An Absence of Time: Remarks on the Temporal Mode of Being in Royal Elamite Inscriptions

Eternity is said not to be an extension of time but an absence of time.
- Graham Greene

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Abstract The surviving royal inscriptions from ancient Elam (in the south and southwest of modern Iran) speak of two historical characters who occupy particular positions outside physical time. These are Šilhaha (probably active in the early nineteenth century BC) and Princess Bar-Uli (in the second half of the twelfth century BC). Šilhaha became a prominent figure in Elamite history. His position is known through a legitimizing formula used by several subsequent rulers who claimed to be the ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’. Thus, Šilhaha became a sempiternal being as his metaphysical existence was necessary for all the future kings who would make such a claim. However, his temporal mode of being changed from sempiternal to omnitemporal when he appeared in a curse formulated in the late twelfth century BC. In this curse, Šilhaha occupies a divine position. To appear in such a position means that his metaphysical existence would become necessary for the future both within and outside physical time.

As for Bar-Uli, she is called the ‘beloved daughter’ and ‘salvation’ of King Šilbak-Inšušinak I (conventionally 1150-1120 BC). Being her father’s ‘salvation’ denotes her role in this world and the hereafter. Moreover, her image, engraved in a mirror-like scene on a chalcedony bead, further emphasizes her position and role.

Drawing on the terms ‘temporal’, ‘sempiternal’ and ‘omnitemporal’, this paper examines the textual contexts to see how the shift in the temporal modes of being occurred. In the end, the image on the chalcedony bead will be briefly discussed.

Keywords: Bar-Uli, Elamite, royal inscriptions, sempiternal, Šilhaha, temporal mode, omnitemporal

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Introduction

The rulers of ancient Elam (whose remains have been mostly recovered in the south and southwest of modern Iran) made use of ‘time’ in their rhetoric to give weight to their position carefully placed between the ‘past’ and the ‘future’. Commemorating the past manifests itself mainly in the restoration of old temples, hence preserving the ‘name’ and ‘memory’, whereas the ‘future’ is often expressed in relation to the continuation and well-being of the royal line. All the preservation of the past and preparation for the future took place in the present. The royal Elamite inscriptions often give the impression that the ‘present’ is a king’s regnal period and not an infinitesimal portion of time as one may find, for example, in the definition of ‘present’ in a general dictionary.

This view about the present as a stretch of time recalls some Heideggerian concepts. Heidegger stated that if we ‘characterize time in terms of the present, we understand the present as the now as distinct from the no-longer-now of the past and the not-yet-now of the future’. ² He also used the term ‘nearing nearness’, ‘nearhood’ (Nahheit, borrowed from Kant) which brings future, past and present near to one another by distancing them. It follows that nearing nearness ‘unifies in advance the ways in which what has-been, what is about to be, and the present reach out toward each other’.³

Closer scrutiny of the inscriptions in question reveals more intricate details about some temporal matters. The extant Elamite corpus provides a good number of personal names. A few of these figures appear as kings of the past whose names are frequently mentioned by later rulers in connection with certain achievements (mostly temple building). Thus, it is no wonder that the scribes knew the names of dozens of previous sovereigns. A good example is EKI 48 §2 inscribed at the time of Šilhak-Inšušinak, where a list is provided with the names of 25 previous rulers ⁴, reaching back about a millennium before his time.

At least two of the persons named in the inscriptions become significant characters indicated by the changes in their temporal mode of being. In other words, although these historical characters are ‘temporal’ entities - that is, they are surrounded and bound by time ⁵ - at some point in history, they came to occupy positions that required them to be ‘timeless’. Yet, the term ‘timelessness’ may be too vague here because it does not clarify whether the entity in question is within the physical time or outside it. Instead, one may employ the terms ‘sempiternal’ or

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² Heidegger 1972, 11.
³ Heidegger 1972, 15-16.
⁴ Eighteen of them were previous builders of the baštu ‘pit’ of the god Inšušinak (for the meaning of baštu see Tavernier 2013, 477-478).
⁵ Or more precisely, a temporal entity either possesses a monadic property with a sense of pastness, presentness, or futurity, or it stands in a dyadic relation with a sense of earlier than, simultaneous with, or later than (DeWeese 2002, 50).
‘omnitemporal’ to render more precisely what happened in the temporal modes of the persons in question.

