

## Male Doctors and Female Patients

M. J. Geller

The study of Babylonian gynaecology still awaits a comprehensive edition of relevant texts, although a forthcoming volume from Ulrike Steinert on women's diseases promises to fill this vital gap in our knowledge of ancient Babylonian medicine.<sup>1</sup> Recent publications by Paul Potter of a number of treatises on women in the Loeb Classical Library<sup>2</sup> add significantly to our general background knowledge of gynaecology in roughly the same period as the Akkadian texts. One cannot help but notice in these Greek texts the paucity of references to any theory of humours or bloodletting, the two signature topics of Greek medicine, as well as the fact that passages in Greek gynaecology often resemble the *Listenwissenschaften*-format typical of Akkadian texts from the same period.<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, one tablet copied by O. R. Gurney and published in 1973 has attracted particular attention, since it was edited a decade later, in 1982 by Erica Reiner, in honour of Gurney on his 70th birthday.<sup>4</sup> Reiner's edition was authoritative enough to be followed in all later editions and translations of this text.<sup>5</sup>

While Gurney described this tablet as prescriptions for facilitating childbirth, Reiner understood the text as a series of pregnancy tests, while pointing to Egyptian parallels likely to have influenced Hippocratic sources on pregnancy in relation to women's diseases. The difficulty is that not only are Egyptian sources are much older than any Hippocratic parallels,

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<sup>1</sup> The transliteration of this tablet is provisional, awaiting the eventual publication of photos which will allow for collations. The present edition, however, has profited from reading the text with the online NinMed group and especially from critical comments, additional information, and astute corrections from Gilles Buisson, in his crucial role as editor of the JMC; he also to be credited for bringing to my attention many of selections from the Hippocratic corpus cited in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Potter *Hippocrates* IX [2010], X [2012], XI [2018], as well as the French edition of *Nature of Women* edited in Bourbon 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Florence Bourbon remarks that the Hippocratic treatises *Nature of Women* and *Diseases of Women* “a conservé du matériel ancien, et des noms d’ingrédients rarement cités dans la *Collection hippocratique*” (Bourbon 2008: xlii), [ref. courtesy G. Buisson]. She also remarks (ibid.) that the treatise *Nature of Women* may be the oldest of these treatises.

<sup>4</sup> Reiner 1982. While pointing out interesting parallels in other literatures, Reiner's edition was preliminary, possibly because by this time Edmond Sollberger had decided to send all published UET VII tablets in the British Museum back to Baghdad without recording any excavation numbers or photographing any of the tablets, making collating these tablets virtually impossible, from that time until now.

<sup>5</sup> See Scurlock 2014: 582-585, Böck 2010: 110, and Steinert (forthcoming). Any proposed edition of this text (including this one) continues to be provisional in the without means of collating or viewing photos of the tablet.

but there is little evidence that Egyptian medical texts from the second millennium were still current in later periods, nor is there smoking gun evidence of Egyptian influence over Hippocratic medical writings. Hippocratic and Babylonian medicine, on the other hand, are roughly contemporary and display numerous common features.<sup>6</sup> Some specific parallels between UET 7, 123 and Hippocratic treatises on the *Diseases of Women* have already been proposed,<sup>7</sup> but other problems remain to be solved in this important text.

## UET 7 123

- 1 [mal-tak-ta-šú PEŠ<sub>4</sub> ki-i NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub> 1 GÍN útar-muš] 1/2 GÍN Ú BABBAR 4-tú<sup>na4</sup> gab-u  
 2 [mi-šir-a-a ina sigÀKA ana ŠÀ.T]ÛR-šá GAR-an mu-šú gab-bi  
 3 [ÍL-ši-ma ina GEŠ]TIN-nu BABBAR LUH-si ki-<sup>r</sup>i sig<sup>1</sup>ÀKA SA<sub>5</sub>-at lu MÚD ul-lu-ha-tú  
 4 [MUNUS.BI PEŠ<sub>4</sub> k]i-i sigÀKA ši-i SIG<sub>7</sub>-at MUNUS.BI NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub> ki-i lib-bi ŠÀ<sup>!</sup>.TÙR-šú  
 5 [ši-ru]<sup>?</sup>-šú ki pi-it GÌR u-ši GUR<sup>!</sup>-ma dul-la-šá e-pu-uš šip-ru-šú  
 6 [NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub>] maš-qit NAG-šú ki-<-i> É GIŠ.NÁ-su IGI maš-šit in-na-áš-šú GÚR.GÚR  
 7 LI HAR.HAR NU.LUH.HA u ILLU <sup>r</sup>LI<.TAR> [1-š]ú 2-šú 3-šú NAG ù BURU<sub>8</sub>-šú PEŠ<sub>4</sub>
- 
- 8 DIŠ KI.MIN A SULLIM<sup>sar</sup> ina sigÀKA NIGIN-mi ana [ŠÀ.T]ÛR-šá GAR 3-UD ÍL-<sup>r</sup>ši<sup>1</sup>-ma  
 9 šum<sub>4</sub>-ma SULLIM<sup>sar</sup> GIM ŠEŠ ib-tar-rum MUNUS.BI PEŠ<sub>4</sub>
- 
- 10 DIŠ KI.MIN Ú.BABBAR NAGA.SI ina sigÀKA NIGIN-mi ana ŠÀ.TÙR-šá GAR 3-UD ÍL-ma  
 11 ina šal-šú u<sub>4</sub>-me sigÀKA ina A LUH-si šum<sub>4</sub>-ma sigÀKA [SA<sub>5</sub> MUNUS.BI PEŠ<sub>4</sub>]

