

**The Medical Information in *LUDLUL BĒL NĒMEQI*.
Some Notes on the Suffering and its Treatment**

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Abstract

The poem *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* (“I Will Praise the God of Wisdom”) concerns itself with the problem of unjust punishments inflicted on a righteous and once important man Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan. Amongst the many problems which befall the hero is physical suffering. The detailed description of its progression, followed by its treatment, shows a sophisticated knowledge of the magico-medical literature. The notion in historiography that the poem has educational purposes encourages us to look for internal structures that relate to the learned literature of the time - incantations, rituals, and prescriptions. This will eventually broaden our reading and understanding of the poem’s medical information.

Ludlul bēl nēmeqi (henceforth, *Ludlul*) is one of the most popular theodicy texts from the second and first millennium Mesopotamia. It was composed in Kassite Babylonia, but the oldest surviving manuscripts date from the Neo-Assyrian kingdom.² Studies of *Ludlul* suggest that it is very probable that the author of the text was an educated exorcist (*āšipu*).³ The text was actively copied, taught and rendered so that its hero Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan became mythically paradigmatic for individuals who lived centuries after the poem’s composition.⁴ The poem is a private confession of a once mighty and influential man who suffers from different kinds of trouble and distress.⁵ He tries to understand the reasons behind Marduk’s punishment and to restore his well-being and social status. To do this, the sufferer must deal with the consequences of divine anger (*kimiltu*). Divine punishment for behavioural transgression is a common theme in Mesopotamian literature.⁶ Berlejung states that sin or moral evil describes human intentions and actions that are qualified as evil, violent, wrong, or as vices and crimes.⁷ Yet, what was ungodly and unrighteous for the deities was often a secret for the Mesopotamians, and they needed consultations with divination specialists to reveal it. Gods were unpredictable, and their justice was often beyond human comprehension.⁸ Texts referring to innocent suffering

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² List of the existing manuscripts can be found in Lenzi 2023: 52-62.

³ S. Noegel describes him as a “highly learned ritual professional.” (Noegel 2016: 614).

⁴ Lenzi 2023: 387.

⁵ See the latest publication and translation of the poem in Lenzi 2023. In 2014, Oshima proposed that there are five and not four tablets of the poem (see Lenzi, 2023: 14). The poem comprises two parts. The first part deals with the hero’s misfortune, which affects his position, prosperity, well-being, and health (Tablets I and II). The second follows his recovery after the appeasing of Marduk (Tablets III, IV (very poorly preserved) and V).

⁶ See Bricker 2000, Lenzi 2020: 172-178.

⁷ Berlejung 2015: 272.

⁸ Berlejung 2015: 286.

and divine anger, such as *Ludlul*, point to a lack of balance between man's deeds (behaviour) and the consequences (fate) and ask the gods to intervene.⁹ What was required from humans to stop their suffering was unconditional obedience and righteousness.

Ziegler distinguishes between Mesopotamian literary texts that treat human suffering retrospectively ('*action de grâce*') and those that treat it amidst the suffering ('*textes situés avant la rémission du souffrant*').¹⁰ *Ludlul*, part of the former category, is the poem that focuses on the patient's recovery compared to other texts. Although the plot and the messages of *Ludlul* follow common religious concepts about the sovereignty of the gods, some parts of the text describing the illness and the recovery of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan suggest the author's solid understanding of ancient medicine. His erudition in the magico-medical scriptures and other fields of Sumero-Akkadian science led Lenzi to conclude: "*Ludlul* is not an exorcism text, a medical text, an omen text, prayer or lamentation; rather, it is a narrative poem that incorporates ideas and tropes from such texts while it recounts the various experiences of a particular man".¹¹ This is important since it allows for a multifaceted reading of the poem which reveals different aspects of its meaning.

The aim of this paper is to study how the medical information and terminology in the complex text are presented. I was inspired to look for specific structures in the text by Lenzi's insightful suggestion that the poem serves the interests of the ritual experts and accounts for the occasional failure of the divination experts in a way that "provides a literary salve to mollify the attendant emotional and existential toll such failure may have taken upon the ritual participants (the experts' clients) and an ideological tool to avert any potential professional consequences thence from their clients or among their own ranks."¹² Considering the author's education and Ziegler's note about the peculiarity of *Ludlul*, we might assume that there could be glimpses of exorcists' techniques and practice in the text. I suggest that parts of the poem presenting the hero's physical suffering testify to the incorporation of a well-known pattern in Babylonian **diagnostics**. A clue for such a conclusion is the consistent description of the body's afflictions in the text.¹³ We know that the usual proceeding towards healing in Babylonian medicine was to begin with diagnostics *qaqqassu ana šuklultīšu* ("from his head to the rest of

⁹ Berlejung 2015: 274.