Indeed, a change in one’s position may entail a change in one’s temporal boundaries. In a discussion on God’s temporal mode of being, Garrett DeWeese discusses the terms ‘atemporal’, ‘sempiternal’ and ‘omnitemporal’. Of these, ‘atemporal entities must be abstract’. What sempiternal ‘attempts to capture is the concept of an entity that, once it has begun to exist in time, will necessarily exist as long as the physical time in which it is located exists’. An entity is said to be omnitemporal if and only if it is necessarily metaphysically temporal, and it necessarily exists.

Such changes in the temporal mode of being are known from literature other than that of the Elamite, too. A good example from Mesopotamia is Šulgi (2094-2047 BC), the second ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Whether his name is preceded by the DINGIR sign (i.e. divine determinative) or not, his reign is divided into two periods. The textual evidence suggests that his apotheosis occurred in the 23rd year of his reign.

In the Elamite cases, however, it is not the use of the divine determinative that implies the deification of the characters, but the text and its message that communicate the idea. The two Elamite characters who offer the best cases for the purpose of this study are Šilhaha and Bar-Uli. Šilhaha was a ruler who is thought to have been active in the early nineteenth century BC, and Bar-Uli was a princess in the twelfth century BC. We know the latter not only from the inscriptions but also from her image engraved on a chalcedony bead, whereas Šilhaha is known from a few administrative tablets and the royal inscriptions of some subsequent rulers.

Šilhaha

We know very little about Šilhaha. This is mainly because, to date, no royal inscription of this character has been recovered from regular excavations. Nonetheless, he is known from the royal inscriptions of other rulers and a few administrative texts. He was probably active at the beginning of the sukkal.mah (grand vizier) period, c. 1880 BC. His name appears in the formula ruhu šak šilhaha meaning ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’. This formula was used by some later rulers

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6 DeWeese 2002, 52.
7 DeWeese 2002, 54.
8 DeWeese 2002, 56.
9 See Potts 2016, 124. For the star sign preceding the king’s name see, e.g. Selz 2016, 606.
10 In addition, every mention of a particular relationship between a king and a god serves the same purpose. One example, among dozens of others, is Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104 BC) who is introduced as ‘the pious (and) pre-eminent prince, offspring of Babylon, sovereign of kings, valiant vice-regent, viceroy of Babylon, the sun-god of his land, who makes his people flourish …’ (the translation of the Akkadian text B.2.4.11 is after Frame 1995, 33-34).
11 Henkelman 2012, 492.
12 De Graef 2012, 541.
presumably as a legitimizing title.\(^{13}\) Of course, Šilhaha is not the only who bestowed legitimacy through his sister but he is the one whose name is mentioned most frequently in this regard. Atta-hušu\(^ {14}\), Temti-halki\(^ {15}\), Kuk-našur\(^ {16}\), Temti-ahar\(^ {17}\), Kutir-Nahhunte I\(^ {18}\), Humpan-u-mena\(^ {19}\) and Huteluduš-Inšušinak\(^ {20}\) were called the ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’. In addition, the same title was used by Tepti-mada\(^ {21}\) and Tan-Uli\(^ {22}\) in seal inscriptions. Moreover, there are at least two peculiar cases in which Humpan-u-mena\(^ {23}\) and Kuk-našur\(^ {24}\) are introduced as a ‘son of Šilhaha’ and not the ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’. In addition, in an inscription of Šilhak-Inšušinak\(^ {25}\), Šilhaha is included as one of the previous builders of the haštu (‘pit’) of Inšušinak.