<sup>6</sup> See however the counter arguments in Asper 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See Geller 2021. Detailed comparisons are particularly apt in women's medicine, such as the description, 'let them dribble the milk of a woman who is nursing a male child' (*gala gunaikos kourotrophon*, *Diseases of Women* 2 340 = Potter 2018: 376-377), which reflects a similar instruction in Akkadian medical texts, see Schmidtchen 2021: 34, 37, reading GA<sup>!</sup> ZÚG-ti šá ma-[ra] Û.TU, 'milk of an unclean woman who have birth to a son'. The reading is based upon ND 4368, copied by J. Kinnier Wilson in Iraq 18, pl. XXV and recopied in CTN 4, 72 (Wiseman/Black 1996: pl. 43). The reading ma-<sup>r</sup>ra<sup>1</sup> is somewhat problematic, although the damaged ra-sign (with traces visible in the eBL photograph) may be written over an erasure.

12 *šum<sub>4</sub>-ma* <sup>sig</sup>ÀKA SIG<sub>7</sub>-*ruq-tú* MUNUS.BI [NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub>]

13 DIŠ KI.MIN <sup>na4</sup>*gab-u mi-šir-a-a* GA[BA.LÀL *ana ŠÁ.TÙR-šá* GAR *šum<sub>4</sub>-ma*]

14 <sup>1</sup>GIM<sup>1</sup> *a-lap me* IGI.IGI MUNUS.BI [PEŠ<sub>4</sub> .....

15 [L]I NAGA.SI' PÈŠ [..... MUNUS.BI NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub>]

rev.

1' [.....] x <sup>1</sup>SIKIL *zu-ut<sup>1</sup>* x [.....]

2' [<sup>4</sup>nu.mu].un.gi *is-sa-nu* [.....]

3' [*mim-m*]a NU SUM-su 1 NINDA GÚR.GÚR SIG<sub>7</sub> *k[ab-ba-r]a* NINDA *sah-lé-[e .....*]

4' 2.<sup>1</sup>TA<sup>1</sup>.ÀM BÍL *ina* A LAG *tu-kap-par<sub>5</sub>* GABA.LÀL Ì *hal-ša ta-sal-làh-ma ma-<sup>1</sup>áš-š<sup>1</sup>-tu<sup>1</sup>*

5' 1-šú 2-šú 3-šú *ana ŠÀ.TÙR-šá* GAR-*an* NITA-šú NU TE-šú *a-di* UD.2.KÁM EGIR *šá iz-zi-zu*

6' *mim-ma gáb-bi* NU SUM-su *šá qer-bit-si* ZI-hu u <sup>mi</sup>ŠÀ.ZU LÁ-šú *mál-tak-ta-šú*

7' *ki-i* PEŠ<sub>4</sub> u *ki-i* NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub> <sup>4</sup>ú-sa-pu *ina* IZI BÍL *a-na di-ik-me-en-na* GUR-ru

8' *ina* Ì *hal-ša* BÍL SÚD *tu-lam lu* *ina* A *tu-kap-par<sub>5</sub>* *ana maš-šit* DÙ-uš *ma-la* BURU<sub>14</sub>-tú

9' *ta-máš-ši* *ki-i* ŠURUN-su *sah-pu-ma ta-at-tar-šu-uš* u *maš-šit šá* GÚR.GÚR SIG<sub>7</sub>

10' *kab-ba-ra šá iṭ-pu-pu ta-ad-da-áš-šum-ma iz-zi-zu maš-šit an<-ni>-ta*

11' SUM-šum-ma ÍL-š<sup>i</sup> *ki-i* ŠURUN-su *maš-šit i-man-za-qu* u *ina* IGI A.MEŠ  
*ta-at-tam-ha-hu*

12' [MUNUS.B]I PEŠ<sub>4</sub> *ki-i maš-šit bal-ṭa-tú* u *ru-bu-us-su la <i->man-za-qu ul* PEŠ<sub>4</sub>

13' [*ru-bu-u*]s-su *na-di* BAD-e *ki-i la sah-pa maš-šit šá* GÚR.GÚR SIG<sub>7</sub> *kab-ba-ra*

14' [*šá iṭ-pu-pu š*]u-a-tú SUM-su u [*mal-ta*]k-tú *ta-lat-tak* GABA.RI 1-en <sup>giš</sup>DA

15' [..... <sup>m</sup>Ga-húl-<sup>d</sup>T]U.TU<sup>8</sup> ZI-hi

<sup>8</sup> The name is restored courtesy of Ulrike Steinert.