¹⁰ Ziegler 2015: 218-229, Lenzi 2023: 340, n. 152.

¹¹ Annus/Lenzi 2010: xxxv-xxxvi. The poem starts with a hymn to Marduk. According to W. Moran this hymn praises Marduk's healing capabilities (Moran 1983, 258). Worthington explains the behaviour of the god as mood changes and whims, presenting him at the end as a relenting deity (*ilu muštālu*) (Worthington/Piccin 2015: 121).

¹² Lenzi 2012: 39.

¹³ To my knowledge, this observation is only marked without being studied in detail. See, for example, Abusch 2021, 133.

him”) – starting from the upper part of the body and finishing with the bottom part.¹⁴ Symptoms were checked by an *āšipu/mašmaššu* exorcist. The exorcist, a specialist in making sense of different kinds of physical appearance, including physiognomy, visits the patient at his home to examine his body and make a diagnosis.¹⁵ This principle is evident in divination and medical catalogues and series, amongst which the most important are the second chapter (Tablets 3-14) of the standard diagnostics series *Sakikkû* (“Symptoms”), the *Assur Medical Catalogue* and the *Nineveh medical encyclopedia*.¹⁶ Historiography has already shown that the poem’s vivid imagery is influenced by the exorcists’ magico-medical literature in presenting the destructive evil powers that bring diseases.¹⁷ This imagery closely resembles the one in the incantation series *Utukkū lemnūtu* (henceforth *Evil Demons*) – a collection of incantations to prevent attacks by demonic agents.¹⁸ A head-to-toe approach of presenting disease in connection to a demon is attested already in a precursor of the incantation series.¹⁹ The information in the text about ancient **therapeutics** is, however, less detailed, focusing on the result of the medical incantations, rituals and *materia medica*. The nature of the healing *šimdu* bandage, which restores the health and prosperity in the life of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, is unclear.

I INVESTIGATING THE CAUSES OF THE ILLNESS. DIAGNOSTICS *IŠTU MUḪḪI ADI ŠĒPĪ*

The protagonist’s suffering starts “From the day Bel punished me” (Tablet I, l. 41), after which day his protective deities and spirits abandon him. In the following year (Tablet II), the hero consults with divination specialists (II, ll. 6-9) who cannot release the divine anger from him. His social and psychological struggles increase when he is struck by an illness (II, l. 49). Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan’s physical suffering commences with a synchronous attack of different actants (II, ll. 49-58):

¹⁴ *Sakikkû* Tablet III l. 38 (Schmidtchen 2021: 250). The body examination was completed by exorcists. The principle *ištu muḪḪi adi šēpī* is explicitly mentioned by the editor of the text Esagil-kīn-apli in his editorial note (Schmidtchen 2018: 317, line 61). See Heeßel 2001: 255-261, Heeßel 2000: 24, 75.

¹⁵ KAR 44 (Exorcist Manual) first lists the priestly and cultic functions of the exorcist. Afterwards, magic is found, which includes different incantation compositions and scattering of flour rituals (Geller 2018: 293).

¹⁶ See Schmidtchen 2021, Steinert (editor) 2018, The Nineveh Medical Project: <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/asbp/ninmed/>, visited in December 2023.

¹⁷ See Noegel 2016.

¹⁸ Individual incantations from the series are known from the Old Akkadian to the Arsacid period. There are some Middle Assyrian witnesses to *Evil Demons* tablets and a commentary (Geller 2016: 5).

¹⁹ Tablet Ni 630, ll. 130-159. Geller 1985: 144, Couto-Ferreira 2018: 54.