We cannot say with certainty how Šilhaha came to this position. All we may say for now is that the use of the expression ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’ by various rulers after him, ‘clearly shows that Šilhaha was, or at least became at a certain point in time, a very important person in the early stage of the Sukkalmaḫat.’\(^ {26}\)

The key evidence of Šilhaha’s sempiternity is the use and perpetuation of this legitimizing formula. The metaphysical existence of Šilhaha was necessary for all the later rulers who would style themselves ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’. Šilhaha would have to necessarily exist as long as the physical time in which all the historical events were located would exist. However, at some point his temporal mode changed. IRS 53, a text of Huteluduš-Inšušinak in the late twelfth century BC, concludes with a curse against anyone who would damage and destroy what this king built. The passage reads:

\[^{AN}in-u-ni-na-ak ha-ti-ip da-ah-ba-âl-na ba-at-ti DIŠ ha-te-la-di-âl \[^{AN}in-u-ni-na-ak-ni a-ki100\] is-il-ha-ti uk-a-kur ur ta-ak-na\]

May Inšušinak trample with his feet, may the curse of Huteluduš-Inšušinak and Šilhaha be inflicted upon him.\(^ {27}\)

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\(^{13}\) For avunculate see Potts 2018.
\(^{14}\) IRS 10-13; Sollberger 1968.
\(^{15}\) IRS 15 & 16.
\(^{16}\) At least twice in royal inscriptions: IRS 17 & 49 variant 1; and once in a seal: Amiet 1973, no. 49.
\(^{17}\) IRS 49 variant 2.
\(^{18}\) IRS 49 variant 3.
\(^{19}\) IRS 38 variant 8b.
\(^{21}\) MDP 43 2016
\(^{22}\) MDP 43 2330.
\(^{23}\) IRS 38 variant 8a.
\(^{24}\) MDP 28 8.
\(^{25}\) EKI 48 §2-3.
\(^{26}\) De Graef 2012, 541.
\(^{27}\) Translation after Malbran-Labat 2018, 473.
This curse formula can be understood as Elamite propaganda and a reaction to the weakened position of Huteluduš-Inšušinak as a consequence of Nebuchadnezzar’s attacks on Elam. In addition, the Elamite curses are often conditional and future-oriented: if somebody does something vicious to the king’s name or what he has built, the gods’ curse will befall him. In the maledictions in the royal Elamite texts, it is usually a triad or a quartet of deities that is invoked to place the ‘fear, terror’ (Elamite: hat) upon the malefactors. Notwithstanding, in the inscription in question, it is Inšušinak (a deity), Huteluduš-Inšušinak, and Šilhaha (two historical characters) whom the wrongdoers should fear. Thus, Šilhaha is no more just a king of the distant past whose existence in physical time is necessitated through the legitimizing title. When the kings are elevated to divine positions, a change in their temporal mode follows. Their existence is no more limited within the boundaries of the physical time. By becoming a divinity, Šilhaha’s temporal mode of being is changed from sempiternal to omnitemporal.

Bar-Uli in Textual Sources

B/Par-Uli is another historical character who received a distinctive place in a few royal inscriptions as well as in Elamite art. A Middle Elamite princess and apparently the youngest child of the house, she deserves attention as she is spoken of differently from other offspring of the king.

The prolific Middle Elamite sovereign, Šilhak-Inšušinak I (c. 1150-1120 BC), left a considerable number of inscriptions concerned with various subjects, from extensive imperial construction programmes throughout the kingdom to military campaigns and religious architecture. Invocation to deities and dedication of the kings’ achievements to the gods are eloquently verbalized in the royal texts. This frequent theme portrays the king asking his patron god(s) to accept his achievements

28 Nebuchadnezzar I launched a series of attacks on Elamite territories in revenge for attacks on Mesopotamian centers by some earlier Elamite kings, most notably Šutruk-Nahhunte I (c. 1190-1155 BC) and Kutir-Nahhunte II (c. 1155-1150 BC). The Elamites took the statue of Marduk to Susa. Nebuchadnezzar I managed to capture and send it back to its temple (see Liverani 2014, 366). His attacks shook the Elamite throne. The curse formula in question seems to be a political gesture despite the weakened position of the Elamite king.

29 For the curse in the ancient Near East see Kitz 2007. For the curse in royal Elamite inscriptions see Jahangirfar et al. 2022.