**TRANSLATION**

- 1 [His test for (ability to) be pregnant or not pregnant]: you place [1 shekel of *tarmuš*], half a shekel of white plant, a quarter (shekel) of [Egyptian] alum, [on a wad of wool] into her vagina. [She wears it (for) the entire night, and *she washes (herself)* in white wine. When a wad is red or spotted with blood, that woman may get pregnant]. When that wad is green, that woman may not get pregnant. When from her uterus (*libbi šasūrrišu*)
- 5 her [flesh]<sup>2</sup> protrudes like a breach birth (lit. foot-opener), turn it back and do the procedure for her; her condition --
- [not (able to get) pregnant]. Give her the potion to drink. When *she sees her bedroom* -- a tampon is to be worn by her,
- you have her drink *kukru*, juniper, thyme, *nuhurtu*, *abukkatu*-resin and you have her vomit -- (ability to get) pregnant.

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Alternatively, you wrap juice of *šambaliltu* in a wad, you insert into her vagina, she wears it for 3 days.

If the *šambaliltu* becomes multicoloured like *murru* (bitter)-plant, that woman is (able to get) pregnant.

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- 10 Alternatively, you wrap white plant and horned alkali in a wad and insert into her vagina. She wears it for 3 days,
- on the 3rd day, you wash the wad. If the wad [is red, that woman can get pregnant], if the wad is (the colour) green, that woman [is not (able to get) pregnant].

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Alternatively, [you insert] Egyptian alum and wax [into her vagina, if] it looks like seaweed, that woman is [(able to get) pregnant .....]

juniper, alkali, fig, [..... that woman is not (able to get) pregnant]

rev.

- 1' [.....]. *sikillu*, exudation of [.....]
- 2' thorn-bush, Dilmun dates [.....]
- 3' whatever is not to be provided for her. 1 *aklu* of fresh thick *kukru*, an *aklu* of

*sahlû* [.....],

- 4' you roast two each, you wipe (them) down in muddy water, you sprinkle wax,  
pressed oil and
- 5' once, twice, three times you insert a *tampon* into her vagina. Her man should not  
have sex with her until two days after that (the tampon) has been in place.
- 6' Nothing whatever is to be provided for her. That which is inside her is to be  
removed and the midwife is to take note of it. Her test
- 7' for when (able to get) pregnant or not pregnant. Roast the *usabu*-plant (hyssop)  
over a fire and turn it into ashes.
- 8' You roast in pressed oil, you pound, you soften or you wipe in liquid, you make (it)  
into a tampon, as much as is sufficient
- 9' you use. When her muck is overflowing, you stretch her out and a tampon of fresh
- 10' thick *kukru* which is saturated you give to her, and it will be in place. That tampon
- 11' you give to her and have her wear it. When the tampon absorbs her muck and you  
can dissolve it (the muck) in the surface of water,
- 12' that [woman] can get pregnant. When the tampon is fresh but does not absorb her  
muck, she may not get pregnant.
- 13' Her muck being openly excreted -- when not overflowing, the tampon of fresh thick  
*kukru* --
- 14' [which is saturated] -- give that to her and you perform the test. A copy from a writing  
board.
- 
- 15' [Tablet which ... Gahul]-Marduk extracted.

#### Notes on the text:

1 *mal-tak-ta-šú ki-i* PEŠ<sub>4</sub> *ki-i* NU PEŠ<sub>4</sub>: This incipit is restored from rev. l. 6'-7', which is exceptionally not written as the start of a new section, one of the puzzling features of this tablet (see below). The restoration is confirmed by a similar line in BM 42313+, which reads (in l. 29), *ana maš-tak-ti* [MUNUS] [NU] [*e-ri*]-*i*, 'for a test that a woman may not become pregnant' (see Scurlock/Andersen 2005: 262). Note that this phrase in the LB parallel is at the beginning of a new line but without a ruling indicating a new section.

