

**Abstracts des Communications  
de l'Atelier Médecine Mésopotamienne du 9 juillet 2019 (65<sup>e</sup> RAI, Paris)**

**Nils Heeßel**

**Disease Names and Disease Lists: Towards an understanding of Babylonian taxonomy of disease.**

Abstract: Research on Babylonian and Assyrian diseases in Assyriology has largely focused on identifying diseases according to our modern taxonomy. This has been increasingly criticized in recent years because of theoretical and methodological problems, often under the heading of “problems of retrospective diagnosis”. However, while scholars invested much time and effort into this debate, there has been surprisingly few attempts to understand the emic perspective: By analysing the way Babylonians named and ordered diseases, the Babylonian rationale of disease taxonomy comes into view, which promises interesting results concerning the Babylonian view of sickness, disease and medicine. Preliminary results of an analysis of disease lists and disease names will be presented in this paper, pointing beyond the current debate on the problems of retrospective diagnosis and outlining possible ways for future investigations.

**Francesca Minen**

**Engendering healthy royal heirs. Some thoughts on the rationale behind Sakikku 36-40**

Over the last decades Assyro-Babylonian medicine has received much attention from Assyriologists and is now regarded as a proper sub-discipline in the framework of Ancient Near Eastern studies. Most recent years have experienced intense analysis of medical sources in order to reconstruct the background and role of medical practitioners, their sources, theories and methods of healing. These activities have been generally focused on therapeutic sources, which are still in the process of being edited; however, they have left aside another consistent part of the medical corpus, namely diagnosis.

The most representative source for diagnosis is the so-called handbook *Sakikkû*, “Symptoms”. The series has been edited first by René Labat (1951), but the text has been improved consistently over the years, mainly thanks to Nils Heeßel (2000), who provided new textual editions of selected tablets also a first comprehensive study on the handbook, and JoAnn Scurlock (2014), who offered an updated, almost complete English translation of *Sakikkû* and other relevant medical sources. The handbook consists of 40 chapters distributed in 6 different thematic sub-series. Among these, the last subseries, *šumma ālittu arātma* (tablets 36-40), is quite fragmentary and, together with its position in the economy of *Sakikkû*, has been labelled so far generally as a collection of medical prescriptions regarding woman and child. As a matter of fact, the sub-series has never been considered in its entirety: even specific studies have been focused on diagnostic omens concerning either women (Stol 2000) or children (e.g., Cadelli 1997, Couto Ferreira 2017).

**Strahil Panayotov**

**“Pros and Cons of Mesopotamian Eye Disease Texts”**

Babylonian therapeutic practices and drugs for healing eye ailments had a great success in the ancient world. Babylonian remedies were acculturated into other ancient medical systems in a variety of regional languages, including Aramaic, Syriac, Egyptian, Hittite, Greek, and Latin. For now, the largest corpus of Babylonian Eye Disease Texts is the second chapter of the Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia (7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), which is arguably the best preserved and systematically standardized collection of medical treatises (series) from the ancient world, prior to the Hippocratic Corpus and Galen. While the heterogeneous Hippocratic Corpus comprised dozens of individual treatises collected over several centuries, the cuneiform tablets of the Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia are original manuscripts, which were edited within a short period of time by a team of expert scholars, who incorporated sources from all of Mesopotamia that can be traced back to the Middle Babylonian period.

Although, there is abundant evidence of Babylonian medical acculturation, structure and serialization of Babylonian eye disease texts, the technical nature of cuneiform medicine is highly laconic and often seemingly impossible to grasp from modern perspective. There is a conundrum: how was it possible to heal eye disease with laconic practices recorded in cuneiform texts? The present paper will discuss this issue and the pros and cons of cuneiform medical texts on eye disease vis-à-vis medical theory and practice.

**JoAnn Scurlock**

**The Effectiveness of Ancient Mesopotamian Medical Practices: The Example of *kurkānu*-turmeric**

It is conventional wisdom in American medicine that plants are either a) poisonous or b) useless for any medical purpose or c) both at the same time. Cutting edge pharmacological research in the United States is in the field of designer drugs and genetic modification experiments. Meanwhile in Asia and the so-called third world where it is increasingly impossible to afford the exorbitant cost of the medicine produced (and “tested”) by the big drug companies, what is truly cutting edge research is being performed on plants that can be grown locally at minimal cost. What is emerging from these studies is the realization that traditional herbal medicines “really” do work and, in the process of understanding how they work, manifold new discoveries have been made. For the most

part, Ancient Mesopotamia has been shut out of this exciting new field of medicine due to the fact that we do not know the modern equivalents of most of the plants. However, there are exceptions, words with secure etymological connections to known Aramaic and Arabic plant names. In an article now in publication, I was able to present in great detail what modern experiments can tell us about *šūšu*. In this paper, we shall examine a few uses of *kurkānu*.