30 For a similar ability of a few Elamite rulers in legal documents see, for instance, Hinz 1972, 105.

31 A further point to be discussed here is the position of Huteluduš-Inšušinak, who precedes Šilhaha in the curse formula. Obviously, Huteluduš-Inšušinak, too, is elevated to a divine position – so accordingly, his temporal mode changes to omnitemporality. As mentioned above, this curse seems to have been formulated to elevate his position by placing him between Inšušinak, i.e. the ‘Lord of Susa’, and Šilhaha, a central character in Elamite history. Hence, he could also fulfill his role as a divine hero who could be part of the group of deities in the afterlife. For rulers who received a divine status during their lifetime see Selz 2016, 606-607.
and pious deeds and award him, his wife, his children and all the descendants he would have in the future with a blissful life. In Šilhak-Inšušinak’s inscriptions, the enumeration of the members of the royal family becomes a distinguishing feature, as seemingly in his texts ‘the children are enumerated in chronological order’. Hence, Bar-Uli is the last one to be named. Her name appears in two settings: first with no distinction from others, and second when she is singled out. EKI 54, one of Šilhak-Inšušinak’s longest inscriptions, belongs to the former kind, in which the king, after enumerating some royal figures adds:

\[
ta-ak-ki-me DISANl.-li-is-tai-me ta-ak-ki-me SALba-urAN-ú-li-me pu-lu ku-ši-ik-ú-pe a-
\]
\[
 ak SALANnab-ba-un-te-u-tú-pa33
\]

For the life of Lilir-taš, for the life of Bar-Uli [and] the children I have got and [the children of] Nahhunte-utu.

The name of the princess is also mentioned in the same manner in an unprovenanced inscription of Šilhak-Inšušinak. The first part of this inscription informs us that the king made his stele (\(\text{is}-\text{ub-mu-ti}^\text{j}\)) and inscribed his name on it for his own life, as well as the life of Nahhunte-utu and the persons he enumerates (Bar-Uli included, as expected after Lilir-taš), for the lives of the children of his family, and the grandchildren to be born. Then it follows that the king gave a piece of land to a person called Duhi’-ir lak because he was attentive to the king. Afterwards, the king offered a sheep, flour\(^{r}\) and beer\(^{r}\) in celebration of making this stele.

In two of the four so-called \(\text{takki.me}\) (‘life’) inscriptions composed at the command of Šilhak-Inšušinak, the king concludes the list of the children with Bar-Uli, paying her more attention. In IRS 47 he states that:

\[
ta-ak-ki-me ú-me ta-ak-ki-me SALANnab-ba-un-te-u-tú ru-tú ba-ni-ik-ú-ri-me [the
\]
\[
 names of eight persons] ta-ak-ki-me SALba-urAN-ú-li-me pa-ak ba-ni-ik-ú-ri in-ru-ur-ú-
\]
\[
 ri-me in-ši-ka\text{a}
\]

For my life, the life of Nahhunte-utu, my beloved wife [and for eight persons’ lives and] the life of Bar-Uli, my beloved daughter, my salvation.

This passage recurs in IRS 48. The key term here is \(\text{in}-\text{ru}-\text{ur-ú-ri-me}\), here tentatively translated as ‘my salvation’. The significance of \(\text{pak}, \text{haník} \text{šuru˘r.˘ri.me}\), meaning

\[32\text{ Reiner 1973, 58.}\]
\[33\text{ EKI 54 §3.}\]
\[34\text{ See Arfaei 2010. Arfaei explains that he received some photos of this inscription along with a note indicating that the inscription had been photographed in a farmer’s house in Sulaqān, Shahr-e Kord, but without any information about its original provenance.}\]
\[35\text{ IRS 47 & 48.}\]
\[36\text{ See, among others, Grillot-Susini 1994, 15; Malbran-Labat 1995, 108. It is attested in Neo- and Achaemenid Elamite as \(\text{širi}^\text{ which, in Hallock’s opinion, means ‘friend’ or the like}\) (Hallock 1969, 757). According to Hallock, in the Achaemenid Elamite \(\text{širi}^\text{ is always suffixed with ‘-ni ‘thy’ as part of a formula in letters addressed to superiors’}. Hinz (1974) has proposed ‘happiness,}
‘beloved daughter, my salvation’, may lie in a particular dynastic role that the princess was expected to deliver. Based on the king’s fondness for his daughter, it has been suggested that perhaps she was the oldest daughter of Šilhak-Inšušinak and Nahhunte-utu, or she was the king’s only daughter, and being his šuru could signify that she was a ‘prospective bearer of guaranteed legitimate grandchildren’.

