Saana Svärd

*Women and Power in Neo-Assyrian Palaces*

Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project 23


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This volume is a revision of the author’s 2012 PhD dissertation, completed at the University of Helsinki. Svärd analyzes theories of power in order to study the Neo-Assyrian women of the palaces, with “palace” functioning as a cipher for more abstract conceptions of “administration” and “government” rather than the physical structure itself. (While the book is thus concerned with the sociopolitical entity of the Neo-Assyrian Empire [ca. 934—612 BCE], the earliest texts relating to palace women in this study are from the reign of Assurnasirpal II [883–859 BCE]. In fact, owing to the nature of the distribution of the material evidence, the weight of the study is geared toward the three kings whose reigns are particularly well-documented for the Neo-Assyrian period: Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.) By considering theories of power, Svärd’s aim is to answer the question of what *kind* of power these women had: “Whether or not a person is seen as having power depends on how ‘Power’ is defined. If it is seen only as hierarchical and related to force, it is easy to exclude women from ‘the sphere of power’ and conclude that they were without power or oppressed. This is why the focus of research has often veered away from the power wielded by women” (2). Consequently, Svärd aims to examine women’s power from two complementary perspectives, the *hierarchical* and the *heterarchical*, categories she develops from sociological discussions regarding the concept of power, particularly from the viewpoint of women’s studies and Assyriology. While heterarchical power relations may include hierarchical power relations, they may also incorporate other types of power, such as reciprocal power, resistance, and
persuasion. They may thus include negotiable and lateral power relations as well as the more normative power dynamics that have often been the focus of many previous studies of power and gender. In the following chapters, Svärd maps hierarchical and heterarchical power dynamics through close study of the textual evidence, working from the extensive electronic Corpus of Neo-Assyrian Texts created by the University of Helsinki under the directorship of Professor Simo Parpola. (Felicitous archaeological evidence is considered as well.) Accordingly, Svärd can confidently claim to have gathered “all the texts relating to Neo-Assyrian palace women” (3). This primary evidence is incorporated in the appendices, which include transliterations and translations and also identify the texts with references to the State Archives of Assyria series wherever possible.

Part 1 considers hierarchical power relationships, beginning with a theoretically informed discussion about the nature of power itself. Svärd distinguishes between structural power (something inherent in the structures of society, e.g., taxation or another administrative system) and individual power between rational autonomous individuals. In other words, Svärd asks what was the particular position of women in the palace administration (structural power) and how a woman acted within this position (individual power). To begin, the focus is upon queens and queen mothers. In particular, she considers the sēgallu (MÍ.É.GAL, lit. “women of the palace”), translated “queen” by most modern commentators (šarratu, lit. “female king,” is instead reserved for female tribal leaders and goddesses rather than a queen proper). The chapter summarizes and analyzes the textual evidence concerning the queen in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Svärd cautions against too easily associating the title with the wife of the king or mother of the crown prince. Indeed, while the king could father children with a number of different woman, Svärd argues that only one woman at a time could enjoy the title and that this individual could continue her role even after the death of the king. Only in death—or deposition by the king—was the title passed on. The title could also be applied retrospectively, as seems to have been the case with Esarhaddon’s mother, Naqi’a (44). This “rewriting of history” by Esarhaddon saw his mother’s status elevated according to his own long-range political agendas. As a sēgallu, Naqi’a was able to take on a role “similar to that of the king,” as documented by the Zakûtu treaty (SAA 2.8) and building inscriptions associated with the queen: Naqi’a and sēgallu like her had real, hierarchical authority at court (58–59). Accordingly, Svärd uncovers an important governmental office for the sēgallu.

Svärd ends this discussion by considering the phenomena in which high-ranking Assyrian are women referred to, reverently, with male titles (e.g., bēlu, “lord” [masc.]), despite their female sex. Ultimately, Svärd concludes that influential women of the court in a society where institutional authority was most often a masculine property could have been seen as “honorary males” (83). This highlights the unusual status of the sēgallu, whose power is distinct when compared to the activities of the other women active in the palaces,
discussed in the next chapter. While the sēgallu may have had a high rank in the court hierarchy, “immediately after the king, even before the crown prince” (84), clearly this was not the norm for most women in the palaces. Issues of class and social status must also be taken into consideration when considering hierarchical power relations across a gendered spectrum.