“As for me, the wear[ied one], a *mehû* storm? was cast? upon me.
 Debilitating sickness (*muršu muniššu*) advanced against me,
 An evil wind (*imhullu*) f[rom the hor]izon blew against me.
 Ague (*di’u*) cropped up from the surface of the netherworld,
 A wicked demonic cough (*šūlu*) came forth from its Apsu.
 An un[rel]enting demon came forth from Ekur,
 Lamaštu c[am]e down from the midst of the mountain.
 Chills (*šuruppû*) streamed in? with the waters of the inundation,
 Debility (*lu’tu*) broke through the earth with the vegetation.
 They jo[ined] their forces, they approached me as one.”²⁰

These afflictions, described figuratively, could be organised into two categories. The first group includes malevolent supernatural forces (angry gods, demons, and elements): amongst them are *mehû* storm, *imhullu* wind, *šūlu* demon, *utukku la ne’i* demon and Lamaštu demon. All of them appear as illness bringers in *Evil Demons*.²¹ Early Assyriological studies by R. Campbell Thompson and R. Labat showed that Babylonian medicine drew on magic, that is, incantations appeared in therapeutical recipes within the medical corpus, and diseases were often thought to have been caused by various demons.²²

The second group of afflictions comprises more natural causes such as *gig munnīšu* weakness, *di’u* headache, *šuruppû* chills and *lu’tu* softness. They altogether join their forces and surround Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan. This notion reminds us of the accumulation of symptoms of a disease. Here, a short remark about the terminology is required. There are two words denoting illness in Akkadian, both of which are used in *Ludlul – muršu* (*gig*) and *sil’itu*.²³ Although they are presented as synonyms in a commentary text, they are subtly different.²⁴ Apart from *muršu munnīšu*, *muršu* is attested as something permanent and describable in Tablet II, l. 50: *šikin muršīya*, Tablet III, l. 5: *dannu murša kabta* and l. 50 and l. 80: *lazzu muruṣ qaqqadī*. We find *sil’itu* always connected to duration and time in Tablet II, l. 90: *appūnāma īterik silētū*, l. 111: *adanna sili’īya* and Tablet III, l. 49: *sili’tu iriku*.²⁵ Notably, the weakening disease of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan came through a *mehû* storm, which, I would suggest, seems to be understood as an allusion to Marduk’s wrath (*uggatu*). The latter is described earlier in Tablet I, l. 5, as a *mehû* storm: “Whose fury *uggatu* is like a *mehû* violent storm, a wasteland.” Noegel suggests that the seven illnesses (II, ll. 49-55) – all from the first group of afflictions, including *gig munnīšu* and

²⁰ Lenzi 2023: 73/75.

²¹ See Noegel 2016: 633, n. 137.

²² Geller 2010: 8.

²³ See Tablet II ll. 110-111, Stol 2010.

²⁴ Lenzi 2023: 272.

²⁵ Stol 2010: 29.

di'u, are described with the demonic characteristics of the malevolent *Sibittu* demons, and their presentation ultimately recalls incantation texts from *Evil Demons*.²⁶ The imagery of forces of nature and hellish habitats augments the potency of the demonic agents and gives them irresistible power. This aerial imagery further accentuates the unexpected and surprising sickening touch and seizure.

Other monsters from *Evil Demons* are presented indirectly in *Ludlul*. Such is the case with the *asakku* demon, a personification of the *asakku* disease – a strictly magical disease not occurring in the medical literature, which results from committing a sacrilege.²⁷ The similarities between *Ludlul* and *Evil Demons* are complemented by the description of common symptoms and illnesses. A characteristic of the bilingual incantation series are lists of diseases in a fixed sequence, which are quoted in the spells.²⁸ Such lists in *Evil Demons* Tablet II (ll. 68-69) and Tablet VI (ll. 55-57, 63) enumerate *muršu qaqqadi*, *di'u*, *šuruppû*, *mangu*, *lu'tu*, problems with the eyes and internal disease, which torture Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan in different stages of his prolonged illness. These similarities speak of the shared intellectual environment in which *Ludlul*, *Sakikkû* and *Evil Demons* were created. As Geller notes, there is a strong relationship between the *āšipu/mašmaššu* exorcist in *Evil Demons* and the *ka.pirig* exorcist in *Sakikkû*.²⁹ All the above-mentioned words denoting diseases could be found in Assyro-Babylonian learned and related to exorcism materials, including incantations, rituals, and therapeutic texts.³⁰ Table II of *Evil Demons* seems further intertwined with *Ludlul* since it contains mainly a hymn to Marduk, describing his role against the demons.³¹ He is “the merciful one who loves to revive the dying” (Tablet II, l. 57).³² This description resembles the hymnic beginning of the poem (Tablet I, ll. 1-36), where Marduk is the one whose “bandages mollify, they revive the doomed (Tablet I, l. 22).”³³ Marduk’s rage is indeed the primal cause of all the troubles that befall the hero – physical, psychological, and social. As Stol notes on the psychosomatic suffering in

²⁶ Noegel 2016; 633.