#### Chalendar Véréne

##### **Hématite et magnétite dans les pratiques thérapeutiques mésopotamiennes**

La pierre *šadānu* est particulièrement bien attestée dans les textes thérapeutiques mésopotamiens. Sur un total de 115 mentions de ce minéral dans la documentation cunéiforme, M. Melein (2018) recense 98 attestations dans le corpus médico-magique. Utilisée sous plusieurs formes : portée en amulettes ou entrant dans la réalisation de recettes plus complexes, elle pouvait être indiquée dans le soin de multiples tableaux cliniques. Cette communication se propose d'étudier les utilisations thérapeutiques de cet ingrédient minéral en lien avec sa symbolique telle qu'elle nous apparaît par les entrées dans *Urs-ra = ħubullu* ou encore par le texte du *Lugal-e*.

#### Simkó Krisztián

##### **Make a string of amulet stones? Evidence from an unpublished Late Babylonian tablet.**

The corpus of amulet stone lists is a varied group of texts, encompassing all kinds of sources from simple inventories to multi-column tablets, and with a clear focus on the magico-medical importance of the discussed materials. Ranging from basic physiological problems like headache to complex issues with the social standing or religious affairs of the patient, the possible uses of stones are described in great detail. In addition, these sources unequivocally attest to a custom, according to which not a single piece, but a well-defined group of different stone types was employed for any given magico-medical problem. As for the technological aspect of how such strings of amulet stones were created, the information comes from standardized descriptions provided by sources, which always list the necessary stones first. In the case of more detailed texts, references to the cord type, the making of small pouches or leather bags and the ritual context are also included.

The presentation will centre around an incantation, which is known only from an unpublished Late Babylonian tablet. Even though this small tablet does not have a colophon, indirect evidence clearly suggests that it represents an excerpt from a longer collection that contained not only the basic information about the necessary amulet stones, but also references to the corresponding ritual context, including the incantations to be recited over the finished strings. As one such incantation of the consecratory type, our text can be used to infer hitherto unknown details about the techniques surrounding the preparation and, to a lesser degree, application of strings. The presentation will thus demonstrate that, apart from a remotely comparable Sumerian spell known from a collection of prescriptions and incantations against the neck disease *gu<sub>2</sub> gig-ga*, this incantation is one of the most important sources we have to date for studying the technological aspect of string making.

#### Mark Geller

##### **Notes from the desk of an Assur apothecary.**

The text of BAM 1 has been thoroughly commented upon but never translated. Wrestling with the meanings, behind this unusual catalogue of drug lore leads to some surprising results.

#### Bácskay András

##### **Six glosses in six manuscripts of one therapeutic prescription. A case study.**

The aim of this paper is to provide a case study of my on-going research on glosses and embedded variants attested in therapeutic text corpus. The presented therapeutic prescription is preserved on six clay tablets from different Assyrian and Babylonian scientific libraries which have been kept in tablet collections of four different Museums (British Museum, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Metropolitan Museum and Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire). Through the example of the presented text I would like to demonstrate the methodology of the research and present some preliminary results.

#### Rumor Maddalena

##### **"Dreck-, Deck-, or What the Heck? – Puzzling *materia medica* in Mesopotamia"**

Babylonian and other ancient medical traditions display a fair amount of medical ingredients with names that suggest they are made of foul substances, such as animal body parts or excremental products, the purpose of which is often unintelligible to the modern reader. Such ingredients are generally classified by Assyriologists as *Dreckapotheke*, implying a literal interpretation of the substances, but in some cases their names clearly refer to medicinal, and in no way "Dreck", plants. Furthermore, their pairing with less puzzling, if not *normal, materia medica* in the pharmacological list Uruanna has sparked curiosity as to their exact function in Babylonian medicine. Various suggestions have been proffered, ranging from their serving as *secret* or *coded* names (*Decknamen* theory – Köcher 1995) to their originating from *popular* or even *alternative* names, yet none seems

conclusive. What do we make of these strange names and their (sometimes seemingly appalling) presence in ancient therapy? Our appreciation of Mesopotamian pharmacology, and ancient medicine in general, would benefit from a better understanding of this still obscure area. In this paper I will return to this topic by re-examining and reflecting on Köcher's *Decknamen* theory while trying to reframe and place it in a wider historical context.

**Robert Hawley**

**“On the Canaanite and Aramaic glosses in Uruanna”.**

Alongside *Šammu šikinšu* and the so-called *Vade mecum* (BAM 1), a third major Assyrian pharmacological treatise, known by its incipit as “URU.AN.NA = *maštaka*”, has been the subject of much recent work. Within the framework of a recent European-funded project, JoAnn Scurlock and Jeanette Fincke have prepared a new critical edition of the text, based on the full collation of the known manuscripts, and the time thus is now right for launching some adjacent inquiries. Among the curious features of this series, already attested in the Middle Assyrian period but nevertheless best known from 1<sup>st</sup> millennium witnesses, is the set of glosses for various plant names, to the effect that a given plant is known as such-and-such “in Canaanite”, “in Aramaic” or “in Subarian” (to cite just a few examples). This paper presents a preliminary overview of these glosses, with some reflections on their socio-linguistic background.