It is noteworthy that Bar-Uli’s name is also mentioned in an inscription of Huteluduš-Inšušinak, Šilhak-Inšušinak’s successor. Here, her name follows that of Lilir-taš, as in her father’s inscriptions, although with no distinction from others and not as the last person to be named.

The available contexts provide some certainty regarding the sense of šuru; however, a new study is required for a more solid conclusion on the meaning of this word. The way we understand it now, being the king’s ‘salvation’ denotes future-oriented implications - both in this world and the hereafter. While one may conceive of her as a sempiternal entity who would preserve the royal seed, being the ‘salvation’ implies that she would intercede with the gods in the afterlife in her father’s favour. Thus, her metaphysical existence would be necessary in the future as an omnitemporal entity.

**The Image of Bar-Uli**

The image of the princess has been engraved on a small chalcedony pendant that King Šilhak-Inšušinak gave to his beloved daughter as a present. This pale-blue piece has a hole for suspension. According to the short Elamite inscription accompanying the image, the king took this ia-áš-pu (chalcedony) from Puralsiš, a locale otherwise unknown, and gave it to ‘Bar-Uli, my beloved daughter’ (ba-ar-AN-ú-li pa-ak ha-ni-ik-ii-rî). This small bead shows the king seated while his daughter is standing in front of him, stretching her hands to receive the gift from her father. What the king is holding as the gift is the same ia-áš-pu bead. Thus, one image is reflected in itself an infinite number of times. The Droste effect highlights the position of the princess and the king’s fondness for her. To quote Shalem, this

salvation, prosperity’ for šunu/išri. His objection to Hallock’s interpretation is about the verb buttuknu (conjugation II) in PF 1860: u-ri-nî AN-na-ap-pi a-ak. DiŠ-da-rî-yu-ur-iš DiŠ-sumki ha-ut-tuk-nî which Hallock understood as, ‘May god and Darius the king become thy išri’ Hinz has translated the same passage loosely as, ‘May the gods and Darius the king bring about your well-being’.

38 Or šunu.išri.me as recorded in IRS 48.
40 Álvarez-Mon 2019, 108. Apparently, Nahhunte-utu first was the wife of Kutir-Nahhunte, Šilhak-Inšušinak’s brother, and then she married the latter. According to Malbran-Labat (1995, 175), Šilhak-Inšušinak had three children from Nahhunte-utu.
41 For this inscription see Lambert 1972.
42 The maximum dimensions are: height: 3 cm; length: 4 cm; width: 2.8 cm. For this bead and its inscription see Sollberger 1965.
44 Named after a Dutch brand of cocoa, the ‘Droste effect’ occurs when a picture appears within itself.
artistic work ‘celebrates but one instance, and does not allow this moment to merge into the flow of time’.

Conclusion

In the royal inscriptions and an image engraved on a bead from ancient Elam, we find at least two characters whose metaphysical existence in the future is necessitated by certain capabilities and expectations. One of them, Šilhaha, was a sukkal.mah in the nineteenth-century BC. Despite our limited information about him and his activities, indirect evidence, mostly the legitimizing phrase ‘son of Šilhaha’s sister’, indicates that he probably initiated a new era and brought about important political changes. In a curse formula, he (along with Huteluduš-Inšušinak, during whose reign the Elamite power was on the wane) assumed a divine position. This unprecedented curse formula not only highlights Šilhaha’s credit for his activities in the past but also signals a change in his temporal mode of being. To act like a god means to dwell outside the boundaries of physical time.

As for Princess Bar-Uli, the Elamite female line readily stands out in the Elamite texts and art. Their role is more often than not in connection with dynastic

44 Shalem 2018, 195.
45 Or three if Huteluduš-Inšušinak is included as well.
affairs. The princess is introduced as the king’s ‘beloved daughter’ and his ‘salvation’. The term ‘salvation’ could imply that she would bring happiness to her father by keeping his name alive and perpetuating his memory in this world, and also by acting in his favour in the afterlife. This interpretation requires that it is not only her physical existence that is necessary to continue the royal line, but her metaphysical existence would also be essential for the expectations to be fulfilled. With regard to ‘salvation’ in the other world, it would be necessary for Bar-Uli to have an omnitemporal character.

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Abbreviations


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