²⁷ “Who might it have been but Marduk who abandoned me so that I was turned into Asakku-demon flesh (Tablet IV, ll. 31-32).” See Geller 2016: 81, n.62. *Evil Demons* was part of the exorcist literature listed in the Exorcist Manual. This catalogue is accredited to the 11th-century Babylonian scholar Esakil-kîn-apli (See Geller 2016: 6, Geller 2018: 292-312). For Asakku’s identification as a disease in literary texts, see CAD A/2: 325-326. Further allusions in the text mention the *eṭemmu* ghost in Tablet IV, 30 and the *gallu* demon in Tablet I, l. 85.

²⁸ Geller 2016: 28.

²⁹ Geller 2016: 41.

³⁰ Lenzi 2023: 263.

³¹ Geller 2016: 8.

³² *réme-nu-u šá m[ī-tú ana b]ul-lu-tu i-r[a-]* (Geller 2016: 79).

³³ *pašhū šindūšu uballaṭū namtara* (Lenzi 2023, 64), see Abusch/Milstein 2021. For the hymnic introduction and the connection of the text to Mesopotamian liturgical scripture, see Lenzi 2015.

ancient Mesopotamia, illness is a stigma which transposes the person into the realm of social death.³⁴ During the illness, there was a distance between the patient and the community, which could make the former depressed and desperate.³⁵

The medical verses in *Ludlul* mention problems in different parts of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan's body. Significantly, the poem employs more than 100 anatomical and pathological terms.³⁶ The verbs which describe the damage over body parts reflect the demons' actions. They act very aggressively, and opposition is evident between the potent "they" and the weak "I" (Tablet II, ll. 59-70):

“They stru[ck my hea]d, they covered my skull,
My face? darkened, my eyes welled-up.
They strained my neck muscles, they made my neck slack,
They struck my chest, they beat my breast.
They attacked my back, they cast tremors upon me,
They kindled a fire in my chest.
They roiled my innards, they twist[ed] my guts,
They afflicted [my lun]gs with coughing and phlegm,
They afflicted my limbs, they made my belly feel queasy.
My high stature they demolished like a wall,
My broad build they leveled like rushes.
I was thrown down like an uliltu-plant, cast down on my face.”³⁷

The diseased body parts could be organised into three sections from head to toe. The first one, HEAD (ll. 59-61) includes the struck (from the verb *nêrû*) head and the covered (*tê'u*) skull, the darkened (*ekêlu*) face, the flowing (*na'ālu*) eyes, the strained (*etēqu*) neck tendon *labānu* and the loosened (*ramû*) neck *kišādu*. Then, afflictions in the TORSO follow (ll. 62-67); the chest is struck (*mahāšu*) by the demonic forces, the breast *tulû* is beaten (*terû*), the back *šeru* is touched (*lapātu*), and tremors *ra'ību* are inflicted (*nadû*) on the sufferer's body. The evil forces further inflict burning *išātu* in the epigastrium *reš libbi*. Afterwards, the sufferer complains that his innards *qerbu* are disturbed (*dalāhu*), his guts *unāti libbi* are twisted (*atāku*), his lungs *hašû* are infected (*la'ābu*) with cough *šualu* and phlegm *huhhu*. His belly *pitru* feels nauseous (*nāšu*). Finally, a short description of the LIMBS *mešrêtu* is given (l. 67). According to the text, they

³⁴ Stol 2000: 68.

³⁵ “I took to a sick-bed of confinement, going out was a hards[hip], my house became my prison.” (*Ludlul*, Tablet II, ll. 95-96).

“My grave lay open, my funerary goods prepared,” (*Ludlul*, Tablet II, l. 114).

³⁶ Listed in Lenzi 2023: 241-277.