The 'test' in this context is not clinical but theoretical, with parallel views of potential for pregnancy in Hippocratic aphorisms:

Women do not conceive who have the womb dense and cold; those who have the womb watery do not conceive, for the seed is drowned; those who have the womb over-dry and very hot do not conceive, for the seed perishes through lack of nourishment. But those whose temperament is a just blend of the two extremes prove able to conceive. (*Aphorisms* V, Jones 1943: 175)

There is an important parallel in the Hippocratic *Nature of Women*, which introduces a *peirētērion*, translated by Potter as a 'test for fertility'.<sup>9</sup> Potter's translation of 'test for fertility' is overly ambitious,<sup>10</sup> since the idea of a 'fertility' test is a modern construct, based on advanced technology, far beyond the experience of an ancient physician. The same applies to a similar label in the Hippocratic treatise on *Barrenness*: *peirētēria ei kuēsei*, translated by Potter as 'tests whether a woman will become pregnant', which is another instance of an observation rather than a 'test', since the instruction calls for feeding the woman butter and mother's milk to determine the result (Potter 2012: 339). In any case, the basic meaning of *peirētērion* in Hippocratic contexts resembles the semantics of Akk. *maltaktu*, 'test'.

The Hippocratic *peirētērion* and the use of 'pessaries' (*prostheta*)<sup>11</sup> in *Nature of Women* follow immediately upon two instructions, *ēn boulē gunaika kuēsai*, and *ēn boulē egkuon poiēsai*, 'if you want a woman to become pregnant' and 'if you want to make a woman fertile' (Potter 2012: 300-301, Bourbon 2008: 80-81). The distinction, however, is between two key terms, *kuēō*, 'to conceive' and *egkuopoieō*, 'to impregnate', but not between becoming pregnant and fertile, as translated by Potter.<sup>12</sup> In effect, the Greek texts conform to the Babylonian views of whether a woman *potentially* can or cannot become pregnant, in the same way that Akkadian prognostics (in the *Diagnostic Handbook*) predict whether a person may (potentially) die or survive an illness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The term (a variant of *peiratērion*), is an 'ordeal', related to *peiraō*, 'to attempt, try' and the noun *peira* 'trial, attempt'.

<sup>10</sup> Potter 2012: 303, but see also Bourbon 2008: 81, translating *peirētērion* simply as 'test'.

<sup>11</sup> Translated in Bourbon 2008: 82 as 'applications', and *ibid.* 81 n. 1, contrasting *prostheton* with *pessos*, another term for pessary. Potter's translation, however, remains preferable.

<sup>12</sup> See Bourbon 2008: 80-81, 'si vous voulez qu'il y ait une grossesse' and 'si vous voulez qu'une femme puisse engendrer', which is not the same as 'fertility'.

<sup>13</sup> An indication of the similarity between Greek and Akkadian prognoses appears in the Hippocratic *Nature of Women* (Potter 2012: 210-211), commenting on an acute condition involving fever, numbness, pain, and thirst. The text then notes, 'if this disease befalls a woman who is pregnant (*ēn men kuousē epigenētai*), she will die, but if she is not pregnant, with care she recovers.'

2 [mi-šir-a-a]: Restored after l. 13. Egyptian alum is to be inserted into the vagina using a 'wad' of wool (*itqu*), which resembles prescriptions for 'pessaries' (*prostheta*) in the Hippocratic *Nature of Women*, with one instruction reading: 'Another: enclose Egyptian alum in a piece of wool and apply,' (Potter 2012: 302-303). Egyptian alum is mentioned six other times as an ingredient in Hippocratic treatises on women (information courtesy G. Buisson): *Superfetation* (Potter 2010: 349, 351), and *Diseases of Women I* (Potter 2018: 65, 135, 175, 189).

3 [GEŠ]TIN-*nu* BABBAR LUH-*si*: Although the reading GEŠTIN-*nu* for *karānu* 'wine' is not secure, there is a parallel to this procedure of 'washing' in white wine in the Hippocratic *Diseases of Women 1*, referring to rinsing the uterus:

Potter 2018: 143, 'irrigate (*kluzein*) with warm white wine'.

Potter 2018: 145, irrigate (*kluzein*) at once with new wine boiled down.

Potter 2018: 169, 'have the patient irrigate herself (*proskluzesthō*) with wine'.

Since the logogram LUH-*si* in the Akkadian context is ambiguous, it is perfectly possible that the woman washes herself in order to cleanse her uterus.

*aklu*: a small measure, see AHW 26.

4 SIG<sub>7</sub>-*at*: The form indicates that *itqu* 'wad' is a fem. noun in this text. The colour 'green' indicating not becoming pregnant contrasts with the Hippocratic statement that, 'when a woman is pregnant, she will take on a general green color' (*Diseases of Women 1*, Potter 2018: 81), although this refers to the woman's body and not to a tampon.<sup>14</sup> In another passage of this same treatise, however, the physician tests to see if the woman's menstrual blood, poured onto sand, turns green when dried, indicating that her discharge contains bile and can indicate whether she can become pregnant (*Diseases of Women 1*, Potter 2018: 65).