**Ulrike Steinert**

**Healing substances in Mesopotamian women's health care texts: properties, effects and cultural meanings**

Medical historians and anthropologists suggest that there is an intimate relationship in folk medical traditions and in ancient medical systems, between concepts of the body and disease processes on the one hand, and therapeutic substances, their preparation and application on the other. This paper analyses such patterns of interrelation in the corpus of Mesopotamian women's health care texts of the first millennium BCE. In particular, it is argued that Mesopotamian healers chose particular ingredients and applied them in particular types of therapy on the basis on their understanding and knowledge about the ingredients' properties and effects, which were perceived to interact with and exert an impact on the patient's body. The contribution will present case studies illustrating recurring principles of this dynamic interaction between the body and healing substances, such as *like cures like* (*similia similibus curentur*), *curing through opposites*, and well as examples of ingredients with cultural connotations or associations that determined their choice in particular medical contexts (e.g. fertility, childbirth).

**Troels Pank Arbøll**

**Practice Makes Perfect: The Career of a Neo-Assyrian Healer.**

The family of the exorcist Kišir-Aššur from the so-called “Haus des Beschwörungspriesters” in Assur has left us a remarkable collection of magico-medical texts. Not only does this collection form the basis for much of our knowledge about Neo-Assyrian healing outside the Nineveh libraries, but many tablets also provide detailed information about individual family members via their colophons. Especially the numerous texts with Kišir-Aššur's name form a coherent group of manuscripts. My dissertation, *Medicine in Ancient Assur: A Microhistorical Study of the Neo-Assyrian Healer Kišir-Aššur*, provides the first detailed analysis of a single exorcist's education and practice in ancient Mesopotamia. By analyzing 66 texts securely assigned to Kišir-Aššur and allocated to six specific phases of his career, ranging from “junior apprentice” (*šamallū šeḫru*) to “exorcist of the Aššur temple” (*mašmaš bīt Aššur*), the study investigates how Kišir-Aššur was educated, how he practiced his craft, and how he produced and organized his knowledge. This paper will outline the background and framework of the dissertation in order to investigate Kišir-Aššur's individual career phases. I will examine specific texts from each phase to discuss his education and practice, as well as consider his training in, for example, diagnostics, anatomy, and physiology.

**Irene Sibbing-Plantholt**

**The Goddess and the Snake Charmer: A Survey of the Mesopotamian Medical Marketplace based on the Relationship between Healing Deities and (Non-)Scholarly Healers.**

In the last few decades, historians of medicine have shifted their focus from looking at medicine as a science to approaching it “from below” and as a social system consisting of relationships between healers and their patients. In the context of ancient Mesopotamia, such a study seems unfeasible because of the lack of textual sources that would allow a reconstruction of the social and daily life aspects of medicine. One aspect of Mesopotamian society that is poorly understood is the medical marketplace at large, i.e. the various options that were available to those in need of healing. There are two potent strategies that can provide a unique glimpse in this opaque medical marketplace: 1) studying the divine representations of healing, who can be perceived as exemplary models that gave meaning to actions and particular elements of society, in particular illness and medical practice;

and 2) letting the scant textual evidence for non-scholarly healers interact with archaeological and iconographical sources, and cross-cultural evidence.

In this talk, these two approaches will be combined in order to shed light on the patients' responses to illness and the different kinds of healers they could consult. Firstly, the origins of the different healing deities will be discussed. Mesopotamian healing deities, including the goddesses who usually are treated as one (Gula/Meme, Ninkarrak, Ninisina, Bau and Nintinuga), are all distinct from each other in place of origin, primary role, when and how they first were clearly associated with healing, and how they relate to mundane healing practices and specialties. Some of them (in particular Gula) became the divine model for scholarly healers, who legitimized themselves by posing as their human parallels and the recipients of their divine wisdom and knowledge. Through this, they were able to distinguish themselves from other, non-scholarly healers, to whom they worked side by side - and against - in the medical market place. But healing deities could embody both scholarly and non-scholarly healers, as they also represent a medical knowledge and practice that is older than constructed pantheons and scholarly medicine.

This indigenous medical knowledge and related healing specialties will be explored through the origins of the healing deities in conjunction with the analysis of such an ancient craft: snake charming. The *mušlahḫū*, "snake charmer", is only rarely mentioned in texts. Nevertheless, this talk will demonstrate that he was a significant healer whose skills, which were reflected in the divine world, were essential for the maintenance of health in ancient Mesopotamia. This new understanding of the qualities of the individual healing deities and the related practice and position of *mušlahḫū* in the medical market place contributes to the general understanding the otherwise impermeable social history of Mesopotamian medicine.

#### **Martin Worthington**

##### **Investigating *lil*-demons**

A recently completed book project led me, via the word *līlāti*, to the family of *lil*-demons (*lilū*, *lilitu*, etc). Though there are many perceptive comments on this group in scholarly literature, there has never been a detailed treatment of them, and a number of questions and ideas about them remain largely unexplored. To do so is my current research project, and in this paper I will present some of my results so far. In particular, I will propose a new solution to a problem of gender (failed gender polarity) in the Diagnostic Handbook, and unravel links between *lil*-demons and *Ištar* (and *Dumuzi*). I also explore issues of circulation and standardisation of knowledge: there appears to have been more 'systematic theology' surrounding *lil*-demons than is apparent on the surface of the sources.