³⁷ Lenzi 2023: 75.

are affected by *li'bu* disease.³⁸ Tablet III (ll. 80-120) and Tablet IV introduce additional anatomical and pathological terminology, building upon the conditions previously delineated in Tablet II while emphasising the healing of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan. These maladies can be categorised into the same three distinct sections:

Section 1. HEAD (Tablet III)

- ∴ constant headache (*lazzu gig sag.du*), (ll. 80-81)³⁹
- ∴ blurred eyes (*tē'āti igi.2-a*), (ll. 82-83)⁴⁰
- ∴ clogged ears (*geštu.2-a ša uṭṭami*), (ll. 84-85)⁴¹
- ∴ blocked breathing of the nose during *ummu* fever (*appī ša ina ridi ummi unappiqu nipissu*), (ll. 86-87)⁴²
- ∴ parched lips (*šaptāya ša illabrā*), (ll. 88-89) and closed mouth (*pīya ša uktattimu*), (ll. 90-91)
- ∴ clenched teeth (*šinnāya ša ittašbatā*), (ll. 92-93)
- ∴ thick tongue (*lišānu ša innebta*), (ll. 94-95)
- ∴ constricted throat (*ur'udu ša innisru*), (ll. 96-97)⁴³
- ∴ swollen gullet (*lu'ī ša ūtappiqu*), (ll. 98-99)⁴⁴
- ∴ loose (*ramū*) and twisted (*kepū*) neck *kišādu*⁴⁵

Section 2. TORSO (Tablet III, l. 100)⁴⁶

- ∴ empty and woven (*rakāsu*) large intestine *šammahu*

Section 3. LOWER PART (Tablet IV, Section A)⁴⁷

- ∴ bound (*kasū*) knees *birkū*.⁴⁸

Although many lines from the end of Tablet III and Tablet IV are poorly preserved or completely missing, and the detailed presentation of the body parts is unclear, the description of the

³⁸ Between lines 71-85, more specific symptoms connected with the patient's emotional condition follow. According to Lenzi, who adopts a methodological stance from the 'Harvard School' of medical anthropology and approaches the passage as a first-person account of a subjective experience of physical disease, they might refer to sleep paralysis (Lenzi 2023: 433-465). These symptoms are provoked by a malevolent attack of the *alū* demon (ll. 71-85). They lead to some physical afflictions. The entire body (*kal pagriya*) is seized by numbness *rimūtu*, the flesh (UZU.MEŠ-*ia*) suffers from paralysis *mišittu*, and the arms are seized by stiffness *mangu*. Further, the protagonist experiences softness *lu'tu* in the knees (*birkū*) and his feet can't move.

³⁹ *gig sag.du* (*murši qaqqadi*).

⁴⁰ From *tē'u*, to cover, CAD T: 377.

⁴¹ From *tummumu*, to deafen, CAD T: 126.

⁴² From *napāqu*, to become blocked CAD N/1: 277. See Annus/Lenzi 2010: 52.

⁴³ From *esēru*, to enclose, CAD E: 334.

⁴⁴ From *epēqu*, to be massive, solid CAD E: 183.

⁴⁵ This line is from a commentary text. See Lenzi 2023: 85.

⁴⁶ The text is, unfortunately, in bad condition. Lines 111-120 are entirely missing.

⁴⁷ Lenzi 2023: 84-85.

⁴⁸ The lines for legs, feet and limbs afterwards are very fragmented.

afflictions of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan in the poem, presenting the weakening of his body, is sufficient to show a resemblance with the head-to-toe structure of *Sakikkû* (Tablets 3-14):

∴ *Structure of Esagil-kīn-apli's catalogue of Sakikkû Chapter 2* (Tablets 3-14): HEAD, TEMPLES (+FOREHEAD), EYES, NOSE (+LIPS+TEETH), TONGUE, EARS, FACE, NECK (+THROAT), HANDS, CHEST (+KIDNEY), EPIGASTRIUM (+ABDOMEN+INSIDES), HIPS (+ANUS +LOINS +THIGHS +KNEES +LEGS +FEET)⁴⁹

Taking these recurrent patterns of text organisation into account, the author's learned vocabulary suggests that the arrangement of the verses describing the physical condition of the sufferer is not only a literary choice.⁵⁰

Further attestation of the author's proficiency in magico-medical literature is the close resemblance between the poem and the prescription BAM 234 studied by Ziegler.⁵¹ Similarly, BAM 234 also describes a case of divine anger: the patient suffers from misfortune *mihru*.⁵² The listed social and physical symptoms include loss and deprivation and loose and ataxic limbs. The man is unable to sleep because of fear and constantly has disturbing dreams. The anger of the deities leads to further deterioration of his health.⁵³ *Ludlul* looks like a sophisticated version of this text. In this light, Lenzi argues that the sufferer's situation in the poem spoke to ritual experts or experts in training since students copied the poem in their curriculum.⁵⁴ It could be that structures in the text, such as the magico-medical one, were part of this indirect communication, referring to specific crucial series studied by the scribes.