ŠÀ<sup>1</sup>.TÜR-šú: 'her vagina' is written with PEŠ<sub>4</sub>(ŠÀxA) instead of ŠÀ, which is either an error or a clever graphic pun, perhaps indicating the womb in which semen (A) is already present.

<sup>14</sup> The translation of colours in both the Akkadian and Greek texts is somewhat arbitrary, since Gr. *xlōros* can indicate a yellow colour, as well as green, as is the case with the corresponding Akkadian term. Florence Bourbon draws attention to this problem within Hippocratic texts, remarking that 'L'adjectif *χλωρός* désigne à l'origine le vert des premières feuilles d'une plante, puis le gris pâle d'un visage humain marqué par l'effroi' (Bourdon 2008: 212, n. 3) [ref. courtesy G. Buisson]. The relevance of this observation for the present context is that a pallid or pale complexion may indicate a clinical sign of pregnancy (e.g. from anaemia). Although the Akkadian text refers to the colour of the tampon rather than the woman's physical appearance, the colour of the tampon may reflect the patient's pallor.

5 [šī-ru]<sup>2</sup>-šú ki pi-it GÌR u-ši: This is a reference to a prolapse of the womb, a theme found in the corresponding Hippocratic treatises on women, with the point being here that the prolapse resembles a breach birth, in which the foetus's foot appears instead of its head. That the Akkadian text is referring to a prolapse of the vagina is supported by Hippocratic references to this same phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

If a woman's uterus comes forwards out of its natural position (*Barrenness*, Potter 2012: 391)  
 If a woman's uterus advances and moves outside (*Nature of Women*, Potter 2012: 197)  
 If a woman's uterus moves away from its natural position to the outside (*Diseases of Women 2*, Potter 2018: 353)  
 If a woman's uterus falls completely out of her vagina, it will hang there like a scrotum (*ibid.* 353)  
 If the mouth of a woman's uterus<sup>16</sup> projects out of her vagina (*ibid.* 357)  
 If the uterus prolapses (*ibid.* 357)

GUR-*ma*: for Akk. *tāru*, reinserting the prolapse into the vagina. That this is the case is supported by evidence from Hippocratic instructions for prolapse of the uterus:

Replace the uterus with your hand, and after binding the patient's legs together in a crossed position, leave her for a day and a night like this (*Nature of Women*, Potter 2012: 199)  
 If the uterus moves out of the genitalia completely, it will be suspended like a scrotum, and cause pain.... When the case is such, apply cold compresses to her genitalia: clean the part outside by washing it with pomegranate peel boiled in strong dark wine, and then press it back inside (*Barrenness*, Potter 2012: 393)  
 Press the uterus gently back in (referring to a prolapse, *Diseases of Women 2*, Potter 2018: 359)

*dul-la-šá e-pu-uš šip-ru-šú*: The last word is read by Reiner (1982: 134) as *me-ru-šú*, 'her pregnancy (?)', although the term *mērû* is usually written indicating the vowel length (cf. CAD M/2 27). For the meaning of *šipru* in this context, see CAD Š/3 84.

6 *ki<-i> É.GIŠ.NÁ-su IGI*: The readings of these signs require collation but reflect Gurney's hand copy, although the signs were not read by Reiner (1982: 134) or Scurlock (2014: 582). The literal meaning would be, 'when she sees her bedroom', with an unusual *-su* suffix personal pronoun, with the meaning being that she wears the tampon before or after indulging in intercourse. The idea behind this reading is that the 'bedroom' is a euphemism for conjugal sex, possibly based upon an Aramaic calque known from literary Targumic Aramaic, in which *byt mškb* 'bedroom' is a euphemism for sex (Targum on Leviticus 20: 15 variant, see the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* s.v. *byt mškb*). Conjugal sex is frequently mentioned in the

<sup>15</sup> References courtesy G. Buisson.

<sup>16</sup> See BAM 240, 8' (Scurlock 2014: 609), referring to the 'opening of her womb' <sup>1</sup>KA<sub>2</sub> ŠA<sub>3</sub>.TUR<sub>3</sub>-š<sub>a</sub><sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup> [ref. court. G. Buisson].



corresponding Hippocratic texts, such as the following, which combines the use of a tampon and sex:

If you want a woman to become pregnant, first clean her and her uterus; then have her drink undiluted wine, and apply a suppository of red soda, cumin, and resin soaked in honey and wrapped in a piece of linen. When fluid runs out (scil. from her vagina), the woman should employ black pessaries as an emollient, and have intercourse with her husband. (*Diseases of Women* 1, Potter 2018: 229)

9 *šum<sub>4</sub>-ma*: This use of 'if' in syllabic form (also in l. 12) usually occurs in medical prescriptions as an explanatory clause, but in this text it clearly contrasts with the use of *ki-i* 'when' throughout the remainder of this text, and the semantic distinction between 'if' and 'when' in this text must be understood as intentional.

