to refer to a very present time for the breakthrough. Reference to the day of the breakthrough would seem much more appropriate here than would notice of the month or year. But if the time in question is a day, which day is it?

The third-person singular masculine pronoun used following the number 7 is the suffixed form, not the independent form. Therefore, the reading would be “his” 7th time. Two individuals are mentioned in this text, Sennacherib and Hezekiah. Sennacherib refers to himself in the first person, and it is Hezekiah who is referred to in the third person. Thus, this 7th time or day should be Hezekiah’s, not Sennacherib’s.

The question then is, What kind of 7th day would be referred to in connection with Hezekiah, king of Judah? There was, of course, a particular kind of 7th day in use in Judah—namely, the Sabbath as the 7th day of the week. The Assyrian king did not have a seven-day week, hence such a reference would not have been meaningful in his case. Hezekiah, on the other hand, had just such a special 7th day, and the text appears to indicate that Sennacherib was aware of that fact. Not only that, but Sennacherib appears to have made use of that fact to make his final assault upon the city.

A military procedure adopted by a number of later enemies of the Jews at various times was to attack them on their Sabbath, when they ordinarily would have been at rest.¹⁶ What we appear to have, then, in this cryptic cuneiform statement is the earliest

¹⁵Na³aman, p. 26.

¹⁶A. F. Johns, “The Military Strategy of Sabbath Attacks on the Jews,” *VT* 13 (1963): 482-486.

known reference to such a practice. Moreover, if this interpretation is correct, this reference now becomes the earliest extrabiblical reference to the Sabbath. And if the city involved was Lachish, as has been proposed above, this would mean that Lachish fell to the Assyrian troops on a Sabbath.

It might be objected that the Lachish reliefs do not show any Sabbath-like activities on the part of the residents of Lachish, but that, on the contrary, they are fighting for their lives. Two points should be taken into account here: (1) The Assyrian reliefs appear to depict a series of events, not just one frame frozen in time. For example, the refugees are coming out of the city gate while the men are still fighting on the city walls. Probably these were not intended to represent exactly contemporaneous events. (2) In addition, the Lachishites may already have adopted the attested later Maccabean practice of fighting on the Sabbath when necessary in defensive warfare.

The final partially legible line of this text, line 20, refers to the livestock that were led out of the city as booty. While this reference is nonspecific as far as localizing this action at Lachish, it is also well represented in the Lachish reliefs. There cattle are shown being led away from the city as it fell.

5. *Conclusion*

The data from the legible portions of the lines of the second half of our text can now be summarized by noting that all of them, as far as their terms of reference can be understood, fit compatibly with the archaeology of Lachish and its artistic representation at Nineveh. Some of these statements are rather nonspecific and could apply to a city other than Lachish. Other statements seem to point more directly to Lachish itself. These include references to it as a "royal" city and to its location, walls, towers, palace, and the siege ramp built to conquer it. Furthermore, the events of the first western campaign of Sennacherib and the interval between it and the second western campaign provide an explanation of how Lachish could have fallen into Philistine hands and then been recovered by Hezekiah.

The present study, thus, has highlighted two basic aspects of the historical situation and historical events in Judah in the early seventh century. First, there is evidence for the identification of

Lachish as the name which has been broken away from the beginning of line 11 of the text, and with this identification we secure an Assyrian account of Lachish's conquest by Sennacherib's army. Second, this reconstruction contributes further to the identification and description of events that occurred during the course of Sennacherib's second western campaign. These two points are complementary in elucidating the history of the period.