After notes about the body's functioning were made, the healers were usually capable of clarifying the sickness and proceeding to its cure. However, there were many mysteries in

⁴⁹ Heeßel 2000: 24, Schmidtchen 2018, Schmidtchen 2021.

⁵⁰ See Lenzi 2023: 95-185, 241-279. For other literary texts in which the head-to-toe model of disease representation is applied, see Couto-Ferreira 2017: 53-54.

⁵¹ Ziegler 2015, Lenzi 2023: 239. For an English translation and commentary of BAM 234 see Ritter/Kinnier Wilson 1980, Stol 1993: 29, Abusch 2000: 85. See also Maul 2019: 99-109.

⁵² CAD M/2: 59.

⁵³ "Since his god and goddess are angry with him, if that *awīlum* (subsequently) becomes ill with *qāt māmīti*, *šudimmerakku*, *qāt amēlūti* or *muruš himmāte*, the iniquities of father and mother, brother and sister, of clan, kith and kin, will take hold of him" (Ritter/Kinnier Wilson 1980: 26). The ritual in the text intends eventually to release the patient who should overcome his fears, see Stol 1993: 29. Another prescription, BM 64174, differs from BAM 234 in that it does not present physical suffering (Abusch/Schwemer 2016, AMD 8.2, text 3.7). Here, again, the problem is divine anger - *šibsāt* (var.: *kimilti*) *ili u ištari elīšu bašā ilšu u ištāršu ittīšu zenū*. The *bārū* seer and the dream interpreter do not give the patient good oracles - *itti bārī u dāgīli* (var.: *šā`ili u ensī?*) *dīnšu lā iššer*. A treatment is prescribed with apotropaic leather pouches. According to Abusch, BM 64174 is a precursor of BAM 316, where witchcraft already plays an essential role in the sufferer's afflictions (Abusch 2000: 87).

⁵⁴ Lenzi 2012: 63.

the field of pathology, medicine at that time was often a “team sport.” Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan mentions different specialists who tried to help him determine his sickness by various means. The failure of the ritual experts is one of the reasons for the sufferer’s desperation. Tablet II (ll. 6-9, ll. 108-111) and Tablet III (ll. 25-28, ll. 39-42) detail the challenges which the healers faced. The *āšipu* exorcist “did not release the divine anger against me with his ritual (II, l. 9)”, “was scared by my symptoms” (II, l. 108) and “could not reveal the nature of my sickness” (II, l. 110). The *bārû* priest “could not determine the situation with divination”, “was confused by omens (II, l. 109)” and “could not determine the duration of my illness (II, l. 111).” Finally, the *šā’ilu* diviner “could not clarify my case with incense” (II, l. 7). *Šā’ilu* is attested mainly in literary texts and was usually consulted after the *bārû*.⁵⁵ His incense, called *maššakku*, served as an offering in libanomancy.⁵⁶

II. THE HEALING POWER OF THE BANDAGE

Following a long period of suffering, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan’s recovery is manifested in four dreams.⁵⁷ A non-human being appears in his first dream (III, ll. 9-20). The creature is clad in radiance and proclaims the patient’s healing. A second dream reveals another figure identified as a purification priest and messenger of Laluralimma, an exorcist from Nippur. The being poured water in a purifying ceremony *ubbubu* and rubbed (*umašši*) Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan’s body after reciting *balātu* incantations (III, ll. 21-28). Geller notes that the poem provides important clues regarding the end-uses of magical incantations, especially those associated with disease.⁵⁸ In a third dream (III, ll. 29-39), a female figure appears, “whose appearance was beautiful” (III, l. 31). In the last dream, a medical bandage *šindu* is brought to the sufferer by the exorcist Ur-Nintinugga, who was sent by the appeased Marduk.⁵⁹ He gave the bandage to a servant of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan to apply it. Although there are many details concerning the symptoms in the poem, extensive information about the therapy is not given. It is, however, retrospectively already in Tablet I (ll. 21-22, ll. 25-26):

“His (Marduk’s) beatings are barbed; they pierce the body.
But his bandages mollify; they revive the one afflicted by the Namtar demon.
He is the one who makes one acquire the demon-shivering.