14 *a-lap me*: seaweed is used as an ingredient of Hippocratic pessaries to 'clean the uterus', in a listing of therapies which is reminiscent of Babylonian *Listenwissenschaften*:

'Or boil honey, butter, rushes, fragrant reeds, and seaweed (*bruon thalassion*) in wine, filter it off, and flush with this' (*Diseases of Women* 1, Potter 2018: 202-203)<sup>17</sup>

Rev. 2' [<sup>4</sup>nu.mu].un.gi *is-sa-nu*: The first plant is an unusual syllabic writing for the logogram <sup>4</sup>numun.gi (= *baltu*, 'thorn'), while the second plant is a late orthography for the common ingredient *asnû*, 'Dilmun dates' (see CAD A/2 338).

3' [*mim-m*]a NU SUM-*su* (also in l. 6' and 14'). The form with suffix -*su* may reflect a LB orthography of the verb *nadānu*, as reflected in von Soden, GAG §102, 1 (AnOr 33 p. 172). It should be noted that this form differs from other appearances of this verbal form with more usual -*šu* suffixes (SUM-*šum-ma* in l. 11' and *ta-ad-da-áš-šum* in l. 10').

One unusual possibility is that, the expression *mimma lā* SUM-*su* may be a calque on an Aramaic root ZWD, which means 'to provide' (food) for someone, which in the present instance would mean that the patient should not eat anything. The form of Aramaic ZWD might explain the -*su* suffix on this verb, in contrast to other instances of *nadānu* in the text, with more general meanings of to 'give' to the patient.

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<sup>17</sup> Seaweed (*bruon thalassion*) is attested in two other Hippocratic treatises, which present similar texts [ref. court. G. Buisson]: 'apply a poultice (*kataplassein*) of thin seaweed.' (*Nature of Women*, Potter 2012: 225). 'Apply a poultice (*kataplassein*) of the kind of seaweed they lay over fish' (*Diseases of Women* I, Potter 2018: 117).

*k[ab-ba-r]a*: restored after ll. 9'-10'. It is difficult to know if traces indicate a sign before NINDA, but this and many other details will only be resolved through collation of the tablet.

4' A LAG: *mē kirbāni*, lit. 'water of a clod (of earth)'.

*ma-<sup>1</sup>áš-šī<sup>1</sup>-tu*: Although the middle two signs do not resemble this reading, the context requires an object to be inserted into the vagina, for which there is no other obvious candidate.

6' *qer-bit-si*: If the final sign is correctly copied and not an error for *-su*, one possible explanation might be vowel harmony for this exceptional form of the suffix pronoun.

7' <sup>u</sup>*ú-sa-pu*: This is a hapax as a plant ingredient, but related to Gr. *hyssop*, which occurs as a medical ingredient in Loeb Hippocrates VI and X (court. P. Potter). The fact that *hyssop* occurs as a medical ingredient indicates the unusual character of this text and that it may show influences from outside the normal repertoire of Akkadian medicine.

8' *ma-la BURU<sub>14</sub>-tú ta-máš-ši*: if the sign BURU<sub>14</sub> as copied by Gurney is correct, it represents a writing of Akk. *erištu*, in the expression *erišta mašú*, lit. 'to reach a sufficient (amount)'. See *Diseases of Women I* (Potter 2018: 125), 'leave an interval of time you think is sufficient for the woman', which comes close to the Akkadian expression.

9' ŠURUN-*su sah-pu-ma*: This expression is key to understanding this entire text. Reiner was the first to translate this logogram as 'womb', which has been followed by subsequent translators, despite the slender evidence upon which this meaning is based. The corresponding Akkadian term is thought to be *rubšu*, which usually refers (except in Mari texts) to either animals or demons, either to their 'lair' or to their dung. The only feeble evidence for 'womb' occurs in a lexical commentary, which gives *re-e-mu* ('womb') = *ru-ub-šu* for Sum. UZU.A.SÌLA.GAR.RA (lit. 'moist flesh consigned to the street'), but in any case *not* corresponding to a logogram ŠURUN. The only other reference cited for the meaning of ŠURUN as 'womb' is our text, UET 7, 123 (see CAD R 395). Scurlock (2014: 583-585) elaborates this meaning by explaining the following term *sahpu* as 'looks abnormal (lit. "has turned over/fallen flat on its face")', probably based upon an incantation in an Akkadian medical text.<sup>18</sup> The meaning of 'lying flat' is possible but hardly plausible in this context, since a

<sup>18</sup> Cf. CAD S 34 citing BAM 574 iv 21 and 26, *irrū suhhuru ze-er karšu u šī riqītu buppāniša sahpat ... riqītu litrus*, the intestines are curled, belly is cramped, and the stomach itself lies flat face down -- let the stomach become straight.'

physician would not know whether the patient's womb was 'lying flat' without some sort of medical instrument or intervention, nor would this necessarily be an indication of an abnormal womb.