Accordingly, in chapter 4 Svärd goes on to discuss these “Other Palace Women.” She is interested in particular in the role of the šakintu, the official in charge of the queen’s households. Svärd advocates translating this term as “female administrator,” noting several problems with the traditional designation “harem manageress”: “The term ‘harem’ is heavily loaded with cultural meanings that are not transferable to ancient Mesopotamia.… Too often words like ‘harem’ and ‘veil’ conjure exotic images of oppressed women at the mercy of an insatiable despot, and there is a danger that such images may influence the conclusions drawn from the evidence” (91). Instead, the šakintus were high-ranking female administrators, the foremost female servants of the queen, with considerable resources and staff at their disposal. A related female courtier is the sekretu, which can literally be translated as “the sequestered woman.” Svärd disputes the felicity of utilizing this literal translation, since the evidence suggests that the term instead came to be applied to general female residents and personnel of the palace. Nevertheless, the term invites an excursus on the possibility of gender segregation at the Assyrian court, which Svärd summarily rejects (107). Just as the šakintu has unfairly been relegated to the administration of the harem, so also have the sekretu been too readily understood as the occupants of the king’s harem. While some sekretu may indeed have had sexual relations with the king, this most likely entailed only a specific subset of sekretu, with most enjoying a high status at the royal court. Consequently, Svärd suggests the more neutral “court women” or “palace women” as the most appropriate translation for the term (108–9).

Other professional women, such as court musicians, are also considered. Indeed, Svärd’s close reading uncovers a host of female professionals who were active at the Assyrian palaces: female musicians (nuārtu); financial officers (lahḫennutu); female scribes (ṭupšarrutu); smiths (nappāḥtu); stone-borers (pallišu); barbers (gallābtu); perfume makers (muraqqitu); cupbearers (šaqqitu); and bakers (āpīt). Clearly, women could hold diverse positions at the royal palaces. The ways in which they could exercise power were also diverse, usually resembling the power of male officials who were active in similar roles: the exercise of power seems to have been tied to status rather than exclusively to gender. Svärd thus concludes that there were few exclusively female forms of power in the Neo-Assyrian palaces (143). In part, this may stem from the nature of the textual sources themselves: the women in the Neo-Assyrian texts were women active in male spheres of action and appear according to the interests of the largely male scribal class who wrote
the texts. A full examination of women in Neo-Assyrian palaces must therefore also examine the role of women outside of the official, male system of administration.

This observation sets the stage for part 2, “Power and Heterarchy in the Neo-Assyrian Palaces.” Chapter 5, simply titled “Heterarchy,” formulates a discussion of power along heterarchical lines. Originally developed in the discipline of archaeology, heterarchy is a perspective particularly well suited to the study of women because it acknowledges that power can exist outside of male hierarchies. Svärd provides the example of heterarchy at work in a modern workplace:

a coffee room, where there is no apparent hierarchy present and which is definitely not a forum for formal decision-making. However, in the course of the discussion, someone suggests that the company should pay for coffee for the employees in order to increase productivity. If a general consensus is reached that the idea is a good one (and the relevant structures exist, i.e., the company is not in dire financial straits), it could be implemented the very same day. Power was used, a decision was made, but no hierarchy or protocol was evident. (158)

To explore this type of power in the ancient evidence is thus to search for examples of coercion, persuasion, and influence.

Svärd is able to make the following observations. Heterarchical power structures are most observable in relation to nonroyal women of the palace; unsurprisingly, given their elite status, when royal women exercise power, this seems to be more explicitly connected to hierarchical power structures than the power of other palace women. Nonroyal women demonstrate their heterarchical power in written documents such as petitions (162–63) and in the negotiation of judicial proceedings and marriage agreements (164–67). Svärd also considers other webs of communication outside the prevalent social order, for instance in her discussion of witchcraft as a specifically female form of resistance to authority. One may recall here several pertinent biblical analogues, such as the story of the so-called witch of Endor in 1 Sam 28. Could this also be understood as an example of female heterarchical power?

Ultimately, Svärd summarizes her findings as follows: “it seems to me that exercise of power in the court had more to do with his/her title and position than gender. In other words, the ways in which power was exercised do not seem to differ much based on gender and evidence of specifically female forms of power is scarce” (173). This is an important conclusion, suggesting that future studies must incorporate detailed consideration of social class and situation alongside the study of gender and power. Moreover, Svärd stresses that both hierarchical and heterarchical power relationships
must also be considered in this context, and one hopes that in the future biblical scholars may take up this paradigm when considering the role of women in the Bible. Thus, although the primary concern of this study is descriptive, to examine how women acted in the Neo-Assyrian court and to describe the kind of power they had, Svärd’s secondary aim, the development of a new theoretical approach to power to use in analyzing texts, may be the most important. Svärd’s methodological caveats have the potential for utilization outside of the Neo-Assyrian context, as a way of considering power across ancient cultures and literatures. This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of women in the Neo-Assyrian palaces as well as the ways in which this role may be uncovered. The appendices provide a useful sourcebook for scholars interested in exploring the women of Neo-Assyria as they pertain to a royal courtly setting.