⁵⁵ CAD Š/1: 111.

⁵⁶ See Lenzi 2012: 48, n.40.

⁵⁷ Annus/Lenzi 2010: xxii. For the identification of the images see Lenzi 2023: 292-298.

⁵⁸ Geller 2016: 43.

⁵⁹ Lenzi 2012: 54-63. Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan experiences four dreams in which divine figures give messages to him.

But with his incantations, he expels chills and cold tremors.”⁶⁰

There are two pairs here which describe a disease and a treatment. The first pair is *šuruppû* chills and *hurbāšu* tremors, resulting in *ra’ibu* shivers from one side and *tû* incantations from another.⁶¹ The second concerns the reviving action of the *šindu* bandage against the afflictions of Namtar (Fate) demon. The vague information about the therapy could be interpreted in different ways. The most obvious one is to suppose that since the poem is not strictly a medical text, the *materia medica* used to release the suffering of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan is a hyponym of a medicine.⁶² What is essential is the healing itself, not the means through which it has been completed: the author could have also used an ointment or a potion if he thought it suited the poetic structure of the poem better. It is tempting, however, to look for a specific reason for applying a bandage. It is well known that critical medical recipes were transmitted secretly. Their preparation was called a *niširtu* secret.⁶³ Indeed, in *Ludlul* no medical substances are mentioned.⁶⁴ The names of only a few plants are found, like *daddaru* (*būšānu*), but these have not been used in a medical context.

I propose two wordplays that concern the understanding of the pairs distinguished above. The first one refers to the water imagery in the poem and is constructed with the parallel use of the paronyms *nāšu* and *našû*. The image of the chill-provoking *mê mīli* (“water of inundation”) in which chills are streamed (*inūšu* from the verb *nāšu*) is opposed to the healing *mê šipti* (“water of incantation”), brought (*nāš* from *našû*) by a purification priest and cast (*našû*) upon the patient.⁶⁵ The linguistic interplay eventually shows the healing result of the incantations. To explain the second pair, I will direct the attention towards a case of intertextuality between *Ludlul* and *Evil Demons*, whose only reference to a bandage – *riksu*, is in Tablet VII (107-109):⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *zaqtā ništātūšu usahhalā zumra/ pašhū šindūšu uballaṭū namtara/ šū-ma utukka ra’iba ušarši/ ina tēšu ušdapparū šuruppū u hurbāšu* (Lenzi 2023: 64).

⁶¹ For *šuruppū* see CAD Š/3: 371. For *hurbāšu* see CAD H: 248. For *ra’ibu* see CAD R: 80.

⁶² I.e. a word whose meaning is included in the meaning of another word. Texts, like the “Gula Hymn of Bullutsarabi” show that the bandage was a largely popular treatment in literary texts: “I am the physician, I can save life, I carry every herb, I banish illness. I gird on the sack with life-giving incantations, I carry the texts that make (one) well. I give health to humankind. (My) clean dressing salves the wound, (My) soft bandage relieves the pain.” (Foster 2005: 587).

⁶³ CAD N/2: 276-277.

⁶⁴ A bandage recipe usually has many ingredients and detailed instructions on how to prepare the medicine. See in <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/asbp/ninmed/>.

⁶⁵ Finally, *agū tāmātu* (“the current of waters”, see Lenzi 2023: 146) receives the *šuruppū* chills of the sufferer. See *Ludlul* II, 56, III 23, 27, 74.

⁶⁶ Geller 2016: 23, CAD R: 348.

“Take some aromatic cedar oil,
and apply (it) to the victim’s body.