The alternative translation given here is based upon the basic meaning of ŠURUN as 'dung', usually corresponding to Akk. *kabūtu* or in this case to *rubšu*.<sup>19</sup> From the point of view of a male physician, vaginal discharge may have been described figuratively as 'muck' (or German *Dreck*), without specifying whether it was primarily bile or phlegm, as in Greek texts. The adjective *sahpu* describing ŠURUN has a basic meaning of 'to cover, overwhelm' (CAD S 30), typically referring to water or flooding, which is another figurative expression for an excessive discharge of fluid from the vagina. Greek Hippocratic texts refer to excessive bile and phlegm, or excessive menstrual flows (Potter 2018: 177, et passim).

It is worth noting that there is the potential for confusion in this text between *rubšu* and *rupuštu*, 'phlegm', since *rupussu* is another possible reading. The argument against this suggestion is that there is no evidence for either U<sub>8</sub> or ŠURUN as a logogram for *rupuštu*, and phlegm is not often identified in Akkadian medicine as a disease vector, unlike in Greek medicine.<sup>20</sup>

*ta-at-tar-šu-uš*: one of the procedures employed in Hippocratic texts is for the patient to lie flat.<sup>21</sup>

10' *maš-šit an<-ni>-ta ... ki-i ŠURUN-su i-man-za-qu u ina IGI A.MEŠ ta-at-tam-ha-hu*: Reiner's translation (1982: 136) assumed that the 'womb' absorbed' (lit. sucked up) the tampon: 'if her womb absorbs the *maššītu* and it dissolves in water,' with Scurlock (2014: 584) following suit with 'if her womb sucks the tampon and it is softened by the waters'. It is hardly possible for the vagina to 'suck in' the tampon, which is then dissolved or softened in water. Much more likely is for the tampon (as subject) to absorb the discharge and then it is tested to see if the results of the test dissolve in water; if so, the woman is pregnant. That this is correct can be seen in another line, *maš-šit šá GÚR.GÚR SIG<sub>7</sub> kab-ba-ra šá iṭ-pu-pu ta-ad-da-áš-šum-ma*, 'you give to her the tampon which the thick fresh *kukru* has saturated (*iṭpupu*)', again indicating

<sup>19</sup> Based upon other references in this text to *rubussu*.

<sup>20</sup> Akkadian texts regularly refer to 'bile' (*martu*) but the Akkadian term for 'phlegm' (*rupuštu*) is difficult to distinguish from saliva and mucus (cf. *illatu* and *ru'tu*).

<sup>21</sup> See Potter 2018: 355 (*Diseases of Women 2*), 'leave the patient reclining and do not give her anything but gruel until seven days have passed' and 'when she wants to go to stool, have her do so in the reclining position.' This refers to prolapse of the uterus.

that the tampon is the subject of these clauses. Another similar clause (l. 12') reads, *ki-i maš-šit bal-ṭa-tú u ru-bu-us-su la <i->man-za-qu*, 'when the tampon is fresh but does not absorb (lit. suck up) her muck (discharge).'

13' *[ru-bu-u]s-su na-di BAD-e ki-i la sah-pa*: This is another crux, not previously understood. Scurlock (2014: 583) reads *na-ṭi-pè-e* but leaves it untranslated. Our translation assumes the descriptive verb *nadû* to refer to normal condition of the discharge being excreted and obvious (lit. open, *petû*) but not overflowing (*sahpu*).

14' *1-en*<sup>gis</sup>DA: This formulation is not typical of colophons referring to a *lê'u*. The use of *ištēn* in this context is intended to indicate the indefinite article, i.e. *a* writing board. While well-attested in Akkadian (CAD I/J 275), this usage is also a common feature of Aramaic syntax, in which *hd'* 'one' is used for this same purpose.

### General comments:

The crucial point is whether the Akkadian text re-edited here represents actual tests for pregnancy (as is usually assumed) or whether more general obstetrics-related questions were being addressed. The idea of a clinical test for pregnancy is modern, based upon advanced technology which was beyond the capabilities of ancient medicine, and in any case the matter of whether a woman was pregnant or not would soon become obvious over time. In this particular instance, comparative studies of medicine have considerable value, since roughly contemporary evidence from Hippocratic medicine engages with similar problems while supplying more detailed contextual information regarding questions of pregnancy. Hippocratic treatises on gynaecology and obstetrics suggest that the main concern was not whether a woman was pregnant, but rather whether she could get pregnant. The following extract from the Hippocratic corpus, *Aphorisms* V (Jones 1943: 175) illustrates this point:

If a woman does not conceive, and you wish to know if she will conceive, cover her round with wraps and burn perfumes underneath. If the smell seems to pass through the body to the mouth and nostrils, be assured that the woman is not barren through her own physical fault.... If menstruation be suppressed, and neither shivering nor fever supervenes, but attacks of nausea occur, you may assume the woman to be with child.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This apparent 'test' for pregnancy is well attested, that an aromatic substance (e.g. perfumes or onion) is held to the woman's vagina to see if the smell can be detected via her mouth, which assumes no internal blockages hindering pregnancy. This, however, hardly qualifies as a test.