Let all of the *apkallu* and *abriqqu* purification priests bind you with one of their pure bindings.”⁶⁷

I suggest that the interplay in this case is between the healing *riksu* bandage in *Evil Demons*, the group of seven demons in *Ludlul* – described with the same word (*rikis sebet*) and the healing *šindu* bandage in the poem.⁶⁸ Namtar (Fate) demon, the vizier of the goddess of the Underworld Ereškigal, is a merciless illness bringer. His leading role is shown in *Evil Demons* where the seven *sibitti* demons serve as his *šipri* (messengers).⁶⁹

In both interplays, the opposition is between an evil image and a relieving one. The main elements from the sufferer’s dream with the purification priest (one of the two dreams – the second and the fourth, in which healing activities take place) are found in the same seventh tablet: purification with water and incantation spells.⁷⁰ What is missing is the *muššu’u* massaging.⁷¹ *Muššu’u* by itself comprises a whole series and represents the act of rubbing. It occurs only in a medical context, where it is attested as a treatment of afflicted limbs and women’s bellies.⁷² Böck notes that the attestation of *Muššu’u* spells in magico-medical texts refers to symptoms of paralysis *šimmatu* without specifying the body part, to afflicted arms, hands, hips, feet, ankles, and heels. Many of the symptoms have the weakness of the limbs in common, reminding us of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan’s condition.⁷³ The short analysis thus proposes

⁶⁷ Geller 2016: 272. *Ludlul* does not mention to which part of the body the bandage is applied. From the medical prescriptions it is known that they are put chiefly on wounds, against feverish conditions, or to soothe gastrointestinal problems. For example, one prescription in BAM 575 (r. i 12) presents a soothing bandage therapy for an internal disease against symptoms resembling these of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan: “If a man’s internal organs are twisted (*gannû*), he has fits of *gahhu* coughing (and) a diminished appetite for food and drink, he continually has *ru’tu* phlegm: you pound *nînu*-mint, he drinks it in oil and he will vomit... You boil down *lipāru*-tree leaf, *qutru*-plant leaf, tamarisk leaf, *burāšu*-juniper, *kukru*-aromatic, *šumlalû*-aromatic, *tūru*-opopanax (and) [. . .] in date juice, (then) you dry (and) crush (the mixture) over and over again, you mix it in fat, you spread it on a piece of leather (and) you bandage (LAL) him with it.”

⁶⁸ The polysemantic word *riksu* is used in *Ludlul* also in Tablet II, l. 104 in a still different meaning, referring to the affected joints of Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan.

⁶⁹ See Tablet V, l. 76. For *šipru* see CAD Š/3: 73.

⁷⁰ “Go, [my son, take a ...-vessel] ... [pour] red spring waters – Tigris and Euphrates water – into it, put tamarisk and *maštakal* in it, cast the Eridu spell into that liquid, and sprinkle that man with water. Pass the censer and torch over him so that the Fate-demon (Namtar) being in the victim’s body may pass like water... (*more ritual activities follow* – K.M.) ...May trouble and magic not approach him, may he be calmed by the spell from his (god’s) pure hand, may (the victim) be entrusted safely into the benevolent hands of his personal god. It is an Uduḡ-hul incantation.” (Tablet VII ll. 80-97), see Geller 2016: 23.

⁷¹ The tablet, however, still shows considerable overlap with *Muššu’u*’s incantations (Geller 2016: 23). The compilation process of the series *Muššu’u* is unusual since most of the incantations come from other series, including *Evil Demons* and *sag.gig.ga.meš* (“*Headache*”), see Böck 2003: 2.

⁷² Böck 2003: 11.

⁷³ Böck 2003: 15.

that a probable origin of the treatment with a bandage in *Ludlul* could be found in the incantation series *Evil Demons* and *Muššu'u* and that it eventually refers to the text's educational purpose.

Conclusion

Suffering and treatment occupy a crucial place in *Ludlul*. The specific way body afflictions are presented in the poem suggests that the long narrative about the physical maladies of the main protagonist Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan follows an established approach towards describing diagnostics and healing, witnessed in the magico-medical literature. This could be explained by the social environment in which the text was created and transferred and by its educational purposes. The often-figurative presentation of the diseases strictly follows the model of symptoms organisation in the most essential Akkadian diagnostics series *Sakikkû*. Conversely, the choice of *materia medica* – a healing bandage, could be interpreted in different ways. This is because the diagnostics part in *Ludlul*, describing the symptoms and diseases the patient suffers, significantly surpasses the therapeutic one. The prescription, which was revealed to Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan in the last of four dreams, could be simply a somewhat arbitrary treatment relating to the omnipotence of Marduk since the trope of the healing bandage is also witnessed in other texts. However, similarities between *Ludlul* and the incantation series *Evil Demons* and *Muššu'u* could suggest an informed explanation and educational context for the author's choice. Therefore, it is likely that both topics of physical suffering and its treatment could eventually refer to Sumero-Akkadian written learned tradition.

Online resources and dictionaries

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