In another Hippocratic treatise, the signs that a woman is pregnant are not determined by a specific 'test' but rather by general observation, often based upon a woman's reaction to receiving a drug::

If a woman wishes to know whether she will become pregnant, have her drink finely ground anise in water and go to bed; if she is befallen by itching around her navel, she will become pregnant, but otherwise not. Another: if you do not recognise that a woman is pregnant: if she is pregnant, her eyes will be compressed and more hollow than usual, and their whites will not have the natural whiteness, but be more livid.... Another : grind red ocher and anise very fine, dissolve in water, give (sc. to drink) and let the woman sleep. If colic comes on around her navel, she is pregnant : if this does not happen, she is not.<sup>23</sup>

Note the opening phrase, that a woman wishes to know is she is able to conceive, which is the crucial question involved in these procedures.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the crux distinguishing this translation from that of Erica Reiner's (and those following her) is identification of *rubṣu* as an unpleasant vaginal discharge which is to be absorbed by a tampon, rather than as a hapax-synonym for the womb. This approach is generally in agreement with Hippocratic treatises dealing with the same topic, which also attempt to predict through observational 'tests' whether a woman can conceive or not, as in the following comment on false pregnancies:

If no flux follows, the woman will appear to be pregnant, and when she has intercourse with her husband she will suffer a pain that seems to indicate that some object is lying there. A weight is present in her belly and it protrudes, rising up just as in a woman who is pregnant; she suffers heartburn, particularly after the fiftieth day, and pain from time to time occupies her belly down from the navel, as well as her neck, her groin and her lower back. After two or three months sometimes her menses break out in a mass through the vagina, and what comes out has a fleshy appearance, as if it were from an abortion, and is dark in colour. (*Diseases of Women* 1, Potter 2018: 23).

Unlike our Akkadian text, the Greek passage refers to specific symptoms, but it also refers to having intercourse with her husband as well as a vaginal discharge which might represent a prolapse, all relevant to determining whether a woman can conceive or not. The point of these tests is to most likely to determine whether a woman can get pregnant after having experienced illness, miscarriage, or an aborted birth, rather than as a physical means of determining fertility.

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<sup>23</sup> *Barrenness* (Potter 2012: 341). A similar observation also occurs in another Hippocratic treatise, *Superfetation* (Potter 2010: 329), which is concerned with whether one can predict a stillbirth, based on symptoms of oedema. See also *Aphorisms* V (Jones 1943: 169): 'If you wish to know whether a woman is with child, give her hydromel to drink [without supper] when she is going to sleep. If she has colic in the stomach she is with child, otherwise she is not.'

The overall format and structure of this text is hardly typical for Akkadian medicine. Since the subject in this case is a woman, that already changes matters, as well as the fact that the contents of this text are not recipes for getting pregnant or avoiding pregnancy, but for simply testing whether the subject may be able to get pregnant or not. The incipit has been restored on the basis of ll. 6'-7' on the reverse, 'her test when the woman is either (able to get) pregnant or not (get) pregnant'.<sup>24</sup> The fact that this key phrase introducing the main theme is also found in the middle of a line on the reverse and broken over two lines, rather than appearing as an incipit in its own right, shows that the usual textual formatting does not apply.

The other puzzling feature regards the use of *kî* throughout the text, when the usual formulation in medical texts would be *šumma* 'if'. There are three instances of 'if' clauses on the obverse of the tablet (*šum+ma*), clearly indicating an intentional distinction between clauses with 'if' and those with *kî*, which must mean 'when' rather than 'if'. This distinction is unknown from any other medical recipes or medical texts but must be a deliberate alteration in the meaning of these clauses, as temporal rather than conditional. However, the use of *kî* for 'when' rather than 'if' is a feature of another Semitic language -- Aramaic, which only employs *kî* for 'when' and not for 'if'. It may be relevant that the original text was excerpted by the scribe Gahul-Marduk from a writing board (rev. l. 15'), since the possibility exists that whoever composed this unique text concerning pregnancy was an Aramaic speaker, and that this text is an example of 'code-switching' in which one language may interfere with another, especially in oral contexts. In this way, the original text may have substituted Aramaic terms for Sumerian logograms used in the text, rather than the usual Akkadian equivalents, and the overall logic of the text may reflect that of an Aramaic speaker producing Akkadian technical literature.

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<sup>24</sup> The pronoun *-šú* may alternatively refer to the owner of the tablet, Gahul-Marduk.

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